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On the natural history of reconstruction. The affective space of post-earthquake landscapes

Abstract

Architectural spaces are central in eliciting moods and atmospheric feelings in subjects. In this paper, I describe the relation between specific spatial gestures and the emotional response that arises from situations, with a focus on the spontaneous architectural actions that are performed as response to the pervasive moods that subjects encounter in space. As a case study, I address the post-earthquake reconstruction of Italy's central Apennine region, that has been severely damaged by seismic events in 2016.

Keywords

Architecture, Affective space, Post-earthquake reconstruction

Architecture has a lot to do with moods. Emotions pervade space as atmospheres, occupying the environment and partaking in a certain situation that the subject experiences. Their precise location cannot be ascertained, for they exist in a pre-dimensional, undefined space (Schmitz 1969: 98). To inhabit, claims Hermann Schmitz, is to cultivate emotions in an enclosed space (*umfriedeten Raum*, see 2015: 28), and we may consider this notion of *enclosed* in a wide sense, beyond the immediate meaning of *Innenraum*, interior space.

Emotions and moods are both manifestations experienced within the gamut of the subject's affective states; there may be no clear dividing line between them, and distinctions are sometimes instrumental: some affective scientists, for example, claim that "*moods* [differ] from emotions mainly in intensity and duration, in particular as being less intense and longer lasting than emotions" (Colombetti, 2014: 1). Contemporary phenomenology proposes a more nuanced distinction,

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where *Stimmungen* are understood as “forms of the situational correlation to the world, not understood in terms of specific events”, whereas emotions are rather bound to anchoring points that are their real generative location; hence, they become condensed and directional, emerging from the immediateness of situations and acting as activators of the subject’s experience (Griffero 2017: 42).

These articulations may be useful to gain a clearer understanding of how architecture relates to moods. Buildings usually possess a stability over time, offering their inhabitants a sense of permanence bound to their nature of physical objects. We know that architectural spaces may elicit a certain mood, a feeling that we recurrently experience each time we visit them; often we seek to *return* to a certain city, or building, or room, because we desire to find that sensation again, one that made us feel well and to which we want to be attuned: the longing for *home* is the archetypal expression of this permanence. *Habit* is a quintessential part of inhabiting (Vitta 2008: 80), the spontaneous and irreflexive reverting of our corporeal state to a condition of comfort, a feeling of intimate protection – *Gemütlichkeit* – that we have previously encountered in some place.

Architecture conceived as a praxis of building space has the capacity to provide the physical scaffolding for the emergence of such affective states. If atmospheres are by their own nature transitory objects of perception (Böhme 2001: 50), by analogy with the distinction drawn by affective scientists, moods as posed by spatial conditions may possess a stronger stability, a property of being more closely hinged to the material construction of architectural environments. Architects can devise entirely artificial structures, completely detached from the contingency of the outside world: these are spaces of interiority, where every tangible element may be the result of deliberate design. It is almost as if the ephemerality of atmospheres could be somehow *pinned down* through architectural intention, stabilizing a condition that becomes present over and over again. Could this be how buildings afford moods?

We know that architects have the ability to craft immersive environments, severed from the natural world, where the subjects’ emotions and moods will be durably influenced, albeit with the clause that each subject will experience such affects through his specific corporeal disposition. This expressive potential is not limited to interior spaces alone: buildings in their public *facies*, as parts of a wider environment

such as the city can strike observers, offering an affective tone. As Adolf Loos famously wrote in 1910, "Architecture arouses moods in people, so the task of the architect is to give these moods concrete expression. A room must look cozy, a house comfortable to live in. To secret vice the law courts must seem to make a threatening gesture. A bank must say, 'Here your money is safe in the hands of honest people'" (Loos 2002: 84). This correspondence is not a mere linguistic matter of *character*, intended as a building's ability to express its function (De Matteis 2012: 106), but calls into play the subjects' corporeal stirrings.

Thus, we may well agree that architecture creates moods. The question that I want to address here, however, is another: is architectural practice *influenced* by moods? To what extent does an enduring affective tone that is collectively experienced determine the way our environment is transformed through architecture?

This question entails a number of different answers, depending on the various understandings that we have of architectural practice. The most conventional one implies the centrality of an author, an *artifex* who deliberately designs an *artifact* that responds to and interprets the conditions of reality. In this sense, we can plainly associate specific architectural styles to the historical mood of the time they came into being: think of the overbearing rhetoric of fascist monumentality, or the shady hues of Gothic revival buildings, inspired by Romantic and Victorian sensibility. Some theses argue for the connection between different epochs and the collective corporeal disposition of the population, influenced by historical events and conditions (Schmitz 2011: 116). In this sense architects make no exception, acting (citing the fortunate title of the 1996 Venice Architecture Biennale) as "seismographs" of their time.

Architecture considered as the mere work of architects is, however, a very restrictive view of things, if not altogether a simplification. The reality of the built environment is largely determined by actions performed by subjects that have no deep understanding of what it means to make architecture; in many cases, there is no clear aesthetic agenda to be pursued. In an anthropological perspective, the transformation of space is a rather spontaneous act, responding to basic and immediate needs that, although often overlapping with those at the center of professional design work, lack the clarity of intent implicit in formalized projects. In this sense, the transformation of the environment is a basic

expression of culture, not unlike what anthropologists like Leroi-Gourhan term the “aesthetic behavior” of ethnic groups (1993: 271), describing it as the spontaneous adaptation of changing needs and conditions (Oliver 2003: 14). *Architecture without architects*, title of a popular 1964 book by Bernard Rudofsky, describes the achievements of vernacular builders, who may well be illiterate but egregiously respond to the environmental qualities of their habitats.

We may feel a distance between our “higher” architectural skills and those of a Dogon tribe: but even the use of more advanced construction techniques, implemented within a complex regulatory system such as that wherein building practice takes place in western contexts, is the expression of a specific cultural milieu. Architecture can be considered as a wider field of spatial practices, not limited to professionals but also encompassing the actions carried out by common people, or by practitioners who operate on a shallow level of complexity, providing technical solutions that do not imply a sophisticated interpretation of extant reality. Contemporary building practices embed culture in a way that is not entirely unlike vernacular architecture: the complexity of such conducts, however, may make them erroneously appear as fully rational, intentional endeavors.

These architectural actions may have effects that are all but menial, profoundly altering the human environment. Often their motivation can be pinpointed in the changes that occur in an historical mood: during the 1940s and 50s, Austrian-American architect Richard Neutra helped define the idea of modern Californian house by designing countless homes in affluent Los Angeles suburbs. As Julius Shulman’s photographs of the time tell us, these architectures thrived in the generous relationship with the surrounding landscape, merging gardens and interior spaces in a strong spatial continuity. Their openness towards both city and nature was tell-tale of the optimism of post-war America and of a felicitous urban condition where conflict was mostly absent. But if you were to visit Silver Lake or Palos Verdes today, seeking traces of Neutra’s modernist masterpieces, you would be disappointed: most have disappeared behind fences, hedges and walls, disrupting their original transparencies. These barriers did obviously not take form on the architect’s drafting table: they were later willed by the homeowners who clearly felt a mutation in LA’s urban ambiance,

today scarred by the trauma and violence typical of many large western cities. In this climate, doors must be locked at night, and gardens enclosed.

If we want to describe the real space of our human habitat, of urban settlements, considering the affective state of their inhabitants, we must consider that these un-designed transformations are much more influential than architects are often willing to admit. An account of this anthropological dimension of the built environment goes beyond architectural criticism: it equates with a *natural history*. By this I mean that the transformation of the human environment must be considered as an ongoing process, an aggregate of actions produced by a multiplicity of subjects forming a collectivity, rather than the discrete agency of specific individuals. There is no poetic or manifesto subtending such process: a deep and transversal affective condition, usually undeclared, orients what might often appear as isolated choices.

1. *Architectural moods*

When the mood changes in a particular place, time, and community, the affective tone of the individuals who pertain to that group shifts, gradually or abruptly. In terms of “rational” decisions, this may entail the rearrangement of priorities, the allocation or subtraction of resources; in short, economic choices that are inherent to any building initiative. But not only quantitative matters come into play: as when we are affected by an unpleasant emotion, or in a somber mood, we tend to move in a different way from when we are happy and uplifted, and our corporeal posture is not the same, so the quality of architectural elements changes along with the *Stimmung* that we feel “in the air”.

There is a tight connection between gestures and postures that we perform with our body and those that are expressed by architectural objects. This nearness is not a mere matter of analogy or metaphor, as implied in the anthropomorphism recurring in many historical buildings; neither are we speaking of the “projection” of the subject’s private inner state onto an inanimate object that he encounters (Griffero 2014: 53). In 1886, Heinrich Wölfflin claimed that a building’s expressive capacity relies on the resonance that is established between forms and the corporeal experience of the observer: “Physical forms possess

a character only because we ourselves possess a body” (Wölfflin 1994: 151). This correspondence hovers above a mere morphological similitude between building and observer, an elementary mimesis of postures: “Since only human form, of course, can express all that lies in humanity, architecture will be unable to express particular emotions that are manifested through specific faculties. [...] Its subject remains the *great vital feelings*, the moods that presuppose a constant and stable bodily condition” (Wölfflin 1994: 152).

Wölfflin’s intuition paved the way for the recognition that buildings, as all other works of art, affect the subjects’ emotional realm (Colombetti 2014: 178). But his view was very much oriented towards the architectural object, somehow lifted from its wider environmental and cultural context. To understand how this relationship unfolds in more complex conditions, one must consider a wider and deeper array of actors: “The coming into being of [...] architectural gestures is not only defined by the expression of movement of spatial situations, but also by the interplay of user and situation, to make possible the comprehensive ‘concretization’ of the spatial expression” (Jäkel 2013: 50, my translation). Gestures, as suggestions of movement, are atmospheric generators (Böhme 2001: 102), semi-things that inhabit space *between* the material world of things and the subject, pertaining to neither and both.

Architectural gestures are crucial in the emergence of mood, but there is more than that alone. Situations in built environments may stem from the material quality of things, irradiating their presence into space. Gernot Böhme terms these emanations *ecstasies*, thereby intending the expression of the presence of a thing (2001: 132). All things that are in the environment and perceptually available to the subject are *present* in the physical sense, but only some rise to the foreground, becoming salient and anchoring atmospheric perception. We all know how different a wood-clad interior *feels* from an aseptic dentist’s office: many of the atmospheric qualities here derive from the ecstasy of materials (Griffero 2014: 96). Yet also individual objects, or an array of them, can sometimes catalyze a space’s qualities, as a magnetic piece of art located in a museum gallery is capable of doing.

In either case, the atmospheric presences become the *content* of the subject’s experience. Content not unfolding linguistically, rather through the emotional resonance of the orientational metaphors connected to spatial gestures – upwards and upright, downwards and

slumped, forward and advancing, backwards and retreating etc. (Lakoff, Johnson 1980: 14) – or the poignancy of some objects' ecstatic irradiation in surrounding space. This spatial content pre-reflectively alters the subject's corporeal condition, attuning him to what he encounters in that situation, and providing a form of cognition that is affectively denotated (Colombetti 2014: XVII). The intensity of response may be variable, depending on the subject's particular disposition and previous experience: yet we know that it is impossible to remain indifferent, for at most we can *contain* the external evidence and expression of the corporeal response, preserving a form of "inner posture" that is descriptive of our role among other subjects (Schmitz 2011: 45).

The subjects' lack of indifference to the emotional content made available in experienced space makes no exception even when the architect is engaged in his work, in the intentional endeavor of matching the rational with the expressive, the economic with the poetic. Even more so, an affective tone influences the spontaneous making of the vernacular builder, one whose actions are near immediate equivalents of gestures of embracing or defense.

2. *The destruction*

To exemplify the above, I will provide a description of an encounter that I made in April 2018, during a visit to the area in central Italy that has been severely struck by earthquakes between August and October 2016, in the northern part of Latium, Umbria and Marche (Fig. 1). This account does not intend to be objective: it is inevitably linked to my own affective response to that situation, to what I observed in the several towns and villages scattered among the Apennine mountains that I visited. Less than two years after the seismic events, the reconstruction efforts were still largely incipient, with many temporary structures already set up or underway, but few permanent interventions carried out, in a deeply fragmentary framework of initiatives.



Fig. 1. Pretare, under Mount Vettore, Marche

Differently from the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake, that struck a major city with important economic, political and cultural roles, here the earth has shaken many tiny hamlets that were already suffering from depopulation and a weak economic fabric. No one knows if and to what extent the reconstruction promoted by the government will ever be completed; even less is there a certainty regarding the timeframe within which this effort will take place. It is a notion that no one dares speak out too loudly, but the extension of the destruction provides a feeling that this region might be somehow abandoned to the present ruinous state. This feeling, albeit latent, seems to be somehow embedded in many architectural artifacts that can be found throughout the area.

But in speaking of *encounter*, I intend to point not to an object or a specific situation: rather, at the palpable *mood* that can be felt here. It is as if the landscape of hills, valleys and forests was layered with an overbearing tone that cannot be located in a single point, but is diffused and follows the visitor even where there is no devastation to be directly observed. Most buildings in the area suffered enormously under the jolts of the earthquake, while the natural features of the landscape seem to be unaffected by those traumatic events. Nevertheless, when traveling from one place to another, you could almost say that

even nature has been hurt, possibly the transposition of what the subject himself feels as a base affective tone, a mood. It is a sensation comparable to what it must be like to be in a war zone, where the latent tension of conflict remains even where everyday life appears to continue undisturbed.

The subjectivity of the description opens a wide set of further issues. As a traveler, an occasional visitor to the region, I could only directly record my own response to this encounter. Although familiar with the area before the 2016 events, and with a certain experience with earthquake disaster areas, I was engaged by the situation I encountered in a way that does not necessarily coincide with the affective condition of the local inhabitants. I have tried to describe their spatial practices as responses to the trauma they have experienced, yet have observed them through my own affective sensibility: I thus do not exclude the possibility of a mismatch between my restitution of emotional states and what a local inhabitant may experience, and the practices this leads to. Nevertheless, in any first-person description incorporating the affective dimension, we must accept the inherent subjectivity, the changing perspective that stems not from diverging opinions, but rather from corporeal responses that may radically differ. There is an implicit *truth* in every affective stirring, since it precedes any interpretive act, eluding falsification. Furthermore, we must consider that emotions in their spatial expression become shared and transversally available to all subjects, and that any discrepant responses account only for a certain part of our agency. In this sense, we can ascribe to first-person descriptions a certain degree of facticity, while keeping in mind that there is no pre-determined cause-effect relation between spatial situations and the various subjects' responses.

Once the *caveat* of this first-person description has been declared, I mean to point out what could be the architectural components of the pervasive mood of the earthquake-stricken territory. It is not easy to single out individual elements since the *Stimmung* that I encountered emerges from both the physical and the immaterial constitution of space and from the affect transmitted by the inhabitants of those towns. I will focus on two recurring features that can be encountered in the landscape of ruins that has come to replace the picturesque mountain villages.

A striking fact that one cannot avoid noticing is the nature of deformation the seismic jolts have caused to the buildings. The villages in the damaged areas were to a wide extent made up of traditional stone architecture. The load-bearing masonry, lacking elastic properties, has reacted poorly to the earthquakes, with widespread damage that in many cases was more evident on individual sides or partitions. Some buildings thus appear comparatively undamaged if viewed from one angle, while utterly destroyed from other sides (Fig. 2). They have not entirely collapsed since the direction of vibration has affected walls differently, demolishing some while leaving others standing. The result of this type of damage is shocking for it preserves the recognizability of the structures, deforming them however in grotesque ways that challenge our usual expectation of what a building is: an enclosed volume, characterized by the integrity of its envelope; an opaque box that shelters inhabitants from both climate and introspective gaze.



Fig. 2. Damaged buildings in Castelluccio di Norcia and Pretare

Buildings in these conditions are scattered throughout the affected region where one comes across them with tantalizing frequency. The architectural gestures embodied by them is difficult to describe, although it is clearly bound to a deformation that is all but natural, despite the fact that it was caused by a natural event. The shock that we experience when encountering such an artifact is not far from what we

feel when we see a picture of a dismembered human, such as in medieval painting, where strong images of disemboweled corpses were introduced in pictorial cycles to warn beholders of the wrathful revenge that strikes mortal sinners.

The deformation of a body – an architectural body in this case, with which we experience a corporeal resonance – is striking in the sense that it ranges out of the ordinary. Its repercussions can be powerful and long-lasting, especially if we encounter such figure close at hand. In his 1997 novel *Enduring love*, Ian McEwan places the vision of a deformed corpse at the outset of the plot, leveraging on its grotesque appearance to trigger the dramatic events that will eventually involve the two men who first come upon the victim of the fall from a hot-air balloon:

I could see his hair curling over his shirt collar and sunburned skin along the tops of his ears. His tweed jacket was unmarked, though it drooped strangely, for his shoulders were narrower than they should have been. They were narrower than any adult's could be. From the base of the neck there was no lateral spread. The skeletal structure had collapsed internally to produce a head on a thickened stick. And seeing that, I became aware that what I had taken for calmness was absence. There was no one there. The quietness was that of the inanimate, and I understood again, because I had seen dead bodies before, why a prescientific age would have needed to invent the soul. [...] These were the thoughts with which I tried to protect myself as I began to circle the corpse. It sat within a little indentation in the soil. I didn't see [the man] dead until I saw his face, and what I saw I only glimpsed. Though the skin was intact, it was hardly a face at all, for the bone structure had shattered, and I had the impression, before I looked away, of a radical, Picassoesque violation of perspective. Perhaps I only imagined the vertical arrangement of the eyes. (McEwan 2004: 22-3)

We are quite familiar with our own bodily reaction in such a situation. In front of a deformed or disemboweled corpse, we feel drawn away, in a spontaneous reaction of *disgust*. It is a primary affective response emerging as a form of protection for the subject that witnesses something that may be harmful to him. Corpses and decay, among many others, can be elicitors of disgust (Tedeschini 2018), and the described encounter with the shattered body clearly suggests a rejection. Can we qualify a partially collapsed building in this same sense? We spontaneously stay away from objects that appear to be unstable, as a tree deviating from its usual verticality: this can be easily explained in terms of staying clear of danger. But I believe that in the case of the

buildings disemboweled by the earthquake, something deeper acts out, the implicit recognition of a certain expressiveness, the mirroring of corporeality that, as Wölfflin claimed, architecture is capable of sparking.

The multiplication of this effect on a territorial scale, with buildings in this condition lining village after village, accounts for the physical scaffolding of the *Stimmung* that is in the air. One feels not welcome among such ruins that have nothing of the “hygienized” picturesque of archaeological sites or abandoned mountain villages. Paradoxically, the architectural corpses of the semi-collapsed buildings appear to be still alive, as witnessed by the immediate urgency of non-trespass “red” zones, the ongoing demolition work, and the temporary housing settlements located just on the margins of the damaged villages.

3. *Turning away*

How can we describe the spontaneous gestures that are performed to respond to this “landscape of disgust”? There is not a single gesture, but rather a family of actions that all embody some form of *turning away*. Disgust makes us withdraw, step away, turn around, at most with some desire of casting a gaze over our shoulder at the repulsive object. But the utmost drive is that of looking the other way, in an effort to shield ourselves from the unwanted, powerful contraction of the lived body. Smell is often the primary driver of disgust, eliciting the contingent atmospheric perception that we associate to many repulsive situations (Griffero 2014: 64): but here we are in front of an odorless horror, hinged to material objects that, differently from breaths of air, are unlikely to go away. They may be demolished, as is happening in many of the damaged towns: what remained of Amatrice, all but razed by the earthquakes, has been systematically removed by the Civil Protection Department, an initiative that has sparked strong criticism, for along with the ruins go the traces of the town’s history.

As long as the deformed buildings remain present, looking away will be the most likely reaction. It may eventually evolve into a stable corporeal attitude, a mood transversally experienced by a majority of subjects, most potently by those who have witnessed the events that led to the destruction. It is permanent, not transitory, and one of the deepest drives for demolition could be traced in the need of releasing the

population from this corporeal constriction. In his essay *Luftkrieg und Literatur* – translated into English as *On the natural history of destruction* – W.G. Sebald questions the absence of descriptions of the aerial bombings in post-war German literature. His claim is that it descends from a wider, nation-wide response of *turning away*, fueled by a sense of shame, as a “non-aggressive and therefore permanent atmosphere” (Griffero 2017: 80). About this literary “black hole”, Sebald writes:

The remarkable aspect of such accounts is their rarity. Indeed, it seems that no German writer [...] was ready or able to put any concrete facts down on paper about the progress and repercussions of this gigantic, long-term campaign of destruction. It was the same when the war was over. The quasi-natural reflex, engendered by feelings of shame and a wish to defy the victors, was to keep quiet and look the other way. Stig Dagerman, reporting from Germany in the autumn of 1946 for the Swedish newspaper *Expressen*, writes from Hamburg that on a train going at normal speed it took him a quarter of an hour to travel through the lunar landscape between Hasselbrook and Landwehr, and in all that vast wilderness, perhaps the most horrifying expanse of ruins in the whole of Europe, he did not see a single living soul. The train, writes Dagerman, was crammed full, like all trains in Germany, but no one looked out of the windows, and he was identified as a foreigner himself *because* he looked out. (Sebald 2004, 30-1)

The diverging gestures of inhabitants and visitor point to the subjectivity of corporeal response. The latter is not fueled by a sense of shame, rather by the almost morbid curiosity of gazing at the horrific landscape of ruins. Yet despite this divarication, we must observe that the emotional expression anchored to the ruins does not allow indifference: the reasons subjacent to the corporeal response may be different, but there is a strong analogy in the effect, in the drive to action to balance the account with a landscape of destruction, to cope with the war’s devastation.

In the subsequent architectural narratives, diverging emotional responses as expressed through these gestures may eventually lead to surprisingly similar architectural results. Top-down reconstruction programs often aim at overwriting the damaged cities, reverting to an ideal, historical condition where, in the words of Georges Steiner, “lacquered depth” may turn them into a frigid “stage set” that primarily wishes to remove a collective memory (1971: 60). This is what happened, for example, in the post-war rebuilding of many German cities, where the same sense of national guilt that led the train riders to divert their gazes purported the erasure of most signs of destruction. Yet

even in the case of natural catastrophes, where shame does not underlie a collective mood, there is often an equally deep impulse to bring the city back to what it was *before* the event: this is driving the reconstruction of L'Aquila, where most buildings are being restored à *l'identique*, far beyond the legitimate scientific claims of architectural conservation standards.

The official narratives thus often dislodge the facticity of emotional responses, installing an overarching, pacifying vision that is politically willed. The spontaneous response to the urge to *turn away* becomes more striking in the case of basic architectural actions, those pertaining to the anthropology of space-making that we identified before. Architectural design knows a wealth of gestures that are meant to *turn towards*: the opening of a window, the orientation of a façade, or the embracing of landscape through a columned portico. There are, however, fewer devices that *turn away*, and almost all are based on the shielding of sight, fencing in, walling off. Protection appears far more a rudimentary architectural act than aperture, and this again can be traced back to the different moods these gestures are expressing: to shield is to protect, and such a need arises in atmospheric conditions that make one feel threatened.

In Arquata del Tronto, among the Apennine villages most severely damaged by the 2016 earthquakes, one particular building struck me for the way it was *turning away* from the destruction just next door (Fig. 3-4). It is a multi-purpose hall sponsored by the Diocese, and it was inaugurated on August 24th, 2017, exactly one year after the first seismic event. It is a rather conventional architecture built in a very short time to provide the local population with a gathering place. Rising a short distance from the destroyed village, on a former fruit orchard belonging to the Diocese, it faces the medieval church of SS. Pietro e Paolo, that has entirely collapsed during the earthquake. This building is not a temporary structure: it is meant to stay.



Fig. 3-4. “Agorà” building, Arquata del Tronto

There is something stupefying about this architecture, in all its benevolence. The finely pruned lawn, keen landscaping and immaculate children’s playground sit between the building and the church, lying in a ruinous state on the other side of a wire-mesh fence. Plants and young trees line this fence, offering no screening of the pile of stone

rubble that once was the church. One receives the impression that, even in the unlikely case that the historical building will one day stand again, this architecture will continue to step away, expressing a form of repulsion embedded in its utter indifference. This is no deliberate *turning away*, rather an unwilling, spontaneous architectural gesture. In turn, we can question what this built situation will provide in terms of emotional modulation to its users: will the children playing on the hobby-horses *look* at the ruined church? Will it become a familiar, anaesthetized landscape of things, one that bears no difference from any ordinary place? Is the projection of future that this architecture is affirming one that says that everything can go on, *as if nothing had happened?*

4. *As if nothing had happened*

Let us look into this last question: some of the architectural gestures encountered in this traumatized landscape seem to state that human life can go on, as if nothing had happened. It is not an unusual paradox, laden with political significance: there is an implicit difficulty in dealing with collective memories of man-made or natural destruction, with frequent mismatches between institutional positions and the grieving of those who were directly affected (Tarpino 2008: 143). In this post-earthquake region there is no “official” memorial, but even in L’Aquila, where the reconstruction process has entered its second decade, there is no agreement and little public discussion on the possibility of rendering a monumental homage to the victims of the 2009 event.

Some clues in the spontaneous architectural gestures to be found here, however, point towards a form of rejection and isolation of the sources and traces of an enduring trauma. Among the most uncanny sights that one comes across while traveling through these villages are the many shattered houses, partially collapsed yet precariously still standing, that display their interior spaces. In some cases, it almost seems as if a single wall or a section of the building had been surgically removed, in a way that somehow reminds of Matta-Clark’s architectural perforations. One small house in particular, in the village of Pretare, had lost the corners of its ground floor, while its upper floor appeared entirely pristine (Fig. 5-6). From the gaping corner, one could

look into the once cozy living room-cum-kitchen, with all cooking utensils still neatly aligned along the ceramic-tiled countertop. Nearby, in front of another building, one could peek into a bedroom opened to the view like an architectural section drawing (Fig. 7).



Fig. 5-6. A damaged house in Pretare



Fig. 7. A collapsed external wall in a house in Pretare

Coming across these architectural corpses, one feels embarrassed, to say the least: you are looking at something that you are not supposed to see, that was never intended to be seen by any other than the dwellers of that house. The loss of integrity of the building and exposure of its bowels brings it to a condition of nudity, and the observer comes across the same alternate and contemporaneous need to *look* and *look away* that we may experience in front of human nakedness. In the permanence of the shattered buildings and piles of debris the trauma of the earthquake is perpetually re-presented, and only the cleansing of the rubble can hygienize this corrupted landscape. Yet the damaged buildings' nakedness becomes itself a form of territorialized neurosis, affecting the *Stimmung* of things and humans, and against which the survivors counteract with their own lenient architectural devices.

The nudity of these buildings is *offensive* not only because it breaks a social norm of privacy, allowing anybody to cast a gaze into the (now dead) interiors of the homes. It is so because it discloses the manifold deeper senses of nudity, those that Didi-Huberman tracks in his analysis of the Renaissance figuration of the Goddess Venus. Nudity is not

the expression of ideal feminine beauty alone: it is also laden with desire and sometimes cruelty. But these further contents are typically *isolated* by means of a powerful mechanism that interrupts the connections with other pieces of thought (2014: 28). In his 1925 essay *Hemmung Symptom und Angst*, Sigmund Freud connects the act of isolating with a process that, through a sort of “negative magic”, means to blow away not only the consequences of a traumatic event, but to make the event itself *unhappen*, *Ungeschehenmachen*.

“Magical thinking” may well provide an explanation for some of the spatial motifs of the reconstruction. As new temporary structures are set up to shelter the social life and economic activities of the affected populations, the landscape becomes dotted with new buildings, most often lacking any elaborate aesthetics, yet producing sense for their very being new and pristine, starkly differing from the surrounding devastation (Fig. 8). Several such buildings line the via Salaria, running in the valley the destroyed villages once overlooked. Alongside residential modules for the displaced inhabitants rise the warehouses and sheds for the small industries and the shops that were once hosted in the area. In the spartan corridors and rooms all materials, fixtures and furnishings express the temporariness of these spaces meant to rise quickly and be equally rapidly removed as the activities return to their original sites, in an ideally near future (Fig. 9).



Fig. 8. A temporary commercial compound near Pescara del Tronto



Fig. 9. Temporary commercial building near Pescara del Tronto, interiors

And it is in the cold atmospheres of emptiness that the “magical thinking” comes into play, as a possibly collective mechanism of *Ungeschehenmachen*. Modest picture frames line the corridors and shops, showing photographs of the picturesque villages *as they were before*. These naïve postcard-like images act as magical objects, counteracting the shattered reality that lies just outside this building. It is sufficient to raise your eyes beyond the via Salaria to contemplate what remains of the small towns, but inside this protected space – *umfriedeten Raum* – the photographs make the earthquake *unhappen*. Albeit displaced, life here may continue *as if nothing had happened* through the aid of elementary architectural gestures and objects.

In the space that will eventually host the town’s former tavern, mirrors, paintings and antique pieces of furniture line the still-empty room, salvaged from the old stone building that once housed the restaurant (Fig. 10-11). A vague sense of melancholia is hinged to these objects, ecstatically irradiating their magnetic presence into the surrounding space, almost surrealistically detached from their context, in



Fig. 10-11. The displaced tavern, Pescara del Tronto

an incipient attempt at recreating the atmosphere of *what it was like* to dine in Pescara del Tronto. Yet what these floating pieces display is the power of those spontaneous acts that transform space: it is the response to the nudity of the disemboweled buildings, and the nakedness of the new buildings that are meant to shelter the surviving life.

5. *Being there*

To travel in these towns is a grievous experience, and I have not mentioned the encounters with the inhabitants, who in their human resiliency are enduring a situation that is difficult to describe in its depth. In these tiny communities, everyone was struck by the death of someone known, and many who were not hurt helped clear the rubble of collapsed houses, extracting dead bodies. For those who have only experienced the dramatic events through aseptic television reports the trauma is not direct, but still it is potently expressed by the landscape as a whole, in its material and immaterial features: but it is in the man-made of architecture that the wounds become equally visible to everyone in a non-transitory way. The *Stimmung* of this wounded region is deeply embedded in its buildings, both in the old shattered ones, and in the subtle responses to this mood that the new ones express.

How architecture helps generate the mood that is *in the air*, and how spatial practices emerge as responses to this mood, all feed into the anthropological cycle of making and experiencing space. As a visitor, one may pass through these places without modifying them as inhabitants do: but he cannot remain indifferent to the powerful affective content expressed by the situation. In this sense, *being there* means to all live under one same mood, in the collaboration between bodies that is orchestrated by architectural settings.

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