

Culture of living

The concept of private living, living in general and the culture of living, its transgressions and possible future cultures of living.

In 1907 Adolf Loos organised so-called 'flat hikes' in Vienna. Those interested could purchase a ticket for two persons, valid on two 'hiking days' days for 20 crowns in the shop Goldmann & Salatsch at Graben or the shop of the artificial flower factory Steiner in the Kärtnerstraße in the city centre. The fact that one had to pay for a ticket should protect the owners of the flats from too many visitors and the money was used for specific good causes stipulated by the buyers themselves. The tours comprised almost exclusively private flats and on two consecutive days you could see some of the Viennese interiors redesigned and equipped by Loos within eight years. Loos was convinced of a 'culture of living' and he described it as precisely as the culture of dining, wearing clothes and shoes, of furniture and of craft. A 'proper' culture of living could be learned and the 'flat hikes' among other things should serve to do so. Loos published a small catalogue including brief descriptions of all projects visitors could see on the two days. All the flats that could be visited were listed with their precise address, the floor, sometimes there was the special remark 'no lift' as well as an indication of the most conspicuously equipped rooms with the respective materials and furniture. Listing these exquisitely equipped room is not only proof of Adolf Loos' art of furnishing but also of an exquisite lifestyle, an art of living and an unrestricted desire for an equally unrestricted culture of living: anteroom, visitors room, music room, dining room, fireplace room, bedroom, studio, wall coverings made of leather, mahogany, onyx and Japanese wallpaper , tables to eat, desks to read, to smoke or to play, chairs to relax, to work, to debate etc. The arrangement of the rooms, the furniture as well as the materials are proof of an aesthetic culture of living and life of the Viennese middle classes shortly after the turn of the century. They kept new surfaces and materials but were still rooted in the way of living of the 19th century.¹

How does such a 'culture of living' change? Cultures are always connected with the place where they come into existence or where they are rooted in. They emerge with the first forms of bourgeois living and are passed on throughout centuries, refined

¹ Loos, Adolf: Wohnungswanderungen. In: Opel, Adolf, Ed.: Die Potemkinsche Stadt. Verschollene Schriften 1897-1933. Georg Prachner, Wien 1997.

and finally consolidated as cultural heritage. Walter Benjamin, for instance, describes the interior of bourgeois living in Paris at the end of the 19th century as the prototype of introverted living. This entangled inside covered with excessive decorating: a cave that only accepted the outside of public life insofar as it hovers like a cocoon and insignificant like smoke in space without really occupying it.² In Paris just like in Berlin or Vienna the interior of the later 19th century consisting of uncountable parts of furnishings disguised in styles of all past epochs, self-contained, concealed and filled, has been a prototype of the concept of private living and a culture of living until today. But where is the boundary to Benjamin's 'world affairs'? Where does the glance you cast on the private cross the line of frivolity? Where does the look start to be public? Doesn't a changed 'culture of living' automatically call for changed boundaries between private and public life? Doesn't change need the infiltration with the outside?

The private is a relative idea and so privacy is an equally relative and elastic term. Looking for an etymological explanation, you find that the term 'private' was borrowed from Latin in the 16th century. In Latin the original meaning of 'privare' was to rob and to free: The characteristic 'privatus' referred to something authority or supremacy was deprived of, something isolated from the state and the public, detached, alone, peculiar or deprived of a thing. These explanations illustrate that the concept of personal, individual and unobserved was preceded by a violent act of liberation. At the beginning of individual living the concept of the private was much more important than we guess nowadays in our everyday usage as the characteristic private referred to all that was successfully put out of reach of the state or the church. From then on private describes all that is personal, confidential, not official, secret, secluded or not public, that belongs more or less to a single person and not to the state. Despite all relativity privacy is still linked with a universal value. The wish to realise privacy has existed almost invariably and independently of cultural signs since the beginnings of bourgeois living in the 16th and 17th century of western culture. It is the synonym of individuality, subjectivity and representation and it is realised by excluding all that immediately becomes something 'else' when it is excluded from the 'own'. This creating of the 'other' is an equally relative concept which asserts itself as firmly as all that included. You always have to define the other to assert the own. By

² Benjamin, Walter: Das Passagen-Werk. First volume. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1982.

forming this other you find what strategically links all concepts of privacy despite all relativity.

The idea of the private is not only linked with a universal value; private life, privacy, and the demarcation of a private home of public control stand for a universal model of western culture that at the same time refers to a universal and collective desire, the desire for uniqueness among a mass of sameness and the collective desire to possess nobody can take from you: your our four walls. This universal model is based on a paradigm forming the foundation of every architectural concept since antiquity – the paradigm of the divided space. It divides space into a hierarchically more highly valued space of public life and a secondary space of private living, in a space of work and relaxation, in a space of productivity and reproduction, in an inside and outside, in culture and nature. All architectural concepts are based on the existence of two parts of space, in which one part continuously has to demarcate itself from the other one. Specific strategies of exclusion and demarcation employed by architecture translate this divided space into prototypical concepts of private living: thick walls or at least walls pretending to be thick to keep the outside away from the inside, fences to demarcate the private from the public and limited openings which can be varied and closed, only letting certain information in from outside and filtering it so long until it can be part of the private without any complications. Differentiating between two parts of space also implies differentiating between male and female space. As soon as architecture realises the common model of divided space which splits space into public and private, into systematic and chaotic, productive and reproductive, architecture also produces and reproduces common models of the relations between the sexes and common models of difference, of roles, of attributions and sexual identity. With the concept and the construction of private living architecture produces sex and sexual differences. Also what is understood by a 'culture of living' has mostly to do with handed down ideas of sex and sexual roles. The concept of private living only very rarely includes criticism of common models; on the contrary, architectural concepts mostly reinforce and form common models and so the common value systems and power structures. The inside of living as well as the organization and decoration of the interior surface of the private flat has always been linked with the feminine whereas the construction and the structure of space, public visibility and presence has always been linked with the

masculine. Separating the public from the private has always been linked with traditional sex-specific attributions seeing women's position in reproductive work and in private, men's position however in the outside, the public and in productive work. On the other hand you can assume that the space of private living can never be neutral and the practice of private living can never be a neutral practice. On the contrary, all ideas of differences between the sexes are already firmly implied in the image of living, already in the idea, the concept, the memory and the projection of living.

What kind of changes does the universal concept of the private experience now? How is a changed culture of living defined? What do the media and the private access to networks enable? Do they only change the boundaries or also what grows within these boundaries?

At times when the public had to maintain itself with a massive presence of monumental typologies, defining the private seemed simple as well. The private simply defined itself by being different to the public. What we nowadays understand as 'private', like depictions of Dutch interiors of the 17th century or of villas of the 19th century for instance, has always been interspersed by the public. Also the media has always been represented in the private. Jan Vermeer's paintings of the early 17th century for example, show people in their private family life almost exclusively at the window, at the interface between private living space and the street. There is always light falling through the window into the inside, often the window is open and the people look frankly and directly outside. In many of these paintings a further 'opening' verifies the infiltration of the private with the public. It is maps decorating the walls next to the windows instead of pictorial motives. They are proof of the open spirit of the people living there and of the imaginary contact with faraway countries. Maps can focus the gaze, for example when you look for a certain point, but they can also let the gaze wander like screens you look at without having to look at particular objects. You look out of the window when you want to see the real outside.

On the other hand private living has not always been clearly divided from the public and interfaces between private and public have not always been set along material limitations but along dividing lines constructed by society. If you look at the history of architecture you see that the boundary between the private and the public was seldom to be found at the outer layer of the wall, but either often in the inside of

the house itself or outside far in front of the building. In the house of the 19th century the boundary between the private and the public was not to be found along the outer limit of the house but along a fictitious but precisely defined line between the anteroom, the man's room and the drawing room, including all these rooms as mainly public, and finishing with the lady's room which was almost entirely seen as private. In American houses however the boundary between the private and the public has not been set along the outer limit of the house, which is by far not as massive as in Europe, but along a hardly accentuated but still commonly accepted line between private lawn and street; a line along which no hedges are planted like in Europe but which is free and visible and where electronic surveillance or signs like 'strictly private' keep unauthorized persons from stepping over it.³

Although the wish for privacy is respected in almost all western cultures, the boundary between private and public and the degree of the public accepted within the private varies from culture to culture. In rural areas it is usual for strangers to go freely at least as far as the kitchen of private houses whereas in cities a number of layers between public and private space have been introduced to put off contact between strangers and the private as far as possible. In cities however it is far easier to look at private rooms. In the Netherlands there has been a long tradition of private rooms that can easily be looked into due to the history of commercial enterprises and the small space to lighten the narrow pieces of land. Until now you can often not only look into but also sometimes look through the big, totally glazed living rooms of Dutch residential buildings often bordering on a public path or the channels.⁴

This universal model of private living has been incredibly permanent in spite of all changes in style, revolutions and cultural differences and characteristics. Most concepts of living have been using the same model of conventional privacy that has been put into practice by architecture throughout centuries. Until now a series of different rooms are joined together in a graduation of public, representative, informal,

³ In a paper on the 'American Lawn' Elizabeth Diller & Ricardo Scofidio refer to the fictitiousness of the 'boundary of the house' and the brutality of the boundaries of 'private properties' with which a piece of land tries to mark itself off the next without materially constructing this boundary. It becomes obvious through gradual differences in the length of the blades of grass of the lawn, the way the lawn is mown or the colour of the lawn created by artificial fertilizers. In: Georges Teysot, Ed.; *The American Lawn*. Princeton Architectural Press, New York 1999.

⁴ Two plots of land on the recently finished peninsula in front of Amsterdam, Borneo-Sporenburg, built on by the Rotterdam company MVRDV, drastically illustrate this different concept of the private in the Netherlands: both of the three-storey townhouses divide the narrow plot of land once again in half in order to divide the private – the intimate – space in half again and to maximise the 'public', in this case the common space, that seems flooded with publicity.

private and intimate corresponding to the generally accepted and demanded idea of 'privacy'. In almost all private houses the formal, representative rooms like living or dining room as well as the kitchen are near the entrance to quickly provide for family and friends. The intimate individual rooms like the bedroom, the rooms used for washing oneself, for regeneration and sexuality are almost always in the part of privacy farthest away from the public so that the representative picture of the public is not contaminated by the emotions and the sensuality of intimate processes. By projecting and realising the private, architecture has normally been reproducing the traditional, conventional and common picture of privacy that has hardly changed since the middle of the 19th century except some peculiarities in fashion or style. It achieves the rigorous demarcation of all that is outside the private, the exclusion of all that is strange, an equally rigorous separation of the private in intimate, private and representative as well as the maintenance of the intact, 'public' picture of privacy in its common emblems like flower or picture windows, doormats, lawns, curtains, garden gnomes, mailboxes, blinds, garage, pets, nameplates, addresses etc.

The question to be asked is not the one about changes in private living or changes in the culture of living, but rather about changes in the public. When public space and experiences in the public are continuously disappearing, is there only privacy left? When it is not necessary any more to leave the house, does only the house exist? How do we use the concepts house and home? Whereas public place is steadily declining at the moment, the degree of privacy of living has been steadily increased in the course of time. The house of the middle ages was actually a public house, for instance. The close family did not only use it to sleep and eat, but there was enough space for the entire extended family together with a large number of guests. Besides the house served as trading centre, warehouse and workshop at the same time; the rooms were multifunctional and had both intimate and public functions. The medieval economy of the city made the wall to the street transparent, according to Sennet.⁵ He describes that residential buildings in medieval Paris had weird constructions shaped like wooden shutters you could turn down so that they served as counters. Within the next centuries this private space was continuously enlarged until the family completely withdrew from the public to the private in the 19th century.

⁵ Sennet, Richard: *Fleisch und Stein. Der Körper und die Stadt in der westlichen Zivilisation*. Berlin-Verlag, Berlin 1995.

Mixing 'private' and 'public' has always taken place. It began when houses were equipped with electricity and subsequently with electrical devices which also enabled new forms of communication: radio, telephone, TV, fax, computer, email, cell phone, video surveillance and webcams as well as new forms of transparency through new materials and constructions on the one hand transported public spaces and incidents to the inmost space of the private and on the other hand exposed the most intimate bodily functions that are satisfied in private to the curious looks of the public.

In 1927 for instance, Ernst May planned in the housing estate Bruchfeldstraße in Frankfurt not only exemplary communal facilities like playgrounds, washing facilities, a ward etc. to enable direct communication among the inhabitants, he also installed fixed radio connections in each of these flats. Beside generous glazings and sunroofs oriented towards the common green spaces that presented the private body in public, the radio guaranteed the provision with more or less common programs and a higher degree of publicity inside the flats. New constructions of reinforced concrete as well as new technologies allowed to open the flats over huge panes of glass and to extend them over boldly towering balconies; the inmost part of the flat began to constructively turn itself inside out whereas at the same time the outside in the shape of the media and of public control maintains itself in the inmost part of the private.

At the end of the 40s William Levitt planned one of the first big suburban housing estates using prefabricated houses advertised with two catchwords. On the one hand it was the price of about \$9000 making the house attractive for lower classes as well, on the other hand it was the slogan 'TV-equipped' making the reasonably priced houses, which should become prototypical of almost all American suburbs, that popular. Planned as inexpensive houses for soldiers who had just returned from the war and their families they included access to public TV stations and an installed TV set. The device was installed in the living room wall of the so-called 'Cape Cod' house. The TV set in the fitted wall and a big window appearing like a screen should serve as synonyms for modern privacy for a long time; they were

also a model in the Europe of the 50s. Later the so-called 'picture window' enabling to look from the street into the well-ordered private was added.⁶

Private living itself however can also become a medium in order to spread prototypical architecture and prototypical living. The best example of this were the construction exhibitions of the 20s and 30s in Germany which should above all answer the question 'How do you live properly?'. Like never before privacy was freed of all individuality so that it could be standardised, exhibited and public. One of the most important exhibitions of the 'new living' of the modern age in Berlin in 1931 defined not only the new architecture of this private way of living but also the new inhabitants of the 'flat of our time', the motto of this exhibition: a 'house for a childless couple' by Mies van der Rohe, a 'house for the sportsman' by Marcel Breuer, a 'bungalow' by Lilly Reich etc. They also defined the inhabitants of this future way of living: Those would be sporty, single and childless and their new way of living would be spread horizontally. The reason for this was obvious; only if living took place on one level, on the 'public level' of the ground floor, it could not escape to secluded and limited areas of private individuality and comfort. The vertical opening of the houses, the horizontal liberation of the ground plan and the spreading on one single level reduced the amount of privacy and brought as much publicity as possible to the living.

At the beginning of the 20th century only few architects broke through this paradigm of a functionalistic ground plan on one single level split into single rooms. At the end of the 20s Adolf Loos' villas started to break open the strict separation that had characterized his early renovations. With his 'Raumplan' he let private living develop itself as a continuum between functionally related rooms: The entrance hall opens to the music room, the drawing room is only separated by columns from the dining room and with the help of platforms stairs get a new function as living space. In these houses moving along different staircases starts becoming the central element of living. The House Moller in Vienna, constructed between 1927 and 1928, clearly shows this movement within the private: Between the entrance and living room there are four different levels which are increased to a dramatic of spatial

⁶ At the beginning of the 50s already two thirds of all American families bought a TV set, furnished their suburban homes according to furniture magazines and installed TV, picture window and fireplace in their living rooms.

sequences by visual contacts. Arriving at the last corner of the living room the inhabitants revolve around for the last time in order to take a seat in the elevated oriel and to look through a succession of props, wall parts, joists, niches and edges back to a complex spatial structure.

In the late modern age Friedrich Kiesler multiplied the spatial radicalism within private living with which Loos experimented in his late villas. Over decades he tried to approach a spatial variety of living he could only circumscribe with 'infinity'. In models, drawings, sketches, fragments of models, collages, exhibition architecture and installations he followed this principle of an infinite and convoluted form of an 'infinite house'. With the concept of 'correlation' the limits of architecture and all related disciplines as well as spatial limits should be nullified. Whereas Loos in fact did not change much of the culture of living of the 19th century, Kiesler's spatial experiment was linked with a radical social experiment. Kiesler's conceptions of a culture of living in the infinite house was one of a communicative model in which several generations should openly live together. The continuity of space should also lead to a continuity of social contacts, foster communication and create common interest. At a time when architects of the late modern age considered functionalism and maximal economy crucial for living, Kiesler's demand for a model for several generations, which was locked up more or less like in a cave, was against all features of the modern postwar culture of living. A dark cage instead of glass cubes flooded with light, rough walls instead of smooth, hygienic surfaces and an open kitchen-living room instead of small, functionalistic kitchens. According to Kiesler, the spherical shape of the infinite house would derive from 'the social dynamics of two or three generations' living under the same roof. The answer to both the early and the late modern age was back to the extended family in which more generations lived together under one roof.⁷

Maybe we cannot really speak of a 'new culture of living', but the individual functions of living and working, of recreation and public life are starting to mix both in time and space, similarly like Kiesler anticipated it within the 'infinite house'. Working hours are getting more and more flexible, the workplace can be set up independently

⁷ The first, small model of an infinite house was created in 1950. Also Kiesler refers to the metaphoric and analogy of death, birth and living. In the infinite house all final points would 'meet again and again' (Kiesler, p. 136), it is 'infinite like the human body' without a beginning or an end.

of the company head office and branches and spare time is not limited to fixed times like the weekend, but is getting freely available, flexible and more demanding at the same time. So 'living' is playing a new role both socially and spatially and both conditions and requirements such a kind of living has to meet are different than in the past. More and more project and freelance work as well as teamwork over a short period of time achieve that spatial structures can not be created for living alone, but have to offer manifold, complex ways of using them. Living space itself has only little been changed by information technology but it has changed the way living space is used and so also the culture of this use – the culture of living. It is as if architects of private living would lag behind the technological developments. What do future spatial structures that make spatial networks possible look like? If really all boundaries between working and living, between public and private dissolve, the question how architecture reacts to this has to be asked. What do structures for gradual transitions not only between public and private, between the inside and the outside, but also between the countless number of possible cultures of living look like?