



URBAN
(COL)LABORATORY PUBLIC INTERVENTIONS



QUESTIONS

Where did you decide to sit today? At the front or the back? Was it a conscious decision?

Is it possible to stand or lie down?

Where does the front start? At what point does it become middle?

Is it defined by the type of chairs, the layout of the room, or by our position facing you?

How is this position supported?



By a series of practiced and performed locations or circumstances: a place within a conference / laboratory, a recognized 'place' within an institution, a place on a panel under the heading 'Cultural Sustainability and User driven Innovation,' a stage set apart from other bodies, which then constitute an 'audience' or 'public.'

This is the way we start to work about places thinking about how each location reinforces and produces a certain 'Spatial Etiquette' which defines a particular place by establishing what should be done and where.



INTRODUCTION

On the left is Helen and on the right Diana, we have been working together as collaborative duo **urban (col)laboratory** since 2005. Our research practice is rooted in 'performative urbanity.' Located between performance art, architecture and writing, we investigate the rhythms and routines by which people negotiate, define and produce everyday spaces. We come from different backgrounds in both practice: Architecture / critical writing and Performance / media art and in cultural contexts – UK and Germany.



FISSURES IN THE HARBOUR OF KNOWLEDGE
Lecture Performance Walk, Ruhr University Bochum (DE)
Symposium TANZ MACHT RAUM - RAUM MACHT TANZ, 2009





These differences inform each other to realise projects that combine performance and architecture, practice and theory, intervention and lecture. Projects that use the body to explore the effects of the built environment; its influences on how people rest, move and live, and projects that analyse the rhythms of daily life to investigate how can we can rethink the power of the built environment within social, political, economic and emotional infrastructures. To date, outcomes have included performative walks, lectures and films all produced through intense periods of site-specific research.



PLAKATIERTEN
VERBODEN

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VERBODEN





Initially called **urban laboratory** we changed our name to **urban (col)laboratory** because our work is always a collaboration between us and the place we work with. The process makes the work – the work always changes during the process of making; coming specifically out of the place we work with to shift the way people think about that specific place.



CHOREOGRAPHING KNOWLEDGE
Lecture Performance Walk, Murray Edwards College, Cambridge (UK)
Nightjar Festival and Cambridge University Festival of Ideas, 2009





Our cultural differences allow us to work critically in other cities and countries as we are more aware of the rules and conventions that produce our own blind spots. Ultimately our work singles out blind spots and spatial etiquette by finding the boundaries and Parameters of a place through the practice of stepping over them and rubbing up against the expected.









Urban (Col)laboratory
C/o Ms Helen Stratford
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From the Director of Development
Mrs Juliet Corbett, MA

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21 October 2009

Dear Ms Stratford,

Filming permission agreement

We write to confirm our agreement as follows:-

1. We hereby grant you permission to film, photograph and record all or any part of the non-residential areas of Murray Edwards College during the series of performative tours entitled "Choreographing Knowledge". Non-residential areas are defined as those parts of the College which do not contain student bedrooms.
2. The performative tours will take place on Wednesday 21st October (8-9pm), Thursday 22nd October (7-8pm) and Monday 26th October (7-8pm).
3. You may not film, photograph or record any individual without gaining their written permission in advance.
4. Permission is granted for you to use the film, photography and all other recorded footage for the following purposes only:
 - i. Documentation of your performance work for personal use
 - ii. Presentation to prospective clients for the purpose of securing future projects and/or employment
 - iii. Excerpts to be shown as part of academic conferences in art, architecture and performance, subject to the College approving the use of these excerpts in advance.

Kindly indicate your acceptance of the foregoing by signing and returning to us the enclosed duplicate of this letter.

Yours sincerely,

For and on behalf of
Murray Edwards College

Date: 21/10/09

Read and agreed by:

Signature: Helen Stratford

Date: 21/10/09

Blind Spots

Lecture Performance Walk, Manchester Piccadilly Gardens

Get Lost! Festival, TRIP (Territories Re-imagined International Perspectives)

Psychogeography Festival & Conference, MMU, June 2008





EVERYDAY BLIND SPOTS

We are interested in site-specific working because we see it as an essential way to engage with and make visible different spatial perceptions and different ways of constructing knowledge about place in a very concrete way. Through productive disruptions in established physical relationships and adjacencies we make visible the built environment as stage, performer and director in order to ask how places are performed.



Piccadilly Gardens is a public park in the centre of Manchester that was renovated in 2001, winning multiple architecture and landscape awards. Based on a 5-day long period of research including interviews with passerbys, participant observation and performative disruptions Blind Spots was a performance lecture at Piccadilly Gardens, which explored the city as a stage for every day performances that construct reality. The starting point was the idea to observe a public place as a theatre-stage.



We looked specifically for a clear space or square with definite boundaries, in order to research who is the director, what is the stage and who are the audience. Picadilly Gardens was a public place, which was occupied, yet whose maintenance had appeared to have become neglected. We researched the architectural design of the Gardens, its history, the legislation that controlled the space and investigated how these elements sometimes contrasted with and sometimes reinforced the formal and the informal actions that took place there.



Throughout the 5- days performative and productive disruptions combining physical interventions, observations and interviews uncovered the spatial etiquette – the constraints, conventions and boundaries by which Picadilly Gardens operates some of which were uncomfortable to cross. Indeed, in all our work there's always a moment of stepping over boundaries, rubbing up against the expected and critically engaging with routine procedures. This is an experimental process. Sometimes it's a direct result of the working process and sometimes it takes place during the logistical organisation of the work itself.



In Manchester we asked people questions, but were asked by security wardens if we had a license to do so. We sat in places but were told we couldn't sit where we wanted. Our position as women 'hanging around' on a public 'catwalk' provoked aggression and assumptions about what services we might be offering the male population hanging around there.



Through performance based research we discovered that this public place was highly regulated by legislation, high security presence and spatially defined places for specific types of public activity. The lecture-walk highlighted these conventions and rules that organise the 'social character' of Piccadilly Gardens. Yet it also offered a socio-spatial critique of these structures by inviting the audience to playfully intervene in the everyday routines.



During our on-site research we discovered children playing on an out of use fountain inventing a new game in a place whose use had been defined otherwise. Our performative lecture invited the audience to take part in these playful and performative gestures that explored the gaps in the prescribed place to find potential moments of play and imagination in order to disrupt, challenge and create new places – new spaces to speak and act from.



The on-site performative research and lecture walk was part of Get Lost! Psychogeography festival, June 2008 and formed the basis of a lecture video of the same title:

<http://www.vimeo.com/8836607>

Home is Where the Piano Is (How can you feel at home in Orchard Park?)

Participatory project and interventions in public space

Orchard Park, Cambridge (UK)

Crop Marks Contemporary Art Trail, August 2009





COLLABORATION

In each project we do not simply bring something to a place or do just a walk and talk. Rather, we use the opportunities of the place to make visible its structures. In this way the collaborative aspect of our practice is not only between each other or the people who inhabit a place, but rather it is a collaboration with the place itself. In all our projects, the form of the work always grows out of the specificities of the place.



'Home is Where the Piano Is' was part of CROP MARKS, Contemporary Art Trail, Orchard Park, Cambridge (UK), August 2009. Orchard Park is a major, mixed-use development currently under construction on the northern fringe of Cambridge. The site will eventually include 900 new homes, public open spaces, commercial units and community facilities, but at the time had received much bad press due to the economic decline and halt in building work leading some journalists to refer to it as a battlefield or bomb site rather than a new and developing community.



With this in our minds, on arriving in Orchard Park we instantly realized that it wasn't the place for a lecture walk – there was no 'audience' and creating links to people through a participatory work was more pertinent than a final work, performance or talk, hence the action of research and the 'working' became the work itself. A simple question 'How can you feel at home in Orchard Park?' became a key way of meeting as many people as we could over 8-days.



We explored the specificity of 'at homeness' by asking people who live and work in Orchard Park for instructions regarding what we can do to feel more at home; putting this advice into practice in different locations across the development. The activities included 'hang out your washing' 'take a dog for a walk,' 'pay someone to make you feel at home,' 'invite people round,' 'meet as many people as you can' and 'have a picnic.' Some practices, such as hanging out washing and having a picnic in seemingly unused public spaces, challenged what people thought were acceptable.







At the same time, by asking people how we could feel at home and what home means for people in Orchard Park we managed to get under the surface. In performing spatial practices that make a home a home we also collected very intimate stories and began to construct knowledge of and understand why people liked living there, even momentarily integrating us into the new community.



A short video documentation of the project 'Home is Where the Piano Is', including the on-site performative research, the interviews and the activities alongside statements from the Developer's can be viewed online:

<http://www.vimeo.com/8837743>

Walking Through Walls / Durch Wände Gehen (Haunted Topographies)

Audio night walk-for-one, Centraltheater Leipzig

Festival 'play! LEIPZIG - Movement in Urban Space', June 2010

Franz Kafka
Regie: Sebastian Hartmann

PHANTOM
GHOST



PERIPHERAL PRACTICES & SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Drawing on our individual backgrounds in architecture and performance, we use inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural investigative processes including recorded conversations, questionnaires, architectural research, intervention and performance to engage with people and places in different ways. Audience and participants include residents and visitors, but also those who produce and occupy places through daily routines such as cleaners, construction workers and maintenance people.



Our most recent work 'Walking Through Walls' is an audio walk-for-one that took place in the Centraltheatre, Leipzig as part of the festival play! LEIPZIG - Movement in Urban Space, 24 - 27 June 2010. Exploring some of the more intimate and forgotten spaces, including tiny back stairs and make up tables the walk contrasts these intimate spaces with larger histories, questioning what lies behind the walls, under the floorboards, and above the ceiling.





It asks how the theatre is produced, what defines its boundaries and what gestures and routines happen after dark and out of sight to reconstruct its places everyday. At the same time the tour explores how the building figures in the broader urban landscape of the city: the landscape just beyond its walls.



Again the site specificity of the work determined its form. Rather than a theatre piece – which would be expected in the context of a theatre building – we decided to use a walk that focused specifically on people who work in the theatre but who are meant to be invisible. Ghosts that creep in out of the corner of an eye ‘through the squint glance of a nervous stare,’ but which viewed straight on vanish, disappear and cease to exist; Ghosts whose actions extend the potential for experiencing the theatre otherwise.



We spent a week talking to cleaners, ticket sellers, administrative staff, make-up artists, dramaturges, service engineers, technicians and maintenance staff to review the theatre as a stage for everyday performances, rituals and routines from the perspective of those whose functions are hidden from view of the audience, yet whose daily repetition is central to the functioning of the theatre.



The audio walk-for-one walk took place during the nighttime routines of the theatre. A member of the theatre's evening services, passed the walker an unmarked envelope containing a letter. The letter set the scene for the walk, which led the walker, guided by the voice of an actor from the house ensemble, around the darkened corridors of the theatre. It focused on the position of the walker who became a participant, through the locations they were instructed to take up in relation to the physical spaces of the theatre, and a performer through the chance meetings they encountered with nighttime workers.



Somewhat different to the previous two projects people had a clear route to take. Partly a reflection of the structures of the theatre and partly critical of the institution's latest motto to 'open itself up to the city,' the clearly-directed walker embodied both the highly controlled and hierarchical structure of the theatre but also the idea of a place produced by the repetitive actions of those working there – like ghosts walking a repeated path – sometimes interacting with others and sometimes alone.







Ultimately, as with all our projects, informed by 'real' material, facts, figures, conversations and recordings, 'Walking through Walls' produced a narrative that inhabited a hidden and in-between reality; opening the mind of the walker to latent and anecdotal topographies. In this case re-presenting the stories of place while bringing into question ideas of reconstruction and reenactment, which paradoxically always modify a never attainable original.



The final comments came from a small book we left for people to leave us a message:

“A wonderful disorientation of rooms and doorways. There was a great curiosity to open all the doors to see what happened behind them during the day. Oneself is haunting this place like a ghost and has left a piece of oneself there. It’s shrouded in fog. From today on I’ll enter the building differently than even yesterday”, “I felt like a ghost roaming the theatre”, “Great how you can re-discover a well-known building.”

ABOUT **urban (col)laboratory**

English architect and critical writer Helen Stratford and German performer and media artist Diana Wesser met each other in 2004 at Akademie Solitude, Stuttgart, Germany. After a nightlong discussion about the performativity of architecture and urban spaces they started an ongoing email exchange. The outcome of this interdisciplinary collaboration is a series of papers, site specific performances and videos.

urban (col)laboratory Selected Projects, Exhibitions & Screenings

- 2010 *Walking Through Walls / Durch Wände Gehen*, audio walk at Centraltheater Leipzig, Festival 'play! LEIPZIG - Movement in Urban Space', 24 - 27 June
Metropolis LAB Copenhagen, Work Presentation, 28 - 30 June
WAC: PARTNERING, Wysing Arts Centre, Exhibition, 6 November - 19 December
- 2009 *Home is, where the piano is (How can you feel at home in Orchard Park?)*, participatory project/intervention, CROP MARKS art trail, Cambridge, 24 - 31 August
Choreographing Knowledge, A performative walk and talk around Murray Edwards College
Nightjar Festival & Festival of Ideas, Cambridge (UK), 21 + 22 October
Fissures in the Harbour of Knowledge, Lecture Performance Walk, TANZ MACHT RAUM - RAUM MACHT TANZ, Symposium at the Ruhr University Bochum (DE), 25 April
Choreographing Knowledge, poster presentation, Symposium Constructing Knowledge - Das Wissen der Architektur, Faculty of Architecture, RWTH Aachen, 5 + 6 November
Blind Spots, video screening, Subvurt Surveillance Festival, The Britons Protection, Manchester (UK)
- 2008 *Blind Spots*, Lecture Performance Walk, get lost psychogeography festival, Manchester (UK), 6 June
Blind Spots, video screening, TRIP psychogeography festival, Manchester (UK)
- 2007 *Performing with buildings: A review of the work of Diana Wesser by Helen Stratford*
paper in: Journal of Media Practice Volume 8 Number 3
- 2005 Concept *Madrid under Madrid* shortlisted for Madrid Abierto festival (ES)

URBAN (COL)LABORATORY SHORT CVs



HELEN STRATFORD is a practising architect and critical writer based in Cambridge-shire (UK). Qualified to postgraduate level in Architectural Practice and Critical Theory, in 2004/2005 she was resident fellow in architecture at Akademie Solitude, Stuttgart, Germany. A member of 'taking place' a feminist group of architects and artists, architect at MOLE, Cambridge, she is also a Creative Practitioner for Creative Partnerships, Arts Council England. Her practice draws upon architecture, writing and performance to explore the role everyday objects, and activities play in supporting certain ways of being or placing. Her work and research has formed the basis of many spoken papers, performances, exhibitions and presentations at international conferences and events, including most recently a 6-month residency at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, on their communities under construction residency.

www.wysingartscentre.org | www.takingplace.org.uk | www.molearchitects.co.uk



DIANA WESSER is a performer and media artist, based in Leipzig (Germany). After taking courses in classical Ballet and Modern Dance, she studied media art at the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig/Germany to postgraduate level, while gaining further qualifications in contemporary dance and improvisation practice. In 2006/2007 she held a teaching position at the Academy of Visual Arts, Leipzig and founded the "Werkstattmacher" program to encourage young performance artists at LOFFT Theatre Leipzig. She is working as a curator for several site-specific performance festivals including most recently the conference and performance festival 'play! LEIPZIG - Movement in Public Space' in collaboration with Centraltheater and Dance Archive Leipzig. Her works provide a critique of performativity and theatrical aspects of everyday life. Through videos, performances and participatory projects she investigates social and cultural codes, how they become apparent in the body and its relation to space. She realised numerous performances particularly in public space in collaboration with Marina Quesada (Argentina/Germany), Hermann Heisig (Germany) and theaterKUNST Copenhagen among others. Her dance films are screened on festivals all around the world. www.dianawesser.de

PICTURE CREDITS

Page 2 + 3: **Metropolis LAB 2010**, Copenhagen (DK)

Credits: Metropolis Biennale / KIT

Page 4: Fiona Bennet

Page 5 – 9: **Fissures in the Harbour of Knowledge**

Lecture Performance Walk, Ruhr University Bochum (DE) , 25 April 2009

Symposium TANZ MACHT RAUM – RAUM MACHT TANZ

Credits:

page 5 (left) + 9: Helen Stratford

page 5 (right) + page 6 – 8: Martin Lücke

Page 1 + 10 – 15: **Choreographing Knowledge**

Lecture Performance Walk, Murray Edwards College, Cambridge (UK), 21, 22 and 26

October 2009, Nightjar Festival and Cambridge University Festival of Ideas

Credits:

page 10 + 11 (research Talks): Diana Wesser

walk documentation:

page 1 + 13 (right) – 15: Julian Hughes

page 12 + 13 (left): Eva Böhmer

page 16: Filming and photographing agreement letter

Page 17 – 25: **Blind Spots**

Lecture Performance Walk, Manchester Piccadilly Gardens, 6 June 2008

Get Lost! Festival, TRIP (Territories Re-imagined International Perspectives)

Psychogeography Festival & Conference, MMU

Credits:

Page 17, 18 + 21 (research): Helen Stratford

19, 20 + 22 (research): Diana Wesser

23 + 24 (walk documentation): Guy Jones

25 (videostill from 'blind spots', lecture video): Lee Johnson

page 26 – 32: **Home is Where the Piano Is**

(How can you feel at home in Orchard Park?)

Participatory project and interventions in public space,

Orchard Park, Cambridge (UK), 24 – 31 August 2009

Crop Marks Contemporary Art Trail

Credits:

Page 26 – 28, 33, 34: Helen Stratford

Page 29: Diana Wesser

Page 30 Amelia Poon

Page 31: Nick Cheek, installation / sculpture by David Kefford

Page 32: Paul Roylance

Page 35 – 47: **Walking Through Walls / Durch Wände Gehen**

(Haunted Topographies)

Audio night walk-for-one, Centraltheater, Leipzig (DE), 24 – 27 June 2010

In coproduction with Centraltheater and Dance Archive Leipzig,

play! LEIPZIG – Movement in Urban Space Festival

Credits

Page 35 – 41 (research) and 42 – 47 (walk documentation): Helen Stratford

Page 48 + 50, background images: Diana Wesser

Page 49, background image: Helen Stratford

Portrait Helen Stratford: Martin Lücke

Portrait Diana Wesser: Helen Stratford

Page 51: Helen Stratford / Murray Edwards College, Cambridge (UK)

A photograph of two women in a modern, brightly lit interior space. They are looking up at a large, circular skylight in the ceiling. The skylight has a radial pattern of white beams and is filled with a grid of small, dark, rounded objects. The woman on the left has long, dark hair and is wearing a black top. The woman on the right has voluminous, curly blonde hair and is wearing a black dress with a large, ornate gold belt buckle and a silver bracelet. The ceiling is white with several large, white, curved structural elements.

**URBAN
(COL)LABORATORY**

Helen Stratford (architect and critical writer, Cambridgeshire, UK)

Diana Wesser (performer and media artist Leipzig, DE)

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