

Chapter 1

Proximity, Distance, Urban Space and the Human Body: An Introduction



Abstract The chapter contains a general introduction to the topics of the book against the backdrop of a reflection on the notions of proximity, distance in urban space and the effects of the pandemic. On the one hand, the text focuses on the bodily dimension of how we experience the city. On the other hand, it looks at the link between the construction of proximity spaces and the attempt to contrast social and spatial inequalities. The general objectives of the book and its structure are defined in this context.

Cities have long been places for experimenting with forms of proximity and practices of distancing. On the one hand, urban settlements have been characterised by the density of human bodies and relations from their most distant origin. They are places where diverse activities and functions and different social groups come together in a shared space. On the other hand, owing precisely to this plurality of sites, functions and people, cities present multiple forms of distancing, internal boundaries, enclosures and thresholds, which divide activities and populations.

Proximity and distance are thus two constituent dimensions that coexist in urban space: we cannot be close without assigning a scale to distance, intended primarily as the threshold between bodies and the possibility for fertile encounters between different people.

The Covid-19 pandemic, if we think carefully, induced us to think above all in terms of the dialectic between constrained proximity (but not cancelled, as this would be impossible) and distance, challenging both architecture and urbanism to occupy a threshold between these two poles.

This twofold nature of urban space, this continuous oscillation between density and distance, proximity and separation, has become the fundamental trait of the contemporary city. As Ash Amin tells us, it is increasingly more a “land of strangers” (Amin 2012), where diverse populations with little in common share spaces (beginning with public ones) in a continuous renegotiation of possibilities to encounter one another. As Louis Wirth was well aware, the simplest definition of the city refers precisely to this density, potentially conflictual, between different people: “For sociological purposes a city may be defined as a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals. Based on the postulates which this

minimal definition suggests, a theory of urbanism may be formulated in the light of existing knowledge concerning social groups” (Wirth 1938: 8).

This heterogeneity has brought new forms of proximity concerning the growing pervasiveness of information technologies and communication to the contemporary city. Never as now, and never as during the Covid-19 pandemic, have we experienced the relevance of what Melvin Webber referred to as “communities without propinquity” (Webber 1963). However, this in no way signifies, as we shall amply demonstrate in this book, a loss in the importance of physical proximity: instead, it weaves together diverse forms of relations, some remote, mediated for example, by social media and more comprehensively by the network in which we are all increasingly enmeshed.

In other words, proximity, both material and virtual, alludes to the contemporary city and the complex issue of a possible coexistence, in a context witness to the radical pluralisation of forms of life (Pasqui 2018). Furthermore, proximity alludes to the difficulty in recognising principles of coexistence based on references to pre-constituted identities and communities.

The simultaneous presence of proximity and distance is thus a principal ingredient of the city’s essence. What is more, it also depends on the fact that, as human beings, we experience the city through the physicality of our bodies. There is more: bodies involved in practices of proximity are also ‘theatrical bodies’ that act in urban space as if on stage. Through encounters, through the forms of social interaction that characterise public life, these ‘theatrical bodies’ follow different scripts, some mandatory, some free and spontaneous, forming the meaning of urban spaces and transforming spaces into places.

The relations that occur in public, to cite Erving Goffman, are an integral part of life in the city, of that “everyday life as representation” that defines how we inhabit places and social and spatial relations, the “rituals of interaction” that connote and constitute them (Goffman 1959).

We are thus human bodies that encounter the body of the city. We have always known this, and we have verified it with particular urgency during the now lengthy time during which the pandemic forced us to remain separated and isolated. Reflecting on the link between the pandemic and the city means reflecting on spaces and bodies, along with a debate on relations between space and society that is anything but simplistic (Pasqui 2022).

If we adopt a Spinozian perspective, each body is a pattern, an extremely complex set of bodies composed in accordance with multiple relations. The human body is organised according to variable and shifting links traversed by a myriad of other bodies. The bacteria that inhabit our body, that compose it, are as heavy as our brains. The virus that changed our lives is merely another body that decomposes essential relations within our bodies. In short, an unpleasant encounter.

Similarly, the city is an assemblage of bodies: buildings, open spaces, streets and squares, infrastructures, technological services, plants, animals, clean air and suspended particles, networks and information. Bodies create variable compositions between one another and with our bodies. Bodies that are more or less malleable and more or less porous: once again, good encounters and unpleasant encounters.

This is how we inhabit urban space: encountering other bodies, some presenting resistance, others offering purchase, composing our body within the space it occupies, in its bottleneck, its plurality, with urban bodies and the multiple populations that cross and use the city (Pasqui 2008). When an encounter is good, our strength is increased; when it is unpleasant, it is diminished.

How then are we to imagine the design of urban space, particularly proximity spaces and sharing, within a similar perspective? How are we to imagine the action of a project when we intend primarily to foster positive encounters? What can we do to simplify positive encounters, knowing that not everything depends on us and that unpleasant encounters, tripping hazards, violence, viruses and catastrophes remain possible and largely unpredictable?

A reflection on the proximity spaces begins with the need to discover our existence in urban space, in public, in front of others. We must describe and imagine our ordinary and everyday habits of encountering others and coexisting in the spaces of the city, knowing it is above all in public proximity spaces that the quality of our encounters can improve, that potential conflicts can find composure here.

How then are we to imagine spaces open to what is possible; spaces that do not bridle and regulate the body but offer footholds and occasions for practices of proximity? The first step is precisely the construction of a different way of thinking about how we design public space. It is a question of imagining public space as a space that corresponds with the moment and with the injunction of the plurality of forms of life, with flexible space. If we seek a correspondence with this moment, we must imagine public space as a space open to many different uses, to unpredictable possibilities. The concept of ‘openness,’ to unforeseen events, nonetheless presents different shades. An ‘open’ space could initially be intended as versatile: an object is versatile when it can be used in many different ways, when it lends itself, in virtue of its conformation, performance and structure, to diverse uses. A ‘versatile’ space permits only certain possibilities for use, but obviously excludes others. On the other hand, open space can be ‘vague’, undefined, in the sense it does not strictly prefigure any particular use, as it lacks complete and designed qualities. Vagueness and versatility have the potential to be contradictory. To be versatile, a space may need to be heavily designed and planned; while a space can be vague even when it is weakly designed, or not planned at all. What equilibrium must architects identify when playing with the line between versatility and vagueness, leaving room for that openness that favours the freedom and innovativeness of practices? How are we to interpret this moment in design, knowing that in any case the body requires footholds and resistances in order for it to inhabit urban space and to dance within it? How does the gap between vagueness and versatility, between suspension and active modification through design, permit us to offer the body, literally, that openness that allows for a possible coexistence? Perhaps coexistence needs to be imagined in the sense of the *cum*, what the Italian philosopher Carlo Sini called “co-possible aggregation” (Sini and Pasqui 2020).

There is another aspect to consider: the question of proximity is not politically neutral because it has solid ties with social justice. The reflection on the 15-min city—developed during the pandemic though rooted in thinking on the disciplines

of urban planning—demonstrates the need to reinvent proximity spaces in a context capable of radically reducing socio-spatial inequalities, the gaps between parts of the city, where services and facilities and the performance of open public spaces are severely asymmetrical.

An example: the most drastic effects of the pandemic have been suffered by those living in poor conditions and those with access to limited or poor quality open spaces. In substance, the pandemic only radicalised the forms of socio-spatial inequality affecting all cities in Italy and Europe, within the more general framework of the inequalities that have characterised the Western world over the past fifty years (Piketty 2015).

In this context, design has become decisive to the construction of proximity spaces which assume this complexity and this plurality. Spaces capable of supporting possibilities for fertile interaction among diverse opportunities for socialisation and platforms for contrasting spatial injustices.

These conceptual frameworks support the strength that returns in this book, which proposes a rediscovery of the design of proximity spaces, beginning with what we have learned and continue to learn from the terrible pandemic experience, and from a concrete example of urban design.

Once again, this is not a new topic: the tradition of urban planning offers multiple examples for the study of proximity spaces. Nonetheless, it seems evident that the pandemic urges us to change our point of view and undertake new experiments in design.

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and several consequent reflections on the future of cities (Cannata 2020; Nuvolati and Spanu 2020; Ardenne and Femia 2021), have recentred interests on the concept of proximity (Manzini 2021; Pellegrini 2012). Proximity intended as both the relationship between communities and urban functions, and as relations among people, built spaces and open spaces. An historic and fertile field of interest for Anglo-Saxon and Northern European urban studies (Giedion 1941; Cullen 1961), manifestly represented in Italy by the policies and resulting neighbourhoods of the INA Casa¹ (Di Biagi 2001; Pilat 2019), a spatial and social programme that appeared to have been surpassed by the styles and rhythms of life in the contemporary city. In parallel, an ‘action research’ developed by the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DASU) at Politecnico di Milano² reached its conclusion. The research concentrated on contextualizing the stations of the new M4 metro line to produce a proposal that would join flows with places and long-range networks with local ones. The goal hinged on the idea of transforming

¹ The INA Casa programme was a post-war housing plan promoted by the Italian State to build some two million units. It takes its name from the *Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni*, National Insurance Institute, which funded the programme.

² The research, entrusted to the DASU by the City of Milan and Metropolitane Milanese SpA, was articulated in two phases (2017–2018 and 2019) and developed by a Research Group coordinated by Gabriele Pasqui and composed of Paolo Beria, Paolo Galuzzi, Francesco Infussi, Antonio A. Longo, Laura Montedoro, Laura Pogliani, Paola Pucci, Piergiorgio Vitillo; and by an Operative Unit composed of Lucia Bocchimuzzi, Marika Fior, Filippo Oppimitti.

these new stations into regenerative urban thresholds, platforms for enabling environmental systems, systems of settlement and infrastructures in the neighbourhoods of the city crossed by the new metro line (Fior et al. 2019).

When the pandemic focused attention on the core theme of this reconsideration of the stations of the new M4 line and their context, at different scales, it assumed new meanings concerning the unprecedented situation raised by Covid-19 for anyone dealing with urban spaces and services. Returning to the consideration of the new metro stations in the wake of the pandemic makes it possible to relaunch a reflection anchored to the design of proximity spaces.

This book has been written to foster a return to considering the theme of proximity and the relations it generates in the urban fabrics of the contemporary city by borrowing the contents and results of the aforementioned research. The theme of neighbourhoods returns powerfully in interpretations of the contemporary city after last appearing during the 1950s and '60s as an alternative to sprawling development and as a representative, though not exclusive, component of public initiative. That said, even the city's quarters face social, demographic and spatial decomposition and processes of fragmentation, which any urban project must be able to incorporate and deal with.

On the other hand, large infrastructures, such as Milan's new M4 metro line, (Fig. 1.1) are also an occasion for rethinking the city in its entirety. The possible connections between open spaces and systems of landscaping lining new Green and Blue Infrastructures (GBI), assuming the plural identities of the urban space traversed by this infrastructure, as an important platform for redesigning the proximity spaces.

Substantially, the study related to the M4 offered a privileged vantage point for a broader and more articulated reflection on proximity-centred design strategies for urbanism.

The thesis supported here is that the challenge of restarting immediately after the pandemic by focusing on a new and different urbanity is difficult though possible. However, only under the condition of coherence and integration of strategies and actions in the programming of urban transformations, coupled with innovation in the field of regulations, and an interweaving of issues of welfare, public space, active communities, slow connections, health and urban safety, the environment, and sustainable tourism.

The overarching objective of this book is the proposition of a vision of contemporary dwelling based on a renewed form of proximity and the values it brings. Values that, on the one hand, consider the need to build more just cities, in which services and facilities are distributed across the city and, on the other hand, the need to reimagine proximity spaces considering the complex dialectic between distance and new practices of sharing.

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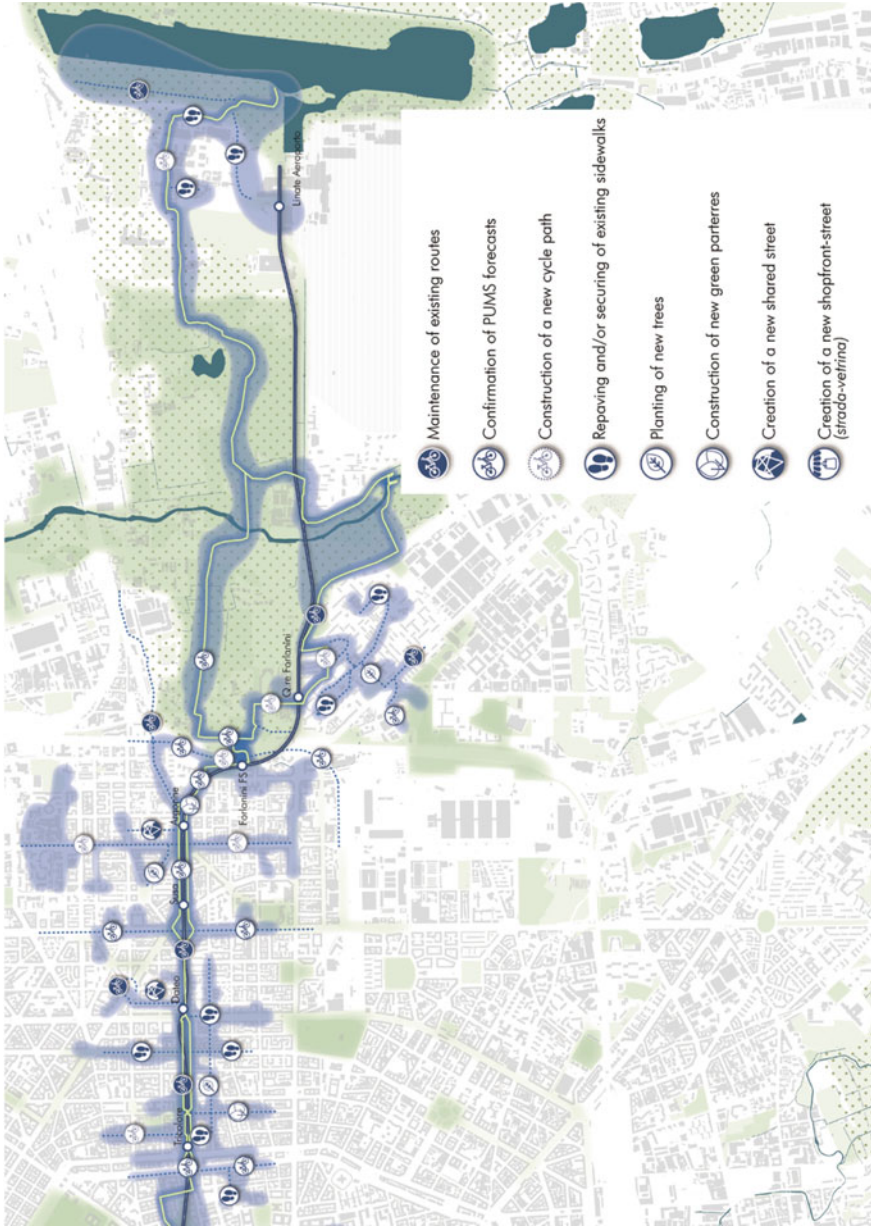


Fig. 1.1 (continued)