

## Rethinking the Dimension of Proximity

Space of proximity is a concept that today is acquiring a renewed importance in spatial design practices. This relevance is underlined by at least two phenomenon: in urban contexts characterized by mature economies we can see the emergence of forms of inhabiting characterized by two extreme dimensions: a wide range of large-scale movements, linked to work and leisure practices (weakening of the intermediate dimension of the medium range scale movements). the emergence of a demand of comfort for an horizon of proximity corresponding to an area where you try to export some domestic practices. The space around the house has an unfamiliar dimension but different expectations starts to be required for it. Thomas Sieverts, speaking of the Zwischenstadt, complains about the lack of hospitality of open space, outside the house the inhabitant has no choice, no meaningful destination is accessible on foot. Outside is either the desert, or an hard environment, full of obstacles and totally discouraging from walking. These conditions describe in a critical sense the actual condition of the notion of proximity. Different expectations of comfort and wellbeing begin to emerge for these smaller scale spaces. Also because of these phenomenon: improvement of soft mobility, improvement of connection of soft mobility to public transports; reduction of movements/displacements of people and goods; "0 km market" models of distribution of goods, namely and services; re-orientation of big commercial distribution with the multiplicity of smaller selling units and the invention of new typologies, offering a large heterogeneous choice of material goods and immaterial services. lack of residential mobility, but growing professional mobility; an extending commuter culture and elaboration of politics of urban densification; increasing associative networks.

All these conditions re-describes the notion of proximity as a space of interaction of objective quality of spaces and mental desires and projections of the inhabitants, a double condition not considered by current urban design practices.

If the modern project first intended the theme of proximity within the context of the representation of an ordered structure of the territory (the model of n. u.), and then as a concept, antithetical to the first, characterized by an independence between spatial configuration of the city and reticular practices (i.e. the criticisms formulated within the Team X), actual conditions requires a theoretical and instrumental renewal.

Today we must try to re-think the notion of proximity considering, on one side, the practice of inhabiting as something that goes beyond the dimension of the house and expanded to the scale of "part of a town"; on the other, observing the obscillation of the dimensions of public/intimate in the inhabiting spaces; reconsidering, in the end, the category of routine. This attempt is carried out through a sampling process in Geneva (different squares of 1 km side identified in the city fabric), trying to define general theoretical themes about proximity spaces comfort-qualities and desing themes. In Geneva weren't chosen central areas or extreme peripheral sotuations since they're too symbolically characterized, but intermediate areas. The hypothesis is that a new attitude toward the design of proximity spaces can avoid the construction of "modern places of poverty".

Three areas of reflection. The outputs of this research on Geneva can be grouped according to three areas of inquiry: Dwelling, Formation and Atmosphere. Dwelling refers directly to a survey of the relationship between space and body size and the ways in which inhabitants use space. According to De Certeau, the search for comfort by a city's inhabitants might be described as a tactic<sup>1</sup> that re-writes space and re-combines materials, customary rules and codes – as the capacity of a subject to utilize the folds and furrows of spatial and social orders, re-construing them to personal advantage. It is taking possession of a topographic system, appropriating and defending the "given". In this "comment from below" on the features of an urban landscape, the inhabitant focuses only on some of the conditions present in the urban field, leaving others in a state of inertia.

An example of this first area of inquiry is the theme of Friction. Residential spaces in the Libellules quarter are marked by the presence of two large housing complexes, separated by a fabric of smaller dwellings. In our observations we have detected a tendency, on the part of some of those living in the large complexes, to move from one complex to the other and back again to use open spaces and their facilities – sometimes to avoid direct contact with the immediate surroundings. As for the routes taken to traverse the quarter, we can observe a preference for slow walking, attentive to the elements that connote the landscape traversed. There are vegetal outgrowths and single objects – signs, entrances, porticoes of various kinds – to attract attention, thus slowing the pace of the walker. This can be viewed in terms of friction<sup>2</sup>, meaning a resistance to movement produced

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<sup>1</sup> On this topic, see: Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien, 1. Arts de faire et 2. Habiter, cuisiner*, Gallimard, Paris, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> This theme has been developed by students Fanny Christinaz and Christophe Mattar.

between two systems in contact. The slowing of pace is an indicator of ease, and from reports given by the inhabitants, we gather that it is closely linked to feelings of security: a “slow” space is controlled and safe, unlike a space that one would traverse “quickly” – the case for nearby industrial areas.

Formation addresses both the form and the movement giving rise to the form as part of the generative processes by which form is structured. When thinking of urban comfort in terms of formation, we accentuate its spatial character, its dependency on a particular “infrastructure” or spatial palimpsest<sup>3</sup>. Attention to form is one of the features of a particular period in architectural research – the period from the mid 1950s to the early 1970s. Scholars in this period adopted a critical standpoint in relation to modernist urban design, seen as too remote from contextual values and the elements and formal arrangements of permanence that characterize that context<sup>4</sup>.

An example of the second area of inquiry is the theme of Archipelago. In Vernier it is possible to describe comfort as a discontinuous condition, exploring it in terms of the notion of an archipelago<sup>5</sup>, meaning a group of islands of differing character. The ribbon of urban fabric running along the hill crest, with a vale on either side, includes more dense areas with a special, picturesque, somewhat intimate or semi medieval atmosphere – semi-public spaces, access conditioned by form, symbolically connoted by the presence of materials, surfaces and signs that inspire us to imagine them in such terms. In opposition, one can equally pick out places of more extrovert character, framing views and distant horizons and signified by the presence of elements such as especially imposing trees. The second group tallies with breaks in the built fabric, where one can explore conditions of tranquility and release. Together, the two different types of “island” describe a comfortable urban sector, in that they offer opposing yet complimentary situations. The image of the archipelago accentuates the micro-reticular nature of comfort, something dispersed yet connected, a phenomenon that cannot be activated within a continuous configuration.

Atmosphere qualifies urban space synesthetically according to ambient conditions; in this case, comfort is defined according to an “immersive” practice in which urban landscape is regarded experimentally as an envelope.

The notion of atmosphere defines comfort as an “immersive practice” in which urban landscape is explored as an envelope endowed with intrinsic environmental and climatic features. Experience of the atmosphere of a place is in a sense “beyond the measure”, a thing that cannot be rendered using traditional representations contrasting physical space with lived space. As Gernot Böhme has said<sup>6</sup>, atmospheres are intermediate phenomena, interstitial between subject and object, situated between the psychic interior and the environmental exterior spheres. They are tied to given environmental qualities and relatively independent of the inner life of a subject. Atmosphere is a spatialized, supra-personal<sup>7</sup> sensation that resists attachment to solid, circumscribed or discrete elements, but has a connection with situations that possess a meaning of their own. The process is akin to qualifying the “surplus” in relation to a place, the difference that lies behind a social or cultural segmentation of space. To render this contextual relationship or perceptual, situational attachment requires us to pay attention to the forms of mutation and variation in atmospherical performance.

An example of the third area of inquiry is the theme of domesticity. This concept is an invention of the bourgeoisie, something traditionally associated with family values and family spaces, their intimacy and their symbols of hearth and heritage<sup>8</sup>. But through observation of the morphologies and usages of the furnished central space at Le Lignon, framed by its residential megastructure, we have been able to pinpoint comfort features more properly belonging to a domestic space. Residents tend to occupy the services and open spaces in the center by exporting behaviors more commonly found in the home, such as studying or resting, perhaps in

<sup>3</sup> On the idea of cities and countryside as palimpsest, see: André Corboz, *Le territoire comme palimpseste*, “Diogenes”, 121, Jan-Mar 1983, p. 14-35.

<sup>4</sup> The main examples in Italy are the “operante storia urbana” by Saverio Muratori; Aldo Rossi’s scientific approach; Carlo Aymonino’s interest in urban phenomena and Vittorio Gregotti’s architecture of the countryside. Alongside these, we can consider the ideas of permanence in Pierre Lavedan and themes of duration and evolution in the work of Marcel Poète.

<sup>5</sup> This theme has been developed by students Delphine Quach and Marwen Feriani.

<sup>6</sup> «Atmospheres are clearly neither states of a subject nor qualities of an object. [...] This means therefore that they are somewhere *between* subject and object. They are not relational but rather the relation itself». Gernot Böhme, ed. Tonino Griffero, *Atmosfera, estasi, messe in scena. L'estetica come teoria generale della percezione*, Marinotti, Milan 2010, p. 92 (Originally published as Gernot Böhme, *Asthetik: Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*, Wilhelm Fink, Munich, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Thinking in terms of atmospheres challenges the idea of place as reservoir of external objects serving as a counterpoint to an aspatial, personal interior dimension. On this idea, and on overcoming the concept of atmosphere as a vague concept tied in with a primarily personal realm, see: Tonino Griffero, *Atmosferologia. Estetica degli spazi emozionali*, Laterza, Bari, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> According to Walter Benjamin, living space first became distinct from work space at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. See Christopher Reed (ed.), *Not at Home. The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1996. p. 7.

corresponding attire. The state of privacy is here transformed into a state of intimacy<sup>9</sup>; looking becomes more introverted. The ground and the volumes housing the shopping center, school, church, sports club, leisure center, car park and garden, are modelled using a technique reminiscent of Loos' Raumplan<sup>10</sup>, the result resembling an interior composed of different degrees of intimacy. Here one can experience different situations and atmospheric densities, defined by surface materials (mainly asphalt and grass), different kinds of artificial lighting and the transit of the sun. The central court is used in different ways at different times of day, in the same way that one uses the interior spaces of a dwelling. In the morning, outdoor areas close to the range and the two towers at the end are used; at midday, spaces further way, closer to the river bank are occupied; in the evening, it is again the surfaces adjoining the building and grassed areas. Space usage varies, in other words, according to fixed material factors (components and materials found in the central services) and variable climatic factors. At this scale, domesticity is not a homogeneous feature, but a discrete, intermittent condition, expressing itself in response to multiple use patterns and times of day.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Sennett, *Destructive Gemeinschaft*, in: Norman Birnbaum, (ed.), *Beyond the Crisis*, Oxford University Press, London, Oxford, New York, 1977. p. 187

<sup>10</sup> Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity. Architecture as Mass Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 1996, pp. 233-281.