

# On Choreographing Architectures

**A conversation between Sasha  
Amaya and Elisabeth Leopold**

*In the following conversation, dancer, choreographer and interdisciplinary artist Sasha Amaya speaks to writer and curator Elisabeth Leopold about the process of her choreographic project CHOREOGRAPHING ARCHITECTURES which was presented at Deutsches Architektur Zentrum (DAZ) in Berlin.*



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*In her latest work, CHOREOGRAPHING ARCHITECTURES, artist, dancer, and choreographer Sasha Amaya seeks to understand if and how the two disciplines could come together in a collaborative format, where one neither served the other, but instead were in a more horizontal state of influence. Having studied architecture – Amaya holds an MPhil in the History and Philosophy of Architecture and Urban Studies from the University of Cambridge – one senses that Amaya is moving from different directions towards a unifying centre, uniquely embodying multiple perspectives within herself and her work. I had the privilege to engage in conversation with the artist about her practices and her latest work, CHOREOGRAPHING ARCHITECTURES, which took place at the Deutsches Architektur Zentrum (DAZ) in Berlin. After eight months of conversation and collaborative research, Amaya's work culminated in a three-day event of performances, workshops, and talks, gathering people from dance and architecture, as well as the public at large.*

**ELISABETH LEOPOLD:** You studied architecture and urbanism in addition to dance, and now work primarily in artistic fields. Can you tell me more about your interest in bringing choreography and architecture together at such a collaborative, fundamental level?

SASHA AMAYA: I was interested in if and how these two disciplines of choreography and architecture – who think and care so much about space – could talk to and share with one another. Through the process it became clear that while choreography and architecture have many philosophical and theoretical commonalities, our working processes, goals, and values can be quite distinct. In that distinctness, there were many things to be gained. I held close to me the respect for and value of materiality that many architects seem to have. Architects match well the right material for the right structure, sometimes even seeming to covet raw materiality for its own sake. In general, they are not trying to twist and force a material into something it isn't meant to do. In dance, I think we sometimes have a harder time accepting beauty in our material and matching it to the right performance. Of course, as a choreographer and dancer I still get fascinated in the process of transforming my body, form, and energy -- that's part of the transformational joy of dance, and in particular of contemporary performance. However, the value that the architects placed on materiality, and raw materiality, really informed how I understood our bodies, the collaborators I invited in, and how I created the work. There was a beauty in the differences in our bodies and training methods that was intentional and hugely important to me.



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**ELISABETH LEOPOLD: While seeing and sensing the space differently, how do you understand the action of choreographing the architecture of this specific space of the DAZ in Berlin?**

SASHA AMAYA: I spent a lot of time in the Scharounsaal, the main gallery space at the DAZ, prior to the beginning of rehearsals. When it is empty, there is something hugely exciting about expansiveness of the room, and the way the light falls down the very tall, white walls. The space is a jolt of energy.

‘The space is a jolt of energy.’

The ceiling features angled skylights, which connect me strongly to the outer world: the light, the time of day and year, the precipitation conditions outdoors. This shifting sky influenced the process hugely, and really let me feel a connection to the natural elements beyond the plaster, metal, brick, and glass indoors.

Yet these architectural features, too, were important. In order to emphasise the space itself, the set designer installed a really minimalist and striking white carpet, which refocused our attention on the simplicity and power of the space.

Throughout much of the piece we create frames through our own form which to see space -- light, angles, surfaces, and scale. Sometimes we are moving with our bodies, at other times we are using our bodies to reflect attention, at other times we are creating frames for seeing something beyond us: each of these aspects has a different temporal mode, which I think the audience senses.

**ELISABETHLEOPOLD: In addition to these shared interests, but also differences in training methods and values, have there been other underlying research questions – answered or unanswered – that were leading you in this but maybe also other creation processes?**

SASHA AMAYA: This particular project that is Choreographing Architectures is one of research and creation, rather than spectacle, or radically new movement research. What I was occupied with instead in this study was a psychological and procedural displacement of the assumptions I make about space, time, and process, and how seeing and thinking through the minds and eyes of the architects with whom we were in dialogue could give me a new point of beginning for creating choreographic work. Nevertheless, of course we care profoundly about aesthetics of the work and how it communicates to those who observe it. We want to offer prisms into seeing and sensing space differently.

**ELISABETH LEOPOLD: You mention the psychological and procedural displacement of the assumptions you make about space, time, and process, can you go more into detail about what strategies or practices did you find to foster these shifts?**

SASHA AMAYA: Some of the things we did were really simple: watching the architects approach space – and also speaking with them about how they did so – involved a lot of measuring, tapping things, discussing dimensions, and the age and type of materiality. This is a simplification, but these are just the sort of things I don't normally do when I go into



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*Workshop participants at Architectural Drawing for Dancers (and Everybody!): On Sections, a workshop from Ana Bisbicus (in white), who was one of the architects following the choreographic creation process*



the studio to create choreographic material. So I tried to take these architectural approaches as points of departure: both in their basic form as activities in themselves, but also in creating choreographic activities inspired by these types of exercises and ways of thinking about space.

In addition to our research roundtable, we had two architects who followed the process, coming to rehearsals, occasionally participating in warm ups, and giving feedback on what they saw, felt, and sensed. At least of equal importance, was the different mindset the architects brought, which is harder to describe. It was a way of seeing or sensing things: the timing they would spend looking at something, or wouldn't. The way they would hear something, or miss it. Again, the approach wasn't a research project to study how architects work, so these are not scientific claims. Rather, for me, it was encountering these different types of seeing, sensing, and valuing, and being open to them influencing the process. Dancers usually create work with other dancers, so it was totally new and different to have someone from a very different field participating in the process this way. It was very special.

This bore out in the work in several ways, I think. The relationship between parts and the whole, and that relationship between building things up, was something for me that was very architectural, and can be sensed in the work. There were many formal details which repeated, references and motifs. Many of us have also had that experience walking past a building in a much frequented neighborhood: laying the foundation seems slowly, then there is scaffolding, and then, one day, before you expect it, everything is up, the windows are in, it is finished! it was exciting to play with this increasing sense of time that actually doesn't happen through a big rupture or a dramatic break moment, but just through steady accumulation into complete transformation. This choreographic work also spun itself from the ground up.



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Through the kind of physical language I chose, I ultimately wanted to bring attention to scale, sensation, and the play between what we see, hear, sense, and what foams up in our minds.

**ELISABETH LEOPOLD: The piece begins with the telling of a story while the audience has their eyes closed; after moving in silence, toward the middle of the piece the screams of the performers fill the whole space; towards the end, lyrical music comes in out of the acoustic rumble. What role do sound and voice play for you, especially within this project and space, but also in general within your dance and choreographic practice?**

SASHA AMAYA: The voice was a thrill to play with in the space both because the acoustics in this space are extraordinarily reverberant and because the exhibition room is normally so quiet and restrained. I had some wild moments alone in the space really pushing the sound. In the final work, sound played a huge role and the sensitivity of the space – the fact that you can hear us on the carpeted floor, the way the introductory dialogue brings attention to the acoustics. The beginning is so quiet and controlled – we invite the audience to settle down and then zoom in – and with them throughout the work, almost imperceptibly, slowly build up the sound, the speed of our movement, our verticality until, at the end, we are ‘dancing to music’. Watching material construction is also like this for me: nothing is happening, and then everything is happening, and then all of a sudden we are just living with, or even in, this new structure. I was inspired by that architectural dynamic.

*‘I ultimately wanted to bring attention to scale, sensation, and the play between what we see, hear, sense, and what foams up in our minds.’*

*'Maybe that daring, or sense of embodied curiosity and inventiveness, will be one of the things we leave in exchange.'*



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During the process, It was also wonderful to bring architects in to show them how loud and quiet the space could really get. While they quickly sense the acoustics of a room, they don't normally take that extra step to be really loud somewhere or to lie down to look upward – yet, to my mind, these were things that the room quite plainly invited. It took the experimental openness of the dancing body to go there, and it was a pleasure to share these experiences with the visitors to our process. Maybe that daring, or sense of embodied curiosity and inventiveness, will be one of the things we leave in exchange.

*'This choreographic work spun itself from the ground up... Almost imperceptibly, we slowly build up the sound, the speed of our movement, our verticality until, at the end, we are 'dancing to music'. Watching material construction is also like this for me: nothing is happening, and then everything is happening, and then all of a sudden we are just living with, or even in, this new structure. I was inspired by that architectural dynamic.'*



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©Sasha Amaya: Overheard video stills from video captured by Leon Frind and Guy Cohavi

## CHOREOGRAPHING ARCHITECTURES

CONCEPT, CURATION, CHOREOGRAPHY Sasha Amaya

PERFORMANCE Sasha Amaya, Tasha Hess-Neustadt,

Emilia Saavedra, Zoé-Afan Strasser

SET DESIGN Katharina Pia Schütz

COSTUME Sasha Amaya and Rike Zöllner

SOUND SUPPORT Brian Questa

ARCHITECTURAL DIALOGUE PARTNERS Ana Bisbicus and  
Simon Warne

STUDIO TRAINING Jan Burkhardt, Marion Sparber and Alan  
Fuentes, Sigal Zouk

OUTSIDE EYE Sigal Zouk

TEXT Sasha Amaya

GRAPHICS curious / Sasha Amaya

PHOTOGRAPHY Dieter Hartwig, Miriam Tamayo