

Article

# The Smithsons' Unbuilt Projects: Considerations on the Retirement House Approach

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**Abstract:** The Retirement House (1959) was a project developed by Peter Smithson that did not have the opportunity to be materialized beyond the drawing; therefore, we will use this proposal as a case study to investigate deeper into his design themes. Two texts will be considered, “The nature of home: it’s equipment and furniture” and “Container and Contained”, presented, respectively, in the publications “Ordinariness and Light” and “Alison and Peter Smithson—from the House of Future to a house of today”, as a “guide” for an interpretation of the project. The Retirement House, recognised as being set within their Appliance Houses research, is charged through the different influences and cultural references that inhabit the Smithsons’ oeuvre in the 50s. As a main objective, we intend to show in more detail the inception and design themes of the case study through the analysis of installations, texts and other projects that serve as an experimental legacy. We intend to demonstrate the functional character and interconnection of spaces present in the work of Alison and Peter Smithson that form an operative design tool, set within the capacity of a topological variation that can imprint a flexibility value, with pronounced interest in contemporary architecture and the current housing crises. The present article is part of ongoing PhD research on Alison and Peter Smithson’s work.

**Keywords:** appliance houses; modernism; retirement house; Smithsons



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## 1. Introduction

Alison and Peter Smithson, from the 1950s onwards, began a series of architectural projects in which they introduced new approaches to how a space should be managed and appropriated. However, their urban planning schemes received most attention and praise. The housing projects marked the decade with experimental proposals, reflected in exhibitions and sketches whose development was a means to test forms and moments of appropriation. Between the 1950s and 1960s, the couple’s work received a boost by becoming associated with CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne) and the formation of TEAM 10 (Team X or team ten). Always associated with these two groups, their written production became close to their designs, as there were constant theories that ended up being reflected in projects, either explicitly or implicitly. The possibility of this reflection has allowed us to develop a rich work on the domestic space and its definition. The aim is to understand how this reflection can support the development of contemporary housing, providing clues for a new development of living spaces by presenting a new point of view on the couple’s work. Retirement House will only be considered a utopian project because it was never built, since its project definition and theories, which we will discuss, reveal a solid commitment to the adaptability that housing should have, both in 1959 and in contemporary times. It can be considered that the relevance of the issues raised and reflected on by the couple in their texts and plans signals that it has never been more important than it is now to apply them or to at least look at their work again.

## 2. Methodology

The present exposé, divided into three phases, intends to confront the Smithsons' notions on domestic space within contemporary viewpoints and interpretations. Section 3 titled "Retirement House's Ambition" opens the discussion with Txatxo Sabater's<sup>1</sup> notions on *insulas*, while Section 4 "Experimental Legacy" establishes the context, evolution and maturation of the ideas that gave rise to the Retirement House proposal by establishing parallels between other works, exhibitions, and texts by the couple. Sections 5 and 6 ("In Situ Analysis" and "Conclusions") deepen the reading within the technical drawings' interpretation, based on their publications. Through this interpretive study, it is possible to establish a contemporary validity for the Smithsons' spatial concepts within notions of container and contained.

## 3. Retirement House's Ambition (Subject of Study)

The interest in choosing the Retirement House project as a case study on space notions and readings is enhanced by the fact that the design emerged during a period of great creative intensity for Alison and Peter Smithson. During their constant search for and validation of theories, a series of projects known as Appliance Houses emerged, introducing "niches" that generate "places" dedicated to appliances. This notion has implicit design strategies that, from the beginning, try to isolate objects in a certain spatial continuum, in essence, to find a place where one can isolate the appliances from the rest of the residential spaces.

This evident and explicit intention aroused interest in what can be considered to be the last version of the Appliance House research, the Retirement House design, in which the various ideas that had previously been explored had matured [1].

The text "Novos Descritores, Novos Operadores Projetuais" by Txatxo Sabater, a disciple of Ignasi de Solà-Morales' research methodology who was linked to the Barcelona Architecture school, was considered to be the common thread of what to look for in the Retirement House, or a reading lens thereof, as it deals with several themes related to "design operators" that are, in themselves, design solutions applicable in the contemporary dwelling.

Throughout this research, Txatxo Sabater's descriptors and design operators are used because they have an interesting resonance in the case study through the following themes: "Internal dissociation", "Functional separation of day/night" and "Detachment" [2]. Concepts that will be taken up again later, as well as the concept of "Subvert, misuse", are presented in the book "Casa Collage" [3], confirming a validation of the timeless thinking of the Smithsons, in the definition of domestic space.

## 4. Experimental Legacy

To appreciate the Retirement House (1959), it is necessary to understand what gave rise to it; not only the various designs of the Appliance Houses (1956–1959), but something before that period, where traces of the intentions can be found. In the article "Domestic Spaces for the Consumption: the Alison and Peter Smithson's Appliance Houses", it is mentioned that the House of the Future, an installation, imprints the first intention of the Smithsons and their concern with appliances, how they should be arranged or would be arranged in the future, creating in this installation a choreographed path of how appliances constitute and define space, a fusion of architecture with appliances [4].

For the couple, space was shaped and defined by these elements that appropriated the space and limited it; a clear and rigid delimitation, yet fluid and organic [1]. They considered it a radical proposal, in an idea of "appliance-way-of-life", where these features, like in a car, integrate their functions in a predefined order with no margin for change. This utopian vision inhabits the "family flexibility", though only for a specific situation [5].

In the Smithsons' timeline, there is a period before the installations where their interest in the organisation of the appliances with the same emerges. The first registration of this is in the Rumble Villa (1954), an exercise that did not get off the paper but that had a strong

theoretical connection; where, like the installation the House of the Future, there was an intention of having a model that was repeated, creating a villa, with this idea of three “Pavilions” that converged to a central common space. This allowed for greater flexibility and was much closer to reality and the possibility of repeating different variations of the “Pavilions”, which the authors refer to as another installation which shares the same name. Programmatically, the composition is set in two “Pavilions” with dormitory characteristics, composed of a bedroom and bathroom, and a “Pavilion” dedicated to meals, containing the kitchen and dining room [1].

Something that concerned the Smithsons throughout their career was the sense of appropriation of space, evidenced in the installation of Patio and Pavilion (1956), months after the installation the House of the Future. At first glance, one could not find two more different installations, considering architectures of extremes, with one referring to the future and the other to the past/origins. Patio and Pavilion reveals the sense of appropriation of space, with a strong connection to the House of the Future, because it also demonstrates an idea of inhabiting, a constant relationship with objects, the recognition of territories and the focus on the search for the limitation of the space; a limitation from the outside but a recognition of the territory appropriated by someone who lived there [6].

In the same year, the need arose to create the Appliance Houses (1956–1958), with the focus on resolving the location of the appliances, as they were considered by the couple to be a set of equipment with a great influence on the layout of the living space.

At the beginning of their tests, the Appliance Houses had an organic character that moved away from the conventional and rectilinear, which was mirrored in the Snowball Appliance House project (1956), with similarities to the House of the Future, wherein the main difference was the removal of the garden by a blank space that provided for growth as needed. The rest of the projects of this set were nothing more than a few sketches; for example, in the Strip Appliance House (1957–1958), the predominance of the curve is reduced to a central element, whose connection with the other spaces becomes difficult to establish. In this search for a solution, the couple’s visit to the Eames house was fundamental, and Alison and Peter Smithson were fascinated [4].

When analysing the text written by Dirk van der Heuvel “Container and Contained”, it is described that Charles and Ray Eames taught the Smithsons to look at architecture differently. When visiting the Eames’ house in Santa Monica, the couple saw how the objects constituted a collection, as well as the house itself, by filling the metal structure with a variety of elements, that were colourful, translucent, and kinetic. This makes the whole set a collection, not only seen as a collection of materials, but also seen as the relationship established between the interior and exterior of the dwelling. As Peter Smithson says, it opens the possibility of “looking in and looking out” being reflected in the incidence of light, reflections, shadows, ventilation and the creation of accesses and terraces [1].

Although this visit is associated with the idea of the collection and application of various materials, as is more commonly known, there is also another approach to this vision. This article aims to inform a less explored point of view that consists of considering the separation of the appliances from the remaining objects; with that in mind, the couple responded with the last project of the Appliance Houses research, our case study Retirement House, whose main focus would be the creation of “niches or cubicles” (respectively nicknamed by Dirk and Alison and Peter Smithson) that would hide the appliances from view, as they occupied considerable space in the dwelling, thus freeing up the living spaces, which, as fixed points, were necessary for the functioning of the dwelling [7].

For the couple, the Appliance Houses had the objective of approaching the society that resembled what they saw in advertisements, creating spaces dedicated to the household appliances that were “kept” in the house.

The couple’s concern for living space is constant. The text “The nature of home; its equipment and furniture”, makes explicit some points that were the basis for the creation of the Retirement House. “A new way of looking at objects is a new way of conceiving the

house” details that this new way for the Smithsons was to give prominence to the objects, in part influenced by the Eames couple.

They saw objects as part of a collection, thus generating new ways of defining the dwelling plan never previously seen in the Smithsons’ work; taking care to establish a harmony between objects, equipment, and furniture, they began the series Appliance Houses, where they aimed to polish this theory. Although they moved away from CIAM heterodoxy, the conventions of modern architecture were kept, and reinterpreted by the couple, in this case, through two concepts that are reflected in the case study, based on the housing unit of Le Corbusier, his idea of a “wine-rack”; this was a seed that complemented the concept of the free plan, reflecting the need for the living space to be served by the following four points:

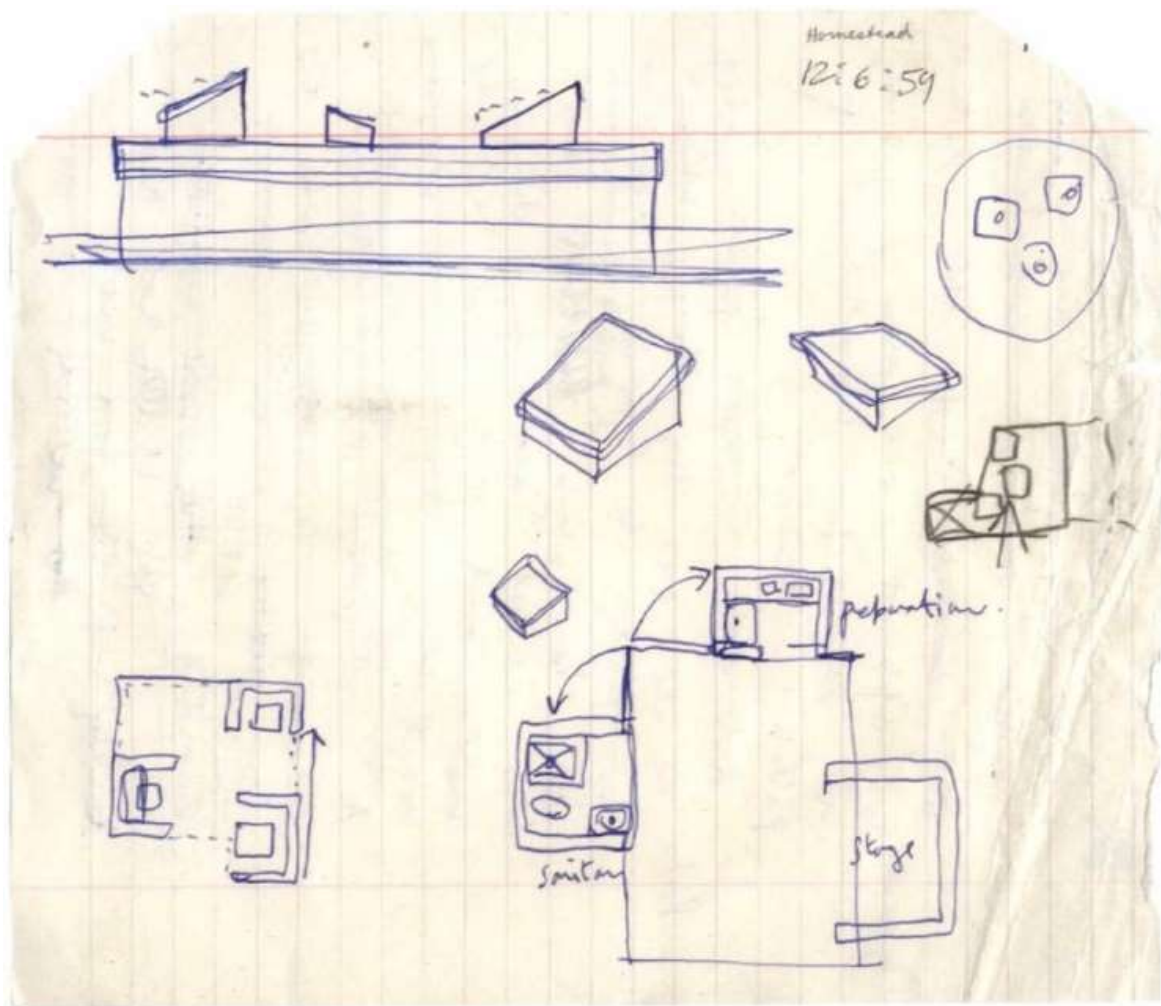
- Unity for parents;
- Unity for children;
- Eating and cooking;
- “Family extra”—refers to an extra element that can vary according to needs; the couple exemplifies that can be a pigeon cote, sun parlour or Grandma’s bedsit.

From these themes and concepts, the Smithsons try to give a volumetric identity that creates harmony between the various points, underlining the reading or notion of shelter.

As a way of finishing their text, the couple writes: “Instinctively we dislike the flat roof as visually it does not carry the notion of shelter”; for them, the flat roof design assumes a room with an exterior use [8].

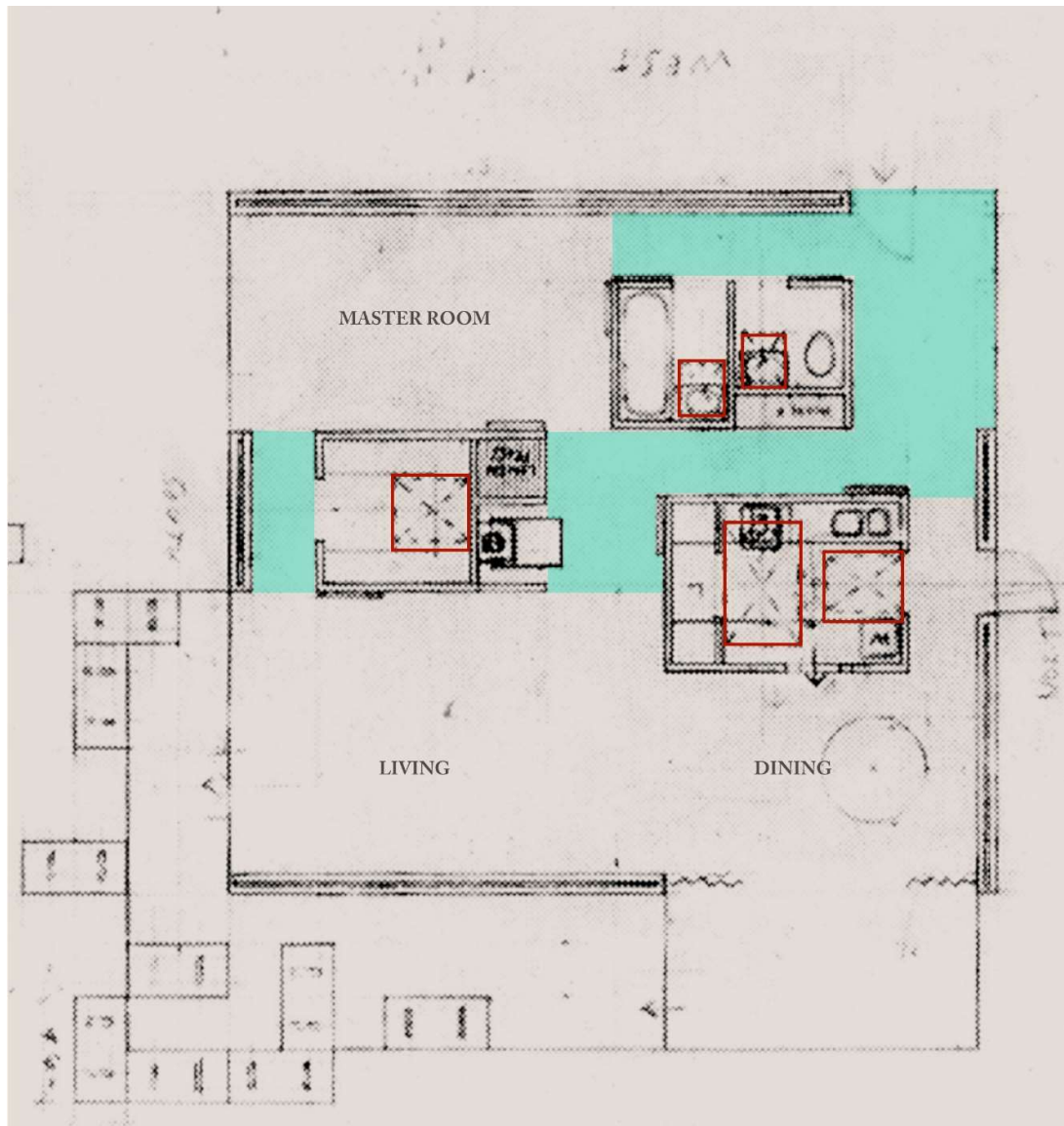
## 5. In Situ Analysis

The Retirement House, like the other Appliance Houses, understood early on the need to have a “container” that defines where these elements should be kept, not like a cupboard, but with the concept of a cupboard; this is reflected in Peter Smithson’s text “In praise of cupboard doors”, where he reveals his interest in the cupboard as a way of hiding objects and also stating “. . . a room can be a cupboard. . .”. The same goes for Taxtso’s idea of “Insula; Internal Dissociation”, where he says: “an island placed in a larger space (. . .) An insula can house (. . .) an intimate space, within a particular space.” [2]. The pursuit of these notions is evident in the first sketches (as shown in Figure 1) of the Retirement House, where the “niches” appear “apart” from the central space, trying to conjugate between themselves and the remaining space. As such, the first idea has a very strong connection to the cupboard, a space created to house the function of storage, and the other two ideas conceptualise a bathroom with divided functions, possibly to establish a first connection between them and the space that connects them. Still, in the same sketch, the fixed elements become part of the plan, and they come closer together, with this approximation establishing a stronger connection; however, this movement generates new spaces based on physical limitations. It is possible to witness the first intention to eliminate corridors and assume the “containers” to be something that should have a *punctuated* presence in the plan. As they are not only on the floor but also on the roof, the first intentions of skylights reveal the same bridging and presence on the roof itself, with different inclination directions and dimensions suggesting the function it should contain [1].



**Figure 1.** First sketches of Retirement House by Alison Smithson. Image from page 219 in Smithson, Alison; "The Charged Void: Architecture"; New York; The Monacelli Press, cop 2001 [9].

From the first known technical drawing (as shown in Figure 2), it is possible to understand that the object controls the space, and that space is the fixed point that is assigned to it. Currently, the three moments present subdivisions (like those of the Rumble Villa project) and one of them assumes the laundry outside.

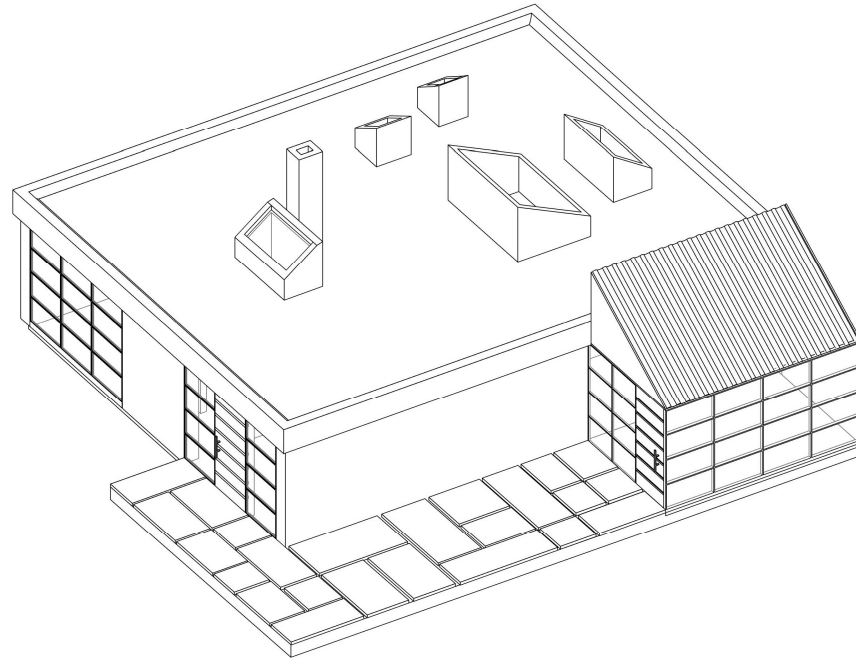


**Figure 2.** Study of corridor spaces and location of skylights (in red), about middle version. Collage by the author, with one image from page 219 in Smithson, Alison; “The Charged Void: Architecture”; New York; The Monacelli Press, cop 2001 [9].

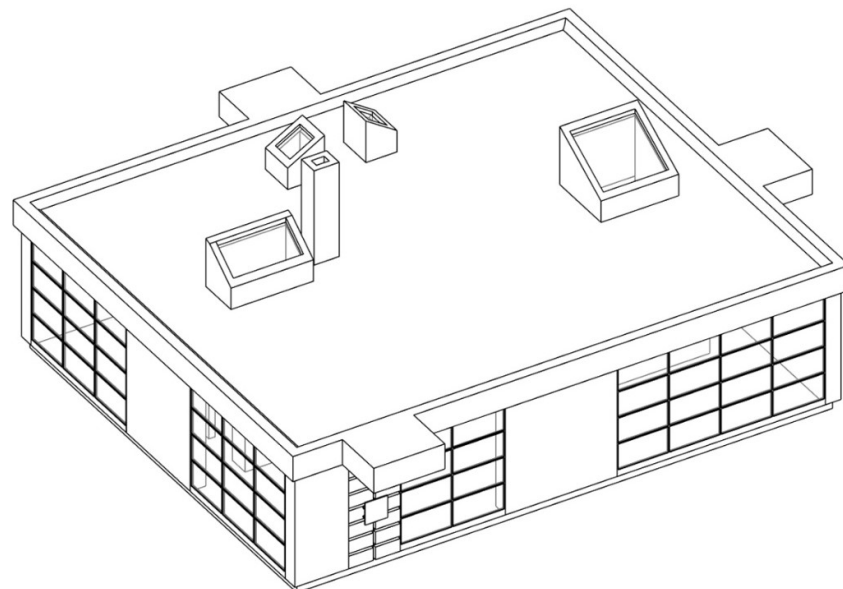
Represented in aqua green is the whole distribution space, contemplating only one room. This is something that reveals the need to redefine the space and to be faithful to his theories, because, if each fixed element was served and *punctuated* by a skylight, the need for the kitchen to be served by two was left unexplained (other than a functional need).

Figure 3 shows the exterior appropriation, an element that establishes the relationship between the interior and exterior of the dwelling driven by Japanese motifs; its materialisation, disconnected from the rest of the proposal; and the introduction of the sloping roof with an indication in the floorplan of a passageway, being pondered by making use of the *ken* (a Chinese measure of Japanese use as a way of harmonising the space). This whole segment ends up redesigned, giving way to horizontal signalling of the doors that meet the exterior. The representation of the door opening is neglected in the last versions of the project (Figure 4), remaining only in the previous version with those annotations. According to the design intention, only the entrance and back door would be hinged, and all the remaining doors would slide (as shown in Figure 5), with possible Nipponese motivations or as a way to assume a sliding wall that divides the space and restricts the vision, changing

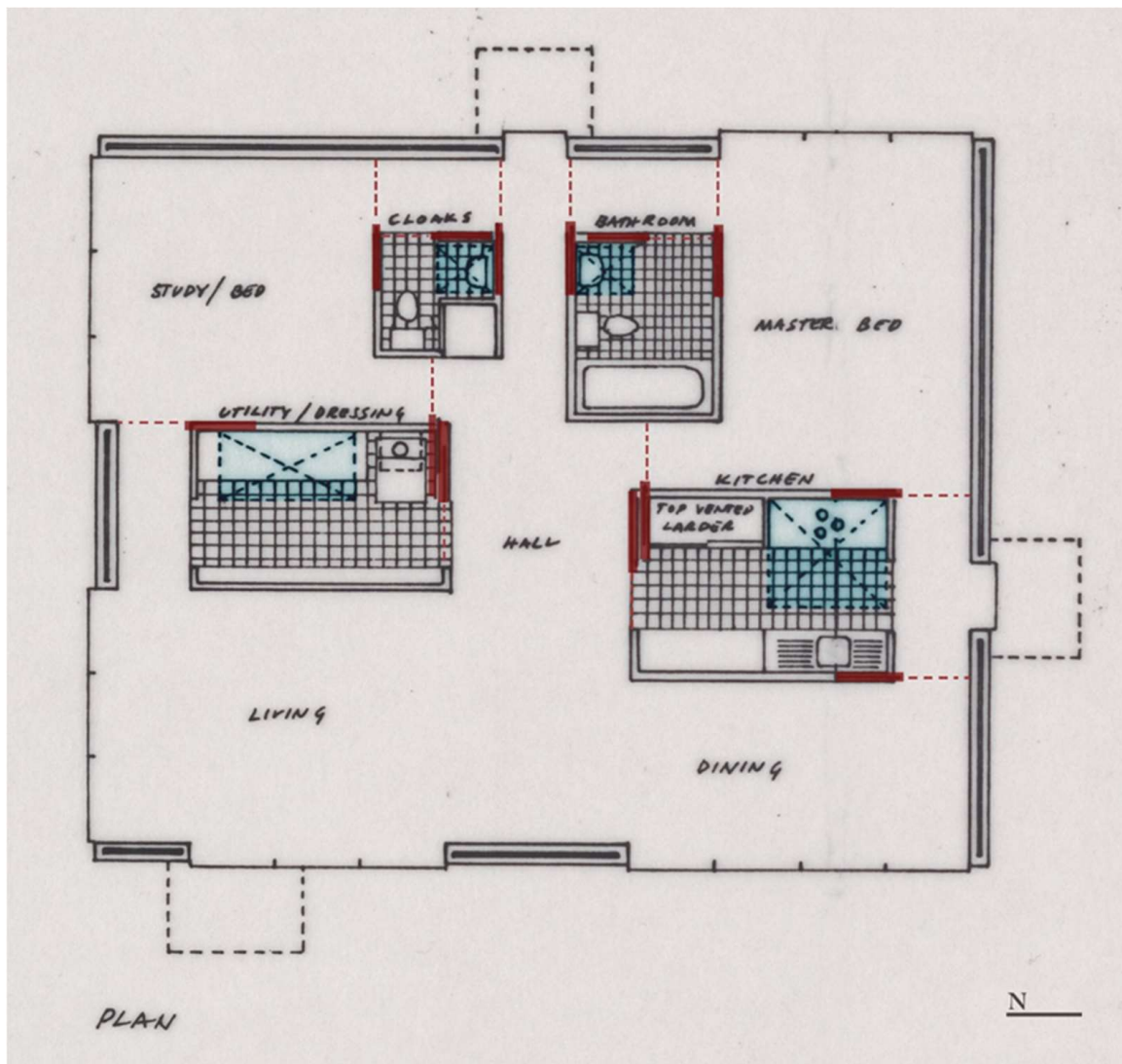
the interior with a kinetic movement through which the position of these elements can be revealed. The plan has a visible day and night movement and, through the arrangement of planes, suggests the season, something implicit not only in Peter Smithson's text (the cupboard itself held the Christmas and Easter decorations), but also in Txatxo's vision, which emphasises the need for a plan that reflects the difference between day and night: "day-night divide, because a dialectic between the apparent and the secret is superimposed on it" [2].



**Figure 3.** Drawing of the middle version of Retirement House. From the author (author's study).



**Figure 4.** Axonometry of the latest version of Retirement House. From the author (author's study).



**Figure 5.** Study of kinetic apertures and skylights. Collage by the author, with technical drawing from the archive of Archival Collections at the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard.

From the first sketch of this project, the Smithsons worked on a blank canvas, a free plan. Inspired by Le Corbusier, the free plan is an important point to allow them the necessary functional and structural freedom to configure the dwelling, but with a grid to guide them. This is how the Smithsons achieved it, storing the equipment essential for the house to function, with the concern that it be hidden from view, like a cupboard.

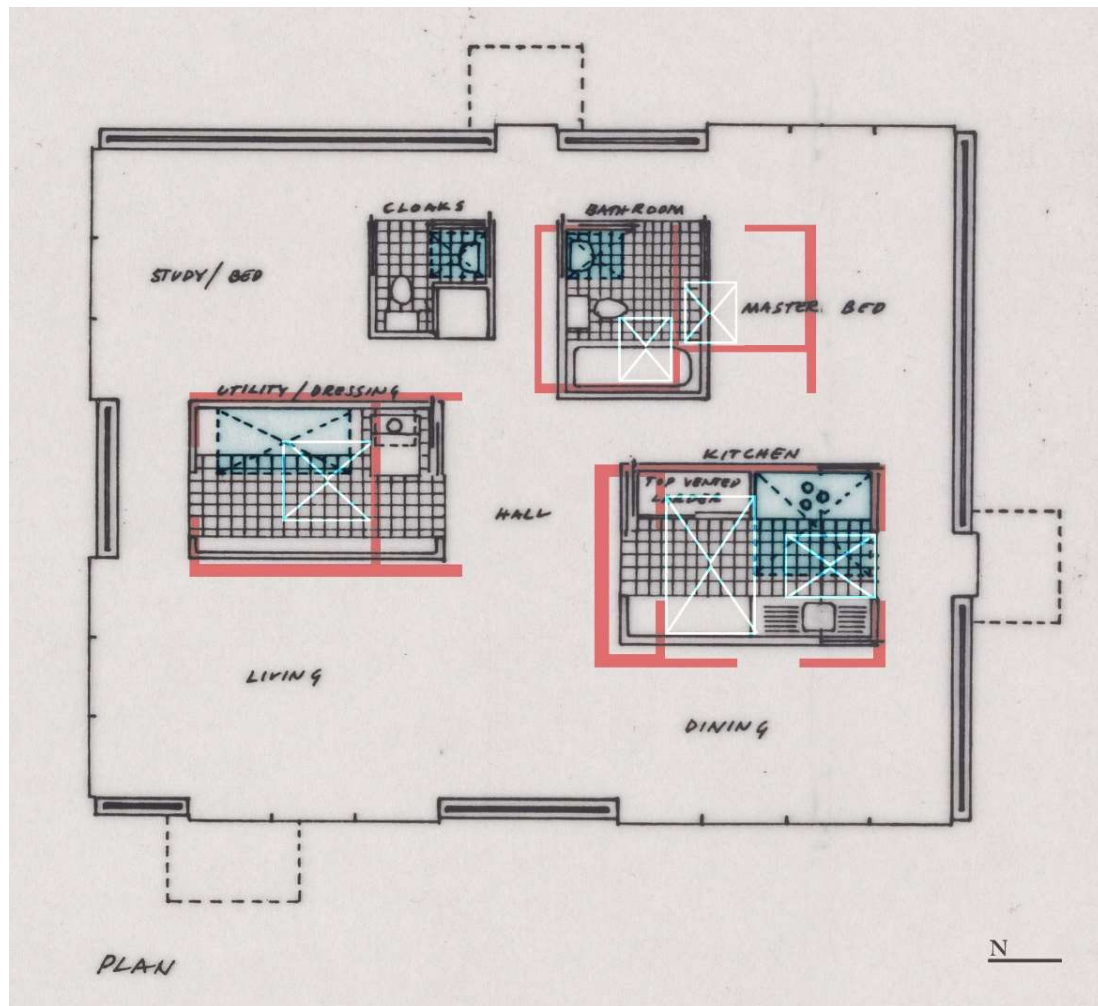
The same concern is shared by Txatxo when exploring dynamics: “In large environments, you need a decisive, repetitive element, that imposes a certain stability (...) The tendency to minimise the use of compartmentalisation” [2]. An answer is given by the Smithsons in their exploration of this project. Its importance is debated because it is considered a timeless issue, or at least a contemporary one. After all, it is still considered an architectural approach that requires care, care that has been explored for a decade by the Smithsons; as Txatxo says, “Open space demands order and beauty” [2], and that is the Smithsons’ ambition.

Beyond the railings of the Retirement House plan that defined their location, it was also tested how much equipment was necessary to reveal the house with all the elements opened fully. If all the doorways were closed, only the natural light from each dedicated skylight would naturally illuminate the spaces. It demonstrates the concern of each space



to have a dedicated natural light source, with the result that distribution spaces disappear and the whole plan can be appropriated with more diverse functions.

Although never built, the Retirement House underwent continuous variations and changes until its final version; for example, the bathroom, which, in the initial sketch, is divided, ends up joining, and in the last version separates again (as shown in Figure 6), although it could be joined again. However, these speculations are not the focus of the study, but they also emphasise the versatility of the solution, with the character of a re-introspection of the modern movement (Figure 7) adjusted to the needs of the human variety.

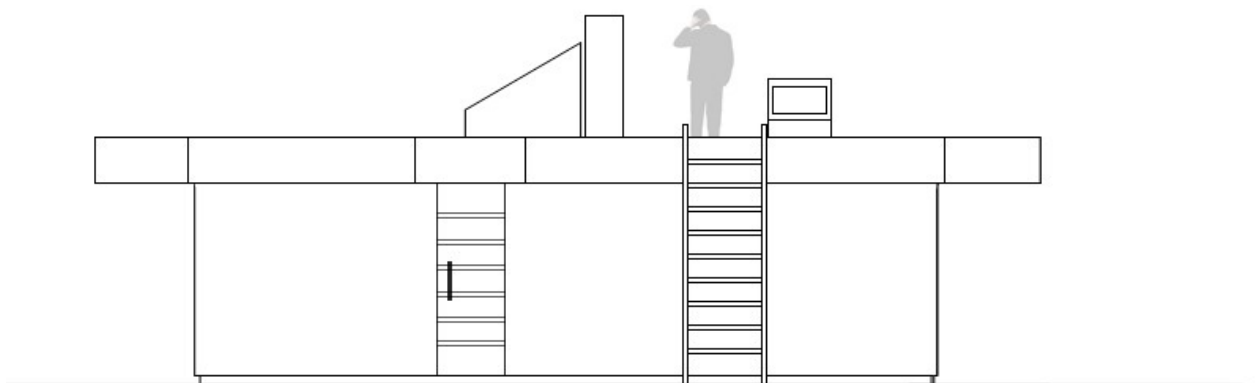


**Figure 6.** Overlapping versions, focused on skylights (white squares) and “niches” (in red). Collage by the author, with technical drawing from the archive of Archival Collections at the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard.



**Figure 7.** Perspective of the skylights of the latest version. From the author (author's study).

There is a statement that should be considered in "The nature of home; its equipment and furniture", which states that to design a flat roof is to assume an exterior room. This extract reveals that one of the Smithsons' intentions would probably be the idea presented in the book "Casa Collage", "Subvert, misuse"; the idea that the extension of the living space could be upwards, with access to the roof. The solarium idea that appears in a previous proposal disappears and is left to their art of inhabitation. The appropriation of the space by those who use it could be fulfilled by the roof because, taking also into account the same text, this dwelling does not fulfil the creation of the four points of the house; it was missing the "family extra", which could be materialized in the use of the roof [10] (as shown in Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Sketch with the appropriation of the roof. From the author (author's study).

These concerns began to be explored and tested in the exhibitions and are reflected in the Retirement House, where, by analysing the floor plans, it is possible to understand the design intentions in the definition of the space, with the constant search to guarantee the most varied domestic appropriations, taking care to design a space that would mould itself to the present, which Alison and Peter considered volatile due to constant family changes, and that would allow it to last over time due to its easy adaptability and topological regeneration, according to various needs. The disappearance of corridors and the insertion of kinetic planes gave the couple the fluidity they hoped for, making it possible to anticipate occupation and guarantee an ecological solution for long-term use that was adapted to the needs of its users and to the unpredictable needs of the domestic space.

The idea of arranging the equipment in its own spaces brought to the Smithsons' work an anchoring to the open plan concept and to the modern movement, making a revision and a new interpretation of the modern premises. The non-execution reveals its failure, at least in part, as what was intended to be hidden was the appliances; ironically, today, intentions turn out to be the opposite, as people want to be able to show their purchase of the latest model that appears in advertising, and, due to an increasingly constant renewal of appliances, being able to see them will help you to not forget that you have them and even help you to be able to mark the temporal period.

With the Put-Away House project, Peter Smithson tried to revive a configuration of living space based on a central element that hides what one no longer wants to see (put-away), a "cupboard" that is dedicated to storing all kinds of objects, divided by the frequency with which they are used, and which may include part of the "appliances" that are no longer useful [1].

However, it will be through the spatial sequences and the individual characterization set in clear spatial units, underlining a latten order in open dialogue with the compositional relationship between a void and object equilibrium, that the Retirement House thematic approach can portray and enhance contemporary design themes.

## 6. Conclusions

The Appliance Houses, the House of the Future and Retirement House are far removed from contemporaneity, as they are seen as events that took place in a defined period, something that caught the eye, especially the House of the Future for its prediction of what the house of the 1980s could have been; however, its relevance ended up being marked in the minds of its visitors and admirers by its ephemeral side and the way it was presented and sold. For better or worse, the Smithsons managed to draw attention to their futuristic project that had a clear intention; only with further exploration, years later, was it possible to understand that they were not looking for the result, but rather for the ideal home. Throughout the 1950s, the couple created a theoretical revolution in the way single-family housing was conceived. Initially, they dedicated their exploration to specific contexts, e.g., "a young couple without children", and so they designed what could be the best solution for this vision, again in a sense of use and throw away, which evolved with the arrival of a new approach to single-family housing.

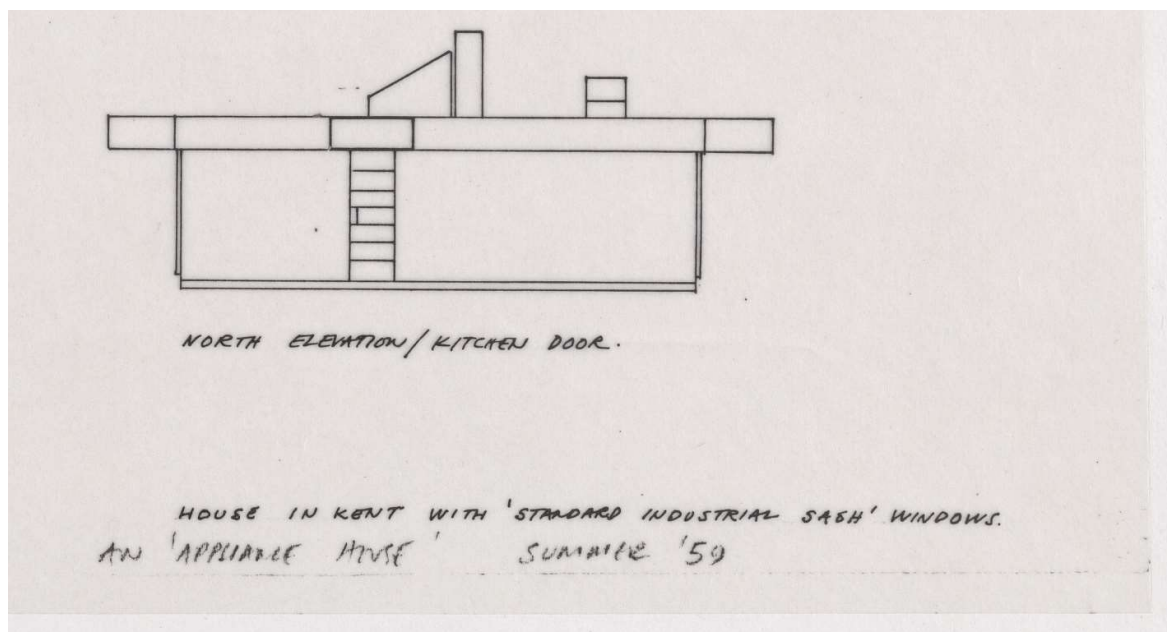
Appliance Houses was a set of projects that aimed to continue the theoretical exploration that the House of the Future began, but with a broader approach this time that allowed for greater flexibility due to its modelling characteristics. This was an exploration with less publicity than the House of the Future exhibition, as they were sketches and without an exhibition. Although it received less public attention, it is considered just as important as the House of the Future because it is an assumed continuation of the theories behind the exhibition element.

It has never been clear that the Retirement House was assumed by the couple to be the last Appliance House, as this was stated in a very light-hearted way in the presentation made in the book *Charged Void: Architecture*, but also in a footnote present in the latest version of the technical drawing, which contains the following information: "House in Kent (. . .) An 'Appliance House'" (as shown in Figure 9). To see in its original form the footnote that validates the exploration of assuming this project to be the culmination of the Appliance Houses is all thanks to the possibility of having access to the Harvard archives.

Retirement House, which reveals the final evolution of this whole process, is a theoretical maturation of the second half of the 1950s that proves to be such a current and pertinent theme today.

The Smithsons are no longer looking for the ideal couple to adapt to the house, but rather to create a house that adapts, not to the couple, but to families/different family structures. This opens the possibility of this model to be able to adapt or be changed with the greatest of ease, while ensuring the traditional services necessary for the correct functioning of the house. This is a theoretical thought that allows for the constant reuse

of the house, the need for minimal interventions and, as the family changes, the house to follow this evolution. The extreme possibility of becoming another family with different needs and the house still being able to accommodate and respond to those needs is one of the main issues housing is facing today—“ageing without moving”. With the different social, health and economic issues at hand, the potential for a home to adapt without losing its architectural character is today fundamental.



**Figure 9.** Footnote in the latest version of the Retirement House or House in Kent technical drawings. (House in Kent with ‘standard industrial sash’ windows. An ‘Appliance House’—Summer ‘59) Technical drawing from the Archive of Archival Collections at the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard.

The flexible/adaptive side that the Smithsons are looking for is achieved in this project. Through an evolution of theoretical thinking it was possible to apply a solution that starts from literal pillars that are fundamental to housing and, through them, allows for greater flexibility and the reuse of property without jeopardising the quality of the family space, a solution that is considered pertinent and necessary to discuss again today and in the context of the constraints that the housing crisis is currently facing.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The choice of Txatxo Sabater is pertinent because of his vast published work on housing, and his way of organising architecture into groups of design solutions. This research began in 1976 and continues today, with publications of interest in the search for the quality of domestic space; we suggest reading other publications by the author as a way of consolidating a greater context, such as the following: ‘Indeterminación...desjerarquización’ (ELISAVA, 2014); ‘Guía de estudio para la Gerohabitación, cohabitación,

emancipación’ (UPC-ETSAV, 2009); ‘Las casas en que viviremos’ (Iberdrola Instituto tecnológico-Gers Barcelona, 1998); and ‘Aprendiendo a vivir todavía’ (ETSAV, 1987).

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