

Disaster-Affected Spaces as Multisensory Living Labs

Comfort and Regeneration through the Reuse of Abandoned Spaces

Laura Giraldi

Università degli Studi di Firenze
Orcid id 0000-0003-1913-1548

Francesca Morelli

Università degli Studi di Firenze
Orcid id 0000-0001-6190-1409

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Abstract

Disaster-affected environments are often framed as remnants to be secured, remembered, or replaced, overlooking their potential as multisensory spaces where perception, memory, and embodied experience intersect. This paper reinterprets post-earthquake abandoned architectures as multisensory living labs, where interior and spatial design support both experimental practices and organism-centered well-being. Drawing on cross-modal correspondences, environmental psychology, and neuroscience-informed design, the study examines how the coherence of light, sound, materials, smell, and microclimate influences orientation, perceived safety, and stress regulation.

The research is based on two case studies from the Horizon 2020 Search & Rescue project: Poggioreale (Italy) and a semi-collapsed building in Madrid (Spain). Through comparative sensory mapping and a user-centered approach, the paper identifies comfort patterns that support spatial legibility, embodied interaction, and cognitive clarity.

The study argues that disaster-affected spaces can be reinterpreted as experimental commons, where regeneration occurs through the activation of multisensory qualities, positioning design as a driver for resilience and adaptive reuse.

1. Post-Disaster Abandoned Spaces as a Design Resource

In contemporary landscapes, abandoned spaces constitute a widespread and often problematic condition. Former industrial buildings, closed shopping centers, amusement parks, and other public or private spaces have progressively lost their function and symbolic meaning (Pannofino, 2020). Deprived of activities, rituals, and social relations, they often become residual parts of urban experience.

A particularly complex category is represented by spaces abandoned following disasters such as earthquakes, floods, or explosions. In these cases, abandonment is not only the result of the catastrophic event but also of socio-economic fragility, territorial vulnerability, and reconstruction processes, often limited to safety measures. This approach tends to reduce interventions to technical operations, while overlooking the perceptual, symbolic, and relational value of these environments.

Recent studies in environmental psychology and neuroscience applied to design show that spatial experience emerges from multiple sensory stimuli and from the embodied interaction between body and environment (Haverkamp, 2025; Mallgrave, 2015; Pallasmaa & Robinson, 2021). Post-disaster spaces can be understood as complex multisensory environments, where light, sound, materiality, and atmosphere contribute to meaningful experiences.

This paper reinterprets these spaces as *multisensory living labs*: real contexts in which perceptual experience can be observed and designed. Unlike controlled laboratories, they offer

dynamic and unpredictable conditions for studying human behavior in situations of uncertainty. The European Union itself promotes the adoption of *Living Labs* as user-centered environments for co-creation, experimentation, and validation of innovative solutions (Desole, 2026; Schuurman et al., 2011).

Post-disaster environments are not merely unused spaces, but places marked by trauma, memory, and resilience. As palimpsests of memory, they retain material traces of past events and contribute to place identity (Ellard, 2015). Instead of treating them as voids to be filled, this paper considers them design resources able to generate new forms of experience through adaptive reuse.

2. Interior and Spatial Design as a Practice of Reactivation

In post-disaster reuse, interior design, spatial design, and wayfinding systems can mediate the relationship between body, environment, and perception, without invasive structural intervention. Rather than demolition or reconstruction, this perspective favors light, reversible, and low-impact actions capable of transforming the perceptual quality of space while preserving its identity.

This approach also responds to environmental and economic concerns: disposal, demolition, and rebuilding involve high energy, material, and financial costs. Adaptive reuse extends the life cycle of existing spaces and turns them into flexible environments. Design can act on the sensory dimension through temporary lighting, chromatic differentiation, textile and sound-absorbing elements, and reversible pathways or plat-

forms. These interventions enhance orientation, reduce perceptual ambiguity, support embodied anchoring, and improve accessibility without compromising the existing fabric. Design therefore operates not on the load-bearing structure, but on the sensory experience of the place. It transforms the ruin into a temporary, legible, and inhabitable interior, reactivating its experiential potential and allowing new uses, from cultural production to technological experimentation.

3. Case Studies

The research adopts a qualitative, research-through-design approach combining literature review, comparative case study analysis, and sensory mapping. The analysis focuses on the embodied experience of first responders and users interacting with unstable environments, exploring how multisensory conditions influence orientation, perception, and action in post-disaster contexts.

The two case studies were developed within the Horizon 2020 *Search & Rescue* project, where abandoned environments were used as testing grounds for technologies and operational procedures. Although different in historical, spatial, and symbolic terms, Poggioreale and the Madrid site share strong perceptual intensity generated by instability, fragmentation, and material degradation. This makes these places relevant for a reflection on multisensory reuse and adaptive regeneration. Within the *Search & Rescue* pilot activities, these environments provided realistic conditions in which perceptual, operational, and spatial dynamics interacted. Light variation, acoustic reverberation, deteriorated materials, dust, and spatial discon-

tinuities affected spatial understanding, decision-making, and the embodied experience of first responders.

The reuse of abandoned architecture can thus enhance multisensory qualities, turning ruins into spatial configurations that support engagement, orientation, and new forms of interaction. It also reinforces memory and identity through the material and symbolic traces they embody.

3.1. Poggioreale: Memory, Identity, and Social Regeneration

Poggioreale is a small town located in the Belice Valley, in western Sicily (Italy), abandoned after the 1968 earthquake. Today, the site is partially accessible through controlled visits aimed at preserving the structures and limiting access to dangerous areas. Despite decades of abandonment, its urban fabric remains recognizable: streets, public buildings, churches, and fragments of domestic architecture still reveal the original configuration of the village.

The site is characterized by collapsed roofs, deteriorated surfaces, debris, exposed walls, and environmental exposure. Natural light enters roofless buildings, creating shifting contrasts and shadows; sounds reverberate in empty spaces; dust, wind, and material decay contribute to a dense multisensory atmosphere. These conditions create an immersive perceptual environment, in which the relationship between body, matter, and space becomes particularly intense.

Within the Horizon 2020 *Search & Rescue* project, Poggioreale was used as a full-scale simulation environment for rescue operations conducted in April 2022 (Fig.1).



Figure 1. Laura Giraldi and Francesca Morelli, “Use Case 1: Victims trapped under rubble” in Poggioreale (Sicily, Italy), pilot activity on search and rescue operations, 2022.

Several areas of the historic center, including the former nursing home, church, and hospital (Chalaris et al., 2021a), were used as operational scenarios because their structures remain legible enough to support realistic emergency simulations.

The use of the site remains compatible with its historical and symbolic identity. The ruins do not merely function as operational settings, but as environments capable of activating emotional, sensory, and cognitive responses. The interaction between responders, abandoned architecture, and unstable spatial conditions generated a specific embodied experience strongly influenced by the multisensory qualities of the place. Deteriorated surfaces, amplified sounds, dust, natural light, and atmospheric conditions shape a complex perceptual environment, fostering spatial awareness and direct interaction between body and matter.

Beyond emergency simulations, Poggioreale offers opportunities for cultural and social regeneration. Its emotional and narrative dimension makes it suitable for artistic events, cultural initiatives, and audiovisual productions, where sensory authenticity becomes central. The site can therefore be understood not only as a memory landscape, but also as a potential cultural infrastructure able to reconnect the community with its territorial identity.

Through performances, exhibitions, workshops, and collective initiatives, the abandoned village could evolve into a distributed cultural hub, reinforcing social cohesion and counteracting depopulation processes.

In this sense, the project does not generate value ex novo, but reveals, preserves, and amplifies a value already embedded in the place.

3.2. Madrid: Operational Infrastructure and Experimental Flexibility

The second case study concerns a group of abandoned buildings in a rural area on the outskirts of Madrid (Spain) (Fig.2). The site is isolated, marginal, with limited accessibility and a lack of significant urban relationships. Unlike Poggioreale, it does not possess consolidated historical or symbolic value. The structures are abandoned, with partially collapsed walls, deteriorated elements, and large interiors without maintenance.

These conditions make the site suitable for simulating emergency scenarios, as it resembles post-earthquake destruction settings. Within the Horizon 2020 *Search & Rescue* project, the site was selected as a testing ground for complex rescue operations involving unstable conditions, including the release of flammable gas and the introduction of smoke and odor-based stimuli (Chalaris et al., 2021b).

During the pilot activities, artificial stimuli intensified the multisensory conditions of the site and reproduced realistic emergency situations. Smoke, odors, damaged surfaces, structural discontinuities, and unstable environmental conditions generated a high-intensity perceptual environment, enabling the testing of technologies, operational procedures, and responder behavior.



Figure 2. Search & Rescue Project team, “Pilot – Use Case 7: Chemical Substances Spill” in Madrid, pilot activity on emergency response to a chemical spill, 2022.

As in Poggioreale, the deteriorated spatial configuration influences environmental perception. Damaged surfaces, structural openings, and missing wall sections create a dynamic relationship between interior and exterior spaces, affecting orientation, spatial understanding, and decision-making. Unlike Poggioreale, however, the value of the Madrid site does not derive from collective memory or symbolic heritage, but from its ability to function as an operational, experimental, and productive infrastructure. Its flexibility allows continuous re-configuration, transforming a marginal abandoned space into a platform for research, innovation, audiovisual production, crash testing, and multisensory experimentation.

4. Comfort Patterns: Toward a Dynamic Definition of Comfort

The comparative analysis identifies five recurring principles, here defined as *comfort patterns*, which describe how space can support orientation, perception, and action in post-disaster environments characterized by instability, fragmentation, and high sensory intensity. These patterns are not prescriptive solutions, but adaptive design strategies responding to the specific conditions of each context.

Comfort is not understood as a static condition of well-being, but as a dynamic process of perceptual and cognitive regulation through which individuals orient themselves, understand, and act under unstable conditions. In post-disaster environments, comfort patterns do not correspond to conventional stability or protection, but to the capacity of space to support cognitive clarity, orientation, and embodied interaction. This interpretation aligns with restorative design, which highlights the role of the environment in psychophysical recovery (Pazzaglia & Tizi, 2022).

The two case studies show how interior and spatial design can transform instability from a critical factor into a design resource.

Sensory Coherence

Coherence among sensory stimuli enables more effective perceptual integration, faster cognitive responses and greater interpretive clarity (Mallgrave, 2015). In post-disaster contexts, where sensory overload and environmental ambiguity are common, the alignment of visual, acoustic, tactile, and environmental stimuli becomes essential for reducing cogni-

tive stress and facilitating orientation. When stimuli are congruent, the cognitive system can process information more efficiently, reducing cognitive load and enhancing clarity. Conversely, sensory incoherence in degraded or unstable environments increases disorientation and fatigue. Design can therefore orchestrate stimuli, even with minimal devices, to re-establish a coherent relationship between perception and space.

Design implication: The alignment of lighting, materials, and acoustic cues can be used to reduce perceptual ambiguity and enhance cognitive clarity in unstable environments. The alignment of lighting, materials, textures, and sound cues can reduce perceptual ambiguity and improve cognitive clarity in unstable environments.

Spatial Legibility

Spatial legibility is the ability of an environment to communicate its organization and make paths, hierarchies, and relationships understandable. In post-disaster scenarios, fragmentation and collapse compromise the readability of space. Recognizable elements, such as residual structures, landmarks, material transitions, or lighting variations, can support mental maps and improve perceived safety (Lynch, 1990). Interior design can reinforce these elements without invasive interventions.

Design implication: Designers can reinforce spatial legibility through wayfinding systems, light gradients, and material differentiation to support orientation, spatial comprehension and perceived safety without altering the identity of the site.

Embodied Anchoring

Spatial experience is deeply embodied. Embodied anchoring refers to the relationship between body and environment through touch, movement, balance and proprioception. In unstable environments, irregular surfaces, changes in elevation, and material discontinuities activate a continuous bodily awareness. Temporary pathways, platforms, supports, and tactile references can strengthen the body-space relationship and improve safety.

Design implication: Tactile surfaces, reversible platforms, temporary support and physical reference elements can strengthen the body-space interaction, improving stability, awareness, and protection.

Refuge Zones

In high-intensity sensory environments, *micro-refuge zones* become essential for cognitive and emotional regulation. These are areas where stimulation is reduced or controlled, allowing pause, recovery, and perceptual reorganization. They may emerge through shadows, protected interiors, or quiet areas, or be designed through lightweight interventions such as textiles, screens, acoustic buffers, or controlled lighting.

Design implication: The design of micro-refuge spaces using soft materials, filtered light, and acoustic buffering can support emotional regulation and cognitive recovery without modifying the existing structure. Lightweight and reversible interventions can create micro-refuge spaces that support emotional regulation and temporary recovery without modifying the existing structure.

Biophilic Devices

Natural elements contribute to physiological and psychological comfort. Light, airflow, vegetation, water, and natural materials can reduce stress and improve the environmental quality of the experience. In post-disaster environments, biophilic elements may already be present or can be integrated through minimal and reversible strategies.

Design implication: Integrating natural elements such as natural light, ventilation, vegetation, and water can support physiological well-being, reduce stress and improve the sensory quality in high-intensity environments.

Taken together, these patterns show that comfort does not eliminate complexity or instability, but makes such conditions legible, orienting, and cognitively sustainable.

Rather than neutralizing instability, *design can* transform it into a meaningful and inhabitable experiential condition.

5. Interior and Spatial Design: Models of Reuse and Multisensory Infrastructures

The analysis of comfort patterns redefines the role of design in the reuse of post-disaster spaces, shifting the focus from material transformation to perceptual activation. Interior and spatial design operate as mediating practices between body and environment, intervening through light, reversible, and low-impact devices. Light, textiles, platforms, and temporary systems can re-establish coherence among sensory stimuli, enhance spatial legibility, provide embodied anchoring, and introduce comfort without altering the existing structure.

The comparison between Poggioreale and Madrid outlines two complementary models of reuse. In Poggioreale, comfort patterns emerge largely from the historical structure and material stratification of the site. Sensory coherence is generated through the interaction of light, material, and sound; spatial legibility derives from the persistence of the original urban fabric; refuge zones and biophilic elements are already embedded in the environment. Here design works through revelation and amplification, enhancing what is already present.

In Madrid, by contrast, comfort patterns must be constructed through design and simulation. Sensory coherence is achieved through the orchestration of stimuli; spatial legibility is supported by artificial devices; refuge zones compensate for perceptual intensity; and the biophilic dimension remains an unexplored opportunity. Here, the value of the space is not intrinsic, but emerges through use and design activation.

These two models, *memory-based* and *performance-based*, are complementary. They show that the value of abandoned spaces is constructed through modes of activation, perceptual conditions, and degrees of transformability. Post-disaster spaces can therefore become multisensory infrastructures for research, training, cultural events, and audiovisual production. In a context increasingly dominated by digital simulation, their sensory authenticity remains a distinctive and non-replicable value. Reuse becomes a process of perceptual regeneration, in which design does not replace the existing, but reactivates it through experience.

6. Conclusions: From Ruins as Voids to Ruins as Perceptual Infrastructures

This paper has reinterpreted post-disaster abandoned spaces not as voids to be filled, but as active multisensory environments capable of generating experience, knowledge, and new uses.

Through the analysis of the Poggioreale and Madrid, it has shown that reuse does not necessarily rely on material transformation but can occur through the activation of perceptual qualities already embedded in space. Similar dynamics can be observed in other post-disaster regeneration contexts, where abandoned environments have been progressively reactivated through cultural, social, or experimental practices.

The main contribution lies in the introduction of *comfort patterns* as interpretative and design tools. In unstable and high-intensity sensory environments, comfort does not coincide with control, but with the capacity of space to support orientation, cognitive clarity, and embodied interaction. The case studies highlight two complementary modes of reuse: one grounded in memory, identity, and emotional engagement, and one based on performance, adaptability, and experimentation.

Within this process, interior design acts as a perceptual mediation. Through reversible devices, such as lighting, textiles, and pathways, it can transform the experience of space without altering its structure. This approach also represents a sustainable strategy, avoiding invasive interventions while

enhancing the existing fabric. Post-disaster spaces can thus become permanent multisensory infrastructures for technological experimentation, cultural production, and audiovisual practices, contributing to their reintegration into the contemporary landscape.

In contexts increasingly shaped by digital and simulated environments, these spaces offer a sensory authenticity: a dimension that cannot be fully reproduced artificially and that significantly enhances perceptual experience and emotional engagement (Ellard, 2015). The reuse of abandoned spaces, understood as a cultural and design-driven process, redefines the relationship between body, space, and environment. The ruin ceases to represent loss and becomes a perceptual infrastructure capable of generating experience, knowledge, and regeneration, reaffirming the role of embodied experience in contemporary design (Mallgrave, 2015; Pallasmaa & Robinson, 2021).

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MULTISENSORY INSTALLATIONS

The Asylum is Full of Flowers, but You Can't See Them

Sara Masoero

Independent Artist

Massimo Schinco

Psychologist Psychotherapist

Orcid id 0000-0002-0782-1800

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Abstract

This paper presents *The Revealed Beauty*, an immersive installation developed from two years of archival research in the former psychiatric hospitals of Racconigi and Collegno (Italy). The project emerged from the convergence of two interests united by the idea of making the invisible visible: attention to the hidden suffering of institutionalized patients and macro photography, capable of revealing details beyond ordinary perception. By intertwining these perspectives, the installation transforms historical trauma into an experience that juxtaposes horror and beauty, restoring visibility to lives that remained unheard. The work consists of more than one thousand macro photographs of flowers and over five hundred handwritten letters written either by patients or by their relatives to hospital doctors, many of which were never sent. Each flower is symbolically associated with a former patient, creating a suspended landscape in which fragile memories become visible through transparent layers of tulle. The encounter with these archival materials generates a deeply sensory and emotional experience, encouraging visitors to engage with forgotten individual stories.

The paper argues that profoundly painful human experiences can be represented within a regenerative aesthetic framework without diminishing their historical and emotional weight. This reflection is grounded in the contributions of Ernest Hartmann (2008), Gregory Bateson (1972), and Massimo Schinco (2022, 2026) on creativity, translation, and bridging processes, as well as Arno Gruen's (2007) work on the relationship between emotional authenticity and expressive language. By combining visual documentation, narrative, and theoretical reflection, the paper enables readers who have not visited the installation to engage with its experiential and emotional dimensions.

1. Introduction: Cultural Acts and Acts of Care

Primo Levi called it “the burn of memory” (Levi, 1986): memories that still burn, hurt, but must always be preserved, despite the pain they cause – or perhaps precisely because of it. Because it is precisely there, in pain, that memory corrodes and works; it manages to get to the heart of things, to change their substance.

Italian psychiatry, before the laborious and certainly still incomplete reform processes initiated by the so-called “Basaglia Law” (L.N. 180 13/05/1978), tells one of these stories; stories that “burn”, but whose memory must be kept alive, so that they are never repeated.

Basaglia and all those who over time have somehow identified with this process have done much more than close asylums: they have contributed to deconstructing the concepts on which ordinary psychiatric practices are based, attempting to reconstruct them on other foundations. The starting point is that care can no longer be based on segregation and custody, with the resulting abuse and violence. The process involves overcoming the limitations of an exclusively biological approach, complemented by re-education and social containment. The desired outcome is the recovery of the humanistic, full meaning of care in all its aspects; this implies listening to other persons in their entirety to address their fragility.

When illness is scientifically described and analyzed, it is inevitably categorized in general and abstract terms; the events that characterize it are narrated “in the third person”. However, every encounter is unique: unique because it is situated in time, space, relational circumstances, experiences, and dreams of

the people involved (Schinco, 2011). It is therefore essential to configure a treatment event as an encounter. In the encounter, suffering persons can finally recognize in themselves the manifestation of a unique individual, with a personal history and a social context that must be understood and respected. Only by respecting the dignity of the suffering person and recognizing, at least to the extent possible, their right to work, study, and affection – that is, to inclusion in the shared life of the community – can there be treatment; treatment necessarily occurs through a personal relationship between the caregiver and the patient. The asylum system, whatever its initial intentions, has ended up being imbued with oppression. To truly overcome it, we cultivate the idea of a world inhabited by everyone, without cages that artificially separate an “outside” for those who submit to a presumed “normality” from an “inside” for those who do not fit within the canons of “normality”. In such a worldview, care, even when it is intended for a single individual with their unique history and unpredictable future, is always care for everyone; if the community does not care for itself, not even the individual can be fully cured (Schinco, 2023).

This implies, as the World Health Organization itself has long recognized and promoted (W.H.O., 2021), that the idea and practices of care should not be considered the exclusive prerogative of a specific category of people, namely “health and social professionals”. The specialized work of the latter can become much more meaningful, effective, and efficient to the extent that it arises from a social community oriented, in its daily way of life, toward “taking care” (Anzani & Scullica, 2023). Even merely mentioning the difficulties and opportu-

nities in progressively implementing care practices and institutions on these foundations would go beyond the scope and dimensions of this paper. It is, however, important to emphasize how, from this perspective, a cultural event can be considered in all respects an “act of care”; in this act the relationship between community and individuals generates, indeed re-generates, meaning for both. For this to happen, good and edifying intentions are not enough: nor is it sufficient to adopt an approach that almost exclusively privileges stimulating the necessary reflection at the level of critical thinking. If we want to speak about the whole person, we must use language that comes from the whole person and speaks to the whole person. To avoid emotionally overwhelming the speaker, this language cannot be divorced from beauty.

2. Why Multisensoriality?

The choice of a multisensory approach is particularly consistent with the objectives described above. In a naive and low-key perspective, the experience of a place (e.g., an installation) designed to stimulate in a multisensory way could be misinterpreted as an aesthetically richer experience, more captivating, more impactful for its users, and nothing more. After all, a well-seasoned and flavorful dish is always more appealing than a bland, flavorless one. Sometimes, such notions are passed off as educational expedients.

Things are quite different.

Quoting Ellard (Ellard, 2015), Fatone and Anzani highlight how

Elements such as the quality of light, the topology, the spatial organization, the geometry and rhythm of architectural forms, as well as the textures, materials, sounds, and even the smells of spaces, actively engage the human perceptual and cognitive systems. (Anzani & Fatone, 2026)

As Inghilleri points out, this engagement results in generating experiences.

[...] it is our subjective experience that unifies sensations. Experience may be defined as the set of information deriving from our internal world (bodily and psychological) and from the external world (physical and social: places, environments, objects, and people around us). It involves cognitive, emotional, and sensory dimensions. This definition of experience is crucial for understanding the concept of cross-modal congruence: experience may be fragmented, painful, and negative [...] or, conversely, positive and integrated, leading to wellbeing. It is toward this latter form that individuals naturally tend [...]. (Inghilleri, 2026)

From both a factual and theoretical point of view, experience and language are intertwined in a circular relationship with generative characteristics.

It is the mind's nature to generate and utilize diverse languages, corresponding to the diverse experiences that characterize each person's life: languages of the senses, emotions, affections, images, music; choreographic languages, verbal, narrative, poetic, logical-mathematical languages... each of them possesses some unique and irreducible characteristic: for example, what is ex-

pressed through affections cannot be fully translated into mathematical or sensorial terms; what is expressed through music cannot be fully translated into words, and so on, yet none of our mental experiences is completely isolated from another. Indeed, each of them can be considered the final product of a translation, a representation, a “staging” starting from an underlying creative subjectivity.¹ (Schinco, 2026b)

Multisensoriality not only reflects the functioning of the mind, characterized by the generation of experiences characterized by complexity through what Bateson called “bridging” activities between different languages (Bateson, 1972). It directly evokes the human mind’s capacity for reinvention (Bergson, 1934). In reinvention, no one simply replicates another’s experience, but brings into play their own specific, unrepeatable, and unpredictable personal qualities (Bergson, 1931; Hartmann, 2011; Schinco, 2026).

3. A Multisensory Exhibition as an Act of Healing and Regeneration

The installation *Revealed Beauty, Whispers of Freedom* was created by Sara Masoero (curator Luisa Gastaldelli) and exhibited for the first time in Racconigi (IT) in 2024, and then, in an expanded form, in Cuneo (IT) in 2025. A new exhibition took place in Collegno (IT) in 2026. The installation was sponsored by the Municipalities of Cuneo and Racconigi as well as the Regione Piemonte and benefited from the collaboration of the Università delle Tre Età of Bagnolo Piemonte (IT) (Fig. 1).

1 Translation from Italian by the author.



Figure 1. S. Masoero (L. Gastaldelli Curator): *The Revealed Beauty*. First room: *On the Wings of Freedom*. Cuneo (IT), 2025. Photo by Sara Masoero.

The aim of the exhibition, through a multisensory journey across multiple spaces, is to “restore life and dignity to forgotten people and stories”²: psychiatric patients with their experiences of being interned in the asylums of Racconigi and Collegno. The premise is that, through the transformative power of art, visitors can connect with the harsh experience and profound pain of these people, whom the community first rejected and then almost completely forgot. The artistic experience regenerates the lost personal encounter, arousing intense emotions whose quality allows it to stimulate thought without overwhelming it.

The task of “describe by writing” an installation in which words, through letters and poems, although playing an important role, are in the frame of an overall multisensory experience, presented itself as a significant opportunity for the authors of this essay. The reader will note how different languages are employed throughout the paper: the evocative and poetic one with which the installation is described and narrated, and, on the other hand, the abstract one with which the installation is observed and commented upon within a defined theoretical framework. The underlying assumption is that precisely this difference, and not the simple juxtaposition of the two modes of thought and language, is what can trigger a generative mental experience in the reader (Schinco, 2026). This is what the authors of the paper hope.

2 Introduction from the news *Cuneocultura*, <https://www.cuneocultura.it/evento/la-bellezza-rivelata-sussurri-di-liberta/>.



Figure 2. S. Masoero (L. Gastaldelli Curator): *The Revealed Beauty*. First room: *On the Wings of Freedom*. Cuneo (IT), 2025. Photo by Sara Masoero.



Figure 3. S. Masoero (L. Gastaldelli Curator): *The Revealed Beauty*. First room: *On the Wings of Freedom*. Cuneo (IT), 2025. Photo by Sara Masoero.

Furthermore, the mental experience of the narrative through words is compared with that generated by the images chosen by the artist, setting in motion a further bridging activity between levels of thought (Bateson, 1972).

Reading the article is a completely different experience from visiting the exhibition. By choosing the combination of different narrative and commentary modes described above, the authors hope that reading can trigger a mode of mental functioning based on the same types of processes; this way, the experience of an authentic encounter, albeit with different intensity and implications, can at least be evoked.

3.1. First Room: On the Wings of Freedom

In this reconstruction of a room in a former psychiatric hospital, original objects from the hospital have been made available to the artist: the white iron bed, the wood and cotton screen, the iron bedside table, the restraints, an iron bowl and spoon, and a men's blue pajama jacket with vertical white stripes. The only element that conveys warmth and evokes the intimate atmosphere of a home is the blanket, composed of nearly two hundred photographs of dandelions, hand-sewn by the artist onto ecru cotton fabric. The dandelion petal, light yet tenacious, detaches from the flower, so fine and impalpable; it is almost impossible to grasp it; it slips through the fingers. The thoughts of the inmates are like dandelions: if the body is imprisoned, the mind can still fly far away, finding in dreams, in desire, in poetry a small space to resist (Fig. 2).

We can imagine the patients, watched all day, wrapping themselves in a warm blanket of dreams and thoughts that – thanks

to the darkness – no one can see. A blanket that warms and feels like home, and that embraces their desire to escape, to go beyond, to seek another dimension to survive, even if only in dreams or imagination.

Many of these words, thought in the intimacy of the night, were written and became poems, saved by some nurses who understood the importance of these testimonies. Now these poems hang from hot air balloons. More than three hundred white rice paper hot air balloons, hand-assembled by the artist, are suspended from a wooden structure that surrounds and surmounts the room. Like wings that carry them aloft, far from reality, they are presented, in a sound installation, by young people between eighteen and twenty-six: young people to whom the baton of memory is passed, so that they can spread what has happened. The poems speak of freedom, of dreams, perhaps written to vent one's sadness, the frustrated desire for a "normal" life, or perhaps to manage – through words – to feel like women and men again (Fig. 3).

Something of them remains: the search through words for a little beauty that can make them fly away, like in a hot air balloon.

3.2. Second Room: Beauty Revealed

"The asylum is full of flowers, but you can't see them". This installation, however, aims to make them visible, to bring to light what has been prevented from blooming, to reveal what has been kept hidden (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. S. Masoero (L. Gastaldelli Curator): *The Revealed Beauty*. Second room: *Beauty Revealed*. Cuneo (IT), 2025. Photo by Sara Masoero.

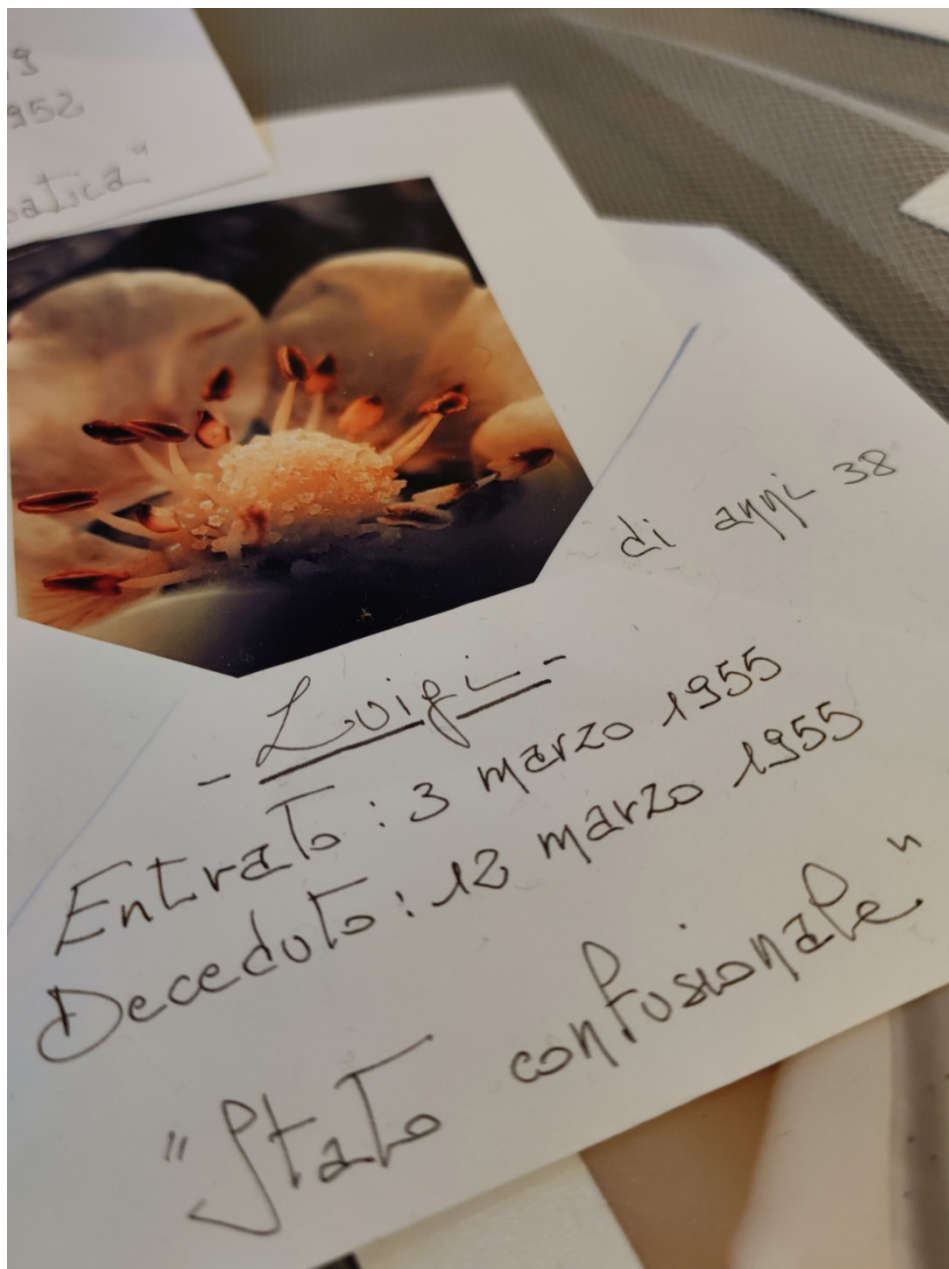


Figure 5. S. Masoero (L. Gastaldelli Curator): *The Revealed Beauty*. Second room: *Beauty Revealed*. Cuneo (IT), 2025. Photo by Sara Masoero.

A mirror has been placed in the center. Mirrors were forbidden in the asylum for security reasons. But the lack of an object in which to see oneself weakens one's awareness of oneself and one's identity. Without the gaze of others, impeded by confinement, and without the ability to look at oneself, one almost disappears, becomes invisible.

Around the mirror, a period living room recreates the denied intimacy of a home: a sofa, four chairs, a bedside table, and a 1950s lamp introduce the viewer to a welcoming and familiar environment; the environment is deprived of those who have spent years in an asylum.

Above the living room, strips of white tulle are suspended, holding color photographs. Tulle hangs from a 3-meter-high inverted U-shaped wooden structure. Hundreds of photographs of flowers depict tiny details: a petal, a corolla, a pistil... a perfect microcosm, yet often overlooked by our hasty and distracted gaze (Fig. 5).

Each flower is symbolically associated with a patient of the asylum, whose name, diagnosis, age, dates of admission to the hospital, and finally the date of death are recorded.

They are all people who never left the asylum: lives filled with pain, now lifted on a tulle that carries a river of images. Lives now exposed to the gaze of others on a transparent tulle, which allows both vision and light to pass through. Lives as heavy as boulders, now lifted aloft on an airy, impalpable fabric, light as air. A symbolic compensation for the lightness denied, for the gazes missed, to be received and returned.

Despite the restrictive and often humiliating conditions in which they were held, the patients tried hard not to lose their will to live and resist. Their letters to their relatives, hand-copied by the artist on sky-blue paper and placed on the bedside table, are a prime example. They were never sent; no one ever considered their authors' need to maintain contact with loved ones from their "previous" lives, but these men and women never lost hope, and from their closed rooms they continued to dream of heaven.

It is the same resilience of a flower, delicate yet strong in its incredible will to live, that even on asphalt manages to find a tiny crack through which to peek out and let its beauty blossom. And if it is trampled on, slowly, imperceptibly, its corolla rises toward the sun until it stands upright again.

The inmates who were allowed to walk in the park were drawn to the flowers and often made them the subject of their poems, identifying with their vital strength and resistance to adverse conditions:

You, humble and dear daisies,
[...]
for long days you have suffered
frost and freeze over and cold oblivion
[...]
so that I, passing by you,
am amazed to see you beautiful, always in bloom...

Patients also suffer the chill of confinement in the asylum, yet they resist, feeling like flowers, fragile yet tenacious.

It is the strength of life, which transcends everything and astonishes and enchants – it enchants the patient who sees the flower at its fullest splendor, and it enchants us who read the words blossoming from its pen.

3.3. Third Room: Traces from a Submerged World

“Most Illustrious Director, please forgive a poor, anguished mother for taking the liberty of writing to Your Lordship” ... “The patient is always agitated, noisy, and sleepless. It is best for relatives to refrain from visiting the patient” ... “Reply as soon as possible for news, because we know nothing” ... “My poor, unfortunate son, who died in the asylum...”³

In the archives of the former psychiatric hospitals of Racconigi and Collegno, a forgotten treasure lay locked away in dusty folders, brought to light by long and painstaking research. This is the extensive correspondence between the patients’ families and loved ones, the doctors who treated them, and the director of the asylum, dating from the late XIX century to the 1970s.

These letters provide a faithful snapshot not only of the reality of the asylum, but above all the complexity of human relationships, characterized by strong affections but also by dark shadows.

Most of them are written by family members: many inquire about news, ask for permission to visit their loved ones, and urge doctors to treat them with sensitivity. They are stories

3 Excerpts from the correspondence between relatives of the patients and doctors of the asylum.

of bonds abruptly severed by hospitalization; relatives do everything they can to ensure the connection doesn't break, to ensure contact doesn't break, they send small gifts, then ask the Director if they were delivered, or send stationery so their loved one can respond...

The love and concern of family members were certainly perceived by patients and were a powerful factor in healing, perhaps sometimes the most effective. Indeed, people described in the medical records as “maniac, violent, hallucinating” appear calm, affectionate, and saddened by the separation from their children or spouse during family visits. Letters written by family members to the director provide descriptions that sometimes conflict with the medical reports.

The coldness of medical diagnoses doesn't consider personal histories and difficulties that may have led patients to unhealthy behaviors or extreme actions, which resulted in their hospitalization.

Sometimes family members write to the healthcare staff to tell the whole story, to try to make them understand that their loved one isn't ill but was simply a victim of circumstances. Among the letters to the director, one stands out: a father whose daughter, hospitalized for a suicide attempt, reveals that she had been incited to commit suicide by her husband, who no longer knew how to pay off his many debts and had even gone so far as to sell the dowry she had brought. The father recounts all this with tenderness and concern, but we do not know whether and to what extent these personal stories were taken into account by doctors in their prescriptions.

Many men and women wrote personally, revealing, already by the late nineteenth century, a good level of literacy, even among women; illiterate people did everything they could to stay in touch with their loved ones, asking the mayor or the parish priest for help.

A small portion of these letters, however, depicts more complex and difficult family relationships: faced with the prospect of the patient's immediate discharge, some family members write to the director asking for time, saying they are looking for a place for their relative. Behind these practical concerns, one can sense feelings that are difficult to confess, such as fear and shame.

These are the most secret facets of human relationships, which, to a careful eye, are revealed between the lines of some letters.

The replies from the doctors and the Director constitute a small portion of this correspondence and were usually written in pencil under the family members' letters, then copied and sent later by the secretaries (Fig. 6).

The letters, approximately two hundred in total, are placed on a desk, inside an office cabinet with a single open door, and an armchair that, together with a period lamp, evoke a familiar, intimate atmosphere, similar to that recreated by the correspondence between patients and their families.

They were all hand-copied by the artist with a 1950s fountain pen on antiqued paper, and they peek out from the envelopes, ready to emerge from the silence after decades and reveal their stories to anyone who wishes to listen.





The viewer will be able to remove them from the envelopes, read them, touch them: an experience to be enjoyed through the senses, through contact and physical proximity to these long-unheard voices, now revealed in a hushed tone, like flowers in a fragrant garden (Fig. 7).

At the end of the visit, the viewer leaves carrying with them these stories, finally seen, finally revealed. They are pieces of a memory that must be recovered and preserved, lives that, along with the viewer, cross the wall and will live on in the lives of those who heard them.

3.4. Fourth Room: Forget-me-not

It is the flower of time and memory, a small and delicate flower, simple in beauty, a symbol of memory that resists the passage of time and distance (Fig. 8).

The forget-me-not tells us that we must not forget, and in the installation, photos of this flower are paired with ten people whose fate must be remembered, so that it never happens again. These are the people, among those identified by the research, who spent the longest years in a mental institution, never leaving until their deaths.

Opaque and invisible existences, seemingly without a trace, covered by oblivion, as they are now covered by tulle. Only a scroll with their first names and the number of years spent in the mental institution testifies that they existed, that beneath that tulle, covered by layers of silence, some people dreamed of a normal life, with a home, a family, and loved ones.

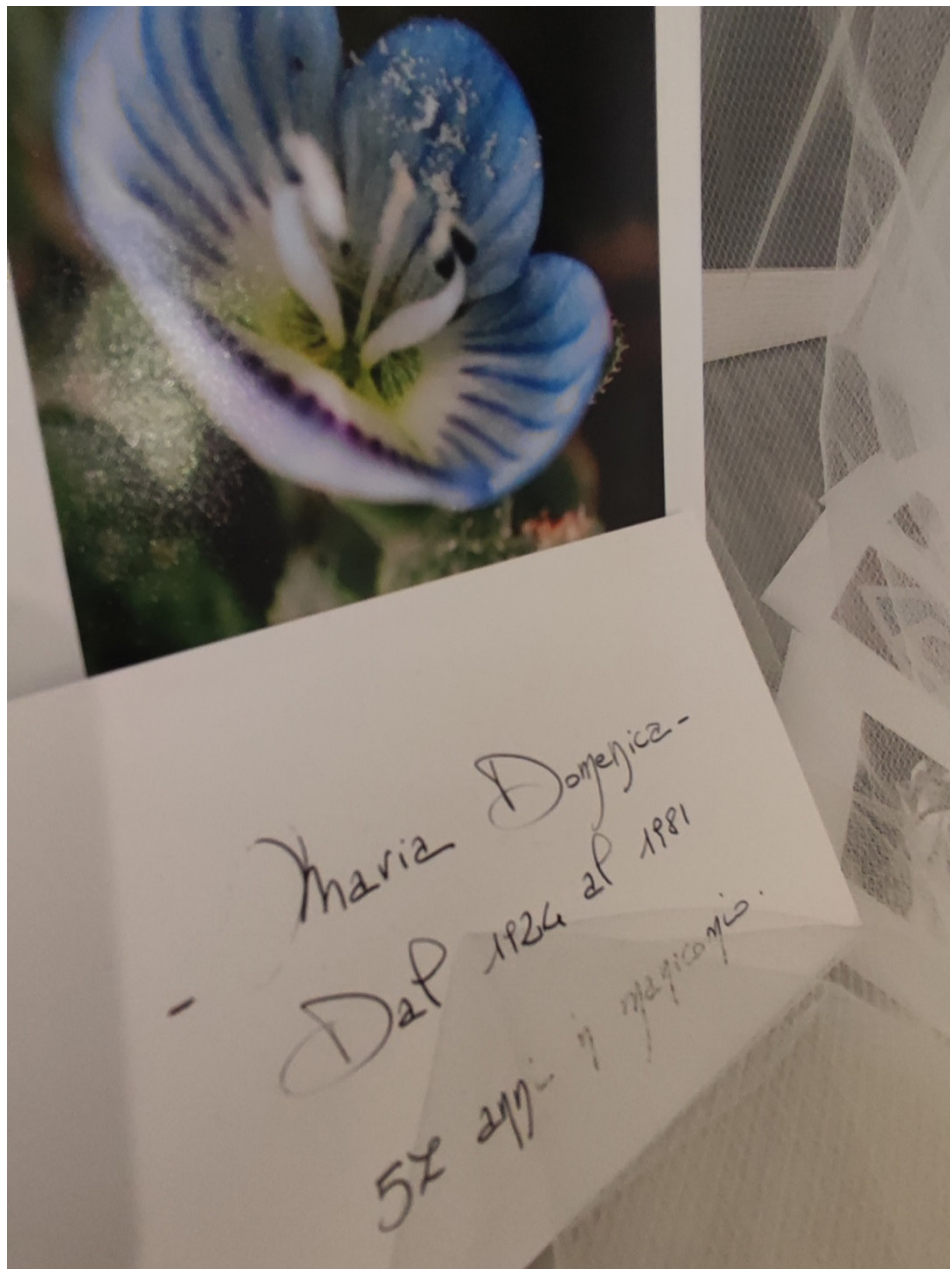




Beneath the tulle, on the floor, are photos of the inmates, taken from their medical records; They emerge from the envelopes, revealing details of unrecognizable and nameless faces, like an eyebrow, a forehead... details that suggest fragments of forgotten stories.

The elliptical composition located in the center of the room is composed of all those objects that patients, upon entering the asylum, were not allowed to take with them. They are vintage objects, dating from the beginning of the last century to the 1970s and 1980s: a handbag, a wallet, small jewelry, a pen, shaving brushes, glasses, slips, bras, matches, photos, letters, perfume, a face powder... things that our closets overflow with, yet were once few and precious, carefully preserved and repaired to last a lifetime. Perhaps because we can now buy everything we need and even the superfluous, we no longer realize the importance these small things have in defining our place in the world and our individuality.

Three types of objects in particular stand out, which the inmates were forced to do without and whose absence profoundly wounded their dignity: underwear – which in the asylum was forbidden to women for reasons of practicality and hygiene; belts and shoelaces, which were prohibited for safety reasons. The composition leans toward the photographs, reaching out to these people, stripped of their dignity and their few possessions, to compensate them for everything that was stolen from them: things, time, opportunities, encounters... The objects of normal life, of everyday life, outside the asylum, cross the walls and enter, to reunite with their owners, reach them, and redress them.



Then the indistinct, identical figures in white coats and clogs come back to life, becoming unique and distinguished people again, becoming well-dressed, made-up, and well-groomed men and women again. Their black-and-white lives return to color, revealing all their beauty, like the little forget-me-not in its marvelous ultramarine blue (Fig. 10).

4. Conclusions: Multisensoriality as a Potential for Encounters between People

The twentieth century was marked by radical states of local and global crises, which were also addressed by the development of the so-called ‘critical thinking’. In the XXI century, a deeper and more desperate malaise has taken over: the “crisis of the crisis”. Confronting its destructive potential has been made urgent by the pandemic: to get out of the “crisis of the crisis” we must stop escaping it, and instead develop the capacity to “live together”. By dealing with the pain brought by the crisis, we can enter a real “time of healing”, characterized by authentic creativity, solid caring, willingness to honour the spirit’s demands. (Schinco, 2022)

Although with some exceptions – e.g., authors such as Bion (1962), Maldiney (2000), Gruen (2007), and Benedetti (1976) – reflection on mental illness and healthcare institutions has also been characterized by an emphasis on modes of thought strongly rooted in the rational and cognitive realm, typical of critical thinking. Adopting a frankly multisensory perspective overcomes these limitations, allowing language to access the “emotional vitality of being”.⁴

4 Arno Gruen 2015, personal communication.

Indeed, when the multisensory experience enables encounters between people and generates opportunities for connection, it conveys not only the specific contents that characterize that single, unrepeatable encounter: through the contents and circumstances in which the encounter occurs, it conveys also the very experience of free creative play, and with it the experience of beauty.

In this historical moment, the experience of beauty can be seen as something that goes far beyond mere recreational enjoyment. It places us on the frontiers of questions concerning the very possibility of “being well and healthy” within the parameters of our civilization.

As Guglielmi writes:

Everything seems now conditioned by a pre-packaging of the parts, so that designing, redesigning living spaces, would only become the management of sophisticated interactive systems, capable of providing quick and immediate solutions. But is all this possible, erasing in about eighty years the stratifications of four thousand years of human history? (Guglielmi, 2026)

Furthermore, the experience of the beauty of the encounter itself allows for a confrontation with contents of human pain and destructiveness that would otherwise be intolerable; it thus opens the doors to authentic compassion, that is, one that is not pietistically based on a sense of guilt, nor guided by external norms, nor even by a superficial “conformism of pretending to be good” that we sometimes rely on in an attempt to avoid confronting internal emptiness (Gruen, 2007).

Authentic compassion, in the thinking of Authors such as Gruen (2007) and Lévinas (1990), is a founding characteristic of the human soul. If we consider the type of focus it arouses and requires, it can also be called “mercy” (Schinco, 2019). In fact, accepting one’s own and others’ states of need paves the way for the power of human creativity that is expressed in every area of life, from the development of resilience to the capacity for relationships and artistic creation (Hartmann, 2011; Schinco, 2011).

Research in these areas, vitally connected with action in the field, is open and transdisciplinary in its essence (Anzani & Scullica, 2023).

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