

# THE WALLS

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## The walls

A wall is a partition, a break in the surface, a pause in the gaze in favor of an absence of information, it is a body that prevents us from seeing beyond itself. It can be seen in two directions: the one we observe from the outside and the one we hope to see from the inside. Besides, it is rarely the wall that one looks at, but rather the environment that is around it, the environment that it delimits. And we are dying to see the other side, in a moment of voyeuristic weakness that we wish to be discreet because it is shameful. We observe with attention the lights that flash in the cut-outs of this virgin and poor surface. The windows of privacy and intimacy are the treasures of the walls that the shutters voraciously protect. Our curiosity craves these treasures and their shy tales. But walls sometimes have some sordid stories to tell. Stories that haunt them, one after the other,

and that follow one another without ever really saying everything, keeping the horrors as well as the pleasures in a mute secret that thickens by dint of existing. An infinite superimposition of strata of remembrances and memories makes up the walls of our dwellings, imprinting itself on the prosaic stratification of the materials that constitute them. Brick, cement, brick on several floors; until it forms a semblance of a building of shapes memory which will gradually welcome in its pores the thick layer of a coating of memories.

The wall is also and above all the infinite possibilities that lie behind it, the things that are absent, the things that are invisible, the opacity that calls for transparency. They can sound hollow or full, but building a wall is above all building a situation of confinement and spatial restriction. In cities, their superimpositions and alignments orient and direct the body, which can only move through the axes they grant us. One could say that we are subjected to them because they are impassable. It is because of them that distances are always shorter "as the crow flies", and this expression symbolises our frustration at their impassability. We would like to be able to step over them, to go faster and further without taking the time to look at the shapes of the path they suggest or the detours they impose on us.

Walls support and protect while concealing the things they contain. Take a bunker; four walls, a floor, a roof, a material, for a rudimentary architecture. Bunkers are spaces of silence that leave nothing to be added, and the walls rule as sovereign over such magnanimous temples. Their lack of ornament makes them mysterious and austere. They are silent and discreet. They are hidden walls, architectures of the inside and of protection, mute spaces, as deaf and cold as the concrete that makes them up. Yet their voids and their nothingness have called forth the fullness

and the weight of history. The monotony of a bunker walls reflects the weight of the very history of its construction. Built to protect and shelter, it has been given the thankless task of enduring time and its ills. Walls are shelters. They create cramped surfaces that reassure us and protect us from the outside. Inner spaces where things become alive before dying and fading away. Workshop-spaces of our small world and our daily life where rest and creation are tangible activities. They keep us safe from outdoor wind and rain, safe from the storm of the outside world. All together, side by side, the walls form a pile of improved, solid huts that will survive the weight of the things they contain.

The walls ooze our stories and desires by letting them leak through their pores. In fact, we spend a lot of time hoping that they will bear this burden. If a crack were to become too large, if water were to start crawling under the paint, it would already be too late. Collapse becomes imminent, panic increases, and everything should be done to prevent the worst from happening. Then the wall cracks, letting the water fill the room, as if it had rained directly inside, the storm continues, the outside and the inside meet, the mud invades the floor as the wall finally yields under its weight. The whole building collapses and the water licks the memories until they disappear, in a violent abolition of the border.

Thus, walls delimit a surface, they secure a perimeter which must be labelled under different names according to what it contains. A building contains several houses, a house contains several rooms, each room contains an activity, a function; and all this is made of walls within walls which contain other walls and some pieces of floor-ceiling. The whole thing forms a living space that is delimited, segmented and compartmentalised so that we don't get our feet



In the childhood home, Joinville-le-Pont, France. 2020  
- The living room -



- The bedroom -

stuck in the carpet, so that we know where to do what, where to welcome whom and in which order. Walls condition our lifestyles by forcing us to name each parcel they delimit. We won't cook in our bedroom or bathroom, because our tools are distributed according to these nomenclatures of space. Ovens and fridges in the kitchen, the shower and toilet in the bathroom, the bed in the bedroom and the sofa in the living room. Everything must have its place and its surface: its compartment, which the wall defines.

Vilém Flusser, in a chapter entitled *The Nudity of Walls* in his book *A Small Philosophy of Design*, tells us that "culture appears to us in the form of an ever-increasing accumulation of things that we place against the four walls of our homes, to cover their nudity and conceal the fact that they are given to us. Sometimes these things that make up culture cover more than the simple nakedness of the walls. They hide cracks in the walls and conceal the risk of the building collapsing and burying us under its rubble."<sup>3</sup> So walls are contemporary ruins not collapsed yet that bear the weight of our lives. They silently wait for us to disappear, as our forms and objects disappear and melt into them like a setting frozen by time. They wait for time to forget them after having seen them born and grown. A wall is always already a ruin. It will bear witness afterwards to our passage and the way we leaned against it. Walls are crutches for objects and people, they support our worlds and our moods and never disappear completely. They remain via their foundations, via the roots and anchors in which we have planted them. And sometimes that is all that remains of our great civilisations exhausted from having to stand,

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<sup>3</sup> Flusser, Vilém, "La nudité des murs" in *Petite philosophie du design* ("The Nudity of Walls" in "A Small Philosophy of Design"). Belval : Circé. 2002. 116 p. The same applies to the following quotations, unless otherwise stated.

exhausted and weary of seeing us fill in the gaps in the upper floors of a form that is collapsing from its base.

The walls are being worn down by our futile habits, by our ways of bumping into them, or even rushing into them. The walls are out of breath. They sweat, they ooze a sticky, slimy liquid that seeps through their cracks. And the culture that Vilém Flusser talks about is our sofa, our television and our bedside table, the picture we hung on the wall 'to decorate', the green plant that is quietly vegetating in the corner, the garbage bag we forgot to take down this morning. It's the trickle of water that ran for five hours without anyone noticing, the storm that dug into the windowsill, and the shape of the chair we sit in every morning for the first meal of the day - the traditional French coffee-and-cigarette. This is the culture that we lean against the walls, this is the shape of time and era, spread out before our eyes like a film set waiting for us to come to play our own role, waiting for us to come and sublimate our lives, so that the walls can drink them in silence.

"This way of looking at culture becomes even more obvious if we imagine that one of the four walls is knocked down and replaced by a window without glass. The remaining three walls then become a stage on which the tragicomedy of culture continues to be played out - this is a truly historical view of culture: man as an actor on a theatre stage."

Flusser shows us an image, a space to observe without fear of being seen as a peeper. He expresses the impression one has when looking at the vinyl cover of Sonic Youth's *The Destroyed Room: B-Sides and Rarities*<sup>4</sup>, the one related by Jeff Wall in his photograph: a pictorial description



of a mass of culture. A heap of shapes and colours that makes up the 'culture' of what a room should be, all hierarchy absolved and dissolved under the pleasurable and seductive disorder that the image conveys. Flusser concludes his chapter by saying: "In short: considered from an aesthetic point of view, the walls are the limits of a theatre stage on which the tragedy of the human effort towards beauty is played out." If walls are the supports of our houses, they are also and above all the supports of our lives and our habits, "late forms of the cave" which has always contained the wonders and aberrations of each of the times we live in.

To escape this, we have found only one solution: the door. A precious form, because in addition to presenting the possibility of an obvious opening - and therefore of escape - it brings above all the comfort of being able to choose between the inside of the wall and the outside, between seeing and being seen or, on the contrary, between hiding and being blind. The door is therefore less mysterious than the wall because it cancels out its characteristics, it makes it crossable and penetrable, reducing the first restriction to transform it into a possibility. The door is a frontier post that can be crossed if you have what you need and/or if you show up at the right time. You need to have your key, your authorization or your entry ticket, at the moment when the walls are 'open', when access is allowed; when the theatre is ready, the actors are backstage and the show is about to start.

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<sup>4</sup> Sonic Youth. *The Destroyed Room : B-Sides and Rarities* [vinyl album]. 2006. Geffen Records. 77 min