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# Digital Urban Acupuncture

Human Ecosystems and the Life  
of Cities in the Age of Communication,  
Information and Knowledge

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# Preface

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Norman Bates is split between two houses (Zizek 2006): the modern horizontal motel and his mother's gothic house. He is constantly running between the two, not being able to find his own. This parallels his complex personality, impersonations, and (perceived) identity(ies): The two architectures represent Norman's identities, and the continuous oscillations between the one and the other mimic their confrontation. *Psycho* is a product of modernity, in which this type of struggle is evident: In the change of the century, and after the wars, "home" becomes a complex concept, and a space of conflict, which becomes even more radicalized as the times of the revolutions of the young generations start appearing at the horizon, first with the signals of music and art, and then with the sexual revolution, the drugs, and the nomadic lifestyles which come with them at both physical, mental, and economic levels.

The postmodern dimension tends to obfuscate this dimension. If a postmodern architect was to be involved in the design of *Psycho*'s location, the two buildings, with some probability, would have been collapsed together, in one of Ghenry's style mashups, where the poles of the antagonism could have penetrated one into the other, combining them into a new hybrid entity. With all probability, in this case, Norman would have had no need to kill his victims, as the tension of running around between the two places (and identities) would have collapsed as well, into a third space of hybridity. At last, Norman Bateson would have been home.

Defining home also implies defining what is not home. And, thus, it implies the definitions, on the one hand, of public spaces and, on the other hand, of the private and intimate ones, which become ever more layered and fragmented: from a house, to the teen's room, to headphones with which to create and personalize our space, to the Internet, in which we can multiply ourselves and potentially create infinite numbers and modalities of public, private, and intimate contexts, identities, and environments.

The genesis of the Sony Walkman, for example, is perfectly fitting in describing this sort of (r)evolution.

As the technical opportunities allowed for smaller devices with higher quality to become ever closer to the body, architecture changed.

At first, you experienced music in the concert hall, with the selection of the musical landscape being performed administratively, by experts, curators, and politicians. Then, music moved into the houses of the rich, with instruments and expensive devices: They could invite, decide, and experience music in their own terms, the elites of culture. Then it started moving into every home, with record players and the radio: You could choose what to listen to, but there would still be fights over the radio channel to hear, or on what record to buy, a fight around consensus, authority, and the micropolitics of the house. And then, the music arrived behind the closed doors of teenagers' rooms, with all the signals of their desire for privacy, discouraging intrusion. Music also left the home, with the "ghetto blasters," the battery powered radios which you could carry on your shoulder and lay down, to broadcast music around yourself: Where your music was, the territory was your, nomadic, mobile, with you at the center. From the ghetto blaster the walkman arrived: By wearing headphones, you could completely personalize the space around you, connecting it to visions, memories, and desires. The walkman was probably the first available augmented reality consumer device: wearable augmented reality. This signed a radical transition: The compresence of multiple sounds in the same space, "attached" to the bodies of their owners, transformed urban locations into open source spaces of perceptions; it became possible to wear our own interpretation of space.

Multiple walkmans in the same space meant multiple interpretations of it: While someone was remembering romance, someone else could be experiencing violence, or excitement, or sadness, through the technological device connected to their body, extending it and its spatial capabilities.

Myriads of microhistories, side by side, compenetrating each other, paired to dress codes, behaviors, intentions, attitudes, and composed continuous flows of tactical usages of space: different music for taking the train, to wait in line, to walk in a certain neighbourhood or in another, for each person, simultaneously, in enormous numbers.

Architecture exploded: By listening to a different music, you could experience the same place in entirely different ways, also connecting to different times and places, with memories, past experiences, information (audio guides in your headphones), and emotions.

Then came the internet, further radicalizing this process, from both computational and relational points of view. Computational, for the action of algorithms, producing and presenting content and opportunities for interaction at every step, in ways which are mediated through the availability of network and connectivity, and by the action of the algorithms which select what you will experience at a certain space/time on your smartphone, and who you will connect with, what reviews you will see instead of others, what you will find in your search engine query, and what will other people see about what you expressed online. And relational, with people, object, places, a sort of novel set of superpowers which allow for almost telepathic connection with other identities, information producing or absorbing devices, remote vision through imaging, video, or tele-presence, and much more.

Time definitively became nonlinear, multiple, and emergent, and so did spaces, contexts, identities.

Norman Bateson could have easily been Norman, Psycho, and a dozen other personalities at the same time, with different Relational Ecosystems and interconnection with objects and locations, no matter where/when he was.

In all of this, the public, private, and intimate spaces are not only becoming progressively hybrid in these senses (as they integrate digital and physical, and as they become interconnective and nonlinear, instead of identitarian and linear), but also mediated. The readability and understandability of these spaces become more opaque and incomprehensible every day, and out of our possibilities for control, however individual or autonomous. Accessibility and openness are only at the surface, at the interface level, and we are all progressively loosing the ability to understand what lies below and about how to get big pictures in unmediated, autonomous ways.

In this scenario, this book constitutes a small step which could prove to be helpful to create interventions in both of these senses.

Its objective is to introduce a methodology—Digital Urban Acupuncture—which allows to gain better understandings about the Relational Ecosystems found in territories (and, particularly, in cities), between human and nonhumans, people and buildings, devices and plants, and so on, and to use these understandings to design—autonomously and collaboratively—interventions in the posthuman relational fabric of the city. This book is about a method using which it is possible to try to understand the city as an hyper-complex living being—a body, with energies, emotions, and behaviors, at micro-, meso-, and macrolevels—in which millions of identities interweave relations to punctually stimulate this body through performative actions—the needles—in order to create tangible, collaborative, and participatory effects.

To do this, a reflection is necessary on the possibility to reappropriate our public, private, and intimate spaces, and about how to perform across them as individuals, identities, communities, cultures, and societies.

This is what we dedicate this book to: not only to learn new methods and techniques, but also to reflect on how to work together in order to reclaim our spaces in socially constructive, autonomous, sustainable, solid, caring ways.

Rome, Italy

Salvatore Iaconesi  
Oriana Persico

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Here, we will highlight a few inspirations which have made this book possible, and some institutions and organizations which have always supported us.

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