

# The Body As a Site of Spiritual Practice: Can Architecture Help?

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## Somatics and Spirituality

The human body is an ordinary part of nature that can be the site of spiritual insight. This presentation is based on the author's 40 years experience with somatic practices (acupuncture and tai chi, the Alexander Technique, Body-Mind Centering, and EyeBody). Somatic practices acknowledge the combination of physical, emotional and cultural factors in human embodiment (Hanna, 1980; Linden, 1994; Cohen, 1994; Murphy, 1992; Johnson 1997; Grunwald, 2004).

Several years ago a conference held on a university campus asked why the religious influence on politics is dominated by the Right, and asked what the Left had to contribute regarding spirituality and politics. One of the panelists suggested that the selfish and brutal aspect of human nature comes from our lower self, the physical animal that is governed by the reptilian brain. This idea that the body is bad, while the higher mind and spirit is good is fairly common. However, in my experience spiritual life was awakened through body attunement.

Body workers bring exquisite attention on anatomy and physiology and in the process encounter a reality behind/beyond/above the physical that is non-material, what is called spiritual. In fact, this reality may still be material, but it is an energetic materiality that is much finer than what we call material. Material and the so-called immaterial may be one, a continuum. A personal example:

As a child I had no prior religious or spiritual training except a lesson in August 1976 from an American Zen Buddhist at Tassajara Zen Mountain retreat in California who taught a handful of people how to practice zazen, or sitting meditation. That was the first time I entertained the idea that Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" could be supplanted by a more basic idea that "I *breathe*, therefore I am." Two years later I started Alexander lessons. The Alexander Technique is a system of posture and movement involving careful attention to head and neck that creates a unity of body and mind that F. M. Alexander (1932) called the self. I started taking lessons in order to deal with scoliosis. Inadvertently, I had experiences that I later learned were recognizable stages/aspects of spiritual awakening: one, a feeling of petals opening around the heart and warm liquid outflowing from those petals; two, in the middle of an Alexander lesson, an uncontrollable shimmering of the visceral lining that did not show on the outside of the torso, something I later learned is known as a "kriya" in Siddha yoga. After a year of twice weekly Alexander lessons and these two extraordinary experiences a friend invited me to visit his ashram. There in the evening service I learned how to chant "honor the inner self" (om namah shivaya). As we settled into a final 10 minutes of silent meditation I reviewed the Alexander lesson I had had earlier that day about the "whispered ah." Then I remembered to think "om namah shivaya" at the third eye. At that moment on October 30, 1979 of the coming together of a full breath (whispered ah) with the nervous system (third eye) I experienced a classic Kundalini awakening. That is, I saw and felt the energy that, in the Siddha yoga worldview, lies at the base of the spine. I perceived this force as flames of molten gold or golden electricity that traveled up along my central core. I felt that I had experienced the energy that makes up the universe, both organic and inorganic, both material and immaterial. In my case sustained attention to the physical body led to spiritual awakening.

The Alexander technique continued to be so important to me that in 1984 I enrolled in the 3-year teacher training course in San Francisco to certify as a teacher of the Alexander Technique. As a full time professor of architecture (specializing in its social and cultural meanings) I realized that I would have to find a way to justify this huge expenditure of time in my academic life. If I were to become an expert about the body I would need to find a way to connect that to the designed environment. I decided to write about chairs, where the body and environment meet (Cranz, 1998). Eventually, I completed 6 years of training in a second training class in New York City. In 1989 I developed a new course “Designing for the Near Environment” in order to focus on how the body meets the environment. I have taught the course annually ever since, eventually changing the title to “Body Conscious Design.” This wording is meant to capture the importance of both body and consciousness in the design professions.

More generally, many other individuals and other traditions have also noted the relationship between body awareness and spirituality: Zen Buddhist meditators come to rest within the body in order to achieve spiritual awareness. Paying close attention to physical sensation (breathing, head-neck-spine, various specific locations in the brain, including the third eye and upper visual cortex) helps focus the mind. When the mind no longer jumps from thought to thought, feeling to feeling, sensation to sensation, the self comes to appreciate that cognition is another sense, not higher than the other senses. (This raises the question of whether or not there is a higher consciousness, above or behind cognition, or if the *integrated* self is the source of sacredness, sometimes thought of as the spiritual.)

### **Architecture, Body, and Higher Consciousness**

How can architecture support the experience of tuning into a higher form of consciousness (spirituality) by supporting and honoring the body?

A first possibility is that the eternal soul incarnates in the human animal, thereby joining heaven and earth. Sacred architecture in the west represents this idea by joining a square base (earth) with a round dome (heaven).

A second possibility is that the design of the material environment can draw our attention to our physical structure and movement along the 3 planes. Some environments, like libraries, emphasize the vertical plane, and thereby stimulate use of the neo-cortex. Playrooms and bedrooms emphasize horizontality, and thereby re-enact mammalian commensalism. Yet other built forms, like passageways, naves, and vistas, emphasize the sagittal plane to communicate and invite forward movement. (Cohen, 1993; Tolja, 2001)

A third possibility is that architecture is multi-sensory which helps bring people to “presence.” Presence is defined as being in the now, rather than in the emotional past or the calculated future. Presence is in contrast to over-focused problem solving and under-focused daydreaming. Tuning in to the senses helps one become present. When does architecture help people directly experience the vitality of presence? The size and shape of rooms define much about their purpose, so architecture helps shape experience by setting expectations, guidance, and constraints for behavior. In addition to shape, size, movement, architecture also involves color, texture, scent, and sound. Multi-sensory environments help bring us to the now; for example, an ashram with plush carpets, fragrant incense, blue lights, vibrating sitar music activate all the senses. So does the comparatively austere Zen zendo with the scent and feel of grass mats, dim light, gongs and knockers.

A fourth possibility is that architecture extends the human mind (Clark and Chalmers, 1998) and body. Ancient Egyptian architecture has been interpreted as reenacting the formation of the human body (Schwaller de Lubicz, 1981). It replays the proportional system in some cases like

Luxor, and I would add my own possible interpretation that in Karnak the closely spaced giant columns re-enact the process of cell division in mitosis.

Fifth, and most generally, the design of the everyday environment can improve public health and well being. The ordinary environment is a walk through collective consciousness. It's a bleak prospect. Inadequate daylighting disturbs the diurnal rhythms of city dwellers and creates a host of health problems (Kim, 2015). Chairs are the wrong size for most people. The assumption that we need only to sit, stand, or walk leads to the absence of places to lie down, lounge, sit cross legged, squat, etc. The provision of features to facilitate those actions would tell the user that those actions are expected and legitimate. Architectural design can help honor the creature within us and paradoxically allow us to connect with our spiritual nature

### **Experiential Anatomy**

The author will lead the conference participants in a proprioceptive routine in order to demonstrate how changes in somatic awareness can influence artistic, architectural, and design production (Cranz and Chiesi, 2014). In this instance, the focus will be on the design of buildings and urban squares.

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