How can the architectural practice conciliate spontaneous practices with formal planning in Western countries, fostering the appropriation of public space?
# Table of contents

1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 5  
   1.1 Premise ........................................................................................................ 5  
   1.2 Societies of control ....................................................................................... 7  

2 A relational approach to urban analysis .................................................................. 14  
   2.1 “The invention of property” ........................................................................ 14  
   2.2 Downtown San Diego case study ............................................................. 18  
   2.3 The grid ..................................................................................................... 29  
   2.4 A relational approach to urban analysis .................................................. 31  
   2.5 From public space to common space ....................................................... 33  

3 A relational approach to design ........................................................................... 40  
   3.1 Gibson’s theory of affordances ................................................................. 40  
   3.2 Later contributions to the theory of affordances ..................................... 44  
   3.2.1 A new ontology for theories of direct perception ............................... 44  
   3.2.2 Agency and invitation ........................................................................ 49  
   3.3 Contribution from urban studies .............................................................. 51  
   3.3 Contribution from architecture ............................................................... 58  

4 Conclusions and final remarks ............................................................................ 65  

5 References ....................................................................................................... 70
Figure 1. La Villeneuve, in Grenoble (France), realised between the 1970 and the 1983, is one of the many example of European, peripheral housing complexes, built drawing upon the modernist paradigm.
1.1 Premise

The sheer structuring of modernist cities, derived from ideals of normalisation and compartmentalisation of every aspect of life, led to the realisation of aesthetically innovative architecture that lacked, however, any relationship with the human scale. From the second half of the XX century, new developments were conceived as “machines for living”, isolated from the rest of the city and scarcely adaptable to the need of their dweller. The high degree of formalisation contributed greatly to the decay of these areas, which often ended up becoming the theatre of dramatic social unrest.

The last decades of the past century have seen an increasing awareness of the sociological societal implication of architectural design – often neglected by the theorists of the Modern movement, which planned their city bearing in mind an ideal concept of average man that could not find a counterpart in real life. Despite the broadening up of the perspective with the inclusion of other disciplinary fields in the recent years, the reading of urban space still shows a high level of spatial formalisation, which often prevents a free appropriation of space by the inhabitants.

The exercise of control – deployed through the means of planning– often comes at the expenses of the development of spontaneous practices. Such issue came inevitably into being with the “institutionalisation” of an architectural discipline towards the end of the Middle Ages. Before that time, buildings were artefacts produced by the common efforts of a community – surely hierarchically organised, but with no trace of Promethean figures such as architects, which instead took a leading role during the Renaissance.¹

This paper aims to deal with the possibilities of spatial appropriation within contemporary Western cities. The primary assumption of the research is the impossibility of studying urban space only from the narrow perspective of the architectural discipline. That is why contributions from different fields of studies have been sought and brought together, in the attempt of proposing a comprehensive understanding of multifaceted issues. In particular, the object of study is public space, an often-abused concept of which a thorough analysis will be ventured in the second chapter of the paper. The third chapter will move, from

the analytical premises laid down in the previous paragraph, towards the definition of a methodology that would ideally allow conciliating the planned and the unplanned.

Before moving to the analysis of the concept of public space, it will be useful to pause briefly for an overview of contemporary societal conditions across Western countries, with the aim of identifying to which extent the theme of control has contributed to limit the margin of freedom in the range of behavioural possibilities within urban space.
1.2 Societies of control

Across the years, various thinkers have tried to explain the forces underlying the development of urban space. The traditional critical paradigm strongly influenced by Marxist historic materialism, focuses on the capital–labour dialectical relationship and tends to explain societal configuration in terms of economic dynamics.

British geographer David Harvey clearly connects globalising dynamics with significant economical changes happening in Western countries over the last couple of decades. In particular, Harvey claims that the adoption of new forms of economic policies were inspired by the ideology of neoliberalism, which he defines as the “theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”\(^2\) However, the actual enforcement of this economic doctrine was rather distant from the original intentions of those who, according to Harvey, first formulated it in 1947.\(^3\) In fact, despite its theoretical rejection of state intervention in the economic field, states themselves have been significantly involved in the implementation of neoliberal policies of deregulation and privatisation across Western countries.

In this respect, American professor Neil Brenner’s thought is comparable. Brenner proposes the concept of *actually existing neoliberalism*, stating that “neoliberal doctrine represents states and markets as if they were diametrically opposed principle of social organisations, rather than recognising the politically constructed character of all economic relations.”\(^4\) However, while Harvey seems to emphasise the implementation of neoliberal policies as a deliberate strategy carried out by the dominant class to preserve its hegemony, Brenner’s analysis appears more balanced. In fact, in Brenner’s thought the process of transition from Keynesian to neoliberal economy can be seen an attempt to respond to 1970’s crisis of stagflation - developing differently at each geo-political level and according to the interaction with the existing institutions. Brenner claims that the dynamic in question is an “open-ended, trail-and-error process of institutional searching rather

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3 Ibid.
than the basis for a post-Fordist mode of social regulation”. Nonetheless, similarly to Harvey’s interpretation, the gradual shift is considered responsible of deepened uneven spatial development and destruction of the city space.

An interest concept delineated by Brenner is that of *creative destruction*, oxymoric expression that points out the existence of two dialectically interlinked phases – albeit chronologically coexistent – in the transition from the Keynesian to the neoliberal economic configuration. On the one hand the moment of destruction has mainly entailed a process of withdrawal of states from supporting national industries, the dissolution of Bretton Woods agreement, the attack on trade unions, the dissolution of welfare services and the devolution of powers to other entities, to the detriment of the national state authority. On the other hand, the creative phase has consisted of generalised privatisation and deregulations, but in particular it implied the research of new form of *flexible* labour force, as well as the “extension of global commodities markets through trade liberalisation policies” and “new forms of state policy to promote capital mobility within supranational trade blocs”.

Brenner reflects as well on the concurrent dynamics in action within urban space. He significantly claims that cities were not merely influenced by the new economic paradigms, but urban space itself has become “increasingly central to the reproduction, and continual reconstitution of neoliberalism itself during the last two decades”. In particular, he acknowledges the augmented responsibility of municipalities in relation to the past, the predominance of public-private partnerships and the privatisation of municipal services and the multiplication of speculative investments.

The diffusion of the above-mentioned phenomena can be read both in the transformation of the urban environment itself and in the deployment of specific regulations. In Brenner’s view, neoliberal policies have implied the establishment of “new privatised spaces of elite/corporate consumption” together with the spreading of gentrification phenomena. These transformations have been accompanied by relevant changes in social life, as the thriving

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6 Ibid., 18-19.
7 Ibid., 18-19.
8 Ibid., 28.
of gentrification has promoted the “intensification of socio-spatial polarisation”, and the establishment of enclavistic, “‘purified’ spaces of social reproduction”), such as gated communities, creates a deep rupture in the space of the city. In this context, Brenner argues that “new discriminatory forms of surveillance and social control” have been introduced, greatly reducing the margin of possibility for the development of a spontaneous social life. The theme of behavioural control emerges thus as a key issue within urban space.

Brenner’s thought can be of help in the transition from Harvey’s deterministic interpretation of economic dynamics towards a pluralist approach, which has stood out in the last couple of decades for its refusal to explain societal dynamics only through the critic to capitalism. In his paper “The concepts of Life and the Living in the Societies of Control”, Maurizio Lazzarato, Paris-based Italian sociologist, argues that already French philosopher Michel Foucault had recognised that the capital-labour relation reduces “society and the multiplicity of power relations that constitute it to the single relation of command and obedience exercised in the factory or in the economic relations.” Lazzarato, albeit acknowledging the relevance of Marxist critique, claims that such critique should be included in a “broader framework, that of disciplinary societies and their twofold techniques of power: discipline and biopower.”

To clarify these last concepts, it will be useful to introduce what Lazzarato means when talking about disciplinary societies. His ideas are strongly influenced by the work of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who - in his “Postscript on the Societies of Control” – outlines the evolution from disciplinary societies to societies of control. The former, firstly theorised by Foucault, were characterised by “the organisation of vast spaces of enclosures”, through which the individual would pass during the course of his whole life: “prison, hospital, factory, school, family”. Disciplinary societies’ aim is to “transform the confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered classes”, through the use

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10 Ibid., 25.
12 Ibid., 172.
13 Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, *October* 59 (1992), 3.
14 Ibid., 4.
of techniques of confinement and biopolitical techniques, namely by addressing the management of life of the whole population.16

However, according to Lazzarato, disciplinary institutions, in their confinement of space and subdivision of time, actually confine the outside and the virtual, neutralising the power of variation: “they impose the temporality of the clock [...] but they neglect the temporality of the event.” These concepts are of interest as, Lazzarato claims, they were influential in the development of twentieth century planning policies, “that is, in the neutralisation and control, at a social scale, of the logic of event, of the creation and production of the new”.17 As mentioned in the premise, such ideals were translated into planning principles that led to the doom of many modernist post-war plans.

As mentioned, Gilles Deleuze outlines the evolution from the disciplinary societies to the societies of control. Even though the capital-labour relations is not identified as the sole cause of the historical development, Deleuze claims that perhaps it is indeed “money that express the distinction between the two societies best, since discipline always referred back to minted money that locks gold as numerical standard, while control relates to floating rates of exchange modulated according to a rate established by a set of standard currencies.”18 Both Harvey and Brenner had already recognised the relevance of the abandonment of Bretton Woods agreement in the shifting socio-economic scenario of the last couple of decades.

The incipient society of control entails “ultra rapid forms of free-floating control that replaces the old disciplines operating in the time frame of a closed system”19. In the epoch of control, the factory has been replaced by the corporation, and the school has been replaced by perpetual training. While capitalism of disciplinary society is of production, society of control is characterised by a higher-order capitalism, based on services and finance. “Control is short term and of rapid rates of turnover, but also continuous and without limit, while discipline was of long duration, infinite and discontinuous.”20

16 Lazzarato, The Concepts Of Life And The Living In The Societies Of Control, 173.
17 Ibid., 177.
18 Deleuze, Postscript on the Societies of Control, October 59 (1992), 5.
19 Ibid., 4.
20 Ibid., 6.
Deleuze, in the alarming conclusion of his paper, claims that Societies of control conceive a mechanism that can “give the position of any element within an environment at any given instant”. The progressive decline of disciplinary institutions, albeit still co-existing with the new society, is leading the way for the “dispersed installation of a new system of domination”.

A further relevant contribution to the reflection on the theme of control comes from French anthropologist Marc Augé, who denounces the proliferation of non-places, namely those environments realised nowadays to pursue a specific end - such as commercial or transportation. When outlining the features of non-places, Augé identifies the main one in the process of identity loss and “emptying of the consciousness” that people entering these environments undergo. From being an individual with a well-rounded personality, in the non-place each person becomes merely a user of the space, a passenger or a consumer of goods.

Furthermore, Augé suggests that non-places establish a specific relationship with users by creating a “solitary contractuality”. At the entrance, the individual stipulates a tacit contract with the managing authority, accepting to adapt his behaviour to a set of implicit or explicit rules, which allow only for a univocal and predetermined spatial fruition. Heterotopias of contemporary society, these environments are tangible spaces - such as shopping malls and airports - parallel to the outside world. Their boundaries clearly defined, their accessibility subjected to strict behavioural codes. Far from being the direct cause of people’s behaviour, we believe that such a space can be well representative of the climate embedded in contemporary society, very much like money according to Deleuze.

Shopping malls and airports are certainly the most mentioned types of architecture in which users must conform to specific behavioural codes; moreover the limited accessibility and private ownership seems to render them the antithesis of “public space” par excellence.

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21 Deleuze, Postscript on the Societies of Control, 7.
22 Ibid., 7
24 Augé, Non-Places., 94
Figure 2. Gated community in Sao Paulo, Brasil.

Figure 3. Trafford shopping centre, Manchester.
However, the control lies not only in the reduced accessibility or type of ownership, but also in the deployment of specific spatial organisation that prevent differing spatial fruitions. When the environment is designed so that users can only behave in a predetermined manner, the possibilities of developing spontaneous practices and creating a lively social environment are greatly reduced. In this light, even public space can often be considered quite restrictive in terms of behavioural regulation. While the formalisation of the modern – and of disciplinary societies – has largely been acknowledged, the form of control spreading in the contemporary seems to be overlooked.

The research brings forth the idea that architects, being responsible for the definition of urban space, should re-think their agency in the process of spatial production. How to combine the need for *planning* contemporary cities, while opening up the possibility of differing, *unplanned* appropriations? The following chapter deals with the concept of public space, main field of analysis of the research.
2.1 The “invention” of property.

In a more or less consolidated tradition of architectural thinking, the space of sociability and exchange within a community has often been identified as public. Rather frequently, the term is understood in a binary opposition to private space, often uncritically accepting the identification of public with social, and adopting a reductive categorisation that seems to be imposed by natural law. Questioning this taxonomy and investigating its implications for the architectural practice is compelling for architects that operate within urban space – if by urban space we assume the Lefebvrian acceptation of the term, which indicates broadly the anthropised space encompassing cities and manufactured landscapes. In this section, an attempt will be made to analyse such concept by bringing together contributions from different disciplines, which are believed to be relevant both to architectural reasoning and practice.

First of all, it is important to highlight the connection between public space and the concept of property and property rights from a legal perspective. Despite the appearances, it is rather difficult to try and establish an exact definition of what property is, as the concept has been readjusted over time according to the different era and geographical location, becoming the ground for continuous negotiations and debates. In the XVII century, British philosopher John Locke attempted to explain “the intersection of proprietorship and sovereignty by locating them in a natural order”. According to Locke, the rights that individuals have on a property derive from the surplus generated by labour, and the main role of the State lies in granting the respect of these rights of property.

However, this conception of property was in sheer contrast with practices that had been customary up to the XVII and XVIII century in England, as well as many other countries. In fact, in the Middle Ages legal powers could not be attributed to a singular authority, but to a plurality of coexisting, overlapping legal systems. Each of these regulated different spheres of the society, ranging from the local scale and the customary use of land – which entailed the temporary use of fields by rural families – to the scale of the state and finally to

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a supranational scale, which was embodied by the figure of the Emperor or by the authority of the Ancient Roman Law.\textsuperscript{28}

However, the different sources of jurisdiction was not only a matter of scale, as many regulations were also applied according to the \textit{principle of personality of law} – meaning that each religion or corporation was entitled to apply its own rules on its member, regardless of their geographical location.\textsuperscript{29}

After the Peace of Westphalia in 1646, the strengthening of the national states in France, England and Germany – all characterised by a high level of bureaucratisation – lead to the concentration of all the judicial system into the hands of the governments. The new legal system, based on a principle of “territoriality” was often imposed with violence on the previous multiple ones, hence inaugurating the Modern era of absolutistic sovereignty.

Locke’s theorisation of the role of the State, together with Thomas Hobbes’ strive for the recognition of the private citizens’ rights, greatly supported such process of power concentration, contributing to the definition of \textit{private} and \textit{public property} in modern society. The former is recognized by the Anglo-American system as the “the right of individuals to exclude others from the uses of benefit of resources”; the latter is intended as resources owned by governments, which determine “who has \textit{access} to resources held on behalf of a constituency”.\textsuperscript{30}

The \textit{Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen}\textsuperscript{31}, building its foundation upon the Roman Law, can be seen as further milestone in the legal categorisation of public and private property. The French document, highly influenced by Jean Jacque Rousseau’s \textit{Du contrat social}, establishes rights over property as natural and guaranteed by the \textit{social contract} – a supposed agreement between humans that establishes the transition from a \textit{state of nature} to the existence of a society.

\textsuperscript{28} Ugo Mattei. \textit{Beni Comuni} (Roma: GLF Editori Laterza, 2012).
\textsuperscript{29} Mattei. \textit{Beni Comuni}.
\textsuperscript{30} Blackmur, \textit{Appropriating ‘the commons’}.
In his highly polemic work *Qu’est ce que la propriété?*, French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon harshly critiques the *Déclaration* and compares property to a theft, as the appropriation of a resource by an individual automatically excludes the others from the fruition of the same resource. Quoting French economist Jean-Baptiste Say, Proudhon argues that land is a “natural wealth” but is not regarded as a “transient” good, such as air and water. In fact, a field is a fixed and limited space which certain men have been able to appropriate to the exclusion of all others [...], so the land, which was a natural gratuitous gift, has become social wealth, for the use of which we ought to pay.”

As an alternative to this conception of property, Proudhon proposes that of possession, which implies the temporary use of the resource without compromising the future fruations of the same ones by others. Such concept, which might have appeared inconceivable at the apex of the capitalist era, is becoming again of great relevance. In fact, two centuries later, Italian jurist Ugo Mattei, seems to endorse Proudhon’s interpretation of property. In his *Beni Comuni. Un Manifesto*, Mattei argues that public and private cannot be seen as dialectically opposed, as they both have the power to exclude people from those resources that centuries ago were available for everyone to enjoy.

The irreverence of Proudhon’s work is furthermore testified by his strives for the complete abolition of property, and the establishment of a regime of cooperation and common ownership of the workers, which will be later defined *mutualism*. If we acknowledge that the categorisation of public and private has been legitimised by property, Proudhon’s thought appears quite relevant to the scope of this research, as he highlights explicitly how property is far from being an absolute concept. By borrowing Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid’s words, Proudhon argues that “the right of property is not innate, but acquired. It is not grounded upon the constitution of man, but upon his action.”

Nowadays, the legal system of Western countries fully recognises the rights to both public and private property. For instance, in the Article 42 of the Italian Constitution, we can

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33 Proudhon, *What is Property?*, 70.
34 Mattei, *Beni comuni*.
35 Proudhon, *What is Property?*, 45.
read that property is a right of which the entitlement goes to the state, to authorities and to private citizens. In particular, “private property is protected by the law, which determines the procedures of purchases, fruitions and limit to it, in order to assure as well its social functions and its accessibility to everyone.”\footnote{Federico Bianca, \textit{Istituzioni di Diritto Pubblico} (Napoli: Simone, 2014), 312.} As already pleaded by John Locke and the other natural law theorists in the VII century, the tole of the state is that of protecting the right to private property.

From the previous brief overview, it is clear that the concept of public property is open to debate and on-going contestations. Property geographer Nicholas Blomley claims that, despite appearing to the common opinion as a consolidated and unproblematic assumption, property is indeed “a right to exclude” established over time, which can be enforced by “a set of specific rules and practices that determine how exclusion may be affected.” From this point of view, “even public property is defined by the right of exclude – and by the monopoly right of use.”\footnote{Don Mitchell and Lynn A. Stacheli, “Clean and Safe? Property Redevelopment, Public Space, and Homelessness in Downtown San Diego” in \textit{The Politics of Public Space}, ed. Setha Low and Neil Smith (New York: Routledge, 2006), ebook.}
2.2 Public space today: Downtown San Diego case study

Strictly related to the concept of public property - and equally controversial - is that of public space. If we accept a common idea prevailing in contemporary Western countries, and building upon the concept of property previously outlined, we can define *public space* as a portion of space *owned* by the state. However, if we – for instance – take a closer look to the American system, it is clear that this acceptance of the term can be quite reductive, as the treble categorisation of public spaces established by the US Supreme testifies.

The first type of public space is “the most open type of public space [...], includes places like streets and parks which ‘have immemorially been held in trust for the use of the public and [...] have been used for purposes of assembly. [...] These places are, must always be, open and accessible to all”.[38] The second kind includes public property that is owned by the government but is not openly accessible: its access and fruition is limited to specific groups and functions. The third one entails public property that is usually not open to the public, but which can be opened in specific occasions.[39]

Despite the apparent clarity of the above mentioned taxonomy, reality shows that complex issues lie beneath the frame established by the law, making it rather difficult to disentangle the bundle of legal, social and political aspects. Urban geographer Don Mitchell outlines rather effectively the contradictions implicit in the legal frame in force throughout the United States of America. According to Mitchell, these contradictions are clearly readable in the process of redevelopment carried out in Downtown San Diego. The course of the events that has taken place can be seen as representative of a common trend in the United States; therefore, Downtown San Diego will be used as main case study of the research.

The historical nucleus of the city traces back to the establishment of Presidio Hill, historic fort located in the area of today’s Old Town. Up until the end of the XIX century, the city was a village of modest dimension, whose population amounted to less than 1000 inhabitants.[40]

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38 Mitchell and Stacheli, *Clean and Safe?*.
39 Ibid.
Figure 4: Presidio Hill, first Spanish settlement in the area of San Diego.
Figure 5: San Diego Downtown in the 1915.

Figure 6: San Diego harbor and waterfront, 1937.
The Spanish had settled in the area across the XVI and XVII century via the establishment of missions, religious foundations that would often clash with the native populations living in the area since Prehistory. In 1821 the territories of Central America under the Spanish domination, which came to be known as Mexico, gained their independency from the colonisers; hence, Alta California – which encompassed San Diego’s territory - became a part of the newly formed country. However less than thirty years later, in 1848, Alta California was incorporated to the adjacent United States of America, which had been battling Mexico for the control of the states located across today’s border.  

Towards the end of the XVIII century, San Diego became object of interests of several entrepreneurs, who aimed at exploiting the geographical and topographical qualities of the city, so as to make San Diego a centre of primary importance in the country. Over the years, the outcome of such plans was heavily influenced by the attempts of connecting the city with a branch of the railroad – operation that would have greatly endorsed the success of San Diego as international trading port. Whenever the perspective of a railroad connection became tangible, the town underwent phases of real estate boom.

The first initiative undertaken by real estate developer William Heath Davis was that of shifting the centre of interests from the Old Town to the South – an area adjacent to the seaside, where today’s Downtown is located. Davis laid out an orthogonal system of street and built a wharf, as well as investing in the development of housing and tourist accommodations. However, San Diego did not succeed in attracting new settlers and investors until another businessman came on the scene. Towards the end of the century, Alonzo Horton managed to revitalise the town economy and became known for the acquisition and development of the area later named New Town – or Horton’s additions. As a result of Horton’s great efforts on speculation and advertisement, San Diego experienced his first remarkable real estate boom, subsequently fuelled by the realisation of the long-awaited railway connection in 1885 by the entrepreneur John D. Spreckel.

In the subsequent couple of decades, the cyclic phases of boom and bust of the real estate market did not weaken San Diego’s status of international hub. (Figure 8) The city gained

42 Ibid.
further benefits in the 1920’s, thanks to establishment of the naval, marine and air bases, which later on contributed to the development of the aerospace industry – now driving force of the city economy, together with biotechnologies and the pharmaceutical sector. As San Diego grew more important, the city centre began losing its vitality and the middle-class – once enthusiastic of living in the hearth of the city – fled Downtown and settled into the sprawling suburban area.

With the 1994 North America Free Trade Agreement, the adjacent city of Tijuana became involved with the economy of San Diego, as a consistent share of the industrial output began being assembled in the less environmentally and labour regulated adjacent Mexico. Thus, while the economies and landscapes of the two cities increasingly intertwined, Downtown area started being perceived as a “second class” district. The collective imagination was that of an unsafe, “dangerous place with nowhere to park”, where homeless and other “undesired” people would find their shelter.43

From 1985, decay of the centre was tackled by a series of redevelopment project – endorsed by both privates and government – aimed at restoring the image of Downtown, by promoting the city as entertainment centre and tourist destination. As a result, the most notable intervention entailed the redevelopment of the Gas Lamp quarter, which had been until then the city’s red-light district; the new Convention Centre, in the Southern part of the district; the Horton Plaza Mall, right in the hearth of Downtown.

The redevelopment associated with Horton Plaza Mall can be regarded as exemplary of the chaos within legal frameworks, and of the intertwining of public and private interests in the space of the city. Horton Plaza Park is a small park located in the hearth of Downtown, facing today’s Horton plaza mall. Thanks to the presence of the 1910 Broadway Fountain, the square has always been considered of great civic value, and in the 1970’s it was appointed as historical landmark.

Before the Horton Plaza Mall redevelopment, the park had become the major place of gathering of the marginalised, weakest individuals of the society. Theoretically, from a legal point of view the US Supreme Court should include the park in the first “category” of

43 Mitchell and Staeheli, Clean and Safe?.
Figure 7: Development of industrial activities, post-war period.

Figure 8: San Diego downtown, 1968; nucleus of the directional centre.
public space – those that are openly accessible to everyone. However, subsequent events will prove the inconsistency of these definitions.

As mentioned, the shopping mall was conceived as a part of the redevelopment plan of the area, in the attempt to create a new point of attraction, both for tourists and local consumers. (Figure 14) However, the presence of the adjacent, above-mentioned park seemed to be creating discomfort and feelings of insecurity. As Don Mitchell argues, “redevelopment in cities like San Diego […] relies on particular dialectic of public and private property. Public property is critical to redevelopment in several ways”\textsuperscript{44}. In fact, it soon appeared that the increase of value determined by the realisation of the Horton Plaza Mall, was to be jeopardised by the “unwelcoming” character of the overlooking park. As a result, the people that had been living and gathering in the area were simply displaced to other areas – hence procrastinating the tackling of an important issue such as the destitution of large strata of population.

To cope with the “homeless issue”, the management and policing of the public space in the Downtown district was handed to the so-called “Business Improvement District”, an authority created by local entrepreneurs, which subsequently delivered the responsibility to other private entities. Such a process lead to an upheaval in the property regime of the city, as public investment was directed towards the realisation of “festival” spaces of \textit{spectacle} – such as the Horton Plaza Mall – “moving the spaces of sociability onto private property”.\textsuperscript{45}

Mitchell argues that a new “\textit{pseudo-public space}” was thus created”, as well as a “new property regime in which private interests can enforce exclusions in publicly accessible spaces.”\textsuperscript{46} The expulsion of undesired population by private authorities was firstly attempted through “architectural means”: the park was made inhospitable to the homeless people by removing the benches and the public toilets, at the price of making it unwelcoming and unusable also to the rest of the citizens. Moreover, the spatial expedients were strongly backed up by the legislation of California, for instance by identifying homelessness with misdemeanours such as panhandling.

\textsuperscript{44} Mitchell and Staeheli, \textit{Clean and Safe?}.
\textsuperscript{45} Mitchell and Staeheli, \textit{Clean and Safe?}.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
Figure 7. Horton Plaza Park.

Figure 8. Horton Plaza Park, 1943.
Nowadays, Horton Plaza Park is in the process of being renovated by a joint partnership of Civic San Diego – city-owned, non-profit agency – and the adjacent shopping mall Westfield Horton Plaza. The project entails the re-design of a park and a paved plaza, and, rather ironically, planners claims that it will become a “hub” and meeting place for “both tourists and local” \(^{47}\). Such a declaration of intent seems to be clashing with the previous attempts to “deter loitering”. \(^{48}\)

Despite being property of the city, the land will be managed by Westfield Horton Plaza for the next 25 years; once again, the accessibility, control and use of public space will be prerogative of a private corporation. In this respect, Mitchel argues that “the traditional, at least partially democratic, regulation of public property is replaced with a privatised set of rules of exclusion, and a form of violence – perhaps a potential one – that while retaining state sanction, is nonetheless in the hand of private individuals”. \(^{49}\)

Drawing from Harvey’s work, Ugo Mattei claims that this shift from an epoch of strong national governments to the globalised era – characterised by the regression of the state in favour of powerful, international corporations – was determined by the economic policies carried out by Thatcher and Reagan between the 1980’s and the 1990’s. These measures – Mattei argues – led progressively to the overtaking of private interests upon the public ones, causing upheaving hybrid situations. With the risk of falling back into a slightly reductive critical paradigm, Mattei’s thought is surely of interests, as he highlights the overlapping jurisdictions over urban space, which might recall the already mentioned pluralism of coexisting authorities that characterised the Middle Ages – hence the nomenclature *neomedievalism*. \(^{50}\)


\(^{48}\) Ibid.

\(^{49}\) Mitchell and Staehehi, *Clean and Safe*?

\(^{50}\) Ugo Mattei, *Beni comuni*. 
Figure 9: Horton Plaza Mall.

Figure 10: Scenario for the redevelopment of Horton Plaza Park; works are expected to be concluded in 2016.
Figure 11. Imposition of a grid due to the initiative of land speculators such as Alonzo Horton.

Figure 12. The deployment of the grid is still readable in the urban tissue of Downtown San Diego.
2.4 The grid.

In the XVIII century, both Davis and Horton pursued their speculative interests by parcelling out the land adjacent to the seaside, currently known as Downtown San Diego. (Figure 16) But in which manner the real estate development was carried out? With the help of Canadian geographer Nicholas Blomley, in this paragraph a reflection will be carried out on the grid as “a pervasive form of disciplinary rule, backed by sovereign power”\(^{51}\); the analysis will help clarify the development of urban space in San Diego and in similar cities.

Blomley argues that the grid, as well as the frontier and the survey, contribute to the “enactment” of private property – and its violence – within space. In particular, the grid implies the establishment of an order in which an inside and an outside are clearly outlined; the sheer delimitation ends up fostering the idea of such order as an a priori condition. What is outside the established frame is perceived as uncertain and unsafe, recalling closely that state of disorder – depicted by Locke – preceding the social contract. According to Blomley, the establishment of such boundary is “put to work to justify violence, whether of the state or of paramilitary organizations”\(^{52}\).

By referring to the work of XVII century mathematician John Dee, Blomley highlights the connection that geometry and land measuring have had in the course of history, and how such link have been exploited in land development processes: “[t]he perfect Science of Lines, Plaines, and Solides [which] (like a divine Justicier,) gave unto every man, his owne.”\(^{53}\) The deployment of the grid has certainly been endorsed by the common conception of space as an abstract canvas, unrelated from the surrounding environment and geometrically divisible; the naturalization of the grid has led us to think of it as prepolitical.\(^{54}\)

Furthermore, Blomley argues that “the spatially defined environments in which we move – the homes, workplaces, streets, neighborhood, shops, and so on – can serve to reflect and reinforce social relations of power through complex and layered spatial processes and


\(^{52}\) Ibid., 123.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 127.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
practices that code, exclude, enable, stage, locate, and so on.” Drawing from the work of legal geographer David Delaney, Blomley claims that even though the relation between geometrical lines and space commonly suggests a relationship of control between owner and a given portion of land, in reality the power relations are exerted on people and their social relations – and especially on the excluded non-owners. The grid, as an instrument to clearly define and divide, not only creates boundaries that support the existence of the liberal regime, but also serves to “displace attention from the violences between social subjects to the territory itself. Thus, a defense of property relations becomes posed as a defense of the grid.”

The daily experience of the grid, Blomley argues, has led us to “internalise and reproduce the ‘self-restraint’ associated with property”: nowadays we hardly question the legitimacy of the grid, as our social position is probably assured by its same existence. On the contrary, those who live outside the regime of property – such as homeless people – can experience forms of indirect violence, as they cannot be “placed” anywhere within the space of the grid. Similarly to Mitchell, Blomley resorts to North American cities as a spring of examples to clarify these dynamics; in particular he highlights that, since law prohibits sleeping or panhandling in public, and homeless people cannot retreat in a private sphere, homeless have nowhere to perform these activities. Once again, the public space is prerogatives of those who are, first of all, landowners.

56 Ibid., 131.
57 Ibid., 131.
58 Ibid.
2.5 A relational approach to urban analysis.

The thought of Carol Rose, American professor of Law, seems to sum up the overview on public property and space so far carried out: “property is not a static, pre-given entity, but depends on a continual, active doing.”

The notion of a space as an on-going process is very dear to British geographer Doreen Massey, who in her 2005 book *For Space* strives for a reconceptualization of space, and the opening up to a political perspective. In line with Blomley, Massey harshly criticises the concept of static and closed space, often depicted merely as a “snapshot” related to particular instant in a temporal sequence. Space, which the modern had intended as a horizontal surface with a top-down point of observation, must be questioned and problematised.

The three basic assumptions that Massey brings forth are the idea of space as “product of interrelations”, a sphere of the “possibility of the existence of multiplicity” that is always “under construction”. The idea of space being composed by interrelation is groundbreaking, especially if applied to the field of architecture and urbanism, where the top-down imposition of geometric devices such as the grid is current practice. The relations between different entities become thus of primary importance, coming before the singular identities. Most importantly, these entities are “heterogeneous bits and pieces (that are simultaneously natural, social, political, economic and cultural)”; such relational approach hence investigates the connections between elements that may vary in nature and size, arriving to couple the tiniest event to the largest.

Moreover, Massey sees space as the open-ended sphere of “dynamic simultaneity, constantly disconnected by new arrivals, constantly waiting to be determined (and therefore always undetermined) by the construction of new relations. It is always being made and is always

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61 Ibid.
therefore, in a sense, unfinished (except that “finishing” is not on the agenda)”\textsuperscript{63}. From being an abstract surface scrutinized from above, space is now conceived as being constantly modified by our practices, and even by the only presence of our bodies.\textsuperscript{64}

In the study of a place, Massey emphasises a characteristic she names \textit{throwntogetherness}, namely the coming together of elements from different categories – such as sociology, economy or geology – forming a particular “here and now”.\textsuperscript{65} The opening up to the political derives from the engagement with “the existence of multiple processes of coexistence”;\textsuperscript{66} the political resides precisely in the negotiating of those relations existing between different cross categories.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Massey, \textit{For Space}.
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Ben Anderson, \textit{For Space} (2005): Doreen Massey.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Massey, \textit{For Space}.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Ben Anderson, \textit{For Space} (2005): Doreen Massey, 232.
\end{itemize}
### 2.5 From public to common space

So far, we have made an attempt to argue the insufficiency of the legal perspective to account the ever-changing relations shaping urban space. In particular, the main objective was to outline how the contradiction between public and private interests – well consolidated in the collective imaginary – is actually a fallacious one. In fact, both public and private property share the prerogative of excluding from the fruition of common goods that in certain cases are essential for the primary needs of human beings.\(^{67}\) Even the most remarkable example of public realm such as the Greek agora – praised by Hannah Arendt as the space of democratic participation and appearance, was to a certain extent a place of exclusion, as women and non-citizen were not admitted to the active political life of the polis\(^ {68}\). Contemporary urban space, precisely bounded by legal criteria into public and private, thus carries the same prerogative of exclusion.

The identification of public space and social space appears then inaccurate. As demonstrated by the case of the redevelopment of Downtown San Diego, public space is not always accessible to everyone, despite the fact the categorisation established by the U.S. Supreme Court states otherwise. Thus, if accessibility restrictions and regulation of behaviours are often characterising features of public space, it is clear that sociability and exchange within the urban realm cannot be freely pursued, crashed in between what Ugo Mattei calls the “pincers” of public and private domain.\(^ {69}\)

Thanks to Blomley and Massey’s contributions, the research has brought forth an alternative, relational view of urban space. Instead of being conceived as a plain surface in which sheer boundaries divide public and private space, the city is a composition of different layers that are deeply interwoven. The analysis of urban space should hence be directed towards the recognition of the relations between different layers – if by layer we intend heterogeneous entities of different nature and size, that composing each other come to determine the complexities of the city. Of primary importance are the relations between people and space, which – Massey argues – is modified even by the simple trajectory of our

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67 Ugo Mattei, *Beni comuni.*


69 Ugo Mattei, *Beni comuni.*
body. Can we define a concept that encompasses the people that modify and are in turn affected by urban space?

Jurgen Habermas retrieves the outset of a so-called public sphere in the birth of the bourgeoisie, when the middle class of the XVIII century would gather in cafes and discuss current issues, thus forming the public opinion. However, his conception has been criticised for being rather reductive, as Habermas seems to neglect the exclusionary character of a public sphere defined as such, namely composed only by white and relatively wealthy men.

One of the harshest critiques of Habermas’ concept of public sphere comes certainly from Nancy Fraser, who points out the discriminatory connotation of such a sphere against women and other marginalised groups. Over time, the concept of counter-public spheres came to the centre of the attention, as to indicate the gathering of those groups that were initially excluded from public opinion. As a result, the notion of public sphere stretched considerably, readapting its “boundaries” and encompassing progressively “multiple, contending, often mutually exclusive public spheres”.

If we take a look at the work of American philosopher John Dewey, we encounter the concept of “public”, namely an aggregation of bodies that share a common interest. The public is seen as contingent and temporary entity, which can dissolve once that determined interest is gone. Dewey’s definition of public is interesting because it outlines the “malleable” nature of the public, far from the bounded entity described by Habermas. However, the identification of the originating cause with the existence of a common threat implies a situational definition of the public, as it highlights its ephemeral nature – while there are certain human needs and common interests that could be considered as permanent.

In this respect, the concept of multitude proposed by Spinoza seems to bring a meaningful contribution to the discourse. According to the Dutch philosopher, “[the multitude]
indicates a plurality which persist as such in the public scene, in collective action, in the handling of communal affairs, without converging into a One, without evaporating within a centripetal form of motion. Multitude is the form of social and political existence for the many, seen as being many: a permanent form, not an episodic or interstitial form.”

For Spinoza, the multitude has an active importance, as the legitimation of the political power is not given by a social contract – like contract theorist such Hobbes and Locke had claimed – but by “a consensus that must be perpetually renewed.”

The active role of the multitude is even more relevant if we delve into spatially related issues. In fact, while a Cartesian view of the world has accustomed us to consider space as a blank, inert canvas, the active concept of multitude entails a space that is continuously shaped by practices over time, and which affect the multitude itself in a mutual relationship. This idea of space allows taking into account temporality, a factor that was eliminated by the modern paradigm.

In particular, the work of Michel de Certeau can clarify the acceptance we give to the concept of practices, which are said to be shaping urban space on a daily basis. Drawing upon Foucault and Bourdieu, De Certeau identifies practices as “recognisable and repetitive activities that […] are defined by the fact of their possible application by any individual with the aim of appropriating and socially reproducing the economy of a place”.

We have come to delineate a concept, as of now indicated as multitude or public, which draws from the Spinozian definition of multitude and at the same time entails a non-bounded entity with the prerogative of being always open to include new counter-public spheres over time. This multitude is thus a propulsive force that actively shapes the urban environment through its practices, and is affected by it.

A straightforward consideration can be drawn from the concepts just outlined: a space is needed for the multitude to actualise its practices, in turn to re-producing that same space. However, we have discovered that such a space cannot find any reference in the system of

76 Oyarzun, Common Spatialities, 54.
proprietorship, characterised by exclusion and access regulation even in the case of public space. The practice of *commoning*, intended as both the coming together of a multitude to deal with a common interest, and the production of space through material practices, has lately been posed at the centre of the attentions by many disciplines; such shift is due to the staggering increase in the number of associations, demonstrations and protests, which hover in a realm between state and private interests.

The hidden potential of self-organisation has sparked the interests of many scholars, most likely in concomitance with the increased availability of information, which nowadays allows gaining awareness on disparate events across the world. Commoning practices are studied in order to understand if and how they could find a place within the frame of the contemporary economic and legal system of proprietorship in force in Western countries, with slight variations according to the state. The attitudes towards the issue range from revolutionary to more moderate, “reformist” positions.\(^{78}\)

A significant – but vain – attempt to establish a legal frame for *common space* was made in Italy in 2007. The Rodotà Commission was appointed to elaborate a law reform of the third book of the *Codice Civile – Della Proprietà* (On Property) – in order to highlight the inadequacy of both public and private property to take into account the essence of the *common goods* – such as squares, forests, water – as these are characterised by their *inclusive* nature. According to the proposed definition, *common goods* are such in virtue of their accessibility to everyone, and their value lies in their *use*, not in their *exchange value*. Currently, the only two countries in the world in which common goods are recognised by the Constitution are Ecuador and Bolivia.\(^{79}\)

In addressing the study of commons, one of the first questions that are raised concerns *management* issues, and how to address the organisation of such a multitude with shared interests, as well as its relative space of reproduction. Furthermore, American political economist Elinor Ostrom, in her book *Governing the Commons*, claims that the success of the common lies in the participatory, transparent, establishing of rules, which have to match local conditions and be respected by the participants and by outside authorities;

\[^{79}\] Ugo Mattei, *Beni comuni*. 
Figure 13. Publics gathering during the Occupy London protests, in 2011.
most importantly, the system of governing has to be built according “nested” level of responsibility.\textsuperscript{80} However, Ostrom claims also that the *common* has to define clear boundaries; however, these aspect clashes with the non-exclusionary principle, which was already harshly criticised in Habermas’ conception of *public sphere*.

Hence, drawing from such critique of her work, many have claimed the need for a more “open and fluid” forms of institutions.\textsuperscript{81} In his *Manifesto*, Ugo Mattei hints to the management issue claiming that everyone should be able to participate to the administration and take legal action for the safeguards of common goods, even a non-citizen or a state-less person. However, he also claims that the common goods will in time attract the most forward-looking administrators,\textsuperscript{82} implying that – although open to everyone to participate directly – there is still the need for a coordination, similarly to what Ostrom meant when arguing for the need of “nested tiers” of organisation.\textsuperscript{83}

As mentioned, the concept of *publics* can be retrieved in many concrete examples across the globe. On the one hand, some experiments try to conciliate *commoning practices* with the existing legal framework, such as the case of public-civic co-management partnerships, which allowed the creation of social centres hosting several independent organisations.\textsuperscript{84} On the other hand, organisations such as the Occupy movement, which in 2011 protested against social inequalities across the world, can be placed at the opposite side of the spectrum for its radical criticism of both governments and financial capitalism. When talking about the protests of Occupy London, Doreen Massey claims that such gathering of people, arguing and sharing space and experiences, represents a remarkable, political spatial production.\textsuperscript{85} Even though the movement would initially gather on *private* land, a common space was thus created through the relations among the individual participating to the protest, as well as a physical space continuously modified by people’s presence and actions.

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{80} Ana Đžokić and Marc Neelen, “Instituting Commoning” in *Footprint 16* (2015).
\textsuperscript{81} Đžokić and Neelen, *Instituting Commoning*, 23.
\textsuperscript{82} Ugo Mattei, *Beni comuni*.
\textsuperscript{83} Đžokić and Neelen, *Instituting Commoning*.
\textsuperscript{84} Đžokić and Neelen, *Instituting Commoning*.
\end{footnotes}
After having outlined this scenario, the role of the architect appears rather re-dimensioned. This research wants to propose an architecture that should ideally provide a frame for the development of people’s practices, allowing – with the tools in architects’ possession– for a free appropriation of space. In the following chapter of this paper, an attempt will be made to investigate the nature of such tools, as well as a design process coherent with the assumptions so far brought forward. The analysis will proceed by reflecting on the mutual relationship of men and environment, and on the concept of *affordance*.
3.1 Gibson’s theory of affordances.

In the previous chapter, the investigation upon public and private has shown that this categorization seems to limit the possibility of behaving freely within urban space. As seen, this is mainly due to their exclusionary character; hence, the strive for an in-between dimension, both from a socio-political and a spatial point of view. Towards the conclusion, the active role of the multitude in the process of shaping urban space has been acknowledged: throughout daily practices, urban space is appropriated by a multitude of people, coming together for various common interests.

The mutual influence of humans and environment thus appears as a fundamental step in the understanding the process of appropriation and production of space. But how can the architect foster such process of free engagement and appropriation of space - by designing and acting upon the built environment? A brief encroachment in the field of ecological psychology will broaden the perspective of the research on the reciprocity of man and space, which we will also call environment. Later in the chapter, we will clarify the acceptation of this concept.

American psychologist James J. Gibson can undoubtedly be considered one of the most influent scholars of the relationship between humans and environment; he can indeed be considered the “father” of ecological psychology. Gibson’s efforts have been focused on the elaboration of a theory of perception that would entail direct, unmediated visual perception. With his research, the American psychologist argues that vision can be thought as a perceptual system that allows an active “information pick-up”, rather than a passive reception of stimuli – as it was commonly thought up until then. Perception entails the moving about and exploring within the environment, as well as awareness of the self in relation to that same environment.86

In his major work, The ecological approach to visual perception – from 1979, Gibson points out the limits of the Cartesian conception of space, which he claims to be a pure geometrical abstraction. Despite belonging to different academic fields, this concept resonates with the work of both Massey and Blomley, outlined in the previous chapter. In

order to study perception, he argues, it is necessary to abandon the categories adopted by traditional sciences such as physics or biology, which deal with phenomena that are not perceivable from a human point of view. Instead, Gibson proposes a new taxonomy of the environment, elaborated in relation to the scale of a generic terrestrial animal.\textsuperscript{87}

The environment – which he claims to be the surroundings of animals, and more specifically what they can perceive – entails a medium, namely the atmosphere, substances, more or less solid and/or substantial objects, and surfaces, the interface between medium and substances. In particular, the properties of the surfaces allow to distinguish different substances within the environment.\textsuperscript{88}

Gibson’s work is relevant to the scope of this research in particular for the elaboration of his theory of affordances. According to the American psychologist, the term affordance indicates what the environment “offers the animal, what it provides and furnishes either for good or for ill”.\textsuperscript{89} Specifically, “the composition and layout of surfaces constitute what they afford”.\textsuperscript{90} For instance, a flat, horizontal and rigid surface affords support.

This “invariable combination of variant” allows animals to perceive the affordability of such surface; hence, when we see an object we do not perceive its qualities but its affordances: “if a surface of support [...] is also knee-high above the ground, it affords sitting on. We call it a seat in general, or a stool, bench, chair, and so on, in particular. It may be natural like a ledge or artificial like a couch. It may have various shapes, as long as its functional layout is that of a seat. The color and texture of the surface are irrelevant.”\textsuperscript{91} The set of affordances offered to humans is not limited to those pertaining to the physical environment. In fact, the “higher” level of affordances is represented by other human beings, with whom we establish social relationships. According to Gibson, other people afford “the whole spectrum of social significance”.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{87} Gibson, \textit{The ecological approach to visual perception.}
\textsuperscript{88} Gibson, \textit{The ecological approach to visual perception.}
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 127-128.
It is important to point out that the concept here outlined implies a complementarity of the animal and its environment. Gibson specifies that an object has properties that make it affordable for a specific animal: for example, what is affordable for an adult human, might not be affordable for a human child, who has a different size and thus engages a different relationship with the environment. In this regards, Gibson defines affordances as ecological, “in the sense that they are properties of the environment relative to an animal.” Moreover, he expands on the concept of mutuality by introducing the idea of ecological niche, which he defines as a “set of affordances” and mainly refers to “how an animal lives.”

With a reference to the categories previously identified, Gibson indicates some basic affordances that terrestrial environment offers to animals. For instance, the medium-atmosphere affords breathing, locomotion, visual perception and sound perception – amongst others. Non-solid substances, such as water, afford drinking and pouring; solid substances afford manufacture. Surfaces might afford “posture, locomotion, collision, manipulation, and in general behaviour”. It is important to note that not all the affordances offered by the environment to animals can be considered beneficial: in fact, some can be considered “injurious”. Furthermore, affordances might also be misinterpreted “if information is picked up, perception results; if misinformation is picked up, misperception results.”

The theory of affordances draws upon the concept of valence, demand and invitational character, earlier elaborated by Gestalt psychologists Kurt Lewin and Kurt Koffka. However, while the existence of a valence always depends on the existence of an observer – thus falling into the realm of phenomenology – the affordance does not change: “the observer may or may not perceive or attend the affordance, according to his need, but the affordance, being invariant, is always there to be perceived”. Gibson thus attempts to go beyond the traditional duality between the complete “subjectivity” of the phenomenological approach and the “objectivity” of a physical world of noumena, which cannot be perceived.

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93 Gibson, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, 128-129.
94 Ibid., 127.
95 Ibid., 137
96 Ibid., 142
98 Gibson, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, 138-139.
by senses. Despite his efforts, later scholars will point out how this passage constitutes a poorly elaborated aspect of the theory of affordances.

Throughout the whole text, Gibson often mentions the importance of the concept of affordance for architects and urban designers, whom he considers poorly prepared – from a theoretical point of view – to fulfill their role. It is indeed evident how relevant the concept can be for the architects, being the ones responsible for the definition of the environment, considered by Gibson as the set of “action possibilities” offered to animals and humans. In fact, in the first chapter of his book Gibson claims that “the fundamental ways in which surfaces are laid out have an intrinsic meaning for behavior”.

99 Rob Withagen et Al., *Affordances can invite behavior*.
100 Ibid.
101 Gibson, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, 44.
3.2 Later contributions to the theory of affordances.

In the years following the publication of Gibson’s studies, many philosophers and psychologists began appropriating and dwelling on his theory of affordances, attempting to clarify some points that were considered ambiguous, or to find a concrete application of the theory. Dutch professor Erik Rietveld claims that there is general agreement in identifying affordances “as possibilities for action provided to an animal by the environment – by the substances, surfaces, objects, and other living creatures that surround the animal.”\(^\text{102}\) However, the concept is still quite open to differing interpretations and debate. In the course of this research, the analysis of various scholars’ work led to the identification of a number of issues, which are of specific interest for the architectural practice.

### 3.2.1 A new ontology for theories of direct perception.

One of the major critical point of Gibson’s theory is highlighted – among others – by philosophy professor Anthony Chemero. According to Chemero, Gibson’s work appears vague when stumbling upon the subject-object dichotomy: an affordance, Gibson claims, “is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behaviour. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer.”\(^\text{103}\) Chemero points out that the apparent overcoming of the dichotomy earlier mentioned carried the “burden” of an impasse: if, in the theories of direct perception, meanings reside in the environment and not in the mind of perceivers, how to justify the concreteness of the environment? Chemero’s work appears relevant to us for his attempt to outline a new ontology for theories of direct perception.

Chemero begins outlining his theory by endorsing T. Turvey’s concept of affordances, conceived not as resources existing in the environment, but as dispositional properties, which are “conceivable only in actualising circumstances, circumstances in which the disposition becomes manifest”.\(^\text{104}\) In order to actualise affordances, the dispositions must thus be complemented by animals’ abilities.

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103 Gibson, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, 129.
In this respect, American professor of psychology Henny Heft is the promoter of a contrasting school of thought that, dwelling on some ambiguous passages of Gibson’s main book, claims that the “animal relata” that actualise environmental dispositions are instead more appropriately a matter of body scale. However, the concept of size and scale can be easily included in the overarching idea of animals’ abilities introduced by Chemero.

At this point, the premises for outlining Chemero’s reasoning are laid out. By stressing their relational character, he claims in fact that affordances are not animal-related properties; they are instead “relations between particular aspects of animals and particular aspects of situations”. It is then possible to conceive affordances as meaning-rich relations that are concretely perceivable by animals: “according to radical empiricism, everything that is experienced is equally real. Among the things we experience are relations between things, so relations are real, with the same status as the things that stand in relations.” Chemero’s idea of an environment composed of relations is comparable to Massey’s concept of space, in which relations become even more important than the entities they connect.

Chemero thus outlines a theory that implies affordances as “relations between features of the environment and abilities of animals”; in this respect, he points out that abilities must not be confused with the concept of disposition, introduced by Turvey, which entails a guaranteed actualization of the affordance “when coupled with the right enabling conditions”. On the contrary, an affordance might or might not be actualized, as its existence is not dependent on a perceiver who attends it.

3.2.2. Agency and invitation.

According to several academics, the question of agency – and the intentionality of agency is another important aspect neglected by Gibson in the development of his theory. While brilliantly elaborating on the concept of affordance as a possibility of action, he leaves unclear one major aspect: how can an animal operate the choice to attend a determinate

106 Ibid., 184.
107 Ibid., 186.
108 Ibid., 189.
109 Ibid., 189.
affordance, among the many offered by his surroundings?

M. Reed’s *selective retention theory* attempts to introduce agency within the discourse by proposing the emerging of intention as a process of selection of resources coming from the environment. According to Reed, “intention are thus the ‘species’ that emerge out of competition among perceptual and action processes for utilizing affordances”.

Anthony Chemero critiques this “selectionist” view, in which affordances are seen as environmental resources that conceptually exist “prior to the animals that come to perceive and use them.” However, we have previously seen that affordances can be conceived as relations, not as resources. Furthermore, they necessarily presume a mutuality of environment and animals; such relation of mutuality implies a co-existence that cannot be reconciled with the sequential relation, entailed in the idea of resources pre-existing animals. Such environmental properties – Chemero argues – “are not affordances in the absence of complementary properties of animals”.

Endorsing a different perspective, Dutch scholar Rob Withagen attempts to prove that affordances possess an *invitational* character, which can influence and invite the perceiver to attend it. While acknowledging Gibson’s definition of affordances as action possibilities, Withagen tries to move further by claiming that some affordances can also invite. As stated previously, the existence of an affordance does not depend from the existence of a perceiver; on the contrary, for an affordance to *invite*, an observer is necessary to perceive it.

What are then the reasons for an affordance to be able to *invite* a perceiver? Although conscious of identifying just a limited number of them, Withagen considers the main reasons to be the action capabilities of the observer, the importance of the affordance in question, cultural aspects and personal history of the perceiver. However, Withagen stresses that invitations do not necessarily constitute causes: an invitation can in fact be declined.

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110 Rob Withagen *et al.*, *Affordances can invite behavior*.
113 Ibid., 183.
114 Rob Withagen *et al.*, *Affordances can invite behavior*. 
Furthermore, the attendance of an affordance does not imply a conscious mechanism of choice: “agency should not be understood as a process of deliberately making a decision about which affordance will be actualized. Instead, animals unreflectively act upon the affordances of the environment that attract and repel them.”  

The work of Erik Rietveld is of relevance as it complements Chemero’s theory and, at the same time, adds a new level of analysis to the questions of agency. In fact, Rietveld draws upon the already mentioned concept of *ecological niche* outlined by Gibson and introduces the notion of *form of life*, borrowed from Austrain-British philosopher Wittgenstein, and substitutes it to the generic *animal species* brought forth by Gibson. Such idea offers a greater flexibility and can be conceptualised at lest on three level. The first one entails the human species in general – as distinguished from other animals; the second level refers to particular socio-cultural practices; lastly, the third level can be thought as “the particular engagement with affordances of individuals”.  

We can thus outline a new definition of *affordances* and *ecological niche*: “affordances are possibilities for action the environment offers to a *form of life*, and an ecological niche is a network of interrelated affordances available in a particular form of life on the basis of the abilities manifested in its practices; its stable ways of doing things.”  

Similarly to Chemero, Rietveld does not relegate affordances in the phenomenological realm. However, he clarifies an important aspect related to the question of invitation, which can be understood only after introducing the already mentioned three-level concept of *form of life*.

The existence of the affordance does not depend on the abilities of a *specific* individual, but “on the abilities available in a *form of life* as a whole”  

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115 Rob Withagen et al., *Affordances can invite behaviour*, 257.  
117 Ibid., 10.  
118 Ibid., 22.  
119 Ibid., 28.
needs and abilities of the *specific* individual. For instance, a glass affords seeing through to a human being, but if a specific human being is blind, then the affordance will not be attended.

The concept of *affordance* here outlined can be a useful tool if studied in his application to other disciplines; scholars such as Chemero, Withagen, Rietveld and the same Gibson often stress its relevance for the architectural practice. Bearing in mind that certain layouts afford specific action possibilities, and that certain affordances can even have an invitational character if related to specific individuals, the design process can entail a development that, ideally, take into account the possible *practices* of a given *form of life*, and of specific individuals who are a part of it.
3.3 Architect as “catalyst”.

What is then the role of the architect in the context so far depicted? To answer this question, we will draw from the thought of Canadian sociologist Brian Massumi, who offers an insight into the topological approach in architecture. Before proceeding, it seems important to hint briefly at the Deleuzian concepts of virtual and actual, which will be later used by Massumi.

First of all, it seems compelling to stress the different between virtual and possible; while the latter is conceived as a “purely negative category”\(^\text{120}\) that lacks reality, the virtual “possesses a full reality by itself. It is just that this reality is not actual. It is like a field of energies that have not yet been expended, or a reservoir of potentialities that have not yet been tapped. That is to say, the virtual is not composed of actual entities; but the potential for change that it offers is real in its own way.”\(^\text{121}\) Both virtual and actual are thus seen as real. However, the two are not linked by a deterministic cause-effect relationship; instead, we could more appropriately argue that the virtual carries the potentials for the emergence of the actual – to which it does not resemble, unlike the ideas of Plato’s philosophy.

Following up on Massumi’s work, we will thus endorse the idea that, if we try and dissect analytically the process that lead to the architectural form, a multiplicity of forms can be produced as a response to the interaction of virtual forces. Such virtual forces are nothing but the translation of the constraints imposed by the contingent situation and – inevitably – by the personal history of the architect. The choice of the constraints that are considered most relevant derives from an arbitrary selection operated by the architect; it will be the architect as well that will decide which one of the many possible forms will finally become actual. Since the actuality of the form only depends on the choice of the architect, each one of the other would be equally possible solutions.\(^\text{122}\)

The architect’s role is that of “catalysing” the process towards the emergence of a form,


\(^\text{121}\) Ibid.

not that of creating ex-novo or that of proposing a pre-existing schema or form\textsuperscript{123}. In the light of the research, typological studies acquire a new significance: typology can be simply seen as the response that has been given in certain occasions to similar constraints. They are not to be proposed for their hylomorphic qualities but as a repertoire that can be used to analyse what possible forms can emerge from the interaction of a set of virtual forces. The design process terminates with the emergence of an architecture, however the life of the building itself is just at its outset; time will allow for its \textit{appropriation} by the people that will live in it, pass through it and look at it.\textsuperscript{124}

Through a powerful metaphor, American philosopher Manuel Delanda helps understand the difference between the two approaches: “the blacksmith treats metals as active materials, pregnant with morphogenetic capabilities, and his role is that of teasing a form out of them, of guiding, through a series of processes (heating, annealing, quenching, hammering), the emergence of a form, a form in which the materials themselves have a say. His task is less that of realising previously defined possibilities than actualising virtualities along divergent lines.”\textsuperscript{125}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item[123] Massumi, \textit{Sensing the virtual, building the insensible.}
\item[124] Ibid.,
\end{thebibliography}
3.4 Contribution from urban studies

After having outlined Gibson’s theory and its later contributions, it appears that the concept of affordance entails a decisive role for the built environment in the process of affecting – and being affected by – humans and their practices. If we now move from the field of ecological psychology to its possible implications within the architectural practice, a question spontaneously arises: in which ways can architects concretely operate upon the built environment?

In order to give an account of the means that architects possess, it might be useful to take a look at the experiences of some thinkers that did not tackle the issue of appropriation from the same angle adopted in the frame of this research, but are nonetheless of great relevance. In fact their work revolves around the connection between physical configuration of the built environment and the possibility of action with it, and will be precious for the definition of a different praxis – which could be, ideally, more sensitive to human needs. Several other practitioners have developed an architectural practice that – acknowledging it or not – takes into account the action possibilities offered by the environment. However, in this research we have mainly dealt with examples that could bring a specific contribution to the discourse around common space.

American urbanist William Whyte’s work can be regarded as a milestone in the field of study that brings together architecture and its social implications. His documentary and related book, The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces – from 1980, describes the way in which American urban spaces are used, and attempts to explain the reasons for both their success and their doom. With an inquisitive eye and humorous tones, Whyte delves into the real life of American city dwellers – with their small daily actions and routines. The outcome of the research is meant to serve as a guideline for the zoning resolution of New York Planning Commission126.

How – and to which extent – do physical features affect the use of a certain space? This is the main question with which Whyte is concerned. Having begun his work with the assumption that the main factor influencing people’s use of urban space is the sun exposure, he soon

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Whyte’s documentary consists of an analysis of fourteen plazas and three small parks across the United States. It is built through a combination of techniques – ranging from the recording of the movement patterns throughout the day with a time-lapse camera, to the direct, eye-level observation of the flows of people and their behaviour in streets and squares.
distances himself from this hypothesis and realises the complexity of the interweaving factors affecting human behaviour.

However, Whyte identifies a number of issues that he believes to be fundamental to the creation of a lively urban environment, characterised by a high degree of sociability. These factors are the existence of spaces suitable for sitting, the connection with the main streets, the presence of sun and light, food and retail activities as an “attractor”, and the presence of water and of vegetation. Some of these elements, and their interactions, are more relevant to the scope of this research, and will be further expanded upon.\textsuperscript{127}

The main issue tackled in the documentary is undoubtedly the movement of people within the urban spaces throughout the day; such movements are composed of moments of walking, standing or resting. Each of these activities can be engaged by a group of people or by individuals; the most “successful” urban spaces usually host diverse types of user.\textsuperscript{128}

Through direct observation and recording, a “choreography” of movements and colours manifests itself to an attentive eye; such spectacle – Whyte claims – is not perceivable in the “empty architectural pictures”\textsuperscript{129}. Standing people might be by themselves – usually watching other people or waiting for someone – or gathered in groups. In either case, people often seem to gather in specific spots of the urban space, such as the corners, at the entrance of the subway – maybe before saying goodbye? – or at the edges of squares and plazas. As Whyte points out, people seldom stop in the middle of large spaces, as “they like defined spaces: steps, edges and flagpoles”.\textsuperscript{130}

As for the practice of sitting, Whyte provides an intuitive and almost banal observation: “people tend to sit where there are places to sit on”\textsuperscript{131}. However, history has proved that those responsible for the urban design have repeatedly failed to acknowledge this basic principle. American cities are often characterised by large scale, out-of-proportion empty spaces, which hardly offer possibilities to sit – hence of \textit{staying}. When existing, the quality

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{127} Whyte, \textit{The Social Life Of Small Urban Spaces}.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
of the sitting is rather questionable. Provocatively, Whyte describes the “average” bench as follows: “this artefact is an object the purpose of which is to punctuate architectural photographs. It has some utility has a bench, but it is usually placed in isolation; the dimensions are exquisitely wrong.”\textsuperscript{132} As seen in the first chapter with the case study of San Diego, sometimes the unwelcoming feature of the built environment derive from the intentional will to exclude social groups from the fruition of space.

However, the issue of the sitting space must not be limited to benches alone. In fact, the spaces that Whyte praises the most are those in which the sitting space is \textit{built into} the plaza itself, through ledges, planters at sitting height, steps, etc. The higher the complexity of sitting configuration, the higher the number of sitting possibilities and combinations.\textsuperscript{133} The recurrent theme as for the practice of sitting – but also throughout the whole documentary – is that of \textit{freedom of choice}. When people have the possibility to choose how to make use of their environment, they are in charge.

Another aspect that Whyte highlights as fundamental to achieve a higher degree of liveability is the relationship the space engages with the main streets. A self-contained space isolates people from the rest of the city; a space that is located far too below or above the street-level is often destined to be unused, unless some particular circumstances take place. Enclosed mega-structures, such as shopping malls, offer the surrounding environments bare façades, which appear as a “brutal rejection of the street.”\textsuperscript{134} Those realities, which imply an urban space thought and built at a non-human scale – are rather common in many American cities.

According to Whyte, a striking evidence of the negative effects caused by this process of enclosure are well testified by Bryant Park in New York. The space in question has increasingly become the realm of thieves and smugglers, and it is therefore heavily patrolled by police forces. Whyte claims that the unfavourable fate of the park has been influenced by the presence of walls and fences around it, which cut it off from the street and rest of the city – as well as from the eyes of other citizens.\textsuperscript{135}

\textsuperscript{132} Whyte, \textit{The Social Life Of Small Urban Spaces}.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
Figures 17. Extract from Whyte’s documentary.
Chicago’s First National Bank Plaza. The steps that lead to the partially sunken plaza do not only afford being climbed, but during peak hours they often become a sort of “amphitheatre” from which people can observe little performances or simply watch what is going on in the square below. Similarly to standing people, those who seek a place to rest, and maybe chat, tend to prefer the edges—a defined space where can they observe the centre of the space while feeling protected; an example is offered by Seagram Plaza, where the trees at the edges provide a “cavey” sense of protection, besides the obvious shading advantage.
These elegantly simple steps are an important feature. They are low and they are easy to go up and down. They are also easy to sit on. And the corner has a right angle that is fine for groups. But there is a problem. The corners of the steps are precisely where the main flow of people to and from the buildings can be found. Yet this is where people like to stand and sit. The two practices of sitting and moving – together with the social activities that often accompany them – are here accommodated by the element of the steps, coming together in what Whyte defines as a "friendly kind of congestion".
In conclusion, Whyte attempts to define a characteristic that stands out upon the above-mentioned “ingredients” for the creation of a favourably dense social space. He names such feature *triangulation*, implying the ability of a place “to bring people together”, especially strangers. For this to happen, usually an “external stimulus” should exist, either a physical feature of the environment or an event – such a show, food selling and retail activities. This commonly perceived *stimulus* is what connects strangers, temporarily coexisting in the same urban space.\(^{136}\)

The concept of *defined* space designed at the right *scale* – intended as an adequate relation between human and environment – was proper also of American activist Jane Jacobs, who often collaborated with Whyte during the course of her studies and research. Her major work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* – published in 1961, revolves around a harsh critique of modernist planning and of coeval processes of urban renewal. These were endorsed by officials and entrepreneurs of the time and had devastating effects on the urban space, contributing to gentrification and allowing land speculation.\(^{137}\)

Similarly to Whyte, the force of Jacob’s work lies in the description of social phenomena and behaviours at the scale of the street and the neighbourhood. In particular Jacobs was striving for the pedestrian re-appropriation of the streets, which had by then become the realm of automobiles. Moreover, she claimed the spaces for pedestrians should be designed in order to promote diversity, both in terms of program and of spatial features. Such diversity would ideally be achieved through an accurate control of the scale of the project – sore point of modernist urban planning – and the creation of multiple pedestrian trajectories within space, in order to promote free and unobstructed circulation.\(^{138}\) The physical environment envisaged by Jacobs displays the same inclusiveness of Massey’s heterogeneous space.

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138 Jacobs. *The Death And Life Of Great American Cities*. 

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3.4 Contribution from architecture.

Contemporary to Jacobs and Whyte are the works and reflections of Dutch architect Herman Hertzberger, one of the main exponent of the structuralist movement in architecture during the second half of the XX century. Despite having architectural practice as a starting point—unlike Whyte and Jacobs, who privileged sociological aspects—Hertzberger offers relevant insights that can well integrate the considerations previously outlined.

In *Lesson for student in Architecture*, Hertzberger highlights the mutual relationship between built environment and men: “Form not only determines usage and experience, but it is itself equally determined by them in so far as it is interpretable and can therefore be influenced. In so far as something is designed for everyone, that is as a collective starting point, we must concern ourselves with all conceivable individual interpretation thereof, and not only at a specific moment in time, but also as they change in time.”

These words refer to architectural projects as object of multiple interpretation, hence of *multiple possibilities* of use. Moreover the element of *temporality* enters the discourse, as Hertzberger does not conceive the project as concluded in a specific moment, but in a state of continuous evolution—idea that seems to recall the thought of Massumi regarding the architectural process. To further clarify this concept, he coins the term *polyvalent form*, which—drawing upon the structuralist paradigm in architecture—entails a project as a “framework” that is filled with associations and thus “brings about a mutual dependence with users”.

Hertzberger’s intention is that of shifting the attention from a program-based design to a different kind of process, in which spaces could ideally “accommodate the pattern of relations of those who will use it”. Furthermore, forms should accommodate *potentials*: “each form therefore, rather than being neutral, should contain the greatest possible variety of preposition which, without imposing anyone specific directions can thus consistently bring about associations”.

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140 Ibid., 150.
141 Ibid., 110
142 Ibid., 162.


Figures 18-9. The same element, a small brick podium at the centre of the hallway, acts as a catalyst for different types of spatial fruition over time.
This last thought is of great relevance. Even though Hertzberger’s work is apparently unrelated to the discourse of ecological psychology previously outlined, the reference to the concept of affordance is rather immediate. The formal features within a project should afford a variety of action possibilities, without having a constrictive character. However, some clarifications are here needed in relations to some concept identified by Hertzberger. In fact, the Dutch architect focuses on the concept of *form*, which seems almost to imply a schema imposed a priori due to its intrinsic properties, thus stressing the idea of form as starting point of the architectural process. However, by introducing Massey’s concept of space, as well as that of affordance, we have established that the process should firstly deal with relationships, rather than singular identities. For that reason, it seems more effective to focus on concepts such as *matter*, which implies an agency of the environment.

Hence, the idea of *form* accommodating *potentials* can be replaced by that of *matter* accommodating *virtualities* – borrowing the Deleuzian acceptation of the word. Affordances, which as – Gibson claims – point both at the matter and the man, can thus be considered such *virtualities* that are there to be *actualised*; nonetheless, the are *real* – as we already saw in the previous chapter through the analysis of Chemero’s work. In this respect, De Landa’s words help clarifying the connection between the power of an affordance-based architecture and the possibility to design a built environment open to different, ever-changing actualization through time: “ [...] we must struggle to model the future as truly open ended, and the past and the present as pregnant not only with possibilities which become real, but with virtualities which become actual. This realm of virtual entities capable of divergent actualization is only one of the several immanent resources which insure the openness of the future.”\(^1\)

Danish architect Jan Gehl is considered by many the contemporary heir of the school of thought inaugurated by Jacobs and Whyte. Both with his projects and his research works, he operates within urban space with the objective of restoring a “human scale”. In his seminal work *Life between buildings*, published in 1987, he introduces the themes that will be relevant in his later production. In particular, the emphasis on creating urban space with multiple resting spaces and sitting possibilities closely recalls Whyte’s work.

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\(^1\) De Landa, *Deleuze And The Open-Ended Becoming Of The World*, 7.
Figure 20. Hertzberger’s Montessori School, Delft. Small niches in the hallway provide the space for study and play, offering action possibilities related to children’s size and abilities.

Figure 21. Hertzberger’s Montessori School, Delft. The varying height of the steps allows for different types of gathering in the space.
Building upon the consideration of the American urbanist, Gehl highlights how the practice of sitting can open up manifold action possibilities: sitting “paves the way for numerous activities”\textsuperscript{144}, or better \textit{practices}, such as eating, reading, sunbathing, watching people, talking, and so forth. The lack of resting space thus results in a lack of design quality. In the process of designing the physical features of the urban environment, architects should aim for a mixture of traditional seatings and what Gehl names \textit{sitting landscape} – a terminology that recalls Whyte’s \textit{built into the plaza} configuration. This type of seating entails also stairs, façades’ details and ledges, pedestals, and all kind of “urban furniture” that can “provide a wide range of supplementary, secondary sitting opportunities”.\textsuperscript{145}

In Gehl’s imaginary, the urban space becomes an inhabited landscape composed of \textit{multipurpose elements}, which recalls Hertzberger’s idea of \textit{polyvalent form}. Similarly to Whyte, he praises the spatial configurations that afford possibilities for interaction, such as benches located at that specific distance that favours conversation, or tables disposed at a right angle. This \textit{sitting landscape} becomes thus a \textit{conversational landscape}, Gehl emphatically claims.\textsuperscript{146}

Drawing upon Jacob’s work, the Danish architect also makes a plea for the study of the “right scale”, in the attempt to avoid the creation of overly large, empty and human un-friendly environments. In particular, Gehl stresses the importance of studying how to accommodate both the flow of people and the spaces of rest – their intersection and sequence within the urban space. Some essential features should be that of being “manageable”, namely having a defined character and being articulated on the basis of walking distances.\textsuperscript{147}

Similarly to both Whyte and Jacobs, Gehl also reflects upon the issue of “security” within urban space, which is nowadays often tackled through an increased police patrolling. Gehl suggests that the best way to secure a safe environment is the mutual surveillance that people exert on each other’s\textsuperscript{148}. Police and restrictions from authorities can thus be considerably reduced in those environments characterized by a high degree of human

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}[144]
\item Gehl, \textit{Life Between Buildings}, 161.
\item Ibid.
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\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Figures 22. “Sitting landscape” (Life between building, Jan Gehl).
concentration. This process can be fostered, for instance, through the implementation of retail activities and services on the ground level, in continuity with the street, which can provide an additional element of what Whyte named *triangulation*. 
4. Reflections and final remarks.

The research question of the present paper arose from observing the way in which urban space is nowadays lived across Western countries. Staggering socio-spatial polarization and uneven urban development are not only to be found while comparing western and third world states, but as well within post-industrialised countries themselves. In a first moment, such empirical remarks directed the research towards the traditional critique of the capitalist system, which establishes a direct connection between economic paradigm and spatial consequences.

However, in a second moment the perspective on the issue was broadened and a multiplicity of interconnected factors appeared alongside that which seemed to be a simple cause-effect relation. With the contribution of thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and his scholar Maurizio Lazzarato, a more complex reality was outlined – of which, surely, the neoliberal paradigm is a significant component and indicator at the same time. The societal condition Deleuze disturbingly names *society of control* encompasses phenomena that deal with each other in a non-linear way. From behavioural to psychological considerations, from economic to spatial issues, from security and political matters: the common ground characterising Western societies is the immanent form of control that is progressively overtaking different aspect of people’s life.

In this perspective, architects might find themselves designing spaces that endorse such tendency. The rigid formalisation of the public space found in many city cuts off any opportunity for the spontaneous practices of urban dwellers, which find themselves crushed between the obligation to adapt to restrictive sets of behaviour and the physical limitations offered by an unwelcoming built environment. Both design-based dissuasion devices and aggressive policies are often justified by governments with the conceit of granting a highly secured urban environment, failing to address issues that must be tackled with a forward-looking and interdisciplinary strategy, and at the same time contributing to the culture of terror through the deployment of military forces and security system within the city. The intention is to keep away the unplanned, the controversial, the discussion.

Such phenomenon appears to be softer in European countries rather then in the United
States, which has therefore been often used as case study in the course of this research. Public space is hence at the centre of the reflection, and in particular the investigation upon its nature. By linking its legitimation to the concept of property, which gained consensus from the XVIII century onward, the divide between public and private appeared unfounded. In fact, their common exclusionary character, enforced in turn by the state or by the privates, prevents the free accessibility to those goods that have been of common use for centuries, such as water, air and ultimately land.

The chaos of the legislation, which does not recognise the existence of common property, is even greater if we consider how the interests of the public are heavily intertwined with that of the private. Hence the public, which in the post-war period was at least guarantor of the welfare of the majority of people – although retaining the above-mentioned exclusionary character –, is nowadays enforcing the interests of the private to the expenses of the weakest strata of population, as shown through the analysis of Downtown San Diego case study.

What we should focus on is therefore not public or private space, but space in general, which we can call *common* if we accept its *dispositional property* of being shaped by practices of a *multitude*. In turn, such multitude can be seen as a group of people coming together in order to deal with a common issue, and its legitimation is not given by law but by a continuous renewal of mutual consensus. In particular, we have discovered that the categorisation of space in private and public has led, over time, to the common misconception of space as inert container. Through the contributions of Massey and Blomley, we have redefined space as the realm of heterogeneity and coexisting relations.

Having established these premises, we should ask ourselves *how* appropriation is achieved within the urban space? And especially, what do we really mean when talking about appropriation? In this respect, the concept of affordance is crucial. As already concluded while dealing with the concept of public and private, the research endorses the complementarity of *multitude* and *common space*. Equally, the concept of affordance entails the complementarity of animals – and we herein refer to humans – and environment, which also includes other animals. We have discovered during this research that affordances are nothing but the relations existing between a given object and the abilities of a form of life; their existence being independent from the existence of a perceiver, they do not belong
neither to the mind nor the environment.

The architectural implications of such acknowledgment are of great relevance: the built environment is populated with action possibilities that derive from the relations with humans, intended as a form of life. Benches and steps might afford sitting, a sill might afford resting on it, a glass might afford seeing through, and so forth. The uncertainty regarding the affordance being attended must be emphasised, as affordances’ invitational character exists only in presence of an individual with determined abilities and capacities.

How then does the concept of affordance relate to that of appropriation? Drawing again from the work of Brian Massumi, this research wants to stress the importance of an open-ended future, key concept to foster spatial appropriation. More specifically, this would entail the reasoning upon the category of the virtual.149 The architect’s role, in the moment of “catalysing” the emergence, lies primarily in the capacity of imagining virtual forces, which can well be seen as the relations between humans and built environment – namely as affordances. These relations, virtual but nonetheless real, have then to be actualised by the architect into built forms, which will offer certain action possibilities to humans. Such possibilities might invite, and thus be attended, according to the abilities and needs of a specific individual.

However, together with actualising a “static form”, the architect should attempt to “embed the accidental”. In order to do this, he or she should consciously translate virtual forces into “a populations of actual effects that more fully implicate changeability and the potential for further emergence than self-enclosed forms or ordered agglomerations of forms.”150 By incorporating these actualities, new virtual relations might emerge from the interplay between those and the environment – which includes other humans as well. Matter will thus provide a broader range of action possibilities, and the future of the environment can be imagined as open-ended, continuously becoming theatre of the attendance to the many affordances.

History has shown that “even in the most ordered formal composition there are accident
zones where unplanned effects arise”\(^\text{151}\). Even the most rigid configurations ends up conflicting with the accidental, and the interplay between formal and informal configurations over time appear inevitable.

The reading of architects’ and urbanists’ work has been valuable in order to draw some suggestions on the possible outcomes of the processes above outlined. The design proposed entails an operation that we will figuratively associate with that of landscaping, in which the importance lies in the relations between elements, not in the pre-eminence of specific objects. Bearing in mind that the layout configuration will be connected by ever-changing relationships – sometimes foreseeable but mostly unpredictable – to the surrounding environment, architects should imagine these virtual relations and how they can catalyse the emergence of different spatial fruition, and thus landscape the active “matter” as a set of affordances.

We propose, through the connection of the concept of multitude, appropriation and affordance, a design procedure in which the main goal is that of increasing the number of action possibilities, counteracting the tendency currently dominating urban space – both public and private. As Massumi puts it, “built form could be designed to make the ‘accidental’ a necessary part of the experience of looking at it or dwelling in it. The building would not be considered an end-form so much as a beginning of a new process.”\(^\text{152}\) And of course, even in this case, a multiplicity of unplanned “accidentals” will take part to the process, contributing with a rich variety to the new life of the building.

The pursuit of an open-ended architecture, which offers a multiplicity of action possibilities, is here seen as central for those architects seeking to promote the appropriation of space by city dwellers. As seen, when a space is highly formalised, its configuration limits greatly the possibility of behaviour, hence constituting an obstacle for people to enact their daily or occasional practices. On the other hand, a built environment that offers a high degree of affordances stimulates the process of appropriation, by allowing for greater freedom of behaviour and action in space. Issues of security should be addressed not by formal means but with proactive policies, and by promoting social life – which, as seen, increases the

\(^{151}\) Massumi, *Sensing the virtual, building the insensible.*

\(^{152}\) Ibid.
level of mutual control. By offering the widest range of action possibilities through spatial means, architects foster the multitude’s spontaneous practices, which – with their same existence – shape what we have called *common space*. In this light, space is characterised by an agency that is renewed over time, thanks to the interplay with the *multitude* acting within it and shaping it.
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