The Blur Table

An investigation of the virtual experience through the social act of the meal

virtuellt rum
dela en måltid
social distansering
bostadsarkitektur
virtual space
sharing a meal
social distancing
domestic architecture

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Den sociala distanseringen under Covid-19-pandemin utmanade hemmets funktionalitet. När de rumsliga övergångarna mellan privata och offentliga aktiviteter plötsligt försvann, fanns en suddig härva av sinnestillstånd kvar på matbordet. Med datorn som verktyg kunde otaliga formella och informella sysslor utföras från samma plats. Idag har de flesta återgått till fysiska lokaler men spår från pandemin finns kvar i vårt sätt att arbeta. Med hemmet som basis undersöker projektet förhållandet mellan virtuellt rum, fysiska objekt och användaren. Snarare än att försöka förbättra hemmet och dess interiör, föreslås sätt att arbeta med det virtuella ur ett arkitektoniskt perspektiv. De verktyg arkitekten använder för att undersöka rum används här inte för att illustrera tankar, utan för att utgöra tankar. Det virtuella får ett sammanhang genom mötet med måltiden som social akt och kan därmed förstås ur ett fenomenologiskt perspektiv. Måltiden förblir central genom projektet då den möjliggör rumslig aktivering och skapar friktion mellan det virtuella och det fysiska. De idéer som utforskas i projektet sammanställs i *The Blur Table:* den gränslösa möbeln.

The social distancing of the Covid-19 pandemic challenged the performance of the home. A blurry tangle of states of minds was left on the dinner table when the spatial transitions between private and public activities suddenly disappeared. Myriads of formal and informal activities could be conducted from the same spot, often with the computer as tool. Today, most are back in physical facilities, but traces from the pandemic are left in the way of working. This project investigates the relationship between virtual space, physical objects, and the user in a domestic context. Rather than improving the home and its interior, the project suggests ways of working with the virtual from an architectural point of view. The space-investigating tools of the architect are used not to illustrate thought, but to constitute thought. By intersecting the findings on the virtual with the social act of the meal, the virtual is given a context and can thereby be understood from a phenomenological perspective. The meal remains central throughout the project as it enables spatial activation and creates tension between the virtual and the physical. The notions explored in the project are synthesised in The Blur Table: the border-less furniture.

This project explores the relationship between virtual space, physical objects, and the user in the context of physical distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic. When the pandemic lifestyle peaked, whole days of activities could be conducted from the same chair. Today, the covid-19 pandemic has loosened its grip, and most are back in physical facilities.

However, there is no returning to a pre-pandemic way of working. It left traces that are here to stay in terms of communication. The enforced remote working many found themselves in during the pandemic paved the way for the virtual-physical communication that is the post-pandemic way. In schools and offices, virtual meeting options are now standard practice, as are physical rooms dedicated for this purpose solely. The criteria of which we measure the performance of a building has changed as new needs are to be satisfied.

Understanding how virtual and physical space interact with each other and with its users has become part of the architecture profession. Using the fundamental tools of the architect, drawing and modelling, this project aims to constitute a gateway to an architectural way of thinking about the virtual.

The virtual intersected with gastronomy when one served as a tool to understand the other. The social act of the meal became the apparatus that not only manifested the project's investigated issues in space and time, but further expanded them.

Food also has a value as a symbol of being opposite to the virtual; something physical with an inherent sense of realness to it. Through this conjunction, the virtual could be understood as part of a human experience, rather than merely a technical device.

BACKGROUND

In 1956, the British artist Richard Hamilton explored technical devices and usages in the home in his artwork *Just What is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, so Appealing?* The collage displays a living room decorated with logos, emblems, gadgets, and two humans. Among the objects is a television screening an image.[1] Today, homes are filled with technical devices whose content changes without connection to their physical form, like the television in Hamilton's collage. Despite being immaterial, this content highly controls our behaviour.[2] How can architects, whose medium is space, obtain a deeper understanding of the human interaction with non-spatial technologies?

In his 1992 article *Architecture in a Simulated City,* Japanese architect Toyo Ito contemplates how architecture can stay relevant in cities filled with virtual media. He describes the unpredictable and disproportionate relationship between the material and immaterial qualities in objects with virtual content, suggesting that *goods-as-entities* therefore are losing their significance. Using car design as an example, Ito explains that "Volkswagen and Citroen were designed using forms that imply a variety of mechanical functions [...] Current cars are designed almost as an image which is irrelevant to the mechanism."

Virtual content also lacks the conventional life cycle of physical objects. While the physical device is produced, worn, torn, and disposed, its content exists on its own terms with a capacity to embody new devices. Thus, a challenge appears, according to Ito: how should architects design *architecture-as-entities* that endures through these ephemeral conditions? He presents the following solution: "I do not mean that architecture should be replaced with video images or that temporary buildings should be used. We should, rather, build fictional and ephemeral architecture as a permanent entity."[3]

During the Covid-19 pandemic, functions of the city moved into the enclosure of the home.[4] Despite the long-established domestication of virtual devices, the blueprint of the home has remained relatively unchanged. New, however, is our way of interacting with the home interiors. In her 2018 essay *The 24/7 Bed,* Spanish-American architecture historian and theorist Beatriz Colomina explores the bed's role in the virtual society. No longer tied to physical facilities, work can be performed from bed. The work-home division, established during industrialization, has thus disappeared, giving way for what she calls a new horizontal architecture of "... a collapse of traditional distinctions between private and public, work and play, rest and action."[5]

In her 1998 text *The Dining Table,* British architect Sarah Wigglesworth celebrates the collapse of distinctions when examining the dining table in her work-home. Gathering objects, like pepper mills and letters, indicates what activities have unfolded. Stains and scratches make permanent evidence of activity on the surface. Over the day, the table experiences different phases such as business meetings and mealtimes. Despite these phases, Wigglesworth argues that the table never belongs exclusively to one practice, because of the everlasting presence of physical traces. Inspired by the organic and ambiguous use of the table, Wigglesworth adopts the conjunction of these conventionally separated programmes.[6] Despite not dealing with virtual technologies, the study is relevant to the understanding of the virtual through its

phenomenological examination of objects and of multi-use of singular places. with virtual technologies, the study is relevant to the understanding of the virtual through its phenomenological examination of objects and of multi-use of singular places.

Hamilton displays domestic technology as means of expression, hierarchically positioned alongside humans; the enclosure of the home appears merely a display cabinet. In attempting to save architecture from becoming static relics, Ito encounters two paradoxical challenges: "... to make something real while goods hardly have reality. [...] to create a permanent space in a constantly changing city."[3] Colomina and Wigglesworth examines the entanglement of states of mind caused by our contemporary inhabitation of traditional furniture.

All these notions are synthesised in the 2019 installation *The Venn Room* by the interdisciplinary architecture studio Space Popular. The project explores a virtual merging of physical homes made possible by virtual reality. The blueprints of the homes intersect like Venn diagrams, creating new hybrids. Virtual objects become memorabilia of domestic activities, like the physical objects on Wigglesworth's table. Space Popular wonder if these ornaments will be the status symbols of tomorrow, as the television is in Hamilton's setting. *The Venn Room* creates architecture that is virtual and temporary, a concept rejected by Ito. As indicated by his phrasing in the matter, virtual content is often considered to exist outside *real life.* Here, Colomina's and Wigglesworth's understanding of experience is crucial.

Are interactions with virtual content not *real,* or does it exclusively concern the virtual content?

Fundamental notions can be extracted from these works that lay the foundation for working architecturally with the virtual. First and foremost, one must sift focus from space as a binary system of solids and voids. Instead, human states of minds produced by the entity-less contents of digital devices is what constitutes virtual space. Secondly, domestic objects are embedded with meanings regarding identification, expression, and memory. Virtually produced objects act in a similar manner, but lacks the familiar life cycle of tangible, physical objects.

Thirdly, it is urgent to investigate the sense of reality in relation to the virtual Set within the context of the socially distanced student during the Covid-19 pandemic, this research aims to investigate the following question:

What is the relationship between virtual space, physical objects, and the user?

1. MATERIALS, METHODS, AND RESULTS

1.1. METHODOLOGY

To test and expand on theories discussed in the background of section, a series empirical explorations were conducted, where each lead to an intermediate result. The fundamental tools of the architect, drawing and modelling, were used to perform the explorations. Visual material was not initially produced to communicate thought, but as a way of thinking through making. By using familiar methods of investigating physical space, the virtual could be understood through an architectural lens. Three main themes were extracted from the experiments:

The virtual and reality, The virtual and sharing space, and The virtual and privacy. The concepts were then tested in an architectural performance with two objectives: to manifest the explorations in space and time, and to further expand on the investigated notions leading to new intermediate results. All the results were then synthesised in a physical design: *The Blur Table.*

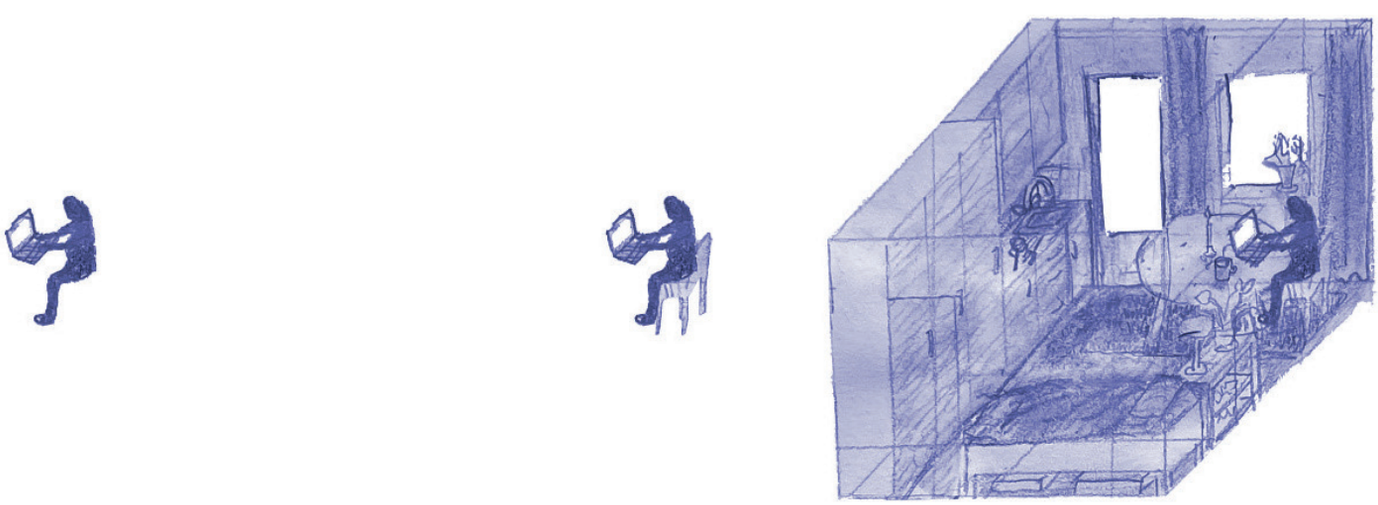

Fig. 1 – The physical object as anchor. Werme Oscarsson, E. 2021.

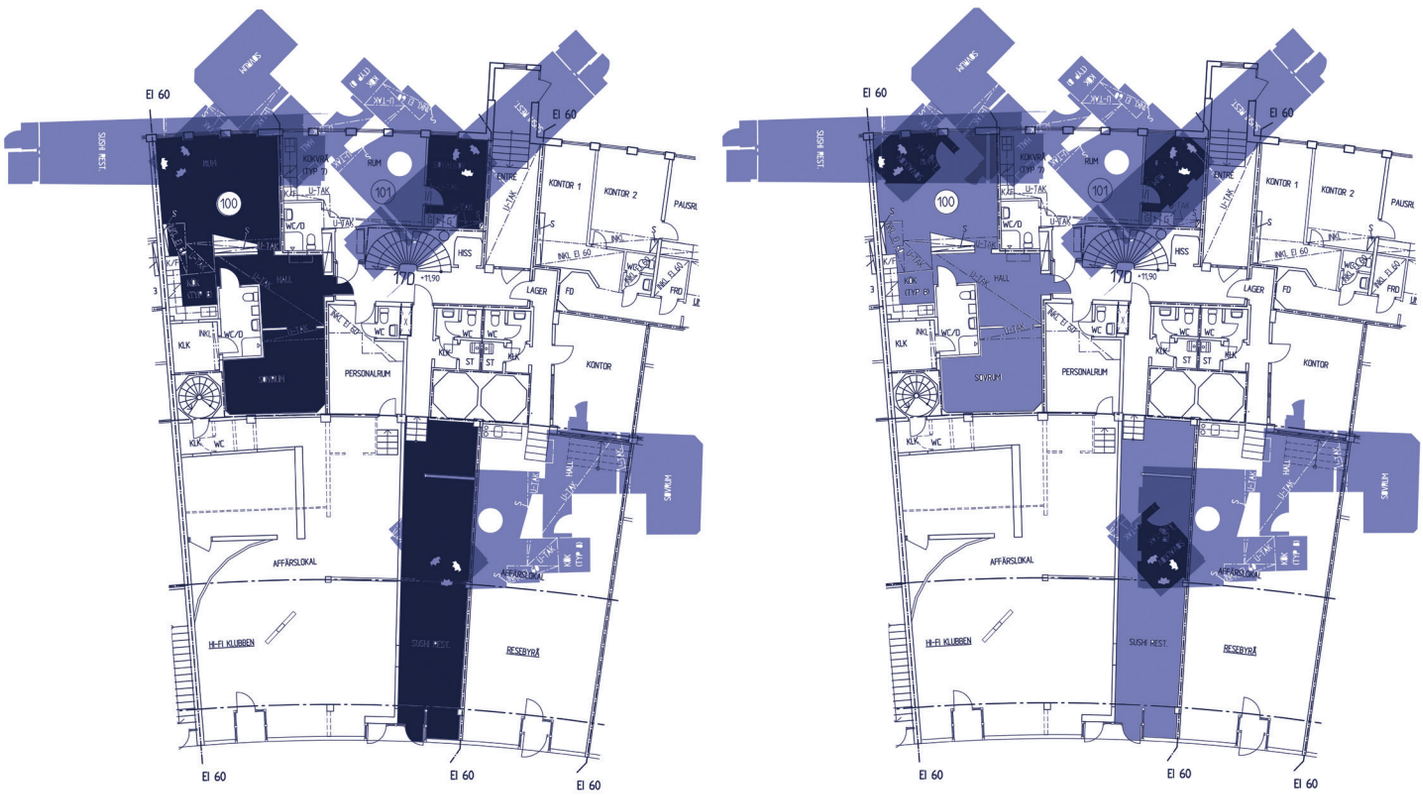

Fig. 2 – Shared virtual space in physical apartments. Werme Oscarsson, E. 2021.

The site of the project is the home in general. Different domestic buildings with different qualities are analysed throughout the project. However, the main site of investigation was my own studio apartment.

The studio apartment is ideal for the intentions of the project. It is a place in which many found themselves confined during the pandemic; a place where the challenges of social distancing investigated in this project collide.

1.2. EXPLORATIONS

1.2.1. THE VIRTUAL AND REALITY

Toyo Ito's opinion that goods now lack reality is an example of how virtual content is often not considered *real.*2 The Cambridge Dictionary defines the word real as "things as they really are, not as they exist in the imagination, in a story, on the internet, etc.", and provides the following example:

"Why waste time on virtual friendships, when there are people out there in the real world who want to spend time with you?".[7] While the question of what really is real can be philosophised, these examples demonstrate the common view of the virtual as something existing outside the *real world.*

In practice, when engaging in virtual activities, physical objects become anchors that remind us we have a body and a place – that we exist in the real world. (Fig. 1)

1.2.2.THE VIRTUAL AND SHARING SPACE

When people meet virtually, they bring their place with them. These places intersect and create a shared virtual space. This volume of this virtual shared space is the same in every physical space, even though the physical spaces differ. (Fig. 2) Space Popular describes this phenomenon:

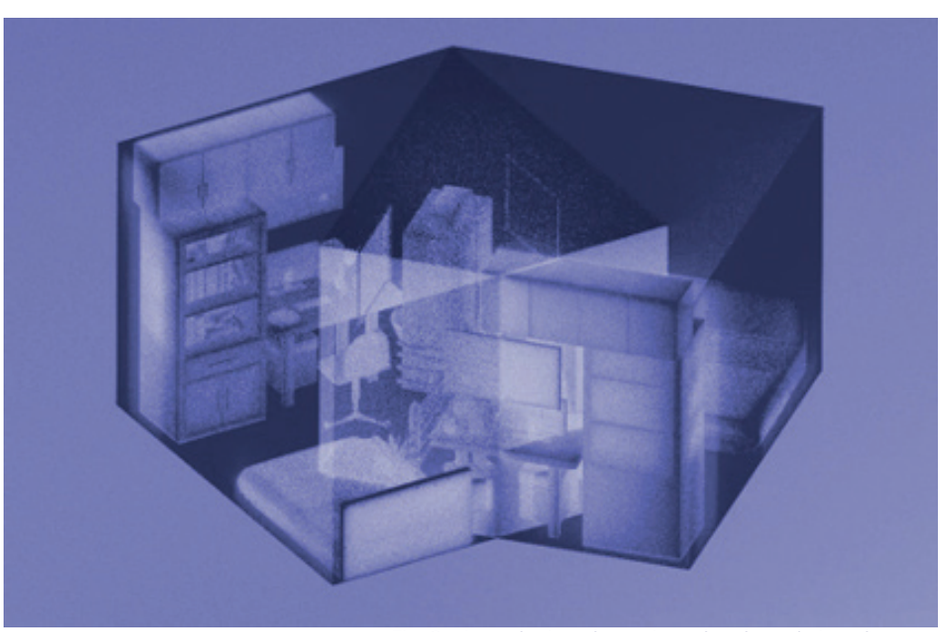

Fig. 3 – Introducing clutter into the shared virtual space. Werme Oscarsson, E. 2021.

The home will be to the experience of virtual space what the body is to the physical experience of architecture. Our bodies dictate which doors we can pass through, what size our beds –and therefore our bedrooms– need to be, or how high a tread can get. In the same way, the size and layout of our homes dictate where we can stand, sit, walk or reach in a virtual world.[2]

This idea is not only applicable software we use today. The physical environment is always present when video calling, not only on display for the receivers of the call, but emotionally for the inhabitant. What happens if we introduce furniture? Clutter? Other people living in the same space? (Fig. 3)

1.2.3. THE VIRTUAL AND PRIVACY

"As you bring your domestic blueprint into the virtual environments that you share with others, hybrids are formed, overlapping formal and functional categories in unprecedented ways and thus challenging our social codes and rituals", argues Space Studio.[4] Working from home challenges the home's performance in terms of privacy. To deal with this, there are both virtual and physical strategies to adopt. Software offers virtual background that attempts to blur everything but people. Physical spaces and the bodies inhabiting it are rearranged to only share chosen parts. Physical tools such as curtains and screens, can be used to hide what is desired to be hidden. (Fig. 4)

1.3. ARCHITECTURAL PERFORMANCE

1.3.1. INTENTION AND STRATEGIES

The explored notions were tested in an architectural performance with the aim to spatially assemble the project's components: virtual space, physical objects, and the user; the three extracted topics needed to constitute the performance. The incorporation of *The virtual and reality* required for an encounter between virtual space and something inherently real and physical. One option was to work with furniture, but this lacks the social component. The meal, however, is both inherently real and a reason to meet. The chosen activity became the virtual lunch.

The virtual and sharing space is most clearly understood when participants in different physical spaces meet in the same virtual space. The virtual interface was not to be investigated in its design, nor constitute an obstacle for the users, as the intention was to achieve undirected conversation. The online conferencing platform Zoom, used for video meetings in the participant's university, was sufficient for this purpose.

To investigate *The virtual and privacy*, the level of spatial direction needed to be determined beforehand. What kind of space should the participants be situated in? Should they be permitted to use privacy strategies? How should the video and audio equipment be set up? There were two evident paths to choose between. A carefully directed performance controls the environments and documentation, but risks losing the desired social spontaneity.

A less carefully directed performance engages the participants and allows unpredictable but contextually common phenomena to occur.

The latter was chosen, viewing the undirected conversation as a building block in the ensemble. To enable post-analysis, the participants were required to use a web-cam and to photograph their physical setup.

Fig. 4 – Virtual/physical strategies of privacy. Werme Oscarsson, E. 2021.

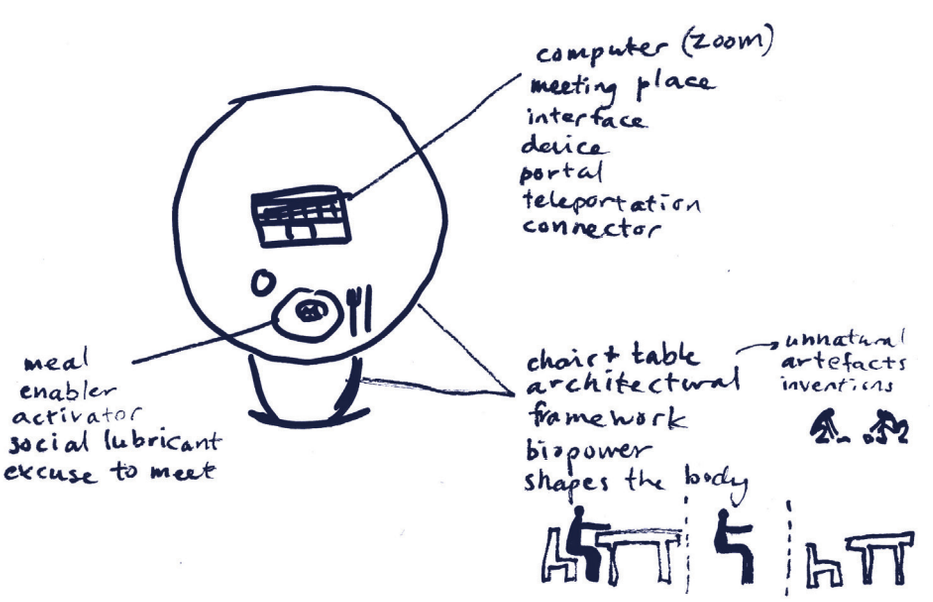

Fig. 5 – Investigating the roles of the objects. Werme Oscarsson, E. 2021.

Fig 6 – Spatial activation.
Werme Oscarsson, E. 2021.

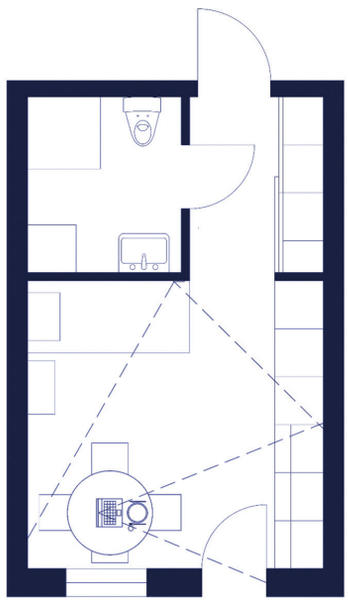

Fig. 7 – The plan visualises the camera setup.
Werme Oscarsson, E. 2021.

1.3.2. PREPARATIONS

The respective roles of the involved objects (Fig. 5), spatial activation (Fig. 7), and documentation (Fig. 6) were analysed before the performance. This established a general idea of the unfolding of the event to ensure the right preparatory measures. The participants were sent a spontaneity. A less carefully directed performance engages the participants and allows unpredictable but contextually common phenomena to occur. The latter was chosen, viewing the undirected conversation as a building block in the ensemble. To enable post-analysis, the participants were required to use a web-cam and to photograph their physical setup. digital invite listing the virtual location, date, time, required equipment (meal, chair, table, computer, and camera, and documentation instructions (photograph the setup in plan and elevation before the event). For documentation and reflection, the performance was to be recorded in two ways: with Zoom's own recording function and with an external camera in my apartment.

1.3.3. EXECUTION

Each participant documented their setup. The lunch lasted forlasted for 45 minutes and included eating, talking, and coffee drinking. Several unpredicted phenomena occurred. People who were not formally invited, but shared physical space with invited participants, joined the lunch. One participant was not in its home but in a university building. While the invitation had not stated anything on these topics, it was unforeseen. (Fig. 8)

Fig. 8 – Screenshot from the recording of the virtual lunch. Werme Oscarsson, E. 2021.

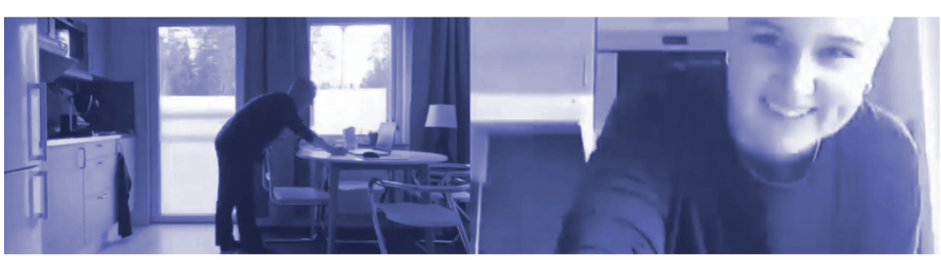

Fig. 9 – Interaction with the screen. Werme Oscarsson, E. 2021.

1.3.4. INTERPRETATION

The performance made visible the role of virtual meeting interfaces in relation to the user and his or her physical surroundings. They function as sources of input and output: transmitters of spatial, physical efforts. Mouths were used to speak on one side; ears were used to listen on another. Through the act of making a cup of coffee, the space and objects of a participant's home was activated. As a response, another participant repeated the process in their home. Chain reactions of events passed through the virtual transmitter.

(Fig. 9) Thus, a question posed in the background section is answered: are interactions with virtual content not real, or does it exclusively concern the virtual content? The performance exhibits a clear connection between virtuality, the body, and physical objects. Stating that activities concerning the virtual are not real becomes comparable to saying a conversation is not. *The Virtual Lunch Document* aims to simultaneously communicate the performance physically, phenomenologically, and multi-sequentially. (Fig. 10)

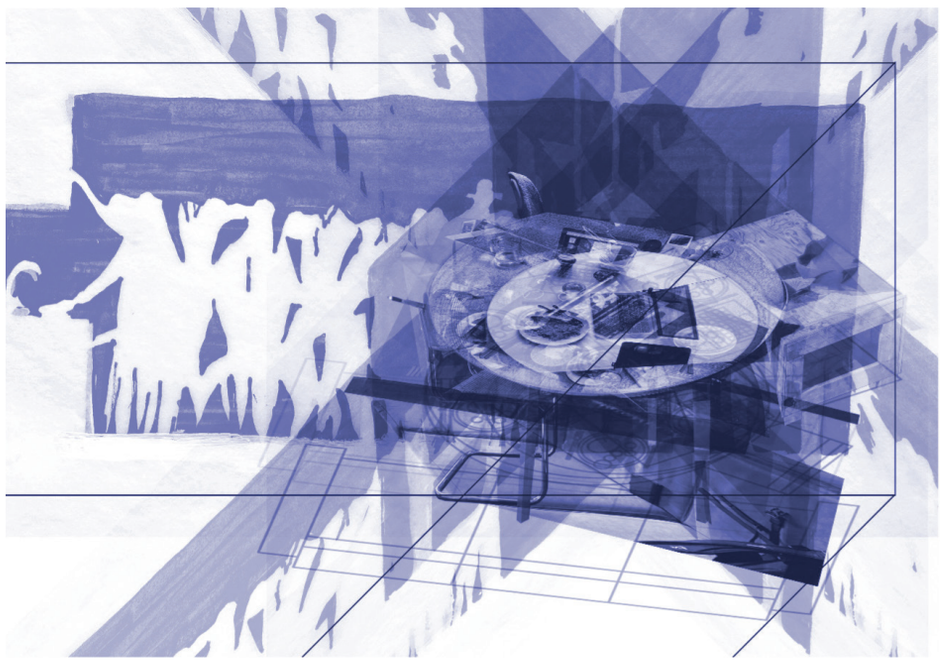

Fig. 10 – The Virtual Lunch Document. Werme Oscarsson, E. 2021.

2. DESIGN

2.1. INTENTION

Diagrams of the set ups in different hierarchical arrangements demonstrate that no representation of the experience is wrong. Physical spaces can contain multiple virtual spaces simultaneously – and virtual spaces can contain multiple physical spaces simultaneously. This ambiguity is a fundamental characteristic of the virtual experience. The lack of spatial transitions between virtual spaces, physical spaces, and states of mind creates a mental blur. (Fig. 11).

Applying Toyo Ito's reflection on architecture in the virtual city, the next step was to materialise the investigated notions into furniture.

2.2. RESULT

The outcome of this project aims to synthesise the intermediate results from the explorations. *The Blur Table* presents a distinction between different kinds of objects - the mundane and relatable tools and the alien object that is the new piece of furniture. The table becomes the interface between mundane objects and the user, rather a presence than an object. Thus, the design deals with the notion of *The virtual and reality.* (Fig. 12) Like Wigglesworth's table6, *The Blur Table* manifests

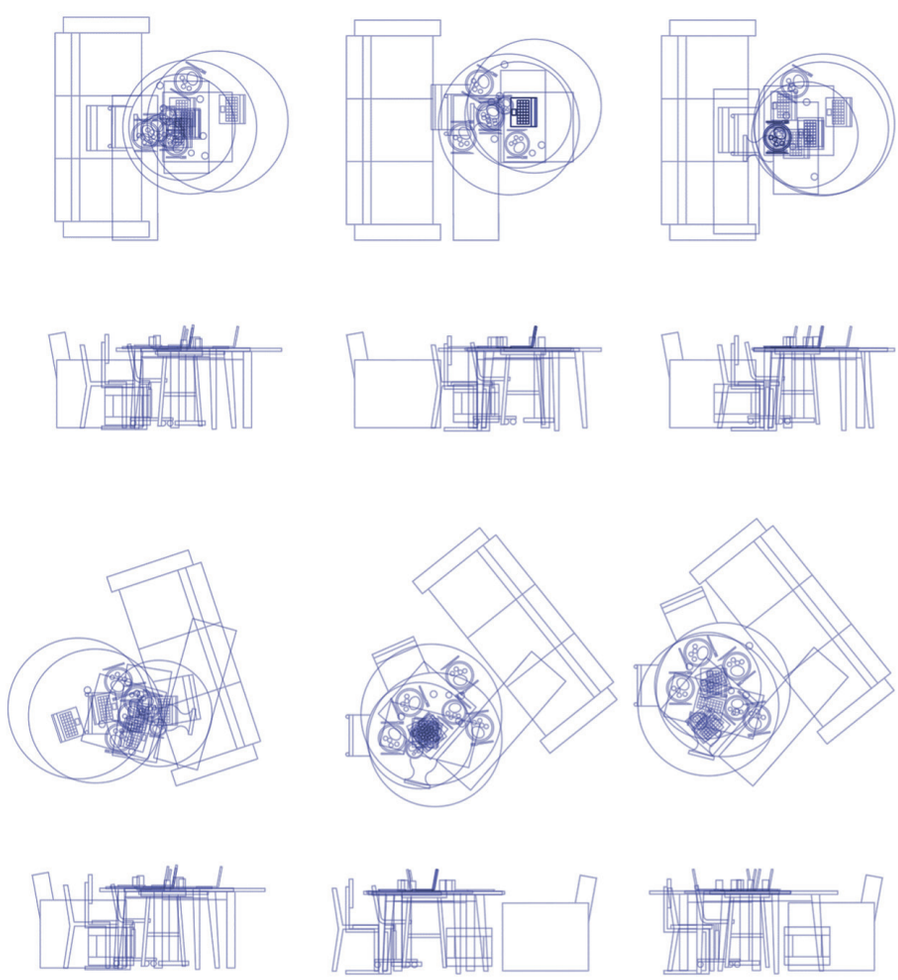

Fig. 11 –Diagrams investigating the phenomenological experience of the virtual event. Werme Oscarsson, E. 2021.

life's different sides – not through phases, but through varyingly visible but everlastingly present domestic objects. This distinction omits the temporal stages of Wigglesworth's table; everything that has happened, happens, and that which will happen is present simultaneously in *The Blur Table* through the embedded meanings of the physical objects. Using *The Blur Table* thus becomes a matter of *(The virtual and) sharing space* – not with others, but with oneself in different moments in time. There is also the question of *The virtual and privacy;* the objects inhabiting the table, as well as the home the table inhabits, will be intimately linked to the person they belong to. With *The Blur Table,* they are always on display. (Fig. 12) Like the architectural performance, The Blur Table manifests the virtual experience in space and time. The idea of the virtual meeting software as a transmitter can be applied to the table. In this case, however, the table acts as the interface. The user on the one side of the transmitter is the human, on the other side are the objects. The table is an enabling structure creating the conditions for interactions between the users. When one interaction leads to the next, a chain reaction of spatial, physical events passes through the physical transmitter. While the meal was the tool to reach the table, in the context of the performance, The Blur Table is the interface to reach the meal. (Fig. 12)

3. DISCUSSION

The aim of the project is not to improve the home nor its interior, but to find ways of understanding and working with the virtual architecturally. Thus, *The Blur Table* should not be regarded a practical furniture to be used in the home, but an artistic materialisation of the unravelled notions.

What is the relationship between virtual space, physical objects, and the user? Researched architecturally, the question must be answered in the same language: the visual material. Just as the early material was produced to constitute rather than to illustrate thought, the latter material is produced to constitute rather than to illustrate a result. Intermediate results can be derived from the research, such as the concept of the virtual meeting interface as a transmitter. Providing a finalized answer, however, would be to risk harming the infant that this research is. The network of ideas and relationships entangled in the visual material is not yet mature. Knowing what the project is and what it might become can only be properly understood when doing the next step, as has been the core methodology in this project.

However, there are other imaginable directions for this project. It was conducted from the point of view of a young Swedish student living in a studio apartment in Umeå during the Covid-19 pandemic. Focused on that experience, it excludes all other experiences of both the virtual and the pandemic and its consequences. Different domestic blueprints might give different results, as might alternative lifestyles. To deepen the architectural understanding of the virtual, other experiences should be investigated.

Another possible direction is to dive deeper into the different forms of virtual technology. This project focuses on virtual meetings and not on virtual reality and augmented reality. It is possible that these immersive technologies will become domesticated in the future, as are computers and smartphones today. Bringing the spatial dimension into the virtual, they are relevant concerns for architects to be involved with.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The engine driving this project is the entanglement of subjects that initially seemed unrelated. By investigating non-spatial entities with space-investigating tools, essential themes could be extracted. Joining the themes with the social act of the meal, new ideas could be derived. The virtual needed to be activated into the virtual experience, which was made possible by multiple conjunctions. When working architecturally with virtual communication conducted from the home, three themes are relevant: the connection with physical space and objects, the sharing of virtual and physical space, and privacy of the users. These themes should be thought of not only practically but also phenomenologically from the point of view of the user.

To conclude, *The Blur Table - An investigation of the virtual experience through the social act of the meal,* is partly a study of a way of working, partly a study of the subject it investigates. It presents an open ended, synthesising design whose primary purpose is not to propose improvement, but the materialisation of notions unravelled in the process.

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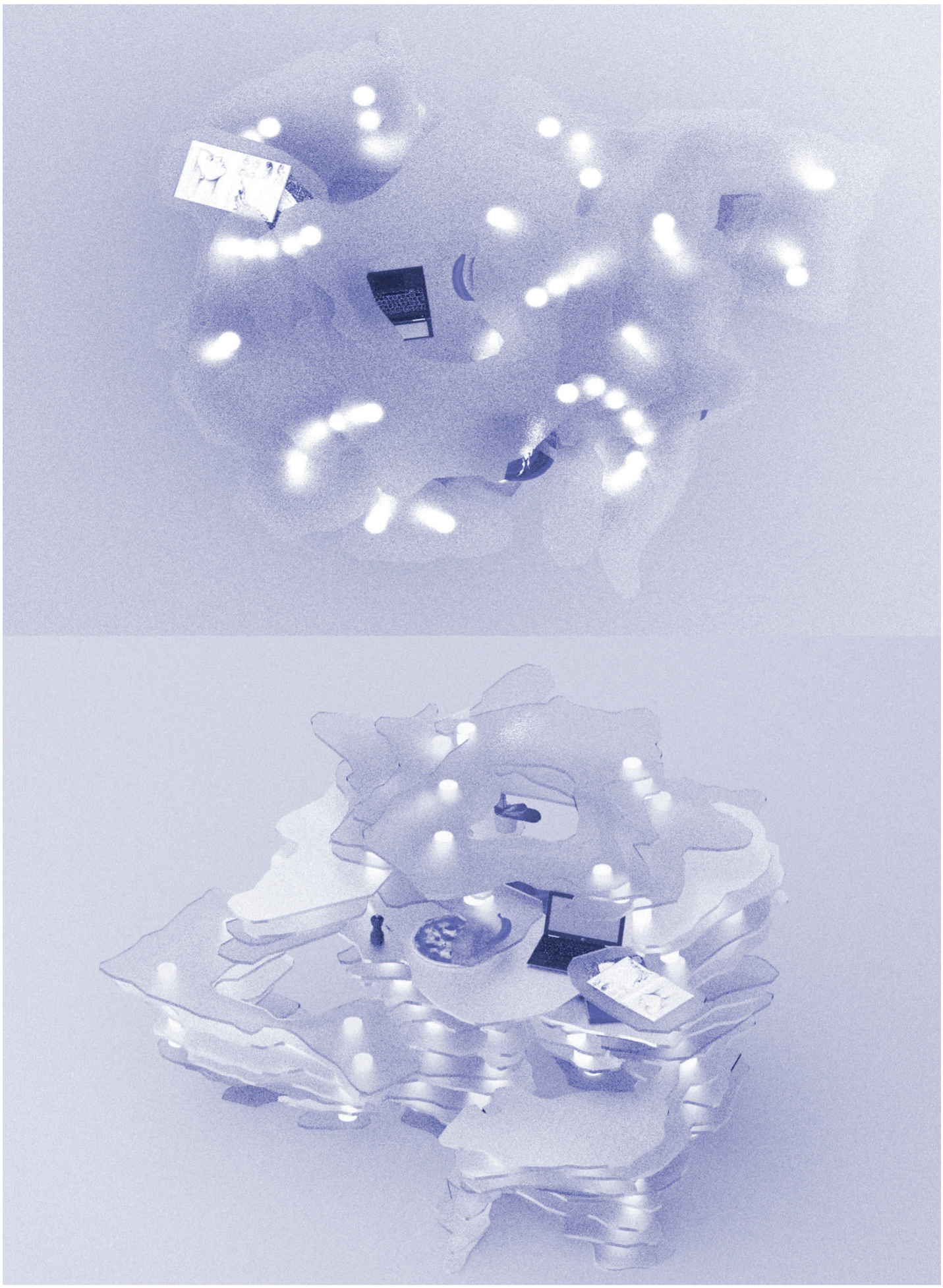

Fig. 12 – The Blur Table. Werme Oscarsson E. 2021.