

Placing Movement, Shaping Place

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Placing Space: Architecture, Action, Dimension was an intensive summer course offered at the University of Maryland to undergraduate and graduate students of spatial design and movement. Co-developed and co-taught by architect, Ronit Eisenbach, and choreographers, Dana Reitz (Bennington College) and Bebe Miller (Ohio State University), this three-week workshop explored dialectical relationships between architectural structure as the frame that orders and gives meaning to human movements and the ways in which human movement orders and shapes architectural space. The class offered students a rare opportunity to focus on the embodied experience of place in an inter-disciplinary culture of shared inquiry and serious play. A flexible “set” designed by Eisenbach and custom-built for the class was installed by the University of Maryland’s Clarice Smith Performing Arts (CSPAC) crew. This environment allowed students to change the size, shape, volume, and image of the space in response to and in anticipation of human gesture and motion. This set of fabric “walls” were easily manipulated in both great and small increments enabling participants to test out their physical presence, their impact on actual movement choices and the perception of the intertwining of object, space, and movement. Dimension, sense of place, and personal position were all part of this laboratory. Sponsored by the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center and the Center for Creative Research, an organization dedicated to advancing research in the arts in general and choreography specifically, the experience exposed students to an environment in which genuine curiosity, a sense of adventure, and working with uncertain outcomes was supported. Structured exercises guided an otherwise open-ended inquiry.

CHALLENGE

All too often in architectural education, teachers are seduced by the production of building proposals and plans as if they were the ultimate products of our efforts. Yet in fact, these are merely the by-products of an education rather than its goal. One could suggest instead that the goal of pedagogy is students’ development as thoughtful and able designers. Generally, design studios are conceived as a series of courses the process of which follows a repeating pattern — site analysis, *parti*, schematic design, early design development — and the outcome of which is a building design. This schema misses the opportunity to introduce students to a range of other skills valuable to the future practitioner. Recognizing this deficit, architecture educators have created a host of other experiences that enrich students’ educational experience: community design studios to develop leadership, social activism and citizenship skills; design build studios enabling direct engagement with questions of labor, economy, materiality, assembly and detailing; and study abroad programs to offer students the opportunity to experience another culture and inhabit spaces that they “know” only by sight.

One area of architectural pedagogy ripe for exploration lies in a view of architecture as an embodied experience that involves time-based events. This perspective suggests that no matter how many models, drawings, virtual structures or fly-throughs are created as part of the design process, it is impossible to understand fully the spatial and material qualities of these solutions without being in the spaces. With this in mind, *Placing Space* was designed to help architecture

students learn to appreciate and trust their bodies when designing spaces, not just to rely on abstract representations of space and material. At the same time, the experience offered students of movement the opportunity to shape the environment in which they act.

A SHARED VISION FOR INQUIRY

At an event designed to spark potential collaborations at the University of Maryland between UMD faculty and Center for Creative Research¹ (CCR) fellows, choreographer and CCR fellow Dana Reitz and architect, Ronit Eisenbach discovered that they possessed a mutual interest in exploring relations between movement, time and space directly. Each brought their own perspective — the architect interested in environments that anticipate and shape event and gesture, and the choreographer in the event and gesture that creates environment. With generous involvement from the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center along with support from the Center for Creative Research, we were able to co-develop and co-teach a new intensive summer course (*Placing Space: Architecture, Action, Dimension*). This first discussion grew into a course plan; choreographer and CCR fellow Bebe Miller then entered the conversations and we were able to design a third week with the added emphasis on image and story.

Together we wondered how we might explore this shared territory, asking:

- How might we create a research environment aimed at honing sensitivity to embodied spatial experience?
- Can we develop a physical and pedagogical environment to enable the manipulation and study of spatial, temporal and movement relationships at full scale and in real time?
- Can we design a culture of dialogue and play that would allow questions beginning with "what if" to lead the way?

Working with the image of a "catalytic incubator" to explore these questions, we set about creating a curriculum that involved designing human movement and environments together. The intent was to create fertile conditions for investigation of the relationship between environment, event and

gesture. Rather than aiming for finished, polished works by the end of the workshop class, the goal was to generate "genuine pieces of curiosity," material for continued exploration among each participant. Thirteen participants, students from five disciplines and three generations, joined us.

AN INSTALLATION WITHIN AN EXISTING SPACE

The Great Space is the heart of the School of Architecture, Planning, & Preservation. Two stories tall and lit from above by skylights, the space is surrounded by studios at the ground level and classrooms above. A walkway encircles the space allowing visitors to gaze down and view the activity below. The Great Space has no permanent furniture or structures- during the academic year it hosts, and adapts to, many activities. When models are due, students and their desks spill into this space; during thesis reviews, partitions are rearranged; upon graduation, banners, a stage and rows of seats establish a formal and ritualized place; career fairs, open houses, dinners all take place here. In the summer, with the studios empty, the space is quiet. This was the site for the summer class.

Working closely together, Dana Reitz and Eisenbach conceived of a laboratory environment and a set of props to explore the inter-relationship of architectural structure and human movement directly.

Eyehooks embedded in the concrete ceiling provided anchor points for a temporary grid of moveable steel tracks. Installed by riggers from the performing arts center, these tracks supported a series of eleven space-defining translucent fabric panels. The design allowed for spatial collapse as well as extension. The panels could be moved slowly or quickly, each panel sliding along its track. Four central panels rotated around a pivot, allowing for the creation of oblique space. Ropes attached to the panels allowed participants to move them from the ground or from the adjacent balcony. The tracks could also travel down the long axis of the space. Dimensions marked on the track's surface allowed for precise adjustments that could be repeated. High-intensity theatrical projectors installed at both ends of the space allowed a further transformation of the environment



through the projection of still and video images on the panels. A sprung wood dance floor covered by marley anchored the space.

The setting was a critical element that we sought to understand fully through our bodies. We took time to introduce ourselves to the workspace — its volume, the limitations and opportunities offered by the rigging, the materiality and luminescence of the panels. The space was considered both from the inside and the outside, from positions in which we could look at or down, or see and be within. Initial movement exercises encouraged action throughout the volume, engaging the setting in active dialogue. We sought to understand the space through our whole bodies, observing how our sense of the space shifted as we moved through it, noting the information that came to us through our eyes, ears, feet, skin and focus.

THE CURRICULUM

Our intent was to create a culture of dialogue and play, a pre-condition for creative research focused on the inter-relationship of action and space, research that in the words of choreographer, Dana Reitz, was “not necessarily saying, “I want to test “x” in order to conclude “y”. Rather, we constructed a creative situation in which the researcher sets up possibilities to observe and ask: How do you test that? How do you keep going in that direction? — a situation in which one question leads to the next in a chain of open inquiry. We created physical and pedagogical conditions that allowed the participants to use their interests to set up situations in order to experience the space and allow the event to develop. Students engaged



in a “generative research process,” as Reitz put it, similar to the iterative process of design studio, in which they learned to find aspects in their projects that didn’t quite work and use that information to formulate their next effort.³

The samples of work that follow are situated in terms of the questions they sought to explore. Together they illustrate four types of explorations that characterize student work in the course: Embodied Experience, Portability of Spatial Experience, Improvisation, and Reference.

1. EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

These preliminary exercises had three goals: first, to introduce students to the nature of “presentness” as a quality of performance and of architecture; second, the idea that our bodies are highly sensitive instruments that collect valuable information about our surroundings; and third, the notion that the “whole” includes and implicates the action, its placement and the space around it. By entering into conditions of balance and extension, students became particularly aware of their bodies’ abilities and limits and the ways in which any scenario includes the whole.

With the intent of awakening the group to a heightened sensation of active balance and tension, *Placing Space* began with an apparently simple composition assignment that first involved three black shapes on white paper, then people acting in space. Rudolf Arnheim’s classic chapter on “Balance” from his book, *Art and Visual Perception* was our starting point. Each participant was invited to bring his or her sense of equilib-



Balance and Compression

rium, tension, and energy to the task:

Balance and Tension: You are given a white 11 x 17 paper, black paper, scissors, and glue. Create three black shapes. Imagine a field filled both with tension and a sense of equilibrium. Balance the field. Maximize the tension. Destabilize the field, rectify it and energize it with your next move. Consider the effects of weight, edge, center, size, pressure and force.

Students quickly realized that the black objects had an effect beyond their perimeters and that the power of the composition resulted from the interdependence of all its elements: the objects, the spatial field and its edges. With this in mind, students developed movement modules that intensified the relationships between action, placement, space and presence.

Bodies and concrete push against one another. The bodies flatten, conforming to the harder concrete. A dance is designed to make us see again what we already know —columns work continuously to hold up the building.

Concepts of balance and instability become visceral with a six-foot long stick in hand. In this exercise, students explore their body's ability to balance, the division and delineation of space, and the ways in which their own energy might be extended to spaces beyond their reach. By extending their reach, students began to explore the shape of space and the line of action formed by their energy and implied by their movement.

2. PORTABILITY OF SPATIAL EXPERIENCE



Balance and Extension

*Yoko's Threshold*

Building on the idea that the whole included the action, its placement and the space around it, our goal in this section was to explore the memorable and transmissible characteristics of gesture and spatial experience and their intertwining. We wondered: how does an understanding of movement inform spatial design and visa versa? What effects might the phenomenological character and quality of a space might have on movement? How might one design space and movement to focus attention on particular aspects of each?

To explore these questions, some students were encouraged to begin with a movement phrase, "develop a movement phrase that is independent of a site. Now design a series of spaces for that module." Others were asked to begin with a site:

"begin with a particular spatial set-up. Inhabit this set-up with a movement module especially created for that environment," or "study a space outside of our studio. What gives that space its particular character? Watch how people move there. Consider movements that illuminate some particular aspect of that location. Transplant the found movement to the studio and situate it in a new space that captures some essential characteristic of the original place."

Yoko chose to study a tiny, tiny room just off her kitchen: it was both pantry and screen porch, threshold and closet. As she explained it, doors and screens offered a sense of extension, yet at the same time, its minute footprint lent a sense of containment. Using props from the studio and a square of light from a skylight, she recreated an environment that held for her the essential characteristics of the room. Although at times her dance carried her beyond the illuminated confines of the 'room', as the square of light slowly migrated along the floor with the path of the sun, she was careful to keep her feet placed within the threshold of the imagined room.

3. IMPROVISATION

Movement involves transformation in time. The dancers among us were used to thinking about compositions and environments that evolved, the architects less so. This group had to expand their focus to include the dimension of time. We introduced two exercises that reinforced non-verbal communication, intuition, play and a sense of compositional development in time. The first, *Silent Dialogue* (conducted with three objects and a partner), used gesture, rhythm, and choice to keep the dialogue alive. The second *People Play* had a similar structure but with people. In each

case, the next "move" required students to gauge the situation and jump in. It was interesting to note how narration, association, expectation, desire, and humor crept into the arena and kept the action going.

As in the balance exercise, an exploration that began with objects continued with people. As images flashed behind them, one person leaves the audience to become an actor. The choice of place and action is hers alone. She considers the situation and begins to raise the largest panel. Another person joins upon feeling that the moment was right. Together they roll and raise the fabric. Someone else walks through the newly created opening. The panel is dropped upon a body now caught between the two sides. Action, reaction, action, reaction, the play continued, inspiring a change, inspiring a new move, inspiring a new participant to join, until everyone in silence felt that the play was spent.

3. NARRATIVE AND REFERENCE

In the final week, choreographer, Bebe Miller joined us and our focus moved to the construction of place and narrative. By making elemental changes to the wall structures — as simple as adding visual imagery or as radical as relocating the work site — the class noted the affects of memory, association, event and time on their understanding and perception of context. Participants explored such questions as: Can spatial and temporal juxtaposition alter meaning? Are there fundamental associations or narrative fragments that can be found in certain places? Video clips and images snatched from the world beyond the studio were projected on the panels, introducing scale and reference to the vocabulary of movement, dimension and surface.



Stills from People Play



With the realization that the installation allowed for the transformation of the spatial configuration in time, the movement of people and the movement of structures began to coincide. Instead of “setting up” the space prior to a presentation, the architecture joined the choreography and became fluid, pulled and turned by people who shaped both space and human gesture in concert. The complementary movement of the people and the panels intrigued us implying a necessity of movement and a reference point without bringing in other imagery.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

A letter written by all the students in the course — performing arts, liberal arts and architecture — shows the value they placed on the integrated learning experience,

The interdisciplinary experience is transformational, collegial, open-ended and expansive; education in one of its richest forms. The play of multiple teaching methods and teaching media has pushed us into new areas of practice and understanding. We have each been engaged to the maximum of our attention and abilities at all times. Students of varied disciplines have gained new experiences of dimension and space, body and action, time and place. Through the intensity of contact this workshop has provided, we have developed a creative community, in which we have been shaped and propelled by each other’s artistic development. This experience has stimulated reflection that will continue to inform our work.

While we have looked in this essay at the value of this collaboration for architectural education, the choreographers involved had their own percep-

tives. “There were so many things to explore and investigate,” says Reitz, who often collaborates and team teaches but is new to having an architect as an artistic partner.

It wasn’t meant to answer all of the questions. It was meant to stimulate so that the students could go out and find their answers. [...] Architecture students [should] learn to appreciate and trust their bodies when designing spaces, not just rely on images. To learn to combine what looks good *and* feels good. It’s about changing the lens, going from internal to external.⁴

Reitz’s goal was for students to generate “kernels of genuine curiosity”, saying, “I look for [projects] that are transmissible, generative.” Reitz continues by saying that,

She and her professional colleagues all see enormous potential for research into movement in its broadest sense, knowing that it can be carried out, with full focus, in a variety of ways. I have always thought that the study of movement can play a serious and vital role as part of an all-encompassing research mission, and that it can play a grounding role as part of a full educational mission.

From my perspective as an architectural educator, I find myself valuing the way *Placing Space* enabled future designers of movement and of space the opportunity to work together in an environment that enabled them to experiment with and observe the intersecting elements of their practice. Participants were actively involved in all aspects of the project: in making movement and spatial choices, in witnessing, acting, recording and shaping situations. The compressed time frame pro-

moted in-depth, cross-disciplinary investigation in an intense laboratory environment. This occasion to consider “embodied” knowledge beyond each discipline’s normal routes of inquiry, language, or conventions, aimed at developing a sense of shared ground and increasing each participant’s awareness. It was a rare opportunity for students to gain access to knowledge that they may not have previously considered and explored.

ENDNOTES

1. CCR was founded in 2003 by Sam Miller of LINC (Leveraging Investments in Creativity) to support American dance. Central to this mission is the reaffirmation of the arts as valuable contributors in the creation of new knowledge. Consequently, CCR promotes situations for senior established choreographers to enter into University life in a more non-traditional manner – to initiate projects that do not necessarily reside in dance programs, to address subjects and situations not necessarily rooted or contained in dance, and to take advantage of and encourage embodied experience, knowledge, and curiosity. Three universities and eleven choreographers were the initial partners in a pilot program. University of Maryland was one of the three. This particular project was made possible with the generous support of CCR, LINC, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the University of Maryland Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. Susie Farr the Director of CSPAC and Dana Whitco of CCR were instrumental in making this experience a reality.
2. Photo Credits: Jackie Croussillat (fig. 1a, 2b, & 5), Yoko Feinman (fig. 1b), Mercedes Afshar (fig. 2a), Deborah Bauer (fig. 3) Tzveta Kassabova (fig. 4).
3. Paraphrased from a series of conversations with Dana Reitz during and after the workshop, June 2006.
4. Bailey, M. A., 2006. Moving Boundaries. *Dance/USA*. 22, (1): 23-27.