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Home

“when the peaks of our sky come together, my house will have a roof.”

Paul Eluard

“We must learn again how to inhabit.”

Jaques Derrida

The Hague, Gemeentemuseum; the large painting shows a wide, bare space with open structures, outlined by thin frames and partially filled with transparent, white, and soft-colored panels. In other similar works, ladders – long, narrow, and seeming rather unstable – suggest to provide an escape to, where exactly? There is no visible horizon; the perspective seems endless, without any visual boundaries to the sides and above. In it, human-like red blotches seem to float through space, desperately seeking shelter close to the panels but lost in an artificial environment that looks alien, inhospitable, and barely livable. This seemingly dystopian world is part of the work of Constant Nieuwenhuys, the artist and visionary who worked on his “New Babylon” project between about 1960 and 1969. The painting (“Entrée du Labyrinth”) however is dated 1972, some years after Constant had decided to terminate working on his all-encompassing vision. The project, largely based on historian/cultural theorist Johan Huizinga’s “Homo Ludens” (1938), tried to envision a world in which people would not have to work anymore due to increased automation and robotization. In a world largely articulated by common spaces in favor of private spaces, one could spend the time on play and creativity; nevertheless, an environment as envisioned is not a playground only. Nomadic

man was not to be attached to one place only but able to occupy a space/make a place as long as needed; as illustrated by Hilde Heynen: *“The individual can thus form his own home, within a global structure that exploits all poetic possibilities of technology”*¹. But years later, it appeared to become the exact opposite of what it is believed or supposed to be: a place for total “freedom.” New Babylon was structured on the assumed promise of social and technological future developments, both, however, not yet in sight. The unforeseen result was a world of control, an alien world of estrangement in which the familiar traditional connotations of what was considered a home were turned upside-down.

Constant could no longer envision or incorporate humans in his project; man was reduced to random, lost figures in red; no longer the free, self-conscious inhabitant but the individual searching for a place to dwell. Fifty years later, in 2018, Bruno Latour would conclude that today *“we live in the ruins of modernization, we look in the blind for a place to dwell”*².

A place to dwell

To have a home in the world means to have a home in real time; to have a home in a networked world is basically not that much different when focused on the principle of “dwelling,” i.e., to be “at ease, at peace” in a certain place, at a certain time. The latter, however, requires the awareness that technologies that influence and modify our environment – our dwelling space – should also be regarded as possible options to ensure a form/method of spatial privacy as well as facilitating enhanced experience, not as threatening and/or comforting only. “Home-automation” in that sense is something of a paradox: many technologies automate human action and/or activity, but at the end, nothing has fundamentally changed. It is technology as a convenience, as comforting service without any additional human value. Automating former manual actions within, e.g., our cars reduces the car to a vehicle/mode of transport; automating functionalities within the home reduces the home to a roof over our head, to a place of comfort only. All that is essential for dwelling can never be automated; it is and will forever remain a work in progress. As Mark Wigley so adequately argues: *“(..) because the house conceals the unhomeliness that constitutes it that the “mere”*

¹Heynen, H. (2001). *Architectuur en kritiek van de moderniteit*. SUN. (p.231, transl.mp)

²Latour, B. (2018). *Down to Earth*. Polity.

*occupation of a house, which is to say the acceptance of its representation of interior, can never be authentic dwelling. (..) Home is precisely the place where the essence of home is most concealed*³.

With New Babylon in mind: what exactly caused Constant to end the works on his all-encompassing and extensive project, were/are his proposals indeed the wrong answers to the situation but, in its ultimate goal, the adequate approach and justified methodology? When Michel Serres stated *“We seek to find, in our dwelling, in our room, in our bed, the sensations that we experienced for nine months”*⁴, somehow, he acknowledged that from the moment we are born, we can never be at home. These texts therefore try to cover the question of ontology: do we need the physical, separated, enclosed entity we call home to ensure we can dwell? If so, what does that look like? If not, what is the alternative, what does it (not) represent?

Like architecture in general, also before and while designing and building housing, a determining question is how the ultimately envisioned/created space will be used and experienced since after all, we do not provide elementary shelter only. So far, we do not limit ourselves to a basic construction, we provide an artificial physical framework (including designed decisions and statements) providing the prerequisites for lived space; as such, it will function also as a barrier between man and nature as well as between man and technology. Nevertheless, recalling the words of Bloomer and Moore: *“the general assumption, seldom debated, is that architecture is a highly specialized system with a set of prescribed technical goals rather than a sensual social art responsive to real human desires and feelings”*⁵. However, we seem to encounter a contradiction here; i.e., “a set of technical goals cannot be paired to sensual social art.” I believe that architecture, when executed properly, can and should facilitate the arts and, as such, also answer the human desires and feelings that are essential for experiencing our lived space.

At the same time, architecture and “technology” can facilitate human desires and feelings by acknowledging that it is the conscious inhabitant that comes first: technology should serve instead of control. If we become the unconscious victims of increasing technology, we become victims within our environment, without really understanding what went wrong. In their extensive report, Michael Friedewald *et al.* state *“in order to gain wide acceptance a delicate balance is needed: the technology should enhance the quality of life but not be seeking domination. It should be reliable and controllable but nevertheless adaptive to human habits and*

³Wigley, M. (1995). *The Architecture of Deconstruction, Derrida's Haunt*. MIT Press. (p.113-114)

⁴<https://mydesiringmachines.wordpress.com/2014/10/19/michel-serres-on-architecture-urbanism-space/>

⁵Bloomer, K; Moore, C. (1977). *Body, Memory, and Architecture*. New Haven and Yale. (pref.)

changing contexts”⁶. (A variety of online videos illustrate this issue in a hilarious way: e.g., a man returns to his “smart” home with a voice-controlled front door, an hour before, however, he visited his dentist where he received an anesthetic. Once he orders the front door to open, he is not understood since his blurred voice is no longer recognized: the door remains shut⁷.) Like a wide variety of “solutions,” we could question which problem was originally in need of addressing; while in certain circumstances, the need for a door-opener (voice-controlled or otherwise) will not be subject for discussion where it serves inhabitants with a severe handicap or confined to a wheelchair, it is by no means a necessary item in each and every house. It serves no other purpose besides comfort, and the goal and the intended/assumed result of the technology remains the same, i.e., the door opens or maybe not. Assuming we do not wish to strive for Ray Bradbury’s fully automated home⁸ (which, abandoned in the end, burns down to the ground), it is us who need to remain in control, not our home. A recent report/study⁹ by ING on smart homes, suggesting that “the breakthrough of smart homes is near” illustrates the paradox: e.g., “*Voice is only an intermediate step to Artificial Intelligence where the smart home itself knows what needs to be done*” (transl.mp). It is not “the smart home itself that knows what needs to be done”; it is an algorithm, programmed by humans to identify, address, and react to a particular situation. It is about the way we relate to our home environment that is changed here; we no longer have a mutual relation to our home but experience an environment that reacts/adapts according to external influences. At the same time, the report addresses the issue of reduced labor; since more people can install their devices themselves, the role of the professional is reduced, causing less work and unemployment. This is a confusing purpose and means while addressing commercial purpose first instead of keeping the inhabitant in control.

A parallel current complaint is that housing has become too expensive: the costs of building regulations and all “modern” (technological) items involved has made contemporary building not only complicated to design and build but also expensive. The framework we call a house has “developed” into a commercialized product derived far of what is, in fact, desired or necessary. If we accept that the fact – if you prefer, the choice – to consider our housing a neoliberal market-product to be bought and sold like any other product – as we do now for decades – we should stop being annoyed about the consequences. We have so far

⁶Friedewald, M., Costa, O., Punie, Y., Alahuhta, P., & Heinonen, S. (2005). Perspectives of ambient intelligence in the home environment. *Telematics and Informatics*, 22(3), 221–238. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2004.11.001>

⁷<https://youtu.be/-gZs73DeUQg>

⁸https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There_Will_Come_Soft_Rains_%28short_story%29

⁹https://www.ing.nl/media/ING_EBZ_doorbraak-smart-homes-dichterbij_tcm162-181983.pdf

dismissed our options for empowerment, our possibilities for participation, and our fundamental right to create a private place we call – and define as – home. If we buy, let alone rent a house, we have already drifted away from the options to create our own (built) environment; we are confronted with the often poor residues of the design and building processes, i.e., the minor cosmetic adaptations that cost the inhabitant usually much more than really necessary. Curiously, for the place we call home, in which we spend most of our time, we have to trust/rely on third parties to achieve what is so vital to our life, i.e., our home. As a result, we end up with what Kisho Kurosawa and later Lieven de Cauter referred to as a capsular society, i.e., creating an enclosed private sphere.

One could question whether this is a matter of supposed convenience or simply disinterest; did we ever agree/consent with the current marketing of our housing or do we believe this is the default? It seems what is sometimes referred to as shifted baseline syndrome (SBS), i.e., the fact that we tend to see the current situation as the “normal” one, instead of recognizing that the situation really can/should be a different one. If we, e.g., accept the fact that our home is no longer the private space it is supposed to be, we have shifted our standards and believe the current situation is the new default. When it comes to issues of privacy within our homes, the same estranged situation occurs. Our home is no longer the secluded, (legally) protected private space it once was. The valid argument here is often that we have “nothing to hide” where the argument is/should be that we do have much to protect as well as to participate in. If “to dwell” means to be at peace in a certain place – and at a certain time – it implies within a hybrid world the opposite of a fixed place since we no longer experience or consider this the safe haven we knew. Rephrased: it means that where it concerns our private space, we should acknowledge that some physical entity should provide the basics for our shelter and that some digital entity should protect our privacy, which today within the context of an Internet of Things and People implies the synthesis of both. In the illustrative words of Shusaku Arakawa and Madeleine Gins: *“One’s own living room is and isn’t one’s own sensorium. All that is tentative is in the realm of sensoria; all that appears to be definite has been physically constructed”*¹⁰. Imagine the possibilities of using developing innovative (digital/sensorial) technologies available for incorporating the arts: the five senses and the imagination, within what is “physically constructed.” The “living room,” i.e., lived space, is the sphere we create by applying and incorporating (sensorial) technologies that facilitate and enhance our experience.

¹⁰Gins, M., & Arakawa, S. (2002). *Architectural Body (Modern & Contemporary Poetics)*. University Alabama Press.

While on one side, we are more connected and mobile than ever, we also seem to seek the safe house we know; to dwell is a work in progress. Witnessing the current trend for tiny housing – one of its often intended advantages being closer to nature – is that we apparently recognize that the ways we inhabit can/should be concentrated on what is sufficient, responsible, and manageable but also, at the same time, seems a return to the romantic, capsular entity that withdraws from urban “modern” life. An increasing number of people seem to seek other contemporary values and priorities while translating those to their immediate environment; at the same time, technological developments amount to its – assumed – opposite. It was Sigfried Giedion who remarked decades ago that architecture is the interpretation of a way of life valid for our period. Although this statement does raise some questions concerning what validity is referred to, its overall value as our “place on earth” seems hardly negotiable. Today, however, there seems to occur a rather fundamental difference between what is envisioned on one side by those who seek the basic values of a traditional built home environment covering all aspects of a comfortable home life; while at the other side, the increasing synthesis of the digital and the analog and of the real and the virtual questions this.

When William Mitchell, 20 years ago challenging our imagination, predicted that “(..) *“inhabitation” will take on a new meaning - one that has less to do with parking your bones in architecturally defined spaces and more with connecting your nervous system to nearby electronic organs. Your room and your home will become part of you, and you will become part of them. (..) For cyborgs, then, the border between interiority and exteriority is destabilized*”¹¹, he, thus, challenged the pure ontology of home as we know it. But “parking ones bones” suggests somewhat practically that what is at stake here is a more or less temporary need to seek shelter, not some permanent home. It emphasizes the ever-existing need to dwell, not the necessity to find a physical place and stay. This nomadic point-of-leave confronts us with another way of building, one that facilitates primary shelter but also provides the “nearby electronic organs,” whether we will be(come) cyborgs or not.

Home in a hybrid world seems to develop into an increasingly problematic item; the paradox of having a shelter without having protection other than physical, a place that is not “chosen” by us but, to a large extent, for us by a system that renounces us from being a participative inhabitant does not do justice to our (occasional/temporal) need for a private sphere. First, there is the condition to dwell, second, the translation

¹¹Mitchell, W. J. (1996). *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn (On Architecture)*. The MIT Press.(p.30-31)

into a sphere that facilitates, and, third, the physical framework in which this occurs. In an environment that increasingly develops into or becomes an interface, it is primarily, as put by John Rajchman, *“a question of constructing free spaces of unregulation, undetermined by any prior plan, which so loosen an arrangement as to follow for sensations of something new, other affects, other precepts”*¹².

“Free spaces,” however, require a rethinking of its consequences for (spatial) privacy; the next chapter will try to provide a start for this.

¹²Rajchman, J. (1998). *Constructions*. MIT.

