

## **SPACE AND PERFORMANCE**

### **Researching place and gesture in real settings**

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#### **Abstract**

*Although architecture and cinema or architecture and photography are two well developed fields of study, the connection between theatre and architecture has raised less awareness from academia.*

*The purpose of the Dramatic Architectures project was to gather these two fields, find new ways of understanding their connections, namely the issues of gesture and space, researching the common areas of the two fields, and establish a methodology of research. For its subject, several possibilities were considered: the architecture of theatres, the connection between creative processes of both areas, site-specific theatre, the questions of light and sound in space, etc. For the time being, the project decided to focus on the research of site-specific theatre.*

*Site-specific art is a common artform since the 60s that attempts to create works around specific places, attempting to raise the awareness about the place or attempting to change the aforementioned place.*

*Originally, site-specific art, according to Mion Kwon, attempted to draw attention to the specific conditions of production and presentation of works of art, but later it was used to draw attention to broader cultural and social issues connected with each place.*

*In my presentation, I aim to propose a methodology of research for site-specific theatre that highlights both the dramatic, performative and architectonic elements of site-specific theatre. Based on the analysis of *The Rest of the World*, a site-specific performance by *Visões Úteis* that took place in a taxi across Porto, I will try to define boundaries of research and methods to investigate the connections between space and performance, for the audience, in site-specific theatre, that can enlighten the hidden meanings and affects of space and gesture against a real setting.*

**Keywords:** Site-specific performance, Theatre, Portuguese Theatre, Space.

#### **Introduction**

Although the connections between architecture and cinema or architecture and photography are respected and developed fields of study in academia, the connection between theatre and architecture has been mostly overlooked.

It is not easy to explain the reasons for such situation, because both areas have a long common history. In the Western world, the most impressive vestiges of theatre practice come from the Greek amphitheaters of the Theatre of Dionysus Eleuthereus, of Delphi or of Epidauros. Furthermore, the social changes throughout history prompted changes in theatre and architectural practice, as any study of theatre architecture can attest. This connection between both fields is also deeply felt by theatre practitioners, as Iain MacKintosh notes that «Theatre people understand this instinctively, though rarely speak out except when opening a new theatre. On these occasions the actor often inveighs against modern theatres which, lacking the character of the old, fail to support his or her art.» (1993: 1).

On top of this background, we have the recent practice of new art forms that explore the use of real spaces or non-conventional spaces to develop new ways for building drama, connecting with the audience and delving into new subjects and proposing new understandings of the human condition.

The purpose of the Dramatic Architectures project was to gather these two fields and try to focus on the space between them, trying to find new venues of understanding. Namely on the subjects of gesture and space. This project was started in 2014 with a seminar, where we gathered theatre-makers, architectures and researchers in a seminar as a exploratory survey of the field. The results were wide and interesting and we are still working on them. But we had theatre-makers complaining about the architecture of theatres being used today, but also architects pondering the difficulties of creating stages for classical plays but also able to accommodate new plays that challenge the theatrical conventions of space, light, sound and performance. We learned of the importance of theatre as a way of questioning, displaying and even saving architecture, but also how some architectures have used theatre has a way of thinking about architecture itself.

The seminar gave us the urge to organize a larger, conference, open to international research, to allow us to discuss with other researchers, share findings and better understand this promising field.

Obviously, the first priority of the project was to determine a focus of research and a perspective. With so many unexplored areas, we felt the need to focus on a more familiar one. We decided to settle on site-specific theatre, for which there is already some research. Beginning on familiar ground allows us to profit from the work of previous researchers and thinkers. Site-specific theatre also allow us to focus on non-theatrical architecture, without excluding it, and afforded us the possibility to research two areas that seemed essential for both areas and with lots of future potential, namely space and gesture.

Therefore, we needed a more specific methodology of study of the area that could successfully approach site-specific theatre in a way that could produce meaningful results either for theatre and for architecture.

This paper is an attempt to delineate such methodology, based on a case-study of a site-specific piece created by the Portuguese theatre troupe, *Visões Úteis*.

### **Site-specific theatre**

Site-specific art is a common artform since the 60s that attempts to create works around specific places, trying to raise awareness about the place or change the aforementioned place.

Originally, site-specific art, according to Mion Kwon (2002: 3-5), attempted to draw attention to the specific conditions of production and presentation of works of art, but later it was used to draw attention to broader cultural and social issues connected with each place. That is, space was turned into metaphor for something considered more important, like a political or social issue.

However, this methodology can render the space itself invisible or merely a stage for the performance, to which it contributes through novelty and exoticism.

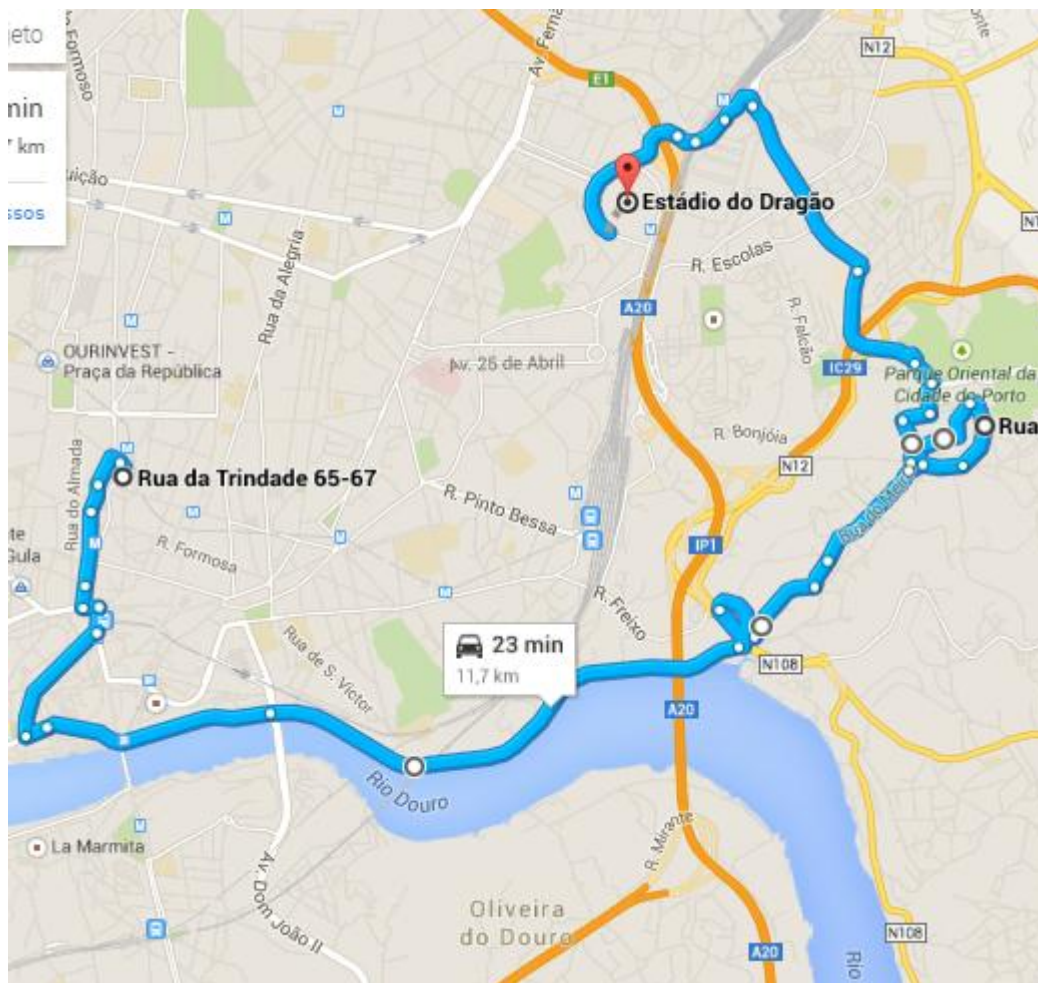
To be meaningful, a space should be taken at its own value: social, economic, architectural value. I will try to review what this type of analyses conceptualizes through a specific performance: *O Resto do Mundo* (*The Rest of the World*), by the Portuguese company Visões Úteis (2007).

### ***O Resto do Mundo***

Visões Úteis is a theatre company located in Porto, which has been working since 1995. Most of their productions take place in conventional stages, displaying a deep political commitment and awareness of current issues. But one of their projects is Arte na Paisagem (Landscape Art), through which they have produced some very significant pieces of site-specific theatre, like *Coma Profundo* (2002), in Porto, or *Errare* (2004), in Italy.

*O Resto do Mundo* is part of the Arte na Paisagem project and was a journey by taxi from the center of Porto to some of the more degraded areas of its outskirts, using text and characters from the short-story *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad, which was said by two actors and recorded voices being played on the car radio.

Taken at face value, this is obviously a social commentary on the wide class divisions within the city and Portuguese society. Yet, if we examine the performance more closely, we will recognize in it an artful and clever use of urban spaces at the service of performance and gesture.



**Figure 1.** A overall view of the route taken during the performance. This is only an approximate map, because after entering the eastern part of the town, the taxi would embark in a labyrinth of dead-end roads and tracks very difficult to replicate on Google Maps. The itinerary would start at Trindade, go towards the river, go upriver and then turn left into a maze of deserted roads and poor neighbourhoods, before turning back to the city centre.



**Figure 2.** This picture was taken by Paulo Pimenta under an effort by the company itself to document the areas visited during the performance. This picture shows quite well the living conditions and type of landscape that would be seen by the performance's audience. The company put in a lot of effort documenting the process and interacting with the communities involved, even producing a short documentary portraying the performance, *A Caminho do Resto do Mundo*, by Pedro Maia (2007), which included amateur shots taken by some of the inhabitants of these areas.

Through this performance it is possible to recognize some of the different types of spaces described by Judith Rugg (2010: 33) that are used by site-specific theatre, the most meaningful for this work was the contingent spaces, that is, the spaces that are contiguous to the hierarchical spaces of the organized city. These contingent spaces, states Rugg, are "transformed into installations for time-based performances of the overlooked, contesting the construction of the city as spectacle primarily determined through the hegemonic ordering and regulation of architecture and planning." (2010: 34), usually to "waste reveals the myth of progress driven by the (supposedly) innovative power of capitalism and must be hidden" (2010:39).

It seems obvious that we are in the presence of such kind of performance, even if "O Resto do Mundo" was part of a larger project to explore the writings of the Polish writer Joseph Conrad, and the center of the project was a staging of his text "An Outpost of Progress" detailing the capitalistic exploitation of the Belgian Congo.

Yet, I would like to examine more carefully the dramaturgical construction of the performance, which, I would argue, is based on the construction of contrasts and continuities of space and gesture.

Such continuity is provided by the travel, itself. The audience is taken by taxi on a continuous route in continuous time that gives a sense of perceptual coherence. Yet, this coherence of time and presence is contrasted by the careful selection and succession of contrasting spaces being crossed.

Georg Simmel (2004: 76) observed that urban life was marked by deep contrasts and a strong specialization. I would argue those characteristics were essential to give birth to drama and dramaturgy in general. We just have to take notice that the origins and history of Western Theatre were largely a urban affair, born in the city-states of Greece and progressing on the stages of the urban centers of Europe. But we can also take notice of the structures of rural theatre, which is mostly marked by its ritualized, repetitive and continuous nature.

Not only that, but modern cities are marked by strong contrasts, by the concept of different areas, with different populations, with contrasting life styles, be they neighborhoods, ghettos or districts. These differences can be defined by economic reasons, like wages or social classes, and social reasons, like immigration, minorities, professions, and other reasons.

It is striking how these two elements combine in *O Resto do Mundo* to generate a dramaturgy of urban contrasts. Analyzing the itinerary of the performance, one cannot fail to notice that this is built on distinct areas: the departure takes place at the more noble area of Porto, near the town hall, the site of political

power, then follows to the touristic area, where cultural and artistic endeavours are on display as a capitalist utopia.

After that, the route slowly goes up river, mimicking the boat travel up the river Congo that takes place at the story *Heart of Darkness*, by Conrad, until it goes inland, crossing a farming area and a degraded area of slums and drug dealing, before returning to the city center, to end near a football stadium and a shopping mall.

This dramaturgy of contrast of spaces is reinforced by natural light. The performance employs sunset as a way to underline the difference between the daylight of the city, and the twilight or outright darkness of the poorer districts. And the contrast is reinforced by the dress code of the characters, where the driver uses white, when he comes from the noble part of town, and the mysterious passenger that enters the taxi in the gray area between the city center and the outskirts – in a gas station - wears black.

Apart from that, we also have to deal with the dramaturgy of inside/outside. The performance plays clearly with this concept, where the passengers/audience are inside, but always under the threat of outside. They are warned beforehand not to open the windows, but in a certain moment one of the performers open the windows, obviously as a tease. And the windows work two-ways. The audience can watch from the inside the alien landscape outside, but they too can be watched, as intruders entering an area where they are not supposed to be. This was clearly employed by the troupe to play with the fears of the passengers. The players have reported to me of passengers closing their eyes or refusing to look outside the window, apparently fearful of the real space outside, of this unknown area of their own city that is revealed to them.

More than the social critique of the performance, this infusion of fear in the audience is for me more interesting, because it is based, obviously, on the presence of performers and sound being heard, but mainly on the dramaturgy of space and light. The audience is gradually taken to an unknown place, in a very premeditated movement, and this movement renders a sense of helplessness. Closed inside the car, the audience can feel some degree of safety inside, but

outside the space becomes more and more meaningful and frightful. And the movement, the context, creates a change of perception of space that is largely emotional and taking place on the body level.

This is a deliberate and very clever use of the dimensions of space and the distance between them. This distance between the "good city" and the "bad city", the first embodying culture, power, history, engineering and nature, and opposing the "bad city" represented by forsaken nature, poverty, underdevelopment, powerless community and abandonment is dramaturgically linked through a continuous movement through space and under very specific natural light conditions. The conclusion of the movement, and of the performance, is the crass consumerism on display at the shopping center and the football stadium, that gives a simulacrum of success and unity in a community that the audience has just seen to be a divided and failing.

Ideology, of course, but this dramaturgy also exposes the unknown, where the geographically unknown is also the emotionally void. The lack of emotional bonding of the passenger with the surrounding environment reveals also a lack of emotional bonding with the human landscape. Taking an idea of Walter Benjamin (1992: 66) one has to have an emotional binding that organizes space. The audience, coming from a middle class, intellectual background, is exposed to the emotional barrenness of the landscape. I am not saying this landscape has no human bonds in it. There are, and, in some situations, we can find closer relationships than in the city center. But the audience of this performance, of theatre in Portugal, in general, has little or no human connections with this landscape. Very few people experiencing this journey were from a background with friends or family in this area. And, as Benjamin states above, having no emotional focus renders this space meaningless and more bewildering because of that. Yet, the audience also feels it is close, at least geographically. And this renders the performance more powerful. These are different "regions", in the sense of Goffman (1993: 129), of areas with emotional or perceptual barriers to the individual perception. Even if geographically and politically and representationally they are the same region.

Finally, I would like to point out that an effect of fictionalizing these real spaces is that the audience itself is fictionalized. That is, the audience becomes removed from reality and settles in a magic circle, theorized by Johan Huizinga (2003), that overlays reality itself.

However, going back to Benjamin (2004: 62-63) and his distinction between document/matter and the work of art/form, it is very clear that site-specific theatre works with the matter of space and gesture, but to understand it as art, as work, this has to be dealt through its deliberate form, which is, I would argue, dramaturgy. It is by the invisible binding of the different materials that the artist can build a cohesive work that we can study and bring a deeper awareness.

## **Conclusions and methodology**

This is still a preliminary survey of a promising field, but I would like to draw some proposals as methodological principles to fuel further research around this field.

First, I would argue that space should not be a metaphor, as this erases the specificity of each space towards its representation, but would insist on the need to have a clear view of the conditions and relationships of the real space.

Secondly, it is clear that space cannot be disconnected from gesture. Space is an experience and the way the performer or the audience experiences space cannot be ignored. Such experience occurs through perception and movement. Movement has a specific dramaturgy that transforms space and its perception.

Thirdly, the physical and emotional connectedness of the audience and performers to the spaces cannot be ignored. This is more important in site-specific theatre, where the local audience almost always has some sort of previous knowledge or preconceptions about the space involved. So that all the theatrical devices and transformations have to play into this preconceptions, including light, sound, and others, and have to be considered.

Fourth, the fictionalization of real spaces is a powerful force, still to be explored and better understood. It is obvious that the individual experience of the space it is not always the same, and can be manipulated, namely through fiction. But this fiction cannot ignore nor be completely independent of the surrounding space. Some negotiation has to happen. This is a matter that warrants further research.

Fifth, space and gesture are the matter of site-specific theatre, that must be shaped through form, that is, through dramaturgy. I propose that this dramaturgy is fundamentally similar to stage dramaturgy, specifically in its use of continuity and contrast to shape meaning and subject, and, therefore, art. But a better systematization of this kind of dramaturgy with the previous conditions should be better explored.

In this article I tried to map some possibilities for further research. I am confident that some of my assertions warrant further revision and discussion, but I am also confident that these statements, and this discussion will allow this research project to develop some meaningful results that can be beneficial to both architecture and theatre.

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