This is the published version of a paper presented at Innovating, Housing, Learning: Oikodomos International Conference 2011.

Citation for the original published paper:

Altés Arlandis, A. (2011)
Living together: on the role of architecture in the production of habitable collective spaces.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-80983
Innovating, Housing, Learning
Oikodomos International Conference

Brussels, 27-28 October 2011
at W&K Sint-Lucas School of Architecture
Paleizenstraat 65 1030 Brussels

Paper:

Living Together: On the Role of Architecture in the Production of Habitable Collective Spaces

Author:

Alberto Altés Arlandis, Architect, Guest Studio Lecturer, Umeå School of Architecture, UMU, Umeå, Sweden
PhD Candidate, Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura del Vallès, UPC, Barcelona, Spain

OIKODOMOS is a Virtual Campus co-financed by the Long Life Learning Programme of the European Union to support housing studies in Europe. In the first two years of the project, 2007-2009, OIKODOMOS has developed, implemented, tested and evaluated an innovative pedagogic model based on a blended learning approach which combines on-line learning activities carried out in web-based environments -specifically designed for this Virtual Campus- with seminars, design studios and workshops physically taking place at the participating universities. The goal of the third year project activities (2010-2011), is to consolidate the pedagogic model, to expand the Virtual Campus to other institutions and to disseminate the project results among the academic and scientific communities.
living together.

on the role of architecture in the production of habitable collective spaces.

The paper reflects on the need for another approach to the concept of habitability that would allow the application of collective solutions and proposals simultaneously and transversally at all scales, from the room to the city, reclaiming the values of the collective as an alternative to the reigning individualism and atomization.

In front of those practices that either linger in the unstoppable race to produce the new and its new shapes and forms or align with neoliberal currents in the production and absorption of surplus values at the cost of the creative destruction of urban spaces and territories, one must claim the urgent need of other ways of doing and making that engage decisively and uncompromisingly in the task of designing coexistence.

It is paramount and indispensable to advance beyond the formal and typological, incorporating not only the already known discourses of adaptability, dissociation and other contemporary private rituals but also the critical design of common, collective, public and intermediate spaces that foster sociability and conviviality making the sharing of spaces, resources and experiences possible.

habitability – collective housing – community – right to the city

Alberto Altés Arlandis
Architect
PhD Candidate
ETSAV, UPC, Barcelona (Spain)
UMA, Umeå School of Architecture, Umeå (Sweden)
alberto.altes@upc.edu
fig. 1: Container of the Urban Asymetries Master program at TUDelft, shortly after the fire that destroyed the faculty of architecture building. Photo by the author of the article.

“The polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be” (Arendt 1998:198)

Hanna Arendt presented her understanding of the city through these words already in 1958. The constitutive essence of the city lies in the set of complex relationships that take place among people. Relations that emerge, according to her “from the doing and talking together” and take place in authentic, real space: the one that exists “in between people dwelling together for that purpose”.

Instead, it seems like architects, urban planners and others insist in understanding the city and architecture as mere buildings, and furthermore, in the fact that these have nothing to do with people except for the “annoying” fact that, once finished, they will be inevitably occupied by hordes of “stupid, ignorant and insensitive” individuals. It looks as if the most important was to define, devise and, above all, formalize those objects-buildings, or in other words, an aesthetic, artistic, cultured and autonomous practice, that must not get dirty or contaminate with other issues of ethical, social or political nature that should not interfere at all in the resulting image-architectures.

If it is worrying to verify how contemporary architectural production and the debate associated to it have lost most of their social, critical, political and utopian impetus, the worries turn into indignation and disappointment when looking at the case of dwelling and the production of living environments. The results of many years of scandalous real estate, neoliberal and architectonic frenzy are now visible. The design of coexistence, the production of habitable spaces – undoubtedly the main task and function of architecture- has been abandoned in order to embrace: on the one hand, the serial and indiscriminate fabrication of non-architectures that
repeat types, materials and structural systems on the basis of a pragmatic and productive juxtaposition of normative restrictions and the interests of bankers, investors, developers and builders; and on the other hand, the dazzling production of unique prototypes of image-architecture that satisfy the ill, self-worshiping yearnings of an elite of architects abandoned to the ceaseless luxury of formal exploration, in search of new opportunities to produce the new, the stunning, the original.¹

It is difficult to understand how such an outlook along with the unsustainable situation and social emergency around the issue of housing in Spain, has not yet produced – in spite of the real-estate bubble explosion, a firm, serious and critical reaction within the profession, schools of architecture, boards or even other, supposedly critical, institutions related to spatial practices. In and around these institutions, professionals and scholars, a lot more research, deep reflection and knowledge should be produced to question current housing policies and social housing models, to understand and explore the options of cooperative housing and other modalities of alternative co-habitation, to assess the potential of interesting initiatives of self-construction that have been almost eliminated from the catalogue of public housing solutions and, more generally to approach the needs, realities and possible futures of “living together”.

The most recent European housing statistics provide only a glimpse of the Spanish disaster. In 2008 for instance, 85% of occupied dwellings are owned by its occupants, in front of a 13% of rental housing. Such percentages place Spain in the last positions regarding rental housing in Europe, only scoring better than Estonia, Rumania, Czech Republic and Poland. (In the case of Poland there exists a cooperative sector² that represents a 24% of the total of occupied dwellings, which makes the percentage of owned dwellings drop to 64%, well below that of Spain).³

These numbers are even more revealing when compared with data regarding other European countries such as Germany, with a 54% of rental dwelling and 46% of owner-occupied; the Netherlands, with a 42% of rentals and 58% of owner-occupied; France with a 39% and 57% respectively; or countries like Denmark, with a 39% of rentals, 46% of owner-occupied and a 7% of cooperative housing; or Sweden, with a 44% of rentals, 38% of owner-occupied and 18% of cooperative housing, which makes it the country with the lowest percentage of owner-occupied of the UE.⁴

It is obvious of course that most of the rentals included in the data shown above correspond to dwellings owned by the state or diverse forms of managing companies controlled by the state or municipalities, that also take care of the maintenance and reparations required. The Swedish case is the most interesting and rich, since the state is not developing social or state subsidized housing as we know it in Spain, but regulates the market by fixing the rents in order to guarantee access to housing for all. The cooperative sector in Sweden and Denmark is so

¹ I’m not denying here the emergence, in rare occasions, of elegant, important and solid architectures resulting from rigorous investigations and determined takes on exploration and avant-garde, resulting perhaps of careful combinations of knowledge, sensitivity and desire; what I question and oppose is the current trend through which the production of “the new” and “the original” becomes and end in itself.
² The cooperative sector in Spain is practically inexistent and there is no official data available regarding its evolution or current situation.
³ Housing Statistics in the European Union 2010, pag. 64, Occupied Dwelling Stock by Tenure, %
⁴ It must be noted that the cooperative sector in Sweden is quite complex and a part of it resembles the homeowners associations that we know in Spain and other countries.
complex and at the same time interesting that it would require a whole paper, but the mere fact that such advanced countries invest and take care to articulate and maintain laws and policies aimed at fostering housing cooperatives, should at least awaken the interest among both researchers and politicians, working as a referent or setting a horizon of possibility that could encourage reforms and proposals pushing the Spanish housing pool toward the collective, boosting strategies to promote collaboration and coexistence from inception.

It might be that the most spectacular data and statistics are those revealing the frenzy of building construction in Spain, where during the years 2006, 2007 and 2008, the number of finished dwellings was 705,924, 676,914 and 652,738, respectively. The available data from the Spanish Ministry of Housing and the National Institute of Statistics is helpful to calculate the total increase in dwelling units in Spain during the 2000-2009 interval, from 17 to 26 million units. During the same period, in France for instance, the number of dwellings increased in a very different proportion, from 28 to 31 million units.

This data could be combined with other information, perhaps less scientific but equally illustrative as the one published in Spanish media during the past few months about the real estate market, building construction sector and the Spanish banks, stating for instance that the number of mortgage foreclosures has increased from 14,000 in 2004 to more than 100,000 in 2010. The final balance is worrying, and thinking, or rethinking, possible solutions is more than urgent. Nevertheless, the problems, debates and reflections around housing are not taking a prominent space in publications, neither among professionals, nor within the study plans of most of the schools and faculties of architecture.

Paradoxically enough, even in those cases in which the issue of collective housing is explicitly undertaken, the approaches are notably professionalist and autonomist, leaving social issues and other questions mentioned above on a side and betting on educating architects to integrate in the current dynamics of the international market of architectural professionals, or in the best cases, aiming at producing the next “starchitects” of domestic architecture.

On the contrary, architectural publications and exhibitions present more and more stunning and dazzling images, “literally, such is the shininess and freshness of the surface that one is seduced into believing that something genuinely new is happening”, but in fact there is almost nothing under the surface and appearance of such architectures, just a huge ethical and political void that ignores the social “real” and avoids engagement. Those practices and methods fit perfectly in the category of “fresh conservatism” that the Dutch architect and critic Roemer van Toorn proposes in order to explain contemporary architectural production and its spectacularly fresh, although empty, wrappings.

---

6 Housing Statistics in the European Union 2010, pag. 74, data on “Dwellings Completed per 1000 inhabitants” combined with official population statistics.
7 Housing Statistics in the European Union 2010, pag. 60, “Dwelling Stock by Type of Building”
An autonomy born out of architect’s pretension of carrying a special intelligence and superior knowledge, that should be exempt of evaluation and protected from inexperienced interferences, an autonomy that, even worse, can derive into dangerous and opportunist, darker or less, maneuvers aiming at protecting the privileges, not even of the profession as such but of just a few that self proclaim themselves the ones chosen to defend architectural quality and the cultural dimension of the discipline, on the basis of the “proved competence” of their professional production.10

The mere presence of the user is seen as threatening the architect’s authority. The experience of architecture is thus the experience of the architect that seems to claim exclusive rights not only to the production but also to the interpretation and reception of the work of architecture.

Even in cases like the excellent and extensive editorial work of Aurora Fernández Per and Javier Mozas in the well-known and successful publications of “a+t” on housing11, the result puts together a considerable amount of research focusing almost exclusively on typological and formal aspects, openly declaring its uncritical nature: “we don’t critique designs, we analyze them” they reveal in their presentation blog.

These and other investigations have focused on disciplinary and “scientific” analysis of what happens around “housing” in the visible avant-garde of contemporary architecture, through graphics and parameters that are in no way interested in those aspects more closely related to coexistence or co-habitation. ¿Where are the statistics and data, percentages and surfaces destined to common spaces, laundry rooms, kid’s playrooms, tool workshops, shared kitchens or even, simply, the rooms destined to the safe bike parking with a direct access to/from the street? Where is the data and analysis of housing cooperatives and other initiatives close to co-housing? Wouldn’t it be possible to investigate and define indicators that could help explain the degree of coexistence, the possibilities of sharing, and the collective potentials in relationships with, for instance, an efficient use of energy and resources? Isn’t it simply necessary to reflect about the collective?12

Almost forgotten remain some brilliant examples that have not received much attention but that have, nevertheless, explored the potential of “the collective” in a responsible and resolute manner. Alvaro Siza’s project for the Frankelufer block in Kreuzberg as part of the IBA exhibition of 1979 in Berlin took shape on the basis of an understanding and combination of social and historical aspects, in an attempt at incorporating and reflecting the contradictory and complex character of Berlin at that time, “dissolving the limits between history and present, between building and block, between the block and the city, between the everyday life of the block’s courtyard and the public life of the city” (Testa, 1987). Introducing thus “the common” and “the collective” not as mere objects of his design, but as its generative parameters.

---

10 I am referring here to the recently presented local association AxA (Arquitectes per la Arquitectura) in Barcelona, and the implications of their exclusive statutes. For a complete vision of the issue, check the blog of a counter group at http://ntretots.blogspot.com/ and specially the article by Pere Riera on the topic at http://arquitecturadispersa.blogspot.com/2011/05/reflexions-al-voltant-de-la-creacio-de.html

11 http://aplust.net/about.php?idioma=es

More recently, Siza has had the chance to finish his social housing project in Bouça (Porto) that was started and partially executed between 1973 and 1977 as part of the interventions of the “Servicio de Apoio Ambulatorio Local” (SAAL). Conceived in a context of social, political and economical emergency in the country and as part of a series of interventions aiming at tackling the lack of affordable housing, the original design already included common spaces, community rooms, collective courtyards and access galleries as central elements.

Fig. 2: Series of Pictures taken at the social housing complex in Bouça, Porto. Design by Álvaro Siza, 1973-2006. Photos by the author of the article.

In the more recent second phase of restoration and extension (2001-2006) Siza has continued exploring the role of these and other collective spaces such as the “patio”, learning from the diverse ways of doing and making developed by the inhabitants of the original design and making diverse new forms of occupation and seizure of the space possible. The new inhabitants integrate silently in the dynamics of appropriation of in-between and common spaces, giving rise to a quiet, inhabited, shared and vital environment.

Wouldn’t it be appropriate to retake certain modesty that allowed dealing with the construction of our “habitat” in less shouting and grandiloquent terms? Isn’t it possible to think architecture a bit more as a comfortable and changing container of the diverse practices of everyday life and less as a rigid and static “stage” or representational device?

The interesting work of the research group Habitar\(^\text{13}\) is moving forward in the direction suggested by these questions. From Barcelona, they have conceived and organized a series of exhibitions entitled “Rehabitar” (Re-Inhabit) as a set of nine episodes that progressively take place in and around the space of “Arquerías de Nuevos Ministerios” in Madrid, exploring the possibilities of re-inhabiting our dwellings, understanding that process as a way of “using again the house and its spaces in the simplest, truest and most uninhibited ways, knowing that rather than refurbishing the spaces we inhabit, we should change the ways in which they are used” (Monteys et al., 2010).

\(^{13}\) http://www.habitar.upc.edu/?page_id=403
The exhibition and the work of these researchers contains, among other things, a much needed critical reflection on housing in Spain that should at least lead to numerous debates and reactions.

Among their proposals and provocations destined to “subvert the use we make of the home in order to infuse it with new life”, one can find most of the essential and urgent questions regarding housing today, and a number of interesting points of departure for possible alternative ways to design domestic space, that, perhaps only implicitly, contain diverse winks to notions of “the collective”: “re-inhabiting ground floors” as a way to “infect” the street with domesticity and dissolve the limits of “the public”, “re-inhabiting the street” in an attempt at giving back its truly public condition to urban space through the introduction and addition of other uses, re-inhabiting the apartments and blocks by means of satellite-rooms, rethinking the position and amount of doors in a dwelling, or questioning the diverse possibilities of access and entry, the relations of certain rooms with others or the predominance of the living room over the other rooms of the house.

The importance of such research and exhibition lies precisely in its taking a critical standpoint regarding the localized reality of the Spanish housing market and situation, and moreover, in the easiness and naturalness with which “dwelling” is understood as not only happening in the realm of the room or the apartment but as taking place in other intermediate or in-between spaces, exteriors, satellites, common spaces, public zones, the street, public space… the city. Their position is also, of course, decisively moving away from dark and idolizing elitisms of untouchable (perhaps also un-usable or uninhabitable) architectures and, more or less explicitly, betting on the user, the inhabitant, that shows up in drawings, models and texts, as undeniable protagonist of dwelling proper, before and above an architecture that should serve coexistence.

How come there aren’t any other voices, research, reflections, experiences, critique and proposals centered and focused on the dweller? Isn’t it possible to extract useful reflections and ideas or to take some experiences and radical proposals from the past - that perhaps contain the essential collective ingredients - as points of departure? Wouldn’t it be relevant at least to revisit other ways of understanding “habitability” in other historical moments?

The functionalist manifesto “acceptera”, signed by Gunnar Asplund, Wolter Gahn, Sven Markelius, Gregor Paulsson, Eskil Sundahl and Uno Åhrén in 1931, foresaw some necessary changes in the home for it to adapt to the new social reality and already announced then a future in which dwellings would be complemented with other collective rooms, functions, systems and facilities. On the side of some of the movement’s flawed proposals and their particularly radical rejection of historical legacy – albeit understandable in the context of their time – their reflections on the need to transform domestic space, and specially, around the implementation of collective and shared solutions, can be considered as an excellent point of departure for the task of rethinking the possibilities of living together.

Fig. 3 Cover of the functionalist manifesto “acceptera”, 1931.
“We have already pointed out how the functions of the home are reduced in some aspects. […] A good part of food preparation, that would also take place in it, is now carried out in factories, as much as the tasks of sawing and finishing of clothes, etc. Entertainment, that was one of the domestic activities, can be found now in theaters, cinemas, associations and other more or less public attractions” (Asplund et al., 1931: 72) Adding immediately after: “But the home will be probably complemented in the future in other ways, with collective rooms and services of diverse nature” (Asplund et al., 1931: 72) And bringing in some examples: “When the parents work outside of the home and lack the possibility – or in some cases the interest – of maintaining domestic service, children cannot stay home without vigilance during working hours. Playing rooms and “babykeeping-rooms” (spädbarnskrubbor) will then have a function to fulfill. […] Laundry rooms with washing, drying, ironing and folding sections are nothing new, and heating is since long distributed from collective stations” (Asplund et al., 1931: 73)

Fig. 4 Kollektivhus, John Ericssonsgatan, Stockholm, 1935. Sven Markelius. Dining room, space for children and main facade.

Wouldn’t it be reasonable to retake some of these ideas and to rethink the possibilities and potential of common uses, equipments, services and rooms? Laundry rooms, ironing and folding spaces would allow for instance to take washing machines and tumble driers out of the domestic space, which would gain those m2 for other, more interesting uses. Moreover, the use of industrial and collective washing machines and driers does not only reduce the sheer number of machines and waste but does also affect long term maintenance and management costs since these equipment usually has a much longer life cycle than domestic machines.

Fig. 5 Some collective spaces in the cooperative housing complex Bostadsrättsföreningen Tegelslagaren in Göteborg; Ragnar Dahlberg, 1946. Interior common spaces: Tvättstuga, Torkrum, Mangelrum (Laundry room, drying room, ironing and folding room) Photos by the author of the article.

14 All the quotations from the functionalist manifesto “acceptera” are translations from the original in Swedish by the author of the paper.
These advantages, at the level of pure efficiency, meet the current preoccupations about energy consumption and efficient use of resources, but are by no means as important and beneficial as those derived from the very fact of sharing spaces and services, which importantly increases the probabilities of co-presence in common spaces and thus the actual cases of interaction and socialization.

Fig. 6 Some collective spaces in the cooperative housing complex Bostadsrättsföreningen Tegelslagaren in Göteborg; Ragnar Dahlberg, 1946. System for booking washing and using times in the laundry room; and view of the rules of usage and order. Photos by the author of the article.

In the same direction, the well-known argument that justifies the elimination or reduction of interior and exterior common spaces claiming that they are too expensive to maintain can be easily contested by means of a good managing program run by the inhabitants themselves, who acquire not only a responsibility and a task to fulfill but also a sense of participating and belonging to a community or group. Community work carried out by the inhabitants means notable savings that make investments in reparations, maintenance or acquisitions of new collective machines or equipment possible.

It is obvious that these kind of collective collaborations is more feasible within housing cooperatives, but just a few simple changes in the ways owner’s associations are conceived, combined with incentives and information programs would surely facilitate the adoption of such collective dynamics in a massive and voluntary way. Returning to the Swedish case, it is quite common in the cooperative communities of that Scandinavian country to agree on some dates in which most of the inhabitants/neighbors will meet in gardens and common spaces in order to take care of the maintenance and reparations or improvements of those spaces. A playful and joyful atmosphere usually defines these encounters that often lead to interesting collective lunches, dinners or barbeques held in some of the common spaces around the houses, conveniently equipped for such activities.
But it is not even necessary to look for examples or references out in Europe in order to have the right approaches to dwelling that incorporate scales other than those strictly limited to the home premises and thus make a more collective vision feasible: the Spanish regulations in terms of habitability in other historical moments have understood it in a much wider sense than the one reflected in the norms approved and enforced today by each regional government (Comunidades Autónomas). Both the “Ley de Casas Baratas” (Affordable Housing Act) from 1922, and the “Ley de Viviendas de Renta Limitada” (Limited Rent Housing Act) from 1955, explicitly referred to common rooms and spaces, courtyards, exterior spaces and gardens, etc… considering them all as constituent parts of the dwellings.\textsuperscript{15}

In those regulations, the home was moreover linked to other realms and spaces of the urban environment, as well as to other services and facilities, understanding thus the act of dwelling as happening simultaneously at all scales, from the domestic space of the home to the city.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} “Reglamento Provisional para la Aplicación de la Ley de Casas Baratas de 19 de Diciembre de 1921, Capítulo1º, Sección 1ª, Artículo 2º. Gaceta de Madrid nº 209" 28th of July 1922, pag. 364

These kind of approaches to the idea of “the collective” and to a wider understanding of habitability cannot be found even in the most recent research nor in the most interesting and radical proposals of the last decades, which have continued to focus on the interior of the home and on typological and formal aspects that of course shouldn’t be left aside either.

Well known, although not so well applied, are the discourses reclaiming an adaptation of existing dwellings to the new family structures and alternative forms of co-habitation by means of diverse strategies to transform domestic interiors and layouts. Several systems have been explored or rehearsed in order to make the space of the home more flexible – in “more or less illusory” terms – questioning the hierarchies of rooms and the rigid oppositions between public-private or day and night; more interesting dissociation devices that “deconstruct the integrity of the home” (Sabater, 1995) giving rise to diverse spaces of appropriation and/or encounter, intimate sometimes, that oppose the hegemony of the living room; or even proposals that literally separate “satellite” spaces or rooms, which not only transform the home into a system capable of hosting a more complex set of attitudes, habits and situations, but do also hold a collective potential in as much as they are conceived as parts to be shared with others.

The continuity and transparency of modern space has also been questioned, those spaces in which “the gaze controls everything and intimacy is missing” (Eleb, 1995), as well as the existence of servant spaces that could be gained as dwelling space: making kitchens and bathrooms bigger for instance, opening or illuminating the latter, or simply widening and transforming corridors into places with the help of adequate furniture.

It is true that, as always, there have been a number of exceptions, and specially during the last few years one can find interesting proposals that address some of the most serious problems that have been pointed out or manage to solve some of the typological issues mentioned above; but we cannot say that these initiatives and explorations are receiving attention hardly comparable to the one generated by other “media” architectures.

In any case, with rare exceptions of interesting experiments rehearsing the incorporation and widening of access galleries as spaces available for temporary appropriation and potential interaction, the questions related to dwelling together, co-existence, community and collective elements and spaces are not being addressed. Either they don’t apply, as a result of rigidity and inadequacy of administrative and normative frames, or they are not found interesting or attractive fields of inquiry and experimentation.

The discipline throws itself into the production of architectures of high media impact and greater iconicity, if it is necessary by means of artifices, tricks and disguises that present mediocrity in sophisticated and opportunistic wrappings. A case of such extreme cynicism is for instance the recent work of Gert Wingårdh for one of the biggest Scandinavian producers of “catalogue houses”, the Swedish A-Hus. The collaboration of the Swedish architectural media star with the manufacturer of detached house has been carefully wrapped in “green” paper, in a move that tries to take advantage of current sustainable trends and “green wash” campaigns, with a proposal for a supposedly “ecological” home whose inhabitants would achieve a reduction in their CO2 emissions from 7 to 1 ton/year per person.

---

17 More on this can be found in Monteys, Xavier y Fuertes, Pere (2001) “Casa Collage, Un Ensayo sobre la Arquitectura de la Casa”. GG, Barcelona.

18 See the company’s webpage and the projects “1 tonne hus” and “Bright Living”: www.a-hus.se
In spite of the diverse “sustainable” and technological gadgets with which the house is equipped (as a result of “close” collaboration with numerous other companies interested in the project) and the equally sustainable proclamations with which the prototype is presented, it is in fact a detached, single-family house of considerable surface and volume, designed to host a specific type of family whose lifestyle and consumption patterns are not those of a low energy and footprint profile. It is essentially a design that encourages unsustainable models of land occupation and resource consumption. Even though it is in fact a modest assignment – the design and development of 3 prototypes and the construction of 1 house – its impact on the media is huge, what explains the unusual interest and dedication put into the project by the architect himself.

The same office does not show equal dedication or innovative enthusiasm when it comes to solve collective housing assignments, what often leads to conventional and not-so-flexible solutions and typologies in their usual designs. Their proposals not only neglect the collective aspects reclaimed throughout this text but also fail to adapt to new social structures, habits and families, even showing clumsy or awkward layouts.

Meanwhile, other examples with no media impact at all rehearse innovative and interesting solutions that address, at least, the typological renovation of domestic space. Nevertheless, the aspects related to the meaning, conception, administration, function and value of that what is collective in front of that what is individual are almost always left out, and it seems like today’s architectures and urbanisms keep on having strong interests in designing exclusively for the private and individual realms.

In one of his last projects in the north of Sweden, Ralph Erskine received the assignment of designing a small residential neighborhood in collaboration with one of the housing companies controlled by the municipality. The design was finished in 1989 and is known as Träsnidaren, a name taken also by the cooperative association that manages it. It is a part of a slightly bigger area designated as Östermalm, which marks the end of a relatively compact urban center in its eastern side. The complex included 23 buildings and a total of 221 dwellings, combining several typologies of 60, 73, 77, 90, 120 and 130 m² of surface and experimenting with diverse organizational devices in their interiors.

Meanwhile, other examples with no media impact at all rehearse innovative and interesting solutions that address, at least, the typological renovation of domestic space. Nevertheless, the aspects related to the meaning, conception, administration, function and value of that what is collective in front of that what is individual are almost always left out, and it seems like today’s architectures and urbanisms keep on having strong interests in designing exclusively for the private and individual realms.

In one of his last projects in the north of Sweden, Ralph Erskine received the assignment of designing a small residential neighborhood in collaboration with one of the housing companies controlled by the municipality. The design was finished in 1989 and is known as Träsnidaren, a name taken also by the cooperative association that manages it. It is a part of a slightly bigger area designated as Östermalm, which marks the end of a relatively compact urban center in its eastern side. The complex included 23 buildings and a total of 221 dwellings, combining several typologies of 60, 73, 77, 90, 120 and 130 m² of surface and experimenting with diverse organizational devices in their interiors.
More interesting than the resulting typologies are the in-between and collective spaces that Erskine was capable of articulating so as to make them easy and accessible for everyday life usage. Interaction happens almost in a natural way and the area has become in a few years one of the most popular in the city. Young couples and families, pensioners, students, university professors and researchers, as well as immigrants share spaces and an interest to enjoy a quiet and pleasant environment without fences, cameras and other surveillance or control devices.

Fig. 11 Series of pictures showing some common spaces of the housing complex Träsnidaren in the neighborhood Östermalm in Umeå, Sweden. Access corridor, children’s garden and collective building with office, meeting/events room, laundry rom, gym, sauna and guest rooms. Ralph Erskine, 1989. Photos by the author of the article.

Fig. 12 Series of pictures showing some common spaces of the housing complex Träsnidaren in the neighborhood Östermalm in Umeå, Sweden. Accessibility from one of the courtyards, in-between spaces of diverse dimensions and bike parking. Ralph Erskine, 1989. Photos by the author of the article.
All in all, one wonders whether it may be necessary to critically rethink the conditions of habitation resulting of the two contemporary forms of residential formation and urban growth *par excellence*, the sprawling suburbia of detached houses, and the peripheral suburbias of collective blocks. It might be that an inversed reading *a-la-Zizek* is possible, one that against the generalized trend of idealizing the environment of those single-family, detached-housing developments and presenting them as the dream of each and every middle class family – often referring to the inherent security, privacy and community values that they are supposed to guarantee – dared to describe them precisely as the very locus of some of the worst contemporary horrors: the suburbia of isolated, detached houses is, in fact, terrible; not only the voluntary enclosure of its occupants in capsules of exclusion, but also the expression of spatial, social and communicative failure derived from extreme forms of individualism and capitalism.

Zygmunt Bauman explains, in a remarkably eloquent way, the process that leads people to opt for such a degree of isolation: “The drive towards a ‘community of similarity’ is a sign of withdrawal not just from the otherness outside, but also from commitment to the lively yet turbulent, invigorating yet cumbersome interaction inside” (Bauman, 2003:110) In order to denounce then the problems and side effect of such a retreat that would seriously and decisively affect the ability of their protagonists to co-exist: “The longer people say in a uniform environment – in the company of others ‘like themselves’ with whom they can socialize perfunctorily and matter-of-factly without incurring in the risk of miscomprehension and without struggling with the vexing neet to translate between distinct universes of meaning – the more they are likely to ‘delearn’ the art of negotiating shared meanings and a modus convivendi” (Bauman, 2003: 111)

The disturbing filmic constructions of the Austrian director Ulrich Seidl offer a perfect illustration of such horror. Through diverse narrative devices that reinforce the potential of film as an alternative apparatus of spatial critique, Seidl reveals the horror within the familiar and the
known, presenting the everyday lives of the inhabitants of suburban Vienna in such a way that their various forms of human and everyday oddness are amplified, with the intention of generating the necessary distance from the audience to avoid a passive spectator. His work masterly explains how the horror of such a capsular society is rooted in a sort of communicative collapse: “Since they have forgotten or neglected to acquire the skills necessary for living with difference, it is little wonder that such people view the prospect of confronting strangers face-to-face with rising horror” (Bauman, 2003:111) “Mixophobic paranoia feeds upon itself and acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy. If segregation is offered and taken up as a radical cure for the danger represented by strangers, cohabitation with strangers becomes more difficult by the day” (Bauman, 2003:113)

Fig. 14 Frame still from *La Haine* de Mathieu Kassovitz

The same kind of inverse reading can be applied to the reviled sets and groups of collective housing blocks in the suburban peripheries of modern cities that, as opposed to the frequent dystopic descriptions of crime, insecurity, unhealthiness and ghettoization, could be seen as enclaves of enhanced socialization, coexistence, acceptance of difference and spirit of community, nourished in many cases by a common feeling: that of being segregated, excluded, symbolically and territorially expelled from the visible space of the city.

In this case, the excellent work of Mathieu Kassovitz in the film *La Haine* can serve also as a complementary illustration. The main characters, Vinz, Huber and Saïd, a Jew, a Black and an Arab, fight to survive in the periphery of Paris. In spite of their diverse origins, they inhabit the banlieue together and, for instance, are also together outraged at the attack against the gym that Hubert is running. The flat roofs are taken by the youth who, collectively, organize their encounters, meals and meetings; and the square and the intermediate spaces in-between blocks are activated at the beat of the music that a dj-neighbor has chosen to share from his wide-open windows. “Jusqu’ici tout va bien”. They are, in fact, not the causing agents but the object of hate and rejection projected by those who consider them alien and other, those who have segregated them socially and spatially in order to protect themselves from difference; those who have, from the centre, pushed them away to the periphery.

It might be not only necessary but interesting to rethink the collective values and dynamics of coexistence latent and present in these dwelling ensembles, extracting the keys with which to contaminate the closed, endogamic and tidy spaces and enclaves of the visible city and its neoliberal and individualistic suburbias: free of difference.
It is an unavoidable social and architectural challenge to face the real housing problems of these times and to extend the right to a home and to the city to everyone. Wouldn’t it be necessary to dedicate much greater and serious attention and work to the designing of a common habitat? Let’s think together in order to live together.

Fig. 15 Series of pictures taken as part of a research project and collaborative pedagogy experience in an informal settlement of El Cairo known as “Garbage City”, resulting from joint actions of the Locus Foundation, Umeå School of Architecture and a few local organizations. A general view of the settlement in relation to the centre of Cairo has been combined with a snapshot of one of the kitchens and an image of one of the 10 children that live in the same house with their parents. Photos by the author of the article.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


CASALS TRES, Marina, et al. (2009), ‘Habitability, the scale of sustainability’, *CISBAT 2009 Renewables in changing climate*,


HORNSBY, Adrian (2009), ‘Implossions into an Inner Void: Global Architecture Without a Place or People to Call its Own’, *Hunch, The Berlage Institute Report on Architecture, Urbanism and Landscape*, 13 26-37


LATOUR, Bruno


LEFEBVRE, Henri (2006), *La presencia y la ausencia : contribución a la teoría de las representaciones*, (Colección conmemorativa 70 aniversario ; 43; México: Fondo de Cultura Económica).


MONTEYS, Xavier et al. (2010), *Rehabitar en nueve episodios (1)*, (Madrid: Ministerio de Vivienda, Gobierno de España).

RANCIÈRE, Jacques


ZIZEK, Slavoj

ORIGIN OF THE IMAGES
Figuras 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15: Photos by the author of the article.
Figura 4: Wikipedia Commons. Kollektivhuset, John Ericssonsgatan (Sven Markelius)
Figura 10: Google Maps, Orthophoto.
Figura 14: Captured frame stills from the film La Haine.
Fig 1. Container of the Master program Urban Asymmetries at the Faculty of Architecture in TUDelft, shortly after the fire destroyed the main building of the faculty. Photo by the author of the article.

Fig. 2: Series of Pictures taken at the social housing complex in Bouça, Porto. Design by Álvaro Siza, 1973-2006. Photos by the author of the article.

Fig. 3 Cover of the functionalist manifesto “acceptera”, 1931.

Fig. 4 Kollektivhus, John Ericssonsgatan, Stockholm, 1935. Sven Markelius. Dining room, space for children and main facade.

Fig. 5 Some collective spaces in the cooperative housing complex Bostadsrättsföreningen Tegelslagaren in Göteborg; Ragnar Dahlberg, 1946. Interior common spaces: Tvättstuga, Torkrum, Mangelrum (Laundry room, drying room, ironing and folding room) Photos by the author of the article.

Fig. 6 Some collective spaces in the cooperative housing complex Bostadsrättsföreningen Tegelslagaren in Göteborg; Ragnar Dahlberg, 1946. System to book washing and using times in the laundry room and view of the rules of usage and order. Photos by the author of the article.

Fig. 7 Cooperative housing Bostadsrättsföreningen Tegelslagaren in Göteborg; Ragnar Dahlberg, 1946. Exterior spaces, general view of the accessing corridors to the blocks. Städdag (Cleaning day), 2011. Photos by the author of the article.

Fig. 8 Cooperative housing Bostadsrättsföreningen Tegelslagaren in Göteborg; Ragnar Dahlberg, 1946. Exterior spaces, detail of the working group. Städdag (Cleaning day), 2011. Cooperative housing

Fig. 9 Presentation image of the prototype Bright Living No.2 with the family that lives in the house as part of the 1-tonne-hus project, resulting of a collaboration between A-hus and Gert Wingårdh.

Fig. 10 Orthophoto showing the situation of the swedish housing development Träsnidaren in the neighborhood Östermalm in Umeå, Sweden. Design by Ralph Erskine, 1989. Picture available through Google Maps, downloaded in September 2011.

Fig. 11 Series of pictures showing some common spaces of the housing complex Träsnidaren in the neighborhood Östermalm in Umeå, Sweden. Access corridor, children’s garden and collective building with office, meeting/events room, laundry rom, gym, sauna and guest rooms. Ralph Erskine, 1989. Photos by the author of the article.

Fig. 12 Series of pictures showing some common spaces of the housing complex Träsnidaren in the neighborhood Östermalm in Umeå, Sweden. Accessibility from one of the courtyards, in-between spaces of diverse dimensions and bike parking. Ralph Erskine, 1989. Photos by the author of the article.

Fig. 13 Frame still from Hundstage by Ulrich Seidl. Fragment.

Fig. 14 Frame still from La Haine de Mathieu Kassovitz

Fig. 15 Series of pictures taken as part of a research project and collaborative pedagogy experiment in an informal settlement of El Cairo known as “Garbage City”, resulting from joint actions of the Locus Foundation, Umeå School of Architecture and a few local organizations. A general view of the settlement in relation to the centre of Cairo combined with a snapshot of one of the kitchens and an image of one of the 10 children that live in the same house with their parents. Photos by the author of the article.