

# THE ARCHITECTURE OF INTERIORS AS RE-WRITING OF SPACE: CENTRALITY OF GESTURE

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## **ABSTRACT**

Culture of interiors has been often forced to coincide with the architecture history or with the furniture one, misunderstanding that the specificity of inner-space is shared among both of them. This paper aims to contribute to the definition of the discipline of interiors and proposes an interpretation of its specific character, establishing and grounding its ethic and methodology of design, by discussing some theoretical issues. Main focus will be addressed to those human inhabiting activities, like relations between objects, their use and space, which are basic for the creation of the meaning of places and therefore central in a so called 'interior design approach'. The centrality of the subject experience is relevant (both in the teaching strategy and in the professional practice) because it becomes the parameter to design uses and shapes and determinates those cultural meanings where objects can be properly set. The interiors approach in fact, stresses the importance of these cultural relations between objects and context as possibility of really using and understanding the places, and therefore to design or re-design them, like in the intervention on the existent.

*Keywords: Interiors Theory, Identity and Design, Social and Cultural human factors*

## 1 CENTRALITY OF GESTURE

"[...] He looked at the bedroom furniture placed in the garden. [...] Everything was arranged just as it had been in the room: side-table and lamp on his side, side-table and lamp on her side. [...] The chest of drawers stood near the foot of the bed. Beside the chest of drawers was an electric stove. At the foot of the bed there was also a small bamboo armchair with a print cushion. The gleaming aluminium kitchen furniture occupied the path, instead. The table was covered by a yellow muslin tablecloth. The cloth, too

big, hung down at sides almost to the ground [...]. He had also brought an extension wire into the garden and all the household appliances were connected to electricity.

It worked, just as when they had still been inside the house”<sup>1</sup>.

With a specific tradition of studies within Interiors, from the very early beginning of my teaching activity in Architecture, I have always tried to identify and focus some characteristic elements of Interior discipline which I would use also working within other frameworks: as my courses in Architectural design, where there was no express request for interior themes. With this specific task in my mind, I tried to transform practice into methodology, identifying design behaviours able to give deeper meaning to architectural space and bringing what I had always thought to be the core of Interiors.



Figure 1 Giotto, *Annunciazione ad Anna*, 1303-04

In this framework, a fundamental parameter to recognize whatever project as characterized by an approach within the field of Interiors is the evidence of human presence in the design process. Not only in terms of human scale metrics, from the use of inches and foot to more sophisticated golden section

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond, C. Perché non ballate? In *Da dove stai chiamando?* (Minimum Fax, Roma, 1999), 178-179.

and so on, but in terms of the project to be capable to show existing relationships between space, that we prefer to call “place”, gesture use and meaning. Space is an abstract term coming from the ancient Greek word *stadio* used to define the parameter for measuring; therefore space is objective and abstract and never related to the subject: it is a quantitative way to count the world.

On the other side, “place” is a subjective way to refer and describe spaces: it is always related to the subject. There is no place without a subject, while there is always a space [1]. With this knowledge in mind, practice and teaching architectural design had to keep in account the subjective dimension of life: no interest for abstract geometric compositions, because a correct project always involve use and gesture, objects and subjects, defining/describing places.

This also explains why, working with Interiors at school, the self-dimension is often called in evidence: the reflexive action of involving “yourself” in the design process is almost the only strategy both to avoid extreme generalization and to give depth of meaning to design choices.

According to these statements, interiors own a specific character that connects dwelling with life, needs and desires of the people they have been thought and realized for [2]. Shape and gesture in the interior are strictly connected and this topic represents the basic specificity of interior culture.



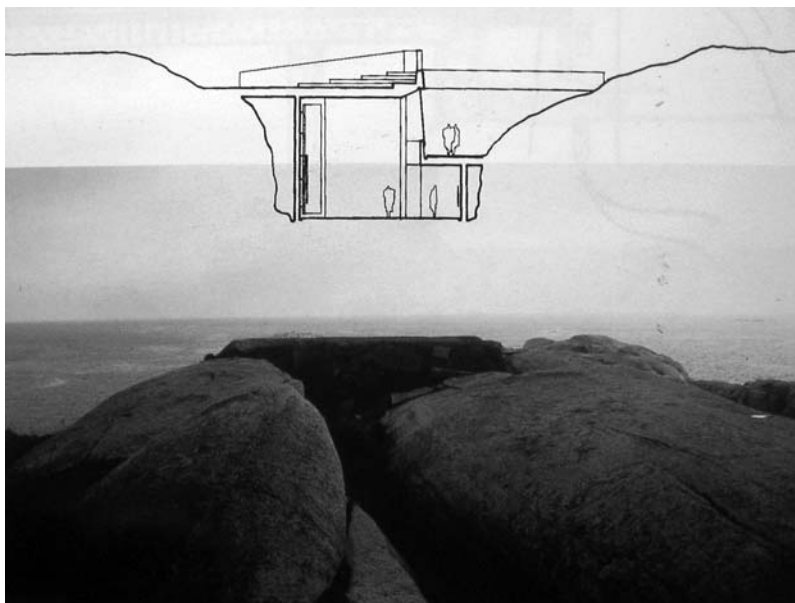
Figure 2 Guido Guidi, *Gesture*, 1970 (courtesy the author)

Therefore, Interiors represent, rather than an operative field in itself, an approach to design focused on the relevance of gesture, considered as the action building the place [3].

Moreover, in opposition to the aesthetic and technologic drift towards spectacularisation of some contemporary architecture, The Architecture of Interiors leads to overcome the concepts of dimension, context and building typology: no matter if you are inside or outside, in an open or closed space, in a room or in a shopping mall, since they are all considered as “place of the gesture”, produced and signified by the action of inhabiting [4].

Interiors as discipline makes architecture concentrate on the crucial question of “dwelling through actions”, transforming the abstract space into a “place-to-be” [5].

This theoretical interpretation underlines the role of Interiors in contemporary architecture debate as the discipline whose validity relies in the methodology of shaping spaces, building relations and meanings between man needs and the places where they live.



*Figure 3 Sverre Fehn, Verdensende Art Gallery, project, 1988  
(courtesy Sverre Fehn)*

## 2 AROUND OBJECTS

There is a semantic polarity between the physical nature of objects and their capacity to nullifying themselves in deference to the activities to which they

are linked; and even more drastically, between their features and the settings that their simple use creates.

It is a dichotomy that shifts attention from the product to the spatial phenomenon that is produced through its use: this determinates a new semeiological figure in which the object, its use and the space that is generated by this use, appear indissolubly linked to one another. And so, despite the fact that product is the locus of designing and exchange, it is elsewhere that the significance linked to the goods appears: for instance in that spring from the way in which the objects are used, from their intrinsic capacity to construct precise spatial situations.

Mario Praz called them *Stimmung*, in his “Filosofia dell’Arredamento” [6]. He notes with scrupulous precision that a discourse on the subject of furnishing – and on its indispensable complements – cannot be held without grasping the presence of a broader, more complex phenomenon that, starting expressly from objects, arrives at the spatial dimension determined by them through the way in which they make themselves available for use.

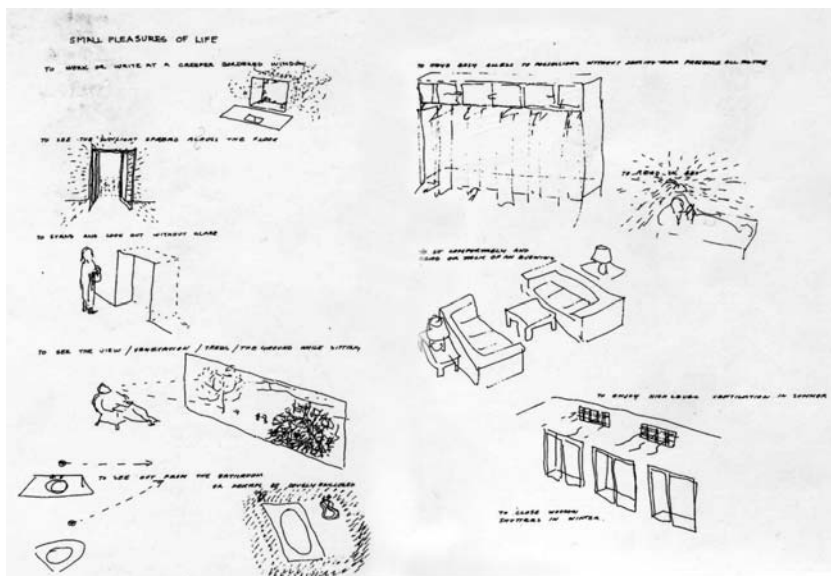


Figure 4 Alison and Peter Smithson, *Small pleasure of life*  
(from: Smithson, A. and P. *Changing the Art of Inhabitation*, London, 1993)

The character and the quality of an ambient is defined by the system of objects and of actions this system can give rise to: they construct precise settings, suggest models and lifestyles, support cultural endeavours. This is the reason why everywhere we go, museums of material culture are obliged to mend the fracture that always exists between objects and context, through

hypothetical reconstructions, through a plethora of information, through communication strategies, through – in a word – the “exhibition setting up”. That is again a discipline within the field of Interiors. All those efforts are due to the attempt to close the gap that makes objects mute once they have been torn out of their space, of real life: the only place where they have and keep a meaning.

The same silence, the same privation, is at times the fate of a contemporary furnishing product when, uprooted from its settings and its use, it becomes incapable of any performance that is not self-referential and autistic, whether it relates to performance, to aesthetics, to technologies, materials or other.

The practice of interiors, in this view, is addressed and suitable both to new design and to intervention on/around existent since it takes care of relationship between gesture and space, with the help of objects. However, “working on the existent” is paradigmatic for the discipline: the already existing constructions are the place where space has to be thought around the subject, where new gestures need to “find home”. It is the place where investigation between actions and shapes are more deeply developed because of the reduced freedom connected with the existing boundaries.

### 3 WORKING ON/AROUND THE EXISTENT AS A RE-WRITING OF SPACE



*Figure 5 Superstudio, Camp: fundamental acts, 1971-72  
(from Area: designing actions, 2005(79+), p. 25*

The choice to work on/around the existent has to be taken in the account not only as “building on existing buildings”. Even we recognize a tradition in this field, with a specific value, the interest is widen towards the more extensive definition “working on/around existent” that allows to involve more possibilities: being “building on existing buildings” only one among many. The extension of meaning, that is also an extension of opportunity, is rooted in the very primitive condition of recognizing every act of design as an act taking place within a given context. From the hyperbolic crowded Tokyo city centre to the extreme emptiness of a desert [7]. To take the self-evidence of context as starting point of any design process is the only possibility we have to avoid self-referential shapes and projects: no other discipline more than Interiors develops a sensibility towards to existent read through out its several layers, from the philological (and objective) to the phenomenological (and subjective) one.



*Figure 6 Le Corbusier, Bestegui Apartment, Paris 1929-31  
(from Rassegna: Cemento, 1992(49), p. 34*

It is also the extension of a methodology developed from “human dimension” to “being-things”: the attention devoted to gesture and use can be easily

extended to context: to what is on site when/where we are going to work. The design turns into the art of negotiating realities through the built form: everything comes into the account and needs to find a place, that is the project answers, that is the final construction.

In this concern, Roland Barthes theory about text<sup>2</sup> product and production [8], can be very helpful lighting the typical process undergoing every well-planned interior design work.

If we undertake his assertion “Every meaningful activity can generate text” and metaphorically we can transpose it from the field of literature to the one of architecture to gain a possible operative method, we should define the scope in which this model could be useful and valid. Although the equality between the reading and the writing of a text appears a clear and logic fact in literature, it is much more complex to transfer the procedure of decoding/creating to the field of architecture were we immediately encounter the physicality of the matter, the weight of the third-dimension and the oddity of the concept of void. Of course every text contains a specific physical dimension, since it is written (or printed) on ‘physical’ pages, but it establishes a different relation with the user: it is the book, we might say, that enters and inhabits the reader, when by reading fragments of text temporarily move ‘into’ the user. On the other hand, every act of understanding or ‘reading’ an architectural artefact implies the action of entering/inhabiting a physical space. Nevertheless, with all the diversities of the case and with a (necessary) specific knowledge of the discipline, the comprehension of an architectural work is the result of a ‘reading’ that becomes productive through a constant process of separating/rejoining. Reading a building implies ‘deconstruction’ in order to recognize the fundamental elements and seize the design principles to achieve new level of understanding.

In the same way as in the textual practice of language, the point is not to discover the meaning that text/work is supposed to contain, an univocal meaning crystallized into the work/product, but the production of a new ‘significance’ that “emancipates the signification’s statute and makes it plural”. There’s not actual distinction between the identity of the author and the one of the reader, and it is precisely this need to define the two roles that fall-off in the practice of text, refusing a ‘metaphysic of the classic subject’ sustained by the traditional philology. This way of understanding things doesn’t discharge or deny the traditional scientific methods but it rather consider them as a starting point for the production of significance. When

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<sup>2</sup> “Every meaningful activity can generate text: painting, composing music, filming, etc..[...] If the theory of the text tends to abolish the separation between the different art disciplines it is because their artworks are not anymore considered as simple ‘messages’ [...] but as perpetual products, statements, which the subject keep on debating on: this subject is certainly the one of the author, but also the one of the reader”. Excerpt from: Barthes, R. *Le Plaisir du texte*, (Éd. du Seuil, Paris, 1973), 240-241.



dealing with projects that are related to 'the existing' this new approach produces a positive and powerful effect whose consequences overcome the ones of the plain comprehension.



*Figure 7 Guido Guidi, Villa dei sogni, 1980 (courtesy the author)*

Every act of building, by evidence, deals with an existing condition which must establish a dialogue with, for all the reasons that provoked the act itself. A careful analysis and reading of the existing context enables the architect to recognize and underline the elements characterizing the form and the space which the new structure will be put in relation with. This process of knowledge shouldn't try to discover or 'unveil' hidden meanings but rather remain a semantic activity that become, therefore, 'production'. By breaking off the 'mono-logical state' of the architectural work, the comprehension becomes wider and the authenticity as unique/original can start to be dismantled. This idea arises from a profound critical revision of the Kantian aesthetic where the artwork and the spectator are counter-posed and stranger to each other. In the textual practice, and then in the thinking about 'difference', subject and object loose their 'stability' and the same borders that used to mark their ambit become uncertain, as transitory elements, introducing a 'practice of representative perception that presupposes the mutual imbrication' [9] of the one and the other. In a similar way, Bhabha talks about the 'third space' as a new semantic and relational place that

originates from the impossibility of defining in an exact and fixed way both the object and the subject as well as their reciprocal boundaries. “[...] This implies an inevitable weakening of every abstract interpretation of the idea of the authentic. The pure and uncontaminated concept of the other (the work) has been crucial for the anti-capitalistic critic of the cultural economy of the western world in modern age. [...] But who can define authenticity then? Once again (someone) stands for the observed assigning him a position”<sup>3</sup> and an universal value in accordance with the western order of things [10].

In this way the idea of a ‘moving significance’, immerse in the circumstances, originates and demolishing the basis of the monolithic authenticity that was traditionally accepted. A fuzzier notion focuses on the productive action of the subject and on the productive condition of the object introducing an intermediate space where subject and object are overlapped and where their meanings become plural. Although it is more difficult to define, this concept is not less reliable of the (counter-posed) idea that used to build a system of power and justify the action through the invention of the authentic and the original. In this way the reader becomes profoundly responsible, the old beliefs provided by the myth of the authentic are left behind and a new relationship with the work is established. The reader is eventually a direct and active author in that productive process of significance he has been always excluded from. By ‘discoverer’, or even just ‘spectator’, the designer becomes, as well as the author, ‘craftsman’ in a continuous confrontation with his work that, as we already stated before, evolves from product into production.

Moving the discussion onto the specific field of architectural, it is necessary to remark that working on ‘what is built’, acting within a given space, arises the issue of the attitude of place to give hospitality. Every project that ‘finds its home’ inside an existing realm, measures and challenges the ability of the space to welcome the gestures and the structures that are necessary acts to give new use to the same space. Researching to what extent a place is able to host is a fundamental passage in a design process that is not willing to be ‘colony’ of space, but guest [11]. This way of designing could – ultimately – happen as the mere, simple insertion of furniture and objects into a space and this might be the perfect challenge for the designer’s ability to understand the hospitality of the built matter and to perform in a built environment [12]. There’s no dwelling (inhabiting) without hospitality and dwelling is – to say it with Norberg-Schulz – an existential phenomenon more than a physical need.

There is no gesture without a place willing and available to receive it and the place has always welcomed the gesture, and the life. Some places – either natural or artificial – have been destroyed by intense exploitation or abandoned in decay for the ineptitude of someone to inhabit them; some

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<sup>3</sup> Chambers, I. *Paesaggi migratori*. (Costa&Nolan, Genova, 1996), 16-19.

places are 'colonized' by the aggressive violence of univocal gestures. Many places have been built with no care for their distinctive characters, with no interest for their specific fundamental elements, with no concern for their form, but only with the stubborn superimposition of an alien, foolish design act. This has been very true every time the architectural process was carried on 'running after' the myth of the authentic as an ontological legitimation of the design through a continuous search for the origin and the primitive state. It is not possible to 'get back home' since we must now deal with progressively complex negotiations and interactions that are dissolving and hybridising the original state of the work that survive only in the movement, in the transit and in the incapacity to stand still.

#### 4 CONCLUSION



*Figure 8 Carlo Scarpa, Museo di Castelvecchio Verona 1958-75  
(ph.: Arno Hammacher, courtesy CISAAP)*

Freed from the obsession for authenticity, and from the utopia of 'return to the roots', driven by a healthy will to research, read and understand an existing space as it is (with its imperfection, with its history of transformations and transitions), Italian architects of the second generation of Modern Movement managed to combine the attention for the context without giving up that necessary productive attitude that should sustain every project. To these architects and to ones that successfully followed their path – in Italy as abroad - we should look at today.

The work as text, the space as place for gesture, the project as 're-writing' and the search for hospitality are then the fundamental elements of a praxis that expresses itself through a conscious manipulation of the existing that is continuously transformed as its authenticity is disintegrated.

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