

CHOREOGRAPHIC PRACTICES

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EDITORIAL

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DANCING URBANISMS

The theme of this special edition on 'Dancing Urbanisms' seems timely in an era in which over fifty percent of the world's populations now live in cities and urban environments (Chen et al. 2018:4). Increasingly, people across the globe are gravitating to urban areas, adopting urbanized modes of living that cause us to reexamine the composition of daily life. Such dramatic shifts in population distribution from rural to urban locales invoke equally significant shifts in social, economic, political and ecological systems and infrastructures as growing numbers compete for access to space, opportunities and resources. Modes and methods through which site dance practice might explore, reflect and expose the complexities of urban living from micro- (personal and local) to macro- (infrastructural and global) scales inform these articles and artist pages.

 Serendipitously, this special edition has emerged alongside the final stages of co-writing our current book *(Re)positioning site dance: Local acts, global perspectives* (Barbour, Hunter & Kloetzel, Intellect 2019) in which we

explore how site-based choreographic practice can refer beyond the local and embodied to engage with global and political agendas. This collection contributes to the emergent discourses and reflects a breadth of practice that illustrates and articulates processes of re-mapping and re-positioning dance in the cityscape.

Collectively, the contributions in 'Dancing Urbanisms' explore and question how site-based choreographic practices in urban locations extend understandings of embodied experiences in and relationships to site and place. Choreographic practices are broadly considered in this edition as practices of bodies moving in space and time, and as methods through which theoretical and conceptual understandings may be generated. Such choreographic practices may occur in diverse or even vast urban sites and environments over long durations or within highly defined events or places; they may offer opportunities for engaging with and celebrating extant structures or happenings, or for subverting and challenging dominant social and localized practices. These practices may be variously characterized as site-specific, ambulatory, site-adaptive and place-responsive, and may reveal perspectives of artists, local residents, tourists or newcomers via diverse methodologies.

Themes of navigating and wayfaring play out through some of the contributions, as authors – for example, Victoria Hunter, Kate Lawrence, Alessandro Carboni, and Beth Cassani – consider how site-based dance practice offers a mobile form through which we might navigate our way through the complexities of urban environments and experiences. In particular, many contributors note how site dance practice can be a lens through which we might attend to the particularities of site and place as opposed to being swept along by the ever-mobile nature of 24-hour cityscapes that promote productivity and consumerism over wandering, lingering and taking in the view.

Methods of mapping sites, places and events are articulated in detail in these contributions. Alessandro Carboni's article, for example, articulates a range of strategies arising from his process of Embodied Mapping. In this process, in which individuals capture and respond to the features of particular sites, participants discover ways to anchor experiential engagement within the built environment, physically marking and noting urban events. Kate Lawrence's discussion of vertical dance challenges us to raise our gaze and attend to the often neglected space above us; such a perspective, she asserts, may allow us to invert and reconsider hierarchical power relations embedded in practices of urban design, regulation and governance. Leslie Satin's article takes us to the contested space of Tel Aviv, Israel and, through autobiography and travelogue modes of writing, addresses themes of conflict, located-ness and identity. Focusing on the aftermath of urban conflict, Beatrice Jarvis offers an account of working with individuals living in Berlin, examining how ambulatory flows produced by walking, conversing and dancing through the city may release memorial flows and embodied recollections in such environments. Analyzing a range of site-based dances, Victoria Hunter extends urban cartography as a form of vernacular mapping and reflects on the potential for site dance encounters to engage spectators in playful exchanges with familiar (and unfamiliar)

urban terrains. In this discussion, Hunter identifies how habitual, repetitive, movement patterns can be employed as a form of mapping in relation to activist agendas, supporting alternative, potentially disruptive, ways of being in urban sites and places.

From these reflections, planned, designed, constructed and seemingly static urban features emerge as elements that can dramatically shape and inform our encounters with (and subjective constructions of) cityscapes. Indeed, architecture – mass-produced, artistically-renowned, or makeshift – has always enjoyed a significant impact on dance in urban areas. This is apparent in urban site-based dance where, equally, celebrated structures like the Guggenheim Museum in New York (for Meredith Monk's *Juice* [1969]) or less fêted buildings or urban features, such as alleyways or car parks (for Boris Charmatz's *Danse de Nuit*, London [2017]), may act as partners for the creative dance act. In these processes, urban architecture and design may offer merely a backdrop or a disinterested container for an urban choreographic practice, or it may figure more profoundly as a dialogic partner, key to the effective realization of a process or performance (Kloetzel 2019).

In this special issue, contributors explore these architectural and design layers, noting how the built environment figures prominently in their work. Certainly, this is evident in both Carboni's and Lawrence's articles that call attention to built structures as, respectively, a spur for a creative response or a vertical surface upon which to perform. From another angle, Vanessa Grasse shares how her mobile, improvisatory practice, *Mesh*, directly draws from architectural attributes of the environment to offer a base for collective action. In Grasse's work, *Mesh*, dancing bodies often take their cues from surroundings structures – arches, bridges, gates, pathways, and the like – to inspire similar bodily configurations. Yet, Grasse's intentions within the work move much further than mimicry, with the cooperative creation of such structures – by professional dancers, community members, and passers-by alike – serving to underscore human interdependence. Thus, *Mesh* offers an experiment through which to reconsider relationality among urban dwellers. In partnership with Grasse's article, Beth Cassani – a dancer-participant in *Mesh* – offers an autoethnographic perspective on *Mesh*. In her contribution, she examines the practice as one that, while inspired by architectural features of urban environments, can also promote social interaction and engagement among an urban citizenry. Scrutinizing the mobile, participatory and site-adaptive nature of *Mesh*, Cassani argues that participant interactions within the practice – interactions that disrupt both the social norms and patterns of urban spaces – serve to challenge neoliberal precepts and homogenization of the cityscape.

Other contributions also consider the socio-political possibilities that emerge from movement practices in urban spaces. Karen Barbour, for example, sees backyard gardens as sites of potential activist intervention, places where issues of production, consumption and sustainability may be examined through site-based dance practice. In this discussion, she considers the impact of socio-cultural changes on residents' access to and use of urban spaces for growing food, particularly in the context of increasing population and pressure on land. Melanie Kloetzel, too, perceives the potential

for socio-political commentary stemming from urban site dance practices. In her case, she explores a particular site-adaptive process and performance, *Rooms*, as an example of how such practices may stimulate constructive discourse around pressing geo-political issues. Noting the need to hone site-based methodologies to such ends, she contends that placing inclusive or participatory dance practices in urban areas intended for public assembly can be a critical means to address the seismic and systemic issues of our time. As such authors collectively assert, dance in urban settings has the potential to explore the regulations and conventions of urban spaces, disrupting norms and opening spaces of resistance against dominant neoliberal agendas.

Running through and across this collection of articles and artist pages are a number of modes or approaches to writing that articulate or allude to the complex nature of such site-based choreographic practices. The range of registers or 'voices' presented (poetic, reflexive, analytical and descriptive) makes evident the multifaceted nature of site-based dance; as well, these diverse registers reflect the many agendas, conditions, constraints and regulatory/organizational parameters navigated by those who engage with this particular form of dance practice. Through this rich palette of perspectives, we, as co-editors and curators of this collection, hope that this special issue provokes new considerations of 'dancing urbanisms' as a critical practice of the twenty-first century.

References

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