There are things in our lives that, so to speak, work in background: pearls of wisdom that help our comprehension of the world and provide a key to understanding and making sense of our practices. I experienced Lecoq’s theatrical pedagogy through the teaching of two of his former students at the School of Mimodrama in Milan, during the early years of my university studies in architecture. Only later, when I started my professional work and, at the same time, decided to pursue my student career in philosophy, did I become aware of how that seminal experience, so far from the orthodoxy of my technical–scientific education, instilled in me a ‘submerged idea’ that deeply shaped my vision of architecture. Ludwig Wittgenstein states: ‘Architecture is a gesture. Not every purposive movement of the human body is a gesture. Just as little as every functional building is architecture’ (1998: 49). In my opinion, Lecoq’s pedagogy provides the most appropriate key to decode Wittgenstein’s riddle.

The organic relationship between gesture, movement, body and architectural space, experienced through theatre workshops and theatrical training, played an unprecedented role in the educational programme of the Bauhaus in the early 1920s. Under the guidance of Oskar Schlemmer and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, the theatre company of this avant-garde school of architecture, art and design, staged expressionist performances with masks, disguises, dynamic objects and portable structures. Walter Gropius, underlining the importance of Schlemmer’s work within the school, writes:

‘The most characteristic artistic quality in Oskar Schlemmer’s work is his interpretation of space [. . .]’. It is apparent that he experienced space not only through mere vision but with the whole body, with the sense of touch of the dancer and the actor. (Gropius, 1971: 7)

Therefore, in the light of Gropius’ words, we can establish a common ground among architectural and performance arts. It is a matter of interpretation of space. Our experience of space, the same that underpins our experience of architecture, is not merely a visual experience but, on the contrary, constitutes a synesthetic engagement that involves our whole body and its movement.

Lecoq had the opportunity to apply his research on mime, gesture and movement directly to architectural pedagogy in 1968, when Jacques Bosson invited him to teach at the École
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Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Bosson, an architect and set designer, was charged in 1965 with the teaching of scenography at the architecture school that would later become the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris La Villette (ENSAPLV). Bosson’s interest was mainly focused on the design of mobile structures for travelling and tent theatres. His activity led to the further development of departments and institutes of theatrical studies and, since 1974, the establishment of a partnership between the ENSAPLV and the theatre school L’École Charles–Dullin, directed by his wife, Monique Hernant Bosson. Within the innovative thrust of this architecture school, Lecoq held workshops on the analysis of the movement of human body and of its space, and, until the academic year 1986–1987, taught annual courses in the Study of Movement, Dramatic Architecture, Experimental Scenography and Plastic Expression (Scheffler, 2013).

Thus, between the courses delivered in his own school and these interdisciplinary exchanges between architecture and theatre, Lecoq, over twenty years, developed a pedagogy of movement aimed towards architectural education. These researches gave birth, in 1976, to the Laboratory for the Study of Movement (LEM), where students were encouraged to discover and experience the primary relationships between bodies and space, and later apply this training to the creation of dynamic and wearable stage objects.

Far beyond mere scenographic application, Lecoq’s research was, in this respect, mainly focused on the adaptation of his pedagogy of movement to the training of architects, and aimed at creating the figure of the ‘architect–mime’ (Lecoq, 2002: 23). Miming, as a knowledge process that leads to the rediscovery of the dynamic meaning of life, stands at the core of his theatrical pedagogy. Lecoq, deeply influenced by the theories formulated by the anthropologist Marcel Jousse, conceived of miming as a universal background for our relationship with the world.

‘Le Geste, c'est l'Homme’ wrote Jousse (1969: 49). According to Jousse’s law of universal interaction, the human gesture represents ‘the sharpest and the most effective tool’ (Jousse, 1969: 32) available to the anthropological science for ‘studying the living being as living’ (Jousse, 1969: 34), but it is also a useful tool in order to understand and know the world. Lecoq explains and simplifies Jousse’s main idea through a concrete situation belonging to the everyday life of the architecture world:

A person who handles bricks all day long reaches a point where he no longer knows what he is handling [. . .]. If he is asked to mime handling a brick, he rediscovers the meaning of the object, its weight and volume [. . .]. Miming is a way of rediscovering a thing with renewed freshness [. . .]. To mime is literally to embody and therefore to understand better.

(Lecoq, 2002: 22)

These considerations imply the value of mimodynamic pedagogy not only for actor training, but also as an educational tool in every field of knowledge, including architecture. There is a form of ‘hidden mime’ in every art: ‘Every true artist’, Lecoq states, ‘is a mime [. . .]. There is a submerged form of mime which gives rise to different creative acts in all the arts. This is why I could move from teaching theatre to teaching architecture’ (Lecoq, 2002: 23).

Therefore, the focus of Lecoq’s pedagogy is not exclusively on mime or actor training, but on teaching creativity in a broader sense. The pillars of his method, the study of Movement – ‘with a capital M’ (Lecoq, 2006: 67) – and improvisation, underpinned by the observation of reality, aim to develop creative thinking or, in other words, design thinking. Referring to his own theatre school, Lecoq emphasises that ‘the school’s sights are set on art theatre, but
theatre education is broader than the theatre itself’ (Lecoq, 2002: 16). His work always nurtured a dual aim, to address the theatre on one hand and life on the other, and he wished ‘to educate people to be at ease in both’ (Lecoq, 2002: 16). He intended his school as a ‘crucible for creativity’ and ‘not only a school where work is interpreted but where new work is created’ (Lecoq, 2006: 123). His school was mainly an education of the sight. The neutral mask, for instance, is a practical tool for achieving that phenomenological epoché, described by German philosopher Edmund Husserl as a suspension of the judgement, in which the empirical world is bracketed and the observation is freed from pre jugements, rational structures and categories. Likewise, in Lecoq’s pedagogy,

the neutral mask opens up the actor to the space around him. It puts him in a state of discovery, of openness, of freedom to receive. It allows him to watch, to hear, to feel, to touch elementary things with the freshness of beginnings.

(Lecoq, 2002: 17)

In his courses, Lecoq urged architects to recreate built spaces through the miming action. Students were asked to feel the physical impressions aroused by the imagination and to replay those impressions by means of gestures, attitudes and movements, in order to reveal the inner dynamics of the architectural spaces. Lecoq’s aim was not to transform architects into actors. Rather, he desired to improve their design skills: to build in a better way the means to take into account the dynamics of the body and its movements. According to Lecoq, architectural education, like every other form of artistic training, should always be founded on bodily awareness. Only through the involvement of the point of view of the body in the observation of reality, and by means of the embodiment of creative process, can one reach – like the greatest mime or the greatest architect – ‘the universal poetic sense’ (Lecoq, 2006: 5). In this process, architects are invited to ‘mime existing spaces in order to know them better’ and then ‘to mime what they will build, in order that their buildings will come to life’ (Lecoq, 2002: 23).

More specifically, two aspects of Lecoq’s research are especially pertinent to our discussion: first, the consideration of the moving body as a generator of both theatrical and architectural space; and second, architecture (building, square, town, furniture) as the object of a direct miming enquiry. Regarding the first point, Lecoq’s approach participates in a wider philosophical movement aimed at reconsidering and reverting the assumption of a classical idea of space as an absolute and geometrical concept. For instance, the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty invites us to reject the vision of space ‘which is given to a disembodied intellect’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 29) as a ‘uniform medium where things are distributed according to three dimensions’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 23) in order to discover, through the phenomenological observation of our perceptual experience, ‘the idea of a heterogeneous space, with its privileged directions linked to our specific bodily features and to our situation as beings thrown in the world’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 29). According to Merleau-Ponty, modern science, art, philosophy and psychology agree that our relationship with space is not a relationship between a pure distant subject – an intelligence without body – and a distant object – the physical fact contained in a homogeneous space. Recalling Léon Brunschvicg, the idealist French philosopher, Merleau-Ponty rather speaks of an ‘inhabited space’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 27), always given in correlation with our body and organically connected to it: geometrical space does not exist independently of our dynamic experience, but directly derives from the physiological process of perception and from the sensory-motor scheme of our body.
The idea that space is not merely a geometrical issue and a pure dimensional entity, given a priori before the body and its movement, emerges quite clearly in Lecoq’s argument. Lecoq embraces a point of view very close to those philosophies – like phenomenology, pragmatism or organic relationism – that develop a criticism of formalism and abstract rationality.

In Lecoq’s mimodynamic pedagogy, the moving body constitutes, in the sense suggested above, the centre of a space-time interrelation projecting a field of forces: ‘Movement is not only a displacement of lines, but also it causes pressures and tensions in space. Forces play against one another in this way, giving a living vibrant consistency to space’ (Lecoq, 2006: 89). Furthermore, movement has to incorporate time in the form of rhythm, so that space can come to life: ‘A movement has no form and no life if it has no rhythm, and here we touch on a major aspect of movement’ (Lecoq, 2006: 88). Experiencing Lecoq’s teaching means experiencing this inextricable unity of space and time, joined in the exercise of movement: ‘the dynamics underlying my teaching are those of the relationship between rhythm, space and force’ (Lecoq, 2002: 21). Movement is the origin of life. The secret for a living theatre and a living architecture precisely resides in experiencing the dynamic of this unity. Every gesture played by human beings happens in a relationship with the space around them. The external space is reflected in the inner space, provoking an emotional feeling. The natural and the built environment mime themselves in us and make us move.

One of the most interesting aspects of Lecoq’s teaching from an architectural perspective is his research into the use of the chorus in Greek tragedy. Lecoq deals with the chorus as if it were the very architecture of the theatre: ‘The chorus organises the space and time of the tragedy and also its structure [. . .]. The chorus is the highest form of organisation in theatre’ (Lecoq, 2006: 110). The chorus moves organically as one body, as a living creature. Its dynamics are subjected to the general laws of motion identified by Lecoq (2002: 94). The chorus is a collective body and a spatial device at the same time, which generates an emotional place. Lecoq’s work aimed to investigate the relationship between the spatial and dynamic configuration of the chorus and the physical and emotional response it generates. At the same time, he was fully aware that the chorus establishes a direct dialogue with the architectural space of Greek theatre. Its speed, configuration and direction are functions of the whole theatrical space. It is the chorus that, as an architectural device, creates the space for the relationship between audience and actors. It is the balanced tension between chorus and coryphaeus that generates the space in which the actor–hero will play his drama, and in which the audience is involved with all its emotional participation. The chorus is a breathing architecture, with a centre of gravity and peripheral edges that shape an organic geometry. A law of mutual attraction keeps its components connected. As with materials and architectural structures, the chorus has a breaking point beyond which its tension is too loose and then its structural integrity is lost: ‘Beyond a certain distance, the chorus no longer exists, it breaks up. Here we find the threshold of stress, known to architects’ (Lecoq, 2002: 140). Lecoq, for example, used a choral structure for the opening of the show ‘Chi è di Scena?’ with Anna Magnani, the famous Italian actress: the crowd of about sixty actors, all singing and dancing, suddenly disappears when a siren blares out, leaving the actress alone, centre stage, singing a traditional song (Lecoq, 2002: 145).

The preparatory work on the tragic chorus should be considered as basic in architects’ training. The exercise on grouping, in which students walking freely in the space are asked to suddenly gather themselves in groups, can help architecture students to understand the dynamics of aggregation of people in an architectural or urban space: what kinds of balance or imbalance they produce, and what kinds of spatial and emotional configuration results from their different movements, speeds and weights. The ‘balancing of the stage’ is another
interesting exercise that explores the balance of volumes and masses around a centre of gravity, and the emotional tonality expressed by their different configurations. In the development of Lecoq’s courses, this exercise marks the beginning of the work on chorus.

The study of the relationship between bodies and space, investigated through the experience of its individual or collective embodiment, becomes a common ground of research in the fields of both theatre and architecture. After all, push and pull, action–reaction, balance–imbalance, thrusts, masses, weights, tensions, forces in equilibrium and centres of gravity are all elements belonging to the vocabulary of the statics of architecture and of its mechanics of tensile and compressive strengths. Besides these aspects, Lecoq’s method develops an analytical approach to movement study: the mime of action. This kind of research also has great importance in architectural education: first, because it involves the analysis of some fundamental structures characterizing our way of grasping the world, a world populated by objects that architects are asked to design; second, because this preliminary work prepares the field for the investigation of elements, materials, colours, light and other qualities, that are also the primary ingredients of the design of objects and architectures. For instance, regarding the first point, two miming actions, which were proposed by Lecoq at the early stage of actors’ training, investigate the original haptic relationship with the world: the rotatory manipulation of an imaginary bar (‘le baton’) and the sequence of the chain of actions consisting of seeing something, going towards it, grasping it, seeing another thing, grasping it, releasing the old one, going towards the new one, and so on (‘je vais prendre, je prends’). These sequences, combined with the dynamics of push and pull, are the basis on which more complex mimic gestures can be articulated, but above all, they are the mimic transposition of the original structure of our relationship with our environment: the original structure of our being-in-the-world, in a Heideggerian sense, as being-in-a-world of things ready-to-hand.

Contemporary Italian philosopher Carlo Sini, discussing the action of a hand that grasps a bar from a pragmatist perspective, interprets this gesture as a ‘bodily grapheme’ (Sini, 1989: 33), emblematic of our relationship with the world. Sini recalls the pragmatist motto that defines the meaning of a concept as the practical consequences resulting from the truth of that concept. This is equivalent to saying that the meaning has to be discovered in the gestural response: ‘the original event is the response’ (Sini, 1989: 26). The meaning is defined on the basis of what one is willing to do: on the base of the concrete action of responding and corresponding (Sini, 1989: 30). Furthermore, Sini remarks that the practical and gestural response already represents a modality of thought: ‘thinking is to be embodied in pragmatic relations and responses’ (Sini, 1989: 31) that constitute the way in which the world is given to us. In this perspective, Sini interprets the gesture of grasping as a ‘constitutive grapheme of our perceptual and responding embodiment’ (Sini, 1989: 33). Stressing the correlation between the hand which grasps and graspable things, Sini writes that ‘it is the grasplable thing which creates the void of the hand, printing on it its impress as it was a matrix’ (Sini, 1989: 33). Thus, there is not the hand prior to the grasped thing and vice-versa; the thing reveals itself only when it is grasped: in the hand, which grasps, responds and corresponds to things, there is the ‘rebound’ (Sini, 1989: 36) of the world. The established correlation between the hand and the world reveals both the philosophical relevance and the wide pedagogical value of Lecoq’s mimodynamic exercises, as well as the expressive mechanism of miming gesture: like in the ‘symbolon’ of ancient Greece, in which each half refers and leads to the other, the miming gesture is the half that refers and leads to the world. The grasping hand becomes the symbol of the bar, the sign which points at and signifies the bar. Comparable to Wittgenstein’s or Merleau–Ponty’s philosophical research, Lecoq’s approach shows, in practice, the body as mirroring the margin and edge of the world, as the unsayable expression and limit of language.
Our gesture is the rebound of the world. Our gesture denotes and means the world. Miming is to exhibit, as it were, the mould of the world in order to mean the world. The work of the architect, as well as of the mime, is exactly placed on the threshold between gesture and the world. Architecture protects and extends our body; at the same time, it is the response of our body to the world. Architecture is the threshold between our body and the world, the rebound of our gesture, the simultaneous reflection of the needs of our body and the exterior world. In the mimodynamic exercise, architecture students may experiment with the body as symbol and sign which points at and says the elements of architecture. The embodied learning of these original structures should be of primary interest for architects.

Finnish architect and theoretician Juhani Pallasmaa, referring to architecture as ‘mimesis of the body’ (Pallasmaa, 2005: 66), remarks on the relationship of action–reaction between body and architecture. Our living experience of architecture consists of actions: approaching the building, entering a door, looking out through a window and so on. Therefore, the authentic meaning of architecture is to be a proposal of a possible action.

Understanding architectural scale implies the unconscious measuring of the object or the building with one’s body, and of projecting one’s body scheme into the space in question. We feel pleasure and protection when the body discovers its resonance in space. When experiencing a structure, we unconsciously mimic its configuration with our bones and muscles.

(Pallasmaa, 2005: 67)

In this perspective, the objects of the world, the things ready-to-hand, cease to be mere inert materials provided with appropriated dimension and functional shape; they acquire individual life and their own emotional tonality: ‘the door handle is the handshake of the building which can be inviting and courteous or forbidding and aggressive’ (Pallasmaa, 2005: 61).

Therefore, mimic exercises can provide the most suitable training in order to achieve a knowledge of materials that overcomes their mechanical and technical features, involving sensible and emotional aspects. The exercise of discovering the natural dynamics of elements, materials, colours, lights and forces, by means of their embodiment, leads to an understanding of how they reflect themselves in us and how they change our attitudes. By the observation and embodiment of the expressive language of materials, one can discover their intimate ‘powerful tragic content’: ‘a sugar-lump which dissolves, a piece of paper which crumples, cardboard which folds, wood which splinters, cloth which rips, are all profoundly tragic movements’ (Lecoq, 2002: 92, 141).

The investigation of colours and light completes the palette of ‘flavours’ (Lecoq, 2002: 45) by which architects and actors can finally express themselves with the richest range of nuances. Lecoq emphasizes that, even if we cannot actually see the shape or the movement of colours, their perception arouses our motion and emotion alike, so that we can find a specific time, space, light and rhythm for each of them.

Furthermore, Lecoq directly investigated the field of architecture by means of specific exercises. To Lecoq’s eyes, ‘town squares are the privilege sites in which a secret alchemy reveals itself in the crucible of imagination’ (Lecoq, 2006: 1). The mimodynamic analysis of such themes, which constitutes an important passage in Lecoq’s educational journey, may help architecture students to rediscover the value of the architectural environment as an authentic Theatre of Life.

Finally, I wish to dedicate my last note to a paradigmatic theme of improvisation, the ‘childhood bedroom’, in which, in my opinion, the relationship between architecture, memory and
project is investigated in a distinctive and sensitive way. Presenting the subject of this silent
improvisation, Lecoq describes the return to a childhood home. Once the door is gently
pushed open, the bedroom opens wide, its objects waiting to be rediscovered: toys, furniture,
a window, the bed. Lecoq urges students to place themselves ‘in the position of primal naivety,
a state of innocent curiosity’ (Lecoq, 2002: 29). Students are required to plunge deeply into
the past of their more intimate or even imagined memories. Discussing this improvisation,
Lecoq writes:

> The theme is not the bedroom of my childhood, but a childhood bedroom, which you
play at discovering. The dynamics of memory are more important than the memory
itself. What happens when you find yourself confronted with a place that you think
you are discovering for the first time? Suddenly, a memory is triggered: ‘I’ve already
seen that!’ You are in an image of the present and suddenly an image of the past
appears. Out of the interplay between these two images comes the improvisation.

(Lecoq, 2002: 31)

The narrative bodily action starts out of the interplay between the present of the situation
and the past of the memory, while the imagined room and its objects come out of the interplay
of the inner emotion and the reaction of the miming body. The memory is projected into
the design of a childhood bedroom. From an architectural standpoint, it is really a matter of
designing a child’s bedroom, drawing the room by inscribing the body in the world as it were
on a blank sheet. The design of a childhood bedroom comes to life in the narrative chain of
the mimodynamic action. Voila! It is in this gestural genesis that I situate the origin of the
architectural project and the birth of architecture.

Notes

1 I wish to thank Rick Kemp for pointing out that this belief is now fully supported by findings in
cognitive science. As he remarks (Kemp, 2012), mimesis can be described as an earlier cognitive
development than language. These researches confirm that the proprioceptive and perceptual aware-
ness of the environment means that the experiencing consciousness is operating imagistically and
and gesturally.

2 This exercise consists of a game of balancing and unbalancing, by the movement of the actors, an
imaginary rectangular stage, balanced on one central pivot. The game starts when an actor moves
from the central position, creating an imbalance. A second actor must restore the equilibrium by
entering the stage and following the movements of the first. When the second actor decides to stop,
one by one, additional actors are required to enter the stage and lead the game, while the others
move as a group in order to preserve the equilibrium of weights (Lecoq, 2002: 141).

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