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Learning architecture as an impure discipline

Mental and emotional dimensions of architecture

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Synopsis

Starting from new strains of phenomenology and from recent neuroscience's theories, the paper aims to address the topic of "impurity" of architecture grounded in human "affective space" that modifies the way the world is for us. Specially in the case of urban transformations and mainly in regeneration programs, where it is increasingly manifest a wider requirement and instance for participation by the inhabitants, people's feelings and emotions become something that needs to be taken into account in practicing architecture and planning. Concepts such as "affordance", "atmosphere", "embodiment" and "empathy" become central in our way of experiencing space: along with other concepts such as memory, identity, imagery, they redefine the balance between reflective and pre-reflective domains. This raises questions about how to learn the impurity of architecture, which claims the development of critical devices required to understand biological, psychological and cultural aspects in a more integrated way strictly connected to social practices.

Key words: Impurity, affective space, atmosphere, empathy, critical devices.

1. Effective and affective spaces

As we know, the practice of architecture contains and merges ingredients from many different categories, such as physical facts and cultural beliefs, material technologies and mental intentions, knowledge and dreams, etc. In the last decades, architecture has largely related on theories developed in other fields of research, such as philosophy, environmental psychology, sociology, linguistic, human geography, cognitive science and information technology, just to name a few. Nevertheless, architecture has mainly looked at physical and material aspects, whereas mental and emotional dimensions have been marginalized and regarded as something that is basically private and does not influence the public sphere.

Nowadays we are witnessing an epochal shift, due to both media developments which allow for acquiring information and sharing choices in real time and emerging perspectives of neuroscience which promise a deeper understanding of the mental implications, affects and effects of the space that surrounds us. Specially in the case of urban transformations and mainly in regeneration programs, where it is increasingly manifest a wider requirement and instance for participation by the inhabitants, people's feelings and emotions as well as their awareness become something that needs to be taken into account in practicing architecture and planning, because "to neglect the emotions is to exclude a key set of relations through which lives are lived and societies made"¹. Urban areas are not just physical – buildings, squares, roads, parks. etc. – they are also "affective" spaces we inhabit: emotional and mental constructions give – or no – meaning to places and shape the fabric of everyday life.

Hence the central research question will be: what is the influence of architecture (particularly in/of public spaces) on our affective sphere and vice versa how our affective sphere intervenes in the fruition of space, in the role we attribute to it, in the developing of imaginative dimension, in the constructing of social relationships? How can a building or an urban space make us feel happy or sad, enthusiast or bored, rooted or alienated? Emotions can deeply "alter the way the world is for us, affecting our sense of both time and space. Our sense of who and what we are is continually (re)shaped by how we feel".²

Starting from these considerations, the paper aims to address the topic of "impurity" of architecture³, grounded in human "affective space"⁴ which associates the emotions with all stimuli both internal to the agent and within its environment. Specially with the recent discovery of mirror neurons, we are today more aware of complexity and plasticity of our brain as well as of the close relationship between mind and body, organism and environment, nature and culture. As stated by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch (in order a biologist, philosopher and psychologist) in their text "The Embodied Mind" (1991) – a real

¹ Anderson, Kai and Susan J. Smith, 2001. Editorial: emotional geographies. *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 26, no. 1, p. 7-10. Royal Geographical Society. ISSN 0020 2754. Also in: Wiley Online Library, first published December 2002. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-5661.00002>.

² Sandberg, Linda and Malin Rönnblom, 2016, Planning the new city-emotional reaction and positions, *Emotion, Space and Society*, vol. 21, November, p. 50-57. Elsevier. ISSN 1755-4586.

³ In his research, Juhani Pallasmaa has spoken several times about an impurity of architecture. See bibliography.

⁴ The concept of "affective space" was pioneered by Hermann Schmitz, starting from: *System der Philosophie/3.2. Der Gefühlsraum*, 1969, Bonn, Bouvier, and taken over by several authors, e.g. Gernot Böhme and Tonino Griffero.

milestone for the development of cognitive science – the organism both shapes the environmental field and at the same time is continually being shaped by it. It is what they call en- activism which, along with the importance attributed to the embodied sensorimotor activity, helps us to understand the origins of emotion in relation to other individuals as well as to real, lived spaces.

By placing subjects at the center of the research, the paper intends to study the relationship between individuals - as well as groups and communities - and spaces they inhabit. This can be done by guaranteeing centrality to the pre-reflective emotional impact that spatial situations produce on subjects, where for "spatial situation" it is intended the inclusive description of a specific condition, including both the material articulation of space and its intangible qualities that influence the subject's emotional sphere.

2. The affective space in urban transforming processes: a new paradigm

Along with developments in neuroscience, new strains of phenomenology have indicated a new paradigm for the understanding of the subject's experience of the space, in which a wide sphere of emotional resonance becomes important. Concepts such as James Gibson's "affordance", Gernot Böhme's "atmosphere" or Jean-Paul Thibaud's "ambiance" together with "empathy" – which, by linking with the first studies on the subject (T. Lipps, 1905), considers it as an emotional experience of sharing – become central in our way of experiencing space, redefining the balance between reflective and pre-reflective domains and assigning to the latter a far more important role than has long been the case. Along with other concepts, they reclaim to be investigated to provide an alternative way of dealing with the human and social components of urban transformations processes. In this emersion of affective space, some of the main issues that have been central in the late 20th century urban theory, must be reconfigured to embrace these new demands. This concerns, for example, the concept of "memory" that, from Aldo Rossi's classical book *L'architettura della città* (1966) onwards, has mainly concerned its physical and historicized acceptations, while less attention has been paid to its interdisciplinary character which concerns the possibility to develop a theory or better multiple theories of remembering, corresponding to the multiple kinds of memory, starting from the relationship between internal memory and external memory, the latter which tends to be designed to provide highly stable storage in a way that may play a vital role in remembering.⁵ In any case, the goal would be to enhance the interaction between architecture or urban fabric or built environment and human embodied-mind to reveal the hidden complexity that escapes rational analyses and measurement.

This raises questions about how to learn the impurity of architecture, which claims the development of critical devices required to understand biological, psychological, cultural aspects in a more integrated way strictly connected to social practices. Regarding this, we can recall some studies aimed at overcoming the traditional opposition between experienced space and designed

⁵ See, Michaelian, Kourken and Sutton, John, 2017. "Memory", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [on line]. Library of Congress Catalog Data* (accessed 24 April 2017). Retrieved from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/memory/>.

space, such as: the concept of "thirdspace" of Edward W. Soja where "everything comes together [...] subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined [...] mind and body, [...] everyday life and unending history"⁶; or the concept of "ambiance" as in Thibaud's theory, where the goal is to describe "the forms, processes and conditions under which an urban experience occurs".⁷

We have just begun. The challenge is to develop a type of architecture and urban design conceived as "dynamic approach focusing on sensorial methods of structuring space and time"⁸ able, therefore, to include in its process also people's feelings: as sustained by new phenomenology, feelings don't live only inside individual consciousness but also "out of us", embodied in things, spatial contexts and urban situations, thus becoming re-traceable by several subjects even in a historical perspective.

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⁶ Soja, Edward W., 1996. *Thirdspace. Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places*, Oxford, Blackwell. ISBN: 978-1557866745.

⁷ Thibaud, Jean-Paul, 2011. *The sensory fabric of urban ambiances. The Senses and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2, p.203-215. Taylor Francis (Routledge). ISSN: 1745-8927.

⁸ Thibaud, Jean-Paul, 2015. *The Backstage of urban ambiances. When atmospheres pervade everyday experience. Emotion, Space and Society*, vol. 15, May, pp. 39-46. Elsevier. ISSN 1755-4586.

Biography

Paola Gregory. Associate Professor in Architectural and Urban Composition at the Politecnico di Torino, Ph.D. in Architecture at the Sapienza Università di Roma, where she is member of the Board of the Doctorate in "Architecture. Theories and Project ", directs her research on two main areas of study : the implications of a "landscape dimension of architecture" and the developments of contemporary architectural thought. Among her main publications:

- P. Gregory, La dimensione paesaggistica dell'architettura nel progetto contemporaneo. L'architettura come metafora del paesaggio, Roma-Bari 1998;
- P. Gregory, New Scapes. Territories of Complexity, Basel 2003;
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