Expanding Interior Design through Humanities

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Abstract

Designing a home that is not a home, but which aspires to be so for a short time, responding to a wide variety of cultural needs, is a difficult challenge, which design could however tackle with essential contributions from the field of humanities. The paper aims to explain the initial results of a study led by a multi-disciplinary group of designers, social workers and environmental psychologists. The research focuses on the quality of Italian centres for refugees. The ephemeral nature of the settlement in the centres and the variety of identities of the tenants due to their multi-ethnical and multi-identity nature, require tools, processes and knowledge from a wide range of disciplinary contexts. How could design and humanities respond to the cultural diversities implied in this state of living? How could design comprehend the environmental-psychological concept of place-identity [Proshansky, 1978] in temporary places? How could design, starting with a social condition of dis-location and dis-placement [Papadopoulus, 2002], re-place a new location, a new place? Starting with the three main elements of living [Canter, 1974; Vitta, 2008] – bodies, spaces and objects – the study aims to explore how space's physical qualities could enhance the cultural integration that is promoted in reception centres. The places' 3 basic elements are expanded into a wider concept of hospitable capability, with the contribution of social and psychological sciences: *bodies* & privacy *vs* collective spaces + *spaces* & attachment *vs* temporariness + *object* & personalization *vs* standardization. This approach aims to answer the need for places which are able to comprehend and open to *cultural diversities*. The paper surveys a wide range of case studies of hospitable and open-cultural places, in order to outline models for interior design characterized by a *humanities-centred* approach.

Keywords

Interior design; temporary living; hospitable; environmental system; cross-cultural approach.

Where design aims to provide answers for designing spaces with a marked semantic content, such as living spaces, its con-formative action must use tools aimed at interpreting the requests, needs and vocations of those who inhabit such spaces, and at translating them into a full set of elements that determine the designed environment. The design of living spaces relates to the whole range of meanings associated with man's "being-in-the-world". The ancestral ownership of a place, the act of settling, are closely connected with the self-determination of being (Golinelli, 2008), with identification or the recognition of belonging to a certain place, with which one establishes a privileged relationship and with regards to which one "orients" oneself to the rest of the world (Norberg-Shulz, 1984). The constructed universe, which includes urban areas but also squares and public buildings, as well as homes and private rooms, is at the same time a manifestation and a determination of the quality of this relationship.

Referring in particular to the context of private housing, this favours the dimension of accommodation, of the home. The shape of the home has assumed over time specific connotations closely linked to socio-cultural (as well as geo-climatic and technological) factors. Many observers of Western culture see nomadic living as a characteristic trait that clearly influences design processes in terms of the forms of houses. The acquired awareness "that 'belonging' and 'identity' are to a large extent negotiable and revocable" (Bauman, 2003), makes a new type of "transitory" bond with the inhabited place possible: "the appropriation of a place is carried out only in the present time dimension and bears the mark of a meteoric presence, which can immediately go elsewhere" (R. Tomassini and P. Volonterio 1995). On the other hand, the massive migratory phenomena, which have become accentuated over the last two decades, pose for the interior design of temporary housing the challenge of integrating culturally diverse housing models. In relation to this context, the paradigms of the approach to interior design seem to change, and the design process takes part in re-defining the relationship between the human being and the built environment, into new forms of collaboration with the humanities that interpret the evolution of that relationship.

Interior design for transitory living: temporary, hospitable, cross–cultural

Temporary. The built space can be designed (or re-designed) by a designer according to the concept of 'fitting out', seen as a "temporary settlement practice". The interior design process always starts with the person and the recognition of their needs (material and immaterial): the project always develops, regardless of the scale, from this unit of reference. The man/neighbourhood relationship identifies a "micro-environment": the design acts on the systemic configuration of the variables constituting the space. Thinking in terms of 'fitting out' means imagining space as a device with an *adaptive vocation*, in other words connoted by a vocation to make the space for the reception of events that will happen there "prepared, ready": reversible, in its material dimension and structural organization; temporary, in terms of both constructive and symbolic nature[1]; highly communicative.

Designing a space that meets these requirements, means overcoming the defining categories of traditional architecture (interior space; margins; equipment/furniture), and considering new elements for the articulation of the furnished environment:

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1 The ephemeral material condition (which is expressed in the use of "time-programmed" materials, in the application of "dry" techniques in the construction phase, in the design of a "life cycle" for the artefact-space that includes disposal and/or disassembly, etc.) does not in fact necessarily go hand in hand with a time-limited immaterial content.

1_borders. Borders are that whole series of physical fences, like partitions and diaphragms, decide a space with its own sense. It's a separation aimed at the construction of that micro-environment that temporarily houses and gives meaning to the relationship between man and his surroundings. A separation between dichotomies that from time to time assume a different weight in one direction: internal/external; public/private; collective/individual; open/closed; defined/undefined. The border often becomes itself an inhabited place, emphasizing the temporary nature of contemporary settlement, but also the role intended for designs to fit out "open" situations (Desideri, 2002). From a metaphorical perspective it is also the place where the separation between non-homogeneous elements becomes tension towards a breakdown of the boundaries in the urban landscape, of suburbs pressing the city, of those geographical, political and social borders that still articulate the "globalized" world (Augé, 2007; Clement, 2005).

2_frames. With the term "frame" we can thus identify those components most related to the design of soft variables (as defined by the primary design): surface treatments, luminous atmospheres, background sounds and smells; including the latest fringes such as WIFI connection areas or interactive devices. The design of soft variables enhances the material structure of space by incorporating/overlapping intangible enclaves that influence relational dynamics, since they define potentials of use and/or specific functions.

3_stage prop. Let's start with the world of the theatre, in which the term "stage prop" originates: in the work of the Czech set designer and director Josef Svoboda, as well as in the more recent work of Germany's Anna Viebrock and her Lithuanian colleague Eimuntas Nekrosius, it is evident that the prop is a tool for action and acquires sense within this connoted use. A link between the practice of fitting out a stage set and the daily experience of every individual in the use of "things" emerges in the research of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1981). Similarly, Paolo Inghilleri observes that (2003): "... individuals use objects and live in spaces, highlighting the complex relationship between individual well-being and connection with a territorially localized system of goods (i.e. between individual and socio-cultural development)". It's like saying that the systems of objects globally tend to be a tool for the action of communicating. The stage prop is thus a "thing" that becomes a "sign".

Hospitable. In their book Empire, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri see the new barbarians in those global nomads who move in large streams due to wars, dictatorial regimes, and dreams pursued by the rich countries of the world. These barbarian-migrants constitute a powerful multitude, capable of transforming territories politically, without taking root in them, resisting territorialization. The multitude establishes a new relationship with the built environment, interpreting it as a place for the satisfaction of transitory needs, a place in which to sleep, relax, take a break. "The multitude", writes Jennifer Allen (2002), "-refugees or even ravers - does not inhabit architecture, but pushes it to the limits of existence, treating the constructed space as a temporary second skin barely distinguishable from the basic functions of the body." The multitude poses a challenge to the design of inhabited places, which is that of fuelling the ability to make *hospitable places*. This challenge is widely taken up by contemporary artistic practices, able to act as paradigmatic incubators of processes of use that link the fragment with complexity, with the aim of building a sense of belonging to the community and places (Crespi, 2008). By way of example, the work of Atelier van Lieshout investigates the deepest and most complex aspects of a space designed for the multitude. In *capsules for sleeping (Mini Capsule Side Entrance and Maxi Capsule Luxus, 2002)*, there emerges a kind of architecture able to integrate seemingly irreconcilable aspects: on one hand the lack of roots, brutal functionality, resistance, minimum size, flexibility, expansiveness; on the other hand, the attempt to create a hospitable place, able to make people sleep but also dream, able to stand

between the excessively bare room in which one feels non-human and the super-furnished room in which one feels like an intruder. "As a unit to house people, the capsules of the AVL are paradigmatic examples of situations in which you find migrants living in limbo, somewhere between full citizenship and death" (Allen, 2002). Since 2000, the Wurmkos collective has been proposing, in various versions and locations, the installation *Tana* ('den'), a relational environment (Bordone, 2006) that becomes, in the artistic process, a temporarily available space with a significant aesthetic content. This temporary space is presented as a workshop which generates an excess of drawings and texts that accumulate on the walls, added by participants who bring with them difficulties (diseases, mental disabilities, etc.). The abundance of works produced stimulates the perception of a tight relationship that goes against the hardships and privations of the subjects. The installation seems to show the materialization of that hidden surplus, well described by Frederic Rahola (2006). The existence of individuals "out of place", without belonging and *in excess* with respect to any territory and economic system, can find an outlet in equally provisional places. Rahola cites Bauman and speaks of non-static human off-casts within the mental confines of society and thus territorialized within new confines, new monitorable centres, at the same time temporary (due to the provisional nature of the guests) and permanent (since they exist indefinitely). We perceive the sense of people in excess, of an excess which it is necessary to heal and eliminate with appropriate antidotes. In Wurmkos this excess finally has its own support, its own materialization, and emerges with all its energy from the limits in which it had been confined. It is now free and interacts, creating a place of relation.

In this sense, the den of Wurmkos becomes a point of reference for the relational qualities of that hospitable environment that design aspires to build.

Cross-cultural. In our recent history, the Humanities have dealt with the study and description of the culture phenomenon from two opposing viewpoints: culture viewed from within (the emic approach of sociologists, anthropologists and related) and that seen from the outside (etic approach). It is with this understanding that we can recognize the approach of the designer as an *vat* the design. In relations between individuals of different cultures we find different communication situations which might be summarized as follows: intra-cultural, when people belong to the same culture; inter-cultural (or cross-cultural), when people of different cultures engage in reciprocal attempts to know each other; meta- (or trans-) cultural, when two people from different cultures do not enter into the merits of the other's specificities but base their communication mainly on abstract/transversal aspects. "The etic approach has given rise to cross-cultural psychology, which aims to carry out systematic comparison among various cultures by using quantitative methods (questionnaires, psychological tests, etc.) and abstract models of explanation" (Anolli, 2006). The term "cross-cultural" emerged in the social sciences in the 1930s, largely as a result of the Cross-Cultural Survey undertaken by George Peter Murdock, anthropologist. Initially referring to comparative studies based on statistical compilations of cultural data, the term gradually acquired a secondary sense of cultural interactivity. The usage of "cross-cultural" was for many decades restricted mainly to the social sciences[2].

The term "cross-cultural" is here intended as an approach beyond design or, in other words, a specific design thinking especially applied to cultural diversity in an extensive way. The term is, more-

2 Among the more prominent examples are the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology (IACCP) established in 1972.

over, already known in design culture[3]. First of all, in the field of the design of digital interfaces: a disciplinary area in which we have long been investigating the effectiveness of communication of non-typographical/calligraphic elements (e.g. icons, formal structures, colours, patterns), both in terms of comprehensibility and semantic consistency.
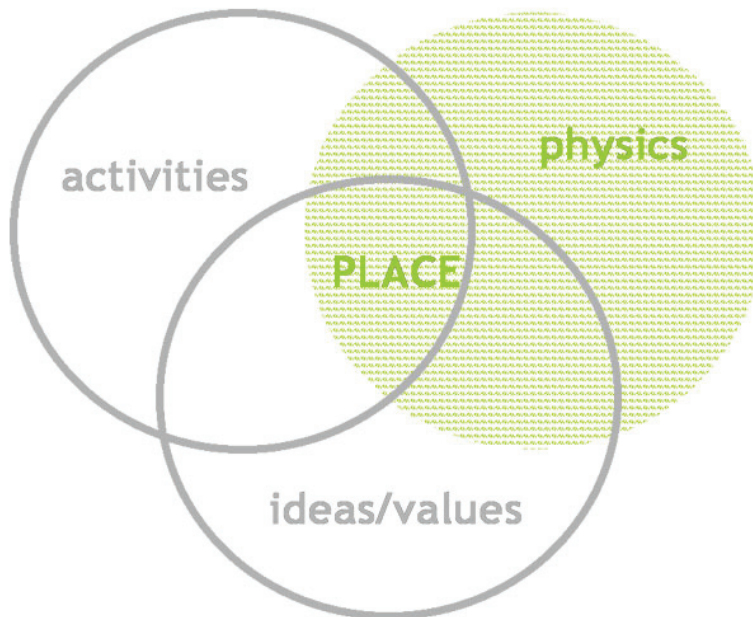
Interior design and social sciences: from space to place

The definition proposed by Canter (1972) concerns the psychological construct of place, understood as a unit of environmental experience that includes a complex mix of parameters: actions; characterizing physical attributes; emotionally oriented knowledge.

The author, like the whole of the discipline, investigates not only the phenomena of perception of space and its environments in terms of pleasurableness and environmental quality, but specializes in the analysis and evaluation of the emotional dimension as a crucial parameter in interaction with the place. Emotion is an indicator for subsequent forms of relationship with the place. In the words of Amendola, the "demand for experience" has evolved – in other words the designer today asks the sociologist and psychologist not so much how to maximize the performance capabilities of the architecture as how to best act on emotions.

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3 Even before this appeared that of trans-cultural design. Cf. Welsh,W. 1996 in International Design Conference, Aspen.

Canter, along with another pioneer of environmental psychology, Terence Lee (1974), in the 1970s started a trend of psychological research focusing on the analysis of the complex relationship between man and place, as interactive and "transactional" as possible. The most interesting analytical parameters that their research has given the world of design refer to the implications of the visual-perceptive and emotional effects generated by the design. Performance and storytelling are no longer sufficient to effectively render the perception of environmental quality; we must add the fact of experience (understood in its emotional dominant) from which the key reading of performativity emerges (Giunta, 2012). The contribution of psychological research to design is therefore characterized by an approach that takes into account human aspects analytically, from the individual to groups, in terms of daily individual and collective behaviour; it has methods of scientific analysis that produce charts and interpretative models made available to designers; can intervene, with his specific know-how in various stages of the design process: during conception (indicators of relationship between environment and behaviour), in a subsequent phase of project specification (psycho-behavioural responses to the built forms) and, finally, in the assessment phase (effect analysis).

Starting thus with the measurable "parameters" that environmental psychology provides for design culture – *the character of the place, or the affective dimension evoked, and families of qualities derived from the nature of the experience* of interacting with the designed site (in other words we could consider how the *affective dimension is experienced*) – we could say that the quality of a contemporary space, because it allows its interiors to be fitted out in a range of potential ways, depends on the extent to which a designer is able to orient its shift into becoming a place, in other words designing an "environmental system".
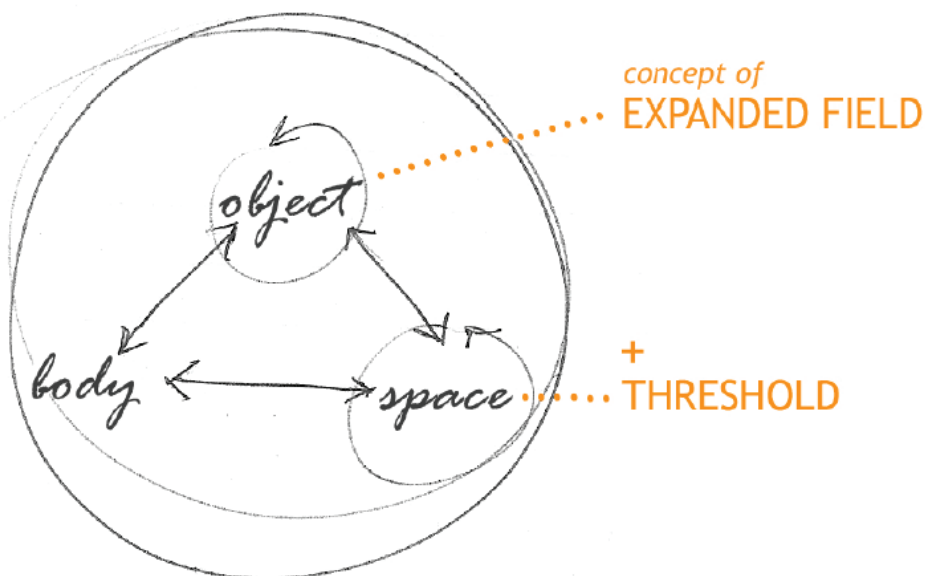

FIG. 2
Environmental system (Giunta, 2007)

To create an "environmental system" three elements operate interactively:

- **Bodies**, namely the social component, ranging from the individual to the community and therefore from spaces designed for an individual or for groups/communities that must identify themselves in them and operate there;

- **Objects**, or the inanimate actors of the inhabitation scene, that in relation to the theory of the expanded field (Krauss, 1968) work as fragments in semantic symbiosis with their surroundings (space) and in function of the use that the bodies make of it;

- **Spaces**, i.e. the collection of containers, which first come into relationship with each other, generating spaces/threshold. Reasoning according to a conjunctive approach, this space-space meeting gives rise to bands of possibility and transformation in which, once more in the dialogue with objects and bodies, endless games between figure and background take place.

In the light of this, we can see that the social component is a resource critical to the project's success, insofar as it is a variable that formulates, interprets and, lastly, activates the demand. The body, first space, is intended as a resource, provider of energies (aesthetic, creative, managerial, technical) that contribute to the co-construction of the most symbolic and temporary part of the material design.

How "to feel at home" in forced houses: towards a cross-cultural design approach

In the study "*The Design of spaces, fittings and scenarios for Milan, hospitable city*"[4], the elements making up the environmental system highlighted specific design problems, in reference to the theme of the project for the temporary reception of asylum seekers and political refugees. The theme expresses a housing situation that maximizes the dimensions, described in the introduction, of temporariness (vs. insecurity of attachment), hospitality (intended as familiarity and comprehensibility of the place, capable of supporting autonomy), cross-culturality.

Bodies, *objects* and *spaces* have become as many viewpoints from which to read the crucial dichotomies of the design and the psychosocial needs underpinning them. Privacy and collective space are the extremes that enfold all the possible spatial configurations aimed at managing the meeting and interaction between the individuals that live the space. Without mentioning the gender variable. The formal nature (structure, materials and finishes) of space and its overall configuration prove to be fundamental for an effective qualitative (and emotional, see the above-mentioned models) perception: in the interaction with the system of spaces it is essential that the individual perceives himself as *capable*, that the environment is readable, practicable and sufficiently modifiable. Containers and systems of objects must be able to respond, over time, to the introverted needs of isolation, intimacy, protection and, conversely, to those extroverted needs of socialization, sharing, co-management, and integration. The universe of objects, finally, is the field in which infinite variations between identification and standardisation can be played out, in other words, practices of signification, appropriation or mimesis can be activated with and on objects: personal traces, decoration, neutrality, superfetations.

"Reversibility + participation = belonging"; this trio of keywords might be translated into design parameters, where *reversibility* becomes "degree of structuration of the space's physical component" (layout) and *participation means* "user potential to intervene in the process of signification of the

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place" (pre-determined *vs.* extemporaneous use). The frame, designed by these criteria, is established as an essential new reference for the understanding of design needs which the contemporary project is called to answer.

There thus emerges the importance of ethical-design awareness (as well as aesthetic-design awareness) of the designer in the definition of that core object that floats around and that can contribute (more or less positively) to the construction of the relationship between man and his artificial environment and its representations. It is necessary to manage the project, understanding the fallout in terms of well-being/ill-being that affective and emotional investment on the space/object system can generate. A project for interiors can thus be understood as the configuration of artificial habitats: the tension underlying this type of project is to give a material form and containers to relational configurations that are always in the making, that will take place in the spaces. The product-space makes way for the process-space, a sort of "expedient" that is completed (physically and especially in terms of sense), through individual creativity and mechanisms of appropriation, in real-time.

Dealing with the project of reception sites dedicated to multi-ethnic users, such as refugees and asylum seekers, implies re-designing a temporary place that is a house although not a home, that should be able to establish a significant relation with the hosts' cultural background but also to introduce them into the new culture. It's a place that hosts a process of changing, of learning, of redemption. In this sense we should think of a place "on the move", which explores a multiplicity of strategies and tactics over time, which is able to respond to the wide range of requirements from the guests.

In this sense the design attitude feeds on a cross-cultural approach, so that it can foresee places and scenarios that speak a multitude of languages and signs to a multitude of "identities in progress".

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