

**From Interior to Interiority:
Locating Key Historical Moments in the Relationship
between Spaces and Individuals**

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Abstract

We spend increasingly more time in architectural interiors, spaces that can give us the quality of life and interesting scenarios for the growth of identity and interiority. However, both spatial interior and psychological interiority face difficulties inherent to contemporary life. This text proposes a critical review of the literature on the socio-spatial archaeology of the subject in order to see possible paths of realisation of interiority in the present. The document presents several stages in the sociocultural evolution of an interior space that needs to be described with different adjectives (spiritual, hedonistic, promiscuous) and groups the most relevant contributions of the literature according to this proposal.

Keywords: interiority, interior architecture, individualism, subjectivity

Introduction

The notion of humans being endowed with interiority cannot be dissociated, in modern terms, from the examination of the evolution of this interiority from an ecological and complex approach, that is, considering the person not as an isolated being but trying to survive and develop its potential in changing spatial environments. This constitutes an anthropological idea of the human being as being historically and spatially contextualized that overcomes the Cartesian dualism which implies, in this sense, an importance to the physical and spatial aspect of human life, particularly the environment closest to the person. The interior space is therefore interesting to be carefully examined. I propose a review that links the study of the architectural interior with the psychological interior, going from space to subjectivity, from interior to interiority. In order to understand this link, a historical approach is proposed here in a spirit of synthesis that allows us to see the key moments gathered in three stages in the relationship between both concepts on the basis of a broad theoretical picture of the development of subjectivity, intimacy and spatial privacy. This last concept, extensively studied in the associated literature, are keys in the construction of the subject and here they will be considered related to interiority.

It seems relevant to me not only to locate key moments in the emergence of the evolution of interiority, following the idea of decisive moments in history by Zweig (1940), integrating and discussing contributions often dispersed in several academic disciplines, but also to learn from them when thinking the current urban and domestic crisis, where the interior and interiority could work as essential material and psychological devices to enjoy a life with quality and dignity. The above cannot be addressed without first asking about the scope of the historical and cultural nature of the interior and interiority that refer to the universal experiences of the person. On the one hand, there is an "eternal" dimension, outside of time and significant to the very human condition of seeking-habitation (due to the need for refuge from the outside), which would lead us to think of the interior as something present in all cultures and historical periods. But on the other hand, there has been a historical condition, related to the crisis of the classical city with the arrival of industry, and the need to retreat to the private sphere, that marks an emergency of the interior, according to Rice (2007) at a very specific moment, the 19th century. Here I will argue that, since there have been several kinds of interiors and stages in the interiority evolution, if we can talk about an emergence of interior, it cannot be located in one single period, but in key moments where technology and culture go hand in hand to construct different ways of understanding interiority.

The Spiritual Interior

The eternal dimension of the interior is marked by first radical experience of a person, the exit of a uterine interior to reach an exterior that is socially “dressed” as a new shelter; protection for the infant lived as a new sphere of privacy. This protection has been “designed” since immemorial times, but we could think, as is suggested by Huppatz (2012), that, among cavemen, a form of interior design emerged even before architecture was conceived. This author supports the modern narrative about the interior with a search of its origins independent of the idea of the domestic interior that Rice (2007) handles, or the consolidated architectural interior, central in the writings of Riegl (1985) on the Pantheon Roman. Huppatz (2012) prefers to focus on the Paleolithic interior with the idea to link its birth to the aesthetic creativity burst reflected on the cave paintings, embellishment and transformation of an existing space moulded by geology. Pile (2000), in his *History of Interior Design*, also proposes that the starting point of the interior goes as far back as the prehistoric era, a key moment during which cave paintings began to mark the beginning of the history of art (Janson, 1962; Gombrich, 1950). Pile attributes to these spaces above all a character of protection. In Abercrombie (1990) and Abercrombie and Whiton (2008), the aesthetic character that emerges from the sacredness of space is fundamental, with references to the afterlife. They compare these walls with the stained glass windows of a gothic cathedral, a point that gives us a clue to group very distant moments in an era of spiritual interior essential for the human evolution.

An attractive conceptual framework to understand these surprisingly realistic forms of representation is indeed Darwinism, which leads us to think that, by painting animals on the rock, *homo sapiens* found a way to develop symbolic thought, which would lead him to dominate and manipulate nature in an abstract way and survive. In the innermost sections of the caves, in the etymological sense of the Latin word *interior* (comparative of *inter* or *interus*, that is, what is more inside), the inhabitants surely found a kind of auto-control representing animals from a dangerous exterior in a hidden, spiritual and aesthetic interior. Thus, natural walls were not only protections: they functioned as conceptual walls, aesthetic and spiritual devices important for surviving, something confirmed by studies which stress the direct biological and evolutionary benefit of spirituality as a complex ideological superstructure (Henneberg & Saniotis, 2009).

In warmer regions, the first environment was built without solid walls: a protected natural space, a garden like the one described in *Genesis*; a domesticated nature where we find the idea of artificiality

that is consubstantial with the idea of design. In it we find axes, destinations, closures and especially thresholds (Abercrombie, 1990). To enter an interior is indeed always to walk across a mobile or fixed threshold, an experience that can be lived as a homecoming, a form of *topophilia* (Tuan, 1974), recovery of the happy space. Or it may be something sacred, as it was to enter through the portico into the internal cavity of the Pantheon in Rome, where spirituality is more evident than in the caves because we know exactly the kind of rituals that were carried out. For the Austrian historian Riegl (1985) the Pantheon is a fundamental milestone in the creation of the first architectural interiors. According to Giedion (1971), it inaugurated the second age of space, that which envelops a large interior given by the Roman arch, vault and concrete technology. When the Pantheon became a Christian church, a community of people could be gathered to hear sacred texts, experiencing for the first time an elevated form of physical and spiritual, as both collective and individual interiority. New technology strengthens and coincides with a running cultural transformation, in this case, the search for spirituality, the central concern in St. Augustine, who seeks inwardly the path to truth and divinity through self-knowledge (*in interiore homine habitat veritas*) (Augustine, 2006; Cary, 2000; Chiariello, 2015).



Figure 1
Roman Pantheon
(Photograph
by Wknight94,
Wikimedia
Commons)

There has been much debate about Augustine's role in the history of modern notions of "subject," since important scholars, such as Taylor (2006), argue that Augustinian philosophy contains the *cogito's* argument. Marion (2008), among other authors, disagrees with Taylor in the sense that one cannot equate the Augustinian "inner turn" with modern self-reflexivity; neither the discovery of

the soul (the *psyche*, personal and impersonal at the same time) with the modern ego (Vernant, 1991). Rather, this idea of spiritual interiority would be of an accord with Plotinus and derived from the ontological affinity between individual souls and God. Eksem (2010) believes that Augustine's project can be conceived as a union between the Cristian religion and the classical philosophical enterprise dominated by the idea of "caring for the self." What we could also call, in Foucault's terms, "practices of the self" (rituals of abstinence, conscience examination) was initially fed by Socratic conversations that had place as much in the domestic space (in the symposia of the *andrōns* of the Greek *oikos*) as in the public space of the *polis*. Christianity internalized spatially several of these practices in churches (or adapting ancient temples as the Parthenon), chapels, confessionals and catacombs.

In this period, another relationship with the outside is perceived, different from the classic one, in a new era of insecurity and urban crisis. Psychologically, we are already facing an experience of spiritual retreat and self-awareness, important in the monk's cells (heirs of the *cubicula* of the Roman *domus*), in the hermit solitude and in the conventual retreat, where conditions for privacy are given within the framework of collective discipline. We can talk there, broadly speaking, about a mystical interior, still not intimacy in *stricto sensu*, nor of individualism (although Dumont, 1986, speaks of an individualism "outside the world", that of the monks, precursor of modern individualism). It appears as a religious interiority that does not need perfectly defined thresholds; the chapels or prayer stools could work as retirement supports, to be in contact, not so much with the modern self, but with the beyond.

The Hedonistic Interior

Another key period that marked a turning point in the interior's character and conception of the self is the beginning of the Renaissance in the 15th century, the beginning also of the transition towards modernity with its intensification of individualism, science and capitalism. These three interrelated phenomena will produce and be influenced by critical spatial changes: one of them is the diffusion of secular forms in the domestic sphere that contrast with the external character of medieval civilization. In this section I would like to emphasize that the nature of such privacy will no longer be solely spiritual or intellectual, but hedonistic, understanding this hedonism in a large sense and with different connotations, as we will see examples from the 15th to the 19th century.

My point of depart is Sombart (1967), who stated that the increase in sumptuous consumption is the real driver of modern capitalism. This author very lucidly saw how, during the Florentine *cuattrocento*, the festivities agenda no longer depends only on the religious calendar. We are facing a new joy of living subsequent to the Black Death, along with a rise of what Sombart calls “privatization of luxury” (destined to the interior of the *palazzi* and not to the processions in streets and squares), from which art and decorative arts (at that time as prestigious as painting) are eloquent examples. With regard to the boom of furniture in this period, it is worthwhile to revive a thought by Lukacs (as cited by Rybczynski, 2006) about it:

Since the self-consciousness of the medieval people was scarce, the interiors of their houses were bare, including the rooms of the nobles and the kings The interior furnishing of the houses appeared along with the interior furnishing of the minds. (p. 47)

The link proposed by this author is as suggestive as it is questionable. Lukacs’s statement could be interpreted as a way of conceiving the individual in western terms, with minds full of activity, something that, from an oriental philosophical point of view, would be out of place. But here it fits with several phenomena that are intensified in a period of increasing economic individualism and ostentatious consumption, reflected by artistically crafted furniture located in rooms with a new aesthetic coherence transversal to all its elements. Therefore, could we talk about an emergence of the interior during this period?

Given the minority nature of the above mentioned innovations as well as the centrality of the decorative arts and representation spaces (intended to show off aristocratic status) both in Renaissance and Baroque interiors, we could exclusively think, actually, of an advance in the *longue durée* of interiority’s evolution, with specific but important novelties that are going to be leaking to the whole of society over the course of several centuries. At this stage, we witness an artistic-hedonistic interior, often shared by numerous friends and family members, focused on magnificence and aesthetic enjoyment, in a line that Sombart (1967) has very lucidly seen as a passage from sacred to profane love. Elias (1994) writes, for this period, about a “civilizing process” (the medieval warrior becoming a courtesan). The refinement of customs and self-containment, reflected on manners handbooks, are developed in parallel to spatial transformations in palaces with areas that encourage study and retreat (like San Jerome in Figure 2), but also a taste for collection and artistic decoration. *Studioli* and aristocratic libraries begin to spread as well as cabinets or wardrobes in buildings thought more as residences than as defense fortresses.

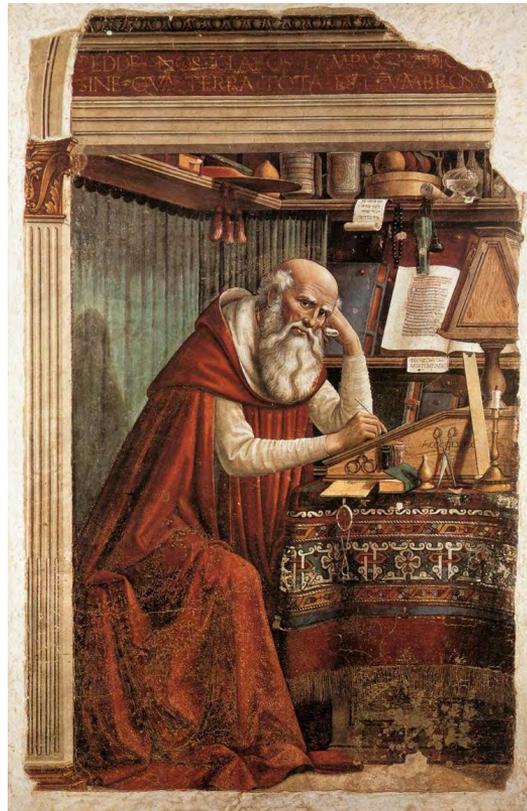


Figure 2
*Saint Jerome
 in His Study*
 (Domenico
 Ghirlandaio,
 1480)

Federico da Montefeltro's *studiolo* (1473-1476), Duke of Urbino, the court in which Castiglione was inspired to write his work *Il Cortegiano* (1524), is a lavish space, with marquetry that recreates a three-dimensional and illusionist architecture. Originally, the upper *friso* was decorated with twenty-eight portraits of illustrious men from the past and present (by Giusto di Gand and Pedro Berruguete), today located in the Louvre Museum and in the Galleria Nazionale delle Marche. There, unlike medieval paintings, the interaction of the figures in the space dominates the painting, something that Evans (1987) highlights as a characteristic feature of the Renaissance. When beginning to define this realistic space, Arnheim (2000) claims that the 15th century painters "preferred to give their subjects a similar form to the inside of a box ... Instead of getting lost in an infinite space, these centrifugal forces were confronted by forces in the opposite direction ... The person saw his powers defined by an interior space" (pp. 66-67). In Mantua, Isabela d'Este's *studiolo* shows us an important trend, which is the novel participation of women in the use of these interiors endowed with the elegance of courtesan life, but that can be also been seen as small private Pantheons.

Figure 3
Aristotle (Giusto
 di Gand, 1476.
 Painting in
 Federico da
 Montefeltro's
 studiolo)



These proto-individualist practices belonging to a spatial “interior turn” are simultaneous, in the 17th century, to the Cartesian “epistemological turn” a “subjectivist turn” strengthened by activities such as reading (facilitated by the new printing press), relevant when considering a literary genealogy of the self (Lajer-Burcharth & Sontgen, 2016), added to a pictorial genealogy revealed by portraits and customized decoration. It is then when the autobiographical writing spreads among the social elite: a form of experience of the self that requires a certain type of furniture (*secretaires*, booksellers, lecterns). And it is also at this time (in the 15th century, according to the Oxford Dictionary) when the English word *interior* appears to designate a contrasting space with the outside (Rice, 2007), and the word *privacy*, until then used to legally designate a nonpublic property domain, is used to talk about something secret or occult by someone.

A century later, in the Netherlands, we witnessed another important event in the emergence of the interior. Numerous canvases present women doing their jobs in spaces that appear as totally domestic

(dedicated exclusively to the things of the house) and not as a representation (social exhibition). The virtuosity of painters in detailing the light effects (Vermeer, in Holland and Velázquez, Caravaggio in Spain and Italy respectively) was simultaneous to the improvement of a fundamental technological device in order to have illuminated interiors: the glazed window. The women painted by Vermeer and Franz Hals are usually next to windows through which light arrives and illuminates neatly checkered floors and furniture conveying peace and Calvinistic order (Cieraad, 2006), with beautiful and also practical articles with which the Dutch commercial bourgeoisie made life more comfortable. The technological improvement in the production of more transparent glass (lenses, mirrors, telescopes.) was allowing to have large windows and pleasant illuminated interiors, more orderly settled than those of the past since the design flaws or lack of maintenance could not be hidden. Mumford (1955) attaches great importance to this fact and argues that “glass helped put the world in a frame, made it possible to see certain elements of reality more clearly The crystals not only opened the eyes of the people but their minds, seeing was believing “ (p. 143).

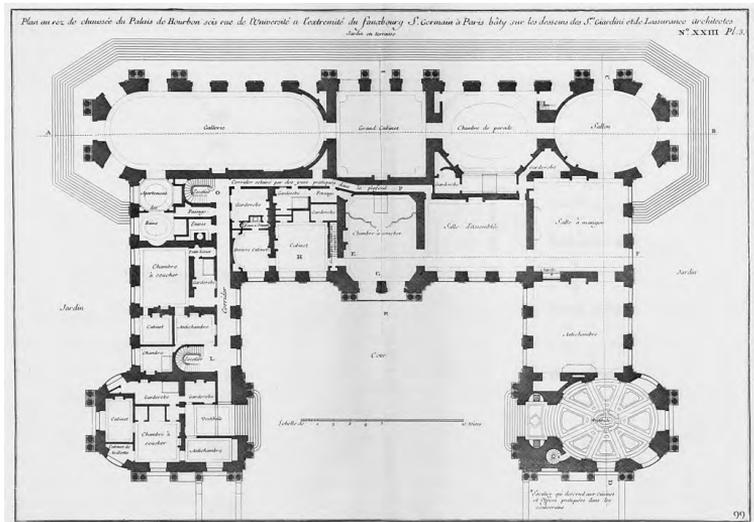


Figure 4
*Young Woman
 with a Water
 Pitcher* (Johannes
 Vermeer, c. 1662-
 1665)

At the beginning of the 18th century, after the monumentality of the baroque, we observed in France a refined hedonism, with a taste for intimacy that joins the *joie de vivre* of its aristocracy. We observe clearly a third line in the construction of physical and cultural interiority has to do with the appearance of an architecture of privacy (family and individual), limited to the social elite, through

distributions that guarantee the voluntary solitude of the individual (especially sought in toilet and hygienic areas) in a given building). If Vitruvius (1999) had dedicated the first chapter of his treatise to the walls of the city, to the protection of the community, during Modernity it is no coincidence that we see the emergence of walls and individualizing domestic devices that consecrate the *Homo interior*; doors, corridors or direct access to bedrooms. The Palais Bourbon that the architect Giardini built in 1722 in the outskirts of Paris for Louise-Françoise de Bourbon, legitimized daughter of Louis XIV of Madame de Montespan, was a model for other architects interested in novel distributions such as corridors.

Figure 5
Palais de Bourbon
(Jacques-François Blondel,
1752)



Blondel's 18th century treatises defend the designing of what he calls *comodité* rooms, far from the representation and formal and baroque etiquette (Eleb, 1999). These suites were thought to enjoy a way of "being at home" with specific and comfortable clothing (the *négligée* French fashion, "vestment interiority", if we could say so, that we continue to practice). It thus increased an inner sphere of openness and relaxation where people felt free to show themselves as they were.

Finally, we come to a period, the 19th century, which Rice (2007) considers foundational in the emergence of the interior as a manifestation of both a material and cultural construction. Here Rice is following Walter Benjamin's path, who maintained that, from the reign of Louis Philippe of Orleans (1830) forward, the bourgeois enters the historical scene, and, in his world, the space of life is constituted by an interior opposite to the workplace (Benjamin, 1999). We could think that the interior and domestic bubble, during

this significant moment in European modernisation, would be a space exhibiting domestic efficiency and productivity. However, despite the gradual entry into the house of modern technologies (such as gas light, which allowed a whole new nightlife), the predominant characteristic of the bourgeois environment, when it came to his home, was a comfort surrounded by objects that take us to an exotic universe. The rational space of exploitation in the factory is opposed here to a oneirically hedonistic and furnished home, loaded with all manner of decorative and historicist artistic fantasies. The velvet of the upholstery, carpets and curtains is the soft counterpart to the hardness of the steel, the iron of the factory, the structures of warehouses and stations. Domestic interiority will serve as a scenario of escape from a world increasingly subject to capitalist logic. Comfort responded to the alienated forms of existence by providing reverie and coziness to spaces profusely described in the literature of Balzac and James.

These 19th century spaces reveal, according to Praz (1982), the owner's personality, with the presence of *Stimmung*, a word that in German is used both to designate an special atmosphere and a subjective state of mind (or the correct tuning of musical instruments). Rice (2007) speaks of *doubleness* as a double semantic development that marks the emergence, on the one hand, of an interior consolidated as a three-dimensional space with its own visual significance, with a deliberate intention of effect in the coordination between color and furniture. On the other hand, as a *topos* of subjectivity, of the growing and simultaneous desire for intimacy and comfort. This last point implies a whole world of materialized poetry in many cases associated with a gender construction; the Victorian refuge cared for by the woman of the house.

In the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, psychology would continue to grow as a science investigating forms of construction of a subjectivity increasingly linked to the individualism and the solitary narcissism of modern cities and societies. Lajer-Burcharth and Sontgen (2016), in this sense, point to the fourth line of construction of interiority, based on the psychoanalysis model, which proposes seeing the sphere of the mind as an interior space, with an unconscious moulder of behaviour and subjectivity. Subsequent to Freudian theory, and in contrast to the Lacanian idea that the unconscious interior is structured as a language, Bachelard (1994), will say that the unconscious is a hosted unconscious, nourished by the first spatial experiences in the natal house, whose poetic resonances refer to the very being that we are.

Figure 6
*The Parlor of
 the Whittemore
 House, 1526
 New Hampshire
 Avenue,
 Dupont Circle,
 Washington, D. C.*
 (Photograph
 by Frances
 Benjamin
 Johnston, 1900)



The promiscuous interior

Benjamin (1999) talked about a decadence of the domestic interior which can be our last key moment in interiority history. In spite of the growing interests about interior architecture and design among big audience (due to the spreading of real estate ownership in the 20th century and the ensuing increase in the quality of domestic life) and scholars in social sciences as well, we can think that the actual interior raises a significant number of problems. We are facing an architectonic space in increasing demand due to the intensification of individuality, chaotic urban life and space scarcity.

This demand in continuous growth forces us to find solutions in our dense and shared spaces. We can no longer think of complete redoubts of intimate isolation, but of partial intimacies obtained by negotiating with the tensions, contradictions and ambiguities between the public and the private of the modern world (like the apartments shared by roomies). In cities, there is an increase in the difficulties to nourish interior life from external and urban experience.¹ The times of the philosophical discussion in the open air between the Greeks of the Antiquity or the enjoyment of the *flaneur* walk of the 19th century are far away. In a world suffering from an ecological crisis the external spatialization of the subjective is also increasingly complicated, since the activities will increasingly depend on enclosures, temperature controls, noise filters and

¹ In this topic I do not agree with Sennett (2016).

prevention of interruptions. We need interiors more than ever but, at the same time, not many quality domestic interiors are available. Therefore, other forms of interiorities might be thought.

At this point I consider it appropriate to assess the concept of interiority defined by McCarthy (2005), for whom spatial interiority is not a condition that depends on a restrictive architectural definition, but an abstract quality that allows the recognition of an interior; a quality that refers to a theoretical and immaterial set of coincidences and variables that make an interior possible. Indeed, today we must necessarily reconsider the questioning of the idea of interior space as an enclosure with clearly defined limits, in a daily life marked by new technological and cultural practices. Domestic comfort, for example, has already jumped into the public sphere, into coffee shops, semi-closed VIP waiting rooms. Privacy is something sought after in the same public space (Sparke, 2008); we could even think that a physical interior, once it has played a historical role, is no longer necessary for the actual *Homo Connectus*, who has much of his intimate data and activity in his computer. Effective forms of delimitation of personal space proliferate in the same sphere of the collective (work tables, personalized corners), and these can become nomadic spaces thanks to digital technology. Modern individuals alternate life between the closed interior and semi-closed spaces that can also nourish interiority. In some way, the original cavern and garden are still present in our relations with space.

Conclusions

We have seen an unfolding of the interior space with different layers (spiritual, hedonistic and promiscuous) that nourish a changing idea of interiority. The review has shown processes of subjectivation, individualism, psychological interiority and construction of identity. These terms appear with a variety of articulating presence in specialized literature according to whether we place ourselves in philosophy (which has problematized and deconstructed the idea of subject); sociology (Durkheim speaks of individualisation as a product of the modern division of labor); psychology (Giegerich, 2001, defines psychology as the science of interiority); or cultural studies (which address the formation of identities) respectively.

Paradoxically, at the same time as the bourgeois-aristocratic interior becomes rare, the consumer society democratizes and puts into circulation products inspired by all the advances in the history of the house necessary for the individualization process. Most of these advances are link to efficiency but not always to refinement and interiority, with recent losses of privacy that speak of setbacks in the introspection spaces. Thus, in a consumerist world, we could

think that the interior lives a crisis similar to the urban crisis of the industrial age. And, in the same way that the urban crisis was at the base of the birth of urbanism as a formalised discipline, the crisis in the interior has fueled an internal turn in architecture and an interest in interior design. In short, the academic development and literature about interior spaces coincide, in a paradox similar to the one previously mentioned for urbanism, with a crisis of interiority and a necessary reformulation of it to which architecture can help proposing new paths of designing and building.

This crisis is parallel to a widespread consensus about the necessity to reformulate modern individualism towards a less consumerist and more sustainable application; this later individualism could contemplate lifestyles embracing interiority through practices that would mitigate the undesirable effects of modern development. In the context of the current environmental crisis (with an added crisis of urban space and housing scarcity) the need for interior spaces is arguably greater than ever as self-knowledge grows so as to foster a contemporary individualism that, even recognizing itself as a debtor of a history of construction of subjectivity understood as freedom, pretends to move forward by taking spiritual elements of interiority and relaxation.

This reformulation of the concept of interiority can be connected with the contemporary yearning for consumption of experiences that replaces that of things. It is interesting to consider not so much a nostalgic recovery of old forms of interiority, increasingly difficult to obtain, with isolation devices and neo-monastic solitude, but those fueled by experiences of shared peace that find shelter in a well-arranged architectural space; the one that fosters a limited sociability, in family, couple or in the circle of close and chosen friends, which returns us an essential part of ourselves, of our memory and character. With it an interior space promoting a subjectivity that is not linked to radical forms of individualism or consumption, those that today usually imply solitude or digital narcissism. To take a positive stance on the crisis of space would mean deepening a shared idea of the interior, privileging not so much the encounter between the subject and the objects that surround it but the encounter between subjects, living an intersubjectivity that creates subjectivity. We would be rethinking the construction of a subjectivity that both reflects and causes changes in the construction of physical and psychological interiority.

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