

Chapter for Moving Sites

BETWEEN DANCE AND ARCHITECTURE

Dr Rachel Sara in collaboration with Alice Sara

Word count: 5169

This chapter draws from a 12 year collaboration between an architecture educator and theorist, and dance educator and artist. The collaboration resulted in a series of workshops, which use the processes of dance to develop an understanding that is located somewhere between the two disciplines. This chapter draws from architectural theory in conjunction with references to the collaborative work in order to theorize a relationship between architecture and dance. The workshop structure is presented and critically reflected upon as part of the output of the collaboration. The chapter concludes by locating architecture and dance, which are normally separated by distinct ontologies, as part of the same continuum. The collaboration is presented as an attempt to develop a new trans-ontologyⁱ that is between architecture and dance.

Architecture is not just about walls

Architecture is defined by the actions it witnesses as much as by the enclosure of its walls. Murder in the Street differs from Murder in the Cathedral in the same way as love in the street differs from the Street of Love. Radically.

(Bernard Tschumi (1978), *Advertisements for Architecture*),

The events and activities of everyday life construct architecture as much as the architect-as-designer herself; Architecture is constructed by its use. From the everyday activities of walking, talking, flirting and sleeping, to the deliberate critical and political occupation of space, to the carnivalesque activities of illegal raves, street parties and, zombie walks, *use* constructs the

function, atmosphere and meaning of a place. When you change the function, atmosphere and meaning of a place then you construct architecture.

This relationship between the physical space and the actions that the space witnesses has been variously explored and interpreted by both architects and theorists who highlight the potential meaning (as well as the architectural potential) inherent in such a union. The 20th century Dutch architect and writer Aldo van Eyck, whose work explored humanism in architecture, stated that he was not interested in space and time, but instead in place and event. This signified a shift in focus: from understanding buildings as a merely physical objects, which might age with time (independent of human activity); to understanding buildings as emotionally and personally significant places which are determined as much by the events that go on in them, as by the demarcation of their walls. Fundamentally, we might see this as a shift in focus from the building (object) to the person (subject), from the (hard) walls to the (sentient) body and perhaps even from the designer to the user.

In the 1970's, Architect, writer and educator Bernard Tschumi explored another similar duality, shifting the space/time versus place/event dialectic to explore the relationship between concept and event. In an essay entitled 'architecture and transgression', Tschumi investigates the notion that architecture inhabits an impossible location in which it transgresses the inevitable paradox of architecture as both a product of the mind – a dematerialized and conceptual undertaking – and 'architecture as the sensual experience of space and as a spatial praxis' (1996:66). He argues that since both these elements do co-exist within built architectural projects, there is an inherent paradox, due to the 'impossibility of simultaneously questioning the nature of space and, at the same time, making or experiencing a real space' (1996:67). For Tschumi, this implies that since the paradoxical oppositions are denied, architecture is inherently transgressive, meaning that architecture necessarily breaks or goes beyond accepted limits; in this case by contradicting a perceived paradox.ⁱⁱ

More recently, this notion of architecture as occurring at the intersection between both place and event, concept and experience, was explored through the example of the Occupy movement by Architect, educator and urban theorist Louis Rice. He argued that the Occupy events were fundamentally architectural events, declaring that 'architecture is the occupation of space' (Rice 2013:75). Through this example, Rice proposes that the encampments demonstrate an 'inaesthetic'ⁱⁱⁱ form of architecture and urbanism – in which 'the visual is immaterial, the processual qualities and relational assemblages are essential' (2013:74). Through this essay, Rice implies that we might see physical spaces and the material world as having agency (or the ability to act upon others). In other words the shift from building (object) to person (subject) is completed, as both are treated as equals – place and event are elided as one. This is not to suggest that; 'architectural design has a direct and determinate effect on the way people behave. [This] implies a one-way process in which the physical environment is the independent and human behaviour the dependent variable' (Broady 1966:174). Instead the argument is that we should understand both the building and the people, the walls and the bodies, as mutually constitutive.

Dance is not just about event

The shift in focus from architecture as being concerned with the building, to the intersection between place and event therefore begins to imply a commonality with dance, as an activity that is concerned with constructing event and place. It sets up an understanding of architecture that has more in common with dance than might immediately be obvious and begins to suggest that there might be a value in exploring the domains of architecture and dance in conjunction. What can dance bring to architecture? Why should architecture be of any interest to dancers? What understanding might be gained by investigating dance through the lens of architecture and vice versa?

Reading these architectural critiques through the lens of dance, it is possible to apply much of the thinking to this other event-oriented discipline. Equally to architecture, we may see dance as both able to exist as an experiential spatial practice (product of the senses) and simultaneously explore

concepts that critique the nature of space (product of the mind). Therefore according to Tschumi's logic, dance could also be understood as inherently transgressive. It is also possible to understand dance (as event) as influenced (or acted upon) by the place in which it is both created, rehearsed and performed. Simultaneously the place is also affected (or acted upon) by the dance (event) that goes on within it. This implies another elision; perhaps we should understand the building and the people, the walls and the bodies, the architecture and the dance as mutually constitutive.

Architecture and Dance are about more than the frozen object

Simultaneously, contemporary architects are regularly criticized for focusing too much on the object (usually a building), and in particular the visual – the glossy image of the object that is pornographically reprinted in architectural journals and websites. 'Instead of being a situational bodily encounter, architecture has become an art of the printed image fixed by the hurried eyes of the camera' (Pallasma 2005:30). Buildings that capture media attention are typically those which photograph well, and have a clear, visual concept. So buildings like London's Gherkin (or 30 St Mary Axe, by Foster and Partners), the Bilbao Guggenheim (Museum of Contemporary Art by Frank Gehry) and the Shard, London (a skyscraper by Renzo Piano) are 'known' and recognized by many without the perceived need to actually visit and experience the buildings first hand.

While attention to the visual is obviously necessary, relying primarily on sight has its limitations. 'More than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sees at a distance and maintains a distance' (Irigaray, 1998:74). An over-emphasis on the eye denies the rest of the body: it denies the role of the user of the building in constructing its meaning; it denies the physical experiential understanding of a place and denies the potential for the building to change over time. We might therefore understand this kind of architecture as prioritizing concept, space and time (embodied in the object), over meaning, place and event (embodied in the subject).

There are parallel arguments in the discipline of dance. Whether explicitly or implicitly, dance is always an exploration of the body's relationship with space, but it is also always an exploration of the body's relationship with time. Dance explores this relationship of space and time to the body, and this body is a living body. Every breath taken, every beat of the heart, is a passing of time, every gesture made and progression through space is a relationship with time. However dance is marketed through the fixed image of the bold, dramatic movement – usually this is a leap or a particular tableau, photographed against a neutral (often black) background.^{iv} Gravity, time, and location are suspended, the body is a representation of the 'ideal' body, and the sounds, the smells and the vibrations of the live event are inevitably lost. This representation of dance can be seen as prioritizing that which is embodied in the object (in this case the dance/r/s), over that which is embodied in the subject (in this case the constructed meaning, the influence of the place and the event).

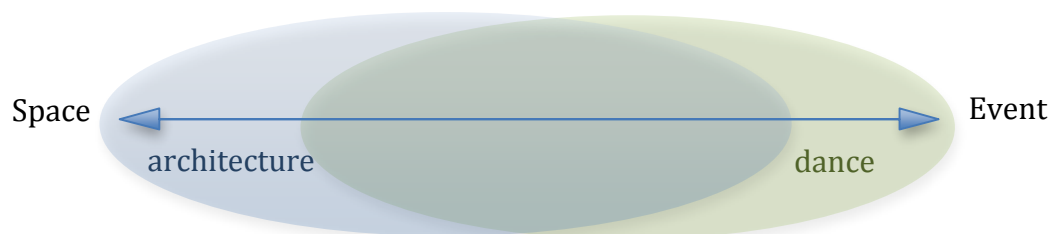
This objectification of both architecture and dance is damaging for both disciplines, since the root of all our understanding comes from our personal experiences. In architecture our understanding of spaces always refers back to those places that we have experience most: 'our room, our house, our street, our village, our town, our landscape' (Zumthor 2006:65). We experience architecture with our whole being – the feeling of light on our skin, the isolation of being in a large space alone, the texture of the floor surface, the warmth of the space and the smell of new timber, the muffled sound of a small, carpeted space, or the echoes in a large hard surfaced room. The way in which these phenomenological^v, close-up experiences combine is fundamental to the way that we feel about architecture and our relationship with it. Both the affect of event, or use, on architecture and the affect of architecture on its use, underline that a piece of architecture is never a finished or fixed object, but rather a relational, experiential, and contingent construct.

How might the relationship between architecture and dance be understood?

Conceiving of architecture in this way emphasizes the body in relation to architecture. If it is possible to construct architecture by affecting the function, atmosphere and meaning of a place through the way in which it is inhabited, through the events and activities that take place in it, and perhaps even through the way in which that space is experienced, then might we see dance as a form of architectural production? If this is the case, then what is the difference between architecture and dance? Is there a distinction between either discipline?

The easy answer is that of course architects are different to dancers – defining the role of each is simpler than defining the discipline. Both disciplines have accepted and distinct ontologies associated with distinct ways of knowing and approaches to practice. Architecture practice normatively involves drawing, whereas dance practice involves the use of the body. Each discipline has its own set of theories and ways of being. Architects might typically be seen to produce the spaces that dancers might dance in (often heavily inspired by the kinds of activities that they predict might go in that space) - dancers create events/activities within those spaces (often heavily inspired by the space for which they are creating those events).

However if, as Rice implies in relation to the Occupy movement, both place and event are considered as mutually constitutive then we begin to see each discipline less as distinct, distinguishable activities, and more as locations along a continuum between space and event:



Architecture can be seen as more typically concerned with the space end of the continuum, and dance more typically concerned at the event end of the continuum. However as the continuum also implies, there are architects who are much more concerned with the creation of event, or in other words what the architecture does, than the space itself, just as there are dancers who are

more concerned with the creation and reinterpretation of space, than the event itself. Dance can be seen as acting across most locations along the continuum from site independent work at the 'event' end of the continuum, to site specific work, right through to work that is intended to shape and act upon the space in which it is performed/created.

What might happen between architecture and dance?

The combination of understanding space and event as mutually constitutive, and the perceived problems with contemporary architecture's overemphasis on the visual highlights the opportunities for understanding, investigating and creating spaces through means outside of the norms of architectural production. Whereas traditionally we may have characterized architecture as being about the creation of fixed spaces, designed in a studio at a distance from site and experience; dance suggests another way. In contrast to the experience of designing a building through drawing (mediated by either pen or computer), dance allows a 'whole body' experiential exploration and understanding of spaces and can prompt us to think through experience how space affects us, and how we can affect space.

In a parallel rejection of the separation between space and event, the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1945), rejected the separation between mind and body. He explored the idea of existentialism, locating the body at the centre of the experiential world. Through this argument, Merleau-Ponty rejects Descartes's dualism in which the body and the mind are recognized as separate entities (the body is merely mechanical and the mind the intelligent element that enables the activity of the body). Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues that the mind and the body are unified; our bodies have their own intelligence.

This phenomenological argument implies a need to investigate and understand architecture through bodily experience. Returning to the critique of architecture as overly reliant on the image, this bias might be seen as a corollary of the emphasis of the role of the drawing (produced through either pencil or computer) on architectural education and production. Architectural theorist and educator Federica Goffi writes:

‘In today’s practice of architecture, the problem of ‘drawing’ is the problem of ‘building’, both are seen as final ends...Prior to this contemporary understanding, the building was a perpetually unfinished entity, capable of being worked and reworked including through the media of drawing.’ (Goffi 2007:88)

Once the drawing is the output, the experiential qualities of space are easily forgotten; the way in which the building weathers and ages, how it might change it’s meaning with every continually changing use; the subjective interpretations that each visitor to the building brings. All are easily neglected, just as the fixed image of the marketing shot forgets the subjective meaning constructed through the live event.

Exploring somewhere between architecture and dance, between space and event begins to allow a different set of values to inform both disciplines. Sliding along the continuum between the two poles of space and event, acknowledges the attempt to investigate somewhere between the concept and the sensual; between mind and body and between the object and the subject. It implies not solely a shift in the focus of attention, but also a shift in the means of investigation, from the output to the process, from the object to the method.

Dance Workshops for Architects/Architecture workshops for dancers

In a series of workshops for architecture students and academics, we exploited this quality of being between architecture and dance. Designed through a collaboration between architecture educator and theorist Rachel Sara, and dance artist and educator Alice Sara, as well as additional collaborations with dance artists and educators Clare Baker and Melanie Clarke, the workshops have been held over the past 12 years in both dance spaces and architecture spaces. Various located at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London, as well as at the architecture design studios at Sheffield University, Plymouth University and the University of the

West of England, and as a part of an international architecture conference,^{vi} the workshops aimed to function between space and event, mind and body, object and subject, concept and experience.

The workshops were developed through discussion and aimed to heighten participants' focus on the experiential qualities of space; to prompt participants to affect the qualities of space solely with their bodies; and to allow participants to communicate an understanding of a space to others using movement. Inspired by the work of social critic Walter Benjamin, the workshops allowed a creative engagement with the 'objective' world of architecture: 'The process was seen as a way of allowing participants to read themselves into architecture and feel themselves reflected in architecture, acknowledging the endowment of architectural space with a subjective psychological quality (Nigianni, 2007:256). The intention was not to teach the architecture students and academics to dance – or even to attempt to investigate architecture through dance, but rather to explicitly work between architecture and dance, between space and event. Although designed for architecture students, the workshop could as easily be delivered to dancers, without great need for adaptation, as our exploration of space is a shared concern. With this intention, the workshops loosely exploit the practice of dance, to investigate ideas from both disciplines.

Entitled 'Body Stories in a Peopled Space'^{vii}, the workshops were structured over two hour period, which took participants on a journey from experiencing space, to affecting space, through to creating space using their bodies. The workshops followed the format:

- 1 Warm-up games (whole group, exercises 1)
- 2 Observing and experience space through the body (individual, exercise 2)
- 3 Use of the body to alter the environment (whole group, exercises 3-4)
- 4 Defining space and creating narrative (in small groups, exercise 5)
- 5 Communicating conceptual ideas through the body (in small groups)

6 Reflections (whole group)

1 Warm-up games

The warm-up games were developed to help the participants feel at ease in their engagement with an unfamiliar way of working. After some playful ice-breaking activities (playing zip-zap-boing¹ and passing around a movement to go with our names), we began by engaging deeply with the space, asking participants to be very aware of their own bodies and how their bodies inhabit the space. This prompts participants to understand space as it is experienced; in other words to see the space as a place with a meaning that is constructed through the relationship between the building (object) and the person (subject), between concept and experience, and between the walls and the body.

[Img 1011 here]

Exercise 1

We start walking through the space inhabiting our bodies inhabiting
the space.

Noticing our pathway's through space. Are we walking in a straight line or are we
arcing through the space? Noticing other people in the space and the pathways they are
making.

Seeing the patterns that emerge in the space.

Now we can introduce time, explore pace. How fast/slow are we moving?

¹ See for example <http://dramagames.info/2011/07/03/zip-zap-boing/> accessed 18.12.13

What if we stop?

What impact does it have on the space? On the energy in the room?

We explore proximity to others, how near/far are we to other people? As we do this groups form and disband.

What about different levels?

How does it feel to move up high while others move

close to the floor?

What if you lie still?

Notice the whole space. Notice the people and how you and they alter your experience of the space.

2 Observing and experience space through the body

This stage of the workshop aimed to give participants a deep experiential understanding of the space in which they were working. It emphasized going beyond the image of the space, to really understand a space through the body. The exercises were designed to enable the participants to take their time, to get up close to the building and to reflect on the feelings that the place invokes.

[Image 1147 here]

Exercise 3

Find a space, be in that space in whatever position is comfortable and use all your senses to experience it:

Touch - explore the texture and temperature with your hands as well as the whole body.

Where would you lick? What might you stroke? Where would you like to lean or sit?

Sound – listen to the sounds outside the room, inside the room and inside yourself, how do they affect each other?

Smell – Observe the smells and how they make you feel.

Sight – Close your eyes - See the light source through your eyelids, then open your eyes and observe what can be seen of your space and its view

Write a record of your experience.

Find a partner – take them to your space, tell them exactly where you were, whether you were standing/sitting/lying, which way you were facing, and swap over, then experience their space

Write a record of this experience.

Read your notes and share your experiences with your partner

You were both in the same room, but may have had very different experiences.

What was similar about your experiences?

What was different?

3 Use of the body to alter the environment (whole group)

The third workshop stage set a series of quick tasks, which ask participants to use solely their bodies to alter the environment. This stage introduced participants to the ways in which they, even without any expertise in dance, were able to dramatically change the nature of a place solely by changing the way in which it is used. The workshops were also designed to demonstrate to participants that they already have the tools with which to communicate via the ways in which they inhabit the space, and to help them to develop techniques to develop movement material for the next exercises.

[laban image here]

Exercise 4

Without talking, take a moment to:

Link 2 points in the room

Make a space within a space

Make a dark space in the room

Change the light of the space

Emphasize the height

Change the energy

Change the sound

Make the space unfriendly

Make it softer

Divide the space – A few times

Exercise 5

Divide into 2 groups. Each group should make an entrance for the other group.

Enact or perform these entrances

How is outside defined?

How do you know when you are 'in'?

What creates entrance?

4 Defining space and creating narrative (in small groups)

The fourth workshop stage was longer, and allowed participants to develop material to create a short narrative piece (or event) that explored ideas of space and place. It prompted architecture participants to move outside of their own ontological positions – not asking them to perform as dancers, but to inhabit a trans-ontological position in which they are neither operating as dancers, nor as architects, but instead are operating somewhere between. They were tasked with holding onto their architectural knowledge; how to create sequences of spaces, atmospheres and concept,

whilst also being prompted to create and communicate using the language and constituents of dance.

[Img 1239 (colour adjusted) here]

Exercise 6

Form a group of around 5.

Create a sensorial journey for the rest of us to experience, an evolving environment- transform our experience of the space

Are you inside or outside the Space? Do you cross over it's border?

How close are you to others within the group?

How close are you to the audience?

Consider the levels in space – sit/kneel/stand?

Think about energy, motion, directions in space

Consider the timing/duration/rhythm of actions and events

Are you making a series of spaces or a single space?

5 Communicating conceptual ideas through the body

The fifth stage of the workshop was a performance. This prompted architecture-disciplined participants to communicate their ideas in ways that are quite different to their usual practice. Where architecture designs are usually presented as fixed and finished images, the performance prompted participants to consider the relationship between the place and the body over time. It also prompted an understanding of the audience, who might be considered as analogous to the users of a building. Again, the performance reinforced the trans-ontological position. Participants are reminded that they are not expected to 'perform' solely as dancers, but somehow to use the techniques and constituents of dance as a way of creating meaning at the intersection between space and event.

6 Reflections

This final stage allowed all the participants to reflect on what they had learned from the process and to discuss what understanding might be gained by investigating architecture through the practice of dance. What emerged from the discussions was that the workshop brought to the fore often forgotten elements of architecture: sensory experience; emotion and meaning; the inter-relationship between the user and the space; between multiple users of space; between time and contingency. Each inter-relationship is continually affected by, as well as having an affect upon, the other.

Dance artist Alice Sara reflects:

What became increasingly apparent to me in co-facilitating these sessions, and seeing how architects work, was this disparity in how the two disciplines consider time.

Experiencing a space, altering a space with our bodies, unavoidably creates a conversation between time and space. While a dancer's response to the creative tasks would likely involve some element of development through time, the architecture students (and academics) have tended towards the tableau or a static formation of

bodies in space. As we developed these workshops we increasingly included preparatory tasks and ways of introducing tasks that encouraged the consideration of time. For example we used to have as a final task, “Explore a space, and as a group find a way of representing/altering this space with the body”, and have since developed the final task to ask participants to “create a sensorial journey for the rest of us to experience, an evolving environment”. We found this enabled the architecture students to allow their exploration of space to have a relationship with time. (Sara: 2013)

This broadened perceptions of the range of ways of communicating ideas, and the value of understanding architecture as a sequence of experiences, rather than a single object. The workshops construct an understanding that there is no fixed ‘space’ to be designed and represented, but rather ‘an ongoing interaction between ‘object’ and ‘subject’, ‘architecture’ and ‘user’, space and event.

The workshops gave architecture students a deeper, empathetic and more holistic understanding of space: as rooted in human experience rather than solely the formal arrangement or ordering of space. This might be seen through what social critic Walter Benjamin describes as a process of ‘mimesis’, which he uses in the psychoanalytic sense of a creative empathising with the object. For Benjamin, the ability to identify with and assimilate to the environment refers to a constructive reinterpretation that goes beyond mere imitation and becomes a creative act in itself’ (Nigianni 2007:256). Through this creatively empathetic understanding the workshops begin to explicate the relationship between architecture and dance and suggest not only that through inhabiting an ontological position somewhere between architecture and dance we can understand architecture, but that in this liminal place we might also be able to create architecture.

The knowledge that is constructed through the collaboration further develops the relationship between space and event, so that we might begin to see them not as two poles, at opposite ends of the same continuum, but rather as an ongoing interaction. Practicing between architecture and dance allows a creative empathizing that in itself resists separations: between mind and body,

object and subject, fixed and contingent, concept and sensory, space and event. In doing so it implies a new way of inhabiting both domains – that of space and event, dance and architecture as continuously affecting and reinterpreting the other. This model is analogous to notions presented through the Möbius strip.

[Image 6413 (cropped) here]

A Möbius strip is a surface that can easily be created by cutting a ribbon (for example a strip of paper), twisting it once and gluing together the ends. It has one continuous surface; when you run your finger along this surface you can continuously travel from what at first glance looks like an 'inner' to the 'outer' surface without crossing over an 'edge'. Using this as a diagram, we can see that space and event at first reading seem to be on different sides of the ribbon. However a closer investigation shows that if you follow the ribbon around, you find that both domains are infinitely connected.

Conclusions

Working between architecture and dance suggests a radical redefinition of the relationship between the two domains. It generates a knowledge and even a way of being that is itself 'between'; a knowledge that is between mind and body, space and event, object and subject. This is explored here as a trans-ontology, which implies not only a way of thinking that is across the two domains, but also implies an altered way of being. In turn this suggests the need to develop new approaches, by making connections across and between domains and dissolving the rigidly drawn boundaries delineating each. The collaboration is itself a form of resistance to disciplinary boundaries, in the way that it interrupts the binary categorizations of each.

The collaboration forms a critical practice, in which the normative models of each domain are actively questioned, challenged, reformulated and rethought. Through investigating in this way we are able to question what both disciplines could, or even should be. Perhaps in working in

this trans-ontological way we can allow ourselves a deeper and more nuanced exploration of space that we may not usually take the time for, and in working with our bodies, a conversation can be developed between space and time; between place and event; between architecture and dance.

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ⁱ ‘Trans’ is used to mean through, across or beyond, but also implies changing thoroughly, and ‘ontology’ is used to denote a theory of being, that is strongly linked to ‘epistemology’ or theory of knowing.

ⁱⁱ Jonathan Mosley and Rachel Sara, *Architecture and Transgression: An Interview with Bernard Tschumi* in Mosley and Sara (eds), 2013, *The Architecture of Transgression AD*, Wiley: London, pp 32-37

ⁱⁱⁱ I.e. Not concerned with beauty

^{iv} Ironically the dramatic forms captured in dance photography are often described as ‘architectural’ – which very much conforms to an understanding of both architecture and dancer as object.

^v Prof David Seamon defines phenomenology in *Phenomenology, Place, Environment and Architecture: a review of the literature*, as *‘the exploration and description of phenomena, where phenomena refers to things or experiences as human beings experience them. Any object, event, situation or experience that a person can see, hear, touch, smell, taste, feel, intuit, know, understand or live through is a legitimate topic for phenomenological understanding.’* Available at http://www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/articles/2000_phenomenology_review.htm, accessed 17.12.13

^{vi} *Transgression*, The 10th International Conference of the Architectural Humanities Research Association (AHRA), University of the West of England, Bristol, 21-23 November 2013

^{vii} This workshop title was generated through collaboration with Clare Baker.