URBAN DESIGN

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ii

ECOLOGIES

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Urban Design Ecologies

ii inclusive interiors 05

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#05

Urban Design Ecologies
Projects for City Environments

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ii inclusive interiors Book Series

ii inclusive interiors is a series of studies that – in the attempt to build the foundations of an adaptable environment that meets the need of intercultural dialogue determined by the current phenomena of transnational migration – aims at outlining the most relevant architectural experimentations on collective interiors, in order to highlight the most innovative strategies and tools of "inclusive design" in this regard. In doing that, it collects multidisciplinary critical contributions focusing on the new spaces and architectures that respond to the change of social sphere in a society marked by the intensification of the mobility of people as well as information.

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**VIA
GIAN CARLO CASTELBARCO**

MEDAGLIA D'ORO   1854 — 1917

Human Interpretations of Space

Madalina Ghibusi

This chapter focuses on the several implications between people and space. Nevertheless, the relationship between these two entities, good, bad, strong or merely existent, is a simple acknowledgement that architecture lives, and it is as dynamic, complex and fragile as the human nature. This short analogy between the architectural object and human, introduces the identity meaning of this inquiry that is regarded as a tool to understand the participants of the dialogue. The dialogue in this context is intented as one of the ways of knowledgeble exploring (Zingale 2009, 64), as architects trying to understand not only to ask. Then, the participants in this dialogue are, on one hand, the space and the individual, and, on the other hand, the several disciplines that deal with these two. From the architectural point of view, the means of understanding the human needs, require access to deeper insights into psychology of the individual and the masses, trying to relate to socio-culural tools connected to the space conditions. In this sense we need to calibrate the implications that sociological approaches have in the field of architecture, also through approaches and terminology that are supported by the fields of human geography and environmental psychology. The discorse will highlight how, for example, *place*, *genius loci*, *identity*, *place attachment* are common terms studied cross-disciplinary. The touching points between the sciences that deal with the terms of city and people can be reached through a deeper insight in connecting concepts and terms, trying to apply a soft, practical and conceptual approach on a hard science in the *osmotic* continuous relastionship between these (Cervelli and Sedda 2005, 185). This relationship is going to be reagarded

as one that can be described by empathy. Then it is important to mention the different approaches on the term of *place* in the search of the human dimension of architecture and to undersand not only how it is perceived and experienced but also what kind of behaviour this interaction can build into individuals.

So the discourse of this human interpretations of space does not regard social architecture, in the sense of the architectural space that is able to meet the needs of social challenged users, but more an insight from the sciences centered on the human nature and its implications on the architectural space as a proposal to open new ways of thinking about the space we design. In this case, the speech of identity focuses on the reflections of the human experience of the space and the relationships created due to this condition, whether active or passive, whether the human is participant or consumer, physically present or not. This position can overcome the fragile relation between contemporary space and other human cantered sciences, if it is regarded as a potential to engage the individual into giving the space emotional valences. A strong structure of the space cannot be modified by the human diversity and uncertainty and it should because it seems that this social evaluation can ensure a quality of the place throughout time.

Leaving space for interpretations can emerge into a power of engagement between the storyteller and its listener or between space planner and client. But city planners write the story of the city with their own language while common people do not have access to the same tools to express their vision and perception of the city they live in or they want to live in. They express themselves through their actions or the human language. How do we translate these words into architecture? Taken the statement that "the cities are the last hope of a collective action truly efficient" (Bauman 2014, 42) as a hypothesis, how do we define this action? A collective action implies that a diversity of human nature proceeds in a unique act and participates for consuming the objective of their action. Is it possible that the nature of the man as a consumer can be the trigger and the bonding element for a collective act? This inquiery is necessary in order to practice the dialogue between space and its users, to establish a common language as the means of communication even if this prooves to be, the space itself.

An empathetic relationship

Recognizing itself into a building throughout the social relationships that one practices every day is an evaluation of identity in the reciprocal way depicted by Christian Norberg-Schulz, where the user of a space "has to identify himself with the environment, that is, he has to know how he is a certain place." (Norberg-Schulz 1980, 19). This way of developing an affective connection between two entities without knowing each other is a form of empathy. Bill Hillier and Julianne Hanson state that architecture itself can be a social art, giving the space the power to generate the relations between the function of it and its social meaning by identifying the same order between buildings and people relationships: "Architecture is not a social art simply because buildings are important visual symbols of society, but also because, through the ways in which buildings, individually and collectively, create and order space, we are able to recognize society: that it exists and has a certain form" (Hillier and Hanson 1984, 2). If we interpret the relations between different types of spaces, grouped into small communities by the same type of preference in lighting, we can say that architecture performs on a system of human interaction. The way different rooms open to each other through transparency or isolate through thick insulated walls talks about communication. The hierarchy between the areas that host the main function and the rooms that support it can be developed on the structure of the working society: the fewer representative ones cannot thrive without the background support of the numerous annexes. This interpretation is not new, as also Henry Lefebvre demonstrates how "In spatial practice, the reproduction of social relations is predominant." (Lefebvre 1974, 50). And what is relevant for the discourse of affective relations between space and social interpretations is that recognizing this relations inside a building can help people orientate within it or approach it in a more familiar way: "Without reducing the importance of orientation, we have to stress that dwelling above all presupposes identification with the environment. (…) one gets along without feeling *at home*. And it is possible to fell at home without being well acquainted with the spatial structure of the place" (Norberg-Schulz 1980, 20). Getting to know a place so well that you can use it without being aware of it, is the way architecture "mimes" the human behavior in order to make itself acceptable and to self-sustain a permanence in time.

So, the representation of the social interaction within the object, the building or the space, creates empathetic connections because the person approaches and identifies himself with the place. All this happens to the persons without being conscious of what makes them experience it this way as they cannot identify in the same language of the designer the rules of the architectural space that is intended to express social networks of relationships: "The social purpose of a building may thus be the expression of a status, a role, a group, a collectivity, or institution; and a collection of buildings may represent the social system as a whole." (Norberg-Schulz 1980, 118). Therefore, this form of empathetic interaction between architecture and the manifestation of its perceptions, can be seen as one of the social dimensions of it.

Secondly, the empathy could synthetize the relationship between the field of architecture and human sciences, as it is concluded by Chris Label after an inquiry of the development of the design thinking: "The architect empathizes with the people and the place in which they live in order to give form to that identity. The human scientist empathizes with his subjects in order to understand, describe and explain that identity" (Label 1997, 34). Another manifestation of this empathy that formulates the importance of a reciprocity between space and its user, was, the essentializing quote of Winston Churchill: "We shape or buildings, and afterwards, the buildings shape us".[1] This speech, held in the House of Commons after a serious war bombing, was, according to Marino Bonaiuto, Elena Bilotta and Ferdinando Fornara, a first shift from the functional necessities that an architecture must guarantee towards one in which there are recognizable aspects resulted from the "relationship between persons and the physical-spatial assessment" such as "affective, communicative and symbolical" aspects (Bonaiuto et al. 2014, 9).[2] Throughout the book the discourse continues on the development of this "architectural psychology" (ibid.) that also defines some guidelines for the phases of the design process: starting from an analysis and understanding of the users, throughout the design and construction phase and then the part of evaluating the product based on its use. This thread of the design actions can illustrate the first definition of the empathy as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the

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1 – Quote from "Churchill and the Chamber of Commons".
http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/building/palace/architecture/palacestructure/churchill/.

2 – Translation of the author.

feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner".[3]

It can also be identified in the work of the anthropologist Edward T. Hall the same empathetic connection between architectural form and its receiver through experience. He offers a framework for the discussion of experiencing the space by developing his concept of proxemics (Hall 1966, 1), studying the relationships between human and the way he uses the space: "virtually everything that man is and does is associated with the experience of space" (Hall 1966, 180). To picture this action and reaction between built space and its user, he describes the work of Frank Lloyd Wright in the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo and the way the building "provides the Westerner with a constant visual, kinesthetic, and tactile reminder that he is in a different world. The changing levels, the circular, walled-in, intimate stairs to the upper floors, and the small scale are all new experiences. The long halls are brought to scale by keeping the walls within reach" (Hall 1966, 51). From this point of view, a critical discourse on how the arhitecture is being experienced is more recently laid out from an architectural perspective, by Henry Plummer, through a classification of relationships between the architecural form and the behaviour it generates with people and with its setting (Plummer 2016).

These interpretations of the connections between these interlaying fields of sciences (architecture, psychology, sociology, anthropology) is supporting reciprocal empathy between each other but also between the sciences and its subjects. All this is in the pursuit of an understanding and a proactive use of the specific differences and the common characteristics found in these subjects.

Confronting attitudes towards the Place

The Oxford Dictionary of Architcture defines the term of place throughout the notion of *genius loci*.[4] Introducing this concept it is necessary to be mentioned the interpretations of place conducted by Christian Norberg-

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3 – Definition from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary: www.merriam-webster.com. (November 2017)

4 – As found in the dictionary, the definition for the notion "place" is "see genius loci". The definition of *genius loci*, in the same dictionary, is "Latin term meaning the 'genius of the place', referring to the presiding deity or spirit. Every place has its own unique qualities, not only in terms of its physical makeup, but of how it is perceived, so it ought to be (but far too often is not) the responsibilities of the architect or landscape designer to be sensitive to those unique qualities, to enhance them rather than to destroy them." Oxford Dictionary of Architecture Third Edition. 2015. Oxford U.P.

Schulz (1980) throughout his approach on the notion of *genius loci*. The author, in his well known publication *Genius Loci: Towards A Phenomenology Of Architecture*, investigates the architectural purpose as place making throughout the psychological and symbolical implications of different forms of architecture. Before Norberg-Shulz, beginning from the 1970s, geographers like Yi-Fu Tuan, Anne Buttimer and Edward Relph engaged into a more broad inquiery of the notion of place relating it to the human experience (Seamon and Sowers 2008, 43). Firstly, Yi-FuTuan develops the concept of *topophilia*[5] as "the affective bond between people and place" (Tuan 1974, 4). In his later studies he redefines the notions of space and place related to their experience throughout a comparative study and so he defines place through familiarity, enclosure, pause and static movement. In addition, for a space to become a place it needs to be known and thus processed through the identification of one's with it, "place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other" (Tuan 1977, 3). The same perspective is also debated by Relph through his concept of *insideness* of a place, arguing that the more a person feels protected inside a place, the stronger is his identifcation with it, and thus the places become "fusions of human significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world (…) They are important sources of individual and communal identity" (Relph 1976, 141).

In urban contexts, Anne Buttimer, in 1972, starts questioning the definition of place studying the experience of it and the behaviour of diffferent groups and communities in residential areas (Buttimer and Seamon 1980, 189). She proposes a measure of the *sense of place* as a "function of how well it provides a center for one's life" (Buttimer and Seamon 1980, 171). More recent studies of this *sense of place* argue that "it is the people – individuals and society – that integrate these features, through their value systems, to form a sense of place" (Jiven and Larkham 2003, 78). This is also the case of the strategy that the architect Joze Plecnik applied in the city of Lubjliana, where, in his designs he intentionally left some free space for people's own interpretations of what is built because this "requires users' capacities for making sense of places to be brought into play at the conscious level: one knows that one has oneself made the meanings of such places, because one knows that the

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5 – The text refers to the meaning of the term in the field of human geography popularized by Yi-Fi Tuan in 1978 although previously the notion has been first introduced in 1948 by the English-American poet Wystan Hugh Auden referring to a love of places in the poetry of John Betjeman. Later, in 1958, the concept was developed by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard through a phenomenological approach on architecture in his work "La Poétique de l'Espace" where he introduces the book with the term of topophilia as being the investigation of poetic images of the loved places "espaces aimés" (Bachelard 1958, 17).

meaning could have been otherwise" (Butina-Watson and Bentley 2007, 68). So, the *sense of place* should be triggered through the own experience of it in a *place making* process, targeting in the same time both the individual and the community he is part of, to arrive to more stable and representative identities in time. Joze Plecnik, in his design of the river banks in Ljubljana triggered an on-going demonstration of the multitude and diversity of uses and interpretations of these longitudinal and inclined areas by both designers and people. It has become a memorable part of the urban character and identiy that is still exploited nowadays in formal and informal ways, in urban design interventions and in the ways citizens experience the edge between the water flow and the city, giving it personal values. In this way the river banks function as a stretched center of the life of citizens, providing and enriching a sense of place, over time, while reinforcing the visual, cultural and social identity of this capital. This identification is enabled on micro and macro level by this architectural strategy and is contributing to the reinforcement of the community both through the representative value and through the practical use of these public spaces by the individuals. In the contemporary urbanity,

Charles Bohl, in the pursit of the *place making* strategies, emphasizes how the development of a community is based on a strong identification of the area that is not only easily recogsnisable but also has the potential to "put communities on the map"(Bohl 2002, 46).

As a community is linked throughout the social relashionship these, again, can be seen as "the means by which the link toward the place is imbued with affectivity" (Rollero and De Picolli 2010, 6). Therefore, if a place is able to generate a human reaction towards or within it, it receives also a psychological potential, not only cognitive but also on the affective level. This affective level is questioned throughout the concept of *place attachment*. Although it is generally accepted the importance of the *place attachment* in the past decade for social sciences researchers, in the contemporary era, the challenge is exactly the fluidity of it and the difficulty of reconciling it with the need for close emotional ties to specific places (Lewicka 2011, 226). Assuming this affective level of the spatial experience, Anne Buttimer approaches it by "investigating patterns of identifications with the territory" (Buttimer and Seamon 1980, 25). We can see how in defining the spatial experience process, the concepts of place attachment and place identification intersect. Searching for a clear definition of the concept of place attachment there is still a great ambiguity of theoretical support. Therefore, place attachment can be pictured as "an umbrella concept embracing the multiplicity of positive affects that have places as targets" (Giuliani 2003, 150).

For a more clear overview upon this ambiguity of the concept, the investigation on the notion can be done, as proposed by Leila Scannel and Robert Gifford (2010) by stucturing all the existing theories on three dimesions that are: place as the object of attachment, person as the actor and process as the psychological interactions. Following this multi-dimensional framework, the *place attachment* is defined as being "a bond between an individual or group and a place that can vary in terms of spatial level, degree of specificity, and social or physical features of the place, and is manifested through affective, cognitive, and behavioral psychological processes." (Scannell and Gifford 2010, 5). But although this formulation of the concept is intended to offer a narrower and clearer image of the *place attachment*, Rollero and de Picoll observe that the overlapping of cognitive and affective dimensions in the study of *place attachment* and place identity is what makes them difficult to be measured in specific cases. So in order to measure these in a research on a group of residents of the italian city Turin they proposed a segregation of these two aspects

without denying their copresence in the spatial experience process that can have in the same time two dimensions: "an affective dimension, that is the emotional bond toward places (place attachment), and a cognitive dimension, related to the cognitions about the self as a member of a physical space (place identification)" (Rollero and de Piccoli 2010, 2). The research[6] conducted on a group of 328 persons confirmed both the link and the differences beteen the concepts as founded on their hypothetical segregation. For example the level of education predicts both the attachment and identification but in different ways, while the length of residence influnces directly only the identification and social relationships are a direct predictor of place attachement (Rollero and de Piccoli 2010, 6). Spatial interpretations of results of these kind of applied research can calibrate the design process according to the resources of the inhabitans and the inhabited space towards a sense of place, as a calibrating function of it. But for creating this *sense of place*, the environment should nourish the bonds between the person and the place whether they are enabled on cognitive or emotional level.

In the context of the approach coonducted by Rollero and De Picolli we can relate the case study of Nevicata14[7] from the place attachment point of view supporting on one hand that "being active in a physical environment leads to the development of a higher place attachment" (ibid.) and on the other hand that "the affective link does not require long time to develop" (ibid.). In 2015, in Milan, the space of the temporary project called Nevicata14 was conceived by the studio Guidarini & Salvadeo and Snark as a sea of white islands evoking a rare and simple pleasure that people can have in an urban Milan: the one of the snow and its possible meanings for the urban living. The project was promoted as an invitation starting by asking the question "what will be here?", and offered the image of a sort of white canvas on which everyone can be free to dream and suggest his needs and wishes for the Piazza Castello in Milan. Such an approach

6 – Chiara Rollero and Norma De Picolli carried out a research in Turin, Italy, on a sample of 328 inhabitants randomly chosen from a total of 30 apartment buildings from all the city's districts. The research aimed to grasp the differences between the affective and cognitive connections with the places, and the correlated predictors of both place attachment and place identity (Rollero and De Picolli 2010, 3-4).

7 – The project was developed like a collective action of rethinking and redesigning future strategies for the urban space of the Piazza Castello, initiated by the Milan City's Hall and the Triennale Museum. The process took place in 2015 in the context of the international event EXPO15 and it was designed by the studios Guidarini&Salvadeo + Snark. More details about the project can be found at: http://nevicata14.tumblr.com/ (November 2017).

activated engaging behaviours between all the actors and even role-playing in the sense that people co-designed temporarily the space. This was triggered into the inhabitans, tourists and passers-by through the joy of experiencing their own interpretations of the identity of that specific urban square. In this case the fragility of unpermanence is also creating *place attachment*, thus the dynamic background of the contemporary space is not conditioning the development of strong relationships with the place. It is also interesting to see how affective relations between people and places is not neccessarily conditioned by the duration and organisation of it, but more by the feeling of control over it, of making the place the own emotional property of someone. Therefore, this experience illutrates how also informal and temporary scenerios can evoke the *place attachment*.
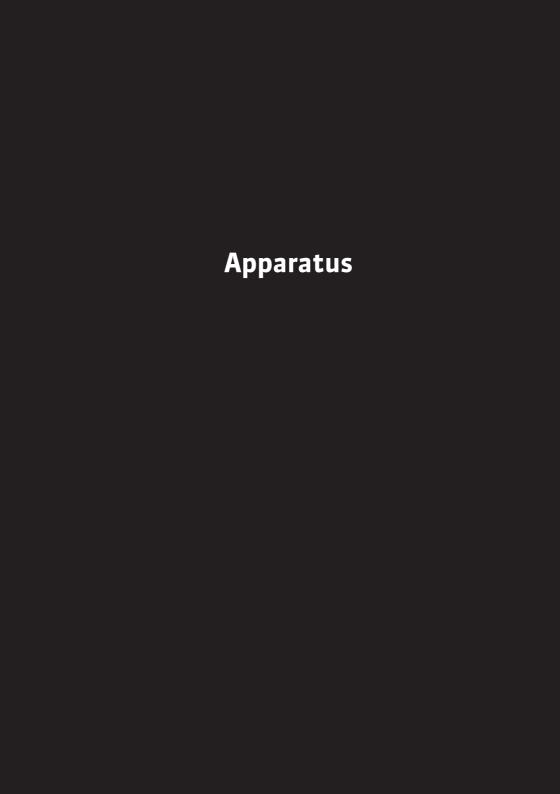
Conclusion

Environmental psychology that focuses on *place attachment*, *place identity* and *sense of place*, showed how that "the processes of collective action work better when emotional ties to places and their inhabitants are cultivated" (Manzo and Perkins 2006, 347). But the challenge is to cultivate this emotional tie between architecture and its user, because accordingly to Edward Relph, places "are not abstractions or concepts, but are directly experienced phenomena of the lived-world (…) and are often profound centres of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties" (Relph 1976, 141). After we have introduced the experience as being the mechanism of enabling emotional and pshychological connections, future inquiries can regard the transition from user to consumer of space to better grasp the possible emotional ties as consuming implies more implication than simply using. This consumeristic approach is a constructive transformation although often the consumer is the one that engages into a action mainly motivated by its personal gain. Jean Baudrillard relates the relationship between the consumer and the objects to a system where the first finds himself and so he becomes the designer (Baudrillard 1968, 26). In a contemporary digital era, Carlo Ratti shows how citizens, by consuming the space, change the future upcoming (Ratti 2014, 85). These points of view, in different ways, suggest that the act of consuming defines an identity. The way we choose to consume the space reveals the commons and the specifics of our human nature in a specific context.

Relating to a place, the act of consuming does not necessarily have a destructive dimension but a constructive one, giving it new interpretations,

as usually a place does not end after using it. The physical construction might need restoring in time, but the place identity grows in time through different acts of this type of consumption. In a way, it could be said that the citizens participate more in the collective act for the city if they truly consume it, as consuming relates more to the inner individual than the simple act of participation. A consumer is usually engaging into a certain activity mostly for supplying a need or desire, in other words for personal gain. This particular intention is what transforms the user of space into a consumer of space in the first place. By relating to the consumer of space and the act of consuming instead of user of space and the act of using we can arrive to deeper meanings of architecture, in an active way rather than a passive one. Therefore, the consumer not only takes something for his personal challenges from the space, but it also questions further what the space has to offer for the specific interest of every individual. From this point of view, the discourse can shift its focus on the relationship of consuming as being the scale of measuring the value of interaction. So, it can be further questioned that, the space of the city needs a sort of transformative consumption through the specific needs and desires of the people in order to be evaluated at its fully potential, in the sense in which Jean Baudrillard states that "consummated and consumed is never the object but the relationship itself" (Baudrillard 1968, 201). The same view of a constructive consumption but this time in urban areas, is also assumed by Henry Lefebvre talking about the space that "appears as a product of singular character, in that it is sometimes simply consumed (in such forms as travel, tourism, or leisure activities) as a vast commodity, and sometimes, in metropolitan areas, productively consumed (just as machines are, for example), as a productive apparatus of grand scale" (Lefebvre 1974, 349).

A productive consummation can be perpetrated through the relationship between the city's form and the behaviour it generates, and consequentely, on emotional level, the engagement it enables. To sum up, throughout the discourse of this chapter it was highlitghted the importance of a dialogue based on empathy between architecture and other discplines in order to constructively understand the way in which, through the place, it is developed the bond between architectural intention and the human experience. This can open a new road of further investigation debating if and how this bond can work both ways by giving it a consumeristic value.

Apparatus

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List of illustrations

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