

Care and dwelling culture

Giampiero Bosoni¹ and Chiara Lecce¹

¹ Design Department, Politecnico di Milano

Abstract.

Dwelling reveals the definition of an “anthropological” existential space in which to experience relationships within the world. This living space is described by Christian Norberg-Schulz¹ as consisting of many spaces: a pragmatic space in which people satisfy their biological needs; a perceptual space; an abstract space of pure logical relations; a cultural space in which people find their collective activities as a community; and an expressive space related to art as an interpretation of change. In this spatial composition, man projects his image of the world into his environment in order to feel at home. And when the world becomes an interior, man is capable of dwelling, which then implies something more than shelter. Dwelling integrates both concepts of *house* – the shelter, the dimension of intimacy, comfort, pleasure and security, and the response to our biological needs; and *home* – the cradle of the inhabitant’s existence with its thoughts, memories and dreams, man’s primary world. A duality that is similarly found in the definition of *care*: a diligent and caring concern for a subject/object, which engages both our soul and our activity – caring for someone or something, actively looking after it, providing for its needs both physical and psychological. The link between the concept of *care* and *living* goes back to the ages and is not even referable to the human species alone. It is therefore necessary to identify a closer temporal and geographical span to try to trace some fundamental transitions and degrees of influence between the two terms, for this reason the period considered starts from the 19th till today, and it took into account mostly the Western Countries.

Keywords: First Keyword, Second Keyword, Third Keyword, Forth Keyword, Sixth Keyword.

1. Dwelling as the essence of every living being

L’abitare è il modo in cui gli esseri umani sono nel mondo, il luogo in cui si abita e dunque il luogo in cui si è vivi. Insieme all’abitare la relazione è inevitabile, è il modo in cui siamo al mondo con gli altri.²

¹ Norberg-Schulz, C.: *Genius loci: Paesaggio, ambiente, architettura*. Electa (1979).

² Emanuele Coccia, *Filosofia della casa*, Einaudi (2021).

Dwelling is the way in which human beings are in the world, the place where we inhabit and therefore the place where we are alive. Along with dwelling, relationship is inevitable, it is the way we are in the world with others.

The relationship between occupant and place is also called *habitat*, the natural or artificial environment in which a person, an animal or a plant lives in. Richard Neutra wrote “liveable space and liveable time are not at all the same for all creatures.”³ Neutra identifies a home as a *built* object, may it be a nest or a house that fits into the contingent world of the inhabitant and reflects his needs as well as his sentiments. This concept – similar to the Marc Augé’s *lieux*⁴ – has an direct analogy with Martin Heidegger’s theory on *Dasein*: being in this world means living in it, and inhabiting should take care of this existential space.⁵ Indeed, in the living place we recognize our soul, and it becomes a very important spot for our existence.

Referring again to the philosophy, every house is a purely *moral* entity: we build houses to accommodate in a form of intimacy the portion of the world – made up of things, people, animals, plants, atmospheres, events, images and memories – that make our own happiness possible.

On the other hand, the very existence of the practice of house-building is evidence of morality – the theory of happiness – can never be reduced to a set of precepts relating to our psychological habits or a form of psychic hygiene. It is a material order involving objects and persons, an economy that intercepts things and affects, self and others in the minimal spatial unity of what we call *care*, in the broadest sense: the home. Happiness is not an emotion, nor a purely subjective experience. It is the arbitrary and ephemeral harmony that holds things and people together for a moment in a relationship of physical and spiritual intimacy.⁶

Ettore Sottsass defined the domestic as the temple of living, where we can preserve and protect the ancestral feeling of the *familiar*.⁷ On a conceptual point of view, domesticity, as the dogma of home, determines a threshold between the inside and the outside. At the same time a domestic place also responds to our social and personal needs.

Architecture, and in it the house in particular, is phenomenological in itself: the fullness of living can only occur through a relationship of mutual definition between subject and object. The house then becomes a space of mediation between the individual and the reality that surrounds him.

³ Neutra, Richard. 1962. *World and Dwelling*. Stuttgart: A. Koch.

⁴ Augé, Marc. 1996. *Nonluoghi. Introduzione a una antropologia della surmodernità* (1992). Trans. Dominique Rolland. Milano: Elèuthera.

⁵ Heidegger, Martin. 1991. *Saggi e discorsi (1951)*. Trans. Gianni Vattimo. Milano: Mursia.

⁶ Coccia, 2021, pp. 6-7.

⁷ Sottsass, Ettore. 2002. *Scritti: 1946-2001*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza.

The question of living has always been and remains an essential and primary issue in human life; its fundamental priority, the fact that it is a need and a right for all, condenses around this theme a whole series of possible readings and interpretations. The relationship between the individual and the place in which he or she lives is structured in many different relationships, and is not necessarily based on the built environment. Anthropology has frequently highlighted how the home represents, in many geographical and cultural contexts, a “living” entity, which changes over time, follows and accompanies the existence of the individual. Not only that, but the house is first and foremost a roof (shelter) and a wall (boundary/protection); this essential characteristic belongs to prehistoric living. On the other hand, the philosopher Martin Heidegger pointed out that in the ultimate purpose of living lies the meaning of building. Two separate activities that must necessarily dialogue, if a human being resides in dwelling. Building and thinking for dwelling.⁸

2. Care or the modern concept of the house as a “machine for living”

A man of the eighteenth century, plunged suddenly into our civilization, might well have the impression of something akin to a nightmare.

A man of the ‘nineties, looking at much of modern European painting, might well have the impression of something akin to a nightmare.

A man of today, reading this book, may have the impression of something akin to a nightmare.

Many of our most cherished ideas in regard to the “Englishman’s castle” – the lichened tiled roof, the gabled house, patina – are treated as toys to be discarded, and we are offered instead human warrens of sixty storeys, the concrete house bard and clean, fittings as coldly efficient as those of a ship’s cabin or of a motor-car, and the standardized products of mass production throughout.⁹

As assumed by many historians the 19th century home interiors embraced the essence of intimacy.¹⁰

“The 19th century was, like no other era, morbidly attached to the home. It conceived the home as the custody of man and placed him in it with everything that be-

⁸ Chiara Fagone, *Geografia di un interno, Luoghi dell’abitare e ricerca artistica tra memoria e sperimentazione*.

⁹ Frederick Etchells, introduction of *Toward a new Architecture* by Le Corbusier, translated by Frederick Etchells, Dover Publication, New York, 1986 (first edition 1931)

¹⁰ Sparke, P. (2008). *The Modern Interior*. Reatikon Books, London.

longs to him, so deeply that one might think of the inside of a compass case in which the instrument is usually set in deep grooves of purple velvet.”¹¹

For many Modern Movement architects the interior had become so inextricably linked with the Victorian middle-class domesticity, that they started their “revolution” by minimizing its existence. They found in the spaces of new public sphere buildings – factories, stores, exhibition halls, sanatoriums, etc. – an alternative mode, which they believed to be both rational and functional. They were also inspired by the functional spaces in the modern transport objects like train and airplane equipment, ships cabins or Pullman comfort seats.¹²

For the entire second half of the 19th century, and up to the time of the slogans of the so-called “Modern Movement” in architecture, the tendency remained precisely that of reducing the dwelling to a mere mechanism.¹³ It was Adolphe Lance who, in 1853, proposed the idea of a “machine for living” for the first time:

Would it not be possible to go further and also design our building or our houses in their relationship to the man who frequent them or lives in them, not only to determine their general disposition and distribution, but to also discover the thousands of special applications, multiple assistances, and economies of time and energy, which the introduction of the results of the progress of science and of industry into our dwellings could provide for domestic life? A house is an instrument, it is a machine, so to speak, which not only serves as shelter to man, but must, as much as is possible, submit to all his needs according to his actions and multiply the results of his work. Industrial buildings, factories, plants of all sorts are in this respect nearly perfect models and worthy of imitation.¹⁴

Despite the mechanization of services and the new functional allocation of space, “comfort” – the idea of “care” in that historical period – became the axiom of architectural theory, at least until the dramatic and widely publicized revival of the theme of the “machine for living,” espoused by Le Corbusier in *L'Esprit nouveau* in 1921.¹⁵

Above all, the Modernist architects transferred the key characteristics of new commercial interiors – large open-planned spaces, high levels of transparency and porosity and, perhaps most importantly, a sense of inside/outside

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *L'intérieur, la traccia*, trad. Antonella Moscati, in I “*passages*” di Parigi, pp. 234-235.

¹² Sparke, P. (2008). *The Modern Interior*. Reatikon Books, London.

¹³ Teyssot, G. (2020). The Ur-Forms of Modernism. On 19th Century Hospitalized and Hygienic Dimensions of Architecture. *Docomomo Journal*, (62), 18–27. <https://doi.org/10.52200/62.A.IZO61SEB>

¹⁴ “Review by Adolphe Lance, of: M. Léonce Reynaud, *Traité d'Architecture*”, in *Encyclopédie d'architecture* VI, 1 April 1853, 47-53, VII, 1 May 1853, 62-69, p. 68.

¹⁵ Teyssot, 2020.

ambiguity – into the domestic arena. By taking those features into the private spaces they set out to eradicate the domestic interior's role as an overt expression of beauty, as a space for interiority and identity formation, and its links with fashionableness and social status. In their place they emphasized its utilitarian features and the efficiency of the processes undertaken within it. [...] Of the three main drivers of modernization – industrialization, rationalization and standardization – the first two came together in the industrial and commercial context. Then Modern Movement architects sought to transfer them into the home, hoping in the process to dedicate that arena to rational production and social equality.¹⁶

During the late 1920s the architects of German rationalism, suggested the concept of the *Existenzminimum*. The German school had a positivist conception of the design of human life too: one of its primary goals was to house the working class in liveable, well-articulated dwellings. With mathematical precision, German architects organised many dwellings in gigantic ingot-shaped buildings, which they placed taking into account the position of the sun and other variables, in well-equipped neighbourhoods.

The Modernist's rational approach to space planning inevitably impacted most strongly on those areas of the home dedicated to work rather than to leisure, display, social relations or interiority. That was especially the case as household tasks. In its early formulation, the domestic rational interior focused exclusively on process rather than aesthetic for the interior also began to emerge. [...] The strong desire to embed the rationality underpinning the activities that went on in the production – and work – related interiors of the public sphere in the private dwelling represented a real commitment to its radical transformations. For women it had offered the possibility of their liberation from the drudgery and amateur status of the private sphere, while for Modernist architects and designers it provided a means of ridding the home of bourgeois domesticity (and thereby de-feminizing it), of making it healthy environment and of realigning it with the “masculine” values of work and rationality.¹⁷

Two exemplary cases of this approach within domestic interiors were: the publication titled *Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home* (1915), by Christine Frederick, who transferred the Tayloristic methods within the domestic sphere; and the 1927 Grete Schütte-Lihotzky's proposal for a scientific management

¹⁶ Sparke, 2008, p. 130.

¹⁷ Sparke, 2008, p. 130.

of labour, designing the famous mass-produced and standardized Frankfurt Kitchen for the German social housing programs.¹⁸

Shortly thereafter, Le Corbusier ratified *functionalism* as the dominant architectural theory of early 20th century Modern Movement, introducing his famous slogans: “the house is a device”, or “a house is a machine for living in” and “one can be proud of having a house as serviceable as a typewriter.”¹⁹

This dominant architectural mindset determined a critical approach exclusively based on functionalism with a blind trust in “science” with an alarming definition of a passive final user who has prefixed universal needs (a classic example could be ideal – and unreal – model of Le Corbusier’s *Modulor*²⁰).

2.1 Modernism and Healthcare Spaces

Modernism resulted architecturally in an ideal and liberated expression of equality, which would incorporate a practical, economic design aesthetic with mass-production. For example, distinctive architectural features such as flat roofs, balconies and terraces were regarded as “modernist” through their association with Modern Movement and later International Style buildings.²¹

The design historian Margaret Campbell has made an extensive research, over the past years, precisely dedicated to the correlation between care and health issues and how they affected Modernist architecture features. For example, she questioned why these flat roofs, balconies and roof or garden terraces found at latitudes and in climatic conditions that would normally be considered unsuitable for outside use? The answer is that not only did they “satisfy a desire to acquire a fashionable suntan and reveal avant-garde architectural taste”, but their primary purpose raised for the treatment of pulmonary tuberculosis.²²

¹⁸ Lecce, C.: *The Smart Home. An exploration of how Media Technologies have influenced Interior Design visions from the last century till today.* FrancoAngeli, Milano (2020).

¹⁹ Le Corbusier: *Towards a New Architecture*, Dover Publications, New York (1927), p. 241.

²⁰ The term Modulor derived from the combination of *module* (module) and *or* (in reference to the *section d’or*, the golden section). Le Corbusier’s aim was to provide a range of harmonious measures to suit the human dimension, universally applicable to architecture and mechanical things.

²¹ Reyner Banham, *Theory and design in the first machine age*, London, Architectural Press, 1960, and Richard Weston, *Modernism*, London, Phaidon, 2002. Both explore the tenets of modernism. See also J M Richards, *An introduction to modern architecture*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1940, for a contemporary view on modernist buildings.

²² Margaret Campbell, ‘Architecture of hope: hope for a cure. Tuberculosis, a design response’, MPhil thesis, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, 1999. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1251640/#fn37>

Campbell's research let us to introduce a relevant topic that during the entire 19th century and much of the 20th strongly impacted on Western Courtiers' health and dwelling conditions: tuberculosis.

After the identification of the tubercle bacillus (*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*) by Robert Koch in 1882, but before the great achievements of Selman Waksman who discovered the streptomycin in the 1940s, treatment methods for tuberculosis were relatively simple. The origins of these guidelines were fixed in 1840 by George Bodington, an English physician who published *An essay on the treatment and cure of pulmonary consumption*. His method – not only for patients with tuberculosis – was based on rest in the open air and a good diet.

For this reason, the supposed recuperative properties of dry air meant that early sanatoria were located in alpine regions, and effectively, when combined with prolonged periods of rest and a rich nourishing diet, tuberculosis patients often experienced a degree of remission.

Among many examples, Campell suggests that during the early twenties of the 20th century, Le Corbusier took his interest in flat roofs, terraces and balconies from Swiss sanatoria with which he was familiar.²³ Like the design for the LC4 chaise longue à *reglage continu*, created by Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand, could well have been influenced by the reclining chairs used by pulmonary tuberculosis patients during their two-hour daily exposure to fresh air and sunlight.²⁴ Tuberculosis was a modern disease closely associated with “the rapid growth of industrialization and poorly nourished working class”²⁵, therefore, the reclining chair, which was part of the cure, was also inherently modern.

Furthermore, the removal of dust was a prerequisite of a tuberculosis-free environment, as “tuberculosis-carrying cough droplets or sputum, although dried, are still infectious and can survive in house-hold dust”.²⁶ That fact provided Modernist with yet another rationale for rejecting the dust-collecting surfaces and clutter of the Victorian parlour and for replacing them with open, transparent, clean, with spaces which contained a minimum number of furniture items.

Those that were included were defined as items of “equipment”, rather than as providers of comfort. Open-framed reclining chairs, mad of wicker or tubular steel, were light enough to be easily moved around, from the terrace back into the living room, and their open forms permitted spatial continuity.

The sanatorium provided a recurrent theme with early 20th century modern architecture. Josef Hoffmann had designed both the exterior and the interior of the Punksdorf Sanatorium in 1904, while the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, went on to create the Paimio Sanatorium some fifteen years later. He also

²³ Penny Sparke

²⁴ Margaret Campbell, From Cure Chair to "Chaise Longue": Medical Treatment and the Form of the Modern Recliner. *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1999), pp. 327-343

²⁵ Campbell, 1999, p.2.

²⁶ Campbell, 1999, p.3.

worked on the building's interior, contributing a number of special features, including non-splash basins and green ceilings to add a level of restfulness when patients were lying down.²⁵ The cupboards in Aalto's sanatorium were all wall-mounted to allow for cleaning to take place beneath them.²⁷

2.2 Bacteria in or out?

Another similar in-depth research which puts in correlation Modern Movement principles and hygiene care of interior spaces, has been reviled through the article titled "The Bacterial Clients of Modern Architecture" by Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, published in 2020 on a special issue of the *Docomomo Journal*.²⁸ They reads Modern architecture under the lens of a design practice that – in part – defined itself in opposition to bacteria:

If architecture shelters the human, the first responsibility was now to offer shelter from microbes. Modern buildings were modern only inasmuch as they offered a prophylactic defense, a visible filter of the invisible microbiological environment. Smooth white surfaces, expansive glass, and sun terraces were primarily instruments of health. The buildings were understood to be cleansing machines that must themselves be constantly cleansed but also exhibit their cleanliness, exposing anything unmodern in their vicinity as a form of dirt, a stain to be promptly removed in order to preserve the wellbeing of the human. The limits of the modern building preserved the limits of the human by keeping microbes at bay. Modernizing architecture was first and foremost a medical procedure to evict millions of tiny threatening organisms.²⁹

Somehow, for Modernists, physical, mental, moral, social and economic health were dependent on the apparent cleanliness of buildings, as conveyed by routine esthetic descriptions like "clean lines" and "pure form." The building itself was envisaged as an organism: a body with its own skeleton, organs, circulation system, nerves, skin and metabolism. Human health was seen to be dependent on the health of buildings. Modernizing architecture became a sort of "purification" of buildings, leading to a health-giving environment of light, air, cleanliness, and smooth white surfaces.

The historian Sigfried Giedion, was one of the first to assert the moral rejection of the "infected atmosphere" of ornamentation was the movement's real source since the 1890s: "Architecture was an unwell organism and the wall had first to be cleansed of

²⁷ Sparke, 2008, pp. 142-143.

²⁸ Colomina, B., & Wigley, M. (2020). The Bacterial Clients of Modern Architecture. *Docomomo Journal*, (62), 6-17. <https://doi.org/10.52200/62.A.YSGG9KKU>.

²⁹ Colomina & Wigley, 2020.

all decorative eruptions of the 19th century. There had to be a rediscovery of the esthetic values of the pure surface plane.”³⁰

In this sense, beauty was a sort of product of health. Technology itself was interpreted as a form of “purification” that progressively have to discard excess in the name of efficiency.³¹

Modern technology will paradoxically recover the pre-technological “purity” that unites the 20th century human with their uncontaminated origins. Humanity will finally cure itself: “We are unhappy living in unworthy houses because they ruin our health. [...] The house eats away at us in our immobility, like consumption (Tuberculosis). We will soon need too many sanatoria.”³²

As previously explained, Modern architects directly absorbed the design principles – air, light, cleanliness, smooth surfaces, undecorated simplicity, utility rather than excess, and white walls –by late 19th century tuberculosis sanatoria building types.³³ These principles had, in turn, been directly inherited from the sanitary reform movement: “Doctors started acting as architects and architects as doctors”.³⁴

In particular, the specific “directions” to follow were those of Florence Nightingale, the British activist nurse whose *Notes on Hospitals* of 1859 called for ventilation, large windows, cleanliness, smooth floors without gaps and white walls, simple plans with few corners, minimal utilitarian furniture and no extraneous fabrics or decoration.³⁵ The same year, soon after the famous book, *Notes on Nursing*, this architectural prescriptions were applied in order to preserve the health of houses.³⁶ Nightingale’s idea was to relentlessly clean the body of the building and the body of the human, flood the space between them with health-inducing fresh air and light, then keep that space under constant surveillance. Moreover, as with Le Corbusier, the blankness of a wall surface allowed humans to restore themselves both physically and mentally. In fact, Nightingale wrote extensively on the need to reduce noise and visual complexity to calm the nerves of patients, consequently curing the body itself.

Few years earlier, in 1842 Edwin Chadwick reported an extended statistic document for the UK government, on the unhealthiness of the modern metropolis (drawing on data, observations and recommendations from medical officers throughout the

³⁰ Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, Cambridge, Harvard University, 1967, 293.

³¹ Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, 142.

³² Le Corbusier, *Towards an Architecture*, trans. by John Goodman of 1923 book, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2007, preface of 2nd edition of 1924, 94.

³³ Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture*, 61-116.

³⁴ Colomina & Wigley, 2020.

³⁵ “Pure, white, polished, non-absorbent cement is the only material fit for hospital walls.” Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Hospitals*, London, Longman, 1859, 15.

³⁶ Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing: What it is and What it is Not*, London, Harrison, 1859, 20. Douglas Galton would also apply the principles of hospital design to all “dwelling” types, even if “the sick are more easily affected by insanitary conditions than persons in health.” *Observations on the Construction of Healthy Dwellings Namely Houses, Hospitals, Barracks, Asylums, etc.*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1880, 164.

British Isles, along with reports from France and Germany). This report had led to the first public health laws in 1848 that would be echoed throughout Europe and included the public imposition of “whitewashing, cleansing, or purifying” of houses.³⁷

The sanitary reformers absorbed the germ (bacterial) theory of contagion once demonstrated in the laboratories and field tests of Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch in the early 1880s. Suddenly, countless billions of invisible bacteria became visible and this simply took on a whole new level of urgency.

This discourse at the intersection of medicine and architecture was fully absorbed by subsequent generations of architects. Modernist architecture was espousing the controversial principle of a new, modern, healthy (withe) man: “I place man in a new environment: he is strong, smiling, healthy. Illness suffers a crushing defeat.”³⁸ The “artificial” environment essential to human wellbeing is a disconnection from bacteria. The basic principle is disinfection and isolation, the core defense against epidemics.³⁹

Soon after the WWII, Charles Eames, John Entenza, Eero Saarinen and Herbert Matter, re-asked Le Corbusier’s question “What is a House?” in 1944 (a year after the discovery of the antibiotic streptomycin but five years before it was successfully used on patients to cure tuberculosis). The industrialized house of the near future would feature an array of anti-bacterial technologies in addition to chemical sprays which guard against insects for six months, including: a device for electronically cleaning air of bacteria, a “bacteria destroying” lamp in the refrigerator, and sterilization lamps “the rays of which destroy bacteria, can arrest the spreading of infectious diseases” in water and storage units.⁴⁰

This matches the anti-microbial obsessions of post-war domestic life with its ever-expanding array of disinfecting chemicals, application methods, and cleaning protocols targeting the bacteria on different surfaces of buildings, furnishing, appliances and people.

Paradoxically, the reduction of infections in urbanized society has fed, on the other side, the rise of allergies and auto-immune disorders which can be associated to cancers, diabetes, depression, neurodegenerative disorders and many others present-day diseases. The reason is that all these multiple logics of isolation in contemporary urban society have reduced microbial diversity.

Indeed, bacteria were the first life forms on land (more than three billion years ago) and we literally depend on them. Reducing the diversity of bacteria is now understood to be the real problem. This calls for a return to an environmental theory of health

³⁷ Edwin Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, London, R. Clowes & Sons, 1842.

³⁸ Le Corbusier, *The Radiant City*, trans. by Pamela Knight, Eleanor Levieux, Derek Coltman of 1964 book, New York, Orion Press, 1967, 43.

³⁹ Colomina & Wigley, 2020.

⁴⁰ Charles and Ray Eames, John Entenza, Eero Saarinen and Herbert Matter, “What is a House?”, *Arts & Architecture*, July 1944, 32-49. The article was referring to the “Precipitron” and “Sterilamp” devices for removing bacteria from air and surfaces that were manufactured by Westinghouse since the late 1930’s and advertised for use in homes in architectural journals during the war.

which sees bacteria as an extended ecology with countless alliances with other ecologies (bacteria everywhere doing the work of filtering, decomposing, and recomposing): “Anti-bacterial architecture is anti-human. Buildings are part of this ecology, part of the body, not just carrying the human microbiome but contributing to it and transforming it.”⁴¹

Colomina and Wigley end their article with a reference to the contingent COVID-19 pandemic emergency that was already begun, asserting the necessity to reevaluate the actual principles of domestic spaces “safeness”:

Each pandemic, like COVID-19, necessarily reactivates all the emergency protocols of isolation, social distancing, and sanitization of every surface. These protocols are essential to slow down the spread of disease, but they weaken immune systems if turned into the ongoing basis of everyday life, just as the over-use of antibiotics only incubates more deadly multi-drug resistant pathogens. Modern architecture was produced under emergency conditions – with millions of people still dying each year because there was no cure for tuberculosis. It treated everyday life as an emergency by monumentalizing early 19th century sanitary reform protocols as the very image of health. Alternative understandings of health are long overdue. All the architectural concepts of protection, stability, environment, comfort, order, etc. need to be reconsidered. Or, to say it more simply, the very idea of shelter and care needs to be rethought. It no longer makes sense to live in a hospital.

3. The Italian Dwelling Culture

Talking about *dwelling culture* means, first of all, keeping in mind that rites, customs and habits – expressed in different forms – manifest themselves through sensorial, perceptive, symbolic and gestural values before assuming the features of spaces or objects.

In this direction, the humanistic root of Italian design has always played an important role. During the 20th century, the Italian dwelling culture has been often a contradictory world, but also rich in ideas and researches always attentive to transformations: secularly accustomed to temporariness and therefore led by a natural spirit of survival to seek the most practical solution, without ever losing the pleasure of form, even if only in a detail. In addition to this sensitivity to observe and reread the historical origins of the project, both cultured and profane, the masters of Italian design have often been able to give shape to alternative, unpredictable models, “counter-types”, capable of satisfying or even soliciting the opening up of new forms of living, and of cohabitation.⁴²

⁴¹ Colomina & Wigley, 2020.

⁴² Bosoni, G.: Tipo e controtipo dello “stile” italiano. In G. Bosoni (ed.) *La cultura dell’abitare. Il design in Italia 1945-2001*, pp. 12–21. Skira, Milano (2002).

The nexus linking some of the most famous Italian interior projects realised in the 20th century – from those of Carlo Mollino, Gio Ponti, Franco Albini and Carlo Scarpa to those of Gae Aulenti, Ettore Sottsass and Mongiardino – is an astonishing way of interpreting space, which is realised through architecture, design and art. It is a skill learnt over the centuries.

Paola Antonelli has developed a theory, which she called *Existenzmaximum*, about the spaces we will inhabit in the future. According to her theory, Italian design culture plays a leading role, and could even ensure the permanence of Italian living interiors as paradigms of the domestic landscape. The name was a neologism suggested by the previously introduced late 1920s German *Existenzminimum*. Antonelli notices that since the 1960s, the rationalist conception of a minimalistic calculated spaces, to which people had to adapt to, has been strongly undermined.

In fact, since then:

The domestic walls had already been perforated by the entry of objects such as the radio, television and telephone, which made the small domestic receptacle more flexible and permeable. All over the world, the architects, artists and visionary designers of the 1960s were learning to take these new possibilities into account. The *Existenzmaximum* begins with a spatial design that is small in size and yet extraordinarily comfortable, in which physical limitations serve to design rather than oppress, thus leaving the senses and the spirit free to roam the space.⁴³

3.1 Specificities of the Italian dwelling culture according to the idea of *care*

Even if Paola Antonelli identifies this historical shift by the 1960s, it is relevant to take a step back in time and reposition ourselves during the Italian inter-war period, which was a crucial, lively and painful cultural season. During the twenty years dominated by Fascism, the research of Italian rationalism and the neoclassical forms expressed by the group of artists and architects known as the Novecento intertwined, amidst bitter contrasts and fatal attractions. In the background of these design “laboratories” it is possible to “listen” to the echo of the noisy provocations of the Futurists and the intense suspended expressions of metaphysical painting. A strong reference of this feelings is well detachable among the words written in 1928 by Gio Ponti, for the editorial of the first issue of *Domus* magazine, entitled *La casa all’italiana* (The Italian way house):

In the old Italian house, there is no great architectural distinction between inside and outside; elsewhere there is even separation of forms and materials: from the inside, the Italian house manages to penetrate into the open air with its porticoes and terraces, with pergolas and verandas, with loggias and bal-

⁴³ Antonelli, P.: L’Italian design tra globalismo e affettività. In G. Bosoni (ed.) *La cultura dell’abitare. Il design in Italia 1945-2001*, pp. 22–37. Skira, Milano (2002), p. 32.

conies, terraces and belvederes, comfortable inventions for serene living, and so Italian that in every language they are called by their names [...]. Its – the ancient Italian house – design does not descend from the material needs of living alone. The so-called “comfort” is not in the Italian house only in the correspondence of things to the necessity, the needs, the conveniences of our life and the organisation of services. Its “comfort” is in something superior: it is in giving us with architecture a measure for our own thought.

But if for Ponti everything is linear and harmonious, the complexity of the cultural and aesthetic tensions manifested in the period between the two wars, even with respect to furniture design and interior architecture, is perhaps best represented by the fine thinking of a committed intellectual like Eduardo Persico, a leading theorist of Italian rationalism. In one of his unfinished essays written in 1935, entitled *La casa nuova* (The New House), Persico states that “the idea of a new house is not a Novecento paradox, a polemical pretext; but an extremely serious matter in which the moral destiny of the modern European is engaged”. The housing cell, according to a typical expression of the Modern Movement, is in fact the element at the basis of the formation of architecture, and hence of the urban whole. There are many authors (Figini and Pollini, Giuseppe Terragni, Baldessari, Franco Albini, Giovanni Muzio, De Finetti, Asnago and Vender, Carlo Mollino, Cosenza, Adalberto Libera, Giuseppe Pagano, Levi Montalcini, and so on) to whom we owe the blossoming of this theme in those years, and it is especially in this period, thanks to these protagonists, that the theme of interiors developed according to autonomous and parallel declensions.

3.2 The Italian translation of the functionalist idea of comfort during the 1930s.

In this sense, from an experimental and programmatic point of view, the research on housing models proposed at the Milanese Triennali of 1930, 1933, 1936 and 1940 is fundamental. Looking at the succession through the years of all these 1:1 scale environments, it is possible to highlight a progressive Italian-ness autonomy in approaching an original interior philosophy, progressively taking distances from the pure European functionalism. Taking the case of Franco Albini temporary exhibitions designed for the 1930s Triennali, it is possible to clearly identify this process. One of the most famous exhibition is Albini’s *Stanza per un uomo* (Room for a single man), presented at the VI Triennale di Milano in 1936. Created as an experimental model of living for a “single man”, it contains in its 27 square metres, is a perfect demonstrative environment of the lecorbuserian *machine à habiter* model, in which the entire configuration of the space is determined by furnishing objects and almost completely dedicated to body care and hygiene (a cult typical of the Fascist period but extendable to the modernist ideas of the time). Four years later, Albini presented another environment, titled *Stanza di Soggiorno per una Villa* (A living room for a Villa), at the VII Triennale di Milano. “It is an anti-egoist conception of things, which brings us to that basic concept of modern architecture to feel all things and all problems linked together in the organic coherence of the architectural conception, of the environment,

of the house and of the city.”⁴⁴ With these words Carla Zanini Albini, Franco Albini’s sister, introduces the installation which intention was to define an interior-exterior space: the back wall is in fact completely glazed and through it the design of a garden can be glimpsed, creating a strong effect of continuity. The organic vision of the environment is also found in the choice of inserting a tree inside, positioned in the centre of the room that crosses the two levels of the structure, or the use of a floating floor of transparent tempered glass covering a fake flower meadow. The room is then “populated” by a series of alienating presences: the terracotta-pink coloured concrete sculpture by Jenny Wiegmann, the dining table with a marble and glass mosaic top, the bird cage in red twine net – stretched from top to bottom between two elliptical rings –, and the two surreal “chairlift” armchairs (two seats swinging in the living room suspended from the mezzanine). This scenography reflects the essence of a new poetic that was rising within the Italian dwelling culture, indeed an idea of comfort much closer to our contemporary concept of wellbeing. The encounter with nature, the idea of enjoying a moment of relax hanging on a rocking chair, or on a kind of modern hammock, are just some of the elements characterizing several Italian interiors of late 1930s and 1940s.⁴⁵

3.2 Where to live to be happy?

Soon after the II World War the most basic living needs and dwelling spaces were gone. Most of Italian and European cities were destroyed and with them most of the residential buildings.

Modern Movement “metric” approach to existential problems, after the war became a criterion applied on a worldwide scale in the design of private spaces for the proletarian classes.

But, once again, in Italy, many young architects were proposing different solutions, for simple and functional, yet flexible, new domestic interiors.

The RIMA exhibition (*Riunione Italiana Mostre Arredamento*) of 1946, was a private initiative that in 1946 took charge of rebuilding the bombed Palazzo dell’Arte to set up a series of exhibitions of individual furniture projects oriented by the principles of “economy, practicality and good taste”⁴⁶, with the primary objective of an upcom-

⁴⁴ Albini, C. (1941, gennaio). A proposito di un arredamento esposto alla VII Triennale.

Costruzioni-Casabella, 157, 34-40, p. 34.

⁴⁵ See also BBPR interiors or the Villa Figini, a small single-family villa in Milan, designed by Luigi Figini from 1934 to 1935. The house is partly a rationalist design taken from Le Corbusier. In fact, Figini’s house is a succession of rooms, some covered and some open. Each one, as in an enchanted world, with its own secret to be revealed. There is an open-air one for physical exercises, one with a couple of square meters of lake or sea, one in which there is the tree by observing which we relate to the whole of nature. After all, Figini was passionate about nature and in 1950 he published a book he had been working on for twenty years, titled *L’elemento verde e l’abitazione*.

⁴⁶ Rogers, E. N. (January 1946). “Pronto soccorso”, *Domus*, 205: 6.

ing future series production. The uncertain psychological condition of the Italian post-war orients architects (especially the young ones⁴⁷) to design furniture systems that incorporate the principles of practicality, lightness and adaptability. This is shown by the assignment of the *Grand Prix* of the 1946 exhibition to the young architect Ignazio Gardella. Gardella offers a series of prototypes of furniture for a hypothetical accommodation for three people, designed for “precise needs of life but with a certain flexibility: various modularity of bookcases, reversibility of the cabinets, interchangeability of internal equipment, etc.”⁴⁸

Indeed, one of the most “human” voices that emerged in this period was the Bruno Munari one.

The young artist and designer wrote in 1944 a series of articles on the pages of *Domus* simply based on the concept of “happiness” and dwelling, on the meanings of inhabiting and on the real sense of designing new objects.

Everyone dreams of the ideal design of their home where they plan to happily live out their remaining years. Everyone dreams. Architect, boatman, blacksmith, astronomer, painter, waiter, leather goods traveller, tram driver, everyone dreams. He dreams of a house where only he and his family could live, a house that will be his psychological portrait, a house, like snails, like woodworms. A house he has wanted for years, a house he may never build, a house, like ants, like moles. [...] But a house. A free house. Man, if he wants a house to shelter himself, must PAY, to pay he must WORK, to work he must consume Hours, Years, Life. Look at the house of Ferdinand Cheval. He dreamed perhaps of an Indian temple. He could not have it. He set to work alone and built his house with his own hands. You don't like it. He does. A lot. [...] Where to live to be happy?”⁴⁹

This former article signed by Munari really puts the foundations of some of the most recognizable characters of the Italian design. The freedom and adaptability of systems of elements that try always to found an open dialogue with its inhabitants, with their need, their moods, their emotions. The Italian interiors define an informal approach, unhinging the coordinated, millimetres calculated kind of spaces.

Later, in the 1960s some creative personalities, such as Joe Colombo, took their task to the letter, designing multifunctional, portable and foldable structures, made possible by the development of materials such as pastiche and fibreglass. Others, like Ettore Sottsass, opened up space by articulating it and adopting an exotic playfulness in finishes. But the most revealing projects were those concerning individual objects capable of creating spatial fields within themselves.

Returning to Paola Antonelli's theory, she asserts that today we are in the midst of the *Existenzmaximum* age, where the boundaries between various areas of design are disappearing.

⁴⁷ Rogers, 1946.

⁴⁸ Gardella, I. (July 1946). “Alloggio per 3 persone”. *Domus*, 211: 7–9.

⁴⁹ Bruno Munari, Dove abitare per essere felici? *Domus* 195, marzo 1944, pp. 80-85.

Space is no longer what it once was. Because of the need to structure the immense immaterial world of the computer network and to expand the restricted physical space available to the individual, architecture has become the universal paradigm.

4. New meanings of care within the contemporary dwelling culture

As a result, on the one hand, of mass-media civilisation, allied in projecting housing essentially as a consumer good, and, on the other, of the converging traditions of counter-reformist Catholicism and the more recent working class *esistenza-minimum*, leading for different reasons to limit well-being in private life, we are led to lose a balanced idea of the truest purposes of the home and therefore of its image. We are not educated, as in past eras, to a mature collective culture of dwelling.⁵⁰

These problems are steadily increasing due to the economic crisis, the worsening social inequality that has led in many countries to homelessness and the extension of precarious housing. And the intensification of migratory flows has led to truly dramatic living conditions (the estimate of people living in the slums of European cities and other developed countries according to the report *The challenges of slums* is about 54 million, a small percentage when compared to the billion people outside the West who live in slums).

The relationship between environments and states of mind, the correspondence between sensations and suggestions that interiors are able to arouse, but also the different perception of the same place as one's emotions vary, has been the subject of countless descriptions in the very last decades. The home and its rooms often become the setting in which joys, disturbances, dramas and passions manifest themselves and reverberate.⁵¹

Looking at the contemporary, the city, and with it the individuals who inhabit it, has changed radically since the 1980s. Domesticity now determines a threshold between the inside and the outside, just as the domestic place responds to people's social and personal needs at the same time. The birth rate is falling dramatically, the proportion of elderly people and adults living alone has been increasing more and more. At the same time, the quantity and quality of services available 24 hours a day has also increased. Thus, domestic interior space has become so thin that people are forced out into the street. Flats have become much smaller, they are essentially service spaces: a room with an open kitchen where the person sleeps and takes care of his or her body, where one can also have company from time to time. In the metropolis, isolation makes less and less sense, we are now used to sharing work space, cars, bicycles, material and immaterial resources. People do not have to work all the time, but they

⁵⁰ Adriano Coronidi (1994). *La Casa di Adamo in Terra*. In A. Coronidi (Ed.), *Architettura dei luoghi domestici. Il progetto del comfort*, Jaca Book, p.11.

⁵¹ Fagone, C. *Geografia di un interno. Luoghi dell'abitare tra memoria e sperimentazione*, Milieu (2018).

must be constantly available to do so, they must always be available, and technology allows this.⁵²

George Teyssot states that living means creating a routine for oneself in order to counteract the unforeseen circumstances of everyday life and that the acquisition of new habits is in response to the emergence of the new and unexpected (e.g. the climate crisis). This brings us back to the contingency of our current experience of living, so traumatically called into question by the emergence of the global pandemic. The concept of *care* then returns to take on an even stronger and more complex meaning, because it reminds us how inhabited space must be designed to protect against the virus, but also, paraphrasing Franco Battiato's well-known song, against the upsets, pains, mood swings and obsessions and manias of contemporaneity, in order to finally try to overcome those famous gravitational currents.

⁵² Siracusa, M. (2016). Una terza modernità. In B. Finessi (ed.). Stanze. Altre filosofie dell'abitare. Marsilio.