

The Surface of Public Space

Working with the “Plane” to Design Urban Voids

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*At the end of the 1940s they taught me
that architecture was about mass and volume.
Space arrived in the 1950s.*

Denise Scott Brown

Abstract: This Paper examines the “return to the surface” in the design of contemporary urban space: shunned by modernist thinking, this dimension has now reacquired importance and ... “relief”. The surface, horizontal and vertical, is no longer a space of capricious decoration. Landscaping, texture, colour, tactile, visual and audio effects are now structuring materials. They configure weak actions with strong effects. The soil, in particular, is the “skin” of public space, its face. Promenades, piazzas, widenings, crossroads, grow more complex in their performance and image, intensifying the experience of their use. They indicate specific functions, through a design of palimpsests. They draw lines on the ground for team sports, trace maps for the installation of furnishings, host technological networks, bring light and air to underground spaces and incorporate lighting. Like façades, soils also multiply their layering to become complex technological and bioclimatic devices. For example, ventilated walls and “dry laid” paving. Or vertical screens, *brise-soleil* and silkscreened walls, rises and drops, undulations and level changes, technical floors, raised paving, plug-in grids, landscaped parterres: from the second screen to ... the second pavement! This text describes techniques, morphological developments and feasibility and offers an *excursus* through examples from past and recent history.

Keywords: public urban space, dematerialization, void, design of the soil, return to the surface, working “with the plane”, “horizontal” action, second pavement, patchwork, design on the ground.

A Precedent

In his 1986 essay *Progetto di suolo*, published in Casabella, Bernardo Secchi spoke of the positive indulgence of coeval urbanism in the morphological and figurative definition of open spaces, though still at

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the vast scale of cities and territories. He clearly condemned a negligent attitude toward the “intermediate” spaces of the city that arose for various reasons throughout the previous decades: either as an ideological conviction (the isotropy of the modern early twentieth century city), or due to scarce attention and a lack of commitment (the semantic poverty of the post-war city).

They were signs of a beneficial change in favour of a system of urban voids.

For Secchi this newfound interest was evident in the drawings made by urbanists at the time: «[...] the cartographic approach to the representation of their projects has changed: a sort of return to the origins has extraordinarily increased their iconic and metaphoric character and diminished all that was codified».

«All of this -he continued- is designed to shift attention: from the building to the ground, to the surface between buildings, which cannot be negated or reduced to pure technical space»².

Returning to this theme almost twenty years later, in a text entitled *Progetto di suolo 2*, Secchi reiterated the concept, anchoring it, more decisively, to the tradition of the historic city. In particular, he referred to the *lesson of Siena*, to his personal experience of medieval space during the 1980s when he was commissioned to prepare an Urban Plan for the town. «Siena -he wrote- has always stimulated the imagination: not only of individuals, but above all of society». He praised the strong character of the Piazza del Campo, which emanates from simple choices of scale, orientation and paving materials. «Those who have spent time observing the piazza, how shadow and sun move during the seasons and how its various parts are used; those who have remained seated on the paving of this piazza, sheltered from the wind, appreciating the soft warmth of the bricks and its sloping surface, those who have observed how simply the pattern of the paving facilitates the drainage of water [...], the ways in which the same pattern suggests how it should be used without imposing anything, cannot but agree that it is above all the great comfort of this public space that belongs to the common experience and makes it so beloved»³.

2. SECCHI 1986

3. B. Secchi, *Progetto di suolo 2*, in AYMONINO, MOSCO 2006

Secchi's invitation was to bring the example of Sienna into the present. Those who today perceive the warmth of a paved surface from the past embody tradition: the ancient foundation of everlasting values. The desire to learn from this valuable inheritance exists precisely in the act of sitting [in the square – TN]. It is considered a valid lesson more than a common good inherited from the past. Piazza del Campo is not a space to be rediscovered in the oldest built fabrics, nor is it a space to be mourned, joining the chorus of those who now lament its presumed death. Siena is not a legacy, but an indication of a condition of wellbeing to be renewed, an indication of the joy of spending time together outside, in the space of "everyone". Piazza del Campo is a reality to be replicated. So long as contemporary design is able and willing to consider it.



Siena, Piazza del Campo (Photograph Paola Veronica Dell'Aira)

Surfaces With ... "Depth"

In truth, positively, the superficial dimension in the design of open space is regaining ground. It is an entirely contemporary dimension, the foundation of economy, ecology, an openness toward methods and processes, flexibility and deferability.

Without stretching too far back in time, this attention toward the two-dimensional definition of public urban space, the vertical nature of margins and, above all, the horizontal plane of the ground, often combined with the design of roofs, is solidly rooted in twentieth century thinking.

It is true that the «ideology of Early Modernism [...] was mistrustful of the surface as the space of criminal decoration», but «it is precisely the master of smooth and white surfaces who was one of the first to challenge this ideology; in the early 1940s Le Corbusier had already begun to apply his pictorial research to un-plastered concrete surfaces»⁴.

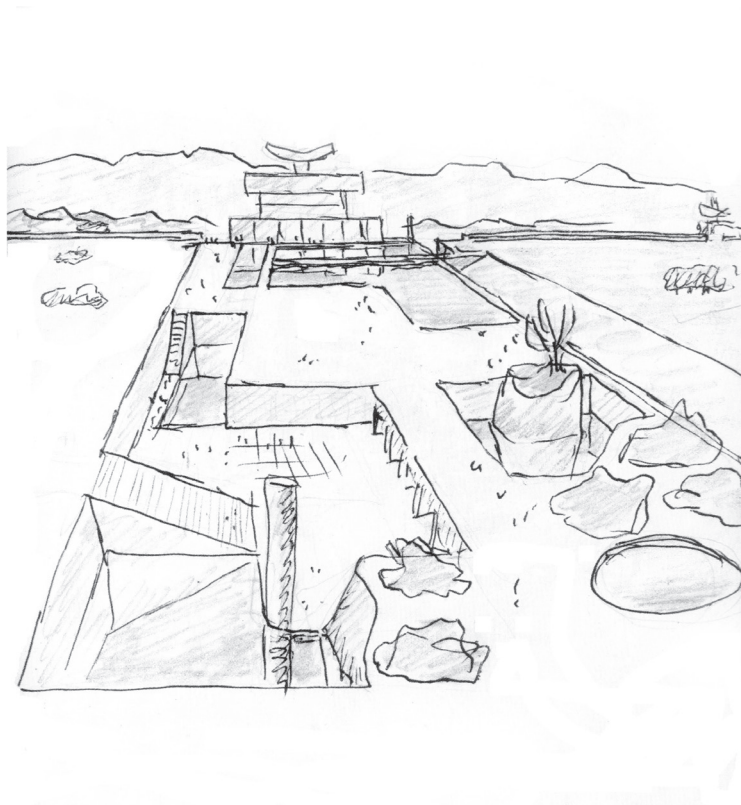
It is above all the horizon of Cubism that served as a link. As Braque and Picasso flattened volumes onto the surface of the canvas, in the buildings of the Swiss master, the third dimension benefits from motifs investigated in graphic and pictorial exercises. At the outset it was principally Purism that served as a guide, instructing the geometrism of early works; later, this role was fulfilled by more archaic figurative cultures: from the sinuous forms of swimmers, to still lifes, to the *divertissement* of flora, fauna and animals. A close dialogue was established between surface and space: a dialogue that also including cutting in walls, as in the outline of the *Modulor* impressed into the base of the *Unité d'Habitation* in Firminy Vert, or the figures sculpted into the Foundation Stones: the solar cycle, the concept of the building, information about authors and dates. In Marseille, in Firminy, in Rezé Nantes, the masses of the *Unité* were treated as iconic backdrops to the open spaces that complement them.

Something more occurs at the Capital Complex in Chandigarh. More than the colourful inserts in the concrete, more than the pictorial treatments of the walls, more than the bas-reliefs. There is the panelled

4. AYMONINO, MOSCO 2006



*Le Corbusier, Maison de la Culture, Firminy, Bruneaux-Loire, 1959-1967
Bas-relief impressed in the end wall of the building (Photograph Paola Veronica Dell'Aira)*



*Le Corbusier, Capitol Complex of Chandigarh, the Plateau, 1952
Sketch (Image from AYMONINO, MOSCO 2006, p.252, in Bibliografy)*

fresco of the Gateway to the Palace of Assembly, the large tapestries hung from the walls of the court halls, and the murales framing the Hall, but, above all, there is open space, the clearing that connects the masses of the Parliament, the Secretariat, the Governor's Palace and the Palace of Justice. To hold together the scale of so much architecture, the *plateau* assumes strength and importance. This is perhaps the main construction of the Capital Complex: a large taught surface, a compact slab that travels horizontally and "branches out" to link the government buildings together.

Everything started when Le Corbusier was invited by Maxwell Fry: «You have the obligation to introduce within the heart of the Capital Complex the signs that express on the one hand your idea of urbanism, and on the other your philosophical ideas [...]»⁵.

This led to the concept for the grand *Dalle*. It is a source of constant surprise. Contrary to the uniform and diagrammatic distance *interpartes* of a *Ville contemporaine*, the "piazza" in Chandigarh is made of "ups" and "downs", of reliefs and depressions, in multiple plastic and material details, of the design of symbolic forms that serve to produce experience and communicate values: the impression into the concrete of the profile of "modulor" man, the graphic of the harmonic spiral, the ideogram of the alternation between day and night, the reflecting pools, the lowered garden of the *Fosse de la Consideration*, the sculpture of the *Main Ouverte*.

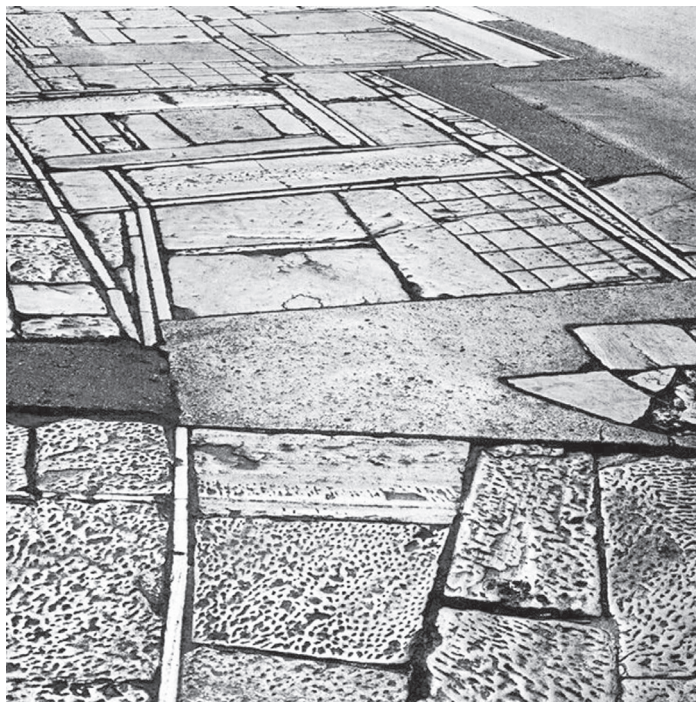
Together with Le Corbusier, the "painter" of open spaces, is the Carlo Scarpa of erudite material patchworks of urban exteriors: the inlays on the ground at the entrances to the IUAV di Tolentini and the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice, or the Gardens at the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona.

Also similar to Le Corbusier are the powerful colours of Luis Barragán; or the "city scene" of Venturi and Scott Brown; the understatement of Pikionis in Athens, where working with the ground is the art of not entering into conflict with the unparalleled moments rising above it; there is the landscape architecture of Roberto Burle Marx, the master of one of the most famous *Promenades* in the world, the

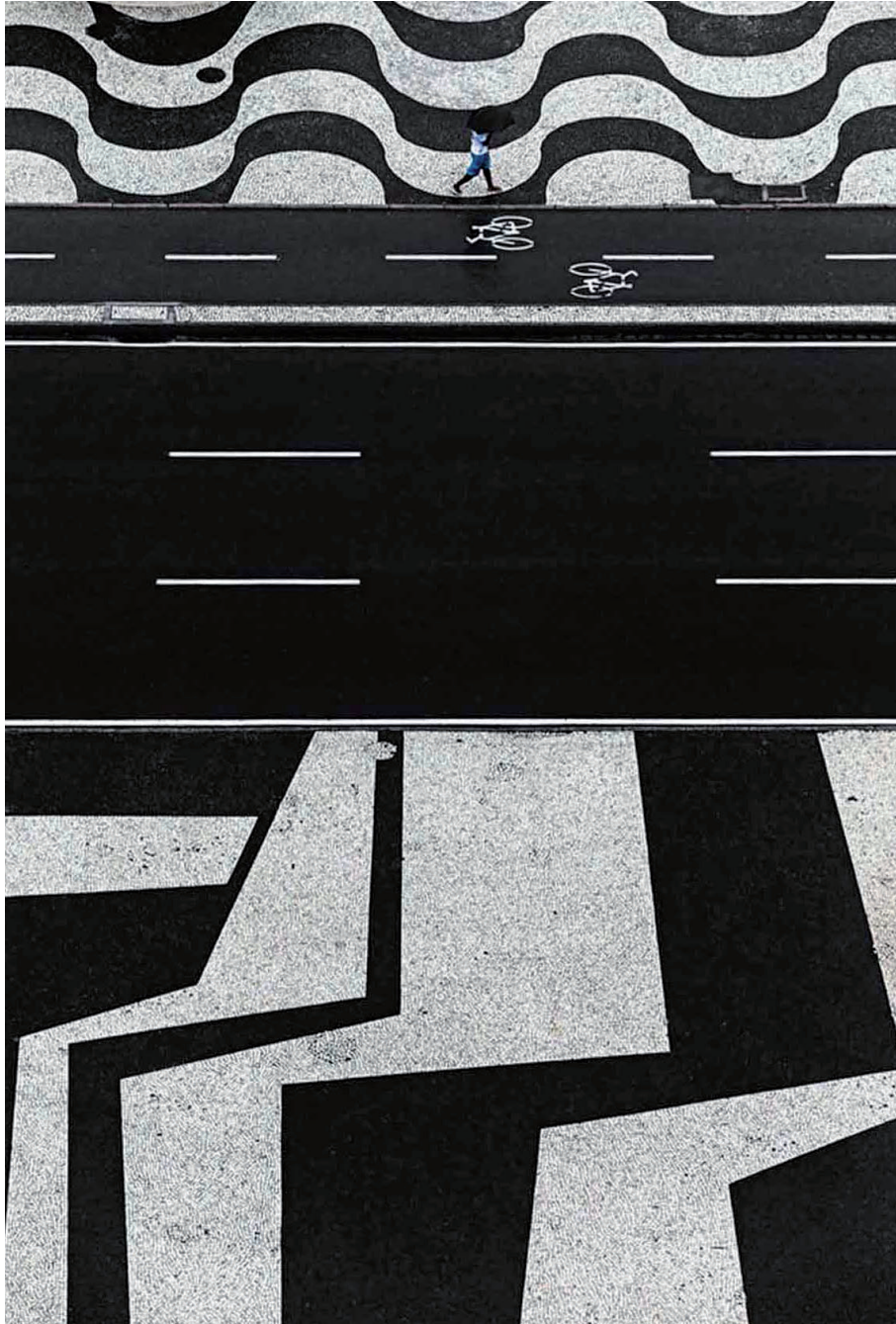
5. W. Boesiger, H. Girsberger, *Le Corbusier 1910-1965*, Zanichelli, 1987



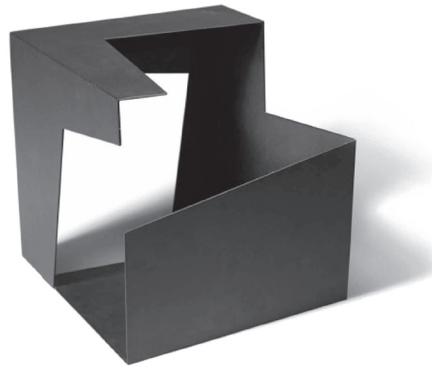
*Carlo Scarpa, Castelvecchio Museum, Verona, 1958-1964
Giardino-Corte (Photograph Paola Veronica Dell'Aira)*



*Dimitris Pikionis, Paved route to the Acropolis, Athens, 1958
(Image from Repertory 01 in Sitografy)*



*Roberto Burle Marx, Copacabana Boardwalk, Rio de Janeiro, 1970
Paving Patterns (Image from Repertory 02 in Sitografia)*



*Jorge Oteiza, Caja vacía, 1958
(Image from Repertory 03 in Sitografía)*

Copacabana Beach Promenade. The list could go on and on: surfaces given such importance and care that they become volumes. Two-dimensionality, in these proofs, is anything but a terrain sacrificed by design, anything but a renunciation. It speaks to us of a “depth” of a diverse sign, opposed to volumetric development and, precisely for this reason, less banal, more of a challenge; it speaks of a “depth” founded on an intensity of action more than its objectuality, of a “depth” that aims, paradoxically ... at being as thin as possible!

Spaces of ... “concept”

The neo-culture of two-dimensionality, in open public space, is rooted on the one hand in the theoretical and applied laboratory of dematerialization and the void, a fertile terrain in architecture as in the other arts during the past century⁶, on the other hand it draws on conceptual art, for which the production of meaning is less important than not creating objects or spaces.

The contemporary era marks a passage, an inversion, with respect to the decades that preceded it. Contemporary architecture and urbanism look to the intellectualism of such artists as J. Kosuth, B. Nauman and J. Beuys; they are linked to the abstract painting of Malevich, to the Spatialism of Fontana; inspired by the a-sculptural universe of J.

6. BOCCHI 2015

Oteiza, folded plates, made only of widths and lengths, though incommensurably full of volume. In the contemporary era, design voluntarily moved from objects to spaces, form closed to open, from solid to void.

The contemporary era focuses on fabrics, on relations between urban events, on the in-between. It looks at the openness of the landscape, fleeing from the closed stigma of the *forma urbis*. It cares for the connections between objects, rather than for objects themselves. This has led to the imposition, among different themes, of categories of intervention once considered marginal and service-related, from infrastructures to paths, to “qualified corridors” (artistic, archaeological, ecological), to “invisible” operations of cabling.

Digital culture has given us a self-limiting common sense that makes action more efficient the less we come into contact with or observe it. The “less visible” is now preferred. It authorises the levity of intentions. It legitimises the playful and the anti-rhetorical. It favours an eclecticism of language, frees up morphological research and encourages experimentation with technology. In short, in the subtlety (often the exiguity) of operations, it affirms a “weak” idea, in the positive sense of the term, the bearer of a fecund way of observing our surroundings, *sub specie* incomplete, open and interactive. Intensity prevails over density; subjective perception surpasses objectivising and anti-dialogic determination; evanescence wins out over consistency; variability over permanence.

We speak of the contemporary, yet the foundations had already been laid in the best of modern ideas. Le Corbusier, as mentioned, stands in the foreground, precisely as a great manipulator of volumes, a poet and, above all, a master of three-dimensional plasticity. However, the *promenade* and the open plan transported his heart beyond the sculptural values of volumes and spaces, toward their greater role as a reciprocal medium of relations with their surroundings. He was the apostle of “liberated” space. He was the one who took pleasure in the dimension of the “zero volume”, when in the *Maison des Hommes* he expressed his hope for a boundless anthropic world.

Moving along this same line were such great authors as Giovanni Michelucci and Leonardo Ricci, believers in the importance of space “outside of all things”. «[...] I want to remove any diaphragm inside the

city: open up hospitals, prisons and even cemeteries [...] knock down [...] the walls that divide the life of those 'inside' from the life of those 'outside'»⁷.

Never minor, space dominated by the horizontal, less object-oriented and principally void, catalyses the ideas and interests of those who, more than to fix structures and forms, wish to explore how to relate them to one another, convinced that space is never here nor there, but always between here and there.

The void between objects leads us into the boundless territory of the visions of B. Taut, to the monumental airiness of A. Aalto, to the "living city" of F.L. Wright and the "green city" of Ginzburg, Ladovsky and Melnikov.

Hans Scharoun employed the term *zwischenraum* (the space between), in other words the space interposed between the more well-defined environments of his projects. He used this term because it surpassed the simple role of circulation, assuming a greater strength and weight. More than a connection between spaces, it became a space of its own: ample, abundant, generous. He saw it as the backbone of any spatial organism, while he exalted the particular condition of "never knowing" a univocal and precise form as, at best, it would expand like a liquid across the continuous multiplication of spatial inventions. Precisely in virtue of this condition, the *zwischenraum* became democratic and participatory space par excellence, an indeterminate space able to capture the user, to actively involve him in its definition and/or completion. In the urban projects known as *Wohnzelle*, in particular, in the free constellation of volumes that characterised them, the *zwischenraum* was the entire open environment around the houses. It was the space of no one and thus of everyone, the true public space. It was a void awaiting action, a void that invited collective interpretation, a void as a sign of hope for a future of non-hierarchical and non-constricting social integration⁸.

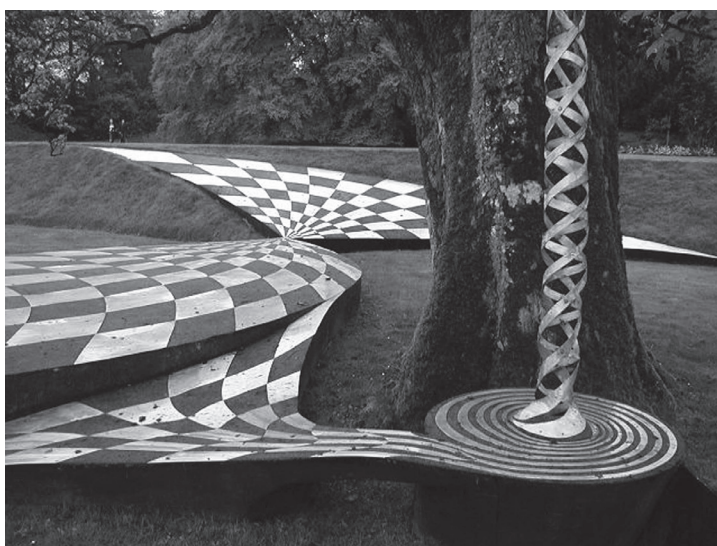
Between the *zwischenraum* and the *continuum* of the "city

7. G. Michelucci, *Perfino i cimiteri*, in G. Cecconi (ed.), *Giovanni Michelucci. Dove si incontrano gli angeli*, Zella Editore, 2005

8. HANS MOLDENSCHARDT 1994



*Ernst Cramer, Poet's Garden, Zurigo, 1959
(Image from Repertory 04 in Sitografia)*



*Charles Jencks, Maggie Keswick, Cosmological Garden, Dumfries, Scotland, 1988
(Image from Repertory 05 in Sitografia)*

world”⁹ we find plants and nature. The world of landscaping is rife with references. The “living” expanses of Lawrence Halprin dialogue with the gardens “in movement” of Gilles Clément, the sculptured planes of Le Corbusier and the pop voids of Martha Schwartz, the green geometrisms of Ernst Cramer and the *Cosmological Garden* by Charles Jencks.

A separate chapter must be dedicated to the role of graphics and advertising messages employed to define the urban environment. There is still much to “learn” from the lesson of Las Vegas.

«The urban structure at the time [...] -Denise Scott Brown wrote - was not dominated by buildings but by signs». Density was not the result of close-set buildings, but the “intensification of the rhythm of communication”. The flat sign offered Venturi and Scott Brown the means to introduce the theme of “super-thin” decoration into modern architecture, compared to Baroque decoration, with the classical, with Rococo, with the bas-relief of art Deco. Contemporary decoration is «[...] a decoration [...] whose depth is close to zero [...], the ideal of luminous diodes with length and height but no depth [...] decoration was made of LED and thus only a surface»¹⁰.

“Horizontal” Actions

We will now look at the contemporary development of so many famous premises.

It is pleasant to observe the tendency of today’s architects, as in so many examples of the past, to seek out the best possible relationship with context, working in close contact with the characteristics shared by the building and its surroundings: morphological transfers, conceptual, functional and formal interferences.

Contemporary architectural thinking looks to the proposition advanced by Christopher Alexander to not occupy surfaces, building isolated homes, but instead knowing how to qualify the surrounding environment, of knowing, above all, how to “repair the world around us”¹¹.

9. The concept returns in both Michelucci and in Ricci.

10. D. Scott Brown, *Presentation*, in AYMUNINO, MOSCO 2006

11. ALEXANDER 1977

Enric Miralles used his covered structures to create calligraphic weavings that extend the rhythm and curvature of the earth, into complementary external spaces (Utrecht City Hall, the Olympic Archery Range, Palafolls Public Library ...); Lapeña & Torres Tur redesigned the roof of the Baluard del Príncipe in Palma di Maiorca, linking it with the Paseo de las Murallas; Daniel Libeskind scratched the *parterre* of the gardens at the Jewish Museum in Berlin with chips of stone, sharpened like the wounds cutting into the building's zinc-clad walls, representing the anguish of the Holocaust on the exterior of the building.

Increasingly more often, contemporary buildings become design generators, impressing their morphological matrices on the spaces around them.

Yet it is above all the self standing two-dimensional world that is most convincing and challenging.

Between the territories it influences are landscaped areas, widenings and public squares, crossroads, parking lots, paths and routes; there are no-lands, interstitial areas, abandoned and degraded zones.

The most recurring objectives include environmental rebalancing and territorial restyling (earthworks and land operations); there is also a need to reconnect what we use and consume in the city; there is an idea of a strong and structuring continuum, an extensive permeability and accessibility, a con-fusion without limits in the multiplication of "outdoor" species and typologies.

Modellings of terrains, drawings and textures of pavements, colours, claddings, screens, sources of sound, green inserts, all become structuring materials: evident, references, producers of comfort. They configure weak actions yet they procure strong effects: economically feasible, functionally efficient and easily communicable.

The soil, in particular, is the "skin" of public space, its face.

It tends to grow more complex in its performance and image, to intensify the experience of use. The surfaces we walk on become "morethansurfaces". They indicate specific functions, they create space multipurpose through design based on palimpsests. They draw lines on the ground for important team games, they lay out maps for the plug-in installation of furnishings, they host and organise technological networks, they bring light and air to spaces below ground and incorporate

lighting systems.

Paths and routes are dominated by the Boardwalk.

In Vila Seca, Spain, the overhead image of the 'Pinar del Perruquet' Park (2009) by Artex is a drawing of flat sinuous profiles. They are large resilient reservoirs, framed by cor-ten steel or stone that has been modelled to create seating. They are home to skins of water that mitigate heat or beds of earth for low plantings that resist the actions of salt. To densify the *continuum* of bare pine trees, the architects created artificial trees made from tall and slender steel shafts topped by fronds; this emulation of a natural canopy is obtained by linking a domino of fibreglass panels: a *parasol* layer, a generator, in its oscillation, of a pleasurable sound, similar to branches swaying in the wind¹².

Also in Spain, for the Harbour Remodelling in Malpica (2009), Creus e Carrasco overlapped the quay with a "new topography", developing 7 profiles in moulded concrete assembled to create a floating second pavement running alongside the historic walls: paths, *mirador* terraces, platforms for resting with seating in overlapping wood and spaces below for the passage of cabling systems¹³.

In Benidorm, Carlos Ferrater's West Beach Promenade transgresses his usual minimalism to create a 1.5 kilometre long waterfront made of sinusoidal motifs that emulate the waves of the sea. It is a continuous curb that absorbs the level change between the water and the sea. The upper surface is finished in a lively pattern of ceramic tiles in 22 colours. Different colours define different uses: playing fields, areas of rest, leisure and contemplation. The curb resolves the problem of drainage, hosts infrastructural systems and parking and links the beach and road with gentle ramps that eliminate any architectural barriers¹⁴.

The writings of Enric Miralles, expressed in richly inlaid pavements (concrete, *terracotta*, stone) characterise the waterfront at Hafencity in Hamburg (2005)¹⁵.

There is also the Garden Line Promenades in Portugal, the viaduct underpass of the Parque de Cidade and the Avenida Montevideu in

12. a + t architecture publishers, *Strategy Public*, n. 35-36, 2010

13. Ibidem

14. Ibidem

15. a + t architecture publishers, *In Common III°*, *Espacios Colectivos*, n. 27, 2006



*Enric Miralles, Utrecht Town Hall square, 1977
(Photograph Paola Veronica Dell'Aira)*



*Daniel Libeskind, Gardens at the Jewish Museum, Berlin, 2001
The external parterre (Photograph Paola Veronica Dell'Aira)*



*Artex, Pinar del Perruquet Park, Vila Seca, 2009
(Image from Repertory 06 in Sitografy)*



*Creus e Carrasco Arquitectos, Harbour Remodelling, Malpica, 2009
(Image from Repertory 07 in Sitografy)*

Porto, by Manuel de Solà-Morales (2001), the vast granite platform of the Passeggiata di Matosinhos by Eduardo Souto De Moura (2002)¹⁶; the Avenida Atlantica in Vila do Conde by Alvaro Siza, (2005)¹⁷; the Caminho da Trincheiras along the walls of Madeira, by Paulo David, (2004)¹⁸, with its complex world of subservices feeding water features and pools.

Horizontal signage becomes the narrative of bicycle paths, appropriating drawings, and utilising captivating lettering to create a “distracting” excursion, lightening the fatigue. A great deal can be learned from the Muro di Sormano (2011), by Tagliabue-Origgi, along the route of the Giro di Lombardia. The slope is the fil rouge of this project; the ribbon of asphalt speaks of the physical landscape and the landscape of memory tied to the world of sport and the episodes that have consecrated the myth of this historic climb. The white drawings and writings provide indications of heights, describe the species in the woods, indicating directions and the names of the mountains in the distance and recalling the words of past champions¹⁹.

Public squares, those in the periphery *in primis*, are dominated by areas intercluded between sky and earth: base surfaces and tops that protect, for example the Theatre Square in Antwerp, (2008) by Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò, with its gigantic 15 meter high translucent pergola²⁰, or the Open Centre for Public Activities in Cordoba (2010), by Paredes Pino with its traces on the ground indicating uses, and its “ceiling” in coloured metal discs of differing diameters and heights: an intro-illuminating device that also gathers rainwater²¹.

Historic centres tend to transform their pedestrian areas into domestic “pseudo-interiors”, laying down continuous paved surfaces, in rubber, asphalt or cast in situ concrete, “urban linings” covering the ground and furnishings. Examples include the Urban Lounge in St. Gallen (2006) by Pipilotti Rist & Carlos Martinez²².

16. Lotus Navigator, *Velocità controllate*, n. 8, 2000

17. a + t architecture publishers, *In Common IV°*, *Espacios Colectivos*, n. 28, 2006

18. Ibidem

19. P. Lazzaro, *In punta di pennino*, Ediciclo, 2005

20. a + t architecture publishers, *Strategy Space*, n. 37, 2011

21. Ibidem

22. a + t architecture publishers, *In Common IV°*, *Espacios Colectivos*, n. 28, 2006

Elsewhere we find devices that intensify density, as in the project in Innichen Fuzi (2005) by AllesWirdGut. The greatest challenge was to overcome seasonal fluctuations: the village is in fact filled to capacity during the summer and almost empty during the spring and autumn. «Using small means, the useable surface can be expanded or contracted: during the spring and autumn clearly defined spaces are flooded with water to create small geometric lakes, while other spaces are occupied by flower beds [...]»²³.

There is a proliferation of public spaces across building roofs that compensate those subtracted at grade. The fifth perspective becomes an accessible public square, as in the work of Ken Smith in New York (2005), or the “visual” surface of the Santa Caterina Market in Barcelona (2005) by EMBT, finished in multi-coloured ceramic tiles.

Courts and courtyards in former industrial areas are opened up to the public. Examples include the Lux Steel Court in Esch-Sur-Alzette, Luxemburg (2004-2014), another project by AllesWirdGut: a vast plug-in space that can be built step by step, through the in progress assembly of structures atop the grid of the paved surface²⁴.

Important brownfield projects (*docet* the historic Promenade Plantée in Paris) include the High Line in New York (2011) by Field Operation + Diller Scofidio + Renfro²⁵, and Prag’s Boulevard in Copenhagen (2005), by Kristine Jensen Tegnstue, a progress of arrangements, defined by adjacent uses: a public square, a garden of aromatic plants, a special area for children, a multipurpose playing field, an outdoor theatre, areas for special events, steel fences, green neon, paving in granite, graphic paving patterns, surfaces in red and black rubber²⁶.

The most important design research is being developed by three young groups: Topotek1, Superflex and BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group).

Topotek1, in particular, have for some years been exploring the virtual side of easy and economic materials such as asphalt, often disregarded: «[...] compared to the ‘naturalness’ of such materials as ter-

23. a + t architecture publishers, *In Common I°*, *Espacios Colectivos*, n. 25, 2005

24. a + t architecture publishers, *In Common IV°*, *Espacios Colectivos*, n. 28, 2006

25. a + t architecture publishers, *Strategy Space*, n. 37, 2011

26. a + t architecture publishers, *In Common III°*, *Espacios Colectivos*, n. 27, 2006



*Studio Tagliabue-Origgi, Muro di Sormano, Como, 2011
(Image from Repertory 08 in Sitografia)*



*Studio Paredes-Pino, Open Center for Public Activities, Córdoba, 2010
(Image from Repertory 09 in Sitografia)*

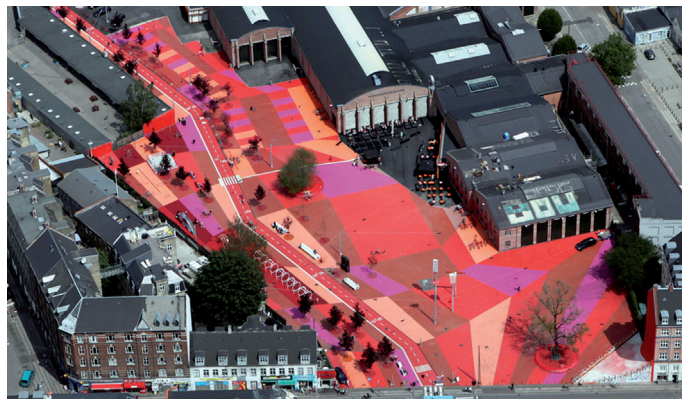


*Pipilotti Rist & Carlos Martinez, Urban Lounge, St.Gallen, 2006
(Image from Repertory 10 in Sitografia)*

*Kristine Jensen Tegnestue
Prag's Boulevard,
Copenhagen, 2005
(Photograph Cristine
Capetillo, Repertory 11 in
Sitografi)*



*Topotek1, Superflex,
BIG, Superkilen Park,
Copenhagen, 2012
(Image from Repertory
12 in Sitografi)*



*Topotek1, Aqua Soccer
and Dymaxion Golf,
Hamburg, 2013
(Image from Repertory
13 in Sitografi)*



racotta, stones and gravels»²⁷, but which possess incredible properties: mutability, plasticity, sound-absorption, drainage, hygienic and anti-smog properties, the ability to capture energy, reversibility and recyclability²⁸.

Asphalt, based on the “lucid approach to design” adopted by this young German group is loaded with fantastic attributes, becoming a generator of figures, textures and collages: from the re-stylised No-lands of Berlin²⁹, to the murales on the ground of the Eberswalde Postindustrial Park (2002)³⁰, to the traces that serve to regulate different sports in the Urban Playground in Berlin (2002)³¹, to the simple signs on the ground, memories of guidelines of the playful chalk games of childhood.

«The surface -they write- is the thin film between the ground and the sky. It constitutes the space in which man expresses himself, it is the kingdom of his movements, the space of his experiences, his point of contact with the universe; the surface functions as a canvas for painting or drawing. [...] The surface comports a semiotic system that we read and map [...] everything is visible on the surface»³².

In 2011, the 3 offices completed a project that is as exemplary as it is provocative: the vast multipurpose park of the Superkilen in Copenhagen. This large installation consists of an urban mantle, with graphic compositions that refer also to the vertical dimension of space. It is a gigantic carpet, in highly resistant concrete, asphalt, natural rubber and bands in white stone, organised in areas of different colours that extend from floors to the walls of neighbouring buildings. The western area features shades of red, the central area is black and dark grey, while the third area is marked by landscaping and lawns³³.

Experiences

In conclusion, it is necessary to represent the additional

27. M. Zardini, *Asfalto: una nuova crosta terrestre*, Lotus Navigator, n. 7, 2002

28. LAGANÀ 2006

29. a + t architecture publishers, *In Common I°, Espacios Colectivos*, n. 25, 2005

30. Ibidem

31. Ibidem

32. Ibidem

33. STEINER 2013

advantages of the newly exalted involvement of the “surface”, as a “lightweight” action that is often easy and fast to implement.

The simplest coloured asphalt surface is its emblem.

«It is the paradigm of Landform Architecture that, by ‘deconstructing’ the modernist ideas of the soil, supports the rebirth of urban space [...]»³⁴.

This rebirth is above all in “openness”: of process of programming and decision-making, in design choices, in the dynamics of realisation.

It is easier to “participate” in land action. In most cases, land action defines actions “within reach” of the user, the “zero volume” that consents expressions free from the need to possess specialised technical know-how.

This generates the virtuous dimension of the transformative operation.

It features three distinctive qualities:

1. interdisciplinary complexity as the dimension that involves multiple fields of knowledge;
2. the characteristic of evolution, as a system of flexible interventions that are easy to implement and reversible;
3. the value of the “public realm”, in other words, the realisation of a true “space for everyone”³⁵.

The design of a space “for everyone” is that which establishes the maximum alliance between the city and the numerous disciplines it involves: architects, engineers, geographers, botanist, economists, as well as philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists³⁶.

The possibility to use elementary techniques to create, in a short period of time, reversible configurations that are captivating for their utilitarian and perceptive qualities (from temporary utility to happenings), expands the reservoir of users. This in turn generates consensus, and thus possible financial strategies and policies that can be activated, both public and private.

The notion of the “public realm” imposes an immersion within the interpretation of individual and collective imaginations. It creates an urban environment sensitive toward the material and emotional

34. G. Celestini, *Introduzione*, in LAGANÀ 2006

35. See the activities of the Gruppo ARC *Working with people to make great places*. «The quality of our public realm is [...] in creating environments that people want to live and work in».

36. ALTARELLI, OTTAVIANI 2010

instances of humanity. It fixes a close relationship between architectural forms and the socio-psychological needs of inhabitants.

It is not solely a question of the permeability and accessibility of space, but more of an open source urbanism, in which actions increasingly arrive from the “bottom up”, and solutions are on demand: from the spontaneous reappropriation of abandoned spaces to the ecological and/or agricultural use of residual areas, to public art performances, to phenomena of urban activism³⁷. There is a proliferation of pop-up piazzas, of mobile and modular facilities, urban ready-mades, “temporary” projects based on local needs and designed to be disassembled and replaced by something else³⁸. Furthermore, this notion of working “with the plane” can also be resilient. It can open up toward so-called “prudent” projects, capable of looking beyond their temporary usefulness, based on a logic of post-occupation, in other words thinking about the space they occupy after they have disappeared.

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37. See the activities of T SPOON Studio. The heart of the research of T SPOON is the creation of microenvironments, ecosystems based on the interaction between urban strategies at the large scale and the minute and multiple nature of everyday contemporary life: projects become like grids open to possibilities able to catalyse mutations as part of a continuous dialectic between space and its inhabitants.

38. See *Esterni speaks public. Idee, progetti e interventi per un design pubblico*, Esterni, 2010

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