Cities in a Changing World

Questions of Culture, Climate and Design

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Cities in a Changing World: Questions of Culture, Climate and Design Online

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INTRODUCTION

Cities in a Changing World: Questions of Culture, Climate and Design Online

This proceeding publication is the outcome of the conference, Cities in a Changing World: Questions of Culture, Climate and Design Online, held in June 2021. It was coordinated the research group AMPS and City Tech, CUNY in New York.

A conference organised prior to an international pandemic found a prescience in setting a theme focused on cities and change. The widely observed urbanisation of the human population, despite the exposure of cities to climate impacts, places the city at the core of the human condition in our time, requiring analysis and investigation to identify and address significant social, economic, and environmental challenges that are compounding due to the intense pressures of the expansion and increasing displacement/migration of urban populations. The COVID-19 pandemic raised the stakes, provoking fundamental reconsideration of cities and the benefits but also dangers of density.

The theme of the conference, Cities in a Changing World, allowed scholars from over 30 countries to explore the nature of cities and countryside from the profound perspective of global disruption and abrupt change in patterns of daily life. In many cases, these scholars found the "new" normal exasperating ongoing challenges of climate degradation, social fragmentation and injustice, inequity and hardship. Others observed and documented creative adaptations that provide hope for critical analysis and constructive change for increased social equity and awareness/engagement with the environment supporting sustainable initiatives. Questions of the relationship of culture, climate, and design prompted scholarly investigation of place, heritage, climatic and geographic adaptation in the emerging scholarship of place-based sustainability.

This conference and the papers collected in these proceedings provide a rich exploration of cities in cultural, climatic, and geographic contexts. Theory, history, and design, separately or in combination, provide the basis for the presentation of diverse ideas that moves the scholarship of Cities in a Changing World forward.

Jason Montgomery
City Tech

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STRIVING FOR OUR OWN SPOT WHILE AVOIDING THE EMBRACE OF THE OTHER. AN ARCHITECTURAL PROBLEM OF TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 somehow changed our lives, at least for a while. The public spaces were no longer able to be shared by anyone, as an extension of our daily use space. Our existence' space did shrink abruptly. The home was also the office, the school, the restaurant, the cinema, the gym, and the playground at the same time. Any house turns out to be the most crowed and almost unbearable place of the world. Now we're striving for our own spot, while avoiding the embrace of the other, everywhere. Even at home. The question of our own privacy and safety gains new meaning today. Particularly in urban and dense areas, it became an architectural problem that urges to be unraveled. It's time to rethink the domestic space and the nearby space – as the new need of an outside domestic space – while we crave to maintain our health and sanity.

Thus, the aim of this paper insists mainly on how to keep any space opened and free, but simultaneously private and controlled, regarding the domestic realm. Through two filters of approach: the dwelling and the street level of the city, it aims to reflect upon the broad issues of individual isolation and privacy in order to outline some solutions to ease the problem somehow.

Home issues: finding solutions

In a fair world everyone would live in a perfect house with lots of space, pure air, clean water and all the means to fulfill any need. Nature, people and the built world of men would tie together in harmony. However, our reality is quite different. We live in a damaged planet, ignoring the Mother Nature's alarming signals like we could control it all. Stressed by our contemporaneity, people are forced to live mainly in crowded cities, swamped in pollution and diseases. In order to stay alive in the city, they struggle to afford living squeezed in few square meters, regardless of the conditions and the comfort of their homes. Actually, the world's urban population increased enormously and cities became denser and denser. Thus, it's not possible to ask for anti-density planning and greenbelts[1] anymore. It's not possible to ask for single family houses with little backyards, for everybody. Rather, it's time to question how to deal with so many people living in such high-dense-buildings in a city center.

Criticism apart, concerning the urban planning and its several questionable decisions and impositions, all over the world, in this paper we just want to emphasize some housing problems related to the living conditions and daily life routines in a big city. Aside from any family type or sociological, cultural and economic consideration, the risks and constraints of the present moment are felt wherever

and affect us all, no matter how. Yet, they are no longer associated just to marginality and poverty: they can interfere with anyone. Hence, it's essential to face them urgently in a comprehensive way, as we can't solve its causes or problems promptly, as well as it has no easy solutions.

When we ought to confine at home for long periods of time; when home offices and remote work become more mainstream practices, we really need to rethink our homes in order to maintain our health and also our sanity. Moreover, if the main reason is a contagious and fatal pandemic, which implies the physical distance and isolation of people, it gets even more challenging at home. Focusing upon these worries, here we'll outline some ideas.

AT HOME: PRIVATE AND CONTROLLED

To live in an apartment requires several limitations and habits that we are used to override. Above all we have to respect the use rules of the shared common spaces, no matter how big, high or sophisticated the building is. Some are guaranteed by public laws, others concern just the private condominium (gated complex). Anyway, we can't use them randomly and most of the time we tend to avoid using these spaces. Furthermore, we hardly know our neighbors, so we easily ignore them. But as we cross our own door, we feel free and safe. We feel *at home.*

Once at home, there are some ordinary and daily routines that demands the right conditions and a specific useful area, where function and form/space are associated, like: to cook/*kitchen* to shower/*bathroom*, to sleep/*bedroom*, to rest/*living-room*, etc. Usually, the living-room is the social area where we spend most of the time doing lots of domestic and personal actions like resting, seeing television, listening to music, playing around, eating our meals or even to work, and so on. On the other hand, the bedroom is the most quiet and private zone. Nonetheless, the comfort of it all depends on the relation between the square meters (m2) vs the number of occupants to each function/space.

In fact, at home we share. We share touches, smells and sounds. We share things, spaces and air. We contact, we control. Within our privacy we cherish our intimacy, thereby the corridors organize the space distributing its functions; the walls delimit each area; the doors let us enter and lock them back; the windows let the light gets through the rooms and also allows us to look outside; and if we are lucky to have a balcony or a terrace, then the green may grow and flourish and we can breathe the open-air.

However, if our personal behavior and way of living ought to change by the need of self-isolation, even between the members of the same family, then we surely need to rethink it all. Although, there isn't just one solution or "the right recipe", from an architectural point of view, there are some topics that we should take more seriously, like:

Flexibility: let it slide

Sliding away walls and doors may be a solution to improve the flexibility of the spaces. Retracting walls allows space to transform completely, whenever we need to use the same area for different actions/functions and for several family members at the same time. For example: the *living-room* may be the "office", "high school" and "nursery", at once. Assured by soundproof acoustics walls, when it's closed, we can personalize each space providing silent workplaces, as the day goes by. Then at night it can be opened, giving back the living space, so the family may gather together again.

Transparency: let it be seen

The importance of the natural light in our lives is proved crucial. The sun light interferes daily with our system and mood, so if we subdivide the inner space, then we'll need to improve the natural light in it. Consequently, we need more transparency (glass-walls) not only to let the light gets through the spaces, but also to control what is happening on the other rooms: where the kids are having on-line

classes or just playing around, for instance. However, on an outside-in visual relation, sometimes it may be used translucent rather than transparent glass, to assure more privacy.

Verticality: let it be air

More simultaneous multiple functions in the same spaces, means more people breathing the same air. So, if we increase the m3, we are enlarging the same m2. For that, we just need apartments with higher ceilings to make use of half-sized levels. This way, we can double de action area allowing also the implementation of transformable furniture to create and shape new spaces. For example: If the ceiling is high enough, the bathroom on the lower-level may support the bedroom on its ceiling (upper/half-sized level), accessing by a ladder that is a bookshelf as well, opened to a high-ceiling living-room where so many things can happen – as illustrated in Figure 1.
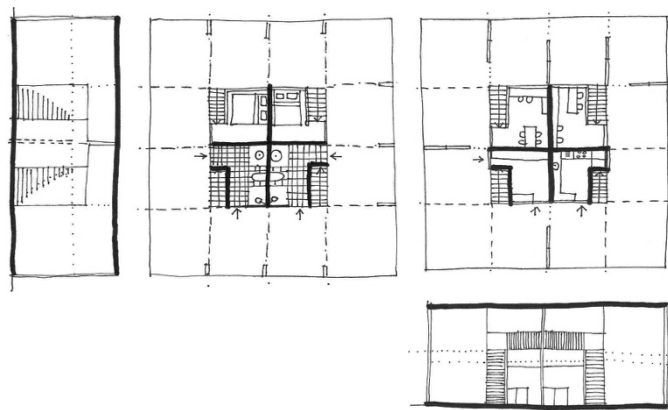

Figure 1. Half-sized levels: Bath+bed_box; kitchen+office-box

Ecology: let it be green

As we may be inhibited to go outside (to public spaces) for long periods of time, we do need an alternative place to breath open-air. Besides the use of natural materials; the implementation of ecological systems to consume less energy and water; or just to keep the building cooler (with green facades, for example), as the eco-conscious demands nowadays, the roof-tops common gardens may be an option[2] – as illustrated in Figure 2. It's a healthy and useful entertainment that can be shared properly by the inhabitants of the same building, giving them a chance to experience nature a bit closer, instigating ecological values. But we can also interweave "green" and "light" by creating inner gardens, adjoining courtyards: some belonging to each apartment; others to the common areas of the building. Aiming to emphasize the natural lighting harmony, this shall help to tie the outside/inside relation, providing suitably that required sensation we use to feel on an opened public space, creating a connection with natural environment and encouraging a new living urban style, at the same time.
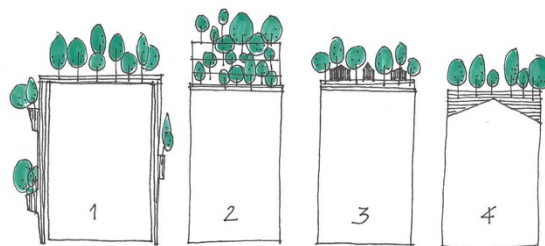

Figure 2. 1_Orverhang with common intermediate layers; 2_Adding vertical parks (stacked); 3_Adding private gardens + facilities + community workshops; 4_filling up pitched roofs

THE STREET LEVEL: PRIVACY AND SAFETY

The street is a public and vibrant urban space which can perform multiple functions and activities. It provides not only the mobility of people and goods, but also the infra-structures we need to inhabit in an urban context, like the supply of energy, telecommunications, water, the collection of waste, etc. Essentially, the street is the public thoroughfare where people may freely gather, interact and move around, therefore it should offer to the pedestrians the right conditions: the bench where to sit; the growth of trees; plants; birds; the shadow and sun radiation; the place to talk with neighbors; or even the playground for the kids. And this is even more pertinent concerning the adjoining residential areas.

But, if a lockdown is in question, then the public space' use is the issue. More than ever, the street level of our neighborhood is relevant. Somehow it will be the outdoor extension of our homes, so we do need to rethink it all, in order to permit the safety of their users, above all.

Availability: right downstairs

When we are forced to remain at home or nearby, avoiding the circulation of cars or public transports, then it's important to assure walk-distance not only to reach the bakery where to buy the bread, but also all the daily needs (grocery store, drugstore, takeaway food, laundry, etc.). According to this, the segregation between residential areas and the tertiary sector no longer makes sense. A *"balanced neighborhood"* – which Jane Jacobs[3] talks about, that means "living close to everything we need" – may be the solution to gain and restore urban quality of life. Moreover, if a street is potentially dangerous if it discourages foot traffic, then this functional mixtures in the city will also improve the street safety, implying a greater flow of frequent "familiar faces" routines.

Proximity: side by side

It's already well known that the sidewalks should be large enough to suitably accommodate pedestrians, even more when regarding the distances implied by a pandemic, for example. In this sense, the streets should be oriented more toward pedestrians, rather than cars.

But if the intention is to control the crowd, forcing the segregation of different familiar groups, then uneven subdivided sidewalks (with different elevations and functions) may be a solution. It suggests, above all, different oriented directions, therefore more organized and narrow pedestrian traffic. It should also afford some specific relaxing zones (with different elevation) just to sit around, or where coffee shops, restaurants, etc., may use as an open-air extension of their trades – as illustrated in Figure 3.
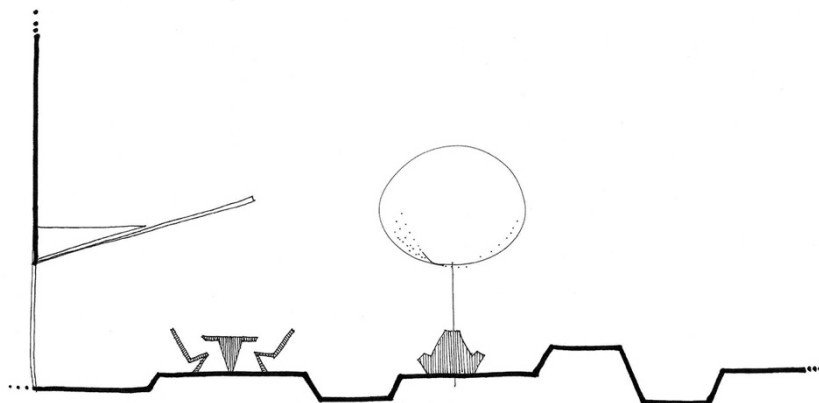

Figure 3. Uneven subdivided sidewalks.

Sanity: playing around

There is no doubt that people sanity is at stake in times of pandemic. More than ever, it is needed to readjust energies and stay healthy. Sports and the use of open spaces reveals essential for everybody (kids and adults). Therefore, parks have to be well situated and attractive to enhance their use as desirable outdoors meeting places. More than a large scale, they should be well equipped with interactive urban furniture, playgrounds, sports zones and other different interventions, prevailing the flexibility of uses, creativity, comfort and safety. Nowadays there are already good examples, spread all over the world, which should be proliferate with this kind of ideas and designs, for example: Loop/FAHR 021.3[4]; LentSpace/Interboro[5]; The Infinite Bridge/Gjøde & Povlsgaard Arkitekter[6]; Five Fields Play Structure/Matter Design+FR|SCH[7]; Paprocany Lake Shore Redevelopment/RS+Robert Skitek[8]; Red Planet/100 architects[9]; etc., between many others – as illustrated in Figure 4.
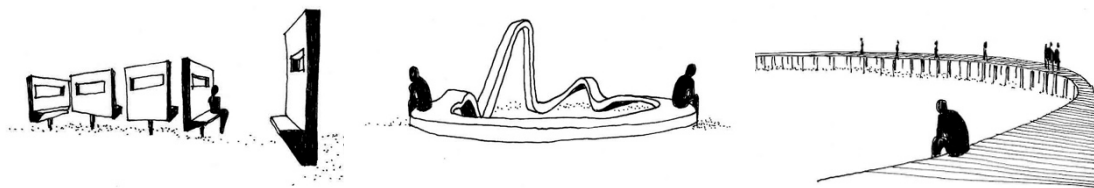

Figure 4. Some examples of street furniture, structures and public space.

Diversity: community gardens

Striking a smart balance between the pleasures of nature and funny outside activities, offers genuine added value in a daily basis. If parks can provide amusement and energetic open-air activities, the closet relation to nature may be reinforced through gardening activities. When there is no chance to implement roof-tops common gardens in the buildings, then the creation of small community gardens, with direct and controlled access, spread around the residential areas, may provide an alternative leisure activity so desirable in times of lockdowns.

CONCLUSION

Attending to the urgency of rethinking the domestic space and the nearby area (as the new need of an outside domestic space) – to preserve our health and sanity – is the main goal of this paper. It necessarily calls into question the essential issues relating privacy and safety to inhabitation, particularly in urban and dense areas, regarding nowadays constraints caused by the pandemic, and to prevent the embarrassments of eventual futures ones, as well.

In this sense, at home, if the need of self-isolation (even between the members of the same family) is the main problem, the idea is to apply to: *Flexibility*: let it slid; *Transparency:* let it be seen; *Verticality:* let it be air; *Ecology:* let it be green. This way, we can easily reshape the space, subdividing them into multiple functions with creativity, better acoustic conditions, luminosity, visual connection and well-ventilated areas, enabling a comfortable elasticity of our homes. As well as, bringing "the green" to our domesticity will make us more wholesome or self-sufficient, like Dima Stouhi writes: *"Architects and designers are now searching for design solutions that will resonate well into the future, turning to 'biophilia' as an important source of inspiration that promotes well-being, health, and emotional comfort."*[10]

On the other hand, if a lockdown is in question, then the public space' use is the issue. Thus, the street level of our neighborhood will be the outdoor extension of our homes, so we emphasize *"the need of cities for a most intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual*

support, both economically and socially (…),"[11] in order to avoid people from leaving the cities and their tiny apartments in favor of suburbs or rural areas which offers more safety and autonomy. Hence, the question of *Availability:* right downstairs; *Proximity:* side by side; *Sanity:* playing around; *Diversity:* community gardens, are the solutions we outline here, in the attempt to ease the problem somehow. It is time to relate the residential buildings (our homes) to the street level more seriously. Our neighborhood, the walk-distance in our district, may be our survival area for a while, thus it is important to feel safe and to have all the facilities and amenities we need, just around the conner.

Back in 1966, Edward T. Hall wrote about the essential and existential need of distances between man: *"Birds and mammals not only have territories which they occupy and defend against their own kind but they have a series of uniform distances which they maintain from each other (…). Man, too, has a uniform way of handling distance from the fellows. (…) Personal distance and social distance, however, are obviously still present."*[12] More than ever – and according to the official guidelines of central organizations involved in the global response to COVID-19 – it's important to consider these distances as a crucial architectural matter, either at home or in public spaces.

But at the same time, we have to be careful with the meaning and the implications of self/social isolation. It surely brings waves of desolation, uncertainty and disturbance – damaging our mood and well-being – rising up the need to connect and socialize with others. While striving in our own spot, we yearn for the embrace of the other. And this became also an architectural problem of today. Through a well-conceived circulation, for example, it's possible to restore the confidence in urban life. For that we really need to enhance the space qualities, its unique value, ability and effectiveness, learning to adapt and adjust with creativity and flexibility, both outside-in and inside-out.

If *"crisis, upheavals, illness do not arise by chance. They serve us as indicators to rectify a trajectory, explore new directions, experience another life path"* – quoting Carl-Gustav Jung – then we believe this is the right moment to take the chance to change things for the sake of humanity, empowering the role of architecture in our societies.

NOTES

[1] Like Ebenezer Howard mentions in his book "*Garden Cities of Tomorrow*".
[2] MVRDV' *Rooftop Catalogue* illustrates 130 innovative ideas of how reprogramming rooftops, commissioned by the City of Rotterdam and developed together with Rotterdam Rooftop Days. It *"hold significant potential in creating a multi-layered urban environment, allowing the city to continue developing inward".* Accessed June 28, 2021, https://www.archdaily.com/963540/mvrdv-develops-a-catalogue-for-repurposing-rooftops ISSN 0719-8884.
[3] Like Jane Jacobs mentions in his book "*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*".
[4] *Loop,* Public space, structures and facilities, Oporto - Portugal, 2018, Architects: FAHR 021.3, accessed June 28, 2021, https://www.fahr0213.com/work/loop.
[5] *LentSpace - The Fence,* Street furniture, New York - USA, 2009, Architects: Interboro, accessed June 28, 2021,
[6] *The Infinite Bridge,* Bridge, Aarhus – Denmark, 2015, Architects: Gjøde & Povlsgaard Arkitekter, accessed June 28, 2021, https://www.gpark.dk.
[7] *Five Fields Play Structure,* Public space, structures and facilities, Lexington - USA, 2016, Architects: Matter Design + FR|SCH, accessed June 28, 2021, https://www.yatzer.com/five-fields-play-structure-matter-design.
[8] *Paprocany Lake Shore Redevelopment,* Park, Tychy – Poland, 2014, Architects: RS + Robert Skitek, accessed June 28, 2021, http://rsplus.pl/pl.
[9] *Red Planet,* Playground, Zhabei - China, 2017, Architects: 100architects, accessed June 28, 2021, https://100architects.com/project/red-planet.
[10] Dima Stouhi, *Bringing the Outdoors Inside: The Benefits of Biophilia in Architecture and Interior Spaces*, accessed June 28, 2021, https://www.archdaily.com/923100/bringing-the-outdoors-inside-the-benefits-of-biophilia-in-architecture-and-interior-spaces?ad_source=myarchdaily&ad_medium=bookmark-show&ad_content=current-user
[11] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* (New York: Random House, 1992), p.14
[12] Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension,* (New York: Anchor Books Edition, 1990), p.113

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