Metaphorical spaces. The art used by designers to explore, experiment and express concepts of Interiors

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Abstract: The paper aims at studying the potential of art of being a metaphorical “tool” for the interior design approach. The relationship between the design approach and artistic installations can be seen in three dimensions of the design process: in exploring the theoretical meaning of the space (the art as a media to know novel vocations of spaces during the concept generation process); in experimenting the physical impact of the artefact in the space (the art as a matter of innovation during the verification of the project); in expressing innovative spatial concepts (the art as a “language” to communicate novel provocative and disruptive visions during the communication of the idea). We will choose (as case studies) those installations conceived by designers in order to underline the artistic value in the design field. In conclusion: we embrace the idea that art can be considered as a paradigmatic incubator in the process of “living” the Interiors. Starting from that, we are going to underline some methodological attitudes within the design culture in relation to the artistic research and to interpret new domestic aesthetics.

Keywords: Interior design, art, installation, exhibit, metaphor

1. Spatial metaphors: a critical introduction

In the traditional discipline of interior design, the setting up represents an interesting place of design research, technical research for sure but also aesthetic, to investigate the contemporary “language”. In this context, the set up is investigated as a means to represent housing and domestic interiors architecture, being them typological or conceptual prototypes.
When the setting becomes particularly expressive, it tends to move apart from the function of being at the service of the content and heads toward pure research, which can be identified in the set up typology.

To simplify, we could say that the designer designs settings, spaces which are representative of something else, while the artist designs installations, spaces which are self representative.

However, these two attitudes, these two disciplines of two possibly different professionals, the designer and the artist, share some contact points of intersection where it is no longer possible to separate art from design, regardless of whether the author of the work is an artist or a designer.

Art on the one hand, and architecture on the other hand, are tracks intersecting to infinity. Infinity not meant as a place but as a time. These two tracks continue to intersect one another.

There are designers who design the container, and other designers, artists, who design the content.

Adolf Loos already reminded us about this possible division or coincidence:

“There are architects who design following a process where their imagination does not create spaces, but wall structures. What remains are the interior spaces. For such spaces, the architect will choose only later which coating he feels will be most appropriate. The artist instead, the architect, thinks first about the effect he wants to achieve, then with the mind’s eye he builds the image of the space that he will create. This effect is the feeling that the space arouses in the spectator.” (Loos, 1992 p.80)

We call these special spaces, that mainly awake sensations and contents, metaphorical spaces: places where space is transformed, translated; it becomes "something different" from its content (set up) otherwise space becomes the content itself (installation). And the metaphor, as one of the figures of speech, is one of those artifices of the language, even in space communication, aimed at creating a special effect, a transfer of meaning. The metaphor is interpretation, asking and seeking for interpretation.

As is known, Sottsass (2002), has devoted an entire period of his life and of his working life to a project called Design Metaphor (1972-78), with the aim of redefining the principles of design being of service to the human rights and destinies. As Sottsass taught through this long search that lead to a masterpiece, let us try to use this perspective as a method to investigate the contemporary value of the Metaphorical Space that designers put on stage in the contemporary design of the interior. This method is definitely close to the world of art (somewhere between sculpture and visual art), and sees a designer necessarily learning from the expressive techniques of the artists, to implement some of its principles that make the work more akin to the aesthetic aspect rather than to the functional one.

In the same way as we have architects who make art, there are now many artists who do architecture. Even Perec investigates the issues of deep or metaphorical meanings of the functional space or a metaphorical space:

“More than once I tried to think of an apartment in which there was a useless room, absolutely and intentionally useless. It would have been a space with no function. I would have been of no use at all, [...]. I was unable, despite of many efforts, to fully carry out this idea, this image” (Perec, 1974 p.42)

In the years of the Vanguards of the early twentieth century, many young architects and artists have investigated the issue of the metaphorical set up. We remember how museums and exhibitions were the ideal places to display a new vision even about housing and more generally about space.
In the Landesmuseum in Hannover, El Lisitskij before, in 1927, with a manifesto space for Constructivist Art, and lately Moholy-Nagy in 1929 with his “Space of the Present”, have given a new and consistent innovative drive to the theme of space set-up.

Hannover was also the city of Schwitters, and those were also his times, and right there, in his apartment, in the years between 1920 and 1936, was created the MERZbau: a manifesto work where space is sculpture and home, totally immersive and representative of a metaphorical philosophy and of a life.

In those years, another author coming from the Germanic area is one of the great innovators on immersive set ups and installations: Kiesler. In the Manifesto of Tensionism (Kiesler 1925 in Bottero 1995) his utopian and avant-garde momentum can be easily understood: The man suffocates. And the holes of your windows are of no use to free him. We must find out the drive of the time, in the same way as electricity was discovered. We have to invent a new life.

Another example is the definition of the concept of "Correlism" with the intention of defining a space that is not longer metric and discontinuous, as in the rationalist modular cage, but that establishes a continuum in a balance of dynamic relationships. His research work and project, which in the 50s will lead him to define the famous Endless Houses, will be based on the very tight relationship between man-environment-architecture, not only from a volumetric, geometric and dimensional perspective but also in terms of anthropological, psychological and mythical relationship.

In the same year and in the same place where Kiesler shows a new vision on installation, 1925 in Paris, the young Le Corbusier stands out with his Esprit Nouveau Pavilion, where he put on display a small building that is half the accommodation type for his utopian project of the Immeuble Villa and half a promotional space of a new idea of living. This will be the first of other spaces set up by Le Corbusier, which, by means of metaphorical translations, clearly communicates his luminous vision of modernity that was rapidly changing.

This research is pursued by Le Corbusier until the end and, for example, in the famous Philips Pavilion at EXPO 1958 (Brussels), he designs and creates with Xenakis a "métaphore organicist", something in between a tent and a modern cave. In the descriptions of the same Le Corbusier, he speaks of a "stomach" that contains a Poème électronique (composed by Varèse), made of light, images, rhythms and sounds, time and space, that "digests" hundreds of visitors at a time. Following these metaphorical references, we could say that the installation "swallows" the observer and "metabolizes" him, providing them with the artistic sensibility of that time.

2. Metaphorical spaces

2.1 The relationship between art and design in envisioning new models of conceptual spaces

In this age of re-definition of disciplinary boundaries, some disciplines intertwine “languages” and exchange practices in order to experiment new ways to interpret contemporary issues.

Herein it is investigated art as a potential metaphorical “tool” in the interior design approach.

Here the metaphor -usually used as a figure of speech in the literary field- represents a way of communicating design concepts and moving conceptual models from a domain to another one. It represents a mental model for every artistic genre. It is a movement of affine meanings, it is an abbreviated and contextual knowledge (Weinrich 1976, De Angelis 2000). Therefore with the expression “metaphorical space” we mean those artistic installations that express some values.

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related to a specific kind of space using something figurative and symbolic in the place of another thing.

The conceptual allegiance between design and art seems conducive to experimenting with new forms of collaboration that lead to the re-codification of process and content in the interior design field.

According to Gombrich’s concept of “beholder’s share” (2001), art is incomplete without the perceptual and emotional involvement of the viewer and -in this case- the “inhabitant” of the conceptual space. This was a crucial subject of study by a contemporary generation of Viennese art historians. In their work, Kris and Gombrich both recognised the importance of contemporaneous schools of psychology and incorporated perceptive and emotional response into art criticism.

The use of the word “reading” in relation to works of art implies that some works are involved in extracting meaning. Images and installations with “hidden” figures and details are designed to make users scrutinise images with more than normal intensity (Walker and Chaplin 1997).

The field of culture has a relative autonomy, but its boundaries are permeable, and it is in this permeability that it creates its compelling role within contemporary society. The challenge of the design approach is to intervene within these boundaries to rethink existing structures and develop new models of spaces.

One definition that has been given to the branch of visual cultural studies and that examines visual or pictorial rhetoric is that of visual poetics. Such rhetoric can be found in virtually all figurative imagery. A picture is “of” something, and therefore, the content is the substance contained within a representation. Barthes introduced the terms “denotation” and “connotation” to distinguish between first level (literal) and second-level (associational) meanings. These, in turn, gave rise to a third level of meaning that Barthes (1977) named “myth”.

This approach is confirmed by humanistic studies in which aesthetics is defined as an inter-cultural category (of knowledge). In this sense, art, anthropology and design are places of discussion, understanding and evaluation of cultural activity (Caoci 2008).

Furthermore art and design offer important elements useful to understand both artistic installations, focused on representing contemporary forms of domestic spaces, and a multiplicity of meanings derived from them. In the design discipline these elements are interpretative tools that facilitate knowledge and the exchange of content, whereas in the art field, an “expressive key” allows for the understanding of new spatial experiences. From this follows the idea of “translation by design”: translating encompasses the action of interpretation and the expression of new metaphorical spaces.

De Angelis (ibidem 2000) introduces this definition: the metaphor as a minimum unit of a story, it entails a specific time and space and it is able to intensify the dimensions of the object/content involved. She suggests an interesting distinction between narrative installation and metaphorical installation as well. This last one represents a deviation of the “language” and allows further connotations able to redirect the concept to another level of perception and to produce meanings non-existing before. Also for this reason the metaphor is an useful key to express interior spaces and architectural models, because it focuses on one specific image able to summarise the core of the idea. In this case generating metaphors means to associate features of “source-concept” to a “target-concept”. In particular we can use metaphor in the interior design field both for reframing usual spatial concepts and framing, as well as making understandable, unusual ones. How can we use metaphor for this double goal?
• Reframing usual spatial concepts: dramatising emotional qualities; reframing the functional experience; moving conceptual models from a domain to another one.
• Framing and making understandable unusual spatial concepts: modeling the working principle; re-writing the idea with new languages and communication registers.

2.2 Artistic installations as a way to exploring, experimenting and expressing innovative concepts of Interiors

Interior design has always drawn inspiration from art; indeed several architects are both artists and designers and adopt a mixed attitude in creating objects and spaces. Herein we can underline some “trans-actions” that go beyond mere architectonical functions and try to interpret new domestic aesthetics. We embrace the idea that art can be considered a paradigmatic incubator in the process of “living” and “performing” the Interiors; starting from that, we try to underline some methodological attitudes the design culture uses in artistic research.

The relationship between design approach and artistic installations can be recognised in three dimensions of the design process:

• in exploring the theoretical meaning of the space;
• in experimenting the physical impact of the artifact in the space;
• in expressing innovative spatial concepts.

In the first dimension - exploring the theoretical meaning of the space - art is considered as a medium of knowing novel vocations of spaces during the concept generation process. In this case, designers take advantage of the artistic model in order to investigate the idea and its implications in the space. We can consider this kind of installation as some sort of semifinished work which is useful to go on with the development of the concept.

In the second dimension - experimenting the physical impact of the artefact in the space - art represents the innovative factor during the verification of the project in the actual space. In this case the artistic installation is a way to “perform” new gestures, behaviours, functions and to envision new impacts in the reality.

In the last dimension - expressing innovative spatial concepts - art is assumed as a “language” to communicate novel, provocative and disruptive visions during the communication of the idea. This means to exploit the potentials of art in triggering the process of creating new concepts of space that stage the Impossible, the Paradoxical, the Utopic. This dimension is directed to the audience because it has a strong communicative vocation.

By analysing Interiors through these installations, the perceptive experience of the user is one of the main aspects we are interested in. In this context the interface is a key element; indeed, if - in the interactive system - we define the modalities of the perception (sensing) and those of the action (acting) (Quinz 2014), we surely can state that the interface establishes a crucial active principle in experiencing and interacting with spaces. We are speaking about interfaces not only in terms of surface but also in terms of environment.

We are moving to an aesthetics of relational behaviors (Bourriaud 2008). For this reason we can not forget the art and design vocation of creating “communication areas”. We can consider these artistic installations as a sort of “protocol of experimentation”, a practical test to verify the theoretical hypothesis and the relational modalities that happen in the space. Two main aspects arise: conceptual and perceptual. On the one hand, going beyond the objectual aesthetics in favour of the process, and, on the other hand, giving shape to a relational praxis of the art (Quinz 2014).
Paraphrasing Gadamer (Gadamer in Antonucci 2016, p. 118), who wrote that "Players are not the subject of the game but the game that is performed through the players is", we could say that the subject of art is neither the artwork (or work), nor the observer, but it is the unveiling of their relationship.

In metaphorical spaces the most important thing to observe and try to understand is precisely this relationship.

Therefore some questions emerge:

- How do contemporary designers use the metaphor as a paradigm to express specific design attitudes?
- What are the new key points that are able to express the contemporary domestic landscape?
- How is contemporary art interacting with the design discipline in order to give shape to new critical scenarios?

We will try to extract some design attitudes able to answer to the previous questions by a selection of case studies chosen according to the following criteria:

- recent projects (year 2016);
- installations that represent “inhabitable” Interiors;
- design driven approach;
- installations presented in public exhibitions.
- For each case we will pinpoint the following entries:
  - short description;
  - method/method and guide-lines of the exhibition;  
  - metaphor;
  - paradigm of spatial experience.

3. Methods, metaphors and paradigms of spatial experience

3.1 International Architecture Exhibition

Following are two cases (British and Switzerland Pavilions) from 15th International Architecture Exhibition (Venice 2016). It is not a coincidence that this kind of cultural event is rich of interesting examples because it is a privileged platform where to stage architectural topics through new forms of narrative that borrow “languages” and expressions from the art field. Herein the aim is showing future scenarios and experimental work-lines.

At first we mention the British Pavilion exhibition Home economics. Five new models for domestic life that participates in responding to social changes through a design approach. It raises urgent issues about the role and responsibility of the domestic space in familiar life. This project represents five new models for domestic life according to five periods of time: hours, days, months, years and decades. The installation is full scale 1:1 and displays architectural proposals as a direct spatial experience. The topic of this work is the crisis of both housing and the ways of living in Britain. The conditions of life are profoundly changing because of social relationships, family structures, gender roles, migration flows and ageing population; therefore this installation seeks to interpret this

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1 In the case of exhibitions with multiple installations, the entry “method” is related to the exhibition itself because the role of the curator is crucial in order to understand the design approach and it is called “method and guide-lines of the exhibition”.

2 [https://www.britishcouncil.it/events/home-economics-padiglione-gran-bretagna](https://www.britishcouncil.it/events/home-economics-padiglione-gran-bretagna)
situation using the lens of timescales. This topic opens to some interesting issues: ownership vs sharing, private vs public, individual vs collective, permanent vs temporary, time vs space.

Method: this research finds an applied experimentation in this installation. It is carried out by an interdisciplinary team made of architects, photographers, artists, writers, fashion designers and financial developers. All these competences collaborated in order to envision alternatives to the conventional domestic architecture.

Metaphor: “Lens of timescale”. Each part of the installation formulates the main metaphor in secondary ones. Hours: Own nothing, share everything; Days: Home is where the Wi-Fi is; Months: A house without housework; Years: Space for living: not speculation; Decades: A room without functions.

Paradigm of spatial experience: “Room by room”. The visitor follows intersections of a space that represents the “zooming out” and the “zooming in” of contemporary housing.

The Switzerland Pavilion, hosts Incidental Space3 by Kerez, an architect and curator who has created an extremely impressive research area.

Method: holistic design with some points of contact between manual execution and digital production. He tries to answer the question "how can you use the medium of architecture to contemplate an architectural space that is totally abstract and as complex as possible?" Metaphor: "Cave/Cloud". Kerez produces a metaphorical space with perfectly matching double meaning: the ancestral idea of the cave (interior) and the futuristic idea of a cloud (exterior).

Paradigm of spatial experience: “Exploration”. Both spaces can be experimented by visitors, who are invited to take possession of this revealed place.

3.2 Architecture as Art

In the exhibition Architecture as Art4 (curated by Bassoli and directed by Nicolin, at the Pirelli Bicocca Hangar, see below Entrance and Bricolage projects) 14 professional studios have been asked to create a fragment of architecture freely interpreting new design paradigms related to primary gestures such as entering, covering, living. "We are talking about architecture, but we are displaying it as if it was art," said Nicolin during the presentation of the exhibition which aims at providing "true" experiences to overcome the problem of displaying architecture through mediums that can not realistically represent space, such as drawings, photographs, models and video.

Method and guide-lines of the exhibition: dual interpretation of architecture as art, with the formal and metaphorical experimentation of the technique and of the building material.

Grasso Cannizzo creates Entrance, a cubic volume consisting of many vertical and suspended metal rods. At rest, this idea of architecture is a sculpture.

Metaphor: "The sound threshold”. The theme of entering is interpreted here by a poetic atmosphere, the musical metaphor of the sound signal that announces the entering of a guest in any house.

Paradigm of spatial experience: "Immersion". The visitor is invited to interact with the work, to enter the cubic volume from anywhere, making his way with his own body, and then walk out from another place. The experience proves to be very strong from a physical point of view (because of the

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3 https://prohelvetia.ch/it/dossier/biennali-venezia/
4 https://biennials.ch/home/
physical displacement by contact of the rods that are very close one to another) and from an acoustic point of view (because of the musical sound of the rods that resonate like oriental bells), and it does not involve only the individual visitor but the entire exhibition space and other visitors, because of the loud sound generated and of the interaction required by this work.

Amateur Architecture with its Bricolage, a title playing with the meanings of the words of the technique and of the material used (brick and assembly), interprets the theme of the wall, a rising barrier that separates but also joins. By building a three-dimensional wall made just of bricks, cutting transversally the exhibition space but which can be walked through, deconstructed in some parts and almost embroidered in its texture, the author investigates the potential of the most traditional building material, that is nowadays often abandoned.

Metaphor: "The ruin". The idea of using once again this element and these materials, certainly connected to the author’s living experience in China, offers, together with the metaphor of the ruin, a point of restart for a new regenerating architectural approach.

Paradigm of spatial experience: "Crossing". The visitor, by crossing a threshold, is given the possibility to walk for a few meters inside of a living wall.

3.3 Arch and Art

In the exhibition Arch and Art\(^5\), curated by Di Battista, in the Garden of the Palazzo dell'Arte of the Triennale in Milan, a number of pairs, made by one architect and one artist, worked together to create installations combining art and architecture. Here we mention the works signed by Chipperfield + Pistoletto and Souto de Moura + Kounellis.

Method and guide-lines of the exhibition: dual interpretation between architecture and art, with the methodological and metaphorical experimentation of artistic and aesthetic issues.

In the work of Chipperfield and Pistoletto, the proposal is an archetypal form of the house, with two design styles correlated to each other: an outer shell, architectural and tangible, and an inner casing, artistic and abstract.

Metaphor: "In between". The installation consists of two shells that do not touch one another, leaving a space in between, empty and generator. The metaphor of the distance between the artistic and architectural discipline is highlighted by this not tangent space, two parallel works, with no contact points, whereas in the past the two were often interwoven.

Paradigm of spatial experience: "Art is encompassed by architecture". The artist's work is contained in the architect's work, revealing a different view of interiority yet integrated to the architectural body.

The work of Souto de Moura and Kounellis, seen from outside is a big vertical volume, which resembles and symbolises a transport case.

Metaphor: "Container". The metaphor of the container is used for a special content, that is the internal work, which results in a big linear sculpture-structure, a sort of large staircase inviting us to climb the verticality of the space up to a window, from where to observe the outside from a high and unusual point of view.

\(^5\) http://www.domusweb.it/it/notizie/2016/03/30/arch_and_art.html
http://www.assolombarda.it/arch-and-art
Paradigm of spatial experience: "Change one’s point of view". Souto de Moura himself metaphorically refers to the "proportion in the volume that accentuates verticality, mental and physical condition of the western man".

3.4 Rooms. Other philosophies of living

The exhibition Rooms. Other philosophies of living⁶ (of which we mention Intro, Resonance and D1), curated by Finessi with Cataluccio at the Palazzo dell’Arte of the Triennale in Milan is the occasion, after years of oblivion and rediscovering an ancient top-notch Italian tradition, to look once again at interior design as a place and discipline of integration between architecture, design and art.

Method and guide-lines of the exhibition:: 11 subjects are identified (analysed through a system of literary, sociological, filmic and artistic references with an interdisciplinary approach) acting as key elements to trigger thoughts and inspirations on suggested spatial metaphors.

Novembre with Intro, displays a large sphere with an outside reflecting surface, whereas from the inside comes a speech taken from the movie “8 ½” by Fellini and from the book "design explained to my mother" by Novembre himself, which attracts us in a space covered with red leather. Here the designer makes the best out of all his aesthetic and sensual efforts, to design a room that opens unprecedented reflections between architecture and art, interior and bodies, to become more self-conscious.

Metaphor: "Maternal womb/self-consciousness". A room full of metaphors: from the mother’s womb to self-consciousness, to the perfect shape in between a sphere and an ovoid.

Paradigm of spatial experience: "Space Introspection". The designer pushes the visitor to lay on a soft surface where he will realise to be inside a body, namely a head, an hypothetical mirror of himself.

Anastasio, Resonances: a room that explores the relation potential of human beings, the "opportunity to affirm or deny the dimension of listening to ones own and to the other." The space is at first visible from the outside, through a window cut in two by a lace curtain, that moves away from the wall and enters space by articulating it and affecting the furnishing elements, which are literally divided into two equal parts, cut by this full height tent/diaphragm.

Metaphor: "The Double". Anastasio works on the metaphor of doubling, of living together as a couple, of living together as twins.

Paradigm of spatial experience: "Shared private". Interior personal space is shared with another life, another being, one’s double or one’s complementary.

Librizzi, D1: an abstract room, made of three slender fences, diaphanous netted diaphragms, which are polychrome, which may be crossed and which surround a central empty space. Here space is concentrated and circulates on itself, revealing traces of relations among elements. The first enclosure represents the landscape/architecture relationship, the second identifies the interior space and the third determines the relational space between people and objects.

Metaphor: "The first human room". The idea is that of "the first man's room", metaphor of the interior in the interior as a sacred space where the table is an inviolable altar around which all residents relate one another and live the house.

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⁶ http://www.triennale.org/mostra/stanze-altre-filosofie-dellabitare/
http://www.salonemilano.it/manifestazioni/eventi-appuntamenti/lista-eventi-del-salone/2016/stanze-nuovi-paesaggi-domestici.html
Paradigm of spatial experience: "centralisation and circulation." The visitor explores space through filters and diaphragms that tend to spatial concentricity and radial movement.

3.5 Domestic Dimension

Last but not least, we point out the exhibition Domestic Dimension⁷, curated by Finessi at Fondazione Achille Castiglioni, where the historic space of "The Living Environment" designed by Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni for the exhibition "Colours and shapes in today’s home", presented at Villa Olmo, Como, in 1957, has been staged again.

Method: the visual perception as a key of reinterpreting the space.

Metaphor: "The optical chamber". Here the Castiglioni brothers have deformed space into a trapezoidal shape, a metaphor of the optical chamber obtained by obstructing the visual projection, which emphasises the quantity and quality of existing furnishings and accessories, including famous designers' objects, historical, prototypes or anonymous, in an interior space that represented the new increasingly complex society.

Paradigm of spatial experience: "The view from the outside". The environment can be observed only from the outside through a large opening or through a small door that visitors are invited to open. From these two points of view you look directly at the future of housing, the future at that time which is now, that from that moment on ceased to be in "style", setting a new contemporary language.

4. Conclusions

The "use" of the art in envisioning new concepts of Interiors is a historical issue (as we stated in the Introduction) but is nowadays becoming more and more significant because it explores new contemporary registers and copes with new spatial frictions.

We can pinpoint five main actions that lead the designers in conceptualising and giving shape to these installations:

- exaggerating meanings;
- provoking strong reactions;
- stressing design attitudes;
- triggering new uses of the space;
- suggesting new behaviours.

Applying all these actions in the interior design concept generation process represents an interesting potentiality. Each of them are ways to go beyond borders and to experiment novel vocations of spaces.

We can extract some interpretive lines from some of the cases previously described in order to underline some paradigms of intervention:

- modular time as a paradigm of different scales of living (see: “Home economics. Five new models for domestic life”, British Pavilion, Venice Architecture 2016);
- deformation as a paradoxical way to explore architectural shapes (see: "Domestic Dimension" at Fondazione Achille Castiglioni);

⁷ http://fondazioneachillecastiglioni.it/dimensione-domestica/
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- visionary space (see: Swiss pavilion “Incidental space”, Venice Architecture 2016 and Intro by Novembre);
- landscape of contemporary topics (see: “Rooms”, Triennale di Milano 2016) and archetypes (“Architecture as Art” at Hangar Bicocca).

This contribution represents a partial critical “photography” of the contemporary landscape of artistic installations by designers and architects in representing concepts of Interiors.

This kind of analysis and the metadesign approach envisage an interdisciplinary hybridisation between art and design, visual perception and architecture. We can pinpoint virtuous relationships that lead to new possible critical readings where artistic installations are not only expressions of art but also crucial matter of design.

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