

## The Affective Meaning of Neighbourhood

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**Abstract.** Three examples of places appropriated by inhabitants of a popular neighbourhood-situated on the outskirts of Venice (Italy) serve to illustrate how affective bonds grow between dwellers and their neighbourhood. The affective meaning of neighbourhood is defined in terms of the manner it fosters the identity of its inhabitants by providing spatially located symbols or a symbolic charge that is inherent to some specific public places of the neighbourhood: arcades, the surelevated entrance to a bar and the wharf where the ferry from and to the mainland arrives and departs, are described and analysed in terms of the inhabitants' psychological experience.

**Key words :** neighbourhood, identity, symbol, affective meaning, public spaces.

### 1. Introduction

The neighbourhood of Sacca Fisola is situated at the western end of Giudecca island, in front of the historical centre of Venice (Italy). Its choice for an observational study of public places in a neighbourhood satisfied many of the criteria that we had set for such a study.<sup>1</sup> We mention those that seem relevant for our argument :

- the limits of the neighbourhood correspond to the physical limits of the island. The neighbourhood's boundaries are thus clearly defined, even for its inhabitants;

—Socially speaking, the population of the island is rather homogeneous to contain groups with a specific internal cohesion. Yet, everyone identifies with the status of an inhabitant;

—Sacca Fisola was built in 1958-1968. The three to five storey constructions are thus relatively recent. They are situated at the periphery of a large city—Venice. The purpose in building Sacca Fisola was to offer subsidized dwellings to part of the working population. This, by the way, is the origin of a large number of peripheral

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1. The empirical data were collected and a separate report subsidized by Unesco was produced jointly by M. J. Dozio, P. Feddersen, L. Chenu and the author as part of a larger research comparing three workingclass neighbourhoods. This article published in French in *Annales de la recherche urbaine*, no. 17, as well as a lengthier study published as a book in French were made possible by the Dr. Donald Cooper Funds.

neighbourhoods built after the war and much depreciated today;

—Sacca Fisola has a reputation as a slum.

To sum up : Sacca Fisola is easily delimited as a neighbourhood and its anonymous constructions at the periphery of a large town are exemplary for a situation often found within the urban environment.

The word *Sacca* means 'place where water enters and forms a sort of stead'. Sacca Fisola, at first a marshy place, became over the centuries a true island through the accumulation of detritus and construction material from the city of Venice.

At the end of the last century it became possible to cultivate the island. A small industrial plant was also built there and later an electrical transformer.

As Venice was being increasingly confronted with problems related to the job market and to the availability of lodging, the authorities became interested in the island : an urban plan was prepared in 1942 under the responsibility of the Istituto fascista autonomo per le case popolari della provincia di Venezia. Several propositions were put forward : they concerned a global planification of the island with the explicit purpose of building popular dwellings. The planners aimed at recreating the atmosphere of Venice, while using modern construction means. These propositions were not concretized.

In 1956, a new committee responsible for the plan examined three new projects concerning the island; they took up the themes developed in 1942 and, again, aimed at building popular dwellings for the working class. In order to avoid erecting a dormitory city, several socio-cultural and leisure equipments were planned for the neighbourhood. However, as

early as the implementation stage, the centre for social activities, the movie theatre, the professional school, the sport equipments and the idea of implanting small industries were abandoned. The construction of the dwellings began in 1958 and was carried on in stages until 1968.

In its final version the urban plan of Sacca Fisola does not refer to the urban structure of Venice : it is based on an orthogonal system. The three to five storey constructions are often isolated, or else grouped together and organized around yards. They are separated from each other by small streets. The main square of the neighbourhood is situated in the centre of the island : the Campo della Chiesa, that groups the church, the parish, the kindergarten, the dispensary as well as the shops. On the south side of this space is a channel that separates Sacca Fisola from three small islands. One of these is now used for treatment of household waste from Venice. In Sacca Fisola about 35% of the planned surface has never been built and this explains the presence of many lonely walls and several abandoned grounds.

Most of the inhabitants of the island were originally young couples with modest salaries that had been waiting for a long time to get their own apartment. Twenty years later, the population has stabilized and the children who have grown on the island consider themselves as coming from Sacca Fisola.

There are practically no opportunities for working in the neighbourhood. The island witnesses every morning the departure of practically all of its active inhabitants, with the exception of a few shopkeepers and teachers who work in the neighbourhood. All workers leave Sacca Fisola and use the ferry *vaporetto* in order to reach, either Venice, or, for the

majority, Marghera, the industrial town situated on the main land.

*Sacca* also means cul-de-sac: this would probably be the appropriate denomination for the island, given its isolation. Today planners in Venice admit, "if it had to be done again", *Sacca Fisola* would not be built. The neighbourhood is close to the historical city: planners would rather use it as a resort for tourism. This might also explain why *Sacca Fisola* has been really left to itself by the authorities.

## 2. Places and Symbols

Our study centres on the everyday relation of *Sacca Fisola*'s inhabitants with their habitat. It thus explores in a more precise way the affective meaning of public spaces of the neighbourhood for its inhabitants. The empirical data has been collected during a two months' stay in the neighbourhood, during the spring. We collected observational data, conducted formal interviews and informal conversations with the inhabitants, and obtained information from official sources. The analysis tries to make explicit the affective meaning of certain places for inhabitants, requiring that we also take into account unconscious factors.

Two concepts in particular have been of use for this analysis. The first one is that of 'identity'. Identity is defined along two axes: time and adhesion. The identity of an inhabitant with respect to his or her neighbourhood changes over time but it also has continuity. Identity is experienced between two extremes: emotional "fusion" with the neighbourhood or total rejection of it. The second concept that has been applied for the analysis is 'symbol' as defined by Jung: "the best possible expression at the moment for a fact as yet unknown

or only relatively known" (Jung 1976, p. 475). Fact stands here for something psychological. Jung adds elsewhere that symbols "make possible the irrational union of opposites" (Jung, 1969, p. 468). Hence, we propose the following relationship between identity and symbol: places that feed the inhabitant's identity in his relation to his neighbourhood contain a symbolic charge and may hence be viewed as symbols.

Thus, our analysis of the affective meaning of public places in a neighbourhood for its inhabitants implies localizing and describing places that promote feelings of attachment and detachment. When this continuum is broken up, that is, when a place is but the support of a fusion with the neighbourhood or the support of its total rejection, then this place is not any longer charged symbolically. Methodologically speaking, the researcher's problem is to connect with the inhabitants the phenomena that the study is believed to define. We have discussed this question in detail elsewhere (Noschis 1987); it will suffice here to mention that we believe the crucial element to be less that of explaining tensions than the expliciting of what goes on in the participant observer himself when he is in the public places of the neighbourhood. In discussions with the inhabitants it then become possible to extend this type of description to their own experience.

Jung stresses: "A symbol really lives only when it is the best and highest expression for something divined but not yet known to the observer. It then compels his unconscious participation and has a life giving and life-enhancing effect." (Jung 1976, p. 476). The symbol does not only synthesize what has been experienced but continues to enliven the present through what it anticipates. This is

the irrational aspect of the symbol, its way of talking to the unconscious. Given that architecture in Sacca Fisola is formally poor, it might be more appropriate in this case to talk about a symbolic charge associated with places rather than about materialized symbols. With Jung, we may further stress that the central distinction is between living and dead symbols: the first type continues to act upon us, the latter has been entirely given to consciousness, it has outlived itself. In Sacca Fisola, if the fact of being in certain places at certain times continues to animate the inhabitants and to give life to their attachment to their neighbourhood, it becomes important to discover what they may feel in these places and how their unconscious takes part in these events.

For purely functional reasons, a first condition must be filled in such places: the person must be allowed to recognize him or herself in her or his apparent role—that is, they must be able to feel at ease on the “front stage”.

With Goffman (1971), we may say that being on the public scene can be compared with acting on stage; this is also the first meaning of the term *persona*. The physical environment has to sustain such manifest roles that are crucial in structuring identity.

We suggest that the most important tension related to the identity of inhabitants in their relationship to their neighbourhood is the opposition between the desire to be one with the neighbourhood and the desire to part from it. In order that this interplay of feelings be lived, a ‘play’ that structures the identity of the inhabitant—it is necessary to be able to define one’s situation and to occupy a place on the scene of the neighbourhood. In this respect, architecture becomes the scene and the physical support for identity. Even the inhabitant who rejects the role that he is

assigned by tradition needs a frame. This frame needs to be as explicit as possible, in order to serve as a reference and to show the distance between frame and individuals. We are going to show how Sacca Fisola offers a scene for roles to be adopted and in this sense encourages the play of identity.

If the existence of an architectural support of a functional order is guaranteed, then the symbolic might live and even become actually concretized. Durand reminded us, in his *Précis des leçons d’architecture* (1817), that this is a fundamental aspect: he stressed that it is the use of space that has to preside over the conception of public spaces. For instance, he suggested that arcades substitute all “childish things with which one pretends to decorate and to make beautiful.” “Thus disposition and the conveniences”—convenience is to be understood here in its old meaning of what is adequate for the user—“rather than forms and proportions” guide the architect. According to Durand, this is how the architect may rival with Greeks and Romans. This he can not achieve by simply imitating decorations unrelated to use.

When referring to symbol, one therefore refers to affect, something that is beyond rationality, alive by its very ambiguity. This is how it makes possible the play of identity. It also constitutes itself through history and within history. It is thus dependent on those who recognize it, who take part in it (Lévi-Strauss 1962). (Referring to the works of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss notes that the animal becomes totemic if it is good for food. This is the view that we follow here).

The history we have in mind reaches beyond the simple individual biography. It is the fruit of the cohort of generations. In the

specific case of architectural symbols, life habits and visions of life intermingle through a continuous exchange in time. Thus the historical centre of Venice displays for its inhabitants forms that have reached or maintained an adequate symbolic resonance throughout history. In this respect Sacca Fisola can only offer allusions. But they might make it possible for its inhabitants to project on its simple and rough facades what is explicitly and richly expressed in Venice.

We discuss three examples below: The arcades on the square or *campo*: the bar in particular the two steps that separate its floor level from that of the *campo*; and the pier for the *vaporetti* (ferries) with two constructions—a bar and a kiosk—built next to the waiting-room. These examples show the articulation between everyday life and the symbolic. They demonstrate how what the inhabitants experience might charge these places with a meaning that reaches far beyond the functionality that their conception aimed at.

### 3. The Arcades

In the historical centre of Venice there are only two public spaces that are bordered by a wealth of arcades: one is San Marco, the political and religious centre; the other is Rialto, the economical and commercial centre. In Venice, the arcades are thus found only in exceptional places and take on a particular meaning by characterizing the most important public places of the urban web.

Huge arcades extend all around the square of San Marco and the *piazzetta* that occupy the bottom-level of the Dukes' Palace, the Tower of the clock, the old and the new *procure* and the library of San Sovino. Originally the sumptuous aspect of the colonnades

simultaneously stressed the solemnity and the official character of these places. Today these arcades also serve as a frame for luxury shops, travel agencies, big cafés with their orchestras and small souvenir shops. Yet, the slow atmosphere characteristic in time of Canaletto still prevails: one is pleased to walk about, to stop for conversation and to look at the passers-by or at the windows in an interplay of shadows and tents.

A particularity of the spaces situated under the arcades, is also that they provide protected place for informal meetings of passers-by. In antique Greece arcades were the social and political centre of town. We know that the philosophical school of stoicians derives its name from the walks that master Zenon and his scholars took while philosophizing under the arcades, the *stoa* or colonnade of the Greeks. (On arcades see Rudolfsky 1969.)

Arcades are a well-known element in architectural language. They create an atmosphere by a play of interpenetrations: public and private, exterior and interior, exposed and protected, light and shadow.

Although Venice's arcades are few, the city offers a large number of covered passages and gates (*porteghi* and *sottoporteghi*) where the space is characterized by the same interpenetrations. But they are more intimate: the spectacle is more modest and the encounters more private.

This reference might be useful for an analysis of the arcades in Sacca Fisola. A series of arcades has been built at the floor level of one of the constructions situated on the *campo*; but they have been reduced to a merely formal essence. These arcades house the shops of the island,

The architecture of these arcades is poor; but it serves a practical function : umbrella in winter, parasol in summer. At the same time, the covered space marks a protected territory in front of every shop : the shopkeepers might thus display their ware in front of their windows, gaining some space and better attracting clients. When business is quiet, the shopkeepers might sit down on chairs in front of their shops; they can then follow the life under the arcades as well as one the whole *campo*, and chat or talk to passers-by.

From eight o'clock a.m., but particularly between ten, and twelve, women do their shopping; some shopping will be done after the siesta in the late afternoon. During these moments, but especially in the morning, the arcades are place of meeting, a place of exchange between women, shopkeepers and clients, mothers and children; the children will use the smooth surface under the arcades for rollerskating or for skating-boards. The life under the arcades then stands in sharp contrast to the deserted *campo*.

The arcades of Sacca Fisola have a rigid, rectangular form and they are three and a half metres high. They harbour intensive activity, i.e. they are adequate as a functional support for activities : shops can extend outside, outside games can be played under the arcades, public encounters may become personal and secret meetings. Today, the inhabitants—in particular women shopping—consider this place as a territory that share. The protection and the physical limits offered by the arcades set this space apart from the rest of the *campo*.

We have mentioned the essential contrasts that arcades reveal : light and shadow, exposition and protection, exterior and interior. These dimensions contrast but they are also

complementary at a psychological level, helping the individual recognize his own destiny. By rendering concrete the conflict between two contrasting dimensions and, more particularly, by delimiting the places where they interpenetrate, where interior and exterior compete, while simultaneously coexisting, arcades offer themselves as a symbol. In order that this be experienced by users, it is necessary that the space is appropriated, filled with a history that testifies to this ambiguity. As some among all the public places of the island, the arcades are more specifically charged with the shared memories of women : shopping, sharing, discussions, disputes, conflicts in an evolving everyday life that the inhabitants have built during years of cohabitation in this protected space.

There is a tension between what is, and what is not, integrated. Arcades become the reflection of man's psyche, a way of spatializing it; they are protection from blind impulses, but are simultaneously exposed to these forces. With respect to arcades, the symbol, "that which is anticipated but not yet recognized", contains both the desire to open oneself to what is outside and the need to be protected from total exposition. The identity of the inhabitant with respect to his neighbourhood is situated precisely within this conflict, alternating between memories and emotional experiences attached to the two opposed poles, between feeling part of the community and feeling apart from it.

#### 4. The Gianni Bar and its steps

The Gianni Bar is one of the three cafés situated on the Sacca Fisola's square. It is on the northern side of the *campo*, at the most important point of access to it. Men have taken the habit of moving from one café to the other during the day.

Strategically, the Gianni Bar is well situated because, from it, it is easy to follow what is happening on the *campo*. Bars are places where one comes to know events taking place in the neighbourhood, or to read death announcements and lottery results posted on their walls. But—and this is much more important—it is also the place for gossiping and for discussing soccer and politics.

All through the day, men who don't work meet at the rear of the bar for playing cards and drinking a few glasses of wine. At aperitif hours, small groups gather next to the bar and the card playing gets more intense.

Women are seldom seen. Some women come by to call their husband for dinner. The freezer next to the entrance is the children's place: here, they select and buy their ice-cream. If father is in the bar, they may take the opportunity of asking him to pay for it. A flipper placed next to the freezer is the meeting place for the adolescents; while they are playing, they may look through the bay window at what is happening on the *campo*.

The entrance to the bar is, in itself, a privileged place: two steps elevate the bar slightly with respect to the *campo*, allowing people who stand there to follow events, to greet those who get into the bar, while keeping posted on what is going on inside the bar. The door is closed during the winter but it is always open in the summer.

Although they do not refer directly to steps, Alexander and his collaborators (1977) insist on the importance of the limits that separate and that connect a construction to its environment.

A construction is part of the town, part of the life of the people who live around

it. People like to gather close to a construction, along the borders of a square, along a wall: they thus contribute to the insertion of the construction into its context if the limits of the construction do invite people to stay there. By its horizontal irregularities, the limit might offer protection or some corners for stopping and standing in the shadow, for observing while having one's back protected. In the case of the Gianni Bar, the difference in level offers the possibility of being slightly above others, in a dominant position. This architectural detail connects the construction with its environment. It invites passers-by to stop and observe the *campo* and to take part in them in a privileged manner. Men who gather in the bar often stop and stand on this step and their attitude is meaningful: the steps are a stage for the masculine role. From morning until the bar closes, there is almost always someone on the steps who will exchange a word with the passers-by and participate in observing and commenting life of the *campo*. This is particularly evident during the walk *passeggiata* in the late afternoon, when the *campo* is especially rich in activities.

It is its context—the strategic situation of the bar—as well as its scene—a masculine place for meeting and exchanging opinions—and its continued use throughout the history of the neighbourhood that has charged the bar symbolically. This is particularly so for the steps leading to it, although at first sight they may appear architecturally negligible. The entrance to the Gianni Bar is a privileged place, a pedestal from where one dominates and where one is respected. The symbolic charge and the historical allusion that it materializes may be summarized by reference to a throne. It is a symbol of glory and elevation: the god-like right of the king, authority

and its divine origin. The steps and getting on to them mark symbolically the progression towards power, the elevation towards the sky. These references to the symbolism of the pedestal (which is also a reminder of the elevations in the historical centre of Venice, where differences in level are richly expressed by a varied and manyfold architecture) indicate the momentary feeling of achievement that one might have in dominating what is happening on the *campo*, a feeling that may translate into an experience of taking part in the divine.

Identity is tied here to the intensity of this feeling, on the steps of the bar by the man who stands there. To the extent that he has the impression of taking part in the divine, he is one with his neighbourhood—he can love it from his superiority; simultaneously, to the extent that he feels alien to the scene, it will incite him to stress his distance from the neighbourhood. The social dimensions of encounter remains central to the neighbourhood bar, but its strategical position, as well as its fittings, may contribute in reinforcing its role as a support for identity.

##### 5. The Wharf

Venice and the main islands of its lagoon are serviced by a communal network of ferries, the *vaporetti*. In Venice it is the most commonly used means of transportation. Wharfs are placed at key points of access, be it on the islands or in the historical centre. In the latter case, they are situated all around the island and along the main channels, notably the Canal Grande. The ferry network guarantees relatively easy access to all main points of the city.

In Sacca Fisola the wharf of the *vaporetti* is served regularly. It is placed on the Canale della Giudecca, in front of Venice's historical

centre. The waiting room and the bridge are next to the ticket. There is also a bar, a news-stand, a phone booth and a mailbox.

Every morning from 6.30 a. m., a third of the 2500 inhabitants leave Sacca Fisola to go to work on the mainland. Those who leave take the *vaporetto* to the historical centre of Venice or, in many cases, to the industrial centres on the mainland. Men like to wait for the ferry in front of the news-stand, reading their daily papers, or next to the small access to the bridge. The few women who leave early in the morning wait inside the waiting room and talk together. Late in the morning, other women will leave for Venice to do their shopping and some youngsters will go to where they are doing an apprenticeship. At noon, those who work in Venice come back for lunch before returning once more to their job. In the early afternoon some women leave again for Venice. The return to Sacca Fisola takes place after six p. m.

In the morning and in the evening, at the times when the inhabitants go to their work or come back, the wharf is very alive and becomes the focal point on the island: it is a place for meeting and talking, a glass or a coffee, for buying a newspaper and browsing in it. Two announcement stalls give informations about reunions of the neighbourhood committee, public assemblies or about the political parties' positions on the larger problems of the country. They cannot be overlooked by the passengers coming from the *vaporetti* and are thus strategically well placed.

A small coffee bar is placed so that clients can follow and anticipate the arrival of the ferry. The news-stand is also close to the wharf and one is almost compelled to look at the headlines when walking past it. These constructions have been built after the bridge and

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the wharf itself, but they were designed with respect to the main activity of the place—waiting for the arrival of the ferries. The various places are used and occupied daily: men and women have become accustomed to using the place in a certain way.

Symbolically, the wharf is the point where the crossing starts and where it ends, a dual place, but also an ambiguous place, a place of attraction and repulsion. Generally speaking the wharf marks symbolically the passage from one world to another. An epical example of such a passage is given to us by Eneas—in Virgil's epic poem, when in the company of Sibylla, he descended to meet his dead father in the world of Shadows, of Sleep and of Night. After Charon has carried them across the river, to the bank of the dead, they have to face the monster Cerberus.

Eneas throws Cerberus seeds and honey—themselves symbols of protection and peace—and is thus able to calm the monster down. The myth stresses that one enters only if one knows the gesture, the offer that opens the access. The entry to the world of death may be viewed as the description of all entries into the unknown.

The wharf is such a place, an entrance and a time of tensions that one has to be able to face. This is also the symbolic message of many porches and pavements of wharf in the laguna. They are richly ornated and were intended to put people in touch with the place that they were going to reach or to leave. For example, on islands such as San Michele, San Giorgio Maggiore or San Servolo, the wharf is situated on a separate place, outside the walls that define the constructions of the island. All visitors are thus forced to enter through a porch or by marching on a decorated pavement. In the case of the islands of

the Venitian lagoon, the message will be one of welcome and protection but, by the same token, it will evoke the opposite feelings of mystery, insecurity and adventure.

In today's touristical Venice all wharfs are surrounded by souvenir shops, automatic distributors, news-stands and gondoliers or porters waiting for tourists. Thus, whereas the point of access carries a heritage from traditions dating back from before the *vaporetti*, present day business connected with mass tourism hides the message of the pavement in front of the wharf, the steps and the columns that constitute it. The modern version of the symbolic message—now carried by the stands is no longer addressed to the inhabitants or to those who come to penetrate the secrets of a place. It is received in the context of the mass tourism now dominating the economy of the historical centre.

However, in Sacca Fisola there is no evident trace of pavements, nor of porches, nor of souvenir stands. It is a neighbourhood that has no historical past nor touristical present. Consequently, it has no need to greet people nor to mark their arrival or to show respect or protection. However, in Sacca Fisola the wharf does function. We thus see it as endorsed with a symbolic charge while the inhabitants experience feeling close to the ones that been described above.

Psychologically speaking, the wharf is the door of the shelter that one has to be able to open in order to leave, but it is also the door through which it is good to be able to come back—at least as long as one has reasons for attachments. One of the conflicts inherent to this place—at times of waiting, while savouring a coffee, reading the news headlines or looking at the *vaporetto* across the channel with people from elsewhere—is related to the

difference between being part of a clearly defined neighbourhood, albeit isolated and peripheral, and the extension of the world on the other side of the Canale della Guidecca. It is a conflict between the limited and the unlimited, between what might be dominated and what cannot be dominated, a contradiction between aspiration and reality.

Waiting for the *vaporetto* lasts for only brief instants in a day and conversation with others might further reduce their length. Yet, for the inhabitant of the island, these instants are a reminder of his being part of his neighbourhood. There will be days when his wish to create a distance will be stronger, and others when he finds it difficult to leave. The position chosen on the wharf, posture and gestures also refer to such feelings. Sometimes the person will choose to be close to the news-stand, watching the channel with anxiety or at other times talk or close her eyes while leaning against a column or sitting in the waiting room. This is the identity conflict that is staged on the wharf. In Sacca Fisola the wharf allows for these feelings to be lived; the characteristics of the place are a support for them through their very existence and disposition.

Given that all accesses and departures from the island have to take place at the wharf—if one excludes a small bridge that connects the island to another island called Giudecca—Sacca Fisola is quite a unique neighbourhood: the wharf is very broadly used and invested psychologically. Therefore, its specific characteristics—notably its immediate environment do operate a transition between the world of the neighbourhood and the external world.

### 6. Discussion

The above examples are related to spatial characteristics, observed behaviours and the

symbolical charge inherent in the places discussed. They allow us to better define the central question in a study on the quality of space in a neglected neighbourhood.

We would like to refer to Christopher Alexander, as one of the architects having developed an important reflection on the quality of space. As a professional architect he is concerned about constructions that show a good fit with behaviours. He assumes that in the exercise of their profession architects rely on a system of rules that they have gradually acquired. He calls these rules a *pattern language*. This is a way for expressing the participation of the architect to a cultural project. The aim is to find a pattern language that may guarantee good results (Alexander, 1979).

For Alexander, behaviour and space are inseparable and generate each other. References to psychology—to behaviour and the meaning of spaces—inform all his work. The pattern language that he defines sums up the qualities that are inherent to all the constructions or places where we feel good, where we have the impression of being alive. According to Alexander, there is a “quality without name”, a “nameless quality” that serves as the most important criterion for defining a pattern language. He tries to give a description of this quality that cannot really be defined, by looking at terms such as “alive”, “comfortable”, “whole”, “free”, “exact”, “without ego”, “eternal”, in relation to behaviour and to the meaning that spaces have for us. However, Alexander also notes that such terms can at most help us feel and see this quality, without defining it completely.

It is no exaggeration to say that the reflections of Alexander are shared tacitly by most architects and designers concerned with creating places where people feel good. Our

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analysis of the symbolic charge associated with architectural solutions in the neighbourhood of Sacca Fisola allows us to clarify what is to be understood by 'quality of space' in this context. It shows an explicitly psychological perspective on the affective relationship between an inhabitant and his or her neighbourhood. The problem of quality of space is not a concern for architects and designers only: it is a fundamental aspect of the everyday relationship between the user and his environment. This is where a broader interpretation, in terms of the unconscious and the symbolic, is revealing.

In the case of the analysis of a neighbourhood, it becomes possible to show spatial supports that "work". These should not be neglected, if, for example, one is to develop a renovation programme that should be able to respect the identity of a neighbourhood's inhabitants. In Sacca Fisola, nothing has

been a really notable success. Quite a different planning approach could have resulted in similar results or perhaps been better as far as the feelings of the inhabitants for their neighbourhood are concerned. Yet, the places of the neighbourhood that have been appropriated by the inhabitants, and thus charged symbolically during the short history of Sacca Fisola, confirm that it is important to clarify the relations between habitat and inhabitants. These define the affective meaning of a neighbourhood for its inhabitants, in relation with their identity. It is by accepting the deep bonds that grow between inhabitants and their habitat, and by enlightening them, that conditions might be defined for an intervention that would not only respect the physical reality of a neighbourhood for its inhabitants, but that would take account of its psychological significance.

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