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THE DIGITAL AND THE SOUTH: QUESTIONINGS VOL. 2

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LO DIGITAL Y EL SUR: CUESTIONAMIENTOS VOL. 2

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BETWEEN PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL WINDOWS: OPENINGS OF LIVING IN THE PANDEMIC

ENTRE JANELAS FÍSICAS E VIRTUAIS: ABERTURAS DO MORAR NA PANDEMIA

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Abstract

This work discusses the physical and virtual windows enhanced during the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2020 to 2023, reflecting on new ways of understanding the production of domestic space and the ambiguity of openings during the period of isolation based on texts by Brazilian writers Helô D'Angelo (2022) and Aline Valek (2021). Relying on the theme The digital and the South: tensions, it brings into dialogue the perspectives of these writers, who are users of architecturally designed spaces, regarding the pandemic in Brazil, which also are perceptions on dwelling initially shared online during the peak of isolation. Using the collage methodology, in which distance is bridged, according to Fuão (2014), this study incorporates the perspectives of philosopher Paul Virilio (2002) and researcher Beatriz Colomina (1992) to examine the permeability of living amid digital technologies. At a time when the home became increasingly introverted and connections with the outside world were mediated through various types of windows, the boundaries between interior and exterior, physical and digital, became blurred yet simultaneously reinforced by the sanitary measures imposed by social isolation.

Keywords: Architecture, Living, Windows, COVID-19 pandemic, Literature

1 Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020, Helô D'Angelo, a comic artist and illustrator from São Paulo, moved into an apartment on the first floor of a building in a neighborhood that at first sight seemed quiet. When health institutions imposed social isolation, many people complied with its measures by confining themselves at home, leading to a different daily life, with new sounds and movements produced by the neighbors, as D'Angelo has seen from her window. From observing this confined daily life, the comic artist began creating comic strips based on scenes she saw from her window, initially publishing them on her social networks throughout the pandemic and later gathering them in a printed publication (D'Angelo, 2022). In the first comic, the reader is introduced to a facade showing the twelve apartment windows in which each group of characters who appear in the stories live, who are portrayed throughout these almost three years of the pandemic. The reader is then a *voyeur*, as the author herself describes it, observing the lives of these neighbors as someone standing at the window across this fictional condominium.

In the book, interspersed between some blocks of the comics, the author puts short texts to contextualize the moment they were written for readers who may not have followed the rhythm of her social media publications in real-time, simultaneously with the news that came out during the isolation. In this way, the comic weaves her anguish over the uncertainties of the pandemic into the story. Amid *panelaços* – protests where a group of people bang pots and pans from their windows – against the government and shouts from its supporters, Brazil was facing a vertiginous increase in deaths, reaching the number of fifty thousand in June 2020 (Coelho, 2020). For the author, this seemed a terminal situation that would not be overcome. But it was only the beginning. The artist and writer Nuno Ramos (2022) also expresses his anguish during this period. He mentions this impressive absence of limits in a conversation from May 2020, where he portrays this moment as an absolute loss of shape and boundaries, an apparent infinite descent with no ground in sight.

In an interview, D'Angelo (Vitral, 2021) says that her new apartment transformed her window into a theater box overlooking the whole neighborhood. From what she saw outside this opening, she reinforces how important it is for storytellers to be good “gossipers” since the observation of other people's lives can make up complex and believable material for writing. “So, in that sense, I think that in addition to inspiration, I like to weave endings to these stories that we hear halfway”, says D'Angelo (Vitral, 2021, our translation). The interviewer then raises a question about the similarity of the balconies that D'Angelo draws with profiles on social media and asks if her social media neighbors are also part of her stories, to which she replies:

[...] Of course, much of the inspiration for the comic comes from sources beyond the neighbors themselves. Since we spend so much time hanging out in these social media “windows”, I think a lot of the stories from social media spill over into *Isolamento*. This includes broader stories, like people's emotions at particular moments — whether it is a period of widespread panic or record deaths — and more specific ones, like a blogger who, after being canceled' embarks on a journey of self-care and therapy. To quote Drummond, I think there are various feelings about the world that I capture in the comic. And as the world is confined to windows (whether real or virtual), I end up using the material that comes to me (Vitral,

2021, n. p., author's quotation marks, our translation).

During the lockdown, windows were more than a membrane separating inside and outside the houses, working also as a permeable means of collective communication and political manifestation while the streets were momentarily closed. Writer Aline Valek (2021) mentions the synchronization of the shouts with different purposes coming from her neighbors in *Hour of Synchronicity*. Valek is also intrigued by "gossip by halves", especially at a time when many people were confined in their homes. The shouts from the windows, whether in protest or as expressions of pandemic-induced anguish, created ways of interacting with others even without seeing them. As D'Angelo notes (Vitral, 2021), through these physical and virtual windows, a form of sociability with the outside world became more present during confinement, exacerbating the individuality of each housing unit.

Someone shouted GOAL from the window [...]. The neighbor from another building understood something else, went to pick up the pot, and started shouting "Bolsonaro out!" out of turn. She is not wrong. I do not think it is wrong to shout from the window, but we need to normalize and give a new meaning to shouting from the window, especially when we live in confinement. You could even say to me "Wait, it depends" and we could think about in which situations it would be acceptable or not to shout at the window, as hypothetical legislators of the scream. Generally speaking, the socially acceptable shout at the window is the one that belongs to more than one person, the one that invites you to shout together. The shout is comfortable because everyone is in sync with the same feeling and subject. They are watching the same scene: a soccer match, a political and humanitarian disaster, the last seconds of the year. [...] A year of the pandemic is enough time for you to become a completely different person; on the other hand, not even that amount of time can change other things. Like the nightly *panelaços* that continue with the same strength as last year, motivated by hatred for the gnawed *pequi* (expression from the name of a Brazilian fruit) that governs us. (Valek, 2021, n. p., our translation)

Architect and professor Guilherme Wisnik (Coutinho, 2020), in an interview with Gama magazine, was asked about his relationship with the window in his house during the pandemic, whether "there is more of the world coming in or going out through it" (Coutinho, 2020, n. p., our translation). Wisnik replied that today the window represents a two-way channel, a point of connection with the outside world, and wonders if it is a coincidence calling the screens we open on digital platforms windows. He then references Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* (1954) to discuss his relationship with others around him during this time.

The feature film follows a photographer who, isolated in his apartment while recovering from a fracture, observes his neighbors and eventually begins to suspect that one of them has committed a crime. From the fragmented narratives of material and immaterial windows narrated by D'Angelo (Vitral, 2021) and Wisnik (Coutinho, 2020), as well as the synchronized cries mentioned by Valek, one can see how the openings were protagonists in this state of waiting during isolation. As part of the discussion on "The Digital and the South: tensions", this work draws from these perceptions about the multiple windows that remained open throughout the pandemic in Brazil, demonstrating the ambiguity between the physical and digital realms during this period. It discusses contemporary living, offering a critical reading of these experiences in dialogue with a theoretical analysis focused on architecture. The following discussion delves into the multiple openings within the digital context, drawing on the perspectives of Paul Virilio (2002) and Beatriz Colomina (1992) to explore, much like Hitchcock's character (1954), how we come to observe and be observed in indiscreet ways.

2 Methodology

The methodology used in this work builds upon a practice refined in recent years through other projects and a recently defended master's thesis. It is a collage, a method that has shaped a distinct research approach. To frame it as a methodological practice, we began with the constellation way of thinking, developed by Rita Velloso (2018) based on Walter Benjamin's ideas, who discusses the relationship between components under investigation, positioned as stars, and their imaginary lines connected in a given set. This approach addresses not only the proximity of one star to another but also the possible meanings that the set as a whole can reveal (Velloso, 2018).

The bibliographical framework that shapes this methodology also includes a background in fiction literature, bringing in perspectives from different authors on the writing process. One of the most significant writers in this formative journey is Ursula K. Le Guin (1986). In her essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, the author discusses how narratives are often linear, favoring weapons and the hero's journey. Le Guin (1986) proposes a new rationality, based on the valuation of the container and the space where items are stored along the way. The writer approaches writing and creation as acts of carrying a bag with different elements that are gradually added together and articulated, even without apparent initial connections.

Thus, a *modus operandi* that accumulates objects during a thematic immersion was built, allowing us to think about possible meanings. This method is similar to what researcher and architect Beatriz Colomina describes in *Still Writing* (2023), where she discusses her methodology of thinking through images. The approximation to Colomina's method, which is also very transdisciplinary, then becomes an instrument for investigating architecture that can be described as a way of thinking through collages, since the text has the same importance as the images. According to Fernando Fuão (2014), the collage brings the distant closer to a fragmented world. In addressing the multiple windows that permeate contemporary daily life, focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes appropriate to consider them through this methodological perspective.

3 Discussion

In the *Split Wall*, Beatriz Colomina (1992) reflects on the word window in English, whose etymology

reveals that it combines *wind* and *eye* (ventilation and light in Le Corbusier's terms). As Georges Teyssot has noted, the word combines "an element of the outside and an aspect of innerness. The separation on which dwelling is based is the possibility for a being to install himself" (Colomina, 1992, p. 121, author's quotation marks).

The association between physical and virtual windows made by D'Angelo (Vitral, 2021) and Wisnik (Coutinho, 2020) and the etymological analysis of the word window are the starting point for discussing the prominence of this element during confinement. Even though the comic artist and the architect have distinguished the two types, there has been a kind of hybridization between them, adding greater ambiguity to their definition.

In the aforementioned text, Colomina (1992) references the French architect and philosopher Paul Virilio and his discussion on the changes in the construction and spatial perception of architecture with the emergence of electronic interfaces inside houses. In recapitulating Virilio's thinking, Colomina revisits the figure of windows from the looking, stating that the eye functions as a door to architecture, and the door, being an architectural element, is the first structure of a window. Virilio's observations date back to the 1980s, when he was primarily concerned with cinema, the strong presence of television in domestic spaces, and the early days of the Internet. However, the constant presence of the duality of time and space in his analysis remains relevant today, especially when considering spatialities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In *Improbable Architecture*, Virilio (2002) draws on Walter Benjamin's assumption that cinema is capable of exploding the possibilities of space, expanding it through the camera's close-up: "so that now, abandoned in the midst of its far-flung debris, we take on adventurous expeditions" (Benjamin apud Virilio, 2002, p. 71). The metaphor of space as fragments projected from a distance through new technologies refers to a kind of open system, with limits that are not easily perceived. The French philosopher then attempts to predict how the telecommunications system could impose a new way of life on urban dwellers based the *inertia* and sedentary living principles.

[...] legal citizens for whom the liberty to come and go is suddenly replaced by the liberation of home reception. [...] The office, which was once an other-place, an architectural aside, has now become a simple screen. In the *bourgeois* apartment, the space reserved for work and study has become the terminal of an office-viewfinder, in which the data of tele-information instantaneously appear and disappear as the three dimensions of constructed space are translated into the two dimensions of a screen, or better of an interface, which replaces more than the volume of the ancient dwelling, with its furniture and their arrangements, its contracts and blueprints. This new arrangement also directs the more or less distant displacement of the occupant. This transmutation – where the inertial confinement of the new office has become the axis of gravity and the nodal center of techno-bureaucratic society explains yet again the contemporary, post-industrial redeployment. (Virilio, 2002, p. 73)

These observations have been consolidated to this day, especially with the ubiquity of the Internet in our daily lives. Overcoming the omnipresence of television and other techniques discussed by Virilio (2002), this sedentary lifestyle has been continuously renewed in urban centers. When we analyze the isolation imposed by the pandemic as a type of exceptional sedentary lifestyle, we can also infer it worsened something that was already in progress.

The philosopher's perception of teleworking reduced to a screen is currently materialized in the multiple screens-windows in the palms of our hands, technological devices that are present in the daily lives of a large part of the population. Windows that blur together, as D'Angelo says (Vitral, 2021), mixing the windows of our immediate neighbors, on the side of our homes, with those further away, with whom we share the terrain of social networks, the latter almost always in a state of openness. For Virilio (2002), bringing time closer together through

telecommunications is, in turn, a distancing in space, which means

The vast dispersion of the scattered debris now involves more than the fragments of the concentration-camp universe denounced by Benjamin. Scattered as well are the personnel, the tele-laborers, who have become objects and subjects of an energy and film transmutation whose purpose has moved from simple industrial production to the long-distance representation of that structural and post-industrial reduction that affects all neighborly relations. As Benjamin noted: "Every day, there grows a need to own the object at the closest possible proximity, through its image and even more its reproduction." No longer aspects of physical space, size and proximity are now elements of the time of photographic, cinematic or infographic exposition, which is a delay of almost instantaneous response, irrespective of the distances among interlocutors. Coming together to deconstruct structurally or to scatter to the winds, the functions here of eye and equipment become confused, since by definition the resolution of the transmitted image is its instantaneous reduction. But this reduction affects more than the simple content of representation, the projected form-image. It also takes over constructed space, the territorial form, from which emanates the organization of time through the chrono-political direction of the so-called "advanced", or developed, societies. (Virilio, 2002, p. 74, author's quotation marks)

Virilio (2002) also mentions a morphological and architectural fracture, since the fragmentation and decoupage of material space into geometric dimensions, with the separations of built space, have been replaced by an instantaneous cut, almost imperceptible in the time of telecommunications, according to Faria (2024):

There is an inertia due to the concentration on real time related to broadcasting and reception through the media, to the detriment of, or renewing, the previous concentration on the real space of living together in a neighborhood, characteristic of city architecture. The settlement of time is now given greater weight than the settlement of urban space, leading the notion of proximity to take on other meanings. (Faria, 2024, p. 59, our translation)

In using the term social distancing (Carvalho, Ninomiya & Shiomatsu, 2020), the World Health Organization also denotes its ambiguity. Although the effectiveness of keeping part of the population confined to their homes, sociability has acquired other forms of closeness, precisely through digital technologies. There has been an attempt to transpose fragments of the collective spaces of the city onto virtual spatialities using digital platforms as a sort of common ground to foster closeness during isolation. However, these forms of sociability, much like D'Angelo's (2022) starting point as an author-observer of her neighbors' stories, also reinforced a certain type of individualism that had existed even before the physical isolation decrees.

Virilio (2002) also mentions some pertinent notions for this discussion, starting with the consequences of this fragmentation of space into individualized compartments, referring to the separation and functional distribution of a house into rooms. To address this "the irruption in which the architectonic undergoes a series of topological distortions whose effects still remain largely unknown" (Virilio, 2002, p. 78), the philosopher uses elements such as walls, windows, doors, and chimneys to discuss the access to the space of the house. Virilio considers all these openings to be types of windows.

The first opening is the door, which is responsible for granting access to the home and featured as its threshold since it is also responsible for the articulation between inside and outside as it necessarily implies penetrability to access the interior/exterior. The second window would be the one that appeared later, since there was no exclusive opening for lighting in the first houses, except for the chimneys. This window as a type of interface first appeared in places of devotion and later became popular in rural homes and bourgeois residences. The third window is the television screen, "a removable and portable window that opens onto the false day of the speed of light emissions" (Virilio, 2002, p. 79). One of the main characteristics that distinguishes it from the others is that it is not oriented towards an immediate exterior. It is an introverted opening that turns towards distant exteriors, beyond its surroundings.

As a means of physical and communicative access over great distances, the audio-visual and automotive media merge here, collapsing the traditional architectonic structure. Basically, just as the television set posted before the sofa is an object that punctures the walls, the garage must also be considered in the context of its effect on the rooms of the house. Both are thresholds of transformation that provoke the anamorphosis of constructed architectural and urban structures. Movable elements such as seats, beds or various arrangements conspire with new means of transportation and telecommunication to contribute to the deterioration of a stability which is actually a stasis of immobile equilibrium. As a phenomenon of accelerated substitution, contemporary living becomes the crossroads for mass-media. At this point, the garage could easily replace the house, that "dwelling" which was only a parking lot for the nomad's furniture anyway. (Virilio, 2002, p. 80, author's quotation marks)

Virilio (2002) continues the discussion by questioning whether in the future there will be a dissolution of property based on these fragmented

units of architectural space, combined with the autonomization and overvaluation of the window-screen, in this case, the television.

Don't we already feel a kind of domiciliary atopia in the urban absorption of towns and suburbs? Isn't the ostensibly functional development of the modern architectural plan, with its hierarchies of space into principal and secondary rooms or receiving and serving units, really nothing more than an aspect of the different modes of access, such as door, window, stair, elevator, as well as of the means of automotive communication and audiovisual telecommunication? As regards recent developments in advanced technologies, we must pose one final question. How will it end? (Virilio, 2002, p. 80-81)

The philosopher also discusses how these technologies have advanced over time to create a false supplementary day since the window of these technological devices has the power to artificially create it. American professor Jonathan Crary (2013) addresses this infinite day discussing the current state of capitalism, which demands a dedication to 24/7 (twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week) consumption. In the context of the pandemic, it is inevitable to associate these dissolutions of boundaries with the space where these temporal activities are inscribed, leading to an attempt at uninterrupted illumination of all spheres of daily life, aimed at obliterating the alternation between night and day, leading to the existence of an infinite productive day, with windows always open. In this way, to return to Virilio's window-screen is to analyze it as the beginning of the dispersion of this opening onto other screens, small windows onto an infinite outside world, which are no longer anchored to the space of the house, but to the body due to their size and mobility.

In this logic, time and space are distorted and remain in uninterrupted continuity due to the fragmentation of space and time, and the absence of a demarcated separation between day and night. The philosopher adds that this continuous time may even be the chronological time of history, but it does not fit into everyday life. This highlights the role of interruptions in structuring time on an individual scale, and draws attention to this aspect, especially during social isolation.

Between 2020 and 2023, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical limit was imposed more dramatically, while the temporal limit became more blurred, due to the accumulation of daily activities in a single space: the home, even more introverted. This confinement has considerably reduced the markings and fragmentations between a sphere of life and another, concentrating them in a continuous flow of work, study, leisure, and rest, with a practically smooth temporality due to the absence of clear demarcations, such as spatial ones, and thus not necessarily following the clear division between day and night. Virilio says:

Today, technology plays an analogous role in creating from all forms of new interruptions a modification of time, a distortion of the astronomical day which affects the arrangement of urban space and of architecture, as the window displaces the door. The solar day that structured the living day was displaced by the chemical day, in which candlelight permitted the development of numerous nocturnal activities. The chemical day gave way to the electric day, which indefinitely prolonged the perception of daylight. With the recent advent of the electronic day, the extension of day and of visibility spreads, taking over space as the extension of an audio-visual and tele-topological continuum, and erasing all the antipodes of those of geographic distances, as well as the dead angles that domain constructed by closed-circuit TV. [...] Basically, reality encounters the fate of modernity: it has always already happened. The moment of the direct perception of objects, surfaces and natural or constructed volumes gives way to the indirect and mediated reception, an interface that avoids day-to-day duration, as well as the calendar of everyday living. We will never be neighbors in any televisual proximity, and the media are not our contemporaries. We live today in an ever-growing fault between the promptness of the broadcasts and our own capacity to grasp and measure the present moment. (Virilio, 2002, p. 83-84)

For the philosopher, the absence of present time in instantaneous communication reaches the building, reducing it almost to an image-form. Using terms such as "video-city" (Virilio, 2002, p. 86) and "televisual urbanization" (Virilio, 2002, p. 86), Virilio describes this conformation from his present, which has become more pronounced in contemporary times.

We have passed beyond caring about the supremacy of one mode of information over the press, radio or film. Our house has become a press house, an architecture in which the information-dimension grows and intensifies, and in direct opposition to the activities of all journalists. The contour of daily living and the framing of viewpoint in an architectonic constructed of doors and doorways, windows and mirrors are replaced by a cathode framework, an indirect opening in which the electronic false-day functions like a camera lens, reversing the order of appearances to the benefit of an imperceptible transparency, and submitting the supremacy of certain constructive elements to that cathode window that rejects both the portal and the light of day. (Virilio, 2002, p. 87)

Virilio's description is very similar to Paul B. Preciado's analysis (2019), in his book *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics*, about the political and sociocultural dynamics during the Cold War, which were responsible for shaping domestic and public

spaces in American cities, incorporating alienating and symbolic mechanisms. One of these spatialized logics is materialized in the bachelor apartment discussed by Preciado (2019, p. 35), which incorporated the aesthetics of the spy agent through the transformation of the male housing into a command center. The dwelling conceived as Virilio's press house is also placed as the image of a spaceship sailing solitarily through space, with the first windows sealed, facing an obliterated exterior, while the telecommunications windows and their control panel gain greater importance. That said, it is possible to argue how the regimes of visibility in architecture have become increasingly ambiguous:

If architecture offers a view through the very materiality of the erection of walls, partitions and buildings, it also contributes to the dissimulation of the horizon of appearances. In this, architecture operates in a manner similar to the way in which state-of-the-art technologies of communication make prisons more visible and more shadowy. More than any form of demonstration, it is this occultation that is the common denominator of all technologies, old or new. It is the privileged analyst of all arrangements of space and time. For example, the first *tableau*, the first means of ocular representation, was the opening for door-ways and windows. This was long before the easel-and-canvas painting, which so often was self-enclosed, as in a triptych. To understand the first *tableau*, we would have to try to return to the visual unconscious, to the nature of the opening and the closing, rather than attempt to repeat individual demonstrative performances of one electronic optic or another. To this end, consider the evolution and three-dimensional extension of the light-providing opening from the ancient cloister, through the mullion windows of the Middle Ages, the great lancet and rose windows, past the special effects of gothic architecture, to the bow-windows and the great metal spokes of the last century and beyond, and up to the glass facades of our present skyscrapers, and the curtain-walls that were themselves contemporaries to the invention and development of the cathode opening. All of this helps explain the importance of this transmutation of appearances, the subsequent supremacy of the televisual window over the door and other traditional means of access, a supremacy that already contributes to the decline of public space and the decrease of collective venues. (Virilio, 2002, p. 90-91)

4 Concluding Remarks

The discussion indicates a current state where the window replaces the door, becoming the main architectural element that organizes the space, affecting architecture and its assumptions, and relegating physical access and actual presence to the background of real experience. When Virilio mentions the "primacy of the access protocol" (Virilio, [1993] 2014, p. 93), one can also perceive proximity to the context of social isolation due to the omnipresence of artificial windows and the real imposition of sanitary protocols for entering spaces to avoid contamination by the virus.

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With all of this, there is no reason to stand stunned before post-modern facades or the ambiguous character of an architecture that has announced its own superficiality. The mediating of the environment now affects much more than simply the tools of communication, such as control towers, video-based management, nodal centers, and informatics centers; it has come to re-order intimate space, the very nature of our domiciles, through the development of teledistribution. Servan-Schreiber's apartment offers a taste of this future; every room save the bedroom is dominated by a piece of advanced electronic furniture. There's a telex-computer console for satellite correspondence, a game computer for the kids, a home-management computer for domestic affairs, an educational computer for the study of languages, history or math, a word-processor replacing the old typewriter, not to mention televisions and VCR'S. (Virilio, 2002, pp. 99-100, author's quotation marks)

Thus, it is possible to perceive a shift in the perception of living between physical and virtual windows, with the latter being increasingly privileged even after confinement. Today, houses can have all their rooms with windows without physical openings to the immediate exterior. Through digital openings, the exterior becomes the entire world. Furthermore, the house as an object hermetically sealed off from its surroundings came before the pandemic, as stated by Virilio (2014) and recapitulated by Colomina (Colomina, Bodegraven & Al Assal, 2023). And although they were inserted in other contexts, they also assumed that their occupation was in a state of isolation.

From these readings, one can infer that windows, although differentiated by the nature of their materiality, became cyborgs in today's daily life, as evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic years. This term is based on the philosopher Donna Haraway (1985), who makes us understand openings as hybrids with permeable borders. Haraway questions the purism of the binary divisions between natural and artificial, something valuable to bring to the present discussion between physical and digital, which challenges a dichotomous analysis in contemporary times. With the ubiquity of technology in the daily lives of many, digital spatialities function in a way that overlaps with physical ones.

Although it can be said that there were no substantial changes in terms of the architectural materiality of physical windows after the isolation period, we can see a change in the perception of domestic space users. The pandemic marked a critical moment, but in some ways, it was part of an announced turning point in terms of how we understand openings. While we used to avoid crowds in the streets, we now gather

in digital swarms. Today, even without health recommendations, we continue to observe from our windows the many others who are enclosed, and we become enclosed in front of those who open up to infinite horizons and neighbors.

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