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**Ordinary Domestic Interiors:
An Original Observation Inside Italian Homes**

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Ordinary Domestic Interiors: An Original Observation Inside Italian Homes

Lucia Frescaroli

Abstract

Looking at the last sixty years of the house design history, we find many remarkable examples of villas, apartments, furniture and other Italian domestic spaces designed by famous architects. But does this compendium of cases include the most common dwellings and their inherent ways of living? Furthermore, is it even possible to define a sharable meaning of 'common dwelling'? The essay focuses on less-known examples of home interiors of Italian suburbs from World War II to today in order to give an answer to these questions. By discussing Michael de Certeau's *L'invention du Quotidien* (1980)¹ and *Histoire des choses banales* (1997) by Daniel Roche², the first part of this contribution explores the meaning of the 'quotidian' and the 'ordinary' in domestic life, and underlines the cultural, creative value of domestic practices. The second section takes into account a set of advertisements, surveys, catalogs, articles, and fine-art as well as non-professional photography, and it defines the main features, values, and characteristics of 'ordinary home interiors'. In the conclusions, the essay observes to what extent living spaces of common people differ from the images offered by the glossy magazines, and it pinpoints contemporary agents that are playing a dominant role in the process of home-making.

Keywords: Domestic interiors, Interiors design, Ordinary, Ordinary homes, Quotidian.

¹ Cf. English edition: de Certeau, M. 1988, *The practice of everyday life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, translated by Steven Rendall. (1st ed. fr., Gallimard, 1980).

² Cf. English edition: Roche, D. 2000, *A history of everyday things: the birth of consumption in France, 1600-1800*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, translated by Brian Pearce. (1st ed. fr., Fayard, 1997).

Introduction

Is it still necessary to ponder on the meaning of ‘home’ and the making process of its concept nowadays? The critical literature has encouraged such a research for a long time. For instance, Geroge Perec in his essay *Approaches to What?* wrote: “What’s needed perhaps is finally to find our own anthropology, one that will speak about us, will look in ourselves for what for so long we’ve pillaging from others. Not the exotic any more, but the endotic.

To question what seems so much a matter of course that we’ve forgotten its origins. [...]. What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our tools, the way we spent our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us.”³ According to his appealing rhetoric, interiors researchers should take into account especially the everyday-life spaces to better comprehend the meaningful process of home making. The French author aims to elicit questions about “the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual”⁴, through which, in his opinion, we can grasp a deeper understanding of our society.

More recently, many other critics (such as Franco La Cecla, Maurizio Vitta, Fulvio Irace, to name a few) have tried to rethink the meaning of ‘home’ from different standpoints. For instance, in *La Buena Vida* (2001) [the good habiting]⁵, Iñaki Ábalos claims that it is possible to gain insights into contemporary dwellings and the concept of ‘home’ by further investigating the modern domestic spaces. Although Ábalos grounds his analysis on a body of examples that includes only top-notch cases of home architecture and design (but, curiously, avoiding projects like *Ville Savoie* by Le Corbusier -1931- or the *Waterfall House* by Frank Lloyd Wright -1939-), his essay reveals the effort of rethinking the concept of ‘home’ from the then-uncommon standpoint of social idealism related to a planimetric analysis.

However rich the critical literature on the meaning of ‘home’ is, it seems that what is more importantly missing is a defined and shareable concept of ‘home’ in its declination of ‘quotidian’ and ‘ordinary domestic life’, in a more delimited set of contexts. This is why the aim of this essay is precisely to move towards such a desirable agreement. Through the construction of a theoretical framework that includes foundational texts such as Michael De Certeau’s *The practice of everyday life*, Daniel Roche’s *A history of everyday things*, and Giovanni Starace’s *Gli Oggetti e la Vita* (2013)⁶ [The objects and life], my work tries to define the characteristics shaping the ‘endotic’ spaces described by Perec.

³ Perec, G. 1997, *Approaches to What*. In *Species of Space and Other Pieces*, Penguin book, Harmondsworth, translated by John Starrock, reprint edition, 210-211. (1st ed. fr., Cause commune, 1973).

⁴ Perec, 1997, *Op. cit.*, 210.

⁵ Ábalos, I. 2009, *Il buon abitare. Pensare le case della modernità*, Marinotti, Milan. (1st ed. esp., Gustavo Gili, 2002)

⁶ Starace, G. 2013. *Gli oggetti e la vita. Riflessioni di un rigattiere dell’anima sulle cose possedute, le emozioni, la memoria*. Donzelli Editore, Rome.

As a premise of this research, I believe that only by observing shapes, qualities, ways of use, and aesthetic values of ordinary homes one can delineate its conceptual category. This means we need to relativize the elitist architecture and design influence, and figuratively cross the threshold of ordinary houses in order to investigate how ‘interiority’⁷ is generated. As Steiner writes, let’s “deflect the lens of the camera away from these modern landmarks and [let’s turn it] towards the everyday and the banal, towards non-architecture, towards what Rem Koolhaas has called generic”⁸. That is to say, let’s go beyond the academic discipline and investigate the real. Let’s interview the ordinary inhabitant and explore the figural places as a matrix into which the value of ‘home’ comes to life.

The Quotidian and the Ordinary

To define the meaning of “everyday life”, and consequently, the essential characteristics of the concept of ‘home’ that shields this life, it is fundamental to refer to Michel De Certeau’s essay, *The practice of Everyday Life*⁹. In this essay the French author presents the ‘quotidian’ as the result of a historical distance that separates the authorities controlling the circulation of knowledge from the ‘common’ man, that is to say those people who receive the ‘culture’ offered by the authorities and develop their knowledge principally from their personal experience. The paucity of the relationship between these two groups stabilizes the concept of ‘quotidian’ as a condition into which people act freely and independently, and that is why they generate a ‘private’ conscience¹⁰. This dynamic is principally manifested in the domestic context, and it shows a parallelism between the literary-narrative field described by De Certeau’s essay and the culture of contemporary domestic design. By analyzing how this ‘private’ conscience becomes manifest and formalized, De Certeau states that the actions performed by ‘common’ people that personalize and domesticate any kind of good can be seen as a second-degree form of fabrication and production. This standpoint gives to ‘common’ actions a proactive value, and, moreover, it recognizes an inventive property able to re-elaborate new forms of interaction between men and goods – forms that go beyond¹¹ the initial purposes for which products (both goods and services) were created.

In the light of this insight, the act of ‘consumption’ is no longer a passive practice, but a concrete act of production. Consumption “is devious,

⁷ For the meaning of ‘interiority’ see: Bassanelli, M. 2012, Cavum/Plenum: Interpretations of Domestic Space, *IDEA JOURNAL*, (2012), 140-149.

⁸ Steiner, D. 1999, Anonymous Architecture?, *Domus*, 811 (January 1999), 16.

⁹ De Certeau, M. 1988, *Op. Cit.*

¹⁰ Cf. Gans, H. J. 2005, Cultura popolare e cultura elevata. Un’analisi e una valutazione delle culture di gusto. In Mora, M. (edited by), *Gli attrezzi per vivere. Forme della produzione culturale, tra industria e vita quotidiana*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 117-136.

¹¹ The products on the market (either cultural or actual goods) are conceived, a priori, with a precise purpose and a specific modality of interaction. This may be seen as a constrictive and limiting factor, however, the possibility of the consumer to use the product in a new way allows the user to break this limitation, that is to say to “evade” from a pre-established use and to endow the product with a new meaning.

it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own product, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order”¹². This means that we should not accept the idea of an exact correspondence between ‘high-culture’ knowledge and an intrinsic value that is usually considered of ‘higher’ quality when compared to the knowledge produced by the ‘mass’¹³, generated by common, everyday actions or activities. Thus, the living practices that characterize what is ‘quotidian’ can be interpreted as a source for a specific domestic culture – mostly unnoticed and fragmented. This culture is the fruit of the creative re-use of spaces, furniture, and objects that have been selected among an a-priori range of choices offered by socio-economic systems in which habitants-consumers¹⁴ are immersed. The everyday life becomes formalized and acquires its own specificity by means of various ways of use, which are the micro-activities that depend on the particular necessities of occupants.

However, this ordinariness does not seem particularly captivating, or it does not cause a sensation. Perec underlines this aspect in his *Approaches to What?* in which he reminds readers to “question the habitual. [...] To question what seems so much a matter of course that we’ve forgotten its origin”¹⁵. The writer invites to reawake our sleepy eyes, and to identify in the consequentiality of habitual practices, spaces, and objects an actual narration of what we are. Looking at everyday places and dwellings implies the consideration of the most ‘common’ activities and spaces which could reveal us our modern anthropology. This “anonymous history”¹⁶ (using Siegfried Gideon’s words) is narrated by objects that are all around us, and for that reason, the anonymous history of the most ordinary houses is a history closely linked to the most widespread products and their related models of consumption.

Similarly, Daniel Roche puts into relation the domestic dimension to the complex commodity system, and he confirms the necessity of observing the culture of domestic design through ‘the world of common things’¹⁷. According to his definition, those ‘common’ objects are so popular and well-known that they have become symbols of a domestic environment acquiring an internationally shared value. This point of view becomes particularly fruitful if we want to investigate the meaning of the ‘quotidian’. The French historian recognizes into the production and consumption of everyday objects the quality of a narrative text that is useful for the understanding of society and western common-life habits. His reflections echo De Certeau’s evaluations. Roche observes societies from the

¹² De Certeau 1988, *Op. Cit.*, 11.

¹³ Cf. Crane, D. 2005 *Cultura elevata versus cultura popolare (rivisitate). Una riconcettualizzazione delle culture registrate*. In Mora, M. (edited by), *Gli attrezzi per vivere. Forme della produzione culturale, tra industria e vita quotidiana*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 137-156.

¹⁴ For a more complete definition of this category, see Fabris, G. 2012, *Il nuovo consumatore: verso il postmoderno*, Franco Angeli Editore, Milan.

¹⁵ Perec, G. 1997, *Op. Cit.*, 206.

¹⁶ Cf. Giedion, S. 1948, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

¹⁷ Cf. Roche 2000, *Op. Cit.*

standpoint of those objects that have been generated by a practical need, such as those tools without any particular cultural value and that cannot be included in what we usually call 'Art'. Therefore, the 'ordinary', from Roche's viewpoint, is strongly influenced by those actions that originate from practical needs and that for a long time have not been considered specific cultural practices. In this sense, the habitation is simply an 'ordinary' space, because it is dependent upon a habitual order that is largely recognized and determined by pre-set cultural products, which are, in turn, strongly influenced by the market trend.

This perspective may seem negative; however it hides a positive value: the particular subjectivity of inhabitants and their creativity can convey to domestic spaces a quality of uniqueness thanks to personalized ways of use and customized habitual practices. Without this specificity, living spaces would appear as if they were serial and deprived of humanity. The quotidian and the ordinary are two conditions in which people can act freely and express their subjective way of living. As a matter of fact, all inhabitants' practices produce, more or less consciously, a specific knowledge, a spark of a culture, and all these activities have the quality of forming and modifying domestic spaces. The ordinary home is the locus where these conditions are shielded and where one's own personal subjectivity and his/her own history generate and manifest.

Ordinary Homes

The previous section tries to understand and problematize what kind of space the ordinary and the quotidian generate, and it explores their variables and their specific features. Considering what we have said so far, it is possible to individuate a series of elements that could help define this kind of interior.

The term 'ordinary home' may be understood as representing those spaces without any particular cultural importance. Or, as opposed to 'trendy' or 'fashionable' houses, an 'ordinary home' does not aspire to be widely recognized from a specific culture, but it rather seems as a "background whispering". However, an 'ordinary home' can also be a cultural counterweight. I have already quickly mentioned how strongly the economic and productive context of a given society influences the most common interiors. This is why 'ordinary homes', in order to contrast this socio-economic authority, can also be understood as the dynamic locus that fulfill the subjective needs of its inhabitants through the unorthodox use of common products. Thus, 'ordinary homes' are shaped with those products that are addressed to broad market segments - let's say common, widespread products.

Therefore, the specificity of 'ordinary homes' is not ascribable to a specific style or a social class, but rather to specific ways of living. The culture generated from ordinary design can be defined as 'interclass' knowledge. Being broadly accepted, even amongst all social classes, the concept of an 'ordinary home' can be defined as a living model that must be considered and discussed critically. This is why it is important to look at

those professionals that have grabbed the specificities of this living model and have translated them in their work practice – each one of them in accordance with his/her singular personality and sensibility.

In order to verify these theoretical premises and advance our discussion towards a shareable definition of an ‘ordinary home’, it would be fruitful to observe and analyze a large body of common living spaces and their furniture systems. However, since this kind of study requires an excessive long time to be carried out ex novo, I have preferred to relate to previous studies, interviews, advertisement collections, and surveys based on the observation of ordinary living spaces in Italy during the last sixty years. This gave me also the possibility to significantly enlarge the body of cases for my analysis.

The following list is a brief collection of cases that outlines the historical evolution of the last sixty years of Italian ordinary homes¹⁸. This overview will help us understand more deeply which living models have mostly characterized the Italian ‘ordinary home’, and who are those figures who have more heavily affected the spaces of the collectivity. These sources have been selected primarily for their popularity, as a matter of fact, magazines, television advertisements, and catalogs, can reach large sections of the population. However, some of these items have been taken for their direct relation with the social context (i.e. photo reportages and surveys). Finally, the cases are organized chronologically, to understand more clearly the evolutionary trajectory of the Italian ordinary home.

The Ordinary as Extraordinary

Figure 1. *People Going Back Home at the End of Second World War.*
©«Domus» n.205, January 1946, p. 6.



¹⁸ The historical starting point of the research considerations is Second World War, because it changed radically Italian people's lives. However, some architects are interested in popular architecture developed before the war too. Cf. Pagano, G. and Guarniero, D. 1936, *Architettura rurale italiana*, Hoepli, Milan.

The first study case is a project that appeared in the 1945 issue of the magazine «Domus» which tackles on the dramatic post-war situation¹⁹ (Figure 1). The magazine mission aims to explore new ways to give back dignity and humanity to people's life. Rogers' article answers by proposing five home projects from five different architects. They take into consideration primarily the home design, because the postwar context gave to architects the possibility to be designers and thinkers of new possible models for a decorous life.

One of these projects has been designed by Vittorio Gandolfi²⁰, who offered home solutions for working class families. His proposal rethought modern furniture, by considering house habits, lifestyles and the related house objects. Especially, he dealt with the idea of feasibility in terms of affordability. This is why the apartment layout and its furniture look plain and coming from the Italian popular tradition (Figure 3). For instance, the kitchen setup is marked by poverty, however, in contrast, the architect tries to lend dignity to the house by keeping the representative family value unchanged, which are usually concretized in the organization of the living room (see Figure 2, for example the two emblematic filled chairs). Furthermore, the architect's proposal to furnish the daughter's room with two separate beds (which was unusual for a poor family at the time) reveals the intention to introduce intimacy and sense of privacy in ordinary domestic spaces. Thus, ordinariness emerges from a combination of past history, traditions and habits, and small innovations, but not of minor importance, that triggers an improvement in the living condition of the inhabitants.

¹⁹ Cf. Rogers, N., R 1946. *Pronto Soccorso. Cinque proposte di cinque architetti*, Domus, 205, (January 1946),

²⁰ For more information about the architect see: Gandolfi, V. 1963, *Vittorio Gandolfi architetto. Attività dal 1942 al 1962*, UTOA, Bologna.

Figure 2. *A Sketch of the Living Room Proposed by Vittorio Gandolfi.*
©«Domus» n.205, January 1946, p. 7-8.

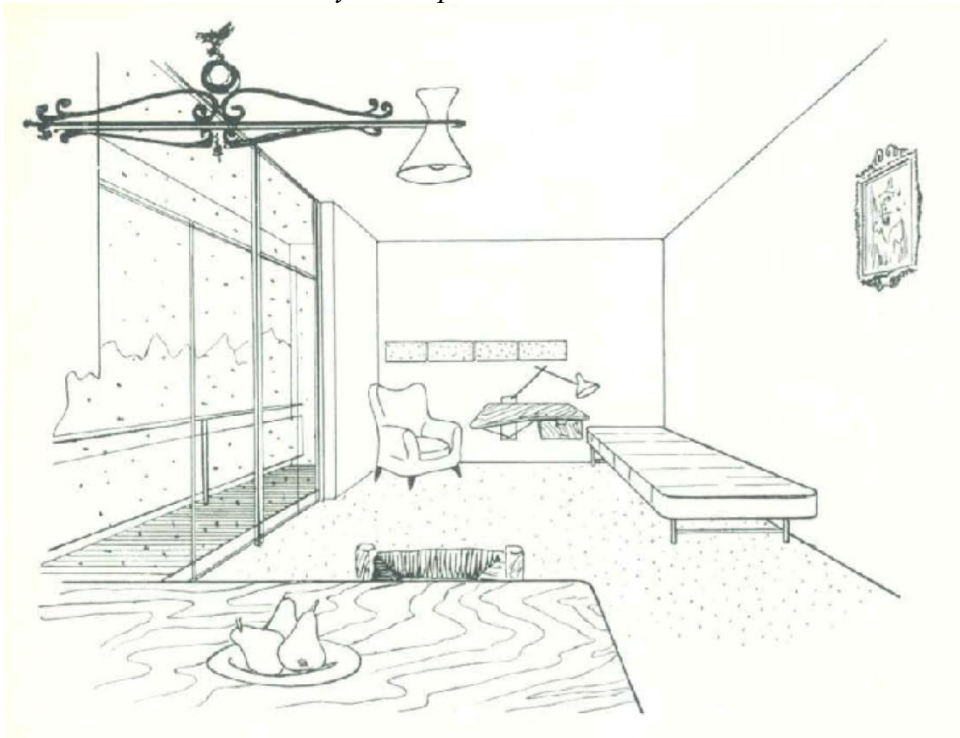
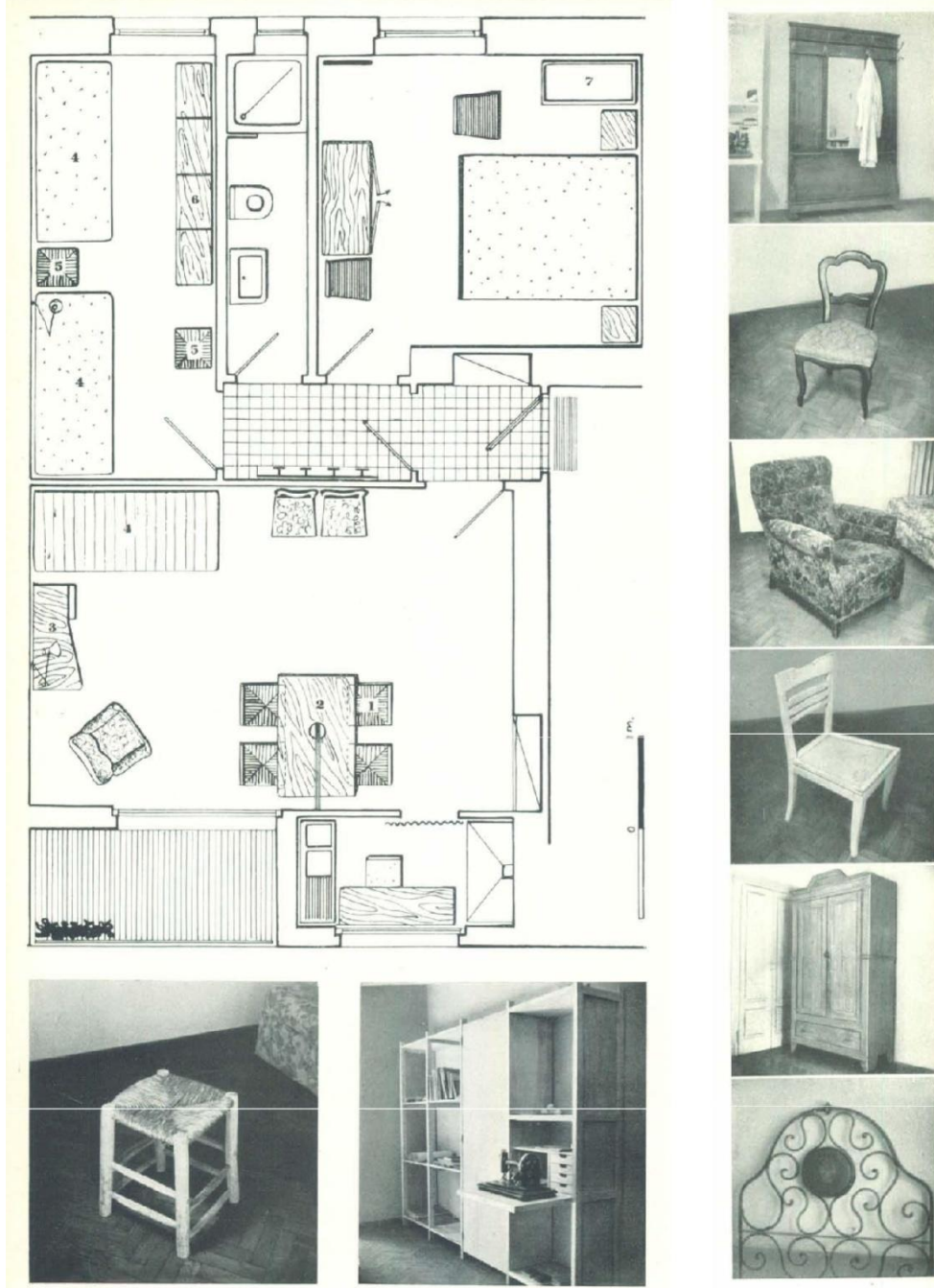


Figure 3. *A Plan and Pictures of Original Furniture used in Vittorio Gandolfi's Project. ©«Domus» n.205, January 1946, p. 7-8.*



Prophetic Ordinarity

The second study case belongs to a decade marked by confidence in the future: in the sixties the quality of life was rising thanks to the economic boom, and it was generally believed that such a positive trend would continue by virtue of the industrial development. The increasing accessibility for large population groups to furniture products influenced the domestic habits and the more traditional living models. In this new socio-economic condition the house exhibitions increased in number. This

augmentation of events displaying new possibilities of house interiors promoted the creation of a field of research on furniture and design more and more detached from real domestic contexts. For example, the exhibition *Forme e colori della casa oggi*²¹ [Forms and Colors in Today's House], held in 1957 in Como, testifies a large gap between architects' projects and real Italian domestic spaces.

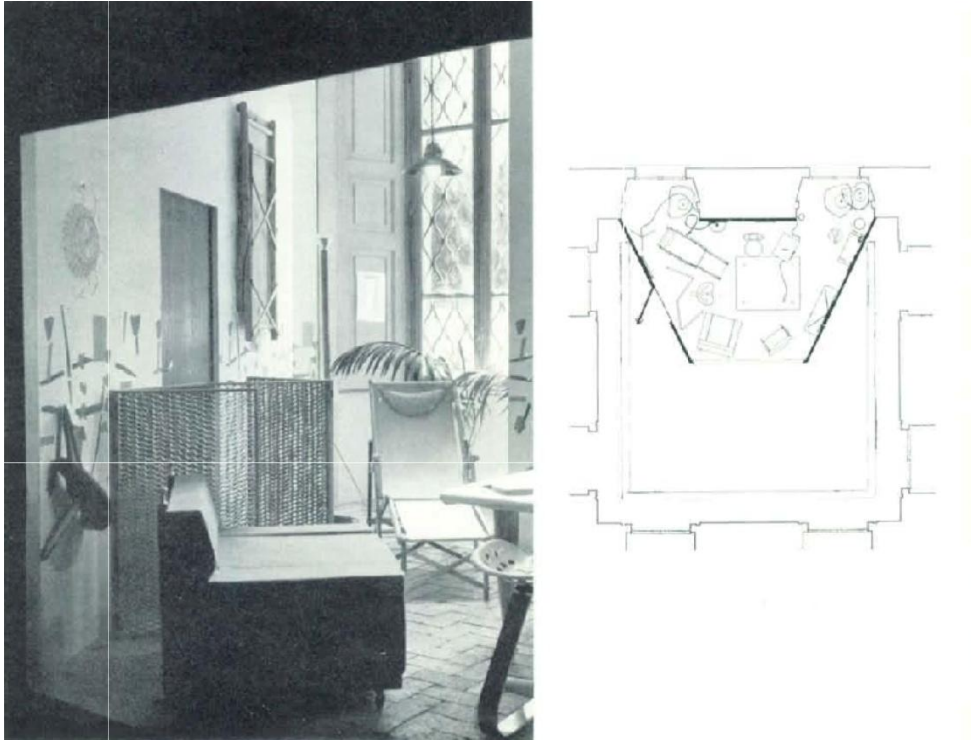
Nonetheless, although the major cultural trend was distancing the home design project from real life conditions, some designers were laying the basis for future home design developments. For instance, Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni's project can be seen almost as "prophetic" for those years. The two brothers designed a Livingroom-studio composed by a heterogenic body of objects (Figure 4): some are common objects, some are items coming from the rural Italian tradition, and some are modern prototypes. Different materials, forms, and object histories coexist in this room, and they transmit a sense of lightness and playfulness. The hybridity of its combinations of colors and traditional and modern materials (i.e. foam and fluorescent lamps), along with the apparent absence of a formal unifying grammar, present a specific Italian mannerism that would fully develop only a decade later. This juxtaposition of habits, and of common and innovative objects in a habitual domestic (Figure 5) space symbolize the Italian trust in the future, as well as the Italian ambiguous attitude towards the then-new social and family relationships.

Figure 4. *The Livingroom-Studio Proposed by Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni.* ©«Domus» n.335, October 1957, p. 42.



²¹ Cf. Mostra a Villa Olmo, *Domus*, 335 (October 1957), 33-48.

Figure 5. *A Picture and the Plan of the Livingroom-studio Proposed by Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. ©«Domus» n.335, October 1957, p. 42.*



Ordinariness and Comfort

At the beginning of the Sixties, while the entire Italian economy was growing more or less homogenously, the life style of the Italian society were evolving in many different ways, due to the various and specific interactions between geographic-bound cultures and modern house concepts. These differences were particularly marked between Northern and Southern Italy. Laura Minestroni describes this historical moment as follows: “Generally, from the 1960s advertising market we can detect two substantial tendencies in domestic rebuilding: on the one hand, the bourgeois, traditional house, and on the other, the modern, young house. The first one anchored to a concept of “domestic decorum” fostering dignity and a representative classicism; the second one oriented towards ideas of functionality and comfort, locus of the new and of the modern technology”²².

The tension between the traditional culture of the house and its familiar hierarchy, and the new social and economic conditions to which new generations aspired is represented also by Pietro Germi’s film *Sedotta e Abbandonata* [seduced and abandoned] (1964). This movie is set in a Sicilian domestic space that represents the short-circuit and the sclerotic relationships of a family. In this context, a fridge and a washing machine that appears in an unreal countryside kitchen (Figure 6): a stone sink, an old cabinet and a stone table contrast symbolically with the presence of new,

²² Minestroni, L. 1996, *Casa dolce casa. Storie dello spazio domestico tra pubblicità e società*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 46. Own translation.

white electric appliances. In these years, this generational clash became more and more relevant. After World War II, the Italian catholic agriculture culture was very much alive and possessed an inalienable value. Nonetheless, from the Sixties, this cultural stratus progressively disappeared in favor of an unshakable trust in the future and a refusal of the past and its related values. This detachment was triggered especially by economic growth.

Figure 6. *A Frame Taken from the Italian Film Sedotta e Abbandonata, in which it is shown the Contrast between Modernity and Tradition, Symbolized Respectively by the New Fridge and Traditional Kitchen Furniture*



This context encouraged the modern attitude of consumerism. According to Minestrone, “consumption became then a means of integration and realization based on a unifying and acquisitive ideology and on a mythology – inherited by the US – founded on possession and heterodirection”²³. This cultural trend pushed designers and architects to merge together furniture and new appliances (household appliances and mechanical tools) in order to improve the quality of family housework. It also created, “in a few years, a steady demand for house appliances, although limited to woodstove for countryside houses, electric and gas stoves for city houses”²⁴. It is interesting to remark that this progressive and emblematic development, highly hybrid, was taking place principally in the most ordinary dwellings.

²³ Minestrone, L. 1996, *Op. Cit.*, 38. Own translation.

²⁴ Minestrone, L. 1996, *Ibidem*. Own translation.

Ordinariness between North and South

At the end of the Seventies a series of interesting authorial photo reportages still show this cultural attitude²⁵. Particularly, the 1978 Gianni Berengo Gardin and Luciano d'Alessandro's work captured the attention of many critics of architecture and design²⁶. It revealed a fragmented and articulated domestic landscape: the houses portrayed by the two photographers showed domestic spaces that were still mostly hybrid, merging tradition and innovation, and only rarely, purely modern. These pictures exhibited different ways of living across different social classes, and they even made it possible to infer who the inhabitant was and what his job and his passions were – let's say, an ethnographic study. For some of them it was even possible to understand their geographic location, so that the reportages also depicted the contrast between the North and South of Italy. As a matter of fact, the north of the peninsula was wealthier than the south. By simplifying, this contrast could be seen in comparing the house design and furniture: northern houses were more frequently fully equipped and richer in décor (Figure 7, Figure 9), while southern ones were more traditional and poorer (Figure 8).

Figure 7. *Kitchen of a Countryside House in Veneto (North of Italy).*
©Giovanni Berengo Gardin, Gardi, Luciano D'Alessandro, *Dentro le case*, Milan, Electa, 1978, fig. 114.



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²⁵ Cf. Pellegrino, M. 1976, *Scene di matrimonio*, AGA "Il portichetto", Cuneo; Donà, C. 1979, Artigiano Gastone. Sessanta anni quattro camere+servizi, *Modo. Rivista di cultura del progetto*, 17 (March 1979), 46-49.

²⁶ Berengo Gardin, G. and D'Alessandro, L. 1978. *Dentro le case*, Electa, Milan.

Figure 8. *Kitchen of a Countryside House in Sardinia (South of Italy)*
©Giovanni Berengo Gardin, Gardi, Luciano D'Alessandro, *Dentro le case*, Milan, Electa, 1978, fig. 220.



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Figure 9. *Interior of a House in Piedmont (North of Italy).* ©Giovanni Berengo Gardin, Gardi, Luciano D'Alessandro, *Dentro le case*, Milan, Electa, 1978, fig. 70.



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Ordinariness and Bricolage

In the early Eighties, a group of professors and students of the Polytechnic University of Milan carried out a research on the working-class

areas of Milan by means of planimetric measurements analysis and non-artistic photo reportages²⁷. This study, titled “Spazio arredo della casa popolare” [Space and furniture of popular house], reports that the spatial organization of habitations was standard generally, and that interior spaces were diversified and organized according to subjective functions. Generally, they also followed a hierarchical logic from “the most public” (such as entrance and living room, Figure 10) to “the most private” (such as parents’ bedroom). Moreover, the domestic spaces of these houses were articulated and fragmented, because they lacked a project that integrated both architecture and furniture in a coherent whole. This study showed many different types of apartment that look apparently the same in the plan but their ‘interior landscapes’ are totally different from each other. The reason is that inhabitants used to choose their furniture entirely by themselves, bending its qualities to their subjective needs – they transformed their home spaces independently (Figure 11). In these terms, habitants looked like *bricoleurs*²⁸.

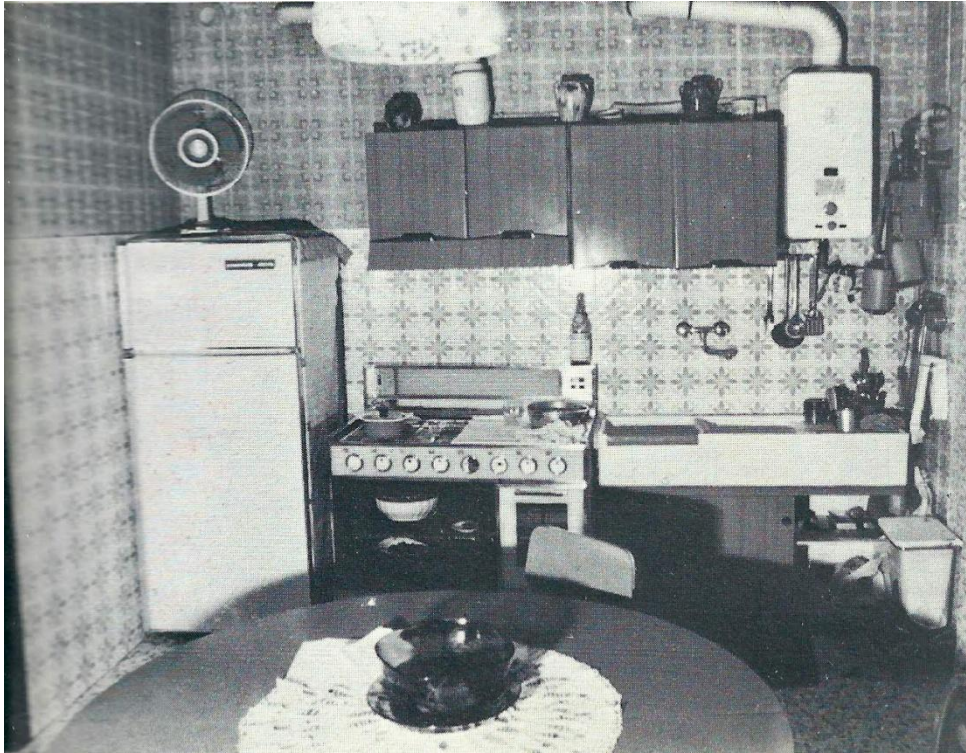
Figure 10. A Living Room in a Popular Apartment in the Milanese Suburb. ©*Spazio arredo della casa popolare. Un’indagine*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 1981, p. 30.



²⁷ Ottolini, G. 1981, *Spazio e arredo della casa popolare. Un’indagine*, Franco Angeli, Milan.

²⁸ The term *bricolage* was introduced in the fields of anthropology and sociology by the scholar Claude Levi-Strauss. According to him, *bricolage* is a practice that involves a personal, subjective use of those objects of which a person is surrounded or those that are more immediately available to him/her. By doing so, he/she adapts those objects to his/her needs.

Figure 11. *Picture of a Kitchen in a Popular Apartment in the Milanese Suburb. ©Spazio arredo della casa popolare. Un'indagine, Milan, Franco Angeli, 1981, p. 47.*



Ordinariness Today

To conclude this section, I propose to take into consideration a photo reportage titled “Dentro le Case. Mille case Italiane del Duemila” [Inside the Houses. A Thousand Italian Houses in Two Thousands]²⁹. This research (Figure 12) was sponsored by the committee of the Milan Furniture Fair and it aimed to examine what was present in reality inside the Italian houses at the beginning of the 21st Century. A number of sociologists (such as Marzio Barbagli and Franco La Cecla) and critics of the interior-design field (Ida Farè, Giampaolo Ferretti, Paul Ginsborg,) enriched this study with their comments. In short, most of the photos, taken from the inhabitants themselves, have perplexed the researchers because they showed domestic spaces characterized by furniture of little esthetic value, often strictly linked to traditional models of living and filled with knick-knacks without any cultural or economic value.

²⁹ Bocchi, L. and Scarzella, P. 2000, *Dentro le case. 1000 case italiane nel 2000*, iSaloni, Milan.

Figure 12. *The Book Cover of Dentro le case. Mille case italiane nel 2000 Makes Possible to Have a Glimpse of the Contemporary Interior Landscape of Italian Homes*



As we have seen, this kind of interiors have started to develop many years before the 21st Century, by juxtaposition and subtraction of elements³⁰, without a univocal formal organization. It seems the fruit of a gradual and continual re-integration of objects and furniture with spaces. From this perspective, the interiors do not possess a form on their own, but they can be defined as shapeless, that is to say they are a system of different parts that do not originate from a singular project that integrates space and furniture, but they are an ongoing process of adjustment.

Conclusions

The essay has tried to consider from a different angle the history of architecture and interior design, as well as the evolution of the

³⁰ Cf. Teyssot, G. 1987, *Paesaggio d'interni*, Quaderni di Lotus, Electa, Milan.

contemporary domestic landscape. And while studying the point of view of De Certeau, Perec, and Roche, it offers theoretical developments for the contemporary discussion on interior design. My research underlines that the quotidian in the domestic landscape is the result of a cultural gap, in which a powerful ‘popular’ creativity emerges – that is, a force that can shape the domestic spaces and personalize the goods provided by specific cultural, social, and economic systems.

From the list of study cases mentioned above (certainly, not exhaustive), we can identify some characteristics of the ‘ordinary home’ concept in its historical trajectory from the postwar years to today. It can help us to move towards a shareable definition of the category of domestic space. As we have said, ordinary homes are not prestigious, or ‘trendy’, or ‘fashionable’. They do not look for social recognition, but rather they are like ‘background whispering’. Ordinary homes are highly dependent on the economic and productive environment, but they are not the result of an artistic project. They are the fruit of an effort that aims to satisfy subjective needs by means of limited resources. This is why they are characterized by the most common products, usually low-price. Through the analysis of ‘ordinary home’ appearances we have sketched the generalization of an inner logic that defines its conformation and evolution. Finally, these cases have helped clarify the dynamic relationship between the conceptual and concrete formation of ‘home’ and inhabitants. Architects and professional designers seem no longer the principal agents idealizing common houses and making ‘homes’.

The Appearance of Ordinarity

From the Sixties to today, we can observe that the main changes in the concept of home, and its inherent ways of living, are related to the furniture and house equipment. The survey conducted from the professors and students of the Polytechnic University of Milan in the early 1980s confirms that the most common planimetric layout had been unchanged from the 1960s to then, while ‘interior landscapes’ changed radically. Thus, in ordinary homes, furniture and décor have acquired great importance because they have become the means through which inhabitants could directly transform their house in their home.

This proves that ‘ordinary home’ is shaped, theoretically and practically, fundamentally by the furniture chosen by its inhabitants and its subjective use, instead of architectural partitioning or structuring. The home layout is actualized by juxtaposition and subtraction of elements, echoing the living rhythm of its inhabitants and meeting their needs. The inhabitants manipulate the objects offered by the economic and productive systems, and customize their use.

The ‘Author’ of Ordinarity

The study cases *Dentro le Case* [Inside the Houses] and “Dentro le Case. Mille case Italiane del Duemila” [Inside the Houses. A Thousand Italian Houses in Two Thousands] have showed that thanks to the increase

of spending power in large groups of the population during the 1980s and 1990s, inhabitants could more easily modify their own house by purchasing furniture or various house goods. Furthermore, inhabitants became more aware of their own choices and acquired new instruments of selection and critique, especially in the Nineties (in particular because of the spread of the World Wide Web). So, they became the main ‘designer’ of their own house. Thanks to the empowerment of the global circulation of information, inhabitants can now domesticate, humanize, and personalize their domestic spaces, as if they were house ‘bricoleurs’.

In this context, architects, who were meant to realize high-quality domestic projects, seem to be replaced by new ‘figures of mediation’ that are more influential on the processes of home-making. These figures are producers and distributors of furniture that are asked more and more to foresee and satisfy the needs of large groups of the Italian population. In this respect, the IKEA phenomenon is particularly significant: low-price furniture of a rather good quality, easy to assemble, esthetically elaborated, commercialized through a strong web of advertising – these characteristics have given an immediate answer to the living tendencies of the last two decades. This is why IKEA has become such an impressive phenomenon that is modifying the most ordinary domestic environments. The flexibility of furniture and design has now become a mass, common characteristic. Affordability and personalization of delivery and assemblage encourage the simplification of furniture items, and promote functionality and low-cost materials.

The Qualities of Ordinarity

The qualities of ‘ordinary homes’ originate from affordable design projects using modest resources; they evolve in a dialogue with the needs of their inhabitants, in absence of the mediation of architects or professional designers. They are generally economical, as well as they are easy to get. This is why they are characterized by spontaneity, truthfulness, naturalness, cheapness, and simplicity.

Finally they are imbued with a narrative value: as Alessandro Mendini states, every house can be considered a museum. For every person can be seen as a museum (because he/she brings in him/herself a unique history, a singular narrative, and a singular practice of the domestic); thus, ordinary homes are places that reveal those narratives. Every ‘ordinary home’ may be understood as a possible subject capable to spell the main features and events of the history our ‘endotic’ spaces.

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