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Unexpected made natural. Turning the project into a tactical tool

Original
Unexpected made natural. Turning the project into a tactical tool / Deregibus, C. - In: Urban Corporis X. Unexpected / M. Milocco Borlini, A. Califano. - ELETTRONICO. - Conegliano : Anteferma, 2021. - ISBN 9788832050967. - pp. 180-189

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2868352 since: 2021-01-27T17:07:35Z

Publisher:
Anteferma

Published
DOI:

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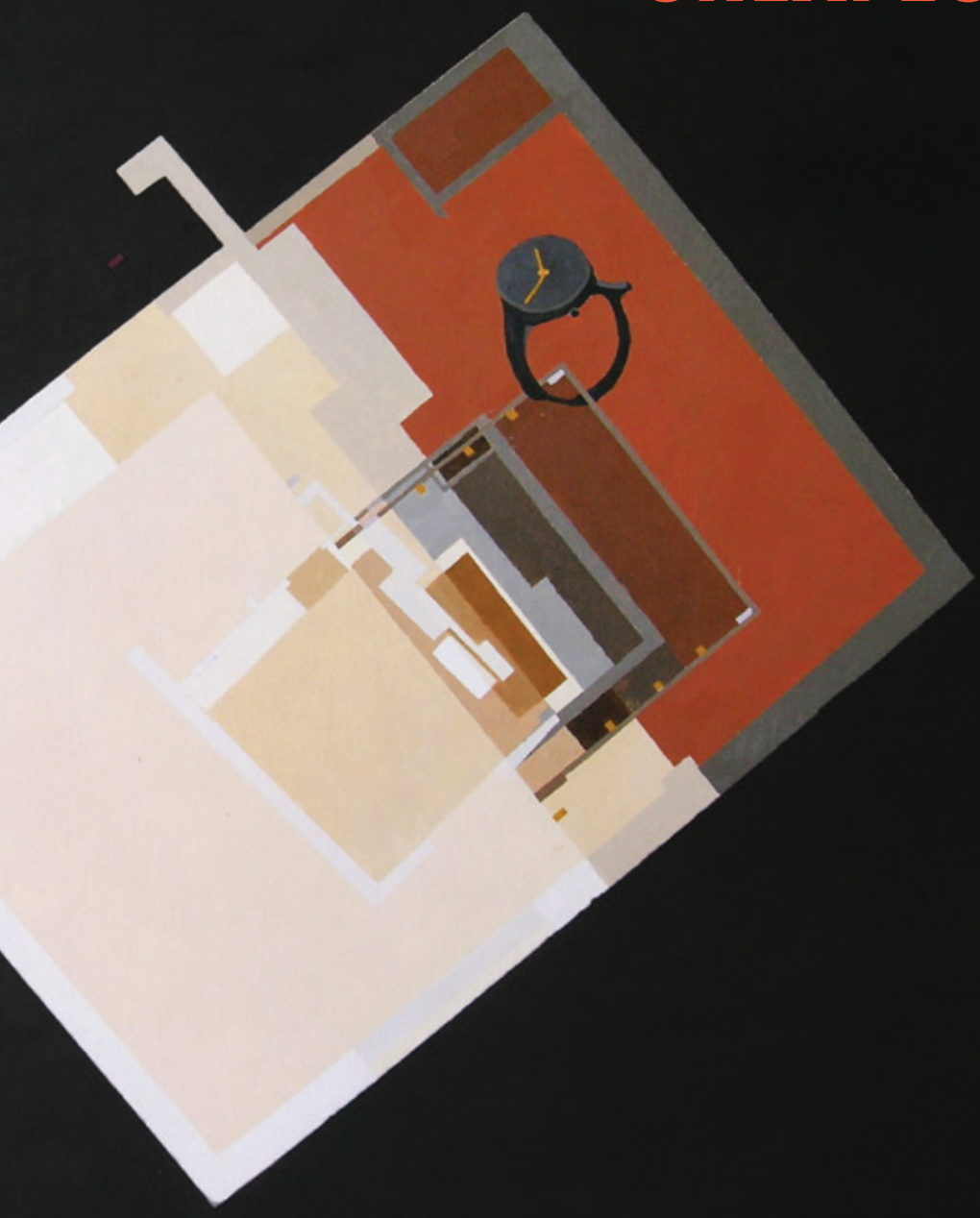
(Article begins on next page)

26 November 2026

URBAN CORPORIS
UNEXPECTED



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URBAN CORPORIS X
UNEXPECTED - SPECIAL ISSUE

URBAN CORPORIS X - UNEXPECTED
First Edition, January 2021
M. Milocco Borlini, A. Califano, I.U.V.A.S. FIRENZE, iuvas.org.

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Publisher
Anteferma Edizioni, Conegliano, Italy
ISBN: 978-88-32050-96-7 (digital version)
www.anteferma.it

The essays in this book have been double-blind peer-reviewed by selected experts

The authors have signed a release in which they take full responsibility for their text and the images included in this book
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Cover image, Rachel Hurst, Intimate Squared Rooms_R + R's Room, 2020 Courtesy of the Author.

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01. All normalities are unexpected/1, Carlo Deregibus, 2020, propriety of the author.

Unexpected made natural

Turning the project into a tactical tool

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Keywords: Architectural design, Risk management, Potential, Strategy and tactics, Adaptation

Abstract

All crises produce shocks, changing people's perception of life, habits, and rights. In systems theory terms, we could state that, during a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, people start marking a distinction between the past and the future, noticing transformations that before stayed ignored. Two attitudes emerge: a nostalgic one, pretending to go back to normal as soon as possible, rejecting any changes; and a revolutionary one, claiming that nothing will be the same as before and asking for even stronger transformations. But things do not stay unvaried, nor do they overturn: the future happens together with the evolution of people. There is a continuous shifting we are not even aware of, and which becomes noticeable only at a distance: this is especially true about space and its perception. However, not all transformations are good: while some of them seem to be a natural evolution of the present, others appear to be forced. This (apparent) randomness may have a clear relation with the tendency of traditional design to use projects as prescriptive models for the future. Indeed, using systems theory again, we could say that projects, by marking a distinction between what is designed and everything else, also originate the possibilities of unexpected, which then becomes an (unavoidable) flaw of design. In a crisis, the attitudes mentioned above push the predictive approach to its limits and, by proposing either old or new models, they prophetically raise expectations toward an ontologically false future. Quite the opposite, also with the aid of case-studies showing how unexpected normality can be, the paper investigates architectural design as the artfulness of evolving spaces by exploiting the so-called potential, changing the unexpected into the founding element of design. Then, the project can become a tactical tool for implementing subtle, yet effective actions, able to influence spaces toward an ontologically unexpected, yet natural future.

Introduction

> *Everything had been admirably thought out as is usual in dispositions, and as is always the case not a single column reached its place at the appointed time* (Tolstoy, 2010, p. 1069).

> *The most important thing to do in order to make the world a peaceful place is to create a situation in which we don't make waves* (Oki, n. d.).

All crises produce shocks, changing people's perception of life, habits, and rights. In systems theory terms, we could state that, during a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, people start "marking a distinction" (Luhmann, 1996, p. 47) between the past and the future: a before/after distinction which makes it possible to notice previously ignored transformations. Reactions to this new awareness seem to go toward two main directions: a nostalgic attitude, pretending to go back to normal as soon as possible, as nothing happened or changed; and a revolutionary one, claiming that nothing will be the same as before and willing to exploit the crisis for forcing even more radical transformations. We will not discuss if/whether these attitudes are inspired/aroused by the media, nor their relationship with economic interests, nor even the psychological dangers or those concerning welfare and employment rate. Instead, we would like to highlight that, in the case of the pandemic, public debates mainly have aroused around the topic of the *space*, and the way of living it (Deregibus, 2020b). On the one hand, people want "their" space back, recognising the absolute importance of public spaces as sociality places, of homeplaces as individual nests, of workplaces as places of commitment and confrontation: a new sense of possession emerges, as well as an updated sense of belonging. On the other, people claim to have the right to revolutionise "their" spaces, which are being proven inadequate precisely by the pandemic: public spaces, as well as homeplaces and workplaces, must change, and they have to do it *now*.

But rarely things stay unvaried, nor do they completely overturn: usually, the future happens *together* with the evolution of people, with a continuous shifting we are not even aware of, and which becomes noticeable only at a distance. Whether the crisis will last or not, people and spaces more likely will adapt, maybe in such a radical way that what how seems to be a critical limitation of freedom, tomorrow will be a usual way of living (ibid.). Just like it happened for sharing personal data on social networks, or for controls in airports and terminals, it may happen that limitations in using the space will be no more seen as threats to freedom, but as a normal necessity. Such adaptation continuously happens, continually shaping our spaces and our perception of spaces: it is a "silent transformation" (Jullien, 2011).

Then, whether these transformations are good or bad is all but obvious. While Some of them seem to happen in a natural way, others appear to be forced and artificial, and end up being rejected by people (Chia, 2014). There is a strong tendency of promoting participation for reducing this apparent inconstancy (Kempenaar and Van den Brink, 2018): still, our hypothesis is that even a participative process may generate forced changes due to the tendency of design to produce *prescriptive models* for the future. In other words – and this is true especially in participative processes – design works on what Okashah and Goldwater (1994) called *known knowns* (things we already know to know, as it happens in products design) or at most *known unknows* (something that we know we don't know, as it is for city planning), but usually ignore, or conceal, *unknown unknowns*: that is, precisely the unexpected.

Therefore, after some examples of silent transformations, our aim is to conjecture a different way of designing changes, so to make unexpected natural.

1. Unexpectedness of normal, normality of unexpected

Marking the before/after distinction means formalising a fixed point in the perception of time, just like deadlines and recurrences do. However, we are so accustomed to making this distinction that we struggle to perceive, more than the change itself, the *possibility of change without a clear transition*. We look for revolutions, but transformations stay hidden in the mists of normality so that, when we notice them, they may surprise us. Therefore, on the one hand, normality comes unexpectedly because we are not able (or used) to see its evolution; on the other, unexpected is ubiquitous to the point that getting a critical distance will reveal it everywhere. Moreover, normalities, as well as unexpected things, cannot be compared among different times or places (Deregibus, 2020b): we could compare different situations, but not the way there are/were perceived, due to different intentionalities and biases involved – in a Husserlian sense – as well as to the role of the environment – in a Luhmannian sense. The ontological consequence is that, in any case, all normalities are somehow unexpected.

1.1. Urban space

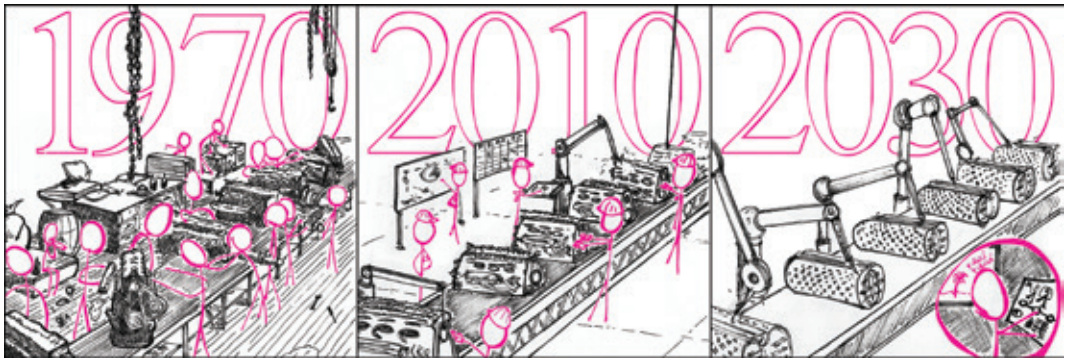
Urban development shows, maybe better than any other example, how unexpected the change can be, and how natural. In the seventies, all European cities were choked by traffic. After the economic boom following the end of the Second World War, the car became a symbol of freedom and social standing, soaring to be a state of personality. From 1950 to 1970, cars increased 250% in the USA, 500% in the UK, 850% in France, 2000% in Germany and a whopping 2600% in Italy (Boscarelli, 2003). Clearly, cities could not change as quickly. What we are now used to call "historical centres" were very different, with lanes running in stately squares and medieval districts, as it was the most normal thing in the world: indeed, *it was* the most normal thing in the world. No pedestrian areas and no more bikes, which were so common before the War (Belloni, 2019): other things were far more critical. Only after the eighties, a sustainable vision raised, leading to the promulgation of the Agenda21 in 1993. More subways were developed, more soft mobility routes and plans were implemented. As a (partial) result, nowadays most cities in Europe have a pedestrian area, usually corresponding to the historical centre or relevant areas: a definite change in the perception of the city, which allowed a rehabilitation of heritage that before was literally inconceivable (Bigio, 2015). We are now used to take a walk in the city centre, to socialise in public spaces, to enjoy pedestrian and green areas: again, just as it was the most normal thing in the world. That's because the adaptation of the city went together with the adaptation of people. Similarly, things can change again: and will change. The pandemic showed us a different way of living and, consequently, models for future cities that were so diffusely discussed (Saaty and Sagir, 2015) proved to be wrong. That's because they relied on known knowns, while actual changes are as unexpected when they happen as normal after the adjustment period needed for tuning shapes and habits. Thus, it is entirely plausible that cities will change together with our way of living it, with maybe green areas more similar to woods then parks – more natural, even savage, because no one will go there, or with pre-set footpaths to be used for going around respecting reciprocal distances. In other words, what today seems to be an intolerable limitation of the way of living public spaces, tomorrow could unexpectedly become the most normal thing in the world (fig. 01).

1.2. Homeplace

The evolution of the homeplace is just as dramatic as that of the cities. The intense urban growth allowed/caused/required by the economic boom (Capello, 2001) also gave birth to a new



02. All normalities are unexpected/2. Carlo Deregibus, 2020, propriety of the author.



03. All normalities are unexpected/3. Carlo Deregibus, 2020, propriety of the author.

type of blocks of flats and houses. Building techniques and typologies were different across the countries, depending on the development of the family and the society (Barbagli and Kertzer, 2005; Lane, 2015). In Italy, for example, quite all blocks were built with a concrete frame, plastered or tiled cavity walls, and very peculiar flats' plan based of the also typical family structure: a working husband, a housewife, two or more children. It was the most normal thing in the world for the housewife to choose furniture, tapestry and tents: the house was her reign, especially the kitchen – a four meters square cubicle. The family ate and passed their time in a cramped dinette. A long, narrow corridor led to an even narrower bathroom, to the enormous bedrooms, and to a nice living room, too precious to be lived and whose couches would be new forever (Baldini, 2010). People and houses adapted reciprocally: flats were built with the typical family as a target, and the family aspired to become typical (Cosseta, 2000). Nowadays, both are changed. The traditional family is less common, both parents now usually work, there are fewer kids per family, and rarely grandparents live with their sons. The whole social dimension is different, and spaces are changed accordingly, with new standards to aspire to. Modern flats expose open spaces, with the kitchen as a socialisation place; bedrooms are smaller, bathrooms larger; terraces are very welcome; cars are necessary, but not as much as in the past. Obviously, these trends are all but unquestionable: housing standards are so different among different cultures (Liu *et al.*, 1999) that it's clear that normality is a very relative concept. The pandemic inspires a possible next evolution, toward a different way of organising the houses, especially with reference to the ever-growing extended families, the need for spatial adaptability and the smart-working requirements. Thus, it is not impossible to think to a new homeplace, in which the open space can be separated into isolated, soundproof cells useful for working or studying; or to the "revenge" of bedrooms, now essential for enjoying smart-working and distance learning (Semi, 2020); or the evolution of dining space and livings, in a world in which invitations to dinner are forbidden. Things that were absurd just until 2019, and that, unexpectedly, may become the most normal thing in the world (fig. 02).

1.3. Workplace

The evolution of the workplace – especially the manufacturing workplace – is so evident that there exist museums showing the working conditions of just a century ago. At that time, the industry was like a systemised artisanal work (the so-called Industry 1.0). Then, there was the evolution to mass-productions, where assembly lines commuted workers in machines – as Charlie Chaplin's Modern Times lovely represented (Industry 2.0). The next step was robotic process automation (Industry 3.0), and now Industry 4.0, i.e. exploiting the Internet of Things for building smart factories, is the new trend. The shape of the workplace changed according to this evolution. Workers were once inside the factory, manually operating on the machines for even more than 12 hours per day (Gasca, 2009). That normality is now unthinkable, and new standards have emerged. Many workers currently operate on the controls of machines – standing near them more than manipulating them – and office work increased exponentially (Rainhorn and Bluma, 2013). Obviously, this change had a price: those now abnormal standards were adopted in delocalised factories in the Far East, again creating a new, relative as questionable, normality (Klein, 1999). But, if workplaces don't need people's presence anymore, why should they exist? We could develop remote factories, with at most a few workers supplying physical maintenance. Then, while thinkers were discussing (Fadini, 2018), the unexpected happened. The pandemic irrupted, imposing remote-working. Beside its opportunities and risks, what is truly relevant for our thesis is seeing that people actually managed it. In other words, they

adapted themselves to the new situation. Obviously, it was not that easy, especially for some categories of workers or depending on different conditions – for example, the management of children, as schools were closed. But the debate on remote-working could start only thanks to a before/after distinction, because it became possible to compare the "after" with the "before", on the base of the (mostly unexpected) experiences of people. All theoretical expectations that were possibly proposed before relied on the known, conjecturing a series of known unknowns. But the unexpected made it clear that the revolution of the manufacturing may lead to an ultimate separation between workers and workplace, so that it's possible now to think to spaces before typical of just dystopic movies. And our habits will change consequently: while it was normal to have a strict time-table in the day, the future may allow free disposal of time, possibly leading to a result-based work, instead of the present, time-based work. So again, normality will be different, and we'll maybe discover that it will better fit our new habits (fig. 03).

2. Fascination and danger of modelling

The three examples above show that evolution is, more or less, always unexpected. We could think that experts and specialists could manage these changes: an urban planner will adjust city models, reacting to the variations of the conditions; an interior designer will promptly feel the latest style trends, updating its projects; managers and designers will reshape workplaces following the ongoing utilitarian nature. There should be a constant evolution of the projects: and this evolution would indeed be enough, if the project was a problem-solving tool, i. e. a way of answering a question. But at the base of problem-solving there is the necessity to model the present situation, so to make its complexity more manageable and define the problem itself: consequently, the model tends to replace the actual contingency, losing its relations with the environment (Husserl, 1970). This separation could work for many human activities, but, in the case of architecture, it inevitably leads to failure. In fact, models (possibly) work just *within* the modelled system: or rather, the model defines a new system precisely by excluding the rest of the environment (Moeller, 2006, p.16). The problem is that unexpected is "an irritation between systems [which makes them] resonate with each other" (*ibid*, p. 38): therefore, it comes from *outside* the system defined by the model. Thus, as using the project as a problem-solving tool requires to define models of the present and/or the future, the condition of the existence of the project would also be the leading cause of its failure. In other words, the distinction between what is inside the model and everything else automatically produces the possibilities of unexpected, which will ontologically be *out* of the model.

Considering the three systems (which are three among many others) of the examples mentioned above, they are quite obviously connected: the work organisation strongly influences houses, both determine the city, public transport affects housing and workplaces, and so on. Each system has its own evolution, but this evolution is strongly influenced by what is outside the system itself: or rather, by the reciprocal irritation of the systems. Even if we can somehow manage these systems (indeed, they are *known knowns*), these irritations are by some degree unexpected (they are *known unknowns*) because they overcome the safe boundaries of the systems themselves, so that "the system produces information that does not exist in the environment but only has correlates out there" (Luhmann, 2002, p. 122). So, even "normal" irritations go beyond the specialists' field of knowledge and, consequently, from existing models of reality. Then, the most unexpected thing is the one that we cannot even imagine to foresee (Hill, 2012, p. 28): therefore, irritations such as the pandemic will be much more intense (indeed, they are

unknown unknowns), and will provoke even more unpredictable cascade irritations between the systems – as exemplified by the clashes between remote-working and the housing system in the pandemic. Furthermore, in an undefined future, from the medical research system (which is part of the *environment* of the *three-systems' system*), a vaccine could come out, invalidating all those projects so carefully arranged: because they were, indeed, nothing more than models.

Now, both the nostalgic and the revolutionary attitudes aroused by the pandemic persist in proposing models – either educated views of the present or brand-new ones – pushing the modelling approach to its limit on the base of the panic. By this way, they prophetically raise expectations toward *ontologically false futures*, relying on a pseudo-scientific approach which cannot fit the continuous happening of unexpected. Consequently, the expectations will only be disappointed, because the future (or better say *the present of the future*, i. e. the actual state of things in the future) will be inevitably different from its model – which is *a future of a present* (Luhmann, 1996; p. 51). Even when considering all the known systems, unexpected will continue to be there, outside all the distinctions. And from there, it will influence the contingency, invalidating plans and project just like it happened to the admirable, but useless, Kutuzov's dispositions for the Russian army in War and Peace (Tolstoy, 2010, p. 1069). If projects continue to propose prescriptive models, unexpected will continue to be nothing but a problem and a flaw of the project, instead of its natural premise.

3. From modelling to orienting

It could seem that unexpected, being a "natural premise to all projects", could just be suffered: for exploiting it, we definitely need to change our way of design, *outgoing* the boundaries of model-making (Turkle, 2009, p. 90). Indeed, the main consequence of the iteration of irritations is that the whole process has a radically contingent nature (Deregibus, 2020a). This state is inconsistent with the (predominant) idea of modelling the future, as the failed future-city models show: but at the same time, it can become a critical resource for the project. In fact, unexpected is the most evident symptom of what François Jullien (2004, p. VII) called the "*potential*" intrinsic to the situation. Among all the possibilities (all the possible *futures of the present*), the potential is the evolution that seems to be the most favourable, as the contingency seemingly shows a *propensity* toward it (*ibid*, p. 16). Interestingly, in prescriptive models, the futures of the present can be evaluated as positive or negative on the base of their adherence to the model itself. This is obvious, as the traditional way of design *opposes* the project to the events, trying to force them to become consistent with it: for example, by trying to convince the others (i. e. the client or public opinion) of the goodness and beauty of the project, or to find the normative way for making it real. Quite the opposite, the propensity is free from any moral or qualitative character: it is the best *future of the present* just because it has the highest possibility to became *a present of the future*, and *that* is its positive quality. This (plausible) propensity may change at any moment, so the project, too, must evolve, reducing the irritations of the system as much as possible. Thus, exploiting the potential emerging at any moment requires to *continuously* adapt the project (De Rossi and Deregibus, 2020), using the unexpected changes *for* and *with* it (Hill, 2012; p. 25), instead of suffering them. Therefore, for exploiting the potential, we need to overcome the limitation of modelling, or rather, to use models exclusively for their *contingent* usefulness (Deregibus, 2020a), avoiding any prescriptive lust.

Moreover, as unexpected involves both the designer and the other actors, it is possible to imagine that adapting the project may *reinforce* the project (for the designer) precisely by embed-

ding the unexpected as soon as possible, thus being always ahead of others. A continuous move up which would minimise what Oki Enkichi called "waves", or the consequences of the frictions between the plan and the real. Then, the project may be continuously calibrated also for influencing the others, thus orienting the process toward a preferred result (Deregibus and Giustiniano, 2019). Hence, the *efficacy* of the project tends to a very peculiar idea of operational *efficiency* (Jullien, 2004, p. 120). The project then becomes a tactical tool for implementing subtle, yet effective actions (Chia, 2014) toward a result which should be *conjectured*, but not fixedly *decided* – and this requires to abstain from the compulsive fascination that all architects have for their own proposals. This is especially true for complex transformations of urban space or similar, where many actors are stakeholders, and the architectural proposals risk to be reduced to their aesthetic character (De Rossi & Deregibus, 2020) – which is essential, but unable to orient the whole process, as too many examples clearly show. Quite the opposite, an adaptive project permits to sense the evolution of the contingency by a continuous orientation of the actors and factors influencing it, so that the future it will produce will be *ontologically unexpected, yet natural*.

Conclusions

Going beyond predictive illusions asks for a considerable change in architectural design, requiring to turn the step-driven traditional project into a continuous tactical practice. It's quite a new approach that enhances the strategic potentiality of architectural design: or rather, its (potential) ability to orient processes by working on space. The possible reward of such change is the capability of greatly influencing transformations, finally stopping the typical lamenting of architects – «they modified my wonderful project!» – and turning the strongest (and invincible) enemy of the project – the unexpected – into its strongest ally.

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A BOOK OF *A*RCHITECTURE. *A*RT. PHILOSOPHY *A*ND URB*A*N STUDIES TO NOURISH THE URB*A*N BODY.

"Urban Corporis Unexpected", through different contributions, deals with the changing reality brought by the Sars-Cov2 pandemic. The book presents a series of essays, pointing out different perspectives upon dynamics and relation caused by this situation, underlining how the isolation period has affected both the domestic and the urban sphere, shaping a multifaced interpretation of the changed lives, spaces and routines.