

Ghosts and Teeming Worlds

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Ghosts and teeming worlds



Cristina Bianchetti^{1*}

Abstract

The article continues a trajectory of studies performed in the last few years regarding the topic of the body in discourse and urban planning design (Bianchetti. in *Bodies between space and design*, Jovis, Berlin, 2020, Bianchetti. in "Spazi corpi politiche" dialogue with Simona Forti and Paola Viganò, Biennale Democrazia, Turin, 25 March, Teatro Gobetti, 2023a, Bianchetti. in *Le mura di Troia. Lo spazio ricomponi i corpi*. Donzelli, Rome, 2023b). It takes three books as its focus. The authors are: Colin Rowe and Dennis Hardy, Anthony Vidler, and Antoine Picon. I am personally very attached to these three books and believe they can help understand three different forms of the relationship between spaces and bodies. These forms of the relationship, respectively concern: the recomposition of bodies in space; the transfiguration of space that becomes projection of the neuroses and phobias of those who inhabit it; the tension between materiality and disembodiment. Recomposition, transfiguration, and disembodiment are ways in which spaces and bodies relate to each other. They speak of vulnerability, but also of the power of the body-in-space. The underlying question is: to what extent are urban planning policies and designs able to grasp the irreducibility of bodies? To what extent are they able to overcome the dedifferentiation that has created them for so long? Recomposition, transfiguration and disembodiment force us to reposition our attention beyond the ghost of a pure project, in the fallible and teeming kingdom of the relationships between bodies and spaces. The aim of the article is to highlight fragments of a critical discussion on design based on the complex relations between space, life, bodies and designs.

Introduction

There is a widespread belief that by prefiguring space, an urban design can increase or diminish the wellbeing of bodies, their health, comfort, safety and power. And, in some ways, also certain liberties: to move, to use space differently, to be with others, or by oneself, or with a few people; to feel good by enjoying pleasant conditions of warmth, light and shadow. In other words, a belief that, by prefiguring space, design can improve or worsen the variety, plurality and quality of our ways of life. Questioning what is exactly the meaning of wellbeing, comfort, safety and freedom in space make concepts visible, measurable, and graspable—concepts which in other respects would otherwise be somewhat imprecise. Apart from the

popularity of the topic (Recalcati 2011), attention to the body is crucial in any reasoning about the city.

Although it is possible to easily agree on the fact that an architecture, an urban design, or a policy always represents a position regarding the relationship between spaces and bodies, it is less easy to concur about what happens next: the numerous definitions regarding the concept of biopolitics, for example (Forti 2012; Viganò 2023), or also, more simply, the ways in which we address the notion of the body in extensive literature that has witnessed the interweaving of several philosophical, historical, anthropological, culturist and feminist voices.

I have explained elsewhere (Bianchetti 2023b) that my proposal is more phenomenological than transfeminist, at a time when we once again read Carla Lonzi (2023) and books by Butler (1993, 1999) that are, so to speak, classical, as well as books on feminist philosophy. I prefer to adopt a phenomenological perspective because I believe it to be more open, and less restrictive. In other words, I am convinced that when we examine

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the relationship between bodies, spaces and design, and immediately turn it either into a gender issue (i.e., a cultural, linguistic and social issue) or a question of sex (i.e., biological), this instantly introduces a break, and solves complex issue too abruptly (Redaelli 2023). I have many doubts about specialising, separating, disconnecting, and isolating, something implemented by the more radical transfeminist discourses, anchored to identities used as a banner, even when they declare the latter to be fluid and sectorial. I prefer to refer to bodies: bodies marked by differences, desires, impulses and unconscious thoughts. The differences between the sexes, like life and death, are included in the body. Referring to bodies is like taking a step backwards and looking at things from a distance.

So, bodies that matter (Butler 1993), that have a sex and gender that are more or less coinciding, fluid, blurred, and interwoven, but also have a weight, age, skill, and scars; that have memory, experiences, imageries, myopias, misunderstandings, and setbacks. Bodies that matter due to their plurality, difference, and skill, to their irreducible nature, to the fact they are powerful. Bodies that define teeming worlds due to their irreducibility and their power. *What can a body do?* is the question asked by Spinoza, a question that is still the basis of our reasoning about bodies and spaces (Deleuze 2007). The body can first and foremost touch, leave a trace, mark a distance, and build a stumbling block.

Within a phenomenological perspective, bodies transmit and translate connection with the world (Merleau-Ponty 1952), and therefore with space, the urban and dwelling; they allow us to access the world. Merleau-Ponty emphasises the enigmatic and ambiguous nature of the body: an entanglement of life and inertia, creativity and mechanical repetition. Given this situation, rigid Cartesian separations are inadequate or abstract. “I am my body” wrote Merleau-Ponty, and connection with the world and nature is transmitted and translated in the body.

This is the perspective with which I propose to work on the relationship between bodies and spaces, keeping a close eye on urban and architectural aspects, studying three different variations and extracting a few fragments for a discussion inspired by the three books. Repositioning myself along paths already taken. While in the past I tried to study the relationships focusing, on a case-by-case basis, on the sick body, marked by psychoses, anxieties, and fears; the hedonist body that pursues pleasure; the emancipated body of counterculture; the body crossed by the narcissistic cult of one’s own image; the perfect body of the organic analogy; or the medium body iconically represented by the Modulor. In this case, the relationships do not involve the forms of the body, but the *forms of the relationship*; recomposition, transfiguration,

abstraction. These relationships appear to me as the door with which to access the irreducibility of bodies: the fact they generate teeming worlds. I will try to underline a few elements which I think will spark a discussion.

Recomposition

*...After all.
is it not the son that
makes the father who he is?
[G. Manganelli, Pinocchio. Un libro
parallelo: 44].*

The first book is *Arcadia for All. The Legacy of a Makeshift Landscape* by Colin Ward and Dennis Hardy. The book was published for the first time in 1984 and again in 2004. Colin Ward and (Hardy 1984) was an important exponent of anarchist philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century in England and a member of the editorial staff of *Freedom*; he was also involved in many ways in Anglo-Saxon politics. Together with Dennis Hardy he wrote other books, piecing together the history of informal dwelling in and around the countryside Ward and Hardy (1986).

The key feature of the book is a makeshift landscape: an improvised landscape, a landscape of chance, a backup landscape, muddled, disorderly and temporary. And its link with freedom. The story is set in England in the first half of the twentieth century, astride modernisation and “modern folk art” (almost an oxymoron). A landscape of plotlands, lands of shacks, railway carriages, old buses, vans, in some cases, airplane fuselages which, when re-adapted, are home to individuals, friends and families. Unconventional places, built using makeshift materials. Reflecting the art of getting by. Of doing what one likes to do. What one is capable of doing. Let me be clearer: the gesture by Piero Portaluppi and his Wagristoratore is incomparably remote: a train carriage used as a restaurant that in 1929 was positioned on pillars sunk into the fields covered in gentian herbs in the Ossola Valley, along the San Giacomo pass, 2318 m above sea level. It was an intentionally provocative, gesture by Portaluppi, almost surreal and ironic vis-à-vis new tourism in the Alps. The plotlands in Essex reflect the art of getting by. They are the organisation of an everyday landscape of free time, far away from the city. This phenomenon began in the early twenties and intensified during the war, turning the countryside in southeast England (the territories along the coasts, rivers, canals, woods: a countryside venerated as the expression of an extremely beautiful nature) into something similar to the American frontier. Unfinished places whose features were that of remains, abandoned

ruins, and yet, at the same time, with an enchanted propensity to succeed.

The protagonists are the citizens who, for one reason or another, decide to find refuge outside the city, to gain for themselves “private picnics for life”. A landscape of poor people and bohemians outside the city. An *Arcadia for All*, one of freedom, tranquillity, and a return to nature. A domestic arcadia of deckchairs in front of a lawn. But also of the possibility to show off their ability to orchestrate the space around them. The bodies that live in this Arcadia are *Leib*, living bodies, concretions of the world, and also *Körper*, obstructing direction, thing, object. Bodies that are one with their objects (with the objects that make them bodies): shacks, railway carriages, airplane fuselages, deckchairs. This aspect (the importance of the objects that make up the *Arcadia for All*) paves the way for reflection, a somewhat lateral reflection, but not completely foreign to my reasoning. Today, at a time that is very remote compared to the one in which the book was written, there is a revived interest in the forms of life condensed in physical objects: potentiality, functionality, cycles of existence, the object as the interface between human and non human (Harman 2018). The object goes beyond the projection of an intentionality (to live in the fuselage of an airplane). It is a vibrant object in which the intelligence that has been deposited there enters into a dialogue with our intelligence. Nothing could be further from the approach adopted by Ward and Hardy.

Going back to the text, it's clear that in this case the body (pleasure, desire, the urge to live outside the box) creates the very beautiful space of the Essex plains. It achieves this by disseminating shacks, some of which, over the years, are turned into “modern pleasure plots”. That space is simultaneously very beautiful and ungrammatical (the opposite of the principles of beautiful landscapes, i.e., of the aesthetics of landscape); that very beautiful and ungrammatical space allows individuals to find themselves (Vernant: 1989: 200), to project themselves, to objectify themselves in what they actually do, in what they achieve: activities and works that allow them to find themselves, not power, but *energeia*, that are less decisive as regards their conscience, but decisive in actions.

Let's assume that the very beautiful and ungrammatical space produces those individuals who created it [after all, like Pinocchio and Geppetto, is it not the son that makes the father who he is?]. They help to make them recognisable to themselves. The individual is not a closed inner world in which he has to penetrate in order to find himself. The individual is extrovert. Existence comes before being conscious that one exists; knowing how to

live comes before knowledge: first we know how to live then we have knowledge (Vernant: 1989, Sini 2021: 351): I do all this and am aware of doing it. I know I am doing it because I see it in space. Space recomposes the body (Bianchetti 2023a, 2023b).

Recomposition is the first form of the relationship between bodies and spaces. A form illustrated very well by the case of the plotlands. The bond between body and space is such that neither bodies nor spaces can be taken for granted (Manganelli 2002). This circumstance helps to answer the question suggested by Florinda Cambria (2023): what comes first? space or bodies? do bodies create space? does space recompose bodies? Cambria adds that it is a question destined to fail, because it continues to reason about a before and after. About a simple, linear temporality. Answering the question means recomposing this issue in a principle of simultaneity and reciprocity, moving beyond the question: space acts (Viganò 2023)? what type of actor is it? is it space that acts on bodies? In actual fact, the positions assumed by (Sartre 1984) (the *être-là* of the body is the body, 2014: 412) and those of Foucault (the body is that little fragment of space where I am, 2008: 5) converge exactly with this principle of simultaneity and reciprocity.

Transfiguration

*...and if we loved life.
why should we transform it, huh?
this is the question we should ask ourselves ...
We would really need to be a misfit,
wouldn't we?
[J. F. Celine, 1960 cit. in Magrelli 2022].*

The book entitled *Warped Space. Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture* was published in the year 2000 (Vidler 2000). It contains studies launched in the eighties. In this case it is a well-known book written by Anthony Vidler, professor and dean of the Cooper Union School of Architecture in New York, and one of the most authoritative historians and critics of architecture. Like other books written by Vidler, this book proposes a history of architecture written without focusing on aesthetic or formal aspects, based on the hypothesis that it is impossible to clearly separate the normal from the pathological, the familiar from the extraneous, a closed-dark space from the transparent luminous sanitised space of the modern. Vidler uses the Freudian category of the uncanny (Vidler 1992) to provide an excellent explanation of how architecture is intimately associated with this notion: the house has been a theatre of spectacles and ghosts ever since the eighteenth century, and

the labyrinthine spaces of the city are always a source of anxiety. Distress, disquiet, discomfort; the inhospitable becomes design material. We could add that it removes its ethical, pedagogical and universalist dimension.

Here too there is a dual relationship involving two transfigurations: that of the body and that of space, interwoven in an incessant transit. Space becomes the projection of the individual and his neuroses and phobias. It is never empty space, but is full of disturbing objects and forms, including architectural objects and forms. Vidler narrates the many forms of an irreducible relationship between spaces and bodies: psychological (space as an expression of the neuroses) and artistic (deformation of the nodes and rules of the canonical representation of space that is rooted in the Renaissance).

We are again in the eighties. Even if the deformation of space and that of the body came much earlier and was very present in early 20th-century avant-garde movements. It developed as a crisis of the enlightenment's dream for a rational, transparent space, in turn inherited from modern utopianism. Space is no longer the passive container of objects and bodies. Much less is it rational and transparent.

In short, Vidler says that deformation is old news. It emerges together with a psychological idea of space with Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin, but, we could add, also with Poe. And, before them, Freud. And then, it leaves many traces at the end of the century. Traces that are present in the chapters of the book that focus on Vito Acconci's objects, Greg Lynn's folds, Libeskind's void, and Morphosis' neoformations. These examples reflect the spirit of the eighties! Years of stylistic nomadism just about everywhere, which in the words of Boltanski, is a reflection of the cultural logic of the economy.

If we were to ask ourselves what would have been the conditions for this transfiguration of spaces and bodies to possibly (re)emerge in the eighties, we would find many traces in the superimposition and intermingling of forms of representation in architecture, cities, plastic arts, photography, and cultural studies. In the crisis and difficulties of the critical function, considered by Carla Lonzi as a project of falsification (1970). In the alterations of perceptions, thoughts and actions: something that recalls what drugs do to our nervous system. The great cultural upheaval that was to sustain the neo-liberal policies of that decade lie in transfiguration. Or rather, in an enormous caesura between transformation-deformation nourished, on the one hand, by an exuberant imagery, ungrammatical and incongruent and, on the other, by an *appel à l'ordre*, the return of a design for the city that rested on a solid base: the ground, continuity, and form. On the one hand, the allegorical and hallucinatory city. On the other, the pedagogical, theatrical, ideological city.

On the one hand, a city in which one precipitates: there are no others. All the others are hidden and revealed in this city. On the other, a city that is interpreted and designed in the discontinuity of its existence. The La Villette competition was the expression of this duplicity. This is why it is the best example of the fault line of the eighties.

Towards the end of his life (and a long conflict), Celine acknowledged Proust's *grandeur*; in an interview cited in exergue with Guénot and Darribehaude (in Magrelli 2022) he makes an only seemingly predictable admission. Transformations, prefigurations, and deformations are triggered by a state of profound, painful dissatisfaction: "It is a sickness". Discomfort, unease, and inconvenience (sickness) generate design, and not ethical and pedagogical tension.

Materiality and disembodiment

*...I'll show you who I am ...
flesh, blood, bones just fade away.
An invisible man can rule the
world ...
[The Invisible Man: film directed
by James Whale, 1933,
Universal Picture, based on the
homonymous science fiction novel
by H.G. Wells].*

The third book is more recent, even if it was published a few years ago: *La matérialité de l'architecture* Picon (2018). It helps us tackle the third issue, that of the two opposites, materiality and disembodiment. The author, Antoine Picon, is an engineer, architect, and professor of history of architecture and technology at Harvard University.

The key to this book is in its title: architecture works with matter to make it expressive. It clashes with its heavy, obstructing nature. The interpretation of materiality has changed enormously over the years, starting with Vitruvius. Considering it as key creates a possible, different history of architecture (and helps us get a better understanding of the effects of digitalisation). This hypothesis is referred to in the exergue of the book thanks to a citation by Wölfflin 2005:

"la matière est pesante, pousse vers le bas, veut s'étaler sans forme sur le sol. Nous connaissons la force de pesanteur de notre propre corps. Qu'est-ce qui nous fait tenir debout, et nous empêche de tomber sans forme? Cette force de réaction, nous pouvons la caractériser, par exemple, comme volonté ou comme vie. Je l'appellerai force formelle.

L'opposition entre force formelle et matière, qui met en mouvement l'ensemble du monde organique, est le thème fondamental de l'architecture [Heinrich Wölfflin, *Prolégomènes à une psychologie de l'architecture*, 1886]

So: materiality as a persistent trace allows us to rewrite, understand, and reconstruct the history of architecture and weave it together with the idea (also variable) of the body [33]. The structures built in the thirties by Eduardo Torroja or Frank Lloyd Wright are linked to a modern and heroic vision of the body, obviously very different to the one we have today. We have moved on from that idea, as we have from the ideas that the body is a hydro-pneumatic machine, as it was during the period of Descartes, or vital fluid, similar to the electricity that brings Frankenstein to life during the first industrial revolution. Even if we are tempted by new analogies between the neurological system and machines, we have distanced ourselves from this kind of perspective. And the issue of cyborgs is something completely different.

Picon believes that abandoning the strong and univocal idea of the body (the heroic idea of Wright's modernism) helps to interpret the so-called crisis of tectonics and the desire to renew the structuralism adopted by contemporary architects and theorists who focus on numerical technologies and neurosciences (the author cites Neil Leach and Cecile Balmond). In this case too, digital technologies have changed the way in which the individual perceives and thinks about himself. Just like the way in which research tried to find the right proportions, the current structural approach speaks to us about our bodies and the way in which they project us into the world.

The concept of materiality varies continuously. Just think of the late nineteenth century when, in the middle of the spiritistic trend, ghosts appeared much more material than we would ever have thought. So much so that ways to record their presence increased a great deal. The photographs by William Hope—thought for so long to be authentic—are just one example.

The third form of the relationship is the contraposition between materiality and disembodiment. A clash between the corporeal nature of matter and the disembodiment of bodies: in the 'spirits' photographed by Hope, in the physiognomy by Bertillon, in Instagram profiles, in legal entities, in the words of design. Wölfflin returns: the topic of architecture is the opposition between matter and *force formelle* (life, resistance, irreducibility).

Where is force positioned? Force is in the invisible, in disembodiment, as it is in the film by James Whale; is it there in its infantile and enjoyable form: the unwrapping of the bandages around an incorporeal and invisible

head? Flesh, blood, bones just fade away and the invisible man can rule the world! Or is force in matter? materials, machines, and structures?

Perhaps it's worth adding that disembodiment is always easily found in a project that involves statistical and legal entities and roles (designer, administrator, promoter, inhabitant, etc.). It has always conjured up ghosts and stays well away from the teeming worlds of bodies. Paradoxically, disembodiment is even more obvious during a period in which the body is the object of a "new religion", elected to be an aesthetic and moral principle: new forms of enslavement which, in the guise of physical-dietary-psychic wellbeing infiltrates the intimate folds of everyday life. A wellbeing that in self care expunges sickness and death. In actual fact it is a form that is only seemingly contradictory to the illusion of the horror of the thirties: in which flesh, blood and bones just fade away and the invisible man can rule the world. When flesh, blood and bones correspond to the parameters of the "healthy body", the latter can rule its own narcissism.

Conclusions

I am my body, writes Merleau-Ponty, in what is perhaps his best book, *La prose du Monde* (1952–2019), and in the body one transmits and translates one's connection with the world. The book examines everyday language, something we share in a more or less conscious manner; something that envelops us, surrounds us and crosses through us. It crosses through things, our bodies. "Words inhabit things. It is not an already established path in which sign and word are the guise, external translation" (Sini in Merleau-Ponty, 2019:41). Language is something that cannot be studied from another place, but from within. The reaction of the body with space is very similar to what links corporeity and language. It also crosses through our bodies (in a non linear, deformed, transfigured and interrupted manner). It is made up of deformation, and prefiguration. A weave of life and inertia, of creativity and passive, mechanical repetition.

In this essay I have drawn attention to a few fragments of the transit between bodies and spaces. A transit that is not linear, but deformed, transfigured and interrupted. Above all singular, individual and irreducible. The recomposition between spaces and bodies is the first observed relationship. The second involves deformations and transfigurations (both used in this case almost as synonyms, but obviously with a different root in time). Finally, the third, considered as the tension between materiality and disembodiment that is so frequent in the discourses and designs of space. My hypothesis is that these three forms of relationship help to refine an idea and discourse about the city, capable of grasping the differences, of overcoming the de-differentiation that has characterised

them in the past. But it is also an idea and discourse on the city that transits between different fields of knowledge. Which, by not renouncing their own specificity, let themselves be challenged by issues and concepts of other fields: artistic, philosophical, anthropological, and literary. What is important is how these concepts move and not where they are rooted. Pier Luigi Crosta would say: what's interesting is the use we make of them. Observing these relationships provides a dual benefit. On the one hand it helps to build a better discourse on the city and its design. On the other, it helps to prompt a reflection on the meaning of our practices as architects and urban planners: on what we are capable of discussing.

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Author contributions

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