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Time Travel through the Living Room

Room for raucous parties, TV room or cozy family space—the living room has taken on many faces since its invention in the 1920s.

Cover image — Kampung Admiralty, Singapore
Credit — Patrick Bingham-Hall



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The Rediscovery of our Home

We live in interesting times. The pandemic has changed how we think about the space around us. We have rediscovered our neighborhoods and learnt to appreciate our connections. At the same time, we have reconnected to our own home as the place where we can express our individuality. How will our living space change given this new relationship? What impact does the blending of home and office have? And what do we expect from our homes in the future? Let's take a closer look.

Author — Oona Horx-Strathern
Illustrations — Leandro Alzate

The writer and political thinker Hannah Arendt once said, “In times of deep crisis we have a right to expect illumination.” The pandemic has led to a total disruption of our lives that most people (including futurists) would not have imagined in their wildest dreams. But it has also led to illumination about the future—which will never be “as it used to be” or “back to normal.” As the Chinese saying goes, “may you live in interesting times.”

One of the first rules in dealing with such “interesting” times as these is not to look at things in black and white, but in shades of possibility. A responsible approach involves avoiding apocalyptic and gloomy pessimism, while not wearing rose-tinted glasses of blind optimism either. Instead, we need to see the world in terms of

possibilities—and adopt what is called possibilism or “possibilistic thinking.” So let’s forget the debate about optimism OR pessimism! The future will not be “good” or “bad”, but created by the ability to transform.

Harnessing the “plastic hour”

If we want to understand how and when transformation and change happens, we can look to the work of philosopher Gershom Scholem who talked about the importance of recognizing the power of the “plastic hours.” These are those crucial moments—like now—when it is possible to act, those times when everything can change because history is in a volatile flux. If you move then, something happens, he explains. But more importantly, you need to remember that nothing happens unless you

move. In such moments as these, an ossified social order suddenly shifts and turns pliable, prolonged stasis gives way to energy and motion, and people dare to change, and hope. Plastic hours are rare. They can take many forms and usually require the right alignment of public opinion, political power and, crucially, a crisis such as a pandemic. However, in order to be effective, they depend on social mobilization and leadership.

Leadership is about the ability to look forward, to have a vision, but also to understand changes that are happening in the present. We can do this by identifying, documenting and understanding trends, particularly the big social demographic shifts or megatrends. These are the trends that affect decision-making over decades, and which are played out in the short-lived smaller trends and counter-trends that we see and experience in our everyday lives.

Building a connection to our communities

Trends such as urbanization, new work, individualization, neo-ecology and connectivity are just a few of the megatrends that have recently taken on increased momentum, urgency and focus in our society.

The pandemic has effectively provided us with a fast-forward track to the future—trends that were slowly gaining importance have now shifted into the foreground, and new smaller trends are evolving and emerging as we re-evaluate, re-calculate and re-consider how we want to live. In our cities, for the first time ever, many of us have experienced our urban landscapes as quieter, calmer, friendlier, and with cleaner air. In terms of connectivity, we have looked more closely beyond the internet and digitalization and have rediscovered and learnt to appreciate a connection to our communities, neighborhoods, and even our neighbors. Thanks to these new experiences and perspectives, we get a sense of a what a “new normal” might mean, and can plan for the resilient, more livable city of the future.

Rediscovering our homes

More livable on another level is about reconnecting and rediscovering our homes. Over the last decades we have become hyper mobile—and paradoxically, the more mobile we became, the more important our homes became. Now that we have spent more time in them, we have got to know them better, like discovering a long lost relative. Home is more than a shelter, or a cocoon, it is our center of gravity. It is also a self-portrait—the place where we can express our individuality, where we go to remember who we are. The design, objects and furnishings we surround ourselves with speak volumes not just about us as individuals and about our state of mind and body, but also about the life we want to live in the future. Our individualistic consumer society means we can express ourselves and these needs through our choices—with everything from our teacups to our sofas, to our walls and our doors. As home has become more important, so too has design. In this age of design democracy, good functional design in our homes is no longer seen as elitist or exclusive, but as a basic human necessity. Increasingly it matters what we surround ourselves with, where these things come from, what they are made of, and who made them. Or as Marie Kondo,





The kitchen is now the engine of the home in the sense of “Cooking is the new commute”.

the Japanese organizing consultant, says, “the question of what you own is actually the question of how you want to live your life.”

Changing from “linearitis” to resonance

For many years now society has been driven by a kind of linear thinking that in German we call, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, “Linearitis.” This “disease” of blind acceleration has been stopped in its tracks by the pandemic. According to the sociologist Hartmut Rosa the solution to the problem of acceleration is “resonance.” If we want to understand and improve our quality of life, he says, we should not look to measure it in terms of resources, options, or moments of happiness, but rather by connections and relationships to the world. Resonance is, he believes, the answer to the big structural problems in our age of hyper-individualization, complexity and multiple options.

One of the big challenges to finding meaningful resonance in our homes is the advance of digitalization in the guise

of the smart home. But as with all trends, there is a counter-trend to this—the so-called mindful home. In the age of digitalization the desire for the authentic, the analog, the tactile, the durable and sustainable is growing. If we want to really form the home of the future we need to focus more on the “I” as in inhabitant, than the “I” as in internet. Ask yourself if you really want to allow electronic gadgets to “relieve” you of your domestic daily rituals and habits in the same way that a pickpocket would “relieve” you of your wallet when you are not looking? As analog inhabitants we would do well to remember that the *raison d’être* of the home is not about providing digital prostheses. We can also see this counter trend today in the longing and demand for handwork, crafted, individualized objects and interiors that resonate with our values and beliefs.

The Emergence of the “Hoffice”

Just like “smart home”, so “work-life balance” is one of the great misnomers of the last decades. Balance implies an even distribution of weight—something that in pre-pandemic

hectic times was rare in many people’s lives. Today, with a new perspective, we are talking instead about work-life blending, and central to this is the role of what I call the Hoffice (the blending of home and office). The Hoffice will play an important role in our lives and homes in the future—leading to the need for designing hybrid work-life spaces as opposed to exclusive, separate work and life spaces. As more people adapt to working from home, so too our homes adapt to us. A new life-work rhythm means we can use our time and space at home differently. For example, we speak of “cooking as the new commute”: the time that was once spent traveling to work and back can be repurposed into creative cuisine. Our kitchens are, one could say, no longer simply the heart of the home, but have replaced the car as the engine that keeps us going.

In Latin, *domus* means both house and residents, referring not only to the dwelling but those who live within its walls. It implies a co-existence or co-evolution between the two. In terms of systems theory, housing is nothing less than a complex adaptive system. Or as Stewart Brand says, “Age plus adaptivity is what makes a building come to be loved. The building learns from its occupants, and they learn from it.” It is estimated that in Germany of the 25% of the population who found themselves working from home in 2020, 40% had never worked from home before. This pattern has been repeated across much of the western world, and has been for many a Darwinist lesson in adaptability, creativity and patience—not only on the physical design front, but in terms of social design. This is because a good working “Hoffice” is about mental distancing just as much as physical distancing. Trendy open-plan living spaces or “living kitchens” suddenly seemed to function less as a cool social interaction hub and more like an experiment in survival of the fittest (and fastest). Prime working spots near routers, quiet corners, purloined desks, privacy, —all these have become the new home currency replacing the priority for inter-household communication. In the future we will shift away from “open plan” to “broken plan”—compartmentalized or flexible adaptive living spaces. As we adapt to our buildings, so they too adapt to us. .

Embracing adaptive evolution

The four elements that we need to invest in to create a good home (and Hoffice) can be boiled down to air, light, sound and love (in German the 4 L’s—Licht, Luft, Lärm, Liebe). Air not just in terms of quality, but also as in a good headspace to think, and maybe even a balcony or a terrace. Light, meaning good interior lighting but also natural light—both not just to help you see, but to help you think (as they say,

when you have a good idea, a light goes on!). Sound quality and control is often underestimated—some need a little background rumble so as not to feel isolated, others need complete peace and quiet. And lastly we need love—to invest time and energy into our homes—instead of treating them like an unloved and uncared for relative. When we look towards the future, it helps to realize that new ways of living and working are not about reinventing, but a process of adaptive evolution. Ideas such as modular building that went out of fashion many years ago are now being reinvented and revived in order to solve the housing and building challenges of the 21st century. Modular, pre-fabricated (or pre-crafted, if you want to make them sound more sexy) building methods mean that on average we can construct homes for 20% less cost, 50% quicker and with much less damage and disruption to the environment. Modular pre-fabricated construction is fashionable once again, for “everyone deserves great design”.

What have we learnt?

As we emerge out of a crisis, we need to rethink our pattern of expectations, our perceptions and presumptions in order to face and bring about change. The break with routines and the familiar releases our sense of the future again. Only then can we see a way and find the right time to slide through those new doors of opportunity. Let’s remember what the psychiatrist Stephen Grosz once said, “The future is not some place we are going to, but an idea in our mind now. It is something we’re creating, that in turn creates us.”

Oona Horx-Strathern

Oona is Irish, grew up in London and now lives in Vienna. Her main interest is in the future of living, architecture, design, building and urban development as well as cultural and social change. She studies human geography at Bristol university and has worked in television and print journalism. She has been a trend and future researcher for over 25 years, and author of the annual Home Report on living and building trends, and lives in the Future Evolution House in Vienna that she built with her husband Matthias Horx.



**“As with all Trends,
there is a Counter-trend”**

Oona Horx-Strathern spent the Lockdown with three generations under one roof while doing research into how we will make our homes part of our identity in the future.

Author — Evelyne Oechslin
Photography — Klaus Vyhnalek

Ms Horx-Strathern, you say there will be no “back to normal” after the pandemic. What was wrong with that normality?

Nothing per se. But there was a certain need for renewal. The pandemic has accelerated this process. During the lockdown, we formed a new relationship with our cities because we experienced them as quieter, cleaner and greener than ever before. Besides, we had the chance of rediscovering our homes which we had been neglecting over the past years.

Let’s talk about urban planning. How will this watershed event change our cities?

The Lockdown has helped urban planners identify which elements are critical to quality of life. For example, Paris is currently planning the 15-minute city. This means that everything that is important must be within walking distance. Instead of dividing cities into shopping districts, residential areas and working quarters, we will ensure in the future that you can find everything you need to live in every district—just as you would in a village. This is incredibly important, especially in demographic terms, because we live in an ageing society and older people want to be able to look after themselves independently in their neighbourhoods.

You say “during the pandemic we have rediscovered our home like a long-lost relative”. A very nice metaphor. How are our homes going to change under this more loving gaze?

Investing in their home as part of their identity has not exactly been a priority for many people in recent years; it’s been more about the projected image. You only need to think about the many representative cuisines which were

rarely used. But now, the inner status is becoming more important: people are creating a home for themselves. This has an impact on the materials we surround ourselves with. We are observing a trend towards more sustainability, curved shapes, more warmth. We are starting to reappraise what feels good. This is a counterbalance to the coldness and angularity that so often characterizes the technology around us.

Speaking of technology: How has the pandemic changed our expectations of the smart home?

For every trend there is a counter-trend, and finally a synthesis. The smart home trend has always been accompanied by a love of the analog. Examples are vinyl records and books. I basically believe that technology should never exist for its own sake, i.e. as a technical gimmick, but that instead it ought to improve our analog life. During the pandemic, this awareness has been heightened. We have embraced a new relationship with our surroundings and the people around us. And in doing that we

have realized that human connectivity is more important than technical connectivity.

What effects might the new view of our home have on the distribution of spaces?

The “Hoffice” (office at home) is here to stay. This has resulted in a movement away from loft-like open spaces towards more privacy. Sliding doors, paravans and other room dividers are becoming more important. The kitchen will also change. Many have started to invest the time they would have otherwise spent commuting in cooking and baking. We are also seeing a trend towards larger bathrooms. These have been turned into our personal “selfness space”.

**“We are starting to
reappreciate what feels
good.”**

“There is a movement away from loft-like open spaces towards more privacy.”

During the lockdown you lived under one roof with three generations. How has your home changed during that time?

Initially, we moved all the furniture around, since everyone needed a desk. I would describe the daily selection of seats as Darwinian. If you had an important meeting, that gave you priority for a quiet workplace. In the evenings we all met up, in order to cook and eat together. We worked out that

there were 120 possible seating combinations around our dining table. So we tried out a new seating arrangement every evening.

How do you envisage your home and workspace in the future? Are there things you still want to change?

“I would describe the daily selection of seats as Darwinian.”

Since we have our offices on site, we are already very well set up. What I like about my office at home is that it's very cozy, with carpets and velvet curtains. However, in the future, I'd like to give more consideration to ecological aspects when buying new furniture.



Three generations of the Horx-Strathern family live and work in the Zukunftshaus on the outskirts of Vienna.

Looking to the Future

The fact that we want to make our homes more individualistic, that we place more value on what feels good and that sustainability aspects are more of a priority are all trends that will improve our lives.

In product development, we try to anticipate what our customers will be wanting tomorrow. While we don't have a crystal ball, one thing is clear: Working from home is not going to go away. We have compiled a few relevant facts on the following pages.

Markus Föllmi Head of Innovation Hawa Sliding Solutions



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