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Ariane Wilson (eds.)**

**Constructing Knowledge  
— Das Wissen der Architektur**

**RWTH Aachen University  
November 5–6, 2009**

**Conference Proceedings**

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## **Choreographing Knowledge**

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### **Abstract**

Disruptions in established physical relationships and adjacencies can make visible the built environment as a series of fictions, played out as stage, performer and director; questioning how places are performed. This change of focus, from the public to the personal, allows the city to alter; and creates places that speak across their prescribed functions. Rather than considering it simply as the constitution of objects, building here is performed as unfolding series of processes and practices; moments in everyday lives measured out, productive of and produced by daily rhythms, routines and practices. Through the work of urban (col)laboratory this paper explores how such notions of practiced and performed identities, involving dynamic models of place, are relevant and necessary for re-thinking conventional architectural assumptions and finding alternative ways of engaging with the built environment. They look towards forms of architectural knowledge that offer and produce alternate (social) processes through performative spatial interventions.

Keywords: architecture, performance, spatial practice, performativity, urban public spaces

### **Introduction**

urban (col)laboratory are a collaborative duo whose art practice is rooted in ‘performative urbanity.’ Located between performance art, architecture and writing, our process-led research practice investigates the rhythms and routines by which people negotiate, define and produce everyday spaces. We realise projects that combine performance and architecture, practice and theory, intervention and lecture. To date, outcomes have included performative walks, lectures and films all produced through site-specific research that uses the body to explore the effects of the built environment; its influences on how people rest, move and live. In analysing the rhythms of daily life our practice investigates how we can rethink the power of the built environment within social, political, economic and emotional infrastructures.

### **Everyday Blind Spots**

A path crossed over and over, a street swept again and again: negotiations of the city are conducted through everyday rituals, tasks, and activities. Manchester Piccadilly Gardens is a public park in the centre of Manchester that was renovated in 2001, winning multiple architecture and landscape awards. Based on a five-day long period of research including interviews with passersby, participant observation and performative disruptions, “Blind Spots” was a performance lecture at Piccadilly Gardens, that combined performance and architecture, practice and theory, intervention and lecture to explore the city as a stage for every day performances which construct reality. Urban (col)laboratory investigated the architectural design of the Gardens, its history, the legislation that controlled the space and how these elements sometimes contrasted with and sometimes reinforced the formal and the informal actions that took place there. The lecture walk highlighted the conventions and rules that organise the ‘social character’ of Piccadilly Gardens, focused on what can be done and where and offered a socio-spatial critique of these structures. In parallel to this, it invited the audience to playfully intervene in the routines of Piccadilly Gardens. The on-site performative research and lecture walk was part of “Get Lost! Psychogeography festival” (June 2008) and formed the basis of a lecture video of the same title (Figure 1).

### **Collaboration**

Drawing on our individual backgrounds in architecture and performance, we use inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural investigative processes including recorded conversations, questionnaires, architectural research, intervention and performance to engage with people and places in different ways. Audience and participants include residents and visitors, but also those who produce and occupy places through daily routines such as cleaners, construction workers and maintenance people. We do not simply bring something to a place or do just a walk and talk. Rather, we use the opportunities of the place to make visible its theatrical structures; highlighting hidden relationships and overlooked activities. In this way the collaborative aspect of our practice happens not only between us or the people who inhabit a place, but rather with the place itself.

For “Fissures in the Harbour of Knowledge” urban (col)laboratory participated in research involving performative actions and questionnaires with students, alongside official histories of the Ruhr University Bochum (RUB) including the architect’s original concept for the masterplan and a published interview with architecture professor Helmut Henrich. Since its construction in 1962 the image of the RUB has changed from modern to depressing to monumental. Yet there are gaps in this monumental presence. The concrete edifice has moments of deterioration including tipping paving slabs whose repetitive sounds mark the daily rhythm of students arriving and departing.

Our performative walk used the spaces of the university to explore the interactions of memories, practices and place and at the same time invited the audience to take part in playful and performative gestures that build on existing fissures to find potential moments of play and imagination in order to disrupt, challenge and create new places – new spaces to speak and act from. The performative research and walk took place in the frame of TANZ MACHT RAUM – RAUM MACHT TANZ / Dance Makes Space – Space Makes Dance Symposium, Ruhr University, Bochum (DE) in April 2009 (Figure 2).

### Site Specific

We are interested in site-specific work because we see it as an essential way to engage with and make visible different spatial perceptions and different ways of constructing knowledge about place in a very concrete way. Through productive disruptions in established physical relationships and adjacencies we make visible the built environment as stage, performer and director in order to ask how places are performed.

“Choreographing Knowledge” was the title of a week-long period of research followed by three performative walks that took place at/in Murray Edwards / New Hall Cambridge UK as part of Nightjar and Cambridge University “Festival of Ideas” in October 2009. Phases 1 and 2 of the college buildings were built in 1964 by architects Chamberlain, Powell and Bonn to accommodate the third women’s college of Cambridge University, founded in 1954.

In all our projects the form of the work grows out of the specificities of the place. For “Choreographing Knowledge” we quickly started to discover that the power structures of the college were played out through the décor of the building, the landscape and the places people took up in relation to others. Rituals such as high table, formal hall, and exclusive access were reinstated and reinforced by spatial occupancy and etiquette revealing that what was supposed to be a ‘modern’ college actually reinforced ‘traditional’ routines and hierarchies.

In response to these hierarchies, “Choreographing Knowledge” focused specifically on people working at the edges of the college. We spent a week talking to porters, gardeners, administrative staff, caterers, chefs, librarians and maintenance staff to review the college as a stage for everyday performances, rituals and routines from the perspective of those whose functions are academically marginally located, yet whose daily repetition is central to the functioning of the college. The three performative walks took place during the evening routines of the college and focused on the position of the audience who became both participants and performers through the locations they were invited to take up in relation to the physical spaces of the college (Figure 3).

### Spatial Etiquette

In “Blind Spots,” “Fissures in the Harbour of Knowledge” and “Choreographing Knowledge,” performative and productive disruptions explored spatial etiquette – the constraints, conventions and boundaries by which a place operates. All construct knowledge of a place and all are frequently painful to cross. In Manchester we were asked by security wardens if we had a license to ask questions and told we couldn’t sit where we wanted, in Bochum the walk explored how the failure of the architect’s utopian vision opened up new possibilities for human interaction and in Cambridge permission was required for each and every action we made. In all our work there is always a moment of stepping over boundaries, rubbing up against the expected and critically engaging with routine procedures. This is an experimental process. Sometimes it is a direct result of the working process and sometimes it takes place during the organisation of the work itself.

For “Home is Where the Piano is,” the process, the action of research and the “working” became the work itself, rather than some final work, performance or talk. A simple question “How can you feel at home in Orchard Park?” became a key way of meeting as many people as we could over five days. The project was part of CROP MARKS, Contemporary Art Trail,, Orchard Park, Cambridge (UK), August 2009. Orchard Park is a major, mixed-use development currently under construction on the northern fringe of Cambridge. The site will eventually include 900 new homes, public open spaces, commercial units and community facilities. We explored the specificity of ‘at homeness’ by asking people who live and work in Orchard Park for instructions regarding what we can do to feel more at home; putting this advice into practice in different locations across the development.

The activities included ‘hang out your washing’ ‘take a dog for a walk,’ ‘pay someone to make you feel

at home,’ ‘invite people round,’ ‘meet as many people as you can’ and ‘have a picnic.’ Some practices, such as hanging out washing and having a picnic in seemingly unused public spaces, challenged what people thought was acceptable. At the same time, by asking people how we could feel at home and what home means for people in Orchard Park we managed to get under the surface. In performing spatial practices that make a home a home we also collected very intimate stories and began to construct knowledge of and understand why people liked living there (Figure 4).

### **Conclusion: Critical Spatial Knowledge**

Through embodying alternative strategies of using public space the practice of urban (co)laboratory offers alternate ways of constructing spatial knowledge through critical practices that offer different manners of acting; producing alternative social processes through spatial interventions.

Our most recent work “Walking Through Walls” is an audio walk-for-one that will take place in the Central Theatre, Leipzig as part of the festival “play! Leipzig—Movement in Urban Space,” 24 – 27 June 2010. Exploring some of the more intimate and forgotten spaces, including tiny back stairs and make up tables; contrasting these intimate spaces with larger histories, the audio walk will question what lies behind the walls, under the floorboards, and above the ceiling. It will ask how the theatre is produced, what defines its boundaries and what gestures and routines happen after dark and out of sight to reconstruct its places everyday. At the same time the tour will explore how the building figures in the broader urban landscape of the city: the landscape just beyond its walls. [www.playleipzig.de](http://www.playleipzig.de)

Ultimately, as with all our projects, informed by ‘real’ material, facts, figures, conversations and recordings, “Walking through Walls” will produce a fictional narrative that inhabits a hidden and in-between reality; opening the mind of the walker to latent and anecdotal topographies that critique the spatial etiquette of everyday urban spaces.