

# UNCONVENTIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING!

PROJECTS, PRACTICES, POLICIES

EDITED BY MADDALENA FLORIANA GRASSI,  
VALENTINA NOVAK, FRANCESCA SERRAZANETTI,  
CONSTANZE WOLFGRING



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Maddalena Floriana Grassi, Valentina Novak,  
Francesca Serrazanetti, Constanze Wolfgring

Funded under the PRIN 2022 programme – Projects of Relevant National Interest, by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR) with PNRR funds: NextGenerationEU – Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.1. Project Title: “From Unconventional\* Households to Unconventional Affordable Housing”. CUP H53D23007080006. Project Code: 2022PZYKER

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MIMESIS EDIZIONI (Milano – Udine)

[www.mimesisedizioni.it](http://www.mimesisedizioni.it)

[mimesis@mimesisedizioni.it](mailto:mimesis@mimesisedizioni.it)

Isbn: 9791222324302

DOI: 10.7413/1234-1234095

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2025 – MIM EDIZIONI SRL

Piazza Don Enrico Mapelli 75

20099 Sesto San Giovanni (MI)

Phone: +39 02 24861657 / 21100089

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ROBERTO RIZZI\*  
LIVING IN “SEQUENCE SHOT”

*Suggestions*

a.

When Pieter De Hooch painted *Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard* in 1663, now housed at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (fig. 1), he drew attention to a simple gesture of daily life: two women are intent on placing clean linen in a wardrobe while a little girl is playing nearby. The scene is placed in the foreground, slightly off-centre to the left. The open wardrobe doors envelop the women in a somewhat dusky embrace, highlighting the luminous patch of folded sheets toward which their four hands converge, hands that seem to exchange glances of complicity.

Several sources of light rhythmically structure the depth of the composition: a diffuse light emanates from the stairway leading to the upper floors of the house; another one filters through glazed openings highlighting the window on the façade of the house; the farthest light falls on the buildings in the background and reflects in the water of the canal that runs between two streets.

This layered structure of spatial depth is reinforced by a succession of spaces portrayed.

The first room, in which the main scene takes place, is followed by another room, perceptible by the differing layout of the floor tiles. Beyond the open doorway, the urban space unfolds: a street, the water of the canal, another street, and finally, through the half-open door of the house in the background, one could imagine another sequence of rooms belonging to that dwelling.

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\* Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies.

This representation expresses an ideal of continuity in domestic spaces, coherently linked in sequence: each space is precisely identified by its spatial qualities, the articulation of its boundaries, and the typology of its furnishings. At the same time, however, these spaces are tightly interwoven through a complex web of relationships governed by the very thresholds that divide them: the transparency of windows, the gradable apertures of doors, the varied material treatments of surfaces. It is a form of continuity in which each fragment appears to be entrusted with a specific activity, an activity that, while perhaps unsuitable or impossible in a neighbouring fragment, does not result in indifference, mutual exclusion or in a mere juxtaposition between the parts.

It is as if each spatial unit, each room, looked at its contiguous to acknowledge their differences while preserving shared qualities. This “gaze” is defined by a kind of selective disposition, manifest in the way transitions between rooms are resolved: the elements of separation and connection and the quality of light and materials come together to define thresholds that, in the design of living spaces, act as junctures between places of *resemblance*<sup>2</sup> and difference.

*b.*

Mark Rothko’s pictorial research unfolds within the framework of American Abstract Expressionism. However, it gravitates toward a kind of “abstract impressionism” in which the gestural impulses typical of his contemporaries<sup>3</sup> are tempered by a calm, measured movement. His work is shaped by a contemplative attitude, the result of which is a slow and delicate gesture that leaves no visible trace (fig. 2). Varying degrees of transparency or depth are achieved through successive layers of pigment,

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2 I use the word *resemblances* to highlight the coexistence of sameness and difference, to evoke a condition, typical of contemporaneity, in which change becomes meaningful precisely through the simultaneous presence of identity and alterity. What I attempt here is to articulate, in spatial and architectural terms, the reflections developed by Francesco Remotti (Remotti 2019).

3 One need only think of Jackson Pollock’s *action painting*.



Figure 1. Pieter De Hooch (Rotterdam 1629-Amsterdam 1684). *Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard*, 1663, oil on canvas, 70x75,5. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (on loan from the City of Amsterdam).

which transform the flat chromatic surface into an actual space, perceived as a vibrant, expanded, and luminous substance. The rigid plane of the canvas is thus transfigured into a sort of veil that not only allows light to pass through, but almost seems to emit it at times, becoming space itself, expanding not just beyond the painting, but especially on the viewers' side of it, enveloping them into it (Argan 1977).

What is depicted in these works becomes a metaphor for these very dynamics: large chromatic fields, composed in horizontal bands, are placed side by side, dense at their core, dissolving at their edges which can be defined – although never sharp – more often ragged, permeable, or fused into one another through subtle blending.

When transposed into the three-dimensional realm of architecture, this approach invites us to consider boundaries as places of connection, rather than breaks or separations between adjacent elements. Thresholds that are not mere gradients of passage, but particular spaces capable of organising relations, generating space where previously there was division, turning a boundary into a place to be inhabited.



Figure 2. Mark Rothko (Dvinsk 1903-New York 1970), *Untitled (Violet, Black, Orange, Yellow on White and Red)*, 1949, oil on canvas, 207 x 167,6 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Gift, Elaine and Werner Dannheisser and The Dannheisser Foundation, 1978 (© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York).

c.

One of the most well-known warnings that opens Georges Perec's *Espèces d'espaces* (Perec 1974) ends with a similarly well-known and often-quoted phrase:

"In short, spaces have multiplied, been fragmented, and diversified. Today, there are spaces of every kind and size, for every use and every function. To live is to pass from one space to another, while trying as much as possible not to hurt oneself too badly." (*ibid.*, pp. 15-16).

Perec's reflection begins with the need to become conscious of what, by habit, is taken for granted or experienced without attention, as though it no longer contained any information or meaning. Habit anaesthetises and conditions: "Where is our life? Where is our body?" and crucially, "Where is our space?" (Perec 1989; it. tr. 1994, p. 12). The spaces we inhabit appear familiar in their apparent realism, but their reality and everyday presence do not make them immediately comprehensible. And if our present time has multiplied, fragmented, diversified, and specialised the spaces in which we live, the real challenge is our ability to move among them, to navigate these fragments and, in so doing, recompose a unity that cannot be assumed a priori.

Beyond the philosophical background of Perec's thought, what is particularly relevant is the emphasis on the need for connections across spaces that enable movement and passage, thereby making life possible. That is, not merely the spaces, but the way in which they are related, so that passage occurs "as much as possible without hurting oneself too badly". What Perec suggests is that dangers and tensions lie not only in the physical differences characterising spaces, but in the relationships among those occupying them: individuals or groups with divergent or even conflicting interests, or different or asynchronous times of use.

Here is what Perec's observation seems to convey: the urgency of carefully designing the transitional spaces mediating between the multiplicity of contrasting spatial fragments that characterise contemporary dwellings. These connections must allow for ordered, resolved, and hierarchically articulated transitions.

## Contextualisations

a.

Since the urbanisation processes triggered by the Industrial Revolution, architecture has been called upon to devise residential solutions capable of responding to high demand under constrained financial and spatial conditions.

At the height of its engagement with this issue, the Modern Movement developed housing strategies that, broadly speaking, revolved around the relationship between the *dwelling unit*, whose spaces were rationally configured and equipped to meet the needs of private family life, and *service* spaces, conceived as collective and public complements. The former were assembled according to precise distributive rules (fig. 3) (such as corridor-access or linear block typologies) within compact buildings laid out on open lots defined by transport networks. The latter were either clustered into architectural focal points or extended across specific parts of the buildings (e.g. the base, the rooftop).

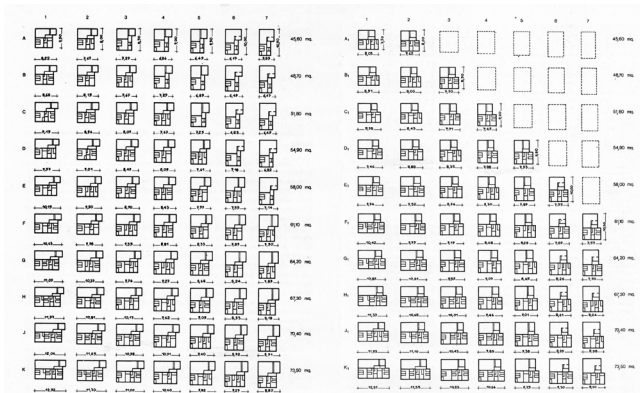


Figure 3. Analysis of a housing typology in which the depths of the building body (rows) and the front (columns) vary, maintaining the same area. Left: east staircase. Right: west staircase. Alexander Klein, *Contributi scientifici applicati al problema dell'abitazione*, in “*Zeitschrift für Bauwesen*”, n. 10, Berlin 1930 (Source: Baffa Rivolta & Rossari 1975, pp. 102-103).

Furthermore, the private units were strictly defined according to the number of users (fig. 4) and their financial means, which determined the number of "rooms" and their hierarchical arrangement based on function and circulation. Services were identified according to usage thresholds, intended to compensate for what was lacking within the dwellings themselves (Aymonino 1971; Baffa Rivolta & Rossari 1975).

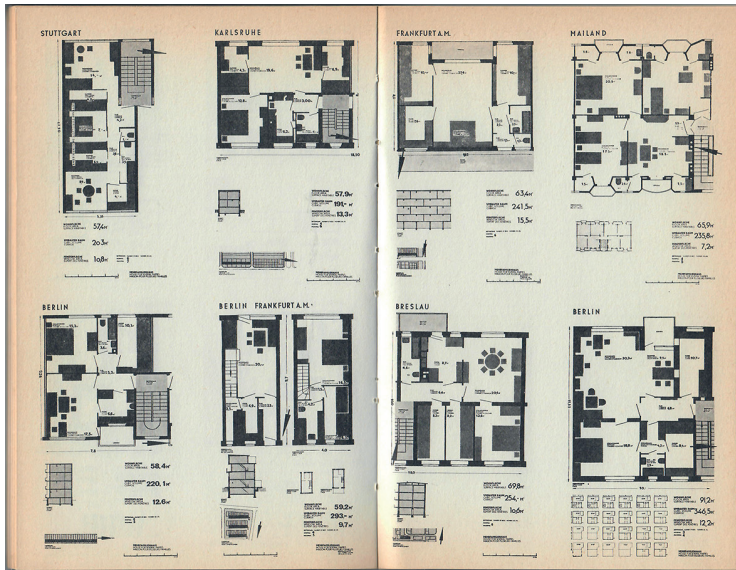


Figure 4. Housing for the Existenzminimum, II International Congress of Modern Architecture, Frankfurt, 1929, Exhibition panel curated by Ernst May. Above right is the Italian participation with a plan by Giovanni Broglio for the IACP Regina Elena (now Mazzini) quarter in Milan. Source (Aymonino 1971, pp. 150-151).

What increasingly came to dominate, ultimately becoming a stereotype, perhaps even betraying the movement's original ideals, was the self-contained nature of the housing unit: spatially hierarchical and entirely set apart from what lies beyond its entrance door. This exacerbated an idea of independence that

cannot truly exist and engendered a potential disconnection between the home and the city, between dwelling and social interaction, as though the apartment were the ultimate guardian of intimacy, the embodiment of the self or the nuclear household. This model neglects that the city itself – and the distances inherent in any social relationship – protects us from the excessive proximity and intimacy that the domestic sphere imposes, as the recent pandemic has made all too clear (Molinari 2020).

Conversely, the potential of the domestic environment to respond to the crisis of traditional public spaces, which have been taken over by commerce and leisure activities concentrated in specific times and places, remains largely unexplored.

The crisis of this model is made evident by new economic and sociodemographic dynamics, and by the resulting transformations in modes of dwelling. These changes challenge the entire system underpinning the model itself, ranging from regulations (which govern dimensions, performance standards, and requirements derived from this model) to construction methods and technologies, to the organisation of the real estate market, to public intervention policies and related funding mechanisms.

It would seem more fruitful to pursue research and experimentation capable of overcoming this rigid duality, breaking through the closed autonomy of the dwelling unit, toward a continuum that draws fragments of domestic activity into public spaces and invites particles of collective life in proximity to the home.

*b.*

Dwelling, understood in its broadest sense as a form of relationship among human beings, and between humans and other living beings, objects, and the world, is today shaken by profound transformations. It continues to be of concern to us, insofar as we uphold the principle that these very relationships ground and give meaning to architectural design: a practice that translates them into form, making them both possible and meaningful.

These transformations affect relationships among subjects, between subjects and places, and between subjects and time.

Today, residential demand appears profoundly transformed, marked by great variety and fragmentation. The traditional family unit, consisting of a couple with children, is no longer dominant, while new forms of cohabitation are emerging, driven by economic and sociodemographic changes (fig. 5). An economic change is for instance, the delocalisation of work, which not only causes people to move away from their original places of residence but also leads to repeated relocations in order to follow the shifting availability of jobs, often based on temporary contracts subject to frequent changes and transfers. This all unfolds within a context of ongoing economic instability and precarious employment.

In terms of sociodemographic changes, examples include young people's lengthened stay at their family homes, declining birth rate, and ageing population, only partially offset by increasing migration.

New modes of cohabitation are emerging, with single-person households becoming particularly prevalent. In Milan, for instance, out of a population of 1,396,059 people<sup>4</sup>, the average number of individuals per household has remained steady at 1.84 for over a decade, with approximately one-third of households comprising a single person. These individuals may be students, workers, or the elderly, but also the unemployed or adults who end up alone and out of work because of personal reasons and disrupted life paths. These situations are highly diverse, often marked by hardship and vulnerability.

Similarly, cohabitation arrangements are increasingly diversified, ranging from adults who choose, or are forced, to share a residence (e.g. elderly people with students or caregivers; young adults living with their parents for extended periods), with degrees of autonomy that may be rather high, to single-parent households or blended families with children.

The relationship between people and places is also marked by growing transience, driven by work-related mobility. As a matter of fact, work is increasingly carried out across distributed networks – dictated by organisational needs, proximity to clients or end users, or logistical constraints – rather than in one fixed location.

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4 As of 31 December 2019, Municipality of Milan based on ISTAT data.



*A proposal for design*

How could we synthesise the reflections developed thus far?

What impact can they have on architectural design culture?

How could we formulate an ideal design brief that puts these ideas into value?

Which elements could we focus on to respond to the questions that emerge from them?

The hypothesis here proposed is to reason through the notion of *spatial transitions*, as a category capable of capturing and addressing the issues we have outlined, not by concentrating on moments of "duration," that is, on states of equilibrium and stability (rooms defined by specialised functions), but instead on their *transitional passages*, seen as essential and generative elements.

The suggestion explored here is that of a: *sequence of thresholds from kerbside to street-facing window*.

{sidewalk ... gate ... concierge desk ... (covered) path ... [shared service] ... garden ...

[shared service] ... courtyard ... [shared service] ... stairwell entrance ... landing ... [shared service] ... stair/elevator ... landing ... [pause] ... entrance door ... apartment ... circulation ... [equipped node] ... room ... [flexible partition] ... services ... window}.

What is proposed, then, is not a single threshold element where two opposing and competing entities confront one another, but rather a concatenated system of passages (cfr. De Hooch), resolved in sequence through resemblance (cfr. Rothko), and enabling (cfr. Perce) both movement and dwelling. A system along which variations in layout can be articulated both in terms of the gradation between shared communal spaces and private ones (thus overcoming the binary of dwelling/services), and in terms of a more collective articulation of domestic space (thus overcoming the hierarchy of room/apartment).

Such a sequence must also be imagined as part of a system, one composed not only of a variety of similar points of origin

and destination (from various sidewalks to other frontages and overlooks), but also of sequences shaped by other trajectories (toward workplaces and places of study, to mention some). The outcome is a complex web of converging, overlapping, diverging, or interrupted directional strands, along which different subjects move at different times, and whose coexistence becomes possible, and meaningful, precisely through the way the spaces they traverse are articulated: either in continuity or in rupture.

These sequences must therefore be imagined as successions of spaces (marked by continuity and interruption) that are progressively selective and specifically attuned to the people who, along any given sequence, proceed along their path, stop to move towards other relational systems, or enter, arriving from elsewhere. Each sequence can be considered in both directions, either inbound (toward the gaze upon the street) or outbound (toward the street), with corresponding variations in use and dynamic flow. The aim is to hold together seamless continuity and gradations of specificity, so that what is lost beyond a threshold is compensated by what is gained beyond it: what is no longer possible merges with what now becomes so.

### *A didactic experimentation*

For some years now, within design studios and master's theses in Interior Architecture, part of the Architecture, Built Environment and Interiors programme at the Politecnico di Milano, we have been working on these themes. We have done so by focusing on various public housing neighbourhoods in Milan (San Siro, Mazzini, Ponti, Niguarda, Gratosoglio, Lorenteggio, Sant'Ambrogio, fig. 6), with contributions from colleagues in other disciplines (Urban Design, Architectural Technology, Building Physics and Environmental Studies, Sociology), and, despite the autonomous nature of academic research, by engaging as much as possible with local stakeholders (public agencies, associations, third-sector organisations).

The projects developed by our students in this context have sought to explore these issues and have been an essential source of insight for the reflections here presented<sup>5</sup>.

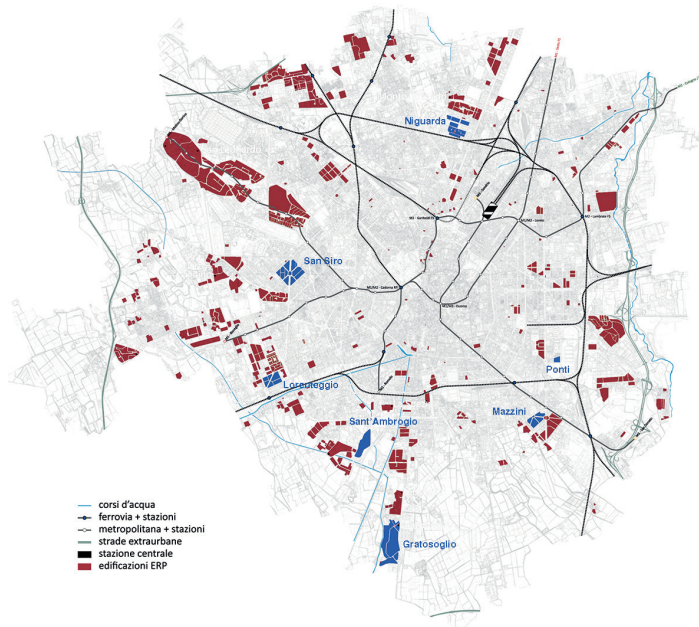


Figure 6. Public housing (ERP) in Milan. Map showing the location of ERP neighbourhoods (as of 1993), highlighting the neighbourhoods in which didactic experimentation was carried out in the Milan Polytechnic's Interior Architecture Studios.

5 This is not the place to present a systematic overview of the solutions that have been tested. The neighbourhoods listed include portions that are sufficiently homogeneous in terms of accessibility, built density, and resident profiles; within them, a range of different transformation strategies have been experimented. Comparing these cases makes it possible to identify a repertoire of alternatives tied to specific contexts, while a transversal reading brings to light both recurring patterns and exceptions. What is here presented is a further synthesis, organised into broad thematic groupings.

The choice of context for this design exercise is not accidental, nor should it be seen as contrary to the premises outlined above. On the contrary, the most recent examples of rehabilitation within this housing stock have begun to experiment with innovative solutions, disrupting the rigidity of the original layout and introducing new forms of mediation between places, between buildings, and between apartments. Examples of such forms of mediation include giving depth to windows, enhancing balconies and loggias, disseminating spaces for bodily care, adding value to stairwells at ground level and on intermediate landings through light and spaciousness, incorporating green spaces and micro-gardens into buildings, and introducing “domestic infrastructures” that support social interaction.

In synthesising the outcomes of these experiences, rather than listing specific solutions or their variations depending on context, we should identify the different spatial domains that may arise, regardless of scale or location (urban space, building, apartment, environmental unit, among others). These domains are not fixed, dimensionally defined places within a strict hierarchy, nor are they isolated from one another. Rather, they are simultaneously co-present and diachronically reiterated. They could be identified as follows:

### *Entrances*

Entrances are places where passage is selective. Movement is smooth for those who belong to, or recognise themselves within, a cohesive or formalised system of relationships beyond the threshold; it is interrupted for outsiders. Entrances thus make a different way of being together visible. The opposite direction, on the other hand, introduces conditions of looser constraints and anticipates a return to broader forms of shared space. Entrances occur repeatedly along the sequence described earlier, and at each point, they reduce (or increase) the size of the user group, tying spatiality to differing degrees of communal experience.

This can be seen, for instance, when approaching a group of buildings organised around a shared open space, often marked

by a civic number and a concierge's station (frequently abandoned or underused). The deviation from the general flow of the street is often accentuated by moments of expansion, like an effluent branching off from a main current. Here, fragments of delocalised services, coordinated with others, serve both as a prelude to the sharing of a specific group and as a link to other relational systems. Or again, this dynamics can be seen in the repeated ground-level access points to vertical circulation cores along building fronts, where the insertion of elevators and the reactivation of rarely used or degraded ground floors and basements dissolves the abrupt transition from the openness of courtyards or gardens to the enclosure of stairwells, extending the collective character of outdoor spaces (through transparency, dimensions, greenery, etc.) to areas typically reduced to mere functional corridors. The same applies to the proximities of residential units' entrances, which are often enhanced by material treatments or volumetric articulations (greenhouses, winter gardens, which sometimes have passive climate control functions) or by site-specific personalisation devices. Similarly, within individual environmental units, the crucial issue is how to express the variability of entrances and their potential connections in ways that correspond to the multiplicity of interpersonal relationships: each condition – to open or close, to expand or contract, to allow or deny the passage of light and gaze – activates design devices and relational dynamics that must be attentively considered.

### *Nodes*

Intersections of movement mostly involve individuals who share a common purpose, where passage is not selective, since all participants belong to the same relational system. Nodes are points of stops, pause or stillness, of temporary dilation along the route. Because of their static character, they often become opportunities for localised functional intensifications, for instance in connections or changes of direction along horizontal or vertical paths, in open or enclosed settings, or on the intermediate landings of stairwells. The same applies within

residential units, where nodes often mark the point around which services such as bathrooms and kitchens are arranged.

Simple elements, including benches, supports, and the like, or the material, chromatic, geometric, or spatial articulation of one of the building's surfaces, can confer character to these spaces and help to counterbalance the excessive functional specialisation of individual rooms. In doing so, they promote greater fluidity and diversity of use through a partial diffusion of functions and activities.

### *Overlooks*

Associated with moments of rest or contemplation, these places invite us to observe, penetrate into, and understand (or imagine) what lies beyond. Attention is paid here to the visual relationship of space and light between places, made tangible through the enhancement of visual depth, toward the greenery, the city, or other parts of a building or dwelling unit. Overlooks may unfold horizontally (through apertures, windows, or transparencies) or vertically (e.g. through double-height spaces, balconies). They may as well rely on inclined planes, rotated or offset walls and ceilings, ramps connecting different levels, or even on more complex articulations such as stepped platforms with integrated seating.

### *Paths*

Paths lie along horizontal or vertical lines of movement, towards the most private spaces or away from them. They facilitate a coordinated movement, connecting entrances, nodes, and overlooks. They accompany motion with a rhythmic cadence or an uninterrupted continuity of their defining elements. Often undervalued in favour of those spaces designed for dwelling, with which they are sometimes contrasted, paths instead offer an opportunity to emphasise the dynamism of movement, whether of people or things. This dynamism reflects the evolving nature of relationships among residents.

### *Beyond the Threshold*

The threshold is a place of interweaving, a space where opposing sides generate relationships.

When read in sequence, thresholds acquire directionality, generated by the sense of movement. The place one comes from begins to recede, while the place one is approaching begins to take shape. One has experienced the former, while the latter always holds something unforeseen.

Within this anticipation lie expectations, desires, and hopes...

The threshold becomes the place from which we perceive what lies beyond in an original way, not merely in its literal reality.

In many ancient Roman houses, small garden courtyards open off large reception halls. These *viridaria*, where fragments of nature are combined with frescoed representations of lush gardens (as in the Villa at Oplontis), do not offer direct access. They can only be contemplated through windows set in the surrounding walls, as though, by denying entry, an added value were produced – a value born of the threshold itself, which admits the gaze while withholding the body<sup>6</sup>. In this sense, every window possesses such a quality: we do not simply see what lies outside, namely beyond that glass, but also what we imagine to lie beyond it (fig. 7)<sup>7</sup>. Like any threshold, considered as a tangible architectural space, its surface expands and contains our presence *here*, along with the difference *there*, creating a single, possible whole.

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6 This is a line of thought often revisited by Francesco Venezia. See, for example, *Stanza con finestra* (Venezia 2010) or *Introduzione al mondo etrusco* (Venezia 2012).

7 This is masterfully described by Giovanni Raboni (Raboni 1977).



Figure 7. Ettore Sottsass (Innsbruck 1917-Milano 2007), *Mia madre seduta davanti alla finestra piccola. Era contenta...*, [My mother sat in front of the small window. She was happy] lithography, in Alfredo Taroni, ed., “Trattato di architettura”, artist’s book in 70 copies with 10 original lithographs (© Edizioni Lythos, Como 1999).

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