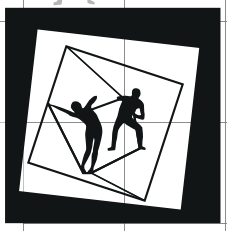
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IN-PRESENCE / THE BODY AND THE SPACE

The role of corporeity in the era of virtualization

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IN-PRESENCE / THE BODY AND THE SPACE

The role of corporeity in the era of virtualization

For those who deal with the city and the territory, space refers to the body
(C. Bianchetti)

The EURAU Milan 2024 Conference aims to unpack the significance of corporeality in contemporary times and its relevance for the upcoming years. Specifically, the focus is on the relation between body and space and how this relates to architecture, the city and the environment, interpreted as physical facts and processes. Within the background of a technological turn, the focus is now on what has changed or will further change in this relationship and what, on the opposite, remains unalterable, inherently bound to the material and impervious to the virtual.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

16 **MARCO BOVATI, ANNA MORO, DANIELE VILLA**
Spaces, Bodies, Design - A Multidisciplinary Perspective

21 / COMMITTEES

25 / KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

27 1 / CONCEIVED

29 ID002 NADIA AMOROSO
Visualizing climate action in urban design and landscape architecture. Strategies and impact

33 ID005 JOSEP MONTAÑOLA, MARGARET KRAWECKA, MAGDALENA SAURA
Architecture and corporeity. Towards a new concept of place-making

37 ID009 LAMIA ABDELFATTAH, MATTEO ARIETTI, ANDREA BALESTRINI, CHRISTIANE BURKLEIN, GIULIA CASTELLAZZI, DIEGO DEPONTE, ANDREA GORRINI, VIRGILIO DIAZ GUZMAN, ZAYNEB KADIRI, GIULIO MARZULLO, FEDERICO MESSA
The anatomy of public space. A multidisciplinary perspective

41 ID010 JORGE RAMOS-JULAR, FERNANDO ZAPARAÍN-HERNÁNDEZ
Body-space relations in Bill Viola's audiovisual scenographies

45 ID012 ZHENGWEN ZHU
Approaching the playground. Spatial practices for the body

49 ID020 MARÍA REDONDO PÉREZ
Products, atmospheres and interactions. Relations between the body and Light Art

53 ID023 DIANA SALAHIEH, LAYLA ZIBAR, IRENA FIALOVA
Exploring narrative research methods for an embodied reading of Prague's walkability

57 ID025 DANIELA COPPEDE PACHECO CIONI COPPOLA
Diagramming & mapping. The underlying system of architecture

61 ID028 ALESSANDRO DI EGIDIO
Fighting technological alienation. Performing media as a sustainable practice of human-machine symbiosis

65 ID034 SARAH JAVED SHAH, LIHENG ZHU
The [socio-cultural] production of space.
Doorstep: Exploring threshold in non-western contexts

71 ID035 FRANCESCA BERNI
The weather body, the water space. Exploring the landscape as technological environment

75 ID040 CIGDEM AKIFOGLU, PELIN DURSUN ÇEBI
Bodily experiences on paper space. Imaginary narratives

79 ID041 BEATRICE LAMPARIELLO, SILVIA GROAZ
From object to subject. The body architecture of Hans Hollein

83 ID042 LAURA SUVIERI
The silent body. Exploring the neglected nexus of type, materiality, and human perception in Carlos Martí Arís

87 ID044 INÊS SALGUEIRO, RUI AMÉRICO CARDOSO, LUÍS S. VIEGAS
On the importance of the body's experience in space and the act of drawing for the architectural conceiving process

91 ID046 MARIO COPPOLA
Coexistence: The goal of architectural composition now.
Architecture as trespassing tool to embrace culture, body, Earth

95 ID047 ANNA PROSKURIAKOVA
Reimagining interaction between Industrial heritage and human bodies. Revitalization of post-industrial areas as an opportunity for small and medium-sized Italian cities

99 ID048 NILSU ALTUNOK, PELIN DURSUN ÇEBI
Looking at the city from our body through the "Walkers' Handbook or a Walking Lexicon"

103 ID049 MINGYUE ZHANG, JIN BAEK
The body in architectural experience. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology interpreting the strolling spaces of traditional oriental gardens

107 ID050 ANTÔNIO FREDERICO LASALVIA
Paxton after Paxton: Form as formlessness in the dance of architecture

111 ID055 ROBERTO PODDA
Eye-foot-hand. Actuality of a phenomenology of bodily life in the "exponential" space

115 ID060 GAMZE SENSOY
Tracing the experience through the metamorphosis of body-space relationship

119 ID063 ZÜMRÜT SAHIN
The artist's studio unveiled. Exploration of practice, body, and space

125 ID067 RAFAËL MAGROU
Re-composing the theatrical space from the fourth wall

129 ID068 FRANCESCA CASALINO
Dancing bodies. Anna Halprin and her workshops at Dance Deck and beyond

133 ID071 EZGI SELIN KARADEM, ET AL.
How do we use our bodies to investigate our surroundings?
Deciphering the individual and collective narratives of the architects

137 ID072 BEATRICE-GABRIELA JÖGER
Between virtual and corporeality. Challenges in experiencing architecture today

141 ID073 ELIF CEMRE ÇELIKCAN
Spatial cognition and representation of a verbally experienced environment.
A study on preschool children's spatial construction through drawing

145 ID074 GEON-IL LEE, JIN BAEK
Questioning the meaning of 'atmospheric'. A foundational study on climatic approach to 'atmosphere'

149 ID081 ZÜMRÜT SAHIN, NILSU ALTUNOK, PELIN DURSUN ÇEBI, FATMA ERKÖK
Performing the everyday. Temporal spatiality constructed by body movements

153 ID085 YUE ZHONG
Touching the surface "Nahsicht" theory of Alois Riegls in tactile interaction between body-space

157 ID087 VALENTINA RADI
Generative thresholds. The simultaneity of passages

161 ID090 FRANCESCA COPPOLINO, VINCENZO VALENTINO
Spectrographies. Body, cinema, memory in the architectural project

165 ID095 ANDREA CRUDELI
The corporeal imagination of tactility. The methodology of Harquitectes

169 ID096 PABLO BERZAL CRUZ
Performing space. An approach to architecture through performance

173 ID097 MELIKE NUR SAHIN
Transformation of the objective-subjective dialectic in the body-space relationship throughout architectural periods

177 ID099 MARTINA CARANDENTE, ANNUNZIATA AMBROSINO
Space and rhythm. The cult of the body

181 ID102 FULYA SELÇUK, FERHAT HACIALIBEYOĞLU
From me/my body to margin: Discovering the minor spatialities of daily life through subjective trajectories

185 ID105 DEMET SATI, PELIN DURSUN ÇEBI
Rethinking the body-space dynamic: Space as a body.
A comprehensive investigation through phenomenology and language

189 ID108 VOICA MARIUS, MARIA TÎLVESCU-NICULA, MARIA-CRISTINA CLENCIU
Unique experiences in the approach of architectural education

193 ID109 LINGZHENG ZHU
Writing as Cosmogenesis. A Chinese genealogy of bodily traces in digitally augmented spaces

199 ID110 SIMONA CAPALDO
The transitional project for disused buildings. An alternative to the vulnerability of bodies and spaces for another way of doing architecture

203 ID115 TIANQIN CHEN, ANTÓNIO CARVALHO
Integration of aesthetics and accessibility. Enhancing living spaces for ageing communities

209 ID117 PAOLA BUCCARO
Beyond the threshold: The effects of the dematerialisation on the relationship between city and home

215 ID120 FRANCESCO TOSETTO
Natural tension. Myth, shape, body

217 ID127 LEONOR REIS, CARLA GARRIDO DE OLIVEIRA, FILIPA DE CASTRO GUERREIRO
Fragmented narratives: Drawing memory and time in the scarp of Fontainhas

221 ID129 ESTHER LORENZ
The Augmented Kinesthetic City. Embodied experience of Hong Kong's urban morphology

225 ID130 SEGAH SAK
Ankara train station as a locus of conflicts

229 ID132 AI CHENG, WU YUE, FILIPPO ORSINI
The interplay of action art and architectural spatial practice. A case study of Chengdu

233 ID134 ANGELO GANAZZOLI
The tomb as an architectural garrison in the era of virtualization.
The recovery of the sacred dimension of architecture

237 ID135 TIAGO ASCENSAO
Ready-made architectural processes: Re-signification of reality as a solution

241 ID137 SARA GALANTE DE CAL
From 'common place' to a 'place in common' through architectural design

245 ID139 GIACOMO D'AMICO, ROSA MARINA TORNATORA
Designing beyond Earth. An evolution in body-space-architecture paradigm
for space design

249 ID142 MARTINA RUSSO
Ludomestic. Critical perspectives on dwellings, from standardization to
Reversible Destiny lofts by Arakawa+Gins

253 ID148 MARTINA CRAPOLICCHIO, SANTIAGO GOMES, ROSSELLA GUGLIOTTA
Elements of everyday life. Domestic spaces and actions in a pedagogical experiment

257 ID150 JEONGHEE KO, BAEK JIN
Reimagining Myeongdong. An act-oriented approach to urban resilience and adaptation

261 ID153 LUÍS CARLOS BUCHA
The shell as spatial emergence: A house for and from the body

265 ID173 YIDAN LIU, MARCO BOVATI, PAOLO VINCENZO GENOVESE
Cultural narratives in transitional spaces of Miao Villages.
A case stundy of Guzang Festival and Jiubai Village

269 ID174 CARLA COLLEVECCHIO
Corporeal landscapes: Sculpture as a pedagogical device

275 ID177 MARIA LUNE NOBILE
The city as a laboratory. Investigating body space interactions in the contemporary city

281 ID181 BILGE CAN, FATMA ERKÖK
Critical potentials of embodied mind through the works of Raumlabor

285 ID184 MARGARITA DANOU, SEVINA FLORIDOU
Voroklini coastal promenade and re-configuration of the Verki coastal estuary

289 ID190 ELIF CEMRE ÇELIKCAN, ASLIHAN SENEL
Spatial correlators in the functioning of autobiographical memory:
wandering through Virginia Woolf's home

293 ID194 OZAN AVCI
The Body as the site of architectural knowledge

299 ID205 MICHELA BAROSIO
Types, codes and algorithms for a perception's centered design

303 ID206 GIANLUIGI DE MARTINO, VIVIANA SAITTO, STEFANO GUADAGNO
Not only human. Not only terrestrial. Teaching through the measurement
of body and space

307 ID212 CLAUDIA PIRINA, GIOVANNI COMI
To the rhythm of dance. Interactions between body, light and architecture

311 ALISIA TOGNON
1/ ENDNOTES

313 2 / INTER-ACTIVE

315 ID004 LUCA LAZZARINI, GLORIA LISI, MARO MAREGGI
The Walking Body. A reflection on the walking–design relationship based on the experience of Laboratorio del Cammino

321 ID006 DAFNI RIGA
Bodies on the move. Exploring the effects of speed in the body-space relationship

325 ID008 ALBA BALMASEDA DOMÍNGUEZ
Bodies, water and the city: Collective bathing in urban surroundings

329 ID021 NICOLETTA BRANCACCIO
Embodying the oblique. How space coding and construction of reality can explain the relation between space and emotions

333 ID024 BELEN ZEVALLOS BORGES
Making a case for space in schools. The learning landscape of Wütoschingen

337 ID030 SIDDHARTH SRIVASTAVA
The body and its urbanity. Cities in India

341 ID033 YOURI SPANINKS AMARO
The body is the machine. Interpreting Lisbon's threshold spaces through corporeity

345 ID036 CAROLA D'AMBROS
How body shapes architecture. The immersive experiences of Villa Fontana and the Twin Villas

349 ID037 SILVIA SFLIGIOTTI
The art of arriving. A somatic approach to a critical understanding of the built environment

353 ID039 BUKET SAMANCI, IREM SÜTÇÜ
Dynamic interactions between boundary and the body: Instantaneous spatial formations

357 ID045 SUSANA VENTURA
The composition of architectural sensations: Blocks of intensive body-space and their potential to transform environmentally-sensitive architecture

361 ID054 CHRISTINA GEORGA
When cinema introduces the new embodied spatial experience. Regaining hapticity through the cinematic lens of Michelangelo Antonioni

365 ID058 RAFFAELLA CAVALLARO
The pedagogical value of the body in the design of contemporary learning spaces. Giving the child back his ninety-nine worlds

371 ID059 ROBERTO JUAN CARDINI
Interactions in the processes of occupation and appropriation of space. Interpretation of practices in the Mercato Sonato, Bologna

375 ID065 IPEK ÖZER
Reading body and place relationship through public art

379 ID069 SEÇIL YATAN GÜL, ASLIHAN SENEL
Notational Drawing. A study of an embodied knowledge of architectural space

383 ID070 FRANCESCO IULIANO
The interaction inhabitant-space as a design tool. How an inhabitant-centred design approach can shape the renewal of the existing building stock

387 ID080 NATALIA MATESANZ VENTURA
Affecdent bodies and spaces in the reshaping of the established city. Urban communes and counter-drag in the free city. San Francisco, 1966-75

391 ID084 INÊS SALEMA GUILHERME, RUI JORGE GARCIA RAMOS, GISELA LAMEIRA
Everyone and everywhere. Intergenerational practice as evidence of the bodies in the space

395 ID086 GIULIA AZZINI
The human scale of riverscapes. A body-centered perspective for fragile territories

399 ID092 THIRUNESHA NAIDOO
Interactive designed public spaces: Shaping Melbourne's general markets through performativity and performance

403 ID093 CASSANDRA COZZA
Children architectures. Spaces for discovering and caring inhabited by different and changing corporealities

409 ID100 GIANFRANCO ORSENIGO
"You must have been there". Designing re-socializing spaces within prisons

415 ID106 FRANCESCA MUSANTI, ANDREA MANCA, CLAUDIA PINTOR
Sensitive places. A phenomenological perspective for accessible design

419 ID124 MAHDI ALIZADEH
The pursuit of presence in Siza's architecture. A phenomenological narrative of Piscina das Marés

423 ID131 MARIA OLIVEIRA EPIFÂNIO DA FRANCA, ANA SOUSA BRANDÃO ALVES COSTA
A journey around my apartment. The relationship between dwelling and the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown

427 ID136 ELEONORA ANTONIADOU
The body as a tool in architectural pedagogy. Global tools Body Workshops

431 ID140 GLORIA CALDERONE
Designing bodies: New challenges for a more corporeal urbanism

435 ID141 ANDREA SCALAS
Grounding. Body and contact with prehistoric matter

439 ID155 ANDRÉS SEÑORET
Does social interaction at a street level promotes community ties? Density, diversity, bodies and affect in neoliberal downtown Santiago

443 ID157 ANDREA MANCA
The maieutic value of form. A genealogical ramification of engagement in architectural and urban project

447 ID166 BARBARA COPPETTI
Retrospective | Prospective. The body inhabits the world

451 ID170 JAVIER SÁNCHEZ MERINA
Microarchitectures. Exploring intimate connections between body, space, and the understanding of diverse realities

455 ID171 PAOLA SCALA
Traces, bodies and the public space

459 ID172 YIORGOS HADJICHRISTOU
Body in space. Space as a body. Interaction of bodies in Malleable courtyards

463 ID182 BILGE CAN, FATMA ERKÖK
Searching for the traces of avant-garde theory in practice. A parallax view of Diller and Scofidio

467 ID191 E. BURCU ERYILMAZ
Les immatériaux and the paradigm of interaction

471 ID193 ORFINA FATIGATO
Project as a process of transition: Precision, adaptability, indeterminacy

477 ID195 SORAIA PATRÍCIA ANTUNES DOS REIS, CARLA GARRIDO DE OLIVEIRA , FILIPA DE CASTRO GUERREIRO.
Cross-border cooperation: For a sustainable territorial planning. Insights from Rio de Onor and Rionor de Castilla in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula

481 ID200 NEIL LAMB, WHITNEY BEVAN, MARÍA JOSÉ MARTINEZ SANCHEZ
Enhancing student learning, inclusivity, and a sense of belonging in higher education through community engagement and civic projects

485 ID203 GERARDO SEMPREBON, CHANG LIU, ZHI LEI
The enigma of density. Testing design proposals to revitalize Hua'anli urban village (Wuhan)

489 ID216 CRISTELLE LECOEUR
First semester in architecture: A body confronted with the reality of suburban spaces

492 STEFANO SARTORIO, FRANCESCO AIROLDI
2/ ENDNOTES

495 3 / AFFECTED

497 ID007 AIKATERINI ANTONOPOULOU, SEBASTIAN AEDO JURY
The body of the crowd as a cartographic tool through the Kill the Bill movement in Bristol

501 ID027 JULIA NERANTZIA TZORTZI, MARIA STELLA LUX
Citizens as main characters in urban adaptation. People's experience and contribution in the development of Decision Support Systems

505 ID056 ALESSANDRO GAIANI
Post natural inclusion

509 ID061 CINDY MENASSA-KÜELBY
Rethinking design: Body, behavior, nature, and our role in balancing ecosystems

513 ID062 FRANCESCA DI FUSCO
Interdisciplinary dialogue: Body, space and well-being. The impact of architectural and urban configurations on paces of care

517 ID078 SARA NAFI
Exploring the synergy between transit-oriented development and architectural humanism. Qatar's transit evolution: bridging architecture and urban living

521 ID079 CICEK KARATAS
Navigating fragility and urban memory: The role of the Beledna Memory Map in preserving intangible cultural heritage post-earthquake in Antakya, Hatay, Turkey

525 ID089 FRANCESCA MELINA
A paradigm of the contemporary city: Temperature as embodied perception

529 ID091 ZHENG WU
Wind-driven urban design. Design urban ventilation corridors from the block scale

533 ID098 DANIELA BUONANNO, LUCIANA MACALUSO
Tree-space-body. Urban forestry in Naples and Palermo

537 ID101 DEEMA ALATTAR
Examining outdoor thermal comfort and the use of public transportation system: A sustainable approach for Qatar's rapidly evolving cityscape

541 ID118 CATARINA FREITAS, GISELA LAMEIRA
Visual urban quality and health. A pre-intervention analysis method

545 ID121 GENNARO VITOLO
Contemplation and rebirth: Cemeteries between atmospheres and inner journeys

549 ID122 GRETA CALIENDO
Cultural heritage and public space. Affecting social complexity of Contemporary City

553 ID138 FRANCESCA ZANOTTO
Diverse bodies, multiple scales: Architectural strategies for urban biodiversity

559 ID144 GIOVANNI COMI
Thinking in architecture. Matter as mediation between body and nature

563 ID152 ALESSANDRO FRIGERIO, LAURA MONTEDORO
Overtourism in UNESCO sites and its effect on urban public space. An EU project experience of research by design in Athens, Florence and Krakow

569 ID158 AYELEN BETSABE ZUCOTTI
The tags associated with the Munch Museum and its relationship to the Oslo community

573 ID159 KRYSTALLIA KAMVASINOU, LORENZO STEFANO IANNIZZOTTO
Bodies in the Void: Addressing socioecological challenges through temporary practices in *Terrain Vague* sites

577 ID168 NADIA MOUNAJJED
The body and the architectonics of the desert

581 ID179 FRANCESCO AIROLDI
Every-Body. Spatial education as a co-design strategy for disaster risk reduction, disaster risk mitigation, and climate change adaptation

585 ID180 HOCINE ALIOUANE-SHAW
Using situated pedagogies and the concept of interdependence to engage with the environment and call its future into being

589 ID186 SILVIA DI MAURO
Relational stratifications. Body-centered approaches for an adaptive reuse strategy

593 ID189 ALESSANDRA SWINY, MARIA HADJISOTERIOU, TERESA TOURVAS
Unsettled. Creating community in a displaced environment

597 ID209 SILVIA BASSANESE
Bodies - Figure[s] - Ground[s]. Practices that enable conflictual society to find form of coexistence

601 ID210 ALISIA TOGNON, EKIN OLCAY
Mountainous Mastery. Architectural adaptations and urban fabric in Trentino's challenging terrain

607 ID213 YI GUO
The affected body in hyper-dense urban habitats: Exploring embodied architectural experiences in Hong Kong and Shenzhen

610 SILVIA DI MAURO, KEVIN SANTUS
3/ ENDNOTES

613 **4 / VULNERABLE**

615 ID017 ALLANA AVILA DORNELES
Vulnerability and Neuroarchitecture. Approaches to care in healthcare environments: a narrative review

621 ID032 MICHELA BASSANELLI, CAROLA D'AMBROS
Bodies, Work, Care. How office and domestic space is changing

625 ID043 NADIA MOUNAJJED
Pedagogies of care: Practices and methods for a non-ableist body-centered design

629 ID052 LUCA LANA
The Gardening Body: The queer ecology of Prospect Cottage

635 ID053 FABIOLA CRISTALLI
Sewing along the borders. Spaces and identities in and through modern cross-border cities

639 ID066 GAMZE AKYOL, EKIN OLCAY
Echoes of heritage: Navigating the intangible heritage and urban memory in the post-disaster

645 ID077 ANGELA COLUCCI, ANTONELLA CUPPARI, ANNA SCHELLINO
Diversity as a resource for inclusive public city. Exploratory walks for public city co-production and co-design

651 ID088 SARA RICCARDI
The invisible ones: Bodies and spaces of the Italian prison in the 21st century

655 ID104 CLAUDIA PINTOR, ANDREA MANCA, FRANCESCA MUSANTI
As many people, in as many places, as possible. A hypothesis of phenomenological approach to accessible project

659 ID114 FRANCESCA RIPAMONTI
Shaping new and diverse gestures. A qualitative approach to the design of Healthcare Centers

663 ID116 INÊS ANDRADE, LUCIANA ROCHA
Architecture in conflict. Dichotomies on current challenges in state-subsidized neighbourhoods in Oporto, Portugal

667 ID126 MARIO GALTERISI
Built spaces, vulnerable bodies. A study on the influence of stigma in architecture

671 ID133 MICHELA VANDA CASERINI
Beyond the ring-road: Ethnographical reading of a spontaneous settlement in Maputo

675 ID146 FIDEL MERAZ, ELEONORA NICOLETTI, MERATE BARAKAT
Architectural inclusivity: Adaptive spaces for aural wellbeing of individuals with dissimilar sensorium

679 ID147 MARGARIDA PINHAL, FILIPA DE CASTRO GUERREIRO, CARLA GARRIDO DE OLIVEIRA
The palimpsest, strategies to drawing multiples spaces to multiples communities. Martim Moniz, Lisbon

683 ID160 ARIANNA SCAIOLI
Empowered bodies. The legacy of Tschumi's work as a driver for social and spatial transformation

687 ID161 MARIANA AGUIAR ANTUNES, CARLA GARRIDO DE OLIVEIRA, FILIPA CASTRO GUERREIRO
Res-publica: The social role of architecture and urban design in the production of public housing in Porto

691 ID162 EMILIA CORRADI, CAMILLO FRATTARI
Addressing vulnerability through place-based knowledge and co-design practices

695 ID169 SILVIA DI EUSANIO
Rethinking urban spaces: An intersectional perspective

699 ID178 CAMILLA CASONATO
Standing around the model. Bodies, participation, and landscape representation

703 ID185 ANGELA KYRIACOU PETROU, MARIA HADJISOTERIOU
Design practices of inclusion

707 ID187 SAMER WANAN
Child's play in the Palestinian landscape: On vulnerability & attachment

711 ID198 FRANCESCO STEFANO SAMMARCO, ANNA TERRACCIANO
From Limit to Limine. Piazza D'Armi in Nola: from marginal place to new gateway to the city

715 ID201 CAMILLA CASONATO, ERICA CANTALUPPI
Heritage, community, and education. The case of Museu da Citade in Sao Paulo

719 ID202 GERARDO SEMPREBON
Architectural design to regenerate fragile buildings in rural China

723 ID208 MARIA FIERRO
The "invisible" spaces of marginality: The case of Roma communities

727 ID214 DIOGO FARIA
Queer spaces of the cityscape of Funchal

730 ARIANA SCAIOLI
4/ ENDNOTES

733 **5 / AUGMENTED**

735 ID011 ALEKSANDAR DUNDJEROVIC, STEPHEN SIMMS, MARIA MARTINES SANCHEZ
Body-centred strategies of urban scenography and cybernetic theatre: Two practice-based research case studies 'The Cybernetic Cabaret' and 'Looking for Andy'

739 ID013 ASMA MEHAN
Corporeality in Virtual Spaces: An exploration through AR/VR Technologies

743 ID014 AARON PATERSON, MARIAN MACKEN, SAROSH MULLA
Embodied Drawings and Virtual Twins

747 ID015 TINO GRISI
The generative artificial intelligence as tool of human augmented intuition and sensitivity in architecture

751 ID016 ADELFERNANDO AL BLOUSHI
Virtual postures. Presence and simulated spatial phenomena

755 ID018 JENNIFER SHIELDS, ANNA OSELLO
Cultural heritage and augmented, mixed, and virtual realities: Accessibility and inclusion for people with disabilities

759 D019 STEFANIA RASILE
Architecture, death and the digitalization of memory: Cemeteries in virtual commemoration times

763 ID022 ANDREEA-GABRIELA NISTORESCU (MARINESCU)
Synthesis and synergy. The role of human-centered design in interior architecture and the dynamic interplay between physical and virtual environments

767 ID029 NERANTZIA TZORTZI, TARA SAHAFIAN
Analysis of water element integration in the architecture and landscape of Persian Gardens amid the hot and arid climate of the Iran's desert

771 ID038 JUAN CARLOS DALL'ASTA, JOHN LATTO
Reimagining body-space dynamics: Lessons from Shanghai, the contemporary land of Toys

777 ID051 ELENA ROCCHI, ELIZABETH LERMAN
Principled innovation in immersive learning environments: A roadmap for transformative change at Arizona State University's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts using "technologies of human expression"

783 ID075 CUI LIU, ZHIYUAN GU
An assessment framework of physical-virtual publicness in public space

787 ID076 MAGDALINI GRIGORIADOU, GIORGOS LOUKAKIS, THEMISTOKLIS LEKKAS
Beyond reality: Exploring embodiment-disembodiment in mixed reality environments with non-euclidean geometries, innovative navigation modalities and perceptual dissociation in video games

793 ID111 VALENTINA RIZZI, DANIEL BARBA-RODRÍGUEZ
Virtualizing bodies in transformative platforms of corporeality: Embodied visualisation over flesh boundaries

797 ID113 ANDREEA ROBU-MOVILA
Neuroarchitecture. From effective computing to affective computing in the design process

801 ID128 SARA ANNA SAPONE
Transformation of an anthropic ecosystem. Essemburg Park between physical experience and digital representation

807 ID156 SARA CODARIN, KARL DAUBMANN
Humanizing VR: Foregrounding the role of the body in digital twins

811 ID163 GIOVANGIUSEPPE VANNELLI, MONICA ROSSI-SCHWARZENBECK
When the body-space relationship needs wider understanding to foster participation.
A strategy to integrate reality, virtuality and stakeholders in post-disaster design

815 ID176 DARIA BELKOURI, PRITCHARD DOUGLAS
Reclaiming the city for people. Digitisation of city walks to enhance urban co-creation

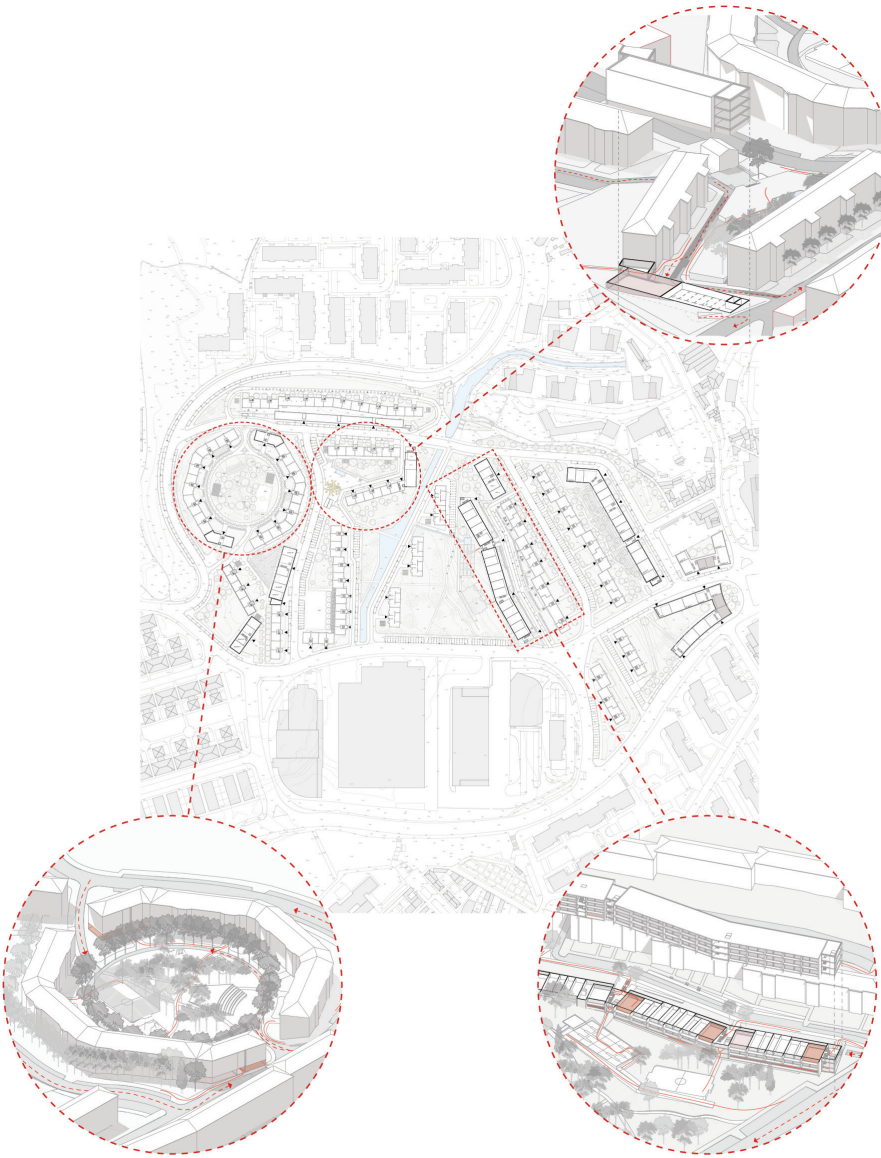
819 ID183 CAROLINA PACCHI
Just cities in the digital era. Hybrid spaces, bodily presence and planning

823 ID192 ALVARO GONCALVES, PEDRO GUILHERME, SOFIA SALEMA
Rescuing an Unfinished Vision: A representation of the semi-dome of the Malagueira neighbourhood through Immersive Virtual Reality

827 ID199 MARKELLA MENIKOUI, ADONIS CLEANTHOUS
Prosthetic intelligence: Bridging the corporeal-ethereal gap in perceptions of space making

831 ID204 PRITCHARD DOUGLAS, DARIA BELKOURI
Assessing quality in the convergence of the physical and virtual:
Challenges and imperatives

834 GERARDO SEMPREBON
5/ ENDNOTES



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Res-publica:
The social role of architecture and urban design in the production of public housing in Porto

Key Words
Housing, Densification, Addition, Neighbourhood

Architecture at the core of public housing

The design competition for affordable housing and urban regeneration in Lordelo do Ouro (Porto, Portugal) [1], sets the ground for reflection over the issues concerning public-commissioned housing settlements as articulators of urban and social (dis)continuities, centering the discourse in the relationships between vulnerable bodies and vulnerable places, and the social responsibility of designers at the forefront of care.

The ongoing discussion concerning public housing deals with calls for regeneration and further densification as key-interventions to consolidate and 'stitch' together the vast and detached settlements with the surrounding urban tissue. Our research features the city of Porto, in which a considerable amount of the large public housing settlements have partially preserved their peripheral condition, while being assimilated by the surrounding urban tissue despite never experiencing effective integration within their social and physical context.

The call for proposals is carried out in the area encompassing the already inhabited Pinheiro Torres and Lordelo public housing settlements. The Competition's Preliminary Program – in written terms - and Reference Solution – a guiding masterplan – ascertain the construction of ca. three hundred new housing units within five new housing blocks – including two high-rise and three high-density horizontal blocks - framed by the city's Director Plan, defining the area as one of "detached buildings, where collective housing prevails" [CMP 2020, p. 7]. Furthermore, the plan defines the restructuring of roads, the unearthing of Ribeira da Granja water canal, and including a call for landscape and urban design projects for the public areas among new and existing blocks.

Contextualizing vulnerability

After contextualizing and carefully analyzing the competition's terms, we question, however,

wether these generic recommendations suffice to ascertain the interventions would be provided with the desirable quality of a prosperous neighbourhood.
Furthermore, we question the adequacy of both terms and reference solution while intervening in apparently detached territories, without further enhancing urban discrepancies and vulnerabilities, and leading a comprehensive approach towards successful urban re-integration.
We pose these interrogations while simultaneously observing the site encompassing Pinheiro Torres and Lordelo public housing blocks, appearing as testimony of the Municipality's inability to successfully manage and care for public space and built environment, effectively extending to the bodies inhabiting the space – despite the place's inextricable qualities, its peripheral condition, difficult spatial integration and the stigma associated with public housing have become key-factors to perpetuate several forms of vulnerabilities.
We proceed to re-define the approach to a design competition for public housing: our aim is not to produce any solutions to the rather contentious guiding terms adopted by the Municipality of Porto, but alternatively propose a solid base to ground possible interventions – addressing desirable qualities of spaces for living, overcoming the generic and neutral user and, finally, overcoming the difficult integration and social-urban stigmatization associated with public housing in Porto.

Research-by-drawing
Grounded on the affirmation that space is not neutral, we start by addressing the inhabited neighbourhoods of Lordelo and Pinheiro Torres within their wider urban context and then at the intermediate scale, while undertaking an exercise of ideographic description [Viganò 2010], confronting the lines of (architectural) design with the lines of (human) desire. The research-by-drawing modus operandi [2] produces a base for prospective futures, gradually revealing the place's potential and frailties, its pre-existing urban structure, drawing our interest for "everything that, until then, has provided a place for shelter and reunion, and has been able to seduce" its inhabitants [Lacaton, Vassal, Druot 2016, p.100].
On a wider scale, we realize that in a short period of 70 years, this previously industrial and agricultural periphery has experienced swift densification, particularly intensified by large public housing settlements spreading across Lordelo do Ouro and Foz parishes, and preserving one of the inner city's most important natural structures. However, other important urban and living functions failed to keep up with such rapid growth, relegating the place to a mono-functional, peri-urban and poorly connected *grand-ensemble.* [3]
When we zoom into an intermediate scale and to the space-between-buildings [Gehl 2011], we identify spaces of congregation and places for shelter, namely the chapel or the small groceries shop/caffee at the neighbourhood's core, as well as a series of unbalanced situations – such as the inappropriate use of public space for parking, or the lack of compromise between the built environment, the public space and the way people are using it everyday: there have been transformations and diversity in living habits which both buildings and public space have not been able to respond to.
Additionally, the inevitable association between public housing and social and intersectional vulnerabilities effectively meant the contextualization of vulnerable bodies in Lordelo do Ouro - (perhaps reproducing one another?) - resulting in stigmatization of both inhabitants and neighbourhood.
We argue that the corpus of material information we gathered, both on the place's inextricable potential and vulnerabilities, but also on the ways bodies participate, appropriate and modify the place they inhabit, should ground the terms for a design competition – or, in broader terms, any type of intervention - aiming to act in public space and, particularly, when it comes to (re) designing and (re)defining a housing settlement, minding every aspect such program entails, and re-directing the disciplinary discourse to undertake the responsibility to care for vulnerable people and places.

Project strategy
Therefore, we question the adequacy of a standard Preliminary Program and Reference Solution, exclusively based on generic principles for urban composition and quantitative parameters. Alternatively, we propose a strategy addressing the construction of additional housing units and the effective (re)definition of shared places, allowing space for new communal practices to flourish and reproduce.
Thus, our strategy is based on the idea of balanced densification [4], a proposal for urban addition grounded on the following principles:
Short-term:
• Redefining streets and paths: addressing both vehicles and pedestrian flows, and liberating space from inappropriate use [poor car parking...];

• Clarifying space-between-buildings: effectively shaping and giving defintion to space through new constructions (housing units); avoiding leftover and "multi-purpose" spaces; attributing functions and levels of use to space;
• Reorganizing densification: suggesting the association of smaller neighbouring units within the wider neighbourhood, congregating present and future inhabitants, by creating new spaces for reunion (communal studies, shared laundries, plots for communal gardening and farming) both in new buildings and in recently liberated space-between-buildings;
Long-term:
• Readdressing existing built environment: promoting effective improvement and updated quality living standards for pre-existing buildings;
• Permanent reassessment of public realm: an on-going process of constant adaptation of spaces according to ever-changing paradigms (What to do with leftover parking space in a potentially less car-centered future neighbourhood?)
Nevertheless, we stress the importance that these principles imply a drawn solution, and the articulation of both should allow proposals to overcome quantitative parameters and generic guidelines.

The added value of a body-centered approach
In essence, we believe our proposal to be a body centered approach, where the research-by-drawing method reflecting the blueprint of bodies in space, together with the definition of a process strategy for public housing, should be able to respond and overcome the cycles of reproduction of social-spatial vulnerabilities: we argue that the arrival of new people and the addition of new construction to the existing ecosystem should be regarded as an opportunity to effectively promote places for togetherness. The clear definition of spaces for shared practices, expectant of new meanings, promoting a sense of affection and responsibility towards neighbours and neighborhood, justifies the added value in this approach.

ENDNOTES

[1] Firstly announced in april 2020.
[2] The research-by-drawing modus operandi was grounded on several visits to the place and resulting photographic / drawing reports, cartographic material, blueprints, and photographic reports produced over the years, compiling numerous layers of material information.
[3] Despite the fact this grand-ensemble was slowly absorbed by the continuous mass of urban tissue, it still stands as an island, disconnected from network accesses, excluded from public policies for mobility [Coentrão, 2021] and lacking complementary functions to support life in a prosperous neighbourhood.
[4] "To thoroughly densify, amplifying the existing and not wasting area, implies a strategy of addition and juxtaposition, bringing [people, interventions] closer in a case-by-case approach, to congregate, to enhance, to bring added value." In Lacaton, et Al. 2016, p.102. Author's translation.

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FIGURES

Fig. 1 - Mariana Aguiar Antunes, A strategy for togetherness: neighbouring units as places of common, 2024, plan and axonometric views, 16x24cm

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