



Flexibility and gender
equality in housing

Public housing building in Can Batlló.

CHAPTER





01

Flexibility and gender equality in housing

00. Introduction

In the introduction to *The image of the city*¹ by American urban planner Kevin Andrew Lynch – who studied users’ experience of spaces – Lynch described the city as an entity whose moving elements are as important as the unmoving physical parts. His point of view is easy to understand if you look at the movement of people, traffic or the activities carried out on the street as being as important as the city’s buildings or fixed infrastructure. The perception of the city not as a physical item but as an organic one that is in constant evolution is very similar to the view we could have of any occupied architectural work, but more particularly of residential ones. In fact, one could define a home as a shared-living group that inhabits a place defined by a set of spaces. This means that spaces are as important in the definition of housing as the functions and uses given to them by their inhabitants.

This approach to housing is probably not an original one although, from the architects’ point of view, research has often focused on more ‘static’ aspects. Some leading architects of the second half of the 20th century, such as Christopher Alexander and N. John Habraken, already developed theories



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of housing, precisely placing at their centre not the formal conditions of architecture but the uses and occupation of spaces. Alexander’s design patterns or Habraken’s theory of supports respectively can be considered two examples of this interpretation.

For this reason, in the next few pages we will seek to analyse housing from a dual point of view: paying attention to the easily recognisable spaces that make up a home on the one hand, and considering the more everyday functions and uses that take place in it on the other.

In the context of collective housing, it is worth remembering that, for years, successive pieces of housing legislation have been passed resulting in the definition of a set of minimum compulsory physical conditions of habitability. Despite this, legislative efforts have historically focused on a quantitative definition that could explain a set of dimensions regarding health and comfort requirements, adapted to the standard occupancy of a home. This legislation could be considered to be valuable at the times of highest speculative pressure on mass housing production , particularly in the first half of the 20th century – but has proven to be insufficient at times, such as this, of demographic diversity, redefinition of shared-living models or a tendency towards the individual appropriation of spaces. As shown by all

1. Kevin Lynch (1998). *The Image of the City*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili.

Adaptability and flexibility

Although here we talk about *flexibility*, the term that best defines our conceptual approach is *adaptability*. In relation to this, we agree with the terminology used by professors Jeremy Till and Tatjana Schneider in their research on flexible housing².

According to their work, which uses the nomenclature previously used by engineer Steven Groák (*The Idea of Building*, 1992)³, a home is flexible when it can adapt to changing needs and patterns, both social and technological. In a way, he is referring to a home designed to permit physical modifications that will make it suitable for different configurations. On the other hand, by *adaptability* we mean the home's ability to accommodate a variety of social uses. In this case, without making changes to the layout, spaces can be considered to be adaptable when they allow very different functions and uses.

The term *flexibility* would thus be used very specifically to refer to the ability to change the physical configuration of the home. But, in general, we will use the word *flexibility* in a much more open way so as to include both abilities – adaptability too –, although giving priority to the soft concept of flexibility, the concept according to which a user is able to modify the appropriation or use of a space without any technological resources.

In this regard, the wish for flexibility has been found to be one of the qualities most sought after by contemporary architecture. Great masters of modern architecture have included this characteristic – albeit with different strategies – in their designs. And neither is our local tradition

2. Jeremy Till, Tatjana Schneider (2007). *Flexible Housing*. London: Architectural Press.

3. Steven Groák (1992). *The idea of building: Thought and action in the design and production of buildings*. London: E & FN Spon.

of modern collective housing – originally represented by architectural projects as important as those of Francesc Mitjans, Francisco Juan Barba Corsini, Josep Antoni Coderch and Lluís Nadal, for example – a stranger to this desire for flexibility.

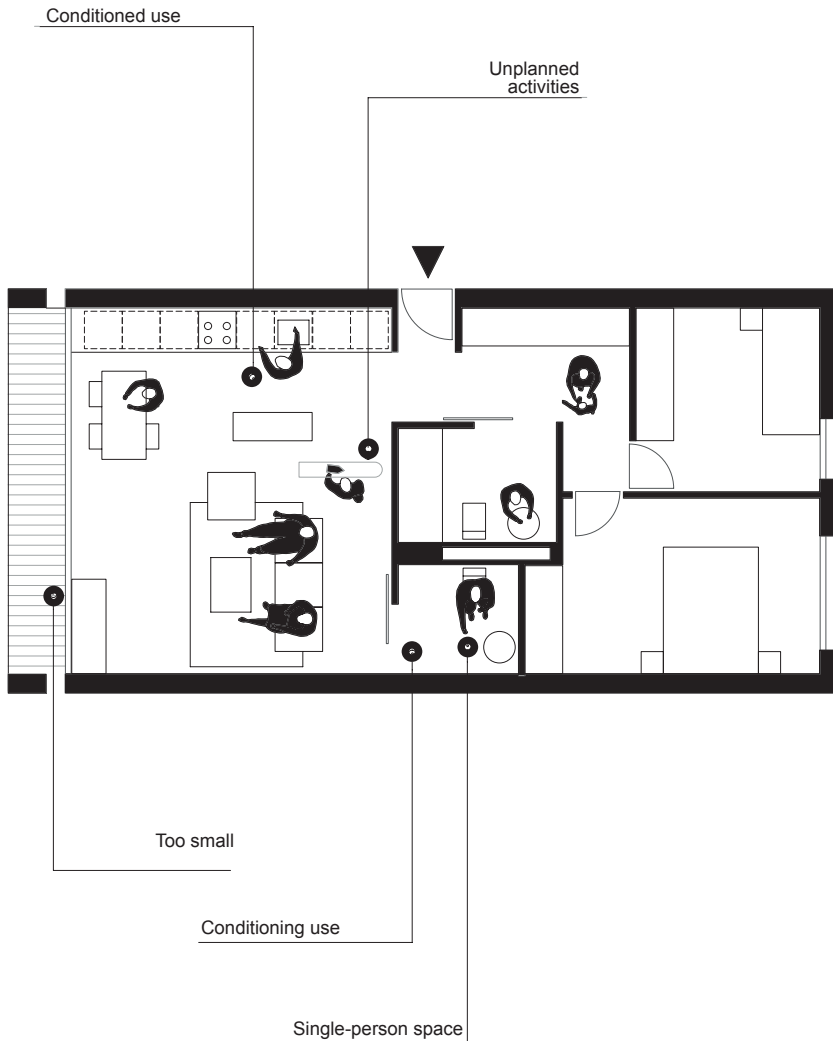
Space hierarchies

By including the gender perspective in this approach, the analysis of space hierarchies seeks to detect and raise the profile of situations of inequality, subordination or imbalance in the use of homes by men and women. It is worth remembering that the concept of gender perspective – or gender studies – refers to the category of analysis in which methods for detecting cultural constructions differentiated by



Interior of a home in the Can Batlló developments built by IMHAB.

Configuration



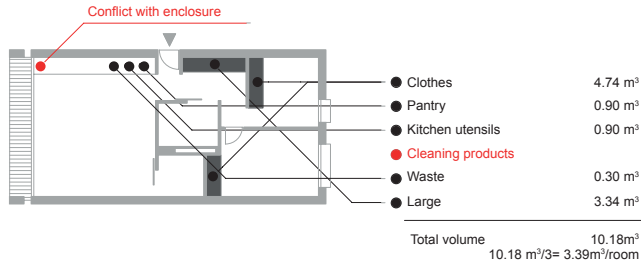
By observing the activities that usually take place at home, we can identify the main types of storage required, although subject to adding large spaces or storage rooms that can be used for any kind of storage.

Without reaching the percentage suggested by the Smithson's, in order to carry out this analysis we have assumed that each inhabitant could need a minimum of approximately 2.5 cubic metres for storage, spread out among the various areas based on function.

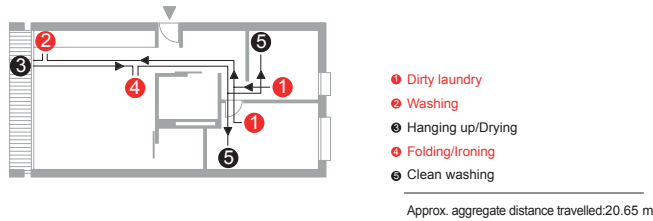
A good example of planned storage can be seen in the project for Building H1 of Phase IV of the Bon Pastor development designed by Alonso, Balaguer, Riera i Arquitectes Associats. This project envisages a large storage space located in a shared and central area of the home, near the entrance. The amount of storage space is supplemented by wardrobes in the bedrooms and over four metres of kitchen cupboards. It is easy to see how this amount of storage space makes it easier to distribute and store things.

Everyday uses

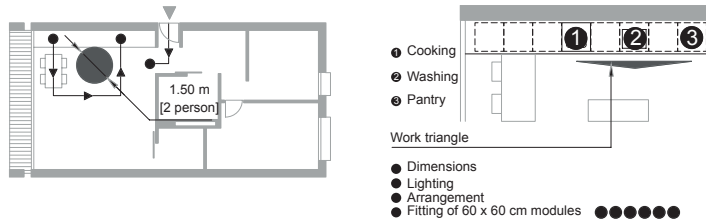
1 Storage



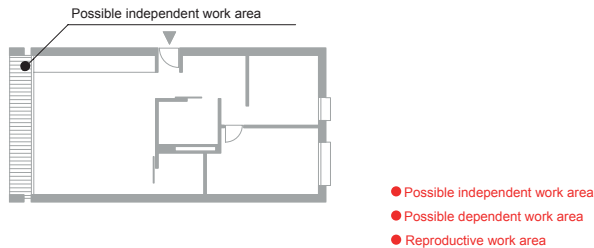
2 Laundry cycle



3 Food axis

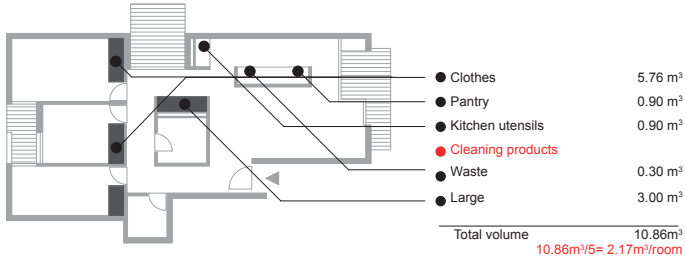


4 Work spaces

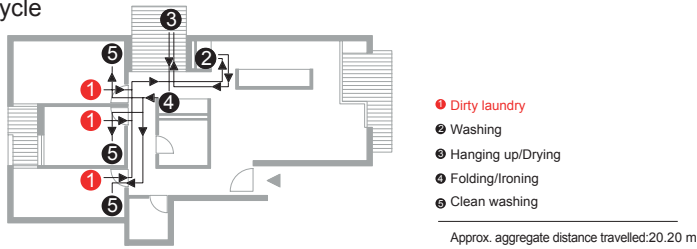


Everyday uses

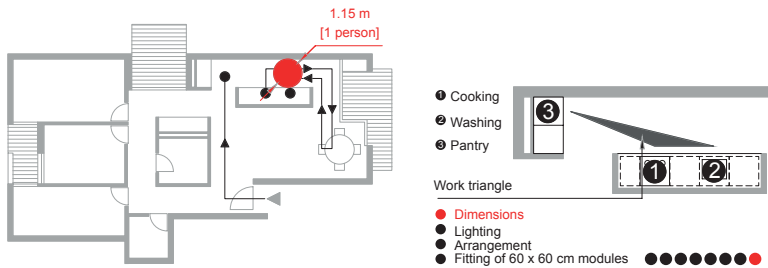
1 Storage



2 Laundry cycle



3 Food axis

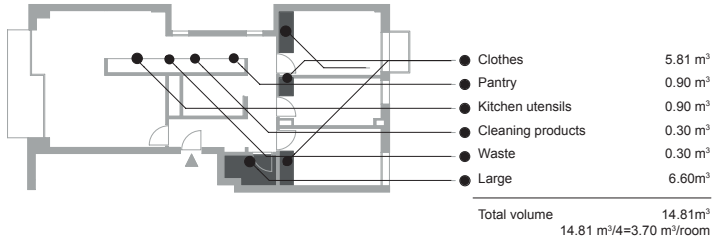


4 Work spaces

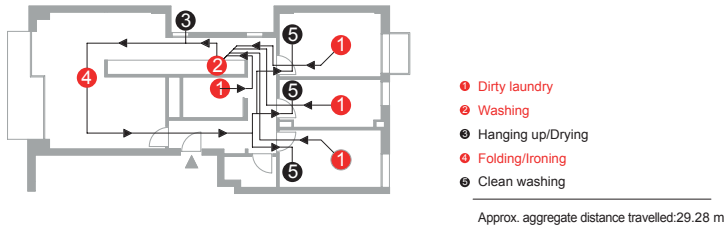


Everyday uses

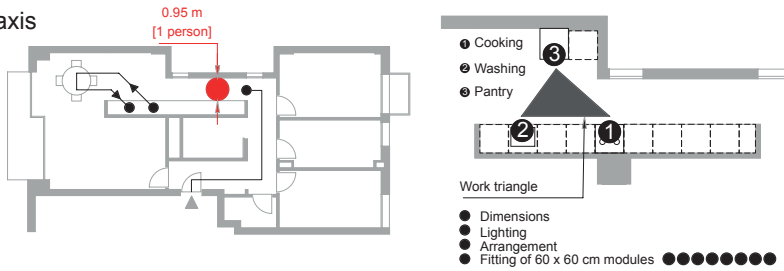
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