

Anna Veronese  
**Architecture post Covid-19.**  
**Using proxemics in spatial design**

### Abstract

The outbreak of coronavirus and the worldwide spread of the concept of social distancing have made it necessary to reorganize the space around us according to new measures. In this regard, it could be useful to deepen the study of proxemics, a discipline theorized in the 1960s by the American anthropologist Edward Hall with the aim of understanding the meaning that men attribute to the concepts of distance and space. Since we will need to think of a new kind of architecture, Hall's theories will be able to offer a precious help that covers all the scales, from the city to the neighbourhood to the single building. We have the chance, not to be missed, to review the model of the contemporary city: let's make it an opportunity to rethink spaces on a human scale in order to reach a new normal.

### Keywords

Architecture — Proxemics — City



**Fig. 1**  
 Edward T. Hall, *La dimensione nascosta*, Bompiani, 1968 and *Il linguaggio silenzioso*, Bompiani, 1969.

«This book constitutes a highly provocative scientific contribution: even where it can justify some objections, it will not fail to open new avenues of research. It can be expected that it will stimulate not only communication scholars or cultural anthropologists, but also psychologists, educators and – above all – architects and urban planners».

It is with these words that Umberto Eco introduces the book *The Hidden Dimension*, written by the American anthropologist Edward Twitchell Hall in 1966 and published in Italy by Bompiani in 1968. In his work Hall systematizes the reflections – already mentioned in the 1959 book *The Silent Language* – that led him to the theorization of a new science: proxemics. With the term proxemics, which comes from the union of the words “proximity” and “phonemics”, Hall refers to that set of observations and theories that study the meanings that man attributes to the concepts of distance and space. According to Hall it is possible to identify four main spheres of distance that mark the relationships between men and that can be imagined as bubbles around each human being: the sphere of intimate distance (1 to 18 inches), where the physical contact of couples or family relationships takes place; the sphere of personal distance (1,5 to 4 ft), for interaction among friends; the sphere of social distance (4 to 12 ft), where the exchange with colleagues or acquaintances takes place; finally the sphere of public distance (more than 12 ft), for public relations and speaking. While considering that the cultural factor plays a primary role in the study of proxemics – just think of the difference that occurs in ceremonies and human relationships between, for example, countries of the Mediterranean and the Far East – it is interesting to note the attempt to establish precisely measurable spheres of distance, stable and ready-to-use categorizations beyond cultural differences.

«The ability to recognize these various zones of involvement and the activities, relationships, and emotions associated with each has now become extremely important. The world's populations are crowding into cities, and builders and speculators are packing people into vertical filing boxes—both offices and dwellings. If one looks at human beings in the way that the early slave traders did, conceiving of their space requirements simply in terms of the limits of the body, one pays very little attention to the effects of crowding. If, however, one sees man surrounded by a series of invisible bubbles which have measurable dimensions, architecture can be seen in a new light. It is then possible to conceive that people can be cramped by the spaces in which they have to live and work» (Hall 1990, p. 129).

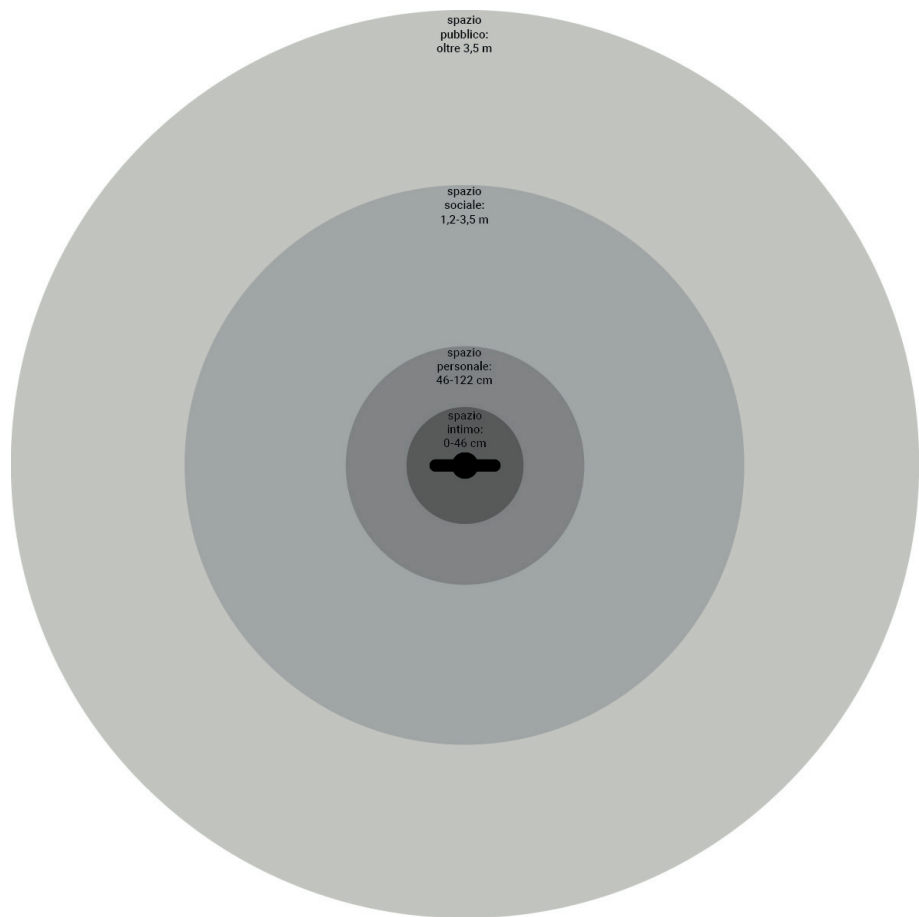
Today, with the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the fear of contagion and the global spread of the same concept of social distancing, Hall's proxemics seem to acquire a particular importance. The first months of 2020 marked an enormous change in the relationship that the contemporary man has with time and space, highlighting the crisis of the model of the city in which we live. The interruption of the frenetic flow that regulates urban contexts, the redefinition (and reshuffling) of work time and free time, the depopulation of public places and the confinement in our homes, are some of the factors that have exasperated the evidence of these problematic nodes.

Certain images typical of the ordinary pre-pandemic life have become unthinkable and pose the need to redesign the places that housed them according to new measures and new objectives. I'm thinking about the atomization of living spaces, the studios of a few square meters, the promiscuity and overcrowding of public transport, factories and open space offices, and finally the management of all structures with a collective vocation (schools, universities, museums, but also barracks, prisons, etc.).

In a very short time, we found ourselves watching identical images of very different cities: the threat of the virus would therefore seem to impose a new necessity, that of rethinking spaces according to some new global rules and needs.

In this scenario, the study of proxemics, with its vocation for the universal synthesis of data, could be a valuable tool for the architects called to design the city of tomorrow.

Trying to think of the classification theorized by Hall in terms of architecture and city planning, the concept of scale immediately emerges. We can talk about "intimate scale" (housing), "personal scale" (spaces for interaction among friends), "social scale" (workplaces and schools) and "public scale" (spaces for public relations and public speaking). With a minimum recommended distance of at least one meter between people, we are effectively witnessing the crushing of the intimate and personal spheres into one category. From an architectural point of view this can be translated with the rediscovery of "filter" areas such as courtyards, balconies, condominium terraces and stairs: semi-public spaces that allow the occasional extension of the private and domestic dimension in one more open and convivial, while respecting the measures of the social distancing. Although they are not much used in normal times, during the last few months these spaces have made a significant difference for those who have been able to use them and given their number and often their considerable extension, they represent a capital of great importance in the economy of buildings, especially in big cities. Therefore, aiming to ensure a much greater flexibility for living spaces in case of another confinement, their

**Fig. 2**

Explanatory diagram of proxemic spheres of distance.

role will certainly have to be rethought and given new value. The reconstruction of the idea of *community*, typical of places and architectures of the past and which in the current crisis has found a new meaning, will go hand in hand with them.

From a purely urban point of view, the same idea of contraction and expansion of space, depending on the needs of the context, is the basis of the theory of the “elastic city” (Ware, Lobos, Carrano 2020) and the notion of self-sufficiency of neighbourhoods or large sectors of the city. It would be a question of thinking about a structure on an urban scale that could be quickly divided into smaller, temporarily autonomous units in case of necessity. Real neighbourhoods in normal times, they would turn into self-sufficient blocks in case of crisis: this would result in a multicentric organization of the city, which would also offer an answer to the problem of subordination of the suburbs to the centre. In this hypothesis, proxemics could be useful in defining these new neighbourhoods, establishing maximum distance spheres between the citizens and the various goods and services of basic necessities which are indispensable for the function of each unit in case of isolation. The study of a system of distances “on a human scale” within the urban fabric would also help for a progressive abandonment of the car in favour of light mobility, with the consequent recovery of part of the public space now occupied by roads and parking lots. An example of this is the project *La ville du quart d'heure*, designed by Carlos Moreno<sup>1</sup> for the city of Paris and part of Anne Hidalgo’s program in the campaign for her re-election as mayor of the city. The idea of Moreno, a Smart City specialist, is to make all the basic social functions within the various *arrondissements* accessible to everyone in a maximum of 15 minutes on foot or by bicycle.



**Fig. 3**

A condominium terrace of a Roman "palazzina", photographed on March 11th, 2020.

Though at a great cost, the pandemics of the past have certainly forced architecture and urban planning to evolve and improve. The bubonic plague, which spread in Europe in the fourteenth century, conditioned the decisions on an urban scale that marked the transition from the medieval city to the Renaissance. In the mid-19th century, the epidemics of yellow fever and cholera inspired the urban plans of many European and American cities – such as Haussmann's proposal for Paris or Frederick Olmsted's proposal for New York. Plans that, with the aim of sanitizing and making the building fabric healthy, led to the introduction of wide roads, systems of green areas and parks inside or on the edges of cities, sewerage infrastructures and underground water drainages. Likewise, the spread of Spanish fever at the end of the First World War contributed to the subsequent reflections on the post war construction of new neighbourhoods and therefore on the expansion of cities and suburbs, which then animated the discussions of urban planning during the twentieth century.

The crisis we are experiencing must therefore be an opportunity, a fundamental turning point for the evolution of both architecture and cities. An honest analysis of the crisis we had arrived at will be of vital importance so that we do not miss the opportunity to rectify the approach. Architects, urban planners, engineers must have the courage to return to listen to other professionals, anthropologists, sociologists but also ordinary citizens, in the project of a new normal. Books such as *The Hidden Dimension*, although conceived in a very different historical moment, can serve as a starting point for reflections that consider all the *scales* – from the city to the neighbourhoods to the buildings. We are now facing the need to codify a new proxemics, which can help us to go back to considering people as the active



centre of the space around them and therefore to «finding suitable methods for computing and measuring human scale in all its dimensions including the hidden dimensions of culture» (Hall 1990, p.179).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Scientific director and co-founder of the Chaire eTI (*Entreprenariat Territoire Innovation*), Université Paris 1 Panthéon – Sorbonne / IAE Sorbonne Business School.

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Anna Veronese (Rome, 1992) architect, studied at École nationale supérieure d'architecture de Paris-Belleville and at University of Roma Tre, department of Architecture, where she graduated cum laude with a thesis on the requalification of the area of Matera. She worked in Milan for the architectural firm OBR Open Building Research and is now enrolled in the XXXV cycle of the PhD in Architectural composition at Università Iuav di Venezia. She also collaborated with the Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti and with FAI at the project of the thematic path “Olivetti e Matera” inaugurated in 2019 in the Lucanian city.