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## Thinking and rethinking

*“Problems of dwelling are above all not architectural but ethical problems”<sup>1</sup>.*

Karsten Harries

*“Architecture is more than an array of techniques designed to shelter us from the storm. It is an instrument of measure, a sum total of knowledge that, contending with the natural environment, become capable of organizing society’s time and space.”*

Paul Virilio, Lost Dimension

In the introduction, I have emphasized that these texts are not intended as or written in a scientific mode, nor that I claim to be comprehensive when it comes to the periphery of this topic. These texts are focused on three, in my view, complementary issues: architecture, technology, and dwelling, which could well imply that it seems wishful to add an order in this and also to remind us that the circumstances today have some resemblance to earlier times. As illustrated in, e.g., Chapter 5, all three seem only to be publicly/commonly discussed separated from each other; where it concerns a topic important for each and every citizen – the home – the emphasis is not on what binds all three issues, while, at the same time, we all are “confronted” with the ultimate result, i.e., the house as a framework for our homes.

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<sup>1</sup>Harries, K. (1997). The Ethical Function of Architecture. MIT Press.

As illustrated in Chapter 4 (“Early and recent history”), about 30 years ago, several architects made serious attempts – sometimes with foresight and interesting results – to restore and/or intensify the link between architecture and philosophy; in particular, founded on the existing discrepancy between both. Since dwelling is a timeless issue and history seems to repeat itself here, allow me to elaborate a bit further.

Think again of the statement by Leo van Broeck in the “Introduction”: *“We should (re)organize the spatial presence of the human species on earth.”* However, momentous as this may sound: this is a recurring issue within architecture and given the fact that this discipline is considered the appropriate one to realize this, it is the question whether “architecture” is capable of shaping and articulating such a presence or such an environment. After all, every built result is a “final” result, i.e., a physical translation of a series of complex questions that often *can* have no adequate answer. If we take seriously the fact that our life needs – and is now again confronted with – a series of uncertainties, ambivalence, or even sometimes chaos, how do we expect architecture to answer this other than to provide a framework for actions only? As once so adequately illustrated by Eric Bolle, referring to Peter Eisenman, who *“designs an architecture that does not close, does not totalize or unify, but on the contrary opens, scatters, fragmentates, and thus meets our state of fundamental uncertainty. (..) what is unlocked is an architecture of absence: a space to roam freely, to roam around uninhibited”*<sup>2</sup> (transl.mp). It implies that the notion of a particular place for a particular person is abandoned; each individual is in fact a nomad, to be treated equally when it comes to a place to dwell. Instead of claiming/using a fixed space/place, we utilize the options provided within the framework provided by common structures, articulated by means of open and participatory technology.

One could argue – these days in particular with good reason – that dwelling is the most elementary fundamental topic. First, we encounter its various origins and definitions, often according to the discipline involved; e.g., the UK law defines “dwelling” rather rational as “a self-contained substantial unit of accommodation”<sup>3</sup>. If we search deeper, we find other descriptions or definitions that have in common that many define/refer to the issue as some physical entity, an artificial form facilitating shelter or a house. It should be obvious by now that, given the scope of this publication, I consider the rather practical or pragmatic definition provided above not the primary one that is the subject for discussion.

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<sup>2</sup>Bolle, E. (1992). *Tussen Architectuur en filosofie*. VUB Press.

<sup>3</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dwelling>

One most relevant to these texts is Christian Norberg-Schulz's condensed phrasing: dwelling is an "existential foothold"<sup>4</sup>. Other, more abstract, definitions utilize a more theoretical or philosophical approach, e.g.:

*"Dwelling is the cultivation of feelings in an enclosed space, that is, a way of interacting with these environments that overflow into physical space and affect us in a bodily way, in order to avoid being affected in a mere passive sense, by making these environments intimate, familiar, to a certain extent adaptable"* (Hermann Schmitz, orig. "Der Mensch und die Grenze im Raum," cited<sup>5</sup> by Holger Zaborowski). The interesting part of this definition to me concerns the "enclosed space" and its "overflow into physical space," i.e., the suggestion made here is that the former exists next to the latter, emphasizing a necessary active involvement or participation in this.

Since I am interested in the ontology and functionality of these "environments" within an increasingly networked hybrid world in combination with the framework of these texts, I will begin by leaning on Martin Heidegger's well-known lecture<sup>6</sup> dating back in 1951. Briefly, Heidegger considered "dwelling" a phenomenon that goes beyond the realm of buildings, an activity first although it is – in part – depending on that same building. Illustrative, in particular, compared to present times is his statement concerning the role/position of dwelling, made after World War 2 and, therefore, more than understandable: *"However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the real plight of dwelling does not lie merely in a lack of houses"*<sup>7</sup>. Heidegger here emphasizes the need to think beyond the realm of not only providing a physical structure but also to consciously consider the impact a house will have when reduced to just a protective framework. Dwelling is always a dwelling in time; when, e.g., le Corbusier, in 1942, stated that *"man dwells badly, and that is the deep and real reason for the upheavals in our time,"* he did not refer to future situations; he could not foresee our contemporary "upheavals." Nevertheless, in both statements, it seems clear that indeed "we can only build if we can dwell," i.e., if we feel safe and secure but also in close encounter to the natural and artificial worlds that surround us, serving as a concept for our sensorial, lived space. This is a concept "renewed," i.e., our "hybrid/networked" environment today is and

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<sup>4</sup>Norberg-Schulz, C. (n.d.). *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. (1980th ed.). London: Academy Editions.

<sup>5</sup>Zaborowski, H. (n.d.). Towards a Phenomenology of Dwelling. *Catholic Review*, 32(Fall 2005).

<sup>6</sup>Heidegger, M. (2007). *Bauen Wohnen Denken. Vorträge Und Aufsätze*, 139–156. (I have used the English translation by Adam Bobeck)

<sup>7</sup>Heidegger, M. (1951). *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (p. 15).

will become more “sensorial/tactical” than ever before, offering us not only disruptive and/or threatening aspects but above all the additional enhancing, experiential variations. As Hartmut Rosa so imaginatively illustrates when discussing controllability: “(..) *home* only becomes a resonant concept after we have *already lost it*. (..) home represents our hope for a segment of world that we can adaptively transform, our desire to find or create a place in the world where things speak to us, where they *have something to say to us*”<sup>8</sup>. (ital.orig.)

Looking at today’s world, we may conclude that we have drifted away from this desired situation; we have a “home” in an increasingly networked world – sometimes beyond our control – where the dichotomy between private and public space has become blurred, i.e., questionable and negotiable. We have outsourced the production/realization of our housing and therefore “disconnected” the relation and contact we have with this environment. When we shifted – some would say developed – from looking onto a map to determine our position and direction to looking on the digital/artificial image on the tiny screen of a digital navigational system, we lost our spatial feeling with the natural world outside; we are no longer in close (sensorial) contact with our surroundings, be it natural or artificial. We delegated or outsourced our “sense of place” and space to technology, to an instrument that more often escapes our control. As such, we reduce our experience and interpretation of the world outside the two-dimensional abstract image provided; we no longer construct or rely on our own image. Technology here constrains our creative and imaginative options to envision a world built on our own experiences. When it comes to building, it includes the close, human relation we have with the tools and means we possess to act as a “*homo faber*” (or maybe even “*homo ludens*”) to ensure we regain and maintain an active position in determining and shaping our lived space.

We also increasingly live and work in a world that seems to function based on control, while, at the same time, it seems to be to a large extent out of control, making it more complicated to provide the preconditions for dwelling. When Theodor Adorno stated that “*it is no longer possible to dwell*,” his conclusion was drawn from the horrific experiences in World War 2. Should we argue today that it is no longer possible to dwell, we come to this conclusion not because of that same experience but because a networked world – often beyond our control - offers us an alienated or false sense of security when the inhabitant is no longer the conscious active participant, in particular, where it concerns the (built) environment and its (digital) infrastructures.

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<sup>8</sup>Rosa, H. (2020). The Uncontrollability of the World. Polity.

The contemporary situation of our “being on earth” can be described as an actual – but by no means new – problem; research illustrates again and again that we cannot continue the way we do, and creating a multi-faceted dilemma that has its consequences for, in fact, all aspects of our life and the way we occupy/inhabit the earth is most certainly one of them. As illustrated in Chapter 4, a wide variety of architects/artists has envisioned and designed the results of a fundamental rethinking of our society and (built) environment; many were sooner or later dismissed as being utopian, as unlivable. As argued in Chapter 4, the initial reasons for envisioning/creating different worlds originated mainly from societal visions often rooted in, e.g., radical political backgrounds; when Constant Nieuwenhuys created his New Babylon, he assumed that people would become nomads, wandering from one place to another without the “bore” of daily work diminished by automation. In Hilde Heijnen’s phrasing: “*New Babylon is the fictitious result of total liberation - of the abolition of every norm, every convention, every tradition, every habit. (...) It is a world in which the fleeting and transient power has acquired law, a world also of collective creation, absolute transparency and openness*”<sup>9</sup> (transl.mp). As argued in the previous chapter, today, we can conclude that “absolute transparency and openness” will be judged by many as the inadequate answer of the need for privacy; also in Constant’s New Babylon, it ended in his inhabitants aiming for protection.

While the circumstances at those times were partially comparable to today’s times, there is a significant difference, i.e., neither of them lived and worked in a hybrid world; this rapidly transforming time in which the need for dreams, imagination, and creativity as well as the urge to act was as actual and pressing as today. Utopia, defined here as “eu-topia” or “good life,” thus, can be seen as an inspirational place, a place to be further defined and lived by its inhabitants. When Anthony Vidler, in his 2007 lecture at the AA questioned “The Necessity of Utopia,” he referred to utopia as “a device for invention or radical intervention”<sup>10</sup>. When Slavoj Žižek argued for a new utopia, it is not for some far-away view of a society that is structured upon a set of circumstances thought anew: he argues for a “reinvention of utopia” out of an “urge for survival”<sup>11</sup>. Despite the fact that his primary focus was/is capitalism/neoliberalism and not the built environment, both, however, are integral parts of the complex problem at hand.

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<sup>9</sup>Heynen, H. (2001). *Architectuur en kritiek van de moderniteit*. SUN.

<sup>10</sup><https://youtu.be/XM-QqN-P1BY>

<sup>11</sup><https://youtu.be/CbN7Kxv0r5M>

When, in 2003, Guardian journalist Jeremy Melvin commented on the death of Cedric Price (see Chapter 4) he stated – referring to, e.g., his “Fun Palace,” 1962 – that Price offered *“a focus to the optimism of the time, when it seemed possible to remake society around the potential for delight and opportunity.”* One could safely argue that today’s times lack a certain amount of “optimism,” which, however, does not exclude the need to “remake society around” any “potential.” When Shosaku Arakawa and Madeleine Gins created their “Reversible Destiny”<sup>12</sup> - project which ultimately included the “Bioscleave House” (completed in 2008), they aimed high by declaring that they created an environment that “would prevent death”; it was thoughtfully designated as “an interactive laboratory of everyday life.” Compared with, e.g., Eisenman’s House VI, it again questioned ingrained patterns and deregulated habits by completely turning familiar and traditional connotations upside-down, with the aimed purpose of preventing routine. The ways and means of providing our housing today “serves” the opposite; by building houses the way we – continue to – do, we frame our lived space in such a way that personal initiatives, individual influence, creative powers, as well as the unexpected are trapped in what third (commercial) parties believe to be adequate and appropriate. We do not frame our built space as an “interactive laboratory of everyday life.” Already back in 1969, Hugo Priemus defined dwelling (“wonen”) as *“interaction between people and the living environment”*<sup>13</sup> (transl.mp), extrapolated for today: if that “living environment” changes according to, e.g., technological innovation, the “laboratory” changes with it, forcing us to contemplate the consequences, to rethink, and renegotiate our position.

One could remark that the examples mentioned above bring us half way; i.e., if we acknowledge that the current ways of providing a sense of spatial privacy, combined with the options to enhance our (built) environment, we need the awareness that living and acting within lived, hybrid space influences our identity. Living in the “infosphere” thus requires that we use our imagination, our creativity, and the means to turn these into freedom. In today’s times, we often seem to search for identity, for meaning, and for a sense of belonging; i.e., some prerequisites for dwelling. Where we should, in fact, aim for a contemporary attitude as well as one open to the future, we tend to “dwell” in the past. Paraphrasing Rem Koolhaas’ words at the 2013 Triennale in Milan: we prefer comfort above challenge.

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<sup>12</sup><http://www.reversibledestiny.org>

<sup>13</sup>Priemus, H. (1969). *wonen, creativiteit en aanpassing*. Mouton.

## Place and identity

As argued earlier, we are known — i.e., identified — because we have an address; usually physically via our home, sometimes theoretically, by, e.g., an IP-address or geo-locational via our smartphone. When we meet new people, one of the first questions usually is: where do you live, where is your home, or where do you come from? Identity, as Bibi van den Berg so extensively described<sup>14</sup>, has several dimensions. Briefly here, since this is not the appropriate platform for too much detail in this: first, identity means *sameness*, i.e., people can be recognized or distinguished as *individual people*; second, identity means *identification*; and, third, identity is a *process* (ital.orig.). We act/behave different according to the situation/location; therefore, place is an influencer/modifier of our identity<sup>15</sup>. Since we move through spaces/places and act accordingly, we should talk “identities” instead of “identity.” Instead of an (built) environment that is stable/inert, we will experience and act in a more hybrid environment that is becoming an interface; we, thus, interact with a sphere that influences/affects our identity. In the words of Bibi van den Berg: “*who we are is closely related to where we are.*” When our private space is no longer the protected sphere, we are accustomed to we can either reinstall and protect once again or we can accept and rely on the fact that our environment protects us when needed/desired, i.e., without falling back on the classical traditional entity we call home. It implies that our identity — as means of identification — is no longer provided by the simple fact that we have an address, as is argued by Jeff Malpas: “*Rather than thinking of place in terms of identity, identity needs to be rethought in terms of place itself — which means in terms of place in all its complexity as well as its simplicity*”<sup>16</sup>.

Elaborating on both notions, complexity can be understood here as the sum-total of physical structures in close combination with digital infrastructures, providing a sphere in which we will need to discover/find our ways and — ultimately — our place. Simplicity can be understood as our elementary position as humans within a natural and artificial world; i.e., as long as we acknowledge that the former — complexity — is an entity added by us and for us, we can also become aware that the dichotomy of public (natural) space vs. private (home) space is an artificial one. If we consider architecture, i.e., the act of building as a continuous process in which we — try to — find our place and role, we may well achieve the awareness and agency

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<sup>14</sup>Berg, B. van den. (2009). *the Situated Self; identity in a world of Ambient Intelligence.* (p.132)

<sup>15</sup>Note; see an actual interesting development on <https://disposableidentities.eu>

<sup>16</sup>Malpas, J. (2012). *Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger and the question of place* (p. 18).

we require to “dwell.” As long as we believe that technology within the built environment is something that “happens” to us, we dismiss this agency; in the illustrative words of Michel Sacasas: *“technological determinism is the product of cultural capitulation. It is a symptom of social fragmentation”*<sup>17</sup>.

This determinism rarely is topic of discussion in other disciplines/fields; e.g., the technical/biological innovations in health-care seem to find their ways without too much discussion, apart from those topics where it touches upon the primarily ethically based issues. Innovative technologies provide us with options to add artificial limbs and organs and/or modify our molecular structure; developments that will proceed to limits that we still do not grasp, let alone accept. When, however, this reaches our immediate environment (see, e.g., Philip Beesley, Marcos Novak, and Lars Spuybroek), we tend to reject/discard its options because we tend to feel uncomfortable with its results.

Searching for one’s identity in a hybrid world and an environment in constant change, thus, also implies the confrontation with and conscious “search” for the unexpected and the unfamiliar, with the accompanying precondition that we take back control and autonomy over what constitutes and guides this search as well as its findings. It means discovering the sphere that provides us the preconditions to dwell. Technology-prophets often argue the promises and advantages of (digital) developments; it makes a modern life easier, more efficient, etc. But, assuming we are look for Aristotle’s “good life” we *“should not relegate the discussions on what that is to private space”* (transl.mp), in the words, of Peter-Paul Verbeek in an interview<sup>18</sup> a few years ago, to add at the end to believe in actions on a micro-level: *“interfere with everything.”* Given the importance of a good life as well as private space, I suggest we extent this interfering to our immediate built environment and the ways and means in which this is realized. This, however, requires the awareness that a hybrid world is a world we all occupy, inclusive of the ultimate desire to a have a “good life.” The next chapter will try to address this important issue.

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<sup>17</sup><https://thefrailestthing.com/2014/09/27/technology-will-not-save-us/>

<sup>18</sup>NRC-Handelsblad, 19/20-12-2015, p.18-19. (Wordt de vrije wil een illusie?)