

# Laban-Based Movement Learning and Architectural Education: An Experiment Towards a New Pedagogy

*M. Catherine Deicher*

***The first inner vision of a choreutic shape and the first inner vision of any architectural creation or an abstract drawing have a great resemblance.***

***The invention of an architectural, plastic or pictorial form is, in reality, a choreutic phrase.***

(Laban 1974, 115)

As a young student of Laban's theories, I was fascinated by Choreutics. The various scales, especially the transverse ones, were particularly rich. Their complexity and puzzle-like patterning stoked my movement imagination and produced feelings that enlivened both mind and body. I was further intrigued by Laban's comments on space as a lively medium – "a super-abundance of simultaneous movements." (Laban 1974, 3). It brought to mind my early experiences visiting the building sites of my father's construction company. He would allow me to wander through structures at different stages of the building process. These visits inspired me to feel the flow, shape and resonance of volumes as rooms became finished, stories added, windows framed, and doors hung.

Those early experiences left an imprint – one that was re-awakened and deepened when I discovered Laban's work. Over my years as a dancer, choreographer and educator, it has always seemed evident that the practices of dance/movement study and architecture were fundamentally related. For some, this may seem to be an odd pairing at first. Architects design and create solid, tangible structures that are more or less unchanging over time; dancers articulate liminal traceforms that vanish before one's eyes. But a closer look easily reveals what is essential to both disciplines: space as a medium for creating three-dimensional patterns, and a transformation of human movement in time.

So it was with that perspective that I embarked on a project to see what movement study of Laban lineage could bring to the education of architecture students. Could the choreutic perspective inform and expand their sense of space? How might it influence approaches to the shaping of space and form? Could it support the students' ability to "read" sites more sensitively? Could it inspire a greater imagination for the uses of materials?

These questions led me to pursue an educational experiment with two faculty members in the School of Architecture at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Professors Don Hanlon and Napa Chayaworakul. They teach the "Beginning Design Studio" for graduate students entering the school's three-and-half year program. To start, over the course of several months in the spring of 2010, we exchanged views on our respective disciplines and pedagogy.

What I learned was fascinating. For them, architectural education is missing a component that addresses an enlivening of the senses, especially the bodily-kinesthetic ones. The professors expressed the view that students have lost touch with the humanities, and are often at the mercy,

in some sense, of the mechanical or technological. Even the examples presented to students as great architecture are less about people than about the machines involved in their design and construction. Thus, these teachers were clearly concerned about the prevailing design education that does not encourage or allow for a rich, satisfying, personal physical experience. In its place, they favor an approach that brings the body into the foreground – a necessary counter to the heavy hand of technology. Such pedagogical orientation would restore balance to the educational processes that can often be overtaken by abstract intellectualizing. Thus, all three of us agreed on the importance of bringing a felt sense of the body and space into student awareness through physically grounded experiences that could relate to architectural concerns. The result was an experiment that has stretched out over two academic years.

## Study One – The First Venture

**My course unfolded as an interweaving of movement experiences, written and oral responses to readings, and discussions of issues relating to architectural practice.**

The initial attempt was carried out over the course of 15 weeks during the fall semester of 2010. I designed a movement-based course focused on space

as a dynamic medium for expression, to be explored from a kinesthetic perspective. Fourteen students took this course, while concurrently enrolled in the "Design Studio" taught by Hanlon and Chayaworakul. While students were engaged in these courses, we planned to attend each other's class sessions as much as possible in order to help students relate and connect their learning. From the start, the three of us understood that, at best, we would be making a very modest, initial attempt to contribute to an ambitious vision – architectural education that values and incorporates a fully developed multisensory awareness.

My course unfolded as an interweaving of movement experiences, written and oral responses to readings, and discussions of issues relating to architectural practice. One of the first themes raised was how environments, designed spaces, and built structures co-create movement experiences, how they work on us, and impact our feeling life. To probe this, students were given three tasks to help answer the question: "How do buildings choreograph us?"

1) The viewing of a DVD on parkour or free running, entitled *Jump London*. Parkour practitioners or traceurs run, jump, climb, vault, roll and swing their way through any kind of environment. *Jump London* showed how a group of young French traceurs used the features of several historic London buildings to practice their skills. My aim was to get students to see how buildings can inspire movement responses "outside the box," and to appreciate how the uses and "movement lives" of buildings can change over time.

2) To physically explore a large public sculpture at Milwaukee's Wick Park designed by sculptor Jill Sebastian. This work consists of structures placed in an area the size of several tennis courts, and includes a number of evocative areas: a maze outlined by hedges, an arcade formed by vertical poles that grow in height and are connected by horizontal bars at high levels, tables and chairs of irregular size and proportion, straight and curved walkways creating a variety of paths. I asked students to approach the work in a

spirit of curious play - to physically engage it. They had to get a sense of what the work was inviting them to do; then they had to do it. Students reported entering into the experience at first as cautious pedestrians, but eventually found themselves climbing poles and hanging from bars, hiding in the maze, walking on the tables and jumping off into the grass. This exercise helped them form an understanding of the structure and space through using their bodies. It was set up to get them to avoid falling back on prior intellectual understanding, and to sidestep the sometimes habitual primacy of garnering information by using the visual sense alone.

3) Finally, to attend a site-specific dance event by the Wildspace Dance Company at Milwaukee's Lynden Sculpture Garden. Artistic Director Debra Loewen used its large-scale sculptures and vast woodland setting as a springboard for creating a series of dance vignettes that took place in various areas of the garden. I asked students to consider the interrelationships of site and movement, to think about how the dancers revealed aspects of the site and sculptures and, conversely, how the site and sculptures influenced choreographic choices. What was particularly useful about this exercise was that the audience had to travel to various locations in the garden and select their unique vantage points in order to view the dances. This made the viewers' experience a function of their own movement choices, a contrast to the controlled viewing perspective of a conventional theater.

The class met twice a week for 75 minutes, and each session involved a variety of movement explorations, solo and group improvisations. I designed these to be physically accessible, incorporating skills and abilities students could easily draw upon. Throughout the course I stressed the importance of making themselves attentive and available to new sensations. I emphasized that the point was not to "be right," but to take chances by experiencing the unfamiliar.

Movement experiences culled from the Laban taxonomy were designed to address movement of the body in relation to *energy*, *shape*, and *space*. Here is a partial list of the themes we explored:

- the rhythm of breathing, breath support for movement;
- sensing weight, getting a feel for body mass in relation to gravity;
- sensing inner volume/spaciousness, and the ability to use physical landmarks to direct action in space;
- the experience of grounding and rootedness through the feet and legs;
- the relationship of body parts to center, and of the body as a connected whole;
- a range of dynamic/energetic qualities embedded in our movement lives;
- the kinesphere, and the variety of levels and reach spaces available for personal movement;
- the proximity to others, and the relationship;
- the general, shared space;

- the felt, physical properties of 1, 2, & 3 dimensional pathways and traceforms;

- the balance and mobility through countertension & spatial pulls.

In their end-of-semester course evaluations, students expressed taking great pleasure in the movement course. They especially appreciated the regular opportunity it gave to recover a sense of relaxation and recuperation from their intense studio work. They wrote positively about experiences of relating to each other through movement improvisations and of the usefulness of understanding their own movement lives. Several remarked on a growing curiosity to explore how buildings can impart a sense of energy and dynamism - a reflection of our work with *Effort*.

I was encouraged by these responses, but not surprised to learn that virtually every student recommended more guidance in applying movement learning to their studio practice. Through class discussion, it was clear that students' prior educational experiences had placed movement study on the periphery of formal education at best. Even for curricula that require a movement component (physical education, dance, sport, etc.), the emphasis is rarely on applying movement learning to other areas. The possibility that movement could be a lens and means for understanding a variety of other disciplinary practices is still a rather unappreciated notion.

To complicate matters a bit further, I asked students to become aware of the process of moving – to be able to recognize what they were experiencing and articulate their responses to it. This is the work of developing body-mind connectivity - a skill that has strong implications for those who work with space and movement, and one that must be built up over time.

This 15-week semester gave me a good opportunity to introduce experiences and skills to help students *begin* developing awareness of their own movement lives and to provoke thought about its relation to architectural study and practice. The next challenge was to build upon this initiation and extend it further into their curriculum in meaningful ways. So, the three teachers went back to the drawing board.

#### Study Two – Integration

We decided to pursue a more focused approach for the fall semester of 2011. Instead of running a separate movement class concurrently with the architectural design studio, we opted to include a two-week movement "block" within the context of the studio course itself. In that way the movement experiences would be the lead-in for a design project. I met with the class of 20 in a large movement space for three four-hour sessions during the first week of the block, and the students proceeded to their design project thereafter.

The goal of this block was for students to understand, experience, and render the notion of "suture." The professors provided context for this by explaining that in most cases, people consider the space between solid forms as neutral, or as the absence of form. However it is important for architects to learn how to visualize space as a form in its own right, with characteristics similar to those we ascribe to objects, such as shape and density. It is also common for people to consider the space between forms or objects as a void keeping them apart. The "suture" proposes the opposite; it suggests that the space, far from being neutral, is active, and serves to hold its

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surrounding forms together in a composition by virtue of the complex relations that pass through the space. Furthermore, the space can have a character of its own, apart from the forms that surround it. Architects need to acquire the skill of visualizing the space without its peripheral or enclosing solids.

My task was to create a series of experiences that would sensitize students to space as a tangible, malleable medium, and to set the stage for them to imagine space as a record of movement through the suture that binds the peripheral forms together, and gives meaning and definition to the structure. Then, the students' task was to render the suture of a still form – one composed of bodies – into a three-dimensional design.

I began by "a blind walk" exercise, in which each student gently guides his or her blindfolded partner through a variety of spaces – in and out of doors, over various terrains, through quiet/empty areas and those busy with sound and movement, etc. My directions to the guided were to attend to their physical and other sensory impressions as they went about their journey, gaining information about their environment. This leads to a foregrounding of the kinesthetic and haptic sense, proprioception, and the interplay of our sensory apparatus.

The movement work that followed began with body-level experiences and progressed toward making physical connections to space. I edited and condensed many of the exercises I had used the previous year to touch on almost all the themes mentioned above. However, I did not address *Effort* due to time constraints.

I spent a fair amount of time leading students in exercises to enliven their kinespheres by experiencing and creating a variety of traceforms, and asked students to consider the resonance or feeling tones imparted by different spatial



Still Form Composition Partial View

### **“Movement is, so to speak, living architecture....”**

patterns and zones. They noted the important role that personal experience, education, and culture play in their interpretations of space. Students also readily grasped the spatial pathways of dimensions, diameters, and diagonals, especially as they passed through the center to the periphery. They referred to the pathways clearly in their improvisations, creating a variety of stellated expressions.

What was missing was a more curvilinear approach, especially as it occurs in transverse space that lies between center and periphery. To address this, I used the imagery of water, jello, and other tactile media to help students get a sense of molding and shaping those more intermediate areas. The effect of this was interesting in that it produced a great deal of idiosyncratic movement, and the students' personal preferences began to appear. It also seemed to conjure a mood of sensuousness.

I extended the construct of kinesphere to describe the shared space of duet and group improvisations. My hope was that their previous individual explorations would bring a new sensitivity to variations in proximity and relationship. I also wanted students to connect the experience of the myriad potential pathways of their own kinespheres to the space beyond – the space of architectural design. I think this struck the students as quite heady, and we took time to talk about a few more of Laban's statements:

Movement is the life of space. Dead space does not exist, for there is neither space without movement nor movement without space. (Laban 1974, 94)

Space is a hidden feature of movement and movement is a visible aspect of space. (Laban 1974, 4)

Movement is, so to speak, living architecture.... This architecture is created by human movements and is made up of pathways tracing shapes in space, and these we may call 'trace-forms.' (Laban 1974, 5)

Students were well-grounded in how space is defined/made visible by architectural design, and I think prior study in their discipline helped them see how movement can do the same thing. However, the notion of space as a lively medium, something other than a void seemed to be one that would need more time to take root. Accomplishing that was exactly the point of the design studio assignment.

Accordingly, the last day of movement study focused on the preparation for that. Groups of 8-10 students practiced constructing still-form compositions with their bodies. That required them to use their skills to make contact with each other, share and bear weight, forge balance/counterbalance, and employ body shapes that expressed compression and stellation (see image: *Still Form Composition Partial View*). These compositions were to be held while their classmates moved through the open spaces -- the suture of the form -- exploring the nature of it.

The final stage of preparation involved creating still forms as just described, but this time I moved through them. My task was to reveal the space -- to demonstrate the shape and character of it through my body. As might be expected, this required a great deal of plasticity in my movement, but I was surprised to experience the dynamic character of these sutures as well as a variety of three-dimensional nooks, crannies, and pathways. There were areas more conducive to flow fluctuation, time, focus, and pressure variations than I would have expected by simply looking at the forms. This aspect of the preparation also allowed viewers to perceive the space as corporeal time since time was measured by



Preparatory Sketches 1, 2, 3 and 4

my moving body. Prof. Hanlon observed that it also fused the bodies of the form into a single composition of mass and space by contradicting the normal perception of space as a void that keeps forms apart.

While I moved through the forms (held for 5 minutes), students recorded the revealed space through a series of quick, free drawings in soft media, such as pastels and graphite (see images: *Preparatory Sketches 1, 2, 3 and 4*). They already had considerable ability to render three-dimensional ideas on paper, but the task of illustrating a suture was thought to need some modeling. Prof. Hanlon showed several drawings that he completed in order to “get the ball rolling,” while Prof. Chayaworakul elaborated by presenting a variety of Laban’s drawings (Laban 1984, 6). The examples she chose showed how traceforms of human movement can suggest multi-faceted space forms. After practicing several rounds of free drawing in response to still forms, we created two final ones. One group created the form while the other drew; then they exchanged roles. I was the mover for both rounds.

For the design assignment for the course, the two professors introduced the slogan, “Observe, Interpret, Invent,” to transform this experience into a new tectonic composition. Thus, students observed my movement through the still form, interpreted it through their drawings and, finally, invented a new composition as an object in space. They were encouraged to use any materials that their drawings suggested to convert their impressions of the suture into solid form.

An important aspect of this last phase was for students to change their understanding of the datum of the composition, in this case, the horizontal plane to which all parts of a composition refer. They had to shift their notion of datum from what was beneath the still form (the floor beneath the bodies) to a position about midway through the new object. This had the result of emphasizing the six dimensions or orientations previously discussed in architectural theory lectures: zenith/nadir/forward/backward/right/left. This clarification was related to the movement experience of the horizontal plane of the kinesphere, in which low level is expressed below the body center. By adopting this new orientation, students were coaxed out of the usual assumption that the datum would be the ground; it gave them a new experience of nadir, that is, the space below. The accompanying images illustrate the phases of preparation for the design project (see images opposite).

#### Some Reflections

Since this article is being written at mid-semester, Fall 2011, I am unfortunately without any feedback from the participants in

Study Two. However, the two professors were excited about what the integrated project brought. They felt that students created complex, richly articulated designs that revealed the ability to model the suture in refined and sensitive ways. It has obviously been fruitful to provide selected movement experiences that serve as embodied research for design projects.

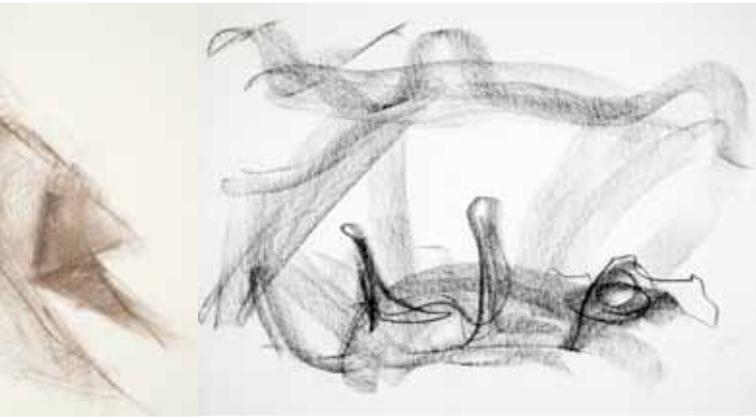
The three of us are encouraged by the results of our collaboration thus far, but we recognize that this was a tiny beginning into what could become a much more expansive project. Based upon my experience to date, I would offer the following ideas to extend the movement study potential for architectural education:

(a) Equip the architectural studio, or an alternative space, with simple props and building materials that could be manipulated to create and improvise with temporary environments; things like poles, expanses of fabric, and sheets of cardboard so as to give students an opportunity to invent and play with a variety of provisional spaces and the feelings they create.

(b) Incorporate field trips to a variety of buildings, with the goal of physically exploring different spaces. This would support shifting the view of buildings merely as objects to an awareness of them as ready “sets” for movement and interaction.

(c) Develop the concept of “kinesthetic empathy,” as it could be applied to deepening experience of the qualities of materials and designed space. This form of empathy is a recognizable concept to most dance/movement educators. In my practice I describe it as “feeling along with” something engaged, when an observer wants to tap into the dynamics and forms of a movement event. We all experience it without any formal training at all. For instance, we flinch when a boxer we are watching takes a hit. We catch our breath and tense our muscles when witnessing a violent quarrel. Our stomachs get light when we watch a car speed off a cliff, even in a movie. In other words, kinesthetic empathy is a kind of attunement. We enter into it by observing visually, but the experience quickly spreads out to include sense of movement, breath, rhythm, timing, muscular tension, and spatial orientation. Therefore, it provides a full-bodied, multi-sensory feel for a movement event, and it is a skill that has application to architecture as well. The aesthetic theory of empathy was popular at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Theorists at that time argued that, because we learn the nature of gravity, contraction, strength, and other qualities through our bodies, we have a groundwork of experience that enables us to identify with objects of art. According to Heinrich

**...students were coaxed out of the usual assumption that the datum would be the ground..**



## Students' Suture Models



Andrew Quinter

Wölfflin, a Swiss aesthetician who wrote a book on a psychology of architecture, "the elements of architecture can convey a feeling because we are able to project our own physical experiences into these elements." (Moore 2009, 203 also 93-4) This suggests that we can learn to "feel along with" a building, to distinguish the qualities of its materials in a sensory manner, and to attune to it and come to an understanding of it that goes beyond what vision or intellect alone would provide.



Ben Penlesky

Practically speaking, these strategies would require far longer than one semester of time to elicit any meaningful changes in the learners. Nevertheless, my tiny experiment with the help of two university professors could be viewed as a beginning piece of the new puzzle of architectural education – a curriculum in which space, human body, sensory awareness, and movement play an integral part. It is indeed exciting to envision the large picture yet to be completed.



Jared Kraft

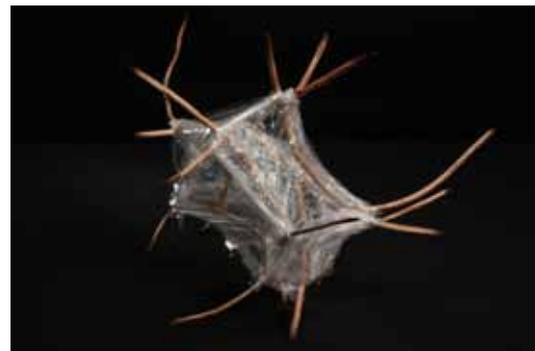
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