

MARKING PRESENCE

Authors: Belinda Mitchell, Kate Baker, Suna Imre.
belinda.mitchell@port.ac.uk

Abstract

Much has been written about the visual understanding of space through perspectival constructs, with emphasis given to an assumed static observer. This paper aims to find new innovative ways of understanding our dynamic bodily relationship with our surroundings, by including a sensory investigation of every-day experiences of our encounters with buildings, which are often overlooked. The paper will explore the body in relationship to the built environment, and the proprioception of bodies and buildings. It will be based on our current research, investigating ways of mapping and notating bodies and their responses to architectural space. It will look at what types of notation are appropriate, and how these findings can be used to affect and enhance the design and building process. The aim is to develop scores through an investigation of various forms of notation that emphasises the sensory, and our experiential perception and response to space. The paper will look at a number of graphic representations including: dance notation, language, architectural plans, maps, sketches, drawings and diagrams. In order to investigate the possibilities for considering the relationship between body and building, an exchange will be used between the disciplines of architecture, interior design and dance by considering the body moving through a series of spaces, and the act of mark-making as a method of recording sensory response.

The results of the exchange offer new ways to describe and represent space that take place through an evolving process, drawing in the materiality of the building, its tactility, its surface qualities, and felt language. Insights have been gained into how we perceive space offering new ways to describe and develop design interventions informed by the sensory. The project develops a broader set of linguistic possibilities to engage with the built environment and a grammar of notation, with a choreographic score that describes and activates the moving body in the built environment.

Theme

Drawing and Notation. Drawing as a sometimes intuitive other times driven by convention means of mapping appearance and movement, with special reference to innovative methods of notation.

Introduction

The paper discusses an investigation into the perception of architectural space through a multi-disciplinary approach, to provide insights into how we use and understand the built environment. An architect deals with the formation of space, its volumes, shape and the impact on the user, an interior designer deals with how we occupy, think about and organise space. A dancer engages with space from the location of her body, connecting inside with outside. For our research we have made use of the interconnections of these three disciplines.

Our methodology is illustrated in this paper by discussing a performative event "Marking Presence" that took place at Winchester's Theatre Royal, a building that contains a very rich and varied series of spaces. A small group of us, an architect, a choreographer, dancers and an interior designer, worked together to develop a score through an inter-disciplinary exchange. We set out to explore how we map space from the ontology of our disciplinary experience. It builds on a practice-based paper that investigated the relationship between an archaeologist, visual artist and interior designer, (a Drawing Place event,¹) and a wider research project the 'Sensory Experience of Space'. The project engages with experimental drawing and methods of notation that engage the body to question how we understand and

¹ Drawing Place is an arts organisation based in Winchester UK

notate space. Drawing here is understood in its broadest sense, to draw in, to collect, to draw together, drawing as a state of becoming and as an embodied action.

Architectural drawing and language

'Language is at the core of making, using and understanding buildings' (Forty 2000, p12). In order to design a building an architect will use the language of drawing, words and images to convey meaning and to describe the final product. A modernist vocabulary privileged five main words, 'space', 'form', 'design', 'structure' and 'order'. 'Words that were lost in the modernist project were compositional terms as 'repose', 'strength', and 'massiveness', streets became 'the street', walls 'the walls', (Forty 2000, p22). Architectural language was abstracted away from the experience of space and the plan and section have become the main tools of communication. In their book 'Chambers for a Memory Palace' Donlyn Lyndon and Charles Moore make a case for considering an architecture of nameable parts as ephemeral sensations, so that all these parts can work together to affect how we *live* in places and what they bring to mind. *'The nouns in themselves are of little significance; it is the way they act to structure our experiences that affects us.The elements are ones that we have found to be present in architecture throughout the world; the actions describe how these elements shape the experiences that a place affords'* (Lyndon and Moore 1994).

We experience space visually, but also through our bodily understanding, how we hear, touch, smell and taste the space. Buildings cannot be experienced all at once, but are understood in sequence over time. As Forty (2000, p39) points out *'When people read a 'plan' they project their bodily experiences into that space in order to understand it, they are performing a language like act of interpretation of the image.'* Images create a mental picturing of the space being planned. The plan acts as a space of imagination for architects designers and clients to project a future possibility. The plan also acts as an organisational tool, to arrange and rearrange spatial relationships and as a site for imagining. It creates a reality of it's own. Language, text, drawing and how we talk about the space determines the way we imagine the space.

Within our project, "Marking Presence" a route through the spaces was notated by through diagrams drawn over the plans of the building. These drawings acted as location points for the performers, and talk about the building in a linear diagrammatic form. The drawing is informational. It acts to locate the action within the space. But the drawing gives little information about the materiality of the space, the tactile qualities, the rhythm and pace and what might be encountered. It only maps and marks the journey through directional arrows, locating where to go and to move onto with a suggestion of artworks that might be encountered. There is nothing to tell us how the space might be used or inhabited rather than organised as a route to travel through. Within the architectural design process the data we refer to on how people occupy space comes from a lineage of anthropometric data, such as Neuffert and the New Metric Handbook. Even with Le Corbusier, 'modular man' (Corbusier 1954) is distilled into a clearly defined set of fixed data. This information documents and records the body in relationship to millimetres and centimetres, not taking into account the stretch of an arm the angle of the leg or the lean of the body against a wall. 'Design terminology ... cannot describe the intentional emotive interplay between humans, objects, and environments', (Caan 2011, p37). The project sets out to rectify this position.

The Project

We investigated how the body interacts with space and the language of representing space. To do this we drew on the language of score, the score of the building and the score for the dancers together with the plan of the building as a set of actions. The body is seen from a phenomenological perspective, a non-dualistic approach that takes into account the whole body described as *the 'lived body'*. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) The work took place in the context of a larger event 'Map, Plot, Plunder', a Drawing Place event which took its visitors on a multi-sensory voyage through the Theatre Royal to explore the backstage spaces and to stand on the stage itself. The event set out to disrupt the familiar perception of a theatre with audience and actors on opposite sides of the proscenium arch, through creating multiple performances and experiences throughout the building. One clear perspective was replaced by many

focuses of attention that involved a number of interlocking and interlacing experiences. The audience encountered experimental dance, film, sound and lighting installations, music, and live writing, all woven into an orchestra of sounds, words, lines, connections, and conversations. Visitors became part of a spatial continuum as they participated in a continuing 'conversation', changing installations and dances by their presence, interacting directly with writers to influence the work they wrote throughout the evening. (10 days Across the City, 2011) Visitors interacted and interpreted the work, weaving narratives through their own histories and routes. These conversations acted as open-ended set of activities, of drawing and redrawing, which Catherine de Zegher, has described in her essay 'On Line, Drawing through the twentieth Century' as, '*drawing is characterized by a line that is always unfolding and becoming.*'

The event took place over a 6 hour period. We mapped and notated 170 visitors who took part in it. A journey was created that mapped, marked and engaged people with the space and the dancers who were placed along the route. Three main points were located to mark moments of presence within a cacophony of sounds, visual spectacles, and interactions. These location points acted as '*mental constructs*' that help us to position ourselves and make alliance with things, buildings, or spaces'. They enabled the participants to create their own paths between these points '*allowing the mind to do the connecting, and the path allowing the feet to wander, explore, make choices, and put things in sequence.*' (Lyndon and Moore 1994, p10.)

At different points of the journey around the central atrium people were mapped and marked on the building itself at various points: the line of their legs, angle of their arms the line of their heads. Layered drawings were created that marked the presence of the audience within the space. The audience was also asked to think about the spaces they were travelling through: the act of crossing a threshold, the change of pace as you walk through a high open space such as an atrium compared with the more cramped condition of circulation spaces and smaller rooms, the difference between a large space atrium full of people and a crowded lift.

The journey was designed to take people through the building to various locations where artworks were installed, but also to perceive the building as a choreographed experience. People were encouraged to touch the fabric of the building and to feel the effects of encounter with others and being on one's own, of movement and stasis. The dancers changed the way we would normally experience space, questioning the visualization of space. Both dance and architecture act as spatial texts and structure ways of seeing the world (Valerie 2009, p184), based on the Cartesian principle of seeing things from a particular perspective or viewpoint, locating the viewer as separate from the world. The work set out to disrupt this single viewpoint and to blur the boundaries between inside and out, changing the way we view space in order to perceive it differently, in a non linear discontinuous way. A collection of marks built up over time creating a memory of all the people that had taken part. The work very clearly annotated difference through the angles and shapes of the bodies that materialised, at odds with the 'modular man' and the anthropometric body.

Methodology

Score

We worked with a score, a simple set of instructions for the dancers to work with and improvise to within the space. This score was placed in areas of the building such as the stairs a handrail, a wall. The audience then negotiated their way through space, weaving in and out of the dancers, making 'drawings' on the walls, the walls acting as invitations to lean, openings to look through, places to close your eyes and chairs and ledges to sit on.

Movement/ dance improvisation in this situation was an important method of working as the raw physicality of the building is absorbed and negotiated through the body. The dancers can respond spontaneously by pushing against, rolling across and leaning into in order to acquire an embodied understanding of the building both in the present moment but also in future explorations by accessing their muscle memory. The dancers were trained in dance

improvisation and within this context it was specifically their experience of contact improvisation that was of interest to us. Contact improvisation is a dance technique where points of physical contact, usually between two people provide the starting point for an exploration in movement improvisation. Trust, awareness and presence are also key ingredients. For the purposes of Marking Presence, the dancers' partners became the site, and it was this very specific language created between the two that informed our investigation.

A score provided the structure for this dialogue. It was written as a simple clear set of instructions. The score built on the work of the Anna Halprin, and the RSVP Cycles (Halprin 1969) and its subsequent development in relationship to Helen Poyner and her environmental dance work. It gave the dancers an open yet supportive framework for investigating the site they were in, and allowed for a spontaneous response that took into account other inhabitants of the site. This very particular fusion of movement approaches gave us a unique language for responding to site, as the dancers inner world (which encompasses imagination, impulses/emotions etc) are expressed physically and interwoven with the material outer world in spontaneous composition.

Dance Notation

How does dance notation compare to architectural language and drawing? How can dance notation impact on the architectural process? As early as the 15th Century text and drawing have been used to notate movement. These scores provide rich visual material in terms of drawing, movement and rhythm as they engage with a more sensory form of 'writing', but recently, scores have tended to rely on either drawing or text. Extending notation through text and drawing for our score has helped us with our understanding the feel of spaces and our responses. However, some contemporary scores as Laban notation provide a structure into the enquiry of movement within space. These diagrams provide an enquiry into the emotional experiences that are concealed within human motion. Kathi Palitz, dancer and Alec Finlay, writer, in 'Labanotation, the Archie Gemmill goal' discuss notational systems as being a bridge between '*word and movement, as it tries to transform movement into something you can write down, read, analyse and reconstruct.... in fact, notation itself is an organization of symbols for body parts put together into movement and phrases, like letters into words and words into sentences.*' (Finlay, 2002).

Dance notation works with the body at its centre, it records and notates the movement of the body in space, '*it records on paper the elements of movement – parts of body, basic actions, timing... the basic movements of flexion, rotation, as well as the positions of the feet, walking, jumping and turning, and a simple arm sequence*'. (Hutchinson 1998, pxi) The range and patterns of movement in space can be developed, '*by varying the timing, by being specific about the type and aim of the pathways you make, where you are facing in the room and in which area of the room you are dancing; by selecting a particular direction, number, level and size of steps made on a chosen pathway.*' (Hutchinson 1998, pxi). The language of dance provides a set of infinite variables, a playful language that explores a variety of movement and gestures that can be examined in the context of restricted space that a building creates.

Experimental notations of body, space and building.

In architectural design the body is usually defined through static diagrams, through perspectival constructs. Shashi Caan (2011) states '*design requires more than just measuring the body in its relevant parts; as for any building activity, it must start from the inside and work outwards to incorporate all the qualities of experience.*' Dance notation has the potential to offer an alternative way of connecting the body to the built environment through its vocabulary and inscription of movement.

Our work has been influenced by the by the notational scores has been applied by Bernard Tschumi as part of the design process in his architecture, seeking to represent space through means that go beyond a fixed drawing. '*He represents space through a tripartite mode, annotating events, movements and space in order to introduce the order of experience of time – moments, intervals, sequences.*' (Tschumi, 1990). These notations open up

possibilities for representing space whilst annotating events that take place within them. They take the form of diagrams, photographic fragments, and orthogonal drawings, creating a number of viewpoints to be read simultaneously. The drawings also attempt to explore the relation of bodily and social movement in space. (Forty, 2000) Tschumi describes notation as *'An extension of the drawn conventions of choreography, this notation attempts to eliminate the preconceived meaning given to particular actions in order to concentrate on their spatial effects: the movements of bodies in space. Rather than merely indicating directional arrows...'* (Tschumi, 1990). In his drawings he uses film as an analogy, *'cinema was the first to produce discontinuity – a segmented world in which each fragment maintains its own independence, thereby permitting a multiplicity of combinations.'* (Tschumi, 1990).

Caan (2011) discusses how the brain gathers information through both visual and sensory means and it is from this that we formulate our reality. 'Current scientific research recognizes that the brain does not always perceive things as they actually are'. (Caan, 2011). In order to interpret space the brain takes information in, in fragments and does not read a single static image. Tschumi's transcripts use sequences of movement diagrams, photographs, and orthogonal drawings to describe an event, which is closer to how the brain interprets raw stimuli. Finlay has also been an important influence. His performance of the Gemmill Goal and his discussion with the Palitz demonstrates the creative possibilities to be gained by using notation, film and photography. His drawings alongside Tschumi's work open up multi-dimensional ways of working within the project to document movement in space, drawing events through orthogonal means, mapping and marking the body in relationship to a site or building.

Conclusion

Marking Presence has been a useful vehicle for exploring new ways of thinking about space and design that develop from the experience of the body in space, enabling us to develop a vocabulary that extends beyond the architectural, to include the body, and how it engages with our environment. The aim is to provide a new language to the description of space, the action of doing, and to gain another way of thinking into and experiencing and imagining space.

Our bodies are in constant engagement with the built environment. The project worked on engaging with our bodily presence and to actively involve the body the space and fabric of the building. Movement/dance and contact improvisation enable a physical engagement with the space through bodily investigation and research. The research opens up a different set of language, drawing and text to describe a space coming from within, creating poetic languages to work with, although, the actual moment to moment response of the dancer, viewer or reader remain hidden.

Being able to use a mixed explorative palette similar to Tschumi and Finlay we have started to explore new representations of space drawing on the language of movement through dance, and using sequences of drawings, text, photographs, and notations can describe space from different viewpoints giving a more multi-dimensional understanding. It offers new representational practices and engages with *'a framework which acknowledges both the physical or interior dimension of subjectivity and the surface corporeal exposures of the subject to social inscription and training.'* (Grosz, 1994)

Bibliography

- Bould. T. and Mitchell. B., 2012. (in press) Interior Archaeologies: View Points, Knots and Entanglements. Interior Educators International Conference.
- Briginshaw, V., 2009. Dance, Space and Subjectivity. Palgrave Macmillan
- Butler, C. and de Zegher, C., ed. 2010. On Line, Drawing through the twentieth Century. The Museum of Modern Art.
- Caan, S., 2011. Rethinking Design and Interiors. Laurence King Publishing Ltd
- drawing place, 2011. 10 days Across the City. Press release, 20 October 2011. Available on the drawing place

website at www.drawingplace.co.uk. [Accessed November 2011].

Finlay, A., 2002. Labanotation the Archie Gemmill goal. pocketbooks

Forty, A., 2000. Words and Buildings, A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture. Thames and Hudson

Halprin, L., 1969. The Rsvp Cycles : Creative Processes in the Human Environment

Poynor, H., and Worth, L., 2004. Anna Halprin. Francis Taylor

Hutchinson, A.,1998. Choreo-graphics: A Comparison of Dance Notation from the Fifteenth Century to the present. Routledge

Grosz, E.,1994. Volatile Bodies, Toward a Corporeal Feminism. Indiana University Press

Lyndon. D., & Moore, C.,1994. Chambers of a Memory Palace, MIT Press

Otero-Pailos, J., 2010. Architecture's Historical Turn. University of Minnesota

Merleau-Ponty, M., 1962. The Phenomenology of Perception. Routledge

Tschumi, B.,1996. Architecture and Disjunction. MIT Press

Tschumi, B.,1990. Questions of Space. AA Publications