

THE ELEMENTS OF THE HOUSE

The house is the junction of	mountains
dreams	abysses
illusions	metamorphosis
death	flowers
birth	odors
mutations	spices
feasts	clouds
contemplation	stones
rituals	rivers
conflicts	the wind
confrontations	the sun
destruction	the stars
execution	the moon
love	the soft
hate	the metallic
fury	the stony
memory	the woody
desires	the glassy
wounds	the crystalline
satisfaction	gestures
paralysis	faces
intimacy	movement
distance	penetration
ecstasy	openings
mourning	burials
density	isolation
absurdity	protection
resurrection	wombs
contentment	walls
lust	intestines
sleep	spheres
wakening	cubes
coldness	voids
flesh	squares
the morning	transparencies
the day	transcendence
the night	plains
light	depressions
anticipation	erectons
the spring	the skies
the winter	the subterranean
the summer	the horizon
the autumn	infinity
fire	
ice	
water	
earth	
flames	

R.A., New York, 1972

Fig.1. Poem by Raimund Abraham Source: Brigitte Groihofer (ed.), *Raimund Abraham: [Un]built* (Vienna/New York, 1996), 62.

The Concept of Appropriation in Collective Housing Design

Understanding Dwelling as a Poetic Practice

Nevena Novaković

Dwelling and a Collective Form

The enthusiasm of the twentieth-century architecture debate on housing evokes nostalgia. The relation between space and privacy, collectivism, emancipation, identification (to name just a few), were discussed extensively and in detail. This essay is motivated by a sense of emptiness where architecture theory or even the philosophy of housing design previously existed. An illustrative example of this thesis is the contemporary architecture culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the lack of theory is followed by an extensive production of collective housing, dominated by the

demands of the housing market economy, marginalizing the human need for meanings and integration in a wider urban environment. In this essay the importance of *reviving* the architectural interest in the appropriation concept in the context of collective housing design is argued.

In 'Preface to the Study of the Habitat of the "Pavillon"', published in 1966, Henri Lefebvre questioned why eighty per cent of the French population preferred to live in detached houses (*pavillon* in French).¹ It was a period in modern history in which the concepts of collectivism and community were perceived as imperative for prosperity and welfare, both in Eastern and Western Europe. If there was a dominant housing ideology, it was oriented opposite to individualism. Therefore, Lefebvre's question could be formulated in other ways: What was wrong with collective housing as a dominant housing model of the time, and not only in France? Why was dwelling not identified with the collective form?

The collective housing ensembles, usually called *mass housing* or *housing estates*, are probably the most tangible result of the modernist approach to urbanization. The general image of the form comes from the neat geometrical composition of high-rise towers and elongated slabs in a generous open and usually green space. The modernist collective form, though completely different in many locations around the world, is nonetheless always strangely familiar. The applied 'compositional approach', as architect Fumihiko Maki named it, implies a properly functional, visual, spatial and sometimes symbolic relationship of buildings tailored individually.² It is a static urban composition made with the tendency to complete the formal statement. This thesis resonates with Lefebvre's answer to the question of collective form error, closely associated with the post-war modernist mass housing schemes. Through completeness, geometric rigidity and urban form repetitiveness, the produced urban and architectural space does not lend itself to appropriation, that is, the creative practices of dwelling that comprise the everyday activities and meanings that transform space.

In this essay several writings of Henri Lefebvre concerning the relation of space and the everyday practices of appropriation, understood as the essence of dwelling, are interpreted. It offers two methodological readings of the appropriation concept in the context of collective housing design. The first is a reminder of the explanation of dwelling as the practice of human self-realization through space. In its context, the collective form is beyond the spatial resolution but enables the beginning of the creative act of space modifications that allows people to feel at home. The second is rendering the appropriation concept as the conceptual tool for reading the existing dwelling space transformation done by residents. It is about learning through appropriation narratives about the space affordances for the physical and emotional claiming of dwelling space.

Dwelling Is Not a Function

Henri Lefebvre's studies on the dwelling are associated with the research of the Institut de Sociologie Urbaine in Paris (ISU),³ but also with close encounters with architects, planners and artists during the 1960s and 1970s. The research that the Institute carried out considered interesting thematic dichotomies, such as the relation of everyday life and urbanization processes. It resulted in a large number of publications of great scientific influence, such as the *L'Habitat pavillonnaire* of 1966.⁴ In his in-depth research on Lefebvre, Łukasz Stanek points out that the ISU studies on dwelling were important to Lefebvre's development of the theory of the production of space.⁵ Moreover, they were important in his understanding of the production of space as not limited to the domain of bureaucrats and planners, but as also taking place in everyday human practices.

The ISU studies on dwelling in detached houses and collective housing were closely related to modernist architecture culture and the planning practice embraced by the state. Lefebvre was critical of functionalist urbanism, seen through the pre-war Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Modern (CIAM) ideology of the functional city and its post-war technocratic

application. His position is clearly explained in the publication *Utopie expérimentale: Pour un nouvel urbanisme* of 1961.⁶ The text is about his reading of the project of the new modern city for 30 000 inhabitants in the Furttal Valley, near Zurich.

According to Łukasz Stanek's research, Lefebvre saw a double error in the design approach to this project. On the one hand, he considered the sociological theory of universal human needs, integrated operatively in the design, as simplified. The list of human needs presented was contradictory to his understanding of the dialectical nature of needs, which are specific to a particular social and cultural group but are by no means the sum of the needs of individual group members. For example, the need for security implies the need for the unforeseen, the need for information also means the need for surprise, and the need for privacy implies the need for numerous social contacts.⁷

On the other hand, Lefebvre was critical about the relation between the sociological theory of needs and the spatial organization of the project design.⁸ It was based on the literal transposing of the list of twelve human needs to the seven levels of a sociospatial organization. This approach implied that the correspondence of hierarchical organization of space to specific social groups would lead to the satisfaction of universal human needs. For Lefebvre, each of these levels of space, such as the neighbourhood and district, articulated the technocratic abstraction of space that is supposed to contain social life like an empty box.

In the famous text 'A City Is Not a Tree', Christopher Alexander explained the functionalist organization of the city in a very similar manner. Pointing to the sociospatial totality brought about by the hierarchy of levels, the 'tree structure' was described: a branched mathematical structure in which 'no piece of any unit is ever connected to other units, except through the medium of that unit as a whole'.⁹ Alexander emphasized the absence of urban rich-

ness and complexity caused by the neat spatial separation of functions and human activities. In other words, the functional city deprives its residents of the experience of overlap and multiplicity of activities.

Lefebvre referenced Alexander and concluded that the modern city based on the tree structure leads to social segregation.¹⁰ He accepted Alexander's theory as a valid argument against the spatial determinism that rests on the functional zoning and hierarchical organization of urban space. Therefore, it can be argued that collective housing incorporated into the city tree structure was from the outset preordained to fail, due to the spatial separation of homogeneous sociospatial units and to the absence of urban complexity in public space.

Dwelling Is a Social Practice on Many Scales

If dwelling should not be understood exclusively as an urban function, and residential space not as a separated territory, what would be a good starting points for rethinking the architectural space of dwelling? Lefebvre turns our attention from formal speculations to the anthropological understanding of dwelling. For the answer about 'a humanly significant spatial order',¹¹ we should not search inside the form itself. According to Lefebvre, we should be looking into the essence of human activities and experiences that spatial form needs to embrace, support and enable. To conceive the *habitat*, we should be understanding the *habiting*, or more precisely, the dwelling.

In Lefebvre's words, habitat is something of a pseudo-concept.

Toward the end of the nineteen century, urban thought (if it can be characterized as such), strongly and unconsciously reductive, pushed the term 'habiting' aside, literary enclosed it within parentheses. It opted instead for 'habitat', a simplified function, which limited the 'human being' to a handful of basic acts: eating, sleeping, and reproducing. These elementary functional acts can't even be said to be animal. Animality is

much more complex in its spontaneity. . . . Habitat, ideology and practice, had even repressed the elementary characteristics of urban life, as noted by a very shortsighted ecology. These included the diversity of ways of living, urban types, patterns, cultural models, and values associated with the modalities and modulations of everyday life. Habitat was imposed from above as the application of a homogeneous global and quantitative space, a requirement that 'lived experience' allow itself to be enclosed in boxes, cages, or 'dwelling machines'.¹²

In 'Preface to the Study of the Habitat of the "Pavillon"', Lefebvre explains the several fundamental theses of his understanding of dwelling. First, dwelling is an *anthropological fact*. That means anthropological in essence and not in terms of the subject of inquiry of anthropological sciences. The material facts of settling on or detaching from the ground, becoming rooted or uprooted, living here or there, and consequently leaving, are all inherent to what it is to be human.¹³ Understanding dwelling as an anthropological fact means that it cannot be separated as just a distinct human activity related to specialized space.

Further, the dwelling is an *open place*. Although there is the general character of the individuals that make up the human race, every society through space and time is characterized by changeable sociospatial relations. Those relations mediate *the social practice of habitation*, such as proximity and distance, closeness and separation, intimacy and estrangement, between the individuals and groups. Therefore, the invention and discovery of modes of habitation must always remain possible.¹⁴ Moreover, the dwelling should not be seen as an individual activity related to determining the small-scale territory. The practice of habitation comprises human activities and experiences in the function of personal self-realization but also *relates to multiple scales* of social processes. The dwelling must be thought of as social practice rooted in spatial continuity.

Finally, the dwelling has a *spatial dimension* that can be seen as ‘material habitation’ consisting of moveable or immovable objects.¹⁵ Lefebvre further explains that the material artefacts do exist objectively, but at the same time, they are always employed for signifying the relations that mediate social practice. This means that spatial patterns of movable and immovable properties mediate physical relations between people, separate them, or bring them together. They form a social organization of everyday life through a spatial configuration in which we live and through which we are moving. However, at the same time, they represent social relations in symbolic terms. Therefore, the dwelling form is a ‘double system: palpable and verbal, “objectal” and semantic’.¹⁶ The relationship between the two domains is important and should be studied.

Lefebvre considered two (utopian) architectural projects eloquent in the context of unity between the architectural and urban experience, and inter-relations of social process at various scales.¹⁷ Those are Constant Nieuwenhuys’s *New Babylon* of 1974 – the future city concept with the playful and creative human being at the centre, and Ricardo Bofill’s *The City in Space* project of 1970 – with its large-scale multifunctional neighbourhood. The architect envisioned the new typology of urban housing, organized by strict rules of geometry and facilitating spontaneous living, choices of modes of life, work and free time. ‘Structures at once complex and flexible, capable of rapidly assimilating and even facilitating the changes of everyday historic reality.’¹⁸ The projects share the vision of continuous common space and overlapping places of everyday encounters and unknown situations.

Dwelling Is a Poetic Practice

Dwelling in a detached house is the closest to what Lefebvre identified as a *poetical practice*. According to the author, this is where modern man has the opportunity to dwell creatively, to organize the space to his tastes and patterns. Contrary to collective housing that is rigid and inflexible, often impossible and always prohibited to convert, a detached house is a

malleable space and it lends itself to rearrangement. It allows the family group and its members to appropriate to some extent the conditions of their existence. They can alter, add or subtract, superimpose their ideas on what is provided.¹⁹

Lefebvre relates the concept of poetical practice to dwelling following Martin Heidegger's teaching on fundamental acts of building, dwelling, thinking.²⁰ Associated with the Greek word *poiētikos* in Heidegger's theory, the dwelling is creative and productive, and therefore the fundamental feature of the human condition. It is not an accidental form or a determined function.²¹ Furthermore, Lefebvre translated the understanding of dwelling poetically to the more analytical concept of *appropriation*, in his words one of the most important things handed down to us by centuries of philosophical discussion.²² As such, appropriation is the reverse of domination, and it has a dimension of resistance or practising the right to the city.

For an individual, for a group, to inhabit is to appropriate something. Not in the sense of possessing it, but as making it an oeuvre, making it one's own, marking it, modelling it, shaping it. This is the case with individuals and with small groups like families, and it is also true for big social groups that inhabit a city or a region. To inhabit is to appropriate space, in the midst of constraints, that is to say, to be in a conflict – often acute – between the constraining powers and the forces of appropriation.²³

Therefore, appropriation is the open-ended practice that modifies both the physical and the symbolic components of space. Like any creative act, it has an affective dimension and can be related to personal and group identification. To appropriate is to engage cultural practices, representations, perceptions and feelings at a personal and social level. To dwell is to express oneself through spatial elements and form, activities and meanings attached to space, in so doing participating in the production of space and in establishing the social relations through space. It is a dialectical concept,

positioning the dwelling practice as mediating between the spatial capacities of what is given and the cultural significations that are needed to be brought forward.

The Architecture of Poetic Dwelling

Lefebvre was not alone in his criticism of modernist architecture or functional planning. Critique and reevaluation of technocratic abstraction of space came from theorists and practitioners of architecture, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. The new generation of CIAM members, known as Team 10, was concerned with grounding modernist architecture in the experience of everyday life and city narratives. The housing projects and theoretical considerations of Alison and Peter Smithson, and of Candilis-Josic-Woods, for example, were immersed in considerations of the human experience of place through movement and associations.

In the same discourse, we could put forward the underappreciated design approach by modernist architect Juraj Neidhardt, who spent his life practising architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Coming from the architecture studio of Peter Behrens and Le Corbusier, Neidhardt developed a distinctive anthropological approach to modern architecture, rooted in dwelling narratives and the housing culture of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The principles of oriental architecture and urbanism, which he found in Bosnia and Sarajevo, derive from the philosophy 'deeply social'.²⁴ Neidhardt posited the spatial continuity of dwelling by detailed mapping, drawing and an in-depth research of space and everyday activities from the scale of the city to that of furniture and objects of everyday use. The author recognized the function of each of them in the social life of the traditional urban neighbourhood (*mahala*), the principle he called the 'neighbourhood cult'.²⁵ He turned this knowledge of housing culture and the relation of architecture to everyday narratives to the modern expression in architecture and urbanism.

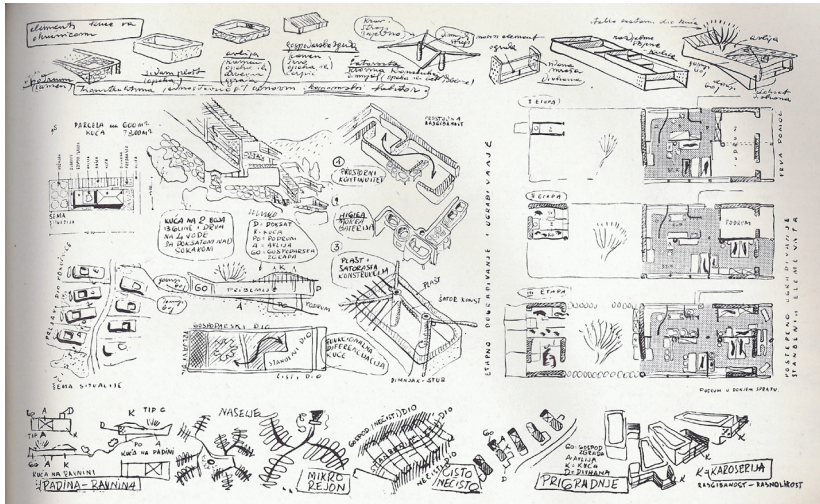


Fig.1. Utilization of traditional architectural elements in modern architecture. Drawings by Juraj Neidhardt. Source: Dušan Grabrijan and Juraj Neidhardt, *Arhitektura Bosne i put u savremeno* (Ljubljana, 1957), 237.



Fig.2. Housing project Koševska dolina in Sarajevo by Juraj Neidhardt, 1967. Photo of a model Source: 'Juraj Neidhardt: Sarajevo', *Arhitektura Urbanizam* 47 (1967), 35-36.

There are also inspiring collective housing designs that considered appropriation as an explicit design method, usually along with the participation of future inhabitants. Project PREVI (*Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda*) is an experimental neighbourhood collectively designed by a group of avant-garde architects in Lima (Peru) in 1960. In contrast to modernist large-scale gestures, the PREVI project experimented with small-scale and high-density housing that was open to future transformations by residents. It was a pioneering attempt to reconcile the conflicting forces of informal growth and top-down planning.²⁶

In the same light, Lucien Kroll's iconic *La Mémé* building for student housing of 1970 can be mentioned, influenced by Lefebvrian theory and the Situationist International group.²⁷ Beside the pioneering co-design approach, the architect envisioned the new living ensemble as an open structure that would support the encounters between the students and the urban environment on a larger scale and accommodate the future modifications needed over time. The approach is defined by Kroll as *incrementalism*. Both examples can be seen as the precedents to the contemporary practice of famous architecture studio Elemental, identified today with the concept of incremental design.

However, it is important to note the very recent research conclusions concerning the architecture of appropriation. In the longer-term outcomes, the quality of the dwelling environment can be compromised by unregulated inhabitants' modifications, as happened with the famous Quinta Monroy neighbourhood.²⁸ Therefore, the continuity of negotiations of views, actions and experiences embedded in a cultural context is important in the life of the housing community, even after the architectural design process is formally over.



Fig.4. Spatial appropriation of collective housing, Borik neighbourhood in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014. Research on the appropriation of the open space in collective housing was done during 2014. The results of detailed mapping, photographing and questionnaire were related to neighbourhood form and configuration. Photo by Nevena Novaković

Appropriation as a Housing Design Concept

Lefebvre's theory of dwelling as a poetic practice invites us to centre architectural imagination on the living body and everyday practice. The design of collective housing can be inspired by the recognition of dwelling as a creative and productive practice of space modelling. In that context, the collective form should be supportive of the appropriation experience rather than imposing other experiences. The goal of appropriation-friendly design is the empowerment of people and communities to project their thoughts, emotions and actions towards the residential space on different scales, and to make a connection with space. This is design that is not oriented only towards the economic, technological and demographic side of the housing problem, but also the idea of poetic dwelling. As the referenced architectural projects illustrate, the idea is not new, but marginalized and underdeveloped for different cultural circumstances.

More operatively, we can define several principles of collective form design, learning from Lefebvre's theory. As a spatial unity, the collective form should not be sharply separated from the environment at large. The porous and ambiguous boundaries of the collective form can simultaneously provide the integrity of the whole and the feeling of environment continuity and the integration to a city territory. In the same context, the collective form should not be composed by only employing built form. On the contrary, the open space is an equally essential constituent of form, providing the continuity of dwelling space to multiple different scales. Furthermore, the collective form should not be associated with only one function or human activity. Form needs to support the experience of overlap, multiplicity, even ambiguity concerning the activities that take place in the space. As a spatial unity, it should not be identified with a distinct social group. The form needs to support the co-presence of different individuals and groups, residents and non-residents of the neighbourhood. Finally, the space that form is organizing should be soft and, in a sense, unfinished. Pliable to creative dwelling practices, to the appropriation of inner and

outer space, providing in that way the ambiguity and negotiation of public and private, individual and collective.

In addition, the theory of appropriation can be considered as an analytical theory. That means it can be translated into analytical concepts for identification and interpretation of spatial modifications, including the open space between the buildings. It is possible to create architectural representation methods for the most straightforward and easily observable forms that occur in residential spaces on different scales. Information about what is transformed and how, of transformation position and scale, can be used for rethinking the collective form configuration, specifically and in general.

Most of the collective housing ensembles built dominantly in the 1970s in Bosnia and Herzegovina have never undergone an urban and architectural renewal. They are a legacy of large-scale social effort to meet the urgent demand for quality housing in former Yugoslavian cities. Now 50 to 60 years old, they also stand for the beauty and unattractiveness of modernist endeavours, the joy and unsatisfied needs of their residents. Their peculiarities derive from the blending of the original large-scale design and the accumulation of small-scale traces of inhabitation. These collective housing ensembles necessitate renewal and adaptation to new requirements, but also the appreciation of their diverse architectural values. Nevertheless, they are rich in appropriation and from them we can learn to design and build new poetic neighbourhoods.

- 1 Henri Lefebvre, 'Preface to the Study of the Habitat of the "Pavillon"', in: Stuart Elden, Elizabeth Lebas and Eleonore Kofman (eds.), *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings* (New York, 2003), 130-133.
- 2 Fumihiko Maki, *Investigations in Collective Form* (Saint Louis, MO, 1964), 6.
- 3 Lefebvre was a cofounder of the Institute in 1963 and its president until 1973. Its contemporary successor is Le Centre de recherche sur l'habitat (CRH), currently located at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Val de Seine.
- 4 Le Centre de Recherche sur l'Habitat (CRH), crh.archi.fr/spip.php?page=inc-english&lang=en&id_article=13.
- 5 Lukasz Stanek, *Henry Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research and the Production of Theory* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
- 6 Henri Lefebvre, 'Utopie expérimentale: pour un nouvel urbanisme', *Revue française de sociologie* 2-3 (1961), 191-198.
- 7 Stanek, *Henry Lefebvre on Space*, op. cit. (note 5), 101.
- 8 Lefebvre cited in: *ibid.*, 95.
- 9 Christopher Alexander, 'A City Is Not a Tree', in: Michael W. Mehaffy (ed.), *A City Is Not a Tree: 50th Anniversary Edition* (White Salmon, WA: Sustasis Press, 2016 [1965]), 10.
- 10 Stanek, *Henry Lefebvre on Space*, op. cit. (note 5), 105.
- 11 Maki, *Investigations*, op. cit. (note 2), 29.
- 12 Henri Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*, translated by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003 [1970]), 81.
- 13 Lefebvre, 'Preface', op. cit. (note 1), 123.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 124.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, 126.
- 17 Kuch Upendra Patel, *Realizing Henri Lefebvre: Ideas of Social Space in Lucien Kroll's La Mémé, Brussels 1969-1972 and Bernard Tchumi's Parc De La Villette, Paris 1982-1987* (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2016), available online at: deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/kshpatel_1.
- 18 Ricardo Bofill web page: ricardobofill.com/projects/city-in-the-space/.
- 19 Lefebvre, 'Preface', op. cit. (note 1), 130.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 122.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*, 130.
- 23 Lefebvre cited in: Stanek, *Henry Lefebvre on Space*, op. cit. (note 5), 87.

- 24 Dušan Grabrijan and Juraj Neidhardt, *Arhitektura Bosne i put u savremeno* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, NR Bosna i Hercegovina, NR Slovenija, 1957), 150.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 26 Architectuul web page: architectuul.com/architecture/previ.
- 27 Patel, *Realizing Henri Lefebvre*, op. cit. (note 17).
- 28 David O'Brien and Sandra Carrasco, 'Contested Incrementalism: Elemental's Quinta Monroy Settlement Fifteen Years On', *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 10 (2021), 263-273.