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Exploring Performative Liminality

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Exploring Performative Liminality

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Abstract

In a quest for *Performative Urbanism*, we believe performativity can uncover new tools and processes for the urban regeneration of liminal spaces. Turner describes liminality as a fundamental characteristic of performance, as a field of “pure possibility” (Turner, 1967). Van Gennep’s performative rites of “passage” (Van Gennep, 1909) constitute the life of a human being, in which the “liminal rite” is an in-between stage marked by uncertainty and ambiguity. The liminality of the Los Angeles River (LA River) lies in its current transitional status, seeking to become a naturalized public amenity while maintaining its function as a flood control channel. We developed a pedagogical experiment along the Los Angeles River involving a site-specific performance as a liminal rite. Our collaborative research demonstrates that “performative liminality” can serve as a relational and transitional tool for activating spatial affordances (Gibson, 1979) and as a strategy for transforming liminal sites.

Keywords: Performative urbanism, Liminality and liminal spaces, Urban regeneration process, Los Angeles River, Pedagogical experiment.

Exploring Performative Liminality

From the *Performative Turn*, the borders between disciplines are not to be thought of in terms of limits, but rather as “transformative spaces”. These spaces are fertile, transitory environments where invention, hybridity, and metamorphosis can occur, thus creating the conditions for an emerging field called *Performative Urbanism*. In light of the *Performative Turn*, we believe performativity can uncover new tools and processes for the regeneration of “latent urban resources” (D’Arienzo, 2016, p.12), existing elements found within liminal environments such as neglected public spaces, endangered heritage sites, abandoned architectures and wastelands, or even underused urban infrastructures.

Figure 1*Illuminate the night.*

Liminal is defined as a state, stage, or period of transition and derives from the Latin root *limen*, which means threshold. The *Performative Turn* has embraced the liminal and places disruptive thinking at its core, generating intersectional thinking as a revolutionary creative state of mind, a performative liminality. The concept of liminality was originally developed by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in the early 1900s in his book, "Les Rites de Passage" (1909) and was further developed by another anthropologist, Victor Turner, in the 1960s. Going further, "liminality refers to any 'betwixt and between' situation or object, any in between place or moment, a state of suspense, a moment of freedom between two structured world-views or institutional arrangements (...) liminality opens the door to a world of contingency where events and meanings - indeed 'reality' itself - can be molded and carried in different directions" (Thomassen, 2014, p. 3). In fact, Turner has described liminality in his book *The anthropology of performance* (1967) as a fundamental characteristic of performance, a field of "pure possibility." Later on, the architect Tiphaine Abenia also used the concept of liminality to describe the ambiguous and elastic space-time that lies between the abandonment of a place and the moment of its reclassification (Abenia, 2019), be it demolition, conservation or transformation, a state of "pure potentiality." Both authors are referring to Van Gennep's "rites of passage" in which the "liminal rite" (also called transitional rite) is an in-between stage marked by uncertainty and ambiguity. Rooted in an anthropologic thinking of indigenous societies and based on the concept of liminality, the original "rites de passages" of Van Gennep describe *the life and evolution* of human beings:

- Pre-liminal Rite: *separation, abandonment, removal from the world.*
- Liminal Rite: *transition, metamorphosis, uncertainty and ambiguity.*
- Post-liminal Rite: *incorporation, reclassification, return to society (in a different light).*

Abenia re-used these three performative states to describe *the life and evolution* of architecture and, more specifically, large abandoned urban structures (Abenia, 2017). Both Turner and Abenia insist on the fact that this in-between stage, marked by uncertainty and ambiguity, ruptures the process preceding it, without yet prefiguring what will succeed it. This stage becomes then a “performative” space-time of re-invention and metamorphosis, of switching from one state to another, a moment of transformation. *Latent urban resources* would then be suspended into this liminal state, waiting for the liminal rite that will engage and perform its potential reclassification. By doing so, we can argue that *latent urban resources* are thus no longer to be thought of as figures of rejection or inert and inactive waste, but as “liminal” space-time where potentialities remain active - at their highest intensity. The question then becomes: *how do we identify and access those latent potentials that are suspended into the liminal state?*

Affordances X Performativity

By coming back to the distinction made by Turner and Abenia on *possibility* and *potentiality*, we can explore a conceptual and experimental framework to articulate the role of performance-based tools as “vectors of potentialization” to initiate the regenerative processes of *latent urban resources*. Also relevant here is Gibson's theory of affordances, articulated in his essay on *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979) in which he defines affordance as “the totality of possibilities for actions and interactions of an object or environment” (p.29) which may be perceptible, concealed, or deceptive. He thus calls for us to renew our modes of attention and experimentation with the environment, so as to be able to capture its affordances – particularly those that are “hidden.” The affordance, as a set of possibilities for action and interaction, refers to philosopher Debaïse's “puissances passives” (Debaïse, 2005), the ability of the environment to absorb change. To initiate metamorphosis, the use of *active* “puissance,” the capacity to produce change, becomes necessary and this is where performative practices come into play. Performance, “marked by the double seal of action and becoming” (Carpigo, Diasio, 2018, online) embodies an *active* “puissance” of transformation that modifies reality by performing the liminality of a metamorphosis. By merging the “liminal” conditions of performance and places, we would be able to explore ways of using performative *actions, devices* and *processes*: (1) to explore and transcend latent potentialities; (2) to guide a metamorphosis; and (3) to perform the “liminal rite” of Van Genep. By doing so, we would be able to open up scenarios for the reclassification of the

latent urban resources and to engage in a post-liminal process of returning to society – in a different light and for a different use.

The Los Angeles River

The 132-kilometer-long concrete channel that runs through the city of Los Angeles, known as the LA River, has been throughout its history a liminal space in the sense that it lies in a state of continuous transformation, contingency, and flux. Its liminality brings forth its character as a performative space that has captured the cultural imagination of artists, designers, historians, movie producers, and curious visitors. Prior to its channelization in the 1930s the river was a natural watercourse that behaved erratically and caused disastrous flooding. Today the river is not only a critical part of the city's storm water infrastructure but an extreme example of how *latent urban resources*, ranging from spontaneous ecologies to public recreation, thrive within the confines of its concrete surfaces. It is within this context that the river's liminality becomes evident, making it an ideal site for experimenting with its performative potentialities.

Figure 2

Exploring performative liminality



The Halprin Legacy and the Landscape Studio

To deepen our relationship with the channel's environment and explore its affordances, we used scores, as relational devices between performative bodies and places, exploring the potentialities of transformation. The use of “scores” in that particular intention finds its roots

in the collaborative work of choreographer Anna Halprin (1920-2021) and landscape architect Lawrence Halprin (1916-2009). In the late 60s, they developed a creative process based on scores, the RSVP cycles, dedicated to raise environmental awareness and engage communities in the design of their local built environment. Lawrence Halprin wanted to create his own system of “motation”, enabling him to “correlate scores for motion and environment together, where they could be mutually interrelated and affect each other” (Halprin, 1969, p. 71), a liminal process of creation based on the performativity of both bodies and places. By doing so, he developed a way of scoring that would encourage designing for motion, thus extending the performative liminality of the built environment, freeing people’s behavior and supporting natural ecosystems within the city.

As part of an undergraduate landscape design studio called *Designing with Scores*, we experimented with the Halprins’ methodologies. We conducted several workshops with students along a stretch of the river in the Elysian Valley where the channel becomes a “soft bottom” waterway with flowing water, vegetation and wildlife. These elements, along with the concrete slope, railing and lighting, became the *latent urban resources* which we sought to unleash through the creation of a site-specific performance. Meeting at the river for rehearsals became a weekly ritual which served as a liminal rite, a “performative” space-time of appropriation and transformation for instigating a process of urban regeneration. The performance itself took place as part of a larger scale liminal rite, the Frogtown Artwalk, an annual community event that celebrates local artists and musicians. Students used their performative experience along the river to inform their urban regeneration projects. Rather than designing masterplans, several teams of students proposed *post-liminal rites* in the form of community events ranging from magnet fishing, planting seeds and art making, using materials recycled from the river. The students’ desire to bring the community together points toward the enlightened mindset they had developed, akin to Van Gennep’s post-liminal rite of “return[ing] to society in a different light” (Van Gennep, 1981, p. 30) while signifying their full immersion in the experience of Performative Liminality.

Towards a Performative Urbanism

Our collaborative research demonstrates that “performativity” can serve as relational and transitional tools for activating both spatial affordances and social empowerment as necessary for the transformation of liminal sites. Through this work, we engage with *Performative Liminality* as a process of ongoing creation, in which scores as methodological devices operate to reveal the ecological and cultural richness of latent urban resources. We believe that an extended performative approach, rooted in these experimentations, could be used to “perform” the liminal rite and bring about the potentiality of reclassification. By

developing a new operating model based on the richness of the liminal theory, we would be able to transcend the space-time of transition as a true metamorphosis, a collective and performative pre-figuration of the future of the site that would become inseparable from the project of reclassification.

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