

# Another Day In Quarantine: The Transmutation Of The House

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I didn't wake up that day like all the others. I had slept badly. My only peace of mind was that my morning had started with a nice *mate*<sup>1</sup>. How beautiful is the certitude when you can embrace it, when it covers you like a shelter or like the batik blanket I used to have in my room with green walls. Now a new day was beginning, another day of a physical distance that neither I nor anyone else was used to. My partner and I went to the balcony to let the air pass through us and, like that, for a few seconds, slowly transmute.

Our small balcony has the aridity of a desert, but its bland paint seemed a good plan, it evoked hope. On that balcony I had made a suggestion to him before. I told him that I wanted to put a grill in the tiny space of our balcony, where not even three chairs can fit, in that same space where water usually falls from the neighbour's air conditioning units. He told me I was crazy and that there were probably rules that didn't allow us. I'm sure there are. I persisted, I insisted with the idea of gas grill. He looked at me, laughed, and went for the mosquito repellent and alcohol gel. New goods are taking part of people's provisioning.

On Friday, March 20th at 00hs Argentina began a mandatory quarantine. President Alberto Fernandez's announcement on Thursday night kept a large part of the population awake.

## Aislamiento social, preventivo y obligatorio

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El aislamiento social, preventivo y obligatorio es una medida excepcional que el Gobierno nacional adopta en un contexto crítico.

**Con el fin de proteger la salud pública, todas las personas** que habitan en el país o se encuentren en él en forma temporaria **deberán permanecer en sus domicilios habituales** o en donde se encontraban a las 00:00 horas del día 20 de marzo de 2020.

**Hasta el 31 de marzo inclusive, deberán abstenerse de concurrir a sus lugares de trabajo y no podrán circular por rutas, vías y espacios públicos.**

Solo podrán realizar **desplazamientos mínimos e indispensables** para **aprovisionarse de artículos de limpieza, medicamentos y alimentos.**

<sup>1</sup> About the mate: <https://yerbamateargentina.org.ar/en/>.



Dengue fever<sup>2</sup> and the coronavirus become two enemies to be fought. Inexplicably, the quarantine began to be expressed in the house and in our bodies. My hands are rough and I'm getting a callus from washing myself. I couldn't help thinking about my life, my affections, my friends. I miss my routines so much. I want eternal hugs. I feel that care and freedom are fused in a very strange way that has the texture of slime and the complexity of a thesis. I'm overwhelmed and somehow, I tuned the TV on. TV programs show coronavirus cases merged with educational programs, and offers or suggestions for sports exercises at home. Spaces are assembled and disassembled, furniture is moved, objects are displayed or stored. Functionality becomes one of the keys to survival in confinement where the house can - and in some cases must - be a place of work, leisure, intimacy and entertainment. This doesn't make our normality any better, even though people are continually trying to normalize some of these experiences.



<sup>2</sup>Dengue fever has been present in Argentina at least since 1998, but in 2016 there was a significant outbreak in the country. Back then the cases were registered in Misiones, Formosa, Salta and Jujuy (Northwestern Argentina). However, this March 2020, endemic cases of dengue fever were registered in the City of Buenos Aires and in Buenos Aires Province -where a third of Argentina's population lives. From then on, health workers continue to announce the massification of dengue fever risk in the country. <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/253933-dengue-la-epidemia-continua-su-expansion-en-argentina>



I observed the street and it was empty. I realise that our lives are more fragile than we thought; the penetration of social media in our routines and the changes in our emotional ties. Those streets are no longer walked in the same way. Confusion and uncertainty can sometimes be devastating. The *mate*<sup>3</sup> was suddenly not passed from hand to hand because there was no longer any face-to-face encounter. The figure of the bait (*la persona encargada de cebar*), who knows the times and rhythms of the *mate* round, is no longer there. People find themselves in a Whatsapp, Zoom, Hangouts or Skype call. Everyone has his own *mate*. It's still a backwater in this storm.

For more than three years I have researched the ways in which the middle classes inhabit and use their homes in a town in Buenos Aires state.<sup>4</sup> Now the audios of my informants kept coming back to me,

talking about their daily practices, that they were tidying up, cleaning up, and trying to stay "positive" but things had changed. I couldn't help asking myself about the other houses: the ones you can't see, the ones with corroded materials or water leaks, the ones with empty refrigerators. What happens when inequality is embodied in the house in quarantine times? Risk and contagion seem to be the order of the day. Dengue fever bites are there too. The Argentinean state has taken the lead with action and responsibility. The State is present and at home. The hashtag #Quedateencasa (#Stayathome) contributes to that purpose.

Ways of organising work and its modalities, popular economies and the health and social security system are all being shaken by quarantine. On March 28<sup>th</sup> the Secretary of Access to Health, Carla Vizzotti, announced the arrival of thirty-one thousand reagents for testing COVID-19 in Argentina. These will be sent to different points in the country to speed up and decentralise the diagnosis. Later, the undersecretary of Health Strategies, Alejandro Costas, announced that a total of 690 people have been infected and 17 have died in Argentina. The average age of the cases detected is 44 years. Of those infected, 58% are male.

<sup>3</sup> Mate is a popular beverage in most South American countries: Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and southern Brazil. It is made using leaves and small branches of the yerba mate plant, which are soaked in hot water to make mate or in cold water to make *tereré*. The leaves soaked in water are put in a pot, called *porongo*, and are drunk with a *bombilla* (special straw with a filter).

In Argentina, the mate is part of the daily life of many people, it is shared in a round and there is always someone in charge of priming and passing the drink to the whole round.

<sup>4</sup> My research takes an ethnographic approach in focusing on the forms of inhabiting of the middle classes in Haedo (Morón, Buenos Aires, Argentina). It is important to note that both -in my research and in recent events- house (*casa*) is the word most used. For the purposes of this note I will use the word home.

In times where immediacy seems to be a virtue, it is time to observe, listen and record. Moments like these do not resist analysis. However, experiences can help to continue sharing and creating social bonds not only among those of us who do social and human research but also with each person who inhabits our societies, and our homes.

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*Imgge1. Print Health Ministry Web Page. Source: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/coronavirus/aislamiento>*

*Imgge 2. Daily kit of the author: yerba mate, alcohol gel and repellent. Own source.*

*Imgge of Mate Preparation. Source: Salaamarilla Blogspot*

*Imgge 3. Cleaning and organizing the rooms. Own source.*