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Rachael Davies

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# Meeting at Chisenhale Dance Space in the 1980s

RACHAEL DAVIES

Chisenhale Dance Space was inaugurated in 1980 as an artist-led space for new, experimental and independent artistic practice and community activity, the only one of its kind in the UK. It was founded by an interdisciplinary group of New Dance practitioners, which, alongside the X6 Collective, included musicians, dance artists, performance artists, theatre makers and poets. Influenced by second-wave feminism and the milieu of counter-cultural collective activity of the seventies, Chisenhale Dance Space,<sup>1</sup> like its predecessor the X6, operated as a non-hierarchical collective. There was no artistic director – the collective, as an entity, acted as director. This alternative approach to organization relied heavily on collective meetings in order to make decisions, plans and organize.

An organization's meeting practice is relational to its structure and the conduct of its work – that is to say that 'most organisations have a constitution or memorandum of association, which sets out the structure of the organisation and the rules for holding meetings' (Francis and Armstrong 2012: xviii). Here, then, I reflect on different modes of meeting practices at Chisenhale Dance Space and consider their relationship to organizational dynamics and artistic practice. Given the centrality of collective meetings to Chisenhale's non-hierarchical structure, this article aims to demonstrate how the act of meeting, more broadly, played a prominent role in Chisenhale's history, a claim substantiated by archival documents.

In 1986, the collective stated that a long-term aim for the dance space was 'to become a *meeting place* for dance and movement artists in this country (the UK) and from abroad'.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the collective made the act of meeting central to the work and activities facilitated at Chisenhale. The emphasis here on creating a meeting place is a reminder of the importance of

having a suitable physical place for people to come together. As co-founder of X6 Dance Space and Chisenhale Dance Space Jacky Lansley writes, 'space was (and is) a crucial dilemma for dance artists not in major companies' (2017: 35). Chisenhale endeavoured to provide an alternative space to meet in order to develop new ways of thinking about dance that challenged traditional dance practices and institutions (namely ballet and contemporary dance companies) – places that the collective felt reinforced hegemonic values about the body, gender, race and movement practices more broadly. To do this, the Chisenhale collective required a space that existed independently from mainstream institutions and in which a new set of spatial practices could be developed. It was Chisenhale's alternative approach to organization and governance that engendered these new, alternative spatial practices, and it was from these spatial relations that experimental artistic practices and methodologies were fostered. Here I consider how Chisenhale's meeting practices fostered a progressive, anti-establishment, feminist position that influenced approaches to artistic practice. Within this I will also consider the role of the place in which Chisenhale's members met, the collective's relationship to this place and thus the significance of this relationship. I have identified three examples of Chisenhale's meeting practice that focus my enquiry: contact improvisation, co-counselling and collective meetings.

I frame the focus of this writing by situating the relationship between Chisenhale, the collective; Chisenhale, the building; and the activities therein as a trialectic of space, as theorized by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1991 [1974]). Lefebvre writes that 'space implies, contains and dissimulates social relationships ... space is not a thing but rather

<sup>1</sup> To clarify, I refer to Chisenhale Dance Space as Chisenhale throughout this text, noting that this should not be confused for Chisenhale Gallery or Chisenhale Studios.

<sup>2</sup> Quotation from a paper given by the Chisenhale collective as part of the Chisenhale Dance Space/ National Organisation of Dance and Mime New Dance Weekend (1986). My emphasis. Sourced from Chisenhale's archival material, which is not yet publicly available.

a set of relations between things' (82). For Lefebvre, living bodies produce social relations and thus they produce space, social space (170). Lefebvre theorizes space – a social product – as a triad of the perceived, the conceived and the lived (39). Following the understanding that social reality is spatial, how then can the act of meeting be conceived as part of the production of space and what are the implications of the collective's relationship to the building within this?

I deviate briefly here to provide a description of Chisenhale's physicality, first because it outlines the defining features of the space, which subsequently influenced its use, but also because it is useful to readers less familiar with the space. Chisenhale Dance Space is located on the second floor of Chisenhale Works, a former veneer factory established in 1942 (LBTH 2016: 8), on a residential street in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH). The building, which is leased from LBTH Council, sits adjacent to Duckett's Canal and overlooks Victoria Park, Tower Hamlets' largest and most popular green space. The entire space measures 30 x 40 ft, which is accessed via a concrete winder staircase from the ground floor. In 1980, Chisenhale comprised of a single open space, lined on both sides with original factory windows, providing vistas to the north-east and south-west and subjecting the space to all weather conditions: beautiful natural light as well as the bitter cold. Chisenhale Works homed the wider artistic collective Arts Place Trust (APT)<sup>3</sup> and, as well as facilitating a dance space, provided artist studios for the APT collective. When the Chisenhale Dance Space collective moved into the building, the space had been derelict for eight years and thus had suffered a commensurate amount of neglect: nearly all the factory windows that lined the space were shattered (fig. 1), surfaces were thick with dirt and dust and essential amenities such as electrics and plumbing were either obsolete or non-existent. Despite this, the building fulfilled the collective's primary need – the need for a place to be together and meet. Given the neglected state of the Chisenhale Works building, there was a significant amount of manual work the collective had to do before the space could be used. Artists describe extensive cleaning, repairing of windows,

building partition walls and installing plumbing and toilets, among other things. Aside from putting into practice the politics of collectivity they advocated for, the process of renovation provided the collective with an understanding and experience of the building on both a practical level and an embodied level: the feel of its surfaces as they were cleaned, sanded and



■ Figure 1. Inside Chisenhale Dance Space (c.1980). Photograph by Jessica Loeb. Image courtesy of Chisenhale Dance Space

painted; how light filtered across the space at different times of the day; its smell; temperature; and atmosphere.

The time and labour expended on the building gave way to familiarity, producing a particular 'representational space' or 'lived space'. Consequently, for those involved during that period, Chisenhale wasn't solely perceived as a place of work, a studio, arts centre or performance venue. Rather, it was a 'home' that had been carefully tended to and restored.<sup>4</sup> But, importantly, this was not a domestic space or private space; it was a public space, not owned by a single person but communally shared. I understand that the word 'home' was used by an original collective member not to imply domesticity but rather to engender the positive connotations associated with feeling 'at home', alluding to comfort, safety, continuity, belonging and trust in those around. This is in part evoked in the building itself and also within its function as a space for dance practice. This relationship and the feelings had by collective members is what makes Chisenhale an interesting case in the examination of organizational practice, specifically meeting, and the place in which this happens. What spaces are produced when organizational practice engender these qualities? And what are the potentials and limitations of this environment?

<sup>3</sup> Arts Place Trust (APT) is now known as Chisenhale Arts Place. In the late 1980s Chisenhale Gallery opened as the third part of the Chisenhale Works consortium alongside the dance space and artist studios.

<sup>4</sup> As part of my research I have conducted an oral history project with Chisenhale's founding members and many of the artists involved with the dance space during this period. On several occasions, individuals described Chisenhale as a 'home' for them and their practice.

During its early years, the relationship fostered between the artists (collectively and individually) and the building evolved from one initially defined by acts of repair and renovation to one of creativity and experimentation. This relationship is epitomized by one of the space's defining features, the seasoned maple wood floor, which had been carefully salvaged from X6 Dance Space and moved to Chisenhale where it was fitted by Philip Jeck and Douglas Gil (fig. 2). The process was slow and laborious – planks of wood had to be de-nailed, the pair then had to work out, first, how the floor would fit into the new space and, second, a method for creating a sprung floor. Finally, the floor was varnished with help from other collective members. At Chisenhale, the feel of the maple wood floor first became known to the body through the manual labour of fitting it and then later experienced in classes, rehearsals and performances as many more bodies rolled, pressed, laid, fell and moved across it in creative exploration. The body is central to understanding the relationship to and production of space. Lefebvre writes that 'social practice presupposes the use of the body' (1991 [1974]: 40) and this is no more evident than in the history of Chisenhale, its restoration and role in the development of artistic practice. In my conversation<sup>5</sup> with artist and early Chisenhale member Françoise Sergy, she recalls the sensorial quality of the space, referring specifically to the physicality of the floor and the experience of doing contact improvisation up against the brick wall of the performance space, which, like the floor, had been tended to by many working hands, sanding back the layer of paint to expose the raw brick.

<sup>5</sup> Citations from Françoise Sergy and Gaby Agis are taken from interviews with the artists I conducted as part of an oral history project (2022). The public version of this oral history project is available here: <https://bit.ly/3Z8alNy>.

■ Figure 2. Philip Jeck and Douglas Gill laying the maple wood floor, brought from X6, at Chisenhale Dance Space (1983). Photograph by Jessica Loeb. Image courtesy of Chisenhale Dance Space



Sergy's recollection brings me to the first example of meeting practice at Chisenhale: contact improvisation (CI). In Britain, as in its birthplace of North America, CI was a ground-breaking development within the field of dance and very much integrated into Chisenhale's work. In CI sessions or jams, people came together and bodies met – colliding into, rolling over and falling on one another or, as Sergy recalls, with the building itself. Under a mutual agreement that necessitated care, consent, trust and safety among participants, CI was both a personal and political form with 'democratic potential' (Goldman 2021: 72). Within the context of the New Dance scene, CI drew on and shared attitudes of the Women's Liberation Movement, namely that of resistance to leadership, mutual social support, community and an interrogation of process.

A concern for process over product and awareness of the conditions in which the collective was working and living in fostered an organizational practice of consciousness-raising at Chisenhale Dance Space, the influence of which can be observed directly in the presence of co-counselling that took place between members. Co-counselling was a peer-to-peer practice that emerged in the 1970s and was widely associated with the Women's Liberation Movement and consciousness-raising (C-R) groups, in particular. Influenced by radical feminist thinking, co-counselling challenged the therapist–patient relationship and the power dynamics engendered therein by encouraging participants to take turns in the role of both 'patient' and 'therapist'.

During sessions at Chisenhale, which took place in pairs or small groups, individuals were encouraged to discuss any arising issues and share how they were feeling. Influenced by C-R, co-counselling positioned identity politics at the core of its philosophy with the belief that social change could be achieved from generating new knowledge through consciousness-raising exercises and interpersonal relationships (Farinati and Firth 2017). Similarly to C-R, co-counselling's non-hierarchical approach rejected the notion of authoritarian leadership and insisted on a radical democracy whereby each voice was 'heard with seriousness' (Cornell

2000: 1,033). Similarities can be drawn here between the meeting practice of CI and co-counselling: both requiring similar social formations, both adopting feminist approaches to leadership and authorship and both requiring an absolute attentiveness and care for another body, through listening (in co-counselling) and touch (in CI). At Chisenhale Dance Space, co-counselling was practiced regularly – from dedicated sessions to moments in rehearsals and workshops in which individuals felt compelled to share a feeling or experience triggered by a given situation. Reflections were drawn from all aspects of life but, within the context of dance practice, often drew on an individual's previous traumatic experience of institutional dance training, namely that of ballet.<sup>6</sup> By engaging with this practice, Chisenhale created a space for individuals to radically reconsider their own position within and to society and reflect on how they might contribute to social change. The focus being how new approaches to and understanding of dance and performance practice might contribute towards such social change. In this way, the practices of C-R and co-counselling further reveal the relationship between space and society, echoing Lefebvre's claims that every society produces a space, its own space (1991 [1974]: 31).

Evidently, the collective structure and non-hierarchical approach of Chisenhale's membership lent itself well to the practice of co-counselling, which depended on a safe and trusting space to meet and share. But physical space was also a key component of co-counselling. In a guide to leaderless therapy, the East London Big Flame group, Red Therapy, describe a fundamental criterion for the activity as having the right environment with enough open, undisturbed space where people feel comfortable (Red Therapy 1978). Thus, for the collective, there was a requirement not only for a space with suitable physical characteristics but also the appropriate social conditions, or as Lefebvre writes, 'the set of relations between things' (1991 [1974]: 82).

The set of relations Chisenhale's collective embraced were influenced by the New Left and the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) (Adair 1992; Claid 2006; Jordan 1992; Lansley

2017). These sentiments challenged Western capitalist ideals of efficient organizational structure and production, which typically adhered to patriarchal values, hierarchical structure, bureaucratic managerialism and a focus on products. Thus, like many collectives influenced by the WLM, Chisenhale adopted an anti-establishment approach and many of the collective's activities were conducted in a non-hierarchical manner, concerned as much about the ways in which their work was done as the work itself, exemplified here in the practices of co-counselling and contact improvisation and, as I will go on to discuss, collective meetings.

This attention to process aligned with the New Dance movement more broadly and was supported by the feminist maxim 'the personal is political'. The collective proposed that artists should harness 'an awareness of the personal state of each individual in relation to her needs, in relations to others, in relation to the environment, to the social context, to the city, to the financial context, to the country, to the political context, to the world' (Claid 1977: 2). Chisenhale's political and artistic endeavour, supported by its particular organizational structure, provoked work that was 'social yet critical and analytic' with 'a real possibility for dialectic growth and change', for both society and within the field of dance.<sup>7</sup>

Here, I return to Chisenhale's collective meetings, which underpinned this endeavour. The collective's progress relied on meetings, which were plentiful. Early members recalled these could be 'endless', 'long' meetings that might 'go on for hours',<sup>8</sup> even sometimes decisions and points of discussion rolling over week after week. While the meetings engendered a progressive politics, they could also be challenging forums that were not only a test of endurance, but also open to tensions in opinion that had to be collectively worked through in order to progress. Nonetheless, they set out a base and way of working that was central to Chisenhale's spatial practices.

Chisenhale's physical place, as per de Certeau (1984), was a mobilizing factor within Chisenhale's artistic endeavour and in the creation of innovative and progressive spaces that were produced there. Dance artist

<sup>6</sup> Anna Furse, an original Chisenhale Dance Space member and participant of co-counselling, reflects on her ballet training describing 'ballet's unique form of physical expression...as torture. It is no exaggeration to say that a ballerina's work is a smiling, lyrical cover-up for a great deal of blood, sweat and tears' (2000: 20).

<sup>7</sup> Quotation from a paper given by the Chisenhale collective as part of the Chisenhale Dance Space/ National Organisation of Dance and Mime New Dance Weekend (1986). Sourced from Chisenhale's archival material, which is not yet publicly available.

<sup>8</sup> As part of my research I have conducted an oral history project with Chisenhale's founding members and many of the artists involved with the dance space during this period. Chisenhale's meetings were the focus of many of these conversations, and the descriptions used here are taken from some of my conversations with individuals.



■ Figure 3. 'Close Streams' (1983) by Gaby Agis. A performance on the rooftop of Chisenhale Dance Space. Photograph by Nick Adler. Image courtesy of Gaby Agis

and choreographer Gaby Agis describes the 'beautiful quality of sound and light' (Davies 2022) and other features of the space that provided what she describes as a profound level of concentration. No doubt the space inherently possessed features (architectural, geographical and historical) that gave it certain desirable characteristics but, moreover, and as Agis went on to tell me, it was the production of this space and how it had been repurposed by the collective and artist community that evoked this experience and promoted the ethos of New Dance. More obvious examples of this are in decisions made by the collective when repurposing the factory space. For example Chisenhale never had mirrors and, during its early years, there was no formal stage/seating area, which provided a more democratic and flexible space that both challenged social and cultural behaviours as well as the politics of the proscenium arch, while providing artists (and audiences) with opportunities to experiment with space, spontaneity and a closer interaction.

Similarly, in a meeting with the Arts Council of Great Britain on dance in non-traditional spaces, Chisenhale members and visiting artists Philip Jeck, Mary Prestidge, Miranda Tufnell and Jane Wells described how being environment responsive was important to both their practice and politics. One collective member argued that access to alternative space was fundamental in supporting alternative artistic experiments.<sup>9</sup> Chisenhale's physical characteristics were utilized on many occasions. Its residential location enabled community-orientated projects, such as the work of Mary Prestidge and cris cheek or the participatory work of Rosemary Lee; in 1983 Gaby Agis made use of the roof space for a one-off performance (fig. 3); Mary Prestidge, Fran Cottell and Jan Howarth devised a large-scale collaborative performance with local community groups that journeyed along the length of the canal on land and water (fig. 4) and Mona Hatoum made use of the expansive derelict space on the ground floor to stage an installation in 1987. While much of this work might be seen as site responsive, I propose instead that it is more accurately described as context responsive – responding to social, political, cultural, artistic and physical influences.



What is important about Chisenhale is that it was an alternative space for dance and performance practice, or, in Lefebvrian terms, differential space – space that is distinct from the mainstream. In 1982, Chisenhale's aims as a collective were to (in no order of preference or priority) 'programme and develop new work; to programme and develop multi-media work; work with non-Western cultures; work with youth'. The underlying agenda was to 'practise and develop movement skills whilst incorporating a critical perspective on racism and sexism'.<sup>10</sup> This was supported by the collective's organizational structure, and politics engendered therein, as well as its physical location, which in turn allowed for acts of meeting. I have focused on acts of meeting as collective organizational meetings, CI and co-counselling but this can be extended to the work that occurred more broadly, the meeting of disciplines, artists and audiences, participants and teachers. The flexible nature of the building and the collective's politics enabled Chisenhale to be responsive and porous to external influences, and to produce different spaces and sets of relations. This responsiveness is evident in Chisenhale's programming: a co-counselling session might be followed by a tea dance, an African drumming workshop, a cabaret evening, an Arabic dance class, a theatre writing workshop or performance by one of the many eclectic dancers and artists.

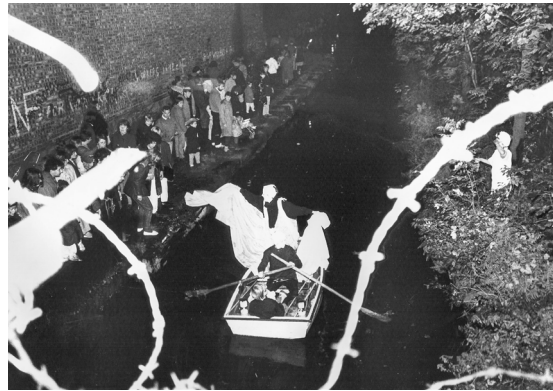
According to Lefebvre, differential space challenges, resists and attempts to dismantle

<sup>9</sup> Reference from a meeting between dance artists and Arts Council of Great Britain in 1983. Sourced from Chisenhale's archival material, which is not yet publicly available.

<sup>10</sup> Quotation from a booklet produced by Chisenhale Dance Space in 1982. Sourced from Chisenhale's archival material, which is not yet publicly available.

the homogenizing forces of capitalism, namely in its precedence of use value over exchange value. Critical of dominating homogenous spaces, otherwise termed abstract spaces, Lefebvre exclaims 'Change life! Change society!' while adding the proviso that 'these precepts mean nothing without the production of an appropriate space' (1991 [1974]: 59). Lefebvre's concept of differential space aligns with the Chisenhale collective's own bold vision for social change. Chisenhale's reappropriation of industrial-cum-derelict urban space also manifests Lefebvre's proposition that under the conditions of neo-capitalism, in which there are many spatial contradictions, land and property is abandoned under changing capital values and state priorities. This in turn gives way to the reappropriation of abstract space by non-homogenous bodies, a condition that was prevalent in 1970s and 1980s London that artists were able to exploit, as was the case at both X6 Dance Space and Chisenhale.

By finding home in a derelict, post-war factory, the Chisenhale collective rejected both the capitalist associations of the factory space and the material structure of traditional dance spaces like opera houses and theatres. In doing so there was an opportunity to reconsider ways of working, organizing, producing and thinking about dance practice. This is not to say that the space was by any means neutral but, in terms of artistic practice, removing dance from its traditional context, with all its historical and material connotations, the collective created a new, differential space that was unique to Chisenhale Dance Space. This in turn provided new opportunities for dance and movement practices. A space was crucial for Chisenhale's meetings, meetings grounded in feminist, anti-establishment thought. If 'living bodies produce social relations and thus they produce space' then the conditions and work of Chisenhale's collective membership combined to produce an alternate set of spatial practices. Central to maintaining these spatial practices were acts of meeting at Chisenhale. As per Lefebvre, with the possibility of appropriate (alternative) space lies the possibility for positive and progressive change. In Chisenhale's case, this change started in the act of meeting. Where we meet and how we meet matters.



■ Figure 4. 'Passing Through' (1987), a collaborative performance event by Mary Prestidge, Fran Cottell and Jan Howarth in collaboration with women and girls from the borough, including Grenfell School, the Somali Women's Association, the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) 'A' Team and the Women's Music Workshop, among others. Image courtesy of Mary Prestidge

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