

# ***DANCE, SENSES, URBAN CONTEXTS***

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### USE OF SPACE IN THE DANCE-HOUSE IN THE MEZŐSÉG REGION<sup>1</sup>

Based on my observations in the Transylvanian Plain, I would like to demonstrate that the local dance-proxemics operated as a communications-system, in which important social (ethnic, economic, gender and status) roles and relations were symbolized. The spatial organization and proxemics of various dance-types had an effect on their formal and structural character, and through this, on the creative process of the dancers. My study sheds light on the fact, that the dance-house and its yard was an independent space for the community of the dancers. The borders of this space and the proxemic rules symbolized and strengthened the independence, sovereignty, and social cohesion of the local community.

*Keywords:* dance; dance-house; dance process; Transylvanian Plain; proxemics; social roles; spatial organization

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As results of the so called "spatial turn" in social sciences [Gyáni 2007; Blank, Rosen-Zvi 2010:3] we know at least two important facts about space: 1. It is not only an empty entity and not just a background of events, but it has important influence on these events. 2. It is not homogeneous, but it includes different smaller parts with various qualities and symbolic meanings.

Based on my observations in the villages of the Transylvanian Plain (hereinafter referred to as Mezőség) in Romania [Varga 2016:2–4], I would like to demonstrate, how the local use of space in dance occasions operates as a nonverbal communication-form. In addition to this, it has an effect on the form of the dances.

This essay is intended to be preliminary to a larger-scale work referring to the peasants' use of space, in which I will write about the dance location, its space arrangement and the "hidden dimensions" of space. The earliest of our data in relation to the dancers' use of space concerns the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; its forms and rules evolved at the traditional weekend dance occasions which ceased in the mid-1960s, however, in traces and in transformed versions, these forms could continue to be observed at large wedding parties or balls at the beginning of 2000.

#### **Briefly about proxemic observations**

I encountered research referring to the human use of space and related interpretations by reading the American anthropologist, Edward T. Hall's classic work, *The hidden dimensions* [1990]. Hall highlighted for the first time that people communicate through space arrangement, by setting the boundaries of space as well as narrowing or widening the space intervals and he also stated that the human space perception is culture dependent. He draws a distinction between fixed-feature space, semifixed-feature space and informal space. A

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structure of a settlement for example is a fixed-feature space, in a café (where e.g. chairs can be moved) the space is semifixed and a distance maintained in encounters with others belongs to informal space [Hall 1990:103–112].

In defining the Hungarian dance types, György Martin underlined the importance of examining the dancers' motion in space and the floor plan of the dance [Martin 1995:25]. In many cases, traditional dance monographs pay attention to showing particular uses of space.<sup>2</sup> However no Hungarian research related to village dance cultures has focused on a proxemic perspective to date, nor have the possible added meanings of use of space in dance been examined.

### Locations of the dance events

In the Mezőség region, until the end of collectivization in the late 1960s, young, unmarried people used to go to a weekend dance event, locally called a *táncház* (dance-house)<sup>3</sup>, which they organized for themselves in a house or in a barn rented for this purpose.

The expression *táncház* referred not only to the room or the house of the event, but in a wider sense also to the entire property, and even to the dancing community that would take part in the event [Novák 2000:31]. Summer "dances" were held in an appropriate barn, but in this case they also used the following expression: "Let's go to the *táncház*."

### Use of space in the dance-house

The size of the dance-house in Szék (Sic) was about 24–25 m<sup>2</sup> [Novák 2000:31]. In the nearby villages of the Central Mezőség people danced in even smaller places, which is surprising because the Mezőség dances require quite a large space due to their whirling and twirling characteristics. The number of dancers varied, however, sometimes around 15–20 couples were able to dance even in a very small place, tightly crowded.

The different dance types can be characterized by their partially set or free use of space, which obviously depends on the size of the space and the nature of the dance occasion. With the change of the dance culture the individual dance types also altered which entailed the transformation of the use of space.

People knew the women's circle dances accompanying the men's solo dances in every Hungarian-inhabited village of Mezőség as well as the small circle dance form of two couples. The use of space regarding the *négyes* (foursome) depended on whether they danced it as an accompaniment of a men's dance or by itself. In the first case, the men performing the motifs were dancing in front of the band, and two or three small circles of four dancers circled beside them, however, in the latter case, the *négyes* could use the entire dance place.

The so called *forgós-forgató*s (whirling-twirling) couple dances, due to their formal structural characteristics (men throwing woman behind their backs, women's twirling under

<sup>2</sup> Observations on peasant's use of space in dance (not the entire studies are listed): [Fügedi, Varga 2014:116; Karsai, Martin 1989:36, 38–40, 43; Pávai 2012:80–86; Ratkó 1996:115–118. With reference to the Mezőség: Faragó 2006:129, 131, 140–141; Kallós 2006:305; Novák 2000:68–73; Varga 2007:94].

<sup>3</sup> The local people always distinguish "dance-house" and "ball". "Ball" is a special, and a quite new form of dance event in Mezőség.

the arm and separate dancing of the couple members), would seem to require quite a large space but nevertheless most of the people knew these dances in the Mezőség villages.

Because of the high number of dancers and the limited space available, the proxemic rules connected to the improvised *forgós-forgatós* dances strongly influence the possibilities of both dance creation and improvisation, and therefore significantly affect the formal appearance of the dance.

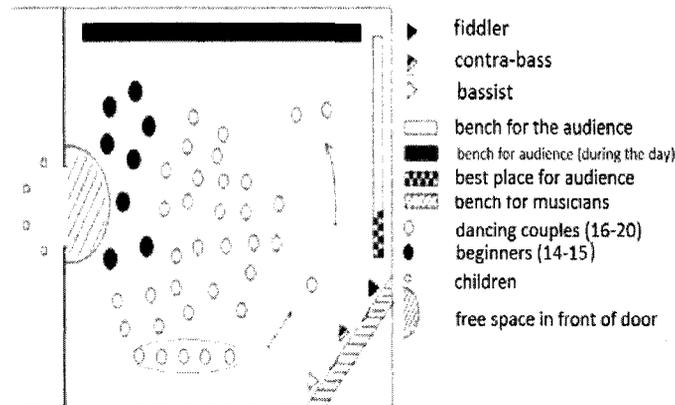


Figure 1. The layout of the dance room of a dance-house in Visa (Vișea, Transylvania) and the proxemic patterns of the whirling-twirling couple dances. Graphic by Sándor Varga 1998.

In the picture above, we can see the layout of the semifixed-feature space of a dance-house in the village Visa (Vișea). The music band was usually situated facing the entrance, on a wooden pulpit in the corner called the "gypsy bench" (in Mezőség the musicians usually were gypsies) in order that the spinning skirts would not disturb them while fiddling. The double bass player often played facing the corner so as to take advantage of the walls' amplification of the sound of his instrument.

The picture also shows that the young people in Visa (Vișea) used the larger room of the dance-house. When examining the division of space from the outside in, we notice the generational differences among the dance participants and the related symbolic hierarchy as well. Children, around 11–14 years old, danced outside the dance room. They could watch the older people's dancing through the door. The so-called "half-money payers" (the young lads, fourteen and fifteen years old, who had to pay only half of the "gypsy fee"), in the period between confirmation and the end of the year<sup>4</sup>, could dance in the area around the entrance and far from the musicians' corner. Fully privileged dancers could occupy the bigger part of the room. Older women and probably the hosts of the dance-house, the so called *bámulók* ("onlookers"), sat on the benches. The use of space also showed the hierarchical differences between the dancers and the non-dancing participants: the "onlookers" either sat on the bench or stood in the corner on the periphery of the dance place so they would not disturb the dancers. On occasion the dancers who felt hot even threw their clothes on them.

Dancers followed specific rules when using the space in the middle of the dance place and dancing in the crowd. The dancers needed to pay attention not only to themselves but also to the others around them. The common dance motive of throwing the woman behind the man's

<sup>4</sup> The confirmation in the Calvinist communities of Transylvania is usually around Easter.

back did not always depend on the man's mood controlling the process and the general dance creating principles; the man was able to throw the woman behind his back only if there was enough space for the woman to turn around. So men were always supposed to pay attention to the dancers around them and only initiate this motif when and where he perceived there was an appropriate free place.

The woman also tried to protect herself and keep her balance: while whirling, she lifted her elbow out to the side and if needed, she took support from her partner or the other dancers' backs or shoulders nearby, and pushed herself further around. Vehement women may have jostled and kicked the others lightly. It was a general expectation that women should use the smallest possible space for turning, like "size of a hat" [Karsai, Martin 1989:40].

The motif of circling around while holding each other tight was not applied often in a crowd, since this way the others all around were able to get closer to them, and the dance space for the circling couple became smaller. The same was true for the leg-hitting motifs of the men, in which the man rested one hand on the woman's shoulder, because this way their use of space became static and limited. According to informants, the leg hitting motifs look nice only in front of the musician. Such spectacular motifs get lost in the crowd, so the dancer cannot gain significant aesthetic effect from them.

Generally speaking, every couple motif in a crowded dance space should be danced much closer to each other than if performed in a larger room or in the free place in front of the musicians. As the couples disperse and the crowding decreases, the use of informal space also changes: the motifs become wider, the movements increase in amplitude and the couple turning and leg hittings happen more frequently. As a result the dance creation becomes freer. Hence we can say that dance proxemics affect the use of particular motifs and even the creation and the structure, so the whole process of the dance.

The photograph below shows that two or three couples leaving the crowd are waiting for their turn, locally called: *sort áll* (queuing up), opposite the band on the right. Dancers queued up like this in most of the villages in the Mezőség. The most prestigious place is in front of the band, and each couple can dance there only once or twice in each dance cycle.



Figure 2. Queuing and dancing in front of the band in a barn in Visa (Vișea). Directed shooting to reconstruct the former use of space in dance. Photographer Vivien Szönyi, 24 July 2013.

The place in front of the musicians is significant from the aspect of dance structure because the couple in this location can dance here for their pleasure, uninterruptedly. During this time the musician pays attention only to them, keeps the rhythm visually with the dancers in front of him, locally called: a *lábuk alá muzsikál* (he plays music beneath their feet). He helps them by speeding or moderating the tempo, he supports the dance closures and accented movements (heel clicks, leg hitting) rhythmically and with sound effects, and he urges them to perform better by playing their favorite tune. Furthermore, the onlookers and the other people in the queue also focus their attention here, which encourages the male dancer to perform accurately and more beautifully and also to show his most difficult and spectacular motifs. The free dance space gives an opportunity to do so: beside the under-arm turns, the separately danced motifs, the most frequently occurring variations are the turning as a couple and the leg hitting with one hand resting on the woman's shoulder. According to my experience and the interviews, the dancers hit their legs (either separately or leaning on the woman) most often in this location.

After finishing their dance, the couple stops to rest opposite the queuing dancers, on the other side of the music band, and then joins the crowd dancing. In the crowd the couple slowly gets closer to the right side of the place opposite to the band and stops at the end of the queue again. This way, the crowd moves slowly counter-clockwise around the dance place. According to my experience at wedding parties and balls, during a twenty to forty minute

long dance cycle, a couple appeared in front of the band two or three times, but never more than five times. Recollections by dancers from former times also confirm that the same situation prevailed at weekend dances in the past.

### **Rules of use of space and the connected hidden dimensions**

The above examples highlight that men and women used space differently during the whirling-twirling couple dances. The gender roles integrated into the local culture manifested themselves in this context: during men's dances, women watched separately and passively, or they followed the men's performance by turning as groups in small circles, the *négyes*.

The use of space in front of the music band includes some information regarding social positions. Better dancers and those higher in the social hierarchy for some reason can spend more time directly in front of the musician. I experienced how less skilled, poorer, or weaker dancers were simply pushed away after a while (after 1–2 minutes) while a representative of the village intelligentsia could spend a longer time in front of the musicians even if he could not dance properly. The musicians however, did not support them as enthusiastically as the better dancers.

The different use of space within Mezőség dance practice reflected the division of society by villages, village parts, social layers, ethnic and age groups. This could be observed especially in Szék (Sic). It was a village large enough that the Hungarian young people could organize dances of their own in each so-called "street" or "neighborhood" (Hungarian term). The *táncház* in Felszeg Street was divided due to social tension in the collectivization period: the landowners and the poor danced separately there for a short time. In addition, the Romanians organized *az aprók tánca* (small dance, dance occasion for children) and a *nagy tánc* (big dance, dance event for grownups) independently for themselves in Felszeg Street until the 1960s. The non-confirmed Hungarian adolescents, who danced in the "small dance", were divided by "streets" as well. More and more people have gone to school to the city since the 1960s. Collected information indicates that they organized separate dances for themselves upon returning home for summer holidays, even in the 1970s. The gypsy ball was a traditional dance occasion in Szék and was organized by the gypsies on the evening of *világítás* (lighting, All Saints' Day). Accordingly, as many as 8–10 well-defined social groups organized individual weekend dance occasions in the 1960s. In addition, girls often separated themselves in spinning bees and danced and played behind curtained windows until the lads arrived; furthermore the married women and the elder ones gathered together for a separate amusement related to women's spinning at carnival. Lads and men were forbidden to enter here until it ended. From the 1980s, the village also held a disco parallel to the dance. Young people working or studying in the city went to the disco. The dancers and the disco goers did not visit each other's parties.

A stranger or a lad from another street<sup>5</sup> was allowed to enter the dance of a neighboring village, another part of the village or another ethnic group's dance if his relative took him to the yard of the dance-house. Otherwise the local lads might beat him or chase him away. The

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<sup>5</sup> "We are off to be strangers" told the Hungarian lads in Visa (Vișea) when they went to dance in another village. The Romanians had a similar expression: *Merem la țureni* (We're going to another place). It was rare for a girl to visit a foreign dance event, except she had relatives in the village, who took her to the dance occasion.

aim of the visit was usually to get acquainted with the girls. To avoid trouble, the guest was recommended to ask his friends' help or, lacking that, the help of the organizer who usually accompanied the visitor to the barn or the dance-house. Usually, the guest had to stay in a place far from the band. If the organizer or the acquaintance was friendly, he immediately pulled the stranger into the dance. Accordingly, it was a general tradition in the Mezőség that if foreign guests arrived at the dance occasion, they were forbidden to dance until the local people allowed him to do so. The rite of acceptance involved taking a girl to the lad sitting passively on the periphery of the dance place, taking the guest's hand, and pulling him to the dance. The local term for this was *felállítás* (standing up). Before that happened, the organizer asked the selected girl if she accepts the foreign lad. Acceptance always meant not only dancing but talking to him as well, moreover the lad could escort her home when the dance was over.

The above mentioned traditions were in use until the mid-1960s, when the traditional weekend dances ceased to exist. The only exception is again Szék (Sic), where the weekend dance-house with gypsy music closed its doors in 1991.

### Summary

The walls of the *táncház*, and the benches placed alongside, marked the space limits of the dancers' movements. They tried to make optimum use of the semi-fixed feature space by regulating the distances between two places, namely by the informal space, in a way that both the space map of the individual dance types and the social relations interact. In this connection, we can say that the proxemics of the semi-fixed feature space as well as the informal space affect the process of dance making and it also influences the formal manifestation of certain motifs.

The research unambiguously shows that the *táncház* and its yard can be regarded as an independent place of the youth who danced there, and where the space boundaries and rules of the use of space symbolized the sovereignty and autonomy of the community that organized the occasion. One could enter here only after fulfilling some important conditions. The gate and the threshold can be interpreted here as demarcation elements. Accepting someone into the dance-house or expelling a person can be interpreted as a temporary rite, in the course of which the community either accepted or excluded someone ritually, confirmed by the proxemic signs. The leader of the community, the organizer, controlled or supervised these rituals and this way assured the sovereignty of the community. One of the most important moments of the rite of acceptance was the *felállítás*, where the initial position is meaningful: the organizer, who sometimes took responsibility for pairing guests with a partner, is stood while the guest sat (there was a vertical level difference between them), the dancing community was active whereas the guest was passive [Balázs 1995:118]. The guest's inward movement reflects the quality of his social transformation: during this, he reached the center of the dance rite from the liminal situation on the way from the gate up to the place in front of the musicians, in other words, from an idle passivity he gradually became an active participant and could present his dance knowledge [Balázs 1995:115]. This ritual acceptance had an important social function: hosting the foreign lad relieved the endogamous tendencies,

as the dance was the only community event where young people had the chance to get to know each other.

By analyzing the cases from Mezőség, we have demonstrated that the local dance proxemics indicated and therefore made conscious and fixed ethnic and gender differences, separation by age groups, positions in social life and at the same time, worked as a significant means of community cohesion because it improved the prestige of the dance-house as social institution through keeping the rules of use of space through proper protocol.

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