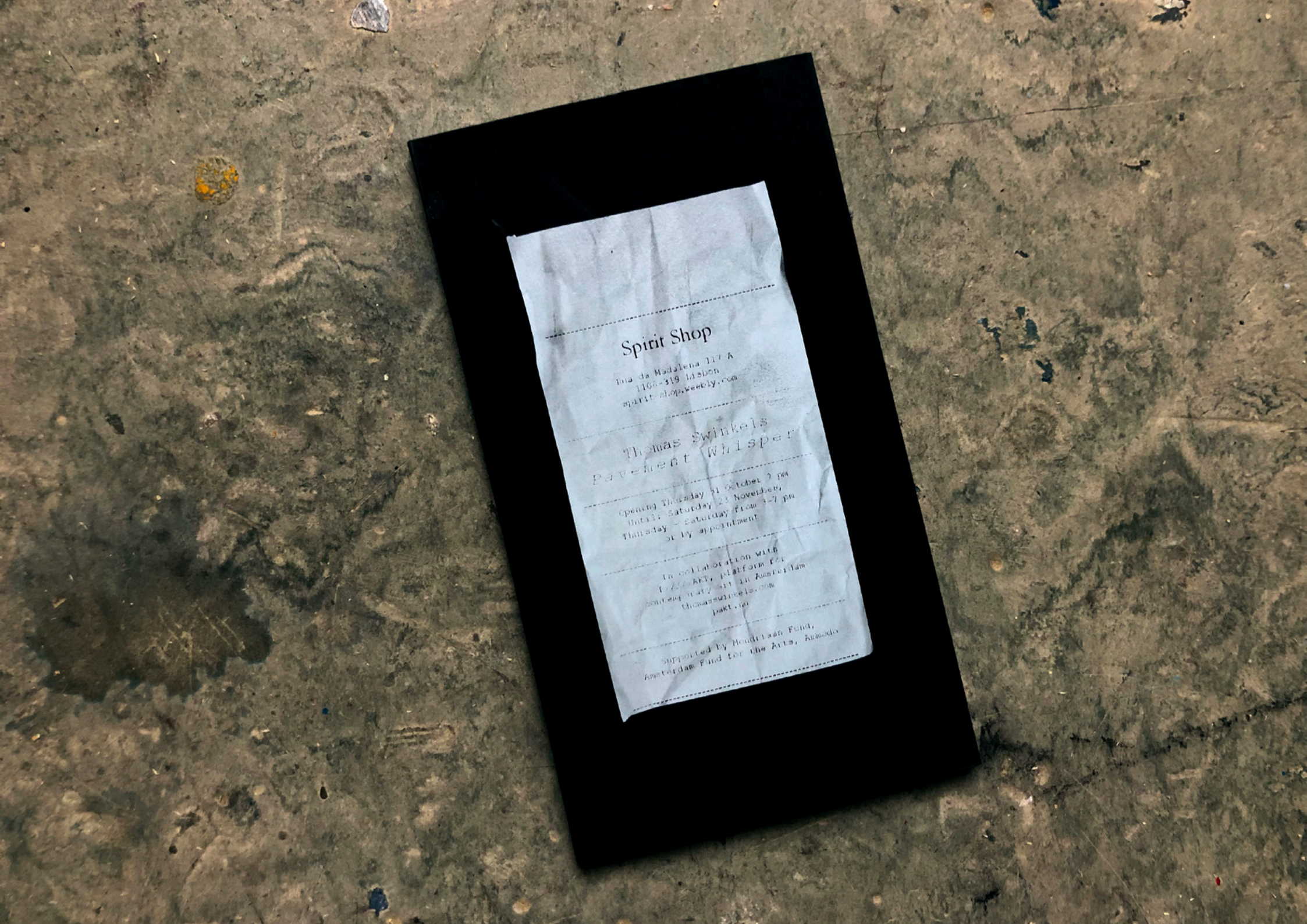
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The Ill-Tempered Environment
MICHIEL HUIJBEN

He lives on the third and top floor of a former social housing block built in 1940. Every morning, around 9 o'clock, the sun enters the living room from the east and draws a bright, glowing rectangle across the room. He'll be sitting at the table, drinking his third coffee, withdrawn into a single spot of shade and writing a text on his laptop. He'll squint at the screen before adjusting its angle, trying to block the window's reflection. In it, he can see the sky and the tops of the houses opposite.

Modern architecture's innovations were fueled by the quest for a spatial expression of three abstract principles: light, air and openness. The resulting spaces were shaped as much by this quest as by new production techniques. The steel skeleton frame, plate glass and novel insulation technology sliced thick and solid walls into ever thinner layers with differing functions. Walls were punctured with larger and larger glass 'holes,' effectively reimagining them as mere frames for huge windows (like the one he's trying to hide from in the morning). When historian Siegfried Giedion first saw Le Corbusier's private residences, he cheered: finally, the house was freed from its heavy, opaque shell and rearticulated as a cube of air! The house had become an environment in its own right, containing an atmosphere distinguished from that of the outside.

The term 'atmosphere' originates from the 17th century and is derived from the Greek terms 'atmos', which means vapour, or steam, and 'sphaira', meaning sphere. It was used to describe the layers of gas surrounding earth: the air. Some centuries later

'atmosphere' became more of an aesthetic term, used to describe the sort of spatial mood that we now mainly think of when we hear the word.

In the late 1700s, British physician Charles Blagden published a book titled *Experiments and Observations in a Heated Room*. These experiments, as the title suggests, explored the effects of various temperatures on the human body. Participants (including Blagden himself) entered a heated room where their corporeal response was measured. First, each body was subjected to a temperature of 38 degrees Celsius, just a single degree above the average, healthy body temperature. Room by room the temperature increased, until the sequence reached its final room whose air measured an excruciating 100 degrees Celsius. Blagden described a scorching sensation on his face and legs, but on the whole he actually seemed quite unaffected. His experiments were the first to discover the role of perspiration in the regulation of body temperature, revealing what we now know to be obvious: by sweating, the human body is able to adapt to increasing temperatures.

By eleven o'clock he's got all curtains drawn, doors and windows open, trying to keep the sun out and invite the breeze in. It's not really working: on the wall in front of him the thermostat reads 29 degrees and counting. His forearms lean on the table's edge, wrists just slightly touching the overheating laptop in front of him, its fans excitedly whirring inside. Waiting for an idea, his fingers rest on the keyboard. Hot damp and sweat starts to gather between his skin and these surfaces. The air is thick and disgusting and he struggles to find the focus for his task.

Around the beginning of the 20th century, "human activity such as respiration, the emission of bodily

odors, or the burning of coal or gas"[1] was seen to dilute clean air to the point where it was deemed offensive and unhealthy. Air was becoming something to be mistrusted; something that could be deemed 'good' or 'bad'. Le Corbusier was convinced that the 'ideal house' of the future contained "the correct air for breathing."[2] To replace the suspect air filling buildings, this 'correct,' good air would have to be manufactured and imported into the home by mechanical means. In comes the air-conditioning unit.

At first it was called the 'Apparatus for Treating Air'. Willis Carrier was still a young man in his twenties when, in 1902, he invented it for the Sackett-Wilhelms Lithographing and Publishing Company in Brooklyn, to stop their paper stock from wrinkling with damp. In photographs taken at the time, Carrier poses with the room-sized, steam engine-like device that was fitted with two large kettles and an impressive mass of valves, pipes, vents, ducts and meters. The way it worked was by cooling and purifying the outside air before pushing it into the room, while sucking the hot, dirty air out, and dumping it on the pavement.

By the middle of the 20th century, this conditioned air would be flowing through tens of thousands of homes. Air had gone from being natural matter to a synthetic material – a product, purchased and injected into the indoors. That this new air was conditioned meant that it wasn't the same as that outside. Though the house's borders had become thinner, they had also become more sharply defined, by differentiating between inside and outside air.

1 *Synthetic Air.* Wulf Böer. Future Anterior, Volume 13, Number 2, Winter 2016.
2 *Dialectic Atmosphere of Architecture: on Aesthetic Experience and Meteorology.* Ana Vignjević. AM Journal of Art and Media Studies, 12, 2017.

Modernism's borders aimed to enclose only what was 'pure' and well-tempered.

Meanwhile, his house is drawing more and more outside heat in. His face is red and glowing. Using his index finger, he wipes away a bead of sweat that just dripped from his nose onto his laptop's trackpad. It accidentally selects part of the last sentence he was writing: *"most buildings' insides are hidden to us, reducing them to shells."* His forearms slide across the table's surface. It's worse when he sits still. He'll feel drops of sweat rolling when he's not moving, so he wriggles in his seat, gets up and walks to the bedroom, walks to the kitchen. There, he drinks a glass of water as he stands by the tap, looking at the confusing jumble of pipes spreading into his apartment. Once, it was common for those elements of the house, those that regulated its atmosphere, to be plainly visible.

In his 1969 book *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment,* Reyner Banham criticized the idea of the house as an empty shell, noting that "the history of architecture deals almost exclusively with external forms of habitable volumes as revealed by the structures that enclose them."[3] Banham saw this as a dated (and essentially 'un-technological') view on what does and doesn't belong to architecture, which eliminated space within the definition of 'architecture' for the appliances needed to make it function 'correctly'. Seen this way, a building would be not unlike a comatose patient, sustaining life only by being hooked up to medical equipment. Banham argued that instead of being mere contents, this technology is fundamental to the structure and

3 *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment.* Reyner Banham. University of Chicago Press, 2d edition, revised, 1969–1984.

function of architecture, and had rendered dwellings as hybrids, comprising both external enclosure and internal equipment. His main objection to most modern architects was their failure to recognize that this merging of structure and appliance didn't come at architecture's volition; it was the technology bending architecture to its will, *that* was the true 'machine à habiter'.

The thermostat reads 37 degrees, so the air is now much hotter inside than out. Hot air smells different from cool air, more charged. The relation between his apartment and its atmosphere is an active one, one of intensification. His body now radiates the same heat that the house is pushing on him. He thinks about how he's gaining similarities to his environment, or perhaps it's becoming similar to him? He can actually feel the air, it's that dense. That this unresolved problem of atmospheric comfort would be the material result of some search for light, air and openness seems absurd to him. He shuts his eyes and imagines melting into the air around him. It's not difficult. As his heartbeat slows down, he thinks he can even hear his blood circulating through his body at reduced speed, too. Then he closes his laptop, 'Can't finish this, not today.'