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BUILDINGS' DIARIES

A graphic tale about two architects living in a socialist collective housing unit vs. their experience while being involved in interior design projects for apartments in contemporary collective housing units

By designing and constructing a building, the architect shapes the life of the future occupant, and then, once in the use of the space, the owners shape the architecture created by the specialist. So, the building grows and lives with those who populate it, always adding a new layer, a new meaning, with every change they make. The buildings are never kept as the architect envisioned them.

Using the defining elements of the comic strip, the narrative element, frame, sequence and flexibility, as instruments, we will analyse and decipher the architecture and the different typologies of residents that inhabit and interpret the space of the socialist building block in which we are living for three years. In parallel, we will analyse and highlight some of the conclusions drawn from the involvement in a number of interior design projects of apartments in new residential complexes.

Comics + Architecture = LOVE

The relationship between architecture and comics, not being a recent phenomenon, can shape its starting point from the moment when Le Corbusier manifested his fascination for Rodolphe Töpffer's[1] comics. The architect himself chose to use the graphic narrative in „Lettre a Madame Meyer" (1925), for the presentation made for his client, of the unrealized project of the Ville Meyer (Neuilly-sur-Seine, Paris). In this project the architect explores the degree of variety that can be achieved in a single family home, illustrating using both *image* and *narration,* in a *sequential presentation,* consisting of fluid sketches, unframed, with similar proportions, depicting the indoor and outdoor space of the house, urging the client to examine the proposal space, step by step.

Emotional Theoretical context

As the architect Florin Biciușcă explains in the book " Experimentul Cățelu", during the communist regime, the building block was supposed to be an equalizing element. In a society that did not want to be divided into social classes, did not want to take into account the differences that could exist between two families, being like a predetermined pattern in which all individuals who would populate the space had to clutter in order to carry out the activities imposed by the partitioning.

[1] Luis Miguel Lus-Arana. *La Ligne Claire de Le Corbusier. Time, Space and Sequential Narratives*. Valencia: Le Corbusier, 50 Years later. International Congress. LC 2015, 2015.

In the 11th issue of the *L'Esprit Nouveau number* journal (1921), the architect Le Corbusier published the article, "Toepffer, précursor du cinema", in which he analyses the work of the artist Rodolphe Töpffer (1799-1846), who was considered an important pioneer of comics, who also had a strong contribution in the development of cinema. The article analysed the comic strips *Monsieur Pencil*, created in 1831 and published in 1840), and Le *Docteur Festus*, created in 1831 and published in 1846.

At that time, when those living in individual houses were accommodated in the block of flats, that which in the first instance could seem very attractive, providing an illusory comfort, gradually becomes a constraining environment. [2]

As the anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu points out, in his article *Block between place and habitation*, where he analyses the particular case of a block in the Drumul Taberei neighbourhood, this sort of vertical arrangement was also conceived as a means of social homogenization, wanting to cancel the differences, imposing on the owners the same space. But the owners have managed to find unique ways to inhabit the limited space in which they were forced to live.

Thus, they gave a new interpretation to each room, like: *the kitchen*, which, although it was intended only for the preparation of food, had in same cases even a small bed,[3] *the closet* became the father's repair shop, or in some cases risked being demolished to gain more space, *the bathroom* could either be a hairdressing salon for acquaintances, or laundry/ drying room, and *the service sanitary group* had the potential to become a dark room for an improvised photography laboratory, or became unusable, when the things that had to be stored in the demolished closet appeared in this space.

The constrained flexible space of „Tei" student dormitory

The architecture of a building brings people's lives together. When an architect designs a house, simultaneously shapes the life of its occupants. The moment the

[2] Florin Biciușcă. *Experimentul Cățelu*. Bucharest: LiterNet, 2005, 29.

[3] Vintilă Mihăilescu. *Blocul între loc și locuire.* Bucharest: Revista de Cercetări Sociale, 1/1994, 76.

Vintilă Mihăilescu analyses in the subchapter "The kitchen and living room before 1989 ..." the social function that the kitchen had in the lives of the owners, before the Revolution of 1989, which sheltered, not only because of functional reasons, due to the lack of central heating, the family meetings and the friends meetings, leaving the living room unoccupied. The latter has a complete revitalization after 1989, when the family gathers in front of the TV, the socialization leaves the kitchen space for the space of the living room.

client starts making use of the space, he also shapes the architecture, so the house starts living along the one who inhabits it, thereby constantly gaining a new meaning with every transformation it goes through. Starting from this idea, and trying to understand the space of a building which goes through a number of changes with each inhabitant, I thought about the dorms building of the University of Architecture and Urban Planning „Ion Mincu", in which I lived for three years, while I was a student. I photographed each room, from approximately the same point of view, to observe the similarities and differences that resulted after different people occupied the same type of space.



Figure 1 – Room 128, photography by Genţiana Dumitraşcu

Some of the key elements of living together, captured in the photos, were still very fresh in my mind, from the time I used to live in a small dorm room with other four girls: the lack of privacy when five people live in an area so small, the importance of the student drawing table, which is certainly the centre of the architect's universe, that is never to be touched by visitors, the desire to transform the room,

making it a multifunctional space and using every centimetre wisely, the fear that someone from outside will judge the mess in the room, the tension of some students, thinking that their mum could see an ashtray in one of the photographs, excitement that the experiment takes place on their birthday etc.



Figure 2 – Room 128, photography and collage by Gențiana Dumitrașcu

Looking at the photographs we can observe, that the same space was interpreted in a number of ways, according to the inhabitants ever-changing needs: completely different floors, a variety of wood essences used, different shades of carpet, linoleum, old rugs, that were gifts from grandparents, rooms with one coloured wall, with two different coloured walls, or with each wall having a different shade of colour, with photos, vinyl, projects, or origami animal stuck on walls which are covered with pencils and markers drawings, drapes, blinds, linen or lace curtains framing the windows, beer bottles hanging from purchased or improvised lampposts, hammocks, bicycles, skateboards, pats of models, etc.

Our building's diary

Analysing the process of habitation and appropriation of space of the inhabitants of a socialist building block versus the one of the inhabitants of contemporary collective housing building, we decided to investigate the space of the socialist block in which we live in, discussing the ways in which each individual brings changes to the space he uses, whether it's the apartment's space, the balcony's area or the building's staircase.

Taking into account the advantages that the comic strip offers to this process, we decided to illustrate the analysis of this small community, clearly divided between locals that moved in immediately after the building was finalized, in 1968, and „the newcomers", a kind of intruders, including new owners and tenants.

The analysed 10 floors building, with seven staircases, is situated at the intersection between Câmpia Libertății and Baba Novac streets. Each staircase sums a total of 44 apartments. As the main façade is facing IOR Park, we were lucky to find an apartment on the 5th floor, from where we are able to enjoy, from our 10 meters long balcony, a wonderful view of the park. The building's exterior finish is a composition between plaster and arranged portions of green mosaic.

The time frame in which we chose to conduct our analysis is the one that shows our building before it passes through the process of rehabilitation of the buildings' facades. From the moment you came into contact with the main façade of the block, you could have a first contact with the multitude of ways of treating a given space to different owners: the balcony. As a first example of individual and collective adaptation at this type of space, the balcony, which receives the most interpretations in the socialist collective housing, also offered, when analysing our building, a complex performance. We must mention here: a wide range of materials and colours of the carpentry used to close the balcony's space, a multitude of multi-coloured curtains used to decorate it, a generous number of flowers in pots, so often watered and carefully cared for by hardworking housewives, which were always shaking all the blankets they had, dusting everything, including the exterior air conditioner unit, or proofs of the passing fashion of exiling part of the kitchen's appliances, especially the cooker and stove, on the balcony. There were also a small number of tenants who decided not to interfere with the way the space of the balcony was envisioned by the architect,

keeping it open, and often furnished with beach umbrellas and lounge chairs. On the other hand, a couple of balconies were used as storage space for old furniture and other items, of which, for various reasons, the owners couldn't part with. Each of them tells a story, each of them offers clues about the ones who inhabit the space.

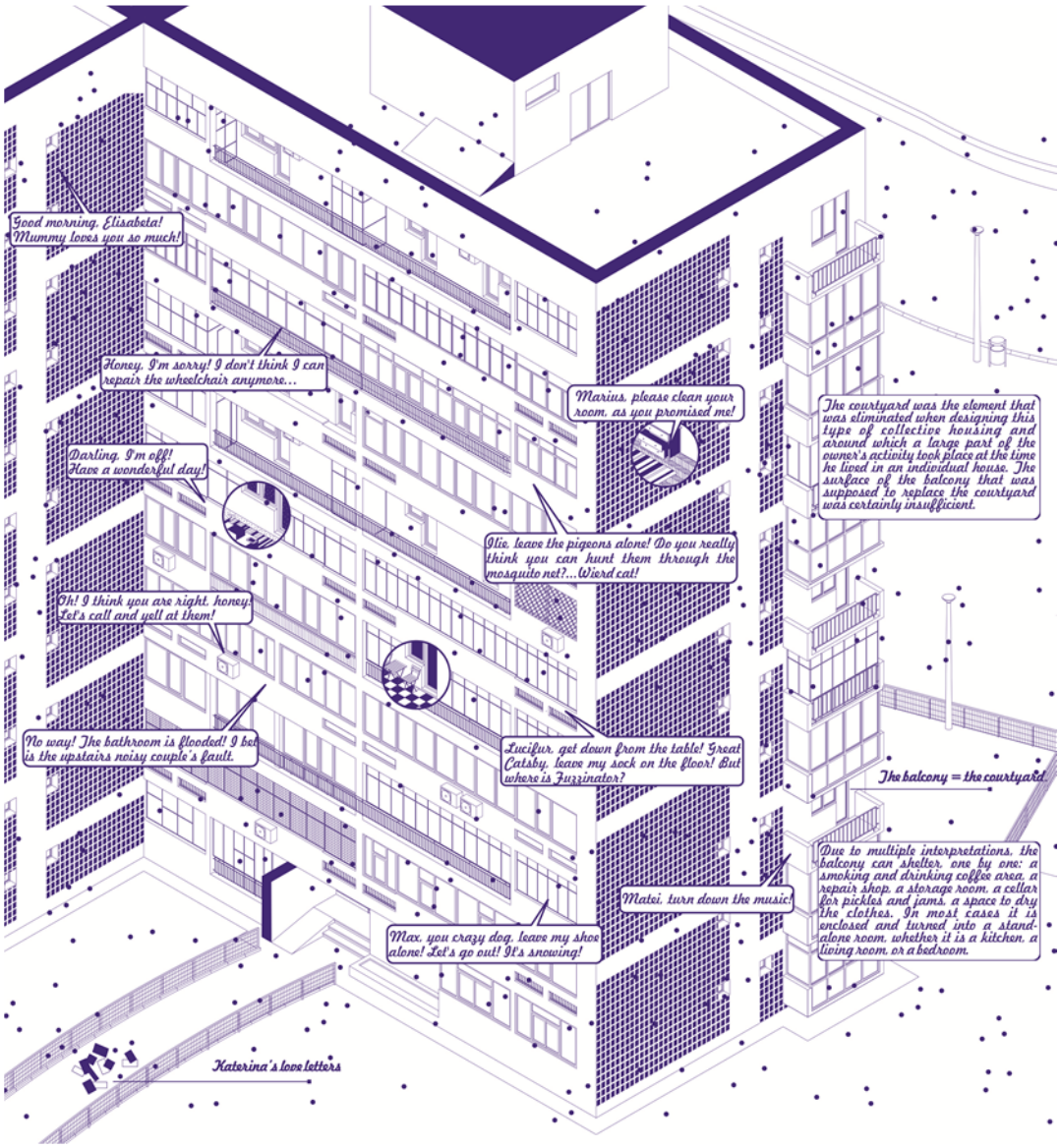


Figure 3 – Our building, illustration by Gențiana Dumitrașcu and Andrei Dumitrașcu

The magical space of the staircase

The staircase, which in Vintilă Mihăilescu's article is symbolically called „no man's land", for which the tenants do not want to take responsibility, to the administrator's revolt, being utilized only for the occasional use of groups of young people who meet to consume alcoholic beverages, draw graffiti on the walls, listen to music, in the case of our building the space is interpreted differently on almost every floor. Of course, we also had groups of young people, eager to take refuge from the cold weather, sharing a beer and trying out their artistic talent, not yet thoroughly exploited, on the white walls, freshly painted by the administration. But, almost every floor tells a different story.

For example, the residents living on the first floor decided to barricade themselves behind metal grills, that separates their apartments from the rest of the staircase, a retired old lady, with a passion for cactuses, decided to share with the rest of the tenants part of her collection, placing carefully in the hall, 6 six cactuses of different shapes and forms (we also suspect her for the "beautifying" the elevator mirror using a picture frame with intricate decorations), a family on the 7th floor considers the staircase space as an extension of their apartment, always leaving with confidence, half of their pairs of shoes in front of the door.

Of course, each entrance is accompanied by a door mat, thus creating an impressive collection, which can entertain to the observer with pieces from the former Persian carpets, considered so precious when purchased, chopped up and downgraded to the state of a door mat. The staircase space is also where small talks between neighbours take place, in which even we, *intruders* who pay rent, symbolically named by permanent tenants „the newcomers" get to be involved. There is always a retired lady, very vigilant, who seems to be aware of every move made by each tenant, the neighbour who is always too upset, convinced that you wanted to cause a flood just because you felt like it, late at night, the retiring neighbour who comes out every day to make small repairs to his car, or just to polish it, a multitude of cats and dogs that offer the opportunity to have a warm conversation in the lift, on a rainy Wednesday.

The staircase space also plays the role of magical zone, a distant relative of the Bermuda triangle, in which neighbours abandon for a short period of time the things they want to throw away (an old table, a chair that they can't find useful

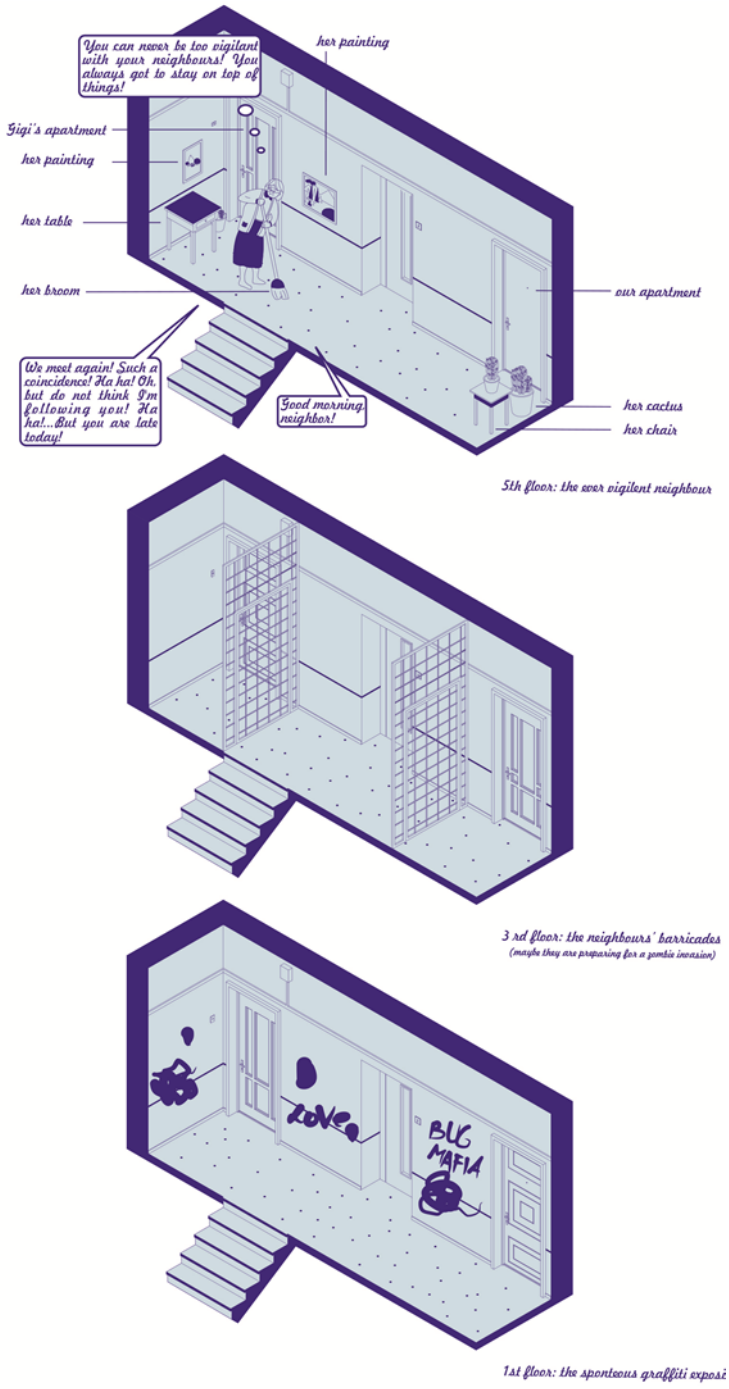


Figure 4 – The magical space of the staircase, illustration by Gențiana Dumitrașcu and Andrei Dumitrașcu

anymore, hangers, etc.) in the idea that before depositing it at the corner of the building, where the trash gets taken, one of the neighbours might want it. It is a silent agreement between the ones that offer and the ones that receive.

Gigi & Katerina, a fragile love story. Investigating the built space using 49-year-old letters

This is the true story between Gigi an Katerina, as it is was presented to me in 25 letters, notes and greeting cards, that I found, scattered in the snow, in front of our building's entry, on a cold February morning, in 2017. The building where we have been living for more than 3 years is part of the City Hall program, which rehabilitates the buildings' facades and changes the old window carpentry with a new, white and shiny PVC one. This action is an attempt to maintain and repair the image of the collective dwellings, built during the communist era. However, during this program, all changes made by the owners to each corner of their properties are removed, and also their stories are becoming harder to read. In order to complete de change of the carpentry, the owners of the apartments were asked to empty their balconies, except for the elderly occupants who, for a fee, let the workers carry out this task.

On the morning of February 17, in front of my building's entry, among the snowdrifts, construction materials and old junk, that now seemed insignificant and was expelled from the owners' life, we found a number of sheets of paper spread in the snow. Very quickly, I realized that they were, judging by the colour of the paper and the calligraphy used, old letters. It seemed cruel to me that once precious memories, carefully kept until that moment, would have this end, swept up by the boots of workers, in the cold snow, so I gathered them in a hurry. In the following days, I dried them, put them in order and I tried to unravel their story, because, apart from a date written on a greeting card (July7, 1969), there was no other information that could help me to easily establish the chronology of the events. That is how our detective work started. All the letters were written by Katerina, a young, fragile woman, to her then boyfriend, Gigi. The love notes, which later became letters, followed the evolution of the lovers' feelings, as well as the burden of Katerina's complicated disease, burden shared by the two of them.

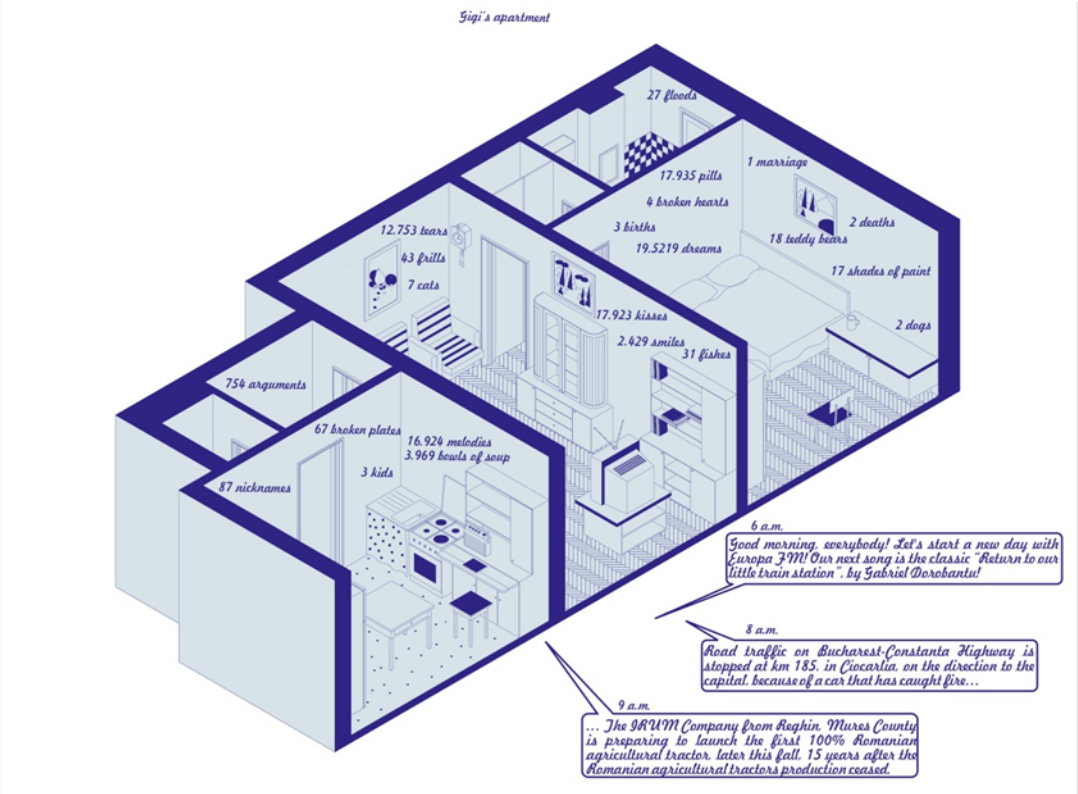


Figure 5 – Gigi's apartment, illustration by Gențiana Dumitrașcu and Andrei Dumitrașcu

Their story walks the reader through a number of architectural settings: the little shoe repair shop in which they first met, the cinemas they went, the polyclinic which Katerina went to much too often, the shop in which they both work, her bedroom, where she falls asleep every night, with Gigi in her mind, the train station where she always waits for her mother, who comes to take care of her poor health. We started looking for the two protagonists, to find out if they are still living in the building, but neither the owner of the apartment which we live in, nor any other neighbour had heard of any of them. The letters seemed to belong to no one. The sweet sadness, the complicated clues of the illness described, the constant fear and dilemmas, as well as Katerina's tumultuous feelings haunted me for a long time. From all her letters we can outline a long-awaited world of Bucharest in the 60s, which is definitely worth exploring in detail and does not deserve to be forgotten in the snow.

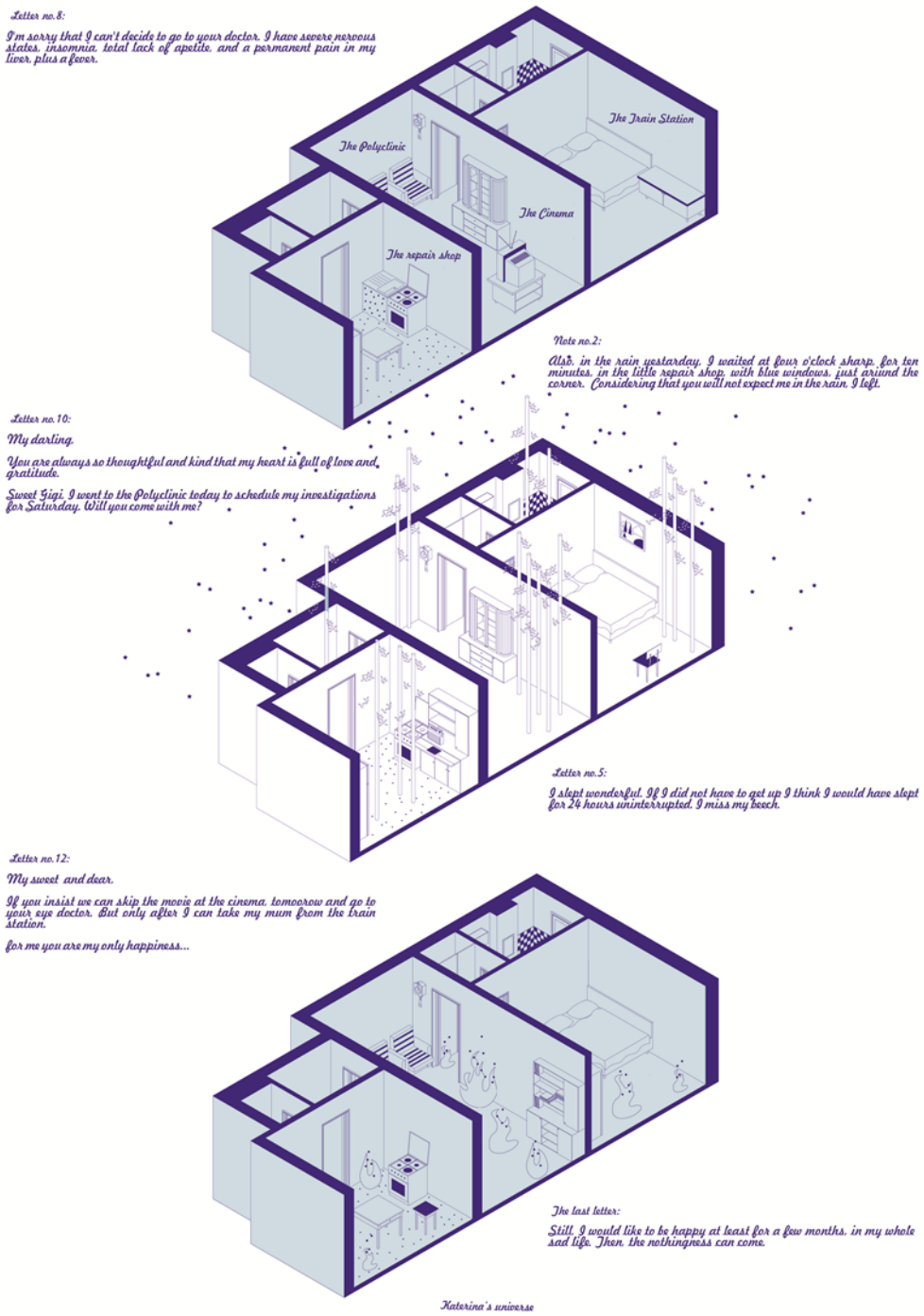


Figure 6 – Katerina's universe, illustration by Gențiana Dumitrașcu and Andrei Dumitrașcu

One of our “main suspects”, during our shy investigation remains our next door discreet neighbour, almost ghostly, always wearing colourful caps, which strongly contrast with his sober outfits. We still believe, to this day, that he is Gigi.

Where is the storage closet? I want my storage closet back!

When we take into discussion the way the space is used in contemporary collective housing units, we could underline the following directions, traced from the experience gained by participating in the implementation of interior design projects conducted in such apartments:

- Young families with a child or two, with average and above average income, acquire 3 or 4 room apartments. They are those who want a complete separation from the tumultuous and gaudy Bucharest, choosing residential ensembles from the North of the Capital, where there is the mirage of closeness to nature, of a select lifestyle, away from the possible mischiefs encountered in the socialist building block (the neighbour who listens to a certain kind of music much too loud, adolescent rebels who draw graffiti on walls, intrusive old neighbours). If the old residents of socialist blocks still support the idea of the little community, developing and maintaining close relations with their neighbours, those who buy apartments in the new collective housing units want to leave these habits behind;

- The owners are delighted that the purchased apartment has new finishes, which are later changed in the process of the interior design project;

- The desire to bring back the abolished closet space, even multiply it;

- The desire to open, in most cases, the kitchen space, giving a larger area to the living room;

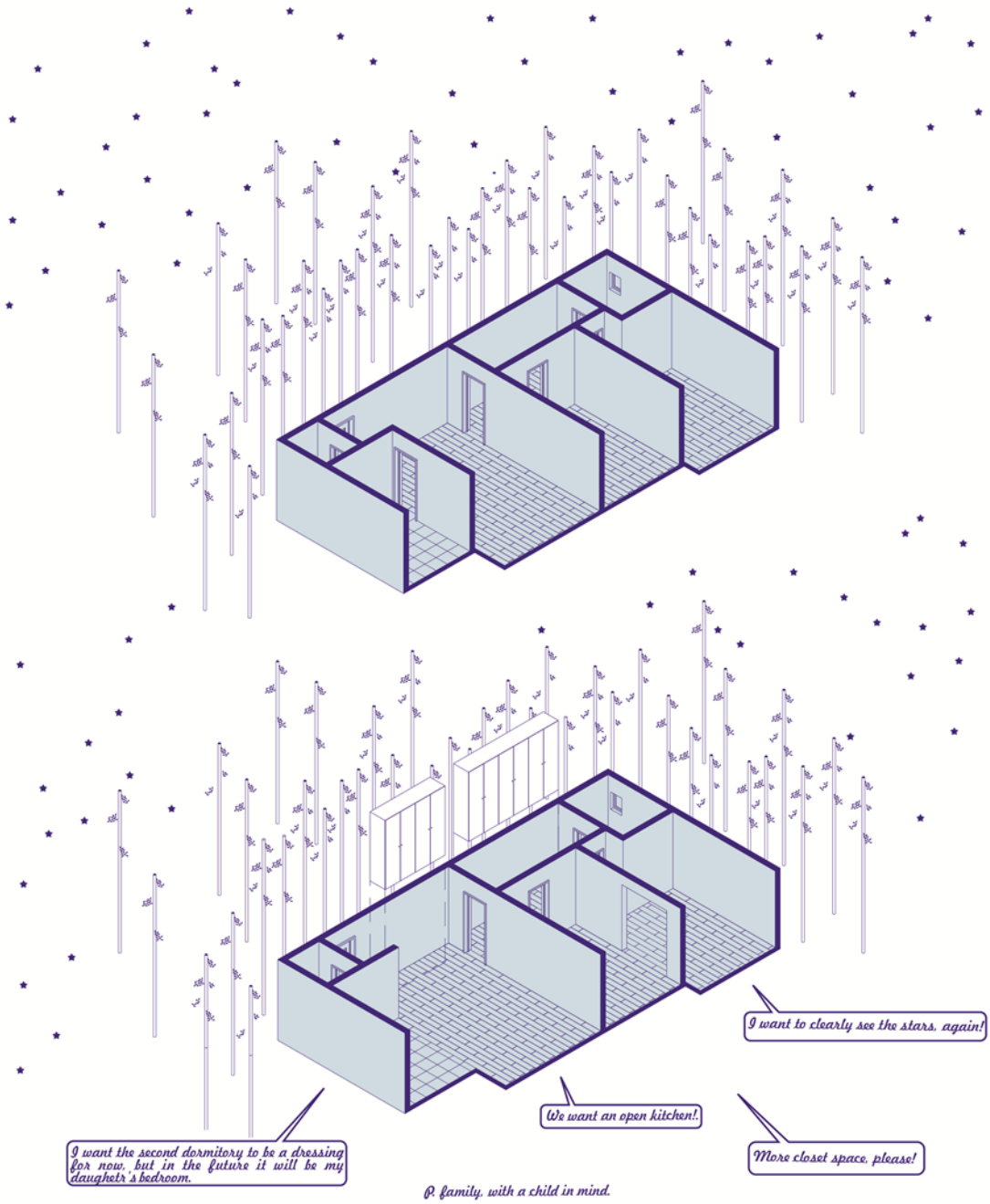


Figure 7 – Apartment 1, illustration by Gențiana Dumitrașcu and Andrei Dumitrașcu

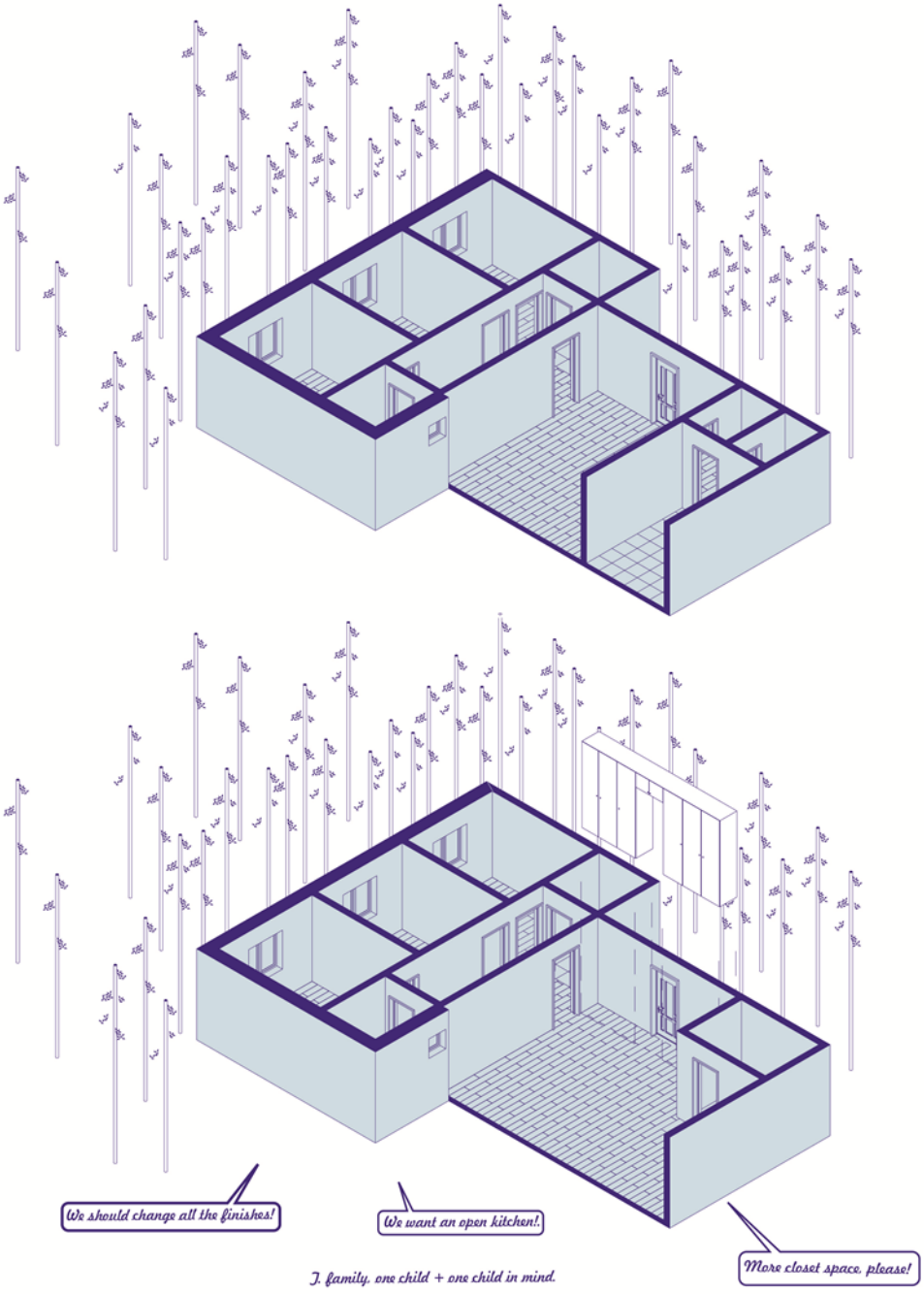


Figure 8 – Apartment 2, illustration by Gențiana Dumitrașcu and Andrei Dumitrașcu

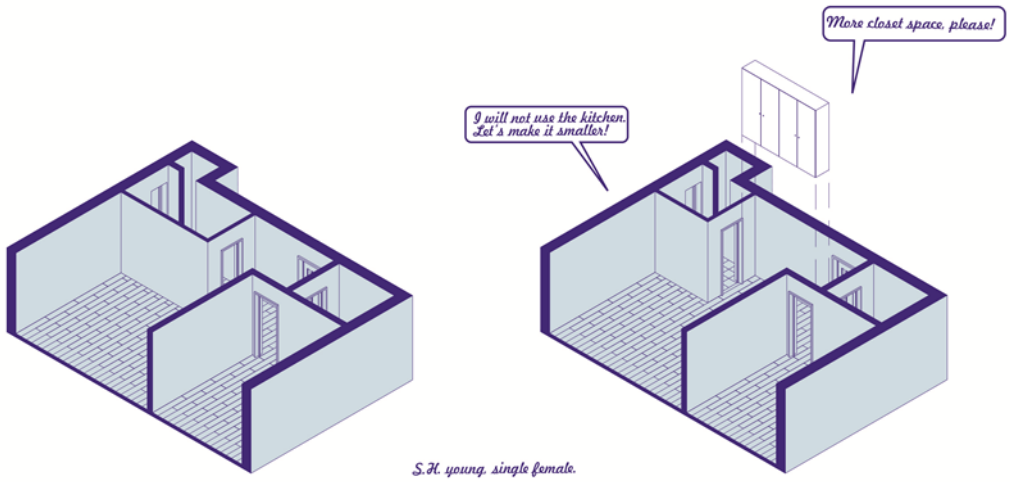


Figure 9 – Apartment 3, illustration by Gențiana Dumitrașcu and Andrei Dumitrașcu

- The desire to take into account, in the design of the project, the possibility that the family needs may change over time (the office can be turned into a bedroom for a future child, or the office space becomes a dressing etc.). We can observe the need to keep at least part of the architectural project flexible;

- If the young families want to buy apartments outside of Bucharest, being delighted to be able to carry out much of their life there (the kindergarten, the gym, a number of shops being present in the residential complex), young single people want to purchase apartment in the centre of Bucharest.

A possible conclusion. The need for a flexible architecture

Architects such as Yona Friedman, who in the early 1960s promote a new design process, architectural visionary groups from the 1970s, such as Archigram with Walking City project, Archizoom with No-Stop City project, Super-Studio with

Superface project, but also recent examples such as the proposal of architect Alejandro Aravena, for the „half of a good house” in Chile, in which the architect designs only half the house, the rest being finished by the future owner, are recognizing that the ever-changing needs of the space user directs the arzhitectural process towards the realization of a flexible architecture.

Both in the case of the residents of the socialist building block, whose lives are woven into a small community, which bring new changes and interpretations to the space according to the needs of the family, as well as in the case of residents of new residential complexes, which apparently manifest discreetly when it comes to customizing the space used, there is a deep desire to make the space their own. The user wants to remodel the space easily in every stage of his life, often without the architect's contribution, which can offer only one frame in these cases, where the general directions of the project are described.