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Dancing in the Streets Busts a South Bronx Move

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Eva Yaa Asantewaa

"As this has never been done before, we have no idea what we're doing today," Joanna Haigood half-joked at the launch of Paseo, less a walking tour than a movable, danceable feast, a peripatetic block party that, for one delightful hour, would twist through the South Bronx neighborhoods of Hunts Point and Longwood. Haigood, a site-specific choreographer based in the San Francisco Bay Area, had teamed up with musical director Bobby Sanabria (multiple Grammy winner) and Dancing in the Streets executive and artistic director Aviva Davidson to create this public celebration.

With hip-hop poet La Bruja's blessings, the procession stepped off from the Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education on Simpson Street. Threatening clouds hung low, but spirits flew as we followed the lead of the ebullient Sanabria and his musicians, passing dancers on fire escapes and brownstone stoops. Cries of "¡Que vivo, Puerto Rico!" went up as we passed balconies flying the island's flag.¹

— *Eva Yaa Asantewaa*

People invest a broad range of values in places and localities. Belonging, identity, and meaning are aspects of the human experience that depend in large measure on place. Places are the physical dimensions of our lives; homes for our traditions and memories. Places provide us with the ability to store history and anchor cultural traditions.²

— *Roberta Singer and Elena Martínez*

Think Globally, Dance Locally

The story of Dancing in the Streets arises from the archetype of Place and the specificity of places. This tale stars a small, scrappy arts organization with ambition: ambition to move the art of dance from conventional theatrical space into the public square; ambition to ground dance in resourceful urban communities; ambition, as well, to reveal the history and meaning of unexpected — and unexpectedly rich — environments in New York City and beyond.

"We do public work about a public place and the people connected to it," says Aviva Davidson, the Columbia-educated arts administrator who, since 1998, has served as executive and artistic director of New York-based Dancing in the Streets.

In 2011, this nonprofit, with a history of producing site-specific work by Eiko and Koma, Ann Carlson, Joanna Haigood, Stephan Koplowitz, David Roussève, Elizabeth Streb, and other innovative choreographers of the postmodern era, made an unprecedented move from midtown Manhattan to the South Bronx. Davidson threw her lot in with those predominantly working-class and poor neighborhoods whose historic cultural gifts and contemporary successes go largely unacknowledged.

In fact, ask most Americans for a snap impression of the South Bronx, and they will probably draw a blank. Others might associate the area with decades of "white flight," abandoned, decaying buildings, drug dealing, and gang violence. They might call up memories of Howard



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Cosell interrupting his '77 World Series sportscast at Yankee Stadium to declare, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning" as flames engulfed a nearby abandoned school. Or they might know that the South Bronx remains one of our nation's most economically disadvantaged and health-challenged districts.

Few realize that the vibrant, multi-ethnic South Bronx developed three music forms with worldwide popularity: doo-wop, salsa, and hip hop — great sources of pride for its people. Fewer still know that, in recent years, local community-empowerment organizations — THE POINT CDC, the Bronx River Alliance, Sustainable South Bronx, and Rocking the Boat, among others — have worked steadily to create green jobs, reclaim the endangered Bronx River for community recreation, and restore the area's environment to good health. Many of these educational and activist initiatives involve community engagement through the arts.³

Davidson, though, saw potential — both for the fiscal health of her organization and, as she began to study the matter more closely, for making a unique, powerful contribution to the South Bronx's cultural and educational revitalization through meaningful dialogue and sharing among visiting artists, their local counterparts, and community residents. Dancing in the Streets, severely challenged by the national recession, found a path to its own rebirth through partnering with Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education, a respected neighborhood institution founded in East Harlem seventy-eight years ago as the first settlement house to serve New York's Hispanic community. Casita Maria, which relocated to the South Bronx in 1961, had recently opened a massive, state-of-the-art facility on Simpson Street in Hunts Point.

When Davidson sat down to talk with Casita Maria's executive director, Sarah Calderon, the two leaders immediately felt an intuitive connection and shared sense of mission. The likelihood of collaboration was never in question. Calderon wanted to add dance to Casita Maria's youth education and internship programs, an idea that was realized when Davidson merged Dancing in the Streets' popular and well-supported hip-hop projects with Calderon's ArtWorks program for teens. Calderon also saw the strong potential for developing new audiences and raising her organization's visibility on a citywide, national, and possibly international basis. For her part, Davidson needed a cost-effective new home base — a partner with infrastructure, facilities, and staff. With financial stability, she could turn attention to strengthening her board and securing ongoing, not merely project-based, support.

The two women quickly addressed details of a strategic, three-year partnership in which Dancing in the Streets would retain its independent 501(c)(3) status but benefit from a dramatic reduction in overhead expenses. It would receive free rent, office equipment and supplies, telephone and Wi-Fi service, and generous space to hold meetings, rehearsals, classes, and a wide range of public events. This, Davidson estimated, would save her a tenth of her annual budget. In addition, since Dancing in the Streets' budget falls below the threshold for some funding sources, the two organizations could apply together for sizable grants that Davidson could never have attained on her own — for example, the Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund grant, which they received for the South Bronx Culture Trail (SBCT), a two-year, multi-program initiative. Part of SBCT's programming includes site-specific public performances highlighting layers of history, architecture, and culture through Hunts Point and Longwood streets that Davidson had personally explored and envisioned. Haigood's *Paseo* — planned for October 2012 — would mark the first manifestation of this initiative. On January 31, 2011, Davidson's organization officially became Casita Maria's first company in residence.

For some observers, this development might raise a few legitimate questions. Has Davidson risked flying beyond the radar of New York's most influential media outlets that, in their already meager coverage of the art of dance, remain focused on Manhattan venues and a few prominent Brooklyn presenters? Was she steering Dancing in the Streets away from the kind of rigorous, monumental (and often costly) site-specific commissions that had gained it favorable critical notice over the years and toward more popular (and highly fundable) community-oriented work?

Time will tell if mainstream arts editors and critics will maintain interest in Dancing in the Streets. But, considering the second concern, Davidson argues, "I see this as not at all a shift in focus but as a deepening, an expansion of the focus we've always had," and she notes Dancing in the Streets' longtime experience in providing a platform for the talented youth of Red Hook, Brooklyn, and their multifaceted hip-hop culture. *Where the Waters Meet*, a site-specific project initiated by Davidson during her 1993–98 tenure as performing arts

curator for the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (Sheboygan, Wisconsin) also provides a hint of what Dancing in the Streets and Casita Maria might be able to accomplish together.

Davidson invited Pearl Ubungen — a Pilipina American, San Francisco–based choreographer and cultural activist — to work with Sheboygan’s predominantly German Lutheran and Dutch Reform communities and the smaller Hmong and Mexican populations, groups that had rarely interacted with one another.

Ubungen’s project, funded by the Association of Performing Arts Presenters and the Lila Wallace–Reader’s Digest’s now defunct Arts Partners Planning and Production grants, was hailed by the *Sheboygan Press* as “an idea that was long overdue.” Davidson recalled that audiences, usually drawn from the white community, for the first time included “entire Hmong and Mexican families — from infants to grandparents.”

Remembering how Ubungen had visited many homes, churches, bars, and other hangouts to connect with Sheboygan’s people, Davidson says, her definition of “site specific” has evolved with the opportunity for Dancing in the Streets to spend adequate time bonding with a single community, developing trust and fostering art that reflects not only the physical attributes of a place but its rich, complex meaning.

Taking It to the Streets

“You know, many of us stop fully experiencing our environment after a certain point. We have such tremendous pressure to achieve, to get things done, to move on, that our focus gets very narrow. ... When you watch children playing or engaging with the world around them, they are open to and interested in everything. But why does that go away?”⁴

— Joanna Haigood

For nearly thirty years and more than five hundred performances, offering opportunities primarily to midcareer and emerging artists, Dancing in the Streets has reached new audiences throughout New York City, the United States, and abroad by highlighting uncommon places as sites for uncommon cultural experience. Just a handful of these novel environments include:

1. Catwalks spanning the grand arched windows of the Beaux-Arts Grand Central Terminal
2. An old hangar at Floyd Bennett Field, historic home base of record-breaking aviators
3. The wedge-like open space of a former tobacco warehouse in the Brooklyn neighborhood known as DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass), within view of the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges
4. The twelve-story facade of a grain elevator terminal in Red Hook
5. The sally port of Governors Island’s Fort Jay

In 2009, this writer participated in a Dancing in the Streets workshop for dancers, choreographers, and architects. Joanna Haigood invited us to convene at the rotunda of Federal Hall National Memorial, a Wall Street landmark I had passed many times without thought to its significance. The building was New York’s first city hall; it also was the site of George Washington’s oath of office and the drafting of the Bill of Rights. Haigood set us free to take in history and architectural design through different modes of perception, encouraging us to discover points of interest in the building’s charged, formal space and to respond with imaginative, impressionistic movement.

We often read that Dancing in the Streets arose out of a bit of creative whimsy — a story that founder Elise Bernhardt admits is partly true. In 1983, Bernhardt, now executive director of the Foundation for Jewish Culture, produced the high-profile Brooklyn Bridge Dance Festival in honor of the bridge’s centennial. She had long eyed the bridge as a site for her own choreography, but securing the necessary permissions seemed impossible until this historic occasion. The fest — particularly Remi Charlip’s parade of 250 dancers streaming across the span — won popular and critical acclaim beyond all expectations, and Bernhardt felt inspired to create something more lasting.⁵

Indeed, she launched Dancing in the Streets the following year, but Bernhardt traces her fascination with outdoor, site-specific work — her “Aha!” moment, as she calls it — to a much earlier experience as a young dancer watching Merce Cunningham’s troupe perform in an old courtyard in the South of France. She noticed that dancing bodies look quite different outside traditional theatrical space — a revelation for her. She began to be intrigued by the potential of what she calls the “Three As” (art, architecture, and audience) and strategies of directing

audience focus and engaging communities.

Site-specific dance not only makes environments and objects much more readable to more people, it also begins to introduce democracy into the presentation and reception of dance, addressing the more typical class and intellectual elitism and esotericism that limits who has access to the art and whose interpretation and validation matter.

Working outside of theaters and in many sites that are less than favorable, we ... present our bodies as vulnerable and as a part of a landscape. This means our intentions, objectives, processes, and our audiences' perceptions of art and environment are more intricately connected and affect each other in surprising ways. The merging of ends and means, as well as a merging of "us and them" is unsettling and curious. We are not presenting a dance work; we are dancing and breathing, using "dance" as a verb rather than presenting it as a noun. In site work, everything is a work-in-progress.⁶

— Eiko Otake

Eiko Otake of the duo Eiko and Koma — acclaimed for the stillness, minimalism, and delicate mutability of their performances — has written thoughtfully about the couple's experiences with site-specific work. Each opportunity to perform outdoors, for free, in a setting that anyone can easily access, transformed their view of the relationship between artist and audience.

She recalls the aftermath of one of the duo's performances for Dancing in the Streets in a New York City park. In the janitor's locker room that she was using as a dressing room, a cleaning lady approached her to share her interpretation of the dance and thanked her with a big hug. Otake remembers thinking, "She would not have come to see us if it was in a theater." Through working with Dancing in the Streets on this and numerous outdoor performances, Otake came to realize that people need not be intimidated by avant-garde art. "They are capable of taking in what might be a bit strange to them," she says. "If barriers to understanding can be removed, everyone can be his or her own expert."

"When I produce free events, I enjoy the elements of spontaneity and surprises," Otake wrote in an essay about *Offering*, a piece co-commissioned by Dancing in the Streets, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the University of Arizona, Tucson. "Free audiences are willing to be puzzled, be opinionated, recommend the event to their friends, or even help out. The wide variety of reactions make me feel that Koma and I are Offering unpredictable adventures to people and by doing so creating a small time and space in which we all are a little more human."⁷

Dreaming, Dancing, Remembering

The truth is that the arts really become transformative when we move away from spectatorship and towards engagement. ... We know people are more excited about arts and culture when they feel a part of it, not just watching something because they are told it is good for them.⁸

— Andy Horwitz

By highlighting local sites that have neglected or near-forgotten significance, Dancing in the Streets offers communities new ways to unite and to share vital knowledge that might otherwise be lost with the dying out of older residents. Just as South Bronx neighborhoods woke up to the importance and needs of their ailing river and took action, residents could have a chance to transform how they — and, ultimately, the outside world — think about the streets they call home.

Davidson tapped Lisa Sorin, a longtime Bronx resident recommended by Casita Maria, to assist with community outreach for *Paseo*.

"My parents came from Puerto Rico in the fifties and met in Hunts Point, where my sister and I were born," Sorin says. "We moved from the South Bronx in the late sixties because of the fires and crime. Who would have ever imagined I would end up working in the same area?"

Through working with Davidson and Haigood, Sorin set about learning all she could about site-specific dance. At first, the vision driving *Paseo* seemed unattainable, but when Sorin walked the neighborhood blocks with Davidson at her side, her enthusiasm and sense of mission grew.

"I was going door to door and sharing the ideas for *Paseo*'s procession with all our neighbors — the residents and business owners — and my excitement became contagious. People were willing to help just for the idea of being part of something big and wonderful that included

their home.”

Her first challenge, though, came from building managers concerned about liability. “They were uncomfortable with having strangers dancing on their fire escapes or hanging flags on their balconies,” she recalls. “But one extremely accommodating management director suggested that I approach the tenants directly. The tenants had no problem signing off on letting us go through their apartments to use the fire escapes and balconies.

“Outsiders view the South Bronx as a negative, dangerous place, but Hunts Point is really about family, music, pride. I was approached by so many residents — some in tears and others in sheer joy about *Paseo* and the memories that came back.”

As Elaine Delgado of Casita Maria has explained,

In its almost eighty years of history, Casita has had a number of alumni who have made outstanding contributions to the arts, such as Tito Puente, Rita Moreno, Tina Ramirez, and DJ Grand Wizzard Theodore. It became very clear that providing high-quality artistic opportunities was vital to accomplishing our mission of empowering youth and their families. The partnership with Dancing in the Streets has helped us significantly in achieving this goal.

Paseo marked a very special moment in the history of the South Bronx. It was a day when the members of our community were able to travel in time, celebrate their music and dance legacy, and be part of it. It was very moving to see how proud they were about their history and how honored they were to be there. In addition to this great sense of pride there was a deep gratitude to both Casita and Dancing in the Streets for making this possible. We can't wait to celebrate Paseo in 2013. With Paseo and other projects of the South Bronx Culture Trail we aim to create a legacy for future generations and highlight the rich cultural history of our community.⁹

“My community has phenomenal talent, but it's not being supported,” says dancer Arthur Aviles, a South Bronx mainstay and cofounder of Hunts Point's Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (BAAD). “There are beautiful dancers in this area, but I don't see that they're being engaged. Dancing in the Streets and Casita Maria could take that step.”

As *Paseo's* growing audience streamed along behind Bobby Sanabria's musicians, they eventually encountered Aviles dancing atop a ledge on an abandoned building, his body splashing over its wall like three-dimensional graffiti.

Formerly a star of New York's “downtown” avant-garde performance scene as a member of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, Aviles has become, over nearly fifteen years, a beloved catalyst among the artists and cultural activists of the South Bronx. He had never made or performed site-specific dance until Davidson persuaded him to join the cast of *Paseo*.

“My work focuses on the concert stage,” Aviles says, “and I like that. I find that ‘dancing in the streets’ is a pretty incredible, astronomical feat. Bigger than someone just contemplating choreography.”

Aviles, however, could not pass up the chance to work with Haigood, a fellow Bard College alum with whom he shared a mentor, Aileen Passloff, one of the Judson Dance Theater's pioneers. Haigood had been making site-specific dance since the 1970s, much of it involving gutsy aerial work around unusual architectural structures.

“Joanna took me and two interns out to the site with a ladder and a harness,” he says. “She didn't know if the building was architecturally sound, and the beauty of Joanna is: She went up first. I appreciate so much that the choreographer is willing to do something that she's asking her dancers to do. We were up there together, sitting on the ledge, talking about all of the possibilities of the site. At first, as they took the ladder away, it was scary, and I glued myself to the wall!”

Haigood tossed Aviles a few airy directions, then set him moving to a recording of “Over the Rainbow,” salsa style.

“The building turned into this huge, imposing thing that I needed to turn away from or to hit,” he says. “I was representing what was coming, the future, and I was just dreaming and dancing.

“It became emotional for me,” Aviles says, remembering the *Paseo* rehearsals he witnessed

at BAAD and at Casita Maria. "I'd look at the costumes — the Danza Fiesta bomba dancers in their white dresses and suits — and see my mother, my family. It was magical to see the community people take ownership of that history."

With Paseo, the South Bronx begins a new chapter in Dancing in the Streets' twenty-eight-year legacy. Davidson's plans include large-scale projects focused on the Bronx River (2014) and the art deco buildings along the Grand Concourse (2015).

Throughout the past twenty years, Dancing in the Streets has produced several of my large-scale site-specific works, workshops, and small experiments that have been extremely influential in my art practice. No other producer has invested more in my career or engaged communities at such a deep level in the process than Aviva Davidson and Dancing in the Streets. I have learned a tremendous amount through these collaborations and continue to incorporate the information and insights into my work elsewhere.

The choice to be anchored in the South Bronx and in partnership with Casita Maria was a brilliant move for Dancing in the Streets. Both organizations have a long history of community engagement, investment in leadership, and a commitment to producing and creating opportunities for unique and exemplary artists and arts events. The strong synergy between them has the potential to extraordinary things. I think their impact has already been felt through their amazing collaboration on the South Bronx Trail. For me personally, it was a great privilege to be welcomed in such a sincere and overwhelming enthusiastic way by this community during the process of creating Paseo, and I am thrilled at the prospect of building these relationships in the upcoming years.¹⁰

— Joanna Haigood

Paseo, in its way, reflects the public's increasing taste for interdisciplinary performance, immersive experiences, and unusual levels of participation by audiences, exemplified by well-received works such as Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, Woodshed Collective's *The Tenant*, and Third Rail Project's *Then She Fell*. *Paseo* isn't even alone in using the South Bronx — its cultural and historic touchstones — for a setting. In late summer 2009, this writer boarded a tour bus in East Harlem to take in *The Provenance of Beauty*, a performative tour of the South Bronx "in its eternal state of evolution,"¹¹ by turns informative and poetic, presented by the Foundry Theatre with poet Claudia Rankine as our guide. But unlike most of these total-immersion productions with their enclosed environments, and the confines of that air-conditioned tour bus, *Paseo* spilled its audience, an ever-swelling, often-dancing crowd, through city streets. We became part of the very landscape that was *Paseo*'s "set" and subject. Do we even know what the word "audience" means anymore?

In *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, Susan Leigh Foster sources the word "choreography" in *chora*, the Greek word for space, countryside, or region. Foster argues for a historic connection between dance notation and chorography, an ancient Greek subdiscipline of geography: "Chorography developed intensively in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a practice of mapping and also describing and analyzing a locale's terrain and inhabitants."¹²

Dancing in the Streets' South Bronx Culture Trail and *Paseo* projects can be understood as acts of modern-day chorography as well as choreography — tracing, mapping, reanimating, singing, and dancing through memory to uphold cultural and communal values. These values — the primacy of love and family, the power of language and creativity — set the stage for positive action and achievement, for dreaming and dancing the future of the South Bronx and its people.

Eva Yaa Asantewaa's writing on dance has appeared in Dance Magazine, the Village Voice, SoHo Weekly News, Gay City News, and other publications since 1976. She blogs on the arts at InfiniteBody and teaches the annual "Writing on Dance" workshop series for New York Live Arts.

NOTES

1. These first two paragraphs first appeared in Eva Yaa Asantewaa, "This Road Is Officially Opened: *Paseo*," *InfiniteBody*, October 7, 2012, <http://infinitebody.blogspot.com/2012/10/this-road-is-officially-opened-paseo.html>.
2. Roberta L. Singer and Elena Martínez, "A South Bronx Latin Music Tale," *Centro Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 180.
3. Information on South Bronx environmental activism provided by Maggie Greenfield,

deputy director, Bronx River Alliance. Also see an interview with Maggie Greenfield and Kellie Terry-Sepulveda (Kellie is Bronx River Alliance board chair, as well as executive director of THE POINT CDC), *The Bronx Journal*, YouTube, January 10, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHIMS3IAP4>.

4. Joanna Haigood, "An Interview with Joanna Haigood," in *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces*, ed. Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 58.
5. Elizabeth Zimmer, "In Memoriam: Remy Charlip (1929–2012)," *DanceMagazine.com*, August 24, 2012, http://dancemagazine.com/in_memoriam/4597.
6. Eiko Otake, "Site Works: Feeling Wind, Feeling Gaze," December 28, 2006. Read the entire beautiful, revelatory essay in *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces*, ed. Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011).
7. Eiko Otake, section titled "Free Admission," in the essay "Offering." Downloadable at <http://eikoandkoma.org/sites/ek/files/ActisVirginWITHNEWDATESPFPERFORAMCNES.pdf>.
8. Andy Horwitz, "On Social Practice and Performance," *Culturebot.net*, August 28, 2012, <http://www.culturebot.net/2012/08/14008/on-social-practice-and-performance>. A good source of information on theater and dance initiatives with similarities to Dancing in the Streets' community engagement.
9. Email message from Elaine Delgado, director of marketing and individual giving, Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education.
10. Email message from Joanna Haigood.
11. The Foundry Theatre, *The Provenance of Beauty*, <http://www.thefoundrytheatre.org/provenance/provenance.html>.
12. Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 17.

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