



Adaptability at home after lockdown

Latitud 40 [Paula González Azcárate, Diana González Díaz, and Sandra Busturia]

[Sandra]

—We are Latitud 40, an architectural cooperative that carries out, amongst other activities, construction projects, both refurbishments and new builds, with a focus on energy efficiency. We have always been linked to study and learning processes and that is why our team is multidisciplinary: we have two architects and a sociologist.

In this regard, we thought it was a really interesting idea to take part in this MUSAC project and we are very grateful to Eneas and Kristine for inviting us to present our take on post-pandemic cities. Let's introduce ourselves:

[Diana]

—I'm Diana, Diana González Díaz. I am an architect and have a master's degree in Environment and Bioclimatic Architecture from the Polytechnic University of Madrid. I specialised in nearly zero-energy buildings and, especially, the Passivhaus standard, making almost passive houses designed to save energy by using natural resources such as the sun and wind.

[Paula]

—My name is Paula González Azcárate. I'm an architect and I specialise in urban planning and encouraging civic participation processes for urban design. I also have experience in passive houses.

[Sandra]

—I'm Sandra Busturia González, the third member of Latitud 40. I am a sociologist specialising in urban sociology with a Master's Degree in Urban Design from Oxford Brookes University.

[Paula]

—When we think about the impact the pandemic has had on homes, we do so in the conviction that architecture, from the designing of a staircase to the designing of a building or a city, has an effect on the daily life of society. Architecture and sociology are in a continuous feedback loop.

[Sandra]

—As you say, architecture creates emotions and habits in society and society also demands new spaces when they no longer meet their needs.



[Paula]

—COVID and lockdown hit exactly two years ago and came as a shock: most of us experienced that time in our homes. At that point, the home was an obligation but many people were excluded.

—In this podcast, we will debate how the pandemic has affected the use of the home and how privacy within our homes is taking on new meanings today. The evolution of cities and homes brought on by epidemics is astonishing.

The transformation of cities and homes brought on by epidemics

[Diana]

—Yes, that was already mentioned in previous podcasts: in the 19th century, some of the big metropolises, such as London and Paris, saw the structure of their city change to prevent the spread of infectious illnesses such as cholera. Backed by scientific theories such as the miasma theory, sewer systems, street paving, and wide avenues to allow sunlight and wind to sanitise cities were designed. This link between architecture and health took on greater importance with modernism where architecture came to be demonised for its lack of public health.

—Some of the great modernist architects, such as Le Corbusier (who was also quarantined when he was a child) and Alvar Aalto, were firm believers in light, air, and hygiene. Those were the starting point for the aesthetics of their architecture: there was a new appreciation for balconies, large windows, and flat roofs, which could be used to go outside and sunbathe. Spaces which at that time were prescribed for tuberculosis patients in clinics in the Alps. These are elements that point to a public health focus in architecture.

[Sandra]

—I didn't know that, Diana: is this present in the homes of today?

[Diana]

—Well, it is. Look, it was possible due to the technological advances and industrialisation of the time.

- But have a think now about the tiles in your bathroom or kitchen, which make better hygiene possible in these humid spaces and prevented miasma making residents ill back then.
- The mosquito nets you may have on your windows, which prevented thousands of deaths from malaria.
- The concrete used in the foundations of your building which prevents rats getting in and nesting, meaning rabies can't enter our buildings.

As the dean of the school of architecture of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Jakob Brandtberg Knudsen, said: "in the last 150 years, life expectancy has risen from around 45 to 80 years and it is fair to say that half of that is due to architecture and engineering and the other half to the medical community". In other words, architecture and health go hand in hand.



[Sandra]

—The female architects sweeping at home.

[Latitud 40] —[laughs].

[Diana]

Yes, but from our point of view, what is needed now, and what we are involved in at the studio is putting forward a concept of architecture that looks after not only physical but also mental wellbeing. In this regard, as well as designing buildings that protect the environment and meet the specific needs of our clients, we are careful to make sure the whole process is more friendly: the design and works phases can be very emotionally demanding, involving a significant investment of time and money. Given our years of experience, we have realised that construction processes are not only very technical, but they are also human processes.

[Sandra]

—Of course, modern architecture broke away from all the previous, obsolete architectural standards but stood for highly functionalist urban planning. It viewed the city as a machine: every part had to fulfil its highly specific role. And with spaces highly segregated by function. Current urban planning has moved forward and adds that human process, which you mentioned Diana, in the more caring, greener city that more human and inclusive cities create.

[Paula]

— What urban planning were we on when COVID hit, Sandra?

Urban planning landscape when the pandemic began

[Sandra]

—Well, a few decades back, cities were already transitioning towards globalisation, in a neoliberal setting, turning away from the streets, which has been shaped by urban design. Houses had become a place of sanctuary, refuge against the increasingly inhospitable, noisy, stressful, and competitive public spaces.

—And, then on top of that, the pandemic broke out in this context. Public spaces were not only stressful, but they were also a space that was frightening because they presented the risk of contagion. Here, homes take on extraordinary relevance. You can now basically live your life without leaving your house. Ikea's famous "Welcome to the independent republic of your home" doormat became even more literal.

—This boost to individualism had been forged with the famous PAU (Urban Development Plans) where thousands of developments and villas had been built during the housing boom, which Jorge Dioni captured in the essay titled *The Spain of Swimming Pools*. And those spaces are green islands compared to

communal spaces and blue islands compared to pools that are located on the outskirts of cities where young families live with small children. The fact of the matter is that it's a world of mortgages, alarms, private publicly funded schools, several cars per family, shopping centres, online shopping. In other words, a model of city that favours



individualism and social disconnection from the city itself. This model became even more desirable with COVID due to lockdown at home.

[Diana]

—Yes, it did. Actually, that lockdown was the “easiest and quickest” solution as contaminated air cannot be removed in the same way as dirty water.

[Sandra]

—Of course. In fact, we think the subject of change in Spain under the COVID pandemic was precisely the home: we moved from homes to sleep in to homes to live and work in.

—Beforehand, in big cities such as Madrid, leading a life outside of the home from 9 in the morning to 9 at night was very common. But the pandemic made our homes our most secure and comfortable habitat. And they were used intensively. Of course, we were forced to adapt our home into offices, schools, nurseries, infirmaries, leisure and sports venues.

—And this has come with an exponential increase in the use of computers and mobiles as a way to not be so isolated. In some sense, the gaze of big brother became involved in everything it came across, in everybody’s privacy, which was an alteration of the threshold between public and private. The classic inside-outside sphere disappeared. There is a change in the concept of privacy. In some sense, that webcam brings the public sphere into our living rooms while we work. Into our bedrooms while we do yoga and even into our bathrooms when we bathe our children and we videocall grandparents to create bonds.

—So, of course, in those situations, I can imagine the need for a home that does not give away any type of information about me. Or rather, gives away what I want to give away. A house with some sort of specific area, a room with cameras on 24 hours a day which is the public sphere of my life. The part I want to show. And when I leave that room I enter my private space where I don’t have to worry about what I’m wearing or if I’m making noise, if my house looks like the house of a person with a certain level of income. In that regard, Diana, have you had any requests of this type in your work in new builds or refurbishments as architects?

Housing in cities and post-pandemic society

[Diana]

—Yes, we do see a change in clients’ needs and, for example, the requests we get for refurbishments. For instance, the demand for a separate office is quite widespread. It reminds you a little bit of those big flats where renowned professionals and doctors and lawyers saw clients in their

own homes. Nowadays, most houses are actually smaller. We don’t have as much space available. Therefore, we have to include versatility. And that office also has to be a meeting table, a bedroom, or a gym.



[Paula]

—This versatility also occurs in the push to balance work and family life and joint caring responsibilities. At Latitud 40 we try to include gender-focused design principles. In fact, in the Valencian Community or the Basque Country they already have regulations in this area. They signal, for example, that all bedrooms should be the same size to prevent hierarchies being established and to accommodate different models of living together, to integrate kitchen and living room (something which is very much in demand today) so that it can be used by more than one person at a time. Or including separate toilets to facilitate more flexible use of the bathroom. Furthermore, we usually analyse aspects that do not normally appear in spectacular magazine photos but do condition the daily lives of families, such as how the rubbish is taken out or washing inside the house and providing the house with sufficient storage space.

[Diana]

—Another request we often get is for the house to be able to host the leisure activities that were previously done outside the home. More families are asking us for home cinemas, with a structure to hang a projector from and space for a screen. We have even been asked for a pool table. In other words, homes are taking on the role of venues and it seems like this habit is here to stay.

—Looking back, another request we get often is to increase sound insulation. In lockdown, with silent streets, problems with noisy neighbours became more noticeable.

—Right now, the Technical Building Code is very lax and there should be an improvement in the regulations for residential use.

—Another necessity we get asked for a lot is improved thermal insulation. As people are spending more time at home and as they are poorly insulated, due to the poor building practices in most homes, the cost of heating has risen. We, as an architectural studio, were already well placed to use efficient architectural practices and our client profile was already aware of energy saving and protecting the environment. But there is an upswing in requests and it is most likely linked to an interest in saving money.

[Paula]

1. Vestibule 2. Healthy air at home 3. Using healthy materials 4. Certifications designed to assess wellbeing 5. Outdoor spaces such as terraces and balconies

—Another space which is used in a different way is the vestibule. We have noted how this space in the home has taken on a new role, as it used to be somewhere you just passed through. It has now transformed into a disinfection area in the worst times, where hand gel and masks are kept, and where shoes are taken off. And well, there is a demand for a shoe rack in this area that wasn't previously there. And, on the other hand, as there has been an increase in online shopping and the delivery of packages this space has become a semi-public place in the house, which calls for a visual barrier to the rest of the home.



[Sandra]

—In other words, the hall was first done away with. And we have now brought it back to put all our Amazon packages there.

[Paula]

—Yes, something along those lines.

—Another issue that's now on the table is ventilation in the house. Historically this was done by opening the windows. Fortunately, technology has given us these new ventilation control machines that allow you to have a continuously ventilated home with clean air at a comfortable temperature.

—In addition to these machines, there is an increasingly greater awareness about using healthy and natural materials in construction in a switch from materials such as concrete or petroleum derivatives, such as emulsion paint, to materials that do not give off volatile organic compounds that are harmful to health. Many clients stress this aspect to us.

[Diana]

—And we are also seeing this, in fact, in some commercial products that are altering or improving their techniques to address the needs of individual clients.

[Paula]

—Another change we have noted is the rise in certifications designed to assess wellbeing. Up until now we had architectural quality seals such as LEED, BREEAM, and PASSIVHAUS. Following on from the pandemic we have seen a growth in some certifications such as WELL, which is focused on quantifying the wellbeing of occupants, thanks to the use of natural materials, having more light or clean air in buildings.

—And well, undoubtedly, based on the experience of lockdown, the premium on outdoor spaces such as terraces and balconies has risen. We believe the fact these surfaces are added to buildability does not help. Because in a framework where homes have very tight spaces, giving someone a choice between having a slightly bigger living room or having an extra bedroom, as opposed to having a terrace, makes for a difficult decision.

[Diana]

—In fact, the winners of the last Pritzker prize, which is the Nobel prize of architecture, the French architecture studio Lacaton & Vassal, have been doing apartment blocks for years which have outside spaces called winter gardens (open in summer and closed in winter) and a little balcony. For them, "the main luxury is space". And, to a certain extent, they were visionaries.

—Regarding our professional work and the refurbishments we do on houses, we should mention that the quality of the existing building stock in Spain can be vastly improved. 75% was built before there were energy efficiency regulations. Additionally, there are more than 25 million homes and, according to official data, more or less



100,000 new homes are built per year. This ratio clearly indicates that most of the homes where we will live in the future will still actually be those that are already there: the future is in refurbishment and renovation.

—This trend is visible in the boom in refurbishments that we have seen. We think it is linked to the fact that as people spent more time at home in lockdown, the needs and discomforts our houses pose us became more evident.

—Although this desire for refurbishment has been halted by the rise in material prices and supply times. Whereas a few months ago a contractor or supplier gave us a validation period of three months for a quote, that timeframe is now down to two weeks given the volatility of material prices.

[Sandra]

—In conclusion, when we had the first meeting with Eneas, he asked us if we were “positive” about the future of cities and, specifically, homes. At Latitud 40, we have had many discussions on the matter, but we think the answer is that we are, that social change is cyclical, with movement forwards and backwards, and architecture has always shown that in its different guises. But it has always aimed and tried to improve the problems experienced by inhabitants of both homes and cities.

—The pandemic has brought to the surface inequality in the domestic realm and the city in general, but we think another world is possible. This is a historic moment, not for architecture that is reactive to a situation, but rather proactive and understanding that architecture as holistic.

—Looking beyond the pandemic, we campaign for another form of designing and building or refurbishing homes. At Latitud 40 we are strongly committed to participatory and conciliatory processes. Construction, in our Spain of bricks, has always been a male space, based on hierarchies, on working under stress, pressure, with little sense of working together. And, basically, not very appealing for clients.

—We are strongly committed to a different way of working, by creating spaces for understanding, horizontal meetings with all stakeholders to prevent problems and move forward. We seek to create spaces in construction for these meetings and we are as transparent as possible,

[Paula]

—Yes, we don’t think it is right to perpetuate the idea that you have to be brave to build your own house.

[Diana]

—We are going through very complex and highly uncertain times and we think that addressing and rethinking residential architecture cannot be done solely in a closed office by designing the physical space, as if it were a Lego building, as it is about a job that is tied to the social and human aspect. That’s why it requires the involvement of multidisciplinary and mixed teams that can provide better comprehensive solutions. That team needs to be made up of a wide range of professions: psychology, sociology, education. And the teams need to be gender-balanced too, of course. It is vital that people and the community are at the heart of the process.

—Thank you, everyone.