FEDERICO DE MATTEIS

Atmospheres of Dwelling. Phenomenologies of "Being-at-Home"

Atmósferas del habitar. Fenomenologías de "estar en casa"

**Resumen**

Introducido inicialmente por Martin Heidegger en la obra filosófica del final de su vida, el concepto de habitar ha adquirido a lo largo de las décadas una importancia fundamental en la teoría arquitectónica. Sin embargo, su estatus "clásico", junto con su centralidad en la arquitectura posmoderna, ha impedido en gran medida el desarrollo de una discusión abierta sobre la validez actual de esta noción. De manera similar, el trabajo de otro autor de culto como Gaston Bachelard, cuyo libro La poética del espacio es igualmente venerado como un clásico, parece ser adoptado acríticamente fuera de una contextualización adecuada. Si bien el habitar representa un motor fundamental de la presencia humana en el mundo, estas dos explicaciones principales y sus implicaciones en el proyecto deben mostrarse frente a otros modelos complementarios o antagónicos, como los propuestos por Deleuze y Guattari, Sloterdijk y Schmitz. Cada uno de estos autores define su posición frente a la propuesta original de Heidegger, al tiempo que se abre a diferentes repercusiones en la práctica del proyecto.

**Palabras clave**

Habitar; Heidegger; Bachelard; Deleuze; Sloterdijk; Schmitz.

## Darmstadt, August 1951 and Onwards

While most living architects have – at some point or another of their education – come across Martin Heidegger's seminal text *Bauen Wohnen Denken*, "Building Dwelling Thinking"[1], few have actually encountered this cultural item within its actual setting. It mostly circulates in compendiums of texts on architectural theory, perhaps in blurred photocopies where the book's front matter has been long since removed, or at best in compilations of the German philosopher's "top ten writings". Ever since the re-discovery of this essay through Christian Norberg-Schulz's controversial 1970s and 80s books[2], Heidegger's speech at the 1951 Darmstadt conference *Mensch und Raum*, "Man and Space",

1 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 347–63.

2 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space & Architecture* (New York: Praeger, 1974); Christian Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling: On the Way to Figurative Architecture* (Milan: New York: Electa; Rizzoli, 1985).

# Atmospheres of Dwelling. Phenomenologies of “Being-at-Home”

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Federico De Matteis, “Atmospheres of Dwelling. Phenomenologies of “Being-at-Home”, *ZARCH* 21 (December 2023): 34-43. ISSN: 2341-0531 / eISSN: 2387-0346. https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_zarch/zarch.2023219754

**Abstract**

First introduced by Martin Heidegger in his later philosophical work, over the decades the concept of dwelling has acquired a fundamental importance in architectural theory. Its “classic” status, however, along with its centrality in post-modern architecture, has largely prevented the unfolding of an open discussion on the present-day validity of this notion. Similarly, the work of another cult author such as Gaston Bachelard, whose book The Poetics of Space is equally revered as a classic, appears to be uncritically espoused outside of a proper contextualization. While dwelling does represent a fundamental driver of human presence in the world, these two primary accounts and their implications in design should be discussed against other complementary or antagonistic models, such as those proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, Sloterdijk and Schmitz. Each of these authors defines his position vis-à-vis Heidegger’s original proposal, while opening to different repercussions on the practices of design.

**Keywords**

Dwelling; Heidegger; Bachelard; Deleuze; Sloterdijk; Schmitz.

has been elevated to the status of cultural icon, encompassing a trove of timeless considerations on what it is like to exist on the Earth. The rare privilege of transcending time and space is indeed reserved to just a few human artifacts, so that we may forget that Mona Lisa was a Renaissance woman before being elevated to mysterious canon of beauty, and Hamlet the character of an Elizabethan tragedy ahead of embodying the archetype of doubt and revenge. In Heidegger’s case, once this “cult” status has been acquired, it is difficult to question and engage the ideas formulated in the writing, which are expressed in a somewhat impenetrable language, not devoid of almost mystic overtones. It might be useful – even for the non-German speakers – to listen to the original audio recording of Heidegger’s lecture[3], and witness the near-liturgical oratory tone he adopts. Even more informative is the transcript of the discussion that followed the philosopher’s presentation, where Otto Bartning,

3 Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqSSzgg5eio


Figure 1. Catalog of the exhibition "Mensch und Raum" (Man and Space) at the Darmstadt Conference, 1951.

the conference's organizer, commented Heidegger's words in terms of the "architectural mastery" of man's existential space, and other attendees (with the caliber of José Ortega y Gasset, Paul Bonatz, Hans Scharoun and Rudolf Schwarz) questioned how this conception of dwelling could orient the post-war reconstruction process in Germany[4]. The exhibition staged as a side dish to the conference (figure 1) displayed what had by then become the "canon" of 20th century modern architecture, with spaces for living, working, studying and praying designed by celebrated authors such as Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, Behrens and Frank Lloyd Wright, etc.

Sited in a specific time and place, Heidegger's thought on dwelling takes up a different form. In a bomb-shattered German landscape, where countless citizens had been displaced from towns razed to the ground by the Allied destruction campaigns, prominent architects and thinkers gathered to discuss how to put the cities back together. If, as Edward Relph postulates, place is the expression of the unity and indivisibility of the human experience of the world, of the meaningfulness of practice and action[5], the destruction of the citizens' habitat in the wake of the bombings had opened to the phenomenon of *placelessness*, entailing the loss of meaning and existential bearings. Deprived of their roots, the German citizens were displaced by railway from one end of the country to the other, a condition of wordless trauma well described by Stig Dagerman in his 1946 report *German Autumn*[6]. The landscape implicit in Heidegger's speech – one we could almost christen *A View from Todtnauberg*, the philosopher's idyllic mountain retreat at the edges of the Black Forest (figures 2 and 3)[7] – is certainly not that of the destroyed cities: it speaks of rolling hills and forests, brooks and villages, of solid construction in wood and stone. "Only if we are capable of dwelling," claims Heidegger, "only then we can build"[8]. In the ebb and flow of displaced citizens, this ability to dwell had perhaps been lost; and, one could also imagine, in the philosopher's thought it was not by means of modern architecture that it could be found again, for it was rather necessary to turn one's gaze towards the archetypal ways of creating space, the "simple oneness" represented by a farmhouse in the Black Forest.

4 Ulrich Conrads and Peter Neitzke, eds., *Mensch und Raum: Das Darmstädter Gespräch 1951* (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1991).

5 Edward C. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 7, 22.

6 Stig Dagerman, *German Autumn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

7 For a broad reflection on Heidegger's mountain abode, and on other celebrated philosophers' dwellings, see Dieter Roelstraete, ed., *Machines à Penser* (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2018).

8 Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 361.

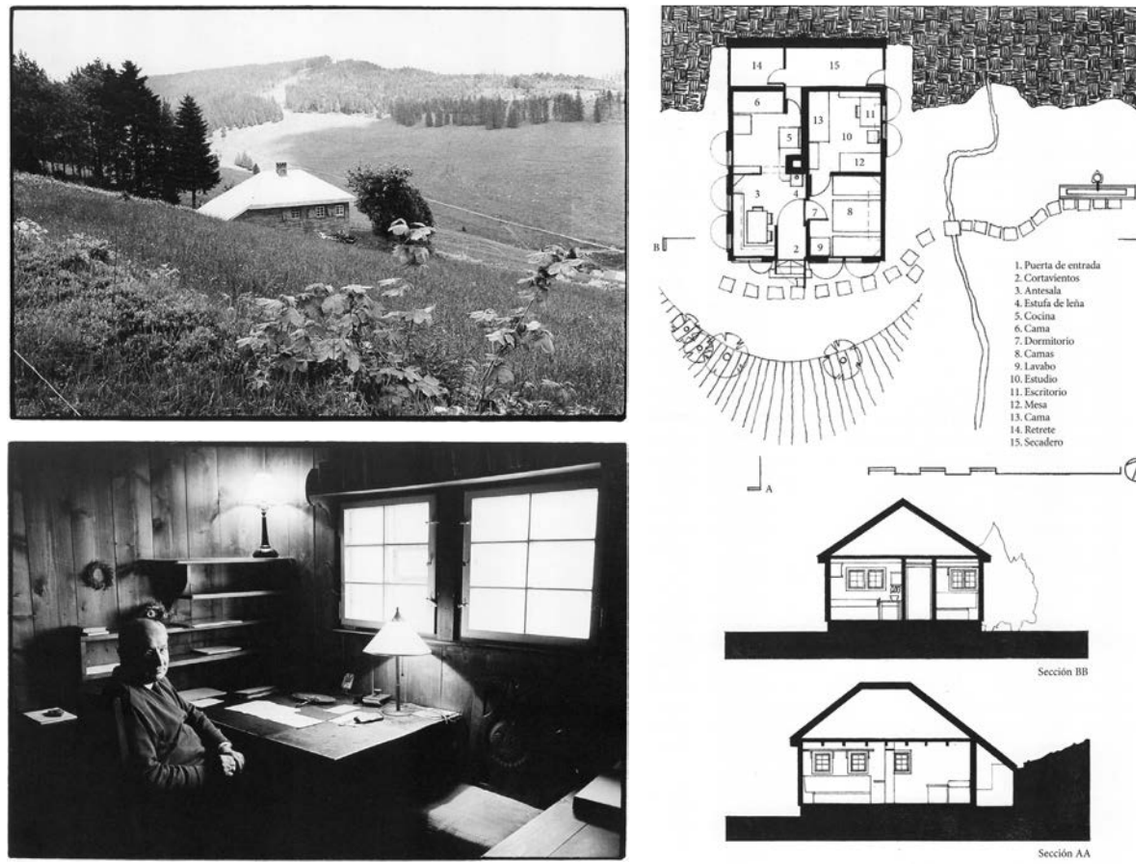


Figure 2. Heidegger's mountain hut in Todtnauberg, 1968. Heidegger and his wife are sitting on deck chairs outside, with the distant view of the Alps; Heidegger in his studio.

Figure 3. Heidegger's mountain hut in Todtnauberg. Floor plan; and sections.

Heidegger's *Wohnen* appears as a radical critique to the architecture that followed the Industrial Revolution, a regressive utopia longing for a lost world. There is indeed little it shares with the modernist ethos of most other attendees to the 1951 Darmstadt conference: although the tragic years of World War II had prompted a wide revision of urban and architectural models through most of Europe, what had been previously achieved in terms of style and construction technology was by then part of an established, irreversible tradition. Yet there was one belief that the philosopher and the architects did share: the conception of building as a "mastery of space" (*Bewältigung des Raumes*), a concept which speaks of submission, power, violence[9], cognate to the Old Testament invitation to subdue the Earth and establish dominion over all creatures[10]. In a world still haunted by the fresh memories of war, Man's inhabitable space – at least in Central Europe – comprised a vast landscape of menacing ruins, to be reconquered, sanified, subjected to order, rebuilt. The immense development of public housing estates in many European countries was accelerated precisely in the years around the Darmstadt conference, with the significant support of American funding: an effort both pragmatic and humanitarian, necessary to restore order to the damaged towns, and to teach citizens *how to dwell* in the modern city, inside modern architecture.

Heidegger's post-modern revival provides an altogether different interpretation of this notion of dwelling, where there is no mention of the violence purported by human action on the land: poetry, according to Norberg-Schulz's interpretation, is the primary driver of dwelling, and architecture a poetical revelation[11]. While for us it is today difficult to accept this rather romantic and optimistic stance, it seems obvious that, still today, our architectural conception of *dwelling* is largely imbibed of vintage fragrances, traditional villages gently perched on hillsides with their stone walls and

9 "Gewalt" is the German word for *power*; "Vergewältigung" means *rape*.

10 Genesis 1:28.

11 Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling*, 17.

terracotta roofs, intimate domestic spaces (preferably clad in wood), somber objects bestowing meaning to an otherwise brute landscape. What appears implicit in Heidegger's (and in his interpreters') words, is that human presence alone makes the world a place worth inhabiting.

In the years of the Darmstadt conference – perhaps as an implicit reaction to the growing modernization of architecture and cities – positions similar to Heidegger's are not rare. Gaston Bachelard's 1958 *La Poétique de l'Espace* (*The Poetics of Space*) is another text that has acquired near-cult status among architects, as a charming, oneiric exploration of an idealized childhood home, where the author disentangles the deep and permanent bonds between our selfhood and the space of our early existential experiences[12]. While Heidegger considers the making of architecture as the incarnation of human existence, of our relation to the ground and to our very mortality, Bachelard is far more interested in the psychological dimension of how we dwell, of how spaces shape our ways of being. His reflections on domestic space range from the intimate to the cosmic, largely drawing from literary sources and poetic inspirations, with strong influences from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of inhabiting[13]. The house of infancy is the place of primitive memories, where these hallmarks of our existential dimension can find refuge and persist over time, even though the house itself may disappear[14].

But what if we were to *visualize* the house described by Bachelard? What type of dwelling would it be? While writing in the late 1950s, with the process of modern urbanization about to enter its second century of life, the philosopher looks at a traditional model of house. Cellar, garret, nook, stairs, attic, roof: the house Bachelard invites us to tour and explore is something between the quintessential hut and the upper-class *domaine*, the countryside retreat of the wealthy and affluent French bourgeoise, ironically described in its real-estate anthropological dimension in Marc Augé's *Domaines et châteaux*[15]. This is not a house for everyone, the anonymous *banlieue*: it is spread on many levels, the number of its rooms exceeds that of its inhabitants, each of whom is afforded a private, intimate space, an alcove or nook from which even other family members have to stay away. In Bachelard's mesmerizing narrative there seems to be the same fundamental fallacy we find in Freud's psychoanalytical oeuvre: this is not *everyone's* house – or life –, it is the privileged residence of the wealthy upper bourgeoisie, of the neurotic patients the Austrian doctor would treat in his Viennese office. If Heidegger theorized dwelling from the near-monastic retreat of his rustic hut in the woods, Bachelard did so from his gabled, three-floor *maison* in Bar-sur-Aube. What we must thus observe is that the two philosophical works that for decades have affected our understanding of what dwelling is – and to a large extent still do so – are all but transcendental works that reach above the contingent condition, to describe what it is like to be human and to be at home, but rather the (beautiful) musings of two old-aged, white, male, Northern-European, extremely cultivated and prominent individuals, who observed the world from a privileged position.

## Other Dwellings

What remains unaccounted for? Much does. An empirical observation of how humans inhabit – rather than dwell – helps us frame the two accounts we have so far discussed as very partial perspectives. If Heidegger binds dwelling to building, inhabiting may take place even where building – at least in a conventional sense – is interdicted. If dwelling is about rootedness and habit, inhabiting can unfold even where roots cannot be set, and where habit is continuously superseded by emergency. If dwelling is about our ties to ancestral places, inhabiting is often bound to nomadic and temporary practices rather than to stable buildings. If dwelling is by definition intimate and laden with secrecy, inhabiting is possibly a collective practice embracing a community rather than an individual or a

12 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962), 161. Also: "In so far as I inhabit a 'physical world', in which consistent 'stimuli' are typical situations recur [...] my life is made up of rhythms which have not their *reason* in what I have chosen to be, but their *condition* in the humdrum setting which is mine. Thus there appears round our personal existence a margin of *almost* personal existence, which can be practically taken for granded, and which I rely on to keep me alive; round the human world which each of us has made for himself is a world in general terms to which one must first of all belong in order to be able to enclose oneself in the particular context of a love or an ambition", 96–97.

14 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 8.

15 Marc Augé, *Domaines et Châteaux* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

family nucleus[16]. If dwelling refers to autochthony, inhabitation can be multi-cultural and trans-border. There is no end to the nuances and variations of human inhabitation, which all together draw a picture so broad and diverse that no single model can address it – no matter how deep the fundamentals that the model may seek.

The divarication between the classical theories of dwelling and the present-day, actual practices of inhabitation is no menial matter. In the design of housing, it may be questionable to just proceed along normative tracks, providing space to idealized and disincarnate human subjects. Producing housing "by the pound" – what has allowed European nations to give shelter to vast crowds of urban workers over the past century – has been an only partial response to creating what is necessary to "feel-at-home" in the city, and certainly does not represent a mode of design that can still be adopted today. While we must acknowledge the gap between theory and practice, recognizing that no conceptual model – especially if philosophically grounded – can produce direct repercussions on the architectural process, we are nevertheless prompted to continuously question the foundations of design. Who are the subjects we are to design for? What are their practical needs, and how can the physical space of architecture cater to them? What are, perhaps more crucially, the affective spaces they desire to encounter, and how can they relate to what our work as architects conjure? How can we strike a balance between what is broadly needed by many, and the nuanced diversity of what is expected by just a few? These are not new questions for the architect: what is new is the sense of engagement and responsibility that is felt as an urge in contemporary practice, vis-à-vis the growing inequalities, deep sense of crisis and need of "making up for the damage" that haunt our societies.

Dwelling, as a foundational concept, has not been overcome: its classical Heideggerian formulation has rather been recast in different terms, making space for a broader outlook, less reliant on the specific cultural derivation we have outlined above – what makes it appear somehow obsolete in relation to the sense of inhabiting we may experience in our age. Deleuze and Guattari, most notably, postulate a model of space that clearly stands against Heidegger's fundamental sense of rootedness. Space is not a given in itself, rather an articulation of practice descending from the opposite anthropological dimensions of nomadism vs. sedentarity, the "smooth" and the "striated" spaces[17]. Each is constantly changing into the other, for there is no fixed delimitation between the two, rather a series of conditions that blur the state of human presence in the territory over time. In the spatial taxonomy illustrated in *A Thousand Plateaus*, lines, movements and trajectories intertwine to create a framework that never acquires a full stability. The variety of human subjects and of conditions of life embraced by Deleuze and Guattari are a counterpoint to Heidegger's "Mortals", who somehow all appear to behave in one and the same way. In the crisis-ridden contemporary world, where sedentarity is no universal norm but rather a privilege for those who can afford it, Deleuze and Guattari's observation of flows can perhaps better explain some of the many conditions of "irregular" inhabitation. The informal settlement of *The Jungle* in Calais (figure 4), for example, for the brief duration of its existence it largely escaped and exceeded an Heideggerian conception of dwelling: here, borders both ideal and real were continuously invented, shifted and overwritten, topographies and places established and deconstructed, identities defined and contradicted[18].

Not all contemporary acceptations of dwelling, however, stand in such contrast to Heidegger as Deleuze and Guattari's. Peter Sloterdijk's philosophy of the spheres recognizes the crucial importance of the concept of *Wohnen*, yet amplifies its theorization to encompass forms of social life that are broader and more in becoming than in Heidegger's text. Where Heidegger postulated the centrality of the godhead as a space-defining presence, Sloterdijk recognizes how this "divine monosphere" has been broken[19], supplanted by an infinite array of micro-spheres. This "foam", where each bubble relates to an individual, implies that life "unfolds multifocally, multiperspectivally and heterarchically.

16 Jürgen Hasse, "Wohnen – Eine Existenzielle Herausforderung," *Bürger & Staat* 2–3 (2019): 88–93.

17 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 474.

18 Fiamma Ficcadenti, "The City of Migrants. Urban Transgressions and New Affective Geographies," in *The Affective City: Spaces, Atmospheres and Practices in Changing Urban Territories*, ed. Stefano Catucci and Federico De Matteis (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, 2021), 240–55.

19 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres: III. Foams* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2016), 22.

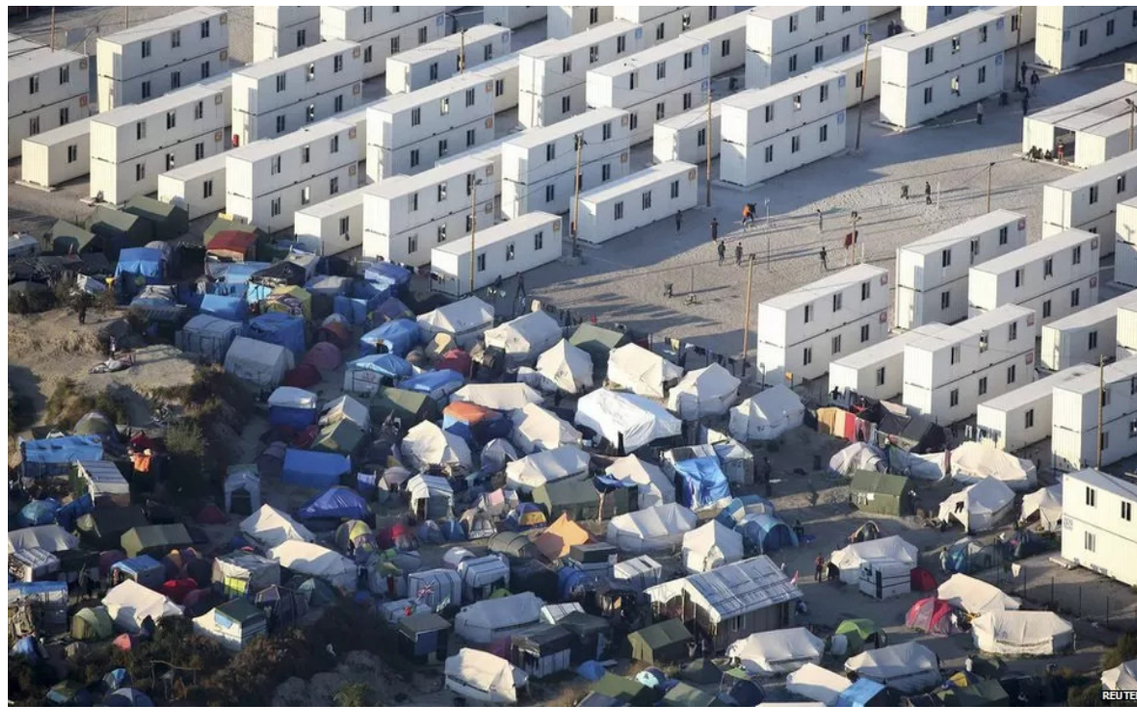


Figure 4. "The Jungle" in Calais, 2016.

Its point of departure lies in a non-metaphysical and non-holistic definition of life […]. If "life" has a boundlessly manifold space-forming effect, this is not only because every monad has its own individual environment, but more significantly because they are all intertwined with other lives and consist of countless units"[20]. Sloterdijk hereby overcomes Heidegger's metaphysical posture and uniqueness of subject. The steadfastness of the dwelling individual, perennially rooted to the soil, is equally substituted by subject who is constantly engaged in space making, i.e. resolving the nature of their roots day after day. For Sloterdijk, "building" is not a matter of poetry alone, but as contemporary life demonstrates – especially in extreme conditions of habitation such as fallout shelters or other polluted spaces – it is made possible and guided by technological advancements only[21].

Sloterdijk's interpretation of dwelling, which is indebted to Heidegger but also declaredly parts its way from him, provides us with a useful framework to address some of the contemporary challenges of housing. The philosopher's articulate discourse and theorization of the atmosphere as an object of deliberate human intervention and even design – through pollution, air conditioning, aromatechnics, atmoterrorism and the like – sets the conditions for the "climate performativity" of buildings. Architecture's urge to be climate-effective does not simply arise from the need to contrast an "aggressive nature" wherein we as human subjects are simply thrown (which would be Heidegger's stance): it reveals itself as one of the many technological actions that are necessary to dwell in a condition that is all but purely natural, influenced as it is by human activity. While in Heidegger's account the Mortals appear as being something as the "victims" of a brutal world, upon which they are called to bestow order and exert "the mastery of space", by acting on what Sloterdijk conceptualizes as the atmo-sphere *we* are directly responsible and must thus seek recovery for our own action.

Finally, Heidegger is widely recognized as having been the first author to thematize moods – *Stimmungen* – as a fundamental philosophical concept, an intuition that largely anticipated the foregrounding of feelings and emotions in the wake of the affective turn[22]. As a derivative of a deeply-rooted, primarily Northern-European tradition[23], mood is fundamentally connected to

20 Sloterdijk, 23.

21 Sloterdijk, 135–37.

22 Since the mid-2000s, the "affective turn" has been theorized as a broad cultural repositioning that considers affects as fundamental drivers and descriptors of human interaction. See, among others, Patricia Clough and Jean Halley, eds., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2007).

23 Witold Rybczynski, *Home: Short History of an Idea* (New York: Viking, 1986), 15. See also Mario Praz, *La Filosofia dell'arredamento* (Milan: Longanesi, 1964).

Figure 5. War-damaged residential buildings in Ukraine.

dwelling, and not all moods are ultimately welcome: home, the quintessential place of dwelling, is meant to harbor intimacy, domesticity, and above all comfort. These sensations are perceptible not just to the owner of the dwelling, but become spatially available to anyone entering the space. Atmosphere – in an acceptation different from Sloterdijk's – again becomes a keyword, describing the spatial dimension of moods and emotions, and how these can affect all the subjects who are corporeally present[24]. Differently from Heidegger, here the lived body plays a fundamental role: it operates as a sounding board of experience, and the affective queues the subjects encounter in the ambient environment are felt as corporeal stirrings. What is however relevant – and establishes a continuity with Sloterdijk's conception of dwelling as a continuous process of making – is that the atmospheres as spatialized feelings are not simply received. The inhabiting subject is more than a passive receptacle of emotional queues: "[…] dwelling is first and foremost the search for the […] right atmosphere in an interior: an atmosphere is the right one because […] it protects the home's privacy, comfort and warmth, but can also satisfy our socio-expressive needs, possibly also addressed to the outside world. But a dwelling atmosphere is right, that is, comfortable and intimate, not so much and not when, as in Nordic culture, it aims to replicate on the residential level the aesthetic utopia of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but, more simply, when it becomes for a felt body an indispensable and exclusive place of self-representation"[25].

Schmitz's idea of dwelling does not tread too far from Heidegger's: we can dwell at home or in some other human-made environment such as the garden, but in any case it needs to be an enclosed space purposely built to this end[26]. Consistently with a traditionalist view of the relationship between man and ground, dwelling is not strictly meant for the nomad, for space must be *pacified* to accommodate the feelings conducive to homely and intimate atmospheres. The pacified home, the place of dwelling, is therefore not simply an architectural array, but much more the abode of the feelings, harboring the comfort of "being-at-home".

24 Atmospheres have risen to acquire a central stature – among others – in phenomenological aesthetics, primarily with the work of Hermann Schmitz, Gernot Böhme and Tonino Griffero. See Hermann Schmitz, *New Phenomenology: A Brief Introduction* (Milan: Mimesis International, 2019); Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2017); Tonino Griffero, *Places, Affordances, Atmospheres: A Pathic Aesthetics* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2019).

25 Griffero, *Places, Affordances, Atmospheres*, 121.

26 Hermann Schmitz, *Atmosphären* (Freiburg ; Munich: Karl Alber, 2014), 27–28.

## Housing Emotions

There are varieties of dwelling: modes of dwelling for those who are sedentary, others for those who are in motion; different ways of being that speak of human adaptation to both the terrain on which one stands and to the contingent conditions of existence. Architecture can somehow mirror such conditions, as it is built to harbor the sensations associated with dwelling. At other times, however, it becomes a dystopian space: like in the war-damaged German towns that served as a backdrop for the 1951 Darmstadt conference reported in the opening of this account, or in other wars closer to us in time (figure 5). When the world becomes uninhabitable, dwelling is no longer a possibility.

The closing question to this essay relates to the nature of design practices as they descend from our theoretical position on what it means to dwell. Beyond providing a response to client briefs and regulations, to design residential spaces means for an architect to give body to a form of dwelling. It also means to provide the architectural scaffolding on which emotions and atmosphere will be expected to emerge, well knowing that these are not – or perhaps only partially – available to be designed, but will have some form of connection with the built environment. Finally, to give physical boundaries to a certain conception of dwelling is a deeply political act, speaking of the architect's relationship with the world and our way of being in it.

## Image Sources

Figure 1. Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.

Figure 2. Adam Sharr, *Heidegger's Hut* (Cambridge Mass., London: The MIT Press, 2006), 42.

Figure 3. Sharr, *Heidegger's Hut*, 39, 26.

Figure 4. Reuters.

Figure 5. Celestino Arce/nurPhoto/AP.

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**Federico De Matteis** is an architect and full Professor of Architectural Design at the University of L'Aquila, Italy. His research work focuses on the affective dimension of space and the corporeal resonance between the experiencing subject and architecture, and on the possible tools to express this relationship. His recent books are *Affective Spaces. Architecture and the Living Body* (Routledge 2020), *I sintomi dello spazio. Corpo architettura città* (Mimesis 2021); *The Affective City: 1. Spaces, Atmospheres and Practices in Changing Urban Territories* and *2. Abitare il terremoto* (edited with S. Catucci, LetteraVentidue 2021 and 2022).

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**Federico De Matteis**
University of L'Aquila
federico.dematteis@univaq.it

**Federico De Matteis** es arquitecto y Catedrático de Proyecto Arquitectónico en la *Università degli Studi dell'Aquila*, Italia. Su trabajo de investigación se centra en la dimensión afectiva del espacio y la resonancia corpórea entre el sujeto que experimenta y la arquitectura, así como en las posibles herramientas para expresar esta relación. Sus libros recientes son *Living Body* (Routledge 2020), *I sintomi dello spazio. Corpo architettura città* (Mimesis 2021); *The Affective City: 1. Spaces, Atmospheres and Practices in Changing Urban Territories* y *2. Abitare il terremoto* (editado con S. Catucci, LetteraVentidue 2021 y 2022).