

## Telling the Story of Space Between Design and Construction

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### Abstract

Philosophy has always examined subjectivity in terms of its relationship with time, but less frequently has it engaged with the theme of space; however, as soon as it begins to do this, it runs into questions that remain very much open. Paul Ricœur only moved to consider the topic of space after having reflected at length on time and the temporality inhabited by subjectivity. Making space a topic means not only thinking about the extension of the *one's own body as a lived body* but also reflecting on that physical space in which "the other comes closer and where the close becomes other" and in which the encounter of identity and difference creates continuous short circuits, especially in the increasingly congested western metropolises. Starting from the "unexpected application" of the narrative dimension to architecture, Ricœur goes on to develop an interesting reflection on space built and space inhabited.

*Keywords: Space; Ricœur; Narrative; Architecture.*

### Résumé

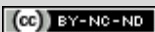
La philosophie a toujours examiné la subjectivité à partir de sa relation avec le temps, mais elle s'est moins souvent souciée du thème de l'espace ; cependant, dès qu'elle commence à le faire, elle se heurte à des questions qui restent très ouvertes. Paul Ricœur ne s'est penché sur le thème de l'espace qu'après avoir longuement réfléchi sur le temps et la temporalité habitée par la subjectivité. Faire de l'espace un sujet de réflexion signifie non seulement penser à l'extension de son propre corps en tant que corps vivant, mais aussi réfléchir sur cet espace physique dans lequel "l'autre se rapproche et où le proche devient autre" et où la rencontre de l'identité et de la différence crée des courts-circuits continus, en particulier dans les métropoles occidentales de plus en plus encombrées. Partant de l'"application inattendue" de la dimension narrative à l'architecture, Ricœur développe une réflexion intéressante sur l'espace construit et l'espace habité.

*Mots-clés: Espace; Ricœur; Narration; Architecture.*

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# Telling the Story of Space

## Between Design and Construction

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### I. Aporias of Space, Aporias of Place

In 1948, the then 40-year-old Maurice Merleau-Ponty gave a series of talks for a French radio programme in which he set out the broad outlines of his thought and, in simple but effective language, outlined the concept of “space” both in classical science and in his own philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Classical science, explained the French philosopher, is based on a clear distinction between space and the physical world, according to which space is the uniform container within which things are distributed according to its three dimensions and within which, however much they move, they always preserve their essential qualities. There are, of course, cases in which, because of movement, an object does change its properties: for example, if an object moves from the North or South Pole to the Equator, its weight will change, or it may change shape if an increase in temperature distorts it. All these changes in properties do not result from the movement itself – space is the same at either pole as at the Equator – but are caused by the physical factor of temperature, which varies according to location. From this point of view, the field of geometry remains distinct from that of physics: in fact, the geometric properties of the object remain the same during its movement, since the physical conditions are not variable. But everything changed with the advent of so-called non-Euclidean geometries which see space as curved and the movement of things as an alteration, and thus draw a distinction between the parts of space and its dimensions, irreplaceable among themselves but able to cause changes to the bodies that move within it. Instead of a world in which the role of identity and of change are rigidly delimited and subject to different principles, in this new geometric conception objects cannot have an absolute identity, form and content are as it were intermingled, and the rigid shell that constituted the world provided by homogeneous Euclidean space disappears. If it becomes impossible to distinguish between space and things, space no longer becomes the realm of things that can be mastered by an observer, but rather something perceived through lived experience. To explain this epochal change, Merleau-Ponty cited the explorations of twentieth-century painting, particularly that of Cézanne. Whereas classical art rested on a rigid distinction between drawing and colour, in which the spatial scheme of the object is first drawn and then filled with colour, “Cézanne, on the contrary, stated: ‘when you paint, you draw’ in the sense that neither in the perceived world nor in the painting that expresses it are the contour and form of the object strictly distinguished by the interruption or alteration of colours, by the chromatic modulation that must contain everything: the object’s form, colour, physiognomy and its relationship to nearby objects.”<sup>2</sup> In this effort to represent objects and space as we perceive them

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Conversazioni*, dir. Stéphanie Ménasé, trad. Federico Ferrari (Milano: Se, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Conversazioni*, 25.

in lived experience, everything is broken down, disjointed, re-figured. Painting is driven not by geometric perspective, but by the need to achieve a “style of perceptual experience,” the possibility of offering different perspectives within paintings, giving a careful observer “the sensation of a world in which two objects are never seen at the same time, in which, between the various parts of space, there is always the duration necessary to lead our gaze from one to the other, in which being is not given, but appears and transpires through time.”<sup>3</sup> Space is no longer that which contains objects simultaneously nor is it a container of simultaneous things that can be dominated by an observer who is absolute and equally close to all of them, an observer with no perspective, no body, no spatial situation; on the contrary, the space of twentieth-century painting is more the “space that appeals to the heart,” a space organically linked to us and in which we are situated and close by. “It is possible that in an age obsessed with technical measurement and effectively consumed by quantification,” Paulhan adds, “the Cubist painter celebrates, in his own way, in a space reconciled more with our heart than with our intelligence, a kind of tacit marriage, a reconciliation of the world with man.”<sup>4</sup>

Faced with this spatial revolution in science and painting, phenomenological philosophy, Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest, has now realised that its relations with space are no longer those of a purely disembodied subject with a distal object, but those of a “space’s inhabitant,” of a “being thrown” into the world, as Heidegger has it, in which things are no longer simply neutral objects to be contemplated, but there to be enjoyed, used and transformed through a symbolic language. The phenomenological contribution, and in particular that of hermeneutic phenomenology, would then be that of having placed at the centre of its thought the question of the lived body, of the “flesh of the world” as an unavoidable perimeter of human experience.

In the wake of Merleau-Ponty’s insight, and even before Heidegger, thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricœur, when they find themselves thinking about *space*, end up in an aporia: that of thinking of physical space as spatialised time, as a place of time, without any consideration for the ethical-political implications of space, understood as a *setting*. For Derrida, this failure to make space a subject of its own has deferred to the undisputed primacy of temporality in Western philosophy: “so much so that one is tempted to say that time and metaphysics are so close as to border on identity; time from this perspective is the apophantic aspect of onto-theology, its privileged vehicle of expression.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, from Plato to Heidegger, via Hegel, there has been the same process of relegation of the relationship between space, writing and corporeality and the terms that compose it, which is left as a silent background to the dominant relationship in our civilisation: the relationship of time and soul. It is Plato with his famous definition in *Timaeus*, the “moving image of eternity,” who, by shifting time into the invisible domain of universals, brought it about that time “despite its stubborn elusiveness, remained the exclusive point of contact for the involvement of ‘animate’ interiority. Interiority, consciousness, temporality and eternity are consolidated by belonging to the same ontological array.”<sup>6</sup> Only at the

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<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Conversazioni*, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Paulhan, *La Peinture cubiste*, ed. Jean-Claude Zylberstein (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 174.

<sup>5</sup> Claudio Fontana, *Prefazione*, in Didier Frank, *Heidegger e il problema dello spazio* (Torino: Ananke, 2006), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Fontana, *Prefazione*, 8. See Jacques Derrida, *Khôra* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

moment when geometric, measurable and calculable space is superimposed on its status of *setting* and interposes itself amongst its geometric properties, as happens in Cubist painting or in Merleau-Ponty's conceptualisation, is it possible to treat space in a new way. It is necessary to think of it not only with reference to the extension of one's own body, as a lived body, but as "physical space," the space in which the *other* becomes *close* and where the *close* becomes *other*. This thought soon prompts another: that of regarding identity and difference, sameness and otherness as conjoined and contiguous in space. For this reason, it is necessary to perform a radical rethinking of the "dwelling of man on earth," which starts from Heidegger's famous statement of dwelling-building-thinking.<sup>7</sup>

What is required now is a re-appropriation of the singularity and specificity of places in order to oppose that process of standardisation and homogenisation of inhabited spaces that is happening in all the great contemporary metropolises. If it is true, in fact, that the modality of a good life for Paul Ricœur is expressed through the ethical tripod of "living with and together with others in just institutions," it is necessary to ask ourselves how it is possible to think of a good life within the anonymous and increasingly congested spaces of Western metropolises, where the same pattern always seems to be proposed, that of a culture that stages – as Adorno and Horkheimer write – a false identity between universal and particular.<sup>8</sup> A false "identity" because it is syncretistic and ends up creating dangerous short circuits. In fact, the risk is being unable to either see the importance of the ethical and political weave of social relations, or to understand space as a place to co-construct and build, to imagine, because it is perceived only as a "passage" and a junction for unsuspecting flâneurs, as Walter Benjamin would say.<sup>9</sup>

For this reason, a "topological" thought is urgently needed, a thought on space, which becomes a thought on the sense of place, of the "genius loci," as Norberg-Schulz would say,<sup>10</sup> which is able to understand the forms in which space becomes intelligible and is practiced, represented, inhabited and transformed in places, defined by limits and boundaries that articulate it, differentiating it symbolically and functionally.<sup>11</sup> After the drastic process of standardization of the world, it is important to rediscover the singular quality of places, which, no less than the men who inhabit them, cannot be reduced to a mere territory to be exploited. An aspect of that process of general rationalization of the modern age, when an exasperating individualism and a lack of attention to the common good became dominant, is the consideration of the earth as "space" to be plundered and exploited. For this reason, it becomes a moral imperative to initiate a way of thinking about living space that reshapes the process which has ended up suppressing cultural and natural differences between one place and another.

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (1951), in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (1936-1953) (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954).

<sup>8</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1947).

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Ágnes Heller, *Can Modernity Survive?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

Marc Augé expressed this epochal change very well when he describes as *non-places*<sup>12</sup> all those non-identity, non-relational, non-historical spaces. These *non-places* are always the same: undifferentiated spaces in which cultures merge and in which an unspecified number of individuals cross paths without ever entering into a relationship with each other, driven only by the frenzied desire to consume, to speed up their day-to-day operations or to reach some other place. Products of the *supermodern* society, unable to integrate into themselves those historical places that are confined and circumscribed in particular areas, trivialised as “curiosities” or “interesting objects,” the *non-places* are focused only on the present and, like our age, are characterised by being completely precarious, temporary, and transitory, as well as by a solitary individualism. Everyone, in fact, passes through *non-places* but nobody inhabits them. Paradoxically, every traveller who feels lost in a foreign country, in places, such as shopping malls, that are the same everywhere in the world, enjoying the security of being able to find their favourite restaurant chain or the same layout of spaces inside an airport, can finally find himself to the point of recognizing himself in the very anonymity of highways, petrol stations, and other *non-places*.

In this epochal passage from places to *non-places* specificities and differences have been lost, aligned to progress, to the forced homologation of the global village that has ended up destroying the symbolic value of space (for every civilisation has its own space) and of its articulations, even aligning in a single and homologating act philosophical reflection and architectural and planning practices. With the scientific conception of space, as mere geometric and anodyne extension, we have lost any possibility of considering the historical and cultural value of places, their simultaneously sedimented and dynamic character, their distinctive features, local histories, and commemorative traditions. Places have thus been degraded to localism, identities to parochialism, physical space to an abstract and homologating spatialisation, with a dramatic impact on the lives of individual inhabitants, who no longer perceive the difference between what is theirs and what is foreign to them, as well as their sense of belonging to region with a particular landscape.<sup>13</sup>

But the progressive failure of urban planning policies has highlighted the need for a deconstruction of the value system of modernity, and of the anaesthetisation of increasingly anonymous and degraded landscapes. If the meaning of places and their spatial order can be lost due to the cancellation of symbolic spaces and the destruction of elementary and contextual knowledge – which derive as much from the homologation of forms and functions as from the subjective inability to recognise the meaning and identity of places, rendered bland by the anonymous and uniform spaces of large cities – then philosophy must have the courage to stop and reflect on the space in which we move.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, philosophy must look for a link between *living* space and *visible* space, between the inhabited space of identity (cultural, historical, ethnic, religious, and others) and the space that seeks to express difference, and thereby discover how fruitful it is to examine the visual

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<sup>12</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Vereno Brugiattelli, *Ermeneutica del paesaggio. Esistenza, interpretazione, racconto* (Trento: Tangram, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Ágnes Heller, *Dove siamo a casa. Pisan lectures: 1993-1998* (Milano: Angeli, 1999).

arts and architectural space in particular. If it is for the architect to *imagine space*, it is surely for the philosopher to provide the tools for reflection and analysis.

In contrast to the postmodern idea that there can be no definitive answer to the ontological angst of living, and that every architectural project must take account of its intrinsic weakness, Paul Ricœur argues that it is possible to reflect on an architectural act and an architectural project, to find a formal plausibility – in a narrative sense – for the construction of spaces, but above all an architecture that, taking into account the anonymous and congested places of Western metropolises, proposes to design cities in which space becomes the living space to people's human values, to the possibilities of capable people, or people capable of living and living with, of relating not only with themselves but also with other – different, foreign – people and with institutions. Space understood as living space, as visible space through which citizens can reconfigure a new space, that common space – which is the space of ethics and politics – within which every single building becomes an opportunity to re-appropriate a tradition and build an identity that is able to face continuity and change without being annihilated.

## II. The Narrative Dimension and the Architecture

It was at the XIX<sup>th</sup> International Exhibition of the Milan Triennale (1994) that the proposals for a deconstructionist architecture and a narrative architecture were first articulated together, in which Ricœur, invited with Jean-François Lyotard to discuss the complex relationship between philosophy and architecture, stated that “independently of any architectural project, man has always built because he has inhabited. At this point it is pointless to ask whether living precedes building. In reality it is necessary to start from an integration of living and of constructing.”<sup>15</sup>

If the theme of architectural space appears in Ricœur for occasional reasons, it nevertheless becomes an intriguing theme on the assumption that the fascinating interaction between philosophy and architecture is capable of significantly rethinking the connection between narrated time and constructed space, between being human and inhabiting, between life and space, between memory and construction.

It is always a source of satisfaction for an author to discover an entire field of investigation in which his analyses find an unexpected application, or rather, more than an application, a projection that gives such analyses a scope capable of modifying, in a kind of boomerang effect, their original meaning. I refer to the current reflections on the narrative dimension of architecture and consequently on the temporal dimension of architectural space.<sup>16</sup>

Although Paul Ricœur and Jean-François Lyotard share the same cultural climate of a crisis of both modernity and an all-encompassing rationality, their conclusions are very different: postmodernism in Lyotard is read through the glasses of Derridean deconstructionism governed by the idea of abandoning the great narratives that “claim to be universally valid” and “whose

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Architettura e narritività*, in Pietro Derossi, Claudio De Luca, Emanuela Tondo (eds), *Architettura e narritività* (Milano: Unicopoli, 2000), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narritività*, in Rossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narritività*, 64.



diffusion is necessarily violent,"<sup>17</sup> whereas in Ricoeur the idea of narration is revived, albeit along the paths of hermeneutic narrativity. These different modes of approach determine a different way of conceiving the architectural impulse. In his critique of the modern, Lyotard ends up criticising the very idea of the project that precedes every *architectural construction*, since the project harbours a "metaphysical legacy," aimed at the "legitimation of the work," through the claim to "satisfy a demand" in a definitive way: a "demand for harmony, for every human being and among them in habitable space-time" and so what remains despite everything "modern is the project, the promise of progress, the eschatology."<sup>18</sup>

Beyond the contrasting manifestations of different architectural practices, the project is always about promising "a definitive solution to the ontological angst of inhabiting and especially to the modern humiliation of being put in a box – what we call being 'housed' ".<sup>19</sup>

This polemical attack on projects is driven by the need to weaken the metaphysical legacy that haunts architecture and that always leaves unanswered the question: how can we have such a deconstructed architecture, such a weak architecture?<sup>20</sup>

To this question Ricoeur accepts Lyotard's idea that there is no longer a single story, but a plurality of stories; but, not wanting to be left in this hiatus between singular and plural, he tries to answer by starting again from the architectonic design and project in order to find a formal plausibility in a narrative sense. Putting the art of building next to that of narration, space next to time, Ricoeur thereby establishes a parallel between time that stretches out in the story and space that gathers people together within an architect's project. Thus, he does not understand architectural space as a place of difference and decontextualisation, but as a place in which the architect must condense time, or rather the memories shared by a community, that seeks to re-establish that link between context, territory and citizen that seems to have been set aside by deconstructionism.

Far from the idea that narrative is a weightless and meaningless legacy for late modernity but believing that thanks to it we can overcome the aporias and contradictions of an urban space made increasingly anonymous by equally anonymous architectural and urban planning practices, Ricoeur formulates the idea of *narrative architecture*. Promoting a virtuous exchange between the *spatiality of history* and the *temporality of the project*, narrative architecture thinks and designs space according to the same movements as narration: namely, prefiguration, configuration and refiguration. If the human dimension of time can be recovered by narrating it, so space can become lived-in and living if the history of a lived and shared space is recovered in the architectural project. In this sense, the architect must not be guided by the need to follow the imposed canons of living,

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Alterità e immaginario postmoderno*, in *Identità e differenze*, XIX<sup>th</sup> Triennale di Milano (Milano: Electa, 1996), vol. 1, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Lyotard, *Alterità e immaginario postmoderno*, 46-55; see Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> Franco Riva, *Decostruzione e narrazione. La città postmoderna*, in Paul Ricoeur, *Leggere la città. Quattro testi di Paul Ricoeur* (Troina: Città Aperta, 2008), 9.

<sup>20</sup> See Lyotard, *Alterità e immaginario postmoderno*, 55.

but by the urgency of reviving spaces, or rather places, by building and designing a symbolic and meaningful link between a locality and its inhabitants.

If the birth of the literary story represents a qualitative leap with respect to everyday life, in the same way the architectural project represents a step forward with respect to the ordinary and chaotic use of space. Only with an architectural project can spaces be rationalised with every civilisation showing what identifies it on its own territory. This means that projects, like stories, distance themselves from nomadic settlements.

A story born of creative imitation or narrative, of which Aristotle speaks, refers to our ability to understand narrative events within our existence to the point of also understanding their ethical teaching: this pre-narrative structure of experience means that we identify with the life stories we hear and tell. These “life stories,” in fact, only make sense with this exchange of memories, projects, and experiences: and it is this tangle that gives life to the stories. This level of pre-comprehension applies not only to time but also to space: the architect, in fact, can only make his project attractive if his building recreates the movement of life.

As we grow up, we occupy different spaces as time progresses, so from the cradle we come into a room, then a house, a neighbourhood, a city, in which the umbilical cord that connects us with the beginning, with the origin, becomes a nostalgic desire that feeds us every time we leave and every time we return to the same places. This movement of leaving and returning is replicated every time an architectural project, and even more so an urban plan, is guided by the idea of facilitating a return “home.” If, in fact, today's places are those of continuous migrations, these displacements are experienced in a less traumatic way if the movement of returning to the point of origin is facilitated. Only if architects know how to imitate with every architectural artifice the nostalgia that drives us to return to our home, to our room, will they succeed in making places become “life places”:

to protect the dwelling with a roof, to delimit it with walls, to regulate the relationship between outside and inside through a play of openings and closures, to represent with a threshold the overcoming of boundaries, to indicate through a specialisation of the parts of the dwelling, in plan and in height, the assignment of the various activities of daily life to distinct spaces, above all waking and sleeping, through an adequate study, even if summary, of light and shade.<sup>21</sup>

If the operations of building mimic stopping and fixing a dwelling in space, then leaving and returning must also take paths which are as little anodyne as possible: “the going and coming that involve operations complementary to those of fixing a dwelling: the walk, the street and the road, the square are part of building, insofar as the acts they guide are part of the act of inhabiting.”<sup>22</sup> If living is made up of rhythms of stopping and moving, of approaches and displacements, which change the rhythms of time and life, this must provoke “happy architectures” and “successful planning,” facilitating the passage from the house to the city. If, in fact, place is the original qualification of inhabited space, it must also become the totality of places,

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<sup>21</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narritività*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narritività*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narritività*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narritività*, 11.



when these are understood not as a refuge in which to settle, nor a mere interval to cover and overcome. This prefigural reading of places makes us understand how they are necessary for the growth of a people, for the enrichment of individual lives, because they not only frame our stories, but provide the necessary junction and crossroads of individual and collective stories. Stories and tales in fact need spatial frames so that the individual events can unfold, in the sense that every story is not only an exchange of memories, but also a story of what has happened *in that very place*. For this reason, every space is not only a physical place but something that has to do with a lived time. Places are therefore not just geometric points, but physical points where something happens that is linked to someone's existence.

The second stage, that of configuration, is the one “in which the act of narration is freed from the context of everyday life to enter the sphere of literature, initially through writing and then through narrative technique.”<sup>23</sup> This is the moment of creation of the literary story in which the story testifies both to the originality of the author and to continuity with or distancing from a context, namely that of tradition.

The creation of a narrative is a poetic act that creates the new, the unprecedented. Every narrative composition that gives life to a fiction is characterised by four aspects: a synthesis of the heterogeneous, a passage from an initial state to a final one through regulated transformations, a succession of vicissitudes that frustrate the work of concordance represented by the plot, a circular relationship between the whole and the parts. In this work on the *mythos* time is involved twice: in the narrated time specific to the narrative plot and in the time of the telling, which has its own characteristics and recalls the fact that a series of stories is itself a tradition (intertextuality).

In this context, semantic innovation means not just the novelty of the weave but also continuity with tradition, whether the intention is to respect or reinterpret it.

Interpreting the configuration of time through literary narrative is a good exercise in understanding the configuration of space through architectural design:<sup>24</sup> between the two poetic acts there is much more than a simple parallel from which “we recognise the display of the temporal and narrative dimension of the architectural *project*. On the horizon of investigation there is, as has been suggested by many, the manifestation of a space-time in which narrative values and architectural values are interchanged.”<sup>25</sup> The first configuring level in architectural creation is the one corresponding to the temporal synthesis of the heterogeneous, which has its equivalent in a spatial synthesis of the heterogeneous. The plasticity of a building is composed of different elements: the cells of space, the forms, the boundary surfaces, which find together a certain unity, a discordant concordance subsumed in a broader synthesis.

If narrative offers its model of temporality to the act of constructing and configuring narrative space, so each construction requires not only a time of completion, but also the manifestation of chronological time in the sense that each brick contains “the petrified memory of the building under construction. A constructed space is time condensed.”<sup>26</sup> This condensation of

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Architettura e narrazione*, in Ricœur, *Leggere la città. Quattro testi di Paul Ricœur*, 62.

<sup>24</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narrazione*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narrazione*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narrazione*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narrazione*, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narrazione*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narrazione*, 14.

time in space is increasingly evident if we consider the work of configuring building and dwelling. The functions of dwelling are continually reinvented by the act of building, shaping every construction in which the reciprocal reference is to that architectural intelligence, (the second level of configuration), which is “invested by the mobility of the gaze that passes through the work,”<sup>27</sup> and that determines every concrete realisation and makes every architectural element represent a “provisional victory over the ephemeral marked by the act of building.”<sup>28</sup> Every material that lasts over time is always a victory over the transience of time. As the story persists in that written sign that is fixed on paper, so the materials, the cement, the bricks define a space that is lasting over time.

This persistence marks the historicity of the building, not least because everything is built in a space that has already been built, within a city with buildings that have already been built, with respect to which the architects are confronted, like the narrator with the various literary genres before him, with an architectural history and a territorial tradition that must be either renewed or continued: “and to the extent that the built environment preserves a trace of all the life stories that marked the act of living by past citizens, the new ‘configuring’ act draws new ways of living that will fit into the tangle of those completed life stories.”<sup>29</sup> The struggle against the ephemeral thus takes on another meaning, when it concerns not only a single building, but its relationship with all the other buildings that make up a city or a neighbourhood. Relating a work to an already built context means redrawing new plans in which the gesture of destroying and rebuilding takes on a broader significance.

Reconstruction must also have a meaning in the local history of its inhabitants, and in this sense “the ephemeral is not only on the side of nature, to which art superimposes its persistent tangibility, but also on the side of the violence of history, and threatens from within the architectural project considered in its ‘historical’ dimension.” As happens every time “ruins must be integrated into ongoing history.”<sup>30</sup>

For this reason, building is a cognitive impulse, when it is combined with the need to mend ruptures and wounds that might compromise a future civil coexistence between different ethnic groups. In the same way, as reconstructing can be guided by the reading of the different cultural sedimentations of a city that constitute its history, its past, but also the present from which to start again to design future and significant urban contexts: “monumentality then assumes its prime etymological meaning, in which monument is synonymous with document.”<sup>31</sup>

To interpret this need for continuity very often the builders are not the users, so that today urban planning and architecture must apprehend the need for a dignified life required by many as

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<sup>27</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narrazione*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narrazione*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narrazione*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narrazione*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narrazione*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narrazione*, 67.

<sup>30</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narrazione*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narrazione*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narrazione*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narrazione*, 16.

perhaps only a return to pure architecture, free from any ideology, and applied to “new possibilities of inhabiting the world opened together by the art of telling and building.”<sup>32</sup>

So it is in the last phase, that of refiguration, that the link between story and architecture becomes closer. If we think of the story, it does not end its journey with the text, but with the world of the reader who consumes the text, making him enter a hermeneutic circle in which the text enters into interaction with life. The same thing happens in architecture: if at the moment of prefiguration, living and building are one and the same thing, to the point that it becomes impossible to establish which act comes first, so at the moment of configuration, building in the form of architectural design prevails over dwelling, partly because the real needs of citizens are often not considered. It is not enough for an architectural project to be rational in order to be accepted by citizens, but it must be able to anticipate their needs and expectations in order to “perform a sort of responsive discipline that architects must provide.”<sup>33</sup>

And just as the reception of the literary text implies an attempt at plural literature, a patient approach to intertextuality, so receptive and active living implies a careful re-reading of the urban environment, a new learning of the juxtaposition of styles and therefore also of the life stories of which all monuments and buildings bear a trace.<sup>34</sup>

All citizens who live responsibly and consciously know how to reread the urban environment that surrounds them in continuity with cultural history, but also with the many life stories that have embellished monuments and buildings, even if only in the form of traces. Traces that are not only the vestiges, the mouldy imprints of the past, but the living testimonies of the past, “those from the stone that lasts,”<sup>35</sup> that actualise, in memory what has existed, and in narration what has happened. Thinking together “narrated time” and “built space,” the city becomes a text to be read in which the reader, or rather the citizen, is the one who perceives time and space, as that unique dimension that is *space-time*. If the world of the text bears all the traces of many lived stories that reverberate in space, it becomes the space-time of acting and living, but also the frame of every trace that is fixed in the memory.

But which memory? Memory as repetition or memory as reconstruction? Whereas the former is destined to repeat the same action and prevent a process of elaboration and healing, the latter aims instead at healing its inhabitants and reconciling with what has been in order to open up to what is yet to come.<sup>36</sup> Building those bridges that were thought to be cut between present, future, and past: “so the present and therefore the work designed and built stands as a mediation and is involved in the passage of time. While it gives itself, it stops, it produces an expectation, the

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<sup>32</sup> Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Architettura e narrazione nel pensiero di P. Ricœur. Storia di una applicazione inaspettata*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narrazione*, 69.

<sup>33</sup> Rovatti, *Architettura e narrazione nel pensiero di P. Ricœur*, 69.

<sup>34</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narrazione*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narrazione*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narrazione*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narrazione*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 649-717.

expectation of the refiguration that will make the work the object of new dialogues and new interpretations."<sup>37</sup>

Building is to account for how each one of us is always an identity on the move, an identity that is the result of a kind of *itinerancy* halfway "between wandering and the domestic spirit" in which space and time are given together, as in Bakhtin's chronotope:

With itinerancy, space and time are integrated into each other in what Bachtin termed a chronotope. And for the third time the idea of the possible imposes itself: how does a world (*Welt*) differ from a simple environment (*Umwelt*), in what we project as an inhabited land in which we can deploy our own possibilities? It is the environment of narrative identity and itinerancy. Happy is the architect who arouses itinerancy among the vestiges that have become testimonies given to the history of the lives inscribed in the life places.<sup>38</sup>

The architect or the urban planner succeeds in arousing itinerancy when living is never reduced to establishing a dwelling, when construction is not reduced to the mere pouring of concrete, since it is not possible to think of built space except as the space in which every architectural design can suggest a new interest in the common good, as in the interpersonal plots and the narrative they arouse. If itinerancy for Heidegger is the proper way to become lost and disoriented, for Ricœur it becomes the way to capture the fragility of the human. If "the city arouses even more complex passions than the home, insofar as it offers a space for movement, for approaching and receding. One can feel lost, wandering, bewildered, while, on the other hand, its public spaces, its squares invite commemoration and ritualised gatherings,"<sup>39</sup> this means that in the city one can walk, one can get lost and wander, but one can also gather within the good built for everyone, the plural good, which becomes visible in the squares, in the meetings, in the public commemorations, if understood as public and not neutral places in which there is a sense beyond and above one's own egocentric expectations. The square as a place of sharing, the monument as a memory of what happened, as happens for example in the streets that remember the martyrs of brutal violence or in the parks where a red bench commemorates female victims of violence, or in monuments to the unknown soldier. These gestures that modify the city spaces and make history perceived as alive and palpating, the great as well as the small history or the buildings built to bring together peoples and communities allow the "construction of a lived space," the one in which the time of construction arises and is placed in the space of life and invites us to reflect on who we are and what we can achieve together. Only in this way can cities invite both their inhabitants and tourists to read them as expressions of a harmonious beauty, a beauty capable of holding together memory and wound, memory and future.

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<sup>37</sup> Pietri Derossi, *Composizione e/o narrazione*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narritività*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Ricœur, *Architettura e narritività*, in Derossi, De Luca, Tondo, *Architettura e narritività*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 239.

### III. Lived Space and Narrative Space

In the rhythmic play of prefiguring, configuring, and re-figuring in this sense, the world of life advances. When the inhabitant enters a building as a place of understanding and personalisation, they then enter into a circle with life. Conversely, in the boundary between inhabiting and building, between life and the city, whereby one builds while inhabiting and inhabits while building, the demand for architecture and planning meet, and at their point of intersection so do the social and the political. A built city, but a city inhabited by institutions that regulate and draw good plans and a city marked by that symbolic public square where institutions and citizens meet to build common paths and where together they look for solutions for a life which is “happy” and without conflict.

If dwelling is the sharing of common spaces, a search for shelter and protection, then the city has always been the bearer of a promise: one in which each person, feeling part of a whole, promises to care for their immediate environment and openness to proximity. *Being the place of proximity* means opening up to the other, seeking a way of building and rebuilding that is “attention to the other,” especially if this other is the defeated, the marginalised, the one who lives on the periphery, but also a space to seek mediation and compromise against all forms of violence and abuse, in the awareness that there is much to do to affirm a culture of standing together and a culture of building.

If, therefore, it is true that in “cities there is something inextricable,”<sup>40</sup> to use a happy expression of Ricœur, this means that there is still much to do and to build in order to achieve the coexistence between equal and different, between natives and foreigners. Guided by the same phenomenological movement that seeks to account for the life lived and the history lived within city spaces, then the thought that imagines the space of construction and narration is the one capable of giving “a sense” to the many wounds and misunderstandings. A sense given by that narrative ability to connect the built space with the lived space, the space that every person feels as their *life place* and in which they *want to live and* to welcome and meet the other; a place where they feel they belongs and for which they are ready to welcome the different and to modify the context in order to share more. Perhaps to give shape to new and intriguing narratives, those that connect the present to the past in order to reconfigure a future time previously considered impossible. The inhabitants who feel city spaces as life places are, in fact, those who do not devote themselves to mourning and nostalgia for what has happened, but who are driven by the need to preserve the evidence of a precious and material heritage in order to hand it on to generations to come. In this lived space, then, the voices of those who have preceded us echo with the fragile but powerful voices of those who have yet to arrive and who await a welcoming hospitality in order to do so. It will then be intriguing to narrate about these visible and inhabitable cities, these spaces built and experienced intensely by the force of the many who are no longer lost and marginalised.

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Architettura e narritività*, in Ricœur, *Leggere la città. Quattro testi di Paul Ricœur*, 71.

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