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Familiar Horror

Revisiting the Architecture of the Street, the Block and the Room



Gerhard Richter, *Betty* (1988).

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Revisiting the Architecture of the Street, the Block and the Room

The street, the block and the room: these are the most common spaces of our existence. Everywhere, at any time we dwell within these places, and for this reason we assume they are innocent backdrops for life – stages for the everyday. Yet these spaces represent the *summa* of how human subjectivity has been tamed and molded within predictable social patterns. Since life and work are now one and the same, labor cannot be confined within specific ‘workplaces’. For this reason, domestic space – the space of reproduction – becomes the most strategic vantage point for considering how life itself – as *bios*, as *dynamis* – is put to work and exploited. Issues such as gentrification and the credit crunch can only make sense when seen within the larger process of the enslavement of life as a source of economic value. Here, the common spaces of the everyday become a rather insidious sphere, where dwelling happens in a state of permanent precarity and uprootedness. This condition clashes with the ideological cliché of the home as a reassuring space of intimacy and family values. Instead, the intimacy of the domestic becomes the locus of a familiar horror.

This year Diploma 14 will focus on dwelling by opening the Pandora’s box of our contemporary horror as it emerges in daily routines. We will look at dwelling on three scales – the street, the block and the room – in order to construct the framework for analysing how economy, politics and form have shaped subjects and habits. This analysis will be the starting point for a molecular revolution within and against domestic space.

1. The Habitual

In his essay *Das Unheimliche*, Sigmund Freud analyzes how a generic sense of anguish and fear emerges from what is most familiar to us. The term *Heimlich* refers to the intimacy of what is familiar. According to Freud it is precisely within this intimacy that the most powerful sense of terror can emerge at any moment. Paradoxically this sense of terror arises not in spite, but *because* of the sense of familiarity and intimacy. The closer things are to us, the more they can become adverse to us. Literature is inhabited by ghosts that arise from the domestic sphere. As in Kafka's short story *The Cares of the Family Man*, the most forgotten and useless object – a flat star-shaped spool for tread – can become an animated presence, which unsettles and defamiliarizes what we thought was the last resort of our sense of domesticity.

The possibility of danger and fear are thus fed by what is habitual and arouses a sense of familiarity and security. Like many B-movies have shown us, horror becomes more powerful when it twists into a nightmare what seemed so habitual. The Italian philosopher Paolo Virno has recently revisited Freud's *Das Unheimliche* within the context of post-industrial modes of production. He noted that the concept of *Heimlich*, by referring to the "habitual" addresses nothing less than the world of ethics. In many contemporary discussions, ethics is always interpreted as the sphere of "good values". Against this interpretation, Virno goes back to the etymological origin of ethics, which is *ethos*. Commonly understood as the character that describes the guiding principles and beliefs of a society, *ethos* can be identified with the "habitual", a pattern of daily routines that defines the structure of a form of life. While today "politics" has been often reduced to the caricatures of political representation such as elections or protest, it is the *ethos*, the "habitual", the most accurate seismographer of the political condition of our time. And yet how can we even discuss the habitual, when our way of living is no longer organized according to unchanging habitual patterns, but is constantly adjusted according to increasingly precarious conditions? Virno argues that it is precisely when the habitual is drastically unsettled by the aggressive corrosion of newer modes of production that a longing for the habitual in the regressive forms of "roots" and "origins" emerges as a powerful ideology. Domesticity is seen as a "retreat" from the world, a place where it is possible to reconstruct authentic social relationships. Architecture has often fueled this understanding of the domestic as an authentic place as opposed to the harshness of the city. Think of houses designed by architects where abundance of green, idyllic vistas, and interior design fetishism, attempt to reconstruct a pastoral microcosm untouched by the chaos of the city. In this way the house becomes an ideological blanket that covers the total commodification of living.

This condition is perfectly represented by one of the major contributions to the contemporary domestic landscape: IKEA furniture. The "IKEA world" represents (for better or worse) a fundamental assault to the solidity and permanence of the domestic interior. Cheapness,

sobriety in design, and variety of products makes IKEA the first-aid solution to any household necessity. Moreover no previous commodity has ever become so mimetic of our biographies as Ikea objects.

A shopping stroll into IKEA is a compulsory rite of passage whenever we change home or split with our partner. It is there that we realize how our most intimate life vicissitudes can easily fit into domestic products like the convex fit into the concave. And yet in spite of the radically generic ethos unleashed by IKEA, the company makes any possible effort to represent its products as anchors to the habitual, where the “normal” family shines in all its symbolic and sentimental power. While Ikea as materialist deconstruction of existence is the crudest (but for this reason honest) depiction of how the uncertainty of our existences is a mass produced commodity, IKEA as “way of life” still projects a reassuring image of the house with its firms roots into “domesticity”. The tension between reification and coziness is at the very core of many contemporary images about domesticity.

Our most rarefied and unstable living and working conditions become the fertile ground for the revival of cultural roots, regional identities and bio-friendly life-styles. It is within this cultural landscape that we have to consider the return of the old good *Heimlich* in the form of obsessively praised concepts such as community, grassroots, bottom-up, ad-hoc, bricolage and participation. All these words seem to conjure a situation in which the radical tensions and contradictions that define contemporary forms of life can be softened, smoothed and somehow solved with the narcissism of good intentions. Against this scenario, we aim to disclose once again the tabula rasa that defines our forms of life. Such tabula rasa is no longer the emptiness of loft-living, but the domestic world swamped in the over-abundance of images, stories and believes whose hypertrophic quantity is the cause of our experiential poverty. Rather than dismissing this poverty in the name of some more reassuring narrative, we believe that a new project for the domestic must twist the adverse new forms of *Unheimliche* towards a new general and radical reform of housing. The focus of this reform is not the production of a newer domestic architecture, but the possibility of a different ethos *within and against* the contemporary domestic landscape.

2. Affective Labour

In order to propose a counter-project to dominant domestic models we need to understand the project of housing as an architecture that brings together spatial, social and juridical aspects of modern living. In his famous *Zur Wohnungsfrage* (The Housing Question), Friedrich Engels argues that it makes little sense to approach the question of housing with the simple intent of

making better homes for people. For Engels there is no socialist architecture to be made: there is only a class critique of architecture and the city. Engels's admonition has resonated through the history of architecture and urban planning of the last century, by depriving these disciplines of the possibility to come up with incisive policies about social reform. Although Engels's admonition must be taken as a forceful invitation to not be *naïve* about housing and its role within a capitalistic society, we should not overlook the house itself as a fundamental locus of economy. Before it extended to the whole population, the concept of economy referred to the organization of domestic space. In the *Oeconomica*, a text attributed to Aristotle or one of his disciples, economy is distinguished from politics as the house (oikos) is distinguished from the city (*polis*). Economy thus coincides with housekeeping, the management of the household: a role assigned to women in the history of western civilization. This gender discrimination has always been powerful because relationships within the family and the house are usually defined as "natural" since they support the most basic human condition: the reproduction of the species. Yet as Dolores Hayden as argued in her seminal book *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, "Cooking food, caring for children, and clearing the house, task often thought as "woman's work" to be performed without pay in domestic environments, have always been a major part in the world's necessary labor". The "intimacy" of the house as the locus of *reproduction* is here identified not only as a place of exploitation and gender discrimination, but also as a fundamental asset of production at large. While domestic and affective labor have always been *naturalized* within the intimacy of the domestic, their social relevance within modern and contemporary economy is immense. This is why within the industrial (and post-industrial) society the house remains the epicenter of both economic and political conflicts. We can argue that even more than public space, domestic space is where the political manifests itself with the most urgency within contemporary life. Such urgency is not only about the affordability of homes for dispossessed people, but also what forms of life we can imagine beyond the existing paradigm. The great lesson of material feminism was to approach these issues from the basic aspects of dwelling. By focusing on different organization of households, material feminism saw the architecture of the house (and the relationships it entails), as a ground for a much larger social reform. Beside the historical context of this particular critical tradition, what emerges from the attempts at reforming the household is a more general question about housing — how do we live together? Is the reproductive function of the house something we should exclude from the productive sphere? Can it be excluded? What are the juridical, social and spatial conditions that define the ways we cohabit? Are the family apartment and the single family house the only two options for urban living?

As labour coincides increasingly with *affective* labour – socializing, taking care of others, producing knowledge – the house is not a sanctuary, but, rather, the very battlefield on which contemporary subjectivity is constructed, and the inner conflict of our society are played out.

3. Diagram

The idea of an analogical relationship between the house and the city is a long-standing leitmotiv perhaps first highlighted by Alberti, and later assumed by Cerdà as the sine-qua-non of rational urban thinking. However this analogy is far from being obvious and in fact it suggests a diagram of power relationships rather than a mere functional organization. The house-as-city (and all the more so the city-as-house) is thought as the place of ‘natural’ hierarchies: master and servant, man and wife, public life and production. Clearly, these hierarchies are not natural at all, and architecture becomes the tool through which they are enforced rather than the default expression of their existence. Alberti had seen already the potential for this diagram to unfold in an actual political project in the XV century; in architecture, it would take a few centuries for this idea to be applied as a design methodology. The scales at which it would become explicit are the family apartment, the building-object, and the masterplan – the three levels at which, still today, we are used to design. However these three scales and their analogical relationship should not be taken for granted and, in fact, this year Diploma 14 proposes to look at the question from a different perspective, substituting the flat, the object, and the masterplan with the street, the block, and the room. Contrary to the original triad, these three entities cannot be taken as a series of analogous Russian dolls organized following the same set of relationships. The roots of this difference, which seems a rather simple one, are in fact quite deep and not at all matter-of fact. The flat-object-masterplan triad has been devised with the intention of establishing a clear division between public and private in terms of ownership and jurisdiction. In the ancient Greek and Roman city, or in the early Islamic and medieval city, the analogy city-house would have been rather meaningless as boundaries were set, and spaces were organized, with different logics depending on the different scales. Ritual prohibitions, gender divisions, and military preconditions dictated different sets of limits that overlapped and sometimes contradicted each other. The space of an individual within the house was not necessarily set – the bedroom had not been ‘invented’ yet – exactly as the space of the individual within the city was often ambiguous as there was no public space as such, and privately owned structures crowded the space of the city from the large scale of temples built by rich families, to the small scale of market stalls that clogged the streets. However, from the renaissance onwards in the western city authorities try to clean up this complexity by reducing everything to a clear system of jurisdictions based on the public-private opposition. As the city is the realm of its ruler, who allows the citizens to live within the boundaries of their own private space, so the master of the house rules the private environment, allowing his family members a specific space within the household organization.

To then rethink the question of housing from the point of view of the room rather than the apartment, the city block rather than the building-object, and the street rather than the masterplan means to challenge the default dichotomy of public-private upon which our very idea of dwelling is based, as well as the basic social machine through which modern society is built: the nuclear family.

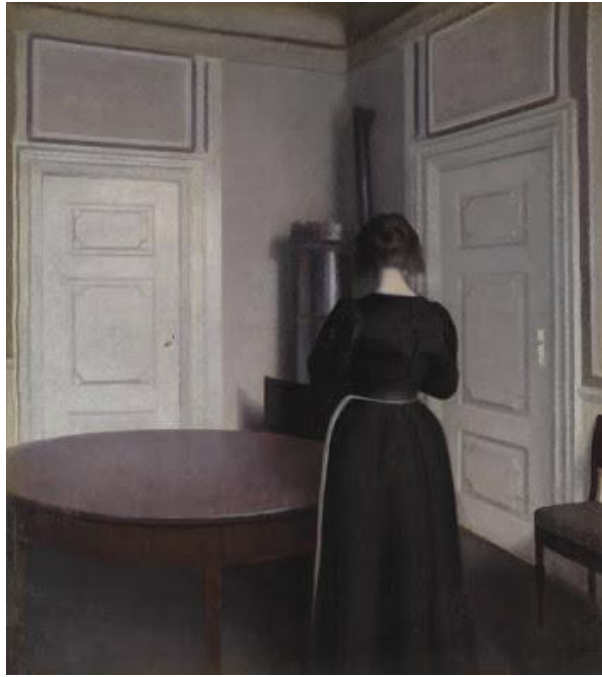
These categories are problematic because we take it for granted and fail to recognize their constructed nature. While until the industrial era they could be used to describe fairly accurately the relationships between individual and society, apartment and city, today these relationships are far more articulated. We therefore strive to describe and understand the contemporary condition by using conceptual diagrams (the nuclear family, the flat, the private vs the public) that do not correspond to our experience of living and working in a post-fordist environment where our house has become way less private thanks to social media and 24/7 work, and 'public' space is in fact completely ruled by private interest.

Familiar horror arises also because of this discrepancy. We feel horror at the idea of not complying with the standard; but also, as this standard is clearly not that real anymore, we also regard the standard itself – the family, the flat – with horror. The analogy between house and city becomes then monstrous rather than reassuring.

4. Room

We propose to look at the room at face value, stripping it of the expectations and preconceptions created by the last three centuries of typological discourse. The very fact that we name rooms following the objects that they contain – kitchen, bed-room, bath-room – is a sign of the fact that in the past objects had the power to give meaning to spaces which were largely non-typological and more open to interpretation and change. Today as practicing architects we work with a preset toolbox of purpose-intended rooms which can just be shifted around and given a different position or different form while in fact still fitting in the same diagram – the nuclear family apartment. But should room have functions at all? Should an apartment be divided in rooms? Are the standard sizes requested by law a way to protect the citizen, or a straitjacket to enforce a certain behavior?

If we were to free the room from its constraint to fit within this toolbox, perhaps new combinations could arise – and, with them, not only new spatial diagrams, but new social ones. Such an attempt has seldom been made in the last centuries; in XIX century America, for instance, the Beecher sisters transformed the kitchen into a large multi-purpose room at the centre of the house, therefore transforming the symbolic organization of the family.



Vilhelm Hammershoi, *Interior*, 1899.

Rediscovering the room, and starting a project from the room, does not only mean to question the functional subdivisions we normally take for granted. It also means to challenge the idea of what is public and what is private within the house itself. In the 1950s, Mies designed the Lakeshore Drive apartments as one very large room – only for the tenants to build up walls and reconstruct the ‘familiar horror’ of the bourgeois rooms full of tchotchkes and doilies criticized and mocked by the literature and films of the time. What was groundbreaking in Mies’ project was the rejection of the traditional idea of privacy. While degrees of openness and seclusion are a constant of living environments, the actual concept of privacy is a relatively recent one and until the XVII century only monks had the ‘extravagant’ idea of using spaces to be alone – and then again these spaces of solitude were not necessarily for sleeping but, in certain cases, for prayer and study (while it was perfectly acceptable to sleep and bathe with other people). With the best possible intentions, architects have tried to propose new horizons for the family apartment playing with double levels, with different distribution patterns, with new models of furniture. However we have hardly ever criticized the basic articulation of living spaces into a preordered set of rooms. Taking the room as the first element of a project for living space might allow us to see the question of housing on completely different terms from the ones we normally work with. The very presence, form, position and quality of furniture and objects will be integral part of the project of the room this year, precisely because furniture is not a neutral element but rather a powerful way to characterize (or de-characterize) the room. Ultimately, to imagine a city made of rooms for individuals or groups of people means ultimately to reject the model that sees the city as an agglomeration of nuclear families.

5. Block



Thomas Struth, *Crosby Street*, New York, 1978.

Following a broad generalization, in the premodern city there was no typological discourse, but only a seemingly organic pattern which was the result of the interaction between survival, representation, liturgy, and military needs. Buildings were not objects as such but just fillers in this pattern. From the renaissance onwards, a difficult negotiation emerges between the ambition of giving the city a form and that of organizing housing rationally. There is then a project for the city, and another project for increasingly specific housing types. The solution of modernism to this dilemma was to detach the form of the city from the form of buildings which stand as free objects within a field, as in Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine*. The strategy of zoning functions that had already triumphed within the apartment succeeds then also at an urban level.

This solution was also seen as a way to update (and, potentially, eradicate) the urban archetype that had in fact mediated the relationship between the form of the city and the form of architecture since the XVI century: the urban block.

We seldom think about the block as an actual architectural project as it seems yet another element in the catalogue of 'the habitual'. And yet the block is a bizarre product as it quite difficult to define both in juridical and architectural terms. The block is the space between streets seen as one, finite and readable architecture. It can be the output of different projects,

and owned by multiple actors, and yet, the moment we call it block, we agree to discuss it as one architectural piece that developed through time.

In the modernist pattern there are two *forms* (infrastructure and objects) separated an empty *ground* of nothingness or trees; one is a private form, the other is a public form, and the 'ground' is a virtual no-man's-land. But the block, conceptually, asks to be read as one entity – even when it does contain empty spaces and greenery, as in Lucio Costa's Superquadra. The block had its heyday in the XIX century, when large swathes of industrial city were built at once and made it recognizable as a 'project': haussmannian Paris, the Eixample of Barcelona. Nevertheless a block does not need to be homogenous. On the contrary the most interesting moments in a block are exactly those overlappings, voids and discrepancies that emerge from its being an entity composed of heterogenous parts. More specifically, the block does not exist as a juridical entity, but only as a collection of different ownerships.

In fact, we take the idea of city block for granted, but the block itself is a hybrid and disquieting thing, so much so that the architecture of the XX century has rejected it altogether. Where two properties touch, something interesting can happen: a potential for sharing, or a leftover that embodies the absurdity of private ownership as in Gordon Matta Clark's *Fake Estates*, thin, unbuildable strips of land that legally don't belong to either of the neighbouring properties. To conceive a project starting from the rooms and the block means then to reimagine a subject that does not reject the nuclear family, but also allows other forms of life – and ownership – to exist. If choosing to address the room means to bypass the traditional tension between individual and family, taking in account the block rather than the building-object is a strategy that aims at reversing another familiar tension: that between architecture and city.

6. Street



Jeff Wall, *Passerby*, 1996.

The term *street* seems perhaps to embody better than any other ‘the habitual’ on the scale of the city. Taking the street as object of familiar horror is an obvious choice; already Le Corbusier in the 1920s identified it as the locus of all the most trite and traditional conventions, dark, dirty, and inexcusably banal from an architectural point of view. And yet the street is the urban counterpart of the project of the block: a void that is charged not only with circulation, but also with an ambition of representation. In an interesting reversal of Alberti’s tidily analogical system, in the XIX century the street becomes the foil of the domestic. The dangerous, vulgar, and polluted street is contrasted by a flourishing of the culture of the interior as place of escape and compensation. Politics and revolution take the streets while the families of the Biedermeier era retreat in the safe havens of their overdesigned homes. We could see this as the moment in which the city-as-house analogy shows its cracks if the same dynamic did not happen also on the scale of the apartment: rooms are subdivided into smaller rooms as the system of privacy becomes more and more complex – servants are banished to the back of the house, children are divided by gender and eventually granted their own private room in a multiplication of the levels of interior-ness available. Instead of this system of nestling thresholds, we propose this year to recognize the room and the street as opposite, and yet complementary levels of the project of the city. The rooms of Hammershoi’s paintings, and the deserted streets of Thomas

Struth's photographs, in their almost deadpan familiarity, seem ready for a new project that tackles them head on in all their architectural and symbolic potential rather than 'updating' them as part of an efficient productive machine.

These elements, long assumed as the most clichéd spatial figures, have been so forgotten in the search for the rationalization of an apartment-object-masterplan system that they can become new blank categories through which to rethink the way we use space.

7. Project

Through the means of an architectural project, we will try to address this year the possibility of forms of life that exceed the traditional molds of the 'habitual'. This does not mean to invent subjects outside of reality, but, rather, to observe and try to understand the contemporary condition from a fresh perspective. It is not a matter of avoiding 'normality', or seeking borderline conditions for the sake of it, but rather of recognizing the way in which what we consider as familiar is, in fact, a sophisticated construction that might well have outlasted its actual usefulness. For this reason at the core of our investigation will be the understanding of the ethos and the subjectivity of the persons the project addresses; to this end, the format of the unit will include this year a new layer of inquiry that will use non-architectural references as primary research material for a rigorous definition of the overall social argument at stake. To discuss familiar horror means to discuss the way in which space both shapes our cultural production, but also to revisit the way in which art, literature, and cinema present and represent the domestic condition and its political implications. The Parisian apartments of Truffaut and Bertolucci's movies, the interiors of Hopper's motels, the Wall Street office that Melville's Bartleby ends up transforming in his cocoon are not mere narrative devices but rather paradigmatic spaces that can be taken as extreme examples able to shed light on much more general historical condition.

The first part of the thesis will be then devoted to the choice and investigation of a city. Each student will select a case and study its morphology and the evolution of its housing stock. As we are interested in the scale of the block, a starting point could be to look for grid structures that can lend easily readable examples. The grid has proved perhaps the most resilient and successful instrument for the creation of block structures that can be extremely different, from the dense, high-rise tissue of Manhattan to the compact pattern of Barcelona to the fragmentation of the *polykatoikia* in Athens. The study of the pattern, the block, and in

particular of the typological genealogy are extremely important as they should help each student to find a meta-theme to develop both conceptually and architecturally during the rest of the year.

To this end, in November each person will also choose an artifact – a novel, a painting or a film – that will become a paradigmatic reference to address the general theme unearthed during the initial research. In fact this artifact can be directly related to the chosen city, but it does not have to. What matters is the construction of an overall conceptual thesis which is addressed on the one hand typologically and architecturally, and on the other hand from the point of view of the subjectivity, the ethos, and the culture related to a specific urban condition.

The artifact will become the starting point for the production of a series of drawings that will try to draw out of the specificities of the artwork some more general conclusions on the kind of space the thesis wants to address. What we propose is to treat the chosen artwork as evidence to reconstruct and discuss a wider condition: namely, the form of life that the architectural project will construct, or criticize.

In the second term, we will put forward an architectural project that, starting from the room, will try and propose an alternative for the chosen city without resorting to the traditional design categories of apartment-object-masterplan.

The third term will be devoted to the actual conclusions of the thesis, namely the representation and discussion of the form of life itself through drawings, images, models, and detailed technical solutions.

The construction of an argument will be at the core of the thesis work; however, this year we believe the argument should not only be rooted in a historical and typological analysis, but also on the understanding of the actual subject the project addresses. By subject we mean the inhabitants, but also their very form of life: their culture, their habits (or lack thereof), their way of seeing the world. Beyond the actual architectural project, the form of life implied by the thesis should also be explored through the means of representation, and of a technical and tectonic development of the proposal. While this is compulsory for 5th year studies handing in a Technical Studies report, we encourage the whole unit to consider the way architecture is *made* as a quintessential expression of the ethos of the project.

As usual, while the theses will be developed as highly individual proposals, we hope the group will collaborate throughout the year sharing resources and working together.

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