

# ● READER ●

● Title • *The One-Room Apartment*

● Author • *Robin Middleton*

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*1983* • When ●

*On the “minimal dwelling” of a one-room apartment. Interesting illustrations.*

# THE ONE-ROOM APARTMENT

Robin Middleton

That manipulative, organizing mind that seeks to confine living within the walls of a single cell is something one associates, as a rule, with the radical modernism of the twenties. One associates this reductionist ethic, in particular, with that Germanic zest for systematization and organization, and one thinks specifically of Ernst May and all those housing estates for which he was responsible at Frankfurt-am-Main. *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum*, expressed thus, encapsulates all one's prejudices against that will to reduce existence to its minimal form. Yet, surprisingly, the single-cell living unit is not included amongst the hundred-odd designs in the report of that title, produced by the CIAM congress of 1928. All the architects involved considered the minimal existence to be a family affair. And how proud the leading architects of the period were of their ability to squeeze family life right down may be seen at a glance in Leo Adler's *Neuzeitliche Miethäuser und Siedlungen*, of 1931, which involved most of the well-known architectural personalities. The English, of course, were not quite so adept at producing modern architecture of this kind, though one of the most famous of the buildings to be erected in England in the thirties, Wells Coates's Isokon flats, in Lawn Road, London, of 1934, was made up of such minimal cells, and they were moreover for single- and two-person occupation. They provide evidence of a depressing episode in architecture.

When designs of this kind were parodied it was usually the space-saving flat or the labour-saving device that was caricatured. Raymond Roussel, that maverick dandy and poet, began as early as 1925 with a mobile home (a thrust at Le Corbusier's aspirations) which he had built and which he exhibited at the Salon de l'Automobile and which he sent twice on tour through France. *La revue du Touring Club de France* devoted a whole article to it. 'La Maison Roulante', however, was in a class of its own, with bodywork by Lacoste, interior fittings by Maples, with a bedroom, a dining room/living room, a complete bathroom and separate chauffeur's quarters. At the tail end of the minimalist period, William Heath Robinson, a real gadgeteer if ever there was one, took up, almost as his own, the whole gamut of cramping and pinching that constituted the advance of modern architecture. 'Flat dwelling' was a theme he returned to again and again in such books as *Absurdities* (1934) and *More absurdities*; in the end he was impelled to write and to illustrate with K.R.G. Browne *How to live in a flat* (1936), which is crammed full of space-saving

arrangements and devices, some of the most gruesome kind. But as before, in all such parodies, from Raymond Roussel onwards, Heath Robinson is concerned with the dwelling that is made up with interlocking spaces and parts, not with the single cell unit. Only at the Bauhaus, one may be somewhat surprised to find, was the essence of the whole enterprise clearly discerned and properly parodied. The man in a box, labelled 'Minimal dwelling', of the late twenties, sums up the ethic more accurately than any proclamation or programme of design. The author has remained anonymous (though it might have been Pauli).

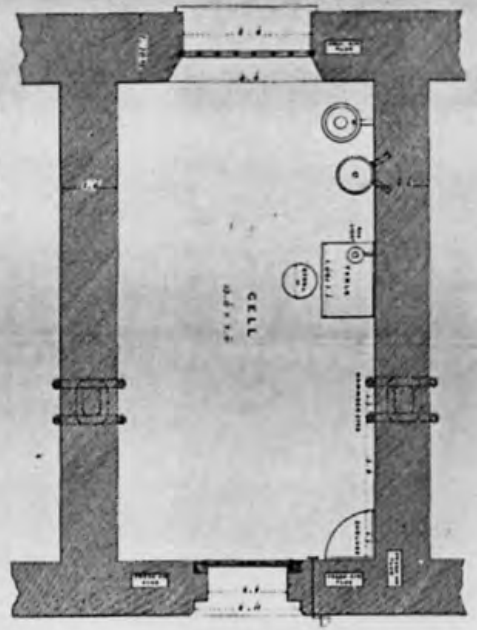
This ideal, however, seems to have been a recurring one; it can, for instance, be traced back to the seventeenth century, when the organizing spirit was first thrusting forth. The prime example is a design by Cornelius Meyer, an hydraulics engineer about whom very little indeed is known. He was born in Amsterdam but was called to Rome around 1680 to advise on the control of the Tiber, and in that city he seems to have spent the remainder of his life, producing endless schemes for banking and diverting the waters of the river and draining the Pontine marshes. But he also produced an array of other ingenious proposals, most of which were published in the two volumes, or rather two parts, of the *Nuovi ritrovamenti* (1696, 1689). Apart from the hydraulics, there are designs for dykes and bridges, carriages and carts, notes on silk farming, observations on the trajectories of comets and eclipses, the making of spectacles, the breaking of glass with high notes, a proposal even for an automobile, etc., but perhaps the most intriguing of all his offerings is the single-room apartment. There is virtually no text by way of explanation, only a note to the effect that Vitruvius's three criteria of 'stabilità', 'fermezza' and especially 'commoda', can be best and fully satisfied within the confines of the restricted space; and this restricted space is evoked by the four illustrations reproduced here (which do not in fact quite fit together) and their annotations. Meyer clearly liked ingenious and devious devices – listening tubes, spying glasses, secret connections and passageways, etc. Some of his obsessions, as one might expect, are close to Heath Robinson's: fold-away furniture, for instance, or the reliance on the chicken and the egg for an instant food supply. Both men shared attitudes of mind. Both men were imagining frameworks of confinement, ultimately, no doubt, for the containment of their own cranky selves.

Between Cornelius Meyer in the seventeenth century and Heath Robinson in the twentieth is the ultimate exemplar of restriction

in the name of self-improvement – the single-cell unit designed in 1840 by Major Joshua Jebb for Pentonville Prison (where he was assisted, very marginally, by the architect Charles Barry). This was, demonstrably, the most ‘functional’ of buildings ever conceived. The function was limited and could be clearly defined – everything was conditioned by the principle of Separate Confinement. Redemption of the mind and soul was to be achieved through isolation: the chance to reflect on one’s crime and to repent at length. Everything for a bare mode of living – everything apart from food preparation, that is – was provided within the cell: a hammock, a table, a stool, a shelf, a book or two, gas lighting, a basin with hot and cold water, and a w.c. One could be watched within this cell through a spy-hole in the door, but one could not look out, even through the window which was filled with a fixed pane of obscured glass. So determined was Jebb to provide the optimal of minimal conditions that he devised an exemplary heating and air-conditioning system, complete with humidity control. This was one of the first of its kind to be installed anywhere, and just preceded those designed for the rulers of the realm in the Palace of Westminster, or the Houses of

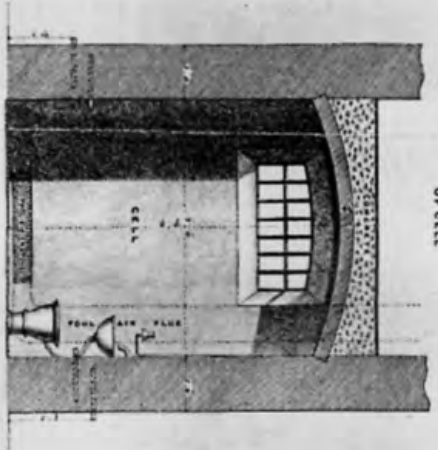
Parliament, and the Reform Club in Pall Mall, both designed by Barry. Jebb’s fully serviced living unit was one of the wonders of the world when it was complete; the King of Prussia himself came to England to see it, and so did many other such dignitaries.

Though Cornelius Meyer’s apartment, Jebb’s cell and the minimal dwellings of the twentieth century are all products of a particular cast of mind, there is of course a basic difference between them. Meyer’s and Jebb’s spaces are for isolation and confinement – you are not really meant to venture forth from them, except furtively. The *Existenzminimum* units are, so to speak, like base camps to which one returns to satisfy basic physical requirements such as eating, sleeping, washing, etc. before venturing forth once again to take part in the real battle of life, which is work and, perhaps, sport. Jebb, one should note, also allowed his prisoners out for physical and spiritual exercises; work was to be contained in the cell. Happily, whatever their differences, all such contrivances can be viewed now as aberrations, products of slightly sinister, manipulative minds not all that different from that of the officer’s in Franz Kafka’s chilling story, ‘In the penal settlement’.

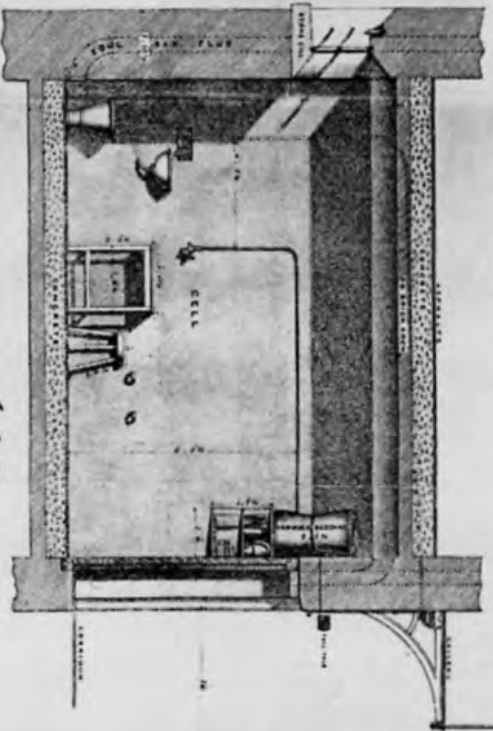


PLAN OF CELL

Note: The strengthening glass on doors which appear on this walls on the ground plan.



TRANSVERSE SECTION OF CELL



LONGITUDINAL SECTION OF CELL

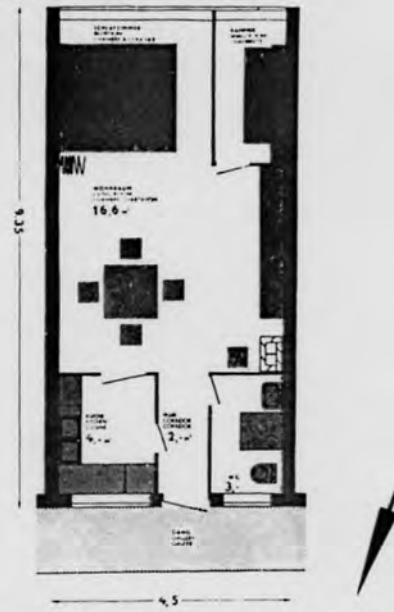
PRISON CELL

Plan of Pentonville Prison - 1844

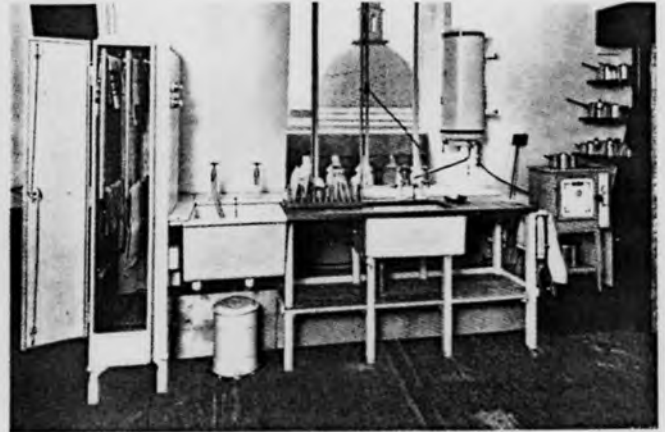
*J. Jebb*  
*Major J. Jebb*  
 Major J. Jebb } Surveyor Genl  
 of Prisons

Major Joshua Jebb - Prison cell from Report on the Construction of Pentonville Prison, 1844.

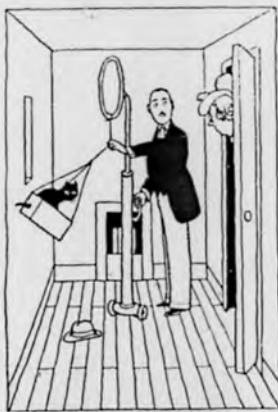
FRANKFURT A.M.



Ernst May - Plan from 'House for Several Parties', Frankfurt A.M., from Vorbereitender Internationaler Kongress für Neues Bauen, 1928.



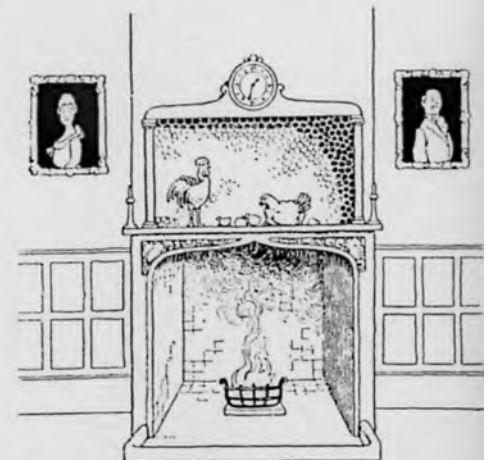
Wells Coates - Living room and kitchen of Isokon single-person flat, Lawn Road, London, 1934 (Architectural Review, 1933).



PROVING THAT THERE IS ROOM TO SWING A CAT

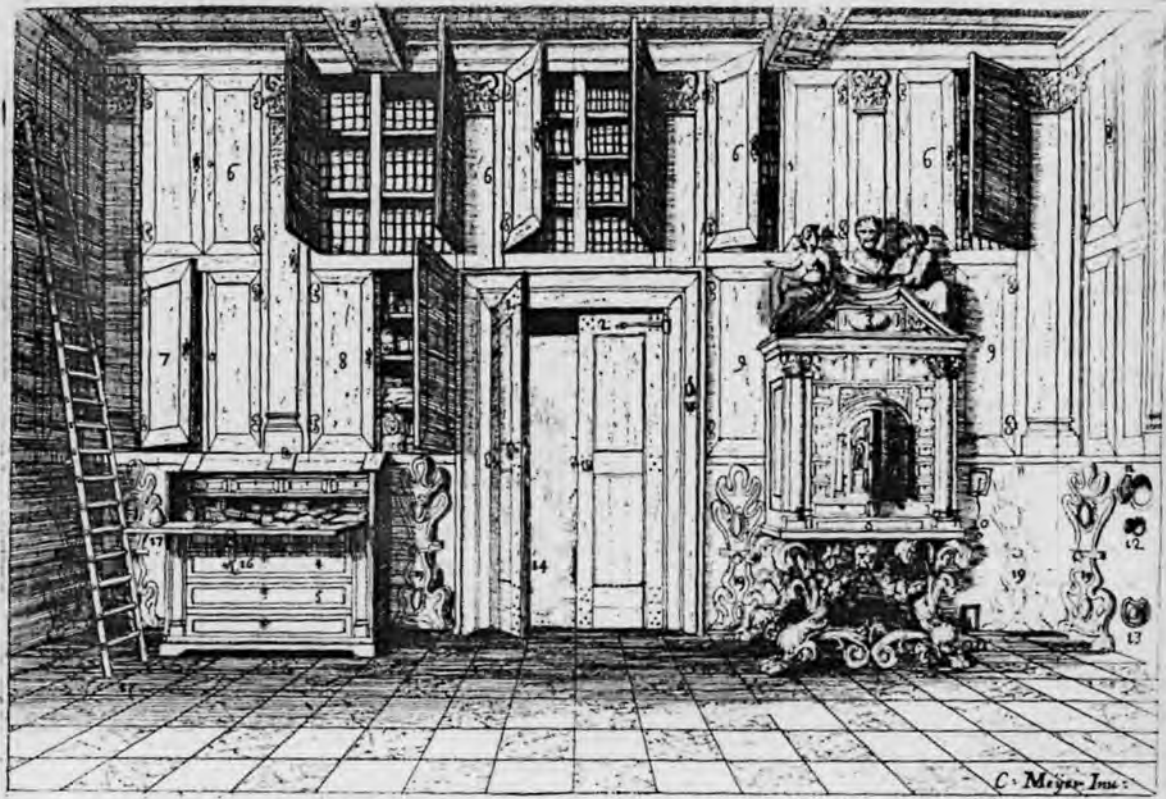


ECONOMY OF SPACE IN THE LOUNGE HALL



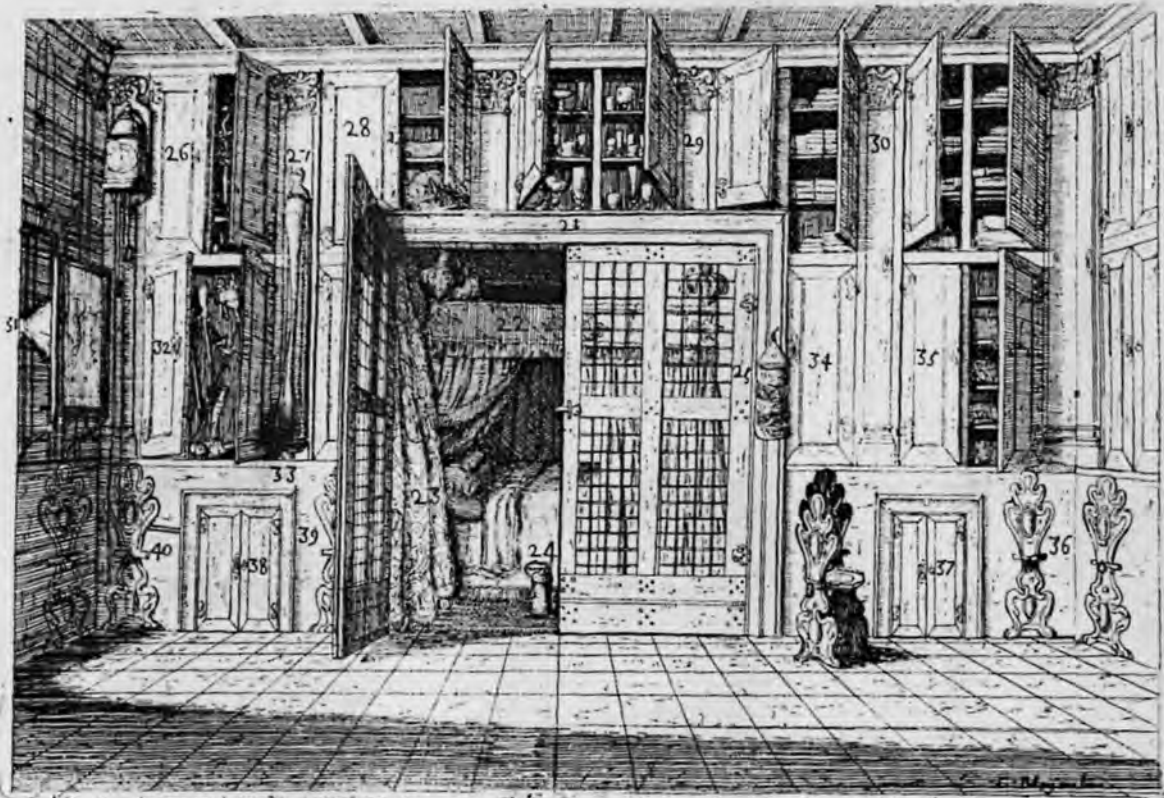
A handsome Tudor overmantel with chicken-run in Plantagenet Court, W.

Heath Robinson and K.R.G. Browne - How to Live in a Flat, 1936.



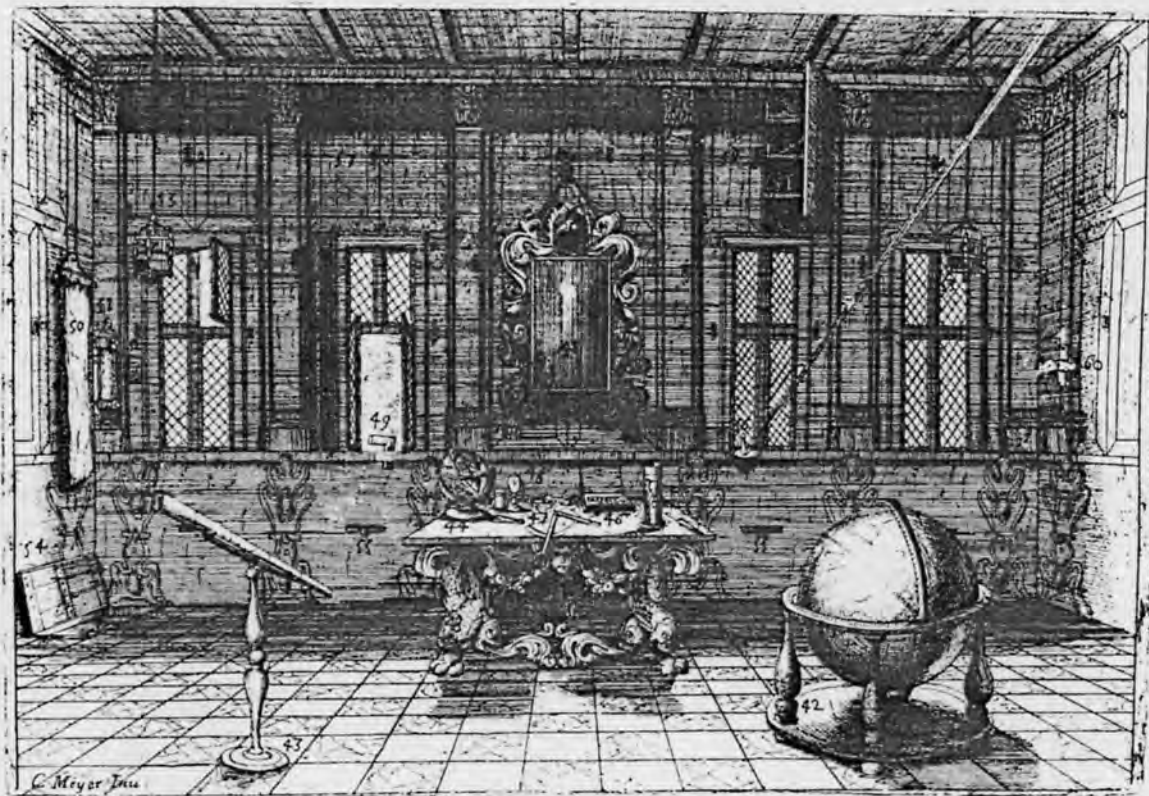
First Wall

- |   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|--|
| 1. Ingenious door contrivance permitting the leaf to open on the left or the right. | 6. Cupboards for books.                     | 12. Speaking tube to make contact with other rooms and even afar. | 15. Ladder to reach upper levels.            |
| 2. A similar door, with self-closing device.  | 7. Cupboard for ledgers and diaries.        | 13. Barber's tray.  | 16. Master key for all the locks.            |
| 3. Cabinet with various drawers.  | 8. Cupboard for letters and private papers. | 14. A chicken which can come in and lay eggs.                     | 17. Service bell.                            |
| 4. Desk with a bench to write and read.   | 9. Cupboard for curios.                     |   | 18. Entrance bell.                           |
| 5. Drawer for clothes for daily wear.   | 10. String for curios.                      |   | 19. Chairs that slide away within the walls. |
|   | 11. Listening tube to find out what is      |   | 20. Kennel for the dog.                      |



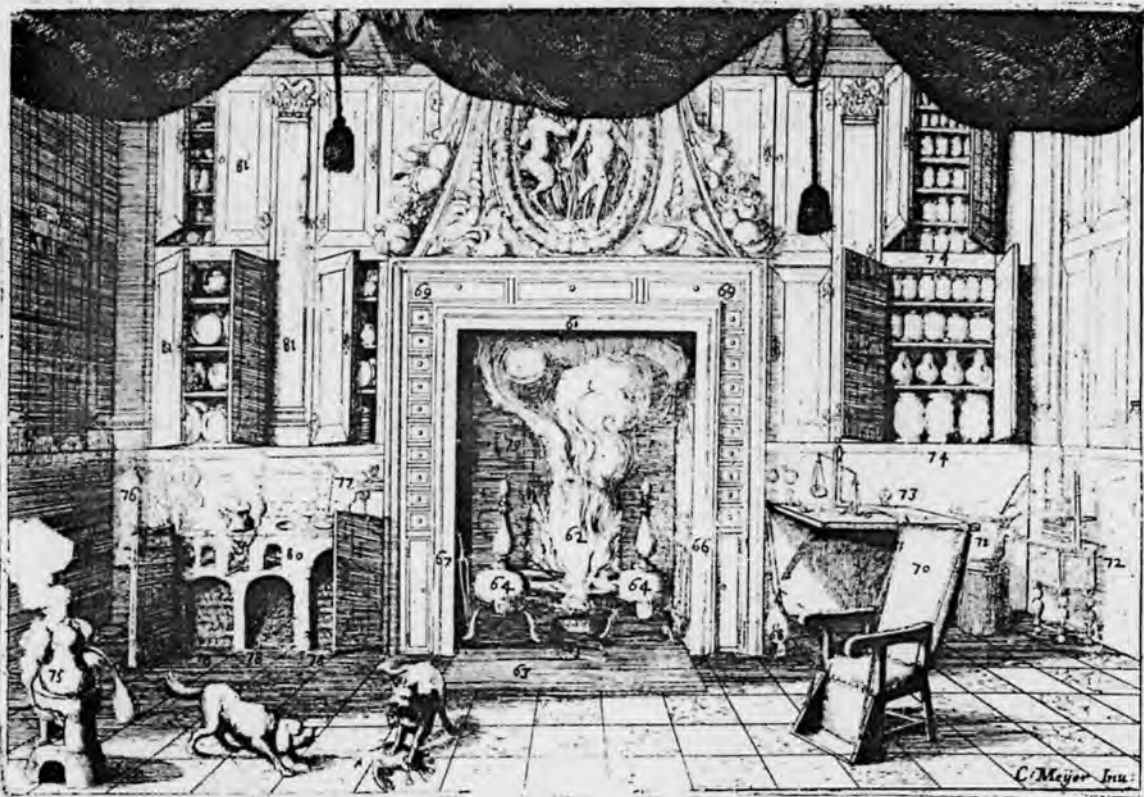
Second Wall

- |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
| 21. Alcove with doors behind with which the bed can be made. | 26. A longwinding clock (one year) with a lantern for night viewing. | 31. Camera obscura to watch the activity in the street while yet in bed. | 36. Secret stair connecting to other rooms.                |
| 22. Bed in alcove.   | 27. Tool cupboard.   | 32. Gun cupboard.  | 37. Cupboard for silver bowls and beakers.                 |
| 23. Door to alcove.  | 28. Cupboard for storing clothes.                                    | 33. Temperature gauge.   | 38. Cupboard for silver candlesticks.                      |
| 24. Urinal.  | 29. Glass and beaker cupboard.                                       | 34. Dirty linen cupboard.  | 39. Closet behind the bed which is permanently ventilated. |
| 25. Brush and comb rack.                                     | 30. Linen cupboard.  | 35. Cupboard for daily linen.  | 40. Handkerchief cupboard.                                 |



ird Wall

- |                    |  |                              |                 |
|--------------------|--|------------------------------|-----------------|
| Mirror.            | 47. Geometrical instruments.                 | 53. Bird cage.               | 59. Jewel safe. |
| Terrestrial globe. | 48. Opening for fresh air.                   | 54. Wine cellar.             | 60. Lock.       |
| Telescope.         | 49. Concave mirror to watch street activity. | 55. Seats let into the wall. |                 |
| Celestial sphere.  | 50. Hand towel.                              | 56. Sun clock.               |                 |
| Microscope.        | 51. Calendar.                                | 57. Strongbox for gold.      |                 |
| Gold scales.       | 52. Memo pad.                                | 58. Silver safe.             |                 |



rth Wall

- |  |                                       |   |                              |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Fireplace for smoking meat.                    | 66. Spade.                            | 72. Press.                                    | 77. Hot and cold water taps. |
| Hot water cylinder.                            | 67. Tongs.                            | 73. Fold away table.                          | 78. Wood and charcoal store. |
| Iron plate to retain heat and to prevent fire. | 68. Bellows.                          | 74. Food storage jars.                        | 79. Oven for some things.    |
| Fire dogs.                                     | 69. Spice and medicine drawers.       | 75. Stove and urn for distilling.             | 80. Oven for other things.   |
| Grille to cover fire at night.                 | 70. Tapestry covered reclining chair. | 76. Board for cleaning and sharpening knives. | 81. Crockery store.          |
|  | 71. Mortar.                           |   | 82. Waste pipe with trap.    |