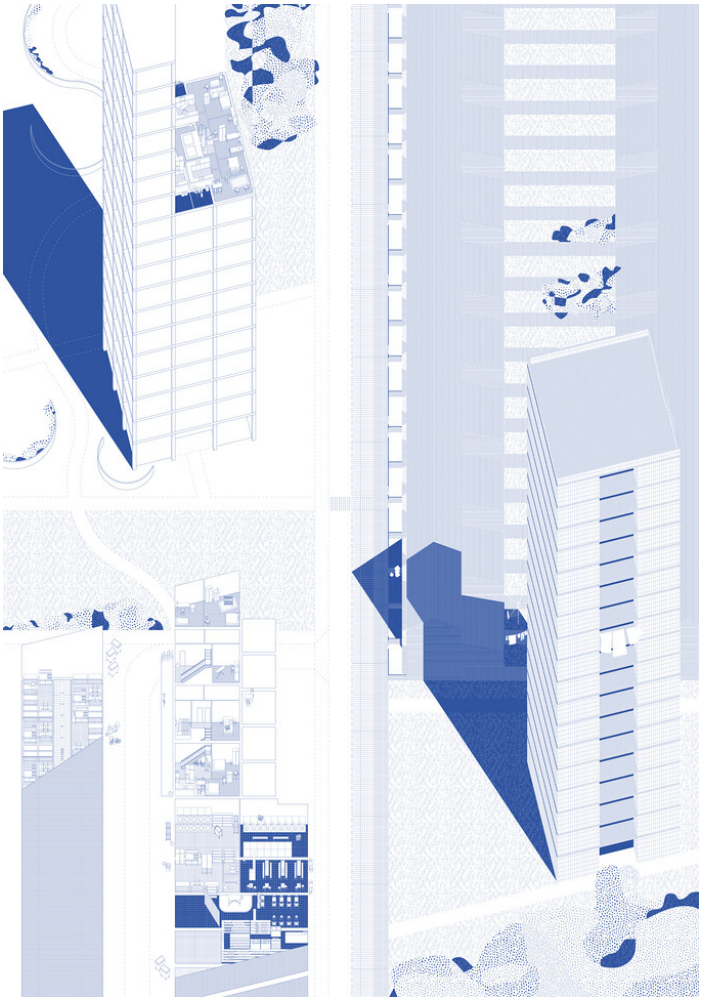
Alberte Lauridsen and Marianna Janowicz

Slippages, Spillages, and Divides



The contemporary city is organized with a clear front and back; layered but segregated. Drawing: Edit, 2021.

During the strictest Covid-19 lockdowns in the UK, the continued labor of waste collection workers and supermarket delivery drivers allowed other parts of the workforce to stay safely sheltered at home. The essential character of their work was dramatically exposed when most businesses were shut, the highstreets empty. Garbage collection vehicles suddenly stood out in deserted roads.

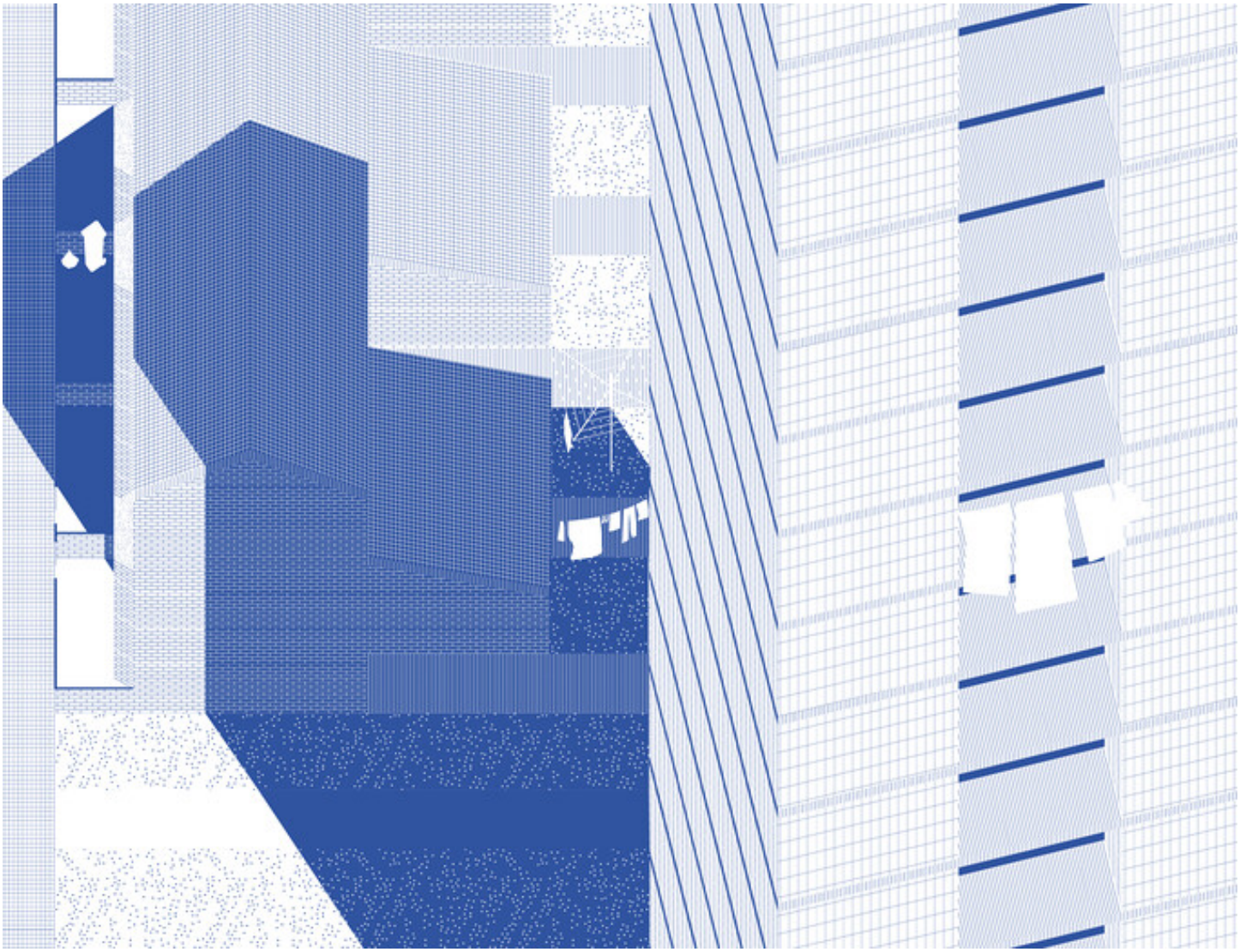
The language that was used to describe the situation quickly revealed what is popularly understood and valued as “work.” The phrase “work from home” dominated headlines, describing predominantly middle-class office workers who transitioned to working on laptops in their living rooms, kitchens, or bedrooms. Working from home was not an option for many. It is not possible, for instance, to collect garbage cans remotely. Furthermore, the phrase “work from home” and the surrounding discourse failed to recognize that the home has always been a site of work: homemakers have always worked at home. For when we say “work,” we often simply mean “productive, paid work.”

Both the case of the garbage collector and the homemaker reflect the chronic undervaluing of reproductive labor, which originated in the separation of the home from the workplace that began during the shift from a subsistence to money-based economy.[1] Even with the pandemic, this divide still manifests itself today, and the power relations that result are both represented and perpetually reproduced in the built environment. These spatial hierarchies can be observed not only in the home, but also in the spaces and systems that support the contemporary city, like cleaners moving invisibly through luxury hotel service areas, or dark kitchens churning out countless take away orders.

Spillages

As a domestic element within the built environment, the clothesline opens up tensions and anxieties surrounding the visibility of reproductive labor. Laundry drying on balconies and in gardens exists in the liminal space between the private realm of the home and public view, and its spillage out of the home can be deemed problematic. In the UK and across the Global North, publicly displaying washing can be banned by lease covenants, landlords, or management organizations, and is also often socially policed. Paradoxically, clean laundry is seen to contaminate the built environment.

Signs of reproductive labor, we are told, should be



Reproductive labor spills out onto the facade with washing lines inhabiting the liminal space between private and public. Drawing: Edit, 2021.

concealed and confined to the boundaries of the private home. Historically, however, doing laundry was communal work, and a space for womens' socializing and solidarity.

Yet the increasingly entrenched separation of genders that came about with the industrial revolution led to the expectation that women should not spend time alone (i.e. without their husband) outside of the home. Thus, groups of women in public came to be seen as threatening or deviant, even classified as prostitutes.

As Diane Ghirardo writes: "Structures such as laundries have largely disappeared over time... [R]arely preserved as such, they were not valued precisely because they were associated with women and domestic activities."[2] Drying laundry outside has also been entangled in issues of race and social status. In post-war suburban America, for instance, the washing line became associated with lower-class living and families who could not afford a tumble dryer.[3]

The capitalist approach to reproductive labor is contradictory. On the one hand, it mystifies womens' unpaid care work as labor of love, and on the other, it disguises and disavows the pivotal role of social reproduction. At the same time, the myth of maternal labors of love is used to enshrine the political power of the nuclear family and entrench the exploitation of unpaid labor. This also affects the professional, paid sectors of similar work. As Jayati Ghosh points out, as a result of womens' unpaid reproductive labor being undervalued, professions associated with care and ideas of "feminine" work are chronically underpaid for workers of all genders.[4] This is exemplified in professions such as nursing, which is traditionally associated with a feminized workforce and thus notoriously underfunded. In the global care chain, middle class families employ low-waged, often racialized, immigrant workers who usually have to leave their own family behind to care for someone else's children and/or household.[5] The notion that reproductive labor should be carried out by the lowest paid and most vulnerable members of society further contributes to the perceived low status of that work.

Within the heteropatriarchal system, cleaning and homemaking can be a source of pride for the homemaker, but the same sentiment or the same mission is never recognized when speaking about professional domestic workers or city cleaners. Similarly, the contemporary open-plan kitchen has been elevated to a space of social status, and is often a place for entertainment, while industrial and urban "dark kitchens"—a type of restaurant without a dining room attached—are hidden from view. The heteropatriarchal family is instrumentalized to provide a sense of status for the homemaker while at the same time alienating them from workers carrying out similar work professionally, outside of the family context.

Divides

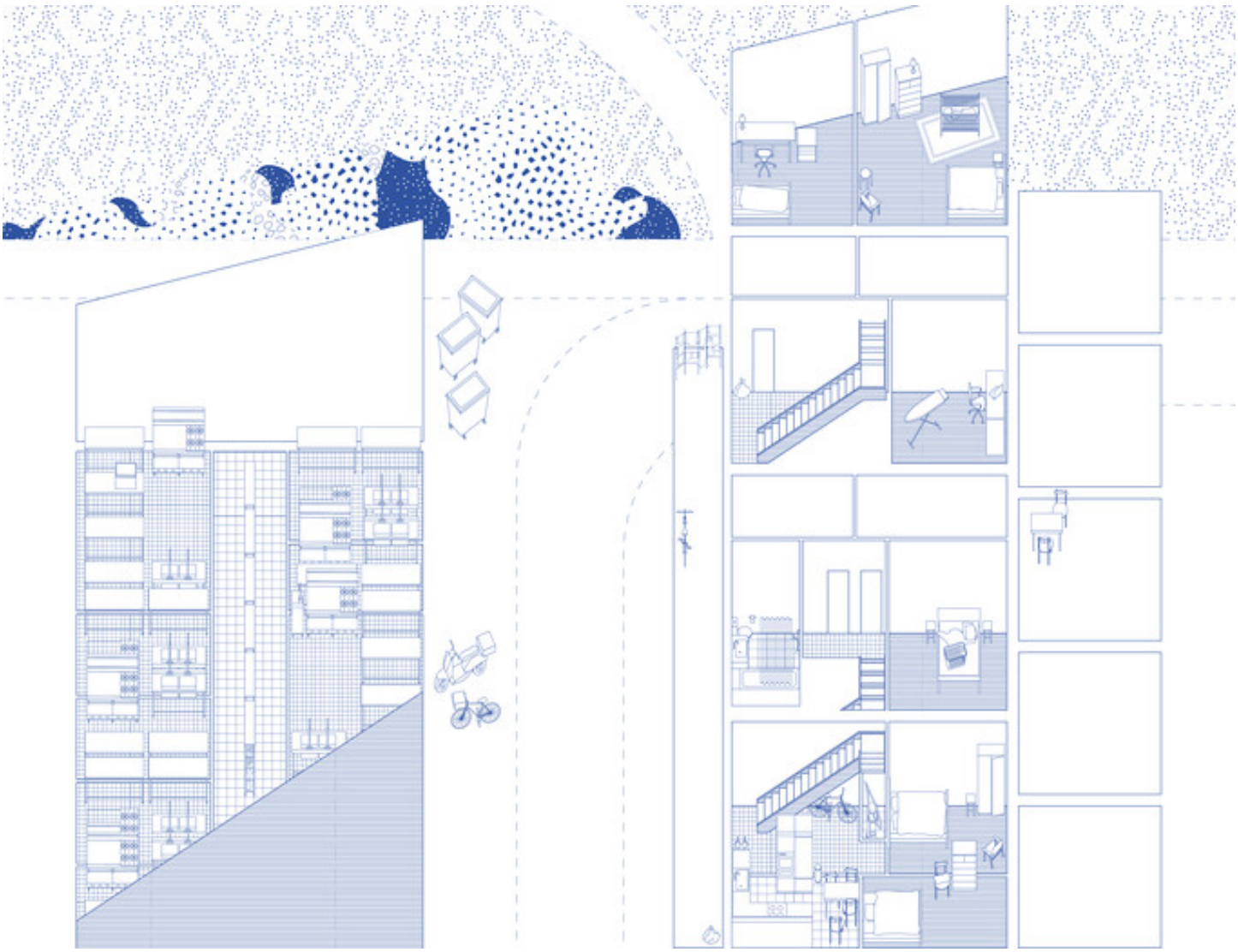
The spatial divides between the served and the servers often produce parallel worlds which unfold simultaneously. Sometimes the large distribution centers responsible for miraculous next-day deliveries are many miles away, but other times the "front of house" and "back of house" are only separated by a thin wall. These divisions can also be more subtle and temporal, such as with food delivery drivers who move through city streets steadily and discreetly, yet with no infrastructure to speak of, no physical place of their own. Their meals often get picked up from dark kitchens hidden away under railway arches or windowless dead-end rooms. In luxury hotels, designers go to great lengths to distill and separate routes for guests and for workers. Cleaners move unnoticed and unheard through cavernous corridors, service lifts and linen stores while guests enjoy the serenity provided by invisible labor.

In the UK, "poor doors" are entrances to buildings assigned to social rent tenants in developments that are supposedly "mixed tenure." In practice, this means owner-occupiers often get a spacious lobby with a sofa, while social rent tenants enter via a much humbler door often placed next to the garage or garbage storage, next to the "service" areas of the building. In his research on the five-square-meter maid's rooms in Lebanon, Bassem Saad reveals the proximity and stark contrast of tiny, often windowless workers' rooms attached to grand spaces reserved for the family. A similiar kind of spatial stratification is common also in the UK, where "houses in multiple occupation," also known as HMOs, contain dozens of miniscule rooms behind the facades of ordinary-looking Victorian terraced houses. These homes house students, low-income people, and notoriously often underpaid laborers such as seasonal Eastern European workers.

Slippages

The status of social reproduction is dependent on the presence or absence of familial ties, which have the cultural power to brand reproductive work as a "labor of love." The instrumentalization of the family unit in this sense reveals that the manner in which reproductive work is carried out is not natural or inherently practical. It also exposes that the factors which produce spatial stratification of the society are intersectional. As Silvia Federici writes:

> primitive accumulation has been above all an accumulation of differences, inequalities, hierarchies, divisions which have alienated workers from each other and even from themselves.[6]



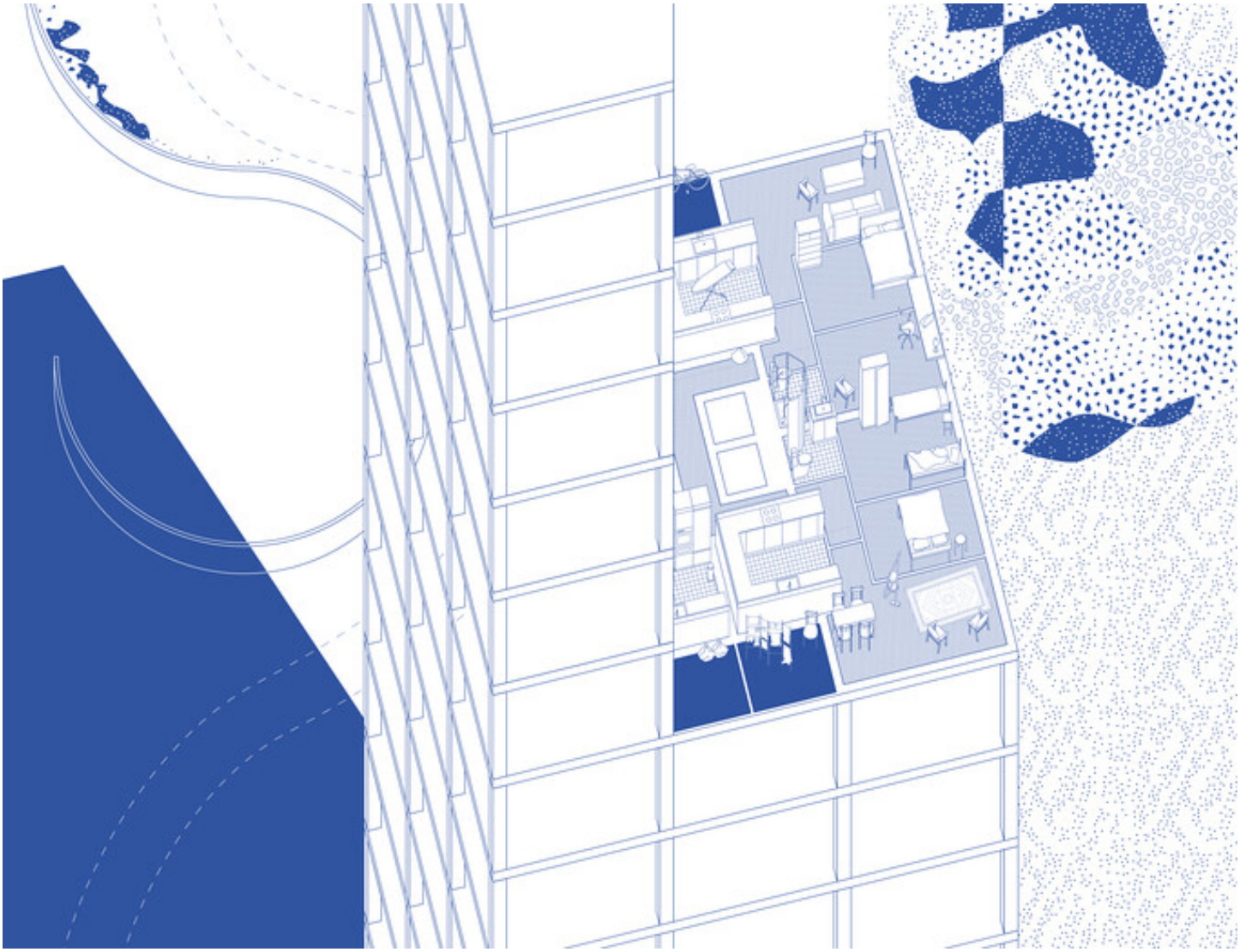
Parallel worlds of the server and the served sit side by side as dark kitchens occupy left over space at the periphery of the public realm. Drawing: Edit, 2021.

In other words, the political project that exploited womens' reproductive powers in medieval and enlightenment-era Europe is the same as the one that subjugated entire parts of the world through colonization in order to extract and accumulate resources. And it is the same one that today produces new forms of spatial stratification and alienation.

The liberation of unpaid and low paid workers in care, maintenance, and all types of social reproduction must happen simultaneously and in solidarity in order to bring about substantial change. A recognition of the home as a site of labor as well as questioning the spatial stratification of reproductive labor on an urban scale can help expose the inextricably linked power structures that inform decisions about which type of work should be celebrated and which concealed. The deeply ingrained ideas about "front of house" and "back of house," and what is deemed acceptable for public view inform not only the way dedicated work spaces are designed and organized, but also how labor is valued.

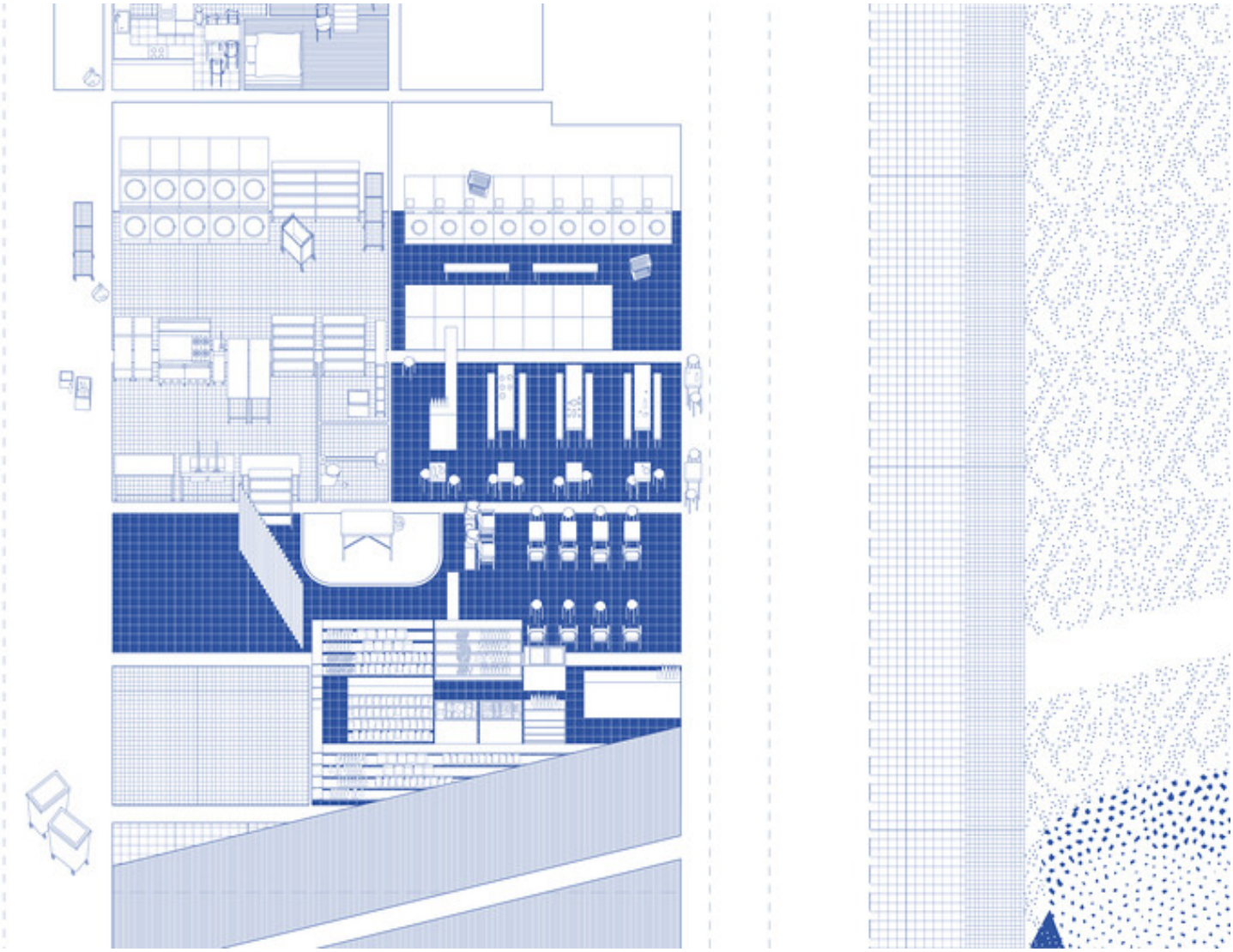
In "Figures, Doors and Passages," Robin Evans develops a critique of the corridor as a preventative and separating device. He describes modern architecture as "an agency for peace, security, and segregation which, by its very nature, limits the horizon of experience—Reducing noise-transmission, differentiating movement patterns, suppressing smells, stemming vandalism, cutting down the accumulation of dirt, impeding the spread of disease, closeting indecency and abolishing the unnecessary."[7]

Perhaps a manifesto for change in attitudes towards reproductive labor should include the abolition of the corridor. A case for reproduction to take up space and get in the way. An argument for a big reveal, a stop to the modest concealing of work considered undesirable and



Domestic space is siloed from productive labor, alienating and separating domestic and non-domestic workers. Drawing: Edit, 2021.

undignified. A call for air-dried laundry, washing lines, kitchens, canteens, launderettes, maintenance centers to be vast and in plain sight. Against the frictionless parallel spheres, and in favour of incidental encounter, interruption, and intersection.



The front of house and back of house organization of streets and cities aims to give an impression of frictionless living. Drawing: Edit, 2021.

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Alberte Lauridsen is an architectural designer and researcher, and is a founding member of feminist design collective, Edit.

Marianna Janowicz is a London-based architect, researcher and educator interested in domestic spaces and infrastructures and the politics of reproductive labour. She is a member of feminist design collective Edit.

Workplace is a collaboration between e-flux Architecture and the Canadian Centre for Architecture within the context of its year-long research project **Catching Up With Life**.

1
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2
Diane Ghirardo, “Women and space in a Renaissance Italian city.” In: Ian Borden and Jane Rendell eds., *Intersections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories* (London: Routledge, 2000).

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Jayati Ghosh, “ *The Public Value of Care and the Politics of Womens Work,” UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose* (June 18, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpgyqO_YwBw .

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Cinzia Aruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%* (London: Verso, 2019).

6
Silvia Federici, 136.

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Robin Evans, “Figures, Doors and Passages,” in *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (London: Architectural Association, 1997), 89–90.