

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE CITY: THE EMBODIED SPACE OF PEDAGOGY AND EDUCATION

DALL'AULA ALLA CITTÀ: LO SPAZIO INCORPORATO DELLA PEDAGOGIA E DELLA DIDATTICA

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ABSTRACT

Spaces, places and bodies in education and school are themes characterised by light and shade. This study aims to follow, as if on a journey, the path through the different places of educating, stimulating new reflections and drawing on contributions from neuroscience and the performing arts. Counter-spaces represent a corporeal elsewhere, a liminal and imaginative space to be inhabited, to open up new perspectives at the boundaries of different disciplines.

With respect to the space of the classroom, a new approach is proposed as hetero-topia, a stage for educational and didactic action, according to the metaphor of teaching as theatre. Public space can also become educational space, and neuroscience and performing arts can contribute to enrich the pedagogical context. Public space is also an incorporated space to settle and inhabit, where relationships are formed, mistakes are made, and where learning while having fun.

Gli spazi, i luoghi e la corporeità in ambito educativo e scolastico sono temi caratterizzati da luci e ombre. Il presente studio vuole percorrere, come in un cammino, il sentiero che attraversa i diversi luoghi dell'educare, stimolando nuove riflessioni e attingendo dai contributi delle neuroscienze e delle arti performative. I contro-spazi rappresentano un altrove corporeo, uno spazio liminale e immaginativo da abitare, per aprire nuove prospettive ai confini delle discipline.

Si propone un nuovo approccio allo spazio dell'aula scolastica come etero-topia, palcoscenico dell'azione educativa e didattica, secondo la metafora dell'insegnamento come teatro. Anche lo spazio pubblico può divenire spazio educativo. Neuroscienze e arti performative possono contribuire ad arricchire il discorso pedagogico. Lo spazio pubblico è inoltre spazio incorporato, in cui accasarsi e abitare, in cui stringere relazioni, sbagliare, imparare divertendosi.

KEYWORDS

Counter-spaces, places, embodied simulation, affordance, public space

Controspazi, luoghi, simulazione incarnata, affordance, spazio pubblico

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Introduction

“We do not live in a white and neutral space; we do not live, die, or love in the rectangle of a sheet of paper. We live, die, love in a squared, cropped, variegated space, with bright and dark areas, drops, steps, depressions and bumps, with both hard and brittle, penetrable, porous parts. [...] Now, among all these places that differentiate from one another, there are a few that are somehow *absolutely* different; places that are in contrast with all the others and are meant to erase, compensate, neutralise or purify the latter. These are somehow *counter-spaces*, localised utopias. The remote corner of the garden, the attic or, better yet, the Indian tent set up in the center of the attic, and finally - on Thursday afternoon - the big parents’ bed. It is in that bed that one discovers the ocean, because among its blankets one can swim; but that bed is also the sky, because on its springs one can jump; it is the forest because one can hide; it is the night, because among its sheets one becomes a ghost” (Foucault, 2006).

When we think of places of education, care and teaching we certainly see lights and shadows, unexplored openings and bright plains within which to venture. Not only classrooms, schools, gyms, backyards and parks, but also cities, streets, gardens, urban spaces, public parks, or windows, theatres, hiding places, shelters, elevated observatories; corners, paths, valleys and hills can become effective, accessible and inviting learning environments. Educational places accommodate the body and relationships, emotions and personal history; they are spaces connected to others, places open to other places, where real places communicate with each other.

This study aims to walk, as in a journey, the path through the different places of education, stimulating new reflections, openings, drawing on the contributions of neuroscience and the performing arts, feeding into the pedagogical discourse with new perspectives and insights at the spaces where it is possible to develop teaching and learning processes.

What are the characteristics of places capable of generating educational intentionality? How can we transform school and non-school spaces into intentionally educational places?

The other-places, the *counter-spaces* that Foucault describes, are meant to be heterotopias (the absolutely other spaces) that form an integral part with the pedagogical and educational discourse. There is an elsewhere, a liminal and imaginative space that we would like to try and reach, to go beyond the known and open other, unusual paths, at the boundaries of disciplines and beyond epistemological limits, in the search for a new way of exploring the educational environment, discovering other spaces that can enrich educational reflection and generate new perspectives. These are disquieting spaces because they counter commonplaces, deconstruct a way of seeing environments and spaces; however, they are contexts that open new routes by sailing seas, like ships that are reservoirs of imagination and feed dreams, push the adventure of the real further, open the breath to the infinity of the sea.

The reflection on the spaces of education is structured from three perspectives; firstly, we would like to test a new approach to the classroom as a hetero-topia. The classroom can become a stage for education, according to the metaphor of teaching as theatre. Secondly, our aim is to reflect on the relationship between spaces and bodies, while studying the space of performing arts and the notion of affordance, leading to a reflection on educational space as an embodied space to settle and inhabit, in the relationship that is created with the other.

1. The classroom: from the “out-of-place” space to the hetero-topia of the stage

*“I wish there were stable places,
immovable, intangible, never touched and almost untouchable, unchanging,
rooted;
places that would be sources, points of reference and departure”.*

Georges Perec

While everything is about to change, in the Italian school, especially from primary school onwards, the current scenario is a classroom of *half-busts* (Gamelli, 2001; 125), organised in rigid rows of desks and chairs oriented toward the teacher’s desk. The classroom structured in this way has the power to separate (the body from the mind, the teacher from the students), to limit (the use of different languages), to elevate speech and the verbal to the centre of communication, leaving the bodily, the

motor and the relational aspects in the background. We know well that space and body go hand in hand in learning and teaching (Gamelli, 2001; Borgogni, 2020; Rivoltella, 2012), and one has to wonder whether the relationship with corporeality in school is in any way related to that with spaces.

If the body is not needed in school (Figure 1), space can be rigid, stable and thus remain unchanged over the years. School today needs to build loose spaces (Borgogni, 2020), permeable, accessible and inviting (Borgogni, 2020; Borgogni & Dorato in Ceruti & Mannese, 2020), purposefully educational, capable of transforming into places of effective learning. Schools need to accommodate “children in their entirety” and not just “children's minds” (Alfieri, 1974). Spaces, even public (Borgogni, 2020), can be characterised by their own educational and didactic purpose and this can stimulate meaningful learning as it is conveyed by the body in movement.

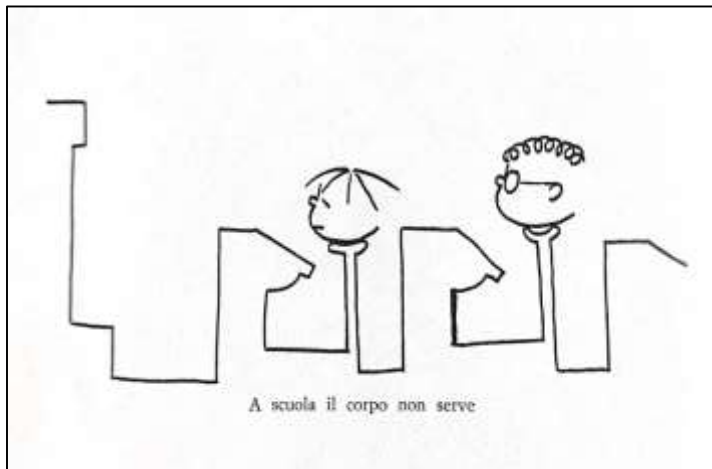


Figure 1: In school, body is not needed

Source: Francesco Tonucci in AA. VV. (1974), *A scuola con il corpo*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia

If stepping up the desk is like being on stage (Gamelli, 2001), it is up to the teacher, the pedagogue, to choose which space-theatre to share with pupils (spectators). They

have the delicate task of venturing into the discovery of what other spaces, heterotopias to explore and make their own in educational and teaching choices. The classroom itself can become “the stage of narrative action, with its spaces and times, lights and shadows, the backstage, the proscenium, the audience; the classroom as an interweaving of languages, an opportunity to address the fragmentation and division of knowledge” (Gamelli, 2001).

Today, the Italian school finds itself “surprised” (“*spiazzata*, out-of-place”) by the new needs created by the pandemic (Borgogni & Dorato, 2020). The body denied, forgotten, constrained in classrooms and on desks finds new dimensions, stands up, moves “indomitable” and forces teaching staff to new semantics and systems, forces to rethink didactics and methods, that is, the meaning of educational action.

If teaching is a performative activity because it is theatrical insofar as it is voice, gesture, and body in a context (Zappettini & Borgogni, 2022), it is the teacher who is called upon to rethink the ways in which not only the setting is organised, but also the teaching, the pedagogical relationship, reshaping education completely (Vullo & Lucangeli, 2021).

The classroom as a stage, not only because “teaching is theatre (and theatre is teaching)” (Rivoltella, 2021), but also because theatre stage fiction allows for acting, playing, telling stories, actions, meanings that refer to *absolutely* other spaces, belonging to the world of fantasy and imagination. They constitute living, concrete and real experience for actors and spectators; what happens in the classroom setting refers back to other worlds, creatively generating meanings, learning, discoveries. The classroom thus intended can become the secret garden where to build stories, the window that opens onto new discoveries or the atelier in which clay is worked to bring projects and new learning to life.

The classroom as a stage leads us to draw on performing arts and theatre cultures certain specific aspects that will be clarified below.

2. Where there is space there is body: affordance and potential space

*“When I dynamically live again the path that went up the hill,
I am most certain that the path itself had muscles and counter muscles”.*

G. Bachelard

We get out of the classroom space and relaunch educational and didactic action from the school space to the outside, in the cities, streets, parks and squares. For it is in public space that the most substantial part of people's experience of movement takes place (Borgogni, 2020). Public space has an educational purpose (Borgogni, 2020; Borgogni & Dorato, 2020; Borgogni & Farinella, 2017) and yet, despite the richness, history and beauty of our territory, Italian children and teenagers are less independent in mobility than their European peers, receiving the same independence from their parents three years later than a German or Finnish child (Shaw et al., 2015 in Borgogni, 2020).

Children love to play in public spaces, and allowing them to explore, we quickly observe that “where there is space, there is body” (Borgogni, Farinella, 2017); that is, as soon as the space allows it, bodily practices take over, spread out, and transform into bodily meanings and discourses.

In a qualitative survey conducted in 1955 and published by Alvin Lukashok and Kevin Lynch (1956), on the childhood memories of forty young adults, in order to understand the relationship between urban context and emotional response, it was observed that the areas expressly designed and dedicated to play (play areas or playground) were the least liked and least used by the sample interviewed. Children's preferences, or rather, the memories and emotions that childhood places had left behind, were mainly directed toward messy, hybrid, potentially risky, conflictual spaces and, indeed for this reason, interesting and worth to be experienced (Borgogni & Dorato, 2020).

Spaces therefore carry an attractiveness and accessibility that influence the emotional response of those coming into contact with them, and are able to transform a common *space*, represented by the infrastructure and the objects in it, into a *place*, that is, a space where there is life (Eichberg, 2009), rich in meaning, belonging, memories, expectations, a space used (De Certeau, 1980), lived (Borgogni, 2020).

How many pedagogically qualified experiences may be able to transform common spaces into educational places?

Spaces and places allow interaction with objects, natural or artificial. This passage allows us to explore the notion of *affordance* introduced by James J. Gibson (Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia, 2006), which refers to the concrete possibilities that the object offers to the body that perceives it.

We experience the world based on how others interact with it and thus based on the intentions and action potentials of those we encounter. The way we see the world on

the basis of our perception of motion depends not only on how we can interact with it, but also on how others can.

As neuroscience gives evidence, the observation of the possibility of performing an action causes a motor activation in the observer that maps the perceived space as consisting of different intersubjectivities.

In theatre and performance, the actor's work is characterised by a real *deflagration of affordances* (Sofia, 2013) to create new ones. In theatre, the everyday world explodes into different affordances, and surprises spectators, provokes, frightens, attracts and fascinates them, precisely because it is unexpected (Zappettini & Borgogni, 2021). The actor works by creating affordances and leaving the spectator in a fluctuation of expected and unexpected co-constructions. Barba (2009) defines this *potential space* below:

“for me, the effectiveness of space on a stage was in its ability to arouse in the spectator a double perception: it was a recognizable space and, at the same time, a *potential space*, ready to strip out its identity in order to be transformed by the energy of performance. It was an emptied space, not a space without anything in it, unadorned and dumb. It admitted to being what it was, and determined to deny itself”.

Based on the research mentioned above, the authors observed that children's games are most satisfying when they are allowed the greatest opportunity to modify the environment according to their needs: imagine, create, hide (Lukashok & Lynch, 1956; 145 in Borgogni & Dorato, 2020). We observe how pedagogical work can qualify as *subtractive and potential work*, where the teacher, who becomes an educational director, accompanies the learner in the exploration of space by emptying it or arranging objects in order to allow new affordances, where the body can inhabit spaces again in a creative way.

Borgogni (2020), who echoes Franck and Stevens (2007), suggests the choice of loose, more open and socially inclusive spaces, as they accommodate different activities not related to their initial use and function. Infrastructure, accessibility and the possibility of choice are elements that allow space to become loose; however, in education, the teacher's choice to recognise the possibilities of action turns out to be fundamental, preferring loose environments over tighter, more rigid ones, when they allow only specific and planned uses (Borgogni, Farinella, 2017).

The construction of space occurs through action and movement. The notion of affordance emphasises how our experience of space is based on our relationship with infrastructures and objects and the observation of others' behaviour.

In theatre, the spectator observes the actor's actions and through *embodied simulation* (Gallese, 2007; Gallese & Guerra, 2015) participates and enters into the process of spatial relations mediated by the actor's actions. Theatre actions swing between fiction and reality, contradictions and paradoxes, proximity and distance, creation and destruction.



Figure 3: Street artist offers to shelter two little girls.

Sant'Antioco 2022. Source: Zappettini

The concept of affordance appears closely related to that of *ambiguity*, which has been investigated by neuroscientist Samir Zeki (2003). The spectator is pushed by the actor toward a continuous *instability*, a continuous experiential unbalance in which ambiguity is constituted as a discrepancy, a gap, between what the spectator expects, anticipates, and what the actor can actually do.

An ambiguity that opens the relationship to multiple possibilities, and this feature is among the most important in theatre (Zappettini & Borgogni, 2020). A harmonic resonance is then created between the actor's actions and the audience's reactions, a *dance of intentions*, which become dialogue in the reciprocity between the parties.

If we replace the role of the spectator with that of the student, and the role of the actor with that of the teacher we understand how actions and movements in relation to space are crucial in the knowledge of the world. In social behaviour it is very useful to be able to predict what others are going to do.

The world-building experience is based on the fact that I acknowledge the other as someone who interacts with my world through the same motor routines, that is, through a *vocabulary of motor acts* highly congruent with my own. In the theatre, the actor, who must be able to guide joint attention, does not use the same motor routines as the spectator, but organises them differently and works precisely to find and construct new routines. But if one also perceives the world based on how the other interacts with it, if the actor's techniques of interaction with the world are non-daily, my construction of the world will also be non-daily (Sofia, 2013).

The co-constituted world is modified as actions change. The way we perceive and act in the world changes depending on how others mutually perceive and act in the same shared world. One's way of being in the world depends on others and their relationship to the world.

The close correlation between bodies, which contribute to making space alive, makes us understand how space in theatre is an element capable of transforming the experience of the people who inhabit it, their actions, their life on stage and in the audience. Such reflections help us widen our thoughts on the purpose of educational space, which in its dramaturgical becoming can take on several meanings.

The relationship that the performing arts establish with space and the spatial relationships involved between subjects and objects in the stage environment allow us to look at the educational space as a metaphor for the theatre. The teacher-actor is also called upon to disorient the learner-spectator, arousing curiosity, using ambiguity and affordance in order to increase motivation, enhancing their communication by leveraging space and the relationship with objects.

Secondly, the teacher-actor is called upon to deconstruct and reorient the educational space in a direction of *potential space*, that is, stripping it out of those elements that deaden actions and channel them in a single direction, working instead on the possibility of exploring loose spaces by reducing risks and expanding the possibilities for manipulation and action.

3. Inhabiting the spaces of relationship: for a pedagogy of hospitality

*“Inhabiting is not knowing, it is feeling at home,
hosted by a space that does not ignore us,
among things that tell our lived experience,
among faces that we do not need to recognize”.*

Umberto Galimberti

In the sensory-motor acts, actually performed or potentially evoked, those activities of orientation and grasping take shape, with the chains of motor intervention contributing to configure the world as a viable environment, studded with pathways, obstacles; in short, to create an inhabitable world. The creation of such a world depends not only on grasping an object, but on our own ability to move and orient ourselves in the space around us, as well as understanding the actions and intentions of others.

Children use space by incorporating it, consciously or unconsciously; they modify, construct and play with it by tracing paths even where there are none, using furniture in reverse, drawing space until they informally own it (Borgogni & Farinella, 2017; Borgogni, 2020). Even an inappropriately occupied space can become inhabitable and generate new meanings by transforming a space into a place.



Figure 2: The monument in St. Peter's Square in Assisi (2022),
turned into a game for kids. Source: Zappettini

According to Archetti (2002), “the way humans are on earth is by inhabiting it. To be human means to be mortal on earth and that is to inhabit it. Humans are insofar as they inhabit, which means to stay and hold, to guard and grow fields, to be close [...] to inhabit is to care, and care permeates inhabiting in every aspect”. Are the places of care and education, those of pedagogy and teaching, places where to learn to dwell and be home for the others?

A pedagogy of hospitality, also intended as *maternage* (Canevaro & Gasparetto, 1994 in Borgogni, 2020), could accompany schools and cities to become inhabitable homes for one another, in the hospitality that allows us to be at home in the world we live, with other people. Public space can become an environment that also admits mistakes, a city in which it is also possible to make mistakes, where the probability of risk decreases and the possibility of exploration, of spontaneous movement, increases.

There is also a type of space, the immaterial one, given by the educational relationship, which “is first and foremost essentially relationship: neither of the two parties involved, teacher and pupil, can be considered separately from the other, but rather constantly in relation to each other” (Iori, 2016).

This type of space refers back to one of the counter-spaces mentioned by Foucault, the one which generates other meanings, but needs equal care and education. Then there are classroom, school and public spaces; they can become inhabitable spaces, when people living in them establish a relationship with them, when they walk or stroll through them, interact with objects and people in participatory and active ways.

The physical activity that can be performed in public spaces can be *selfish* (for one's own pleasure and well-being) or *altruistic* (for pleasure, but also for public utility and environmental sustainability) (Borgogni & Farinella, 2017). To inhabit public spaces means choosing to walk to school, stimulating services that allow children to engage in altruistic motor activities in cities (e.g., *pedibus*), and choosing participatory design of public spaces (Borgogni, 2020).

Public spaces are an in-between, something that unites and divides at the same time, allowing to experience the world together (Arendt, 2017). It is the counter-space that becomes home for new views, that allows the body to get closer to the other in the helping relationship (Borgogni, 2020).

Humans inhabit, embrace spaces and stay in them; this way, they can walk through them. The human relationship with places, and through places with spaces, resides in dwelling. The relationship of man and space is nothing but dwelling thought in its essence.

Places open access on earth and, therefore, in the world. Places are dwellings and allow humanity to stay in them.

Dwelling is, therefore, the fundamental trait of man's being, “the making of space happens and prepares the possibility for man to belong to a place, which dwells both for things and for man's staying” (Gallerani, 2011).

To remain, to pause, to stop in spaces, in relationships and encounters to recognise and settle down, to inhabit. In Han's words (2021), today, “the permanent compulsion to produce leads to *disaccommodation* (Enthausung), which makes life more contingent, ephemeral and inconstant, while dwelling requires duration”. Rituals, such as that of theatre, take place in public spaces. Rites constitute spaces of dwelling, of making home; according to the Korean philosopher, they protect us from the depths of being.

Conclusions

Space speaks (Ceruti & Mannese, 2020), it is a system of signs and consciousness that reveals meanings, values, beliefs, uses. Thus, entering an empty classroom, bodies are present, in the postures that inhabit it, in actions, in movement, in relationships. “Space speaks of itself and the other from itself, it produces actions, information and relationships or compromises them, even apart from any educational purpose” (Ceruti & Mannese, 2020).

Addressing the spatial dimension in education and didactics today means placing the bodily dimension at the centre, since the body is the main actor, “the zero point of the world, where ways and spaces intersect, the body has no place, but it is from it that all possible, real, utopian places are born and radiate” (Foucault, 2006). Bodies and places constitute two pedagogical dimensions on which intentional educational action is based and cannot be separated.

The performing arts can help pedagogues, teachers, and educators to rethink spaces, all of them, from the classroom to the square, without disconnecting them from bodies, movement, and relationships. If schools could adopt the spatial value of theatre cultures (Cruciani, 2003), perhaps bodies, voices, faces could “breathe” again, giving the possibility of new relationships, breaking down walls, emptying spaces.

As Perissinotto writes (2004), Theatre Animation had attempted a change:

“Once fixed seating and the division of spaces are eliminated, entirely new relationships become possible; bodily contact between actors and spectators can occur; the level of voices and the intensity of acting can vary; the feeling of participating in a common experience can happen; and, most importantly, each scene can create its own space, either contracting into a limited area or expanding to fill in the entire available space. The action, in this case, “breathes”, and the audience becomes one of the most important stage elements”.

The school, too, could create its own space by expanding, in order to shorten distances and create an experience of “communion”, in which to truly inhabit the educational space.

Times and places that mark homecoming in relationships can lay the foundation for a pedagogy of hospitality, which in theatre finds tools that can foster mutual welcome.

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