

Use of masks and confinement: home, function and fiction

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Abstract

The article discusses the transformations in perceptions and uses of domestic space since the COVID-19 pandemic, taking as its starting point the text 'I love living here' by Carla Soares. The analysis highlights how confinement has revealed the functional precariousness of contemporary housing and the inadequacy of its spaces to accommodate the multiple dimensions of everyday life. Based on dialogues with authors such as Carlos A. C. Lemos, Renata Marquez, and Wellington Cançado, the study addresses the overlapping functions in domestic environments and the relationship between materiality, affection, and imagination. It also reflects on the role of fiction, material culture, and 'trifles' as forms of re-signification and resistance in the face of the spatial and social restrictions imposed by urban living. The text proposes



to understand the home not only as a shelter, but as a symbolic and affective device capable of shaping ways of living and imagining the world.

Keywords: Domesticity; Architecture; Housing; Material culture; Pandemics.

Resumo

O artigo discute as transformações nas percepções e usos do espaço doméstico a partir da pandemia de COVID-19, tomando como ponto de partida o texto “Eu adoro morar aqui”, de Carla Soares. A análise evidencia como o confinamento revelou a precariedade funcional das habitações contemporâneas e a insuficiência de seus espaços para comportar as múltiplas dimensões da vida cotidiana. A partir de interlocuções com autores como Carlos A. C. Lemos, Renata Marquez e Wellington Cançado, o estudo aborda a sobreposição de funções nos ambientes domésticos e a relação entre materialidade, afeto e imaginação. Reflete-se ainda sobre o papel da ficção, da cultura material e das “miudezas” como formas de ressignificação e resistência frente às restrições espaciais e sociais impostas pelo habitar urbano. O texto propõe compreender a casa não apenas como abrigo, mas como dispositivo simbólico e afetivo capaz de moldar modos de viver e imaginar o mundo.

Palavras-chave: Domesticidade. Arquitetura. Habitação. Cultura material. Pandemia.

Resumen

El artículo analiza los cambios en las percepciones y los usos del espacio doméstico a partir de la pandemia de COVID-19, tomando como punto de partida el texto «Me encanta vivir aquí», de Carla Soares. El análisis pone de manifiesto cómo el confinamiento ha revelado la precariedad funcional de las viviendas contemporáneas y la insuficiencia de sus espacios para albergar las múltiples dimensiones de la vida cotidiana. A partir de diálogos con autores como Carlos A. C. Lemos, Renata Marquez y Wellington Cançado, el estudio aborda la superposición de funciones en los entornos domésticos y la relación entre materialidad, afecto e imaginación. También se reflexiona sobre el papel de la ficción, la cultura material y las «pequeñeces» como formas de resignificación y resistencia frente a las restricciones espaciales y sociales impuestas por la vida urbana. El texto propone entender la casa no solo como un refugio, sino como un dispositivo simbólico y afectivo capaz de moldear formas de vivir e imaginar el mundo.

Palabras clave: Domesticidad; Arquitectura; Morada; Cultura material; Pandemia.



INTRODUCTION

When we rent an apartment we rent
a landscape we rent neighbours we
run into in the lift, the temperature in the mornings,
certain noises, certain sun
exposure, dust; we rent the words
spoken to us by the doormen, the relative distances
between the places we frequent; we rent the places
we start to frequent, the smell of paint, the touch
of parquet flooring; we rent the right to say that we live there,
the safe conduct to enter and leave, and even the permission
to die there; we rent the future memory
of an apartment and the right to put it
in a poem.

(Marques, 2017, p. 23)

This work is an adapted version of a chapter from the master's thesis "Domesticities and counter-domesticities: chronicles and tidbits from confined lives", defended in 2024 in the Post Graduate Programme in Architecture and Urbanism at UFMG, with a scholarship funded by CAPES.

The complete text has been divided into chapters that, in an episodic manner, shed light on and attempt to elaborate on specific issues of domesticities and living between 2020 and 2023, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. Based on a common understanding of this period, issues such as control mechanisms and health measures established in relation to homes and bodies, remote work, unpaid care work, the ambiguity of digital and physical windows, and living in a context that seems to have come out of science fiction were analysed.

Drawing on theoretical concepts not only from architecture but also from other human sciences, these issues were analysed based on narratives of everyday domestic life published throughout this period. This research, using the collage methodology, aimed to dismantle and reassemble what domesticity was, and how we could define it at a time when the home became a shelter for those who could isolate themselves there during the pandemic. Thus, this text focuses specifically on this spatial unit, the home, which is understood here as the main stage for activities within these many domesticities, which we concluded were impossible to define in a single way at present. It became clear that the home has always been a space of disputes, confinements, and restraints, which do not necessarily fit all of life and everything that this spatiality is often willing to be and contemplate within it. Based on Carla Soares' text, this discussion begins, moving on to the use of other references on how we can understand the home from this chronicle of everyday life.



I love living here

In March 2022, the writer Carla Soares published a text called “I love living here” (Soares, 2022). Her texts, published on the Internet through a newsletter – texts published digitally and sent to her readers via email – called “Outra Cozinha” (Another Kitchen), have a common theme: they investigate “what eating reveals about us” (Soares, 2022). The text mentioned above was actually written in January 2021, when Carla was living in Belo Horizonte and the house was a writing theme that was on her mind, straying a little from the theme of food, but not going too far. Meanwhile, her husband was living in the interior of Paraná, and he often sent her photos of animals there, such as beetles, lizards, and birds, saying that he was relieved to be in contact with a more peaceful landscape. This daily life closer to nature revealed a gap between their routines, since Carla was isolated in an apartment in a big city during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Opening the balcony early in the morning to feel the cool breeze, having breakfast in the warm sun, being in a quiet place, being able to see the sky and having space to spread my arms. While he shows me how surrounded by life he is, I go about my days feeling trapped in a place where I can't even see the sky, and my nights are deprived of sleep because of the noise that gives me no rest. These are small things, so we tend to think it's okay. But the accumulation of these small daily indignities, which we think we have no right to suffer precisely because of their apparent size, leaves everything sour. (Soares, 2022)

Carla even mentions the irony of a sticker stuck on a window located between the laundry room and the room intended to be a maid's room, which read “I love living here”.

Every morning, when I go to clean my cats' litter boxes in that room, I see this sticker, which was already there before I arrived. I feel a tremendous urge to rip it off every time. It's partly because of the irony of where it's stuck in the house — a room that probably never even served to comfortably accommodate a person stretching out to sleep, and which is now underused as a storage room for random items and a cat toilet. The sticker bothers me because of where it is in the flat, but also because I hate living in this place. I have been feeling so limited, without many options for what to do inside the house. I have been thinking about how unspecific the rooms are. They are a jumble of small squares, distributed side by side and on top of each other in the building, without much differentiation, like a bunch of black Ford Model T cars lined up on the production line. I look at them and think about how



these rooms can't hold much else besides staring at screens
— the TV, the computer, and the mobile phone. (Soares, 2022)

The writer continues her text by commenting on the inefficiency of dwellings, both houses and flats, which, according to her, are not built to have shapes other than right angles and squares, nor to accommodate other activities such as hobbies like gardening, for example. "It is even difficult to imagine what other things we could do in a house" (Soares, 2022,), she says. In addition to providing shelter for survival, the writer points out that even in matters considered basic, residences have left much to be desired, with service areas becoming smaller and smaller or non-existent, "an imaginary space connected to the kitchen" (Soares, 2022,), and also describes kitchens as poor, since in rental properties they are the most outdated and out of place rooms in relation to the rest of the house, generally being small, poorly lit, poorly ventilated and without sufficient surfaces such as worktops or cupboards to perform the act of cooking on a daily basis with quality.

It may seem that a mediocre kitchen is just something you have to deal with. But having a poorly designed kitchen is very disruptive. It's a daily task that we have to perform several times a day, and so in these cases it becomes a constant improvisation. A lot of people love to talk about the pleasure of cooking, but very few talk about how difficult it is to feel that enthusiasm in a place that doesn't suit you. (Soares, 2022)

Not having enough space for essential survival activities, where they cannot be carried out comfortably, is also perceived by the body and is one of the reasons for weariness and stress during this task. Carla talks about her discomfort with how brighter spaces, balconies, and green areas could make the experience of living in big cities less sterile. However, these are currently considered luxury items due to their unavailability or inaccessibility to the majority of the population. These discomforts became glaring during the pandemic and the inability to go out to perform other activities outside the home, leading to their concentration in insufficient and inflexible spaces, leaving life with these characteristics as well.

The pandemic has made it clearer that our homes are not as comfortable as we thought, nor do they offer as many possibilities. However, many people had to spend a lot of time in these spaces long before the pandemic. People with reduced mobility, people working from home, mothers with newborn children have always spent more time in these environments and needed other possibilities. The proportion of options that include other functionalities, however, has always been very small. Our homes today are mostly designed to be bedrooms, where we go to spend the night in front of a screen of our choice, until it is time to take a shower and



sleep to work the next day. No matter how well decorated and cosy we try to make them, if we look at the raw structure of the rooms, this is the basic function of a home that we will find. That is also why it was so uncomfortable to have to stay in these spaces for so long during the pandemic: because they do not allow us to create many moments of respite, even when we have time for it. My imagination wanders to this distant possibility of change in buildings, but the reason for dreaming is not only because of the discomfort with my home at the moment, which makes me wish things were very different. The spaces we build are a mirror of what we understand we need, but the opposite may be even more important. Spaces also shape the way we are able to imagine and structure the world. Buildings make us mentally organise how things can be. (Soares, 2022)

Carla also says that “buildings are our attempts to change our perception of a wild world into something more comfortable and gentle” (Soares, 2022,), and the pandemic brought the home as a space “safe” from the virus. But it cannot be said that, in general, it was a kind of comfort, even though for many it brought some amenities. The harshness and separation caused by confinement, according to the author, brought hostility due to the way the spaces where we were stuck for our own protection were built. Carla, although not a trained architect, has a very valuable understanding of the constituent elements of the visual language that defines spatialities. Her perception that the home can be more than a box where we increasingly internalise ourselves and turn only inward is extremely important for the design of gentler architectures, through which the author dreams of ways of living that are equally more generous with life itself:

Walls are a very solid reminder of how we can feel in our relationship with the world. That is why, for example, a house without internal walls, where privacy for the people living inside is reduced, can force people to learn to be more open. An excess of glass and openings can create a sense of transparency. Places that are too small can teach us never to demand space and to be content with little, while also connecting us with the need to go outside, as the feeling of confinement can be intolerable. Changing these construction details, then, gives rise to different dispositions and availabilities. I keep asking myself: what would our homes be like if they were a starting point for life and not a kind of box in which we shut ourselves away? (Soares, 2022)

The feeling of welcome and presence in the world, absent in current constructions according to the author, demonstrates how architecture has turned to creating things that we are deprived of, like a bad joke, where spaces pretend to be what



they are not, like a kind of pastiche. She revisits fads such as “Instagrammable spaces” inside homes, leading their residents, for example, to fill apartments completely detached from contact with nature outside with plants.

Soares then mentions the issue of how there is a custom of paying attention to decoration, given the impossibility of changing the raw structural material of the spaces where we live, “in the minutiae of a house as an expression of our identities” (Soares, 2022). She herself points out that these details are more accessible interventions than more profound changes in the spatial configuration of dwellings, which are often rented.

Sometimes I think that the houses we live in have so many flaws because it is as if they depend on our vague dissatisfaction, so that we can keep buying objects that change the environment. And not infrequently, we end up a little overwhelmed by these possibilities, often trying to declutter our homes from successive decorations. It is a sign that things are not working. The structures we live in, pardon the pun, are too concrete. Realising how many changes could be made to our homes, which seem increasingly strangled by crowded cities suffering from property speculation, can give us a feeling of powerlessness, and that changes in this area are just a silly utopia. But the things we dream of, even if they are not accessible now, remain stored away and slowly transform, sometimes over generations, the world we live in. (Soares, 2022)

There are several points to be explored in this excerpt. One of them relates to the book *Domesticidades*, by Renata Marquez and Wellington Cançado, which discusses how the presence of junk, even when it overlaps with real needs for quality space, is a relevant part of the construction of living and domesticity. It is possible to assume that, given our confinement in precarious spaces during the pandemic, we do not notice as much how these little things have their own poetry. This attachment to details that often mask and do not address larger structures and problems may seem somewhat depressing or even superficial, but it is as if these knick-knacks were pleasing to the eye and a symbol of life as something that exists. Signs that, even if suffocated, there are artefacts of an experience lived inside or outside the home that have left traces and remain there, like an archaeology of everyday life imprinted on the inside.

For the historian Vânia Carneiro de Carvalho, in her text “Sculptures inspired by gallant life: an exercise in analysis”, from 2017, these small objects even speak of a form of relationship with the space of the home. Carvalho, in addition to discussing gender and artefacts of domestic life in the text, which will be addressed later, brings Jean-Pierre Warnier’s



thinking to the debate on the knick-knacks that contribute to the construction of domesticity:

Jean-Pierre Warnier offers us a very useful methodological tool for understanding the diversity of appropriations we make of the material world and, therefore, the diversity of identity that this materiality would promote. He tells us that objects are like prostheses for our bodies, but not prostheses that complete something that once existed and is now missing, such as an amputated leg or a lost tooth. Human beings would essentially depend on material prostheses to live and constitute themselves as human. Based on the notions of body techniques launched by Marcel Mauss, Warnier develops the concept of bodily synthesis to demonstrate that the individual, by using a certain repertoire of artefacts (prostheses), produces a body that will be as different from others as the set of material prostheses that he has selected and articulated in a sui generis combination. Without aiming to develop an anthropology of the individual, as it is Warnier's goal, these notions sensitise the historian to understanding the changes that may have occurred in the bodies of men and women when they leave the public space of the city behind and enter the domestic environment of their homes. What changes in this transition? Only the senses constructed in the home with objects of decoration and comfort? (Carvalho, 2017, p. 257)

Carvalho (2017) also revisits in her analysis the English anthropologist Alfred Gell and his notion of the agency of works of art through the mechanism of capture, like a trap, through fascination and enchantment.

When entering the home, the body carries with it the effects of experiences lived outside – different movements, rhythms, sounds, engagements of attention, tensions, the memory of efforts made. It is not the senses of objects that reprogram the body entering the domestic territory, but the objects themselves that enable new ways of living to be experienced. (Carvalho, 2017, p. 269)

During the pandemic, ethnographer and visual artist Paula Zuccotti started a project called Lockdown Essentials (Zuccotti, 2020) or Archaeology of the Future of Global Lockdown. Zuccotti's (2020) proposal, following the line of other works previously carried out, was to inventory objects and photograph them based on the question: "what are the 15 objects that are helping you on this journey?"



Zuccotti archived this series of inventory photographs on her website, bringing together mappings of intimacies from different countries. Brazil has four records of these fragments of domesticity in a state of exception. For Valeria, in the city of Olinda, state of Pernambuco (Brazil), for example, these are her essentials (Zuccotti, 2020)

1. Mobile phone. It is my main means of communication with friends and family; I watch live streams and use social media a lot.
2. Medicine. We take it at the slightest sign of illness and/or for anxiety.
3. Holy Bible. We use it a lot to strengthen our faith and learn more about it.
4. 70% alcohol. It has become part of our daily lives, inside and outside the home, on our hands and objects.
5. Bleach. Essential for cleaning the house, shoes, and clothes for disinfection, we have tripled our consumption.
6. Face masks. We all use them very often, a little difficult, but essential [...]
12. Pet toys. We spend more time with our pets, interacting better and having a lot of fun.

(Valeria as cited in Zuccotti, 2021)

Perhaps this updated version of the question, "What would you take to a desert island?", is rephrased as: "What do you consider essential when your home is an island?". This material attachment to trifles is part of the memory of what has been experienced, and in this case, linked to the space experienced.

However, returning to Carla Soares' text, despite the narrative richness of these knick-knacks, urgent questions arise from confinement in spaces that are insufficient for most people:

Even if the windows where I am are small and the horizon is short, not being afraid to look outside is better than believing that you simply have to make peace with the sticker that says "I love living here." Imagining the place where you would love to live is making it possible for it to exist. First, in your thoughts; then, who knows. (Soares, 2022)

Architect Carlos A. C. Lemos, in his text from 2017 "In the processes of domesticity, the superimposition of everyday practices in the same architectural space", discusses domesticity as it receives multiple activities within the space of the home. As a scholar of "domestic life practices" (Lemos, 2017), he says of his career that "primarily, it dealt with the essential functions of residential shelter [...]. These



are functions that we now refer to in programmes as the need for rest, service and living areas.” (Lemos, 2017, p. 241).

Starting in Brasília in the 1960s, Lemos recalls a competition for the design of low-income housing to be replicated on a large scale throughout Brazil. The architect was quite astonished by the winning house, both for its small size, “absolutely incapable of accommodating a medium-sized family” (Lemos, 2017, p. 241), and for the winner’s proposed solutions to solve the daily lives of “five poor souls” (Lemos, 2017).

According to Lemos, this idea probably never got off the ground, but it prompted him to investigate what the proletariat’s expectations would be for an ideal home, one that would encompass the various activities included in a programme of needs. In 1964, the architect began a pilot study on the subject with students from the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of São Paulo (FAU-USP). Later, with the help of Professor Maria Ruth Amaral de Sampaio, the research continued, focusing on self-construction in the city of São Paulo, following the evolution of these dwellings over time. Lemos considers the sequential examples of ways of living that he obtained through Sampaio to be extremely useful in relation to the “occurrence of overlapping functions, or activities, in the same domestic space.” (Lemos, 2017, p. 242).

Lemos also recounts a failed attempt by monks from São Bento to propose housing in small one-bedroom, one-bathroom flats, similar to hotel rooms in São Paulo. This type of housing was actually widely used by wealthy men in São Paulo society for secret romantic encounters, and was given the name *garçonnières*. Lemos points out that this precursor to what we understand today as studio apartments proliferated moderately from 1920 onwards, but in a very particular way in Brazil. Its popularity came about through the middle class’s acceptance of the overlapping of domestic activities in the same space, only in the early 1950s.

Bringing this into the context of the 21st century, the author mentions the presence of devices such as computers, which corroborate this overlap concentrated in the bedrooms of middle and upper-class families. This concentration also demarcates bedrooms as exclusive spaces, isolated from the rest of the house, no longer just for sleeping. However, this removal of common spaces as a priority brings significant changes to the design of the rest of a housing unit:

Nowadays, when architects discuss housing requirements with their clients, they commonly agree to minimise the so-called ‘service areas’, which have always been centred around the kitchen. This is the reality today, after several thousand years, cooking is no longer the centre of interest in the home, and the fireplace in the living rooms of chic houses is a symbol of the early days when raw food was exchanged for cooked food around the fire. Indeed, we can easily



follow the involution of the work areas of homes caused by progress, which has gradually removed and continues to remove domestic activities, taking them outside the home thanks to the industriousness of the industry that emerged after the Industrial Revolution, which began the struggle for the equality of women with men. Everything I have just stated is implied in Siegfried Giedion's magnificent book *Mechanisation Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History*. This is a fundamental work for understanding today's home, completely free from the obligation of labour dedicated to handling foodstuffs and, above all, cleaning the paraphernalia associated with cooking. Goodbye to pots, pans and cauldrons. Today, many people survive in their homes in this frozen food empire, with only the help of a microwave and two or three other appliances. In short, even with a small sink and a tiny washing machine, it is possible to have a gastronomic centre perfectly superimposed on the family living area, the lounge, leisure and reception area. (Lemos, 2027, p. 247)

Here we can see the imposition that architecture places on everyday life, limiting service activities such as cooking. The issues that Carla Soares raises in her text are part of a project of spatial restriction, which in fact creates barriers to inhabiting the domestic space beyond what is described in an initial programme of requirements, often requested by people who ultimately will not live there. When Lemos (2017) says "goodbye to pots and pans" and mentions the "frozen food empire", one can also see a connection with the recent context of the pandemic, especially based on a recent statement by the president of Ifood, the largest delivery company in Latin America. Fabrício Bloisi says that "in ten years, no one will cook anymore" (Wiziack, 2024,), predicting that the price of food outside the home "will compensate for abandoning the stove" (Wiziack, 2024). Statements like this border on the absurd, given the functioning of the Ifood platform itself, which works with the precariousness of its delivery workers (The Intercept Brazil, 2022), who, it is worth noting, worked more intensely during the pandemic and still do not have a regulated definition of labour rights (Filho, 2023). Furthermore, they obliterate the reproductive labour involved in cooking by assuming its almost complete outsourcing.

Returning to Lemos' (2017) text, the author says that:

The aforementioned progress brought about by successive discoveries and inventions is obviously also affecting the way we live in general and, in homes, has ended up influencing the criteria for overlapping in such a way that, especially in middle-class homes, the various categories of activities can all coexist in the same environment. Only the sanitary facilities



will be located separately. In the rest of the house, everything will be permitted anywhere. Everything will be classified as a "living area". (Lemos, 2017)

But what kind of permissions to "be" are these, given that this supposed progress has also led to the production of cramped and inefficient living spaces? Lemos (2017) again provides a brief historical overview, this time on Brazilian living rooms. Since colonial times, there has been a space set aside for receiving visitors that was isolated from the rest of the intimate environment of residences. This space also concentrated the temporality of the day until the 19th century, with the advent of electricity, which allowed the room to be occupied at night as well, also changing the time of dinner. Lemos also mentions the spread of radio as a "great family unifier" (Lemos, 2017, p. 249), around which people gathered to listen to programmes, a function later also attributed to television. According to Lemos (2017), the living room became a basic part of the needs of middle-class homes from the 19th century onwards. Concluding the text, speaking of contemporary times, the author says:

The computer with its internet has subverted everything. In a short time, it took over the telephone and television, and a few years after its release, it became embedded in mobile phones, then reigned supreme in tablets and iPads. Today in Brazil, these communication devices are equal to the number of inhabitants. For these gadgets, social classes no longer exist; absolutely everyone is their slave. Acquaintances socialise with acquaintances, who also chat with strangers, and these strangers also communicate with each other, virtually initiating unlikely friendships. Everyone knows everything. There are no more secrets. In the near future, this universal connection of minds will make meetings or social gatherings between people unnecessary, but we cannot yet guess how friendships, relationships and love will endure. Homes will be 'smarter,' functioning fully at the touch of a button or with commands sent from mobile phones in cars stuck in traffic jams. And families will be made up of individuals carrying the same key, which will open the single lock of the home. I can say nothing about domesticity at that time. (Lemos, 2017, p. 250)

The future that came was more dramatic: the spaces of Brazilian middle-class homes, although endowed with various privileges, became insufficient, stuck in time. Carla Soares rented one of them, a very common reality in Brazil, where these 20th-century flats are currently offered for rent in large cities, housing family combinations different from those for which they were originally designed.



FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The tasks that overlap in the same room are currently adding up continuously, leaving these homes stacked with an even greater pile of activities to accommodate, often without enough space to fit an entire life inside them. Domesticity finds its impasses here: even when dealing with its extension into the digital realm, the physical realm has imposed itself dramatically with isolation. As much as this hybridisation of daily life favours the concentration of previously in-person activities around and within screens, the precariousness of the remaining living spaces has also become clearer. Although work, study, leisure, and other activities do not take place outside the home during the pandemic, it is impossible to try to fit everything inside the door.

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