THE CURVE IS RUINOUS: ARCHITECTURE AND THE PERFORMATIVE INTERVENTION *SPIRALS*

HARI MARINI

The way that city-spaces are shaped, produced and used entails choices that are entangled with social, political, moral, cultural and economic aspects and values. Architecture plays a significant role in the urban phenomena, since it can re-produce or challenge social roles and reinforce or discourage urban change. Therefore, we should re-consider how space is produced and for whom. As the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre puts it: '(t)he analysis of any space brings us up against the dialectical relationship between demand and command, along with its attendant questions: "Who?", "For whom?", "By whose agency?", "Why and how?"' (Lefebvre, 1991, p.116).

Traditionally, in western societies, architecture tends to be a male-dominated profession – for example, in the UK in the 1980s, about 9 per cent of architects were women (Walker, 2003, p.244). Therefore, the processes of conceptualising, regulating and controlling space has largely been defined by male thought. In his innovative study *Skateboarding, Space and the City* (2001), Iain Borden recognises that although architectural historians have attempted to shake underlying conventions in architectural discourse, their work continues to 'remain within the architectural canon of such "great" male architects as Le Corbusier and Loos, consequently leaving the core object of study unchallenged' (Borden, 2001,

Figure 1. *Spirals* (London, Barcelona, Broadstairs, Belgrade, Coventry, Athens 2013-ongoing)

p.8). Preconceptions about matters such as, cleanliness, the meaning of 'home', the ambiguous distinctions between public and private space, the design of walkways, the plans of working spaces affect and are affected by concepts related to gender and identity. As the geographer Doreen Massey observes:

> *From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood.* (Massey, 1994, p.179)

In 1981, Leslie Kanes Weisman observes that although '(w)omen constitute over 50% of the users of our environments, yet we have had a negligible influence on the architectural forms our environments express' and urges that 'each woman

must become her own architect' (Weisman, 1981, p.8).

In this paper, I discuss how a performative intervention developed by female creators can potentially propose an architectural gesture that suggests an alternative way of engaging with the urban environment, its derelict spaces and architectural structures. I examine how space is conceptualised and produced by focusing on lines, walking, architecture and performance; and how, by the means of performance, imaginative spatial practices can contest rigid 'truths' related to space production and use.

I look at the performative intervention entitled *Spirals* created and performed by a group of female poets, artist and performers[1]. I have been working on *Spirals* with my performance group PartSuspended (www.partsuspended.com) since 2013 (ongoing). Although different aspects of the project – regarding its processes and outcomes – could form part of the discussion, for the purposes of this paper, I focus on the way that spiral lines created within the project oppose linearity and straight lines, and bring imagination, poetry and improvisation to urban space, whilst they open new possibilities of producing, activating and experiencing city-spaces. I argue that performance projects such as *Spirals,* reveal the poetics of spaces, and call us to re-think the value of performative gestures conducted by female artists especially in relation to architecture. Women artists *become their own architects* by creating their own the paths – literal and metaphorical – though walking, bodily gestures, or writing.

I will begin my discussion by analysing concepts related to straight lines that have governed and shaped modern architecture, and then I will continue the discussion by analysing the way that walking, performance and poetic gestures in ruined spaces can challenge those concepts.

[1] For further information about the project, images, video-poems please visit: https://www.partsuspended.com/productions/current/spirals/

The Curve is ruinous

Contemporary city planning and design principles of architecture have been affected by a range of issues emerging from the industrialisation of western cities during the 19th and 20th centuries and their consequent deindustrialisation. Problems such as the overcrowding of urban centres, which were not sufficient to serve the high number of population moving to cities; the lack of urban infrastructure and the demand for sanitisation of urban settings, required planning solutions that dictated concepts and practices that can still be evident in contemporary urban planning and architecture. For example, the improvement of the water supply and sewage systems, because of threats to public health[2], became a critical moment for urban planning and affected how cities were designed and functioned thereafter. The role of plumbing in cities' cleanliness and hygiene introduced by the architect Adolf Loos in 1898 was connected with modernity, verticality and order[3]. This had a powerful impact on modern architecture, which was mainly characterised by rationalised designs at the beginning of the 20th century.

A prominent architect who has influenced modern architecture was Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (1887-1965), known as Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier's projects and ideas as well as principles of the International Congress of Modern Architecture that he established, greatly influenced future architectural work. His concepts, his built projects, as well as his unfulfilled proposals had an enormous impact on architecture and urban design in the 20th century. Le Corbusier was a rationalist architect whose vision of city planning was based on strict geometrical values and emphasised the utilitarian side of architectural planning and designing.

In *The City of Tomorrow* (1924), Le Corbusier reinforced the idea of the ordered

[2] For a discussion on body, cleanliness and city design in the 18th century European cities, see Richard Sennett's *Flesh and Stone* (1994).

[3] Adolf Loos praised the plumber as 'the pioneer of cleanliness (…) the first artisan of the state, the billeting officer of culture, of today's prevailing culture' (Loos 1997, p.18). For Loos, the water usage and sanitation of the urban environment was an imperative for a culture that requests modern development.

city and he analysed the principles that should govern city planning. He asserted that 'a town is pure geometry' and '(w)hen man is free, his tendency is towards pure geometry. It is then that he achieves what we call order' (Le Corbusier, 1971, p.28). Le Corbusier, seeking perfection and order in architecture and urban planning, celebrated the straight line and the right angle. He said: 'a modern city lives by the straight line, inevitably; for the construction of buildings, sewers and tunnels, highways, pavements' (1971, p.16). He claimed that the right angle attains 'superior rights over other angles', it is 'lawful, it is part of our determinism, it is obligatory' (1971, p.27), whilst '(t)he curve is ruinous, difficult and dangerous; it is a paralyzing thing' (1971, p.16). Le Corbusier arrives at authoritarian conclusions that provide no escape from the idea of formality and functionality of the design, both in terms of domestic space and city layout. In his architectural vocabulary there is no flexibility, no place for the accidental, the contingent and the improvisatory. He attempted to regulate the complexity and the ever-changing character of cities.

Jane Jacobs passionately opposed orthodox city planning that followed Le Corbusier's principles. In her seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Jacobs opened a way of thinking about cities in terms of their liveability; how cities can become more diverse and respond to human visions and needs. Jacobs argued for diversity in the city since she believed that this would advance public life. She says: '(t)he ubiquitous principle is the need of cities for a most intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially' (1961, p.14). Jacobs raised crucial issues about making a city habitable, diverse and socially vibrant, which had been overlooked by trends that followed Le Corbusier's tradition.

Along the same lines, the architect Eileen Gray criticising the work of those contemporary pioneers of modern architecture, like Le Corbusier, objected the rationalised geometric forms and the machine aesthetic of modern architecture. In an interview in 1929, Gray states: '(t)heir desire for rigid precision makes them neglect the beauty of all these forms: discs, cylinders, lines which undulate

or zigzag, elliptical lines which are like straight lines in movement. Their architecture is without soul' (Gray, 1981, pp.71-72). Although for Le Corbusier the curve is disastrous, difficult and threatening, for Gray lines other than straight give soul to architecture. Gray emphasises the value of re-examining architectural models and freeing architecture from the dominance of the straight line.

Lines are associated with concepts and practices present in a variety of historical, cultural and anthropological contexts. In his seminal work *Lines: A Brief History* (2007), Tim Ingold discusses how 'the straight line has emerged as a virtual icon of modernity', whilst modern thought advanced a dichotomising dialectic that:

> *(...) associated straightness with mind as against matter, with rational thought as against sensory perception, with intellect as against intuition, with science as against traditional knowledge, with male against female, with civilization as against primitiveness (...) with culture as against nature.* (Ingold, 2007, p.152)

If we are seeking spatial practices and processes that are inclusive, that overcome futile distinctions between outsiders and insiders, that call for participation, sharing and community, then we should re-consider how space can be abstracted from concepts entangled with certainty, authority and linear progress. In the following section, I'm going to discuss how the practice of walking can challenge concepts dictated by the straight line, and can become an act of creation, of *poiesis*.

Walking as an act of *poiesis*

Walking as a mode of travel, but also as a spatial practice, encourages creative responses to urban space and generates critical reflection. Through its rhythmic movement, walking 'generates a kind of rhythm of thinking' and finds its place between 'being and doing' (Solnit, 2001, p.5), as Rebecca Solnit puts it. The

walker absorbs, translates, imagines and transforms the multiple stimuli of the environment; she/he reflects on space by being in it; walking and thinking come in tune, and support the walker's participation in a creative practice. Through walking we re-position ourselves within the cityscape; we experience city-spaces through various perspectives by being immersed in them, and we deepen our connection and comprehension of the physical space in which we live.

For Le Corbusier, '(m)an walks in a straight line because he has a goal and knows where he is going; he has made up his mind to reach some particular place and he goes straight to it' (Le Corbusier, 1971, p.11). The connection between straightness, reason, goal is clear in Le Corbusier's statement. Walking in straight lines from point to point avoiding deviation, hesitation, distractions, intuition, shapes the city-user's experience within a destination-oriented path. In this way, paths and streets are rendered to be merely 'connectors' (Ingold, 2007, p.75); they serve to connect destinations, not spaces that offer experience in themselves. According to Ingold, connectors are associated with transport, the main difference of which from wayfaring is that 'transport is destination-oriented' (2007, p.77). Thus, '(w)hile on the trail the wayfarer is always somewhere, yet every "somewhere" is on the way to somewhere else' (2007, p.81), the transported traveller 'who departs from one location and arrives at another is, in between, nowhere at all' (2007, p.84).

Although, in western contemporary cities, paths and streets often fail to grow organically within the city's net, I suggest that they still contain possibilities for wandering, exploring and creating. Despite the increasing effort of regulating all possible routes spreading in the city's net, walking remains an act dependent on the idiosyncratic movements of the individual that contests the city-space as imagined and materialised by urban planners and architects. Michel de Certeau defines 'walking as a space of enunciation' (De Cereau, 1984, p.98) that is performed by urban pedestrians. The pedestrian creatively tracks her/his route, whilst she/he breaks free from controlling routes and constraints of urban space. In his analysis on ordinary urban walking, de Certeau aims:

Figure 2. *Spirals: Genesis* by PartSuspended (London 2017)
https://youtu.be/AkVhf1BSMuo

> *(…) to locate the practices that are foreign to the "geometrical" or "geographical" space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions. These practices of space refer to a specific form of operations ("ways of operating"), to "another spatiality" (an "anthropological", poetic and mythic experience of space), and to an opaque and blind mobility characteristic of the bustling city.* (1984, p.93, italics original)

Considering 'ways of operating' in contemporary society, de Certeau looks for a creative way of 'making'. 'The "making" in question is a production, a *poiesis* – but a hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of "productions" (television, urban development, commerce, etc.)' (1984, p.xii, italics original), he says. Following de Certeau, we could suggest that walking is an act of creation, of *poiesis*. The walker produces new ways of 'making' the city through the gaps that emerge from the city's net, deviating from established

routes, conventional rules and dominating systems of production. Walking invites new possibilities of experiencing and reshaping the built environment and speaks something of the city.

Walking along spirals

Walking has attracted the attention of a variety of artists, as way of exploring the relationship between performance art and physical space. From Bruce Nauman's video performance piece 'Walking in an Exaggerated Manner, around the Perimeter of a Square' (1967-1968) to the landscape creations of Richard Long (see Long, 2009); and from Francis Alÿs's interventionist's *paseos* (walks) (see Godfrey et al., 2010) to Tehching Hsieh's 'One Year Performance 1981-82' (see Heathfield and Hsieh, 2009); walking has epitomised a human physical action, which at the same time carries artistic, political and social dimensions. In this section of the paper, I focus on the *Spirals* project (2013-ongoing), in order to discuss how the performative intervention *Spirals* generates an imaginative and poetic approach to walking in city-spaces and creates its own transitory architecture.

As we have seen straight lines have been praised by modern architecture, while meandering lines might have been perceived as a threat to order, authority, linear progress. However, I suggest that it is often through a winding course that walking becomes an act of creation and provokes a poetic experience of space. The act of moving and progressing in spirals and not in linear forms provides a way of being in tune with space and time. It is through curves and cyclical movement that the sense of place is created. As Kenneth Olwig argues: '(t)he "deliberative steps" that bring the peripatetic mind a sense of place and community are (...) inherently circuitous' (Olwing, 2002, p.22). Olwing compares the peripatetic progress with the act of marching, arguing that the peripatetic progress is 'topian' and 'does not parade us linearly to the steady beat of its drum but, like the spiral of a harmonic progression, allows us to return to, and regenerate, the places that give us sustenance' (Olwing, 2002, p.23).

The *Spirals* project crosses geographical borders and unites female voices in an exchange of languages, cultures, personal narratives and modes of expression. The spiralling walk adopted in the project acts as a sign of becoming, transforming and awareness. It challenges the idea of productive-linear time as well as the sense of linear progress, and attempts to make us re-think and return to 'places that give us sustenance'. In the project the spiral acts as a symbol of sharing, unity and reconnection; a symbol of (re)visiting the past and at the same time (re)thinking the present and (re)imagining the future. The symbol of a spiral can be found in nature and in countless ancient and contemporary artefacts; often representing evolution, transformation, rebirth, growth, lifecycles, fertility, cyclical forces and patterns of nature, as well as the movement from internal concepts and the inner self to the outer world and vice-versa.

For the project we have been collaborating with female poets, performers, musicians and video-makers. Through the performative gesture of making and walking along spirals, the project makes the transitory architecture of paths made by the female walkers-performers-poets-creators visible. The project has sought to articulate the female experience of time, path, migration, memory, home and sense of belonging in a poetic and imaginative way through live performance, performance on camera, poetry, experimental writing, music and video-making. Female performers created their own spiralling paths within ruined spaces in European cities and walked along them. They became their own architects by designing their spiralling route and moving along it. Their gesture stood in contrast to linearity and purpose-orientated built spaces.

The performers reflecting on the poems, which have been selected for the project, chose materials that were associated to images, words, feelings of the poems and at the same time were inspired by the location. Flowers, soil, chalk, corn, oranges, beans, flour, ice cubes, pieces of glass, feathers, fabric, coal, turmeric, foam, foil, cotton, tulle, net, wire were some of the construction materials used to build spiralling paths by the performers. A series of spirals winding in towards the centre of the route, or winding out towards the city were created inviting the

Figure 3. *Spirals: As If* by PartSuspended (Coventry 2019)
https://www.interimpoetics.org/interim-36-3/hari-marini

performers to inhabit them and walk along them. By walking along spirals the makers imagined and created their own poetic version of pathways within the cityscapes. Deriving from personal experiences, accidental encounters as well as poetic texts, the spirals created on the ground have invited creators and viewers to imagine lines and spaces differently.

Spiralling in ruins

For the *Spirals* project, PartSuspended group has worked, filmed and performed within leftover spaces in European cities, such as London, Barcelona, Broadstairs, Belgrade, Coventry and Athens. Each of these cities has been the place where the female poets, whose poetry has been integrated into the project, lived either temporarily or permanently.

Poems related to the notion of home, migration, memory, femininity, place and love have guided performers and audience to the experience of city-spaces

through the spiralling walk. The video-poems and live performances have been shown in a variety of venues and festivals, reaching out to diverse audiences, and different types of spaces, such as the Worker's Chamber in Novi Sad (Serbia) as part of DAN event, 'Seeing the Invisible', organised by BAZA–Spatial Praxis platform; the occupied self-organised Embros theatre in Athens (Greece), as part of International Video Poetry Festival organised by The Institute (for Experimental Arts) – Void Network; [SPACE] artist studios (London). Also, the group has run workshops open to the public, in which members of the public were invited to create their own spirals and poetic texts.

The majority of the spaces that have been used for performance and filming purposes were derelict, such Can Batlló in Barcelona (Spain), a former industrial complex textile factory; the ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral (UK); the ruined open-air theatre in Strefi in the centre of Athens (Greece); the backyard of the Kulturni Centar in Belgrade (Serbia); the seashore alongside the load-bearing wall in Broadstairs (UK) – the wall supports the cliffs on which the Kingsgate Castle (converted into flats) is located. I consider important to briefly discuss the function of ruined spaces and preconceptions related to dereliction, and how a performative intervention can make us think differently about rationalised categorisation of city-spaces and their functionality.

Ruined spaces are associated with disorder, ugliness and impurity; they disturb visual order and escape the rhythm of the city. They often signify a failure of the past, whilst their presence raises questions for the future. Mary Douglas's famous characterisation of dirt as 'a matter out of place' (Douglas, 1978, p.35) can also be applied to spaces of dereliction. Their proximity to shiny and new constructed structures makes their presence problematic. Although derelict spaces can be found in central locations of cities, they are considered as urban voids or wastelands (see Doron, 2000; Edensor, 2005). However, ruined spaces contain the 'promise of the unexpected' (2005, p.4) as Tim Edensor observes. They question dominant codes of smooth city-spaces and reveal 'the contingent, ineffable, unrepresentable, uncoded, sensual, heterogenous possibilities of

contemporary cities' (Edensor, 2005, p.19). Therefore, urban ruins provoke excitement, and in cases discomfort and confusion, and they challenge spatial conventions and our engagement with built spaces. They can act as spaces of counter-practice that offer an alternative way of experiencing and organising city-spaces and city-life. They provide possibilities of architecture and spatial practices that open up meanings and encourage poetry, imagination, play and multiplicity.

In *Spirals* project, the unanticipated encounters, routes and connections as well as the accidental blending of materials, objects, textures, levels and forms within the ruined spaces have informed the act of walking as well as the visualisation of the spiralling paths. The aesthetics as well as a sense of freedom that rundown spaces provide have contributed to imaginative approaches. Through the interaction of the performers with the ambiguous forms and unexpected material of ruined spaces, the project speaks something of the ambivalence and unpredictability of life in at least three ways. First, the decline of physical appearance, which contests ideas about durability and fixity of the built environment, highlights the unavoidable decay and ageing, and reminds of the connection between life and death. Second, the slow meditative walk in ruined spaces that stand still, projecting their slow and silent way of crumbling, highlights the value of resisting the speeded-up flow of the city and of rethinking time. Third, the immersion in ruined spaces emphasises the value of being open and attentive to the surroundings for this attention contributes to acquiring knowledge as we walk along paths; as Ingold puts it: 'knowledge is integrated along a path of movement' (Ingold, 2007, p.91, italics original).

Conclusion

Space is not a homogenous entity, seen from a one-point perspective, but it is the product of stories and processes – past and present – that call us to imagine the future. It is a synthesis of stories and routes, the endless combinations and versions of which confirm that 'the world is *not* ready-made for life to occupy. (...)

Ways of life are not therefore determined in advance, as routes to be followed, but have continually to be worked out anew' (Ingold, 2000, p.242 italics original). The *Spirals* project invites us to imagine city-spaces, lines, ruined spaces, time differently. It re-connects city-spaces with poetry and imagination through walking, spiralling routes, poetic texts, gestures and performance. In light of socio-political changes (and challenges) in Europe (financial crisis, immigration, displacement, Brexit etc), as well as the international women's movements, a discussion on the production of space and how creative practices can open new avenues into analysing and experiencing space becomes crucial. The *Spirals* project invites us to imagine city-spaces, lines, ruined spaces, time differently. It re-connects city-spaces with poetry and imagination through walking, spiralling routes, poetic texts, gestures and performance. It produces a shared space by creating a network of women across European cities, and attempts to challenge preconceptions in regard to socio-political and geographical borders and the use of space. The *Spirals* project emphasises the value of personal and collective experience in producing space, as well as the role of shared art practices within current sociocultural changes.

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