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# After the Ruins

## An Affective Topography of Post-Earthquake Cities

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*Abstract.* The research we present focuses on a phenomenographical mapping of a mountainous region of Central Italy which, between 2009 and 2017, was struck by several catastrophic earthquakes. As the reconstruction efforts are variously proceeding to reinstate a questionable status *ante quem*, there is a widespread feeling that this rebuilding is in fact ignoring the “human space” that animated the towns before the dramatic events. This affective topography thus aims at presencing the atmospheric situations we have encountered by means of a variety of media, among which drawing, photography, cartography and commented walks.

*Keywords.* Phenomenography, Affective Topography, Urban Atmospheres

### Introduction: a Shaken Landscape

Between 2009 and 2016, vast portions of Central Italy’s mountainous areas were struck by severe earthquakes, resulting in widespread destruction and a harsh death toll. Both major cities such as L’Aquila and smaller towns, for example Amatrice, suffered extensive damage. If in the latter case the centers affected by more recent events still today largely lie in ruins, in L’Aquila the reconstruction has made substantial progress, bringing back to life wide portions of the historic fabric. Nevertheless, the outcomes of this process of rebuilding have been harshly criticized due to the intention - common among administrators, political decisionmakers and technicians - that the reconstruction should strive to reinstate a condition *ante quem*, bringing the city back to what it was *before* the traumatic event (Varagnoli, 2019). In our opinion, such position embodies an implicit act of “removal,” ignoring the affective dimension of urban space (De Matteis, 2019, 83). In this sense, there is little possibility of negotiating the trauma embedded in the inhabitants’ corporeity, allowing the onset of a healing process unfolding on both practical and existential levels.

Starting from this consideration, our project consists in producing a *phenomenography*, i.e. a differed presentation of a spatial situation encountered in first person (De Matteis et al., 2019). We have selected a territorial route across the central spine of the Apennine mountains in the Abruzzi region, connecting the areas damaged by the 2009 earthquakes with those hit in 2016. Using a variety of tools - cartography, drawings, photography, and commented walks - we created a narrative of the spatial encounters made in five distinct locations along the route, covering the varying degrees of destruction and reconstruction that these wounded territories are found in today. Our wider

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goal consists in attempting to grasp and “make present” (Gumbrecht, 2004) the atmospheric conditions of these towns and landscapes, not with the intent of producing an immediate design alternative, but to allow the spatialized affects to come to the surface, becoming visible and potentially orienting a discussion on the future of the reconstruction process.

### **Affective Topography**

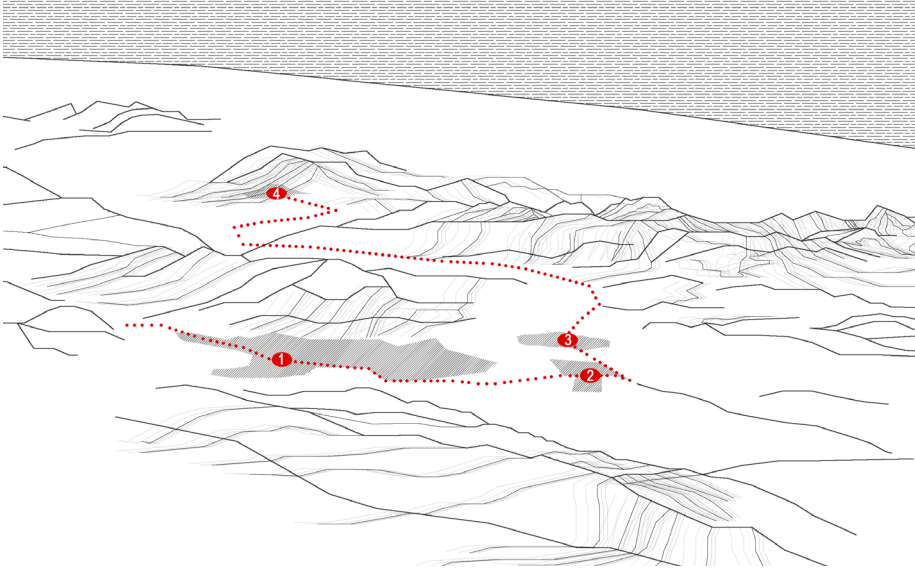
Exploring these ruined or rebuilt places of Central Italy, the quake’s traumatic effects become manifest through a variety of entities and hues. In some cases - such as Onna - the damage on the city’s physical structure has been so extensive as to make any reconstruction nearly impossible. Other situations, most notably L’Aquila, are on the other hand witnessing a dynamic rebuilding effort, which has returned many of the city’s urban spaces to usability. Yet despite this, only a small fraction of the original population has returned to live in the historic center, which is mostly used for daytime activities only. The deliberate ‘erasure’ of the earthquake’s traces, as can be observed in L’Aquila, Paganica or in other rebuilt portions of towns, merges with the absence of stable residents to express an affective response to both the catastrophe and the ensuing reconstruction.

In performing our observation, as a research group we started from the consideration that, differently from the local residents, our degree of familiarity with the places we explored was very varied. We put our ‘strangers’ eyes’ at work to map the affective space by means of a *phenomenographical* exercise. The tools we adopted to record the lived experience in the sites of the earthquake territories have been deployed in two distinct stages. In the first, during the exploration of the various areas, we commented our sensations as they were unfolding (Thibaud, 2013), live-recording the group’s voices and documenting the sites through photography. The walking exploration of the places progressed in different ways, depending on their being inhabited or abandoned, the degree of visible physical damage or reconstruction, or even fleeting atmospheric elements such as the wind, sunlight and temperature. All these variables concurred in soliciting from each of the explored sites a distinctive corporeal disposition, a subjective stance largely shared by all group members as we discussed in real-time what we were experiencing.

The routes through the sites were not strictly fixed in advance, but rather proceeded in relation to the encounters we made along the way, since our attention was drawn to various elements: in the more damages areas, for example, it could be a fractured building, the overwhelming presence of wild vegetation, or an open door allowing a glimpse onto dust-covered personal objects still visible in a former domestic space. Equally, the rhythm and pace of the exploration was dictated by the encounters, which we commented as they were taking place.

The photographic work followed the exploration and proceeded as a ‘live stream’ of visual recording. In a second stage, as we selected and organized the images shot by the various members of the group, we could critically outline the entities that had captured our attention during the walks, from the fragments of urban space to the mountainous landscape, to the details of architecture and the traces of human presence emerging from personal items or domestic interiors. Through the critical work on the photographs we identified a number of salient situations that appeared as being affectively charged: these spaces were then re-drawn to strengthen their expressive power, removing color and in some cases increasing the contrast to bring to the foreground the emotional content of the spatial situations. The composite

result of the exploration, combining the narrative of the lived experience of the exploration and the ex-post work on the images, is our synthetic phenomenographical documentation of the atmospheric space we encountered during our walks through the earthquake-stricken towns.



**Figure 1.** Commented walks route with its main stops:  
1. L'Aquila, 2. Onna, 3. Paganica, 4. Campotosto

## A Fragment of the Walk

Our exploration through the earthquake towns took place over several days and included five locations along a territorial path across the Apennine mountains. Sampled fragments of these walks can provide a notion of the method and of the observations' outcomes. In Paganica, a small historic center located in L'Aquila's suburban area, we met what was perhaps the most intense spatial experience, one that affectively engaged us with an atmosphere eventually following us throughout the journey, later extending and lingering into the process of production of our phenomenographical observation.

We entered the town through the square of Santa Maria Assunta, the largest local church, then walking along the main street and later returning by way of a secondary road. The neatly restored square offers insight into the contradictory condition of the reconstruction process: the church faces onto two renewed corner buildings painted a "reassuring" pastel color erasing not only the traces of the earthquake's damage, but also any historical patina (Sørensen, 2015). This restored part of town lies entirely empty, the sole living presence being heralded by the sound of the fountain's waterspouts.

Beyond this entrance threshold, the street opens into an altogether different urban condition, an almost surreal, uninhabited landscape of ruined buildings. Here the sensation experienced was one of uncanny disorientation, as we first entered the deserted wasteland of semi-collapsed buildings. Many of the town's houses have been consolidated, but these partially restored architectures dot the urban fabric in a piecemeal fashion. One house, for example, sported brand-new window casing, while the adjacent elevation was still encased in temporary bracings to prevent collapse.

The rebuilding, contrasting with the nearby traces of destruction, was suggesting something: the erasure of the traces of what had occurred. In some way that was difficult to decipher, we sensed that Paganica’s original atmosphere had vanished. Walking further into the heart of the town, this initial impression became stronger, and one member of the group commented: “By erasing the earthquake’s traces, the place’s history was removed as well.”

This early shock slowed down the pace of our exploration, as we moved among the streets and buildings in a reduced tempo. Walking on and around piles of debris and dirt, our movement was directly guided by the earthquake’s traces. Penetrating secondary alleys leading towards the houses’ entrances, a broken window or half-open door revealed personal objects mixed with rubble. All these entities were *expressive* of a present situation while also evoking the haunting of human life past, a twofold condition towards which we sensed a felt-body resonance (Griffero, 2016).



Figure 2. Paganica, November 2019. Photos by authors

As the walk progressed, our comments expressed an increasing density of emotions: “The more we walk, the worse I feel”; “The atmosphere is *haunted*.” The *presence* afforded by the expressive array *moved* us by generating continuous physical movement and corporeal stirrings (Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby, 2011). The atmosphere became increasingly heavy, with a burden of vague anxiety, and as our steps grew slower, the spoken comments left more space to photography. The disemboweled houses, abandoned objects, a crushed car, the photographs of people who had lost their lives on the night of the earthquake, all somehow ‘froze’ a dramatic atmosphere from which it was impossible to subtract oneself.



Figure 3. Drawings and photograph by authors  
 From left to right: L’Aquila (1&2), Paganica, Onna

## Conclusion: From Mapping to Design Thinking

Our phenomenographic description of the earthquake-stricken landscapes and towns strives to be a non-objective, non-representational *making-present* of spatial situations. In its ontology lie both limitations and potential: it is *subjective*, in the sense that it reports the experience of specific subjects, not a universal and measurable condition; yet it brings to the surface a sense of the atmospheres we encountered, as emanations of the urban and human environments that we corporeally resonated to. This acquired visibility, the *presencing* of such phenomena, is for us the added value of an exploration grounded on the primary evidence of the felt-body's response, in an attempt to elevate it from its ineffable latency.

The ensuing question relates to the use that can be made of this explorational tool. Once we have brought to light entities that are otherwise unavailable - since they remain opaque to conventional, distancing descriptive mechanisms - how can they become foundational for the process of reconstruction of these damaged urbanities? In fact, what we are observing are traces of the human depth of these towns, the testimony of their past life and of the trauma they have suffered. It is a type of evidence that does not appear in the dry representations normally serving as the basis for the mimetic reproduction of an ideal pre-catastrophe condition. We believe that in the critical process of rebuilding, such traces must not be overwritten: we are not speaking of the calligraphic precision of recorded history, rather of the patina, the dust, the dirt sedimenting where real human life unfolds. Along with these stains, the cracks and fissures created by the earthquake should turn into the scars of the trauma, in a process no longer relying on the naïve aspiration to removal, rather on the thoughtful negotiation of mourning. Instead of pretending that *nothing has happened*, it is on these grounds that a healthier and more solid future urban life can emerge.

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