

Idealistic Expressions of Space and Movement in Ballet Versus Whirling Dervishes

Gongyu Zhou

*School of Architecture, Tianjin University, Tianjin, China
3024206106@tju.edu.cn*

Abstract. Dance serves as a vital medium for expressing human idealism. Dance movements can reflect the specific existential consciousness of people in a particular region and time period. This study aims to approach the subject from the perspective of architectural space, focusing on historical cases. It primarily analyzes the ideologies and imaginings conveyed by European ballet during its courtly and theatrical periods, alongside the idealistic world of Islamic Sufi whirling dervishes, to explore how architectural space can assist in communicating dance's idealism. The era of ballet's prominence in the French court coincided with the maturation of French classical architecture. Both emphasized the significance of proportion. Ballet movements represent both a pursuit of perfect proportion and a reflection of an underlying arrogance. The nobility found in ballet's movements an embodiment of their pursuit of nobility. The extreme opulence of Versailles, characterized by polished reflective surfaces and mirrors, created an illusionary realm that helped people escape the real world. Later stage ballet was often associated with the proscenium arch, creating an entrance to another world. Combined with exaggerated, surreal leaps, it shaped the pursuit of unrealistic ideals. In contrast, Islamic Sufi whirling dervishes do not convey ideals through visual perception. They experience proximity to Allah through ecstatic spinning. The circular dervish hall provides a unique environment for this pursuit of authenticity. Audiences do not appreciate the movements themselves but imagine the spiritual state, experiencing the dance through envisioning an idealized condition. These two examples contrast in their modes of expressing imagined space by a visual or non-visual imagination, although both masterfully create ideal environments suited to their respective movements.

Keywords: idealism, imagination, dance, dervish, visuality

1. Introduction

Do you know why European ballet theaters often have proscenium stages? Why do we rarely see Sufi whirling dances performed on such stages? Dance is a largely spontaneous art form that expresses human joy or perhaps a connection to their gods or goddesses. When we begin to dance, we often enter a state of overwhelming bliss, lost in an ethereal imagination. Dance reflects the dancer's idealism and conveys a unique sense of existence. Architectural space serves dancers in

more than just providing a venue. We believe that successful architectural space can enhance dance's idealism and help dancers create a more authentic environment that aligns with their pursuits.

Before I stepped into Palace of Versailles, I had been told that this was one of the most luxurious palaces in the world. Yet its splendor still left me in astonishment. Sophisticated lamps hang down from the ceiling. The golden decoration shone so brightly, reflecting my image. The floor's reflection made me feel as though I were walking on water. And the well decorated mirrors are so exquisite as if marked as an entrance of a fantasy. In the case of Sufi whirling dance, the circular religious space aligns with the dance's characteristic rotational movements, a shared pursuit of nearness to Allah. That of European ballet reflects the underlying ideals of the French aristocracy, demonstrating how architectural space and ballet mutually influence and reflect notions of royal power. And once ballet takes the stage, how space and dance work together to shape people's imaginations and pursuits of fantasy. These examples offer a new perspective on architectural design: design need not be solely a product of real life; it is also crucial to satisfy users through imagination and idealism. Besides, imagination can be fulfilled not only through visual architecture, but through no vision as well.

2. The unchangeable pursuit

Idealism is something we all pursue. For architecture, its practical functionality is an essential aspect, including people's daily activities and movements within these spaces, the direct feelings evoked by the scale of spaces, and their openness or confinement. Simultaneously, its role in our imaginative world may be less readily apparent, yet I believe it remains indispensable. It's like waking from a dream in the morning, realizing I was soaring through the sky like a bird. This brings me joy since it's a world distinct from reality. I don't expect to truly fly like a bird. However, the mere dream still gives me delight, which can be summarized as a form of idealism, and when architectural space fosters such idealism, it's hard not to regard it as successful. This pursuit of an ideal world has existed since ancient times. In the burial chambers of ancient Egyptian pyramids, for instance, space played its symbolic role significantly. Through the integration of diverse media, the chamber space became the pharaoh's afterlife universe, reflecting humanity's expression of otherworldly imagination through spatial design. Thousands of years later, the expression and employment of the idealism still persists in our designs.

In this process, I noticed dance, for it is a remarkably direct means for people to express their emotions and showcase an ideal state. The Tajik people live in the high mountains, where the eagle serves as their national symbol. They revere the eagle, as it symbolizes wisdom, courage, and agility to them, and the eagle flute can bring them beautiful music [1]. Their dances mimic the eagle's posture and movements and they imagine themselves as soaring eagles. Through the music played on the eagle flute, they feel themselves soaring through the sky, drawing ever closer to their revered symbol [2]. Movements directly express personal emotions and imagination in folk dances, while in other contexts, they may convey a collective consciousness or an idealistic state as perceived by the audience. Such dances clearly separate performers from spectators, transforming dance into an activity that not everyone participates in. For instance, dances during Zhou Dynasty of Chinese history typically reflected hierarchical concepts. The ritual dance, known as the Yi dance, was performed as a square formation of dancers. The Zhou emperor performed it with eight rows and eight columns, while the specifications for feudal lords and others decreased in scale accordingly. This dance emphasized collective formation, creating a sense of order compared to individual movements. It displayed the nation's culture and military might while fulfilling the ruling class's ideal of a well-ordered, hierarchically defined world capable of enduring long-term stability [3].

In terms of the relationship between dance and space, the whirling dervishes of Islamic Sufism and ballet exemplify how space and dance interconnect within an idealistic state. Both clearly reflect a shared ideal condition that fulfills the spiritual space of both dancers and spectators. Building on this, I find it even more compelling that they simultaneously represent two idealized approaches. The imagination in ballet is realized through the visual, while the imagination in the Sufi whirling dance is achieved by closing one's eyes, in other words, non-visually. That is to say, architecture informs the imagination in different ways. One is visual, the other non-visual. The former requires architecture functioning as a vessel for the imagination. The latter also requires architecture, but perhaps virtual architecture imposes a greater influence on them than a visible building.

For 17th-century Europe, the popularity of ballet also reflected dance's pursuit of the ideal human state. After being introduced from Italy to France, ballet swiftly transitioned from a folk dance to a courtly art form, becoming a symbol of high society. The founding of the Royal Academy of Dance (1661) and the Royal Academy of Music (1669) marked pivotal historical events of this era. Compared to its 15th- and 16th-century forms, ballet at this time became more formalized, evolving into a dance that reflected the monarch's will along with political aesthetics.⁴ Perhaps in the ideal state envisioned by kings and nobles of the era, their status far surpassed that of the ruled. High society and common society seemed like two entirely distinct worlds. This notion first became apparent in the rise of ballet. Ballet is a highly technical dance form, with strict regulations followed by the movements of dancers' legs and feet, demanding years of rigorous training. These regulations tended to exist as a pursuit of perfect proportions [4]. It is not difficult to imagine the potential meanings behind the term “perfect.” In the elite's idealized vision, “perfect” is not a universal state but rather implies an inherent disparity between individuals. The emphasis on ideal proportions helps establish orthodoxy, thereby reinforcing the authority of the ruling class. During Louis XIV's reign, as royal power strengthened, such notions naturally took root among the upper class of society. Equally possible is the notion that the pursuit of classical standards including ideal proportions, and the promotion of aesthetic ideals further strengthened the consolidation of power.

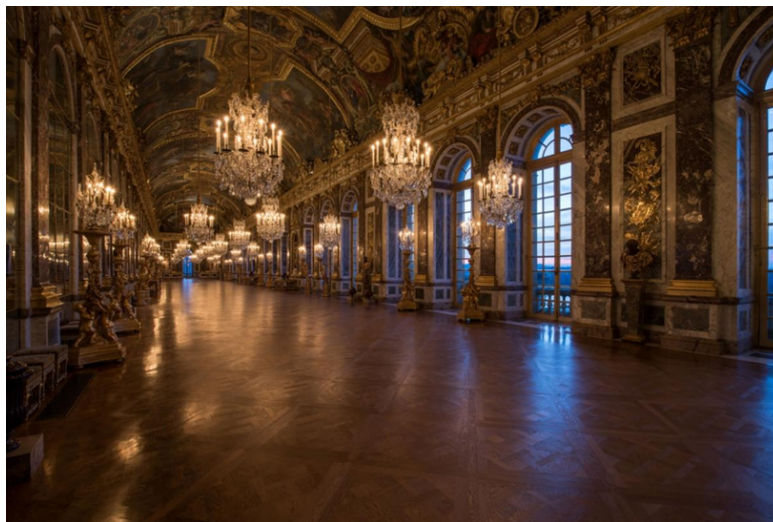


Figure 1. The Hall of Mirrors, Palace of Versailles [5]

What kind of space could accommodate the emergence and expression of such a vision? The Palace of Versailles stands as one of the defining architectural representations of this era, powerfully reflecting the aspirations of its rulers. (See figure 1) As a royal palace, it also served as a venue for hosting balls and appreciating dance. The layout features a prominent central axis and numerous

radiating paths, symbolizing the king's sovereign authority [6]. And perhaps its interior atmosphere better embodies ideals transcending ordinary society. Reflected light became a key decorative feature. Extensive use of gold and other materials created opulence, with floors gleaming like mirrors. Mirrors themselves served as a more direct intervention. Light was transformed into myriad patterns, fostering an ethereal sensation. This space is visual, and the ideal state it creates is also visual. It's based on seeing someone else and imagining yourself like that. People see their reflection in the mirror and feel that this is their ideal self. Dancing in such spaces naturally evoked a sense of unreality, as if inhabiting an entirely different world. This environment fulfilled the king and minister's imagined status, sharing a common pursuit with ballet. It provided a space for court ballet to realize such idealism, which sought perfect proportions and visual balance of its movements. Gravity binds ordinary people. But for rulers, with the aid of ballet and court architecture, they feel lighter and freer. At the same time, it cultivated a sense of no privacy. Once within this space, every movement ceased to belong to oneself, existing simply to be admired [7].



Figure 2. Drottningholm Theatre interior, built by Carl Fredrik Adelcrantz, 1766, depicted after its restoration in 1921 [8]

After ballet emerged from the court to become a theatrical performance accessible to the public, its form evolved, while the imagination of another world persisted. the popular proscenium stage of this era is regarded as a reflection of this tendency. The stage's surrounding was clearly defined by a frame, frequently adorned with elaborate decorations, which created a lavish effect while simultaneously emphasizing the stage's boundaries. (See figure 2) From the audience's perspective, ballet performances resembled images reflected in a mirror. The rise of Romanticism in the 19th century placed greater emphasis on phenomena beyond rational empiricism. Combined with Europe's cultural tradition rich in supernatural beings and magic, which were suppressed during the Enlightenment but revived in Romanticism, these influences collectively brought themes of courtly love and the supernatural to ballet [9]. Thus, the audience did not seek a realistic narrative but rather glimpsed another realm which was considered as an idealized world distinct from their own. The proscenium arch is emphasized as a window opening onto this realm, like the boundary of a dream world. Everything is idealized in this realm, unconstrained by rationality or real-world logic. You cannot enter this mirrored world as “flowers in a mirror”, so you are free to imagine it as you wish. Classic ballets like *Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake* bear distinct Romantic features. The stories are displayed through silent movement, where love possesses magical power and embodies an idealized beauty. Fairies and spirits are frequent inhabitants of these tales, for they aren't seen in our daily

lives but perfectly suited to these idealized narratives, as if they were meant to be part of our imaginative worlds. (See figure 3) Actually, they are also part of European history and culture described as a human imagination across time. The depth of the stage is also crucial. Backdrops painted with perspective techniques connect at the center, creating distinct idealized spaces for different scenes. How can performers convey an ideal world that fulfills the audience's imagination? A primary method is creating the visual illusion of reduced gravity. In ballet performances, dancers move with such lightness that merely touching the floor on their toes conveys a sense of weightlessness. Through precise body control, dancers make jumps and landings appear seamless and natural [10]. Lifts of the female dancer by the male dancer frequently appear in



Figure 3. Swan Lake, Mariinsky Theatre [11]

dance dramas. These movements are seamlessly connected to the female dancer's jumps, showcasing a “microgravity” effect. Female dancers extend their time on the air through strategic arm movements during jumps—such as adding a fifth position arm placement before returning to first position mid-air. They also create the illusion of gliding through the air by executing splits at precise moments to alter their center of gravity [9]. Performers often deliberately avoid strict timing to the beat, allowing for extended suspension in the air. By mastering and strategically applying physical laws, the performers make their movements transcend them, creating an intuitive sense of an illusory world that responds to the proscenium stage design. Ballet's movements and spatial construction jointly emphasize that this is a dance meant to be admired. Without an audience, the dance would lose its direction and descend into chaos; the meaning of many movements would vanish unless the dancer immerses themselves in their own ideal world, willing to be their own spectator. Over centuries of ballet's evolution, its spontaneous entertainment function gradually faded, while its role as an ideological tool or aesthetic object grew stronger. Thus, its spectatorial nature became essential to its existence.

Beyond ballet, the whirling dervish dance of Islamic Sufism is another form that attracts me a lot. Contrast to ballet's widespread influence, it is preserved today mainly as a cultural heritage. But many young people particularly in Turkey remain deeply drawn to it, finding self-realization within its practice. This dance and its spatial context jointly strive to create an idealism, though it differs significantly from ballet's state. Whirling dervishes are intrinsically tied to their spatial context. Architecture and dance collectively express humanity's quest to draw near to Allah. Sufism advocates achieving a trance-like state through “listening” and whirling to approach the god. These

rituals are typically held in specific religious ceremonies. The mullah, a revered Islamic scholar regarded as Allah's messenger, serves as the ceremony's central figure. The venue is usually circular, with tables and stages also designed in this shape. Within the circular space, the sight is naturally drawn to the center, where the mullah typically sits. The wooden stage, elevated above ground level, is functionally designed to optimize audience visibility while emphasizing the mullah's status, expressing love and reverence for Allah. Monks and other attendees sit around the stage and a red carpet adorns the stage's center. To the faithful, it symbolizes the spot where Rumi the Mullah once sat. After sharing a meal, the dervishes begin chanting prayers accompanied by Arabic instruments, then step on the stage and disperse around it. After performing gestures symbolizing the union of humanity and Allah, they start their dance. The dancers raised their hands above their heads and spun in place for extended periods with eyes tightly closed, sometimes circling the central red carpet. Sufi believers revere music and dance. Through whirling, they sought to achieve a state of self-forgetfulness, pursuing closeness to Allah. (See figure 4) During their rotation, they typically emptied their minds, experiencing the Divine Presence and seeking union with the god through this practice [12].



Figure 4. Dervishes performing a ritual dance, Konya, Turkey [13]

Although this movement is no longer confined to religious rituals and has become a form of entertainment for the public, bringing it into theaters still remains challenging. This difficulty stems from the dance's characteristic of uniform circular rotation, which lacks a primary orientation. Traditionally, audiences encircled the circular stage, with the spatial configuration perfectly suited to viewing requirements and harmoniously aligned with the dance's ideal expressive state. Theaters, however, are typically directional, with audiences seated on one side of the stage. Performers often require visual contact and other forms of interaction with the audience. This develops a fundamental conflict with the non-directional nature of whirling. Performing whirling in a conventional theater disrupts the dancers' spiritual space, causing the dance to lose much of its essence. Some dancers describe spinning as profoundly joyful, as it allows them to feel closer to God. When spinning in place, as the rotation accelerates, the surrounding scenery gradually blurs, diminishing distinctions between scenes until everything seems unified. This sense of unity and continuity may offer them a powerful experience. Even with eyes closed, they perceive an idealized world. The circular design of the prayer hall enhances the authenticity of this ideal state, intensifying their sensations of drawing ever closer to God while detaching from the material world. This, I believe, is the fascinating aspect of this dance. It is not a performance for spectators but rather a form of self-discovery and exploration. The dance process is an inner communication with God, not a display of movements for an audience. Thus, spectators are not essential to the whirling dance. In religious

ceremonies, those watching the dance are also participants. They may play music or recite scriptures, assisting both the dancers and themselves in communicating with God. If spectators sit in the prayer hall or another circular space to observe the whirling dance, they are not merely watching the repetitive spinning motions. Instead, they attempt to imagine the dancers' psychological state, including their idealistic pursuit of communion and closeness with God. I refer to this tendency as invisible architecture. For architectural space, when it is visible, it can exert an influence on individuals within it. But this influence does not need to be conveyed through sight. The pure whirling process diminishes the role of sight. Once the dervishes close their eyes, the architecture becomes entirely invisible. That being said, its profound influence persists. For these dancers, they don't imagine themselves as visually separate. They employ non-visual imagination. Unlike court ballet, which uses visual presentation as the content of imagination, the whirling dervishes' imagination does not lead to a visible result. Architecture is almost internalized in their minds.

3. Conclusion

Architecture and dance share a degree of mutual dependence. They influence each other and exhibit certain synchronies in historical development. Both often pursue people's idealistic states, distinct from architecture's typical role. Since dance frequently reflects human imagination, space must resonate with it. During ballet's introduction to the French court particularly the dominance of French classical architecture, both disciplines served monarchical authority to some extent. The Palace of Versailles created spaces filled with reflective effects, crafting unreal spatial states. Dancers rose onto their toes, their perfect bodily proportions announcing their detachment from the ordinary world outside. And they lost all privacy simultaneously with their images endlessly reflected by mirrors, seemed on display before the king forever. Later, ballet was moved into theaters, and ballet performances became part of civic life. The proscenium stage demonstrated how architectural spaces could satisfy the audience's idealistic pursuits by creating illusory entrances. The dancers' series of movements, seemingly in conflict to the laws of gravity, strengthened this idealism. The Sufi whirling dance, however, did not focus on displaying physical actions to the audience; instead, it conveyed a spiritual state. This is how non-visual dance takes shape. In the state of spinning, one could empty oneself and continually draw closer to God, communicating with the divine. This ideal state was better achieved with the aid of circular halls. However, they do not rely solely on this space devoid of visual focal points to construct their ideal world. Here lies a crucial distinction between ballet and whirling dance. The former requires architecture to complete the imagination, while for the latter, architecture is almost internalized in your mind. Here, architecture functions more as a catalyst, invisibly informing the imagination. Working in harmony with the steady rotational movements of dance, it achieves an exquisite pursuit of a sacred ideal world.

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