building the tango
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this is building the tango, a constructive investigation into the material consequences of dancing the tango.

building the tango is about the resurrection of passion and life, as well as passion for life, of which the reality is now. it also involves resurrecting passion and life on a site occupied by ghosts and ruins: belle isle in richmond, virginia.

the constructive investigation of dancing the tango on belle isle includes reclaiming the scandal, individual movements and individuals moving together, opposition of body to body, opposition of bodies to space, placement of feet, love of the dance, and feeling the heat of the tango.

studying the material consequences of the tango requires that the structure, itself, is a tango. it is symbolic of a man’s struggle for the possession of a woman. the structure is one part man, one part woman, every part dance. the constructive realities of the tango create a dance of materials, a dance of space and a dance of bodies within.
building the tango is a result of the personal inspiration, guidance, and perseverance of the following individuals. I wish to thank:

jaan holt, paul emmons, and caren yglesias for their rhythmic and intense wisdom

david mangum for holding my hand and asking me to dance

ralph white for his extensive knowledge of and care for belle isle

the richmond ballet for an intimate view behind the scenes

anne norman van gelder for setting the tempo

julie taylor for lending her experience of the dance

john winebrenner for whose relentless energy and dedication I will always be grateful

cary sweat for coffee, brownies, and true friendship

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muy fuertes abrazos to william tate for igniting the flame and revealing the passion.
for my parents. thank you for always filling my dance card with unconditional love, patience, and support.
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“an ear of corn

by the miracle of your prophetic notes women and girls were instantly born, moonlight in water pools, their hips born to sway and a wild longing in their way of loving...

when I think of you, beloved tango... I feel the tiles of the dance hall shake and hear the moaning of my past. today I don’t have... my mother any more... but I feel her coming on tiptoes to kiss me, when your song springs from the sound of the bandoneon”

enrique santos discépolo, juan carlos, marambio catan
[dancing a stair]
we all dance a stair; whether ascending or descending, we all dance a stair. some people take their steps two at a time, others run them one by one, and then there are those who need to use two feet for every stair.

each rise over run is a step.

each step is our own.

each step is our dance.
dancing a stair
a dancing stair
"a stair isn't something you get out of a catalogue but a very important event in a building."

louis i. kahn
[ icons + inspiration ]
“it was born for couples to dance to entwined, to celebrate the mixing of the natives with the flood of european immigrants who sought new homes in the new south. its instruments: the guitar, the piano, violins, basses, and the bandoneon, which seem forever to belong to it and it alone.” rafael flores
“whistling

a street in barracas, to the south,
on a summer night,
when bluer is the sky
and sweeter is the song
wafting from Italian boat...
Its light dying, a street-lamp
flickers in the shadows
and underneath a portico
a lover
speaks to his beloved…”

jose gonzalez castillo
“remember that at the time just to dance in front of each other the right arm of the man touching the back of the lady was a little too much...now here we have a dance in which there is a close embrace, cheek to cheek, chests together, the legs invading each other’s space, in a long conversation of love and passion, with amagues, hooks, flirtatious looks and caresses...the writing of a prologue to a love story that was soon to follow.” O. Sergio Suppa
belle isle is an island located in the heart of richmond, virginia, a city socially and physically divided by the james river. the falls of the james, home to belle isle, is a seven mile stretch of river rapids formed during the transition between virginia’s upland piedmont region and its lowland tidewater area. belle isle’s close proximity to the james’ north and south banks enables it to serve as a connective space, encouraging recreational congregation between richmond’s divided society. the northeastern point of belle isle is a relatively flat section of the island which offers panoramic views of downtown richmond. it is a piece of land continually being shaped by the commanding waters of the james river, analogous to the shaping of the building by the form of the tango dance.
at different times this field once held a powhatan indian fishing village, a colonial era horse race track, small farms, a civil war prison camp, a 19th century iron plant, a rail line, a 20th century steel plant, a granite quarry, and a hydroelectric power plant.
[ anticipation of the tango ]

In dancing there is form and structure; firm, gesture, there must be an element of gesture.
Hungarian dance artist and theorist, Rudolf von Laban, was widely praised for developing Labanotation, a systemic attempt to graphically analyze and record movement. Laban believed five basic bodily movements occur in dancing:

- **Gesture**: any movement not connected with supporting the body’s weight
- **Stepping**: transferring the weight from one support to another
- **Locomotion**: transporting the body from one place to another
- **Jumping**: movement without a point of support
- **Turning**: changing the position of the front
locomotion
stepping
jumping
gesture
turning

building the tango
gesture, stepping, locomotion, jumping, and turning
"in dancing, people organize the expressive movements of their bodies into rhythmic and visual patterns." adolphe appia
[ assemblage ]

building the tango
programme
the project will provide for the following:

- a place to dance, to feel the heat of dance.
- café: seating for 30-50
- dance space for 150-200
- restrooms
- stage for orchestra which will include: piano
  stand-up bass
  bandoneon
  guitar
  violin
- media screens to show artwork from the tango’s golden age
- raised platforms
- displays of tango icons and famous tangueros

materials
glass    translucent    corrugated metal
wood (red) sound producing paint
screens café chairs slits of moonlight
tango orange open-air

concepts
individual movement scandals turning
tango orange silhouettes twisting
framed views of: view decks lifting
arms dance on water draw
legs screens corte
pelvises paths, alleys fan
various levels divisions staccato
view decks tango “atmosphere” solos
heat leading duets
heat following trios
opposition embracing

references
carlos gardel azucena maizani buenos aires
astor piazzolla piranesi mc escher
paris tita merello mercedes simone
adolphe appia libertad lamarque rudolf von laban

hostinato rigore
"in taking the long, characteristic tango steps, the dancer should feel like a panther stealing through the jungles, treading softly so as not to make a noise. for example, keeping the weight over the left heel, with left knee slightly bent, reach far forward with the right leg very straight. let the ball of the right foot contact the floor first, and smoothly lower the heel to the floor. transferring the full weight onto the right foot, let the right knee bend as the left leg reaches forward. the shoulders DO NOT BOUNCE. rather, the body stays on a very even, low plane, giving a stealthy feeling to the step. the body balance should be over the supporting heel at all times, with a feeling “drawings back” from the step.” ted shawn
→ woman guided by man

→ designated space for man and woman cross

→ man and woman as separate beings - a definite space between them
Cabezazo - signal for dancing given by man to woman
A quick tilt of the head, eye contact, uplifted eyebrows

Dancers - upper bodies help upright and close
FACES almost touching

Man's hand pressed against woman's back
Guiding her

Lower body doing most of work

Woman: Hips swivel, legs alternate in short or wide sweeps
And quick kicks sometimes between man's legs

Man: Guides, flies with music, directs woman, meld with her steps, avoid other dancers, adds fancy pivoting moves

Dance: pauses and abrupt directional changes
Very serious, highly concentrated

Hard expressions

Erotic and sultry

Originally a strong blend of machismo, passion, longing, with a fighting edge to it

Symbolic of struggle for the possession of a woman

Becomes less melancholic, more sexual, vulgar
shaded areas are moments of support or other importance

ascension through alleys
end at mezzanine overlooking main dance space
there should be lots of turns, changes in direction
building the tango
ANTICIPATION OF THE TANGO

FEAR:
Assumption:
When you are
surrounded by
numbers of you &
men dancing
and
the atmosphere is
completed about that
person's final moment
before joining with
member of opposite sex.

Waiting prepared to practice steps
to learn steps

Reference to origin of tango when
men (European immigrants) moving
for prostitués at bordelloes (missing
their motherland and women
they left behind) made up the
Tango taught to me another
- a flowing éde, very masculine
- learning from possession of a
woman
- singing over - women and men
make final dance preparations
column could be short on one side (female) and long on the other (male) representing opposition flush-pull freeze-ball
ASSEMBLAGE

how do people enter a space
with fanfare - look at me
unnoticed - scouring past

division & opposition

compactness between
the man's anticipation
of the tango and
the man's approach
to assemblage so
that the single man
have an opportunity
to check out/stand
away from female
in relation to origin
of the tango - born
out of bordello's
where there were
prostitutes and
considered free for
all

men's anticipation
of the

sites of moonlight
anticipation of the tango - early rendering
cabeceo - a nod, a ritual and wordless communication between a man and woman across the dance-floor

1. negotiation between a man and a woman at sufficient distance that no one else need ever know who asked whom and who refused whom
2. women sitting around edge of dance-floor, the men, from across the room, catch the eye of a possible partner and nod to one side
3. after the imperceptible cabeceas, women rise magically in waves around the dance-hall, eyes level and backs straight, toward as though underwater, toward partners unidentifiable to any but themselves.
roof trusses - plan

1" = 50'-0"
roof frame - plan

1" = 50'-0"
roof purlins - plan

1" = 50'-0"
roof mullions - plan

1" = 50'-0"
dance is, “a language of action in which the various intentions and bodily mental efforts of man are arranged in coherent order.” rudolf von laban
in building the tango, the dramatic distinction between man and woman and the inherent hierarchy between them during the dance takes precedent. The physical and mental role playing of genders gives both man and woman distinct and exaggerated characteristics throughout which help to determine material, structure, and the connections between.

The man whose body is angular and highly defined, sets the tempo. He is the giver of structure, and the dominant lead throughout. He is very much in control and is represented by concrete, concrete block, and steel.

The woman, who is more amorphous in shape, follows the man’s lead, is then seized, enveloped, and ultimately possessed by the man. The delicate nature of glass and glass block represent the woman as it derives strength from heat after amorphous origins and must be embraced by the structure.
“although movement on its own is independent of all surroundings, it is nevertheless advantageous to provide it with a space broken up on various levels that enhance the moments of action and display its detail to best effect; in other words the setting should provide some obstacles to the movement.”  Adolphe Appia
“I examined the type of structure required for space if it is to be employed for the form and movement of the living person, and I concluded that space does not share the life of the body by assuming form, but, on the contrary, by opposing it. To accomplish this spatial composition employs only a few lines. These are the horizontal, the vertical, the oblique, and various combinations, such as a staircase that provides the body with a type of support that no other combination can rival.” Adolphe Appia
“to receive its portion of life from the living body, space must oppose this body; space that embraces our body only further augments its own inertness. but opposition to the body gives life to the inanimate forms of space. living space is the victory of bodily forms over inanimate forms. the mutuality is complete.” adolphe appia
building the tango is a play of opposition between body and space which provokes dance. the tango hall begins as a very organized and structured experience where man and woman step simultaneously in connective, yet separate spaces. while they are aware of the sight and sound of each other’s steps, the entrance is about final resolution and practice of dance steps for males and females in their respective gender designated spaces. as the dancers move toward the dance floor, they encounter the anticipation of the tango, which is comprised of narrow hallways. these corridors, originally inspired by cattle stalls, enable the cabeceo and pair a dancer head-on with a dancer of the opposite sex by a mere nod or glance. obscure openings in the corridor partitions provide an escape from a knowingly unsuccessful pairing of dancers. if the match is welcome, the dancers continue, side by side to the dance floor separated only by a small channel of water which ultimately falls between the anticipation of the tango and the assemblage. once on the dance floor, the dancers are given the opportunity to dance or socialize amongst a series of structures representing both genders. these social structures begin to embrace the passionate nature of the tango by weaving a pattern through plan, referencing the “natural twist turn” step. they also begin to shed their skin and structure, becoming more vulnerable and exposing the dancers within. throughout the dance floor, there is a sharp contrast and undulation of stairs which change rise and run dramatically to enable travel, as well as seating. the tango hall ultimately steps down into the water of the james river where the dancers become completely engulfed by the passion of dance and may end their dance by ascending a stair adjacent to a wall of water used for cleansing.

building the tango is a structural metaphor to the passion of the dance, from beginning to end. it engages people with opposing spaces and provokes scandal and bodily opposition off the dance floor through its secluded catwalks, corridors, stairs, and boat landing. the heat of the tango is felt while defining, confusing, and ultimately breaking down gender roles in the transition from architectural organization to chaos. building the tango on belle isle resurrects a passion for life while promoting recreation and mixture of various cultures north and south of the james river.

investigating the architectural consequences of the tango implores a structure that is equally masculine, feminine, and full of dance. these constructive realities generate opposing spaces with a dance of materials, a dance of space, and a dance of bodies within.

this is building the tango.


O. Sergio Suppa, http://totango.net/sergio.html


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17. Giovanni Battista, Piranesi, Taschen, Italy, 2001: p37
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