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le carré bleu



Alison et Peter Smithson's, Cluster City/Golden Lane (1952)

l'accessibilité
comme instrument de beauté

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Accessibility as an instrument of beauty

Talking about beauty in a society like the one of the 21st century, characterised by the domination of speed and technology, by an aesthetics built on the basis of polished images¹ and based on appearance rather than on being, seems anachronistic. Beauty is not understood here as the *science of beauty and the liberal arts*², but in accordance with the Aristotelian sense of sensation and perception through the sense organs.

And yet, situated between empirical experience and suprasensible nature, beauty is an essential need of the psyche and a right of every individual. It is not a reassuring category of order but a transcendent entity belonging to the dimension of the ego, the id and the unconscious and coinciding with the search for *poiësis*. "It is, in fact, the poetic which, in the first place, makes life livable"³, wrote Heidegger. Accessibility⁴, for the sociologists Cass, Shove and Urry, on the other hand, concerns "the possibility for individuals to establish the times and spaces of everyday life, in order to carry out the practices and maintain the relationships that they consider significant for their social life"⁵. So what do beauty and accessibility have in common? The primary purpose of architecture is people.

Bruno Zevi said it, Lucien Kroll wrote it. Being a "social animal"⁶, the primary purpose of architecture is therefore the relationships between human beings, and the urban space is the first place on which to weave these relationships. It could be equipped with technically and scientifically functional services and infrastructures, it could be easily accessible, but its aesthetic quality, its beauty will depend on the sensory experience that will make the urban space accessible to every human being, the purpose of the design, regardless of physical, mental and cognitive abilities and aptitudes.

In order to study the accessibility-beauty correlation, a reworking⁷ of the motivational model synthesising the architecture-humanity-relationship triad proposed in 1954 by the psychologist Abraham Maslow on the needs of people and the patterns of use of public spaces was adopted. Physical accessibility, which does not only coincide with motor accessibility and which guarantees each person an autonomous use of the place, has been placed at the base of the pyramid, as its absence excludes the person from the spatial experience created. This is followed by orientation, i.e. the legibility of the urban space, the sensory spatial experience, and then the social relational experience.

At each level, the relationship of the person to the public space is outlined by specific questions: provided that a place is physically accessible to any person, what makes this place relevant? In the case of a perceptible and recognisable environment such that orientation is guaranteed, what kind of aesthetic (sensory) experience is possible to perceive? In the case of a usable, perceptible and recognisable space, to which it is therefore possible to attribute an aesthetic quality, how is it possible to interact with other people? By following each of the proposed models and needs, a higher degree of accessibility to the urban space will be achieved.

The physical accessibility of a territory and an urban space

It has been written that the physical accessibility of a territory and an urban space is a necessary condition for the emergence of higher forms of accessibility. The accessibility of places in the city, whether squares, streets, districts or buildings, can be defined as the possibility of reaching a particular place, taking into account both the network of connecting infrastructures and the morphological fabric of the territory. However, it is possible to distinguish different forms of accessibility to urban spaces. The one that unites two points of a place (relative accessibility between origin and destination) and the one that unites a point with all other points of the territory (integral accessibility of the urban system)⁸. The system of lifts and footbridges over the river Limmat designed by Leuppi & Schaefroth Architekten connects two Swiss towns, Baden and Ennetbaden, which were previously linked by a cable ferry and two bridges with poor accessibility. The landmark, which can be crossed both horizontally by footbridges and bridges and vertically by a glass and steel lift, is an iconic sculpture in the Swiss urban landscape. It not only ensures accessibility for people with reduced mobility, but is also a place of social identity.

Olafur Eliasson's *Cirkelbroen* Bridge in Copenhagen has the same characteristics. An expression of the historical and cultural heritage of the area in which it was built, the wooden barge and boat bridge is a unique link between two fragments of the city. Walking along it, one has the same feeling as if one were crossing the bridge of five sailing ships placed side by side. The fact that the circles are of different sizes and are not aligned in a straight line allows the user to slow down. *Cirkelbroen* has changed from a place of passage to a place of stay.

The second level of Maslow's pyramid suggests that for a space to be accessible, it must also be legible and recognisable, i.e. there must be an appropriation of the place by the user. On the other hand, each individual, as Kevin Lynch writes, when confronted with his or her own description of the city and thus a reduced scale of urban space, constructs his or her own mental topographic map. The easier it is to construct such a map, the more comprehensible the space to which it refers. However, the emblematic elements must be designed, highlighted and displayed in such a way that they can be perceived by all the senses. Recently, several crowdfunding initiatives have shown that the use of IoT (Internet of Thing) devices and a good communication strategy can make urban space easy to read and recognise.

Avanti-Avanti Studio is a design team founded by graphic designer Dobaño and architect Muñoz, both supporters of the "Design for All" association, who, based on what they have done with TfL's *Legible London* and Pentacity Group's *WalkNYC*, have come up with a synergy project with Applied wayfinding, Paisaje Transversal, Urban Networks, Paralelo 39, CGR Arquitectos and Dimas García, *Leer Madrid*. Valuing the individuality and diversity of each visitor or inhabitant, the *Diversity Cube*, an integral part of the project, offers infinite possibilities for moving around the urban space of Madrid. Depending on their language, abilities, socio-economic profile, reason, rhythm and means of movement in the urban space, the individual has the possibility to choose possible movement profiles.

And, once they have started their journey, they will encounter destination, orientation, information and interpretation points scattered around the city, so that they can modify or deepen their route according to occurrences and preferences. *BlindWiki, Unveiling the Unseen*, is an audio platform created in 2014 by the Spanish artist Antoni Abad for the city of Rome and enriched on the occasion of the Venice Art Biennale in 2017 with the project *La Venezia che non si vede*. A group of volunteers, blind and visually impaired, were invited to explore the city of Venice on foot or by boat.

Constructing their own sensory mental map through the calli and canals, each person recorded their own geo-located narrative voice on their personal city account. A wide variety of information was thus collected on architectural and cultural barriers, difficulties encountered but also sensations, smells, sounds, noises, surfaces touched. The collection of these points of interest has made it possible to draw a collective and sensory map of Venice, making it accessible to all. *BlindWiki*, which had already involved the citizens of Sydney in 2015, Wroclaw and Berlin in 2016, saw in 2020 the participation of the city of Valencia.

Sensory spatial experience

For the experience of space to be lived by all, without distinction, it is necessary that a place is not only physically accessible but that all the senses, and not only sight, whose dominance in architecture is obvious, are called upon. See for example the *Torres de Satélite*, built in 1958 by the architect Luis Barragán and the sculptor Mathias Goeritz in Mexico. These are iconic, emotional landmarks intended to be perceived by sight alone. Yet architecture should take on visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory and sensory experiences and remove cultural, cognitive and mental barriers.

Looking at Penda's *Soundwave* from a distance, a huge digital sound viewer seems to take shape. Five hundred ascending and descending bars of different heights anchored to the base iconically trace the skyline of Xiangyang, the ancient capital of southern China, like frozen music. These bars emit sounds and lights according to the proxemic movement. Walking through them, one has the impression of entering an artificial forest and then reaching the nearby *Myrtle Tree Garden*. The interactive surface *Musical Shadow* also transforms the soundscape into a design tool.

Designed in 2016 for the Mesa Arts Centre in Arizona by Daily tous les jours⁹ and now used in other urban contexts, such as the Pearl Divers in Dubai, this multi-sensory interactive installation emits pre-recorded sounds and voices according to the shadows cast by each person walking along it. Moving figures and dancing bodies create different soundscapes. Never identical to each other. Why? People change, the movement of the sun changes. The interaction between the bodies is at its maximum when several people interact.

An excellent opportunity to explore listening in relation to the time of day, the direction of the sun and the season of the year for those who do not have full visual skills. The length of the projected shadow, its intensity, the generation of heterogeneous sounds make this experience changeable, creating multiple sensations and moods. In the morning, when the shadows are longer, the sounds convey tranquillity and calm; at noon, when the shadows are shorter, the sounds become rhythmic and frenetic. At sunset, the shadows lengthen again and the sounds become harmonious. Finally, at night, the words give way to the natural soundscape. And what about the sense of smell?

Although more involuntary, the sense of smell also influences the behaviour and attitude of each person and affects emotions and memories. In creating a dictionary of smells, several researchers, including the authors of *Smelly Maps: The Digital Life of Urban Smellscapes*, have recreated the smell maps of seven European and American cities: Amsterdam, Pamplona, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newport, Paris and New York. Like *BlindWiki*, but using their own noses, a group of volunteers walked around their city noting the type of smell they perceived. Based on the data collected, an urban olfactory lexicon was developed. Then, other groups followed olfactory routes and recorded the type and intensity of the odours they perceived. What to do with these maps? Researchers from the Fundação Champalimaud in Lisbon have shown that there is a close relationship between the neurons responsible for the sense of smell and the areas of the brain responsible for constructing spatial maps.

Relational and social experience. Space as a metaphor for play and theatre

Having made urban space accessible, legible and recognisable, having designed the aesthetic experience that makes this space accessible to all the senses, so that all physical, social and cultural barriers are eliminated, it is now necessary to build relationships. Architecture is for man, every man, as we wrote at the beginning, needs relationships. Eugenio Turri wrote: "The inhabitants of the space - all of them - are both actors and spectators of the transformation, in the "measure in which they operate, in which they act, in which they are actors who transform and activate new scenarios: that is to say, the mirror of themselves, the consciousness of their actions"¹⁰. The urban space is thus given a social and pedagogical dimension. If, in particular, the barriers encountered are of a cultural and cognitive nature, a useful tool for designing relationships becomes playful. For, by transposing what happens in the space of interpersonal relations to what happens in the urban space, the game, the playful aspect of the composition of colours, signs and form is the mediating device between the unconscious, the world of the person and the urban world.

Like the metaphor of theatre suggested by Turri, play allows the person, his or her emotional sphere, his or her creative capacity to be brought into play. The British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott describes play as a concrete space, "a transactional, intermediary space, in which it is possible to elaborate experiences, to nurture the conditions that generate bonds and trust, and to plan creatively new paths"¹¹. The games and relationships, however, are not virtual, but real, physical.

Superkilen, an urban project by BIG, Superflex and Topotek1, runs through a large part of the multi-ethnic district of Nørrebro in Copenhagen.

Divided into three macro-zones, a green zone used as a park, a black zone and a red zone with a mainly playful character, it is a place full of three-dimensional visual and tactile signs. A composition of plastic objects.

Located between architecture, land art and sculpture, it is a space that can be used by everyone. It is a relational space that seeks to break down all cultural barriers and create emotional spaces. The border between public and private is made transient. It is a space to be crossed but also to be experienced. Universal design, assistive technologies, sensory architecture and relational architecture are now priority principles in contemporary urban planning and design, so that urban space is a place of accessibility and beauty for all.

notes

- ¹ Han, B.-C., *La salvezza del bello*, Milano: figure nottetempo, 2015.
- ² Baumgarten, A.G. (1735), *Estetica*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1992.
- ³ Heidegger, M. (1954), *Costruire, abitare, pensare*, in *Saggi e discorsi*, trad. it. G. Vattimo, Milano: Mursia, 2014, pp. 130-133.
- ⁴ Il termine accessibilità è composto dalle parole latine *ad* e *cedere*, ovvero camminare per/attraverso.
- ⁵ Cass N., Shove E., Urry J., *Social exclusion, mobility and access*, in: "The sociological review", Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005.
- ⁶ Aristotele, *Politica*, IV secolo a.C.
- ⁷ Il modello della piramide di Maslow è stata rielaborata dai ricercatori ungheresi Szaszák, G.; Kecskés, T. in Szaszák, G.; Kecskés, T. *Universal Open Space Design to Inform Digital Technologies for a Disability-Inclusive Place-Making on the Example of Hungary*, *Smart Cities 2020*, www.mdpi.com/journal/smartcities.
- ⁸ Ingram D. R., *The concept of accessibility: A search for an operational form*, in «Regional Studies» vol. 5, issue 2, 1971, pp. 101–107.
- ⁹ Studio canadese conosciuto per aver ideato diverse esperienze di arte pubblica collettiva e partecipativa.
- ¹⁰ Turri, E., *Il paesaggio come teatro*, Venezia: Marsilio, 1998, p. 16.
- ¹¹ Winnicott, D.W. (1971), *Playing and Reality*, Londra: Tavistock Publications, trad. It. L. Tabanelli, *Gioco e realtà*, Roma: Armando Editore, 1997, p. 75 e pp.163-164.

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