



Dansbana! in the context: performative process for inclusive public space

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Abstract

The historical building typology 'dansbana' was important social spaces, especially among young people, in Sweden and the Northern parts of Europe, in the beginning of the 20th century. They were typically small-scale structures built of wood, a lot of times designed and constructed as a community activity. The music was played live, and the dance would be different kinds of steering dances, where girls were waiting to be asked out to the dance floor.

Dansbana! is an organization (run by the architects Anna Pang, Anna Fridolin and Teres Selberg), creating public spaces for dance with hands-on, dance-specific methods, founded to change statistics showing that young girls are heavily underrepresented as users of public spaces for activities. At the same time the concept of the traditional building typology 'dansbana' is updated to meet the needs and wishes of local dance communities and young girls in today's contemporary world.

Gender inequality is global and one of the biggest obstacles to sustainable development, economic growth and poverty reduction. This research aims to produce and communicate alternative methods to work together towards the SDGs, challenging norms within urban development and broadening the spectrum of how to execute practice-based research globally. Using the experiences from three projects by the organisation Dansbana! in the region of Stockholm, Sweden as well as their most recent installations in Istanbul, Turkey and Akron, USA this research aims at a) visualizing methods of inclusive and context-specific production of public space with young girls as focus group b) developing further the cross-disciplinary participatory methods used within the organization Dansbana! today c) expanding the role of the architect through playful, performative investigations.

An updated building typology for dancing

The historical building typology ‘dansbana’ was important social and cultural places in the early 20th century in Sweden and the Northern parts of Europe. These, often community-built structures for dancing, were popular meeting spaces across classes, especially among a young audience. Often semi-permanent and outdoor, with or without roof, they were typically built of wood in circular or octagonal shapes, but there are also rectangular, quadrangular and elliptical examples.



Figure.1: Examples of the historical building typology ‘dansbana’

Most of the historical ‘dansbana’s were demolished in the late 20th century when the disco, rave and club scene moved the dancing inside, but some are still in use. Here the dance activity even now dominates by steering dances, where the social code for girls is to wait to be asked out to the dance floor. However, international exchange, political revolutions and social development have globally made today’s dance scene very different from 100 years back.

Dansbana! is an organisation run by the architects Anna Pang, Anna Fridolin and Teres Selberg creating public spaces for dance with the aim to change statistics showing that young girls are heavily underrepresented as users of public outdoor spaces for activities, such as skate parks, parkour parks, soccer fields and basketball courts (Blomdahl et al., 2012). Simultaneously, in times when young people don’t have a relationship to the term ‘dansbana’ anymore, they are making updated contemporary versions of this historical building typology. To embrace contextual influences as well as ideas and reflections from their participatory processes, each design is made specific. Materiality, colour, and form always change, but all spaces have included a dance floor as well as an interactive built-in sound system to encourage spontaneous dancing.

Girls as focus group

The Handbook for Gender-Inclusive Urban Planning and Design by the World Bank states that

“modern cities are designed BY MEN and FOR MEN...neglecting the needs, interests, and routines of women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities in the city. This has enormous impacts on women’s access to jobs or schools, on their freedoms and safety, as well as their health and agency, and it reinforces gender inequalities”
(World Bank, 2020).

The statistics behind the start-up of Dansbana! was primarily highlighted from a health perspective in the report but is even more alarming from a democratic perspective. Who uses our public spaces today and what can architects do to question who we are designing for, to disrupt the canon and get a public environment meeting the needs and aspirations of everyone, including previously unseen groups? The work of Dansbana! is often referred to as activist because of their bottom-up approach. Today, in fact, most municipalities in Sweden have a mission to work with inclusion of girls/women and people with different cultural backgrounds in urban planning. How this should be done in a fair and efficient way is very complex and this paper aims to (only) share the participatory experiences of the organisation Dansbana!.

Participation and activation

The methods of Dansbana! include traditional architectural techniques of analysing a site through observations of flows and physical as well as social aspects, but also interdisciplinary sessions of test-dancing together with participants, the use of a toolkit and on-site investigations through 1:1 consultations and prototyping. Key aspects discussed and investigated on site together with future users are issues related to the dancefloor (size, location, properties, direction), the sound system (spread to dancers and to neighbours), and the importance or not of a roof (existing context). In Dansbana! Vårby gård many of the participants were practicing Indian dances, where they were keeping the rhythm with their bare feet stomping the ground and thus wished for a hard floor surface. Terrazzo became the material choice. In Dansbana! Södertälje the local girls were dancing contemporary and jazz styles and wished to move with their whole body close to the ground which resulted in a softer rubber floor surface.



Figure.2: (from left) Dansbana! Vårby gård (photo by Nicklas Dennermalm) 2016, Dansbana! Södertälje 2018, Dansbana! ArkDes (2018) re-inaugurerad in Liljeholmen 2022.

Creating playful scenarios, dancing together, alone, or even dressed up with a wig, sunglasses or tattoo arm, an open conversation happens naturally. The initial workshops encourage everyone to connect and play their favourite music to the portable speaker, and facilitators always dance along with the participants to erase unnecessary hierarchies. Sometimes professional dancers have been invited to teach easy steps or a choreography. This has been a way to give something back to the participants, a way to make the workshop attractive as an experience in itself.

Approximately halfway into the project a feedback session is run, both to get further input to the design process, but also to follow up and create greater belonging to the space. One year, which is the typical timespan between initial workshop and finalisation of a dance space, is a very long time for most young people. Therefore these sessions can be important to keep up the interest. To not create unanswered expectations, the organisation Dansbana! never start a participatory process without knowing that their collaborating partners will realize the project and build a space for dance to give back to the participants, and the community.

At the inauguration of a new Dansbana! an opening event is organized together with the client (a municipality or cultural institution). Typically, a young up-coming dance group of girls would be invited to have a show followed by several short dance classes with a varied program; breakdance followed by baroque dance, capoeira with swing, etc. These activation days have been important to claim the place for dancing. Involving local dance organisations has generally been more nurturing for the place than to invite famous dancers or groups from outside. An online booking system, where anyone can book the space, has been a way to provide an ability for organisations to plan outdoor courses and workshops. More programmed dance sessions typically also result in more spontaneous dancing.

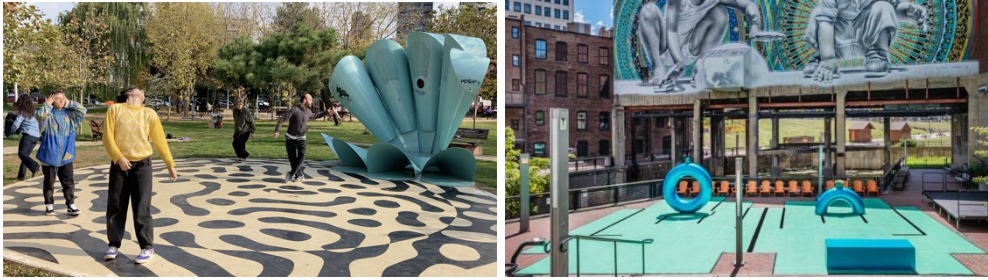


Figure.3: (from left) Dansbana! Kalamis, Istanbul 2021, Dansbana! Akron (photo by Field Studio) 2022

In the two most recent projects by Dansbana! the participatory process had to change and develop from their previously worked out methods; Dansbana! Kalamis in Istanbul designed and inaugurated in the middle of pandemic times through a strictly online process and Dansbana! Akron in Ohio where an unfair city planning and social tension in relation to racial aspects was an obvious issue to take into consideration.

The choreographer Pina Bausch changed the dance scene by asking the dancers questions instead of giving directives (Lepecki, 2001). In this way, she shifted the knowledge base from the choreographer to the dancer. In the initial part of a Dansbana! project, when running workshops with the future users, all ideas and aspects raised by the participants are embraced. Even though it is impossible to answer to all of them in the final design these issues are valued as important arguments, voices to have a dialogue with throughout the entire design process.

Conclusion

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Urban Development describes gender inequality as global and one of the biggest obstacles to sustainable development, economic growth, and poverty reduction (2030 Agenda for Sustainable Urban Development, n.d.). The statistics on gender in relation to public space that Dansbana! was initiated from (Blomdahl et al., 2012) was based on research investigations carried out in Stockholm, Sweden. In this region the organisation also made their first three public spaces for dance and developed their participatory design methods. However, recent projects have been located far from this context. Local specificities and situations relating to the time we live in, have made the organisation realize that the best strategy to have, is to step into each new project with an open approach to adapt their methods to that very specific context (spatial, social, and political). Through this reflexive attitude our role as architects becomes more playful and rewarding and brings both the finalised space and the architectural design process closer to the user and back to the human scale.

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