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Embodying Space, Performing Learning Designing Interdisciplinary Learning Through Architectural Pedagogy

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Abstract

This research examines how architectural pedagogy can function as an interdisciplinary interface by integrating embodied, spatial, and collaborative learning into broader educational practices. Its aim is to propose a transferable pedagogical model that draws on foundational elements of architecture — such as spatial awareness and material engagement — to enrich teaching and learning across disciplines.

The study is guided by two core questions: (1) *How can architectural pedagogy, through embodied learning, enhance creative and performative practices?* (2) *In what ways can spatial thinking foster interdisciplinary connections between architecture, performance, and education?*

Using a practice-based methodology, the research developed and tested *archiBODY* in April 2024 a model designed to integrate architectural thinking into other educational domains. A central case study involved a collaborative workshop series with the Rosedale School's Department of Performing Arts, where dance and performance students explored bodily relationships to space through exercises and installations. The methodology emphasised learning through doing, sensing, and making, reflecting architecture's experiential dimension.

The findings indicate that engaging with space physically and reflectively encouraged students to reconceive both their creative processes and their understanding of the environment. The workshops demonstrated that the feedback loop between body and space not only deepens awareness but also fosters collaborative construction of meaning and form.

In conclusion, the study argues that when reframed as a platform for embodied and spatial learning, architectural pedagogy can serve as a valuable interdisciplinary tool. This approach supports more holistic, performative, and participatory modes of education, applicable in both formal institutions and informal community contexts.

Keywords: Architectural pedagogy, Embodied learning, Spatial thinking, Interdisciplinary education, Performative space.

Embodying Space, Performing Learning

Learning is not only an intellectual process but also an embodied and spatial one. The ability to act, perform, and create depends as much on how individuals inhabit and perceive space as on what they know conceptually. Yet educational practices have often privileged abstract knowledge and verbal expression over bodily awareness, limiting opportunities for learners to explore the connections between movement, space, and meaning. Performance studies remind us that performance is not confined to the stage; it is embedded in everyday acts of presence, communication, and participation (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). Recognising this wider scope of performance highlights the importance of approaches that re-engage learners with their own bodies and spatial environments.

This paper investigates how architectural pedagogy can contribute to such approaches. Architecture is understood here not merely as the production of buildings but as a mode of pedagogy grounded in spatial awareness, material engagement, and embodied experience. The study proposes that architectural methods can enrich performative and educational practices by cultivating sensitivity to the feedback loop between body and space. To investigate this proposition, the research developed *archiBODY*, a practice-based pedagogical model that integrates architectural thinking with embodied and performative learning. Conceived as an interdisciplinary interface, *archiBODY* uses spatial exploration and making as tools for connecting architecture, performance, and education.

Two central questions guide this inquiry. First, how can architectural pedagogy, through embodied learning, enhance creative and performative practices? Second, in what ways can spatial thinking foster interdisciplinary connections between architecture, performance, and education? These questions are explored first through a theoretical and conceptual framework, and subsequently through a practice-based research model tested via a collaborative workshop series.

Theoretical Framework

The research builds on a theoretical foundation that positions learning as a fundamentally embodied and spatial experience. Four thinkers in particular — Lecoq, Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, and Pallasmaa — provide critical perspectives that inform both the conceptual and practical design of the *archiBODY* workshop model.

Jacques Lecoq: Body in Motion as Space-Maker

Jacques Lecoq's approach to physical theatre emphasised movement and gesture as primary ways of understanding the world. For Lecoq, the body in motion does not simply occupy space but actively reveals and shapes it. His exercises invited performers to “mime”

architectural forms (Lecoq, 2000/1997), allowing them to feel and enact space rather than merely represent it. This notion of space as a dynamic field generated through bodily action resonates directly with the research aim: to position architectural pedagogy as an embodied practice that enriches performative learning.

John Dewey: Learning Through Experience

Dewey's philosophy of education underscores the value of experiential learning, where knowledge arises from active engagement and reflection. In *Experience and Education*, he critiques approaches that separate abstract theory from lived experience (Dewey 1938), arguing instead for education that emerges from doing, sensing, and interacting. This emphasis on experiential process aligns with the methodological choices of the *archiBODY* workshops, where students moved fluidly between movement, drawing, making, and reflection.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Phenomenology of Perception

From a philosophical standpoint, Merleau-Ponty expands this understanding by describing perception as embodied and relational. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), he rejects the notion of space as a neutral container (2012/1945), proposing instead that space is lived through the body's sensorimotor interaction with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not a subject observing space from outside but the very medium through which space becomes meaningful. This phenomenological insight underpins the pedagogical emphasis on the feedback loop between body and environment in the workshops.

Juhani Pallasmaa: The Multisensory Dimension of Architecture

Architect and theorist Pallasmaa further grounds this framework in architectural discourse. In *The Eyes of the Skin* (2005), Pallasmaa critiques the dominance of visuality in architecture and advocates for a multisensory understanding of spatial experience — one that engages touch, sound, movement, and atmosphere. His insistence that “*profound architecture makes us return to the body*” (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 41) frames architecture as a site of embodied knowledge, bridging the sensory, the material, and the spatial.

Synthesis

Together, these perspectives situate architecture as a “living” pedagogy — an embodied, sensory, and performative way of engaging with the world. They collectively provide the theoretical ground for *archiBODY*, a model that translates these insights into educational practice by treating body and space as co-constructors of meaning, learning, and creative expression.

Conceptual Framework

Building on this theoretical ground, the research articulates a conceptual framework organised around three interrelated principles: learning through play, learning through making, and interconnection. These principles translate abstract ideas of embodiment and spatial awareness into pedagogical strategies that can be enacted within workshop contexts.

Figure 1

Embodied play as a means of activating space through guided movement prompts. (archiBODY workshop, Rosedale School of the Arts, Spring 2024; designed and led by Pantea Eslami).



Learning Through Play

Play operates as an open-ended mode of exploration (Kolb, 1984; Dewey, 1938) where learners are free to improvise, experiment, and respond intuitively to spatial and bodily prompts. Rather than aiming for fixed outcomes, play invites curiosity and risk-taking, enabling students to experience space as a dynamic field of possibilities. Within *archiBODY*, play-based activities activated sensory awareness and encouraged students to test how gestures, rhythms, and interactions could generate spatial meaning.

Learning Through Making

Making grounds these explorations in material form. Through drawing, sketching, and three-dimensional construction, ephemeral gestures are translated into tangible artifacts. This process not only documents but also transforms experience, allowing learners to externalise and reflect on their bodily engagement with space. In the workshops, models and drawings became iterative tools — both records of embodied perception and platforms for further movement and reflection.

Interconnection

The final principle emphasises learning as a collective endeavour. By weaving together individual contributions, students co-constructed shared spatial compositions and performances, discovering how diverse perspectives and bodies can generate interconnected knowledge. This principal frame architecture as a “playground” where disciplines, practices, and learners intersect, forming collaborative modes of inquiry.

Together, these three principles define a flexible but coherent pedagogical approach. They provide the design logic for *archiBODY*, guiding its progression from movement to representation, from individual perception to collective performance. More broadly, they outline how architectural pedagogy can foster embodied, performative, and interdisciplinary modes of learning.

archiBODY

The principles of play, making, and interconnection were tested through *archiBODY*, a workshop model designed to integrate architectural pedagogy into a performative learning environment. The first edition was carried out at Rosedale School of the Arts in Toronto, with senior students from the Department of Dance. Developed in collaboration with the department’s director, the workshop aimed not simply to overlay architecture onto performance, but to create a shared platform where the two disciplines could intersect and generate new forms of knowledge.

Design of the workshop was structured as a circular and interconnected sequence of activities, designed to activate different modalities of learning — movement, observation, drawing, making, and performance. Each stage was intended to deepen students’ awareness of the body–space relationship, while also opening new avenues for reflection and collaboration. The design emphasised reciprocity: movements gave rise to sketches, sketches evolved into three-dimensional models, models inspired new choreographies, and performances in turn reshaped students’ spatial perceptions. In this way, the workshop enacted a feedback loop between embodiment and representation.

Figure 2

Translating embodied gestures from abstract sketches into three-dimensional models, materialising movement into spatial form. (archiBODY workshop, Rosedale School of the Arts, Spring 2024; designed and led by Pantea Eslami).

***From Individual Awareness to Collective Space***

The early phases of the workshop focused on cultivating bodily sensitivity to space. Through guided explorations, students experimented with curves, spirals, and trajectories, becoming aware of the invisible volumes traced by their gestures. These embodied explorations were then abstracted into sketches and later into three-dimensional models, allowing students to externalise the fleeting qualities of movement. Importantly, this process was not aimed at producing aesthetic artifacts, but at materialising perception — capturing the ways bodies carve and reshape space.

The transition from individual models to collective composition marked a critical pedagogical shift. Students were asked to combine their individual constructions into a shared body-landscape, negotiating how separate spatial sensibilities could coexist within a single environment. This collaborative stage foregrounded interconnection: architecture became the medium through which individuality and collectivity were reconciled. Students learned that space was not only shaped by their own gestures, but also by the presence and actions of others.

Figure 3

Collaborative body-landscape created by merging individual models, illustrating interconnection and collective spatial composition. (archiBODY workshop, Rosedale School of the Arts, Spring 2024; designed and led by Pantea Eslami).



Performative Turn

In the final phase, students returned to movement, using their collective models as scores for performance. Choreographic sequences emerged from the material qualities of the body-landscape — its openings, closures, tensions, and rhythms. This process illustrated the performative dimension of architectural pedagogy: space was not merely represented but enacted. Students discovered that architecture could inspire movement just as movement could generate architecture, creating a reciprocal dialogue between the two practices.

Figure 4 & 5

Choreographing movements inspired by the collective body-landscape, demonstrating the performative turn from spatial form to embodied action. (archiBODY workshop, Rosedale School of the Arts, Spring 2024; designed and led by Pantea Eslami).



Figure 6

Final performance sequence integrating movement, models, and collaborative spatial awareness, presenting the outcomes of the workshop process. (archiBODY workshop, Rosedale School of the Arts, Spring 2024; designed and led by Pantea Eslami).

**3- Educational Implications**

Throughout the workshop, students engaged in a process of alternating embodiment and reflection. By moving between bodily awareness, representation, construction, and performance, they experienced learning as iterative and layered. The workshop revealed that architectural methods — drawing, modelling, spatial composition — could serve as tools for performative education, while performance-based approaches could expand the scope of architectural pedagogy.

Rather than treating architecture and performance as separate domains, *archiBODY* demonstrated the potential of a shared pedagogical platform. The workshop showed that embodied exploration of space can foster creative expression, critical reflection, and collaborative meaning-making. For the students, it offered not only new ways of understanding performance but also new perspectives on how learning itself can be enacted through body–space interactions.

Findings and Discussion

The *archiBODY* workshop revealed several key insights into how architectural pedagogy can function as an interdisciplinary framework for embodied and performative learning. First,

students reported a heightened awareness of their bodily presence in space. Through guided explorations of curves, spirals, and trajectories, they came to perceive space not as a static backdrop but as a dynamic field shaped by movement. This aligns directly with Merleau-Ponty's conception of lived space as something co-constructed by body and world, and with Lecoq's insistence that space is revealed through action (Merleau-Ponty, 2012/1945; Lecoq, 2000/1997) rather than abstraction.

Secondly, the translation of embodied gestures into sketches and models encouraged students to externalise and reflect on their experiences. By materialising ephemeral movements into lines and forms, they were able to recognise spatial patterns that might otherwise remain unnoticed. This reflective practice echoes Dewey's emphasis on learning through experience (Dewey, 1938) and his argument that knowledge arises from cycles of doing and reflecting. In this sense, architectural representation served not as an end product but as a tool for deepened perception.

Third, the shift from individual explorations to collective construction underscored the role of collaboration in embodied learning. As students negotiated how their models might join together into a shared landscape, they confronted questions of coexistence, rhythm, and relation. This process revealed the inherently social dimension of space: bodies and forms do not exist in isolation but constantly interact and transform one another. The collaborative aspect resonates with Pallasmaa's call for architecture that re-engages the senses (2005) and the communal dimension of experience.

Finally, the performative turn in the workshop — where students re-animated their collective models through choreography — demonstrated the reciprocal dialogue between architecture and performance. Just as movements inspired spatial forms, those forms in turn generated new movements. This reciprocal exchange suggests that architectural pedagogy, when reframed through embodiment, can act as a catalyst for interdisciplinary creativity.

Taken together, these findings highlight the potential of *archiBODY* as a transferable pedagogical model. By weaving together play, making, and interconnection, the workshop demonstrated that architectural thinking can expand beyond the design studio to enrich performative practices and to foster participatory, embodied modes of learning.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how architectural pedagogy can extend beyond the design studio to serve as a platform for embodied and performative learning. Through the *archiBODY* workshop, students discovered space not as a backdrop but as an active partner in creative practice, generating new awareness and collaborative possibilities.

The significance of this work lies less in the specific activities than in the transferable model it proposes. By weaving together play, making, and interconnection, *archiBODY* frames architecture as a pedagogy of participation — one that enriches performance-based education while also offering tools adaptable to other disciplines.

The next step is to develop this model into curriculum modules and community-based applications. In doing so, architectural pedagogy can contribute to more holistic, participatory approaches to learning, where body, space, and collaboration are understood not as supplements to knowledge but as integral to how knowledge is created.

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