Conversations

Homing Instincts: Apparata and Dogma on the urban home

In this candid conversation, Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara of Dogma join Astrid Smitham and Nicholas Lobo Brennan of Apparata on the histories and futures of urban dwelling.

The current exhibition *Dogma: Urban Villa* presents the practice's recent research on the adaptability and affordance of the townhouse, adding to its catalogue of critical influential thinking on domesticity. Itself an experiment in building reciprocity, Apparata’s project A House for Artists won the inaugural Neave Brown Award for affordable housing. In this candid conversation, Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara of Dogma join Astrid Smitham and Nicholas Lobo Brennan of Apparata on the histories and futures of urban dwelling.

ASTRID SMITHAM Recently I’ve been taking part in some meetings about housing; for instance, a round table with Members of Parliament and people from all over the sector — so, developers, academics and then the architects, as a tiny fraction of that panel. My point has been about how what I identify as an absence of design, in much of UK housing, has become a public health crisis. The MPs appeared receptive to the idea that design matters; but the conversation from the industry tends to focus on land and finance only, as though design is ‘resolved’. How do you put the case forward for a more social architecture; for ways of living that address topics of agency or loneliness?

NICHOLAS LOBO BRENNAN Perhaps that allows us to address your exhibition Stadtsvilla or Urban Villa, as it puts forward this idea that the arrangement of a building might actually matter. The first point for us would be around intention. How do you go about putting forward — in public, to the greatest number of people — that design actually matters?

MARTINO TATTARA I think a lot depends on the audience. What is more difficult to convey is this: our work is, of course, about design, but it's also deals with certain aspects that, architect or designers engaged with housing do not traditionally consider: for example, how houses are managed, how land is acquired, the cost of land as a proportion of the cost of housing… So there is a dual perspective on communication here: when you speak with people outside the discipline, they indeed might need convincing on design issues or choices, and I think that we try to make that clear. Conversely, when speaking among architects, I feel that they often need to be convinced to look just outside the perimeter of architecture itself…

> "We often tend to universalise certain tropes about domesticity which the West, through colonisation, has imposed on its domestic habits."
>
> - Pier Vittorio Aureli

PIER VITTORIO AURELI I very much agree with what Martino says. In fact, over the last years — through our research, our projects, but also in our exhibitions — we really try to make the effort to build a more holistic understanding of domestic space, where design is always put in relation with its social and political context. There’s a tendency to overlook structural problems that are the very roots of what we can call the housing crisis.

At the same time, I agree that there is also a crisis of imagination of what domestic space and housing in general can be. This is due the fact that — and let me say, I have experienced this both at the academic and general level — there is an *illiteracy* about the history of domestic space itself.

To follow up from Martino, architects and students of architecture often fail to fully understand how issues of property and land acquisition influence the form of houses. Moreover, when you think of spaces like the kitchen or the bedroom, there is an assumption that these have always existed. We often tend to universalise certain tropes about domesticity which the West, through colonisation, has imposed on its domestic habits. One way to help is to regain a certain kind of knowledge and ability to open up our design imagination about domestic space and housing. We need to reclaim this history somehow, to become more aware that the history of domestic space is full of problems and issues that are not reducible to the kind of essentialist view that we have today of housing: a “family household”, for instance, or a typical family home.

1/4 Dogma, Urban Villa, from Speculation to Cooperation, exhibition as Flanders Architecture Institute, deSingel International Arts Centre, Antwerp 2024. Photo credit: Robbrecht Desmet

AS Over the last 40 years in the UK, a particular and generic set of characteristics has been developed around apartment design, to the point that apartments are almost only of one particular type: that is, based around an internal corridor with a high level of compartmentalisation and specific uses for the rooms. This thinking often carries through to the shared spaces as well: for example windowless corridors, in an architecture that controls social encounters. Notionally, these conditions are in relation to UK fire regulations or cost, but the result is that the way in which buildings might be used by groups and individuals is constrained at every scale — from the whole building to the floor plate, to the apartment and the room. UK housing culture has embedded within it certain concerns around privacy, often dialled up to the point of social isolation. These aspects are present in every aspect of housing delivery and this is something we are responding to with our work.

"UK housing culture has embedded within it certain concerns around privacy, often dialled up to the point of social isolation."

- Astrid Smitham

NLB Clearly there is an ideology – since Thatcher – that there is no society. The claim that any architecture is without an ideology, without any awareness of a kind of social engineering — is problematic. Architecture that is based around social separation, that instructs occupants to live in a particular way, as in: don't live outside your home, don't go and cook in the yard, don't farm on the roof. This approach is very negative, and tries to control how people live.

Our projects often involve undoing fixed notions of typology; to break it and start again from first principles. For instance, where is the living room? Could the living room be placed within shared areas, without the maximum possible privacy as the starting point? Or could it be that the living rooms are connected by doors in the party wall? We're trying to find devices that try to allow for new tendencies rather than only allow for historic social models that may not even exist in most cases any more. In your work, we feel that you're also putting forward a strangely reasonable and yet very radical project, right?

PVA Well, I think it's almost impossible for architecture to escape typology. I think no matter how strange or bizarre a building is, it is always reducible to a type. Rafael Moneo once wrote that type is really the essence of architecture, in the sense that whenever we design something, we always start with an assumed type. But you're right that we often like to slightly subvert, change, modify or twist existing types — in the case of this exhibition, we have used the Urban Villa. Most of the time, it is built for speculative reasons; there is nothing really utopian or radical about it, but by changing or altering some of its aspects, something completely different could emerge.

This sort of manipulation of types can sometimes happen with very small details; like, for example, in your project, the House for Artists — the fact that you can link the houses through this shared access deck. It's a small detail that completely changes the way in which people relate to each other. These are, for us, very important features through which architecture can 'invent' something that is more relevant than exuberant shapes. We are very interested in what I would call the silence of typology; sometimes typological design is not a loud form of design, but it's more from within the quotidien environment.

"Many of our previous projects try to bypass the way in which traditional living types have been conceived."

- Martino Tattara

NLB One of the things we enjoy in your work is that one can't recognise it as housing, or a conventional notion of housing. Housing comes loaded up with pre-conceptions, and what I see does not exactly fit those. I find that to be really powerful politically and socially, playing through what type really means. But again, we're always wondering, what sits below these notions of type? Maybe there are only very few types; only two types of architecture, for instance...

PVA The way that I understand type — I don't know if Martino would agree — is really not as an image or a model but really the way in which, structurally, things are put together. When a space is used habitually, it becomes a type, even if it's something that doesn't look like a house or a building; there is nevertheless the emergence of a typical understanding of that space. So for me, type is a very good starting point.

MT I do agree. I like the way you described our work. The project in the exhibition, the Urban Villa, is perhaps less representative in that regard, but many of our previous projects try to bypass the way in which traditional living types have been conceived. For instance, by working with equal or identical rooms — perhaps a basic idea of domestic space — and what we could call the concentration of services. In many cases, this takes the form of what we call the inhabitable wall, the service wall or core. Playing with these, we try to develop a different type of living space that could accommodate different types of households, because they rely on these two special features. For sure we do not see types as, for instance, a living unit of a certain dimension that accommodates a certain number of people — which is the most common way in which this notion is used, especially in housing.

AS One of the things you mentioned, and which we were interested in with the House for Artists, was how you can make spaces that are open to residents for different and open-ended uses. In the UK, as a renter, you have very few rights; the way that tenancies and contracts works leaves the renter incredibly vulnerable, with a feeling that you could be removed at any point. An important part of the design for us is finding what we can do as architects to give more of those rights to the renter.

In terms of the building, this meant designing a floor plan and a fire escape strategy that would allow walls to be added and removed — but also reaching an agreement with the client that such changes should be permissible. We did get that agreement. Then you have to make that possible materially, making sure walls are made so that they can support shelves, so residents can drill into them, make additions. The next step is informing the residents of what they need to know — so they know where the pipes, the services, the electrics and so on are; they know where they can drill safely. You also empower the residents by removing the mystery of what the home is.

1/6 Apparata, House for Artists. Photo by Martina Ferrera.

MT These are all very relevant themes and topics which we have also tried to address. In another project a few years ago, we tried exactly to empower inhabitants, giving them actually the tools and the sort of instruction on how to modify their own living space. This was very important; it has also to do with the fact that people tend to see housing as something static; an sort of investment that will, if left alone, might grow in time as the place where it is located appreciates —or if you are unlucky, it decreases. In fact, maybe we should think of domestic spaces as a sort of investment, but one that can grow in other terms; for example, maybe you can enter by investing a low amount of capital, and then when you have the means to invest more, you can actually modify that. This process of modification is something that could indeed be facilitated, so that home is something that is actually something more flexible; it can grow, it can shrink — and not only physically, but also in terms of the resources that are invested in it. We could try to accommodate that in design, but it happens very rarely.

PVA Absolutely. This is, for me, one of the biggest challenges in housing today. Actually in ancient or pre-modern times, houses were just that: very flexible structures where the flow of events, of time and of generations was always accommodated. In fact, things started to go the wrong way with the rise of private property, and with the idea that when you own a house, you have absolute ownership, excluding others from the right of using that space. This creates a lot of problems — besides, of course, turning housing into a commodity.

So we really think that flexibility — this possibility to grow or to shrink according to users' needs — is very important, but it's also crucial to distinguish it from a kind of market flexibility. The housing market today is very much appropriating this idea of being flexible — or rather, the idea of living in smaller houses. Living in small houses can sometimes be very convenient and very good. It's just that at the moment, this sort of ethos is completely co-opted by real-estate logic, in terms of capital investments made to increase profits. The big question is, how to claim this flexible way of living to develop a logic of use-value rather than exchange-value. In our research, we looked at cases in which people have tried to achieve that: not squeezing things in for the sake of meeting needs, but really, the possibility of evolving a household that can allow this use-value flexibility. Looking back to historical examples is very useful, in that sense.

AS Even cohousing has also been co-opted as another model of serviced small apartments or studio homes, delivered in a kind of hotel style living. It's questionable what that actually means in terms of building communities. It's quite transient, hence the model is used for student housing. There's no concept or quantum of community that builds up, there's no sense of having communities grow organically, feeling that they have a place to stay, with a sense of ownership.

"The term cohousing has been co-opted as another model of serviced small apartments or studio homes, delivered in a kind of hotel style living. It's questionable what that actually means in terms of building communities"

- Astrid Smitham

PVA Absolutely. We have studied, at DOGMA, the history of the residential hotel, and we really believe that such a type today would have incredible social needs and implications. It's really disheartening to see these developer companies that seem to have reinvented hot water itself with this hotel-like lifestyle — when actually this existed for a long time; it was even actively destroyed as it was considered rather immoral and not a right way, really, of domestic living.

Since the 19th century, there were large numbers of residential hotels that offered, for very little rent, temporary accommodations to different kinds of inhabitants. There were different categories: from very luxurious residential hotels to mid-price rooming houses, all commercially established. There was nothing utopian or socially emancipatory about it; it was very successful and in some cases, even provided a sort of informal form of welfare, especially for elderly people or those living alone. Cities like San Francisco and even New York were full of these models. That type eventually came to an end in the 1970s and 80s, when most of these places were either demolished or transformed into tourist hotels; that is to say, the hotels that we know today. These are exclusively for short stays, and they're also much more expensive. One does not normally stay at a modern hotel for four weeks or four months, as used to happen before.

The question for us would be: can we decommodify this way of living? Can we make it truly affordable and open to anyone? Can this become a form of social housing that, for example, is not just open to families, but to all kinds of inhabitants? This is something that as DOGMA we have tried to put forward and it's interesting to see the reactions to such a proposal. But it's sad to see this model as fully appropriated by the markets and and and proposed as another very expensive commodity.

1/6 Dogma, Faux Corbu, prototype for communal house, 2023

NLB At the other end, district councils struggle to house families with five or more people in urgent need. When I grew up in a charity-owned apartment block, we lived in this one bed apartment; when my mother became pregnant with my brother, we just swapped flats with the tenants above — an older lady whose family had moved out. There was no financial transaction, we just swapped homes: we went upstairs, they came down. There was a staircase that linked the two apartments; we would play with her grandchildren when they came. That was our world. That seemed normal to me, then. But actually it seems entirely sensible as well, where something is no longer useful to a person, but they have a social relationship with somebody else who has that need.

AS I remember a similar experience of that world from a child’s view; my grandmother and great-aunt lived in the same building, but in separate apartments. There was this idea that you'd live in multiple parts of the building. The building would become something quite flexible and porous, and you could use all parts of it. That's something that's really lacking in the experience of many children now: to explore any kind of territory outside of their own home, where they're kept locked away and safe. Their world has shrunk, essentially; I remember so many different places that I could walk to, that belonged to my territory.

With House for Artists, the shared veranda acts as an additional space that is neither home nor city. One of the residents told us how she'd seen her daughter grow in confidence just by having this extra space to wander; a space that was in the building, but not part of the home. Her daughter felt safe to chat with other people in the building, which seems to have had a big impact. That's something homes can contribute on the building scale, but I think it's also a way of building up the city.

Apparata, House for Artists, shared deck.

NLB The building is not just a building; it's a description of how collective life could unfold in an entire city or neighbourhood. We see this in the work of DOGMA too. And that's quite important. If design is somehow playing out or supporting collective life, affecting how social bonds can change on a bigger scale, then that's important.

> "The building is not just a building; it's a description of how collective life could unfold in an entire city or neighbourhood."
>
> - Nicholas Lobo Brennan

MT Well, to expand on what you were saying, maybe we can return to the exhibition that explored the urban villa. We already mentioned the limited scale of the building, which perhaps facilitates an interaction or collaboration between inhabitants. One of the features that we try to invest in is the circulation space. Maybe this is also a reaction to a very Belgian condition, where collective circulation is limited as much as possible; the standard is to have very narrow stairs and lobby space is really at a minimum scale. In fact, with our proposals for spaces inside the private unit or apartment, we tried to be slightly more generous, within reason. Also we attached, to these circulation spaces, some extra rooms that could be used to invert this proportion between private and public. We tried to invest into this in-between space, which exists between the public realm of the city and the private space of the unit. We feel that even with just a few square metres more, we can really achieve a lot.

AS Circulation space is almost the most important part of the building. The lift landing is one of the most important communal spaces in terms of building social bonds. So why shouldn't it be a place where you can have dinner with your neighbours? It's the place you're most likely to bump into them. If that's a place that has a nice view and is in the open air, it makes a huge difference from having a windowless, artificially ventilated, dark space.

NLB It points to this idea of scenario design, whereby one is trying to design for things to happen that are unexpected. Which runs counter to this notion of 'training', where you as the architect are, consciously or not, exerting a huge influence on how people can use a space and thereby behave in a specific, 'correct' way. We are interested in how people can productively misuse the building.

"We tried to invest into this in-between space, which exists between the public realm of the city and the private space of the unit."

- Martino Tattara

PVA Actually, there's a real example that demonstrates what you said, in which certain design moves are almost scripting possible or potential behaviours. One controversial example would be Henry Roberts' 'House for Four Families' built as a model housing for working class residents in front of the Crystal Palace in 1851 — and which became very influential for many projects of social housing in Europe later on. One feature of that project — almost an invention by Roberts — was the vertical core. Basically he eliminated the gallery, the deck that would give access to several apartments with only one stair. So he introduced a vertical core that would serve only two apartments.

The reason he introduced that core was to minimise as much as possible the number of neighbours who would use that shared space. His intentions were precisely to get rid of the last remnants of shared space, in households where it was once very common to share broadly, to share many things. So this is one example — in the negative, of course — of how a typological invention implies a certain kind of behaviour, or even perception of spaces; I think for architects, to be aware of this aspect of design, it is very, very important.

NLB I do think there's a lack of awareness of that. It seems to come from a specific ideal that the priority is to be private, to be separate, that the home is an impenetrable castle.

MT This is substantially linked to what we were discussing before, namely the very patronising idea of mass housing — of this prototype of social housing — which is partly about privacy but also really about controlling behaviour and avoiding connections. There are explicit remarks in the documentation for Roberts' prototypical housing which cautions against female members of the family from meeting with males. So eliminating places like staircases avoids that kind of potentially promiscuous encounter!

"We should go beyond a kind of romantic idea of collective or shared space; they're not simply spaces where people are interacting, but where people establish some form of reciprocity."

- Pier Vittorio Aureli

PVA It's also important to clarify, however, that shared space is not a problem when it comes to fashionable or trendy houses for the middle or upper classes, or for the elite. But when it comes to social housing, or public housing, it becomes a bone of contention. There is almost an assumption that when people are living in those homes, they won't like each other; they don't want to share space — so shared space is kept to a minimum. There are counter examples that have proven to be very successful. Actually, one case that I like a lot is a project in Mumbai, by RC architects; contrary to how social housing is commonly built, they have maximised circulation to create rooms and spaces outside the private unit — and this extra space is very much beloved by the residents.

We should go beyond a kind of romantic idea of collective or shared space; they're not simply spaces where people are interacting, but where people establish some form of reciprocity. This is crucial — especially for people who often find themselves alone or with problems that cannot be solved within the family. In fact, I prefer the term 'reciprocity' over collective, because reciprocity can also happen when you're not inside a collective space — the knowledge that you can trust your network, that you have a certain confidence within the area that you inhabit. Architecture can play a role in fostering this, together with other aspects of reciprocity in housing.

1/4 Urban villa, Dresden, 1902. Architect: Max Wendler. Drawing by Dogma

AS There is this assumption that shared space is negative, to the point that it's often not even an option. It’s not that you can choose to engage with your neighbours or not; often you're not even given a space where those connections could be made — for instance, in terms of self-organising. If there's an issue, as a group you can quickly have a strong position, rather than everybody battling individually, without the time or resources to do that. So it has this dimension of feeling safe as a group, as well as in terms of knowing who your neighbours are.

One resident in the House for Artists shared her thoughts as a woman coming home alone at night. She used to wonder if anyone would notice if, one night, she didn’t. But by having this shared walkway and knowing her neighbours, she feels that people would notice; there's a safety in being seen and seeing others. Within this reciprocity, you can do things like share childcare; if you know that you're going to be late to collect your child from school, you might feel able to call your neighbour who lives two flats down. It just expands your field of support. We try to support each other and develop that support. Another resident said that earlier in her life, when she was a single mother with a young child, she would have benefitted enormously from that.

PVA This is really what I would call reciprocity, which is sometimes mystified or obscured when we use the word collective. With the term ‘collective’, we perhaps imagine this more sort of festive mood in which communities come together physically in one one place, but reciprocity is exactly the phenomenology you described. It’s not about being in a collective situation.

AS It's about interactions between people — not necessarily about the entire building acting as a unit. It can be something small like knowing where you can borrow a bicycle pump, while collective living is seen as this big thing.

NLB Maybe we could speak a little bit more directly about the Urban Villa as a collective project. Was that investigation somehow framed by the local government, to a certain extent?

MT It was something specific for the city of Antwerp — actually for Flanders, then we decided to work on Antwerp — we wanted to test the ideas of this type in this project. Through the institution that hosts the exhibition, we were put in contact with the city architect within a branch of the municipality. We shared the hypotheses; in the end they were supportive, offering us a series of sites that they considered interesting. Among these sites, we selected three. At the same time, what was offered was only a partial framework for development; they didn't really want to put their name on it. Some of these speculative or hypothetical sites were partly private, and somewhat complicated in terms of their land use. So the municipality didn't necessarily want to show that they were endorsing certain developments in those areas that could then give rise to polemic among citizens or even property owners. There was a partial framework, but not always explicit.

NLB But the fact that you have that connection with the municipality — I find that very positive and I think that makes it plausible, right?

PVA Yes, this is very important. Although we develop what you might call theoretical projects, we don't want these projects to be read as utopian or paper architecture. We want these projects to be as realistic as possible; at the same time by challenging some political or technical limitations that you have when you actually build housing. For us, the parameters — the existing parameters — whether we accept them or we discuss them, are very important. Otherwise the risk is that this kind of project easily becomes an act of wishful thinking, without really addressing the structural problems that affect housing.

AS It comes back to the question we had at the very start: how do you argue for design? In the UK, a lot of housing design involves massing, followed by facades — rather than considering how a design performs socially, or in terms of climate resilience, loneliness, agency, mental health. How does it perform in all these factors? The fact is design is what tends to be forgotten or not recognised. With these projects — and through that relationship with local government — you can talk, share or demonstrate those aspects of design, which are about the performance, beyond the superficial or recognisable aspects.

KOOZ With that, we'll have to wrap up — there is much more mileage in this conversation, so I hope that it can continue. Thank you all for your candour and your time.

PVA Thank you — and of course, to Apparata.

NLB Thanks! Yes, we'd be very glad to continue the conversation.

Bio

Dogma was founded in 2002 by PVA and Martino Tattara. Since its inception, the practice works on the relationship between architecture and the city by focusing mostly on urban design and large-scale projects. In recent years, Dogma has been working on a research by design trajectory that focuses on domestic space and its potential for transformation. Pier Vittorio Aureli teaches at Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) where he directs the laboratory 'Theory and Project of Domestic Space'. Martino Tattara is a professor at the Technische Universität Darmstadt, where he leads the Institute of Design and Housing. The practice received the Iakov Chernikhov Prize in 2006 and the RIBA Charles Jencks Award in 2023.

APPARATA is an architectural practice founded in 2015 by Astrid Smitham and Nicholas Lobo Brennan. Based in London, they are known for their community work emphasising collective life and the construction of buildings as a critical practice. The firm recently won the inaugural Neave Brown Award for Housing in 2023 for the project A House for Artists, a new form of low rent co-housing combined with a community arts centre in Barking, London. Astrid Smitham and Nicholas Lobo Brennan hold teaching positions at the Kingston School of Art and the TU Wien Faculty of Architecture and Planning.