

THE MEASUREMENT, THE RIGHT MEASUREMENT, THE MINIMUM MEASUREMENT

By Prof. Dr. Klaus Klemp

It's perhaps Israeli-French artist Absalon (1964–1993) who could be considered the most radical of mini-apartment owners. Wishing to split his time between Paris, Zurich, New York, Tel Aviv, Frankfurt am Main, and Tokyo, he designed a series of six living pods called the “Cellules”. Intended to accommodate just one person, they would each require only a few square meters of space, allowing him to inhabit multiple cities across the world. Unfortunately, Absalon died prematurely aged 29, leaving behind only his models—he never had the chance to experience the global way of living he had conceived of.

Absalon's Cellules are just one evolution in the long history of small homes. Think, for instance, of the small caves and huts of our ancient ancestors, the tipis and bush houses of the Native Americans, the igloos of the Inuits in the far north, the yurts of the shepherd nomads of the Eurasian Steppe, the woven Berber tents in north Africa, or the dwellings of hermits.

Our homes are undoubtedly our most important spaces of experience, even more so than the workplace—especially today since both are often rolled into one. Home is something of our own, our private

sphere and protection, a place where we can shut the door behind us. Much like society and the way we



▲ *Solutions* (1992) portrays Absalon himself performing a series of actions in daily life.

coexist, concepts of living also exist in a state of continual transformation—at times individually, at times collectively, and often both at once.

The first known town, Çatalhöyük, emerged in Anatolia during the Neolithic period, around 7,500 years BC, or in the Mesopotamian region within the Tigris-Euphrates river system. Here, you would enter the house over the roof and pull the ladder up behind you to keep out unwanted visitors. This settlement idea was refined further by the Greeks in the standardized houses and grid-planned cities of Miletus and Prien—but even there, living spaces weren't exactly lavish.

In short, small was considered to be the normal and most functional way of living for a long time. Small could be quickly built and dismantled but was also suitable for larger settlements. Even though the Romans loved this effectiveness and even invented the tenement, they were also the first to build actual palaces. Those who came to fame, wealth, or power owned large townhouses and country villas, whereas the common folk lived rather modestly—in the Roman Empire, the city was defined by a new secular diversity.

During the Middle Ages, people found comfort in their half-timbered houses. Those who settled below



▲ *Die Wohnung* as part of The Weissenhof Estate built for an exhibition in Stuttgart in 1927. Overall planning was by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, architecture by Walter Gropius and design by Marcel Breuer.

the castle could not afford stone so built dwellings from wood with clay and straw infill. This provided comfort during winter—while the princes were freezing in the lofty halls of their castles, the artisans, masons, journeymen, and apprentices down below were rather cozy. Even for those who only had a tiny chamber, it was not the individual room that counted but the overall structure. It's a set-up which raises crucial questions, one that also concerns today's mini-apartments: What is the social and spatial context? Does something small open up into something bigger, or remain isolated?

European industrialization turned the world and concepts of living upside down. It kickstarted the process of urbanization that redefined the way we live and persists to this day. The rich bourgeoisie were still building like princes, but creating living space for the new proletariat became a permanent problem of the nineteenth century. In Paris, and elsewhere, huge tower blocks emerged,

and along with them came their own social hierarchy. Wealthy citizens occupied the *bel étage* (first or second floors), while “poor poets” and other such starvelings lived in a hovel under the roof. The Berlin tenements that appeared at this time were also far from desirable, while unregulated capitalism in Manchester, the heart of the British cotton industry, guaranteed low wages and high rents.

Undoubtedly, reforms were due. In the Ruhr region, coal mining and steel barons built urgently needed settlements for the miners, who were largely recruited from the East. These colonies with their small houses simulated rural life with an artificial half-timbered frame, a goat shed in the garden, and a large combined kitchen/living room accommodating the entire family. As early as 1846, Eisenheim, the oldest German workers' settlement, was established by what was then the Gutehoffnungshütte metallurgical plant in Oberhausen. Fortunately, its planned demolition in ►