

SPACE &  
PERFORMANCE -  
THE VALUE OF A  
PROTAGONIST

Nicole Roper  
19836622

Ad692 Histories and Theories 3



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CUT OUT

# FORWARD

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The beginning of this exploration sought to identify relationships between space and performance, with the intention of identifying various forms of performance and considering how they interact with a given space. However, the piece lead through some rich avenues exploring a more triadic nature of this relationship, three essential aspects became apparent, the presence of an audience, a performer and a stage. Throughout the exploration, these three-characteristics continued to unveil themselves, but one, however, seemed far more prominent; a performer or spacial protagonist became the only truly intrinsic value of this relationship and thus became the thread of thought throughout the dissertation.

This piece therefore explores spatial protagonism as a key individual/ item or character in the narrative of a performance; this character ranges from traditional style performers, such as dancers, to users, domestic performers and inanimate spaces and buildings.

You will see the entire document in black and white, as to allow focus, no hue or distractions.

*In this dissertation, we are the protagonists.*

## INTRO

This dissertation will explore the heterogeneous nature of performance and its relation to space, design and architecture. The term “performance” in this piece has no single definition, but the context by which the term will be used will be defined at its point in the thesis. Churchill famously said, “we shape our buildings, there after they shape us.” (Parliament), this quote really encompasses the nature of this exploration, how does space inform how we act and connect through performance, and how do we and our own personal theatre inform the nature of our surroundings? We will explore this thought predominantly in relation to the reliance on a spatial protagonist, without a ‘character’ to experience space can space even be real, can a performance take place without protagonism.

Initially, consider the tradition association of the word ‘performance’, an English dictionary defines performance as “musical, dramatic, or other entertainment presented before an audience.” (*Definition of performance by Dictionary.com*) this relates to what we tend to think of as happening in theatres for example. As such, it is in this context that we must consider performance artists and how they interact with their performance space, thus introducing a spacial protagonist. The concept of how people occupy space is one that dates back at least as far the 14<sup>th</sup> century with the creation of Leonardo DaVinci’s Vitruvian Man. A commission done by Davinci for Vitruvius Pollio, an architect who believed that the medical configuration of a person ensured perfect balance and so could be used as a template for successful design. He also believed

“the working of the human body to be an analogy for the workings of the universe” which could be applied to include the workings of how we connect with space. (*The Vitruvian Man - by Leonardo da Vinci*)

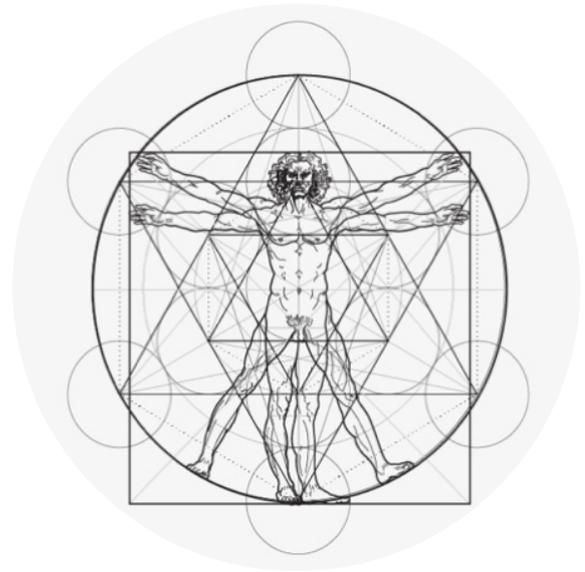


Figure 2- The Vitruvian Man

## IDENTITY AND SPACE

This theory of the connection of body and designed space has been explored by many other practitioners and theorists since Pollio’s initial thesis, a notable mention being the Los Angeles based performance practise, Gerald & Kelly, and their installation into Mies van de Rohe’s Farnsworth House entitled ‘Queer Space’ as part of the Chicago Arts Biennale. This performance allowed dancers to perform a choreographed dance that utilised, explored and exploited the space within Farnsworth House. The dancers explore different ways of being in each given space,

by forcing themselves into small gaps and pressing themselves against various architectural and design features and interfaces. Gerald & Kelly use their choreography to not only explore space, but also narratives and societal themes. Meaning the performers are using the design of a space to communicate a theme before they even begin performing. In this way, the dancers created queer identities for themselves through their exploration of a queer space and movement unlike their own, thus showing a direct link between the character/protagonist/performer in the space and the space itself (*Shaw*).

In an interview with CAB Blog, Gerald & Kelly begin to talk about the formation of these relationships between performer and architecture. They include two dancers, a male and a female, in their choreography at Farnsworth house to represent and channel two protagonists of the story of the house's creation, Mies van de Rohe and Edith Farnsworth. They stress that their intentions were to be rid of misogynistic tellings of the unrequited love story of Mies and Farnsworth and to bring to the light the truth of Farnsworth's 'clarity of vision' in her work on her manifesto for modern living, and her rejection of societal norms for women at the time... showcasing her true identity as a queer, successful figure. Gerald & Kelly state

“Over the course of the performance, through language, movement, and sound, each of the three performers channels parts of Farnsworth and parts of Mies, but also parts of the architecture and the landscape, the trees, the river, the birds.”  
(*Gerald & Kelly*)

This quote encompasses this and shows that aspects of choreography have been taken from the space, as such, the identity of the human and the human performance,  
(continued on page 14)

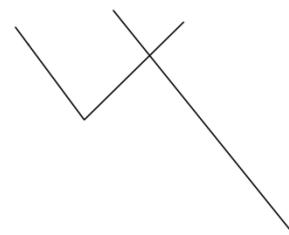
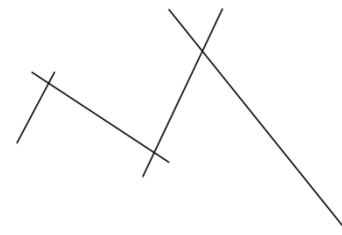
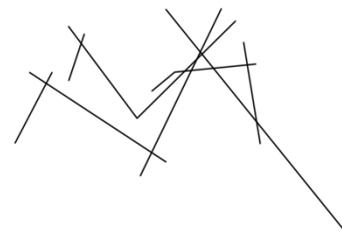
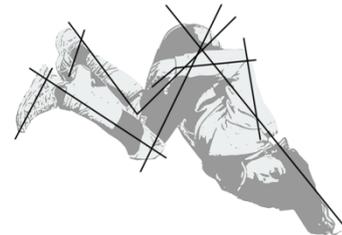
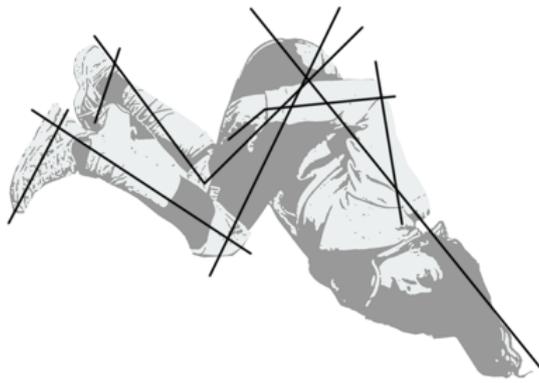


Figure 2- Original image accredited to ArchDaily.com, study accredited to Nicole Roper, own work.



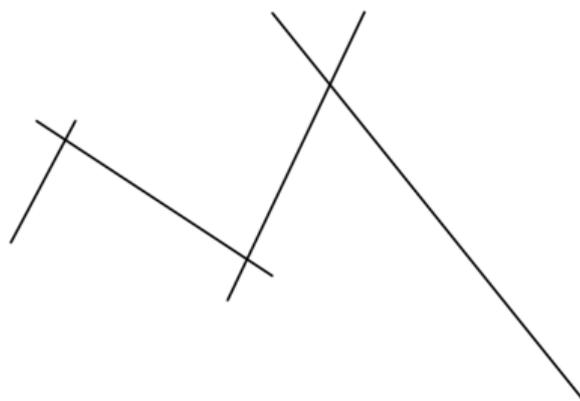
By breaking down fig 2



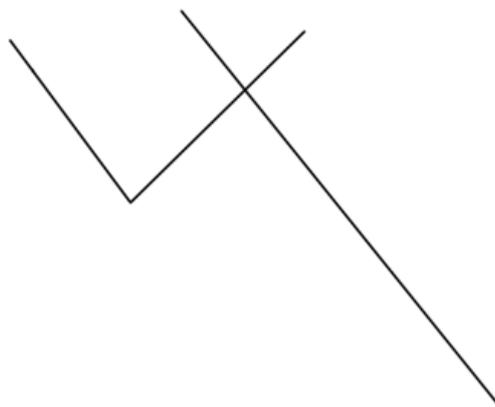
you have been forced to consider



form independent of anthropomorphism



and what you have seen is resemblance



to domestic structures, in this case, a stairway.

*(continued)*

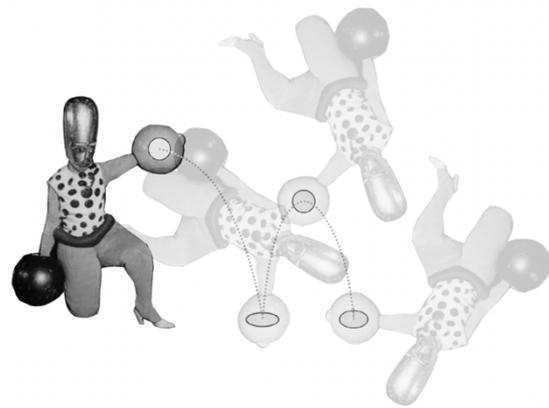
in this case through dance, has been informed by spacial aspects directly. In this way, performance in its form of dance has a direct relationship with its space.

To illustrate this new formation of queer identity, *figure 2* is a study of the human form of a Gerald&Kelly dancer interacting with the stairs at Farnsworth House. The intent behind this study is to show, in its simplest form, the human body becoming a replica of its surroundings. The body does not naturally form a shape reminiscent of a staircase but in the context of performance it has... a physical representation of the link of identities between performance body and space.

## BAUHAUS AND THE TRIADIC BALLET

Bauhaus is a German school of design who have an immensely powerful influence over the world of architecture, design and art. They are known for creating and designing works that seem surreal and defy any normal understanding of objectivity, space and reason; in this respect, the Bauhaus school are known for works of queerness. A well-known figure and teacher of Bauhaus, Oskar Schlemmer, took this to a new level of performance with his costume designs for the Triadic Ballet at The Metropol Theatre in Berlin, 1962. The show saw dancers take to the stage in costumes that abstracted their figures, gave them new features and changed the way they were perceived. Their bodies were no longer seen as 'bio typical' and the way that they performed changed as a result. What Schlemmer showed here was that performance, in this case Ballet,

could be achieved and potentially bettered through giving dancers architectural figures as opposed to biological features. Giving a dancer a spherical form instead of a hand changes the way they communicate, thus innovating the performance and the discipline as whole. In summary, The Triadic Ballet showed that spatial and architectural features can benefit performers through forcing them to rethink the way they can move, limit the ways they can communicate etc. (The Bauhaus Did Ballet?)



*Figure 3 - Study looking into a costume from The Triadic Ballet and considering how it may inspire new movement. accredited to Nicole Roper, own work.*

In 2018 documentary, *Bauhaus Spirit*, they explore what Bauhaus has meant for the world of design and where their ideologies were born. In reference to the triadic ballet, choreographer Christian MioLoclair analyses the movements explored in the piece in relation to potential modern-day adaptations, he suggests that had Schlemmer created the ballet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century he would have used poppers and funk dancers. This is because of the use of geometric shapes and way in which this method of dance explores space and surroundings. The dance genre is well known for queering the body in its natural form and defying what

is typically possible of the human body, something the Bauhaus school was also experimenting with through costume. A relevant consideration is to look at how the different forms of dance expose new explorations of space. Whilst we traditionally think of dance as a push on the limits of the body, we can also look at it as a way of discovering new dimensions of space; what space is there, and we take advantage of or how does space form around a moving body etc. Take the example of street/ break dancing, this form tends to see the performer exploring lower levels of space, from the ground up, noting points of contact between the body and ground surface, whereas contemporary dance tends to see performers toying with gravity and weightlessness, often using partners to push into heights previously unoccupied by the body.

Another brief but notable mention in this instance is that of mime artists and their exploration and relations with space. Mime by definition is 'the art or technique of portraying a character, mood, idea, or narration by gestures and bodily movements' (*Definition of mime / Dictionary.com*). As in the art of slapstick comedy, mime does not rely on props and or items to convey its situation, but the body. The body becomes and informant of space for the viewer in that the artist will use movements and suggestions of space to show its location or spacial situation, the most well-known example of this being the classical 'trapped in a box' act often attributed to 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian mime artists during street performances, whereby the artist uses their hands to act as if they are constantly colliding with interfaces of a box that are not truly there. To summarise, in this art form, space is directly relevant but not used in a physical way but more a metaphysical suggestion, again through movement.



*Figure 4- Mime and spacial discipline study accredited to Nicole Roper, own work.*

In figure 4, shown is a mime artist performing the 'trapped in a box routine' and explored on top is the limited range of spacial movement that the artist is metaphysically restricted too. Space here is a discipline, a way to conceal the performance and keep it within boundaries, the relationship here being that of a rule (the available space) and a follower (the mime).

# DOMESTIC PERFORMANCE & DOMESTIC SPACE

The word theatre is not always a term to exclusively describe a particular typology, the act of attending an entertainment venue, sitting in raked seating and watching performers on a stage, but can also be used as a way to describe our everyday 'performances' in a domestic setting. For instance, my personal theatre moment right now is the movement of my fingers on my keyboard, the act of sitting cross legged on my bed with my back arched looking at my laptop. My day, as will yours, will be made up of moments, movements and performances that all attribute to my day as a whole, mimicking scenes in a script or acts in a play.

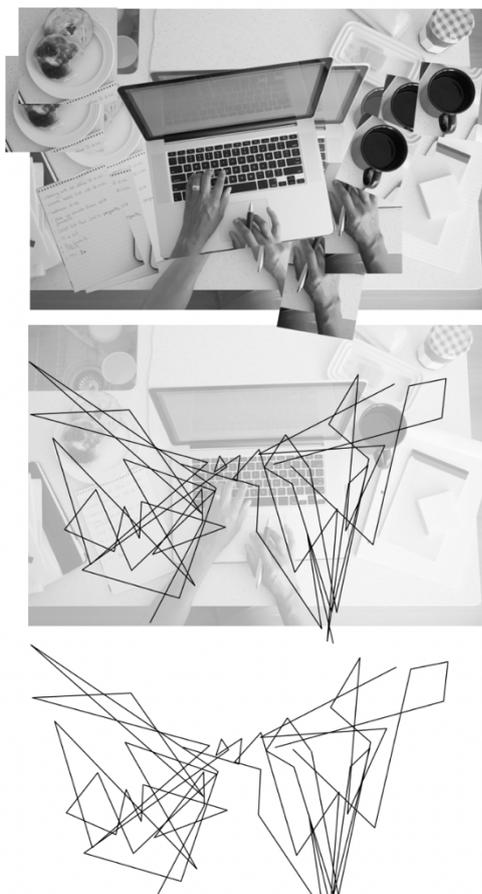


Figure 5- Wigglesworth style mapping of movement on desk, accredited to Nicole Roper, own work.

Domestic theatre in this thesis refers to the acts and actions that make up everyday life, a theory that has been explored by architects, designers and theorists before now. For example, Sarah Wigglesworth and her exploration of the performance that is a dinner party and the exploratory drawings that came from that theory entitled 'Dining Disorder'. Wigglesworth's work showed the configuration of dinner party props on a table, for instance, glasses, utensils and plates, and then through a series of drawings she mapped their movements, their stage directions as it were, that were the subsequent result of the way the diners interacted with those props during the party (*Dining Disorder*, S. Wigglesworth). What this experiment did, was showed empirically the way that space, in the context of a dinner party set up, was directly informed and manipulated by the users of that space, evidencing a relationship between domestic user and domestic space. The journey of a napkin from packet, to folded on a table, to the lap of a diner, to their mouth and then to eventually the bin is a journey that is not

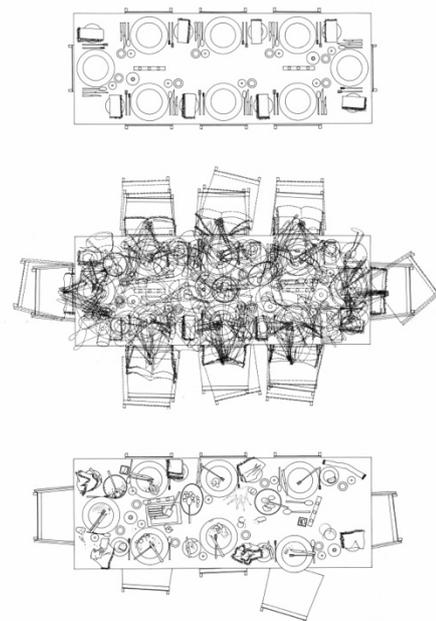


Figure 6- Sarah Wigglesworth, *Dining Disorder*. (Editors, 2018)

autonomous but dictated and created by its user, a protagonist must be present for changes in the napkins space to occur.

## STAGED DOMESTICITY

Another practitioner looking at domestic performance is Alex Schweder, an architect running his own practise but also a workshop/ program he calls 'its form will follow your performance'. In this, he offers 'free design advice' where he will not actually change anything physically in the home, but start by identifying relationships between user and space, creating a rapport with the client and establishing their own personal domestic theatre and its requirements and changing the way the person acts in the space rather than changing the space itself.

Schweder's approach looks to prove that architecture, just as a performance and personal theatre, is 'made up of everyday actions' (*Alex Schweder: Performance Architecture*), an example of this principle is a work of his entitled the 'ok boyfriend loft'. The 'ok boyfriend loft' was a commission for a lady who approached Schweder with a space she had in her small city apartment that was becoming wasted space. It was too high for her to reach, it wasn't big enough for any kind of inhabitancy and she described it as an 'ok boyfriend, he's there and he holds my stuff but that's about it' (*Alex Schweder: Performance Architecture*). Schweder found out a lot about her life and he reimaged this loft by making it worse, making it different and changing the way she thought about the space. He dressed as his client and enacted different scenes in this loft space which were photographed and then hung in her home to act as instructions for how she was to use this space and, in this way, she was forced to rethink the loft and change her relationship with it, without any physical redesigns. This way of practising architecture relies

heavily on an open mind and willingness to retrain the mind to form relationships with inanimate objects and understand your own performance. Additionally, this method draws relationships out and shows direct links between space and performance and its entire effectiveness is based on the identification of these relations by the user.

Another practitioner looking at relationships between domesticity and interaction is Beatrice Colomina and her study 'The century of the bed', whereby she looks at the growing relevance of the bed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In an interview with DeZeen, Colomina argues that with the digital revolution and the growing use of information in digital form that the bed is becoming the home for more than just sleep but work also. Particularly for younger people and their dependent relationship with phones, as a generation the need to leave our domestic setting and engage in the real/ social world to attend education and work is becoming less necessary. The space that previously had been exclusively associated and reserved for rest is merging into our daytime lives, and how does this effect our relationship with the space? She refers to this change as horizontal architecture, whereby multiple activities can be performed in one space and the amount of space needed in a domestic setting is reduced (Block, 2018). This means that the relationship that we have with the space our bed resides in is becoming more about dependence, if most of our lives are spent in bed, i.e., for work and sleep, than that space has become something of a stage where we perform most of our personal theatre moments. In this sense, we can assume that Colomina's work presents the bed as the stage, the place where we perform the majority of the time.

Pause now to consider how I have become the director of this act of your domestic theatre. By breaking the fourth wall and incepting these ideas in your mind, I have become a producer of thought, a protagonist in a scene staring you, reading a dissertation.

This dissertation, without me to write it and you to read it, is abstract fiction.

This isn't the first reference to the bed and performance, an example of a visual art piece exhibiting the idea of spatial injustice is the 'Black Power Naps' project by Fannie Sosa and Navild Acosta. This installation is one that represents an 'inherited exhaustion' felt by women of African American dissent as a direct result of their gender. Sosa said, 'It came from understanding that the American dream is a sleepless one,' (blackpowernaps.black, n.d.) the creators presented this as a series of beds that invited spectators in to enjoy a laziness that embedded a sense of deep seeded systemic racism caused by the need of those of non-white American race to try harder when it came to achieving the American Dream. These artists use the bed as stage in a more literal sense of the word performance, they show the bed as a prop in a street art performance but relate it to the theatre of work and the working world. By taking a domestic prop out of its setting, the artists queered what the bed means whilst still presenting it as a place of rest, the relationship between the item became one of prop and performer as opposed to person and personal theatre. The bed as a prop without a user to understand it and interact with it, doesn't mean anything. The ways in which these thinkers have reimaged what it means to 'be a bed' relies on a person/ protagonist to see their line of thinking also, equally their thoughts wouldn't have emerged from anywhere had there not been domestic performers to observe.

## ARCHITECTURE AS A PERFORMANCE IN ITSELF

Performance architecture, in its own right, is a school of thought. Some architects prove their designs and their work to be a

performance by its own means, an autonomous structure capable of the same awe-inspiring feeling of a human performance. Previously discussed industry professional, Alex Schweder, talks of spaces that 'tell stories independent of human interference' (*Alex Schweder: Performance Architecture*). What is meant by this is a piece of architecture that projects performance through its design rather than strictly through movement, that is not to say that some works of architecture don't inspire through movement also.

Diller and Scofidio prove this thesis of performance routed in architecture in multiple works, notably The High Line, New York. This project sees the transformation of a derelict railway line into a structure of green architecture that houses a public walkway and seating areas throughout. Its monolithic nature and popularity in the city has made it the stage for visiting audiences and used the planted green life as its protagonist. In this respect, the installation becomes a stationary performance, an act with an every changing and adapting script, the script being its inhabitancy and state.



Figure 7 - The High Line, New York. Diller and Scofidio. Original image referenced to (DS+R, n.d) edited by Nicole Roper.

Historically speaking, places are often referred to as telling a story based on its history, for instance when we travel to a site such as Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, we experience a feeling of awe and often of wow but not because of the site's architectural details but because of what it represents, the people and stories we know and associate with such a place. In this case, the camp becomes the storyteller of this particular performance, the protagonist in a story and the performance in its own state separate to 'human interference'.

Scholars have looked at why certain places, besides just the built environment, seem to have a 'feeling' about them, and as far back as the Roman era people have attempted to explain this, the explanation I find the most relevant in this essay however is that of 'Genius Loci' derived from the Latin 'spirit of place' (*refer to footnote*). In modern articles, people such as Iris Brook have contemplated secular explanations for the belief in places having spirits; for example, she reflects on various ideas associated with spirit of place, such as energy, narrative, authenticity and character (Admin, 2015). If we now compare these aspects to the prior example of the awe felt at Auschwitz concentration camp, we can easily identify aspects of the Genius Loci to explain our feeling. To name one, consider the narrative of the camp, we know through our education the events that unfolded at the site, we can see images of the people effected, we can find out statistics about what happened there etc., and all these things together create a historical form of storytelling. It is that story that pushes us into a performance, the camp is the location of the story and the act of us visiting is us immersing ourselves in that theatre. And so, we can see whilst the example used is one of brutal devastation and a story that affects us

emotionally, the camp is a contributor to the performance of the place's history.

'Performance Architecture' however is not limited to the historical aspect of storytelling through site visitations but is also a contemporary school of design whereby practitioners create places and things for their production value. Revisiting the previously discussed Farnsworth House for example, a glass home is not practical, it does not take a scholar or professional to see that a transparent home has not been placed where it has for pragmatic reasons but that it holds an element of spacial performance in its own right. Equally the Bauhaus influence on the National Theatre in London is not simply put but is there to represent something greater than a building which houses an entertainment venue. Architecture holds influences from design schools, art movements and practitioners all of which contribute to its design and formation and ultimately its physical performance as a site, building or place.

Steven Holl briefly looks at this concept, the idea of architecture being the product of many stimuli combined and refers to 'spaces like music' (*Steven Holl Interview: Spaces Like Music*). What Holl means by this, is that just like music is the finished combination of vocals, different instruments, song writers, producers, influencers etc. Architecture as we see it in the real world, is the result of designers, architects, movements, advances in construction and so on. Therefore, creating a relationship in the production of both architecture and music as a form of performance.

## BODY IN SPACE

Other thinkers have described performance architecture as something

In religious schools of thought, thinkers have suggested that in places where the Genius loci can be felt is an area presided over by a God and it is the presence of the deity can be felt when in that place.

much more personal, an event that does incorporate the body in its being and human interference is a key element. Much like the Queer Space installation at Farnsworth house, this thought holds that performance architecture is the exploration of a space using the body to do so, sometimes this is just to gain a better understanding of a surrounding, and sometimes it has a much deeper background. For instance, on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, a peaceful protest in the USA saw protesters take up residence lying face down on the floor to shed light on the details of the George Floyd murder that took place earlier that year (*During a Peaceful Protest*). The participants in this case explored a new aspect of their given space in order to perform and protest a social situation; they misappropriated their architectural surroundings in order to communicate a new meaning. This protest is a perfect representation of performance architecture that relies on human intervention.

Figure 8 shows a study that represents the misappropriated performance architecture shown in the 2020 protests in America. Item r illustrates the performer in his newly found position of architectural exploration contrary to traditional uses of such a place.

Users of space are only sought through experience; we understand to stand up straight and walk as we cross a road because we are taught as such, we have knowledge of the uses of roads, that they are carriage ways for motor vehicles and equally we understand the fragility of our own bodies in relation to these machines. It is through knowledge and experience that we interact with space and it is the protagonist's decision to misappropriate that space, making for a more interesting act in their theatre.



*Figure 8- Misappropriated space and performance architecture study. Nicole Roper, own work.*

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Through this thread of thought, various relations and links between the world of space and the world of performance have been found and considered. It is without question that architecture and spatial design are art forms as they stand, just as is performance in its many facades, as such it is not unreasonable to suggest that relations are likely to be of intrinsic value. Relations and developments in any discipline are how the subject evolves, just as it takes disasters in history for society to not repeat the same mistakes. It takes human mistake and inspiration to create something beautiful, therefore relationships are essential to creating any type of art and relationships between space and performance in this instance are undeniable.

The final conclusion of this dissertation is to identify the necessity of a performer in the relationship between space and performance, without a protagonist, a space is not experienced, and a performance is not performed; without at least someone to experience, can it even be said to exist? In each instance in each chapter written here, a human intervention, action or knowledge is required and thus it is only logical to assume that people are intrinsic to the relationship between space and performance.

Protagonism is essential to experience, and experience is essential to knowledge; without experience we have no knowledge and without knowledge we do not understand. As such, a protagonist is, in all areas of life, **invaluable**.

“Experience is the teacher of all things.” *Julius Caesar*

“The only source of knowledge is experience.” *Albert Einstein*

“Nothing ever becomes real until it is experienced.” *John Keats*

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