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“Urban interstices”—their design—are the topic of this book. What are urban interstices? What different issues, opportunities, roles, and concepts do they deal with? The book’s five chapters written by urban planners, architects and interior designers provide five different views and keys—Urban rewriting, Architectural threshold, Green rooms, Connecting publicness, Ephemeral devices—and draft a possible path to sound the spectrum of urban interstices’ design in Italy. Urban space can be “interstitial” in its ambiguous capability of signification in the sense-making process; that is, in the double valence of a mute void—space without signification—or meaningful room—a small and dense universe of suspension. Sometimes the project for interstitial spaces aims to transform the former into the latter. Sometimes, on the other hand, the project makes the interstice an interface, connector, exchanger, membrane, space of interrelation. So that urban interstices become alternatively thresholds and pulsating rooms, and urban catalysts activated by specific design moves and devices. And somehow they also speak of a general “interstitial” condition of urban space today. The critical path proposed here is based on the review of seventy contemporary Italian cases. A collection of sixty projects is provided in the second part of the book, while ten cases—two for each thematic key—are explored in brief monographic essays and by interviews with the authors of the projects. They are the subject of the photographic essay, Visual narration, put in the middle of the book.



Bonfantini | Forino

URBAN INTERSTICES IN ITALY



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URBAN INTERSTICES IN ITALY

DESIGN EXPERIENCES

edited by

Bertrando Bonfantini *and* Imma Forino

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**CONNECTING
PUBLICNESS**



WE ARE
WHERE
WE WANT
TO BE

COMMUNITY

SANTO DOMINGO

SPRITC
BIRRE
VINO
BIBITE
CAFFE

SPRITC
BIRRE
VINO
BIBITE
CAFFE

FARM
CULTURAL
PARK

SANTO DOMINGO

HUMAN INTERSTITIAL GEOGRAPHIES

Pierluigi Salvadeo

Aboriginal creation myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who had wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path—birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes—and so singing the world into existence. (Chatwin 1998, 2)

The Pokémon GO Fest took place on June 18, 2019 in Chicago. This is the very first four-day Pokémon GO event, which greatly exceeded all predictions in terms of participation, with more than 60,000 participants throughout the event and 287,000 “Trainers” playing around Chicago for the duration of the event. The “Trainers” have walked approximately 290,000 kilometres, caught more than 15,000,000 Pokémon, and made 213,000 new friends. Pokémon GO is a Free-to-Pay video game, completely based on Geolocalised Augmented Reality through the GPS system and is the result of the collaboration between three Japanese groups: the Japanese software house Game Freak, the Pokémon Company affiliated with Nintendo, and Nintendo itself—a joint stock company and world leader in video games and consoles. After downloading the app on your smartphone, the game involves hunting down virtual monsters, navigating in real space using GPS, but simultaneously immersing yourself in the virtual space inhabited by Pikachu and his friends, through augmented reality.

It is in this way that the players, moving within a hybrid space, somewhere between the real and the unreal, pass through other places and other spaces, whose main characteristic is that they are neither only real nor only virtual, but both. It is another geography, which is not yet drawn by maps on paper, nor even on the plans of cities and buildings, but which can already be fully explored and experienced. It is a *true-false* geography, which is not even dreamlike in the same way as the psycho-geographical maps of Guy Debord, who, disengaging himself from reality, studied the correlations between psyche and environment, subverting classical geography through a sort of creative rethinking of urban spaces. Nor was there any of the political vision of the corresponding Situationist movement, which saw in the form of the existing city a sort of coercion of the freedom of the individual, who should in

fact inhabit space in a creative and nomadic way, as Constant thought with his New Babylon. The dream space of their psycho-geography did not collaborate with the real space of the city, but rather criticised it and superimposed itself on it as the only possible alternative. The recommendation was therefore to walk around the city, estranging oneself, and looking upwards so as not to see or be conditioned by the street level, so that the gaze would go from one detail to another without grasping the whole, but allowing the mind to reconstruct other maps and other spaces.

However, our perception of the geography of our cities nowadays is quite different: a perception that encompasses not only space, but also people's behaviour, the governance of cities, information and communication flows and, in a nutshell, the various material and immaterial locations that represent the references of our lives. As early as the late 1980s, Peter Jackson, Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield, spoke of maps of meaning. *Maps of Meaning*, the book written by Jackson in 1989, describes how to make sense of the world by making our geographical experience intelligible. In this discussion, the classical view of landscape-oriented geography in the strict sense is abandoned, in favour of another type of approach that considers the plurality of cultures and the consequent multiplicity of landscapes that they are able to generate. By cultures we mean the complex interweaving of popular or elite expressions, genders, races, languages, ideologies, etc. It is the sum of the different cultures that generates the maps of meaning that Jackson describes, which are able to draw the world and the spaces we inhabit. The cultures indicated by Jackson are thus not simply systems of meaning: they become tangible spaces, and represent the way in which the social relations of groups are structured in physical and spatial form. So we are not referring to an elitist type of culture, but rather to all possible human manifestations that cross the inhabited area. The maxim "landscape is a way of seeing" (Jackson 1995, 177) clearly expresses the all-encompassing character of this concept of culture, according to which each individual has his own way of seeing and imagining in parallel many different spatial forms or metaphors that host the spaces of his actions. The emphasis is therefore on the idea of landscape as a "cultural geography," capable of describing the synthesis of all ways of being, living and seeing, rather than as a fact that can only be reduced to a series of physical features, as is the case with classical territorial geography.

It is this reconstituted relationship between different cultures and different spaces, which could be defined as the process on which another and more contemporary concept of space is based: the interstitial space, no longer understood only in its physical form, but as a different and more complex

system, where events and spaces, governance and spontaneous actions, communication and listening, men and things, discourses and actions, animate and inanimate beings, atmospheric agents and artificial climates, etc. all intervene. These categories are all in need of their own spaces in which to carry out their actions, the final form of which is the result of complex processes of negotiation or confrontation, capable of satisfying and reconciling the different cultural and social trajectories.

It is a type of space whose character is not classically expressed in the physical encounter/confrontation between different built volumes, but whose true nature lies in the complex overlapping of different situations, whether material or immaterial, real or virtual. Thus, socio-spatial dynamics give shape to space, but at the same time they take shape from space, which ceases to be simply an architectural place, and becomes a complex, articulated and co-present structure of use. It is a subversion of the way of thinking about space, with solutions that are not only site-specific, but also “man-specific,” as prophesied in *Freeland: When Do I Need My Neighbor? A Common Ground To Be Found...*, the urban scenario presented by MVRDV for the Venice Biennale of Architecture, *Common Ground*, directed by David Chipperfield in 2012. Here the criterion for defining space is that of mass customisation, that produces a shared urban space, the result of free and complex negotiations. Each action takes place in the space left free by the previous one, where action means both the act itself and the space that the action produces. “How do we organise cities in an era torn between over-regulated urban planning and increasing individualisation? (...) What are the ‘minimum common grounds’ of our development? (...) Is it possible to envisage a city that reclaims both individual and collective intelligence and creativity?” (Chipperfield 2012, 114). These are just some of the questions at the heart of the project, which with a certain clarity express the search for a space constituted by the overlapping of problematic orders of different nature and status: from the reasons of physical space to the demands of man, whatever they may be.

A reconsideration of the nature of today’s space as a condition of its interstitiality means understanding what has changed today with respect to our way of inhabiting and using space, but also of observing and cataloguing it, establishing new points of view and different ways of describing it. It is a more inward-looking vision, which abandons the bird’s-eye view that allows us to recognise the physical perimeters of spaces, and instead takes a closer look at each individual part that inevitably blurs into the next. It is Serge Latouche who argues that in the era of globalisation, beyond the often blurred geographical boundaries, the limits of our possibilities to do

and act have disappeared: “Modern limitlessness is a unique and protean monster” (Latouche 2012, 17). However, Latouche maintains that the paradox of our age is that the limitlessness of doing actually corresponds to the appearance of a different infinity of other limits that are related to each other: political, cultural, ecological, economic, knowledge-related, moral limits, etc. In other words, limits of a different order and degree that require constant bargaining between the parties. This seems to perfectly describe the condition of contemporary urban space, to which we can now give the attribute of interstitial, since it is the sum and confrontation of these other types of limits, according to which we can act within perimeters that are more or less blurred, but from which our action can be expanded out of all proportion towards other spaces and the whole world.

Reyner Banham was already aware of this when he wrote *The Architecture of Four Ecologies* in 1971, in which the interaction between different categories, such as geography, economy, climate, demographic movements, technologies and culture, goes far beyond a simple physical reading of space. For Banham, describing the space of the city by expanding disciplinary boundaries and cultural horizons meant describing a kind of artificial ecology: no longer, therefore, urban spaces as a continuous narrative, but rather their description, made up of logical leaps and interrupted sequences, characterised by a frequent lack of linearity of events.

Banham was describing the constitutive processes of Los Angeles, but it seems that these prophetic definitions fit well with many of the spaces in our cities today. Interstitiality understood as the encounter/confrontation between non-homogeneous categories, parallel realities that overlap one another in the same existential space, expresses a different measure of reality and a composite and fragmentary approach to the city. It is a type of identity of urban space that can no longer be found in a single, shared sense, the result of the coexistence of different, sometimes conflicting, ideologies. In this respect, Kevin Lynch already wrote in 1971 about “density nodes,” connected to each other through a “polycentric network.” In the book *The Image of the City*, Lynch describes mental maps or environmental images, capable of interpreting information and guiding actions, as a kind of orientation tool, much like the *staging* of a film script. A sort of synthetic vision that moves the spectator/citizen through the spaces of the city, but also through the different characters that the places are able to express, through the contrasts that the different polarities claim for themselves.

Giving structure and identity to the environment is a vital capacity of all animals capable of movement. The means used for this are innumerable: visual sensations of colour, shape, movement, or the polarisation of light, and other senses such as smell, hearing, touch, kinesthesia, the perception of gravity, and perhaps of electric and magnetic fields. (Lynch 1960, 3)

It is a *filmic* vision of the city, no longer seen only from the point of view of the architect, but from another angle—that of an architect/director able to capture, as in a sort of composite geography, the most heterogeneous aspects of urban space. This is exactly what happens in cinema when the director works on space and on the complexity of all the elements that contribute to defining it:

With a good approximation it can be summarised that geography in cinema can reveal itself on the planes of code and sign, of the space of representation, of storytelling, of iconography, but also in particular stylistic-discursive configurations that have been called “cartographic forms” of cinema. (Avezzi 2017, 25)

Therefore, understanding the limits of the different spaces of the city does not so much mean knowing how to act on them in a quantitative and dimensional sense, describing only their physical nature, but rather understanding them in a qualitative sense, broadening the disciplinary boundaries and cultural horizons to examine their vital substance. Thus, for the contemporary city we could really speak of a sort of general condition of interstitiality of space, to which specific categories of reference correspond, which I would summarise as fluidity, simultaneity, loss of orientation, the conversion of the citizen from passive user to active participant, and dissemination.

The interstitial space of the contemporary city is fluid

This is a widespread condition within our cities, to be understood as the result of the fact that a stable, and once and for all defined identity, is less and less detectable in them. The mobility of ideas, images and people erodes the concept of space and in particular of those spaces that we call *places*. And if it is true that the substance of a place lies in a surplus value that goes beyond its formal or functional qualities alone, succeeding in summing up strong symbolic values within itself, then a large part of its quality is determined by the sum of the life experiences that take place in that place, and by the perception that affects the gaze and mind of those who carry out their actions

in that same space. These are actions that today more than ever go beyond the boundaries of the very space from which they originate.

It is the paradox of contemporary space, confined around the action of the person, but at the same time totally open to the world, beyond any place and beyond any limit. Places and limits that presuppose that they are continually crossed through access thresholds that we could more appropriately rename “access protocols” (Augé 2007). So in order to move from one space to another, in the interstitial space of the contemporary city it is necessary to use passwords or show identification documents (Boeri 2011). Space today has been transformed into a fluid geography made up of places, understood as interpenetrating, overlapping or side-by-side subsystems, each of which fades like a fluid into the one before or after it, while claiming its own specific identity.

The interstitial space of the contemporary city is characterised by the simultaneity of events

Many things can happen at the same time in the same locality, and an action, even if it happens simultaneously with another, always marks out its own specific spatial environment in which it can take place. These are physical or virtual spatial environments that allow us to overlap time and space freely: while I perform an action here, I can participate in an event there, being virtually present there as well. As Manuel Castells writes: “The culture of real virtuality associated with the electronically integrated multimedia system, (...), contributes to transforming time in our society into two different forms: simultaneity and timelessness” (Castells 1996, 199).

Today, space is no longer a single, unambiguous concept, and the simultaneous presence of different types of links connecting different spatial environments is enhanced by a growing interactivity that characterises the active relationship between users, in space and time. It is a free combination of space and time that simultaneously generates different locations, which form or unravel, retract or expand as human actions take place within them.

The interstitial space of the contemporary city is characterised by the loss of orientation

Images, brands, customs, fashions, as well as objects, architecture and spaces, migrate from one place to another on earth in a non-hierarchical order, which

is, if anything, dictated by the laws of the market, finance, marketing, fashion, etc. The result is a phenomenon, at times confusing, but incontrovertible, according to which many spaces, exterior or interior, typical of some places, can be found again, the same or with very few variations, in different places belonging to different locations. This is the case for the commercial spaces of certain major brands, whose spatial typologies are the same in all geographies. But it is also true of certain urban sprawl spaces in some of the world's capitals, whose impersonal character does not belong to any particular location. In other words, a sort of dissociation is generated between use and figure, which Castells points out very well when he states that:

The development of electronic communication and information systems allows for the increasing dissociation between spatial proximity and the performance of everyday functions: work, shopping, entertainment, health, education, public services, corporate governance and the like. (Castells 2014, 454)

One could therefore describe the loss of orientation as the recovery of another kind of spatial value that cannot be defined in its physical form, but can be described in its constitutive processes that occur over time, governed by the nature of the networks of relations between events and actions that are layered one on top of the other or next to each other.

In the interstitial space of the contemporary city, the citizen is transformed from a passive user into an active participant

This is a change of role that can trigger virtuous processes of open innovation: “Open innovation is the method of bringing people’s ideas together and is based on a number of principles such as collaboration, sharing, decentralisation, transparency of processes and plurality of participants” (Murray, Caulier Grice, and Mulgan 2011, 53). It follows that in the interstitial space of the contemporary city, practices take place with greater freedom and this, at least in part, is the result of the structuring of our actions through the support of the internet, enabled by computer devices. It is a dissemination of uses supported by a network of flows that evolve in junctions that often lack a real spatial dimension, except for the different conditions of use that are determined at that moment and in that particular space. They are like hubs, linking together different locations, which in turn are characterised by flows of exchanges, communications, actions and events. In our cities, a new governance of users

guides the constitution of spaces, transforming the citizen from a passive user into an active participant and proposer.

The interstitial space of the contemporary city is disseminated, as are the flows of actions that determine it

It is a space whose structure is extensive and in which there are different contents with different types of links, so it is not possible to make a single, predetermined reading of it. The city has become a true theoretical structure, readable as a macro-text composed of micro-texts connected to each other in a heterogeneous map that can be explored by the user, in which not only the origins of the discourses and intertextual references can be found, but also every possible destination. And it is precisely the destinations that are of most interest, as they are nothing more than the complex system of dialogues, events and decisions that can ultimately produce new and complex spatial formulations.

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