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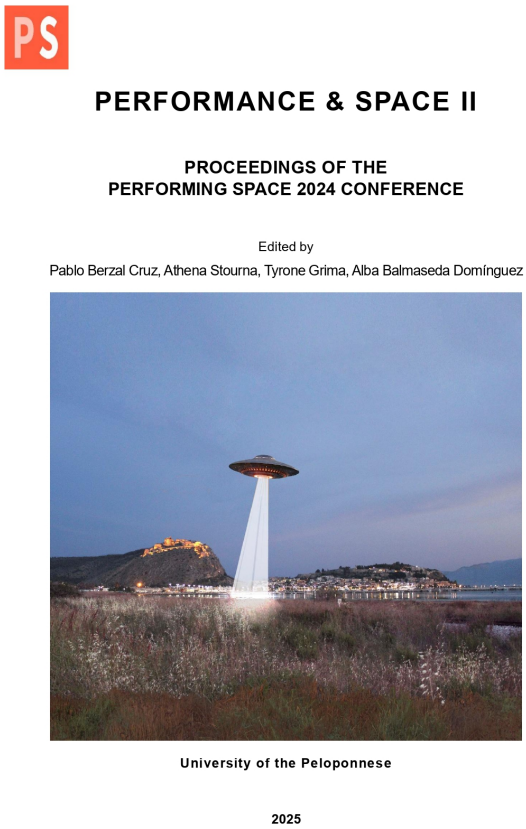

Understanding the Environment through Performance

Pablo Berzal Cruz

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Understanding the Environment through Performance

Pablo Berzal Cruz
Independent researcher

Abstract

The increasing presence of digital devices in our daily lives seems to be causing us to disconnect from our environment. It appears that the real world is no longer attractive enough to capture our attention. This is due to a basic cognitive function present in all species, whereby attention is directed towards the most intense stimuli in the environment. This function has been fundamental to the development of our cognition, societies, and the construction of our environment. However, the stimuli produced in the real environment can hardly compete with the intense, brilliant visuals and sounds of digital devices. This physical and mental disconnection from our environment is causing disturbances to our cognition, particularly among the younger generations who have grown up immersed in digital media. Furthermore, the process of environment construction has changed, producing spaces that increasingly resemble video games and dehumanising our habitat.

To regain our connection with the real environment without abandoning the advantages offered by digital devices, we propose using performance as a tool for understanding the environment, based on a special form of conscious action. Applying performance to teaching, research, our professions and even our daily lives can help us reorient our attention towards our real environment. It can also broaden our understanding of human relationships with the environment.

For the past 15 years, we have been exploring the use of performance as a tool for analysing and understanding our environment in various contexts. In this presentation, we will share some of our experiences in the fields of university teaching and academic research at the Polytechnic University of Madrid and the University of the Peloponnese. From these experiences, we saw the need to create a broader project that would encompass all disciplines studying the relationship between human activity and the environment, which was the origin of Performing Space.

Keywords: Real environment, performance, embodiment of space.

Understanding the Environment through Performance

I can only really perceive time and space if I am aware here and now of my own body and the space it occupies.

We tend to live in a kind of dream, disconnected from our environment, while our environment unconsciously conditions our thoughts, moods and behaviour. We are not masters of ourselves, but subjects of circumstances. Our tendency to live in a state of semi-sleep has been exacerbated by the use of digital devices in recent decades, which have made us addicted to visual stimulation. The bright, intense visual stimuli produced by digital screens capture our attention more than the stimuli in our real environment. As a result, we live increasingly immersed in a virtual environment and disconnected from the real environment, without embodying the space we inhabit, which is causing serious problems in the cognitive development of the new generations.[1]

In experiments on the behaviour of laughing gulls, Nobel and Lehrman (1940) demonstrated that, when false eggs were introduced into their nests, the gulls preferred to incubate them rather than their natural eggs. This type of behaviour has since been observed in all vertebrate species; it is a common biological rule that attention is focused on stimuli of higher intensity — what Tinbergen (1951) termed 'supernormal stimuli' — and we lose interest in those of lower intensity. Our addiction to digital devices is largely caused by supernormal stimuli capturing our attention. However, this dynamic has been fundamental to the cognitive and social development of our species, as well as to the construction of our environment. As demonstrated by McCauley and Lawson (2002) through their study of the use of supernormal stimuli as one of the fundamental mechanisms in the most important rituals of all societies, and, as we studied (Berzal Cruz, 2025), the importance of supernormal stimuli in navigating the territory and the assignment of meanings in the construction of the environment (Berzal Cruz, 2025).

“It is sometimes possible to offer stimulus that are even more effective than the natural situations” (Tinbergen, 1951, p. 44).

We have built our societies and our environment by learning to use supernormal stimuli. However, in recent decades, this knowledge has caused us to become disconnected from our environment, resulting in our losing the ability to interact with it in a way that maintains a balance between human activity and space. We live in a disembodied world, disconnected from the senses, except for the stimuli produced by digital devices that do not belong to the real environment.

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[1] We mention among other works on the possible negative consequences of the use of digital devices: on our cognitive processes, Jean Healy (1999); on social relations, Rodolfo R. Llinás (2002); or on the perception and construction of the environment, Harry F. Mallgrave (2013).

This phenomenon is also affecting architects, who are one of the most important agents in the construction of the environment. New architects in particular have increasingly connected with their surroundings primarily through digital tools. Their relationship with space is disembodied; they have trained as architects using only their retinas. We only have to observe the architectural production of recent decades to see that something has broken, that our environment is increasingly dehumanised.

"We belong to space and time; our bodies combine with them and include them" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 162).

How can we reverse this process? How can we become part of space and time again? How do we embody our knowledge of the environment again?

Within architecture, some authors have approached the perception of space from a phenomenological or neuroscientific point of view.[2] However, in order to recover embodied knowledge of space we need to include an essential tool in the study: performance. As anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) warned in his study of human reality, to understand the cognitive processes that occur in the interaction between space and the body-mind, it is necessary "to become performers ourselves, and bring to human, existential fulfilment what have hitherto been only mentalistic protocols". Therefore, in order to understand the construction of our environment, in order to understand deeply the relations between body-mind and space, we must use performance as a tool of knowledge, of research.

But how can we introduce performance into the study, teaching and practice of architecture, archaeology, art history or any other discipline that studies or works with space and its use? In the performing arts, of course, the answer is simple: they already do it. But what about the rest? To find answers and put them into practice, we have set up the Performing Space project. A meeting point for all disciplines that study the relationship between human and their environment, together with the performing arts. However, prior to the creation of the Performing Space project, I developed several pedagogical and academic research experiences that could be used as a basis for reincorporating the embodiment of space into teaching, professional practice and everyday life. A few of these are listed below.

Embodying Space Again

The Master's in Ephemeral Architecture at the Polytechnic University of Madrid was the best context in which to obtain the best results. From 2011 to 2024, I directed the Performance Workshop for this programme, which gradually became one of its core components. The reason for its centrality is simple: it combines work on performance and space, incorporating all possible approaches to architecture. The method used in the workshop is essentially as follows:

[2] See Berzal Cruz (2024)

1. A small training of the participants in the techniques of focused attention, in order to be able to observe the reactions of the body-mind to the performativity of the space they are in.
2. They are shown examples of how artists have used performance to reflect on space.
3. They are asked to create a site-specific performance that will help them to better understand a particular space and its dynamics.
4. They are asked to describe and document the experience, the results and their conclusions.

Figure 1

The Body as Part of the Space. "La estatua" by AnnaGiulia Saggese 2022. Máster Arquitecturas Efímeras, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. (*Photo by the author).*

Certain dynamics recur in the proposals of the participants, such as the use of the body as part of the space, the re-contextualisation or de-contextualisation of the space, the sensory exploration or the emotional exploration of the space.

The use of the body as part of the space has been presented in many different ways, such as measuring the space with the body, or linking the plasticity of the body to certain architectural elements (Figures 1, 2). The dynamic of re-contextualisation consists in introducing a series of sensory stimuli and/or a specific action that transforms the space and transports the occupants to another place (Figure 3). De-contextualisation consists of introducing an activity into a place that is completely different from the usual use of that space, thus revealing spatial qualities or a kind of spatial performativity that is hidden in the

usual use of the place (Figure 4). Perhaps the most popular dynamic among participants was sensory exploration of space, which involved depriving themselves of one or more senses (including kinaesthesia) in order to focus their attention on a particular spatial quality (Figure 5). Emotional exploration focuses on the emotions associated with, or evoked by, a place. Participants can map a place by tracking certain emotions that arise during exploration, by entering an action (Figure 6).

Figure 2

The Body as Part of the Space. "Cuerpo en espacio muerto" by Juan Pedro Checa Noguera 2022. Máster Arquitecturas Efímeras, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. (Photo by the author).

Figure 3

De-Contextualisation. "Encuentro" by Benjamín Ruiz de Esparza, 2022. Máster Arquitecturas Efímeras, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. (Photo by the author).

Figure 4

Re-Contextualisation. “Sumérgete”, 2017. Máster Arquitecturas Efímeras, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. (Photo by the author).

Figure 5

Sensory Exploration. “Cadenas”, by Sandra Pizarro Cantarer, 2019. Máster Arquitecturas Efímeras, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. (Photo by the author).

Figure 6

Emotional Exploration. "Recuerda y siente", by Rocío Avilés Tovar, 2018. Máster Arquitecturas Efímeras, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. (Photo by the author).

The results of the workshop so far have been truly excellent, with participants enthusiastically discovering our ability to embody space, to understand on a much deeper level its qualities, its dynamics and the spatial performativity that operates within it.

One of the most eye-opening experiences for me was the workshop that I developed together with Maria Mikedaki and Christina Zoniou in 2018 at the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of the Peloponnese, where we worked for four months on the relationship between spectators and space in ancient Greek theatre, from the classical period to the present day. At that time, I was very interested in how we can consciously create cognitive maps in our exploration of space. Using the techniques of devised theatre, in particular the documentary theatre in which the workshop was immersed, and based on focused attention, we were able to conduct experiments with the participants to achieve our goal, with amazing results (Figure 7).

More recently, again at the University of the Peloponnese, in this case at the Department of Performative and Digital Arts. In 2022, I continued my research alongside Athena Stourna in the workshop she led, titled *Listen, Watch and Be Silent*. The workshop examined Nafplio's history of incarceration, with participants developing a performance at sites where prisons once stood. We examined the ability to consciously experience the spatial performativity of a particular location, encouraging participants to explore the sites by moving through them. The results were again excellent (Figure 8).

Figure 7

Cognitive Maps. "KoinoPoeisis", Ancient Epidaurus, 2018. Department of Theatre Studies, University of the Peloponnese (Photo by the author).

Figure 8

Spatial Performativity. "Listen, Watch and Be Silent", 2023. Department Digital and Performing Arts, University of the Peloponnese (Photo by the author).

The last example I would like to mention is another important context in which I have been able to develop my work on how to introduce performance into the compression of space is the Department of Advanced Design at the Polytechnic University of Madrid. From 2013 to 2014, in collaboration with Alberto Morell Sixto's teaching group, we developed various activities designed to help students understand space through their bodies. These experiences emphasised the perception of the body as part of space, such as measuring space with bodies, or the sensory exploration of space through touch, hearing, and kinaesthesia. Through these experiences, we enabled students to embody the spaces we were studying. The results were excellent once again. As with our work on the Master's in Ephemeral Architecture, it was fundamental that we were able to develop the teaching techniques we used over time (Figures 9, 10).

Figure 9

Measuring Space with the Body. Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, Egypt, 2023. Department of Advanced Design, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Photo by the author).

Over the last 15 years, our work has shown us that using performance in different fields can help us regain the capacity to experience space corporally, despite the increasing pressure of electronic devices in our lives. These are just a few examples of performance's enormous potential in teaching, research and our daily lives. Reconnecting with our body-mind and experiencing our environment periodically may be essential for the next stage in human evolution and our environment.

Figure 9

Measuring Space with the Body. Temple of Apollo in Didyma, Cairo, Turkey, 2014. Department of Advanced Design, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Photo by Eduardo Pérez Gómez).

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