

Introduction  
Existential Alembics

When invited to represent France at the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale, Patrick Bouchain took everyone by surprise when he decided to transform the exhibition pavilion into a living space for the three-month duration of the event. To that end, he gave carte blanche to the young collective EXYZT, who managed to tuck a fantastical caravansary into the imposing, colonnaded classical temple provided. Dubbed the “Metavilla,” it housed in its tubular scaffolding sleeping quarters, a large kitchen and dining area, a studio, a workspace, and a roof deck with sauna and mini-swimming pool to enjoy the view of surrounding greenery.

Preparations for the project gave the creative team ample occasion to pester the event’s administration. Participants were permitted, for example, to purchase computers and overhead projectors on the Biennale’s budget, but not crockery, stoves, sheets, or pillows. “Why is buying a computer more ‘architectural’ than buying a mattress? Why is projecting images more accessible than sharing a meal?” Once the pavilion was open, a delegate from the group presented the Biennale’s director on a daily basis with a list of guests to be comped in. Since all backers enjoyed free access, Bouchain and his gang included every one of their friends who’d put up so much as one euro. The beleaguered director finally refused to see any further lists and satisfied himself with stopping by the pavilion now and then to take a breather and have a vermouth.

The occupants of the Metavilla stocked up at local shops a stone’s throw away from the Giardini della Venetia where the Biennale was being held; they had bread delivered every morning. They kept house, washed dishes. They had planned programming only for every other week, so as to leave room for the unexpected. “It was an actual home,” Bouchain recalls. “When you walked in, it smelled nice. Tiloch would be cooking, people would be getting up late, still eating breakfast.” Visitors didn’t “take the place seriously” at first glance. “The public was surprised to walk in and see us going about our daily lives. The reaction was often: ‘Is that all there is?’ And then, later: ‘You’re right—that’s all there is!’”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Bouchain and EXYZT, *Construire en habitant* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2011).

I wanted to write a book examining this “all there is” more closely—expecting, of course, not to be taken seriously myself. Talking about where we live, what our living spaces mean in our lives, what they make possible, our aspirations where habitations are concerned: this topic, when not utterly devoid of interest, provokes a certain defiance, as if the simple act of thinking about it threatened us with a fatal dose of middle-classness. I had chronicled the squats of my hometown, Geneva, to accompany a book of photos<sup>2</sup> that revealed their especially rich history, and for my pains, had drawn down upon my head the fury of the Twitter commentariat, who labeled me a Swiss anarchist and claimed there was no need for an “Ikea catalogue of squats.” We insist—and how rightly so!—on the necessity of reappropriating public space, but pit it rather simplistically against a world of domesticity that for many only brings to mind far-from-inspiring images of fearful retreat, couch-potato-fication in fuzzy slippers before the TV, the compulsive hoarding of household appliances and resolute indifference to the world at large. However, doing so reduces housing to either a mere contingency, a practical problem to be resolved, or else a comfy, castrating trap.

And yet, in an era as unforgiving and disorienting as our own, it seems that, on the contrary, there is meaning to be found in starting over from the concrete conditions of our existence, from the acts—barely acts, really—and basic pleasures that keep us in touch with our vital energies: lounging, sleeping, daydreaming, reading, thinking, creating, playing, cooking and eating meals we enjoy, taking pleasure in our solitude or the company of our loved ones—taking pleasure, period. Far away from a social world pervaded by powerlessness, falsehood, animosity, and sometimes even violence, a world of foreclosed horizons, our homes loosen its viselike grip. They let us breathe, explore our desires, simply *be*. Of course, you could rail against individualism, but I rather like the image American architect Christopher Alexander suggests: if someone doesn’t have a space to call their own, expecting them to make a contribution to communal life is like “expecting one drowning man to save another.”<sup>3</sup>

At first, I set out to defend those periods of time when we are unavailable to anyone else, which I for one absolutely require, something that elicits incomprehension or disapproval among my loved

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<sup>2</sup> Julien Gregorio, *Squats: Genève 2002-2012* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Alexander, with Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein, Max Jacobson, Ingrid Fiksdahl-King, and Shlomo Angel, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

ones (cf. Chapter 1). I also wanted to devote a few pages to amending my description of the benefits of domestic seclusion while taking in account the chaos caused by the internet and social networks, spaces where I, like many other people, spend an entirely unreasonable amount of time (Chapter 2).

But some of the most burning issues facing us today also find themselves projected into the home. With the dizzying increase in house prices over the last fifteen years, the quest of lodging has become an undertaking that exposes the majority of the population to the violence of inequality and the power dynamics of oppression. The difficulties of finding a place to live, or at least a decent place, that we each attempt to navigate as best we can, hobble, hinder, and deplete millions of lives (Chapter 3). When we imagine what our lives might look like were space an abundant and accessible commodity, even in large cities, reality certainly leaves something to be desired.

In a less obvious but just as crucial way, something preventing us from putting down roots is not merely the lack of space but of time. The privilege of reverie surrounded by four walls hinges on having a generous amount of time at one's disposal, no longer counting the hours and the minutes. However, we are rigorously subjected to the discipline of a merciless schedule. Worse yet, we have internalized the idea that our time is a passive, uniform commodity to be filled, valorized, made profitable, which keeps us on constant alert, with guilt always waiting to ambush us (Chapter 4).

Nor is it possible to see a dwelling as anything but the site of a fierce power struggle, one that makes preserving balance a basic necessity. Deeming housekeeping a thankless and undignified task, we delegate it to subjugated classes without much concern for the living conditions to which such specialization condemns them. In countries where domesticity has virtually or entirely vanished, this work has fallen to cleaning women, and most importantly, women in general, ever since the figure of the "perfect housewife" was imposed at every level of society in the 19th century (Chapter 5). More broadly speaking, the image of women devoted to managing the domestic sphere—the only place where they could ever blossom and thrive—retains a remarkable import and seemingly self-renewing capacity for influence. It contributes to perpetuating the nuclear family as the only normal, desirable household model, even as lifestyles evolve and just a dash of daring would be enough to forge a new one (Chapter 6).

What remains is discussing the home in its spatial, material dimension. Throughout human history, there has seemed to be a felt need to experiment with portrayals of the ideal dwelling, to project ourselves into imaginary spaces. Our dreams of houses are an affirmation, in the face of all opposition, of a faith in the future; they uphold the possibility of founding the world anew. “We are architects, and architects are optimists,” declare the founders of Rural Studio, where for the last twenty years students have been building homes and public buildings from recycled materials for under-resourced communities in West Alabama’s Black Belt.<sup>4</sup> (I confess I envy them their opportunity; replace “architects” with “journalists,” and the sentiment doesn’t work nearly as well.)

The books we give our children overflow with fabulous edifices; with what fascination, what delight, what an omnipotent feeling they fill sheet after sheet of paper with drawings of walls, windows, a roof, a smoking chimney. Once we grow up, we must usually settle for magazines or interior design shows to nourish our fantasies. We have fewer chances as well to debate the form a pleasant, accessible, and environmentally viable dwelling will take, even as the buildings where we live and work shape a large part of our lives. Thus I have attempted to describe the beginnings of what in my view would be an ideal architecture (Chapter 7).

“The little roof a book makes when left open facedown, spine skyward, is the safest of shelters,” writes Chantal Thomas, and author I was led to more than once in writing this book.<sup>5</sup> I live in a cramped apartment, cluttered and uncomfortable. I am neither a DIY expert nor a great cook (it would take a word stronger than “euphemism” to accurately describe that statement). My capacities to provide concrete hospitality are exceedingly limited. But I would be more than happy if even a few readers were to find in the pages that follow shelter of some sort.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Freear, Elena Barthel, Andrea Oppenheimerdean, and Timothy Hursley, *Rural Studio at Twenty: Designing and Building in Hale County, Alabama* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Chantal Thomas, *Souffrir* (Paris: Payot, 2004).

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The Great Eviction:  
To Live, We Need Space to Live In

Three a.m. on a January morn. Stretched out side by side under a fluffy comforter they slumber, impeccably tucked in, their personal effects well within reach, the very image of conjugal bliss. But the caps they wear are not a quaint touch of vanity their age might explain away: in fact, their bed is slotted into an apartment building lobby on the ground floor of the Rue Commines in the 3rd arrondissement of Paris. In a way, the comfort they have attempted to recreate, the fragile order with which they have been able to surround themselves, only makes their situation more shocking than if they were huddled up in sleeping bags or on a flattened cardboard box. They make even more unavoidable the fact that the something is missing here: a border, a boundary. Something that would protect them from the gazes of passersby, from cold and inclement weather, aggression both accidental and deliberate, theft, dirty pavements, the traffic's roar, noise from the nearby boulevard. This scene is out-of-place, in the literal sense of the word: it belongs in the safety of a bedroom. My eyes should never have beheld it. The contrast between the privacy of a bed and the outside air of a nocturnal urban landscape has given rise to the oneiric images of Winsor McCay's comic strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, whose titular hero always finds himself back within the four solid walls of his family's home every morning<sup>6</sup>; here, it simply points to a disaster that distresses us no end.

The sight of people in the street, a kind of modern pillory, exerts an extraordinary disciplinary force. It spurs those who witness it to wonder not how they could improve their own lot, but how they might keep theirs from taking a turn for the worse. Rather accept everything as is than run the risk of such a fate. But it is also a traumatizing sight because it tears apart the illusion created by the whisperings with which consumerist discourse lulls us. The advertising messages that still saturate our daily lives would have us believe that we move about cocooned by plenty, peace, and safety, needing only to name and fulfill our every last desire, and in order to help us do so, they relentlessly flatter our appetites, our aspirations, our narcissism. Characteristic of this discourse, in Jean Baudrillard's words, is

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Braun, ed. *Winsor McCay: The Complete Little Nemo, 1905-1927* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2014).

“the denial of the economic rationality of commodity exchange under the auspices of a general exemption from payment.”<sup>7</sup> Its mission does not end at simply offloading products onto those who can afford them; it consists of convincing people that capitalism cares for you as a human being, and not just a customer. Of course, the living conditions of many people, even if they still have a roof over their heads, have led them to express doubts about such a claim. Still, few more brutal refutations exist than the sight of someone like yourself tossed out in the street.

We get used to such things without really getting used to them, since really doing so is impossible. We often speak of a house as a second layer of clothes; like clothing—albeit on a different level—it protects, conceals, ensures the well-being of our bodies, offers a modicum of social exposure, and enables a form of expression. Not being able to escape the crowd and its harassments, avoid prying eyes, shut the door behind us, survey a few square feet of which we are absolute sovereigns, breathe, recover, do our business, bathe, cook, store a few prized belongings—not being able to do these things is to lack one of the two necessary layers of clothing.

Of all these privations, being unable to shelter ourselves during the vulnerability of slumber may be the most unbearable. While we may think we are tuning out when turning in at night, we are mistaken, Pascal Dibie remarks. To the contrary, we are joining “the city once more become what it was at its beginnings: an association of sleepers and bedowners.”<sup>8</sup> A city was first and foremost a community whose members showed enough mutual trust to sleep beside one another, pledging to protect as a group the slumber of every individual. American essayist Jonathan Crary also deems this rather intimate business, which entailed a high degree of collective organization, to “stand for the durability of the social.” This theory clashes with our preconceived notions: in school, we skip from prehistory to Athenian democracy or the social contract as the noble mortar holding human beings together in groups. However, in light of this new perspective on what constitutes society, the fact of homelessness becomes the betrayal of a fundamental pact. Crary situates the end of the “paternalistic model of watchfulness” in the 17th century. Before then, he explains, those in power were duty-bound to watch

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard, trans. Barry Smart. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Pascal Dibie, *Ethnologie de la chambre à coucher*, op. cit.

over the sleep of one and all, down to “the lowliest, even the ‘wretched slave’”; afterwards, the right to a peaceful night’s sleep became the privilege of the wealthy. Those who disturbed bourgeois peace and quiet were the very paupers and outcasts once “fully included among the sleepers.”<sup>9</sup>

The continued existence of the homeless amounts to a kind of sacrilege; if we are, despite everything, to allow it to go on, we might at least try to ease their lot as much as possible. In *A Pattern Language*, there is an entry entitled “Sleeping in Public,” in which Christopher Alexander recommends keeping public space stocked with ample benches and creating comfortable places, sheltered from circulation, that might appeal to pedestrians for taking a nap: “If he has no place to go—then, we, the people of the town, can be happy that he can at least sleep on the public paths and benches; and, of course, it may also be someone who does have a place to go, but happens to like napping in the street.”<sup>10</sup>

So enticing is ideal the Alexander outlines that we are tempted us to strive for it, even if the problem of cold or inclement weather remains unsolved, and the degree of societal pacifism required for people to give themselves over to slumber with such unquestioning trust seems nigh unattainable. As we can each see for ourselves—and when Alexander was writing in the 1970s, he himself knew it well—contemporary cities tend resolutely toward the exact opposite.<sup>11</sup> They tolerate neither the spectacle of poverty nor what they deem as laziness. At any rate, they are increasingly designed as functional spaces, places to be passed through that choreograph flow with maximum efficiency, rather than places to make our own that invite stopping, lingering, or living. This is the very evolution that the encampments of the Occupy and Indignados movements tried to put a halt to in 2011, from New York to Madrid.<sup>12</sup>

On these occasions, activists in these movements discovered what life in the streets meant. In New York, the occupiers of Zuccotti Park told journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, “one problem often overshadows everything else, including job loss, the destruction of the middle class, and the reign of the 1%. And that is the single question: *Where am I going to pee?*” As public bathrooms are a rare sight in

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Christopher I, *A Pattern Language*, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Gilles PATÉ and Stéphane Argillet (dir.), *Le Repos du Fakir*, 2003, [www.gilfakir.com](http://www.gilfakir.com).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Max Rousseau, “Le mouvement des immobiles,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, July 2011.

American cities, people are left to their own devices, relieving themselves as best they can and running the risk of legal repercussions if caught in the act. In a report entitled “Criminalizing Crisis,” an aid organization for homeless people recounted the story of a family who, having been on the streets for over a year, finally secured an apartment in 2010. But the day the lease was to be signed, the father of the family missed his appointment with the apartment manager because he had been arrested for “public urination.” The property was rented out to another person. As of March 2011, that family was still seeking lodging. The same report details the case of a pregnant homeless woman who, having been first driven from the museum where she had sought shelter, and then from a bench in front of that same museum, wound up delivering a stillborn child.<sup>13</sup>

None of this is unique to the U.S.: “If only there was somewhere we could go! But wherever we go, we bother people,” observes Wenceslas, one of the Parisian homeless people Claus Drexel follows in his 2014 documentary in *The Edge of the World*. Yet American society seems to surpass all others at blaming you for what it’s done to you. For instance, the city of Tampa, Florida, passed a 2013 ordinance requiring police to arrest anyone caught sleeping or “storing personal effects in a public place.”<sup>14</sup> The most innocent activities, basic bodily functions, the mere presence of homeless people—these are all illegal. On the other hand, there is “no law requiring cities to furnish food, shelter, or bathrooms” to their citizens who lack these. They are simply asked to go away, and if they can do so without leaving a putrid corpse behind—so much the better! Ehrenreich estimates that the rise of such intolerance, which she traces to the early 1980s, paralleled the financialization of the economy, as if abstraction, in victory, had imposed its phobia of the bodies of the poor. The only hint of a change in attitude lies in Utah’s undertaking to furnish all entire homeless population with apartments, after the realization that this would prove cheaper than harassing and imprisoning them.<sup>15</sup> This approach, dubbed Housing First, has earned the Republican state nationwide acclaim.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, “Homeless in America,” TomDispatch.com, October 23, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Terrance Heath, “Utah is ending homelessness by giving people homes,” *Nation of Change*, January 23, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>16</sup> James Surowiecki, “Home free?” *The New Yorker*, September 22, 2014.



For Ehrenreich, the people who truly inspired 2011's Occupy movement were neither Tunisians, Egyptians, nor Spanish Indignados, but homeless Americans and their "tent cities," which have multiplied across the land since 2009.<sup>17</sup> With the crises, but also cut off from welfare, more and more people are losing their homes. And yet the phenomenon is not a new one. During his first term as president (1981-1985), Ronald Reagan slashed the public housing budget by half, which caused more than half a million people to lose their disability benefits: "'Until then,' says Tim Brown, director of Sacramento County's Ending Chronic Homelessness Initiative, 'basically there was no homelessness.'" The rise in home prices did the rest. "We've seen falling wages and rising rents. The two finally collided," explains John Krintz, a former electrician who now lives in a tent.<sup>18</sup>

This "collision" means that a job is no longer any guarantee of a roof over one's head. In the U.S., despite the difficulty in obtaining precise statistical figures, the National Coalition for the Homeless estimated in 2009 that out of three and a half million people who spent extended periods of time out in the streets every year, 19% had steady employment.<sup>19</sup> The same is true of 15% of the France's homeless population.<sup>20</sup> In the summer of 2013, American fast food workers, particularly worried by their low wages, organized a strike of unprecedented scope. Contrary to stereotype, many of them are not high schoolers at a day job, but rather middle-aged adults, often with college degrees and families to support. Most of them rely on government food stamps to survive. "The government steps in and graciously makes up the difference with our tax dollars, thereby excusing management from paying workers enough to keep them and their families, you know, alive," sums up historian Thomas Frank. Among those Frank met while researching his article in North Carolina is Willietta Dukes. She has worked in fast food for sixteen years and raised two children, but she cannot even afford lodging: her grown son now puts her up in his spare room. She tells the story of how, one day, her team manager shared his "favorite

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<sup>17</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, "Homeless in America," art. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Ehrenreich, "Tales of Tent City," *The Nation*, June 22, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> "How many people experience homelessness?" National Coalition for the Homeless, [www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org).

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Rollot, "Un quart des sans-domicile ont un emploi régulier ou un temps partiel," *Le Monde*, April 8, 2014.

stress-reduction technique: every day he goes home and climbs into his hot tub. 'I don't even have a home to go to!'<sup>21</sup> she wails.

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Frank, "Home of the Whopper," *Harper's*, November 2013.