

# Representing the Subjective

Private Niche and Home – a subjective approach to architecture

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ONCE HEARD AN ARCHITECT complaining about not having time to photograph his work before the client moved in, a comment quite significant for the contemporary architect's relationship to architecture. Freeze the moment before someone has been soiling your work. However, to understand architecture, one needs to look beyond the moment where the keys are handed over to the user. It is in the usage of architecture that cityscape is created, a concept wider than the internal logic of architecture, an organism in constant change.

Opening any book of architecture, it strikes you how architecture is usually portrayed – as measurable objects with proportion and scale, but with no relationship to either time or people. No trace of life is

Art sometimes interprets the essence of the city better than any traditional architectural device.

This article seeks to understand elements in the city, indefinable through traditional architectural media.

The lack of coherence between the contemporary city and the traditional architectural methods of representing it, prevents us from understanding the built environment.

By searching in fields adjacent to architecture, the understanding of the city can be extended.

found in either drawing or picture. One could think society was deserted. Yet architecture implies a subject – someone will use it, but as to how, we are getting little guidance in contemporary architecture representation. The pictures and drawings of the buildings are all representation of absence, absence of a subject.

If we instead move our focus to the personal subject, quite a different picture crystallizes. Architecture then becomes just one among other conditions in the layered meshwork of our cities. This article aims to research what elements arise in the populated cityscape, and how these elements can be represented. By understanding the city organism we can gain a greater knowledge of conditions influencing contemporary architecture.

## Place and Space

In the "Practice of Everyday life" Michel de Certeau makes a distinction between "*place*" (lieu) and "*space*" (espace). The concept "place" describes a condition where the elements are clearly distributed in relationship to each other. They are in distinct locations, each element in one place. "Place" indicates stability.

The law of the "proper" rules in the place (...).<sup>1</sup>

"Space", on the other hand, indicates a condition influenced by time, direction and events. "Space" depends on context. "Space" is ambiguous and influenced by variable conditions.

In short, *space is a practised place*.<sup>2</sup>

According to this definition different elements and conditions in the city could be described as "places" and "spaces". For instance, a monument as an object is described as "place", but if I recall "I was sitting beneath the monument in the sunset in July", it is "space". My memory includes the monument along with other conditions. The concept "space" has a narrative character.

Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.<sup>3</sup>

Michel de Certeau also tries to distinguish how we express ourselves when describing our environment. In an analysis C. Linde and W. Labov made of how people in New York described their apartments, two types of descriptions crystallized, the "*map*" and the "*tour*".<sup>4</sup> "Map" descriptions describe such static conditions as "the kitchen is

by the bedroom". "Tour" descriptions are characterised through actions: "You walk through the kitchen". Thus, where "map" is related to *seeing*, "tour" is related to *going* or moving.

It turned out that only three per cent of the descriptions were of the "map" type. When talking, we tend to describe our environment through "*tours*", as we tend to relate to our environment through "*space*". However, in scientific descriptions we do the opposite.

It seems that in passing from "ordinary" culture to scientific discourse, one passes from one pole to the other.<sup>5</sup>

For the past five centuries scientific and literary descriptions of our environment have been slowly dissociated.<sup>6</sup> The map for instance, has developed from being a description of actions in the Middle Ages: "20 paces straight ahead, then turn to the left" to today's one-dimensional geometrical map born in the tradition of Modernism.

Being an architect almost requires two personalities. As professionals we describe the city with geometrical elements, such as "map" and "place". As individuals we describe our environment through personal observations in "space" and "tour", including a subject as well as non-architectural conditions.

(...) as designers and dwellers we apply different sets of values to the environment. In our role as architects we aspire for a meticulously articulated and temporally one-dimensional environment, whereas as dwellers ourselves, we prefer a more layered, ambiguous and aesthetically less coherent environment (...).<sup>7</sup>

If, as professionals, we began to map the city with "space" and "tour" instead, would we discover other elements in the city just as important as the geometrical elements already scientifically defined? Have other disciplines, such as literature and art, managed to find important conditions in the city that architecture has missed?

## Private Niche

- Are there any particular places where you feel at home?
- There are anonymous places which lack personal character. Places like hospitals. I could easily see myself institutionalised in a medical institution. And radio stations. Radio studios like this one with a mix of intimacy and anonymity. And shopping malls. Places where it does not matter who you are. You are not walking around personalising your environment, you just pass by in the escalator like anybody else.
- That's places where no one lives.
- Yes, that's the point. It could also be a train station. People pass by, it's very casual, but you could still meet people there, they are doing something there. And sometimes strangers' eyes meet...It makes me feel comfortable. I'm comfortable when there are a lot of people and no one who knows me.<sup>8</sup>

In a big city there is a wide range of scale between private and public space. The scale and constitution of the semiprivate spaces often resembles that found in a private home. The distance to surrounding people and objects is small – it could almost be like home – only, in the city, people and objects around you are unknown, like unwritten pages.



Note: The painting “the Corridor” by Ola Billgren from 1969 shows an institutional corridor, probably taken from a hospital. The picture is composed as you would a snapshot, a composition most people can relate to. We have all taken holiday pictures.

At the same time the picture is overwhelmingly intense. The lighting situation in the corridor is almost overexplicit. The light is reflected in the painted wooden doors just as you remember light would be, but just rather explicitly. The materiality is so evident you could almost feel it by looking. Light and materiality are not described as they look, they are portrayed as *one would remember them*. As in a dream.

In the corridor nothing is happening. There is nothing sensational about the room, no reason for picturing this very corridor as a motif. It is completely normal, but through the lack of events and the explicit character of the materiality in the room, it is a motif we all can relate to. Yet it is all too ordinary, the painting gives you an impression of an over all intense normality.

Eventually, certain spaces or situations in the city become more important to the individual. These spaces or situations do not necessarily have a geometrical character as the previously defined “place” did, they could also have non measurable dimensions like in “space”. Their specific character is related to the subject itself, a result of the subject’s domestication of the city. They may not be of any importance to other people, but of great importance to me or you.

These spaces work as nodes in a personal system analogous to that of elements and monuments established through the urban planning procedure. As a contrast to planned public space, they were not created with their private function in mind. Their attraction lies in the private choice and the possibility of using public space in an unorthodox way. Like a

home not owned by yourself – but containing objects and a scale found in the private sphere.

In this article I refer to these spaces as *private niches*. *Private*, so as to keep in mind their strong connection to the specific person they were chosen by. *Niche*, because this concept can serve for describing not only places, but also conditions and atmospheres. Private niches are a result of the individual’s adaptation to the planned structure of the city.

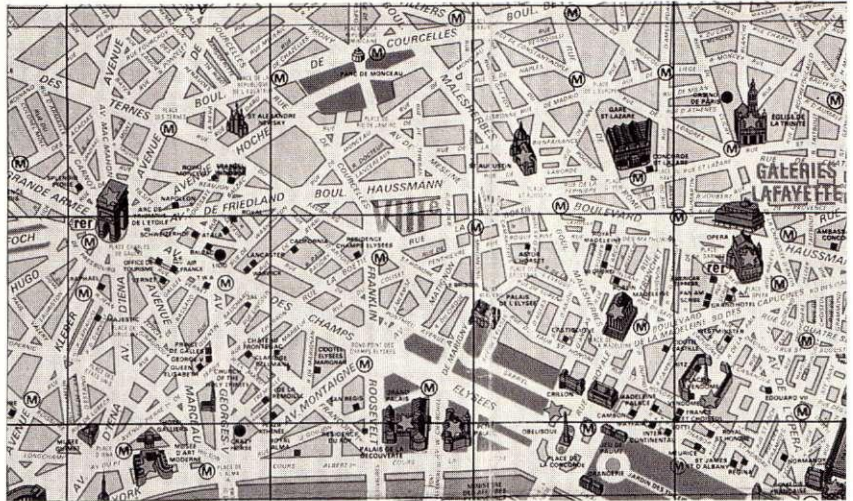
In a smaller city the close relationships between the inhabitants creates fewer opportunities of finding private niches. The range of scale between the private sphere and the public space decreases with the smaller population. Finding a private niche requires an alienation for the people around you – when leaving, no one shall know where you are heading to.

## General and subjective grammars

The picture above shows us a map of Paris. Studying it closer, one notices it consists of two types of information, two systems of nodes on top of each other. First, the architectural cityplan of Paris with its historical monuments and its characteristic system of boulevards, “places” – architectural information about the city elements, although in this case in a more popular version than you would find in professional plans. Second, a separate node system of places especially useful for the tourist; Air France, TWA, American Express offices, Crazy Horse etc. The importance of the traditional city elements and the tourist spots are indicated by their size and colour. According to this map Galleries Lafayette is far more important than l’Arc de Triomphe when visiting Paris. The map’s invented subjective character shows us an example of how a person can perceive a city.

This tourist map with its two different systems and their mutual role of importance is analogous to the existence and the relationship between the system of planned city elements, *the traditional node system*, and *the personal node system* consisting of private niches. It therefore serves as an illustration of the two juxtaposed grammars of the city, the general and the subjective, both equally important for the individual.

In “The Arcades Projects” Walter Benjamin tries to cover an era about to disappear by describing places and situations in Paris that are *important to him*. He is mapping Paris literally using different characters and subjects he finds significant for the time, such



as the *flâneur*, the collector and the arcades. Benjamin illustrates a city not with traditional city elements, but through these characters and subjects and their relation to 19th century Paris. In his personal map the characters and situations take the places of monuments and boulevards. Worth noticing is that the text fragments end with a direction as to how they should be put together within the project, resulting in a subjective inner logic you would find in a personal node system.

To reach the greatest concreteness – as it appears in the children’s plays, in a building or a situation in life – for an age.<sup>9</sup>

Representing the private niche is not easily done. Its highly subjective character does not lend itself to traditional architectural representation devices such as drawings, partly because the private niche is more than an architectural element. By searching in adjacent fields to architecture one can come closer in representing its nature.

Note: Tourist maps always tend to provide you with a ready-to-use selection of private niches. Tourist maps are quite an interesting piece of architectural invention. They try, for obviously commercial reasons, to map what a city is about for a certain subject – the tourist. Therefore they extend the traditional map with another dimension. Of course this map would be of no use for someone living in Paris. Its character is subjective in contrast to the objective character of the traditional city plan.

## Documenting the Private Niche

For a closer definition of the nature of the private niche one can study the work by artist Sophie Calle. Her art expresses a mode of representing the private niche and its subjective qualities. *Sophie Calle's photographs are documents of our private niches.*

From an ethical perspective her work might be in conflict with the idea of the integrity of the individual. Nevertheless, in her work is found, as in the subject's contact with the private niche in the city, a blunt egoism necessary if you want to cope with life in the city. Sophie Calle explores the boundaries of integrity, she sponges on the individual as the individual sponges on the private niches in the city.

Sophie Calle took work as a hotel janitor with the intention to look into the private lives of unknown people – the guests of the hotel. Through her

job she had unlimited access to their private belongings. The fundamental idea about this action is that she is not acquainted with the people whose possessions she photographs and studies. She does not know more about these people than what their belongings tell her. As a matter of fact, the guests does not mean anything to her – it is their traces she is interested in, their objects.

By staying with an unknown person's belongings the subject can reach a certain amount of peace similar to the peace found in the private niches in the city, where the scale and the intimacy of other people is familiar but without the commitment that comes with the relations and possessions in a home.

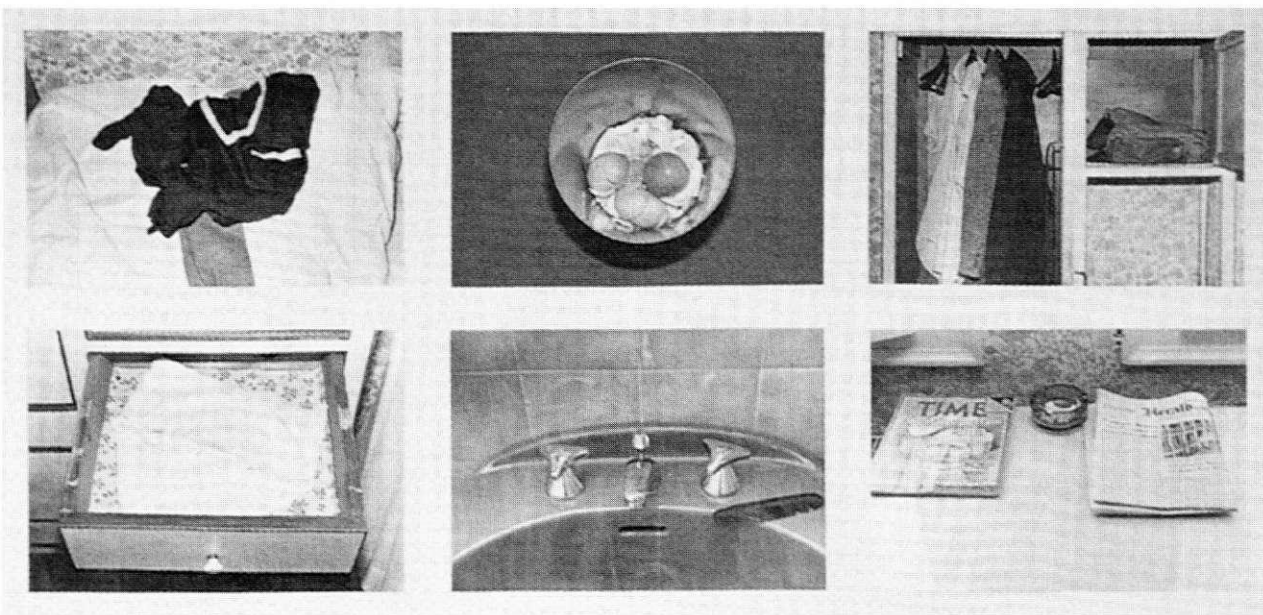
In "Suite vénitienne" Sophie Calle is following a man, Henri B, that she by coincidence knows is going to travel to Venice, Italy. This is the one and only piece of information she has about

him. He is like an unwritten page to her, as she has no former relationship to him. This study has great similarities with her studies in the hotel, but with the difference that she chooses to photograph an unknown person instead of photographing unknown people's belongings. Focus is moved from the person's belongings to the subject itself. By following the man and by trying to live his life, she is for a moment released from her own self.

(...) she who follows is herself relieved of responsibility for her own life as she follows blindly in the footsteps of the other.<sup>10</sup>

The other's track are used in such a way to distance you from yourself.<sup>11</sup>

This subjective action is equivalent to the one an inhabitant in the city is experiences in the private niches of the city. In the private niches man can hide from its own self.





## Home

Analogous to the city inhabitant's subjective relationship to the planned city structure, is the relationship between *the house* (here in the meaning of housing and planning of houses) and *the home*. *The house* is the planned, architectural object based on geometrical order. *The home* is the subjective mirror of the house, created by the individual living there. The easily understood difference between the house's and the home's importance for the individual can help us understand the idea of *a niche in the city*.

Home is not an object, a building, but a diffuse and complex condition, which integrates memories and images, desires and fears, the past and the present.<sup>12</sup>

Home is not, perhaps, at all a notion of architecture, but of psychology and sociology.<sup>13</sup>

The appearance of home is unclinical and unpredictable. When modernistic architecture struggles to state normality and standardise, the individual works hard to erase the tracks of normality and to leave its own marks on its home.

A home can be so personal and expressive that it becomes hard to stand for others than the person who created it. This fact also makes a visit in a home highly interesting, the home offers a clear picture of the person living there. Among the private niches, what we call home is an extreme, a terminal point for the subject's relation to the city.

Just it is impossible as it is for architects to design private niches and predict life in the cities, just as difficult is it for architects to build homes. Although many design magazines try to tell us how to decorate people's homes, it is not something that can be made by an outsider. If one tries to design *homes*, one ends up creating scenography.

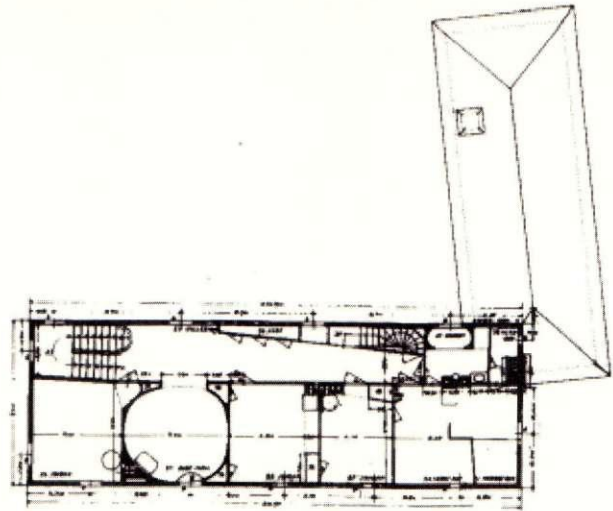
A good example of how a home can be represented is actually found within the field of scenography in Ingmar Bergman's movie *Fanny & Alexander*. The scenographer, Anna Asp, built three different homes to represent three different personalities. One of these personalities was Helena, Fanny and Alexander's grandmother. Her apartment is almost exaggerated *homelike*, crowded with comfortable furniture and heavy fabrics. In fact, the scenography was practically built up in an exaggerated scale – everything is oversized. The rooms in the picture are four meters high, together covering an area of 450 square meters. Door and window frames are constructed from cornices mounted side by side in order to match the proportions of the rooms. The oversized proportions made it possible to fill the apartment with details that together helped in enhancing the depth in the perspective.



Not only are perspective qualities are gained through the distorted proportions, but the impression of Helena's home also becomes over-explicit, almost as if it had an amplified volume. The great amount of details and objects help explaining Helena's character to the viewers. The scenography becomes a mirror of her personality and through this she gets a *past*.

Enhancing impressions through manipulation of scale and form is sometimes also done in architecture. An uncommon treatment of scale is found in the City Library of Stockholm, where Gunnar Asplund worked with a very large monumental scale and a very small intimate scale you would normally find in a home. All elements in between are excluded. The building's oversized classical volumes are juxtaposed with playful interior details such as intarsia and figurative doorhandles. Through the elimination of the a scale in between a gain of information is made. The purpose of the building becomes clear – the small scale of the person enhances the vast scale of the monument.

Among private houses, Asplund's Villa Snellman is a rare example of architecture on the borderline to scenography or art – architecture beyond universality. At first glance it seems to be a normal house no different from other houses built during the 1920's in Stockholm, but at a closer look that conclusion fails. What appears to be a symmetrical composition is revealed as a composition consisting of several distortions. The windows have slightly distorted



positions, creating a nearly symmetrical facade. The rooms of the house are unclear in their appearance, often far away from absolute geometrical shapes. The architecture itself is almost as an interpretation of a house. As one would remember a house or perhaps, as a house would appear in a dream. The corridor on the second floor has a theatrical perspective with references to Andrea Palladio's manneristic *Teatro Olimpico*. The round room is exaggerated in its shape, its roundness becomes extreme.

### Constructing the subjective

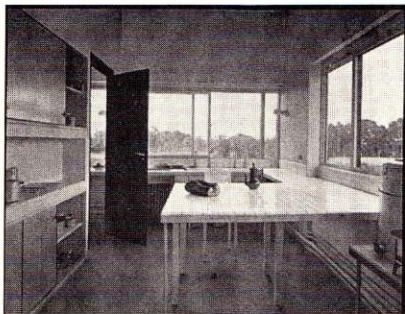
Some architects go as far as actually representing their own work through scenographic images. By doing this they get to choose the character of the invented person living there, and do not have to deal with undesired personalities of real people that could collide with their architectural intentions. The greatest example ever of this is Le Corbusier.

In the pictures of Villa Savoye, the observer gets to know Le Corbusier's architecture through the subject living there. The photographs are a sequence of pictures starting at the entrance moving upwards in the house. The pictures could almost have been taken from a screenplay where Le Corbusier is the director and the dweller a product of him directing. Much as in the work of Sophie Calle previously mentioned, the picture sequence shows a hunt for a certain subject, in this case the inhabitant. Through the search after the inhabitant, the observer gets to see selected frames of the interior.<sup>15</sup>

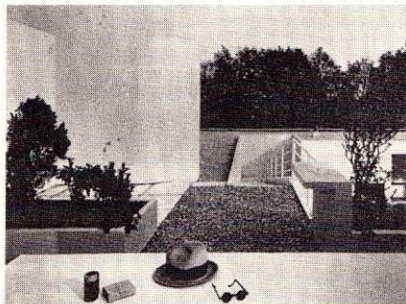
We are following somebody, the traces of his existence presented to us in the form of a series of photographs of the interior. The look into these photographs is a forbidden look. The look of a detective. A voyeuristic look.<sup>16</sup>



The person living in the villa is absent (the pictures implies that he just left the room), but his things are not. Through his things Le Corbusier shows us what life in his houses should be like. The picture becomes more than just an image of architecture, it is also a picture of the dweller, enhancing Le Corbusier's architecture through his home.



An awareness of elements in the city, non definable through traditional architecture media, does not only help us to gain a greater understanding of life in the cities, but in studying how these elements are represented in other art forms, new dimensions in architecture could be generated. As a matter of fact, some of the architects we regard as the most successful in our time have deliberately used such influences in their architecture. Of course that could be like skating on thin ice. It is easy to fall through, ending up with banal results. Nevertheless, as some of the examples above show, the result could be rewarding.



## Notes

1. De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life* transl. Steven Rendall (University of California Press) Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA 1984. p. 117.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid. p. 119.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid. p. 120.
8. Pallasmaa, Juhani. Fom lecture notes at KTH, Stockholm 1992. p. 3.
9. Translation of a radio interview with the author and playwright Kristina Lugn. *Idlaflickorna*, program to the play *Idlaflickorna* by Kristina Lugn. (Kungliga Dramatiska Teatern) Stockholm 1993.
10. Benjamin, Walter. *Paris 1800-talets huvudstad. Passagearbetet*. (Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion) Stockholm/Stehag 1992. p. viii.
11. Calle, Sophie, Baudrillard, Jean. *Suite venitienne/Please follow me* (Bay Press) Seattle 1988. Text from book cover.
12. Ibid. p. 76.
13. Pallasmaa, Juhani. From lecture notes at KTH, Stockholm 1992. p. 3.
14. Ibid. p. 2.
15. Jonson, Monika. "Rummet som berättare". *Arkitektur* 2-1990. Stockholm.
16. Colomina, Beatriz. *Privacy and Publicity* (MIT Press) Cambridge, Massachusetts. London 1994. p. 283.
17. Ibid. p. 289.



## Illustrations

The illustrations are listed in order of appearance.

1. Billgren, Ola. "The Corridor". 1969. *Album Ola Billgren En retrospektiv Vol 1* Exhibition catalogue from Rooseum's and Moderna Museet's exhibition 1991.
2. Paris Tourist map.
3. Calle, Sophie. *Sophie Calle ... in under skinnet*. Kulturhuset Stockholm 1991.
4. Calle, Sophie. *Suite vénétienne! Please follow me*. (Bay Press) Seattle 1988.
5. Picture from the screen play *Fanny och Alexander* by Ingmar Bergman. *Arkitektur 2-1990*. Stockholm.
6. Asplund, Erik Gunnar. Plan, Villa Snellman. Arkitekturmuseet. *Asplund* (Arkitektur förlag) Stockholm 1990.
7. Le Corbusier. Villa Savoye. Pictures from *Privacy and Publicity* by Beatriz Colomina (MIT Press) Cambridge, Massachusetts. London 1994.



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