Embodying architecture, studying dance: movement as means of studying body-space relationship

V. Safak Uysal, Markus Wilsing

University of Bilkent,
Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture
Department of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design
Ankara, Turkey

ABSTRACT

Body, even at its most still form, is the most violent against the acclamations of architectural space formulated in terms of a “search for the order in the environment”. It leans against the wall, hits the table, falls over the bed, approaches the window case, shakes and trembles in empty space: in short, it moves; it is alive. However violently, the presence of the human being is the fundamental input for the architectural practice since it is an art of creating spaces to enhance the living conditions of the human being. In recognizing the violent character of the body, we must include not only the real bodily movement, but also the extensions of that movement which we make in imagination. In this study, the authors discuss the possibilities of studying theatrical dance in order to understand the body-space relationship, constructing an analogy to the contact improvisation technique. Use of space in performance is examined on a two dimensional model: one dimension marked by body and space at its extremes, and the other marked by the affirmative and the negative types of interaction. The schema provides one with a general categorization that classifies space as (1) background, (2) motivator, (3) partner in dialogue, (4) mental counterpart. The limitations brought about by the universal approach are mentioned at the end, in order to be approached within the following study.

1 INTRODUCTION

Contact improvisation is a dance form which focuses on “establishing a physical and kinetic familiarity” with one’s partner through senses of touch and on “engaging in supporting each other’s weight” as the two partners move in constant flow. In contact, the geography of the body is regarded differently than it would be in other movement techniques. Rather than distinguishing the body by its parts, contacters think “more of the body surfaces as planes of support” (Bronet and Schumacher 1999). The tactile experience of getting-in-touch with the other’s body is what constitutes the essence of contact, as the ongoing flow resulting in continuous movement is accompanied by a sense of flowing of one into the other’s body “which feels like an extension/part” of the one through touch (Potuoglu 1996).
Making use of an analogy to contact improvisation technique, we will refer to the body and the space as two partners in contact. The ways in which they relate to each other as they share weight and move in constant flow is going to be the base of our argument. Most importantly, we feel the need to emphasize the “experience of the other as an extension of one’s self” in contact improvisation since such an understanding of partnership will be helpful in differentiating our stand-point from other approaches in which the bodily experience is already presupposed as being apart from space.

Thus, in the obscurity of their unlimitedness, bodies can be distinguished only where ‘contacts’ of amorous or hostile struggles are inscribed on them. This is a paradox of the frontier: created by contacts, the points of differentiation between bodies are also their common points. Conjunction and disjunction are inseparable in them. Of two bodies in contact, which one possesses the frontier that distinguishes them? Neither. Does that amount to saying: no one? (de Certeau qtd. in Potuoglu 1996)

Potuoglu recalls de Certeau’s regards on the “marking of a boundary” as an indispensable aspect of any ‘spatial practice,’ including Contact Improvisation”. Therefore, establishing boundaries and inscribing “frontiers” is accounted for as being inevitable for the continuous flow into the other or the practice of the “bridge”.

Every frontier is simultaneously a bridge: every flowing into is also a way of hardening edges, articulating a boundary….Why not appropriate this double stance of any “contact”—establishing both a frontier and a bridge—for conceptualizing the already “never fixed/in-flux” bodies? Weren’t they constantly trying to differentiate themselves from Others while dying to loosen those boundaries in order to flow? (Potuoglu 1996)

Thus, in our analogy, the body and the space are in a constant struggle to differentiate one’s self from the other on that thin line which marks the boundaries of both—the skin—and to loosen those boundaries in order to experience the flow into one another. As the two collide into each other’s territory through such partnership, a new unite entity is born, named “bodyspace”. The new-born’s total weight will sometimes be supported by merely the body, the space’s feet off the ground as it is being lifted by the body, as in the case of BODYspace (↑[ ], or, rather, the space will take the place of the supporter in order to lift the body off the ground, as in the case of bodySPACE (↑[]). At times, they will work in perfect co-operative companionship, both keeping their contact with the ground as they share each other’s weight, as in the case of BODYSSPACE ([][]). Such placing feet on the ground is only to declare one’s independent existence within the limits of mutual dependency—by way of affirming each other’s existence. Or, the spectres of both will meet in their total denial of each other—a negative body in a negative space—as in the case of bodyspace ([][]).

As we move along, we will:
(1) collect visual data from a number of choreographic pieces, through the analysis of which we have been able to schematize the experience of the “bodyspace”—in still photographs,
(2) make room for, rather descriptive, commentaries related to the choreographies at hand—in italics,
(3) enlist a series of imaginary remarks that come to the mind of one particular viewer during his/her participation in the performance as audience—in footnotes of font size 10,
(4) describe the conceptual schema, at which we have arrived as the conclusion of our analysis, that is in the form of a(n) (in)complete circle centering around two coordinates—first having “body” at one extreme while having “space” on the other; and second having “affirmation” on one end, and “denial” on the other—as the major body of the text in font size 12.

2 BODYspace: SPACE AS BACKGROUND

BODYspace is the realm of the sovereign body, in which the body establishes, defines, describes, and perceives space with respect to, recalling Schlemmer, the laws of its subjective organic being (Schlemmer et al. 1961). As Kunst defines, “it is the body itself which through its premediated, well-designed movement and totally devotional form, reduces, and extends space, endowing with meaning through spatial relations” (1995).

...light goes on. We are confronted with a half-naked statue-like figure. A white male is pausing right there, in front of us: His upper body is bare while his lower body is disguised with a black-sheet wrapped around his waist like a skirt. I can’t even state that he is “standing”...the way in which the black cloth blends into the blank space that surrounds him does not let me place his feet on the ground (Figure 1). All that can be said is that he IS there, hanging in vastness; or rather, there IS he: detached from the proscenium-stage-box, the existence of which we are aware though we are not exactly able to visually approve as no light is giving life to it at the moment...

Figure 1: Cry, by Michael Popper

...is this the Michael I talked to the other day? I mean, I worked with this guy...attended a few workshops led by him...for someone who has already gotten to know him, would it be possible for one to look at this body on the stage as if he was “anyone”, and it was “any body”...
In this type of a relationship, the body, who is “capable of play and playing with spatial relationships”, turns into a residence for space through a process of abstraction. It is a body captured at the very moment of establishing the aesthetic perception of the set. The a priori definitions of up and down, left and right, front and back lose their meaning, and begin to be redefined since such acclamations are affirmed only along with the construction of these relations by the body moving in space (Kunst 1995).

...as he begins to move, we are temporarily and gradually detached from such awareness as well. That no stage is existent for us. No space is allowed to exist except that which is limited to the surface of his illuminated body and the volume it encapsulates...I mean, the man moves in wonders. He doesn’t even change his position throughout the whole piece, only making use of very slight weight shifts as his arms, head, and torso lead him. This is a body that says “nothing but me; thanks, I don’t need the rest”. As the lights went off, we—left without the only proof of the existence of space, to be embraced by the darkness which now corresponds to spacelessness for us—had to admit that it did not...this is about what the body can do all by itself...

Many examples of the avant-garde dance pursue a body that is the basic constructing element in the formation of space. In these examples, there is a certain degree of recognition towards the definitions brought about by the surrounding space, in which the body acts as an-other architectural element constantly in move; therefore, defining and redefining. The subject is in the position of exploring the architecturally defined space, acting out as violent as it can in order to search for ways to break the rules for such three-dimensional ordering of space. By way of introducing the time dimension, body is the authority who shapes the history of this totally new terrain, this unknown geography.

In Mikrokosmos, by Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, for instance, the audience is exposed to the full sight of a reading room at a library (Figure 2). The pace of her general choreographic style can be traced easily in this quartet where four women, as they move, create two and three-dimensional geometric constellations that constantly change shape and pattern.

...there is something uncanny about these women. The naturalistic look...hands going through the hair...clothes being adjusted...the beaten down look, still up against any type of frustration...the revealed ambivalence about the nature and role of the female gender...Would the piece feel the same with four men performing? Definitely not...

Figure 2: Mikrokosmos, by Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker
It can even be claimed that this is an architecturally designed piece in which the whole structure can be broken down into its constructing elements and principles familiar to us all from basic design courses.

...one side of the room is totally glass letting the daylight in, revealing every single detail in the emptied hall: the staircase, the grid patterns on the tile floor, the entrances and exits, the chairs piled in fours in front of the glass-wall...etc. These four ladies skip, and bend, and turn, and revolve, and blend into the wall in line but only to rush away in a cubic cluster, and sit on the floor, and break into groups in synchronized or in-canon movement sets, and repeat combinations to accentuate a rhythm that is—at times—accompanied by stamps on the floor, and so on...

It is the full-recognition of the tensions and definitions brought about by spatial constructs that is suggested in Mikrokosmos. Setting boundaries as they move in linear and planar configurations, or creating volumes as they stand on the corners of a square, these four bodies are formally restructuring the space in which they activate. In the meantime, the viewer’s imagination is asked to fill in the extensions implied by their movements in order to recognize the planar and volumetric relationships. Of course, the role of the almost virtuosic synchronization in which they perform cannot be denied in identifying such relationships at ease.

...as these women move off the walls, against which they were touching only an instant ago, it is as if they are the carrying columns built into the wall that come alive and start wandering about the space they happen to bound...

In BODYspace type of relationship, therefore, the space is a differentiated Cartesian space, or, at its extreme, one that does not even exist. However, it is the body—which relies on the capabilities of its own kinesphere in order to create space and establish itself through choreographed kinetic/four-dimensional relations—whose primacy is observed, differentiating space either right from the beginning, or relying on the already existing three-dimensional structure to carry such differentiation even further.

3 BodySPACE: SPACE AS MOTIVATOR

BodySPACE, contrary to the BODYspace, is a realm where the primacy of space over the body is observed. The sovereignty of space that is acclaimed in this type of a relationship calls for a transformed body which is forced to assume an attitude towards the concept that is put forth by spatial constructs. The performance space is not merely a background, but, rather, it is a constructed set that reflects the other components of the performance. It will function primarily as an autonomous new world that provides a perspective through which the functions of the body can be conceived (Kunst 1995).
...in Magnanimous Cuckold, “Popova did not paint a set but instead built a construction, an autonomous installation...The wooden structure was composed of two windows and two doors, ladders, platforms, wheels and the blades of a watermill [Figure 3]...Essentially it was a spatial formula whose components, as well as their interactions and correlations, were abstracted and reduced to a minimum level of expression...It was through action that Popova’s construction came to life. Energy seemed to pulse through all the crossbeams and planes, stimulating the performances of the actors...In performance, action and construction were inseperable” (Kovalenko 1991) ...

Though activated by taking part in the functioning of the new construct, the body is given a passive position in the new construct. The constructed space that is absolute and totalitarian will transform and reflect the body—which will appear mostly as an abstracted figure—within this new world, and will attempt to establish it as a new body for a new space.

“...actors could forget the existence of a painted backdrop, but they could not help taking all the elements of the construction into account as its spaces and rhythms defined all of their movement possibilities. The use of such a construction in Cuckold demanded not just actors trained in a certain technique, that of Meyerhold’s biomechanics, but also a new kind of theatrical costume. All the actors were dressed in identical work uniforms” (Kolesnikov 1991)...

Instead of the body turning into a residence for space, in bodySPACE, the body is asked to invent new modes of self-realization in the new environment. These inventions could be taking the form of new movement techniques, as in the case of Meyerhold’s biomechanics in Magnanimous Cuckold, or move towards a gradual abstraction of the body, as in the case of Schlemmer’s marionette in Triadic Ballet (Schlemmer 1961). Within this totalitarian view, the body is pictured as incapable of meeting the demands of the conceptual construct. The physical and natural limitations of the human form are suspended and/or replaced with new means of expression in order to be able to adapt to the laws of the primate-space.

...is it possible to look at the images projected by these machine-like bodies without frustration? Doesn’t this—and others alike—architectural utopia suggest a mechanistic way of living ornamented with a futurist touch? Is this what I look like from outside when I think I am in harmony with the whole? An anonymous “me” performing for the good of the “system”...

Figure 3: The Magnanimous Cuckold, by Liubov Popova
E.T.A. Hoffman and Heinrich von Kleist are those who kept Schlemmer company in liberating man from his physical restrictions and in enlarging his freedom of movement beyond one’s capability. The results could go even further as the organism, which is substituted with the mechanical human figure, is “recast to fit its mold” in order to obey the laws of the sovereign space. Gordon Craig is also another example who asked the actor to leave the stage to be replaced by the inanimate figure Ubermarionette. The possibilities suggested by the Bauhaus will go as far as imagining plays whose plots consist of nothing more than the pure movement of forms, color and light; all spatial components, therefore asking for the total literal abolition of the human body off the stage space (Schlemmer 1961).

The new space of the bodySPACE is,

therefore in its final consequence a mechanical or artificial space, in which the body is replaced by an automaton, a cold anthromorphic being, an intelligent machine. The other possibility, which is more in favor of the body as a means of expression and does not abolish it per negationem, seeks a body which functions differently, which brings about new modes of expression. (Kunst 1995)

4 BODYSPACE: SPACE AS PARTNER IN DIALOGUE

Rami Be’er’s use of the stage space will carry the discussion to a point at which the body and the space are affirmatively related to each other, neither one emposing primacy over the other (Figure 4). In Aide Memoire, the frontal area of a comparatively large stage space is designated for the use of a body that, through its kinetic experience, re-formulates the spatial relations.

Figure 4: Aide Memoire, by Rami Be’er

However, at the back, eight panel-walls are placed in a row, each twice as high as a human body, and side by side with body-wide intervals in between. They seem to
provide the entrances and exits to and from the space as well as introducing the idea of physical contact that can take place between the body and the space.

...the dark empty space that is disguised by the panels provides an illusionary effect as the moving bodies disappear into darkness or appear at once from behind. While this illusion forces us to question what is really there (the body or the space?), such an encounter ends in the co-operative work of the body and the space as the dancers begin to lean against the panels, hang off the sides, and share their weights with the wall as they move...

These wall-like structures are not merely practical/functional architectural devices that permit performers to hide behind. If these are ever to be called tools, they should be defined as the spatial-other with which the body physically and autonomously realises its own self by way of confrontation. Paying back, these devices always keep company, intervening in the way the body moves, letting it shape through or be shaped by such interaction. “There is no movement without the wall and no wall without the movement” (Kunst 1995). Kunst defines the realm of the BODYSYSTEM as that of the physical relationship: it is therefore the relationship of the concept within which space conceptualises and forms movement, while on the other hand it is only the body, through its total physical devotion and power, which actually defines it as a physical space. The audience observes an interdependent motion relationship realised in the exploited physical body and in the space in which practical and symbolic functions merge.

The co-productive body of the BODYSYSTEM lies at the essence of many of Lloyd Newson’s pieces, who exemplifies works of physical theatre with DV8, as well:

Figure 5: Strange Fish, by Lloyd Newson

...in Strange Fish, a male-female duet stroke me with their including of the wall literally as the third partner, as if the sequence was a trio. Again in the same piece, I can recall a series of instances: a female Christ figure falling off the cross moving about it; another woman struggling on a stone-covered floor where she leaves her traces as she moves, only to uncover the surface of the wooden floor at certain places.
In Enter Achilles, eight males create wonders during their contact with physical space and objects: sliding on the counters of an English-pub, jumping off the billard table, one of them letting the beer-soaked rug shape his body, another letting a football motivate him in delicately rounded moves. In Dead Dreams, three men climb on each other and on the side of a wall to experience victory in grabbing a bar attached to the wall only to lose it in seconds, sliding and falling off the wall’s surface (Figure 6)...

In all of the above instances, body and space work in a mutually affirmative manner: both stand on their own feet, declaring their own primacy; however, neither one emposing its superiority over the other. “It is therefore a relationship in which space is not conceived and established as a construct which…demands its own body; a relationship in which the body does not attempt to imitate the activation of the prime mover, which draws spatial relations with its own kinetic relationships” (Kunst 1995). What takes place instead is that they co-operate, touching each other at a level of physical co-existence. Such cooperation, in one way or the other, relies completely on actual physical contact that takes place between body and physical constructs establishing the performance space.

5 Bodyspace: SPACE AS MENTAL COUNTERPART

Bodyspace is the realm of the alienated body in an alienated space. The two experience a negatively constructed relationship that relies on their total denial of each other. There is no contact taking place, as there is neither the body nor the space to have contact with. In order to exemplify such alienation, let us take a look at another short piece by Anne Teresa, Monologue:

...what of the homoeroticism suggested by these beautiful and not-afraid-to-take-risk bodies? Colliding into each other...hitting...torturing...how they turn the four-wall trap into a gay space through their actions...Is this what happens when there is no passive female figure to “handle”? Hard male oppression on another male...

Figure 6: Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men, by Lloyd Newson

...a hesitant face on a flat, pure white background. She looks undecided whether to begin speaking or not. Words come out in pain. Rather than the words themselves, though, it is her face that makes me feel the pain. As she speaks, she begins to fasten her pace gradually increasing the speed of words coming out of her mouth. She looks
detached. Totally ripped off from the white wall behind, she gradually speeds up till, at one point, words don’t seem like they are spoken by her. Nothing to hold on to during this endless fall through a pure white abyss (Figure 7)...

...it is as if she takes flight as her spoken words leave her behind. I feel lost in space…running out of breath…As she slows down, it is my breathing that drags, too…so much that I need to inhale a big pack of oxygen when finally the piece is over. My body realises that it’s been relying on low supply during this five-minute-long flight...

Figure 7: **Monologue, by Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker**

Once the body is abolished in bodySPACE, we moved further, to re-contact the body in an undifferentiated Cartesian space to see it floating and alienated. The space is neutralized in such a way that it provides the body with no clues to be motivated, or to violate. The body cannot focus neither on creating space nor occupying it because there is a gap in between. The spatial contact which replaces the physical contact occurring between the body and space causes the body to be elevated from the ground, and loose contact with any other type of mark that would normally allow the body to orientate itself in three-dimensional space.

This is a realm where the body does not physically touch the space, but the space-in-between (body-space) is imagined as part of the body in order to sustain contact while not touching. A, rather, spatial touch can be spoken of as the body-space touches the space and interacts with it. The body moves away, but still remains in touch. Such a negatively constructed relationship will detach the body from space in order to let it float. Once the space also begins to move away, and let its space-space interact with the body-space, then, the interaction will totally take place “in” an imaginary space which does not physically exist. The two interactors are already out of sight, and one approves the primacy stated by the other, paradoxically, through negation and denial.

“...motions in a void needing bodies...and not just any motions...though a computer production, these bodies are as true to life as possible, with no computerized moves to violate the constraints of the human anatomy or the laws of the physical world. The sound of their breathing, their footsteps, even as they are off-view...scratches all over, as they are drawn “on” empty space with invisible pens to be erased by, again, invisible erasers (Figure 8)...The dancers appear as life-size drawings emerging from the darkness and moving in an apparently limitless three-dimensional space. Though the dancers are visible on three screens, they move through a much larger virtual
area, and so travel in and out of projected image, often traversing the spectators’ space” (compiled from Riverbed’s website)...

The virtual environment, in which Merce Cunningham’s *Hand Drawn Spaces* takes place, is one that is neutral and undifferentiated. Because of the imaginary quality, any movement can happen at any time. Such cyber characteristics involve a new type of freedom and anonymity; however, this freedom does not provide a comfort such as that suggested in BODYSPACE. The mutual affirmation and co-operation that is observed in BODYSPACE is counteracted here, as the body and space run into mutual negation and denial, becoming alienated from one another. The freedom that is provided suggests no fit at all. “Nor is movement catalyzed or implied” (Bloomer & Moore 1977).

...alien, in a sense, they are because they move too well, having lost the little accidents and the secondary motions that give actual movements their individual and unrepeatable character. Instead, these are hand drawn figures embodying a dance. A rib-cage built from spirals, a pelvis made up of knots...drawn bodies, completed as they are inhabited by the ghost-like movements of motion-capture that let you feel the effort, balance, resistance, and tension going on underneath...

**Bodyspace** type of relationship, then, assumes an overmanipulated body which is totally passive. The interaction takes place at a mental level, in a space which is “realized in electronically stimulated sensation” (Bloomer & Moore 1977). Neither agent is physically activated, but become part of the interaction through involvement of its spectre. The imaginary spaces collide into each other in order to celebrate anonymity. Even in its negation of space, which is never equal to ignorance or subordination, the body recreates it and its autonomy, and vice versa (Kunst 1995).

![Figure 8: Hand Drawn Spaces, by Merce Cunningham](image)

6 CONCLUSION

“The demand for autonomy for stage space causes a change in the very essence of certain aesthetic components of performance; it forces them to find for themselves a
Figure 9: Bodyspace schema

**BODYSPACE**

Space as Partner in Dialogue

_Aide Memoire, Strange Fish, Enter Achilles, Dead Dreams…_

Full contact
COOPERATIVE BODY-
COOPERATIVE SPACE

AFFIRMATIVE RELATIONSHIP

BODY-BASED
Mikrokosmos

LESS contact
ACTIVE BODY-
DIFFERENTIATED
SPACE

SPACE-BASED
Magnanimous Cockold
Triadic Ballet

TRANSFORMED
BODY-CONSTRUCTED
SPACE

BODY-BASED
Inner contact
PASSIVE BODY-
SUBJECTIVIZED
SPACE

SPACE-BASED
Monologue

Gap in between
FLOATING BODY-
UNDIFFERENTIATED
SPACE

NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIP

Bodyspace

Space as Mental Counterpart

_Hand Drawn Spaces_

No Contact
ALIENATED BODY-
ALIENATED SPACE

BodySPACE

Space as Motivator for Movement

Bodyspace

Space as Stage for Movement

Cry

PRIMATE BODY

Bodyspace

Space as Stage for Movement

Cry

PRIMATE BODY

Bodyspace

Space as Stage for Movement

Cry

PRIMATE BODY

Bodyspace

Space as Stage for Movement

Cry

PRIMATE BODY
new aesthetics” (Kunst 1995). So far, we have described the basic types of relationships between body and space based on our arguments regarding “primacy” and “recognition” with examples from a number of choreographic pieces. The dynamic structure of this relationship is examined from a universal and “totalizing” perspective: one that is rather objective. One dimension of this two-dimensional world is marked by the primate body and the primate space at the extremes. The other dimension is defined with respect to the positivity or negativity of the constructed relationship. The affirmative relationship relies largely on Bojana Kunst’s conceptualization of the relationship between theatrical body and theatrical space. The negative relationship, on the contrast, owes its roots to a number of concepts borrowed from the architectural field. However, the lack of concern for the subjective experience is especially the latent emphasis of this paper, existence of which we have tried to affirm through the commentaries (in italics) and the footnotes (of size 10).

The multi-layer structure of the relationship between body and space requires one to handle a number of perspectives all at once. The apparent contribution suggested by the analysis forms imported from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, philosophy…etc. has been asking one to respond to the demand for the “self-referential” from the post-structuralist era on. Performance studies recently have been affected from various methodologies suggested by a series of lines of thoughts: “what is the relative importance of anatomy, training, and cultural conditioning in the construction of female and male body images in dance?”, will ask the feminist analyst… “why does the body move the way it does, how does the way it moves relate to its relationship with space?”, will ask the ethnograph… “how do I experience the moving body in space as I try to capture its immediacy of being-in-the-world?”, will ask the phenomenologist…and many others. The footnotes and the italicized commentaries of this paper also do stand on a similar ground, which relies on the experience of the subject. The approach described throughout the paper, though attempts to provide a complete picture in defining the physical aspects of the body-space relationship, seems to fall short in covering aspects as such because of its objective characteristics. Therefore, what these aspects add to performance studies as an analysis criterion is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is obvious that such questions cannot be disregarded once the body and the space are questioned with respect to their (and that of the audience’s) subjectivity. Leaving the introduction of these concepts as they are used in analytical thinking to a later stage, this paper builds the ground for the study of these methodologies as analytical tools in performance studies. Later on, whether, and more importantly, how, these analyses can be utilized during the design process—in educating students who are concerned with and aware of the position of the body with respect to the architectural space—is the subject of further question marks. After all, the architect also functions like a choreograph—one that relies on the principles of improvisation—as the authority who constructs the main structure, in which the overall development of the piece can be realized. Through the realization of the relationships he or she defines, the architect does suggest a certain way of moving, that is living. The wide range of possibilities ranging from the BODYSPACE to bodyspace lays out the first layer in defining this certain manner in living. The rest will follow.
7 REFERENCES


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