

Critique of Technical Reason: Memory, Emotion, and Third Space in Urban Design

Francesco Berni, Michael Mossman

In urban design, technical rationality has assumed a hegemonic role, shaping both design methodologies and the epistemologies that underpin them (Jacobs, 1961).

This dominance frames urban space as rational, functional, measurable, and ostensibly neutral – often detached from the lived experiences of its inhabitants (Magnaghi, 2000).

This contribution seeks to challenge such a paradigm, arguing that the design of urban space is fundamentally rooted in empirical qualities of emotions, memories, bodies, and relationships – dimensions frequently silenced or underappreciated within rationalist objectivities of technical discourse. Drawing on extensive theoretical frameworks and on a workshop conducted in the Australia Pavilion at the 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale, taken here as the central case study, the aim is to explore the transformative potential of decolonial, relational, and non-hierarchical design approaches. Specifically, the workshop focused on the meaning of ‘home’ and was conducted with international students from the University of Sydney, Iuav University of Venice, Politecnico di Milano, University for Foreigners of Perugia, the Architectural Association London, and the University of Queensland.

The method adopted for interaction among participants was the Indigenous technique of yarning (Mossman, 2021), a practice that activates collective listening and storytelling grounded in respect, reciprocity, and openness. The form of the pavilion exhibition is in-the-round to consciously support this mode of exchange. Within this context, each participant locates themselves in relation to city-making, architecture or design as a process of relational appreciation of home through personal narratives, shared emotions, childhood memories, and embodied impressions. These non-technical elements nonetheless decisively inform the dialogical process of engagement and interactions, from the macro scale of cultural urban practices to the detailed creation of the Living Belongings presented in the Pavilion. The Living

Belongings, produced by Australian students, utilised different modes of creative expression through 'making' to materialize their own meaning of home. Scents, materials, and textures were tied to memories, experiences, and personal histories embodied in physical form. These Belongings then became the subject of storytelling, narration, and exchange among participants in relation to Indigenous Australian concepts of Country and culture. In small groups in the pavilion, discussions generated interrelations of thoughts, memories, and lived experiences that gradually evolved into design intentions.

This represents an important formative step-one that holds significant value in deconstructing prevailing modes of thought and widening the perspectives of an academic curriculum within the European context. Country in an Italian sense, is relational to the distinct tapestry of cultures that are embedded with histories, languages, practices and customs, plants and animals, and cuisines that are inherently connected to place.

Recognizing such sources of knowledge indeed requires acknowledging Western 'rational' methods as culturally situated tools that often exclude other epistemologies (Smith, 1999). In acknowledging the diaspora of individuals across vast and varying landscapes, one can retain their distinct understandings of their cultural make up while also appreciating original cultural contexts of places they currently call home. Through engagement with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl (Merleau-Ponty, 1954; Husserl, 1970), Jung's depth psychology (Jung, 1961), and the sensory architectural theories of Pallasmaa and Pérez-Gómez (Pallasmaa, 2005; Pérez-Gómez, 2006), the Venice workshop demonstrates that foundational thought processes can originate in a pre-reflective and embodied dimension of experience.

From this perspective, technique is not the point of departure but rather the formalization of intuitions, lived experiences, and deep-seated desires. The concept of third space articulated by Homi Bhabha and integrated into Mossman's practice (Bhabha, 1994; Mossman, 2021, Mossman et al, 2024) offers a crucial interpretive and translational key. Yarning, as a practice of interpersonal engagement, thus operates to create and inform the emergence of a third space – one situated between disciplinary knowledge, cultural identities, and embodied

practices – suspending binary divisions between technique and emotion, rationality and affect, knowledge and lived experience. Within this relational space, the city as a cultural landscape emerges not as an object to be constructed, but as a living ecology of stories and relationships. These experiential dimensions resonate with realities within our own contexts as well, reflecting forms of forgotten consciousness central to Pasolini's critique and, in some cases, the subject of research aimed at integrating them – albeit still marginally – into urban planning and design. An example is found in community mapping practices adopted in France, Italy, and the United Kingdom (Poli, 2019; Leslie, 2006). This critique does not reject technical reason; rather, it repositions and recalibrates it within a more complex ecological network of respectful understandings and learnings to innovate new opportunities. Ultimately, design processes evolve and unfold through experience, attentive listening, and memory, reactivating the generative potential of the city as a habitable, shared, and meaningful place.

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Fig. 1 Detail of the Australia Pavilion, 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale.
Credit: Elisabetta Diotallevi



Fig. 2 Circular spatial form inspired by the Aboriginal practice of “yarning”.
Credit: Francesco Berni



Fig. 3 Living Belonging by a University of Sydney student.
Credit: Elisabetta Diotallevi



Fig. 4 Living Belonging by a University of Sydney student.
Credit: Elisabetta Diotallevi



Fig. 5 Living Belonging by a University of Sydney student.
Credit: Elisabetta Diotallevi



Fig. 6 Living Belonging by a University of Sydney student.
Credit: Elisabetta Diotallevi



Fig. 7 University of Sydney students at the Home exhibition in the Australia Pavilion.
Credit: Elisabetta Diotallevi



Fig. 8 University of Sydney student Noah Sunderland describing his Living Belonging "Away Sick". Credit: Francesco Berni

Francesco Berni, PhD in Urban Planning, Expert in Urban Regeneration Practices, Adjunct Professor at the University for Foreigners of Perugia. Collaborator of the workshop “Home” at the Australia Pavilion, 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale. Specialising in urban regeneration, social innovation, and public sector innovation. His work combines academic research, professional practice, and grassroots experimentation within a reflective practice framework. francesco.berni@unistrapg.it

Michael Mossman, Associate Dean Indigenous, University of Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning. Creative Director of the Australia Pavilion at the 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale. Kuku Yalanji architect, researcher, and educator from Far North Queensland, currently living and working on Gadigal Country in Sydney. His work focuses on Indigenising the built environment and advancing First Nations knowledge systems across architecture, education, and policy. michael.mossman@sydney.edu.au