



How Architecture Is Invigorating Ballet

"Each art form can offer something that you don't get in other forms of art," says choreographer Troy Schumacher.



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I'm sitting in an auditorium watching five or so dancers in the Ballet Collective contort their bodies, leap across an empty stage, and perform mind-boggling

feats of athleticism. But the whole time, I'm looking for subtle clues about how the dance relates to the Lowline, an underground park planned for an unused section of New York's subway, by the architects at Raad Studio. The show's choreography was inspired by the firm and the project.

There are certain moments that hint at a subterranean setting—a shift in lighting, a dancer's arm clawing from under a tangle of bodies, a certain tone of music—but there's nothing overt. When I speak to the performance's choreographer and Ballet Collective founder Troy Schumacher, I learn that it's less about a literal translation than an interpretation of the same creative sources.

"There are different ways architecture can be explored in dance," Schumacher says. "But what ended up being more interesting to us was taking the concepts these architects are working from and what inspired them and seeing how close that is to inspiring us."

For the Collective's eight previous ballets, Shumacher looked to different artists and mediums—like painters and photographers—for inspiration. This time, he chose architects and architecture to explore the season's theme entitled "What Comes Next."

When ballet and architecture collided in the past, the results have been fascinating. "It's not often that one sees a ballerina partnered by a cavalier in an armless diving suit adorned with tassels," wrote a *New York Times* critic after watching a performance of Bauhaus impresario Oskar Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet. When architect John Pawson collaborated with the Royal Opera House, in 2006, he created a James Turrell-esque backdrop for the choreography. Zaha Hadid has built sets for Frédéric Flamand, a Belgian choreographer who "likes to explore non-traditional spaces" and has a

cadre of architect collaborators including Thom Mayne, Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, and Jean Nouvel.



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In an interview with *Archinect*, Steven Holl described his collaboration with choreographer Jessica Lang as a whole new territory. "I think that's also where you find the stimulating aspects—going forward into the future, it's always that blurred territory between one art and another art that gives you the sort of new territory," he said. "That's much more stimulating than just studying architecture qua architecture."

This is the route Schumacher wanted to take—a more abstract interpretation of the disciplines. While the intersection of architect-as-set-designer and choreographer has been explored, Schumacher didn't want to go that route. His stage is completely devoid of props. It's just the dancers.

"The idea of working with the space around me was very appealing," Schumacher says. "There are different ways architecture can be explored. But what ended up being more interesting was taking the concepts these architects are working from, what inspired them, and seeing how close that is to inspiring us."

To that end, Schumacher invited architects to send him drawings or renderings of their projects. The conceit was to use their work as a starting point for his, "It's a vehicle and communication tool for choreographer and composer and architect to use moving forward," he says. "It's kind of a transformation so to speak of their art. As opposed to using a non-performative element to augment the performance, it's using it to inspire and guide the dance."



Schumacher picked Carlos Arnaiz, of CAZA Architects, and James Ramsey, of Raad Studio, as collaborators—architects whose work grapples with a lot of conceptual heft and who are doing interesting things with their forms.

"With James, the whole concept of the Low Line, is so poetically beautiful," Schimacher says. "It is taking something that was once incredibly useful [the subway] and bringing an outside source, light, to allow it plants grow and thrive. And that's like the mission of Ballet Collective, to bring outside sources in to inject life into it."

The performance is divided into three pieces. Raad's work inspired a dance called "Until the Walls Cave In." The next "act" is a shorter dance called "The Answer," which was inspired by a composite photograph of basketball player Allen Iverson taking multiple shots at hoop, which Arnaiz sketched over.

"It's about this whole idea about trying to find new pathways to achieve a goal," Schumacher says. "We took that a little further and how it's somewhat about deferring your expectations and not knowing what to expect at times as you move forward and find new directions to solve a problem."

(The third dance was inspired by photographer Paul Maffi with source art that isn't architecture related.)

To Schumacher, there's a clear connection between dance and architecture from the perspective of a body moving through space and how those motions are shaped by a building or by a choreographer's decisions. What how that connection informs each discipline is less clear.



"Architecture impacts the dance in every way, from both movement thorough space and where it happens and where inspiration comes from," he says.

"Architects are thinking about the exact opposite angle, what transpires in their spaces and what they can facilitate and what experiences they can give. It's hard to me to say what dance can teach architects. Looking at the complexity of what could happen in a space and how an architect could translate that into movement, you could look at the shapes that bodies are making and what abstractly transpires between bodies and space."

One thing is certain about the relationship between dance and architecture: Schumacher hopes it brings more relevance to ballet, which has a reputation for being stuck in tradition.

"Ballet is an art form where 'relevant' isn't a word we use to contextualize it," he says. "On one hand, I hope we're creating works that make people who don't ordinarily come to the ballet experience what a meaningful dance can provide artistically. Each art form can offer something that you don't get in other forms of art."

To other artists and designers, Schumacher hopes the creative process can prove as inspirational as the performance itself.

"A large part of this is about showing you can find amazing inspiration just looking outside of where you think you should be and looking at something extremely different," he says. "Looking at something outside of your normal field of vision can lead you to new places. The power of collaboration is not a buzzword."

[All Photos: Whitney Browne]