In a text entitled ‘Asyl für Obdachlose’ (‘Asylum for the Homeless’), included in his collection of essays Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigtem Leben (‘Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life’), dating from 1951. Theodor W. Adorno informs us that “the house belongs to the past”. He continues: “The traditional dwellings, in which we grew up, have taken on the aspect of something unbearable: every mark of comfort therein is paid for with the betrayal of cognition [Erkenntnis]; every trace of security, with the stuffy community of interest of the family.” The houses would only be worth throwing away like old tins. “The destruction of the European cities, as much as the labor and concentration camps, are merely the executors of what the immanent development of technics long ago decided for houses.”. There seems to be no glimmer of hope anywhere here, all that remains is the recommendation “not being at home in one’s house”. Because, in accordance with the famous formulation at the end: “There is no right life in a wrong one”.

The fact that such a gloomy appraisal of the situation would not hold the majority of our contemporaries back from settling down comfortably to a wrong life, was foreseeable. Ever since the “housing-addicted”19th century – as Walter Benjamin once called it – the housing culture has been served by an industry that has made a commodity out of a primary necessity, first for relatively few people, then, in the course of the 20th century, for practically everyone, at least in the industrial societies. In fact, the range of housing types and furnishings on offer has never been as wide and generous as it is today. The size of the living area that individual inhabitants have at their disposal today has multiplied, which is not a sign of luxury but rather of an altered demography. Single people need for themselves everything that can otherwise been divided up among larger families, and regional migration also causes changes in the relations: if in some areas of Austria today it may be calculated that there are 100m2 per person available, that is a sign of empty farmhouses, not of luxurious circumstances.

Housing has today become a commodity that changes hands between owners ever faster. It is not unusual to move every five years and to a certain extent this is the logical consequence of a divorce rate that reaches 60% in the big towns and cities. The public authorities offer ‘first-time’ housing, the very name of which indicates that what is being promoted is the first step in a more extended career in housing and moving. In contrast to the USA, where the necessity of frequent change of place has led to a high degree of standardisation in housing, a cycle which can only be broken out of when a certain income level has been attained, the commodity of housing in Europe is comparatively varied. In countries with welfare states, the utilitarian principle of “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” has long since emancipated itself from the idea that such happiness can only be achieved at the price of standardisation. Since the 1990s, subsidised housing has undergone a change from a utilitarian to a hedonistic phase: whereas, formerly, there was a choice between A, B and C types, advertising now uses life concepts that cannot be colourful and ornamental enough, so that the respective residential buildings are equally colourful and ornamental. The fact that this plurality in residential housing has in the meantime been sold as far as China and South Korea, American suburbia as well as luxury residential skyscrapers, made it an universal phenomenon.

Nevertheless, something is grating within this system: the uneasy feeling that one should not be home at his oneself is returning to gnaw away at our conscience. After all, some 40% of the global energy consumption is spent on the construction and maintenance of buildings, and
a further 20% on traffic, the extent of which is determined not least by urban and regional planning. Housing is at least indirectly responsible for a total of 60% of the encroaching apocalypse. Knowledge of this fact is nothing new, and there have been no lack of proposed solutions. By making the use of a south-facing winter garden as a ‘sun collector’ obligatory, the solar architecture of the 1980s incorporated a piece of nature into the house. It is no coincidence that it took the greenhouse as its model, a type of building which reached its heyday in the 19th century and promised to claim the exterior for the interior. The glass-covered passage was the inner city application of this idea. With the winter garden as an integral part of the house, solar architecture created a loose, multi-layered atmospheric arrangement, which would summon the power of light, air and sun – the hygienic ideal triad of classical modernism – yet at the same time would be liberated from the sterility originally associated with them. The solar house was allowed to have a roughly hewn, homemade character and could even a bit tacky.

If extensive air management, as Peter Sloterdijk states in the third volume of his trilogy “Sphären” (“spheres”), is characteristic of our age, then this concept was an anachronism, which was consequently replaced by the “passive house” – the German term for zero-energy-building –, although at no mean cost: with the passive house there arose what Sloterdijk, in the context of his analysis of the ‘air conditioning’, describes as an “atmospheric separation of human beings”, with the “difficulty of reaching them more apparent than ever in the fact that they were differently-minded, differently enveloped and differently ventilated”. The passive house, one of the great technical challenges of which was the airtightness of the shell of the building, follows the motif of the hermetically closed capsule. Life in a capsule distances itself from the original sense of the word ‘housing’, which etymologically derives from the idea of ‘enclosure’ or ‘demarcation’, where both sides of the dividing line remain equally important, since beneath the fence runs a common earth. The capsule, in contrast, is a purely internal world, in an ideal case suspended above the earth or in outer space.

The “passive house” has had to depart from this illusion of self-sufficient suspension quite some time ago. Even 10 years ago, the owner of a passive house which was embedded in largely unspoilt nature could wake up with a good conscience about making a contribution towards avoiding the end of the world. In the meantime, the systemic context has become part of public awareness: the burden of mobility demands, grey energy in building materials and the question of waste disposal, which makes some solar energy facilities appear as future special waste, produced at high energy cost. Quite apart from the problem that every individual step in the direction of sustainable household management is tarnished by the continuing inevitability of having to deny its own high standard of living to the majority of the world population.

The situation is therefore paradoxical: in full awareness that we are dependent on one another to a greater extent than ever before, we are grateful for the opportunity to encapsulate ourselves in a “passive house” and pretend to ourselves that we enjoy sovereignty over the atmosphere. To avoid any misconceptions: nobody would deny that waste heat recovery and mechanical ventilation belong to the necessary repertoire of contemporary architecture, yet changes in our ways of living, and therefore the demands we make upon architecture, need to become much more profound and radical. The idea of a self-sufficient capsule, the inhabitants of which are freed from all external constraints, is today suitable only for one kind of construction brief, one for which questions of air renewal are no longer of any consequence: that of the grave.
Perhaps one should, in general, begin to think about housing from this end. Should not someone who is looking for a radically new house for the living not also be able to imagine a new house for the dead? The connection is not as far-fetched as it might seem. The idea that the dead do not completely disappear from the world of the living exists in most cultures. It is not by chance that in old rituals the threshold is dug up before the corpse is carried out through the door in the direction of the cemetery. Once deceived about the fact that it has left the house, the dead person would not have any reason to return as a spirit. In many traditions, ancestors are venerated inside the house, and in all cultures the last place of rest enables us to draw conclusions about how the living reckoned themselves positioned in this world.

An idea of what such a place for the dead could look like today might be gained from a monument to the victims of the German concentration camps, erected in 1946 at the Cimitero Monumentale in Milan by BBPR, a group of Italian architects who lost one of their members in the Austrian concentration camp of Mauthausen. The memorial consists of a light steel construction painted white, a cubic framework with a few marble panels inserted into the spatial grid; it is delicate and airy, not something with which one would associate death. Nevertheless it is a tomb, and in the centre there is an urn, which contains ashes from Auschwitz. The memorial was erected immediately after the end of the catastrophe of the Second World War and therefore five years before ‘Adorno’s ‘Reflections from Damaged Life’, cited at the start of this piece, was written, and in its lightness it seems to constitute an opposing pole to Adorno’s cultural pessimism. With their tomb, BBPR have given a positive twist to the ‘asylum for the homeless’, which is what contemporary housing seemed to be to Adorno. The awareness of being able to exist in the future simply as inhabitants of a borderless globe produces an architecture of radical openness. Perhaps the future of housing will really be reminiscent of such an edifice: what will the houses and apartments of the living have to be like if they are to accommodate their dead within such a airy framework?