URBAN DESIGN

ECOLOGIES
projects for city environments

Madalina Ghibusi
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Urban Design Ecologies

Projects for City Environments

edited by
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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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Introduction

What does it mean living in an urban environment? Are the cities the product of their inhabitants or are the inhabitants the product of their cities? What are the ingredients for a successful method of planning the urban habitat of tomorrow? These are some of the questions that start building a picture of the practice of today in urban design, planning and management. The different natures of the challenges anticipate the operating system around which the speech of this book is constructed. It both encloses and discloses investigations of the relations between the space, its builders and its users that find themselves in a phase of overwhelming exponential growth of population in the urban habitats. Added to this, the growth is also an intensive one, so the pressure and instability is experienced from micro to macro levels intertwining and exceeding the physical one illustrating how the space is now the product of this tensions, both representing and molding them beyond the physical requirements. This is the trigger that enabled this cross-disciplinary collaboration in the pursue of covering a range of understandings of the urban environments in order to bridge new strategies for the urban tomorrow. Throughout the diversity of points of view, it is still identifiable the common investigation of the relation between actions and space that are each generating and reinforcing the other depending on the contextual premises and evolution in time. Around this principle, the various positions taken by each author intersect, overlap, compete, juxtapose and contrast in a generative formula: the *Urban Design Ecologies*.

The urban system materializes in the form of the city. The limits of the cities are dilating and stretched dynamically but consistently, both physically and in terms of influence on the quality of the life of inhabitants. Global versus local, top-down versus bottom-up, immediate needs versus long term results, public versus private investments: the challenges of

Policy + Program + Identity = Space

Pierluigi Salvadeo

Nowadays we are no longer able to catalogue the spaces and things that surround us in our lives on the basis of the traditional descriptive categories, a condition to which we have grown accustomed and for which history has been preparing us for some time. As far back as the late sixties, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour were thinking about a city where symbolic value had taken the place of the material substance of architecture (Venturi et al. 1972). *Learning from Las Vegas* originated as a research exercise for the students of the Yale School of Art and Architecture and in the analysis they carried out the architectural systems of *space*, *structure* and *functional program* could literally be replaced by a comprehensive representative form that it was no longer possible to describe in terms of known categories of form and function. Jean Baudrillard, who wrote *Le système des objets* (Baudrillard 1968) just a few years prior to *Learning from Las Vegas*, came to more or less the same conclusions. For Baudrillard objects have by now undergone every possible process of cataloguing and it seems that the vocabulary is no longer adequate to name them. However hard we try to propose classifications, none of them will any longer be able to respond to the complexity of uses, history, culture and mental structures that govern the life of all things. In fact objects possess a charge that goes beyond their form or their function, and one that affects the categories of culture, experience and the mind.

Abstraction. It is like a sort of abstraction, which predominates and comes at this point to be considered the fundamental reality of the object, but it is precisely from this new reality that it is possible to govern the transformations of the environment. Thus, for Baudrillard, objects have lost the "substantiality which was their basis, the form which enclosed

them, whereby man made them part of his self-image: it is now space which plays freely between them, and becomes the universal function of their relationships and their 'values'" (Baudrillard 1968, 21). Spatial values that have become independent of the things that have always characterized them, such as function, form, material and technology. In these new conditions abstraction is the most concrete reality of objects and the space generated by them.

Concreteness. Next it fell to Rem Koolhaas, journalist, author, scriptwriter, urbanist and architect, to present his views on the situation as an acute and inventive reporter, writing his retroactive manifesto for Manhattan toward the end of the seventies. He gave it the dazzling title of *Delirious New York*, for Manhattan, he argued, "is a mountain range of evidence without manifesto" (Koolhaas 1978, 6). It is the already constructed, and therefore real, product of an as yet unformulated theory, i.e. that of a world "totally fabricated by man" in order to allow him "to live inside fantasy." Manhattan is an inhabited abstraction, and the irrationality of its architecture and its spaces answers to a constitutive logic that can probably not be traced back to the rational principles that usually govern the construction of the buildings and the formulation of the spaces in the city.

Context. Rem Koolhaas called this "Manhattanism," and "fuck context", the slogan he coined many years after the publication of *Delirious New York*, would for him be the obvious expression of the emergence of another kind of relationship between the "written text," represented by the project with its constituent rules, and the context in which it is set, which before him had always been the object of reference and space of explanation for much of the reasoning behind the building. The type of project evoked by Koolhaas is one that offers an all-inclusive, or rather a synthetic response, and one that permits continual modification and updating without losing its own underlying motivations.

Integrity. One of the earliest projects in which the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) took this approach was the one for the competition for new City Hall of The Hague (Lucan 1990). I mention it here because it is a project that derives its deepest principles from *Delirious New York*, written a few years earlier. The idea is that above a certain scale, the building has to have an integrity and an autonomous value of its own, with specific architectural and figurative features. In addition, on the inside, the architectural program has to be developed with freedom and flexibility, even disengaging itself from the form of the space. It is in this way that the building can truly carry out its role within the city, combining, to use the words of Koolhaas, combining, to use the words of Koolhaas, "architectural specificity with programmatic indeterminacy" (Koolhass et al. 1998, 921).

Decontextualization. In The Hague Koolhaas disengaged intellectual processes from emotional ones. He mixed everything up, making use of things to which traditional histories of architecture would not, up until that moment, have given either room or credit. Indulging in a general principle of decontextualization, the building evokes a culture of congestion recounted through a sequence of inhabited walls whose sum resembles an abstract metropolitan skyline. Out of this comes a broken-down volume that multiplies its visual planes and effects of depth. There is no real relationship between exterior and interior and no sense of moral duty governs the gap between container and content. The so-called context is not even represented in the drawings that illustrate the project, because it is superfluous and it could even be argued that the building is *its own context.* The form of the building is no longer a consequence of the functional program or vice versa, and it expresses an abstract figurativeness that could easily be located in a variety of geographical situations, superseding any utilitarian solution and any concern for the contextual.

Transnational. This was a building that seemed to anticipate by many years the transnationality that today is often expressed with a certain nonchalance in the architecture and the spaces of our cities. The figurative nature of the architecture migrates from one place to another on the planet, with the complicity of fashion, design and company branding, as well as the various types of more or less social media, the Web, the speed and ease of movement of people and things, the cultural exchanges between institutions, the general sense of hybridization of the spaces of our existence and much more.

Landscapes. It is a theme that Arjun Appadurai, an Indian-born anthropologist who is a naturalized US citizen and considered one of the top experts on the cultural aspects of globalization, tackles in a broad and cogent manner. For him, communication through the contemporary media combined with the circulation of people generates a "new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities (in which) we see moving images meet deterritorialized viewers" (Appadurai 1996, 4). In other words a new space of the imagination has been created that stems from the mobile relationship between a continually migrating population of viewers and the boundless images produced by all the possible mass-media events in circulation. We are speaking of imaginary landscapes which Appadurai divides into various categories—"ethnoscapes," "mediascapes," "technoscapes," "financescapes" and "ideoscapes" – that are intertwined in every possible way but of which "the individual actor is

the last locus." All these landscapes are the building blocks of "imagined worlds", that is to say spaces of the imagination evoked by advertising and brands which intersect and are mixed up with the real spaces inhabited by people and occupied by things. Thus for Appadurai:

> The lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes (...) are blurred, so that the farther away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world. (Appadurai 1996, 35)

Places. All too explicit from this point of view is the case of Prada, which in Los Angeles, on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, has neither sign nor brand name on the street, relying on the threshold as a space of transition between the real world on the outside and the one that is more a projection of the imagination on the inside. There is no need for the brand to be displayed in the restricted dimension of a local space. It is much more exciting and economy. If we think for example of the Abercrombie & Fitch chain[1] which dispenses completely with signs, entrusting the identification of its presence to the perfume that emanates from its stores or the ostentatious sensuality of the athletically built members of its staff stationed at the entrance, the subject of selfies posted continually on the social networks, or to the images of various advertising campaigns with an amiably sexy content. They are all imaginary or imagined spaces, transnational spaces, that are equally at home on the Web and in material reality, but in any case express their own idea of place.

Regeneration. And if it were not so we would not be able to calmly accept the building covered with gold leaf at the Fondazione Prada in Milan, which instead of trying to establish relations with the context of the former manufacturing zone that surrounds it, flaunts itself as a new context of reference.[2] And that is what it has actually become now, given that it is from precisely this new context that the regeneration of the entire area of the Scalo di Porta Romana draws much of its energy. Different, but equally significant, is the case of Bilbao and the Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank O. Gehry (Rocca 1995). Its location, on a former industrial site, placed it within the purview of the plan of urban redevelopment of the city launched several years earlier, which included a conference center, an

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1 – See www.abercrombie.com

2 – See www.fondazioneprada.org

international airport, a new subway and a plan to upgrade the banks of the Nervión River. Situated in a fringe space that could be described as a sort of *terrain vague*, the Guggenheim Museum has proved capable of reconstituting a recognizable character for the place, reinventing it from a *tabula rasa*. Part of the merit must go its architectural, spatial and figurative qualities, undefinable except as part of the highly personal poetics of its designer.

Policies. And so the discourse expands to cover whole districts of the city, with the so-called *urban projects.* Entire urban areas subjected to profound processes of regeneration, aimed at the creation of extensive pieces of city developed over periods of time that can even be relatively short. Experiences of intervention in the compact city that distance themselves both from attitudes of mimicry and conservation of the characteristics of the historic city and from interventions that see sprawl as their primary principle of settlement. They are projects which attempt to systematize the different building, landscape and infrastructural components, and the occasion for them is often, at least in the initial stages, provided by political or economic opportunities, rather than urbanistic or architectural ones, by things like expositions, celebrations, programs of economic development or image building, sporting events, etc. In these cases the practice of the urban project represents not only a fundamental means of organizing all the actions needed to carry out the work, from policies to economic planning to programs, but also an element of synthesis that is of crucial importance for the creation of future opportunities that planning instruments are not by themselves able to provide or even envisage.

The architect is asked for a project that will be capable of imagining the different possibilities of use of the space according to various degrees of flexibility, of defining the symbolic and figurative value of the space through the architecture of the buildings and of revealing every possible relationship between the different parts of the structure and the city.

Programs. So what we are talking about is not just the design of space as such. The responses of the designer are also expressed in a broader and more inclusive *curatorial form,* attentive to the *processes of formation and the possible programs of use.* In the case of *Euralille,* for example, the directors of the management company viewed Rem Koolhaas as the curator, able to produce not so much a finished project as a morphological proposal regarded as a strategic means of controlling and verifying a more wide-ranging process of regeneration. It could be said to have been more of an urban vision than a genuine planning scheme, a sort of synthetic project able to express the meaning of the space irrespective of the individual

projects that would be implemented over time. Another interesting case is that of the Vila Olimpica in Barcelona, which solved the problem of accommodation for the athletes, but at the same time tackled the theme of the seafront and the reclamation of a series of beaches that had until then been neglected and were in a state of decay (Marinoni 2014). Many architects were called on to tackle different parts of the general layout designed by Martorell Bohigas MacKay Puigdomènech, so that each space was able to develop its own themes and figurative expressions with specific spatial identities not always completely in keeping with the relevant contexts.

Estrangement. For many of the cases cited it would be possible to speak of an approach to planning closer to the one taken by the product designer, a kind of *urban design* that in my view conveys better the sense of the estrangement of the project with respect to the space and local cultures. So the distinction between design, architecture and city breaks down, while the difference between the various modes of work and cultural references is maintained. Perhaps we might talk of a different sort of research into the form of the space with uses that have not been established for once and for all. Thus works of architecture that do not respond directly to functions, but if anything to uses that, as they develop in time, trigger processes of recomposition and even rearrangement of the space.

Life. So the decision-making strategies for the determination of programs of use take on fundamental importance. It is out of these that the categories of interpretation of space arise and, based on the experience of the people, shift the attention from the physical aspect of the city to the living one. We should no longer just be asking ourselves about how the formal structure of the city ought to be shaped. If anything we should be looking first and foremost at what its organizational structure might be, at its systems of connection and information, its propensity to favor processes and generate relations and its ability to ready itself for different conditions of use in order to create new and different opportunities.

Process. "The global city is not a place but a process" (Perulli 2007, 68). If then it is the process of formation that counts, i.e. the succession of actions that over time result in the proliferation of space, then architecture in itself is no longer the only category capable of shaping space, but represents just one part of a wider and more complex system of relations between questions of a different nature, in which the project of architecture comes increasingly to resemble a project of production, of organization. *Against*

Architecture is the title of the book by Franco La Cecla in which he explains the inferiority of architecture when compared with the intensity of daily life represented by actions, feelings and usages (La Cecla 2008). Spaces and things, today, want to escape from the fetters of their functions. They want to live more freely and no longer be described by their physical aspects alone, but by many other questions that do not specifically pertain to architecture, even if they have existed within it.

Actions. It is no coincidence that since the end of the last century there has been a proliferation of studies and of research and work groups investigating the spaces of the city whose focus has been more on actions than on space itself. Multiple and varied proposals of use such as the ones submitted every year to the competition cheFare[3] on the themes of collaboration, coproduction, innovation, economic and environmental sustainability, equity and communication. Hardly ever do the projects proposed make description of the form of the space in which the actions envisaged will take place a priority, but what is in fact suggested inevitably produces the spaces in which the actions occur. An equally interesting case is Actions: What You Can Do with the City,[4] which operates with a similar format. The idea is to put on show on each occasion 99 actions capable of bringing about positive changes in contemporary cities all over the world. Its organizers challenge participants to imagine new ways of using the city and its spaces, be they public or private, large or small, clearly defined or interstitial, through inventions understood as human drivers of change that can start out from any common action: walking, playing, putting on a performance, designing clothes, gardening, recycling, bringing agriculture into the city, furnishing open urban space, reutilizing abandoned buildings or decayed fabrics. Lastly, I would like to mention *NUB, New Urban Body.* This is the name of an exhibition recently staged at the Palazzo della Triennale in Milan. Its manifesto declared:

> The current evolution in the ways in which people live, work, get together and use services is having a positive impact on the transformation of the city. More and more frequently we are finding ourselves face to face with multifunctional urban bodies that are able to respond in a flexible and adaptable way to our need to construct and manage our own daily program.[5]

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3 – See www.che-fare.com

4 – See www.cca-actions.org

5 – See www.triennale.org
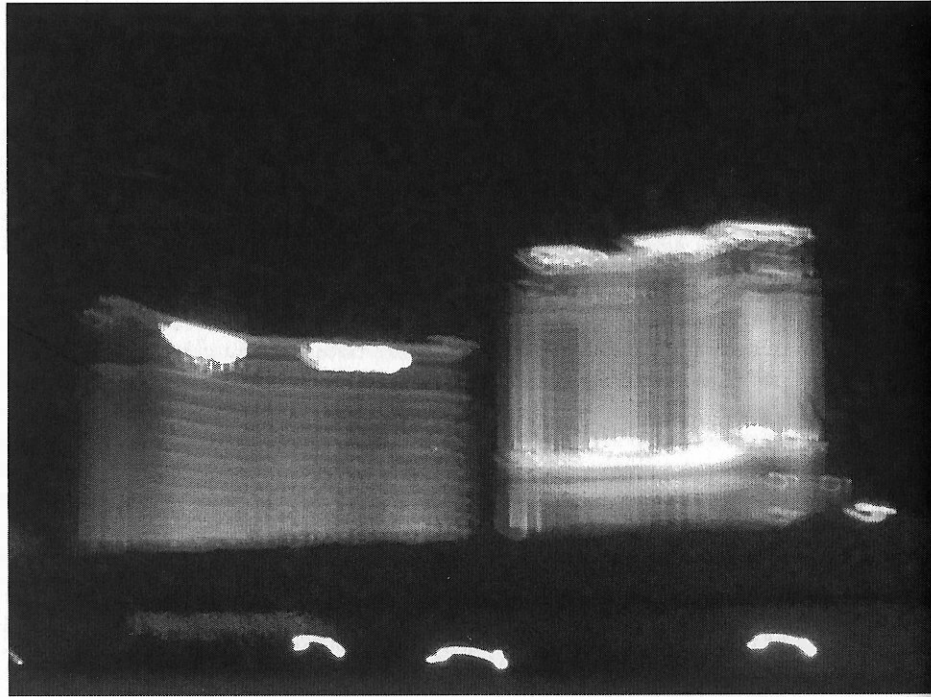
To the actions and new lifestyles of people corresponds a different way of using spaces, whose form is nothing but an inevitable consequence. The exhibition was interactive and obliged the visitor to approach it in a dynamic and proactive way. The catalogue is in the same style, as the curators have chosen not to present it on paper, but online and in interactive form, since fixing thoughts, actions and spaces in print once and for all would be contrary to the fluid and temporary character of any action.

Professionalism. But research along these lines does not stop at theory and, to cite the case of Italy alone, work groups able to provide genuine professional services to the various communities are growing increasingly significant. I will mention only a few of them here. One interesting example is Avanzi,[6] which has adopted the slogan *Sustainability in Action.* The group's aim is to support actions connected with social cohesion,

urban regeneration, co-working, events of various kinds, natural resources and business innovation. Another is Temporiuso[7] a cultural association set up to promote projects for the temporary reuse of abandoned spaces in which associations, activists and researchers participate in various ways at the local and international level through the organization of workshops and groups to carry out research into the territory. And then there is Esterni,[8] which describes itself as a *cultural enterprise* that designs services, stages events intended to bring the community together and carries out campaigns of collective communication.

Space. At this point it has to be asked what will become of the real identity of space in such a complex and open situation, one in which not even

6 – See www.avanzi.org/it

7 – See www.temporiuso.org

8 – See www.esterni.org

architects are in a position to provide reliable and lasting definitions. In fact it has become difficult today to define the characteristics of the city with precision, as it had been possible to do in the past, basing the categories on vocations of a functional character, such as commercial, industrial, business or tourist activities (Perulli 2009). From this point of view we are witnessing an out-and-out process of hybridization that is evidently a response to the complexity of social relations today and to the complicated dynamics of planetwide exchanges of every kind: cultural, commercial, political, etc. Cities now host uses that cut across all sorts of boundaries and the space where actions are carried out no longer needs to be *typological*, but anything can happen even in spaces very different from one another.

Location. These is nothing surprising about the fact that the English term *location* has now entered the Italian language as a sort of transference of the notion of place. It is in any case a term that is used in Italian for spaces in which we meet as if we were in a square or any other public place of the city. And so various identities overlap and become interchangeable in the same spaces, proposed over and over again to the user in a kind of consumerist bulimia.

Limits. This is well explained by Serge Latouche, who says that, even though the human condition is comprised within limits, today "hyperconsumption frees us from any imperative other than consuming without limits" (Latouche 2012, 15)[9], apparently going beyond and possible limit. And yet, continues Latouche, "(...) the denial of limits and the disdain for restraint today mean that limits and restraint resurface in the form of disasters (...)" (Latouche 2012, 16): disasters that can be natural, social, political and of any other kind. The paradox lies in the fact that, according to Latouche, contemporary unlimitedness is accompanied, *de facto*, by a reestablishment of innumerable limits that circumscribe our existence and that overlap with one another: from geographical limits to cultural limits, from economic ones to moral ones. So bounds are always present, indeed they have been reinforced and multiplied, but the difference with respect to the past is that they are laid one on top of the other in the same space and the same time, managing to coexist. Eleonora Fiorani has made the acute observation that the current state of affairs opens the way for:

9 – The passage has been translated from the Italian edition

(...) a specific geography of globalization able to connect national situations beyond their borders and, therefore, to treat constructed spaces in terms of discontinuity in order to reconstruct them in new territories that do not coincide with the sum of their parts, but get their dynamics from the flows that pass through them and of which they are part. (Fiorani 2012, 19)

Identity. Thus spaces have a less and less stable form and it is difficult for architecture to express their constantly changing characteristics. And yet, however mutable or even immaterial the flows that pass through the city, whether of people or things, of finance or information, they always end up in physical places where any flow, be it material or immaterial, takes on a real form whose constitutive logic lies inevitably in architecture and its research into spatiality. Politics will get its answers from politics, economics from economics, sociology from sociology and architecture will have to go on getting them from architecture.

So the identity of a place is less and less, if it ever has been, a stable quality defined permanently and for all its different classes of users (residents, temporary residents, occasional visitors, simple voyeurs...). But at the same time the identity of a place remains strongly anchored to a static, formal and material dimension of a space that fixes a certain propensity of meaning thanks to its geographic location and its construction. Even the most immaterial of the terminals of access to a network in fact retains a form and produces a setting. For these reasons too, therefore, notwithstanding the proclamations of immateriality and the scaremongering about non-places, many of the static and unstable spaces that vibrate in the infinite "semiosis" of contemporary existence will continue to serve us as good and sound references in the "inner" geography of our lives. (Boeri 2011, 39)

Research. It is the paradox of our age. On the one hand everything has grown more fluid and blurred, while on the other it seems that this very vagueness is forcing us to come up with new forms of certainty. The city is characterized by the immaterial flows that pervade it and that by now represent the spaces of life of our existences, while inevitably we are still fond of the symbolic and emotional qualities defined by the material substance of architecture. But perhaps it is precisely from this necessity of the spirit that our research into space has to start over.

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