

## **An interview with trend researcher Oona Horx-Strathern**

### **Individually together**

Oona Horx-Strathern addresses the existential questions of life. Where do we want to live? How will we live in future? Her Home Report does not point out fanciful ideas but solutions where human beings take center stage.

*Interview: Katharina Feuer*

#### **How do you become a trend researcher?**

I studied geography, or more precisely human geography/anthropogeography. Do you have this subject in German? It deals with structures in living together as well as general developments, and, in addition, looks at urban planning and architecture. My thesis was on Le Corbusier. He was way ahead of his time with his Unité d'Habitation in Marseille, a kind of co-living space. I think studying him sparked the desire in me to focus on “how will we live in future?”.

#### **What are the tasks of Zukunftsinstitut for which you work as a trend researcher, author and consultant?**

The aim of Zukunftsinstitut is to impart a system that helps us to think about the future. We identify (mega) trends and demonstrate the countertrends inevitably resulting from them. We accomplish this by research, workshops and studies. We want to promote new ways of thinking or, in other words, thinking outside the box.

**In your Home Report you present many best-practice examples. This makes future tangible.**

For us it was important to show the developments that already exist. Scandinavia is a beautiful example. This part of Europe has a different social system and is already implementing very visionary concepts. You will not find banal floor plans in these countries. By showing this we want to encourage people to risk something different.

### **How will a floor plan look in future?**

The floor plan of the future does not exist. In the past there were phases of life – childhood, followed by educational training and job, a family and retirement. Today we have many more phases with quite diverse needs. I observe that the young generation is reluctant to invest in a house or an apartment. Young people are more mobile and flexible. They want to spend their money on living and experiences.

Along with the different phases the functions of the rooms change, too. They often overlap, i.e. there will be a space for working or playing in the kitchen. I acknowledge that the currently widespread open floor plan, the ‘loft-living trend’, will be followed by a different development. People need a private space of their own again, a retreat.

### **You call this countertrend a ‘Broken Plan’. Why?**

The challenge today is to bring people together and, in doing so, respect their individuality. On the basis of this fact we have built our ‘Future Evolution House’. The functions of the modules – all united under one roof – give them their name: the hub/lounge as a meeting point for the family, ‘love’ as a retreat for couples, ‘kin/guest’ for the children and guests, and ‘think/work’ as an individual, separate office module.

### **How will this work in an urban context where we are experiencing housing shortage? What sort of development do you see there?**

Compact floor plans in the field of micro living. The trend toward small living spaces is certainly down to the lack of space in the cities, so that within cities so-called shared spaces become more and more popular.

## **How do these shared spaces work?**

A beautiful example of shared spaces, aka co-living, is 'The Collective' in London. It comprises a total of 550 apartments, so-called 'twodios', private studios with sometimes only 11 m<sup>2</sup> of living space, combined with more than 10,000 m<sup>2</sup> of shared space, complete with gym, cinema, co-working spaces, bar and restaurant. Conveniences that individuals could not afford in a normal apartment. You pay a fixed price for the complete offer. It's a sort of village in the city.

## **Does this work out? In villages people do quarrel, don't they?**

**With respect**

**to sharing concepts the question is whether harmoniously living together isn't just utopian?**

True, concepts such as this are not suitable for everyone. The German iLive enterprise, for instance, appoints a community manager to its projects. In the past such a position was called caretaker or janitor (she laughs). He or she organizes meetings, mediates and takes care of a good network.

Campus Garden Heidelberg is such a project. It even features a hen house – 'urban chickening'. In the evening, students meet next to the chicken coop, drink their after-work beer and tell each other about news.

## **Do you see other developments in the city?**

There is another trend called 'Vertical Villages' because in cities you cannot expand outwards but very well upwards. Visionary architects like Jeanne Gang, Winy Maas or Ole Scheeren demonstrate, how a human form of building is possible also in the city. They integrate lush greeneries in their buildings.

## **But isn't there a risk of isolation in high-rise complexes? That people withdraw into their own shells?**

To prevent that, designers reposition and connect living modules, bring

people together with a guiding system so that they meet their neighbor and talk to each other. But it is true that this is one of the challenges of the future – avoiding that people become lonely. This is a real demographic danger.

### **Do we not all want to have an area of our own as soon as it is financially or spatially feasible?**

No, even though you would think so. But man is, after all, a social being. Twenty years ago we thought that thanks to digitalization everybody would be working from home.

But this is not the case. People look for each other. ‘Wohnprojekt Wien’ is an example of how this type of cohabitation works. People in different phases of their life live here, individuals, families, couples, retired persons, singles, in one community, sharing spaces and resources. One of the inhabitants, Barbara Nothegger, wrote a book about it: the ‘village on seven floors’.

### **What role do architects and interior designers play in the development of alternative dwelling projects?**

A very important one. But sometimes my impression is that they are still stuck in the walkman age while the rest of us is running about with iPhones. There is still a high measure of redundancy and lethargy in view of all the opportunities already in existence. I call that ‘They stick to what they know’. I would like to see more courage, more visions. I concede that there are some good approaches, but there is still so much scope for further development.

### **In Germany, people have taken to the streets, demonstrating for affordable housing. What should politicians do in your opinion?**

Exactly that. They should promote affordable housing. Many property developers will only get a building permit if they fulfill certain conditions. They have to provide a certain percentage of affordable housing. Creative solutions for building attractive and even sustainable, affordable housing

do exist.

## **Is there a countertrend to the increasing flexibility and mobility of our time?**

This is, again, a question of one's current life phase. Some people will return to their home town after years of living a nomadic life. Town centers are being revitalized. Urbanization of villages follows the run toward the big cities.

## **Would you explain 'urbanization of the village'?**

Urbanity is brought to the village, which means that the advantages of the city are being transferred to rural settlements. Village centers are revitalized with shopping facilities, cafés, stores etc. The village functions in the town and vice versa. Public spaces are important, where people can come together. This is still the way of life in Southern Europe, while, on the other hand, some places in Germany look almost deserted. Here, too, the big challenge is to bring people together and give them the necessary space for their activities.

## **If you had to build your house once again today, would you design it exactly the same way again?**

Nine years have passed since I did so. I would perhaps use more wood and apply a modular design.

We still adhere to our decision of not having built a smart home. We must remain active and refrain from controlling our home conveniently from our sofa. We should want to get up. If necessary, smart home functionality can be retrofitted.

## **Oona Horx-Strathern**

Born in London in 1963. For more than 20 years now, she has worked as a trend researcher, consultant, speaker and author for Zukunftsinstitut and others. In Vienna, she built the 'Future Evolution House' together with her

husband Matthias Horx.

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