

Article

## Urban Meta(na)morphosis

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### Abstract

The present research explores the use of the art practices in “no-places” as an instrument of urban regeneration. “No-places” are meant as architectural and urban spaces where people perceive to be in a decayed and anonymous areas, without identity and ties with the territory due to their shapes and their ways of fruition. The goal is to transform them into ‘new places’, creating a different relationship between people and spaces. This is achieved without structural and architectural measures, but modifying those aspects concerning the perception, orientation and recognition to have an impact on the fruition and on the sense of belonging to the place. In particular, research focuses on the anamorphic artistic installations; anamorphosis is a geometrical process of optical illusion based on a distorted projection that enables the recognition of the original image watching it from a specific point of view. The enigmatic and fragmented labyrinth of signs becomes understandable for the observer only when he recomposed it with his eyes and his movement, thereby contributing to define new perception and use of the space. In the first part of the text we analyze some installations that use the anamorphosis as a tool of urban acupuncture; in the second part, the *Boscoreale* railway station constitutes the case study for the application of anamorphosis to a “no-place” of the urban mobility.

**Keywords :** anamorphosis, perception, urban installations, no-places, artistic acupuncture

### 1.1 Introduction

The post-modern society is characterized by the flows logic and by the intensification of globalization processes. These features have produced profound transformations within today’s urban contexts, modifying the very perception of the contemporary city. This becomes evident in the appearance of several city spaces, which are now a sign of a discontinuous and fragmentary urban geography (Sennett, 1994). The concept of network society, emblematic of the new information and communication methods of our time, is not always matched by the creation of a parallel system of connected physical places, thus leading to a “schizophrenia structural” (Castells, 2000) between two spatial dimensions that risk not being able to dialogue with each other. The architecture is not only the space through which people move, but also a place of communication. For this reason, it is necessary

to oppose the proliferation of these “no-places” (Augè, 2009): real ‘empty boxes’ of anonymous and disconnected spaces devoid of relations with the surrounding territory and where people come across without meeting each other. «Never before in the history of the world have non-places occupied so much space» (Bauman, 2002). The “control of the indeterminate” (Bertagna, 2011), therefore, constitutes a relevant question within the new social and urban morphology, inviting to rethink to the tools, strategies and actions with which to plan the city. Referring to the recurring analogy between the city and the human body, used over the centuries by numerous scholars, it is possible to consider, in the approach to the ‘sick parts of the city’, traditional urban planning methods as interventions similar to surgical transplants, capable of removing or replace unhealthy tissues. The most recent interventions, on the contrary, prefer the re-

generation to the replacement of diseased tissues, considering that the contemporary urban space is largely already built (Secchi, 1984). Acting on micro-areas and on single places through local and punctual interventions, they give the possibility to transform those spaces into new structural nodes able to reconnect the parts, channeling the flows of that lymph necessary to make vital the urban organism. The purpose of this contribution is to investigate the use of artistic practices as urban acupuncture methods applicable to “no-places”.

### **The methodology: artistic punctures for the regeneration of non-places**

Zygmunt Bauman defines the no-place as «a space devoid of the symbolic expressions of identity, relationships and history» (Bauman, 2002). The transformation of a no-place, therefore, implies the need to intervene on cultural aspects and temporal processes capable of influencing both the physical space and the individuals who inhabit it. The transition from ‘no-place’ to ‘new place’ focuses on the reconfiguration of the link between people and spaces, operating on those relations of perception, orientation and recognition capable of generating an impact on emotions, on symbols and on the sense of belonging to a place (Lynch, 2006), and which can hardly be interpreted through a ‘top down’ planning. Jaime Lerner, Brazilian architect, urban planner and politician, says that «many cities today need acupuncture because they have ceased to care about their cultural identity» (Lerner, 2003). With this reflection as a starting point, this contribution refers to those urban practices that act as micro-punctures on urban objects and places chosen to be catalytic for urban renewal (Shieh, 2006). They ignite a spark (Lerner, 2003) able to induce significant reactions and interactions to generate a network of interventions (Marzi and Ancona, 2004) for the benefit of the whole organism-city (Solà-Morales, 1999; Shieh, 2006). Also the low cost and the short times differentiate urban acupuncture interventions from those regulated by traditional planning (Marzi and Ancona, 2004). Taking this into account, redesigning the spatiality of a place without structural and / or architectural interventions is a complex operation. It means creating a new form, stronger than that expressed by the physical spatiality of architecture and able to bring people closer to a place that, for a long time, has been the bearer

of negative meanings, with inevitable repercussions on social and urban decay. According the scheme of environmental pleasantness proposed by Kaplan and Kaplan (Kaplan R., Kaplan S., 1989), the positive relationship that individual has with space depends on two main factors: the understanding of the place, which will be coherent and readable if it will satisfy the cognitive efforts of man necessary to know it, and the exploration of space, which will be guaranteed only in the presence of perceptive stimuli capable of leading to the acquisition of new knowledge. The research aims to investigate the artistic installations as a tool for the regeneration of non-places, both because the artist has always constituted, if not an interpreter, an attentive reader of the city, allowing thus a coherent reading of space and its problems, both because art encourages the exploration of space through participatory and relational processes.

### **The tool: the anamorphic installations for the redesign of urban spatiality**

The choice of the tool through which to interpret the action of artistic acupuncture in urban spaces derives from the analysis of the ‘*Trompe l'oeil*’ technique made by Lerner in “Urban acupuncture” (Lerner, 2003). It reads:

«Sometimes, the city uses the fake to save the real. (...) an imaginative example of *trompe l'oeil* is the illusionist decoration of the nave and dome of the Church of the Gesù in Rome, enlarged a century later. Or the Church of St. Ignatius of Loyola, where the dome, designed but not built, was covered with a *trompe l'oeil*, a false perspective. In Berlin, during the restoration of the Brandenburg Gate, huge tarpaulins were mounted to hide the work. Images of the city appeared on them, in order to create a different perspective. (...) Many use *trompe l'oeil* to amaze, to create a false perspective or to accentuate an absurdity. In our case, acupuncture consists in making falsehood work for the truth».

Starting from the considerations made on *trompe l'oeil*, the research investigates the artistic installations realized for urban regeneration with the technique called “anamorphosis”. Anamorphosis constitutes a particular geometric process which develops, as the *trompe l'oeil*, a perspective illusion. Using the projection of a deformed image on several different planes, it makes the



Fig. 01 – “Firmeza” alley in the “Luz Nas Velas” urban art intervention: comparison between the anamorphic image seen from and outside the vantage point (source: Greta Attademo)

original subject recognizable only by looking at it from a precise point of view, called point of advantage. This technique, created during the Renaissance and widespread during the Baroque period, was rediscovered nowadays by many contemporary artists, especially for its interactive and playful character, capable of generating new relationships between the observer and the space concerned by the artistic setting. Anamorphosis, in fact, allows the individual to be involved not only in the process of creating the work, as occurs in other acupuncture interventions, but also in its use, making people an integral part of the new relationship with the artwork and with the space. The anamorphic installation, thanks to its ability to inscribe a new narration within the place, «can change that space, it can add a level, with another type of purpose, another type of meaning that simply increases that space by providing it with a form and a body that are different from its simple physical structure» (Bertone, 2013). Among the various experiences it's worth mentioning the one conducted by the BoaMistura, an interdisciplinary team of Spanish architects and artists who implements a series of participatory urban art interventions with the aim of redeveloping degraded communities, both at a social and urban level, using art as «(...) a tool for change, as something beyond simple contemplation. Involving people in art means activate them socially through the direct change of their reality. They appropriate of the place and a feeling of identity grows. It acts as a turning point, introducing the idea that if

something 'stupid' as some paint can change or improve some aspect of your life, then it is possible to change others too! It calls for a change in mentality»<sup>1</sup>. In the opera *Luz Nas Velas*, the BoaMistura intervenes on Brasilândia, a favela located on the outskirts of Sao Paulo in Brazil. It is significant the choice of an irregular occupancy space, that is not part of any city planning system, because it is a reality that needs to reintegrate and reconnect itself with the rest of the city. Words like *Amor*, *Orgulho*, *Docura* are painted in anamorphosis in the favela and they generate a new landscape that allows to cancel the tortuous and narrow space of the alleys, thanks also to the use of bright colors that, crossing steps, walls and floors, filter the gray of the slum and become a new canvas, made of fragmented geometries that break the monotony and generate amazement. The playful use of the artwork allows to capture the gaze of the hasty observer and relate it to the space crossed. The inhabitants of the neighborhood, in front of the unusual change, open a new dialogue with the space, moving in the play of apparently mysterious signs and fragmentary entities, to assume that one position in which the meaning is finally revealed. The social change obtained through the anamorphic technique is interesting: Brasilândia, after the realization of the artistic intervention, has assumed a crucial role in city tourism, leading travelers and visitors to use new paths and subjective points of view to know a urban fabric which previously generated fear and scare, thus allowing the construction of a new space full of mean-



Fig. 02 - "Black" anamorphic installation created by the group of artists Mangiatori di Patate (source: Greta Attademo)

ings and social relations. The cultural identity, highlighted by words with a positive meaning that appear walking and moving in space, is also strengthened by the active participation of the inhabitants in the realization of the project, made possible also thanks to the use of simple and low-cost tools. *Luz Nas Velas* represents just one of the many interventions of the collective which, working on abandoned buildings, degraded streets and forgotten places in different American and European cities, aims to create invisible connections capable of connecting spaces and people.

Another interesting urban acupuncture intervention is realized in Italy, more precisely on the hill of *Pizzo Sella*. This is located north-west of *Palermo* and it is known to many as a symbol of speculation and unauthorized building in the late Seventies. The 170 houses built illegally on the hill, largely unfinished or abandoned following confiscations, fully represent the phenomena of disur-

banization and disfigurement of the urban landscape. Starting from 2013, the artistic collective *Fare Ala* has made the hill the center of an urban art project, called "*Pizzo Sella Arte Village*". The artwork take possession of the abandoned houses with the idea of contrasting the presence of those structures and not to legitimize their presence in any case. In a provocative way, art changes their perception by intervening as an act of denunciation and social awareness. One of the art installations, called "Black", is created in anamorphosis by the group of artists *Mangiatori di Patate*. A large black spot spreads inside an empty house, like a virus to counteract abuses on the landscape, infiltrating the walls, beams and pillars and attacking that corrupt urban system through new forms that attempt to 're-signify' the urban eco-monster. The long waiting times necessary for the demolition of the residence have encouraged the artists to use the anamorphic technique. Using the building as a white canvas on which to paint, the fluctuating black shape

cancels the presence of the abusive walls and opens the eyes of the observer towards an illusory space which, just like a black hole, invites him to move towards it. The attention is focused on *Pizzo Sella* also thanks to a photographic communication campaign of the new installations on social networks and to an online mapping project of the various works created. This artistic project not only contributes to create a network of knowledge of the phenomenon, but it becomes the starting point for a series of interventions, workshops and guided tours that continue to follow each other over the years with the aim of opening discussions and experimenting new artistic practices for the reconnection of the hill to the urban territory.

### **The case study: the project of the anamorphic installations in the Boscoreale station**

The drafting of the framework agreement for scientific collaboration between the Department of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II (DiArc) and the *Ente Autonomo Volturno* (EAV) a Campania company that operates the public rail transport service and manages its infrastructural assets, provides the opportunity to develop research on the drawing of a new spatiality in 'no-places'. The case study is the Boscoreale railway station sited on the route between Naples and Poggioreale (Campania, Italy). The station, designed and built between 1996 and 2000, was unused until 2009, when it was activated. It is also called *Antiquarium* due to the proximity of the namesake archeological museum in which are kept roman antiquities from the archeological sites of Pompeii, Herculaneum and Boscoreale. The EAV aimed solving fruition problems in the station spaces focusing on the mezzanine level. The search for a new spatiality must take into account the perceptual, cognitive and behavioral aspects that come into play in the reconfiguration of the relationship between people and places. The research is developed in three phases following the procedure realized by Canter and Lee about the application of psychological research to the design process (Canter, Lee, 1974). The features of the space and user behavior are analyzed in the first phase called "conception" and then they are linked in the phase called "specification". In our case study, the analysis of the space shows that the only function of the mezzanine floor (125 x 18 meters) is to connect the hall with the

platform, accentuating that it is oversized and disproportionate. Analyzing user behavior through the incoming and outgoing passenger flows and their gathering for departure of the train, it is noticeable their preference for short distances and the presence of many unused spaces. Looking at the space from the main views of passenger routes, the relationship between spatial analysis and behavioral responses is clear: the perception is to be in a closed and deep place, where travelers cannot move freely also due to the presence of repetitive sequences of central pillars. The random placement of furniture and the absence of a project have produced hybrid spaces where vandalism and degradation are predominant. The final phase provided by Canter and Lee is the "evaluation". In this phase the existing space is examined on the basis of psychological effects produced, with its positive and negative aspects in order to define the design choices. Therefore, structured interviews are realized to three categories of stakeholders: promoters (involved institutions), operators (locally based associations) and users (people using the station). Also the Russell's "circumflex model" (Russell J.A., Pratt G., 1980) was given to them, in order to identify the affective quality attributed to environments. It emerges clearly that mezzanine floor is perceived as a repetitive and anonymous space, but also as a too broad space that disorients the users while choosing the route. The project proposal, taking into account the results of interviews, the name of the station "*Antiquarium*" and the proximity to the museum, consists in the regeneration of the relation between people and the historical-cultural heritage of the city. For this reason, the anamorphic installations for the station will narrate, in a contemporary key, the history of antiquities from archeological digs carried out in Boscoreale suburban perimeter in the late 1800s. The installations use history as a key to strengthen the identity of the place and the anamorphic technique as an element to create a new relationality within the space. The installations are projected in a digital environment: in the 3D model the reciprocal positions of planes and the observation point of the traveler are settled. The observer's vantage point is placed at a certain height (1,60 meters from the ground) so it can be easily viewed by a passerby of average height. Since the anamorphosis must be caught at one single glance, particular care has been taken to the visual field, in order to bring into focus all the significant





Fig. 03 - The Cubiculum of the Villa by Fannio Sinistore and the privileged view of the first anamorphic installation. (source: Greta Attademo)

elements of the scene at the same time and without marginal aberrations. 'Cubiculum', the first installation, has historical concept. It shows one of the iconic images of *Fannio Sinistore's Villa*: a bedroom in which walls are frescoed with the Second Pompeian Style. This style is characterized by scene of nature that use the trompe l'oeil in order to break down the wall illusory. The idea is not only to re-propose the view of entrance, but also to recreate the illusion of a greater space given by the frescoes. The

closure of the space is simulated only from the vantage point reproducing on the pillars the *Cubiculum's* frescoes with the anamorphic technique. Moving in different directions, it is possible to reveal the perspective illusion and to understand that the narration continues in those points invisible from the vantage one with showcases and panels that use a fast and intuitive graphic that fits into station context exactly.

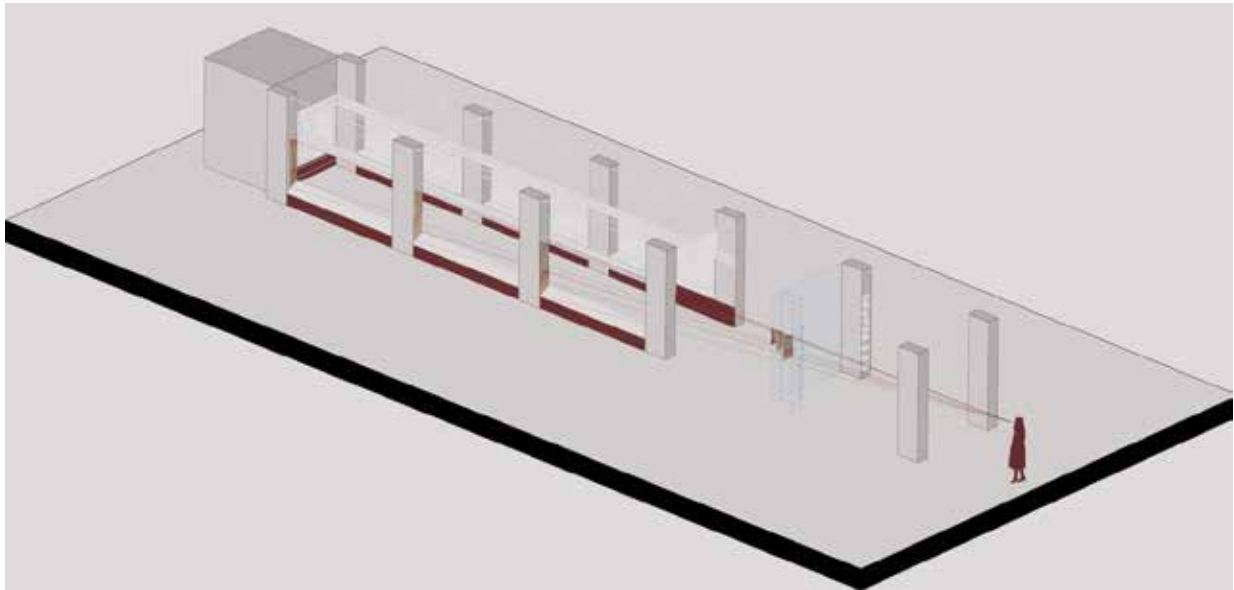


Fig. 04 - The anamorphic process applied in the first installation. (source: Greta Attademo)



Fig. 05 - Unveiling of the perspective deception and new spatial use of the first installation (source: Greta Attademo)

The second installation, '*Città degli Argenti*' has an identity feature. It uses one of the most powerful symbols of the city, the Silverware Treasure, found in the *Villa della Pisanella* at the end of the 19th century. The small size of the space between elevator and escalator creates an illusory spatial depth through an unusual perception that goes beyond the typical concept of scale. The anamor-

phic image from the vantage point is uniform and two-dimensional and it represents a cup belonging to the treasure. When moving towards it, it is easy to recognize its composition made of small metallic discs that evoke circular elements of treasure. They accentuate the spatial depth being placed on different planes.

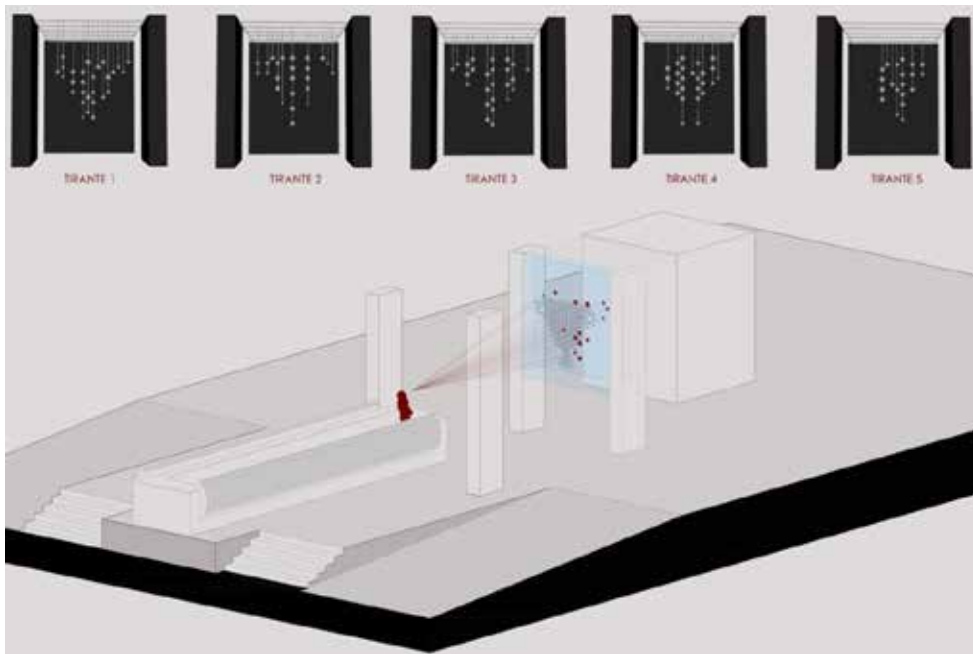


Fig. 06 - The anamorphic process applied in the second installation. (source: Greta Attademo)



Fig. 07 - Comparison between the privileged view of the second anamorphic installation and the unveiling of the perspective deception. (source: Greta Attademo)



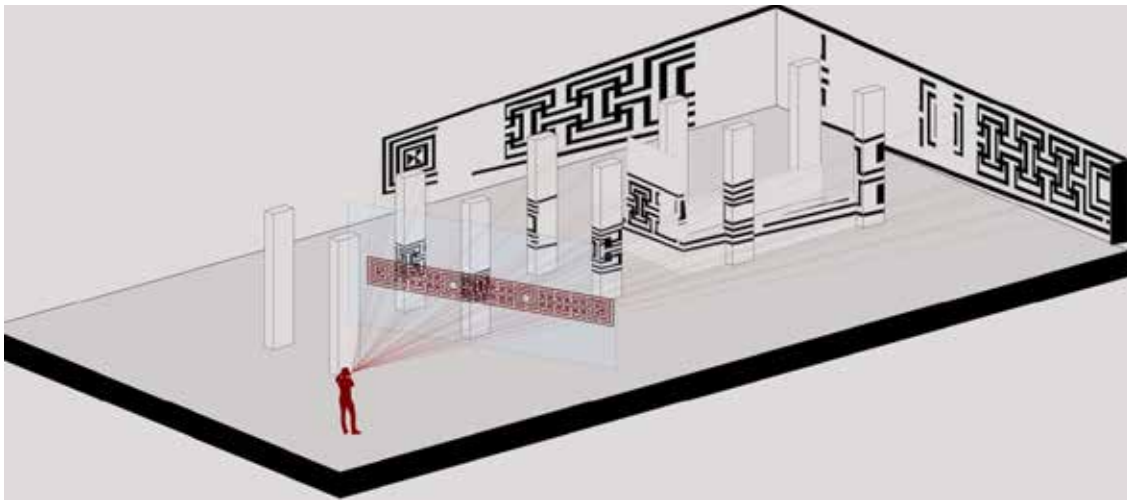


Fig. 08 - The anamorphic process applied in the third installation. (source: Greta Attademo)



Fig. 09 - Comparison between the privileged view of the third anamorphic installation and the unveiling of the perspective deception. (source: Greta Attademo)

The third installation, called '*Tessellato*', has a relational feature. The change of the angle view adopted in the new perspective vision aims reducing the feeling of being in a 'long corridor'. The anamorphosis allows creating a flat view, altering dimensions and relations between elements. The anamorphic image is the "*tessellato*", a mosaic floor from the salon of Sinistore's Villa. The mosaic is now observed from an unedited point of view to confirm the idea of vision change of the installation. Here again, hidden parts are included in a decentralized exhibition through the introduction of showcase that are used both to continue the narration in the empty space determined by the geometric process and to communicate information about the anamorphic image, tempting the observer to move in the whole space. The realization times foreseen for the three installations are short, as the mixed method used during the set-up phase first involves the use of projectors to pass from digital anamorphoses to their reproduction in physical space through strokes of color, then the construction of the materic elements on-site. The latter not only allow the quick assembly of the installations, being made up of MDF panels, tubular steel and aluminum plates, but also contribute to making low the cost of the entire intervention.

### Conclusions

The use of anamorphic installations is an excellent tool to contrast the fragmentation and the anonymity in which many no-places lie. The design of a site-specific intervention, capable of taking into account both the specificities of the place and the needs of the people who live there, can draw a new spatiality of the place fortifying its identity and its relationship with the territory. The EAV decided to finance the entire implementation because of its interest gripped by the interactive and playful features of anamorphic installations that enable the observers to understand the space with its new meanings. The Boscoreale station could be a pilot project, encouraging the realization of artistic installations also in other railway stations of that area and creating a widespread museum network with a cultural space accessible to everyone. The anamorphic installations, therefore, can constitute a valid urban acupuncture tool due to the possibility of being used on a small scale, intervening on the perception of the space and on the interactive relationship with

people, as well as advantageous for the low costs and for the times of realization.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ferrari Marco, 2016. Art for Change, Interview to BoaMistura. <https://www.artwort.com/2016/01/22/arte/street-art/art-for-change-intervista-boamistura/>

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