

Between the Lines: Experiencing Space Through Dance

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Abstract

'They will hear with a third ear what is said here between the lines – and even what is left unsaid.' (Reik, 1949)

How can a space affect us and we affect a space? How can we encourage architecture students to close the distance between themselves and the built environment? **This case study records/relays/reflects on an innovative workshop that enabled first year architecture students to deepen their understanding of architectural space through dance.** The aim of the workshop in question was to explore a variety of spaces through the whole body (and its owner/the person within it/embedded/entwined); the way that space influences people and people influence space. The workshop had a deep impact on the students involved; increasing their focus on the experiential qualities of space.

Keywords: Architecture, Experiential Learning, Dance, Design studio, Interdisciplinary Learning

Good Practice Points

- The workshop encouraged the students to take risks by throwing them into the unknown of another discipline, thus building their confidence and their ability to question their own barriers, boundaries and self-imposed limitations.
- The students were given the opportunity to experiment with another discipline in order to further their understanding of their own subject.
- The collaborative and experimental nature of the workshop along with the group tasks allowed the students the opportunity to bond as a group and improve their team work skills; building trust and support to respect each individual's contribution to the group, and improving the sense of individual responsibility to group work.
- The workshop brought together many students that had not previously worked together, therefore students were allowed the opportunity to work with different people and break out of the usual student groupings. This built their confidence to communicate with different types of people and adapt working approaches accordingly.
- Students gathered skills to experience and represent space that they can draw on in future work and had their minds opened to other possibilities for development, for example beginning to expand the ways in which architecture might be represented and communicated. Students go on to challenge typical architectural drawings and presentations.
- Working in a very different way to their usual working practice, the students gained a less definable and more holistic understanding of space.
- In the context of representing space the students were able to begin to conceptualise and abstract ideas/information and thus find a way to get to the essence of an idea/observation.
- Students were given the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences and to discuss their own and other students' work, thus encouraging self-reflection and constructive criticism.
- Mentoring has an important part to play in facilitating the freedom of students' explorations whilst providing a safety net.

Introduction

Typical architectural representation has been criticised for focussing too much on the visual – what we can see of the building (Lawson, 1997, p 24). While attention to the visual is obviously necessary, relying primarily on sight has its limitations. *'More than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sees at a distance and maintains a distance'* (Irigary, 1998, p 74). However, we experience architecture with our whole being – the feeling of light on our skin, the isolation of being in a large space alone, the texture of the floor surface, the warmth of the space and the smell of new timber, the muffled sound of a small, carpeted space, or the echoes in a large hard surfaced room. The way in which these experiences combine is fundamental to the way that we feel about architecture and our relationship with it.

'Architecture is made by design and by use' Hill (1998, p 11). It is the former that is presumed to be the architect's domain. This workshop challenged this assumption, with the intention of enabling students to develop an experiential understanding of space in use. It also gave students techniques to represent that understanding through another discipline - dance. It asked students to *"empty your mind of all other thoughts...stop looking and start feeling your environment... strive toward meaning by drawing from within your psyche"* (Sullivan, 1995, p 8).

Method

Background

The workshop came together through collaboration with an architecture studio tutor and an independent dance artist. Initially held in 2001, it has been repeated annually, involving around 20 students from the School of Architecture at the University of Sheffield. As it has been repeated four times, it has been reflected upon and refined, so for the purposes of this case-study we will focus on the most recent workshop in 2004.

'Between the lines' was an optional component of a project for level 1 architecture students. The option is one of five options within an umbrella project for all level 1 students (the whole level 1 cohort is usually around 100). The numbers are limited to 20 as beyond that the group would become unmanageable for this kind of work. The umbrella project aimed to explore understanding and representation of space through a variety of disciplines. In this option the discipline was dance.

Workshop Outline

The workshop had two main sections, the first to experience the space and the second to represent it. The students were led through a series of task-based exercises, giving them the tools to explore a space experientially, and then to use their discoveries to

represent it with their bodies. However, there was a parallel aim to develop group-working skills and team building.

The workshop was structured around the following outline:

- Introduction
- Move to 'outside the studio' location
- Ice-Breaking

Section 1: Experiencing Space

- One-minute to change a room
- Creating a biography of a space
- An alternative measuring exercise

Section 2: Representing Space

- Representation task 1
- Lunch
- Warm-up exercise
- Representation task 2
- Performance
- Group discussion and reflection

Introduction Aware of the usual reaction of non-performing arts students to such an activity, the term 'dance' was avoided in advance of the workshop (reference was instead made to the 'use of the body') and then used only once a clear definition was established at the outset of the workshop. The term was defined to give dance the broadest vocabulary, using any movement the body is able to achieve; a shrug of the shoulders or shake of the head as valid as any turn or jump, roll or fall. This freed us of any preconceived notions of dance as a codified/stylised form and some reluctance from students who cry 'I can't dance!'

A brief introductory presentation commenced the day. This consisted of a short introduction justifying the need to consider bodies in space and how dance specifically can be of relevance to architecture, as well as introducing ourselves as tutors. Mindful of our aim to give the students an experiential (as opposed to analytical/cerebral) understanding of themselves and space, this introduction was kept to a minimum.

Move to 'outside the studio' location Moving to a new environment (the drama studio) to begin the practical part of the workshop has proved helpful to allow the students to leave behind their usual ways of working and approach the workshop with an open mind.

Ice Breaking If you can picture the panic on the faces of 1st year architecture students when they realise they will be ‘dancing’ all day and not writing notes or sketching ideas, you’ll realise the need for a good warm-up! These necessarily must involve the tutors losing their own inhibitions in order to put others at ease to do the same. Initially the aim is to get everyone comfortable with each other and to get used to moving their bodies. These exercises included a throw and catch name-learning game (throw the ball and shout the name of the person you are throwing it to), a brain-wakening game of Zip, Zap, Boing (actions passed between participants with different rules for different actions), and passing a sound and movement around a circle. These games have proved to be excellent to help students lose inhibitions/lower their defences and increase willingness to participate and experiment in later tasks.

Section 1 Experiencing Space

One-minute to change a room Due to the fear induced by the word ‘dance’ and the likely lack of experience in this art form, we felt it essential to develop the workshop incrementally. Therefore, after the initial inhibition-losing warm-up, we continued with a series of short instructions to encourage students to work together. They were given one minute to complete instructions such as ‘make the room unfriendly’, ‘make the room smaller’, ‘make the space softer’ etcetera, using only their bodies. These exercises were successful in continuing to develop more trust between the students while introducing the possibility that people can alter the mood of a space. The time limit also restricted their thinking time thus encouraging more instinctive reactions, unfamiliar to some of the more pragmatic analytic students, and necessary skills for the remainder of the workshop.

Creating a biography of a space Having made everyone at ease, bonded the group and got everyone ‘thinking on their feet’, the students were given slightly longer tasks to encourage them to experience space with all the senses. Working alone, they were asked to find a space within the room and to be in that space with their eyes closed. They were then led through a multi-sensorial exploration of that space:

- **Touch** - exploring the texture and temperature with hands as well as the whole body.
- **Sound** – listening to the sounds outside the room, inside the room and inside themselves, how do they affect each other?
- **Smell** – Observing the smells and how they make you feel.
- **Sight** – Seeing the light source through the eyelids, then opening the eyes and observing what can be seen of your smaller space and its view.

The students noted down their observations and experiences of being in that space to create their own biography of it. Short extracts were shared to get a snapshot of other people’s experiences in their spaces. This task was added to the 2004 workshop in

response to the previous observation that the students were reluctant to take time to really experience a space and realise its subtleties. Instead they tended to use the senses to come to a quick and finite conclusion about the space. It appeared a very successful addition, with students sharing personal reflection and deep observation.

An alternative measuring exercise The next task returned the students to group work and moved up to explore a larger space. Students were asked to 'measure the space in as many ways as you can think of using only your bodies'. The aim with this exercise was for the students to gain a personal experience of the space by physically measuring with their own bodies. The students were encouraged to develop their conceptual thinking, looking beyond the dimensions of the space and conventional measuring devices. Initially the students have tended to focus on the proportions and work individually. With direction they began to work more experientially and as a group, e.g. measuring the length of the room by lying the group head to toe on the floor and counting how many people's heights fit into the length. Once they nearly exhausted proportional measurements they started to think about how they could measure other aspects of the room (eg. the brightness of the light, the acoustics, the hardness of the walls). This task asks the students to think about themselves in relationship with the space and how their bodies can be used to make practical observations about the space as well as emotional ones. The exercise benefits from additional guidance and coaching to maintain motivation and expand possibilities beyond the most predictable.

Section 2 Representing Space

The second section used the knowledge gained through the first section and introduced ways to represent space. This is where the 'dance' came in. Observing that students tended to err towards mime and find abstraction difficult, in the latest workshop the following task was modified to introduce these skills incrementally; to lead them easily towards the creation of a small group choreography and prevent the students feeling out of their depth along the way.

Representation task 1 The first representation task gave them the skills to learn how to make 'movement material' (this is dance-speak for 'the steps') and then how to form this material into a choreographed statement/piece. In groups the students were given tasks looking at different aspects of the space:

- A movement 'sketch' - Each student chose 2 different body parts to associate to two different features in the space and sketched (in movement) that feature with its respective body part; eg – right elbow 'draws' the corner of the room and links to the left hip drawing the window frame. These 'drawings' might be literal sketches in the air or might be more abstracted. This was then taught to the others in the

group and joined with the other students' two movements to create one phrase of movement.



Figures 1 and 2: Student work from workshop: reinforcing spatial characteristics

- Characteristics – The students added to the phrase by making observations about the emotional characteristics of the space (eg. hard/soft, friendly/unfriendly, functional, flamboyant etc) and changed the dynamics, rhythms and qualities of the movements to reflect these observations.
- Behaviour – The students then developed their movement phrase further, adding another layer. Observing how the space creates ritual and affects behaviour, and allowing this to inform decisions about where to place each individual in space, if and where they move through the space and when they do the movement in relation to each other.

This series of tasks resulted in each group having a small choreography, which was presented to the other groups. The 'audience' were asked to make observations about the space gleaned from the choreography itself. The point of performance was probably the most exposing and vulnerable moment for the students up to this point. However, by this stage in the workshop they had gained in confidence and trust within the overall group and thus proved able to present their choreography with sufficient confidence and conviction to fulfil the task (some even revelling in the opportunity!). This completed the morning session.

Warm-up Following a lunch break an additional warm-up should be included. This re-invigorates students and picks up the energy levels, which clearly dipped at this stage in the latest workshop.

Representation task 2 This final task was set to allow students to utilise the skills learnt throughout the morning and explore the ideas for themselves. Students were asked to work in small groups and create a site-specific representation. They were given the freedom to choose a space in or around the immediate vicinity (in this case on the university grounds so as not to encounter any problems of permission). They were asked to:

- Plan a way to experience the space.

- Go and do it!
- In the space or back in the studio, design a way to represent and/or comment on the space and their experience of it.
- Implement this (as far as possible).

This was the longest task of the workshop and an opportunity for the students to explore the skills learnt and ideas generated in the morning session. The students were mentored through the process, encouraging and assisting the generation of ideas, concept development and abstraction of ideas, as well as more practical mentoring about the choreographic construction (decisions about time and space, rhythm, dynamics, structure etc.). In all the workshops, some groups have worked more successfully than others, depending on the group dynamics and confidence of individuals within the group. However, with guidance and mentoring, they have all been able to work with sufficient co-operation to explore the space in a variety of different ways and generate ideas of how best to represent it.



Figure 3: David Ward and Sue MacLennan perform 'Dancing About Architecture' an art/dance residency at the Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield. 1989. Copyright: Getty Images

Performance The final part of the workshop involves the performance of their group representations. As the groups were given the choice of space and whether to perform in situ or back in the studio, a performance tour has been usual. This has proved to be fun and hugely revealing. It is clear how much the workshop has informed and influenced the students from the work produced. While it has varied enormously in quality, the work has always succeeded in the aim to represent a space. All works inform the audience. Some pieces have proven clear in communicating something about a space but may not have much subtlety; others may be very subtle but may be less clear in getting their message across. Occasionally some groups have succeeded in creating works both subtle and clear, with sophisticated use of dance vocabulary to express their ideas – really quite an achievement for level one architecture students!

For example, one group created a site-specific piece in the car park that was sophisticated in its exploration of ideas such as - using their movement in space to represent the flow of cars through the car park and using the rhythm of both the form of the site and the movement within it, to influence the rhythm and use of time within the choreography. They created movements that were abstracted and expressive without resorting to mime and succeeded in revealing and highlighting the characteristics of the space.

It is not, however the final piece of choreography that is important here. Rather the process of the creation and perhaps still the performance itself, which encourages students to think differently about a space, about people in a space and to learn through experiencing and then conceptualising/abstracting that experience. As a result a reflection and discussion period is considered to be essential.

Group discussion and reflection Following the final performance tour, the day was completed with a group discussion and reflection and documenting of feedback. The discussion reveals what the students have gained from the workshop, and is also an opportunity for those still reluctant students to question the relevance of the workshop (so far there has only been one student who has raised this at this stage). While as always, some students will have gained more than others from the workshop, the feedback has proven positive and revealed that the students have really taken in the possibilities discovered within the workshop.

Summary of feedback and the wider impact of the workshop

The feedback suggests that students found the workshop to be 'mind opening' and gave them a far deeper and experiential understanding of space, as one student commented: *'seeing a room as not just a space full of objects but an area where we interact, feel and experience many things both physically and emotionally'*. This holistic understanding is highlighted by almost all of the students involved, who gained an understanding of architecture as being more than just the formal arrangement/ordering of space, but also rooted in human experience. One student described the value of this as *'useful when designing our own buildings and rooms, in that we can take into consideration the people that may use these spaces and how we would like them to feel.'* This can be understood as developing in students an empathy for the users of the building that might help to counter the recent criticism of the architectural profession that exposes the inability of architects to relate to and represent the needs of clients and users (see for example RIBA, 1993; Stansfield Smith, 1999; Worthington, 2000, Andrews and Derbyshire, 1993; Egan, 1998).

The workshop also opened their minds to the breadth of ways of communicating ideas, and the value of abstraction in order to communicate the essence of things. This has been seen in their future work, with a few students taking the approach quite directly through into other projects, using movement pieces and choreography to represent

ideas in their design work, as well as choreographing their design presentations more carefully. Other students have clearly expressed an increased sensitivity to the experience and qualities of space that has been noted by tutors in their subsequent work.

The resulting students' work clearly shows a depth of understanding in the way in which space affects us as users, even highlighting issues such as the political nature of spaces. This paper argues that the addition of alternative perspectives by someone representing an 'other' voice can strengthen architectural education, enabling students to develop critical perspectives outside the boundaries of their own discipline. This, therefore, has relevance to educators aiming to develop critical and creative thinkers in any discipline.

Costs

The workshop incurred no additional costs apart from the fees of the dance artist. The 'Between the Lines: Experiencing Space Through Dance' workshop is available under CEBE's departmental workshop programme; for further details please see the CEBE website at <http://www.cebe.heacademy.ac.uk/news/events/depworkshops/index.php>.

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