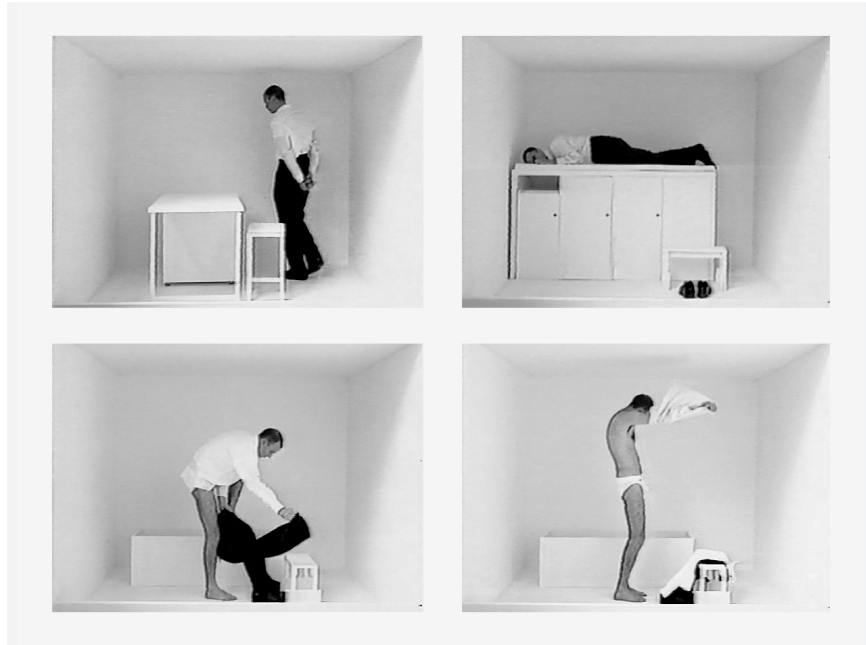


Absalon's *Cells*

A Queer Reappraisal of Individualism

Klea Ott



Film stills from Absalon's video *Solutions*, 1992. © Estate Absalon.

Today, the home is regarded as one of the most coveted yet inherently unstable commodities, transcending its symbolic form to reveal deeper structural contradictions. Idealized as a bastion of privacy—a retreat from the pervasive social world of production—the house, within the relentless logic of neoliberal economy, fails to address the diverse and evolving needs of the individual. Instead, it upholds the archetype of the “universal man, user, and citizen,” an abstract figure enmeshed in heteronormative and homogenizing frameworks that continue to dictate modes of existence and social compliance. This essay explores this failure by offering an alternative perspective on traditional housing schemes centered on *individualism*.⁰¹ The “I,” long overlooked in scholarly discussions of domestic space, gains new importance when examined through the work of Absalon, a homosexual Israeli artist born in 1964. Absalon produced architectural experiments that, despite their enigmatic and radical nature, offer fertile ground for exploring contemporary debates about identity, autonomy, and domesticity.⁰² The artist's intention was not to operate on a social level or offer a critical commentary on social behaviors. Rather, his work was intensely personal, focused on transforming his own life. By designing objects and spaces purely for himself, Absalon sought an escape from ingrained behaviors and societal impositions, prioritizing the “I” above all else.⁰³ Perhaps his obsession with his own body and isolation stemmed from his sexuality, social stigma, and the health issues that eventually led to his death. The idea of focus on the self, referred to as *individualism* in this research, encompassed different meanings and evolved over

01 *Individualism*, conceived as a practice of self-care, offers a perspective through which a queer use of space can be delineated through the intensity of the relations to self, that is, of the forms in which one is called upon to take oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of action so as to transform, correct, and purify oneself and find salvation. (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 42.

02 Guillaume Désanges and François Piron, *Absalon Absalon* (Paris: Paraguay Press, 2021), 24.

03 *Ibid.*, 19.

various epochs.⁰⁴ In the realm of this research, *individualism* aligns with the queer lens applied to Absalon's work, as his artworks open a discussion on what a space for one's own, in its purest form, could be.⁰⁵

During the AIDS epidemic—a period marked by intense stigma against homosexuals—Absalon created his artworks with the awareness of his own HIV-positive status. The emergence of AIDS in the early 1980s was characterized by widespread ignorance, mistrust, and limited recognition by both medical and administrative systems. This environment forced many homosexuals to retreat from public life, increasing the risks of exclusion and alienation for those affected. Although the primary populations impacted by the epidemic were gay men and people who used injection drugs, heterosexuals were also at risk of contracting the disease.⁰⁶ In its early stages, media coverage of AIDS was scarce, leading to widespread misinformation about its transmission. In France, this period saw an unprecedented wave of media scrutiny, which amplified public awareness and anxiety surrounding the illness.⁰⁷

Absalon can be situated among artists whose creative practices were profoundly shaped by the struggles surrounding the AIDS crisis in the 1990s, alongside figures such as Lili Reynaud-Dewar, Niki de Saint Phalle, Robert Gober, and Keith Haring. Their approach was driven by an urgent necessity to exist, enacting performances and artworks that embodied denunciations of oppression and bore witness to the mechanisms of determinism.⁰⁸

Absalon engaged with the concept of *individualism* at a time when the very definition of what constitutes an individual was an open question—one that has continued to be debated from the 1980s to the present day. This discussion has been central to queer theorists such as Teresa De Lauretis, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and, more recently, to Judith Butler, all of whom have approached heteronormativity as a complex and expansive construct, explored through nuanced frameworks. De Lauretis examined the intersections of gender, sexuality, and representation, emphasizing how cultural and social structures shape individual identity.⁰⁹ Sedgwick investigated how heteronormativity underpins the narrative of our historical existence,¹⁰ while Butler revealed the constructed nature of gender and identity.¹¹ In this context, the notion of the self becomes a central concern in queer theory, which challenges the dominant, singular perspective that has historically defined societal truths—particularly what is often referred to as the “natural state.”¹² While Absalon's work does not directly address these questions, and it would be anachronistic to align queer theory directly with his life project, there is nonetheless a deep interconnection between his work and these themes. This critical lens finds resonance in architecture, especially in the study of domestic space, where much of the scholarship centers on family housing and is rooted in assumptions about normative structures of habitation or idealized visions

04 Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, examined the term *individualism* and outlined three distinct interpretations. He first describes it as a notion often associated with a self-centered attitude that disregards the needs and desires of others. Secondly, he presents it as a positive valuation of private life, such as the intimacy of family life. Finally, individualism can be seen as a practice of self-knowledge that lies at the heart of queer theory. (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 42.

05 Désanges and Piron, *Absalon Absalon*, 9.

06 Erin Ruel and Richard T. Campbell, “HIV/AIDS: Attitude Change in the Face of an Epidemic,” *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (2006): 2167–2175.

07 As the 20th century comes to an end, an estimated 33.6 million people worldwide—men, women, and children—are confronted with a future shaped by AIDS. Recent data from the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organization (WHO) estimate that by the close of 1999, around 32.4 million adults and 1.2 million children were living with HIV. Moreover, nearly half of those infected with HIV contracted the virus before turning 25 and often succumb to the fatal complications of AIDS before reaching the age of 35. See: “The HIV/AIDS Epidemic at the End of 1999,” *Population and Development Review* 24, no 4 (1999): 827–829.

08 Désanges and Piron, *Absalon Absalon*, 20.

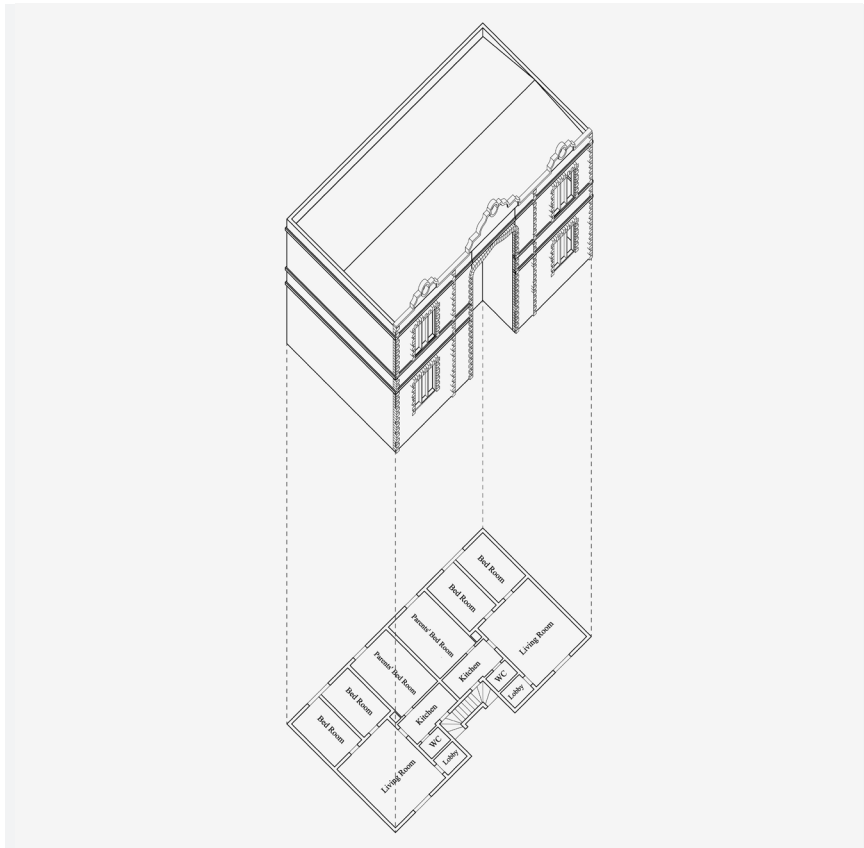
09 Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1–3.

10 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 3.

11 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), 259.

12 The term “natural state” refers to the philosophical notion that human existence is fundamentally relational. This concept suggests that individuals are intrinsically connected to and shaped by their interactions with others, as well as by the social and environmental contexts in which they exist. Identities, values, and perceptions of reality are not formed in isolation but emerge through continuous engagement with the surrounding network of relationships. This view challenges notions of individuality as self-contained, highlighting instead the interdependence that underpins human existence.

of it. The replicable paradigm of the family house, which tends to be presented as an immutable model, frames most of the perception we have of our contemporary Western home. This housing structure first took shape in the eighteenth century in a Western context. The model then evolved further during the Victorian era, giving rise to a distinctive suburban housing style that both reflected and reinforced the heteronormative, performative ideals of the nuclear family.¹³ Henry Roberts's Model House for Families, presented at the *Universal Exhibition* in London in 1851, served as a notable example of how a modest architectural proposal on a small scale can, due to its replicability, significantly shape the way housing has been conceived for the past 150 years.¹⁴ This housing paradigm not only established the foundation for the concept of the "American dream" but also operated as a model that could be reproduced.^{15 16} This conventional lifestyle undermines the sense of *individualism*, pushing people into a collective existence characterized by power dynamics between oppressors and the oppressed.



"A Model House for four Families" erected in Hyde Park at the Industrial Exhibition of 1851 by His Royal Highness Prince Albert. From James Steven Curls, *The Life and Work of Henry Roberts 1803–76, Architect: The Evangelical Conscience and the Campaign for Model Housing and Healthy Nations* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co. Ltd., 1983).

Many advantages have recently been observed in the adoption of alternative contemporary housing models, such as cooperative housing. It is generally asserted that tenants in cooperatively built dwellings typically enjoy better homes, more amenities, and lower rents compared to those

13 It was not until the 1840s that the word "suburb" lost its primarily elitist bourgeois association and became firmly attached to the middle-class residential neighborhood. See: Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 62.

14 Maria S. Giudici, "Counter-Planning from the Kitchen: For a Feminist Critique of Type," *The Journal of Architecture*, no 23 (2018): 1204–1205.

15 The concept of the "American dream" centered around heterosexual marriages, represented a desire for a conventional and ordered domestic existence amidst the changes brought by industrialization and urbanization.

16 Maria S. Giudici, "Counter-Planning from the Kitchen: For a Feminist Critique of Type," *The Journal of Architecture* 23 (2018): 1204–1205.

living in privately constructed houses.¹⁷ However, these types of housing have largely retained interior layouts originally designed for traditional family structures. Most still include marital bedrooms, standardized children's rooms, and shared spaces such as kitchens and living rooms. As a result, this form of co-housing falls short of addressing diverse social realities. These projects are frequently presented as “democratic” models, ostensibly valuing each individual voice.¹⁸ However, such perspectives can obscure how these structures may still uphold rigid and standardized domestic frameworks under the guise of inclusivity and individual empowerment. In that sense, *individualism* tends to be overshadowed by emphasis on the collective, which makes invisible the vital need for the practice of self-knowledge.¹⁹

Furthermore, scholars have shown that living alone is an increasingly common condition and deserves to be treated as a subject of great public significance.²⁰ This phenomenon provides a perspective that deepens our understanding of how to reconsider domestic spaces in relation to social realities and raises the question of whether living alone can lead to a better life in society.²¹ These observations lead one to question how an ideal domestic space might be envisioned within contemporary Western social structures and realities. What does Absalon's work reveal about the neglected “I” in contrast to the celebrated “we”? To what extent can living alone contribute to an improved quality of life and foster better inclusivity in society? How do Absalon's artworks and his ideas of withdrawal and self-enactment remain relevant in today's context?

ABSALON

Meir Eshel, an artist from the 1990s, spent much of his life in Paris and has been known by the pseudonym Absalon since 1987.²² His work centers on exploring *individualism*, focusing on withdrawing from social norms and external frameworks. Eshel moved to France at the age of 22 in 1987, having decided to leave his childhood home in Israel after completing his military service, where he worked as an aircraft technician at the Hatzerim Israeli Air Force Base for three years. After spending two years in Sinai and later in the dunes of Ashdod, his uncle, Jacques Ohayon, an art critic and professor of art history, recommended him to his friend, the artist Christian Boltanski, who was a professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris.²³ Since 1990, Absalon knew he was HIV-positive, and in the absence of therapies, AIDS took his life in 1993 at the age of 28. Few people were aware of his illness, including his partner, the artist Marie-Ange Guilleminot, the gallery owner Chantal Crousel, and his assistant Philippe Picoli, with whom he shared the studio that another of his uncles, François Lasry, had acquired for him in the Paris suburb of Boulogne, in a building designed by Le Corbusier. This studio served as the space where the majority of Absalon's projects took shape.²⁴

The unignorable context of AIDS and the impact it had on the lives of homosexuals underpins a perception one can have of his artwork. In the early 1980s, prevailing beliefs about AIDS, before HIV was identified, were that it was highly contagious and deadly. This view merged with existing homophobic prejudices, portraying gay men as vectors of disease and danger. From the outset, AIDS became directly linked to sexuality

17 “Housing Conditions Monthly Labor Review,” *Monthly Labor Review* 44, no. 6 (Washington: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016): 1440.

18 Steffen Wetzstein, “The Global Urban Housing Affordability Crisis,” *Urban Studies* 54, no. 14 (November 2017): 3162.

19 Björn Petersson, “Collectivity and Circularity,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 104, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 141.

20 Eric Klinenberg, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 19.

21 Désanges and Piron, *Absalon Absalon*, 20.

22 In the Old Testament, Absalon's name is related to an impatient and ambitious character. He is portrayed as the son of King David, rebelling against his father and meeting a tragic fate through assassination. See: Désanges and Piron, *Absalon Absalon*, 9.

23 Désanges and Piron, *Absalon Absalon*, 9.

24 Ibid.

and lifestyle, already subject to stigma, social condemnation and, in many regions, criminalization.²⁵ Even after HIV was clinically identified and it was understood that the virus could also be transmitted through heterosexual contact, the association between homosexuality and AIDS persisted across much of the Western world. Numerous reports detail instances of healthy gay men and lesbians being dismissed from their jobs or evicted from their homes on accusations of being AIDS carriers. As a result, the queer community experienced social marginalization on multiple fronts. While Absalon never explicitly identified as an activist, it is highly likely that his work was profoundly influenced by his social and health circumstances.

He positioned himself as an iconoclast, actively seeking self-awareness by using his own body as a unique measure. In many of his works, he engages with his body and interacts with his creations, often placing himself in absurd scenarios that establish unconventional relationships between his art and himself. In contrast, some of his pieces are specifically molded to his body's dimensions, ensuring their perfect and optimized use. His quest for self-agency unfolds across various mediums, particularly through videos and sculptures. This aspect becomes evident in the deliberate posture of resistance he adopts in the video titled *Noise* (1993) where he screams until he loses his voice.²⁶ It conveys his commitment to challenging the prevailing power structure within which we exist. The only documented lecture by Absalon, held at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1993, sheds light on his deliberate ambition of pursuing a voluntarily concealed life. This lecture stands out retrospectively for his awareness of his mortality. It revealed that his ideas were deeply personal and not focused on engaging with the art world. He did not create for the masses; rather, he conceived his work for himself.²⁷

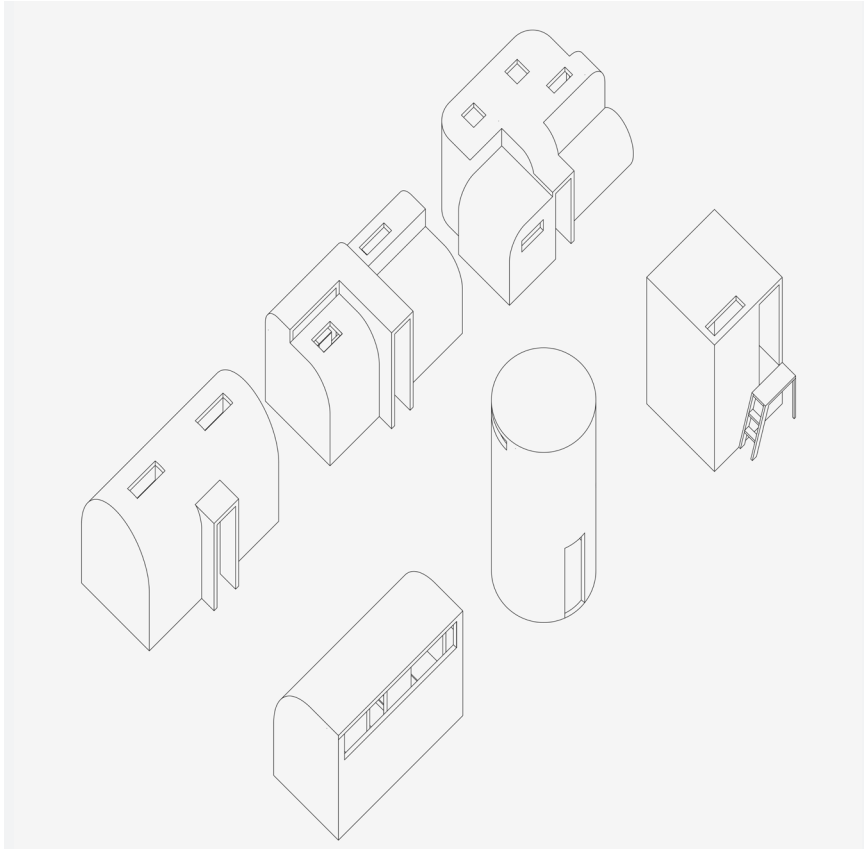
Four groupings of artworks exhibited at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1988 revealed his experimental character. Absalon produced a series of fragile furniture objects of modest dimension, positioned between models and proposals. They did not imply realization at a human scale nor have a clearly denoted function. One of them, titled *Nine Cells*—made of cardboard, wood, and white paint—consisted of nine boxes on a white wooden table. The tops of the boxes were opened, offering a bird's-eye-view of a series of simple models of daily furniture. The furnishings filled all available space, eliminating any possibility for conventional use and thereby suppressing their intended function. For instance, in his boxes, multiple tables were placed closely together, leaving no room for chairs; thus, the tables could not fulfill their usual role as gathering places for seated individuals. *Nine Cells* represents one of the initial iterations of what would eventually evolve into his final project, the *Cells*.²⁸ Beginning in 1989, Absalon turned towards the understanding of everyday objects and their interaction with space. His investigation demonstrated that he was attempting to create furnishings that would not appear as intrusions in space but rather would blend seamlessly into their respective interiors. The study of furniture and the analysis of its formal properties led him to the conception and realization in 1990 of *Proposals for Habitats*, made out of wood, cardboard, plaster, and white paint on a 1:1 scale. This experimental artwork presented an inventory of recognizable and abstract forms arranged in a room.

25 Jennifer Power, *Movement, Knowledge, Emotion: Gay Activism and HIV/AIDS in Australia* (Australis: ANU Press, 2011), 31–58.

26 Désanges and Piron, *Absalon Absalon*, 9.

27 Ibid.

28 Philippe Vergne, *Absalon: The Man without a Home is a potential Criminal* (Philadelphia: Moore College of Art & Design, 2011), 2.



A reconstruction of all Absalon's Cells, as originally envisioned by the artist in 1993. The cells are numbered from one to six (left to right). Based on photos taken by Arthur Péquin at the CAPC Museum in Bordeaux from Guillaume Désanges and François Piron, *Absalon Absalon* (Paris: Paraguay Press, 2021). Drawn by the author.

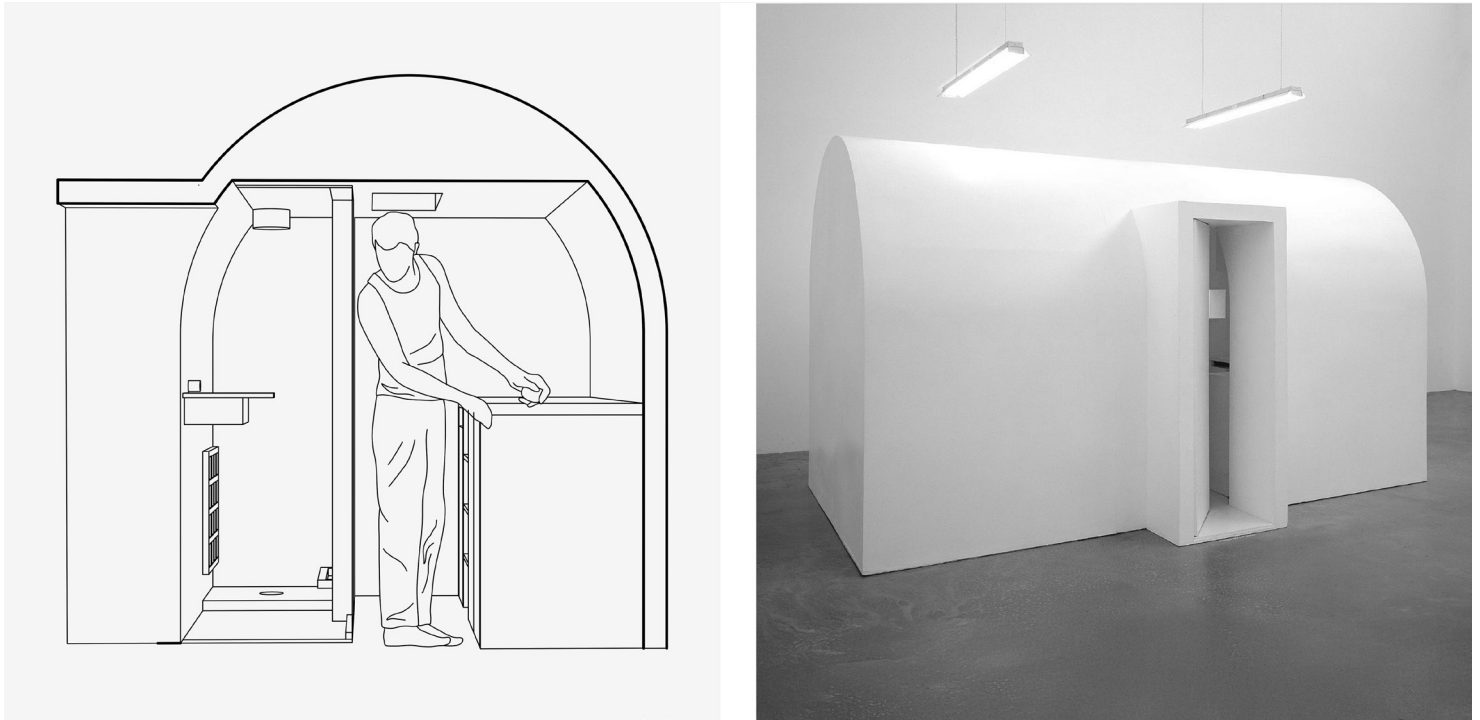
Absalon's work was a continuous progression; each step was nourished by the preceding one. An interesting feature of Absalon's work is a series of videos, such as *Proposal for Habitats* (1991) and *Solutions* (1992), that drew the path for his final project, the *Cells*. The first video, *Proposal for Habitats*, presented unidentifiable objects resembling pieces of furniture but lacking any functional purpose. Absalon explores various positions implying the use of these objects. In a similar way, the first iteration of the *Cells* (1991) comprised geometric abstract volumes. The following year, *Solutions* clarified what was hinted at in the first video; he filmed himself attempting to inhabit one of his prototypes. Absalon performs domestic tasks, and the furniture finally accommodates his body dimension.²⁹ In these videos, it becomes clear that Absalon sought to examine human life in its smallest details to understand what kind of space could accommodate and even transform his life. He presents a perspective that not only questions domesticity as a matter of style but also envisions a radically different way of living than that implied by the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior. This exploration reaches its culmination in the final iteration of his *Cells*.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Pier Vittorio Aureli, *Less is Enough: On architecture and Ascetism* (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2014), 52.

CELLS FOR LIVING

In the spring of 1993, Absalon constructed the second version of life-sized prototypes of the *Cells* for an exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. Just before his death, he decided that he would spend the rest of his days in these *Cells*, making his life a work of art:³¹ “That is to say, these houses are anything but utopian; they are real houses in which I will truly live.”³² His idea of domesticity goes beyond stationary life and embraces an alternative, transient perspective. His will to locate the *Cells* in diverse urban landscapes where he used to work resonates with the dissolution of the outmoded eighteenth- and nineteenth-century suburban housing paradigm.³³ Treated as 1:1 scale prototypes, these mock-ups were devoid of water and electricity and are now open to the public. They were not architectural projects but rather a series of installations. Confined to nine to ten square meters, the interiors were meticulously tailored to the artist's size; he stood at 1.89 meters tall. Consequently, the *Cells* were not conceived for the size of an average person.³⁴ If someone were to visit him, the constrained space would place Absalon and his guest just forty centimeters apart, initiating a more intimate and personal connection.



Left: A perspective section of Absalon's *Cell No. 1*, illustrating the bed and bathroom arrangement. Drawn by the author.

Right: Absalon, *Cell No. 1*, 1992. © Estate Absalon.

31 Ibid., 54.

32 Désanges and Piron, *Absalon Absalon*, 19.

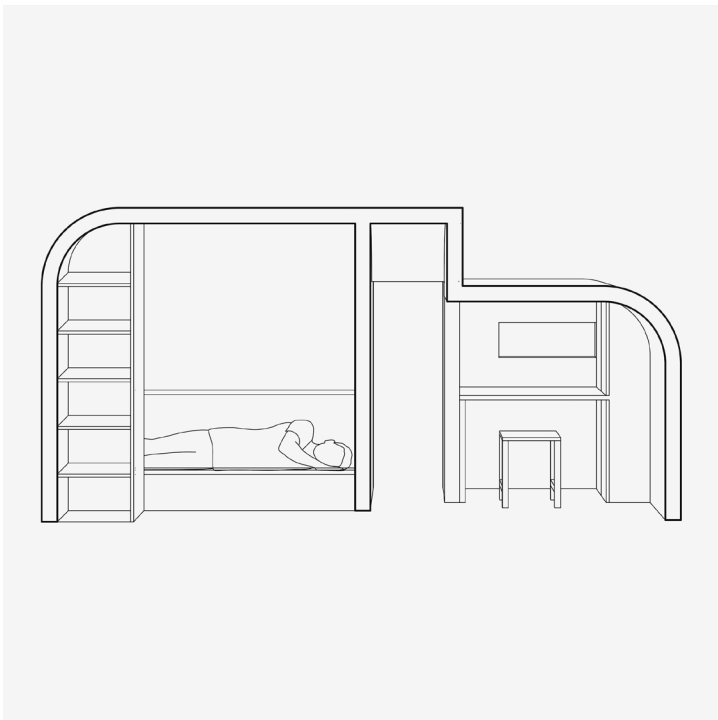
33 Georgina Downey, *Domestic Interiors: Representing Homes from the Victorians to the Modern* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 2.

34 Marine Morin, *Absalon, zone d'art habitée* (Paris: Dilecta Eds, 2014), 50.



Left: A perspective section of Absalon's *Cell No. 2*, illustrating the kitchen cabinets and workspace. Drawn by the author.

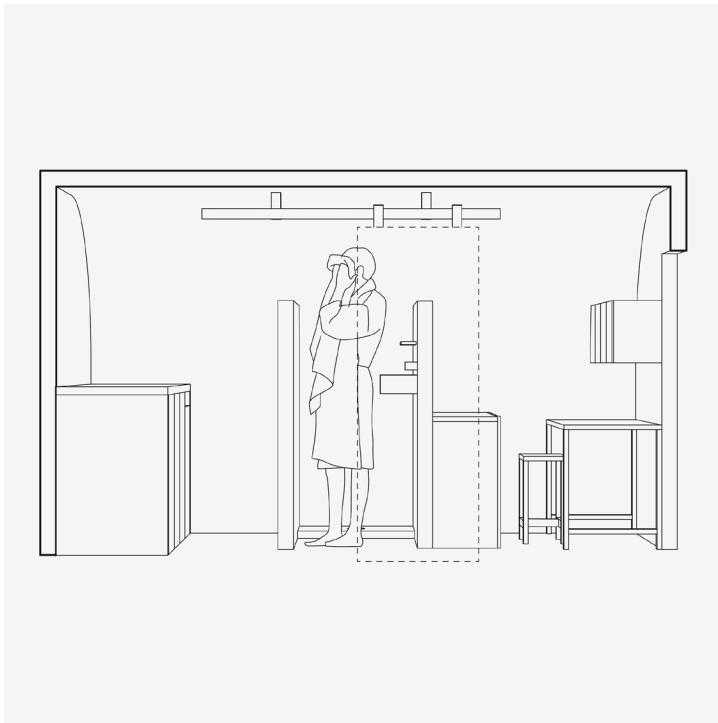
Right: Absalon, *Cell No. 2*, 1992. © Estate Absalon.



Left: A perspective section of Absalon's *Cell No. 3*, illustrating the storage space, bed and workspace. Drawn by the author.

Right: Absalon, *Cell No. 3*, 1992. © Estate Absalon.

His domestic spaces redefined the relationship between the body and space, preventing him from accumulating material possessions or conforming to conventional bourgeois family life. Yet, he viewed restraint not as a form of punitive discipline, but as a means of shaping his chosen way of life. His project reveals an essential aspect of self-organization by emphasizing the growing importance of rules and norms.³⁵ Absalon had to measure his movements, actions, and activities, like eating, reading, washing, and sleeping. This led him to have a lifestyle of very strict discipline, which Absalon referred to as a daily choreography.³⁶ He drew a parallel to the way using a fork and a knife might seem counterintuitive at first and becomes a habit over time. Beneath their minimalist appearance, his *Cells* raise multiple questions concerning the emancipation of the physical body from the social body. Their pure whiteness and absence of unnecessary architectural ornamentation create spaces that transcend mere physical perception, allowing room for self-agency and autonomy.³⁷ His perspective is most likely influenced by a Foucauldian understanding of existence, particularly based on *Discipline and Punish*.^{38 39} The final stage involved the actual construction of the domestic cells, which were planned to be strategically placed in locations to which he used to travel—Paris, Zurich, Frankfurt, New York, Tel Aviv, and Tokyo. Echoing his health situation, he perceived each one of them as “a virus in the city.”⁴⁰ Regrettably, he didn't witness the installation of the *Cells* in the cities he aspired to inhabit.⁴¹



Left: A perspective section of Absalon's *Cell No. 4*, illustrating the centralized shower.
 Drawn by the author.

Right: Absalon, *Cell No. 4*, 1992. © Estate Absalon.

35 Aureli, *Less is Enough*, 55.

36 Laalou and Morin, *Absalon, zone d'art habitée*, 50

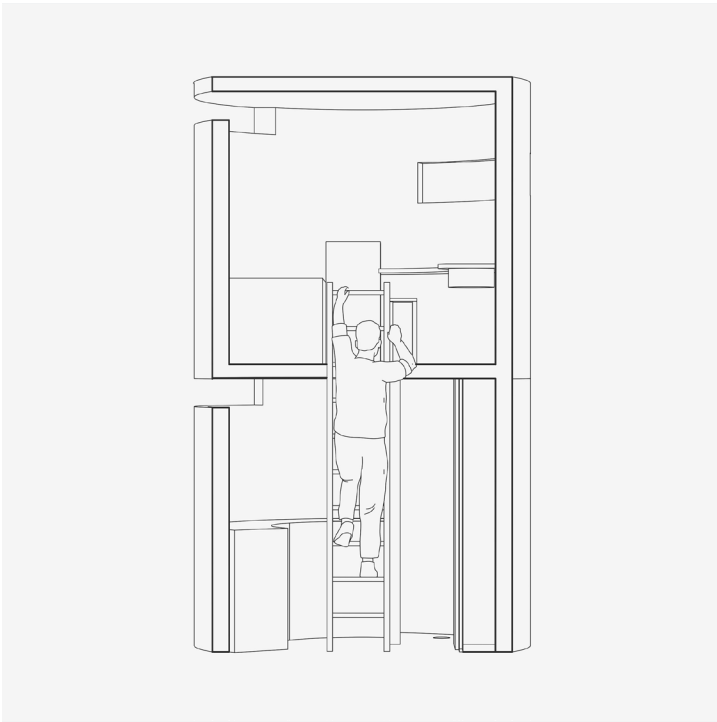
37 Ibid.

38 In this book, Foucault examines the development of the Western prison system, police forces, and the administrative and legal hierarchies that sustain mechanisms of social control, alongside the broader emergence of a disciplinary society. Although Absalon does not explicitly reference Foucault, his familiarity with Foucauldian theories suggests an awareness of these critiques and reflections on society. Thus, one might interpret Absalon's work as engaging with similar critical perspectives and frameworks for understanding social structures.

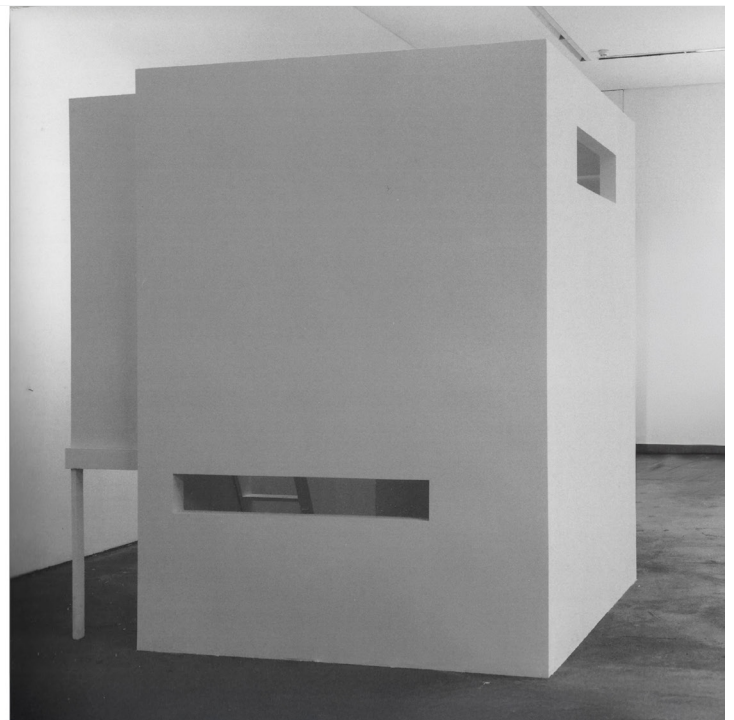
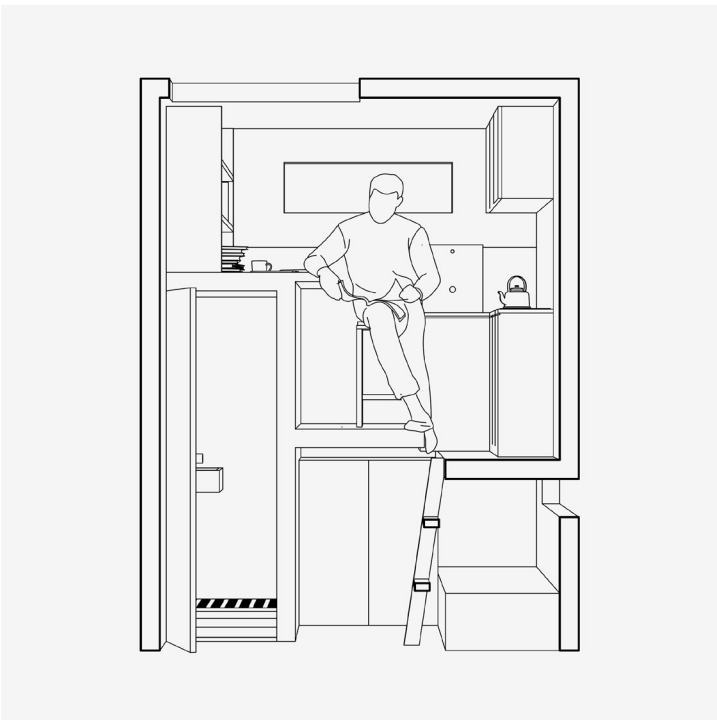
39 Absalon is often associated with modernist architectural models and the machine aesthetic of Le Corbusier. Nonetheless, it is necessary to differentiate between them. By rejecting the generalizing criterion of the modulator in favor of an absolute specificity of scale, Absalon's work turned to a radical incarnation of non-standardized architecture. See: Vergne, *Absalon*, 5–6.

40 Laalou and Morin, *Absalon, zone d'art habitée*, 19.

41 Désanges and Piron, *Absalon Absalon*, 11.



Left: A perspective section of Absalon's *Cell No. 5*, illustrating the separation of functions on different levels accessed by a ladder. Drawn by the author.
Right: Absalon, *Cell No. 5*, 1992. © Estate Absalon.



Left: A perspective section of Absalon's *Cell No. 6*, illustrating the vertical compartmentalization of functions. Drawn by the author.
Right: Absalon, *Cell No. 6*, 1992. © Estate Absalon.

In this context, vulnerability, resistance, and resilience play a crucial role. Absalon's autonomous units unveil a persistent and strong commitment to a rigorous material economy that results from the curation of essential needs and desires. This commitment does not entail punitive discipline but rather goes against a consumerist approach of accumulation and embourgeoisement.

Most of the pieces of furniture arranged in the cells have been standardized. *Cells No. 1, No. 2, and No. 4* share the same bed with a wardrobe underneath. Additionally, all cells feature a consistent bathroom system, most of the time incorporating the water closet within the shower. The sink in the bathroom also appears to be uniform across all cells. Nevertheless, the replicability of these elements doesn't affect the singularity of each unit. All of these city cells represent distinct ways of living and illustrate the impact of domestic interiors on our daily rituals. Their plurality might underline that Absalon believed that our needs and desires have the potential to change. The multiple arrangements he organized can be understood as a symbol of our evolutive needs and that our relationship with the domestic interior and its arrangement is temporary. The architecture complements his choreography during various activities, such as cooking, working, or reading. For example, when seated, the ceiling adjusts to accommodate these movements. Some rituals are even perceptible from the outside; in *Cell No. 3*, a distinct cylinder indicates the sleeping area. Some cells exhibit clear partitioning of activities, creating a stratification in their arrangement and revealing a dichotomy between domestic and daily pursuits. Conversely, others blur the boundaries between these functions. Two cells are constructed over two floors, with the upper level accessed by a ladder. With his whole trajectory laid out in front of us, Absalon's universe may seem close to certain science-fiction dystopias in which humanity has burrowed itself away in aseptic and uniform housing.⁴²

A QUEER PERSPECTIVE ON INDIVIDUALISM AND DOMESTICITY

While Absalon's work may not directly challenge dominant social or spatial orders, it is fertile ground for envisioning the liberated "I" in its fullest form within a domestic context.

Foucault, for instance, claims that power relations are everywhere, even at a micro-level, especially in spaces where one might least expect to find them.⁴³ They do not function through repression and prohibition but rather tend to operate in a productive manner. In this sense, sexuality, for instance, emerges from a network of power relations embedded in bodies through social constructions.⁴⁴ In the scope of this paper, the power structure that is questioned is the dominant norm referred to as heteronormativity. Given that knowledge-power is omnipresent, one could explore what responses can be formulated and which counter-practices can be developed to challenge these structures.⁴⁵ Foucault argues that resisting power does not involve freeing oneself from it but confronting it directly, making it illusory to position oneself outside of such structures: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power."⁴⁶ In his writings, he outlines several methods of resistance. One involves disrupting established paths to knowledge by creating new frameworks that can reshape existing power dynamics. Another approach is to reverse

42 Ibid., 24.

43 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 93.

44 Sam Bourcier, *Queer Zones: La Trilogie* (Editions Amsterdam/ Multitudes, Amsterdam, 2018), 139–140.

45 Bourcier, *Queer Zones*, 139–140.

46 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 5.

disciplinary discourses as a way of challenging the desire for knowledge. Foucault views discourse as both a product of power and a source of resistance. Ultimately, he elaborates on the ongoing construction of the self through a unique relationship with oneself and emphasizes the necessity of taking care of the self. This ethic is described as a “technology of the self” as an art of living, a *téchnê* that should lead to a relationship of reflexivity. It involves work that allows one to escape social and psychological determinations.⁴⁷ According to Foucault, “The care of the self, or the attention to others’ self-care, emerges as an intensification of social relations.”⁴⁸ The cultivation of the self is thus not a self-centered endeavor pursued only for personal benefit; rather, this practice also contributes to the well-being of the entire society.⁴⁹

Similarly, Absalon seems to embrace the practice of self-care in the *Cells* project. For him, being alone transcends mere biological functions like rest and sleep; it also includes the solitary joys of contemplation and the act of voluntary withdrawal.⁵⁰ The *Cells* represent a modern reimagining of the monk’s cell, emphasizing the use of space, above all else. This ethos of use, stripped to its core, embodies a fundamentally queer approach. By paring the environment down to its essentials, Absalon challenges the consumerist fixations of contemporary culture, proposing a radical form of self-definition that prioritizes discipline and intentionality over material comfort. These single-person dwellings are deliberately austere, imposing a strict order on existence and redefining domesticity as a site for profound self-enactment, free from the distractions of excess and materialism.⁵¹ In this way, Absalon’s *Cells* provide a lens through which to understand what a queer use of space can entail: an ongoing act of self-construction and self-awareness, existing outside conventional social norms and representations. As Georges Chauncey, a queer historian and writer, suggests, a queer space cannot be predetermined by physical forms or objects; it is the subjective experience that imbues a space with queerness. Thus, interiors become simultaneously spatial and conceptual, shaped by the gaze and lived experience of queer individuals. Absalon’s *Cells* do not offer expansive or freely appropriable spaces. Instead, they present optimized environments that reflect the rigor and choreography of his daily life, resonating with a queer use of space by providing an affirming and disciplined context for exploring identity. His approach to art mirrors this act of self-enactment, where spaces are created not for comfort or utility but to enforce a deliberate discipline, challenging us to rethink what it means to live with intention and autonomy.

Even in the twenty-first century, living alone continues to carry significant stigma often perceived as a consequence of external forces confining people to their homes—most recently, COVID-19. Sociological discussions frequently associate this trend with rising loneliness, the decline of civil society, and the erosion of communal bonds. Yet the reality is more nuanced: the number of people living alone has surged dramatically over the past few decades. In the United States, solo dwellers now make up 28 percent of all households, a proportion as common as childless couples and more prevalent than traditional nuclear families, multigenerational households, or shared arrangements with roommates. In Europe, the figure is even higher, with 30 percent of the population—over 72 million people—living alone.⁵² Interestingly, solo living has proven to be one of the most stable living arrangements. Over a five-year span, people who live alone are more likely to continue doing so than any other group, aside from married couples with children. This phenomenon has opened up new avenues for personal, social, and romantic development. Young and middle-aged singletons have played a key role in revitalizing urban public

47 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1896), 140–143.

48 Ibid, 53.

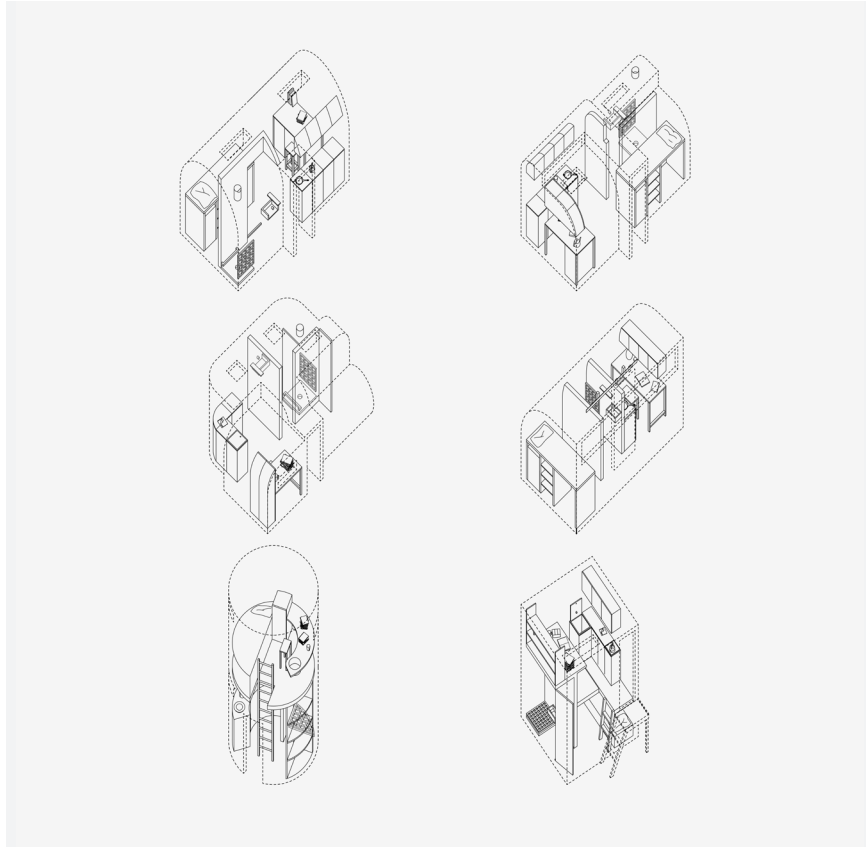
49 Ibid.

50 Laalou and Morin, Absalon, *Zone d’art habitée*, 51.

51 Aureli, *Less is Enough*, 54.

52 Klinenberg, *Going Solo*, 297.

life, as they are more likely than those living with others to spend time with friends and neighbors, visit bars and restaurants, and participate in informal gatherings. For many women, the growing acceptance of solo living has offered an empowering escape from dysfunctional marriages and restrictive family structures, enabling them to reclaim their dignity and reshape their lives.⁵³



Axonometric views of Cells No. 1 to No. 6, arranged from the top left to the bottom right. The illustration highlights the interior organisation of functions tailored to serve the single occupant. Based on photos taken by Arthur Péquin at the CAPC Museum in Bordeaux. From Guillaume Désanges and François Piron, *Absalon Absalon* (Paris: Paraguay Press, 2021). Drawn by the author.

Even as collective housing models gain interest as economically viable solutions for those who wish to live independently, these arrangements often come at the cost of individual freedom. The yearning for “a home of one’s own,” however one envisions it, remains an ideal that is still far from fully realized. What, then, could this home for one truly be? Absalon’s lifelong investigation into the rituals that shape our daily lives pushes us to reconsider what is essential for a good life. His *Cells* are more than artistic experiments; they challenge the social constructs that dictate our patterns of living and redefine domesticity as a site of self-enactment. By stripping away excess and embracing only what is truly necessary, Absalon’s work encourages us to envision a life detached from societal demands, where personal space becomes a means of liberation rather than confinement. In this way, his work invites us to contemplate domesticity not as a passive backdrop but as an active stage for realizing a more intentional and autonomous existence.⁵⁴

⁵³ Klinenberg, *Going Solo*, 12.

⁵⁴ Dogma, *The Room of One’s Own* (Milan: Black Square, 2018), 30.

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