

Reinhabiting, the house, the street and the city

Introduction:

Reinhabiting is a research project that considers existing buildings and public spaces in Spain as opportunities for a new approach to the way we inhabit them. The word involves inhabiting again, in an intensive simple manner, rethinking how spaces can be used – more than undertaking unnecessary alterations. The term “reinhabiting” was developed by Habitar, a research group of the Catalan Polytechnic University UPC, during the years 2010 and 2011, in the context of a R & D project which results were shown in 6 exhibits at Nuevos Ministerios Gallery of Madrid. The project had funding from the Ministry of Housing. The index of the exhibits was defined by 9 themes, episodes, which have become 9 small books. The contents of all exposures can be consulted on-line () and we encourage their observation parallel to the reading of this text. This article will be focused on the proposals that emerged during the preparation of project and will develop the theoretical framework and architectural context from which they arose.

1st exhibition – episode 1 – What’s reinhabiting?

Reinhabiting is to think of new use, different, or simply prolong the old, especially appropriate in a time like this and in a country like ours, with a oversized fleet of homes. In fact, today, with thousands of empty houses and as many second homes, industrial buildings and vacant infrastructures in good condition, to think about new homes or in any prefabrication, it seems a matter perfectly deferrable. It has past more than a hundred of years from the publication of *El Prácticón*². In it, the author Angel Muro, rose to culinary category the use of leftovers. This could be a way to define the aim of the project *Reinhabiting*: make the most of the leftovers.

The first exhibition³ discussed the concept and objectives of the project Reinhabiting. Although these are several, there is a common goal of not obsessing about the “demolition and new construction,” but to make the most of what already exists. Reinhabiting is an attitude of mind and so it refers to the subject rather than the object to itself. *Reinhabiting* means re-living something altering its use. It does not mean repair or consolidation and, of course, is not equivalent to a stylistic aggiornamento. Reinhabiting addresses some proposals that provide the dwellings with new services that are actually inexistent or improve their accessibility, their resources and, in general, their possibilities of use. But we also see how some of the interventions also involve substantial changes in urban structure, in transport and facilities, taking into consideration the always fertile relationship between the house and the street, which can itself become subject of intervention.

To demonstrate this fact in the first exhibition we exposed some suggestive cases: for example we compared the town of Arles (Fig. 1), the *reinhabitation* of a Roman ruin, with the attitude of the hermit crab, which uses an abandoned shell as a house. Also a set of pictures of nativity scenes help us to show the meaning of *reinhabiting*. In this case, an inhospitable place, as a stable, eventually becomes a household (Fig.2). We are also interested in returning to the people their condition of main character in architecture. From that point of view the emptiness shown at the picture of Las Meninas by Thierry and Bruno Lahontaa (Fig. 3, A and B) or the transformation of Saddam Hussein Palace into an inhospitable space (Fig. 4) after the American invasion demonstrate the capacity of human activity to transform an architectural space.

2nd exhibition – episode 2 – Satellite rooms

The second exhibition developed the concept of satellite rooms⁴, a proposal to reinhabit a housing block. In this second exhibition we proposed the possibility to extend the dwellings temporary, adapting them to the changing needs of their residents, thanks to a reorganization of the whole building. The idea is to give the building a sufficient number of rooms, separated from the house, a few floors above or below, that allow to extend the home temporary to meet its needs and, once satisfied, free them for the use of other tenants of the block (fig. 5).

The beneficiaries of the *satellite* room are many. Some are related to the so-called extended family, such as old people requiring care without having to give up their privacy, the first steps towards the emancipation of a teenager or an adult child who returns after a separation. Others are related with the introduction of a workplace at home without interfering its comfort. Occasionally, there is simply the need of having a private space separate from the everyday annoyances of a house. It is not only a matter of a surface increase, but also of Benefits of an Autonomous and equipped room.

In the exhibition we showed several proposals for different public housing blocks in Spain. Taking into consideration the increasingly number of vacant homes, we proposed to replace some of the empty apartments of a block with a set of rooms each of them equipped with independent access, private bathroom, kitchenette, and storage space. All around about 20 m², to accommodate, without leaving the building, situations like those described above (fig. 6). This is not about building new apartments in the block, but to complete existing ones.

These *reinhabiting* proposals were accompanied by historical references of discontinued homes, or in other words, houses where a part of it –usually a room- is separated from itself. This is the case of the dwellings in La Baixa, Lisbon, s. XVIII; the *chambres de bonne* of France from the XIX century; the service rooms for the bourgeoisie in Spain (fig. 7); the separate room of the apartments situated at 25 Street Versailles in Paris, 1928-31, designed by B. Lubetkin and H. Ginsberg; or most recent cases as the buildings that combine residential and office spaces as the case of the building design by Kengo Kuma in Tokyo (fig. 8).

3rd exhibition – episodes 3+4 – Domesticating the street

With “Domesticating the street”⁵ we intended to return to the urban space its character of place, by encouraging social relations through a reflection on the characteristics of the street and the uses that can be developed in it beyond road traffic and pedestrians. To demonstrate this fact we chose a painting by Paolo Veronese, *The Feast in the House of Levi* (fig. 9) where the street is used as an extension of the house. It is a setting for a dinner, and a dinner is a domestic act.

Our proposals were linked to European and American experiences that aim to break the idea of the specialized street -the street as infrastructure- and return it to its condition of place. Actions like the Community Garden Movement (fig. 10) or the placement of chairs in Times Square (fig. 11), both in New York, or the square markets of Rome which change their appearance according to a schedule, or the snowed Amsterdam canals transformed into a flat surface perfect for ice skating (fig. 12). All these examples invite us to see the street as an open space ready to be used for civic activities, not just for the movement of vehicles. In the exhibition we invited to do actions in public spaces such as those developed in Shared Space, a concept defined by the engineer Hans Moderman in the early seventies to solve traffic problems which nowadays continues to be alive thanks to an open platform held in internet. The concept of *Shared Space* proposes to de-specialize the street by building continuous pavements and eliminating traffic signs. In a similar way, the initiative *Parking-day*⁶, developed in different U.S. cities, is also an invitation to use the street as an extension street of the domestic space (fig. 13). We also mentioned other initiatives as *Depave*⁷, also from the United States, consisting of deasphalting abandoned areas for planting gardens and orchards instead for the service of the community (fig. 14). Finally, to make the most of our public space, we proposed the idea of using the street daily or weekly according to an schedule that would regulate its uses, in that way incompatible uses could operate in the same place at different times (children playing, market, movement of vehicles, etc).

The exhibition also encouraged to “*Reinhabit the ground floor*”⁸ as a strategy to revitalize the streets extending to it the liveliness of indoor activities, diluting the limits between public and private. It aims to encourage the reconsideration of the former but increasingly current relations between work place and home, taking advantage of the distinctive qualities of the ground floor and preventing the deterioration of street life by giving new uses to many empty ground spaces.

The exhibit proposals invited to recuperate the ground floor as a space for housing in the compact Mediterranean cities, a house that could be combined with a work space. The home-store that characterized many ground floors until 30 years ago can

be rethought turning it into home-office or home-workshop that opens its activity to the street (fig. 15). Also the exhibit invited to regulate and encourage some commercial activities that occur in the threshold between public and private space (fig. 16). Finally, we collected several examples where were used awnings as a simple ephemeral measure that helps to break the rigid boundary that often exist between what is public and what is private (fig. 17 and 18).

4th exhibition – episodes 5+6 – Indoors

The fourth exhibition, titled “Indoors”, addressed the issue of household organization, dealing with two concepts: first the role of doors in homes and on the other hand, the subject of infringing the use of some spaces to meet the needs of each resident (including those considered useless).

“More doors”⁹ is the title of the fifth exhibition that proposed the refurbishment of dwellings just changing the quantity, position and typology of its doors. The flexibility of a house can be improved just adding a door (fig. 19 and 20). The exhibition was critical with the tendency of generating mono-spaces, instead of that we encourage to keep certain doors in order to have the option of adding or splitting rooms (fig. 21). The exhibition also showed several types of doors which design allows us to imagine a use beyond the circulation (fig. 22).

The sixth exhibition “Misusing”¹⁰ invited us to rethink the use of certain conventional spaces of European houses as the hall or the living-dining room. The exhibition drew a critical point of view towards those homes where the living room has predominance over the other parts. This type of organization is in contradiction with the real use of the house and it is rather the expression of an *a priori* standard family organization that has nothing to do with the actual family caseloads (fig. 23).

The exhibition drew a series of proposals that substantially improved the use of the home through small internal reforms:

1-“A corridor plus” offered the possibility to resize our halls to improve its use. With a little more width the corridor may invite to work, play or even eat (fig. 24).

2-“A table in the kitchen,” warned of the discomfort of Spanish conventional kitchens (narrow and specialized), reflecting on the fact that the kitchen often becomes a meeting place, make it wider it could be the substitute of the dining room (fig. 25).

3-“Enter through the kitchen,” proposed a specific refurbishment for small apartments: to join the hall with the kitchen. We understood that the kitchen can be considered a “public” space of the house and it could be located closer to the entrance in order to free a room for other uses (fig. 26).

4-“Less hierarchy” invited to observe the house without the dimensional primacy of the living room above the other living spaces. The habit which force us to project the living room as the “center” of the house prevents us to reflect on other questions that should not be neglected: Why grouping all the bedrooms?, Why not to divide the living room in two? And even more, why there must be a living room? (Fig. 27).

5th exhibition – episodes 7+8 – Abandonment and opportunity¹¹

In this episode we decided to think of the abandoned and vacant buildings as opportunities to revitalize the city from within, trying out alternatives to demolition and incorporating new uses such as housing. It is difficult to establish a clear “disused buildings” statistic, unless a particularly relevant situation occurs, such as that experienced by the metropolitan area of Barcelona, which in 2011 had a 14% of empty office buildings, the equivalent to 820,000 sqm¹². It is also the case of Lisbon, with around 4,000 abandoned housing buildings - more than the 7% - as a result of a significant decrease in its population¹³. In many other situations, the abandoned buildings are dismantled public facilities, office buildings, hotels, health centers, obsolete and abandoned agricultural structures, prisons, schools, religious buildings, closed or transferred military installations, transport infrastructures or old factories and warehouses engulfed by the growth of the city, in number in on which has not always absolute (fig. 28).

Even today, the belief that demolishing and rebuilding are cheaper and provide better results than re-using persists. However, in terms of carbon footprint this attitude is more than questionable. When in good condition, “these buildings are a resource [...] The reuse of existing buildings is in itself a Sustainable strategy

in Preserving the embodied energy of the Existing fabric,” according to British architects Buschow Henley, authors of some works of recycling grouped under the banner of *Adaptive Reuse*¹⁴.

While many cities transform abandoned buildings into public facilities, reflection developed by our group went a step further encouraging a more widespread reuse into housing. Thus we presented a series of examples / ideas useful for reinhabitation of these buildings.

1- “To live anywhere”: the house-studio by Pierre Chareau for the painter Robert Motherwell inside a military Quonset hut-type (Long Island, 1946) (fig. 29) or the mobile shelter designed by the athenian architect Aristide Antonas in a double-decker bus (2009) (fig. 30) are examples of how reusing could provide from ordinary material an attractive solution.

2- “Dwelling infrastructures”: is what happens in many cities with a viaduct or any other comparable infrastructure. Examples such as Tokyo, Paris, Berlin and Evora in Portugal, to name but a few cases offer suggestive images (fig. 31). The viaduct provides structural stability, in addition to the roof and some walls, so “half house” is already made.

3- “Capsules”: one of the most general feature of the abandoned industrial areas is the absence of partitions. It is well know the possibility of reusing them as Lofts. However, it is possible to ameliorate these empty spaces by capsules. Artistic interventions by Allan Wexler as The Crate House (1991) (fig. 32), are comparable to the portable rooms Nohotel, designed by Tobias Lehmann and Floris Schiferli (fig. 33). These capsules are similar to Sleepbox (2009) (fig. 34) by the architects A. Goryainov and M. Krymov, which are designed for stations and airports and which lead to think of a more intensive and sustainable use of industrial empty spaces.

4- “Mezzanine”: a way to tap the excessive height of the industrial gaps is by means of mezzanines. In the exhibition we showed the so-called Naked House (2000) by Shigeru Ban, which though not a reused building illustrates the use of this distinctive feature (fig. 35).

5- “The car at the front door”: another feature of industrial abandoned buildings is its strength. The proposed rehabilitation of the Fiat building in Turin, Lingotto (Giacomo Matte Trucco, 1915-23) by Richard Meier proposes that the 500 new homes can be accessible from the car, by using the ramp that goes up to the building rooftop (fig. 36). Something similar occurred in the recent conversion of a cold store of cod built in 1939 in Oporto into houses and stores (fig 37).

6- “Regulations”: a usual problem in refurbishment operations is adapting the building according to existing regulations. In this sense we proposed two measures. On the one hand creating a “RH” sign the buildings subject to reinhabitation (in the same way as historic vehicles are marked with an H in Spain), so that they have to abide by their own regulations. Similarly, we proposed a procedure in order to guide intervention in an abandoned building, rather than determining the possible routes of intervention. The analysis of the compatibility between this support and the activity would be necessary. Only then can these buildings be successfully reactivated.

6th exhibition – episode 9 – House Move

Finally, the last exhibition “House Move”¹⁵, which took the form of a short film¹⁶, was a return to the essence of the concept reinhabiting, understanding that:

“The move is a state of mind. When we move we take stock and inventory of the house, but also of our lives. That state of mind and the shape of wrapped furniture and objects, ready to move, are a promise –a project-, of colonizing the new house and, at the same time, of reorganizing the old one differently. To move is the most economical, easy and reversible of reinhabiting”¹⁷.

In the exhibition we invited to give a chance to our homes before moving, and to try to reinvent our domestic space by simply changing the displacement of its furniture. The furniture does a role in houses beyond use: selecting and placing the furniture we can turn a house into a home. The furniture shapes the architectural space as its walls or doors.

Final remark

One of the final remarks of our project refers precisely to the actual Spanish housing law. The law is often an impediment to refurbish our houses and is one of the reasons why many buildings are just turned down instead of being rehabilitated. If there is a consensus on the sustainability and the historic appropriateness of rehabilitation, there should also be a housing law flexible enough to allow new intervention strategies on existing dwelling buildings with a wider concept on habitability. If we associate flexibility to cultural and industrial buildings and not to housing it may be due to the rigidity of our housing law. For us, this is a mistake and a loss of opportunities for *Reinhabiting*.

Notes:

¹ Follow it on: <http://www.habitar.upc.edu/2008/03/22/proyecto-rehabitar/>

² MURO, Ángel: *El Practicón. Tratado completo de cocina y aprovechamiento de sobras* (1894)

³ See it on: <http://www.habitar.upc.edu/2010/03/11/rehabitar-1/>

⁴ See it on: <http://www.habitar.upc.edu/2010/04/11/rehabitar-2/>

⁵ See it on: <http://www.habitar.upc.edu/2010/05/12/rehabitar-3/>

⁶ Follow it on: www.parkingday.org

⁷ Follow them on: www.depave.org

⁸ See it on: <http://www.habitar.upc.edu/2010/05/13/rehabitar-4/>

⁹ See it on: <http://www.habitar.upc.edu/2010/06/11/rehabitar-5/>

¹⁰ See it on: <http://www.habitar.upc.edu/2010/07/11/rehabitar-6/>

¹¹ Follow it on: <http://www.habitar.upc.edu/2011/04/11/rehabitar-8/>

¹² Pellicer, L.: "Barcelona acumula más de 820.000 metros cuadrados de oficinas vacías". *El País*, January 19th 2011

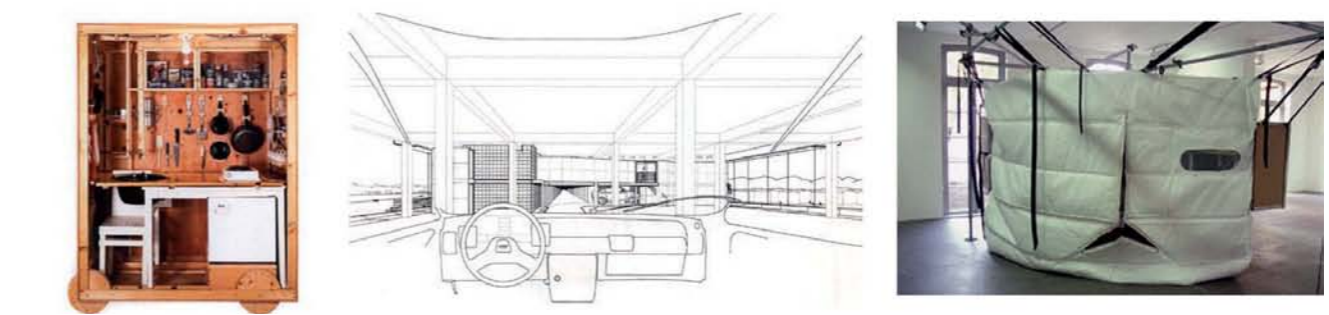
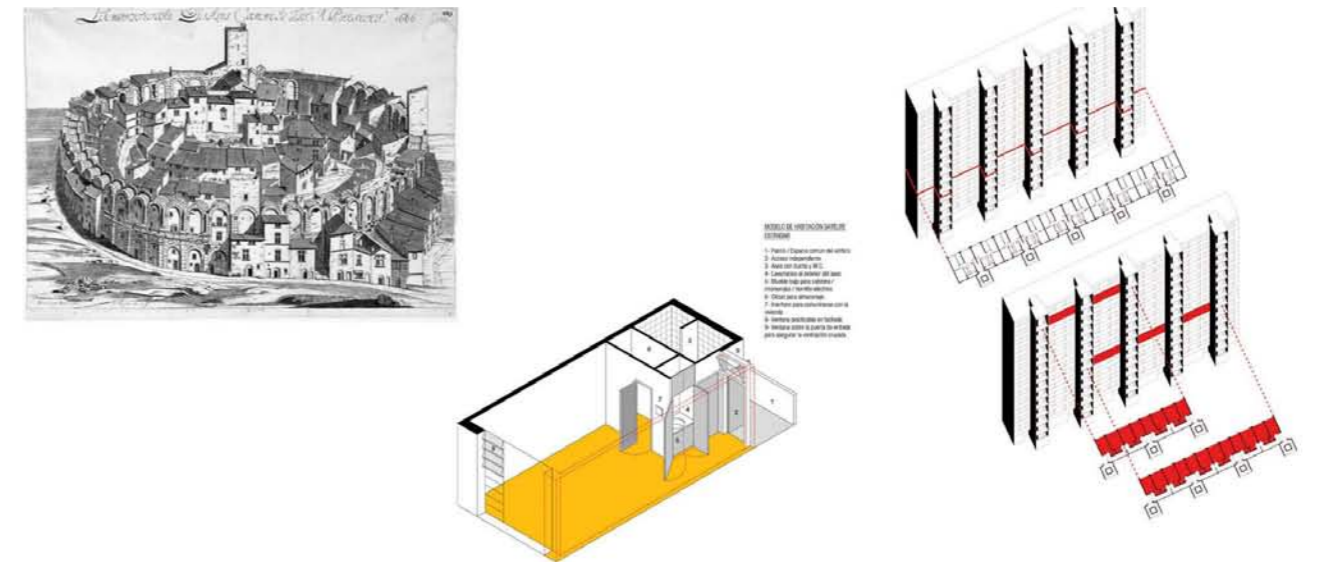
¹³Datos de 2008, publicados en Relea, F.: "Lisboa, la capital del vacío". *El País*, August 1st 2010

¹³See it on: <http://www.hhbr.co.uk>

¹⁴Follow it on: <http://www.habitar.upc.edu/2011/12/14/rehabitar-y9-mudanzas/>

¹⁵See the film on: <http://www.habitar.upc.edu/2012/02/27/mudanzas/>

¹⁶ From: <http://www.habitar.upc.edu/2011/12/14/rehabitar-y9-mudanzas/>



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