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Purpose

Having practised yoga for 5 years I have questioned myself how the architecture effects the practice. Most of the classes I have taken have been under ground in old boiler rooms or cellars. Is this ideal? How would a yoga facility manifest itself if built from scratch? In order to delve deeper into the topic I have dedicated my diploma project to propose a yoga school here at KTH Campus, Stockholm, Sweden.

What is yoga?

The yoga we practice today draws upon a 3000 year old tradition that started out in modern day India. The first occurrence of the word “yoga” itself is in the Katha Upanisad (third century BCE), where it is revealed to the boy Naciketas by Yama, god of death, as a means to leave behind joy and sorrow and overcome death itself (2.12 ff).

The yoginis dedicated to this end has gone about the task in different ways through different eras. From pacifist Buddha 400 bc to warrior yogis of the 1700 century to street begging contortionists 100 years later to Swedish architecture students in boiler rooms today. The more popular forms of yoga practiced in Sweden today stem from the posture yoga developed in the beginning of the 20th century in India. At that time a re-situation shifted yoga from the matha (cloister, monastery) to the fee-paying classroom - and changed the guru into a remunerated, professional yoga instructor and the sisya (yoga student) into client(Singleton 2010). This was accompanied by a trend of gymnastics through the world and specifically India through organisations such as YMCA. This put a swede among the line of gurus important to the modern yoga, Pehr Henrik Ling who initiated the Swedish gymnastics movement in the 18th century, which later became highly influential to the gymnastics practiced by YMCA.

A large amount of the population in India took a liking to the posture based training designed to be reasonable in cost and safe to practice. Being it to prepare the people for revolution or to make them good Christians (Singleton 2008).

What kind of building is it?

There runs a strong situationist trait in the relationship between yoga and architecture. There is no neufert dimensions for the yogi, and when offered a space it most often manages to reprogram it to suit its needs. One good example of this is when my field investigation brought me to participate in a yoga class at Down town camper, a hotel in central Stockholm. The class was supposed to take place in a meeting room, but got moved to the hotel bar due to double booking. We moved a couple of tables out of the way, dressed down to spandex and rolled out our mats and after one sun salutation the idea of someone entering to have a drink felt very far away. This flexibility has resulted in that the regular yoga space in Stockholm normally lies where no one else wants to be: in the cellar.

Reaching this far in my investigation my preconcived image of the the yoga space as an religious indian space started to get questioned. That's when I got in contact with Dr Suzanne Newcombe who researches the relationship between yoga and space at London school of economics and political science, London, England.
According to her research the term often used for yoga schools in the western world is Studio. Something she concludes as appropriate because of yogas resemblance to art. How it houses highly disciplined practices of unpredictable insight and creativity where yoga practitioners seek to transform themselves – often in ways that they can only intuit and not necessarily articulate. But she recognises also the religious aspect of the practice. She writes following in her paper when trying to shed light on the many varied and strong views on what true yoga means:

“However, “True Yoga” is a sacred place … a place set apart and forbidden. In what way forbidden? In my experience, it is an imagined understanding often approached with metaphors and stories, but consisting of insights that are hard to verbalize and share with others. Perhaps here is the heart of many religious experiences. As such, the place of “True Yoga” needs to be treated with both respect and curiosity. This is a description of a place of deep meaning and transformation for those who articulate it. The idea of “True Yoga” for the practitioner is an attempt to identify and protect an experience of holiness and meaning, that may have deep significance for their lives and worldview.”

I can relate to this description of going within and finding unexpected things. It is a pause from everyday life where you can see it from another perspective. Reading the book “Rituals and walls: the architecture of sacred space”, I found this description of the word temple resonating with the description mentioned above.

“Temenos, from the Greek temno, “to cut”, enclosed a space whose emptiness signified a zone of respect where everyday activities were suspended. It is important to know that temno is also the etymological origin of the Latin word templum, that is, temple. Originally the temple was not a building but simply a space separated from everything else.”

There are voices such as philosopher Alain De Botton who argue that we’ve secularized our society in a bad way. That we’ve given up on highly important functions in our lifes because of difficulty separating it from unfeasible ideas. For me the yoga movement has been an response to that. A sacred space that doesn’t have a baggage of history like the church has in Sweden, but one that feels inspiring and creative. A more individual contemporary way of expressing your spirituality fit for the 21st century.

Narrowing my research down I felt that the two main guiding principles of the architecture would be the temple, where the rituals and movement of yoga guides you to a place set apart from everything else … and the studio, the well functioning creative workshop suitable for highly disciplined practice with unpredictable outcome. More than that I wanted it to represent a yoga school.
The proposal

The proposed yoga school is a split floor building placed in a northeast facing slope. The landscape around it is made up by solitary placed brick buildings which has been built and added to during the last 80 years by KTH and the red cross university collage of nursing. On the south, the building is flanked by a busy pedestrian walkway and to the east there is an large oak tree. To the west of the school there is a bushy scenery of different sized trees and shrubs divided at places by exposed smooth bedrock.

The programme for the 1000square meters building is of a medium sized yoga facility in Stockholm, which includes a café, small yoga shop and a ayurvedic treatment room.

During my field investigation I visited several yoga classes of different kinds. And one thing that I realized was the importance of rituals. The spaces you move through before starting a class. Often youd find shrine or image of a god or guru together with the smell of incense and sparse light entering the school. Another important moment is how and when you take of your shoes. How is yoga mat and the different tools stored. How can each of these steps and rituals take you further in to this place set apart.

The entrance is placed in the east by the oak tree. Behind the entrance door there is a dimly lit small vestibule flanked by a bedrock shrine. Moving on you reach the entrance hall with a helpdesk, small yoga shop and pick up space for washed yoga mats. At the end of the room is a big staircase leading up through an enlarged opening to a west ward facing hall where you take your shoes off.

To each side of this hall you find a dressing room and in the opposite direction the entrance to a top lit corridor. This 5 meter high room runs a long the center of the building from the south to the north and serves as an antechamber for the main yogahall. In this space you find the yoga matt deposit, waiting space and water closets and two pairs of doors leading in to the main yoga hall. The yoga hall has a mono-pitched ceiling where the lower end is at the entrance and the higher end on the opposite side. Skylights are placed between the glue lam beams in a way that shields of the warm sun at noon but lets in rays of light during morning and evening practice. From the lower end the yoga practitioner can observe and await the teacher to assign you an appropriate space or start your practice while waiting for a space to free up on the floor. On the other side there is a massive light weight concrete block wall pierced by 36 small windows facing northeast where the sun rises and through which you can get glimpses of the old Oaktree.

On the ground floor lies the restaurant, the office and employee restroom and under that the installations.
The walls are constructed of expanded lightweight aggregate concrete blocks with the dimension of 500 by 250 millimeters. The roof is made of glue lam beams which in its turn carries a black asphalt felt roof.

The irregular herringbone pattern and the regular brick pattern have been chosen for their tectonic character and to appeal to the situationist relationship between yoga and architecture. The big wall can be seen either through the playful relationship between architecture and yoga and seen as 1000 open ends or as a definite border something untouchable to make you shift your focus to within.

Some limitations have been difficult during this project. For one the distance to India. I have had contact with several architecture schools in order to get a hold of architectural drawings of the major yoga schools Mysore, India, but without succeeding. I have also opted for a working method new to me where plans and hand drawn sketches are the driving force behind the work It has been frustrating at times but I decided to stick to it.

The end result is a sort of temple like building inspired by the square outlay of the symmetrical mandalas of the temples of India. A character that represent that there is something sacred within and at the same time a practical building with a industrial silhouette. A building that is a part of the neighbourhood and that at the same time shows that there is something not quite ordinary going on inside. At first it felt baffling that it became another basement, but in the end its what represent yoga architecture of our time. And when placed on top of ground it can show it self of to its surroundings reminding of another point of view of a world set apart a place within and gracing the citiescape adding a new character to its existing plethora.
Stockholm 1:40000
KTH campus within the square and the plot in the center of it.

- Yoga facility
Field investigation
Ashtangayoga.nu my regular yoga space. It lies in a cellar on odengatan.
yogayama investigation

1. Enter the building seeing something like a shrine and see the reception across the store.
2. Buy a klippkort and borrow a yogamat (that needs to be fetched from quite far away)
3. Book a class at the booking station.
4. Take of my shoes and put them on a shelf.
5. Head on down to the dressingroom passing the nicely deposited private mats.
6. Change into yoga gear.
7. Go to the bathroom and get wet feet having to pass by the shower.
8. Reaching the expresslockerroom it feels as if the shoelimit faded away. Get a bit dirty feet. Lock away important belongings.
9. Reach the door to Studio 1 and sign the attendance sheet.
10. Open the door quietly and seek eyecontact with the teacher that points me where I could

11. After 1h 40min I thank the teacher and head out of studio 1.
12. Hang my borrowed mat on the hooks outside in the corridor.
13. I go to the expresslockers to retrieve my belongings and get a bit dirty on my feet, then head down to the dressingroom.
14. I take a shower and enter the sauna.
15. The sauna is out of service so I go to the steam sauna. It’s a shared one which is nice because I’m alone in the mens changing room. No one comes through...
16. Take a shower.

17. Get dressed then go upstairs again.
18. Put on my shoes.
19. Go up to the cafe and have something to drink.
20. Visit the restroom.
21. Leave through the main entrance and go to school.
LOBBY/INFO
WAITINGROOM
HALL/STORAGE MATS
HALL SHOE DEPOSIT WN
DRESSING
STUDIOS
TREATMENT ROOM
OFFICES
CLEANING
STORAGE
RECEPTION/STORE
CAFE/RESTAURANT
BACKYARD/GARDEN
INSTALLATION/STORAGE/WASH
1. Enter the hotel and get into a big space, the reception is far enough away so that you don't have to make contact with them. Head on in to the big lobby.

2. I see people dressed for yoga farther on ahead and walk until the end of the corridor.

3. Here there are mats to borrow I take one mat and hang around. One of the hotel staff comes and tells us that the yoga class today has been moved from its usual conference room to instead take place in the opposite side of the building.

4. We follow his directions and end up at the bar where everyone is moving tables and rolling out mats where room is made. A DJ is setting up his gear for the session.

5. I need to change clothes and don't feel comfortable doing it in the bar so I seek out a toilette and change.

6. I go back to the bar and leave my belongings on a table.

7. The guru tells me that there is a free spot at the front row. I roll out my mat and the practice begins shortly after.

8. At the end of the practice I roll the borrowed mat and collect my belongings.

9. I go back and leave the borrowed mat where I took it from.

10. The guru leads us all upstairs where we relax in the net hanging between the lobby and a skylight.

11. After the relaxation they say it's after work in the bar, I turn down the offer and get dressed by the side of the net and the walk down.

12. Can't find the guru so I leave without saying goodbye.

This experience highlighted the situationist virtue of yoga, and in how it can endure/profit from using/reinterpreting existing spaces meant for something else.
Yoga at the hotel bar at hotel downtown camper (me to the left)
Research and Inspiration
Literature list:

Alain de Botton, Religion for atheists, 2012.

Suzanne Newcombe,
Spaces of Yoga – Towards a Non-Essentialist Understanding of Yoga. Oxford University 2018


Naciketas and Yama god of death
PEHR HENRIK LING 1776-1839
SWEDISH GURU INVENTOR OF HEALING MOVEMENTS
ADAPTED BY ORGANISATIONS SUCH AS YMCA

TIRUMALAI KRISHNAMACHARYA 1888-1989
INDIAN GURU WITH DISCIPLES SUCH AS SRI PATTHABI
JOIS, DEVI AND B K S IYENGAR.
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