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>>ON >>>>THE>>>
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NOMADISM AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES

Home in the Context of Contemporary Nomadism

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Home, Nomadism, Architecture, Design, Art.

Abstract
Contemporary nomadism is not limited to *digital nomads*, and can be motivated by work, monetary and social circumstances that do not cancel the need for a *home*: a physical and spatial context, foreign to the material detachment imposed by digitalism.
The article will address the opposite of this later stance, in which dwellers struggle with the lack of identity when they deal with the absence of a *home* in which their personality is reflected (in the spatial layout and objects defining it). Something absent in digital nomadism, in which detachment is an inherent feature.
This identity is anchored in the possibility of choice – space, objects, affections – which collides with the nomadic need for impermanence and ephemerality.
We will dwell in architecture, design and art in search of a methodology capable of subverting the anonymity underlying nomadism and together defining a *home*: mobile spaces that move with the dweller or static spaces that suit different uses and expectations in the practical and sensory use of space; furniture encased in architecture or collapsible and portable; dematerialization and alternative media in contemporary art as means of expression.
The purpose is to define a joint intervention practice which will allow the contemporary nomad to benefit from a physical but also sensory *home*, as in a sedentary dweller's house, whose life remains as a legitime reference to those who need to be on the move.

1. Introduction

Since the end of the last century, the generation between the ages of 20 and 35 has been identified as having temporary and variable labor status (Bartholomew & Mayer, 1992). Something that remained true in the present century as work is becoming as precarious as it is flexible: nowadays the "digital nomads" seem to be only the most referred example, but we must distinguish these as their work can be performed remotely, and their mobility is intentional (Pandurska et al., 2024, p. 113). However, it's possible to identify in those who move, due to work but also study, the desire to find stability not only in their professional lives but also in their personal spheres (Marcu, 2019, p. 4).

Such desire, while it can't be fulfilled, manifests itself in the way they relate to the home and its objects. The individuality of the inhabitant is diluted in what is the absence of a *home*:

> […] the place where a person feels they belong" (Home Noun - Definition in the Cambridge English-Portuguese Dictionary - Cambridge Dictionaries Online, n.d.), turned into a volatile space incapable of generating defining elements of their Individual Identity.

This is the context of Melucci's *Complex Society* "defined by a significant decline of material production" (Bartholomew & Mayer, 1992, p. 6) in which the investment in comfort and identity is made on ephemeral goods, easily abandoned once a new move comes around, but unable to create an individual identity at home: a "narrow domestic identity" (Melucci, 1989, p. 93).

Architecture as a container fulfils the need for shelter, but it doesn't solve the need for intellectual and psychological comfort. A house, in its broadest sense, should be able to respond to needs generated by instability and unpredictability, in which the same spaces are occupied successively by a series of dwellers with different needs.

Housing proposals have therefore been created in which the meaning and use of spaces is mutable: what we would previously recognize as a bedroom or living room is defined in these proposals as abstract spaces, without a specific use assigned (which is manifested in their area, shape or place in the house) allowing them to be occupied according to the needs of the dweller at a given time.
The impermanence of the house's dwellers is accompanied by a change in their type. For a long time, the house was designed for the typical nuclear family, but since the beginning of the century it has been recognized that sharing a house is actually done between members of the wider family, friends or even strangers (sharing expenses), which translates into a *Household* rather than a *Family* (Afonso, 2000, p. 156).

This creates a type of domestic architecture that is necessarily anonymous, to allow greater freedom in the appropriation of its spaces, which gives its occupant greater responsibility in guaranteeing an individual identity (their own) in the space. It is in this context that the movable objects in the house (the furniture) gain more importance, which coincides with the moment in which the (potentially temporary) inhabitant pays less attention to them (because they are potentially dispos-

able): this fact makes physical comfort secondary, as well as visual and intellectual comfort.
Since the possession of *objects of affection* that take up physical space is not possible, the dweller's individual identity may resort to the dematerialization of those goods that can appeal to this process (which is not necessarily a bad thing). But if intellectual comfort remains safeguarded for digital generations, physical comfort is not so much. And visual comfort, which is associated with physical pieces that allow such comfort, not at all.

It is therefore necessary to study the relationship between design and architecture regarding the changes felt in Western society, in which a disused household (the *nuclear family*) created the models that currently define our idea of living.
We will explore mobility as an inherent feature of the Individual and the Household, in the sense that *ownership* (and what kind of *ownership*) needs to be re-evaluated according to the new labor and social variables that deny the stability model: change of work, location and interpersonal relationships, in favor of constant change.

The idea of ownership of domestic objects will be reassessed on different scales, through the role that – static and anonymous – architecture has, and the potential of – mobile and affectionate –design in complementing the disappearing identity in today's immaterial life: two fields of knowledge that are capable of defining and qualifying space, the first through fixed elements and the second through features that are mobile or physically disconnected from their context (Krampen, 1989, p. 139).

2. Methodology

The issues raised and to be raised in this article have been a recurring concern in the author's work, because of the mobility imposed by his professional activity: several changes of house, city and job have led him to focus on issues of individual identity in the domestic space. The methodology used is therefore mixed: it's theoretically supported by the identification of the subjects that lead to the creation of a *home* (whether through the space that welcomes us or through the mobile elements that qualify it) which in turn leads to a critical review of the existing solutions proposed to qualify the house as a home. As a consequence, his own proposals are referred, as they result from the previous theoretical and practical research, making this – speculative design research – the main applied research methodology.

3. The Role of Architecture in Social Nomadism

It is still common in domestic architecture to opt for solutions that were created at the beginning of the last century, when research into spatial solutions involved a scientific approach to the physical, health and social needs of residents (Aymonino et al., 1973). At the time, it led to a definition of the different spaces in the house directly linked to the function assigned to them.

This perception of the house was accompanied by research into design that sought to simplify the utilitarian object around its strict function and its constructive simplification. The point of this process was similar to that of functionalist architecture models – which defined uses and users (Montan-

er, 2001) – seeking to make the house and furniture accessible to deprived groups, ensuring their health and happiness. Predicting a specific use and mass production were thus coordinated to efficiently and cheaply assemble goods that fitted perfectly in their users' everyday life. The idea that it would be possible to predict and respond to every need and use of a household led, in some cases, to the fusion between the house and its furniture, which became fixed and static.

Housing models from the beginning of the XX century were thus designed to respond to a pre-conceived way of life based upon the nuclear family (Silveira, 2006), a lifetime job which took place somewhere accessible: the main city became connected with its suburbs (Neves, 2005) through available transportation, so it seemed logic to work upon the household's physical stability.

More extreme utopias would melt the center core of this ideology: the family (Bauman, 2003) would disintegrate in favor of the Individual as a member of a Community, not a Household (Teige, 2002) in *Dom Kommunas* that imposed a stricter way of living still based upon the Individual's permanency in a specific place (Laboratoire Urbanisme Insurrectionnel, n.d.). However, it's interesting to think that this kind of reasoning, which led to anonymous and impersonal spaces, would adapt to today's nomadism.

The 1960's brought several experimental housing models whose main purpose was to question and promote research rather than to create feasible proposals. They did it, howev-

er, based upon real tendencies identified by their authors, like mobility and transformation, which led to the idealization of cities as mobile mega structures, or houses as minimal pods (Clark, 2009; Lin, 2011), or even as wearable suits (Cushicle and Suitaloon, 2012), something that would be classified as a New Functionalism (Montaner, 2001), because even if it was a movable structure, it was still sterile to the individual's identity.

In the beginning of the XXI century people became aware of the social changes that put into question the type of dweller used until now: a strict nuclear family becomes a Household, which accepts other than family ties between dwellers (Afonso, 2000), and a Worker can now be temporary, changeable and remote (Bartholomew & Mayer, 1992): some of the features that define Melucci's Complex Society (1989).

We are facing a new nomadism, which may however have its origins in numerous factors: it is common to mention digital nomads, to whom technology has enabled constant mobility, with no plans to establish roots (or a home). But there are also those whose mobility is a consequence of economic or political imperatives, which in both cases leads to the abandonment of the original cultural context. In this case there is a desire to belong and to build an identity in the place of arrival, even if a new move is predictable.
This nomadic feature privileges a collective identity, developed outside the house, which would never become a home, since it is disposed of any sign of individuality: Melucci's "narrow domestic identity" (1989, p. 93) because it's an ephemeral element of its dweller's identity.

3.1. Unmovable Mobility

Mainstream housing architecture still uses a functionalist layout, where spaces are designed with a specific function in mind: main bedroom, children's bedroom, living room, etc., which become obstacles to appropriation because dwellers are not only nuclear families, but households composed by same age friends, renters, etc. The functionalist spatial hierarchy can't support the needs of dwellers with similar needs, requiring similar spaces, areas, etc. Since this change in the social and the individual paradigm have been identified, housing proposals have been designed replying not only to nomadism, but also to another unpredictable features like house sharing, remote work, moving from room to room inside the same house, etc. But, while assuming the uncertainty, such proposals do not rely on the construction's mobility or ephemerality: the building is permanent (not a movable module) and internal spaces are conceived so to promote appropriation.

Riegler and Riewe's Bahnofstrasse building (Graz, Switzerland, 1992) is one of the earlier examples of this tendency, where all rooms are accessible through a shared space (Fig. 1), but also among themselves through 3 to 4 doors in each room. Also, there are infrastructures for the kitchen in two spaces (in a separate space and in the living room), which allows to create an extra bedroom/office/living room if dwellers choose to move it from its original place to the living room. Also, the extra doors connecting each room allow them to be extensions of the previous one, or simply for a dweller to pass through an alternative path rather than the one used by the others (promoting privacy among dwellers).

SANAA's Kitagata housing building (Kitagata, Japan, 1994) has a different approach, also because their cultural background is very different (Fig. 2): it's easily identifiable a tatami room, for instance.

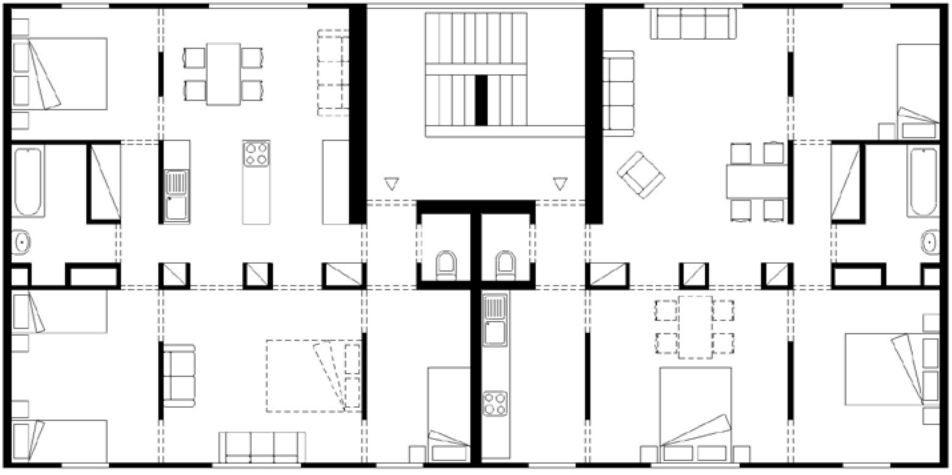

Figure 1. Riegler, Florien and Riewe, Roger, Bahnofstrasse appartments, floorplan, 1992 (author's drawing).

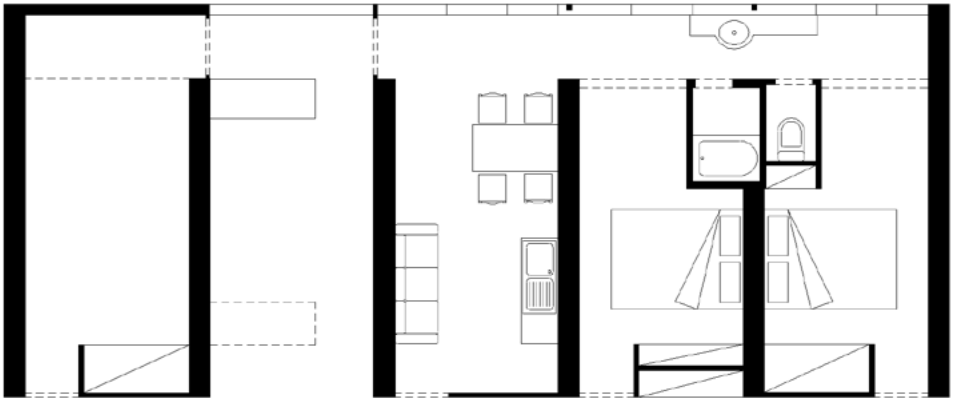

Figure 2. Sanaa, Kitagata appartments, floorplan, 1994 (author's drawing).

There is a common corridor inside, which arbors the sink and gives access to the shower and the toilet, in two different spaces (allowing them to be used simultaneously). But this proposal's main feature is the way each room has its own access to the outside gallery. Rather than a common entrance, each dweller has its own entrance, allowing one's schedules and companions to remain private. And, as in the previous example, the nuclear family still finds its place in such proposal, but it's allowed to evolve since space is malleable: children who become adults can still share a house with their parents while gaining a little more privacy.

The E11 proposal for a housing competition from 2011 tries a different approach, in which, rather than defining a single use for a given room, it proposes a multifunctional apartment composed of several rooms, each capable of receiving numerous functions (Fig. 3): we can identify the kitchen, through its fixed furniture, but the size of the remaining rooms it's the same, and each makes the most of the building's gallery access to give each one a personal entrance, even if in different levels (most apartments have two floors).

Figure 3. The author, E11 housing proposal, architectural competition, floorplans, 2011 (author's drawing).

This allows also to have a home office or shop, since there is always an individual entrance for customers or collaborators, who don't interfere with the home's private dynamics (which also benefits from multiple entrances for each room, from the inside of the apartment).

4. Design: Furniture as an Answer

As seen in the previous examples, architecture allows appropriation and individuality as it becomes more anonymous. Surely, we can identify with a certain space as it allows us to do what we need or want to do, but such activities require tools to do so.

There are already a great number of such tools – furniture – available in the market that can assure one's individual identity. But what we have been discussing is the existence of a new variable, Bauman's revolution in progress (Conti, n.d.) which places the individual between two paradigms: permanence, in a certain place, which may not give him the security and means to acquire property, furniture included (*La Generación 'Low Cost'*, 2015); and life's changeability and *liquidity*, where (constantly) moving is necessary to have a regular income.

In both cases the dweller is faced with an ephemeral house (not in a physical sense) where it is impossible for him to build a home, since he doesn't have the financial means to do it, or doesn't have the physical stability to build it: he *carries the house on his back*, a popular expression that clearly identifies a *home* as something beyond four walls and a ceiling.

There are parts of our individual identity that can be dematerialized, like music or books (although vinyl and paper can

be also *objects of affection*), but the real question resides in furniture, since nowadays liquid life transforms such items into disposable ones: because we can't afford likeable/quality items that last, or because we can't constantly move such items with us, thus recurring to disposable furniture ready to abandon once we move again. In either case, the dweller doesn't bond with those objects.

We immediately think about cheap furniture from a specific brand, which, however, doesn't promote their products as disposable, although self-assembled products may require (more) regular maintenance. However, the money spent on those makes them throw away items, although not all of them end up in the trash: in bigger cities, where the municipalities have specific days of the week to collect big objects that are thrown away, people organize *trash safaris* to collect pieces of furniture from the street before the garbage truck passes by. It's not only a matter of need, but also of sustainability, but still one takes the found piece of furniture primarily because he *needs* it, and not because he *loves* it.

4.1. A Solid Product in a Liquid World

There is another path to explore: objects/furniture that allow for emotional ties without being disposable, static or uncomfortable. Something lasting, physically and emotionally, but also moveable so it can be carried by the *liquid dweller*. Something other than the self-assembled furniture, which wasn't designed with disassembly in mind (País, 2015), or the articulated beach chair, practical and moveable, but uncomfortable. Victor Papanek is a necessary reference since its work uses

practical assembly processes that make furniture as easy to carry items. It starts as critical of modernist furniture which clinical aesthetics made it unappealing to taste and comfort (Papanek, 1971). Also, expensive items as status symbols also were condemned, regardless of their aesthetics, which led him to propose simple furniture easily assembled through fitting of different pieces, without screws, nails or glue. Based upon standard plywood measurements (reducing waste) his designs weren't even finished, which made them prone to DIY, thus accessible to everyone.

Through today's knowledge, Papanek misses one key point of sustainability, which is *durability*: excessively simple fittings, exposed materials, all features which may lead to a premature use of his pieces, thus promoting consumption. To add complexity and finishing was to give up upon the self-made aspect of his proposals, but nowadays the space and tools needed to DIY aren't easily accessible to those *with a liquid life*. The main core of his work remains pertinent: assembly through fitting, without nails, screws or glues, making it possible repeatedly without damaging its different pieces.

We can mention, the *+table* (or *++table* and *+++table*, according to size) from the Dutch collective of architects Bureaufraai (Fig. 4), since it's true to the Papanek's will to use standard measurements to design the final product: the sum of all the pieces composing the table(s) can be extracted from a single sheet of plywood with minimum waste. The products aren't DIY or even open source and are made by CNC routers that even inscribe the logo. It's a final product that is sold to the customer disassembled

Figure 4. Bureaufraai, +++table, furniture (https://www.bureaufraai.com/portfolios/table/).

and flat-packed, a feature from which he can benefit from again and again, once he moves out to a new home.

The Hardwareless Shelf (Fig. 5), as the name implies, only relies on its main elements to stand, each piece fitting each other, with a final *T*-shaped piece fitted between the shelves and the sides to guarantee maximum stability. The shelf's bigger dimensions and the need to carry a lot of weight make this solution an achievement which can be applied (like the previous example) in other types of furniture.

The ABBA armchair (Fig. 6) is a design also based upon fitting different pieces which don't require additional fixations, making it easily assembled and disassembled.

But besides technical research, it is also a study on the use of *archetypes* in design, making use of a traditional or well-known shape to stimulate affinity between object and owner. Besides durability and quality, its design is based upon the idea that an object becomes permanent once we nurture affection for it: if we

Figure 5. Stuby, Normam, Hardwareless Shelf, furniture (Schmidt, P. (2012). *Plydesign: 73 distinctive DIY Projects in Plywood (and other sheet goods)*. Storey Pub., p. 192).

Figure 6. The author, ABBA mountable/demountable armchair (through fittings, without glue, nails or screws), furniture prototype (author's photo).

like it, or if it's closer to our memories, we tend to take care of it and carry it with us.

A final mention to the Floyd furniture brand (*Floyd Home*, n.d.), to refer an already available product, which started as single product: the Floyd Leg (Fig. 7), made of lacquered metal, that can be screwed onto existing pieces without damaging them (such as wooden boards, stone slabs or any piece that you want to turn into a support) which makes use of isolated materials with character to transform them into - detachable, and reassembleable - furniture.
It has since expanded to full pieces of furniture, still using the principle of a metal assembly piece that joins together the remaining parts, which allows it to be mail sent, self-assembled and… self-disassembled innumerous times.

Figure 7. Floyd Leg, furniture leg (https://floydhome.com/).

5. About Narratives and Dematerialization

We can consider this as the third chapter in the process of re-interpreting our *home* in the face of a contemporary, nomadic context. After *space* and *mass*, we will dwell in something in between, which consists in the dematerialization of our (literal) objects of affection. Previously we talked about furniture and how it can't prevent itself from being *matter*, because it fulfills a purpose that can only be done through its physicality. But there are other purposes that don't require mass or matter, so to speak.

Joseph Kosuth, in his 1969 essay "Art after Philosophy" (Kosuth, 1991) defined Conceptual Art's principles, which he thoroughly applied in its own work: one of the most famous was "One and three chairs" (Fig. 8), one of a series of objects he exposed not only through the physical object, but also through its photo and its definition.
His purpose was to decompose objects in several layers, using linguistics' definition of Sign, Signifier and Signified to make an understanding of Art in general. The image we have of a chair – *the sign* – can be deconstructed into its "material and tangible elements" – *the signifier*, or the physical chair – and its "concept and abstract entity" – *the signified*, or its definition (Flatschart, 2013).

So, is it possible to exclude the Signifier while maintaining the Sign and the Signified? Can, for instance, an artistic expression be stripped from its physical support and still be true to itself? There are some art forms that are inexorably moving towards dematerialization, like music and literature.

Figure 8. Kosuth, Joseph, One and three chairs, artwork installation, Centre Pompidou, 2020 (author's photo).

There was a moment, after the CD and others, where music still required a dedicated device, but nowadays streaming has become the norm and not even the music file is truly ours.

Books still depend on a specific electronic device, due to the fact of being read instead of being listened, but in each case, the dematerialization of the support – the CD, the book – will (has) lead to a drastic reduction in the contents of our homes: words and sounds don't require books and vinyl, which don't require shelving, which don't require moving: sometimes they're just our smartphone in our back pocket.

It´s important to define, however, in which circumstances this rule can be applied.
Some don't appreciate dematerialization because they can't detach themselves from the physical experience of reading and listening, i.e., holding and smelling a book while reading, adding it to their bookshelf, manipulating a vinyl and listening to its imperfections.

But also because some books and music depend on this involvement to be properly experienced: the book "S" (Abrams et al., 2013) tells a story within a story, where a (physical) book is being simultaneously read by two readers, who exchange messages with each other, writing notes in the margins of the pages and adding documents between the pages of the book for both to consult.
The work of literature therefore consists of a real book with "handwritten" notes and yellowed documents that fall from the pages when we (the third reader) leaf through it.

Tori Amos composed an album while on tour, and when published (Amos, 2002) it came with, among other memorabilia, a map of her tour route, where she points out the places she visited and where her songs began to take shape.

In both examples, literature and music can't be detached from its physical context, which is something which becomes more obvious when contemplating Visual Arts: a handmade drawing or a collage can't simply be digitalized and thrown away, since they, as an object of art, depend upon their signifier to make sense (as a whole).

5.1. New Artforms for a New Living

Therefore, we can't apply this dematerialization process uncritically, throwing away our (art) possessions once we get it on digital files.
What we are searching is a way to bring dematerialized art to our homes, since, in its essence, it doesn't have matter and it's easily moveable. What remained physical, and massive, were the means to display it, even if the TV sets used in early videoart were converted to flat screens. Also, powerful projector hanging from ceilings are common sights in our visits to contemporary art museums.

But in a domestic context one can benefit from the miniaturisation of nowadays projectors to bring videoart to our homes: the already dematerialized file can make use of a tiny device to expose a "wall-sized" image or video, turning a huge art piece into a pocket-size object once the need to move arises (again). This must be considered as a true opportunity, since the availability of the technology to a broader public may also define its wider use in art (Gonçalves, 2022, p. 3). Meaning that a type of artistic expression which depended on its exhibit in dedicated spaces (galleries, museums, public spaces) now opens to the domestic market as technology allows it, and demand exists through those who depend on the mobility of their possessions to define their home. And to dematerialize is to become mobile.

Television can already be replaced by these devices, which project onto a white wall left free for this purpose. Less well-lit spaces can therefore serve as a canvas for the domestic exhi-

Figure 9. Riera, Javier, Sector primario, still from video projection on the wall, MUSAC, 2015 (https://javierriera.com/gallery-category/exposiciones/#sector-primario).

bition of large pieces of video art that occupy entire walls in hallways, originating from small-scale projectors, stored in a corner: Javier Riera's Sector Primario (2015) consists of the projection of silent figures that elegantly move through space (Fig. 9), creating a sense of calm and connection with nature, that we could easily imagine in our living room or even our hallway.

Likewise, electronic waste has grown exponentially as our smartphones and tablets lose functionalities or become obsolete: using them as a support for videos that do not depend, for example, on playback quality to be enjoyed not only extends their useful life but also offers free (and nomadic) supports to display in our homes. Valhacouto (2020) is a stop motion video

during the Covid confinement, exposing the need to search for shelter in our own shelters (homes) from the constant presence of our roommates (Fig. 10). It was projected on a wall, viewed on a flatscreen, but it was also made to use of out-of-use electronics, like tablets and smartphones, easily placed in walls or furniture, easily transported, but also replaceable (as the video file does not depend from the support for its artist value).

Again, using the domestic context as a stage to video art may not apply to all existing art pieces, as their focus was to be publicly exposed, introducing visual and sound disturbances that are difficult to sustain at home, all the time. But the discovery of a new display platform may (and should) lead to the development of new art pieces.

Figure 10. The author, Valhacouto, still from a video, to be displayed on many supports, 2020 (author's video).

6. Conclusion

A way of living results from a multitude of circumstances that involves causes and consequences. Far from considering such consequences as negative, we must design its response as a multitude of factors that includes a variety of disciplines. In our approached portable way of living we could include other disciplines in order to find a broader reply, like in the *kitchenless city* series of studies (*Overgrowth - Anna Puigjaner - Bringing the Kitchen Out of the House*, n.d.; Puigjaner, n.d.; urbanNext, 2021), in which the author focus on urban systems that don´t depend on private kitchen to ensure the daily diet of the urban population, thus relieving their dependence upon the house, as we traditionally (and occidentally, we may add) conceive it.

Here were presented three possibilities, supported by three disciplines – architecture, design and art – that likely aren't the only ones possible, even in the referred fields. So, this article may be understood as challenge for researchers to gather existing knowledge and creating more, in the subject of a contemporary nomadic life.

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IV

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Architect (2001), with a Master in Intervention Methodologies in Architectural Heritage (2006) and PhD in Minimum Housing (2013) from Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto (FAUP). Master in Product Designer (2017) and in Visual Arts (2021) by the School of Fine Arts and Design (ESAD.CR) of the Polytechnic of Leiria. Researcher on the "Forest-4future" project at the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria - Design and Arts Research Laboratory (2021-2023). Invited Adjunct Professor, at ESAD.CR of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (since 2021).
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She has coordinated numerous national and international research projects focused on product and service innovation, as well as emergency design. She is the author of several publications and academic papers exploring design culture, with particular attention to the communicative aspects of product, fashion, and living design. She also serves as the artistic director of the Lab Museum of Design, where she curates educational exhibitions on various design-related topics.
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Her research and teaching activities also include Design for Kids within the Master's program in Design for Kids and Toys at the Politecnico of Milan, and Jewelry Design in the Master's program in History, Design, and Marketing of Jewelry at the University of Siena. She is the author of numerous publications, including articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings at both national and international levels.
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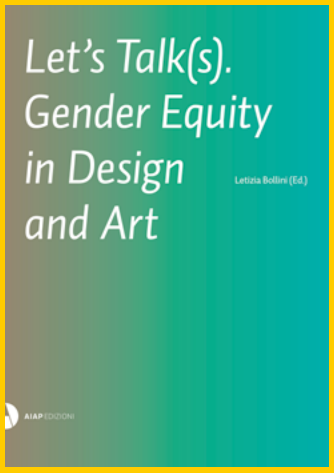

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