

Reviews

Alessandro Meloni

Percepire e rappresentare lo spazio oltre la visione. Strategie di comunicazione multisensoriale per l'accessibilità del Museo di Arte Orientale Edoardo Chiossone

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The book *Percepire e rappresentare lo spazio oltre la visione. Strategie di comunicazione multisensoriale per l'accessibilità del Museo di Arte Orientale Edoardo Chiossone* by Alessandro Meloni is part of a line of research that has gained increasing relevance in recent years, investigating the relationship between representation, perception and accessibility. Published in the *Beyond Accessibility* series by FedOA Press, the book addresses a topic of particular significance for Representation studies: the possibility of understanding and communicating architectural space through methods that transcend the traditional primacy of vision.

From the very first pages, the research framework emerges clearly through a set of questions that guide the entire investigation: «Can a blind person understand the characteristics and qualities of space in the same way as a sighted person? Can the sensations perceived by a blind person enrich the aesthetic reading of architecture?» and, above all, «Which methods and representation tools can contribute to an accessible communication of architectural space?» [p. 15]. The relevance of these questions lies in their ability to shift the debate from the normative domain of accessibility to the broader field of spatial knowledge and experience, directly involving representation as a tool for cultural mediation and the construction of architectural knowledge.

The volume is structured into three complementary sections. The first establishes the theoretical framework of the research by addressing the themes of perception, representation and orientation. One of the most original aspects of this section is the ability to place Representation in dialogue with different disciplinary fields, ranging from neuroscience and cognitive psychology to the philosophy of perception and wayfinding studies. The author examines the functioning of vision and the relationship between the eye, the brain, and the

construction of mental images, while simultaneously analysing perceptual dynamics activated through alternative sensory channels.

Particularly noteworthy is the emphasis placed on neuroscientific studies, which are not treated merely as a supporting theoretical framework but rather as a means of redefining the very concept of architectural experience. Reflections on cognitive processes, multisensory perception and embodied perception let to overcome a predominantly ocularcentric conception of architecture, demonstrating how the understanding of space results from the complex integration of visual, tactile, auditory and proprioceptive stimuli. In this respect, the book explicitly engages with theories of embodied perception and multisensory experience developed by scholars such as Juhani Pallasmaa and Harry Francis Mallgrave, whose work serves as a reference for rethinking the relationship between body, perception, and architectural space.

The significance of the first section also lies in its capacity to bring the issue of accessibility back into dialogue with questions that have historically been central to the discipline of Representation. Perception is not treated as a secondary or highly specialised topic but rather as an interpretative key for understanding the processes through which space is known, represented and communicated. From this perspective, the comparison between sighted and blind individuals acquires a methodological value that extends beyond the specific case study, encouraging a critical examination of many of the implicit assumptions underlying contemporary visual culture.

The second section focuses on the Edoardo Chiossone Museum of Oriental Art in Genoa, adopted as a case study through which the previously discussed theoretical issues can be tested in practice. The interest of the analysis lies not only in the historical and architectural

value of the building but above all in its particular spatial configuration, characterised by complex circulation systems and limited physical accessibility. The reconstruction of the museum's design history and subsequent transformation proposals, including the project developed by Gae Aulenti, allows the author to highlight the often problematic relationship between architectural quality, usability and inclusion.

The case study, however, assumes a significance that extends beyond the simple application of theoretical principles, becoming a genuine experimental laboratory in which to test the capacity of representational tools to contribute to the construction of inclusive spatial knowledge. The building's complex layout, the succession of routes; in this regard, the presence of both physical and perceptual obstacles provide an opportunity to assess different methodologies while comparing their strengths and limitations. In this sense, the museum is not merely an object of study but a research platform through which procedures transferable to other cultural and architectural contexts can be developed.

From a disciplinary perspective, the chapters devoted to representational strategies and spatial analysis are particularly significant. Virtual models, panoramic photography, three-dimensional isovists and simulation tools are employed not merely as devices for documentation but as genuine interpretative instruments. Representation thus assumes an active role in the process of knowledge production, confirming one of the underlying assumptions that runs throughout the volume: understanding space also means identifying effective ways of communicating it.

The third section presents the applied outcomes of the research and arguably constitutes the most compelling part of the work. Theoretical analyses, scientific references, and experiments conducted on the case study converge in the definition of an operational proposal aimed at improving the museum's accessibility. In particular, the *MultiPano* project and the development of tactile devices for understanding space in the absence of vision demonstrate the author's intention to

translate theoretical reflection into concrete mediation tools. The most convincing aspect of these experiments lies in their capacity not merely to compensate for a sensory limitation but to enhance alternative modes of perception and architectural experience.

At the same time, the contribution of the book extends beyond its applied dimension and the specific issue of museum accessibility. One of its most stimulating reflections concerns the relationship between aesthetic experience and multisensory perception. Architectural appreciation has traditionally been associated with a predominantly visual reading based on the observation of form, proportions, and compositional relationships. The book proposes a different perspective, suggesting that the understanding of architectural qualities may also emerge through the coordinated involvement of other senses. In this way, the absence of sight is not interpreted only as a limitation but rather as an opportunity to recognise aspects of spatial experience that are often overlooked in contemporary design culture.

From a methodological standpoint, another distinctive feature of the work is the constant dialogue between empirical observation and theoretical construction. Perceptual investigations involving both sighted and blind participants, in situ experiments, and analyses of digital tools are not presented as isolated episodes but as parts of a progressive process of verification. The research thus assumes a circular structure in which theory, experimentation, and design continuously inform one another; once again recognising representation as a tool that is not only descriptive but also heuristic and interpretative.

From this perspective, the book also offers an important contribution to contemporary reflections on digital technologies. Virtual models, immersive panoramas and simulation tools are not celebrated as autonomous solutions to accessibility issues but are instead framed within a broader communication strategy. The author's attention remains consistently focused on the ways in which these tools can facilitate the construction of mental images and the understanding of spatial qualities. This balanced

position successfully avoids both technocentric enthusiasm and an exclusively assistive conception of inclusion.

Equally noteworthy is the decision to address accessibility through the concept of multisensory perception. In recent years, disciplinary debate has often focused on the removal of physical barriers or on the adoption of dedicated technological devices. Meloni's work instead proposes a broader reflection in which accessibility and perception are considered inseparable aspects of the same cognitive process. The result is a conception of architecture and its representation grounded in the plurality of experiences and in the enhancement of different modes of relating to space.

The conclusions effectively synthesise the overall contribution of the research. The author states that the work aims to redefine the concept of accessibility by abandoning common assumptions associated with a strictly visual conception of architecture, highlighting how an understanding of these dynamics can enrich the experience of all users, not only those with disabilities. Within this framework, accessibility is no longer seen as a set of technical solutions addressed to specific categories of users but rather as an opportunity to expand the ways in which people relate to the built environment. It is no coincidence that the book ends with an ideal reference to Paul Klee's celebrated perceptual diagram. If, in Klee's reflection, the construction of the image originated from the interaction between subject, world, and perception, Meloni's research appears to extend its meaning towards an authentically multisensory and inclusive dimension. It is precisely in this opening that the most significant value of the work resides: demonstrating how representation can become a tool capable not only of describing space but also of expanding the very possibilities of its understanding. The result is an original contribution to Representation Studies, one that extends the debate on accessibility beyond its normative and technological dimensions and reconnects it to the fundamental issues of perception, communication and the construction of architectural experience.

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