



**A PLACE
TO CALL
HOME
(FOR NOW)**

**EVEN THOUGH SHE MAY NOT LIVE IN HER DREAM HOME (YET),
JOURNALIST CAROLINE BUIJS GETS TO ENJOY BEAUTIFUL
PLACES BY 'BORROWING' THEM FROM TIME TO TIME.**



As a child I lived in a perfectly ordinary townhouse on a perfectly ordinary street in a perfectly ordinary Dutch town, and I dreamed about living in a house like the wooden villa from *Pippi Longstocking*. When I got a bit older I watched the TV series *Dallas* with my sister every Saturday night: I not only enjoyed it for the love story between Pam and Bobby, but I would imagine myself living in all of the big American mansions with swimming pools.

The first place I called my own was a tiny room in a student house on one of the most well-known canals in Amsterdam—the Keizersgracht. The room had been the servants' quarters in a previous life and it overlooked the neighbor's backyard. After that, my Amsterdam living spaces steadily increased in size: my next place was an apartment in the Jordaan neighborhood. For the very first time I had my own private kitchen, and a shared bathroom and shower—even though we had to install the shower ourselves. The old lady who lived there before us would still go to the local swimming pool to shower. She also, by the way, shared this small apartment with her husband and five children: not because she loved tiny homes but because of the housing shortage and poverty caused by the war.

FEELING AT HOME

I still live in the city (now with my husband and two kids) in a comfortable good-sized apartment—and here is where my housing journey came to a halt. It is not a *Dallas*-style mansion with a swimming pool, no Villa Villekulla with a wooden veranda, but I'm still very lucky. And I'm surrounded by all sorts of places that I can borrow. I've learned that you don't actually have to own a house or a garden for it to feel a little bit like it's yours. If it is a beautiful summer's day and the weather makes me long for a backyard, for example, I'll simply stuff a book and blanket into my bag and bike to a nearby park: I'll borrow it as a yard for the day.

I'm sitting in my office as I'm writing this story. It is a studio that I share with other freelancers: another home of sorts. The kitchen in the studio feels like an extension to a living room—there is a warm rug on the concrete floor, a lamp in the corner, pretty paintings on the walls and a big turquoise-colored table for eating lunch. The table is also sometimes used for a stamp-cutting workshop taught by one of my studio mates and it's a nice place to hold meetings with colleagues. My workspace in the studio also

has a homey feel: the wall next to where I sit is full of pictures, I have a plant on my desk and the windowsill is covered with my Fat Lava vase collection; the only thing missing is a couch for taking naps. Sometimes if it is too busy in the studio then I'll go to the coffee shop around the corner to write, which feels a bit like I'm borrowing a living room. It always makes me think of the TV series *Gilmore Girls*, and how Lorelei and her daughter Rory sit in Luke's Diner like it's their second dining room.

JUST LIKE BULLERBY

In his book *The Architecture of Happiness*, Swiss-British philosopher Alain de Botton writes that you can call a place home without actually owning it: 'In turn, those places whose outlook matches and legitimates our own, we tend to honor with the term "home". Our homes do not have to offer us permanent occupancy or store our clothes to merit the name. To speak of home in relation to a building is simply to recognize its harmony with our own prized internal song. Home can be an airport or library, a garden or a motorway diner.'

Vacations are the perfect time for a homestay: living in a 'real' house when the owners are away on vacation. The best part is that it offers you a glimpse into someone else's life and it's a great way to get decorating ideas for your own home. If there is a piano in the house you can watch a YouTube video and learn how to play your first notes, or you can experience what it is like to have a rooftop terrace or a hammock in the yard. The house has character because someone actually lives in it. I'll never forget the homestay where I finally got to live in the house I dreamed of living in as a kid: a Swedish-style house like Pippi Longstocking's. That was definitely, as De Botton says, in harmony with my own prized internal song. It had a nicely filled bookcase, a cabinet full of different vintage china cups and plates, a wooden veranda (without a horse but still with a beautiful view), flowered wallpaper and a typical Swedish fireplace. And the icing on the cake was that the Swedish author (and creator of Pippi Longstocking) Astrid Lindgren herself had stayed there before—she and the owner were friends—so it immediately became a hit with my daughter too. That night after reading *Ronia, The Robber's Daughter* she asked softly, "Do you think this is the bed Astrid slept in?" The house is located in a small >

**'THAT TINY SENSE OF PANIC YOU'RE FEELING
RIGHT NOW IS EXACTLY HOW HOSTS
FEEL THE FIRST TIME THEY OPEN THEIR HOME'**

neighborhood comprised of three houses, just like in Lindgren's village of Bullerby (based on the real Swedish village, Sevedstorp). The stay that summer was made even better by the neighbor who told us in his broken English that we could take as much lettuce out of his yard as we wanted. When we stayed in the house for the second time during Christmas and it snowed at night, the same neighbor came over of his own accord and shoveled the driveway. The owners of the house also went out of their way to pick us up on Christmas Eve and bring us back through the mist that commonly arises in the area—it was a half-hour journey through a dark and snowy fairy-tale landscape.

STRANGERS ARE FRIENDS

This social aspect is what led American designer and entrepreneur Joe Gebbia, along with two others, to start Airbnb. In the TED Talk he gave in 2016, he discussed his first experience as a host and how it completely changed his perspective. He held a yard sale the day after he graduated from design school in Rhode Island, US, and that night he drank a beer with a man who had purchased a painting from him earlier in the afternoon. The man was taking a cross-country road trip and when Gebbia found out that the man didn't have anywhere to sleep that night, he invited him to stay at his place on an airbed. That night Gebbia stared at the ceiling wondering: What the hell am I doing? A complete stranger, who may be psychotic, is sleeping in my living room. He scared himself so much that he immediately got up and locked his bedroom door. In the end the man turned out not to be a psychopath and they still keep in touch: he's a teacher now and Gebbia's painting is hanging in his classroom. Maybe, thought Gebbia (and this is where his perspective changed), people who he learned to label as 'strangers' in his childhood are just friends waiting to be discovered. The practice of hosting people soon became second nature to him. After a few bumps in the road he created Airbnb, which is now completely reliant on trust.

To demonstrate this point during his TED Talk, Gebbia asked every person in the crowd to unlock his or her cell phone and hand it to the person sitting directly to the left of them. "That tiny sense of panic you're feeling right now," he said, "is exactly how hosts feel the first time they open their home because the only thing more personal

than your phone is your home. People don't just see your messages, they see your bedroom, your kitchen, your toilet." Gebbia then added, "Now, how does it feel holding someone's unlocked phone? Most of us feel really responsible. That's how most guests feel when they stay in a home."

NEIGHBORHOOD BARBECUE

Maybe I like vacationing in other people's homes because of my parents. In 1976, long before there was Airbnb, my parents rented a house in Germany that they found through my father's company newsletter. It was our first vacation out of the country. We took the train and a bus to get there because we didn't have a car and the owner organized for the neighbors to pick us up from the bus stop. During our stay, my mother wrote this in her vacation journal: 'Frau Hesse came to pick us up and bring us "home". She is very nice and immediately showed us around the house. In one word: fantastic! It's a villa!'

Even though I was only seven years old, I have a lot of memories from that vacation; maybe it is precisely because of the personal treatment we were given. My most vivid memory is when I discovered The Beatles: The bedroom I shared with my brother had a record player on the small table between our beds, and from morning till night we played The Beatles' 1962-1966, *Red Album*.

As it turned out, the villa sat in a very social neighborhood and they included us during the three weeks we lived there. In the beginning it was still a little strange: We came home from the city one evening to find the entire neighborhood barbecuing in our yard. Our house had the largest yard so it was standard practice for it to be used for these sorts of occasions. We were invited to join them, of course, and later on in the vacation my parents invited them all back one evening. I still remember my mother telling us the next morning about how special it was for her to talk about the war with Germans from her generation. 'We didn't drink coffee first like we normally would back home,' she wrote in her vacation journal. 'Instead we immediately started drinking beer. We laughed a lot as we discussed German culture, past and present. I know for certain that these types of discussions bring us one step closer to a better world.' ●

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS CAROLINE BUJES



1. Caroline (second from right) with her family on the balcony of the rented house in Germany. 2 to 5. Details from the Swedish home. 6. The house in Germany.