

Urban Space as Stage for Performance Stimulating Performance in and by Space

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Abstract: The cultural life of a city does not lie in a purposely built and detached complex of buildings. It has to reach out to general public, interact with and penetrate in the daily events of city life. The paper sets out to explore new opportunities providing different modes of performances in the urban fabric. To create transparency between 'high culture' and 'general public' is to popularize the awareness and appreciation of general public towards contemporary arts as well as regenerate the spirit of urban life.

Architecture becomes the tangible reality of 'being' in performance and 'being' the performer. It should 'be' a stage for performance, the back stage, the rehearsal studio, the thinking space, the critic and the audience. It should partly or wholly be each of its sum and also be the sum of its parts.

The paper is a theoretical investigation into how 'high culture' confronts the general public; while the high culture refers to the contemporary dance form, general public refers to the urban context of New Delhi.

Keywords: City | Contemporary Dance | Architecture

1. CITY AS BACKDROP

The densely populated urban scene provides a stage for performances. The backdrop is furnished with urban life; the daily events and human drama; its history, nostalgia and individual narratives which provide chance encounters to reflect in the cultural arena of the city.

The city spaces are being configured, not just as a host to the performance spaces, but as a stimuli to movement of various rhythms creating the dynamics and choreographing movement in the city.

2. CONTEMPORARY DANCE

Dance acts as a means of artistic expression and communication. It depends upon the community and at the same time helps to sustain the society. The investigation is how to uphold the communication of dance as a free artistic expression. Communication is no longer restricted to one side (i.e. the dancers or the performers) but should be a dialogue between the performer and the audience. Under this arrangement, the boundaries between city space and performance space are blurred.

3. PERFORMER-AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP

The interest of choreographers/dancers in site specificity shows the desire to have more **direct contact** with the audience/spectator. Indeed, audience gets is included into the performance at certain level. This subsequently leads to a new interpretation of the role of spectator/audience. **The distinctive boundary between performers and spectators is dissolved.** The role of the spectator/audience is no longer passive and static. The dancers focus on the interaction with the general public and the response of the audience has immense impact on the performance. The audience becomes the "performers" and the performers become the "audience", enacting the response from the audience.

Dance acts as a means of artistic expression and communication. It depends upon the community and at the same time helps to sustain the society. The idea is to uphold the communication of dance as a free artistic expression.

Communication, hereby, is no longer restricted to one side (i.e. the dancers or the performers) but should be a **dialogue** between the performer and the audience. In this sense, the communication is to be enhanced and encouraged. This is done by **fusing dance performance spaces with the urban space.**

The city spaces at the same time are being configured, not just as a **host** to the performance spaces, but as a **stimuli** to movement of various rhythms through it creating the dynamics; **choreographing movement** in the city.

Under this arrangement, the boundary between city space and performance space are blurred. The city is the stage and all individuals become dancers celebrating movement and dance in an urban space.

4. THE SPATIALITY OF MOVEMENT

'There is no such thing as "empty" space. Space has a life and that life is movement.' – Rudolph Laban

Dance can be defined as patterned, rhythmic movement in space and time. This is a broad definition that links dance to common, everyday patterns of movement¹. While dance

realizes some of the patterns of movement that are potentially implied by empty space, architecture restricts potential movement through the imposition of boundaries and the creation of spatial structures. The spatial patterns act on the body and the body acts on them influenced by the various spatial tensions. Any movement is generated as a response on impulse to the pulls between our inner architecture (corporal) and the outer architecture.

Dance and body movement can serve as a tool to analyse deeper meanings of space and its relationship with the human body and mind. Whether we realize it or not, we indulge ourselves in a constant dialogue with our everyday spaces. These spaces affect our movements, influencing the way we sit, stand, move, walk or just 'be' in them. The manner in which we respond to spaces is affected by the quality of those spaces; its form, texture, scale, colour as well as associated emotions and memories.

Translating the language of identifying and relating to a certain space into a body movement and exploring the dynamics associated with it therefore becomes vital. The aim is to explore how spaces (real or abstract) affect our experience, creating norms and informing our bodies and minds using dance as a direct tool for expressing the same. Through these bodily improvisations and dance techniques, a corporal relationship to space which then will provide an architectural insight of designing spaces with deeper meaning and a direct relationship with the human body.

5. MOVING BODY IN [IDEAL] SPACE

The movement of a dancer in (ideal) space is largely defined following aspects; namely **form, scale, geometry and proportion**. These elements largely influence our corporeal experience of space through concepts of bodily intentions which are not tangible but are observable and contain an element of measure. The concepts of scale/proportion, symmetry and flow, give form to building elements such as wall, floor, roof and opening and help order those elements to delineate, enclose, open up, welcome and move into spaces through bodily confrontations.

Scale and proportion are often based on a norm in a quest for harmony or an idealized perfection. The movements also resonate with them. A bigger space accounts for equally large dance movements. The body starts expanding its boundaries and the movements follow the same tendency. Spaces of smaller scale provide for movements of short intervals which are generally broken and repetitive.

The **basic form** of a space may vary from a sphere to a cube to a tetrahedron and so on. With the sphere or circular spaces there is always a given dynamism; a line of force which directs that movement. The body starts behaving like a wave and becomes more fluid, submissive. In contrary to that a

square or a cubical space provides for sharp, linear movement with clarity in direction and control.

Symmetry suggests stability and firmness, **asymmetry** brings excitement. There is a tendency in most of the spaces meant for rest or comfort to be symmetrical, where there is an emotional demand for balance and security. There exists this inedible connection in the mind of the human body between symmetry and stability and hence affects movement. Asymmetrical spaces on the other hand provide for adventure, risk and excitement. Against the security, comfort and repose allowed by symmetry, the demands and values get completely changed.

Architecture does not simply suggest movement; it frequently **choreographs** it, encouraging us to move in a particular way, adapting particular positions, sometimes quite insistently. The scale and proportion, movement, flow and symmetry; all these factors control our spatial movements, thereby shaping our experience of space and giving situational meaning to space. These spatial orders enable us to preserve and improve the quality and content of our day to day spaces.

6. MOVING BODY IN REALITY

'The interplay between the world of our bodies and the world of our dwelling is always influx. We make places that are an expression of our haptic experiences even as these experiences are generated by the places we have already created. Whether we are conscious or innocent of this process, our bodies and our movements are in constant dialogue with our buildings.'
(Juhani Pallasmaa)

Consider the simple game of stepping on every crack in the sidewalk in our childhood. Here the child plays his body (its dimensions, shapes, and rhythms) against the given grid of the sidewalk paving. Usually the chance cracks are integrated into the game, this complicating the time and the movement patterns that are developed. Variations in the speed, rhythm, and dynamic of the movement are rather simply induced by the configuration of the grid; fast, less stable movement through the double-box-two-leg maneuvers, and jump turns at the ends of the grid. The body is stimulated by the physical pattern into an interaction that generates a kind of spontaneous primitive dance².

As described in the above section, all human movement traces complex spatial configurations. Its forms can be seen as a compounding of movements through the spatial axes – a process continually changing in time. Curvilinear and diagonal motions are developed in relation to the two axes, while spiral and helical motions are developed in relation to three axes. It is interesting to note that movement in two axes or one plane, such as walking, running, and most forms of human locomotion, is the most prevalent mode in a typical day's activities. Movement in one dimension, such as diving into the

water (a very tightly defined and restricted movement), and movement in three dimensions, such as the basketball player's wind-up (a very spatially complex and dynamically changing movement), are both exceptions to our normal patterns³. Although we are capable of an infinite range of movements, most of us move within a fairly narrow range of our possible spectrum. One of the critical determinants of this range is the built environment: **the spaces and the stuff that we construct and inhabit.**

A building is an incitement to action, a stage for movement and interaction. It is one partner in a dialogue with the body.

7. RHYTHM IN ARCHITECTURE

The beauty of introducing dancing to architecture and architecture to dancing is the paradox of the **moving** and the **static**, yet both heading for the same intention, dealing with the power of representation accordingly to the rules of nature, acting within the framework of **space and time**. Well, in fact it isn't technically impossible to make architecture move, neither isn't it impossible to have dancers perform a static dance. However, the magical happens to be greater in our imagination than in reality. Let's say, it is architecture's virtue that excludes technical support in our question.

From the architects' point of view there is that inherent contradiction of how to give shape to an immobile building that is to represent a mobile art. The subject includes the potential danger to design a building that pretends to be in motion which is by nature deceiving. While architecture thus isn't able to dance, it nevertheless might be able to be moving anyway, in another, a more inspiring way. The challenge therefore is to work out an appropriate way of representation. For only our imagination is actually able to shift space into motion. Strategically, it only can be the intention to design a building that radiates a stimulating spirit towards movement on whomever user, the public, the audience as well as performers and choreographers.

The question arises; what kind of quality or attitude does a building to be equipped with in order to emit a stimulating spirit towards the moving? Is it the illuminating dynamic of our mindset?

Apparently, the dynamic is inevitably connected to time. For movement takes a certain amount of time to transform from one point to another. Referring to Rosalind E. Krauss, author and art historian, meaning is bound to time as well, that is the time of its recognition. In "Passages in Modern Sculptures" she writes that "meaning does not precede experience but occurs in the process of experience itself". She points out two important aspects when puzzling about ways of representation. She basically says that meaning occurs as an immediate phenomenon in the very moment of the encounter between men and art. And she calls this moment a process, which is her

reference to time, the time it takes to experience, associate, reflect, contemplate as well as to recognize and conclude⁴.

However, the recognition of a building resembling something else literally, let's say a "dancing building" would be a very immediate and short one nevertheless it could be very powerful. Yet the moment of sensation vanishes with its recognition. Once the design purpose is figured out the sensation is gone. A building, in order to resemble the art of dancing more authentically and abstractly is rather to imitate a dancer's attitude instead of its mere appearance. Therefore its sensation must be extended over time just like a dance that takes its time. A building's sensation must even be extended over the whole time of its existence.

Focusing on architecture's temporal character might be a plausible approach towards stimulating a dynamic feeling of space.

"But the moving becomes more clear if the space and time around the moving are one of its opposites - stillness." says Merce Cunningham. However, the difficulty is that architecture's presence is really spatially dominated whereas its temporal qualities are rather subtly present. Gottfried Lessing, who is quoted by Rosalind E. Krauss, provides a very interesting understanding of the temporal character of a body in space: "All bodies, however, exist not only in space but also in time. They continue, and at any moment of their continuance, may assume a different appearance and stand in different relations. Every one of these momentary appearances and groupings was the result of a preceding, may become the cause of the following, and is therefore the centre of a present action." Lessing gives us a highly promising clue, since his notion of the always changing appearance and relationships of bodies in space and time, proposes the promise of movement without physically moving⁵.

French theorist Lefebvre points out that the single point perspective and visualisation are ideological constructs which define the perception of space and of bodies within it; and it is through these spatial relationships that subjectivities, or notions about individual actions and discourses and the individual's understanding of his/her own experience, are constructed or socially agreed/imposed upon. Dance and architecture can organise space following a logic of perspectival visualisation but they can also disrupt this logic by creating 'in-between' spaces.

The specific approach however doesn't really matter. What matters is the importance of the awareness of a building's representational power and how to apply it appropriately. For architects are communicators and real magicians at once, studying the challenge of how to finally conjure up something magical, through communicating their imagination. This is what really separates architecture from a mere building.

Meaning, as we saw it, reveals in the immediate event of sensation.

That is the moving in us.

*"Some form of changing process remains for us to feel and cannot be expelled. Awareness of change is the condition on which our perception of time's flow depends."*⁶

Those of us who are concerned with buildings tend to forget too easily that all the life and soul of a place, all of our experiences there, depend not simply on the physical environment, but on the patterns of events which we experience there. We know, then, that what matters in a building or a town is not its outward shape, its physical geometry alone, but the events that happen there... (Juhani Pallasmaa)

After understanding the relationship between space, time and movement, this chapter will focus on how, then, should these elements and events be placed within the existing urban fabric and the experience of travelling that is born with it.

"The human body brings space to life and dance into being. And the choreographic placement of dancers' bodies describes the volume within which dance is performed. Choreography itself consists of a changing series of images built upon combinations of the human body. For that reason empty space between dancers is as critical as the space each occupies." (Armstrong & Morgan)

The spaces between elements within the built environment are therefore just as essential as the space each element inhabits. It is the space in-between that electrifies the individual element with life and expression. **Exploring this inter-relation between body, space and movement; to create an architectural framework that accentuates, modifies, dissolves and stimulates human movement, celebrating the dance of human body in its most natural phenomenon becomes the underlining purpose of the design.**

Dance is a tool for communication and only through multi disciplinary communication will it be meaningful and interact with the urban space. Interaction between performer and

audience needs to be intensified and a successful performance venue should definitely go beyond the box container type. **The urban space should become the performance space.**

Dance, in this case, is a collective portrayal of a number of events – the gathering of the choreographers and dancers, the lively street performance, the participation of public, the daily dance of urban life, etc. All these events are to be infused in the street environment so that it infuses **urban liveliness and public activity into the city space.**

The addition of new events and dance activities onto an existing street involves a change in the urban setting. As a result, it will generate a new response, a new urban drama to unfold each day. This interaction between public movement and the urban fabric will **create a variety of rhythms**, influencing the daily events and individual narratives, creating a new **sense of place.**

The conceptual framework for the design translation is based on enhancing the experience through an urban space. This is achieved by celebrating the **phenomenon of movement** and exploring its interrelation with body and space. The intention is to create a diversity of urban experience, with a **rhythmic content** that informs the body and mind of its user thereby influencing movement through the urban space. This would in turn make each individual user of that space a **choreographer**, composing his/her dance as one moves through the space.

REFERENCES

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