

Envisioning Transitions

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Bodies, buildings, and boundaries

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“**Transition**” is the dynamic process of changing state, going beyond, crossing over, and passing from one point to the next. The signification of the word is close to that of **evolution, modification, mutation, and transformation**, all of which are confined into a strictly restricted timeframe.

Etymologically, “transitions” can be nothing else than temporary: they appear silently, burst, violently establish, and gradually disappear into reality. In their blinding momentariness, “transitions” bear with them the positive undertone of change and renewal, along with the hopefulness of that which is unknown.

If the term “transition” recurs regularly in the contemporary vocabulary of **architecture and design cultures**, this repetition reveals a period characterized by **overlapping and sequential changes**. The word is without a doubt overused, but not without reason. Indeed, we find ourselves in an unusually extended period of consecutive “transitions”, overwhelmingly undefined in temporality and ambitions. As we are witnessing societies go through stark demographic, political, economic, and cultural changes, the intersecting problematics (e.g., ecological, digital, pandemic, etc.) form a rather complex topography of change, negatively charged by the instability of dilated time and the uncertainty of undefined destination.

The word is employed with the confidence of a natural process, as if it were a storm, and while we affirm our existence in “transition”, we nod our troubled times away. Whether positively or negatively perceived, “transitions” form bridges between histories. **Yet, what does it actually mean to be in “transition”?** Can we define it as an autonomous and productive period whose importance could go beyond a starting and an ending date? How are “transitions” impacting and being impacted by human spaces, the built environment, and design cultures? What are some concrete, practical case studies that demonstrate how “transitions” could affect architecture and design cultures while emphasizing the role that these disciplines play in transitional processes?

It is within this backdrop that we put forward the theme of “transition”—in all its simplicity and complexity.

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INTRODUCTION

Prof. Annalisa Trentin, University of Bologna

This publication collects the contributions selected and presented at the international conference, *Envisioning Transitions. Bodies, buildings and boundaries*, organized within the 36th cycle of the PhD course in Architecture and Design Cultures of the Alma Mater Studiorum of the University of Bologna, held in December 2022.

The international conference, organized by the doctoral students, has become an annual appointment, developed for the discussion on topics of interdisciplinary nature, useful for expanding knowledge and research goals, carried out within doctoral research and within the Unibo Department of Architecture.

The PhD program in Architecture and Design Cultures is multidisciplinary in nature, bringing together the specificities of architectural composition, urbanism, history, aesthetics, design, cultural heritage, technology, and design, combining fundamentals and applied research in an interdisciplinary perspective. The research activity is therefore developed according to thematic areas that, given the nature of the PhD program, aim to develop studies in the field of architecture and design cultures as wide as possible.

The international conference *Envisioning Transitions. Bodies, buildings and boundaries*, which follows those organized in previous years as: *The Matter of Future Heritage; CHANCES Practices, spaces and buildings in cities' transformation; The Ecological Turn. Design, architecture, and aesthetics beyond "Anthropocene"* and *Ground(s) - Mapping, designing and caring: Towards a convivial society*, once again focuses on topical matters trying to open a debate on contemporary issues.

The topic of transition and its relevance in the field of architecture and design, identified by PhD students of 36th cycle: Andrea Cattabriga, Valentina De Matteo, Francesco Di Maio, Lorna Dragonetti, Arshia Eghbali, Clara Giardina, Marco Iannantuono, Jing Zou, Giulia Marzani, Angelo Massafra, Claudia Nigrelli, Serena Pagliula, Marco Palma, Dafni Retzepi and Yuqing Zhu, was identified in three tracks with the intention of answering specific questions: the first track 'Bodies' questions on how to relate bodies and transitions; the second track 'Buildings' focuses on how architecture is adapting to the demanding framework of transition, and finally the third track 'Boundaries' focuses on how territories, cities, and various spaces of interactions are transforming and therefore the boundaries between people and objects, spaces, and different relational dimensions.

The selection of papers collected in this publication with the relevant contribution of keynote speakers Paul Emmons, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, Laura Kolbe and Ami Skånberg Dahlstedt, testify an effort to combine contributions from different disciplines and provide different visions and interpretations on Transitions.

Annalisa Trentin

Coordinator – Unibo PhD program in Architecture and Design Cultures

Inhabited intervals between the city and the house. From transition spaces to relationship places

Emiliano Zandri - Sapienza University of Rome

ABSTRACT

Transiting through architecture is a fundamental action to read, understand and interact with the architectural elements. A good part of the authenticity and power of an architectural experience is based on the possibility of understanding a building as sensorial. In this sense, collective public housing can alter, articulate and influence the human experience. These spaces, "other" than strictly defined as domestic and private, become a branch, a collective and democratic filament, where feeling at home is possible anyway. Thus, the transition space becomes a filter, an imprecise and porous limit, a place to stop in the shade of a tree or to explore an architectural threshold.

Next door, the staircase in front, or the other side of a patio, a terrain, the water fountains, the green outdoor space or the top of a terrace, would be the base for generating a new architectonic scenario for the collective coexistence. This is not just a "way back home", but a contest of new places and pathways shared with the citizen's community. This will generate a new experience of differentially living the "transition", leading to an emphatically rethinking about belonging to a place.

The paper aims to suggest possible future strategies for collective public housing through modern post-war examples in Rome and Madrid in which, beyond the formal characteristics of the buildings, it is possible to find a human and collective dimension of living. Today, as syncopated episodes, the examples represent an exception in the urban context of the city that has grown up around them and preserve the intangible value of the places unaltered.

KEYWORDS

transition; collective housing; atmosphere; Rome; Madrid.

Introduction

Over the years, the relationship between the home and the city, between the public and the private dimension, has represented a topic of considerable interest due to its change from an architectural, urban and social point of view. This relationship is particularly interesting if understood as a space of transition and proximity between houses and as an opportunity to rethink the boundaries of domestic space also outside, in close contact with the city and the street.

Today, the recent pandemic condition has brought to attention both the space of the house, understood as an area of individual/family confinement, and understood as a series of solutions that can foster social relationships with the surrounding environment and with the rest of

the community, in a scenario increasingly characterised by times and ways of life that push towards individualism. This second reading of the collective house unequivocally talks about an idea of an inclusive city in which to rediscover a sense of expanded domesticity.

In this sense, the pandemic has been a pretext in which to rediscover the importance of some places precisely because, in moments of the spatial restrictions imposed by the lockdown, the transition areas between the city and the home have undergone a contraction, transforming, even more, from physical and tangible to digital. In these conditions, we brought the public space at home, leaving the city empty. The technology, in a certain sense, has suggested different types of help, actually consolidated in daily practices (the possibility

of buying online, delivering food, streaming and video calls, workouts on TV, etc.) However, those have contributed to an individualistic system, increasing people's loneliness and entailing psychological problems already evident in this first post-pandemic phase.

Beyond the possibilities of technological connection, we must therefore think that the home is still the intersection between humans, plants, and domestic animals, among smells and perfumes, whose identity is built on communication and interaction in the daily life of different individuals rather than about their separation.¹

Therefore, the importance of the physical and real environment can still be fundamental to determining the quality of our daily life and generating a supportive, active and participatory society.

As Aldo van Eyck already wrote, it is necessary to create an expanded frontier that organises the movement of citizens by stages, intervals and episodes, mitigating the anxiety that can cause hard transitions. The house and the city must guarantee a feeling of familiarity.²

Living between houses, recreating intimate relationships of coexistence between human beings and other species instead represents a form of domestic exteriority that reconnects us with the places we live, and always feeling at home. In this sense, the home is not only a well-defined physical space but also a state of mind, the result of an atmosphere and the product of a series of phenomena that link us to the city.

The in-between space's familiarity tells about our way of living, reveals habits and customs and offers an additional interpretation of the architectural project. The spatial perception of things around us generates an atmospheric experience: the architect Juhani Pallasmaa writes that an authentic architectural experience consists, for example, when approaching or confronting the volume of the building and feeling its physical presence rather than the shape of the façade. Entering

or crossing the border between two areas, and not only in appreciating the visual image of the door or looking through a window, rather than in the form of the window as a unit of visual composition.³

This perceptive, phenomenological and physical recovery of the city between the houses passes through a city linked to the movement and passage of bodies between built spaces. In this sense, the street has represented the instrument through which we have always related to places, first linked to the human dimension of the pedestrian and then to the vehicular one. This change in infrastructural dimensional relationships, determined in particular by the use of the car and the exponential growth of the city, has progressively changed our habits and our ways of living between buildings, especially concerning the street level and the relationship with the ground. Over time, the "interesting distance" between things has been lost, expanding the dimensions and restricting the times of a city that we have learned to call "generic".⁴

However, our Italian cities in the past have been - and continue to be in part - anything but generic. The urban spirit played a leading role in public space, which consisted of experiencing the street. The Mediterranean climate, in particular, and the favourable external atmospheric conditions amplified the possibilities of the inhabitants to leave the house, to transit and to carry out jobs and social activities, occupying and living in the space. Living between the inside and the outside, in the middle, under a shadow is one of the characteristics that struck several scholars, such as Walter Benjamin, during his travels in Italy.⁵ Here, architectural forms have always manifested, as Albert Camus also describes, a concrete society characterised by reflective freedom and an altruistic individualism, which favours nature and moderation over excess and history.

This characteristic of urban life is linked to time: it self-regulates and self-feeds itself,

occurring precisely on the street. In 1969, the architect Bernard Rudofsky published the book "Streets of people, a primer for Americans": he defined precisely the importance of thinking of the street not only as a means of mobility about the American context but also as an architecture", as taught by the Mediterranean tradition. This cultural and environmental scenario testifies how the street is the architectural and urban element for maintaining the human scale, the testimony of walking as a fundamental act of human life.

In particular, therefore, mending this dimension through a "return to the street" and its nature as a public place of relationship means placing the attention once again on the space between the houses by retracing examples of public collective housing. It contributed to investigating not only the domestic dimension of internal spaces but also the open space proportion, creating a dimension defined as Mediterranean. In the analysis of the architectural project of collective housing, much more importance has always been given to the built form rather than to the shape of the void it left, of the open space and nature. This reading has sometimes been marginal in the evolution of the city's architecture, but instead, it can contain interesting food for thought for future insights and experiments.

So, it is becoming interesting to analyse this approach starting from the relationship between the street, collective housing and the city. This transition in the city at eye level, at a ground floor plan, allows us to define the space based on a human scale and to understand the pedestrian route as a theatre of ordinary events. It would represent an area of transition from chaos to harmony: this space manifests expanded domesticity.

Walking between the houses through Rome and Madrid

The post-World War II period was probably when Mediterranean, vernacular and

picturesque influences most characterised our modern lifestyle.

In this sense, in the neorealist panorama, Rome and Madrid have represented a point of reference in the experimentation of collective housing: in particular, in the 1950s and 1960s, it is possible to find a common itinerary that, in addition to a careful reflection on domestic spaces, contributed to generating an atmosphere on a human scale among the buildings built.

Therefore, it is not only a question of analysing the formal characteristics and the language of architecture in detail, result of historical, political and social contingencies, daughters of the historical period in which they were built. Rather it is looking today at the space that the built parts leave free or on how some elements increase the richness of transit passages between the public and private dimensions.

In the 1950s, the important experience of the Ina-Casa, for example, in one of the first cases of the controversial season of Italian neorealism in Rome, in the Tiburtino District in Rome (1949-1954), offers us the possibility of recognising an interesting view of spatial articulation.

Manfredo Tafuri (1935-1994) describes the project plan as "vaguely informal and only marginally typologically controlled". The different buildings that make up the whole generate a series of spaces made up of houses only, except for some commercial buildings designed by Mario Ridolfi (1904-1984): their composition perspective returns an image that rushes towards a variety of spaces that "abandons any planimetric rhythm and which, despite some inconveniences encountered, offers advantages over previous urban compositions".⁶

Today, through the transition space on the ground floor, a domestic atmosphere alien to the rhythms of the surrounding suburbs envelops the originally planned area. The different typologies (towers, houses in line,

terraced houses), the pedestrian paths, the covered passages and the urban gardens recreate the dimension of a village, which nowadays, despite some appropriations by the inhabitants, clearly shows its relationship with the city.

Walking along the neighbourhood, from the public space to the private one highlighted the sensation of advancing by stages and episodes. If on some occasions, this atmosphere is produced by gradual, covered and uncertain passages, it is through the elevated road designed by Ridolfi, like an urban corridor over the city, that it manifests itself most clearly and without mediation. The gesture thus makes it possible to generate a separate entrance to the houses in line on the ground floor, filtered by a private patio, and one to those on the first floor, doubling the role and dimension of the street: the district the district these solution in two parts. Today that the built surroundings have developed densely, and the streets have become the property of cars; the one located on the west side of the project seems to be defined in a more private way both for the inaccessibility to outsiders to the scale both for the position itself to the settlement.

In 1954 Gio Ponti wrote for a *Domus* Editorial article, "...we have lost from a design point of view..." he defines the Italian way "...between the Anglo-Saxon and the German approach of collecting single-family housing in the garden city, and that of grouping the house into a large machine as in Marseille, we have the Italian way of the *riione*, which means the approach of bringing some houses together in single structures, gathering them very close, creating spaces small and alive, constantly varied and always commensurate with the person, his habits and his essential pleasure..."⁷

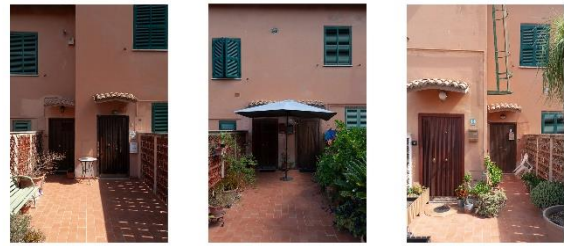


Figure 1. Transition and domestic episodes in Ina-Casa Tiburtino, Rome. Ph. Emiliano Zandri©



Figure 2. Transition in elevated street in Ina-Casa Tiburtino, Rome. Ph. Emiliano Zandri©

Chronologically similar to the Roman Tiburtino intervention, the project for the Poblado Dirigido by Caño Roto (1956-1973), in the southwestern part of Madrid, expresses an interesting relationship with the street.

Unlike the roman neighbourhood, the space designed in the plan presupposes an order and a rhythm that contextually defines the hierarchy of the open spaces, even before that of the built ones: the reiteration of the spatial sequences that made evident the compositional strategy. Furthermore, the decision to place the taller buildings in the northern part of the lot was determined by the need not to have shadows on the lower ones and by the morphology of the land itself. The structure of the system, relatively rigid and static, becomes dynamic through the topography of the land, showing a specific resistance to a desire for a "clean slate" proposed in that by Le Corbusier in the CIAM. In this perspective, the initial conformation of the ground helped the two architects, Antonio Vazquez de Castro and José Luis Iñiguez de Onzoño, to develop a series of spaces and platforms sized on a human scale which reconstruct some forgotten scenes of

Mediterranean-style life, such as children playing on the street⁸, and small squares where to share knowledge and meeting opportunities. The size of the streets and the thought-out proportion with the “poly-typical” buildings generate different collective spatial opportunities and enrich the passage and transition in the urban scenario.

As they expand and contract, strolling in the neighbourhood takes on the most characteristic, and perhaps unexpected, value in walking the narrow streets that cut the settlement from northeast to south-west: here, Caño Roto is transformed into a small village, perhaps in the past even more accentuated by the materiality of the walls. The public space is compressed and squeezed between the types of patio houses. The simple entrance doors represent the thresholds through which the boundary between the domestic and the urban evaporates. However, precisely because of their small size that the inhabitants often transform them into an extension of their living room, a garage or a warehouse, an expression of the need to occupy, colonise and make the city their own. By leaving space in the centre for the lower buildings, areas of public use are created that are more protected than driveways. This organisation of pedestrian streets and squares responds to the common goal of creating a safer public urban environment with numerous green areas free from parking, placed in the external part of the lots.

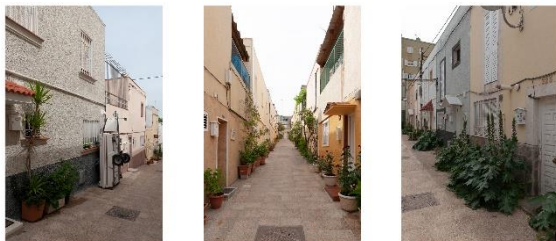


Figure 3. Transition and domestic episodes in the street of Caño Roto, Madrid. Ph. Emiliano Zandri©



Figure 4. Transition in the street of Caño Roto, Madrid. Ph. Emiliano Zandri©

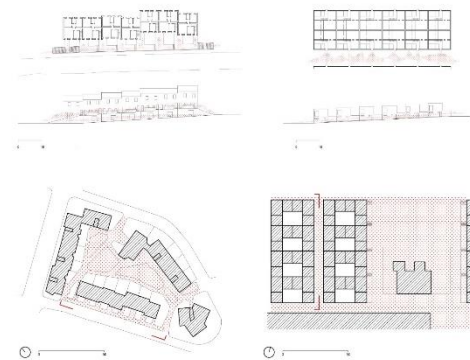


Figure 5. Transition in Ina-Casa Tiburtino (left) and Poblado Dirigido de Caño Roto (right): front and floor plan (portion). Drawing by author

Despite the transformations that have taken place over the time of the residential buildings, through informal appropriations or additions, the strength of the project is therefore still clearly visible precisely in the organisation of its open spaces. It allow for the definition of an atmospheric filter both between the residential unit and the immediate surroundings, both between the neighbourhood itself and the rest of the city.

In the metropolitan suburbs of contemporary cities, built with the logic of urban “sprawl”, the proliferation of houses alternates with large abandoned and undefined spaces in a *continuum* without quality and in which everything seems to lose identity. Even in the case of public interventions for collective housing of architectural relevance, the projects tend towards a rather clear separation between the city and the building itself: the result is most often the construction

of a landscape in which any type of relationship and space liveability is difficult to create. At the same time, the densifying processes of the contemporary city have saturated the once peripheral areas.

Therefore, in a landscape mainly of closed spaces, these modern examples offer the possibility of reflecting on the value of the space between the houses. These examples continue to represent today a sort of anomaly in the city development, a syncope in the rhythmicity of urban space and time, where even today, it is possible to find a greater affective and immaterial dimension of the places, also highlighted with the image and the experience on the place.

These parts of the city, despite metamorphic and regenerative interventions that could have altered their architectural qualities over the years, seem to not only survive the habituation of the generic city but also maintain relevant characteristics based on relational processes, affectivity and customs spaces that become the most interesting elements on which to focus your gaze. This type of observation is almost paradoxical because it focuses on projects born to be conceived as objects of city expansion, a symbol of housing needs, hygiene, territorial definition and a whole other series of quantitative data that they left the phenomenological aspect of places in the background. Modern architecture has always brought a reading of physical space based mainly on tangible and built forms. Investigating today the sensorial capacity and resistance to the recognisability of some neighbourhoods means rediscovering their value in intermediate, open, colonisable and indeterminate spaces. This short-circuit could therefore pursue the objective of observing space by analysing forces that cannot be explained through objective data. The goal is to restore attention to the relationships and connections between architectural objects and bodies, to the dynamism of reality seen through today's eyes and times.

Conclusions

Although we can consider the examples as known, it is possible to recognise that today they increasingly represent a condition of an "anomaly" in the interpretation of life between buildings, particularly concerning the dimensional perception of the city that has grown up around them.

Often underused, forgotten, and no longer responding to the precepts of a certain type of collective life, the open spaces of transition between the home and the city still represent one of the most important resources of our life: understood as spaces of transition, they can transform in free and democratic spaces of relationship.

Bringing back gaze on these places can allow us to prefigure intervention and transformation strategies in other city spaces, even starting not so much from the objectivity of data but from everything that these data leave out. Precisely architecture and urban planning cannot be considered the only sciences capable of territorial modifications. It would be useful to incorporate the subjective and experiential role of the user in the analyses, learn to read the signs and stratifications, often informal and mistaken for degradation, perhaps not categorical in pre-established forms and styles but still a manifestation of an empathetic fervour of a given place. These margins of the neighbourhood between the house and the rest of the city can be re-read, not as a physical limit but as a malleable membrane in which to concentrate major efforts for the redevelopment, transformation and change of the urban environment, both for the neighbourhood itself and for the adjoining areas. This would make it possible to include in the housing practices and sense of domesticity belonging to the residents, passers-by, of occasional users. The availability of open and green spaces is decisive for thinking of promiscuous and collective urban places, in which temporary

activities and equipment coexist with the permanent ones for the construction of coexistence and contemporary identity for the places we will live in, rediscovering an intermediate dimension of living. It is there, in fact, that more than anywhere else is, the quality of a neighbourhood is measured.

Just retracing its traces can help us to build up a new possible one, reading the contemporary needs of our life stylings. The city at eye level is important because it creates affinity and generates participatory, self-organising and coalition processes among citizens.

The overcoming of the concept of the traditional family and the increasing percentage of people living alone (young, old, single fathers and mothers) should be translated into design experiments allowing greater interrelationship possibilities,

collective interactions and contact with the environment that surrounds us.

The urban settlement can often be the scene of collective demonstrations and appropriations in the common areas. The open courtyards can become intergenerational collective halls, the drying racks playgrounds, and the small squares with barbecues collective kitchens.

Moreover, nowadays, because of the need for a new ecological lifestyle, we can understand the transition space as a phenomenological space in which a fundamental role has been recognised throughout history. This would include, in its meaning, reflections which concern not only human well-being but also other species, creating an enlarged domestic landscape. This theatrical scenario interacts with the movements and activities of all living being.

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