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# Mapping a City's Energy: using digital storytelling to facilitate embodied experiences of urban space and place

**Rosemary (Rosa) Cisneros,  
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and Sarah Whatley**

## **Abstract**

This essay looks at how embodied knowledge of the city can be shaped by the intentional movement of dance and sensory mapping experiments, through a close examination of two different movement practices undertaken as part of the Dancing Bodies in Coventry (DBiC) project. The essay also explores the different ways in which embodied experiences of urban space and place are documented, as well as what the hybridisation of the digital and the bodily might mean for how we understand and navigate our urban environments.

## Introduction: Being in the City

Cities each have an identity, a history and a personality of their own. They also have their own energy and this is reliant on a number of different factors: their geography, their industry, their heritage and culture, and their citizens and visitors. Inhabitants and visitors have to constantly negotiate the different energies and dynamism of a city. Becoming aware of how a city makes one feel can foster a new type of relationship with urban space. It can encourage a rediscovery or reimagining of that space. Importantly, the body is central to this relationship of being in a city. It is a site of embodied knowing that responds to cultural, social and gendered norms. Social scientists Betty Block and Judith Lee Kissell define this embodied knowing as a form of 'being embedded in a society, a culture, a language' (Block and Kissell 2001: 8).

In this essay, we look at how embodied knowledge of the city is shaped by the intentional movement of dance and performance art, and how these forms can encourage individuals to exist in the world in a more embodied manner. We examine two works performed as part of the *Dancing Bodies in Coventry* (DBiC) project: "Dancing above the City" by Kate Lawrence and a "Psychogeographic Drift through the City" performed and digitally documented by two Coventry University postgraduate Architecture students, Aswad Iftikhar and Kathiravan Pugazhendhi.<sup>1</sup> These works show how the intersubjective and affective practices of dance projects and performance art in the city can alter the experience of urban and social space. Our essay concludes with an exploration of the different ways that embodied experiences of urban space and place are documented, and what the hybridisation of the digital and the bodily might mean for how we understand and navigate those urban environments.

Urban spaces have long been sources of choreographic inspiration for a number of dance practitioners, especially in the development of embodied walking practices and sensing scores (*inter alia* Lavery 2005;

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<sup>1</sup> Dancing Bodies in Coventry included photographer Antony Weir, Videographer Raluca Maria Polodeanu from Reel Master Production, Sound designer David Sheriff, Dr Marie-Louise Crawley and Dr Rosa Cisneros. For more info see <https://dancingbodiesincoventry.com>

Cocker, Scliar Mancin and Wookey 2010; Garrett Brown and Meehan 2019; Whitehead 2019). In particular, these varying practices seek to understand the city in choreographic terms. Importantly, they imagine the city less “as a stage upon which to dance, but rather to apprehend it as a field of forces and intensities, *as* choreography [...] a weave of flows and rhythms, the live entanglement of relations between body and space” (Cocker, 2010). The emphasis is on how the body senses that place and space, rather than on the visual spectacle of how the city might appear as dance. For Emma Cocker, mapping the city in choreographic terms becomes more than a simple visual mapping of the traces of movements encountered and scored; rather, the rhythm of the city must be felt and sensed. In this way, choreography conceptualises the city as “the temporal unfolding of fluid and ever-changing relations” (ibid).

Dance artist researchers Natalie Garrett Brown and Emma Meehan seek to take this conceptualisation further. Foregrounding the lived, sensed and experiential aspects of place and space, they explore how “dance invites inhabitants to experience a sensory relationship with site and place, to enable new and alternative imaginings of the city [...] with the visual repositioned as just one of several senses that might orientate us in the world” (Garrett Brown and Meehan, 2019: unpaginated). These practices seek to encourage a slowing down, a pausing, a lingering, a drifting in the city in order to develop both a deeper listening to, and sensing of, the urban environment, and also a potentially deeper connection of body to environment. This essay aims to demonstrate how the development of a ‘walking score’ and other such operations, such as the Situationist-inspired ‘drifting’ or *dérive*, can lead to a more embodied understanding of urban and social space. Throughout this writing, we use the term ‘walking score’ to illustrate a framework for moving through a city, with video or still photography here being the main source for documenting that framework.

This essay shares work from two different walking practices carried out in the city of Coventry, UK, that developed as part of the DBiC research project (2018-2020) - one with vertical dance artist, Kate Lawrence, and another with two postgraduate Architecture students who sought to use psychogeographical mapping perspective to reflect on an embodied moving through the city through the lens of their own architectural practice.<sup>2</sup> It also offers a critical analysis of how an online digital

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<sup>2</sup> Psychogeography originated in France during the 1950s during the avant-garde movement, with Guy Debord a key figure in developing the concept. Psychogeographers proposed a revolutionary approach to architecture believing in unitary urbanism and

scrapbook tool, MovesScrapbook (created as part of the EU-funded project CultureMoves [2018-2020]),<sup>3</sup> was used to create new forms of embodied experiences of walking or moving through the city, and the impact and importance of documenting such urban interventions in terms of communicating and archiving responses to our known, and unknown, environments. Finally, we argue that digital technology has a valuable place in fostering and documenting different and nuanced relationships with a variety of urban environments. We offer the reader these scores and case studies as an invitation to use digital storytelling tools to undertake new (and/or expand existing) practices of exploring their cities in an embodied manner.

### Coventry's Dancing Bodies

Coventry, located in the West Midlands (UK), is a city known for its historical references to feminist icon Lady Godiva (and Peeping Tom who dared to spy on Godiva's naked protest ride through the city in the thirteenth century), the motor car industry, and the medieval walled city and historic cathedral that was destroyed during heavy bombing raids during the second World War. The city recovered from the Blitz by embracing the Brutalist modernist architecture of the 1950s. It constructed one of the UK's first shopping centres and an infamous ring road that circles the inner city, which functions as a boundary between those who work and those who live in the city centre. Coventry is also known as a centre of international peace and reconciliation and has a history of welcoming communities from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The city recently won the title of UK City of Culture for 2021.<sup>4</sup>

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claiming that citizens should be allowed to decide the type of spaces and architecture they want to reside in and be surrounded by.

<sup>3</sup> CultureMoves: <https://culturemoves.eu>

<sup>4</sup> City of Culture: <https://coventry2021.co.uk/>



Figure 1: *Godiva Awakes*, Imagineer Productions [2020] Coventry City Centre (Coventry, UK). Photo: Antony Weir

This multimedia project (DBiC) serves as a first step towards building an archive for the rich history and ecology of dance in Coventry. The city has a deep history of dance that is understudied. The DBiC multimedia project aims to bring that history to light through a series of short films and related podcast episodes. The project provided an opportunity for artists, practitioners, dance groups, producers and academics to reflect on and revisit spaces within the city of Coventry. Filming took place in various locations throughout the city and the work encountered encompassed a variety of dance and movement forms, including Irish traditional dance, flamenco, rave, physical theatre, and vertical dance as well as more contemporary and somatic-based practices. Above all, the project was interested in how diverse dance and performance artists have taken to the city, how they breathe life into the city, and how they might help us to experience and sense it differently.

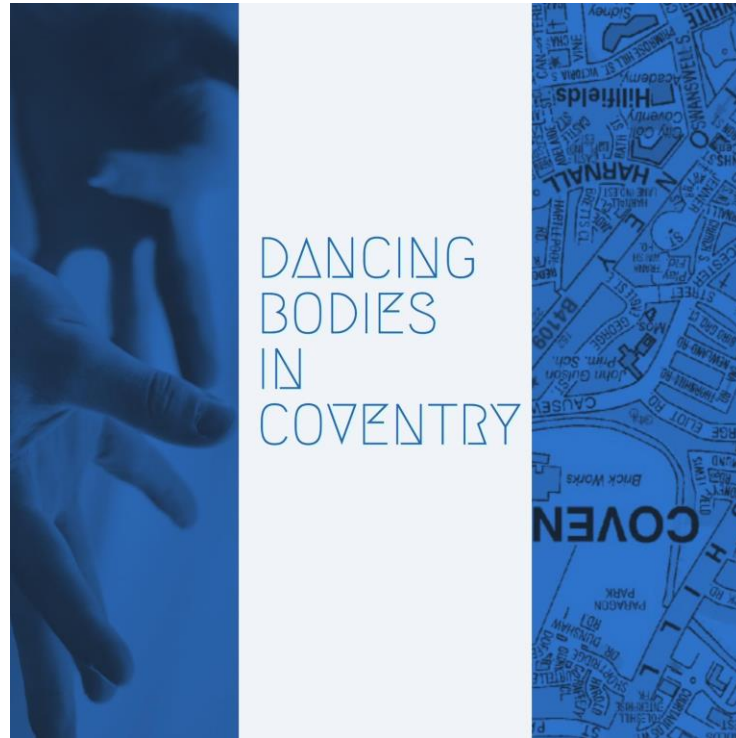


Figure 2: Dancing Bodies in Coventry logo. Design: Rosamaria Cisneros (2018)

### Walk 1 - Dancing above the City: Kate Lawrence

Vertical dance artist Kate Lawrence was one of the artists invited to explore the city for the DBiC project.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, and unlike the other artists filmed for the series, this was her first visit to Coventry. We documented Lawrence walking through Coventry city centre as a first-time visitor, asking her to explore the city through her own tourist gaze and the lens of vertical dance. Her walk visually ‘mapped’ the city through reflecting on how vertical dance might be created above it. The form of digital storytelling used here was to ask Lawrence to reflect on camera on certain sites around Coventry in relation to her own vertical dance work and her artistic process and methodology.

Lawrence is principally concerned with space, and with making the familiar strange. She describes her work as “vertical dance”, even if it is often associated with (or misnamed as) “aerial” dance. In her doctoral thesis, Lawrence sets out a manifesto for vertical dance, something that underscores its political as well as aesthetic principles. She asks the dancer:

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.verticaldancekatelawrence.com>



...to reappear, re-manifest her acts in public spaces, with others, in order to effect lasting changes in social space [...] The manifesto's *philosophical* aim is to change perceptions of social and architectural space through the actions of the body. *Politically*, [it] asks people to talk to each other in order to make the apparently impossible (walking on walls) achievable through negotiation (Lawrence, 2017: 10, our emphasis)

Taking place “above the city”, Lawrence appropriates equipment designed to be used by rock climbers and/or industrial access workers (rope, harness and positioning devices, commonly a grigri or rig) to suspend dancers against walls, on ropes, balconies, windows and trees (ibid.: 11). These surfaces are then used as tilted dance floors, which give rise to new physical techniques and perceptions of space for the dancers (ibid.). Whilst frequently commissioned to create something “spectacular”, Lawrence is more concerned with what it transforms, and its lasting (if any) impact. With reference to Lefebvre’s characterisation of the construction of buildings as a confiscation of space from nature (1974: 49), and his call to recover nature through lived experience and thus unify the perceived, conceived and lived aspects of space, Lawrence argues that the suspension of bodies on buildings inserts nature into the built environment and provides new images of relationships between hard, inert surfaces and soft, living bodies.

Lawrence’s discussion of vertical dance challenges us to raise our gaze and attend to the often neglected space above us; such a perspective, she asserts, may allow us to invert and reconsider hierarchical power relations embedded in practices of urban design, regulation and governance. Vertical dance is a form of “occupation” that requires agreements from the gatekeepers of the space, for example, building managers, health and safety advisers, construction company representatives, engineers, councillors, and artistic programmers, who must sanction this apparently purposeless activity because they share a vision that it is worthwhile. The worthiness of the activity lies in the real and repeated manifestation of an apparently impossible action: to dance on walls, releasing the disruptive power of the physical body over the functional plans of architecture (Lawrence 2017: 11).



Figure 3: Kate Lawrence in Coventry next to a Medieval wall. Photo: DBiC Project (2018)



Figure 4: Kate Lawrence - Vertical Dance (2018) Photo: KLVD Company

To document Lawrence's walk, the team used a combination of cameras and writing, which helped us to reflect on our encounters. Lawrence described how she, as a vertical dancer, would occupy that space and imagined what would be possible, while also reflecting on her technique and choreographic approach. For example, while exploring Coventry Cathedral and after walking through the new and old Cathedral of St. Michael's, Lawrence discovered the large clear glass that had etchings of angels. She recognised the work of New Zealand-born artist John Hutton, and was reminded of a time when she danced on the Guildford Cathedral in Surrey, UK, in her piece *Descent of the Angel* (2009). Once inside the new cathedral, the vibrancy of the colourful stained glass windows prompted her to discuss the piece on diffraction that she was then currently working on together with a physicist. The built environment and architectural elements of one of the city's principal heritage sites was a

catalyst for Lawrence to reflect, recall and remember her past and current performance projects. As such, it is useful to frame Lawrence's walk through the city through the lens of performance artist Rachel Sweeney's framework of topographic exchanges between sense, perception and corporeal memory (2012). Sweeney's inquiry uses choreography as a tool to explore cartographic processes and spaces. It directs attention to the shifts happening within the dancer's body. Lawrence's navigation of Coventry within the DBIC project reflects a similar approach. The film of her walking score offers the viewer an understanding of her choreographic process. It provides the viewer with an insight into how a vertical dancer might approach a city and illustrates the complexities of her craft.<sup>6</sup>

Lawrence's choreographic choices rely on a site including the objects and structures within that space and the combination of how those interact and inspire the individuals who enter into that space. This is particularly visible in how she treats the Whitefriars Gatehouse in Coventry (the old toy museum).<sup>7</sup> In passing by, Lawrence stopped, struck by its weathered sandstone tiles and its wooden windows, sensing its materiality. Reminiscent of performance theorist Holger Hartung, who has considered the agency of materials and objects in relation to site and the body, Lawrence reflected on the material objects she encountered on her walking meditation. Hartung regards cracks, fissures, and tears in walls, paper and concrete as performative figures that have a 'complex relation with materiality and with movement' (Hartung 2019: 151). Both Lawrence and Hartung imagine and reimagine a site through observing those performative figures that inhabit the space. During the walk, Lawrence suggested that her 'choreography is governed by the architecture and the space' (Lawrence 2019) and she needs to understand what she can practically do within a space before entering a creative frame of mind.

Lawrence was also drawn to the natural features of the urban environment. The city's trees, for instance, prompted her to reflect on her 2016 vertical dance piece on trees, *Cuddio/Ceisio (Hide/Seek)*. Discussing this piece, she described the emotive response of dancing on a living thing that one can feel moving in the wind. Sweeney's cartographic

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<sup>6</sup> The final film can be accessed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpPqboCLtjo&t=4s>

<sup>7</sup> Whitefriars Gatehouse is a small sandstone gate-house that was originally thought to have been all medieval and provided controlled access to the Whitefriars (Carmelite) Monastery: <https://www.coventrycity.org.uk/buildings-at-risk/toy-museum.html>

mapping through choreography and Hartung's 'performative figures' again both offer lens through which Lawrence's walking score can be read.



Figure 5: Kate Lawrence -Vertical Dance (2018) Photo credit: KLVD Company

## Walk 2 - Embodiment and Architecture: a Psychogeographic Drift through the City

The second case study looks to another form of digital storytelling to document a walking practice. In early 2020, the authors invited two Masters of Architecture (M.Arch) students from Coventry University, Aswad Iftikhar and Kathiravan Pugazhendhi, to engage with a variety of site dance materials (including the *Dancing Bodies in Coventry* online 'archive' various and walking scores [Lavery 2005; Whitehead 2019]) and develop and document their own embodied walking practice through the city. The two architects were not originally from Coventry and had moved to the city for their postgraduate studies. This served as a fitting scenario to enable them to discover the city through the development of their own walking practice and to capture this via the CultureMoves digital tool 'MovesScrapbook'.<sup>8</sup>

The MovesScrapbook is a digital application which allows users to collect, manage and organise their own content for various purposes; choreographers, for instance, can use it to organise ideas and collect inspirational materials as a starting point for creating a new performance.

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<sup>8</sup> This tool was developed as part of a research project, CultureMoves, looking at the potential intersections between dance, site, tourism and digital storytelling, and where the central consideration was how dance as an embodied practice might be able to create new forms of engagement to spread the knowledge of cultural heritage sites and also the history of those sites.

The scrapbooks created can be both private and public, displayed on the account of the CultureMoves portal or embedded into an existing website or blog. The visual nature of the scrapbooks make them ideal for sharing via social media. Through the MovesScrapbook digital tool, the user is able to curate digitally mediated environments that can facilitate a return to the dancing body. This dancing body may find itself remembering an instance, a person or a place in history that may then have implications for the ways in which the body moves through time in the moment.

The architecture students used the tool and the *Dancing Bodies in Coventry* archive to explore Coventry as an embodied place, whilst not losing sight of their own architectural perspectives. Each architect explored the city through a psychogeographical lens loosely based on the Situationist-inspired drift or *dérive*, the unstructured wandering and attunement to hidden places and narratives of place. Bridger *et al.* suggest that psychogeographical practices are playful and political. They “explore the conscious and unconscious effects and impacts of environments—how we make sense of the world”—and prompt us to imagine a world “beyond the consumer capitalist order of things.” (2016: 44) The students’ psychogeographic drifting and reimagining of the city is captured in the visual scores they curated and documented through the MovesScrapbook tool. The images below draw attention to these two walking scores.



Wrapping the Materiality

Figure 6. Photo Credit: Kathiravan Pugazhendhi



Movement around the Curved landscape

Figure 7. Photo Credit: Kathiravan Pugazhendhi



Dead Space

Figure 8. Photo Credit: Kathiravan Pugazhendhi



Culture of Niche Space in Coventry

Figure 9. Photo Credit: Kathiravan Pugazhendhi



Sandstone change into Green texture Material

Figure 10. Photo Credit: Kathiravan Pugazhendhi



CONCRETE VOID

Figure 11. Photo Credit: Aswad Iftikhar



PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE IN ONE PICTURE

Figure 12. Photo Credit: Aswad Iftikhar





### PEACE IN THE CITY

Figure 13. Photo Credit: Aswad Iftikhar

Figures 6-13: Psychogeographic score of Coventry carried out using the MovesScrapbook.

The two students used the MovesScrapbook tool to curate visual scores that explored how they sensed the city—physically and kinesthetically—and how they might make sense of the urban landscape through their embodied practices. The MovesScrapbook app enabled the students to document their practice on their smartphones and archive their practice in the moments of walking, sensing and viewing the city. Additionally, the digital tool enabled them to experiment with non-linear storytelling techniques and assemble fragments into new narratives. In such a way, they were able to reassess how their experience of walking the city could be captured and re-told through digital storytelling, and be remembered differently.

The ways in which embodied sensing as felt and sensed experience is re-framed through digital images also points to the beginnings of a hybrid walking practice, enabling a meeting-point of the digital and the embodied. As dance artist-researcher Carolyn Deby has pointed out, contemporary everyday life in the city is a hybrid performance where flows between the real and virtual comprise a blended experience. Today, we navigate “mutual entanglements” (Deby 2020),

shifting between our smart devices' two-dimensional screens and our three-dimensional embodied world. The recent Covid-19 pandemic has made our interactions primarily digital, and further highlighted what Deby terms the mutual entanglement between the embodied and the digital. These mutual entanglements were already being explored and negotiated by the architecture students in documenting through the MovesScrapbook tool their physical, embodied experience of urban walking. Significantly, this work centered around walking scores (which already enable authorship), as well as the digital, which further encourages agency and reflexivity. Rather than seeing virtual and embodied ways of knowing as separate or contradictory, we see in the walking scores how digital storytelling can facilitate different ways of thinking about embodied experiences and offer a space to observe, reflect upon and respond to these experiences. As such, the project also framed what occurs in daily life, what Deby might call a hybrid performance (2020). These everyday hybrid performances have, since the global Covid-19 pandemic, become something more of a norm, with the increased use of the digital that has emerged as a result of various lockdowns.

Due to widespread lockdowns and social distancing restrictions in the UK, there has been a sharp acceleration in facilitating embodied, live experiences through digital platforms. For example, dance lessons were, through necessity, quickly moved to digital platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Hangout; a plethora of dance performances were offered online, some using "Zoom choreography" to great effect. Navigating embodied, sensed experiences via digital platforms has now become something of a norm and we have swiftly adapted embodied practices to this new normal; and within this context, ideas of how we constantly negotiate shifts from the embodied to the digital, from our bodies to our screens, and back again, have expanded and become more widespread. Alongside, and related to this negotiation, concepts of simultaneous co-presence between mover and viewer have also expanded. For example, an online audience may not be sharing the same physical space with the performers that they are watching, but they are still sharing a digital space, even when that engagement is asynchronous (e.g. not a "live" stream). This, in turn, has understandably given rise to further questions about the relationship between liveness, embodiment and documentation, as well as how we might begin to archive embodied practices through documentation. What might embodied documentation mean? Are there any new embodied approaches to the digital archive that we can explore? Or should we now be thinking about such questions

through the lens of how we begin to first document and then archive those mutual entanglements between the embodied and the digital? How might this then affect our documenting and archiving of our embodied experiences of our own (urban and/or home) environments?

Although during these lockdown times negotiating and documenting those mutual entanglements between the bodily and the digital is happening more in a home environment than out and about in a city's streets, the key questions emerging are similar to those raised by the students' documentation of their urban walking practice. In these "stay at home" times, the digital storytelling tool shared here can be explored and repurposed by the reader/walker to create new stories and new walking practices.

### **An invitation to the reader: develop a walking score for your city using the MovesScrapbook**

We now invite the reader to use the following score to enter into a deeper conversation with their own cities and use the MovesScrapbook tool to explore the performative figures of their urban environments. This walking score is set out to enable the reader/walker to revisit their city from an embodied place while using digital storytelling. The MovesScrapbook tool has the ability to capture responses that may be connected to authorship, identity, affect and embodied experiences: we ask the reader/walker to consider how the tool can help define one's own story and refine one's way of seeing and being in the environment. We also encourage the reader/walker to explore non-linear storytelling techniques. Finally, the reader/walker is invited to consider the following central question while exploring their city: How as architects / dancers / citizens / residents can you represent and remember a psychogeographical mapping of a city through the use of digital storytelling tools?

#### **Score:**

- Go on a drift through the city - alone or with a partner (if with a partner, let the drift remain silent). Let yourself wander through the city landscape, without looking at a map. Let yourself become attuned to the city and follow your instincts and intuitions as to where you (safely) might go.

- Use a digital storytelling tool such as the MovesScrapbook accessible here - <https://portal.culturemoves.eu> - to document your drift. Take photos, videos, or make notes and drawings of spaces and places that you are drawn to.
- Notice how your body feels. What are you sensing?
- What do you notice about how you feel in the different spaces you encounter?
- What do you notice about how your *feeling* changes from place to place?
- Now consider the different materialities of these city spaces. How might the materialities of a city's architecture affect its identity?
- Is there a relationship between these materialities and the histories of the city?
- Does using a digital storytelling tool such as MovesScrapbook help you to see or embody the space - and its materialities and histories - differently? How so?
- What is the relationship between embodied experience and digital documentation?

## Conclusion

This essay, with its accompanying score designed to be used in conjunction with a digital storytelling tool such as MovesScrapbook, has offered several possibilities for how we can navigate our urban environments differently, and begin to document and archive that navigation. Rooted in a perspective where we seek to understand the city in choreographic terms, with the focus on how the body senses place and space within urban environments rather than the city as visual spectacle for dance, we offer digital storytelling as a means of mapping a city's energies and, paradoxically perhaps, facilitating an embodied experience of urban space and place.

This article presented two different examples of walking practices and digital storytelling methods in the city of Coventry (UK) - one documenting and curating the story of the body in the city as told by a dancer and a choreographer, and the other using a psychogeographic and architecturally informed perspective, both of which map the body in urban space. We invited the reader to respond to these different visualisations of the body in the city - as well as to the choreographic and psychogeographical theoretical frameworks underpinning them - by

embarking on their own journey in their own city environment. This hybrid practice is one that seeks different ways to reach embodied sensings of the diverse architectural, environment, cultural and historical landscapes that make up our twenty-first century cities. Through the suggested score, the reader is invited to explore their version of the hybrid practice that combines the digital and the bodily, the material and the immaterial, and the historical and the present.

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