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# CITTÀ CHE SI ADATTANO?

# ADAPTIVE CITIES?

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Rosa Tamborrino

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# **CITTÀ CHE SI ADATTANO? ADAPTIVE CITIES?**

TOMO  
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4

**STRATEGIE DI ADATTAMENTO  
E PATRIMONIO CRITICO**

**ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES AND  
CRITICAL HERITAGE**

a cura di  
edited by

**Rosa Tamborrino**

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# EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH ARCHITECTURE: THE HUMANISTIC APPROACH OF YASMEEN LARI

ARIANNA SCAIOLI

## Abstract

*This historiographic work shows how women have been significantly hidden from history, shading their involvement in practice and academia behind a male architect's effigy. The contribution examines Yasmeen Lari's architectural work showing a humanitarian and socially responsible attitude. The focus is a critical re-reading of her architecture and activities through a gender lens, focusing on the role of women in this process.*

## Keywords

*Women in Architecture, Women Empowerment, Social and Environmental Justice, Self-reliant Communities, Spatial and Cultural Transformation*

## Introduction

The discourse on gender equality and women empowerment in space is gaining broader attention in the current architectural debate, bringing into the foreground a series of issues that have characterized our society and cities. Furthermore, the relevance of the framework proposed by the SDGs has been the identification of gender equality as a prerequisite for achieving broader sustainability challenges [UN Women 2018]. In this context, the involvement of women in architecture, design and decision-making becomes crucial to implementing this global transition [Hawken 2017].

Parallel to this reflection on the architectural practice and research, it raises the necessity to recast the canonic historiography, introducing new interpretative and critical scenarios. Indeed, the construction of a narrative – through and starting from – a feminist perspective has led to a shift in the framework to adequately place women architects who, thanks to their work, advocacy, and resistance, have made a significant contribution to the field of space, architecture, and urban design.

This historiographic work shows how women have been significantly hidden from history, shading their involvement in practice and academia behind a male architect's effigy, highlighting the recurrence of women architects' underrepresentation in the construction of the built environment- both in the past and nowadays [Willis 1998].

Borrowing an expression coined by Sumita Singha, these women architects are the «Vanished» [Singha 2018]; however, it is not only a matter of adding their contributions

to architecture books, giving them credit and visibility, but especially investigating the reasons why they have been first taken out.

An understanding of these factors – critically re-reading the traditional histories – could, on the one hand, reorientate the way in which we construct and study the history of architecture. However, on the other hand, it could inform the discipline itself, broadening the spectrum of experiences and perspectives and fostering a transformation of the built environment, which is physical and socio-cultural.

We have gone from considering the history of architecture as the history of great voices – great masters – where the image of the architect, traditionally a white-male hero or genius was a persistent one in the narrative. By being elevated onto a pedestal, the highlight on the collaborative dimension, intrinsic in the profession, was strategically left apart, be it with other architects or the community.

Therefore, the contribution examines and reflects upon the activities and architectures that Yasmeen Lari, the first woman architect in Pakistan, has brought forward – tirelessly – throughout her career, culminating and concretizing in humanitarian and socially responsible architecture. The focus is a critical re-reading of her work through a gender lens, focusing on the role of women in this process. A woman designing for other women.

By shifting towards a living history, a more significant fragmentation emerges, which carries an epistemological richness, given by the notion of building a shared history of many voices, which chorally contribute to the development of a place. This notion of complexity and multidimensionality, which questions the boundaries of architecture – broadening its relevance into other fields, is encompassed in feminist critique, referring to a matrix of social, historical, cultural, racial and class instances. This entanglement becomes evident in Lari's position towards the architectural project encapsulating environmental, social and gender justice tenets. This *ethos* sets the premises for the *Barefoot Social Architecture*. It is a holistic design approach centred around an ethic of care for people and the environment brought forward through a collaborative, context-specific, democratic, and humanistic process that lays its ground in a pedagogical methodology.

## Methodology

The contribution presents a reflection on the work developed by Lari, integrating and translating tangible and intangible values into space and architecture by focusing on how women can be part of the design process. Furthermore, it contributes to the discussion about women in architecture by investigating the complexity of her approach – architectural, humanitarian, and pedagogical – from a feminist perspective. These themes, especially the attention towards women and their empowerment, emerged during activities, conferences, and discussions on the occasion of the conferment of an honorary degree given to Lari at Politecnico di Milano in 2021. This research stems from an archival investigation, retracing her projects and texts but also retrieving primary and secondary sources, with the aim of critically re-reading them from a feminist perspective building a path that connects the first part of her career – the «prima

«prima donna» phase – to the second one – the humanitarian architecture. Prima donna is a term that Lari uses to describe the first part of her career, working as an established architect in Pakistan.

Drawing from the research path of Rudofsky in *Architecture without Architects* of 1964 and Fathy in *Architecture for the Poor* of 1973 - two of Lari's "mentors" – it is possible to delineate an alternative way of performing architecture that challenges the *status quo*. Therefore, they have merit to bring back the attention toward an architecture made by and for people, focusing on their needs and expectations, which is "light" on the planet and significantly impacts the communities [Lepik 2010].

These precedents have undoubtedly influenced Lari's approach to architecture, which shows an intrinsic complexity and richness, and is able to go beyond the disciplinary boundaries to foster a socio-spatial and cultural regeneration in this context. This multifaceted condition is analyzed and discussed through critically re-reading some of her projects. The objective is to show how they interact with the community – especially women – on various levels and scales – from the crafting of artisanal objects to the involvement in the building process until the construction of resilient and sustainable architectures.

### Yasmeen Lari: an architecture of resistance and advocacy for the marginalized

After receiving her architectural degree from Oxford Brookes University in 1963, Yasmeen Lari set up Lari Associates in 1964, facing the fragile conditions of Pakistani urban and rural areas from a design perspective. What is interesting to recall from her first architectures is that, even though her primary clients were industries and the upper class, she was already questioning this "predatory" system, focusing on the needs and aspirations of vulnerable communities. *Slums are not a Lost Case* published in 1975, *Toward a Revitalization of Traditional Habitats* in 1978, *A Time to Conserve Karachi's Environmental and Cultural Heritage* in 1996, and many projects like Angoori Bagh Housing, Lahore, 1973-1977 – with a specific focus on women – The Lines Area, Resettlement Project, Karachi, 1981, and the participation as a consultant for Karachi Development Plan 1974-1985, show an attitude towards the project that will be made explicit in the second part of her career, with her humanitarian architecture. She decided to fund the Heritage Foundation of Pakistan in 1980, together with her husband, the historian Suhail Zaheer Lari, focusing on preserving and valorizing Pakistan Heritage sites and empowering communities, especially women, through architecture [Berlingieri et al. 2021] (Fig 1). Her commitment is directed toward improving the lives of the poorest communities in Pakistan, the 99% of the population, through an architecture that would be «low-cost, zero-carbon, and zero-waste» [Lari 2020]. This *ethos* lays the ground for the *Barefoot Social Architecture* (BASA), a transversal design approach that intersects notions of social and environmental justice and promotes the empowerment of the most vulnerable communities through collaborative and co-creative actions [Lari 2010; Lari 2011b] going toward self-reliant communities [Shuman 2000].



**1:** Women Empowerment through Architecture. The collage by the author shows fragments of images by Heritage Foundation of Pakistan. From Left to right: Women empowerment is fostered through their active participation in crafts, design activities, and construction processes. This approach aims at giving women tools and capabilities to autonomously build shelters and micro-Infrastructures to support and provide for their families.

Hence, the rediscovery of local materials and vernacular techniques – implemented and reinterpreted – the cataloguing and valorization of Pakistani heritage sites and the empowerment of communities through architecture are part of this threefold strategy. First, it promotes the preservation and transmission of the Pakistani culture, which was rediscovered after the period of British colonialization ended in 1947. By shifting the attention toward the notion of site-specificity – be it related to materials, techniques, or communities – Lari refocuses the architectural project to dialogue with a place’s material and immaterial culture. Therefore, it goes beyond the concept of *genius loci* to the one of «amor loci» [Granata, Pileri 2012] which reunifies the idea of comprehension, proximity, care, and ownership of a place.

Therefore, what she is setting up are not just “architectural objects” but processes of reactivation, or borrowing Lari’s words, «not architecture but collaborative work» [Lari 2020] where both the territories and the communities that actively inhabit them are protagonists. Differently from the western humanitarian aid model, which «in spite of good intentions, fails to provide succour to target populations due to their unsustainable siloed approach that treats people as helpless victims who should be happy with handouts» [Ramzi 2019] here through the direct involvement of communities and the transmission of knowledge, it is possible to foster a lasting transformation, not just by giving an ephemeral answer to an emergency.



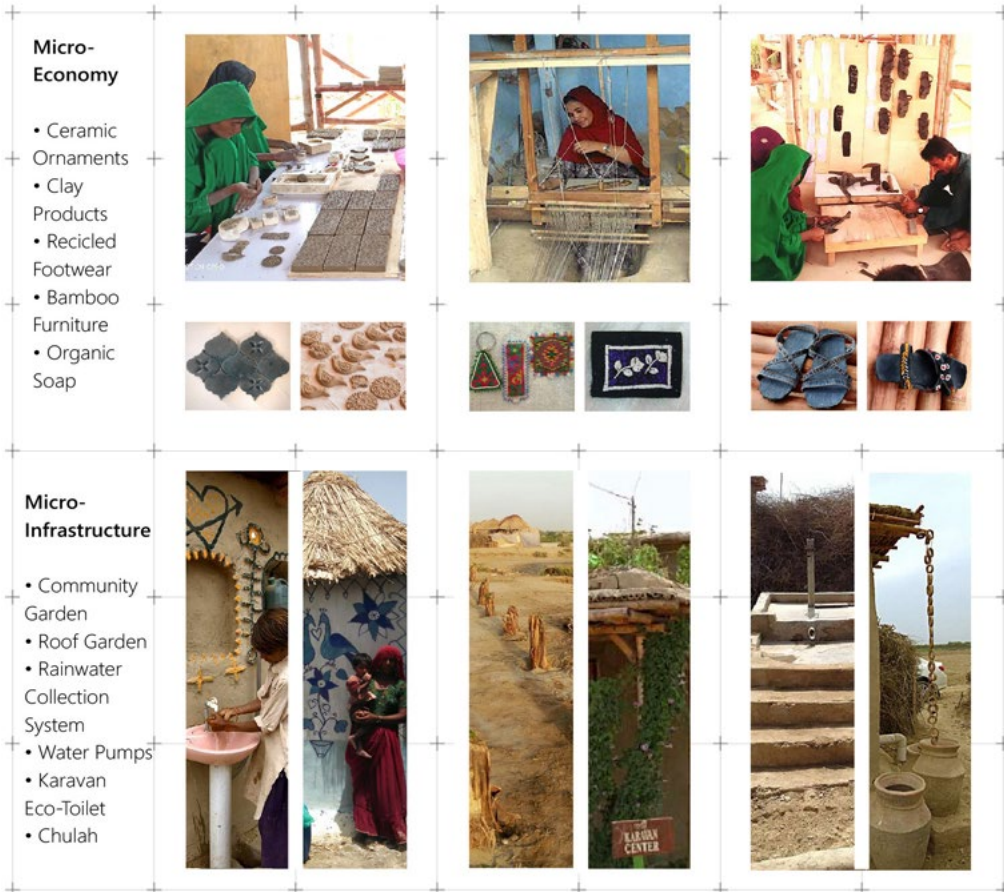
In this sense, the empowerment of vulnerable groups [especially women] can become the driving force behind this transition towards self-reliant communities, building local knowledge and a sense of care that could foster a condition of greater preparedness to face future crises. [Santus, Scaioli 2021]

Lari brought forward a reflection on the modalities of pursuing architecture in a more democratic, humanistic, and caring way [Lari 2000]. She observed, understood, and reinterpreted the needs of the places and communities which were highly vulnerable following earthquakes and floods in 2005, translating these issues into a holistic design process encompassing social, environmental and gender justice tenets [Lari 2011a]. To better grasp the relevance of Lari's work, it is crucial to consider the traditional role of women in Pakistani culture and society. Pakistan occupies the penultimate place in the global ranking for gender equality, where the condition has worsened in the last few years [World Economic Forum 2021]. It demonstrates to be multiscalar and multi-thematic, where architectural design is linked to broader themes such as women empowerment through the promotion of a local economy, the promotion of learning activities of construction techniques and craft workshops. Since 2010 with UNESCO, she has promoted the activities described in the Heritage Foundation of Pakistan Revival of Women's livelihood report in Swat. With the *Women-centered community-based disaster risk reduction management program*, implemented as part of Heritage Foundation of Pakistan's pilot program in seven villages in Pakistan with IOM, more than 40,000 homes have been built since 2013. In 2021-2022 she promoted a series of workshops on the assembly of housing prototypes Zero Carbon Initiatives for Women Empowerment, and together with the British Council, INTBAU Pakistan and INTBAU UK, the event *Empoweristan Pakistan's Climate-Smart, Women-Centered Empowerment* has been organized, promoting women empowerment showing the construction of two prototypes. Recently, in May 2022, she promoted *Gender Ecologies* together with British Council, INTBAU and BRAC University. It is a program rooted in the intersection of gender, climate, sustainability, and heritage, exploring this entanglement through co-creative processes and design solutions.

## A women-centered design strategy

«I am still in search for roots and seeking what the most relevant and most rewarding way to practice architecture in a country such as mine» [Lari 2000]. It is indeed a reflection on the roots and the most profound meaning of performing architecture. Yasmeen Lari, reflecting upon the message contained in *Architecture for the Poor*: «You must start from the beginning, letting your new buildings grow from the daily lives of the people who will live in them, shaping the houses to the measure of people's songs» [Fathy 1973, 45], has directed her attention to the issues of dwelling in the rural Pakistani areas affected by environmental crises. Accordingly, the first assumption has been the recognition that climate change does not affect everyone symmetrically [Terry 2009]. Disasters increase existing social and gender fragilities, primarily affecting women, where, in case

## MICRO-ECONOMY AND MICRO-INFRASTRUCTURE



2: Micro-Economy and Micro-Infrastructure. The collage by the author is composed by fragments of images by Heritage Foundation of Pakistan.

of an emergency, they are the most vulnerable to the effects of catastrophic events, increasing their marginalization [GIZ, UN-Habitat & GenderCC 2015]. Therefore, as advocates of this transition through active participation, the attention toward women has been the focal point of Lari's strategy. *Women-centered community-based disaster risk reduction management program* recasts the conventional intervention strategy, assuming that it should incorporate a gender-sensitive perspective, starting by recognizing women's needs and aspirations and not perpetuating women's inequalities often caused by gender-neutral projects.

The innovative aspect of her approach is linked to the fact that these architectures are not only designed to meet the needs and aspirations of women but are also built by them, increasing their sense of dignity and recognition in a place. The project is carried out by involving the female population in all phases – from training to construction. Through

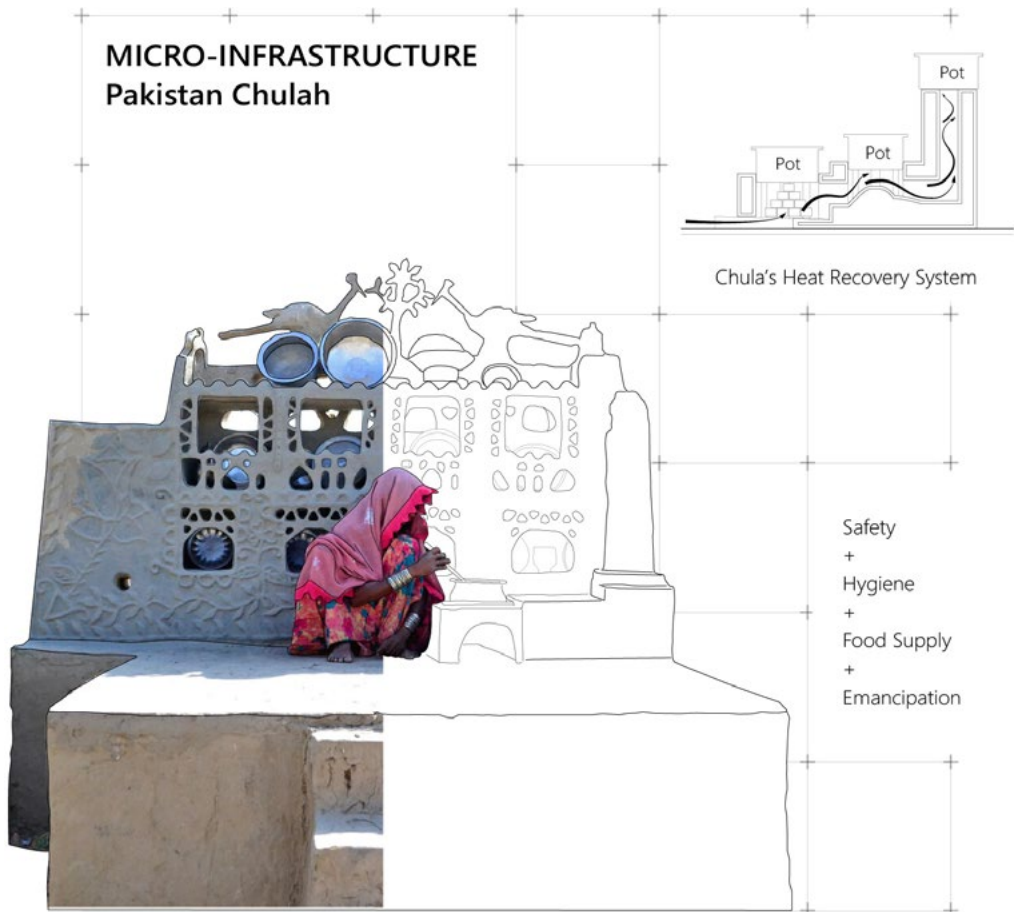
co-creative and collaborative processes, they contribute to the production of collective work. In this sense, the action of building an architecture increases a person's sense of belonging to the space, which becomes part of herself, an extension of her own identity, and in which to feel represented. This *modus operandi* recalls an assembly line in which the individual activities are planned to be carried out independently, thanks to light materials and easily understandable and transmissible techniques [Sapone, Scaioli, 2022].

Her design strategy goes toward a holistic project that intersects various themes and works on different scales simultaneously. This contribution stresses the multiscalarity of her approach, where women's empowerment is framed in each of them and where the outcomes are strongly interconnected. It reinterprets Ernesto Nathan Rogers concept of «from the spoon to the city». The paper presents her work stressing the interconnectedness of four main scales/activities: the micro-economy, the micro-infrastructures, the prototypical architectures in bamboo and the urban scale project (Fig. 2).

The micro-economy has been set up because a great part of the population lives below the poverty line, which reduces their access to food, clean water and sanitation, increasing the mortality rate. In this scenario, architecture becomes a source of income, but especially of pride and empowerment for women, who can support their families and improve their living conditions by creating small artisanal artefacts. *Revival of Women's Livelihoods in Post-Conflict Swat* and *Mitigating Vulnerability for Women: Use of Crafts Skills and Green Enterprises*, two reports by the Heritage Foundation of Pakistan, describe the various activities that women have performed ranging from the production of natural soap – to improving hygienic conditions – to terracotta jewels and artefacts, bamboo furniture for the house, but also *Kashi* or glazed pottery. These entrepreneurial economic activities allow women to become independent, access the market, and improve their knowledge by participating in courses and workshops and learning how to build houses or facilities for themselves and their families [Lari 2008; Lari 2014].

The second category, which has been identified, deals with the micro-infrastructures conceived to improve safety, hygiene, and housing conditions and provide food. Specifically, they include community and roof gardens, rainwater collection systems, water pumps, *Karavan* Eco-Toilets and the *Chulah*, quickly built up by what Lari calls the «barefoot entrepreneurs» (Fig. 3).

Specifically, Lari has turned her attention to the problem of the kitchen stove, where the goal was to improve its design to reduce the exposure to smoke and dirt for the women who use it while ensuring a washing and socializing area. She transformed the traditional stove by introducing a platform that raises the kitchen from the ground, keeping dirt away. At the same time is configured as a space that can be modified according to the user's needs. It not only provides women with a space to work and socialize but also to sell their crafts, becoming a tool to improve their condition [Lari 2018]. Furthermore, the platform elevates women's status, modifying their perception in relation to spatiality. In this sense, the ability of architecture to respond to a contingent need emerges not only by offering a physical-material response but by assuming and translating a series of intangible values into architectures, which directly influence the perception and ways of experiencing space for women. Although each *Chulah* is designed according to a standard



**3:** Micro-Infrastructure: Pakistan Chulah. The collage by the author shows the kitchen (Chulah) and its functioning in section. This device fosters women empowerment and at the same time it improves their living condition. The collage is composed by a fragment of an image by Heritage Foundation of Pakistan.

model, it is presented as a project open to modification. Through the decoration, it is personalized, adding ornaments handed down from generation to generation. The role of decoration is central in expressing the individuality of women within an organized community and their way of recognizing themselves in a space, transcending the dimension of simple, uncritically applied ornament. In this sense, decoration is not just a material question but a cultural one, as can be seen through Wright's reflection on its value: «The matter of ornament is [...] an expression of the quality of the soul within us, easily enjoyed by the enlightened when it is a real expression of ourselves» [Wright 1992, 51]. The prototypical architecture with a bamboo structure – the *LOG Lari Octa Green*, a housing module, the Women Center, a place of gathering for women, which presents an uplifted structure able to resist floods, becoming a safe place for people to escape to in case of an emergency, and the *KaravanGhar* Shelters [Lari 2008; Lari 2011a; Lari 2011b; Lari 2015; Lari 2018]. The prototype construction process is designed to encourage the

maximum participation of communities, specifically women, strengthening their ability to be part of the architectural production process. Thanks to the example of some instructors trained by the Heritage Foundation of Pakistan, women experiment with multiple solutions to build the prototype project (Fig. 4). First, they learn cutting and assembling techniques for the bamboo elements to create the supporting structure of the prototype, using different types of knots. Next, they deal with assembling the structures and producing woven straw rope; they learn to create lime and mud compounds for building bricks for masonry and then treat the surfaces to make them water resistant. The realization of the housing prototypes begins even before the implementation; thanks to theoretical training and learning-by-doing, women and men acquire valuable knowledge for construction, transmitting what they have learned. In this sense, Lari has 'modelled' the process of building prototypes around the concepts of simplicity, reproducibility, economy and inclusion.

## PROTOTYPICAL ARCHITECTURES



4: Prototypical Architectures. The collage by the author is composed by fragments of images by Heritage Foundation of Pakistan.

The urban scale focuses on the Angoori Bagh Project 1973-1977. It was initially conceived as a six thousand low-cost housing complex. However, only seven hundred and eighty-seven have been built. Here women's needs have been considered, understanding how they and their children and families would use both the domestic and public spaces. Lari considered their concerns about children playing outside their view in this vast complex.

Moreover, people in Lahore are not used to living in flats but in houses linked to the ground where they can grow vegetables and have hens. Therefore, the design solution she presented and discussed with the community encompassed their necessities. The residential units present small courtyards on the ground floor and terraces on the other levels. Furthermore, great attention was given to interpersonal relations, where open spaces and streets became gathering spaces for the community [Berlingieri et al. 2021].

## A pedagogical approach for empowering women

What emerges from Yasmeen Lari's approach is a strategy that takes shape within the communities in «a communal enterprise» taking up the definition of architecture as «spontaneous and continuing activity of a whole people with a common heritage, acting under a community of experience» suggested by Pietro Belluschi [Rudofsky 1964, 3-4]. Furthermore, architecture becomes a pedagogical tool that frames a spatial, social and

### A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH



5: A pedagogical approach. The collage by the Author is composed by fragments of images by Heritage Foundation of Pakistan.

cultural regeneration, building a sense of community engagement with a place. Training is a fundamental notion developed by the Heritage Foundation of Pakistan, brought forward thanks to the YouTube Channels (Yasmeen Lari's Zero Carbon Channel, Heritage Foundation of Pakistan Channel), which provide simple tutorials both in English and Urdu, but also thanks to the various reports which give detailed information about the constructions and the context.

Rather than giving people the finished structure, she provides them with the knowledge to build their own houses and infrastructures, triggering self-aid and mutual support chains (Fig. 5). This condition improves communities' capabilities to cope with emergencies and increases their self-reliance.

Specifically, thanks to the example of some of these instructors formed by the Heritage Foundation of Pakistan, women experiment with multiple solutions to build architecture. For example, Lari started the formation of Stove-Sisters, women who live in rural areas trained in the construction of the *Chulah* and who pass on what they have learned to other women, often poor and illiterate, from nearby villages. Therefore, this attitude fosters the democratization of architecture that takes on different connotations, from the broader one that refers to a series of fundamental rights, such as living in an appropriate place, to the democratization of the process and construction techniques.

## Conclusion

This contribution attempts to portray the complexity of Yasmeen Lari: a woman, an architect, a volunteer, an advocate for the poorest, a wife and a mother, showing how this spatial and cultural revolution can be brought forward in several ways. These various features that characterize her person emerge and influence an attitude toward the architectural project that assumes a political connotation – of resistance – besides those of care and attention for people and the environment. This attitude – focusing primarily on women's condition – is explored through the material dimension of architecture since «For today's oppressed women, it holds the promise of liberation [Lari 2000]. Her contribution stretches the disciplinary boundaries, where her mission to refocus the attention on the Pakistani culture, which was “forgotten” during British colonialization, shows an intrinsic complexity. Indeed, her approach entangles gender, class, and race instances, which intersect with ecological attention. These aspects show Lari's intentions to transform spaces and architectures while simultaneously improving social, economic, and environmental conditions. It is, in fact, a *modus operandi* that reveals the intention to implement a cultural revolution that is permanent and transmissible from generation to generation to preserve its future. The words by Charlotte Perriand, written to Pierre Jeanneret in 1936, seem to line up with Lari's humanistic architecture. «If I abandon the “profession of architecture” in order to focus on problems more directly connected with life, it is to be able to see more clearly into these problems» showing the intention to refocus the attention on everyday life and problems, looking at how people effectively use space. Accordingly, Lari, leaving behind her activity as an estimated architect, which could guarantee her economic stability and social prestige, showed the courage

to pursue an unconventional path. Her decision to dedicate her time and resources to the poorest communities, with the same commitment and attention given to prestigious clients, stimulates a reflection on the role and essence of architecture. By recasting the ontological dimension of the discipline, she becomes a beacon of hope and, indeed, an inspiration for future generations of architects.

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