

Luca Molinari, *The houses we are (Le case che siamo)*

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pp. 11 and 12 - Introduction

Home – the most beloved and stable place in our lives, the place in which to take shelter and in which to construct the lasting fragments of our existence. This most enduring memory, in a constantly changing daily life, is probably the least discussed phenomenon of the first part of this century. And yet there is nothing that we encounter and experience that does not deal with this most simple and natural of words.

The dream of a home is an illusion for millions of asylum seekers and emigrants.

The home as haven, the universal dream of not only the middle class; home as the scene of a crime, of some concealed wrong, of a domestic neurosis manifesting in the endless rows of small houses littering our metropolitan suburbs; home as a political site where the private becomes public in the form of a new project.

Today the home is an universal place in which we can reimagine ourselves and the world around us: it has in fact become an actual laboratory for understanding and transforming the world.

Home is one of those terms that will never be questioned, even though its nature is undergoing radical change and by this process many of the cornerstones of recent history are being undermined. In order to restore value and significance to this bedrock of private and public life, we must reconsider the profound meaning that the word has for each one of us.

In a world where all too often words fail to express our experiences, reconstructing our basic vocabulary signifies restoring meaning to our actions and to the consciousness they invoke.

Starting again from home, from the home that we are and that we inhabit absent-mindedly, involves a return to primary gestures, to renewable symbols, to visions that have for millennia given value to the places we inhabit and that still now call to be rethought and revitalized. At the same time, returning to the home means retrieving the desires we express every time we inhabit a place, every time we transform it and share it with others. By developing awareness and nurturing critical, authentic and well-balanced thought with regards to the home, to the many homes that we are and that we utilize, means slowly building the foundation for transforming the realities that we, increasingly nomadic and distracted, experience; it means resemantizing a world in demand of radical and urgent renewal.

p. 19 – La casa solida (*The solid house*)

The tale of the three little pigs is one of the most exemplary stories of architecture known, as well as being a metaphor for middle-class virtues of good building.

The house of the third little pig – solid, rational, sensible, resistant to time and bad weather – is the basic epitome of the middle-class house which encroached upon the green and still welcoming suburbs of a good part of the world. Moreover, it is the perfect example of an idea of home that is no longer urban but isolated and self-sufficient, a bastion of domestic privacy and warmth, and a shelter from menacing threats from without.

p. 45 – La casa trasparente (*The transparent house*)

It was Le Corbusier, however, who moved visual and symbolic perspectives forward with the idea that new homes should house long horizontal strip windows. It signaled transparency in the service of a new cinematic domesticity. The house is a true “architectural promenade” designed from within, and the long series of windows project their domestic surroundings onto the landscape in a continual search for a nature tamed and geometrically framed by an interior perspective.

The strip window is a bridge between two uncommunicative worlds: the traditional house and the extremism of absolute transparency.

Mies van der Rohe was completely convinced that the search for something absolute and timeless must be constantly pursued in all architecture. With the house he designed for his patron, and alleged lover, Edith Farnsworth, located seventy-five kilometers from Chicago and constructed between 1946 and 1951, the master of Aachen was able to give his most extreme visions form.

Constructed on a 60-acre (24 ha) estate, this 8.5 x 23.5 m. glass and white steel box – raised off the ground – denies logic in its aspiration for ideal purity. All of its interior features are stripped down to the bare essentials, and housed in a body of fine white wood which hides from view all clutter and disarray. Each element is designed to enhance the sense of transparency and lightness of a home in which everything appears suspended.

The window screens play an important part in the history of this house, which was originally designed as a weekend retreat for a solitary female client. The project, which sprang from a mutual attraction between client (Farnsworth) and architect (Mies), came to end in one of the most publicized court disputes in architectural history. The window screens were designed against Mies’s will, but upon Farnsworth’s claim that she could not fathom living in a glass box without the comfort of protection, and they were installed so as to transform the house into a possible scenario for a stage with no audience. Behind the great white window screens Ms. Farnsworth could finally find a bit of peace.

The owner detested the house because it was either too hot or too cold, and because it harbored mosquitos year round. She eventually sold it to a collector of famous homes, Lord Palumbo, who admired the house for its absolute formal perfection. Regardless of its turbulent history, the house became one of the most beloved icons of contemporary architects whose attempts to replicate its design in almost every corner of the world frustrated most owners but delighted the glossy magazines.

Today, the transparency of the house seems a minor issue, inciting neither debate nor protest. The house of reality show Big Brother is the perfect glass house, open 24 hours it shamelessly offers unlimited access day and night, without any window screens for concealment. But even the space of this “house” is broken apart and dilated so as to include our lives and the chance that all that we do and live is opened to scrutiny at any given moment. The great search for a transparent space was the first virus to quash the physical and social separation between public and private. Today the internet makes all of this possible on a much more elementary scale because it does not require complex spaces nor high costs. Full visibility can be experienced from within an ordinary house built of walls and windows. The threshold with which architecture slowly has to reckon has subtly shifted due to the change in the life and behaviour of billions of people. And in the end, perhaps the only entirely glassed-in “houses” will be those strange little holding pens set up for smokers in the most preposterous of public spaces, in which our transgressions and vices are on view like some sort of peep show for all to see.

pp. 74-76 – La casa invisible – (*The invisible house*)

There are already some who theorize that soon most people, especially amongst the new generations, will no longer need a permanent home, and will more often instead search for flexible and temporary places in which to stay. This will be a population accustomed to rapid connectivity

and extreme flexibility, a population disinterested in possessing objects and goods, in brief, a population accustomed to living and sharing space in a different way.

The expression “this house is not a hotel” will now become “this city is a haven of homes”: the first example already being that of Airbnb, the largest online accommodations chain of its kind in the world. Owning no property, and boasting an online catalogue of more than two million apartments to let and share, the estimated 25.5 billion dollar initiative of Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia – whose motto reads “at home anywhere in the world” – has reached global success thanks to their recognition of an already underway phenomenon and to their having found a genuine, well-organized network through which to promote it. Together they have basically put an end to our two-century-long understanding of privacy.

I believe, however, that the scenario we are faced with today is even more complex and dramatic in some ways. Thanks to social media, the world now offers and records, in real time, the coexistence of intersecting influxes, revealing different and opposing universes living side by side.

In just a few clicks of a mouse we are able to access a growing number of low-cost routes and their users, the wealthy one percent of the world’s population, and that of a mass of desperate others pushing against our nations’ futilely-constructed border walls. Actually, it has always been this way throughout human history, but the decisive difference now is that we are given the possibility to read and experience everything live and from within that big, open house of the digital world in which we find ourselves immersed.

The homes we live in, the homes we experience with our bodies and their virtual appendices, will undergo a slow yet radical metamorphosis as a result of all of these phenomena which erode the contemporary urban landscape from within.

The time has come to start thinking about different social categories, ones that surpass the customary contradistinction between permanent citizens, migrants, tourists and the homeless, and ones that instead focus on constructing mindful and alternative forms of citizenship.

The figure of the citizen who is allowed to build only by remaining deeply rooted to a place or to a home will most likely be called into question by other forms of mobility that are due to have increasingly greater impact on our domestic landscapes. In a situation of global citizenship, produced by the fact that the majority of the world’s population will eventually live in widespread and precarious urban environments, the true challenge in both political and cultural terms will be how to cultivate active practices of citizenship and belonging.

What we do not wish for are neo-nomadic figures who feel they belong nowhere, and whose relationship to a place is only that of temporary utilization of its resources, without any reciprocal contribution. Today, tackling the question of housing and its physical, social and symbolic significance means working towards the creation of environments that can accommodate individuals with heterogeneous backgrounds and cultures; it means aspiring to make it possible for these diverse realities to live and grow together in the future.

Faced with the challenge of the traditional public space, the domestic environment has extraordinary potential that requires greater and further reflection. Both a physical and virtual laboratory where desires, fears and differences can be seen as resources to aid us in rethinking the very idea of city, and that of the human and natural landscape, for the next several decades.

pp. 80-83 – La casa che sono – (*The home who I am*)

These homes are who I am. And you, which home are you?

There is nothing more important than the places we inhabit even if we believe not to notice them. And the home, that place which dwells in us, that wraps itself around us until it becomes a part of our spirit, is probably our most needed universal space.

Home is a word that is always with us. It is a basic necessity.

It is desire, strength, family, construction and shell. It is torment and labyrinth. It is the senses and odors that through our nose and heart become the memory and the anchor of our being.

We are born with a natural spatial instinct, one that stays with us our whole life long. The nine months spent inside the mother's womb is, unreservedly, what forms our first experience of a lived-in space. We depend on this space, we measure it by gradually extending our hands and feet. We live there in a space full of sounds and rhythms, full of colors, light, shadows, movement, tremors and voices that arrive filtered from afar. I have often asked myself what it is a child experiences inside the womb, especially during those last weeks before it is born. But I am certain that the deep memory of this experience is the basis for how we hear, measure and inhabit the space outside. Perhaps it is for this reason that we think of the home in so deep and so natural of terms, because it is the closest image we have to that first place of welcome. Home is feminine, as is the womb that once protected us, and from this bodily, sacred place, nearly everything derives.

The home marks a neat and colorful line inconsistent with the naked earth and with Nature because it is an artifact and, as such, stands in contrast with the external world and with the natural forces, which are, ultimately, what terrorizes man.

The home is the beginning of a universe of method and experiment that over time we have come to call architecture. And it is to this place, to this primal idea, that architecture returns each time it feels the need to reformulate itself or to experiment. Marc-Antoine Laugier, an eighteenth-century abbot and architectural theorist, identified the primitive wooden hut as the archetype of construction and the classical orders, and with his drawings sensed what Voltaire would later write about in *Candide*. The idea of a natural house became the magnificent obsession for two long centuries of modern architects. Le Corbusier designed his *cabanon* in Cap Martin along the French Riviera as a place of radical experimentation, where everything is reduced to the essential in a harmonious balance between proportion, color, detail and material; and as such, it became testimony of the contemporary living space. There Corbu lived in a natural state, naked and unfettered. Through the hut's small window the designer-creator would sit and ponder the Mediterranean sea and its eternal myths.

The house continues to be the source of what we call an inhabited environment. First huts and nomadic tents, then fixed walls, foundations and weather-resistant materials, without ever losing, however, those essential features of human dwellings that remain with us still today: the idea of a defense from the outside, a place of shelter and gathering, the fire at the center, the separation between public and private spaces, not many outward openings so as to reduce heat dispersal, and few pieces of easily transportable furniture.

The city is built of a concentration of houses, and the home will continue to function as a place of refuge from the necessary, albeit dangerous, labyrinth, which is nothing other than the image of the first urban dwellings.

At the same time, the home is the most tangible and enduring portrayal of our private dreams and desires, where individual and collective culture meet to form what we today call family.

Within a home the interpersonal relationships that take place there both change the space and are conditioned by it. Each room is a continuous and inadvertent representation of this tension between individuals who create, within a few square meters, their own lifestyle and mode of representing it. The home would not exist without us.

This is why it is of such vital importance to reconsider the question of home today, because it means investigating the body as well as the mind of a changing world, and as thus arousing hope and inquiry for matters still unanswered. At last the hypocritical veil is being dismantled, that which in the name of privacy once kept us from viewing the home as the primary social space for identifying conflicts and potential relationships among the individual and the collective, among the public and the private, the family and the transient soul. The home continues to synthesize our deepest fears and our wildest dreams, reflecting a social body inhabited by increasingly different individuals. Paradoxically, the home will become, in the cities comprised of tens of millions of people, one of the most interesting hybrid, public places to observe with attention and love.

The homes that we are, are therefore the political and social laboratories of our lives, and of how we live in the world around us.