'City of Light': The Production of Urban Space by the Esoteric Spiritual Community of Damanhur, Italy

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'CITY OF LIGHT': THE PRODUCTION OF URBAN SPACE BY THE ESOTERIC SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY OF DAMANHUR, ITALY

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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to question mainstream conceptualizations of space and spatial processes by considering the case of an arguably 'diverse'[1] space and culture, which is the esoteric spiritual community of Damanhur, in Italy.

The Damanhur community, which was established in the 1970s, consists of about 600 people living in a valley about 50 km from the city of Turin and a number of sympathizers (500–600)[2] periodically joining courses and workshops organized by the Damanhur University. The inhabitants focus their lifestyle on spiritual practices and experimentation, and—as we shall discuss—the local space has been arranged according to particular social and cultural understandings of life, the afterlife, nature and communitarianism. More precisely, specific esoteric-and- magic views about spirituality ('spiritual research', in the words of the Damanhurians) affect local understandings of space and geography, and several spatial concepts at the basis of Damanhurian culture are hard to describe and understand in terms of standard geographical language and knowledge. Our hypothesis is that grounded theologies (or grounded spiritualities like Damanhur's) are at the heart of specific processes of spatial production and are worth investigating for several reasons. First of all, they help to challenge traditional assumptions about space and geography, which ultimately stimulate normalized conceptions.

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[1] The expression 'diverse' — much like the adjective 'alternative', which is discussed later in the next section — is certainly ambiguous: it comes easy, for example, to question 'diverse from what?' The expression is used here in the sense proposed by Gibson-Graham, aiming at challenging monolithic and conservative visions of the economy (focused exclusively on market transactions), by considering practices and spaces excluded or marginalized in most economic analysis. This exercise ultimately aims at cultivating an ontology of economic difference, questioning how we—as academic subjects—become open to possibility rather than limits on the possible (see particularly Gibson-Graham, 2008).

[2] Official data are unavailable. Figures are approximate, and they were obtained through interviews during the fieldwork (see later in the chapter for methodological remarks).

Secondly, they resonate with the trend to destabilize political economy as the primary source of spatial production (specifically 'diverse' spaces; cf. Gibson-Graham, 2008; King, 2003), emphasizing the role of 'other' rationales—in this case, spiritual and alternative ones. Finally, the analysis of Damanhur contributes to the limited literature on the geographies of spirituality, more specifically, on the so-called new spiritualities. As such, the chapter makes use of an extreme case to illuminate the processes that are set in motion when a group of people coalesce around the decision to remake their urban realities from scratch. Whereas the specific desires and spiritual beliefs that drive Damanhurians may not be shared by the majority of urban dwellers, their experience nevertheless reveals much about the practices and challenges involved in such an endeavour. Those intent on enabling alternative urban futures may therefore beneficially learn from this case.

In order to explore this topic, the chapter is organized as follows. The next section presents a short overview of the existing literature on the geographies of spirituality and introduces some key concepts which are used to interpret our case study. Then, the case of Damanhur is introduced, followed by a methodological section. Then, the core arguments of the chapter are developed by analysing the spatialities and conceptualizations of space mobilized by the community, which are then summarized and discussed in the concluding section.

Theoretical Perspectives: Some Brief Notes on Geography, Spirituality and Autonomy

There is considerable literature about the geographies of religion, as a number of scholars, over the years, have developed analysis focussing on specific cultural, social, economic and political perspectives (for some glimpses of the debates, see Holloway & Valins, 2002; Hopkins, Long, & Olson, 2013; Kong, 2010; Tse, 2014; Yorgason & della Dora, 2009). Interest in the religious sphere is largely based on recognizing that religion and spirituality are crucial elements for the everyday life of a number of people, and that religion and spirituality are pivotal in shaping our culture and knowledge, even in fields apparently unrelated to faith (Holloway & Valins, 2002; Sutherland, 2017). This chapter is situated in the relatively small literature on the geographies of so-called alternative spiritualities and new religious movements (see particularly Bartolini, Chris, MacKian, & Pile, 2013 and 2017; see also the edited collection by Lewis, 2008, and Sutcliffe & Gilhus, 2014). There is no one exclusive definition of these terms, which have to be framed as relational constructions: various spiritual and religious movements may come to be seen as 'alternative' cultural formations, in that they are peripheral to their society's dominant religious culture and are supposed to be 'new', in that most of their elements have a modern origin, although many 'new' religious movements are based on ancient forms of knowledge and practices, as in Neo-pagan movements (Clarke, 2006). Damanhur fits into this

framework, blending as it does elements from supposedly distant places and times in order to give life to a hybrid and 'interstitial' grounded community.

 A key idea at the bases of debates on the geographies of religions and spiritualities is that there is not at all a neat distinction between the religious and the secular: the two spheres overlap, and secularization can itself be conceived as a kind of theological process (Bartolini et al., 2017; Kong, 2010; Tse, 2014). With this framework in mind, Tse (2014) has outlined the geographical research agenda concerning 'grounded theologies', that is, revealing how spaces, places and networks are made up of performative practices of place-making driven by specific understandings of the transcendent (in this case, a mixture of pantheistic visions of the divine and esoteric knowledge). Grounded theologies are both 'theological', because they involve some views of the transcendent (including negative views, such as denying its existence), and 'grounded', as they inform meaningful spatial, social and cultural processes which apparently have little in common with the religious sphere.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the grounded spiritualities enacted by the Damanhur community, particularly by looking at the multiple ways in which spiritual conceptions have produced space, different ways of understanding space and peculiar spatial forms of autonomy and resistance. More specifically, the research focuses on local practices and knowledges strictly connected with the spiritual and transcendental spheres.[3] This research approach is supported by distinct perspectives. First, it embraces the need to challenge the idea that economic forces are the primary engines for the production of space, by trying to consider other logics and rationales (see, e.g. King, 2003). Second, it follows Yorgason and della Dora's suggestion (2009) to let religion 'speak back' to geography, that is, allowing it to disrupt pre-existing imagined geographies, producing alternative forms of experience, modes of practices and senses of the world, and ultimately different conceptualizations of space and geographical concepts. Finally, the research aims at emphasizing the political dimension of Damanhurian's spiritualities, by considering how this esoteric spiritual community comes to be seen as a specific type of autonomous space in which alternative spatial imaginaries are religiously rather than politically derived. Putting it differently, it is argued that Damanhur may (also) be considered as a variant in the category of 'autonomous spaces', defined by Chatterton and Pickerill (2006, p. 730) as 'spaces where people desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation'. As is discussed, Damanhur did not develop as an explicitly anti-capitalist site, and actually it is a capitalist system fully imbricated in flows and market-driven transactions. At the same time, economic forces and capitalist ideologies are imbricated in the peculiarities of the Damanhurian spirituality, and the local production of space seems to be mostly driven by 'other' and 'diverse' rationales. In this sense, in the eyes of many

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[3] On the conceptual relations between ideas of religion, spirituality and transcendence, see, for example, Barnes-Holmes, Roche, and Gregg (2001).

supporters, the spiritual community develops 'in opposition' to the distorted logics of consumerism and individualism ruling most societies (cf. Defilippis, 2004), and it is possible to think of Damanhur as a site (or an 'island', to use a typical spiritual metaphor; cf. Bartolini et al., 2017) of 'spiritual resistance', which developed also through conflicts with the State which took form during the years.

Introducing Damanhur

The history of the community dates back to 1975, when a group of spiritual researchers, enthusiastic about esotericism, founded the Horus Centre of Information and Research. Led by Benedetto Lavagna and the community's future founder, Roberto Airaudi (1950–2013), the group ran lectures and training courses relating to esoteric knowledge, energy healing, alternative medicine and paranormal phenomena (Introvigne & Zoccatelli 2013; Cardano & Pannofi 2015). During this period, a plan was forged to establish a 'questioning community' (Sutherland, 2017) where these spiritual interests could be explored in everyday life in a tailored environment. In 1977 the group purchased land in Val Chiusella, a rainy and wooded area. According to local narratives, the history of the community's foundation is embedded in myth and symbolism. As we see later in this chapter, Damanhur is believed to occupy a central position in 'spiritual' networks, so-called synchronic lines. Moreover, the original owner of the land started having dreams about the foundation of Damanhur years before Airaudi and his disciples physically came to buy the land. Even the name of the community testifies to the presence of historical and spatial referents, as Damanhur is the name of an ancient Egyptian city dedicated to the cult of the God Horus and meaning 'City of Light'. The central site of Damanhur is that of Damjl where buildings (the 'Open Temple' and some houses) were constructed and where the original community of Airaudi and 11 of his followers fi settled. By this point Airaudi was recognized as the spiritual guide and he chose to be called Falco (Hawk) as an esoteric name (to which, later, he will add that of Dandelion—a strong flower which survives in harsh climates). Similarly, community members abandoned their birth names in favour of names combining elements of flora and fauna, such as 'Ant-Coriander', 'Swan-Reed', 'Steinbock-Peach' and 'Shark-Hemp', to characterize their spiritual identity. Airaudi passed away in 2013, but his spiritual, material and political heritage is still considerably in the air and, according to believers, his 'energetic' presence as well.

Damanhur's historical development meaningfully evolved through different periods and dynamics which cannot be fully described here (for wider reviews, see Berzano, 1998; Cardano, 1997; Introvigne, 1999; Pace, 2000; Palmisano & Pannofino, 2014). We briefly relate the most important events in the history of the community, which can be divided into four phases.

1. *The origins of the Eighth Wonder of the World.* The community started as an autonomous project, an ideal utopian community separated from the outside world, as a sort of spiritual island (cf. Bartolini et al., 2017). In order to establish a communal living and distinguish his community from other eco-New Age foundations originating in the 1960s in Europe, Falco and five ministers became the so-called military government, imposing strict socio-political and economic regulation on the life of the group. The economic position of the community was strengthened through the initiation of commercial and artisanal activities. The community also produced a Constitution in 1981, a flag and its own currency (called *Credito*). But the most remarkable Damanhur project began during this phase: the building of an 'underground city'—'the Eighth Wonder of the World', as it has been widely defined (Del Re & Macioti, 2013). In 1978, Damanhurians started realizing a system of underground temples that would later be known as the Temples of Humankind.[4] Construction on the temples continued in secret until 1992, when an ex-member revealed their existence, provoking conflictual relations with the law, as the temple had been built without any planning permission or safety regulations. Conflicts between Damanhur and the outside world continued throughout the 1990s, particularly—as discussed in the following section—as a result of legal disputes with former members about working conditions, presumed abuses and health issues, casting a shadow over the community in the eyes of many external observers, some of them perceiving Damanhur as a sect exploiting the work and wealth of its members (Del Vecchio & Pitrelli, 2011).

2. *The Game of Life.* The second historical phase began in 1983 with the introduction of the Game of Life, involving survival and self-sufficiency exercises, as well as journeys and simulated battles in the woods. The Game incorporated a journey around Italy that opened up opportunities to establish contacts and recruit new members to the existing community of 150. The project implied, for a short while, a transition to an economy based on joint property rights, and the attenuation of the pressures of cohabitation rules, as participation was increasingly favoured in the community's political management. As the community aged, the arrival of second-generation Damanhurians increased pressure for an internal educational system, and so the 'family school' was established to teach pre-school and primary school aged children (since 1986) and adolescents (since 1993).

3. *Openness to the world*. The third phase came about when ex-member Filippo Cerutti divulged the secret construction of the Temples to the public in 1992. The repercussions of this affair (including legal repercussions) marked a watershed in Damanhur's history, prompting the community to

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[4] The Temples, which have become renowned for their stunning mythological frescoes and the vividness of their mosaics, include rooms dedicated to natural elements (such as Air, Water, Earth and Metals) as well as mirrors, meditation, dance, music and plants (Esperide Ananas, 2006).

open up to the outside world and rethink its organizational pattern. From a community characterized by relatively closed borders, Damanhur re-organized itself as a network with multiple affiliated branches both in Italy and abroad. Openness to the world implied also involvement in national and local politics. At the local level, Damanhur has been involved in the local government of many small towns through the foundation of a political party and various successive local community mayors.

4. *Social and Economic Growth and Visibility towards Damanhur Crea*. In 2000 the fourth phase began with the birth of the Damanhur Syndicate. At this time, Damanhur's economic activity consisted of companies, cooperatives and laboratories (Del Re & Macioti, 2013). Equipping itself to become an organization in which commercial activities would enjoy special prominence, the spiritual community has reaped considerable rewards from these ventures in the past few years. In 2003 the community bought a former Olivetti factory nearby, which it inaugurated in 2004 as a showcase for its commercial activities, particularly those connected with art, culture and health. Known as Damanhur Crea, this multipurpose centre — the largest in the valley — hosts many activities and services: examples are a shop selling organic foods and natural products; a holiday farmhouse; a bio-architectural studio; a consultancy in renewable energy and utilities; a bio-building company; a beauty farm; a hair salon; a fine-arts and restoration studio; a goldsmiths; an art gallery; a 'selfic' laboratory[5]; a health clinic; an organic café and restaurant; and an 'ethical' insurance company. The Damanhur Federation, an appellation chosen to highlight the network of micro-communities which make up the 'City of Light', now extends over an area of 500 hectares including woods, cultivated fi residential areas and about 100 private dwellings, artists' studios, crafts workshops, companies and farms. Various Damanhurian 'ambassadors' have established relationships with other organizations all over the world, and they regularly organize conferences, courses and activities related to Damanhur. According to the Damanhur website, supporters can be found in Croatia, France, Germany, Japan, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Spain, the United States and Canada. New Damanhur Centers have also been started in other Italian regions and in various parts of the world.[6]

Those who choose to reside in Damanhur live in houses — built mostly according to criteria of energy self-sufficiency and sustainability — hosting about 20 people (including old and young members, couples, couples with children and unattached people). The federation is divided into 8 regions comprising 25 residential units named 'nuclei'. According to Italian Law, Damanhur is a de facto

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[5] A discipline that unites art and wellness research. For more information, see www.damanhur.org/en/research-and-experimentation/selfica (last accessed 4 July 2017).
[6] Details may be found on the Damanhur website: http://www.damanhur.org/en/share-experiences/ damanhur-in-the-world (last accessed 20 December 2017).

religious denomination. With regard to private rights, Damanhur has over time been a consortium, an association for social advancement and today it includes various co-operatives allowing the redistribution of profits from their commercial activities and property sharing. The members of Damanhur thus own shares in the co-operatives, which legally own the community's land, houses, economic activities and financial assets.

In the absence of reliable public data, fieldwork exploration allows us to affirm that the community is reasonably wealthy, allowing the equivalent—in material terms—of a middle-class lifestyle: most of the inhabitants have a car, take foreign holidays and live in nice houses. However, comparative comments like this have to be taken with a grain of salt because much of the wealth is accumulated and mobilized collectively, for example, for the maintenance of collective services, infrastructure and common spaces, where the distinction between public and private is particularly blurred, as discussed later in the chapter.

Methodological Remarks

The Damanhur case study allows important speculations in methodological terms. Although this line of reflection is not fully analysed here, it is interesting to stress that Damanhur is an esoteric community, and hence a vast amount of knowledge is basically kept secret from 'outsiders'. In order to describe our positionalities, it has to be stressed that we are external to the community, and we have been enabled to visit Damanhur and to meet the Damanhurians thanks to a local research project involving other researchers.[7] The Damanhur community kindly 'opened up' for interviews, participant observation, focus groups and questionnaires. The research team we were part of carried out 20 in-depth interviews with members of the community and 20 daily visits. It has to be emphasized that research practices were mostly mediated and supervised by Damanhurians responsible for the community's 'external relations'. Most of the interviews were carried out in the presence of these 'mediators'.

Although the surveillance of the mediator was non-intrusive, it could suggest that the interviewees were not fully free to present their ideas, views and knowledge of the community, and in this sense the interviews turned out quite similar, describing a peaceful, eco-friendly community of people devoted to meditation and spiritual research. We already knew about the existence of apostates who had left the community over the years and painted an alternative picture of the community—one

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[7] The research group, lead by Luca Ozzano, includes: Roberto Burlando, Anna Lo Presti, Monica Gilli and Nicola Luciano Pannofino. This chapter has been developed and written by the two authors, who have the exclusive responsibility for the data and arguments presented here. Specifically, Sections 1, 3 and 5 have been written by Stefania Palmisano; Sections 2, 4 and 6 by Alberto Vanolo.

emphasizing exploitation, secrets, hierarchies, troubled relations inside the community and controversial political and economic connections between Damanhur and the external world.[8] Damanhurians dismiss these criticisms as coming from people who were unable to evolve spiritually as members of the community and therefore express their frustration by denigrating Damanhur. This juxtaposition poses interesting methodological problems.

Since Damanhur is an esoteric community, most of its knowledge and practices are concealed, becoming more and more accessible as members reach superior levels and status within the community. Access to the field came about gradually as the researchers and the Damanhurians gained reciprocal knowledge and confidence. At the beginning of our fieldwork, the community allowed us to explore and to have contact with them accepting an implicit pact of exploring the way they wanted, including interviewing people in the presence of a supervisor. To give an example, we were asked not to draw maps because they could help thieves and other 'bad people' to find what they were interested in. We complied with this request and so our exploration was perforce confined. This analysis does not touch upon controversial political or social issues, as it focusses on spiritual knowledge we accessed through qualitative methodologies, specifically interviews, participant observations and documental examination of various books, documents and papers kindly provided by the community. Apostates' criticisms and negative newspaper articles were studied but not explicitly codified for the purposes of this chapter.

Damanhurians' diffidence towards us was attenuated by the participation of one of us in the community's life in August 2016. Ethnographical research was conducted for ten days within the community participating in a programme called Aminé, 'A 10-Day Adventure in Damanhur'. Guests (or 'pilgrims') were hosted by a local family and participated in group projects and daily tasks organized by Damanhurians in order to illustrate their life, culture, arts and spirituality. The community soon learnt to accept and welcome the presence of a professional outsider (Agar, 1980) who, in her role as guest, conversed with the locals and with other pilgrims.

The Production of Space in Damanhur

The doctrine at the basis of Damanhur was developed by its founder, Falco Tarassaco. According to local narratives, he was 'enlightened' from childhood, possessing various extraordinary powers, for example, healing, visions and time-travel. Most of his knowledge has been transmitted orally, but Falco himself wrote about 20 books, and a number of other books about Falco and his spirituality have been

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[8] An important website collecting these stories is http://www.caproespiatorio.net (last accessed 1 April 2017). The case of apostates of Damanhur has been extensively analysed in Cardano and Pannofino (2015).

written by members and translated into various languages.[9] Members and supporters of the community still discuss these texts, so the schematization of Damanhurian doctrine in this chapter should be viewed as a rough summary of a vast, complex topic. The words of a member of the community emphasise Falco's pivotal role:

> I am writing a book (…) dedicated to Falco. His teachings are inexhaustible and now that he has left his body, they must be divulged to the world in a Universalist sense, beyond the specific Damanhurian language. (Interview, 5 March 2017)

In order to present its main thesis, that is, the relation between spiritual visions, practices and space, this section is divided into two parts: the first discusses the Damanhurian view of the world and its epistemology, understood as the foundation of what they call 'the physics of spirituality' (their view of an alternative, different, epistemology allows some reflections on conventional geographical understandings of the world); the second focusses on a limited number of examples of spaces and practices enacted by the local community, in order to try to map how space both mirrors and supports specific visions of the socio-spiritual sphere.

Spiritual Beliefs and Alternative Cosmogonies

The main Damanhurian ideas about the foundation of the universe and the origins of human life are described in a key book entitled 'The Curious Divinity', which is a collection of Airaudi's teachings. Although this is not the only book on this topic, it is the one which develops a philosophical (not strictly mystical and metaphysical) understanding of the creation of the universe. It contains the most important beliefs mentioned by Damanhurians in interviews. Its main idea is 'physical spirituality' (or 'esoteric spirituality'), understood as a kind of 'spiritual science' overlapping the rational and mystical dimensions of the self, based on the hypothesis that human beings inhabit an ecosystem which is both spiritual and material in nature.

According to Damanhur's physical spirituality, we live in a universe populated by 'shapes' characterized by *multiplicity* and *distance*. Multiplicity means that universal existence is split among the billions of subjects and objects filling space, from stars to dust, from microbes to divine forces, including human

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[9] Some of them are: *Il libro del risveglio*, Val Ra Damanhur, Baldissero Canavese (Torino) 2004; *Racconti di un Alchimista. Gli straordinari anni di formazione del fondatore di Damanhur in 33 storie*, Niatel, Vidracco (Torino) 2011. See also: *Costituzione della Federazione di Damanhur*, Damanhur Editrice, Torino 1999; *La Via Horusiana. Principi, concetti e tradizioni della Scuola di Pensiero di Damanhur secondo gli insegnamenti di Oberto Airaudi*, Damanhur, Baldissero Canavese (Torino) 1999; M. Faruolo, M. Gagliardi, E. Mensi, D. Pacchioni, S. Palombo, G. Vassallo, *La divinità curiosa. La nascita dell'universo secondo la Fisica spirituale*, Val Ra Damanhur, Baldissero Canavese (Torino) 2006; Esperide Ananas, Stambecco Pesco, *Le storie di Damanhur. 1. Il baule delle memorie*, Val Ra Damanhur, Baldissero Canavese (Torino) 2006; Ibidem, *Le storie di Damanhur. 2. Scacco al Tempo!,* Val Ra Damanhur, Baldissero Canavese (Torino) 2007; Ibidem, *The Traveler's Guide to Damanhur. The Amazing Northern Italian Eco-Societ*y, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley 2009; S. Pesco, *La mia Damanhur. La più grande comunità spirituale italiana raccontata da chi ci vive*, Altri Paraggi, Torino 2011.

beings. Distance is intended in both its spatial and temporal dimensions; particularly, it articulates the trajectories and the rhythms allowing the transition from one shape (i.e. form of existence) to another. By mobilizing these two concepts, Damanhurian philosophy aims at challenging supposedly conventional nodes characterizing both pre-religious and post-religious thinking, that is, the idea that life on Earth may be conceived through dichotomy (male vs. female, good vs. evil, life vs. death, etc.), and that events may be interpreted in terms of causal connections. According to this philosophy, the universe may be conceptualized as a plane constantly affected by 'neutral events', which can be metaphorically interpreted as the constant outpouring of 'potential energies' which, meeting the physical plane of reality, may trigger material and palpable events. The drops of potential energy are all the same, but they may trigger very different events, from the impalpable events of the everyday life in the cosmos (a spider moving a leg) to the explosion of a star. The ontology of reality, or more simply the production of human and non-human events, has to be conceptualized in relation to complex logics of synchronicity involving potential energies within the universe, and synchronicity is one of the main keywords and evocative concepts of Damanhurian philosophy. The human being is seen both as the centre of the universe—the one who perceives and makes experience of the universe—but at the same time human life is just one of the possible 'shapes' characterizing the experience of reality. The human body may be considered as a bridge to different planes of experience, beyond mundane everyday life.

> Spiritual awakening means that you are in a somnambulist state and you have to become aware that the world is not what you see. (…) We know and we need to get in contact with the spiritual ecosystem. (Interview, 24 April 2017)

In the esoteric cosmogony of Damanhur, the original 'absolute conscience' self-generated nine distinct divinities, and human beings are just one of these. Put differently, the entire universe has been produced by a 'curious divinity' who multiplied the potential planes of existence in order to develop new possibilities of knowledge. Human life is just one of these planes.

Applied to everyday life, the ideas of multiplicity and distance are coherent with a way of life based on variety and difference at all the levels of the human experience. Rather than specialization and strict discipline of the self, Damanhurians are supposed to 'experience' variegated realities and planes of experience.

> We learn how to practice astral journeys: getting out of our physical bodies in order to travel in other dimensions of reality and also to meet the inhabitants of other planes of reality. (Interview, 17 August 2016)

This is also reflected in the proliferation of very different spaces and approaches in spiritual research: Damanhur is a patchwork of borrowed and re-elaborated spiritual ideas, symbols, cultures and rituals from very different eras and geographical settings, from ancient Egyptian religions to Celtic cultures, from occult-theosophical to New Age, embedded in the specific experience of a small community (see some examples in Image 12.1).

It is worth mentioning that ideas of multiplicity, heterogeneity and distance are at the core of many academic conceptualizations of space in human geography. Doreen Massey's (2005, p. 9) speculation on space emphasizes that it is the outcome of interrelations, processes and interactions on different geographical scales in a framework of 'dynamic simultaneity'; space is a 'sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity' (p. 9), and hence geography is ultimately focussed on difference and distance; and space is a sphere in which distinct heterogeneous trajectories coexist, as space is made up of processes and evolutionary paths. Of course, there is no direct relationship between the Damanhurian conception of reality and Massey's conception of space, but still there are some striking similarities in languages and sensibilities. They both refer in some ways to post-structuralist views of the world, decentred visions and interpretations of reality, and the need to embrace openness and situated understandings which challenge conventional dichotomies (near and far, modernity and tradition, inside and outside).

Image 12.1 - *Examples of statues and symbols in Damanhur*

(Photo: Authors, 2016)

The complex epistemologies, philosophies and ontologies enacted by Damanhurians may (also) be framed as strategic elements in the politics of alternative or subversive spirituality. On the one hand, in order to subvert conventional ways of conceiving the world, the Damanhurian spirituality has largely destabilized linear understandings of space and distance, as we see in the following section. On the other hand, the Damanhurian philosophy challenges everyday conceptions of life in times of modernity/postmodernity and globalization. In a world where everything seems to have a 'meaning'—for example, the market, as relations and experiences are more and more commodified Damanhurian spirituality re-frames reality in *seductive* terms (cf. Men In Red, 1999). Seduction, in philosophical terms, has been interpreted provocatively by Baudrillard (1979) as the opposite of production: if the latter is based on the idea of materializing something that belongs to a different order (crafting, making visible), seduction is based on the logic of slippage, appearance, play. The logic of seduction does not make sense of explicit or implicit desires; rather, it is a hypnotic dispositive capturing attention beyond any sense or meaning. The object of seduction, in this sense, is not something directly representable because it plays with the absence of distance, or synchronism, between the Self and the external object. The idea of the real as partial experience going beyond any explicit causal mechanical order (as in the metaphor of the 'neutral events' raining over the plane of reality) and any linear conception of time (as reality belongs to many alternative and parallel universes lying outside standard conceptions of time) may be intended as an aesthetic experience of seduction, and the entire existence of reality is interpreted as the outcome of the curiosity (seduction) of a divinity. The experience of the real, in Damanhurian philosophy, is placed at infinite cognitive distance, outside any realm of production and arguably outside conventional conceptions of space.

The Human Production of Space: Scales, Relations and Natures

Damanhurian spirituality is at the basis of the production of the community's landscape, and local spaces are imbued with local spiritual knowledge, composing an intricate spatial-spiritual dialectic. Three specific examples follow.

First, according to Damanhurian spirituality, the world is crisscrossed by a network of energy lines, with nine major lines running from North to South and nine from West to East. These lines 'emerge' on the surface of the planet only in specific places, functioning as antennae connecting worldly spaces with 'other' worlds and planes of existence, in a way that echoes traditional Chinese cosmogony. Places crossed by multiple lines of energy are 'synchronic nodes', and many religious buildings and holy spaces are specifically located in these areas, where sensitive people may perceive the potential for

multiple dimensions and states of consciousness. Damanhur is supposed to be located where four lines overlap.

Synchronic nodes destabilize linear conceptions of distance and proximity. They are as portals allowing communication and exchange of energy with distant places and planes of existence. For example, souls willing to reincarnate travel along these lines, and magic rituals may allow exploiting this potential, for example, by travelling through space or by communicating with divine entities. For example, Damanhurians engage in experiments in inter-dimensional time-travelling and space-travelling ('astral journeys'), sometimes through dreams.

The Damanhurian cosmogony of sacred spaces is mirrored in the built environment, most explicitly in the case of the underground temple. This huge building is invisible from the outside and is a vertical structure: the deeper it goes in the Earth, the more symbolically it permits access to secret esoteric knowledge. The temple is crowded with statues portraying the inhabitants of the community sculpted by the inhabitants themselves: every statue is supposed to be a sort of 'double' of the inhabitant symbolically living within the temple's holy space. The temple has secret passages, fake doors, unreadable symbols and other mystical elements as well as artworks (stained-glass windows, frescoes and mosaics) reminiscent of Byzantine, Egyptian and Greek models and also of Art Nouveau and Art Deco. It has become one of the Valley's most important (and expensive) touristic attractions; it can be visited almost every day, and is widely advertised through the Damanhur website.

> […] with its halls, labyrinths, secret and hidden doors and mosaics, it is certainly a tourist attractor. […] The temple is a book carved in the mountain, which at some point opened to the world. (Interview, 15 May 2017)

As a second example, Damanhurian spirituality supports ideas of harmony with nature through the production of 'sacralized' natures. Damanhurians are not strictly environmentalists (although they are sensitive to the topic), nor do they pursue an ideology of equality with different forms of life (many of them eat meat). Rather, they produce a 'fourth nature'[10] which is socio-spiritual in meaning. Damanhurians live close to woods, and according to interviews, many of them emphasize the importance of being 'far from the city' and 'in close contact with nature' for their spiritual research and community life.

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[10] We use the adjective 'fourth' in a provocative and qualitative way in order to distinguish it from the second and the third natures discussed by Marxian scholars; see, for example, Smith (1984).

I can't think of myself living in the city. I have done that in the past, but I am not interested in that anymore. I really need to be in close contact with nature (…) and the woods. (Interview, 31 March 2016)

Moreover, Damanhurians usually make 'pacts' with the spirits of the woods, which are often imagined as sorts of faeries and elves. The sacralized nature is hence produced by a number of magic rites. By choosing the name of an animal and a vegetal species, the inhabitants re-subjectify themselves as beings belonging to other 'races'. In their view, animal and vegetal races are characterized by collective heritages, that is, sorts of collective minds accumulating experiences and knowledge. By choosing to 'belong' to other races, people may access these heritages, in a way echoing totemic rites which allow 'possession' of the inner qualities of animals.

In tune with synchronic lines, specific natural elements allow the possibility to enter into contact with distant energies and entities. This may be the case of trees, particularly a number of specific holy trees. The locals hug these trees in order to establish contact with natural forces, but there are a number of other possibilities for contact, including stones (Image 12.2) and the mobilization of specific geometric shapes and colours in specific landscapes (Image 12.3). In addition, many holy elements, spaces and passages are kept secret from the world outside, including us. Damanhurians have re-labelled local spaces in ways that reflect the sacralization of space by playing with ideas of distance, relationship (it is possible to 'talk to' and to 'listen to the music' of vegetables, thanks to local technologies) and synchronicity (toponymies such as 'door of the Sun', 'door to everywhere' and 'door to the Earth' may be mentioned), but the actual geography of this imaginary world is difficult to map. Suffice it to say that different divinities and spirits are believed to inhabit different geographical places, and hence different pieces of land may be 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' for specific spiritual, magical and ritual practices. As anticipated, it has been impossible to develop maps; in their words, it could be 'dangerous' and could threaten the inhabitants' 'security'.

Image 12.2 - *Stones as portals*

(Photo: Authors, 2016)

Image 12.3 - *Colours, pyramids and woods as elements of a therapeutic landscape*

(Photo: Authors, 2016)

The issue of security may offer some further elements of reflection on the production of space. The idea often appears in interviews that a great deal of effort has been made to make Damanhur 'secure'. For instance, the issue of 'healthy food' seems to be quite relevant to environmental security, as does fear of 'environmental catastrophe' (cf. Swyngedouw, 2013). According to an unverified story we heard during fieldwork, in the year of the Chernobyl disaster (1986), the Damanhur community contacted NASA in order to prepare a missile for launching to abandon Earth. Another example is that during fieldwork a new high-tech house was proudly presented, emphasizing an efficient heating and cooling system based on internal air-recycling technology—the presentation concluded with a comment on the fact that, in case of a new Chernobyl-style nuclear disaster, the system would allow long-term safety.

A last example concerns private property, particularly fear of thieves. To protect their wealth, the community established an internal surveillance system based on forms of community watching. But most meaningfully, private property is gated with symbolic fences and boundaries imbued with magic through specific rites. In other words, magical rites, practices and artefacts are supposed to 'discourage' criminal acts and ultimately to protect houses. The theological rationale is that reality may be moulded through beliefs and images, that is, a ritual building a narrative and an 'order of discourse' on protection may ultimately produce the reality of security. But security from what? The menace is generally conceptualized as an external, exogenous force, that is, the 'bad people'. In postmodern times characterized by widespread feelings of risk, insecurity and lack of protection (cf. Bauman, 1999), Damanhur seems to offer coordinates for building an idea of local security through 'separation' from society from many perspectives, including the economy (ideas of self-reliance, the attempt to develop a local currency), the environmental (self-reliance, autonomy), the political (entering the local growth machine, for example, joining the administration of local municipalities) and the spiritual (magic, rituals and invisible geographies).

Concluding Remarks

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the Damanhur case study allows us to observe processes of production of space driven by so-called alternative spiritualities. More specifically, we have discussed how the Damanhurian spirituality implies specific understandings of space and geography, ultimately nurturing a complex spatial-spiritual imaginary characterized by discontinuity and non-linearity. Damanhurian spirituality informs the way space and geography are conceived, as well as the mundane production of space within the community. On the material level, the most evident fact is the construction of a highly symbolic landscape made up of heterogeneous symbols and

meanings: this spiritual landscape is partly visible (statues, circles of stones, buildings) and partly invisible (the underground temples are the main example), as Damanhur is ultimately an esoteric community characterized by secrecy and unavailable geographical knowledge. At the same time, the spiritual space is made up of mundane and magical practices: Damanhur is literally crowded with magical beliefs, rites, presences and objects which live side by side with human beings in inhabitants' everyday lives, ultimately shaping an 'alternative' society which seems to be driven by 'alternative' values, goals and rationales. Of course, the aim of this chapter is not to develop any moral analysis, and, in this sense, we do not argue that Damanhur is a strictly positive model for urban life, a meaningful utopia or an effective experiment challenging neoliberalism, commodification and other hegemonic forces which seem to dominate 'ordinary' urban spaces under capitalism. Most probably, Damanhur is a partial and situated experience, and the forces of neoliberalism and commodification surely take form within this spiritual community, too. At the same time, it is possible to think of Damanhur as a variant in the category of 'autonomous spaces'. As discussed, Damanhur did not develop as an explicitly anti-capitalist site, but according to our interviews, many supporters consider this spiritual community an 'island' of spiritual difference and resistance. It is also interesting to notice that this 'island' has ambiguous relations with urban imaginaries. On the one hand, the name itself Damanhur means 'city of light', confirming the key role of urban imaginaries in utopian thinking (see, e.g. Pinder, 2005). On the other hand, inhabitants tend to romanticize the idea of being 'non-urban', implicitly considering the urban as a space deprived of spiritualities and nature. In this sense, Damanhur is surely a 'diverse' urban space: it is arguably invested by planetary urbanization (cf. Brenner & Schmid, 2015), but it is also perceived and narrated as a 'non-urban' settlement, confirming the centrality of spatial thinking in Damanhur's spiritualities.

Finally, this study demonstrates the powerful interconnections between spirituality, space and geographical knowledge: it is difficult to envisage Damanhur without thinking of a particular situated landscape made up of material and immaterial elements and it is impossible to understand the complex doctrine underlying local spiritual beliefs without assuming specific understandings of space and time. In this sense, this chapter challenges the spirituality-spatiality dichotomy, as the two spheres are imbricated.

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