A 'POCKET' SPACE

Fabricating a temporary shelter
in domestic spheres

# Colophon

But me He caught—reached all the way
From the sky to the sea, He pulled me out
Of that ocean of hate, that enemy chaos,
The void in which I was drowning
They hit me when I was down,
But God stuck by me.
He stood me up on a wide-open field,
I stood there, saved—surprised to be loved!

*Psalm 18:16-19*
*(MSG)*

# Table
# of
# Contents

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# Prologue

In the very beginning of the research for my thesis project, I was very interested in the idea of a bird's nest — the construction and how it covers the bird like a cocoon, allowing the bird to see out but nobody to see in. Visually, the little bird's nest is barely visible to the human eye because it has matched the color composition and texture of where it placed — this feature serves as a protective camouflage from potential predators. It also has an invisible crossing between the inside and outside — the threshold between the bird's nest and the human perspective.

# Nesting

How wonderful
to imagine the possibility of having my own nest!

Perhaps this profound interest toward the bird's nests derived from the experience I had when I was living in Switzerland. In 2010 I applied for a basic year program in a school in Basel, where one out of six classes in the program was supposed to be held in English. Soon I realized that I was the only international student they had that year. In the year that I started, they also shuffled the teachers around and changed the system for the English class. It was challenging for me to follow half of the lessons since half of my teachers and classmates were not willing to speak in their imperfect English. I tried to grasp all the incoming information, fragmentarily in Swiss-German and English words. Frequently, confusion after confusion happened and it produced many unpleasant feelings, I felt as if I were enclosed in a solid room with four walls surrounding me, because I could not naturally be a part of what was happening in the actual space I inhabited. During that period of time, it was very easy for me to decide to just stay at home as often as I could to avoid any kind of overwhelming reactions from other people around me. To isolate myself from the social dynamic might seems like the easiest way out, but I asked myself if it's actually the best solution?

EXTERNAL
x
INTERNAL
( MENTAL )
SPACE

The question of how to have a perfect balance between being in public and private space stimulated my investigation into looking for the natural process of transition from one social moment to another. Relating to the tension between interior and exterior, public and private, I'd like to quote *Peter Zumthor* — the architect of place and experience, who is known for his sensuous materiality and attention to space. The following quote is a fragment from his book '*Atmosphere*', where in one chapter he wrote about how the façade of a building could pronounce a statement to the outside world:



I own a castle.
That's where I live and that's the façade
I present to the outside world.

The façade says: I am, I can, I want—
in other words, whatever the owner and
his architecture wanted they build it.

The façade also says: But I am not going to
show you everything. Sure there are things
inside—but you go and mind your own business.

*Peter Zumthor*

If I consider my home as my castle, like birds consider their nest and their territory as their castle, what will occur once I go outside my home? How could I still carry the threshold between inside and outside, between public and private with me when I'm outside my home? The following investigation is an attempt to gather all the components to establish my 'nest'.

# Searching for the ingredients to build a good spatial quality to support the working process

For me a good spatial quality is a rich environment where there are opportunities to discover new things in a manner where everything unfolds naturally. Where there is a positive stimuli and a good amount of concentration. For instance many times in the Textile department as a collective working space as well as where the classes are conducted, we need a good amount of concentration to be able to have a good work flow process. Whereas, I found it difficult to focus on working in the department when everyone is having a constant conversation. It is inevitable for me to start comparing the experience that I had in the space outside and inside my home. Home can serve as a safe place for me, where I can have space both physically and physiologically; I could have a generous amount of space for myself when no one is at home. I could move around, listening to music, and work without any disturbance any time I like; the total control of the space is an important component in the building of a great spatial quality. But of course as soon as I leave my home, the ownership of a good amount of personal space can't always be fully and perfectly conducted. As unoccupied space becomes less available, it is almost impossible to have the same generous amount of space somewhere else outside my own house. How could I then find the solution in the situation where I no longer have the amount of space I wish for? In the following illustrations, I will try to explain how I experience the space of different places outside my home, and how each place carries different elements that build a good spatial quality to support my working process—reading and writing.

# How the presence of a wall behind me gives a comfortable feeling

QUALITY OF SPACE

ENCLOSURE

MARGIN HOME

TERRITORY

HABIT
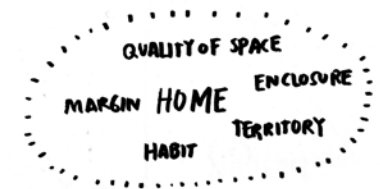
Tuesday afternoon. I am working in the keet at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie. It is a rather empty space, with light that is a bit too bright. Psychologically, I feel rather tense when I work in here — perhaps it's the light? Or perhaps because almost none of the surrounding objects around me are familiar? When I try to work in here my thoughts have a hard time moving forward. I still feel foreign in this space, like I don't belong to this space yet. Let me find my earphones and listen to some familiar music from my music library — Billie Holiday's, I think. Perhaps it will make me feel a little bit like when I am working at home... I move to one of my classmate's working table Anastasia's, to get closer to the heater and the electric plug. There is a white square wall standing behind this seat, it strangely created a more comforting surrounding for me. Now behind me there is a visible divider between me and another person. There is an unbelievable feeling of concentration when I suddenly become aware of being enclosed, or something enveloping me. I imagine if everyone could have a personal space in the keet, say, that there is a solid room — with four walls and a closed door enveloping each individual. It might be excellent for when I need to be alone to reach a good level of concentration — which is necessary especially when I need to write and read. But at the same time, I would isolate any kind of social dynamic around me. If people always need to knock first in order to open the door before they could start a conversation with me, people might hesitate — any kind of communication exchange could not flow naturally. All these solid partitions give a clear impression of division, saying 'do not disturb'.

Sometimes, public space simply becomes infrastructure or space without any identity.

Should we let the public areas surrounding us become places with no identity, putting us in bad moods or making us depressed, and sometimes even aggressive towards each other?

*Ana von Löw*

Listen! Interiors are like large instruments, collecting sound, amplifying it, transmitting it elsewhere.

*Peter Zumthor*

A good balance of openness and closeness is an important aspect to build a good spatial quality. But how much enclosure would be sufficient for me to be able to 'breathe' in my personal space, yet at the same time not lose touch of the social dynamic around me? How much do I want to expose myself to the others? How much openness will make me comfortable? Christopher Alexander is an Austrian architect and professor noted for his architecture theories about elemental components of building design, wrote a book called A Pattern Language, together with five other architects. The book empowers anyone to design any kind of building. I am most interested in the parts of the book that discuss building the ideal layout for a home. In one of the chapters they wrote about how a half-enclosed wall helps to get the balance of enclosure and openness right; and in these places people feel comfortable as a result.

In another chapter about workspace enclosures, they conducted a simple experiment of how different variables might influence a person's sense of enclosure in his workspace. In one of the variables, the writer explains how:

A presence of a wall behind,
gives me a more comfortable feeling
because I don't feel too exposed.

If my back is exposed I will feel more
vulnerable—I could never tell if someone is
looking at me, or if someone is
coming toward me from behind.

It is almost impossible to be aware of everything that goes on 180° around me; I cannot feel in real control of such a wide angle without moving my head all the time. If I have a wall on one side, I only have to manage an angle of 90°, which is much easier, so I feel more secure.

*Christopher Alexander*

# A 'pocket' in a space
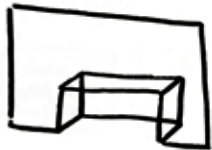
Friday afternoon, I decide to go to Starbucks to continue with my writing. I come into the café scanning each corner and seat. I picture myself in a few spots where I could sit for quiet a long time. I need to sit in a corner, I thought. I go to the back part of the café and find a corner next to the window! A lot of natural light comes in through the big window facing the backyard. My seat is also located next to the toilet door. The door becomes an occasional obstruction to my view when someone comes in and opens it. The occasional opening and closing of the toilet door in this Starbucks reminded me of the layout of the living room in my house. There is a door in the middle of the wall where I could enter the living room from the hallway. At the left side of the door there is a dining table where I normally have my meal and do my morning reading. When I sit at the corner of the table (see the diagram below) the door does not only functions as an element to separate the living room from another room, it also functions as a flexible enclosure where I can adjust how much space I want to have when I sit there. For instance, when I pull the door halfway through the space, it immediately creates an additional enclosure on my left side and it makes me less exposed. The door together with the corner of the room creates a 'pocket' in the space, which gives a feeling of protection; some kind of shelter for me (shelter (verb): find refuge or take cover from something unpleasant.) For me a shelter is not always necessarily taking refuge physically from bad weather or a storm, but it could also be a shelter for my mind. To have the freedom and the scope to think and develop in a way that suits me. When I sit in the 'pocket' in my living room I think I get a glimpse of the sheltered feeling, like when a bird is in its nest.

What do I want to see when I am inside?
What do I want other people to see of me?
What sort of statement do I want to make publicly?

*Peter Zumthor*
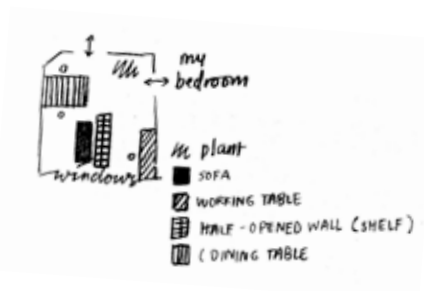
I have a friend who is working as an architect who introduced me to the information about a Dutch professor and architect, Herman Hertzberger. He believed the architect's role was not to provide a complete solution, but to provide a spatial construction having a life that is determined by its user. I found this principle inspiring because he is not only thinking from his own perspective as the one who designs and builds, but also from the perspective of the inhabitant. One component from his work that I personally find very interesting is that he creates a specific place within communal space for individual or shared use. As an example, shown in two images below are two different areas in the Delft Montessori school building. The first picture shows the in-between space with four little pillows that seems like a resting place in front of the window, in between the little black desk and the pale grey pedestal. The second picture shows the pit on the ground that functions both as storage for the little black stools and also as in-between space for a shared use.
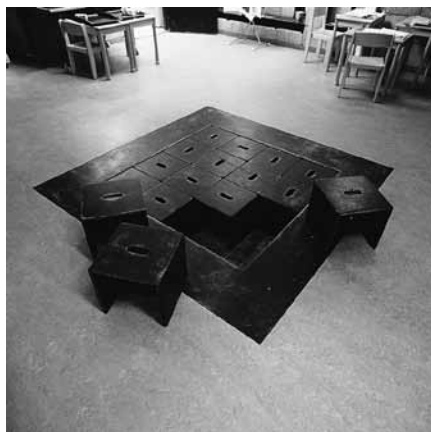
These setting of this specific in-between spaces are embedded in a way that remind me of the idea of the 'pocket' space that I have in my living room and the significance it has to provide the physical and psychological mind space. This idea of connecting space or threshold within a communal space, stimulates me to generate a further question: How could I translate this fixed feature, which is made out of a hard material—concrete, wood, et cetera — into something that is flexible and portable? Something that is lighter than a concrete pit and smaller than a space under a staircase or corner of a room. Something I could carry with me, and that would enable me to mark my space. Something that could communicate to my surrounding that I want to retreat from the chaotic flow through the façade of my 'nest.' What kind of construction could possibly translate the same intention? What should the dimensions be? Can it give the same feeling of protection that I have when I sit in my 'pocket' space? How much opening will make me feel the most comfortable? How much of myself do I want to expose?

# The appropriate distance between me and the other people

It is a winter's afternoon when I see a group of birds perched along a telephone wire. I have always wondered how they space themselves between one another, almost always perfectly even. I read in the Birdfeeder Handbook where they describe in one spread about space and territory: When two birds come too close to each other, one will give way. The minimum distance at which they still accept one another is called individual distance. All birds keep a personal space around themselves. It is sensible policy for a bird to keep its distance from its neighbor. It stops collisions when a flock takes to the air and prevents conflict when feeding. Birds also defend a fixed area called a territory, which is needed for feeding or breeding or both.

A minimum distance between one and the other is vital in animal life. They keep them-selves from one another within communication distance. This minimum distance func-tions as a 'frame' where they have space to learn and play, and have places to hide. An animal with a territory of its own can develop an inventory of reflex responses—when there is potential attack from the predator, they will have an automatic response rather than spending more time to think about where to hide.

A flamingo in the wild won't mind you if you stay more than three hundred yards away. Cross that limit and it become tense. Get even closer and you trigger a flight reaction from which the bird will not cease until three hundred yards limit is set again.

*Yann Martel*



HUMAN

LIMIT /
BOUNDARIES

FLAMINGOS
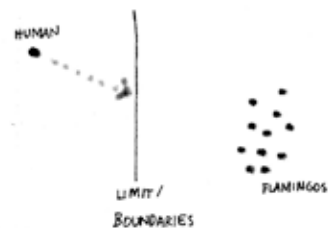
Many important functions are expressed territoriality in an animal's life. Lack of proper spacing in animal lives leads to aggression. When crowding becomes too great after population build ups, interactions intensify, leading to greater stress. As psychological and emotional stress increasing, tempers wear thin, subtle but powerful changes occur in the chemistry of the body. Such cycles are now generally recognized as normal for the warm-blooded vertebrates and possibly for all life.

As a comparison with distance regulation in human life, how do we find a solution when one finds oneself forced into behaviors, relationships, or emotional outlets that are overly stressful? What if it's possible for us to implement the territorial behavior of animals in our life? How will it affect our life if we have the same basic policy of minimum distance from one to the other? What if every individual is aware and sensitive enough to respect everyone's personal space? Perhaps one doesn't have to lock themselves in a closed room to retreat and be isolated. Perhaps all that is needed is to take a small pause to 'breathe'.
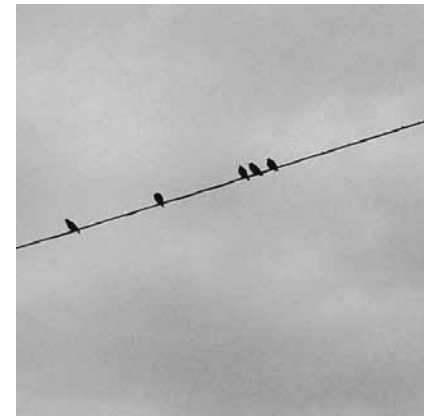
The following event is an attempt to explain how I experience a glimpse of having the proper spacing between me and other people:

Last Saturday the sky was painted in beautiful weather in Amsterdam, I decided to have a stroll in the city and look for a café to sit and read. I was biking around and I found one! It's an organic food shop in Haarlemmerstraat with a small area in the corner to sit. I searched for a seat and finally chose one at a long table next to a big window. I placed my backpack on the seat while ordering a coffee, so that people who came in would know that someone wanted to sit at that corner of the table. Two ladies came in and occupied the seats at the other end of the long table. I wanted to read my book so I moved to the other small round table next to my first seat—it was only a small distance apart from the first table where I was sitting at. I wanted to have less noise, but the move didn't really make sense since there would still be other people coming in—strolling around, buying food, sitting at the other tables and talking. For me to expect to have less noise was ridiculous, almost impossible. The music in this café played a bit louder than what I was used to or desired and more people started coming in. Unexpectedly, sitting at the little table by myself brought me contentment. I carried on with my reading and writing in between all the noises around me. What do I want to have exactly? How is it possible that I could concentrate a bit more after I moved to another table? How does that small distance make me more relaxed? Does it contain enough distance between me and the other people in the café?

# Sheltering from innumerable amounts of information

**Brought me out into a spacious place.**

I wrote this sentence on my yellow post-it note, still stuck on the wall from a few months ago. It is a fragment from a verse in Psalm 18 .The word spacious points to the word wide-open, a synonym to the Greek word, *agape: selfless love, wide open especially with surprise or wonder*. I intuitively connected the sky with the interpretation of a spacious place, because it is visually spacious, generous, large, and wide open. This is probably why I have always been profoundly attracted to what occurs in the sky everyday. How the stillness and beauty fills the sky with endless color compositions. The habit of looking at the sky brings me great comfort. This profoundness towards spaciousness arrived within me in such a subtle way that I did not realize it in the beginning. Only after I investigated and did the research for my thesis, was I able to step back and recognize it as a red thread through a few projects from my previous semesters. I unconsciously persevered / maintained the idea of myself looking for the right amount of efficient spatial quality everywhere I go. But as less and less space is available, I started to look for possibilities of how to create and carry my own personal space for retreat from overcrowded situations. In the beginning I thought I was searching for a hiding place, because it simply gave a clear division between me and other people; but at a certain point, the word hiding gave a negative impression. From this point on, I started questioning myself further: How much seclusion do I want to have from the public, in order to create an ideal space? Do I want to isolate myself completely from the social dynamic around me, or could I find another solution that would allow a good balance between a perfect enclosure and the entrance to my social surrounding?

amstelveen
library

starbucks
overtoom
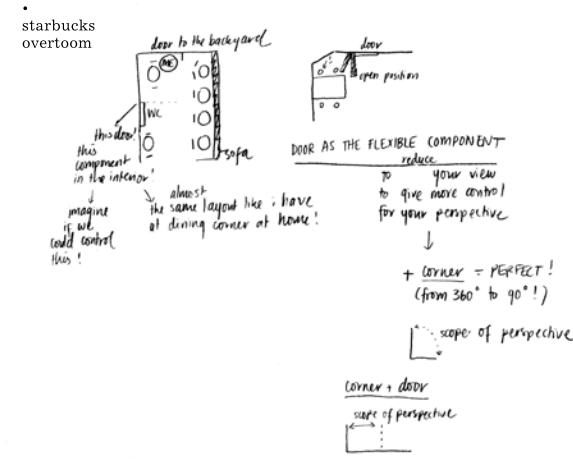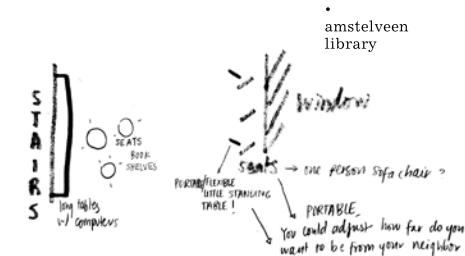
In my previous semester I started to create a wearable piece that partly covered my ears and eyes. Inspired by bowerbirds' nests, I created a garment with the shape of the bower with hand-embroidered stripes on it; the little stripes resemble the pattern in which the bowerbirds construct their nests from little twigs. I also added two slits on it for the arms to go though. I formed the shape of the garment to resemble a hood, inspired by how a bird shelters itself in their nest, since I found it interesting to witness how the bird could decide how much of itself it exposes to the outside world when inside its nest. From this piece, I developed the system further and tried using different materials for the hoods shape. I merged three layers of different material with the intention of embedding the functions of providing warmth and acoustic isolation. This piece is not particularly functional, but it gives a certain degree of comfort because it can reduce the visual noise of my surrounding.

Today we live in a world with countless choices and an immense amount of new information that moves toward us at great speed. The endless stream of information can gradually turn into broken rhythm, fragments and clusters of sound when I try to perceive it, and sometimes it can overwhelm me. In the following examples I will try to explain the experience of how I perceive information through my sense of hearing and seeing:

**Seeing And Understanding:**
I am sitting in the bus on my way somewhere, on the seat by the window. At the same time that the bus is moving forward, my eyes constantly move quickly from one side to the other. My eyes are trying to comprehend all the scenery that passes before them. Say, if the bus is moving with the average speed of 40 km/hour, how could I grasp all the views that I pass by at once? When it's already almost impossible to grasp all of that with my eyes, how do I perceive all the information in this digital era where we always have innumerable possibilities of choices? We have *Google* to find any kind of information within seconds, *Facebook* to find your long lost friend and *Skype* to talk to someone who lives across the continent—all of these within our reach.

**The Amount Of Information Gathered By The Ears:**
I occasionally receive a call from a friend, yet sometimes I cannot understand the entire conversation because he speaks so quickly. Often, I need time to digest the information from the conversation in order to have a better understanding of it. Especially when there is too much volume, too much confrontation, too much argument; at a certain point it makes it too difficult for me to perceive any of the information. It feels as if all that noise will consume me slowly and I cannot even come up with an immediate response.
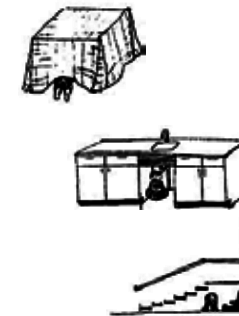
From these two illustrations, I would like to point out my reason for relating the senses of hearing and seeing to the concept of 'sheltering'. When I was young, I would pretend that I had my own house. By claiming the left over space in between the two single beds in the bedroom I shared with my sister. I would build a roof out of blankets to cover the unfilled space making it partially closed and then invite my friend or my little sister to play "house" inside. For children small cave-like spaces give the feeling of protection. Children are trying to create a place that is their own size in the midst of 'the adult space'. Like making the little cave for shelter as a child, I am perhaps also trying to shelter myself from the innumerable amount of information around me today. By enveloping myself with something, expecting to have visual and acoustic privacy from it. I imagine when I enclose myself with my garment I can see out but nobody can see in, like a bird in its nest.

# The space
# behind the scene

**The following fragment of writing about the concept of 'self-presentation' from *Erving Goffman*, caught my attention when I scanned through the book *The Schools of Herman Hertzberger* written by *Abram de Swaan*. The idea of two different realms between 'the backstage and the stage' within a space overlapping to each other fascinates me. It underlines the connection between the notion of a 'pocket' space in my living room and the making process that I have been trying to develop. I have been thinking about fabricating the crossing between the idea of external space, internal mental space, and the idea of a threshold that is silently attached in a space. I am looking for a system that I can instantly assemble and retreat into when I need it, but also store back again when I don't. The meeting point between something architectural and something wearable is something that I intended to explore further.**

It is not so much isolation that people need,
but an adequate self-presentation.
They want to be able to present themselves
at any moment in time as competent,
virtuous, empowered... in other words,
as people who know how to behave,
who know what they can do and omit to do,
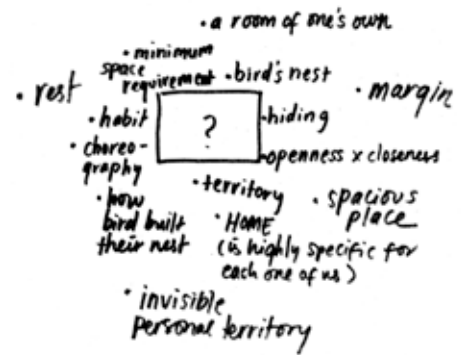and who are entitled to make their voices
heard.

They expect others to respect their dignity,
to keep an appropriate distance, physically
and physiologically, to respect their 'space
of moral inviolability.'

In order to preserve that inviolability, they
must be able to withdraw and seek seclusion
at times. In their private, secret space they
can work on their presentation, mend minor
violations, conduct body maintenance, and
exchange with a partner fierce and rapid
reviews of a previous performance and stage
directions for the next scene.

This too belongs 'backstage' and 'behind
the scene'. From this vantage point, pri-
vacy is often a brief and incidental need to
rehearse, change costumes, and to apply
make-up for the next scene. If people can
arrange the presentation of their 'self' away
from all scrutiny, they will not have much
need for more seclusion.

*Abram de Swaan*

# Epilogue



Hand-drawn mind map around a box with a "?" in the center:

- a room of one's own
- minimum space requirement
- bird's nest
- margin
- rest
- habit
- hiding
- choreo-graphy
- openness x closeness
- how bird built their nest
- territory
- spacious place
- HOME (is highly specific for each one of us)
- invisible personal territory

When I ponder on what a shelter is for me personally, the fundamental quality of it is carried by home. A home is elemental for our life and highly specific for each of us. Home is an institution for retreat and reflections, it is the archive of our life—which makes it a rich space because it brings together small chapters of our lives. As I am away from my home where I grew up, and my culture, the following question pop up: do I still have the substantial quality of a shelter? *John Berger*, an English artist and thinker writes his perspective on the definition of home:

To the underprivileged,
home is represented, not by a house,
but by a practice or set of practices.
Everyone has his own.
These practices, chosen and not imposed,
offer in their repetition,
temporary as they may be in themselves,
more permanence and more shelter than any lodging.

Home is no longer a dwelling but the untold story of a life being lived. This set of habit, more permanence, more shelter than any lodging.

*John Berger*

When it rains most bird head for shelter

Speaking of habit, almost everyday I will pay attention to what kind of color palette the sky displays. As well as how flocks of birds gather together at the top of a tree, waiting for the other birds to perch beside them so they can fly together forming beautifully continuous changing patterns that make them appear like they are dancing. Watching the sky has become my temporary shelter. I look up and rest my sight and thought from the traffic of the world. In this state, I find a solution momentarily, to retreat; any kind of circumstances around me doesn't seem to matter anymore.

# Index

He stretches out the skies like a canvas —
     yes, like a tent canvas to live under.

*Isaiah 40:21 (MSG)*

**p. 03**
Peterson, Eugene H. The Message. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004. Print.

**p. 16**
Zumthor, Peter. Atmospheres. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006. Print.

**p. 22**
von Löw, Anna. 'Soft City'. Apartamento 2013: 16. Print.

**hidden in between p. 21-22**
Zumthor, Peter. Atmospheres. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006. Print.

**p. 24**
Alexander, Christopher, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein. A Pattern Language.
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**p. 28**
Zumthor, Peter. Atmospheres. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006. Print.

**p. 34**
Martel, Yann. Life Of Pi. New York: Harcourt, 2001. Print.

**hidden in between p. 37-38**
Peterson, Eugene H. The Message. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004. Print.

**p. 50**
Hertzberger, Herman, and Abram de Swaan. The Schools Of Herman Hertzberger. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2009. Print.

**p. 54**
Berger, John. And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief As Photos. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. Print.

**hidden in between p. 53-54**
Peterson, Eugene H. The Message. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004. Print.