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The Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Politecnico di Milano organises at the School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering (AUIC), EURAU Milan 2024 "IN-PRESENCE / THE BODY AND THE SPACE - The role of corporeity in the era of virtualization", the eleventh edition of the international conference, which takes place from 19 to 22 June 2024.



/ EURAU Milan 2024

11th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

EUROPEAN RESEARCH ON ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

IN-PRESENCE / THE BODY AND THE SPACE

The role of corporeity in the era of virtualization

For those who deal with the city and the territory, space refers to the body (C. Bianchetti)

The EURAU Milan 2024 Conference aims to unpack the significance of corporeality in contemporary times and its relevance for the upcoming years. Specifically, the focus is on the relation between body and space and how this relates to architecture, the city and the environment, interpreted as physical facts and processes. Within the background of a technological turn, the focus is now on what has changed or will further change in this relationship and what, on the opposite, remains unalterable, inherently bound to the material and impervious to the virtual.

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Bodies on the move: exploring the effects of speed in the body-space relationship

Key Words

Body-space relationship, Speed, Embodied movement, Environmental perception, Affective experience

The person-environment relationship has received researchers' undivided attention throughout the years, with insights spanning multiple disciplinary fields: from environmental psychology, sociology and geography to urban planning, architecture and neuroscience. Scholars studying the complex body-space interaction regard both components as a system, in which the person is part of the environment [Rapoport 1977; Ingold 2022]. Multiple factors mediate the way humans perceive the environment: physical features and environmental properties, perceptual-cognitive and affective judgements, purposes, preferences, and culture. Since the 1970s, scholars have been stressing the role of human corporeal movement in environmental perception. Visual perception and sensory experience of space are not static processes [Rapoport 1977]; instead, the human body plays an active role in interpreting reality through movement [Gibson 1979]. The new mobilities paradigm advocates for "the recentering of the corporeal body as an affective vehicle through which we sense place and movement and construct emotional geographies" [Sheller & Ury 2006, p. 216]. Humans are mobile beings that experience emotions while on the move [Rapoport 1982; Cresswell 2006; Metz 2008; Spinney 2015]. Yet, it is crucial to address the following questions: What happens when the concept of speed is added to the equation? How does speed condition movement through and within space? The present contribution aims to provide a theoretical reflection on environmental perception and affective experience of bodies on the move, drawing from the hypothesis that different forms of movement, and thus different speeds, give rise to different sensory and affective experiences [Johansson et al., 2016]. Regarding the body as both a physical structure and as a lived, experiential structure [Merleau-Ponty, 2002], we will challenge the concept of speed and explore potential reconciliations for embodied movement in space. Finally, we will present empirical insights from a study on environmental perception and affective experience of being on the move at different speeds.

In an era of perpetual movement (of humans, objects, information), the effects of speed and its pervasiveness in our experience of space are increasingly questioned [Solnit 2001; Rosa 2015]. The high speeds of human mobility have eradicated the sense of distance, annihilated space and time, and dissociated kinaesthetic from visual space [Hall 1982; Schivelbusch 1988]. Through the mechanization and disembodiment of human mobility, modern rhythms facilitate movement from A to B but impoverish spatial experience, rushing passengers through intangible landscapes. "It's the end of the foreground" [Schivelbusch 1988, p. 65], that is the fundamental spatial dimension of the mobile experience in which the person establishes contact with the space he/she is moving through. Experiences of movement have increasingly become passive, disengaged [Metz 2008] and mediated by filters: windows, screens, transparent or semi-transparent surfaces. The insulating capacity of cars and trains induces a 'tactile sterility [Sennett 1994], where sounds, smells, sensations of touch and temperature are all diluted [Urry 2006]. With the aim to reinstate embodied movement and body-space interaction. scholars underline the potential of slower speeds and rhythms [Gardner 2009; Edensor 2010; Pileri 2020]. Slow mobility is expressed through active modes of movement in which the body itself generates motion, such as walking and cycling. Active and embodied movement at speeds below 20 km/h yields rich sensory experiences, enables immersion of the body in space and encourages the person's engagement with the landscape [Illich 1974; Gehl 2010].

The above observations are supported by evidence from a study (carried out in the context of a PhD research project) on the relationship between mode of movement and environmental perception. The study took place on three peri-urban areas along the embankments of the Po river in Lombardy, Italy, where it is possible to encounter individuals using different modes of movement. Based on the premise that the study would include participants of all ages and using the method of intercept survey, the aim was to qualitatively investigate environmental perception and affective experience of people walking, cycling, or driving a car. Individuals who agreed to participate completed a verbal questionnaire and were free to provide additional personal observations. The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open-ended questions regarding purpose and duration of movement, familiarity with the surroundings, perception of speed during movement, environmental features perceived during the trip, and demographic data. Moreover, participants were asked to describe the surroundings in their own words.

The survey yielded a large amount of gualitative material, that does not lack complexity. Participants involved in the study age from seven to 74 years-old, therefore constituting a wide sample that allows for data interpretation according to age. Findings for the three modes of movement (walking, cycling and driving) are currently under interpretation, yet it is possible to derive some preliminary observations. Firstly, walkers and cyclists referred to both largescale (i.e., river, vegetation, landmarks) and micro-scale environmental features perceived in the foreground (i.e., animals, types of vegetation), confirming previous research that slower speeds allow for an enhanced visual perception of space [Liu et al. 2021; Hannam et al. 2021]. Walkers and cyclists involved in the study declared no disability; we may thus consider their bodies as able to generate motion at different speeds, according to their age and experience. Their kinaesthetic and sensory experience was almost non-mediated, since they also referred to sounds, smells, the weather and other sensory variables, such as the pleasant shade of the trees. On the other hand, car drivers' description of their surroundings was limited to generic visual judgements of environmental features perceived panoramically and at a distance (i.e., river, fields). This observation confirms the assumption that the car functions as a 'vision machine', dominating sensory experience and imposing panoramic, cinematic views of the landscape to the otherwise immobilised passenger [Larsen 2001]. Secondly, cyclists particularly expressed feelings of freedom and relaxation during movement, while some referred to the potential of the bicycle in stimulating both body and mind and inducing an affective, mobile sense of place, as also suggested by Dunlap et al. [2021]. Although all participants reported stops during movement, walkers' and cyclists' motivations to stop were often related to a need for observing and engaging with space, as pointed by Pileri [2010]. whereas car drivers' motivations were of instrumental nature. The main conclusion drawn from this preliminary analysis aligns with previous studies in indicating that speed is an experiential quality of movement and environmental perception [Ingold 2021] and is suggestive of our sense of dwelling or belonging to a place [Kaplan 1988; Sheller & Urry 2006].

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