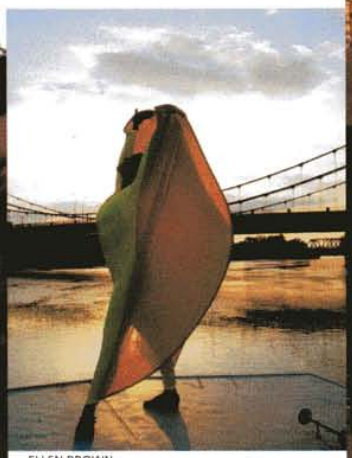
JAMIE FAGRELIUS



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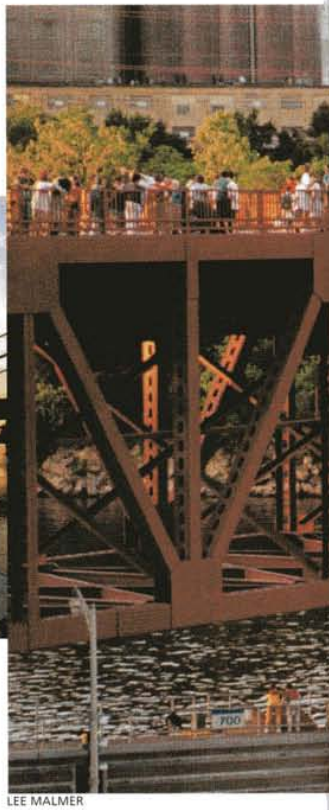


LEE MALMER

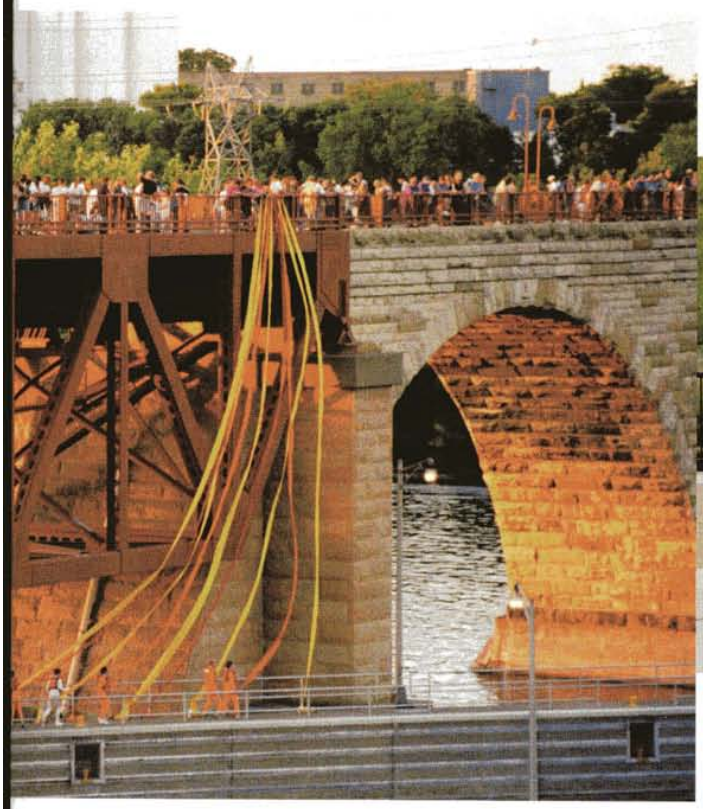
# Riverfront

"Solstice River," a site-specific dance performance celebrating the Minneapolis riverfront, invites audiences to experience the river in a whole new way

BY CAMILLE LEFEVRE

In 1883, when railroad baron James J. Hill had the Stone Arch Bridge constructed over the Mississippi River below St. Anthony Falls, engineers of the day doubted whether a curved span of limestone and granite could withstand the trains, much less the vagaries of weather, the river, and time. A century later, however, none of those factors had significantly contributed to the bridge's potential demise. Indifference and neglect were greater threats. Minneapolis had turned its back on the historic bridge, flour mills, and ancillary structures surrounding them, an area formerly renowned as the flour-milling capital of the world.

That all changed in the 1990s when Minneapolis began reclaiming its central riverfront. Rail lines were removed and walking trails completed; archeology was revealed at Mill Ruins Park. The wreckage of the Washburn A Mill became the Mill City Museum, and the Milwaukee Road Depot an event center, while railroad and mill buildings continue to be converted into offices, lofts, and condominiums. Arts organizations, including the Guthrie Theater, are erecting spectacular new buildings. And the Stone Arch Bridge is now a pedestrian walkway, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the site of an annual dance performance and community celebration, "Solstice River," by Minneapolis choreographer Marylee Hardenbergh.



JAMIE FAGRELIUS

*Choreographer Marylee Hardenbergh places "Solstice River" audiences on Minneapolis' historic Stone Arch Bridge, scatters her brightly clad performers on sites along the bridge to draw attention to the river environs, and connects audiences with the lock-and-dam structures below the bridge with long colorful streamers.*

# Awakening

Since 1997, on the two mid-June evenings of the summer solstice, thousands of people have gathered on the 2,100-foot-long historic bridge for the site-specific event, as up to 40 performers draw their attention to the natural, architectural, and engineered features of the river environment. Far below the bridge, on a narrow jetty curving into the river, dancers carry large colorful props resembling navigational signs. Kayakers scoot across the water and twirl their paddles in unison. Motorboats are moving stages on which dancers boldly reach into space as their costumes billow in the wind.

To the south, performers in brightly colored unitards swoop and twirl in Mill Ruins Park, and on the balconies of the Washburn A Mill and adjacent loft buildings. To the north, a dancer appears on the volumetric tanks next to the St. Anthony Falls Laboratory. "Solstice River" also reveals the infrastructure of the lock and dam. After six women promenade down the bridge, enormous lock gates dramatically open as the women move onto a 50-foot-high walkway. Here they dance in unison with expansive movements of reverence and joy, then pour the water they've carried into the lock.

As dusk settles over the site, a 1,200-foot-long swath of blue fabric is unfurled down the middle of the bridge. Hardenbergh and her bridge captains urge the audience to "hold the river" and ripple it into waves as children frolic underneath. "I want two things to happen to the audience," says Hardenbergh of the performance. "I want them to feel more connected to the site and to each other." Her goal is transformation—in how audiences perceive the river and its industrial environs, but also in how audience members see themselves in relation to art and architecture, the natural and built environments, and place and community. And she's succeeded.

In a survey conducted after last year's "Solstice River," respondents reported that their understanding of bridge history, the river environment, and the overall site was enhanced by attending the performance. Furthermore, 60 percent of respondents said the Stone Arch Bridge and "Solstice River" are now connected in their minds. "The dance doesn't leave a footprint," Hardenbergh says. "It leaves lasting impressions."

"Solstice River" is a powerful example of how dance inspired by, created within, and reflective of a specific site in the built environment can cause individuals, and an entire audience community, to experience a place in a new way. "We've found that events like this encourage people to visit the area and look at it with new eyes," says Ann Calvert, principal project coordinator, Community Planning and Economic Development Department, City of Minneapo-

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lis. "One thing in particular I appreciate about 'Solstice River' is that it takes place in a magnificent environment that's thrilling to be in the middle of; but also, because the performance is interwoven with and embedded in that environment, it challenges and encourages people to really stop and look at things."

## The Experience of Place

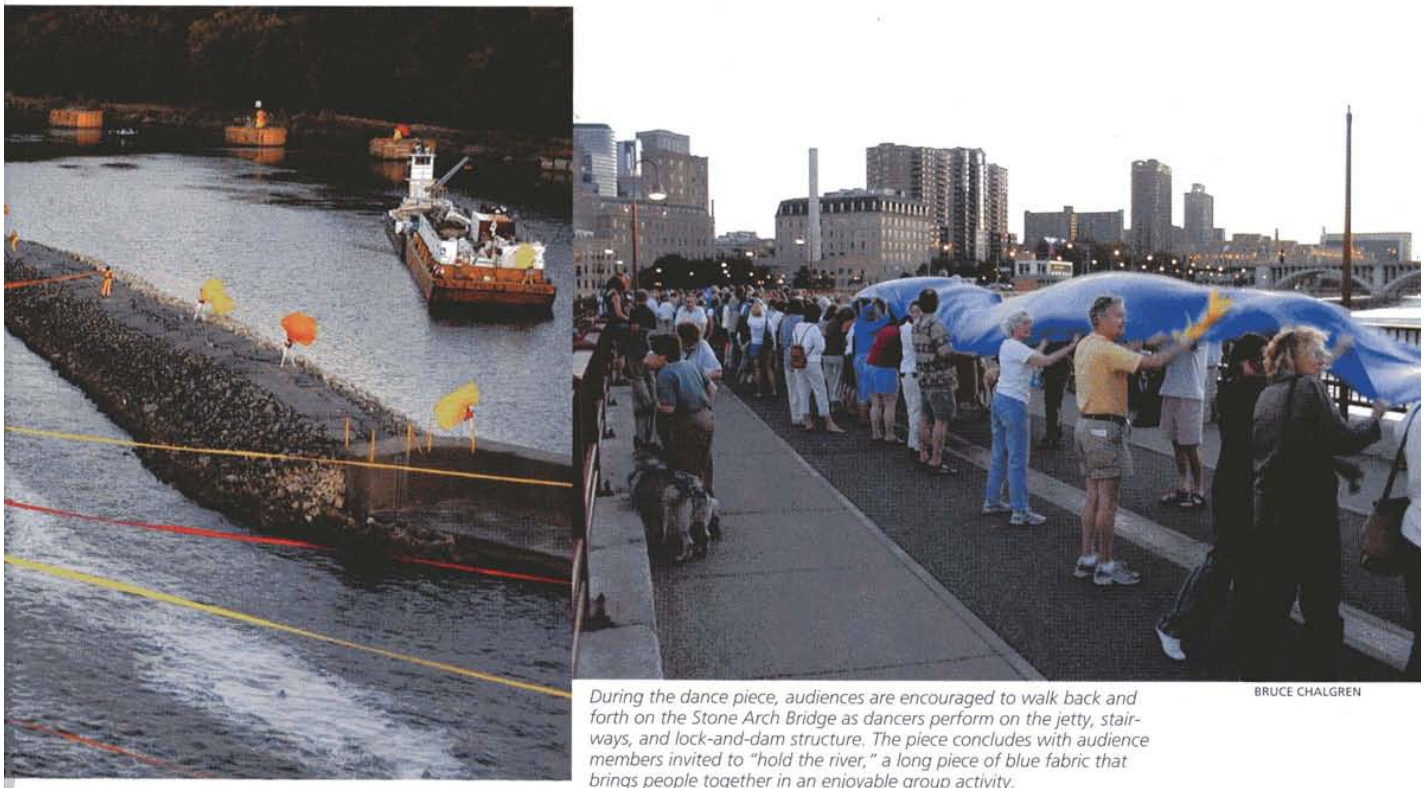
In his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), geographer Yi-Fu Tuan wrote, "Deeply loved places are not necessarily visible, either to ourselves or each other. Places can be made visible by a number of means . . . [including] the evocative power of art, architecture, ceremonials, and rites." Part of what makes that power evocative is the element of de-familiarization included in those creative processes. De-familiarization occurs when a familiar object or event is removed from its everyday context and is subsequently seen with fresh perspective.

The effects of de-familiarization have been investigated by a variety of scholars, including architectural theorist Bernard Tschumi and dance critic Sally Banes. But early-20th-century literary critic Victor Shklovsky described de-familiarization best when he wrote in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique," "Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. . . . The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar.'"

Hardenbergh is one of a handful of site-specific choreographers across the United States who de-familiarize historic places rendered invisible in their communities (whether through day-to-day familiarity, demolition, or blight and neglect) by making them the setting of, the motivation for, and an integral character within a live dance performance. De-familiarization occurs as the choreographer reanimates the site by moving the dancers and the audience through it during the dance; and as she recontextualizes the site by using it for performance.

Unlike concert dance on the proscenium stage, or even dances that move outside the concert hall or into an odd venue as a change of pace, site-specific dance is of one place and no other. A dance is site-specific when the choreographer receives direction about space, structure, and audience placement from the site itself. The site, in turn, becomes the framework for the dance. The site-specific choreographer also generates the work's movement vocabulary and its content out of her research into and interpretation of the site's cultural matrix of architectural and historical, political and economic, and social and environmental characteristics. These findings are subsequently filtered through the choreographer's distinct artistic sensibility and stylistic preferences.

In Los Angeles, Heidi Duckler, artistic director of Collage Dance Theatre, combines modern, postmodern, social, and vernacular dance styles in her theatrical site-specific works. Most recently, Duckler and company have roamed through the Ambassador Hotel and Perino's Restaurant, two buildings threatened by the wrecking ball that were designed by Paul R. Williams, the first African-American member of the American Institute of Archi-



BRUCE CHALGREN

*During the dance piece, audiences are encouraged to walk back and forth on the Stone Arch Bridge as dancers perform on the jetty, stairways, and lock-and-dam structure. The piece concludes with audience members invited to "hold the river," a long piece of blue fabric that brings people together in an enjoyable group activity.*

tects. The San Francisco–based choreographer Joanna Haigood, artistic director of Zaccho Dance Theatre, is a modern and aerial dancer whose works have been performed on 120-foot-tall grain elevators in Minneapolis and down the Ferry Building clock tower in San Francisco. Her recent dance installation "Ghost Architecture" took place in a structure that reconstructed, on the exact coordinates, the height, width, and footprints of several former buildings demolished to make way for the Forum wing of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

In New York City, Stephan Koplowitz has choreographed large-scale dance works in the windows of Grand Central Terminal at Union Station and in the Whale Room at the American Museum of Natural History. Last summer's "Grand Step Project" was a site-adaptive work that occurred on six public staircases in New York City, the first being the steps of the World Financial Center's Winter Garden. The works of Noemie LaFrance include a piece for the 12-foot stairwell of the Clock Tower building in lower Manhattan and a noir dance drama in a Lower East Side parking garage.

## Form and Movement

In addition to the Stone Arch Bridge, Hardenbergh's dances have occurred at the Seneca Wastewater Treatment Plant in Eagan, on the Aerial Lift Bridge in Duluth, and on cherry-picker machinery at the Minneapolis Farmers' Market. Her dancers have scaled the Opus Building in downtown Minneapolis and the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota. Perhaps her most political work was staged on the plaza and in the windows of the bombed-out Parliament building in Sarajevo.

The daughter of an architect and an interior designer, Hardenbergh is a choreographer, a registered dance therapist, and a CMA—a movement analyst certified by the Laban Institute of Movement Studies. Her approaches to both site-specific dance and dance therapy, she says, can be traced to the work of her mentor, Irmgard Bartenieff, who was a movement analyst, dance therapist, and protégé of Rudolph Laban, whose investigations of body architecture and spatial relationships inform Hardenbergh's work.

A German movement analyst and choreographer who initially studied architecture at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, Laban developed a movement system that begins with the three-dimensional body placed inside a kinesphere (not unlike Leonardo da Vinci's fivefold man). Three axes (front and back, above and below, right and left) intersect the body to demonstrate how the human form moves in the space surrounding it. Laban augmented each axis with levels and directions of motion as he explored paths (or "trace forms") and spatial tensions associated with the body's movement in space. By studying the relationship between the "architecture of the human body" and the paths the body makes in space, Laban found patterns, which he called "space harmony" and likened to musical scales.

In generating site-specific choreography for "Solstice River," Hardenbergh drew from several Laban principles, such as teaching her dancers six simple universal movements that are a modified

JAMES PHELPS

*Hardenbergh's site-specific dance for the Duluth Aerial Lift Bridge included performers in kayaks and on roller blades, as well as dancers on the bridge itself.*

version of Laban's "space harmony" concept: rising and sinking, narrowing and widening, retreating and advancing. Then Hardenbergh sent dancers to the site and instructed them to "allow movement to emerge from your body as it senses the site." She edited these findings into big, free, open movements amplified by the dancers moving in unison and with colorful props that extend their broad gestures, so they can be seen from a distance. "The audience walks around and up and down the bridge to find and watch the dancers, and they hear the music and feel the rhythms," she explains. "All of this opens up the site 360 degrees, so people feel like they belong there."

"A city does not become historic merely because it has occupied the same site for a long time," Tuan wrote. "Past events make no impact on the present unless they are memorialized in history books, monuments, pageants, and solemn and jovial festivities that are recognized to be part of an ongoing tradition." In the 1980s, the first time Hardenbergh ventured to the dilapidated central riverfront, climbed over the barbed wire, and walked across the Stone Arch Bridge, she immediately knew she'd found a site for a dance performance.

Every year, she adds new components and dimensions to "Solstice River" so the Stone Arch Bridge and its ever-changing environs are de-familiarized anew as a place of memory, cultural relevance, artistic intervention, and community gathering. "As people come back year after year," Calvert says, "they see and take note of changes happening along the riverfront and have an appreciation of the ways in which the area is continuing its rebirth."

## LandMARK Riverfront Celebration

On August 27 and 28, a multidisciplinary group of artists called Local Strategy is staging its own interpretation of the Minneapolis central riverfront in a public-art event titled "LandMARK: 24 Hours at the Stone Arch Bridge." Playwright, performer, and director Lisa D'Amour, who became "obsessed with the location" while living in Minneapolis for five years, is leading the team.

"I would go to the river because it's a direct connection to my home in New Orleans," she explains. "I started to get interested in how this site put Minneapolis on the map. The government built an army base nearby, prospectors arrived, it was a tourist attraction because of the natural beauty of the falls, then people saw dollar signs and started using the site for every ounce of what it was worth. When I arrived in 1996, the mills were crumbling and the area looked as if people had eaten the site alive. I became curious about the history that was layered there. So I started doing research."

Local Strategy's research has included reading, tours, and time spent at the Mill City Museum. "But the most important research has been experiential," D'Amour says, "spending hours as a group at the site, discovering when the site feels intimate, when it feels expansive, the different views, and the various emotions we have there."

An interlocking "system" of dance, music, theater, and visual-art events, as well as processions and tours, will occur on the riverfront walking trails, near Mill Ruins Park, in Father Hennepin Park, on the river itself, and on the Stone Arch Bridge. During a reoccurring three-step dance, for instance, a line of 25 people will make its way slowly down the bridge. The dance is a response, D'Amour explains, to "our interest in the relationship between work, repetition, travel, and large numbers of people" embedded in the history of the site.

While some of the performances and installations will be obvious, and others are meant to be discovered, D'Amour says, "We aim to give our audience the opportunity to deepen their experience of this place and gain access to the many layers of history, culture, and natural beauty contained within it." —*Camille LeFevre*