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**Presenting the
performance “Pre-Bard
// Post-Shard” and its
theoretical ground on
the performativity of
the urban space:**

The urban space is
dramatised.

Aliki Kylika

Abstract

This text presents the theory behind the performance “pre-Bard // post-Shard” that took place in several venues in London between 2013 and 2014. The performance promoted an awareness of history as the means to inspire social and urban awareness. It had the form of live-installations where the urban map was built live on stage by the participatory activity of performers and audience alike. The theory behind it was based on the performativity of the urban space, which is understood as the interaction of humans and the built environment within the familiar scale of everyday life. In turn, this affects the shape of the city through the longer cycle of historical time. To experience this performativity, one needs to participate in the performance of its becoming. To form this theory the research engaged with the subjects of site-specific-theatre and immersive theatre, Deconstructivism, urban space, urban flows, the event, collective consciousness and history.

[link: <http://www.alikilylika.com/Performance-1/Performance-Cities-1>]



[Image 1: 'pre-Bard//post-Shard' (2013-14) Flyer]

The city is ever changing. It's ever flowing. It is the nexus of social life and the built environment. It is an ancient form of settlement, while also, still, the modern condition of life. The study of the city and its development exposes in its very core, in the form of its everyday life and of its urban space, the political and the social state of affairs in each era: to study the evolution of the city involves in fact a study of the history of the nations, as well as a study of culture and sociology. It therefore offers an understanding and an awareness of our environment such that affords to the individual the formation of a citizen identity.

In an attempt to promote such social and urban awareness, and in fact to gain this understanding for oneself, contemporary theatre offers an essential medium: theatre is essentially storytelling that has the power to present complex concepts in a grasping, entertaining and interactive manner. The idea of telling the story of the evolution of different cities in a theatrical format and showcase the everyday life of the urban dwellers in the history of each city produced in 2012 the performance 'pre-Bard//post-Shard' about the history of London. Towards the creation of this project a wider research on space and theatre, the dramatisation of architecture and its analogy with the dramatisation of the urban space, was undertaken.

Contemporary theatre has adopted a new vocabulary in order to identify and classify specific forms that fall outside the norm of classic theatre, such as site-specific-theatre, immersive theatre, devised and physical theatre and so on. These forms differ from each other, but share the common characteristic of being unconventional in all or some of their elements; their use of space, text, bodily expression, relationship with the audience and the application of multiple media. In all of these forms influences from performance theory are found, connecting them with anthropological rituals, social processes and patterns, psychoanalysis, embodiment, personalization, direct action and interaction, everyday life, play practices and others.

Site-specific and **immersive theatres** in particular are stretching the borders between theatre and architecture towards new interdisciplinary territories. In site-specific theatre the text, the narrative, the action and the theme of the play are directly inspired by the architectural elements of the space, its atmosphere and history. In this theatrical form and its derivatives (site-responsive, site-inspired) the catalytic energy of the site informs the final outcome of the work.

A phenomenological-existential understanding of space is therefore expressed, where space is the *vessel* (the medium) for human life, and is experienced as the necessary condition for humans to exist. Space, responsively, is a medium that is filled with meanings once human life occupies it. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1994) writes about

the spatiality of human existence, the space of our dreams, our subconscious and childhood memories, which is rooted deep into the very core of our being in the world, thus connecting us with the entire universe. Space bears the memories and traces of everyday life in it, and reveals it to the investigative eyes and senses of the artists who occupy it in site-specific work.

Immersive theatre on the other hand *constructs* the environment that will most eloquently express the content of the text and allow the narrative to unfold in multiple dimensions and storylines. **Architectural space** is transformed into a spatial script, a **narrative environment** with traces implanted in it to reveal elements of the characters of the play, or the background setting of the plot. In entering this environment the audience takes on an active role that sets an individual path and produces a unique storyline of the theatrical content. The narrative created is influenced by the constructed ambience and elements of the space, the carefully planned acts and most importantly the subjective choices and interpretations of each participant in the audience. The space of immersive theatre is as real as the characters in it, and as poetic as the story it describes. The relationship of this space with the audience is so intimate, that no falsity is allowed for the theatrical effect to apply successfully. In immersive theatre as much as in everyday life, the spatial stories of people are expressed through narrative environments, which, in the words of design lecturer Allan Parsons, they are '*fictional realities and real fictions*' (2009: 6).

The journey in these environments connects the elements of the plot together (facts, clues, traces, symbols, words, images and actions) and allows the visitors to move forward in the story, as a translation of their physical movement in space. This double action works emphatically on the dramatic effect of the space, considering the original meaning of the word drama. The verb δράω- δράω means in ancient Greek to act, to move or to do, and it marks the beginning of tragic theatre, when action accompanied the poetic text for the first time. In English as well as Greek, the word implies a strong emotional state, suggesting that the journey within a narrative environment is an active experience through one's emotions, a psychological examination of oneself.

The environment becomes the drama, as it assumes control of the actions and feelings of the visitors.

Architecture is dramatised.

Narrative environments exceed the theatrical space, and spread across any site where the drama is situated.

In the Jewish Museum in Berlin, created by the architect Daniel Libeskind, the space is the principal exhibit. The building suggests a strong narrative for any visitor that enters it, a narrative spoken through the language of architecture. All senses are activated in experiencing the narrative environment of the museum; mentally, we are informed on the history of the Jewish community in Berlin; psychologically, we empathize with them, while are emotionally triggered by the dramatic spaces of the building; and physically, we are compelled to walk around.

The floor in the holocaust vault is filled with metal plates carved with faces. As one walks on them, the shrill sound produced, echoes around the smooth, elongated, narrowing walls towards the sky light at the top.

This eloquent script of the museum's narrative is composed using the architectural language of **Deconstructivism**. The designs of the museum are a series of conceptual diagrams of the Star of David that organise the structure and form of the building. The walls, planes and columns appear skewed, warped and dislocated following the new syntax that Deconstructivism composed. Influenced by Russian Constructivism in architecture and the linguistic analysis of theorist Jacques Derrida, Deconstructivism was an intervention in Modernist theory and practice, one which placed the building object as the method of critical theory. In diagrams, assemblages, models, digital representations and built structures, the architectural object itself participates in the critical discourse of architecture.

Deconstructivism was an interrogation of the classical rules of composition; balance, symmetry, harmony, unity, purity and hierarchy of form were reexamined to their very roots, were interrogated and contaminated. Through this process Deconstructivism allowed the emergence of a new philosophy for architecture, a new syntax, one which maintains the archetypal of dwelling, while introducing the event, the *folly, narrativity,*

dramaturgy and choreography. Architect Bernard Tschumi marked the space of the 'Parc de la Villette' with red dots - structures of folly, notations of an architectural index, announcing the new quest for architecture, to produce spaces where human desire is expressed. Engaged with its process, its language and theory, **architecture engaged with performance, it became performative**. It created spaces in order to speak.

By using the ambiguous word *performative* I refer to the influential work of British analytic philosopher J. L. Austin (1955) who first presented a performative utterance as a simultaneously enunciative and physical act; according to his analysis, the performative is a repetitive act, when to say something is also to do something. The term has evolved following the work of Jacques Derrida (1976) and Judith Butler (1993, 1997 and 2006) amongst other theorists (Latour, 2005; Law, 2007; Pickering 1995; Thrift 2007) and has become a wider practical and theoretical concept that covers the behaviour and performance of humans as well as objects and their interaction.

The theory and practice of performance have informed the cultural fields of fine arts, cultural studies, anthropology and theatre with matters of body mediation and activity, live presence, interaction, immediacy, temporariness, and engagement. Following these developments, the term performativity focuses predominately in the process rather than the results of an action. The duration and context of the action in the present time become important and are emphasized rather than its completion and future outcome. Bodily participation and interactivity are fundamental aspects within this process, whereas the ability to produce results becomes irrelevant.

Performance practices (in the form of rituals or other events and social customs) have been instrumental in the birth and evolution of architecture, suggesting that the discipline is in fact performative. The performative in architecture manifests not what the architectural object *is*, but what it *does*, placing focus in the flexibility and the interactivity of architecture.

The performative focus in architecture is highly relevant today in responding to the contemporary

spatial needs of a globalised social, cultural, financial and political reality. Globalisation has seen the intensified mobility of human, financial and cultural capital through a multiplicity of interrelated networks including transportation, telecommunication, social media and institutional networks. This mobility operates in a constant flow of people, commodities and information and is better conceived as a global society of flows, also characterised as a network society or, in the term of urbanist Francois Ascher (2001), hypertext society.

Hypertext stands for the way words are linked in different texts simultaneously in the Internet, allowing the user to surf between different platforms. Similarly, *hypertext society* is characterised by loose social relations that shift between layers and create multiple links, operating in a loose, flexible and unpredictable way.

The space into which the society of flows operates is, according to sociologist Manuel Castells, clearly defined:

[It] is made of the articulation between three elements: the places where activities (and people enacting them) are located; the material communication networks linking these activities; and the content and geometry of the flows of information that perform the activities in terms of function and meaning. This is the space of flows. (Castells, 2009, pp.34)

The structure of such space according to Castells consists of nodes and networks. In architectural representation this translates into spatial diagrams.

In the local scale of the city the relational web of Castell's space of flows defines its position in a global context. While it affects the everyday operations of the city, it does not express **the spatial interactions of everyday life in the urban space**. In "the Practice of Everyday Life" sociologist Michel De Certeau (1988) recognises in the footsteps of the urban walker a spatial activity that translates into flows. The walker, completely free in the urban space, just like a 19th century *flâneur*, chooses a path from an infinite number of possibilities. In hesitating, crossing, drifting away, the walker performs a spatial improvisation that enunciates trajectories and unfolds stories in space. This walking activity transforms or abandons spatial

elements in a performative inscription of its urban poem. The myriad footsteps of all citizens create together common places in the city.

As people walk around the streets towards their activities, they subscribe a linear path on the urban map. This line is the geographical representation of these walking flows of citizens. De Certeau notes that as soon as these flows are traced as a substitute for the memory of the original action, the latter ceases to exist; they inscribe the past by erasing it. The individual's particular way of being and moving about in the city falls into oblivion. This flow survey is an act of power over the active body of the walker, a means of control, as it transfers action to legibility by suppressing the practice. Geographical space is for De Certeau a *panoptikon* space, where the entire city can be viewed from afar and above, as a space syntax of the activity of everyone who dwells in it. Just like looking at the city from the top of a skyscraper, the city plan distances the planner from the spirit of the city, which only dwells at the street level of the urban space.

Everyday life practices, claims De Certeau, are a resistance to this suppression. The city plans may control the flows of the crowd, but they cannot dominate the subtle and radical appropriation of spatial elements that are exercised by the urban walker. **Desire lines** are a form of such resistance. They are the paths permanently traced on soft ground by the repetition of the footsteps of different individuals that deviate from pre-designed pathways.

They suggest a persistent flow followed freely by a series of unconnected walkers that spontaneously and actively respond to the design of place. Each step is an internal alteration of the order of space, practiced and immediately forgotten as it moves towards the next step. Walking is subsequently a temporary position, a non-place taking, therefore reducing time to a miniscule.

Time in the space of flows is compressed:

As in split-second global financial transactions or the generalized practice of multitasking, squeezing more activity into a given time; [...] the space of flows dissolves time by disordering the sequence of events and making them simultaneous in the communication networks, thus installing society

in structural ephemerality. [...] The multiple space of places, fragmented and disconnected, displays diverse temporalities, from the most traditional domination of biological rhythms, to the control of clock time.

(Castells, 2009, pp.33-36)

Everyday life is experienced in its temporariness, as a series of **events**. To have the memory of an event is to extend it in time, add duration and project it towards infinity.

Events that are remembered are a form of inscription in our memory that retains their experience active in our thought. Through the recollection of our memories we become aware of our being in the world and help shape our character. **Collective memory** is the memory of events that are experienced in the presence of others. These events and their memory keep us bonded as a group and allows for **collective consciousness** to be formed.

The incident of the 9-11 in New York for example, happened in a few minutes, but had such a severe impact in the lives of people across the globe that will never be forgotten. It has become part of our collective memory and our collective consciousness. Its importance and after effects (the wars that followed it) also make it part of history.

History is the act of organising collective memory; a classification of the importance of different events; a controlling of memory. It is subjective narrative that makes sense of the vast terrain of memories of the past, similar to the geographical map of flows in the urban space.

The study of history reveals patterns of evolution; it is an explicatory process of our current condition: geographical, social, political, cultural and financial. The time of history is for human civilisation what glacial time is for species. The history of cities is the story of the evolution of urban space, through events from everyday life that helped shape it. The history of cities, as a view from above, can only be narrated in the space of flows. As such, it erases the trajectories and events of everyday life that can only be experienced inside this space. To become immersed into this active landscape of memories and spatial practices, one needs to participate in the performance of its becoming. In this sense the urban space is performative.

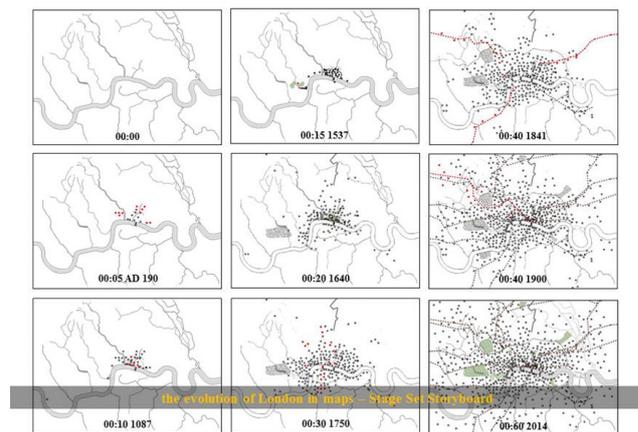
The performativity of the urban space is understood as the interaction of humans and the built environment within the familiar scale of everyday life. In turn, this affects the shape of the city through the longer cycle of historical time.

The metropolis of London is home to 8.5 million people. While there is a great engagement of the citizens with the city, only a few have knowledge of its history and even fewer grasp the effect they have as individuals in society, in the shaping of it. London has grown organically through the eras, from tribal huts and a Roman camp to a global metropolis. The process of its evolution goes in parallel with the development of parliamentary democracy and capitalism, and the development of the London dwellers into citizens.

“Pre-Bard // post-Shard” is a performance about the history of London.

It merges urbanism and theatre in order to give people the story and understanding of their environment, a perception of space and history. It takes the form of a live-installation performance-lecture, where 400 blocks are laid out on stage by the performers, following the timeline of the city’s development (see image 2). Condensed within two hours, 2000 years of the expansion of the built environment is laid out on stage to expose the processes of transformation of the city, the performativity of the urban space. **The built environment** is therefore presented on stage as **a result of the performers’ flows**.

The selected format for the show is one of a **performative lecture**. In it each fact is represented by an action and is enriched by images and sounds. Every date and fact of the timeline that the narrator reads is followed by the laying of blocks on a virtual map on stage. The map is visualised by the main rivers of the site initially and is gradually enhanced with the shapes of landscaped parks, new rivers or scaled architectural models of landmarks. When relevant, a historical fact is followed by a minor action focusing on important events or everyday customs. The lecturer is no more important than the actions performed. The content becomes vivid and memorable, penetrated by additional layers of meaning.



[Image 2: Performance Cities (2013-14) London storyboard]

Scale is very important here; The urban map and the historical timeline shift the proportions of time and the city by lifting the spectator’s view from the scale of everyday life, to a scale that allows historical time and the metropolitan area to be comprehended and controlled. The use of scaled blocks and building models reverses our relation to space. Instead of being a wanderer within the urban space, the audience is positioned as the distant supervisor of the city.

Each uniform block is a dot on the graph of architectural activity in the urban space that is inscribed within the terrain of history. Contrary to this, the action of the performers placing the blocks on stage is temporal, and although repeated in each performance, it is always different. This action therefore embodies the ephemeral and unpredictable in everyday life within the architectural and theatrical space of the map installation.

The performers are citizen volunteers who join rehearsals, members of the audience and auditioned actors, who all share a co-existence in the city.

On stage each participant does not express feelings or characteristics of an individual personality. They are symbols of **the everyday individual**: an inhabitant of the city, a builder and a random person in the street that participates in a small or large way in shaping the environment. The audience participates in the building of the

installation, further engaging with the spatial representation of their city. Different professions, of different ages, from different countries, all participants are part of the metropolis, and build it together. In this process, the foundations of the city are discovered, connecting spaces from everyday life with their historical past.



[Image 3: 'pre-Bard//post-Shard' (2013-14) Credits: Tim Parker, 'the fascinating everyday', Kakia Konstantinaki]

Archival projections of paintings and photographs introduce the urban imagery and further immerse the audience into the living past: architectural designs submitted for various developments, engravings of the various stages of the London Bridge across the eras, paintings of the Great Fire, the Pleasure Gardens in Vauxhall and the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, photographs from the Great Smog et al.

An accompanying soundscape, created by the artist Daniele Imara, is also playing, referencing the urban sounds and music of the different eras: the constant sound of water, horse hoofs, sword fights, mob cries, churchbells and bagpipes is gradually replaced by the sound of car horns, airplanes, phones ringing and electronic music. While the sounds remain in the background, they serve as another element of immersion, one that we rarely ever notice in our everyday life, although it is constantly present – **the sound of the city**.

Disrupting the historical timeline, like a cut through history, everyday life intervenes with small fractions of theatrical performances of archival stories from diaries, journals and literate works.

These are introduced by the lively presence of a minstrel, **staging social customs** in the metropolis throughout the eras: the hanging spectacles in Tiburn tree, the brothels in Southwark, the aristocracy entertainment of dancing in Pleasure Gardens, the crowds on London Bridge during industrial era amongst others.

Minor actions, performed as part of the building, focus on **landmarks and incidents** whose symbolic character suggests another level of understanding the city's evolution: the banks, the palace, the reform prison, the policing, the riots and strikes, the law enforcements, the planning restrictions. The different forces that shape the city are here apparent: the intervention of festivals and celebrations in urban development, the role of the people, the role of the authorities and, in the 20th century, the role of the urban planner as the expert figure on the city.

Within the two hours of the performance, we stop the clocks of the historical process momentarily to cut through time and look at the perpetual change of London. From forest to town, from surrounding villages to a metropolitan city; the transformation of landscape to cityscape and urban life is revealed in front of us.

The urban space is dramatised.

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Aliki Kylika

Aliki Kylika is an architect and a performance practitioner. She holds an MArch from NTU Athens Department of Architecture and Urbanism and an MA in Performance Design and Practice from UA London Central Saint Martins College. Since 2007 she has been working internationally as an architect in private architectural and design projects and as an artist producing self-initiated work. In 2015 she set up, together with performance architects Kyveli Anastasiadi and Alex Schweder, the Viral Institute of Performance Architecture, in order to research, teach and practice within the interdisciplinary meeting of performance and architecture. Her work and research have also featured in publications (*Performance Research* 21:6, 'Viral Institute of Performance Architecture', Dec 2016), art venues (Somerset House London, 'pre-Bard // post-Shard' June 2014), exhibitions (Royal British Society of Sculptors, 'Bursary Awards Group Exhibition', March 2015) and conferences (TaPRA 'Play in Performance Practices' Symposium, January 2013).