

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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



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### Space as an Event.

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## 45

## Space as an Event. From Lina Bo Bardi's Teatro Oficina to Giancarlo Mazzanti's Santa Fè Hospital

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### Abstract

Over time, the term performance has acquired a negative connotation, linked to contemporary pressures towards excellence. However, a deeper analysis of the concept reveals its potential as a tool for activating and promoting human action.

The principle extends to architecture, in which the design actions of subverting, grafting, hybridising, central to a performative work, can determine a process aimed at action. An emblematic example is Bo Bardi's Teatro Oficina in São Paulo in which the traditional theatrical prototype is altered by favouring a visual continuity between city and stage.

Such performative devices trigger a higher degree of interaction when they are placed in places with greater spatial rigidity, such as places of care. In Mazzanti's project for the Santa Fè hospital in Bogotá, the actions aim at subverting the isolation of environments. Interior gardens and permeable facades encourage interaction and well-being, transforming the healthcare experience from a closed context to one of sharing and openness. The work, both theatrical and architectural, through performative devices can become an activator of experiences and meanings, stimulating new relational dynamics.

*Keywords:* Oficina, action, dislocation, alter, Mazzanti

### A Multiform Concept

The term performance has taken on a negative meaning referring to the performance practices that contemporary times force us to adopt. The semantic analysis of this concept reveals certain nuances that pose deeper and more central considerations that will be deployed in this study. The noun performance, from the late Latin *performare*, can be described as “to give form.” (Treccani, n.d.). In Italian, English and French this word is the ancestor of the modern word performance.

In addition, the English term inserts a further sense: from per + form one arrives at the meaning to continue, to promote. The latter verb, from the Latin *promotus*, past participle of pro-movere, can be translated as “to go forward, to advance” (Etymology dictionary, n.d.) and this passage becomes pivotal in expanding further the meaning of the term in question.

Performance transforms itself from an aversive element into a mechanism that can work for and on the actions of human beings by promoting the active component of individuals' experiences. The performing arts, including theatre and music, constitute, according to the German philosopher Gadamer, the reference model for analysing any other art form. And it is precisely in the theatre that this profound metamorphosis from a contemplative, performance-based scene to a performative arrangement of both space and actors manifests itself. (Figure 1)

**Figure 1**

*The Great Show, freely interpreted by choreographer Daniele Toti, 2023. Photograph by studio Unlimited.Limited.*



The conformation of theatre makes it possible to explore forms of interaction and learning, as Fischer-Lichte (2014) also points out, who introduces the concept of feedback in her book *Aesthetics of Performance. A Theory of Theatre and Art*.

The spectator stops being a passive figure, and in this regard Fischer-Lichte emphasises the reunion of two antithetical points of the performative structure: the

aesthetics of production and the aesthetics of reception through the co-presence of actors and spectators.

How do the actions and behaviour of actors and spectators act reciprocally during the performance? What are the conditions on which this interaction is based? What are the factors on which its course and outcome depend from time to time? (Fischer-Lichte, 2014, p. 70).

### **The Oficina Theatre and the Actions of Performance**

A similar interaction is visible in architecture, which fits into this context due to the relationship between its spatial paradigms and the gestural action of individuals. Bodies, in turn, can activate space, modelling it, and likewise space can suggest behaviour to the body in accordance with geometric, phenomenological orientations, determining an active or passive relationship between the parts.

In Oficina Theatre in São Paulo, Bo Bardi adopts design actions of a performative essence that can be enclosed in various operations given the spatial anomaly that cannot be traced back to a theatrical prototype, the alteration of the interior/exterior relationship and the prolusive dynamics of the stage.

The building was redesigned in the 1990s by the Italian architect Bo Bardi together with Elito. The renovation involves the demolition of the existing internal partition, which is replaced by a metal structure that gives a new visual continuity between the different parts. This sequence breaks up the theatrical space in an unprecedented way, making it an extension of the city: the street-walkway is activated in relation to the performance and the design actions do not respond to a canonicity of the theatrical prototype. The scenic space, in fact, becomes unitary and the absence of a pre-established orientation makes it possible to choose continuous points of view that in turn shape the scene (Figure 2).

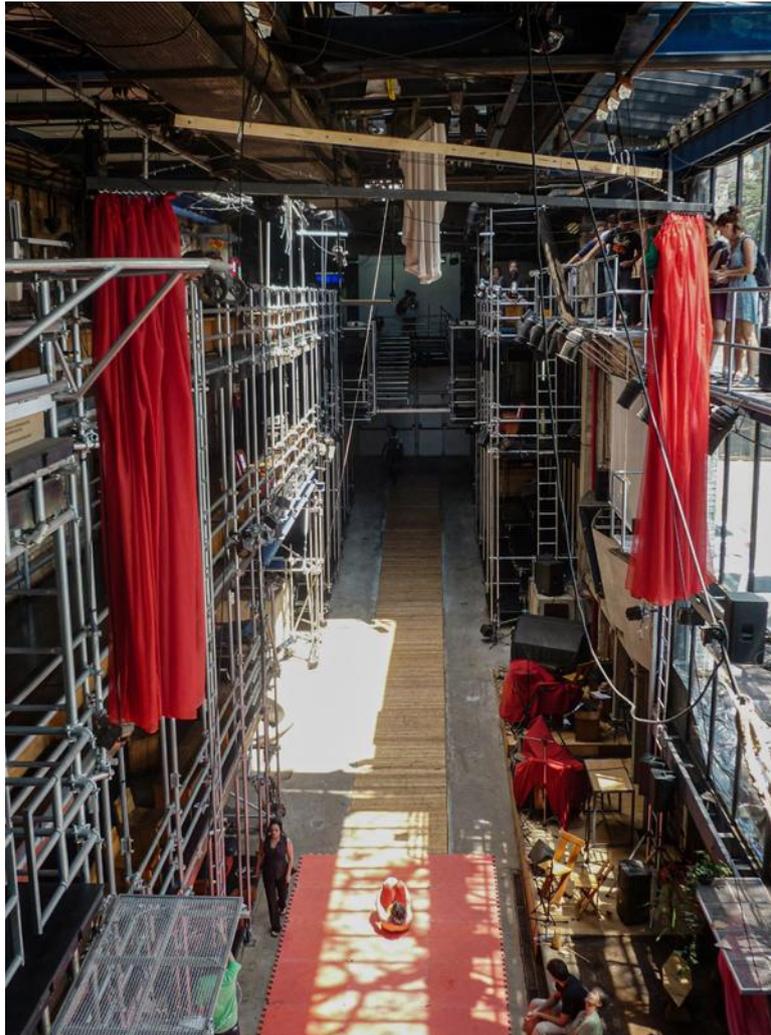
Yet another twist of meaning lies in the alteration between inside and outside. The closed and introverted container of the stage is shattered through a total permeability between the Brazilian landscape and that of the performance. The glass surface that runs along the longest side of the perimeter thus becomes a connecting device that transmits light and vegetation into the interior atmosphere.

The performative design actions are co-adjutant to the performance itself, not only because of a changing scene, but also because of the political and cultural value it communicates under the surface. The Oficina Theatre has become a point of social and political resistance to the military regime since its inception with the Uzyna-Uzona Theatre founded by a group of students in 1961. The transparency of the façade, the only façade that contrasts the materiality of the other surfaces, declares the active opposition to the

regime's censorship actions in the Bela vista district. The same transparency becomes for Bo Bardi a device to try to reduce the distance between art and community (Figure 3). The horizontal and democratic fruition of performances becomes a leitmotiv in the architect's projects, as in the theatre of the SESC Pompeia.

**Figure 2**

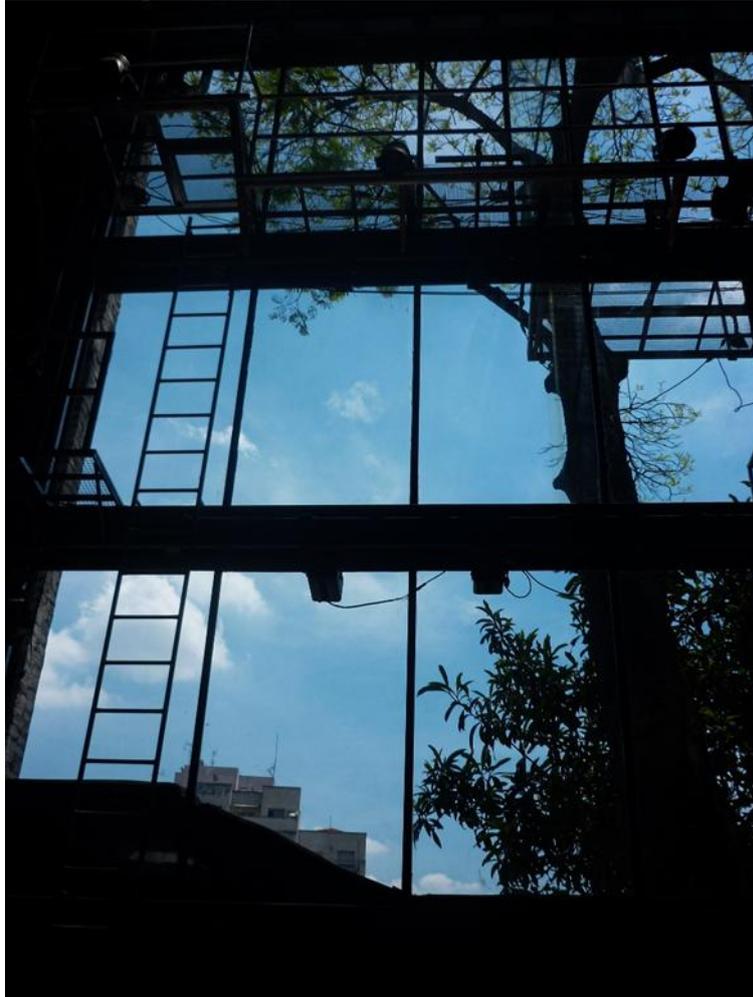
*The stage space of the Oficina Theatre observed from the balconies, 2013. Photograph by arch. Giorgia Lisi.*



Other elements are introduced into the environment that are not typically related to the performance space, but come from the echoes of the surrounding landscape: natural bodies such as plants, waterfalls accompany and enrich the auditory and visual aspect of the interior. The strong hybridisation between architectural and urban space sets off a playful and discovery dynamic in the performance. These characteristics of anomaly, grafting, variation become spatial devices that in turn are derived from design actions: subvert, graft, hybridise.

**Figure 3**

*The Permeability Between Inside and Outside in the Work of Lina Bo Bardi, 2013.*  
*Photograph. Arch. Giorgia Lisi.*

**An Application of Dislocation. The Santa Fè Hospital**

Mazzanti, founder of the Equipo Mazzanti studio in Colombia, considers these characteristics essential when designing spaces for the community. The design actions, typical of a performative and theatrical practice anticipated earlier, are translated into an apparently distant field, into spaces that are, in reality, highly rigid in their layout.

The expansion of the Santa Fè hospital, in Bogotá, is an example of such an approach. Hospitals are frequently perceived as closed spaces, characterised by significant isolation between patients, family members and doctors. Mazzanti's project elides this separation: the core of the building is occupied by a large circular space that accommodates a multitude of plant elements that define a true hanging garden. The overthrow of a space, from isolation to a place of interaction, alters the canonical form by expanding its possibilities. This green

space simultaneously takes on different meanings: it is a cathartic and healing place; it can absorb noise from adjacent areas; it can become a secular and meditative space

Another aspect that is introduced by architect Mazzanti is accomplished in the design action of hybridisation. The distinction between interior and exterior is processed as a gradient and the hospital façade is configured as a boundary that can be crossed. This emphasises the entry of natural light and urban atmosphere through a porous texture of brick elements. This innovative approach challenges the traditional conception of healthcare facilities as segregated spaces, and promotes instead, an environment that encourages connection. Architecture becomes performative as a spatial activator of unexpected phenomena that see the active participation of the actors involved.

#### Figure 4

*The hanging garden of the Santa Fé Hospital designed by architect Mazzanti, 2016. Courtesy of @sitioestudio.co, photograph by Alejandro Arango Escoba.*



### Conclusions

The performative work, whether architectural or theatrical, does not act in a static manner, but can become a tool for knowledge and exploration. In these environments, actions become *reaction objects*,<sup>1</sup> objects capable of producing a creative process in spatial articulation. Just as the theatrical performative aesthetic, highlighted by Fischer-Lichte, allows an overlap between a productive and a receptive doing, the image of a performative

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<sup>1</sup> It was those seemingly ordinary elements such as stones, metal objects, shells that for the architect Le Corbusier could, in reality through a new, deep and attentive look, take on an extraordinary and creative value

architecture acquires new characters. Porosity, permeability and transience become part of the new codes for a reading of space that divert attention from an architectural practice tied to fixity, sectoriality and a cumbersome authorial identity. Architecture accepts the event in a calculated unpredictability given both by human action but also by the circumstances to which it is subjected. Choreographer Sieni approaches this thought in the various points of the Academy's manifesto 111 on the art of gesture: "To form oneself to spaces means to frequent them, not to occupy them, carefully tracing the clues of mutual trust by constructing continuous modalities and implementations that renew the sense of dwelling" (Sieni, 2020, p. 6).

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