Today we agree to consider comfort as an objective concept, but we are not to say. The architectural history of the last two centuries shows that welfare, far from being a purely technical issue – a balance between weather and the physiological human constants – is a culturally constructed idea. Comfort is not a kind of algorithm that can be computed according to certain parameters of temperature and humidity – or at least, not that – but a concept in accordance with diverse and complex factors, such as the relationships between space and the human body or the ways of conceiving nature in architecture.

Comfort is also a relative term. Every era has owned a way of understanding the idea of comfort: from the notion of precarious shelter in the old treaties on architecture's origins all the way to the sophisticated contemporary environments, passing through the almost sybaritic comfort of the Victorian house or the ascetic dwelling of the machines à habiter. Strictly speaking, even this generalization of the idea of welfare would be too risky, since the debate over comfort specifically conceived as an architectural issue is relatively recent. In fact, throughout history, comfort has not always been clear that providing that we now call 'comfort' was the primary function of buildings. To complicate matters, to this cultural and relative character of the idea of comfort should be added the polysemic of the term itself, with its nuances which account for the diverse senses with which every age has conceptualized it. The origins of the word contains itself a kind of misunderstanding, since the term 'comfort', which has been exported to most of the world's languages and is usually linked with English culture, actually comes from a French verb, conforter. The etymology reveals that the sophisticated comfort of today was originally a simple synonym of 'consoling'. It was not until the early 18th-century when the idea of comfort left its primitive scarce sense to signify the physical welfare, according to a semantic crescendo that soon leads the notion to a psychological denotation, as evidenced by the definition in a English dictionary of 1776: "Comfort is an state of tranquil enjoyment.

It was in France, however, where by that time the idea of comfort acquired an actual architectural meaning in the rococo interiors, which were intimate and cozy, far from the ceremonial pomp of the galleries of the court at Versailles – as immense as uncomfortable. The ideal of this new way of conceiving the environment was no longer the original conforter – since what was sought was not merely a simple shelter – nor a petty bourgeois welfare – which was not yet invented – but a new idea conceived in terms of comodité and convenience, two words denoting the rational organization of buildings, their functional decorum and their adaptation to the small scale of the human body. As it is known, it was finally in England, at the time of the Industrial Revolution, where the idea of comfort acquired the meaning we attach today, eventually becoming an essential feature of the British idiosyncrasy. Since then, the idea was inseparable from the national trait: comfort was, overall, ‘English comfort’. In fact, even in the early 20th-century, the term was inseparable from British ideals, especially from the German point of view, as evidenced by the articles of Adolf Loos on the English fashion or by the Hermann Muthesius texts on British architecture and decorative arts, collected in a book not surprisingly titled Das Englische Haus.

All this explains why, until just over a century, comfort was understood as something that, at first, was primarily cultural (specifically English), and only later material[1]. The notion of comfort is therefore an ideological concept, as such, has its own history; although it has not received the historical attention it deserves, with the exception of Mechanization Takes Command, published in 1948, a text that today remains a reference on the subject. In this book Siegfried Giedion addresses the history of comfort with a long sample of those 19th-century inventions that were adopted by the early avant-garde architecture. Fruit of the time – the era of the heroic stories of modern architecture – Giedion's perspective impacted on the technical dimension of comfort, wondering specially the role played by the machines in the new formal paradigm and opening a hermeneutic way that soon after was continued by Meyer Banham in The Architecture of the Well Art and edification, and, published in 1961, a book in which comfort is thought to be a kind of conceptual continuum in a leak that constantly goes from technique to architectural form.

Regarding architectural comfort, remain however many historiographical gaps, despite the myriad of manuals published following Design with Clime[2], a book in which Victor Olgyay knotted systematically the climatic and physiological issues of welfare with modern architecture. The further development of architectural phenomenology, with its emphasis on the relationship between space, body and memory, and Postmodernism, with its historical and qualitative view, were not fruitful to investigate the aesthetic dimensions that unavoidably involves the notion of comfort, nor its cultural sense, except the singular book by Witsul Rybszynski House: A Short History of an Idea (1994), a suggestive history of comfort in the domestic realm. Therefore, it has been necessary to wait for the last decade for a new aesthetic and multidisciplinary review of comfort, based, on one hand, on the environment awareness and, on the other, on the influence of the aesthetics of atmospheres – theorized by phenomenological philosophy, but experienced by art. Such a qualitative perspective is going to be discussed here through a brief history of comfort that in the different meanings assigned to the concept over the past two centuries will be taken in account, according to a sort of map of variable ‘poetics’.

The poetic of fire

The first of the poetic of comfort is the poetic of fire. Always linked to the origin of art and civilization, and to foundation rituals, fire is also a symbol of architecture. Vitruvius was who, at the beginning of Book II of De Archi, and in order to elucidate the origins of humanity – hypothesized that fire or, rather, the fact of controlling it, formed the human society. According to him, the ‘magna commoditas’ generated by the flame gathers men, induces a rapid creation of language and finally leads to stable settlements[3]. This genealogy mining energy, sociability and construction (in this order) was not, however, canonical. In fact, for architects were more practical the ideas proposed 1500 years later by Alberti in De re aedificiorum, a text for Alberti the ‘principle of congregation of men’ is not the campfire, but ‘the ceiling and the wall’, ie the ‘partitus’ thanks to which fire, protected from outside, warms the bodies clustered around it[4]. In Alberti, therefore, construction precedes fire: is that one which ensures the well-being.

This dual perspective leads to a fruitful dichotomy. While for Vitruvius the ‘commoditas’ is, in principle, directly procured by fire – without built mediators –, for Alberti it cannot be conceived outside of the walls of a house. The idea of ‘comfort’ of the former is energetic, and the second’s one, tectonics. However both share the assumption that civilization consists on bringing the nature to create controlled microclimates within unpredictable climates. That both possibilities are intimately linked is evidenced by many examples of pristine architectures, such as skins tents or wooden huts, which are constructions that shelter us from the fire of civilization. As rightly warns Luis Fernández-Galiano in Fire and Memory, comfort is both an energetic and a tectonic concept, as both depend on both the combustion and the construction[5].

In the traditional house, fire induces a sort of topology, rooms are made in terms of proximity to fire – that not only heats, but transforms food, forges
radiator, while ‘ideological comfort’ still depends on electricity and bathrooms, to its mansions. Others, the early 20th-century to incorporate radiators, also status to maintain –, many misgivings and anachronisms of the petty bourgeoisie, which had no representative homogenization of space and, with it, to the breakdown or uninhabitable areas gave way to the thermal which until then houses were organized in habitable of central heating systems because, with the radiators, being. Among them, the main impact was the invention throughout the 19th-century suffered the notion of well-being, the case of ergonomy illustrates how the notion of artiﬁcial microclimates, to the type of beings and objects displayed there. The new science emerged with Industrial Revolution – hence, the shine of the visible architectural characters and vents were disguised or hidden in the bowels of the house (false ceilings, partitions, double ﬂoor), just as the hot water pipes or radiators were disguised in false ceilings or fireplaces. In general, the poetic of hygiene was a poetic of comfort. The machinery of comfort did not alter the traditional forms of architecture, and did not undermine its representative character. It was aesthetically neutral, reduced to be a kind of energetic machinery (a sort of theatrical apparatus) making possible the operation of the scene, but the destiny of which is to remain hidden – hence, the shine of the visible architectural characters is held by the stage of the invisible and ‘dirty’ apparatus. By this way, the idea of this new comfort poetic seems to be inspired in what we may call ‘the Nautilus, the submarine’ invented by Jules Verne, equipped with sophisticated and hidden machinery, but decorated and furnished according to the ideas of comfort and decency that were indistinguishable from those of any bourgeois house. Modern Avant-Garde – it is the time of the second wave of medicalization of human body, an effect achieved not only by ventilation – as modern architects had sought obsessively – but also by sunlight. Conceived by modern as a metonymy of nature, the sun accounted the notion of the returning to the naives, but also and foremost, was a poetical ideal. In the modern notoriety of aesthetic of transparency, the picturesque, the terraces and the solaris and the sporting culture associated with them, they all realized the ideal of outdoor life. The conﬂict between the ideal of homogeneity and that of gradient was only temporary: architects eventually opted for the homogenization of space, got through the new air conditioning systems, as efﬁcient as blind. While it lasted, the ideal of life in nature seemed to reﬁne the notion of comfort, according to processes involving the same gains as losses. On one hand, was the end of the old tradition of architectural ﬁlters of the bourgeois house – shutters, blinds, stores –, which until then had been able to successfully mitigate climate gradients between outside and internal microclimates. Despite their effectiveness, those ﬁlters were replaced, without more, by the curvilinear pan de verre and curtain walls. On the other hand – as gains – was the ideological and aesthetic rethinking of climate as a beneﬁcial effect on human body, an effect achieved not only by ventilation – as modern architects had sought obsessively – but also by sunlight. In this solar-mystic context, a new word, culled from scientiﬁc language, acquires prominence: habitat. For Le Corbusier, designing a city – a sort of built ecosystem – involves building a ‘right habitat’ on a ‘healthily, resistant and immobilized by nature’ land pieces. Nature works here as a kind of ‘principle of vaccination’ to protect the city from those injurious pieces, such as overcrowding, ‘sick light’ or pollution, which were a consequence of capitalist speculations with space. Hence, instead of traditional urban models such as Paris or Buenos Aires, Le Corbusier – like Hilbersiemer, May and Meyer – proposes a new and hygienic scheme based on the adjustment of psycho-physiological functions of dwelling to solar cycles, according to a key – sequence through cosmic – the unifying emblem of Le Corbusier work, as evidenced by the beautiful engravings of Le Poème de l’angle droit – 123 - The welfare culture
Through the helio-centric myth, the notion of comfort—far from being constructed only about the mechanical — acquires a biological sense that anticipates, in many ways, subsequent bioclimatisation and the consideration of both the active environmental techniques—the ‘energy regeneration’ tools, in the Banham jargon—and the passive strategies of ‘conservation’ and ‘selection’. Both dimensions would be part of those integrative visions which, from the 1950s, try to systematise the idea of comfort from a scientific point of view in order to eliminate insinuations and hesitations. Between those systematic points of view highlights that of Victor Olgyay, whose Design with Climate would lead, for the first time, to a nature-biologic notion of comfort, with account for its variable relationship with latitudes and local building traditions through a true physiological concept: the well-being conceived as an hypothermal balance between weather conditions and human elements. This idea of comfort would become later a sort of unie or least common multiple of the language (or jargon) of sustainability.

The poetic of atmospheres

This little story of the cultural construction of comfort would not be completed without trying phenomenologically and existential, aspects of the term ‘comfort’ implies. In the past two decades—since the vocabulary of comfort became part of the language, more generally, of sustainability—in architecture has gained some interest the notion of ‘atmosphere’, imported from both the contemporary aesthetics of nature and some art currents. From the new viewpoint, comfort seems to depend on the construction of an environment that, however, would not already consist of the sum of some physiological constants and weather conditions (temperature, relative humidity, air velocity, swaddling level), but in a qualitative attention to other factors pertaining to human senses: textures, smells, sounds or lights. Thus, architectural atmospheres would not be those biological ‘habitats’ dreamed by some modern, but completely artificial environments would not be those biological ‘habitats’ dreamed by some modern, but completely artificial environments that kind of perfect and portable architecture.

The portable comfort is only an ideal, but notes a trend that is very typical of our time: the tendency to insulate from outside in order to build an artificial atmosphere, which now is not conceived as that environment of perceptual transgressions defended by the vanguard of the 1960s, but as an environment of balance and uniformity. What in this type of environment is now between brackets is not, however, nature, but that second nature which are cities for man and to which he feels helpless or even alienated. Disinherited of industrial cities and megacities, modern man aspire to retrace into the bubble — as Proust or Kiesler dreamed in the 1920s — or to return to maternal womb with a soft architecture of comfortable nooks, opposed to the hygienic and heliotropic transparency of modernity. But earlier in his optimistic praise of modern city the 19th-century had created superb greenhouses, great halls of universal exhibitions and Benjaminian passages, those large structures guarding outside and creating within it a miniaturized world, climatically controlled and exposed to the strategies of presentation of the goods, while maintaining the illusion to live in contact with nature. As this architecture fully anticipates shopping centers, airports, amusement parks and other non-sites, it seems logical that Peter Sloterdijk has suggested that greenhouses and bubbles are the best metaphors to account for our world, never before so exposed to the unstoppable currents of capital flows, and never before so afraid of such currents. So, in an improbable way, the globalization aspires to combine transparency with insulation and air conditioning, as suggested by the large bubble with which Fuller proposed covering part of Manhattan. The skins of those bubbles are being conceived to protect not individual bodies, but the great social body keeping him comfort — according to an ideal of civilization that, not surprisingly, can be expressed by the contemporary term, already a little worn, of ‘Welfare State’. The ‘magna commoditas’ described by Vitruvius — a well-being emerged from gathering around campfire or sheltering in a bubble— may be by this way the principle to knot again architecture and society.

From the metaphor of fire to that of atmospheres, through the poetry of hygience or habitat, this brief and partial history of comfort suggests that welfare is not an objectifiable concept, nor an idea synthesized in the technician or scientist test tubes, but a complex notion, consisting of several intertwined layers: physiological, constructive, aesthetic, existential, social. The history of comfort is thus, a sort of small version of the history of culture.