

Domotics, domus or technics?

On the 9th of april of this year the “Congress on Domotics and Smart Living” took place in Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

By invitation from the organizing Stichting Smart Homes I was present as a member of the discussion panel. For about one hour between lectures and presentations we had discussions with the audience about the use and necessity of domotics.

It was quite remarkable that the majority of visitors as well as exhibitors originated from the technical world; the lectures however were, luckily, of a broader variety.

As well as from this technical as from the real-estate world and several organisations originating from development- and supporting companies we listened to presentations from which one element was strikingly absent:

The leading subject – is this case the house, or perhaps I should say the ‘ living’ , had practically no part in all this.

Often it was all about technical aspects: open source and flexible infrastructure.

Often it was all about real estate: too static, more differentiation.

It was about regulations, installations, standards.

It was about energy-saving, the use of electricity by domotics.

From the discussion-panel I indicated that, as interior architect, I have absolutely no objections whatsoever against technology: on the contrary.

When however technology is used for the sake of technology, because it is possible, without the ascertainment that acceptance and desirability are there, then for me things change.

On other recent discussion platforms domotics are more and more a subject for a technical conversation but that does not necessary imply that is open for discussion too, as far as our direct environment (our interior, if you like) is concerned.

Let me, for the sake of mutual understanding, supply some current definitions on domotics:

- 1 Domotics stands for “abolishment of the daily routine in boring actions”
Villa's Magazine, nr .75
- 2 Home automation (also called smart homes or domotics) is a field within building automation, specializing in the specific automation requirements of private homes and in the application of automation techniques for the comfort and security of its residents.
- 3 Domotics contains all equipment, infrastructure in and around houses which use electronic information for measuring, programming and guiding functions on behalf of its occupants and service-suppliers.
- 4 Combining equipment, information technology and services in- and outside the house and housing-units following a integrated concept that is optimised for the specific needs and behaviour of the occupants.

It should be clear that these definitions, to put it mildly, are somewhat technical in their nature. When we try to reduce domotics to its quintessence it becomes clear: entering my house and switching on the light or entering my house and bypassing a light-sensor makes no difference; the results are the same: the lights are on.

The conception of domotics has something of a contradiction:

Domus means (latin for) house, technology (as reference for the latter part) has basically nothing to do with living. Domotics is still mainly related to actions and techniques to guide, automate and record/register manual actions.

If we take a closer look at the various definitions this is illustrated as well:

It is all about safety, comfort, needs and behaviour; all this in the assumption that it is the essence of living.

Geert Bekaert, a Belgian professor/critic on art and architecture remarked in 1965 already:

“maybe Le Corbusier would, at the end of his life, not have spoken of a ‘ *machine a habiter*’ , because his initial enthusiasm for the gleaming beauty and perfection of the machine had died away. But, understood

properly, this formula still expresses the Le Corbusier's vision on living best. He wanted to get away from the outdated definition of the house, derivative of the palace and status-symbol. He wanted to re-instate it in its primitive function as an instrument of life."
(transl. MP)

In his design dated 1930 for a roof-apartment in Paris techniques were being utilised for the relocation of walls, projections and even the displacement of hedges on the terrace: electrical lights however were not available.

Shigeru Ban's design for the Curtain House in Tokyo contains, instead of walls, a large curtain/screen that replaces both corner facades completely and can open up; outside becomes inside and v.v.

In the much discussed and filmed Maison a Bordeaux by Rem Koolhaas the physically handicapped inhabitant in his wheelchair can 'move' through the 3 storeys of his house by use of a vertically moving platform.

A house is so much more than four walls and a roof; we cannot reduce it to a series of automated and guided actions which have no significant influence on our direct environment.

Recent research has indicated that:

"people are interested in parts of domotics but not in domotics as an overall system".

If we compare this with the developments in cars we find the same discrepancy: technology is accepted but the possibility that it could make us superfluous as a driver, because the car steers on its own, is not.

Our living environment is our safe-haven, our home, as Jan-Hendrik Bakker remarks in his excellent book: 'Welkom in Megapolis'

"we attach a lot of value to it because we regard it as the basics of and the guarantee for our individuality."
(vert.MP)

Some other actual developments also play a role in this; a role which can have - and maybe should have - more implications than domotics foresees at the moment:

The number of objects in our house that are connected to the internet is, so far, limited ; when this number increases the role of our interior becomes different. Our relation to the outside world will change and with it to our environment.

Publicist Wim Nijenhuis remarks in one of his articles:

"Under the weight of telematic communication the interior will become the most important space"

Through our influence, development on technical and communicative subjects our living environment will change; whether we call this domotics or progressive understanding seems to me, in any case in the profession of interior-architecture, an inescapable discussion.

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