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*City, Architecture and Somaesthetics: a Conversation with Richard Shusterman*

**Aurosa Alison, Andrea Borsari**

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In the process of editing some of Richard Shusterman's essays on architecture and the city for an Italian book, *Somaestetica, architettura e città* (2024), a series of conversations took place in the fall of 2023 between the book's editor, Aurosa Alison, the editor of the collection publishing the book, Andrea Borsari, and Shusterman himself, the founder and leading disseminator of somaesthetics as philosophical approach, as well as a multidisciplinary and applied practice<sup>1</sup>. From these written exchanges in English came the book's two long interviews, published in full in Italian translation. The essential core of those interviews is presented here for the first time in its original English. In the resulting text, the questions of the two interlocutors appear in italics, and each group of questions is immediately followed by Shusterman's response, appearing in regular font.

*Among the earliest texts in your bibliography that refer to the city is one derived from the 18 months spent in Berlin following a Fulbright professorship at the Freie Universität in 1995-96 and entitled «The Urban Aesthetics of Absence: Pragmatist Reflections in Berlin»<sup>2</sup>, which is interesting for our perspective in several respects. Your philosophical approach in that essay links the problem of urban experience essentially to pragmatism: how much has your elaboration of somaesthetics transformed the philosophical premises of your relationship with the city, and how much does it stand in continuity?*

It is true that I did not thematize the topic of urban aesthetics in my writings until after the publication of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992), whose

<sup>1</sup> See R. Shusterman, *Somaestetica, architettura e città*, ed. and translated by A. Alison, Bologna, Bologna University Press, 2024, in particular, *Somaestetica e Architettura: abitare e progettare con il soma, una conversazione con Aurosa Alison*, and *Estetica urbana e filosofia della città, una conversazione con Andrea Borsari*, pp. 63-105. The original conversation took place through a written exchange in English, and the text of the responses published here was prepared and revised directly by Richard Shusterman.

<sup>2</sup> R. Shusterman, *The Urban Aesthetics of Absence: Pragmatist Reflections in Berlin*, in «New Literary History», 28 (1997), pp. 739-755.

(surprisingly rapid and welcoming) international reception was what brought me to Berlin as a Fulbright professor, although I had visited the city before. My first time in Berlin was October 1989, invited by Pierre Bourdieu to speak at the symposium on his work at the Freie Universität when it gave him an honorary doctorate. I took the opportunity to experience a day in East Berlin, entering through Checkpoint Charlie before the wall came down the very next month. I feel lucky to have tasted the divided Berlin, even though only for a day and before I knew any German. My next Berlin visit came after *Pragmatist Aesthetics* was published in German in 1994 as a Fischer Taschenbuch entitled *Kunst Leben*. It immediately received considerable media coverage (in daily newspapers like the *Taz* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and even in *Zitty* magazine), as it had done in France (its French translation as *L'art à l'état vif* was published by Minuit, 1992). In France I was able to present the book on TV, since I was fluent in French. Key to this media reception was the book's detailed aesthetic defense of rap music, then perceived as something radically new and transgressive but which is now mainstream old news.

The rap connection is relevant to your question about urbanism, because rap emerged as a distinctively urban phenomenon whose styles were sometimes differently shaped by the different urban environments: West coast styles were more related to cruising in cars while East coast styles were more connected with pedestrian movement carrying a boom-box. Urban life also shaped the broader hip-hop culture in which rap played the leading aesthetic role, supported by the popular street arts of graffiti and breakdancing. I was introduced to hip-hop culture through early and direct immersion by living and working in cities where the genre developed, more specifically New York and Philadelphia. Until I moved to Boca Raton, Florida in 2005, I had lived in major cities all my life (even in Israel, dividing my time between Jerusalem where I studied, and Tel Aviv where I preferred to live because of its beaches and secular culture). Temple University, where I had my chair in Philosophy, was in the center of the North Philadelphia ghetto, and a local African American political activist soon recruited me to write a regular column for the Philadelphia rap fanzine he established. I wrote under the rap moniker «Rich Frosted», and one column was entitled «Ghetto Music». The ghetto is a quintessential city phenomenon. Its dialectics of physical segregation and social exclusion from the rest of the city (together with the porosity of reciprocal influences on each other) I traced from the original Jewish ghettos in Europe to the black ghettos in contemporary America. I suspect that my being Jewish (and even Israeli) helped make my case for rap more appealing or understandable to European intellectuals. As the Jews were historically the blacks of Europe, I could be seen as sincerely speaking for the oppressed from the perspective of someone belonging to a persecuted

minority group. That is why some of the book's European media reception highlighted my Jewish background, though it played no role in the book's account of rap or of pragmatist aesthetics more generally. So one could say that my explorations of urban aesthetics began already with my pragmatist work on hip hop, although I did not thematize that work specifically as urban aesthetics. My experience as a foreigner in Berlin was what made me think more deeply about treating urban aesthetics as an area for pragmatist treatment.

Regarding the final part of your question, somaesthetics (a concept I introduced in the late 1990s) is fully continuous with my work in pragmatism. It is just an expansion and development of pragmatist, meliorist insights already expressed in the first edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, a recognition that since the soma, as our basic medium of perception, feeling, and action, is essential both to the creation and appreciation of art, it deserves systematic study and cultivation. Moreover, as the essential medium of life, the soma needs attentive care for improving our global art of living, beyond the specific domain of the various arts. Somaesthetics emerged to highlight the need for such somatic attention and to explore the ways to best deliver it.

*Can the account of the Berlin experience also be seen as a kind of model of the experience of the city, not a general theory but an example and, at the same time, a paradigm? Is it a kind of tracing of the perceptual experiences arising from frequenting and living in a large city?*

Berlin's prominence in my writings derives not from any belief that it could serve as the paradigm for a general theory of the city (either in terms of built environment or of subjective urban life and atmosphere). Berlin could hardly serve as a paradigm for the planned city. Historically, it evolved from the incorporation of what were initially separate towns, its original kernel merging with the towns of Friedrichswerder, Dorotheenstadt, Friedrichstadt in 1709, and later absorbing Charlottenburg, Lichtenberg, Neukölln, Schöneberg, Spandau, and Wilmersdorf. My writing focused on Berlin because it was where certain features of city life became much clearer to me than ever before, and this was because of the discomfort, puzzlement, and alienation I felt there. In this troubling sense, Berlin was exemplary for me. I suffered in Berlin as I had never suffered in other cities, and that suffering made me think about cities in terms of their problems rather than simply enjoying their pleasures (which I also eventually found in Berlin). I now have very fond memories of Berlin, that include the recollections of what I learned from those difficult experiences and of a few friends who helped me get through those difficulties and learn more about the city so I could write about it.

My philosophical writings are essentially secretions from my life experience as stimulated by irritants in my life. Although I strive to make my texts reasonable, they have their origins in feelings that somehow disturb or irritate and that my thinking and writing then struggle to control, soothe, and cover with an attractive surface, in the same way that the nacre or mother of pearl enwraps the irritant in the pearl-producing mollusk. I've spent much more time in New York, Paris, Tel Aviv, and Philadelphia than I've spent in Berlin, but I never wrote about those cities because they never aroused the sort of perplexing difficulties and discomforts that my Fulbright stay in Berlin did. As you noted, it began in 1995, which marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II and the fall of the Nazi regime. Hitler and the death camps were on TV almost every night, which added a painful layer of socio-ethical darkness to the dark Berlin winter that was one of the coldest on record. I was alone, far from home, struggling to learn German and make new friends in that new language, which almost no one wanted to speak with me. My Fulbright project was «American pragmatism and democracy», but my host at Berlin's Freie Universität insisted that I speak only English with the department secretary. Why? The reason, he explained, was to maintain my social dominance. In English I was an American professor; in German (with my Israeli accent, poor grammar, and limited vocabulary) I sounded like an *Ostjude*, hence inferior in the German social hierarchy and hard to take seriously. Fortunately, I found a couple of kind friends who were patient enough to help me with German rather than insisting on practicing their English.

*Moreover, again in this text on Berlin, you chose the aesthetic figure of absence: you openly declare that you consider it a fundamental structural principle of urban aesthetics as a paradoxical part of its economy of abundance. Absence also refers to a regime of invisibility directly related to that of visibility and presence: what are the ways to reconnect with this dimension?*

I do see absence as a fundamental principle of urban aesthetics, and I realize that it goes against conventional urban theories that aim to combat urban sprawl with the four *Ds* one of which is *density* (the others being *diversity* of land use, better *design*, and reduction of transit *distance*). What brought me to highlight the theme of urban absence was the powerful experiences of absence I felt in Berlin and the variety of different forms of absence I encountered there: absences of significant buildings and even of street names and addresses that were erased by Nazi persecution, Allied bombing, or Communist renaming; absences within abandoned buildings because of decay or perilous building materials; absent populations due to the death camps. But the absence that most strongly disturbed and motivated me was the absence of human warmth that I felt in Berlin. I found the social atmo-

sphere and personal interaction much colder and unfriendlier than I experienced in any other city. The most painful absence for me was that of my partner, a Japanese American fashion designer from New York who came with me to Berlin but departed after a few months. She left not only because of the absence of high fashion opportunities in Berlin at that time. (In 1995, before being fully and officially reestablished as Germany's capital, in 1999, Berlin was a *Moda Wüste*). She was tired of being insistently stared at as an exotic attraction or disturbing anomaly in Berlin's insufficiently diverse demography, which then lacked a significant East-Asian population. In my experience, Berliners had a way of eyeing visually foreign others in a fixed, intense way that felt aggressively intrusive. Accompanying her, I felt the lingering of racial discrimination. I remember the difficulties we had in finding a flat to rent. I would phone up and identify myself as a Visiting American Fulbright Professor at the FU and would be eagerly invited to inspect the property. But when I arrived with my partner, I would be immediately greeted with the polite refusal that «*Die Wohnung ist nicht für Sie*» (The apartment is not for you), which they tried to politely explain by saying that the apartment was either too small or too simple for an American couple. We never got past the door to have a look for ourselves. Eventually, we found a place with a gay landlord who was kind and tolerant but still cold and distant. When Simmel wrote of the «reserve» of city dwellers as involving «a slight aversion» or «latent antipathy» that small-town people see as «cold and heartless», I was convinced he had Berlin in mind. I did not meet such suspicious, unfriendly indifference in other cities I inhabited<sup>3</sup>.

If Berlin provided the personal inspiration for my interest in urban absence, Daoism provided the theoretical background by highlighting the productive interaction between absence and presence, the complementarity of emptiness and fullness. Absences provide places where new things can come to fullness, like an abandoned building transformed into a techno scene. But absences also provide an escape from fullness when such fullness becomes oppressive. Cities are wonderful partly because they provide places of escape, including escape from oppressive homes that are too full of clutter or domestic discord. When thinking of absence in urban contexts, we typically think of empty space. But absence also has a crucial temporal aspect. More generally, we experience space through time; in fact, our perception of distance implies moving through space, and such movement takes time. Berlin is a place where the absent past still lingers through traces and memories, and where silent present absences speak volumes of past presents cruelly suppressed and butchered.

<sup>3</sup> See G. Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental life*, in D.N. Levine, *Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1971 (*Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben*, 1903).

*Another important text of yours for defining an urban aesthetic and the philosophical relationship to the city is «Bodies in the Streets: The Soma, the City and the Art of Living»<sup>4</sup>. The core of your analysis seems to consist in the analogy between the human body and the «body» of the city, which you construct from ambiguities and ambivalences, and also seems to be based on the distinction and opposition, drawn by Helmuth Plessner with his theory of human eccentricity, between being a living body and having an object body. What role did Plessner's thought as a whole play in the elaboration of somaesthetics?*

I thought one promising approach to exploring city life from a somaesthetic perspective would be by comparing the city and the soma, and I saw some striking analogies in the way both terms involve ambiguities and ambivalences whose dialectical relationships help respectively define urban life and somatic experience. The ambiguities and ambivalences of the city and of the soma are not exactly the same. But there are homologies between those of the city and those of the soma that reciprocally illuminate both concepts. Take, for example, the soma's key ambiguity of being both physical object and perceptive, purposive subjectivity. We might compare that to the city's ambiguity as, on the one hand, a built, material environment but, on the other hand, a sociocultural political entity composed of subjects and thus steeped in purposive activity, desires, and feelings. Like human bodies, cities are both natural and cultural artifacts. Like human bodies, cities have a dialectic of size. They need to be big enough to thrive, but if they grow too big, they suffer from various problems and lose their charm and quality of life. Like bodies, cities age and require remedial care to maintain their attractive form. Sometimes cities age gracefully and can be admired for their well-preserved form, but sometimes they are ravaged by negligence and misuse. As human bodies have their boundaries but exceed them by incorporating and using tools, so cities transcend their physical borders through their network of cosmopolitan connections and trade. Bodies and cities both display dialectics of power and vulnerability, dignity and indignity, freedom and constraint, commonality and difference. Rather than rehearsing these and other analogies discussed in that essay, I should simply say that there is no good way to sort the ambiguous elements simply into good versus bad. It strikes me as unreasonable to say, for example, that the built environment is the valuable feature, while the spirit or atmosphere or political feel of the city is unimportant. Or vice versa. In the same way, although arguing for the value of absence in urban aesthetics, I would not argue that all absences are good. In fact, as I said earlier, what motivated me to discover the good of some absences was the experience of other painful absences in Berlin.

<sup>4</sup> R. Shusterman, *Bodies in the Streets: The Soma, the City and the Art of Living*, in Id., *Bodies in the Streets: the Somaesthetics of City Life*, Leiden - Boston, Brill, 2019, pp. 14-37.



Plessner, since he wrote in German, could use the *Leib/Körper* contrast to highlight the familiar phenomenological idea of the body as both physical object and perceptive, purposive subjectivity. He elegantly expressed this ambiguity as «*Leib sein*» versus «*Körper haben*». The soma as I understand it a unity that includes both *Leib* and *Körper* aspects; and somaesthetics is consequently concerned also with physical aspects of the body and their cultivation, not just with somatic subjectivity. That is why I diplomatically declined the suggestions of my German phenomenological friends (for example, Gernot Böhme) to bring somaesthetics under the umbrella of phenomenology's *Leibphilosophie*.<sup>5</sup> I came to appreciate Plessner's ideas long after I started my theorization of somaesthetics. The philosophers who first inspired my thinking in this field were John Dewey and Michel Foucault. These two philosophers, of course, are very different both in theory and in lifestyles. But they both not only recognized the central role of embodiment in our lives, they also explored techniques to improve somatic experience – and not merely theoretically but also in their own life practice. They both appreciated the idea of philosophy as an embodied way of life, which is central to somaesthetics as I conceive it. And, of course, they shared a progressive, democratic, pluralistic spirit while recognizing that although bodily habits have often served to keep people in subjugation and self-repression, the body also has real liberational potential. Merleau-Ponty and William James were also strong influences, though not initially as powerful as Dewey and Foucault.

I learned about Plessner from Professor Hans-Peter Krüger, who has been my closest friend in Berlin, ever since we met late in 1995 through an East-West intellectual discussion group organized by the sociologist Hans Joas as a way of helping to promote the integration of the newly united, formerly divided, parts of the city by exploring the social and cultural problems of the city's unification and how intellectuals might help in resolving them through coordination of ideas from the Eastern, former Soviet Bloc and the West. Plessner's notion of ex-centric positionality appealed to me because it provided a way of understanding somaesthetic reflection: one's ability as a somatic subjectivity (*Leib*) to observe oneself as a somatic object (*Körper*) and examine one's bodily conditions and feelings. This ability to examine one's body seems to imply an ontological dualism of subject and object, involving the idea that the subject cannot examine itself, because by doing so it would lose its subjective character and become an object of observation. This is why Merleau-Ponty argues that the body as subject (what he calls *le corps propre*, which is his term for *Leib*) cannot observe itself. Plessner's notion of ex-centric positionality

<sup>5</sup> For Gernot Böhme's critique of somaesthetics, see G. Böhme, *Somästhetik – sanft oder mit Gewalt*, in «Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie», 50 (2002), pp. 797-802.

relieves this problem because it explains our ability to observe our bodies with reflective, critical distance without us needing to be an ontologically altogether different thing. The soma can simply take a decentered point of view of itself without going altogether outside itself. It does not need an immaterial ghost to observe its material condition and functioning.

*On the side, however, of the physical transformations of urban experience, don't you think that today, in addition to emphasizing the attunement to the vital drive and original forms of life that find their congenial «ecological» niche in large cities, is it not the case to dwell more on the way cities become places of exclusion, of social marginality, of inequality, full of enclosures including material ones and forms of privilege and exclusion?*

With respect to issues of racism, ethnic enmity, and homophobia, I have argued that somaesthetics can have practical ethical, political, and social value in mitigating prejudice and magnifying tolerance and solidarity. The idea is that by bringing enhanced body consciousness we can become more clearly aware of our sensory perceptions and feelings of positive attraction or negative affect; and with this greater consciousness we can either control the effects in action of negative affect or we can work on reeducating that negative affect. We can learn to widen the palate of sensory perceptions that we find acceptable or agreeable. Sensory tastes are learned, and they can be relearned. No child is born loving the taste of beer or whisky. They are acquired tastes. And we can learn to acquire a taste for races or groups we initially find indifferent or distasteful. People who once found homosexual queen- or drag appearance disturbingly unpleasant have learned to find it unproblematic or even interesting. Somaesthetic cultivation of enhanced somatic consciousness includes improving our powers of focused attention (for willful attention is a somatic and not just a mental act). By gaining the will power to control attention, we can better concentrate on what we wish to focus within the vast ever-changing manifold of sensory experience, and we can better manage our affective feelings in that experiential flux.

In a recent article *Soma as and in Space: Public and Private*<sup>6</sup>, I investigate the problem of social exclusion in city life in terms of problems of access. Even when today's grand historic cities do not have gated communities like we increasingly see in the suburbs, they do deploy other means of excluding less privileged members of society: such as poor public transportation that makes certain desirable venues very hard to reach or

<sup>6</sup> See R. Shusterman, *Soma as and in Space: Public and Private*, in I. Cattabriga et al. (eds.), *The Historical City. A Critical Reference and Role Model*, Cham, Springer Nature, 2025 (forthcoming).



imposing high fees of entry that make certain venues financially difficult to access. In my travels, I witnessed at least one city that used private, non-uniformed security guards to remove undesirable individuals from a high-end shopping street because such individuals (whether by their appearance or by their behavior) would disturb the desired shoppers in some way, even simply through the anxiety caused by their presence. It is not the city that pays for this exclusionary security but rather the owners of the commercial businesses along that street who have organized to finance it. This renders the public street a quasi-private space, where access is restricted by criteria determined by private powers and interests. My essay on soma and space discusses the creeping privatization of public spaces through a variety of techniques: There are «business improvement districts» in which organizations run by private property owners in the district take over the management and security of those public areas (streets, parks, squares) within their districts. There are also privately owned publicly open spaces (POPOS), such as atriums within office buildings or concrete plazas connecting privately-owned buildings to the public sidewalk, or indoor gardens within high-rise apartment buildings. The interior garden on the fourth and fifth floors of Trump Tower in New York City, although owned by Donald Trump, is defined as a public space in being legally open to the public as part of a deal that Trump made with the city to build his tower taller than it otherwise could be according to the city's official regulations.

*In a series of lectures during your recent European and Italian tour (winter-spring 2023), you insisted on the soma, the intentional sensory body, as something that is both space and in space. How is the dimension of public space defined from here and how does it transcend the measure of individuals and become a collective place?*

The *soma* is always situated in external space, but it also has its own spatial volume and parts. As the city has private and public spaces, so the body has areas that are regarded as private, such as the genital areas, whereas the face, in contrast, is paradigmatically public. We need to show it on documents that identify us as members of the public: passports, identity cards, driver's licenses. The mere presence of multiple human bodies in a particular space does not make the space public. Those bodies may be occupying a private space. Essentially, a public space is, in principle, open and accessible to all members of the public, though in many ostensibly public places this is not the case. People may have the negative freedom to enter the space but not the positive freedom to really access it if they cannot afford to reach that space or pay the fee to enter. However, beyond this fundamental sense, there is a more

substantive sense of public space that is not simply open to the public rather than being privately owned but also serves as a place where members of the public interact in sharing the space's resources and often regard themselves as stakeholders who should have rights to its use, even sometimes organizing to ensure the quality of that use by contributing to the maintenance or management of that space. In a city, such a public space might be called an urban commons. It may be realized in the city's streets, squares, parks, playgrounds, vacant lots, abandoned buildings, or public monuments or edifices. I'm not knowledgeable about the Italian scene but I've heard something about a movement for *beni comuni* that perhaps reflects the same concern to preserve, for all city dwellers, what Henri Lefebvre called «le droit à la ville». What exactly this right includes is neither clear nor uncontested, but I suppose ideally it would involve not only the right to use the city's public places but also to have some share in the process of making decisions about how these public spaces are designed, maintained, and used. In this sense, urbanites would have an active role in shaping the city beyond the ways they shape its atmosphere through their behavior.

*How can a non-oppressive way of constructing public space be organized, starting, for example, from the thought of John Dewey? And what is the task of somaesthetics with respect to the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion in the use of public space?*

Dewey might provide some help in justifying the urban commons idea of collaborative use and management because he affirms a participatory ideal of democracy. For him democracy is not simply a political framework of laws and institutions, but rather primarily a participatory way of life. He also defines the public quite broadly, beyond the city's legal or enfranchised citizens. «The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for», and this, in turn, requires officials of some kind to perform that systematic care<sup>7</sup>. From the Deweyan idea of participatory democracy as a way of life, I've developed what I call an aesthetic justification of democracy, based on the idea of enriched experience and self-realization and relying on three lines of argument. First, because democracy provides better opportunities for the free and equal participation of more individuals in the political process, it provides individuals with greater resources for self-realization and a richer life. Secondly, as we are social beings who enjoy

<sup>7</sup> J. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, in Id., *The Later Works*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1984, vol. 2, pp. 245-246.

collaborative action and communication, democracy is valuable because it best promotes the satisfactions of collaborative and communicative experience for communally desired ends. Third, democracy's advocacy of the free and equal (though not identical) participation of all different types of people in the governing of community life greatly enriches the experience of them all. It not only provides the spice of variety and novelty but also can provide the individual a heightened sense of her own distinct perspective and identity. In multiethnic cities, a public place can be an open-air museum or theatre of multinational cultural expression that offers citizens a better understanding of unfamiliar others but also a stage to present their own cultural and personal distinction.

Parks and other public places of enjoyment provide a pleasurable atmosphere that encourages relaxed and harmonious interaction between urbanites who do not interact socially in private places. Such pleasurable atmospheres of shared use can help diminish ethnic animosity and suspicion. Frederick Law Olmsted's grand project of Central Park was justified in part by supplying such a «harmonizing and refining influence»<sup>8</sup>. Racial and ethnic prejudices are often deeply embedded in the body, rooted in discomfort about the bodies of alien others. Often these prejudices are so deeply rooted that sharing a public pleasure space will not succeed in promoting positive interaction, and they often lie so deep in the body's muscle memory that the person will not be aware of having and enacting such prejudices. Here somaesthetic work on cultivating body consciousness can play a crucial role of making people more aware of their prejudicial behavior and feelings, which is the crucial first step to controlling them or transforming and transcending them toward tolerance or even solidarity. Official laws or policies of inclusion will not be effective if people do not have more inclusive and tolerant somatic attitudes, displaying a broader range of somaesthetic tastes and knowledge. Beyond these issues of social interaction, enhanced somaesthetic consciousness and its development of a broader palate of sensory appreciation can augment the pleasure we take in the city as solo individuals (for example in our walking through the city and better appreciating its sights, sounds, and surfaces of topography). Sharper somaesthetic awareness involves not only taking pleasure in our bodies interaction with the urban environment but also critically alerting us to problems in that environment, for example by more penetrating attention to our breathing and our feelings of atmospheric conditions of light, sound, odor, and air quality.

<sup>8</sup> F. Olmsted, *Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns*, Cambridge, Riverside Press, 1870, pp. 1-36, here p. 32.

*In your reconstructions of the cornerstones of philosophical reflection on the city since Greek philosophy, you have worked on a genealogy of classics of modernity such as Engels, Simmel, Benjamin, Baudelaire, Poe, Musil, Mumford and others. Today some other perspectives seem to become influential in defining the agenda of urban aesthetics, such as the atmospherology of Gernot Böhme, the reconstruction of emotional spaces even for design purposes, and the study of processes of collective artification aimed at modifying environments to make them more pleasing. What do you think? Do these seem fruitful approaches for reflection and action?*

I value Gernot Böhme's work on atmosphere. His 1993 paper on atmosphere was what alerted me to this issue in aesthetics and architecture. He was an excellent phenomenologist who appreciated the body's crucial role in aesthetics but also in philosophy more generally. I got to know him personally when he reviewed the German translation of my book *Practicing Philosophy*, and we met a few times in connection with a Humboldt project I co-directed on «Soma und Psyche». Böhme based his atmospheric thinking on the new phenomenology of Hermann Schmitz, and you now have in Italy, with Tonino Griffero, an insightful thinker who has done much to continue and enrich the tradition of atmospheric philosophy. From my earlier remarks, it is clear that atmosphere is central to my thinking about architectural and urban aesthetics and other aesthetic topics. In *Aesthetic Experience and the Powers of Possession*<sup>9</sup>, I explain how atmosphere is crucial both to inspirational experience that stimulates creating art and to experiences of being aesthetically moved by art. The role of atmosphere in urban experience (including the different kinds of atmospheres and their different functions and effects) certainly deserves much more study and reflection. Particularly intriguing is the question of actively designing for atmosphere, because such design seems both desirable and problematic. As atmosphere is an important factor of city life, we surely would like to create favorable atmospheres. But because atmospheres do not depend merely on the built environment but also, crucially, on what happens within that environment, most notably through human activities, the idea of designing specific atmospheres (whether for particular buildings, streets, or neighborhoods) becomes difficult, unclear, and unreliable. People may decide to behave differently than expected, to engage in activities inconsistent with the designed-for atmosphere, because their priorities are different from the designer's or the city's; and such priorities may change through unanticipated factors. Prescribing too rigidly or too narrowly the specific activities that fit the

<sup>9</sup> R. Shusterman, *Aesthetic Experience and the Powers of Possession*, in «Journal of Aesthetic Education», 54 (2019), no. 3, pp. 1-23.

designed-for atmosphere means programming people in a way that denies their freedom. It is an ethical overreach of the design function.

Besides this ethical issue, there are aesthetic discomforts in overdetermined design with its prescribed constraints: a felt loss of spontaneity and openness to novelty and surprise that seems important to atmospheres of liveliness and energy. Part of the city's attraction is its dynamic sense of evolving life and of things in the making. That attraction, I believe, is diminished through overdetermined, prescribed, or packaged atmosphere. It makes a city feel like a museum rather than a hub of new life and discovery with open and ever-expanding horizons of experience and possibility. Famously beautiful and culturally rich historic cities suffer from a tourist-dominated atmosphere. My appreciation of Venice has long suffered from this museum feeling, and Florence is increasingly susceptible to this tourist-induced museal atmosphere. Personally, I much prefer the aesthetic feel of Rome and Paris where the full spectrum of city life is throbbingly present and not overshadowed by tourism. The overdetermination of atmosphere for tourism reaches a bizarre summit in the small historic city of Wuzhen (乌镇) in Zhejiang Province, which is wholly devoted to preserving, reconstructing, and reenacting the city's traditional life of past centuries: traditional houses, streets, workshops, restaurants, and customs or rituals. Visitors (who are the vast majority of those found in the city) need to buy a tourist ticket to enter it, after parking their cars or cycles in a large lot outside the city gate.

This critique of urban design's overdetermined packaging of atmosphere is not a rejection of Lewis Mumford's claim that by providing «a dramatic setting for the more significant actions and the more sublimated urges of a human culture», «the city creates theater and is the theater» of social drama; it «fosters art and *is* art»<sup>10</sup>. My critical point is that urban design should not aim for a *mis-en-scène* that narrowly and rigidly stipulates a prepackaged atmosphere with prescribed actions but should instead allow and encourage improvisation and creativity among the urbanites, whose activities contribute essentially to the attractively dynamic, innovative atmosphere of city life. In considering the city as a work art, we should insist on its being a living, open work rather than the product of museal artification. Otherwise, its atmosphere risks becoming more artificial than attractively artistic.

*Do you think emerging issues such as climate change and possibilities for environmental action at the scale of the city should be part of and constitute an agenda for urban aesthetics? How can they be included in new practices of imagined and material urban life experience? Does it make sense to talk about a new aesthetic for the so-called anthropocene?*

<sup>10</sup> L. Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1938, p. 480.

This topic of atmosphere leads naturally to your question about urbanism and climate change, since atmosphere in both its meteorological and mood-related meanings are centrally related to climate. (In English, the word «climate» is sometimes used a synonym for the mood or atmosphere of a social encounter or situation). Climate change in the anthropocene results from changes in the composition of the earth's atmosphere, namely the increasing concentration of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide) that hinder the earth's atmospheric heat going further out into space. This retention of heat leads to the greenhouse effect of global warming and related problems of drought, extreme weather, and the rise of sea levels and related flooding, particularly through extreme storms. Many historically important cities are built on sea fronts, crucial to their economies of trade but also important for their aesthetic appeal. Somaesthetically considered, our love of water is not surprising; most of our body is water, and its presence in our brain and heart ranges upward from 75 percent. Visually and symbolically, the sea presents boundless horizons and unfathomable depths, but also the mirroring reflection of our individual selves. Somaesthetically, the seaside offers good light, quality air, refreshing breezes, and space for play. But now the dangers of global warming bring anxiety to our appreciation of the seafront and tarnish with guilty consciousness the fun of speedboats. If seafront properties remain the most desirable, their desirability has declined because of increased flooding risks as well as steep insurance costs that rise with the rising tides. Urban designers are already reacting to this worry, while combining the values of material protection and somaesthetic pleasure. The current Dryline design to protect the southern tip of Manhattan from storm surge is «essentially a ten-mile long berm...made of infilled sand and earth» fifteen feet high and placed «just beyond the existing waterfront, on top of which and behind which there are constructed pleasure gardens, urban trails, and the like»<sup>11</sup>. The berm's aesthetic value will of course include iconic views from Manhattan's southern tip to nearby Staten Island, Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, along with the animation of ferry traffic from Manhattan to those isles.

Urban designers concerned with climate change and sustainability need to think more about atmosphere not only in terms of ecological dangers to the city's built structure and larger natural environment, but also in terms of the effects of weather (i.e. particular, punctual, changes of atmosphere) on the somaesthetic experience and moods of city dwellers. Weather so strongly affects our moods, mental life, and social atmospheres that we speak of a sunny disposition or a cloudy, foggy mind, or

<sup>11</sup> R. Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018, ch. 10, section 1.



a chilly welcome. Our posture and gait are different when walking on a warm spring day or a cold dark night; and if it starts to rain (especially without our having an umbrella), we will again change our walking pace and posture, and maybe even run. Extremely hot weather encourages lazy moods and relaxation. All this is obvious. What is also obvious but often ignored is that no modern metropolis has a single climate; a city's weather changes not only through the seasons, but through the different hours of the day, in terms of temperature and amounts of sunshine, clouds, rain, wind, or snow. A city can simultaneously display different microclimates (that induce different mood atmospheres) in its different parts. Because of topography some city quarters get more sunshine, while others suffer more blustery winds. These different weathers within the city influence somaesthetic atmosphere in terms of moods as well as feelings of body temperatures. Even on the very same city street, there can be different microclimates. With a few steps we can move from a scorching summer Miami sidewalk to a shivering interior of a bank, restaurant, or supermarket, which are all highly airconditioned to provide instant relief from the outside heat but also to attract urbanites to remain inside those interiors for commercial purposes. For me and many others, this sharp passage from a very hot to a chilly atmosphere is not only somaesthetically unpleasant but also risky for catching a cold. Airconditioning, once a luxury item in many places, is now increasingly ubiquitous, extending from commercial buildings to private residences; and in my assessment the temperatures are kept unnecessarily and unhealthfully low.

*Finally, it would be profitable to explore how a critical approach to somaesthetics can be used in both the experience and conception of architecture and how architecture can promote a somaesthetic consciousness. Soma consciousness is cultivated through practice, prompting us to reflect on how architecture can be understood as an aesthetic practice or an aesthetic experience. In this regard, the somaesthetic approach in everyday life distances itself from the approach of everyday aesthetics for the simple reason that somaesthetic practice does not intend to reflect on how the experience of everyday life dialogues with established aesthetic theories. Instead, its primary goal is to improve the quality of life through practice. Is it possible to find, in the world of architecture and the contextualization of architectural design, the practice of somaesthetics in public or private projects? Can the interactive system hold up in regard to soma?*

Let me respond first with respect to the relationship of somaesthetics to everyday aesthetics, which has become a significant field within contemporary aesthetics. Somaesthetics certainly includes important dimensions of everyday aesthetics. Because the soma is the medium of our lives

somaesthetics is centrally involved in the art of living, which involves many everyday activities. Somaesthetics emerged from pragmatist aesthetics which had the Deweyan aim of overcoming the compartmentalization of art into the elite fine arts by emphasizing the aesthetic dimensions of arts and practices beyond high art. That is why pragmatist aesthetics, with its defense of popular art and the aesthetics of somatic practices, was seen as one of the early forces in the development of everyday aesthetics. Crispin Sartwell's fine essay on «Aesthetics of the Everyday» in the *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (2010) discusses my defense of hip-hop culture in this everyday connection. Somaesthetics, with its essential meliorative impulse to improve the quality of our experience, is deeply involved with matters of everyday aesthetics. From the outset somaesthetics highlighted the value of monitoring and improving the quality of our breathing, and breathing is something we do not only everyday but every minute. (In a similar way, because the soma is always necessarily impacted by its environment, somaesthetics is also very relevant to environmental aesthetics). However, somaesthetics goes beyond everyday aesthetics (and environmental aesthetics), because it has evolved beyond the field of aesthetics, extending into other fields of philosophy. In fact, it is now an interdisciplinary field with research outside the field of philosophy, including the field of human-computer interactive design which relates to your question about interaction.

I'm very pleased to see the flourishing of everyday aesthetics and its close connections with somaesthetics. But I also have two concerns about the future development of everyday aesthetics. My pragmatist aesthetics advocated the aesthetic value of practices outside the realm of fine art in order to oppose art's compartmentalization from our ordinary lives and experiences. The pragmatist principle of continuity affirms the continuity of life and art, the view that art emerges from practices of living and that art's intensifying of experience feeds back into our lives, enriching them and sometimes even significantly reshaping them. I worry that today's intense focus on everyday aesthetics in opposition to the traditions of fine art could result in a similar compartmentalization, obscuring once again the important relations and continuities between art and life. Somaesthetics is concerned with the fine arts as well as with everyday practices. Architecture is a fine art even if it is typically the site of everyday practices of dwelling. My own somaesthetic practice includes work in performance art with the *Man in Gold*<sup>12</sup>. Those performances are hardly everyday experiences, but they do embody the

<sup>12</sup> For my work with the *Man in Gold*, see, for example, R. Shusterman, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths between Art and Life*, Paris, Hermann, 2016, the six articles about the *Man in Gold* in J.J. Abrams (ed.), *Shusterman's Somaesthetics: From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art*, Leiden, Brill, 2022, and the articles about this project on <<https://www.fau.edu/artsandletters/humanitieschair/books/man-in-gold/man-in-gold-reviews/>> (accessed 1-12-2025)

continuity of art and life. They occur not as announced, prescribed events in art venues, but in the ordinary venues of everyday life, especially in the nocturnal city streets. The somaesthetic work with the Man in Gold reflects the pragmatist principle of continuity that Peirce called synechism.

But somaesthetics also reflects the pragmatist commitment to critical meliorism, which raises my second concern regarding our contemporary enthusiasm for everyday aesthetics. We could call it a political worry, in a broad sense of the political. Exhortations to focus on appreciating the beauty or aesthetic appeal of the everyday world instead of superior works of art can dull our critical, meliorist consciousness by giving us the impression that the everyday is good enough and does not require serious improvement. But this belies the troubling conditions of everyday life for too many people. I am reminded here of Adorno's mordant critique of commercial commodity culture: «It corresponds to the behavior of the prisoner who loves his cell because he has been left nothing else to love»<sup>13</sup>. To the extent that preoccupation with everyday aesthetics involves an alienation from the realm of fine art (a realm that involves the critique of existent reality while expressing a utopian desire for a much better world), our enthusiasm for the everyday harbors dangers of uncritical complacency. Somaesthetics is explicitly motivated by a critical, meliorist impulse; it is not satisfied with our everyday experience and use of our bodies. Like much of modernist architecture, it has a utopian yearning (also present in its treatment of lovemaking in my recent book *Ars Erotica*) – the promise of happiness for more people and in more ways.

With respect to the issue of interaction in architecture, it is clear that the atmosphere of architectural environments is constituted by an interaction between, on the one hand, the activities and feelings of individuals within the architectural space and, on the other hand, the influence (including both affordances and constraints) of the architectural space, its structure and its accompanying equipment. In successful architectural experience, there is a fruitful recursive feedback loop between the activities and the architecture, an interaction in which the powers and energies of each are supporting and intensifying each other.

However, I should also introduce in our discussion a different form of interaction developed in somaesthetics that I believe is very important for architecture but also for related fields of urbanism and industrial design. I refer here to the interaction between the users and the architect or designer. Some architectural approaches to public buildings, plazas, or multiperson dwellings seek to be more democratic by asking the potential users of the

<sup>13</sup> T.W. Adorno, *On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening*, in A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, New York, Continuum, 1987, p. 280.

project what sort of building or interior or landscape designs they like or dislike, and then employing that input within the design process, either in the initial design and construction of the project or in subsequent designs of other buildings as a result of users' input from their experience of the designs that have already been realized. In such cases, the success of this interaction depends on the quality of the input of the users, of how the architectural space and materials feel to them, input of the users' full-bodied experience of inhabiting such architecture. One problem encountered in these efforts is the inability of users to articulate their feelings and sensory experience of architecture. Part of this difficulty is, of course, the problem of translating nondiscursive sensory perceptions and feelings into language; this is a very serious difficulty that I never want to underestimate. However, there is another difficulty, even more basic, namely an inability to discriminate more clearly the sensory perceptions and feelings that one experiences in a given space: the qualities of the air (freshness, temperature, odor, etc.), the feel of the floor, the feelings we get from our sense of the width of doorways and staircases, the height of ceilings and other perceptions that relate to one's kinesphere and proprioception. As our senses have been habitually trained to emphasize the visual (and ever more so by our increasingly technological environment), so the training of discrimination in other senses has been largely neglected. Somaesthetics, as the critical study and ameliorative cultivation of the use of the soma as the site of sensory appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-expression, is therefore deeply concerned with sharpening our sensory perceptions, including senses, like tactility and proprioception, whose cultivation is typically neglected. This is a point I've developed in writing about architecture, but also in my somaesthetic studies of the arts of eating and lovemaking.

*City, Architecture and Somaesthetics: a Conversation with Richard Shusterman*

In the process of editing some of Richard Shusterman's essays on architecture and the city for an Italian book, *Somaestetica, architettura e città*, (2024) a series of conversations took place in the fall of 2023 between the book's editor, Aurosa Alison, the editor of the collection publishing the book, Andrea Borsari, and Shusterman himself, the founder and principal disseminator of somaesthetics as philosophical approach, as well as a multidisciplinary and applied practice. From these written exchanges in English came the book's two long interviews, published in full in Italian translation. The essential core of those interviews is presented here for the first time in its original English.

**Keywords:** Somaesthetics and the City, Somaesthetics and Architecture, Richard Shusterman, Urban Aesthetics, Atmospheres, Climate Change.

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