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## **SPACE IN TIMES OF PLAGUE**

**Review paper**

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## Abstract

The article deals in a general way with the subject of the relationship between man and space in the context of the forced isolation introduced last year. It refers to the ways of using space as described by E.T. Haal and to the types of distance described by proxemics. It tells about the observed people's reactions to the enforced social distancing and attempts to introduce changes in the way of using shared places. It draws attention to the complete change of the function of space, which was to connect people, to the one that divides co-users.

From time to time there comes a day when the certainty of the stability of the existing world which we have fostered turns out to be a total illusion. In an instant, we must change the way we function, including all our habits, so as to adjust to the new, unwanted reality. Each time surprised by this unhappy turn of events, we believe that „next time” we will be wiser having survived another failure. “There were as many plagues in the world as wars. Nevertheless, people are always surprised by their occurrence”<sup>1</sup>.

## Keywords

space, sharing, use, connecting, dividing, proxemics, feeling, distance, isolation, emptiness, change of meaning, disorientation, city, community, senses, anxiety, alienation, pandemic, lockdown, micro-spaces, social bubbles, isolation wards, quarantine, online work and education, security, loneliness, social interactions, pandemic, COVID-19, isolation, closure

## The beginning

The germs of the plague never die and do not disappear [...], there may come a day when, to the misfortune of people and for their learning, the plague will awaken its rats and send them to die in a happy city <sup>2</sup>.

It's been a year since our life has changed completely. The previously normal activities had to be suddenly suspended until further notice. The whole world around us, so painstakingly created over the years with an aim of making the best and the fullest possible use of it by all of us, has stopped and is heading in an unknown direction.

So far, all efforts have focused on ensuring that the designed space connects the people using it as well as possible. Now something completely different has been demanded of us - we must divide the space around us, the one we have known and accepted for our activities, so as to ensure as little contact with other people as possible.

„Cities for people” - not so long ago this slogan was approved by almost everyone interested in creating usable space. The city as a place that best reflects the complexity of the relationship between humans<sup>3</sup> and between a person and space was an experimental field for research on the ideal space that allows its happy inhabitants to live to the fullest. Jan Gehl<sup>4</sup> in his book *Cities for People* describes the necessity to design cities in a way that best fulfil their social functions. According to Gehl, city should encourage joint activity in a balanced and harmonious manner. It is important to create parks, squares and other public spaces that gather residents and induce as much activity as possible<sup>5</sup>. The designed space should connect people - this was the thought guiding designers and architects over the last decades. 2020 brought a huge change - urban space, and basically any space shared with others, became perceived as an oppressive element. City spaces became deserted overnight, complete *lockdown*<sup>6</sup>, was introduced, and at best, the order of absolute observance of social distance made the previous model of using shared places impossible to maintain.

2 *Ibidem*.

3 In the article *Sztuka Projektowania (miejsc) przestrzeni międzykulturowych* (w: *Architektura na styku kultur. Nowa Przestrzeń*, 2018) Professor Beata Gibała-Kapecka discusses the function of public space as a place for creating relationships between users, a place of intercultural communication and a place of interaction.

4 J. Gehl, *Miasta dla ludzi (Cities for People)*, Kraków 2018.

5 The articles by Doctor Katarzyna Stryszowska (*Wielowymiarowość przestrzeni publicznych*) and Krystyna Paprzyca PhD (*Miejsce i wspólnota miejsca w strukturze miasta?*) were published in “inAW Journal - Multidisciplinary Academic Magazine” not so long ago, in 2020.

6 *Lockdown* – The term, evoking negative connotations, denoting drastic restrictions aimed at counteracting the pandemic, was announced by the authors of Collins’ dictionary as the word of 2020, and in Germany it became the most popular anglicism of 2020.

## Forbidden touch

Proxemics<sup>7</sup>, which has recently become more and more necessary and obligatory knowledge for every designer, taught us to perceive the relationship between space and a person as the sum of many phenomena. Thanks to it, we know how space can be perceived depending on the distance adopted by a person, determined by individual and cultural conditions. One of the main goals of all architectural spaces built and created with people in mind, was to skilfully connect and bring users closer to each other. They provided the opportunity to connect the occupants of the space by having them staying close to each other in one space, by enabling them to receive the same sonic, aromatic, tactile and visual sensations.

It is pleasant to press on the door handle polished by thousands of hands that passed through that door before us; the pure shine of wear and tear of indefinite time transforms into an image of welcome and hospitality. The door handle is a handshake of the building. The sense of touch connects us with time and tradition: we shake the hands of countless generations through tactile sensations<sup>8</sup>.

Now we expect that the same interiors or spaces separate us from each other in the best and most durable way. We hear that we cannot or should not interact too much with the interior itself. Constantly made aware of the dangers lurking on every surface, we cannot spontaneously admire the texture or scent of building or decorating materials. The involuntary, reflexive touch of the smooth surface of the polished banister remains an unreachable fantasy. To recognize the space, we have sight and hearing, which we can use in an unlimited way for the time being.

## 150 cm of solitary security

Edward T. Hall<sup>9</sup> in his publications on spatial relations, described various forms of human perception of space through various distances. The shortest of them is the intimate distance<sup>10</sup>, which reaches a maximum of 45 cm. The closest people are allowed at such a distance, it builds close relationships and maintains the bond. Sight is replaced by other senses - hearing, touch and smell.

The next in line is the individual distance<sup>11</sup>, of 45 to 120 cm. This is a zone for friendships, family ties and other close relationships. Such a distance enables tactile contact - we remain „at your fingertips”. It is a comfortable space for conversations with close friends, the role of sight becomes more important, and the possibility of using other senses - smell, touch, feeling the warmth of another person - slowly decreases.

7 Proxemics – an interdisciplinary line of research on cultural, behavioural and sociological aspects of spatial relations between people and between humans and the material environment - a term introduced in the 1960s by E.T. Hall.

8 J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry*, Kraków 2012.

9 E.T. Hall, *Ukryty wymiar*, Warszawa 1976.

10 E.T. Hall additionally divides the intimate distance into a shorter one, up to 20 cm, and longer, up to 45 cm.

11 The term introduced by Heini Heidegeer was described in more detail by E.T. Hall, who proposed that it can also be divided into closer and more distant.

Third in line is the social distance<sup>12</sup>, it stretches between 120 and 360 cm from the given person. At this distance we move between strangers and less known acquaintances. This is a good distance for official and professional contacts. This is the so-called non-binding distance - it allows you to start or end a conversation at any moment. In this space, we mainly use sight and hearing when dealing with another person. If it is not possible to maintain a social distance - for example at cash desks at banks, in offices – dividers are used so as to introduce a psychological barrier, causing appropriate behaviour.

The social distance that has been required for a year and considered safe by epidemiologists, set at a minimum of 1.5 m, and preferably 2 m between people in public space, in a way forces the behaviours described above. As a „non-committal distance” it is not conducive to establishing new or maintaining existing social ties, it prevents the shared use of space according to the principles originally assigned to it.

### **Flashback 1. Split, 2019**

Hot evenings in Split are best spent in the peristyle of Diocletian's palace. The stairs surrounding the courtyard serving as coffee tables are crowded with tourists tired of all-day sightseeing. Darkness and warm lights transform the space of the square into a huge living room outlined by a row of columns on one side and stone houses glued between the colonnade on the other side. In the middle, there is a crowd of citizens of the world passing each other shoulder to shoulder as well as waiters from nearby cafes and bars. They skilfully move on the stone floor polished over the centuries, gracefully carrying chilled drinks on large trays and handing them to happy strangers who are involuntarily clinging to each other. Without thinking, they lean on their neighbours, share common stairs and impressions while humming to the street musicians beguiling the time, laughing out loud, talking.

### **The charms of a pandemic dinner**

Occurring from time to time episodes of „loosening of pandemic restrictions” allowed for a temporary use of catering establishments. According to the guidelines, tabletops in restaurants should be placed at a distance of at least 200 cm from each other. Guests should enter the room and sit at the table wearing a mask that they can take off while eating. Buffet-style tables or bars are disallowed. The restaurant should be clearly divided into zones that allow adequate distance between guests who do not belong to the common household. Common areas including the tables must be disinfected every 15 minutes.

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12 The maximum stretch of the social distance, also divided into closer and longer, is 3.6 m. Then there is a public distance, which is also called formal distance.

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In many places solutions were quickly sought that would allow people to use them in a way that was previously associated with pleasure and relaxation. Plexiglass partitions, allowing or not allowing eye contact with fellow diners, took various forms depending on the inventiveness of the owners of the premises, the imagination of the designer, the order of the local authorities and, finally, on specific cultural conditions.



Figure 1. Restaurant in the centre of Paris, 2020

(source: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1189754.shtml> [access: March 12, 2021]).



Figure 2. School canteen in Seoul, 2020

(source: <https://www.post-gazette.com/news/world/2020/05/20/South-Korea-high-school-students-return-coronavirus-Korean-schools-reopening/stories/202005200161> [access: March 12, 2021]).



## **A cult without followers**

Has anyone ever imagined a world without pilgrimages to Mecca? Or the Way of the Cross in Rome without the faithful? The live stream camera aimed at Al-Kaba usually showed countless crowds swirling around the reliquary of the holy stone. It was an extraordinary experience for the participants, associated with not only the divine but also human closeness. The figures dressed in white walked shoulder to shoulder over the kilometres of white floor to come closer to the Black Stone for a moment. Hajj 2020 appeared completely different. The space of the great mosque, which was adapted to receive a huge number of pilgrims, seemed even more monumental than usual. Single persons, who managed to make this most important journey in a Muslim's life, moved at large intervals on the white floor with marked out zones of distance.

St. Peter's Square, the main square of the Vatican, owes its enormous size to the anticipated crowds of the faithful gathering in front of the chapel. The space, outlined on both sides with Bernini's white portico, surrounds the arriving pilgrims, hugs them. The square is a meeting place with the Pope, a general audience and a destination for tourists from all over the world. Large church ceremonies are organized here, because the huge area can accommodate up to 300,000. people. Every day the square resounds with the buzz of conversations, shines forth with flashes, and shimmers with the colours of umbrellas. On festive days, it becomes a place of common prayer for thousands of believers. Easter 2020 changed the way this beautiful space functions. The traditional Way of the Cross, organized on Good Friday, did not take place in the Colosseum as usual, but in the completely empty St. Peter's Square. The Pope leading the service was accompanied by only a dozen or so people. The empty space was the only participant in the ceremony.

The Wailing Wall was rarely as deserted as it had been in the past year. Before Pesach in 2020, cards with prayers of the faithful were removed from the wall, and the wall was disinfected. Due to the holiday, groups of 10 people were exceptionally allowed to pray at the wall. The space of the former Jerusalem temple froze in the face of the omnipresent emptiness.

## **Flashback 2. Rome, 2016**

Sightseeing in full sun is not my favourite activity. That is why we are going to the centre only in the afternoon. The setting sun does not bother you with its bright face, you don't see numerous tours led by professional pilots who also want to have a family life and prefer to spend their evenings at home. There are few tourists around the Colosseum, the entrance to the stairs leading to the alley winding around the Roman Forum is completely empty. The unexpected change of weather and a light drizzle are also helpful. It is sufficiently burdensome - almost all the people in sight give up further walk. We are left alone in the face of the enormous amount of historic space. Nobody interferes, does not enter

the frame, the place seems completely deserted. It is a wondrous experience in a city where you can hardly ever feel alone and distant. The space abandoned by people can be felt more strongly and more clearly, you can focus on it, be delighted with it.

### Music in an empty concert hall

The pandemic New Year's concert by the Vienna Philharmonic will probably go down in the history of music forever. The orchestra against a wall of flowers in one of the most beautiful, acoustically perfect concert halls in the world, led by world-famous conductor Riccardo Muti, had to face a great challenge. A traditional concert taking place for the first time without the participation of the audience lively reacting to the music flowing from the stage, seemed like a general rehearsal being watched from behind a curtain. From among the empty seats in the audience of the Golden Hall, one could hear the ovation of music lovers who being physically absent, were sending their applause to the wonderful performers via the Internet. Thanks to the lack of the usual crowd of participants of the event, Musikverein<sup>13</sup> could show itself in all its glory, present every detail of its richly decorated interior. The music, accustomed to the audience, sounded a bit different in an empty room, it was more alienated and fought against hollow emptiness of the auditorium.



Figure 3. New Year's concert in Vienna

(source: <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/press/5ix4ion-8Fn5-R4cvkn8> [access: March 12, 2021]).

13

called the Golden Hall (*Großer Musikvereinssaal*), it is considered to be the best concert hall. The traditional New Year's concert, expected by the audience, takes place here every year. The hall has 1,744 seats and 300 standing places, which were always occupied until the concert in 2021





Figure 4. A rehearsal at a music school in Washington, 2020 (source: <https://www.classicfm.com/music-news/coronavirus/washington-school-band-pop-up-tents/> [access: March 12, 2021]).

### With a webcam into intimacy

Until now, the private zone has been the mainstay and refuge of every human being. Apart from the closest family members, only those people who were especially trusted had access to this zone. Each one of us could choose whether, when and to whom make our private space accessible. The sudden need to communicate by means of remote devices disturbed this age-old custom. Students, and sometimes employees, were affected the most, and were forced to „let strangers” into their intimate world. The bedroom and the living room ceased to be the private oases and were forcibly made public without asking their owners’ consent. The most private spaces have changed their essence and ceased to perform their previous functions. Instead of embracing their inhabitants with quiet safety, they have become a place of work, learning, and thus, often an arena of personal failures and mishaps. In this way, people were deprived of their private protective space, which in critical moments usually brought relief and the possibility of quietening down. They have lost their intimate spaces, always reserved only for their innermost thoughts and actions, allowing them to maintain internal harmony.



Figure 5. A school operating in the United States - an alternative to online teaching  
(Photograph: ROBYN BECK/Getty Images, source: <https://www.wired.com/story/everything-we-know-now-about-schools-kids-and-covid-19/> [access: March 12, 2021]).

### Luxury room – the place of seclusion

During the pandemic, hotel rooms, adapted and designed for a short-term stay, were in many cases turned into isolation wards for those infected or suspected of being infected with COVID-19. Luxurious interiors with a beautiful view from the windows have suddenly become the places of seclusion<sup>14</sup>. Their lodgers, locked for at least a dozen or so days in a small but well-equipped space, had to deal with loneliness and uncertainty. By changing its basic function, the hotel, a place usually associated with pleasure and reveries of traveling, has become a place of a peculiar oppression. The dream of adventure and travel came true in the least expected way. The role of the place got reversed. Instead of returning to his/her room after an eventful day, its isolated lodger was „condemned” to stay there alone 24 hours a day. A luxurious and desirable space in the past, by changing its purpose, has become something like a prison.

Numerous ads proposing flats, apartments and hotels as the places of forced quarantine<sup>15</sup> began to circulate on the Internet. Advertisers competed in ideas for selling their services. Panoramic views of the depopulated city were offered, the stays were promoted by the possibility of drinking Nespresso on

14 PThe basic meaning of the word „seclusion” has so far been associated with a social sanction directed against a person who transgresses a legal or moral norm. The forms of seclusion and social distance are described by Marek Butrym in the article *Dystans jako sankcja społeczna* („Opuscula Sociologica”, 2012, no 1).

15 Marlena Sokół-Szawłowska describes the impact of quarantine on the mental health of isolated groups („Psychiatria”, t. 18, 2021, nr 1, s. 57–62, [www.journals.viamedica.pl/psychiatria](http://www.journals.viamedica.pl/psychiatria)).

a spacious balcony, the potential clients were reassured by the provision of professional and frequent disinfection and the possibility of delivering purchases to the door. Despite these promises, however, beautiful interiors have lost their most important attribute - as places of forced closure, they ceased to concretise dreams of luxury, freedom, pleasure, relaxation and a great adventure.

### Flashback 3. Skyline webcams, April 2020

At least the first dozen or so nights of lockdown I have spent glued to the monitor. Online cameras are my guide to the new world. I visit well-known places; I see them in an unprecedented view. The empty St. Mark's Square is terrifying, a police car or a disinfection team passes every few minutes on the Duomo Square in Milan. Single motorboats flit through the canals of Venice, in the middle of Piazza Navona in Rome a giant tern made itself comfortable, the only living occupants of Piazza Venezia are soldiers on guard in front of Vittoriano. All the places are so quiet and deserted that I can hear water splashing in the fountain in front of the Spanish Steps from my loudspeakers. Just for peace of mind I strain my eyes to find at least one passerby. Unfortunately, for many days and nights I repeat this attempt without a satisfying, longed-for result.

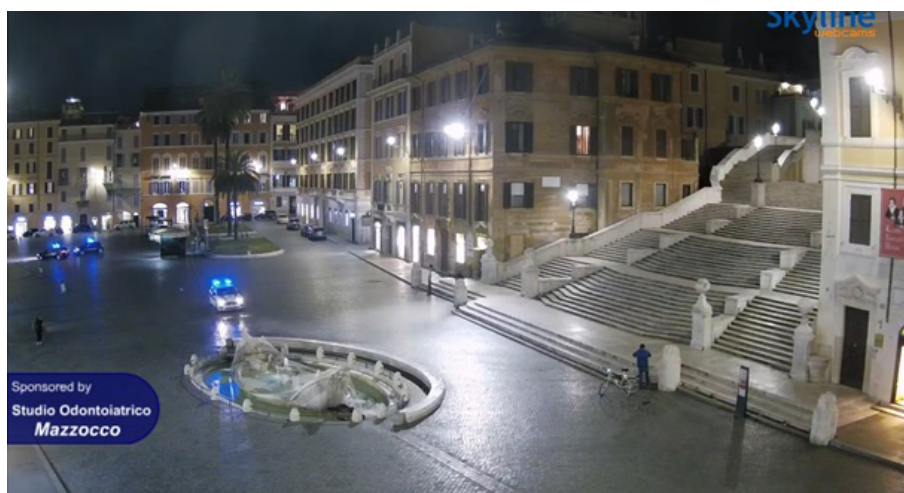


Figure 6. Piazza di Spagna, view on the Spanish Steps (source: <https://www.skylinewebcams.com/pl.html>).

### Conclusions

At the time of pandemic, the space which was created by the people for the people, has become deserted, alienated, detached from its basic, original assumptions, just like its users have become lonesome. Constructed for specific purpose, designed according to measurable rules, during the forced lockdown it has missed the people who usually remain an integral part of it. Schools, churches, playgrounds, restaurants, bars, sports facilities - they were hidden behind dusty windows, losing their



grace, charm and sense of existence. Places created for people, deprived of their presence, have become only empty decorations for the time slipping away.



Figure 7. Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin, 2020 (Photo by Moritz Haase, source: <https://www.afar.com/magazine/photos-berliner-ensemble-shows-future-of-socially-distant-theaters> [access: March 12, 2021]).

We wonder whether the current situation is temporary or will it last longer. Some scientists say it will be months, and according to others it may take years before we return to „normal”. However, more and more often we hear voices that the world which we have gotten so much used to will not come back. This inclines us to ask questions about our future in the context of the organization of everyday life. If we are forced to completely change our habits, new architectural, designing, modelling, technological, medical and other solutions related to all human activities that may be considered potentially life or health threatening will be necessary. We will need a multitude of specialists who will prepare a new, safe space for us. What is required is the paradigm of the new post-Covid space, the description of its conditioning, demands and specific guidelines for almost every field of design. It is quite possible that every now and then public spaces and interiors will have to cope with the necessity of sudden changes, quick adaptation to new requirements and a different way of use. Already in January 2021 as part of the Pre-Opening 4 Design Days 2021<sup>16</sup> you could learn about new directions taking into account the necessary changes in thinking about design. The possibilities of combining the restrictive principles of social distance with maintaining emotional well-being were thought about. The necessity to apply new technologies enabling „contactless” use of space was considered. Since the problem of the pandemic was most acute in the most densely populated areas, the use of various smart technologies enabling the construction of a smart city is being investigated more and more

often. The use of precise monitoring, a machine vision analysing open and closed space, the use of safe materials in public space - glass resistant to bacteria and microorganisms, bactericidal paints, UV lamps for disinfecting closed premisses are examined. More and more often it is postulated to build wider sidewalks to maintain the recommended distance and to create a network of bikeways as an alternative to public transport. Parks and other open areas in city centres are becoming valuable as they enable to stay safely outdoors during the times of lockdown, also small shops opened outside popular shopping malls. After a year-long closure of most countries and various epidemiological experiences, the main emphasis is on designing and creating new spaces in order to keep as much distance as possible, which is to ensure the health safety of society. Let's hope, however, that a walk through the crowded St. Mark's Square, a coffee drunk in a cosy cafe in Paris or being part of an audience of few thousand people at a huge open-air concert will not remain forever as our beautiful memories.

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