

## 2.26 Report

by Rodrigo Perez de Arce

### Inside

With his hands raised, an adult man<sup>1</sup> can cover two meters and twenty-six centimeters.<sup>2</sup> Within this range of measurements, within “hands’ reach,” a wide variety of operations shape our everyday space. The architect Le Corbusier consecrated this measurement as a kind of module, establishing it as a standard appropriate for human beings: his was also a reaction to late 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture’s lack of moderation –or rather, lack of attention—with regard to the “precise” measurements of things. This lack of attention may have been attributable to the abstract nature of the pattern of metric measurements with respect to the human body. 2.26 was a precise measurement on a human scale that simultaneously recognized the qualities of adjustment between necessity and equipment, between the routines of life and the services rendered by the functions of furniture and storage spaces, which were optimally proven in the cabins of passenger ships, the sleeping cars of trains, and the interiors of passenger airplanes. There, with one simple gesture one might remove objects, adjust the back of a seat, turn on the heat, adjust the light, uncover the sink or unfold a bed to settle in for the night. Miniscule, hyper-equipped spaces that established friendly, efficient interfaces: this was the result of a rational calculus, omitting all extraneous adornment in order to achieve an optimal balance between bodily extension and mechanical effectiveness. For Le Corbusier, the two-point-two-six established a starting point for the scope of the inhabited environment. And not just any environment, but the most intense, the one most laden with consequences, the one that most clearly defined the qualities of the new habitat. He was so concerned about being consistent with what he preached that he decided to personally test it through the creation of one tiny cubicle installed for his own personal use in the space of his architecture *atelier*,<sup>3</sup> as well as another cubicle, of almost identical dimensions, on the Côte d’Azur, where he spent his moments of leisure. Not much larger than a confessional, in the tight squeeze between body and enclosure, these cubicles propose a luxury whose rationale lies not in excess but in exactitude: a rationale that could only be defined as “poetic.”

Things were not always within “hands’ reach:” in Santiago, for example, rooms in older structures often extended up to dizzying heights, for reasons that seem to respond to certain ideas about hygiene. Above people’s heads, up toward the sky and shrouded in shadows, a generous cube of air seemed to ensure good health through a bit of useful though static surplus space. Then, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, hygiene was forced to respond to other imperatives, inundating inhabitable spaces with light, whittling them down to “precise measurements,” reorganizing them into more streamlined formats so that people might move more freely within them, and then suffusing them with “fresh” circulating air. The “size” of these spaces slowly became a program, a precise objective, and ultimately a doctrine. Abundant, consistent illumination created uniform conditions of visibility. Ergonomics would contribute dimensional logics through functional reasoning with regard to the human body, its range, gestures and postures. Then the focus would turn to proxemics, through which the value of distances would not be homogeneous but in fact strongly influenced by the corporeal protocols established by each individual culture, repositories of a kind of regulating protocol for distances, modes, and gestures. And so, the universe of situations encompassed by the body’s range of motion produced diverse explanations and instructive circumstances.

Meanwhile, a considerable portion of Latin American urban housing remained circumscribed by the most minimal measurements, an expression, of sorts, of the dimensional inevitability of poverty:

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<sup>1</sup> This measurement is defined in Le Corbusier, *The Modulor*. London: Faber & Faber, 1961, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> This estimate was based on a standard height of 1.82.9 cms, which allowed Le Corbusier to use the 2.26 measurement as a bridge between the Metric system and the Imperial system.

<sup>3</sup> Le Corbusier, *Ibid.*, “A very small office,” p. 153-54. The cubicle measured 226x226x226 centimeters.

narrowness and promiscuity were –and still are—important if shameful characteristics of our cities. The *techos para Chile* [“roofs for Chile,” the name of a nonprofit initiative that builds houses for the poor] are scarcely higher than hands’ reach. Few are the spaces that extend any higher in these environments, where everything is small enough to haul over one’s shoulder, as if the measurement of the body’s efforts and that of the magnitude of things had adjusted to each other, as if that city were ready to pack up and take off in search of another –better— path.

### Further inside

Cave painting, we are told, gave rise to a primordial “artistic” sensibility through surprisingly “modern” expressions. “Mural” art that was frequently executed with the painter lying on his back in order to apply the pigments onto the rough surfaces amid the cramped shadows of the cave, the polar opposite of “easel” painting, with its smooth, vertical, luminous canvas offering a frontal plane for pictorial operations. Dark, cramped, enclosed, the cave was a place, we believed, that belonged to the dimensional field of “hands’ reach.” Feeling it and modifying it must have been the same thing, given that its surfaces received, over and over, the application of paint, traces, and marks that still fill us with awe. There, the body and its surrounding environment must have achieved subtle degrees of adjustment. Our canonical measurements, in contrast, are made vertically, and this shift has surprising consequences in the field of perceptions, the senses and the body’s motor functions:

*(...)the liberation of the frontal extremities and their transformation into arms and hands, into instruments of seizure and work, depend on the support and movement of the feet; in this same vein, the lips were freed from their role as a dry prehensile apparatus when the four extremities were occupied with support and movement, and transformed into part of a delicate mechanism of phonation; moving beyond the ground-level senses (smell and hearing), which were displaced by the hegemony of the sense of distance: the gaze and, to close the circle, the combination of hand and eye... (...)<sup>4</sup>*

This congruence of organs and members establishes the basis for the productive actions that we will comment further on, actions related to unique signs in the collective space, the characteristics of which are essentially appreciated by the gaze.

### Outside, today

In the “open-air,” beyond the confines of the enclosed precinct, the maximum range defined by the two-point-two-six measurement (“hands’ reach” for erect adults, excluding the elderly and children), defines a stratum that may be invisible but is no less an incarnation of the densest territory of urban experience –and for this same reason the most volatile, the most frayed, the most fragile, the most trampled, the most vulnerable to the actions of urban life. With good reason it was traditionally conceived within the notion of the rustic, as something unpolished, thick, irregular, raw.

This stratum, which is the stage for diverse modes of negotiation between city and people, is the medium that embraces the appropriation tactics of those who turn the street into their living space and their source of work; it is the sphere of interchanges for the dissemination of messages, and the space for insistent urban routines. Here we find countless ways in which the public space is appropriated. Fences, trunk-posts, shrubbery—everything serves to stake out a position, to etch tiny stories into the sidewalk. A counterpoint to this may be found in the alarming “security” systems that, with little subtlety, define

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<sup>4</sup> Quetglas comments on the writing of Leroi-Gourhan regarding upright posture (Leroi-Gourhan, André, *Le geste et la parole I, Technique et langage*, Editions Albin Michel, Paris 1964 in Quetglas, José, *Les Heures Claires, proyecto y arquitectura en la Ville Savoye de Le Corbusier Y Pierre Jeanneret*, Ediciones Massilia, 2008, Barcelona, p. 485.

the separation between those on the inside, with their private worlds and possessions, and the “others,” the errant ones on the outside.

The structure of that street space is complex: above, we find an array of innumerable “out of reach” objects. Some seem to represent the unitary will of the state or some central power, as in the case of the uniform foliage of the urban tree layout, with trunks that serve as columns and are arranged in rows that extend out toward the vanishing point of infinity. It would be impossible to imagine ordered, uniform rows without that superior, unitary, and long-term objective. The same might be said for rural boulevards: they are absolutely not ordered and extensive in the areas where lands are subdivided into mini-estates.

After the trees came public lighting, installed now as a unitary network of cables, posts and lights, organized metrically in rhythm with the rows of trees. This warp of aerial cables unfolded some two meters and forty centimeters above hands’ reach, in an infinite openwork loom that, unlike the “avenue” of trees, was formally indifferent ever since its beginnings. Nobody ever contemplated designing its configurations, or gave particular thought to its “formal” effect in daylight. Its appearance (or, to use a fashionable term, its “impact”) was never the object of any “project” that might have taken its presence into consideration, given that its effect was believed to be strictly limited to its utilitarian service. Other “infrastructure cables” were laid underground, but we only find out about them when excavations reveal Santiago’s rural entrails of dust, clay, earthworms, boulders, and gravel.

Rows of trees flank the urban grid: at least, that’s what we customarily assume. In all likelihood, every recently-inaugurated modern street once had trees flanking its roadway. Only time and civilization will tell what will become of those trees. Previously, those trees were watered by rural irrigation ditches that made their way into the city: now there are those who “hose them down;” for this task, doormen and gardeners are slowly being replaced by automated micro-sprinklers that spray high-powered streams of water. At night we can feel the moisture of the plants and the earth: that is how Santiago smells in the summer. In the more working-class neighborhoods people still water plants with pots and buckets because people tend to water the streets there to “calm them down,” to control “the heat,” just as people used to water the unpaved streets to control the dust. Pavement and trees, watered indifferently: the former cools off while the latter grow. Going out to water is a way of being in the street, of looking out in long silences, of “getting some air,” just as in other cities people walk dogs with the goal of getting out of the house. In some neighborhoods, the only people walking are gardeners and nannies, transplanted inhabitants from the working-class world who perhaps see the street as a space that was always theirs, where only the occasional jogger breaks this unspoken social code. In general, the street is still an inhabited space in Santiago.

In the past there were neither cables nor trees on our streets: the former did not exist because they hadn’t been invented. And to some degree the same is true for the latter. Our streets were “dry” because nobody found it necessary, useful or desirable for trees to accompany our urban itineraries. After all, the countryside was close by. The urban standard for the avenue seems to have come from France but, like all truly important ideas of everyday consequence, its origins are ambiguous. Beyond the desired shade offered by the tree or the “natural presence” it embodied, at a time when urban growth began to push wilderness spaces further and further away, perhaps the tree-lined street recalled the colonnade, and unwittingly recreated, in wood, the mythology of the Greek temple. Cadences of tree trunks are like cadences of columns. In any event, the tree-lined street came to be called an “avenue,” but once that tree-lined street was no longer the privilege of the broadest boulevards and became a standard sight in the urban landscape, this genre of street –alternative to the now-unusual “dry” street<sup>5</sup>—was left without a name.

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<sup>5</sup> Streets and squares without trees were known as “dry.”

Be that as it may, the first posts erected for electrical lines were made of wood, and those tree corpses, those rows of totems, were interspersed among living tree trunks, while the ecological price of mass deforestation was paid by distant regions. Other posts, made of concrete or metal rails, would come later, and they too were interspersed among the living tree trunks, so as to sustain the above-ground cables. Because of this, for a long time new neighborhoods in the urban periphery exhibited a sharp-edged silhouette until an abundance of foliage was able to win out over the abundance of cables. Above-ground cables and foliage were competing for the same space: the former seeking the most direct route between terminals, the latter wishing to reach the light. Because we are a digital culture and overreact to any interruption in our connectivity, the cable has a clear advantage. Between pruning cables and mutilating trees, the solution clearly beats around the bushes. Because of this, on certain streets, one is better off not looking up skyward.

The responsibilities for that aerial “superstructure” must be shouldered by various different entities: the cables, the respective power and telecommunications companies, the trees, the “departments for maintenance and beautification.” All are charged with caring for that aerial space.

Telecommunications are affiliated with the Ministry of Public Works and Transportation, given that roadways, telephones and digital networks “communicate” as well as “transport:” some give us the material framework for “practicing” communication with our bodies and others lay out the network of filaments for the virtual traffic of words and images. In this way, the street integrates various kinds of traffic, various velocities, various intimacies.

Affiliated with their respective municipalities, the “maintenance and beautification” duo reveals that “civility” unites the beautiful and the clean in a hygienist notion that, incidentally, the Greeks never would have imagined. The one we espouse may be an aftereffect of the Enlightenment, even though the notion of the beautiful as “beautification” (“adornment: something that is added”) seems to relate more to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (just like the ideation of the “fine arts”).

It is in this way that, high above our man with his hands raised, we may witness the display of technological prowess (effectiveness over appearance) and the civilizing will for progress (adorning the public space, oxygenizing the city) unfolding skyward, visibly and empirically. To measure the practical outcome of these intentions, some people speak of “externalities.” But we know the outcome: trees offer shade, and cables mutilate trees.

To civilize, which is literally to cultivate, implies sustained care over time. For the city, which is inherently a long-term endeavor, sustained care over time entails a transfer from one generation to the next, a process of “handing down:” that is how great trees are cared for, and that is simultaneously the patent meaning of their care, a meaning that is subtly described in English as “husbandry.” To put it one way, trees are long-term investments, like buildings. And that is clearly one of the projections of the street, and it is for that reason that we may identify ambitions and lifestyles, attitudes and shortcomings, just by paying attention to a given city’s streets. Technical networks, on the other hand, only mature, grow, or change as the result of the effects of obsolescence, competition and the proliferation created by growing demand.

Planted firmly upon the ground, our inhabitant occupies the space of the street. Those grounds that support him describe a subtle topography, structured by striations, roadways (inclined to allow water to run toward the curbs and drains); curbs (for guiding vehicular traffic within well-defined boundaries); front yards (for “adornment”) and sidewalks (for walking). All of this is exposed to the greatest level of wear and tear as a result of the frictions produced by everyday use. Good grounds also make for good streets, and the organizational logics described above did not emerge from nowhere. Just as in the tree-

lined street, it took time to separate sidewalks from roadways, to drain water toward curbs and to envision front yards. None of that existed in Santiago before 1874.

This scenario, then, is a hybrid one: its forms are defined by habits and regulations.

From that ground surface up to the two meters twenty six centimeters, a mature inhabitant moves about with ease. That is his most immediate chance to “intervene,” to somehow modify the space that belongs to everyone, concentrating the marks of urban life –whether from wear and tear or intention— in a zone associated with the range of the human body. It is for this reason that the classic notion of the plinth assumes the triple function of support, encounter with the natural ground, and protection against lateral erosion, recognizing and identifying the specificity of that first layer in the vertical articulation of the building.

Understood in the sense of layers or strata, this first layer of the plinth is not the same as the first aerial layer of cables and foliage, nor is there homogeneity in the “field” that is vertically described by the various upper strata that configure the typical space of the street: street lamps, treetops, balconies, cornices, rooftops, ridges, chimneys, equipment and antennae.

There was a time when these aerial strata were filled with signs of domestic life: clotheslines, domestic junk, flowerpots, canaries, and perhaps shouts, as well, adding a bit of nuance to the separation that we often find between the bustling street level and the mute upper levels. But the sense of “beautification,” which is distinct from the sense of the “beautiful,” seems perhaps related to something more akin to the rules of urban planning, as such possessing repressive projections that must have forced the clothing, the canaries, the shouts, the junk and the flowerpots to withdraw to interior spaces. For that reason apartments in Santiago today come with loggias that are protected behind latticework, the function of which is to hide what cannot be shown: canaries, underwear and, of course, the utilitarian space of the domestic sphere. From this moment on, high floors have been stripped of their signs, in their adherence to municipal regulations that govern “good habits” and the dual notion of “maintenance and beautification,” building a more antiseptic public space.

There is, as such, a density that is unique to that territory between the very ground of the street and the range of the hand outstretched skyward. Certeau recognizes, in the infinity of urban tactics, a capacity for action that is independent of the coercions of the central power upon space and its inhabitants. Inhabitants devise practices of use in an effort to take advantage of the conditions of their space. In this way, street vendors, nomadic practices, uses that change over time, tribal signs, the invisible territories of various interest groups, appropriate the street. But appropriating through habit means domesticating. That is where we find signs of life—the plastic bags hanging from trees, the boxes that double chairs or tables, the barriers that govern parking, the strategic positions demanded by various different actors: a world of micro-interventions.

I recall Cartier-Bresson’s images of the trees sheltering a rural road or a casual urban encounter: the shadows in Seville, the faint light of the City of London, the ruins of the Spanish Civil War. I think of Nigel Henderson: the play spaces, the silent groups, the neighborhood commerce. I think Sergio Larraín and the dignity of those vagabond children, the choreographies of staircases and pedestrians in Valparaíso, but all those streets are part of another history. Perhaps those streets do not reveal cables because their cables are underground. Most definitely they do not possess trees because trees were not conceived in that way, and the streets lack “front yards” because it never occurred to anyone that in the city people might have a need for “adornment” with plants. These images also depict a time of low traffic volume, a time when people walked indiscriminately in the street or on the sidewalk.

Looking at any street head-on; seeking modes of appropriation; studying a street's composition, space and forms; recognizing how the un-formed aspect of casual use and the "formal" quality of more permanent installations; as well as the often intense activity beneath the shelter of the web of trees and cables installed as part of a systematic organization of things; reveals a persistent, everyday reality. Like a portrait, what appears is not always stimulating, but it is what it is: tangible, real, in the here and now, just as it is, anonymous, belonging to everybody and nobody—and that, precisely, is the clue to its tremendous relevance.

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