Envisioning Transitions

Bodies, buildings, and boundaries

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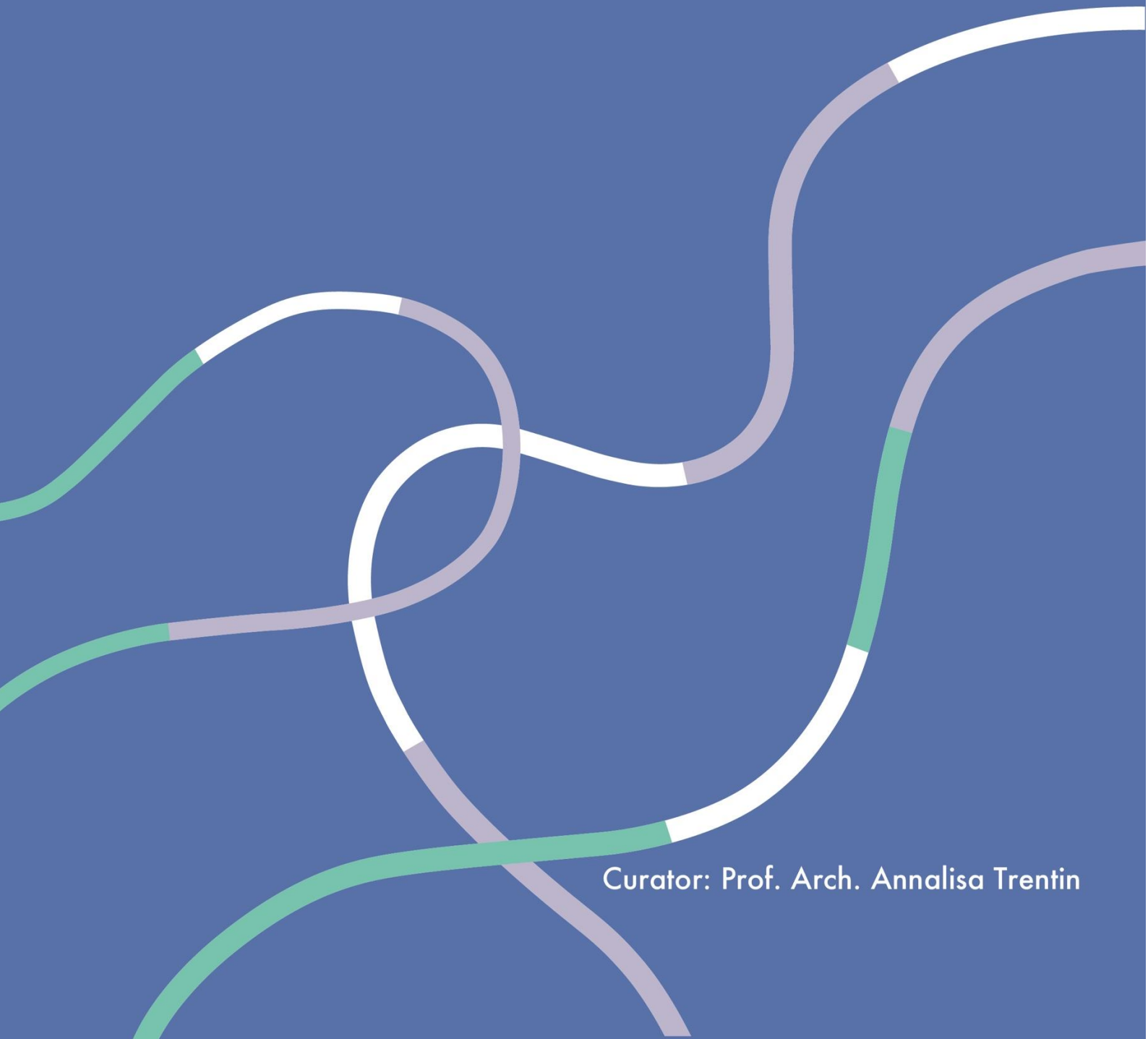

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Urban choreographies: a reflection on the design with differently augmented bodies

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the peculiar character of the body and of its role in urban design in the light of the pandemic and the digital transitions, this contribution addresses the issue of urban design made with and for human and more-than-human bodies.

Ongoing global changes lead urban design to adopt a relational approach that returns to the body, in relation to space and to other bodies. In fact, the renewed focus on the corporeal dimension in the post-covid era and, in parallel, the ever-increasing opportunities offered by virtual realities, open up new possibilities to explore and experience urban spaces through differently augmented bodies. The body can be enhanced through somatic and perceptual attention, facilitated by the contribution of artistic-performative practices, or it can be expanded by cyborg effects with various degrees of technological hybridization. Both possibilities can shape a new understanding in the field of urban studies since they enable a complex and amplified experience of spaces. Therefore, the paper investigates some possible ways for urban design to relate to augmented bodies to build new epistemologies and methods: pushing forward a phenomenological approach, sensory and bodily experience is here considered indispensable for reading and transforming the city.

On the one hand, the city is perceived by the body as a set of interactive conditions, and the body itself expresses a transitory synthesis of these interactions recording its experience through an urban 'bodygraphy' (Britto & Jacques 2008).

Creative and mobile methods for urban investigation – referring to the senses, movement and perception – are thus explored: walking methods and artistic-performative practices such as urban dérive and urban dance. They are understood as ways to acquire an embedded knowledge of spaces from which to proceed to design their transformations, but they are also intended as ways for resignifying places, creating new relationships with the community, a stronger sense of affection and belonging, caring for places, etc.

On the other hand, the digital transition allows the expansion of urban phenomenology, constructing a new body-scheme that questions the spatio-temporal categories of the experience of space and using the possibilities of virtual simulation to innovate, create and build alternative futures in the material world (Seibert 2022).

Understanding the body as a living interface between the virtual and the real environment, a post-human creature hybridised with technology, can open horizons for experimentation on different fronts. On the side of designers, who become capable of tracing nodes of an informational network moving in space and mapping a collective spatial intelligence, but also on the side of citizens who are provided with a tool to actively engage with their everyday landscapes allowing new forms of empathy and significance of places.

Using the lenses of the human and post-human body to interpret urban phenomena, this paper also aims to tackle the dichotomy between real and virtual, physical and digital, biological and machinic, proposing a dialogue between these different corporal sensibilities in an attempt to question their claimed antinomies.

From this perspective, the work of the designer becomes similar to that of a choreographer, who interacts with the "life between buildings" (Gehl 2011) and works through dynamic projects that co-evolve with their actors and contexts. The concept of choreography becomes seminal, both for the renewed attention on the performative features of space in terms of body movements and for the

fertile analogy with the design act capable of holding together heterogeneous and moving components.

KEYWORDS
urban design; public space; choreography; augmented body; multidimensionality

1. Introduction

The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below", below the thresholds at which visibility begins. (…) They are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it. (De Certeau 1980, p. 93).

Dealing with bodies inevitably involves a reflection on transition. The body is a dynamic and changing entity, always in motion and never static. Constantly passing through ephemeral states, it lives in transition or rather it needs to be in transition to live: between physical and perceptual statuses, stopping and passing points, visible and invisible conditions, memories and (e)motions. Nevertheless, a certain degree of contradiction lies in the bodily condition itself, since the body permanently experiences a state of transition – temporary by definition.

Another contradictory aspect concerns the role of the body in modern and contemporary European design culture which has founded its identity on the notion of place, the focus of continuous reflections and re-conceptualisation. Despite this culture having always implicitly dealt with bodies, it has not placed them at the centre of its debate nor considered them as real subjects of the project[1].

However, the transition experienced during and after the pandemic raised the question of the centrality of bodies in space and mainly in the cities, by definition places of coexistence and relations between diverse beings. Moreover, the digital transition accelerated by the pandemic stressed the importance of relationships between bodies, physically distant but networked together.

Starting from the marginality of bodies in the traditional urban design discourse (Bianchetti 2020), this paper reaffirms the experience of bodies in public space, where social practices are performed and shared signification is built. Public space is understood as a mediating ground and field of experimentation of interactions. We adopted a Lefebvrian view considering space as simultaneously conceived, perceived and lived: to comprehend this triad, it is necessary to return to bodies (Lefebvre 1991). In particular, by claiming the possibility for differently augmented bodies to become subjects of the project, the objective is to explore how a multi-sensory understanding of the city can inform urban design.

On one hand, the body is augmented by the expansion of its perceptual attention and, in this light, creative languages such as performing arts practices can increase somatic sensitivity. On the other hand, digital technologies challenge designers to conceive new relationships between space and a 'hybrid' body capable of moving between physical and media environments.

In the condition of 'permanent transition' how can we develop our corporality in space? The relationship of the human being with the living environment consists of continuous interactions in motion of which the body is the interface. An ecological approach to the design of cities can be useful to unveil the potentialities of a space that is «open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always in becoming» (Massey 2005, p. 59). Re-interpreting de Certeau's views quoted above, we believe that this kind of moving body can

be a tool for reading the urban text: through the exploration of diverse forms of embodiment, as designers we need to cultivate a pluriversal understanding of being in the world (Seibert 2022).

2. Re-placing the body in the urban space

The contemporary transition has dramatically emphasised the centrality of the body. The pandemic has displaced bodies in the physical space, in the social space and in the space of control. Moreover, it has displaced them into virtual space as a place of relationships outside the home, where bodily characteristics were secondary to communication flows. Furthermore, this transition also displaces design questions towards a redefinition of the relationship between individual and collective bodies and between them and public space; some concepts have been re-interpreted such as those of proximity and distance, safety and unsafety, porosity and inequality.

Hence, the body becomes the measure of every spatial relationship within the city, where the plurality of coexisting inhabitants' bodies appears (Jacobs 1961). Such coexistence is a political issue and does not elude but amplifies the responsibility of the design project (Bianchetti 2021).

A new challenge for urban design emerges, which consists in shifting the traditional approach to places, understanding them from a relational perspective as a full space between bodies. In order to meet this challenge, phenomenological philosophy can be useful to approach the body as an active, experienced and generative subject (Merleau-Ponty 1945). Also, as cognitive science and enactivism have shown, living beings know through action and movement, and knowledge is always embodied and embedded (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1993; Nöe 2004). This concerns also spatial knowledge, which is always a situated experience based on the sensory-motor, perceptual and cognitive possibilities of the body.

Therefore, the role of multisensory and kinaesthetic experience gains particular importance in the interactions between the subject and the external environment. This leads to reconsidering the importance of the senses, rehabilitating all of them (and not only sight) as a way of accessing the world, environments and their atmospheres (Treib 2008; De Matteis 2020), also including sensory dimensions acquired through the progressive hybridisation with digital technologies.

The multi-sensorial experience as a method of analysis might allow the designer and the researcher to read community and collective features of public space, like its permeability, accessibility, inclusiveness; it allows to identify zones of conflict or resistance, the level of comfort and discomfort, of formality and informality, the sense of place; and finally it enables a deeper understanding of the relationships between communities and spaces considering their uses, memory, potentialities, needs and priorities.

We intend to use the body as a tool for spatial exploration and transformation, widening the operating principles of the project. Moving bodies can stimulate the urban project just as the urban project can stimulate moving bodies.

3. Enhancing the body through performance practices

Many authors agree that bodily experience in the contemporary city is increasingly anaesthetised (Paba 1998; Solnit 2001; Jacques 2012): by the speed of transport and the pace of life, by the consensual nature of urban projects, by the spectacular and consumerist strategies of urban capitalism (Debord 1967; Lefebvre 1999). All these factors hide the fact that the project does not put the body at the centre (Pallasmaa 2005; Pereira 2009). Moreover, traditional space analysis tools are unable to capture much of the complexity of places (relationships,

conflicts, flows, perceptions, sense of belonging). In fact, although the zenithal view (from the top of the city or from the plan of a cartography) is necessary, it cannot be exhausted in itself (Geddes 1904). This synoptic view from above must be alternated with a gaze from 'down below' (de Certeau 1980) and from within, reclaiming the direct experience of the body through space.

Body and space imply each other and they evolve together: one plastically shapes the other in a process of mutual transcriptions and configurations that are always transitory. The city is transcribed by the actions of the bodies which inhabit it: they do so through spatial practices and performances. In turn, the bodies are transcribed by the city which they inhabit: they carry with them the traces of places as an embodied memory, even when they are no longer there (Pereira 2009). The body interacts with urban conditions and, in doing so, incorporates them by recording a kind of cartography: a "bodygraphy" (Britto & Jacques 2008). Thus, if space remains inscribed in the bodies to the extent that space itself becomes a body in some way, then the designer's study of urban bodygraphies can provide information and data about the city.

Considering all this, the alternative to the impoverishment of sensibility in urban practice passes through the re-appropriation of bodily experience. The use of creative and mobile methods for urban investigation, combining approaches from the performing arts as well as sociology, anthropology, ethnography, can expand the traditional tools of spatial analysis and design to 're-sensitise' the urban experience.

The first way of experiencing the city through bodily movement is walking. Practicing the city by walking generates a specific spatial learning, which is a subjective, ludic and empathic knowledge. De Certeau calls it 'blind' because it is a non-conscious, embedded knowledge, linked to touch - to action and movement - rather than to visual images or urban representations. Since this 'blindness' is valuable for learning about the city, walking methods can be used as a knowledge tool and research method. Walking, in the form of drifting, wandering or «transurbance» (Careri 2006) can reveal information about the territory that is useful for redesigning it, but not readable from the surface of a map. Furthermore, walking has a close relationship with artistic practices and can be understood as an aesthetic, environmental and itinerant performance (Paba 1998; Solnit 2001; Careri 2006).

From this perspective, the experience of the walker can be associated with that of the dancer (Jacobs 1961; Jacques 2001; Chêne 2006) and understood as a counterpoint to dance, especially when the urban topography determines routes of ascents, descents, detours, pauses and accelerations (Coquelin 2022). Indeed, every dance and in general every urban performance works with the manipulation of space of which dancing bodies are generative (McCormack 2008). By performing, the body expresses a certain way of displacement in the urban fabric that depends on the specific conditions and relations with the environment (Britto & Jacques 2008).

Therefore, performing arts practices can be a tool to explore spaces through moving and augmented bodies to closer understand space conditions and relationships. At the same time, these practices can also be a tool for modifying the space conditions, establishing new relationships and producing new interactions through choreographing or designing spaces. That was what happened in 2022 with the project 'Sulla Soglia', a co-design project of the Mare Memoria Viva Urban Ecomuseum in Palermo, Italy. Mobile methods, in the form of walking and performance, were applied to explore, design and enhance the underused spaces around the museum, situated in the southern outskirts of the city. Through walking crossings, understood as transurbances and

drifts, conducted to analyse the territory from an urban and social point of view, design actions were conceived referring to the specificities of the neighborhood community and in order to invite it to use these spaces, distinguished between spaces for rest, meeting, play and movement. The design ideas were delivered in the form of a video-performance, rather than technical drawings[2].

As it amplifies sensory learning of spaces and simultaneously reveals their affordances (Edensor & Bowdler 2015), performing arts practices can help urban design to choreograph kinaesthetic experiences. In this respect, a significant example is offered by the enlightening experience of the landscape designer Lawrence Halprin. From the careful and repeated observation of his wife Anna's dance movements, Lawrence has 'choreographed' performative experiences with his designs of spaces, seeking to make them spaces for movement and to strengthen the awareness of the body in space (Wasserman 2012).

In this light, the practices of walking and performance become attempts to decode bodygraphies, since they both extend the sensitive repertoire and put an emphasis on the subjective and affective component. A deeper learning of urban complexity arises from these common aspects, based on a double level of perception: attention of the body to the environment and, simultaneously, attention to the body in the environment. This immersive bodily experience uncovers hidden potentials and possibilities, re-writes spatial relationships, re-signifies space and produces a new sense of place.

Thus, walking and performance become acts of micro-resistance to the spectacularising and anaesthetising urban logics: they are deliberate choices of deceleration and recontextualisation with the rhythms of the city, which enrich the perceptive experience and resocialise it (Jacques 2012; Coquelin 2022). The sensory-motor experience of the city inscribes itself in those who practice it through movement, and thus survives inscribed in their bodies. Founded on proprioceptive and exteroceptive attention, performing arts practices thus provide a possible key for reading and consciously rewriting the 'text' that is the city (de Certeau 1980; Ferraro 1998).

Figure 1. *Sulla Soglia*, Ecomuseo Mare Memoria Viva, 2022 (Palermo)
Author and credits: Mare Memoria Viva

4. Augmenting bodily experience through digital technology

This dynamic experience of the city so far described is written by a variety of movements, traces, memory, empathy towards the everyday space of life, all entwined in a non-visible stratum: an informative layer which pervades and writes the palimpsest of the urban space. the progressive embedding of mobile digital tools in bodily experience of space can be used as a tool to read and operate on this text.

Part of the responsibility to observe and interact in urban environments is today inevitably shared with information technologies. Cloud platforms, mobile apps, the Internet of Things make a machinic specie of their own, coevolving with biological species with different degrees of hybridisation (Bratton 2016). The topic itself is not new: since the rise of robotic science, the integration between human body and technology has always been fertile field of experimentation, nourished also by literary

and cinematographic imaginaries. However, what is new is the rapid growth of the phenomenon in the last two decades, which is making our bodies, variously augmented with technology, new actors in the urban space.
Digital mobile devices accompany us in our everyday lives, following every movement we make, becoming extensions, technological prosthetics which make our body a hybrid device (Case 2010). The possibility of transitioning from virtual habitats to physical ones – both realms which allow bodies to move, communicate and interact – makes the body exist beyond its finite physical boundaries.
At a first glance, inhabiting a world of topologic and immaterial relations raises the topic of the disappearance of the body (Foucault 2008; Bianchetti 2020), apparently supporting the idea of anesthetization of the urban experience and contributing to a deterritorialisation that separates flows from places (Deleuze & Guattari 2017, Turri 2001, Appadurai 2012). On closer observation, however, this body is a living connector between two realms, embodying a state of perpetual transition between the material and intangible layers of space.

This implies a reflection on the possible different types of corporeality that can be observed and fielded in the work of the designer. The hybridisation with devices making us everyday cyborgs (Case 2010; Ratti & Claudel 2017) can be assumed as an interpretative tool of public urban space.
The cyborg body is firstly a *medium of observation* with both a human and non-human gaze, augmented by a technological filter that alters the perception and the way of experiencing space, with implications for its uses and for its processes of signification. It is inherently endowed with a transcalar view, in which the planetary and the individual scale meet: from above, a gaze that allows the tracing of human movement in space; at eye-level, an augmented perception vehicle for a customisable, simultaneous, synchronous experience of different space-time dimensions. The two views operate in a complementary way, materializing a paradox of lived space, an everyday condition in which experience transcends the body allowing it 'to map its position in an external world' (Jameson 1989). From above, the collected data allow us to identify the interactions triggered, from below we can read the hybrid uses, “socio-technical acts” that take place in the public open space and contribute to the co-creation of the city (Del Signore & Reiter 2018).
The cyborg body is a *medium of transmission*, a moving node of a planetary informative network that we engage with through connectors of various nature and in different physical-spatial bodily conditions. As ‘hyperconnected citizens’ (Müller & Vivaldi 2010) we carry embodied technology and situated knowledge (Haraway 1991) and in doing so, we co-create a thinking space (Gandy 2005). Our daily interactions on the virtual level feed a collective spatial intelligence - which not only is a collection of single, personal inputs and interactions, but also a network of ‘moving nodes’ in the form of virtual communities, able to collect the needs, share imaginations, create a sense of place, share practices.
In relation to this last concept, the cyborg body can become *medium of single or collective action* in the space of the city, able to actively warp experienciality or ignite interactions with other devices and other cyborg bodies which populate urban landscapes. In its cyborg space, the body operates through objects and codes specific for the communication between devices, which the human alone cannot use (i.e. QR codes, mapping points etc). At the same time it maintains its very corporal sensorialities, generating a hybrid, digital synesthesia while performing in space.
From a design perspective, the sensoriality augmented by digital visualisation and

interaction technologies can generate forms and meanings that stimulate imagination, for example through immersive representations where "senses can be extended, time can be re-mapped and empathy can be transposed to the design" (Seibert 2022).

This mobile technological filter can open different levels of mediation between the body and its environment, a spectrum of interactions with different degrees of agency, from the more intangible (i.e. selecting options on virtual reconstructions) to the more physical (i.e. changing the features of space for different uses, modifying climatic conditions etc).
The use of these tools helps in better understanding the complexity of public open space and can contribute to the communication of the project, engaging the citizens in the transformation processes. For example in the project 'ID-Exe', developed for Milan Design Week 2021 by the start-up company DOS - Design Open Space, so-called 'Activator Pixels' were spread around popular locations of Milan (squares, boulevards, pedestrian bridges, stations etc). The pixels - consisting of big adhesive QR codes placed on the paving of public spaces - would connect users to original Instagram filters designed to visualize works of digital art and urban furniture on display at the Milan Design Week, opening the possibility of placing the virtual replicas in specific points in the squares. Collected data were used to understand people flows during and after the event and preferences on the type and location of the proposed urban furniture in a specific urban environment (Figure 2). Also, introducing the lens of the cyborg body for urban design does not necessarily require the creation of new software; instead very common and already existing tools - like Instagram or platform apps - can be used to understand the new, *filtered* relationships that we are building with space everyday through our portable devices.

This interpretation can help to reaffirm the strong connection to the physical space of the city, that's the primary generator of virtual-physical interactions, hence the opposite of dematerialization. Through the powerful and widespread technological tools we become capable not only to write the city, but also to visualize and operate in the text that the city is.

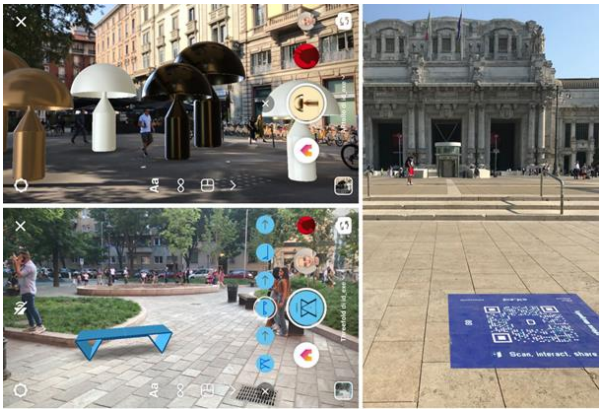

Figure 2. *ID Exe*, Milan Design Week 2021 (Milan). Author: DOS - Design Open Space. Credits: Eleonora Giannini.

5. Understanding the project as a choreography

Both the approaches described are forms of immersive interaction that question the common urban experience and expand it. They imply a wider range of senses by proposing a multi-sensual engagement with space, objects and other bodies. They share a common ground which is the attention to the body in motion as the focus of the urban experience, performing in multidimensional ways.
"Only after programming the movement and graphically expressing it, should the environment – an envelope within which movement takes place – be designed. The environment exists for the purpose of movement" (Halprin 1972, pp. 208-209). As theorized by Halprin, the design of public spaces should be performative and stimulate possibilities for bodies to experience spaces kinaesthetically. Indeed, this kind of experience produces an embodied knowledge

inscribing onto the bodies the memory of places, where the latter can be revealed through the study of urban bodygraphies or visualized through a technological lens.
Augmented bodies' experience of the city challenges their common uses, reveals their unexpressed potential through imagination and leads to the re-signification of places.
The project of public space should keep together both the vision from above and the view from below (Geddes 1904), enriched by the heterogeneous bodily dimensions, temporalities and materialities for a profound understanding of spatial dynamics. In order to achieve this, the project needs to be transmedial, using diverse tools for spatial analysis, representation and communication. Respectively, among the others: mobile methods in conjunction with video, photography and art-based forms of documentation, walking methods in conjunction with audio transcription, GPS and video cameras for enabling the researcher to collect real-time, multi-sensory information. Among the methods of representation and communication of the project, some examples can be body-mapping storytellings, performances and dances on one hand, and on the other hand virtual models, immersive reconstructions and location-based platforms (such as polls or urban gaming).
At a closer look, the design operation is not conceptually distant from the performative-artistic operations. In order to work with the permanent conditions of transition that is intrinsic to the body, we can think of the project as a *choreography* (Britto & Jacques 2008, pp. 79-80) and of designers as choreographers with a kinetic approach to movement through the space (Corner 1999; Wasserman 2012).
Firstly, we suggest this analogy because choreography is "the art of composing dances for the stage"[3], in this case the art of designing (e)motions for the stage of the city, dynamic field of human everyday choreographies. Secondly, because a choreography keeps together heterogeneous, mobile and transitory elements in a dynamic framework, tracing their relations and addressing the conditions of their future co-evolution. And lastly, because choreography, like design, consists also in a graphic notation, being "the technique of representing dance movements through a notational scheme".
"At the scale of the human [and more-than-human] body there is a kind of choreography of movements in various kinds of assemblages and constellations" (Sheller 2018). Understanding the project as the choreography made by and for augmented bodies and experimentation in the application of these methods might contribute to future development of research for a design of public space that is open, dynamic and adaptive.

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