



Introduction: Perspectives on Loneliness

Fernando Nieto and Rosana Rubio

'I believe all human feeling and thinking can be 'charted' between two poles: loneliness and the desire to belong. The only human absolute is loneliness, and all else emanates from it and is dependent on that source.'
(B. L. Mijuskovic, *Feeling Lonesome: The Philosophy and Psychology of Loneliness*, 2015)

Nowadays, there are broad sectors of society that, for various reasons, suffer from loneliness. This situation is even perceived as a kind of epidemic. It is certainly pertinent to analyse such a phenomenon in order to understand whether the situation really is part of a normality that has not been sufficiently understood and managed. There is no doubt about the implications of loneliness in many psychiatric diseases and its inextricable relation to hostility. As such, we should confront the issue head on. It is also true that current socio-economic, political, environmental, and technological premises are triggering undesired situations that are increasing the feeling of loneliness in society.

Nonetheless, loneliness could also be considered not as a medical condition or illness but rather as a feeling consubstantial with the human condition. It is both a universal experience (i.e. we all are individual beings), and a private one (i.e. because of the many ways a person experiences being lonely). From a psychological perspective, there are nuances, ambiguities and emotional intricacies to consider.

There are varied and conflicting philosophical explanations of the phenomenon. On the one hand, there is the viewpoint of materialist, behaviourist, and empiricist paradigms, which consider loneliness to be caused by contextual factors, and therefore a

contingent and transient experience. On the other hand, there are those traditions that consider the feeling of loneliness as an everlasting, inevitable condition that is immanent to the operation of consciousness. All in all, these viewpoints seem to lead us to the understanding that we are facing an extremely intricate phenomenon.

In view of its complex nature, countering the feeling of loneliness in terms of its negative consequences is a systemic problem due to multiple causes, ranging from individual cognitive capabilities and affective motives to the tensions and contradictions in the social and physical environments we are immersed in. From our perspective as architects, we ask ourselves whether architecture could be defined as the environment where Mijuskovic's two human poles of *loneliness* and *the desire to belong* are negotiated.

It is this reading of architecture that motivated the organisation of a seminar on loneliness and the built environment, titled 'Loneliness and the Built Environment: Philosophical, Societal and Technological Perspectives (LOBE seminar)', which took place at the Tampere University Faculty of Built Environment on December 16, 2019. The seminar addressed the phenomenon from a multidisciplinary perspective, with the Tampere University's strategic focus areas of health, society, and technology as the breeding ground for the forum. The invited keynote speakers represent the fields of philosophy and psychology, public health, and architecture. The three lectures were later transformed by the authors into the articles included in the present publication. In addition to them, two additional articles offer further perspectives on the topic from symmetrical – physical and virtual – viewpoints.

In his article "Theories of Consciousness and Loneliness", Ben Lazare Mijuskovic establishes the theoretical background

of the seminar, delving into four themes around loneliness: first, that humans are innately lonely; second, that loneliness is *a priori*; third, that loneliness has consequences; and fourth, that there are remedies to loneliness. In the first theme, Mijuskovic argues that the fear of loneliness is the universal 'existential' condition of each of us, which motivates all our actions. In the second theme, he justifies loneliness based on 'a theory of consciousness that assumes the mind is both immaterial and active; reflexively self-conscious (Kant) and transcendently intentional (Husserl)' and, therefore, universal and unavoidable. His approach contrasts with the currently predominant research approach that claims loneliness is caused by external factors; hence being transient and avoidable. In the third theme, Mijuskovic explains how loneliness directly involves the dynamics of hostility, anxiety, and depression, leading to both destructive and self-destructive behaviours. Finally, in the fourth theme, he elaborates on the remedies to alleviate loneliness in terms of positively promoting empathy as the means to secure intimacy. Mijuskovic also elaborates on the role of the arts and architecture in this endeavour.

In her article "The Languages of Loneliness: Developing a Vocabulary for Researching Social Health", Christina R. Victor addresses issues of contemporary research on loneliness within the context of social health. Firstly, she defines, with the needed precision, the specificity of the concept, distinguishing it from other related yet distinct concepts. Secondly, she discusses the difficulty encountered in measuring loneliness, and states that there is a broad consensus that 'loneliness is an experience that is identified by individuals themselves and is not something that can be identified or observed by others'. Thirdly, she refers to loneliness in later life and how its reception and representation have been transformed,

through policy and practice, from being a social issue to become a public health problem. Finally, Victor proposes a reframing of the research agenda on contemporary loneliness: instead of tackling it from a medicalised point of view, it should be done from a positive perspective that promotes healthy social relationships.

In his article “Loneliness and Solitude in Architecture: Estrangement and Belonging in the Existential Experience”, Juhani Pallasmaa elaborates on the two related – yet paradoxically opposed – feelings of loneliness and solitude. Through a series of short chapters, he develops a number of ideas such as the consideration of solitude as being a ‘strengthened way of belonging’; the need of the creative mind for solitude in order to produce meaningful work; or that architecture and urban planning possess the power to unite and make us belong to a shared reality and, thus, counter loneliness. Pallasmaa reflects also on the loss of our capacity to dwell in space and time, due to today’s ways of life, which nihilates the value of solitude as a positive mental state; and argues that the role of architecture to mediate between us and the world is disappearing, becoming unable to integrate us with our existential reality.

In their article titled “Techno-Architecture and Online Loneliness”, Javier Echeverría, Atxu Amann y Alcocer, Flavio Martella and Lola S. Almendros reflect on how the information revolution of the late 20th century modified traditional boundaries and created hybrid conditions that are, simultaneously, material and informational: an information layer overlaps the material one. They elaborate on suggestive concepts and subjects to grasp how the new set of relationships and realities that they describe may influence the feeling of loneliness. The authors argue that all these concepts constitute a ‘techno-habitat’ in which there is a lack of

proper architectural reflection, one being built mostly by software engineers. This topic raises an interesting disciplinary question on how architectural knowledge, traditionally involved with materiality, can be transferred into the immaterial informational world, where the criteria of ‘organization, decentralization, interchangeability and continuous transformation’ have substituted key architectural categories such as ‘harmony, purity and perfection’. The ontologically distinct ‘offline’ and ‘online’ worlds are discussed, arguing that despite their impossible reconciliation they are open for critical and creative experimentation.

The final article “Loneliness in Place” constitutes our proposal as editors of this publication and incipient researchers on the interweaving of the subjective feeling of loneliness with the objectivity of the reality that the built environment indicates. Through a terminology connected to the everlasting dualism of individuality and collectivity, we elaborate on some possible spatial implications for the feeling of loneliness, and vice versa, how space in its broadest sense connects this feeling to the physical reality while contributing to its alleviation. Deliberately contrasted yet forming a continuous discourse, the two sets of terms allude to very concrete ideas that possess a myriad of possible interpretations and simultaneously a considerable assemblage of symbolic and physical meanings.

In conclusion, the round-table discussion held at the end of the seminar has been transcribed with thorough attention to its original content. The three different perspectives of the speakers were contrasted against each other and in the light of the audience’s points of view. Hence, the topics were re-elaborated and enriched during the discussion. Among the issues addressed were, for instance, the different spatial scales in which loneliness occurs (i.e.,

the city, the community and the home); the concept of architecture as a ‘mediator’ between ourselves and the world; the stigmas and prejudices around the feeling of loneliness; the role of ‘emphatic’ thinking in design; and the positive aspects of solitude.

Overall, the set of articles included in the present publication implies the initiation of an investigation of the theme of loneliness and the built environment. Our interest lies in the problem of properly designing the spatial gradation between the poles of privacy and community, which relates to the feeling of loneliness as described here. This is done by focusing on the interpretation of space as the core of the architectural practice, and speculating and reflecting on spatial qualities in architecture by exploring contemporary societal needs encompassed within disciplinary theories.

Nevertheless, we have asked ourselves, firstly, how the built environment, as a counterbalance to the pervasive information and communication technologies (ICT), enhances the creation of intimacy, thus helping us overcome – physically – our insularity. Knowing from psychologists that the sense of trust in others and the development of empathy are the highest goals and protections against loneliness, we believe that they could be tied into this discussion so as to investigate emerging building typologies, such as new hybrid solutions and urban models that promote collective ways of living, including the culture of sharing and the enhancement of the sense of belonging at their core. Secondly, we have asked how the environmental conditions are able to enhance people’s intentionality, be it enabling or cancelling their capacity to undertake positive personal purposes and agencies, which are also acknowledged as tools against the feeling of loneliness.¹

One of the initial motivations of this investigation was to

detach the feeling of loneliness from its hackneyed meanings – very much present in the societal debates on the issue – whilst simultaneously attaching to it a spatial notion that is deliberately undefined in physical terms, and therefore left unresolved and opened up to each person’s imagination. The difficulty in associating this feeling with the physical reality – at least the one we found as researchers – might be the reason why, at the discretion of their authors, none of the viewpoints included in this publication are illustrated with images.

Note

1. In this regard, at the time this book is being written, we are working on three multidisciplinary research projects addressing this issue of loneliness and its physical dimension. The project ‘Social Robots and Ambient Assisted Living: The Independence and Isolation Balance’ (SOCIETAL) focusses on the alleviation and detection of loneliness within the context of older adults by means of smart environments and technologies. The project ‘Intelligent social technologies enhancing community interaction and sustainable use of shared living spaces in superblocks’ (SocialBlock) develops co-design studies and concepts on how intelligent social technologies and spatial innovations may be used to enhance community interaction and shared spaces in order to promote the sustainable development of urban living areas within the context of the Hiedanranta area in Tampere. The project ‘Implementation of contextual complexity in AI-based assessment systems of older people’s social isolation’ (AISola) aims to depart from detection and prediction models to assess social isolation among older adults and to advance systems that contribute to its avoidance. The research groups involved in these projects belong to four different faculties at Tampere University: Faculty of Built Environment, Faculty of Social Sciences, Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Science, and Faculty of Management and Business. They are supported financially by the so-called Intelligent Society (INSO) platform, an Academy of Finland profiling initiative that seeks to strengthen cooperation on the Tampere University’s strategy axis society–technology during the years 2019-2023.