NOTES ON THE PROXEMICS OF THE 'NON PLACE-TIME'

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During the period of confinement due to the pandemic emergency, the overly abused definition of 'non place' introduced in 1992 by Marc Augé seems to have found an involuntary and unexpected actualization, composing itself with the specular notion here defined as 'non time'.

The space-time expansion due to the sudden absence of bodies in the urban space and to the forced alternation of the monochronic and the polychronic time is at the basis of the atypical urban experience lived in the weeks of domestic isolation, which has made evident even to the wider public how much the city is a complex multidimensional agglomeration where many intangible elements coexist with the material dimension of the city.

The notion of 'non place-time' is investigated through the analysis of the link between man, time and place and the reversal determined by the various space-time caesuras that occurred between people and between people and the collective scene of the city, as well as the definition of technological 'immediate' as an emerging co-constitutive process of personal experience and the environment.

INTRODUCTION

During the period of confinement due to the pandemic emergency, the all too abused definition of 'non place' introduced in 1992 by Marc Augé (Augé, 1992/1995) seems to have found an involuntary and unexpected actualization, composing itself with the specular notion here defined 'not time': the much recurring time suspended in which we have all been immersed, and of which we have somehow acquired full perception only in the slow phases of return to almost normality –and also the need to forge new synonyms dense with periphrasis is a sign of the conceptual inadequacy and of the progressive focus of problems.

The connection of two fields of investigation contributes to outline the framework of the discussion: on the one hand, the definition of the link between man and his built habitat, represented by the condensation of the immaterial dimensions of man's presence in the material characteristics of the city, according to a consolidated vision in urban studies that is linked today with some humanistic approaches to the knowledge of places –from the 'geophilosophy' of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1996) to the 'emotional geography' of Giuliana Bruno (2006)–, on the other hand, the definition of the physical and informational context of the 'infosphere', today described by the two continua mind-body and body-environment which involve refocusing the role of technological mediation as assumed in the period of confinement due to the pervasiveness of the digital.

This notion of 'non place-time' is closely reflected in the atypical urban experience we lived in the weeks of domestic confinement –and for reasons of methodological approach we will define the 'observation period' below– which is investigated through the analysis of the link between man, time and place and the reversal determined by the various space-time caesuras that took place between people first and then between people and the collective scene of the city, as well as the definition of technological 'immediation' as an emerging process co-constitutive of personal experience and environment (Tiainen, Aula, & Järviluoma, 2019).

Fig. 1 Massimo Uberti. (2020). *LOST* [neon and converters]. Naviglio della Martesana, Milan. Courtesy of ArtCityLab. Photograph by Fabrizio Stipari.

DEFINITIONS. TIME AND CHRONESTHESIA

Time is a fundamental dimension of everyday life, of which we perceive the passing and to which we adapt our behavior but it is also a particularly elusive dimension of our daily experiences, as it depends on many factors –age, the activities we carry out and emotions associated with them, cognition, culture– and in turn conditions them by relativizing the psychological time (Gobbis, 2020).

Furthermore, in the Western world, the concept of time for many centuries at the basis of intellectual and religious thought has been and still is in part linear, directional, progressive (Helman, 2005): a conception of time as a road or a tape that connects past and future, rigidly organized into quantifiable segments –years, months, days, hours, minutes–, which Edward Twitchell Hall defined as "monochronic time", as opposed to "polychronic time", which instead passes less linear and where life goes in a fluid and not so rigid flow as in clock's time (Hall, 1983, pp. 41-55). If the clock and the calendar have been among the main cultural

symbols of Western industrial society also as iconic symbols of the close relationship between time and work, our growing need for flexibility in the management of working times has in fact created the conditions for the substitution of polychronic time for monochronic time: in the emerging knowledge society the rigidly organized time necessary for the coordinated functioning of industrial society needs to be increasingly reconciled with polychronic time, more responsive to current lifestyles.

It is common and widespread empirical data, as well as shared scientific opinion, that the subjective perception and experience of time also depend on the type of activity that an individual performs –time seems to accelerate when we are involved in stimulating and pleasant activities– and that emotions affect on our experience of time, which is altered in both senses –it may seems accelerated when we are in fearful situations or slowed down in unpleasant or problematic ones– therefore, like the sensory one, our perception of time is also not truthful, but it is modulated by changes in

Fig. 2 Massimo Uberti. (2000). *Scrittoio* [neon and converters]. Courtesy of Massimo Uberti.

the environmental context. This widespread, even banal, observation does not yet seem to have found a univocal and complete scientific explanation of its deep mechanisms and, both in psychology and in neuroscience, there are different theoretical models and contradictory theories dealing with the new research area that investigate chronesthesia, such as the "awareness of subjective time" (Tulving, 2002, p. 313).

It is known, however, that the processes that lead us to estimate the duration of time are closely linked to the important relationship between time and psychological functions, especially as regards the orientation of the human being through the space-time *continuum*: we cannot analyze time without discussing space as well.

BODY AND SPACE

In *L'intervallo perduto* (Dorfles, 1989) the discourse on the performing arts enucleated and emphasized emptiness as a determining factor in the assumption of a sense of fullness, whether we are talking about the emptiness of the space where the movement of the human body takes place when dancing or of the physical phenomenon of sound that materializes the void of time in music.

In the urban and architectural dimension, on the contrary, the human body gives density to the spaces, making possible the measured perception of distances and allowing us to measure full volumes, above all through spontaneous comparisons of anthropometric proportion, as well as to orient ourselves in space.

"The human body becomes something else again. The human body in its being a complex organism, microscopic or macroscopic portion of the matter, has always been presented/represented as a medium between codes: between the individual and the place, both material and immaterial, that he inhabits; between the individual and the design of space, city, environment and territory; between the individual and

objects, products, interfaces, everyday environment; within the relation between individuals." (Balzani & Raco, 2020, p. 78). The sudden absence of the bodies in the urban space – forcibly lived in the period of observation– therefore implies the impossibility or at least the difficulty of orienting oneself in urban contexts, including family ones, which have suddenly become 'extraneous', where the etymology –'extraneous', deriving from extra 'outside of'– helps and designates "not belonging or proper to a thing; not intrinsic or essential, though attached; foreign" and "of external origin" (Online etymology dictionary, n.d; Lexico, n.d), underlining the lack of familiarity, disinterest, indifference.

Body, physicality and presence in the space-time *continuum* therefore emerge as powerful presuppositions of the sense of belonging to the place, in a relationship between individual, community and place that inextricably shapes and holds together individual and collective identities, mutually strengthening them (Bracconi, 2020).

Fig. 3 Massimo Uberti. (2001). *Stanza silente* [neon and converters]. Watou, Belgium. Courtesy of Massimo Uberti.
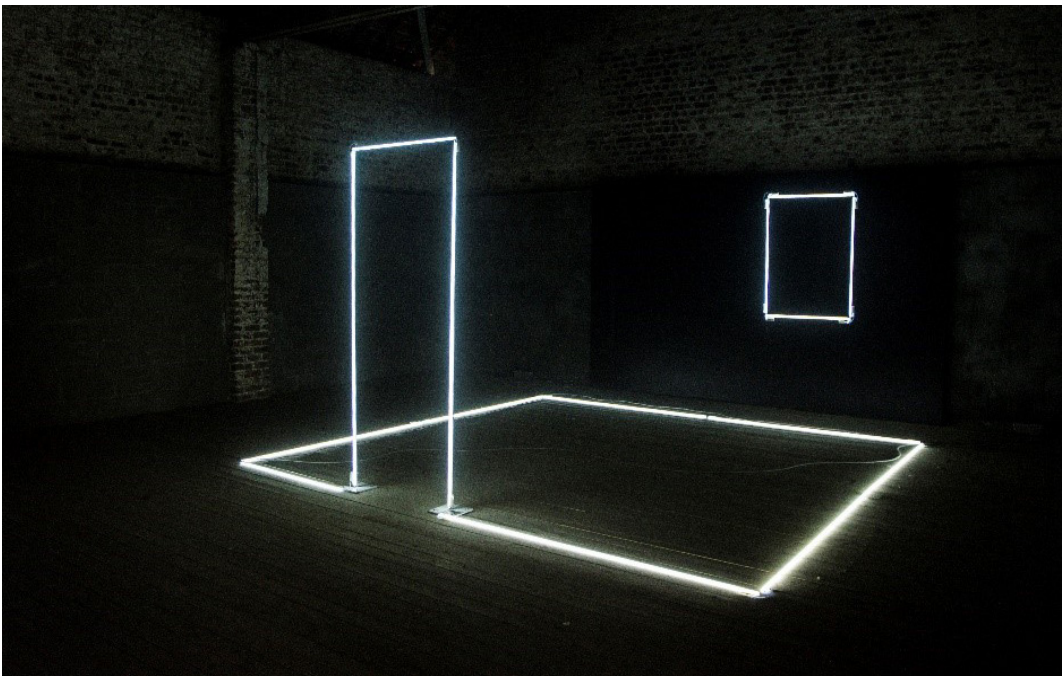
PUBLIC DOMAIN AND *CIVITAS*

The experience lived during the observation period has also shown to the wider public –not necessarily specialized in the comprehension of architectural and urban space– how much the city is a dense and complex multidimensional agglomeration and has highlighted the existence of many intangible elements which, like the material dimension of the city, act on us with such submerged power to seriously endanger, if not undermine, individual and collective well-being.

"With monuments, written documents and orderly associative organizations, it expanded –the city NDR– the reach of all human activities by prolonging them back and forth in time. With his storage facilities –buildings, crypts, archives, monuments, boards, books– it managed to transmit a complex culture from one generation to the next because was able to organize not only the material means but also the human agents necessary to transfer and expand this heredity." (Mumford, 1996, pp. 703-704)

The observation period, therefore, also was as a marker of urban vulnerability, suddenly explaining for everyone how close the relationship between man and city is, and how much the functions that take place there also have a physical impact on places and vice versa on their livability.

A sort of scalar continuity is established, in fact, in the relationships between the individual and his environment: first of all with his home, a relationship also represented by the two terms, on my reading of Martin Heidegger –because in his theory language is considered the authentic abode of being– (Heidegger, 1889/1976) not coincidentally in Italian language close also lexically, *abito* and *abitare* 'habit' and 'inhabit', and gradually up to reverberate in the urban environment, according to the still very current lesson of Edward Twitchell Hall –the use of space obeys cultural as well as physical elements– on the cultural regulation in the use of interpersonal and public space, whose reinterpretation today cannot than dealing with collective reactions appropriate to

the new painful ways of frequenting public space under social distancing rules (Hall, 1966/1996).

Public space, is the space of relationship and "space between things as a concrete space available to civil life, its needs, its wanderings" (Gregotti, 2016), represents the clot interface between the physicality of bodies and architecture and the intangibility of values where *urbs* and *civitas*, people and their identity are held together. The public spaces must therefore not be considered only as the resulting empty space between the full blocks of buildings, but constitute the scene where people meet and where broader social relationships can be generated, and as elements that transform residents from city users into inhabitants and are capable of transforming the surface of a square or a building aggregate into a complex space forming the townscape, as defined by Norberg-Schulz "the spaces where life occurs are places [...] a place is a space which has a distinct character. Since ancient times the genius loci, or spirit of place, has been recognized as the concrete reality man has to face and come to terms with in his daily life" (Norberg-Schulz, 1979, p. 5). The public domain, most of the part we can see in the city in our social life, is "the common ground where people carry out the functional and ritual activities that bond a community, wheter in the normal routines of daily life or in periodic festivities" (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1992, p. 11); the urban experience is well substantiated if there is a harmonious coexistence of material components –buildings and open spaces– and immaterial components –conditions of liveability– that provide for and favor the realization of the social environment, promoting orientation and identification, from which the attribution of meaning and belonging to that particular place develop. When the public space does not allow orientation and identification –due to its original physical characteristics or because it suddenly loses its human presence as it happened in the observation period– this attribution of meaning does not occur and the connective space is emptied, remaining relegated to the sole function of pure crossing of the city.

Fig. 4 Massimo Uberti. (2018). *Abitare. Palazzo Beccaguti*, Mantua. Courtesy of Massimo Uberti.

SPACE, PLACE AND ENVIRONMENT

This vision of the city as a system of material and immaterial systems that holds together people-centered and place-based approaches in an integrated cultural vision highlights the relationship and interdependence of people to their place, where the human being is an integral part of a settlement and inseparably linked to it. The sense of familiarity that binds the inhabitants of a place to each other

and to the context develops over time and brings together all the social dimensions of the life of a community and its culture. Every day, in fact, the city collects and condenses a cultural stratification of knowledge, traditions and rules that constitute it in a continuous, unique and irreplaceable way: a way to transmit and reflect cultural notions, associations and values on how a society thinks about and at the same time, which includes particular morphological and cultural characteristics that form the physiognomy of a place.

Every human action and behavior also constitutes a temporal layer represented by a material reality in the physical structure of the city. In other words, the urban image is the visual result of the overall material and immaterial components of the city, which reflects the diachronic way in which our cities have been experienced over time.

This stratification is particularly significant in historical contexts –all contexts– of the human environment with considerable historical, urban, architectural, social and aesthetic value that allow intangible assets, ideas, practices and values with such naturalness to constitute not only the physical scenario but create also the cultural identity of the inhabitants and is what produces 'the perceived uniqueness of a place', the specificity of each context that has the particular physiognomy of Genius Loci, expressed through its tangible and intangible elements and the result of a combination of physical characteristics of the place, of the activities that take place there, and of the meaning attributed to that place by the inhabitants.

The spirit of the city is a cloud of relationships, representations and actions, but also of smells and flavors: an emblematic case of this all-encompassing unity of the townscape is the evidence of how much, for example, even noise is integral and relevant component of the landscape itself and represents a constitutive factor of the identity of places. It is common experience that during the observation period it was almost difficult to identify the street where we have also lived for years –which became empty due to a lack

of people, activities, sounds and noises– with an overturning that even led us to value an environmental condition of noise, up to a few weeks earlier considered unwanted or neglected.

Understanding these layers and their reciprocal relationship is a crucial factor in understanding the city, perceiving its identity, understanding its physical and historical cultural specificity of places and its material and immaterial vulnerabilities. Understanding a place, its peculiar aspects, today cannot fail to pass through an integrated analysis of all its characteristics, the material, measurable, and connectable to the sense of sight, but also to the other senses (Puma, 2018; Puma, 2019b; Migliorati, 2020).

Among the most significant referring theories and methodologies it is here useful to mention the approach of 'geophilosophy', a term used for the first time in the 1990s by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1996), which focused on the already growing homologation of the globalized world in

Fig. 5 Massimo Uberti. (2014). *Abitare* [neon and converters]. *Università Bocconi*, Milan. Courtesy of Massimo Uberti.
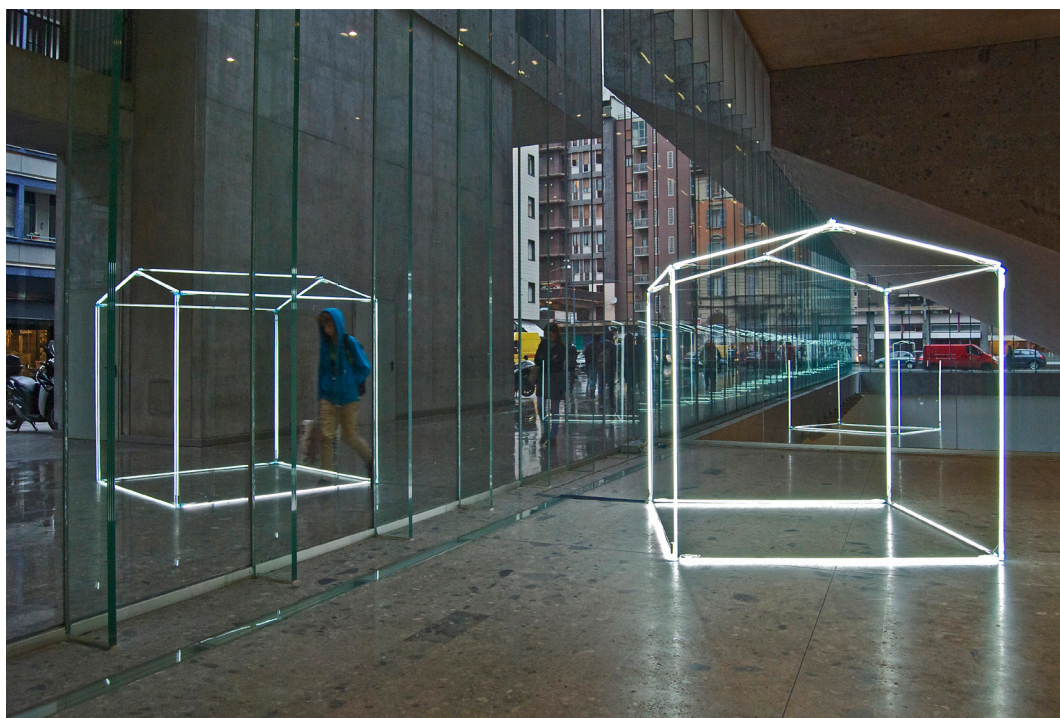
order to stem the loss of the identity heritage of the places and of the social and anthropological means themselves.

The sensorial domain in the study and design of architectural and urban environments is at the center of various experiences based on a multisensory approach to the built environment, which broaden the multidisciplinary view of places by integrating human and technological sciences, as in the *Laboratoire AAU-Ambiances Architectures Urbanités*, born in 1998 and located between Nantes and Grenoble. The recent *Smell of heritage* program is also part of this trend, in which Cecilia Bembibre introduces the sense of smell among the cognitive elements of historical places, and the even more rooted and consistent experiences on the soundscape, among which we only mention here the progenitor *World Soundscape Project*, set up by Raymond Murray Schafer in the 1970s, and the activity of the *Cartophonie* laboratory in Grenoble and of the the London Sound Survey.

IMPLICATIONS. THE MIND-BODY *CONTINUUM*

Listening, touching, feeling the gestures of living, however, today means representing the corporeality of people and communities both in the physical places and in the infosphere of the so-called fourth revolution. Since what is real is informational and vice versa, the infosphere is the fluid 'onlife' environment mixing our analogue and digital daily life where it is no longer possible to separate and discern between online and offline life (Floridi, 2017). In this *continuum* mind and body, therefore, must be thought of in a sort of monism based on different informational configurations, a state that the physicist John Archibald Wheeler summarizes in "it from bit" (Wheeler, 1990).

The presumed dichotomy between the physical dimension of the body and the mental one of the digital world must take into account the fact that the 'networked body' also exists, and this reconfigures the recombined multisensory perception in terms of 'digital proximity': if in the digital world two senses

prevail on the others, immersive technologies call into question the gnoseological primacy of sight in Western culture (De Kerckhove & de Almeida, 2014) by involving the whole body in remodeling spatial and temporal distances of the body in real time in the virtual environment. This means that ICTs have become anthropological and social actors on which we structurally depend, at least in terms of effective and efficient management of the information life cycle.

On the one hand the sudden and totalizing projection in the virtual world lived in the period of observation has limited and mortified the individual and collective physicality in public places, but it has also condensed on itself a resilient response heavily entrusted to technology, which has also found a glue in the mixed and pervasive onlife of the infosphere and has made it possible to cushion the absence of the body and better manage the forced passage from monochronic to polychronic time.

Fig. 6 Massimo Uberti. (2019). *Loved space* [neon and converters]. Milan. Courtesy of ArtCityLab. Photograph by Fabrizio Stipari.

THE BODY-ENVIRONMENT *CONTINUUM*

The mind-body *continuum* in the infosphere described above joins the one outlined in the paragraph *Public domain and* civitas, relating to the *continuum* between body and environment, closely derived from urban studies. In this sense, other different lines of research also go, which with a humanistic approach intertwine media and cultural studies, also highlighting the continuity between body and environment in this perspective, where they are seen as not separate dimensions of reality, but rather as constituting a second *continuum* defined from 'immediation' (Tiainen, 2020, p. 33). In this theoretical line, the reconsideration of human subjects in environmental and situational relationships becomes an attempt "to rethink mediation –between man and environment, NdR– beyond the idea that mediation events take place between preformed entities, like when technological devices are thought as 'mediating' the experience of environments to human 'users' of those technologies [...] to suggest that there is not first a body, then a world, but a worlding through which bodyings emerge" (Tiainen, 2020). If we assume the relationship between environments, technology and sensory experience as fundamentally co-constitutive and dictated by mutually compositional ways the concept of device as medium also assumes another adjective mean clearly exemplified by the IOT: the spread of the IOT realizes connection between things and induces a real evolutionary leap –expressed by the addition to the communication between people and to that between man and machine the communication between objects– which therefore also modifies the meaning of mediation understood as a technical form capable of modulating the physical distance.

What status does the mediating device between man and external reality assume when it is supplanted by a reality that independently makes objects communicate with each other? There are at least two effects that can be reported as a first approximation. On the one hand, the medium multiplies and spreads in an environment where many objects have also become media, therefore not as *altro da sé* but as an active

Fig. 7 Massimo Uberti. (2018).
Città Ideale [neon and converters].
Palazzo Ducale, Mantua.
Courtesy of Massimo Uberti.
Photograph by Paolo Bernini.

extension of man in the external world accessible most of the time by an image that becomes an interface (Puma, 2019a). On the other hand, in this substantial continuity between the person and the environment, the need for humanization and personalization of the virtual proxemics emerges, expressed by the so-called affective computer science which for some time has committed many efforts in the direction of the 'animation' of objects, starting with robots, and the activation and involvement of emotions in technology.

CONCLUSIONS

As argued above, the two ontologically constitutive dimensions of human existence, space and time, are linked in such a close union as to create a general imbalance even when they are individually misaligned. The strong discontinuity

in the chronesthesia experienced by many people in the observation period cannot therefore be associated only with the uncoordinated alternation of monochronic and polychronic time but needs to be framed in the broadest relations of proximity between body and environment, in all the scales that configure the human habitat, from the domestic dimension to urban spaces. Proximity relationships during the observation period underwent a reversal that took place in our daily physical experience of the city, where the suddenly denied human presence also entailed the need to readjust our perception of distance –understood as the measure of physical emptiness– anchoring it only to the urban and architectural landmarks –the human figure is also a measuring element of space: in the urban environment it is the fullness of bodies that gives meaning to the void.

The human body, in fact, substantiates the space both in physical terms and in behavioral and anthropological terms in a process so fluid and continuous as to be natural and unnoticed, therefore when the sudden and totalizing projection in the digital world has exalted the negation of physicality it has also cracked the space-time continuity of our experience of modern flaneurs, engaged in the constant drift of subjective mapping the city. In the prolongation, then, of a distorted situation, this also negatively influenced the individual and collective identity represented materially by the city as a palimpsest and stratification of intangible relationships between people and the community scene in the immediation of the two continua mind-body and body-environment previously described.

The sudden silence of the cities, the sudden re-emergence of space as an hidden dimension and interval 'no longer lost' then gradually expanded into the condition defined here as the 'non place-time', at the base of which could be the cracks and space-temporals caesuras of the context as have been felt by many people in the period of observation but especially after the resumption of the usual frequentation and immersion in the city.

Fig. 8 Massimo Uberti. (2020).
Spazio Amato [neon and converter].
WWF Oasi, Lago di Burano.
Courtesy of Yhpermaremma.

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"Seeing comes before words" (John Berger, *Ways of seeing*, 1988).
The contribution consists of a double text, verbal and visual, independent but intertwined: the author thanks Massimo Uberti for having wanted to choose the proposed verbal text, adopting it as illustration of his own autonomous visual text.
If the verbal text has the deceptive pretense to denote, to comprise objectively the reality, images impose processes of interpretation and reveal the figurative dimension of meaning, thus the narration grows in the encounter between text and images, in which one does not make sense without the others, particularly significant in the two recent public art projects, *LOST* and *Loved space*.

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