

**Footprints on stone.**  
*An outline of Isadora Duncan presence today.*

**Lecturer: Sofia Kondylia,**  
Associated choreographer with Duncan Dance Center, Athens  
Architect

**Supervisor: Penelope Iliaskou,**  
Artistic director of Duncan Dance Center, Athens

## A. STONE

This is a stone I found in Limnos, a Greek island located in the north Aegean Sea, known as well as “the Hephaestus’ island”. Hephaestus was the Greek God of fire. The whole island, together with some others nearby, emerged from the sea million years ago, when an undersea volcano exploded and tectonic plates slid past each other.

The stone I am now holding in my hand was lying on a coast probably for centuries until the day I found it and carried here in Syracuse. You may now pass it around and look at it for a few seconds. (They pass the stone around)



*1 The stone (personal archive)*

As you can see, this stone has a certain weight, color, shape, temperature and texture. Also, it has an age of thirty million years, meaning that this stone was laying at the spot it was found long, long, long... ago before man appears on Earth. It has been shaped by natural forces and ruled by the sea and the wind over the centuries; its color is a combination of materials mixed under high

temperatures: earthy lava, iron and lime. Its journey started from the darkness at the bottom of the sea and continued under the sunlight after the islands’ emersion. The actual shape, weight and size of this earth fragment have been probably altered many times due to its physical exposure to life...

The fact that both past and future of this stone stay somehow indefinite is the main reason that made me focus on it. Looking closely, we can see inside embedded time, space, energy, and therefore, the notion of life.

## B. GOING BACK TO HISTORY

So, stone is aged. Stone is “ancient”. Let’s devote then a few minutes going back to the time when man appears on earth and discovers this material.

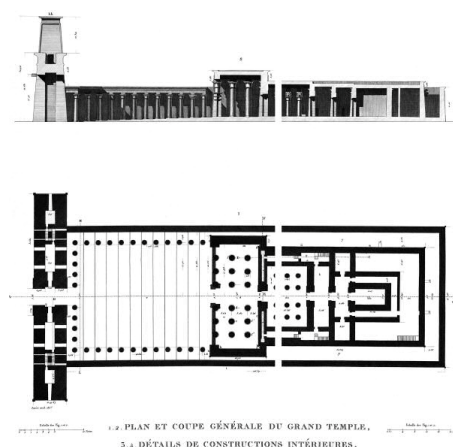
Stone was the first material tamed by man in his struggle for survival. Through using stone he fabricated tools, formed his pagan idols and invented fire. In stone caves he not only found a place to live in, but also imprinted his perception of the world by curving beautiful frescoes on their walls.

2 "Caverne du Pont d'Arc", France, 36000 BC. (Internet source) // 3 The archaeological site of prehistoric settlement Dimini - 4800 BC. (Internet source)



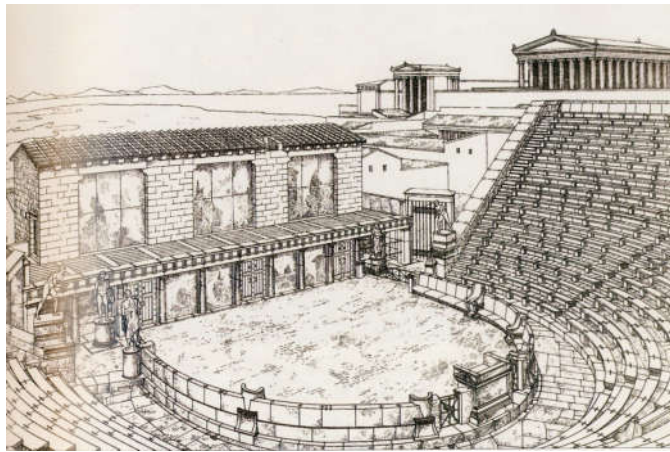
Later he conceived architecture based on it; both practical and religious. Depending on philosophic and cultural profile, stone architecture mirrored each civilization's beliefs translating them symbolically within space and time. As the years went by, stones came to be invested by divine substance: temples, tombs and sculptures connect this material with gods, eternity and the spiritual side of nature and self.

Theocratic civilizations, for example Egyptian or Minoan, with clear social hierarchy are associated with mysticism and idolatry. Their introvert religious architecture mirrors the idea of incomprehensible, omnipotent gods that are only accessed by the kings and need to be propitiated for prosperity. Egyptian temples are labyrinthine, linear-shaped, monumental and with many obscure rooms, heavily decorated only from inside. Long, low in height and dark corridors would gradually end at a small and lighted from above sanctuary. Just a walk near a temple like this would make you feel fear; wonder; the existence of a mysterious god and praise him for living.

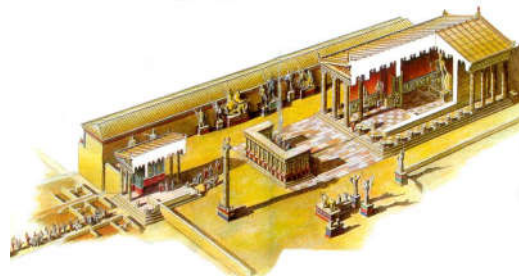


4, 5, 6 Internal view, section and plan and of Edfu temple, Egypt, 237 - 57 BC. (Internet source)

On the contrary, ancient Greek - and potentially Mycenaean - civilization had a more humanistic approach. Greek gods were not inaccessible; people might actually come across them during their life path. Mythology depicts a community of 12 Olympic Gods with human characteristics, benefits and flaws – a small scale mirroring of the Greek society's extrovert nature. Public buildings are large, open spaces, carefully designed in the middle of cities combined with public life and devoted to specific gods. Agora is linked to Hermes, the god of commerce. Parliament lies under Athena's dignity. Theater, with its semi - circular structure is devoted to Dionysus allowing each spectator to share his experience of the dance –theater spectacle within nature. Greek temples hold a symbolic meaning of Gods dwelling among people. They are simple, rectangular and semi open, accessible from all sides and tuned with the landscape. Attic sunlight, red Greek stone and marble monuments are all unified under the colors of the sky, leaving free space for associations between politics, economy, art, architecture and religion.



7 Ancient Theater of Priene (archive of German Archeological Institute of Istanbul) // 8 Temple of Athena, drawings (archive of German Archeological Institute of Istanbul)



To resume, we see stone was perceived as a material carrying not only its own history, but also the history of humanity. Man would always invent gods and search for his purpose in life. Given how ephemeral his presence on Earth is, he understands that life imprinted on this durable, porous material can provide immortality to his ideas turning a culture, a notion or even a single moment timeless...

This sense of timelessness permeates the art of dance as well; that explains how dance was always linked to religion. Indoor dances formed rituals of initiation and outdoor dances were combined with public worship and community gatherings. People danced ecstatically in the proximity of nature harmonizing their rhythm with the cycle of life. Dance became a ritual mean for reaching the divine, dematerializing dancing bodies and reflecting eternity.

### C. ISADORA DUNCAN

Isadora Duncan, a pioneer of the modern era, brought dance back to its primitive roots - and inevitably back to nature. Seeking her own divine aspect of self, she danced both indoors and outdoors, always hymning the feminine body and projecting her dream of an extrovert, Dionysian, ecstatic dance, which expresses the body's inner impulse to move completely free and in accordance to nature. Following no encoded technique and expressing herself by releasing flow from the solar plexus, she danced with lightness and plasticity, making easy, lyrical movements and codifying deep meanings inspired by human tragedy and Greek mythology.

Insisting in restoring truthiness in the dancing body she began observing natural phenomena and studied science as well. Looking into nature and classic Greek monuments she detected the harmonic impact of undulating lines. Finally, she formulated a theory of wave movements. She writes:



*"All energy expresses itself through this wave movement, for does not sound travel in waves, and light also...? And when we come to the movements of organic nature it would seem that all free natural movements conform to the law of wave movement. The flight of birds, for instance, or the bounding of animals..." [Isadora Duncan, "My Life", New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927]*

9 Isadora Duncan dancing (internet source) // 10 Antoine Bourdelle, "Isadora Duncan" (internet source)

It seemed that these undulating lines provided art with such dynamics that figures fixed in stone could project an illusion of movement synchronized somehow with a rhythmic unity. The dancer who could sense and product those movements presents himself as an energy particle of a universal impulse liberating his primitive instincts and calling for kinesthetic comprehension.

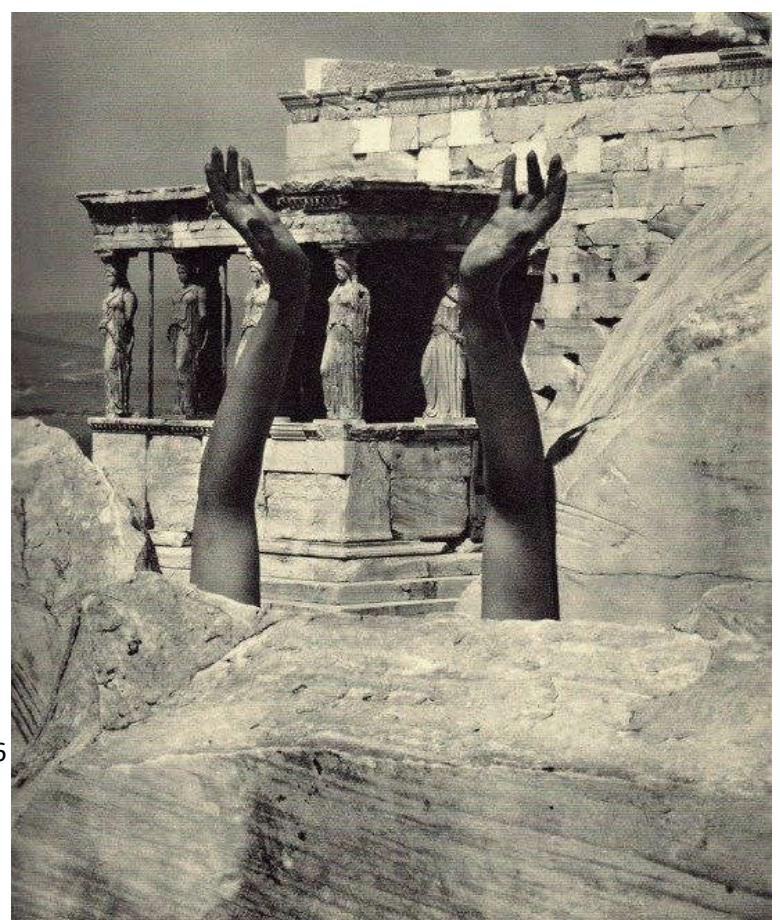
Isadora's connection with Greek culture was not imitative. Her costumes, as well as her movement vocabulary aimed at a modernistic revival. Inspired by the poses of Greek statues her dances were a nature study; an attempt to explore how the body feels inside these poses and to identify harmony within.

Connecting dance with religion she pursues to work by archaeological sites. Considering dance as a "theopraxis" her dances in the proximity of Greek ancient architecture were something more than an eccentric drama expression; a harmonized perception of space and time coupling dance and architecture.





11 - 13 Isadora Duncan dancing at the Acropolis site.  
 Photographer: Edward Steichen, 1920-1921



#### D. ISADORA AND RAYMOND DUNCAN'S HOME - THE DUNCAN DANCE RESEARCH CENTER, ATHENS, GREECE

After two years of personal work, the Duncan family travels to Greece fulfilling their life's dream to dance near the Acropolis site at Ancient theater of Dionysus and deepen into ancient Greek culture. As soon as they arrived in Athens in 1903, they decided to build a "dance temple" – a house, in which they could develop their ideas and revive their Hellenic dream.

They purchased land at Kopanas hill in Byronas. The whole region was agricultural and had a straight view to the Acropolis. Based on the plans of Mycenae palace of Agamemnon, Raymond, Isadora's brother, took over the construction by himself. They settled at the site enjoying agricultural life and hired some local workers to transfer Attic red stone to the hill. Completely isolated from cosmic life, they were collecting their food on their own and wearing ancient Greek costumes.



14 Raymond and workers on Kopanas (internet source)

Considering herself a pure modernist and after staying one year in Greece, Isadora Duncan decided to continue her peripatetic career in Europe. Raymond and his wife Penelope Sikelianou remained at the site to finish the construction and spread their ideas. Although they lived there for many years, the construction was never finished. After they left the building was trespassed by neighbors and immigrants.

In the 1980's Municipality of Byronas took over the reconstruction of the building founding a place dedicated to dance, which would carry their name. "I. & R. Duncan Dance Research Center" was inaugurated in 1992. Classified as newest monument by the Ministry of Culture, it is now operating as a small scale Dance House covering diverse aspects of choreographic research creation and education.

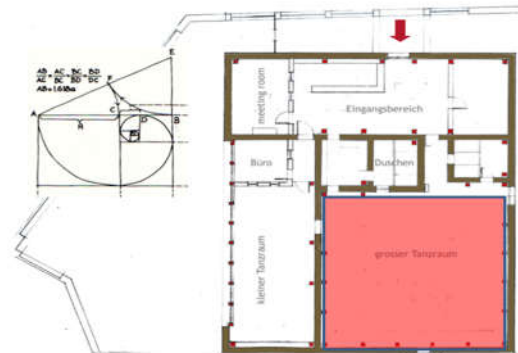


15 Duncan's home 1950, photographer: Dimitris Charisiadis (Benaki Museum archive) // 16 Duncan Dance Center 2003 (Manolis Iliakis archive)



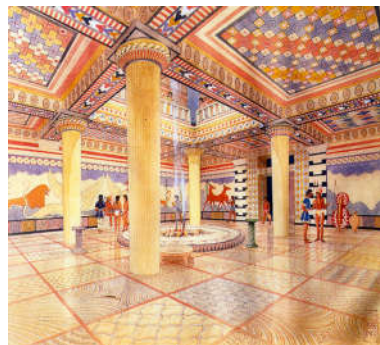


Comparing their plans we can see the Centers' resemblance with Mycenae palace of Agamemnon: both organized in the same way with small rooms and laboratories around a central patio. Both buildings have big, peripheral yard and the same orientation towards the Acropolis to the South. Palaces in Mycenae era differed a lot from temples: having less religious and more agricultural character they have introvert design and more privacy. We know from Homer that their stone walls had few tall windows. The lighted from above atrium was a place for gathering, private worship and dance.



17, 18 (up) Plan of Mycenae palace of Agamemnon and of Duncan Dance Center 2003. (Internet source)

19, 20 (bottom) Representation of the central hall of Mycenae palace of Agamemnon (internet source) and internal view of the central dance hall of the Duncan Dance Center, 2016 (personal archive)



Over the past years the venue has hosted many projects, three of which have explored relations between dance and architecture by means of site specific research and performance. Given that the site has been used in multiple ways, a site specific research in the Duncan center reveals a great palimpsest: a house, a temple, a farm, a shelter, a ruin, a dance hall, a registry and a theatre, which is always related to Duncan's modernistic philosophy about dance, ancient Greek culture and liberation of the moving body.

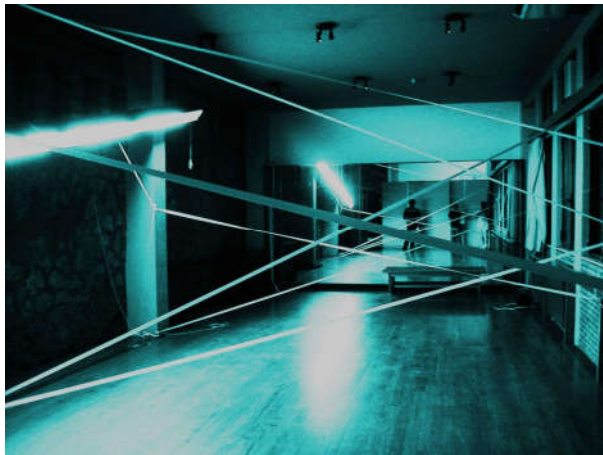
Three selected projects will be presented subsequently outlining the site's dynamics affected by Duncan's presence today.



E. THREE EXAMPLES OF SITE SPECIFIC RESEARCH AT THE DUNCAN DANCE RESEARCH CENTER, ATHENS, GREECE.

1. **Architecture and dance workshop** – Manolis Iliakis, Betty Dramisioti, Evelin Gavrilou, Duncan Dance Research Center, Athens, 2003

The six-day long workshop aimed at locating meeting points between dance and architecture as far as kinesthetic and experiential perception of space is concerned. Following a specific route within architecture space automatically means that all senses translate everything into a unique body – mind experience. Installations by visual artists and Fine Arts school students motivated the dancers of the workshop to rethink their body postures and their ways passing through the historical space of Duncan Dance Center. Lectures about kinesthetic reactions and perception of the body amplified the practical experiment, which concluded in detecting overlaps between architecture and dance synthetic process and inverting the roles of dancers and architects. On the seventh day all participants presented their work on three selected sites of the building giving an improvisational site specific performance, which artistically transforms the place and raises the question of kinesthetic participation and comprehension by the audience.



21 First point of intervention: “In between” space, courtyard - small classroom // 22 Meeting points: architects, dancers and artists working (photoes: Manolis Iliakis)

Almost a century before, the site was aimed to become a place of restoring truthiness in body – space relationship revealing and releasing ev erything divine in the nature of the dancing body. Modern era came to shelter that vision by establishing a place for such quests in a stone building that fulfills not only the former vision, but also surrounds the dancing body with this earthy material. Perhaps not rationally, but definitely kinesthetically, the stone walls of the building stimulate subconscious connotations of body’s ancestry and its dwelling near stones; from caves to architecture buildings and monuments. Body schema encloses long history during the centuries. Silence somehow awakens body memory instantly. And dance would always synchronize them.

**2. Her Topia: A dance – architecture event** – Carol Brown and Doritta Hannah, Duncan Dance Research Center, Athens, 2005

The site specific project questions ephemeral architecture of dance in contradiction to stone architecture's monumentality and permanency. Creating a timeless juncture between them it reveals different ages and layers of the site.

Drawing once again on Greek history and mythology, Carol Brown and Doritta Hannah visualized the whole site – building and surrounding area – of Isadora's Duncan utopian dream as scenery full of metaphors, which invites them to condense history timeline and speak about issues of freedom at a time when wars are held on its name. Inspired by Isadora's Duncan biography, vision and methodology they placed their work on today's concerns setting symbolic reflections between feminism, faith and mythological punishment from gods for surpassing stereotypes.

Within a two week period architect Doritta Hannah and choreographer Carol Brown collaborated with fourteen dancers and multimedia artists, who explored the building area and its neighborhood. Travelling through time and subdued by slow velocity, dancers and spectators experienced the contrapuntal relation of dancing bodies and historic architecture when temporality within stone is seized and permanency within the dancer's body is projected.



23 Dance studio 1: Ariadne (photos: Fotis Traganoudakis)

Starting from the reservoir near the Center, the audience cycles a ritual of women who carry stones and manipulate red stitch interpreting Duncan's movement vocabulary. Women become ancient like the stones they carry and at the very same moment they are messengers of the future, mannequins, activists and athletes. Subsequently, the audience gathers at the foyer of the Center, where a multimedia installation of fragmented images of Arachne sitting in the glass room next to them is shown. Arachne is stitching her huge dress whereas in the locker room red dresses are hanging from the hooks and a dancer stitches herself to the floor with red tape. The audience walks silently past this mythology originated images and stops at the studio where another happening is set. Ariadne, Arachne's virtual other, is represented monumentally as a stable puppet wearing a phantom skirt: red strings beginning from the doll's waist are grounded to six stones lying on the floor. Four dancers curve their bodies slowly holding small mirrors multiplying and fragmenting both the

audience and themselves. The whole happening is reflected on the huge mirror of the studio enlarging the sense of dematerialization. In the smaller studio Niobe, turned to rock after the loss of her 14 children, walks a river of stones, balancing on them and wearing a red veil. Surrounded by reflections and multimedia installations she is an allegory of Duncan's spirit mourning for the loss of her own kids.

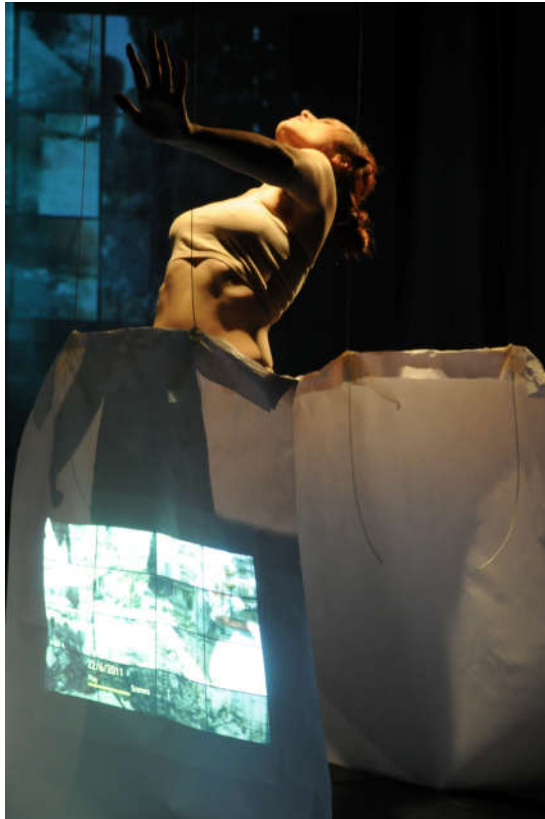
On the courtyard a long mirror table reunites dancers and audience. Arachne enters dragging her giant dress. Dancers follow a ritual dance ending with them on top of the table singing a traditional Greek song, gazing and calling other dancers from the rooftops to participate, gradually expanding the performance to the city of Athens.

23 Courtyard (photo: Fotis Traganoudakis) // 24 Arachne enters dragging her giant dress while the sun sets above Athens city. (photo: Fotis Traganoudakis)





3. **Emersion** – Vicky Spanovangelis, Olga Spiraki, Kiriakos Spirou, Evangelos Papadakis, Duncan Dance Research Center, Athens, 2011



*25 Main Studio, repeated performance  
(photos: Propokopis Papageorgiou)*

This project by architect and performer Vicky Spanovangelis was the last part of a trilogy of works she produced between 2010 and 2011, particularly “Urban-Trajectories” and “SKIN”. All three formed her interdisciplinary doctoral research within fields of choreography and architectural design practices. Moving between two poles, namely from one side the historical urban centre of Athens and from the other side the actual function of Duncan Research Dance Center as a contemporary Dance House, she established acquaintances and counterpoints. The project aimed to an experiential understanding of history, dance and architecture, emerged by means of performance, architectural design and media installations.

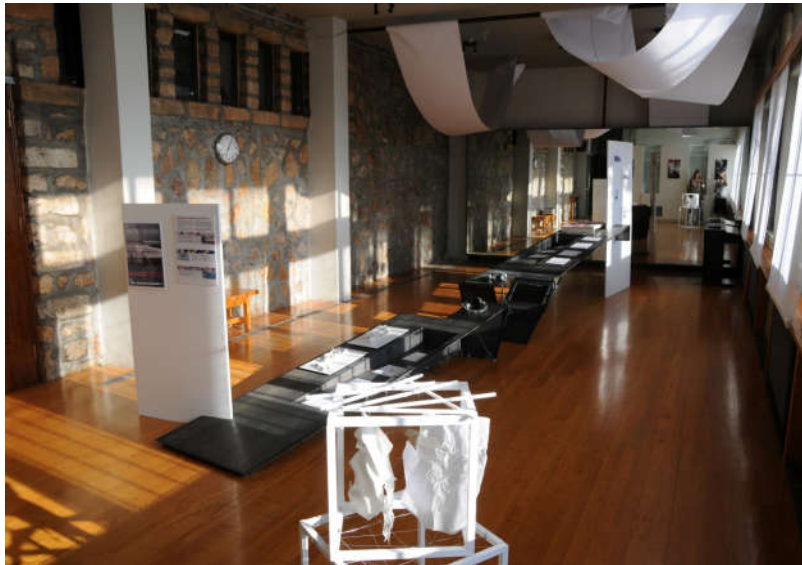
Within a two week period Vicky Spanovangelis transformed the Duncan Dance Center into interactive scenery: cyclically repeated performances occurred along with live media installations while an open design exhibition related to the creative process of project was taking part in the room next door. Dealing with the various spaces of the venue in a non-hierarchical way, the architect established a free flow between the sequences taking place in each allowing all events to happen simultaneously.

The main studio housed the 35-minute live performance organized by a spiral paper construction hanged from the ceiling. This architectural construction offered blank surfaces for live streaming and pre-recorded video projections as well. It also operated both as an interactive dancing partner, on which the dancer was tracing a live drawing. This was meant to act as a symbol of marble monuments evoking memories of the ancient city. The whole performance opens a dialogue between material architectural space and live fleshy body, as the latter unfolds its spiritual dimension within.

In the adjacent smaller studio a design exhibition was set. A slanting ramp surface divided into smaller linear sub-spaces presented models, drawings and texts of the whole process. As it was designed carefully to match the scale of the human body, visitors could approach, “inhabit” it and

listen to audio recordings of the design research. “Emerging” from the floor and presenting products of the creative process, the oblique ramp has a clear symbolic meaning of all memories and connotations that emerge when one is working on revealing the palimpsest of a place.

The third space of the exhibition took place at the small meeting room next to the reception hall. This archive room hosting models, images and drawings of each performance was conceived as a space for reflection and documentation drawing on the experiences of the visitors and artists throughout the process of the event.



26 Small Studio, design exhibition (photo: Propokopis Papageorgiou) // 27 Archive room (photo: Propokopis Papageorgiou)

The idea of dealing equally with space and dancing body returns again and again throughout the projects described above. Would the historical site of Duncan Dance Center call for such approaches? All three projects propose interdependent manifestations of the animate moving body next to inanimate still stone architecture, just as Isadora’s Duncan work suggests. Architectural space is lived, perceived and structured starting from understanding human body’s inner space and vice versa. Body’s space is inhabited, conceived and revealed starting from understanding the architecture it dwells in.

## F. CONCLUSION: CONNECTING WITH THE TIMELESS WHOLE

Ancient stones embedding history; outdoor dance practices which hymn the metaphysical aspect of self since the dawn of centuries; Isadora's Duncan dances seeking for a divine rhythmic unity; her traces upon stone buildings growing to a palimpsest across the times; contemporary dance – architecture research aiming at revealing body, space and time metaphysical bound...

Trying to link this lecture's diverse highlighted aspects I will share a personal concern: why in such an earthy, dense and strong material like stone human beings pursue to immortalize ideas as intangible and spiritual? And why, when done, stones provide the feeling air can exist inside them, like a frozen perspiration? Even more, why those undulating or austere lines of stone monuments provide the illusion of vague movement? Inversing this thought we finally wonder why dance would always pursue vanishing human's figure density and revealing its fourth timeless dimension...

It seems that following this contrapuntal relation of dense, static, earthy stones and fluid, ephemeral dancing bodies becomes metaphysical charming and also apocalyptic of spiritual dimensions that dwell inside our nature. Some people realize this as divine status; some others as part of a rhythmic order. Closing this lecture, I will mention the words of architect Dimitris Pikionis speaking about emotional topiography:

*“Inside the part, you enclose the whole. And the whole is the part”.*

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*This lecture was written by Sofia Kondylia during October – November 2016 under the supervision of Penelope Iliaskou and presented at the annual symposium of INDA foundation on December 16<sup>th</sup>, which took place at Palazzo Greco, Syracuse, Italy with the title “La leggera lievita dei piedi scalzi”.*



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