

BLUEPRINT



Body beautiful

The architect, the dancer and
the spaces in between



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Body talk

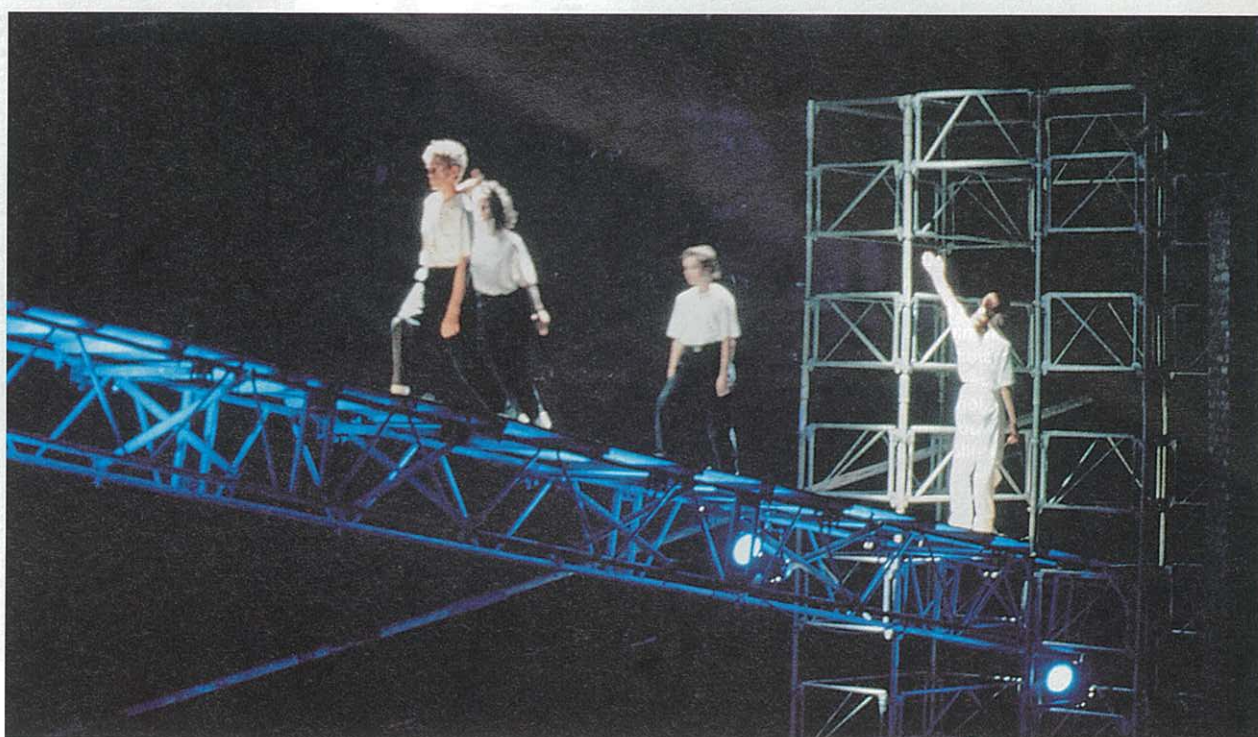
The human body is the original model for measuring and planning the dimensions and volumes it inhabits – but it moves, and buildings don't. **Simon Grant** examines some collaborations between architects and dancers which seek to express the structure of movement and the dance of space

In about 1492 Leonardo da Vinci made his famous drawing, now known as the Vitruvian Man, to illustrate an edition of Vitruvius' treatise *De Architectura*. Following Vitruvius' ideas, it presents man articulating space, the well proportioned body fitting into a mathematical diagram. Working in the same period as da Vinci, Leon Battista Alberti was also deeply influenced by the treatise and created his own architectural vision based on humanistic ideals of architecture, along with ideas of scientific naturalism, seeing it as an integral part of civic life. He did, in effect, give birth to the myth of the "ideal city", a myth that is today under continual scrutiny. Da Vinci and Alberti's new ideas brought people and architecture together, making them aware of how the human body fitted into its surroundings.

The body has always played a pivotal role in architecture and the links have always been close. From the 18th century, streets took on human identities with city plans likened to a map of the human body, including descriptions of "arteries" and "veins". In a multi-disciplinary culture it makes sense to see different disciplines coming together, and one of the most effective collaborations of late has been between dancers and architects.

Both disciplines deal with space. One is about static space; one is about moving through it. And, of course, the human body is a piece of architecture. Although the concept of using the body to break down the distinction between different forms of art has always been on the agenda, increasingly, the work that architects have done with dancers has moved away from pure stage design to collaboration. It is a fine line, and can often be a matter of linguistic definition, depending on who you talk to. Many of these collaborations focus on the human body in urban space and have included partnerships between Frédéric Flamand and Zaha Hadid, Rosemary Butcher and John Lyall, Laurie Booth and Nigel Coates, Gaby Agis and muf and, most recently, Carol Brown, installation artist Esther Rollinson and Stewart Dodd of Satellite Design.

Brown, Rollinson and Dodd are working on a dance installation piece called *Nerve Chamber*, which has as its centre a model city, in turn



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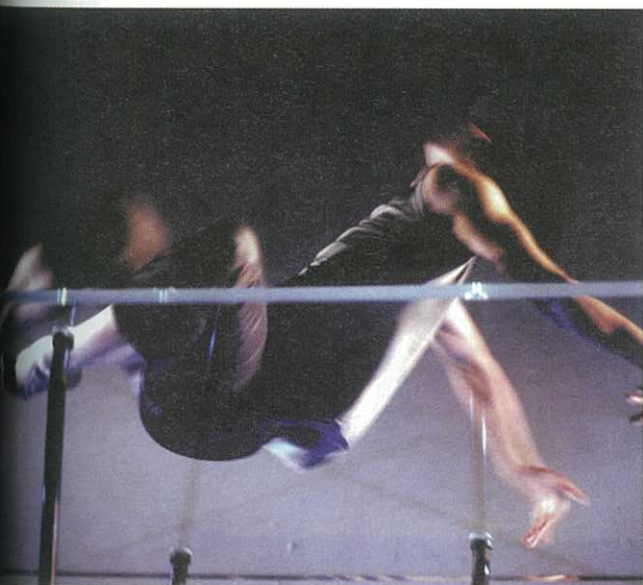
represented as a compression chamber where two strangers come together in a series of developed movements. As is characteristic with the best of these collaborations, the movements of the dancers evolve alongside the development of the architectural space, rather than the dancers being obliged to move around a fixed stage set. Things are changing and architects are benefiting from the concepts of space, movement and time with which dancers deal. It is a symbiotic relationship of course. What was once a case of the architect plonking a set on to a stage is now more likely to include the architect as an integral part of the development and process of the piece. So much so that the results have a range of descriptions from "dance installations" to "spatial interactions".

Just such a close relationship has developed between Frédéric Flamand, choreographer and artistic director of Charleroi/Danses, and Zaha Hadid. Their most recent project, *Metapolis: project 972*, explored notions of the Utopian city and premiered at the Maison des Arts de Cretail in Paris last month. "I had taken on board some of Hadid's architectural concerns," says Flamand. "In the preliminary studies for her building designs I could see the same dynamics and fluidity that are central to my thoughts about dancers' movements."

"Zaha speaks about designs that grow out of early sketches that are often inspired by Arabic calligraphy. When I talk about dancers breathing, she replies with phrases like 'breathing architecture'. We share the ideas of combining dancers, scenographic elements and lighting in a way to make space dance. There were all the ingredients to imagine a combination of these two arts of space: dance and architecture. In her work I saw lines of force and structure for



Space dance: Flamand and Hadid combine dancers, scenographic elements and lights for *Metapolis: project 972*, opposite, in an exploration of what is beyond the city in space. Architects, such as John Lyall whose work is pictured top and above, are included as an integral part of the development of the piece to the extent that the results, like the Brown, Dodd, Rollinson collaboration, left, are described as "spatial interactions"



MATTIAS EK

Close relationships: Choreographer Frederic Flamand and Zaha Hadid's collaboration on *Metapolis: project 972*, right and below, explores the notions of the Utopian city, and the fluidity of the dancers' movements, centre.

In John Lyall and Rosemary Butcher's *Tension-Compression*, dancers used ropes to tension panels of flat plywood into bowstring, boat-like structures, bottom



dancers' movements. As for her, she seemed drawn by the possibility of materialising on the stage her immaterial architectural designs freed from the constraints of building. Quite soon, we chose to evoke a Utopian city structured by a play of opposites: order-chaos, fluidity-rupture, and private-public."

The title of the work was taken from a newspaper article in which Flamand read about the interchanges and "in-between" spaces in urban areas that have no real identity. In a way, this "in-between" space is a metaphor for the area that dancers and architects are exploring. It is not concrete, but depends on compromise, and often a willingness to put ego and singular vision to one side.

The work that Rosemary Butcher and John Lyall have been doing since 1989 has also proved a good example of how structures of dance can fit, a little like a jigsaw, into the aesthetics of architecture. The projects have ranged from tours of British art galleries, including the Tate, Liverpool, to special installations at Hawksmoor's Christ Church in Spitalfields, and the Tramway in Glasgow.

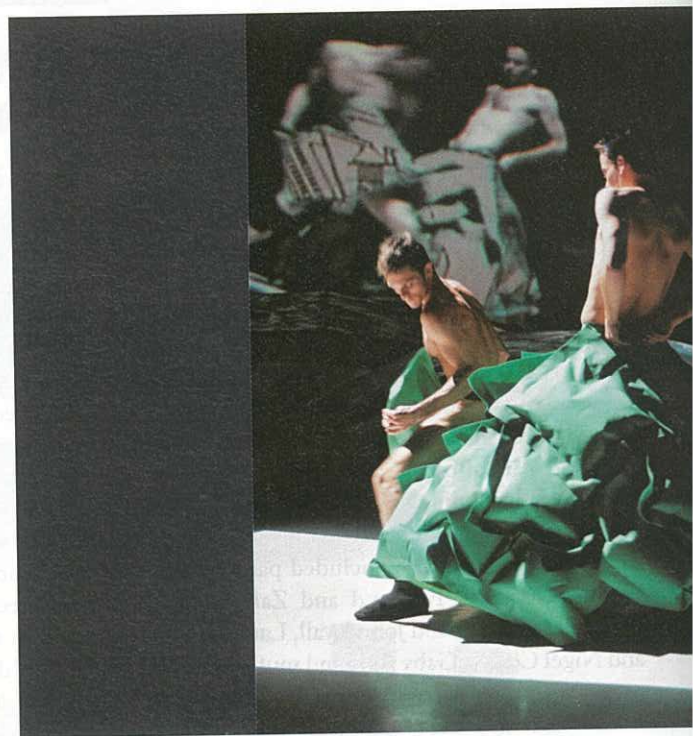
"Rosemary's work is very minimalist and structural," says Lyall. "It naturally lends itself to architecture. She is also especially interested in the movement of people in urban space."

Butcher is fascinated with the formal organisation of dance in which she creates layers of movement that slowly evolve into spatial linear patterns. There is a three-dimensional, geometric form to it which also makes clear the spatial relationship between bodies. Their most recent piece, *Body as Site*, held at the Royal College of Art in 1998, was a continuous work of four pieces by Butcher in collaboration with four different artists: Anya Gallaccio, Ron Hasleden, Paul Elliman and John Lyall. The piece with the latter, called *Tension-Compression*, was based on dancers creating different architectural environments by using ropes to tension 3m by 1m panels of flat plywood into bowstring, boat-like structures. These were lit with red, then deconstructed and stacked at the end wall over a

20-minute period. "I enjoy working with John," admits Butcher. "He could understand the juxtapositions at work, the layers of movement and space. Architects change the boundaries of how we look at things. They create different kinds of space from dancers and look at the space between things. They are very much about seeing space as an interior and an exterior, as interchangeable, and I can see links there."

For Lyall collaboration has given him another fresh angle to his own working practice. "I learnt a lot about light when I was working with Rosemary. I started creating shapes with pure colour and using it in a painterly way. We called our projects 'spatial organisations', we never called them sets. It was like a three dimensional sketch book for building or for seeing the spaces between buildings."

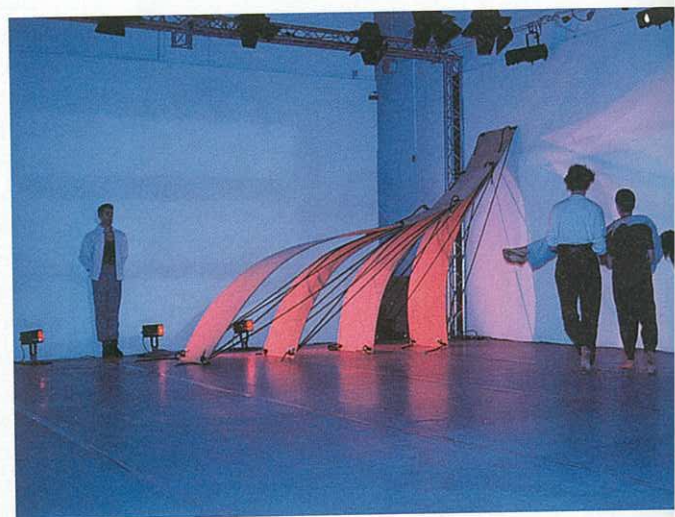
On a practical level, methods of working practice between dancers and architects can often be at odds. Whereas dancers tend to experiment with form and space until the last minute, architects have a far more rigid practice, laying

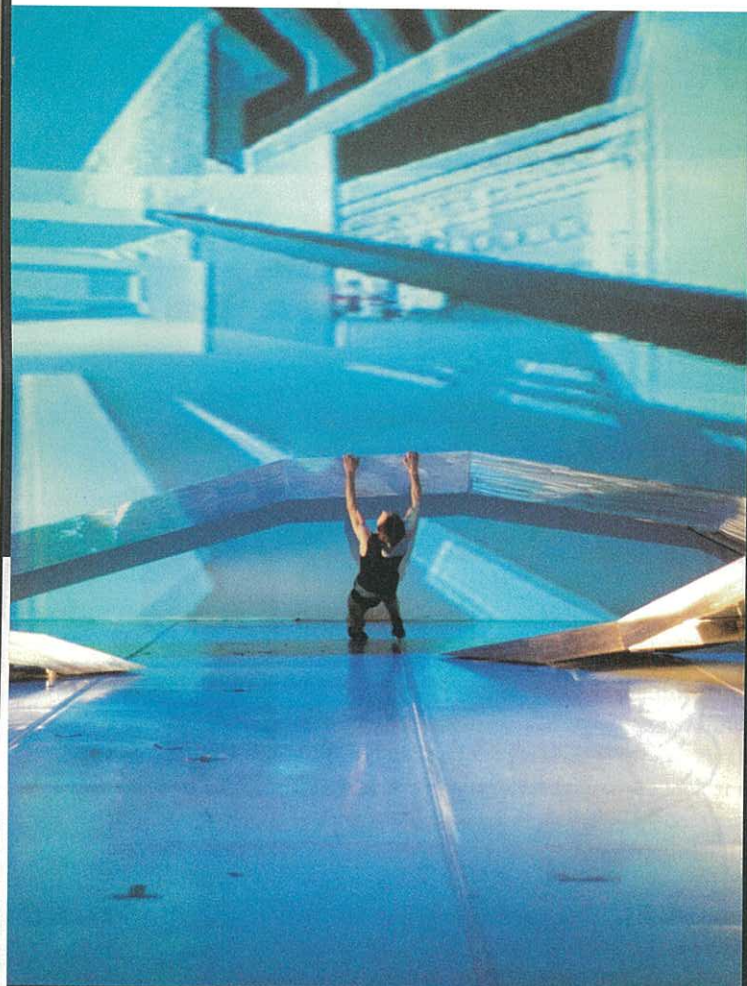


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down plans that are not so easily altered. But it still seems to work.

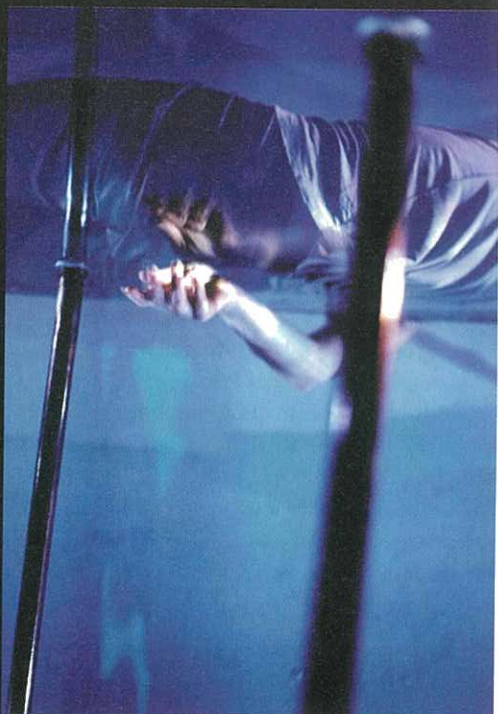
Particularly for Flamand, who has also worked with Diller & Scofidio. In 1996 he asked them to work on what became *Moving Target*, inspired by Nijinsky's notebooks, and later on *EJMI Muybridge*, *Man Walking at ordinary Speed* and *EJM2*, both performed at the Lyon National Opera. "We are always interested in looking at issues of space in relation to discourse other than architecture," say Diller & Scofidio. "As our architecture is a critique of architecture and Frédéric Flamand's choreography is a critique of dance, the collaboration had a good, wobbly foundation." The architect's approach has often involved a good degree of interdisciplinary



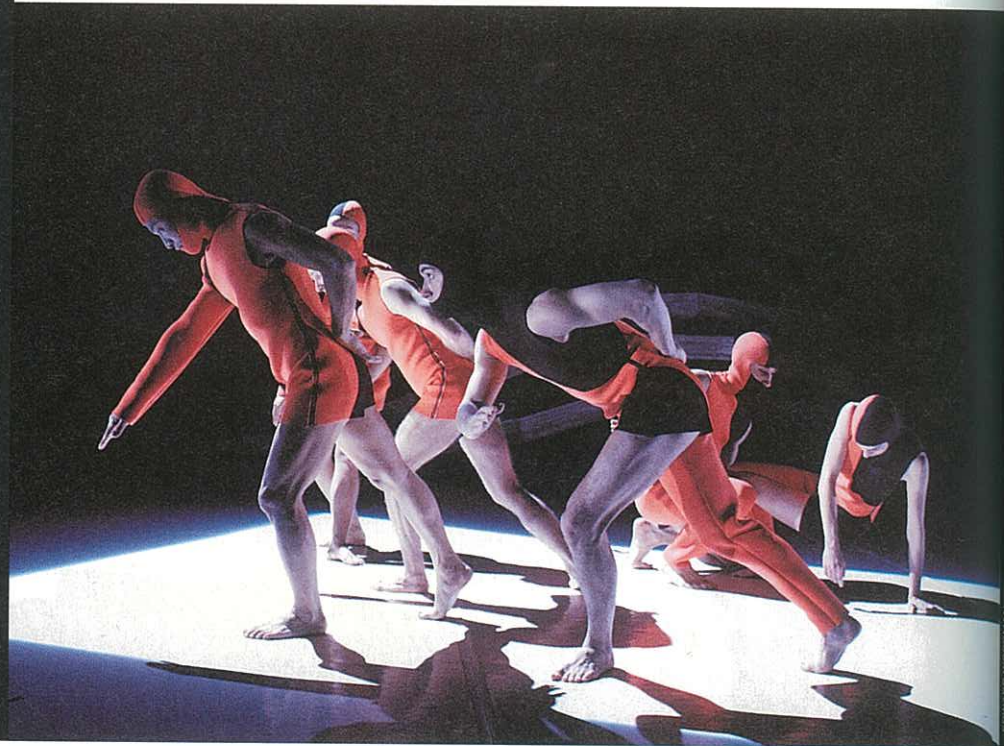


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Dancers like Flamand, Brown and Butcher are all aware of the limitations of the traditional theatre space; the stage has a loaded and referential history, and architects have gone some way into opening up new avenues to explore movement, space and time



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activity, incorporating dance, performance and electronic media blended with bits of architectural theory. In the Nijinsky project this meant subverting traditional use of the stage in the dance installation. “Our staging apparatus could be considered an ‘interscenum’ that interrupts the scene. A large mirror above the stage rotated towards the audience and was combined with projected video, live and recorded images with live action.”

Dancers like Flamand, Brown and Butcher are aware of the limitations of the traditional theatre space, and architects have gone some way into opening up new avenues to explore movement, space and time – the dancer’s movement shaping space and the architect’s space shaping movement. It can sometimes help if the architect’s own work, like, say, the industrial baroque style of Nigel Coates, has its own particular theatricality. Laurie Booth, who performed his celebrated *Requiem* at the South Bank in 1992, took full advantage of this. Coates, who had recently finished a café in downtown Tokyo with a section of aeroplane crashing through the ceiling, was brought in to work on the project.

“I had this idea,” recalls Coates, “of dancers as aircraft transforming into heavenly bodies.” The result was a five-sequenced piece that included props that looked like a crashed plane. “What dance has in common with architecture,” says Coates, “is that it has no text. You can read what you like into either.”

As architectural practices like muf demonstrate, relaxing the boundaries of what the architect can do means that the possibilities are expanding. Looking at da Vinci’s drawing now, it is as if we have come full circle, back to a time when disciplines were not so isolated or splintered. Little has changed. Our cities are still the breathing bodies they always were: pulsating, moving, changing, just like our own forms. ■

Nerve Chamber is at the Jerwood Space, 171 Union Street, SE1, until 28 April.

EJM2 is at the Theatre du Chatelet, Paris during May.

Breathing Cities is published by August / Birkhauser in May.

muf and Gaby Agis are performing *Bringing the Ceiling Down* at Somerset House later this year.