

Shifting Perceptions, Moving Urban Landscapes

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Shifting Landscapes (2007) was a short site-specific event created collaboratively with approximately twenty students as part of a unit in Community Dance I taught at Deakin University last year. The piece evolved in response to the social and architectural aspects of a busy area of the University Campus, one that could be considered a site of transit, used by many but observed fleetingly by people in passing.

I initially chose this area of the campus for the student performance because of the various sight lines and levels it offered. In discussing the site's architecture the students and I agreed that it suggested locomotion through its many paths and elevated walkways, stairs and the limited seating or rest areas. The dance material evolved through tasks based on locomotion and journeys, which were undertaken both in the studio and on site. Some of these tasks used features of the site as a starting point, others were based on metaphors and common sayings related to travel such as 'we're on a road to nowhere', and the material devised was then adapted to the architecture of the place. For example a sequence based on the notion of traveling in crowded situations such as on a peak-hour train, was altered spatially to fit along one of the pathways.

Building repertoires

I hoped that the various ways in which dancers in *Shifting Landscapes*, both through pedestrian activities and more abstract movement sequences, used the site, would give viewers access to multiple ways bodies might use and reconstruct this space. In creating for a chosen site, artists often consider the various sets of rules of a place, which are in dialogue with each other. We can define 'the repertoire' of place, or script of what we know can be done in a place. The repertoire is a set of possibilities that are forged from cultural,

social, personal and historical influences (Wilkie, 2002). Site specific performance can be seen as a way of proliferating this repertoire of behaviour. The activities of performers might be described as 'tactics' as defined by De Certeau (1984), or 'user' operations within a space that produce surprise, variety and creativity, as distinct from 'strategies' that are enacted by the controllers of spaces to maintain power; for example the strategies of the architects of this site who have designed high walls to ensure people don't walk through a particular area between buildings. 'Tactics' reveal the creativity of groups and individuals who are caught in the regimes of discipline that Foucault (1977) argues are an inherent part of modern societies. Such disciplinary mechanisms include the surveillance and monitoring of buildings by grounds staff, security, and faculty as well as the self-monitoring we enact in response to social and cultural rules and expectations. In *Shifting Landscapes* the performers used some of the 'proper' or everyday repertoire of this site for university students, such as walking, leaning and waiting for classes, as well as repertoire more familiar to a dance context, for example lifts and counter balances with others. This layering of dance activities and images on a site already transcribed with meaning is similar to what Nick Kaye (2000) describes as a writing over of sites in performance, creating a palimpsest. Rather than consider the performers' activities as a distinctly separate layer of meaning added to the site, the layers of meanings that already exist in the site become co-creative with that which is introduced (Turner, 2004, p. 382). In the 'space of play' created within a site specific work there need not be a distinction between what is of the site and what is added to it by performers, as elements can both define and contrast one another, and overlap or blur. For instance in *Shifting Landscapes* dancers' variations of sitting and leaning and moving along the ledges of the site involved activities that were pedestrian but followed dance timing conventions of unison and canon. This blurring of dance movement repertoire and of the repertoire of pedestrian site users and dancers is pertinent in that it affirms the potential of site specific work to uncover information about bodies, sites and cultural practice and as a way to negotiate thresholds such as those between process and product, and performer and spectator (Houston and Nanni, 2006).

Composition

The *Shifting Landscapes* performance drew my attention to how the architecture of this site might compose action. For example, the performers both reinforced the suggested order of the site's architecture through their directions of travel, which often followed the paths and walkways, but also defied this order by rolling and climbing across and over concrete barriers and traversing garden walls. My interest in how architecture helps to compose our movement has expanded as a result of this project and rather than create work which predominantly uses dance norms and conventions, my interests have turned to how we might distil the pedestrian values of the site as choreographic stimulus for studio exploration. This forms the central enquiry of my current doctoral studies in dance and has led to me formulating a series of 'mapping' experiments, which I have recently started on campus.

In my research to date I have realised just how many different aspects of movement could be studied and thus have decided to select only a few of these elements for close scrutiny. For the purposes of my current project I have chosen to focus on 'rhythm' and 'intensity'. The element of rhythm is interesting to record and examine as it enfolds the elements of weight and time. Intensity or affect is transient, and like rhythm, connects us to an awareness of duration. It seems important to consider both the weight of the body and the element of time in light of architects' and planners' historical focus on the factual, logical and fixed aspects of urban environments. While sculptural works and architecture do explore weight to some extent, Louppe (1997) holds that dance is quite unique in that our apprehension of space first begins with our experience of our body's supports and our alignment in relation to gravity. In this way dance can offer information to architects and non-dancers about how the body's weight responds to architecture over time.

In order to gain further access to the vocabulary and levels of use of the architecture I have recently engaged dancers in a series of 'mapping' experiments of the campus. Prior to undertaking various journeys on foot through the University campus, the dancers have been introduced to a musical code that I devised to enable them to attune to and describe their experiences of rhythm and intensity. This code draws on the work of various analysts who concern themselves with the relationships between body and architecture, including Yudell (1977). The latter's writing discusses bodily rhythms and how 'the ebbs and flows, weights, rhythms and surges that emanate from us are inherent in the body and its movements' as we negotiate the built environment (1977, p. 61). There are often many rhythms at play simultaneously; for example, in walking a rhythmic march we also have the rhythms of breath, our heart beat and alignment changes occurring at once. We might also be taking in the visual rhythm of patterns within a surrounding building and imagine 'scaling, leaping and occupying its surfaces and interstices' (1977, p. 61). Textures we see and feel can similarly give rise to different rhythms and pace. For these reasons the dancers will be able to map their various experiences and document how these might simultaneously be at play with one another, like a counterpoint structure in a musical composition.

Martin further elucidates the relationship between objects, human movement and weight through the idea of 'inner mimicry' (1965, p. 49). He holds that in perceiving an object or building we transfer the experience of the object into our own body; we become it, so to speak, through 'inner mimicry'. For example, when we perceive something spread out horizontally on the ground we sense it to be lying down, as opposed to a very tall object that appears to stand upright. While physical evidence of these responses is barely noticeable, Martin asserts that psychologists have noted changes in subjects' muscular tension as they perceive different objects (1965, p. 49). Simultaneous to the process of 'inner mimicry', we are also able to identify with a structure by sensing the potential movement it holds within it. Martin terms this our 'motor response' (1965, p. 48). An object or building might be clearly well balanced or not, rough or smooth, curved or angular and describing these qualities we are 'actually describing the motor patterns which

are set up in us by contact with such objects' (1965, p. 46). Similar to Yudell's argument, Martin proposes that we are able to perceive these qualities only because we have previous movement experiences of being on or off balance, sensing different weights and densities, feeling various textures, sharp edges and smooth surfaces. Comments from the dancers in the early stages of this study have revealed interesting insights about the ways in which the dimensions and textural qualities of buildings are experienced. For example, a number of dancers have described weighted, sustained and strong qualities in relation to the larger campus buildings when experienced in close proximity. They invest these structures with their own body histories.

Perceiving and distilling the dynamic performance of place by drawing from dance practice, vision and knowledge seems to reveal the fluidity and flux of a site as it is lived, an aspect of place historically negated by traditional architectural practices (Massey, 1996). There is now a strong interest amongst architects in developing ways to document or notate the performative production of space; for example the space syntax method developed by Bill Hillier.

Perspectives from architecture

Hillier (1984) examines the way the layout of pathways and open spaces can informally and automatically draw people together or keep them at a distance. He discusses the importance of convex and axial spaces in determining our movement; convex spaces being those that are considerable in terms of width and breadth, and typically become local places where people gather. In contrast he defines axial spaces as long narrow pathways through an area, which involve direct human transit in a straight line. He investigates pathways to determine whether they are integrated or segregated and thus how they can facilitate or restrict movement and events such as informal interpersonal encounters, co-awareness and street activity (Seamon, 2004, p. 134). While the space syntax approach is generally used for commercial purposes, it is my aim to see how the documenting or notating of architecturally composed movement might offer new insights and choreographic stimulus for dance.

Recognising the way the traditional maps and plans of architects neglect the traces of movement, academic Paul Carter (1996) also searches for alternative ways in which we might create representations of places that capture the rhythmic performance of everyday life. He advocates thinking figuratively, or a new way of conceptualising and drawing in which the value of passage is recognized. Examples of this type of representation can be found in the dot paintings of the Aboriginal people; for example, the Papunya drawings, which are both plans of a site and traces of passages. These recordings of place are not written in lines but shown through the manipulations of tracks, which utilise a range of written forms and reflect the mythical, participatory and creative aspects of place. This type of representation provides a way of drawing and thinking movement back into places and registers the relationships between bodies in motion. Carter searches for precedents of this type of rhythmic mapping in our own culture; a culture that creates buildings and cities in order to render the ground flat, linear and firm in an attempt to arrest its movement. He examines ways in

which we might attend to the irregular and asymmetrical 'lie of the land', the 'difficult' terrain of the everyday, and how this might actively create groupings of feet, breath and gesture (1996, p. 292). Carter's work offers an interesting framework for examining the rhythmic performance of everyday life.

Another writer whose analysis of rhythm and architecture has informed this study is Steer Rasmussen. He argues that all modern architecture can be divided into two architectural rhythms, one metrical and symmetrical (like a two step) and the other 'natural' and asymmetrical like the samba (Rasmussen, 1962, p. 127). It is his view that, like watching a dance, you can feel the rhythm in your own body by 'the process of recreation' of architecture. I understand this to mean that by recreating the body's passage through architecture we discover its rhythm. He cites an example in the Spanish Steps of Rome, which are structured to reflect an 18th century ceremonial dance for four couples who advance, break and reunite, and again break and reunite as the pattern of steps and platforms do. We see the 'dancing rhythm of a period of gallantry' through the architecture (1962, p. 136). Rasmussen also discusses the varied rhythms of church architecture; for example, the harmony and clarity of Renaissance churches with their use of semi-circular or regular shapes, in contrast to the more restless, uneven rhythms of Baroque churches, which lead the user on through one chamber after another. Similarly the dancers will consider asymmetrical and symmetrical rhythms as they use and perceive the campus environment.

The university campus

It seems particularly important to undertake this type of spatial investigation considering the neglect of corporeal practice historically within academic institutions. Carozzi (2005) argues that academic practices, with their focus on the spoken and written word, separate discourse from action, sensation and emotion and produce Cartesian bodies. She suggests that the physical activities of speaking and writing, and of the conference, seminar or class within academic institutions are rarely considered as bodily activities. We are subject to a specific body-training regime via academic rituals; a training that attends to what a body is saying or writing, the production and reception of verbal meanings, rather than the quality of the voice or the movement involved in academic activities. The spatial practices of the university environment can be likened to those of the monastery and the medieval European academic rituals, which grew out of them; the prioritization of discourse over action is today reinforced through the isolation of bodies in cell-like offices. The allocation of desks, one for each body, and their arrangement in the teaching space is designed to focus students towards the speaker, book, written word (Carozzi, 2005, p. 29) or computer. Bodies often remain immobile and in silence for long periods. The distance between seats discourages physical contact with others (Mehan, 1979). The temperature, smells and sounds of the outdoors, and areas for eating and recreation are generally excluded from the classroom. By examining in a more detailed way the corporeal dimensions of university life I hope to bring the 'academic body' into visibility and work with it.

Whilst acknowledging Carozzi's argument regarding the regimes of academic life, I am keen to explore the way architecture composes our movement by working with dancers within the university environment to find ways that this investigation might feed back into a specific dance enquiry, drawing out information which might be new for dance. In improvisation tasks undertaken thus far, the dancers have been particularly attuned to how their understanding of weight has developed by working with and against the structures and textures of the campus site. Thus far they have found more attention is required and greater subtlety involved in pouring weight on and off different surfaces such as glass, wood and concrete. In testing these structures against the weight and force of their bodies, as distinct from working with weight in the studio and with other bodies, they have noted increased discrimination in their ability to play with weight. Through these initial experiments dancers have also noted a gradual increase in their ability to find ledges and edges that might offer support and thus more varied ways to suspend their bodies. In hanging from structures they appeared to change their gaze from that usually adopted in the studio. They have found themselves focusing on their surroundings in close proximity and adopting skyward orientation more often. The dancers' increased awareness of the vastness of the sky above seemed to alter their pace, as they tended to linger to take in the vast dimensions above them.

Improvising on site at different times of day has also appeared to increase the dancers' awareness of how tensional states may vary according to light changes. Working outdoors in the evenings there appeared to be an increased delicacy, use of light force and bound flow and more attention directed to the ground due to the shadows created. The dim lighting seemed to influence dancers to explore areas close to them and in close proximity with others.

In these initial improvisations dancers have noted that they have been able to increase their understanding of the textures and densities surrounding them through creating sound in the site. Dancers commented that this enabled them to have a three-dimensional sense of the surroundings, it's hollows and protrusions and the spaces beyond what they could directly observe, and this increased their sense of location within a wider context. My intention is to explore how this increased articulation in relation to the surroundings might inform our movement in the studio.

The 'mapping' experiments undertaken thus far in my research have produced some interesting findings. Dancers have undertaken two journeys on foot through different areas of the campus, including indoor and outdoor areas and traversing various levels/ floors. They have used my symbolic code and imaginative writing to document their experiences of rhythm, weight and intensity. From my own analysis of these maps I have found some areas of rhythmic similarity, many revealing comments and some common employment of specific words and symbols. It seems that when the dancers have been close up to large buildings they have repeatedly used the symbol 'grave' and the word 'ominous'. A number have also used the symbol for strong force in relation to the buildings. There are a few specific places where

a distinct crescendo of intensity has occurred for a number of dancers, and this has included the lead up and entry onto a first floor bridge between two buildings. For two other dancers a prominent build in intensity occurred prior to opening the door to a large lecture theatre. This latter experience of a crescendo in intensity has been explored in the studio with the dancers playing with increasing weight and a sense of being pulled or pushed backwards as they walk in an even pace down the room.

Crescendos have also been repeatedly noted leading to and moving up the stairs or ramps in relation to the increasing light, noise and view, but simultaneously a diminuendo was experienced in relation to the shadows and the pace; the body feels heavier and slower on ascent. In contrast to this, one dancer felt her feet and sense of weight became lighter on ascent on one staircase because of the lights at foot level. The contrasting experiences of stairs have been used to produce an interesting movement texture in the studio. A brisk, light pattern of jumps and steps has been manipulated to incorporate a crescendo in weight, moving to the floor, and diminuendo in pace. Reversing this phrase, and the changes in weight and pace has also offered an interesting challenge.

The dancers commonly connected symmetrical two-step or four-four rhythms to the experience of using outdoor paths, classrooms and stairs. At the same time pathways have been noted as slow, smooth and fluently flowing for many. One dancer described her body as very heavy and slow on pathways due to the heat on the day of 'mapping'. In the studio an interesting sequence has been developed from one dancer's experience of walking in an even pace along a pathway whilst noting the irregular heavy pillars on one side and a smooth, continuous wall on the other. Dancers have experimented with having one arm perform a fluent, slow action while the other arm flicks an even and weighted rhythm thirteen-eight time signature. This has been expanded to create three other versions of a sustained body part moving against the thirteen count rhythm pulsed through the whole body.

In the dance studio I have begun to develop a practice whereby the dancers work from their written map of rhythm and intensity to define, explore and amplify various movement textures and body states. Thus far dancers have begun to explore the rhythms derived from using and perceiving pathways, stairs, lobby areas and traditional academic classrooms and lecture theatres. This studio practice aims to displace established methods and approaches in dance in order to reveal new distinctions and textures of movement. It will also elaborate new avenues for using architecture as a stimulus for dance.

In developing a way to represent the dynamic performance of place there is the potential not only to unearth new information for dance but also to provide critical tools for architectural practice. Findings might offer up a different relationship to the environment than that produced by planners and geographers, one based on a non-linearist conception of urban landscapes. The validating and recording of movement in place may open up to those who reside there a greater awareness of the lasting effects of the traces they make and leave behind.

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Biographical statement

Sela Kiek first began her practice as a dance artist in Australia before moving to the UK in 1996, where she worked with various companies and as a lecturer in Dance. She completed an MPhil in site-specific dance and continues to investigate this field in her current PhD research. Sela is a sessional lecturer at the Victorian College of the Arts and Deakin University in Melbourne.