The pandemic made us change our ways of life, both domestically and publicly. With no certainty about the future and no confidence in the past, we move into a weird present in which our expectations are on hold, but our senses are more active than ever. Meanwhile, the question about the city’s future after the pandemic (and therefore, of architecture) has taken a space previously occupied by business leadership or financial analysis seminars. We are living at a turning point, without much idea of where our destiny will turn. The temporal and spatial arc between 2019 in the streets to 2020 in confinement led us to wonder whether something will remain the same. We have seen how the solidity of the
grounds on which we are accustomed to living was diluted. That which the real threat of global warming did not accomplish, the spread of a virus forced us to accept. Our hopes – those that remain – are pinned on this new year. Hence, between 2020 and 2021 there is a break, a cut. The ‘slash’ separating the 20 and the 21 in this issue’s title marks that disruption, that change. Have we learned anything from all this? Does what we have recently experienced change our point of view? Or will we pretend nothing happened and continue as we have been until now?
Today someone confessed that they had dreamed about me. I had retired from architecture to open a nightclub and welcome the visitors. Everybody danced inside. It might be because of a middle-life crisis or the pandemic; or both at the same time. In any case, making people dance seems like an exciting job and – why not – a radical position. Dancing surrounded by people is now as unusual as it is characteristic of the liberties we left behind to deal with COVID-19.

New spatial relationships, resulting from measures to control the pandemic, have transformed cities. The reorganization of work and production spaces that we have experienced this past year will influence aspects such as social segregation, workforce reproduction, new guides for consumption, or the formation of new political and social regimes.

After decades of talking about the importance of street-level activities for the city’s habitability, this year we learned that cities can, in fact, operate without their ground floor. With shops, gyms, museums, cinemas, theaters, and restaurants closed, culture had to move to the digital world, while leisure turned to green areas. This shift evidenced the deficiencies of the public spaces that are not linked to consumption: parks, places to rest, public baths, water points.

That the city can operate under this new spatial regime must alarm us. In 2020, we witnessed the effective segregation and purification of the social space through exclusion processes. Urban space has been fully regulated with rules that dictate how we should move (keeping distances), what we should wear (masks), when to return home (curfew), or who to visit (social bubbles). These changes, unthinkable under other circumstances, have made it easier for governments to manage the territory and social conflicts. The pandemic is the perfect tool for powers to legitimize their actions in the name of public health.

I’m not trying to suggest here any conspiracy theory but to show that the responses given by governments will be decisive for the establishment of new orders. As Marx pointed out, taking Saint Simon’s legacy, “no social order can achieve changes that are not already latent within its existing condition.” Well, the features of the new order have already become apparent.
The Modern Movement promoted hygienist and mechanist ideas, which, in turn, permeated urban design since the late nineteenth century. The city began to be divided into functionally organized spaces: the urban center, the marketplace, the housing areas. Vertical stratification gave way to the spatial zoning of the city. Modern society would dismantle, separate, and disperse the pieces in the family and productive unit of the medieval house. The program that a house previously included had been spatially dispersed, becoming the diagram of a city and its different functional areas.

The pandemic has accelerated the reverse process. While this had been developing for a long time – we just have to think about how Airbnb turned homes into service spaces --, now this process has manifested itself bluntly. A large percentage of people are working from home, covering infrastructure, electricity, heating, internet, and food expenses that used to be the employer's responsibility. With schools and workspaces closed, the house became a space for dwelling, production, education, and leisure, not without facing situations of great precariousness. The house is a productive space, but it is not recognized as such yet. For example, fiscal control agencies still consider that, for a house to count as a workspace, it must have separate accesses for production and dwelling programs. The thousands of cases in which private life disrupts work-related video calls show how laughable that regulation is, as well as how tragic it is to deny aid to tenants and smallholders.

The lack of social connection and the fear of the other instigated by the virus also makes the house and one’s inner circle of people the only place to materialize social aspirations. In other words, for a big part of the population, the possibility of social mobility will be nullified by the pandemic. The rich get richer, while others see their ambitions as confined as their bodies.

If we want to regain the right to the city as a contingent space that guarantees unexpected opportunities and encounters, dancing may be the only thing we have left. Dancing together as an antidote to segregation, impoverishment of urban experience, and restricted participation. It is either the architecture of collective dancing, or revolution.