

# The emotional dimension in the design of spaces of well-being

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## 1. Well-being vs well-being experience

In recent years there has been a shift of interest from the concept of well-being such as body care, anti-aging and anti-disease, to the awareness and recognition of one's own corporeality, in which the very sense of a person in his/her sensory and cognitive complexity has become particularly relevant.

Corporeality leads to the awareness of having a body and being a body.

A central polarity in the analysis of the concept of one's own body elaborated by phenomenological reflection (M. Merleau-Ponty), which F. Varela evolved into the recognition of "real, embodied, incorporated, lived" knowledge (Varela, 1994) and leads us back to the theories of cognitive biology for which knowledge is not an abstract mental mechanism, but an action situated in, and strictly dependent on corporeality.

The "incorporated" intentional action is not, therefore, reduced to a behavioural event of mechanical type, nor to a process of information processing between an input and an output. Cognition is no longer regarded as representation or abstract projection, but as "embodied action" meaning that it depends on the experience gained from having a body with certain sensory-motor skills, which are themselves part of a wider biological and cultural network.

Among other things, the discovery of "mirror neurons" (Rizzolatti, Craighero 2004) highlights how the sensory perception of what is external to us, cognition (the representation and processing), and action (our response) do not occur in sequence, but act simultaneously.

The gestures are no longer reduced to mere para-verbal media, symptoms or signs to interpret and attribute to something else and of an entirely different nature, which has often divided mind and body, perception and action; they lead us to mood and inner emotions. The experience-based space becomes a form of the sensory and cognitive process.

The existence of mirror neurons shows that the sharing of the other's emotional states (empathy) goes through understanding the actions, on the basis of that corporeal dialogue with which we come into the world and on which we have built our knowledge systems.

This fact leads to a series of repercussions in design, particularly in relation to cultural and/or commercial exhibition design. The new installations become the place of coexistence of objects, scenarios and feelings that, while not always in logical relationship, coexist thanks to the strong emotional tensions that animate them, making them vibrate in unison in the represented scene.

We simultaneously find how the ongoing social transformations, the affirmation of a maturity in the self-perception of one's own needs and the openness to new forms of well-being has led to a situation characterized by extremely-visible changes in the new lifestyle, in the forms of consumption and in a new symbolic code.

The care and attention for the person and for the body exceed the link with image and appearance; they are a real way to think and to think of oneself. They are also actions aimed "at something deeper: they become vehicles of meaning or, better still, they have to do with the symbolic." (Fiorani, 2006)

The quest for well-being evolves towards the concept of "wellness experience", where experience shows the ability to represent, narrate and engage with the user on the cognitive and sensory level.

This field of investigation has increasingly more to do with the search for a sort of "feeling good" about ourselves; a moment not severable from our daily life, but part of it; no longer an answer to evil or contingent problems, to be performed at certain times and places, but here and now.

The space of well-being therefore evolves even in its "form" and its location; no longer solely sedentary, geometric/three-dimensional or real, but also virtual, nomadic and portable.

It can now coincide with the memory required to activate an application (App) on your mobile device. In fact, there are now many services related to health and well-being, as the App of White Noise Ambience Lite, which ensures a good night's rest by generating 'white noise', characterized by the absence of periodicity in time and a 'constant amplitude over the entire frequency spectrum', or even Apps linked to specific commercial businesses, such as Nike+Running, which allows one to create maps for movements during sports activities and monitor progress by interacting with the user through the transmission of specific motivational phrases.

New technology increases the space of the body, extending it to new functions, communications and symbols, always intertwined with the world of fashion, which designs prostheses, uses and new meanings.

The functional-body, whose goal was to find the "failure" and repair it, is now replaced by body-emotion. The body-emotion feeds on a new vital balance in which mental and physical relaxation are combined to achieve profound wellness.

Also in this case fashion weaves its actions with the world of design, body and emotion. Within their identity systems and in line with the lifestyles they represent, many companies in the

fashion industry (e.g. Bulgari, Armani, Ferragamo, Moschino, Culti) have developed their own vision of the place of well-being. In line with the brand's identification codes, there are now numerous Spas, which are headed by fashion brands. These places of sensory experience par excellence grant further extension to the communicative and symbolic perception of the brand.

Within the overall vision of brand experience, the spas represent its most perceivable expression, in its being more in contact with the body altogether. Through a design aiming at emphasizing the multi-sensory variables, the company is thus able to complete the relationship with its customers, already undertaken through material production and communication.

Yet, well-being does not feed exclusively on the care for the physical body; sociality, the rediscovery of normality as a value, the infinitesimal, daily facts accompanied by a certain aesthetic taste also highlight new spaces of well-being.

These are spaces where one can meet a friend, drink a cup of tea, in absolute silence or, conversely, meet someone accidentally, stumble into unexpectedness, or simply devote time to oneself.

Among these new spaces we identify most of them, once again, in the fashion industry. One is the Milanese space Nonostante Marras. A space in which the scale of details, objects, clothes, accessories, as well as food and installations, leads back to a place abundant of significance, full of the pathos closely linked to the emotional sphere.

It is a space where one can read a book, browse through a collection of material objects - the formal representation of the certainty that fashion is everywhere and with it a part of us, the most cultural and sensitive part.

It is a space in which the aesthetic and sensitive experience leads to a specific inner well-being; it is the experience of (good)

taste and beauty, which, like an artwork, makes an instant infinite.

The same sense of positive experience, also linked to a certain nostalgia or “neo-archaism” (Morin, 1987), is represented by the combination of experiences of well-being linked to specific territorial locations, including Albergo Diffuso, which represents its most profound cultural project. Spaces in which the territory itself becomes an organized and organizing system to access new experiences of psychophysical well-being.

An example is represented by the Albergo Diffuso Sextantio, in a hilltop village in the National Park of Gran Sasso.

The feeling of well-being, starting from the naturalistic position, is gained through experiencing the authenticity of the places, the food and the interpersonal relations that are on offer. The rooms, far from the standardized furniture typical of city hotels, are characterized by a meticulous attention to detail. The constructive/architectural nature shows the value of the old masonry even through cracks, which spitefully manifest themselves under the fresh paint, but also in furniture elements, which stand as fragments and testimonies of some manual skills and a history that characterized them; they are proudly shown even where patching changed them.

They are what they are; familiar everyday objects, the result of an artisanal knowledge and, therefore, even more reassuring and poetic. Yet, all this is part of the representation of authenticity that the wish for well-being claims nowadays.

Then, these spaces of well-being, beyond their nature, are here to integrate the partial and/or functional aspects in a complex phenomenon, simultaneously crossed by systems of physical, biological, social, cultural relations, which determine its character and specificity.

In this context, perception becomes an active and creative process that goes beyond the simple information captured by sight and hearing. People are not spectators, but main actors,

abstracting themselves to look from the outside so as to live an illusion; one cannot look without joining. The body-consciousness (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1945) moves towards the world extending its spatiality to relate and communicate with it.

Multi-sensoriality, which now pervades the design of the spaces of well-being, allows to "listen" and "participate", through the senses, to the achievement of sensitive experiences in the place increasingly identified as the space of the soul.

Individuals therefore participate in the reality of the world in which they live through their own organic constitution and depending on their physiological and psychic activity.

The numerous stimuli that come from the physical world stimulate the body by means of the sense organs and produce changes in the inner life.

The acquisition of the importance of experience design, based on the emotional and experiential involvement of the user, becomes field of investigation for the project and emphasizes the perception through the senses that Husserl defined "the primitive way in which things manifest themselves" (see Franzini, 1985, 1991).

In its objectivity the object does not have a sense, gaining it only when it becomes part of a lived experience and therefore the result related to an intentional act (imagining, perceiving, desiring).

The pluralization of the spheres in which sense is experienced, typical of complex societies, manifests itself as the participation of each individual in a variety of combinations and, therefore, of subcultures or sub-identities, highlighting the complexity of the primary relationships.

Furthermore, the enhancement itself of experiences, the dissemination of opportunities, and communication openness, define a complex relational network, different from what has until recently been represented by a static, simplifying and hierarchical structure of the pre-modern community.

With regards to design, these reflections take on the role of educating new design experiments aimed at conceiving spaces and places within which the expression of the newly emerging corporeality - which moves between style, poetry and emotion - can reach its highest point.

## 2. The emotional dimension

In the last twenty years, the overall picture shows the completion of a dense global tangle of flows, people, goods, symbols and information; a communications system that has evolved into a kind of continuum that encompasses the planet and connects to a plurality of intricate information and reports.

The communication surfaces, the roles and institutions have changed. Fashion broadens its boundaries of meaning and encompasses within its scenarios the immaterial dimension where their multiplicity of paths is regarded as valid. Non-linear paths, singular, specific, particular, local, but also global adventures. Fashion seems to be the main system within which the acceptance of the multidimensional thinking has taken place - marked by a dialogical rationality, by "that game between clearness and darkness that is precisely complexity" (Morin, 1985).

The scenario has a pragmatic nature, as a form of knowledge that guides the action and proposes objectives of efficiency rather than absolute truth objectives. The scenario investigates techniques, languages and the different skills involved and seeks to determine the possible relations, refers to design, but also to intangible experiences, from the discovery of new behaviours to the design of entire product-systems.

Through a figurative-symbolic, but also discursive-narrative, process, the scenario is the necessary tool for the construction of a space for sharing, a relational platform that necessarily creates sharing.

The revaluation of the emotional dimension, as an expression capable of soliciting new forms of well-being and knowledge, leads to a new centrality of the body as a privileged field for design exploration and as "augmented" space, whose boundaries increasingly become new bodily extensions enhanced by new technology - wearable, sensitive and emotional.

The body has been studied by science as an organism to heal, by economics as a working force to employ, by religion as flesh to redeem, by psychoanalysis as unconscious to be released, by sociology as support of signs to be transmitted (Galimberti, 2003), but, again by fashion, as cultural and aesthetic product to understand and give sense to (Calefato, 1996, 2002; Fiorani, 2006).

A centre of symbolic propagation, in which the natural and social world shape themselves on its spatiality, the body connects to the world through the dense network of symbols with which it defined and still defines space, time and order of sense.

The body – individual but even more collective and cosmic - triggers a complex circulation of symbols, which does not represent so much its identity, but its own place.

The body, as a place, represents our *être-au-monde*, before even being the means by which we know ourselves, things and the network of relationships between us and things.

In this context, fashion, understood as the intersection between dress, body and culture (Fiorani, 2006), stresses a multidimensional living of the body, an open configuration of the self, unfinished and deeply connected with a variety of scenarios which allude more and more to the intangible dimension of contemporary living.

The theme of emotional dimension plays a decisive role in the reflection on the intangible dimension of living.

Through emotions, the activities of the psychic system are subsided or amplified, in the same way as thinking and behaviour are governed.



Even if trying to give order to a discourse on the topic of emotions is always decisively difficult, it seems by now customary practice to approach the subject by discussing what the emotion is not (cfr. Damasio, 2005; Desideri, 2011, 2013; Ledoux, 1996; Goleman, 1995)

Emotions:

- are not thoughts, "on specific situations, it is not mere reasoning, one cannot understand only by asking people what they had in mind while experiencing them"(cfr. Ledoux, 1996). Therefore, emotions are not part of the category of cogitationes and are not identified with them;

- are not intentions, emotions "happen", they are not intentional, but strictly contingent upon an event;

- do not necessarily represent cognitions, "Insisting on the intrinsically cognitive value of emotion means continuing to want to reduce it to something else, simplifying its original complexity (...) Learning about the object of one's fear to knowingly nuke its significance as a threat or a danger sometimes does not exclude the reoccurrence of an emotive shock, characterized by the feeling of fear for something" (cfr. Desideri, 2013);

- cannot be identified with feelings, if feeling is understood as the integration of emotional events with elements and factors of both cognitive or para-cognitive and intentional or almost-intentional nature.

What are emotions then?

They are states that affect behaviour. Emotion is the answer that a body gives to warn that something, in or out of it, is not as it was in the previous moment; in the subject something happened that gives the body a new state of well-being (positive emotion) or malaise (negative emotion).

The discovery of emotional memory, thanks to the studies of neurobiologist Joseph LeDoux, has opened a new perspective on emotions.

The senses are the starting point for the formation of emotions; the external stimuli reach the brain which implements responses in relation to a series of complex interactions.

The responses put into action by the brain are of a physical type (increased heart rate, increased sweating, etc.) and behavioural type (fear, joy, escape, etc.). The emotion, therefore, pushes to react and act in relation to the stimuli that have occurred, thus sending outwards the result of internally-elaborated processes.

The definition of emotion itself stresses the following: "emotion [fr. *émotion*, from *émouvoir* starting, exciting "(then only in moral sense), from spoken latin *exmovēre*, parallel to *emovēre*, *muover* (*movēre*) via (*ex-*)], noun. A very intense feeling, like fear, joy, anxiety, et sim., which can cause psychological and physiological alterations; blush because of an e. Currently, impression or lively and intense disturbance: the strong emotion caused him the illness; go in search of emotions." (cfr. Zingarelli, 1997)

Therefore, emotions happen unintentionally, but can be filtered, selected, adjusted and activated, they are also closely related to sensitive and sign manifestations connected to the resonances that reverberate from sensory and perceptual inputs.

The body prepares to emotion through a reaction; from the outer surface (the thrill through the skin or redness as manifestation of emotion) to the inner surface (visceral movements) to the involvement of motor functions (muscle contraction or need to escape), it defines the mimetic expression.

This trait, expressively manifestative, leads to recognise a specifically sub-symbolic value, particularly when it contributes to the ability to express feelings through those signs, now recognizable as conventionally encoded, both on a general level and in specific contexts.

This sub-symbolic expression can understandably affect the weaving of the meanings.

The recognition of the environment as the context within which space and exhibition configurations affect the behaviour of the visitor leads to more in-depth reflections on the designed space. In particular, environmental stimuli gain motivational value in relation to their ability to induce specific responses and also trigger a complex sequence of behavioural responses aimed at bringing and prolonging the contact with the stimulus itself, drawing benefits from it, or at removing and avoiding the stimulus.

This aspect leads to the necessary linguistic-narrative experimentation behind project activities, which will require particular attention precisely in the spaces dedicated to well-being.

### 3. The new 'spaces' of well-being

The continuous pursuit of personal well-being, adapted to a certain social well-being, is an inalienable requirement of human beings. If, in some places and territories, the expression "well-being" still means prosperity and health, lack of needs and peaceful co-existence between one or more communities, in contemporary societies – those defined as "mature economies" – the shift of interest heads towards a scenario of well-being that is increasingly more immaterial, psychophysical and strongly related to fashion and lifestyle.

Therefore, to act on the value meaning of the well-being system means to operate at the level of construction of sense scenarios in which products and services are presented exclusively linked to a discussion broader than the aesthetic-formal one, that is highly cultural and social.

These are spaces, tangible and intangible, in which the connection with the user takes place through a process of

comprehension that employs an increasingly sensitive and emotional language.

The perception of well-being, a subjective operation, tends to its own objectification within the cultural processes of signification of the fashion system and of the life scenarios of what we might call "living life with quality". This concept places greater emphasis on the quality of the moments of life.

A bon vivre as the personal path of life; a dynamic, emotional and physical process that can be gained through action; a participation in the first person.

In the contemporary metropolis - lacking limits, fluid and "of planetary scale in network connections, made up of images and dense, compact and pervasive communications, which is an intricate landscape of signs" (Fiorani, 2006) – one rediscovers the rhythm of slowness as a medium capable of leading to a new peace with oneself and nature.

Slowness in all its forms; a fulfilling life on a farm or in a natural park, the taste of and excitement for a wine-and-food journey, the promotion of new forms of work: from job-sharing to part-time, more and more choices are optioned by virtue of finding a "new time" to devote to ourselves or to others. And again, slowness in fashion: a slowness in production, in the rituals of life and co-existence in territorial and social spaces.

Even the new city becomes slow. Slow-cities - places where the measure of things is done by placing the human being, as a physical and mental entity, at the centre of the new interests – are placed side by side with Smart cities, Green cities, Slim cities. The search for better paths of development, sustainability, and involvement of the person highlights a new approach. The typical prevalence of the engineering and architectural approach to cities is overlapped by what Landry (2000) defines as an approach based on intangible values, in which he distinguishes the hardware and software of the city and where the latter is the product of the human dynamics of the place and the

connections and relationships that develop between different actors. The investment in soft as well as hard elements feeds a sustainable economic development, provides a better quality of life and calls for the responsible management of natural and social resources; it also fuels special attention to social cohesion, to the dissemination and availability of knowledge and creativity. This does not imply a refusal of technology, on the contrary it advocates for an increased and better employment.

In this scenario at least two attitudes prevalent in the pursuit of well-being emerge: on the one hand, the return to nature and the search for sustainable solutions as a transversal scenario, which spans from the territory (spas, beauty farms, farmhouse, but also organic foods, herbs, teas, etc.) to fashion products (fibres, dyes, finishes with natural products), passing by the care of the body (relaxation techniques and philosophies from the East, soft exercise, etc.); on the other hand, the implementation of relations with the more technological field, a transversal scenario as well, which exploits the new advances of communication systems (online medical advice, health monitoring through specific applications on smart phones - even emotional-sensorial, beauty updates via satellite, quality monitoring of pollution agents, food-chains control, but also wearable technologies for the control and monitoring of vital primary functions, such as the applications through RFID systems).

In this context, well-being is the result of a complex of synergies that go from individuals to the environment and vice versa. The ability to view problems differently is reflected in new attitudes, which lead to strongly-cultural innovations. In all this, Fashion plays a crucial role, not only as a cultural process, but also as a material production system in which quality is also measured by the respect for human beings and their territory.

Let's consider the "differently acting" of a company such as Bonotto, in which textiles are the result of a slow process where

"time", or better, "taking time" is at the basis of the quality process inherent in the products.

The Fabbrica Lenta (Slow Factory) in Molvena, through the recovery of the old looms from the 1950s, is able to recover ancient traditions and textile processes now forgotten. The result is closely related to the new concept of quality and well-being which, as explained above, recognizes – in the daily progress, in the slow way of things, and also ideas - the assumption that even the materiality of the products of a company is culture (Vacca, 2013).

The production of Bonotto represents the image of a story that integrates the partial and/or functional aspects in a complex phenomenon, simultaneously holding systems of physical, biological, social and cultural relations, which determine its nature and specificity.

The fabric thus produced creates an emotional experience that involves, at the same time, all the sensitive abilities of the body and stimulates the sensory and emotional memory at the core of well-being.

The new spaces of well-being are thus material and immaterial "places", the result of a complex system of processes, products, services, and above all an expression of the wish to live "otherwise".