[Creative Practices for Planning Urban Mobility](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14649357.2023.2230046%22%20%5Cl%20%22sa0007)

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How can new forms of interdisciplinarity between city-making and dance-making help engender care for bodies, both human and non-human, in public spaces? What kind of publicness emerges through design frameworks shaped by performances and encounters in the urban design process? These questions frame Theatrum Mundi’s[[1]](#footnote-1) (TM), engagement in European Architecture programme: Future Architecture Platform in 2021, and their theme of Landscape of Care. TM’s engagement was through ‘Movement Forum’ project[[2]](#footnote-2) , a series of interdisciplinary workshops, bringing together creative practitioners[[3]](#footnote-3) (selected by TM based on their ethos of practice), architects and urbanists to raise an embodied awareness of complex challenges of urban mobility.

The project was a provocation to disciplinary design of urban movement, to the set of standard elements and spaces in mobility design, which, although innovative and technologically enhanced, focus too narrowly on major transformation of transport infrastructures. Urban planning and design frameworks contribute to these challenges by misconceiving micro-mobility in cities, underestimating the diversity of bodies and assuming movement and presence in public spaces as everyone’s spatial right (Goh, Loukaitou-Sideris, and Mukhija, 2022; Kern, 2021). Lack of multiscalar understanding of (im)mobility, as Sheller (2018) argues, result in bodies being unequally governed, adapting themselves to the norms of the built environment and socio-cultural behavioural patterns.

In what follows, I offer my own account of Movement Forum, based on my experiences of being both a participant and a co-organiser of the workshops. The contribution of spatial practices, namely choreography and movement, to urban (im)mobility is explored where participants respond to the/a [verbal or written] brief, dwell the site and encounter others. The socio-political concerns around public spaces and mobility of bodies framed the brief of each workshop. In London, the focus on *Power and Gender* was a reflection on recent violence against women in public spaces and in Paris, *Wildness and Queer Counter-Publics* was a reflection on the City’s recent commitment to rewilding efforts. The paper focuses on such embodied responses through unfolding the contributions of Fem\_arc (a Berlin-based collective of architects and artists working on projects from an intersectional feminist angle), and Habibitch (Algerian-born Paris-based, non-binary, queer, femme, dancer, choreographer and activist). Within the Theatrum Mundi’s ‘Movement Forum’, these creative methodologies were applied with 21 diverse bodies of participants in each lab.

**Dancing the Brief**

*fem\_arc* collective started the London lab by sharing the *Wheel of Power/Privilege* by Sylvia Duckwort, a visual representation on how power, privilege and social identities intersect. It initiated a conversation among participants about positioning ourselves in public space and understanding marginalised group in the society deeper. The purpose of the activity soon became tangible as the participants left the building, steered through F\_WALKS, an hour-long audiowalk which includes a series of field recordings and testimonies. The brief changed to a living experience; by walking and listening to provocative stories, problems such as marginalisations and exclusions in public space were not distanced or abstract anymore. In between the stories, there were a series of prompts, inviting and guiding the listener to experience the space, to respond or confront the urban norms of being *legitimate* in public space - for example standing still, longer than one may usually feel comfortable. This experience varied for each participant in relation to our privileges and identities as well as the place, the location and urban surroundings, for example near a playground or in a corner of a crowded street. *What is legitimate in public space* prompted aseries of embodied responses that we all had experienced. Regardless of our differences, our movement became a new but familiar, common language to discuss the experience of the limitations and possibilities in public space, although the dancers were more equipped with vocabularies and could explain such language as the relationship between the body and the space.

Within the French context, where individual bodies, particularly Black Muslim, were distinguishable, ruled and excluded, how is the concept of Wildness and Queer Counter-Publics understood? Can we seek solidarities, as Bingham-Hall (2022) asks, between marginalised forms of human and non-human life, and ways of which they create space through transgressing urban regulations imposed on them? Under the French law, the authorities can ban certain activities - such as the forced unveiling of girls under 18 as an act of ‘liberating’ for the secularisation of the public sphere. Additionally, they can impose French identities on Algerian communities, for instance, and restrict their cultural practices in public (Hadj Fredj, 2021; Mechaï, 2021).

Algerian/French performer Habibitch reminded the participants of the historical French Colonial rules, which were ironically justified as political claims of ‘égalité’. Through their practice, Habibitch intended to decolonise the dancefloor, as it was historically done through Waacking. House dance, with specific expressions, emerged from the empowerment of gay communities (mostly Black Lesbians) in LA in the 1970s; to claim the dancefloor was an act of resistance, creating a safe space for bodies that were invisible.

The dance is therefore a radical cultural practice through which these communities reclaim their rights. Dance and movement are performing the ability to self-identify, to reject social categories, making the space your own, claiming it as a response to privileges that benefit some and oppresses others. This was Habibitch’s response to those whose desires are prioritised in public spaces. Waacking is not just a dance; like any movement, it is a political statement, so the space in which it takes place is a political scene. Bodies in such spaces are not only accepted but as Habibitch (2022) describes, they are ‘valorised, celebrated’ (p73).

**Dwelling the Place**

The site for choreographic practices is not only a physical territory or simply a public space where movements take place; it is a place where its life and history unfold through bodies, movement and encounters, and consequently publicness emerges. For instance, while listening to F\_WALKS, public space was experienced as a place of attunement, a space in which the right to be alone, to be still and to be different was recognised and practiced in public. Through such spatial practices the space became a medium, *a place* (Cresswell, 2014) that brings together things, bodies, and histories; a threshold to weave between listening/knowing and moving/acting upon.

Place and its location, specifically the Bois de Vincennes woods known for Paris’s Colonial Exposition in 1907 and 1931, was the main provocation behind designing the brief and activities for Habibitch: ‘I need to exorcise the woods of their evils, for the sake of my ancestors’. The woods, nonetheless did not have the same meaning for other participants; for some it was a space to claim for a party, transformed temporarily through the act of dancing, and then left in its original form (Bingham-Hall, 2022). Dwelling is a spatio-temporal practice of permission, of agency and being.

**Encountering With Care**

While navigating the city, one's individual journey can be characterized by spontaneity and improvisation: encountering others; but effective encounters often arise due to specific circumstances. The coexistence of multiple bodies and entities within a space is not accidental; encounters are “co-incidental” as Ahmed (2006, p.39) states, suggesting a happening that brings different things together; things that can happen at the same time, which affect how we encounter each other, and that encounter will shape other things. This was experienced in both workshops. In the Waaking workshop, bodies, unknown, and with different identities and capabilities shared the environment together. *We* (as participants) changed to a set of movement responses, constructed through self-expressions, gentle and respectful touches of space and bodies, curiously experimenting the spatial affordances, spaces between bodies, proximities, and making the next move. The navigation process was carefully led to other bodies, constantly checking if encounters are agreed by both bodies, which is a common practice among dance practitioners. Such encounters left traces in the space and in our memories which we used as a new language to communicate about mobility in the city.

*‘what if, alongside sustainability, engineering, and heritage consultants, embodied movement specialists join design teams as consultants at an early stage?*’[[4]](#endnote-1)

This momentary comment emerged from the conversation at the end of London lab.

Responding to the brief, choreography foregrounds differentiated capacities to affect and be affected across places, times and individuals. It can be a “natural place where philosophy, politics around bodies, ideas around justice and equity meet the physical world” (Cosgrave, 2021, p.28). Planning and design for mobility infrastructure, through the lens of choreography and movement practitioners are not prescriptive, abstract, tied with specific disciplinary knowledge, and/or decided by White and male-dominated industry; These sets of embodied practices offer a shared de-disciplinary language to critically explore challenging environments and enact our desired (im)mobility in the city (for such creative explorations see Barry et al., 2022). The responses are emancipatory spatial practices through which vocabularies change to a common gestural language and form a knowledge of the built environment that is experienced individually, constructed collectively, and not reduced to a single and dominant narrative.

Movement practitioners also remind us of the importance of improvisation in movement activities, emphasizing the balance between adhering to established norms and the ability to adapt and personalise movements. . The built environment for performers, as the dancer and scholar Adesola Akinleye (2021) states, is a web to respond to in and out of the rules; like a score, a set of potentials to follow, a set of rhythms between different patterns of use, of harmonies and dissonances between diverse bodies. Movements can also be radical, a disruptive response to a specific site or a brief, as claiming tactics, individual reappropriation of space, or collective modes of coping.

Designing movements suggest a form of communication beyond limited abstract concepts and simplistic understandings of otherness. Without a comprehensive understanding of the sensorial experiences of diverse bodies, planning and design cannot effectively make decisions that cater to their needs. Through collaboration between urban design and choreography, there is a field emerging that calls for more caring, ethical, sensorial and perhaps de-disciplinary urbanism. Movement offers a language of communication in public space that help us to address complex urban questions such as mobility justice.

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1. Theatrum Mundi is a European centre for research and experimentation in the culture of cities with a mis­sion to help to expand the crafts of city-making through collaboration with the arts. See <https://theatrum-mundi.org/> for more details. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Movement Forum included three labs in London, Paris and Lisbon, with one lead choreographer and one lead architecture collective. this article reflects on the experiences of the London and Paris labs. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)