my house

Kissing doorhandles and making love to strange corners
in an attempt to describe intimate experience

by Meis Vranken

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Description of the front of the front door, May 12, 2020.
Place of writing: in front of the front door.
We are standing in front of a door.
What we see:
- in front of us: a wooden door, white
- on the left: a lamp on the wall
- under the lamp: a plastic white square, about 10 centimetres across, with black numbers that say: 5 7
- on the right: a big window
- through the window: a kitchen
- next to the window: a corner
- behind us: a concrete wall of about a metre high
- behind the concrete wall: the street and a parking lot, 7 metres beneath us.
- on the other side of the street: a big grey building. It houses people with no house.
- in the air: a few crows and a pigeon - a light blue plastic bag floating.
- in the distance: water
- very close to us: 8 other white doors
- next to the 8 doors: 8 windows
- through the 8 windows: 8 kitchens
- a black doorbell with a white button

In a few seconds, we will enter the door in front of us. Behind the door is my house.

Description of the front of my front door, October 15, 2020
Place of writing: at Max's living room table.

The gallery that leads towards my front door is grey and very dirty. My front door is all the way at the end, so before I reach it, I pass eight other front doors and kitchen windows. A lot of the windows are very dirty with a kind of black grease. The apartment building is situated right next to the highway that encircles the city, which is why the windows become dirty very quickly. Some people have given up washing their windows altogether, which makes it look as if their houses aren't lived in. This also has the benefit that passers-by (like me) can't peek into their kitchens.

I love peeking into my neighbours' kitchens. I heard from some people that it is a typically Dutch thing to have no curtains. If this is true, then I'm happy that I live in this country! I can barely think of a nicer occupation than looking into other people's kitchens - especially those of people that have arranged everything very differently, which is the case with my neighbours. For example: one has a lot of plants standing in the sink, but no food supplies, cutlery or pans in sight. Does this person only need water, like the plants? Another kitchen is always covered with breadcrumbs and many stains of all sorts and sizes. There are always at least three dirty knives laying around on the kitchen counter, often covered with peanut butter, Nutella, or ketchup. Then there is one neighbour who always seems to be cooking, even in the middle of the night: the window is permanently covered with steam, and strange smells drift through the gallery day and night. In our apartment-block, all our kitchens are the same, construction-wise. This makes it extra nice to peek through the windows: it feels like looking at my own life, lived by a different person.

I have lived in six houses in my life. Four of them with my parents, one with three housemates, and one, where I'm living now, alone.
When I think of the past houses, they all seem to have a slightly different meaning for me. Two were very temporary: playful places that did not involve long-term choices; in my memories they have about them an atmosphere of transition. Another is filled with memories of early student life, with just one room to fit my things in; the rest of the house the constant battlefront of a war between dirty and clean housemates.
Of those six houses, the first has a very special position: it is the house where I was born, and lived the first eleven years of my life. Its smells, sounds, and spaces seem engraved in my memory. The feeling of the doorhandles, the sound of the flushing of the toilet, the smell of the garden shed are with me always, like a big archetype of what a house should be.
As a kid I was horrified by the idea of moving to a different house - how could it ever be possible to leave my only world behind? But when the time came, I was excited - eager to start afresh. Before we closed the door behind us for the last time, I remember writing a farewell letter to the house - I hid it somewhere between the beams of a built-in closet in my old bedroom.
When I was eighteen, I visited the house again. It was shocking. It felt like a different house, as if they had torn the old house down and built a new, similar house in the same spot. The spaces that had been huge and glorious in my memory suddenly turned out to be very small and a bit dark. Even though the new owners had kept a lot of things the same, it smelled strange and unfamiliar. Two hyperactive, unknown children were ravaging around, bumping their toy cars against those precious walls, destroying my memories in front of my eyes. Where did the house go? The kitchen sink - that I had bathed in as a baby, that I had brushed my teeth in for the first time as a four-year-old - was still there, and yet it was not there at all. My body had grown too much, and the house had been absent and unable to grow along. The house, that I had assumed would remain steady and constant during my years of absence, had vanished. It had only existed in my mind - a child's house, seen from the height and perspective of a child, with big mighty parents carrying out the daily routines like gods.
There is a fundamental difference between the houses we live in, and the houses that live in our memories. As Merleau-Ponty describes it, we have a very specific psycho-physical connection with our houses, that can be broken simply by being physically absent.

"[My apartment] remains a familiar domain round about me only as long as I still have 'in my hands' or 'in my legs' the main distances and directions involved, and as long as from my body intentional threads run out towards it." [1]

What is the meaning of these left-behind houses? They guided my life, held my body for years, and then moved to the domain of memories, atmospheres, time periods. Together, they form a group of images that I carry around everywhere I go. Like a mental house, they give me an idea of "home". Along with the things in my moving boxes, they enter and shape every new house I start to inhabit.

Apart from the memories of my own houses, there are more images of safety that have joined the collection. For example, some houses of friends have irreversibly taken up a space in my heart: Ilona's house, filled with more things than even my own, has a terribly calming effect on me - I can sit on her couch for hours just looking around, smiling foolishly;

[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* p. 150

or Iris's house, a place covered in colourful textiles and a huge number of books, that reminds me of the early morning after a sleepover party; or Paulien's houses, bright and spacious like little personal churches, with in the corners a constant buzz, the little sprout of a new project; and not to forget Ignas' bed, a place to talk with friends, smelling completely like him - a real birds' nest.
And then there are the houses that I have dreamt about, houses of people that I have seen in documentaries or interviews, or pictures of houses that I saw on the internet. For example, I often dream about the house of Maarten Biesheuvel, a Dutch writer. It is a bright green wooden house with a garden, named *Sunny Home.* In photos, we see a beautiful wooden interior, with many pictures on the walls and tablecloths everywhere. In the house are always many cats, dogs and goats. In my mind, it is the kind of house I would like to live in when I'm old.
According to Gaston Bachelard, these houses are not just nice places, they are also very important in affecting our ways of giving value to things, our image of intimacy:

"Transcending our memories of all the houses in which we have found shelter, above and beyond all the houses we have dreamed we lived in, can we isolate an intimate, concrete essence that would be a justification of the uncommon value of all of our images of protected intimacy?"[2]

I have taken up the idea of writing about my house because I feel like there is a certain kind of truth hidden in these images of domestic life. We are often so used to our houses, that we don't look at them very closely. Yet, they are our primary environments, they shape our days and dreams, they hold us when we sleep, catapult us from our bed into the day, and bring us back to bed at the end of it. In the same way, they guide us through life and death. I think it is not a coincidence that people with a lot of money often buy more houses - little holiday homes, a summer and a winter house, and more, and more. It is almost a way to create more life, live multiple lives in one life, every new home creating a new way of living, a new daily rhythm and atmosphere. Does the excitement of daily life simply increase when there are more spaces to be called home? Or is it something more delicate, less quantifiable?

I am very thankful for my house. It holds my life, and reflects life back to me. I want to learn from it. I want to observe it's background, it's nooks and corners. I want to find out what it has started to mean for me, and why. This is an attempt to describe my house to you, in all its depth and frivolity and nuance, an attempt to attribute it the meaning I think it deserves.

[2] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* p. 76

Methodology

Er is alles in de wereld het is alles
de dolle hondenglimlach van de honger
de heksenangsten van de pijn en
de grote gier en zucht de grote
oude zware nachtegalen
het is alles in de wereld er is alles

allen die zonder licht leven
de in ijzeren longen gevangen libellen
hebben van hard stenen horloges
de kracht en de snelheid

binnen het gebroken papier van de macht
gaapt onder de verdwaalde kogel van de vrede
gaapt voor de kortzichtige kogel van de oorlog
de leeggestolen schedel
de erosie

er is alles in de wereld het is alles
arm en smal en langzaam geboren
slaapwandelaars in een koud circus alles
is in de wereld het is alles
slaap

Everything is in the world it is everything
the mad dog's smile of hunger
the witch-fears of pain and
the great vulture and sigh the great
old heavy nightingales
it is everything in the world there is everything

all who live without light
dragonflies trapped in iron lungs
have the force and speed
of hard stone watches

inside the broken paper of power
yawns under the lost bullet of peace
yawns under the purblind bullet of war
the ransacked skull
erosion

there is everything in the world it is everything
poor and narrow and slowly born
sleepwalkers in a cold circus everything
is in the world it is everything
sleep

[3]

"Everything is in the world. It is everything." This poem by Dutch poet and artist, Lucebert (1924-1994), is one way to show all the things that exist in the world. I would say it shows especially the horrible things, things I am very afraid of: to live a life without light, in hunger and pain. But it also shows a more overarching fear: a fear of chaos. There are so many things in the world, it is too much to grasp! And at the same time there is nothing more, no overarching power that tells me which of the things are most important. How to give meaning to all these things that exist in the world?

"Although we live in a physical environment, we create cultural environments within them. We continually personalize and humanize the given environment as a way of both adapting to it and creating order and significance." [4]

According to Csikszentimihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, the house creates order and significance in the chaos of life. In a way, the house is a little version of the world. Only so many things can be in it. This creates a possibility to select things, to curate the amount of chaos and order allowed in the direct environment. The house also make space for emptiness and doubt, for rearranging and overthinking.

This thesis is a little version of the house. It demands a similar treatment: one needs to select and structure all the things related to the house, that one *could* write about the house. In the end, only so many things can be kept in. This chapter covers the curation behind the thesis, the thoughts, definitions, ideas, and methods that come shimmering through from under the surface of black text.

[3] Lucebert, *er is alles in de wereld het is alles,* Apocrief/De analphabetische naam, p. 65
[4] Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi & Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The meaning of things,* p. 122

The principles that shape the thesis are summarized by the parameters. They are the guidelines that hide behind the writing like walls, doors and windows. Just like the endless possible ways of dividing a house, there are also endless possible ways of structuring a text about the house. To prevent myself from constantly falling into the pothole of infinite indecisiveness, the parameters will help me to make choices. So, what underlying subjects of primary importance can be distilled from the big well of chaotic ideas?

First of all, *phenomenology* is a subject that should be addressed here. Phenomenology is a philosophical method that focuses on the world primarily as we perceive it. The starting point of phenomenology, and the starting point of my thesis, is that a specific type of reliable truth can be found in everyday experiences. One way to describe this principle could be:

"The closest to all things stands the power that shapes them; extremely close to us the most important laws are constantly being executed." [5]

According to this idea, the powers that shape *us* are to be found in the things that are very close to us, that surround us every day - and what is closer to us than our direct living environments, in my case, my house?

My house is shaping me. This shaping happens through experience. It is the lay-out of the house - the softness of the walls, the smell of the kitchen - that constantly influences my way of being in the world: the arrangement of furniture dictates what movements my body can make through space; the presence or absence of windows makes me want to wear clothes or forget about them; the presence of plants and the absence of touchscreens make my thoughts wander more often in the direction of photosynthesis, and less often towards internet culture and mass media. The daily repetition of these experiences creates habits and signs: things that don't feel separate from myself. My house starts to stick to my consciousness:
"...it is more difficult to admit that the things one uses are in fact part of one's self; not in any mystical or metaphorical sense but in cold, concrete actuality. My old living-room chair with its worn velvet fabric, musty smell, creaking springs, and warm support has often shaped signs in my awareness. These signs are part of what organizes my consciousness, and because my self is inseparable from the sign process that constitutes consciousness, that chair is as much a part of my self as anything can possibly be." [6]

At the same time, my own presence and attention are necessary for the house to have this influence on me. And presence and attention are fluid, directable things: through them, I have agency over the house and my own behaviour. I can change things, experiment, do things differently, paint walls in different colours, throw things away. This makes living in a house into a dynamic construction of mutual influence. As Merleau-Ponty put it:
"(...) My acquired thoughts are not a final gain, they continually draw their sustenance from my present thought, they offer me a meaning, but I give it back to them." [7]
The house offers me meaning, and I give it meaning in return by living in it. Living in a house is like a lively dance: sometimes it is tiring, rough and boring, and then can suddenly become

[5] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 152
[6] Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi & Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The meaning of things,* p. 14-15
[7] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* p. 150

intimate and safe. The dance can be uninspired, consisting out of the same robotic movements, executed without thought, or while thinking about something else, driven by the automatisms of habit. But sometimes the dance is passionate and expressive, the house and me like two partners that are completely attuned to one another.
I think this dance is something that can be trained and shaped by giving it attention, by consciously tracing back the movements that went wrong, and by understanding the symbolic meaning that these actions can carry.

Parameter 1:
My house is the place where I live from. It is my nest. It contains things that remind me of truths I have furnished myself with. Some of these truths are dusty and heavy. Some of them are in development, written in pencil, with question marks behind them. My house represents the way I structure my life. It is also the place where, through attention, I can begin to change this structure.

One way to give this transitional attention to the house is by trying to describe my experience of it. For this, I used the concept of *phenomenological description*.
From the book *The Phenomenological movement: a historical introduction*, by Herbert Spiegelberg, an idea of phenomenological description arises: it is a description that takes experience as a starting point, and tries to describe these experiences without interpretation: *"Phenomenology begins in silence. Only he who has experienced genuine perplexity and frustration in the face of the phenomena when trying to find the proper description for them knows what phenomenological seeing really means. Rushing into descriptions before having made sure of the thing to be described may even be called one of the main pitfalls of phenomenology."* [8]
This shows us one way of looking at phenomenological description, one I would call 'narrow phenomenological description'. *Narrow*, because it tries to make an objective description of a subjective experience. I could try to describe my experience of the hallway, for example, in an objective way. I would thus try to look at it through "neutral" eyes, without focussing on some things more than others, as though I had no preferences. Of course, this could only ever be an attempt, because I could never completely erase the preconditions within myself that guide my focus.
I define narrow phenomenological description as: *an attempt to write down my experience objectively.* This almost painfully detailed exercise of attention trains my eyes, sharpens my pen: it shows me how selective my attention usually is, how importance is not attached to things in equal amounts. More than writing it for another person, I would be writing this narrow description for myself, as a way to get to know the house better, to give it special attention, and to find out how much I have gotten used to it. A certain knowledge can be gained there, knowledge about my daily way of looking at the house, that I may not be aware of.
Then there is also a 'wider' phenomenological description: it is an attempt to describe my subjective experience in a *subjective* way, to consciously evaluate how the house *feels*. This kind of description also opens up the "human" side of the space: it makes it possible for others to empathise with how I experience the house. This is the phenomenological concept

[8] Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: a historical introduction,* p. 693

of *intersubjectivity*, meaning that people always have their own subjective experience of the world, but by describing one's own experience to another person, a mutual understanding between subjects can start to flow.

Parameter 2:
1: If I look at my house, I look at my own way of living.
2: If I look at my house closely, I might learn things about it.
3: If I learn things about my house, I learn things about my life.
4: If I learn new things about my house and my life, I might look differently at my house and my life.
5: If I change my views on my house and my life, I might want to change some things about my house and my life.
6: If I decide to change something in my house, it will change the way I live in my house. As a consequence, my life will change.
7: After this change, there will be some new things to be looked at.
[repeat procedure]
→ Conclusion: By looking closely at my house, I might be able to establish a very dynamic way of living. One way of looking closely at my house, is by describing it. This description also has the quality of communicating my subjective experience to others.

Someone who did a lot of experiments with phenomenological description is the French writer Georges Perec. This is an explanation of one of those experiments:

"In 1969, I chose, in Paris, twelve places (streets, squares, circuses, an arcade), where I had either lived or else was attached to by particular memories.
I have undertaken to write a description of two of these places each month. One of these descriptions is written on the spot and is meant to be as neutral as possible. Sitting in a café or walking in the street, notebook and pen in hand, I do my best to describe the houses, the shops and the people that I come across, the posters, and in a general way, all the details that attract my eye. The other description is written somewhere other than the place itself. I then do my best to describe it from memory, to evoke all the memories that come to me concerning it, whether events that have taken place there, or people I have met there. Once these descriptions are finished, I slip them into an envelope that I seal with wax. On several occasions, I have got a man or woman photographer friend to go with me to the places I was describing who, either freely, or as indicated by me, took photographs that I then slipped, without looking at them (with a single exception), into the corresponding envelopes. I have also had occasion to slip into these envelopes various items capable later on of serving as evidence: Metro tickets, for example, of bar slips, or cinema tickets, or handouts, etc." [9]

[9] Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces,* p. 55

I can imagine that, were I to read Perec's descriptions, the first would be very familiar to me as a reader, because I have also been to such places. Admittedly, I might be surprised by certain details in his observations, details I never bother to pay attention to myself. The second description, though, would be very different: it would give me specific insight into the kind of life a man called Georges Perec lived, a life that could be very different from mine. Though, again, I would most certainly recognize a lot too - we probably share feelings of sadness, joy, melancholy. Those two ways of describing, when combined, would then create a very clear image of the places themselves, and the life lived in them.

Parameter 3:
By describing the process of looking closely at my house, I might be able to attend to it in a very focused way. If I share my observations with others, it might help them to develop their own way of living. The more detailed and personal my descriptions are, the easier it will be for them to understand me. If, as a consequence, others offer me their descriptions, they will enlarge my reservoir of knowledge of ways of living in a house. This knowledge may again inspire me to start looking closely at some aspects of my own house, aspects I might not have considered before.
In this way, the act of describing looking closely at my house will improve my relationship with my house, my way of living, and others.

In this thesis, I will use description-experiments similar to Perec's. Yet, where his "wide" version of description is mainly based on memories, I will also try to describe my dreams, thoughts and fantasies. I believe they are an important part of the subjective experience of a house, and key factors in imagining the house differently.

Parameter 4:
In my house, I am free to dream about all kinds of things. Some of those dreams show:

1. something about the way I look at my house and life
2. an alternative way of looking at my house and life

By describing these fantasies, I might be able to both understand my house better and imagine it differently.

The two versions of phenomenological description will provide me with a way to reflect on my house and myself inside of it. Yet, there is a lot to be learned from other sources that can also inspire and inform the 'house-dance'.[10]
Throughout the thesis, I will take the freedom to be inspired and helped by others. These "others" are often people: friends, writers, singers, philosophers, artists, though they are also embodied by more abstract entities, most importantly "time" in the shape of history.

[10] Here I mean the house-dance that I'm talking about around the top of page 6.

Parameter 5:
Since many people and beings have been living in houses for a very long time, I can also use their experiences to:

1. imagine their way of living, and use it as an inspiration for my way of living
2. get a better understanding of the historical and cultural facts that influence my house and my way of living
3. try to understand their philosophical theories about houses and see if they can enrich the way I look at my house

These are the principles along which I will organize the thesis.

How to go inside of the house

Opt. No. 1:
Take the door handle. Press it in a vertical manner. Press the door in a horizontal manner. If you look down, you will see a threshold. Step over it with both of your feet. Turn around. Close the door behind you.

Opt. No. 2:
Take a hammer from your backpack. Break the kitchen window. Chisel away the dangerous pieces of glass. Step through the hole onto the old-fashioned chair. Take a garbage bag from the kitchen drawer. There is duct tape in one of the plastic boxes in the corridor. Cover the broken window with the garbage bag.

Opt. No. 3:
Go to the dry cleaners. Iron yourself until you are flat. Then, lightly float on the wind, until you reach the post office. Put yourself in a love letter. Ask a lover to slide you through the crack under the front door.

The Hallway

Piak (8): "What if the world is actually a big hall?"
Jonathan (12): "Of course it isn't, idiot! Then it would echo when you speak!"

Jiak (88): "What if the hall is actually a big world?"
Ponathan (122): "Of course it isn't, idiot! Then there would be a large group of well-paid scientists studying it!"[11]

The hallway is very small. When I enter it from outside, the white coat rack is on my left. There used to be a lot of coats hanging there. Every time one would enter or leave the house, at least one coat would drop to the floor. Especially the purple fluffy one, that would always stick out a bit more than the others. After complaints I decided to move some of the coats further into the house, because I never wear all my coats at once.
Under the coat rack stands the shoe rack. The shoes that are closest to the door are the ones that I hardly ever wear.
On the right, there is a milky window that functions as a partition wall with the kitchen. In the faint blurs on the other side, one might distinguish: a table, a chair, a hanging plant.
In front of you, about one arm-length away, there is a white door.
The ceiling here is quite low.

The hallway is the place where one enters the house. The front door is the border between inside and outside. Like a water lock, the hallway is a space dedicated to the procedure of *going in* and *going out*. Coming from outside, it is a space where I let down my physical

[11] Based on an overheard conversation between Jonathan and Piak, somewhere on the beach of Callantsoog.

defence: I take off the shoes that protect me from the cold, wet street, and I take off the jacket that protects me from the weather. It is symbolic of the way I see my house: this is a space where I can be naked, where no one is watching me. It is a space where the floor is soft and sweet and treats my feet well.
It is also symbolic of the way I look at the outside world: a place that is unsafe, where my body needs to be protected. The floor of the outside world has pieces of glass and thorns that scare my feet.
For some people, the front door is a different sign of transition. In the documentary, *Dichterbij*[12], the homeless poet, Hilmano van Velzen, explains how, as a child, he would wear three jackets on top of each other, preparing for his father's fists to land on his body whenever he returned home. For Velzen's childhood self, the inside was more dangerous than the outside.
Of course, it is hard to deduct from the hodgepodge of events, circumstances, and choices, a clear linear explanation as to why someone ends up on the street. In the documentary about Van Velzen, things like a traumatic childhood, addiction and psychological problems are suggested as either causes or results of his homelessness - it is hard to tell which came first.
Onscreen, we see Van Velzen walking around Amsterdam, offering his poems to passers-by. One journalist wittily remarks: "You look so relaxed; it feels like you are walking around in your living room!" Hilmano proudly replies: "It is! I have been living here for thirty-five years!"
One could say that the "outside" has become Van Velzen's territory. He knows every little street and alley; he knows many of the people that are passing by - the street corners and their alcoves seem to be filled with his memories. In a way, he knows much more about the city's subtle atmospheres than any house-resident could possibly know, simply because he experiences it as his personal environment day and night - an experience both intimate and public at the same time. Did he choose this territory? Or is it due to his circumstances? Can unchosen habits result in choices?
Why did the outside become his territory, and why is the inside mine? Why is his territory inherently shared with strangers, whilst mine carefully protects me from them? Did I ever really make a choice to live inside a house? Or do I live in houses because, even to be registered as 'born', I was required to have an address?
Of course, it is a privilege to have a safe house. In many countries, it is considered to be one of the primary needs for survival, one that a lot of people don't have. Yet, this sharp distinction between a safe inside and an unsafe outside is a typically western thought. In different climates, and different cultures, different ways of living occur that attach worth to the environment in different ways.

"Recent writers have popularized the notion that territoriality is one of the most basic needs among animals including man. But animals display just as much variability in their concern for territory as humans do. Although solitary wasps have private nests and permanent sleeping places, and savannah baboons tend to sleep on the same branches of the same tree night after night, there are also many species that do not show preferences for a personal niche in which to withdraw." [13]

[12] *Dichterbij,* directed by Caroline Keman, performance by Hilmano van Velzen, EO, 2020. 2Doc. www.2doc.nl/documentaires/series/3lab/2020/dichterbij.html
[13] Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi & Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things*, p. 122

The Meaning of Things is a book by social scientists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton that shares research into the worth given to the objects of the household. Talking about territory, they proceed to explain that, whereas the territorial behaviour of animals depends mainly on an overall adaptation to the environment, human ways of living are also heavily influenced by their belief systems, and their ways of attaching worth to things:

"We continually personalize and humanize the given environment as a way of both adapting to it and creating order and significance. Thus the importance that the home has depends not only on survival needs (to bring up infants, to eat and sleep in comfort), on the particular economy (hunting or pastoral, farming or industrial), or on the climate; it also depends on values, tradition, and literary and religious associations that cannot be predicted from determining conditions."[14]

I was brought up in a culture that gives great symbolic value to the *inside*: "going home" for me was always entering a door, taking off my jacket and shoes. "Being home" never meant: walking in the forest, sitting on the doorstep or in the café, gathering with neighbours in the middle of the street. Contrastingly, once we were safely inside the house, most of the talk and thoughts went to the *outside* world, to people or things who were not in the house, to politics, football, incidents at work. These things felt more important, more noticeable than the "inside life".
How does this symbolic *inside* work? What importance does it have, and what worth do I *want* to attach to it?

<u>*Really* inside</u>

When I was five or six years old, I had a theory about "being inside". I believed I was touching upon a big misconception of society, so I tried to explain it to anyone who would listen.
It concerns a problem with walls.
If you build a wall in your garden, it is a wall. You can point at it and say: "look at that wall outside!" Whatever side of the wall you are standing, you are standing outside.
If you build four walls in the garden, and you put some wood on top of them, one will say: "look at that garden shed! Let's go inside!" But actually, if you go inside, you are just on the other side of the first wall. You are still outside.
All houses are actually just some walls in the garden. If you really want to be inside, you have to do the following:

- *build a hut inside of the house, or;*
- *climb into a cardboard box, and then go inside the house, or;*
- *go into a drawer, washing machine or trash can, and close it.*

How "open" or "closed" houses are is influenced by the environment: both the climate and the political, economic and social environment provide the premises under which houses are built in certain ways. Turning it the other way around, this implies that houses tell us something about the environment in which they were built.

[14] Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi & Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The meaning of things*, p. 123

There are many examples of dwellings that are somehow "open", both inside and outside at the same time: tents, verandas, galleries, or the Ancient Roman houses with their *impluvium* - a basin at the heart of the house that collected the water that rained in through a hole in the roof.
Opposed to these open houses, there is also a way of living hyper-inside. Whereas many houses are connected to the outside world through big windows, it is interesting to see what happens when a house is completely shut down from any outside impressions.
One example could be Çatal Hüyük (Fork Hill), an ancient Neolithic town, founded around 7400 B.C. in what now is Turkey. It was lived in for 1000 years, but started to deteriorate around 6000 B.C. It is the biggest town that has been found from that time period, and housed on average 8000 people at a time. For ages, it was just a big bump in the landscape. In 1958, farmers discovered the overgrown houses by accident. [15]
The strange thing about Çatal Hüyük is that it has no streets. All the houses are built right next to each other, sharing their outside walls like apartments in an apartment block. As a consequence, the houses have no windows or doors. People entered and left their houses through a hole in the roof.
The people must have lived in a hyper-inside, completely shut off from any outside impressions, except for some daylight coming through the hole in the roof. At the same time, their outside must have been much more *outside*, an endless landscape of wild nature.
We know more about the inside life of Çatal Hüyük than the outside. They seem to have been a people that very much cherished their shut-off, inside life: many layers of artefacts, religious ornaments, architecture and all sorts of household objects were found at the excavation site, including a great number of goddess sculptures that could point at a worship of women.[16]
Ironically, we have a lot of detailed information about the household objects and architecture of this nine-thousand-year-old community, whereas we scarcely have any accounts of the inside life of an average 17th-century Dutch farmhouse. In the booklet *A History of the Dutch folk art, Part Three: Farmhouses*, the historian complains about the fact that barely any objects or knowledge of farmhouse interiors have survived the years. Even though researchers from past ages have left us with detailed descriptions of the farm's tools and technicalities, the amount of cows and sheep on a certain farm, they failed to give us any description of the inside of a farmer's house - the household and living spaces being the domain of the farmer's wife, and thereby not considered to be of any importance:[17]

"The research into farms has (...) been mainly focused on the farming enterprise and the structural engineering of the farm. The living area was of course always included as a part of this, but actually always in quite a stepmotherly way (...). This is why we are now (...), with a lot of difficulty, only capable of forming a deficient and lackful image of how the farmhouses' interiors were once furnished. Descriptions generally fail to inform us; in all discourse about the provinces, rural areas and villages, in old travelogues, there is not a word about the

[15] Bill Bryson, *At Home: a short history of private life,* p. 74 and Ian Hodder, "This Old House"*, Natural History Magazine*, June 2006.
[16] Ian Hodder, "This Old House"*, Natural History Magazine*, June 2006.
[17] This imbalance of historical accounts is not only based on a distinction between the so-called "masculine" and "feminine" domains of the household, but also (amongst many more social distinctions) between the rich and poor households. Whereas no 17th century Dutch farms still exist, many castles and rich city houses (the whole centre of Amsterdam) are much older and sometimes even preserved with original interior.

interior. In stories and childhood memoirs it is barely spoken of. The few exceptions in which the interior is mentioned, the descriptions are always without any detail and, written from memory, not very reliable." [18]

We will never be able to get back a complete, objective image of these interiors that so many women dedicated their lives to. Yet I believe that, like many oral or unwritten histories, this history of low-class, "feminine", inside space has not remained without a trace. Little ornaments, colourful rugs, porcelain dogs and crocheted potholders, now to be found in the thrift store, are the archaeological finds of an aesthetic passed on by generations of women, yet never valued as *design*. It is still considered a "feminine" thing to be *cosy at home*, to spend a lot of time on the household, to *over*decorate, to create a safe and warm nest, a hyper-inside.
The seemingly hard-to-point-out distinction between "feminine" and "masculine" domesticity becomes very clear in Csikszentmihalyi's and Rochberg-Halton's research, for which they interviewed over 300 people from 81 American families about their houses and the objects in their households:

"Of course, the work [the female participants of the research] *were concerned about was less often structural - such as taking out a wall or putting in new plumbing - and tended to be a question of decoration that affects mood rather than material comfort: a new wallpaper, different furniture, a rearrangement that, in the words of our respondents, alters the "personality" of the home."* [19]

It was my own immediate impulsive response to think: *these women should learn how to use the hammer, and then they'll feel more independent, they will know that they could also repair the sink on their own! They will never feel powerful if they keep on decorating!* To my surprise, the research mainly showed positive results of this "feminin" role in the house. It made me realise how negative my own feelings towards words like "decoration" and "new wallpaper" are:

"Although these women were more involved in the emotional state of the home than their husbands and sons, one gets the impression that they were less dependent on it than their spouses or children were. Perhaps being the ones who through their psychic activity created a home inside the house, women felt more in control over it and knew that maintaining whatever affective relationships had been established was within their power." [20]

Despite my own negative connotations, building a home within the house is one of my favourite activities. I often feel a bit embarrassed about the amount of time and thought I spend on it. But apparently, this skill is something to cherish instead of repress and malign. Maybe, where breaking down walls or fixing a tap might breed a feeling of physical independence, the building of a delicate atmosphere paves the way towards a certain emotional agency - something that I would suggest should be worth the time and training.

The residents of Çatal Hüyük spent extensive amounts of time on the interior of their houses. There were no churches, bathing houses, market squares or even streets where "more

[18] Dr. Tj. W. R. De Haan, *Volkskunst der Lage Landen, deel 3,* p.10-11.
[19] Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi & Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things*, p. 133
[20] Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi & Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things*, p. 133

important" things could happen.[21]
Maybe it is time to take the people of Çatal Hüyük as an example, who honoured their homes like churches, and their women like goddesses; apart from a place of physical transition, the hallway could become a space of spiritual transition, a transition to and from intimacy, into and out of personal care. In the hyper-inside of the house, we would not be closed off from the world, but rather at the heart of it, exposed to it. It would open up to us as a room for personal possibilities, intimate relation relaxation and private change. Going out of the door the next morning, we would not be fleeing from ourselves or from "The Wife". We would be taking her with us under our jackets, because she is the one who cares for our interior.

connect the dots

leaving the house	entering the world
leaving the world	entering the hereafter
building a house	mud bricks
building a house	buying cups in the thrift store
opening the door	letting the world in
closing the door	opening a window
human door	cat door
closing windows	put on a sweater
leaving the house	turning the light on
entering the house	entering the world

[21] Ian Hodder, "This Old House"*, Natural History Magazine*, June 2006.

2. The Bathroom

A small bathroom. It is situated in a one-person apartment, in a twelve-storey apartment building. The apartment building is situated on the outskirts of a medium-sized European city.
The bathroom is rectangular in shape, its walls covered with white tiles. On the right-hand wall is a toilet, next to the toilet, a sink, and next to the sink, all the way in the back, a shower behind a see-through curtain.
Above the toilet, a white-plastic reservoir. The water inside of it is waiting readily to be released into the toilet bowl. Above the sink, a little white plastic shelf. On the shelf: an electric toothbrush branded 'Philips Sonicare', two bars of soap on little plates, an old tin can that used to contain olives (it now contains old toothbrushes, old lip-gloss and old mascara, and maybe a lost ballpoint or a sweet tasting lip-balm stick), a tube of toothpaste branded 'Parodontax', three little boxes on top of each other (they contain some rings and earrings), a tube with cream for dry skin, and a little Chinese figurine made for export (it is an old - probably wise - man with grey hair and beard, and an extraordinarily large head). Above this shelf: a mirror. On the left-hand wall: some hooks supporting a red towel, a rope with some light blue toilet paper rolls, a white dressing gown, and a brown wooden cabinet containing various skin and bathing products. On the floor: grey tiles below a purple bathmat and a smaller green bathmat. In the corner next to the mat, very close to the toilet, some little books are piled up.
The bathroom is empty. Through the bathroom door (there is a little window in it), we can see some daylight seeping through. The atmosphere is quiet and still.

Into how many bathrooms have I set foot, in the 23 years that have been my life? A hundred? A thousand bathrooms? How can it be that I have entered a thousand bathrooms, where I have taken a thousand showers and another thousand baths, and yet still I sit here behind my computer, dry as a blow-dried hamster? I remember public bathrooms - white, very clean or very dirty, but white; very small hostel bathrooms, also white, always dirty and with hairs that twist themselves swiftly and irreversibly around your toes; grey-plastic washing facilities on camp-sites, where you have to go and take a shower in the middle of the night if you want it to be hot, pushing a button every thirty seconds in order not to be deprived of the feeble stream of water landing on your body; the vanilla-coloured bathroom of a lover, distinguished by the fact that you always feel like a stuffed hot pepper when you finally open the door to cooler parts of the house; the broken-white bathroom of a very good friend, where the floor is always soaked because the shower curtain is too short or absent; my parents' bathroom, where I was born.

I was born in a blue bathroom. When my mother felt me coming, she was seated in the bath, and supposed to move to the bedroom. Because the bedroom turned out to be too small, I was finally delivered on the bathroom floor.
I can't imagine how it must have felt, to be born in a bathroom. It seems like a very strange starting point. *"I was born in the bathroom, and I will return to the bathroom!" "Home is, where the bathroom is!" "Oh, if only I could go back to that good old moisty bathroom!"*
You may laugh now, if you think it is somehow funny, to speak of a bathroom like that. But don't we all come from the same big, soft, and pink maternal bathroom? Some of us arrive in a mint-green hospital bed, others drop onto a brown leather sofa, and I was born straight

from the pink bathroom into the blue bathroom. Maybe my real birth was when they finally took me into another sort of chamber. Finally, real life begins.
Because the bathroom never really feels like an epicentre, it isn't generally seen as the kind of place that holds life's important moments: on a Friday night, you should be somewhere else. Maybe the bouquet of hot sex scenes in movies give the bathroom some allure, but personally, I've never had very comfortable sex in a bathroom, apart from some masturbatory successes. Bathrooms, bathtubs and shower cabins seem to be full of strange corners that don't fit the body.
Anyway, apart from some horny bathroom scenes, and maybe a few images of women having a very relaxing bath with the advertised bathing gel, not much is coming from that corner of the house. Bathrooms are always white and hard-edged, with a lot of square tiles and straight lines, as if they're made to prove some hard-core rule of geometry. If I had a bathtub, I would immediately move it from the bathroom to some other part of the house. Take the kitchen for example: isn't it is much cosier to sit still and look around in a kitchen for such an extensive amount of precious time? I could put the kettle on the fire and stare at the flames. Or give the coffee cups a good rinse in the soapy water, contemplating their meaning. I could even have a chat with one of the neighbours who was just passing by my kitchen window.

When I was a little kid, I had a friend called Pelle. He was a thin boy with very bad eyes; he even had special swimming glasses that were completely twisted around his ears. I was secretly in love with him. His father had a very big boat on which they lived.
One time I stayed over at their boat, and when I came into the kitchen in the morning, Pelle's father was there, naked in an old-fashioned bathtub next to the stove. "Good morning! Want some tea?" I was deeply shocked by both his casual nakedness, and the fact that he had this wonderful bathtub in the middle of his kitchen. For me, this became a lasting image of how I wanted to be as an adult, full of confidence and peace.
Thinking about this, it is actually interesting that I was so shocked by someone else's nakedness. I would sometimes sit in the bath with my sister or one of my parents, playing with the Barbies, but never would I see someone else without clothes.
During some periods in western history, and in many cultures still today, bathing has been an explicitly social thing. Throughout Greek and Roman times, far into the Middle Ages, most people didn't have personal bathing facilities, except for the marginal upper-classes who would have a personal bath, often situated in the bedroom. Almost everyone went to the bathhouse; this was often connected to a bakery, using the heat of the bread ovens for the heating of the water. It was very normal to see other people naked. In fact, many medieval pictures exist with people in big wooden bathtubs, having entire meals together in the bath. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, mixed bathing was increasingly condemned by church fathers. Even so, and despite the fact that bathhouses were known to house prostitution, people kept going. Only Black Death and other plagues would finally keep the people out of the bathhouse. [22]
I try to picture how these bathing houses must have felt. I imagine them to be a kind of super-social-sauna. Coming from the street with jacket and shoes and everything that protects me. Going into a dressing room. Slowly peeling off all the layers: shoes, socks, pants, jacket, sweater, shirt, underwear. The floor is already damp from previous visitors, and you can hear the echo of people talking inside the baths. Putting all your belongings and

[22] "Bathing", Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 16/8/2020,https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bathing.

clothes somewhere in storage, taking a towel, and stepping inside. Feeling the damp heat against skin that is slowly softening. Feeling very naked when the first people greet you, then getting used to it. Seeing women, utterly comfortable, sitting on some bench next to a bucket of water, chatting away, wildly gesturing, their breasts cheerfully swinging along. Spotting a group of your friends in the back of the room, and maybe saying hello to the blacksmith and the vegetable shop owner on the way. Climbing into one of the big wooden tubs, and taking place next to your friend Rigmundus, and not being surprised by the fact that he has disproportionately large calves but almost no pubic hair, because you have already seen his naked body many times before. Waving to Agglethrudis with the tiny, hairy breasts and the birthmark in the middle of her belly, who is talking to your aunt Amalfrida, who misses one toe and is full of freckles.

What a different experience the Renaissance must have brought. As scientists started to spread the notion that bathing could expose the bodies to diseases that travelled through the pores of the body, it became the norm to wash not the body, but the clothes. Only those parts of the body that were visible in public, meaning face and hands, were to be washed. For some upper-class people, baths were used as treatment for certain illnesses. But bathing in this way had to be done very carefully and according to strict rules in order not to get poisoned by the water. Women had to wear a bathing-dress inside the bath, protecting them from being shockingly confronted with their own virginal nakedness in the reflection of the water.

This attitude remained prevalent in the upper classes far into the nineteenth century. Many books from that time period contain strict bathing prescriptions, especially for women. Bathing was an irregular cleaning method, not to be done more than once a month, and only if prescribed by a doctor. *"There is something lazy and weak about the action of nestling oneself on the bottom of a bathtub like that; it is not decent for a girl."* [23]

It must have been a godsend for these worried people when in 1767 the mechanical shower was invented, making it possible to turn the bathing ritual into something quick, practical and non-confrontational.

For average civilians, it was not possible to stick to all the strict rules set by the bourgeoisie. For a long time, people in the countryside simply bathed in the river, like they had done for centuries, or at the side of an often-dirty water well. The people in the city didn't have many options except going to public bathhouses, even though these were seen as a "filthy, immoral commonality" by the upper class. [24]

Even though they are now often taken for granted in the West, bathrooms are a relatively new phenomenon. The bathroom is an invention that first started it's rise in American hotels, halfway through the nineteenth century. In most hotels at that time, it was normal to have a shared washing room with the other guests. As a way to give a hotel more luxury, rooms with personal baths were offered for an exorbitant amount of money. Americans soon became very enthusiastic about the concept, and the installation of domestic bathrooms began even by the start of the twentieth century. [25]

In Europe, bathrooms were far less popular. Most houses had plumbing for the kitchen, and maybe a toilet, but there was often not enough pressure on the water to fill a bath. Plumbing would have to be redone in order to install a bath in an existing house. Funnily enough,

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[23] Th. Gautier, *Le pied de momie* and *Arria Marcella* (1863), in: *Recits fantastiques* (1981), p. 184 & 251

[24] Alain Corbin, *Pestdamp en bloesemgeur: een geschiedenis van de reuk,* p. 230

[25] Bill Bryson, *At Home: a short history of private life,* p, 595

upper classes were at first very reluctant to install bathrooms in their luxurious houses. When he was asked if he would put extra plumbing in his house, the French duke Doudeauville scoffed: “I am not building a hotel!” [26]
In other parts of society, there was maybe the will but not the space. The first bathtubs had to be put in existing spaces, mostly bedrooms, or sometimes in strange corners or alcoves. But baths remained a luxury for a long time. In 1954, just one French residence in ten had a shower or a bath. [27]
I wonder why the bathroom became what it is now: a space, often completely waterproof and clinically white, with a central lamp that is always too bright - not the kind of space where someone would come and sit next to you to have a little chat while you bathe, or the kind of space where you feel like taking the time to have a good look at your body: it looks oddly fleshy in this light.
Do our bathrooms still want us to find the least possible enjoyment in our bodies? Is it still a space meant for discrete personal hygiene, disconnected from the rest of our daily life and from the people we live it with?
How wonderful it would be if I could turn the bathroom back into a space like the bathhouse, a space that stimulates empathy! Empathy both for myself and others, a room where my own body can be fully experienced in a way that matches the rest of my daily experience. A space like the primordial pink bathroom!

How to turn the bathroom into a lived space of empathy:

1. Cover all the walls with the softest blankets you can find
2. Put a thick, soft carpet on the bathroom floor
3. Find a bathtub that has a beautiful colour, or that is very old
4. Put the bathtub in the middle of the space
5. Decentralize the light: put different table lamps or candle holders in the room. (watch out! Make sure nothing electrical can fall in the bathtub!)
6. Bring in at least three armchairs, and put them around the bathtub
7. Put some little tables with snacks and drinks in different corners - depending on the time of day, it can be coffee and biscuits, tea and cake, or olives and beers.
8. Make sure there are enough towels and bathrobes present
9. Fill the bathtub with hot water
10. Add some herbs or good-smelling oils to it
11. Invite friends and family into the bathroom
12. If they have pets, they are also welcome
13. Ask someone to sit with you in the bath, while the others accompany you on the armchairs
14. If you’ve had enough, add hot water until the temperature is comfortable again, and switch places with someone else
15. Continue this ritual until everyone has reached an intense physical and psychological satisfaction.

[26] Bill Bryson, *At Home: a short history of private life,* p. 594
[27] Bill Bryson, *At Home: a short history of private life,* p. 596

In the corridor (that is very crowded with things and also quite narrow) there is a little white wooden door. Some things are hanging on it on hooks, like purses, bags and headphones. They stick out too much into the corridor, and when one rushes past, trying to catch the bus, the door sometimes flips open and reveals

2.5 The Fuse Box

Dear Fuse Box,

You are a very strange space. Whenever I open you, something makes me feel a bit uncanny. You are full of switches, taps and pipes, and some of the pipes are extremely hot. That's probably why a blast of hot, dry air always blows into my face when I open you. Red rust and a strange white tissue are creeping up your damp pipes. I also hear that you've been on fire once, but that was before I lived here.

To be honest: you scare me. Not in the monstrous way, but in the silent, invisible way. I feel like something strange and unknown is waiting inside you, preparing to invade the house, like the ghost under the bed of a scared child.

Maybe it's because you don't seem to want to be part of the household. I can't understand what you're saying. Only plumbers and repairmen from outside are allowed to speak to you. What are you telling them? Inside information?

And on top of that: you're so small! Are you even a space? Not an inhabitable one, that's for sure. If I try to enter you, it leaves my rear end sticking out into the corridor. It's horrible, humiliating and a poor achievement from your side.

If I could, I would take you out of my house, and put you on the street. Because that's where you belong: you're more outside than inside. I was talking about you with my friend Paulien the other day, and she totally agreed: she said that it's impossible to love an uninhabitable space in the same way one loves a living room or a kitchen. It's because humans can't have that full body experience with

you. We can only stick our nose into you and look around a bit. Like you just want to put yourself on a pedestal and we have to be your humble spectators. Paulien said that saying something like "my favourite space is the fuse box" is as impossible and ridiculous as saying that "my favourite space is the patch of air five metres above Dam Square". You are undefined and you will never be the energetic heart of the house, even though you're pumping around the fluids necessary to keep it warm and hydrated.

(Letter abruptly stopped out of anger and a feeling of powerlessness)

Dear Fuse Box,

I'm sorry about my last letter. I talked with my mother, and she says it's a shame that I wrote you a negative letter like that. She says I'm already so privileged to live in a house in the first place, and that the house is so nice, cheap and safe. It's also a luxury to have a Fuse Box that works well and that is easily reachable for the plumber. I shouldn't complain about you being a bit rough and dirty. Some people live in a house that is completely rough and dirty, or they live on the street, that is rough and dirty too (especially those streets that aren't regularly cleaned by the municipality).

We discussed how I could make it up to you. We agreed that I should buy you some flowers and send you my excuses. But when I put the flowers (they were tulips and peonies) inside you, they immediately died.

I thought that just excuses without the flowers were not enough, so I decided to extend this apology letter into something a bit more elaborate, and to reflect a bit on what is actually your true nature.

If you weren't so uncanny, there could be something nice about you. I imagine that you're the kind of space that I would have built a hut in as a kid. Your smallness, for someone who fits in it, could be terribly

comforting. I imagine it would feel a bit like this poem from Rainer Maria Rilke:

"And there is almost no space here; and you feel almost calm at the thought that it is impossible for anything very large to hold in this narrowness." [28]

Like Harry Potter's "Cupboard Under the Stairs", where he lives and hides when he's with his horrible step-parents, you could be a hide-out. His cupboard, just like you, is a very practical space, not meant for inhabiting, but for storage. For Harry Potter, the space is the only friendly one he has; the rest of the house is hostile. I imagine that he must have felt "almost calm", that his problems also just didn't 'hold in the narrowness' of the space. But, unfortunately, problems don't have the tendency to be shut out by walls or doors.
And in our situation, the problems don't seem to come from the rest of the house, but from you. I could try to hide in you, but I wouldn't be hiding from anything. Moreover, I would feel like I were exposing myself to your creepiness.
So, if you're not a childhood hut, what are you? What is this creepiness that seems to come from you? Here are some characteristic aspects of you:
Unseen. On your own a lot, watching all the goings-on from your little corner, like you're an outsider spying through the window. You're concrete, iron, dusty, whereas the rest of the house is cosy and neat. Your temperature and air quality are horrible, like an environment that humans can't live in without an oxygen tank. All these things add up to one overarching feeling that you give me: you're wild.

[28] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, p. 106

The wildness of the fuse box

There are many kinds of wildness. There is the wildness of nature, in a pristine way: a wildness untouched and virginal, that has not been controlled by humans. And there is the wildness of an animal, a dangerous wildness that is unpredictable and without remorse. These are not the kinds of wildness that I'm talking about.

Your wildness seems to be more abstract, a wildness that is already in the very fact that I can't grasp it. It is the wildness of strangers in old photographs, of unidentifiable sounds, of entering a new city for the first time. It is the wildness of the unknown.

Where does this wildness come from? At first, I would say that the unknown is the outside. Outside is a place where anything can happen, where one can get lost, robbed or harassed. It is the start of the rest of the world, with all its unreliability. But can't the outside also be an intimate space? What about my grandmother's beautiful garden? Or the bench by the water where she always sits on Sundays? These places are not "wild". They are outside and intimate. Maybe the same applies to inside spaces: they can also be wild. What about a house tormented by domestic violence? Or the storage rooms of a hoarder? Or the house where the owner has been lying dead for a long time? There are many wildernesses inside of four walls.

"From what overflow of a ramified interior does the substance of being run, does the outside call? Isn't the exterior an old intimacy lost in the shadow of memory?" [29]

says Gaston Bachelard. After having written a whole book about the importance of being inside a house, of an intimate space, Bachelard comes to the conclusion that it is not so much inside and outside that are each other's geometrical opposites. He argues that there can also be an intimate kind of outside, and a familiar kind of endlessness. I would

[29] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* p. 383

add to that, that there can just as well be a hostile kind of inside, an uncanny kind of intimacy.
Instead of making a distinction between inside and outside, a juxtaposition between indifferent space and intimate space would make more sense.
You, with your undefinable taps and tubes, with your strange heat and smell, are the condensation of the indifference and wildness that lingers through my intimate space. How should I treat you? Should I try to domesticate you? Lock you forever with a layer of plaster?
At the end of his plea, Bachelard says that in order to find peace, "one would have to remain the contemporary of an osmosis between intimate and undetermined space"[30].
If this is true, I should keep your strangeness intact. Actually, I should somehow emphasise your presence in the house even more. You're the thing that could keep me in touch with 'undetermined space'.
Maybe I could see you as a membrane. One through which the wildness can seep into the house. Maybe this is how I could get used to the wildness, without trying to make it mine. I could enter a sort of middle realm, in which the unknown becomes a good friend, a friend that doesn't frighten me anymore.

I read a book by Edward Casey[31]. He also speaks about this middle realm in which we can befriend the wilderness. He uses Henry David Thoreau's "Walden" as an example of living in the middle realm. Maybe we, as future friends, (or: peaceful neighbours), can learn from this.
'Walden' (first published in 1854) is an account of Thoreau's experiences of living in a wild forest for two years, two months and

[30] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* p. 383
[31] Edward Casey, *Getting back into place: toward a renewed understanding of the Place-World.*

two days. The little hut that he builds for himself to live in has the qualities of a tent or boat: it is a first version of a "middle realm", allowing an inside world and an outside world to exist together.
For a while, the hut only consists of a few wooden beams and a door. When he's ready to start building the roof, he waits. At night, he can see the dark sky, and birds can come and sit on his bedside table.

"I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself. (...) life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves are strewn about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be transferred to our furniture, to tables, chairs and bedsteads - because they once stood in their midst." [32]

This rudimentary hut, already a middle realm in itself, is one of the stops on his road to his osmosis with wildness. His account sounds so luscious that I caught myself thinking: why do I seek shelter in the first place? Why not go back to nature, back to the womb of all human life?
But Thoreau's unfinished hut is not our final destination. It's not a sustainable middle realm: when the circumstances are good, one could sleep in such a hut for a few nights. But it is for a reason that people started building roofs: wildness is dangerous. It is not something to be romanticized or anthropomorphized. There is a necessity for proper shelter in order to live inside the wildness.
This is why the membrane is an essential part of the relation between wildness and human: without something to regulate the concentration of wildness in the house, wildness would take over.
In order to protect ourselves from wildness, we build houses, and streets, and cities. We create our seemingly safe environment, at the cost of fields, lakes and forests. But also at the cost of wildness? I think the wildness is still there. It has just shifted shape: first it

[32] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden,* p. 130

lingered between the bushes and rocks, now it rises up from the cracks in the pavement. The tree that fell on top of our ancestors turned into a truck that didn't see us in the rearview mirror. The sting of some strange nettle became the allergic reaction to a newly bought Olaz daycream.

In order to live in peace with the environment, and to inhabit the house and the world wisely, it is necessary to understand the difference between 'nature' and 'wildness', in a relationship "intertwined, but never completely together".
These are the dictionary definitions of the two:

- *Nature - the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations.*
- *Wildness - the quality of being uncontrolled, violent, or extreme.*

Wildness can be in nature. But it can also be in humans, or in human creations. Wildness and nature are both in the world, and sometimes they correlate. As Thoreau puts it:

"We are already at one with nature itself through a luminous wildness held in common." [33]

Parts of nature can be controlled and domesticated. We have gardens and house plants, landscape paintings on the walls and flower patterns on our cushions. But by domesticating nature, we don't control wildness. Controlled wildness is a contradiction in itself.
This does not mean that we should shut ourselves off from wildness. Moreover: even if we wanted to, we couldn't do it. Wildness is within ourselves, and within our world.

[33] Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a renewed understanding of the Place-World*, p. 246

We could of course, in spite of this, pretend that we are shut off from it, for as long as the pretence lasts. We can barricade ourselves in, in a home that creates and maintains the illusion of safety. But ignoring the fact that the wildness is with us might increase our fear of this wildness, while marginalizing our knowledge of it.
With you, fuse box, as a membrane, I propose a sort of "double incorporation" as a way out of this: you bring wildness into my house, and when I acknowledge you, I will recognize that my house protects me from certain wild storms and killers, but that true wildness is both outside and inside, and that uncertainty is not impressed by a closed door.
The house should not be the hand in front of our eyes, preventing us from facing wildness. The house should be the very means to reach a double incorporation of wildness: the house that incorporates wildness, incorporates the world, with all its wildness.

Time to acknowledge you, Fuse Box! - cooome come come come come coooome - I'm luring the fluids that are waiting on the other side of your membrane! - come come come coooome - I'm opening all doors and windows, inviting in the dark night, the slimey, green waterfall! Come in! Come in! Come in! Make yourself at home, unknown!

3. The Corridor

If you were to make a film of my corridor, it would be an action movie. You would see me, and other people, entering, leaving, bringing things from the kitchen to the living room, bringing them back from the living room to the kitchen, coming from the shower, naked, with a toothbrush, a towel, or a little trash bag filled with dirty tampons and the carton hearts of toilet rolls. You would see me stressing around to find the right shoes, hurrying to get to work on time, and then coming back eight hours later, with different shoes on, tipsy.
The movie would start with an empty corridor. We would see my mother entering with a cardboard box that says TABLEWARE AND CUTLERY, followed by my father, who is carrying the iron legs of a bed. Slowly things will be filling up the space, a closet is installed on the wall with a drill, and for a few weeks, you would just see me going in and out, endlessly moving things from boxes into the closet, from the closet to different rooms, from the rooms back into the closet. After a while, things will not move as much - dust starts to settle behind the drawers and at the back of the shelves. Only a few big spring cleans unsettle the world of upper shelves.

At the end of the movie - who knows? Maybe you see my future child, entering with newly bought moving boxes, slowly starting to take things from their frozen spots, with much reluctance, as if they're glued to the house. You see them filling one box that says THRIFT STORE, another that says TRASH, and a smaller box that says KEEP! TAKE HOME. Or you would see no child, but a little army of strong-armed men and women, with large, grey crates, systematically taking everything down, without categorizing, only making distinctions between the things that can be sold to a hardware store, and the things that should go to a second-hand furniture sale.

I never sit down in my corridor. There is no space for a chair here, and the floor is dirty from the shoes that constantly tread through it. For my body, the corridor is a passageway. Yet for my objects, it is the main resting place. They are in the big closet that covers one side of the corridor. It is a funny contrast: I walk in and out, up and down, while the objects sit and watch in rows on the shelves, like spectators in an arena.

One of the spectators is a red rain hat. In Dutch, we call such a hat a *zuidwester*, because it would be worn back in the days when there was a storm coming from the south-west. This one is a modern version, with a print of white cars on it. I bought it a few months ago, in a second-hand shop. I had wanted one for a long time, because my friend's sister has one and we had a conversation about how amazing they are - they make a rainy day into a good occasion to wear the beautiful hat. I think I would like a classic yellow one even more, but they are very expensive and hard to get these days.[34]
The zuidwester is part of a pile with some other hats: fur hats, little caps for the sun, caps that cover your ears in winter, and a really strange one with a carrot-shaped top. Looking at this pile of hats - I think there are around fifteen of them - one might think that a whole family

[34] *Note from a few months later:* since this autumn has been quite stormy already, I have grown more attached to the hat. I've actually started to like the white cars on it more than the classic yellow version.

has their hats stored here. But I live here alone! I love to wear many different hats, and I also think the pile looks quite good.

On another shelf, at eye level, is a white porcelain bowl, with little porcelain roses coming from it. The roses are soft pink, soft purple and soft yellow, and they have little green plastic leaves around them. This bowl belonged to my great-grandmother. I didn't know her very well. My father always says that I inherited her taste for very ornate, kitschy things. I got the bowl when she just died; I think I was seven or eight. We were with the whole family, great-great-aunts and unknown uncles included, in her little apartment in a nursing home. I was allowed to choose two things that I wanted to take from there. All the uncles and aunts were focused on the large furniture like the tables and chairs and sansevieria plants - I think they didn't really like her old-fashioned knick-knacks. I wanted them all, but I already had a lot of things myself back then, so my parents unwaveringly stuck to their limit of two. In the end, I took the white bowl with flowers, and a little bonbon dish with two naked angels on the lid, guarding the chocolates. It broke my heart to leave all the rearing porcelain horses (something I was really into at that age) on the windowsill.

I really like things. I have quite a lot of them. Some of them were given to me, or I inherited them, or they were ordered on the internet. A lot of them come from the thrift store, the flea market, or the street.
I learned thrift shopping and street-treasure-hunting as a kid. Going to the flea market with my parents was a classic weekend outing: I would be given a few big Euro notes in my little hand to spend wisely. I very soon learned how to bargain with the vendors, detecting a little crack in the porcelain dog's foot or a missing doorhandle in a toy car as a reason to nibble away at the price. This training of the eye and mouth, combined with a feverish tendency to collect everything that was collectable for free (little branches, flowers, shells, stones, chewing gum packages and much more would disappear into the pockets of my little jacket), turned me into a very objecty adolescent. Sometimes, I think of myself as an adoptive parent of things that have been rejected by others. At other times, I feel like a horrible hoarder.
There is something magical about things. The other day, I was walking around a beautiful, enormous second-hand store which had a lot of old things, exhibited in a beautiful way. An employee asked if he could help me with anything. I said I was just walking around, enjoying the atmosphere. He said: "It is terribly soothing to be amongst all those things, isn't it?"
It is true, the atmosphere in this thrift store was soothing. There was one corner with maybe a hundred clocks, in all shapes and sizes, from all kinds of time periods, ticking together in this little space, showing me the time. It made me think of all the different lives people had lived with these clocks. I somehow felt connected with them, like I was an animal in its natural habitat, merging with the unknown things, forgetting where my own life ended and another life started.

At the same time, thrift stores can be very depressing. I often enter them with the hope of experiencing this soothing, all-encompassing feeling, but come out completely drained, not knowing why I have a red stone candle holder and a little off-white cushion in my hand. The display of worn-out things for sale, mass-produced plastic trash cans next to hand painted still lives with broken frames, makes everything seem equally unimportant, as if no such thing as worth exists. In this mood, I feel like I could buy anything, yet gain nothing, like a consumerist sell-out trash-magnet.

Why are things so attractive to me? And why do I never get bored of going to the thrift store? In the book *The Meaning of Things* an interesting explanation is offered[35]: household objects play a bigger role in our lives than is often assumed. When we take things into our households, those things become a part of our daily life. By buying and maintaining them, we invest a part of our "psychic energy" in them: we have worked for the money with which we bought the thing, and after that we give those things attention by looking at them, using them, cleaning them, talking about them, et cetera. This attention is then "spent": we only have a limited amount of attention to give to things, and this energy has now gone to this object, and not to something else.

This has a twofold consequence: the objects that we use and attend to, become "charged" with the energy that we have transferred to them by giving them attention. As our life continues, the objects around us soak up our life like an energy sponge. As a result of this, our choice to engage with those specific objects is often connected to personal goals: we choose to use these objects, and not others, because they somehow suit our image of how we want to live. For example: I have a rain hat because I think biking in the rain is healthier and makes me feel more independent than taking the tram, because I like the idea of a colourful, happy hat that can only be used under sad circumstances, and because I feel very "Dutch" when I wear it, somehow continuing and honouring a tradition of generations of Dutch fishermen who worked in our typical climate, wearing these hats. In this way, this simple hat represents the goals of independence, joyfulness and historical awareness.

However, the goals that are contained by the objects I own can also conflict with the development of a personal sense of direction:

"An object that, when attended to, inhibits the pursuit of goals [that help create order in consciousness] *is a hindrance to the development of the self. Thus the material environment that surrounds us is rarely neutral; it either helps the forces of chaos that make life random and disorganized or it helps to give purpose and direction to one's life."*[36]

Thus, the pursuit of goals through objects is not necessarily a *helping* force in the development of the self. The different goals that all the objects together represent should somehow be congruent, and not pointing in conflicting directions. They should help to make sense out of the world, to develop one's own meaningful context.

Even though this sounds quite clear, simple and logical, it can be quite hard to decide whether the different objects I own are helping my sense-giving, or if they are making my life more chaotic. This is because objects can represent different goals at the same time, and it can be hard to decide where those goals come from and which of them should be prioritized. In this context, it is not surprising that sales techniques are very much based on the same idea of sense-giving: it may be that I also obtain many objects because somehow advertisements have convinced me that these things will help my life move forward, that they will make me happier.

In the documentary *Overal Spullen (Things Everywhere)*[37], artist Judith de Leeuw confronts her own consumption of objects: she decides to count all the things she owns. Since her house turns out to be too small to count everything, she decides to rent an empty warehouse, where she can lay everything out on the floor.

Numbering every single thing she owns, from her fridge and oven to every separate paper clip, she counts 15,734 things. This is a very normal amount, according to the moving

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[35] Csikszentimihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, *The meaning of things,* pp. 8-1

[36] Csikszentimihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, *The meaning of things* p. 16, 17

[37] *Overal Spullen,* Judith de Leeuw, BOS, 2011

company that helps her. One elderly mover tells her: “Back in the day, people didn’t have so many things. They had a cupboard, a closet, with things inside, yes. But these days, every cupboard has something standing on top of it.”
What to do with this consumption behaviour? When is an obtained object the result of addictive buying, and when is it not? Some people believe it is best to become a minimalist. The popularity of the Netflix-series *Tidying up with Marie Kondo*[38], a series about the Japanese “cleaning-up specialist” Kondo helping American families with tidying up and throwing away their stuff, shows that many people are searching for a way to deal with their things. Presented as a method of “spiritual cleansing”, people are told to go through all their things, and feel if these objects *spark joy*. If they don’t, they should be thrown away, or “said goodbye to”. The result is always happy, with empty rooms that have a better atmosphere, drawers that can be opened again, forgotten family pictures on the living room walls, et cetera.
Should I become a Kondo-inspired minimalist, in order to achieve a genuine relation to my objects? I don’t think so. Even though this method makes people think a bit more about the objects they own, it doesn’t go any deeper into the personal goals that the objects encapsulate, the belief structures that are built around them by the owners. The only parameter used to judge their relevance is if they *spark joy*, which is actually the same notion that advertisements use: objects can spark joy autonomously, they can make you happier, full stop.
I think an important part of that sentence is missing: objects can indeed spark joy, but they can also contain heavy and dark memories that should be remembered. They can carry a lot of value, they can help you progress with personal development, but only when they are treated with attention and a certain emotional devotion. Most importantly: this attention should also be given to the belief system that is built around them by the owner.
Why throw something out immediately when it doesn’t spark joy? Why not find a way to *make* it spark joy, or find out if it *sparks something else* that might be a helping force along the path of life? I think this spiritualized minimalism is an easy way to avoid something more fundamental: finding a way to deal with the chaos that is the real world. If the things we own help us to give meaning to the world, this blindly idealized minimalism is a way of simplifying the domestic world, but not necessarily giving it meaning.
In her documentary, Judith de Leeuw tries to go further along the path where Kondo left us: she does throw some things away, but most of the things she keeps. She is too attached to them, or she finds it a waste to just trash them. Some things are of high value to her, yet they are too worn out to ever be sold in a second-hand shop. She decides that the only solution is to take better care of her things, to clean them well, give them loving attention and to one by one put them back in her house.
I think there is a certain truth in my maximalist household. Even though it may seem very full and chaotic to strangers, it is never a mess. A house with a lot of things demands a lot of attention and organization. Spending a lot of time on my household, on cleaning, organising and reorganizing my collections of things, actually helps me to structure my thoughts and feelings, to think about my life and the meaning of my things. Executed with devotion and appreciation, household maintenance can be a fundamental way of developing and executing a philosophy of life.

[38] *Tidying up with Marie Kondo,* directed by Jade Sandberg Wallis, written by Marie Kondo, Netflix, 2019.

4. The Kitchen

This chapter will consist of a visual, drawn out description of the kitchen drawer. I will use multiple drawings of the same drawer to show how different layers of meaning can be found in there.

5. The Living Room

One wall of the living room is covered with windows. In the day time, they let the room bathe in light. Right now, the sun is going down. It is already very dark outside, and in the room only a few small light sources are switched on: a little lamp with an orange foot and a white lampshade, beautifully printed with brown leaves; a lava lamp with red lava going up and down in small bubbles; a big shell, too big to be found on any Dutch beach, with a little lamp inside it (it gives a lovely orange glow); a pink candlelight in a red candle holder (it is standing very close to me, on the table); the screen of my laptop, in front of me on the table, that shows the white page that you are also looking at right now; and an old fashioned lamp by the bed, with a base decorated with porcelain pigeons.
I am sitting on a chair by the table. The other furniture in this room is: a wooden cupboard (this is where the lava lamp is located), a bookcase, a little red cupboard, another chair, a brown wooden drawer-cabinet (with the pigeon-lamp on top of it), a bed, and a black leather armchair.
I hear the ticking of a clock. It is a clock I made myself. It is very loud, but I have gotten used to it. Sometimes I hear a car passing by outside, or other sounds from the street: someone parking a bike, a duck getting restless, the wind jerking at the flowers that are hanging outside of my window.

My life is in this room.
It twists and turns itself in angles,
until it fits between chair and table, under the bed and through the door.
It divides itself into little pieces, so that it fits in the little drawers.
It has blown itself up until it reached into all the corners of the ceiling,
squeezed itself through the cobwebs,
until the whole space was filled with life.
This room has always existed.
The room where life happens, or *gathers,*
where all its objects and clutter join each other around the fire of daily life.
This room used to be the *only* room.
It was filled with pans and pots, washing facilities, dinner table, bed and woodstove.
Over time, all these different corners of life retreated to their walls, stretching out the space between inside and outside, colonizing the bubbles of air in the earthen walls, until they were seperate rooms.
Now we are left with the heart of the house. It beats ferociously, pumping it's life into the rest of the house, day and night. It is the centre of the house, often the centre of life. All the other rooms point towards it, saying "you can visit me now, but you should end up there!" In my circulation through the house, drifting from room to room, I always find myself here, finally, at the heart of it.
But where am I, when I'm at the core of the house? Where do I find myself in this space? If this room, it's walls, chairs, cupboards, and books are the decorum of my life, how am I being directed by them? What is the life they are breeding for me? And how do they shape the end of it?

Influenza broke out all over the world right after the first world war. In England, it caused so many deaths that people started calling the front room ("front room" was the prevalent term for this central space at the time, because it was the room in front of the house) the "Death

Room", since it was the room where the deceased family members would be laid out during the period between their death and their funeral. After some time, with the number of influenza deaths decreasing, the *Ladies Home Journal*[39] suggested that the Death Room should now be called the Living Room - to literally make space for life to happen again. Many were delighted by this idea, and the term became the most popular name for this room - as it still is.
If the Living Room used to be a Death Room - where did death go? Is there still a space for death in this lively room?
Philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his essay *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1954), states that the lay-out of a house, the way it has been built up, designs the character of the inhabitants' journey through time.[40] If a place for death is made in the house, death will be incorporated in this journey. His example of such a place for death is the "Totenbaum", which is a coffin made out of a tree. The coffin is part of the house, waiting to be used.
Death is an inevitable part of life, but there is still a choice about how we want to live with death - the death of others as well as our own departure. Yes, many put pictures of deceased loved ones on their shelves, or their own birth card[41]. Others honour teacups or tablecloths that were once held by beloved hands that no longer exist. Some even get very close to the physicality of death, with their fiendish preference for skulls and blood, printed on cushions and hung on walls - this is often considered *morbid*.
But as I look around the houses I know, I never find an actual place for death, nothing that really confronts me with the fact that there will be an end to this household, and the person living in it. Death is kept outside the door, until the day it forces itself in.
Wouldn't it be beautiful if we didn't see death as a creep knocking on the door, waiting around corners, suddenly striking aggressively - but as something that could be *lived* in this house, like I live with with my favourite coffee cup?

In a city with no doors, death can always enter. We are visiting Fork Hill again, or *Çatal Hüyük*, the ancient city from 7400 B.C. in present-day Turkey. On the big plane of houses, rising up in the landscape like a big bump, we see a construction of roofs and holes. One of the holes is very close. Smoke comes from it. We go inside.
We enter the house through the hole in the roof, and climb down a wooden ladder, into the gloom of the living room. After our eyes have gotten used to the half-dark, we distinguish a few platforms, separated from each other by low ridges. The platform we are standing on is a bit lower, and blackened by ash and charcoal. Right next to us, under the stairs through which we just entered, is a smoking oven.
The other platforms are painted white. On the plastered white walls, we see many ornaments and drawings. There is one platform covered with reed matting. If we were to dig a bit in the earth under this matting, we would find a lot of bones and skulls. They are the remains of all the people who lived in this house, the ancestors of the present owners. That's

[39] Erika Palmer, Nov. 4, 2015, *The Fascinating history of the living room* www.builddirect.com/blog/the-fascinating-history-of-the-living-room/
[40] Martin Heidegger, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, in: Barbara Miller Lane, *Housing and Dwelling, perspectives on modern domestic architecture,* p. 53-54
[41] I hear this is not an omnipresent thing. I mean a kind of card that parents send around to notify their environment that their child has been born.

why this city has no burial sites or cemeteries - the houses are inhabited by both the living and the dead.[42]
Let's try this in my house - we dig a hole in my living room floor just under the dinner table. First we remove the planks, and then I ask my father to borrow his jackhammer, so we can eliminate the concrete flooring. We end up looking in the shocked face of my downstairs neighbour, who was just watching some porn.
But do not despair! Maybe we should look at it differently. Maybe it's not so much a matter of bringing death *into the house*, but more a matter of bringing it to the *surface*.
Because isn't death already here, around me, at the border of invisibility? Take, for example, the chair that I am sitting in right now, writing. It is leather, black, and very comfortable. One little cushion is missing on the right-hand armrest.
This chair used to belong to my grandfather. I can only ever remember him sitting in this chair, reading, with the grey dog Pol by his feet. In the morning he would sit there and drink coffee, in the afternoon it would be tea, a bit later a glass of red wine. At night the lamp next to the chair would provide the light that kept him reading.
After his death, this chair was removed from its original house, and taken to a rented storage space. For some reason, the right hand armrest broke off at some point. It was put in a box and later thrown away by my mother, who didn't know where it came from. Then the storage was cleared, and the chair moved to my parents house on a trailer behind the car, together with a bed and a lot of boxes. Halfway through this journey, it started to rain heavily, and the chair arrived at the house soaking wet. There was no space for it in the house, so it was left to collect dust and spiders in a corner of my fathers workshop. After a few weeks, my father stated that he was going to the rubbish dump with some trash, including the chair.
Fortunately, I just happened to be visiting. I told my father that I would make space in this tiny house by getting rid of another chair that I had found in the trash. That is how my grandfather's chair ended up here, in my living room.
When it entered the house, I cleaned it a bit. On the leather of the headrest I found a layer of dirt, probably some sort of moisture from the skin, exactly at the spot where my grandfather's head used to be. A similar yet thinner layer was to be found on the remaining armrest. It was the sedimentation of years of sitting and reading - the only physical evidence of a life in books.

On the left side of the main seat cushion, the black leather was worn out. It was smoother and lighter than the rest of the chair. I suddenly remembered that my grandfather would always sit with his legs crossed, his body turned slightly to the left. In the backrest, slight depressions were visible at the curve of his spine and neck.
Isn't my grandfather, more than in a grave, buried in this chair? Isn't it the ultimate *negative* of his life? The chair makes my grandfather's presence ever more absent, or his absence more present, more than any tombstone or reed matting in the middle of the room could do. Sometimes, when I'm sitting here, reading, I feel like it was my own body that pushed him away from life, as if I never stopped sitting on his lap, the second generation slowly getting too heavy, pressing my grandfather into the leather of the chair, until grandfather and chair became one body.

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[42] Ian Hodder, "This Old House"*, Natural History Magazine*, Howard Richman, June 2006, www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/master.html?https://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/0606/0606_feature.html, date of access 17/12/2020

A few days ago, as I was looking out the window, I saw a black van driving up the driveway of our building. Two men, dressed neatly in white shirts and black jackets, opened the back doors of the van, and rolled out a stretcher with red covering. They pushed it into the building, where two women joined them silently. I saw them walking towards the elevator. I was surprised when I saw how easily they were rolling the stretcher into the elevator, because normally, it is a big hassle to fit things into it. Then the thought struck me that maybe the size of the elevator was based on the size of a body, transported horizontally.
A few minutes later, the two men rolled the stretcher out of the building again, this time with the shape of a body under the red covering. The back doors of the van were opened again, and as the two women watched silently, the men (it was clear from their fluent movements that they had done this many times before) lifted the stretcher into the car, shut the doors, and drove away, the two women following in a small Fiat.
I saw all this from my window on the fourth floor. It was absurd to see it all happen like this, from above, as if through the eyes of some strange god or angel.

So many things happen in our houses. I cannot imagine what these walls have seen and heard before I started to live between them. It is very plausible that someone has died here, or has mourned here, or lost their dear cat. Death is not just hiding in the things that I bring in, it is also in the walls. How to make it visible? Where to find the right infra-red lamp to show us the traces of life and death that are all around?
On Fork Hill, a whole set of traditions was developed to deal with life and death. It is quite astonishing to find how much time they spent on these procedures, knowing that it must have been much harder work for them to get their hands on the basic needs like food and water.

In their way of dealing with life and death, the house was central to the Çatalhüyükans. No communal buildings or squares were found on the excavation site - everything happened in the house. Even though some houses were more elaborately decorated then others, every house had its own shrine, graves, offering place and artefacts. Walls were whitewashed very frequently, more than would have been strictly necessary. A very clear distinction between dirty and clean parts of the house was maintained, as the platforms in the living room that played a spiritual role were kept in a very neat state.
As the house in this ancient city played a key role in life, with the inhabitants always in the presence of their own life and death, it looks like the house itself had become their belief, their way of dealing with death. The Çatalhüyükans treated their houses shows a priest-like dedication, as if they were living inside of a big altar devoted to daily life itself.
The pinnacle of this dedication seems to be one of a generational kind. About every hundred years, it was decided that the house should be “renewed”. The roof was removed, the walls scoured and then torn down until to a height of about one metre. Then the whole remaining part of the house would be filled up very carefully with plaster and other building materials. A new house would be built on top of the old house. This new house would have almost exactly the same lay-out, and even the ornaments that had been painted or sculpted on specific walls of the old house, would be copied on the walls of the new house. In this way, Catal Hüyük became the large hill that it was named for: after hundreds of years of people living there, the city had become a big bump, a city on top of all the older versions of itself, the sedimentation of daily life and final death pushing it higher and higher and higher. Like

an ancient tower block, generations were living on top of each other, with all the dead ancestors as downstairs neighbours, and great-grandchildren living in a future upstairs.[43]

While I was writing this thesis, the father of one of my best friends suddenly died. I think it is now about two months ago. After having to deal with all the arranging and organizing that came along with it, my friend is now trying to get back into a daily routine.
She told me that the hardest parts of the day for her are the ones located around the bed: the time of going to sleep, and the time of waking up. The night is long and painful, without distraction. The morning light only makes her realize that she doesn't feel like starting another sad day.
It made me rethink my bed. Of course, sleep and death are often connected with each other, used as metaphors or euphemisms. But I didn't consider before, how connected the moments *just before* and *just after* sleep are to *thinking* about life and death.
During one particular family holiday in the seventies, when my father was still a child, he woke up earlier than the rest of his family. With the family camera, he took pictures of his father, mother, grandfather and grandmother, asleep in their holiday beds.
The pictures are now hanging by my bed. When I'm sleeping, we are sleeping together. Just before I go to sleep, and just after I wake up, I look at them, forever asleep in the seventies. It is one of the softest, rawest feelings I know.

[43] Ian Hodder, "This Old House"*, Natural History Magazine*, Howard Richman, June 2006, www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/master.html?https://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/0606/0606_feature.html, date of access 17/12/2020

Standing outside the house, looking back at the thesis

The house is a little version of the world. The thesis is a little version of the house.
That is the idea I had in mind when I started writing this thesis. I didn't know exactly what intrigued me so much about the house, I just had a general feeling of excitement about the subject. In the past, when I had to make a statement to people about the themes of my work, I would always say: "It is about daily life, domestic things, and intimacy!"
While writing this thesis, however, I discovered that within this realm, there is much more nuance than I had expected. I thought my interests were general, but actually they are very specific. Yes, I wanted to talk about the house, but not in relation to architecture, or the student housing problem, or expensive interior design. Nor did I want to write diary-like entries about "a usual day in the house", or describe bewitched houses, or read plays that were only situated inside houses.
It was very easy to discard the things that I clearly *didn't* want to talk about. But then I still had this pile of things that all wanted to be in there.
Like in my house, I prefer to keep adding more and more things until it clearly becomes too much. Starting off very simple and minimalistic, with set boundaries and conceptual definitions, is something I could force myself into, but it would take away all the fun for me. This preference, after some months of writing, brought me to the point that I had to stop and look back at what I had already done.
The making of the thesis turned out to be much more in the editing, replacing, arranging, defining and rethinking than in the actual writing. It has taught me a lot about the nuances of my own interests: while writing, it occurred to me that it was not so much about making a point and making it last, but more about finding out what points I actually wanted to make, and how they connected to each other, as a structure of points.
I like how this way of working ultimately connected back to the house: a large part of living in a house is about creating a meaningful structure, too.
More than any fixed facts or findings that can be found in and about the house, I like the fluid, dancing parts of the subject: the repeated actions, the constant change, the circulation of laundry and cleaning - they feel like the direct, intimate reflection of a larger fluidum, that of repeated history, the passing of generations through the similar spaces, the gained and forgotten knowledge lingering through different minds and bodies.
If someone were to ask me now about the themes in my work, my answer would be: "something about the way we create meaning, about structuring and categorizing the world in an intimate way!" Luckily, that definition, too, might evolve into something else.

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