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Transforming fortresses into artworks: two cultural sites become spaces of topological immersion

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Abstract

The paper explores the transformation of places of heritage into spaces of architecturalised contemporary art that takes place as a localised event. This art practice embraces the sites' historical qualities and architectural context, and is defined as 'chorotopical' from *choros* as space and *topos* as locus. The investigation presents two project proposals as case studies: (i) 'Sound[e]scape': an ephemeral sound intervention proposal for the Square Tower of Old Portsmouth Harbour in Southsea, UK and (ii) 'Spatial Sea': a light-projection installation proposal for St. George Gate, in the Venetian fortification of Heraklion Crete, Greece in collaboration with the Municipality of Heraklion. The paper examines architectural site as *aylos topos* and artistic interventions as temporal interruptions creating a lived experience. The paper sets a topological and ontological perspective in the making of site-reliant art and creates a philosophical index for the role of the site in the spatial creation. It moreover shifts the agenda of thinking of art and architecture as two distinct spatial practices, looking on the contrary for practical implications as well as the establishment of a shared theoretical vocabulary when the two dynamically collide in the creation of space.

Keywords: space, site, art, installation, light, sound.

1 Introduction

Art and architecture have been interrelated under various sets of terms throughout history, either via concerns of representational space or the placement and dialogue of the artwork with its surroundings (installation art and installation of the artwork). The term installation art has been extensively used to describe

art practices that decentre the object in favour of its spatial articulation. Since Rosalind Krauss's essay 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' [1] and the reconsideration of the sculptural practice of installation art, one that may be considered directly spatial and of architectural scale, the theories around the articulation of space in its artistic formation and the practices that reflect on this have kept expanding and developing. Claire Bishop classifies exhibits of installation art as such to address 'the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space' [2]. Peter Osborne agrees with Bishop that the term has become almost mundane, with its meaning deteriorated. Bishop, who 'argues that the immersive capabilities of installation art constitute a breakthrough in the sphere of art practice' [3], opens her book *Installation Art: A Critical History* with the statement that 'installation art is a term that loosely refers to the type of art into which the viewer physically enters' [4, p. 6] and suggests that the spatial experience structured by such a practice/practices can be its/their taxonomy agent [4, p. 10].

Proposing that the ontological relationship of art and architecture as spatial practices is currently heading towards the formation of a new practice, the latter is defined as chorotopical art (from the Greek terms *choros* (χώρας) for space and *topos* (τόπος) for locus). Chorotopical refers to an emerging art practice that is ontologically spatial as it creates and sustains space, yet localised as it is inscribed in the place (site) it is created for. The paper introduces the spatial experience of chorotopical art as the artwork itself and explores its reliance on the atmosphere and the less tactile as well as energy related qualities of space. The outcome of this process is ambient, more specifically non-inhabited space conceived and created for questioning the visitors' spatial consciousness.

It is a fact that we are linked to places because of our sense of identity, tied up with memories, culture and place and this is how we maintain a sense of place. This is partially a 'deficiency' and partially an opening to possibility. The less one is constrained by the sense of place, the more open one becomes to sensing new unfamiliar conditions of surroundings. This responds to Henry Lefebvre's dialectical rather than oppositional approach to the production of space [5]. For Miwon Kwon, the 'wrong place' [to be] in contrast to the 'right places', is a place one 'feels one does not belong... disorientating, destabilizing and threatening' [6]. This can be translated to a slightly stressful relationship between the site and the experiencing subject.

2 Mapping the field

Site has become an ambiguous term used extensively within art and architecture discourse in theory but also in practice. Holding multiple meanings and connotations depending on the context, it is very difficult to be defined strictly and in absolute terms. From an architect's point of view site is the ground on which ideas are conceived, designed and materialized, metaphorically but also literally, making almost every architectural creation site-specific. It relates to the topographical framework and sums up the cultural and geographical elements, almost as a kind of cartography for each project. Geographical location, the



wider architectural context and the topography are the basic parts of the site as a system for the manifestation of architectural creation. It is a system to be mapped in various ways and somehow guides the outcome of the design process. It seems that site for art is related predominantly to the specificity of the artwork, in other words to the artwork being a response to a specific location and thus existing in no other way and in no other place. Jane Rendell notes:

'[there are] five ways of thinking about the relationship between architecture and site: reciprocity, materiality, threshold, insertion and infrastructure' [7].

The critical approach of Jane Rendell reflects upon the role of the location and also the tactics of positioning the artwork in reference to the site as context and Miwon Kwon frames site-specificity in terms of locational identity and the problem of unrepeatability mentioning potential critical terms, such as 'site-determined', 'site-oriented', 'site-referenced', 'site-conscious' and 'site-responsive' [8].

It seems that to some extent site-specificity – should there be one at all – is an attribute inherited by space generated artwork. The reliance on the site then, in the context of this investigation, becomes a parameter for classification and typology for the experience. Site becomes more circumstantial and situational than fixed and unchangeable with both site and intervention becoming dematerialised and de-territorialised, thus operating beyond a certain location. Contemporary chorotopical art exists at the point of redefining site and site-specificity. Based on the empirical understanding of the lived spatial experience, site operates as a live architectural envelope and is approached here as 'aylos topos' (áyλος τόπος = immaterial locus). 'Aylos topos' [9] is a term chosen to describe the set of geometrical, cultural and social parameters and the synergy of those in the context of space creation. It moreover refers to the energy related attributes that a specific place holds when becoming a site for artistic intervention.

The material manifestation of a site-reliant art practice in this instance does not demand an institutionally confirmed space (gallery) but a site that will form part of the ontological construct of an artwork that is not just aesthetically present. In this instance the sites are not physically recalibrated to simulate the institutional presence of a gallery and very often they do not present the expected and commoditised white walls, rows of spotlights and grey industrial floor repainted every season. Born out of the hand and brain of the architect or master mason to become churches, catacombs, fortresses or towers, schools or factories, they carry their timeline with them on their rusty beams, nail holes or slippery marble floor tiles. Their architectural anatomy is their birthmark and the latest functional calibration forms their inner skin. Some are listed and preserved with care whilst others are abandoned and left to grow old, these sites are timeless and await intervention to become temporally defined. A site-reliant practice that will insert a different spatial logic is not necessarily negating their perceptual psychology, but on the contrary may establish another critical dimension in their potential (non-) inhabitancy.



Sites as loci inherit complex topologies that change over time and define site-reliant interventions. In this paper, site is seen as a palpable, active organ that exists as set of relational dynamics of immaterial qualities. It acts and reacts within time, it allows and blocks out changing constantly, and depends on intensive and extensive qualities of space. Materialised with substantial and non-substantial elements, it constitutes sometimes a complex of neighbourhoods and sometimes a linear barrier.

The energy the site holds stems from the main characteristics of its nature and operation as a membrane. These are among others the elasticity and the existence of noetic boundaries. The notion of the elasticity raises automatically the question of the topological boundary, a question of proximity and cognition but also of mutual osmosis between an exterior and interior. What site includes and what leaves outside its limits can be described by multiple subsets with open or closed ends.

The limit of the diaphragmatic site is defined more accurately as a temporal and spatial osmotic barrier. The existence of osmotic barriers and boundaries implies the existence of thresholds as critical ontological elements of the complex topology that surrounds chorotopical art and the site-reliant immersive experience. Thresholds produce different concentrations and intensities that respond to moments of heightened sensory activity and/or intense emotional participation. The intensity of the experience is associated with the character of the intervention and the role of the site in the choreography of the experience. The consideration of chorotopical art as a de-facto site reliant intervention in space produces two possibilities; the intervention be either (i) site-notational or (ii) site responsive.

Site-notational implies the employment of notation in the process of conceiving as well as delivering and directing the experience from the maker's point of view as well as the involvement of multiple sites in the formulation of immersion. Notation is a term generally used to describe a system of (re)presenting information primarily using visual language and maintaining a diagrammatic disposition. A primary example of a notation would be written language, which follows the index of a set alphabet (molecules of the notation, notes), grammar and syntax (compositional agents of the notation). The most common use of the term notational in the arts is for music representation. Visual codes are generated to translate music using an almost virtual language (notes, tones and chords) that is open to insertions of personal elements and multiple interpretations during performance (practice).

When the term notational is inserted in the context of the experience in space and chorotopical art, it becomes a topological concept. An index is generated for the site and this may accumulate or recalibrate the energy of the site by manipulating the ontological elements of the latter. A perceptual geography is composed using the architecture of the site in order that an immersive atmosphere is generated. Site-notational is not necessarily subtler than site-responsive. The level of the intensities produced is subject to the density of the site parameters and the situations created within. Site-notational allows these situations to happen and 'to allow is to let an occurrence take place' [10]. This

statement implies a shift to the discursive artwork as opposed to the artwork as exhibit and creates an insightful link to the possibility of a practice that centres the spatial discourse in its ontological subject matter. The site-notational would then fundamentally belong to such a practice with its counterpart being the site-responsive.

A response presupposes an imperative statement compared to a notation, which is the interpretational mapping, based on a layer of existing data. In site-responsive interventions the site energises a question and the intervention discusses the question via a response. It is therefore open to the unfinished, which according to Ajit Nayak [11] is related to an ontological becoming as a creative method of theory building. The site-responsive is very much a creative practice engagement energised by theory, with the latter acting as an agent for the conceptualisation and development of the intervention. The discourse stimulated by the site-responsive remains sometimes open and anticipates the configuration of meaning by the visitor who experiences and maps the intensities intimately and real time in-situ.

3 'Sound[e]scape'

The first case study draws from the idea of a site that exists as a threshold between a cityscape and the seascape, where a combined ambient sound is synthesised out of two soundscapes, one coming from the urban field and another coming from a natural element. The Round and Square Towers of Old Portsmouth Harbour in Southsea is such an in-between place on the South Coast of England. Part of the city fortification, the Square Tower was built in 1494 and restored later to receive an array of uses from gunpowder storage to accommodation for the Governor [12]. Managed by Portsmouth City Council, it is now part of the Millennium Path connecting all historical sites of the area, a transitory locus by nature and history, with part of it utilised for hosting cultural and ceremonial events. The proposal for this site came as a response to the concept of topological thresholds and focused on sound as an energy-related quality in space that can create enclosures. The part of the old fortification that forms the Square Tower is a boundary between the seascape and the old city and lacks an ambient sound of its own.

The intention was to explore whether sound (and noise) created a different type of enclosure via reflection or absorption. The interior of the space would become a series of acoustically immersive environments and the architectural elements of the site itself would define the position of the soundscape thresholds situated in between the chambers and are experienced when one moves from one acoustic condition to another. The latter function as intermediate noetic states of sensing no specific soundscape feeling thus no particular enclosure and are perceived as small intervals between clearly defined and staged auditory environments. The physical presence of short passages formed by the thick walls of the fortress in between the chambers (figure 1) enhances the establishment of the thresholds and encourages transitions and movement. The changes in the acoustics of the space would form mentally apprehended spatial transitions as





Figure 1: Square Tower Southsea interior view of the site (source: the author).

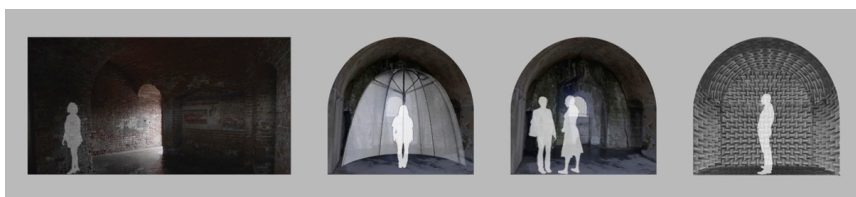


Figure 2: Liana Psarologaki (2012) Sound[e]scape, section diagram of Square Tower Southsea (source: the author).

there is no other way of passing through the space solely experiencing one sound condition.

Four different soundscapes were drawn on the section diagram of the successive vaulted chambers of the tower, to visualise the reception and reflection of different sound effects that would merge with the natural and urban soundscapes as well as the voices of the visitors (figure 2). As indicated, the entrance of the site holds the original sea-city hybrid soundscape and is followed by a sequence of chambers that present an interior equipped with a sound reflecting structure, an interval of the original soundscape and an anechoic chamber (figure 3). The sound reflection room is an ambient space of surrounding sound sources that produce white noise, which is amplified alongside the voices of the visitors when it meets the sound-reflective surfaces of a dome that comes as a site-specific structure. The absorption room is equipped with a microphone and a text on the floor to encourage visitors to explore their voices fading in space as the sounds are absorbed into the multi-faceted surface of the soundproof walls and ceiling.

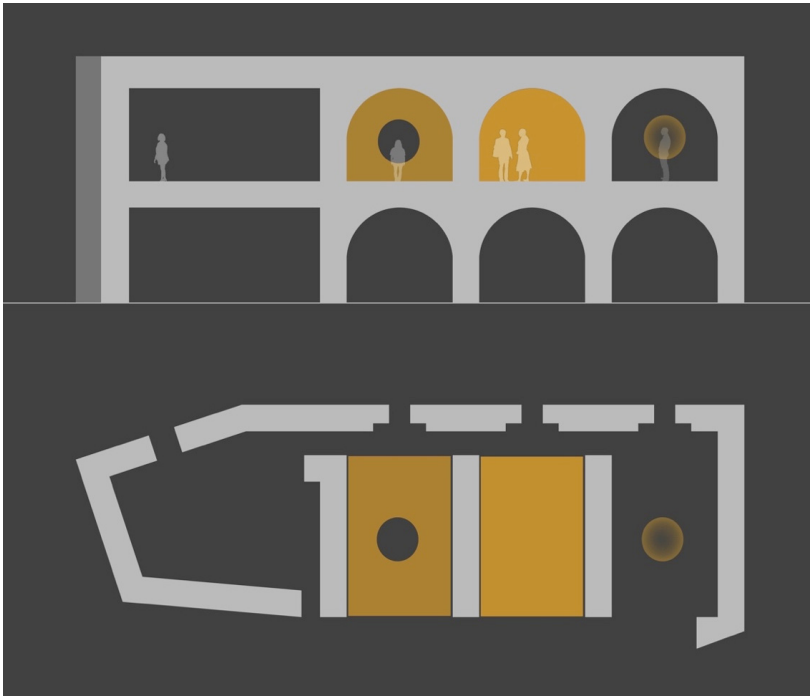


Figure 3: Liana Psarologaki (2012) Sound[e]scape, sound diagrams on plan and section for project proposal (source: the author).

4 ‘Spatial Sea’

The second case study draws from the idea of a heritage site that acts as a connection axis in the form of a passage within the urban fabric. St. George Gate (Lazaretto) of the Venetian fortifications of Heraklion Crete was one of the four main gates of the venetian city walls built between 1462 and 1560 strategically positioned at the four compass points allowing access from the capital of Crete (Candia) to different parts of the prefecture. Based on the designs of Venetian architect Michele Sanmicheli, it echoes the ‘archetypal heroic and tragic spatialities, the relation between the body and the cosmos’ [13]. St George Gate, restored in 2000, is a heritage site managed by the Municipality of Heraklion and hosts art and craft exhibitions and cultural events, at the same time functioning as a busy pedestrian subway from the city piazza (Eleftheria’s Square) towards the port.

‘Spatial Sea’ (2016) is a site-responsive proposal inspired by the particular geometry and geography of Crete as well as the topographical and topological significance of the gate at present times and in the past. The artistic statement in this occasion is the attempt to encapsulate a manifold of spatiotemporalities, creating a lived experience open to social, political, as well as aesthetic connotations and meanings. It creates a manifestation of a hyper-reality, an event

that entails the zeitgeist of the architectural site and the momentum of the creative mind of the artist as well as the intimate engagement and reading of the visitor.

The intervention occupies the north eastern part of the gate (figure 4), including the main passage and the rotunda with dome. It manipulates light as projection, reflection, and refraction, to create a landscape of water without water. Inspired from the Japanese concept of '*minamo*' and the interactive installation of Torafu Architects at Tokyo Designers Week 2011 [14], '*Spatial Sea*' immerses the viewer into a floating sensation of almost touching but never fully reaching a water surface. As such, one becomes with the space to fully apprehend and appreciate an abstract condition of ever changing and fragile beauty. Utilising the latest LED and projection technologies as well as analogue media and a subtle physical intervention, '*Spatial Sea*' aims to recalibrate the timescape of a site that is in fact a '*heterochrony*' [15] (figure 5). It does so by inserting the visitors into a new spatial logic, manifesting the situational over the sculptural embracing gently the architectural features and historical traces of the site.

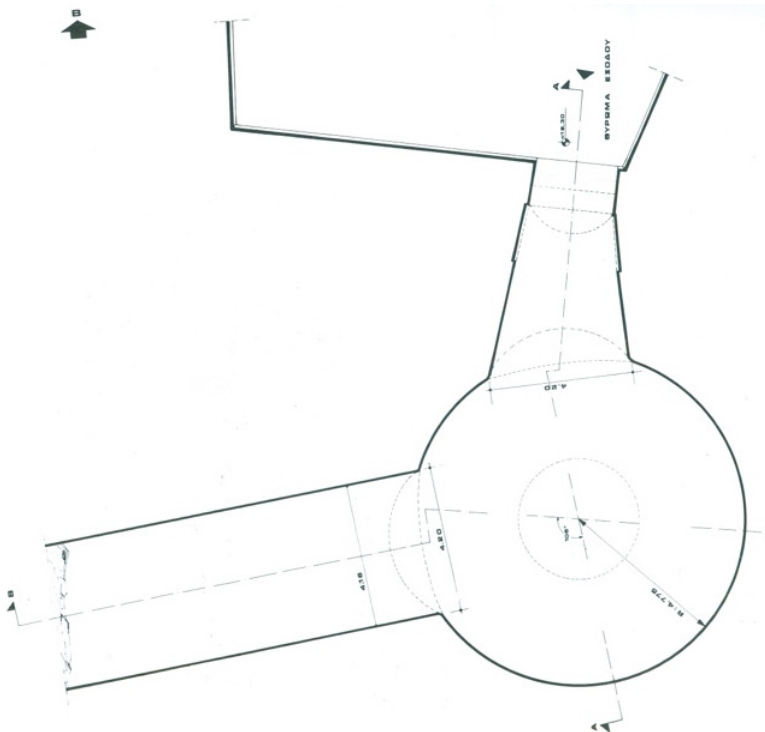


Figure 4: St George Gate, Heraklion Crete, plan of the NE part of the site (source: Municipality of Heraklion).



Figure 5: Liana Psarologaki (2016) 'Spatial Sea', project development visualisation interior view of passage. Source: the author.

5 Reflection

Cultural sites and sites of heritage may not only become poles of attraction for visitors, researchers, and tourists, post restoration. They often entail the potential of becoming dynamic envelopes for the calibration of complex spatialities that are temporal and sometimes fragile. They may encapsulate experiences of virtual and actual components, contributing to the creation of realities beyond the real and disrupting the every-day habitual practices. Chorotopical art as a site-reliant practice that is ontologically architecturalised, utilises the physical and immaterial qualities of such to create uniquely formulated spatial topologies.

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