

Homemade Prototypes: Deconstructing Domestic Decorum

Zahraa Essa



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'Homemade Prototypes'

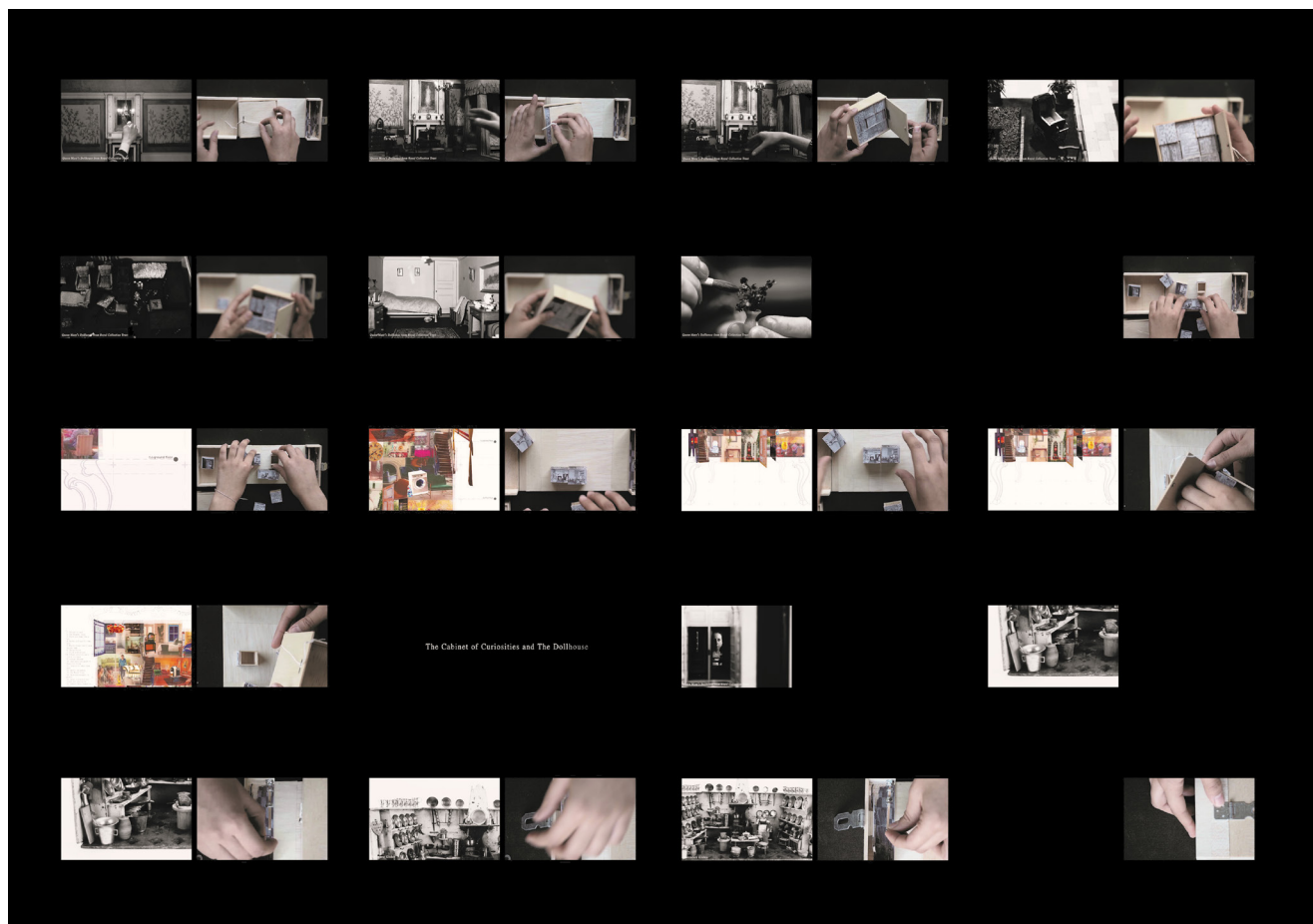
bell hooks (1990) writes in *Homeplace* (a site of resistance) that during the times of white supremacy and racial segregation in America, one's "homeplace" was seen as a place where one could freely challenge the issues of politics and humanisation. Home, as argued by bell hooks (1990) may be associated with forms of protest and power. While Leslie Kanes Weisman (2000) describes home as a highly gendered realm where a woman is always in service of a husband or child. The creation of miniature domestic scenarios dates to models found in ancient Egyptian tombs illustrating what daily life in Egypt was like. However, versions of seventeenth-century dollhouses in Northern Europe are reflected as small-scale replicas of the homes they were situated in, as a display and direct representation and "mini monuments" of wealth and social status. Thereafter, dollhouses become co-opted tools to teach young girls how to run a household and adopt traditionally gendered roles. The project uses the dollhouse through which to prototype and navigate six rooms in the heteropatriarchal South African Indian Muslim home. It deconstructs the constituents in the rooms to reveal the 'hauntings' (Gordon 2008) of the colonial legacy which are instituted and becomes a way of seeing wider influences of trade, empire, economic and societal changes.

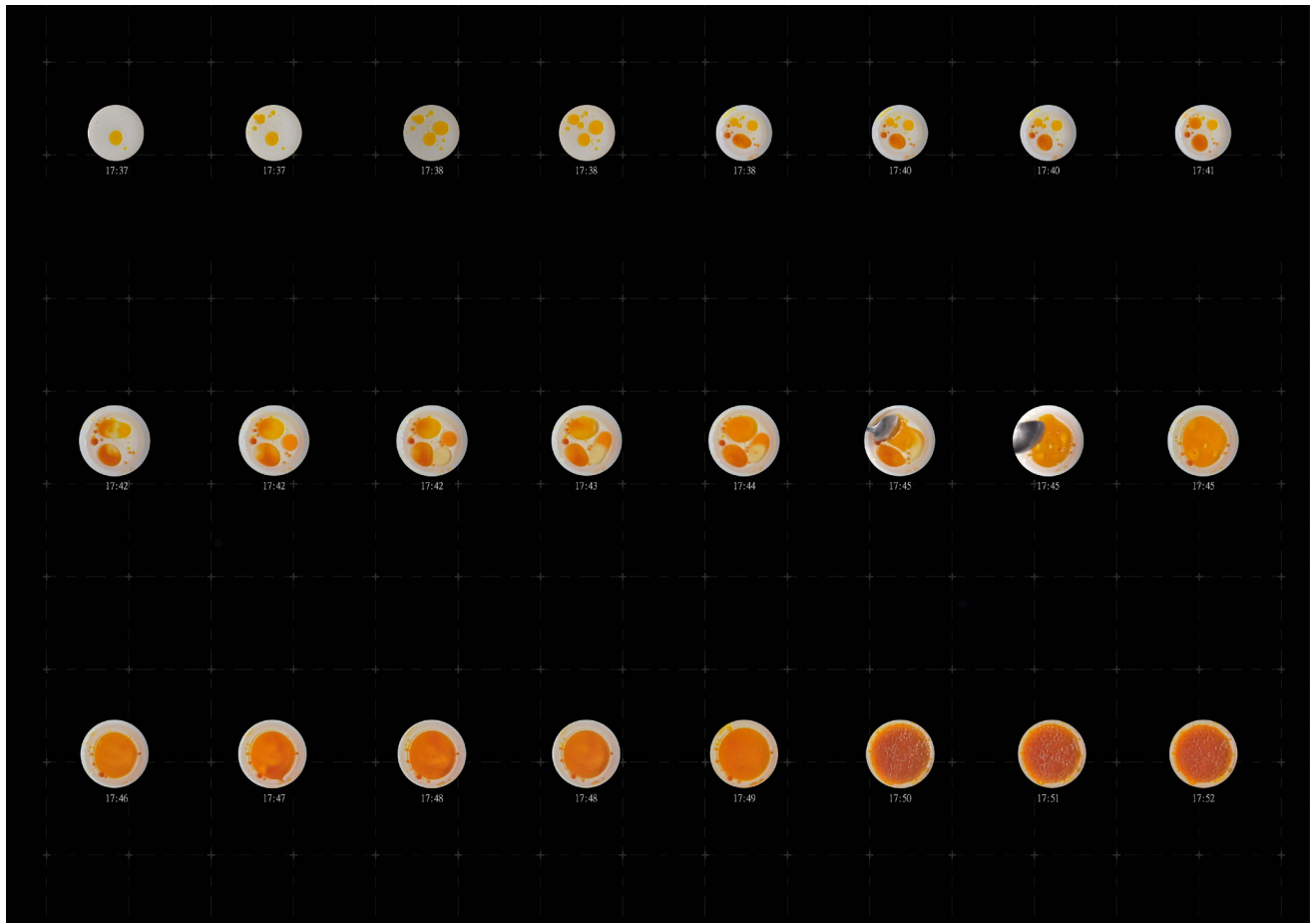
"A homemaker has no inviolable space of her own. She is attached to spaces of service. She is a hostess in the living room, a cook in the kitchen, a mother in the children's room, a lover in the bedroom, a chauffeur in the garage."¹

- 1 Leslie Kanes Weisman, 'Women's Environmental Rights: A Manifesto', in *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, ed. by Iain Borden, Barbara Penner, and Jane Rendell (London: Routledge, 2002).
- 2 Rozskia Parker quoted by Shonisani Netshia, "The Same but Not Quite" : Respectability, Creative Agencies and Self-Expression in Black Middle-Class Soweto Homes', *Image & Text: A Journal for Design*, 29.1 (2017), 55–71 <<https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC-a785c14c3>> .
- 3 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

The above quotation is taken from a manifesto for women's environmental rights from the 1980s. It describes home as a highly gendered realm, where a woman is always in service of a husband or child. Rozsika Parker states that in the nineteenth century, embroidery was considered "natural" to femininity, signifying respectability and obedience – a love for the home, and life without work outside the home.² Typically, artefacts created using the acquired "feminine skills" passed down through time are metaphorical connectors, linking maternal generations together.

It may be argued that while certain practices of "homemaking" which produce artefacts and traditions may relate to cultural and religious practices, others might be drawn from colonial ideals of the home or wider influences – anti-apartheid community cookbooks, ancient Egyptian archaeological finds on cooking and domesticity, empire linked to Silk Road trade networks, early twentieth-century modern kitchens, domestic labour, economic and societal changes and hierarchies of material culture – all of these are registered in the spatial organisation of the home. This research argues that in the process, as practices become hybridised and creolised, home always speaks to that which is intimately present and simultaneously "away," diasporic, or absent. These absences could be understood as "hauntings," always present yet often unacknowledged.³





The project uses the doll's house as a prototype to unpack the constituents and "hauntings" of the colonial legacy within the heteropatriarchal South African Indian Muslim home.

Institutions require the labour of instituting to be produced and reproduced. The project, therefore, takes as its starting prompts different forms of domestic labour mentioned in the quote above by Weisman, essentially containing four enactments in domestic space, namely: cooking, cleaning, childcare and décor.⁴ It investigates how domestic practices and the arrangement of domestic space reinforce issues of power dynamics and colonial ideals in the home.

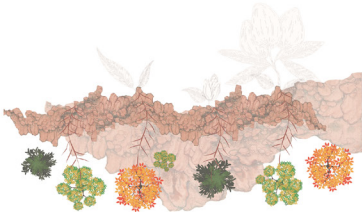
The project draws on multiple understandings and definitions of home, homemaking and homeplace. It understands home as an institutional space that is reproduced in different ways in different contexts. In addition to Weisman's description of home as a 'spatial and temporal metaphor,' as discussed above, bell hooks discusses her definition of "homeplace" as a space of resistance and protest defined in distinction to "home" as a generic label, while Margaret Schütte-Lihotzky's Frankfurt Kitchen is discussed as an example of a feminist architectural project after World War Two.⁵

4 Weismann, 'Women's Environmental Rights: A Manifesto', p. 2.

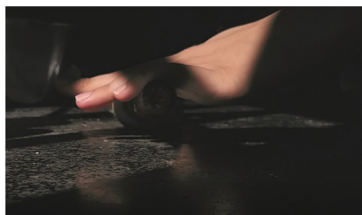
5 bell hooks, 'Homeplace: A Site of Resistance', in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, 2nd edn (Boston: South End Press, 1990), pp. 41–49 (p. 41); Juliet Kinchin and Aidan O'Connor, 'The Frankfurt Kitchen', MoMA | Counter Space <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/counter_space/the_frankfurt_kitchen/#highlights> [accessed 9 December 2021].

bell hooks argues for the recognition of “homeplace” as a space created by Black women. Writing of the segregated South in the US, she articulates that “homeplace” was a space to be free from white supremacy. She argues that while many Black women worked as domestic workers in white homes, they still found the time to create “homeplaces” as spaces to care for and nurture their own families. For hooks, “homeplace” is simultaneously a safe space and political space. The structure of the homeplace is not defined by sexist norms, but more by the struggle to uplift and resist racism and oppression. However, hooks suggests that despite this history, more recent efforts of patriarchy have changed the subversive homeplace into a space where women are viewed as subordinate. This shift in perspective, towards the home not being viewed as a site for political engagement, has had a negative impact on the construction of Black female identity. It has devalued the importance of the Black female labourer teaching critical consciousness in the domestic space.

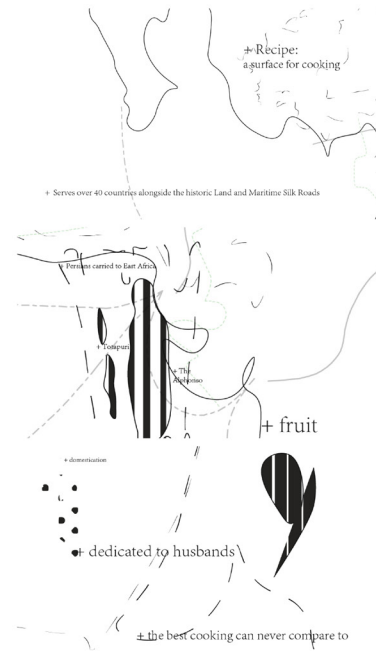
In a very different approach, one of the most well-known examples of a “modern kitchen” is the Frankfurt kitchen, designed by Margaret Schütte-Lihotzky. The design is based on theories of workflow and productivity and



Granite Counter-Top



Making Bread



Manual

described as a laboratory or a factory. The Frankfurt kitchen is an example of design influenced by post-traumatic circumstances of World War Two as well as modernisation.

Each kitchen came complete with a swivel stool, a gas stove, built-in storage, a fold-down ironing board, an adjustable ceiling light, and a removable garbage drawer. Labelled aluminium storage bins provided tidy organization for staples like sugar and rice as well as easy pouring. Careful thought was given to materials for specific functions, such as oak flour containers (to repel mealworms) and beech cutting surfaces (to resist staining and knife marks).⁶

Following World War Two, the Frankfurt kitchen was seen as a radical project that made women's work easier through the use of "scientific" ideas of productivity and an easier kitchen with modern appliances. Yet the kitchen was still understood as a woman's space.

Home may be seen as a "politically neutral space" because domestic practices are considered "ordinary." Robin Evans mentions in his article on 'Figures, Doors and Passages' that the architectural layouts of modern homes are viewed as "ordinary" typologies 'catering for basic human needs.'⁷ However, "ordinary" may suggest neutrality, when in fact viewing domestic practices and rituals as "ordinary" hides the power that they have on our lives and at the same time conceals the institutionalisation of domestic customs and arrangements.

Navigating through the heteropatriarchal South African Indian Muslim doll's house, colonial histories and present-day remnants clearly manifest. The prototype allows us into literal and figurative "curiosity cabinets" identifying and deconstructing important spatial organisations influenced by power dynamics, race and gender, that are often disregarded when we discuss the postcolonial condition in South Africa.

Biography

Zahraa Essa is a Candidate Architect, having obtained her Masters in Architecture at the Graduate School of Architecture, Johannesburg, 2020.

Living in Johannesburg all her life, she is curious and observant of human intuition and resilience and is interested in how hybrid cultures unfold identities, objects and influence social environments - particularly in the city where the landscape and lifestyle are transforming due to capitalism and modernisation.

6 Kinchin and O'Connor, 'The Frankfurt Kitchen', pa. 5.

7 Robin Evans, 'Figures, Doors and Passages', in *Translations from Drawing*

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