

## Weaving Memories: Historical and Choreographic Traces of Carandiru

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### Abstract

This paper discusses an ongoing practice-based research project developed in two public state schools in São Paulo, Brazil: *Etec de Artes* (Technical School of Arts) and *Etec Parque da Juventude* (Technical High School), both located in former pavilions of the *Carandiru* prison complex. The research investigates how choreographic practices can engage with the architectural, historical, and affective traces of spaces marked by memories. Grounded in Practice as Research (PaR), the project combines theoretical investigation with practical artistic laboratories and the development of a performative game of cards designed to mediate embodied experiences within the students of the schools. By proposing movement as a means of engaging with memory, the research seeks to transform spaces once associated with incarceration into places of reflection through movement.

*Keywords:* dance, Carandiru, school

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## Introduction

This research project, entitled “Mobile Experiences in School Spaces: A Choreographic Study in the Former Pavilions of Carandiru”, supervised by Professor Ana Maria Rodriguez Costas (University of Campinas, Brazil), is being conducted in two public state schools in São Paulo, Brazil: *Etec de Artes* (Technical School of Arts) and *Etec Parque da Juventude* (Technical High School). Both institutions occupy prisons buildings that formerly belonged to the *Casa de Detenção de São Paulo*, popularly known as Carandiru. The architectural and heritage history of this site has been shaped by ongoing symbolic disputes, which will be discussed throughout this paper.

This paper, presented at the 8th Paris Conference on Arts and Humanities, emerged from a research internship<sup>1</sup> undertaken abroad as part of the broader project. Entitled “Situating Choreography: A Study of the Relationship between Dance and Space”, the internship was conducted under the supervision of Professor Julie Perrin at Université Paris 8 (Saint-Denis, France) and focused on investigating the concept of situated choreography.

In this pathway, this paper reflects on the development of the research in Brazil in light of theoretical perspectives around the site-specific dance field and dance education explored during the internship in France, as well as discussions that took place during the conference.

## Discussion

Inaugurated on April 21, 1920, the *Casa de Detenção de São Paulo* it was one of the largest penitentiary constructions carried out by the government of São Paulo in the early twentieth century, and for many years it was regarded as a model prison. In 1975, the House of Detention already housed five thousand prisoners, and thus the idea of a model prison gradually gave way to new representations, associated with violence, abandonment, and precarious conditions.

On October 2, 1992, after a rebellion, the police brutally killed 111 men, marking the history of the city of São Paulo: the Carandiru massacre. One of the most traumatic episodes in the recent history of São Paulo (Borges, 2022).

The prison complex was decommissioned and partially demolished in 2002. The destruction of several pavilions not only erased the physical structures but also contributed to obscuring institutional responsibility for the massacre. This reveals the fissures of a process of neutralizing uncomfortable memories, which determines what can be said and remembered about Carandiru and the massacre that occurred there.

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**Figure 1***Former Carandiru Prison Pavilion***Figure 2***Current Etec de Artes Building*

Revisiting this history constitutes a political and sensitive act of resistance against forgetting. By reinscribing the Carandiru massacre into collective memory, space is opened for reflection on the mechanisms of silencing, erasure, and the persistence of institutional violence that permeate these territories.

In the chapter *Material Touchstones: Weaving Histories through Site-Specific Dance Performance* (2019), Hunter argues that architectural materials and spatial characteristics reveal narratives and evoke images that stimulate and sustain memory. Drawing on her site-specific project *The Abbots Dances*, developed at the 400-year-old George Abbot Almshouse in Guildford, England, Hunter describes a creative process grounded in long-term engagement with residents and in the collection of biographical, anecdotal, and historical materials that informed the choreography. Her discussion expands the notion of observation beyond visual perception to encompass embodied observation and co-presence, in which the moving body simultaneously becomes a research instrument and an integral part of the phenomena emerging through interaction. As Hunter (2019) states:

Memorial traces and emerging sensations evoked through being in particular yet fluid places could therefore be considered as ‘situating’ processes or devices that enable us to make sense of our place in the world and in relation to the places we encounter. This process of situating and locating ourselves within a particular place is considered here to operate in a processual manner. Through these consistent situating processes, an evolved sense of relationality emerges in which we come to know about places and ourselves in relation to them in the evolving moment; the site in this sense becomes the place we find ourselves in. (p. 143)

Hunter further proposes weaving as a metaphor for the interlacing of materiality, memory, and performance, connecting narratives and trajectories from the past, present, and future through dance. Site-specific choreography thus becomes a practice capable of revealing the complex relationships between human bodies and architectural materialities, relationships often shaped by power, memory, and lived experience.

From this attentive engagement with the past—and with its material, symbolic, and affective traces—it becomes possible to imagine alternative forms of presence and action within spaces once marked by incarceration, transforming memory into movement, embodiment, and artistic creation.

Methodologically, this research is grounded in Practice as Research (PaR), in which artistic practice is understood not merely as an object of study but as a mode of knowledge production through embodied experience. The artistic laboratories are structured around the interaction of three methodological axes. The first consists of embodied artistic practice through observation exercises and choreographic laboratories. The second involves critical reflection arising from empirical engagement, including the development of a performative card deck, group discussions with students, and research supervision meetings. The third axis concerns conceptual and theoretical inquiry through selected readings and the writing of research reports (Geraldi, 2019).

Combining theoretical and practical approaches, the research integrates literature review with observation activities and choreographic creation developed at Etec de Artes and Etec Parque da Juventude. The project aims to create a performative mediation card deck for use within these schools, investigating, through the moving body, the spatial traces embedded in the former prison architecture while fostering the emergence of new gestures, choreographies, and forms of collective engagement among young people and adult students.

## **Conclusion**

This research contributes to preserving and critically engaging with the history and memory of a place that must never be forgotten. The memory of Carandiru persists in the columns, floors, and walls of the schools that now occupy its former pavilions. The development of the performative game of cards is, therefore, significant to offer for the school communities new choreographic possibilities for inhabiting spaces. Through embodied practices, it encourages site-specific dance experiences that transform places once defined by incarceration into spaces for artistic creation and critical reflection through movement.

## **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used **ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5.5)** to improve grammar in English. The AI-assisted output was carefully reviewed, edited, and verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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