



## Module 3

### Scenography in public spaces

## SUMMARY

*The third module of the MOOC will focus on scenography in public space, which involves the artist choosing, defining and arranging the stage area, which is not pre-defined. This section is split into three chapters:*

- *dialogue between artistic projects and spaces: the reciprocal influence of places and works*
- *the scenographer's tools: processes for composition and transforming public spaces into stage areas*
- *finding the performance site: introducing reconnaissance as the no. 1 tool for staging composition.*

## Chapter 1: dialogue between artistic projects and spaces

This chapter starts with the previously mentioned idea that, unlike theatres or galleries, public spaces are not neutral places dedicated exclusively to hosting art work, like a case designed for a jewel. Instead they are filled with activities, flows, furniture and signs that dialogue with the work performed there. Any space is also home to social connotations, which influence how the work is received by spectators.

Before any story proposed by the artist, the city already has its own story; the story of everyday life in which we are all spectators and actors. Urban spaces vary a great deal. Some feel quiet and complete, while others generate a feeling of discomfort or insecurity, which gives the artist a range of signs and evocations to draw on. Moreover, public space is, by definition, shared. It is for everyone. Artists working in it expose themselves to criticism, controversy or the downright rejection of their work.

The underlying idea is that artists need to work with these elements, and take them into account, drawing on them and using them, rather than ignoring them, which would expose them to misinterpretation or setbacks.

Although the space influences the work, the work can also have a strong impact on the space in which it is based. It modifies shared perceptions, leaves a specific memory in a space and opens and extends the realm of possibilities. The memory of a work may continue to act on those it touched long after the event. The expression **host and ghost**, used to refer to the space and the work respectively, refers to the fact that spaces remain haunted by the poetic filter that the work has placed upon reality. This impact can be felt on various scales, from the micro-local scale of everyday life, right up to the representation of an entire region or the whole planet.



## Chapter 2: The scenographer's tools

The concept of scenography applied to **staging composition in public space** dates back to the emergence of street arts in the 1980s. In unconventional venues not dedicated to the arts, the stage is the provisional space where the action or artistic act takes place. The stage types and variety of spaces where an artist can work are almost limitless.

The **staging** of public space will involve defining the shape, location and characteristics of the stage area chosen. As the frame is not determined by the stage structure, the artist needs to define it by guiding the audience's gaze towards open or closed perspectives at any scale and in any direction: **the city is a 360° stage**.

The framing and perspective work carried out is similar to that of a filmmaker. Language from cinema is often used to explain how the artist establishes a **stage design**: field, out of field, reverse angle shot, depth of field, high-angle shot, low-angle shot, zoom, long shot, etc.

One aspect of a scenographer's work is to position the audience with regard to the action or situation. The audience may be **front-facing**, but can also be on **two, three or four** sides, or positioned in a **circle**. Each layout gives a different viewpoint on the performance and can be summarised through the following staging principles: **proscenium stage**,

**traverse stage, thrust stage, theatre in the round or arena stage**. These configurations can vary throughout a single performance and provide a vast range of potential combinations for structuring a story.

The audience's position can be designed to be **dynamic** by asking the audience to move or **walk** around, or by immersing them in the action. Some artists have even designed mobile seating systems on trailers to create a **travelling** effect for the audience.

Other potential tools for scenographers include adding artificial sets, accessories, lighting or sound systems. However, the scale and resources available need to be taken into account, and outdoor spaces themselves already contain a huge number of ingredients with which artists should consider working (natural sunlight (or moonlight), the weather, the soundscape, the natural architectural backdrop), which will always be more powerful than anything that could be added artificially.

These staging composition tools require artists to have good knowledge of the spaces in which they wish to work, which they achieve through observation and reconnaissance.

## Chapter 3: Finding the performance site

The third chapter focuses on reconnaissance and site visits, which is a vital step in any artistic project in public space, and requires a methodological approach.

The lesson starts with a description of the relationship between the artist and event organiser, as this is key to properly preparing an artistic intervention in public space. The organiser generally has excellent knowledge of the spaces and the social context, with points of contact in the city or region, which facilitates the artist's work. They also have a specific legal responsibility for hosting the

artistic project and for the audience. They will therefore be responsible for submitting applications to the authorities to use public space and for ensuring the safety of people and property. This requires excellent knowledge of the artistic project and constant dialogue with the artist.

The organiser often has an idea of the spaces that could interest the artist depending on the project and the qualities they are looking for. If the project is an **in situ** or **site-specific** creation, designed and written on the basis of a specific place, recce will require several weeks of on-site immersion for the artistic team. If it is just a matter of adapting an



existing piece to a new site, the site visit will be for *adaptation* and may only take a few hours.

Any site visit includes an **artistic approach** and a **technical dimension**. The artistic approach involves identifying the qualities of a site, its **static** characteristics (position, terrain, geometry, architecture, etc.) and **dynamic** characteristics (activities/flows throughout the day, background sound, etc.). An artistic site visit also focuses on the **intangible qualities** of a site: social and political components, connotations, atmosphere, uses, etc. This exercise requires a great deal of perceptiveness and experience, and makes a significant contribution to the final artistic result.

A **technical site visit** aims to check the practical and technical feasibility of hosting the artistic project and the possibility of obtaining the necessary authorisations. This part is carried out by the artist's and organiser's technical teams, and requires professionalism and technical skill.

**Adaptation site visits** use a **deductive** process, since they are looking for a suitable site to host the artistic project. On the other hand, for **site-specific works**, there involves an **inductive process**, as the qualities of the site determine what the artist will do. In this case, the artist conducts field surveys, similar to a geographer or sociologist in their fields of research. Projects designed and written from a specific context are known as "**local site-specific art projects**".