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Things and Dwelling.  
Unique Things and the Modification of the Dwelling Space

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“The past, to repeat the words of Proust, is hidden in some material object. To wander about in the world, then, is also to wander about in ourselves.”

Paul Auster. “The Invention of Solitude”

The phenomenological tradition has provided profound analyses of the way in which things reveal to us. It has also provided an exciting debate on the way in which they are originally presented. But beyond the discussion of whether they are primarily objects of perception (as Husserl believes), tools in a pragmatic context (as Heidegger argues in *Being and Time*) or objects of consumption and enjoyment (as Levinas holds in *Totality in Infinity*), the emphasis of these classical analyses seems to show that the way in which things present themselves to us depends, ultimately, in the way in which we are essentially disposed to receive them. In other words, the interest of these classical approaches is characterized by taking things as the starting point of an inquiry into the conditions of possibility of experience in general. Perhaps for this reason, the power that things have over us to condition our experience has been usually disregarded by phenomenologists. It was probably Heidegger also who first drew attention to this issue in his late philosophy, but here we will focus on the influence that his thought exerted on the phenomenological studies on dwelling undertaken from the 1980s onwards. Particularly relevant to our topic are the contributions made by the Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz, who has underlined the connection between things and the experience of feeling at home in the world (Norberg-Schulz 1983). In recent years, the phenomenological study of things has been the subject of the collective volume *Kraft der*

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*Dinge. Phänomenologische Skizzen*, from which I have taken the expression "power of things" (Därmann 2014). In what follows, I will try to deepen these analyses through the study of the properties that certain things have to modify our experience of the space where we dwell.

In order to do so, firstly, I will briefly outline the structure of the dwelling space in accordance with Husserl's analysis of the distinction between homeworld and alienworld. Secondly, I will offer a description of these peculiar objects that bear familiarity by means of the phenomenological category of "uniqueness". There are some prototypical forms of "unique things", such as amulets, photographs or religious symbols, however we will see that any object can, in principle, become unique as long as it acquires a symbolic character. That is, the capacity of things to modify the experience of the dwellings space is closely related to their status as symbols. In order to become symbolic, in turn, things must preserve the passage of time in their materiality. In this context, we will analyze the relationship between symbolism and uniqueness under the light of the notion of "transitional object" developed by the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, which will bring to the fore the "transitional space" that stays between home and strangeness. In this context, we will also see the importance of imagination and play in the confrontation with the strange.

### 1. Homeworld and alienworld

Husserl's approach to the topic of dwelling appears in the context of his inquiry into the lifeworld. In order to describe the structure of the dwelling space, the Husserlian analysis concentrates mainly on two of the dimensions of the lifeworld: The world as soil and as horizon. These senses are, in turn, closely related.

In temporal terms, the world as soil is founded on the sedimentation of the past experience of a closed human community and provides, with it, a horizon of acquaintedness which brings familiarity to the world. Since the past taken into account here corresponds to an intersubjective level, the meaning transference among the generations becomes an "heritage of sense" for a "generative intersubjectivity" (Husserl 1973, 609).

The sedimentation of the collective past constitutes the history of the community and provides a horizon of meaning for its members. That is, meaning is always pre-given from a generative perspective (Walton 2019, 19). The world, accordingly, gains "typic-

ity” as a consequence of the intersubjective sedimentation process, through which it becomes familiar and the norm for a certain community life. The closest world, defined by its familiarity, typicality and normality, is called by Husserl the “homeworld”.

The homeworld admits an inner gradualness of horizons that Husserl describes as a set of concentric circles structured one-inside-the-other (Husserl 1973, 429). The starting point of the analysis is the “most immediate near world”, where the living body is the absolute point of reference (Husserl 1973, 428). As a consequence, the objects and subjectivities that integrate this “private environment” could always be perceived in strict correlation with the movement of the living body (Husserl 1973, 219). It follows from this that the first others are the closest people (*Nächsten*), which are, in the most common case, the nuclear family members: mothers, fathers and siblings (Husserl 1973, 429). In this sense, the house taken as the place where the family dwells, is the center of the nearest world. From there on, the external circles of the homeworld extend to the limits of what is known and familiar.

Beyond the borders of the homeworld, an unknown world is intentioned as an empty horizon. Husserl writes: “The contrast between homely or familiar and strange belongs to the permanent structure of each world, and in a permanent relativity” (Husserl 1973, 431). Although home and strangeness are both necessary dimensions of the dwelling space, the homeworld keeps its centrality as long as it acts as a general measure for the determination of the empty horizon. Correspondingly, the enlargement of the homeworld over the strange world can occur in two ways. On the one hand, the unknown world is determined according to the general style of the homeworld. In such a case, “the far away” becomes simply a part of the enlarged near world. On the other hand, the encounter with others –involved in a different generative history–, not only entails the determination of the empty horizon as an alienworld, but also brings to the fore thematically one's own homeworld, which is pre-given as soil before the factual encounter with others. As a consequence, homeworld and alienworld are co-constituted as representations of the world (Walton 2019, 33).

As we can see in this brief summary, the structure of the surrounding world implies for Husserl an essential distinction between the close sphere of the familiar and known world (which constitutes normality) and a strange, unknown world (which is identified with abnormality). Both dimensions of the lifeworld, however, are based on the com-

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mon ground of a space defined by the orientation provided by the living body and the sedimentation of tradition. In other words, the space where we dwell must be distinguished from the objective space of physics or mathematics. As Husserl shows in §9 of *Crisis*, objective space results from the application of pure mathematics to the intuitively given nature. As a consequence, space becomes abstract, homogeneous and measurable. It is said that a space is homogeneous when any of its points are interchangeable with one another. Such interchangeability between places depends on the fact that objective space is not oriented, insofar there is no privileged point around which an orientation can be established. Since it is homogeneous, objective space can be measured and extended infinitely (Husserl 1970, 33).

By contrast, orientation and temporal density define what Husserl calls a “territory”: a spatial dimension of the lifeworld temporalized by a generative intersubjectivity and constituted in close connection with the living body of each member of the community. Insofar as each territory is intrinsically temporal, it cannot be identified with a portion of objective space. Husserl observes that a territory is not merely “a fixed piece of land” and he illustrates this idea with the condition of nomadic people (Husserl 2008, 394-5). In such a case, objective displacement from one point to another does not imply a change in the dwelling place of the community insofar they remain integrated by their traditions. That is, the dwelling place of a nomadic people lies rather in its generative time than in space. What this case shows is that the objective space—quantified and homogenized by science and technology—is not the place where we originally dwell. In addition, the example of the nomads shows that it is not enough to move from one place to another to leave our own territory, since it remains in the living bodies of every singular subject that is part of the community. From this perspective, the territory is not only considered in its spiritual dimension but also in terms of its natural aspect. A territory, thus, comprises a certain kind of climate, a topography and a biome (Steinbock 1995, 164). All these levels are sedimented in our living body and, therefore, we carry them with us wherever we go.

In such sedimentation, in turn, lies the key to the preeminence that the homeworld possesses over the alienworld in terms of understanding and valuation, even at the level of passive behavior. Janet Donhoe provides a very clarifying example of this point. When we visit a foreign country where people drive in the opposite side of the road, we may

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actively realize the way in which our own bodily behavior is passively habituated to look first left and then right before crossing the street. This behavior perfectly adapted to our daily environment becomes dangerous in a different context. And even if habits may change over time, the former habits do not disappear completely but remain underneath the new ones, giving the bodily memory the character of a “palimpsest” (Donohoe 2014, 65-6). Therefore, the permanence of bodily habits is not only a reason for the pre-eminence of the homeworld over the alienworld but also explains, at the most elementary level, the strangeness that we experience when we find ourselves in an alien context.

However, although bodily displacement to an alienworld constitutes a paradigmatic form of estrangement from the normality of the homeworld, this is not, of course, the only reason that explains the abnormal becoming of the world. Sudden changes in the context –such as the outbreak of wars, climatic cataclysms or pandemics– can alter the homeworld to the point of compromising the exercise of the habitual practices that make up its normality. In such a case, it is the homeworld itself that becomes strange, without this implying any spatial displacement. But even in the normal case, the homeworld as such has a variable horizon of cognoscibility, so that it contains strange environments, where we find ourselves "outside of our comfort zone". As concrete examples of this we can think of everyday but relatively unusual experiences such as taking an exam or starting a new job, or less common ones, such as being confined to our own house for reasons of public health. In one way of another, if home and strangeness are relative and variable notions, and strangeness constitutes an essential part of the experience of the dwelling space, then we can ask: How do we deal with the strange that shapes our world? And, more relevant to our topic, what role do things play in the attempt to dwell in the strange?

## 2. On “unique” things

First of all, it should be pointed out that there is no such thing as a “class” of objects defined by the capability to modify the way we dwell. In the same sense that there is no specific property that defines which things can be given as gifts and which cannot, the things we are referring here are such only because someone considers them valuable and decides to keep them to accompany her or his stay in the world. Nevertheless, certain

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things seem to possess intrinsic properties that make it easier for them to be chosen as bearers of homeliness. This happens to be the case of photographs.

It is easy to notice that photographs have a clear referential function, as they operate as a perceptual substrate for the presentification of an absent world. In this sense, photographs have the power to produce an experience of familiarity insofar they can motivate memories. It is no wonder, then, that they are among the things chosen by many people to remind them of their homeworld from a distance. But the power of photography is not limited to its representational function. Paul Moyaert points out that the referential character of photography cannot fully explain the "pre-reflexive, almost instinctive" reaction that we experience when faced with the material destruction of the image of someone we love (Därman 2014, 51). That is, although in strictly objective terms – from a third-person perspective– we understand that the photograph is made of inanimate matter, we behave with the paper as if it were in a direct and mysterious relationship with the materiality of the portrayed subject. In such a case, photographs do not function only as a memory aid because of the similarity between the image and the reality represented. By contrast, Moyaert states that they are experienced as if they were icons in the Christian sense of the term.

An icon is a true image of God and, according to Christian theology, its true character does not depend on the degree of resemblance between the image and God Himself but on the "degree of proximity or intimacy" that the representation establishes with what is represented (Därman 2014, 53). The strength of such images can be associated with a religious function when, for example, they are used for prayer. Along with icons, the author highlights another type of religious objects: relics. In this case, the referentiality is not based at all on resemblance but on the metonymic or causal relationship that the relics establish with the subjects associated with them: it can be an object used by a saint or a bone from his body. Moyaert concludes that the common feature that characterizes both icons and relics consists in their condition of being symbolic objects.

In general terms, symbols are a class of signs and signs are characterized by being in the place of something else. Symbols, in turn, are signs for which the centrifugal movement that characterizes the sign –the passage from the referent to the referred reality– is accompanied by a centripetal movement: symbols embody the reality in whose place they stand (Därman 2014, 59). In other words, while in signs the referred reality re-

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mains external to the referent, the symbol carries with it something of that reality. So that in the symbolic replacement of something "x" by something "y," something of "y" is present in "x." By the "material" presence of what is referred to in the symbol, the symbolic object supports indirectly actions directed to the absent reality. This type of behavior towards symbols is called "symbolic action" and consists in the direct expression of love or hate through an object that replaces the direct addressee of that action, which is not physically close. In this sense, the symbol makes it possible to cross the distance that separates the referent from the referred reality and does so by virtue of the materiality of the symbolic object.

Now, if with these elements we return to the analysis of photographs that have a symbolic value, we will notice that their status as symbols does not depend on what we see in them –on the relation of similarity– but on the fact that the portrayed subject is materially present in his portrait: it is the light reflected by her or his body that the photograph registers. On this point, Moyaert endorses Roland Barthes' statement in *La Chambre Claire*: "Photography is literally an emanation of the referent" (Därmann 2014, 63). In this sense, photography endowed with a symbolic value is, like all icons, a kind of relic.

The temporal dimension contained in symbolic objects, which is ultimately what explains the material connection with its referent, can be also addressed in a psychological perspective. The psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott proposes that the genesis of symbolic objects must be sought in the infantile efforts to open up to the world from the primordial indifference that unites the mother with her child. Following Freud, Winnicott asserts that the originary disposition of the infantile subject towards the world is defined by omnipotence: the subject does not perceive that the object that meets its needs possesses an independent existence. In other words, the baby lives the illusion that its mother's breast is part of itself (Winnicott 1971, 15). This illusion, correspondingly, has to be encouraged in the first place by the mother but at a certain point, if the mother is "good enough", she has to disillusion her child (16). The disillusionment that concerns the loss of the immanent character of the primary object opens the possibility of establishing a relationship not only with what stands beyond the subjective boundaries but also with the diversification of the objects that make up the baby's world. This process, which ultimately involves the never completed task of reality-acceptance, begins with

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the replacement of the mother's breast by a unique object which Winnicott calls "transitional object" (18).

So far, we have seen that things such as photographs can function as symbolic objects but, as a matter of facts, any material object can become a symbol as long as it establishes a causal bound with its referent—in this sense, Winnicott points out that in early childhood most common transitional objects are blankets or pieces of cloth (5). What is relevant, in any case, is that this piece of matter has a symbolic character and, as such, acquires an affective value. This is also the reason why symbolic objects can neither be replaced nor be exchanged, for it is their materiality that admits of no equivalent and, therefore, it what makes them "unique."

The concept of "uniqueness" has been introduced in the phenomenological tradition by Edmund Husserl to describe the particular way in which the world manifests itself. The experience of the world is neither comparable to the experience of a singular object that appears among other objects nor to the experience of the synthesis of a plurality of objects, because the world is neither an object nor merely the synthesis of the totality of all objects. In contrast, Husserl thinks that the world is the horizon that provides the background for every object's manifestation and, therefore, it is the condition of possibility for such manifestation (Walton 2003). In *Crisis*, Husserl writes: "The world (...) does not exist as an entity, as an object, but exists with such uniqueness [*Einzigkeit*] that the plural makes no sense when applied to it. Every plural, and every singular drawn from it, presupposes the world-horizon" (Husserl 2012, 143). Since the world-horizon is universal, its uniqueness depends on the fact that there are no horizons that can embrace the world. Consequently, there is nothing outside the world with which a relationship could be established. For this reason, Husserl thinks that the categories of singularity and plurality cannot be applied to the world-horizon.

Emmanuel Levinas has also developed his own interpretation of the notion. Unlike Husserl, the Lithuanian philosopher uses the concept to characterize the opposite pole of the intentional relationship as "unique" (*unique*). In *Totality and Infinity* can be read: "The I is not unique like the Eiffel Tower or the Mona Lisa. The unicity of the I does not merely consist in being found in one sample only, but in existing without having a genus, without being the individuation of a concept. The ipseity of the I consists in remaining outside the distinction between the individual and the general" (Levinas 2011,



117-8). That is, the uniqueness of the I it should not be sought in a in a set of properties but in the absolute inner “relationship” that every subject maintains with itself.

In spite of their differences, both philosophers agree in defining “uniqueness” as a property that lies beyond the distinction between singularity and multiplicity, since it does not depend on the relationship between concepts (defined by general properties) and the cases to which these properties apply. If this were the case, the thing would be not unique in the phenomenological sense of the word but the individuation of a concept with an extension = 1 (such as the Eiffel Tower or the Mona Lisa). In other words, the technical use of the concept differs from the everyday use of the adjective "unique" in English Language, which means, precisely, “being the only one of its type.”<sup>1</sup>

The notion of uniqueness is also in close relation to the value of things. If we consider objects from the perspective of the properties that can be predicated of them, we will see that the value of a particular object depends on the comparison with other objects. That means that valuation expresses at the same time two types of objective relationships: the one that links a particular object with a general property and the one that each object establishes with all others of the same kind. In this sense, valuation implies relating something to an “equivalent”: each member of the relationship represents the value of the other and this comparison makes it possible to exchange an object for other of the same value or for a value expressed in monetary terms (a price) (Dotti 2009, 22). However, this is expressly what the Husserlian definition prevents by holding that something unique is characterized by the impossibility of establishing relations with something else and, therefore, making it impossible to be exchanged. In this sense, uniqueness does not refer to the contingent fact that the concept is predicated of a numerically one entity or, in general, of any objective relationship at all. On the contrary, an object becomes unique because someone chooses it as a symbol. That is, its value is completely subjective. At the same time, several objects can be unique for a person, since it is sufficient that each of them is significant in its own way.<sup>2</sup>

1 See, for instance, the Cambridge Dictionary:

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/unique>

2 It is interesting to note how the objectifying notion of uniqueness (which, moreover, expresses the vulgar use of the term) is used to individualize objectivities that, in principle, seem refractory to becoming unique. This would be the case, according to Henry Lafevre, of all mass-produced objects (among which digital objects would be an extreme case insofar as they lack any materiality): “It is obvious, sad to say, that repetition has everywhere defeated uniqueness, that the artificial and contrived have driven all spontaneity and naturalness from the field, and, in short, that products have vanquished works” (Lafevre 2012, 75). However, in the same sense that the author's signature can individualize a material object (a book, for instance), digital objects such as artworks, tweets or memes, can be

### 3. Things in the space in-between.

Although the structure of the dwelling space seems to present certain fixed points – where the preeminence in terms of valuation and understanding of the homeworld over the alienworld is the most outstanding case–, the lived spatiality is dynamic and this means that the circles of familiarity and strangeness have a relative extent and, therefore, they are subject to change. In this sense, the bodily displacement that enables a first-hand perceptual experience plays an essential role in determining the distant and unknown world. However, it is clear that the mere presence of the living body is not enough to transform a strange world into a familiar one. In fact, the perceptual experience can only reinforce the strangeness by highlighting the contrast between the homeworld and the alienworld. In this context, the power of things come to the fore.

In normal experience, the things that we have called unique sustain the familiarity of the homeworld by supporting the practices that make up everyday life. In this sense, the tools with which we work (such as the writer's notebook, the painter's brushes or the musician's instruments), objects that we only contemplate (such as a painting or landscapes) or things that we consume and provide ephemeral enjoyment (such as food), can be unique. But beyond whether the things in question are tools, objects of enjoyment or mere contemplation, the distinguishing feature that can make them unique is the passage of time. Only with time the materiality of things can acquire the character of a symbol of something absent (such as persons, places or practices) – this is also why nothing new can be unique. And it is in the very traces that time leaves on the matter where the presence of history becomes most manifest. This is why unique things are preserved even after they have deteriorated and can no longer be used. But the fact that they are useless does not mean that they have lost their sense of being. Quite the contrary, what remains of them is their power as symbols. Therefore, it is not strange that in situations of extreme abnormality, in which the homeworld is at risk of existence, people cling to

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individualized through "non-fungible token" (NFT) certifications. These digital signatures, that certifies a digital asset to be unique (in the sense of being the only one of its kind) make it possible to assign a monetary value to an asset that by its intrinsic nature would be infinitely repeatable for free. Becoming unique in this sense gives digital objects what matter gives to real objects, namely their individuality. But by making them the only instance of a class, they are treated as if they were a scarce or irreproducible commodity (like precious stones or material works of art). By creating an artificial scarcity, this kind of uniqueness justifies assigning these assets a (high) market price and thereby making economic exchange possible. Needless to say, this is not the sense we give to the term "uniqueness" here.

things that seem to be completely useless. A paradigmatic case of this behavior, deeply rooted in Western culture, is the flight of Aeneas from Troy, carrying his father, his son and the Penates, the small statues representing the deities of the home and the lineage.

According to Christian Norberg-Schulz, the rescue of things expresses a type of love that is intimately linked to their capacity to make us feel at home. Norberg-Schulz writes: “«The things trust us for rescue», Rilke says. But we can only rescue the things if we first have taken them into our hearts. When that happens, we  *dwell* , in the true sense of the word” (Norberg-Schulz 1983, 135). In his interpretation of the concept, dwelling involves an appropriation of place that allows us to interpret the meaning gathered in the things present in our surrounding world (1985, 17). As a result, dwelling places possess a certain familiarity and offer, thus, psychological security (1983, 224). In short, dwelling in “the true sense of the word” means “to be at home.”<sup>3</sup> Certainly, by taking the Penates with him Aeneas does not save his homeworld from devastation but, nevertheless, something of that world is rescued in that act. Since the Penates carry with them the familiarity of the homeworld into the alienworld, they offer an affective containment that enable to enter into the unknown, mitigating the concomitant fear of the stranger.

In a strictly spatial sense, we will notice that the things that Aeneas has chosen to accompany his journey into the unknown are neither located in the homeworld (which has been left behind) nor are they among the elements that make up the alienworld. These things are emplaced in an ambiguous space that is neither completely familiar nor completely foreign. Winnicott calls “transitional space” this interstitial spatiality that cannot be subsumed under the opposition between homeworld and alienworld and, given its irreducible condition, he characterized this space as intrinsically paradoxical (Winnicott 1971, xvi). In addition, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the value that unique things acquire in adult life is based in their function as structurers of the world in childhood. Indeed, transitional phenomena are key to the constitution of the world because they allow the child to extend the circle of familiarity over the foreign world, until the “private environment” of domestic life is integrated into the intersubjective world of culture in adult life. The value of the symbolic object resides, thus, in that they make the mother

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<sup>3</sup> The identification between the concepts of dwelling and the experience of being at home can already be found in Heidegger and in the theoretical developments inspired by the philosopher, such as the works of Edward Casey and Christian Norberg-Schulz.

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(or father) present and therefore it transmits to the child the confidence that the effective presence of its caregivers would bring it (63). In this sense, the first object of our life is always unique.

However, the comforting power emanating from things does not by itself make the strange familiar but enable to experience strangeness in a safe and controlled manner. Winnicott states: "To control what is outside one has to do things, not simply to think or to wish, and doing things takes time. Playing is doing" (55). In this context, the ambivalent position between external reality and inner creativity places the transitional object as a privileged support for playing. The act of play, in turn, acquires a genetic role in the constitution of the world by opening an interstitial space where some of the omnipotent control over the world, that characterizes early childhood, can be deployed, even if only symbolically. Later in the subject's life, the infantile play is replaced by other activities that also take place in the transitional space such as artistic productions, religion, imaginative living and creative scientific work (19).

Imagination also plays an important role in the delimitation and measuring of the dwelling space. On this subject, Hans Rainer Sepp points out that the act of measuring involves a double movement: on the one hand, imagination creates measure that configures reality and, on the other hand, reality lends to imagination concrete forms that configure possible paths for the operation of measure. The creation of measure and measurement might go back to the origins of human settlement - from Mari in Mesopotamia to the foundation of Rome - when a man engraved a circle in the earth by using his plowshare to stake out space for colonization and the foundation of a city (Sepp 2016, 22). For its part, the close connection between unique things, imagination and the act of creation highlights the value that Virgil gives to the Trojan statues in his characterization of the mythical founder of Rome.<sup>4</sup>

Play and imagination also show that transitional phenomena can become independent of the things that operate as their material support and acquire a value in themselves. That is, the child can feel at home in a mental only play or use, as supporting of play, circumstantial material things that are abandoned once the activity is over. Music or literature in adult life can also provide a space in which to feel at home wherever we are. How-

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<sup>4</sup> Aeneas is introduced in this way in Virgil's masterpiece: "I am that Aeneas, the virtuous, who carries my household gods in my ship with me, having snatched them from the enemy, my name is known beyond the sky. I seek my country Italy, and a people born of Jupiter on high." (Virgil. *The Aenid*. Translated by A. S. Kline. Poetry in Translation. BKI:372-417)

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ever, this does not contradict the importance that the materiality of the thing has in the modification of the dwelling space. In this sense, phenomena such as collecting are often associated with the quest to recreate past (and happy) experiences through the objects that served as their support in another time. The collection as a set of unique objects functions, therefore, as the guarantee of the indefinite reproduction of experiences in which we feel at home. This kind of collecting is perhaps the extreme case of an attempt to create a completely meaningful environment and is located at the antipodes of the abstract and temporally unrooted environments of the "international style" which motivates Norberg-Schulz's critique and reflection on architecture.

In summary, I have tried to characterize, through the phenomenological category of uniqueness, the influence that some things have on the way we experience the space where we dwell. In these analyses we have seen that such power is closely associated with the symbolic value of things. Their evocative power, in turn, reveals the sedimentation of time on the materiality of things and provides, in the cases studied, a space of affective containment where the capacity of the imagination to configure the world in a new way can unfold. However, negative cases can also be thought of, where things do not invite us to feel at home, nor are they indifferent to us, but rather, they challenge us and constitute a focus of strangeness in the middle of home. This phenomenon, intimately associated with what Freud called "unheimlich", will remain for future research though. But, be that as it may, unique things can exert an influence on us because we have deposited something of us in them. Beyond this intentional relationship, things lack any intrinsic property that distinguishes them as unique: they are interchangeable and indifferent objects, mere things among things.

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