

BODIES.

**BETWEEN
SPACE
AND
DESIGN**

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PREAMBLE

6

PREAMBLE

This book was written before the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in February–April 2020, and it was written in a territory—northern Italy—that was severely affected by it. The pandemic caused the body to re-emerge in all its fragility. It repositioned the body in physical space, in social space, and in the space of control and the limitation of freedoms. First of all, the pandemic repositioned the body as sick, diffident, fearful, and reclusive. Secondly, it repositioned the vulnerability of the body, revealing its differential, fractured, and decomposed character. And, finally, it repositioned the mass of dead bodies: a terrible echo of Elias Canetti’s words resounding in the many images accompanying the chronicle of this recent past.

The pandemic was a terrible natural experiment imposed on the relationships between bodies, spaces, and the project. The pandemic asked the project to rethink the density of space as a function of a body requiring protection—a body which, in order to protect itself and other bodies, deprives itself of perhaps the most fundamental faculty: that of touch. Touching other bodies, touching space, hitting it, skimming it, leaving your own imprint; dwelling in the materiality of the body. Reducing the ability to touch is an act of incorporeity in the sense discussed in the following pages: it is to detach the body from ourselves, to become a foreign part of it, to exorcise it.

The pandemic forced the project to think of a future in which density is reduced while safeguarding the interaction between bodies. However: “to preserve itself, the body needs a great many other bodies”—both human and non-human. This is the great crime perpetrated by the pandemic: it is the loosening of the ties of our subjectivities embodied in mistrust, safeguarding, and care.

Lesa, May 2020

AROUND THE BODY. INTRODUCTION

7

*We are not a calligraphic
sign on a white surface,
an ornament.*

*We are a body that twists
into something with density,
and friction.*

Moresco, 2009¹

For all those involved with the city and territory, space refers to the body. This is first and foremost due to an enduring organic analogy that has been very important in the humanist tradition of western culture. The organic analogy has exploited the body to establish a morphology. It has done this by projecting it on the city, representing its ideal perfection, and finding words, proportions, and relationships in the body. It has pursued the body's authority in order to narrate the city, represent it, design it, make it the seat of the social and political body, and impose it on the world. The organic analogy has been powerful in the past and remains so. Anthony Vidler writes about its revival as part of a new appeal for organic metaphors in architecture, even if the body is now radically different: a body in pieces, fragmented, if not deliberately torn apart and mutilated,² indicating an explicit departure from classical humanism.

The organic analogy was powerful and still is. Nevertheless, my first argument is not inspired by this continuous re-emergence of the organic analogy and its vigour. Nor is it inspired by the impetuous re-emergence of the body in our daily lives, driven by canons of health, strength, and beauty: the new sanctuary where contemporary man consummates his alienation. Not a vehicle, but an obstacle to being in the world, patiently remodelled by physical exercises, diets, and the entire repertoire of rituality so very reminiscent of the spiritual exercises of sacrifice and mortification. They place the body in another dimension.

For all those involved with the city and territory, space refers to the body because we act, experience, and live in the encumbrance of our bodies.³ Bodies are not “calligraphic signs”: they are cumbersome and opaque; they have weight, occupy space, leave stamps, measure distances proportional to their gestures, gazes, and voices, and allow themselves to be crossed by them. They enjoy a carnal relationship with the world, which leads to an experienced, individualised dimension of space. The materiality deposited in names, signs, and practices conceals what counts as a body⁴ in its relationship with space, which is unlike a “white surface”. It is space crossed by impulses, desires, and renunciations; existential space that is neither geometrical nor anthropological. Awareness of one’s own body coincides with knowledge of being in a place: it is the body’s hold on the world. In space, “bodies wriggle free”: they are always engaged in something practical. They are bodies that act and suffer. In space they meet other bodies with which they collide, ally themselves, and come into conflict. Phenomenology considers having a body to mean uniting with a defined environment, merging with certain designs, and continuously committing to them: “We must therefore avoid saying that our body is in space, or in time. It inhabits space and time”.⁵ Likewise, Sartre’s existentialism claims that “this *being-there* is precisely the body”.⁶ We are united, merged, and involved with space. Even in Foucault’s structuralism we unexpectedly find something very similar: “my body ... it is the absolute place, the little fragment of space where I am, literally, embodied”.⁷ In this small book, after having studied the mad, medicalised, surveilled, and punished body, Foucault writes about the relationship between the ego and the body, starting with the incredible coincidence that “it will always be there. Where I am”: the ambiguous source of all experiences, but also of all utopias.⁸ The discourse about the body is a discourse about the fact that we are engaged in the world: touched by, invested in, and enlightened by the world, as bodies in spaces.

“My body is the little fragment of space where I am, literally, embodied.” Space belongs to the body. We live and act in space through our bodies.⁹ We incorporate the directions, obstacles, resistances, and openings of space. We do not move forward according to the modernist epic of conquest, frontier, and hegemony. We do not remodel everything from scratch. Our being is active and passive: we act and we suffer. It is always a relationship of co-presence and reciprocal implication: the impact of collisions with other bodies and the world. We receive stimuli and react to them, we hear words

and answer them, we elaborate the messages we receive. This means we are constantly exposed—but, at the same time, it is a sign of the body's consistency, substance, and power of action. Of its frailty. Through the body we are involved in intense processes of connection and interdependence: we meet other bodies with which we collide, ally ourselves, and come into conflict. We are exposed to others, to eyes that spy on us, surprise us, and covertly look at us.¹⁰ We are exposed to encounters, we are transported towards others, we are capable of influencing and of being influenced. We are exposed to the system of norms, rules, and prohibitions that redefine our desires and our parental, sexual, and productive relationships. Or, speaking more generally: our life conditions. Feminist literature has focused extensively on the way in which normative matrices become the premises for models of a stable body.¹¹ In any case, the body cannot be reduced to a sign: it cannot be alluded to, implied, or suspended in the measurements or silhouettes establishing its contours. Relationships with space are built through physical experience: action, perception, and the senses. The body is “*the zero point of the world*”.¹² Space opens up to us through our body; through its position, faculties, strengths, and frailties. And it also opens up to us through our fears, dreams, projects, and desires. Things are arranged according to the meaning they assume for the body. Space is luminous, dark, streaked, smooth, disquieting, dangerous, immense, or cramped because that is how the body experiences it. Sight, touch, and smell are the doors through which the world enters our bodies. What we are and where we are are what counts, as is time, because the body has memory of it: “My body its memory, the composite memory of its ribs, knees, and shoulder-blades offered it a whole series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept; while the unseen walls kept changing, adapting themselves to the shape of each successive room that it remembered, whirling madly through the darkness. And even before my brain, lingering in consideration of when things had happened and of what they had looked like, had collected sufficient impressions to enable it to identify the room, it, my body, recalled ...”.¹³ This is one of the most famous literary images of the twentieth century.

Bodies Between Space and Design: About This Book

The body is a “*canale di transito*” (transit channel)¹⁴ between space and design: the go-between with which design manipulates space. This is the critical position proposed in this book. Design always alludes to a space either filled

with bodies, or void of bodies. Of bodies in their material finiteness. Of relationships: of bodies that either ignore or search for one another. Of antagonisms. Of alliances. It is not the perfection of organic analogy (challenged only by the imperfection of Frankenstein's monster) but the material solidity of the body that makes itself visible, breathes, moves, stays still, speaks, or remains in silence. It manifests its own intimacy: little, insubstantial habits. It exposes itself. The body has knowledge of its relationships with other bodies and with space: it is an "extremely delicate device"¹⁵ in the relationship between space and design.

This is the point of observation from which I examine several twentieth-century architects, urban planners, and landscape designers representative of a primarily European tradition. They are individuals who developed important ideas about the city and architecture, alluding either directly or indirectly to the theme of the body: Richard Neutra, Clair and Michel Corajoud, Alexander Klein, John Habracken, Paola Viganò, Bernardo Secchi, and John Turner. Extensive literature has been dedicated to these authors, often over a long period of time. I certainly do not presume to present a critical outline. But I will use fragments of their ideas and projects to illustrate my theory of how important the body is in urbanism. Each of these authors will help pinpoint the relationship between spaces and bodies using different viewpoints and sensitivities. Recalling their approaches also means recalling the approaches of many other authors, designers, and critics. Without presuming to reassume anything, I will try to propose a possible order in the next few pages, well-aware that my greatest difficulty is relinquishing the numerous positions of other urban planners on this theme.

I have uncovered some of the ways in which bodies and space are related within the endless intricate ties linking the urban project of a city and its architecture to a body that can either be healthy, sick, or dead; a body that needs to be removed, hidden, or treated, as it has been in hygienism, therapeutic architecture, or popular walkscape practices. Or urban project may be linked to a hedonist body, a pleasure-body, a body that is open to the world. A body that invents itself, recomposes itself, and replicates itself until it becomes a body lost in an oceanic sentiment; a sentiment that is almost religious, as Sigmund Freud stated with regret in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*.¹⁶ Or a body that is guarded, scrutinised, and measured in eighteenth-century judiciary anthropometry, as well as in the measurements and gestures in space of the great season of the avant-garde. A body

that looks and searches for gazes, as in El Lissitzky's self-portrait.¹⁷ Or, on the contrary, a body afraid to be seen; a body that perceives the gaze from noises, as in Jean Paul Sartre's walk in the woods.¹⁸ Or again, the body in the crucible of psychoanalysis that transforms relationships with the clients, in restless psychoanalytical sessions in the United States in the fifties, or in Lacanian circuits between *extimité-intimité* where what is important is "that which is foreign to me ... is at the heart of me".¹⁹ The removed body of Habraken's structuralism: a non-existent body that leaves its stamp, that acts and suffers. And in addition to these, the body in a relentless accumulation of different versions: Gordon Matta-Clark's body in pieces; the body without organs; the post-organic body, expressing a not-so-discreet fascination for technology. The freed, emancipated body, the body that claims its rights, the body visible, the body's expression of its desire for affirmation. The body in the gravitation of mass; the famous photograph of Terragni's Casa del Fascio in Como during the assembly of the Fascist Party in 1936 is its most disconcerting architectural representation.²⁰ The impetuous body of the *Multitude*, the orderly body of the community. The alliance between bodies in the space of feminist thought. The visible body of the public space of politics, in the sense intended by Arendt. The list is destined to remain open-ended.

I will focus on several of these figures and examine explicit and implicit ways in which urban projects and designers use the body; its opaqueness is ambivalent. I wish to highlight the strong points, not the linearities. Urban planners discussed the aporias of narrative a long time ago²¹ and much water has flowed under the bridge since, triggering enormous diffidence towards the discursive as well as spatial figure of continuity (I use Bernardo Secchi's words differently).²² The season of structuralism broke down narratives and, through its most famous and opposed author, Roland Barthes, reaffirmed the power of the fragment.²³ Even before then, Thomas Kuhn had demonstrated how even in the reassuring field of the hard sciences, linearity was fractured and disjointed,²⁴ while Stephen Jay Gould discussed the discrete and unrepeatable nature of balance.²⁵ In other words, the abandonment of linear reconstructions is inherent in urbanism, at least for my generation. I don't know whether this is good or bad, but it's difficult to avoid.

My procedure involves accumulation. I've tried to do my best with the data provided by texts and designs. I've observed the ways in which designers and their projects modify space by alluding either directly or indirectly to the

body: a full body that sees, feels, moves, and changes, one that is with other bodies that acknowledge one another, that have reciprocal relationships of indifference, exchange, collaboration, and competition. My interpretation is based on the framework I outlined at the beginning of this introduction. I assume that the body is open to the world (and that this state of being open to the world defines “what a body can do” in terms of knowledge and action); that knowledge is founded on perception (that things are arranged around the body and that space is experienced in the encumbrance of bodies); and that internal-intimate reality cannot be reduced to mere intimacy. I think it is clear to which ideas these three propositions refer; propositions which I have humbly assumed neither sequentially nor to reformulate any theories, but instead to find data to support my reasoning.

This approach allowed me to discard the references to the body adopted in many dualisms: the religious and spiritual dichotomies that pit the body against the soul and spirit (present at least from the time of Homer’s epic with *psyche*—the breath that exits a wound or mouth of the dying leaving only the cadaver of the body). Christian tradition is based on the ontological schism between the body and a spiritual entity; on the one hand, it re-proposes the separation of the immortal and mortal part of man, and on the other revives the body as the channel of union with the community.²⁶ The most important schism, however, is not religious. It involves Descartes. His entire philosophy can be considered a reflection on the body.²⁷ Here, the body is always considered from an external viewpoint; always from a mental point of view. For Descartes the mind does not coincide with the body—but to recognise itself it must distance itself from the body and become independent, as the mind and body are made of different matter.²⁸ And it is this schism that leaves an impression in language: separating *Körper* and *Leib*. On the one hand, there is the body reduced to an object: the physical or material body. An ensemble of organs; the body-object, the body-representation. The body-I-have. The body that occupies a space, that can be represented in detail, can be measured, can be described in its form and functioning. The body that builds facts and practices through the dissected cadavers in Vesalius’ canvases, in Rembrandt’s public anatomy lessons. On the other hand is the subjective side of the body; the experiences I have had, I alone, of my body—of the *body-that-I-am*. *Leib* is the body and the way we experience it in life. Phenomenology would say: *I do not have a body; I am a body*. In biology and history, feminist thinking would claim the overcoming