

# SCOPE

*Contemporary Research Topics*

## Art & Design 27: Architecture

August 2024

Assemblages

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1027011>

MAKING SPACE FOR NEEDLEWORK

Nathalie Bäckström

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

CC-BY the authors;

© illustrations: the artists or other copyright owners or as indicated.

## MAKING SPACE FOR NEEDLEWORK

Nathalie Bäckström

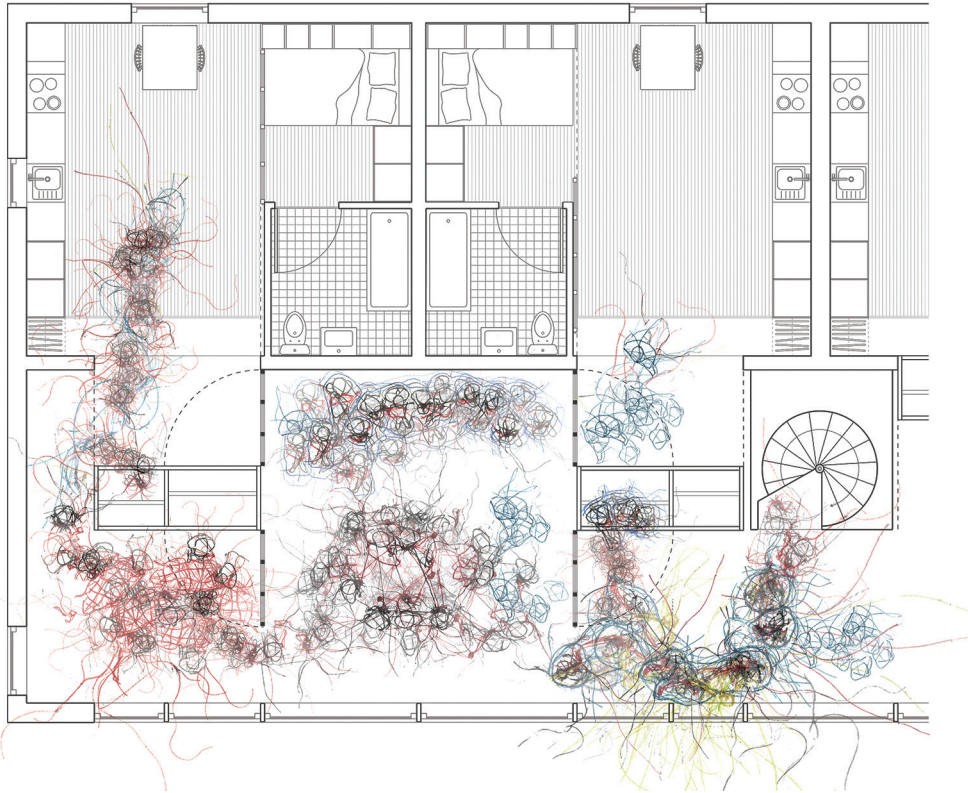


Figure 1. Scanned embroideries layered upon the plan drawing of the collective dwelling from author's thesis proposal *Do you see her when they stitch?*

“Do You See Her When They Stitch?” was the title of my thesis project, finished in 2022 at the School of Architecture at Umeå University in Sweden. The final design proposal consisted of a collective dwelling with a shared space for needlework as the core of the building. In my thesis, I used an interdisciplinary approach to investigate needlework as both the topic of research and the means of spatial exploration. I aimed to underpin the relevance of engaging with needlework in the architectural design process as a way of maintaining the craft and finding new paths for exploring architectural space. The project gave me a deeper understanding of the power of *slow making*, putting an emphasis on the process rather than the final product, and became a good excuse to spend time knitting together with my grandmother.

In his article “The Life and Death of Residential Room Types,” Mattias Kärrholm investigates the appearance and disappearance of room types, looking at Sweden as a case study. Kärrholm presents two examples of rooms dedicated to needlework, the sewing room and the weaving chamber; both of which haven’t appeared in a building plan for many years.<sup>1</sup> As a knitter, crocheter and sewer of garments, I know that these activities require space, and can’t help but feel that this has been neglected in current domestic architecture. Contemporary feminist architectural practice argues that the practices of everyday life, such as needlework, have been hidden through the design of modern architecture.<sup>2</sup> With this loss in mind, the aim of the thesis became to explore how spaces for needlework could *reappear*, making the practice visible.

In her feminist study *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Rozsika Parker sets out to reveal the neglected history of embroidery, making its historical impact and meaning visible. Parker argues that embroidery, on one hand, has been a means to ensure that women obtained and sustained the feminine ideal and, on the other hand, has been utilised as a tool of resistance to these stereotypical constraints. This constitutes the dual face of needlework.<sup>3</sup> The theory of subversive stitching, as discussed by Parker, presents needlework as a political tool – used, for example, during the women’s liberation movement in the hand-stitched suffrage banners, where the ‘slow stitch’ became a subversive act and a sign of commitment to the cause.<sup>4</sup> This idea inspired me to perform my own silent resistance through slow making.

“When I was growing up, all the women in my house were using needles. I have always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair damage. It’s a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it is not a pin.”<sup>5</sup>

The quote above is by Louise Bourgeois, the artist whose work has done the most to ensure needlework’s place within high art.<sup>6</sup> Growing up, Bourgeois worked in her parents’ tapestry workshop mending tapestries, an activity which later had a great influence on her art.<sup>7</sup> In the quote, Bourgeois describes her memories of needles and of others around her sewing. In this way, needlework becomes infused with memory.<sup>8</sup> For me, needlework is strongly connected to my grandmothers, to memories of them knitting, sewing and weaving. To the many gifted socks, sweaters and mittens received during my life. Through them I learned the value and power of *making*, and how it becomes an authentic act of love and care.

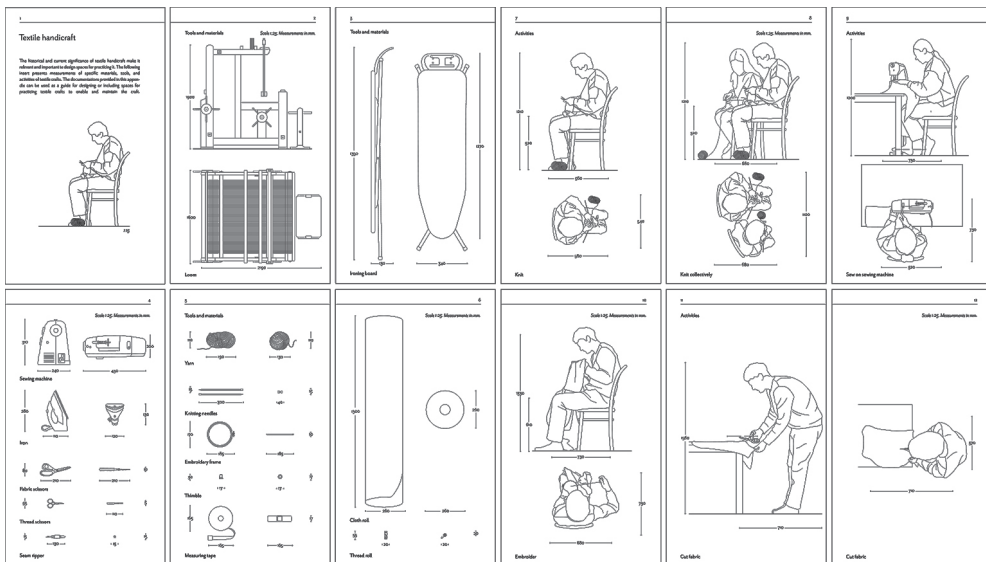


Figure 2. Documentations of needlework made as an insert to *Arkitektens Handbok* (The architect’s handbook).

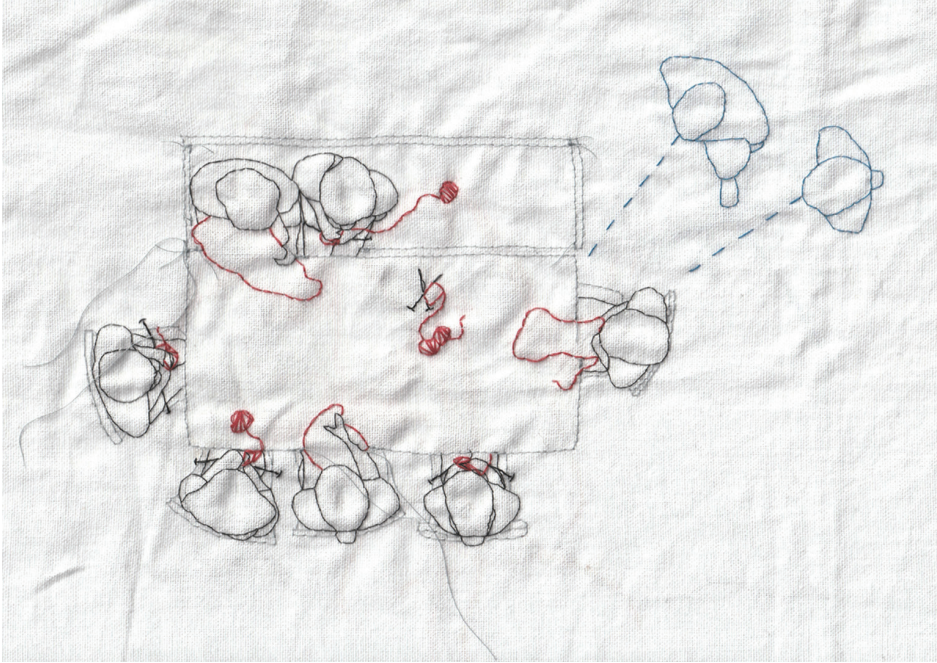


Figure 3. Embroidery investigating a sewing circle.

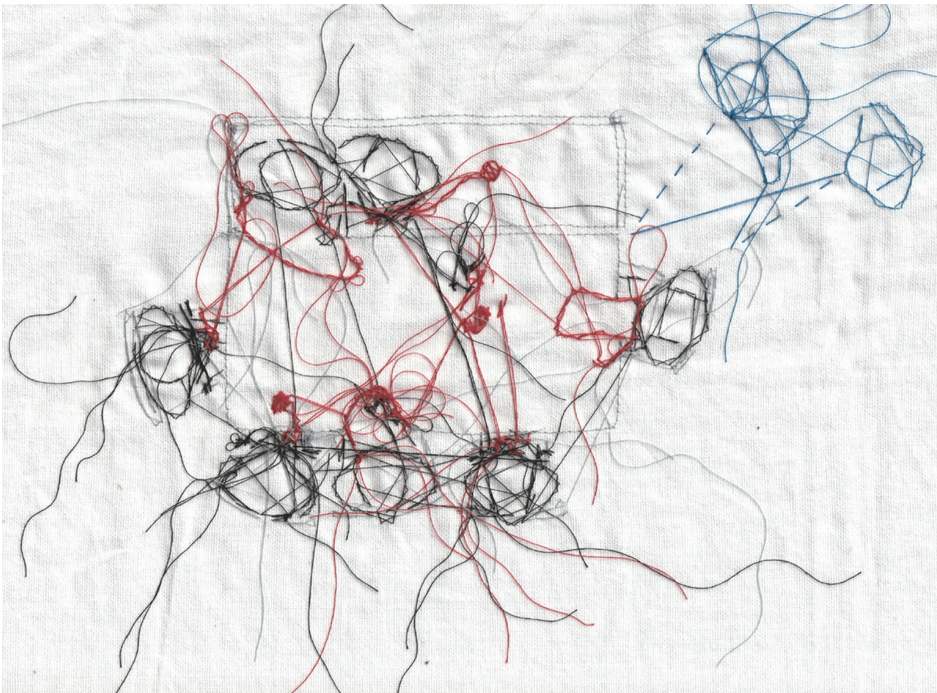


Figure 4. The back of an embroidery investigating a sewing circle.



And so the research for my thesis began with my grandmother, and the documentation of her knitting. The image of grandma was then inserted into the 2018 edition of *Arkitektens Handbok* (The Architect's Handbook, containing Swedish building norms)<sup>9</sup> as a critical exploration, questioning the presence of everyday life (and needlework) within Swedish architecture. I later extended this idea by documenting additional dimensions of the subject, and by creating an insert in the *Handbok* that could be used as a tool for designing space for needlework. This insert acted as a means of silent resistance, and aimed to make the practice of needlework visible.

To further engage with the practice, I organised a small *syjunta* (sewing circle), knitting together with my grandmother. I then explored the spatiality of our meeting through embroidery, stitching diagrams of our movements and other spatial aspects of the room where we worked. Following this, I moved on to document more of these gatherings using the same method. In the process of stitching, unexpected things emerged. For example, I found the back of the embroidery to be more interesting than the front. The back became more spatial and tactile, resembling an architectural model. By engaging with needlework, I found I could gain a deeper understanding of the practice. The process of stitching offered time for reflection and created a deeper connection with the craft. It became a commitment.

Needlework is, in its nature, slow. The slow process involved indicates that its importance doesn't lie in the finished object, but in the *time* and the *space* of making.<sup>10</sup> When knitting together with grandma we would sometimes talk, and sometimes focus on our work in silence. Time would pass, and the light in the room would change. The yarn got warm in our hands and the repetitive movements of the needles synchronised with the sound of our breathing. With bent necks we watched as our work slowly grew, one stitch at a time. When the last thread of my embroidery is fastened, I'm reminded that it doesn't end there. A thread can be unpicked. A garment can be worn, torn, patched, ripped and mended again. It can be passed down through generations. Needlework is soft and forgiving. After finishing my thesis, I'm convinced that architecture should give time and space to needlework. The architectural process could learn something from the slow making that marks the practice. This slowness becomes an act of resistance to the current ideal of efficiency. When emphasis is put on the process, it becomes a commitment, an act of love and care.

My thesis culminated in a design proposal for a collective dwelling with a shared space for needlework as its core. This dwelling constitutes an exploration of how spaces for needlework could "reappear" and become visible through architecture. It critiques the efficiency of modern architecture and questions the way that everyday life has been hidden by design. My proposal is a celebration of needlework, allowing for the craft and its practitioners to take and make space.

**Nathalie Bäckström** received her Master of Architecture degree at the Umeå School of Architecture in Sweden in 2022 and is currently interning at an architectural office in Stockholm.

- 1 Mattias Kärrholm, "The Life and Death of Residential Room Types: A Study of Swedish Building Plans, 1750–2010," *Architectural Histories*, 7:1 (2019), doi:10.5334/ah.343.
- 2 Doina Petrescu, "Altering Practices," in *Altering Practices: Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space*, ed. Doina Petrescu (London: Routledge, 2007).
- 3 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 9.
- 4 Johanna Amos and Lisa Binkley, "Introduction: Stitching the Self," in *Stitching the Self: Identity and the Needle Arts*, eds Johanna Amos and Lisa Binkley (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020).
- 5 Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 19.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 7 Germano Celant, *Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2012).
- 8 Gail Kenning, "'Fiddling with Threads': Craft-based Textile Activities and Positive Well-being," *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, 13:1 (n.d.), doi: 10.2752/175183515x14235680035304.
- 9 Anders Bodin et al., *Arkitektens Handbok* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2018).
- 10 Karen Nickell, "'Troubles Textiles': Textile Responses to the Conflict in Northern Ireland," *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, 13:3 (2015), doi:10.1080/14759756.2015.1084693.