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Placing Space
Architecture, Action, Dimension

With many architectural projects, there is little opportunity to study the construction of space from a movement point of view, while with many performance projects, there is little time to contemplate the influence of the physical environment on constructing experience. *Placing Space: Architecture, Action, Dimension*, a collaborative summer course at the University of Maryland offered to undergraduate and graduate students of spatial design and movement, provided an opportunity for dance and architecture students to mutually investigate the reciprocal role that movement and space can play on each other's formation.

1. Moving the ''walls. '' (Photo by Jackie Crousillat.)

Embodied Experience, Conditioning Space

Placing Space: Architecture, Action, Dimension was a three-week workshop that explored the integration of architectural space and human movement at full scale and in real time. It was codeveloped and cotaught by myself, an architect, and choreographers Dana Reitz and Bebe Miller.[1] The class focused on the embodied experience of ''place'' in an interdisciplinary context of shared inquiry and serious play.

We three, choreographers and architect, agreed that the effect of space on movement and reciprocally the effect of movement on space are intertwined and inseparable. In order to encourage multiple ways of addressing and studying this condition, we wanted to set up a laboratory where we could create a research situation aimed at honing student's sensitivity to embodied spatial experience; enable the manipulation and study of spatial, temporal, and movement relationships at full scale and in real time; and, through our

2. Extending the body to claim space. (Photo by J. Crousillat.)
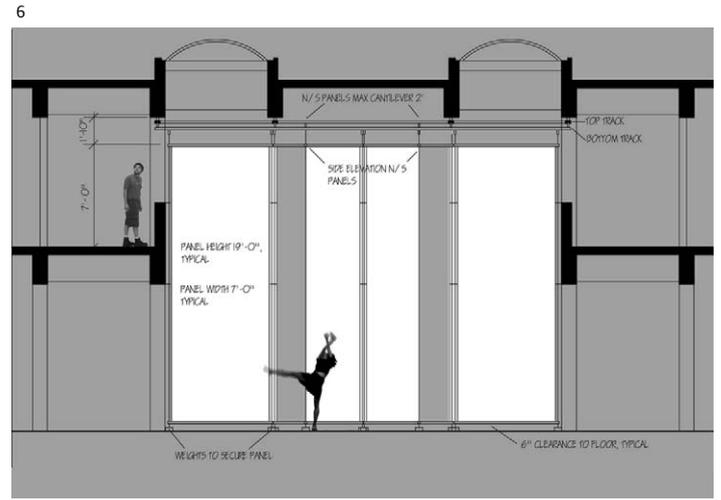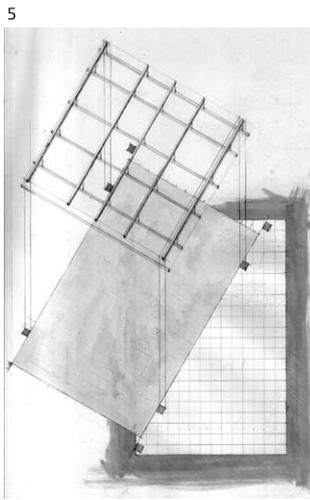

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3. Bodies and concrete push back against one another; viewers see what is already known—the columns' stiffness and its continuous labor to hold up the building. (Photo by Mercedes Afshar.)

4. Hands touch and the fabric gives, drawing forth the memory of the unyielding column surface. Viewers experience these differences visually and viscerally in their bodies. (Photo by Mercedes Afshar.)
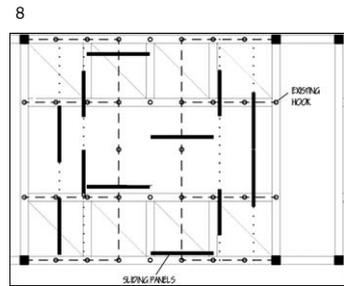
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collaboration and the context of our respective disciplines, develop an explorative pedagogy based on dialogue, experimentation, and play.

Dana Reitz and I conceived a pedagogical laboratory composed of an environment and a set of props that anticipated events and could be modified by people's actions. This flexible ''set,'' installed in the center bay of the Great Space of the

5. Tracks and dance floor define the volume of spatial engagement. (Drawing by D. Bauer.)

6. Cross-section of University of Maryland's Great Space with the Placing Space environment inserted into it. Existing architecture allows observers to gaze at the action from the balcony above, within the set, or from outside of it. (Photo courtesy of Eisenbach.)
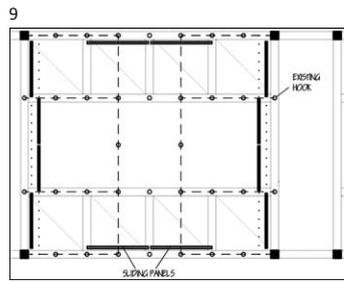
7. Placing Space ''set.'' (Photo by J. Crousillat.)

8–9. Two plans among an infinite set of variations. (Photo courtesy of Eisenbach.)

10. Track and rope detail. (Photo by J. Crousillat.)

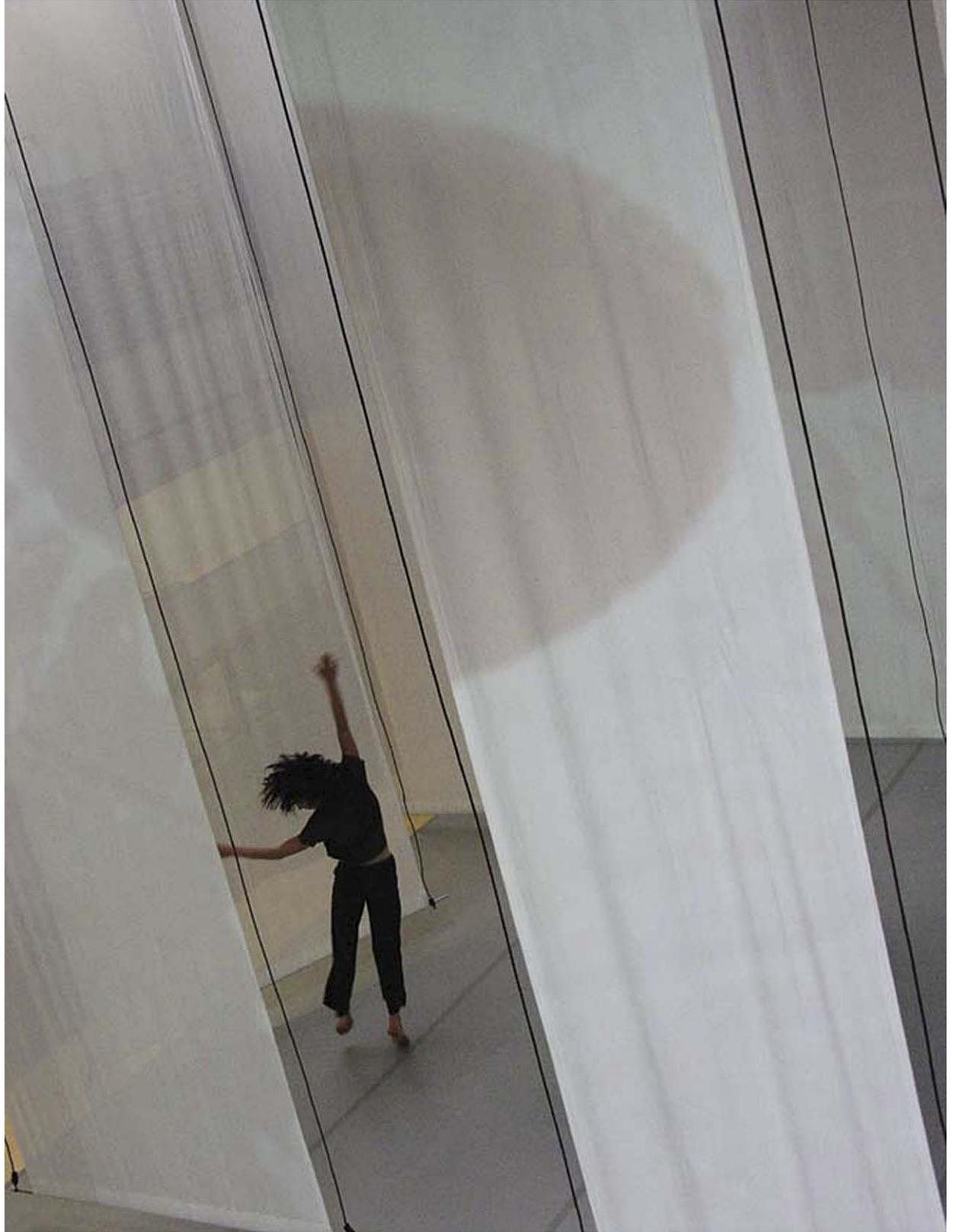11. Adjusting panels, shaping space. (Photo by Yoko Feinman.)

12. Rotating hardware detail. (Photo by J. Crousillat.)
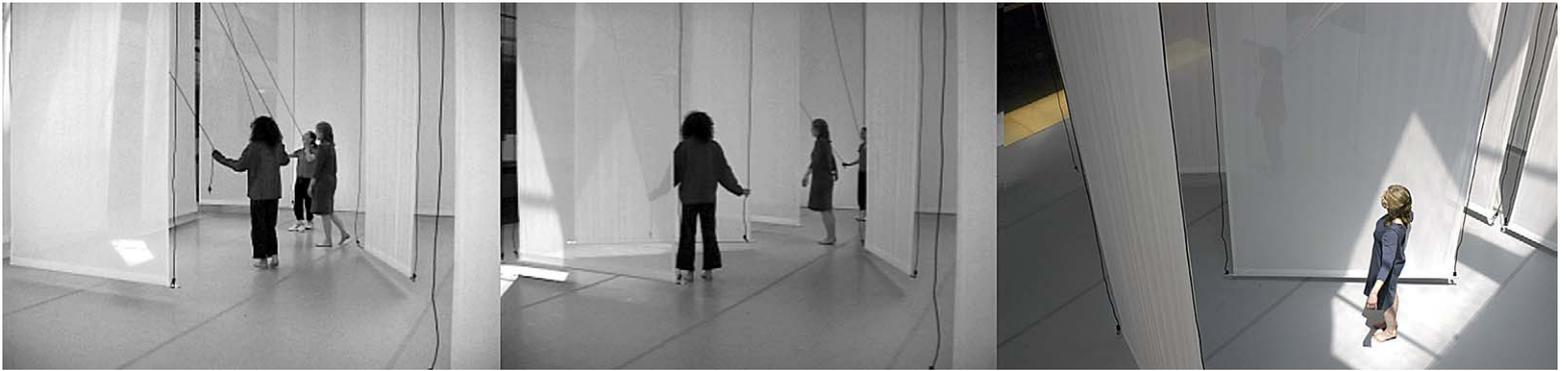
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13. Altering the sense of enclosure. (Photo by J. Crousillat.)

14. Introducing scale and reference to the vocabulary of movement, dimension, and space. (Photo by J. Crousillat.)

15. Slow, swaying motion, two pivoting panels and the sunlit volume that marks the floor are employed to suggest a quiet harbor. (Photos by Anita Chen.)
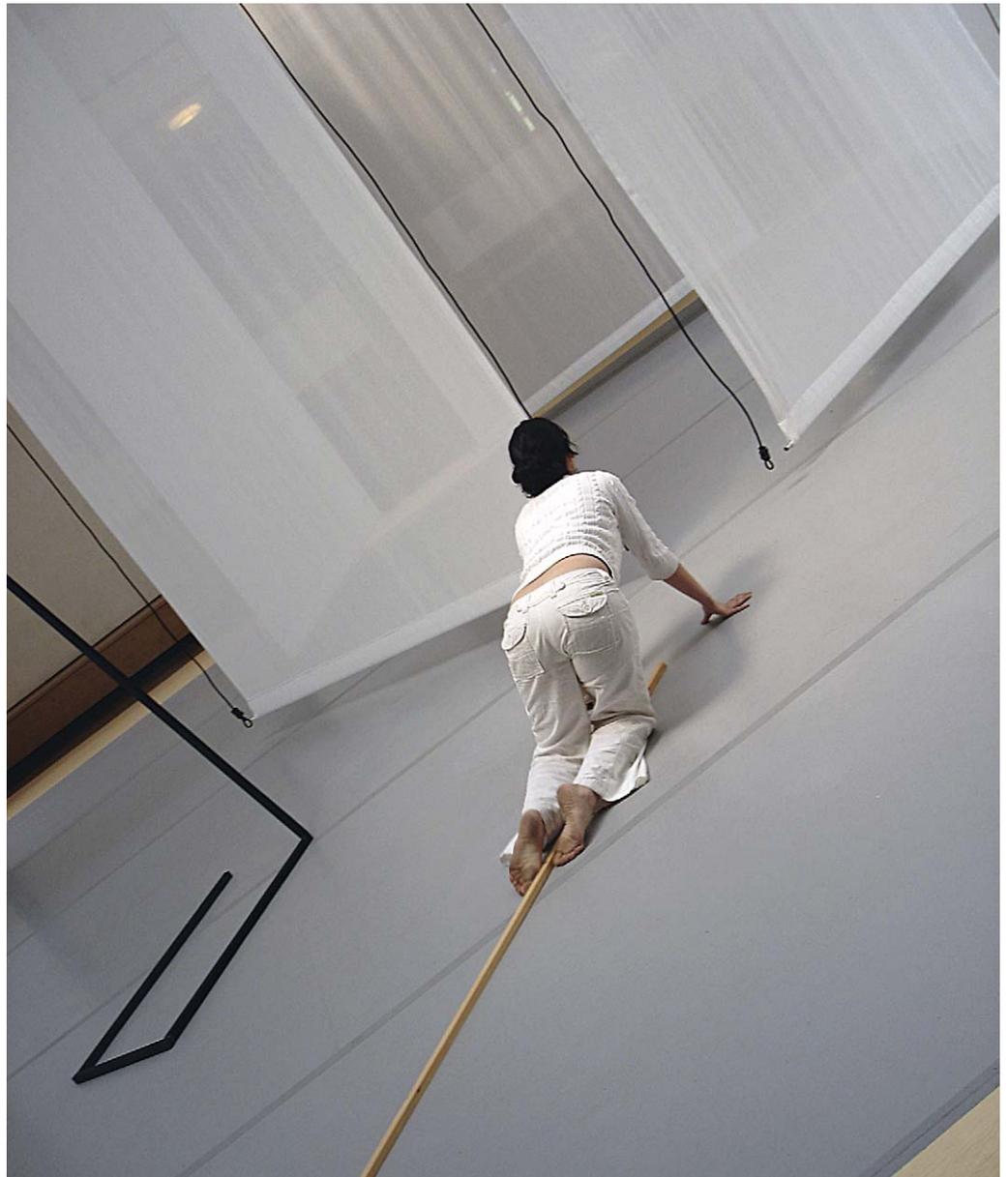
School of Architecture, Planning, & Preservation at the University of Maryland, consisted of sliding fabric screens that could be arranged in a multitude of ways (Figures 1 and 5–13). An adjustable grid of unistrut tracks carried the fabric panels, which could move laterally and pivot. Users of the space could manipulate these using guide ropes attached to both the tops of the panels and the tracks. High-powered theater projectors were set up at either end of the 120-foot-long Great Space to project video or still images (Figures 14 and 29). This environment allowed students to change its size, shape, volume, and image in response to and in anticipation of human gesture and motion.

All too often in architectural education, we do not develop our student's sensitivities to the contingencies of spaces. This opportunity to partner with two distinguished choreographers, whose work focused on the body in space, opened up the possibility to engage a relatively unexplored territory of architecture—the view of architecture and its experience as an embodied, ephemeral condition involving time-base events. With these thoughts in

16. Shifting people's perception of place: stick as partner and bridge. (Photo by J. Crousillat.)

17. Props from the studio and a square of light from a skylight recreate a space that offered a sense of extension and containment. (Photo by D. Bauer.)

18. Object pile. (Photo by M. Afshar.)

19. Dialogic placing and moving objects add the dimension of time and improvised narrative. (Video stills by Tzveta Kassabova.)

20. A simple action, lifting up the large panel, transformed the environment from a series of impenetrable planes to a space of entry. (Video stills by T. Kassabova.)

mind, Placing Space was envisioned to help "architecture students learn to appreciate and trust their bodies when designing spaces, not just to rely on abstract representations of space and material."[2] At the same time, the course offered all participants the unique opportunity to shape an environment in which they acted in concert with the actions they performed. It allowed for direct exploration of how architecture is, as Bernard Tschumi has maintained, "not simply about space and form, but also about event, action, and what happens in space."[3]

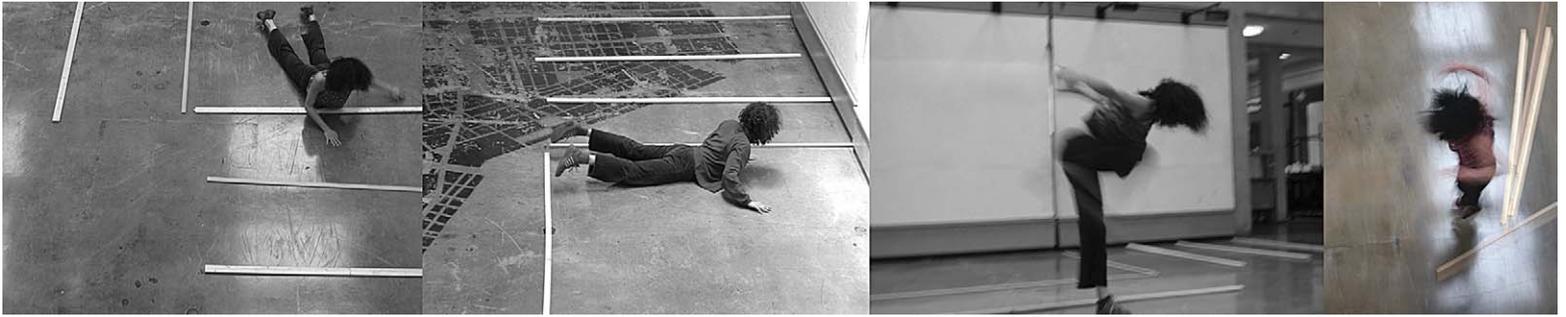In contrast to most design studio experiences, students were asked to shift their focus away from the production of objects to that of situated, embodied, adjustable movements from which they could learn. Unlike other "learning by doing" courses, given the ephemeral nature of this material and its focus on student development, student efforts left no physical trace or products behind.[4] Instead, individual "kernels of genuine curiosity"[5]

21–23. Reciprocity of movement and space. (Photos by J. Crousillat.)

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24. Sticks initially used to reach into space are reused to outline the plan of a stair. Swiftly, Tzveta runs and bumps up and down the ''stair.'' Place and motion intertwine. (Photos by J. Crousillat and Cindy Frank.)

to inspire future related work were encouraged. Initial exercises sensitized students to a heightened condition of haptic awareness (Figures 2–4 and 13). They developed situated movement modules that underscored the spatial and material conditions of the environment.

The laboratory and pedagogy allowed us to move between questions like ''what if?'' to ''what is it?'' to ''now what?'' in a very short amount of time. We were able to adjust our movements and the space in response to these queries. The following examples demonstrate the results of exploring this territory directly.[6]

Bringing an Experience of One Place to Another

Gesture is an elusive notion for architects. We tend to generalize gestures in our spaces. Perhaps, we

consider the impact a counterheight or location of a door handle might have on a space, but rarely do we have the opportunity to consider and observe the interaction between gestures and place. Dancers frequently use gesture and movement to draw attention to the space around them or to convey an experience of a place that is different from the one that they are in. Students were asked to observe how people actually moved and inhabited a place at a particular moment and invent new movements for and of those places. Upon returning to the studio, they translated these gesture/site pairings for others to experience (Figures 15–17, 24–26, 31, and 32). These efforts attuned the architects to a dimension of place making that included the subtlety of individual gestures that resonated with the qualities of particular places.
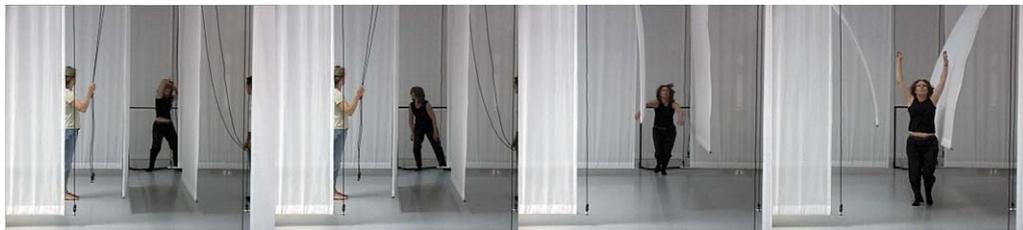
Transforming Space with Action

Movement involves transformation in time. The dancers among us were used to thinking about compositions and environments that evolved, the architects less so. To aid the architects, we explored improvisational turn-taking games that involved ''placing'' an object or movement that shaped the space and created a context for another action (Figures 18–20). As an outcome of this kind of play, instead of ''setting up'' the space prior to a presentation, we set up ''situations'' in which the architecture joined the choreography and became fluid, pulled and turned by people who shaped both space and human gesture in concert. Individual control over spatial conditions loosened as people responded to one another in an ongoing effort to

25. Ropes, designed to pull the panels, are enlisted to hang a frame. (Photo by J. Crousillat.)

26. Ropes are tied to the bars at the bottom of the panels to create an environment of draping fabric crisscrossing through the spatial volume. (Photo by J. Crousillat.)

27. High-intensity projectors installed at either end of the Great Space stood ready to project upon the fabric panels. However, this group chose to project their images from a mobile cart. Pushed along their image became integrated into both action and space. (Photo by M. Afshar.)

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28–32. Moments of engagement investigating presence and possibility. (Photo courtesy of R. Eisenbach [28] and J. Crousillat [29–32].)
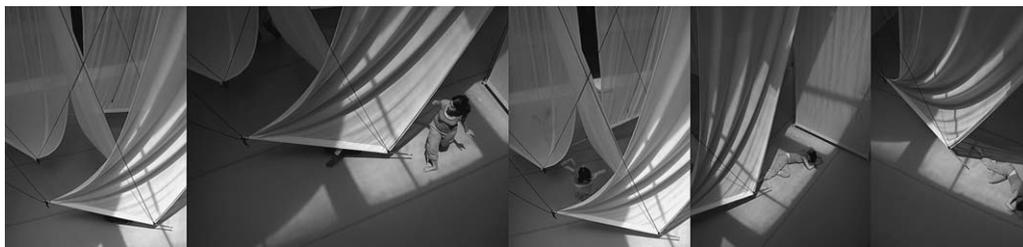
inhabit and transform the space (Figures 20–24, 28, 30, and 32).

Altering Imagined Parameters

Architects like other designers anticipate how their designs will be used. But people often use environments in unplanned ways. The Placing Space environment was designed to be transformable and employed as a tool of inquiry. Like many designs, it was engaged in unanticipated ways. For example, I had imagined that the screens would remain vertical, sliding, and rotating upon their tracks, pulled by the ropes. As the work developed, students began to generate new questions that challenged these initial assumptions about fixed attributes and parameters of the environment. Curious and engaged, the students wondered not only ''what if?'' but also ''what-if-not?''[7] What if the screens were not vertical but twisted? What if the ropes were not just for pulling but could be employed to hang things? What if images were projected but not from the fixed projectors? What if the space was not fixed but constantly changing? These ''misuses'' were revelatory, exposing assumptions built into the ''flexible'' design and reinforcing the richness of working in situ (Figures 24–27 and 30–32).

In making movement and spatial choices, the body in action both makes and occupies space in time. The notion that space is reoccupied and rethought by different people moving in unanticipated directions played out in interesting and generative ways under these circumstances.

Afterthoughts

The images shown on these pages are fragments of space/action investigations; they were neither a prelude to the act of designing a performance space nor a prelude to the choreographing of a performance. Though I used these words, the place we designed was neither ''stage set'' nor ''installation'' rather it was a laboratory in time.

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Participants' actions in this place—their performances that composed the space and their spaces that set events in motion—were vehicles to test out ideas and to learn to observe and think about the interrelationships between event and action, movement and gesture, and space and place. Together we investigated presence and generated possibility.

Notes

1. Dana Reitz and Bebe Miller are Center for Creative Research (CCR) fellows who visited the University of Maryland as part of a partnership between CCR and the University. Student participants: Mercedes Afshar, Swetha Akasapu, Deborah Bauer, Suzanne Braman, Anita Chen, Cynthia S. Cheung-Wong, Jackie Crousillat, Yoko Feinman, Franklin Grace III, Tzveta Kassabova, Beck Krefting, Mauria Peckham, and Amelia Wong.

2. Paraphrased from conversation with Dana Reitz, June 2006.

3. Giovanni Damiani, ed., *Tschumi* (New York: Rizzoli International, 2003), p. 34.

4. To reflect on their experience, students created daily paper and video journals. For examples go to http://claricesmithcenter.umd.edu/2007/placing_space/home.cfm or http://claricesmithcenter.umd.edu/2007/media/placing_space.cfm.

5. Paraphrased from conversation with Dana Reitz.

6. For further information on the curriculum, see Eisenbach, R.Z. "Placing Movement, Shaping Place" in *The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture 96th Annual Meeting Proceedings*. Houston, Texas, 2008.

7. Mathematicians Steve Brown and Marion Walter's concept of "what-if-not" encourages individuals to develop problems themselves. Their book explores the educational potential of integrating problem posing and problem solving. See Stephen I. Brown and Marion I. Walter, *The Art of Problem Posing* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), pp. 33–65.