

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2025)

PERFORMANCE & SPACE II. PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2024 CONFERENCE



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University of the Peloponnese

2025

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doi: [10.12681/ps2023.8384](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.8384)

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MEDITERRANEAN SPACING

Those We Carry with Us Carry Us

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Abstract

July 2024. It is high summer on a beach in the eastern Peloponnese of mainland Greece, where twenty fully-clothed artists – performers, architects, landscapers and theatre-makers – stand next to white plastic chairs lining the shore, before unexpectedly taking them into the sea while locals are enjoying the last sunrays of the day. In this moment, site-responsive performance merges with everyday life, spontaneously assembling all those on the beach to communally witness the ensuing sunset. Such ‘taking place’ is an event of ‘Mediterranean Spacing’ formulated in a workshop for the *Performing Space* conference. Through action research, participants explored regional understandings of how communities assemble in order to debunk long-held assumptions on sites for cultural expression. It builds on notions of *Performance Space* and *Spatial Performativity*, to outline a theory of *Performative Spacing* as an active and activating means of shaping and experiencing events and environments within and beyond theatre architecture. This deliberately undermines architecture’s traditional role as a fixed, durable object designed to order space and those who inhabit it. Because spatiotemporal paradigms – i.e., how space performs and performance is spatialised – are culturally inflected, performative spacing provides a means of dismantling and decentering theatre architecture’s status quo in order to halt a continual deferral to conventional venues. This acknowledges epistemological diversity as foundational to local and indigenous spatial thought, encouraging design thinking that acknowledges and accommodates a multiplicity of worlds. Performance space is therefore approached as a pluriversal phenomenon in which interconnecting worlds coexist as spatiotemporal constructs – as spacings.

Keywords: Theatre architecture, performance space, site-specific performance, action research, spacing

Mediterranean Spacing: *Those We Carry with Us Carry Us*

Performance is action-in-space and site is space-in-action – together they cohere as *spacing*. However, our globalised worldview still tends to regard time and space as separable and absolute, generally oblivious to the spatiotemporal dynamics in our daily environments. In *Event-Space*, I maintain that, as a dynamic entity, “space precedes action—as action” (Hannah, 2018, p. xxi). This notion of spatial performativity – insisting that environments are inherently active and activating – requires a relational understanding of place that recognises the fluctuating relationships between objects, people and the environments they inhabit; all charged with meaning within the living territory of site, which is specific to sociocultural, political, historical and mythical understandings. Such relationality was explored in a collaborative workshop during the 2024 *Performing Space* conference in Nafplio, Greece (6-9 July). Over four afternoons of the conference, an interdisciplinary group of 20 participating artists from a range of creative and ethnic backgrounds utilised situated embodiment to consider ‘Mediterranean Spacing’ through site-responsive action, recognising location as an event in itself – resonating with environmental performativity at macro and micro scales.

The resulting Saturday evening event, *Those We Carry with Us Carry Us*, takes place before sunset on a popular local beach, the frontage of which the Municipality has slated for sale by to developers. Conference attendees are led along a dusty road by the artists who each convey a moulded white plastic chair – that ubiquitous global object we sat on, discussed and played with over the previous three afternoons – forming a caravan that alludes to both partygoers and refugees. They move onto the beach past locals sunning themselves in the depleting heat while others are immersed in the sea with children playing in its shallows. Each artist – asked to consider who they carried with them – places their chair on the shoreline facing distant mountains silhouetted in the lowering light. Each stands with their back to the sea, looking directly at those gathering on the sand before turning to lift their chairs into the water, borne as those they privately convey: some move out towards the horizon with a chair on their back; others toss it playfully or move it in the shallows; some stand on theirs, hold it high above their heads or try to buoy it up in front of them. All are silhouetted by the western light that sparkles and flashes off the wavering surface of a tideless sea. Returning chairs to the uniform lineup, performers reface the growing assembly before each approaches an onlooker, inviting them to sit in their chair and gaze towards the now fast-setting sun. Standing or sitting next to their guests, each speaks softly, describing who they have been carrying in their own languages or indistinctly muttering, a hand resting on a shoulder, back, ankle or knee. Humming rises and falls, forming into a shared song. *Sto Pa Kai Sto Ksanaleo* – “I told you and I’m telling you again” – is familiar to the locals.

Sung in Greek and Turkish, this chant shared by two historically conflictual cultures bordering the Mediterranean is a ballad of longing for those lost at sea; expressing a sense of urgency as it's intoned to the islands and fringes of the inland ocean. The song ends, and together, artists, their guests, local beachgoers, and conference attendees silently watch the sun lower and disappear behind the distant hills, darkening a beach soon accessible for paying tourists only.

Figure 1

Images from the final performance of the Mediterranean Spacing workshop led by the author "Those We Carry with Us Carry Us", Karathona Beach, Nafplio, Greece, Performing Space 2024. (Photos by George Pramaggioulis)





This sunset event was staged prior to a shared meal at the nearby beachfront taverna that concluded the conference proceedings. It was a situated exploration of *performative spacing* – an emergent term I introduced on the first day – formulated to inform *performance space* specifically and *spatial performativity* generally; impacting beyond theatre architecture to theoretically influence the design of landscapes, exhibitions, interiors, installations and urban environments, as well as politics, marketing, and worldbuilding in general. The triad of these three intersecting terms – ‘performance space’, ‘spatial performativity’ and ‘performative spacing’ – can be summed up as 1) the built and virtual environment where live and mediated events explicitly occur, 2) the active and activating qualities of all environments and 3) how they are both relationally designed and dynamically experienced. Considering all three enables artistic exploration, enactment and reception of regionally specific performance practices and spatiotemporal worldviews, in order to reimagine theatre's conventional house: encouraging the formation of decolonised, indigenised and relational community settings rather than commercial, public venues aligned with global capital and hegemonic regimes.

While ‘performance’ and ‘space’ are inherent to the separate yet interconnected disciplines of ‘theatre’ and ‘architecture’, any easy definition of either is ever-elusive, contested and therefore unstable. *Performance* as action – consciously presented and/or received – occurs at multiple sites and scales, while *space* as a four-dimensional continuum evades particularity, stasis and measurability. As nouns they reciprocally contain the characteristics of performativity and spatiality through their dynamic actions of ‘performing’ and ‘spacing’, which imply time, energy and engagement. Understanding *performative spacing* therefore requires the unpacking and articulation of the other two interplaying terms – *performance space* and *spatial performativity*. Entwining all three recognises expressive spatiotemporal practices beyond the singular event on a prescribed Eurowestern stage; illuminating a decolonial imperative to challenge conventional theatre's tendency to 1) homogenise spatial expression through internationalisation, and 2) deny embodied diversity and cultural specificities of the local.

Performance Space / Spatial Performativity / Performative Spatiality

An increasing move towards site-sensitivity, responsivity and specificity in the new millennium – alongside digital virtuality – has extended what, when and where communal public actions take place. Moving away from its ‘proper’ place – bound to theatre's propriety and architecture's property – demonstrates how ‘*performance*’ necessarily engages with ‘*space*’ itself as an event. Presenced both materially and virtually, it takes up residence in globalscapes, landscapes and mindscapes, often inhabiting all three simultaneously. Far from empty, *Performance Space* incorporates the location itself as ‘actant’ – “source of

the action of performing bodies in relation to each other and the space they perform in. In “Spacing Events” my long-term collaborator, choreographer Carol Brown, articulates this action in relation to our “dance-architecture” events (Hannah and Brown, 2016) that chart “choreo-spatial dramaturgies” through “culturally attuned kinaesthetic remapping” (Brown, 2018, p. 76). What, therefore, happens when we perform in dialogue with more local understandings of spatial thought beyond the totalising universalism of Western hegemony?

Figure 4

Images of seaside action research from Mediterranean Spacing workshop, led by the author “Those We Carry with Us Carry Us”, Performing Space 2024. (Photos by George Pramaggioulis).

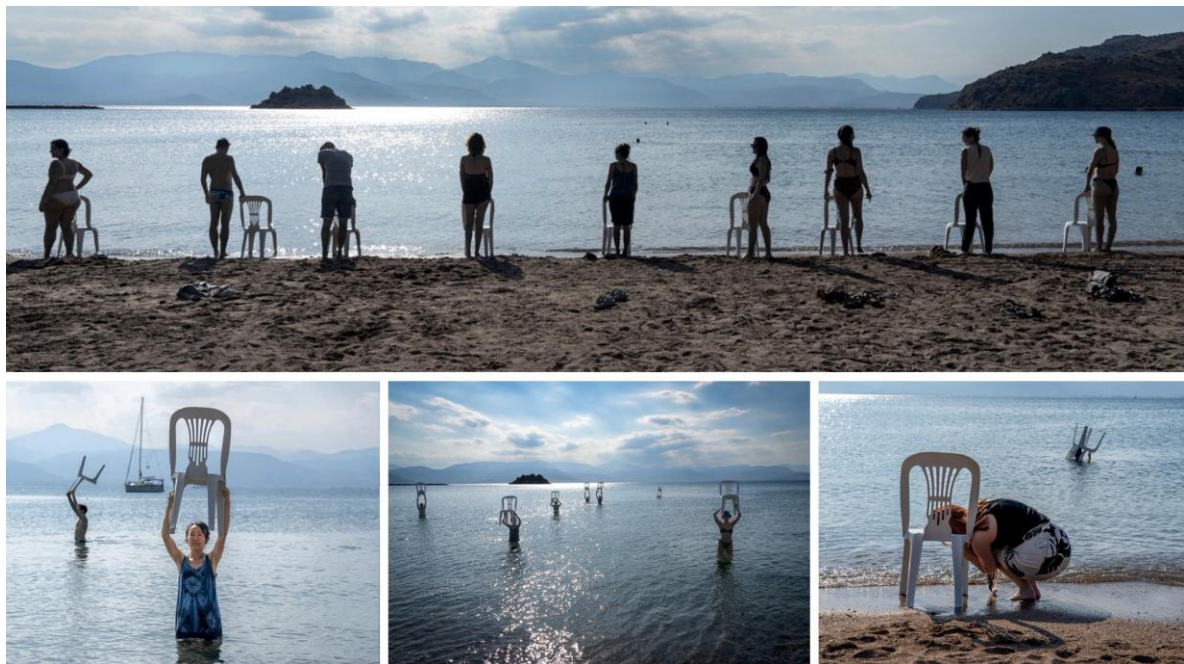
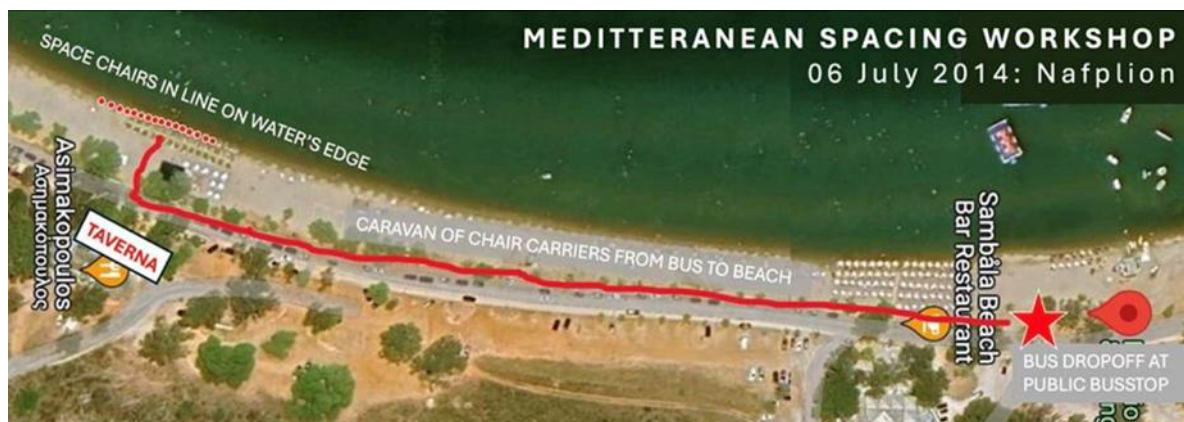


Figure 5

Plan of the final performance route of the Mediterranean Spacing workshop led by the author “Those We Carry with Us Carry Us”, Karathona Beach, Nafplio, Greece, Performing Space 2024



Mediterranean Spacing

Embracing environmental specificity, ecological dynamism and spatiotemporal multiplicity, performative spacing is culturally and situationally informed. The *Mediterranean Spacing* workshop provided an opportunity to engage locally through collaborative dialogue, analysis and embodiment: focussing on “the specificities of cultural traditions, spatiotemporal principles and situated ideologies to propose alternative performance space models through ‘critical spatial praxis’ as participatory action” (Hannah, 2024). This refers to ‘critical spatial practice’, a concept introduced by Jane Rendell (2006) and developed further by Marcus Miessen (2017), where participatory action can highlight inequities and expose the strictures and strategies of power. It involves transdisciplinary engagement and “vital interaction with its situated context” (Miessen, 2017, p. 24) to expose the politics and processes of social space – as a “dynamic relational field of forces” (Weizman 2006).

As emplaced research *Mediterranean Spacing* explored the specificities of Nafplio’s Karathona Beach, a favourite swimming spot for local inhabitants. However, this ancient crescent bay, lined with palms and eucalyptus trees, is a ‘property’ for sale by the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (HRADF), looking for partners in “a development scenario” (Papakonstantinou, 2024). planned to transform the coastline’s “exploitable area” into an upmarket tourist resort with “Hotel - Leisure Resort & Second Home Residencies”. The resulting Saturday evening scene, *Those We Carry with Us Carry Us*, inevitably becomes a work of mourning for the impending loss of connection to an accessible landscape.

While still images of the workshop’s late afternoon in-situ rehearsals are captivating, they belie the necessary integration of local sun/sea bathers, whose unrehearsed actions were inherent to how the event was planned and experienced. Centring on an aquatic island-filled basin – ringed with the continental territories of North Africa, Southern Europe and the Levantine Middle East – the Mediterranean is a biologically diverse and culturally rich region, holding a maritime history of criss-crossing odysseys, trade, colonisation, conflict and migration. The mythic Mediterranean Sea of Odysseus, the Argonauts and Sirens – more recently associated with a flow of refugees, risking their lives to seek asylum far from untenable homelands – is also associated with the dangers of fishing, trafficking, displacement and warfare. This taints the touristic imaginary with loss, expressed in the lament, *Sto Pa Kai Sto Ksanaleo*: a repeated warning and phrase linked to themes of immigration and exile; a reiteration in the face of adversity. In this song the lover insists they will transform their body into a boat, their hands into oars, and their scarf into a sail in order to return to land. They’ll become the vessel carrying those who carried them. The performers convey chairs representing an absent other – parent, unborn child or distant friend – upon which they invite strangers to sit. One participating artist who has two sons, has carried the

daughter she never had: playing with her in the sea and now the artist's ghost supports her guest beside whom she crouches while singing with her fellow performers. Rather than a proscenium playhouse, black box stage, or even stone amphitheatre epitomised in the nearby Theatre of Epidauros, Karathona Beach is momentarily converted into an immersive auditorium of sand and sea where performative spacing of all participants – artists and public – cohere to host a shared experience infused with comedy and tragedy.

Figure 4

Image of seaside action research from Mediterranean Spacing workshop, led by the author “*Those We Carry with Us Carry Us*”, *Performing Space 2024*. (Photo by George Pramaggioulis).



Workshop credits

Workshop participants: Jess Applebaum, Ermina Apostolaki, Alessandro Di Egidio, Daniela Dispoto, Aycan Kizilkaya, Anthi Kougia, Tony McCaffrey, Rafik Patel, Elena Pérez Garrigues, Eliza Soroga, Dimitri Szuter, Rennie Tangç, Mark Turner, Katarzhina Zakharova, Athanasia Zei.

Workshop Guide and τραγουδίστρια (tragoudistria) singer: Stella Sofokleous.

All photos by: George Pramaggioulis.

Leader: Dorita Hannah.

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