

The body in space

*There are dumb edifices,
edifices which speak,
edifices which sing.
Socrate*

What happens to the body when it passes through different spatial experiences?

Let us try going into a Japanese restaurant, with low tables, rice-paper walls, silence and diffused lighting. A space of this type, with characteristics totally different from those we are used to, certainly induces a way of being and a psychophysical state quite the opposite of those that would be evoked by the small restaurant opposite, with its Seine Embankment hanging on the wall, the red-checked tablecloths, the tables too close together, the neon lights and the stainless steel sideboard with the starters at the entrance. We very soon perceive, if we pay the body a little more attention than usual, that in the Japanese restaurant our breathing expands and deepens.

Vice versa, looking for a place in the other restaurant – where in order to sit down we have to ask the person at the neighbouring table to move in a bit – our body adjusts itself to the situation by miming a constraint, primarily by a reduction in breathing. The body does not pass indifferently through spatial experiences.

Although people are well aware of the sensation of well-being or malaise which is experienced in certain environments, in reality the reaction is much more complex. An asymmetrical wall, an overlarge piece of furniture, an ironing board in the middle of the room, only one part of the house exposed to or facing the sun, the fact of having – or not – a view from the window, of being on the ground floor or the top floor, in an attic from which we only see the sky or in a barely lit basement rather than in an orderly, clean, well cared-for space, or the lack of borders because we do not have our own room – all these are sufficient to mould more or less unconsciously our mode of being and to produce a change in our psyche, personality, and body organisation. This does not mean that the connection is taken for granted, automatically or inescapably, but simply that there is a connection.

We might think, simplistically, that to solve such problems it is enough to change houses. Obviously it is not like that, even if occasionally it may work. Much depends on how strongly we identify with our own space and our own body: if someone is intensely reflected in the space surrounding him, he is unlikely to succeed in modifying that space unless he also changes something inside himself. And the difficulty lies precisely in the fact that each change closely affects other aspects of the self. If the identification is strong, even changing cars can be a monstrous undertaking. But when the outcome is successful, it almost always triggers off other transformations both of the body and the personality. In the same way a new view from the window can contribute to altering our perspective on life.

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