

ETH Studio Jan De Vylde
universum carrousel journey

Seven Questions

Ruby Press



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The background is composed of four large, solid-colored quadrants: green in the top-left, blue in the top-right, black in the bottom-left, and red in the bottom-right. A white, curved, wedge-like shape is positioned in the center, overlapping the green, blue, and black quadrants. Two thin white lines intersect diagonally across the composition, one from the top-left towards the bottom-right and another from the top-right towards the bottom-left, creating a sense of dynamic movement.

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Eva Prats (1965, Spain) is an architect and professor. She is the co-founder of Flores & Prats with Ricardo Flores, an office dedicated to the confrontation of theory and academic practice with design and construction activity. They have worked on reoccupations of old structures, as well as on neighbors' participation in the design process of urban public spaces, and on social housing and its capacity to create community. Their work has been presented in numerous exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale (2014, 2016, 2018) and "What Where: Crossing boundaries in the architecture of Sala Beckett" exhibition at the Roca London Gallery. Prats is an associate professor of Architecture and Urban Planning at ETSAB Barcelona and at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology campus in Barcelona, since 2014 and was guest professor at ETH Zurich from 2019 to 2021.

As these 7 questions have been asked in an academic environment, I thought I would develop them within this context. The school is a place to ask and to be asked, so I would like to relate these 7 questions to a conversation started with the students of my studio during last spring semester at ETH.

Our studio is called *Building Communities* and deals with collective housing and urban rehabilitation. During the first weeks of the studio, we work with the urban context, looking for a place to locate collective housing, to build a new community, and we arrive at the development of one of the housing units.

Last semester, the lockdown arrived after a few weeks of in-person classes, coinciding with the moment in which the exercise to develop the housing units had begun. So, all of us were confined to our homes, testing our houses, some of us moving furniture, making room for a drawing table or searching for a place to talk with students during our working sessions. With my assistants, Annina Meier and Guillaume Guisan, we thought it would be a good moment to ask the students to reflect on their intense domestic experience. We thought that these reflections could have an impact on their proposals. To give time to these thoughts we asked them to write them down, so that they could become a register of the unprecedented moment we were living in and share it with the studio.

1

So, the first question is the one that my assistants and I posed to the students:

How is staying at home for so many hours affecting your perception of the house you live in?

When we received their responses to the questions, I found them very personal and rich in insight into the relationship we all have with the closest space that protects us. I enjoyed them, probably because they were written whilst living in an extraordinary situation, not so easy for some of us. Their feelings intensified their perceptions, their thoughts sharpened; this might well be the state of mind from which to discover things.

Their comments stayed on my mind and led me to raise other questions that were not yet fully enunciated. So, when I received this invitation from Jan I thought it could be an opportunity to finally enunciate them. I would like to read just some fragments of their reflections, and the questions that they opened to me.

2

One of the students, Takuma, had to move back home to Tokyo and from there he explained to us:

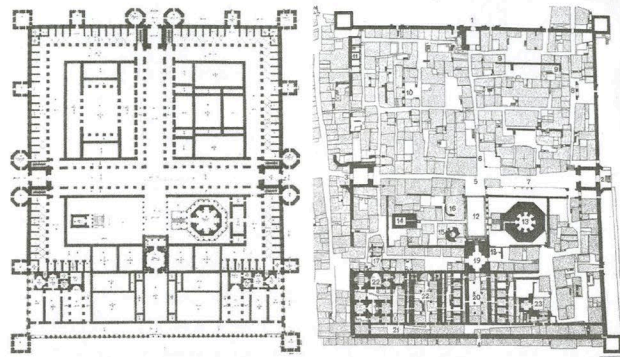
"Through the long stay in my apartment, I started to perceive it as a small town. As I cannot go out easily, my world has shrunk, which means that I perceived the next room as if it was a different district. It helps me a lot for a change."

The mental exercise of this student requires great discipline, but it is also asking for a beautiful aim in the architect's task. This reflection made me go with my memory through different houses that, with my partner Ricardo Flores, we have designed in our own studio in Barcelona. It made me aware that when thinking about living inside them, we were thinking about different activities taking place in a more continuous way throughout the house, offering variations but never with the intention of offering radically different changes of atmosphere, changes in height, the sizes of doors and windows, different orientations, different centuries, as if a new room could make you forget the previous one. So from this comment comes my second question:

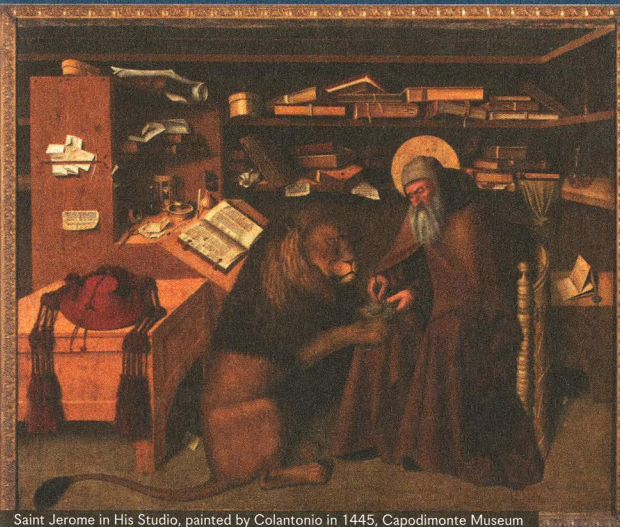
Would radical physical differences from room to room help our state of mind and then make our long stay at home richer?

3

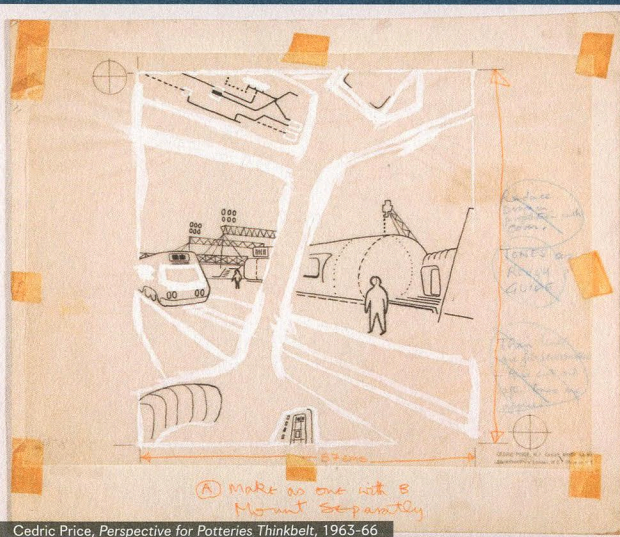
Another student, Lorain, working from Zurich, was more concerned about the size of a private space. He wrote: *"... living in my apartment for such a long time made me think of the size needed for a private space like a bedroom which, in these times, also serves as an office space. It works now for me as a multilayered room with models on top of drawings, on top of bed, on top of carpet, on top of plants, on top of books, on top of clothes, on top of thoughts, on top of dishes etc... The bedroom is taking all these uses which make it very flexible in a way but in a too dense manner in my opinion, so the way to design a living space and leave empty and transitional or flexible spaces in it is something I now find very relevant."*



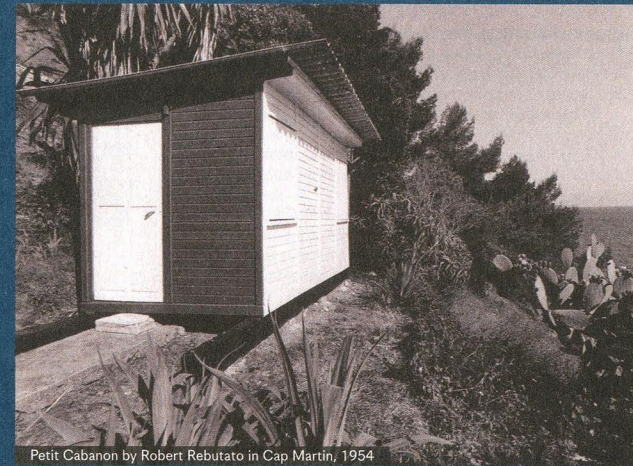
The former Diocletian Palace, Split



Saint Jerome in His Studio, painted by Colantonio in 1445, Capodimonte Museum



Cedric Price, Perspective for Potteries Thinkbelt, 1963-66
Courtesy CCA Canadian Center for Architecture, Cedric Price fonds



Petit Cabanon by Robert Rebutato in Cap Martin, 1954

So again, this comment resonated with me as a will to break the domestic monotony, opening the possibility of not dispersing our daily activities in an equal division around different rooms, but organizing a house of contrasts between empty spaces and full ones. It invites us to live in a house that condenses actions on one side and leaves empty space—silence—on another. And here comes my third question:

Would the differentiation between activity-spaces and doing-nothing-spaces, provide a more balanced home for us?

4

Yufei, a student living in a dormitory building in Zurich came up with the following appreciation:

"I find the actual situation not too bad, because I can focus more on my work without commuting. When you commute to another place, you have to change your mind before work."

The effect that commuting has on our mind called my attention. As I am used to working outside my home, during the first weeks of lockdown, I used to repeat the same routine of Shower, Get Dressed and Breakfast before sitting down to work at my dining room table that had become the drawing board. I believed that this routine was helping me wake up and be ready to work. But after some weeks, I started to lose this habit and rediscovered the easy route from waking up to drawing, something that I haven't done since my years as a student at university. Suddenly, I started to worry... and here comes the fourth question:

How many thoughts or good drawings have we all missed because of having to take the subway to our working space?

5

Flavia, working from Bern, shared with us a good situation that was offered to her during the lockdown and that is entered here to add some new information to the previous questions. She was fortunate to have a guest room where she could work, she described it like this:

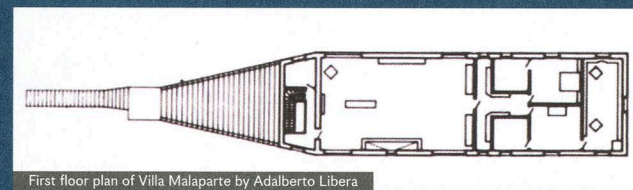
"...the guest room is not directly connected with our apartment, but it is a separate lonely room just in front of the apartment. I like that I have my distance to my work space."

The possibility of an independent room outside seems to offer such flexibility that I am surprised that this does not happen more often in the design of housing units in a collective building. And it also leads me to raise the fifth question:

Could each of us decide on an ideal distance from home to work, or do we even need any?

6

For me, the importance of these reflections is that they were made from inside the problem. It is not oneself trying to understand a program for the project you are asked to design, but being with your mind and your body inside it. Their texts combine mental and physical qualities, they are very personal, and also I found them very useful for others.



First floor plan of Villa Maillart by Adalberto Libera



Frame from the film Le Mépris by Jean-Luc Godard

So, here comes the sixth question:

In this beautiful task of architects to design houses for others, do we have to use our personal joys and concerns to bring richness to a new home, or should we try to "disappear" and work towards an anonymous design?

7

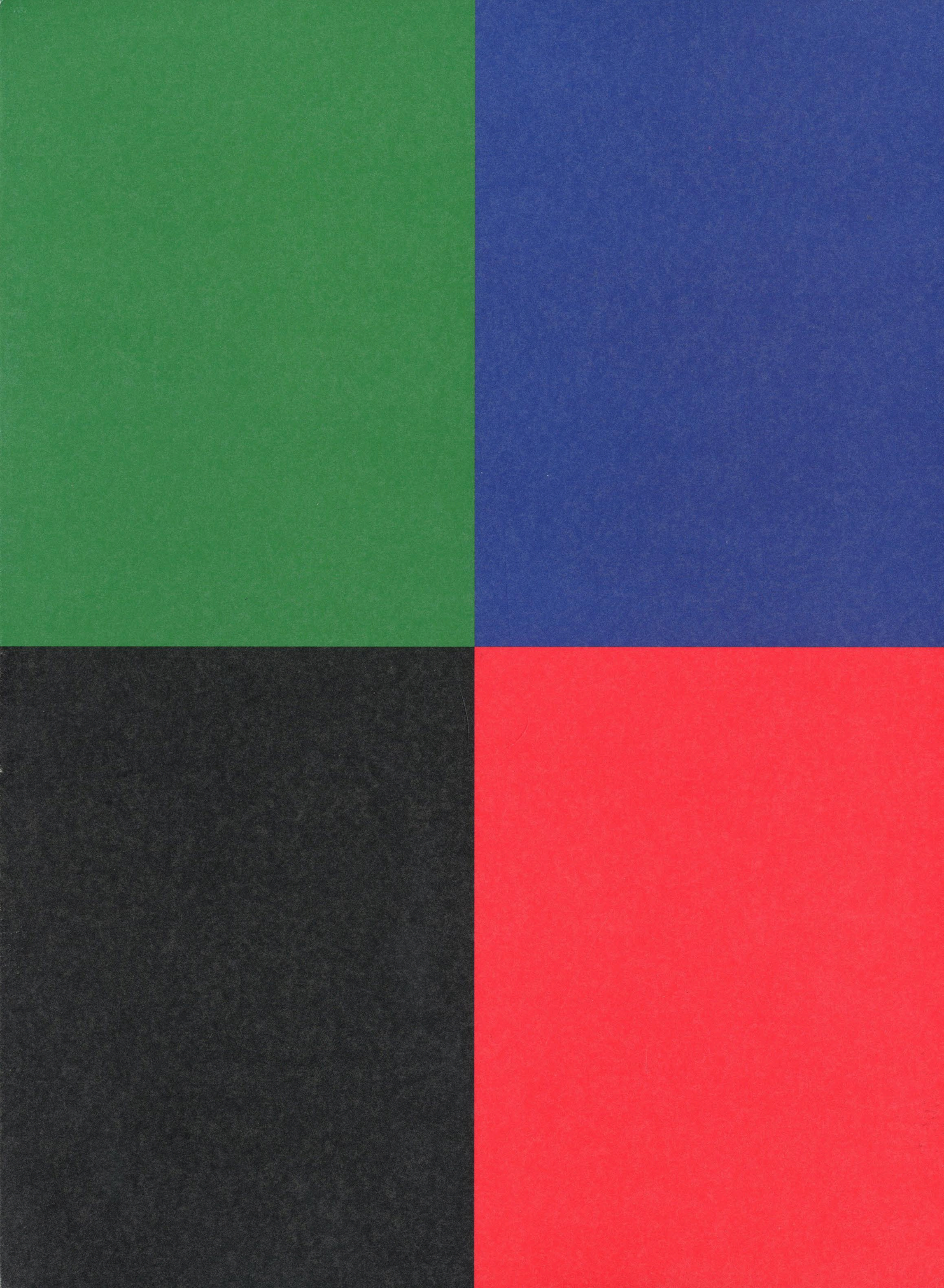
The seventh question is a group of questions that we received from a student, writing from Lucerne. I would like to finish with it, as his text deals precisely with the focus of our Studio Building Communities:

"I have to admit that I am fed up with the whole idea of the domestic. If I could, I would spend the whole day outside. And I actually spend a lot of my time outside. I love to sit at the lake, I love to spend time on the football pitch, and sometimes I don't like to return home.

I don't think about things like my room is too small or I want a bigger balcony. I think about things like my relationship to my flatmates, and why I get along with some people and not with others, I question myself a lot within this. Would I like to live with someone like me? Should I change my lifestyle to try to improve my relationship with my flatmates? Do I communicate enough? Do I communicate enough in general? Yes, sometimes I would prefer to have my flat, to have my flat with my particular idea of order and living. But no, I don't think this is the way I want to go. I prefer the notion of sharing. I prefer the idea of living together. I think to be influenced and interrupted by others is something important. This is maybe what I want to achieve with my project. An idea of living where it is possible to go your own way, but the base should always be something common, something that is shared. I don't know yet what exactly that means in terms of architecture but I want to follow it and I think my project is not too far from it."



Marco Zanuso, Case di vacanza a Arzachena, 1962-63.
Courtesy Archivio del Moderno, fondo Marco Zanuso



Philip Ursprung ▪ Philippe Block ▪ Momoyo Kaijima ▪ Christian Schmid ▪ An Fonteyne ▪ Jan De Vylder ▪ Irina Davidovici ▪ Charlotte Malterre-Barthes ▪ Emanuel Christ ▪ Tom Avermaete ▪ Andrea Simitch ▪ Peter van Assche ▪ Val Warke ▪ Roger Boltshauser ▪ Maarten Delbeke ▪ Joseph Grima ▪ Jaume Mayol ▪ Fredi Fischli ▪ Matilde Cassani ▪ Sam Chermayeff ▪ Ana Luisa Soares ▪ Bijoy Jain ▪ Niels Olsen ▪ Giovanna Borasi ▪ Paul Vermeulen ▪ Marianna Rentzou ▪ Giovanna Silva ▪ Freek Persyn ▪ Eva Prats ▪ Cino Zucchi ▪ Tatiana Bilbao ▪ Karin Sander ▪ Inge Vinck ▪ Christophe Van Gerrewey ▪ Victoria Easton ▪ Carlos Bedoya ▪ Olaf Grawert ▪ Daniel Norell +

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