

SOUL SEARCHING – SHALL WE DANCE?

Katherina Allo

Architect / Studio Instructor

Universitas Pelita Harapan
Department of Architecture
Karawaci, Tangerang 15811
Indonesia

katherina@uph.edu

SOUL SEARCHING – SHALL WE DANCE?

Keywords: movement, dance, rhythm, space, emotion

Abstract

Foundational year in architecture education always has this question of what actually makes a good foundation to build upon a future designer? Is it craftsmanship skills? Is it strong reasoning? Is it sensitivity to beauty? Or is it all of those things?

Those in earnest pursue for beauty will in time realize that while craftsmanship is vital to the creation of beauty, it will soon become merely a tool for repetition of things if the skills are not accompanied by wonder and curiosity for things that have never been encountered with before. And those in earnest pursue for beauty will also in time realize that there is more than reasoning for there are things that cannot be uttered in words, and that beauty relates to human emotion.

The more we look for beauty, the more we realize that it is more than just the visuals, the key is not to look at things but to look through them. It is about experiencing things.

Experience means moving, and being emotional means being moved (Bruno, 2002). How do we hone this emotional side in the initial process of forming a spacemaker? Movement is the element that relates space and time. Experiencing space is about moving in space and being moved by space.

This paper will look at how the understanding of movement relates to the process of spacemaking and how it could help architecture students in their foundational year grasp the idea of *experiencing space* and thus hone their sensitivity to the non-visual elements of beauty. It will discuss how other form of arts which concern mainly with body movements initiate their education for future artists and how coordination with time and space are exercised.

A studio's projects, *Working and Dwelling Space for a Dancer*, will be examined and discussed to see how the concept of dance composition can be translated into an organization of space and how the understanding of movements and the aspect of narration in the respective dance composition helps student to understand the idea of moving in space.

It will study how in a culture where dance is still an essential element to the many rituals and daily life of the people, the knowledge of traditional dance compositions would not merely be helpful in understanding local culture but it is crucial to find the spirit of the place and to continue the process of spacemaking.

1. Rhythm: Body, Space and Time

Rhythm has its way of regulating time and space that even chaos acknowledges its presence whether in a larger or smaller scale. It directly connects with three of our senses; hearing, sight, and touch. The senses of smell and taste are naturally linked with permeating elements although they are in fact rhythmically used by the regulating system of our breath or the mechanism of our oral cavity.

We can automatically feel rhythm with our sense of hearing, and frequently without the agreement of our conscience our body would move as a response to it. The relation is not the same with rhythm acquired by sight, our body does not automatically move to visual rhythm as it does to audio rhythm. Rasmussen (1959) has mentioned how Eric Mendelsohn and Frank Lloyd Wright had connected rhythm of music to their architecture. While Mendelsohn would need aspiration from Bach's to release his creative imagination and see architecture in great visions, Wright would hear music in his ear when he was moved by stirring architecture sights. But still to Rasmussen it did not explain clearly how the visual and audio rhythm are actually connected.

The connection between our sense of touch to audio rhythm may not be difficult to understand by those who play musical instruments. The parts of our body in fact do not require rhythmical audio in order to be able to move rhythmically, as evident in the case of our senses of touch and taste. Our everyday activities; our habits, rituals, and ceremonies; consistently reveal to us how we faithfully perform the rhythm of life.

Levebvre (1992) defines rhythm as the constituent that *reunites the quantitative aspects and elements, which mark time and distinguish moments in it – and qualitative aspects and elements, which link them together, found the unities and result from them*. Music is work of art with what we can easily understand how rhythm connects the quantitative and the qualitative. Surely other works of art do have some sort of connection between the quantitative and the qualitative, but music is work of art that touches even the simplest being. Though Levebvre criticized musician for too often reducing rhythm into plainly quantifiable beats (*des mesure*), still a simple person can feel the rhythm of music raise a certain emotion within his soul. The matter of whether the process of creating a certain piece of music starts from the quantitative to the qualitative or from one's feeling and emotion into the form of a measurement will, for this moment, be left to the authority of those who deal directly with such works. This paper will focus on how the spatial dimension created by rhythm is experienced by a person.

Architecture and dance have common denominators: body, space, and time. For a dancer, his/her own body is the medium to express aesthetic conceptions, thus dancers have the sensitivity to movement and space that is exclusive to their art. While architecture is to be lived by all, the sensitivity to movement and space is crucial for

architects to create spaces that can touch human soul. Architecture is not merely to be seen, but fundamentally, it is to be experienced.

Many would be quick to comment that dance has a transient element in its nature, which is true if it were only within the boundary of stage arts, but for some cultures where dances are parts of the religious rituals and cultural ceremonies, dances are about values strongly held by the people and thus have a prolonged life time, as long as the beliefs live. When a community is still relatively homogeneous, the products of life including dance and architecture would tend to share common values, especially if the lives of the people are united with the same spiritual beliefs. Spiritual belief always acknowledges some sort of authority which will automatically bring into being the power of governing on the lives of the believers. While this paper is not suggesting anti infiltration in culture, which is impossible in any way and at best would only prohibit the process of enrichment in a culture, it is strongly proposing that the process should be incremental to sustain the harmony within the lives of the people. Therefore this paper is trying to look at how that kind of process could be executed.

In a culture where dances are parts of the rituals and the everyday lives of the people, looking at the traditional dances is another way to look at how space is created without sacrificing the values held strongly by the people.

2. Studio Projects

In this studio, students were asked to design a working and dwelling space for an artiste of a certain traditional dance and the students were given the liberty to choose any composition (Note: the students were given caution not to select a composition that is developed solely for tourism purposes). The process was begun with a task of making several visual abstractions from the chosen dance composition which could be about the movements in the composition, the emotion that is aroused from the dance, the space created, or other factors and ideas the students could get from their research and observation. The abstractions started with black and white, and then colored two-dimensional compositions, followed by abstractions of three-dimensional compositions.

In the second phase of the process, all discussions about dance were stopped and the students were immediately introduced to a new topic of site reading. They were instructed to first 'feel' the site for their project with other than their visual sense and then continued on with the process of site analyzing.

Discussions about the dance compositions were brought in again when the students started their design projects (students were asked to choose a 400m² lot from the site with considerations for the nature of their personal dance compositions).

2.1 Project 1

This project is based on the composition of a Balinese Mask Dance (*Tari Topeng Keras*). The dance is the opening piece of a series of mask dances and it is played with a single character of a prime minister. The student first grasped the importance of the mask in the composition as an element that transforms the true identity of the dancer into another character (the series of these mask dances were originally played by only one dancer who would use several masks to transform him into multiple characters), as he visualized it in the black and white 2D composition (Fig. 1). In one of the colored compositions, the student also recognized that when the dancer transforms into another character it is actually a process of spiritual transition, a process where the boundaries of tangible space disperse into another dimension (Fig. 2).



Figure 1. 2D abstraction with charcoal from Project 1



Figure 2. 2D abstraction with colors from Project 1

The 3D abstractions from the mask dance were produced with several compositions of wooden blocks, chosen by the student to convey his understanding of the dancer's staccato movements.

The role of mask in the dance composition was later translated into elements of building or landscape that cover certain private areas in the project. The gesture was not merely symbolical but it was also to create a feeling of space that is pressed and covered as the body space of the mask dancer as he performs the composition (Fig.3).

The organization of spaces was more fluid than the traditional composition in a common Balinese dwelling space which is governed by *Nawasanga* nine squares. The fluidity of the spaces apparently first came from the observation of the movements in the dance composition. As the student continued on with his research he identified the fluidity of daily activities and religious rituals in the lives of Balinese people, thus the necessity to have flowing spaces became essential. Though he proposed an organic composition of space, the traditional Balinese principles of organizing space were still applied unto the whole structure.



Figure 3. Project 1 model

2.2. Project 2

This student's project is based on the *Serimpi* dance, a Javanese dance that is usually performed by four young women. It is a dance purposely composed for entertainment, hence the reason for the young women. It is for displaying beauty and elegance. The *Serimpi* dance was originally performed in the Sultan's palace or *Keraton*, for royal events such as weddings, the birth of a royal successor or ceremonies for circumcision.

The dance is without a certain narrative but the elements of it do symbolize things and beliefs as it is commonly practiced by the Javanese people, so the number of dancers in this piece is to represent the four elements (earth, wind, fire and water) and also the four winds. The characteristic of this dance is especially featured by the remarkably unhurried pace of the movements. Haste is not considered to be elegant nor erudite in Javanese culture, and even more so for women. The slow movements in *Serimpi* dance are only occasionally punctuated by either strong or quick movements of the hands and fingers.

These characteristics of the dance were perceived by the student as constrained movements which she first visualized it in her black and white 2D composition (Fig. 4). Her colored compositions illustrated light and flowing movements, the feminine features of the dance (Fig. 5).



Figure 4. Black and white 2D abstraction from Project 2

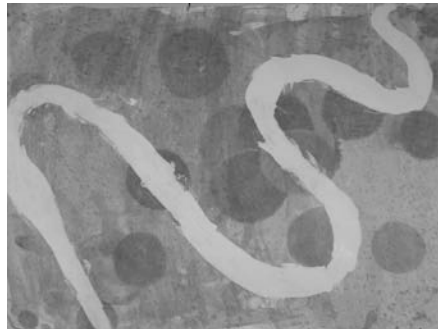


Figure 5. One of colored 2D abstractions from Project 2

She translated those features into her design as spaces that are rigid, symmetrically organized, and very spacious. The spacious feeling was necessary for her to emphasize the slowness of the movements. During the process she continued to add heavy elements and large surfaces in the design (Fig. 6 and 7).

Though her design might have certain visual similarities to that of a traditional Javanese dwelling, she actually had omitted the traditional visual symbolisms and created spaces with the pure essence of Javanese daily rhythms.

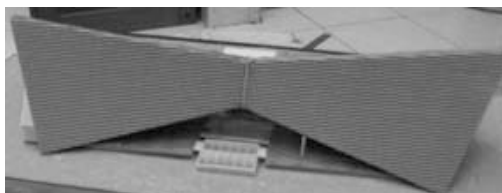


Figure 6. Design exploration from Project 2

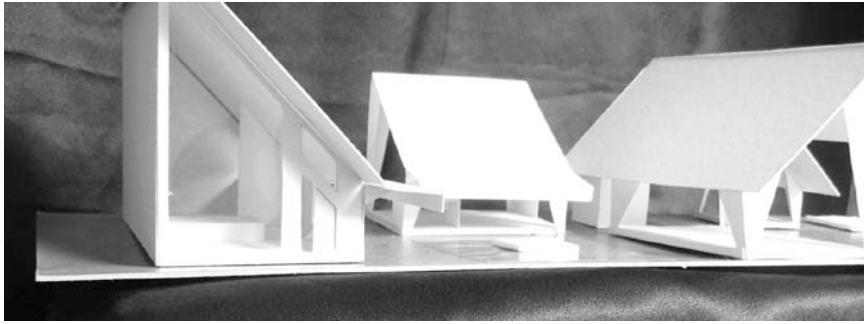


Figure 7. Design exploration from Project 2

2.3. Project 3

Oleg Tambulilingan is the dance which this project was developed. Despite its much resemblance to the traditional Balinese dances, it is relatively a modern dance, created in the 1950s. It was choreographed for a performance and does not have any religious dimension. The composition was developed from a story of mating bumblebees hence the dance is usually performed by a male and a female dancers.



Figure 8. 2D abstraction with charcoal from Project 3



Figure 9. 3D abstraction from Project 3

The student's 2D and 3D abstractions showed how she took in the process of chasing in the story and the importance of how the dancers' attires sweep about the space (Fig. 8 and 9).

Later in her project, the student created spaces that were enveloped by flowing and sweeping surfaces. The interaction between indoor and outdoor spaces was made intimate as though a process of mating in the open air (Fig. 10 and 11).

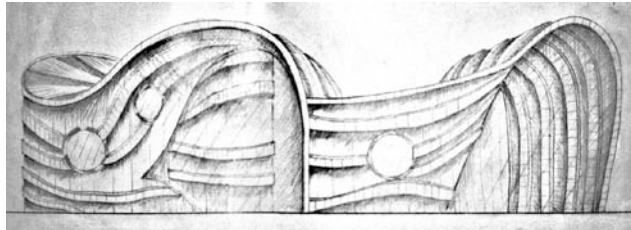


Figure 10. Project 3 front elevation

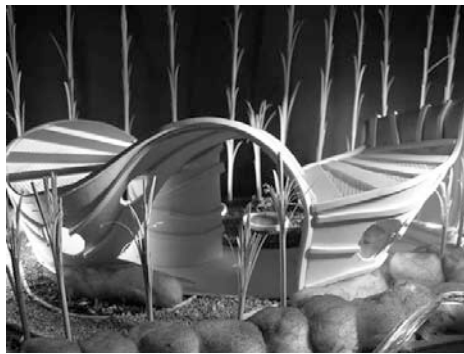


Figure 11. Project 3 model

3. Dancer's Space

How dancers understand the spatiality of their body movements now might have changed from the way it used to be understood by traditional dancers. For one, the way traditional dancers practiced was different than that of their contemporary counterparts. While the contemporary dancers might need mirrors to see how they dance, the traditional ones had to rely more on the senses of their body as the body strived to attain certain positions or moved from one position to the another, due to the absence of mirrors in their time. But that was essentially the original purpose of teaching the art of body movements, to sharpen one's senses.

Dancing used to be part of the education of an ideal character. For the Javanese, an ideal character would be one who can handle his emotion by having total control of his body movement and pattern of behavior (Kusumo, 2004). In the interpersonal relationship, the ideal character would always let the other person take

the initiative, almost totally passive and be easily embarrassed if acted outside the norm.

The Indonesian word for sense, feeling and taste; *rasa*; is actually used not only for describing one's emotional side but it is also used to convey what one thinks. Thus the colloquial term "*saya rasa...*" does not necessarily mean "I feel" or "I sense", but most of the time it also means "I think". Although the Indonesian language does have a specific word for "think", the use of the phrase "I think" would sound rather judgmental, while "*saya rasa*" would express wisdom and spiritual guidance.

Values are deeply ingrained in the traditional dances that even in a setting of a modern dance school, the practice of traditional dances would not have much advantage in having any mirror in the practice hall. For example, in Javanese culture it is not considered polite to look directly at person, therefore in traditional Javanese dances it hardly ever occurs to the dancers the need for looking straight at something. The understanding of "*wiraga, wirama, wirasa*" (to be in control of one's body, to be in rhythm and to sense) requires the dancer to heighten the sense of his or her body, which would actually be easier when one lowers her sense of sight. In the case of Balinese dances, the movement of the eyes is as important as the movement of the body, therefore the emphasis is not on what to look at but on the expression of the eyes.

While the philosophy of Indonesian traditional dances requires a total unity of the personality of the dancer, it is not to be mistaken as individuality without any association to a larger community. Sardono Kusumo (2004) in his writing, titled *Bahasa Diam* (Silent Language), states the importance of a dancer to not be too indwelled in his own personal expression. Not only it will result stagnancy in the development of one's dance, but it will also give negative impacts to other dancers and prevent the advancement of the art itself as a communal experience. *Kecak Bali, Malilo Sulawesi* or *Seudati Aceh* are examples of traditional dances that can gain the spirit of collective unity. Those dances cannot be enlivened unless each dancer is aware of the expression of his surroundings; those of the other dancers', the musicians', and the audience's; and this awareness is gained not by heightening the sense of sight, but by intensifying their sense of rhythm, through the motion and through the sense of hearing.

The late well-known Balinese dancer, I Nyoman Pugra, said one time that a good dancer is one who also plays *gamelan*, knows how to make his own costumes and masks, and knows his literature; but above all that, the best dancer would be one who is also a farmer, for a farmer always knows the rhythm of nature. It is interesting to read the account of how he traveled abroad and experienced foreign cities, how he would just have his eyes closed the entire time and simply listened to the sounds around him. His eyes would be lifted up only when there had been an interesting sound or rhythm.

Pugra's way of experiencing those foreign cities resonates with what Pallasmaa (2005) calls the *acoustic intimacy*, the connection between our sense of hearing and the space around us. Unfortunately, as commented by Pallasmaa, much of this relation has been severed by the advancement of sound system technology, and now by the advancing digital technology; the easiness to download digital audio files and have them played in any place. In any modern urban setting, it is becoming a more and more ordinary sight to see people dwelled in their personal audio space provided by the bright colored ipods.

4. Revisiting Project 1, 2 and 3

Did the students capture the rhythm of their dance compositions? If they did, was it the quantitative or the qualitative aspects of the rhythm, or both? How does the rhythm of a dance composition overlap with the rhythm of life of the dancer?

The ways students approached their dance compositions in the design process can be categorized in four ways:

- 1) applying the movements in the dance composition to the mechanic movements in their design, for example: the sliding movement in *Serimpi* dance (Project 2) was transformed into sliding doors and windows. The student in Project 3 attempted to use rolling doors in her design but later the idea was abandoned because it was considered too mechanical and did not fit in with spaces which were supposed to be intimate and sensuous. (Note: It was one of the objectives of the studio's program to have students understand the interaction between human and building parts);
- 2) using the spatial composition of the dance; project 2 and 3 demonstrated this approach more clearly than project 1 because in the 2nd and 3rd projects the dances are performed by multiple dancers which made it easier for the students to see the geometry of the space. In Project 1, the student in fact also applied the spatiality of the dance composition, but as his dancer was a solo performer it was more difficult to verify the accuracy of the geometry, as is always the case when only movements of one entity is examined.
- 3) using the narrative element of the dance composition to give certain characters to the design project; In Project 1 the student used the brevity of the prime minister to develop a composition of space that was defined by layers of barefaced surfaces, as he also tried to establish the multiple characters of the masks concealing the true identity of the dancer. In Project 3 the story of mating in nature has given the designed space an intimate relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces.

- 4) applying the characteristics of the dance to the design project; whether it is more feminine or masculine, whether it is accentuated by details in certain parts, whether the rhythm is dynamic, or whether the rhythm is more flowing or thumped.

All three projects show that the quantitative element of rhythm was left unexamined by the students which may have been resulted by the fact that they are not professional musicians and have little theoretical knowledge about musical rhythm. Project 2 student did use quadratic geometry in her design, and although Javanese music does use the 4/4 rhythm, the use of those geometries was developed more from the spatial composition of the dance. The quantitative aspect of rhythm was at the most taken in as the element that defines the tempo, whether it is vibrant or moderate. But the quantitative aspect might as well have been overlooked in all three projects because all arts are to be experienced and not simply measured, and that may have been the way the rhythm of the dances was understood by the students.

Whether the rhythm from the dances would be harmonious with the daily life rhythm of the dancers will be difficult to verify as long as the projects remain unbuilt. The special rhythm of spaces in Aalto's student dormitory (Rasmussen, 1959) can only be felt when the building had been occupied and lived. What Pallasmaa calls *the acoustical volume of space* can only be attested when all construction has been built and the materials start to echo the life of the occupant.

5. Closing

In the last chapter of his book, Rasmussen portrays the acoustical dimensions of space and explains how easy it is for us to take the impression we receive by sight as something that is unconnected to our sense of hearing. Pallasmaa continues on with this subject in his own seminal book, illustrating the danger of reducing and restricting our perceptual system to the visual sense alone. The current situation in our contemporary designed spaces demonstrates that more spaces are actually dominated or at least shadowed by audio spaces that are unconnected with the visual environment. The recorded programmed music played in public spaces such as shopping malls or elevators, or the personal music provided by ipods, or even the conversations we have over the cell-phones, all has created audio spaces that are not synchronized with our visual surroundings. A *designed* object has to be a total whole and to be experienced as a whole. As complex as our perceptual system is, so is the complexity of all works of art.

In closing the chapter of *Hearing Architecture*, Rasmussen justly says,

Though it may be objected that, at any rate, you cannot hear whether or not it is good architecture, I can only say that neither is it certain you can 'see' whether it is good or not.

Foundational year in design education is a remarkable time when all elements suddenly seem to collide; new and old, fresh and steady, haste and keen. And of course, the new and new, old and old, haste and haste, and so on. Where do we start in times of such collision? Where do you want to start laying the foundation? And out of what? The necessity for some sort of framework co-exists with the need for liberty to go beyond that framework. It is a time when one wishes that everyone were a gifted jazzier, or a *gamelan* player in the context of Javanese culture, where anyone can set a tune and everyone else follows in without ever fearing of altering the tune at any given moment.

References

- Bruno, Giuliana (2002), *Atlas of Emotion*, Verso, New York, USA
Geertz, Clifford (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, USA
Kusumo, Sardon W (2004); *Hanuman, Tarzan, Homo Erectus*; ku/bu/ku, Indonesia
Levebvre, Henri (2004), *Rhythmanalysis*, Continuum, London, UK
Pallasmaa, Juhani (2005), *The Eyes of the Skin*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, UK
Rasmussen, Steen Eiler (1959), *Experiencing Architecture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA