

Freedom and Fulfilment of the Individual on the Limit between Collective Housing and the City Space

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Abstract

Free space is a very contemporary issue when it comes to the architectural debate; as architects, and more as humans of our times, we seek for free space in our cities, we long for enhancing our networks, opening our horizons, expanding our connections. City is more and more defined as porous, immersive, permeable, accessible, open. It becomes more and more complex to give a clear definition of the public realm, moreover in the sense of its extension and limits.

If, on one hand, it's clear that we live in such a "shared" and "sharing" era, on the other hand It's possible to consider the private quality of the dwelling still standing as a secure place throughout the fluid and pervasive pattern of the open urban space, and to consider the collective housing fabric, as in the past and potentially in the future, still acting as the rigid backbone of the urban framework.

In the interference between these two distinct entities, also stands the opportunity for a positive integration. What can be the narration of the public space gradually becoming private, and of the urban space gradually becoming domestic? How many different kinds of other spaces are we passing through? How many thresholds? Seeking to be able to read and discover the dwelling as existing together with its extension into the exterior, and the city as existing together with its extension into the interior, we can interpret the limit between the two - the urban space and the domestic space - in a gradient of different forms and grades of domesticity.

Keywords: Collective housing, Threshold, Domesticity, Narrative, Pilgrimage

On one hand, stands the individual, on the other hand, the city. The individual, as a subject, produces a certain range of actions related to the city; the city, as a subject itself, produces a range of effects on the individual. Both of them express their subjectivity, or their specific nature, and tend to get in contact one to the other; we could consider the individual as expressing

his own subjectivity through the action of "dwelling", and the city through the action of "housing". As far as "to dwell" implies the establishment of a meaningful relationship between man and a given environment" (Norberg-Schulz, 1993: 1), "to house" implies the providing of the space where this relationship, and every possible relationship, can take place, and

consequently it implies being the environment. Man has been dwelling on earth through time, according to the diverse geographic, climatic, cultural, economic conditions. In the contemporary western European city dwelling has been more and more connected with the more and more private sphere of the living, the emergence of the concept of the interior domestic space of the house went on simultaneously with the development of the definition of the exterior urban public space, the relationship between the two arising among the interesting matters of the architectural debate.

As this relationship happens, it is possible to define a certain kind of space, together with the opportunity to identify a number of characteristics.

1. Threshold as space

We could name this type of space "threshold"; "thresholds are anthropological invariants, they serve to delineate one place from another" (Sensual Design Studio, 2018: 7). The notion had been used by Dutch Team X architect Aldo van Eyck "to signify the relationship of different spatial and psychological registers and scales in the city" (Jaschke, 2009: 176). It's interesting to notice how, in fact, the space of the private realm (the house) and the space of the urban public realm are so different and distant in terms of scale and psychological register that it would be possible to consider them as extreme opposites, and how, therefore, these two notions could constitute a "twin phenomenon" (Van Eyck, 1962: 327): Interior vs Exterior, Domestic vs Urban, Private vs Public, Intimate vs Metropolitan are some of those which are worth to be analysed.

Through the physiological metaphor of the breathing, which happens only when working in the two directions, in and out, Van Eyck well explains the mutual relationship between the two entities of the interior and the exterior; one cannot exist without the other, and the effect that the twin action produces reverberates far over the action itself, producing a number of relevant side effects.

Van Eyck says that this space of relations could be "the built mirror of the human nature, so that men can identify with it" (Jaschke, 2009: 176). He is here suggesting a side outcome: while as individual one might identify in his own personal private space (the house), as an "urban" individual (meaning that specific individual which is engaging relations with the urban environment) one can identify himself within this "built mirror". Some shift of paradigm then happens: identity is not to be found in one specific place or time (and in a mainly ontological way), It descends instead from the condition of the individual put into some kind of relationship with a place, with a time, with other individuals.

When ecology got to be central in the cultural debate, together with the emergence of the theory of the complexity from authors such as Feyerabend and Prigogine, it became clear how the existence of the world, as we know and experience it, is a matter of interconnections and interrelations among its parts. The art also moved towards similar directions, in 1948 Alberto Giacometti put his thin figures together on a common base (the "piazza"), referring to the constitution of the space throughout proximity and sharing, while in 1971 Vincenzo Agnetti worked to his felts "Chi Entra Esce" (Whoever Enters Exits, ed) and "Chi Esce Entra"

(Whoever Enters, ed), pointing out how art derives its value from the engagement it can interlace with the public: as many and as more epistemological levels art can arise, the more it is valuable.



Fig. 1: Alberto Giacometti, *Piazza*, 1948 (source Guggenheim Museum) ©Giacometti

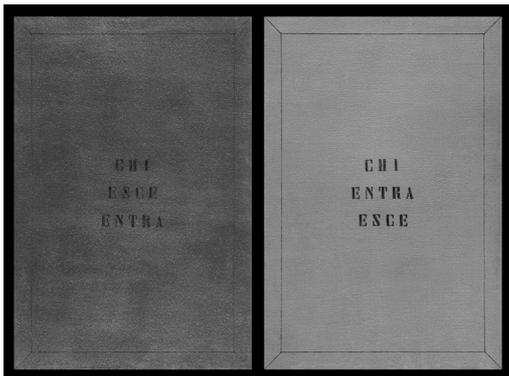


Fig. 2: Vincenzo Agnetti, *Chi Esce Entra, Chi Entra Esce*, 1971 (source <http://www.paperstreet.it>) ©Agnetti

1.1. Characteristic of the threshold

Threshold is usually to be interpreted in a linear way, from one point to the other, and according to this specific issue it seems even more fitting the matter: as "wanderers" men live the "dialectic of departure and arrival, of path and goal", as "the essence of the existential spatiality" (Norberg-Schulz, 1993, 24). Which are, in this speech, the departure, the path, and the goal? We may say the house is the very sacred space of the stillness and of the rest;

the urban space is the milieu of the infinitive choices for the "flaneur", it's where to get lost within the archipelago of the possibilities; the threshold is the place of the transition, where the path is linear and the sequence of the narration is dialectic.

Moreover, we may say the threshold is a space. We, then, may also say it shall have boundaries.

Some characteristics of the threshold space could be then expressed: it's in-between, it's interlacing relationships, it's connecting entities while blurring their boundaries, it's generating identity, It's producing urbanity, it's enhancing domesticity, it's enriching the transition.

Vittoria Di Palma, Diana Periton and Marina Lathouri in the introduction of the publication derived from the conference "The intimate metropolis: Domesticating the City, Infiltrating the Room" held at the Architectural Association in London in 2003, relate the term public to the term collective, and the term private to the term individual, ending up choosing the word "intimate" to identify their field of research as, seeing the city as a "continuously growing agglomeration of people, rather than as an abstract political entity" (Di Palma, Periton, Lathouri, 2009: 1), it "implies an unveiling of the self" (ibid.). This consideration makes, again, the issue of the subjectivity arise, considering how the individual is shaped by his relationship with the urban space of the city, and vice versa.

1.2. The passage from the house to the urban open space

Thresholds, where the getting home and getting out, exiting from the house and entering into the public space happen, may vary according to the

typology of the housing building. If we consider a single family house, the transition happens directly from the very private to the very public: though being potentially rich in terms of physical conditions, it mainly works on two communities: the family and the neighbourhood, then possibly divided into sub-communities according to different gradients of proximity. When considering a collective housing building, instead, we can list, at least, three kinds of communities: the very private of the family, the very public of the neighbourhood, and the semiprivate of the living community, all of the three again possibly divided into sub-communities according to the different gradients of proximity. Then, when it comes to co-housing experiences, the number of communities and sub-communities, and the gradients of proximity grow again.

In collective and communal housing buildings the common and shared space gain a specific importance according to the issue. Common and shared spaces can be analysed to better define the quality of the boundaries through the element of porosity, transparency, intimacy, velocity.

2. Housing as a typology

Within our western European culture, housing stands as one of the major issues in the architectural debate from the industrial revolution on, being the field for a wide range of experimentation.

It is interesting to notice how Carlos Martí Aris in his book "The Variations of the Identity" carries the discourse on until the last chapter without ever mentioning any house among his case studies (he only refers once to the

"sevillian" (of Sevilla) patio house as a model for the Spanish architectural language, from which the typologies of the monastery and of the public building derive. Though, in the last chapter, talking about the notion of "type" in modern architecture, he immediately starts with the vernacular example of the rural houses from Catalonia to explain the dichotomy expressed by Le Corbusier between "plan paralise" and "plan libre", then referring to Colin Rowe comparison between Le Corbusier's Stein Villa and Palladio's Villa Malcontenta, and finally expressing his critique on Peter Carter's narration of Mies Van der Rohe's Farnsworth House and Barcelona Pavillion, stating that, probably, the better solution would have been to explain the first as being only accidentally a house, while being the second essentially a house. It is then clear how housing stands clearly in the focus of the Modern Movement thought, interlacing, and maybe leading, the typological, cultural and theoretical development of the period.

2.1. Housing and thresholds

Already in the working class houses a rigid spatial distribution of the functions, in contrast with the mediaeval more fluid and undefined character of the inner space (commonly considered not more than a "shelter") leads the way towards the construction of the "working class city" of the middle XIX century, and then, together with better hygienic conditions of air and light, towards the "functional city".

Within the Modern Movement most of the "manifestos" were embodied in the design of the single houses or villas, while the collective housing, derived from the need of a quick and money saving post war reconstruction,

absorbing the Foucault's directives of order and function of the working class model and, together with the "grand ensembles" model of the monastery and the hospitals for the poor, offered the occasion to express "statements" related to the more critical issues of the cultural and practical conflicts that living together could arise (Corbellini, 2012: 7).

Foucault's mainly anthropological approach was then substituted by a strictly scientific and sanitary one: light, air and space were exactly measurable quantities, and could be easily related to their economic value.

Within the assumption of the Existenzminimum approach no space in the house was left for thresholds. In-between spaces were shrunk to the minimum, mainly corresponding to the line of the doorway or of the facade. The buildings often stand elevated from the ground.

In opposition to this paradigm of the separation (of functions - dwelling, working, recreation, transport - and of urban elements - buildings, ground, streets -), the Team X proposed to re-introduce the vernacular paradigm of the relationship between entities. The work of Aldo van Eyck and Piet Blom went in this direction, stating that a house should be like a small city, and a city like a large house.

3. Pilgrimage as paradigm

"Any other keyword leads the public discourse as the word "transparency" (Han, 2012:9); with an appearance of freedom, equity and clearness, transparency, though, leads to a loss of meaningful experiences. Directly and immediately imposed, without any scenic diaphragm, the reality loses its narrative, and ends up in a series of meaningless images. The result is the

one of the "ob-scenity" (lack of "scenity") where "the lack of spatial and temporal narration is obscene" (Han, 2012: 56).

The path instead, when leading to knowledge and appropriation, should be led in a succession of narrative moments. The pilgrimage represents the narrative event, it is strictly oriented and therefore not obscene: it is held in a series of scenic representation of specific passages, within the form of the narration and throughout the means of the scenography.

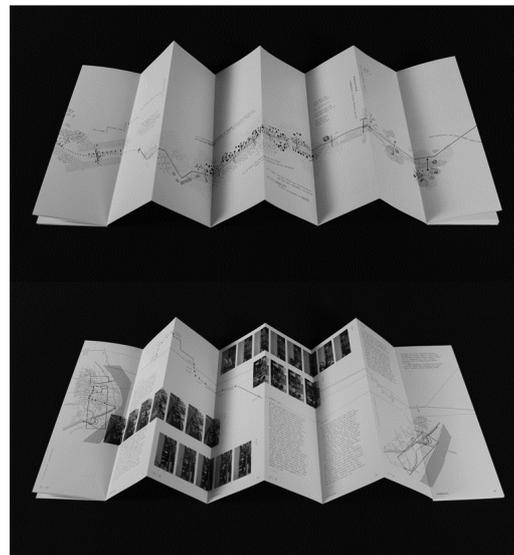


Fig. 3: MINDWALKS, Sensual City Studio, 2016 (source: www.sensualcitystudio.com)

To pass through a number of thresholds means encountering some kind of resistance, enhancing the conflictual negative value and therefore working against the equalization produced by the excess of transparency. Through a process of selection the narration of the space could take place, producing that stratification of history and of meanings which then generates the semantic enrichment needed to produce identity and fulfilment.

Moreover, new meanings can then

produce new passages and new thresholds, and so the pilgrimage can start over again and grow together with the growing of the individual.

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