

18<sup>TH</sup> INURA MEETING -ATHENS 3-10 OKTOBER 2008  
ABSTRACTS

PLANNING HUMAN CONTACT

I will try to concentrate around the regulative or restrictive role that the concept of “user”, implemented by planners or architects, has in the case of public space. The meaning of this concept is usually laid down solely by definitions and descriptions and is strongly grounded around a static conception of identity. This definition is often inadequate to make clear what the term means or signifies, and contributes to the continuance of “naive” perceptions that obscure the understanding of inhabiting space. Using the meaning of human contact as a point of departure, I would like to seek unaccountable aspects in the production of public space and its meaning, that could be drawn around the following point: what is the meaning of human contact implied by projects of development, to whom is space of contact addressed by designers or architects, and, how can we grasp the role of spatial contiguity within this context?

The prototypical reference, that grounds the meaning of **human contact** in common terms, amounts to, in my view, being able to communicate or interact. Human contact is considered here in the large sense of a dynamic mental activity, both cognitive and symbolic, an alternative to -or a complementary to -acting out or reacting. Not making a contact means not taking into account the meaning conferred to a word or an act by its actor. At a basic level, therefore, contact -and the lack of it- is connected with experiences familiar to everyone or at least easy to imagine, such as to socialize or associate with someone, to reach out, or to be shut off, activities that take place in the sphere of public space. The space of human contact is the actual social space wherein language becomes practice, where contacts acquire and/or produce meaning through the recombination, activation and mobilisation of static points in space and in time, and thus they create unexpected effects. In this direction what comes forth is the meaning of “public” space as a place of a continuous flow of contacts and accidental meetings or events in time. The flow of contacts could be read as a different mechanism of producing meaning and underlines the cultural as well as the political dimension of space –which is usually neglected by economic interpretations of behaviour. The notion of reaching out and/or “touching” things with its implication of self-presence, which is contained in human contact, brings us closer to the concept of experience of space, and it can enrich our understanding on the mediating role that space has in the development of cultural values held by individuals or communities. While challenging the prefixed conception of the “user” and his/ hers identity applied by architects and planners, it brings into question instrumental or epistemological principles which define classical engineering (such as those that refer to the idea that a project cannot take form without the initial definition of needs). The study of human contact could reintroduce the importance of the role that single individuals can fulfil in given projects of urban development, that have often ignored their potential and draw mainly upon organizational and management systems.

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