

Static Dynamism: a case for immobility in the post-covid world

Static

/ˈsta-tɪk/

a : characterized by a lack of movement.

b : producing an effect of repose or quiescence.

Dynamism

/ˈdɪnəˌmɪzəm/

the quality of being characterized by vigorous activity and progress.

Status Quo

Mobility of goods, ideas, and humans have been the most important factors in the development of the industrialized, modern world. The following manifesto urges us to rethink our convenient relationship to mobility, and proposes a paradigm for degrees and forms of immobility. The immobility the pandemic has caused is a catalyst to reevaluating behaviours in our proximities.

Here are the far-reaching issues made evident, even highlighted, through this loss of mobility:

- We are over-reliant on goods that need to travel immense distances to reach us.
- We idealize distant landscapes but fail to appreciate and cultivate the beauty of our surroundings. This is seen through the zeitgeist of traveling and the fantasies of greener topical pastures.
- By comfortably fostering dehumanized relationships with those far from us, we sacrifice the search for novel opportunities to engage with those physically closer to us. Our built environment suffers as we opt for new avenues of communication that lack the warmth of touch, atmosphere, setting or tangible architecture.

Preached in models for economic growth, global mobility has proven to be an integral part of the so-called irreversible, persistent machine for unsustainability, individualism and social stratification that dominated our time. It took a global pandemic to slow it down, even just a bit and we believe in its presented potential. While being careful to project into the future at this time, we acknowledge the endeavour of those fighting on the frontlines, as much as those suffering because of COVID-19. We direct our own efforts to thinking positively towards the post-pandemic. By that, we recognize that we are not perpetually isolated, as deprived of contact with others, we are simply restricted from movement, thus making said movement more deliberate.

Emerging responses

Now forced in a state of immobility unseen in our time, we are witnessing incredibly creative ideas and alternative ways to overcome our commodity of over-mobility. In Montreal for example, we hear that the pandemic state of immobility is the occasion to rethink the city for the summer, to bet on local tourism. We hear about a municipal recovery plan for the summer, where the city looks at what the local people need to feel good in their environment. We see advocacy for more collective spaces, where parks and other exterior public places could become small scale diffusion spaces for local culture to keep flourishing. We are encouraged to support local businesses over large-scale online shops. But why should this only be a short term solution? Now that our routine has already been disrupted, why wouldn't we try to improve the quality of life beyond what it was pre-pandemic? This is not only a city-wide challenge, it is universal, and its solutions are proliferating everywhere in various ways. We are trying to fight a world crisis from local avenues.

New Normality

The wide-spread expectation is for there to be a slow return to "normal" or business as usual after the COVID-19 pandemic. This would be a lost opportunity. We can change our perception of mobility to provoke lifestyle and architectural changes, to reshape our way of living for a more sustainable one. We envision a more engaging and equitable built environment in our proximities stemming from an embrace of immobility. We strongly believe that inciting care for the immediate environment, no matter the setting, will echo globally. This is an invitation to reinvent our new normality.

Scales of Immobility

Here, we present a lens as a frontline of questions to ask in a post-COVID world. This “new” condition of immobility, because of all current external reasons, has a much greater potential impact in valuing the *topos* of a place. By *topos*, we mean topical as much as topographical: what is “of a place” in terms of geology, culture and architecture and its overlap. We acknowledge, as well, that the *topos* of a place is subject to change over time. We’ll address the several scales immobility, thus manipulating architecture, *par conséquent*. We raise these questions so that we may appreciate the valuable aspects in our new lifestyles and this potential, new-found local fascination.

- At the most immediate scale, we address the self, where *my* immobility introduces different, sometimes new, ways of dissecting behaviors and attitudes we have in our homes.
- At the second layer, immediate surroundings. Let’s question what is the phenomenological value of our home.
- The next layer is the neighbourhood where, somehow, being forced to sit down in quarantine made us realize who and what is around us.
- Then, the city. Let’s allow ourselves to become “tourists” in our own cities to develop new relationships to them. Let it become part of your identity. Do not assume that behaviour is predetermined, let it surprise you.
- The penultimate is the global scope of mobility. Let’s recognize the “velocity” – distance travelled over a set amount of time, indicative of a footprint – by an object as much as our own “velocity” when travelling. Ideas, as much as goods and people, travel globally. Against this, we need to be conscious that techniques, methods, climate, geography and a slew of other factors vary depending on where we build.
- Last is the relation between the virtual and physical, where there is a novel access to “other spaces” via software, used pragmatically for communication and information. We are now testing the limits of the virtual and finding a lack in it that can be completed by the experiences of proximity and locality, as we advocate, and possibly vice-versa.

What is called for is care

Care is the cornerstone of life in proximity. With this manifesto, used for questioning more so than answering blatantly, we prescribe caring for the external built environment, consumption patterns, and our homes. Explicitly, we call for a look that is introspective. We want to incite to realize what is right here, and care for it.

At all levels in which we are now less mobile, we interact with architecture more intimately than we acknowledged before. Ultimately, our solution is to “slow-down” now and especially when the world starts spinning again. We were living lifestyles that kept accelerating and lost a certain sensitivity to our local conditions.

This World is changing constantly and, ideally for us, slowing down, becoming static. We, on the contrary, have an opportunity to become more dynamic in our proximity.

To see routine as a framework that allows for unpredictable events to occur, not as something definitive that dissuades change.



Fig. 1. Kander, Nadav, "Chongqing XV, Chongqing Municipality, 2006."

Change is often met with resistance because it disrupts our routine. The current situation has made it evident that unpredictability is inevitable. Why not make it a societal goal to question our conception of routine and move towards more proactive principles. Wouldn't it reinforce our resilience if we accepted and even provoked a certain form of chaos, as a way to train toward adaptability?

To reflect and slowly build on our own definition of what makes a place a home. To be comfortable enough in our private space, so that there is no such thing as escapism.



Fig. 2. Shore, Stephen, "Badlands National Monument, South Dakota, July 14, 1973."

Value your environment within your control as to become comfortable alone, especially in a state of prescribed immobility. Allow your environment to reflect you and become extensions of yourself. While there is no true or absolute answer to what constitutes "home," there might be a danger in finding yourself in a living space without much of yourself and your personality around you.

To turn our place upside down, as if it were a snowglobe, and be curious about small, often overlooked, changes; there is still movement possible around our own immobility.



Fig. 3. Leimdorfer, Gilles, Untitled.

Whether it's a new plant or a spontaneous renovation, switching places at the table, moving your furniture or reimagining your yard, valuing your little corner of earth can go a long way. There are wonders to be discovered in questioning our own assumptions about how we live.

To challenge the reflex of seeking the most efficient way to a certain goal. Why not take the time to discover alternative paths that might be more enriching?



Fig. 4. Roberts, Simon, "Devil's Dyke, South Downs, East Sussex, 6th March 2008."

Your built environment can be so much more than a machine for living. It's about the movement of people as the day unfolds; the informal encounters that used to be banal that now suddenly become warm; the eye contact with that person you keep crossing paths with, that at some point turns into a knowing smile and even a "hi"; the play of light and shadows as the sun moves across the street. Take the chance to notice and become aware of the small details that make a place pleasant.

To construct personal ideas about what a city means, independent from how it is portrayed for touristic appeal.



Fig. 5. Kander, Nadav, "Chongqing VI (Sunday Afternoon), Chongqing Municipality, 2006."

We tend to see cities, our own and others, as an image. An image too often projected through famous landmarks, prosperous business centers or olympic stadiums. Is the distinct and important *flavour* of every city lost? As distance increases, our disconnection with reality is amplified as we lazily opt for biased visualization over informed perception. Let's not overlook the local populations that animate cities in spontaneous ways. Let's not forget the emotional memories embedded in all its tangible spaces.

To remain curious about the spaces that are most familiar to us, to acknowledge that there are multiple facets to be rediscovered within our landscape, and that our curiosity for the world should be applied locally.



Fig. 6. Shore, Stephen, "South of Klamath Falls, U.S.: 97, Oregon, July 21, 1973."

Learning how to find pleasure and interest in your nearby environment, whether that is a city block or a rural road, is the first step in overcoming the tendency to idealize distant landscapes. Aim to see a single place with a thousand eyes rather than a thousand places with a pair of eyes.

To rethink our conception of human nature as the binaries, autonomous or dependent, to a more comprehensive human interdependence that starts in our immediate environment.



Fig. 7. Collignon, Guillaume "Eilat, Israel, 2014."

It is dangerous to either try to escape, or simply submit ourselves, to our environment. We need to recognize that we are an agent of change in our (eco)system, whether human or natural. Recent events made us recognize that the usual train of action prescribing high mobility, somehow blinded us from our responsibilities towards each other and the processes of the earth. Let's now take the time to bring this at the forefront of our operations.

To understand that taking responsibility and reducing mobility is a duty to care for the widespread population. It is not a pretext to isolate and ignore the distant and different “other.”



Fig. 8. Hannes Nick, Untitled I.

Our recent state of immobility has allowed us to reconsider the burden of our current habits. This specific result of us “slowing down” is beneficial to all of us as we undeniably face environmental and social crises. All the while, despite physical distance, we should recognize the immense value in connecting: to learn from, and actively care for each other.

To be aware that to live as a community, there must be a recognition that comfortable ignorance prevents the relatively privileged from noticing and understanding the needs of others.



Fig. 9. Kander, Nadav, "Shanghai I, 2006."

Many have rushed to secure previous lifestyle habits, often without consideration for more vulnerable populations. This is seen locally as people hoard goods for themselves or globally, as we consider capital over human lives. Seeking comfort by perpetrating unsustainable habits needs to be called out for the sake of a more resilient and equitable community.

To have a deep understanding of our *topos* and its implications, especially when seeking inspiration from what is being done elsewhere in the world.



Fig. 10. Hannes, Nick, Untitled II.

The growing ease of transmission and access of ideas on the global scale has caused us to accord lower importance to our immediate environment. Importing and exporting ideas has become common practice. We should reinstitute knowledge of *topos* as the prime factor in design decisions. This means that decision makers, such as architects, planners and politicians, should seek and respect local knowledge to build upon what we already have. Innovation is about reflecting critically on what is done locally and in analogous context, rather than a one-fits-all solution.

To behave with interest and involvement, and influence authorities in power to prioritize local values. The built environment can be everybody's project.



Fig. 11. Gronskey, Alexander, Untitled.

A more iterative evolution of what cities can become, which is systematically inclined toward communal thinking, rather than one heroic gesture, is necessary. By bridging the gap between the general public and what is elevated as a luxury service (ie. architecture), we could reduce the feeling of indifference and powerlessness to act upon our living environment. By adopting participatory design and giving people a chance to contribute something, life happens.

To feel involved in thinking up protective measures and alternatives against elements of global mobility that have ceased to be desirable.



Fig. 12. Hannes, Nick, Untitled III.

As we aim to reduce our personal mobility, we should also aim to rethink aspects of our lifestyle dependent on processes of global mobility. This first happens at the scale of the house, where we become sensitive to where our goods come from. Then at larger scales, we become aware of the quantity and source of the materials that make up our buildings. Ultimately, we should question our current global production model that is both unsustainable and furthers inequality.

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