

BEING HOME

You know the future is really happening when you start feeling scared

(Douglas Coupland - Slogans for the 21st Century)

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A reflection by Margarida Saraiva

«Mais si c'était de l'exil, pour la plupart c'était de l'exil à la maison»

Albert Camus

The only measure against the virus is to stay at home.

The role of architecture in the prevention or propagation of pandemics has become a new topic for reflection, as the home, the shelter, takes on a central role in the crisis we are experiencing. Windows, doors, balconies, and terraces have not only acquired different uses, they have also become the stage for human expressions of contact, gratitude or joy.

Furthermore, we are yet to understand the impact of the virus on what the notions of “community” and “home” truly mean for us.

A month and a half ago I was reading Ingo Niermann's text at the CCA archive: “A home serves as a shelter against a world that is shaped by the struggle to pay for that shelter. The bigger our home the more stressed we are to hang on to it—too exhausted to really use it: bigger beds go with less sex and sleep; bigger kitchens with less cooking; bigger living rooms with less socializing; bigger windows with less looking outside; bigger terraces with less being outside. The only home activities that are increasing don't really need space or even deny it: watching television, going online, computer gaming, and meditating. The more importance we give to our home the more it becomes a mere museum of being at home—real estate advertisement doesn't even pretend it's anything else. This museum is empty, missing its crucial piece: us.”

Now that we are all back to that museum (home), the Museum (institution) is still not enough.

In China infected patients and whole families were locked by the authorities inside their homes, in other words, locked from the outside.

In China, any infected family members were removed from home and forced to shelter elsewhere.

Studies from China have shown that 70% of the patients got infected inside their own homes by other family members.

We have seen diaries of husbands taking care of their infected wives inside the home, the wife shut in a room with no contact with the husband other than by phone. Daily meals left at the door of the room. No touching whatsoever.

Home is no longer a safe shelter from the world, and the meaning of the struggle to pay for shelter seems to have vanished overnight. Many of us will not be able to pay for mortgages or rents. At the same time, Home is no longer an empty museum missing a crucial piece. We are back home. But home is the true epicentre of a battleground that seems larger than us, than our families, our cities, our nations (and maybe our world), our political and health systems.

As my flights were cancelled several times during a short stay in Montréal, I had time to enjoy the mountains.



On a mountain near Montréal, away from home
Montréal, January 2020, Photo by Margarida Saraiva

As the flights kept being cancelled and my desire for BEING HOME increased, when I finally got in the airplane, I took a moment to watch the abstract painting forming on the airport runway.



On my way home, I see art everywhere
Toronto, January 2020, Photo by Margarida Saraiva

A man comes and sits right by my side. Is he contagious? Thank God he left the minute the airplane departed.

On my arrival, I found total lockdown. Schools, parks, entertainment facilities, everything had been shut except for basic and emergency services.



The lockdown
Wuhan, February 2020

BEING HOME, I became the cleaner, the cook, the teacher, the wife, and the obsessive consumer of all news regarding Covid-19. Soon, I was the obsessed sanitizer of bodies and surfaces.



Shelter for Covid-19 patients
Wuhan, February 2020

The forces instigating this change are not of a human nature. These forces cannot be seen, touched or heard. The tiniest invisible entity is causing changes whose extent is yet to be fully appreciated. A virus, which knows no boundaries to its interspecies traveling, turned our bodies into its new home.

The invisible makes visible our fragility, our humanity, our equality in the face of death. We are aware that it will be devastating, that it is being devastating, but we are yet unable to see the entire picture.

The invisible entity makes visible, and exacerbates, the fractures of the entire system we live in.



*"Returning home with your disease will not please your parents,
Infecting mom and dad proves you have no conscience"*



"This year a visit home, next year a visit to the grave"

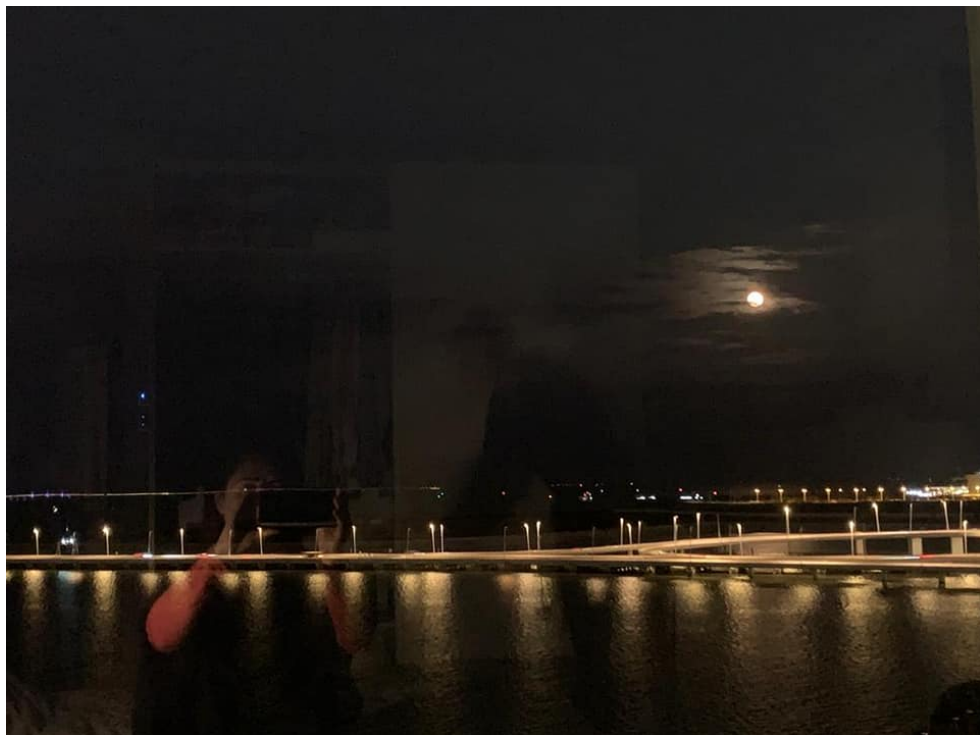


*"Stay at home to prevent infection,
Denounce your in-laws if they come visit"*

I got a runny nose. It might have been the cold. I have decided to lock myself inside my room; I might have been infected during my flight back HOME, it's better to protect all other family members. I finally took a moment to look through my room's big window.



My room, my view. The lockdown turns the sky blue
Macau, February 2020, Photo by Margarida Saraiva



My room, my view. I could finally see the moon
Macau, February 2020, Photo by Margarida Saraiva

In an article that first appeared as “Lo stato d’eccezione provocato da un’emergenza immotivata” [The state of exception brought about by an unfounded emergency] on 26 February, Giorgio Agamben argued that the emergency was groundless and considered the response to the threat of the virus to be disproportionate. By then, I had already seen and read so much information, disinformation and fake news that I was sure the emergency was anything but unfounded. Living in China, we saw this coming... Not the virus emerging in Wuhan, but its coming spread.



Douglas Coupland - Slogans for the 21st Century
Montréal, January 2020, Photo by Margarida Saraiva

The discourse which trivialized the gravity of the virus, comparing it to the common flu, and seeing it has hardly different from its yearly iterations, proved to be dangerous. The state of fear and collective panic experienced in China now reached Iran, Italy, and the rest of the world was to follow.



The war

Otto Dix, 1924 (detail of the work in exhibition at Montréal Fine Arts Museum)

Montréal, January 2020, Photo by Margarida Saraiva

The limitations to freedoms imposed by governments were finally accepted in the name of a desire for safety. Countries that chose not to adopt these measures at once actually saw them claimed by citizens. Agamben failed to see the virus. Just like in China a month prior, 300 persons were now dying in Italy every day.

China was able to quarantine tens of millions and, some weeks before, we had all wondered whether the US, Canada, Europe or Australia would be able to enforce the same measures if the same massive epidemic reached them, only to confirm that states of emergency were indeed declared in many nations.

I still remember the advertising campaign at the beginning of this outbreak. *Itália no se ferma! Milano no se ferma! Roma no se ferma! Venice no se ferma!* [Italy does not close! Rome does not close! Venice does not close!]. A few days later all citizens were asked to stay home and Italy was closed, brought to full internal shut down, but also shut from the outside world, as other countries began imposing measures to close their borders.

Locked inside their homes, Italians sang and played from balconies together with neighbours, while thousands of deaths, overburdening an already overwhelmed health system, proved that BEING HOME was and is the only weapon against the virus, which hit the Italian hospitals in Lombardy and other regions like a tsunami.

In Wuhan residents shouted from their windows to boost morale in the quarantined city: *Wuhan jiyao! Wuhan stay strong! Wuhan stay strong!* But as long as this was in China, it was too far away for concern.

In Portugal, citizens joined to clap their hands from windows or balconies to express their gratitude to health workers fighting this battle on the first line of defence without masks, gloves or sufficient self-protection equipment.

Windows, doors, balconies, terraces became the central stage for the human expression of contact, gratitude or joy. When all doors are locked, large or small windows and balconies serve not only to look outside, they become the only vehicle for collective, simultaneous expression of feelings. And why are feelings important? Because, as Portuguese neuroscientist António Damasio proposes in his new book, *The Strange Order of Things*, emotions are involuntary actions, while feelings are movement, they push us forward, in terms of thinking and in terms of ACTION.

Again Ingo Niermann's text comes to mind: *"No boat or home can be completely shielded. Storms make them shake (the higher up we are in a ship or a house, the more it moves), natural catastrophes (hurricane, ice storm, earthquake) might affect the supply of food, energy, or the internet, and a sudden attack (robbery, war, revolution) might make it impossible for us to escape"*.

As Slavoj Žižek put it: *"We're all in the same Boat now - and it's the Diamond Princess."* On a boat we are usually more aware of the fragility of our relationship with the environment and the forces of nature. Space is precious and we are all confronted with the vastness and strangeness of the sea, the unknown, the unseen.

In China, the crisis brought us back blue skies and in Italy the dolphins could finally return home to the canals. Signs of what our world could be, if we would just slow down.

I am back to work. My temperature is measured every day; a mask and daily health declaration have become compulsory.

Contracts are cancelled. Exhibitions postponed. The Museum's plans are remade. Artists are left without an option but to stay at home as anything involving travelling is suspended. Speakers are left with no option but to stay at home. There will be no conferences, lectures or talks. Teachers will stay at home. Children will not come for workshops... Our way of working is being revised.

One or two weeks later, other cultural institutions and museums from around the world begin closing.

We are paralyzed again. We will revise our work again, but now the dialogue with the pandemic extends to climate change, over-policing (streets, cyberspace or cultural production), free access to health care and basic housing conditions.

What can and should we do, we who shut ourselves at home or are requested to stay home? Do we want self-isolation to become just a selfish defence, a gesture that after all will reinforce separation from the community? What can and should we do as cultural institutions that have shut down? How can we foster community by BEING HOME? How to create and produce social change by BEING HOME?

José Gil highlights the paradox: *"(...) we are told that the fight against the epidemic will only be successful if we combine all individual efforts, if we act in solidarity and awareness of the common belonging to the community. And yet, we are urged to isolate ourselves, to stay at home, to maintain the required social distance (...)"*, not to kiss, not to hug, not to touch.

Nations are closed, cities are closed, and we are closed at HOME, be it the physical space of the house, the city, the nation, or the world. We are in the same boat. We live in the same time, in the same world.

BEING HOME for survival or for death... Italian authorities have declared that patients above 80 years old will be left to die... either in the hospital or at home... Others may die from lack of conditions to quarantine, be it in Hong Kong's cage homes, Brazil's favelas, or African and Southeast Asian slums.

The corona virus places everyone at risk and in danger, regardless of wealth or status, making us all equal, as highlighted by José Gil, not in the face of death, but in the face of the right to live, the right to health and justice. And I would add: the right to free healthcare and proper housing.



Hong Kong Cage Homes
Photo by Banny Lam / soCo

Here, we must distinguish between living space, house and home. The living space is any place where you live, be it under a bridge, a blanket or the arcade of a city building; a house is a physical structure, a construction, the work of architects, engineers, builders, masons, carpenters.

Home seems to be something entirely different.

Home is the laughter, the smile or the voice of your friends, your parents' old smile always waiting when you arrive, the laughter of the children around the house.

Home is a hug. Home is the scent of a loved one. Your body is my home.

Home can be the sofa at the corner of a room, a bookshelf with all the books which contain the world, a bed to rest, a closet with favourite objects, a love letter.

Home is the view from my room when the sky is blue, the mountain where I lie every morning, the beach or just the wave in which I swim.

To get home you have to walk. Home is the journey.

Home is our freedom to speak, to gather, to move, to travel.

Home is also the movie theatre, the concert hall, the exhibition, the conference, the children's workshop.

Home is the canals of Venice for the swans, the lakes in Rome for the ducks, the port of Cagliari for the dolphins, the entire ocean for the fish or a tree branch for the birds.

For the virus, home is the patient's body. Your body is my home.

Home is without ceilings or walls. No foundations. Not even doors.

My friend Rodrigo cannot stay home. He works at the shelters of Albergues de Lisboa. He takes care of the homeless. Together they planted an orchard. He takes them to theatres, to museums. If he stays home, how will they eat, drink, or rest?

My husband's grandfather is in a home for the elderly and does not understand why no one visits him. Why are visits forbidden?

My friend Rita is a teacher. She works in a school where some of the students eat only a meal per day. The one provided by the school. The school is closed.

My kids are still at Home, dreaming of the outside world. I am outside, dreaming of BEING HOME.



Dreaming of the outside world
Macau, February 2020, Photo by Margarida Saraiva

As a reaction to fear and isolation, a new horizon of collaboration is being created by independent movements. Staythefuckhome and Antivirus.2020 are only two examples. Staythefuckhome is a global movement claiming that “governments are only slowly implementing measures to control the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and containing the COVID-19

pandemic. Slow reactions, public appeasement policies, and their urge to stabilize the economy have kept them from taking the measures needed to protect millions from this disease. However, it is not only the government's burden to bear. It is time for us, as citizens of this earth, to take action now and do our part in fighting COVID-19". <https://staythefuckhome.com/>

Antivirus.2020, another global movement, states that *"the majority of us don't have a direct connection with people living on the other side of the planet, but the spread of Covid19 is showing us how much the world is actually connected. Discrimination has no place on the uber-globalised world we live in 2020: we are one people, so why not learn from each other instead of dwelling on our differences?"* The movement was created by architects and designers who live in Italy, China and elsewhere. They firmly believe that people bond over shared experiences. The mentors urge people to share their quarantine related experiences with humour, courage, and resilience: things they notice about their routine, while being stuck at home, tips and hacks, cooking recipes, mood boosters and so on... The group welcomes short videos showing what people's lives look like while stranded at home.

Precisely, remaining active and concerned with others, as well as with the social life of which we are a part, will help to overcome the fear of death and the state of panic. Contagion comes unexpectedly and at random. Anyone, stranger or family, can infect us. Either with the virus or with paralyzing fear.

However, Staythefuckhome ignores the homeless and all those who must quarantine in extremely unfavourable conditions, while Antivirus.2020 allows for the new kind of self-surveillance which is to be avoided when BEING HOME.

The value of media companies is rising in the stock market. All others are crashing... Wherever we might be we are well aware of the fire walls.

Other projects may as well serve as an inspiration for ACTION.

"A home for a hero" is a movement created in Portugal to connect owners of vacant houses with medical staff in need of temporary shelter, and who might be afraid of contaminating their families. This is an action which can be replicated elsewhere.

Developed by Beijing-based studio People's Architecture Office (PAO), "Plug in Houses" is a system of prefabricated panels that "plugs into" an existing structure, enabling the inclusion of a new kitchen, bathroom, and living room. The panels are angular, white additions that affix to the sides and ceilings of crumbling ruins and can be constructed in a day with hand tools. Their modernity seems to purposefully clash with the gray wood, brick, and terra cotta. But this is a good reminder of what creativity and technology can do. Because building a Plugin is cheaper, faster, and more efficient than constructing a full-scale house, it also allows old and new to peacefully coexist on the same lot. Is there a role for this system, or others, during this pandemic in places like Brazil's favelas, or African and Southeast Asian slums?

These two ACTIONS are examples of methodologies that can be replicated to have an impact on a larger number of people and in different contexts.

BEING HOME, *we know that the future has come when we feel scared:* of the virus, of the overall state of panic, of the danger of being confined to a smartphone as the only means of receiving information from the outside world, and of the suspension of rights by state of emergency declarations.

HOME is no longer a place of safety, neither is it an empty museum. Home is the prison and the cemetery, a space of confinement and confinement will save us, or not.

How can we refuse to passively obey anti-social self-isolation? How to claim back our home, our city, our nation and the openness, which we have strived for so long to build, of being able to travel across the larger home that globalization has created? How can we burst the bubble and expand the limits of space and time? How can we expand our world beyond the rooms to which we are confined? How can care and active collaboration expose the ridicule of xenophobia or nationalist solutions to the crisis we are collectively facing? How to avoid the opposite of life? How to prevent lethargy, rigidity or paralysis from taking over our life while BEING HOME?



Bring Down The Walls

Phil Collins, 2018, Photo by Margarida Saraiva

Organized in May 2018 in New York City by artist Phil Collins, Creative Time, The Fortune Society, and over 100 collaborators, *Bring Down The Walls* was a three-part public art project which turned an unconventional lens on the prison industrial complex through house music and nightlife.



Hot Spot

Mona Hatoum, 2013

Mona Hatoum's *Hot Spot*, a cage-like globe lit by red neon light, suggests that borders are political hot spots and we are all part of a "world continually caught up in conflict and unrest"

Margarida Saraiva

March, 2020