

## “The Qualitative and Quantitative World of Robert Wilson's Theater”

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### Abstract

Robert Wilson's theater creations and choreography are an interesting intersection of concepts of space, time and movement and how they are measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. This paper presents Wilson's systems of space, time, and movement relationships within the strictures of the proscenium stage that convey separations and linkages of each element. The configurations and experiences of Wilson's plays create a unique model of mathematical and geometric space-time-movement relationships.

I teach architecture. And for me, a fundamental part of this (wonderful) task is to teach both the qualitative and quantitative aspects/layers of architecture . . . its spatial characteristics, the feel of the space AND the heights/widths of its spaces and openings as fitting to the human scale and form, as well as the language of architectural communication for construction. While the quantity of materials and measurement of the scale of the architecture is absolutely a part of the mission, it is the qualitative characteristics of the endeavor which make it worth the effort and resources, or not.

Architecture is comprised of quantitative and qualitative design thinking, yet these two endeavors have two different languages; one exacting, absolute, and measurable; the other about sensibilities, psycho-emotively-based, immeasurable. The language of architecture is the construct within and around which space allows the actions and means of life . . . its movement in time and space.

Space, time and movement are essential aspects to the act of inhabitation. We learn the math of physics in which quantities can be represented for each: distance, time, rate. The perception of this physics can be yet another thing.

Our perceptual apparatus as human beings (homo sapiens) enables us to READ and UNDERSTAND / PERCEIVE the physical world in qualitative ways, versus quantitative ways; though the qualitative world is inexorably linked to the quantitative world, they are also quite separate conditions and even pursuits in design, yet linked to the same end, outcome, and product.

Architecture's central purpose is to create space for human beings . . . space for life functions and pursuits (dwelling, work, and elevated pursuits such as pleasure, learning, creative invention and worship). How that space is delineated with material structure can be enormously varied [see Bruno Zevi's *Architecture as Space*].

For me, Robert Wilson's theatrical works provide an apt and inspiring example of how space can be considered with both qualitative and quantitative sensibilities. The relationship between these two categories, however are used and experienced in ways that have the human being and its perceptive

capabilities at its core. Wilson uses issues of space, movement and time as the basic building blocks of his theater.

These theater experiences have a sense of de-laminating space from time and use movement as an intersecting device -- a type of weaver to bring them together. Wilson constructs a choreography that acts as a measured structure where actors count out their steps at prescribed rates, sometimes taking an hour to cross the stage. Lighting cues are orchestrated in counts of 1 to 300, versus the usual 1 to 20.

In Wilson's creations, the two axes of vertical and horizontal are conceived, however, not as static, but as dynamic . . . set in motion or qualified according to movement . . . one that plays out in front of our eyes and that is completed, according to Wilson, by the viewer themselves, by providing space for the audience to complete the action through reflection, as a type of meaning.

Yes, theater is a story, a representation . . . not the real thing. However, Robert Wilson's theater presents situations that allow us to wonder about, ponder and question quantitative structures and theories.

Space can be measured in terms of mathematical lengths, areas, and volumes; and space can be measured in terms of perceptual quality, phenomenon, and heuristic type of space (small, medium, large, nasty, OK, or inspiring).

Wilson's theater has minimalist features, are mapped out on coordinates of the vertical and horizontal. Space is represented as a horizontal line and suggests breadth, while time is a vertical line that creates depth and "goes from the heights of the sky to the centre of the earth" [1].

"The two vectors that weave the tissue of time and space advance in unison in the face of the impossibility, not only of thinking, but even of feeling a time without space or a space without time. For Wilson, both are linked in the structure: 'Time exists through space. It is the space around the time that is the construction. And the time around the space. Neither exists without the other' (Linders, 1997). The visual libretto that was initiated with the light becomes a score that makes it possible to visualize both movements, that of time and that of space, in a single gesture. In this score the total duration of the spectacle, as well as its chronometric divisions, would act if this were the measure or the best time of a tonal score. Inside this structure strong times and weak times, dense spaces and delicate spaces, can also make themselves felt" [2].

Intervals of space can have silence, and is used as a solid form in Wilson's plays. Though they may be measured on the one hand as having 'zero' sound, the silences can be pregnant, full, even loud. Therefore, the 'zero' of silence has a qualitative quantity of something positive and to the right of zero. It is measured with our body/mind in the context of the play.

As in theories of relativity, mathematical computations of space cannot be thought of as entirely independent, but as part of a larger dynamic whole. Does math serve and represent perceived, experienced reality? Or is there a necessary and even stubborn incongruence between the two?

Robert Wilson's plays and theater designs are a poignant reminder of the two states or worlds that we live in, that of quantified explanation, and that of qualified wonder and that which defies explanation and quantification.

### References

[1] Vicent Ostria, "Echanges: Pierre Soulages, Robert Wilson" [interview with Robert Wilson], in *Cahiers du Cinema*, no. 477 (March 1994).

[2] Miguel Morey, Carmen Pardo, *Robert Wilson*, p. 60. 2003.