The right to comfort in the century of the self

BY ZARA FERREIRA

— If happiness consists of accumulating household appliances and not giving a damn about anything else, then yes, they are happy, Frédéric shouted. And during this time the manufacturers spin their junk with great publicity and credit, and everything is fine for the best of all worlds...
— Capitalists, said the father.
— Comfort is not happiness! said Frédéric.
— What is happiness? said Ethel.
— I don't know, growled Frédéric.
— But tell me, the fact that we manage to ask ourselves this kind of question instead of wondering what to cook for dinner, does not prove that we advanced a little already? said Mr. Lefranc.
— Perhaps, said Frederick. Yes, in fact, maybe.
— To discover that comfort does not make you happy, you have to have experienced it, right? It's a question of time... When everyone has access to it, we will stop asking the question. We need to look a little further. I may not get to see that moment, but you will do.

Christiane Rochefort, *Les Petits Enfants du Siècle* , 1961[1]

Jean Fourastié called *invisible*[2] the revolution that took place in the three decades since the end of WWII to the first oil crisis – *les trente glorieuses* [the glorious thirty]. It was invisible because it happened inside people's homes, the main stage where the well-being revolution took place on a larger scale.

After the war, the world was divided between two main powers, a Western capitalist bloc led by the USA, and an Eastern communist bloc, driven by the USSR. Even if the second[3] is not addressed in this publication, it must be said that both regions sharing the front lines of the Cold War (1947-1991) believed in the need for, and the virtues of, mass housing, and respective governments committed themselves to providing housing for the masses. From Japan to Mexico, the post-war years were ones of prosperous economic growth and profound social transformation. It was the time of re-housing families split apart and of rebuilding destroyed cities, but it was also the time of democratic rebirth, the definition of individual and collective freedoms and rights, and of belief in the *open society* envisaged by Karl Popper.[4] Simultaneously, it was the time of the biggest migrations from the countryside, revealing a large faith in the city, and of baby booms, revealing a new hope in humanity. A new Man – whose freedom Jean-Paul Sartre[5] places as an intrinsic condition of the *self* – emerges and develops itself over these years, with confidence in modernity and progress. Whether for the proletariat from Engels's *Housing Question* (1872),[6] or for the mass-men of Garcia y Ortez (1930),[7] comfort will be the basis of the search for, and production of, collective housing, in accordance with the new embraced paradigm evidenced in the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*

Whether through welfare state systems, as mainly evidenced in Western Europe, under the prospects launched by the Plan Marshall (1947), or through the establishment of local housing authorities funded or semi-funded by the government, or through the support of private companies, civil organizations or associations, the time had come for the large-scale application of the principles of modern architecture and engineering developed before the war. From the Spanish *polígonos residenciales* to the German *großsiedlungen*, ambitious housing programs were established in order to improve the citizens' living conditions and health standards, as an answer to the housing shortage, and as a symbol of a new egalitarian society: comfort would no longer only be found in bourgeois houses. The contributions on this issue from Portugal and Spain reveal that, even under dictatorial regimes, a new standard eventually arrived, via enlightened architects who were able to design quality architecture for a Man of universal rights.

Despite the Larousse Dictionary having defined, in 1929, "modern comfort" as "the ensemble of provisions intended to make an apartment building more comfortable, such as central heating, a bathroom, an elevator, electricity, etc.," it was only in 1946 that the French census first inquired about the presence of these "elements of comfort" in dwellings across the country. For a person, such as myself, born at the end of the 20th century it is astonishing to realize that, 75 years ago, in an *avant-garde* country like France, only 5% of dwellings had a private shower or bathtub. The introduction of the distinction between hot and cold running water reveals that, in 1962, a hot shower was not available to the

majority of the population – only 39.6% of dwellings had it. Answering the lack of such basic needs was the first stage of comfort that was sought to be assured: sanitary housing equipped with indoor plumbing and central heating would protect health and offer security.

On a second level, rational, functional and well-lit flats layouts would offer tranquility and conditions to develop people's minds and passions. Built to the proportions of adults, children and their needs, with the separation of functions and filled with the features that would guarantee the physiological and psychological comfort of the inhabitants, the modern home should allow the average person the opportunity to explore and achieve their full potential. Soon it was understood that it was not enough to settle the inhabitants in apartments; it was also necessary to create their everyday environment, exploring the role of their individualization within the collective, as Henri Lefaivre evidenced in his *Right to the city* (1968).[8] The neighborhood unit, explored in Sangeeta Bagga's text about the Chandigarh Sector, is one of the primary concepts establishing socially sustainable neighborhoods. Rosalia Vittorini shows us how the INA-Casa program in Italy encouraged community relationships by the inclusion of collective spaces traditional in Mediterranean countries, such as streets, courts, gardens. Claes Caldenby lectures about the concept of co-housing, a Swedish tradition in existence from early modernism. Answering to the phenomenon of uncontrolled urban growth, Louise Noelle presents us the case of *Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán* (1947-1949), in Mexico, while from Japan, Tatsuyuki Maeda and Yuka Yoshida call attention to the threatened future of the Nakagin Capsule Tower (1972), a built example of Metabolist theory which suggested that buildings and cities should be designed to propagate in the same way as the material substance of a natural organism. *Avanchet-Parc* (1969-1977), in Switzerland, explored by Franz Graf and Giulia Marino, and *Torres Blancas* (1958-1972), in Spain, presented by Alberto Sanz, are other examples of how the Modern Movement included a self-reflection or a self-critical capacity of evolving into diverse and flexible answers, distancing itself from orthodox doctrines.

A third level of comfort respected a comfort of use associated with the eventual possession of objects for facilitating daily life. The democratization of electrical appliances would allow the saving of time and the reduction of fatigue associated with household tasks. Through the regular consumption of comfort goods, a certain luxurious comfort is replaced by a comfort understood as useful and liberating. In the framework of an emerging consumerist society, objects of desire[9] – which extended to household occupation – was a method of self-assertion and expression. Linked to progress – of which it is a "natural consequence" – and to the notion of happiness explored by the *Les Petits Enfants du Siècle* quotation, comfort became a central concept within society's evolution and housing production, having become a symbol of modernity. As comfort developed and established itself in everyday life, it tended to become one of the emblems of the advanced state of development of modern

societies as a guarantee of a better life, giving rise to one of the current definitions of comfort by the Larousse dictionary: "psychological, intellectual and moral tranquility obtained by the rejection of all preoccupations." This definition epitomizes the comfort of the *self*.

docomomo International, with its inclusive, pluralist and interdisciplinary nature, in exploring a wide perspective of the Modern Movement's chronological and territorial scope, has been clairvoyant in revealing that modern production is wide and diverse and that it took on interpretations and forms as different as the diversity of cultures where it was implemented. There was a huge variety of approaches to post-war housing whose representation would never be balanced in a single publication. From towers in the center of a big metropolis to low-rise high density developments in small towns, from serpentine mega blocks in the suburbs to entire new towns, some are still splendid today, others have been declared as failures. Giving continuity to **docomomo** *Journal 51* (2014/02) and **docomomo** *Journal 54* (2016/01), the contributions selected for this issue, in addition to geographic diversity and their original innovative approach, present a wide spectrum of challenges when it comes to its implementation or contemporary preservation or adaptation.

Widely referred to as "dormitory cities," "concentration camps,"[10] "rabbit hutches"[11] or "slums in the sky" promoting "walls in the head,"[12] many post-war housing estates have come to be considered a major focus of problems in urban areas, and have been blamed for high rates of crime and psychological and social ills. Even if urbanism and architecture are often accused of this situation, it must be admitted that it results from a complex equation of different issues. As Joseph Abram states in his essay about the French *grands ensembles*, the task of producing housing for all was "titanic", not allowing governments to produce the best of the worlds for all. Many had to be built quickly and cheaply, usually on the outskirts of cities, disconnected from basic infrastructure and services. Entities funding and managing the construction of housing and complementary facilities were often distinct, promoting disconnection among different urban needs. Often facilities were not even built, leaving the heart of neighborhoods without a program, as Umberto Bonono reveals happened in *Portales* (1958-1968). The so-called "failure" was often usually political and administrative. The common physical deterioration that buildings suffer after some decades of use are strongly aggravated by poor housing policies not investing in regular maintenance as, according to Flávia Brito do Nascimento, has been the case for decades in *Pedregulho* (1948-1960) in Brazil. Furthermore, from WWII until nowadays, the world has gone through enormous and rapid transformations in almost every field of life. Consumerism and individualism growing as new paradigmatic lifestyles, women's independence, increasingly diverse ways of working and types of households, globalization, new systems of communication and household technology may have led many previous formulas into obsolescence. As Tim Nagtegaal explains in his essay about *Bakemabuurt* (1953-1957) in The Netherlands, it has been common that original inhabitants,
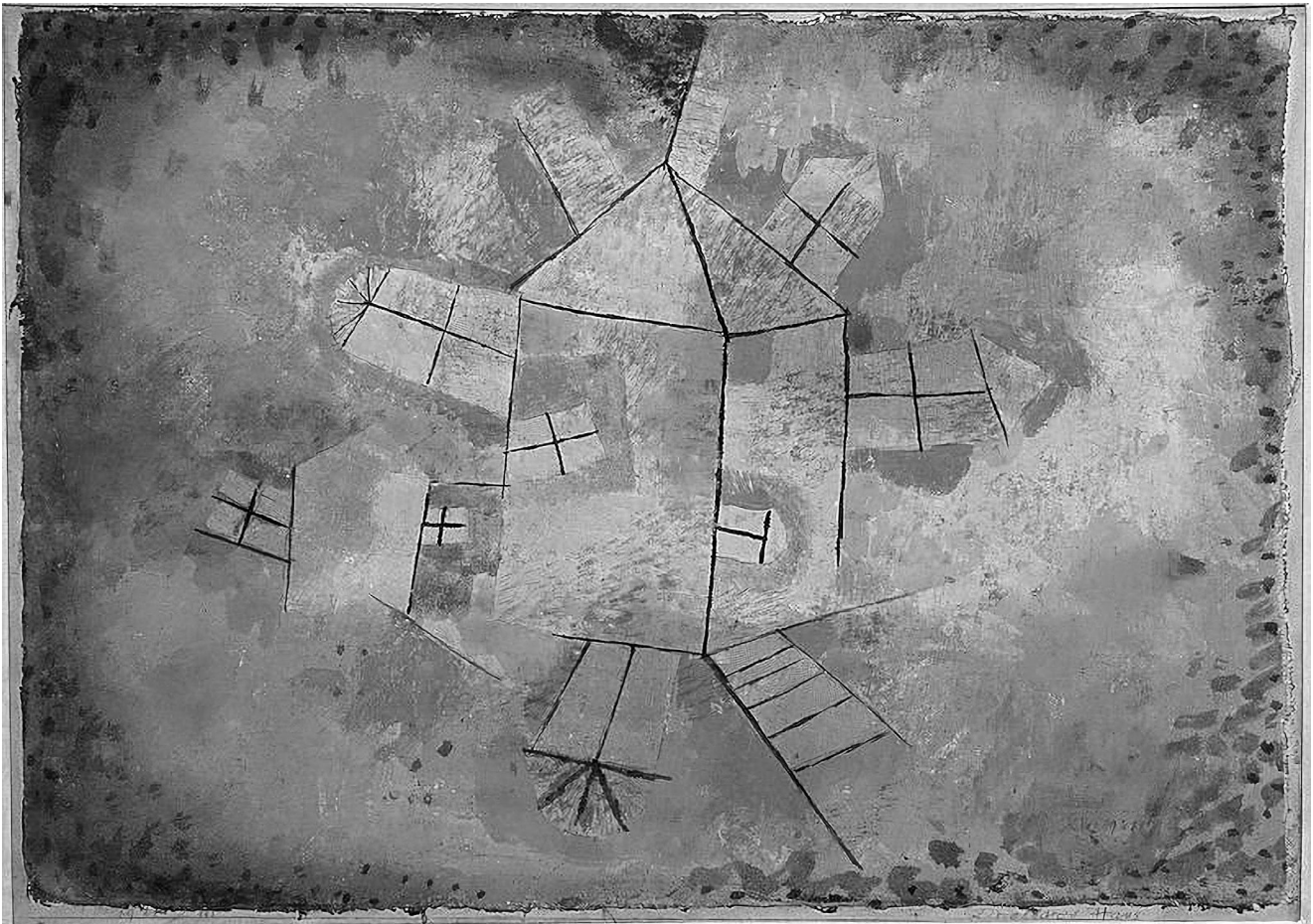
01   Paul Klee, Revolving House, 1921.

within the development of a middle-class with purchasing power, gradually moved to other places. Often in the remaining housing stock have been left, the ones unable to acquire their own house: low-income households, the unemployed, senior people and people from ethnic minorities. Immigrant inhabitants are a segment of society whose degree of satisfaction is sensitive to analysis, since they are living in a place alien to their habitat, culture and ways of life. If, on one hand, those are inhabitants not able to appreciate their new neighborhoods, it is common that society and decision makers stigmatize them. Although some housing estates have been receiving a "second chance,"[13] this architectural product is still often threatened by demolition, as Noni Boyd and Theodore Prudon draw international attention in their essays about the cases of Australia and the USA, respectively. The Pritzker Prize recently attributed to Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal gives us renewed hope in the future: their strategy of adapting post-war housing schemes built in France, in response to demolition policies, have been an example of how the flexibility of the dwelling space can be increased in order to suit different lifestyles, while improving energy performance. It is expected that, with this award, governments across the world may be aware of the statement they have been highlighting with their work: renovation can be more affordable than demolition.

The oil crisis, beginning in 1973, not only weakened many economies but it has also dissipated the optimism in the idea of progress of earlier decades. Radically changing the socio-economic paradigm, the Keynesian economic values of the post-war years were replaced by free-market policies. John Allan's essay evidences the power of such a phenomenon: while in the Barbican Estate (1956-1982) and the Golden Lane Estate (1952-1962), the Listed Building Management Guidelines have been contributing to a sustainable process of maintenance through a symbiotic relationship between community and heritage, the Conservation Plan for the Balfron Tower (1965-1970) did not prevent forthcoming unrecognizable transformation. Following the transfer of the council housing estate to Poplar HARCA in 2007, the Balfron dwellings allocated for rented social housing were replaced by luxury properties for sale on the private market. Within the framework of the current neoliberal economic model, architecture ceased to be seen as a social instrument. Private and individual values gained preference over public and collective ones, leading to a growing crisis in affordable housing, even for the middle classes, and increasing homelessness. 150 million people are homeless worldwide, and according to *Habitat for Humanity*, 1.6 billion people lack adequate housing, with about 15 million forcibly evicted every year. Within the current pandemic, these numbers will increase. As in any other crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic

is accentuating and evidencing social inequalities. Perhaps it is a naive to hope that, because the crisis we are living through is a world-wide one, it would be possible to shorten distances between states and work together to find a welfare vision that, more than ever since WWII, would seem to be necessary.

Before COVID-19, within the paradigm that Byung-Chul Han uses to call the *burnout society* (2015),[14] home was the shelter where we returned to at the end of the day, to rest. After Covid, the five main functions around which the *Athens Charter* proclaimed the organization of cities are now concentrated in one single place, surrounded by walls. The term *burnout* takes on a whole new dimension. The *self* is now in danger: either because it is isolated, not evolving with the community, due to the hard compatibilization with other *selves* in the same time and space. The challenge launched by the *Venice Biennale Architettura 2021* – "how will we live together?" is accurate both in the context of the private life taking place in the interior of the housing space, as well as in the dimension of a collective life, related to the community, and understood as occurring in an "exterior" that is now being re-defined. Nevertheless, the health standards and dignified housing principles that the Modern Movement brought to the world allows that the impact of a pandemic is substantially lower than what it could have been – which it has been – in earlier times. The *self* will be transformed into something else, but *housing* is here to stay as our most precious good.

Notes

The title of this text is borrowed from the BBC documentary series *The Century of the Self* (Adam Curtis, 2002).

1   Free translation from Christiane Rochefort, *Les Petits Enfants du Siècle*, Paris, Éditions Bernard Grasset, 1961, 135. Original: *— Si le bonheur consiste à accumuler des appareils ménagers et à se foutre pas mal du reste, ils sont heureux, oui! éclata Frédéric. Et pendant ce temps-là les fabricants filent leur camelote à grands coups de publicité et de crédit, et tout va pour le mieux dans le meilleur des mondes... — Capitalistes, dit le père. — Le confort c'est pas le bonheur! dit Frédéric, lancé. — Qu'est-ce que c'est le bonheur? dit Ethel. — Je sais pas, grogna Frédéric. — Mais dites-moi, qu'on arrive à se poser ce genre de question au lieu de comment bouffer, ça ne prouve pas qu'on a tout de même un peu avancé? dit M. Lefranc. — Peut-être, dit Frédéric. Peut-être bien, dans le fond. — Pour découvrir que le confort ne fait pas le bonheur, il faut y avoir goûté, non ? C'est une question de temps... Quand tout le monde l'aura, on finira bien par se poser la question. Ce qu il faut c'est regarder un peu loin. Moi je ne verrai sans doute pas ça, mais vous, vous le verrez.*

2   Jean Fourastié, *Les trente glorieuses ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*, Paris, Pluriel, 2010 [1979].

3   See Philipp Meuser, Dimtrij Zadorin, *Towards a Typology of Soviet Mass Housing*, Berlin, DOM Publishers, 2015.

4   Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, London, Routledge, 2011 [1945].

5   Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, Paris, Librairie Gallimard, 1943.

6   Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question*, Michigan, Lawrence and Wishart, ltd., 1942 [1872].

7   Ortega y Garcia, *A Rebelião das Massas*, Lisboa, Relógio de Água, 2019 [1930].

8   Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville*, Paris, Anthropos, 1968.

9   Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society Since 1750*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1986.

10 Camille Canteux, "Sarcelles, ville rêvée, ville introuvable", *Sociétés & Représentations*, No. 17, 2004, 343-359.

11 Françoise Choay, 'Cités jardins ou cages à lapins?', *France Observateur*, No. 474, 1959, 12-13.

12 Lynsey Hanley, *Estates. An Intimate History*, London, Granta Books, 2017 [2007].

13 John Allan, "MOMO's Second Chance – the Revaluation of the Urban Housing", in Ana Tostões and Liu Kecheng (ed.), **docomomo** *International 1988-2012: Key Papers in Modern Architectural Heritage*, Xian, **docomomo** International/**docomomo** China/China Architecture & Building Press, 2014, 16-21.

14 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, Stanford, Stanford Briefs, 2015.

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