

Post-Pandemic Cities #10.

Optimistic about living together

Sam Chermayeff

Hello, my name is Sam Chermayeff. Thanks for having me here. I'm an architect living in Berlin but I grew up in New York and I have a practice here in Germany, despite not really speaking German, that is really about people.

It's a really strange time. I'm recording this on March 15th so today is the first day that my daughter and many other children get to go back to kindergarten and it feels like we're nearing the end of an extremely long year. And a lot has changed although much of my pursuit is very much the same. Architecture's always in a kind of such a long trajectory.

So, I've been asked here to think about what's special about now and what I'm doing to sort of react—if you will—to the pandemic but also to just changing ideas about collective architecture. Because I used to work at SANAA, and what I'm concerned with from the very beginning is making architecture that connects people and I mean that in the classic sense of public space. I mean that in the classic sense of collective housing where people live together, where people invest together, where people—you know—think of their homes as part of a community on many, many scales. From the point of view of just one neighbor to the whole building, to the whole block, to the whole neighborhood, to the city, nation, the European Union in this case, and so on...

What that means for me, I think, in terms of architecture before the pandemic, and maybe still does, is just an idea about trying to have people stay together and separate at the same time. We're in a kind of advanced capital mode now, so there is, including in myself, a desire for individualism and authorship and, let's say, a kind of self-referential model. And then there's also a kind of inherent loneliness. I mean, I live in another country where I don't speak the language, without any of my family. My parents are long gone and my sisters live across the world. But somehow, I need to feel connected to people and so I need to make community and I think a lot of people have that experience given the mobility that until very recently was available to all of us throughout, you know, the last... my entire adult life. So, I'm pushing 40, so at least 20 years people have been able to move around and... like I said, I lived in Japan, I live now in Germany, I go to New York pretty regularly. I need to make connections to people in new ways that are different from before. So, what that means architecturally is... well, it means a lot of things but it means facing your neighbors quite literally.

So, starting with the big building that I do with my partner Johanna Meyer Grohbrügge, who also worked at SANAA, and we have an office called June 14. We're building a very big building—well, big for us—a 23-unit apartment building where the spaces interlock and there are double high spaces and you have to imagine that in the middle of these 23 units, each unit because they're double high and offset, border on four other spaces, on four other units. So you kind of have doors into your neighbor's houses and there are sort of rooms in between houses that can be used. Let's say you can share a kitchen with your neighbor or you can have a guest room that opens to two doors, to two different apartments so that one day my in-laws can come and another day somebody else has their little brother over. And that kind of sharing to me still allows for individualism but also allows for a little bit of negotiation. Let's say a little bit of friction in a positive sense. And the way these apartments are organized is such that they also sort of wrap around each other. So sometimes when you go to your window you actually can see into your neighbor but you still very much have your space. So there's very much transparency but also very individual big spaces and small spaces, right? So sometimes you share small spaces and the big is just your singular space. And they're visible to each other and visible to the street. So they're very bright and open spaces.

But that's maybe hard to grasp from a podcast. You can check it out on <https://kufu.berlin/> I'll spell that in the notes. And that's something that totally makes sense, sort of outside the pandemic and then meanwhile we spent the last year trying desperately to isolate—all of us, right? So we try not to be together, despite, I think, quite wanting to be. At least in my case, I miss people dearly.

So one of the things I've noticed on how my work has really changed the last year is that the kind of focus on the individual and of sharing has become the kitchen. I mean, I'm surely not the first person to say this but everybody, including me, has become a radically better cook during the pandemic. I appreciate cooking more, you know, by force in a way. You know, I have a family, there're no more restaurants, I have to cook. And now that restrictions have sort of loosened, I started inviting people over and I've started to really rethink for myself and for my clients how the kitchen becomes a kind of collective space. So it's not just hosting like it used to be. It's not a kind of formal presentation. Cooking has become inherently more collaborative with people, and that, I think, is fascinating. So if I could take something special from this particular moment in time, it's a kind of rethinking on how to adapt spaces to be open to collective activity. And that means, you know in a very basic way, kitchen islands, right?

Let's just start with something which I certainly didn't invent but everybody would like a kitchen island. Everybody would like to knock down that wall, if you had such a wall, between your kitchen and the rest of the house so that you could stand there and face your house and therefore face your guests and your family, look out the window and make cooking and eating part of like one general togetherness.

And that's been such a fun thing to design also. And because it turns out that you can't have kitchen islands everywhere so you have to really think it very hard about how to just redesign kitchens such that parts jut out and things happen such that you're not facing a wall all the time. I mean, I know that that sounds so rudimentary but it's such a pleasure to kind of catch that thing, to sort of catch a moment when two people can face each other and cut. So, I've been making kind of funny cutting blocks that float in your kitchen if you can't have a kitchen island. Or I've been making things where the pots just hang in the middle of the room or stoves that are movable so that you can bring them instead of having these giant things against the wall... something to gather around.

So, I think that because we have such a small scale of people, of collectivity at this moment, right. We have the collectivity of society, we don't want people to get sick, we don't want people to die. To some extent, we've all been vigilant about that, so you have to make these smaller moves which I think are examples for the larger architectural moves. So I'm hoping that people, in the future, are going to center their houses actually more around the kitchen, more around cooking, more around working and doing things together. Let's say program, right? So now my wife is working on the table, just in the next room from right here so there's no more office. Everything has actually become this kind of collective space. And some people might say, "Darn, don't we want more little rooms and a smaller grain of house?" and I think that in really tough days, sure. But I think in general what people need is a design where you have, what Sejima, my former boss in Japan, would call, "soft division", where I still kind of hear or maybe see my wife and she can see me recording this interview but we have some kind of objects and things and whatnot blocking a little bit of our space so we can still have some kind of privacy in the collective.

You know, one of the great buildings in the last ten years is by SANAA, the EPFL Rolex Learning Center, which is this sort of rolling Swiss cheese space, which surely many of you know in Switzerland. And what's so cool about that is that like our housing, what you need to have there and what's so pleasurable is that you can have your own little space in a giant space where lots of other people are doing things but you have your own space. So it's a rare moment. Previous public spaces or previous, even housing... let's start with public space, like Tiananmen Square or Grand Central Terminal or even Times Square to a certain extent, is like all about this singular grandeur. So, it's all about a kind of awe experience as opposed to something like Lausanne or the Highline in New York where there's a sort of series of semi-private spaces in the public. And I think that again, scales down to the house, where you somehow want a collective space, be that in the scale of a family or multiple families, or, you know, another group of people living together and they're somehow connected and divided at the same time. And that connected-divided, again, Sejima's term "softly divided" makes a lot of sense now in the pandemic because for one thing, we actually need to be divided, but also, we just have a natural desire for some kind of, let's just say, privacy. I mean people overstate privacy,

people don't necessarily want privacy. I don't need privacy really. What I need is a kind of place to be comfortable but still connected and that's not how most architecture—certainly 19th century architecture—is defined. It's not even how most modernist architecture is defined. In modernist architecture, let's be more clear, let's say like the Frankfurt Kitchen, is all about a kind of technical proficiency in terms of order and let's say trying to reach some universality. And what we need to make now is a place where people can be unique but together, right? Which is really a different goal from again, like the Frankfurt Kitchen.

I try desperately to get all my clients to agree on sort of related things but then of course everybody makes their own custom traces. Somebody wants gas burners, somebody wants electric, somebody wants a different oven... I can convince somebody to do a very special spice rack because they cook with lots of spices. I can convince somebody else to have a tiny fridge cause actually they live next to the best market so why would they need to go with a giant fridge because they don't need all that stuff. You know, circumstances are different and then people start to feel better about something special that happens to them but then the universal part of it is that they're connecting with other people, their guests, their wives, their children, you know, and maybe as the pandemic starts to reopen I think that more people will not just want to go back to restaurants like they did before, I think more people will want to have more parties in their house and more connection to their neighbors, I think people would want to knock down walls and make... I already want to make a barbecue on the border between my neighbor and me (I live in the suburbs at the moment and I have a little garden and my neighbor has another little garden and I could build a shared oven in between us to work together. I think that that's the kind of moment that people can get into now because people are really housebound at the moment. And I think that people's house pride is the nicest thing about this pandemic, at least from the point of view of architecture. So, it's been slow and it's been hard but I love that people are sort of coming together to make a house that projects outward, want people to have signs in their windows. People feel that they like each other more, at least in Berlin. I have the impression that people are nicer also. This is kind of a nice note to end on because people being nicer is the greatest thing for architecture that you can imagine because it implies a little bit less "this is mine and that's yours" and a little bit more "let's do it together".

Thanks.