

Scales of Affection: Toward an Epistemology of Memory and an Emotional Reading of the Built Environment

Elisa Mondin, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Can the naive and affective nature of childhood drawing become a visual research method within architectural criticism and design? In an era saturated with hyper-polished and AI-generated images, this paper investigates drawing as an affective and memory-based practice capable of opening intimate, non-normative readings of space. When adults are asked to draw, the response is often a refusal driven by judgement and technical insecurity. When drawing is instead reframed as an act of remembering rather than representing, and the adult is invited to adopt a child-like mode of engagement, it opens up a non-evaluative space grounded in affection, imagination, and embodied experience. Within the architectural field, such drawings enable alternative forms of spatial knowledge by visualising space as it was felt, rather than as it was measured or formally defined. The paper proposes “affective drawings” as a design-driven research method that operates between architectural thinking and artistic and philosophical inquiry. Through a series of case studies, this approach demonstrates how drawing can function simultaneously as a tool for listening and as a critical medium for engaging with the built environment. Therefore, the research introduces the concept of “Scales of Affection,” in which scale refers not only to physical dimensions – from the domestic interior to the urban realm – but also to varying degrees of experiential and emotional depth. By articulating these scales, the paper argues for an epistemology of emotional resonance capable of informing architectural interpretation and contributing to processes of reactivation and care of the built environment.

Keywords: affective drawing, visual research methods, research by design, memory and imagination, scales of affection

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Space is not only a matter of measure, nor merely a geometric entity to be organised and controlled. It is memory, gesture, atmosphere, lived intensity.

Long before being abstracted into plans, sections and metrics, space is encountered through the body: walked, touched, crossed, inhabited. This experiential dimension, although foundational to architectural practice, often remains marginal within dominant modes of representation, which privilege visual accuracy, formal coherence and technical precision over lived experience. This is not, however, an error or a contradiction. Rather, architecture necessarily relies on shared and unambiguous codes to describe, compare, construct, restore and transmit spaces across time and disciplines.

The language of architectural drawing responds precisely to this need: it establishes a common ground of representation, enabling technical coordination and critical comparison between very different spatial conditions. Yet, it is precisely within the field of restoration and conservation that the limits of purely technical representation become most evident. Here, the emotional and physical experience of relating to an architectural artefact plays a crucial role, as built heritage is not only a material object to be measured and preserved, but also a lived environment shaped by memory, attachment and embodied interactions.

But what if drawing itself could become a means of revealing other forms of architectural knowledge? What if, by moving beyond established graphic conventions and loosening drawing from its role as a mere tool of representation, we were able to uncover something more about the built environment?

Rather than merely depicting space as an external object, drawing may function as an embodied cognitive act: a way of reactivating lived experience and translating it into a visual trace. This may open up a different epistemic horizon: one in which memory, affection and imagination become operative forms of knowledge.

This paper builds on this premise to propose *Scales of Affection* as a conceptual and methodological framework for interpreting such drawings. “Scale” is understood as non-Euclidean system, operating not only in an extensive sense – related to size, proportion or physical extension – but also as an intensive one, expressing degrees of experiential and emotional involvement.

Scales of Affection seeks to contribute to architectural criticism and design by foregrounding emotional resonance as a legitimate form of spatial knowledge. In doing so, the research does not propose a new aesthetic nor a prescriptive design tool, but rather a shift of attention: from space as an object to space as a lived intensity, and from representation as depiction to drawing as an epistemic act.

From Embodied Experience to Affective Drawings: An Alternative Way to Read Space

As articulated in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), the world is not known from a detached point of view, but through a body-in-relation: an *être-au-monde* in which subject and object, interior and exterior, perception and action are inseparably tangled.

Space, in this sense, is not given as a neutral container, but emerges through situated experience – and knowledge of space is therefore always embodied, temporal and affective.

From an anthropological perspective, this reorientation resonates with the so-called *dwelling perspective* (Ingold, 2000), which proposes a shift of focus from building to dwelling: from architecture conceived as a design imposed upon space, to environments understood as processes continuously co-produced by inhabitants, time and rituals.

From an architectural point of view, this attitude calls into question the value of design and architectural action themselves: if environments are continuously shaped through use, memory and embodied practices, then architectural knowledge cannot be limited to formal definition or technical control alone. Both perspectives – anthropological and architectural – can be approached through a shared instrument: drawing. When freed from the constraints of technical correctness and predefined representational conventions, drawing becomes a flexible and open-ended medium, capable of engaging with both lived processes and design intentions.

This shift becomes particularly evident when adults with no professional drawing background are asked to draw. Unlike children, adults often approach drawing through the lens of judgement and technical competence, which makes hesitation or refusal a frequent response. Yet, when drawing is reframed as an invitation to recall rather than to represent – and when the child-like mode of engagement is allowed to surface – the act becomes non-evaluative. In this condition, drawing becomes both a space of listening and an operative device for architectural inquiry, capable of revealing how space is experienced and remembered, rather than how it is formally structured.

In this research, this potential is explored through “graphic interviews,” understood as drawing-based conversations centred on memory.

These interviews were conducted with people of different ages, backgrounds, and biographies, and followed a single, intentionally simple rule: participants were asked to freely draw the vivid memory of a built space, allowing the child within to speak. No technical guidance, stylistic constraints, or criteria of correctness were provided. Each drawing was then interpreted through a light yet consistent analytical framework –conceived as a sort of “identity card” of the drawing – designed to enable comparison across cases without reducing their experiential richness. This framework is articulated through five qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory (autobiographical, collective, sensorial);
- Spatial scale (body, anchor-object, room, ensemble, landscape, transit);
- Focus (material, atmosphere, configuration, network of relations);
- Prevalent emotion (joy, fear, security, melancholy);
- Graphic form (figurative, symbolic, diagrammatic, narrative, hybrid).

Rather than flattening the living matter of the drawings into abstract categories or numerical data, this framework keeps them alive as critical material. At the same time, it preserves the primacy of embodied experience, remaining consistent with the phenomenological approach that supports the research.

The Affective Drawings

In this paper, a selection of these drawings is presented and discussed. Following their individual reading, the drawings were subsequently grouped into thematic clusters, allowing recurring affective patterns to emerge, which were then used as a basis for reflecting on possible orientations for architectural practice.

For each drawing, the original title, its English translation, the participant's name, age, and place of origin are provided. All drawings were produced during graphic interviews conducted between 2024 and 2025.

Lancio di palla | *Ball throwing* (2025)

Participant: Luca (27), Cologno Monzese, Italy

The drawing recalls a childhood game played in the grandmother's living room together with a cousin. The domestic setting, ordinarily made of furniture and everyday objects, is here recalled with clarity: the sofa and the armchair, placed at right angles, become the boundaries of a playing field. The large vase with its plant transforms into an improvised basketball hoop.

The hoop itself remains half-hidden, just as it actually appeared from the perspective of a child sitting on the floor, which in fact expands disproportionately, occupying the lower part of the composition and increasing the difficulty of hitting the target. What remains vivid is also the atmosphere of complicity, laughter and playful invention that turned an ordinary interior into a world of its own.

Figure 1

Lancio di palla | *Ball throwing*



Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: autobiographical, shared, familiar
- Spatial scale: interior/living room
- Emotional scale: playfulness, complicity, invention
- Focus: not only the object of the game, but the devices that made it possible (sofa, armchair, vase)
- Emotional scale: playfulness, complicity, invention

- Graphic form: narrative; perspectival distortion – the floor takes up an enormous portion of the sheet, highlighting the child’s low vantage point

Tornando dal mare | Coming back from the seaside (2025)

Participant: Carolina (22), Fregene, Italy

A seaside kitchen is rendered through a mixed perspective, almost axonometric, in order to “fit everything in,” revealing a deep spatial awareness, from any viewpoint: a long set table, stove, sofa, tv. The composition bends and stretches in order to let objects emerge in a scene where every item becomes a machine of rituals: cooking, eating, conversing, watching.

Architecture is not merely seen, but lived multisensorially. The room appears as a condenser of practices: the long table that invites conviviality, the stove as a center of warmth, the sofa and television as familiar presences of everyday intimacy, and the blue inflatable mattress is the anchor-object evoking the broader experience of seaside life and amplifying the human impact of memory.

This is precisely the core of what Merleau-Ponty calls the *body-subject*: knowledge arises through doing and sensing, not just by inspecting with the gaze.

Figure 2

Tornando dal mare | Coming back from the seaside



Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: autobiographical, domestic;
- Spatial scale: room/ensemble;
- Emotional scale: security, warmth, a quiet sense of waiting;
- Focus: ordinary objects as ritual machines (eating, watching, conversing);
- Graphic form: hybrid, narrative. The composition bends and distorts in order to show what matters.

Senza pensieri | Without worries (2025)

Participant: Mirko (40), Piglio, Italy

A mountain holiday home is depicted through a perspective that melts frontal view and axonometric suggestion, once again to hold together what is seen, what is remembered, what truly matters. But this time there is an important difference: the objects represented in the

foreground, which convey warmth and lived intimacy, are not the real anchor-objects of the drawing, however symbolic and precise in memory.

Figure 3

Senza pensieri | Without worries



Rather, recollection opens through a wall treated as a patterned plane, projecting onto the outside and framing the landscape as if it were suspended beyond time – perfect, like a postcard.

Green meadows, sharp snow-covered peaks, the vastness of a blue sky and the inevitable sun peeking-in with curiosity: everything appears exactly as it should always be: *without worries*.

Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: autobiographical, tied to vacation time;
- Spatial scale: interior/room, porous but open to the landscape through the window;
- Emotional scale: peace, serenity, suspension, nostalgia;
- Focis: stove and table as domestic poles, the window as a visual frame that “suspends” the outside world;
- Graphic form: hybrid, with a “special axonometry” and a play of patterns that turns the wall into a surface of passage toward the exterior.

Progetto antico | Ancient project (2024)

Participant: Ugo (82), Venice, Italy

As a child in Venice, Ugo remembers the mischievous ritual of ringing all the doorbells of a building together with his sister, before running away laughing. This playful memory intertwines with a deeper historical layer: facades was once crossed by exposed pull-bell wires, visible infrastructures that connected each apartment to the ground level. The drawing reproduces this fragile and improvised network, accompanied by the note: “The irrational positioning of the pull cords was frequent, since everyone did as they pleased.”

Here, the childish game is not just a scene of laughter and transgression: it is also a window onto a way of inhabiting. The facade is transformed into a living interface, where wires operate as the “nervous system” of the building, testimony to an era in which inhabitants themselves improvised and adapted the built environment.

Figure 4 and 5

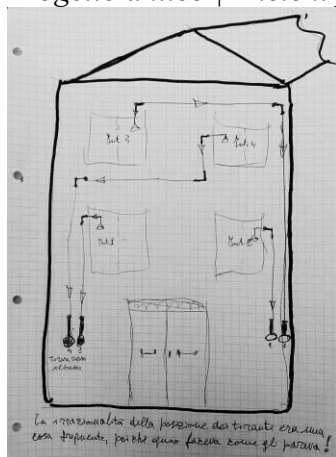
Detail of a pull-bell handle and view of the facade of Corte de l'Orso, documented in their current condition



What might appear “irrational” in compositional terms is in fact situated rationality: a form of “collective intelligence” that exceeds formal design. The note itself becomes evidence of this practice, confirming Ingold’s idea that final form is only a transitory moment in the time flow, and that architecture is always co-produced by its inhabitants over time.

Figure 6

Progetto antico | Ancient project



Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: autobiographical, childhood, shared;
- Spatial scale: facade as an interface between inside and outside, up and down;
- Focus: network rather than object or anchor-object;
- Emotional scale: joyful mischief, active nostalgia, historical remembering;
- Graphic form: diagrammatic, proportions sacrificed in favor of relational logic.

Veliko drvo | The great tree (2025)

Participant: Ines (38), Zabok, Croatia

A large tree towers at the center of the composition, overflowing beyond the edges of the sheet. It is the tree in front of the grandmother’s house, where days were spent together with cousins and friends. The house and the fence are reduced to simple outlines, almost marginal,

while the tree is rendered with care and occupies the center of the scene. The image conveys how one element alone can condense the memory of play, protection and rootedness, becoming the true totem of childhood experience.

Figure 7

Veliko drvo | The great tree



In an anthropological sense, it stands as a node in the *meshwork of dwelling* (Ingold, 2000), where play, kinship and place converge, while also confirming Merleau-Ponty's theory that perception is embodied and situated, and that a single object can become the center of the lived world – not because of its function, but because it organizes around itself the corporeal and affective experience.

Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: collective, familiar;
- Spatial scale: courtyard landscape reduced to a single large Emotional scale: play, rootedness, protection;
- Focus: the tree as the absolute protagonist, the house as a marginal accessory;
- Emotional scale: play, rootedness, protection;
- Graphic form: symbolic, radical affective hierarchy (the tree first, everything else after).

La Mucca Carolina | Carolina the Cow (2025)

Participant: Maria Antonietta (62), Rocca Santo Stefano, Italy

The drawing recalls the external stairway of a small village in the Roman hills, a place that was never just a passage but the very stage of community life. It was, and still is in memory, a piazza rather than a staircase: vast, eventful, and layered with dissimilar recollections – joyful and painful, festive and solemn, from children's games to processions, from weddings to rainy afternoons. Within this space of encounters, Maria Antonietta places herself as a child: this is not the only drawing in the collection to depict human figures, but it is the only one to portray the protagonist herself, perfectly aware even of what she was wearing.

The drawing shows how a threshold can be transformed into a stage of memory and attachment, where personal recollections intertwine with the collective fabric of community life. It stands as a reminder that space is not only built but inhabited through the multiplicity

of experiences it hosts: indeed, the built environment is rendered in grey except for objects and things that truly, emotively, matter.

Figure 8

La Mucca Carolina | Carolina the Cow



Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: autobiographical, childhood, interwoven with everyday village rituals;
- Spatial scale: domestic/community threshold (the stairway as a square of affections);
- Emotional scale: warmth, belonging, recognition – yet also the ambivalence of multiple memories, both festive and melancholic;
- Focus: affective figures (herself as a child, the toy cow, the cat, the flowerpots) emerge in color against a neutral background;
- Graphic form: figurative, symbolic – the grey background frames the chromatic selection of “affects.”

Figure 9 and 10

Stairway carved into the rock in Rocca Santo Stefano, as it appears today



Il giardino dei Treni | The train garden (2025)

Participant: Sara (29), Rome, Italy

In the drawing, a red rope pyramid with its black “nest” at the top and the tunnel mural appear together, although in the real city the two landmarks are not adjacent. The child’s memory stitches them into the same scene, producing a patchwork of places held together not

by geography but by affection. The result is a hybrid landscape where the vertigo of climbing and the strangeness of the mural coexist in a single, imaginative horizon.

From the top of the pyramid, trains pass by, audible and visible, reinforcing the sense of elevation and conquest. Against the abstract idea of “space” and its modular subdivision, the *dwelling perspective* invites us to think about the city as a *network of traversals*. This is precisely what Ingold calls *wayfaring* (*Being Alive*, 2011), the act of moving like a thread within the fabric of the world, generating trajectories and relations along the way.

Sara’s drawing makes this evident: urbanity here is a constellation of emotional poles connected by lived trajectories.

Figure 11

Il giardino dei Treni | The train garden

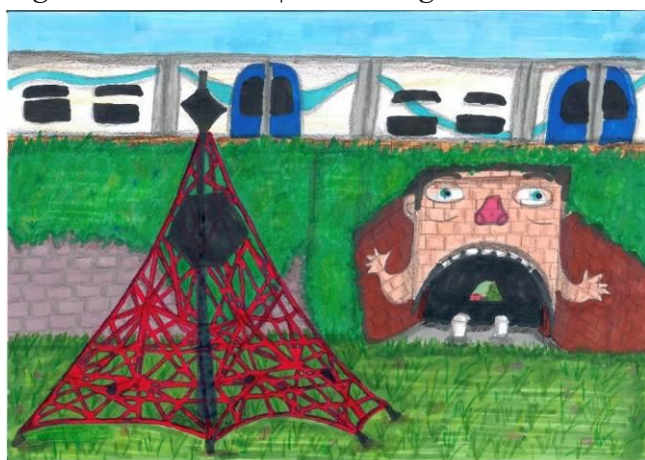
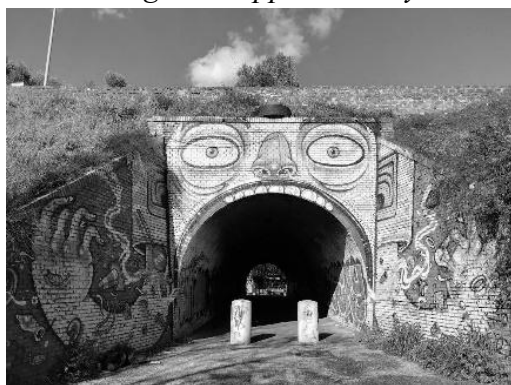


Figure 12

Mural-painted railway underpass corresponding to one of the urban fragments recalled in the drawing, as it appears today.



Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: autobiographical, childhood ritual;
- Spatial scale: selective neighborhood/landscape; transit (passing trains, the view “from above,” from the nest);
- Emotional scale: fear overcome, euphoria;
- Focus: vertigo and conquest; anchor-object: the climbing structure; totemic object: the tunnel’s face;

- Graphic form: cartographic montage: places are united because they were lived together in memory.

La socialidad como horizonte | Sociality as a horizon (2024)

Participant: Francisco (52), Villa La Merced, Córdoba, Argentina

Holiday landscape unfolds as a threshold between nature and light infrastructure: water, hills, pine woods, and, in the foreground, beach umbrellas, deck chairs, children playing. The scene does not treat landscape as a mere backdrop, but as a true matrix of sociality. It is precisely here that the dwelling perspective reveals its force: environments are not containers but contexts of becoming. In this image, the built environment is nothing other than the practice of leisure itself, and form is grasped as its ephemeral expression.

The horizon, the vegetation and the improvised seaside furniture are held together not by geometry, but by the affective intensity of shared presence, voices and sunburnt afternoons.

Figure 13

La socialidad como horizonte | Sociality as a horizon



Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: collective, summer, group-based;
- Spatial scale: open landscape that nevertheless tightens around the body (heat, glare, the sound of water);
- Emotional scale: joy and freedom;
- Focus: atmosphere; coexistence of the wild and the domesticated;
- Graphic form: figurative, panoramic.

Discussion: From Affective Patterns to Design Implications

The drawings presented in this paper represent only a limited selection of the material collected throughout the research. They were chosen because they originate from participants of different ages and geographical backgrounds, and because they clearly activate the main affective scales that emerged from the analysis:

- the scale of the body
- the scale of the anchor-object
- the scale of the room/ensemble
- the scale of the landscape

These scales do not function as discrete categories. Rather, they blur into one another, operating as continuous, relational, and experiential gradients.

It is not a coincidence that the graphic interviews are arranged from some enclosed one – *Ball throwing, Coming back from the seaside*, with wholly constructed environment, interiors – to an open one – *Sociality as an horizon*, which contains very little architecture in itself and yet represents a powerful bond with nature, time spent outdoors, laughter, rituals, music.

This progression from interior to exterior does not describe a linear hierarchy, but rather an expansion of the possible *scale* of architectural engagement. As the drawings move outward, the affective focus shifts from bodily proximity and intimate anchors to routes, landscapes, and shared horizons. It is through this gradual widening of the experiential field that the affective scales take shape, revealing how emotional resonance can operate across different spatial extents.

When read together, the drawings converge into a set of recurring “Affective Patterns” that highlight points of engagement where architectural design and co-design practices may intervene with care, privileging attention and responsiveness over the imposition of predefined solutions. In this sense, the drawings do not prescribe actions but suggest orientations for a more situated and affect-sensitive architectural practice.

Distorted Proportions as Bodily Memory

One recurring pattern concerns distorted proportions, which emerge not as representational inaccuracies, but as traces of bodily memory. In these cases, space is recalled through posture, reach, balance, and movement, rather than through standardised dimensions.

From a design perspective, this suggests the possibility of allowing the body to set the scale: placing objects, devices, or architectural features in positions that may initially appear unconventional, but which foster bodily engagement and attachment. Asymmetries and disproportions can thus be interpreted not as errors to be corrected, but as embodied information capable of informing design decisions.

Anchor-Objects as Memory Condensers

A second pattern revolves around anchor-objects acting as condensers of memory. Handles, stairs, fixtures, or seemingly minor elements often emerge as central figures in the drawings, organising the surrounding space through affective attachment. Rather than removing or neutralising these elements, design interventions may work around them, preserving or reusing what already anchors memory. In this approach, objects are not adapted to predefined layouts; instead, they guide spatial decisions, allowing existing attachments to inform transformation.

Anchor-Objects as Memory Condensers

Other drawings highlight ordinary spaces intensified through use. Here, the affective value of space resides not in exceptional architectural features, but in the repetition of everyday rituals and practices. From this perspective, design can operate through care for what already works: recognising ordinary spaces as potential social condensers, supporting existing uses before

introducing new functions. Avoiding over-design becomes a deliberate strategy, favouring adaptability, appropriation, and the continuation of lived practices.

Overlapping Places Stitched by Affection

A further pattern concerns the overlapping of places stitched together by affection. Several drawings recall space not as a collection of discrete locations, but as experiential sequences composed of routes, transitions, and remembered paths. In such cases, architectural intervention may focus on lived routes rather than fixed points, designing experiential walks in which recurring objects, colours, or forms guide movement and attention. Co-designing these routes with inhabitants—starting from how places are remembered and traversed—allows spatial continuity to emerge from experience rather than from formal adjacency.

Thresholds as Lived Stages

Finally, thresholds repeatedly appear as lived stages rather than neutral passages. Stairs, landings, entrances, and intermediate spaces are often remembered as places of waiting, meeting, or informal occupation. Recognising the affective role of thresholds invites design approaches that resist their neutralisation. Instead of treating them solely as elements to be crossed, thresholds can be designed and co-designed to support everyday rituals and informal uses, preserving their role within the lived fabric of space.

Conclusion

This paper has explored drawing not as a representational endpoint, but as a situated practice capable of activating alternative forms of architectural knowledge. Through *Graphic Interviews*, drawing has been approached as an act of recall and listening, able to surface how space is lived, remembered and emotionally structured beyond its formal or geometric description. By comparing the drawings, the research has articulated a set of affective scales – ranging from the body to the landscape – that do not operate as fixed categories, but as relational and experiential gradients.

These scales become intelligible through recurring *Affective Patterns*, which reveal how attachment, memory and uses organise spatial experience across different extents. Rather than proposing a new design language or aesthetic framework, *Scales of Affection* advances a shift in attention: it suggests moving from space as an object to space as a lived intensity, from formal control to situated awareness, and from abstract interventions to practices grounded in embodied experience. In this sense, affect is not treated as an added layer to architectural knowledge, but as an integral dimension of how environments come to matter.

Ultimately, the contribution of this research lies in framing drawing as a methodological bridge between experience and action. By making affective structures visible, graphic interviews open up possibilities for architectural practice that begin not with form-making, but with listening – recognising that care for the built environment emerges through attention, negotiation, and shared meaning across scales.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all participants in the Graphic Interviews for their time, openness, and willingness to share personal memories and experiences through drawing. Their contributions were essential to the development of this research.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that an AI-assisted language model (ChatGPT and Grammarly) was used to support language refinement and improve clarity and coherence of the manuscript. The use of AI was limited to revising or translating text written by the author. All ideas, analyses, and conclusions presented in this paper are the result of the author's original research.

References

- Chipperfield, D., & Kretz, S. (2018). *On planning: A thought experiment*. Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.
- De Ambrogio, U., & Pasquinelli, S. (2010). *Progettare nella frammentazione. Approcci, metodi e strumenti per il sociale* [Designing in fragmentation. Approaches, methods and tools for the social realm]. i Quid.
- Fratini, F. (2008). *Idee di città. Riflettendo sul futuro* [Ideas of the city. Reflecting on the future] (6th ed.). FrancoAngeli.
- Gehl, J. (2011). *Life between buildings: Using public space*. Island Press.
- Ingold, T. (2000). *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. Routledge.
- Ingold, T. (2011). *Being alive: Essays on movement, knowledge and description*. Routledge.
- Ingold, T. (2013). *Making. Antropologia, archeologia, arte e architettura* [Making. Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture]. Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Ingold, T. (2015). *The life of lines*. Routledge.
- Kahn, L. (2015). *Silence and light* (University lecture at ETH Zurich, transcription by A. Vassella). Park Books.
- Lynch, K. (1972). *What time is this place?* MIT Press.
- Martí Arís, C. (2022). *Silenzi eloquenti. Borges, Mies van der Rohe, Ozu, Rothko, Oteiza* [Eloquent silences. Borges, Mies van der Rohe, Ozu, Rothko, Oteiza]. Christian Marinotti Edizioni.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *Fenomenologia della percezione* [Phenomenology of perception]. Bompiani.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2015). *Segni. Fenomenologia e strutturalismo, linguaggio e politica. Costruzione di una filosofia* [Signs. Phenomenology and structuralism, language and politics. The construction of a philosophy]. Il Saggiatore.
- Paba, G. (Ed.). (1990). *La città e il limite. I confini della città* [The city and the limit. The boundaries of the city]. La Casa Usher.
- Pallasmaa, J. (2007). *Gli occhi della pelle. L'architettura e i sensi* [The eyes of the skin. Architecture and the senses] (3rd ed.). Jaca Book.
- Tafuri, M. (2007). *Progetto e utopia* [Project and utopia]. Laterza.
- Van Eyck, A. (2008). *The child, the city and the artist: An essay on architecture*. SUN.

Zumthor, P. (1999). *Pensare architettura* [Thinking architecture]. Electa.