URBAN INTERSTICES IN ITALY

DESIGN EXPERIENCES

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URBAN THRESHOLDS AT RISK OF IDENTITY LOSS

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The aim of this chapter is to study the phenomenon of interstitial spaces in the city, analysing their formal and spatial aspects as well as their constitutive and relational rules. It intends to do so with the tools and language of architectural composition, as the risk with this type of study is that of falling into the philosophical version of phenomena of the form of the city that have always existed in the processes of its transformation, including under different names. Phenomena that, despite their informality, are now so pervasive and random that they characterise the urban landscape of the contemporary city. Interstitial spaces have become the subject of widespread publications that very often do not go beyond adjectives: when one reads of *residual spaces*, the intended meaning is nothing more than the result of a transformation that has not found a use; when one reads of *undecided spaces*, or *shadow zones*, this means that they are in a state that is not conclusively defined. The so-called *interposed spaces* or *boundary spaces* are such because, due to the redefinition of the physical boundaries of different forms or processes of urbanisation, they are placed in the midst of different situations, each with a precise identity, and incapable of assuming one; *troubled spaces* are those subject to possible and easy transformations of use; when this happens, they are defined as *energy spaces,* or *creative spaces*. On the contrary, their insistence on remaining, despite boundary transformations, leads them to be defined as *spaces of resistance*.

Space is a physical, objective fact that exists independently of our evaluations and behaviours, but when we discuss architectural space, by this term we mean its relational qualities. It is these that constitute a decisive meaning. An interstitial space is first and foremost such if it is defined by different entities: architecture, natural elements, artefacts of landscape and history, pre-established alignments and tracks. Size and shape, as well as scale, are not important references for this category acquisition. Rather, we can say that the boundaries of these spaces can be blurred, that a precise perimeter is not binding, that the distinction in the relationships between interior and exterior is no longer very clear, and the relationships of scale and the compositional rules are no longer those traditional to the discipline of architecture.

In essence, an architectural space is such if it is without a name and without an identity. It can assume the identity of one or more of the elements that define it, or, by means of a design and transformative approach, it can display a new identity of its own. This lack of identity does not fit in with established open space typologies in the urban landscape, but is analogous, for example, to the underground corridors of metro stations that connect places that are either little or very far apart in the city. The attainment of a unique and distinguishable identity is the indispensable quality necessary for the redemption of each of these case studies. It is essential for their new life, because environmental choices are based on the identity and expression of various individuals or social groups, as Donald Appleyard stated in *Spazio e Società* in September 1980 (Appleyard 1980, 22). These are therefore spaces in the condition of being free from characterisations; ready to take on one or more transformations, to let themselves be infiltrated by the identities of their limits. The project can take on multiple identities, or one may prevail. The space between things has become empty because it has no recognisable role, "that space," writes Bernardo Secchi, "is only asked to be permeable, to allow itself to be traversed by placing a minimum of resistance" (Secchi 1993, 5-8). Even spaces and scraps of land improperly defined as *urban voids* are forgotten, neglected or left waiting for speculative operations on the periphery, because they do not correspond to the interests of urbanisation, or are difficult to regulate with legislative rules. They are construction waste. These spaces cannot be read only in a negative city, which has at its centre the voids and not the solids, but can also coincide with architecture, placed interstitially between two voids.

> The idea of emptiness unites all these different types of space under the same reductive classification (…) The word "void" also has, as does the term "space," an absolute value: it emphasises the element in itself, isolating it from the dense system of relations in which it is embedded, and erases its characteristics and specificity. It is therefore opportune to replace the word "void" with the word "interstice;" by this term we no longer indicate the void, but the void "between things," or within things. An interstice is a space that cannot be isolated in itself: it acquires meaning precisely because it is an interval between different elements, from which it derives its qualities. An empty space is actually an interstice, i.e. an interval, between two buildings. And a building, in turn, is an interval, an interstice, between two voids. (Zardini 1996, 57-58)

The proposal of this essay heads in the direction of adopting the concept of threshold within the urban structure. This term refers to the boundary between two different situations. In scientific research, the threshold value

is the specific measurement that, when reached, produces a phenomenon, whether perceptual or stimulatory, such as, for example, the pain threshold.

There are numerous anonymous examples of these spaces in Italy's built-up areas. One possible classification starts with the causes that determined their condition.

Some of these constitute a surprising suspension within the continuity of the urban fabric: a discontinuity or pause, closely linked to the urban morphology of the fabric in which they are found. This condition has also been crystallised for a long time, without ever having precisely acquired a function and a use. The space of Fondamenta Rio Sant'Eufemia on the Venetian island of Giudecca belongs to this reality, and surprises the passer-by every time he disembarks to go in the direction of Molino Stucky.

Other spaces represent a fracture, a misalignment or a paradigm shift within the continuity of an urban fabric or plan, due to the interruption or decay of urban projects and plans, or due to changes in conditions or regulations. They may be demolitions in the street building facades that have not led to reconstruction due to changes in regulations. Pending a reconfiguration process, they give rise to unexpected temporary results and uses. The building facades of many Italian cities, such as in Milan along Corso Garibaldi, are full of such situations.

Still others are spaces that have always been characterised by an uncertainty or ambiguity of their role, or that have undergone a change of this role within the urban structure due to urban transformations or projects, with a consequent evolution or involution in urban hierarchies. The spaces around Giulio Romano's Pescherie in Mantova, on the site of the former convent of San Domenico or those between Termini Station and Santa Maria degli Angeli in Rome possess this characteristic, as do the interiors of large blocks in the urban fabric, which have been opened up, thereby breaking the rules.

Similar to these are the interstitial spaces of the periphery pertaining to road or railway infrastructures, industrial complexes or large areas of shopping centres. With only the technical function of circulation or prescriptive distance, they give rise to land consumption processes. They are characterised by sudden changes in scale and discontinuities that cause separation and distancing. These types of spaces have a potential: they are often the object of shared re-appropriation by groups of citizens or ethnic groups, who reinterpret and reinvent their use according to their own needs, aspirations and cultural codes, with proactive tendencies and daily practices of care and management. For example, the informal or formalised typology of the green open space of urban kitchen gardens belongs to this category.

A further category of these spaces sees them enclosed within physical

enclosures, in response to mechanisms of social and political ghettoisation, with consequences not only in the rules of spatial design, but in the phenomena of exclusion and inclusion, isolation and segregation.

The interstitial spaces mapped by this essay have been redesigned over time. The approaches and tools used to deal with their design stem from their recognition and knowledge. These spaces are first of all clearly legible: their characteristics and boundaries can and should be recognised. Kevin Lynch used the term *imageability* to describe the quality whereby an environmental phenomenon evokes in an observer a vivid image, which goes beyond mere observation, but involves the sphere of perception: "The need to recognize and pattern our surroundings is so crucial, and has such long roots in the past, that this image has wide practical and emotional importance to the individual. (…) A vivid and integrated physical setting, capable of producing a sharp image, plays a social role as well. It can furnish the raw material for the symbols and collective memories of group communication (…) A good environmental image gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security" (Lynch 1960, 4). The qualities of a space, moreover, vary with the intentionality of the reading: "For an aesthetic reading (…) they consist in the organization of metrical and chromatic relationships," or in "associations of ideas between formal *typology* and social and economic facts (…) the 'means' are not the elements (form, colour, function), but the kind of relationships in which these elements are perceived and signified" (Cerasi 1966, n.p.).

The construction of this image is the consequence of a personal choice, and the result will be a creative synthesis of a subjective judgement, which differs according to the meaning attributed to the space. The methods of interpreting these phenomena contain the ideological and artistic objectives sought by the designer, as Maurice Cerasi theorised in 1966: "In the perception of the environment, the factor of *choice* comes into play (…) The environment is, therefore, not the sum of its constituent elements (…) My perception of the environment is a function of my experience of other environments, of what I expect from an environment" (ibid.). This vision is conditioned not only by the formal context, but also by the context of use: "the degree of 'possession' of that space, the physical, intentional relationships established with it, will affect the interpretation and the emotions we feel when faced with the built environment" (ibid.).

Since the consideration and importance given to them has changed, these spaces need to be understood in their geographical and cultural conditions, in their relation to local tradition and the materials of the specific urban landscape, in the conditions of climate and orientation. In the relationship

with the context, each situation has to be adequately assessed: past experiences claim the autonomy of these readings. Their knowledge must not only refer to urban disciplines such as sociology and politics, but also to contemporary facets of their transformation as studied by ecology and anthropology, in the search for previous traces and an understanding of their changing meaning. One of the examples analysed here, the restoration of the fountain in Santa Lucia di Serino, addresses the theme of the relationship between past and present through certain choices made by the architects: the search for historical images in the private homes of the town's inhabitants; the inclusion of a new element—the corten wall that follows the perimeter of the fountain and provides support for all the new services—to reinterpret the trace of the past; the reconsideration of water, not only as a common asset, but as a universal symbol of sociability and conviviality; restoration of the original paving to a lower level in Breccia Irpina marble. Another case study, Piazza Fontana in Quinto de' Stampi (a borough of Rozzano, to the south of Milan), contains more tenuous references to the past, which can describe the historical identity of the place in a condition that overlaps features and events. It includes layout of Via Franchi Maggi, the only historic one, due to the presence of an ancient chapel, which formed the regular urbanisation grid of which Via Europa is one (although not the most important) of the east-west routes, crossed on foot by the space being studied; and the historic row of plane trees along Via Arno, as shown by some images from the 1960s kept in the Archivio Fotografico del Comune di Rozzano. The designers—Studio Labics, run by Maria Claudia Clemente and Francesco Isidori—have entrusted the new identity of the space to the precision of the geometric composition and to a central street furniture structure conceived as a monument, and called Porta Europa, completed by an artistic and sound project.

Each of these presences should not be considered in isolation, but in relation to other urban presences, according to their role and position in the urban structure. Some of Alison and Peter Smithson's statements—"40 or 50 houses make a good street (…) The street is not only a means of access but also an arena for social expression" (Smithson and Smithson 1967, 17-19)—relate to the consideration of the need to understand a wider spectrum than the individual boundaries of the case study. Relationships with other spaces at a short distance can enable organisation into a coherent system. One of the first questions of this study was the field of investigation: what is the extent of the urban interstices in the metropolitan peripheral areas of our country and the threshold between the physical density of these and the ruptures at their margins? What is the size of the urban field (metropolis, city suburb)

within which to identify this landscape, made up of apparently self-referential juxtapositions of elements?

Sometimes, the result of the redevelopment of these spaces arises from the reconfiguration of contiguous, and only apparently conflicting, fragments—as happened in Milan for Segantini Park, on the area of the former Istituto Sieroterapico. The case study of Piazza Fontana, for example, was not considered for the canonical dimensional characteristics of an interstitial space, but for its peripheral role, taking this word not only in its physical but also in its social interpretation. It belonged to a typology of open space that was more akin to that of places in a state of obsolescence—disused manufacturing facilities or abandoned car parks, as this originally was—rather than a square in the traditional sense. Not only because of the absence of its identity in the toponymy, which is only echoed by a pre-existing fountain, but most of all because of the discontinuity and inconsistency of the elements that define it: disconnected porticos, cut-outs of spaces for relations and play at the sides of residential buildings, the presence of heterogeneous green elements. The lack of a building façade defining its boundaries is compounded by the difficult connection in urban relations, for a public space that is revealed by chance, sandwiched between different morphological fabrics. The key to understanding it is, therefore, to interpret it as a magnetic field, where the coexistence and interaction of different poles, dictated by the needs of users of different ages and categories, originated from a participatory process of the inhabitants initiated by the municipal administration. There is a coexistence and multiplicity of uses made possible by the design of a landscape conceived of the natural and the artificial, which can encourage unplanned situations, with overlapping and intertwined levels of space sharing.

The ways in which these spaces are perceived should not be static, but dynamic, "although the pedestrian walks through the town at a uniform speed, the scenery of towns is often revealed in a series of jerks of revelations," writes Gordon Cullen in *Townscape*, where he describes "serial visions" based on the juxtaposition of situations. Within the monotony of a homogeneous urban landscape, contrasting situations and differences in appearance allow us to see the city in a more in-depth way. "Unless this happens, the town will slip past us featureless and inert" (Cullen 1961, 11).

The image of these spaces produces a reaction of our visual perception and of our memory of emotions that we have experienced. This reaction is revealed through a succession of stimulating aspects and a recording of sequential images (Spinelli 2019). Perception also passes through physicality; that is, the position of our body in relation to spaces and their presences. The

sense of position is an instinctive automatism that should be interpreted and considered as an indicator of how we relate to an environment. Architectural design addresses the compression or rarefaction of spaces, our being inside or outside a threshold, and our well-being or physical discomfort in a spatial situation. The sequence against which we perceive these alternating conditions is one of the materials of the project.

The variability characteristics of these spaces are another parameter necessary for studying them. As they are the product of several operators, they are subject to change, which sometimes only shows partially. People and their activities are mobile elements as much as those characterised by physical presence. Even when they freeze their image in time and isolate themselves from the city around them, this same difference in speed brings about transformation. Kevin Lynch defined the design of the city as a "temporal art," resulting in a continuous succession of phases. This openness and continuous transformation, which has accelerated its speed in recent decades, are nonetheless a guarantee of the vitality of spaces such as these.

The undeniable existence of an associative need for each of us finally enters into considerations about the transformation of these spaces. The concept of association includes those of memory, familiarity and meaning. The models of association proposed by the Smithsons, "a veritable 'aesthetics of the street'," and illustrated by Nigel Henderson's shots at Bethnal Green in London should not be sought in the field of social anthropology, but in that of architectural invention. British architects address the concept of mutual influence between the built environment and the social environment: "The *tangible quality of the environment* is connected to the activity of shaping, of building. The *quality of the environment* in its intangible aspects refers to the activity by which the community clothes the fabric of the built environment with additional layers of meaning (…) the scene and costumes of the urban stage (…) sensitivity and knowledge for responsible use of spaces" (Smithson and Smithson 1978, 9).

The restoration of the fountain in Santa Lucia di Serino, based on a project by the 32mq Design Studio, refers to social aggregation, relating to a small community of approximately 5,000 people, for whom the fountain plays an important role, as it constitutes one of the few public spaces in the town. It was a place for people to stay and socialise, even after the provision of water in homes; it suffered a suspension in its role and lack of accessibility due to the damage caused by an earthquake. The project, with the value of structuring an indoor space and an outdoor space with drinking fountains, returned the use of this space to the inhabitants, proposing new and contemporary opportunities.

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