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By Cristina Esposito

### The Rhythm of Life ... Dancing queen: LIVESpace's Claire Russ

Claire Russ sees a connection between architecture and the human form - so much so that she founded LIVESpace to create dance pieces for construction projects

Watching the delicate movements of dancer Ellen van Schuylenburch at London's Palace Theatre in 1996, Claire Russ made a decision. As director of theatre dance company the Claire Russ Ensemble, she would devote a large part of her work to exploring the complex and fascinating relationship between the human body, dance, space and architecture. Her experiences would lead to the formation of LIVESpace, an initiative that creates inaugural dances to celebrate pivotal stages in the construction process, and to projects involving the likes of Alsop Architects and Herzog & de Meuron.

Somewhere in the midst of the ensemble's decade-long European tour, which began in 1990, Russ became intrigued by the link between performance and space, and the engagement between her dancers and the confines of that space. She remembers how 'every theatre stage was a blank canvas which we had to learn to inhabit, to own', and how increasingly the act of not just creating but exploiting that space 'resembled in my mind the architectural act'. In observing van Schuylenburch's solo, Russ realised that dance could not simply be defined as the body in isolation, but that it related to space, to culture, to community and to purpose - just as the individual components of a building were not architecture until those same issues were addressed and placed in context.

As the snippets of theory clarified, Russ set about redefining the notion of dance through interaction with architectural space. She explains: "'Dance" is a loaded word, but that doesn't express even half of what it can do. Although not yet built at the time, Peckham Library takes the whole rhetoric of "library" and translates it. In retrospect, we wanted to achieve something very similar.'

It was Christophe Egret of Alsop Architects who gave Russ and LIVESpace the perfect opportunity to communicate those ideas central to 'the dialogue of space'. The practice was working on Queen Mary's School of Medical and Dental Research in east London, which incorporates a glass pavilion containing pod-like structures and amorphous cellular forms. Russ set about choreographing a celebration that would 'dance the architecture'.



'I thought about the key moments in creating a building and talked to Alsop about why foundation stone-laying ceremonies in particular were so boring,' she says nonchalantly. 'There's never any attempt to ritualise and it seems very tokenistic. I suggested we should make it a dance of ownership - of the art and of the space - that would celebrate the biological forms that pervade the architecture, as well as the local community. We were all very excited about the possibilities.'

The resultant performance, *ROCK*, took place on the dishevelled Queen Mary's building site in November 2003. Aided by an ensemble of students from the London Contemporary Dance School and solo performances by Arthur Pita and Richard Stamp, *ROCK* fused traditional Gujarati folk and contemporary dance with the blaring beats of a hard, industrial soundtrack. The dancers' mesmerising contortions parodied the shifts of the amorphous Centre of the Cell construction, while the contours of the dancers' bodies celebrated the organic forms all around. Russ' preparation involved wandering around a building site, and she recalls how 'the functional gestures between the contractors on the building site were fascinating, so wonderfully expressive'.

The ensemble even convinced 'Big Kev', the banksman, to call in the stone as part of the dance. 'He was brilliant,' Russ laughs. 'We had this big burly builder as an elemental part of a sensitive artistic act, improvising his own dance movements. It really was a radical moment in the choreography.'

Delighted with the performance, Queen Mary's School has invited Russ' ensemble to perform at the official opening ceremony. And Russ is keen to work with other architects and clients in creating unconventional inaugurations for key buildings. Spurred on by the success at Queen Mary's, Russ is optimistic that the concept will catch on.

'The human body is the perfect architecture,' she observes, although she acknowledges that expressing such abstract ideas to potentially non arts-savvy clients may have its challenges.

Although Russ' arguments are persuasive, her rhetoric can be complex, and at times a whole new train of thought emerges from one of the many tangents to our discussion. The delivery, however, is just right - Russ' intensity is startling, and her words are punctuated by a variety of gestures that emphasise her passion for the *LIVESpace* project and for architecture. Russ cites Future Systems' entrance to *Comme des Garçons* in New York as a powerful exemplar of the built environment interacting with the physical body. 'It sucks you into the building,' she says. 'There's a sense of physically travelling, of a journey, as you move through the architecture.'

Russ says she would love to be part of a design team, and envisions a process whereby designers work with dancers, film their movements, look for repeated patterns, then create 3D models so that, in a sense, buildings can start to mould to the human form. She looks forward to a time when 'body consultation' becomes 'a staple part of the architectural endeavour'.

And until then? Russ continues to seek out inspirational projects. Working on New Islington Manchester with Urban Splash would be 'fabulous', as would Liverpool's Fourth Grace. 'That deceptive outwards frailty,' she muses. 'That vulnerability. It would be fantastic to explore in the language of dance - the possibilities are endless.'

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