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Architecture; home, from the surface

'Architecture is a set of highly provisional "solutions" to the question of how to live and inhabit space with others"[1].
Elizabeth Grosz

"Architecture, along the principles of functionalism, programmatic determinism and technological expressionism, produced buildings without connection to site, place, the human being and history"[2].
Karsten Harries

Definitions sometimes tend to cause confusion since they can be explained entirely differently when utilized within other disciplines. Architecture, searched for on, e.g., the EC-Horizon 2020 website primarily brings to the surface a series of documents linked to digital infrastructure. In these texts, however, the topic is a more spatially oriented one that nevertheless does not disregard its — by now close — link to increasing accompanying digital (infra)structures. For these texts, I will use a widely recognized and accepted definition: architecture is the adaptation of space to human needs. To add, not to be regarded as solely physical building but paraphrasing Rainer Banham's words: it is about how it is done, not what is done. This, therefore, does not exclude any means non-physical; in the earlier words of Henri Lefebvre, it is "*the production of space at a specific level*" that includes other means or "levels."

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[1]Grosz, E. (2001). Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space. The MIT Press.(p.148)
[2]Harries, K. (1997). The Ethical Function of Architecture. MIT Press. (p.7)

While (re)thinking architecture, we consider the conditioning of the environment for human inhabitation. When envisioning architecture, from its initial thought on, we decide on a (natural) site, a place, a location, a situation composed of more or less adequate circumstances. This is already a choice steered by series of real and/or envisioned frameworks, i.e., urban development: required or necessary infrastructure, surrounding urban facilities and plans, local transport, and municipalities involved. Also, the choice involves historic factors: do we (ever) start from a *tabula rasa*, do we build on previous architecture, is the location really natural, or is it culturally determined? From the moment we have decided for a location and its initial transformation and/or adaptation started, the final architecture is decided, usually for the rest of its existence. This is, in particular, true for our housing; apart from a minor group of people who can afford to build their own house on a location of their choice, the majority of – ultimately – inhabitants has a choice envisioned, predetermined, and planned by the process described above. We choose out of what is or will be built; only to a minor degree can we really influence and participate in what is to be realized. However, in particular, in a world rapidly transforming into a hybrid world, we can only participate if we take back "control" on each and every level of civil participation.

After we have "*extracted architectonical space as an emptiness out of natural space*,"[3] we create a physical framework that provides the precondition for a house, to become a home, i.e., lived space. At its initiation, the framework is provided by a set of rules, a series of (social, legal, and technical) guidelines that describe and frame the spaces to be built. We have also decided on the parameters that determine what this house will look like, how it is to be used, and how it is to be experienced; in brief, how third parties — besides the inhabitant — envision an important element to frame our "life on earth." These parameters, by now, include a series of measures to provide each house separately with an inner atmosphere that isolates and creates a sphere that has no immediate relation with the natural world outside; we install systems to heat and/or cool, we install double glazing, we insulate our walls and roof, and – more actual – we provide this space with an increasing amount of random technology that is supposed to make our (domestic) life more convenient and comfortable. Our individual house has become the protective cell that isolates us from the world outside: in atmosphere, sound and smell, wind, water, and rain.

We do not build *with* the world; we have — literally — locked out all options to adapt to changing circum-stances, to shifting needs, to other spatial experiences where it once was the answer to a series of rational questions only. Architecture is experienced by moving through the created space it frames. At the same

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[3]Laan, D. H. van der. (1983). Architectonic Space. Brill Leiden.

time, this experience is static, i.e., the built environment is what it is when it was completed; it does not facilitate additional (imaginative, sensorial) experiences. Architecture, in the words of Peter Eisenman, is no longer "the record of a process but the end result of a process."

The definition as described above – i.e., architecture is the adaptation of space to human needs – implies at least two issues.

The first — the adaptation of space – does not exclude ways and means other than physical, i.e., the adaptation is not necessarily a "permanent" one. In that sense, Lefebvre's definition – "*at a specific level*" – is more open and more abstract; open attitude and technological developments raise the amount of "levels" available for experience.

The second — human needs — implies that we are aware of these needs, we acknowledge them, we understand them, and we are capable of translating these into adequate spatial/architectural solutions. Human needs though are not uniform, standardized, or individually determined; our lives are not the sum-total of a series of behavioral characteristics, individual habits, and personal data. Since, however, our traditional current system of building houses implies that we cannot translate everyone's needs into individualized spatial solutions, we have framed this within uniformed regulations that provide some sort of average "solution" suitable for uniformed inhabitation. The result is a system that functions as a straightjacket, producing an architecture that can only be "personalized" by cosmetic choices and leaves the "*homo faber*" – the craftsman — useless during the building process since his/her profession is restricted and reduced to producing standardized works in large series and/or volumes. The entire system is of a linear principle and process: we envision and create individual housing projects, all with their own completed architecture, characteristics, and details; we prescribe materials, utilize them once, and ultimately dispose of them. Where "*Architecture ought to be designed for actions it invites*"[4] as argued by Shusaku Arakawa and Madeleine Gins, now there is no flexibility, no movement, no principle of circularity, no standardization, and no industrialization: hence, no freedom.

As involved and participating citizens we become more and more aware of the increasing variety of options we have to design and create our immediate environment. Some 3D software programs are available for free and easy to use, and more and more manufacturers and retailers offer options to envision and create

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[4]Gins, M., & Arakawa, S. (2002). *Architectural Body (Modern & Contemporary Poetics)*. University Alabama Press.

one's environment, be it interior or exterior. Nevertheless, as long as our housing is envisioned and realized by commercial parties who still fail or are unable to connect their digital spaces to those of the participating citizen, the cooperation will be limited to cosmetic elements.

So far, we leave it up to third parties to decide *for* us instead of *with* us what the built environment should provide, facilitate, or look like. This goes hand-in-hand with the demands and needs as well as (technological) possibilities for more democratic processes when it is about shaping our neighborhood, our lived space, and the means/ways we possess to realize this. Industry provides standardized and/or modular solutions since decades; when it comes to housing, the lack of possible options within used frameworks prevents utilization. Where our housing could very well provide and accommodate systems of infill, their basic structure as well as entire scale prevents the use of modular systems, be it for interior frameworks or infrastructural purposes. Since regulations, followed up by municipalities, architects and project developers dictate the typology we feel committed to the use of fixed materials to realize this; changing this implies the demolishing and destruction of materials where flexible, standardized, and prefabricated systems will last for decades, serving the same purpose.

As Lara Schrijver so adequately concludes while discussing Constant's project: "*The project New Babylon could not have been created without a deep sense of the power of architecture to transform the lives of its occupants. (..) Perhaps this is why we continue to revisit the '1960's: it offers us a sense of true agency in architecture - the possibility that we may, with a simple plan for a new form of housing, alter the world a fundamental way, contributing to a quicker realization of the better future that lie just ahead*"[5].

As argued before, it is hardly realistic to provide everyone with the full range of options and possibilities to create one's own (urban) habitat or lived space. Our housing is an integrated part of a society, municipality, or community: "systems" with their own — often specific — political and social structures. The scale of housing needed to accommodate everyone, in particular, in cities does not justify separated individual solutions only, which of course does not imply that individual creative solutions should be discarded completely. A recent example in the Netherlands where a group of people could create their own house but were also made responsible for the necessary infrastructure such as electricity, water, and sewage systems illustrates the dilemma: unavoidable, important structural systems like these belong to the responsibility of the municipality and not of the individual inhabitant. What is in everyone's interest, i.e., "common"

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[5]Schrijver, L. (2009). Radical Games, Popping the Bubble of 1960' Architecture. NAi Publishers.

should remain common, owned, and maintained by all of us; hence, the municipality. Within the "definition" given above – architecture is about the conditioning of the environment for human inhabitation – it is the "conditioning" that prevails; further articulation is upon the inhabitant.

Ruud Welten once argued that "*building a house is always an act of violence. One appropriates a place that one denies another*"[6] (transl.mp). This raises the following inescapable question: to what extent is our built environment "owned" by the commons, what is "owned" individually, why and by whom? If we conclude that infrastructure is owned and maintained by the commons, why is the built infrastructure and the framework for housing not owned by the commons, and why not the land? The grounds belong to all of us, as urban designer/architect Lotte Stam-Beese argued back in the 1960s. Fact is that since land and grounds are for centuries now the subject of trade, its price is subject to speculation, thus increasing or decreasing the ultimate price of everything that is built upon it. Together with the current system of providing housing, i.e., as a commodity, a market-product to trade, we end up with a system of housing supply that is expensive, rigid, and inflexible, causing much waste and is hardly an example of innovative processes and technologies[7]. Today, it is the ever undemocratic and inadequate answer to a question unknown. Since our housing is a vital element on the crossroads of the roof over our head and the increasing technological options, the latter cannot be excluded from the options available.

In Brian Massumi's critical and decisive phrasing: "*To build in Euclidean space is to build in predictability. (..) a building is a membrane*"[8]. Thus, the built environment, in particular concerning housing, should be thought of as a participatory, flexible, and adaptable system, not some static entity fixed for decades and centuries to come — a system designed and raised for a variety of functions, options, and actions, a system that incorporates infrastructures, be it digital or analog, providing agency and participatory action. In the descriptive words of Bernard Cache: "*Architecture would be the art of introducing intervals in a territory in order to construct frames of probability*"[9].

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[6]Welten, R., Borges, J. L., & Theseus, A. (1995). HET OPEN HUIS, Emmanuel Levinas en het wonen. Genesis, 1–6.

[7]The construction sector is among the least digitized: see https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/capital-projects-and-infrastructure/our-insights/imagining-constructions-digital-future

[8]Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation. Postcontemporary interventions*. http://doi.org/10.1215/9780822383574

[9]Cache, B. (1995). Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories. The MIT Press.

What is needed to provide "frames of probability," and what is needed to facilitate the preconditions for spatial privacy, for lived space? If the answer to this question is a complete separation of individual private space within common public space to ensure that every citizen can live a life in an expected seclusion, in the knowledge that he/she is protected by law without the latent awareness that this is an illusion, then we can proceed as ever before, i.e., building houses. But the "adaptation of space to address needs" does not imply that we should dismiss of what Genevieve Bell and Paul Dourish refer to as "*messiness*"; it does not imply that we should not facilitate disorder, uncertainty, unpredictability, and choices. It does, however, imply "probability," i.e., recognizing, acknowledging, and, above all, facilitating independence, civil participation, and individuality.

While building our current housing, the majority of work, logistical, and technological effort is committed to the process of creating something "final"; a fixed shell that – due to reasons of costs and economics – is reduced to an artificial, inert built environment. When we take a close look at the result, we witness a product that usually lacks creativity, imagination, and joy, and, more importantly, lacks the options for inhabitants to add theirs. Individual choices and/or preferences are often rejected: they "disturb the process"; they "do not fit the overall design picture" and disregard the envisioned (esthetic) image/unity of the entire project. When we realize that it is this built environment that is the primary place on earth where we spend a great deal of our lives, we should also realize that it therefore needs all ways, means, and options to add value to those lives. This implies all beyond the "conditioning" – i.e., the overall facade or framework that separates inner from outer space — which is primarily a technological issue, to be addressed by technologists in close corporation with an urban designer and/or architect.

The primary question that evolves out of this separation of responsibilities and tasks is who is responsible or addressable, and for what? If we leave the design of housing to individual inhabitants, we will not end up in total chaos; we will – within common frameworks — transfer the design and use of private sphere to the ones using this sphere. As Henk Oosterling phrases it in his Premsela-lecture[10] back in 2009: "*Our daily life is fully designed. (..) Problematic because the innovative role of designers seems to have been played out. They disappear as a mediator in a networked society. If everyone is a designer and our Dasein has become all design, the designer is everywhere and nowhere. (..) In Japan, design does not relate to the avant-garde, but to life as art, to the arts of life. (..) Life and design* – i.e., in Japan, mp — *relate as nature to art*" (transl.mp).

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[10]Oosterling, H. (2009). Dasein als design. Premsela.

Idealistically, one could envision a "networked" world in which the inhabitant is the "designer" of his/her sphere, exclusive being that part of the environment that is the "commons."

On this larger scale, our house/home still is the private part of the public sphere; both are increasingly developing into a "smart" environment that makes no distinction between both spheres. In his recent book, Richard Sennett distinguishes two types of "smart cities"; the prescriptive smart city that "*does mental harm; it dumbs down its citizens*" and the coordinating smart city that "*stimulates people mentally by engaging them in complex problems and human differences*"[11]. The first is referred to as "*closed*," the second as "*open*." If we seek for a city that is inhabited by participating citizens that exercise their agency, we need to incorporate a built environment that "stimulates," as a valuable prerequisite for acting as such. In a world that increasingly transforms into a networked world – including the built environment — there is no single entity that "controls."

First though, the next chapter will present and discuss our housing within its framework of process and product.

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[11]Sennett, R. (2018). *Building and Dwelling*. Allen Lane. (p.144)