For an Urban Interiority

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Abstract

Contrary to the traditional definition of interiors, this paper investigates the notion of urban interiority, intended as an expanded corpus of design operations and theoretical perspectives. Urban interiority constitutes a holistic approach to architecture, as it tends to overcome rigid categorizations. Most importantly, the idea of urban interiority invites us to rethink the relation between object and subject, or between human and non-human agents. Four main points help define the role that a project of urban interiority can play in the contemporary architectural production, as well as in the disciplinary debate: (meta)scale, the shift from objects to fields, the dialogue between intensive and extensive properties, and the notion of assemblage.

Keynotes: urban interiority, architecture, interiors, city, assemblage.

In 2001, the US Food and Drug Administration approves officially the use of the so-called M2A capsule (mouth to anus), a pill camera that, once ingested, is capable to collect around 50000 images of the intestinal lumen. The pill generates 512 by 512-pixel, high-resolution images and has been a pioneer instrument to inspect the digestive tract as well as to localize lesions in the esophagus, stomach, small bowel, or colon. In guarantying the fully explorability of its most remote areas, the M2A capsule turns the body inside out, and also creates the premises of a skinless body (Colomina, 2019)
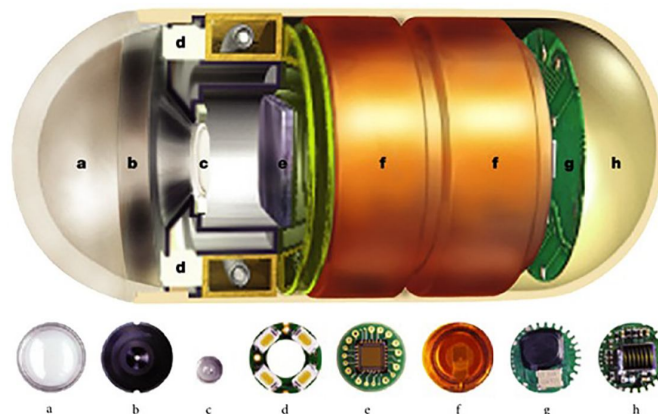

Fig.1. M2A capsule endoscopy, 2001

The same desire to reveal internal mechanisms contradistinguishes the territory of architecture, since long time. In France, in fact, starting from the end of the eighteenth century, a new type of architectural representation becomes extremely popular – it will appear on the pages of newspapers, magazines, and journals.
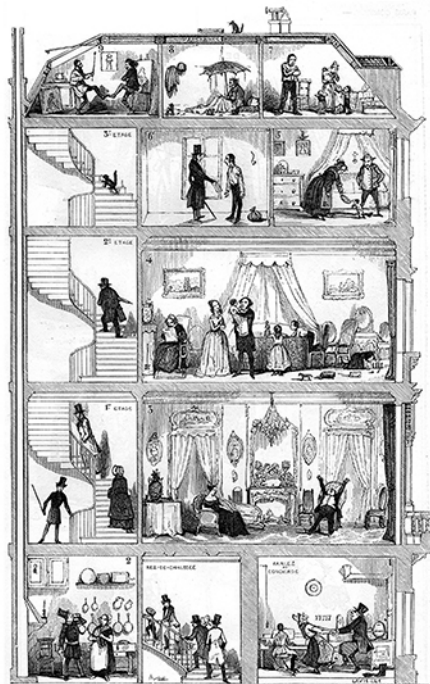

Fig.2. Bertall, *Section of a Parisian residential building on January 1,* 1845

In those representations Parisian buildings are depicted as dissected bodies: they are sectioned and exposed to the public eye, to show not only their spatial qualities but, mainly, the social composition of its inhabitants. Each social class occupies a specific floor of the building. Sections reveal a microcosm of power relations, rituals, habits and, also, a renovated dialogue between the domestic space and the space of the city.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the analogy between the medical world and architecture takes a step further, under the semblance of an obsession for transparency. Transparency became soon one of the distinguishing marks of Modernity, which also implied a radical rethinking of any previous assumption about comfort, domesticity, and privacy. These notions played a critical role in depicting a new idea of architecture coherent with the Zeitgeist. Comfort, domesticity and privacy, at the same time, were typically defining the realm of what we call interior – where the word interior not only describes a physical condition (a room delimited by walls), but a system of values. To be more precise, one may quote Charles Rice and his *Emergence of the Interior* (Rice, 2007) – a phenomenon taking place at the beginning of the nineteenth century in England and in France. According to Rice, one can read the interiors as space and image at the same time, in the sense that

the "interior came to mean the inside of a building or a room; also a picture or representation of the inside of a building or a room" (Rice, 2007, p.2).

Parallel, if not opposed to Rice's definition of interior, is the more inclusive notion of interiority.

Yet interiority is a broad and vague term, containing contradictory readings. While the term interiority is often associated to subjective and introverted connotations – either psychological or spiritual – this paper advocates for its use in a completely different context, by introducing the notion of urban interiority.
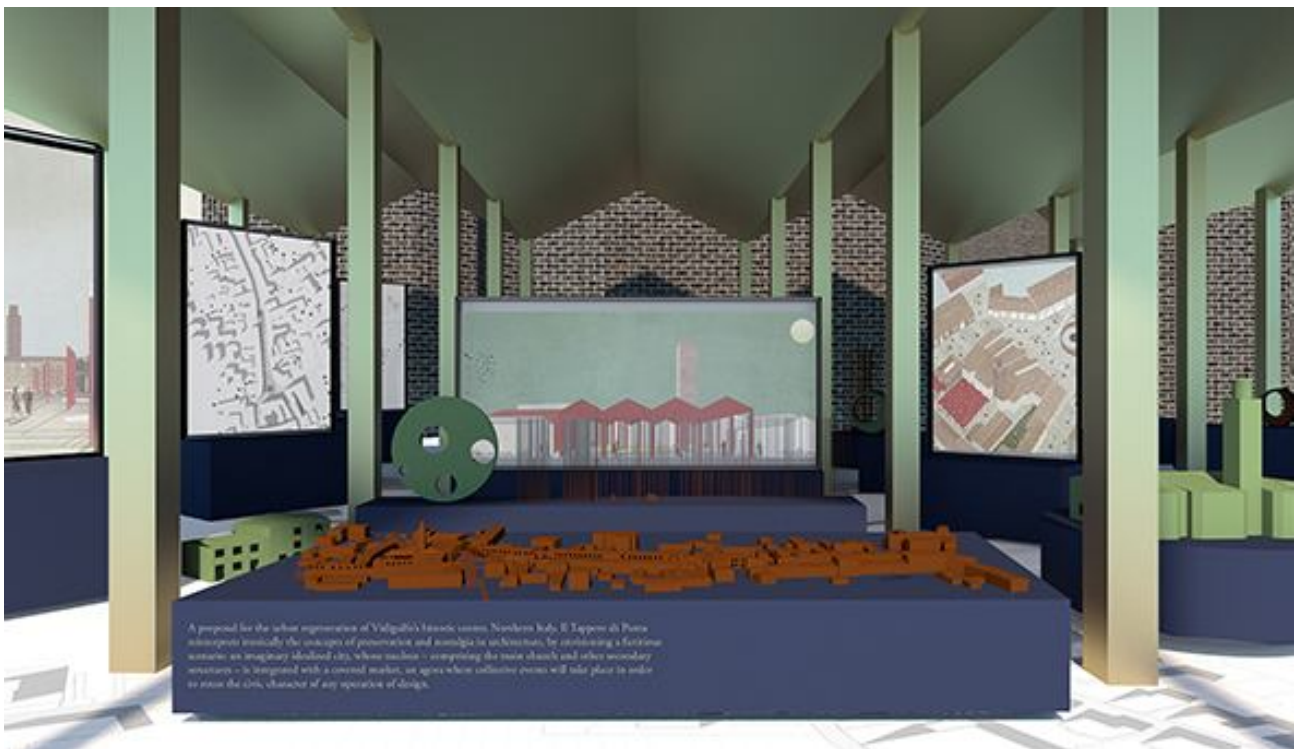

Fig.3. Stefano Corbo, *Cabinets of Curiosities,* 2019. Copyright: © Stefano Corbo

What follows is a manifesto for a project of urban interiority, intended as an expanded corpus of design operations and theoretical perspectives. Urban interiority is not only about space or representation; it constitutes a holistic approach to architecture, as it tends to overcome rigid separations. Most importantly, the idea of urban interiority invites us to rethink the relation between object and subject, or between human and non-human agents. Contrary to Rice's definition of interior as a typical nineteenth century phenomenon, the notion of urban interiority traces back to ancient times. In Giotto, and in other Italian painters from the Middle Ages, there is no such a thing as interior space. Architecture is represented as a framework, a political infrastructure designed to trigger and celebrate public actions. Any private description is radically rejected. Human activities only find their definitive reason when immersed into a collective realm. Something similar can be detected within the complex trajectory of the Renaissance tradition.

Fig.4. Giotto, Prese*ntation of Mary in the temple*, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, 1303-05. Copyright: © Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giotto_-_Scrovegni_-_-08-_Presentation_of_the_Virgin_in_the_Temple.jpg

In the Laurentian Library (1523), one of the several interventions operated by Michelangelo throughout the years over the architectural ensemble of San Lorenzo in Florence, interiors are described as an urban scenography – a reproduction of classical buildings and public spaces. The space of the city – its orders, its proportions, its rhythm – invades the space of the library and shapes its interiors. The interior walls of the library become a taxonomy of all possible architectural elements.

Going back in time, one of the most significant crystallizations of urban interiority is the *domus romana* – villas designed as a refuge from the routine of Rome's hectic life. In Pompeii – see for example the house of Menander, built in the third century BC – the *domus romana* appears in its clearest expression. Conceived as a micro-city, the house of Menander reflects not only personal but mainly social values. It accommodates a gradient of private, semi-public and public spaces such as baths, thermae and atrium. The atrium is the hinge, or the bridge between the exterior space of the city and the most intimate space of the house. At the same time, the atrium connects and help distinguish these two poles. In general, the *domus romana* is an urban ensemble constituted by different degrees of porosity with the exterior.
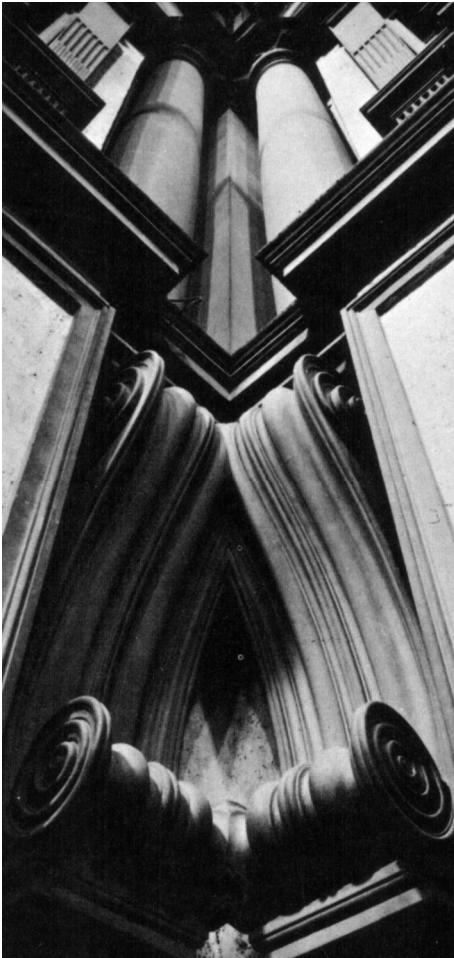
Fig.5. Michelangelo, *Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana*, Firenze, Italia, 1523-34. Copyright: © Wikimedia Commons
Fig.6. (right) *Casa del Menandro, Pompei, Italia, III-II sec. a.C.* Copyright: © Wikimedia Commons

Despite their different articulation, all these precedents – from the *domus romana*, to the Italian painting tradition of the Middle Ages – have a common denominator: they constitute the historic framework defining the idea of urban interiority. Once established a sort of genealogy of this term, four main points help define the role that a project of urban interiority can play in the contemporary architectural production, as well as in the disciplinary debate:

1. Meta-scale: how the notion of urban interiority transcends any traditional separation between interior and exterior, architecture and the city, nature and culture.

2. Objects and fields: traditionally, interiors have been perceived as a more or less orderly accumulation of objects. Contrary to that, the concept of urban interiority is analogue to a spatial plateau – a continuous field inhabited by multiples agents and vectors.

3. Intensive and Extensive properties: complementary to the second point, urban interiority is informed by the unstable dialogue between material and immaterial components, whose collisions generate hybrid spatial consequences.

4. Assemblage: the fourth aspect, probably the riskier and the one more open to development, connects urban interiority to the so-called assemblage theory – a recent reinterpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's definition operated by philosopher Manuel DeLanda.

Meta-scale

The first point characterizing urban interiority has to do with the concept of scale – intended not only as a physical component, related to size, volume, etc., but also as an instrument to reflect on context and contextualism. In disseminating boundaries between spatial components, urban interiority manifests as an attempt to redefine the degree of permeability that architecture can embed. Separation between interior and exterior, public and private spaces becomes fluid, and progressively evaporates. Systems of spatial gradients are introduced to amplify the resonance of architecture within a certain urban fabric and to favour its process of assimilation in the city. Architecture becomes part of a slow process of heterogeneous sedimentation that cities are made out of. Merging the architectural scale and the interior scale into novel articulations, therefore, can allow to look at urban issues from another perspective and, eventually, to also imagine any design intervention as a collective effort to improve specific aspects – a sort of problem solving process.

Fluidity of movement and relations are key-aspects, as in the case of the Nantes School of Architecture, a building designed in 2009 by French firm Lacaton & Vassal. An example of vertical urbanism, this concrete skeleton acts as a neutral platform ready to be invaded by urban traffic. The project represents, to some extent, the evolution of the Pompidou Center's ground floor which is completely porous and open to the city, so that transition from exterior to interior is almost a natural gesture. In Nantes, a continuous ramp connects the street level to the roof, by reaching the various floors of the building. People, bikes and cars share the same entrance, like in an ideal continuation of the city life inside the School of Architecture. Parking, teaching, learning or walking are all treated equally. The building shows for what it is: an urban fragment compressed within the interior space of a concrete-frame construction.

Fig.7. Lacaton & Vassal, *Scuola di Architettura di Nantes,* Francia, 2009. Copyright: © Wikimedia Commons

At the same time, by thinking of urban interiority as a meta-scalar operation, an expanded idea of context derives, since the act of connecting or the reference to urban conditions can also be metaphorical, and symbolical. This is the case of OMA's Casa da Musica, a concert hall home to the National Orchestra of Porto, built in Portugal in 2005. Despite its apparent isolation from the urban flux – the building, in fact, is a sort of elevated meteorite surrounded by the emptiness of a travertine platform, whose access is provided through stairs – here the idea of urban interiority consists in a series of indirect and subtle references to the context, whether the word context embeds traditions, or cliché and stereotypes. In the main auditorium, therefore, the replica of a baroque pipe organ is placed on one of the walls, while the reinterpretation of traditional *azulejos* decorates several areas of the building. Vistas and other strategic connections reinforce the bond between the interiors and the city of Porto.

Fig.8. OMA, *Casa da Musica*, Porto, Portugal, 2005. Copyright: © Wikiarquitectura

Objects and Fields

The critical dialogue between objects and fields informs the definition of urban interiority too. In traditional portraits, interior spaces are often characterized by the overwhelming presence of objects, which fundamentally used to tell about the social status of their owner.

Fig.9. Brueghel the Elder, *Sight (The Five Senses),* Prado Museum, Madrid, 1617. Copyright: © Wikimedia Commons

Very famous in history, in fact, were the so-called cabinets of curiosities, or *Wunderkammer* – which emerged in the sixteenth century as a collection of objects belonging to the field of natural history, geology, archaeology, etc.

Opposed to this traditional depiction of interiors, is the idea of interiority as a spatial continuum – a unified visual, conceptual and physical space of possibility. To some extent, the notion of urban interiority can be better comprehended if connected to the proliferation of what Stan Allen called field conditions (Allen, 1999). In describing the architectural production of the 1980s and 1990s, Allen detected a series of common features. Contrary to objects, a field contains vectors; a field permits to unify, within a common platform, heterogeneous elements, by preserving the identity and singularity of each one of these elements. If in classical architecture the relations among individual elements followed a hierarchical organization, the idea of field implies a horizontal condition, in which forces coexist and interact. Intervals, repetitions and seriality turn into the keywords of peculiar architectural phenomena. In re-affirming the importance of a single composite vision, the notion of field could also allow to rethink the traditional relationship between figure and ground. The transition from an idea of object to the idea of field, as presented by Allen, is therefore not a recent phenomenon, and many are the architectural episodes engaging those conditions. Urban interiority belongs to this corpus of practices, in the sense of an open and hybrid configuration, as seen before.

The MUSAC Contemporary Art Museum of Castilla y León, Spain, built in 2004 by Spanish architects Mansilla + Tuñón, articulates issues of urban interiority both in plan and in the façade, via the deployment of field conditions. Designed as a cluster of irregular rooms capable to host a

variegated program of exhibitions, the planimetric configuration of the museum is a distorted urban grid, recalling both the geometry of some Roman mosaics as well as the structure of the so-called *castrum,* founding pattern of the city of León. The result is an interior geography of modules – a concatenation of spaces that triggers multi-directional axis, diagonal vistas, unexpected connections. The façade of MUSAC establishes a dialogue with another iconic presence in the city: the gothic cathedral. The series of glass panels composing the façade, in fact, derive from the manipulation and digitalization of one of the famous stained-glass windows of the cathedral, which dated back to the eighteenth century. In addition, the MUSAC façade completes an urban scene: it acts as background of a public square designed for collective gatherings.

Fig.10. Mansilla + Tuñón, *MUSAC (Museo di Arte Contemporanea di Castiglia e León)*, Spagna, 2004. Copyright: © Wikiarquitectura

Intensive and Extensive Properties

One of the disciplinary consequences of the shift from object to field is the distinction between intensive and extensive properties. To borrow the classification provided by Reiser and Umemoto in their *Atlas of Novel Tectonics*, one can refer to a comparison between gradients and scales: "intensive differences, also known as gradients, are properties of matter with indivisible difference, such as weight, elasticity, pressure, heat, density, color, and duration. In contrast, extensive properties are properties of matter with divisible differences, such as measurement, constraints, limits, codes, rules, modulation, mass, volume, time" (Reiser + Umemoto, 2006, p.72).

This distinction can be applied to any sort of artifact and process – from restoration, to preservation, to architecture. Rather than antagonist, intensive and extensive properties are complementary: any intangible data or material is equally important in the definition of spatial operative strategies.
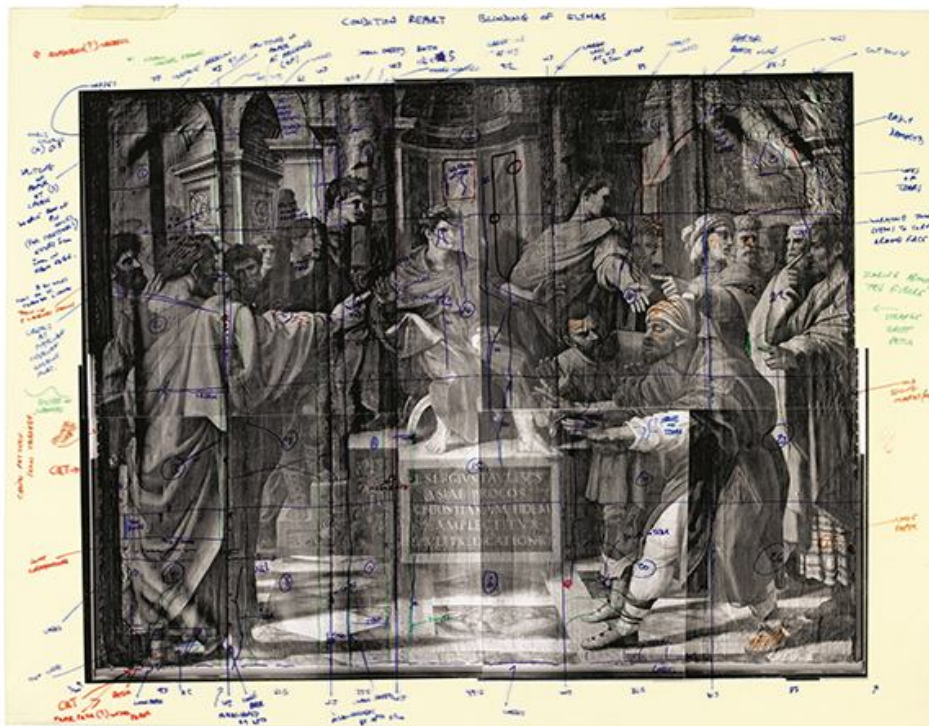

Fig.11. Richard Redgrave's condition report of Raphael *The Conversion of the Proconsul*, 1863

Intensive properties become a necessary resource especially in embryonal research phases, as they allow to establish priorities that go beyond physical aspects. Design processes can include monitoring and registering speed, elasticity, time. But also, the analysis of climatic parameters, the traffic flows in a given area, pedestrian patterns, and so on.

The Jade Eco Park (2016), designed by Philippe Rahm in Taichung, Taiwan, utilizes the exterior climatic conditions of the city – very warm and humid – as a starting point of a design process aimed to define a constellation of spaces, each with a specific micro-climate. Three fundamental parameters – heat variations, humidity and intensity of atmospheric pollution – served as skeleton

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of the entire project. By intervening on the current conditions – by lowering or inverting heat, humidity and pollution – Rahm takes advantage of intensive parameters to produce spatial change. Users can freely occupy the series of spaces designed based on their needs and depending on the hour of the days or the month in the year.
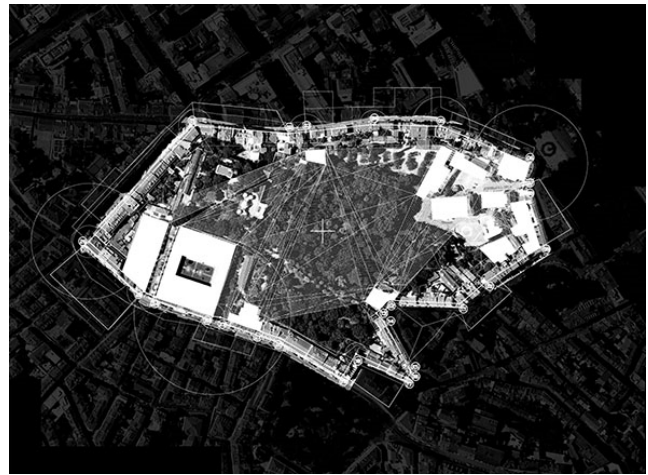

Fig.12. (left) Philippe Rahm, *Jade Eco Park*, Taichung, Taiwan, 2016
Fig.13. (right) Ilaria Bernardi, Antonio Cobo, Stefano Corbo, *Transformative parameters*, Parque Mayer, Lisbon, 2010
Copyright: © Ilaria Bernardi, Antonio Cobo, Stefano Corbo

Also, the project defines a scale of intervention that is urban in its physicality but tells about interiority in searching and adapting to each user's single experience.

In some other cases, even an existing urban park can constitute a field of interiority. In comprehending material and immaterial characteristics of the site, a confluence of information emerges – gradients and scale, thickness, weight, density. Through a process of abstraction, data become diagrams. The superposition of material and intangible parameters generates points of accumulation and maximum intensity. It's possible therefore, to identify design issues, but also potentialities that will influence the process of form generation. Any urban artefact, therefore, embeds an interior condition that can only be brought to light thanks to the simultaneous analysis of intensive and extensive properties.

Urban Interiority and Assemblage

Over the years, the notion of assemblage has taken on a compelling philosophical connotation, especially thanks to the contributions of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who regarded the term assemblage as a "multiplicity which is made of many heterogeneous terms and which established liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures" (Deleuze, Parnet, 1994, p.69). In recent years philosopher Manuel Delanda has returned to the idea of assemblage and, by combining its reference to societal and political organizations with Fernand Braudel's focus on economic organizations, attempted to extend it all aspects of our life: "Assemblages include persons, material and symbolic artifacts: the architecture of the buildings that house them; the

myriad different tools and machines used in offices, factories, and kitchens; the various sources of food, water, and electricity" (DeLanda, 2016, p.20).

Inspired by the comprehensive use of the term made by DeLanda, a project of urban interiority can constitute an assemblage itself. When it comes to the territory of architecture, the word assemblage can recall postmodernist operations of fragmentation, bricolage, historical pastiche, irony, etc. In this specific case, there's no affinity nor analogy with postmodernism. In urban interiority, the notion of assemblage allows to preserve singularity and multiplicity at the same time. And it also permits to think again, after many years, at the relationship between object and subject.

Exemplificative can be the case of the Lleialtat Santsenca Civic Center, designed in Barcelona by H Architectes in 2017.

Fig.14. H Architectes, *Centro Civico Lleialtat Santsenca*, Barcellona, 2017. Copyright: © Wikimedia Commons

Based on the transformation of a 1928 working class cooperative building, the project develops across the definition of an interior urban void – an atrium that allows the encounter between the old decayed structures and the new intervention. This empty space, designed to be utilized for unexpected uses in the future, not only unifies the three different bodies constituting the existing

building. The atrium is the compositional moment of synthesis in the project. The patina of the existing walls and the new polycarbonate roofs coexist in the same environment. In the progression of the spaces designed as well as in the overall process of mending, overlap of textures, patterns and lexicons take place. One may say that the whole project is therefore fueled by a process of assemblage – it is macro and micro at the same time, compact and finite in its multiplicity.

A few years earlier, in the same city, Catalan architects Flores & Prats work on an analogous project of adaptive reuse: Sala Beckett (2014). In rehabilitating a former social club, used in the past for family celebrations, memory is the red thread connecting old and new, on the verge between nostalgia and experimentalism. The building is transformed into a theatre and a dramaturgy school. Rather than containing the new program in a well-defined area, the architects explode the program and diffuse it over every corner of the building. The building itself, therefore, becomes the theatre: materials, decorations, *object trouvé*, and interior vistas shape the main theatrical activity. The intervention on the old building reveals itself as a process of *anastylosis* where existing and new fragments are re-composed in a novel fashion. Notions of legibility and atmosphere regulate the relation between old and new and connect the interiors to the history of the surrounding neighbourhood.

Fig.15. Flores & Prats, *Sala Beckett*, Barcellona, 2014. Copyright: © Wikimedia Commons

Both Flores & Prats and H Architectes produce architectural assemblages. In opposition to those postmodern techniques mentioned before, these two projects of adaptive reuse are informed by a set of design techniques one can call meta-collage. Meta-collage distinguishes from collage because it's not only a representation technique, nor the juxtaposition or a mosaic of materials. Meta-collage, in these two projects, is an ad-hoc design strategy producing assemblages. It generates new

strategical and formal opportunities. Meta-collage is a comprehensive operation that applies to every moment of the project, both in 3d than in 2d. The final result of an assemblage process, Sala Beckett as well as the Lleialtat Santsenca Civic Center are not questioning ideas of image and function. They constitute a composite artifact: a multiplicity that regards architecture as a combination of old and new patterns, entropic relations, interior and urban components.

The four points here presented, along with the historical framework providing a sort of genealogy of the term urban interiority, don't aim to constitute a static and freezing delimitation of its potential. What illustrated here is an invite to look at interior and urban conditions as an intertwined and a-scalar entity, not as separate antithetical terms. Urban interiority reaches beyond traditional domains to pose a set of questions on the space we live in, and on the relation between its components.

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