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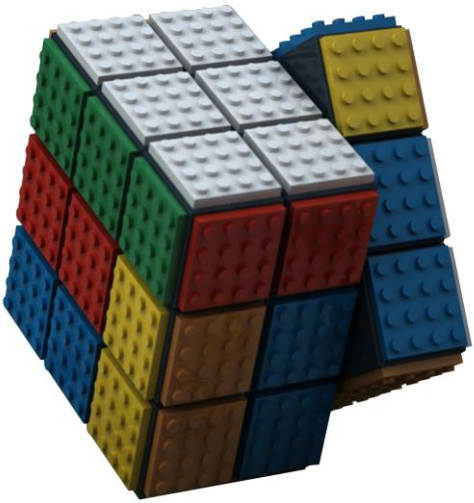

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HOME/LIFE –

A REGISTER OF ADAPTATIONS ONTO AN EXISITING ARCHITECTURE

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Fig. 1: Still from Buster Keaton Short Film *'One Week'* 1920.

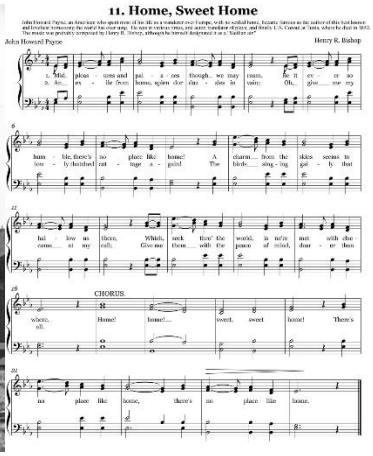


Fig. 2: Song Sheet – *Home! Sweet Home!*

Introduction

Housing is at the forefront of the architectural debate all around the globe. The problems of housing a growing population present the society as a whole and architects in particular with a very difficult problem to solve: How do you accommodate a lot of people from diverse backgrounds and with different priorities in bigger housing developments. But the problem isn't new and various architects have tried in the past to design the ideal building that solves most of the problems.

Of the five Unités d'Habitation Le Corbusier built in France the first one in Marseilles delivered a prototype of a new and modern way of living. Following his principles of architecture his building is been seen as the blueprint of modern living – both in the communal spaces and the individual living units. But the later Unités some of the ideas were diluted, communal spaces were limited or not included at all. The actual siting of the projects can only be seen as not ideal.

The Unité in Briey, built on the outskirts of a small former mining town near the border of Luxembourg has a difficult and complex history. Built 1959-1960 it was the only Unité built under the HLM (*Habitation à Loyer Modéré* or "rent-controlled housing") regulations in France. After the decline of the mining industry the building became more and more neglected until in 1984 the regional government decided to demolish the eyesore on top of the hill overlooking the town. The order was fought by the local mayor with the help of a group of dedicated architects and nowadays the building presents itself as a lively community. The building has been transformed through the residents who took the opportunity to own a bit of cheap real estate. Free from restrictions they changed the flats according to their personal needs and tastes.

Interviewing residents about their personal space has demonstrated the importance of the need to take the updating of the spaces into their personal hands, leaving them to build up a positive relationship to the space through decorating the spaces and through DIY. Homes aren't created by architects. We merely plan houses -

empty shells inviting a diverse occupation. The beauty lies in the way the occupation and adaptation is registered in the fabric of the building, or as Walter Benjamin wrote: 'Living is leaving traces of ourselves'.
The building slowly becomes a vessel for personal memories; the *house* becomes a *home*.

The intention of the paper is to start a project recording and narrating the story of the last 20 years in the Unité through looking at how the residents have adapted and updated their spaces. It will be a story of stairs, walls and cupboards, of kitchens and wallpapers, a narrative seen through domestic objects.

Home! Sweet Home!

In 1822 the American actor John Howard Payne (1791-1852) composed what must be the most well known home song *Home! Sweet Home!:*

Mid pleasures & palaces though we may roam
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like Home!
A charm from the sky seems to hallow us there
Which, seek through the world, is ne'er met with elsewhere!

An exile from Home, splendour dazzles in vain!
Oh, give me my lowly thatch'd cottage again!
-The birds singing gaily, that come at my call—
Give me them! – and the peace of mind dearer then all!

Home, home! sweet, sweet Home!
There's no place like Home!
There's no place like Home!

What is most remarkable in this is that John Howard Payne was living with Cherokee Indians, travelling through Europe and North Africa for most of his live, and it seems he never had any place he called home.

We all dwell in one way or another. This space is usually have a place we can come back to in the evenings to rest, a very private space we usually call *home*. But what is a *home*, how is it created, when do we call a place we stay '*our home*'. This might sound like a kind of strange question but it seems it is fundamental to our wellbeing to have a place that represents us, a special place we can identify with, a place we are willing to defend.

House/Home- the dilemma of the architect

As an architect you design houses. You more or less cleverly arrange volumes or rooms, dived them up with walls and then thoughtfully place the openings between them and in the perimeter walls to allow a transition from one space to the next and fulfil both the need for privacy, a connection to the surrounding context and to provide the necessary ventilation as well as let natural light into the spaces.

As an architect being involved in the creating and reconfiguration of private dwellings is an always a challenging and mysterious process in which most clients are terribly unequipped to understand the impact of a spatial decision they and their architect make during the early design stages onto their subsequent life within this space they will call home one day. The communication between the expert (architect) and the laypers on (client) can often only be described as disastrous. The hurdles of the reading or even understanding a plan and a section and, even more important being able to construct than three-dimensional image of a non exisiting space in your head just using this 'code' are often too high. Once the building is finished, the work of the architect is completed the client moves in, arranges the furniture, places their personal belongings within the spaces.

For an architect the idea of an inhabitant taking over the space you designed is a difficult concept to get used to yet without the occupant actively taking over the space they can often feel disassociated with it. Designing a perfect space can leave the inhabitant feel alien in it.

What is home?

Mircea Eliade (1907-1922), a Romanian writer and philosopher, defines the home as a sacred space, a place you regard with great respect, a place you are willing to defend. The word sacred stems from the Latin word *sacer*

meaning being restricted and limited or defined. It is a place that you consider extraordinary and unique to yourself.

What is the meaning of home? Is it simply the place you go back at night to rest or just keep lace to keep your belongings. For thousands of years humans were nomadic, did not have a place to stay permanently. The meaning of 'home' is a very different one if you move with the seasons, or you have to follow migratory patters of the animals you hunt. Settling down meant that you invested time and effort to make the place you stay habitable, keep out the weather and defend your space against intruders. Sir Edward Coke introduced in the '*The Institutes of the Laws of England'*, 1628 the idea that the private home is "For a man's house is his castle and each man's home is his safest refuge."

Feeling at home, home - sweet home, my home is my castle, being homesick, fear of being homeless are all very strong feelings associated with a place, sometimes with the fear of losing it, the danger of being violated, invaded, or even of losing everything.

But the idea of home does not just refer to the space behind your own front door. It can include the wider social framework you inhabit, an extension of your home. The close proximity of the neighbourhood needs the key cornerstones of the community between known places and events to define a territory you can identify with.

How do we create a home?

Susan Clayton, an environmental psychologist, defines the home as an integral part of our self-definition. We decorate the house to on the inside to reflect our character or status. We furnish it to on one hand feel comfortable but as well to represent who we are to visitors. We take care of our lawn to claim the outside space and to project our care externally:

"These large patches of vegetation serve little real purpose, but they are part of a public face people put on, displaying their home as an extension of themselves. It's hardly rare, though, in our mobile modern society, to accumulate several different homes over the course of a lifetime. So how does that affect our conception of ourselves?"

Jeremy Bentham defined in his Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation the concept of pleasure and pain as key in our engagement with the world we life in. Our decision-making processes are influenced by this to aim for a good life. This making of a place - though pleasure (positive memories) and through pain (personal memories, tragedies, even the DIY disasters) is creating, or even forging a connection with the space. You make a mark, you make a space, you identify yourself with it to the extend of defining the place as an extension of yourself. As Diener, Lucas and Oishi describe you feel a general sense of satisfaction with your own life by having these experiences associated with the inhabited spaces. In this context the whole discussion about spaces occupies the territories of Health and Wellbeing and not just of Architecture in the sense of a good design.

'And whether or not we are always aware of it, a home is a home because it blurs the line between the self and the surroundings, and challenges the line we try to draw between who we are and where we are. ' (Julie Beck, 2011)

To create a home there has to be a continuous exchange between the inhabitant and the space. The way we interface with the space, we identify, plan and implement changes in our surroundings. This exchange or better these emotional events creates memories. The accumulation of memories aids the way we feel about the space – both in a positive and negative way.

A fundamental question is how do you make an impact as a dweller? Do you have the capacity to do it, do you actually have the 'right tools' to do the job.

Mechanisms of appropriation

There are several interventions the dweller can apply to alter, or appropriate the environment in order to make it fit to the specific needs and tastes. These depend on a specific set of skills and abilities, and the availability of materials and tools.

The level of adaptations or appropriations can be divided up into non-invasive or temporary fittings and into invasive and more permanent interventions into the space. From looking at inhabited spaces these can be separated into four lose stages of appropriation. These can differ according to the local tradition. Whereas in Germany it is common to move into an empty flat that was painted in a plain white colour to present a blank canvas for the new occupier, in the UK houses are selected based on the furniture and colours or wallpapers of the

spaces. Traditionally moving in involves much less effort as the spaces are staying defined by the same kind of furniture.

In the first stage lose and mobile objects are placed in the space. These are usually the furniture items and lose surface coverings like rugs. These are arranged to define the spaces, facilitate the operations of living intended in them. Here changes can be made quite quickly without too much effort, different combinations and places tested before a final arrangement is found. Although these items are not fixed unless circumstances change they rarely are moved once the dweller occupies the space. In the next stage fixed items are added: Curtains and Blinds are fitted, lights installed and Pictures hung on the walls. Here skills and tools are needed, an instant commitment has to be made as the installation or the change of these items requires planning and often outside help. These stages are mostly common to all dwellers and dwellings, they are often as well a result of ownership. The further stages are much more adventurous. In the next stage wall and floor coverings can be changed. The final stage is the actual intervention into the spatial and structural fabric of the building – the removal or erection of walls, the addition of extra spaces.

A lot of this appropriation is through DIY, whereby the physical fabric of the building merely presents a framework to be filled with positive and negative interactions. The space is like a body that can be dressed for different occasions, reflecting different moods. It can then be stripped back and redressed.

Case Studies

There are several buildings that adopted the ideas of setting up a positive relationship with the building either throughout the design- and built stages, or they developed a different set up that encouraged a more positive connection with the built structure. Some of these are new-build initiatives involving the future residents to participate in the design and the building of their future homes. Others are buildings that took on a different dynamic, adopting a more informal, sometimes eclectic way of adapting the exisiting building to make it fit their vision, needs and tastes. Of these four are significant in their approach:

New build – Participatory Buildings:

Frei Otto: Treehaus Berlin, Germany, 1984-1987

Built as part of the International Building Exhibition (IBA) the concept involved prospective owners to by part of the design and realization process. Presented as a Ökohaus it was planned as a series of concrete slabs with a basic services. The occupants were encouraged to develop their own environment, to find their own ways of living and expressions through a personal architecture – in the context of high-density inner city living, implementing ecological and adaptive design. Reflecting different tastes and ideas of what a house should look like the appearance is a patchwork – reflecting the characters who set it up and have lived in the structure. In reality few changes were made since the original structure was built. This seems to be mainly due to the complex legal processes involved in the setting up of the building and the fact that it was built within the social housing rules and legislation set by the IBA and Berlin. 18 families finally moved in, some are still living there and are not planning to leave.

Walter Segal: Walters Way, Lewisham, UK, 1977-1980

Set up on a sloping site in Lewisham, a part of South East London, the Walter's Way development is an innovative self build project realised for and by local council tenants under the leadership of the architect Walter Segal. He developed a system that involved only materials available in the local builders merchants, all buildings did not have foundations, all buildings are based on a simple adaptable timber frame structure. The occupants/planners/builders were trained in evening classes to do all basic carpentry, plumbing and electrical work. Of the 13 houses built on the site, 4 are still occupied by the original residents. They describe it as a lively community and all residents have opted to buy their property under the right-to-buy scheme supported by the UK government.

Adapted buildings:

Fig. 2: Stills from *Nemausus 1*, a documentary film by Richard Copans and Stan Neumann for Illuminations Media.

Jean Nouvel: Nemausus, Nimes, France

When Jean Nouvel built the Nemausus social housing complex under HLM rules in Nimes, France in 1987 he fought with the developer to be more generous with the spaces for the individual flats. Delivering a 30% cheaper building he decided to make the apartments 30% bigger. The individual units have a double height space, and open plan arrangement of the spaces. Every unit have a front and a back open space even on the upper floors. On first sight the building must have been a desirable space to live. But each tenant was obliged to sign a tenancy agreement that prevented them from decorating their flats retaining the space and the structure as he intended it – bare concrete walls, exposed services, even 'fake' builders markings, plum lines and fitting instructions on the walls. But the tenants rebelled against these doctrines, attacking the fabric of the building and the strict restrictions - walls were covered in wallpaper and paint, floors with carpets, curtains started to screen off private areas, cornices blurred the lines between the walls and the ceilings. The spaces were personalised and adapted to suit the occupation and to reflect the inhabitant's sense of taste and understanding of comfort.

Adapted Housing:

Le Corbusier: Unité de Habitation, Briey, France

The Unité in Briey in the Lorraine area close to the border of Luxembourg, was built as part of the HLM (Habitation à Loyer Modéré or "rent-controlled housing"). As such the building lacks most of the features we as architects associate with the Unité's: The nursery and the swimming pool on the roof was never completed due to budget restrictions and due to the fact that it was considered a folly idea. A conventional building housing a nursery was built instead close to the Unité. There is not internal shopping street, no shops were realised at all within the building. A Coop was set up during the construction of the building but it closed as soon as it was completed. Being located on top of the hill with no real public transport links and to make the situation more difficult due to the times very little private car ownership the situation was far from ideal from the start.

When it was built it provided 339 living units for approx. 800 inhabitants. As soon as it was completed, the steady decline of the steel industry and therefore the mining industry in France left the building more than half unoccupied. This created a serious problems for the remaining residents who felt abandoned and alone on top of the hill above the town. By 1979 a local homeless population moved in, the building was more and more neglected and by 1983 a demolition order was given to finally solve this problem. But in 1984 a new mayor refused the demolition order, sold part of the building to the local hospital to install a nursing school and sold the rest to a developer. With the help of Ron Howard an architect and educator from East London University they managed to change the perception of the building in the public eye. In 1993 after a long process of negotiations the outside of the building was listed as a 'Monument Historiques', but a majority was left to the inhabitants to adapt to suit/fit their personal needs. All this history is brilliantly described in a publication by Joseph Abran: *Le Corbusier in Briey*, published by Jean-Michel Place Edition in 2006.

Transformations and Adaptations in Briey

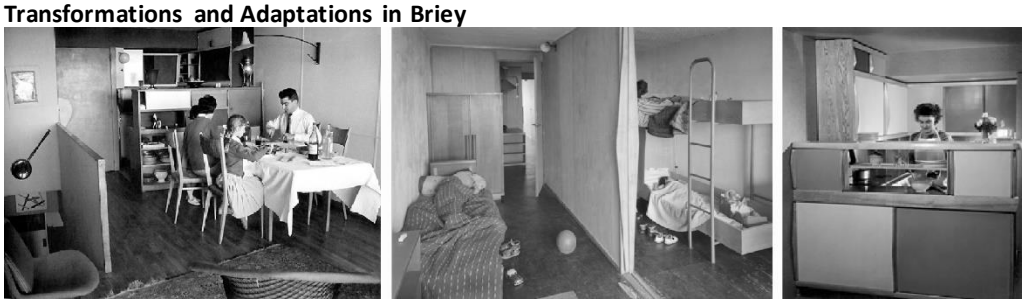
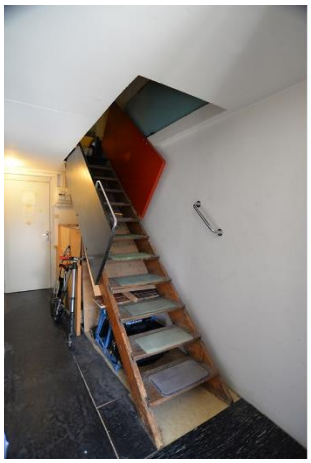
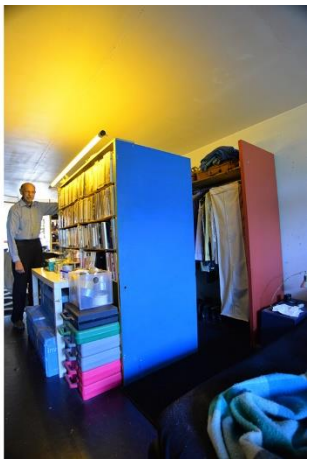


Fig. 4: Flats in the Unité with the original set-up and furniture.

Today the Unité in Briey is a lively organism occupied by a diverse population of residents. While the first floor or La Première Rue has a high percentage of Le Corbusier admirers with most of the flats being either restored or at least preserved in the spirit of Le Corbusier, the upper floors have little what reminds you of the original layout and fit-out designed by Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand. The study is looking into how the residents have adapted their private living accommodation to suit their changing personal needs and the ever-changing moods and fashions presented through popular culture and the media.

The Unité was built with the usual variety of flats inside. They range from smaller units on one level located in intermediate streets, traditional duplex but in Briey mostly without the iconic double-height spaces, up to big units occupying up to six of the cells. The layout reflected a traditional family set up with the common units being set up for a family o four, two parents and two children. All furniture was built-in with all the mode-cons like a built-in fitted kitchen the time had to offer. Nowadays this set up is not suitable for the different types of residents. The flats has changed into private ownership, only the façade, the entrance hall, some flats on the Première Rue and the outside of the building has National Monument recognition. This is reflected in the removal of most of the built-in furniture was removed, partitions demolished, the spaces and the kitchen being updated. Some of the items removed made their way into the international auction houses with some of the stairs selling for $21.000 at an auction at Christie's in New York in 2010. Over a period of two years I have visited Briey to see how the residents adapted their flats, through interviews, photographic documentation and drawings the changes were recorded. In the study we have visited and recorded nine flats and two spaces used for other activities like an office and a youth club.





Pascal, duplex on the Première Rue, entrance at the bottom level, no double height space.

79 years, architect, author and former educator, has been involved in the transformation since 1989 onwards and moved full time to Briey 2009.

Pascal was one of the first people to get involved in the in the rescue efforts of the Unité. He describes that when he arrived the Première Rue was used as a dumping ground for all the rubble from the changes in the upper floors. With the help of like-minded people they cleared the space making it yet again accessible. In the beginning they squatted without paying rent which attracted a series of fellow artists to the space.

Having only a shell with the original stair he didn't attempt to restore the space, opting instead for a more ingenious use of the found materials – mainly leftover original doors being dug out form the heaps of rubble and dead rats. A survey of his flat revealed all together 42 original doors he used to create his living spaces and to partition off areas – together with the bits of the shop from the ground floor now being used as a low storage unit. One door became a new handrail for the stair, another two the balustrade, six doors a partition to a downstairs guest room where the bed made out of yet another door blank. His wardrobe/VHS archive consists of five further doors. A row of tables was constructed out of 13 doors and his office uses another three. The rest is dotted around the flat being propped up by clamps and bits of wood. Pascal rescued the only original door with the original flat number painted on it, now part of his bookshelf. The original layout was changed with the kitchen now being moved to the centre of the upstairs cell. All of the fitting out is of a temporary nature – being easily removable once the needs or the occupants changes.

Pascal, being and architect has naturally a strong connection to the building. There is a constant stream of visitors and Pascal has a lot of stories to tell. He spends most of his time reading at his sofa surrounded by the artefacts and fragments he collected and accumulated.



Kevin, Première Rue duplex, entrance at the upper level, no double height space.

37 years, works in a bank, single, his first flat, a keen art lover.

Kevin has always been interested in art and is a regular visitor to galleries in Metz and London. But the main reason why he has chosen to live in the Unite in Briey is the cost of the flat. Being his first home the money he has available for the accommodation is limited.

Kevin bought a flat on the Première Rue. He can remember the place from his youth when he attended parties in the empty flats.

When he moved in there was nothing there with most of the interior fittings being broken or according to him not salvageable with only the stair being an original feature being worth saving. He occupies an end flat that was set up for a family with two children. In the process of adapting the space Kevin removed all interior partitions

to open up the space. A new kitchen was designed by a kitchen company, the steel handrail for the stairs by a friend working n a metal factory nearby. Facing one of the emergency escape stairs Kevin covered one of the back walls with a fake concrete on a Styrofoam panelling. Being located on the lowest level the flat has no insulation to the open space underneath the building. A new laminate flooring with some insulation completed space.

His favourite space is his new kitchen where he can sit and entertain friends. He likes that his flat feels modern, the scented candles, fake grass on the balcony, make the space feel like home.

Vivian, 4th Rue duplex at the end of the building, entrance at the lower level, no double height space.

39 years of, lives with his wife, three children and a dog, head of the residents association.

Vivian is head of the residents association for a couple of years and knows most of the people living in the Unité. Moving there in 1991, he bought his flat ten years later. He loves the patchwork the community represents. Looking back he says he was insane enough to move in but it was cheap and the place was enormous.

His flat has two units at the bottom and four at the top level including three bathrooms. Apart from the stair there are no original features left. He extensively modernised his flat throughout the years, creating a bigger kitchen at the lower level with a central unit, reflecting the original set up of Perriand's kitchen. All the work was carried out by himself, including the ceiling panelling. Lately they are thinking of removing it to expose the ceiling like others have done it.

Vivian has recently divided up his DJ studio to make space for another bedroom for his baby daughter. In order to visualise the space he has planned the partition on a free and open source 3D gaming software called Blender. He soured the materials from the local DIY store and build the partition out of Melamine chipboard.

For Vivian the whole building is his home, regularly organising a youth club in an empty flat and treasure hunts for the children around the whole building.

Claude, 6th Rue duplex, entrance at the bottom level, double height space.

gardener lives in the flat with his wife and a dog and uses it as a workshop.

Of all the residents, Claude's flat is the most surprising. He is working as a gardener and loves to build treehouses. He keeps most of his work tools in his flat. When entering, the downstairs is occupied by chainsaws, a

strimmer and his beekeeping equipment. A smell of honey draws you to the honey centrifuge in the corner and the rest the space is furnished with self-made furniture and made homely with plants.

The upstairs is like a Wunderkammer and you never know what is around the next corner. Like most of the other flats only the stair is left from the original fit-out. Claude transformed the space with colours and an eclectic mix of furniture. The space behind the sofa is used for plant seedlings and he set up a full woodworking workshop in one of the former bedrooms. Here he realises his projects: wooden benches and chairs and turned candlesticks that can be found all around the space. Recently he became to get more interested in the building. Walls got stripped back to the raw concrete, he started to experiment with the primary colours used in the renovation of the corridors in his own flat.

Claude is very proud of the space he has created for him and his wife. He likes to connection of the plants on the inside with the views into the surrounding countryside.

Findings so far

It is very difficult to quantifiably measure the level of happiness or satisfaction occupants feels in the space they occupy. But it is evident from the history of the building and interviews that an engagement with the space, the transformation they implemented have allowed them to make a (mostly positive) connection with the space. By affecting and changing the space, making it personal they allow the space to feed back, to have appositive effect on their wellbeing, they feel at *home*. All residents taking part in the research expressed that they are now happy in the space, all of them have adapted it in their own personal way to their own personal taste and according to their own abilities.

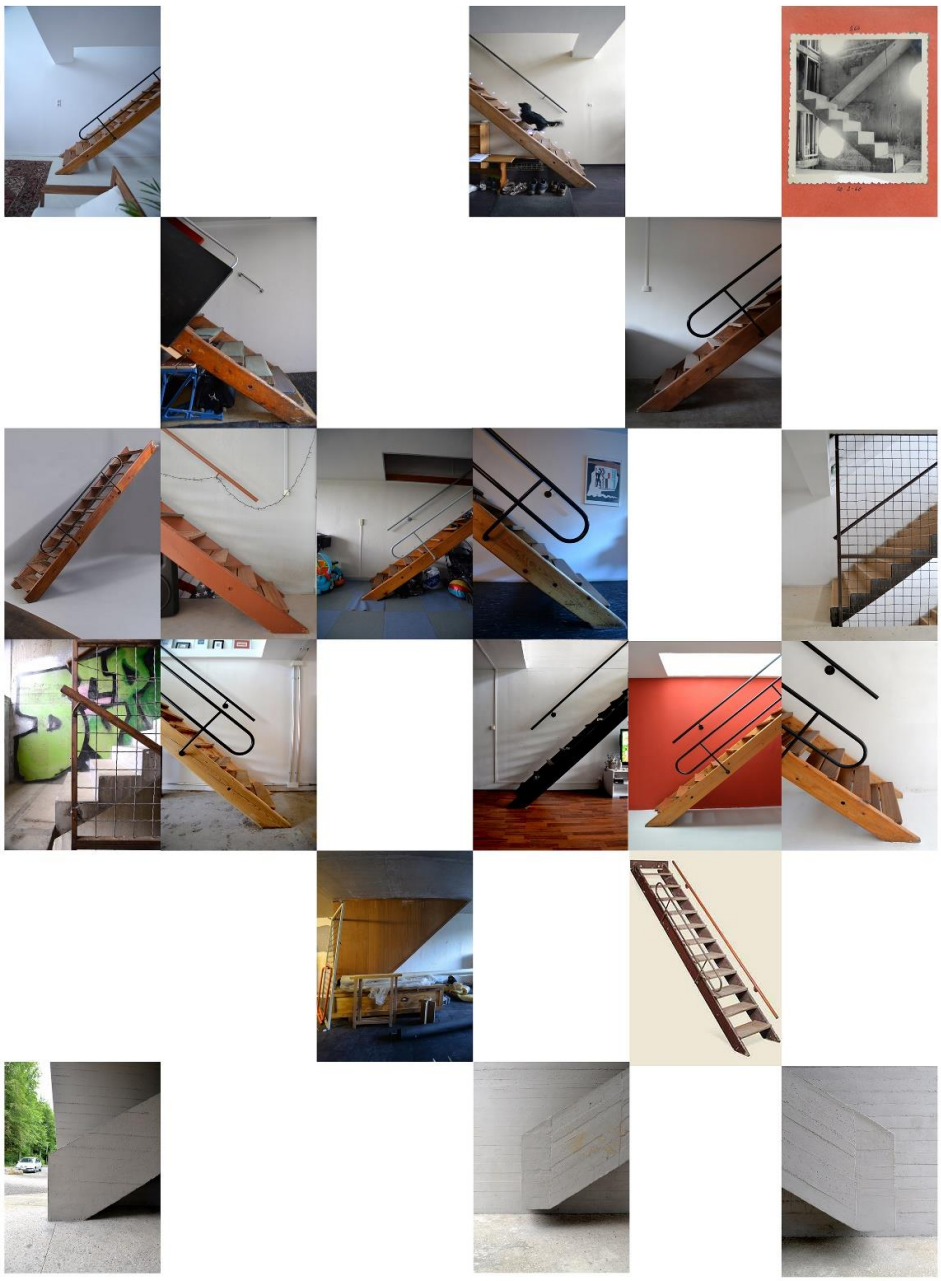


Fig. 5: Collection of photos representing the stairs in the Unité that will be used as the base for the Memory Game.

Creating connecting Memories

The research project was initiated by an article about a stair from Briey that was sold in New York. Maybe the owner of the flat wanted to refurbish and change the stair for a more 'modern' one. Something most architects would find a sacrilege, violation of an icon as it is, after all, a Le Corbusier designed building. Some of the spaces might have lost the original designs and memories. But the residents have created new connections with the space.

We are currently working on an exhibition in the gallery of the Association de la Première Rue in Briey that attempts to bring together the all communities currently occupying the building, expressing and celebrating the diverse patchwork of characters within. The project is taking on the form of a game of a set of memory cards showing always a similar view – a stair from Briey. Following Vivian's example of a treasure hunt each card represents a connection with and a memory of a space. Some of the spaces are current – they can be identified by their residents during the game. Others are memories from the past – images found in the archives of the

construction company that was involved in building the Unité or from auction catalogues. The intention will be to initiate further connections in the space and to present and celebrate the different approaches to living to all the residents.

Final questions to reflect on:
How much time do you spend at home?
How do you spend this time?
How do you structure you life around your space?
How did you appropriate the space to accommodate this time?

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