

Choreographing Architectures – Sensory Dialogues between Dance and Architecture

Ideated and curated by dancer and choreographer Sasha Amaya, “Choreographing Architectures” was a three-day event including a choreographic premiere, talks, and workshops. Fostering discourse into the interconnected fields of choreography and architecture, the event was presented at the spaces of the Deutsches Architektur Zentrum (DAZ) in November 2022.

Writer Elisa Frasson was invited to reflect on the premiere of the same-titled choreographic work from Amaya, investigating the im/materiality of space, creative processes, and community exchange.

Choreography and architecture organize the three-dimensional spaces through movement of the human body in a conceived physical environment, where the space itself and the body serve as primary materials. Etymologically 'choreography', from the Greek (χορογραφία – also chorographia), indicates both dance and space writing, considered as the action of writing or tracing in space (Peponis 1997). Following this path, we can think of choreography within a broader definition as the possibility of bodies organized in and in connection to space. A relationship activated by choreographer Sasha Amaya in her latter project "Choreographing Architectures", which explores how exchange between professionals in both fields, dance and architecture, expands each other's working process and how multiple relations can emerge from shared spaces and encounters.

As an audience member who travels around the city and sometimes arrives quite breathless to the performances, I find an introduction to the evening from Matthias Mohr, artistic director at Radial System, who lays out possible tracks on how to experience a dance work, quite relevant. It offers a chance to calm down and to become open to the following dance experience.

In the programme text, Amaya narrates that she discovered the DAZ galleries while walking around during lockdown: she was amazed by the daylight and found it a perfect space for dancing. It is in this space we return as audience: an enormous hall, with a series of windows on the roof and on two sides; the walls are all white and the floor is covered also with a white moquette. From the first moments, the whiteness of the room pricks our senses alert, while amplifying the sense of airiness of the space. In this expanded impact of whiteness, our attention is first attracted to the four performers, emphasized against the white landscape by their different layers of colour costumes. The dancers walk calmly toward us, welcoming us individually to the space through short personal introductions.

A solo dancer (Amaya) enters the middle of the room and narrates a journey, inviting us to close our eyes. We are introduced to the choreographic piece through the choreography of a text. I find myself transported into a snow-covered landscape, where a warm, cosy fire is warming up the room.



At the end of this journey through the words, I open my eyes: four dancers get closer to each other and begin a quartet on the floor. The movements are geometrically drawn, their busts tilt sideways, they displace their weight on one side to curl up and roll, weaving their arms together. In their deconstruction and re-assimilation of movements, they relate and narrate the surrounding space. Clustered together like a small, compact animal herd, they crawl towards a corner of the room. Suddenly they change direction. The fulcrum of their collective movement balances on the diagonals of the room. They leave the central space to draw its boundaries. They return to the centre and shift our focus towards the ceiling. I have the impression that they are choreographing the ceiling itself.

The quartet breaks down into two sets of pairs, forming with the duets a complementary choreography. Little by little, the dynamic speed increases. Walks accelerate into runs. Their breaths become a sonic gesture launched into space, their bodies increasing in size as they occupy the room.



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I perceive the atmosphere of the choreography as an internal landscape, where the performer's gestures feel intimate with the space. The tactile sense becomes prominent: they touch the surrounding space, the floor, the walls through their hands and their bodies. Thanks to this process of increased perceptive corporeal awareness in the architectural space, I get the impression that the performers are fully inhabiting the room and perceiving its formal structure. In this process of rediscovering the space, it seems to me that their bodies expand and occupy more area.

Attention and energy is accumulated in the gaps between stillness and movement. From this moment the focus on the central space is broken, and turned toward the periphery, the side walls. The performers approach the walls and, in so doing, approach the audience, who are grouped around its edges. The body of the audience becomes an involuntary agent of choreographic design. The initial focus of the floor is now redirected toward the walls on which the dancers move and thump in a dance that seeks multiple supports.



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The dancers move against the wall: they arch their backs, push away, release into it. Our attention is focused, first on a duet against the wall, then shifted to two subsequent solos. Those dancers who are not dancing are watching those who are moving. Interestingly, the placement of the dancers on the walls increases the power of the central space, where the second, and final, solo begins. Reentering the central space, the dancers measure the space with the extremities of their bodies. This spatial tension born from measuring explodes into a displaced composition. The roles of the diagonals and lateral walls are broken, and, for the first-time, an ambient pop track floods the space, amplifying the choreographing action, and chilling the scene.





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The movement choreography has ended. We are now sitting in a space transformed by choreography. In line with what an audience member reflects on during the post-show artist talk, after the collective stream of images and sensations, movement and energy, I perceive the space differently, as if the choreographic design has created energetic shifts that have manifested themselves as physically tactile elements. The choreography, developed through individual and collective alertness for sensory active bodies and designed for the large, airy, white room of DAZ, gave me the opportunity to refocus on my perception of it.

Indeed, the work combines the materiality of this room with research into the emotional aspects of the space itself. In doing so, Amaya succeeds in creating a performance in which sensuality toward space is an equally important way to relate with how we understand, measure, and exist in it.

“Choreographing Architectures” in its wholeness is a community project. Intersecting movement into an already set space, Amaya and collaborators start a research process that goes beyond the functionality that determines our daily notion of using a space, where creative work is considered an opportunity to gather, to sense bodies and surfaces, and to appreciate and experience a space together.

Questioning how to deal with form in the body and space, the performance offers an opportunity to inhabit a place through both the formality and the softness of the movement, where the corporeal presence of the dancers and the audience occupies a critical position towards the architecture. This hybrid encounter encourages multiple and unique exchanges.