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**Bodies and spaces in the public city.  
Towards a new proxemics?**

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Abstract

The pandemic outbreak has put in crisis some values of the contemporary metropolis that seemed to have been achieved: the trend to urban concentration and the widely shared equation between density and sustainability, the speed and ease of physical mobility, the idea of space sharing, and more generally all sharing economies. Beyond the rhetoric of a return to "normality", it is necessary to rethink even the structure of our cities by enhancing the positive acquisitions of modernity and some experiences prematurely discarded - proxemics, the city as a place of the relationship between bodies and spaces, the resumption of reflection on public space as a shared value of *civitas*.

## Keywords

Urban space — Proxemics — Quality of life — Public city — Urban experience

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The 2020 global pandemic has helped us to understand that the project should resume some interrupted paths: the studies on proxemics and perception of space in relation to the distance between subjects, the reflection on the issue of space (public, common, shared), the need to start again from the *bodies in space* rather than from the *city as a body*, a sick organism in need of regeneration.

In terms of dwelling, the "coronavirus" contingency has shown how social inequality is much more evident in the domestic context, in the private spaces of our homes: violated by a constant remote connection with the outside world (in turn represented by other private spaces), they showed us, crudely, not only the differences linked to economic, technological and housing conditions, but a generalized condition of "alienation".

I do not think that the discouraging phase of lockdown has helped us to make up for a lost time or to look at the world with more sensitive eyes on the little things in life, but rather it has produced an "estrangement" of the domestic dimension, in the sense of the term that Bertolt Brecht used about the theater, which "alienated", problematizing it, everyday life, and making its "background" emerge.<sup>1</sup> The Covid-19, forcibly relegating us to our homes, made us deal, even brutally, with our family role, with living within a few square meters, with being parents or being single; perhaps it made us look, with more truth, at the meaning of our humanity. The habits of life have been upset, losing their unreflective and spontaneous dimension, even in the few occasions of experience of urban space. Every action, even the most common and daily (breathing, coughing, walking, entering a café) has become an act that must be "observed". The distrust and suspicion, the feeling of being shunned, seeing a person change sidewalk as we

**Fig. 1**

Piazza di Spagna, Rome, June 15, 2020

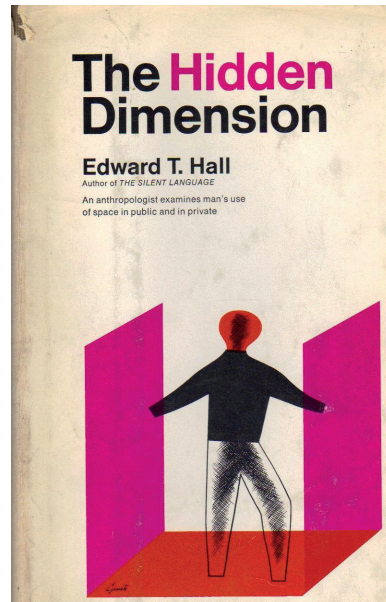


pass, have become everyday experiences that have made us feel, perhaps for the first time, the condition of being foreign bodies in public space, no longer “lived bodies” in Böhme’s meaning. In the idea of space that can never be defined in the absence of a subject that inhabits it, outside the interaction between bodies and the “atmospheres” to which they are subjected; (Böhme 2001) or that otherwise reproduces scenarios similar to those outlined by Foucault’s *biopolitics*.

### Body techniques

The physical distancing between people imposed during lockdown has made the encounter among persons mainly focused on the gaze, «and the window onto “within” is our eyes. These days, when you meet someone close to you (or even a stranger) and maintain a proper distance, a deep look into the other’s eyes can disclose more than an intimate touch» (Žižek 2020). This return to perception, and the (mainly) visual relationship, in which “seeing” regains the privileged position it had always held in Western aesthetics, once again procures a separation between percipient

**Fig. 2**  
Safe travels



**Fig. 3**  
Edward T. Hall, *The hidden dimension*, Garden City, N.Y. 1966

subject and perceived object (space), but also between subjects interacting with each other in space.

The basic principle of a discipline, almost abandoned in recent years but rather in vogue in the 60s and 70s, comes back to the fore: *proxemics*,<sup>2</sup> i.e. the study of the perception of space by human beings and how the distances that individuals keep between them influence interpersonal relationships and the spatial organization of places. It is therefore a question of the use made of the space and the attitude of the body, but also of the gaze, the voice, and everything that influences perception. The assimilation of proxemics to a sort of “human ethology”, especially in the studies of socio-biology,<sup>3</sup> did not do a good service to this discipline in the following years. If ethology mainly concerns instinct-driven behaviors, proxemics refers to learned behaviors, cultural processes linked to our biography, age, cultural and geographical context.

At the same time, in underestimating the relationship between space and body, we have perhaps misunderstood the idea of the body itself, neglecting for example its “techniques”. Marcel Mauss in *Les techniques du corps* (1936), reminding us that each proper technique has its form, claimed that the mistake was to have thought that techniques existed only in the presence of instruments. Before the techniques based on instruments, there is the whole of the body techniques, understood as “effective traditional act”. In this sense «the body is the first and most natural of instruments» (Mauss 1965).





**Fig. 4**  
Physical spacing in a street market in Kalaw, Myanmar

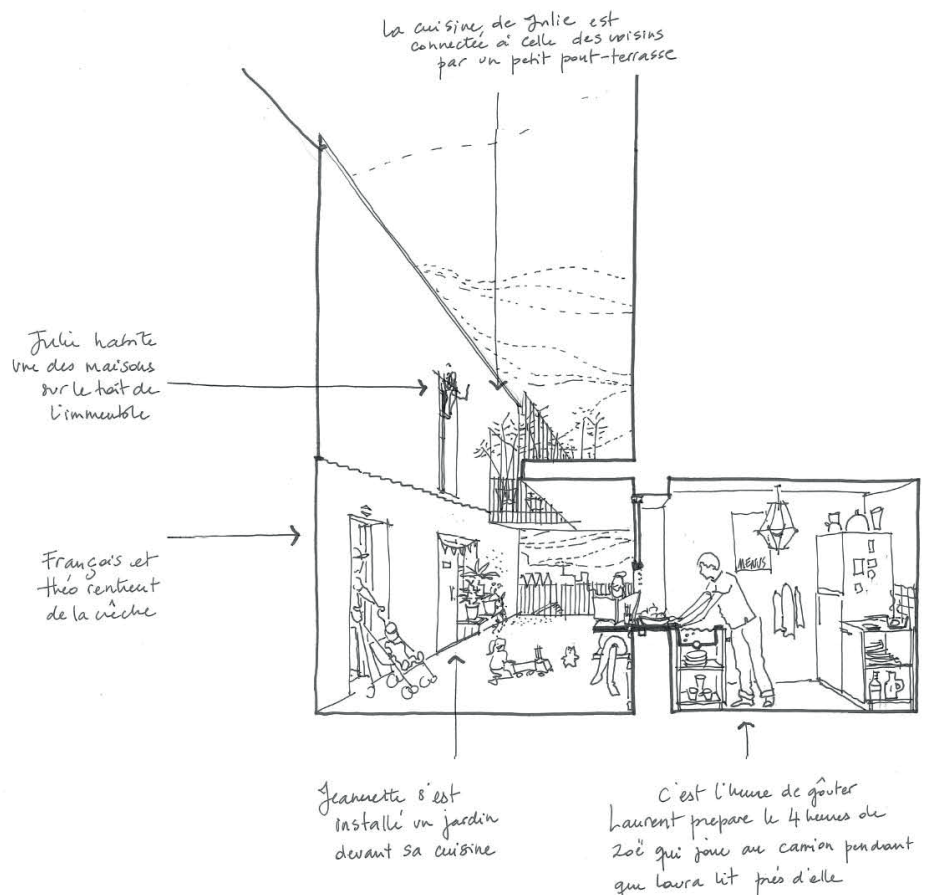
### Scenarios and perspectives

At this point, the design themes for architects appear very evident: on the scale of private living, there is a need to leave great organizational freedom of space, even going beyond the rhetoric of flexibility and concentrating action on co-responsibility of choices by users up to non-allocation of space,<sup>4</sup> technological and network efficiency, temporary division of spaces, recovery of privacy in the home even in the presence of remote school and working.<sup>5</sup>

On the urban and public space level, the Covid-19 affair, in fact, in the unthinkable and sudden transformation of our lives, has also highlighted – as a contrasting liquid – processes that have long been recordable in the health condition of the city's body. The issues of physical distancing and social containment had been growing in importance and interest in recent years, already marking a first decisive advance in the measures that followed the terrorist attacks at the beginning of the millennium (Foucault 2007). On the other hand, issues of control and security can be considered fundamental aspects of the city since the beginning of Modernity (Berman 1985), the other side of the coin from the idea of the city as a place of the conquest of anonymity and freedom, in that mixture of detachment and inebriation of urban life that will accompany a few decades later Benjamin's *flâneur* or Baudelaire's *dandy*.

But it is the very idea of a contemporary metropolis, in its high-density global dimension, that is questioned in this contingency. Shortly the conflict between public health and climate will be one of the crucial elements on which the project of cities will focus, which in the long term will most likely return to being increasingly inhabited, compact and promiscuous. But at the moment the explosion of the pandemic has put into a crisis some values that seemed unquestionable: the trend towards urban densification and the widely shared equation between density and sustainability, the speed and ease of moving physically in the city (and on the planet), the idea of sharing space, and more generally all sharing economies. Should we re-discuss the values of the contemporary city or try to identify which, nevertheless, are non-negotiable?

The restrictions to free movement imposed by the emergency in the first months of 2020 have therefore shown, on a private level, that social inequality is blatant at home; on a public level, that the urban experience in the future will assume different qualities (also atmospheric and “affecti-

**Fig. 5**

Relationship between private and communal spaces in the Lo-Mon + project for 36 accommodations in Montreuil, France

ve”) when the very idea of *urbanity*<sup>6</sup> – that extraordinary mix of proximity and social complexity, stratification of activities and uses, mixtures, and conflicts – has suddenly collapsed.

The containment measures then revealed how much surface area cars occupy in “normal” conditions, and how much public space needs to “make room”, rebalancing the percentage between pedestrians, parking spaces, and roadways, reconfiguring the road section or diversifying it in favor of cycling.<sup>7</sup> More generally, by refuting the rhetoric of the return to “normality”, a radical rethinking of the very functioning of our cities now seems more necessary than ever, even starting from ideas that are not so radical (but manageable) as in the recent strategy for the *Ville du quart d’heure*,<sup>8</sup> which attempts to reconcile the limitation of travel and consumption, physical activity, and reduction of air pollution.

On the one hand, this perspective powerfully brings into the game the public city, the suburbs of the metropolis, where the availability of surface area, the distance between houses, and the reserve of *standard* square meters make it possible to foreshadow possible scenarios, new opportunities for designing public space. At that time the idea, specifically modern, of segregation of activities and separation of pedestrian and vehicular flows – rejected by generations of architects – could now have a new appeal. On the other hand, this direction, perhaps also looking at past experiences (INA-Casa, the Amsterdam playgrounds in the immediate post-war period), will lead architects to experiment (again) on the intermediate dimension between the urban and domestic scale (the neighborhood) and on the intermediate thresholds between public and private, which will necessarily – proxemically – be more “dilated”. And in this regained space<sup>9</sup> new (or renewed) forms of relationship, sociality, and sharing will hopefully take place.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *estrangement* effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) taken up by Brecht from the Russian formalists, led the actor to express together with the acting action the possibility of another action that is not performed. It is the technique that produces the opposite effect of the identification. And it corresponds, in philosophy, to the (Socratic) principle of refuting traditional answers to the questions of man and life. (Rocco Ronchi, *Brecht. Introduzione alla filosofia*, et al., Milano 2013).

<sup>2</sup> The term *proxemics* is coined in English by the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall at the end of the 1960s: from the Latin *proximus* (next) and the Greek *séma* (sign). Proxemics is a discipline that studies what personal and social space is and how man perceives it. Edward T. Hall, *The hidden dimension*, Garden City, N.Y. 1966.

<sup>3</sup> Consider for example the popular works of the English zoologist Desmond Morris, from *The Human Zoo* (1969) to *People watching* (2002).

<sup>4</sup> As stated by the architects in the *Unité(s) Experimental Housing* project in Dijon (Sophie Delhay architecture, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Only in Italy has it been possible to translate distance working into *smart working*, effectively equating the terms *smart* and *online*. Abroad more correctly we speak of working from home, often contracted in the acronym WFH.

<sup>6</sup> New York (2001), Madrid (2004), Londra (2005).

<sup>7</sup> As in the document *Milan 2020. Adaptation strategy*, elaborated in May 2020 by the Municipality of Milan in an open forum to the contributions of the inhabitants.

<sup>8</sup> The proposal, submitted by the Socialist Mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo, was soon taken up by many other European cities.

<sup>9</sup> Such as co-managed common areas, condominium premises, outdoor areas about the apartments, “neighborhood” coworking, etc..

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