

# The Choreographic City: Flows, Streams and Trajectories of Bodies in Space

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“Un nosotros sin nombre, hecho de todos nuestros nombres”.

Marina Garces  
(about Barcelona,  
prego Merce 2017)

## Abstract

*This contribution roots on the explorations of the geographies of the Chania Dance Days Festival 2018-2019. The communicative space built by the festival, activates a conversation that transcends the limits of the festival program and venues. It builds a choreography that grows across the city in a network of enhanced conversations that fly through social media. This research uses digital methods and geolocative data to track and to map, diagram and to explore the features and the weights, the communicative capital and the symbolization of the monuments of the Mediterranean city to understand this cultural conversation. We explore the textures of place as a backdrop for the Chania's festival communicative space which is built by organizers, dancers, choreographers, tourists and visitors.*

## Introduction: Festival cities

Cities mark their summer season with festivals that shape the urban landscape. The spatial interstices of the streets are filled with chatting, meeting and social networking within the mesh of spectacle and festival activities. People flow between parks and squares to festival venues with open access or cross the fences to access the privileged spaces of performers or organizers. Social media also contribute to creating and extending the complex web of online-offline buzzing conversations. The multiplied physical and technology-enabled spaces of encounters and activities build a rich interface for communication. This is what we call the communicative space.

In time of festivals, tourists, visitors, performers and choreographers cross paths and merge in the urban space with locals to build an ephemeral, almost choreographic movement of people in space: gathering in front of festival venues before the start, the still moment during the performances, catching up after the spectacles, and the dissolution of crowds into crowds again to be absorbed afterwards by the city architectural maze of streets. The programmed beat of the

choreographic city constructed by the festival, spreads an integrated interface of a circuit of trajectories of people moving in space. This interface is composed of urban and architectural materialities in combination with a complex virtual layer of interactions on social media.

The network of activities placed on the map feels like a choreography that could have never been planned, or understood. And yet, it raises in complexity and grows across the spontaneous movement of hundreds of participants following their own specific paths, communicating across their infinite ways and interacting -sometimes unexpectedly in serendipitous coincidence- all over the city corners.

Our research starts in the excitement about the circuitry of people communicating with each other, about the city made of accidental meetings, about the rich environment built around the urban events. And what we seek to understand is the geography of those meetings, of that ungraspable activity emerging during festivals and provoked by them; and even more, we try to understand the factors that contribute to the shaping of the festival geography. We call this research on the governance of communicative spaces; and to do it, we use technological means of the digital media. In the case of the Chania Dance Days Festival, the opportunity is golden to explore one particular aspect of the full program of research: the textures of place (Brantner & Rodriguez-Amat, 2016; Rodriguez-Amat & Brantner, 2016).

The idea of textures of place is central to this kind of research because it considers the value of the location in which the conversation happens. Places are full of symbolic value, they are old or beautiful, they have a meaning to people and they are important for the city to curate, to promote and to present itself to the world. Sometimes these locations are of historical relevance; and often those places carry memories of the inhabitants or turn into places that invite the visitors to build new memories, and to share them. This is what monuments do: they mark places for the past and for the future, they pin the time continuity with a stone that reminds and projects. And Chania is a monumental city. Its historical strategic importance combines and adds to its current touristic relevance: a festival here, becomes thus, a perfect occasion for us to explore the geography of the communicative activity and the importance of the location to define it.

In the following lines, this text explains in further detail the features that back our research - cities, festivals, monuments, and the very recent phenomenon of a hybridized communicative spaces built of the conversations that happen on the street and on social media, in the physical space and online. We will describe how we collected data in Chania during the Festival editions of 2018 and 2019; and how that data has been finally processed and visualized to contribute both to the understanding of the factors that shape the communicative space; but also as a deserved payback to the organization of the festival, for their help and for their effort to grow such a memorable city-wide choreographic event.

## **Festival-in-the-city choreography**

This is a dance festival; but also, the festival that is spread into the city feels very much like a choreography. This research starts in the temporality and eventalism of festival spaces, as a break from the routine and as a fading moment that creates alternative patterns to the usual city-wide mobility. This is why festivals are actually entailing a ritual nature: the linguistic roots of the word *festival* - *feria*, semantically describes the lack or absence of a routine; and in Latin languages it means abstinence from work, in most cases in honor of gods (Falassi, 1987). This is, festivals “set aside certain times and spaces for communal creativity and celebration” (Quinn, 2005, p. 928). Many scholars have referred to festivals as moments of anti-structured liminal stage, in which the experience of “*communitas*”, pleasure, and establishment or re-discovery of new meanings take place (St John, 2016). The festival thus, is also a collective act that serves to claim belonging to a certain group or to a certain place (Ekman, 1999). They help bridging and linking culture and identity to places. Through this proximity to celebration and worshipping “public rituals and festivities were critical in consolidating civic identities in the face of internal division and external threats” (Quinn, 2005, p. 928). The primary function, however, remains “to renounce and then to announce culture” (Falassi, 1987, p. 3). A dance festival such as the Dance Days Chania more so, blossoms at the peak of the summer and spreads its activity across the city. The festival program highlights certain locations and times, enables the empowering character of the bodily practices. The body of participants and performers merges with the peak of tourist activity of the Mediterranean summer, activates and enhances the value of the cultural expression, and builds a self- and group identification that re-signifies intense connections with the place and with the moment, illuminating and inspiring collective monumentalized memories, well beyond the programmed activities within the festival brochure. This is, we state, a whole city-wide choreography.

Festivals are crossings, “literal and figurative – that deepen the experience and facilitate the creation of a secular liminal ‘culture’” (Luckman, 2016, p. 189); and dance festivals raise those stakes even more. Indeed, dance is one of the genres of art that exists only in a certain moment of time and space. Dance involves three important continuities that emerge also throughout the festival-in-the-city performance: dance is a life-world continuity; dance is mind-body continuity; dance is a past-present continuity (Henry, 2000). For Geertz (1973) festivals are “collectively authored “text” about society” (p. 80) and they are an act that serves as a metaphor for the movements of the people through the interface of the city - captured or not, with their fanciful forms, shapes and directions. The activity of the collective festival grows a shared conversation as an agora for the articulation of social issues: the festival enables communication among participants, performers, public, tourists, visitors and locals, or as social media citizens, and excites a conversation about themselves and about society, “a story people tell themselves about themselves” (Geertz, 1973, p. 80). This also leads us to understanding of festivals in the city as precious communicative spaces.

The city is already, in itself, a mess of communicative activity: the built environment that facilitates the combination of population, infrastructure and the complex norms, “the communicative city” (Drucker & Gumpert, 2009, p. 65). Those complex infrastructures include

physical objects, such as roads, markets, squares, walls; virtual spaces such as social media, hashtags, and mobile-access platforms; and non-material conditions, such as security, availability of technology, press freedom. But beyond all those conditions, the most revealing feature of cities is that they allow the possibility of anonymous and serendipitous meetings. In this context, the idea of communicative space embraces not only a material entity where the people could physically gather and discuss freely, but also a virtual or imagined community, connected through the media landscape. And festivals indeed enhance these urban features of physical and virtual entanglements; because they are *integrative sites that* generate physical and non-physical spaces for cultural expression (Perry, Ager and Sitas, 2019). The festival experience is not limited to watching, attending and participating; but also watching and reading the reports, following Instagram, YouTube and Twitter, as well as creating content and engaging in conversations on various internet platforms.

Therefore, urban festivals are communicative events of interest for scientific research. In particular, for these three reasons: first, festivals are planned, they are not spontaneous such as demonstrations, or World Cup celebrations. As festivals are programmed events, there is a chain of decisions that involves organizing and therefore reducing uncertainties of what and where the communicative activity is going to happen. Second, festivals do not stretch in time indefinitely; they are temporally delimited, and this makes it easier to prepare for the duration of the research time. And third, festivals are communicatively salient and relevant: the conversation during festivals involves a lot more than whatever spectacle is programmed: people talk not only about the festival, but also about the city, the weather, the history and architecture; and also, people talk on social media, and on the streets, on the venues, before and after the spectacles; and they do so all over the city. And this is what we have been looking for: we want to see how the locations of the conversation matter. Perry, Ager and Sitas (2019) wrote that they did research on festivals to use them as “a lens to shine a light on cultural heritage entanglements in the context of wider sustainable urban development challenges.” (p. 6). And the Chania Dance Days festival is perfect: the festival blossoms in a city full of relevant locations, including first line historical monuments, and world known tourist attractions.

## **Methodology**

Our research aligns with a reflection about a space simultaneously physical and virtual, multiplied by mobile devices and social media, that has shown a lot of interest among researchers: some talk about it as hybrid spaces, some about third spaces, some about code/spaces, and some refer to the geomeia, locative media, or spatial media. This is not the place to explore this further but we have put together some materials about it (Rodriguez-Amat & Brantner, 2016).

We visited the Dance Days Chania Festival in July 2018 and July 2019, where we familiarized ourselves with the city and with the festival dynamic, and collected multiple sorts of data using mobile devices and their geotracking functions (geo-tagged photos and walks) and then retrieved more data from social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. We also

interviewed the executive festival director to obtain some further information about the organization, plans, and decisions around the festival. We then processed this data to answer the underlying questions of our research: Is there a geographic pattern of communication in the two festival editions? And how does this pattern fit the geography of the communication of the non-festival activity on social media? Finally, how can the dialogue between the two patterns enhance the communicative conditions of the city communicative space?

The research on governance of communicative spaces is built on an empirical model initially developed by Rodriguez and Brantner (2016), that considers four modes of analysis: representations and textures of place, and structures and connection of space. This program has already been applied to protests (Brantner & Rodriguez, 2016), to explore the representations of space, and interfaces of online political participatory platforms (Belinskaya and Rodríguez-Amat, 2019); and to festivals as is the case of Tramlines in Sheffield (studied in 2016 and 2018) to explore the structures of space. As an ongoing project, the Dance Days Chania Festival allowed the development of the analysis of textures of place.

### **Textural analysis**

Textural analysis is central to the research on geography and communication. It is built on the assumption that places and locations have the capacity of mediating; this is, they are media of communication themselves. This means that the places are not only representations, but they have power and narrative capacity in themselves (Thielmann, 2010) and also have political value (Tonkiss, 2005). Similarly, websites, media sources or journalists give value to the information they transmit. Textures therefore, presume that places are considered media in their own right and that they function as storytellers: and research on textures or “textural analysis”, then is about the value of places and the forms of communication defined and implemented by the places themselves (Jansson, 2013). And it is also particularly problematic.

The problem is both, conceptual and methodological: the interrogation of monuments and of locations is not straightforward as their ‘speech’ cannot easily be grasped, tracked, or recorded; without having anybody speaking on their behalf. And yet, the machinery of the media and the repetitive practice of tourism make us realize that there are patterns of repetition - people taking pictures from the same spots - that remind us that somehow, even unexpectedly, there are places that call for it, whereas other places remain unnoticed and silent.

To solve this double riddle, the analysis of the Chania Festival has inspired us for the development of the textural analysis mode as a combination of three factors: the first is what we call communicative capital - the amount of “communicative attraction” that one particular location holds. To measure this, we have collected the first 500 posts of Instagram containing the word #Chania, and, after extracting commercial and non-geographable posts, we managed to locate them on a map (see figure 1). And the response was quite spectacular.



**Figure 1. Geolocation of touristic activity: Instagram posts with #Chania**

The posts are spread all over the island of Crete, but mostly within the city, showing a noticeable amount of repetition and a set of “hot spots” that confirmed that there is a particular form of coincidence across the users of Instagram. There are certain repetitive places in which one takes pictures and posts with the hashtag “#Chania” on them. The most relevant spots include the streets of the old town, the harbor, remains of Venetian walls, and of course, the seashore, mostly the beach. This distribution of locations helped us consolidate the idea of “communicative capital” as a concept that simultaneously enjoys an explanatory capacity -to refer to particular spots of communicative interest- and at the same time some form of methodological or empirical accessibility. The term communicative capital links to the work by Bourdieu (1986) on cultural and symbolic capital, which is a form of distributed power, a “supply” of resources that may be activated or converted into an advantage through connections, perceived symbolic value.

The notion of communicative capital, however, is not enough. We know that sometimes tourists might bypass locations with historical and monumental relevance to take selfies on the beach, instead. Therefore, a qualitative dimension to the analysis of textures is more than called for: the value locations acquired through shared memory cannot be measured by any number of pictures. The city of Chania is full of memorable and historical spots that not directly emerging from the pictures on Instagram: the byzantine ramparts, the venetian wall, etc. This is the challenge that led us to explore a second dimension on the textural analysis: the hand arrived from the idea of memory sites by Pierre Nora (1992) in his three-volume book he described how locations build a collective identity and contribute to the imagined community. Monnet (2011) also addressed the idea of symbolization of location, the meaning of which is shared, but also

can be manipulated. This leads to another factor to consider: the transformation of the places into monuments is decided by particular actors. There is an intervention to enable access to particularly relevant spots: staging of *Madame Butterfly* in the Saint Salvatore bastion in Chania opened just for the occasion in July 2018 is a good example (see figure 2) of how the decision-making process turns the ruins into a monument and helps its process of shared memory building.



**Figure 2. General rehearsal of *Madame Butterfly*, Saint Salvatore Bastion, Chania (July 2018)**

## Conclusions

Festivals are complex phenomena; when they are integrated within the semiotic complexity of the city, urban spaces, locations, monuments and heritage, they offer a range of quantitative and qualitative data conveniently condensed in time and space for textural analysis. Moreover, festivals become powerful interfaces that play a role in enhancing the textural features of the city.

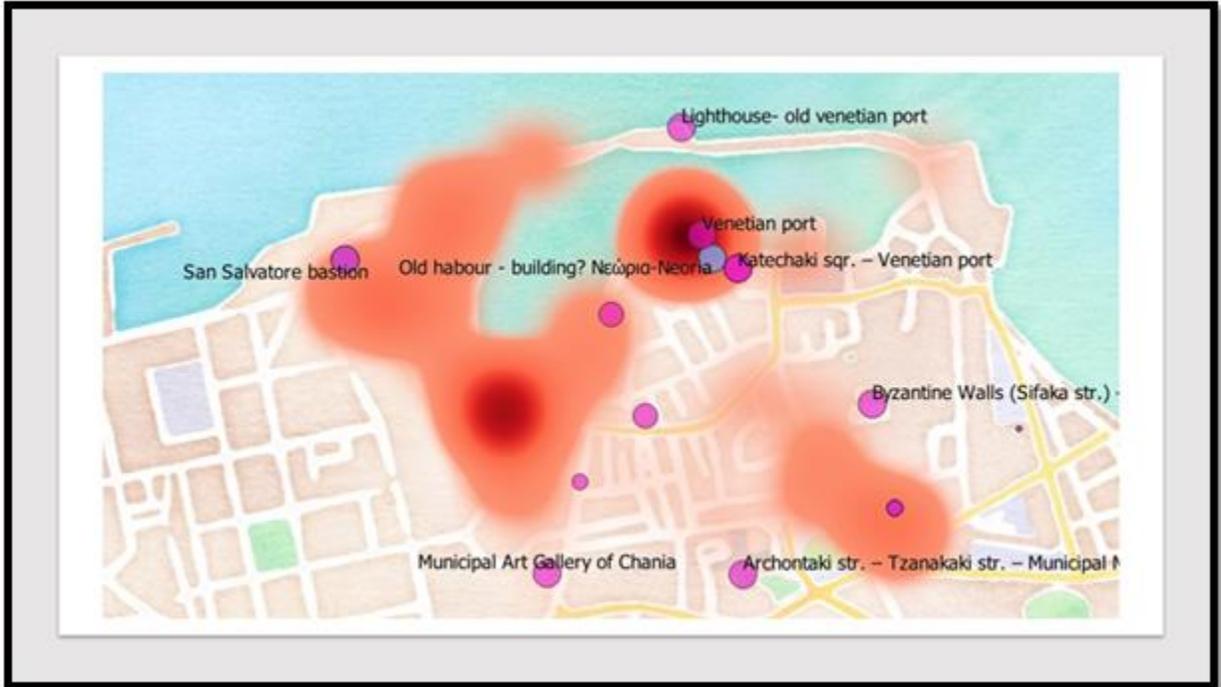
The communicative space emerging from the Dance Days festival in Chania shows the richness of a cultural expression involving exchange of ideas, demonstration of innovation, and a platform for networking; but that space is also a form of enhancing the monumental city: when participants and viewers, visitors and internet citizens engage in the festival conversation, they highlight, frame, and weave a particular city geography that clearly shows nodes of high communicative density (see figures 4-5), and hot-spots of communicative capital.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the organizational difference in venues between 2018 and 2019 (see the maps - figure 3) also brought the festival into the city: increasing the number of open locations and bringing them closer to the areas of higher communicative capital (see the heatmap, figure 4). This is also a practice that can be detected throughout the promotion of the festival on Instagram since 2017 in which the locations tend to overlap with the “hot zone” of the area of higher communicative capital of the city (see figure 5). In this sense, the festival shows a higher space-awareness in the arrangements for 2019 and while keeping the distance from the tourist activity, it still enables a form of dialogue in public spaces. And not only this, the use of monumental spaces restricted to the public (see figure 2) positions the festival as an actor in the operation of monomialization of the city.

The analysis of the textures of the festival’s communicative space shows that the communicative activity during the festival is a rich conversation that trespasses the festival venues, or the spectacle moment. Instead, in 2019 the organizers have made a bold decision of enabling choreographers to bring their own “space specific” statements to the public space. This is not a way of increasing tourist flows, but a very smart way of approaching cultural expression and tourists in the conversation of the city-space. The festival brings new-old locations to life by giving them a fresh meaning: monuments of historical value become venues. The textures of the monumental city of Chania show their full splendor beyond the walls of the festival talk; and the festival makes **the true cultural conversation of the city grow.**



**Figure 3. Geographic comparative of the Festival venues in the two editions 2018 (left), and 2019 (right)**



**Figure 4. Heatmap: Instagram and touristic activity in Chania Centre and Festival Venues in 2018 (Grey) and 2019 (purple)**



**Figure 5. Heatmap and the Festival Venues of 2018 (Grey) and 2019 (purple) with the Instagram activity for hashtags #DancedaysChania (174 items), #Chaniadancedays (4 items), #DanceChania (32 items), and #ChaniaDance (47 items)**

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