



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > Dialogue between artistic projects and spaces > Incorporating the project into the space

Unlike conventional art venues, public spaces are rarely neutral. Their qualities constantly influence works. Such qualities may be geometric, architectural, aesthetic. They can even be intangible, for example, when dealing with the perception of a neighbourhood. Artists choose their performance location for these very characteristics. **The place chosen contributes fully to the meaning of the work and the way in which it is received.**

A good example is Félice Varini, a Swiss artist who works on large-scale visual distortions. In his project *Suites de triangles* realized in 2007, the landscape of the port of Saint Nazaire, France, is more than just the backdrop to the work. It's an integral part of it, and is, in part, its subject. The work goes beyond its pictorial form and would not have the same meaning in a different context. The artist himself insists on the validity of all points of view. Indeed, there is one ideal viewpoint, from which the painted shape is coherent. But the infinity of other viewpoints on the shape are valuable as well.

Places also have **social connotations**. Some feel familiar and foster feelings of belonging or identification. Others are felt to be more exotic, strange, or even hostile. Many artists work with these connotations, which offer a powerful source of emotions.

Sometimes the works involve taking audiences through uncomfortable spaces and offer them a new interpretation of these places. They get them to adjust or get past their mental barriers.

This is the case with *Déviaton*, a project by Greek artist Maria Sideri. It is entirely based on the audience's feeling of locations of social exclusion. She works in places that people avoid because they are afraid, embarrassed or feel unwelcome.

She explores rugged and abandoned spaces in order to present them in another way and transform the audience's perspective on them.



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Scenography in public spaces > Dialogue between artistic projects and spaces > Incorporating the space into the project

Traffic flows, shop signs, day-to-day objects and vehicles are all parts of what make up the story of daily life.

Its spontaneous, autonomous and random composition is based on socially-integrated signs which are immediately understood and interpreted. The artist can choose to immerse himself in these places of ordinary life and give them a role into their compositions. We say their creation is **site-responsive** – meaning devised and created in harmony with the site.

Spaces located in nature tend to be calmer and less overloaded with signs, but that doesn't make the space neutral. All spaces are affected by a network of meanings. A house with a small garden, a farm shed and the edge of a forest all tell stories. **Working site-responsively involves using the stories and themes evoked by the places.**

For example, a parking lot can easily evoke discomfort and danger. It is a great location for expressing conflict or tension, as in Radio Vinci Park, a piece by French artists François Chaignaud and Théo Mercier. This is a love parade in an underground parking lot, between a motorbike rider and an androgynous dancer. It stages a struggle, between combat and seduction, evoking bullfighting or a post-industrial fable. The dark, claustrophobic parking lot causes the steps and screeches of the tire to echo. It increases our fears and amplifies the fantasy.

In another way, sand dunes and the ocean can evoke calm, fulfilment, harmony and the beauty of the world. They serve as the basis for an immersive theatrical experience called *Walking*. The piece was created by US and Dutch artists Robert Wilson, Theun Mosk and Boukje Schweigman in 2006, on the Dutch island of Terschelling.

In *Walking*, the space acts as a backdrop for a sensory, 3-hour, slow and lonely walking experience. It invites participants to contemplate, meditate and engage in a sense of oneness.

Art in public space also means **risking random events**. A noise can erupt in the middle of an actor's monologue and make it difficult to hear. Street actors are specialists at working with such unpredictable events. They adapt to them and integrate them into what they're saying, often very playfully.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > Dialogue between artistic projects and spaces > Facing criticism

Public space is for everyone. **Whatever happens in it can be picked up by the media, widely reported and lead to a debate or controversy.** Exhibiting art productions in public space can be very positively received, but it can sometimes lead to criticism, rejection, or even a clearly hostile reaction. A series of recent controversies confirm this idea.

Les Squames is a production by French company Kumulus. It presents creatures with blackened bodies who behave like monkeys. The painted actors wander around behind the bars of a cage, accompanied by guardians, played by actors. Their exposed bodies refer to freak shows and colonial exhibitions. The show challenges our views about difference.

Initially created in 1989, and performed many times since, the project was presented in 2015 at the festival Les Accroche-Coeurs in Angers, France. A group of passers-by denounced the piece, which they considered racist. Which is quite ironic, when we consider that this piece specifically explores the way we look at other people, and deal with difference. The local authorities cancelled the performance. This provoked public outcry against censure, and the piece was finally authorised indoors, in a theatre.

On a more tragic level is the forced exile of Afghan artist Kubra Khademi. In 2015, in her performance *Armor*, she walked through Kabul wearing an armor that accentuated her womanhood. She intended to stage and denounce the sexual harassment she had suffered since childhood, and the challenges of being a woman in Afghanistan.

But after just a few minutes, she had to terminate her experiment because she grew afraid. In the days that followed, she received threats, which forced her to leave the country and take refuge in Europe. This is a dramatic example of the obvious inequalities of Afghanistan's patriarchal society that she was trying to highlight.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > Dialogue between artistic projects and spaces > Transforming spaces

Public spaces are not blank canvases. But when a creation takes place in it, it is transformed. During the performance, it's quite obvious. On a longer term, the place is transformed in a more subtle way: **performances leave a trace**. In some cases, a visible trace. In some others, something less tangible such as memory, or a shift in the way inhabitants consider places. One could say the artistic work causes a **transmutation of places**, that is, it transforms their nature.

Ordinary spaces become a symbolic and poetic stage. They become what French philosopher Michel Foucaud called heterotopia: with this concept, he pointed out some places that step out of the normal space and time.

Indeed, for the audience attending a performance, the place doesn't have the same status as in ordinary life. It's integrated into the work. It doesn't disappear but is altered by the artistic project. Artists come into these familiar spaces and temporarily **transgress rules, norms and customs**. They disturb habits and social practices, explore them, criticise them and **open up new opportunities**.

The French artistic duo Boiejot.Renauld criss-crosses cities with living units made of wood: tables, chairs and beds are built and moved daily with local residents. Day after day, they set up in different places. Their route is decided and advertised in advance, for those who want to follow in their steps.

Over several weeks, the duo transgresses the rules of the street: they invite passers-by to stop for a coffee, a meal, a chat... or even a night. The street becomes a space to live in, literally. This experience changes the perception inhabitants have of their neighbourhoods.

The Danish collective, Bureau Detours also produces temporary urban utopias. In 2011, they created the DENNIS Design Centre in Copenhagen. For two weeks, they invited local residents to design and build objects for the public spaces they were accustomed to: chairs, benches, tables, skate ramps, barbecues...their designs were tailor-made to the needs of their neighbourhood.

They transformed the place into an open space where new functional and collective utopias could be invented.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > Dialogue between artistic projects and spaces > Creating a lasting impact

An artistic creation's impact is not limited to the duration of a performance or installation. Its ability to stay in the minds of the audience is often a sign of how good it is. Like with films or books, we remember works that have touched or moved us for a long time. This memory may relate to places we see every day and can therefore be regularly recalled.

In *Tape Riot* by the Swiss company Asphalt Piloten, two dancers move around the city. They play with the architectural forms created simultaneously by a Tape artist. The geometric figures in black and red tape stay around a long time after the artists have left. They recall the presence of the dancers for those who attended and redesign some areas of the city for those who missed the chance to see the performance. **The memory of the performance still exists as a long-term physical mark, and an imaginary remnant: the memory of the performance.**

In one of his books, author and artist Clifford Mac Lucas evokes the dual figure of **the host and the ghost** with regard to the relationship between space and art. He says: "I began using the term the host and the ghost to describe the relationship between place and event. The host site is haunted for a time by a ghost, that the theatre-makers create. Like all ghosts it is transparent, and the host can be seen through the ghost. Add into this a third term – the witness, meaning the audience – and we have a kind of trinity that constitutes the work."

This quotation shows that the real space never disappears. It is simply presented through a lens that can remain active for a long time. After all, ghosts never immediately disappear! They continue to haunt places...

On a local level, this idea means that **an aesthetic experience can modify the image that local residents have of themselves, their neighbours or the space they live in.** Artists are sometimes invited to support urban planning or renewal projects. The goal is then to promote the image of the neighbourhood and help give it a soul.

On a more international level, an artistic project can influence the image of the world on a global scale. It is the case of the project *Call Cutta*, created in 2008 by Berlin-based Collective, Rimini Protokoll. The audience member receives a call and images from an unknown person. He progressively understands that he's connected to a call centre operator, based in India, who he gets to meet virtually. The production references Indian call centres and indirectly deals with globalisation and capitalism.

The project creates a connection between the operator on the other side of the world and the audience member. It brings to life a situation that they experience virtually very often.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > The scenographer's tools > Introduction

Scenography is an old word taken from Ancient Greek. Skênêgraphia referred to the decoration of painted panels at the back of theatre stages representing buildings or natural landscapes. During the Renaissance period, scenography became more closely associated with the portrayal of perspective.

From the sixteenth century, the term **set** was more widely used to refer to the representation of space at the theatre. The term scenographer reappeared in the early twentieth century for the person responsible for designing the theatre space.

In the 1980s, theatrical scenography was extended to include exhibition scenography. It **explored new performance spaces**, including urban space in street arts. It gradually became a form of silent spatial mediation between the artist and the audience.

The stage is defined as an artistic performance space, a playground for actors. In public spaces, there is generally no conventional stage, which is considered more to be a symbolic performance space. Places are used temporarily and then returned to their normal use after the artistic action. The term **stage area** therefore refers to the physical scope of artistic action.

Scenography, that's to say creating the stage area, consists of defining and visually or symbolically marking out a stage for action.

There are a vast range of potential configurations: open air theatre, football stadium, shopping street, shop window, bus shelter, private garden. In public space, any space can become a stage and any situation can be a pretext for scenography.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > The scenographer's tools > Frame & perspective

In public space, there is no pre-determined barrier between the audience and the stage. It can be moved or transformed during a performance and play with all three dimensions. In the words of Italian scenographer Pino Simonelli: “the City is a 360° theatre”, with limitless staging possibilities.

The artist defines where the action will take place. They anticipate where the audience will be and attract their attention to guide them in the desired direction. To use cinema language, they define the point of view, frame, perspective, field of view, what is beyond the field of view and the depth of field.

In order to understand the various framing processes, take a look at the staging composition of performances you attend. How they deal with perspective is especially interesting: in theatres, it is restricted by the backdrop, but the set manages the vanishing points and forms a landscape.

In public space, **perspective** is provided by the depth of the landscape stretching out before the audience. It is more or less open depending on the place selected. The artist can therefore play with the various landscape planes to manage audience attention. By changing the lighting or position of the actors, the artist can draw the audience's attention to a hill, a rooftop, balconies or urban furniture, etc. These effects can emphasise a particular aspect or make it disappear into the landscape and play with perspective or depth of field.

Braakland by Dutch artist Lotte van den Berg is a good illustration of perspective. This play shows humanity abandoned in a deserted wasteland. The 9 characters have given up on defending life and society. They live and die outdoors. The audience is located around fifty metres from the actors. The distance breaks down space like a frame which actors enter into and exit from. All the sounds are muffled and the atmosphere is menacing.

The layout is important. It breaks the relationship between the audience and the artists, accentuating the audience's sense of powerlessness and passiveness.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > The scenographer's tools > Stationary configurations

Space is only limited by the artist's imagination. However, it is useful to be able to recognise the most frequent stage layouts. They each have more or less mobile barriers between the performance space and the audience space.

The front-facing layout uses a **proscenium stage**: the audience faces the performance space and everyone looks in the same direction. The action can take place on the floor or on a vertical wall. In this layout, audience members cannot see each other, and they focus their attention on the performance space, which covers their field of vision.

This type of configuration can reproduce a conventional theatre layout, e.g. if a wall marks the backdrop. Alternatively, it can extend the field of vision into the distance. Actors can draw on the various visual planes and movement sometimes visible in the background (e.g. busy street, animals, etc.).

The corridor layout is where the audience faces both sides of the stage area, like in a catwalk show, in a **traverse stage**. This creates a mirror effect, and audience members can see one another. This configuration allows actors to create wings on each side of the corridor.

Semi-circle configurations with three audience blocks place the audience in a U or semi-circle shape, in a **thrust stage**. In this layout, the audience looks towards a central space, where a backdrop can be created.

The four-sided approach uses the **arena stage**: the audience sits or stands around a rectangular stage area. They can see each other while also watching and becoming part of the show.

Finally, with **theatre in the round**, the audience sits or stands in a circle where everyone is an equal distance from the stage but at different angles. This layout creates an enclosed performance space. It is easier for the audience to forget the surrounding public space.

These various layouts can be combined: a performance can start with a front-facing layout, continue with a corridor layout and finish with theatre in the round. Spatial composition can punctuate a narrative and structure it into different movements.

The choice of layout, frame and perspective has a considerable influence on the meaning of the artistic discourse. For example, it can introduce gaps in the story to highlight narrative changes.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > The scenographer's tools > Dynamic separations

Let's continue our study of different audience layouts. Beyond the clearly-identified stationary layouts, artists can play with dynamic ways of separating space. This is what happens when the audience moves between different places or changes point of view. The barrier between the performance space and the audience space then becomes more fluid.

With **immersion theatre**, the performance is everywhere. There is no defined stage area: the audience is at the heart of the performance space and has a 360° vantage point.

One example is the performance *C'est pas là, c'est par là* by Korean artist Juhung Lee. It is performed in various phases: set-up, installation of a visual art exhibition, and the immersive experience. The artist installs a web of tangled threads over several hundred square metres. He attaches a stone to the end of each thread that some audience members hold to untangle this huge maze. As they retrace and roll up the threads, they come face to face with each other, pass over or under one another, and lend each other a hand... for an immersive experience of what the collective can be.

Another frequently-used dynamic style is **walking**. It may be continuous or use stations, with a series of different scenes. It adapts to the various spaces visited and seeks to hold the attention and movement of the audience. We will explain the specific features of this configuration in another lesson.

Another dynamic separation technique is **travelling performance**: the audience generally sits in a moving vehicle, such as a bus, car, truck or boat, but is fully focused on what it can see. Benjamin Vandewalle uses this technique in his project *Birdwatching 4x4*: seats are built into a trailer, with one side closed off with one-way glass.

The audience become spectators of the public space travelling before their eyes, where dancers perform for passers-by and the hidden audience in the trailer.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > The scenographer's tools

> Sets, accessories, lighting and weather

Artists creations have to take into account what already exists in public space.

Their constant challenge is to transform their acting space into a set and a well thought-through scenographical component.

They have to take into account the physical space available - the buildings, roads, plants and signs, etc.

They also have to take into account the flows crossing this space. This includes pedestrians and vehicles, but also some invisible flows, such as background sounds or city smells. For example, when working a few metres from a fire station or a factory, you can expect sirens or alarms to go off during the performance. Buildings and parts of the landscape can be used, twisted and offset, or even added to and amplified by parts of the set.

Some companies have specialised in creating very large-scale scenographical objects that blend into and dialogue with the urban backdrop. One example is the famous giant by French company Royal de Luxe, positioned on the roof of the Gaudi building in Barcelona, or the giraffes by the OFF company.

Others have used graphical objects that play with spatial perception, such as anamorphosis or optical illusions. We have already mentioned Felice Varini in a previous lesson. Another example is Pierre Delavie and his urban lies that distort buildings or create false perspectives and optical illusions.

Another scenographical effect is the construction of temporary architecture. One example is French company Le Phun with its *Palissades* project. There are also optical objects that create new points of view by framing the audience's vision or distorting images of reality.

Beyond physical spaces, artists are also learning to play with the flows crossing the performance areas.

These flows include passers-by, cars and bikes, which can interfere with the safety and meaning of a work. There are two possible approaches. Artists can prepare in advance to temporarily prevent and stop any disruptive flows. Alternatively, they can decide to play with them and incorporate them into the work's dramaturgy. Some even base their project on playing with flows!

This is true for *immobiles* by French company Komplex Kapharnaum. The idea is simple: around twenty participants stand still in a busy street in public space. Nothing more; nothing less: this simple image gives attentive passers-by a radical counterpoint to ordinary urban flows.

Another project, *Chronicles of Events Passing By* from Zweite Liga für Kunst und Kultur, places the audience in a shop to observe the street and movements outside. The street is framed by the shop window and becomes a sort of living documentary. Three performers playing with passers-by complete the scene, with music composed live by a musician from the company. Drawing inspiration from their observation of a specific place in the city, the artists encourage us to decipher the desires, attitudes and expressions of anonymous passers-by.

We have talked about the set and flows... Other scenographical components include the lighting and weather. Some aspects can be planned in advance.

For example, the position of the audience with regard to the light is very important to avoid the audience having the sun in their eyes.



However, bad weather and the seasons are out of our control. We have to work with them! Being cold in winter, hot in summer, blinded by the sun on their faces and acting in the rain are everyday occurrences for artists working in public space.

Sometimes, these conditions can produce extraordinary moments. This beautiful photo of *symphonic body* by American choreographer Ann Carlson is wonderfully set off by an incredible rainbow.

All this requires rigorous scouting, excellent observation and comprehensive knowledge of the space depending on its cardinal orientation, the season or the time of day.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > Finding the performance site > The relationship between artist and organiser

The producers of an artistic event play an important role in the production of a project in public space. Like with any kind of performance, they are responsible for preparing the venue and teams for the project, and for communication around the event.

But public space generates a number of other responsibilities, specific to this medium: in legal terms **producers**, and in a broader sense event organisers, are **responsible for hosting the project and for health and safety**. It is up to them to get the necessary permits from the local authorities. These include health and safety, licensing, police, fire and ambulance services.

In the United Kingdom, organisers are responsible for providing the authorities with a detailed assessment of the potential risks associated with the performance. They are also asked to provide a description of the prevention measures that have been put in place, known as a **risk assessment**.

Organisers also have to handle other **regulatory and technical requirements** that have nothing to do with the performance itself. They have to deal with accessibility and safety issues and comply with current procedures. One of those is guidance for preventing terrorist attacks.

In addition, they also have an **artistic role**, because they help the artist to choose the site for their project and prepare all that is necessary to the project. As seen, project siting has a critical impact on a work's meaning and message.

Their legal and artistic roles mean that organisers need to have a good understanding of the project. It is really important that they stay in constant communication with the artist.

The **project description and technical rider** is often the first step in developing this relationship. It has a key role in the life of a project. It generally includes an art proposal, a specific description of the staging, visuals, a detailed technical description, a schedule of steps to be completed before the performance (which is true in particular for projects with preparation time included) and an estimated budget. Sometimes it also includes a press review, and often images or video.

This all gives an idea of the work required to facilitate preparations for the performance: what people and resources are needed? What data needs to be collected? What permits are required? It aims to give a clear understanding of the key technical and artistic factors for selecting a site and preparing the project.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > Finding the performance site

> The importance of site-visit

In the prior lessons, we've seen that the impact of a piece in public space often depends on how well artists understand a space. **Choosing the right backdrop** for the project is an important step. It's a bit like selecting a natural setting for filming an outdoor scene in a movie. When a performance is programmed in public space, artists and organisers usually go through 2 different phases to choose a place.

Recognition (or "recce") is the very first step, **also called site feasibility**.

The idea is to think of a suitable space, maybe make some connexions and establish if any location may be feasible.

For instance, for a performance that takes place in a swimming pool, recce will consist in finding the swimming pools of the town, and determine those who would accept to receive the performance. Most of the time, recce is carried out by the organiser.

Site-visit comes after: an artist comes to view the different sites that have been identified during recognition, and analyses them. The goal is to choose the best place to perform.

At this point, there's another distinction, between the different types of shows, and their relationship to site:

- A project devised, created and performed in a specific space is called **site-specific**.
- A project devised and created in harmony with a site is called **site responsive**.

Some other shows do not need a very specific relationship to the place. They can perform in various places, with only some small adjustments from place to place. These shows are called **remounts**, as in traditional indoor theatre.

Either a location inspires the artist, which is the case in site-specific and site-responsive projects. Or the artist looks for an ideal backdrop for their project.

Site-visit is always necessary, but artists will adjust their approach based on how important the surroundings are for their project, and the qualities they are looking for.

For site-specific projects, site-visit will be a tool for staging and composing.

Depending on the project, it may require several weeks of immersion in a local community or neighbourhood, in particular, when the project involves collecting stories, or participation of local residents. But sometimes it'll take no more than a few hours, to find the ideal location for a performance that doesn't require this kind of immersive preparation.

In the next video, we'll be focusing on site-visit methodologies.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > Finding the performance site

> Different types of site-visit

Whatever the project or location, site-visit always includes two aspects.

On one hand, **an artistic component**, which involves finding the location that best suits the intention behind the project.

On the other hand, **a technical component**, that involves ensuring that the locations selected correspond with the project's technical requirements and obtaining permissions and licensing to use the selected spaces.

For effective artistic site-visit, it's worth paying attention to **the static, dynamic and symbolic qualities of a space**. Let's go now through all these qualities.

Static qualities include the location's shape and geographical parameters. They cover: the nature of the terrain, geometry and architecture of the place, presence of vegetation or water, direction and path of the sun, the geographical situation, the type of people who live in the area, or the functional purpose of the spaces. **Static site-visit** involves observing the site and, if necessary, carrying out documentary research.

Noting these characteristics helps to **get more conscious of the staging potential of a location**: where could the audience be positioned? What angles could be used to play with dimensions, perspectives and distance? Who would be the local audience for a work presented here? What traces in the place could work as a symbol or a symptom, to resonate with the artistic content?

Once static site-visit is done, you can proceed to the analysis of **dynamic qualities of the place**.

They cover the specific flows of a location, in particular: the flow of pedestrians, public transport, vehicles or even animals. Recurring events that take place at specific times, such as the end of a school day or a market, can interfere with a performance. Therefore, they also need to be taken into account. During dynamic site-visit, artists should think about time. This means observation of the location on the exact day of the week and time planned for the performance.

You also need to ensure that no exceptional event is also planned for the same day that could disrupt proceedings.

Last but not least, in the case of a site-specific creation, a site can be visited, paying attention to its **intangible qualities**: these include connotations, ideas or projects associated with a given location. They can involve the history and memory of the place, urban planning projects or gentrification processes in a neighbourhood.

Choosing a good site from this point of view adds to the meaning of the work. However, this can also be a sensitive area: sometimes it opens up underlying conflict associated with values or uses that can negatively impact a project. In the additional interviews, you'll find a specific example of a conflict of use that impacted a project.

In practical terms, these intangible qualities are the most difficult to get hold of. Indeed, depending on the audience concerned, one place can be associated with a whole range of meanings. Understanding these different aspects requires a great deal of perceptiveness.



Week 3

Scenography in public spaces > Finding the performance site > Adaptation and contextual writing

Adaptation site-visit is necessary when the space is used as a backdrop. The goal is to find the most suitable location in which to present an existing work. Site-visit then involves finding the ideal performance conditions: in terms of geometric configuration, landscape, atmosphere and technical feasibility.

This approach is a **deductive process**. It involves studying spaces to find out if they have the desired qualities. Adapting projects to a new performance space can require cosmetic or fundamental changes to the work itself.

Projects in which **the space itself is used as the basis for production** require in-depth research. In this case, the raw material comes from the location selected by the artist. The location is seen as a social space where relationships, experiences and stories meet.

Site-visit becomes an inductive process, in which the location provides the content of the work. It involves field research and collection work aimed at generating content. The project is inseparable from the place and the people living there, therefore the artist has to think like an ethnologist and become immersed in the locality. The material collected includes facts, historical information, experiences, stories, interviews and sound or video recordings.

Some artists try to become part of the local social fabric, and take their place within the group, neighbourhood or village. Their ability to listen and be empathetic and curious about others are all vital for developing trusting relationships and being accepted by local residents. In this type of artistic project, the work is generally presented in the area where the research has been carried out.

For example, in *Square* by French company KomplexKapharnaüm, the idea is to depict the residents of a working-class estate and recount life stories: the migrants' journeys, people's geographical origins and their relationship with the neighbourhood. The production takes place at the foot of the apartment buildings, and projects huge video portraits of the people onto these. Human connections are of vital importance here, because the project gives voice to a specific part of the city. It lets us see and hear what goes on at home in the private experiences of the residents.

Site-visit only begins with the organiser: afterwards, the artist can open a long research process.