



Embodying Space through Improvisation in Site-Specific Dance Performance

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Submitted: January 20, 2025. Revised: April 28, 2025. Accepted: May 9, 2025

Abstract

Site-specific dance choreography develops as a direct reaction to a specific location's unique physical, architectural, and cultural characteristics. Improvisation is significant in this context for enhancing the dancer's bodily awareness of space. Previous studies have recognized the relationship between dancer and site; however, the role of improvisation in expressing the unique spatial characteristics of a performance site has not been adequately explored. This study investigates the role of improvisational techniques in enabling dancers to adapt, respond, and establish stronger connections with site-specific elements, including structural, environmental, historical, and emotional aspects. This research utilizes a qualitative methodology, incorporating descriptive analysis and in-depth interviews with five experienced, site-specific dance practitioners in Malaysia. The findings identify four key stages in which improvisation enhances spatial embodiment, clarifying the relationship between choreographers and performers with space as a dynamic and interactive element of their practice. This work contributes to the ongoing discussion on site-specific choreography by illustrating the evolving role of improvisation in enhancing the relationships between performers and their environments.

Keywords: embodying; space; improvisation; site-specific dance; environment

How to Cite: Wahid, N. A., Michael, N. N., Saearani, M. F. T. & Ahmad, M. F. (2025). Embodying Space through Improvisation in Site-Specific Dance Performance. *Harmonia: Journal of Arts Research and Education*, 25(1), 188-197

INTRODUCTION

Site-specific dance performances are a contemporary form of choreographic expression that deviates from the norms of proscenium stage work. Site-specific choreography incorporates a selected location's physical, architectural, ecological, and sociocultural characteristics into the creative process rather than using space as a passive backdrop (Muhizam & Roslan, 2019). The complex relationship between dancers, the audience, and the surrounding space is revealed in these

performances, which frequently take place in unusual settings like urban streets, heritage buildings, archaeological ruins, or natural landscapes. According to Hunter (2015), this process forms one's embodied thought and emotional response through spatial engagement, making the body a sensitive and responsive medium that interprets and interacts with the environment.

In this choreographic form, movement is not imposed but rather arises through interaction with the site's design, texture, history, and symbolism—what

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Barbour and Hitchmough (2013) refer to as an “embodied experience” of site. The setting activates the performance rather than just framing it. Spatial dimensions, surfaces, gradients, and natural elements like water, trees, or ruins provide dancers with creative stimuli that impact the choreography and movement characteristics (Edensor & Bowdler, 2015; Kloetzel, 2010). Thus, the performer’s perception of space encompasses layers of emotion, time, and history in addition to the physical. Hunter (2005) uses the idea of “co-evalness,” which refers to the simultaneous experience of multiple time-spaces embodied in the site, to highlight this layered temporality.

Fewer studies have critically analyzed how improvisation works within site-specific performances, even though a sizable body of literature examines how these performances interact with space and architecture. Because it can adapt to the unpredictability of the site, improvisation is frequently recognized as essential to site-specific dance (Stock, 2011). It enables dancers to react and interact naturally, creating movement that melds with the site’s energy, physical limitations, and historical atmosphere. However, as Wahid (2020) points out, a large portion of the literature currently in publication concentrates on audience interaction or site aesthetics, paying little attention to the embodied process by which improvisation aids in spatial negotiation and expression.

Additionally, although Hunter (2011, 2015) and Barbour and Hitchmough (2013) have addressed phenomenology and affect in site dance, there is still a significant knowledge vacuum regarding the ways in which improvisation strengthens the bond between the performer and the choreographer. Performer-environment reciprocity and the emotional intelligence of improvisation have been the subject of international studies by Morejón (2021) and Assaf and Selim (2021), but there are few studies that specifically examine site-specific practices in Malaysia or Southeast Asia. Studies that describe improvisation as a process of “embodying” space—interpreting not only

site characteristics but also memory, cultural resonance, and affective atmospheres—are especially under-represented.

By investigating how improvisational movement aids in the embodiment of space in site-specific dance performances, this study fills this gap. In particular, it looks into how dancers modify their movements in reaction to historical details, cultural narratives, and spatial textures in performance spaces. The study aims to shed light on the relational, creative, and perceptual dynamics at work when dancers use improvisation to interact with space through descriptive analysis and in-depth interviews with Malaysian choreographers and performers. Doing this adds fresh viewpoints to the field of site-specific choreography. It provides a framework rooted in the region for comprehending improvisation as a spatial and choreographic technique. Through a comprehensive descriptive analysis, it seeks the transformative impact of improvisation in site-specific dance performances, providing light on its relevance and repercussions. It is predicted that a more nuanced understanding of the function and impact of improvisation in site-specific dance performances will emerge.

This study aims to identify and analyze the ways in which improvisation contributes to the embodiment of space in site-specific dance performances. Through a comprehensive examination of improvisational movement and its influence on the dancers’ interaction with the performance space’s architectural elements, landscape features, and overall atmosphere, this paper provides a comprehensive understanding of how improvisation nurtures a stronger connection between the performers and their environment. In addition, this research initiative aims to contribute to site-specific dance by focusing on the significance of improvisation as a creative tool for exploring multiple movement variations and creating a dynamic relationship with the surrounding environment.

METHOD

This study adopts a mixed-methodologies research design, integrating both descriptive analysis and in-depth interview methods, to investigate the power of improvisation and its effect on the embodiment of space in site-specific dance performances. The research methodology includes a comprehensive evaluation of significant case studies and scholarly literature on site-specific dance and improvisation, using descriptive analysis methodologies. In addition, in-depth interviews will be done with seasoned site-specific dance practitioners, such as choreographers and performers, including five experienced site-specific choreographer/performer which are Aida Redza, Lee Ren Xin, Rithaudin Abdul Kadir, Rathimalar Govindarajoo and Azura Abal Abas. The framework of these interviews will be semi-structured, allowing for the collection of qualitative data and promoting in-depth conversations. The purpose of these interviews is to investigate the viewpoints, experiences, and methods used by practitioners in relation to the implementation of improvisation in space. The research intends to shed light on the transforming potential of improvisation and its impact on the embodiment of space in site-specific dance performances by collecting first-hand observations and experiences. This method of analysis will allow the researchers to discover significant themes, behaviors, and insights regarding the power of improvisation and its impact on embodiment in site-specific dance performances. The findings will be organized and presented comprehensively and consistently to achieve the study objectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Embodiment of Improvisational Space through Four Phases

In site-specific dance, improvisational space refers to the performer's body's dynamic and spontaneous interactions with the surrounding environment. This

idea entails a four-phase embodiment process in which the dancer naturally responds and adapts their movements to the specific elements of the performance site. According to Stock's (2015) "scoring the site" approach, the creation of site dance through immersion entails spending a significant amount of time alone and in silence during multiple visits to *observing spatial qualities, energy, sounds, and movement; sensitizing oneself to the surroundings – in the sites and around the sites and above and below the sites; inhabiting the site through improvisation; and mapping the site physically, cognitively, and imaginably*. This research explores the relation between improvisation and bodily embodiment during these four phases, offering light on the transformative potential of improvisational space in dance performances. Figure 1 illustrates the four phases of embodying space through improvisation.

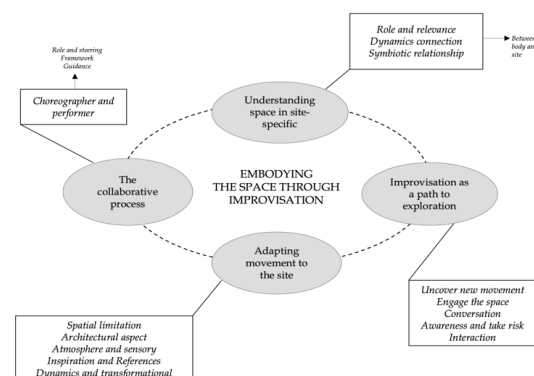


Figure 1. The four phases of embodying space through improvisation

Understanding Space in Site-Specific Dance Performance

Site-specific dance is based on a profound and adaptive awareness of space, not just as a backdrop but as a living, expressive partner in the choreographic process. Unlike traditional stage work, site-specific choreography treats the environment as a co-creator of meaning, drawing from its physical architecture, ecological components, and cultural memory (Hunter, 2005; Kloetzel, 2010). Lefebvre's (1991) theory of spatial production fits this concept of space as relational rather than

fixed; in his view, space is socially created as a physical container and through lived experience, representation, and use. Recent studies confirm the relevance of the Lefebvre spatial triad in modern cultural and creative activities. For instance, Christian Schmid (2022) builds on Lefebvre's theory to explain how spatial production shapes the negotiation of meaning in urban and performative settings, especially in interdisciplinary research. Similarly, O'Brien (2023) underlines the continual relevance of Lefebvre's spatial framework in grasping how media and embodied presence co-construct environments – an idea that speaks to how dancers improvise with and within site-specific contexts.

Direct improvisational interaction with their chosen sites revealed the performers' awareness of space in this study. Aida Redza (personal communication, 2019) states that a vital first step in her creative process is immersing herself in the site to grasp its spatial logic and emotional resonance. She underlines that this physical involvement lets her feel the energies of the site, so enabling more intuitive, improvisational reactions. Emphasizing sensory awareness and presence as fundamental to site-specific work, this method parallels Hunter's (2011) phenomenological viewpoint of "being-in-the-site." Aida's solo work, *Moved by Padi* (2016) is a perfect example of this embodied responsiveness. Performed in a paddy field, the choreography was created by on-site improvisation, accepting her body's interaction with and adaptation to the surrounding rice stalks, soil texture, changing breeze, and natural light. By doing this, she turned rural memory and agricultural rhythms into somatic expressions. Her movement vocabulary developed from physical negotiation with the terrain rather than from pre-imposed choreography. This method strongly reflects Barbour and Hitchmough's (2013) assertion that spatial affect—where movement becomes a reaction to ecological textures and lived atmospheres—shapes site-specific dance.

Ren Xin (2019) underlines equally

the need to attune to a site's historical and architectural subtleties, pointing out how ambient silence, cracked walls, and mossy surfaces affect emotional tone and movement quality. Responding to abandoned urban buildings in the *City of Entertainment* with disjointed angular phrases, she represented the decay and memory of the area. Emphasizing the agency of spatial components in forming performance dynamics, this fits Edensor and Bowdler's (2015) concept of "place textures." The materiality of the site—whether it be architectural remnants or organic terrain—offers physical cues and narrative potential.

Rathimalar included soil and fallen leaves into her dance in *Quintessence* (2009), blurring the distinction between dancer and surroundings. She observed how direct contact with the ground changed her proprioception and gave her movements symbolic grounding. Reflecting this, Stock's (2015) approach of "scoring the site" moves by means of continuous bodily immersion and sensory investigation.

Azura Abal Abas (2019) equally states that historical sites like colonial-era verandas or heritage courtyards motivate memories and resonance-based movements. She observes that the area frequently turns into an extension of the dancer's body—a notion backed by Schechner's (2013) idea of co-presence, whereby performer and location co-create meaning in real time. Dancers in these case studies express a symbiotic connection with space whereby improvisation lets emergent choreography be shaped by architectural form, environmental energy, and spatial history. Rather than just performing in the site, they work with it to let the surroundings influence, disrupt, or drive their movement. Hunter (2015) refers to this coevalness, where dancer and site coexist in mutual temporal and spatial awareness.

Eventually, site-specific dance's spatial orientation is only one aspect of understanding space. It calls for a reflective, sensory, and physical conversation with site materiality and memory. Producing

immersive performances that blur the line between body, place, and narrative, the dancer becomes not only a mover but also a medium through which space finds expressive resonance.

Improvisation as a Path to Exploration

Site-specific dance depends much on improvisation, which is an embodied approach for investigating and interpreting space rather than just a choreographic tool. Improvisation in this setting lets dancers react spontaneously to the site's particular characteristics—its terrain, textures, soundscape, and architectural quirks—thereby enabling a close interaction between body and place. Stock (2015) argues in her “scoring the site” theory that this interaction requires a deep awareness of the body that comes from ongoing exploration, where the dancer's movements are guided by what they feel through their senses instead of following a set pattern. *Maybe, Not Yet* (2018) offers one such instance, where choreographers Mohd Fauzi Amiruddin and Sarah M.S. used improvisation in a semi-enclosed courtyard during rehearsals. The dancers, they declared (personal communication, January 14, 2018), would practice at various times of day, using light changes, changing ambient noises, and environmental disturbances (e.g., insects and humidity) as real-time cues to produce movement. This kind of site-responsive creation corresponds to Barbour and Hitchmough's (2013) concept of affective embodiment, whereby spatial immersion and sensory experience become catalysts for emotional and kinesthetic reactions. Dancers gave up set choreographic patterns to embrace spatial uncertainty and develop a genuine movement vocabulary based on environmental immediacy.

In this context, improvisation is a process of bodily listening. Rithaudin Abdul Kadir (2019) explains how his solo piece *My Alay*, played in an abandoned family home, depended totally on the site's ambiance. Responding to architectural deterioration, creaking floorboards, and the

sad aura of memory, his bodily movements sprang from what he called “the forgotten energy” of the site. Hunter (2011) posits that improvisation enables dancers to navigate the oscillation between connection and disconnection, a process she refers to as the temporal unfolding of presentness. Improvisation in Rithaudin's situation let a deeper genuineness surface by bridging the self with the layered past of the site.

Ren Xin (2019) likewise underlines how improvisation lets dancers push limits and respond to erratic spatial factors. Her performance of *City of Entertainment* included interacting with uneven terrain, exposed drain covers, and fading signage—features that were not just obstacles but opportunities to create site-specific gestures. She explained how the choreography absorbed hesitations, mistakes, and surprises, therefore supporting the improvisational spirit of accepting risk and uncertainty. This reflexivity in movement reflects Barbour's (2011) opinion that improvisation increases sensory awareness by allowing the dancer to be both subject and instrument in the dynamic interaction with space.

Figure 2 shows the process in *He Simply Disappears*, performed at Rumah Penang, Rimbun Dahan. Blurring lines between interior and exterior, domestic and performative, dancers Nur Hanis Yahya and Jazali Mohd improvised their interaction with the window frames and uneven front yard. Their movements came from the architectural rhythm of the site—pauses at thresholds, extensions through open space, and interactions with light and shadow. Consistent with Lefebvre's (1991) concept of spatial production as lived and dynamic, this improvisational approach changes space from passive container to active choreographic partner.

Improvisation also increases the dynamic aspect of space: its emotional and atmospheric “aura.” Rathimalar Govindarajoo (2020) underlines this phenomenon in her comments on site work, saying that the improvised body responds intuitively to changes in energy and has increased

sensitivity to the resonance of the site. This kind of “energetic listening” blurs the distinction between environment and choreography even more. As Hunter (2015) suggests, the improvising body is a temporal sensor traversing spatial emotional changes that are otherwise undetectable in fixed choreography.



Figure 2. Nur Hanis Yahya and Jazali Mohd in *He Simply Disappears* (Source: *Dancing in Place*, Rimbun Dahan 2017)

Improvisation, of course, brings difficulties as well: artists have to balance responsiveness with artistic coherence. Maintaining a choreographic identity while staying open to environmental unpredictability calls for skill, awareness, and faith in the process. But it is in these vulnerable times that improvisation most clearly shows its transforming power. Ren Xin expressed, “I find the most truthful movement on the fine line between chaos and choreography.”

Ultimately, improvisation in site-specific dance serves as a tool for spatial exploration and emotional expression, not merely for generating movement. Improvisation promotes a co-creative interaction with the site by letting dancers explore, change, and react in real time, therefore making every performance distinctive, transient, and profoundly anchored in location.

Adapting Movements to the Site

Improvisation lets dancers physically fit the spatial and cultural uniqueness of a location. In site-specific performance, this adaptation is an embodied negotiation

formed by the dancer’s kinesthetic awareness and the environmental characteristics of the site, which are not only reactive. Site engagement calls for “presentness,” as Hunter (2011) argues, whereby the performer stays sensitive to the site’s physical textures, changing circumstances, and underlying atmosphere. Dancers create a dialogic relationship between body and place by interpreting and transforming these environmental stimuli into movement choices using improvisation.

Ren Xin’s performance *City of Entertainment* shows in Figure 3 the process of changing movement as she intentionally reacts to uneven pavements, abandoned commercial buildings, and damaged signage. Instead of shunning these spatial limitations, she includes them in her choreographic decisions, mirroring the site’s dilapidation and disorientation through broken arm movements and unsteady footing (Lee Ren Xin, personal communication, October 19, 2019). Her engagement with the crumbling urban environment reflects Stock’s (2015) claim that involvement with the site “marries the past and the present,” enabling performers to represent temporal complexity through movement.

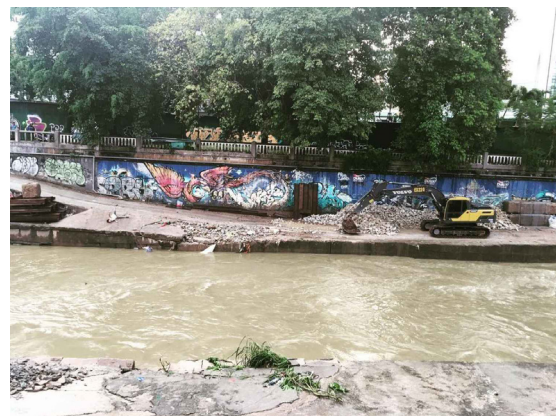


Figure 3. Lee Ren Xin in *City of Entertainment* (Source: *Dancing in Place* at Urbanscape Festival 2018)

Architectural form and topography can also act as choreographic challenges. Responding to the wind’s movement through rice stalks, the softness of the

muddy ground, and the cyclical rhythms of rural labour, the dancer in *Moved by Padi* (Aida Redza, 2016) performs straight in a paddy field as shown in Figure 4. She matches the timing of her breath and movements to the agricultural pace of the location through physical improvisation. This immersive approach speaks to Barbour and Hitchmough's (2013) concept of affective embodiment, in which space's emotional and environmental characteristics are written into the dancer's movement vocabulary. Aida's body becomes a vehicle for reading the cultural and ecological rhythms of the area by including slow weight changes, grounded floorwork, and pauses reflecting the field's stillness.



Figure 4. Aida Redza in *Moved by Padi* (Source: Aida Redza website)

Topography also affects movement exploration. Adapting her weight and transitions to fit the uneven ground (shown in Figure 5), the performer in *Quintessence* (Rathimalar, 2009) interacts with soil, leaves, and forested terrain. Her tactile interaction with the site shatters any feeling of choreographic consistency, therefore producing spontaneous, grounded movements that blur the line between human and environment. Reflecting Lefebvre's (1991) theory of spatial production, this process dynamically creates space via lived, sensory, and representational activi-

ties rather than a static container.



Figure 5. Rathimalar in *Quintessence* (Source: Dancing in Place, Rimbun Dahan, 2009)

Apart from form and texture, a location's symbolic and cultural relevance also influences adaptation. For example, when dancers perform in historically significant or sacred places, their movements may reflect ritualistic patterns or traditional gestures honouring the site's legacy. Performers create a kinesthetic bridge between the past and present, self and community, by changing their spatial decisions to local histories through modest movement, directional pathways, or symbolic motifs. Movement adaptation thus becomes a cultural as well as a physical process, placing the body inside layers of memory and meaning.

This negotiation with space is dynamic. Dancers are still quite responsive to changing circumstances, including audience closeness, terrain changes, and weather changes. They constantly adjust their dynamics, scale, and orientation in real time. Such reactivity calls for flexibility, somatic presence, and improvisational sharpness. As Morejon (2021) points out, these adaptive mechanisms increase dancers' physical awareness and enable them to improvise multidirectionally and preserve coherence even in chaotic settings.

Adapting movement to the site involves a comprehensive process that relies on spatial awareness, cultural sensitivity, and somatic responsiveness. Theory and intuition inform the movement, reflecting an embodied awareness of the physical,

historical, and symbolic environment. The outcome is a performance that springs from the site rather than one forced upon it, producing a resonant and transforming experience for the audience and the performer.

The Collaborative Process: Choreographer and Performer

This element emphasises the collaboration aspect of site-specific dance. It recognises the relationship between the choreographer and dancers in the embodiment of space through improvisation. The choreographer plays a significant role in steering the improvised process, but the dancer's embodiment of space brings the dance to life in the performance site. Collaboration between the choreographer and performer is essential to maximise the possibilities of improvisation in site-specific dance. Before beginning the process of creating site-specific choreography, the choreographer will conduct research and observations of the site. The choreographer was well-acquainted with the site chosen for the dance piece, which aimed to incorporate the space into the narratives taking place there (Assaf & Selim, 2021). The duty of the choreographer is to establish a framework that combines artistic vision, the characteristics of the site, and improvisational flexibility. Choreographers and performers build a shared understanding of the site and the desired creative direction through a collaborative approach. The choreographer establishes boundaries and rules, enabling the performers the artistic freedom to improvise and represent the environment. In 2013, Aida Redza choreographed a site-specific performance titled *Bridge Kaki Lima*. And she employed a collaborative process with her dancers and emphasized that this collaborative approach is essential for developing the relationship between the dancers and the site itself, with the process typically spanning one to two months. Figure 6 shows the process of the *Bridge Kaki Lima* rehearsal using a collaborative process. This collaborative technique assures the performance's co-

hesiveness while respecting the dancers' spontaneous energy and originality.



Figure 6. The process of *Bridge Kaki Lima* rehearsal using a collaborative process.

CONCLUSIONS

Integrating space via spontaneous movement is a fundamental aspect of site-specific dance performances. By active and intuitive interaction with their surroundings, dancers transcend the constraints of the traditional stage and forge a deep somatic relationship with the environment. Improvisation allows performers to investigate, modify, and react in real time to the unique attributes of each location—whether architectural, environmental, or cultural—thus augmenting the authenticity and spontaneity of their bodily performance. According to Zeitner (2023), improvisation is an essential technique for dancers to navigate presence and spatial awareness, highlighting its enduring significance in physical and digital environments.

In site-specific dance, collaborative improvisational involvement significantly enhances its impact. The collaboration between choreographer and performer facilitates a versatile creative process that adapts to the site's characteristics. This co-authorship fosters a developing choreographic framework grounded in environmental responsiveness and embodied inquiry. Kondratyeva (2021) asserts that site-specific dance in heritage contexts facilitates an embodied interaction between current bodies and historical spaces, creating layers of meaning through movement. When dancers regard the site not only as a

place but also as a co-creator, the performance transforms into a significant act for both the performer and the audience, embedded inside a network of spatial, cultural, and emotional resonances.

Finally, improvisation in site-specific choreography serves as both a creative tactic and a method of honouring the location. It enables dancers to engage with space purposefully and encourages audiences to perceive dance as a dynamic, relational process influenced by the distinct characteristics of each setting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the individuals who generously provided their invaluable insights and assistance during this research project.

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