

Dis/Comfort

Rethinking Comfort Through Intentional Discomfort in Architecture

Federica Formosa

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(Architectural Design).

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I take full responsibility for any shortcomings in this dissertation.

"Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable."

Cesar Chavez

ABSTRACT

This dissertation interrogates the relationship between comfort and discomfort in architectural design, challenging the assumption that comfort is inherently desirable or ideologically neutral. Framed as an interpretive, qualitative, and subjective study, it draws on theoretical critique and focus group discussions to explore how design not only responds to human needs but actively scripts behaviour, emotion, and experience. Rather than asking what makes a space comfortable, the research asks: what does comfort conceal, and what might discomfort offer?

Dis | comfort is examined not as a binary but as a relational spectrum, emotional, embodied, and deeply contextual. It explores states of being comfortably uncomfortable, embracing controlled friction to heighten presence, and uncomfortably comfortable, feeling pacified or numb in spaces designed to please.

The theoretical study traces how modernist ideals of “Good Design” promoted standardised, sanitised environments that prioritised efficiency over complexity, often dulling emotional and sensory engagement. This logic found its most intimate expression in the hyper-domestic, where the spaces we inhabit daily become sites of over-protection and concealment from reality.

Conversely, discomfort emerges as a site of resistance, agency, and reawakening. The study explores how discomfort, when consciously navigated or designed, can provoke deeper connection to space and experience. This work proposes dis | comfort not as an error to fix, but as a method, a way of rethinking architecture through subjectivity, sensation, and the rituals of everyday life. Ultimately, it invites a reframing of spatial experience, prioritising lived experience over passive existence. .

Keywords: *Dis|comfort • Hyper-domesticity • Anesthetic • Resistance*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS			v
ABSTRACT			ix
TABLE OF CONTENTS			x
LIST OF FIGURES			xii
01.	INTRODUCTION	1.1 FRUSTRATIONS & MOTIVATION	003
		1.2 BACKGROUND & CONTEXT	004
		1.3 CURIOSITIES	005
		1.4 OBJECTIVES	005
		1.5 METHODOLOGY	006
		1.6 STRUCTURE	007
02.	LITERATURE REVIEW	2.1 INTRODUCTION	012
		2.2 THE DISCOMFORT OF COMFORT	013
		2.3 THE COMFORT OF DISCOMFORT	026
03.	METHODOLOGY	3.1 INTRODUCTION	037
		3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN	038
		3.3 RELIABILITY & VALIDITY	045
		3.4 CONCLUSION	047

04.	RESULTS	4.1	INTRODUCTION	052
		4.2	EMERGING THEMES	053
		4.3	SITUATING DIS COMFORT	055
		4.4	UNDERSTANDING DIS COMFORT	065
		4.5	NEGOTIATING DIS COMFORT	080
		4.6	LET ME BE UN COMFORTABLE	087
05.	UN CONCLUDED	5.1	SUMMARISING DIS COMFORT	091
		5.2	REDEFINING DIS COMFORT	093
		5.3	LIMITATIONS	094
		5.4	TO BE CONTINUED	094
			PERSONAL CONCLUSION	096
BIBLIOGRAPHY				098
APPENDICES				
		A	INFORMATION LETTER	107
		B	CONSENT FORM	111
		C	PARTICIPANT SKETCHES	113
		D	FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION	130
		E	FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPTS	133

LIST OF FIGURES

Unless stated otherwise, all photographs, diagrams, and illustrations belong to the author.

Figure 1: Dissertation Structure.....	8
Figure 2 : Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, Paris, Le Corbusier. 1925.....	15
Figure 3 : Exhibition "Good Design", The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1950 – 1951.....	17
Figure 4 : Exhibition "Useful Objects", The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1946.....	18
Figure 5: "House of the Future", Alison & Peter Smithson, 1956.....	22
Figure 6: Sink at Villa Savoye, Le Corbusier.....	24
Figure 7: Eero Saarinen seated in a Womb Chair, 1950.....	28
Figure 8: "Bioscleve House", Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins, 2008.....	34
Figure 9 : Contextualising the Study.....	40
Figure 10 : Focus Group Structure.....	42
Figure 11 : Methodology.....	48
Figure 12: Insomnia, Jeff Wall, 1994.....	58
Figure 13 : Installation "Premium Economy", Anna Uddenberg, Kunsthalle Mannheim, 2023.....	64
Figure 14 : Tan-Nanna Helu Manna, 2002.....	68
Figure 15: "Untitled (Domestic)," Rachel Whiteread, 2006.....	70
Figure 16 : "The Subway," George Tooker, 1950.....	72
Figure 17: "En premiär," Anders Zorn, 1888, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Sweden.....	74
Figure 18: "Cookie and Millie in the girls' room at the Mudd Club, NYC.....	76
Figure 19: Soldiers swim in Roman baths at Gafsa, Elisofon.....	78
Figure 20: "Rhythm 0, Marina Abramović, Studio Mona, Naples, 1974.....	82
Figure 30: "Enthusiast" ('The Gouty Angler'), Theodore Lane, 1828.....	85
Figure 31: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 1, 2025.....	114
Figure 32: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 1, 2025.....	114
Figure 33: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 2, 2025.....	115
Figure 34: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 2, 2025.....	115
Figure 35: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 3, 2025.....	116

Figure 36: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 4, 2025.....	117
Figure 37: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 4, 2025.....	117
Figure 38: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 5, 2025.....	118
Figure 39: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 5, 2025.....	118
Figure 40: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 6, 2025.....	119
Figure 41: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 7, 2025.....	120
Figure 42: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 7, 2025.....	120
Figure 43: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 8, 2025.....	121
Figure 44: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 8, 2025.....	121
Figure 45: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 9, 2025.....	122
Figure 46: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 9, 2025.....	122
Figure 47: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 10, 2025.....	123
Figure 48: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 10, 2025.....	123
Figure 49: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 11, 2025.....	124
Figure 50: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 11, 2025.....	124
Figure 51: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 12, 2025.....	125
Figure 52: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 12, 2025.....	125
Figure 53: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 13, 2025.....	126
Figure 54: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 13, 2025.....	126
Figure 55: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 14, 2025.....	127
Figure 56: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 14, 2025.....	127
Figure 57: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 15, 2025.....	128
Figure 58: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 15, 2025.....	128
Figure 59: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 16, 2025.....	129
Figure 60: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 16, 2025.....	129

01. INTRODUCTION

1.1		FRUSTRATIONS & MOTIVATIONS
1.2		BACKGROUND & CONTEXT
1.3		CURIOSITIES
1.4		OBJECTIVES
1.5		STRUCTURE

1.1

FRUSTRATIONS & MOTIVATION

The curiosities explored throughout this dissertation started three years ago during a site visit. I remember sitting in the dirt with my classmates, swatting away flies and complaining about the heat. We spoke as if nature had wronged us. But that day, those same complaints inspired curiosities that I have since attempted to understand. What if we are the ones making nature uncomfortable?

We treat discomfort as something to avoid. But our bodies were made to handle it. Rough textures, changes in temperature, the unpredictable, the beauty of vulnerability. These are not threats, they are part of being human. Yet, throughout the years discussions have shifted priority to efficiency over being human. We celebrate homes that ask little of us, as though hyper-comfort is the only benchmark. We are taught to desire fewer stairs, more automation, blackout curtains, larger beds. These are not luxuries anymore, they have become defaults. The brief has shifted. Design now means reduction. Less friction. Less process. Less effort. Less living. More existing.

Since that site visit I have found myself exploring structures that deliberately resisted ease. Spaces that require conscious living, that expose you to the elements, that encourage you to interact, that create small, purposeful inconveniences. What happens when architecture does not soothe, but disrupts? Why does ease always win?

I am not against comfort. There is value in the rituals we build around it, but I keep returning to the same question: Whose rituals are we performing? Are they truly ours, or have we inherited a template and stopped asking why?

Still, I catch myself leaning into convenience. I have internalised the same logic I now find myself questioning. I write this dissertation at my desk, surrounded by five whitewashed walls and a textureless, tiled floor, uncomfortable in a space I once believed to be an example of 'good design'. Even in my own home, I catch myself asking these same questions.

This dissertation is my attempt to unpack that logic. What happens when we design for maximum ease? What gets lost when every minor disruption is erased? I suspect the cost is more than we realise. We lose texture, yes, but also attention, presence, and opportunities to evolve. We start mistaking comfort for happiness. And we forget that some forms of discomfort are not only tolerable, but necessary.

So this begins with frustration, but also with a question: What else might design do, if we stopped trying so hard to make it comfortable?

1.2

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Comfort is commonly defined as a state of physical ease or freedom from pain (Clark & Freeman, 2000). Yet such definitions reduce comfort to a neutral baseline, overlooking the socio-cultural and political processes through which it is constructed. Design not only responds to the needs of the body but also actively produces those needs through material and spatial systems (Colomina & Wigley, 2016). Similarly, terms like “comfortable” and “relaxing” are questioned, emphasising that such descriptors are “socially constructed,” their meanings shaped by “the values held by the society that produces and receives material culture” (Schuldenfrei, 2012, p. 11).

Comfort is therefore not merely experienced; it is designed. It is embedded in the formal and spatial logics of architecture, shaped by cultural norms and ideologies that determine which bodies are protected, which behaviours are encouraged, and which sensations are excluded (Andino & Andino, 2021). “Design isn’t some magic box. It’s a series of functional and aesthetic choices”, choices that are rarely neutral (Roosen, 2024, n.p.). Every design gesture carries affective and political weight, shaping not only experience but expectation, governing how bodies move, behave, and feel (Colomina & Wigley, 2016).

“The history of design is therefore a history of evolving conceptions of the human”. Human bodies are marked by “diversity and plasticity.” Yet, designed environments are calibrated to the average, the normative, and the predictable; what is considered comfortable reflects assumptions about the ideal user. Consequently, what is comfortable for some becomes alienating for others (Colomina & Wigley, 2016, p. 9).

In this context, discomfort can challenge the normative smoothness and ideologies embedded in spatial arrangements. As such, discomfort may be understood not simply as the opposite of comfort, but as a condition that invites re-engagement with the dimensions of design (Roosen, 2024), treating it simultaneously as a form of critique and as a tool for expanding the possibilities of spatial experience.

1.3 CURIOSITIES

This dissertation is guided by the following curiosities:

How do individuals experience and interpret discomfort within everyday spaces, and what can this reveal about the emotional and cultural dimensions of design?

What is lost when comfort is prioritised as the dominant architectural value?

Can discomfort be used intentionally to provoke more meaningful forms of inhabitation? How can this be achieved?

1.4 OBJECTIVES

This dissertation aims to:

Examine the increasing prioritisation of ease, efficiency, and hyper-comfort in architectural discourse and practice.

Critique how comfort is spatially constructed, culturally embedded, and often internalised without reflection.

Open new ways of thinking about design, beyond convention and optimisation, by reconsidering the intangible dimensions of dis | comfort.

Explore the potential of discomfort as a design strategy, to provoke more active, conscious forms of inhabitation.

Inspire further curiosity on the comfort of discomfort.

1.5

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, exploratory approach rooted in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Rather than seeking measurable outcomes, the study prioritises subjectivity, focusing on how individuals experience, interpret, and articulate comfort and discomfort within everyday spaces. Emphasis is placed on emotional, psychological, and sensory responses, those aspects of design that are often overlooked or treated as secondary.

Two focus groups were conducted with architectural design students, chosen for their familiarity with spatial discourse and ability to reflect critically on lived experience. Participants engaged in semi-structured discussions and completed visual exercises before and after the conversation, sketching both an ideal comfortable bathroom and an intentionally uncomfortable one. These activities encouraged personal reflection and highlighted shifts in perception prompted by collective dialogue.

Data was analysed thematically, with particular attention to recurring patterns, tensions, and affective responses. The methodology foregrounds the intangible dimensions of spatial experience, aiming to uncover how design can shape not only behaviour but awareness, memory, and meaning. By centering subjective experience, the research offers insight into how discomfort might be consciously designed, and consciously lived with.

1.6 **STRUCTURE**

01. | INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the dissertation, outlines the central questions and intentions, and sets the tone for the explorations that follow.

02. | LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter situates the concepts of comfort and discomfort within a theoretical framework. It begins by examining the cultural and architectural glorification of comfort, uncovering the ideologies that underpin it. This is followed by a critique of comfort as a design imperative and an exploration of discomfort as a conscious, strategic alternative. The chapter consolidates relevant discourse, theory, and spatial case studies to inform the discussion that follows.

03. | METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted for the research, detailing the qualitative framework, data collection methods, and analytical strategies used to investigate lived experiences of dis | comfort in architectural space.

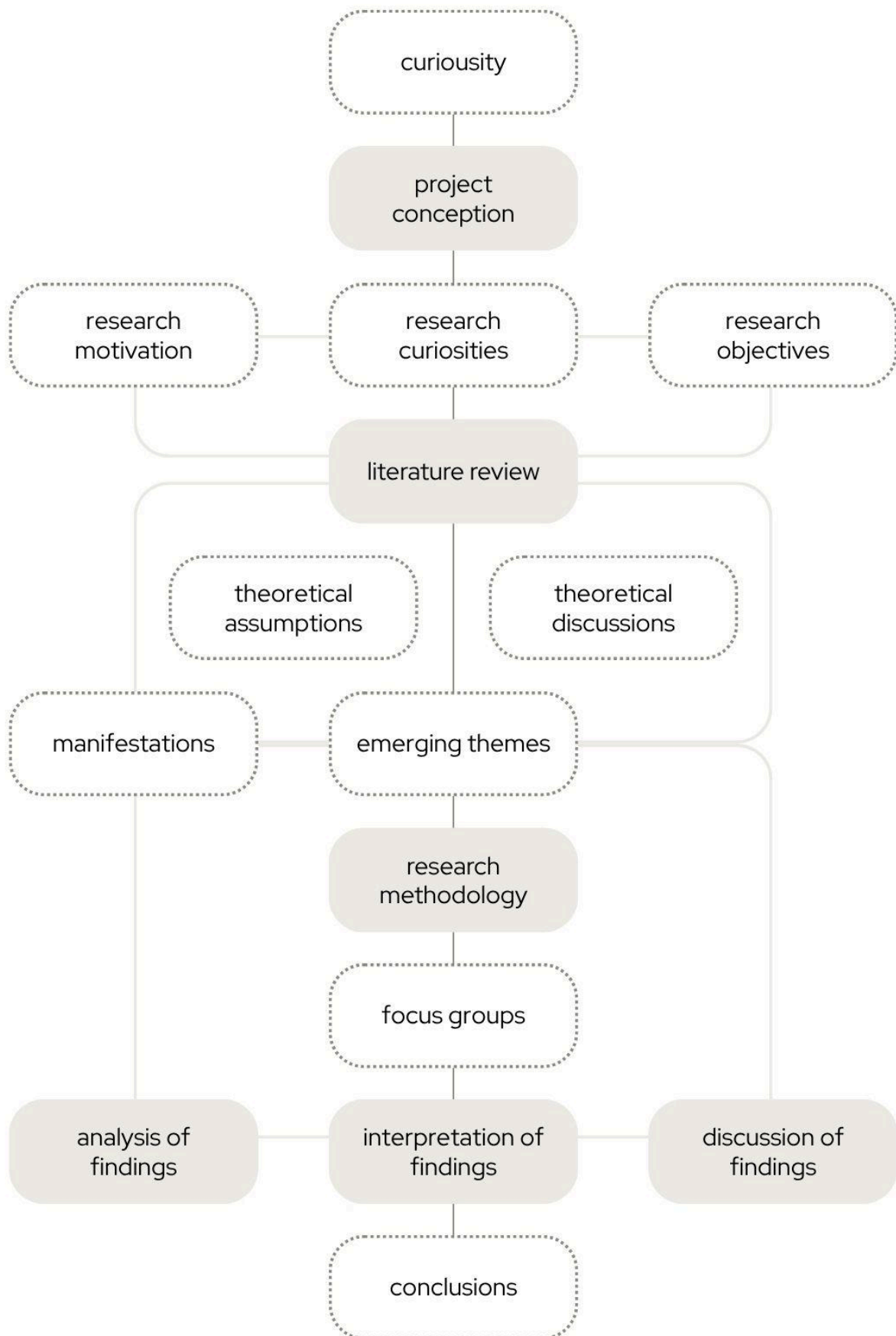
04. | RESULTS

This chapter presents the key findings that emerged from the focus group discussions and visual exercises. These are analysed through the lens of the theoretical groundwork established in Chapter 2, highlighting recurring themes, contradictions, and insights into how individuals interpret and negotiate comfort and discomfort.

05. | UN | CONCLUDED

The final chapter reflects on the main outcomes of the research while intentionally resisting closure. Rather than offering fixed conclusions, it points toward the ongoing nature of the questions raised, emphasising the value of discomfort as an open-ended field of inquiry within architectural design.

Figure 1: Dissertation Structure



02. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1		INTRODUCTION
2.2		BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT
2.3		THE DISCOMFORT OF COMFORT
2.4		THE COMFORT OF DISCOMFORT

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The dissertation explores discomfort not as a failure of design but as a deliberate and potentially generative spatial strategy. To understand its potential, we must first interrogate the assumptions embedded in its opposition, comfort, particularly when it is treated as an unquestioned ideal.

Design, in this context, is more than a technical or aesthetic discipline; it is a mode of world-making. Design is concerned with the “conception and planning of the artificial,” a process through which values are made tangible, shaping not only environments, but also the people that inhabit them (Buchanan, 1992, p. 14).

Comfort, far from being incidental, is actively produced, maintained, and normalised through design. Yet if comfort can be designed, it can also be disrupted. Discomfort, often treated as a problem to be resolved, may instead function as a critical tool, a means of challenging habitual perception and provoking new forms of spatial awareness.

In this sense, the experience of discomfort opens up a deeper interrogation of how design constructs subjectivity itself. Design does not simply respond to human needs; it actively participates in the very production of what constitutes human, including the embodied experiences of comfort and discomfort.

Discomfort can act not merely as the inverse of comfort, but as a generative condition, one that reawakens spatial consciousness and offers an alternative mode of design thinking (Roosen, 2024). Within this framework, intentional discomfort becomes a purposeful design approach capable of challenging normative spatial experiences and provoking new relationships between body, space, and meaning

To explore these complexities, this chapter provides the theoretical and historical groundwork for the dissertation’s broader investigation. It traces how comfort emerged as a central design imperative, particularly in the context of 20th century modernist architecture, capitalism, and domestic life, and how it became naturalised as a marker of good design. It also considers how this imperative often serves to dull spatial experience and suppress critical engagement.

By unpacking the systems that sustain comfort, this literature review sets the stage for a reimagining of discomfort not as a flaw but as a condition with its own political, aesthetic, and affective potential. The theoretical perspectives outlined here will inform the chapters that follow, guiding a deeper investigation into how discomfort might be intentionally designed to challenge normative spatial expectations and provoke new ways of inhabiting space.

2.2 THE DISCOMFORT OF COMFORT

- 2.2.1 | THE RISE OF 'GOOD DESIGN'
- 2.2.2 | AN-AESTHETICS

1.2.1 | THE RISE OF ‘GOOD DESIGN’

The modernist movement profoundly shaped our relationship with design, fundamentally altering not only aesthetics but also social and cultural values. Emerging alongside industrialisation, modernist design confronted a world transformed by mechanisation, mass production, and urbanisation (Ferreira, 2025).

Initially associated with drawing and technical instruction, nineteenth-century European ‘schools of design’ evolved into broader cultural projects aimed at mediating tensions between human labour and machine efficiency (Cunningham, 1979). In Britain, design was envisioned as a moral and social tool, capable of linking art, education, industry, government, and commerce. ‘Good taste’ was equated with good character, and well-designed objects were believed to foster discipline, rationality, and civility. Design was no longer simply about decoration or utility; it was promoted as a form of moral education, instilling cultural values through material experience (Colomina & Wigley, 2016).

As industrialisation advanced, modernist discourse pushed designers to re-evaluate their roles. Did technology threaten human nature, or was it a celebration of it? Design became the terrain on which these anxieties played out, a balancing act between preserving the human and accelerating its transformation (Colomina & Wigley, 2016).

“Modern design keeps declaring its loyalty to the human but actually flips back and forth between ignoring the human and inventing a new one.”

(Colomina & Wigley, 2016)

This tension initiated great controversy, resulting in the 1914 Werkbund Debate between Hermann Muthesius and Henry van de Velde. Muthesius argued for standardisation as a national strategy, promoting modularity and repetition to ensure industrial efficiency and a German style that was exportable. Standardisation was, for him, a pathway to cultural prestige and economic success (Alya, 2015). In contrast, Van de Velde believed that quality emerged organically through craft and time, not from rigid formulas, and therefore he resisted such standardisation, warning it could suppress innovation and diminish artistic integrity (Dubois, 2020).

Standardisation eventually triumphed, shaping the core aesthetic and ideological values of modernism. Institutions like the Bauhaus advocated for simple, industrial forms not merely as style

but as an ethical necessity. Their aim was to unite craftsmanship with mass production, training designers to create efficient, elegant prototypes for the machine age (Winton, 2004). Such institutions shaped public taste through exhibitions, education, and museum curation, linking smooth, minimalist forms with health, civility, and progress. In this discourse, the 'smooth' became shorthand for modernist virtue (Winton, 2004).

"The house is a machine for living in" (Le Corbusier, 1923), echoing Adolf Loos's earlier denunciation of ornament as "crime" against rational modernist principles (Andino, 2020). The design was intended to be efficient, hygienic, and, above all, frictionless. This logic was made manifest in Le Corbusier's 1925 Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau (figure 2), which presented the home as an industrial prototype furnished with mass-produced 'domestic equipment' rather than unique, handcrafted pieces (Winton, 2004). The modernist smoothness offered an aesthetic that numbs complexity and discomfort through sterilised spatial forms (Andino, 2020).



Figure 2 : Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, Paris, Le Corbusier. 1925.

Retrieved from <https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr/en/work-architecture/achievements-esprit-nouveau-pavilion-paris-france-1924-1925/>

The Great Depression further intensified the appeal of such design. Industrial designers such as Raymond Loewy and Henry Dreyfuss were tasked with “enticing new product designs in an effort to stimulate consumer demand” (Winton, 2004, para. 4) through seductive, streamlined forms that promised efficiency and optimism. This was further promoted with the help of concepts such as Existenzminimum and, more prominently, the idea of the ‘house of the future.’ Manuals like Ernst Neufert’s *Architect’s Data* (1936) institutionalised spatial comfort, prescribing uniform environments calibrated to normative bodies (Harrington, 2024).

Now more than ever, design has become a tool for national and economic revival. Museums, trade shows, and advertising campaigns further transformed modern design into a symbol of economic and social recovery, promoting comfort as widely accessible and essential (Winton, 2004). MoMA’s exhibitions, ‘Good Design’ (figure 3) and ‘Useful Objects’ (figure 4), popularised affordable, modernist products as staples of everyday life, promoting comfort not as luxury but as moral imperative, and this launched the careers of designers such as Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, and Hans Wegner (Kinchin & Gardner, 2019).

The cultural programming solidified the belief that ‘good design’ should be simple, beautiful, and standardised. Simplicity became a moral code, its elegance a symbol of clarity, efficiency, and social progress (Winton, 2004). This institutional celebration of design was mirrored in global efforts where governments, manufacturers, and retailers positioned modernist design as a driver of postwar economic revitalisation, linking industrial production to cultural renewal and consumer prosperity (Kinchin & Gardner, 2019).

Yet behind this optimistic façade lay deeper tensions. While modernist design promised to improve human life, it remained closely tied to the very systems of industrialisation that often resulted in alienation and dehumanisation (Colomina & Wigley, 2016).



Figure 3 : Exhibition "Good Design", The Museum of Modern Art, New York. November 1950 – January 1951.

Left: Photographed by Leo Trachtenberg // Right: Photographed by Soichi Sunami

Retrieved from <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1714>

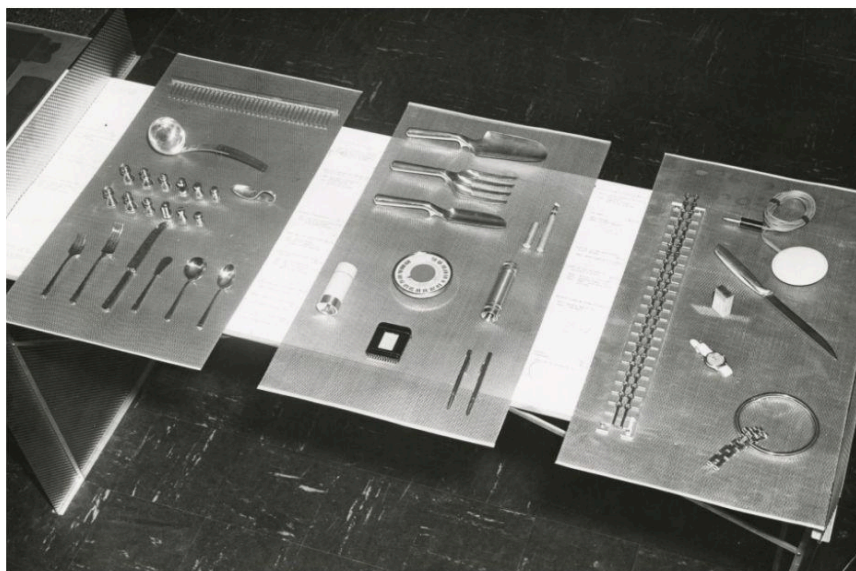


Figure 4 : Exhibition "Useful Objects", The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1946.

Photographed by William Leftwich

Retrieved from <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2787?>

2.2.2 | AN-AESTHETICS

If the promise of comfort was one of modernism's most seductive offerings, then its silent consequence was a deep and pervasive numbness. The modernist ambition to smooth, sanitise, and standardise did not simply provide comfort; it dulled the senses, shielding occupants from the complexities and discomforts of daily life (Andino, 2020). Against the trauma and overstimulation of industrial modernity, design became a strategy of containment: to soothe, to pacify, to silence. Pain was not addressed; it was designed out. This anaesthetic dimension was especially evident in architecture's response to the distress brought about by urbanisation and mechanisation.

The home, in particular, emerged as a carefully orchestrated zone of emotional regulation. Rather than confronting discomfort, modernist designers conceived of domestic space as a mechanism for insulation, psychological, sensory, and social (Colomina & Wigley, 2016). Comfort was no longer a feeling, but a system; consequently, architecture became a form of environmental sedation. The home as a "state of mind", is a symbolic projection of comfort that conceals more profound social anxieties and emotional constraints (Matsuda, 2010, p. 15). What appears seamless often hides fracture. And what feels relaxing is frequently the product of rigid control.

Historically, the home has not always been a site of comfort. The preindustrial house often combined public and private functions, serving as both workshop and residence. It was not until the rise of industrial capitalism that the home was reconfigured into a private refuge for the nuclear family, gendered, segregated, and sentimentalised (Heynen & Baydar, 2005).

The modernist home was conceived as a site of emotional management, where cleanliness and order were equated with psychological well-being (Verwey, 2024). Spaces were organised to conceal life's messiness (Matsuda, 2022), consequently drawing boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable emotional states (Verwey, 2024). In these environments, every surface becomes a symbol of respectability, a performance of identity, a tool of control (Rechavi, 2009).

This search for serenity was particularly emphasised in the postwar period. The years following the Second World War, often termed as the "age of Anxiety", were marked by lingering trauma, political fear, and a "heightened anxiety and stress" that took over daily life (Schuldenfrei, 2012, p. 11). Amidst such instability, the domestic realm was reframed as a space of psychological refuge, masking deeper cultural unease.

Central to this ideology was hygiene. Cleanliness became both a moral virtue and a civic duty, particularly in the postwar domestic sphere. Housing design after World War 2 enforced spatial cleanliness as a form of affective governance (Matsuda, 2022). Surfaces became smooth and easily wiped, fixtures were seamlessly integrated, and the home became sterile in appearance. The comfort experienced by one occupant was predicated on the discomfort or labour of another.

For example, Le Corbusier valued smooth, polished finishes for their calming, anaesthetic effect, a quality that mirrored the growing use of narcotics and medical anaesthetics in the postwar era (Wigley, 2020).

"Whitewash is extremely moral. Suppose there were a decree requiring all rooms in Paris to be given a coat of whitewash. I maintain that that would be a police task of real stature and a manifestation of high morality, the sign of a great people."

(Le Corbusier, 1987, p.192)

Similarly, Adolf Loos described the modernist nervous system as too overstimulated for ornament. Decoration, he argued, could no longer be tolerated by contemporary sensibilities. This biological shift required new responses and consequently, Loos's minimalist interiors functioned as protective incubators for hypersensitive modern subjects, sheltering them from overstimulation, a sensitivity he embodied. His architecture's quiet, plain spaces were therefore therapeutic, designed as barriers between external stimuli and the modernist psyche (Colomina & Wigley, 2016).

This anaesthetic philosophy extended beyond architecture into furniture design, where wartime innovations, initially designed for healing injured bodies, were retooled to sedate and contain the modern subject. However, during this period, many designers redirected their practices toward military needs; the postwar home consequently borrowed logics from the battlefield and the hospital alike. The home, like the hospital, became a site of quiet containment (Winton, 2004).

The Frankfurt Kitchen exemplifies this transformation perfectly. Designed by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, "The Frankfurt Kitchen was designed like a laboratory or factory and based on contemporary theories about efficiency, hygiene, and workflow" (Museum of Modern Art, 2010, para. 6). The standardised kitchen provided customers with a standardised set of furniture and supplies, completing the necessities of a kitchen and allowing consumers to select one of three near-identical models. In doing so, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky aimed to "reduce the burden of women's labor in the home" (Museum of Modern Art, 2010, para. 8), yet it also codified that labour into tightly controlled routines.

As a result, "architecture has been victimised by convention and has shamefully contributed to the banality of our daily lives" (Boulet, 2010), a condition still clearly reflected in our daily spaces. The excessive pursuit of cleanliness can transform the home into a site of emotional sterility, where inhabitants feel constrained by invisible expectations of order (Boer, 2022). In the name of comfort, the home becomes a place where life is performed rather than lived.

Alison and Peter Smithson's 1956 House of the Future (figure 5) aimed to imagine domestic life 25 years ahead, with amorphously shaped walls, integrated technologies, and a seamless interior layout resembling something "out of the Jetsons" (Hicks, 2021, para. 2). Yet despite its speculative ambition, the design remains radical even by today's standards, far from the conventional home, which still closely resembles the model of the mid-20th century.

In our contemporary context, inherited ideals of domesticity are fragmenting. Traditional family structures have become less normative, and the home now serves multiple, often conflicting roles: refuge and workstation, sanctuary and stage (UrbanNext, 2025). The postmodern luxury home could be described as a site of perpetual productivity, where rest gives way to readiness (Spigel, 2005). Digital technologies have intensified this shift, blurring the boundary between public and private, transforming the architecture (UrbanNext, 2025). While smart devices promise hyper-comfort and efficiency, they also amplify surveillance, anxiety, and emotional exposure (Andino, 2020) and therefore, the contemporary dwelling becomes an unstable system, never satisfied, never comfortable (UrbanNext, 2025).

"A well-sized flat with one double room and two single rooms is a machine for the perpetuation of the social norm. A constantly well-illuminated space is a machine for the reproduction of the liberal economy. A well-insulated wall is the fear of the other. But a steep stair is an achievement, a cold flat a reminder of your limits, and a too-small room the perfect place to become lovers."

(Esteve, 2018, para. 12)

The critique is clear: comfort is not neutral. It is constructed. It disciplines bodies, reinforces norms, and suppresses alternatives. The engineered numbness resonates with Slavoj Žižek's belief (Žižek, 1989) that true ideological domination operates by instilling a form of conscious adherence where alternatives and resistance quietly vanish. Comfort, then, becomes a subtle form of ideological sedation, rendering discomfort undesirable.

However, "in order to really understand the nature of comfort in design, we must attempt to underpin the ergonomic nature of furniture inside the domestic space," drawing attention to everyday objects such as chairs, beds, and toilets, seemingly mundane fixtures that embody deeply embedded cultural values and design ideologies (Andino, 2020, p. 4).

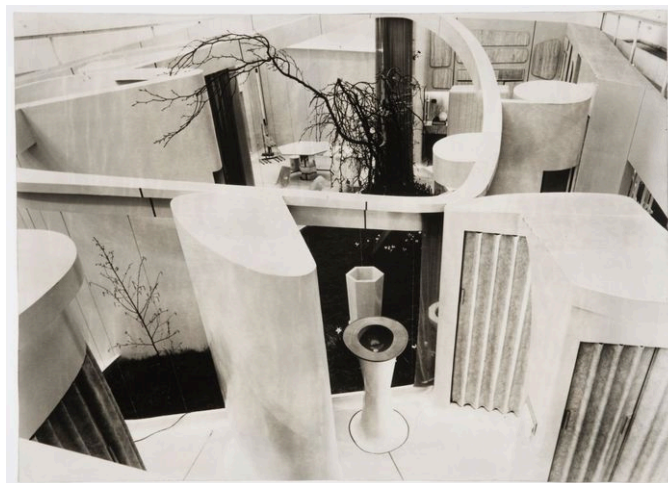
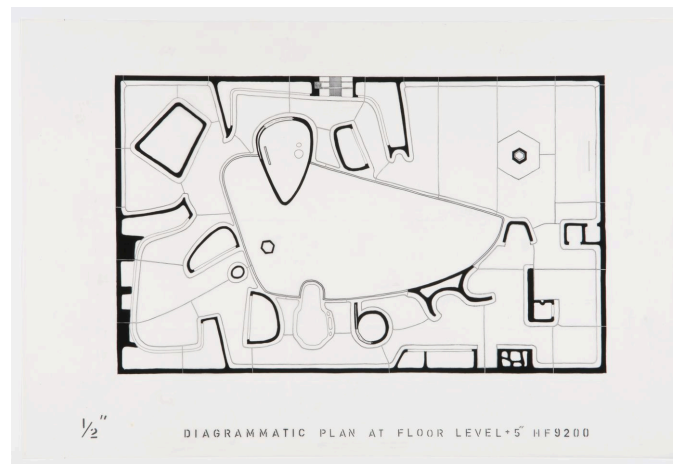


Figure 5: "House of the Future", Alison & Peter Smithson, 1956.

Top: Diagrammatic plan featured at the Daily Mail "Ideal Home" Exhibition, London, 1955-1956

Bottom: Interior view looking down from the viewing platform.

Retrieved from <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/issues/2/what-the-future-looked-like/32734/1956-house-of-the-future>

To ground the critique in a tangible and relatable context, the literature review now turns its focus toward the domestic realm. It is here, within the spaces we occupy daily, that comfort becomes most insidious, familiar, habitual, and rarely questioned. Among these domestic spaces, the bathroom stands out. It is a site universally used, yet deeply individual, structured by routines and rituals that reveal how comfort is produced, policed, and felt.

The bathroom serves as a powerful case study for this dissertation's exploration of discomfort, as it is both private and socially coded, familiar yet often associated with vulnerability and embarrassment (Holland, 2019). Koolhaas's *Elements of Architecture* catalogue frames the toilet as "the fundamental zone of interaction between humans and architecture" (Siracusa, 2014, para. 1). The bathroom is "the architectural space in which bodies are replenished, inspected, and cultivated, and where one is left alone for private reflection, to develop and affirm identity" (Stamp, 2014, para. 1), suggesting that the bathroom is not merely functional but deeply implicated in processes of selfhood and bodily experience, where comfort and discomfort coexist.

The history of the bathroom charts a gradual transformation from a public ritual to a private retreat, tracing broader shifts in cultural attitudes toward purity, discipline, and domestic containment. Dowdy (2021) traces the development of bathing spaces from ancient communal steam baths to their migration into the home. Early baths, often located away from domestic interiors, fulfilled spiritual or purificatory needs. The gradual internalisation of bathing into 20th-century domestic architecture, particularly with the introduction of plumbing and heating in the early 20th century, signalled not just technical progress, but a new logic of containment and bodily control (Dowdy, 2021). It was not until the 1930s that indoor bathrooms became standard in British homes, and even then, they remained cold, utilitarian, and emotionally stark (Hendon, cited in Dowdy, 2021).

Japan's design history offers a contrasting trajectory, one that embraces discomfort as part of a spiritual and bodily ethic. McMahon (2021) recalls the *tosu* latrines of the Muromachi period: wooden toilet rows built near meditation halls at Kyoto's Tofuku-ji temple. Simple, exposed, and aligned in order, they exemplify a form of austere intimacy between architecture, body, and ritual. This stands in stark contrast to contemporary Western bathrooms, which increasingly promise serenity and sensory withdrawal.

Yet the bathroom has since been reimagined as a space of comfort, sanctuary, and self-care. Influenced by urban overstimulation, wellness culture, and the commodification of privacy, bathrooms now promise retreat, quiet, and pleasure. Koolhaas (cited in Stamp, 2014) identifies this shift as representative of a broader cultural transition, from communal function to private reflection. With botanical palettes, soft lighting, and spa-like fittings, the bathroom today appears as the pinnacle of domestic comfort. But what is lost in this pursuit of perfected comfort? Have we sterilised our environments so completely that we are no longer shielded from germs, but from sensation itself?

Le Corbusier's placement of a hand basin at the entrance of Villa Savoye exemplifies this shift, a provocative architectural gesture that blurred the boundary between utility and ideology (Holland, 2019). His later innovations further developed the modernist ideology, redefining the shower as a space of comfort, repose, and bodily pleasure (Andino, 2020). Yet this shift also introduced a form of aestheticised control. As Holland (2019) argues, bathrooms fetishise intimacy, transforming necessary routines into curated rituals. The domestic interior's spatial codes, living room, kitchen, and bathroom, do not merely organise function but cultivate propriety and enforce decorum (Evans, cited in Holland, 2019).

This logic of concealment and comfort is not without consequence. The desire to withdraw into soothing, sanitised spaces may come at the cost of feeling altogether. Are we too protected? Too sanitised? What might it mean to reintroduce public discomfort into private rituals, to bathe communally, to defamiliarise the most familiar, to inhabit discomfort not as failure but as form?

Even the squat toilet, still found in older Japanese train stations and *izakayas*, challenges the ergonomics of Western design sensibilities. To some, its posture is awkward or primitive; to others, it is simply different, a form of embodied awareness Western modernist design has taught us to unlearn (McMahon, 2021). Is this a discomfort we could, or should, accommodate?

This evolution of ideals places the bathroom as a space that oscillates between utility and luxury, shame and sanctuary, encapsulating the anaesthetic condition of modern domesticity. As Wilson (cited in Dowdy, 2021) suggests, the bathroom is now seen as a site for deceleration and disconnect, a response to overstimulation, but also a retreat from engagement. It is so clean, it hurts, and in that pain lies the opportunity to rethink how comfort, discomfort, and design intersect in our daily rituals.



Figure 6: Sink at Villa Savoye, Le Corbusier.
Photographed by Thomas Nemesker

Retrieved from <https://psyche.co/ideas/the-sink-in-the-hall-how-pandemics-transform-architecture>

2.3 THE COMFORT OF DISCOMFORT

- 2.3.1 | AGAINST COMFORT
- 2.3.2 | IN THE NAME OF DISCOMFORT
- 2.3.3 | DISCOMFORT AS A DESIGN STRATEGY

2.3.1 | AGAINST COMFORT

Comfort, as the previous section established, is not an inherent condition but a historically constructed ideal, one whose power lies in its presumed normalcy. Yet the moment comfort is disrupted, its uncertainty is exposed (Ellison, 2017). The unease introduced by discomfort, then, is not simply physical but existential (Abbas, 2025).

Yet, despite the growing emphasis on comforting design, one cannot fully escape the realities it seeks to mask. Eero Saarinen's *Womb Chair*, despite aiming to comfort its users, was "designed on the theory that a great number of people have never felt really comfortable and secure since they left the womb" (Schuldenfrei, 2012, p.18), making this paradox visible.

During the 20th century, alongside the rise of modernist 'good design' and post-war architectural solutions, Russian Constructivism stood out as a radical counterpoint. Its raw materiality, political potency, and experimental spatial practices embodied discomfort and friction as catalysts for social transformation (Stouhim, 2020). However, as modernism's dominant narrative increasingly emphasised universal comfort and standardisation, such disruptive movements were marginalised in favour of designs that assured social order and ease (Stouhim, 2020).

In the expanding discourse on design and comfort, a growing number of voices have begun to resist the ideological dominance of comfort. As Babauta (2025, para. 1) observes, "for most of our lives, we find ways to stay in our comfort zones ... and avoid putting ourselves in discomfort in so many ways." Comfort is now a compulsion, a default mode of existence that narrows our tolerance for friction. Rather than liberating, it begins to domesticate. Babauta warns of comfort's addictive character: it becomes "a place of safety that we start to feel we can't do without" (2025, para. 2), generating a cycle of numbness and dependence.

This has spatial implications. The 'smooth city', as Boer (2024) critiques, reflects an urban logic driven by optimisation and sterility, environments curated for frictionless experiences, devoid of unpredictability or challenge. Cities, once sites of encounter and disorder, are increasingly shaped by the logic of control, resulting in homogeneity and what Döding (2024, para. 7) calls "an addiction with order," where even slight irregularities are seen as crises. Such comfort, he writes, "has proven to numb us," (para. 7), advocating instead for a dose of tension, resistance, and discomfort.

In this context, discomfort emerges not as design failure, but as a critical function. It exposes the limits of modernist 'good design' and conventional thinking. For some, the rejection of comfort becomes a radical act, a refusal of norms that pacify, regulate, and neutralise. Comfort, after all, is not merely aesthetic or material. It is behavioural, ideological, and disciplinary (Yanagihara, 2021). It shapes not only how we live, but who we are allowed to become.

*Figure 7: Eero Saarinen seated in a Womb Chair, 1950.
Photographed by Arnold Newman*



*Retrieved from:
[/www.architecturaldigest.com/story/eero-saarinens-1948-wc-brought-midcentury-modernism-to-the-american-mainstre](http://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/eero-saarinens-1948-wc-brought-midcentury-modernism-to-the-american-mainstream)*

"Should a building – even your home – be comfortable? The answer, to the great majority of us, is "yes." But not to everyone. To some, comfort is not a requirement but a choice."

(Yanagihara, 2021, para. 2)

The critique is not entirely anti-comfort. Comfort is vital during hardship (Babauta, 2025). The issue is not comfort itself, but its hegemony, its unexamined dominance. Saarinen himself appears visibly ill at ease in the very chair meant to soothe, subtly revealing the cracks in the smooth narrative of comfort, "perhaps determined to maintain the tension necessary to keep his career moving forward" (Schuldenfrei, 2012, p.19). Comfort becomes problematic when it replaces challenge, ambiguity, or presence. The pursuit of comfort may produce diminishing returns: a paradox where the very desire that drives comfort is dulled by its excess (Stroble, 2023; Anakwenze 2018).

"...before the game begins, desires is not victory, but the pleasant excitement of the struggle for it; only for the full development of this pleasure a transient desire to win the game is generally indispensable."

(Anakwenze, 2018, p. 7)

In the broader picture, comfort has become the soft architecture of contemporary control. As Abbas (2025, para. 8) suggests, "silence, boredom, emptiness", once essential elements of being human, are increasingly seen as problems to be solved. This cultural reconfiguration, he warns, leads to a kind of performance of life, in which comfort becomes a hollow spectacle, smooth but empty (Abbas, 2025).

In response, several contemporary design provocations push deliberately against this anaesthetic logic. They do not reject comfort outright, but rather interrogate its codes, challenging its invisibility, moral associations, and disciplinary effects.

FAT's Bathroom Sweet (2000), for instance, dismantles privacy by making sanitation theatrical. The walls of the bathroom dissolve, its rituals made public, its assumed neutrality rendered strange (Holland, 2019). Similarly, Hampstead House (Ordinary Architecture, 2015) externalises bathing practices, staging domestic routines once considered private. The works do not simply expose the bathroom; they expose the ideologies embedded within its design.

House for Essex (Grayson Perry and FAT, 2015) offers a different kind of subversion. Here, the bathroom is centralised, organ-like, symbolic, and glorified. No longer a peripheral service zone, it becomes the architectural heart, a shrine to bodily process and domestic ornamentation (Holland, 2019). These projects echo the disruptive legacy of Duchamp's Fountain (1917), in which a urinal was transformed into art, stripping function of utility and dismantling the boundaries of propriety. As Boulet (2010) notes, Duchamp's gesture was not simply irreverent; it was structurally destabilising. These bathrooms do the same for architecture: they displace comfort from its assumed centre, asking what it hides, whom it serves, and how it disciplines.

Beyond the domestic, Valerio Olgiati's architecture enacts discomfort through a more abstract language of refusal. His buildings do not soothe the majority. They confront. As Yanagihara (2021, para. 3) writes, "his buildings demand engagement ... they refuse to perform comfort as a default gesture." Their austerity resists consumption, forcing users into a kind of sensory and intellectual confrontation. They do not offer safety. They offer strangeness.

In this context, to resist comfort is not to embrace suffering, but to reintroduce the conditions for aliveness. As the next section explores, discomfort becomes not a failure of design, but a strategy for challenging its numbing effects. "Comfort is welcome. But discomfort can be, too" (Yanagihara, 2021, para. 6).

2.3.2 | IN THE NAME OF DISCOMFORT

Following the exploration of comfort as a manipulative ideal, this dissertation recognises discomfort as a force that may potentially redefine good design. Rather than oppose comfort outright, discomfort in design exists on a spectrum; a field of choices, scales, and intensities. Boulet (2010) distinguishes between natural, unintentional, and deliberate disturbances, arguing that intentionally embedded discomfort becomes not a glitch but a strategy.

This strategy is not about inflicting suffering, but about breaking the habitual spell “of ‘excessive’ human comforts” (Harrington, 2024, para. 9), prompting users to confront the complexities of their spatial and social conditions. “A steep staircase quickens your heartbeat, a cold flat reminds you to wrap up warm. An empty corner is the best place to huddle with a book, a shoebox room the perfect space to share with a lover. In short, we ought to become comfortable with discomfort” (Harrington, 2024, para. 10). These minor spatial provocations, Harrington (2024) argues, offer the user not punishment but presence, a lived encounter that activates awareness, choice, and agency.

The ideological framing of comfort as inherently good tends to flatten experience and marginalise discomfort’s productive value. Strobl (2023) refers to comfort as a strategy of negation, flattening affect and suppressing ambiguity. Discomfort, by contrast, opens. Discomfort frees us from the false pleasure of ease, allowing renewed attention to self, environment, and relation (Grice, cited in Partida, 2020). Discomfort invites engagement and cultivates resilience, fostering not just endurance but neuroplasticity, a biological openness to change (Strobl, 2023).

This reframing is not new. Hammermeister (2002), drawing on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, reframes beauty as not merely pleasurable but also wounding and unsettling, demanding thought and growth. Nietzsche’s claim that suffering strengthens but also makes us stranger and sharper resonates with architectural practices that resist facile consumption.

“The fact of the matter is that someday, life will have serious discomfort in store for us. Are we going to dread that? ... We must practice temperance now, in times of plenty – because none of us know what the future holds, only that plenty never lasts.”

(Daily Stoic, 2022, 1:50)

Importantly, discomfort in design is not merely personal; it is political. Boer (2024) proposes discomfort as a tool for social negotiation, suggesting there needs to be an openness towards friction. Increasing comfort for some inevitably generates discomfort for others, especially when spatial norms are dictated by unacknowledged privilege. Verwey (2024) critiques the literal and metaphorical fences in contemporary spatial planning that preserve comfort by enforcing conformity. Discomfort, by contrast, interrupts these normative boundaries and reveals the power structures they conceal.

Harrington (2024, para. 8) observes that “coarse materiality, stark geometries, and the deliberate disruptions of spatial norms challenge preconceived notions of space, eliciting emotional responses in the occupants, prompting a deeper and critical engagement with the built environment and the natural world.” Such interventions challenge the idea of design as mere comfort delivery, embracing instead an ethics of encounter. Boulet (2010, p. 11) extends this ethic into the spatial realm, asking whether we could “make room for the disturbed and find a way to use it strategically.” Discomfort, he suggests, may prompt users to question their lives, their surroundings, and their relationships. Andino and Andino (2020, p. 126) go further to ask, “What if we regard discomfort as a solution instead of a problem?” Babauta (2025) tempers this by reminding us that discomfort can foster growth only if navigated mindfully. “You don’t have to be in discomfort all the time,” (para. 7) he writes. Taking breaks is essential.

The key lies in a design that offers gradients, not mandates. Strategic discomfort should not be universal but optional, allowing users to approach a challenge or retreat from it as needed. Seneca’s voluntary discomfort, sleeping on the floor, eating plain food, serves not to punish, but to reduce fear, embedding resilience through exposure (Daily Stoic, 2022). Similarly, architecture might provide zones of heightened awareness that may help in preparing, reflecting, and becoming fully present.

As Yanagihara (2021, para. 6) observes of Olgiati’s architecture, “You may not want to live in an Olgiati structure yourself. You may not like them ... but what you can’t do is deny them.” She asks, “Isn’t that what design is meant to do? Challenge us, provoke us, unsettle our expectations.”

Discomfort reclaims aliveness, resists numbness, and reawakens capacity for encounter, spatial, emotional, and social. Yanagihara (2021) thus posits a mode of design less about problem-solving than meaning-making, architecture that speaks not only to wants but to needs.

2.3.3 | DISCOMFORT AS A DESIGN STRATEGY

Several designers have brought these theoretical discussions to life, reclaiming discomfort as a spatial strategy of resistance. Whether through emotional dissonance, architectural friction, or embodied disorientation, these practices work to expose the systems that comfort often masks, opening space for ethical encounter, political critique, and a more active mode of inhabitation. By unsettling the smooth, controlled cityscape, discomfort becomes a deliberate refusal of passivity (Verwey, 2024).

This same logic underpins Banksy's Dismaland, a dystopian anti-theme park that mimics and corrodes the concept of the experience economy. Visitors confront unsettling social realities, with discomfort deployed not simply to shock but to educate and mobilise, exposing the ideological truth beneath everyday comfort-seeking (Dismaland: 4 Powerful Reasons..., 2024). As with the earlier case of the bathroom, which Colomina and Wigley (2016) expose as a site of normalised control and bodily management, Dismaland challenges the commodified pursuit of ease, staging discomfort as an act of cultural resistance.

Such spatial strategies operate at both political and phenomenological levels. A manifestation of such is the Jewish Museum in Berlin, analysed by Kim (2022), which deliberately disorients through form. Rather than providing an easy-to-navigate route or straightforward narrative, the complex spatial structures evoke the confusion and trauma embedded in Jewish history, expressing history's realism through architecture, maximising emotional and sensory engagement (Kim, 2022). This aligns with Grice's (n.d.) observation that discomfort, when manifest in uneven surfaces, vertiginous spaces, or obstructive geometries, sharpens spatial awareness and foregrounds embodiment.

Nowhere is this more radically articulated than in the work of Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins, whose 'procedural architecture' subverts the very basis of ergonomic stability. The Site of Reversible Destiny (1995) and Bioscleave House (2008) (figure 8) destabilise through angled floors, shifting gradients, and peculiar layouts. (Reversible Destiny Foundation, n.d.). These are not aesthetic quirks but philosophical provocations: a refusal of the passive, comfort-driven spatial norms endemic to both domesticity and modernism.

The comfortable space anaesthetises; the uncomfortable one alerts. This inversion unsettles the ideals explored in earlier chapters, the smooth bathroom, the frictionless home, revealing how even the banal can be reactivated through strategic unease. When designers disrupt these expectations, they convert passive spaces into critical ones, much like how Arakawa and Gins render the floor an obstacle and breathing an architectural act.



Figure 8: "Bioscleve House", Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins, 2008.

Interior Bathroom

Retrieved from <https://www.reversibledestiny.org/bioscleave-house-lifespan-extending-villa/>

03. **METHODOLOGY**

3.1		INTRODUCTION
3.2		RESEARCH DESIGN
3.3		RELIABILITY & VALIDITY
3.4		CONCLUSION

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to investigate the tensions between comfort and discomfort within everyday spaces. Building on the theoretical foundations established in the literature review, the study prioritises lived experience, subjectivity, and critical reflection. In doing so, it adopts an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework, prioritising interpretation and dialogue over objective or quantifiable outcomes, embracing the ambiguity and often contradictory nature of comfort and discomfort.

Focus group discussions, supported by visual exercises, formed the primary method of data collection and analysis. These methods were selected for their capacity to surface affective responses and embodied insights that may otherwise remain unspoken. Thematic patterns emerging from these conversations will later inform the interpretation of findings and contribute towards a working definition of discomfort.

The remainder of this chapter details the methodological approach taken.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.2.1 | RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research approach grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with the aim of examining the complex and often contradictory relationship between comfort and discomfort, as outlined in the literature review. While the previous chapter established key ideological and theoretical frameworks, this methodology shifts its focus to lived experience, foregrounding subjectivity, interpretation, and reflexivity as central to the investigation.

The research was guided by an iterative and flexible process, with preliminary analysis conducted alongside data collection. This allowed emerging insights to inform and gradually shape the direction of the study as it evolved.

Central to the method is the collection of subjective data through semi-structured focus group discussions. Participants were positioned as active co-thinkers rather than passive respondents, invited to share personal experiences and interpretations of comfort and discomfort within spatial contexts. These responses were shaped by lifestyle, educational background, belief systems, and cultural context, factors that enabled rich, candid reflections that both challenge and expand existing academic discourse.

To deepen insight, visual exercises were incorporated before and after the discussions. These highlighted personal associations with discomfort and provided a means to observe how the conversations shaped or shifted individual perceptions. This combination of visual and verbal data enabled a more nuanced understanding of how comfort and discomfort are imagined, challenged, and reinterpreted, extending beyond the boundaries of formal literature.

Analysis followed the principles of IPA, attending closely to both the surface content and underlying meanings of participants' contributions. The approach sought to balance theoretical critique with experiential insight, recognising discomfort not only as a spatial or emotional response, but as a potentially generative force within design. Emerging themes were analysed in relation to, but not constrained by, the literature, allowing subjective experience to inform and challenge prevailing narratives.

3.2.2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

The research began with a desk-based study that helped build a solid foundation for the later stages of the study. This initial phase focused on developing a historical understanding of the promise of comfort, particularly as it relates to critiques of hyper-domesticity. Building on this, the study explored existing theory on the potential of negotiated discomfort within spatial environments. While this stage was not intended to cover every possible angle, it helped clarify the research focus and directly shaped the visual prompts and discussion guides used in the focus groups.

3.2.3 | CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY

Comfort and discomfort are complex themes, so narrowing the focus was essential to keep the research grounded and relatable. Throughout the desk study, the domestic sphere emerged as a relevant typology due to its emotional, cultural, and ideological significance, particularly through the lens of hyper-domesticity explored in the literature.

To ground the research in a tangible and relatable setting, the bathroom was selected as a further zoom-in. The bathroom's private yet universal nature, alongside its associated taboos and discomforts, made it a powerful focal point for eliciting honest and sometimes awkward discussions. This encouraged deeper reflection on discomfort in domestic environments.

While conversations were not restricted to these typologies, they served as familiar anchors to help participants link abstract concepts to personal experience, opinions, and biases. (Figure 9).

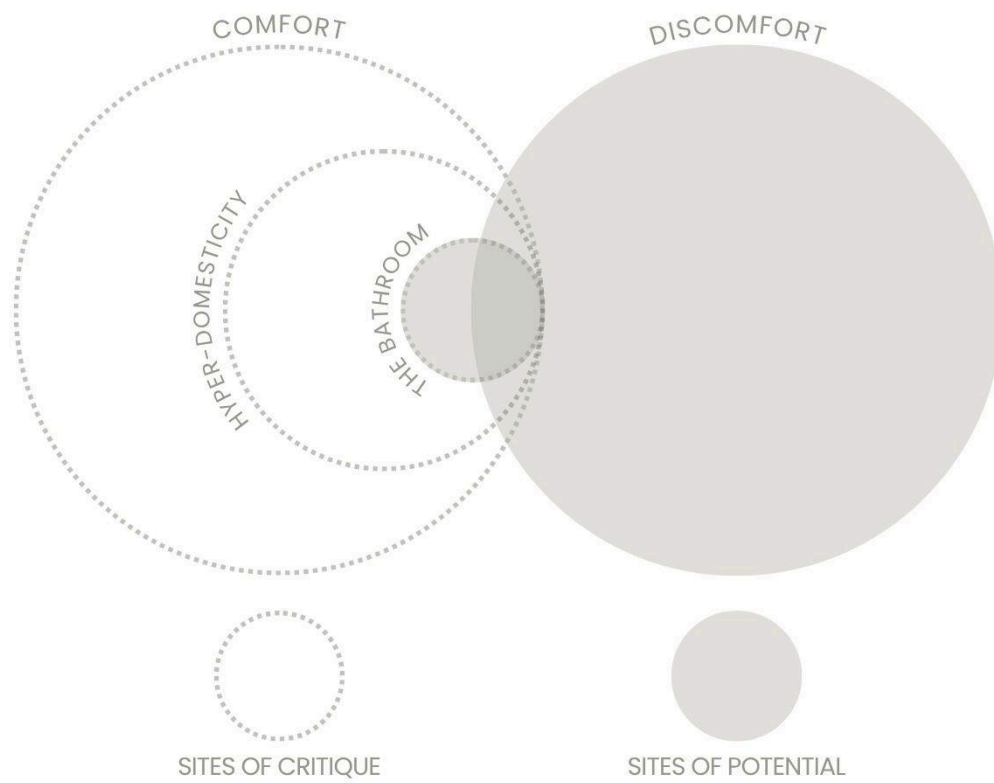


Figure 9 : Contextualising the Study

3.2.4 | FOCUS GROUPS

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals whose educational backgrounds and familiarity with architectural discourse could meaningfully contribute to the study's aims. The target demographic consisted of individuals aged 18 to 30 with formal education in spatial or architectural design. Eligibility was limited to current students or recent graduates from the following programmes:

University of Malta: Master of Architecture

University of Malta: Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Built Environment Studies

MCAST: Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Spatial Design

This age and educational bracket was selected to capture individuals actively engaged with contemporary design education and philosophies, whose perspectives may be less constrained by the practical demands of professional practice.

While MCAST students were invited to participate, none were available to join the focus group. As a result, both focus groups were comprised of participants affiliated with the University of Malta, representing a range of academic levels and specialisations.

Several participants had also completed undergraduate studies in architecture at international institutions, and many participants had also engaged in international exchange programmes. Their diverse educational backgrounds contributed a broader range of perspectives and cross-cultural insights to the discussions, further enriching the groups with experience of different cultural and domestic environments.

Two focus groups were organised, each including eight participants. Having two groups allowed for more structured and manageable discussions, with enough time for each participant to contribute while encouraging a diversity of perspectives.. The composition was as follows:

Focus Group 1:

Me (moderator)

4 recent Master of Architecture graduates from the University of Malta

3 students enrolled in the Master of Architecture at the University of Malta

1 recent graduate of the Bachelor in Built Environment Studies at the University of Malta

Focus Group 2:

Me (moderator)

1 student enrolled in the Master of Architecture at the University of Malta

7 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Built Environment Studies at University of Malta

Focus Group Structure

Prior to the focus groups, all participants received a concise overview of the study, along with a detailed outline of the session structure (refer to the appendices). However, specific prompts and certain details were deliberately withheld to prevent prior preparation and reduce potential bias. This approach was intended to elicit genuine, experience-driven responses, ensuring that discussions reflected spontaneous and authentic reflections rather than premeditated considerations.

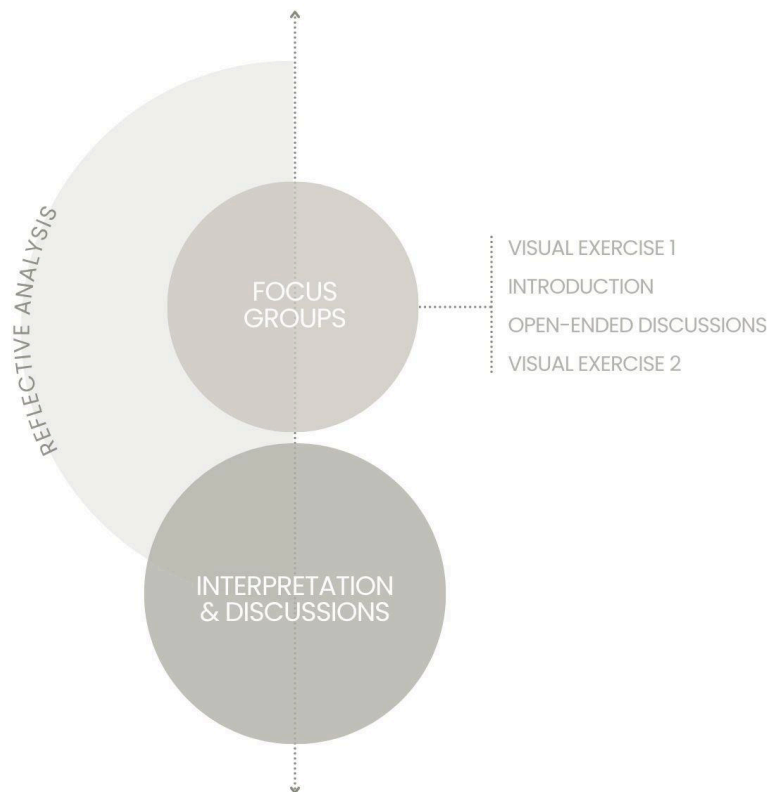


Figure 10 : Focus Group Structure.

Visual Exercise 1

"Sketch your idea of an ideal, comfortable bathroom."

At the beginning of each session, participants were asked to sketch their idea of an ideal and comfortable bathroom. The aim was to gather raw, instinctive responses, personal spatial expressions that had not yet been shaped by group discussion or theoretical framing. These initial sketches served as a baseline, reflecting each participant's unfiltered associations with comfort and domestic space. (Refer to Appendix C)

Introduction

Following the first visual exercise, an introductory text was read out to frame the discussion. This served to orient participants and establish reference points. A few key terms were introduced, not as fixed definitions but as open concepts for collective exploration. (Refer to Appendix D)

Discussions

The discussion phase took place between the two drawing exercises and followed a semi-structured format. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their own perceptions, respond to each other's interpretations, and explore the broader meanings of comfort and discomfort in spatial terms.

Although prompts were prepared, the conversation remained open-ended, allowing organic \ and the emergence of personal and sometimes contradictory perspectives, building a layered understanding of how comfort is imagined, challenged, and redefined.

With participants' consent, all discussions were audio-recorded for later transcription and qualitative analysis. (Refer to Appendix E)

Visual Exercise 2

"Sketch your interpretation of an intentionally uncomfortable bathroom, based on your reflections after the conversation."

At the end of each session, participants were asked to produce a second sketch, this time representing an intentionally uncomfortable bathroom. They were encouraged to reflect on any emerging themes from the discussion and to mirror aspects they personally resonated with in their drawings. This exercise aimed to capture potential shifts in perception prompted by the group dialogue.

Though informal, these drawings served as spatial metaphors, revealing unspoken assumptions, emotional responses, and evolving interpretations. They offered valuable insight into how participants negotiated the concept of discomfort as a design strategy, providing a counterpoint to their initial representations of comfort. (Refer to Appendix C)

3.2.5 | DATA COLLECTION & ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Participants were invited via email, with both invitation and information letters included in Appendix A. Before either session, participants read and signed consent forms (refer to Appendix B), consenting to audio recording and transcription, with clear information indicating all ethical considerations.

To ensure anonymity, participants selected a letter to represent their contributions in transcripts and on visual data, which were otherwise unlabelled. All sketches were scanned and archived per consent agreements.

Audio recordings were transcribed, with only minimal edits for readability without altering meaning or tone (refer to Appendix E). Both transcripts and visual data were analysed qualitatively to identify patterns, tensions, and insights central to the research questions.

3.3 RELIABILITY & VALIDITY

3.3.1 | Researcher's Role

This research is shaped by my personal curiosity and lived experience. Themes such as discomfort, ambiguity, and resistance have consistently emerged throughout my academic and design practice in recent years. These interests are rooted in personal inquiry, influenced by emotional states and life circumstances, and therefore introduce a degree of subjectivity and potential bias.

As both researcher and moderator, I occupied the dual role of facilitator and active participant. While I aimed to guide discussions in an open and inclusive manner, I recognise that my presence and perspectives may have subtly influenced the direction and tone of the conversations.

Interpretation played a central role in this study, not only in analysing literature but also in engaging with participants' diverse and at times contradictory reflections. These insights challenged my assumptions and broadened my understanding.

3.3.2 | Participant Selection

The participant pool, drawn primarily from students and recent graduates in architectural education, offered relevance and depth in relation to the research aims. Their shared disciplinary background enabled informed discussions on spatial design; however, it also limited the diversity of perspectives. The relative homogeneity of the participants, in terms of age, education, and cultural context, inevitably constrained the analytical depth of the findings.

While the group included individuals at different stages of study and some with international or interdisciplinary experience, the absence of early-year students, practising professionals, and non-architectural voices narrowed the scope of insight. Broader participation, including individuals from more diverse educational, cultural and professional backgrounds, may have resulted in a wider range of experiences and more divergent understandings of comfort and discomfort.

Additionally, the shared institutional context meant that many participants were already familiar with one another, which may have influenced the dynamics of the conversation. It is also likely that some participants were already aware of my research interests, which could have shaped their

responses, either consciously or unconsciously. The relatively narrow demographic of the focus group is therefore recognised as a key methodological limitation.

3.3.3 | Research Design and Data Collection

Had the study incorporated additional focus group sessions or supplemented them with individual interviews, it may have resulted in a broader range of emerging themes and more diverse reflections. Involving participants beyond architectural education, for example, those from different social, cultural, or professional contexts, might also have enriched the dataset, offering alternative perspectives on how comfort and discomfort are felt, interpreted, and negotiated. Expanding the scope in this way could have enhanced the depth and complexity of the analysis.

In retrospect, a more embodied, experiential methodology, such as engaging participants in deliberately uncomfortable spatial scenarios, might have provided richer insight into the physical and affective dimensions of discomfort. This approach could have complemented the verbal and visual data, offering a more holistic understanding of how discomfort is felt, negotiated, and potentially harnessed within spatial design.

Given the scope and limitations of a dissertation, certain theoretical perspectives may have been overlooked or underdeveloped. A more extensive study could draw upon a broader range of frameworks and incorporate additional methods to further enrich the analysis.

3.4 CONCLUSION

This study adopted a qualitative methodology to explore how individuals experience comfort and discomfort within spatial design. The approach acknowledged my desires to uncover subjective meanings and interpretations. By combining the desk study, group dialogue and visual representation, the research brought to light layered insights, capturing how discomfort is perceived, articulated, and reimagined by individuals in their own terms.

While not without its limitations, this methodological framework proved effective in starting to understand complex emotional and spatial responses. It demonstrates the value of participatory, reflexive methods in architectural research, offering a foundation for future investigations that seek to understand discomfort not only as a condition to be avoided, but as a beneficial element in design thinking.

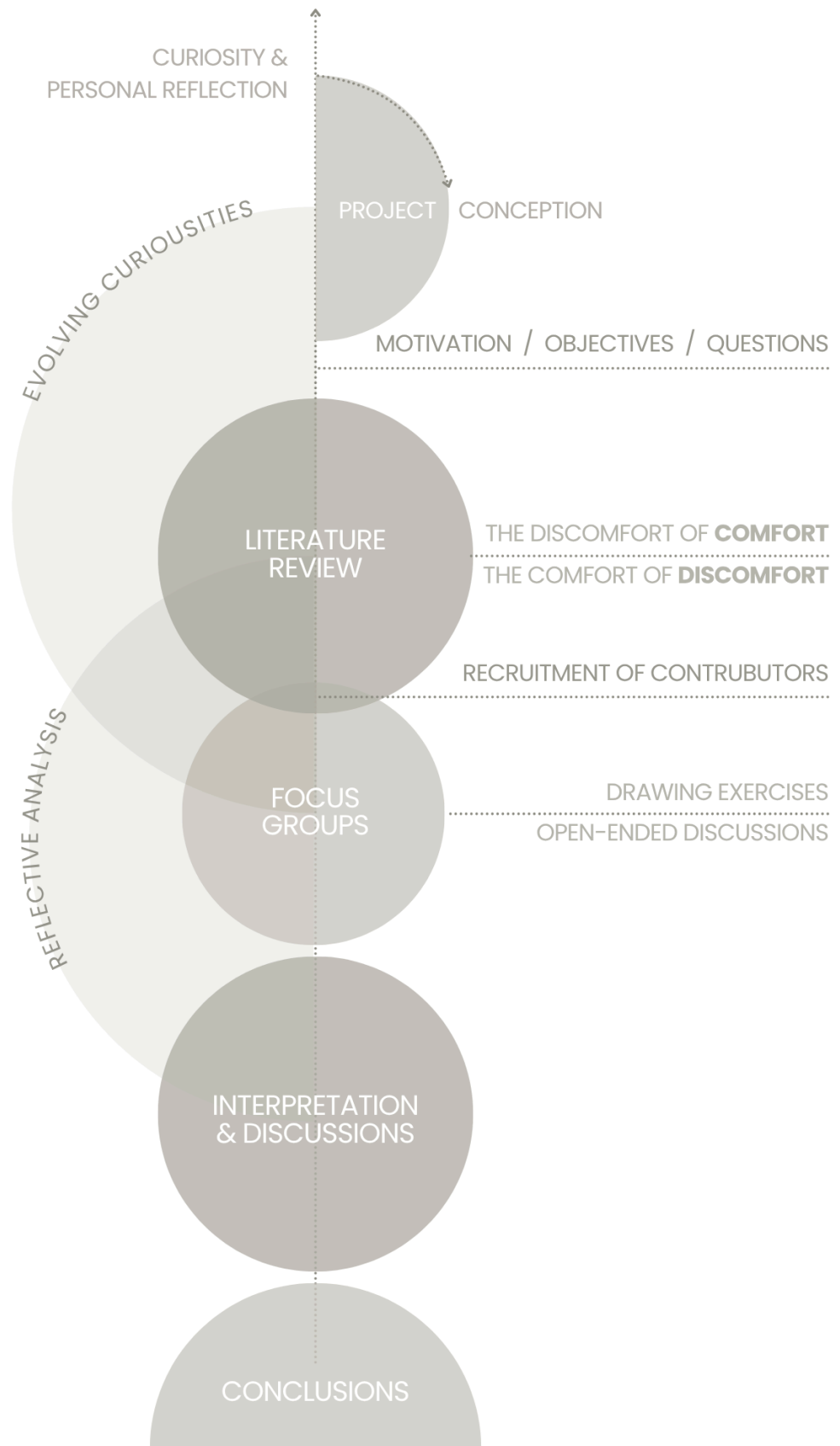


Figure 11 : Methodology

04. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1		INTRODUCTION
4.2		EMERGING THEMES
4.3		SITUATING DIS COMFORT
4.4		UNDERSTANDING DIS COMFORT
4.5		NEGOTIATING DIS COMFORT
4.6		LET ME BE UN COMFORTABLE

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of the research conducted to explore the relationship between comfort and discomfort in spatial experience. Building on the theoretical foundations laid out in the literature review, the analysis draws on qualitative data gathered through the methods described in the previous chapter. The questions and provocations introduced earlier were further developed through group discussions and visual representation, which together form the basis for the thematic analysis presented in this chapter.

Throughout the participatory study, participants were encouraged to debate, question, and share their immediate responses to the themes. While prompts were prepared, the conversations were intentionally kept open and fluid, in keeping with the dissertation's emphasis on resisting rigidity and predetermined outcomes. This allowed space for more honest and unfiltered dialogue, and, in turn, revealed unexpected patterns and recurring themes of dis | comfort.

A number of themes emerged across both groups, most of them unprompted, and are explored in the conversations throughout this chapter. The following discussions are not intended as definitive conclusions, but rather as interpretive reflections and provocations. They highlight moments of tension, curiosity, and contradiction, and offer a broader understanding of how comfort and discomfort are experienced, imagined, and negotiated within daily life.

Discussions revealed a strong link between participants' spatial interpretations and their lived experiences, with frequent associations made to memory, ritual, instinct, daily behaviour, and emotional or artistic response. As such, the data is analysed not only in architectural terms, but also within a wider emotional, cultural, and experiential framework, considering how comfort may emerge within discomfort, and how discomfort itself may be embraced as part of a more meaningful, conscious relationship with space. The intention is not to force architectural translation where it was not explicitly discussed, but to allow the ambiguity and multiplicity of dis | comfort to unfold on its own terms.

To support and contextualise the analysis, a range of spatial and visual references, including architecture, photography, installation art, and everyday spatial encounters, were introduced. These are not positioned as direct case studies, but instead emerge organically through the interpretive process, in response to recurring patterns identified within the discussions. Readers are therefore encouraged to interpret the following discussions through their own architectural lens, drawing connections where relevant and allowing insights to manifest spatially, imaginatively, or speculatively. In this sense, the analysis remains open-ended and reflective, guided not by the pursuit of fixed conclusions but by a continual evolution of questions and curiosities.

4.2 EMERGING THEMES

Across both focus groups, several recurring themes surfaced, verbally and visually. While not always consistent across participants, many drawings shared similar characteristics, revealing shifts in perspective influenced by group discussion. These were first analysed independently, then interpreted thematically (Appendix C).

The following terms emerged as the most frequently referenced. Some are explored in detail later in this chapter; others appear more subtly. Rather than fixed categories, they represent overlapping and evolving ideas that shaped the direction of analysis.

As this study prioritises the lived and felt experience of dis/comfort, these themes lean toward the intangible. They reflect not spatial solutions, but emotional, psychological, and cultural conditions. Readers are therefore encouraged to interpret them architecturally, but also to recognise how they impact the way space is experienced beyond its physical form.

culture. ritual. taboo.
norm. conditioning. control.
ideology. standardisation. expectations.
efficiency. excess. antidote.
passivity. numbness. anesthesia.
memory. familiarity. predictability.
hyper-domesticity. privacy.
nature. Instinct. vulnerability.
threshold. temporality. cycle.
awareness. consciousness. subjectivity.
negotiation. spectrum. balance.
agency. scale. choice. exposure.
curiosity. resistance. friction.

4.3 **SITUATING DIS | COMFORT**

- 4.3.1 | UNIVERSALLY UN | COMFORTABLE
- 4.3.2 | MUST BE COMFORTABLE
- 4.3.3 | EXISTENTIALLY NUMB

4.3.1 | UNIVERSALLY UN | COMFORTABLE

"Architecture, in its contemporary form, is a discipline chiefly concerned with the creation of comfortable spaces that satisfy our varying, and ever-increasing, spatial needs and human desires."

(Harrington, 2024, para. 1)

Though comfort may appear universally understood, its triggers, thresholds, and meanings differ dramatically. This research challenges the assumption that comfort is innate or fixed. Instead, comfort was described as something built over time, learned, shaped, and redefined through exposure, culture, and personal history (Lucas, n.d.).

"Comfort is universal, but everyone has a different threshold to it, depending on how you're brought up and where you live." (Participant 13, personal communication, 2025).

Others echoed this sense of comfort as something gradually acquired. These reflections suggest that comfort is not simply felt, but cultivated. Habituation, memory, and repetition were repeatedly identified as key influences. As Kinchin and Gardner (2016) argue, domestic comfort often arises not from ergonomic perfection but from familiarity and learned spatial rhythms.

This complicates any attempt to design for comfort through universal standards. As Heynen and Baydar (2005) explain, the home has historically functioned as a space that encodes cultural values, gender roles, and behavioural expectations, meaning that comfort is always filtered through ideology. What one person finds soothing, another may find stifling.

Such subjectivity also extends to the emotional and psychological landscapes that spaces evoke. As Ellison (2017) points out, comfort often carries traces of personal memory; it is less a response to design alone than to the narratives and associations carried within a space. Therefore, the experience of comfort is rarely passive; it is constantly being negotiated between the self and the environment, between body and memory, between expectation and reality.

4.3.2 | MUST BE COMFORTABLE

"To be comfortable does not mean to be happy but rather, to exist in a state of sensory relaxation through the avoidance of pain. Comfort is the path of least resistance, where our demands and exertions are reduced to their absolute minimum." (Harrington, 2024, para. 2)

The common assumption that comfort is inherently positive overlooks its ideological dimensions. What is often described as "comfortable" reflects broader processes of standardisation, including visual, behavioural, and cultural norms shaped by postwar modernist design ideologies. Comfort can become a curated, taught, and reinforced addiction (figure 12) :

"A place of safety that we start to feel we can't do without." (Babauta, 2025, para. 2)

"This is what you should want. And we're going to make life, in a way, that this is what you will get. And you will like it. And you will enjoy it. And you will strive for it."

(Participant 6, personal communication, 2025)

This echoed across the conversations, evoking the modernist ideology that shaped domestic space after World War II, an ideology of hygiene, control, and ease, designed not only to house the body but to shape its behaviour (Winton, 2004; Colomina & Wigley, 2016). The result was a one-size-fits-all approach to spatial experience (Winton, 2004), which gave rise to a culture of hyper-domesticity: the over-optimised home as a site of emotional numbing.

The an-aesthetic interior no longer embraces the struggles of life, but suppresses them, controlling unpredictability and avoiding friction in favour of perfection. Comfort becomes synonymous with order, smoothness, and cleanliness. These qualities standardise experience and discourage reaction. The home must appear pristine, the mind remains untroubled, and behaviour quietly follows an unwritten choreography.

But at what cost?

Figure 12: Insomnia, Jeff Wall, 1994.



Retrieved from:

<https://lyndakuitphotographycn.wordpress.com/2016/01/20/research-point-jeff-wall-insomnia-1994/>

4.3.3 | EXISTENTIALLY NUMB

The relationship between comfort and standardised predictability emerged as a double-edged one. While ease and routine were often appreciated, participants reflected on how prescribed comfort, though initially reassuring and often mistaken for happiness, can suppress the unpredictability and messiness inherent to life.

Boer (2024) describes the 'smooth city' as a place engineered for frictionless living, where unpredictability is systematically erased in favour of control. Within such spaces, do we inhabit, or merely exist? "You're always in this bubble," said one participant, "a fishbowl" (Participants 2 & 4, personal communication, 2025). These metaphors captured environments so carefully curated that they no longer provoke any reaction at all.

This sense of spatial sedation finds echoes in critiques of the modernist domestic interior. Hyper-domestic environments suppress the essential discomforts that make living meaningful (Esteve, 2018). When every spatial decision is made in advance, nothing is left to negotiate. The result is an anaesthetic interior, where stimuli are muted and the user becomes passive (Andino, 2020; Esteve, 2018). Architecture, when overly predictable, performs too much on our behalf (Al-Hamad, 2018). The intention may be ease, but the outcome is often a subtle disengagement, where comfort stops feeling like anything at all.

The bathroom emerged as a manifestation of these dynamics. Despite its intimacy, many participants described it as emotionally disengaged. In a space so human, the standardised bathroom design does not invite us to embrace the natural rituals of being human, but rather scripts behaviour in advance.

"I think my bathroom, for me, is excessively comfortable to the point where I use it as an escape. ... It's more likely that the bathroom feels safe than the bedroom. So you stay in the bathroom. You stay in the bathroom for so long ... it becomes depressing. But you don't care because you're sitting down on the toilet ... on your phone ... Before you know it, your legs are dead, you're on the toilet for 30 minutes, and you can't even get up.

I think it's excessive!"

(Participant 11, personal communication, 2025)

The above reflection captures the paradox of hyper-domesticity. The bathroom becomes less a site of hygiene or ritual, and more an escape. It becomes a temporary escape, more akin to the experience expected at a hotel than that of a home.

"This comfort is uncomfortable because it's numb" (Participant 8, personal communication, 2025). This numbness is not a failure of design, but its logical conclusion, the endpoint of perfection that eliminates challenge. Even discomfort loses meaning when there is nothing left to contrast it. In this context, voluntary discomfort becomes a necessary friction, a small but vital interruption that keeps our rituals from becoming invisible.

“

V1: So, what do you want to do with your life?

V2: This chair is very comfortable.

V1: Good. So, what do you want to do with your life?

V2: Well, I wanted to be happier, but the happier I am, the less ambitious I get.

V1: And what are you so happy for?

V2: Because I'm comfortable.

V1: Well, if you're comfortable who cares about ambition?

V2: Well, now I can't stand myself. I'm doing nothing with my life.

V1: Why were you so ambitious in the first place?

V2: So I could do something with my life.

V1: Why did you want to do something with your life?

V2: Because it's better than doing nothing with my life.

V1: Right, but what's the benefit? What's the reward of doing something over nothing?

V2: So I could live a nice, comfortable life.

V1: You wanted comfort, so you got comfortable, and now that you're too comfortable, you're uncomfortable.

V2: See, it's more like I got what I wanted, and I still want it.

V1: Right, but do you see the problem here? You're ambitious so that you can get what you want, but once you get what you want you're unhappy, because you're no longer ambitious from not getting what you want.

V2: It's the doing that was nice, and the done is the end of the doing.

V1: But if you wanted to get there wouldn't you be upset if you didn't get there?

V2: Yeah.

V1: So if you get there, you're upset. If you don't get there, you're upset.

”

“To be so comfortable that it is existentially uncomfortable because you realise you're where you wanted to go, and now there's nowhere to go.”

(Baron, 2025)

As participants described, hyper-comfort renders life frictionless and featureless. There are no surprises, no irritants, no prompts. The contradiction of comfort lies in its circular logic: you want comfort so badly that, once attained, it becomes the thing from which you wish to escape. Comfort, therefore, is not devoid of feeling but saturated with expectations, expectations to behave in prescribed ways, to passively enjoy living, and to conform to an aesthetic of ease.

This existential unease was further expressed through comparisons with previous experiences of temporary, restrictive living situations, particularly during periods of international exchange or student accommodation. These experiences, limited by budgets, space constraints, shared living, and a lack of privacy, were acknowledged as seemingly uncomfortable at first.

"I lived more. Not survived.

*I lived more when I had a very uncomfortable living environment. When I had a shower less than 50 by 50 centimetres, with the curtains touching my a** every time I turned the shower on.*

I lived more. So I didn't waste time delaying everything in the comfortable, nice, hot shower."

(Participant 11, personal communication, 2025)

Despite their discomforts, such environments prompted a heightened sense of awareness. Several participants felt disoriented when re-immersed in overly comfortable spaces. Mild discomfort, when temporary and meaningful, awakened perception and encouraged conscious living. In contrast, the excess of the over-optimised home dulled emotional presence. In its journey to perfection, 'good design' strips away the frictions that define our humanity (Esteve, 2018), erasing the lived experience and the essence of inhabiting a space itself.

"After, I got really depressed from having this excess coming back into my room. Existential. Is this all it? I've achieved everything. I've achieved what I wanted, but I still have to be comfortable."

(Participant 13, personal communication, 2025)

However, not all discomfort was framed negatively. "It is a comfortable discomfort. A certain level of discomfort that you are comfortable enough to introduce" (Participant 2, personal communication, 2025). This observation draws attention to the possibility that discomfort is not always a failure. It is the absence of contrast that numbs.

Anna Uddenberg's 2023 Premium Economy presents pseudo-functional sculptures that mimic ergonomic design while offering no real use, instead anticipating and disciplining the body through form (figure 13).

Her work exposes how aesthetics in contemporary design script behaviour, turning users into performers within curated environments. By blurring object and figure, utility and ornament, Uddenberg critiques the way design enforces roles under the glorification of hyper-comfort and functionality (Zeiba, 2024).



*Figure 13 : Installation "Premium Economy", Anna Uddenberg, Kunsthalle Mannheim, 2023.
Photographed by Jens Gerber. Retrieved from <https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr/en/work-architecture/achievements-esprit-nouveau-pavilion-paris-france-1924-1925>*

4.4 UNDERSTANDING DIS | COMFORT

- 4.4.1 | IN MEMORY OF
- 4.4.2 | INTO THE UN | KNOWN
- 4.4.3 | NAKED & AFRAID

Throughout the research process, the critique of lived experiences of dis|comfort sparked a deeper curiosity. If dis | comfort is to be personally defined rather than universally prescribed, then what exactly makes us un|comfortable in the spaces we inhabit every day?

Given the subjective nature of dis|comfort, this is not a question that can be fully or definitively answered. Still, across the study, recurring patterns emerged, pointing to key factors that participants associated with their own experiences of comfort and discomfort.

Dis | comfort was never captured in its entirety, but the following sections shed light on a number of lived realities, emotional artworks, and conversations that come closest to embodying the dis|comfort explored throughout this research.

4.4.1 | IN MEMORY OF

Throughout the participatory study, comfort frequently emerged as a mnemonic structure. For many participants, it was not found in what was functional or promoted as aesthetic, but in what was known and familiar. They often referred to experiences or spaces that, while not universally pleasant or efficient, held emotional charge.

Domestic comfort is often maintained through rhythm and routine rather than novelty or optimisation. In this sense, familiarity performs a kind of spatial storytelling, replaying experiences that become reassuring through repetition (Kinchin & Gardner, 2016). This connection was particularly strong in relation to spaces associated with ritual. Consequently toilets, showers, and other domestic facilities, typically dismissed as mundane, became characters of domestic life.

One participant exemplified a porcelain toilet that, despite its cold surface, evokes an emotional reaction. “It connects the emotions that I connected to my original place... so it’s not necessarily a practical comfort, but it’s the feeling of comfort” (Participant 2, personal communication, 2025). Here, comfort was not ergonomic, but an emotional experience, rooted in memory and rituals of the past (figure 14).

Figure 14 : Tan-Nanna Helu Manna, 2002.



Author's personal representation of physically unideal, yet emotionally comforting domestic furniture.

Just as memory can motivate comfort, it can just as easily trigger discomfort. “I could spend my whole life in my childhood bedroom, but then one bad experience could make me feel super uncomfortable in it” (Participant 12, personal communication, 2025). Discomfort, then, does not always arise from unpleasantness, but from a disruption of internalised scripts, when a space no longer reflects the emotional logic we once trusted.

In response to such moments of emotional rupture, the unfamiliar must be negotiated, and over time, a new unfamiliar may be adopted. This process reshapes the emotional associations of space, transforming how comfort or discomfort is experienced within it.

Many participants recalled such experiences, in public campsites, student housing, caravans, even public toilets, that were initially disorienting. Yet these settings, though conventionally uncomfortable, were often memorable and strangely grounding. They highlighted familiarity through contrast, making its emotional mechanics more visible.

The familiar offers orientation, predictability, and emotional dis | comfort. The unfamiliar, by contrast, demands conscious living. It reawakens perception and bodily awareness, requiring navigation rather than passive occupation. Therefore, comfort can blur into numbness when over-familiarity dulls sensory response (Ellison, 2017). In contrast, discomfort becomes existential: the awkward sofa, the cold toilet, the noisy street, each demands presence, balance, and intention.

In this light, spatial dis | comfort is less a design quality and more a daily performance of ritual (Abbas, 2025). It is a choreography of memory, comforting or not, that shapes how we inhabit space. Not because the space is perfect, but because it is known, expected, and emotionally legible.

Therefore, when critiquing the subjectivity of dis|comfort, we cannot reduce it to preference. It is shaped by how one has learned to read and re-read space.



Rachel Whiteread's "Untitled (Domestic)" (2002) mirrors this principle. By casting the negative space of a fire escape, she evokes not the presence of function, but the trace of absence, imbuing the void with memory (Buffalo AKG Art Museum, 2006). A mundane, transitional space, no longer familiar, in turn, no longer easy to navigate. A passive task now a conscious experience.

Figure 15: "Untitled (Domestic)," Rachel Whiteread, 2006.

Photographed by BmoreArt

Retrieved from: <https://bmoreart.com/2018/11/rachel-whiteread.html>

4.4.2 | INTO THE UN | KNOWN

If the familiar is associated with comfort, then “the new is discomfort” (Participant 8, personal communication, 2025).

While familiarity brought many participants a sense of emotional anchoring, predictability exposed a more complex relationship with comfort. Participants acknowledged that comfort often stems from the power that comes with control, “because if you can control, you can predict” (Participant 2, personal communication, 2025), enabling choice and self-regulation.

“You feel more comfortable with your cave, because you know what’s inside”

(Participant 2, personal communication, 2025)

Control over one's environment, whether spatial or social, emerged as a central factor in shaping experiences of comfort. The domestic interior, in particular, was designed to provide privacy, consistency, and order. In these settings, function is predetermined, and behaviour is subtly scripted. The body knows what to expect, and this certainty becomes a kind of quiet comfort.

Yet many participants questioned the emotional cost of such predictability. While control can reduce anxiety, it could just as easily induce boredom. “Don't you also think that humans tend to get bored of predictability at a point?” (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025). After all, the “endless reshaping and speculation about possible outcomes is uniquely human” (Colomina & Wigley, 2016, p. 10).

Design that anticipates every outcome may suppress precisely that instinct. When a space answers all questions in advance, there is no room left for curiosity, improvisation, or agency, and consequently, the more perfect the environment, the less alive it feels.

However, this conclusion cannot be universally applied. “It's very dependent on the individual person itself ... there are some people who enjoy a routine” (Participant 8, personal communication, 2025).

The challenge, then, lies in balance. Spaces that are too predictable risk stripping users of emotional agency (figure 16), yet unpredictability can heighten vulnerability. In this sense, comfort stems from the threshold where the user could feel prepared enough without becoming a robot. This calls for a negotiation within spatial environments, where experience can be supported rather than dictated. In turn, this suggests that the solution is not to abandon predictability entirely.



Figure 16 : "The Subway," George Tooker, 1950.

Author's chosen depiction of numbing predictability.

Retrieved from: <https://whitney.org/collection/works/3052>

4.4.3 | NAKED & AFRAID

Discomfort often arose not from unfamiliarity alone, but from a sudden loss of control, particularly in moments when the body was made vulnerable. Participants reflected on situations where routines were interrupted or where the boundary between private and public collapsed. Unlike the predictability of the domestic interior, these encounters exposed them to the unpredictability of others, of space, and of their own instincts.

Many of the most uncomfortable moments recalled during the discussions involved deeply human actions, urination, defecation, nudity, bodily maintenance. Yet these are not exceptional behaviours. They are everyday rituals, biologically necessary and universally shared (figure 17). The discomfort stemmed not from the actions, but from their context, when they were carried out in unfamiliar spaces, under observation, or beyond the safety of routine. These are not discomforts of nature, but discomforts of nurture, reflections of what we have been taught to conceal, suppress, and isolate.

Why do these acts, natural to the human body, become uncomfortable outside their designated environments? The discomfort lies not in biology but in culture. These are discomforts of exposure, governed by architectural scripting and cultural taboos. For instance, swimming naked in the sea is not inherently dangerous, yet in many societies, it is coded with shame. What makes us uncomfortable is not the act itself, but its perceived impropriety within a particular spatial or social frame.



Figure 17: "En premiär," Anders Zorn, 1888, National museum, Stockholm, Sweden.
Retrieved from: <https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/en-premiar/anders-zorn/10103>

This tension is echoed in architectural discourse. As examined in the literature review, the modernist bathroom was never just about functionality, it was about spatial separation and social sanitisation (Holland, 2019). It turned bodily maintenance into a hidden, individualised act. By designing spaces that isolate discomfort, architecture has trained us to expect invisibility, removing moments of vulnerability from public life.

Participants described how this discomfort was amplified in shared or transitional settings, communal bathrooms, campsites, hostels, where privacy was challenged (figures 18, 19). The toilet emerged repeatedly as a site of negotiation: squat toilets, outdoor loos, bidets, shared facilities. These provoked discomfort not simply because they were physically different, but because they disrupted the normalised choreography of domestic hygiene. Yet these moments were also often remembered vividly, suggesting that friction, while disorienting, leaves an impression.

These discomforts, however, were not uniformly framed as negative. For some, they were described as grounding, even desirable under the right conditions.

*"For me, my ideal bathroom, is in nature, the best shower is under a waterfall, the best bath is in a lake, the best sh*It is in a bush, the best pee is over a cliff."*

(Participant 6, personal communication, 2025)

Here, discomfort becomes a kind of presence, a disruption that reawakens the body. When chosen rather than imposed, discomfort can become an act of autonomy. Participants began to frame vulnerability not as weakness, but as a necessary friction that interrupts numbness. This reframes the issue: perhaps the goal is not to eliminate discomfort, but to curate it carefully, introducing just enough to make us aware, engaged, and alive within a spatial or social frame.



Figure 18: "Cookie and Millie in the girls' room at the Mudd Club, NYC

Photographed by Goldin, N.

Retrieved from:

<https://high.org/collection/cookie-and-millie-in-the-girls-room-at-the-mudd-club-nyc-1976/>



Figure 19: Soldiers swim in Roman baths at Gafsa, Elisofo.

Retrieved from:

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/soldiers-swim-in-roman-baths-at-gafsa/agGRFzlejOPNVg?hl=en>

4.5 NEGOTIATING DIS | COMFORT

- 4.5.1 | SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN
- 4.5.2 | THE TEST OF TIME
- 4.5.3 | BY CHOICE

4.5.1 | SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

Following discussions on familiarity, predictability, control, and vulnerability, it became clear that comfort and discomfort do not exist in isolation. They are not fixed poles, but interdependent states that constantly shift in relation to context, perception, and threshold. Most participants did not treat discomfort as something to avoid entirely, nor comfort as something to pursue uncritically. Instead, both were understood as dynamic forces, to be negotiated, recalibrated, even redefined.

“Absolute freedom and absolute captivity, the exact opposite of freedom, are only hypothetical concepts. But I do think that every individual is constantly moving between these opposite poles” (Verwey, 2024, para. 12).

Many participants noted an unconscious preference for environments that held a certain degree of friction. Discomfort was not always a problem to be solved. Instead, it could become a site of awareness, even growth. “There is a necessary discomfort to get to comfort” (Participant 5, personal communication, 2025).

This was not about glorifying suffering or discomfort for its own sake. Rather, it reflected the reality that excessive comfort may dull perception, while small, intentional discomforts could sharpen it. As one participant framed it, “It is a comfortable discomfort. A certain level of discomfort that you are comfortable enough to introduce” (Participant 2, personal communication, 2025).

What counts as comfort or discomfort is also relational. The act of bathing, for example, a practice interpreted widely across the spectrum. Bathing naked in a lake, bathing clothed in a public bath, showering with a partner at home, showering alone at a gym, each carries different implications. For someone without stable housing, a gym shower might feel like a sanctuary. For others, it might feel vulnerable or inadequate. Discomfort is therefore not absolute. The context changed the meaning. What was once uncomfortable could become comforting when chosen, and vice versa.

This context-dependence echoes the idea that “to live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering” (Phillocaliste, 2023, para. 14). A mild, chosen discomfort can act as recalibration, a reminder of one’s body, limits, and vitality (Esteve, 2018). As Harrington (2024) observes, “we often seek out discomfort and thrive within it” (para. 3). When voluntarily entered, discomfort becomes a mechanism of awareness.

This dis | comfort spectrum has long been explored through experimental art and design. In *Rhythm 0* (1974), Marina Abramović invited her audience to use any of 72 objects, ranging from feathers to knives, on her passive body.

The piece destabilised assumptions around control, vulnerability, and responsibility. The discomfort was not only hers, it implicated the audience, exposing the latent discomfort in their own choices.



Figure 20: "Rhythm 0, Marina Abramović, Studio Mona, Naples, 1974.

Retrieved from:

<https://blogs.uoregon.edu/marinaabramovic/category/rhythm-series/>

4.5.2 | THE TEST OF TIME

Participants described discomforts that, though initially unfamiliar or unwelcome, were eventually reinterpreted through habit, necessity, or shifting emotional associations. “I feel like we can adapt quite a lot” (Participant 13, personal communication, 2025). While this adaptability had its limits, it reflected a meaningful recalibration of both body and mind.

“We do this intentionally. We put ourselves in discomfort in order to enjoy the comfort of something else” (Participant 5, personal communication, 2025). Discomfort, then, can serve a comparative function, it sharpens our perception of ease, making comfort feel earned, not assumed. It heightens sensory and emotional registers not because the space has changed, but because the user has learned to read and inhabit it differently. “Eventually, it’s a skill you learn, to be comfortable” (Participant 15, personal communication, 2025).

Participants also distinguished between temporary discomfort and that which offers no perceived endpoint. One participant, reflecting on their experience of living outdoors for a year, shared, “Towards the end of it, I really wanted to take an easy shower. I wanted nothing else but to have that efficiency of it... Every now and then, I do enjoy it, but... I want to know that it’s there when I return” (Participant 5, personal communication, 2025).

This reflection speaks to the desire for oscillation, for spaces that allow departure and return, effort and release. Adaptation, in this context, is not submission but agency, a continuous negotiation of where one sits along the dis | comfort spectrum based on what is possible, bearable, or nourishing in a given moment.

This dynamic resonates with earlier discussions on friction and ritual. Even when discomfort is not pleasurable, it can be purposeful. It marks time, grounds us in context, and illuminates our own shifting thresholds. The architecture may remain the same, but what evolves is our capacity to meet it.

4.5.3 | BY CHOICE

As revealed across both focus groups, it was not the presence or absence of comfort that defined spatial experience, but the user's ability to navigate their own threshold, mentally, physically, and temporally. Thresholds emerged as both physical and psychological markers.

Some participants framed them in spatial terms such as moving between indoors and outdoors, from private rituals to public exposure. Others described them temporally, recognising that what felt intolerable in the moment might, over time, become manageable, or even preferred. The body adjusts, and the mind adapts.

Rather than presenting comfort as a passive endpoint, many participants described it as a process, a journey of exposure, response, and reflection. "The climb of becoming comfortable is better than the actual comfort itself," one participant admitted (Participant 13, personal communication, 2025). Here, the value lies not in ease, but in the momentum discomfort provides, the conscious challenge of recognising a limit and choosing whether to meet it, shift it, or retreat.

This process of negotiation depended heavily on agency. Discomfort, when chosen, became a site of exploration. Participants differentiated between discomforts endured out of necessity, such as homelessness or inadequate shelter, and those deliberately introduced. Unless a basic level of comfort is met, one would not desire discomfort. Discomfort, then, is only liberating when fundamental needs are secured.

Architectural design has the power to facilitate or hinder this negotiation. Not by removing discomfort, but by supporting the user through it. Spaces must offer a spectrum, not a prescription. Design should not erase vulnerability but guide users through it, offering options, thresholds, and rhythms that allow temporary discomfort to serve as stimulus rather than burden.

It is within this context that the work of Arakawa and Gins becomes radical, not because it mimics other provocations, but because it constructs a fully committed architecture of intentional disorientation. Floors tilt unexpectedly, walls curve and resist the body's assumptions, and everyday tasks require new modes of awareness. This was not an attempt to create beauty or efficiency. It was an attempt to keep users alive, resisting habit and cognitive stasis. As Arakawa famously declared, "We have decided not to die." (Reversible Destiny Foundation, n.d.).

Rather than offering sanctuary, these environments propose training. They destabilise comfort as an endpoint, reframing the home as a site of spatial rehearsal, where discomfort extends awareness, vitality, and presence. It is discomfort not as denial, but as preparation, for reality, ageing, death, or simply waking up.

At the heart of this negotiation lies awareness, the mental effort of assessing what discomfort means, and what it offers. Several participants described this in terms of stimulation rather than hardship. "It's not just about being uncomfortable. It's about having your brain actually work" (Participant 15, personal communication, 2025). This distinction matters. While numbness erodes curiosity, intentional discomfort sharpens it.

This understanding reframes the role of design. Rather than eliminating discomfort, thoughtful design can support the user through it. Not through complete control, but through adjustable friction, spaces that respond to shifting thresholds. In several moments, participants described how home, once thought of as a safe haven, began to resemble a trap, a site of passivity rather than preparation. "Why do we need to see the house as a place of just simply comfort? ... Why can't it be the place where you just do your needs?" (Participant 11, personal communication, 2025).

These provocations offer no manifesto, but they suggest a shift: a move away from total comfort as design's highest goal. They do not abandon comfort, but position it within a broader spectrum of human experience, where risk, ritual, and resistance coexist.

To design for this is not to glorify suffering. It is to recognise that comfort is not neutral. It is temporal, cultural, and deeply personal. The home should not collapse, as Yanagihara (2021) reminds us, but beyond that, its function remains open. Between control and chaos, softness and stimulus, disconnection and deep presence, there is a line. And perhaps it is on that line that living begins.



Figure 30: "Enthusiast" ('The Gouty Angler'), Theodore Lane, 1828.

Retrieved from:

<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr/en/work-architecture/achievements-esprit-nouveau-pavilion-paris-france-1924-1925/>

4.6 LET ME BE UN | COMFORTABLE

Despite the ideologies that train us to seek a prescribed lifestyle, it is within human nature to resist such numbness. Participants described moments, quiet or deliberate, where they deviated from the domestic script. Not in protest, but in curiosity. "Everyone thinks they know exactly what they want until someone gives them something they would have never thought of, and then all of a sudden this is so much better" (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025). To accept the unfamiliar is to resist inertia. To embrace discomfort is to reclaim presence.

These forms of resistance may appear small: implementing elements of vulnerability, disrupting visual harmony or even challenging the norms of architectural layout. But they speak to a deeper impulse to reclaim what it means to be human. Resisting prescribed comfort means reintroducing curiosity, pleasant mess, and the kind of discomfort that calls the user back into actively living.

A slow subversion, a spatial shift away from domination and towards engagement (Grice, 2023). Comfort is not abolished, but redefined as something more textured, more lived. A space where comfort and conscious effort exist together. A space that still asks something of us. Such a design does not deliver comfort as a finished product. It opens a threshold, a place where users must think, feel, and consciously choose. And that, perhaps, is the most radical kind of comfort there is.

05. UN | CONCLUDED

5.1 | SUMMARISING DIS | COMFORT

5.2 | REDEFINING DIS | COMFORT

5.3 | LIMITATIONS

5.4 | TO BE CONTINUED

5.1 SUMMARISING DIS | COMFORT

This chapter revisits the core questions that shaped the research, exploring how we experience dis | comfort and what role it might play in spatial design. What follows is a reflection on the key ideas and tensions that emerged through a theoretical understanding, followed by group discussions and analysis.

Across literature, focus group reflections, and critical spatial analysis, **dis | comfort** emerged not as a binary, but as a fluid, embodied spectrum. This research challenged the assumption that comfort is inherently good or universally desired. Instead, comfort revealed itself to be deeply ideological, woven into architectural norms, political agendas, and socio-cultural expectations.

Comfort as control surfaced in both theory and lived experience, linked to the rationality of modernist design. Streamlined forms, hygienic surfaces, and efficient layouts did more than soothe, they scripted behaviour, muted sensation, and standardised spatial experience.

This numbing pursuit of order led to what became described as **an-aesthetic conditions**, spaces so polished, quiet, and frictionless they removed all sense of presence. Rather than calm, they produced disconnection. In contrast, discomfort served as an alert system. It activated awareness, reminded bodies of their place in space, and made the invisible visible. The absence of struggle was not peace, but passivity.

These dynamics found their most intimate setting in the domestic interior. The post-war home, especially the bathroom, emerged as the architectural manifestation of **hyper-domesticity**. Here, comfort became emotional governance. Privacy, cleanliness, and routine stabilised daily life but also suppressed rawness, chaos, and emotion. The bathroom revealed how design disciplines vulnerability, offering control while prescribing how and when it may be expressed.

Yet comfort was rarely defined in practical terms. It often stemmed from **familiarity and memory**. Surfaces, materials, and gestures were not neutral, they were emotionally loaded. A texture might soothe because of a childhood memory, or provoke discomfort if linked to past trauma. These associations were intensely personal, and often invisible. The emotional resonance of space outweighed its functional success.

Alongside familiarity, **predictability and ritual** shaped how comfort was created and maintained. Regular habits like brushing teeth or lighting a room became stabilising acts. These micro-rituals gave rhythm to space, producing comfort through repetition. But this choreography could also constrain. Comfort became something to perform, especially when vulnerability was deemed inappropriate or unsafe. The rituals of the domestic were not universal, but socially conditioned.

What emerged, then, was the role of **temporality and thresholds**. Comfort and discomfort were not static states, but experiences shaped by time. A minor irritation could become intolerable, or a strange design could become cherished with exposure. These shifts showed that space does not dictate feeling, feeling unfolds through encounter and adaptation. The same space can be differently read, depending on duration, mood, or past experience.

This revealed a dynamic **spectrum of dis | comfort**, a continuum rather than opposition. Between extremes of ease and unease lay infinite variations. "Absolute freedom and absolute captivity... are only hypothetical concepts. But I do think that every individual is constantly moving between these opposite poles" (Verwey, 2024, para. 12). Experience, then, exists not in absolutes, but in movement, across thresholds, moods, and contexts.

Throughout the research, **negotiation and agency** emerged as critical. Comfort was rarely given, it was constructed. It was adjusted through posture, material layering, reframing. The user of space became an interpreter, responding and modifying rather than passively receiving. Discomfort was not a defect in design, but an invitation to respond.

In some cases, **discomfort was chosen**. Individuals sought it out to regain control, wake up, or reconnect with their environment. What seemed uncomfortable to some became a form of clarity to others. This rejection of passive comfort reflected a desire for more active, conscious engagement. Discomfort, in these cases, became a strategy.

This led to acts of **spatial resistance**, subtle refusals to use a space as intended. These included physical misuses, aesthetic rejections, or behavioural shifts. These small acts unsettled norms, opening new ways of being within the built environment. They challenged the assumption that comfort equals good design.

Ultimately, this study suggests that **dis | comfort as a design strategy** holds critical potential. The most memorable environments were not necessarily the most seamless. They were the ones that made people feel, deeply, differently, and with intention. Design need not resolve every friction. Sometimes, friction is what gives architecture meaning. Dis | comfort, then, is not a problem to be solved, but a tool to reframe experience. Not a failure, but a form of presence.

5.2 REDEFINING DIS | COMFORT

What is comfort? What is discomfort? The more participants reflected, the less stable these terms became. They ceased to function as fixed conditions and instead revealed themselves as unstable states, emotional, bodily, cultural, and contextual. No single definition could contain them.

Comfort can be a bubble-bath or a shower under rain. It can be a porcelain toilet or a hole in the floor. It can be too much, or never enough. Discomfort, similarly, might sting or awaken, alienate or anchor, oppress or inspire.

What emerged was not a universal truth, but a number of contradictions, each pointing to a different facet of lived experience. Drawing from these reflections, discomfort, then, is not failure. It is a feeling. It is the friction between expectation and encounter. And comfort is not resolution. It is recognition. It is the moment something makes sense, not because it fits, but because it resonates.

In this way, dis | comfort is not a destination, but a language. A process. An experience. A spectrum. A threshold. A choice.

It is not only where we live, but how we live. And perhaps more importantly, how we might live otherwise.

5.3 LIMITATIONS

This study offers only a partial view into the broader and complex phenomenon of discomfort. Its small scale, limited to two focus groups of design students, means the findings are deeply situated and not intended to be generalised. As an interpretative, qualitative project, the insights are necessarily shaped by subjectivity: that of the participants, and of the researcher, whose design background and personal proximity to the topic influenced the analytical lens. While the use of discussion and drawing provided layered perspectives, a more immersive, experiential, and quantitative methodology could have further deepened the enquiry. Other methodological limitations and considerations are detailed in Chapter 3.

5.4 TO BE CONTINUED

This research offers only a glimpse into the complex nature of dis | comfort in architecture and spatial design. Dis | comfort has been, and should be studied more deeply across psychological, social, and physical dimensions not only within the realm of architecture, but as an understanding of life. Such research could implement immersive or experiential methods, which could help capture the embodied and shifting qualities of dis | comfort over time.

From here, the topic opens up an ongoing line of curiosity, one that could continue to branch into increasingly focused, and equally open-ended, investigations.

Future studies could build on these findings by engaging with wider demographics, cultural backgrounds, or alternative spatial settings. Within the interest of this research, an interesting sequel could tackle its architectural manifestations, through a detailed study of physical characteristics, particularly in how they can enlighten new architectural goals in future projects.

Six years of being comfortably uncomfortable. The journey is over. Yet here I am, in my perfectly comfortable room, submitting this paper. More uncomfortably comfortable than ever. I wrote a composed conclusion, but it has left me with more existential questions than answers. So I begin again, in search of the discomforts I never knew I was longing for.

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APPENDICES

A		INFORMATION LETTER
B		CONSENT FORM
C		PARTICIPANT SKETCHES
D		FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION
E		FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPTS

A.

INVITATION & INFORMATION LETTER

Invitation Letter

"Dis/Comfort: Comfort in the Midst of Intentional Discomfort"

Dear Sir/Madame,

My name is Federica Formosa and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master of Architecture in Architectural Design. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled "Dis/Comfort: Comfort in the Midst of Intentional Discomfort,"; this is being supervised by Perit Alex Spiteri. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

My study examines the concept of discomfort as a deliberate design strategy within architecture. It challenges the conventional association of comfort with good design, exploring instead how discomfort can disrupt ingrained perceptions of space, evoke emotional responses, and encourage deeper engagement with the environments we occupy.

Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of individuals' perceptions of the discussed philosophies, helping me gather insights that will contribute to the discussions underpinning my research.

Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured focus group which will follow a qualitative approach, where participants' reflections and interpretations will be analysed and incorporated into the broader discourse of the dissertation. The discussion will take up approximately one hour.

Data collected will be strictly confidential and anonymous. Raw identifiable data will be encrypted and stored offline on an external hard drive or flash drive, or a secure UM server (not the UM Google Drive). Any material in hard copy form will be placed in a locked cupboard. Only my supervisor and myself (and in exceptional cases, examiners) will have access to this data.

The findings which emerge from this research may be published (e.g., in a dissertation, academic journals) and/or presented (e.g., during conferences, meetings). Your name (or any other identifying information) will not appear when the findings are reported.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased.

All data collected will be stored in an anonymised folder and subsequently destroyed once the study has been completed.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, you may contact myself or my supervisor on the details provided below.

Yours Sincerely,

Federica Formosa

Perit Alex Spiteri

Information Letter

"Dis/Comfort: Comfort in the Midst of Intentional Discomfort"

My name is Federica Formosa, and I am currently in my final year at the University of Malta, pursuing a Master's in Architectural Design. As part of my dissertation research, I am conducting a fieldwork study targeting individuals who, as current or former students, have been trained to critically evaluate and interpret the spaces we inhabit. The purpose of this study is to gather insights that will inform and enhance the discourse surrounding my research.

My dissertation, titled *"Dis/Comfort: Comfort in the Midst of Intentional Discomfort,"* examines the concept of discomfort as a deliberate design strategy within architecture. It challenges the conventional association of comfort with good design, exploring instead how discomfort can disrupt ingrained perceptions of space, evoke emotional responses, and encourage deeper engagement with the environments we occupy.

This workshop will involve a semi-structured focus group, approached qualitatively, where participants' reflections and interpretations will be analysed and incorporated into the broader discourse of the dissertation.

The session will be structured as follows:

1. Drawing Exercise 1:

Participants will be provided with paper and pencils and asked to sketch a specific room typology based on a scenario that will be introduced at the start of the session. The exercise will include a brief 5-minute preparation period, followed by 10 minutes of drawing time. To ensure unbiased participation and avoid any prior preparation, the details of this exercise are intentionally not disclosed in this information sheet.

2. Concept Introduction:

A 5-minute topic introduction will follow, during which key terms relevant to the discussion will be introduced, alongside a brief orienting explanation to establish the context for the conversation.

3. **Group Discussion:**

A semi-structured group discussion will then take place, guided by prompts designed to ensure productive dialogue. While the discussion is expected to last approximately 20 minutes, this may be extended if participants agree that the conversation is progressing in an interesting and valuable direction.

4. **Drawing Exercise 2:**

To conclude the session, participants will be asked to create a second drawing of the same room typology. This time, they will be invited to incorporate their interpretation of the topics and insights discussed during the group activity. This exercise will again allow for 10 minutes of drawing time.

5. **Conclusions:**

Participants will be provided with an opportunity to share their concluding remarks and raise any questions they may have.

Results:

The discussions will be analysed and incorporated into my dissertation, contributing to a deeper exploration of the study's key themes. Should the conversation take an engaging or unexpected direction, your insights may also help to inform and refine the focus of my research.

The drawings produced during the session will be scanned and analysed to gain a deeper understanding of participants' interpretations, both before and after the discussions. This aims to provide varied perspectives on how the subject is perceived and experienced, as well as to explore the emotional and conceptual responses it evokes.

Your participation in this focus group is greatly valued, as your contributions will play an important role in shaping and enhancing this study.

Yours Sincerely,
Federica Formosa

B.

CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

"Dis/Comfort: Comfort in the Midst of Intentional Discomfort"

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Federica Formosa. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in a semi-structured focus group in which the researcher will facilitate a conversation exploring the use of intentional discomfort as a design strategy in architecture. I am aware that the focus group will take approximately one hour. I understand that the focus group is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. I also understand that this research may benefit others by helping the researcher gather insights that will contribute to the discussions underpinning the research topic.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.

7. I understand that all data collected will be erased/stored in an anonymised folder on completion of the study and following publication of results within two years of completion of the study.
8. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.
9. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
10. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this focus group to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).
- ☐ I agree to this focus group being audio recorded.
- ☐ I do not agree to this focus group being audio recorded.
11. I am aware that the focus group should be considered confidential and that I should not disclose details of those participating and/or of the nature of discussions to others.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant:

Signature:

Date:

Federica Formosa

Perit Alex Spiteri

Consent Form

Federica Formosa 2025

C.

PARTICIPANT SKETCHES

PARTICIPANT 1



Figure 31: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 1, 2025.

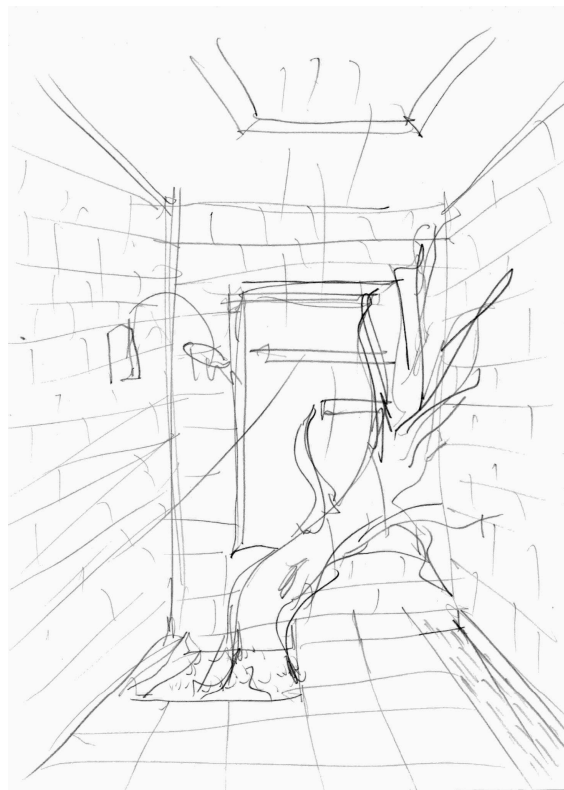


Figure 32: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 1, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 2

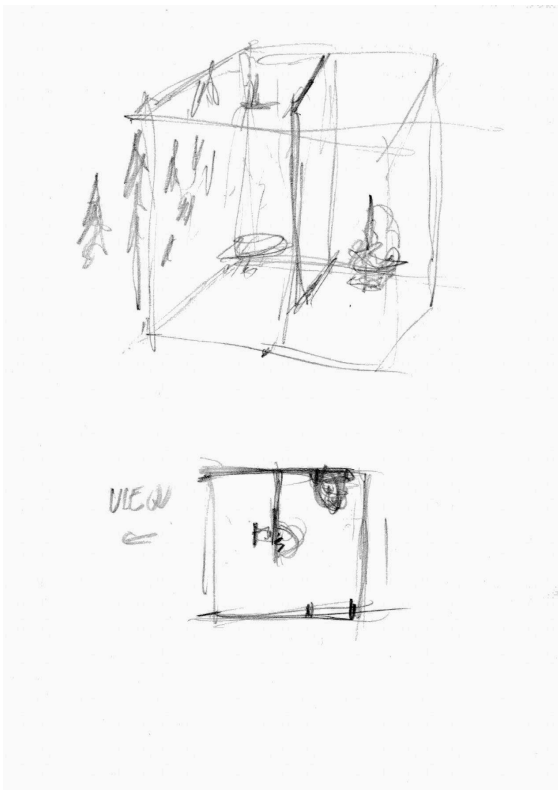


Figure 33: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 2, 2025. Figure 34: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 2, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 3

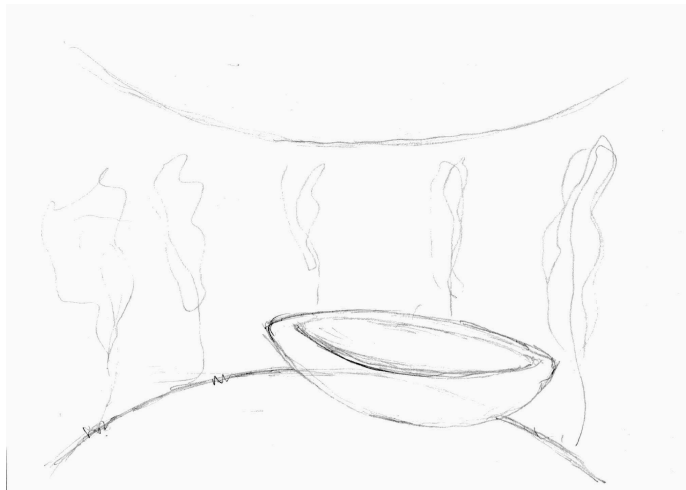


Figure 35: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 3, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 4



Figure 36: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 4, 2025.

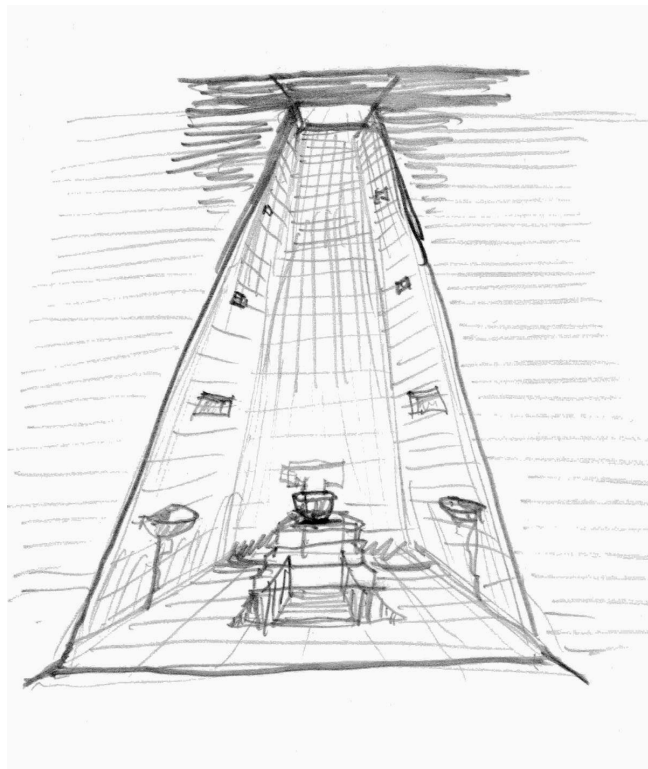


Figure 37: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 4, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 5

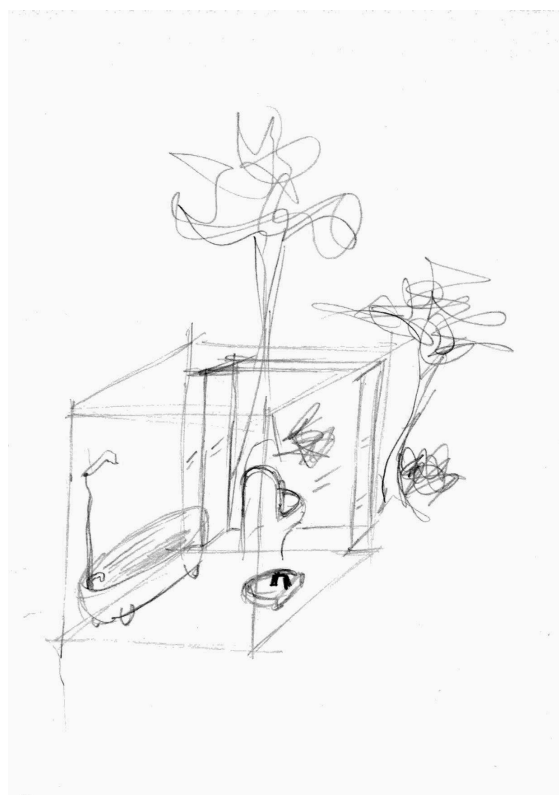
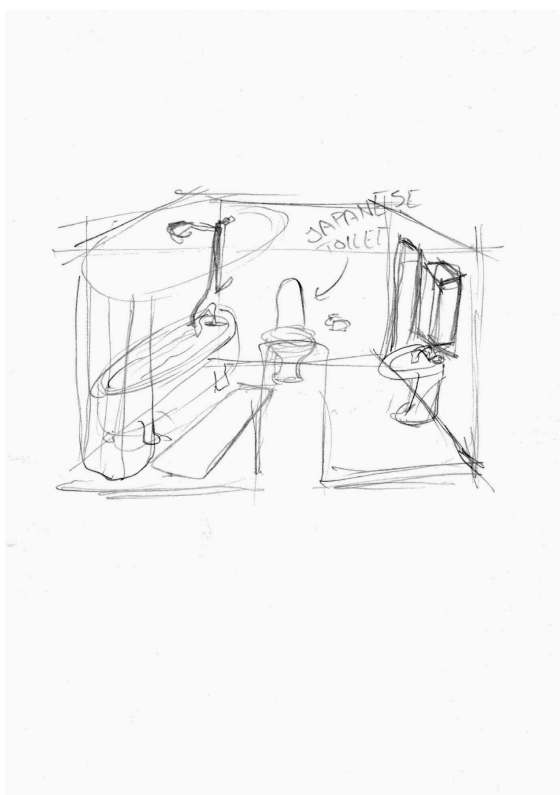


Figure 38: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 5, 2025. Figure 39: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 5, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 6

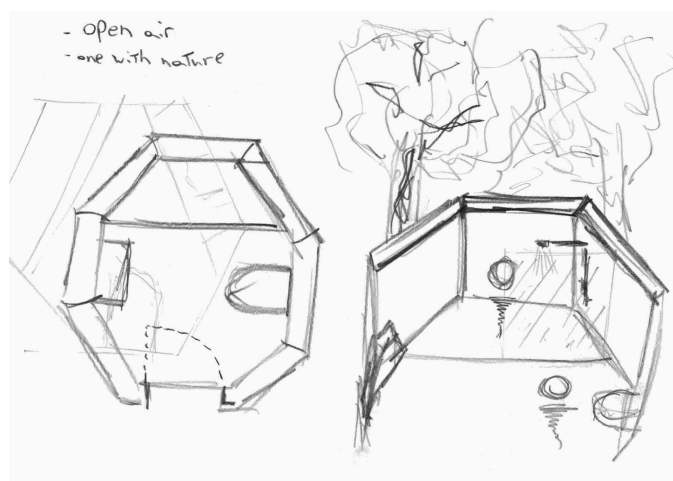


Figure 40: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 6, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 7

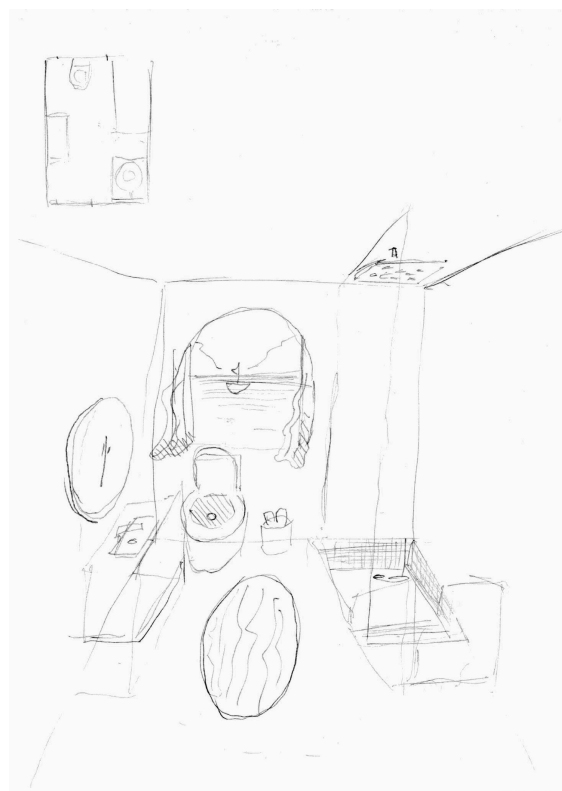
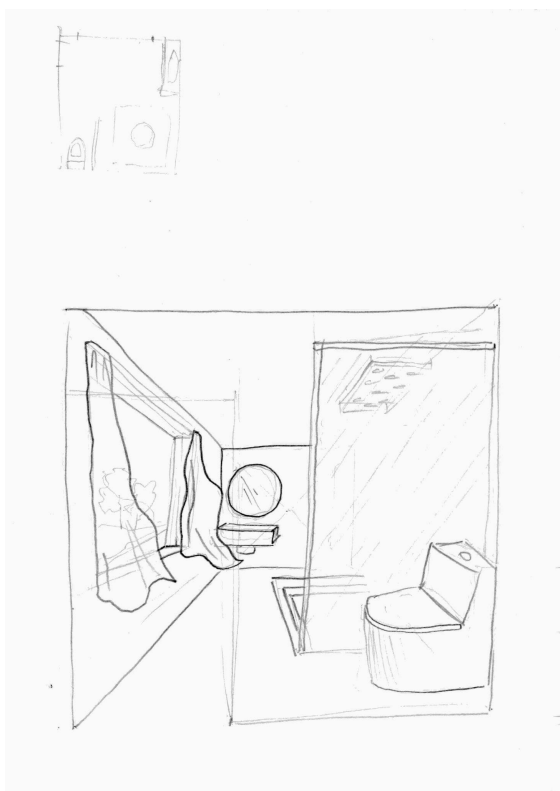


Figure 41: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 7, 2025. Figure 42: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 7, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 8



Figure 43: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 8, 2025.

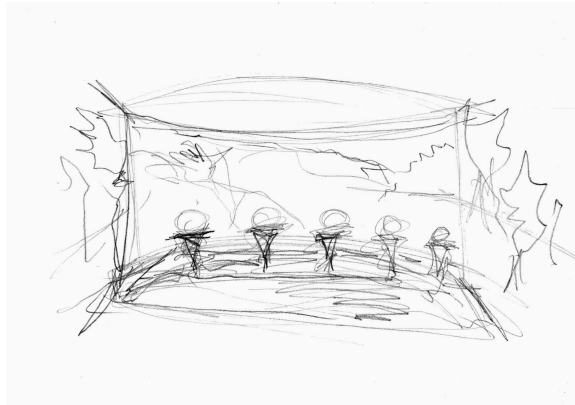


Figure 44: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 8, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 9

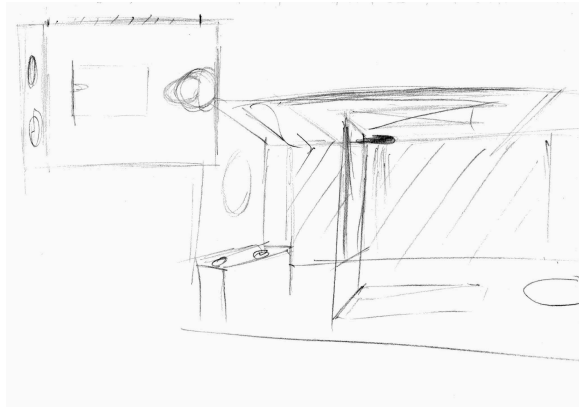


Figure 45: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 9, 2025.

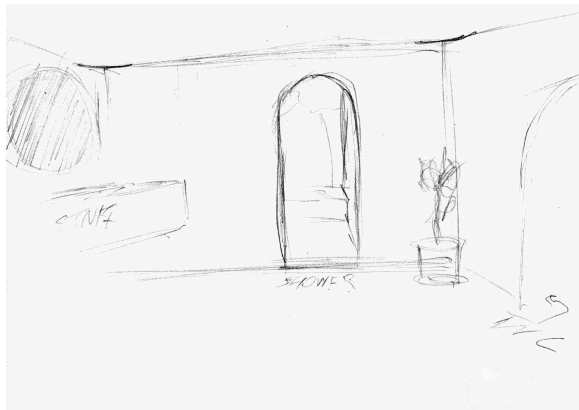


Figure 46: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 9, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 10

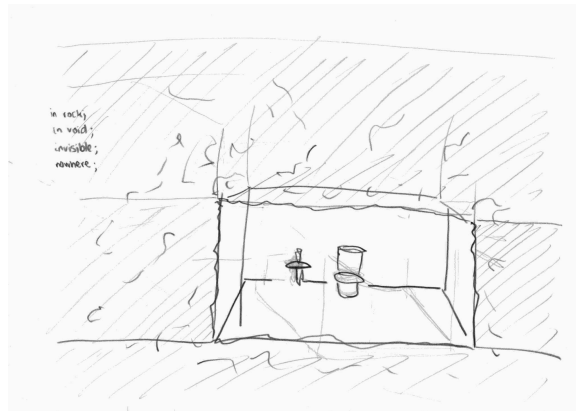


Figure 47: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 10, 2025.



Figure 48: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 10, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 11

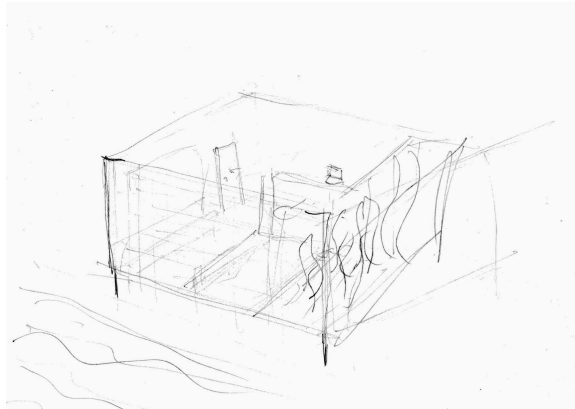


Figure 49: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 11, 2025.

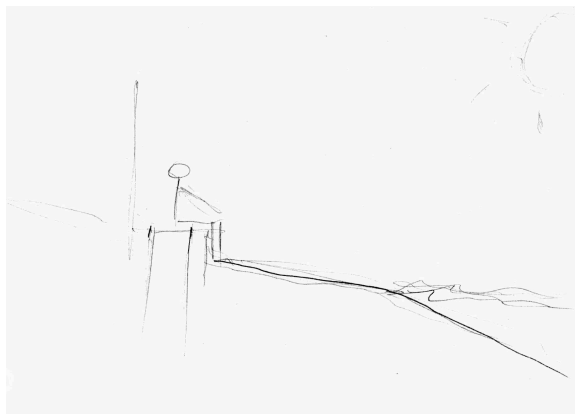


Figure 50: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 11, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 12

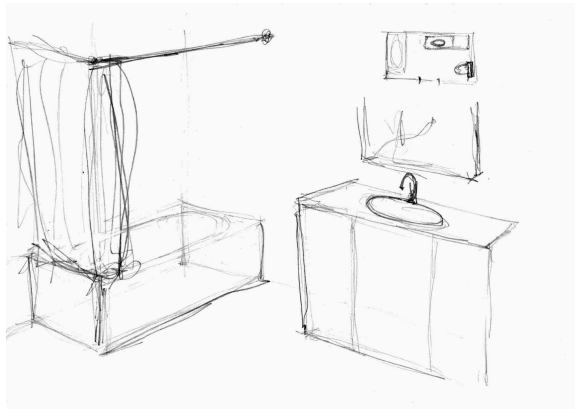


Figure 51: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 12, 2025.

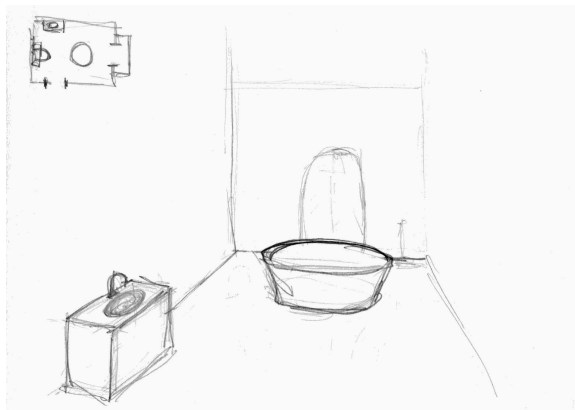


Figure 52: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 12, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 13

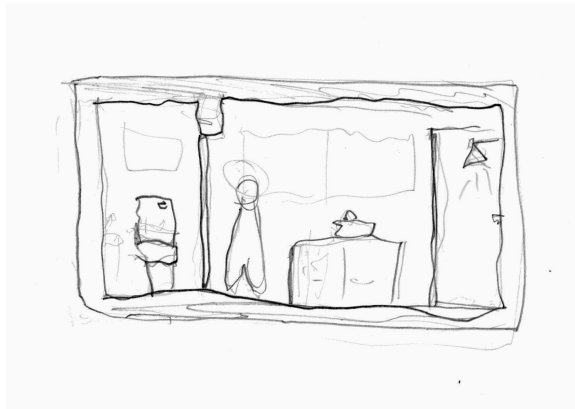


Figure 53: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 13, 2025.

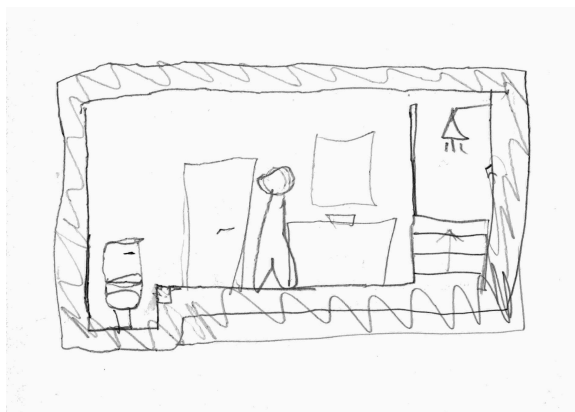


Figure 54: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 13, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 14



Figure 55: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 14, 2025.



Figure 56: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 14, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 15

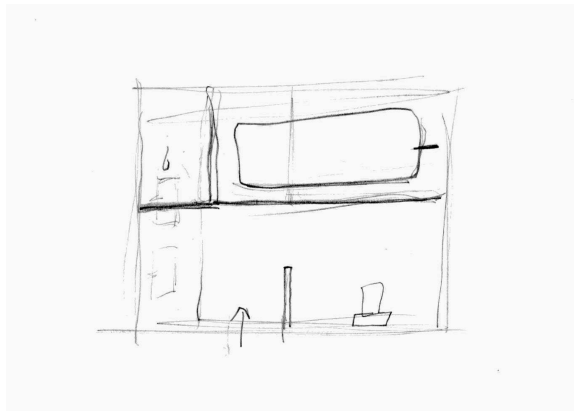


Figure 57: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 15, 2025.

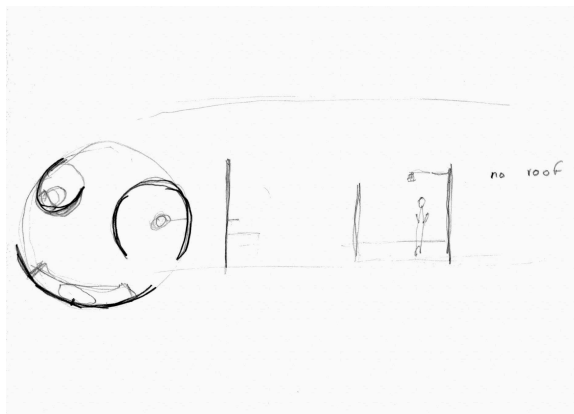


Figure 58: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 15, 2025.

PARTICIPANT 16

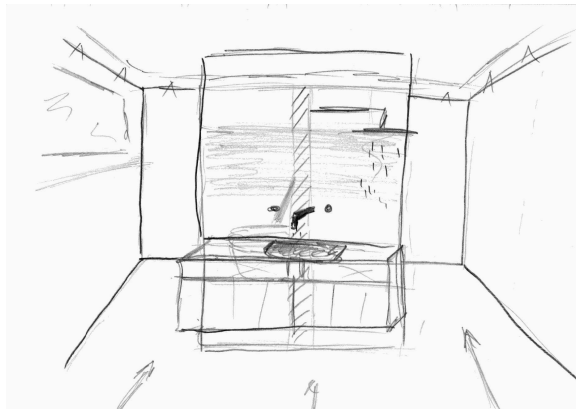


Figure 59: Drawing Exercise 1, Participant 16, 2025.

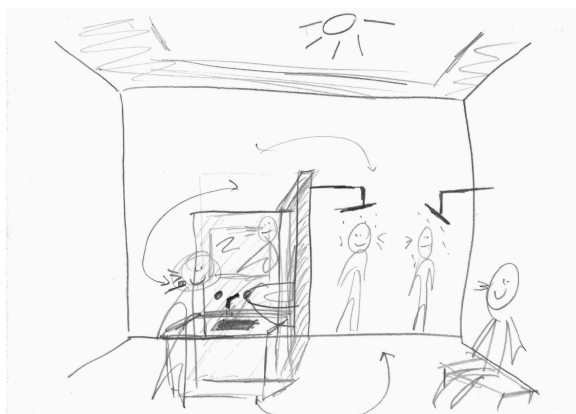


Figure 60: Drawing Exercise 2, Participant 16, 2025.

D. FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION

D.1 | RESEARCH FOCUS

This dissertation explores the relationship between comfort and discomfort in architectural design. Specifically, it investigates how these concepts shape our experiences and our relationship with the spaces we inhabit.

In modern society, we are often conditioned from a young age to desire comfort, ease, familiarity, and convenience. We expect our environments to cater to these desires, and increasingly, we see these desires reflected in our vision of the 'ideal' home. We are encouraged to pursue spaces that offer maximum ease, removing discomfort wherever possible. This notion of comfort, however, raises important questions about the spaces we create.

D.2 | INTRODUCTORY DEFINITIONS

Comfort:	Associated with ease, familiarity, and physical or emotional well-being. Often a primary design goal.
Discomfort:	The absence of comfort, often linked to unease (physical, emotional, or psychological). While generally seen as negative, it can encourage reflection or engagement.
Domesticity:	Home life and devotion to or familiarity with home life
Hyper:	Is used to form adjectives that describe something as having a lot or too much of a particular quality.
Hyper-domesticity:	Exaggerated expectations of domestic spaces to provide comfort, control, and order.

D.3 | DIS | COMFORT IN ARCHITECTURE

While comfort is often associated with good design, we must consider: Are we truly composing the rituals of home according to our own needs and preferences, or are we simply fitting into a pre-existing template shaped by societal expectations? Over time, the rituals of home, those quiet discomforts that once structured our daily lives, are increasingly sacrificed for convenience. We design spaces with effortless flow, seamless transitions, and passive living. In doing so, we remove friction, but we also remove texture, emotional and spatial texture. Discomfort, once part of the natural rhythm of home life, is now often viewed as failure. Inconvenience is avoided at all costs.

Yet, what if these very discomforts, those moments of friction, are what give a home its reality? What if discomfort is not something to be avoided, but something that can ground us, slow us down, and make us feel more deeply engaged with the spaces we inhabit? What if comfort, in its excess, dulls us, numbing us from the rawness of life?

This dissertation questions what happens when we seek only comfort in architectural design. It explores where this search for comfort stems from, what we lose in the process, and how discomfort might be reintegrated into the design process to enrich our experience of the spaces we inhabit.

D.4 | CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY

As part of my exploration, I've chosen to use the **bathroom** as a case study. While the focus here is not specifically on the bathroom as a typology, this space offers a useful example for examining how comfort and discomfort manifest in architecture. The bathroom is a universal necessity, something we all engage with on a daily basis, and serves as a cultural and practical space that reflects both the need for comfort and the potential for discomfort in our environments. By looking at the bathroom, I can compare and contrast various architectural elements and their effects on the experience of comfort and discomfort, making it a practical lens through which to explore these concepts.

However, this discussion isn't about bathrooms alone. Rather, it's about how the concepts of **comfort** and **discomfort** can be understood and applied across different types of architecture. The bathroom is simply a starting point for understanding how these elements might influence design.

D.5 | SCOPE OF THE DISCUSSION

Today's discussion is not about determining what is "right" or "wrong" in design. Instead, it aims to explore how intentional discomfort might influence the spaces we design and how it can reshape our relationship with those spaces. It's about understanding discomfort not as a failure of design, but as a potential tool to deepen engagement and reflection in architecture.

There are no right or wrong answers, and I encourage you to share your thoughts and reflections openly. This research is ultimately about understanding the potential impact of discomfort on our experiences of space and how we might apply this understanding to the design of more meaningful environments.

E. FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPTS

E.1 | FOCUS GROUP 1

Semi-Structured Focus Group Transcript

Date: 20th May 2025

Participants: Identified by individually selected letters for anonymity.

Participant 1 (A), Participant 2 (Á), Participant 3 (C), Participant 4 (G), Participant 5 (J), Participant 6 (K), Participant 7 (L), Participant 8 (N)

Moderator: Federica Formosa (F)

[Drawing Exercise 1 as found in Appendix C]

[Introduction as found in Appendix D]

(F): Now we can start the group discussion. The aim is for you to talk and debate with each other. I'll try not to interrupt too much, I'm mostly here to guide things if they start to drift.

I do have a few prompts to help keep things on track, but if the conversation takes an interesting turn or inspires something unexpected, I might end up ignoring them, and that's totally fine.

I'm starting with something simple that can open up different directions. So the first question is: What does comfort in a space mean to you, and how do you recognise when a space feels comfortable?

Alongside that, I'd like you to reflect on whether you think comfort is universal. Do you agree or disagree, and why?

So, go ahead and discuss amongst yourselves. I'll take a step back for now.

(L): Okay, I was going to say, comfort most of the time comes when you're given options. So, I think, you come to a hotel room and you have different places where you can sit. For example, you can sit on the bed, you can sit on a chair in the corner, you can sit in the bathroom, wherever you like.

There are cushions, and it's giving you alternative routes to live within the space.

(J): And you see it as something positive, no?

(L): Yeah, I see it as something positive, definitely.

(Á): However, I feel like this more works in an environment which you are unfamiliar with. So when you walk into a hotel, that's an unfamiliar environment.

Our comfort, I think, within the home is familiarity. So it's something that, oh, I used to live in a place like that, and this new place reminds me, like my new home, it's reminding me of the place where I used to live.

It connects the emotions that I connected to my original place, that it was good, to my new one. And that gives me a kind of emotional comfort. So it's not necessarily a practical comfort, but it's the feeling of comfort.

(J): The phenomenological aspect of memory.

(Á): It's like transferring the experience from one place to another. The familiarity.

(J): That's interesting. It got me thinking of, you know the porcelain toilet seats? I don't know, but back home, usually old people have them, like your grandma, your grandpa.

And whenever I go to a place that has it, it brings me there. Like you said, it's discomfort because they're always cold as f**k, because I'm from a cold country. But it's still like, aha, grandma.

Which is maybe a bit weird. But yeah, in that sense, I feel like memory does somehow lodge into the comfort of discomfort.

(K): I think even getting used to something... For me, comfort is very personal. My comfort will not be your comfort.

(J): No, of course not.

(K): And even culturally, there is a massive difference. But beyond that, from one person to another, I'm going to have my own comfort, which might not directly be your own comfort.

But with that being said, I do think there's a general overhead sense of comfort. To a certain level, something comfortable will be comfortable for everyone.

(J): For sure.

[Participant 3 arrived]

(F): Can I pause the conversation briefly to catch [Participant C] up?

You missed the drawing exercise, but no worries. I gave everyone a short introduction earlier, but it was intentionally vague to avoid introducing too much bias.

Let me give you a few definitions we're working with so you can follow along more easily.

Comfort: typically associated with ease, familiarity, and physical or emotional well-being, often seen as a key goal in design.

Discomfort: essentially the absence of comfort. It can be physical, emotional, or psychological, and is usually viewed negatively.

Domesticity: referring to home life or a connection to the routines and rhythms of home.

Hyper: a prefix used to describe something excessive or beyond what's typical.

So, hyperdomesticity in this context means the exaggerated expectation that domestic spaces should provide constant comfort, control, and order.

We may completely redefine these terms during the discussion, that's part of the process. But these are the working definitions.

We've used the bathroom as a case study, not because we're limited to it, but because it's a familiar and intimate space that gives us a good starting point to explore the themes.

My dissertation is looking into intentional discomfort as a possible design strategy, a way to both critique and counteract the overuse or glorification of comfort in architecture.

So I'll step back again. My role is just to make sure things don't go too far off course. This is really your conversation, there's no right or wrong here. The point isn't to come to a single answer, but to explore ideas together.

So, sorry for the interruption, please continue.

(J): I had another thought as well. Any one of you ever been camping?

(C): Yes.

(J): We do this intentionally. We put ourselves in discomfort in order to enjoy the comfort of something else.

(K): But why are you assuming that camping is discomfort?

(J): I would say if you don't shower, or you don't sleep on a nice bed, you kind of lose those overarching elements that you were talking about.

(K): But I feel like that's what we're brought up or assumed to be comfortable with.

For me, my ideal bathroom, I draw it in nature. Like the best shower is under a waterfall, the best bath is in a lake, the best sh*t is in a bush, the best pee is over a cliff.

So I think that's because we got so used to the idea of what comfort should be, that for me, camping should be the most comfortable thing ever. It doesn't necessarily mean discomfort.

(L): It's because we're obsessed with the idea of cleanliness in humanity. So it's like, the human needs to be this super clean, god-like thing that is not an animal anymore. It is human.

And we are not like animals, so we don't sh*t outside, or we kind of wipe ourselves with something. So I think it's like this connection nowadays that we're making.

(J): But, I see what you're saying, and I've lived outside for long, extended periods of time. And towards the end of that, I am quite fed up with it.

I lived outside for about a year. I moved from camping and stuff like this. And the thing is, towards the end, I really wanted to take an easy shower. I wanted nothing else but to have that efficiency of it.

Like, even when it comes to... Now we're just talking about the bathroom, but even making food becomes more of a process rather than putting something in the microwave.

Towards the end of it, I was kind of fed up with that. Every now and then, I do enjoy it, but I definitely want that other part as well. And I want to know that it's there when I return. Like long-term comfort, then.

(C): Like long term comfort then?

(J): Yeah, exactly.

(F): Let me interrupt briefly, we'll keep this going, but I want to introduce a new prompt.

Part of my research looks at a spectrum of comfort, like you were mentioning. So, in our discussions, let's think about comfort as something you might want forever, or just temporarily, or maybe in subtle doses.

Continue.

(G): I think that something that links to this, and linking to our previous point of conversation, possibly could be the idea of agency. So, familiarity is something that you have been presented with, a space from the designer's point of view, and you can then impact that space, where a concrete box would not allow you to do that. You can't introduce things.

But then, changing the space, like changing your scenario, going camping, for example, that gives you a blank slate that you can once again completely control: your life, the way you interact with the surroundings. It might be like this spectrum.

So the home is things that you have built up over time. You're now used to them, they're newer things, because the space could allow you to bring those things into it and introduce those aspects. But then you might feel that you might be losing control, for example, and take this shift and go into a virgin site.

Create your own shelter. Create your own way of living. And then that might eventually be too much and you don't want it. So it could be cyclical, in a sense.

(J): Yeah

(G): But I would say that agency, for me, is one thing that I would link to the power to actually impact your space.

(N): I think similarly, the idea of discomfort ties very much with the unknown. So if you're in a home, you can assume, okay, this is the kitchen, that door is probably the bathroom. So you're aware and you can assume what the layout of the space is.

If you're outdoors, or even if there's a long corridor, there's a dead end, you feel a bit uneasy because you don't know what there is.

So it's not dependent on that assumption that, okay, that's just there.

(Á): What you're mentioning is very interesting because it comes down to this predictability, in a way.

I feel like there's definitely something evolutionary there, where people are scared. I don't know what's behind that bush. I feel more comfortable with my cave because I know what's inside, in a way.

So maybe there's this element of predictability and, as you mentioned, also control. Because that comes, in a way, hand-in-hand. Because if you can control, you can predict. And I think it's definitely an interesting lecture on that.

(K): Don't you also think that humans tend to get bored of predictability at a point? I feel like, as creative and investigative beings, we're always seeking something new.

(N): Well, the new is discomfort, I think. So the comfortable is the what you know.

(C): I feel like it's very dependent on the individual person itself as well. Like, there are some people who enjoy a routine. They like to stick to the same things, same traditions, for example.

And then there are others who, I don't know, get bored of doing the same thing every day, seeing the same spaces, and they like to change a lot.

(Á): But also, it's a very cultural thing as well.

Because the way you're brought up is definitely going to influence how you behave in society. So, like, Western Europe, the Western society, is more individualistic, and some of the Asian societies are more about societal engagement.

So I think the mindset is also like setting it up, where do you find comfort?

(C): Yeah.

[Participant 7 left]

(Á): So it comes at an individual level, but the culture you're brought up in is going to highly influence, I think, where you find that comfort as well.

(G): I think thinking of it from the designer's point of view, there is definitely culture. But then I would say there is also base-level ergonomics, for example, that unite us and that can cross culture.

So you could see a Western living room as compared to the Sub-Saharan African concept of what a living room would be. But then if you take ergonomics, you've got heights, you've got dimensions that would be across the board in most cases.

So coming from the designer's point of view, there's those things.

(F): That's one reason I chose the bathroom as a case study, because it varies culturally. Some cultures use a squat toilet, others require a bidet. These are small things we might take for granted.

And these are small things we might take for granted. I wanted us to discuss a space we all relate to because the bathroom is a very specific domestic typology. Sometimes we forget people live very differently and have different ideas of comfort.

Even physiologically, different bathroom designs have different benefits or drawbacks.

That ties into my dissertation.

Also, building on what [Participant 6] said, I want to introduce the idea of numbness.

[Participant 6] was saying how the ideal for him is something very different to the conventional, and throughout my dissertation I'm exploring whether conventional spaces numb our senses or make us bored with the way we live.

You may continue...

(A): I would say, for example, when we think about the tradition of, let's say, apartment, you can almost close your eyes and imagine it, locally.

And that gives a sense of numbness to it, in the sense that, let's say, you know exactly the layout, how it's going to be. You're going to have a long corridor, and you're going to have the rooms to the side, and you know exactly where the shelves are going to be, and stuff like that.

That being said, you see the other aspects of our environment, where you see our traditional townhouses, and they're also unique, in a way.

They always have that special thing to them. So it feels like we're culturally moving towards the sense of numbness, I would say.

(Á): But I kind of also think, because we now live in a world where there's so many impulses, that to compensate, let's say, in your apartment, this numbness is actually nice, because it sets that contrast between, oh, there's flashing lights outside, you know?

Like, we're really moving away from this very traditional society. Like the sleeping cycles are mixing up as well.

And you get so much input that when you get home, it might be nice to have that comfort and numbness. It's the contrast in between.

Like, there's a 24/7 society outside, and you just want the peace of mind, let's say. I think it might have a moving effect into that direction, because it's so many impulses outside.

(J): Because it builds upon, earlier today, I read about the theory of future shock. So in the future, there's going to be so many alternatives. And the environment's going to be so fast-paced.

And he was kind of talking about the future design would be this numbness, in a way.

So when you come home, the options, you know where everything is. It's quite minimalistic and simple, just to sort of give you that break from the everyday life, in a way.

(A): To compensate.

(K): I think we're ready there.

(Á): Yes.

(J): To some extent, I would say, yeah.

(K): I think modernism is what brought us here, if anything.

This is what you should want. And we're going to make life, in a way, that this is what you will get.

And you will like it. And you will enjoy it. And you will strive for it.

(F): Here's a quick snippet from my literature review. From what I've read, the idea of 'good design' after the war was partly influenced by modernism's goal to create controlled, standardised spaces that kind of numb people to what's going on around them. That was only one part of the bigger picture, but an important one.

Design schools started promoting this ideal of comfort, focused on hygiene and simplicity, which led to more flat, smooth surfaces and spaces that were easier to clean and sanitise. These kinds of environments helped people feel calmer and more detached from the chaos happening outside.

(A): So you're saying that the home has become a response to the outside world, right?

(J): I think a very valid design approach to that would be the Scandinavian minimalism that is really big right now, as somehow responding to that sort of idea.

(C): But how would you compare Scandinavian minimalism to the general idea of minimalism we see here in Malta? From what I understand, Scandinavian architecture tends to maintain a

strong connection to nature and that in itself may result in subtle elements of discomfort as part of the experience.

This seems quite different from the minimalist homes typical in Malta, which may reflect a different cultural or climatic approach to comfort and design. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the stereotypical Maltese house, but it often has its own unique characteristics that set it apart from Scandinavian minimalism.

(J): It's the shotgun houses.

(F): How would you compare the two in the context of this conversation?

(J): Valid question. I haven't been to that many of those apartments.

But my own apartment is very, very small. And I pay very much for it. And that is definitely a part of discomfort. But that's other factors that has kind of been part of that. Because that derives from lack of space and gentrification.

(F): When you mentioned Scandinavian design, I don't want to generalise, but it's a style we typically speak highly of here. However, elements typical to Scandinavian design are rarely introduced or incorporated into our local environments. So although both local and Scandinavian styles of architecture can be described as minimal, the understanding and expression of minimalism here is quite different.

(K): I think numbness locally comes also out in what you expect to have and where you expect to live. So it's not just a matter of what's in your house, but how your house is built, where you live, how much you pay for it. You expect to pay a certain amount. You expect it to be quite sh*tty. You expect it to not be well lit.

And out of numbness, not because you expect it in the sense that you want it, just because I think we lost touch with what good design is. And we just accept what the market provides and what there is available. For me, that's numbness. More than what should be inside the house, for example, furniture-wise or layout.

(G): It's clear we've put extreme value on our homes and have neglected our outside spaces, which are the very crux of discomfort. We can't familiarise ourselves with these outside spaces because they're always changing. And that's something really interesting about outside spaces.

Because there are lots of people. You don't expect a stranger to be in your house. You depend on strangers to be in these outside spaces. And maybe that's where the difference is between these Scandinavian countries. It's the wealth of outside spaces and well-designed outside spaces that allow for people to think of these outside spaces as their homes.

Where there's the balance then between safety and, I wouldn't say numbness, comfort and the discomfort between them.

(Á): I think this fits into the previous point you talked about, about agency and about predictability and control. Because what I get from this discussion in a way is like, I don't want to generalise, but in a sense, Maltese society is very individualistic or at least family-orientated.

So my house is my castle and that's where my ground ends. So there's no societal cohesion and social responsibility in a sense. Where my Scandinavian or maybe Dutch, the Netherlands, would disagree because they feel like, oh, this is not just my house, this is my neighbourhood, this is my city.

(J): But that's also affected by political views as well. Because we're very socialistic in that sense. So your cultural background is...

(Á): This is where it starts to feed into how you see yourself in society. Because as soon as you see yourself not just as an individual or a family, but as a member of a larger unit, your home, in a sense, expands.

(K): I think you hit it right on the nail. Our perception of society influences our perception of the house and what we want from it. How much are we willing to share from it and how much do we want to give for ourselves?

(Á): In a sense, this tribalism that you make inhabits society naturally is just like, where do you draw the line for your tribe? Oh yeah, this is my neighbourhood. Who is your tribe?

(C): I think here we have very strong barriers of, this is my home, and it's just our comfort zone. And we're very sort of wary of that boundary.

And then in places abroad, like Scandinavian countries, there would be, for example, these student houses, which would be a really small, shoebox-sized room. And you wouldn't even have a sofa in there. So your boundary would extend to your sleeping quarters. Then there's a common area for integrating with other people inside your building, so it's like a midway space. And then there's the actual outdoor society.

(Á): I feel like what also is a big impact on this is the mode of transport. As soon as you get into a car, your walkable boundaries kind of disappear. Which is, I feel like, one of the bigger causes that you don't often connect it to your neighbourhood, because you're never there.

You get out of your house, you get into your car, and you go to your destination. So there's no need, in a sense, to claim ownership of the neighbourhood because you're never going to walk there.

At least that's what I experienced while walking around. Sometimes the pavement just disappears. I'm like walking, but it becomes very small. I think this is my take on it.

(A): Where are the neighbourhoods that we're going to with our cars then? That's what I struggle with as well.

(Á): But then you go, let's say, to a bar, you drink, and then you sit back in the car. You're always in this bubble. Yeah, you don't leave. You move around spots.

That also happens in cars. I feel like this is the cultural shift compared to Nordic, or there's some countries where cycling culture is big. They own the space because I'm going to stop at any moment, and I can get off and just be part of it.

The car is definitely feeding me into this culture of oh, it's just my house.

(J): Also, if you look at it from Napoli, for example, I feel like the people there, they own the streets. The people who live there, they really own those streets. They do what they want with them. They kind of reclaimed it in that sense.

But I wouldn't say it's, perhaps it's more walkable, rather, but it's not necessarily the bicycle.

(Á): No, what I meant is, that was an example of a big shift.

(F): Building on your example of Naples, this place has a very distinct vibe, especially for outsiders or visitors. People often notice discomfort, not because something is necessarily wrong, but because of cultural differences or different ways of living. What might seem rough or chaotic to some is actually what might feel comfortable and normal for the locals. Something people may experience even in different localities around the island.

That really ties into what we're talking about. In a place like Naples, the chaos is part of what feels familiar and comfortable, even though it might be very different to someone who's exposed to a very contrasting environment.

One of you had mentioned to me that you are more comfortable discussing urban environments. In my dissertation, when I talk about hyper-domesticity, I try to move beyond the traditional idea of 'home.' Because nowadays, the idea of a home has completely changed, and the domestic, to me, might be the spaces I'm comfortable in, which might not be the home.

You've already started broadening the conversation to include outside spaces. So as future architects or people in the architecture field, how do you think we can shape architecture by balancing comfort and discomfort in the spaces we design, whether that's homes or public places?

You can think about this culturally, physically, psychologically, or, see where you want to take it.

(J): I feel one very valid point is Jan Gehl, in his book *Life Between Buildings*. I feel like that is really big importance. But for there to be life between buildings, there needs to be space for it as well, which in areas like CIMAO is zero. There's really not that space for that.

I feel like it's usually where one would allow for this life to happen, instead there's the travel to the car, and then you go to another place where life happens.

(G): I think in understanding, as a designer, what one would design for something to be comfortable for someone, you would look at, I think, this idea of transition, this idea of our indoor-outdoor spaces.

You must understand the context, the ultimate importance of the context, and it's linked to subjectivity. But we seem to be mentioning almost this idea between balance and antidote.

If there's no space where I can enjoy outside, then my house becomes my castle. But if I have an urban living room, then I can afford to shrink my city accommodation, downsize.

But I think it's almost to understand the qualities that would be comfortable for an indoor space, one must understand the outdoor space just as much, I think. How do people use the spaces around it? And that would most probably impact how they would feel that that indoor space would then be comfortable, I think.

(Á): But I was trying to say what you say, but building up on that, is you want to have the things in your flat that you miss from the outside. So for example, you would like, I assume, plants here, because there's not a lot of greenery. You want to compensate for what happened. Which would be the antidote.

But I also feel like you could use elements of discomfort in order to direct movement. So by using this, oh, this is a comfortable zone, this is a discomfort zone, you can actually impact people's movement and lead them to certain zones which would see larger use, per se. So squeezing them.

In a way, through senses, you're like, oh, this is really loud, or I don't know, something like, I don't want to stay here long, so I'm going to move quickly. But this is very comfortable.

You play on the idea of what you guys also mentioned about balance, and then these opposites against each other. Their impact is larger because you see the contrast between them. So you would be more appreciative of those spaces.

(F): I want to make sure I'm understanding you correctly, are you suggesting that things that might be uncomfortable in the beginning, or intimidating or uneasy, can eventually become your comforts?

(Á): It could. That was not my point, but it could.

(F): Sorry, I misunderstood.

(Á): I was using a kind of general discomfort to kind of direct movement. Because then they wouldn't stay there for long because it's uncomfortable.

(J): But that would also enhance the experience of the comfort zone, for sure.

(Á): That was my point. But there is definitely something, I think you also mentioned it before, about getting used to something. There is definitely something to that, yeah.

(K): I think there's also a big element that everyone thinks they know exactly what they want until someone gives them something that they would have never thought of, and then all of a sudden this is so much better.

(Á): But also, when you actually ask them, they not always can tell you what it is. They think of a feeling, yeah, this is what I want, but then...

(K): That's the power of design, of an architect, to imagine what people want, like things that they would have never even thought of to begin with.

As in, I read it somewhere, like before the car, if you had to tell people what they wanted, it was a faster horse. They could have never imagined wanting a car, because it takes a creative person to imagine something that doesn't exist, that you say, oh, people will want this.

(A): It has to be something that's abrasive. I'm thinking of, you know the video of the frog in the water, and the water slowly gets warmer and warmer, it gets really warm, and the frog just settles. What if the water just instantly boils, and the frog jumps?

That is the kind of discomfort that I think you're suggesting, in a sense. In a way, a discomfort that prompts action, rather than a discomfort, a slow, progressive discomfort, that sort of numbs you.

(F): We are figuring out what levels of discomfort should be introduced together. So there's the extreme, there's the in-between.

(Á): I would actually disagree with you, like, society doesn't like harsh and quick change.

(J): No, 100%. But it would prompt them to do something about it.

(Á): Do you agree against it? Because I feel like, are we talking about just an action, or are we talking about a positive change?

(A): I would think that this abrasive, shocking change would prompt a positive effect.

(Á): That's where I a little bit disagree. Because what I feel like society does, if it's like harsh change, they are like, nope, definitely no.

(A): Because they are really scared.

(Á): They lose control, they lose predictability, they lose everything. And they are really not feeling it. So when you're introducing this slow discomfort, level by level, building upon it, it's more likely that society will shift.

(A): I'm not sure how effective that change will be.

(K): I think I would flip your argument the exact opposite. What if you're not introducing discomfort in a good sense, but rather in a bad sense? So, like, someone is inflicting discomfort on you.

So imagine, and this is how I think I'm going to connect your two arguments together, imagine if tomorrow, the traffic doubles. Versus, what if the traffic doubles over the next ten years?

If it increases to a doubling point of view over the next ten years, we see it as a negative progression, but no one would uproar. If tomorrow, instantly, we get the traffic that we expect in ten years, all of a sudden it's a problem.

And I think then, that's where...

(F): Let me give you an example to explain this a bit better. Imagine a public transport system that's slowly getting better. At first, it might feel uncomfortable, you have to walk to the bus stop, deal with crowded spaces, maybe unpleasant smells, and the journey could take longer than driving. These little annoyances add up.

But then, if bigger things happen, like fuel prices going up or driving becoming more difficult, those small discomforts start to feel more acceptable, even worth it. Suddenly, walking to the bus stop and putting up with the smells doesn't seem so bad anymore.

This shows how discomfort can actually be used as a kind of strategy or trigger in design. It's a way to encourage people to change how they move through and experience spaces.

Something we can try to translate into architectural context.

(Á): I think one of these is definitely the size of windows throughout time. They got larger and larger and larger, and you're slowly giving up your privacy, and then you're fully okay with this.

This, back in the 1800s, you know what I mean. It's like, windows are getting bigger and bigger, and I think this is definitely one of those architecture tools where private life is not really private. And a lot of people don't mind that, actually.

Also, your phone, you have no idea how much information you share with yourself. So now you've just accepted that you're not a private person anymore.

But the bathroom is definitely one of those where you still feel like, oh, I do have my privacy.

But do you sometimes take a phone video, you do this also with windows, there's this concept which was my toilet, but I draw, like, have a large window to the nature because I'm not sh*tting in nature, but one of the patterns while I'm being there.

But it's still like one of the last bastions of private space that we consider as private.

(C): Maybe someone else doesn't treat the bathroom as a private space. Taking a sh*t next to your significant other is okay.

(Á): Yes, there is potential.

(F): It's something we've developed to expect. Because it's always been a private matter.

(Á): Definitely. I think in the modern Western society it is one of those very private things. Probably has something to do with the faith system and what you should be ashamed of. It originates, I assume, from religion.

This is assumptions I make. Okay, this is a private thing. Talking about sex and stuff. All of this is like a taboo. Which is now getting also, like, stigmatised. But I feel like the bathroom was still generally considered like, oh yeah, I'm going to put this into a private room somewhere in the apartment, not in the front.

(F): Even within the bathroom itself. Many hide their sanitary pads, toilet paper, etc..

(Á): Exactly. There is definitely this private, very vulnerable, I would say.

(G): Which is now a product of a social layer of values. So we're just a more liberal, maybe less conservative culture, historically, I'm saying, not presently, but the influence.

Then maybe if nudity were completely acceptable, for example, the bathroom would change. There's one thing to be sanitary, and there's sanitation, and then there's... germ theory exists... working around that.

I think culture is definitely one of the strongest drivers. Because then culture creates or has an immense impact on society. Society would impact the buildings that it builds for itself.

I feel like we've added another layer of significance towards the end product, which is comfort or discomfort.

(N): I think shame is a massive part of it. In some countries, it's completely normal to go to a beach and you're completely nude and you're just sunbathing. Everyone else is doing it as well.

Here, no one sunbathes naked. If there's someone topless, everyone's like, you're out there, you're topless. Someone might be comfortable with doing that. For them, it is comfortable to be naked in public. But since no one else is doing it, there's that shame. So they won't do it. It becomes discomfort.

So I think culture and shame is definitely a massive part of it.

(K): I think it also feeds into self-awareness and not wanting to make a scene or make other people uncomfortable, which is, to be fair, a good thing. You want to be self-aware in that sense, but then that drives us to be very self-centred.

(A): When did this happen? We went to Rome and we went to these massive baths where you literally would sit and you would know that all of these people were just... It was their social activity to do...

It was celebrated. It was expected.

(J): We have the sauna culture as well which is very much there. There's inter-gender saunas and people are there naked, men and women.

(F): That vulnerability was appreciated.

(J): And it still is.

(C): At some point it just became part of the law, like, okay, no, this is wrong. This is illegal. You can't be bathing topless. And then they made secluded beaches, for example, which are accepting this nudist tradition.

(A): And that's against the whole point of it. No?

(Á): Exactly. This also I think fits somewhat into what we were originally talking about, how something goes... cyclical stuff.

There was the era when the Romans were all about free. Everyone is free. And society was fed up with it because they were like, oh sh*t, this is getting out of hand now.

And then, okay, let's go back to something a bit more crude. These are large cycles, cultural cycles, is what I'm saying.

But it still reappears because there was still the Renaissance and there was like when people were, again, very free and liberal about everything. But then again, it was going downhill for a bit. And then again.

So it's like when people get disenchanted about the reality, they are like, okay, let's shift from this. And now let's try something different.

(K): I think this feeds into the argument of like, we're never satisfied. No matter in what stage we're in, there's something more that we want, something different.

So, I feel like humans are so predictably unpredictable. We don't know what we want. We just know that at some point we're going to want something else.

(Á): But also, this fits into when there's a saying like history repeats itself. It's like, usually I think that people can remember for like one and a half human lives. That's where the social memory goes back, and then they start to repeat patterns.

With technology, this is like awesome. I feel like it's quickened up quite a bit.

(K): I mean, there's a lot of like, this is why a lot of different art movements after 400 years, there's the new Renaissance, the new Gothic. Because we like to go back to something that we think that's what we want.

And then we explore it. We get used to it. Then we get fed up of it. It's like, I want something else. It's always shifting.

(N): Like we were saying before, this is what we want, but then it starts becoming numb. So now, this comfort is uncomfortable because it's numb. So now we want change. And we seek this discomfort so that it becomes a new comfort.

(K): And I think that's like, to be fair, it's a really positive thing. Imagine how boring it would be if all of a sudden we explored this art and architecture movement and for the rest of time, okay, this is it. We've reached the plateau.

What I hope that we do as humans is that every time we shift from something to something else, we remember the lessons. So hopefully, it always gets a bit better. I don't think it does, but I think that's what you should aim for. Not stopping change, just making sure that you learn from every change, if anything.

(G): I think that would definitely be an ideal.

(K): I don't think we're even close to it. But that is the idea. It's not stopping change.

(J): As you were saying, though, it's also a different era because of the documentation that we can do just the past hundred years. This hasn't existed before either. So the question is if we will start going back where we can actually look at that footage and reflect upon how was that in another sense. But that's talking about a hundred years from now.

(Á): But I think now it's actually the opposite. Now it's too much information that you will have no idea where to start remembering because there is way too much information.

So unless AI somehow plugs into this whole conversation and brings that in to sort out some information, then it's still going to be very difficult. Because previously the issue was the lack of records. Now it's that over-recording of everything.

Like you have basically no idea where to actually start to look for something. Because you will see, oh, like this was documented this way. Oh, but this opinion on the other hand is the complete opposite and it says the complete difference.

Like how are you going to make the choice? Like, oh yeah, they were right or they were wrong. It's getting too overwhelming to sort out these layers and layers of information. So now it's going to be the same. We're still going to forget just because we have too much information.

(G): There was a point, I feel like, let's say right now we've got this hyper-documentation. Everything is being documented. And we could easily say that now, okay, this is the projection and eventually it's just going to keep getting worse.

But could it be that the pendulum is just being pushed further and further? And eventually it's going to swing even further than it did the last cycle. So it went liberal, puritan, maybe now we're ultra-liberal. It's going to eventually, maybe in 200 years, 300 years, eventually swing back the other way even more extreme.

(Á): I think the only difference in this era, in a way, that there might be something that can work on its own so it might not be fully controlled by us.

So, like, even if humanity swings back to, like, okay, let's go back to just speech. Let's not record anything at all. Let's just, like, have discussions and that's it. Like, this thing that was created, it's not necessarily going to go away just because we want to at that point.

If there is the AI element of it, that's why I meant it. When control is passed on to something else, the agency is moved away from us into the computer. Like, no matter, like, where, like, you know, it's going in a major direction.

But, like, you know what I mean? Like, even if humanity wishes to swing back, it's not that easy anymore because we gave up some of our agency and the control over the records. Previously, like, this also happened because people recorded something in paper, they moved that in libraries.

Then there was a cultural revolution and they were burning books left and right. You know, like, libraries, like, the great library of Alexandria or, like, the fascist movement, like, they were burning recordings. But now, because they are not just going to be sitting right now, like, it's not just in one place, but it's all over. It's going to be much harder to stop this recording process.

I mean, it's not within our control, in a sense, I would say. And we are losing it slowly.

(G): So you think that eventually control will be lost?

(Á): I think we will perceive it as control, but not necessarily be in control anymore. Like, because we love to believe that we are and it makes us very comfortable.

(G): Yes, there I agree.

(Á): Yes, so they're going to be like, yeah, we are in control. Really? Are you? Like, now, even when you go somewhere, you look at Google Maps, are you really choosing which way you're going to go? Or are you going to go the path that Google Maps said, oh, it's the quickest way to go?

Like, you're already giving up some of your agencies and making choices without even knowing. So I feel like there is definitely a gradual giving up of agency. We are moving towards that.

(G): Towards a homogenisation of culture. Everyone will just go to the one beach and they go back. It has five stars on Google Maps. And that's where your self-driving car takes you.

(F): I was just thinking about self-driving cars, and I'm wondering if bringing them into the conversation might be a bit off-topic.

However, they do represent another example of comfort, after a long day at work, you wouldn't have to focus on driving or switching gears, which could be very relaxing. But I don't know.

Do you believe that level of comfort is truly necessary? Or it might contribute to a kind of numbness? What do you think?

(G): It's more numbness than comfort, almost. But then it's also, in a way, the choices are taken away.

(Á): Yes, but also, the argument against it is a way that the time you spend, is that really valuable? While you're driving, you're concentrating or keeping with the car.

(J): You become more efficient because you utilise that time.

(Á): Exactly. So does giving up to a certain level of control and choices, the comfort, in a sense, allows you to pursue other elements.

(C): I feel like it varies a bit because it depends on what people perceive as a nuisance or an escape from other things. Some people just like to go on a drive to escape and have a little break. For them, that's a totally different thing.

(Á): Yes, of course. It's more of a larger thing. Individuals can alter.

(J): That's another question, though, talking about comfort. The car, does it give you comfort as well? Because that's what you were saying. It gives you that respite in your everyday life. Or does it?

(N): With self-driving cars, people might still use this time where they don't have to drive to continue working or whatever, which defeats the whole point. You're stuck in traffic, you're uncomfortable, but at least you have time to do nothing, to take rest, which I think is needed, even though you might see it as a nuance. It's needed in your everyday life.

(G): I had seen something recently.

[Participant 6 left]

(G): I had seen, just a personal opinion that, when Wi-Fi was introduced onto planes, they lost the last bastion of being able to do nothing. It's like it was the last place where you could go on a four-hour flight, three-hour flight, no excuse, I was flying, there's no connection, now, you've been offered Wi-Fi, you're connected again, therefore you're going to work.

(Á): But I also feel like this working culture is also shifting. That's also important to remember, that some stuff, as we talked about, AI getting replaced and stuff, and of course we always need something to do, we cannot just sit around while everything is being done. But I think it could potentially shift again, because we have been having this very overworking culture until now, and now it's slowly shifting.

There are companies who are offering a four-day workweek, they do this mental health, I know some of them just pitch on the company like, okay, yes, we are a great place to be, and there's also the US culture in the region.

(J): I think this is interesting, because I read something about the shift of different generations. So, for example, millennials, they see the value of life-work balance in another way than their parents did, who were born in the 50s or 60s, whose main drive was to create a family and work, provide for the family.

So there is that shift, for sure. You can see it on a global scale, in the western countries, I would say.

(A): But then, maybe the four-day work can allow you to work even more in your free time, and do more work. It's a bit sort of double-edged in the sense that comforts allow us to work even more.

(Á): Isn't there, like, a sense of comfort in this comforting work? Like, it gives you a purpose, it gives you something.

Like, imagine you just have to sit at home, and like, okay, what do I do with myself? Like, it would go crazy. We are people who need something to do.

And in the future, I could imagine this, because I'm thinking, oh, but don't buy some work, or whatever, like, this could be more orientated to personal stuff, like art or whatever. But the work itself is a comfort, and it's comforting, which, like, it's not necessarily good to take away from it.

I'm not saying, like, yes, you have to work yourself to death, but if you like what you do, like, why shouldn't you do it?

It's like architecture. You don't really stop when you leave the office. You take it with you, no matter what you do. Like, you sit in the car, and you don't do nothing, but you think about the design. Or you, like, I don't know, go to the bathroom, like, it's in the back of your head.

Like, you can never fully leave what you are doing unless you replace it with a new purpose and activity, which is what you mentioned in terms of car. But it's still there.

(J): I had an old professor who said that the best ideas are usually written on a napkin, because you're not in the office, you're not doing anything else, but you're, like, relaxing, and the thing you have in front of you is a napkin.

(C): I mean, I have a friend who literally told me, like, I come up with most of my design solutions in the shower, like sketching on the glass.

(Á): So... like, so would that be considered work? If you do it outside hours? Just because someone sets a time limit on it, like, that becomes arbitrary in a sense.

Does the hour that you're paid for it define the work? The rest is just up to you. So, like, if you like what you do, like, I don't think that's an issue.

(G): I think there's a very, not necessarily a fine balance, but it's very easy for it to be taken both ways.

So, like, if you see the rise of automation, on one side, the extreme automation could lead to extreme laziness or giving away our agency.

But then if you say, for example, let's go 200 years back where, in order to cook a meal, I had to... Let's go 500 years back.

If you have to grow your food, you have to protect your food, you have to do this, do that.

For sure, there's only 24 hours in a day, and it's been like that, and it's going to keep being like that.

So if your time is freed from doing that menial work, like laundry, for example, the washing machine must have freed up enormous amounts of time for the people that would have been doing that washing.

And then you'd say, okay, so it would allow people to be free with their time. They could use their time wisely.

But then, have they?

If washing would have taken me three hours to do, and now it takes me about 45 seconds to load the washing machine, I now have, you know, two hours and 15 minutes, whatever, left.

How have I used that time?

Have I carried on feeding, you know, the Corbusiers? The return of the Corbusier, the machine for living becomes the city for living, you know, and it's no longer living, it's just production, production.

(F): I think this highlights the tension between individual experience and more universal conditions. For example, someone might be spending their time on what others see as useless activities, while another person might be focused on something productive.

To bring this back to architecture, take the COVID lockdowns, for instance. Most of us were confined to our homes, or at least to more private, individual spaces. If you had a garden, that was part of your home environment; if you went to a park, that was a slightly more public but still relatively private experience at the time.

During those weeks, with schools and workplaces closed, life essentially paused, and we were forced to live within the architecture around us, to a much greater extent than usual. Of course, how this felt depended a lot on where you were living and what kind of spaces you had access to.

But thinking about that situation: were you bored of your space? Did you wish there was more? Did it engage you enough?

And if you compare that to when you could finally go outside, to meet friends or have a picnic, did you notice discomforts in the home that you hadn't been aware of before? Likewise, did you suddenly appreciate certain comforts outside that you'd taken for granted before the lockdown?

Speaking personally, it was the first time my family regularly went on weekly picnics. Usually, they'd complain about things like ants, wind, or sun. But since we were confined to the limits of our home, we started appreciating more.

From your experience, what do you think?

(Á): I fully agree. But I think in a sense this also feeds into what we discussed before of having this outside world and our world, the home.

They were always the opposite. Whatever I missed outside, I compensated on the inside and vice versa.

When in a sense the waking hours shifted, like I was always inside, I of course started to miss the other part of the equation.

(F): Were there any specific things that annoyed you, or that you found yourself missing?

Like, for me, I actually missed the nuisance of sand. I missed brushing it off, the texture of it. That's just an example, but you know what I mean.

(Á): I think even traffic was nice to see after a while. I hate traffic, driving in traffic and all that.

But it was like, finally some people, finally seeing some people around. Or even just being in a space with multiple people, a restaurant.

When you could go for a stand back in the restaurant, I hated when the thing was packed.

Finally, society. We're back.

But at the same time, usually I really like my room. It's very comfortable and I really like it.

But I find the whole thing annoying a month into it. I hated the whole room. I really needed to just move around. My bed, I hated everything that I had there.

(A): For me, that time made me try to work on my spaces a bit more, in a sense.

Whereas before, my bedroom was my bedroom. I would sleep, I would leave. Now I live there.

Let me turn it into a space where I would like to actually go in. Maybe I'd be a bit more comfortable. I don't want to leave every other second. I'm not comfortable in it.

(F): Did you notice any patterns in the things that gave you comfort? Or maybe did you find ways of arranging or managing discomforts that were there before?

(A): For me, it was a sense of just the time I gave to understand the space allowed me to feel more comfortable within it.

I started planting a number of plants on the windows. That just made me more invested in the space and made me appreciate it even more.

(N): I think having control over your own space and bringing in whatever you like.

If we're just used to a space and we're just going in and out of it and it's just, this is the space, this is it, you're investing your time and making decisions on how to change your space, it definitely makes it more comfortable.

Even if it's just adding plants, it just makes it your space.

(C): I feel like even the fact that we're sort of, I don't know, in everyday life, you establish this routine.

Every Saturday we used to go clubbing in Paceville or whatever. Then all of a sudden it's just taken away from you. You're confined to your house.

Me, personally, I just started trying to find new things in that life which I wasn't really allowed to do. Exploring a new place I've never been to or something like that.

(G): Being stuck in a house, I was going to say that being stuck in that house really unlocked the potential of personalisation and to bring back agency.

And that idea of, before COVID, there were certain spaces in my surroundings that would have been wasted, it's storage, it's this, it's that.

When COVID comes, you need a space to work. There were no dead spaces anymore. Absolutely every space.

If the light bugged me, I was not going to put up with the lighting system. So I would have, the level of personalisation increased exponentially.

(Á): Would you say then it was driving you to create the ultimate comfort zone? I think so.

Because you didn't want to have any discomfort. You wanted the ultimate comfort.

I couldn't put up with no discomfort, absolutely.

But did that lead, just going from the previous discussion, to a certain level of numbness? Or was it like, finally everything is perfect?

(G): I'd say, I think so. I think it's the opposite.

It was a constant work. It was a process. It really, really was a process.

So before COVID, you know, your house looks that way because once upon a time you bought a lamp. You put your lamp there. You buy a little table, you buy, and it just adds.

But then COVID comes, and every week it was, no, I don't like these lights. Let's put some fairy lights there. Let's put a spotlight there.

Let's, you know what, let's get rid of all the furniture. Bed on the floor. Every week was...

And that might have been a reaction to the desensitisation of having the same material boundaries. So the same structural boundaries. It was the same wall.

(J): So you lived with the numbness and you sort of awoken.

(G): And you rejected.

Whereas before I could go to a park. I could go for a drive. This had to change scales.

So it had to be, okay, I'm now turning my room into a workspace. I'm now turning my workspace into a sleeping space.

I'm now working on the balcony. Whereas before, the balcony would have just been, I'm feeling hot, I'll open the door. Now the balcony became another biome.

(F): A ritual?

(G): It was breaking of ritual. It was this reiteration.

(Á): So I got two things away from what you said. One is comfort. Comfort is never fully achievable. And the other one. Comfort at home is a response to the world outside. In a sense. Absolutely. And whatever is going on on the outside will impact how comfortable I feel at home.

(G): For sure. Just like we were mentioning. The student dorm in a walk-in city versus the house as a castle in the car-dominated suburbia.

(C): I think even the sense of routine was also very different. Because normally you'd go to your home at the end of a day of working and you'd be like, okay, this is relaxing. And it's your time to unwind. But during COVID, it's like you get bored of this routine. And you're constantly wanting to change things up. You move your bed, you change your workspace to your balcony. Like you were saying.

(G): I think it was also a shrinking down. A condensation of the ecosystem. Whereas before, you could go to university to work. But now I had a corner. And the second I sit down in that corner, that's lecture time. That's assignment time. The second I get up from that corner, I would draw a curtain over it. The workspace is closed. This is now my bedroom. Because in the early stages of COVID, I was going mad. I was waking up and sleeping. Working. Eating.

(C): So you couldn't have these boundaries anymore.

(Á): Absolutely. And it's a lack of sensory input. I think it's one of these. Because previously, you went outside. You had this, oh, okay. I need to walk through here. I need to get there. Now you fully lack that. Like during COVID. Like the area where you usually get your sensory input, that

overwhelms you during the day, that you need to get down from, it's disappeared fully. And now you have to create your own sensory inputs in your room that would kind of create these distinctions between functions. Or even feelings. Like looking at one of the corners of the room, I don't know, with two different materials or two different colours. It could bring a little bit of sensory stuff which is not digital. You get a lot of stuff digitally, but it's somehow still not the same.

I mean, you can watch a video of a forest. It's not going to give you, it's not yet going to give you the same input as it would if you actually go outside. But I would actually love to see people who use VR during this process. I want to see what their reaction was. Because of course, for them, it's completely different.

(J): But still, you don't get the smells. You don't get the wind. The other sensory aspects.

(Á): This is what I was about to say. But it still gives you such a large area of sensory input that they remove you from your environment, visually at least, fully. I'm curious. What impact did that have?

(A): We were so numb to what a real forest was that once we put the VR...

(Á): You can just light a candle.

(G): I would be just curious. Imagine living in a, or spending time in an AR or VR forest. But you're actually working on your plants. It's like you've got your five plants. But when you look up your thousand-acre forest, you can't touch and smell your plants.

(Á): Because that was the issue with getting the digital input from a screen. You could clearly see the boundaries. This is where the sensory input ends. But if you can wrap yourself around it, I think it probably, this should have been an experiment. It probably has been. I need to read up on this. Because then it's like, if you did sensory input, you were lucky. You were moving your sh*t around. The walls kind of disappear.

(F): I'd like to shift slightly towards a kind of conclusion. I'm really enjoying this conversation, and I appreciate that some of you came straight from work or university, so I don't want to keep you too long. But if you're happy to continue, I do have one more question, more of a question to help me out with my own views on this dissertation.

From what we've discussed, things like living in a caravan or enjoying camping, I want you to imagine, just for a moment, that there are no limitations. So forget about budget, stress, the chaos of everyday life, ignore constraints like size, space, or practicality.

If you could design your ideal comfort space, whether it's your home, your studio, your caravan, a yoga room, wherever, would you choose to include any personal elements of discomfort? Would you intentionally introduce something unconventional, maybe through texture, layout, or psychological play?

We've talked about how discomfort is deeply subjective. For me, for instance, that might mean having a skylight in the shower so I can see the rain or maybe even be exposed to it. It could mean designing parts of a house to be more tactile, or referencing case studies where floors are deliberately uneven because the architect believes it enhances physical and psychological awareness. Discomfort could even involve reducing privacy, like in my own home, where the lack of privacy is something I've come to value.

But these different elements may be considered comforts to some, or discomforts to different people. So if you had full freedom, would you welcome discomfort into your space in a way that's meaningful to you? Or would you prefer a fully comfortable, sanitised environment where you can switch off and completely unwind?

(J): No. I'm thinking about my old apartment. We had this discussion the other day about how your idea of apartments looks like. I was like, yes. sh*t everywhere. Paintings all over the walls. You don't see the wall. That's how I like it.

(Á): I was a little bit on the other end of the spectrum. I felt like a little bit clean with a few pieces in it that get highlighted because of the conscious within. But I would introduce, as you mentioned, this kind of privacy element.

I used to live in a place, luckily, which had a really nice glass wall on it in the living room and kitchen area. So you were fully exposed towards the outside world. And I kind of found a strange comfort in that. This comfort of, I'm basically on a display, at this point. I don't know. It was nice to get the sensory input when I required it just by looking outside and taking this massive view in. It got me that element. So I could keep the rest of the apartment this clean, clean style. That would be my introduction.

(C): I think I would tend to agree with you. I come from a household where we have seven people all at once. Three animals. So there's constant chaos all the time. But then I have my own little space which is my room. So if I ever need to detach and unwind, I can just go there.

But weirdly enough, I find that kind of comforting, that there's all this chaos around me. Like recently, I've been in this position where I'm looking for student housing and I had to decide between sharing an apartment with seven different people or getting a studio. And I was kind of conflicted by that. I think I kind of enjoyed the fact that just a step out of my room, it's still sort of within the boundaries of my home, but I'm still surrounded by that little bit of chaos, which weirdly enough, I find comforting.

(J): Yeah. Because that's interesting. Because now we're talking about co-living as well. If that's like a comfort or discomfort.

And I've lived in a couple of those situations. But today, I'm going to be 30 next year. So at some point, you get to the point where you're like, okay, I'm done with that now. Now I want my own

space. You know. But it's still comforting. I still enjoy those days. But I don't think I would go back living with people I don't know.

In that case, you know your family and it's a bit different, I would say, than seven random people that you may or may not dislike. It's a variable of uncertainty there as well, I think. It's kind of the discomfort looking at that possibility now.

(A): I would say to answer your question, I feel like the way I would imagine my spaces are, you mentioned this, they would be responses to the discomfort that we see on the outside, in a sense.

I don't know if that was the answer, but to me, there is a stimulation and sort of problem fixing. The outside problems and the existing problems that we were sort of mentioning that would really be in our faces during COVID. And this challenge to find comfort and identifying the discomfort, let's say.

(N): And I think similarly, I think it is very personal. But being inside, but sort of always having this connection to the outside is something that I value.

Like for example, I wake up and the curtains are open. I really don't care if my neighbour is going to see me. I find that almost nice that I can see my neighbour and my neighbour can see me. It is just, there is that connection. Whether it is people, or the windows open, and the rain is going to come in. It is nice to have that connection. And you are not just stuck in this space in isolation. I agree.

(J): That is also the difference between living in an apartment with or without a balcony. Because that gives you that outdoor space within your compound, which is really nice.

(Á): I would go a step further. If you can just tilt your window, it is a world of difference. I was one of the ones who got scammed. Okay.

(J): You can also just do this.

(G): I was going to say, when you first prompted us, I thought, absolutely not. Why would I? If I don't like the smell of this thing, why would I introduce it? If something annoys me, why would I introduce it?

Then I thought I actually have done this. It might be on a different sensory level to tactile, for example. There are certain points. Let's say it is COVID time. You are either on a lecture, you are either doing nothing, or doing something, or listening to music.

I would be listening to the same music. You end up in your fishbowl. I purposefully put together a playlist of music I had never listened to or music I almost didn't like. I started using that as my

go-to playlist. Eventually those became my favourite songs. Then there is familiarity that we bring in.

(J): Did you make a new playlist after that?

(G): No. I don't think so.

(J): This idea of the uncertainty, that discomfort of not liking these songs, if that was something you enjoyed.

(G): It was. I don't think I went through such a strict process where I stopped listening to music I loved to just listen to stuff I hate. That let me just listen to it.

(Á): I think you combined the two words in a sense. It is a comfortable discomfort. A certain level of discomfort that you are comfortable enough to introduce.

There is a zone. I am fine with having my kitchen fully exposed in my living room. I might not appreciate that much, let's say. I am taking a shift. There is this idea that they are uncomfortable with this level of discomfort. There is definitely a smell to it.

(J): You said something that got me thinking. I used to live with a guy who loved reggaeton. I hate reggaeton. But he would play it all the time. After a while, I was like, it is kind of nice. It is ok. I would still never put it on. But I learned to tolerate it.

(Á): I think this is a survival. People adapt to it. When you live in a community. If I hate you so much, I would just kill you. Humanity wouldn't have gotten very far.

(G): There is another layer. The inbuilt society.

(J): Some primal instinct.

(F): At the end of the day, we make each other uncomfortable all the time. There are discomforts that contradict each other.

I am going to go personal. I may be too loud for people. I may be too chaotic for people. I talk too much for people. But then, when the house is empty, my parents complaint that I am not there being loud, being chaotic.

I am creating a comfort for someone but creating discomfort for someone else. That is a whole other topic.

(Á): There is the white noise. Listening to the ocean. It is great for some people. It might not be that great. Some people put on the rain. Some people put on the city sound in the background. It is too quiet. That is a multi. We go on a hike and put on the construction sound. That is the sound. It finds me back at home.

(F): I had to share a bedroom with my sister for 22 years. She could only sleep with a fan on, no matter how cold it was, it had to be running. That was a real discomfort for me, but I had to get used to it. And I think it's those small rituals in our homes, the ones we often don't notice, that really shape us over time.

I don't want to go too off-topic, but I just want to say I really enjoyed this. If anyone has any final questions, whether about my dissertation or anything else, feel free to ask. After that, we'll move on to the final drawing exercise.

(J): I do have one question. What is the quintessential item in your apartment? If you only had one furniture, what furniture would it be?

(G): The bed.

(J): If it is a wooden floor. You can sleep on that.

(Á): The whole apartment or the bedroom?

(J): The whole apartment.

(Á): Definitely a toilet. I just don't find it really comforting.

(J): Yeah, but if it was the outdoor space, outside, you could go out and take it down.

(Á): I am more of a sitting person.

(J): Leaning against the wall.

(Á): I am going to get my phone and sit down, enjoy my morning coffee. I am not going to go into the...

(G): It reminds me of, I think it was Alvaro Siza, who built the half social housing. He built half social housing. The other half they would fill in, the locals.

(J): It was Alvaro Siza, or another Portuguese architect. Not important.

(G): They gave the residents a choice between a water heater or a bathtub. They thought for sure they were all going to go for a water heater. These people have never had hot water. We are giving them the choice for hot water. Almost none of them chose the hot water. They chose a bathtub. Their answer was: we have used, we have washed with cold water our whole lives. We have never had a bath. We have never been able to lie down in a bath. It is too expensive for us to put in later. If we really want hot water, we can boil a kettle. You try building a bath with pieces of wood. It is not so easy.

Your question: is it a bed? If I just roll out something, then I could sleep.

(F): I have slept on the bus, fully standing up.

(G): If it is a toilet, there is outside. Could it be the bath? I have not had a bath in a long time.

(Á): I could not live without a bath.

(G): Imagine. I am a shower guy. I am absolutely a shower guy. It might be something else we cannot think of right now. Imagine if you did not have a sofa.

(F): Now we are going to go home and start appreciating everything we touch.

(G): I could use a sofa. What happens if you lose your chair, your bookshelf? There are things that come with it. Without your bookshelf, you cannot store things. They are going to be everywhere.

(Á): But that ties to the real minimalist movement. It was more something like this. I cannot recall a specific architect. I remember reading about people who were going with this lifestyle. They literally lived in an almost empty apartment. Nothing in there. It is very similar to what you say. They just brought some stuff out. They slept on the books. They were piled on top of each other. The bookshelf became the bottom book. It is going with that. The objects filled the room. There were no... the functional object. This is not a good way to go about it. Anything that was not essential was removed. Shelves, things could hold each other. You could sleep on the floor. These extensions got removed. I cannot recall exactly what it was... I remember seeing a picture about it. It could be the tap.

(G): Running water.

(Á): Running water. Definitely running water.

(G): You can actually cook things. You do not have to light a fire.

(J): You can also wash clothes in it. Drink it.

(Á): Water. Definitely water.

(F): We cannot even imagine it. I am going to go home, open the fridge, and be like, oh my God, imagine living without a fridge.

(G): A freezer. I can imagine that. We have to go back to burying our food.

(C): Having to get fresh milk every day.

(Á): A lactose intolerant.

(J): You just milk the almonds.

(Á): Just go there and get the almonds. I am finishing up with the milking of the almonds. This is going to be the final. My comfort and discomfort. The milking of the almonds.

[Drawing Exercise 2 as found in Appendix C]

E.2 | FOCUS GROUP 2

Semi-Structured Focus Group Transcript

Date: 23rd May 2025

Participants: Identified by individually selected letters for anonymity.

Participant 9 (C), Participant 10 (D), Participant 11 (J), Participant 12 (K),
Participant 13 (M), Participant 14 (P), Participant 15 (R), Participant 16 (V)

Moderator: Federica Formosa (F)

[Drawing Exercise 1 as found in Appendix C]

[Introduction as found in Appendix D]

(F): I'll be giving you prompts, but I'm going to step back from the conversation as much as possible. The idea is for you to discuss and debate among yourselves. In the first focus group, the conversation sometimes went in directions I hadn't anticipated, but I found those moments valuable, so I allowed them to unfold. Similarly, I'll only step in if I feel the discussion is drifting too far off track.

These conversations are meant to serve as inspiration. They might open up areas I hadn't previously considered and will help shape my thinking for the dissertation and any related analysis.

I'm starting with a few broad questions, just to give you a general sense of direction. So the first question is: What does comfort in a space mean to you, and how do you recognise when a space feels comfortable?

Alongside that, I'd like you to reflect on whether you think comfort is universal. Do you agree or disagree, and why?

Go ahead and discuss amongst yourselves. The floor is yours.

(M): Comfort is universal, but everyone has a different threshold to it, depending on how you're brought up and where you live. I might have a higher desire for comfort than you, whereas you may be more resistant to comfort.

(R): But I think even defining what is comfortable differs for each person. For example, at least in my culture, sitting on the floor is such a comfortable thing. It's a thing we do, and I love sitting on the floor. But if I had to invite my Norwegian friend to my house, I don't think they'd be as comfortable with it as I would be. So I think it is universal, but it's defined differently. We all experience comfort, but comfort on the floor and on the seat are two different things.

(M): But do you think if your Norwegian friend did it a couple of times, would they get comfortable with it? Because I believe comfort is something you build up and get used to.

(R): Yeah, I think they would. Eventually, it's a thing you train yourself into. You're born into this ideal society of comfort, it makes you comfortable, and you grow up being comfortable with those things. But eventually, comfort is a skill you learn.

(K): I feel like, although it is quite universal, it also depends on your structure. For example, you're very tall, so a cupboard is comfortable for you at a certain height. But for me, I have to use step stools and things like that. I feel like the spaces we design can also depend on the person

designing them, for them to feel comfortable. Even with adaptive reuse of buildings: a building that was comfortable for one person may not be comfortable for another. But they can adapt it in their own way too.

(V): That's interesting, what you mentioned, that a space also needs to offer some kind of control. You can control it according to your needs. At the same time, for me, it's important to have my own personal space. That might also differ from person to person. Some people don't mind sitting closer together and having this intimate conversation. Others might feel it's too little personal space, they feel pressured, and they need a bit more breathing room.

(P): I think there's a bit of a standard when it comes to comfortability. Being in this room, for example, with a lot of people at once, everyone feels there's not enough space. I think comfort also depends on multiple factors, it's not just scale. I think it also depends on the overall environment. It can be environmental factors.

(D): It also relates to time. You can feel comfortable in a space for a certain amount of time, but everyone has their own personal limits to how much they can take. What does it mean if you're comfortable in a space for an hour, but then after that it stops being comfortable?

(M): But what, like your room? What space would you be in? I'm trying to think of something that's comfortable for a bit, you have an hour or two and then you're...?

(D): For example, when we went up to EASA, it was a very comfortable space for two weeks. But imagine doing that for three months.

(M): Yeah. But I feel like we can adapt quite a lot. Going back to something like picking up from a tall cupboard, you said you had to step further. It's not like that's a big issue. That's an inconvenience, sure, but you won't think, Oh, this is so annoying, I need to change it. I think you just do it, if that makes sense. There's a certain threshold or gap people are willing to work with, they acknowledge it's inconvenient, but we can't have everything perfect.

(K): I feel like, from what [Participant 10] was saying, your experiences throughout your life affect how you see comfort and what your level of comfort is. For example, I could spend my whole life in my childhood bedroom, but then one bad experience could make me feel super uncomfortable in it. Then I'd have to change the space and fit it to my needs.

(C): I think comfort, going back to [Participant 14]'s point, has a basic threshold. It ties into Maslow's hierarchy of needs. You have your physical needs, like shelter, and then as you go higher, you have psychological needs, which are very specific to each person. So I might have a room, I'm sheltered from the weather, but to make it more comfortable to me, it comes down to personal preference.

(J): I'm thinking of a bidet. I'll tell you why.

(R): I was thinking of bidets too.

(J): Because think about it, for us, a bidet is weird. No one uses a bidet over here in Malta. But abroad, it's such a standard that if you don't have it, it's crazy. But for us, imagine if suddenly everyone had a bidet.

(M): Same in Vietnam, where they have toilets on the floor. Even in Japan. And in Italy they have bidets too, right? In Japan, they have really high-tech toilets. For us, it's kind of a joke. If either of us go to Japan, it's like, Oh my god! You press a button and it washes you. And it talks to you and all this high-tech stuff. It's a level up.

(J): But for us, and I think this ties into what you were saying, and what [Participant 10] was saying, imagine you're there, and there's something invading a very private part of you, just water jumping out. After a certain amount of time, it's going to be super f**king invasive.

(K): No. I feel like it's more the opposite.

(M): But I've heard everyone who's used a bidet say, Oh my god, it's a life changer.

(J): I was saying, there is a limit. There is a necessary discomfort to get to comfort, I think. So when I see a bidet for the first time, what I'm remembering from seeing it, very perplexed, and very sort of... I was a bit, like, what do I have to do to make this work? You know, it felt a bit uncomfortable. Rather than just sitting flat on a toilet, I have to squat, I have to feel a shock of cold come up my a**hole. It's a very intimidating thing. But I have the same feeling as all of you: through time, it becomes something that becomes more comfortable, and something that sort of ends up being seen as almost a necessity to feel clean. I can see that.

(F): I have a couple of related questions, mostly just to push your thinking a bit. You mentioned the word private, right? The bathroom is something we tend to think of as really private and intimate. But do you think that discomfort in those spaces comes from certain things that have happened historically? Like, why is it that we feel it's not okay to shower in front of people?

In some places, like in gyms, it's actually normal for people to do that. So I'm not asking for definite answers, just your opinions: why do you think we tend to feel embarrassed or uncomfortable using the toilet around others?

And second, earlier you said you'd feel uncomfortable with a bidet spraying you. So what would your reaction be to, say, doing your needs into a hole in the floor? Like a squat toilet. It's still a toilet, just a different kind. What do you think?

(J): I'm not uncomfortable with that. I'm not uncomfortable with the hole, because nothing is feeling invasive to me. It doesn't feel like it's coming for me. The hole is just kind of asking for it, if

I'm being quite honest. The bidet is sort of like, I'm coming to get you. That's in the most basic raw terms.

(M): But I think with privacy and how we define privacy, I feel like at the end of the day it comes from us being born into it and being told, okay, this is private, so you must grow up with it. Even thinking about the bidet and the toilet, as in, using toilet paper. We've all used toilet paper, so a bidet can seem weird. It's like, how do you get water up your a** and whatever? If you think of it, if we all grew up using a bidet, then you're told you have to put your hand on your a** with sh*t. And you have this much distance between you and it's like, what the fk? And then it rips. And how do you touch it after you put your hand on it? It's like, what the fk is... You know what I mean? It just depends on where you're brought up.

(R): I think it's more of a norm. It's something that you're told that it's normal and you learn how to be comfortable with it. Because, for example, when I moved here, I was so shocked that people walk around with just toilet paper to clean their a**. I was so shocked by that. And me and my family, the moment we moved here, we spent one day with just a water bottle and the day after we bought a bidet. So it's what you grow up with and what's told to you that's normal.

And the whole thing of, for example, privacy, I noticed this, for example, between me and my sisters. The two older share a room and the two younger share a room. So between the two older, for them, they're so chill with walking around the room naked. If someone wants to change, they just change, you know? But then for the two younger ones, it's more like... if I'm changing, go out of the room and then walk in the moment I finish changing. So it's more of what you said: the norm is to yourself and that's what becomes comfortable.

This morning, my other sister, the older one, she walked in while I was changing and I was like, leave the room! So it's literally about what you define as comfortable and then you just grow up with that sort of comfort.

(F): I experience something similar at home. For example, privacy is often associated with comfort in many households. Privacy in my household is very uncomfortable. We're used to doing things like homework or assignments in shared spaces, like the kitchen. My mum often enters the room without knocking, it's just how we live. Even though we have enough physical space for everyone to be on their own, I find being in a quiet, private room quite unsettling. Whereas, as you were saying, someone else might really need that kind of solitude to feel comfortable. It's interesting how our daily routines and habits growing up shape what we consider comforting or not.

Privacy in the home is definitely one of those areas that shows how differently people experience comfort and discomfort. It brings up a lot of questions: Why do we feel the need to have our own bedroom? Why do we sleep in a double bed, even when we're alone? Why do we surround ourselves with so many small comforts? These everyday design choices, especially in our every

day spaces, feel familiar and relatable, but I'm trying to dig into where these preferences come from, what shapes them, and why. A big why.

(P): I think when it comes to privacy in my case, since I'm an only child, I was always brought up with basically either being home alone or having minimal distractions. And I think that came into a lot with regards to what is mine is mine, my privacy is my privacy, and there's a bit more of a boundary.

For example, there are a lot of rooms which are mine in the house: I have my bedroom, my bathroom, and the only thing that I share is the kitchen and the living, and a study room with my dad. But I can shift from multiple different rooms that are mine. And I think due to the deal of privacy, sometimes I would have periods where I would want the privacy, and then times where I would get bored of being so alone in the privacy, and would need to get out and work in the kitchen, for example. And I think it's because, at a point, I think routine gets boring. And I think that's why privacy then ends up changing in a way.

(C): I mean, I thought of the exact same thing. This year, I am an only child, and my bedroom is where I work most, uninterrupted. But this year, it wasn't really working, so I used to come to the studio. Shifting from a more private space to a more public space. Which, again, comes down to routine. It gets boring, and it's changed things. And what used to be uncomfortable became comfortable.

(R): For example, you guys have scenarios where you grow up with so much comfort for you to have all this privacy. But for example, for me, whenever I have privacy to myself, I find it so uncomfortable. Like my sister, I share my room with her, and recently she's just been like, I'm gonna sleep on the couch. But when she did that, I was so lonely for the first few nights sleeping alone. And I'd even be, not scared, but uncomfortable by just not having another person in the room. Even when I'm home alone, I find it so unsettling. I put on the TV just because I need noise. And I'm so used to growing up with noise that having no noise discomforts me so much.

(K): I feel that so much as well. I'm always used to either, my dad's always saying, Oh, there's too much quiet, put on the TV. So now I can't do anything without having something going on in my ears. I feel like as well, the level of comfort of the spaces I'm in, at least for me, then it's what you were saying before, also depends on my mood a lot. So if I'm tired, I feel like closing all the windows and just having my lights on wakes me up. Or if I'm feeling happy, I'd like to be around people. Sad, I'd just lock myself in my room and just work on my own. So I feel like as well the level of comfort that a person would need in their life also depends heavily on their moods.

(F): Our conversation naturally shifted towards the home and privacy etc. We reflected on how, despite growing up in different environments, we each developed unique comforts and discomforts that shape who we are. This ties directly into the idea of comfort and discomfort.

Do you think that what feels comfortable or uncomfortable to us might actually cause discomfort for others around us? Let's link this to, for example, the urban city. If we design spaces to cater to the comfort of certain people, could that end up making things uncomfortable for others?

To bring it back to something more personal, here's a simple example: in my household, we're quite loud and chaotic, always talking etc. But when I'm out with others, some might find my loudness or constant talking a bit annoying. That's just a basic example, but I want us to relate this to architecture. What are your thoughts?

(C): With the urban context you just mentioned, what comes to mind is homeless people. For example, in New York, they sit on these benches, and homeless people still sleep on them. The general public felt very uncomfortable with it for some reason or other. So they sit on these benches to make them pick the homeless people to sleep on them.

(M): So that was as in it was anti-homeless architecture because American government realised that tourists don't want to come to New York if there's a bunch of homeless people.

(C): And instead of solving the problem, they push them out, pushing the problem out, which is a terrible thing. It comes down to who's important to society. Who matters?

(M): And obviously, tourists bring money and homeless people cost money to solve.

(V): Maybe even if you as a tourist, for example, feel comfortable in an urban environment, and then you see someone else feeling uncomfortable in that same environment, it might make you feel uncomfortable, or make them uncomfortable.

(M): Is this really a good place?

(F): I want to shift the conversation a bit more toward the physical architecture. Since we're all architecture students, we know that the spaces around us are becoming increasingly modernised. I'm talking about this loss of texture, not just physical texture, but also a kind of resistance within the spaces themselves.

We're seeing a lot of cookie-cutter designs, what I'd call 'numbing' designs, and these kinds of spaces are often associated with what's called 'good design.'

What do you think about that? Do you believe that 'good design' is the same as comfortable design? And do you think it's numbing us, both as individuals and as a society?

By 'numbing,' I mean: is this lack of small challenges, like choosing the elevator instead of the stairs, or generally sheltering ourselves from effort, impacting our lives in a negative way?

Are you bored of the spaces you live in, not just your home, but the everyday environments you experience?

(K): There was Le Corbusier, who, it was his idea for industrialisation to lead to a standard, because he saw that having a standardised method would lead to perfection. So in their time, for example, it was something different and out of the norm, so it was something uncomfortable, which they saw would lead to perfection.

And now we can see, it has led to the cookie cutter houses. All of them are the same, and at the end of the day, none of them, because we've seen them so much, none of them really bring a sense of emotion out of us or a sense of like, "Oh, this is really nice," because we just see the same thing every day: copy and paste in the buildings.

But then, for example, something like Gaudí, we always go like, oh wow. Or like when Louis Sullivan, he would say he wants his buildings to evoke emotion and evoke awe in someone. There's a very different sense of, like, the time that you're living in. Like nowadays, since we see the same thing so much, I feel like that's why it causes a sense of numbness. So you need to see something different for you to actually realise that it's there.

(D): I mean, even looking at Malta, we are documenting this in a workshop, but like stopping for a second and actually looking at the buildings around us that existed for the past couple of years, and seeing the people that live in those buildings interact with their spaces. So they have a shared staircase. You'd stop and see people before entering the house actually having a chat with their neighbour.

I mean, my parents bought a cookie cutter apartment. I don't know any of our neighbours. Our walls are so thin that you can't even have privacy in your own home, because if you speak, everyone in your apartment and everyone above you and below you are going to hear you.

(M): I think the 'good design is comfortable design' is like, as soon as I hear it, it's like, I don't think most people... Like, I get it, true, for sure, but then it's a very shallow statement. Because once you actually think deeper in it, it's like, okay so what is good? What is good comfort? What is good design?

To think of good comfort, I'd say we have an obsession with like whatever industrial times we're in now, like going fast and making things nicer, softer, more efficient. There's always this kind of cycle of increasing, which we think is positive, it's more comfortable, it's more efficient. And then once we actually have spaces that are less by this idea and slow us down, then you realise, oh, comfort is in like kind of more personality. For me, at least. And like, slowing down.

(J): I think people have no idea what actually makes them comfortable, to be honest. I think they're with this idea that they're just going to like, well, if everything comes easier, then I'm comfortable. I think if you aim for neutrality by comfort, that's how you end up with a society that becomes much more aggressive and much more frustrated.

(M): I think if they're more comfortable, they become like... numb.

(J): Exactly. But that's what will lead to aggression at some point. People are going to get aggressive at some point because of how docile everything is going to look.

(M): I feel like we're all really comfortable. I feel like us compared to our parents, we're way more chill. I don't think politically we're much more like... We let things happen. We're not very active in that sense because we have very comfortable lives compared to older generations. So we're just, there's no struggle, if that makes sense.

(J): Let's talk about the pattern in terms of comfort. If every day, so I'm going a bit broader than architecture, but let's say I go to my cookie cutter apartment when I get home from my cookie cutter office in my cookie cutter car, there's no f**king texture to anything. To go back home to a dopamine rush every day, okay, a year you can get away with it when you're growing up and when you have too much. But the second you f**king pause I think that's all going to bubble up and drop in your face at one point.

(M): But a lot of people live that life. Obviously, a lot of people, because they're forced to live that life.

(J): But a lot of people live that life that we know of from our age. But when these things happen in history, this just builds up into anger at some point.

(K): I don't feel like it will lead to a certain, like I feel like it depends on the person for it to lead to aggression. I feel like a continuous sense of comfort will end up leading to laziness.

So, for example, our parents in their time, they obviously didn't have ChatGPT and stuff like that, so they would have to go to the library, read a bunch of texts and take their information from there. And we just go onto our laptop and ask it, oh ChatGPT, what should I do about this? Find me a book, find me this and find me that. So I feel like although it's very comfortable to have that tool, the more tools that we have and the more tools that are being invented, although they're comfortable, will end up leading to a lazy society, I feel like. And a sense of numbness.

(J): That's what's going to end up causing the aggression. So I'm not saying we become aggressive, but we're going to be creating a platform so people ten years younger than us are going to enter what we've created. But we've become docile. We're creating a very numb, just bland environment. They're going to come into the world, they're going to start clicking before they got in the addiction that we got in the addiction.

(K): People nowadays just don't care. I don't care, I'm comfortable how I am and I'll just stay how I am. I don't feel like we actually care enough to change something.

(D): No, but it's not aggression for change. What I'm getting at is, it's so bland that if you get bored and you don't want to fight for something, you're going to get aggressive.

(J): It's going to end up at that point. I think we're taking in too, it's too short to think like in the gaps of 2, 3, 5 years. I'm talking in decades from now. Let's say we're going in this pattern where it's cookie cutter, whatever, it can't be that people just are okay with it and it goes down, because it's never been the case like that.

(M): No, but it kind of is, because the people then, if it's in decades, the people that are being born into the cookie-cutter, won't know it was before them, so that's their tolerance of conflict.

(F): I'm going to jump in here because something from the first focus group came to mind that relates to what you just said. An individual had pointed out that our sources of information are constantly increasing. I don't want to generalise, I cannot speak for everyone, but people might look at the past and get that frustration from knowing what the past was and what they're living in. We don't know what the future will hold, but if this pattern continues, could people become so bored or numb to the extreme, where they are so numb that everyone feels dead?

What you said also reminded me of a quote I saw on video. It said, "To be so comfortable that it's existentially uncomfortable, because you realise you're where you wanted to be, and now there's nowhere else to go." That really resonated with what you were discussing. I don't want to interrupt too much, so I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

(M): That's essentially just the journey is better than the destination. I was going to mention that the idea of becoming comfortable, and the climb of becoming comfortable, is better than the actual comfort itself, if that makes sense.

Me imagining having a double bed brings me more, it's a heavy build-up, and then once you actually get it, you're like, okay, it's nice. But then after, I don't know, a week, that becomes your new baseline of comfort, and you want something more. There's always going to be a hunger for the next thing.

(F): So, when thinking about the physical and psychological aspects of discomfort, do you all think we're actually glorifying this idea of excessive comfort, or do you believe it's something necessary?

(M): I think we're glorifying it.

(J): We're so glorifying it. I think I'm lucky in terms of the places where I spend most of my days and where I live. I think my bathroom, for me, is excessively comfortable to the point where I use it as an escape.

Because, people can walk in my room and just, we have this thing with boundaries, we would just walk in the room and whatever. No one's going to question going in a bathroom. Depends on who, it varies, but if I say I'm taking a sh*t or I'm taking a shower or whatever, no one's going to push it. It's more likely that the bathroom feels safe than the room feels safe to go to it.

So you stay in the bathroom. You stay in the bathroom for so long, depending on the sunlight you're getting, it becomes depressing, but you don't care because you're sitting down on the toilet. Then you have your distractions on your phone, which is already that excess dopamine that's rushing in. Before you know it, your legs are dead, you're in the toilet for 30 minutes, and you can't even get up. I think it's excessive. I have a bath and a shower. I never use the f**king bath.

(M): Yeah, I think we can all, at least me, I know that my room is way too comfortable for myself. I remember when I went last year to Byrno on Erasmus, I shared a room with a roommate. We were both in the same room. I have my own room, so I'm used to being alone. I'm always with this person. The room is quite small. I'd go to the bathroom for an hour just to be alone mentally.

I remember in Byrno thinking, I'm so excited to go back home and have my own space and stuff. Once I went, after six months, it was nice for two days. After, I got really depressed from having this excess coming back into my room. Existential. Is this all it? I've achieved everything. I've achieved what I wanted, but I still have to be comfortable. I don't know.

(J): I relate. I feel what you said 100%. I lived more, not survived, I lived more when I had a very uncomfortable living environment. When I had a shower less than 50 by 50 centimetres, with the curtains touching my a** every time I turned the shower on. I lived more, so I didn't waste time delaying everything in the comfortable, nice, hot shower where I know no one's going to come in. I lived more when I just needed to do what I needed to do and get the f**k out.

(M): Discomfort drives you. It's a good thing.

(C): Comfort can be good for a break. You want to make progress. Comfort is the end. It has to be a comfort zone kind of thing.

(P): I have a quote from a book that I had read. It basically sums up a bit this conversation. It says:

"Life becomes a Sunday afternoon. We ask for nothing grand, and we cease to demand anything more than we are willing to give. In that state, we think of ourselves as being mature. We put aside the fantasies of our youth, and we seek personal and professional achievement. We are surprised when people our age say that they still want this or that out of life, but really deep in our hearts, what has happened is that we have renounced the battle for our dreams. We have refused to fight the good fights."

It's a bit more philosophical.

(F): We're taking a philosophical approach in this conversation. If anyone has anything they didn't get a chance to share earlier, or something they feel might not have directly related to the discussion but is still relevant, please feel free to bring it up now.

(K): I feel like we take comfort for granted. Like what you were saying, my bed was too comfortable, and you only realise it after burnout. I feel like you can't know what your type of comfort really is until you've lived other people's types of comfort.

(M): I was going to say, once I came back, I had a reaction where I kind of want to make my room more uncomfortable, if that makes sense. I started hanging up stuff on my walls that are visually very chaotic to me. I get used to it, and it's a discomfort at first, but then I get comfortable with it. I'm changing my room to make it a bit more straight to the door and easy to get out. It's a bit hard to get out. These discomforts, when I get used to them, they'll be uncomfortable first, and then once I get used to them I'll change up again, to create a cycle of always being slightly uncomfortable.

(J): I believe a huge factor also does come down to roots. When I was a kid, I used to live with all three of my siblings in one room, adjacent to the room with my parents in the other room, in a very small compact space. One bathroom for all of us. It was much, much more intimate than how I've transitioned to now. For some reason I still look at that and feel more connected to that than me having my own separate bathroom, separate room, separate everything.

So I think a huge factor does come down to the question of nature versus nurture, to be honest. Maybe it's our craving to always be surrounded by, to have a tribe of people with us, instead of forcing us to be more and more disconnected and separated. I don't know. It's just what went through my head. I don't think it's necessarily that you have to be in the other person's shoes to figure it out. I think it's more about what we're naturally drawn to most of the time. There are a few universals, not comfort, there are a few universalsthat we're just naturally more drawn to, that we don't even think of asking anymore.

(R): For example, what comes to mind to me is people who actually don't have the luxury of being comfortable and choosing to make their space uncomfortable. You live in the street, you live in a tent, etc. You just have an uncomfortable environment. That is, like until the level of humanity is met in terms of comfort, you wouldn't desire uncomfortableness in your space until that is satisfied for you.

(J): I think we need to link the discussion of comfort versus discomfort with survival versus living. Because I think the lines have become so blurred as to what we actually want, what we want to live to, and it meeting a collision with survival. If we're just aiming for survival, we're going against what makes us human or not. Because then we're just animals, if we're aiming for survival.

(M): But survival what do you mean? As in because everyone is surviving. Survival is staying alive.

(J): Cookie cutting is basically just us simplifying survival. Okay, people need X amount of space just to live, they just need a place to share.

(M): I feel like that is trying to take the baseline of survival to a higher stage. Not just survival of eating, a basic level of survival is at least not simply this cookie-cutter thing, which is maybe better than the other situations.

(J): In the sense that survival evolves over time now. I think if we remove everything, we can't go back to how we were thousands of years ago.

(M): But because we know what is now.

(J): But let's say everyone lives in the survival mode of what things are. Like imagine a prison. A prison just offers you the bare minimum to survive.

What's the difference between? I saw this video, from Instagram Reels, of someone going around comparing a dorm to a jail cell. People were getting them all wrong. And we're reaching that point. We're going to reach that point.

(M): Wait, what do you mean? Are they the same, essentially?

(J): University dorms and the jail cell have reached the same point. Imagine an island on limited space where we're just thinking of compact, compact, compact, compact, where the human mind that is supposed to be aimed at creating and challenging, because again, no one can all be neutral, it's in our nature to challenge things in general. So our soul just, our individuality, just protrudes and forms this weird puzzle that's never going to be f**king done.

So if we're oppressing that aspect of us, there's going to be an internal conflict with everyone that, again, broken record, passive, passive, passive, passive, frustration, aggressive, fighting.

(F): Sorry to interrupt, but there's another quote that ties into what you were saying, it's from The New York Times:

"A building is meant to protect us from the worst weather. A building should not collapse upon its inhabitants. But beyond that? Well, that's a matter of opinion."

That really connects to the idea of survival skills you mentioned. Someone that I spoke to also, brought up the example of camping. You opt to go camping for a weekend and you put yourself in that discomfort. But only for a temporary amount of time.

This person mentioned how camping is something that not everyone, but most people, seek to go to for a temporary amount of time. You're putting yourself in certain situations. You have to use the bathroom out in the wild. You're surrounded by nature, which might be comfortable or uncomfortable. For this individual, camping was actually the most comfortable place they could be, their idea of happiness.

Our conversation then explored why that might be. Maybe it's because camping gives you a kind of rush, a sense of connection to the more authentic, raw experience of being human, something we often forget in modern life.

The discussion led into this dilemma, in that sense, it's a bit more of a physical discomfort, but these are physical discomforts. Are they something we want temporarily? Are they something we seek without knowing? And can we experience similar feelings in our everyday environments, or have we become numb to these realities?

To ground the discussion, I brought up the example of COVID-19. During lockdown, most of us were stuck at home with limited access to different spaces. Suddenly, many people started appreciating discomforts in nature that they might have previously avoided, like sand being annoying before but suddenly something you crave, or wishing to be outside in the rain even if you usually avoid it. My family, for example, started going on picnics, something they never really did before.

Maybe this could be a useful prompt for our conversation, about how we stopped limiting ourselves to the home and the usual ideas of privacy versus exposure. What happens when we deliberately expose ourselves to small discomforts, sometimes for a short time, sometimes longer? What can we gain from that?

I'd love to hear your thoughts on whether small elements of discomfort can or should be intentionally integrated into our architectural spaces, whether private homes or public environments.

Also, do you think we've reached a point where, for example, having a large plot of land often means prioritising a pool over a garden? How does that reflect broader architectural or philosophical values?

These are some themes that came up in the last focus group that I think could really add to our discussion.

(K): I feel like what I was saying from before, if you're used to something, seeing something all the time, you're going to get comfortable with it and just ignore it at the end of the day. For example, someone that lives on the front of Sliema and has the view of Manoel Island and all that, after a year of living there, at the beginning, they'll be like, wow, I wish I lived here and it's so nice and I have my coffee on the balcony. But then after two years, three, they're going to realise, okay, it's the same thing I see every day and I just have my coffee in the kitchen.

I feel like everyone is never at the end of the day happy, and you're always searching for something different. Because no one wants to be comfortable...

Everyone wants to be comfortable but they don't want to be bored.

(P): When it comes to certain discomfort, for example, during the COVID time, we used to go out on walks, etc., to get out of the house. A personal experience that happened to my mum was she got caught up with walking, and through discomfort, it made her realise how much she actually loves it. Then after that, they ended up going on Sunday walks, getting a group of friends, and now every year they do the Camino De Santiago. The discomfort led to finding out something that she loved at the end of the day. Which is quite interesting.

(M): A lot of people found hobbies from COVID times. Personally, I don't know. Looking back, I kind of liked COVID. I really didn't mind lockdown and stuff. I think as a person, it was great. I would make sure I cared about them. I don't know. I think it was the thing that kept me going, knowing that everyone else was in the same situation as me, if that makes sense. Obviously, I did have slight desires to go outside and be a bit uncomfortable, but the fact that I knew I was mentally prepared to be in your room when you have to be, I was fine with being there.

(K): I feel like COVID really made us appreciate what we actually have around us because it stripped us away from those everyday things that we found so normal. I became much closer with my friends because after school or our lectures, we'd just go home and we'd stay playing an online Scribblio game. At the end of the day, although it separated us, it made us closer and appreciate more.

(M): I was close to my friends during COVID. Even though it was online and we had no physical interaction, we were all very much desiring contact with other people.

(V): Maybe summarising something that we might say now: we're always striving for something we don't have in the moment. That made me think, do we get to feel uncomfortable with being totally dissatisfied, in a way? Society always pushes us to perform better, to move faster, to experience more, and so on. That also tilts back to what we said before. As soon as we feel super comfortable and we might be satisfied on so many levels, we are seeking discomfort.

I'm thinking, is this something that we personally really feel, or that society is putting on us? I feel like if you come to a certain point where you're like, I feel good in that space, I don't want to continue moving or developing or something else, people will look at you like... then you become lazy, in a way, if that makes sense. Or is this really something that comes truly from us? Is it a personal desire to constantly develop and continue?

(M): I think it's something that we're told since young, phrases like, seek comfort, get comfortable, and all this. And that since we're told it so young, we kind of are numb to it. Once we get our own personal experience, then we realise, oh, this quote is actually... I remember always hearing, what's the gender of this nation? I'm like, sure. And then only recently I've been like, oh, and I've got things like comfort and stuff like this. Once you have your own personal experience, you realise, okay, that this actually kind of means something. It's a personal journey, I'd say.

(J): I think even on a human relationship level, we seek discomfort. I think the best friendships and relationships you can get are when you've reached a point, and I think a philosopher said this, Slavoj Žižek. He said that the heavenly friendship would be one where you insult each other to Timbuktu, and you say f**k you, f**k your mother, because then all you have left is honest love. Because the bad stuff is so there and so visible, you accept it, you visually accept it, and then all you're left with is love.

Once all of that rubbish is stripped away by your choice, that discomfort and that awkward like, f**k you, f**k this, is passed, then you end up with a person who... that's all it is, love. It's layered. There's so much context to it. I think even the best friendships I have are ones where there were more downhills than uphill. Well, not more, a balance. But it's a balance, because if you're just... if it's everything... I don't know, I feel like if it's just, for the longest time... I'm not saying you can't survive a friendship that's just sort of good, good, good, good, good, but it's impossible.

(F): Does it feel surface-level?

(J): It feels surface-level, that's what it is. It feels like you don't know the person. It's too comfortable.

(M): I remember since a kid, I remember thinking, like, if I haven't, as a friend, if I haven't fought with them, I can't consider them best friends. Because it's too... and when I hear, man, we never fight with my friends, I'm like, you can't be so good at that. You love your family so much, but you still fight with them. Like, you have to have an up and down to have a cycle. I feel like, bringing back the subject of comfort and discomfort, it is a cycle of getting one, getting the other, getting the one, getting the other.

(F): How do you think this can reflect into architecture?

(R): Personally, I think it's not that we seek discomfort, I think we just seek to be intrigued by something. And back to what [Participant 16] said about what society kind of pushes you to, for example, the idea of living in a house with a pool, five rooms, whatever. That's the ideal source of comfort that they push you towards. But then once you reach that, you're no longer intrigued by the things that made you achieve that, and the space itself is not intriguing.

But if I live, for example, in a tent, if it's a comfortable tent, I have all my human needs sort of met, but I'm constantly being intrigued by the space itself, by what's happening around me. There's so much going on in it that I'm constantly intrigued, and in that, I'm comfortable, because I don't experience the same thing every single day, exactly the same.

Like, for example, the studio, it's such a numb space, but the fact that a new person will walk in any random day, it intrigues me and keeps me kind of, like, you know, I like this space. I wouldn't be here if no one showed up.

(F): But it's not the architecture itself.

(J): So, comparing...

(M): I'd say, architecturally, to me, I'd say to always have it somehow changing, if that makes sense. Like, if somehow studio, even if it's with furniture, somehow studio every morning, the tables out there were always in a different layout or whatever. That would make, even though the space is terrible, that simple thing, if it changed every day, it would both make me excited to come here before coming here, and then when I'm here, I'll be more... it changes the space a lot.

(K): I feel like this goes into the reason as well why we go on a vacation, for example. It's because we're not bored, but we're sick of seeing the same buildings that we see every day on our commute to uni or to work or whatever, and we have that sense of I want to seek something else, a new architecture, a new this and that and trails and hikes and lakes and whatever, something that we don't have here. And we experience it when we go abroad. So it's also like, I'm comfortable with my surroundings right now, let me go to Portugal and see what they have over there.

(D): Also, I'm not exactly sure how I'm going to verbalise this, but I think this need to seek comfort also comes from this idea of retirement. Like, you need to build up a certain level of comfort so that then, when you stop working, you're in a comfortable space.

(F): So what is a comfortable space?

(D): Exactly, what is a comfortable space? Why is comfort... like, why do you have to stop your life once you reach that form of...?

(K): For example, my ideal retirement would be to buy a yacht and go on a yacht somewhere. Because at the same time, that's always seeking another sense of discomfort. I'm on a boat on the sea for a period of time, going to different countries. Or for example, living on a farm would be another retirement ideal for me, because it's something that throughout my life I haven't had until that point.

(F): An interesting point you're bringing up. You mentioned that your ideal retirement would be on a yacht or a farm. Besides the obvious luxury factor, since a yacht can be even bigger than a house, if I think about it practically, both yachts and farms come with more obvious discomforts than a typical home. On a yacht, you're out at sea, confined to a limited space, and you're not free to just escape anytime you want if you're out in the ocean. On a farm, there are a lot of physical 'discomforts'.

It's quite interesting, because in reality, those spaces might be causing discomforts, but they're also giving you that excitement, they're giving you something new. Another participant has mentioned that they lived in a caravan for a while. Mobile architecture is another kind of physically uncomfortable environment that, in reality, can bring excitement into your life, for example.

Earlier, someone brought up Le Corbusier, and I wanted to add something about that, but the conversation moved on. From the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, design schools and architects started promoting ideas that, in a way, numbed people to their surroundings. Architecture was used not to silence people, but to quiet the chaos around them. This idea partly explains why we experience environments the way we do today.

There was also a literal sanitisation of spaces after the war. People wanted buildings that were easy to clean, that felt safe, and that visually calmed you, helping you to forget the turmoil outside. That's something I didn't get to mention earlier.

Opposing this numbing architecture, a few contemporary designers have also tried to oppose these ideologies. To help visualise this discussion in architectural terms, I want to introduce a case study: the Reversible Destiny Foundation, by Arakawa and Gins. These architects believed that uncomfortable architecture, emotionally, physically, and physiologically, can actually extend our lifespan and improve our quality of life. Their residential designs, which are inhabited today, intentionally incorporate extreme physical discomfort. They use undulating floors, unexpected steps, even bathrooms without doors, spaces designed to disrupt comfort on purpose.

I find this inspiring because their goal was to create environments that, through life stages, from childhood to adulthood, expose people to rejection and discomfort in ways that promote growth and resilience.

Not linked to this case study specifically, but I want to know your opinion on this. Do you think discomfort can be intentionally incorporated into architecture? And if so, can it be done in a way that's beneficial? Should discomfort be an extreme experience, or something more subtle?

To give another example that's maybe more relatable, public transport. Catching a bus involves discomforts like walking to the stop and waiting. But if, say, fuel or cars become too expensive, or policies discourage car use, those discomforts balance out the benefits of avoiding car ownership. So sometimes discomfort leads to a kind of comfort or greater good.

I mention this because I think we can all relate to it, and now we can start thinking about how this applies to architecture. What do you think? Could discomfort have a positive role in the spaces we inhabit? Elaborate.

(J): I feel like the house is taken to an extreme where it might not accommodate entirely.

(F): But you don't need to limit this conversation to the house. You can speak about any spaces we inhabit.

(J): But I do agree. Why do we need to see the house as a place of just simply comfort, instead of it being a sort of training ground for outside? Why are we looking at the house as the most important place you can be in your day-to-day life? Why is that the case? Why can't it be the place where you just do your needs, over time, get used to the discomfort, so when you do go

out and live, because that's where you do your living, you live outside of your house, you're more... I'm not gonna say you're a god and you're perfect and you're more adaptive, but at least you have a much better understanding, and you're more grounded into the reality of certain things.

I might be going for a bit of a stretch, but I feel like people who've come from challenging homes or places that are very uncomfortable are more likely to adapt in harder situations and are more likely going to give you raw, honest truth than be uncomfortable and get to a solution when a solution is required.

(M): So let's say they have to live in that house, would they be more equipped?

(J): I think if they were born and raised in that house and they just lived in it, they might not like it. I'm not saying they're going to enjoy living in that house. I'm saying when they go out in the real world, they're going to be better adapted.

(F): But if you were born in such a house... because before you were saying it's nature versus nurture, wouldn't this be the norm for you? I'm asking, not stating. This might be an extreme case. We're speaking about a spectrum here, so we can discuss both ends of the spectrum.

(J): I personally, in the discussion of nature versus nurture, believe nurture wins more than nature itself. But nature does have a huge factor, and it is going to link you back to certain truths in life. But I feel like nurture, if I was nurtured in that house, I would feel that leaving it after X amount of years, going into adulthood, and going out of my house, I'm met with certain discomforts that are outside of home, I'd be more comfortable, personally.

(K): Like with patience.

(J): It builds, I think it builds a certain amount of patience. For example, I used to move around a lot in my younger years. So for me, nothing ever felt permanent. Everything always felt like I needed to discover, I needed to challenge spaces. So if we had a workshop and there is a hole, and no one's going to go in the hole and go in to discover it a bit more, I would want to challenge, despite how ugly or filthy this space is. I feel like it's something where I would be more curious and less uncomfortable to question than others.

If you live in a rigid space, you're not going to question certain things. Like, okay, if there's an area that you're not supposed to go in, you're not supposed to go in. But you're more inclined to be curious and push yourself to survive more.

(D): I would say that sometimes a rigid space can make you want to explore. That's how it was for me. I grew up in a household where we were told to know a lot. And then what I do in my free time is go and explore buildings that we were told we can't go.

(J): But that's why I can't speak for nature vs. nurture, because me and you can live in that house and we'll both come out with two completely different outcomes. So it's not fixed.

(M): Yes and no. But that house, I think too, like you said, there were places where you can intentionally trip, like, let's say, the bathrooms don't have doors. I'd say the place you can intentionally trip in is a bit of a kitschy idea. It's something that maybe you trip on once and then you get used to it.

You know, like I have a stair in my house, kind of like the stair thing. I fell on it once and now I have my back... And then, you know, I've never done it again. But then stuff like, let's say, a more conceptual idea, like having a bathroom be public. Well, that's different.

If you have to move out of that house, and you take along with you that idea of your privacy of going to the toilet not being private, you might not mind. And probably if you go to a house where it does have privacy, you'd actually be weirded out, at least by that.

(K): I feel like if you had to actually grow up in a house such as this one, like I said, it would create certain motifs and characteristics in your brain that would carry through life. But for example, like with [Participant 10], if you just go for two weeks, you'd find it comfortable for those two weeks and then go back to your version of comfort.

If you spend longer, it would be terrible for you. But if you had to grow up in it and then go somewhere else, it not only creates a sense of caution or patience, like we were saying before, with the tripping, you trip once and don't trip again. But you'd also find it strange to live anywhere that isn't like that. I feel like it would be too comfortable, and you'd always seek that sort of discomfort again.

(J): I might be pushing it, I know of a family... I can't attest to everything they did or how they lived their day-to-day lives, but I used to know this guy well. A norm for them was: no TV, no cartoons, only one channel, like National Geographic, for example. There were a couple of awkward norms like that.

Now, these three siblings are all very different. One's a standard genius, one's a bit creative... But they all came out very different people. And I think these small changes, like not seeing cartoons as a kid, which would have been a discomfort for me, challenged them in a way that shaped them.

So these small, subtle discomforts made a huge difference in how they turned out when they left home. I'm not saying they all turned out the same, but I do think they all learned something from it, some kind of adaptation, subconsciously.

(R): I think it's all mainly about just being conscious of what it is. For example, in architecture, it's about being conscious of the space you're in. If you're in a beautiful building, you're conscious of it, you're seeing stuff, your brain is working.

But if you're in numbing architecture, you don't experience anything, you kind of just become one with it. That's what you were saying about experiencing things outside the world. I think discomfort is just having your brain function.

We'd all like to shut down our brains and go on sleep mode all the time. But when your brain is functioning and working, that is a sort of discomfort. I don't think anyone desires to be in an environment where they feel tense all the time, that's not desired.

But what you do want is something that intrigues your brain and actually makes it function. It's not just about being uncomfortable. It's about having your brain actually work.

(K): I agree. Personally, my room is comfortable, but after living in it for a few years, I found that it makes me uncomfortable. It's small. I have my desk, my bed, and my dresser. But I share my wardrobe with my sister in her room. That's uncomfortable, because I have to go to her room to change and then come back.

Also, there's not much light, so now I don't even study in there anymore. I just go to the kitchen table. I feel a great sense of discomfort in my room that I want to get away from. I feel like we don't seek discomfort. We seek comfort, but one that also stimulates the brain.

(R): Exactly. Like, the same thing with studying. I have very specific spaces where I study, and each semester I can't study in the same place I studied the previous one. I won't touch it. I used to go to Starbucks and then not go back for months.

So it's about being intrigued by the architecture around you, by the spaces you inhabit.

(F): So your comfortable spaces can become your uncomfortable?

(J): Exactly, exactly. I do want to mention, I think there's a significant difference between us discovering a domestic space and us discussing an outside space.

So when you brought up the bus, for example, I don't think that's a discomfort we should be okay with. I think it's based on us being a post-colonised country, and we're still learning to adapt, learning what our boundaries are, and what things we should demand.

I just wanted to say I do think there's a difference between what we accept in a domestic space and what we accept in public life.

(F): I mean, that reflects a cultural difference, right? Like, say you weren't raised in Malta, maybe you can tell us what it's like in Germany. Is it preferred to catch a bus instead of drive? What if it's normal to walk 20 minutes to your bus?

A lot of the small discomforts in urban architecture, like walking more, might actually be good for us. Walking has clear benefits, but here we tend to avoid it. Many might opt to wait for a bus even if the destination is just a 10-minute walk away. Or we'll take the lift instead of the stairs, even though we know the stairs might do us good. Generalising for the sake of the conversation.

And I'm obviously not talking about people with physical impairments, just in general. Maybe it's a cultural thing in Malta? Like, we're used to avoiding discomfort, pampering ourselves whenever we can?

(D): I mean, I don't drive, but what I've started to realise now, catching a lift with my boyfriend every day, is how much cars are literally just used as storage luggage. That's the big benefit and comfort of them. You can just have everything in there. You don't have to think about what to take with you. When I didn't catch a lift with my boyfriend, I would be very methodical with what I bring to uni. Now I just bring everything.

(K): I feel like it also depends on the country. Like you said, in the Netherlands they ride bikes everywhere, even with baskets on them. For us, that's super strange, to bike to uni. Unfortunately, our roads are not accommodated to it.

Even if we had better bike lanes, and better urban design, with proper bike lanes instead of just car roads. Because of how we were raised, we wouldn't take a bike. Some of us don't even know how to ride a bike. Our country's too far gone for that kind of change.

Even if it's a discomfort that's beneficial, we wouldn't take it.

And as we've grown up with it, for me at least, I'm not gonna catch a bike even if there is a clear bike lane.

(M): It's also a mentality thing. Like, even if we did really invest, it would still take a long time for people to get over the mental barrier.

Even if I liked it, it would take me, and probably a lot of the population, a long time to get over the mental block of biking to uni.

(F): I have to bike to uni, I have to sweat, I have to put in that physical effort...

(M): That would take, even though maybe the bike lane would take a decade to plan out, really good bike lanes. It would take another two decades to actually get people to use it. You have to really promote it.

(D): The infrastructure of where you're going needs to be able to support the fact that you're going there with a bike.

(C): It comes down to infrastructure. I know people who used to work in the UK who biked to work because they had a shower at work. Personally, during COVID, I took up cycling. The only reason for that, I felt safer because the roads were empty. I would cycle from my house to Valletta and back and be on the road. It couldn't just be a bike. It could be changing the way we use transport.

(J): One example, Rotterdam pulled off what we're discussing. They changed a whole highway into a canal. Then they made it a whole bike city. It's not a crazy suggestion that just for a few years of discomfort, we achieve a way of living that's much more sustainable in the long run.

(D): But you're comparing a flat city, to a hill city.

(J): Yeah, it's a flat city.

(D): Which is an added discomfort over something we already feel uncomfortable with.

(J): Yes, but I'm not saying, we copy-paste Rotterdam, but there are solutions we need to take into account.

(K): You can adapt. You can end up having an electric bike.

(D): No, no, for sure, but in the minds of people, that's an added discomfort they have to cross.

(J): But even Rotterdam had to do it, and believe me, they're a flat land. People had to cross the hurdle of, you know, it's biking now, so no matter whether we see a tram, an underground, electric bikes, whatever, there's still going to be a point where people are going to have to complain for a few years before we get to a sustainable point. It's just who's going to bite the bullet first.

(F): For those who've lived abroad, I know a few of you have been on Erasmus, and some of you are here temporarily. Do you feel like the communities and society in these different countries were as pampered as much as we are in this context? Were they as numb, even when that slight discomfort may result in something way more beneficial? I mean, in all different senses and examples.

(C): What came to mind when we were thinking about different cultures was Bali, because in Bali everything is very, very open. They have no glass windows, nothing, it's sealed, so you hear everything when it comes in, and everything is made out of bamboo, and it's all natural. So it's a very different way of living, and they are super comfortable with it. People who come here and people who go there always feel different. Take it home with you.

(K): I was thinking about how, ages ago, they used to have, for example, the Roman baths, and they'd just go naked and relax.

(M): Or even the Roman, the poop, whatever, they'd have the poop room.

(K): Exactly, so I was trying to think what was the catalyst to close everything and make a bathroom like a little, small box.

(M): I don't know what made it. Maybe religion or taboo stuff. What made my sh*tting a really tucked away thing.

(D): With the Roman baths, it was public because it was a luxury to be able to afford.

(M): Yeah, but it used to be, let's say, in some castles they had the room, there'd be the throne, and there'd be peasants seeing. So the king would sh*t from a top thing, and there'd be the moat, he'd sh*t in the moat, and then the people would clap when they'd see the sh*t. So they'd see the king, and they'd clap and celebrate. They were literally celebrating.

(F): So even vulnerability was culturally altered throughout the years?

(M): And they were going from a celebration, to now it's become like, you don't talk about it or whatever, you don't show it.

(K): Or even for royalty, they used to, or who had the luxury of having servants and whatever, they used to force them to change them. It was common for people to see each other in that state.

(D): Also, something that I have experienced from the EASA, it's a very, very Maltese thing to not want to be naked in front of other people. Whenever we've gone, most of the people from other countries were very okay with people coming in the showers. Even previous Maltese EASA members have always told us, you guys are going to be the only people that are going to feel uncomfortable with this. Most other people...

(J): For example, I go to the gym with my friend, and then we go to the changing rooms. A bunch of older people, everything out. As in, we accept it, but there's still, as you say...

(F): In that sense the architecture of the gym specifically was designed in a way where privacy is, you know, not...

(J): Everyone's there, everyone has to change. There are just toilets and the showers, it's the only place you can change in private.

(M): I think because when you're older, you kind of just don't give a sh*t. I feel like now I might be against it, but when I'm 50 I won't care.

(F): I would say we give less sh*ts now. We're becoming naked more and more as the days pass, I feel.

(K): I feel like they don't care because, for example, my grandmother used to live in a house where she had seven siblings and one bathroom. So everyone was just like, it was normal to go to the bathroom in front of each other.

(D): But then with our parents, it's much more taboo. Exactly, when privacy starts to become more normal.

(M): I feel like as you get older, for me, I don't know, maybe I won't do it now, go to the gym, but I feel like if I'm 50, I'm past my prime, I guess I don't care anymore.

(F): Maybe you realise it's not that deep?

(M): Yeah, literally. I've heard that even when you reach 40, 50, you really don't care about your appearance. You kind of just say, this is how I am. You know what I mean?

(J): But the point was that if there are still taboo remarks being said under the breath, the transition hasn't been completely made yet. Well, that's something else, I feel.

(M): I feel like it's because we have a bit of a taboo around privacy and being naked. That's because we don't have any sort of activity where we're naked. I'm thinking of places like Scandinavia, they have saunas and stuff, and they're naked and whatever. Or even in some cultures, you just change in front of your family. From young, you've been doing it. Us, we never have that. We never swim naked or something.

(F): There were many culturally significant points in history. For example, the Greeks. For us it's extreme, how the Olympics started.

(M): Naked.

(F): Then we shifted back to a more conservative lifestyle. Obviously, we're relating this back to discomfort within architecture, but it's very, very related, because architecture informs who we are as well. You know, then it became very conservative, and now we're sort of leaning away from that conservative lifestyle again. Or many are trying to, at least.

(M): I think it mainly came from Catholic ideology. Literally, when Catholic ideology came after the Greeks, a lot of things became more taboo and more controlled. And obviously, Malta is a very Catholic country, so we kept those, and we're very conservative.

(F): But that impacts the way we design as well.

(M): Yes, yes, for sure. In fact, you can tell, the way that every room is very closed off from each other or whatever, as opposed to, I guess, some other cultures where rooms are more open.

(P): In fact, en-suites are very common in Malta. Abroad, en-suites are not common. So I think this reflects a lot about the level of privacy.

(F): Do you think it makes a difference, even in our character as a person?

(P): Uh-huh. For example, a few months ago I went to visit a friend of mine in Bologna, and I was shocked. It's literally six girls all sharing a tiny kitchen, one toilet, and one shower. So you can imagine, they're always going up to each other's rooms, asking, can I use the toilet? Do you need it? It was like a time schedule, which for me was crazy.

(M): That breaks the taboo though, even just asking. Like you were just mentioning, do you need to sh*t? I need to. With us, it's like, you're on the street, you never ever verbally say hello to someone. So when you have to, it's a bit embarrassing and all that.

I believe there are so many unintentional design things that just came about and affect us so much, but we just don't think about them. So many little things that make it really uncomfortable, but really affect us.

[Drawing Exercise 2 as found in Appendix C]

Dis/Comfort

Rethinking Comfort Through Intentional Discomfort in Architecture

Federica Formosa

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