



**STEFANO CATUCCI, FEDERICO DE MATTEIS (EDS.)**

**The Affective City. Spaces, Atmospheres and Practices in Changing Urban Territories**

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In his renowned essay *Architektur* (1910), Adolf Loos claims that

*“Architecture arouses moods in people, so the task of the architect is to give these moods concrete expression. A room must look cozy, a house comfortable to live in”* (*Architecture*, 1910).

Despite this being one of the most quoted aphorisms of modern architecture, the Loosian position has nevertheless been a losing one in the architectural debate of the 20th century, due to the affirmation of a scientific and positivistic culture, more interested in the material and quantitative aspects of architecture than in the spiritual ones. Moods have been resolutely expelled from architectural theory up to the present days, and buildings, cities, landscapes are commonly still analyzed and criticized not for their ability to arouse emotions, such as surprise, joy or fear, but with a functional meaning that allows us to verify the actual compliance of needs and expectations. Emotion-blindness of modernity has shifted the experience of space from the traditional first-person perspective to a disembodied point of view: architecture has become a play of objects under the sunlight, we design objects rather than atmospheres.

The numerous efforts to regain the empathic dimension of space have remained occasional episodes throughout the course of modernity, emerging whenever the cultural debate demanded new narratives for architecture, generally stuck into topics such as geometry, tectonics, language, technology, etc. Due in part to this new awareness, a general afterthought in the architects' attitude has gradually surfaced in recent decades. This rediscovery of the Phenomenology of Perception (referring to the famous book by Maurice Merleau-Ponty) has influenced not only Urban Studies, but also the way architecture is represented and produced. The affective city – collective book edited by Stefano Catucci and Federico De Matteis in 2021 – has the ambition to take a stand in this emerging field. Avoiding any re-foundational approach, the book aims to investigate the gaze of contemporary designer, and his ability to conceive architecture as an emotional fact, disconnecting the discourse from the typical modern dichotomy of rationality Vs. subjectivity.

The precedents are many: in the late 19th century, Camillo Sitte and Auguste Choisy recognized the historic city as a lesson and a useful 'toolbox' for Urban Design. The former, through a study of the proportions of medieval public spaces in terms of contractions and expansions. The latter, through an investigation of the forms of movement with which the city is experienced. In both cases, it is through the body, and not the intellect, that we understand the environment around us. Then, at the peak of modernity, in the work of Gordon Cullen and his team at *The Architectural Review*, emerged the suspect that Cartesian tools of representation were no longer adequate: in their drawings, the city gains perspective depth and materiality, but also the presence of the human being. The traces of inhabitants' passage enable a new narrative of a space designed to elicit emotion, in contrast to the abstract geometries codified by Gaspard Monge in the Age of Reason. More recently architects such as Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa, and Alberto Perez-Gomez had the merit of rekindling a spotlight on issue of perception in architecture, bringing attention to light, materiality, care of detail, as devices capable of enhancing the qualities of the space in which we live.

Following this path, the book claims that traditional tools are no longer effective to depict the complexity of contemporary urban reality. In a continuous crossing between aesthetics and architecture, Catucci and De Matteis move from the thesis of the New Phenomenology, a trend that owes its principles to the writings of the German philosopher Hermann Schmitz. Such a new acquisition is possible due to the fact that we are, the authors say, in a 'Spatial turn': a shift in perspective designed to reveal not only a generic quality of the environment, but to grasp space as something that exists only because the subject is immersed in it with his body.

Involving several architectural and philosophy researchers, working on different fields, the book intercepts a wide range of studies, all

linked by the idea that reflecting on the relationship between space and feelings implies a profound reconsideration of the notion of 'user'. On the contrary, adopting 'subject' as the pivot of the perceptual experience, we recognize him as "as a complex entity, endowed with passions, desires and character, bearer of a cultural history and of a personal biographical background". But if each subject is different, endowed with its own individuality, how can we deal with such a variety of possible receivers of the stimuli? According to Gernot Böhme's theories on atmospheres, Catucci and De Matteis argue that these spatialized emotions are not personal and subjective impressions, but a widespread feeling, something that different individuals can recognize, describe, and share. We cannot describe space as something external, because we are a part of it, in so far as we inhabit it. Only by accepting it, design can produce space, not as a surplus of the object but as a manifestation of the dynamic encounter between our body and the external world.

The affective city is not a manual, or a textbook, but rather a collective reflection of scholars sharing a theoretical background. The manifold essays collected in this book are rather lenses with which affectively discover the contemporary urban condition: from the sound/landscape relationship (Ghia) to the ritual/practice one (Catucci), passing through the attempt to reorient restoration theory (Salvo) or steer emerging instances of sustainability (Belibani), focusing on the use/abuse of atmosphere design in the societies of control (Camilli), or looking at how we have changed our gaze on the city due to the global pandemic (Reale).

This work has also the ambition to look into alternative narratives for urban space. Once the existence of shared moods is recognized, it is indeed necessary to devise ways to communicate and to make them explicit. The last part of the book fully delves into new forms of representation, capable to uncovering the immaterial evidence of reality, such as the feelings of anxiety and agoraphobia in twentieth-century urban design (De Matteis) or the imaginary character a space can assume through the designer's eye (Giancotti). These non-representational 'phenomenographies' demonstrate how discourse about feelings needs to be not only verbal, but also calls for a visual dimension, as well as an olfactory or tactile one, and so on. In other words, the urgency is to figure out how to communicate and share the feelings we encounter in space and bringing their perception into the realm of facts. In order to bridge this gap, three other volumes followed this first one, introducing specific case studies and taking on topical issues in the Italian context: the post-industrial crisis in Turin (2022), the trauma and aftermath of L'Aquila earthquake (2022), and the legacy of modernist estates in Rome (2023).

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