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Performing Bodies, Performing Architectures

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Abstract

The interaction between space and the human body holds profound significance in both interior and urban design, particularly in exhibition layouts. Space, defining the interiority of architecture, possesses its own corporeality despite being intangible, qualities we could resume in the expression "body of space". Similarly, human bodies within architectural spaces form complex spatial relations, involving flows, movements, and temporal dimensions, shaping the "space of the body(s)".

This paper discusses a journey started in July 2022 with the workshop *The Space of the Body, the Body of Space. Dialogues between arts and architecture* at Iuav University of Venice, curated by Professor Renato Bocchi in collaboration with Valentina Rizzi. Thirty MA students in Visual Arts, Fashion, and Architecture from Iuav University, along with MA Spanish students from ETSAVA-Valladolid, participated. The workshop aimed to facilitate dialogue between architecture, visual arts, installations, and digital tools, exploring contemporary Spanish and Italian cultural trends.

The seminar commenced with theoretical discussions on enactivism, perception, nonhuman performativity, digital roles in installations, and architectural performance. Subsequently, six working groups, guided by Juan Carlos Quindós and Valentina Rizzi, developed projects focusing on Ca' Tron Palace, a building overlooking the Grand Canal. The resulting exhibition at Fondazione dell'Albero d'Oro showcased these projects. A second edition of workshop, named *DigitalStage*, also curated by Professor Renato Bocchi, took place in September 2023 at the Real Academia de España en Roma, involving PhD Architecture students from Sapienza University of Rome and DigitalStage research by Universidad de Valladolid.

These experiences aim to provoke reflections on how architectural space interacts with human bodies and fosters perceptual transformations. The proposal advocates for a transdisciplinary approach, blending theory with audio-visual materials from workshop outcomes.

Keywords: Performance, architecture, participation, embodiment, site-specific, workshop.

Lab Excursion between Art Installations, Built Space and Transformative Practices

The dialectic between the body and space is pivotal in shaping architectural design, whether it's for interior spaces or urban environments. Furthermore, these dynamic relationships are particularly crucial in the intricate process of designing exhibition layouts. The title of the project being presented encapsulates two distinct yet interconnected lines of thought and action.

Firstly, space, often perceived as the void within architecture, is far from being a mere emptiness. Instead, it possesses its own corporeality, albeit ethereal and intangible. This intrinsic essence prompts an inquiry into the nature of this "body of space" and how it can be conceptualised and articulated.

Secondly, the bodies of individuals inhabiting architectural spaces are anything but static. They act as the focal point of a complex web of spatial relations, encompassing flows and movements within the space. This dimension also incorporates temporal and performative aspects, adding depth to the exploration of a "space of the body(s)".

This article aims to document the insights gained from a series of workshops titled *The Space of the Body / The Body of Space*, which sought to delve into these relationships through theoretical discourse, experimentation, and practical application. To begin, it's essential to outline the theoretical foundations underpinning the project.

Theoretical Premises for Embodied Spaces

In the architectural design process, acknowledging the dynamic interactions among space, materiality, and atmosphere is essential for imbuing space with poetic attributes and activating its inherent qualities.

Peter Zumthor has delved deeply into these themes, advocating for a symbiotic relationship between form and meaning to unveil and amplify the poetic essence within architectural objects. Such properties can be unveiled and applied through the relationship with architecture and in the configuration of the subjects involved in the relationship as equivalent informants, as each other's inhabitants (Zumthor, 1998).

Within this dynamic, the presence of built space does not appear to be the result of an artificial construction process, but a natural extension of the territory. This leads to the "true thing" itself, often eclipsed by the contemporary system of sign references that dissipate its potential. It's the manner in which the body perceives, embraces, and interacts with its surroundings, setting off a resonance that stirs memories and evokes emotional responses (Zumthor, 1998).

The dimension of space as a physical-psychic entity, which shares much in common with the human experience in its structure and sensory nature, is extensively explored in the work of the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, who has always focused on design and its practices as a tactile organism and simultaneously a mental apparatus of the human experience (Pallasmaa, 2009). The fear of confronting the continuum of time in its material evolutions has deeply influenced the development of architectural poetics, which are closely linked to dematerialization and the pursuit of conceptual perfection. However, this underlying profound insecurity towards transformations exists. Pallasmaa (2012), on the other hand, emphasises the substantial value of not abandoning a material, corporeal sensibility in the approach to design, promoting the urge to reconsider the flow of time and its unexpected evolutionary potential in order to reconcile with it. Indeed, there is a symbiotic relationship between movement and architectural development that Pallasmaa conceives as a “predicate”, as a form of action, as a verb, the concrete realisation of movement and space as lived experiences.

Central to this interpretation is the figure of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for his conception of the body as the locus where intentionality is determined through the reciprocal interactions between self and the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). The author contends that the body is not merely a passive receptor onto which external stimuli are imposed, but rather, it serves as the primary site where our understanding of the world is shaped through our practical engagement with it. Merleau-Ponty considers the body to be a medium, not an object positioned passively before us or something that can only be examined externally. Mind and body are not to be seen in opposition because the mind cannot be detached from the body; it is situated within it, embodied. Therefore, the body is not an object situated within the world; it is our viewpoint on the world, our way of *being-in-the-world* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Similarly, corporeality cannot be experienced independently of the world; the body exists as situated within a context that both moulds and is moulded by the individual. Space emerges from the perception of our body in motion within it, actively engaging with it in a manner akin to biological and structural participation. The body shapes space, not as a static entity presented in its fully resolved complexity to the individual, but as a dynamic space that, due to its inherent connection with humans, is always inhabited, animated by the movements of a living body. Without this dynamic interplay, the same space would lack its distinctive identity and character.

In this sense, the body can be understood as both situated and a site. The exploration of the role of the senses within the context of design remains an essential theme in envisioning an architecture intimately intertwined with the body, embracing the embodied possibilities inherent in the discipline. From these theoretical underpinnings, there arises an insight into the integration of performative aspects within the design process, recognizing the body's presence and movement as central considerations.

The notion of architecture as a practice of movement can be traced back as early as the 1920s with the Bauhaus school, where Oskar Schlemmer's teachings amalgamated dance, movement, and design culture, thereby unveiling the potential implications for design and its operational forms. Buildings began to be perceived beyond their physical spatial confines, with endeavours aimed at transcending material boundaries and exploring new realms of architectural possibilities.

Figure 1

Bruce McLean, *Plinths*, 1971. (Photo: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/mclean-pose-work-for-plinths-3-t03274>).



For instance, consider the Gutai group and Saburō Murakami with their famous work *Passing Through* (1956), or the process-oriented investigations of Gordon Matta-Clark with his "architectural cuttings" (Richard, 2018). These cuts, thus violent mutilations of the building, facilitated the merging of exterior and interior spaces, often carrying political connotations. This mode of operation, termed "Anarchitecture," blends poetic and political engagement with humanity, a hallmark later embodied by the collective linked with 112 Green Street, of which Matta-Clark was a member.

Another intriguing illustration is the function of the *oblique* by Paul Virilio and Claude Parent (Johnston, 1996) which represents a radical dismantling of traditional architectural principles. They conceive of an architecture liberated from conventional walls, opting instead

for inclined planes that assimilate and accommodate the potential movements of the human body, thereby acknowledging its motor and performative capabilities. This perspective has initiated a fundamental reassessment of the connection between the body and architecture, acknowledging them as interrelated and mutually reliant dynamics.

Figure 2

Didier Fiúza Faustino, *Les Jetées*, 2012 (Photo: https://freight.cargo.site/t/original/i/49388cc3a3cfeaf5acdf469eb48fc68334629eb7870892d8e2afb2f5deb31f8a/FAUSTINO-Les_Jetees-02bis_HD.jpg).



As highlighted in an article from *The Funambulist* magazine (2023), the concept of the body as a viscous material, capable of assuming diverse forms depending on the surface it interacts with and the object it engages, consciously acknowledges the body's inherent tendency to establish harmonious and pleasurable connections with its surroundings. In fact, the article proposes an interpretation of the viscous potential of the body through three examples. The first one is *Research of Comfort in an Uncomfortable Armchair* by Bruno Munari in which he employs his body to subvert the essential functional purpose and seemingly flawed design of an armchair. Likewise, Bruce McLean in his piece *Plinths* (1971) employs three cubes as both pillars and guides for his movements. Originally conceived as a performance, later transformed into a series of "poses," it shares Munari's impulse albeit in a less explicit

manner, as the cube shape, not directly linked to a utilitarian object, makes the functional absence signalled by the intervention less clear (Figure 1).

The third case is that of Didier Fiúza Faustino's. His entire *Mesarchitecture* emphasises the relationship between the body and space with a language that blurs the boundaries between art and architecture, adopting a multifaceted and subversive approach that transcends normative constraints. Faustino's practice is highly performative, not only in the way the works are experienced but also in their nature and their connection to the surrounding context. His works consistently push beyond conventional understanding, both physically and conceptually (Figure 2).

Throughout these practices, recurring themes such as domesticity, the domestication of space, corporeality, and the subversion of norms provide a common thread. These approaches redefine design beyond traditional categorizations and encourage a rethinking of the fundamental relationship between the body and architecture. Thus, building upon the conviction of a mutual shaping of body and space, we have experimented with a methodology of investigation aimed at stimulating reflection on the extent to which architectural space depends on corporeal presence. Simultaneously, we endeavour to assess the degree to which architecture's capacity to influence the body and its perceptions can generate new dimensions in the experiential realm.

The Space of the Body / The Body of the Space. Process as Project

The limit is the true protagonist of space; just as the present, another limit, is the true protagonist of time (Eduardo Chillida in Bocchi, 2009, p. 107¹).

Based on the identified premises, the present contribution compiles the trajectory and workshop results of two experiments on the subject. The first took place in July 2022 in Venice, encompassing locations such as Ca' Tron and Palazzo Vendramin Grimani (Albero d'Oro Foundation), for students enrolled in the Visual Arts and Fashion Master's degree course at Iuav University of Venice and a few MA students in Architecture from ETSAVA - Valladolid.

The second occurred in September 2023 at the Real Academia de España en Roma, involving PhD students of Architecture - Theories and Project from Sapienza University of Rome. Adopting a methodology that integrates conceptual inquiries, somatic practices, and digital extensions, these workshops position themselves as a process-oriented exploration of encountering and unveiling a continuously evolving density. The objective was to provide participants with the opportunity to engage in practices of spatial measurement and

¹ Translated from the Italian by the author.

comprehension that transcend disciplinary boundaries, fostering a collaborative approach beneficial for both exploratory phases and the development of design outcomes.

Both workshops have been curated by Professor Renato Bocchi with the collaboration of Valentina Rizzi.

I Edition: “Dialogues between Arts and Architecture”, Venice

The first edition of *The Space of the Body / The Body of Space* unfolded between July 18th and 24th, 2022, in the spaces of Ca' Tron, a palace overlooking the Grand Canal in Venice's Santa Croce district. Ca' Tron stands out as a distinctive case within the Venetian landscape for several reasons. Primarily, despite its status as an institutional space owned by the Luav University of Venice, it has gradually fallen into disuse for educational purposes over the years, primarily serving as office space and occasionally hosting lectures or events.

Our very presence within these spaces can be seen as both a reactivation and a rediscovery of a place shrouded in shadows, safeguarded multiple times over the past fifty years from being sold off through collective initiatives led by the university community. At various levels and on numerous occasions, this community has thwarted attempts to dispose of the space by occupying it. Traversing these neglected spaces instilled a desire to observe, explore, and ultimately reclaim them. Thus, from its inception, the workshop was guided by the ambition to intimately engage with the unique identity of the venue. Within this framework, the workshop sought to delve into the intricate relationship between the body and space, fostering a dynamic and expansive dialogue encompassing architecture, visual and plastic arts, artistic installations, and digital and multimedia tools.

During the initial three days of the workshop, participants were immersed in substantial theoretical discussions² delving deeply into topics such as spatial and bodily perception, the intersection of architecture and performance studies, nonhuman interactions in visual arts and installations, as well as the integration of digital tools in artistic projects and exhibitions. Subsequently, six working groups initiated investigative projects focusing on performance and the digital and multimedia processing of the palace spaces. Finally, through a collaboration with Palazzo Vendramin Grimani – Fondazione dell'Albero d'Oro, the results were presented to the public in an exhibition (Figure 1).

² Contributions came from Fernando Zaparain, Jorge Ramos and Juan Carlos Quindós (Espaciar Research Group from the University of Valladolid), Raquel Sardà and Vicente Alemany (Faculty of Fine Arts in Madrid), Emanuele Arielli (Università luav di Venezia), Roberta Dreon (Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia), Cristina Barbiani (director of luav's Digital Exhibit Master), Klaus Obermaier (artist), Valentina Rizzi, Roberta Da Soller and Teresa Masini (PhD Students at Università luav di Venezia), Larisa Oancea Phd. We also had a guided tour of the Lucio Fontana/Antony Gormley exhibition curated by Luca Barbero at the Negozio Olivetti in Piazza San Marco.

The projects delved into various aspects unique to Palazzo Ca' Tron. They ranged from examining the physical and perceived boundaries and the transitions of windows, doors, and passageways, to exploring the notion of privacy associated with typically closed-off areas of the palace, such as its private quarters. Additionally, there was a focus on investigating the interactions between bodies and public space, attire, and sexuality. Moreover, students delved into the history of the building's occupancy through archival and sound research. Through the use of audio and video recording as tools for comprehending and engaging with space, the hidden intricacies within inhabited spaces, shaped by both our presence and past histories, have been unveiled. The resulting works epitomised the essence of the workshop, embodying successful interdisciplinary amalgamations through performances, documentation of performances, video pieces, and installations. Moreover, the exhibition presented an opportunity to devise an exhibition map that would interact with the works displayed at the Albergo d'Oro Foundation during that period by Bosco Sodi. This served as an additional site-specific endeavour, fostering a dialogue between the exhibited works, the final presentation, and the internal coherence in formal choices.

Figure 3

Final Exhibition 1st Edition, Palazzo Vendramin Grimani – Fondazione dell'Albero d'Oro, Venice (Photo: Juan Carlos Quindós).



II Edition: "Digitalstage", Rome

The second edition of the workshop, *Digitalstage*, took place at the Real Academia de España en Roma from September 11th to 17th, 2023.³ Echoing the dynamics explored in Venice with the spaces of Ca' Tron, the process of discovering the Accademia complex—a primarily cultural institution with limited access—engaged participants in a similar exploration. In this instance, the experience was conducted through the Doctoral Programme in Architecture "Theories and Design" at the University of Sapienza in Rome, aiming to propose innovative approaches to space and locales. Embracing a fresh site-specific perspective, the workshop delved into the intricacies and contrasts of a place shaped by histories of restructuring and juxtaposition. Specifically, the research sought to examine practices of design adaptation through digital devices and their interaction with corporeality.

Building on the explorations initiated in Venice with *The Space of the Body / The Body of Space*, the workshop continues its endeavour to furnish a theoretical and methodological framework. This framework, achieved through the comparison and synthesis of concepts and design strategies drawn from contemporary visual and performing arts and architecture, aims to facilitate the exploration of the dynamic relationship between body and space in live corporeal experiences. These experiences encompass various domains, including artistic installation, environmental art, digital exhibition and stage design, and interior architectural spaces. Within this research perspective, the contribution of modern and contemporary artists who have embraced the corporeal dimension as a reference and measure of architectural space, as well as a performative tool for perception, is paramount. Specifically, we examined the contributions of contemporary art research that immerse and engage viewers in a performative manner. This was contrasted with the focus on the spatial and bodily dimensions of experiences developed by certain contemporary architects in scenography and interior design. The communications analysed some experiences of performance art and theatre in their relationship with the architectural spaces that host them, such as Bruce Nauman's experiences in relation to Tadao Ando's exhibition spaces in Venice or Virgilio Sieni's experiences in relation to Rem Koolhaas' spaces at Fondazione Prada in Milan.⁴ Following the

³ The second edition of the workshop also benefited from the collaboration with the ESPACIAR research group from the University of Valladolid, which initiated the Digitalstage project in 2022. The choice of the workshop's title and objectives was also influenced by their presence and expertise.

⁴ Following the Venetian experience, we examined the comparison recently proposed by Luca Massimo Barbero between the work of Lucio Fontana and Antony Gormley and the spaces designed by Carlo Scarpa at the Negozio Olivetti in Venice; at the same time, we dealt with the presentation of historical experiences of interior design, scenography and environmental art in the Italian tradition; a series of experiences of contemporary Spanish art in the same fields, analysed by researchers from the ESPACIAR Research Group at the University of Valladolid; experimentation with the tools of Digital Exhibit proposed by the master's course of the same name directed by Cristina Barbiani at the Luav in Venice. The faculty was composed of Federica Andreoni (Accademia di Spagna), Cristina Barbiani

format established in the first edition, complemented by a series of lectures and debates featuring interdisciplinary discussions on these themes, the workshop involved the configuration of site-specific proposals for artistic interventions based on the history and the space of the Real Academia de España en Roma. These proposals were subsequently showcased on the final day in an exhibition held at the Academia itself (Figure 2).

Figure 4

Final Exposition 2nd Exhibition, Real Academia de España en Roma (Photo: Juan Carlos Quindós).



In this instance, working with PhD students of Architecture, it was essential to delve deeper into exploring insights from the realms of visual and performing arts that could inform a design approach more attuned to corporeal engagement. To achieve this, a workshop was organised with choreographer Lucia Di Pietro, who conducted a session on psychosomatic practices in relation to the architecture of the Academy. This experience enabled the group to

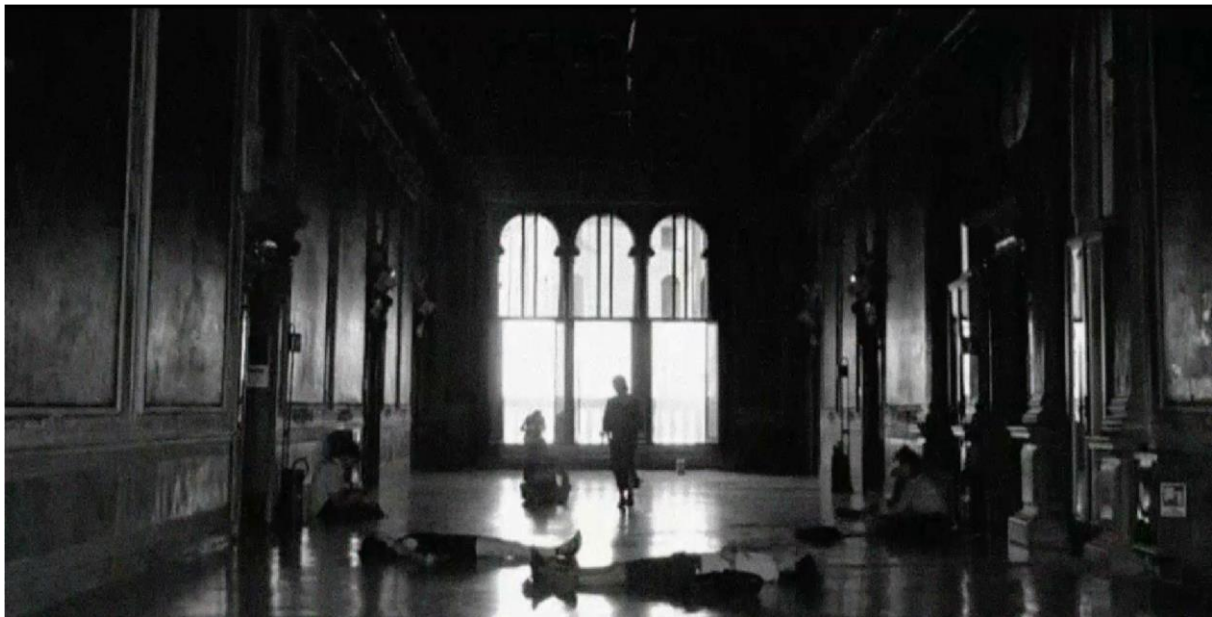
(Master Digital Exhibit luav), Lucia Di Pietro (Università luav di Venezia), Giulia Fegez (Università luav di Venezia), Filippo Lambertucci (Sapienza Università di Roma), Esther Pizarro (Universidad Europea de Madrid), Jorge Ramos Jular (Universidad de Valladolid – ETSAVA), Elena Roccaro (Università luav di Venezia), Fernando Zaparain (Universidad de Valladolid – ETSAVA). The final exhibition was coordinated by Juan Carlos Quindós, with the collaboration of Valentina Rizzi, Niccolò Pagni and Anna Ghiraldini.

broaden their perspectives on both conceptual and exploratory levels, transcending the conventional boundaries of the project. This activity proved to be crucial in unlocking the work and liberating it from conventional constructs. The realised projects explored the inhabitation of the academy's spaces, their appropriation, and revitalization through everyday gestures. Activities such as running, washing, sleeping, ranging from mockumentary to poetry, were employed. Another area of analysis focused on the materials and layers associated with the site's restoration. Significantly, a material and performative approach predominated in engaging with the spaces and uncovering them from a fresh perspective. Once again, mirroring the approach taken in Venice, the final day of the workshop was dedicated to publicly presenting the projects through an exhibition held within the spaces of the Academia. Each group was tasked with independently conceptualising an installation device tailored to their proposal.

Crossovers: The Projects

Figure 5

Occupazione Sonora by Collettivo Cuore, Ca' Tron 2022



The experiences here presented have been conceived as procedural practices, involving relational construction and progressive engagement with themes, places, and disciplines. The projects generated by this process advance along pathways that challenge the conventional configurations of space and the human body across various dimensions. These projects are conceived as means of extending spatial boundaries, employing liminality and projection in their interaction with the body, as well as in their approach to display and intervention techniques. They represent endeavours that delve into the concepts of plurality and reappropriation, tackling the essence of practices that explore the realms of physical and

psychological matter. Their aim is to extract dialogue and potential from these substances and materials, viewing them through somatic, political, and presentational lenses (Figure 3).

The projects developed by the participants in both courses found interesting declinations with respect to the ways of inhabiting and occupying spaces. It has been significant to consider the phases of renovation and integration within the architectural components comprising the venues, along with contemplating future projects envisioned for these spaces. These considerations prompted reflections on *being* in the space beyond its physical structure, perceiving it as membranous bodies and amplifiers. Consequently, there arose reflections exploring the inversion of perspectives, accentuating the potential of an institutionalised space and, consequently, the institutionalisation of bodies and actions within it (Figure 4).

Figure 6

Estudio 31-32-33, by Mattia Baldini, Lorenzo Casavecchia and Laura Mucciolo, Real Academia de España en Roma, 2023



Conclusions

The space of the body / The body of the space stands as a vehicle and experimentation of hybrid approaches to design, integrated and situated. The course, in its declinations to date, has brought out the richness of research in dialogue and the potential of integrating practice-based forms as an important and generative tool for the project in its complexity. An important aspect is tailoring the content and proposals according to the participants: in methodological consistency, it is necessary to develop strategies tuned to the skills and needs of the participants. The structuring of the workshops has proven to be robust and, functionally, open, even to last-minute adjustments and integrations.

In fact, bodily experimentation, the solicitations that play with and on the edge of display, visual acquisition and knowledge are part of a methodology of investigation that takes theory and history as an engine to unhinge thought and reactivate it in new forms. By abandoning the traditional tools for limited but intense segments of time, the tools themselves can then be seen to be declined in extended capacities, new to those who engage with them. It is not only by practising with the given instrument that it is refined. Whoever is confronted with the practices of the project, with the culture of the project, be it architectural or artistic, must form himself/herself as a critical protagonist of his own ideas within the context in which he places them. He/her must become the transformative thinker who draws on transdisciplinarity with a sense of respect and acceptance. The participatory value of such experiences confirms the drive towards a working choice beyond exclusivity and a conscious experimentation as an openness to expositional, social, communicative refinement.

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