

Hinges, passages, and comfort



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"For some, it may seem dim and unilluminated to take the 'mere' comfort of the user as a constituent of architecture. In fact, anyone who is not prepared for that must be accused of an inferior definition of architecture. For, if its intellectual content only existed beyond commonplace purposes, architecture, after all, would be an 'applied,' contaminated art, since commonplace purposes can only rarely be by-passed."

— Hermann Czech, 2007

Abstract

We all know comfort, yet we also do not know comfort. Arguably tied to physical well-being, a state of ease, and accessible for everyone individually, the conception of comfort was not always as such. Early origins beheld comfort as spiritual, mental consolation endowed by religion and acknowledged it as invigoration of the body's organs. It was a collective endeavour that progressively turned into a subjective matter.

For Cumulus Antwerp 2023, the paper 'Hinges, Passages, and Comfort' examines the concept of architectural comfort and a possible return to its collective dimension through the lens of two ordinary architectural elements: the door hinge and the passage. By this, it will transgress the seminal essays 'Figures, Doors and Passages' by the British architectural historian Robin Evans and 'The House as Path and Place' by the Austrian architect Josef Frank.

The essay will pair historical analysis with future speculations, offering alternative paths to substantially comfortable private and communal living. Both elements door and passage are attuned to the emerging private life since the seventeenth century and, hence, build the base to reverse this trend. The text aims to face contemporary, pressing issues in architecture, such as ever flatter housing standards or repellent public spaces, and to question a century-old one-sided cultivation of comfort.

The door, originally conceived to separate the human from the animal, divides all our experienced realities into private and public spheres, as well as all subtle and gradual distinctions in between. The element of the passage, historically introduced for the servants to access all spaces unnoticed, nowadays facilitates efficient connections. Today, both the door hinge and the passage are degraded to a mode of efficient exchange that comes closer to a rational and economic spatial disposition rather than an open and daring superimposition of social and cultural relations. As the history of comfort is a constant negotiation, so is the door's application and the passage's usage.

In light of the conference Cumulus Antwerp 2023, the essay 'Hinges, Passages, and Comfort' asks for a productive and sustainable architectural comfort to emerge. The chances for care and inclusivity as well as intimate collectivity through the revision of the architectural layout are given – let's seize them.

Author keywords

comfort, door hinges, passageways, carnal architecture, bodily architecture, multilateral spatial relations, social inclusivity, Robin Evans, Josef Frank, Hermann Czech

Introduction

We all know comfort, yet we also do not know comfort. Arguably tied to physical well-being, a state of ease, and accessible for everyone individually, the conception of comfort was not always as such. Early origins beheld comfort as spiritual, mental consolation endowed by religion and acknowledged it as invigoration of the body's organs (Köhler, 2003, p.9). It was a collective endeavour that progressively turned into a subjective matter.

Today's physical understanding of comfort finds its infancy in seventeenth-century France. The French bourgeois cultivated indulgences only accessible for the few. Later on, the eighteenth-century English proletariat emphasised elemental needs, opening the concept of comfort to a broader audience (Crowley, 2001). And as the social ladder in nineteenth-century Europe appeared to level, comfort emerged in relation to a materialistic revolution. The revolution rendered tangible a necessary luxury for the people and elicited concurrently one of the greatest resonances of today's European society: a private life (DeJean, 2009, p.16).

Comfort is inherent in one's personally structured daily life and presently cultivated as a right. Almost all our actions and behaviours are justified by the conception of private well-being (DeJean, 2009, p.1). This essay's effort is the questioning of comfort as an individual affair—paradoxically, by illuminating it. Hinges and passages suggest that our built environment possesses latent potentials to achieve comfort beyond common understandings. The treatise critically reflects on architecture as a formal-spatial practice of socio-cultural breadth through the lens of two seminal texts, 'The House as Path and Place' by the Austrian architect Josef Frank, and 'Figures, Doors and Passages' by the British architectural historian Robin Evans. Its argumentation shall prevent the building practice from ever flatter physical concretisations in housing as well as in the public realm. To enable proper care and inclusivity, spatial arrangements and their thresholds have to be revised.

The Door Hinge

A door splits space into two, imposes partitions, and prevents osmosis. It performs a form of caesura and fosters a duality between the individual and the collective, the private and the public, as well as the domestic and the outside world. In George Perec's words, its trespassing "requests a password, credentials, [and] a talent for communication." (Perec, 1997, p.37)

That this gliding from one space to the other is a feast for the architect daring enough to formulate this transition consciously, is seized only seldomly. In the text, 'The House as Path and Place', 1931, the Austrian architect Josef Frank posits a simple, yet radical position: "The opening of the door is of neglected importance [today]; I have to say that almost all doors are applied wrongly. They open towards the wall and the entrant suddenly stands there, causing unrest." (Frank, 1931, p.323)

By opening the door towards the room's centre, the gesture employs a distinct spatial event of psychological breadth. The door spans a natural space between its leaf and the adjacent wall. The entrant is neither suddenly exposed to multiple gazes nor overwhelmed by his exposition but moves rather protected from one space into the other. The door is as much the element that evokes an abrupt break of continuity as it is the element that attentively orchestrates transitions. A direct penetration comes closer to a Foucauldian conception of power relations, with all its forms of domination and coercion, but in Frank's work, entrances are drawn in length. For spatial comfort to emerge, there are concise decisions to be made. And the door hinge, usually spurned, plays a crucial role.

Already in the nineteenth century, opening the door with its back towards the centre belonged to the norm. If one reads Robert Kerr's *The Gentleman's House*, 1864, second part, section III, 'The Sleeping-Rooms,' chapter I, 'An Ordinary Bedroom,' it is recognised that the door that opens towards the room's centre was not only widely distributed but heavily demanded: "The primary features of plan in a Bedroom are, first, the door or doors, the fireplace, and the windows; ... The door ... must open with its back towards the fire (the rule for all doors), this position allows it to open with its back also towards the bed (equally a rule)." (Kerr, 1865, p.132) Studying accounts of Kerr and Frank, the door qualifies as a deliberate promoter of a heightened sense of privacy, a sensitivity that stimulates physically and psychologically. Of course, "[o]ne does not want to see if only by the slightest door-gap, the entire bed unfolding in front of one's eyes." (Czech, 2020)

Since the nineteenth century, the private retreat has been established to compensate for the bodily and mental grievances of daily life, liberating from the suffocating social pressures (Kerr, 1865, p.69). And it is well recognised that a change of community and shift in habits have severe repercussions on architectural settings: Floor plans, corridors, as well as doors are all signs of society. Architecture, at that time, went through distinct adaptations: public spaces in the house decreased in size, while private rooms increased in number (DeJean, 2009, p.9). Purpose-specific rooms emerged and a stark sense of individuality fostered (DeJean, 2009, p.16).

As the quest for social privacy is decided precisely at the link of the communal to the personal, it is the door as a spatial element that is crucial for its attainment. Historically used only to separate the human from the animal and the interior from the exterior (Crowley, 2001, p.18), the ever more

refined domestic space requested an ever more considerate sequence from public to private. And as much as different shades of privacy became established, the requirements of comfort increased too.

Frank responds to this quest, as at his 'Villa Beer', 1929–31, done in collaboration with Oskar Wlach, the Frankian door is sought twice—at the bedroom's threshold and the hall's entrance. While the former event is linked to a well-known desired privacy of one's place for sleeping, the latter conforms to the sociability of the hall. A human of gentility does not want to be hastily exposed, nor should an entrant irritate too swiftly an already established social integrity (Frank, 1931, p.323). Comfort was not only linked to private feelings but to social habits too. The contrary conditions of both locations render obvious the door's need of being relational to the space in quest, and that the hinge has to consider a larger geographical pattern of domestic and public life.

Corridors

For doors to be of wider communicative relevance, they have to be joined by a "longe Entry through all" (Summerson, 1966). In architecture, the element that has overcome distances and separations evidently is the passage; in our homes duly known as corridor. The closest account of this element as a sign of social integrity—or its opposite—can be read in 'Figures, Doors and Passages', 1978, an essay by the British architect, architectural historian and architectural theorist Robin Evans. By analysing figure-ground relations of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century paintings in Italy, Evans distilled that the social and bodily behaviour of the protagonists possessed reverberations in architectural layouts of said time. Before the middle of the seventeenth century "there is no qualitative distinction between the way through the house and the inhabited spaces within it." (Evans, 1978, p.64) Yet, after this period in time "changes of internal arrangement became very evident." (Evans, 1978, p.70) For Evans, it was of significance that "[e]ntrance hall, grand open stair, passages and back stairs coalesced to form a penetrating network of circulation space which touched every major room in the household." (Evans, 1978, p.70)

Albeit the fact that "thoroughfares were able to draw distant rooms closer," (Evans, 1978, p.79) they first and foremost had to secure that "ordinary servants may never publicly appear in passing to and fro for their occasions there." (Gunther, 1928, p.64) Hence, it can be recognised that the introduction of the corridor at the domestic level, in accordance with the adequately placed door hinge, not only fostered a heightened private life but a deeper division "between the upper and lower ranks of society by maintaining direct sequential access for the privileged family circle while consigning servants to a limited territory always adjacent to, but never within the house proper; where they were always on hand, but never present unless required." (Evans, 1978, p.71) The corridor as much as the door hinge exemplifies the social milieu it is embedded in. It provided efficient exchange and employed alternative realities to both house owners and their servants; one that distinguished between a 'supported, staged life', and a 'rear party'. Since its infancy, the corridor is keeping apart what necessarily is in need of each other.

In the current architectural practice, the increased implementation of unidirectional thoroughfares—apparent in the

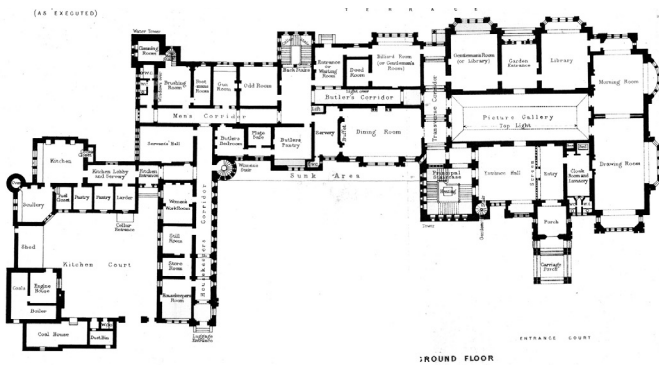


Figure 1. Bearwood House, Ground Floor, 1871, in Robert Kerr, *The Gentlemen's House*

public as much as the private—disengages rooms adjacent to each other. Commonly, the corridor as much as the passage joins spaces far apart at the cost of a bodily matrix of spaces, by repelling physically adjacent localities, and diminishing socially meaningful chance encounters. To bring spaces into a merely functional exchange levels geographically and geometrically distinct locations to numb next-to-each-others. It's neither the arranged proximity within the matrix of rooms, the installing of a heavy door, nor the placement of the household's most offensive activities at the greatest distance—all methods architects such as Alberti heavily relied upon—that brings people together or draws them apart but the strategy of a fully privatised compartmentalisation, coupled with universal accessibility, that provides apparent physical and psychological comfort (Evans, 1978). Occupants of a flat, a house, or an apartment block, citizens on the street, at the mall, and at work, regardless of their social standing, had become nothing but a potential source of disturbance. The corridor "is employed more and more as a preventive measure; an agency for peace, security and segregation which, by its very nature, limits the horizon of experience, reducing daily life to a private shadow-play!" (Evans, 1978, p.89)

Facilitated Communication

As the quest for private space in the nineteenth century had advanced to the new social normality, spatially structuring elements became a means of facilitating communication and reducing incidental contact (Evans, 1978, p.79). Both corridor and passage put together a rational and economic spatial disposition rather than an open and daring superimposition of relations. A corridor performs as the vein and artery of the building, invests in its spatial dynamics, and provides a conduit for people's behaviour (Templer, 1992, p.x). Yet, it usually defies the formation of flourishing encounters; prevents moments of halt and social exchange. In current debates, comments on comfort's conception such as Frank's and Evans's are not evaluated according to their sensitivity but to their rationality.

Comfort in the light of the corridor lost much of its previous historical, social, and spatial charge. It is neither psychologically elaborated nor collectively discussed. Frankly, there has to be a conscious negotiation of the user's genuine needs—which inevitably are different for each one of us (Czech, 2016). Architecture should consider once again to achieve also "an accord about—potentially different—access routes." (Czech, 2016) Even during the seventeenth century, the corridor in Italy was not "an exclusive means of access at this time, but was installed parallel to interconnecting rooms." (Evans, 1978, p.71) While the introduction of the corridor had

to serve social means, interior spaces stayed connected due to reasons of convenience. The plainly connecting corridor of today's time causes space as an entirety to be forgotten; space becomes the blind spot in a scientifically and politically induced world (de Certeau, 1984, p.95).

It took a decisive shift in the corridor's formulation to arrive at the moment of spatial ailment and it will need an equally decisive shift to leave it again. To implement it spatially, stimulative, and socially, while embracing its functionality, approaches a comfort that considers the corridor and its adjacent hinges not as a means of purpose, but life-participating element.

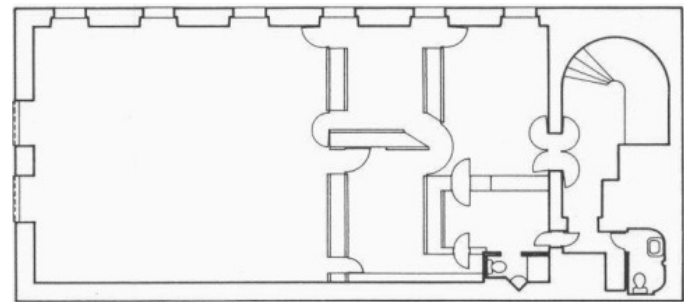


Figure 2. Atelier Singerstrasse, Floor Plan, Hermann Czech, 1989, Courtesy of Hermann Czech

Transgressing Functionality

In another Austrian architect's work, the work by Hermann Czech, also a close follower of Frank, one recognises an additional stimulation on the elements per se. Czech, in his 'Atelier Singerstrasse', 1989, takes the ordinary component of the door and exploits its ambiguous character, fostering a quest that may lead us to the door's latent potential for collective life. Due to its ambivalence, Czech reminds us of Michel de Certeau's door-related logic of ambiguity: "It turns the frontier into a crossing, and the river into a bridge. It recounts inversions and displacements: the door that closes is precisely what may be opened; ... [it] is ambiguous everywhere: it alternately welds together and opposes insularities. It distinguishes them and threatens them. It liberates from enclosure and destroys autonomy. Thus, for example, it occurs as a central and ambivalent character." (de Certeau, 1984, p.128)

Czech's characteristic door is an intervention that points towards the door as a theoretical and practical problem and the possibility in shift from a private to a collective comfort. His ambiguous one-hinge but double jamb leg—analogue to Marcel Duchamp's 'Door, 11 rue Larrey', 1927—explores the dialectic nature of the element. It is neither open nor closed but regularly both and therefore challenges the user mentally as well as bodily. It serves two thresholds and three rooms at once; it is not only functional; it exceeds functionality; it possesses concision and a gesture of economy. The door creates through the act of elimination. Yet its arising ambiguity through the opportunity to close, despite its impossibility to shut, recalls an inexactitude Czech so often refers to. The door at Atelier Singerstrasse achieves this effect by the most traditional of means. It attains through the conventional a rejection of a simple, clean-cut solution and seeks in the door an index of reality (Naegele, 2006, p.6).

Czech's decision is a conscious negotiation that at once serves and challenges a multitude of comforts. In fact, due to the dual nature of the door, the adjacent spaces are either closed chambers or openly connected rooms. The employed gesture generates a dependency between spaces and renders the introduction of a proper corridor fruitless. Although the primary intention is to save space otherwise obstructed, spatial practices of sixteenth-century Italy are latently present. One only has to think of 'Villa Madama' by Raphael and Antonio da Sangallo, or 'Palazzo Antonini' by Andrea Palladio. The interconnected spaces foster a carnal and bodily behaviour, facilitating uncontrolled communication and allowing incidental encounters. The atelier appears as a matrix of connected rooms that "recognizes the body as the person, and in which gregariousness is habitual." (Evans, 1978, p.88) It operates according to a collective understanding of space that since the nineteenth century is considered a fault; mainly because in thoroughfare rooms privacy and retirement—therefore also comfort—are apparently unobtainable (Evans, 1978, p.63). Czech's intervention allows one closed room at every given time while the remaining atelier performs as one big open-plan office (Czech, 2020). It values comfort on terms that prefer the commingling of users to their increasing distancing. Interrelated spaces seek company as much as solitude as a meaningful human condition. Conjoining the advantages of both closed-up spaces and intensely exchanged rooms, the single-hinge but double-frame door aims for an intimacy experienced by a collective.

Collectivising Comfort

If we want to seek a more robust positioning of architecture concerning a caring and inclusive built environment, we have to grasp the ordinary element's potential and understand "architecture's instrumental role in the formation of everyday events." (Evans, 1978, p.89) Does one render our current social proclamations for equality, gender neutrality and openness as impulses for revised architectural layouts yet to come, inclusive spaces might be achieved through the thoughtful and considerate formulation of hinges and passages. Not facing the problematics in plain sight from a spatially concrete point of view, would identify us as moral apostles rather than ethical human beings. Comfort, as much as it is about physical indulgences today, has to be considered as a body and mind in movement always in close relation to our fellow human beings and the immediate environment. Basic architectural elements enable closeness among family members, bonds between roommates, and healthy exchange among neighbours. Their formation leads to a respectable togetherness,

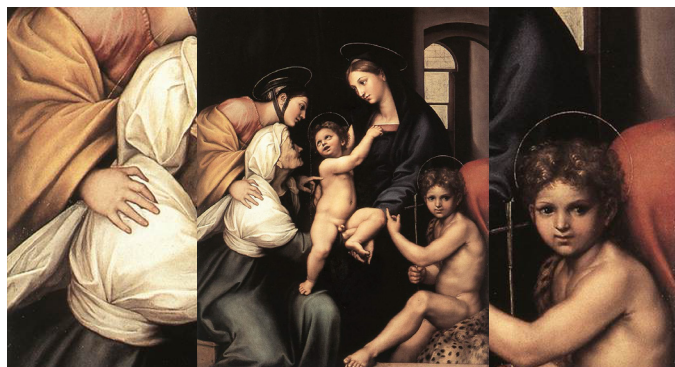


Figure 3. Madonna dell'Impannata, Raphael, 1513, Credit Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence

meaningful conviviality, and an expanded horizon of experience. Both the hinge as well as the passage demonstrate an opportuneness in reinstating concurrent moments of privacy and security, as well as collectivity and community.

However, as long as the social and ecological aspects of today's architecture are more concerned with the fabrication of buildings than their spatial structures, achieving accordance about a collective comfort will be difficult. In today's practice, moral demands exert pressure on the social justices of architecture's planning but in its realisation "the body had been abandoned to lassitude." (Evans, 1978, p.82) Another drawback of the current architectural practice is that the door and the passageway, combined with today's advent of technology, form an unbearable simultaneity of hyper-connectedness and bold separations. The latest developments towards a private life while being permanently virtually connected magnified "the value of objects and diminish[ed] carnality, till the body appeared as little more than a heavy shadow of the spirit." (Evans, 1978, p.83)

Conclusion

The questions stubbornly recurring are: Do we really find comfort in the escape from the pressures of society; seeking retreat in the private instead of the public? Or might there linger such a thing as an architecture propelled by the deep fascination that draws people towards each other again; an architecture that recognises passion, carnality and sociality? Fact is, both the door hinge and the passageway bear latent potential for change. The door is a relational double register, and the corridor a servant of performed life. Comfort is gliding from one place to the other, enhancing the movement from one space to another, strengthening the interhuman relation actively and considering exchange productively. Comfort is as much a matter of movement as it is actively situated within that movement. It employs space in time, as it produces a local condensation in a spatial continuum. Comfort arises if one is bodily and mentally intimate with the spatial practices of daily life. Evoking such spatial intimacy presupposes an architecture that is spatially negotiated rather than theoretically or factually predefined. It valorises the concrete architectural gesture. Our architectural surrounding interlaces physical and emotional realities with economic structures, functional demands, cultural fabrics, and social systems.

Aiming for comfort means seeking general productivity for "future life and its striving, its wooing and desiring." (Loos, 1900) As much as architecture is the fight for space and time, comfort is the endeavour to lend collective life liveability. Dwelling on the simple, clean-cut architectural element aims for both.

For our beloved future, it is clear that comfort emerges if the spatial events produced by the door hinge and the passageway operate consciously in its double register: attuned to a particular privacy, yet, relational to a distinct community.

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