

**How Can The Combination Of Body Movement And
Spatial Dynamics Influence A Spatial Design
Process?**

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Abstract

Drawing from ideas of human geography and “being-in-the-world”, this work explores the synergy of body and space to reveal possibilities within the context of spatial design for performance. Through a phenomenological approach, the aim of this research is to discover how site-specific movement practices might inform other discussions related to the creative processes behind stage design.

I am here. You are here too. We know we are here not because someone has told us but because our bodies are able to feel the space around us in this present moment. I can feel the concrete beneath my feet, constantly morphing in shapes as I walk along. I can also feel the icy cold air on my skin and some sun too, which tells me today is a sunny winter day. Perhaps you can feel an absence of sound if you're currently in an enclosed space, or a hard surface beneath your butt, if you're sitting in an office or library chair. Within the context of spatial design, one tends to ask questions like 'what is a space?' or 'what is a body in space?' and to answer these questions one has to first understand that "consciousness experiences its world and itself through its body" (Sheets-Johnstone 2015). In order to fully comprehend what our consciousness perceives or interprets in terms of space, we need to look first at our bodies and how they react to the space that surrounds them. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone continues this argument by claiming that "if we have conscious experiences, it is because our body moves within the environment as a spatial presence and intuitively knows the meaning of its spatiality". If we are able to understand the space, not only through analysis, but also with corporeal sensations, one can argue that movement can be a primary tool of exploration in this field. By acknowledging the body as a spatial presence, we lay the foundation for a more nuanced exploration of spatial design, one that considers the visceral and intuitive aspects of human experience.

As movement becomes our point of interest here, looking into dancers or movement practitioners brings a solid insight behind the driving forces of movement and how it can be a powerful research tool. Isadora Duncan, a major figure of the early contemporary dance scene, has made her own conclusions along the same lines. She tells us that the artist, without a sense of consciousness about the human form, that is, an understanding and sensibility of its lines and proportions, is unable to comprehend the beauty that surrounds

him. This means that by getting to knowing our anatomy we are expanding the levels of embodied consciousness from space and time into beauty as well. More specifically, and as a woman herself, Isadora asks us: how can women obtain this knowledge?

“Shall she find this knowledge in the gymnasium examining her muscles, in the museum regarding her sculptured forms, or by the continual contemplation of beautiful objects, and the reflection of them in the mind?

“She must live this beauty and her body must be the living exponent of it”

(Duncan and Cheney, 1969).

Following these thoughts, I developed an exercise to put the philosophy into practice. As a woman myself, I was to learn about the beauty of space through research involving movement. I was to embody the space and react to it, matching the flow of the actions to the flow of the space.

The practice consists of three different stages:

I. Experience

Letting the body take the space

II. Description

How does the body respond to the space? How does it describe the space through movement?

III. Creation

The response is used as a language to create something new.

In Victoria Hunter's work, *Embodying the Site: the Here and Now in Site-Specific Dance Performance*, she performs a similar exercise where she labels the different exploration stages as 'experiencing the Site', 'expressing the Site', 'embodying the Site', and finally 'receiving the Site' in the form of a performance work.

Building upon the premise that conscious experiences are intertwined with bodily movement. Site-specific movement practices, such as dance, parkour, or even everyday activities like walking, provide unique perspectives on spatial dynamics. Through the intentional engagement of the body in these practices, designers can gain insights into the nuances of spatial relationships, materiality, and atmosphere.

Because it's also about materiality.

Designers manipulate different materials. This act implies a thorough understanding of the material, what makes it, how can it respond to other forces, how does it move, feel, act under certain conditions.

One of the first things a designer learns is, for example, how to manipulate paper. How many creases can I make, what types of folds can I use for it to visually convey a specific emotion?

This exploration of material is an intrinsic part of our creative processes.

However, spatial designers not only manipulate paper, and cardboard, mdf, and other tangible things, they also manipulate things with broader, less tangible meanings like light, sound and space. In a way, this work is an exercise to delve into the materiality of space.

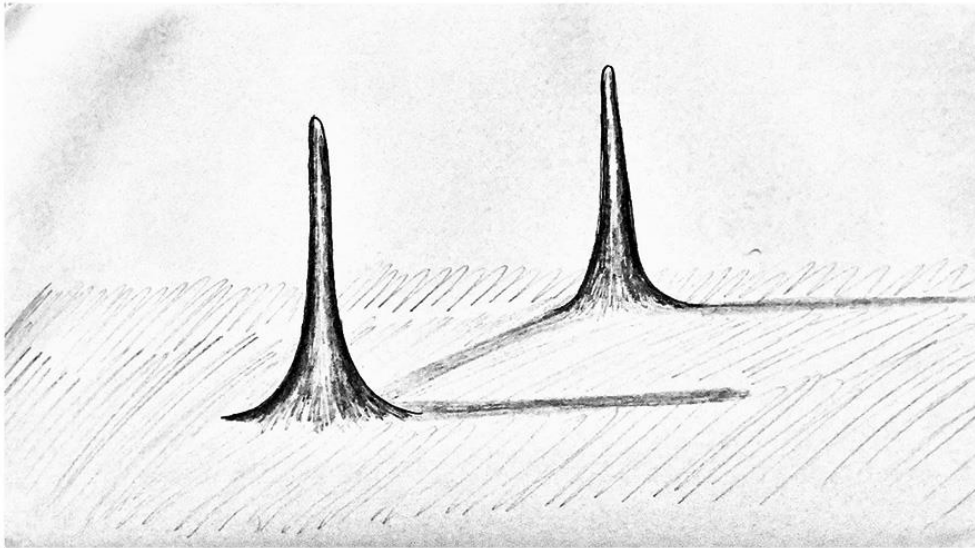
The first part of the exercise features a first encounter with space. There are five different locations, all set within the landscapes of Panama City. From an abandoned chapel surrounded by tropical trees in Gamboa, to the Chagres River and the beach at Veracruz, movement takes the lead in the phenomenological exploration of these spaces.

In Victoria Hunter's work, what she calls *Site-Dance Explorations*, she takes a similar exercise to the streets of Barcelona, particularly to the neighborhood of El Raval. Here a group of women, ranging from different ages, take on the challenge of exploring the neighborhood. The people talk about their experience afterwards and comment on the process. It is an interesting activity as a method of research as one gets to understand the identity of a space through body senses. Many of the women described connecting to the history of El Raval, as well as their own personal stories which combine experiences of immigration and settlement. This was all experienced through a somatic approach.

Replicating this exercise, I was also able to connect with the history of my own country and the American occupation that happened in the spaces I explored, which are now filled with greenery, palm trees, weeds, abandoned buildings and forgotten stories.

At the first location, an abandoned chapel called *Capilla Nuestra Señora Del Buen Consejo*, in Gamboa, I navigate through two distinct shapes, two pillars. These pillars, holding no roof, carrying nothing, shape the dynamic of the movements and affect the direction and intention of the dance. As I **experience** the space, the heat of the day, the hollow feel of an abandoned building my body begins to react. Maintaining the purity of the experiment and following the phenomenological way of thinking, the description of these movements can be observed best in the attached videos.

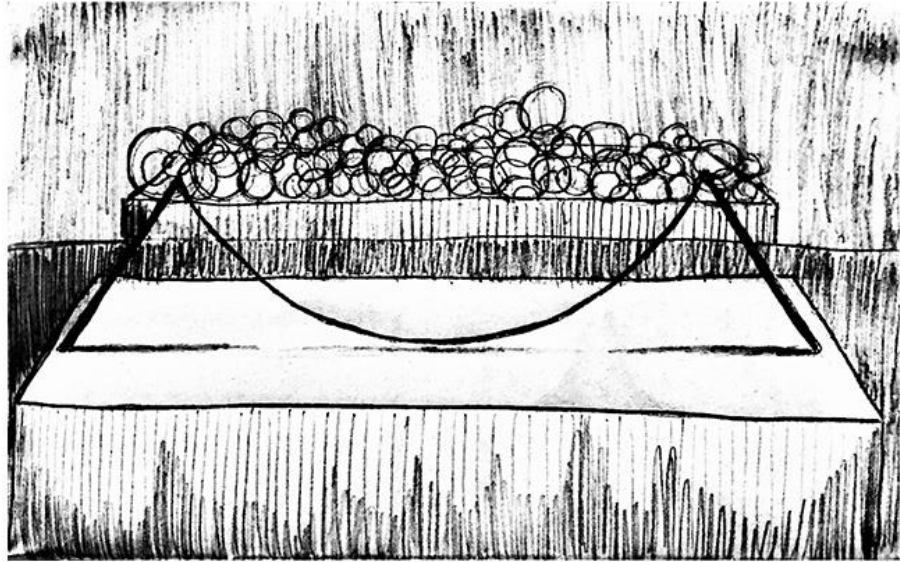
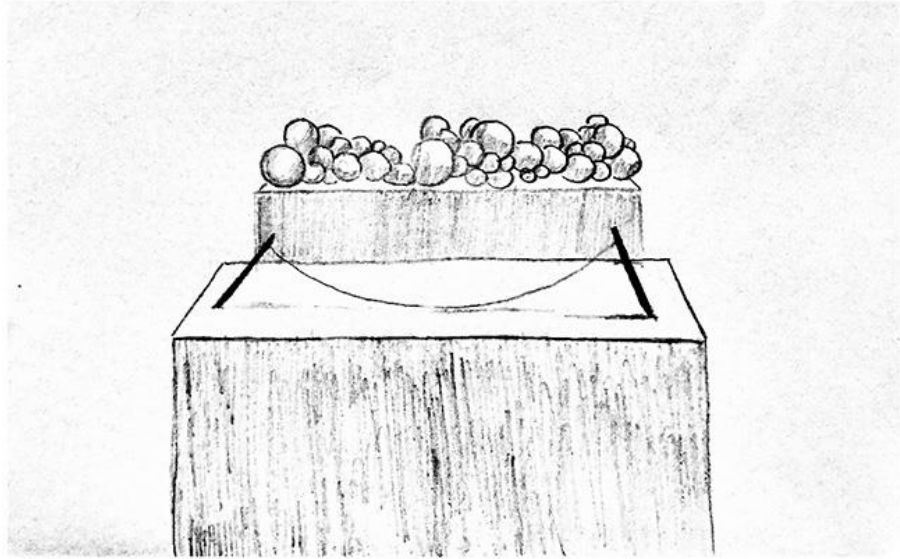
Examining then the trajectory of the body through the space, I extracted what Maxine Sheets-Johnstone refers to as the visual kinetic forms in aims of incorporating these forms into the creation of a new space – “To speak of any spatial forms in dance, shapes as well as curves, diagonals, verticalities, and so forth, is to speak of the imaginative, visual-kinetic forms immediately created by movement: they are not only linear forms but areal forms as well”.



Sketch of a speculative space developed in response to the movement exploration done at the Capilla Nuestra Señora del Buen Consejo

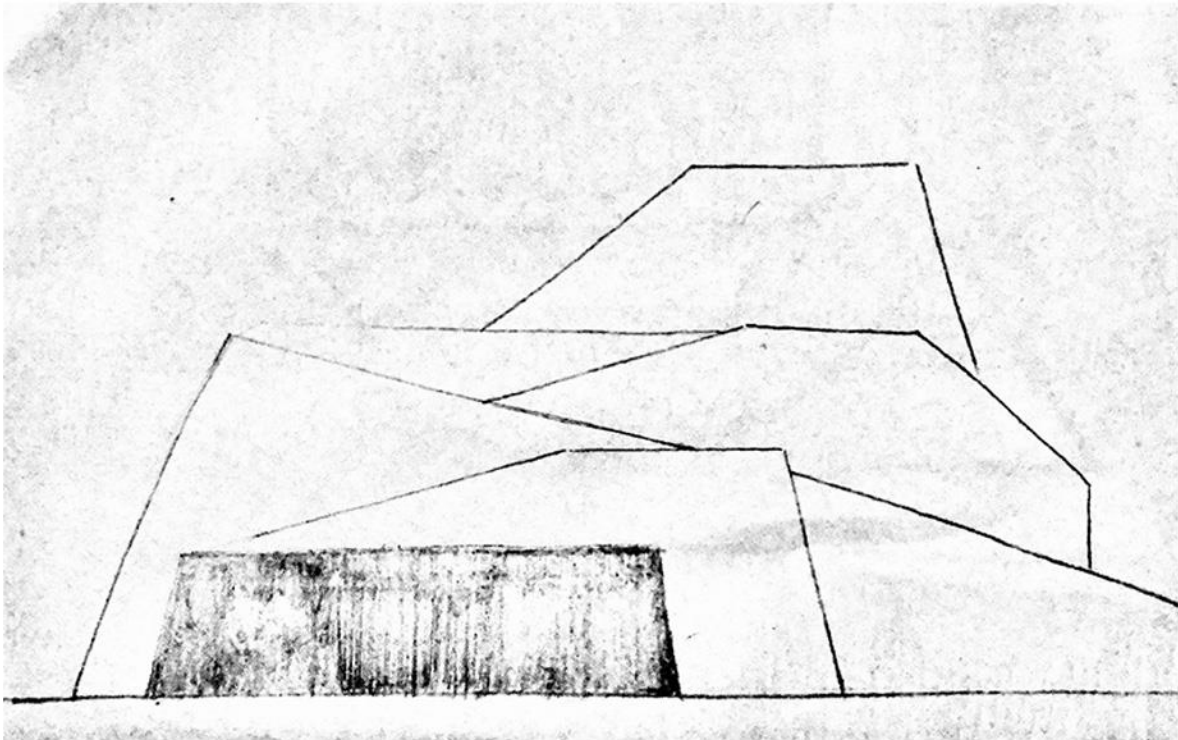
The second location would be next to *el rio Chagres*, the Chagres river. This is an important location as it is a river whose control was directly related to the control of the country. Its currents carry struggles, abundance, life and supply. One can often see boats ranging in all sizes strolling through. This particular location relates more to what Marc Augé refers to as a non-place however. He calls a non-place a space where one is anonymous, a space for transience, not one thing or another, it signifies a temporary relationship. It is near the river, but it is not a space for occupation. People rarely interact with this space, it is more of a corner, a leftover, a gray area than it is a place designed for use, people come and go through here but no one stays. The shape is awkward, there is some concrete randomly poured over the land and a long cable stretches from one side to the other, connecting I don't know what. I can infer some sort of technician works here, tweaking and checking on

Exploring spaces in Panama was proven to be extra fun around non-places as there are an infinite amount of them because of the lack of urban planning.



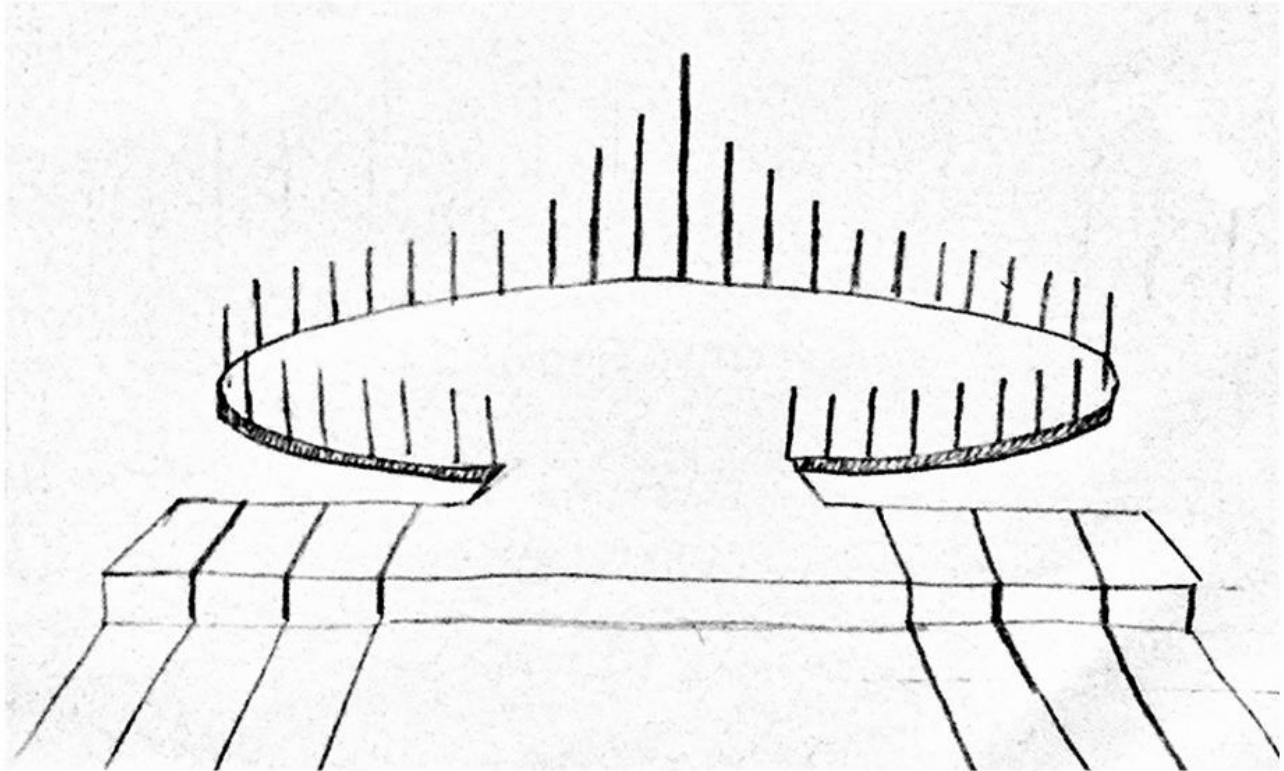
Sketch in response to el rio Chagres

Next to this location, we'll find a peculiar sight – The Gamboa Lighthouse. The space flows from the random patch of concrete on the land, morphing into a hill that goes up and up, ending in a lighthouse. Next to it a control tower stands strong and still. Concrete disappears from the view and tall blades of grass cover the landscape. The levels on this location particularly influenced the movement.



The hill at the Gamboa Lighthouse, as seen from a movement perspective.

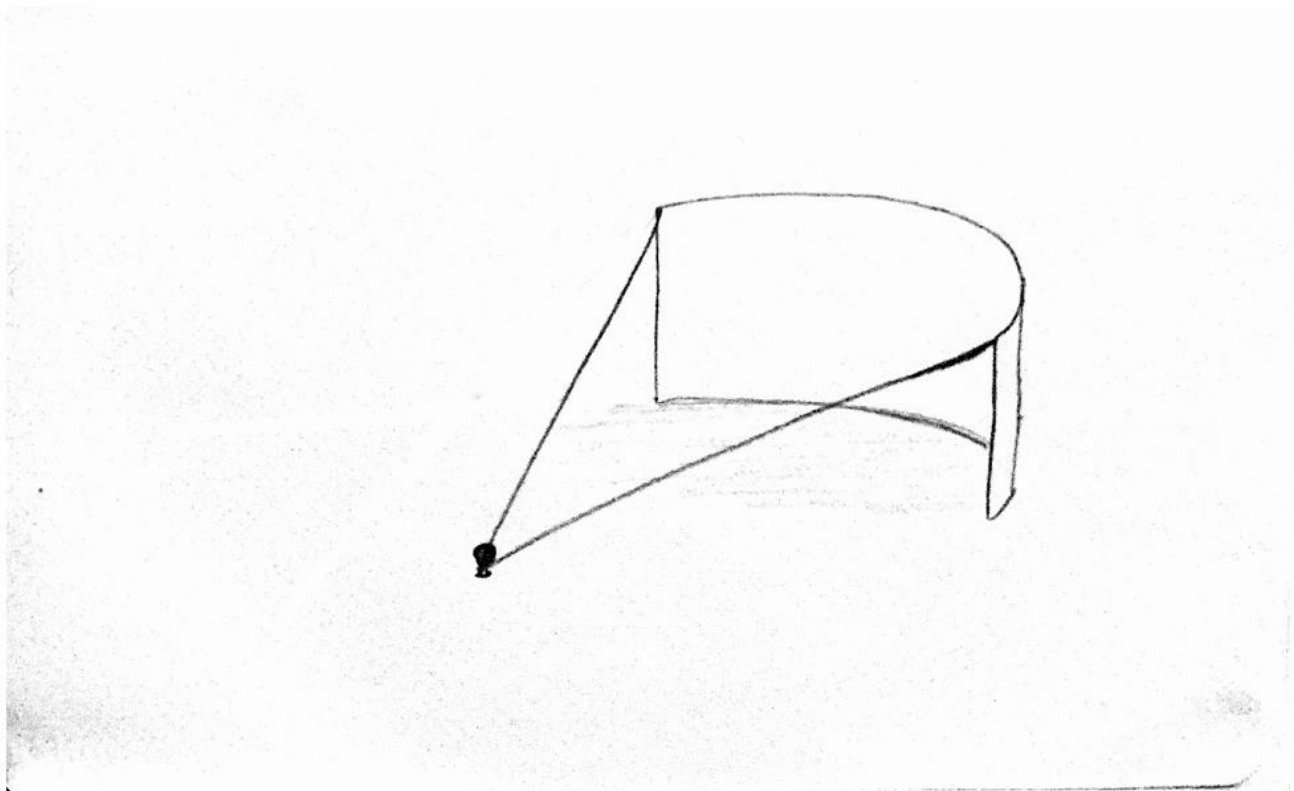
Sketch in response to Mirador del Pacífico



After, the exploration continued into the other side of the Puente de las Americas, an important bridge crossing the Canal. This is the Mirador del Pacifico, a monument dedicated to the long friendship between Panama and China, featuring Chinese traditional architectural shapes and other folkloric elements.

The space felt mystical yet the mysticism was often interrupted by the crazy, bustling sounds of cars in the autopista, running away from the chaos of the city and into the interior of the country, where nature and tradition reign. The contrast over two drastically different countries merged into one form, the people travelling from one side of the bridge to the other, and the ocean below us, separating the continent gave the space a particular feel of opposing forces which made me want to run.

The final location of this research is at the beach in Veracruz. This is one, if not the only, beach that is near the city and one can bathe in. The contamination is so strong across the rest of the city that this cannot be possible anywhere else. Soundscapes of reggaeton, bachata and salsa fill up the atmosphere with airs of Panamanian joy. I could feel the force of the ocean and how it pushed the beach away constantly, creating curves in its shape that define how people interact with the space. The sand beneath my feet changed with every footstep and I could swiftly change its form by simply grabbing it with my hands.



Veracruz beach as a kinetic visual form

In conclusion, movement-based explorations can be powerful tools of discovery, not only of our surroundings but of ourselves and our unconscious as well. It is a particular way of stripping away what we see in space from its context to focus on reactions and responses. The resulting images are imaginary spaces, non-spaces, which could be part of a performance, or as architectural pieces that draw elements from nature. They respond directly to the lines drawn by the body in each location and the overall feel that the body was able to perceive. There is an exciting window of opportunity for more exploration within this practice as it creates a new ground for interdisciplinary processes and research. In terms of spatial design, dance and movement have the power to convey different ideas from those that come from the sight only. The ability to embody the space can be implemented more in spatial design processes, especially as we shift into an era where we wish to find that connection with nature again. What can be more natural than drawing ideas from our own bodily perceptions. One of the reasons we've strayed so far away from the natural world is because of alienation – we've alienated ourselves from things our bodies used to feel every day. We're in our homes, observing things from afar, watching the news on the TV, experiencing other countries and cultures through videos and images. How can we design for humans if we are unable to live through the experiences we're trying to create?

This is a call for artists and designers to get their bodies out there in the world, to experience the natural or unnatural with their own senses, all of them, and dare to be the thing they want to create.

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