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**Abstract:** Site-specific dance takes audience on journeys, whether they intended to explore or not. My senior thesis examines the ways in which site-specific dance is created, performed, and experienced. I ask whether the urban environment of Chicago lends itself to site-specific work and I argue that to define site-specific work and ideas of place and space may not be as simple as originally thought. Throughout the fall of 2015, I explored various site-specific dance companies in Chicago and explored the roles of choreographer, dancer, and audience member. I discuss the “spectrum of site-specific dance” which includes various levels of what site-specific is defined as. For the research, I did embodied ethnographic research in each role: choreographer, dancer, audience and experienced each level of site-specific dance I discuss. I was driven by the idea that the landscape of a place could drive the formation of the dance. How was urban Chicago site-specific dance different than site-specific in another location?

## **Site-Specific Dance in Chicago: Approaches and Roles**

“We encourage you to approach this performance like a trip to an unknown land: pregnant with possibility, holding trepidation and excitement equally, the meaning of which is subject to the authority of your personal experience. We recognize the faith intrinsic in entering a performance such as this. Our goal is to honor that trust, and meet it with our greatest courage, integrity, strength, and vulnerability.” – Jonathan Meyer, *The Cronus Land Passport*

Site-specific dance takes audience on journeys, whether they intended to explore or not. My senior thesis examines the ways in which site-specific dance is created, performed, and experienced. I ask whether the urban environment of Chicago lends itself to site-specific work and I argue that to define site-specific work and ideas of place and space may not be as simple as originally thought. I first explore the history of this type of work, describe the ideas of place and space, define what I call the “spectrum of site-specific work,” and discuss how the three roles of dance (choreographer, dancer, and audience member) are influenced by and create this work.

### **Background of interest**

My interest in site-specific dance in Chicago first came from an interest in the contemporary dance climate of Iceland. I traveled to Iceland in the summer of 2015, and while in Reykjavik I had the opportunity to attend a dance performance at Harpa Concert Hall (figures 1-6 in Appendix). While there are a few different large auditoriums great for dance, the artists chose to use the entire building. The audience ran from room to room, on the stage, off the stage and so on and so forth. The dance became to me, a commentary of modern Icelandic weekends and modernization, and the use of Harpa Concert Hall as a site increased the meaning. The history of the building is tied to proving Iceland as an economic and modern success. In addition, Harpa is all glass, and thus the harbor is part of the building, which also interested me. The way that Icelanders modernize, yet have managed to remain vitally connected to the landscape that they fought and survived off of since their nation's beginnings. I began to wonder about landscape, identity, space, and dance. The questions were many and the focus not narrow. Upon arriving home, I realized I could explore the surface questions here in Chicago. How does site-specific dance vary by region? Since that question is huge and vague I decided to look at how the three roles of dance: dancer, choreographer, and audience member are shaped through site-specific dance in Chicago. Does the urban landscape and its affordances affect the creation of this type of work? And in general, how does site-specific dance creation differ from traditional dance settings and work? These are the questions I set out to explore. Due to my timing, I did not get as deep into specifics of Chicago urban dance, but the methods and theories of site specific in general were gleaned.

## **Methodology**

My methodology for this project included archival research, interviewing, classic participant-observation, and an attempt at embodied research. I began my study by reading a

large number of books on modern dance history, performance art history, and methodology/ethnographies of dance anthropology. The books covered key figures in the creation of the realm of modern dance, histories of Happenings, and methods in anthropological research from the position of a dancer. From there I was able to begin with a few formal interviews. I had seven in person interviews and one via email. These interviews had a framework, yet the questions were open and led to different places allowing the organic thoughts of the participant to be uncovered. I simply asked open-ended questions in the start. Towards the end I would ask more specifics for things that had not yet been covered. I began with interviews of choreographers and directors of three companies: Dance COLEctive, DePaul Dance Company, and Mordine and Co. I also conducted interviews with dancers who have participated in site-specific works. I had the opportunity to observe a rehearsal of Dance COLEctive, to better understand the creative process. In addition I did some participant observations as an audience member of site-specific piece titled, “Cronus Land” by Khecari Dance Company. I attended their November 8<sup>th</sup> show at Shoreland Ballroom. At the *Creative Disorientation: Ethnographic sensibility as Improvisational art* panel at the AAA, I heard Virginie Magnat’s paper *Embodied Research As Methodology in Performance Ethnography*. She said that embodied research is a “Mixing of head and heart. It is a more empathetic way of knowing. This allows us to not privilege our own viewpoints but the ones of those we are researching with. Finally, to gain genuine knowledge, we must experience directly”(Magnat, 2015: presented at AAA in Denver) At the time, I had not thought of my work as embodied, but I feel that my positionality did ultimately lend itself to embodied research. I curated my own site-specific piece so as to both better understand the choreographic and dancer perspective and gain authentic audience insights, outside of my audience perspective of Cronus Land. Finally, I used my own positionality as a

dancer who has done 1 site-specific physical-level dance piece and 1 site-specific idea-level piece, to reflect and analyze this data. From the literature of dance anthropologists, the positionality of dancer/researcher is an important one to balance and use in this type of dance-ethnology, and I found my knowledge of dance to be incredibly vital in this research. Having the perspective of multiple dance companies in the city was not planned, but I think the broad nature of the interviews and perspectives was interesting. I did experience limitations in timing. For example, I was not able to observe at Mordine because her next piece starts in spring. Therefore, having multiple perspectives allowed for a diversity of data and allowed for a broadened perspective of the site-specific climate in Chicago. Since the directors (founders) of the various dance companies are public figures, their real names are used in the study. The dancers are labeled “dancer” and fellow audience members labeled as “man or woman” in order to respect their privacy.

### **History of site-specific and of modern dance**

The history of site-specific dance has a two-fold focus: modern dance and site-specific work/performance. Though not exclusively site-specific work tends to be contemporary modern dance, often with elements of improvising, or choreographed as a collective. Starting with the history of modern dance, we see the first break from ballet in early 1900s with Isadora Duncan in Paris. Mazo, author of *Prime Movers*, explains that Duncan obtained her inspiration and movement pallet from the dancers of Greek Vases because their shapes were natural to the body unlike ballet, which was harsh, and against the body. Duncan’s style is described as a heavy “use of static poses and pantomime, clear gestures with her arms, and facial expressions.... legs strongly apart, feet well planted, and legs bent so tilted that the chin points upward toward the roof, and her arms, which reach high with the palms of her hands facing out” (1977: 53).

Moving forward, dance saw the emergence of a home in popular culture thanks to the work of Ruth St. Denis. Her great break from classical ballet was in her bare midriff and American Vaudeville style. Like Duncan, she was inspired by art. In her case this art was seen in 1903 in Buffalo NY on Egyptian Deities cigarettes. She carried on the oriental and spectacle for years and deeply studied the orient arts. The next wave of 'modern' dancers and choreographers were Graham, Weidman and Humphrey. Doris Humphrey described dance as what "happens in the frightening moment between falling and recovering, during the arc swept by a body moving between equilibrium and uncontrol" (1977: 117). A few of Humphrey's pieces really fall on the "idea" end of my spectrum of site-specific dance: Water Stud is one example in which the dance was created outside of the classic 8-count. Rather dancers "were to feel a wave that curved their backs and made them move from its force and rhythm, an example of 'working from the inside out...the waves gained force, bending the dancers, pulling them to their feet, sweeping them over the stage, then diminished to leave them still again" (1977: 128). Humphrey also made great use of silence. Martha Graham is one of the most well-known dancers and techniques and Mazo states, "to the average bystander, the words "modern dance" bring a picture of a group of young women in black leotards and footless tights sitting square-hipped and spread-legged on the floors, bending sharply. This is Graham technique, one of the pylons of modern dance" (1977:153). Mazo says, "her way of dancing embodies the entire mythology of America: the ideal of progress, born of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and the anguish of failure, born of the inability of progress to protect the powerless; the strict discipline of New England and the freedom of the West; the tiered crowding of cities and the flat spaces of the frontier; the command to be always doing and the desire to dally in idleness, and the terrible need to explore geography, technology, experience, and when all else is exhausted, ourselves...She studied the

relationship of the moving body to space, and began to use the dance floor not as launching pad for balletic leaps but as a foundation for more earthly movement, understanding that a tree draws energy through its roots as well as through its leaves” (1977: 156 and 162). Finally we come to Merce Cunningham, who made “use of pedestrian actions—walking, running, skipping...” (1977: 201). He did not make use of narratives in the way Graham did. Rather he created plotless dances. He, like dance anthropologists saw dance as an intrinsic part of being human saying that “life does not lie outside the dancing, however strange or non-strange, conventional or non-conventional the dancing is, the life of a dance lies there” (1977: 204). He redefined the stage and made it a different type of space. Cunningham relates directly to the idea and formation of site-specific work. He was known for a “Cunningham Event.” Cunningham’s Events met Happenings in the 1960s. Mazo discusses Happenings stating that, “The first happening was produced at Black Mountain College during the Cage regime, and the genre relied on many of the precepts that were developed by Merce Cunningham” (1977: 273). Mazo says that this was a political statement as well as an artistic aesthetic. “Happenings used change techniques, as Cunningham did” (1977: 273). Mazo also says that this dance and performance art was highly intellectual. He says, “one reason for limiting movement was a desire to experiment with the use of non-dancers, thus posing the question, ‘what is a dancer?’” (1977: 275). Today site-specific dance in particular is much more organized. Whole companies are built with that intention in mind. Chicago examples include: Mordine Company, Dance COLEctive, and Khecari. In addition, pop-culture kind of took its own spin of site-specific dance with the flash-mob fad of the mid-2000s.

In Chicago in particular, the emergence of both modern dance and site-specific dance came about with the formation of Mordine Co. The first piece the company performed was

*Journey* in 1970. The piece took place over three levels of a huge warehouse and had 12 dancers doing improvising and a core four with set choreography. Shirley talked about the dance climate in Chicago at the time of *Journey*

“That was a real game-changer. My first work here, it was the first time that seen a strong contemporary dance piece...No one was here doing contemporary work. That got a lot of press; no one had done anything like it in Chicago before. Of course there was Ruth Page and a lot of ballet.”

Today, Chicago is home to multiple contemporary dance studios and companies, and a fair number of site-specific centered companies as well. I was able to connect with Dance COLEctive, DePaul Dance Company, and Khecari in addition to Mordine and Co.

### **Place and Space**

One important question I had for all of my interviews was the idea of space and place. What do those words mean to dancers and in relation to movement. These concepts are central to my question of how the landscape around a person, be it natural or man-made affects the ways that person lives out culture and thus art. To better understand the ideas of place and space I explored the theory surrounding these ideas. Robert Rotenberg in his article titled *The Study of Landscape in Cultural Anthropology* says,

“These ways of describing an environment coincide with the distinction between the opposed terms ‘place’ (lie, ort) and ‘space’ (espace, raum). The terms are opposed to each other because they do not co-exist in experience. One is either attentive to place or one is moving through space. Place is static, the being-there of something dead and unchanging. Space is dynamic, the process of eventually arriving at a destination (a place) by a living person. Space cannot be separated from movement and place never moves. There are as many spaces as there are distinct paths people can take to attain a place. Places, however, are finite. They become defined by memory and imbued with meanings, both mundane and symbolic” (Rotenberg, 2009: 8-9).

When describing the site of a site-specific dance, I am referring to where spaces lead to place. In other words, I am referring to a landscape. In simple terms a “place is a location of elements that we find meaningful” (2009:10). This is directly opposed to a non-place. A non-place is a location

that no matter where it is the world, it is fundamentally the same and thus does not create meaning of its own. Examples of non-place are airports, malls, and bus stops. In site-specific dance, we often find that the location in a place that gets filled with even more meaning as the traces of the dance are left behind. Traces refer to the physical or non-physical remnants of an event or a person who moved through space, thus creating a place. Traces can include memories, names carved in the wood, a scratch on a table, or a conversation held. In dance, we talk about space as high, low, vertical, horizontal, in front, or behind. Space, then are the airspaces our bodies move through and occupy. Spaces have directions (diagonal, straight). A theatre is a place. A park is a place. Whether or not a dancer defines these terms, they think about them with frequency, and those who work in untraditional settings, think about them more. Derek P. McCormack in his book, *Refrains For Moving Bodies: Experience and Experiment in Affective Spaces* says, “Certainly space is not reducible to the status of a passive, three-dimensional container within which the intentional action of an embodied, moving subject unfolds... both (space and bodies) are always in the process of actively enhancing and dampening the qualities of one another. To dance with others is to sense this” (McCormack, 2013: 2-3). For example, when a dancer only has a window ledge to move in, they inhabit it and twist their body to fill different spaces then they would normally do. When a dancer is instructed to do contact improvisation, the architectural limitation becomes the other dancers body and they two work together to create space with their bodies.

### **Range of site specific | levels**

Finally, I would like to define exactly what I mean by site-specific. My definition of site specific (dance) is a piece of dance that is created with the location in mind, using the limitations of the space as possibilities for exploring movement, as opposed to a dance that is curated for a



traditional stage setting. What differs this type of dance from traditional staged dance, is the role of the location, the dance cannot be separated from the space. Site-specific dance requires a different methodology of thinking about bodies and audiences when it is being created than a traditional staged dance piece. There are a variety of methods. Most choreographers avoid what they call “plunking,” that is taking already created or used movement and putting it in a site. Rather, the choreography is developed with the obstructions and allowances of the space in mind. To create a site-specific piece means to express the ideas of the piece to your dancers, to choreograph unifying moments, and then to improvise when in the space. Although, there are professional companies that have the luxury of rehearsing in the space, and thus the entire or most of the piece is solid choreography. During my interviews and observations, I began to realize that there is a range of site-specific dance levels. On one end is the “Idea-level” and on the other is the “Physical-level.” The idea-level is more akin to a traditional staged dance, with the difference residing in the goal of evoking a setting versus using a setting to tell a story. The Physical-level side enters into the actual space, though the methods of using the space vary across “levels.” Boundaries between levels are blurred and choreographers move through the levels depending on the affordances of the spaces and the goal of their work. I discuss each “level” with examples that my interviewees or myself have participated in.

### **Idea-level**

I am defining this first level of the spectrum, *Ideal-level*, as a dance that represents a place, yet lacks set or the ability to be performed elsewhere besides a traditional theatre. This piece was about the trains of the Chicago Transit Authority, (CTA). Our choreographer assigned each style dance to a different role of pedestrian. I, a modern dancer, was assigned to businesswomen. We were told to ride the train, and observe the mannerisms of the population we were representing

and to integrate those pedestrian actions into our movement pallet. We were not able to dance in a train car, nor were we able to bring a train car to the stage. Rather, we set chairs up in train formation, had a voiceover of the “This is Fullerton, doors open on the left at Fullerton” speaker, and had a lot of pedestrian walking like busy city people. The choreographer said,

“I haven’t really had the opportunity to like work on site. I choreographed with space in mind I think....like the train car thing. Like thinking about that and sort of making my space, to the site that I wanted it to be and hoping to like evoke something like a train car in the imagination of the audience members, even if it wasn’t physically there. So, I think it was site specific on the idea-level, but not as much on the physical-level”

Thus, the piece was set with the goal of suggesting a particular place, but was performed on a stage as part of a larger show.

### **Idea-Level: Elements**

*Idea-Level with Elements* can be defined as a piece on a traditional stage meant to evoke the feeling of a place with added set and theatrics. For example, in Pina’s piece, *Full Moon* she created a rocky and wavy ocean shore. Her dancer said, “For Pina, the elements were always important. Whether sand, soil, or stones or water, somehow even icebergs and rocks appeared on stage. She wanted us to move around, through, over, and climb on them. When we dance, they become obstacles” (Wim: 2011). In *Full Moon* there was a giant rock on the shore and dancers through water to compliment music that sounded like the ocean. The water created waves and sprayed as a dancer danced around and through the waves.

### **Physical-level: Obstructions**

*Physical-level with obstructions*, is defined as a site-specific dance in a place, without moving or adding to the space, rather playing with the obstructions and allowances of the space. This is where site-specific truly becomes set in a non-traditional setting, and relies on the affordances of the space in new ways.

“I’ve done some really cool projects in Alabama. Gorm’s Bluff. We had people dancing on the bluff overlooking the big drop off and this is a rural community, where people have a lot of vacation. In a very picturesque setting. And it’s in the south where porches are really important. I organized a whole site-specific event staged on porches in the community. And it integrated people from the community: musicians and dancers and regular people.”

Thus, this work involves going into a space and moving through it. Another example of this level of site-specific would be the piece I did in the DePaul Greenhouses titled, *Organics in Motion*. In this dance, we left the greenhouses as they were, allowing for us to get dirty and to use the tables as obstacles. We attempted to fill the negative space around the tables and plants.

### **Physical-level: Creation**

*Physical-level creation* is a site-specific dance that is done through the creation of a space that can be put anywhere and used time and time again, yet defines the movement. Khecari’s Cronus Land utilized both this level and the next level of the spectrum. In its second half, the dancers were inside of a 5X8 pit and we, the audience, sat on chairs above it. The movement was thus restricted greatly, and bodies were twisted and thrown in ways I would have never thought of. This level is interesting because the creation of a space like this defines the movement, but can be moved and used anywhere. So if they moved this structure to a park, it would have felt very different than inside of this decaying ballroom. The pit was used the year before. The Facebook page for the performance said,

“Expanding upon last year's sold out performance Oubliette, Khecari's new work The Cronus Land is an epic, site-specific dance work installed in the decayed splendor of the grand ballroom of Hyde Park's historic Shoreland Hotel” (Khecari, facebook post)

One of my fellow audience members was talking to me during cocktail hour and when I made an aside about how I was excited to understand why there could only be a 12-member audience, she said “Ohhh! I’m excited for you to find out. I know why because I saw last year’s, and it was

incredible.” Due to the mobility of the created site, previous knowledge of was available, and the site could be put in various settings time and time again.

### **Physical Level: Journey**

*Physical-Level: journey (through architecture)* is a site-specific that uses an expansive site and ushers the audience through the site. An example of this is one of my participants dancing in an art gallery. The piece matched the sculpture exhibit about string theory. In this level, the audience is not stationary they are moving around either on their own or with instructions or a guide. Another example of this is the Iceland Dance Productions show I saw at Harpa Concert Hall. The audience started out in a lobby overlooking the harbor for cocktails and the dancers came out and danced by a piano. We were beckoned into an auditorium and told to sit on the stage. The dancers then danced outside of the auditorium against the glass wall and then coming into the space. Suddenly we were kicked off the stage and told to sit on the floor and the dancers came down from the rafters above the stage and ended the show on the stage.

### **Physical-Level: Production**

The final level, *Physical-Level production* uses the natural elements of a space and adds a set, has dancers in costume as if a theatre production yet could not be displaced from the specific site. Thus, the piece becomes as intense and curated as a staged performance, but it has the added element, limitation, and vibes of the space chosen. Although the set was built, it was inspired by and enhanced the natural decay of the once glamorous Shoreland ballroom (Figs 13-17 in appendix). At 8pm, we were moved through the ballroom following a guide, first through the doorway, where the dancer removed the plastic and beckoned us into the space. A set was built

up on the empty and decaying space. Doorframes with plastic and wooden ramps helped create a world of tulle and wood and plastic. After following our guide through the labyrinth, she left with the dancers. Jonathan came out and we were given chairs, oddly spread. Then we were told to "rest." A table was brought out and placed between us; we ate sushi and drank water. That is when we moved into the structure that housed the musicians and the 5X8 pit.

## **Discussion | the roles and their effects**

In addition to attempting to define the broadness of site-specific dance, my research explored the three roles of a dancer: choreographer, performer, and audience member. I focused on four main concepts: challenges of site-specific, relation and ideas of space and place, and why they do it within each of these roles. I wanted to explore *why* people are drawn to site specific and what makes it what it is.

### **Choreographer**

Each of the choreographers I interviewed began doing site-specific after being exposed to it through a mentor and remained intrigued.

“My mentor, Woody White... He was very interested in site-specific work and I remember seeing a video in the mid 90s of Doug Elkins doing choreography in the middle of the street in New York and that was like kind of really cool. And Woody had this idea of having dance be present in non-traditional spaces. And that was exciting to me. And we did this project at the dance center called Dancing in the Streets and they did site specific works, and they were a New York-based company, a production-based company. They staged giant projects that were site-specific...And I was really struck.”

Of the three choreographers I interviewed, everyone's first piece was related directly to the environment of their training. For example, Dana's first piece was in a high school class and was a site-specific set around the high school. Another example was Margi, whose first piece was in a

sculpture in Chicago, where she had studied dance. From there, choreographers have branched out in their own way.

When addressing the challenges with creating this type of work, I found a few themes: physical challenges, dancer challenges, and unpredictability. Margi Cole highlighted all of these in one short response,

“Challenges. Surface, size of space, lunchtime in the lobby in the loop, which was a lot of fun...but pedestrian traffic. How people react. Sometimes weather. And then there’s the real particular performance sensibility that I like. It’s not staring into a dark theatre performance stare. There’s a visual engagement with the people that you are in the space with but its not um, its not glassy and its not overly personal. So it’s a skill. So I feel like that’s a thing. That’s a challenge. You really have to train people...”

The limitations of the physical place are probably the simplest to overcome, but only if the choreographer is able to adapt the movement pallet. Margi talks about limited jumps and turns depending on the floor, using other moves and elements of the space. In specific, the performance sentiment that Margi identified related to Shirley’s viewpoint of dancers. She says that dancers don’t understand space the same way she does. She says, “Few dancers understand the body as a moment of architecture.... and I work and work and work and I don’t know...sometimes people don’t get things if they don’t value them...In their world that’s not a big deal perhaps.” When I was talking to the dancers, they were all caught off guard by my questions about the definition of space, yet all of the choreographers had pretty set answers. One dancer replied, “I’ve never thought about this until just now.” Perhaps the role of a choreographer, which involves a great deal of planning and curating, necessitates more thought than the role of dancer, which is about the moves and the energy. McCormack comments on this sentiment. He says, “Learning to think through and within spaces produced for and by moving bodies—demands particular attention to the affective qualities of these spaces combined with a commitment to experimenting with different ways of becoming attuned to these qualities.”

(McCormack, 2013: 3). Thus, there is a particular understanding that is vital in order to allow the space to be created around the bodies. He discusses the idea that Rudolf Laban coined, “kinesphere” meaning to “the sphere around the body whose periphery can be reached by easily extending limbs without stepping away from that place which is the point of support when standing on one foot” (2013:182). And he argues that dancers move through potential architectures and thus create architecture through movement. Thus, interesting dancers in dances such as site-specific do not “look for trace-forms already existing in space. Rather he develops a series of propositions eliciting ‘action in an environment of change in which choreography is a multiplying ecology governed by the specificity of a co-constituting environment” (2013: 182). According to Shirley, it is this awareness that is the biggest challenge in her work.

For some choreographers the unpredictability of the reaction is the best part, “You just never really know what’s going to happen when you’re on site. That’s like one of the best and the worst things about it I think.” Unpredictability tends to come from the audience, how they react, whether or not they respect the dance. In some levels like Physical Level: Production and Physical Level: Journey, the audience may not know what is happening, but they are aware they are attending a dance show. In other levels such as Physical Level, the audience may be walking through or may have been invited to an event that they thought was something else.

“The thing that I think I’m most intrigued by with site-specific work is the way that people react. I like watching the audience, just as much as performing in that sort of setting. Because its charged, and sometimes people would walk through us and wouldn’t even see us; or they would be intrigued, or they’d try to talk to us.”

Unpredictability can also include challenges of weather, affordances of the place not being exactly what was believed and so forth. Despite these challenges, choreographers are drawn to this work. There were three themes among my participants: architecture, research on culture, and exploration of body. Shirley of Mordine says,

“I love the subject of architecture...I had a few influences. My first one was the lighting designer and ...faculty at Mills College in Oakland CA, and Arch Lauterer who had actually worked with and designed for Tania and Martha Graham. But I learned so much about light and space, from someone like him. The same time we were studying plays and understanding how a play is put together architecturally, not just verbally. And him, Arch whom I adored and Nicoli. I took several workshops with Nic and he really was excellent at teaching you how your body works architecturally in a space. So those really were two strong influences and I just liked the idea of the human body in context to the world. Whether that's...and whatever situation you find yourself in, how you can explore that. Because even when you're on an obvious stage, you are dealing with proportion you're dealing with depth, you're making an architectural concept in that space with those bodies...I've always had that sensibility and always enjoyed it.”

Her interest in architecture transcends her dance. She reads architectural design books and uses spaces as they are in their pure form to enhance the movement through the natural manner.

For Margi, she found that this work was an opportunity to explore culture and to share dance with those who may not usually have the chance to see this art.

“My favorite part of the work is the customizing and the research that I do. When I did the thing with porches in the south, I was researching recipes and I was talking to musicians in the community about traditional folk songs that were part of the community and using there was a really awesome guitarist and a guy who sang and they travelled around with us and we moved people from place to place. And I studied the Alabama, where the stars fall or like a thing that describes....well anyways I usually do a lot of research that's not just about dance specifically, but about how the culture and the community or space lives and breathes and how that might inform the choices I make as I design work”

Finally, the idea of movement possibilities in odd spaces created an exciting motive for Dana,

“I think the first thing that popped into my head right away is like the obstruction of space like being able to ...like obstructionism is this Avant garde art thing that I don't really care that much for in the abstract, but the IDEA of it, the idea that I get from it is that you have certain limitations, rules, or structures that you're able to create more creatively and find things that you wouldn't have if you didn't have the obstruction you were given. SO I think something really cool about site-specific is that it creates movement and art that again, can't be abstracted from its space, and creates movement that would have NEVER been created if you didn't have like 'oh. You're gunna do this in a garden that has a swirly sidewalk.' Like you'd never think of the specific movement that you did for that space if you were somewhere else. And I think that creates really beautiful things.”



A common thread with all three of these reasons for loving site-specific dance is a fair bit of thinking. These choreographers do research, learn about theories, and bring dances to life based on these concepts and ideas. They use the chosen site, and create stories and meaning tied to the site in varying ways.

### **Dancer**

In the same vein as the initial exposure to site-specific dance that choreographers experienced, each of the dancers I interviewed also were introduced through a teacher. “My teacher had a lot of experience with site specific and was trained in that sort of thing and had done many performances that were site specific so she shared her love with us basically.” None of the dancers I talked with set out with the intention of doing site-specific work, and only some continued to do this work without formal instructions.

When I asked my first dancer what the greatest challenge with the work was for her she said. “Its really embarrassing! Especially the first time, when you’re like, “oh! Maybe I am annoying someone.” The themes that dancers discussed in reference to challenges were: audience, performance energy, and obstacles. While for one dancer, the embarrassment and worry that she was annoying someone was felt, another mentioned that sometimes the audience is rude, “So I think you’ll always get a couple people who are busy and they are mad that you’re in their space. But I think for the most part, people just really like it.”

The performance energy of site-specific is comparable to the performance sentiment that the choreographers mentioned. That is, performing on a stage is a specific type of energy; the dancer does not have to address the audience and can use facials to their discretion. There is a distinct boundary between the lit stage and the dark audience, seated a level below the stage.

There is a separation. To dance through or around a human audience requires an internal calm. One dancer says, “But just keeping this strong presence and performance energy when you’re in this normal space with people all around you. And like not knowing the circumstances, like it was a lot more crowded than we anticipated it would be.” The audience also creates an obstacle that the dancer must learn to move around.

In addition the space itself is filled not only with people, but also with stairs, or sculptures, or plants. The negative space therefore must be filled in different ways, and sometimes dancers are not expecting a particular object or person to be where it is,

“So we had to be cautious of like, we might be running into an audience member here. Or like stuff like that... We kind of just had to figure it out when we got there.”

Rehearsals are usually learning the set choreography and doing structured improvisation in the usual studio space. Most often I found that the dancers do a “dry run” in the space once or twice before the show. Very rarely were they never in the space, unless it was a solely improvisation piece. In the instance of the Physical Level: Production, for example, companies are able to have access to the space for long periods to rehearse with sets and so on.

The final challenge that the dancers discussed was being willing to play with the space and work with its limitations. Like the choreographers, they discussed the challenges of the ground most often: in terms of turning and jumping. They also brought up floor work, “Especially if you’re doing any kind of work on the ground. Like ‘ok, I’m ok getting dirty.’” My favorite part of our greenhouse dance was rolling around on the dirt-covered, and water-leaked floor. I felt that getting dirty was a part of what I was trying to discuss. But one of my dancers did not like it as much and thus spent more time up, playing with the plants on the tables.

In short, dancers told me that they enjoy participating in this genre of dance because it allows them to be creative and gain confidence.

“Today’s rehearsal felt organic regardless of the unfamiliar place. Movement in a space other than a stage is a daunting experience, but a fulfilling one. Stages are meant to be performed on yet they offer little inspiration. Dancing in an organic space, a space not meant for dance requires and reinvigorates creativity.” –*dancer journal entry after rehearsal for my site-specific in the greenhouse*

In addition, I was curious if site-specific dance experiences affected the ways dancers move or connect to spaces even after the cease site-specific work. I found a common theme among the interviewees of feeling like the boundary between pedestrian and dancer had been removed. In other words, the dancers felt that they were more fully “human” as a result of having had these dance experiences, “I feel like I’m more connected to my body, just in general as a dancer.”

Thus, dancers who have worked in site-specific tend to have a broader understanding of dance and what movement can become or can be used for.

Since one of the challenges expressed by the choreographers was the lack of understanding of the architecture of movement, I decided to ask my dancers how they understood place and space. Their responses were incredibly close to the definitions that theorists have defined.

“I think of space because it can be as large or as small as you want it to be and anything within a place can be a space basically. Just like off the top of my head. I think my mind naturally goes to place as a building, state or location and space can be abstracted from that not necessarily, physical or concrete. Like that chair is a concrete place, but the space it occupies is a wishy-washy thing.”

“A place can be very general. Um, but like space you’re talking about like something more *tangible* I guess. And like that, so as a dancer you’re working with like floor space and air space”

It is this notion of floor and air space that I hear over and over in dance classes. We, as dancers move through this space. As Rotenberg says in his article space is active. An understanding of

this difference for dancers who work in site-specific is important because a site is typically a place or a location. Cronus land was set in the Shoreland Ballroom, a place with a history and a group of traces. Yet the dancers moved through the space that was afforded to them. At some times this space was large and expansive, other times it was hardly any room at all. McCormack mentioned the challenge of this on him as a dancer and relates it to being able to give up pride and be willing to ask questions and allow the movement and space to mold each other.

### **Audience**

Audience members of site-specific pieces are there for one of three reasons: they are walking by, they are expecting something, but not sure what, or they are dance viewers and are ready to explore. This distinction is pretty set depending on the level the audience member is viewing. Audience members who are walking by are typically viewing a physical-level with obstructions piece. These are the audience members that many of my dancers and choreographers discussed as we mentioned challenges. These are the unpredictable ones. Sometimes they don't notice, sometimes they walk through, sometimes they are annoyed, and sometimes they react well. One dancer says, "I was told once "Ohh! I didn't expect to see dancing today!" They're reactions are the ones that dancers must learn to most effectively feed-off.

Audience members who are aware that something is happening, but not sure what tend to be viewing a physical-level: obstruction via invite; physical-level: creation via invite; physical-level-journey via invite, or even physical-level: production via invite. When I attended both Cronus Land and the dance show at Harpa in Iceland, I fell into this category. For both Cronus Land and in Iceland, most of the audience was in the third genre of audience member. For

Cronus Land, all twelve-member audience members knew we were attending a site-specific dance, but what that meant in specific we perhaps did not know. In Iceland, I knew I was attending a dance, but was not expecting the journey. Another example of this was reactions from my piece in the greenhouses, where audience members were invited to the greenhouse for a “talk” on Organics in Motion. Some perhaps, knew it would be a dance since they knew the topic of my thesis, others did not, and still some knew but had no idea what it would look like. One audience member shared her thoughts with me saying,

“I thought you were going to come out of somewhere or something and you were just LYING THERE. I WAS SHOCKED. And the dance was beautiful and made me think. It was so cool to be part of it.”

Unlike Cronus Land or Reykjavik Dance Productions, I did not have a guide to direct my audience, so they had to simply figure out how to observe on their own. One audience member said, “We weren’t sure what to do at first, like ‘are we allowed in there, *they’re* in there.”

The final category of audience member is a dancegoer, who knows what they are getting into. This is true for idea-level, idea-level: elements, and physical-level: production. While enjoying my cocktail before Cronus Land, a woman came up to me and asked if I knew someone in the show, I told her I did. She then shared that her daughter is the musician for Khecari and told me she was incredibly excited to see how this year’s piece would unfold. She certainly had an idea of what would happen. The other nine audience members (excluding me, this woman, and her husband) were all professors or students of dance at Colombia, and again knew a bit about what they were getting into. Many of them were more versed in the work of Khecari, and thus expected the journey that was to take place. Even though I did not know too much, I was aware that I would be attending a site-specific piece. This resulted in all twelve of us were very engaged, following the instructions our guide gave us without hesitation, and open to discussion

with the dancers and choreographer after the performance. No one was incredibly shocked or in a place of discontent. Everyone had made a point to be there: obtaining one of the twelve tickets available that night, paying for it, being on time, and being very engaged.

### **Reflexivity | my piece and the process**

For this thesis, I decided to embody the role of dancer/choreographer through the curation of my own piece. McCormack discusses the importance of embodied research in the realm of movement. He gets his ideas from Foucault. He says, “Foucault’s characterization of critique as an ‘ethos’ concerned with an ‘analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.’ The cultivation of this ethos is a project both related to, and distinct from, the by-now familiar claim that Western thinking needs to become more embodied” (2013: 4). As Virginie Magnat said, “one must do to understand (Magnat, 2015: paper presented at AAA in Denver).” For me, the concept was the most difficult. I knew I wanted soil to be a part of the piece. I pulled my connections and got us the ability to use the greenhouses at DePaul. But the idea was so hard to discover. Nothing came, nothing but discontent at city life. That’s when I decided to center my piece on what it means to be a human in the city. To be an urban creature, part of a generation and species bent on besting the environment. But humans aren’t meant to live in concrete. I got to think about the “itch” I and so many of my friends have developed over the last 3-5 years of living in the city. That itch is one of longing for mountains, trees, and stars. My friend Paul describes it as longing for “stars as our night lights and the moon for our lamps.” So many times our peaceful places are ones rooted in the earth or sea. So I decided to explore the pull to an urban oasis. What does a city do to a

human? Does it fill us with the promises it seems to offer? My movement is plant like, trying to find roots.

Rehearsal was interesting. I first played the music for the dancers in the space. Then we took our shoes off and accepted the dirt. Next I taught them the very brief intro. We then did the piece, three times, with the choreography and through the end improvising. Letting the plants, the dirt, and the music get into our bodies. We finally spent a good amount of time collaborating on the lift at the end, figuring it and its timing out. We rehearsed twice more. Then we left. We rehearsed once the day of. Then, we went for it.

We stayed in our pose for 15 minutes while people arrived. I was antsy. It was a long 15 minutes. But one of my dancers afterwards said, “ I liked how when we were waiting we could hear the sirens in the city. It was an interesting experience, being a flower in an oasis and still feeling part of the city.” What a good way to look at that time. My mind was racing with worry about what the audience would do, and my dancers were thinking about their place in the city and what the dance was going to represent. The dance itself went well. I found myself on the floor a lot. People watched and followed, but gave us space. About 15 people came. Far less than RSVPd, but a good amount non-the-less. People came to the event and assumed it was a talk about city organics, but many figured it was a dance, because they knew of my fieldwork. Our choreography was first together than moving to various improvisations and contact improvisation the theme of the dance was an oasis in the city and moving to release the toxins we hold in our bodies. It needed to be in a place where plants and food was grown but not naturally. There were a lot of obstacles in the space...I went and toured it before hand, they offered to rearrange, I said no. I wanted us to move around it, they way we move around things in the city to stay sane. Example: moving quickly through the red-blue line tunnel holding our breath,

maneuvering around tourists, retreating to apartments on loud weekends, so on. After the piece, I explained what the song, the purpose and so forth were. The audience was engaged and offered positive feedback. Most thanked me. One friend called me after to say thanks for sharing my art and life in a city that doesn't feel alive all of the time. My favorite audience remark was that we used the tables and the floor well, I was excited to explore those spaces and it was neat that the audience noticed.

My goal of an ethnographic case study on one company wasn't feasible in this thesis: I both came into the project during the wrong season (summer: break and fall) and I did not have the time to foster the relationships with the people I was trying to connect with. I feel that almost every day I get connected to more in the dance world, and clearly making those connections is important for this work. However, I found I was exploring this question via other avenues. Depaul Dance Company proved to be helpful and insightful and having the opportunity to see site-specific work (Cronus Land) and rehearsals of COlective was also really neat. In addition, I think my focus changed a bit during the course of this project. When I started, I was attempting to focus on the role of the urban environment in the creation of site-specific dance. I soon realized I knew nothing about Chicago site-specific dance and had to do a lot of learning. This led me to developing my spectrum of site-specific dance, to addressing the three roles of dance and how each role effects and is effected by this work. If the structure of this thesis was research for two quarters and writing for one, I think I would have done a case study of Khecari. This is because I have the best report with the company, being old friends with one of the dancers; they are solely Chicago based, whereas Dance COlective does (very interesting) work all over the United States; and they do multiple site-specifics a year, unlike the other companies that do other traditional dance work as well.



## Conclusion

Maybe rather than environment, urban or natural, the culture of a place defines the dance. Part of the city culture is abandoned buildings from another time, such as Shoreland Ballroom, or a greenhouse on an urban college campus. The reaction of the audience, as Margi is intrigued by, would be derivative of the culture of the audience. That is why she does work on bluffs and porches in the south and important city river walkways in Chicago. Landscape can shape dance and the reasons for site specific, but first it shapes the culture, which more directly shapes the dance. Dance is informed by the questions the human creators have and like to ask and explore. Furthermore, site-specific dance varies in its presentation and level. A site-specific dance can resemble a Happening, occurring in a busy square in the Loop of Chicago. A site-specific can resemble a theatre performance, with a set and sound and costume, like Cronus Land. Finally, a site-specific can be on a stage, simply taking the audience on another journey. One simple thread is woven through every level of site-specific dance: the choreography and the work cannot be separated from the place. In idea-level the dance *must evoke* the place and thus, the movement is specific to the idea of the place. In the physical-levels the dance *moves through* space in unique patterns and gestures as the affordances of the site effect the possibilities for body exploration. All in all, site-specific dance is not the simple phenomena I thought I was setting out to explore. Unlike the thoughts provoked in Iceland, I did not find that Chicago-based choreographers went into this work with the motivation of creating a history or a new sentiment for the sites, rather they were wither using the space as is to reinforce its role; or they were using the space a catalysis for artistic exploration that had more possibilities than a stage. These choreographers and dancers were spurred on by the challenges of working with varying affordances of space and

with the roles of audience members, and used these challenges to further their creativity. Site-specific dance is as complex as the humans that dance it and the ideas and landscapes that inspire it.

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