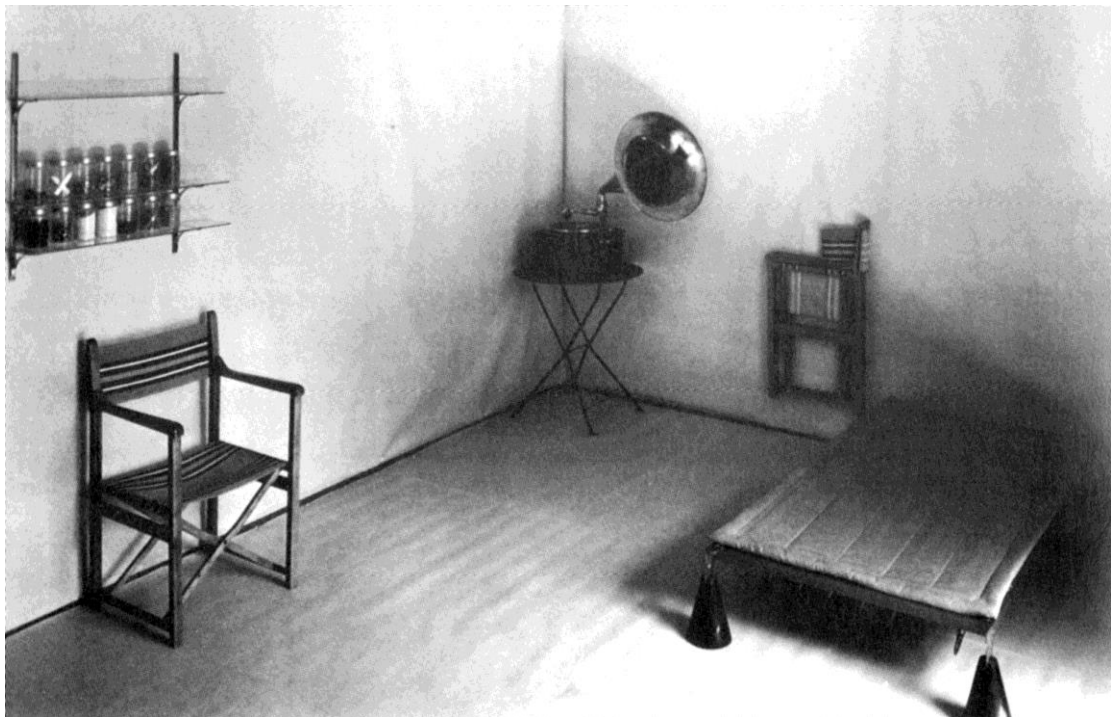


Architectural Association School of Architecture
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Diploma Unit 14
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The Grand Domestic Revolution

Revisiting the Architecture of Housing



Hannes Meyer, Co-op Zimmer (1926).

While the noun ‘house’ emphasizes the symbolic dimension of the domestic realm, the term ‘housing’ focuses on the functioning of the house – the process of containing subjects by subtly defining their way of life. In this sense, Le Corbusier gave the most precise definition of housing when he said that the house is a *machine à habiter*. This definition allows us to understand housing not only as the space of the ‘everyday’ but also as a multifarious apparatus which puts together social, economic, juridical and cultural issues.

This year Diploma 14 will depart from this understanding of housing towards the invention of new forms of domestic space. Once believed to be a place of stability and recovery from the social world of production, housing has become the most uncertain domain, which, more than anything else, reveals the most subjective dimensions of the current economic crisis. As Maurizio Lazzarato has recently argued, the neoliberal economy is a subjective economy that is no longer based – as classical economics was – on the barterer and the producer. A key figure of the neoliberal economy is the ‘indebted man’ – that is, the indebted consumer, the indebted user of the welfare state and, in the case of nation-state debt, the indebted citizen. Housing in the form of property has played a fundamental role in the making of the indebted man. In light of this system’s failure to ‘take care’ of its subalterns, the time has come to propose alternatives to traditional forms of home-ownership. The question of this year’s unit will be to rethink forms of housing, moving beyond home ownership towards more shareable and collective ways of inhabiting space.

The fundamental focus of the unit will be the idea of domestic space, and how its radical reform can be understood as an act of political and social imagination. Each student will work individually on a specific project that will be developed as both a political and economic framework and as a precise architectural proposal. As usual, Diploma 14 will put emphasis on writing and drawing as the quintessential critical tools of architecture.

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I

The Housing Question:

Notes towards the definition of a brief

Housing seems to be an obvious topic within the architectural profession. Indeed part of the reason why we chose to focus on this theme this year is, in a way, to challenge the major trends in architectural education which put a lot of emphasis on narrative, imagination and personal obsessions. We believe that these issues remain important, but that we risk overlooking the possibility to reinvent what we perceive as the most ordinary architectural project – the design of housing. The project of housing must not be taken as a given, neither as natural solution for inhabitation, nor as the answer to social problems. As a matter of fact, housing can be understood as a very controversial topic for architecture within which the most pathological political and ideological contradictions of architecture are ultimately exposed. Housing is both means of enactment and of control of life, and as such it represents simultaneously a possibility of emancipation and a means of oppression. These two aspects of the project of housing are deeply entangled and indeed define the Janus-like character of the housing project. This understanding of the housing question is for us deeply important; it is for this reason that in the following notes we have framed the historical meaning of housing within the perspective of our research. Following these reflections, we have outlined in the last two paragraphs the more practical brief for this year.

II

Rituals

A crucial aspect of human subjectivity is man's permanent feeling of not being at home. Unlike other animal species, man lacks specialized instincts and thus man's "nature" is constantly displaced within any context. In spite of the rhetoric of place, origin, context, identity, man has no place on earth and thus his most fundamental goal is to make a home within a permanently adverse situation. In ancient times man's uprootedness was manifested in a form of life that was nomadic. Tribes and clans travelled across large territories in order to survive what was perceived as a constantly threatening environment. For this reason the early stable inhabitants built their houses not as shelter, but as places for rituals whose performance would alleviate their feeling of being lost and uprooted. In this sense the origin of the house must be understood as a sanctuary, a place in which living instead of being driven by necessity becomes a highly formalized ritual. At the same time by being rooted in a

specific place, the institution of the house is also the origin of politics. It is traditionally assumed that the origin of politics was manifested in the “public space” of the agora. However the sharing of one place in which speech and action would become the defining spheres of the human condition, would be only possible if city inhabitants would be already rooted within the place of inhabitation. The stability of the home would frame the community and enable it to become an intelligible political body. This is why, as it has been argued, the walls around the city were built not (or not only) for the purpose of defending the city from outside enemies, but in order to formalize the law (*nomos*) through which the city inhabitants could peacefully co-exist. It is for this reason that the city has been always compared to a house and vice-versa. The analogical relationship between the city and the house goes beyond a mere metaphor and addresses the peculiar role that both the form of the city and the form of the house have in spatializing the rituals that constitute man’s form of life. Neither a symbolic object, not a mere functional apparatus, the house is above all a machine for rituals, that is the constant transformation of life through staged acts of everyday life. Domestic practices become an art through which inhabitants define a possible space out of the chaos of natural life. It is for this reason that the earliest house typology was the courtyard house: an introverted domestic space protected from the outside by walls. This typology not only assured security from the outside, but also manifested the radical un-naturalness of domestic living. Courtyard houses forced inhabitants to see themselves dwelling within a completely man made context where every aspect of living is contained and measured by a specific space. The typology of the courtyard house is thus the most important archetype of domestic living. It is possible to argue that the modern conception of housing started with the gradual dismantling of this typology by its opening up towards the space of the city. Starting from the Middle Ages the space of the house was gradually developed towards the public space of the street.

III

Control

In ancient times the house was the exclusive space for reproduction, the container of “private” life. Although, as we have seen, to inhabit a house was the precondition for political life, the space of the house was excluded from politics, which happened in the open space of the agora. Within the rise of the modern city the house becomes a space within which the public and private interests gradually became indistinguishable. A signal of this transformation is the development of the façade as the most recognizable feature of the house. The house façade

becomes an ambivalent form: on the one hand it manifests the public dimension of private property and at the same time it addresses publicness as a fundamental backdrop of private life. From the Middle Ages on, the most important spaces of the house face the street and the latter becomes the fundamental datum of the city-fabric. But most importantly, it is during this time that the concept itself of citizenship is linked to private property: to own a house would then become the precondition for becoming a citizen. Private property consisted not only in the domestic household, but also in the possibility to host a space (and thus the means) for production. The medieval house is thus both a house and a workshop and it is starting from these workshops that the household is opened up to the public space of the city. The invention of public space is thus the invention not of a space per se, but of a framework that allows different private interests to coexist. It is even possible to say that public space was institutionalized in order to support the development of private property, a development that was necessary to the economic growth of the city. The private space of the house becomes therefore not only an individual concern, but an actual apparatus targeted at the political and social control of subjects.

Already in the 16th century houses become spaces that organize and define social integration. Sebastiano Serlio's famous book *On Housing for All Kinds of People* marks the start of an actual typological discourse applied to private residential space, an ingredient of the urban mass that had attracted little formal attention in the previous centuries. The rise of this interest signals a shift in which housing, long considered an unplanned response to individual necessities, becomes on the contrary a quintessential focus for architecture as it starts to be perceived as the basis of the productive tissue of a city.

Serlio's treatise highlights this fact by investigating the living habits of all the economic layers of society while trying to develop a shareable architectural grammar loosely based on the classical orders. This grammar overcomes the idiosyncrasies of the medieval 'organic' city hinting at a form of order or organization that will become a prerequisite for the gradual emergence of the industrial city. The theme of control becomes then fundamental in the project of housing from two points of view: on the one hand, the control and the negotiation of the boundary between private property and state-controlled infrastructure, and on the other the organization of life processes taking place beyond the façade.

This last point is clearly exemplified by the way in which Serlio tackles the issue of the distribution of spaces in plan, offering solutions for the very different users which he addresses in terms of their lives as well as of their productive necessities. Next to aristocrats and peasants, a new middle class of merchants and professionals takes centre stage in Serlio's catalogue; their dwellings reject the relative lack of specialization of the spaces of medieval town houses and start to exhibit a more nuanced choreography of use. Both at the level of

formal representation and at that of plan configuration, the house becomes a device which gives life a structure, a precise rhythm, a form.

IV

Distribution

The factory and the rental house, the office and the bourgeois apartment, became in the XIX century the two polar opposites which organized the life of workers, two halves of the same system. It is for this reason that a refined typological discourse on housing has emerged as perhaps the most important and pressing issue in architectural design and research alike. As the obscure face of production, as the enabler which makes production possible, the house has become a centre of attention ever since the development of statistics has made it clear that workers who enjoy a better living condition also produce more – and become better consumers in return. The improvement of the life of workers has been therefore a concern not only of social reformers such as Ildefonso Cerdà who wanted to solve the hygienic issues of Barcelona, but also of administrators driven by market interests who sought to make the working population more efficient, as for instance Georges-Eugène Haussmann. Michel Foucault has famously defined this era as marked by *biopower*, that is to say a form of power which maximizes the living productive potential of the subjects – in short, a power which manages life rather than punishing subjects with death.

The rise of a typological discourse on housing is perhaps the most interesting ongoing result in architectural terms of the attempt of biopower to control and at the same time improve human life. If we look at the actual spaces of the house, an increasing subdivision and specialization of rooms has become the hallmark of modern apartments since the late renaissance. Rooms for sleeping are separated from rooms for eating or spending the day. This specialization was already forecast by Serlio's schemes and had its first heyday in XVII and XVIII century France with the 'invention' of the corridor as device to handle the distribution of private spaces in high bourgeois dwellings. The French term *distribution* emerged in that period to identify the ability of a designer to organize spaces, a strategic approach to design which had no precedent in centuries in which – at all levels of society – rooms could serve to different purposes. The corridor is therefore the sign of a change in attitude as not only the idea of function, but also that of privacy had not been crucial to domestic design previously. The art of distribution, while born as a high-end expertise, would soon enough prove most needed in the articulation of rental apartments for the working class; offering decent and cheap accommodation required exactly the strategic abilities that

distribution implied. The plan organization of the dwelling became at this point the most important task for the architect, an attempt to chart in an almost diagrammatic way the life and movements of the inhabitants. This design focus will become crucial in the XX century when functionalism rose to key architectural tenet and was adopted by most – although not all – representatives of the modern movement. The idea of seeing the house as a machine pushed further the individualization of spaces; perhaps the best example of such a line of research was represented by Margarethe Schütte-Lihotzky's Frankfurt Kitchen (1926), a prototypical space which separated the preparation of food from the actual dining place, further increasing the specialization of the different areas of the house. Schütte-Lihotzky's kitchen was a carefully designed Existenzminimum space calculated on the precise movements of the cook-housewife and aimed at optimizing work; it was intended as an emancipating device which would have saved the housewife time and energy to engage in other pursuits and was part of a long genealogy of attempts to tackle the domestic environment from a gender perspective. While it sought to simplify the life of women, the Frankfurt Kitchen on the other hand involuntarily furthered a process through which the average apartment became a rather fixed agglomeration of single-use rooms. In the last decades of the XX century this model has appeared to be straining at the seams since it was moulded on life forms that do not match anymore a postindustrial condition in which both family dynamics and production processes have greatly changed. The very idea of functionalism has been long under attack as it can only envision fixed, repeatable functions, and it adapts badly to the uncertainty and change that are not only fundamental traits of human life, but also and most urgently hallmarks of an economic condition in which neither work nor social life are as stable as they used to be in an industrial society.

It is for these reasons that the art of distribution is under question in the present architectural discourse; during the year, the unit will therefore try to explore the issue of the design of housing from other perspectives, attempting to find a spatial response to forms of life that cannot easily be pigeonholed in the existing housing models.

V

Production

The rise of an interest for housing as a project in the XVII and XVIII century parallels the formation of an industrial productive system. If a link between housing and production had always existed, it is only within the consolidation of a mature capitalist system that this

relationship starts to become an object of concern triggering the development of a discussion around the issue of housing.

In ancient societies, production and reproduction happened within the same realm – the non-political, intimate realm of the house compound whose subject was always the clan rather than the nuclear family. Labour did not concern citizens, that is to say economically independent men, but women and slaves; it was hidden rather than celebrated, and kept rigorously separated from public and political life. This form of social organization of production changed in Europe during the Middle Ages and the expansion of Christianity, whose ethos on the contrary put a strong stress on the centrality of work. The productive nature of the household started to be then exhibited and flaunted and clans broke down into smaller family groups occupying individual workshop houses. In both these stages the necessities of work and of reproduction mixed freely and happened within the same spaces. The maintenance of the household – cooking, cleaning, weaving and taking care of children – was part of the general activity, to the point that an actual distinction between domestic labour and labour *tout court* would have been impossible. Domestic was everything that happened within the privately owned domain, hidden first, and celebrated later. Domesticity could be separated from public politics and religious worship, but never from production. However this condition came to an end when, towards the end of the Middle Ages, labour became more and more specialized. Tasks had to be organized in a more refined way and they required particular skills; the solidification of a merchant class and the creation of the first organized productive clusters severed household work from productive activities. Serlio's treatise highlights precisely the moment in which domestic spaces, from an indistinct, a-typological, flexible nature, start to acquire a particular purpose – what, with a term borrowed from natural science, will be called in the XVIII century, a *function*. At the same time, production moves out of the house, in specially built spaces; it acquires an architectural definition, a recognizable character, a form of representation. At the dawn of the industrial age, cities swell with immigrants who become citizens not anymore in virtue of their owning the private property which had represented a means of production in the medieval city. On the contrary the new citizens do not own anything but their own potential for work; their houses need only be the places of reproduction, of family life, of biological perpetuation of the species. The construction of rental houses booms, providing generic accommodation for workers whose origins and habits are increasingly diverse.

It is at this point that the modern idea of domesticity is born as radically separate from the sphere of labour and indeed celebrated as a respite from work. It is also at this point that the role of the woman in the household is crystallized as that of guardian of the intimate realm of reproduction and so-called 'affective' labour, the taking-care-of-others that apparently produces nothing and yet enables the economic machine to function. The rhetoric of the

house as we know it has been largely an invention of the XIX century both as a systematization of social roles, and as compensatory fantasy. The systematization of social roles was mainly a gender issue geared towards a rational – if unfair – division of tasks that assigned to women the care of reproduction at large, a tasks that, while invisible, was quintessential to the smooth functioning of an orderly, efficient system. On the other hand the nature of compensatory fantasy of the ideal of domesticity played, and still plays, a crucial part in the construction of the industrial and post-industrial subject. The house is portrayed again as a sanctuary, not, as it had been at the beginning, from a hostile natural environment, but rather from the jungle of the modern city. It becomes, then, the place where the self is offered a chance of regeneration, rest, relax – all necessary, obviously, to ensure the continuation of a good productive performance.

However, we are witnessing in the past few decades another shift; the place of ‘work’ cannot be anymore confined so precisely to a specific space. This has not only become true in terms of city planning – where the failure of zoning as method has been apparent for a long time – but also at the smaller scale of our individual experience. As production in the western world is less and less targeted at creating goods but rather at the generation of knowledge, social exchange and services, our work follows us wherever we go. Labour is not anymore confined to the factory or the office but is performed everywhere and in every moment – and most particularly in the house. The contemporary living condition is therefore victim of a paradox of sorts; while on the one hand our social imaginary still feeds us the myth of the domestic environment as place of rest and intimacy, on the other hand large part of our productive activity takes place precisely in the house. This paradox is intensified by the fact that while household, feminine, ‘affective’ labour is still formally not recognized as *work*, our service-producing, knowledge-based work is, in fact, nothing but affective labour on a large scale.

VI

Housing as Project

The unit’s agenda will also try to articulate the relationship between the project of housing and the form of the city at large. The interest in the typology of the single-family dwelling has not only impacted the way we live and relate to each other, but also, and perhaps most dramatically, the urban fabric. Before a proper typological discourse emerged, the form of the city was predicated on military, ritual, representative or infrastructural rationales that implied a kind of collective thinking. Private housing, especially of the middle or lower class variety, did not dictate the form of the city but rather followed it, filling in the gaps. This generated

sometimes untenable hygienic conditions due to the lack of density regulation and of a rational organization of light, air, and sewage provisions. When the importance of these features became evident, the city started to undergo a process which was not unlike the parcellization suffered from the interior domestic space itself. In essence, the urban tissue started to be developed not from the handling of shared concerns, but rather from the optimization of the individual cell. This logic, already amply discussed in reform projects of the XIX century such as the already mentioned Cerdà plan, became a *pièce de résistance* of Modernism and was ultimately crystallized in the 1933 Athens Charter, a document which declared the subordination of urban form to the individual necessities of the single dwellings. The kind of city tissue produced by this process has not always been successful as in many cases the urban conditions generated by designing ‘from the cell’ fail to provide an adequate framework for social interaction and representation. In some cases particular social and political experiments have countered this tendency trying to work both on the scale of the apartment and on the general configuration; cases of such attempts have happened throughout the XX century in very different conditions, from the courtyards of the Red Vienna complexes to the slab-and-greenery structure of Mies and Hilberseimer’s Lafayette Park in Detroit. However these examples remain quite few and the possibility of imagining a project of housing that does not deny the form of the city remains a challenge. The unit will therefore work this year on two parallel topics; on the one hand the proposal of an urban logic for the intervention, and on the other the development of an interior project that tries to respond to contemporary living conditions.

The first task of the work in the unit will be to select a city; each student will make a choice at the beginning of the year and will spend the first term researching the chosen city, its historical development, the rationale and character of its housing stock, its key projects both realized and not realized. Each city has a different urban logic and the research should allow us to understand what is the grammar of the context as well as the nature of its housing tradition and conventions. As we have seen, housing and production are strictly linked, and the projects developed in the second term will have to address precisely this relationship which might vary greatly from case to case depending on the political, cultural and economic condition of the city you will work on.

In December, this research will arrive at the production of a written essay as well as of a preliminary proposal of a brief for the architectural project. The brief is already a project in itself since it determines the intentions of the actual design: its relationship to the site, its size, its purpose. This document will define the strategic logic of the design and prepare the urban and social argument for the architectural proposal. Moreover, the brief should put forward a subject, an idea of the inhabitant of the project, of his or her needs and of your own position towards their condition.

In the second term, we will develop architectural projects for new living spaces; the scale, scope and nature of the interventions will vary depending on the chosen context and will respond to the brief and the subject put forward in the first term. The proposals will be conceived as new archetypes for living and will try to go beyond known solutions exploring in particular the possibility to insert shared spaces and different ownership models to break the mold of the standard family apartment.

In the third term, we will focus on the discussion of the life that can take place in the proposal from two points of view: the representation of inhabitation, and the design of the interior. The third term will also address the limit between that which architecture can forecast and what on the other hand needs to be left to the inhabitant.

The project of housing implies a project of life; giving a form to housing implicitly means to design a behaviour. This ambiguity cannot be ignored, but the hope and ambition of the unit will be to imagine a different kind of project which addresses existing needs and opens up new possibilities by reimagining the relationship between living and production, and that between private ownership and collective interaction.

VII

Interior

The project of housing is ultimately the project of an archetypical interior. This year, Diploma 14 will address the interior not only as conceptual category, but also as design topic which brings with it forms of knowledge and methodologies that are subtly different from those we normally apply to the scale of the architectural object. The definition of the material character of the interior, its sensual qualities, its environmental performance will be crucial aspects to be addressed by all the unit participants. These aspects will be further developed in the Technical Studies reports which will seek to explore the house as milieu investigating issues of lighting, temperature and humidity control, surface treatment, acoustic quality. As always, Diploma 14 sees these technical aspects as quintessential part of the project; to this end, starting in the first term the students will be encouraged to develop a position in regards to what can be considered as comfort in a domestic interior. Comfort can be understood as having a space that is generous in size, but also as owning an individual room of one's own no matter how small; it can be conceived as quantity or quality of lighting, as the possibility of silence, or as the presence of a significant view from one's window. Comfort can be living together, or being able to live alone. Comfort can be flexibility, but also a strong, defined architectural form that does not compromise with function. The answer for this question, as

open as it might sound, is not at all value free: it depends on the cultural context of the project, as well as on the argument that each student will put forward. Therefore the elaboration of an idea of interior – both from the architectural and the environmental point of view – will be at the core of the year's work. The relationship between immaterial needs, ambitions, and desires, and the movement of the body in space, its physical presence in a specific place, is at the root of such a research.

It is precisely in the project of housing that the architectural detail ceases to be an object of pure functionality – as it happens in the case of infrastructure – or the locus of virtuoso ability – as it is the case in representative and public buildings. In the project of housing the detail responds to its use but also shapes and represents a form of life, a social ethos, an aesthetic understanding of the world. In the contemporary condition this attention to detail is all the more important since inhabitants hardly ever live their whole life in the same house or apartment; on the one hand there is a pressing request for more flexible, more generic housing open to the reinterpretation of different users, while on the other hand the idea of comfort, as we said, can never be generic and is always very specific and, so to speak, historically placed. The project of the detail is therefore situated between the choice of a specific subject, a specific inhabitant and his or her kind of comfort on the one hand, and on the other hand the character of human inhabitation that is always to a certain degree impermanent.

At the core of this research there is, ultimately, the discussion on the possibility of being at home, and of what this home is in social and political terms.

General Information

The whole unit meets once a week for a collective pin-up; a second studio day is devoted to individual desk tutorials. Throughout the year we will present a series of seminars that focus on the key issues the whole group deals with, and in principle the seminars are scheduled on the same day of the collective reviews. We encourage the students to work together in the unit space as much as possible and believe that the knowledge produced by the unit is of a somewhat collective nature even if the projects are individual and express a personal research.

Every student will choose his or her context city in an open discussion with the unit masters and the other participants. It is preferable to choose a city that can easily be visited during the year, possibly during the open weeks.

While field trips are necessarily individual, we believe that travelling together to a chosen city which represents an interesting case-study of the topic investigated is a crucial moment for the unit; normally this travel is scheduled during the second term and allows the whole group a moment of shared reflection.

The unit work is organized in three blocks that develop different skills and target different scales. In the first term writing will be the main activity, together with urban analysis. In the second term cad drawing will support an investigation of the architectural scale. In the third term drawing, 3-d modelling and photoshop montages will be the basis for a more in-depth exploration of the experiential and representational qualities of the design. The Technical Studies report is integral part of the project and although fourth year students are not required to produce one we encourage all the participants to take into account a reflection on the tectonic and environmental character of the proposal from the very beginning.

We also stress the construction of an overall argument and the definition of a personal position as quintessential aspects of the development of a project. Therefore we see as key parts of the unit's experience both an active engagement in the collective discussion, and a particular care in the crafting of presentations.

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