

Urban interiors. Artificial territories. designing 'spatial script' for relational field

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this paper highlights the relevance of interior design for urban regeneration. The aim of the paper is to outline the role of (urban) interior design as the initiator, with its own specific know-how and tools, from which to promote processes of re-signification of public and collective spaces. It is argued that interior design activity conceived in this way enables citizens, and more generally users of those places, to activate 'processes of use' which are more coherent with the logic and needs of contemporary urban culture. The research is grounded in selected definitions in order to build a precise conceptual framework in which to move. This in turn has produced a series of visions and a set of operational tools able to facilitate both the intervention of the designer as conductor/mediator of the process and the community of users involved as future users of that place or environmental system.

RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY AS PREMISE: OBJECT-ARTIFACT & OBJECT-ARTIFICE

Artifact '*anything man-made, such as a spurious experimental result*'¹ An artifact is defined as 'something' not found in Nature, but manufactured or produced by human beings. It is an object whose shape is justified by the provision that was intended. With a hammer, for example, it is clear why there is a heavy end, whereas a stone owes its form to natural causes such as earthquakes, rolling, landslides and waves. The physical characteristics that distinguish artifacts from natural objects are regularity and repetition. Regularity is the set of properties possessed by objects, such as perfect symmetry and rich form made by simple geometric figures (flat surfaces, straight edges, right angles) and repetition is the reproduction of objects where the intention of their creator is equally evident in each. These two characteristics, as observed in cognitive science, assume a precise meaning and can be related to certain types of perceptual organisation.

The artifact is an object that requires an intentional use (whether individual or social) which may support 'potential uses'. It becomes a tool which might be effectively used in human activities that

produce a change in (human) capacity of the user. A tool that leads, through an interaction aimed at building a common or local sense, to a new 'thought construction', primarily contextualised and subjective, of the world around us. Therefore, an artifact produces by a process of mediation (here defined as 'interaction changed by a tool'), new knowledge collectively shared and distributed which influences reality through innovation. Environmental psychology defines artifacts as constituents of human cultures. Here artifacts are firstly 'cognitive objects' which are then realised in practice. To contribute to the definition of artifact, even in this context, we find the same elements: a plan, a purpose and therefore an intelligence capable of creativity.

In order to draw an evolutionary path, we can say that *Homo Abilis* possessed only an embryonic ability to conceive and produce artifacts. The construction of complex tools (such as axes, scrapers and sickle) requires 'imagination skill',² which must be translated into fine motor functions: a degree of creative intelligence that, although low, gives *Homo Abilis* a competitive advantage compared to other species which share the environment. The history of art and material culture shows how the increase of cognitive skills and imaginative or creative abilities in *Homo Erectus* and *Homo Sapiens* led to the construction of increasingly sophisticated artifacts.

And nowadays, if it is true that the era of *Homo Ludens*³ is leading to that of *Homo Videns*⁴, what kind of artifacts are we going to produce? Does the nature of the object-artifact change in relation to the significant increase of potential application and of given value of the imaginative component described above? If so, how? To answer that question it is useful to bring to mind Ubaldo Fadini's observation⁵ of a paradigm shift with the advent of technology that has provoked contemporary epistemology and cultural development. His reflection finds echoes in this extract, from an article by Umberto Galimberti:

Prima la televisione e poi il computer; questi elettrodomestici gentili, come vuole la loro iniziale reputazione, oggi hanno gettato la maschera rivelandosi per quel che sono: i più formidabili condizionatori di pensiero, non nel senso che ci dicono cosa dobbiamo pensare, ma nel senso che modificano in modo radicale il nostro modo di pensare, trasformandolo da analitico, strutturato, sequenziale e referenziale, in generico, vago, globale, olistico.⁶

Contemporary society is steeped in object relations, which convey aesthetic and ethical content, able to meet our daily experience: interfering, stimulating or frustrating our cognitive ability, our emotional skills and our semantic schedules. In his writings, Fadini minutely describes the character of our time (basically constituted by 'Artificial Nature') and, while addressing the limits and dangers, he sketches fascinating visions of a world full of relational objects whose quality is seen as high and rich. The artifice is, according to Fadini's vision, the contemporary *shape of objects* or, in other words, the resultant product of the most advanced level of artifact: objects-artifice are considered as autonomous devices, not against Nature but as a New Nature.

Artifice: 'a clever expedient; ingenious stratagem; a skillfully contrived device'.⁷ More generally, it seems to be possible to consider artifice as a 'process' designed to improve a system (e.g. Nature); the focus is on its capability to improve the appearance, the result, the effect of something. An artifice, as a process which is usually open, operates primarily at the level of the whole mindset, and in a second phase finds expression in a product, or takes shape again in an artifact.

The words artifact and artifice are linked by roots 'art', defined as: 'Human activity governed by technique and based both on study and experience'.⁸ With translation and an updating of the concept, it is conceivable to replace the word 'art' with the word 'design'. Arti-fact becomes 'design-made' we are talking about products. Meanwhile, arti-fice is better referred to as 'design process'; seen as a method of research, applied as a strategic logic of conception for the design or production of goods. *Homo Videns*, as user and manipulator of the artificial imaginary even before artifacts, can be described as a manager of 'object-SPIME'⁹ as defined by Bruce Sterling. Sterling investigates variable relations of objects-man, from the assumption that every age has expressed its own technoculture, which is recognized in some 'manufactured' artifacts.¹⁰ Primitive artifacts are the starting point of an evolutionary trajectory: firstly they evolved into 'machines' and, later, they became 'products'; after that, 'products' take the shape of 'trinkets' driving contemporary epistemology to talk about 'SPIME'.¹¹ Sterling writes:

The term SPIME is a neologism that is formed by the contraction of space and time. The idea is that there is no longer an object as an artifact, but as a process. [...] They are industrial objects whose informational support is so broad and rich as to make it a sort of materialization of an intangible asset.¹²

The concept of SPIME suggests an idea of the user as an 'intermediary'. In addition, Sterling reminds all designers of their responsibility, as professionals to operate in what it is

called 'techno-social kingdom': a complex, intermediate, reality between an anthropological world and one of objects.

Artifact and artifice as attributes, are applicable to objects (and, by extension, to systems of objects), places, ideas and institutions. To further investigate the nature of this contemporary experience and, at the same time, to increase awareness of designers' professional forms of responsibility that are emerging, it seems useful to reflect on the work of the psychologist Paolo Inghilleri.

Individuals use objects and spaces, highlighting the complex relationship between individual well-being and connections with a system of territorially-localised assets (i.e. between individual development and socio-cultural one).¹³

As a result, the importance and responsibility of designers emerges to give a definition of all objects floating around us, which may or may not contribute to building a positive relationship between humans and the artificial world

A NEW HABITUS

It seems that, for the mutants, the spark of experience is defined by the fast track which link different things, aiming to become the lines of a picture [...] Thus, the mutant has learned a time, minimum and maximum, in which to dwell in things.¹⁴

This extract, by the writer Alessandro Baricco with his metaphor about contemporary man as 'barbarian'¹⁵, is positioned here as a fundamental phenomenological assumption to commence a reflection about contemporary urban space. Baricco's barbarian is described as a 'horizontal man' with particular characteristics: knowledge abandons the idea to go deep (vertical movement) in favor of linking (horizontal movement). The sense of things and experience are evaluated based on the relational network potentially available and not so much on specialisation; aesthetic choices and perceptions of coherence¹⁶ about suitable performance¹⁷ are closely related to comprehension ('reading')



and allowed accessibility ('use'), which are contemporary standards for perceiving quality.¹⁸

According to the Baricco, the beginning of the change to a Barbaric age is datable to the crisis in the Western world of the 'conceptual square' of the 'classic'. The framework, underlying the sense of 'classic', is defined by four main parameters: permanent, ethical, rational and objective. This is a concept of 'classical' as a condensation of form and content into unit, a concept based on logical and linear attitudes, as well as digital and analytical principles. One can position a hypothetical 'conceptual square' of the 'Barbaric' in contrast to the 'classic' and define it through opposition; temporary, emic, emotional and subjective (Figure 1).

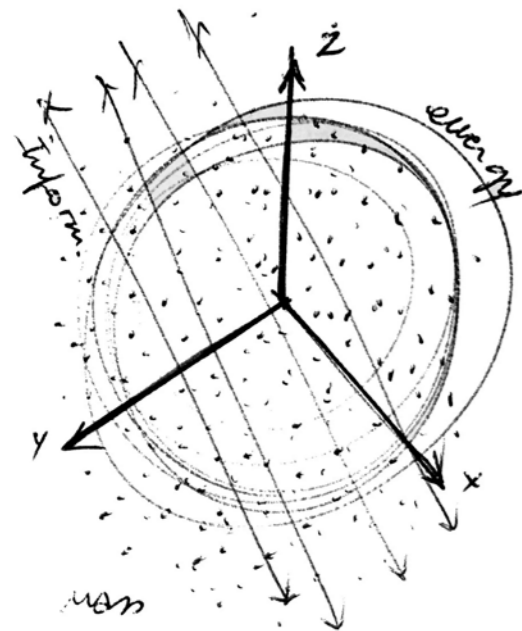
The semantic revolution of the Barbaric age is basically the acceptance of diversity as a positive value; beauty as self-expression/aesthetic tension (not necessarily connected with the search for truth); an awareness of contemporary deep nature as ephemeral and virtual. Moreover, the Barbaric Aesthetic allows multiple and simultaneous presences; in other words, it admits and considers the existence of opposite and

in some cases, also conflictual tensions. The agreement of this nomadic mind-style as the new *habitus* of society changes the concept of 'living' and the idea of 'staying' in public areas;¹⁹ arguably, this makes necessary the establishment of a new and more coherent *habitat*.

Borrowing a metaphor from scientific thought, one might speak of *discrete logic* according to its mathematical attribute of 'not continuous' and focus on the nature or process of 'living fact'. The individual is mostly a user; inhabitable sequences are shaped by a sort of *zapping logic*: home – connections (web or street) – series of interiors – connections (web or street) – home. Living in a contemporary city means to *enter in* and *exit to* an arbitrary juxtaposition of *enclaves*, both real and virtual, with their proper semantic contexts.

Contemporary space can no longer find its *raison d'être*, its effect, in managing, planning and designing the three, traditional, Cartesian dimensions. Paul Virilio introduces as characteristic of the contemporary age, another three variables: Mass, Information, Energy²⁰ (Figure 2). Virilio defines Mass, as the system of objects;

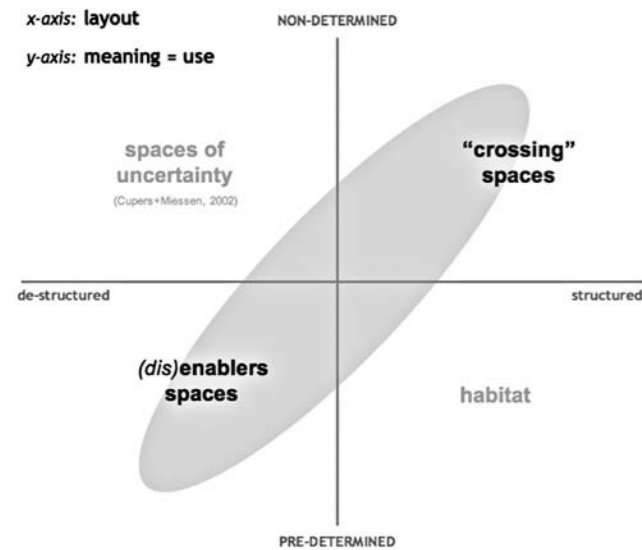
Above
Figure 1: Suggestive image about the current shift of 'conceptual square' from the 'classic' to 'Barbaric' age, each one with their own characteristics.



Information, as the capability of places to be 'crossings'; Energy, as the sum of resources which allows movement of the system (consumption and re-generation, acceptance of upload and download actions and other examples of phenomena based on *cyclical logic*). Added to those features defined, by basic design, as *soft qualities*²¹ these variables require a gestaltic knowledge of the space. At present, for instance, ICT²² should be considered fully embedded in these series of performative attributes, as expression of new sensorial and perceptual potentialities of space itself.

Exhibition practice involves a language which is able to treat and communicate these variables by opening a dialogue with the user, who becomes an actor in the measure he or she is allowed to intervene in through the editing of this shaping practice. According to the above, a contemporary vision of space through the keyword object-SPIME is useful; in other words, an artifice with a high rate of information which, subjectively and by use, may be shaped as artifact. These kinds of spaces might be experienced in a more complex way, as anticipated by Pine & Gilmore,²³ with the aim to perceive their value as *situation* or *happening*: a term conceived as the sum of experience and service. This pattern of use of sites allows for greater utilization of the emotional and sensorial skills of space and human bodies in it.

The 'liquefaction' of solid hierarchies, which *First Modernity*²⁴ considered as a transitional stage towards a new stable one, is now a permanent reality. Referring to the use of spaces, it is possible to observe a 'semantic-based vision' as distinct from a 'cataloguing attitude', which admits and supports more open and stratified configurations. The resulting operational *vacuum* represents, for Bauman,²⁵ a huge potential which is filled by the individual with spontaneous and local initiatives. In this Babel of performative variables, interior design should develop a decoding system for new 'barbarian' needs, in order to anticipate and answer them, designing places *able to play* with systems of objects; enabling spaces *able to structure and to be structured* more as *setting*²⁶ than as pre-set habitat. The connotation 'setting' is suitable to define all spaces that find place on the harmonic diagonal of the conceptual matrix in Figure 3.

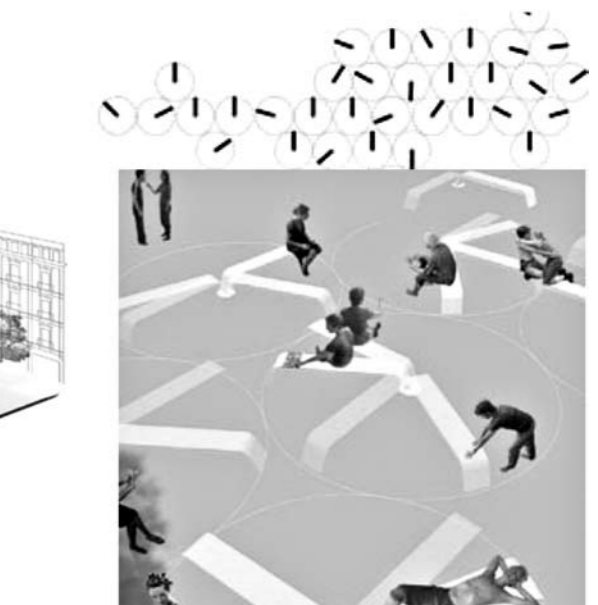
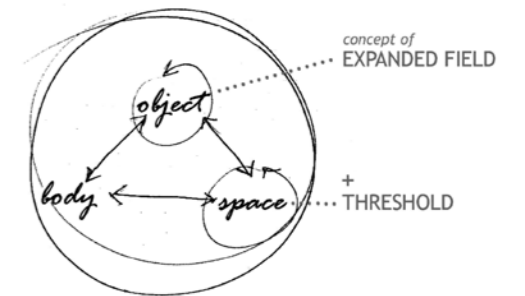


Opposite top
Figure 2: 'Stereo-reality' diagram: sketch based on Virilio's theory.

Opposite bottom
Figure 3: 'Relational field' map (Giunta, 2007): this conceptual matrix is the final output built up to collect and visualise the results of case study analysis. Axes refer to layout of space (X-axis) and vocation of use (Y-axis). The connotation 'setting' is suitable to define the overlapping between both physical and relational structures of space.

The term 'space' must be associated with the idea of 'environmental system', here intended as the whole of bodies, systems of containers and systems of objects. The main idea is that the project for a urban space, according to exhibition approach, might be well conceived as a artifice; taking into account all current epistemological considerations available, useful to develop a metadesign practice more coherent with the emerging techno-culture (Figure 4).

The new generation of interior designers should develop a method of work which would be able to operate both with a systemic²⁷ and emic²⁸ approach. Indeed, starting from new values and needs, the aim of the project is to structure flexible artificial habitats or settings consisting of objects and environmental components that fit to the various functions required by space in time. In addition, an inner purpose of such projects is to shape materials and to provide 'boxes' for relational configurations, always *in fluxus*, which would take place in public places. This principle is coherent with the contemporary attitude, of interior design, toward reconfiguration; it is also suitable to the nomadic character of contemporary society, which 'design' and live places almost in real time (Figure 5).



Above top
Figure 4: 'Environmental system' diagram (Giunta 2007): model of links between the constituent variables.

Above bottom
Figure 5: Risorgimento Square, Bari, 2002. Project by MaO.



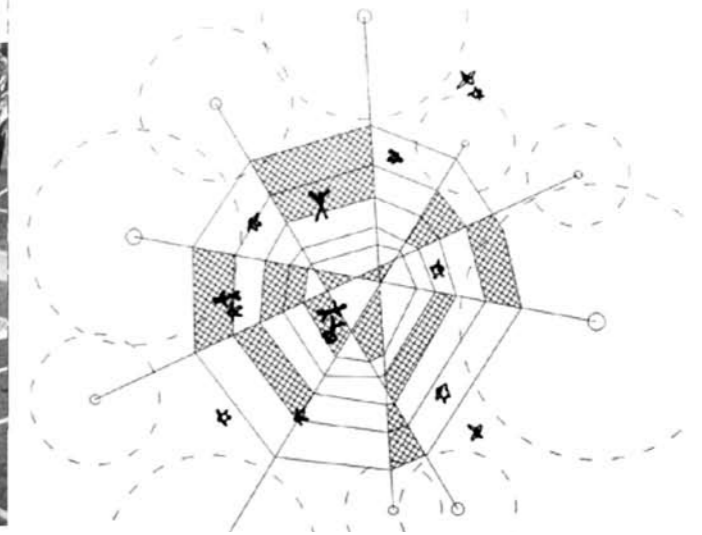
ARTIFICIAL HABITATS: (URBAN) INTERIOR DESIGN AS 'MODEL OF DIALOGUE' BETWEEN OBJECTS AND USERS

The interior design discipline is called upon to enlarge its territories, to start considering cities' interiors as fields of application. Interior design practice might generate a credible, independent, response to contemporary needs. It could develop visions of inhabiting suitable to the paradigms of our society: a permanent uncertainty where transition is a stable reality and liquidity is a permanent state.

Quando possono, i barbari costruiscono a loro immagine i sistemi in cui viaggiare: la rete, per esempio. Ma non gli sfugge che la gran parte del terreno percorribile è fatto da gesti che loro ereditano dal passato, e dalla loro natura: vecchi villaggi. Allora quel che fanno è modificarli fino a quando non diventano sistemi passanti: noi chiamiamo questo saccheggio.²⁹

This second extract by Baricco, poetically describes the huge contemporary phenomenon, still in progress, of urban disposal; he suggests a vision of towns whose appearance and function is changing from inside-out. Old villages are inhabited settlements that 'barbarians' have occupied or inherited; Cities that today are becoming metropolises and global networking hubs increasingly ask for multi-ethnic spaces that seek to ensure integration,³⁰ with complex issues about mobility, disappearance of public space and decentralization of services. Considering this framework, a new role of urban interior design can be outlined: it can play both as initiator and promoter of bottom-up processes, able to generate re-signification and re-appropriation of public and collective spaces.

In this scenario, interior design practice acts with a overwriting logic³¹ where places designed as artifices might enable users to activate situated processes of 'temporary inhabiting'. At the same



time, these physical and cultural dynamics gain the result of restructuring. The users continuously activate processes of construction and re-construction of urban space and interiors through a semantic and performative interface; the project overlaps the existing space. The project 'interior cities' is thus understood as a performative upgrade of places.³² This phenomenon, which is one of the great business of the twenty-first century is already being implemented with operational tools that make reference to interior design, which is seen as a dynamic design approach in between architecture and product design.

Each urban place is primarily seen as a field of potential actions. In particular, considering the diagram in Figure 4 and being grounded in the theory of 'expanded field',³³ it is possible to imagine a public space as a *relational field*. Furthermore, the issue of social forms of involvement becomes evident: the users contribute significantly to determine not only the function of interior space, but the meaning itself. In this semiotic process, user and designer are both operating on environmental systems, as in a co-design process realised just at the end of the project flow (Figure 6).

A percentage of unpredictability – which derives from individual creativity – is typical of this kind of project, which interacts with spontaneous behaviours. Projects designed in this way widely enhance the idea of space as a threshold, and the ambiguous space of transformation as the preferential background in which to test the innovation.

The quality of a contemporary urban space or, in other words, its occupation/inhabitation as a space which is hospitable and enjoyable, is directly proportional to the number of potential exhibits and happenings allowed in its interior. The transition from *urban place* toward *environmental system* is provided by the way the designer links the three actors of the system to each other:

Opposite

Figure 6: Image of the ECObox garden and the mobile kitchen, Paris, 2004. Project by aaa - Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée (Constantin Petcou and Doina Petrescu).

Above

Figure 7: Slacklines, Villamanin, 2005. Project by Cliostrat.

_bodies or the social component: that is both individual and community. The social component needs spaces designed for individual use and also for group or community action; in each case space should be a device to create belonging;

_objects or inanimate actors on inhabited stage: referring to the theory of 'expanded field', to illustrate how 'things' operate, as fragments, in a semantic symbiosis with their surroundings (space), due to their use (bodies);

_spaces or system of containers: If 'conjunction' is the current logic which defines the relations between spaces, we can state that this interaction generates a threshold: a sort of blended interface area. In these places of opportunity and transformation, we can experience the dialogue with objects and bodies, in an endless game between foreground and background elements. An interior designer might operate with the later two variables.

To develop an interior design project in a non-exhaustive way opens various fields of application to the discipline: in fact, any space that contains features where it is necessary to re-configure the space can be conceived as a plausible space. It is now possible to highlight the project for an urban interior effectively works as a *'script'*³⁴ or informational content: a small 'program' that can accept input by the user without substantially changing its structure. In order to paraphrase this concept, and reading this suggestion from the viewpoint of an interior designer, the project acts as an open 'micro-sequence of information' – the system of constraints that structure the potential use of space and its equipment – with 'executables' only if mediated by users' actions, which operate in a relational field inside the urban space as object of observation (Figure 7).

NOTES

1. Online version of the English Collins Dictionary - <http://dictionary.reverso.net/english-definitions/artefact> (accessed: 26th March 2009)
2. Here is intended an idea, or concept, of a product which clearly springs before its production.
3. Francesco Careri, 2001. *Constant. New Babylon, una città nomade*. Testo&immagine.
4. Giovanni Sartori, 1997. *Homo videns*. Roma-Bari: GLF Laterza.
5. Seminar by Professor Fadini, at the Politecnico di Milano (academic year 2007/08) within the program of a course on Epistemological Research.
6. Umberto Galimberti, 2006. 'Le rivoluzioni dell'homo videns' in *La Repubblica*, (21 Feb 2000).
7. Online version of the English Collins Dictionary - <http://dictionary.reverso.net/english-definitions/artifice> (accessed: 26th March 2009)
8. Manlio Cortelazzo, and Paolo Zolli, *Etimologico minore*. (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2004)
9. Bruce Sterling, 2005. *Shaping Things*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005)
10. Sterling, *Shaping Things*.
11. The terms: 'manufactured', 'machines', 'products' and 'trinkets' are definitions by Sterling. They represent artifacts produced in a different techno-culture. Each of these artefacts refer implicitly to the idea of user: from the Hunters and Farmers to Customers, from Consumers to End Users.

12. The definition is referred not only to the concept of product-system but also contain contemporary idea of space as device. Sterling, *Shaping Things*, 76-85.
13. Paulo Inghillevi, *La Buona Vita. Per un uso creativo degli oggetti nella società dell'abbondanza* (Milano: Guerini Associati, 2003)
14. Alessandro Baricco, *I Barbari. Saggio sulla mutazione* (Roma: Fandango libri, 2006)
15. In the etymological sense of stranger: one who speaks a new language, one who occupies a territory of others.
16. Conceptual framework is always 'barbaric age' with its own paradigms and values.
17. The term 'performance' means for a meta-functional attribute, that goes beyond the strictly rational aspects related to the use of the objects|environment, to include other characters, known as *soft* qualities.
18. In addition, Baricco refers to *net surfing* phenomena.
19. As well as their permanent nature.
20. The increased size of the variables describing the reality is a thought developed by Paul Virilio in relation to new areas for action planning and contemporary Architecture. Virilio sees the human as halfway between reality and the network, in a six-dimensional space system, called 'stereo-reality'. The real space and representation of it tend to exchange pictures and constantly merge into one another. In this text, an attempt has been made to decline (?) such macro considerations to the specific context of the interior design. Paul Vivillio, *Lo spazio critico*. (Bari: ed. Dedalo, 1998)
21. Or environmental technology, such as color, light, smells, decorations, microclimate and ambient music. Experiences linked to the perceptual dimension.
22. In the form of intelligent systems (automatic home), natural interaction and augmented reality.
23. Joe Pine, and Jim Gilmore. *The economy of experience*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999)
24. Andrea Branzi. *Modernità debole e diffusa*. (Milano: Skira, 2006)
25. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernità liquida*. (Roma-Bari: Ed. Laterza, 2002)
26. In psychology, the term 'setting' refers to the place defined by relational pairs therapist-patient, which combined with the physical place, lets you experience a cognitive / emotional containment, imperative to finding and expressing self. The present text proposes a generalisation of the concept, to describe the potential to match the double space (physical and relational) in a *unicuum* able to structure / support a positive relationship with the surroundings. In the project, this concept translates into the need consider as pair and balance objects and the human component.
27. The term system refers to the whole object and at the same time the relationship between objects.
28. The term 'emic' refers to anthropology: it means the inner point of view of *natives*, with their beliefs and values.
29. Baricco, *I Barbari. Saggio sulla mutazione* (Roma: Fandango libri, 2006)
30. With the aim to 'match, not to define boundaries' as poetic spaces with cohesive function,
31. An overlapping logic, a continuous overwriting in between the functional and the semantic.
32. In other words, as sum of the whole series of re-use projects or disused structures; in addition it is necessary to consider all those addressed in the transformation of existing interiors.
33. The concept of expanded field, which particularly represents the last stage of research on the expansion of the art objects dialogue with its exhibition space results in not only a 'way of using' space but also altered the perception of environments. As a consequence, the concept of expanded field could be considered more generally as a 'way to inhabit' places.
34. In Computer Science, the term *script* is used to define a specific kind of software. In general, in *script* program, it is possible to identify the following characteristics: quite low complexity; interpretative language; automatic integration in the set-up/starting process of the system; linearity (a *script* might accept input by the user without change –substantially- the structure of original pattern); lack of a proper graphic interface; link with external software to execute more complex actions.