

# **Performativity and the domestic space**

## **Practices of embodied dwelling through enactivism, participation, and auto-construction**

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This paper examines the transformative potential of performativity in reimagining the concept of *dwelling* and of domestic spaces. Drawing from enactivist and embodied cognition perspectives, we delve into the dynamic relationship between individuals, their bodies, and the architectural environment. Emphasising the role of bodily engagement, sensorimotor experiences, and interoceptive awareness, we explore how individuals actively participate in and shape their architectural surroundings. Moving beyond individual interactions, we also highlight the social and collective dynamics influenced by the built environment, underscoring the impact of cultural conventions and societal norms.

This paper investigates some contributions that advocate for a reappropriation of institutionalised domestic spaces through imaginative interventions that challenge conventional norms and envision future-oriented dwelling practices. Within the context of institutionalised domestic spaces, we investigate the role of the *fantastical* and the *monstrous* as disordered qualities that challenge traditional boundaries and offer opportunities for transformation. Through case studies, we examine projects that blur the lines between public and private realms, enabling participatory practices and urban influences to reshape functional space utilisation.

In conclusion, this paper underscores the importance of a dialogue between embodied performativity and the concept of dwelling. It proposes a re-evaluation of our relationship with space that is not just functional but enactive, and it champions the transformative potential of the arts in conceiving our future homes. With a renewed focus on sustainability, participation, and the interplay between the human body and space, we can begin to imagine a future of dwelling that is as dynamic, inclusive, and vibrant as the lives we wish to live within these spaces.

**Keywords:** Embodied and enacted cognition, performativity, participatory practices, dwelling, institutional critique

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### 1. Introduction: the performative circularity of the embodied «dwelling»

The renewed interest for the role of the body in the design-related disciplines signs an important progression in the inclusion of performative practices in the architectural discussion. In particular, the notions of embodiment and habitus assume a crucial role when it comes to understanding body and social implication in space design and practices.

At first glance, the connection between architecture and performativity has always been perceived as unusual, since architecture typically relies on stable materiality. However, there appear to be at least two senses in which performativity has been used within the realm of the built environment: First, on one hand, by assigning agency to the architectural environment, buildings and cities are viewed as having the power to influence humans and shape the social world. In this respect, the designer *performs* social changes through his primary tool, the building or the urban plan. Secondly, on the other hand, by placing the individuals who interact and act within the built environment at the heart of the designer's attention and interest, performativity is attributed to the humans that experience that environment. In practice, we build structures, structures shape us, and we change again structures by acting, organising and performing within them.

This *performative circularity*, as we might call it, shows the limits of a *hylomorphic* conception of the living space. In the realm of architecture, this model views the construction of a building as the imposition of a design or form (*morphe*, typically conceived by an architect) onto passive, inert matter (*hyle*, such as bricks, concrete, etc.). A significant criticism of this perspective is anthropologist Tim Ingold's focus on *making* as a continuous process that might also be viewed as performative overcoming of the separation between subject and (built) object. With reference to the interplay between

people and environment, Ingold contrasts the «building perspective» with the *dwelling* perspective<sup>1</sup>. The building perspective considers architecture as an object created by architects. The dwelling perspective, on the other hand, sees the environment as a living process, continually being shaped and reshaped by the activities of the people who inhabit it. Ingold argues that the process of «inhabitation» is central to understanding architecture. The way we inhabit an environment, he suggests, is not just about how we utilise it, but also about how we perceive, act and experience it<sup>2</sup>. This perspective refutes the traditional understanding of the role of architecture as an embodiment of form alone and instead emphasises its performative nature. It integrates the cognitive, physical, and emotional aspects of human interactions with their built environments.

The first goal of the present paper is to highlight this integration by making first reference to the link between current research in embodiment, enactivism and performative design. The study of the enactive perspective on the architectural experience of the space is a valid approach to the topic of performative transformation of domestic and urban space. Moreover, performativity and performance art investigate and provoke our social perception and the human dynamics that come into play in the establishment of specific social situations. They therefore play a pivotal role in translating embodiment theories into the social dynamics of architectural research as well. They invite us to consider not just how individuals interact with their built environment, but also how social interactions, norms and *institutions* are embodied and facilitated by architectural spaces.

The aim of this paper lies therefore in understanding how to account for the deinstitutionalisation of spaces through transformative strategies and experimentations of alternative life-forms. These experimental approaches provide the space and tools to disconnect patterns of habitation from conventional functionalist norms. On this topic, Sarah Vanhee introduces the theme of *fantastic institutions*<sup>3</sup> as a shift from cultural constraints. The fantastic and imaginary allows for new possibilities in cohabitation and domestic spaces also. Reclaiming and transforming these spaces can bring change to both physical environments and inhabitants. In the context of a housing crisis and evolving productivity dynamics, embracing the fantastic and *monstrous* – as Annalisa Metta aptly

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<sup>1</sup> T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, dwelling and Skill*, Routledge, London 2000.

<sup>2</sup> T. Ingold, *Making. Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, Routledge, London 2013, p. 84, «The spaces of dwelling are not already given, in the layout of the building, but are created in movement. That is to say, they are performed».

<sup>3</sup> S. Vanhee, *The Fantastic Institutions*, 04 May 2020 [<https://www.kunsten.be/en/now-in-the-arts/the-fantastic-institutions/>] last consulted: 10 June 2023.

defines – offers a pathway to deinstitutionalized domesticity. With this understanding in mind, the suggestion is to inject a performative dynamism into housing projects. This aligns with modern reinterpretations of domestic spaces, which downplay the traditional link between environment and function, favouring instead a more action fluidity in design<sup>4</sup>.

The goal of this paper extends beyond the theoretical perspective. In fact, it aims in conclusion to focus on some practical interventions (the work of the Post Disaster collective, showcased in the 2023 Italian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, and the work of the N55 architectural collective) that are emblematic contemporary practices that unite performativity, social action, and architecture. As the primary built environment where we spend a significant amount of our time, domestic space inherently influences our lives. In today's world, the term *home* extends beyond its traditional definition to include more complex ideas related to family and shared living. It is thus interesting to evaluate how fluidity and exchanges among various dimensions influence the development of these types of spaces. At the same time, it is important to remember that homes and domestic spaces have long served as physical representations of societal structures. They define hierarchies, not just in a spatial context – such as which areas are private and which are communal – but also in social terms, reflecting cultural, economic, and social stratifications.

### **1.1. The enactivist foundations of architectural experience**

The idea of a dynamic and embodied relationship between subject and their environment also resonates with contemporary approaches in philosophy and cognitive science, the so called enactivism and embodied cognition. The embodied, and enactivist viewpoint postulates that our perceptual experiences of the world, inclusive of built environments like architectural spaces, are steered by our dynamic sensorimotor activities. Rather than being disengaged observers, individuals actively participate in space, thereby infusing meaning and value into the architectural environment through their bodily engagement.

Enactivism proposes that cognition does not reside solely in the brain but is situated and deeply intertwined with our interactions with the world around us<sup>5</sup>. Attempting to overcome the limitations of a cognitive model that perceives the mind and the world as

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<sup>4</sup> F. Martella, M.V. Tesei, *Domestic Boundaries*, m<sup>2</sup>ft architects, Roma 2018.

<sup>5</sup> F. J. Varela, E. Thompson, E. Rosch, *The embodied mind. Cognitive science and human experience*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1991.

pre-existing and independent entities, Varela and colleagues stress the active and dynamic interconnectedness between the organism and its environment. *Enaction* denotes the fact that a living entity is a self-governing agent, actively creating and sustaining itself via ongoing mutual interactions involving the brain, body, and the world. This outlook notoriously echoes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodied experience. Merleau-Ponty emphasised our perception as being rooted in our embodied interaction with the world, positing that the body (which is simultaneously an objective body, a lived body, and a bodily subject) and the world are intertwined and co-constitutive, thereby challenging the dichotomy of mind and world<sup>6</sup>. A variety of models and interpretations have come to light that amplify the interconnected relationship between the organism and its environment. For instance, this perspective harmonises well with the so-called «extended mind» hypothesis. According to this view, cognitive processes aren't confined to the individual but can extend into the environment, incorporating tools and artefacts that aid our cognitive abilities. According to another interpretation, the mind, rather than being extended outward, is *scaffolded* by «environmental supports»<sup>7</sup>. The central premise of the scaffolding model is that organisms actively shape their environment or *niche* to which they subsequently adapt. This interaction between the organism and its manipulated environment induces a transformation in the organism, enhancing its survival probability. The architectural notion of the scaffold here is not just a metaphor: the external environment is a product of human action, and, in turn, it acts upon human behaviour. A prime illustration of this concept is in fact the beaver's dam-constructing behaviour. This activity alters the beavers' habitat, reciprocally influencing the conduct of the beaver and its offspring<sup>8</sup>. Based on these foundations, it is clear that the enactive approach dovetails with a fresh interpretation of the concept of *affordance*. Looking through the enactive lens, affordances offer value-laden opportunities for interaction, as perceived by the agent. This implies that architects, in creating affordances through built space, inherently shape the experience of architectural environments by emphasising potential for action<sup>9</sup>.

Beyond the cognitive dimension, the bodily and mental extension of the individual in relation to the environment also involves motivational, instinctive, and affective aspects.

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<sup>6</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 2010.

<sup>7</sup> K. Sterelny, *Minds: Extended or scaffolded?* in "Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences", 9, 2010, pp. 465-481.

<sup>8</sup> J. Odling-Smee, K. N. Laland, M. W. Feldman, *Niche construction. The neglected process in evolution*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2003.

<sup>9</sup> E. Arielli, *Pensiero e progettazione*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 2003.

Colombetti, for instance, has extensively elaborated on the role of affectivity within the context of embodied, enactive cognition, challenging the traditional view that considers emotions and cognition as separate entities, and arguing for a more integrated view where they are deeply intertwined. According to Colombetti, emotions and affective states have a substantial role in shaping our perception of the world, our thoughts, and our actions<sup>10</sup>. And just as cognition can be extended into the environment, our affective life, too, can extend beyond our bodily boundaries<sup>11</sup>. In their embodied interplay, cultural and material artefacts are constitutive elements of affectivity and cognition, in other words they are cognitive and “affective scaffolds” of those states. Thus, we can speak of the architectural body<sup>12</sup> related to the interplay between the person, its body schema, and bodily action within space. It is the investigation of this aspect that allows us to delve into how the individual interacts with the architectural environment. It is a continuous updating of the neural representation of body configuration that controls posture, movement and being in body space. It functions as a set of silent, unconscious performances that combine and synchronise bodily information into a sensorimotor pattern to which «interoceptive awareness» is added as a motivational propensity for action<sup>13</sup>.

While enactivism and embodied cognition offer insightful perspectives on human cognition and perception in relation to the environment, their emphasis is often placed on individual interactions with the world, reflecting an engagement that is focused on the bodily and sensorimotor experience. This focus should not overlook a crucial aspect, namely the *social* and *collective* dynamics shaped by the built environment. As social beings, the ways we interact with others are deeply influenced by the cultural and physical settings we inhabit, and architectural and urban configurations not only shape our individual habits but also orchestrate group dynamics and social interactions. They can facilitate or hinder encounters, foster cooperation or competition, and enable or disable certain social practices. Specific uses of architectural spaces reflect deeply ingrained traditions and societal norms and *institutions* that shape our interactions. These cultural conventions, embedded within the built environment, shape not only our bodily interactions with the world but also mediate our social engagements.

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<sup>10</sup> G. Colombetti, *The Feeling Body. Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 2014.

<sup>11</sup> G. Colombetti, J. Krueger, *Scaffoldings of the affective mind* in “Philosophical Psychology”, XXVIII/8, 2015, pp. 1157-1176.

<sup>12</sup> M. Gins, Arakawa, *Architectural Body*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa 2002.

<sup>13</sup> A. Jelić, G. Tieri, F. de Matteis, F. Babiloni, G. Vecchiato, *The enactive approach to architectural experience: A neurophysiological perspective on embodiment, motivation, and affordances*, in “Frontiers in Psychology”, 7, 2016.

Starting from these theoretical perspectives, we see affinities with authors – including those specific to the Italian scene – who have reflected on their implications in the context of architecture. Federico De Matteis, for instance, offers a unique perspective on the way space interacts with individuals, highlighting how their inherent qualities only truly come to life when they are activated by an individual's presence. This challenges our conventional understanding of the objectivity of space by suggesting that space is not determined by static attributes but are influenced by the subjects inhabiting it. De Matteis takes it a step further by suggesting that a space doesn't just exist as a container but becomes a dynamic entity when a person inhabits it and «establishes a relationship with objects and non-objects»<sup>14</sup>. This perspective brings forth the concept of space as a perpetually evolving entity. This evolution is linked to the understanding that we cannot predict with certainty how bodies will function in a given space. As a result, the design process is understood as a constantly evolving practice that facilitates relationships between bodies in a space.

In this perspective, it is interesting to highlight a related concept, that of *intra-actions* by Karen Barad, who, in a neo-materialist perspective, places inter-action on a spatial plane, referring to the space between two terms. It involves an additional agency that the space conveys and on which the space itself operates, in a unique and interconnected temporality where actors act simultaneously, where the relata are not presuppositions but emerge through the *in between action*<sup>15</sup>. In this regard, Anna Caterina Dalmasso suggests a shift from *material agency* to *material performativity* to overcome a hierarchic approach towards identities and meanings. Dalmasso specifies that performativity, by edging the “reciprocal institution” of the bodies in public sphere, serves as a means to develop a notion of identity in the making, as a relational transformative process through bodies and space<sup>16</sup>.

Similarly, Francesco Leoni recently suggested that the identity of an architectural space is related to its domestication. This implies making the space «perceptible, usable and inhabitable by the human being who, because of the limitation of his senses and conceptions, needs an ordering of ideas and phenomena»<sup>17</sup>. The role of architecture, in

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<sup>14</sup> F. De Matteis, *Vita nello spazio: Sull'esperienza affettiva dell'architettura*, Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine, 2019, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> K. Barad, *Performatività della natura. quanto e queer*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa: 2017, p.17

<sup>16</sup> A. C. Dalmasso, *Things That Matter: Agency and Performativity in Aisthesis* 13(1), 2020, pp. 155-168.

<sup>17</sup> F. Leoni, *Spazio ontologico. Le forme della dialettica interno/esterno*, LetteraVentidue, Siracusa 2023, p. 81, «percepibile, fruibile e abitabile dall'essere umano che, a causa della limitatezza dei propri sensi e concezioni, necessita di un ordinamento delle idee e dei fenomeni». All translations are by the authors, unless otherwise stated.

this context, is to domesticate by transforming the unstructured and boundless into a contained space that is necessary for human comprehension. For Leoni, it is the act of living in and using these spaces that makes them habitable and social, often blurring the fine line between mere appropriation of space and its usage. However, he emphasizes that space is continually evolving and «must be educated to its vocation»<sup>18</sup>, not simply tamed or domesticated. This leads us to the next issue.

## **2. Participation and artistic practice in housing strategies**

The performative in design can be investigated through different lenses and the present article proposes an examination of these potentials within the realm of the domestic. Contemporary dwelling presents a significant case for several reasons: firstly, the topic is relevant because of the institutionalised nature of domestic spaces, historically shaped also according to gender roles. Secondly, the domestic sphere is susceptible to participatory practices, urban influences and functional space utilisation. Rooms are increasingly becoming spaces for both work and rest, care and socialisation, witnessing the disengagement from the traditional separation of public and private. How can the privileged standpoint of artistic and performative practices be used as a form of investigation and intervention? How can the imaginative and paradoxical potential of these practices bring about a paradigm shift?

As Bianchetti points out, a human body occupying of a domestic is already a performative act, even in a political sense, and the interior space is an instrument of constitution of public space<sup>19</sup>. This awareness leads to organically performative improvements to housing projects, in the form of contemporary reformulations of the domestic space that, by easing the link between environment and functionality in favour of a higher design fluidity and action<sup>20</sup>, restructure the ways in which the domestic is traditionally conceived. To this regard, Sophie Wolfrum discusses *Performative Urbanism* referring to a practice that involves close collaboration between architects and municipalities in developing urban development strategies. Wolfrum, referring to Erika Fischer-Lichte's investigations in performativity, emphasises the ability of actions to stimulate the development of new spaces and to broaden our perception. The subjectivity of perception allows for the continuous generation of new configurations within the same

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<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, p. 86, «va educato alla sua vocazione».

<sup>19</sup> C. Bianchetti, *Spazi che contano. Il progetto urbanistico in epoca neo-liberale*, Donzelli Editore, Roma 2016.

<sup>20</sup> F. Martella, M.V. Tesi, *Domestic Boundaries*, cit.



spatial sphere. Therefore, space is understood as performative in two senses: first, because it is constantly transforming through the individual's intervention, and secondly, because the individuals themselves are constantly reshaping in relation to the space they inhabit<sup>21</sup>. In this respect, again, it is significant to be aware of the transformational potential of the dwelling strategies through performative knowledge. Along similar lines, Dieter Mersch highlights how «in the performative there is a genuine movement, a “passage”, which makes the concept as politically as it is historically interesting»<sup>22</sup>. As Elke Van Campenhout emphasises<sup>23</sup>, the potential interchangeability between artist, curator, and audience lies in the interstitial oscillations present in space, leading to a rethinking of curatorial practices as capable of transmitting valuable knowledge and, similarly, allowing to the designer to assume the role of curator by being able to create value from everyday situatedness.

### 2.1. The *fantastic* as key to action in the domestic field

Architecture is defined by the actions it witnesses as much as by the enclosure of its walls. Murder in the Street differs from Murder in the Cathedral in the same way as love in the street differs from the Street of Love. Radically<sup>24</sup>.

Within the realm of domestic environments, numerous instances highlight a shift from the pure functionality of spaces towards an exploration of their performative possibilities. The role of design as a facilitator of space rather than its controller has already been discussed. However, how does this role manifest in practice? What methods allow us to balance the need for tangible boundaries in design thinking and the inherent fluidity of space and bodies? This section delves into the importance of identifying spatial attributes that align with the *fantastical*, the *monstrous*, and the *disordered*. These concepts have been used to represent unorthodox opportunities that expand our understanding of dwelling spaces.

Richard Sennett argues that the density of a city, which accommodates different ways of living, implies a rethinking of individual experience as no longer absolute but rather

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<sup>21</sup> S. Wolfrum, N. Frhr. v. Brandis (eds.), *Performative Urbanism. Generating and Designing Urban Space*, Jovis, Berlin 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> E. Van Campenhout, *La curatela come mentalità ambientale*, in P. Di Matteo (a cura di), *Performance+curatela*, Luca Sossella Editore, Bologna.

<sup>24</sup> B. Tschumi, *Advertisements for Architecture in Architecture and Disjunction*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1996.

more indistinct and *self-disordered*<sup>25</sup>. On this premise, he develops the idea of *Designing Disorder*, in which he asks whether and how public spaces can be designed to «loosen fixed habits to disrupt absolute images of the self»<sup>26</sup>. The core belief is that in a free, dense and cluttered city, individuals can uncover their unexpressed and outward-facing potential. In such an environment, personal identity is given the opportunity to self-reflect through interaction with the collective. In this context, the 20th century saw a rising critique of the city's homogeneity and a belief in the potential for its generative disorder. Pablo Sendra introduces the notion of *assemblage*<sup>27</sup>, related to Sennett's concept of disorder, which is described by three key characteristics: socio-material symbiosis, uncertainty, and incomplete form. Therefore, viewing architecture both as an embodied process and a physical body leads us to the possibility of encountering dysfunctional, inappropriate, or deformed structures. This raises the question of what a “deformed” body can produce in terms of shapes and postures, and whether a non-standard body is inherently less suitable for life. The concept of the *monstrous* emerges here, revealing potentials that we have yet to fully comprehend or adapt to. Taking inspiration from what Marie de Brugerolle highlights with regard to the puppet-body in performance<sup>28</sup>, the hybrid body is something we should be accustomed to<sup>29</sup>. In the context of living spaces, this means to adjust our expectation from seeking something permanent and immutable, and to accept being accustomed to a continuous repositioning within the experience of dwelling. A perspective that shares many common threads with the view proposed in this paper is Annalisa Metta's exploration of the possibilities of reinterpreting the concepts of the *monstrous* and the savage within landscape architecture.

One of Metta's focal points is the delicate balance between human domestication and an openness to what is referred to as «monstrous transformations»<sup>30</sup>. From the early stages of her work, a tension between two human impulses is apparent: one to control nature, and the other to hide our interventions within it. This creates a unique dynamic that can be described as a knowledgeable act of desecration, a dance between embracing a raw, unrefined wilderness (a *friche improvisée*, by using Clément terminology)<sup>31</sup> and

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<sup>25</sup> R. Sennet, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (1970), Editori Associati, Ancona-Milano 1999.

<sup>26</sup> P. Sendra, R. Sennet, *Designing Disorder: Experiments and Disruptions in the City*, Treccani, Roma 2022, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, p. 77.

<sup>28</sup> M. de Brugerolle, *What Do the Puppets Show? TV and Screens as the New Vitrines of the Present* in J. Zielińska (ed. by) *Performance Works*, Mousse Publishing, Warsaw 2019, p.195.

<sup>29</sup> I. Caleo, *Performance, materia, affetti. Una cartografia femminista*, Bulzoni Editore, Roma 2021, p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> A. Metta, *Il paesaggio è un mostro. Città selvatiche e nature ibride*, DeriveApprodi, Roma 2022.

<sup>31</sup> G. Clément, *The garden in motion*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2011.

inserting, or *grafting*, elements into the non-human world. Metta explores the concept of the monstrous, beginning with its dual Latin roots: *monere* (to warn) and *monstrare* (to show). This dichotomy presents an inherent ambivalence: on one hand, the monstrous warns us of the disruptive, and on the other, it shows us how the familiar can be transformed. This ambivalence translates into a vision of a space that is full of insertions – manipulated, beheaded, relocated, peeled back, and reborn. In times of crisis, a fascination for the untamed emerges, rehabilitating the natural into the urban context. This wild sense of wonder and mingling ultimately transforms into a proactive project, into action.

Monsters reveal themselves where there is the need to project into the future, and their appearing or hiding measures this propensity. The wild city is therefore a monster capable of sketching the outlines of the places we will inhabit, it warns us and reveals that we desire surprises, the irrational, pleasure, mixture, uncertainty, alterity, metamorphosis<sup>32</sup>.

This desire for the future can be a vehicle for the non-ordinary by leading to a transformative attitude, a performative *marronnage* and undisclosed areas. *Marronnage* is not intended as a reconnection with the own state of nature or a return to an original stage, it is rather the practice of reversing the idea of efficient and controlled design. It is an action of «conscious bewilderment»<sup>33</sup> that streams into the future as performative, operative, generative acts. In this sense, Metta lays the prerequisites to support a design process that detaches itself from the idea of construction efficiency and control, turning towards a potentially monstrous miscellany.

The recurring theme of a need for an experiential approach, divorced from productivist views and aligned with a future-oriented reimagination, is critical. This concept is a call to action preceding the design phase and advocates for the benefits of a transdisciplinary understanding in project work that liberates itself from institutional constraints. In this context, we focus on the house as an example of *institutionalised* space. Ota de Leonardis emphasises that institutions, and their respective studies, are closely linked to the social dimension since they are collective embodiments of human existence<sup>34</sup>. The term *institution* applies to both public and private domains due to their distinct properties: collective existence, temporal continuity, internal structuring, and normative constraints

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<sup>32</sup> A. Metta, *Il paesaggio è un mostro*, p. 40.

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. 152.

<sup>34</sup> O. de Leonardis, *Le istituzioni. Come e perché parlarne*, Carocci Editore, Roma 2001.

enabling the exercise of power. De Leonardis highlights the necessity of «negative capacity of action» for the expression of institutional change's generative potential, and in this framework, the house can be regarded as an institutional space. To this regard, for example, Daphne Spain's work, *Gendered Spaces* (1992), shows how dealing with institutions entails addressing activities oriented towards specific social contexts – for instance, educational activities within schools and religious activities within churches. Thus, the spatial arrangement regulates normative constraints tied to power and role assumption. In the case of domestic spaces, they are populated by social units performing certain tasks, qualifying them as institutionalised spaces.

The role of artistic practices in relation to spatial configurations in housing comes here into play and encompasses two core approaches. Firstly, artistic practices highlight the significance of the domestic in broader social contexts, particularly its interaction with the urban environment. Secondly, performative actions, involving everyday practices, can lead to a redefinition of perceptual and experiential constructs that transcends their functional orientation. The discussion here isn't about negating the functional purpose of spaces that serve basic human needs. Instead, it emphasises the need to consider function alongside other aspects, preventing function from monopolising the influence on domestic spaces. Shifting away from traditional housing components, it is possible to conceive dwelling forms that involve inhabitants and spaces in an ongoing process, akin to interconnected bodies.

Sarah Vanhee critiques how modern art institutions reflect dominant powers and suggest the alternative conception of *fantastic institutions* that would allow a shift from cultural place constraints, enabling a reimagining of cohabitation forms that could be future realities<sup>35</sup>. This idea of fantastic institutions becomes crucial when considering domestic spaces. The exploration of domestic spaces with an emphasis on their transformative potential requires scrutinizing inhabitant's potential for change. Amid a housing crisis and issues with current productive dynamics, this consideration becomes vitally significant<sup>36</sup>. The inclination towards the fantastic and the monstrous could offer a passage towards a deinstitutionalized domestic environment.

Two key reasons necessitate this consideration. Firstly, the tension between the domestic and the domesticated must be problematized. If the home is viewed as a domesticating institution, distinguishing between social construction-induced sedation

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<sup>35</sup> S. Vanhee, *The Fantastic Institutions*, cit.

<sup>36</sup> P. Virno, *L'idea di mondo. Intelletto pubblico e uso della vita*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2015.

and dwelling as a liberating dimension becomes challenging. Secondly, it is crucial to highlight the significance of human and non-human relationships concerning design and openness to the monstrous. Humans are inclined to domesticate, filter, normalise, categorise the unknown and align the wild with the known. This design methodology must be capable of recognizing wild traces, aiding their liberation and growth. The process should remain open to continuous reiteration and to being disruptive, unpredictable, and productive, pushing the boundaries of knowledge beyond functionality. It is a call for active openness to potential change, not necessarily acting intentionally, but willing to accept whatever might occur<sup>37</sup>.

### **3. Transformative dwelling: project practices**

Given the foundation we've established at the beginning, rooted in enactivist paradigms and an embodied perspective, it is critical to comprehend how such ideas can prompt a re-examination of dwelling via the visual and performing arts that allows a re-configuration of institutionalised spaces. These disciplines could serve as tools and driving forces in the design process thanks to their ability to explore, investigate and provoke without being overly confined by structural or functional constraints. The activation we envisage here is a transdisciplinary remodelling of project development, achieved through the incorporation of a performance-oriented consciousness. In contemplating the reform of domestic spaces and the associated strategies, art practice emerges as a crucial element for radically reappropriating the domestic institution<sup>38</sup>. This reappropriation seeks to safeguard a form of dwelling that is not only characterised by participatory collective actions, but also serves as a powerful and political catalyst for change.

Recognising the interplay of macro and micro-politics is fundamental, as the dynamics of governance and power are constantly at play when considering housing practices and solutions. Reflecting on architectural agency and its capacity to effect change beyond macro power structures is crucial. Emphasis should be placed on understanding potential micro-implications in the field of action. Thus, when discussing living, we must always consider the broader impact, prompting us to question the dichotomies we are accustomed to. Firstly, when dealing with the duality of interior and exterior spaces, how do these two

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<sup>37</sup> E. Van Campenhout, *La curatela come mentalità ambientale*, cit., p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> I. Caleo, *Performing (Art) Institutions. Against the autonomy of aesthetics*, in "Connessioni Remote", II/2, 2021 p. 131.

realms influence each other? How do they interact? What can a transformative perspective, inspired by the arts, bring to the configuration of domestic space?

This section introduces two types of case studies which, both through discursive projection and practice, focus on the idea of deinstitutionalising domestic space. The first type explores the relationship between the home and public space, considering the possibilities of collective discussion on dwelling as a strategy for survival. These projects present transformative proposals aimed at dismantling traditional boundaries and opening up a reformulation of reality in an unexpected, spontaneous, and unorganised manner. The second type of case studies involves active and flexible living projects that also function as micro-spaces. The conception of cell-like structures reveals performative potential in their design, linked to remodelling, self-construction, and mobility. This selection explores and problematizes modular typologies that encapsulate a futuristic vision related to housing, pushing the conventional understanding of functionality to its limit.

### **3.1. Sweet Parliament Home/Post Disaster Rooftops**

One of the central points of intervention focuses on the interplay between public and private realms and the ensuing blurring of boundaries this relationship necessitates. In the contemporary era, domestic spaces have evolved beyond their traditional room-specific functionality, necessitating thoughtful discourse to address the dissolution of borders. Performatively, borders – as typically understood via maps – serve as markers of rupture<sup>39</sup>. Similarly, floor plans of domestic spaces also highlight areas of conflict within dwelling spaces, revealing partitions that are not always conducive to creativity or change. By viewing the house as an institutional space, mapping tools can expose frictions that can be leveraged for radical transformation through the arts. This approach aims to explore the concept of margins in relation to projects and the potential for boundary-blurring and problematization through two works: *Sweet Parliament Home* by Andrés Jaque Architects (2011), created for the Gwangju Design Biennial, and the ongoing *Post Disaster Rooftops* project initiated in Taranto in 2012. These projects tackle the theme of boundary crossings through two main aspects. The first envisions a mediating space for citizenship within an institutional exhibition space, where the

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<sup>39</sup> L.A. Casanovas Blanco, I. G. Galán, C. Mínguez Carrasco, A. Navarrete Llopis, M. Otero Verzier (ed. by), *After Belonging. The Objects, Spaces, and Territories of the Ways We Stay in Transit*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich 2016.

dynamics of home and privacy, and urban and public spaces are examined. The second project instigates a debate starting from the roof – a frequently overlooked site of vulnerability – providing an ideal platform for discussing the potential of boundaries.

In *Sweet Parliament Home*<sup>40</sup>, Andrés Jaque Architects aimed to create a discursive space straddling public and private realms. The project crafted an arena for discussing the subdivisions of Seoul city and their implications on living and urban life. Within a semi-enclosed shell, a “speech space” unfolded for community interaction, centralising the values of domestic hospitality and safety – essentially a comfortable setting for critical discussions about dwelling. This conversation involved not only speech, but also agency and presence, effectively blurring the demarcation between private and public, while underscoring the need to recreate safe, convivial environments where citizens can feel at home and question their roles in city life.

In contrast, *Post Disaster Rooftops*, while physically located atop buildings, initiates a collective dialogue through a grassroots approach. Building on the value of crises introduced in Metta's work, which revealed monstrous opportunities in need of future solutions, *Post Disaster Rooftops* considers the future through the architectural lens of human *monstrosity* in the city of Taranto. It capitalises on the roof «as an undefined and precarious place where design/project can be discussed, transmitted/translated and put into practice beyond the dominant standards»<sup>41</sup>. This project raises pertinent questions about the relationships to be established within urban spaces of institutional influence, profit, and political order. Offering a unique perspective on urban culture and the concept of mobile and flexible living, this initiative opens a critical discourse on domestic spaces for various reasons. Firstly, it serves as a platform for civic engagement, promoting communal living through cooperative and generative infiltrations. Secondly, it provides a practical viewpoint from above that is not elitist but embodies a grassroots energy that resonates on both micro and macro levels<sup>42</sup>.

Despite the differing origins and aims of the two projects, they both offer critical insights into the concept of living as a transformative practice. The participatory dimension becomes central in these works, which, through the collective movement of bodies within a space – whether within a structure or atop a building – foster relationships and generate space. Simultaneously, they effect a regenerative shift in the spatial

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<sup>40</sup> Andrés Jaque Architects, *Sweet Parliament Home*, Gwangju Design Biennale 2011, [<https://officeforpoliticalinnovation.com/work/sweet-parliament-home/>] last consulted: 10 June 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Post Disaster Rooftops, [<http://www.postdisasterrooftops.com/ep01-intro/>] last consulted: 10 June 2023.

<sup>42</sup> Fosbury Architect (ed. by), *Spaziale. Everyone belongs to everyone else*, Humboldt, Milano 2023.

understanding of the domestic-urban relationship and serve as a challenge to the movement for citizenship. The act of dwelling, in these cases, is an opportunity for citizens to participate in the reconfiguration of the very spaces they inhabit, thus reshaping their living experiences beyond the project platforms.

### **3.2. Auto-construction and housing modules**

Particularly notable are projects involving the self-construction of mobile living devices, both autonomously and participatively. These initiatives involve designing minimal modular spaces for living and survival within urban areas. These efforts embody a transdisciplinary approach, incorporating the human body during construction, and reflecting on concepts of movement, instability, and transformative influences. Notably, we reference the works of the N55 group and Winfried Baumann. These projects drive a participatory approach open to all citizens, promoting guided living that retains considerable flexibility. In both instances, the proposed solutions serve as platforms for citizens to engage in collective construction activities and shared use. These initiatives build upon principles of mobility, shared living, and access to construction. N55 is a platform providing guidance on utilising existing housing facilities, along with instructions for creating new ones autonomously. Central to N55's practice is the use of instructional manuals, which becomes tools for almost artistic self-creation. The emphasis is on the individuals and the role of art in tangible situations.

Emerging from a non-commercial exhibition and lab space in Nørre Farimagsgade 55, Copenhagen, in 1994, N55 offers manuals for low-cost, mobile, and lightweight construction. Unlike traditional urban planning that limits resident involvement and favors profit-driven interests, N55 seeks to empower individuals to design and share public spaces irrespective of financial status. Examples of this ethos include the URBAN FREE HABITAT SYSTEM, a project from N55's workshop at the Metropolis Laboratory in Copenhagen, and other self-constructed, lightweight, shareable structures such as PUBLIC THINGS (2000) and XYZ OPEN CITY (2013), which are self-maintained by users. SMALL TRUCKS (2005) is another instance featuring a human-powered vehicle that provides shelter and can be customised for various uses, including public events or a mobile home.



Mobility also features prominently in the work of Winfried Baumann. His projects are designed to accommodate *Urban Nomads*<sup>43</sup>, who require temporary or emergency urban housing. His "Instant Housing" series includes small, single-person mobile homes. The series explores various aspects of living, from garments that serve as storage and shelter, to diverse structures that can be inhabited, folded, towed, or transported manually. Like N55, Baumann emphasises the experimental aspect of practice and understanding housing as a dynamic space that constantly reconfigures itself. Such is the case of *Instant Housing Lab* (2020), a transport vehicle that integrates the potential of a stage, a home and a take-away shop.

These cases present interesting perspectives on the possibilities of a deinstitutionalized domestic space integrated into the city. They invite self and participatory construction practices, raising questions, and offering solutions that champion participatory thinking regarding the public use of urban and wilderness spaces. The extent to which these solutions are genuinely accessible to all citizens becomes a pertinent point of consideration. There's a concern that they may be skewed towards the privileged or elitist class, creating potential barriers for those in need. As an innovative approach, it also presents the opportunity to address the growing issue of housing accessibility. When compared to other self-building solutions, a comprehensive evaluation is required to assess their effectiveness and suitability. Regardless, they stimulate the growth of novel housing strategies that challenge conventional notions of permanence and internal subdivision. Empowering users through instructional manuals, they enable the creation of autonomous, minimal, transportable, and shareable habitats.

These examples could be marking a transformative shift in design methodology and the conceptualization of housing, integrating elements of visual and performing arts with urban planning. Providing a spectrum of options to the user, although on a smaller scale, indicates a move towards the adaptability of interior spaces, without sacrificing the dependability of solutions. This necessitates deeper contemplation on fluid and changeable spaces.

In these spaces, the embodiment of the inhabitant becomes a more conscious and prominent element, dynamically interacting with the living environment that continually adapts to future shifts. This intertwining of the physical presence of the body within the living space exemplifies the concept of "embodiment" in architectural design, pushing

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<sup>43</sup> W. Baumann, *Urban Nomads* [<https://winfried-baumann.de/>] last consulted: 10 June 2023.

the boundaries of traditional norms and fostering the evolution of dynamic, user-centric habitats.

## **Conclusions**

Re-examining the concept of dwelling is crucial in our time. As we navigate the dynamic landscape of contemporary living, our conception of the domestic realm continually changes, necessitating not just an evaluation of its physical structure, but also its symbolic significance. Situated away from the concrete practicalities of construction, the visual and performing arts can provide a unique perspective, offering visions of future housing that are more than just structures; they propose spaces where the issue of sustainability is an integral part of a collective and ongoing process. When we consider the *performative* aspect in the creation of these spaces, we open the door to reimagining what these spaces could be. The idea of performance here relates to the active role that design plays in dictating the interactions, behaviours, and even the lifestyle within these spaces. By reconsidering the design and function of both private housing and collective spaces, we can influence how life unfolds within them, how these spaces interact with the larger geographical context, and how they reflect or challenge existing societal and political norms.

This approach foregrounds evolving considerations such as land usage, the maintenance of living spaces, and the identification of marginal cases where public and private heritage spaces intersect and interact. A central premise in this perspective is the embodiment of space: the view of space as an animate entity, a density that is alive and changeable, shaped by human movement and interaction. This concept aligns with principles that advocate for an active, participatory experience of space, where apparent disorder evolves into accessibility and engagement. The notion of “enaction”, defined as the way that we enact our world through our embodied actions, plays a critical role in this discussion. As our contemporary era calls for the expansion and amplification of our bodily existence, it becomes crucial to engage in discursive practices that reinterpret sensory experiences. This allows us to extend the limitations of our physical selves without renouncing our embodied nature.

Currently, there is a growing emphasis on performance and visual art applied to social issues and questions related to the living environment. They advocate for a nomadic approach to design thinking and a re-evaluation of permanence – an approach that recognizes and values the fluidity of our lived experiences. This perspective doesn't seek

to eliminate challenges of stability and structural efficiency. Rather, it suggests looking for an alternative approach, a metaphorical *secondary entrance*, which recognizes the potential of instability as a form of intervention. The task, then, is not to resolve contradictions but to remain within them, allowing ourselves the freedom to continuously reconfigure our embodied selves and our spaces.

In this context, strategies that engage with both micro and macro politics become vital, opening possibilities for participatory and modular interventions. The examples presented in this paper raise awareness about wider issues related to dwelling, such as the meanings of citizenship, site, and practice. The transformative lens of contemporary arts provides tools for reshaping both our physical and cognitive spaces, contributing to a reappropriation of a wild and futuristic understanding of the domestic realm.