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BODY FORM AND CITY IN THE LABAN CENTRE. MOVEMENT AND PERCEPTION IN ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

FORMA CIAŁA I MIASTO W LABAN CENTRE. RUCH I PERCEPCJA W PRZESTRZENI ARCHITEKTONICZNEJ

Abstract

This article reads the Laban Centre as a building in which bodily movement gains a shared meaning. A study of its type, urban setting and construction, set against Laban's theory of space and research on embodied perception, shows how the theatre, routes, courtyards and outer skin turn dance into a shared form. This form becomes clear through experience and is tested through use.

Keywords: *body, experience, form, Laban Centre, type*

Streszczenie

W artykule dokonano analizy Laban Centre jako budynku, w którym ruch ciała nabiera znaczenia w wymiarze wspólnotowym. Analiza jego typu, kontekstu urbanistycznego i konstrukcji zestawiona z teorią przestrzeni Labana oraz badaniami nad ucieleśnioną percepcją, ukazuje, w jaki sposób teatr, ciągi komunikacyjne, dziedzińce i zewnętrzna powłoka budynku przekształcają taniec we wspólną formę. Forma ta ujawnia się poprzez doświadczenie i podlega weryfikacji w użytkowaniu.

Słowa kluczowe: *ciało, doświadczenie, forma, Laban Centre, typ*

1. INTRODUCTION

At the start of the digital age, many writers feared that new forms of communication would leave out the expressive body and lead architecture towards a state without physical form. Instead, architecture has moved towards an intense use of materials and a rich range of sensory effects. Architecture is seen, but it is not known by sight alone. A building is known by a body that walks, stops, turns and measures distance through each step. We understand a threshold by crossing it, a stair by the change in effort, and the depth of a room by the time needed to cross it and by the way a voice travels. Even when we stand still, our view comes from a posture and from a memory of movement. Experience is therefore not an extra layer added to the design. It is the process through which form becomes known.[1]

[1] M. Simon, *The Arch of Projection: Body and Mind in Herzog & de Meuron's Architecture*, "Periodica Polytechnica Architecture" 2011, no. 42(2), p. 25, https://doi.org/10.3311/pp.ar.2011-2.03.

In the Laban Centre by Herzog & de Meuron, space is not simply a container for dance. Dancers can be seen through glass walls, so their movement becomes part of the experience of the building. Mallgrave's account of embodied simulation suggests that we understand the actions of other people through the body and its sense of movement before we explain them through ideas.[2]

To treat the body as a measure does not mean replacing an abstract user with an equally abstract list of sensations. Bodies differ in height, movement, colour vision, hearing, temperature and pace. Yet design must still set out clear shared relations: centre and edge, readable entrances, different ways to move, and degrees of closeness between people and groups. Size and scale remain necessary, but they cannot describe one ideal user. Architectural measure becomes meaningful when people can reach, see, hear, stop and turn, when there is an option other than the stair, and when more than one sign marks a threshold.

Rossi's criticism of functionalism shows that a direct match between form and use cannot explain the full life or lasting value of architecture.[3] In the same way, meeting an average standard does not ensure a good experience. In the Laban Centre, the key measure is the set of relations allowed between different bodies: dancers who extend a movement, visitors who watch, people who sit on the stairs, and users who need more time or different signs. A shared form does not remove these differences. It allows them to exist within a common order.



Ill. 1. *Laban Centre*, Deptford London 1998–2003, Herzog & de Meuron. Source: photo by O. Longo

2. TYPE CONSTRUCTION AND PROGRAMME

The starting point is type, understood not as a model to copy but as a set of relations that can explain and change a theme. In Aldo Rossi's urban theory, type remains through changes

[2] H.F. Mallgrave, *L'empatia degli spazi. Architettura e neuroscienze*, preface by V. Gallese, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milan 2015, pp. 174–180.

[3] A. Rossi, *L'architettura della città*, D. Vitale (ed.), CLUP, Milan 1978, p. 35.

in form and use because it expresses a deeper order than any single function. In a dance school, this idea prevents the building from becoming only a list of rooms. Studios, theatre, library, foyer, offices and services become architecture when a clear order gives form to the institution. Uses change and overlap, while form must organise shared life and make it easy to recognise.

The spaces of the Laban Centre take shape as the user moves. Curved corridors, a ramp and openings between rooms create a sequence of views, pauses and turns. From an embodied point of view, space is not an abstract size, but a field of possible movement understood by the active body.[4]

Between 1919 and the late 1920s, Rudolf Laban formed a theory of movement based on a balance between the physical body, the inner self and the mind. He believed this balance could help heal the conflicts of modern society. In his view, the free dancer made universal laws visible, laws that could guide human beings and the wider world. In 1966 this idea became known as harmonic movement theory, or Choreutics.[5]

In Laban's theory, people find their place through directions that the body can recognise and follow. The kinesphere is the near field of movement, formed by levels, axes and diagonals. Space is shaped through the links between balance, weight, reach and direction. The London building, opened in 2003, turns this idea into a plan of about eight thousand square metres, with a theatre of about three hundred seats, thirteen studios, and the teaching and shared rooms of the school. The closed theatre block stands at the centre. Around it runs an inner street made of foyers, ramps, corridors, stairs and courtyards. Daily movement circles the place where movement becomes a performance: the theatre gives a fixed point, while the routes allow change.

3. THE ROUTE AS A STRUCTURE IN TIME

In the Laban Centre, walking does more than lead to each room: it becomes a way to know the building. Form becomes clear through bodily movement and a sequence of experiences, in line with Jacques Gubler's account of space as part of daily life. Stairs, ramps and landings make moving bodies visible and turn ordinary travel into an unplanned performance. The building not only contains professional dance; it also makes the movements of daily life visible.[6]

Space is not given all at once to a still viewer. It is built through a sequence of views. Bocchi's idea of architecture known through walking treats movement as the means by which space gains meaning. Visitors build a mental picture of the Laban Centre as they follow the inner street, turn, and find studios, courtyards and shared areas. Transparent walls also connect walkers with the dancers. Parallax shows that perceived form grows from the changing link between an object, the viewer's position and the viewer's movement.[7]

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[4] H.F. Mallgrave, *op. cit.*, pp. 187–196.

[5] A.I. Keilson, *The Embodied Conservatism of Rudolf Laban, 1919–1926*, "Dance Research Journal" 2019, no. 51(2), p. 19, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767719000160.

[6] J. Gubler, *Motion, émotions. Architettura, movimento e percezione*, C. Gandolfi (ed. and trans.), introduction by M. Botta, Christian Marinotti Edizioni, Milan 2014.

[7] R. Bocchi, *Progettare lo spazio e il movimento. Scritti scelti di arte, architettura e paesaggio*, Gangemi Editore, Rome 2010, pp. 54–87.

The building offers two ways of seeing. At the speed of urban travel, it appears as one continuous field of colour. At walking pace, it reveals the depth of its outer skin, its layered views and the movement of people. As a person walks beside the front, semi-transparent panels, clear openings and colours form new patterns with every change of distance and direction. Form is not a fixed image but an event that asks the body to move closer, step back or move sideways.

The curved front prevents one final face-on view. The entrance leads into a foyer set at an angle. The theatre blocks the long view and must be walked around. Courtyards bring light from above and restore points of direction, while the stairs link the floors and keep shared spaces in sight. The building appears through hints, turns and returns. The theatre remains a clear centre, while courtyards, light and colour act as repeated signs. Interest comes from gradual discovery, and direction comes from a few lasting relations.

The uneven geometry forms relations: it brings studios close to common routes, joins different levels and creates visual thresholds between students, teachers and visitors. Curved surfaces can also be understood through the body's memory of movement. The front seems to stretch and fold around the building, conveying a sense of tension and growth. Mallgrave argues that we read forms partly by placing our own sense of balance, effort and direction upon them.[8]



Ill. 2. *Laban Centre*, Deptford London 1998–2003, Herzog & de Meuron. Source: photo by O. Longo

[8] H.F. Mallgrave, *op. cit.*, pp. 158–166, 197–202.

The body measures this structure in time through direct acts. A slope changes balance and pace; a curve delays the next view; a wide stair turns passage into rest; and a glass wall allows people to watch without entering. The sequence does not set one dance but gives a field in which different users make their own routes. Mariann Simon describes the work of Herzog & de Meuron as a projection from body to body and sees the Laban Centre as a move towards a stronger sensory experience. This strength is not simply a large number of effects: movement gains meaning because it meets an order. Section matters as much as plan. Courtyards, ramps and broad stairs engage the kinesphere through changes in height, turns and upward views, linking direction with social life.[9]

4. THE OUTER SKIN BETWEEN CONSTRUCTION AND REPRESENTATION

The outer skin of the Laban Centre can be read through the relation between the immaterial and the ultramaterial discussed in the book edited by Toshiko Mori. [10] The solid polycarbonate creates effects that seem to have no weight: light, colour, reflection and images of bodies. The building does not lose material form by rejecting matter, but through a more intense technical and sensory use of it. Semi-transparency and reflection arise from the meeting of surface, light and movement. The front changes what the body sees, while a change in the body's position changes the image of the building.

The skin is the best-known part of the design, but its value is not limited to the colour seen in photographs. Layers of glass and semi-transparent polycarbonate panels, coloured in collaboration with Michael Craig-Martin, filter light, overlap reflections and hold passing outlines. Simon notes that surface and space flow into each other, and that clear and semi-transparent layers and colour have a physical effect on the visitor. By day, the building takes in changes in the weather; by night, inner light carries signs of activity towards the city. The front does not represent dance through an added picture, but through the passing presence of real bodies.

The depth between the layers and the pattern of clear openings suggest touch and temperature: lightness, softness, cold and an open quality. Sight calls up a bodily sense of touch before contact takes place. Construction is therefore not a technical means used to make a set image. It orders the building and gives it character. The theatre keeps the weight of the central institution, while the outer skin takes on the changing light of the life around it. Together they connect the long time of the building in the city with the short time of daily acts.[11]

The link with Deptford is also important. Rossi's idea of locus links the unique nature of an urban work to the meeting of form, place, history and events. The Laban Centre does not copy the nearby industrial setting. It brings a new public institution into this setting, makes its activity visible and changes the meaning of the place.[12]

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[9] M. Simon, *op. cit.* pp. 19, 22–23.

[10] T. Mori (ed.), *Immateriale/Ultramateriale. Architettura, progetto e materiali*, Postmedia Books, Milan 2004, p. 85.

[11] H.F. Mallgrave, *op. cit.*, pp. 181–186.

[12] A. Rossi, *op. cit.*



Ill. 3. *Laban Centre*, Deptford London 1998–2003, Herzog & de Meuron. Source: photo by O. Longo

5. SHARED INTERIOR PERCEPTION AND MEMORY

The courtyards and clear walls create both spatial and social links. Daylight reaches deep areas; dancers' outlines are visible through walls that serve functional and acoustic purposes; and stairs and foyers become places where movement slows and becomes social interaction. The theatre holds planned performance, while the inner street spreads unplanned scenes of practice, waiting and passage. Dance is not shut inside one room, and daily life enters the field of view of those who dance. The institution becomes clear through the shared presence of its users.

Architectural movement grows from the meeting of a moving body and a space that changes with each viewpoint. The parts of the Laban Centre do not move. Instead, the user changes the sense of depth, overlap and transparency, and the relation between inside and outside. Dancers become temporary figures within the sequence of the building.[13]

Memory grows through repeated relations. The slope before the foyer, the dark theatre block, a figure behind the polycarbonate, light falling into a courtyard, or the soft sound of a rehearsal become points of reference through use. At an individual level, users link places and routes to bodily habits. At a shared level, the building makes dance recognisable as a common activity and as a presence in the district.

[13] R. Bocchi, *op. cit*., pp. 54–87.

Colour forms part of the atmosphere rather than sitting on the form as a separate layer. Light passes through the polycarbonate, changes during the day and shifts the balance between solid and clear. Experience depends on a changing relation between material, time and the state of the body. Perception remains multi-sensory: as Simon notes, the body joins sight, hearing and touch, although the design gives more weight to light, colour and visible movement than to sound, temperature and smell.[14]



Ill. 4. *Laban Centre*, Deptford London 1998–2003, Herzog & de Meuron. Source: photo by O. Longo

6. CONCLUSIONS

The idea of architecture known through walking allows us to read the Laban Centre as a structure revealed by movement. The inner street, ramp, curved corridors and openings towards the studios create a set of images like a film sequence. The body joins these partial views and builds an idea of the whole. Changes in viewpoint create parallax across the semi-transparent surfaces and moving bodies. Space is therefore a system of links, closeness and thresholds brought to life by bodily experience.

The relation between body and space can be understood as a meeting between lasting order and short-lived actions. The theatre sets a centre; the inner street turns circulation into a shared place; courtyards mark the route; stairs allow movement and rest; and the skin

[14] H.F. Mallgrave, *op. cit.*, pp. 203–208.

shows the body to the city without fixing it as one image. The architecture does not copy dance. It creates the conditions in which daily movement, practice and performance gain a shared form. Laban's kinesphere explains how each body shapes space from its own range of movement; the design extends this relation to the institution and the city.

The Laban Centre continues a line of research that links the teaching of movement with the making of space. Through Hellerau and the Bauhaus, Mallgrave shows how dance, music, colour and architecture can form an environment in which thought and bodily movement cannot be divided. Strong impressions or unexpected routes are not enough. Sensation and movement must help people know the building, and its parts must be clear in their relations. This happens at the Laban Centre when its stable form and the movement of its users explain each other. Experience does not replace form: it tests form over time. The order is clear enough to be shared and open enough to receive different paces, abilities and memories.[15]

References

[1] Gubler J., *Motion, émotions. Architettura, movimento e percezione*, C. Gandolfi (ed. and trans.), introduction by M. Botta, Christian Marinotti Edizioni, Milan 2014.

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[3] Mallgrave H.F., *L'empatia degli spazi. Architettura e neuroscienze*, preface by V. Gallese, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milan 2015.

[4] Mori T. (ed.), *Immateriale/Ultramateriale. Architettura, progetto e materiali*, Postmedia Books, Milan 2004.

[5] Rossi A., *L'architettura della città*, D. Vitale (ed.), CLUP, Milan 1978.

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[15] H.F. Mallgrave, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–24, 167–173.