

## In Quest of Community



Neighbors in Papenweg, the street where I live.

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## In Quest of Community

Thesis

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## Acknowledgments

*To Paola, Lella, Dina, and Franca,  
the strong women of my family who inspire me every day to be brave.*

I would like to deeply thank my mentors Marion Zwarts and Luc Merx for their invaluable help and precious guidances, which have allowed me to grow tremendously. A sincere appreciation also to all the professors who have accompanied me throughout the whole Master program.

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“Costruire per Agàpe è sapere che il terreno su cui si getta il seme è fertile, che è arato continuamente e lievitato da uomini come te [Tullio Vinay], che i mietitori sono dei giovani che attendono e hanno bisogno del frutto che nasce dalla terra. Per Agàpe tutto il resto non ha valore. L'orgoglio dell'architetto non esiste più. [...] Il risultato sarà bello perché risultato di una cosa amata da tutti.”

"Building for Agàpe is knowing that the soil on which the seed is sown is fertile, that it is continuously plowed and leavened by men like you [Tullio Vinay], that the reapers are young people who need the fruit that comes from that ground. For Agàpe, everything else has no value. The architect's pride no longer exists. The result will be beautiful because it will be the result of something loved by everyone."

Letter from the architect Leonardo Ricci to the pastor Tullio Vinay

In the last few years, I have realized that *community* is a meaningful and recurring word in my life. I am indeed surrounded by experiences and happenings recalling the idea of a communitarian lifestyle.

Since I was in high school I have dedicated part of my summer holidays to volunteer activities. One that left a mark, in particular, is the project Belmondo developed by La Rivoluzione Delle Seppie, a multidisciplinary group of young professionals who decided to revitalize a quasi-abandoned village in the South of Italy. Initially, they settled in a former convent at the gates of the village and renovated that. Afterward, they broadened their focus and started organizing activities to involve both the locals and the foreigners. What used to be a forgotten place inhabited by a few dozens of elderlies have turned now into a lively network of people of different ages, cultures, and backgrounds.

Another significant experience recalling the sense of community is the consciousness-raising group that I have founded in 2019.

Consciousness-raising is a form of activism spread by the feminists in the 1960s to question oneself and the context in which one lives through a dialogical relationship with other women. It was a powerful practice that allowed women to gain self-awareness and gave them space to their voices in a patriarchal society that often kept them quiet. This community-sharing process always reminds me that what seems to be isolated and individual problems often reflect common conditions faced by many.

My grandmother Franca has also been part of my inspiration. Although I have never met her, my relatives have always talked about her as a charming and remarkable woman. In the 1970s she founded a feminist commune and opened her own house to other women who were willing to try an alternative way of living.

These experiences made me reflect on the very essence of community and the fact that, from my personal standpoint, contemporary society has considerably lost its sense of community and sharing. It could be argued that nowadays the house is perceived and referred to as a shelter, a cradle, a safe nest that we create to secure our privacy from the public and potentially threatening world. But it has not always been this way. In ancient Greece for instance privacy and publicity were conceived very differently than today. In the Greek *polis*, the private sphere was dedicated to mere survival activities, while the public sphere was the actual center of life, the *agora*, where the citizens could show their uniqueness and individuality, but commonly. Furthermore, most of the cities from the past, as in the Middle Ages, were enclosed by walls and protected by sentinels which allowed a selection of enemies and allies. This system was essential to grant peace inside and would create the context for a fluid way of socialization where there was no definite interruption between



My grandmother Franca.

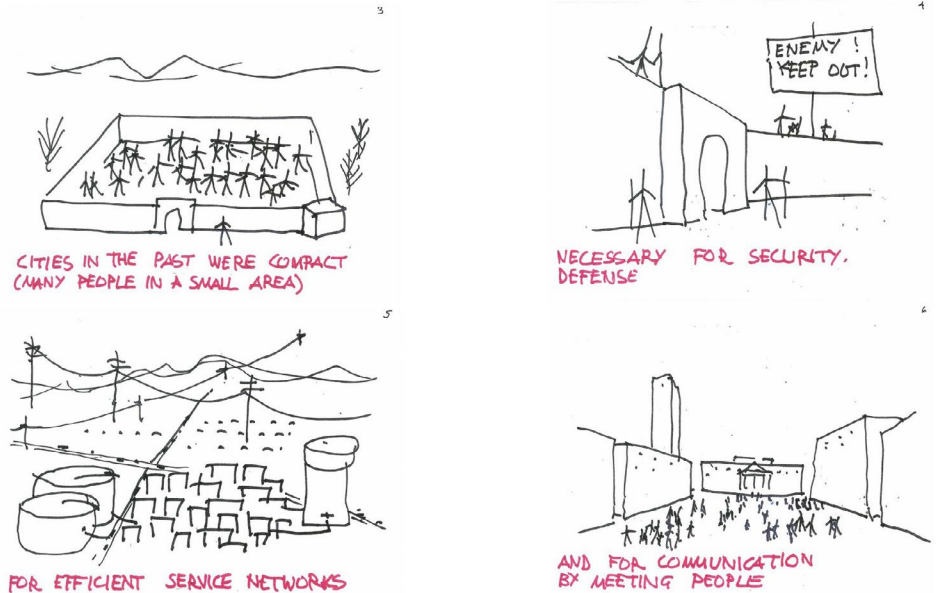
the house and the street and where squares were meaningful gathering spaces. Over the centuries, the dividing line between the public and private spheres has become more and more blurred to such an extent that nowadays, using Hannah Arendt's words, it is more accurate to talk about *social* and *intimate realms*<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, one could postulate that citizens are turning into spectators rather than actors, in our cities, there is not a great offer for communal activities — most of the options do not promote communality, but rather sticking to one's own group — and our society is being defined progressively by conformism and individualism. Urbanization and technological progress made us more independent but also led us to lose our spirit of community and become strangers to each other.

However, the intention behind this master thesis is not to demonize contemporary society but rather to analyze the reasons that led to the condition stated above and to give an alternative perspective to the way of life most of the people are currently used to. Therefore, while on the one hand, I will be exploring the meaning of community, on the other hand, I will examine how architecture can foster community and influence social interactions. Additionally, every chapter will include figures purposeful to support the argument.

Underlying the above, the main question that this research will attempt to answer is: **why, historically, and how, architecturally, did we lose our sense of community and started living over individuality?**

Concurrently, I will apply what learned from the following research to a project, especially a community place dedicated to an alternative way of living. In a society that does not care enough about sustainable lifestyles and where capitalism and individualism are defining our lives, I believe we need a different direction, and an opportunity to live differently. My aim is indeed to design a co-housing and eco-community experience, a countercultural space for people who are willing to live human relationships otherwise, where sharing, cooperation, and inclusivity are the keywords. A place where you can grow food and cook it together; where you can cultivate your knowledge and share your experience; a place where people can connect on a deeper level and that could be an example and inspiration for a more sustainable life, environmentally and socially speaking. A place where I would also want to live.

Yona Friedman (1923-2020) is a Hungarian architect and urban planner. His work had a particular focus on the creation of meaningful communication among inhabitants through the tool of architecture.



Sketch by Yona Friedman, *Utopies Réalisables*, 1974.

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, p. 38-40

“Men, not Man, inhabit the world. Plurality is the law of the Earth.”

*The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt



## 1.0 What is the sound of community?

In 2001 in his "*Community: seeking safety in an insecure world*" the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman wrote that community is a word with a feel.

"The word community feels good: whatever the word 'community' may mean, it is good 'to have a community', 'to be in a community'.<sup>1</sup>

In effect, if we close our eyes and imagine being part of a community it is highly probable that we will envision ourselves in a cozy place, somewhere conveying protection and above all where we feel accepted and understood. In there, people would presumably help each other, listen with sympathy and be ready to forgive instead of holding a grudge. The word community does not only sound pleasing but also forceful. It communicates the human need to congregate and their ability to cooperate. When men and women collaborate as a unit they express the fact that life is not just a biological process and that they can go beyond a merely physical existence by encouraging that instinctual drive to relate to other human beings. In other words, to quote the renowned British architect David Chipperfield (1953),

"civilization is more than the achievement of individual comfort and security."<sup>2</sup>

To not only focus on the word's connotation it is important to define next what is its etymology.

<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman: *Community: seeking safety in an insecure world*, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> David Chipperfield: *Looking for community*, Domus n. 1047, p. 2

Franz Erhard Walther (1939) is a German artist. He distinguished himself for opposing the traditional conception of art and developing his idea of "immaterial works of art" created through the engagement of the public.



*For Balance*, Franz Erhard Walther, 1967.

## 1.1 Etymological overview of community.

In modern English, Spanish, French, and Italian the word 'community' — 'comunidad', 'communauté', 'comunità' — comes from the Latin *communitas* and the Greek *koinonia*.

The term *communitas* could be decomposed into two words: *cum* meaning 'with' and *munus* meaning 'duty', 'debt', and 'gift-to-give'. This triple denotation of *munus* gives the main term an interpretation that is not immediately obvious. According to that, the members of a community would be united by an obligation — a 'duty' — which makes them not completely masters of themselves. *Munus*, intended as a 'gift-to-give', indicates what we do not own, something that starts when what is ours ends. The *munus* shared by the *communitas* neither represent a property nor a social identity, but rather a reciprocity in the obligation to give<sup>3</sup>. Following the Latin root, therefore, a community is based on a necessary giving relationship.

In the Greek translation, according to the Italian encyclopedia Treccani, the meaning of 'community' shapes quite a different scenario compared to the Latin *communitas*. As a matter of fact, *koinonia* originates from *koinè* — which means 'union' — indicating that the individual's existence is not independent of the whole represented by the community. Thus, their destiny is defined within the perimeter of the *koinonia* to which they belong.

In the German language, as in the Dutch language, the terms *gemeinschaft* and *gemeenschap* move away from the Latin and Greek roots considered beforehand. *Gemeinschaft* is composed of *gemein* — which means 'common' — and the suffix *-schaft* (*-ship*).

Within this context, the next subchapter will also elucidate the connotation that the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies ascribes to this word.

<sup>3</sup> Roberto Esposito: *Communitas*, p. 4

## 1.2 How to define a community?

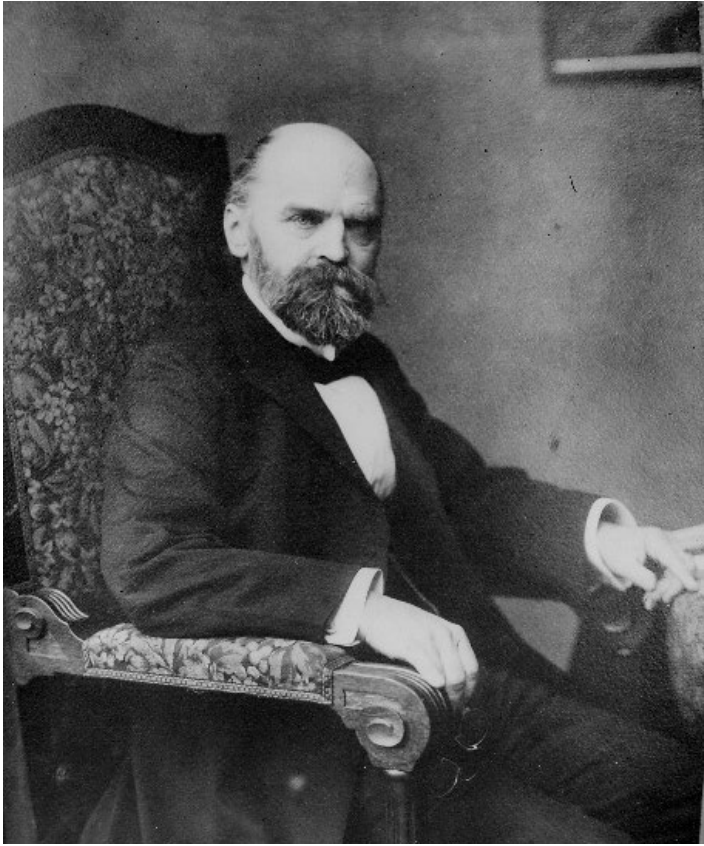
Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936), a German sociologist who was one of the founders as well as the first president of the German Sociological Association, was the first academic to theorize a communitarian society. In 1887 he published his most famous book "*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*" ("*Community and Civil Society*") where he tried to categorize social relationships into two types, namely community and society.

In his interpretation, the concepts of this dichotomy are inseparable, since they are conceived as opposites; they represent two different lifestyles. Tönnies believed that community is something organic, a mutual relationship based on a long-lasting cohabitation and the solid unity of its people. This system is characterized by intimacy, gratitude, exclusivity, and shared habits, spaces, experiences and languages. To clarify his thought, the German sociologist lists various primitive forms of community that are present in the history of human beings and that should serve as the foundation for future communities, such as the relationships between mother-child, spouses, and siblings.

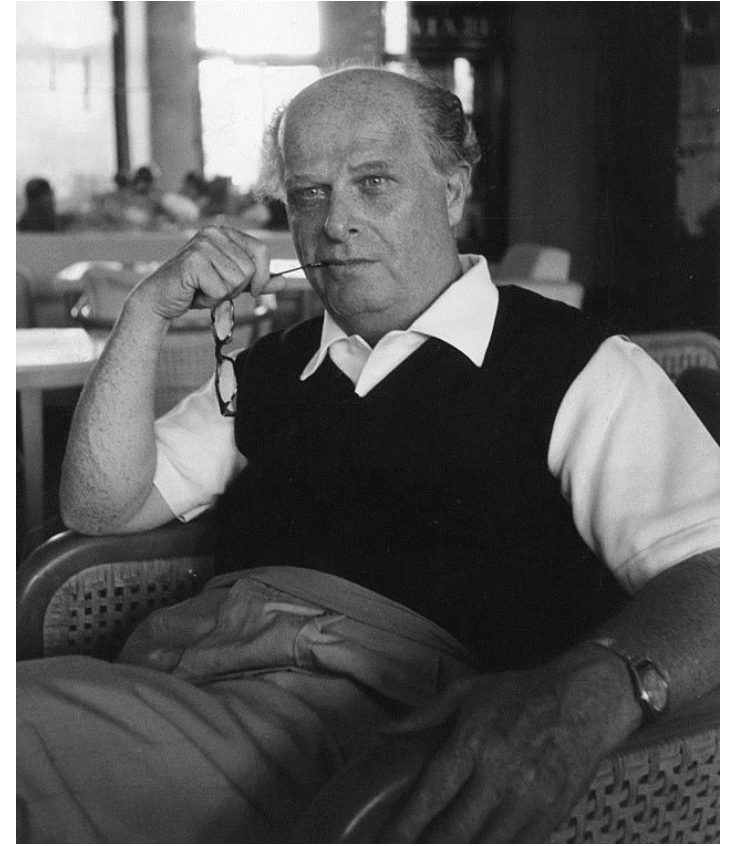
Tönnies, then, counterpose to community the concept of society. In a society, individuals live on their own, separated and in a relationship of tension with others. Any attempt to enter their private sphere is perceived as a hostile act of intrusion. According to him, the typical societal relationship is the trading relationship: in trading, contractor parties are never willing to give more than what they receive; buyers and sellers are in a neverending mutually competitive relationship. Furthermore, this kind of interaction prevents individuals from creating any kind of bond because it only focuses on their trading performances. In other words, the seller is not interested in the buyer as an individual, nor in the use that he will make of the exchanged good, but only in his ability to pay the established price. From this reasoning, it follows that

"Gemeinschaft [community] is the lasting and genuine form of living together. In contrast, Gesellschaft [society] is transitory and superficial. Accordingly, Gemeinschaft should be understood as a living organism, Gesellschaft as a mechanical aggregate and artifact."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies: *Community and Civil Society*, p. 17-18



Portrait of Ferdinand Tönnies.



Portrait of Adriano Olivetti.

For Tönnies, the communitarian structure, based on sense of belonging and participation, was predominant in the Pre-Industrial Era, while the societal structure, based on rationality and impersonality, started dominating in modern industrial society. Also, it should be pointed out that despite Tönnies' vision may seem rather Romantic, his intention was not to criticise the whole new urban system, but rather to highlight the tendency and ease of losing certain important behaviours — such as a meaningful communication and the share of values and feelings — in a *Gesellschaft* context.

If for Ferdinand Tönnies modern Society is intended as a "foreign country" and everything that lacks humanity, hence the opposite of Community, for the Italian entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti Society and Community are two inseparable concepts and represent the only possible bridge between the citizen and the State, leading to the perfect harmony of industry and culture.

Adriano Olivetti (1901-1960) was an illuminated Italian entrepreneur and son of the founder of the renowned typewriters factory. Olivetti's progressive vision was born when, at the age of 13, he started working for his father and realized how alienating and miserable life in the factory was. Growing up, he developed the conviction that a society in which people are considered machines and numbers whose only purpose is to serve the system could have never generated prosperity and happiness. Therefore, not only he started fighting for improving the working condition and a "human society", but he gave life to a concrete reformation that was absolutely forward-looking for Post-Industrial Italy. He was dreaming of a "*City for Man*" (the title of his last book), a community that would have welcomed everyone, not as standardized individuals or social atoms with no future, but as fully realized and developed persons. He wanted to reconcile social solidarity and profit as well as promote culture and its diffusion: only by creating an idea of collective happiness and harmonious coexistence, efficiency and contentment would have been achievable.

From my personal standpoint, Olivetti's conception of how to implement this important change could be summarized in two main points:

1. The Community should be based on the perfect balance between Christian values — such as tolerance — and the ideals of socialism — such as solidarity. In this way, it will be possible to create a "concrete community" in which people can cultivate their humanity and spirituality. Furthermore, this Community needs to be rooted in its territory and in popular traditions so as for its people to develop a love for the native land.

Between 1926 and 1977 Adriano Olivetti entrusted architects with the construction of residential districts for his employees. He deeply believed that good conditions and appearance of workplaces and residences positively affected the quality of social life and production efficiency.



Castellamonte residential district, built for the Olivetti factory employees between 1942 and 1955.

2. The Community should be understood as an extended family which never excludes and always protects its people. Institutions need to support citizens and their moral growth. In his most famous book "*Political Order of Communities*" he states

"In order for a person to be free and to own an absolute spiritual value, [...] the State must exist for the citizen, and not the citizen for the State."<sup>5</sup>

In this regard, he firmly criticized the inadequacy of the Italian political structure and accused political parties of being empty centers of power.

In 1947 Adriano Olivetti founded a political party named "*Movimento Comunità*" ("*Community Movement*"), but more than that, his real achievement was the progressive management of his factory, something that truly and clearly expressed his vision. The Olivetti factory in Ivrea was different from any Italian and global factory; for its owner it was a communitarian "model and lifestyle": first, Olivetti created a whole system of social services for his workers including residential areas, medical clinics, kindergartens, canteens and free library and cinema; also, there was no division between engineers and workers, reduced working hours and a maternity allowance for women. But what was even more surprising was the constant presence in the factory of famous intellectuals, artists and designers (i.e. Carlo Scarpa, Marcello Nizzoli, Ettore Sottsass, Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini) who elevated the working condition through sharing their culture.

In 1946 Adriano Olivetti also founded a publishing house called "*Edizioni di Comunità*" ("*Editions about Community*") with the intention of promoting prominent foreign books that were little known in Italy. Among these, there was also "*Community and Society*" by Ferdinand Tönnies which had certainly been an inspiration for him. Nonetheless, Olivetti went beyond Tönnies' vision that community and society are two distinct entities and proposed a "new action" that would have transformed society into the accomplished expression of a community. The Ivrea complex was the starting point and attempt of a model that he would have wanted to apply to the whole State.

<sup>5</sup> Adriano Olivetti: *L'ordine politico delle Comunità*, p. 57

### 1.3 What does it mean to be part of a community?

Based on what was stated beforehand, perhaps one could conclude that the concept of community only evokes positive images. But, to my mind, the question is much more complicated. Going back to its etymology, it could be argued that a community is both a strong and fragile entity. A community works when its members are willing to accept their duty of sharing and giving, hence inevitably renouncing part of their independence and personal freedom. As Zygmunt Bauman has wisely observed,

"There is a price to be paid for the privilege of being in a community. Community promises security but seems to deprive us of freedom, of the right to be ourselves."<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, a community may not be necessarily founded on respectable values. A group of people united by a common ideology based on xenophobia, hatred, and hostility could also form a community. In this regard, the concept of community could be equated with spatial segregation and ghettos. If a ghetto is voluntary, its members' principles are those of intolerance and discrimination; on the contrary, if a ghetto is involuntary, insiders are outcasts imposed by others and deprived of their freedom. On that account,

"Community is a manifestation or collective representation of human nature which is a repository of both benign as well as base potentialities. Therefore, a community can be a source of both good and evil. It can foster goodwill, tolerance, kindness, and harmony. In the same way, it can become closed, intolerant, oppressive, and exclusionary."<sup>7</sup>

Either way, a community is an entity requiring a great amount of energy and dedication from its members to keep it alive. Being part of a community means recognizing that one's interests come after the collective ones and that everything tends towards a common good.

<sup>6</sup> Zygmunt Bauman: *Community: seeking safety in an insecure world*, p. 4

<sup>7</sup> A. Momin: *Multicommunitarianism in a fragmented world*, p. 454

An interesting example of a communitarian lifestyle experience is the Israeli *kibbutz*. A *kibbutz* — which means 'gathering' in Hebrew — is an agricultural cooperative settlement based on *social equality*, *sharing*, and *mutual aid* typical of the Israeli culture. The first *kibbutz* was the one of Deganya Aleph, which was founded in 1910 and was born on the idea of combining socialism and Zionism (a political ideology whose purpose was the affirmation of Jewish people's right to self-determination and to have a Jewish State). With the intention of building a self-sufficient community based on domestic partnership, *kibbutz* members collectively owned property, managed work division, and voted on all decisions regarding the livelihood of the community. Each individual had the obligation to work for all the others, receiving in exchange not money but the fruits of common labor.

Architecturally speaking, the *kibbutz* was a single undivided space with a large central lawn and public facilities situated around it like an *agora*. Without the need for distinct kitchens, living rooms, and utility areas, the dwelling units were reduced to sleeping rooms for individuals or couples. Scattered across a meticulously landscaped green space, the dwelling units were organized around a network of pedestrian-bike paths, which connected them to each other and to the core collective spaces of the community. This type of settlement introduced a unique living environment that was almost entirely car-free, rich in landscape and greenery, and modest in housing and human in scale<sup>8</sup>.

Along with property and ideology, social lives were also held in common. For instance, most *kibbutz* dining halls did not have chairs but benches because the latter were an expression of communal values. Also, husbands and wives were discouraged from sitting together so as not to lead to any form of exclusivity. Moreover, in the very beginning members were not allowed individual items such as teakettles, radios, and books because using those privately would have moved members away from the community.

But what is even more peculiar is the way children were raised. Since *kibbutzim* were striving for equality of the sexes, children could not run the risk of being mainly raised by their mothers and barely by fathers. As well as women could not be tied to the domestic sphere. Alongside, the community feared that parents would have had the usual tendency of viewing their children as personal possessions and dominating them.

<sup>8</sup> The Israeli Pavillion book for the Venice Biennial: *Kibbutz - Architecture Without Precedents*, p. 9



Kibbutz of Nahalal, 1930s.



Dining hall at the kibbutz Ein Harod, 1934.



Residential buildings at the Kibbutz Tel Yosef, 1928.  
Designed by the German architect Richard Kauffmann (1887-1958).

Thus, in order to give women the opportunity to continue working, promote gender equality and solve parenting issues, *kibbutzim* opted for collective childrearing. The founders created Children's Houses where children would spend most of their time and their financial responsibility was shared by the whole community. Parents could visit them just a few hours a day.

Life in this tightly-knit community proved hard for some. Over the years, several researchers attempted to study the psychological consequences of living in a kibbutz and they all concluded that kibbutz upbringing led individuals to have greater difficulty in making strong emotional commitments, presumably caused by the lack of private property, independence, and strong group pressure to conform. In this regard, another subject of debate was that kibbutz education did not really help children to recognize and develop personal talent, preventing any kind of ambition.

From my personal standpoint, the Israeli kibbutzim are an effective example of how people can join their forces and ideologies to build a remarkable place to share together. But they also clearly represent how easy it can be to become exclusionary and restrictive in a community. Hence, highlighting the difficulty in finding a good balance between personal freedom and a sense of collectivity.

So, as the next step, it would be substantial to analyze how exactly human beings relate to each other and behave in public circumstances.

“Mi si fissò invece il pensiero ch'io non ero per gli altri quel che finora, dentro di me, m'ero figurato d'essere.”

"The idea that I was not appearing to others as I thought I was, that idea gave me no rest."

*Uno, Nessuno e Centomila*, Luigi Pirandello

“We shape our buildings and they shape us.”

Winston Churchill



## 2.0 The abstract mask.

It is a common saying that "eyes are the mirror of the soul". In line with this phrase, one deep gaze would be sufficient to understand the true essence of a person. Conversely, there is perhaps nothing astonishing in the fact that everyone is, more or less consciously, keeping up a façade when relating to other people. Especially in contemporary society,

"We have all become experts in our own representation"<sup>1</sup>

due to social media and our meticulously built digital persona. In light of this, it should not be surprising that the words *person* and *persona* — which in the English language means 'one's public image' — come from Latin and originally meant 'theatrical mask'.

The Italian writer Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), for instance, focused on the perception of identity in many of his works. His main topic is indeed the conflict between being and appearing, symbolized by the mask. According to Pirandello, life is like a fluid vigorously and constantly running, hence leading the Ego to bewilderment and dissolution. In his interpretation of society, people are hypocritical and often disguise their true nature through an abstract mask, causing a detachment from their own Ego. Although Pirandello's vision is rather pessimistic, it may be an intriguing point of view to consider when thinking of how human beings behave when together with others.

In the same way that people carefully create their own persona altering their behavior, equally skillfully they shape their houses to conceal what should not be part of their façade. Indeed, architecture and space inevitably influence human social interactions. As the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall states,

"The strain of keeping up a façade can be great. Architecture can and does take over this burden for people. It can also provide a refuge where the individual can 'let his hair down' and be himself."<sup>2</sup>

In the coming subchapters, an endeavor to better understand demeanor in public moments and contexts will be undertaken.

<sup>1</sup> Beatriz Colomina: *Privacy and Publicity*, p. 8

<sup>2</sup> Edward T. Hall: *The Hidden Dimension*, p. 104

James Ensor (1860-1949) was a Belgian painter and is considered one of the masters of European Symbolism. Certainly influenced by his family's souvenir shop and the Ostend Carnival, Ensor often made use of masks in his painting as an allegory of the hypocrisy and immorality of society.



*The Intrigue*, James Ensor, 1890.

The movie *Pina* is dedicated to the German Tanztheater choreographer Pina Bausch.



Frame of the movie *Pina* by Wim Wenders, 2011.

## 2.1 Erving Goffman, the world as a theatre.

There is a metaphorical concept, already present in ancient Greece, according to which the world would be a play staged by God and performed by Men. It is called *Theatrum Mundi*, or 'Theatre of the World'. Shakespeare too, in his play "*As You Like It*", talked about it when he wrote

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players;  
they have their exits and their entrances;  
and one man in his time plays many parts."<sup>3</sup>

This concept, though not necessarily from a Christian perspective, is widely reflected in Western literature. The Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982), for instance, had the innovative idea of using the *Theatrum Mundi* to explain his theory about human social interactions. In 1956, in his most famous book "*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*", he tackled face-to-face interaction with a dramaturgical approach. Specifically, he used the imagery and terminology of theatre to describe the fact that when a person comes in contact with other people, he or she will attempt to manipulate the impression that others might make of them. Therefore, as described by Goffman, life is like a *play* where people are both *actors* who want to perform their own image and *audiences* who try to form an opinion about them. In the so-called 'front region' — the *stage* — people show and highlight their best aspects; while in the 'back region' — the *offstage* — they prepare or set aside their *role*. Each individual then, or rather, each *performer* has his own 'social front' which corresponds to an 'expressive equipment' that they decide to use or not during their *performance*. The 'social front' is divided into the setting (the physical layout), appearance (the look), and manner (the way the role is carried out). The 'personal front', instead, includes all those characteristics that intimately define the performer and that will follow them wherever they go, such as

"rank, sex, age, race, size, posture, speech patterns, and bodily gestures."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare: *As You Like It*, p. 83

<sup>4</sup> Erving Goffman: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p. 14

However, although Goffman explains social interactions as they were social performances, it must be pointed out that he does not interpret them negatively: playing a role in social circumstances is not equivalent to lying or deceiving.

For the author, having a social self to hide behind and display in front of others is an inevitable human condition. To some extent, our social self, our role, becomes an integral part of our personality throughout our lives.

## 2.2 Edward T. Hall, the anthropology of space.

In 1963 the American anthropologist E. T. Hall (1914-2009) coined the term proxemics — the combination of the word *proximity* and the English suffix *-emics* — meaning the study of human use of space and the effect that certain distances between people have on their verbal and non-verbal communication. Hall's theory is that each animal group has its own proxemic needs and behaviors and that these can be traced to the earliest forms of life on Earth following the evolutionary chain and culminating with the widely diverse use of space which each human culture exhibits today. Humans, being part of the animal kingdom, show many of the proxemic aspects of lower life forms, with the exception that over time those aspects have evolved thanks to the complexity of human thought. Notably, both animals and humans rely on the so-called *territoriality*, namely one's affirmation of their rights over a specific territory. As birds accurately build nests in order to protect their babies and to hold the group together, Man too

"has invented many ways of defending what he considers his own land, turf, or spread. [When considering a castle] the distinction is carefully made between private property, which is the territory of an individual, and the public property, which is the territory of the group."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *ibidem* 2, p. 10

Furthermore, not only do animals and human beings have territories they occupy and defend against their own kind but they have a series of systematic distances they maintain from each other. In particular, the author divides them into four specific interpersonal areas: *intimate distance* (0-45cm; the presence of the other person is unmistakable and sensory inputs are greatly present), *personal distance* (45-120cm; it may be thought of a protective bubble that an organism maintains between itself and others), *social distance* (120-350cm; nobody touches or expect to touch and visual details are not properly perceived), *public distance* (350cm-onward; it is well outside the circle of involvement).

In addition to what was stated beforehand, humans gradually stood out from animals because they also managed to create a number of extensions of their body (from the wheel to the computer), all of which determine their use of space and the relationship to their three-dimensional environment. And, as Hall believes, this evolution led to a fourth dimension for Men, the one of *culture*, which he calls the *hidden dimension* — homonymous of his major book from 1966. The Italian writer Umberto Eco (1932-2016) brightly explains the author's choice of this title in the Italian edition's preface when he writes:

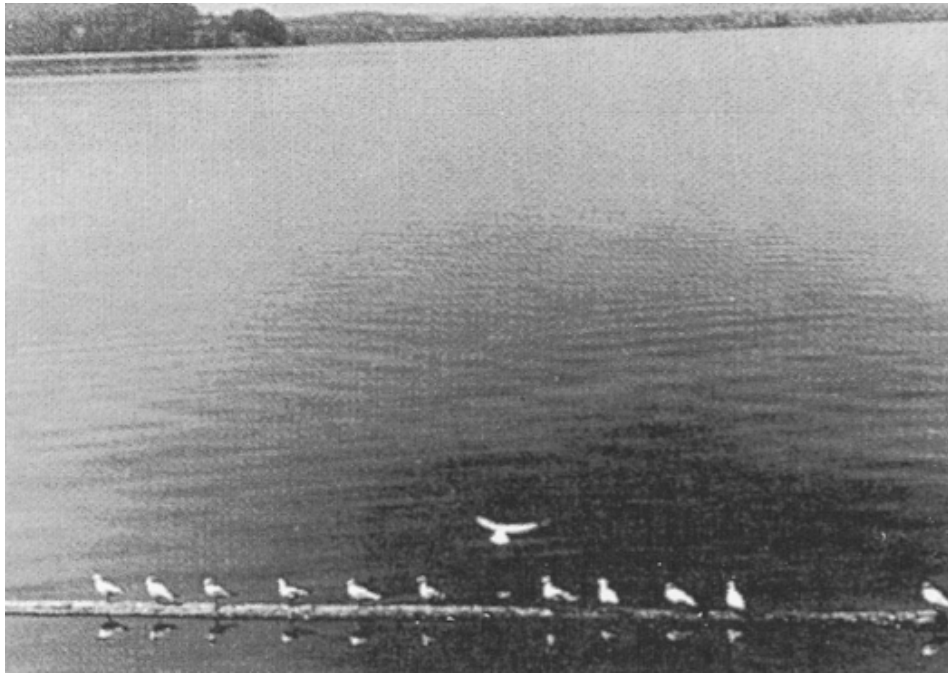
"This book is about a dimension in which we have always lived without realizing it. It is the dimension of our community's cultural behaviors, which are full of meaning even when they are expressed by habits and instincts. To discover the meanings of these behaviors is to discover that we communicate to others even when we don't speak, write or think we are saying anything."<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, human beings, consciously and unconsciously, always communicate something to each other, for instance through their posture, gestures, and clothing. Each civilization, each culture, has its own characteristic way of interpreting sensory inputs and therefore, what may seem normal to certain peoples may be the opposite for others. For example, to most English-speaking populations snow is just part of the weather and the vocabulary is limited to two terms: snow and slush. On the contrary, in Eskimo there are many terms, each describing snow in a different state and, thus, indicating their dependence on a major environmental feature<sup>7</sup>.

According to Hall, it is essential that we try to learn silent communication just as we understand spoken or printed words; only in this way we will be able to truly connect to people whose spatial values are different from ours. And proxemics is what is needed to decipher these silent stimuli, from one culture to another.

<sup>6</sup> *ibidem* 2, preface

<sup>7</sup> *ibidem* 2, p. 91



Example of *personal distance* spontaneously and similarly applied by humans and birds.  
Shown by E. T. Hall on p. 47 of "*The Hidden Dimension*".

### 2.3 The perception of space in Japanese and Western cultures.

In accordance with what has previously been said, proxemics is useful to understand not only how humans interact with each other but also the way they organize their space based on the cultural domain they belong to. In this regard, it is worth delving into two cultures that perceive and use space very differently, the Japanese and the Western ones.

First of all, to have a clearer comprehension of the inherent divergence that defines these two areas of the world it is crucial to explain their distinct conceptions of time and space. In Western countries, there is a general tendency to dissociate time from space as if they were two factors running on parallel tracks. On the contrary, the Japanese conceive them as a single entity and express them with the word *ma* — literally 'gap', 'pause', 'interval', 'interruption'. *Ma* is a whole philosophical concept derived from the doctrine of the *empty* — also known as *negative space* — which is central in Buddhism and Taoism. This ideogram may be interpreted in different ways depending on the context within which is applied: for a musician, *ma* indicates the temporal space between one note and the next, while for an architect it represents the space between two architectural elements, like windows and doors<sup>8</sup>.

If it is in the West that the theory of the *horror vacui* (Latin for 'fear of empty space') developed by Aristotle got a foothold, hence a negative and privative idea of the emptiness, it is in the East that the void is considered the necessary condition for fullness to existing. It is thought of as a temporal and spatial element without which phenomena would be condemned to immutability and inertia.

Therefore, as a consequence of these radically different conceptions of space and time, European cities are based on a system of lines, or streets, each one with its own name; whereas in Japan the intersections but not the streets are named and houses are numbered in the order in which they were built.

Even more interesting is the comparison between a Japanese and a Western house configuration. Because of the *ma* philosophy, traditional Japanese dwellings are deeply connected to temporariness. Therefore, the only load-bearing element they have is the wooden frame that delimits the house perimeter, while external and internal walls — the *shojis* — are movable.

Following the *ma* philosophy, the empty space in this painting is considered to be as important as the trees depicted.



Left panel of the Pine Trees screens by Hasegawa Tohaku, late 16th century.

<sup>8</sup> A. Garda, M. Mangosio, L. Pastore: *Learning from the past: the lesson of the Japanese house*, p. 3

This feature allows this kind of houses to be flexible and transformable and their rooms to be transitory. Depending on the time of the day, rooms may change their function and to do so furniture is moved accordingly: when the meal is over and it is time to sleep, walls slide to close the space, and *futons* are unrolled in the same spot in which eating, cooking and socializing previously took place. For this reason, while Westerners tend to place furniture against walls, the Japanese keep the edges clear because everything takes place in the middle. As a result, there is a constant evolution of space and the focus of attention is not on furniture (which in any case is much less in number than in typically Western houses) but on the activities and relations that happen in there. It is no wonder, then, that although the concept of privacy exists in Japan there is no word for that.

Another peculiar characteristic of Japanese houses is the intermediary environment, a rather unusual space for Western culture. In order to gently guide someone from the garden, a key element in Japanese dwellings, to the inside, the *engawa* — a veranda-like area usually made of wood or bamboo — is present. Going further, one has access to the *genkan*, the entryway whose primary function is the removal of shoes before entering the main parts of the house which are paved with *tatami* — a type of mat used as a flooring material and covered with a soft rush. This environment is lower than the rest of the house and is usually made of stone so as to emphasize the transition from the outer and impure world to the noble realm of the house. The act of going up that step is so meaningful that the usual greeting addressed to a guest is not "Please come in" but "Please come up".

In conclusion, in the traditional Japanese house, each element represents the progression of time, the transformation of nature, and what is ephemeral rather than permanent. Everything plays a vital role in preserving overall harmony.



Interior of the Katsura Villa in Kyoto, one of the most iconic Japanese building. It was built in 1615 by the will of the prince Hachijo Toshihito.



Frame of *My Neighbor Totoro*, by Hayao Miyazaki, 1988. When ready to sleep, the futons are unrolled on the tatami floor.

## 2.4 David Riesman, the evolution of social characters.

David Riesman (1909-2002), an American sociologist, also spoke about the way people relate to each other and society and articulated his theory in his 1950 book "*The Lonely Crowd*".

Before delving into the core of Riesman's argument, a point worth mentioning is that the author would seem to base his research on a specific primary group of people, namely American middle to upper-class white men. On account of the epoch during which the book was written and the choice of vocabulary, I developed the idea that not every social class, race, and gender have been taken into consideration in this work. This being said, "*The Lonely Crowd*", as can be assumed by its title, is about the paradox of a throng whose individuals nevertheless feel alone, empty, and adrift. In particular, the author refers to what he thinks to have become the average condition of modern Americans who, despite the second postwar era's prosperity, are more and more in the throes of anxiety, defeatism, hypocrisy, and loneliness. Riesman wonders about the reason that lead mankind to such a shift and concludes that there have been two revolutions that profoundly changed the relationship between people and society. The first revolution started in the 16th century and, thus, includes the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, and all the political revolutions that occurred until the 19th century. He, then, argues:

"This revolution is, of course, still in process, but in the most advanced countries of the world, and particularly in America, it is giving way to another sort of revolution — a whole range of social developments associated with a shift from an age of production to an age of consumption."<sup>9</sup>

Bearing that in mind, the *social character* type that was prevailing until the Middle Ages underwent a first transformation starting approximately in 1500, and afterward, at the beginning of the last century, a second evolution has begun.

But what does Riesman exactly mean by the term *social character*?

He does not speak of *personality*, which denotes the totality of psychic characteristics and behavioral patterns. He also does not just refer to *character*, which is part of someone's personality and the way he/she approaches the

world and people. Riesman introduces the notion of *social character* and explains it as

"that part of 'character' which is shared among significant social groups and which [...] is the product of the experience of these groups."<sup>10</sup>

In his book, he interchangeably uses the term *social character* with the term *mode of conformity*, because he asserts that any cohesive society inculcates a mode of psychological conformity in its members. It follows that each individual has their character, but society creates a broader kind of character that brings its individuals to be somehow socially uniform.

The very heart of "*The Lonely Crowd*" is the deep analysis of the three social characters previously mentioned. According to the author, their evolution is linked to the demographic developments that occurred in Western society over the past one thousand years.

The first evaluated social character was predominant in the Middle Ages and is defined as a *tradition-directed type*. Demographically speaking, the society that forged the tradition-directed type is a *high growth potential* society, which means that the population does not increase or does so very slowly, for both the number of births and deaths are very high. But if something happened to decrease the high death rate — for example, an improvement in food production or new sanitary measures —, the population would rapidly increase. A society of high growth potential is represented by members whose conformity is their tendency to follow tradition. This kind of character is the product of a society shaped by an extremely patriarchal and religious system, in which the individuals unquestioningly follow the models and values passed from one generation to the next one and obediently accept their social role. In tradition-directed societies, children are taught to behave like adults very early and parents raise them to be succeeded by them rather than to advance in the social ladder.

As of the 16th century, Europe witnessed a gradual decline in the death rate due to better living conditions which lead to a 'population explosion'. This stage is called *transitional growth* because births only momentarily outnumber deaths and then follow the latter in its decline. Those centuries are characterized by increasing personal and social mobility, the accumulation of capital, and an extensive expansion in exploration and colonization which brought a new mode of securing conformity, the *inner-direction* one. Although they are still bound by traditions, inner-directed individuals conceive those as a limit

<sup>9</sup> David Riesman: *The Lonely Crowd*, p. 6

<sup>10</sup> *ibidem* 9, p. 4



Time magazine cover of 1954.

In the foreground, David Riesman; in the background, the *inner-directed* man guided by his gyroscope and the *other-directed* man following the inputs transmitted by his radar.

inhibiting their choices in a world that started offering several options. As a consequence, they have more flexibility to adapt to ever-changing needs, are open to new frontiers and are capable of creating stability even when they lack social approval. While growing up, children raised in an inner-directed society learn from their parents about self-awareness and the importance of adjusting and improving their behavior. In this new situation, individuals have to decide how to carry on with their lives and this sense of responsibility makes them sensitive to the signals sent from their 'ideal self'. To better explain this dynamic, Riesman imagines the inner-directed person to be guided by a psychological *gyroscope* and writes:

"This instrument, once it is set by the parents and other authorities, keeps the inner-directed person 'on course' even when tradition no longer dictates his moves. He becomes capable of maintaining a delicate balance between the demands upon him of his goal in life and the buffetings of his external environment."<sup>11</sup>

The transitional growth is followed by an inevitable *incipient decline of population*, where birth and death rates are leveled but low. This epoch started in the early years of the 20th century and is the result of the nascent modern capitalist society.

"Fewer and fewer people work on the land or in the extractive industries or even in manufacturing. Hours are short. People may have material abundance and leisure besides. They pay for these changes however [...] by finding themselves in a centralized and bureaucratized society and a world shrunken and agitated by the contact of races, nations, and cultures."<sup>12</sup>

The society of incipient population decline develops in its members a social character whose conformity is ensured by their tendency to be sensitive to the expectations and preferences of others. Accordingly, they are called *other-directed* types. The common feature of all other-directed individuals is that people equal in age are their source of direction and this includes both people they know directly and indirectly through mass media. Within this context, the average focus of attention is not on what an individual is or does, but rather on what others think of them and the ability to manipulate this opinion. Hence, other people become the problem, not the material environment anymore. The shift from the inner-directed character to the other-directed one is brilliantly described by Riesman by replacing the gyroscope — the symbolic

<sup>11</sup> *ibidem* 9, p. 16

<sup>12</sup> *ibidem* 9, p. 18



object of the former — with a *radar*, the new token of the latter, which is oriented towards external signals telling the other-directed person where they should go next.

The other-directed children usually grow up in enclosed neighborhoods or the suburbs, the space necessary for their family to live decreases and the habit of living with older people gradually disappears, leaving them alone to face their parents' emotional tensions. Furthermore, parents no longer feel superior to their children, which leads them to a strong uncertainty regarding the best way to educate them.

In this new social and economic situation, the figure of the 'mass-man' emerges: dependent on others, educated to conform, crushed by the need for approval and success, an inhabitant of a world ruled by appearances, deprived of their individuality, lonely and powerless in the crowd surrounding them.

## 2.5 Summing-up.

As an outcome of the overviewed sociological and anthropological analysis of human relations, it should be noted that this is a complicated subject, for it depends on numerous factors. The way people interact and behave in public circumstances may be influenced not only by the physical setting itself but also by cultural and social aspects that inevitably shape an individual.

All theories and concepts previously examined date back to a specific epoch that seems very far in time, namely the 1950s and 60s; nonetheless, the questions they pose remain, from my personal standpoint, very much legitimate and relevant in the contemporary context. "*The Lonely Crowd*", especially, is an exemplary starting point when trying to understand why our society has become progressively more individualistic.

Therefore, to further investigate communality as opposed to individuality, the following chapter will make an attempt to analyze the evolution of the public and private spheres. Specific historical epochs and happenings will be taken into consideration.

*From communality to individuality: the evolution of the private and public spheres.*

“A bizarre adventure happened to space on the road to globalization: it lost its importance while gaining in significance.”

*Community: seeking safety in an insecure world, Zygmunt Bauman*

“The city is no longer: we can leave the theater now...”

*The generic city, Rem Koolhaas*

### 3.0 Life in the Greek *polis*.

The modern English word 'privacy', according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means "a state in which one is not observed or disturbed by other people" and also "the state of being free from public attention". When reading these definitions, one may feel a sort of repulsion from being social, as if 'privacy' was the solution to a condition of stress and anxiety consequent to public exposure. In this regard, the German philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) wrote in her 1958 book "*The Human Condition*" that the function of modern privacy is indeed "to shelter the intimate."<sup>1</sup> But why did she refer to *modern privacy*?

After a keen observation of past and present societies and humans, Arendt came to the conclusion that what modern society — and, from my standpoint, contemporary too — intends as the *private sphere* is in fact more appropriate to be called the *intimate realm*, while the *public sphere* has become a *social realm*. In order to understand this line of reasoning, it is necessary to introduce the Greek *polis* and its organization.

First of all, in accordance with Arendt's theory, human existence is based on three conditions: *labor* corresponds to all activities that aim at satisfying biological necessities for self-preservation; *work* is the fabrication of tools and objects that make life on Earth more stable; lastly, *action*, together with speech, is the means by which humans distinguish themselves from others as unique beings. It follows that action is the only condition that is strictly human. Moreover, whereas labor and work can be accomplished in solitude, action inevitably requires a relation with at least one other person.

Arendt asserts that the perfect harmony of these three activities occurred only one time in history, namely in the Greek *polis*, where the major place was given to action, followed by work and then labor. The reason why action was so important is that, according to Greek thought, it was intended as the opportunity for a second life other than the standard one that each individual received — characterized by labor and work. In this context, action corresponded to the *bios politikos* or the human capacity for political organization.

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, p. 38



*The School of Athens*, Raffaello, 1510 ca.  
Stanza della Segnatura at Musei Vaticani.

"To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence."<sup>2</sup>

In this regard, it is essential to highlight that 'politics' for Hannah Arendt does not primarily relate to government affairs, but to the coexistence and association of Men. Therefore, action allowed people to overcome the banality of everyday life and the repetitiveness of biological necessities by choosing to associate with other human beings.

Because it requires a plurality of individuals, in the ancient city-state action was taking place in the *agora* — the central square — and represented the public sphere of the *polis*. Participating in the life of the *agora*, through speech and action, meant being free from the much more urgent necessities of life and that privilege was possible only by owning slaves. Slaves, just like women, were indeed hidden away and relegated to the house — the private sphere — because their duty was to dedicate themselves to labor and bodily functions.

"Privacy was like the other, the dark and hidden side of the public realm, and while to be political meant to attain the highest possibility of human existence, to have no private place of one's own (like a slave) meant to be no longer human."<sup>3</sup>

It is exactly in this scenario that, in contrast to its modern understanding, the word 'privacy' indicated the mere state of being deprived of something — the *bios politikos* — and its opposite, publicity, was referring to the political sphere.

It is with the advent of Christianity that the dividing line between private and public started becoming more and more blurred. Because the Christian God is more than anything else a creator entity, the major place in the human condition went from being action to becoming work — the act of creating —, while political life became elitist and limited to a defined circle. In such a manner, governors can take control over their citizens and society becomes an oppressive system expecting from its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing various rules, and preventing spontaneity and uniqueness. Therefore, the private sphere starts to progressively be absorbed into the public one. In order to escape this condition, citizens attempt to shape their own private space far from authorities' power, namely their individual intimacy.

As a consequence, what once was the private sphere has turned into the intimate realm, which opposes not the political sphere, but the social one.

<sup>2</sup> *ibidem* 1, p. 26

<sup>3</sup> *ibidem* 1, p. 64

### 3.1 From the Middle Ages to the 18th century.

Contrary to ancient Greece, during the Middle Ages in Europe there was no clear distinction between the public and private spheres. This great difference is, first and foremost, resulting from the economic, cultural, and legal system that was typical of that epoch, namely feudalism. Medieval towns were organized around the castle, the seat of the court, where the lord and his entourage would discuss all political matters. Although the court was not completely closed towards the outside, commoners were excluded from any kind of decision and, for this reason, there was no public sphere — or central square — where they could come forward and actively practice the Greek concept of *action*. As a matter of fact, in feudal society the word 'public' — *publicus* — was not referring to a physical place accessible to the public but rather to social status and it was used as a synonym for 'lordly' (*publicare* meant "to claim for the lord"). It should not be surprising that the attributes of lordship, such as the ducal seal, were called 'public', for lordship was something publicly represented. In his 1962 book "*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*", the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas uses, in relation to this subject, the term

"publicity of representation", wanting to indicate that what was public was indeed the representation of the lord's dominion. The designated representatives needed to *publicly* represent the lordly rights by showing precise personal attributes such as insignia (badges and arms), dress (clothing and coiffure), demeanor (form of greeting and poise) and rhetoric (form of address and formal discourse in general) — in a word, a strict code of 'noble' conduct."<sup>4</sup>

Because of its intangible nature, this conduct had no particular location: it was not exhibited in specific occasions or venues, as it would have been in a possible public sphere, but constantly and everywhere.

Starting approximately in the 14th century, a substantial transformation of life in the court occurred. The lordly courts, whose authority had been seized by force, were superseded by the princely courts, where the prince was assigned his power by the emperor or the pope. Hence, a monarchical type of power became established.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 8

Furthermore, first in Italy and then across Western Europe, Humanism, a new intellectual movement typified by a revived interest in the classical world and studies, spread and integrated into courtly life. Humanists started making their appearance at the prince's court and the new intellectual figure of the *Cortigiano* was born: he was a *gentleman* — also called *honnête homme* in France — an expert in literature, law, arms, and diplomacy who was a valuable adviser and collaborator for the prince. The sphere of representative publicness, then, started being concentrated at the court and the latter progressively gained importance. As a consequence, if in the Middle Ages jousts, dances, and performances were taking place in the squares and streets, starting from the Baroque period they retreated into the enclosures of the palace. It is only from that moment on that society detached itself from the state and, for the first time, private and public spheres became separate in a specifically modern sense. In this regard, Habermas writes:

"Thus the German word *privat*, which was borrowed from the Latin *privatus*, can be found only after the middle of the 16th century, having the same meaning as was assumed by the English *private* and the French *privé*. [It meant] 'not holding public office or official position', hence indicating the exclusion of the private from the sphere of the state apparatus. The *private individuals* constituted the *public*, in its literal sense, while the adjective public was referring to the state as the new ruling entity — The servants of the state were *öffentliche Personen* (*public persons, personnes publiques*); they were incumbent in some official position, their official business was 'public', and government buildings and institutions were called 'public'.<sup>5</sup>

With the establishment of mercantilism and the long-distance trade of commodities resulting from the early capitalism of the 17th and 18th centuries, the social class of the bourgeoisie progressively established itself. To satisfy the rising need for capital and to distribute the ever-greater risks, merchants soon took the form of joint stock companies and started demanding strong political guarantees. The operating base of the bourgeoisie went from being a small town to a state territory, thus leading to the nationalization of the town-based economy. As a result, the commercial activities that once were only a private's matter then became of public relevance and, therefore, subject to state surveillance. It is no coincidence that the first police forces appeared precisely at that time.

<sup>5</sup> *ibidem* 4, p. 11



Entry of Jean II le Bon and his wife into Paris after their coronation at Reims in 1350, Jean Fouquet, 15th century.

This new bourgeois stratum of the great merchants was, from the outset, a reading public wanting to distinguish itself from the noble culture and claim more decision-making power. As the counterpart of the public authority, this stratum gained awareness of itself and became a "critical" and "judging" public, forming and expressing their own opinions — also thanks to the press, the coffee houses, and the *salons*.

"Whatever was submitted to the judgment of the public gained *Publizität* (publicity). At the end of the 17th century, the English *publicity* was borrowed from the French *publicité*: in Germany this word surfaced in the 18th century. Criticism itself was presented in the form of *öffentliche Meinung* (public opinion)."<sup>6</sup>

The "reasoning" public, fervent in wanting to improve its social status, gave rise in 1789 to the French Revolution.

### 3.2 The impact of the Industrial Revolution.

The last decades of the 18th century and the entirety of the 19th century are marked by a significant process of evolution concerning, in the first place, the production system and later inevitably influencing the economic and social systems too. On account of new sources of energy and remarkable technological innovations, the small agricultural and artisan corporations evolved into industrial systems characterized by the use of machinery, which led to the establishment of factories and a working class.

The Industrial Revolution had a tremendous impact on people's life and provoked a transformation in the configuration of cities as well as private houses. Life in the city became more turbulent, fast, and confusing. Therefore, in order to protect oneself from that unsettling world, domestic life and the interior gained significance in being the safe personal heaven in opposition to

the workplace. The newborn necessity for a place of one's own is well described by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) in his 1938 essay "*Paris - Capital of the 19th Century*", where he argues:

"For the private individual, the place of dwelling is for the first time opposed to the place of work. The former constitutes itself as the interior. Its complement is the office. The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions [...] The interior is not just the universe but also the *étui* of the private individual. To dwell means to leave traces. In the interior, these are accentuated"<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin observes that the domestic interior can offer meaning to dwelling and, whereas in the public sphere our traces fade, in the house they are very visible and constitute a tangible memory of the individual. The house, then, is not a mere shell for biological necessities anymore but becomes a proper world to inhabit and to shape, namely an *intimate realm*.

The privatization of life, consequent to the ever more public character of the world of work, is quite evident when considering the change of structure of private dwellings in the big cities: all rooms decreased in size, the spacious vestibule was reduced to a simple entryway, the kitchen was accessible only to maids and cooks, and the courtyard became a small and damp corner. Regarding the interiors, the big parlor dedicated to social receptions was replaced by the smaller family's living room. Concurrently, the special rooms for each family member became ever more numerous and specifically furnished. It is worth mentioning that in the houses previous to this transformation, the architectural symbol of privacy was the bow window, but, because this was open to the living hall, the individual could never really close himself off — an element indicating the yet publicity of the private sphere.

It followed that the gradual shift to a sphere of intimacy made the house more of a home for each individual and left less room for the family as a whole.

<sup>6</sup> *ibidem* 4, p. 26

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin: *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 38 - 39

*The Familistère de Guise* is a complex designed by the industrialist Jean-Baptiste André Godin for his employees and was built between 1859 and 1884. It takes inspiration from the *Phalanstère* by Charles Fourier. Besides the cast iron stove factories, the *Familistère* is composed of a *Social Palace*, intended for housing, a school, theatre, nursery and swimming pool.



*The workplace:*  
textile factory of the 19th century.



*The domestic:*  
bedroom of a dwelling of the *Familistère de Guise*, 1897.  
Photograph by Marie-Jeanne Dallet-Prudhommeaux.

### 3.3 Towards fragmentation and individualism.

If in the Greek *polis*, the clear separation between the public and private spheres was precisely what allowed both to exist — as two entities balancing each other —, in modern society the two spheres intertwine, following a polarization process that has made the private increasingly public and the public increasingly private. As a result of the Industrial Revolution first and Western countries' economic booms after, cities became metropolia populated by masses of relentless consumers and commuters at the service of a capitalist system that made the urban realm bland and homogeneous. The modern city was conceived as a space where consumption and work were the primary activities and, therefore, carefully designed to accommodate shopping malls and office towers. The birth of supermarkets and the progressive ease of finding all kinds of products, accentuated by incessant advertisement, transformed the purchase of commodities into a proper experience, to the extent of becoming almost an obsession. There is a noteworthy short story called "*Marcovaldo at the Supermarket*" by Italian writer Italo Calvino (1923-1985) where he brilliantly describes the sense of longing and anxiety generated by uninhibited consumerism.

"At six in the evening, the city fell into the hands of the consumers.

All during the day the big occupation of the productive public was to produce: they produced consumer goods. At a certain hour, as if a switch had been thrown, they stopped production and, away!, they were all off, to consume. [...] Consume! And they touched the goods and put them back and picked them up again and tore them from one another's hands. [...] Marcovaldo, on entering, also took a cart; his wife, another; and his four children took one each. And so they marched in procession, their carts before them, among counters piled high with mountains of good things to eat. [...] The supermarket was large and complex as a labyrinth: you could roam around it for hours and hours. With all these provisions at their disposal, Marcovaldo and his family could have spent the winter there, never coming out. But the loudspeakers had already stopped their tunes, and were saying: 'Attention, please! In fifteen minutes the supermarket will close!'. [...] At the summons of the loudspeaker, the crowd of customers was gripped by frantic haste, as if these were the last minutes in the last supermarket of the whole world."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Italo Calvino: *Marcovaldo*, p. 89 - 93



Frame of the movie *Playtime*, by Jacques Tati, 1967.



Frame of the movie *Traffic*, by Jacques Tati, 1971.



This whole new condition of the modern city is even more emphasized, and of course made possible, by the mass use of the car. Cars have become an indispensable artificial extension of the human body to the extent that they seize the space where people could meet and allow the smallest social interaction, usually aggressive and competitive. This aspect is quite explicitly represented in the movies "*Playtime*" (1967) and "*Traffic*" (1971) by the French filmmaker Jacques Tati, where he depicts Paris as a grey, cold and anonymous city dominated by a constant flow of cars.

Modernist architects and city planners gave birth to a movement or style, that was often focusing more on cars and the optimization of movements in the city than people and social-bonding gathering places. In 1938, for instance, the Swiss architect Le Corbusier published the renowned *Athens Charter*, a document about urban planning in which he theorized the Functional City and its function-based zones. *The Radiant City (La Ville Radieuse)* is the perfect example of this new conception of the city: it is an unrealized urban design project to modernize the city of Paris that consisted of the construction of uniform tall buildings carefully divided into districts, each of which had a specific function (living, working, shopping). It is quite impressive, considering the previous-mentioned context, the famous photograph of Le Corbusier's hand when looked at it as a metaphor for a God's hand that alters spaces without really considering the human scale of social interactions.

The more the city turns into a disorienting and intimidating jungle, the more the city dweller retreats into their *intimate realm*, seeking safety and calmness. The fast pace of life makes the city an intersection for commuters rather than a meeting point and weakens the public sphere, which transforms into a new kind of privatized and protected *social realm*. Therefore, the distinction is no longer between public and private, but between *outside* and *inside*, expressing a fear of exposure that can only cease in the cocoon-like interior.

The modern city dweller lives in a condition of passivity that turns them into a spectator consuming the spectacle of the city — while it could be argued that the *polis* citizen was more of an actor. As a result of this, we are witnessing an increasing "Disneyfication" of cities, where almost every corner and attraction has become something to consume or to be commodified for mass tourism. This point is particularly stressed by the Belgian philosopher Lieven De Caeter (1959) through his conception of modern and contemporary society as a *capsular civilization*.



Le Corbusier's hand on the model of his *Radiant City* project, 1930s.

The *Nakagin Capsule Tower* is considered the most important symbol of the Japanese Metabolist movement. It is designed to meet the needs of commuters, whom the architect calls *Homo Movens*. In his 1977 book *Metabolism in Architecture* Kurokawa declares: "The Capsule is a Cyborg architecture. Man, machine, and space establish a new organic body. From now on, architecture will assume the character of device."



Detail of the *Nakagin Capsule Tower* designed by Kisho Kurokawa, 1972.

"In a general sense, a capsule is a holder, a container. In a more specific sense, a capsule can be defined as a tool or an extension of the body which, having become an artificial environment, shuts out the outer, hostile environment."<sup>9</sup>

A capsule can be tangible, like every fast means of transport, but also virtual, like all screen devices. Daily life is characterized by a perpetual movement from one capsule to another — for example from home to campus, from office to shop. And when people decide to leave their capsular routine, it is to enjoy an occasional moment of leisure, usually thoroughly organized in advance leaving no room for spontaneity and unexpected encounters.

Deprived of uniqueness and meaningful communal spaces, the city, along with its citizens, smoothes over and loses its peculiarities, becoming, according to the definition of the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, a *generic city*.

"The Generic City is always founded by people on the move, poised to move on. This explains the insubstantiality of their foundations. [...] The Generic City is achieved by the *evacuation* of the public realm."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Lieven De Cauter: *The Capsular Civilization*, p. 77

<sup>10</sup> Rem Koolhaas: *The Generic City*, p. 1251-1252

“Man exists as a unit of society. Of himself, he is isolated, meaningless; only as he collaborates with others does he become worth while, for by sublimating himself in the group, he helps produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.”

*The Organization Man*, William H. Whyte

“La società individualista ed egoista è distrutta. Sulle sue rovine nasce una società umana: quella di una Comunità concreta.”

"The individualistic and self-centered society is destroyed. On its ruins a human society is born: that of a concrete Community."

*L'ordine politico delle Comunità*, Adriano Olivetti

The foregoing research *In Quest of Community* is an endeavor to explore the essence of the word 'community' and to grasp the reasons that led most of the population to considerably lose its sense of community. It proceeds with the premise that contemporary society is witnessing a decline in communitarian values and a flattening of public gathering spaces.

To answer the main question "Why, historically, and how, architecturally, did we lose our sense of community and started living over individuality?", the research begins with an overview of the concept of community. This part includes connotative and etymological definitions, as well as theories and a case study explaining what being part of a community means. The second part is a sociological and spatial analysis of humans' way of relating and experiencing public spaces and occasions. Finally, the last chapter is a historical journey about the transformation of the public and private spheres and an explanation of the progressive abandonment of communitarian values in favor of a more individualistic life.

As demonstrated throughout this research, defining the word 'community' is not simple because it is a broad term rich in significance. More generally, a community is defined as a spatial and social organization that provides a sense of belonging and conveys intimacy, solidarity, and warmth. Ferdinand Tönnies, for instance, considered the family institution as the archetype of community. Nevertheless, a community could also be exclusionary and discriminatory based on the values upon which it was established. Either way, a community exists only if its members are willing to actively participate in its sustenance and it certainly requires more effort than living an individualistic life.

In this regard, the reason for the current widespread individualism lies in various factors. First and foremost, modernization caused a gradual acceleration of the speed of life. Space is shrinking and time is shortening and, as a result, not only life is more stressful but it is also more difficult to establish enduring and varied relationships. As explained by Lieven De Cauter, our lives are marked by the flow from one *capsule* to another, a condition that often precludes us from "going off-track" and making new encounters. For instance, how many people could say that they perfectly know their neighbors nowadays?

Furthermore, the detachment between home and work has produced a gradual decay of the family — parents often leave the house to do an eight-hour job and it is increasingly rare for grandparents to live in the same place as their children and grandchildren now —, which leads to a growing feeling of insecurity and instability for each family member, children especially. In addition, if on the one hand technology and social media facilitate communication around the globe, on the other hand, they encourage seclusion and provoke a disconnection from the present, altering the perception of reality.

The result of all these factors is the mass-man, or, to quote David Riesman, the *other-directed type* of character: a person whose life is anguished, disheartening, flattened by homogenization, and deprived of the initiative.

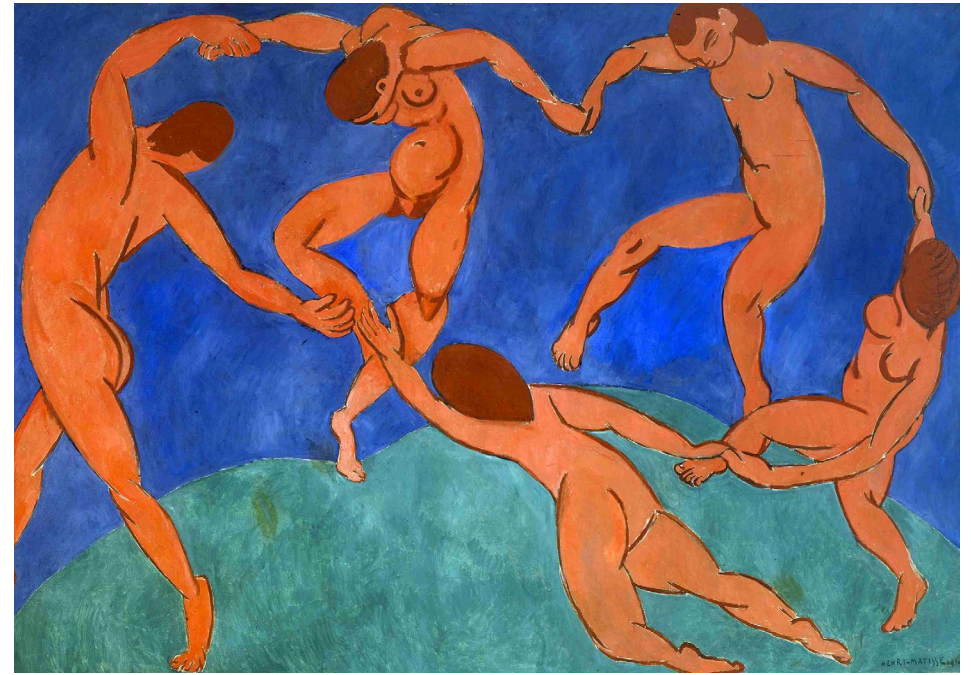
Concurrently, the clear distinction between the public and private spheres has disappeared: in many cases, the informal public sphere has been privatized and reduced to meager spaces for episodic gatherings; while retreating into the private dwelling has become the only way to gain relief from a suffocating system. The evolution of the house from having big spaces dedicated to social receptions and encouraging the interaction between its dwellers to developing special rooms for the privacy of each family member is a validation of the condition stated beforehand.

Within this context, it could be argued that the general perception is that there are no possible alternatives to a capitalist and alienating system. Although this perspective might sound severe, it is the direct consequence of what I have observed and internalized throughout my research process. Moreover, studying the architectural and social organization of some community experiences and personally visiting some others strengthened in me the will to find an alternative that could improve life in our society.

In light of this and considering the unquestionably severe climate emergency, I no longer see the meaning of pursuing a life based on work, competition, and the formula "money = happiness". I believe that it is necessary to stop this race and to revive the reality of social settings as a dimension of human experience as well as reconnect with nature. From my standpoint, a communitarian way of living would be more sustainable not only environmentally speaking but also socially, since it is about providing enduring relationships through cooperation and meaningful communication, reconciling life and work, and listening to our instinctual drive to relate to other human beings. In order to actualize this vision, it is necessary to rethink our spaces and to use architecture to make community.



Group of feminists in front of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence, 1972.  
*"D'ora in poi decidiamo noi" - "From now on we decide"*



*La Danse*, Henri Matisse, 1910.

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