The Body(Ies) and the Space(s)

A conversation between the Editorial Committee members

Alvado Bañón, Joaquín[1]; Bovati, Marco[2]; Devereux, Mike[3]; Kyriacou Petrou, Angela[4]; Moro, Anna[5]; Nobile, Maria Luna[6]; Villa, Daniele[7]

[1] Alicante University, Spain.
joaquin.alvado@ua.es

[2] Politecnico di Milano, Italy.
marco.bovati@polimi.it

[3] UWE Bristol, UK.
mike.devereux@uwe.ac.uk

[4] University of Nicosia, Cyprus.
petrou.an@unic.ac.cy

[5] Politecnico di Milano, Italy.
anna.moro@polimi.it

[6] Umeå University, Sweden.
maria.nobile@umu.se

[7] Politecnico di Milano, Italy.
daniele.villa@polimi.it

Invited Editorial

MB, AM, DV: The relationship between body and space in contemporary times challenges us, as architects and urban planners, on several crucial issues.

New technologies allow events and experiences to be displaced across different places and times; they connect distant people around activities that — until recently — required physical co-presence in the same space, and they enable the experience of places that were once accessible only through physical attendance.

Moreover, the lockdown experience has accelerated this virtualisation of the interaction between body, bodies, and space, pushing it to previously unimaginable limits.

The fundamental question that this scenario raises — and which seems crucial for consciously engaging with design practice today and for understanding how the complex body-space relationship currently influences our approach to studying and designing space — seems to be as follows:

Given the progressive virtualisation of human experiences, what remains fundamentally tied to the essential condition of physical co-presence within architectural and urban spaces, involving direct interactions among bodies and between bodies and their spatial environments?

In other terms, which bodily capacities remain uniquely bound to physical presence, which can be effectively transferred into virtual environments, and which inherently resist such displacement? What do we gain or lose in this shift?

JAB: I totally agree, but the body is a purely private system, one in which any decision would be valid simply because it is a decision. In this case, we would not have structural unspeakable but a total absence of structure, and the decision-making agent would make the decision under conditions of total omnipotence.

A private system is based on a decision. Since the decision is always made within a concrete context, what is decidable is not entirely free: what is considered a valid decision will have the limits of a structure that, in fact, is only particularly unstructured.

The singularity of the decision will tend toward the universality of the rule, and vice versa, because there will be a plurality of contents equally capable of assuming this function of universal representation.

In an opposite sense, the actual contexts limit structural undecidability and the spectrum of contents that can, at any given moment, play the role of universal representation. The action that develops is based on pure decision-making, without concern for the effects of our actions on others. It is a decision to propose action by and for the subject, and it is built on the accident as a context.

In this system, an instantaneous expansion of worldly experience occurs, with the consequent loss of identity and memory. There is an epochal change in the history of artistic perception. The aesthetics of simultaneity emerges a vision of reality that the reader must interpret and reformulate. The kaleidoscopic and changing vision of the city is the place to produce and modify this reality and transform it into an "intelligent" reality in a purely private space. We are confronted with a smooth, haptic, and close-up space that has a primary characteristic: the continuous variation of its orientations, references, and connections. Faced with this, we find ourselves faced with quick, somewhat thoughtless, and incontiguous decisions. These are actions and constructions made in the present, with no proposal for the future. The future is undecidable.

These systems are not defined by the volume of their envelope, nor are they measured in cubic meters. They are defined by their different densities, and their space does not depend on their envelope but on the atmosphere generated by the proposed action. The difference in density is what produces the change in the system, where the boundaries of passage are soft, and the transformations are gradual. SAME AS ARCHITECTURE nowadays. The qualification of these architectural spaces can be measured in "atmospheres," units that depend on humidity, ambient pressure, state of well-being, degree of bodily connection, heat... situations that, when ordered in some way, produce actions that are established in a non-forced and therefore natural manner. The architectural quality will depend on the adequacy of the atmosphere created and its flexibility to incorporate certain programs into sensitive entities. A contemporary architectural response in a private system can be established from these programmatic "wet macaroni" wrapped in flexible atmospheres. Light and heat intensity meshes, ambient humidity sprinklers, damp or extremely dry soils, the feel of disintegrated materials or a reflective opacity, porous organic matter, or heavy, imperishable metals. Layers that provide function and qualify spaces with new units of measurement.

The reality of the private system as the body is a unique and exclusive condition for the future. Being a condition of the future, we cannot approach its resolution through the transformation of its entity; rather, we must make it real through successive contributions to the idea of a "program," contributions from architectural, social, political, economic, and cultural aspects that work toward this condition of the future.

The underlying idea is always the reinvention of our own language..

AKP Taking into consideration the transformative power of our discipline, the significant question about the value of presence is about being present for change. Change and transformations take place through encounters; these encounters can be physical and situated, or they can be virtual encounters; the significance is that co-presence creates a forum for dialogue and action. Perhaps we need to redefine or recognise different instances and tools through which bodies can be attendant, invent new boundaries, design new forms of collectivity and improvise on alternative mechanisms of agency through such expanded modes of interaction.

MD I think you're right. Encounters are the opportunity to put into practice and apply our understanding of space and place. This journal and all involved with it are interested in education. And education alone, for its own sake, is no bad thing, but in architecture and urbanism, we develop our understanding of it by taking it beyond our mind and applying what we know. To simply rely on the virtual space (such as a virtual classroom) to do this is to deny our minds the richness of the experience we gain from interacting in real space and place. Here, I am not arguing that 'real' is better than 'virtual' (although I tend to think it is because it is more complex and intriguing) but rather that these days we need both. They are complementary, not mutually exclusive. MB, AM and DV ask at the top of this discussion: 'which bodily capacities remain uniquely bound to physical presence?' In reply to that, I say physical human-to-human contact does. That is what makes it unique. It requires space and place in which to flourish, and it is the role of architecture to provide such places. That then creates a special importance for architecture. The better the architecture, the better and richer the encounter that takes place is. The more potential that then has to develop our understanding and experience.

MLN The body/space relationship is defined and decoded through the use of our mind. A body in the space acts in different ways by consciously making decisions. The space defines the boundaries. The body understands those boundaries and decides how to make use of them. In their wonderful piece "How to Sit in an Uncomfortable Chair", Bruno Munari clearly reflects on the potential for our mind to interpret, decode and redefine these boundaries. And it is – as Angela is pointing out – a matter of how encounters have the power to change our interpretation of the discipline and give space to new forms of collectivity, both virtually and in the physical environment.

It is still important to admit that what remains fundamentally anchored to the discipline of architecture and urban study is the reading of the place; this could be substituted (or made differently) by the use of technology and data analysis, but will never have the same involvement, when talking about emotions, body memory, reading through senses, or through emotions. We all know what it means to fall in love with a place, to be able to walk through the sequence of rooms in Pompei houses, or just feel with closed eyes the power of the human domesticated nature of the Alhambra through the sound of the water and smell of jasmine, feel through the eyes the violence of the divided city in Nicosia, or just feel the contact with pure nature in the extreme conditions of the Nordic latitudes. That's what we call qualitative values, and it is definitely related to the word "atmosphere" mentioned by Joaquin.

The central question is probably more about what kind of experience, instead, the virtual environment can offer for us as architects... Mike, we never met in person; what would you answer?

MD Maria Luna, I look forward to meeting you in person. While Teams and Zoom, Google Drive, and OneDrive are tools that help us exchange ideas and thereby create new knowledge through, for example, this journal, they lack the immediacy of personal encounters. These technologies are intermediaries, so they themselves influence the encounter. Instead, I want to sit with you and compare our virtual meetings with the personal encounter. The formality of technology deprives us of the anecdotal and idiosyncratic; it diminishes the relaxed and casual yet informed discussion and the spontaneity of action that is possible when a space and place and all the characteristics that you mention are shared. With the virtual, we are constrained. Emotion is suppressed. You are Italian, so I imagine you are full of expressive emotion, but Teams and Zoom lose that in transmission, and Google and OneDrive lose it in translation. Of course, they have their place – the UoU journey is a great example of their benefit – they allow what would be otherwise impossible encounters to occur. Many of us and many of our students appreciate all the opportunities the UoU experience brings, but it becomes a full experience when it encounters space and place and when it acts upon their human experience through architectural intervention.