

Prison of comfort : a conversation with Aristide Antonas

Autor(en): **Schweizer, Jan**

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PRISON OF COMFORT

A Conversation with
Aristide Antonas

Jan Schweizer

Aristide Antonas' work looks at infrastructure from a position which brings together architectural and philosophical traditions. In this interview with him we discussed what it might mean to live within the infrastructure and reflected on inherent forms of comfort.

- JS With the pandemic our use of videotelephony has dramatically increased. It can already be said that this new normality of telepresence will, at least in fragments, outlast the ease of restrictions. This condition of observing while being observed of the recurring videotelephony-meetings reminds me of Bentham's Panopticon about which Foucault writes: «it's a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised». Do you think there is a danger of the infrastructure being misused by power and do you have an idea about how one could resist?
- AA The infrastructure we are dealing with can never be emancipated. This is already a characteristic on which we can focus. Unconscious mechanisms substitute conscious decisions in the infrastructure. A democratic use of the infrastructure could then only be based on conscious decisions that would precede that automatic unconscious use. This fact institutes a bifurcation in the temporal definition of automation. Decisions precede the automatic function of the infrastructure. Thinking about automation can only happen out of the automation's field as a control or a vigilance which always remains exterior to it; there can be no thought in the infrastructure per se since automation is meant to perform without thinking. The use of infrastructure by any power can be then combined with this characteristic of the infrastructure as hiding the operating subject. Resisting this type of use of the infrastructure has to do with an act of uncovering the logic of automatism. But this is often a complicated demarche. In a sense, the infrastructure hides a meta-colonial project which leads to the occupation of human time. We tend to forget that we increasingly perform inside its realm. Resisting this project is often related to a pre-modern conservatism or to an archaic nostalgia.
- JS The notion of withdrawal as the new normality has been subject to many of your projects. One elaboration is the «house for doing nothing» which you designed in response to Žižek.
- AA Now even more familiar, his house is equipped with screens and recording devices making it both a transmitter and receiver. Another key object is the bed like a horizontal baseline. Would you call comfort a premise for this luxury prison?
- AA Comfort is here understood as the crucial element leading to this speculative type of withdrawal. We can be incarcerated due to our addiction to comfort. The less space is needed to produce a comfortable effect—the more a comfortable condition becomes related to a certain type of voluntary incarceration in the world of infrastructure.
- JS McLuhan wrote in 1960: «The CITY no longer exists, except as a cultural ghost for tourists. Any highway eatery with its TV set, newspaper, and magazine is as cosmopolitan as New York or Paris. The PEASANT was always a suburban parasite. The farmer no longer exists; today he is a «city» man». In your recent studio «Athens Derelict Plug-In» at the ETH Zurich you examined downtown Athens. The premise of the studio was to look at recently abandoned houses, now partially inhabited by «users of the common internet infrastructure» and supplied by «peripheral warehouses and ghost kitchens». You are recalling the notion of the ghost. In which way can we take Athens as a case study for examining current tendencies?
- AA Thank you for this fragment by McLuhan. He early understood the condition of an end of the countryside, due not so much to an extension of the city, as was the case with Doxiadis' Ecomenoupolis, but structurally; from the point of view of the inhabitant. Neither of the two drove their remarks so far as to discuss the new type of financial colonization, via the infrastructure, which was not so much visible then. This «city» man drove this type of globalisation of the market. And the «city» man became the indebted man; allowed to feel a fake freedom via the automation of the infrastructure. The indebted man is chained to the internet. Athens entered a phase of involuntary withdrawal and a certain control of its inhabitants via the use of the internet earlier, namely

in the phase of the debt attack on Greece more than 10 years ago. More controlled bankruptcies globally and the pandemic have increased the drive towards an obligatory return to the cell and to politics of isolation. A repertoire of slow violence exercised against everyone in order that they accept withdrawal is deployed. Athens is still an example of this excess, after it suffered the result of a debt war. It had an early experience of what we see now in the world as a necessity of a life in the infrastructure, where the traditional space of the city is collapsing. The public sphere performs via the web. Debt and the pandemic accelerated this form of life, increasingly independent of common spaces, in the realm of an omnipotent network infrastructure. «Withdrawal as a necessity» substituted a city life of debt before being the obligatory answer to the pandemic. But the pandemic deepens the debt crisis while producing the necessity of withdrawal. And «withdrawal as necessity» is only possible in the realm of infrastructure. An abstract relation to debt becomes definitive and material in this specific form of life; isolated residency via the infrastructure.

JS The reading of Athens you have been investigating with the students is stretched between an air of «cell» and «back», the warehouses et cetera. Being connected with the web the cell offers the comfort of combining an actual immobility of the body with a virtual mobility. Could you speak how the cell metaphorically resembles a cockpit performing a virtual flight over the warehouse?

AA No matter how many screens each of us use, they organise a single position in front of a personal cockpit dealing with the infrastructure world. This imaginary cockpit replaces traditional abstract identities while the cell of retreat, an extended bed, becomes the body of this cockpit. We can't move without this stable construction which accurately represents ourselves and our specific understanding of a community. We carry data that identify us. The infrastructure directs this data collection we build in relation to protocols and creates pattern-like categories for the market. This became the main role of the existence of infrastructure; to create value and capitalize identities and communities. A new relation to the material world is tamed. Objects become sets of represented elements to choose from and ask from courier services to bring them over to maximum isolated realms. In this sense the inhabitants of isolated cells overlook the warehouse you mention as hunters of an always already represented world. They hunt shadows of objects visible in cockpits. And the

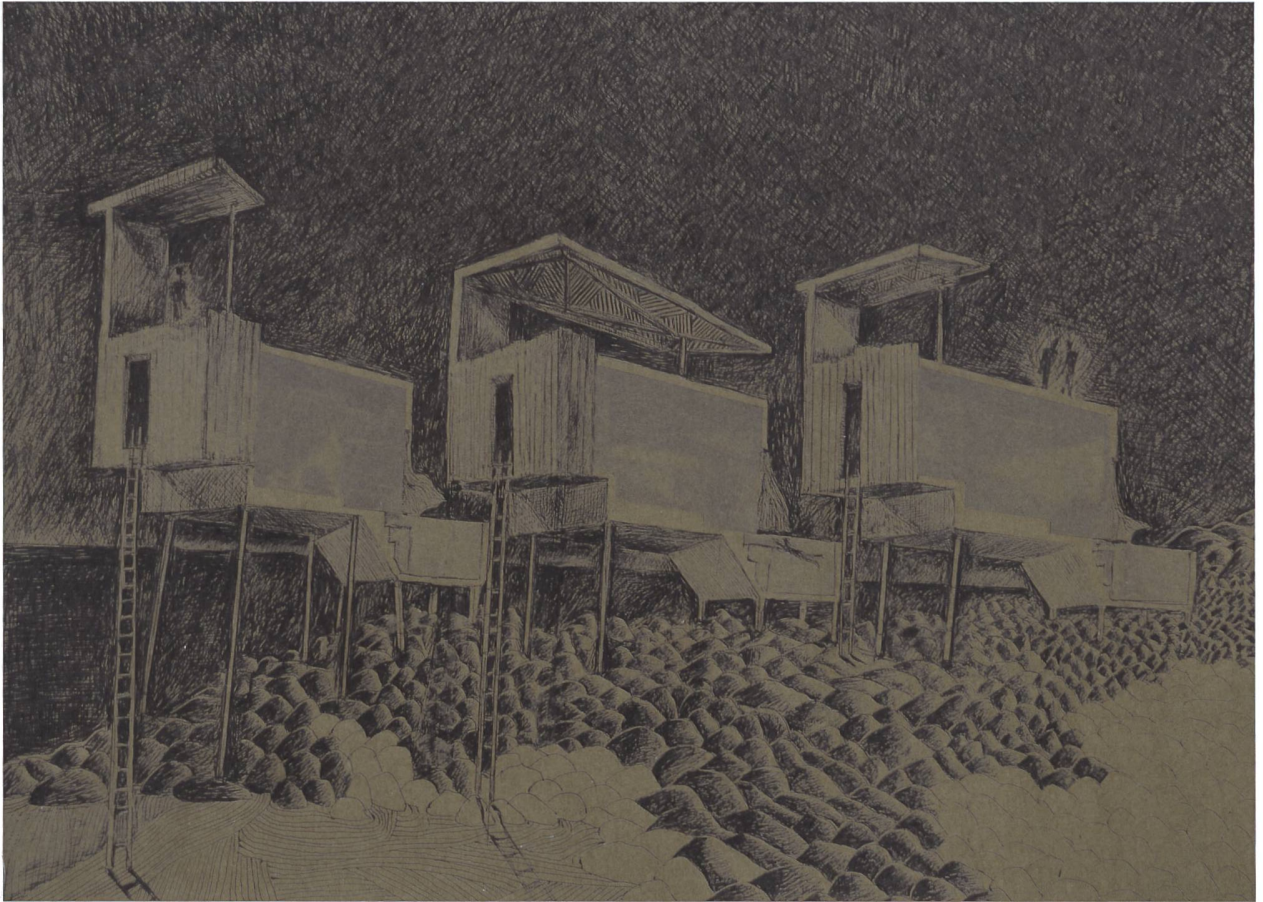
objects—in their «real versions»—move to them while they stay immobile.

JS Can you speak about both the cell and the back in relation to the traditional categories of exterior and interior?

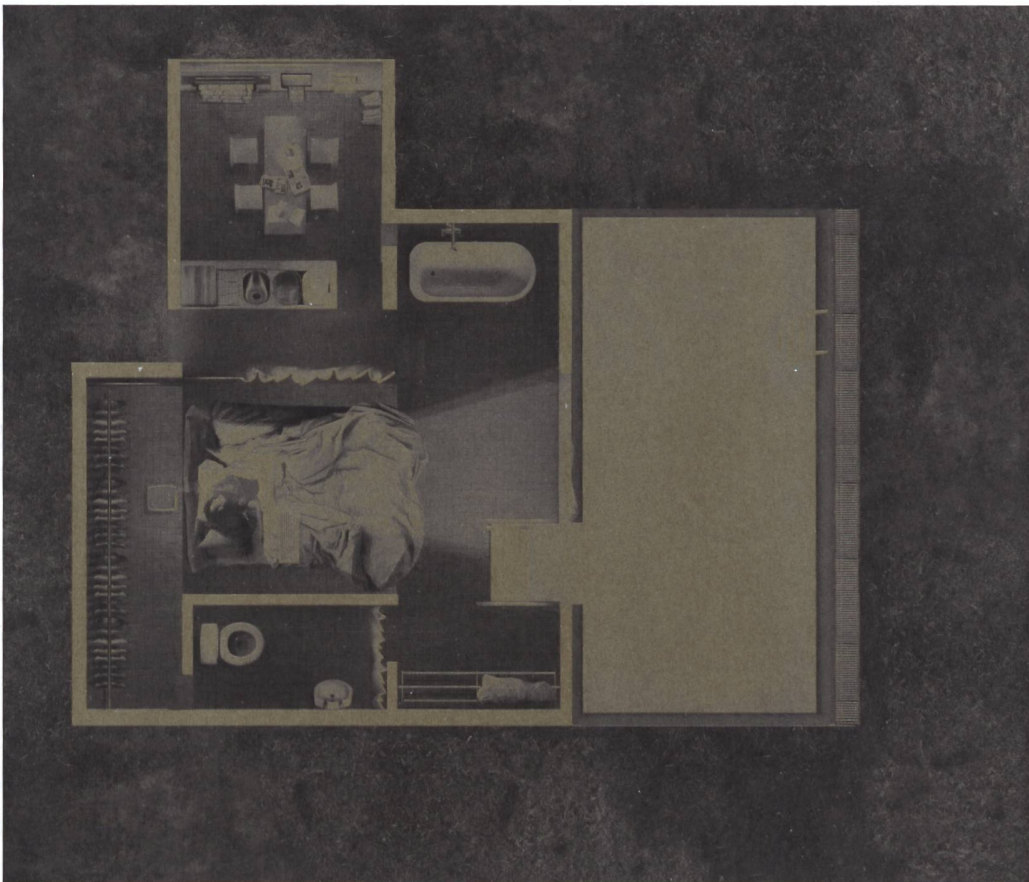
AA This is not easy since the «cell» and its «back» together form a new version of the «interior world of capital» Sloterdijk was speaking about some decades ago. The cell and the back form as a diptych an even more condensed paradigm of an isolated sphere; they do it in a different way. For Sloterdijk the emblematic building for describing the birth of the interior world of capital was the crystal palace, announcing the condensation of a city experience under the same roof; in a single experience we could perform together a fiction resembling a city life. Well, with my work I describe what happens after this; when this common roof isn't needed any more, when the domestication of this common roof erases this meeting setting, when the common roof doesn't seem necessary any more due to a definitive change of scale. The interior world of capital is described by us, flying over an imaginary, endless warehouse. The «cell» and the «back» serve to shape this flight, organizing its interface. The study for the Žižek house I did, provide in my mind a replacement of the crystal palace rationale; the house for Žižek completes an image of an interiority for a fake autonomy; all of us can feel this fake autonomy while enclosed in isolated rooms. The traditional categories of interior and exterior now take on a perverse class meaning. The «back of the cell» and more accurately the services operated by real people in order to maintain this autonomy of the enclosed cell, describes a new working class. The production of goods is accompanied by a growing logistics system for storing and referencing products; a library of all these products forms a catalogue one can use to represent one's own trip around the world as a flight over a warehouse. And a courier service for delivering the things, found in the warehouse, to the «cell», completes a schematic representation of the type of isolation constructed by this cell. The cell exists because it is maintained by an exterior operated by working people. So interior and exterior becomes a new description of lordship and bondage; but when we go closer we find out that lordship is a chosen illusion and bondage is a shared condition.

JS In your short text «fake interior folds» you further discuss tricks the infrastructure utilizes to create a comforting disguise of one's imprisonment. You refer to Plato's cave. Escape

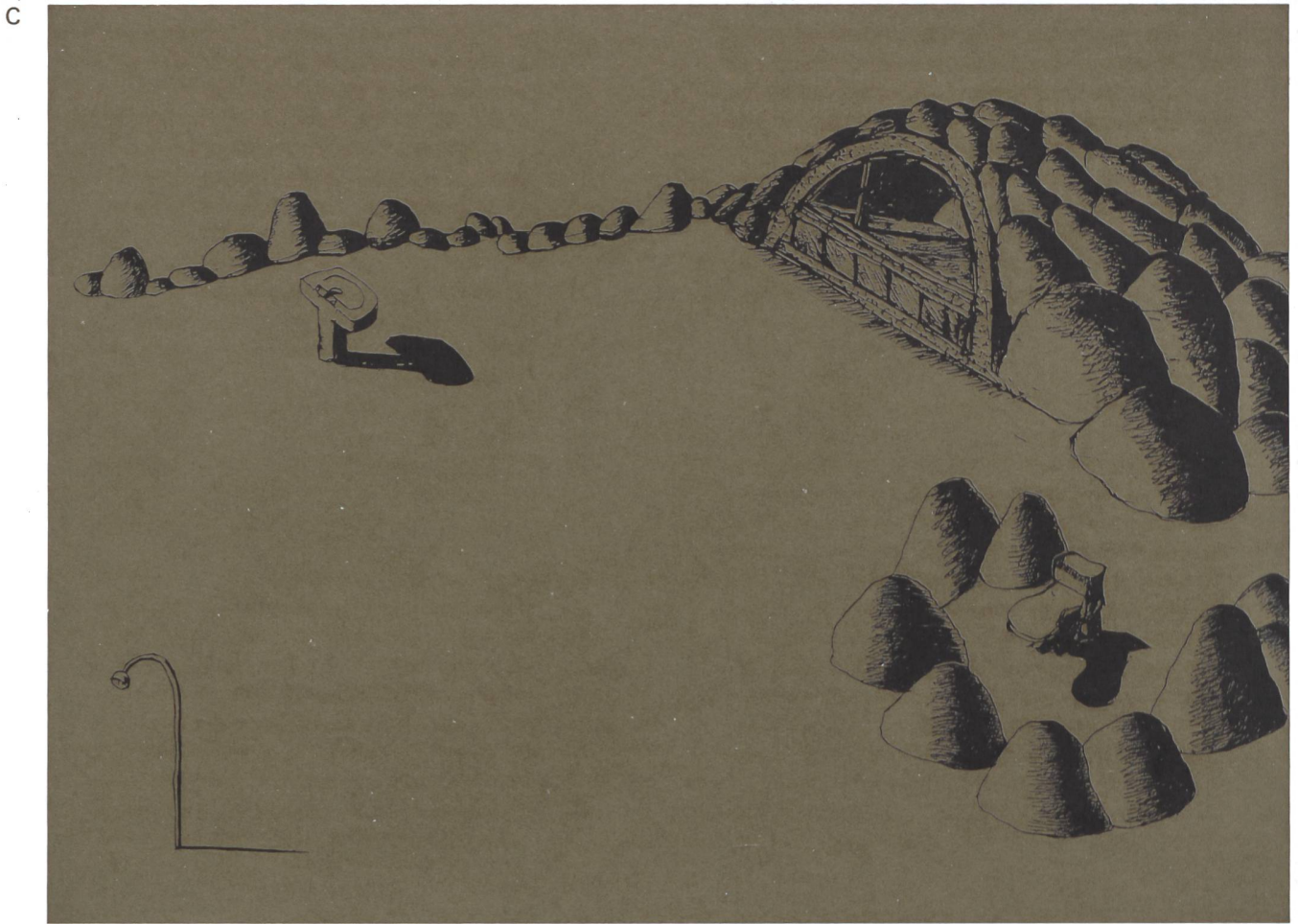
A



B



A Aristide Antonas, Three Houses for Doing Nothing, 2013. Image: courtesy of Krings-Ernst Galerie
B Aristide Antonas, Responsible House, The night plan, 2013



C Concrete Bed with Horizontal Plateau, 2004

D Aristide Antonas, Concrete Bed on an Oswald Spengler Island, 2015, detail.

from the fake depends here on the option of an exterior. Today you propose that one lives in a cave without an exterior: «a domesticated ever-prison is a clear description of the everyday in which the home supplies us with fake exterior folds to visit.» I would like to ask what kind of interfaces are you referring to and what does fake and real mean in regard to them?

AA I refer to a domestic phantasmagoria meant to replace the urban one; domestic phantasmagoria could be another name for an ever-prison chosen—by necessity or by conviction. There is a clear change in the structure of spectacle. The spectacle doesn't happen any more as a common process where people sit in parallel and experience the same visual effect. Today's spectacle is to be experienced by one human alone in front of one screen. It takes place as a quick decision after a short search. We ask for what we see. This can give an answer to why the TV setting in a house has become so obsolete—it doesn't correspond to this type of a personal cockpit view. This is also why today's «fake» isn't a scandal. It is the chosen part of reality. Fake is the mirror where we see ourselves before becoming an erroneous representation of reality. We are more fake than the reality. The new back of the house, this space I describe as a warehouse, is still a pragmatic world functioning with the traditional terms of material labour in a growing immaterial world. The «cell» and the «back of the cell» are parts of the same interior but they show the hierarchy in it. «Interface» we could call the condition of forgetting and the specific choice we make in order to avoid the reality of the warehouse. The loss of the reality of the warehouse leads us also to a loss of the reality of things. It also renders invisible the reality of labour needed for the warehouse services to perform. Real and fake describe different positions of people in the warehouse. Operating in it materially or over-viewing it as a representation gives us a first idea of the contemporary updated distinction between real and fake.

JS Within this steady exposure a real withdrawal might be desirable. With «Shelters of Spengler» you seem to have thought about a set-up which suggests a retreat in the form of a hermit cave or island resort. But actually, one just faces a fake nature hiding all technical installations, another interface. Can we understand this project as an image of a paradise, a world before the infrastructure as an ideal which one wishes but can't return to?

AA Shelters of Spengler represents a thought about nature understood as a scenography. The ideal of nature is related to a human understanding

of it, namely to a transformation of nature to a human garden. Even in the more sophisticated positions about post-humanism, and even in regarding the anthropogenic, humans necessarily remain at the centre of the image since all of this discourse is human-addressed, to humans, even if it tries to serve general concepts such as «the animal» or «earth». The Shelters of Spengler re-elaborate some thoughts from the concrete beds projects. I don't refer to paradise; I again try to show the fake character of the installation and the character of the artificiality where a natural setting is announced. It is a return to the cave through infrastructure.

JS If a return to a nature before the infrastructure is impossible, would it not be the best to become even more artificial? Have you ever thought about the necessity of a new kind of poetry?

AA I am sometimes exaggerating a common wish to show the poison it includes. This is a common way I construct architectural products. Making a wish concrete in an absolute way leads us very close to a nightmare. Some of my works are best understood as counter projects. They are problematic while they can seem to serve the imaginary of a majority of people. Maybe this balance between announcing the problematic and showing it as a solution is what you name «new kind of poetry». The practical question you pose is serious. Artificiality is a necessity for every human act. We only work with it. There is no natural human activity. The human is artificial, constructed, cultivated; even love and death are exceptional human concepts that structure artificial worlds. With this acceptance we can reposition the question, which will now have to deal with two different things; the first is the importance of the consciousness of artificiality. What we consider as natural isn't. Furthermore, we can't scale artificiality, we can't conceive what would be the meaning of more or less artificial. All is artificial; if not, we fall into involuntary idealizations; let's stop worshipping a non-existing nature. Nature is a human concept. But a consciousness of this absolute artificiality of humans can lead to different strategies. Accepting the given of artificiality does help humans to position themselves, but only because it makes things more uncertain. Yet awareness of artificiality opens up a field of investigation about the construction of definitions and the actions that follow them. The second point refers to the concepts we use to describe what is a human environment. And what kind of meaning we give to the concept of respect to an environment; there is a need of definitions in order to organise a set of strategic objectives. In this sense your question leads to a horizon of the most

appropriate artificiality. The quest for a realistic political setting will have to refer to this scenography. With a lost natural factor our judgement has to be based on different types of strategies; saving nature has become a paralyzing mega-project; there is a need not only of scaling it down but also orienting it to some scientific frame pushing towards action. A theatre of repair has to be inaugurated for a possible set of projects of different scales. Beside the fact that a different poetic production is envisioned, human strategies of action will have to invoke and organise new hierarchies of tasks and new operational scenographies.

JS You made the remark that a consciousness of an absolute artificiality of humans can lead to different strategies—but yet it doesn't give any clues for definitions or actions. Can you elaborate on this?

AA An absolute artificiality does not disregard the concepts of nature even if they are consciously constructed. We would need to go deeper into different parameters in order to judge the value of definitions; we would need to think about strategies for faking nature in the best way. Never «save nature», humans are not able to save nature; nature will by definition always be saved. What wouldn't help is the simplicity of the leitmotiv «save the nature» and the supremacy of nature as a theological entity. We need a different conceptualization of artificiality in this new context, while we can't claim the return to any natural order. Humans are idealizing a scenography of nature as the opposite of their urban culture. But it is not like this; nature is no more the opposite of culture, it became a part of human culture. And now humans need fake an erasure of the human in a theatre setting that represents «nature». Humans need to decide about things that are not understandable for most of us. It seems impossible to operate without a new aristocracy of knowledge. Urgency creates a «military operation» condition. It seems we need commanders to decide in our place without really understanding the content and efficacy of the processes they propose. It is scary that this situation becomes normalized and opens a bad epoch for democracy. I draw

this abandoned post-western man in this setting of being unroofed and performing in front of interfaces in the Shelters of Spengler.

JS I would like to return to the notion of exterior. Would you still try to find an ideal in an exterior, a real withdrawal?

AA We don't need an exterior to inhabit but an exterior which provides a view of where we already are. We can't mirror ourselves without any concrete sense of exteriority. To question an environment is equivalent to placing ourselves out of its setting; but establishing an exterior point of view becomes increasingly difficult. Vigilance too depends on a distance from the phenomena one observes. To position ourselves outside this world we created—but not in order to withdraw—would seem more promising. In order to be able to understand what we can do about where we withdrew from. Strangely, but immediately, this does not imply a strategy of direct actions but an archaeology of the exterior.

JS Might then a construction of an exterior allow a critique of comfort which you named «the key element leading to withdrawal»?

AA Comfort names the «unquestionable» in a frame of life setting. The character of a comfortable space does not trigger questions and does not allow promises for exteriors. The self-sufficiency of a comfortable space has reached a level where an absolute small-scale interiority is glorified as autonomous. Emblematic becomes the door to the bathroom: a necessary exit to the technical reality of the body—and the positions offered before screens. In this sense we could say that attoday comfort resembles a drug of inhabiting; inhabitation through this relation to comfort has become a set of abstract windows. Constructing exteriors is a noble task to be undertaken but it is also the main function of this infrastructure; its created windows keep offering views to constructed exteriors. Again, for me the answer is not related to what we are supposed to construct but how we can do it. We don't need an answer here but an architecture.

This interview is a written dialogue taken down on Google Docs in summer 2021.

Aristide Antonas, born 1963 in Athens, is an architect, philosopher and writer and visual artist. His principal topics of interest are «protocols as architecture», «infrastructure of the domestic sphere», «stability from the exaggeration of data flow»; texts combined with traditional design techniques often use references to legislation and archaeology. Aristide has been a visiting lecturer at The Bartlett UCL, the Architectural Association, the ETH Zurich and the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

Jan Schweizer, born 1992 in Düsseldorf, is currently a student at the Master's programme of architecture at ETH Zurich.