

my mother's spaces transformed¹

By Lori A. Brown, Syracuse University, USA

Abstract:

Emerging from the desire to document changes in my childhood home, this art project examines gender's impact on this space after the death of my mother. Over the next several years I photographed the house many times. During this period I was in residence at two artist colonies and presented the work in progress. Through conversations with other artists, I received insights proving helpful in the project's development. A series of collage drawings became a part of the project enabling me to synthesize my observations using particular photographs, research and writing I had been doing since the project's inception. The photographs and drawings have been exhibited at Wells College and the Earlville Opera House in Central New York.

In order to make it possible to think through and live [sexual] difference, we must reconsider the whole problematic of *space* and *time* [...]. The transition to a new age requires a change in our perception and conception of *space-time*, the *inhabiting of places* and of *containers*, or *envelopes of identity*. (Irigaray 7)

1 Emerging from the desire to document changes in my childhood home, this art project examines gender's impact on this space after the death of my mother. Over the next several years I photographed the house many times. During this period I was in residence at two artist colonies and presented the work in progress. Through conversations with other artists, I received insights proving helpful in the project's development. A series of collage drawings became a part of the project enabling me to synthesize my observations using particular photographs, research and writing I had been doing since the project's inception. The photographs and drawings have been exhibited at Wells College and the Earlville Opera House in Central New York.

2 This project begins with an interest in the female space as active within the domestic sphere. It involves issues of place making and hopes to understand both the processes leading to and consequences following the alteration and eventual elimination of such places within the home. Through the passage of time I began to decipher difference, differences of my childhood home. The temporality of these spaces fascinates me, how they have changed from a place created by my mother to one by my father, the spatial consequences of these changes, and ultimately how these alterations have affected my brother and our interactions with these spaces. Aware of certain transformations occurring with time, I eventually realized the

¹ I would first like to thank my father for permission to pursue this project. It has been a difficult, lengthy, and rewarding process and without his support, it would not have been possible. I would also like to thank Syracuse University School of Architecture for a faculty grant that helped defray the cost of exhibiting this project. In addition, I would like to thank the Macdowell and Caldera Artists colonies where portions of this project have been discussed and worked on.

feminine spaces and associations of my childhood home had been reclaimed, distorted, even erased. By displaying my own recent photographs of the house against others selected from our family archive, I am interested in revealing the passage of time and its effect on the spatial hierarchy of the house - specifically, the loss of the feminine. I believe that this loss, once captured, becomes a spatial potential that can be reclaimed. A proposition for something else, something other, and something new can only be contemplated once it has been understood how and why the home has been altered.

3 This work has provided an opportunity to examine gender's impact on the spatial structures of a familiar domestic space and furthered understanding of my father's alterations of our home. Although the primary focus in this project has been to synthesize my observations, it has undoubtedly laid the groundwork for future work to challenge societal "envelopes of identity." As Irigaray points out, for an autonomous and independent self-representation for women and femininity to emerge, a reconceptualization of space and time must occur (see Grosz 120). As both a feminist architect and educator, I am committed to this pursuit. The following photographs and collage drawings are the beginning of my explorations synthesizing my observations with my desires for the space Irigaray speaks of.

the kitchen



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

4 In order to understand the temporal issues at play in the house, one must discuss how their spatial uses have transformed. Before my mother's death, the kitchen was a multi-use space. Obviously used for cooking and eating, it was also a social and commercial space. In order to earn additional money, my mother created and ran a baking business out of her kitchen. After her passing, the kitchen's primary uses changed. My father does not often cook, so it has become a place to eat breakfast and to heat leftovers. However the most fascinating aspect is the kitchen's transformation into a place used to collect random mail, plastic food containers, and other small items. The counter, table surfaces, and utility room have become cluttered and packed with so many items that the spaces have been rendered unusable - now a showcase of my father's daily life. When the family is eating a meal together now, there is no longer a real sense of the event of the meal but instead the focus becomes placed upon the moving and rearranging of things on the table in order to create a space where we can all eat together. Not only does the collection of these unusable items occur in the kitchen, once the family's central space in the house, but it also occurs in the living room and the dining room, spaces adjacent to the kitchen. Spatially, my father has transformed his environment through the addition of items that inherently do not have much value; value in the sense that they are

essentially things he will eventually discard.

the bedroom



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.

5 Another space that has been altered over the course of time is my parent's bedroom. Once used by both my mother and father, the room has become another area for my father to collect and store things. And because few see it, there is a tendency for him to store even more here. The dresser is a good example. Once divided in half for each to use, my father now has stacks of papers all over it. One sees very little of the actual horizontal surface of the dresser because it is so covered with his mail. The most revealing space is the shared space of my parents' bed. The actual area where my mother once slept has been overtaken by mail and is now not able to be used. He has literally altered his environment to such a degree as to eliminate the space my mother once occupied.

eliminated female spaces

6 I believe the altering of one's space after a loved one passes is completely normal. Architecturally there are many ways to do this. However, what I find fascinating is how and with what my father has selected to do this with. He has not physically reconfigured the space: either by changing the furniture or use of the rooms. Instead, he has selected all temporary items - items that could be argued as neutral, meaningless, or recyclable. Are the objects he has selected to do this with important? I believe they are. They allow for this alteration but encourage the space to continually change - adding to or subtracting from. So in fact, this alteration can be changed yet again and again, reconfiguring in order to mask or fill a void left by my mother's passing. The spaces once associated with her and her daily activities are now no longer present but traces are left behind. For example, my mother was a saver of plastic containers to use for things such as leftovers. Unlike my father, she always put those things away once cleaned. Leaving the containers out on the counter, I am constantly reminded of her when I see them. Many of the spaces he has used to collect things act as similar signifiers. However my father has successfully altered the spaces to such a degree that these traces are no longer apparent to anyone other than my brother and myself.

7 Why has the female space been taken over? Relocated? Adjusted? One tries, either consciously or unconsciously, to create a space that is safe for oneself. In my father's case, he is trying to reconfigure and redefine ownership of one's self through one's space at the expense of the spatial memory of my mother. How does one set boundaries of safety? Why so temporal an alteration? What does this say about the intentions of the alterations? Maybe one could begin to answer these questions through the following: these alterations are not intended to be permanent and so therefore allow for easy modifications, adjustments, or changes. The project would like to consider how to reclaim these spaces and this first happens

through the recognition of their absence.

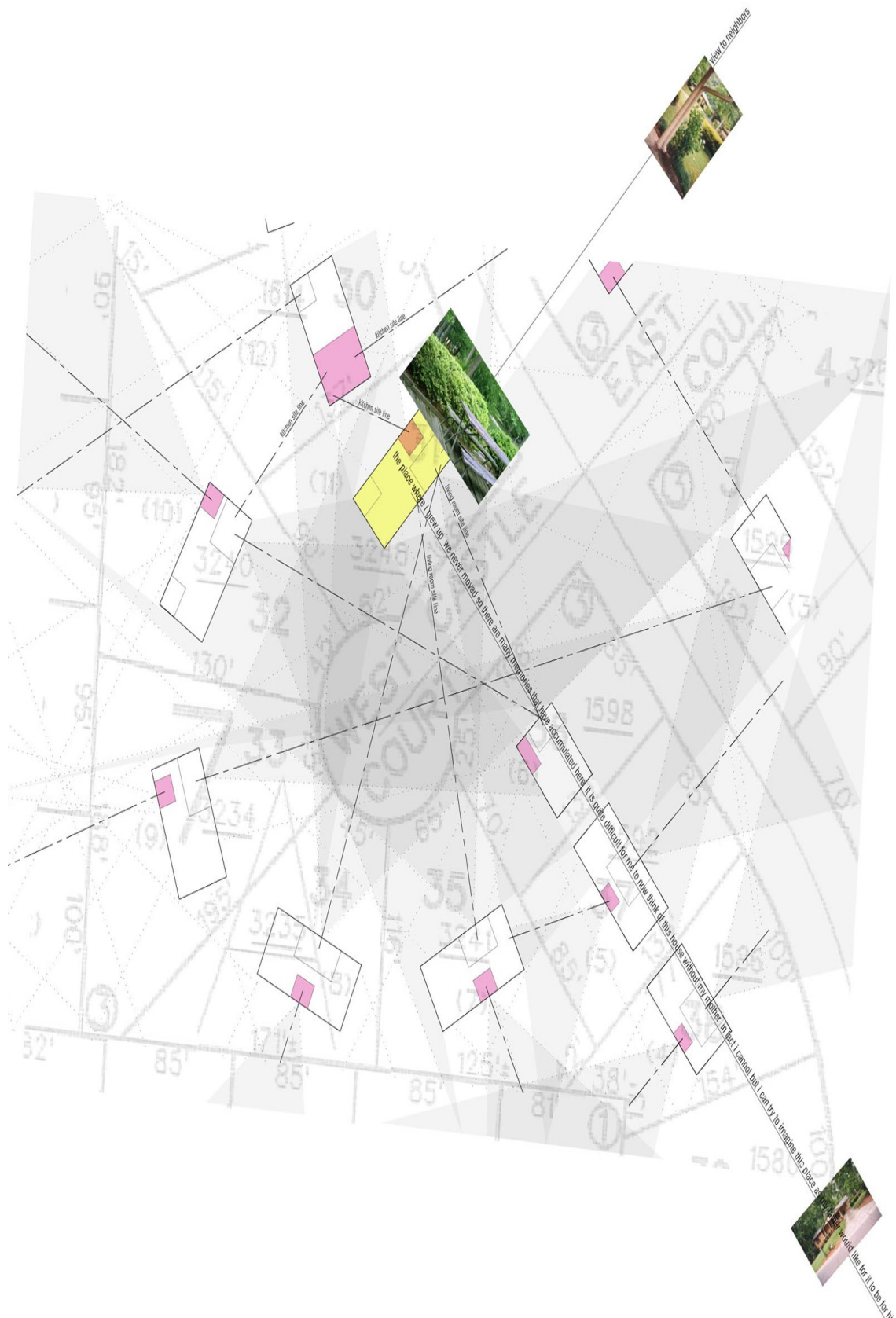


Fig. 9.

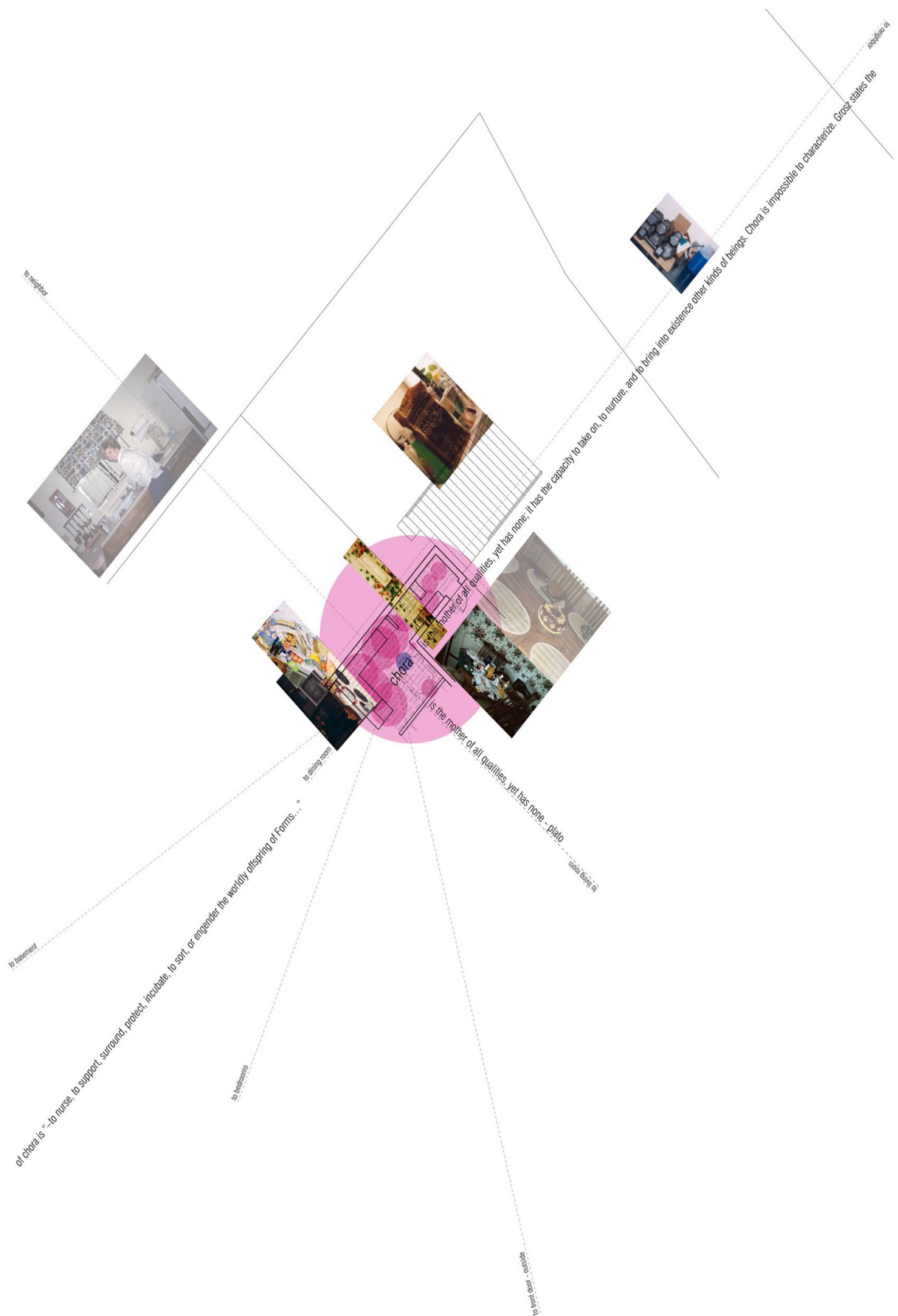


Fig. 10.

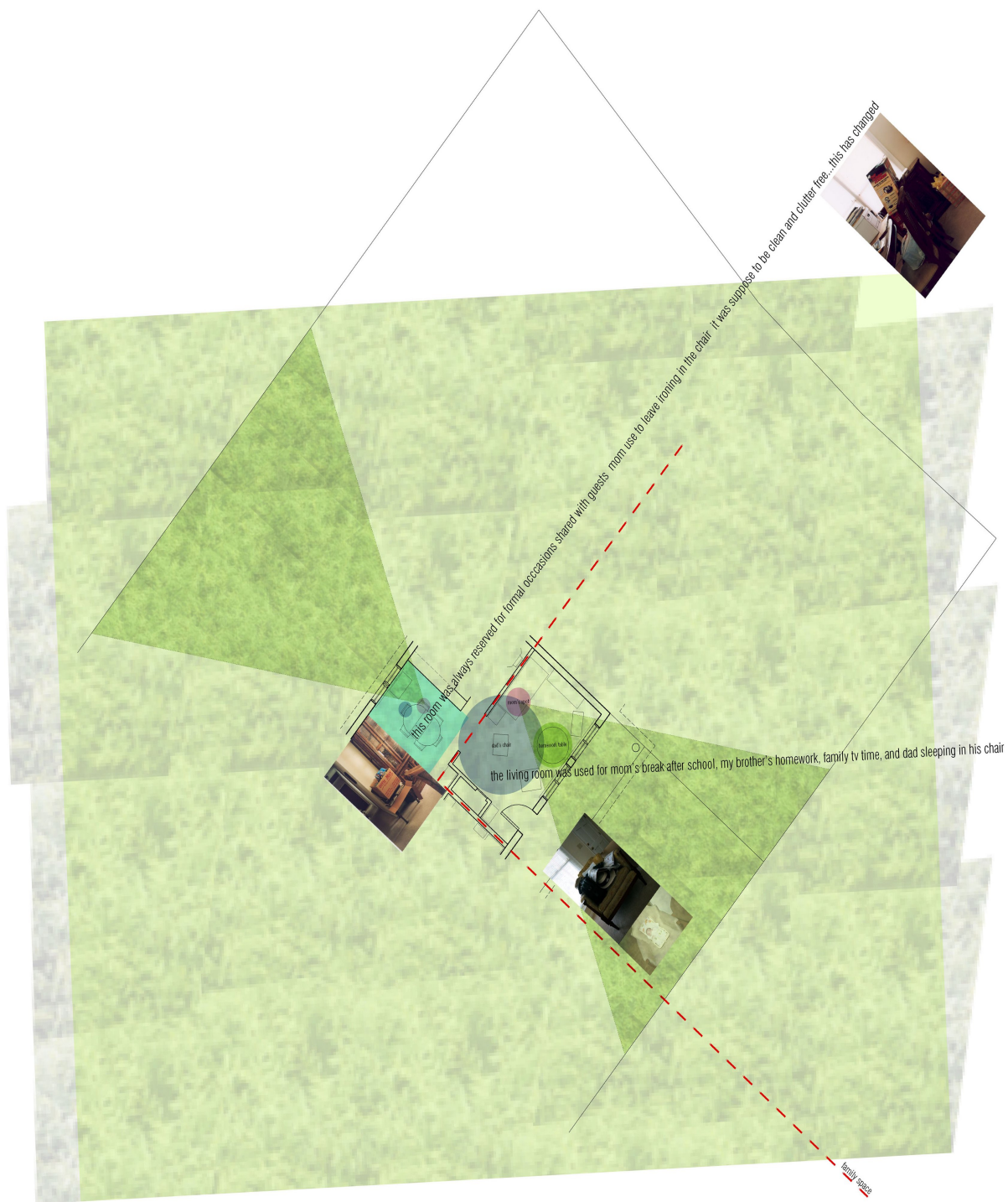


Fig. 11.

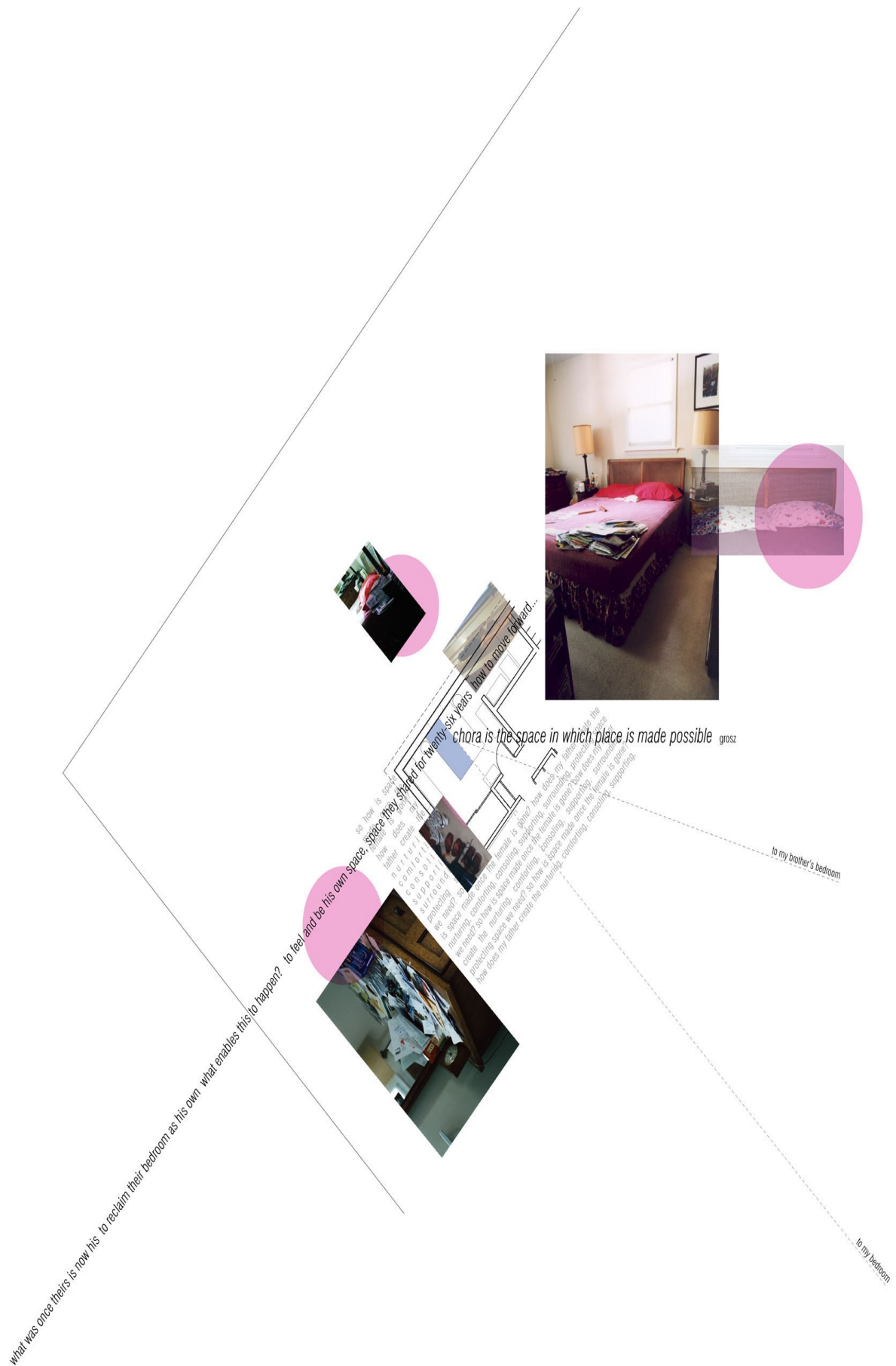


Fig. 12.

Works Cited

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