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Pablo Berzal Cruz, Athena Stourna, Tyrone Grima, Alba Balmaseda Domínguez



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Alessandro Di Egidio

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The Enabling Conditions. The Emergence of Performance from the Halprin Fountain to the Bridges of Venice

Alessandro Di Egidio

Diap Architecture. Theories and Project, University of Sapienza, Rome, Italy

Abstract

Theatre is where architecture happens. Since the dawn of history, humans have identified those specific conformations that characterise performance spaces.

One can read the definition of performance space ambiguously: performance can be understood as arising at times from the capacity of the place to activate human action and interaction, at times from human action activating the characteristics of the place.

In accordance with Gibson's theory of affordances, the complementarity of the human being with the environment is recognised: specific spatial characteristics, duly interpreted, can constitute the proper circumstances for transforming a common environment into a performative space.

This contribution aims to investigate the conditions enabling performance both in spaces conceived to generate instinctive choreographies and in spaces that human interpretation has made into stages.

Halprin's Keller Fountain or Thomas Saraceno's aerial installations are architectures designed to provoke sensory stimulation: the flow of water, the differences in altitude, the winding paths of the former, the sensation of vertigo and instability of the latter, lead the body to move, explore and perform in space.

Nonetheless, even the common space of a bridge can become a stage: in 17th century Venice, the *war of the fists* took place on a bridge that had the characteristic of not having parapets: the very absence of this element, which can be interpreted as a spatial idiosyncrasy, created the enabling condition for the inhabitants of the two islands divided by the canal to challenge each other from September to December, in a battle where the faction that would throw the most opponents off the bridge would be the winner. For the event, the surrounding palaces, bridges, canals became stalls and galleries from which to observe the warrior-actors. The street was transformed into a stage, the city became a theatre, the space recovered its original concept of *chora*.

Keywords: chora, affordances, score, collective ritual, spatial performativity

From the Chora to the Theatre

Before Plato's definition of space given in the *Timaeus*, space was linked to the mythological figures of Hestia, who embodied domesticity, earth, darkness, centrality, stability, and Hermes, who was mobile, identified with the threshold, light, sky, openness, and changing states (Plato, trad. 1965). These two figures represented *Being* (Hestia) and *Becoming* (Hermes). Between the two concepts, Plato inserted the idea of Chora, the substance where everything, both Being and Becoming, happened. Plato defines Chora as the receptacle of every action and transformation, the primordial element constituting both humans and nature, where fire, earth, water, and air were qualities of Chora and not elements. In other words, Chora was the space that hosted everybody and every event.

Similarly, Chora was the space where the rituals that led to tragedy and comedy took place. The dithyrambs, rituals dedicated to Dionysus, occurred in April, when life returned to earth. As Perez-Gomez et al. (1994) observe,

The word dithyramb meant a leaping, an inspired dance, and its original form was an actual bringing back of life, a rising up, a calling up that took the form of dromena, actual «things done», such as song and dance (p.14).

During these rituals, *katharsis* and *mimesis* were experienced: a purification or reconciliation between personal destiny and the divinity (katharsis), and the expression of feelings through movements (mimesis).

The concept of Chora from mythology flowed into culture (from dromena to drama) and shaped the structure of ancient theatre: the performance took place in the space of the orchestra rather than on the stage. Following Gomez's reflections, "The focus of the event was the circular dance platform often named after the chorus itself, a chorus that originally signified a group dance and eventually took its name from orchesis, which also means dance" (Perez-Gomez et al., 1994, p.14). Then theatre evolved, the stage became the space to act and the *cavea* was the space for witnessing the act, splitting the participants into two separate entities, the performers and the spectators, definitively switching from the space of a collective ritual to that of a contemplative show.

Rehabilitating the Elements of Performativity

Today we can exasperate the evolution of theatre from a place of acting to a place of watching. With our world swiftly moving into virtual space—and, less evidently, with virtual space translating its characteristics into the physical world—we are increasingly losing the ability to connect and get in touch with the space, becoming more and more unable to experience mimesis and katharsis.

The aim of this study, then, is to identify the physical elements that still make or can make a space performative, beyond the theatre intended properly as the space of the performance.

To do that, we need to consider the theory of affordances introduced by psychologist Gibson in the seventies. The theory is about the ability to understand the perceptual dynamics of the subject in the environment, in other words, the capacity of the subject to read the space in which he is and the broadness of the variety of interpretations of the elements that surround him (Gibson, 1979).

The ready-made technique clearly manifests what is intended by the theory of affordances, that places the subject and the environment in multiple relations.

Gibson defined affordances as something “that refers both to the environment and the animal. It implies the complementarity of the animal with the environment” (Gibson, 1979, p.58). Furthermore, the variety of readings that one can have of an environment is linked to one's mental openness and fantasy, which are developed by the experience of the environment itself: a lack of experience brings a lack of imagination and this leads to the incapacity to use the space.

Another element to consider is the score, the actual trigger, the instructions, the track.

A Bach music sheet is a score. It is a fixed score because it determines only one type of performance. Then there is an interpretable score, such as that of *Serenade II*, which Wentworth compared to the fixed score. (Halprin, 1970)

The score is a set of signs from which, through a more or less rigid interpretation, an action is derived.

From the concepts of affordances and score, we can distinguish three conditions of “spatial performativity” (Berzal Cruz, 2022, p.81): the condition of rituals, following a given and generally fixed score (1); a second condition where space is designed to facilitate performativity (2); and the last condition, where space is not intended to be but can be interpreted as performable (3). This study delves deeper into the latter two, which have an open score, where the action is not fixed but can be invented and manipulated following the characteristics of the space.

Choreography as a Design Tool and Design as Choreography

In the spaces created by Mr and Mrs Halprin, the score is not explicitly given. Nevertheless, people are involved in the space, and they act within it. Behind the design of the space lies a prevision of the choreography based on the elements and their positions in the space. This outcome is linked to the couple's experiments to discover everyone's limits and possibilities, to put everyone in a position to understand how to interpret the environment to create their own choreography, returning to the rituals of the dithyrambs we discussed earlier, returning to the theatre before fixed space and given scores.

Talking about the work of Mr and Mrs Halprin, Metta et al. (2014, p.51) affirm: "space does not contain dance; it itself becomes choreographic material." In the introduction of the volume, the authors reflect that space "is conceived as a medium for interaction and invention, involving the citizen as an active agent and overcoming the conventional paradigm of the inhabitant as a customer recipient of the final product" (Di Donato & Metta, 2014, p.35)

The spontaneous and dynamic life that characterizes the spaces designed by Halprin stands as evidence that the aspiration guiding the designer's hand has been fully realized

I hoped that what we built would stimulate interactions between people and their environment, that they would enter into it and participate in it and with it. I hoped that they would use the water, climb the cascade, wade in the pool, listen to the sounds, and use the entire composition as a giant play sculpture which would heighten and enrich the normal everyday life-activity in the neighbourhood (Halprin, 1970, p.58).

Spaces conceived through a choreographic approach are those designed by Saraceno, dealing with the idea of *Aerocene*. He creates hanging or inflated structures, going beyond Euclidean space: environments that force you to play while crossing them.

A Theatre Where It Is Not Expected

The third type of space is one that is not designed to host a ritual or enhance performativity, but whose own elements, or the absence of some, lead the space to be recognized as performative. That is the case of Ponte dei Pugni in Venice (Figure 1), literally, the *Bridge of the Fists*.

The bridge still exists today, as a normal bridge in the city, even though it has lost the characteristic that made it famous. What made this simple bridge the stage of some particular moments of Venetian life was the lack of a specific and expected element. The bridge was not provided with a balustrade: it had no railings to protect people from falling into the water. In this 1922 drawing by Antonio Carbonati (Figure 2), we still see people

walking without the protection that divides them from the water. It is as if the water was calling the passersby to do something more than just cross the bridge.

This conformation created the enabling condition for the bridge to be used as the stage for the fight between the inhabitants of the two islands the bridge links. Until 1700, from September to December, the bridge hosted the rumble of the Nicolotti against the Castellani. The faction that pulled the most opponents into the water became the winner of that year, and so on every year. To make it possible to use the bridge, the inhabitants would fix the structure and clean the canal before September to avoid injuries.

What happened on the bridge made all the surroundings a spontaneous theatre. Houses were even rented to see the fight on the bridge (Figure 3). The streets were full of people, and many poems were written narrating the battle.¹ So from September to December, the city changed radically, the space being recognized as performative and the ritual returned to an unexpected stage. All of this made possible by the capacity and imagination to see the conditions that made a theatre where it was not expected.

Figure 1

Ponte dei Pugni ' s Today and Yesterday (2024). Collage combining a photo of the author with the print Lotta sul Ponte dei Pugni by Pietro Liberi (year of creation needed), created by the author. Retrieved from Ministero della Cultura - Catalogo Generale dei Beni Culturali under a Creative Commons license.



¹ The poem which describes better what the bridge meant for the city is Poemetto Bernesco by Camilo Nalin
https://play.google.com/store/books/details/La_festa_veneziana_dei_pugni_fra_Castelani_e_Nicol?i=d=jNdoAAAAcAAJ&hl=en-US&pli=1 [25/10/2024]

Figure 2

Il Ponte dei Pugnì (1922) by Antonio Carbonati. Retrieved from Ministero della Cultura - Catalogo Generale dei Beni Culturali under a Creative Commons license.

**Figure 3**

A Theatre Where It Was Not Expected. Wettstreit auf der Ponte de' Pugnì in Venedig (1673) by Joseph Heintz II Giovane. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons license.



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