

# Life beyond the project

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**Abstract:** How can interior architecture rethink school education as an atmospheric phenomenon, uniting the material and the immaterial through an emotional grammar that places the perceiving being at the center?

**Keywords:** Body; Language; Narration

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary scientific debate focusing on the relationship between empirical evidence and educational practices highlights a consolidated interdisciplinary nature, focused on overcoming the methodological limitations of individual research sectors.

Currently, the epistemological boundaries between Interior Architecture, Design, and Pedagogy appear increasingly fluid, converging toward physical space as an integrated methodological hub. This paradigm responds to two pressing needs: on the one hand, the need to intervene from within, with a transscalar and inclusive logic;<sup>1</sup> on the existing building heritage; on the other, the urgency of codifying new design languages capable of mitigating the sensorial overstimulation and emotional hyperactivation typical of the contemporary anthropic condition through a grammar that dampens the "emotional bulimia that the inhabitants of this millennium experience and which makes them constantly in need of overstimulated emotional states"<sup>2</sup>. This paper explores these complex systems of relationships through the analysis of a case study applied to the redevelopment project of a school complex in the Naples area, developed in Vincenzo Pagano's thesis in Interior Architecture.



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<sup>1</sup>Valenti, A. (2021) Transscalare. Declaration of Interiors. Atlas of Words and Images. pages 106-107

<sup>2</sup>Barbara, A. (2000) The senses as a means or as an end, Stories of architecture through the senses, page 30

The project offers an experimental framework for the design of educational spaces, redefining the ways in which architectural space interacts with pedagogical needs. Benedetto Croce's studies form the basis of a conception of architectural design based on the coexistence of material and immaterial, corporeal and cognitive, individual and collective dimensions.

This theoretical reference highlights the dual nature of architectural work, showing on the one hand the unavoidable concreteness of practical spatiality, on the other the necessary inclusion of sentimental effectiveness.<sup>3</sup> and the perceptive empathic involvement of architectural forms.

## 2. Materials and Methods

We therefore understand that there is an original sense of architecture that attempts to outline, through the organization of the system of things (furniture) and the founding elements that characterize it, the relational dimension between man, belonging and environment, investigating the intimate concept of living that connotes the sense of space, acting as a metaphor of psycho-architecture as a cure.<sup>4</sup> of relationships contemplating as an addition the scientific and interdisciplinary paradigm of Embodied Cognition Science.

Entering a school hall, a gym, a library, a classroom, or even the cafeteria offers students, their families, and, to a different extent, teaching and non-teaching staff, the opportunity to forge a close connection with the emotional experience generated through corporeality. This highlights the fundamental sense of space not only as architectural body / space, but as human body / form, reflecting cognitive, emotional, and decision-making processes as an essential consequence of the body and its interaction with the environment; thus, attention returns to a new way of inhabiting. Therefore, space becomes the essential form of the latter, which, reinforced by the emotional charge of each individual who explores it, elevates to an experiential dimension of it.

At this point, it becomes interesting to evaluate a potential connection between the thinking of two scholars, Mimmo Pesare (Paideia dell'abitare) and Aurosa Alison (Estetica dell'abitare), who attempt to define, at different times and through their specificities, a language that appears common to us architects and that resides in the radical overcoming of the idea of space as a simple physical structure, moving along the lines of phenomenology, redefining the act of dwelling as a profoundly human,

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<sup>3</sup>Croce B. (1946) The history of the figurative arts, On some difficulties concerning the artistic history of architecture. pages 76-84

<sup>4</sup>Inghieri P. (2021). Places that Heal. Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milan.

interior, and relational experience. Dwelling does not simply mean occupying a portion of space, but shaping the identity of each individual through their own sensibilities. In the encounter between pedagogical and architectural disciplines, as we intend to demonstrate their convergence, we witness a formal result that attempts to shape moods and sensibilities through the environment, contributing to the intellectual, emotional, and civil growth of the individual. A space characterized by an emotional resonance thus disposes, through the unconscious, an attitude that allows one to understand and contain one's own experience.<sup>5</sup>, integrating the aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural dimensions and analyzing the problematic nodes that connect physicality, space, and perception.

The basis for this study and experimental reflection was the identification of a new dimension of architecture's social role, which projected the culture of design toward the control of space, understood as a place of relationships. With reference to the cultural identity of logical space, the themes and contents to be translated into meaningful forms lend themselves to a concrete creative exercise, not just a basic morphogenetic exercise. A project that redefines reality through an inclusive approach, capable of harmonizing individual aspirations, collective needs, and historical evolution.

In support of the interdisciplinary discussion introduced thus far regarding the value of space and the meaning to be given to the theme of shaping, it is necessary to return to the more general question of the aims and objectives of a convergence that subsumes the three words that encompass worlds such as: interiors, embodiedness, and pedagogy.

It is at least necessary to extend an observation on the historical identity and relevance of contemporary research that addresses the responsibilities that architecture may assume, in the near future, not only in its direct relationship with those who will inhabit it, but above all with respect to the broader context that sees the city (in the services offered) and the community (in the desired relationships) as protagonists.

It will then be appropriate to rediscover, once again, a forgotten harmony between architecture and social studies in a historical bond that is being lost, whose goal lies in achieving a codified and common language, recognizing a research method capable of legitimizing and defining a quality of style understood as linked to the condition of human well-being, which finds in space an answer to its expectations.

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<sup>5</sup>Juhani Pallasmaa's often used definition of *Stimmung* expresses the ability to shape one's emotions. Pallasmaa J. (2014). *Space, Place, and Atmosphere. Emotion and Peripheral Perception in Architectural Experience*. page 88

A "military disposition will therefore be necessary to think about the future city"<sup>6</sup> so that man can finally rediscover the founding values of architecture.

It is within this framework of civic engagement and valorization of social responsibility<sup>7</sup> that the culture of contemporary design acquires a value attentive to a social experience whose profound consequences have an impact on the maturation of the educational system as places of growth and on the psychological health of human beings.

Relationships are the key to understanding and the wavelength to which we tune in to read and listen to the phenomena we observe unfolding. The formalization of school interiors combines pedagogy (humanistic studies), anthropometry / ergonomics, and technology (technical studies) to overcome the concept of the rigid classroom as merely transmissive, seeking to orient a holistic methodological approach that pushes the creative process toward a dynamic, organic, biological learning space in constant transformation.

Arrangement of desks aligned toward the teacher's desk and blackboard contrasts with lightweight, modular furniture designed to create work islands; the role of the teacher as the sole possessor of knowledge contrasts with the role of the teacher as the director of learning; the role of the passive, receptive student contrasts with the role of the active, collaborative student.

This choice tends to lead to a paradigm shift that highlights a common shift in focus: from the centrality of things to the centrality of relationships.

This new approach entails a comprehensive vision in which the human and technical sciences can also be interpreted as relational sciences. The evolution of architectural thought, bringing innovation to the field of interior design, lives through the three concepts of Form Follow Function, Form Follow Fruition, and Form Follow Feeling,<sup>8</sup> an optimization of the practice of space (function), a focus from practical unity to the telling of the stories of those who live in the space (narration) up to the emotional and psychological impact that the environment generates on people (emotion).

We therefore acknowledge the scientific interest that characterizes this transition from a quantitative condition of reality to a qualitative reading of the connections that

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<sup>6</sup>Reflections contained in the publication by Costi D. (2025) Manual of modern urban planning project

<sup>7</sup>Social responsibility in architecture can be translated through the concept of third space by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, who highlights a classification in the design of places: first space (informal socialization), second space (work), third space (social cohesion and integration).

<sup>8</sup>Form Follows Function by Louis Sullivan - Form Follows Enjoyment by Davide Crippa and Barbara Di Prete, Function Follows Emotion by Harry Francis Mallgrave

characterize everyday life, with which we interpret it, formally preserving the fixed aspect of the past and simultaneously rewriting a broader, more complete, but apparently elusive open system.

This dynamic, fluid dimension that belongs to a weak and widespread modernity<sup>9</sup> It should not be viewed in the school environment as a negative aspect, to be endured as an imposition, but rather as the expression of an achievement, as a new assumption of responsibility that cannot be ignored, allowing instead to better interpret the continuous transformations taking place in the information society.

If, therefore, the sociological and neuroscientific approaches today lead to highly interesting convergent actions, we must rework a design approach more suited to the phenomena arising from an increasingly fruitful relationship between architecture as an expression of human feeling and as the expected outcome of a process of adhesion to an extraordinary context and response to specific living needs. Existence means inhabiting a body: this is the condition that roots us in reality. Furthermore, "[...] the body is not a simple fragment in space, but there would be no space if there were no body [...]"<sup>10</sup> We attempt to orient the project towards examining the emotional aspects that architecture determines in the uniqueness of the individual, seeking to be proactive in welcoming, allowing itself to be passed through, without differentiating.

Before addressing cognitive corporeality, it's important to highlight a fundamental principle in architecture: the ability to connect space and humanity. In this sense, both the architectural and human bodies act as elements that establish relationships and generate connections.

From this premise on human spatiality, it emerges that the body is not a mere passive instrument, but an active agent in the construction of spatial experience.

Distances, such as near and/or far, and orientations are measured through the body; weight and gravity are defined; a metabolism exists through which the temporality of life can be experienced. In its spatial manifestations, the body articulates an emotional experience, configuring itself as a singular yet universally legible corporeality within the context in which it is immersed. In postures, gestures, and expressions, emotional differences in movement and form are discovered.

The here and now transforms into a singular and subjective expression of one's own body, becoming an archetype, a primitive figure that diverges from any future attribution of identity. It is therefore in the singularity of the body and its differences that our perception of phenomenal reality is composed.

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<sup>9</sup>Branzi A. (2006). Weak and diffuse modernity: the world of design at the beginning of the 21st century.

<sup>10</sup>Ponty MM(1965), *Phenomenology of Perception*. p. 156.

In this sense, architecture investigates the quality of the work through its corporeal presence and what is manifest: not in the identities of concept, but in the singularity of evident things <sup>11</sup> Architecture remains inanimate, but through corporeality, a different reality can be activated and brought to life. The true life of buildings, as Santiago de Molina explains, focuses specifically on this aspect. Starting from an analysis of the Pixar saga "Toy Story," in which the toys remain inanimate, he explains how their vitality remains silent as long as humans are present in the space.

It thus becomes an inverted metaphor for what is produced by architecture itself, in which its very boundaries—doors, walls, and furnishings—live in a temporary state of lethargy. Space does not simply exist, but is created by the relationships between people, objects, and the void that simultaneously define its character.

### 3. Results

The choice of the existing GL Radice School, located in Municipality 4 of Naples, which includes San Lorenzo, Vicaria, Poggioreale, and the Industrial Zone, interested and attracted the attention of the design team, primarily due to its plurality of identities and recognizable autonomies of origin, as it extends across multiple buildings to serve a school population of approximately 1.250 students divided between preschool, primary, and lower secondary schools, spread across a population of approximately 24.806.

Using the physicalist conception of space, we tend to direct a vision of the architectural work towards convergence with the scientific method of the Embodied as the latest frontier of neuroscience applied to the practice of making architecture.

The research field, encompassing several theses in the fields of architecture and design, is led by Professor Marco Borrelli, Architect, and Mariantonia Cipolletta, Designer and Engineer, as tutor and co-supervisor. It explores the role that humans have always played in the conceptual and proactive phases of new design horizons. Specifically, the graduate student's focus was on promoting, through embodied design, an experimental approach that proved highly intriguing for envisioning interventions on existing structures, favoring diverse and specific distributional and functional assets, as they are attentive to the intimate and empathetic aspects of all the key figures and actors within the school institution.

Some themes relating to interior architecture can be read within the design work in a dualistic manner as the pedagogical contribution is made explicit by linking itself to the architecture in a subliminal manner: the threshold as an entrance, as a stage

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<sup>11</sup>Siza A. (2002). Writings on Architecture

backdrop and/or welcoming of an inhabitable intermediate space.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to an opposing idea that promotes a sense of dwelling, the limit as the boundary between what the individual knows and what they perceive as unknown; the connective space as an expanded space, materialized in a double skin of the pre-existing building, rethinking areas as opportunities for work and connection, not just fleeting movement, but rather for stationary space, understood as an extension of the classroom: a place of encounter, informal learning, and intergenerational recreational exchange; the domesticity of space as a new code of expression, belonging, and strong connection, in continuity with the room, as it is never defined by a design nomenclature; in contrast to a suggestion that characterizes an atmospheric qualification whose neologism reinforces the phenomenology of the interior perceived as a consolidated space.

In practice, these three points constitute the support that is expressed in many transformative passages of the architectural product and accompany the design idea in a proprioceptive direction that, while requiring ordinary spatial experience, veer into dynamic narratives that concern the meaning and codification of making.

In reference to the different expectations of specific learning needs, the Embodied Cognition method attempts to apply a dialogue with the findings of the discipline of interiors that leverage the plastic qualities of space and corporeality as a cognitive tool because it is connected to often creative activities that integrate with frontal teaching.

The experimental design work implemented in this thesis aims to demonstrate how reorganization and remodeling, through a revision of the functional distribution layouts of the interiors, is a possible solution for improving the quality of the distribution. This approach involves a new organization of spaces in line with the themes of fluidity and resilience in architecture, as extensively introduced by Andrea Branzi in his book *Modernità debole e diffusa* (Weak and Diffuse Modernity).

The aim of the project is to develop an inclusive centre, starting from the study of the building's existing internal structures (classrooms), extending to the school community itself and the surrounding area.

The project for the reorganization of the distribution layout was born from a reflection on the role that educational environments play in the construction of an identity and the contemporary educational experience.

The method thus allowed us to study the school building and its immediate surroundings, in which we attempted to revitalise green areas adjacent to the exits on

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<sup>12</sup>Spirito G. (2015) In-between places. Forms of relational space from the 1960s to today

the ground floors, considering them as a "living space" perceived through a new gesture of the individual engaged in extra-curricular activities.<sup>13</sup>.

A place that becomes a protective refuge where not only a teaching process aimed at knowledge takes place but also the learning of "life lessons" based on relationships between the protagonists/actors of the scene, occasional guests and the space appropriately calibrated for the event and the inhabitants of the community.

The most recent advances in cognitive and pedagogical sciences recognize learning as a constantly evolving bodily, perceptive, and relational process, so that, according to the thesis supporting the project, it stimulates the extended mind in holistic cooperation. From this perspective, space is not simply an educational container, but becomes an active participant in constructing the meaning of an educational experience. Architecture is interpreted as a pedagogical organism capable of guiding behaviors, relationships, and learning practices, thus acting as a conduit, not merely a container within itself where things, facts, and events occur, but rather the very creation of the event.

The focus of research on inhabiting educational spaces encompasses fields such as architecture, pedagogy, and philosophy. Through this interdisciplinary dialogue, whose principal exponents are Heidegger, Bachelard, and Benjamin, it analyzes spatial issues, exploring the concept of making space not as a geometric container, but as a place-making process, a fundamental theater of our experience that fosters the construction of identity.

If all that has inspired this research is true, then reading about the school environment, which must resonate with children, can directly appeal to their senses, arousing wonder, emotion, and a strong desire for change through experience.

From an operational standpoint, we arrived at the idea of a flexible spatial configuration suited not only to teaching but also to collaborative learning. We seek to create a continuous dialogue between inside and outside, where the outside is the inside of every child. The spaces were designed as open and reconfigurable systems, featuring movable furnishings, devices for group work, and collaboration in areas dedicated to individual exploration. Further insertions were created with cocoon-like or nook-like spaces, using shells/alcoves that contain small, freely positioned sensitive spaces throughout the classrooms.

The new compositional language of the internal layouts orients and allows students to "experience" the space dedicated to their learning in full qualitative

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<sup>13</sup>Gomez Paloma F. (2024). Lifelong Learning Education for the Future Word.

well-being with the promotion of an environment as an integral and active part of their growth process by interpreting the space as a third teacher.<sup>14</sup>

Architecture does not simply host educational processes, but actively participates in defining their experience, transforming the time of knowledge into the experience of living.

## 5. Conclusions

The predicted outcomes could represent an interesting avenue of investigation for a future vision of co-participatory interior design. They support an understanding not only of the intrinsic meaning of architecture but also of its social significance, placing the architect at the center of a broader, global and complex process.

The true complexity lies in outlining, through the practices of making, the codification of an emotional grammar in the culture of design, which has always favored figurative codes to represent merely glossy images. This grammar should instead provide a specialized but broader and more heterogeneous lexicon, capable of supporting a much more structured language across multiple registers, ready to be integrated and systematized in a new sensorial and inclusive landscape.

We cannot rely on an idea of the environment as an invasion, which is only an outside free from our inside.<sup>15</sup> It is impossible to speak of an individuality without considering the collective that underlies it and, indeed, influences and reorients it in a reciprocal relationship. Ignoring one of the components of the question or their relational connection would lead to a bias, undermining the overall vision of an architectural space organically linked to the most intimate sphere.

The goal is to contribute, through the creation of active and participatory spaces, to the validation of teaching processes. This is not a quantitative approach, but rather a careful examination of a new relationship that encompasses an inside and an outside, capable of providing even indirect support for expert evaluation methodologies.

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<sup>14</sup>The hundred languages of children edited by Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini and George Forman third edition 2011 includes an interview with Loris Malaguzzi in which he delves into the "pedagogy of relationships" and the interaction between the three protagonists (child, educator, parent) to which the environment is added pages 160-180

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