

*The Co-Created Performing Artistic Space: The Urban Office Garden*

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## **Introduction**

The areas surrounding residential space could have influences over human livelihood as much as the residential space itself. However, they are often neglected when designing living space. Garden, one of the most significant spaces surrounding residential area, is the outdoor space which could easily and greatly integrate natural energy into human daily life. This could thus enhance human holistic health: physical, mental, social, and spiritual health. Garden could re-balance life force to those living next to it.

In several cultures, gardens provide spiritual meaning rather than being only the entertaining or recreation space: Japanese Zen gardens. This study aims to explore the application of performing artistic techniques into garden design, with consideration of garden space as performing artistic settings, a ritualistic platform for human interaction to fulfill its deeper meaning which could enhance human holistic health.

## **Scope and Conceptual Basis**

This study is the qualitative research on a creative art project aiming to explore space design applying performing artistic techniques to enhance holistic health of the residents of urban offices. The 2 case studies of educational organizations working on human development in the urban area of Thailand were selected: the balcony space of an educational office of the Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, in Nakorn Pathom province and the garden space of a home office of a spiritual/educational organization, Jivitasikkha Network, in Bangkok. The study was done with co-creative design methods between the researcher and the residents of the 2 case studies. The finished creative works, the gardens, were presented to public. The qualitative research method was used in data collecting and analysis: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and data analytic induction.

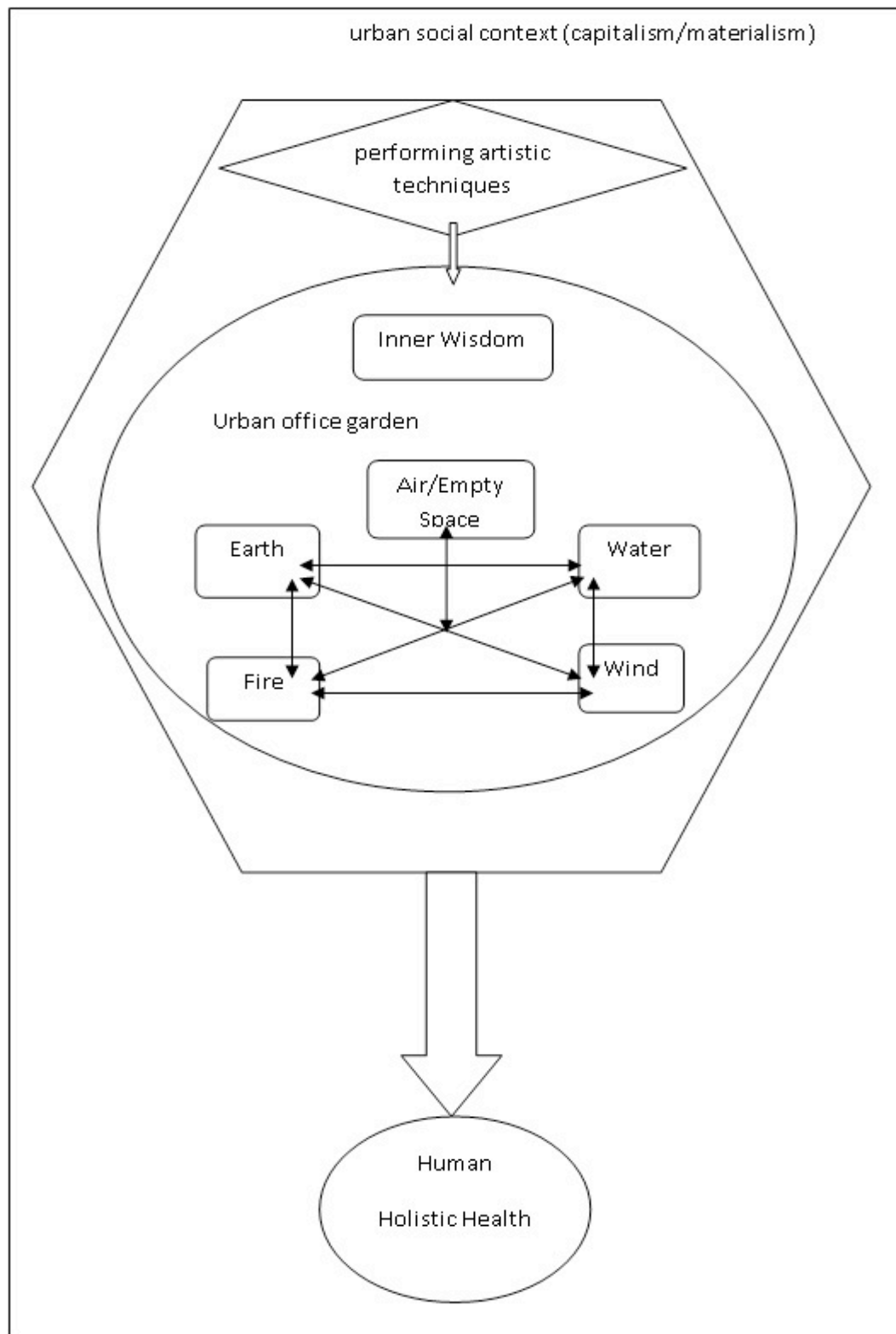
### *Conceptual Basis*

Human beings, as part of Nature, consist of the 5 elements of Earth, Water, Wind, Fire, and Air/Empty space, always dynamically interacting with Nature. Garden is the space closest to human residence which contains the energy of the 5 natural elements of earth, water, wind, fire, and air/empty space, thus could increase creative energy to human beings through mutual interaction.

In human holistic health development, especially in the dimension of mental, social, and spiritual, the 6<sup>th</sup> element, that is, human inner wisdom, plays the important role (Vasant Lad, 1985: 15-23). The garden design with performing artistic techniques would take the integration of the 6<sup>th</sup> element and the interaction among all elements into consideration. The garden space would be considered as the performance setting, with the 6 elements as key actors of the performance.

The capitalistic/materialistic social context is taken into consideration into the study as the challenge to the garden space, the natural space within technological society under capitalism, aiming to enhance human holistic health. The two urban office gardens were thus selected as case studies.

The conceptual basis is shown in the following diagram:



## Study Results

From this study, in the application of performing artistic techniques into the urban office garden design for human holistic health development, it was found that these concepts need to especially be taken into consideration:

1. Deep Listening: the interactive dance among the 6 elements: earth, water, wind, fire, air/empty space, inner wisdom.
  - a. The case of Jivitasikkha Network home office  
This home office had a small empty space which could serve as a garden in front of the office. The co-created design between the residents and the researcher was done with consideration of all 6 elements interacting in the harmonious dance.
    - i. Earth element. Trees and woods were the earth element in this garden. They brought in natural energy amid the concrete urban environment. However, with the limitation of time of speedy urban life, the residents could not take care of watering the plants. The automatic watering machine was brought in to keep the garden green.
    - ii. Water element. As this office garden is in the capital city of Thailand, which is a tropical country, the weather is usually very hot. Water element is indispensable. Small waterfall was created to cool the atmosphere down.
    - iii. Wind element. The wind element was used to create relaxing sound in the garden through metal bells and wind chimes. This could help reduce the stress from urban soundscape: airplanes and cars passing by.
    - iv. Fire element. The fire element was extreme in the tropical city through sunlight. This needed to be taken into serious consideration. Hanging plants were used to screen out sunlight. These hanging plants also helped creating the atmosphere of tropical forest in the city, providing green shade above garden area.



- v. Air/empty space element. This home office garden was quite small (4 meters in width x 6 meters in length). Detailed decoration was needed to increase more attractive focal points and corners. Terrariums were also brought in to create several small gardens within the bigger garden.
- vi. Inner wisdom element. Words of wise men were used to decorate garden wall in order to lead visitors to contemplation. Buddha images were also used as part of Nature in the garden, creating natural sacred and peaceful altar space for viewers.
  - b. The case of Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University office balcony  
This university office balcony was on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of the building. It was without water access. The co-created design between the residents and the researcher were done with consideration of all 6 elements interacting in the harmonious dance.
    - i. Earth element. Plants and wood, which were of earth element, were needed in this balcony garden as the space was directly exposed to sunlight. Rocks were also used to create patterns on balcony floor as a resident feels connected to Japanese Zen rock gardens. Plants used in this garden were drought-tolerant.
    - ii. Water element. The pattern of the rock gardens suggested water flowing. The only consistent water resource was droplets of water from air-conditioner compressor. This limiting water resource was used to water a creeping plant to bring in more green color.
    - iii. Wind element. The balcony was exposed to wind element. Wind element was brought in to create pleasant sound through metal bells and wind chimes. Wind element freely flowing through also helped reducing heat within the garden space.
    - iv. Fire element. The fire element was strong through sunlight shining upon the 6<sup>th</sup> floor balcony garden. A swing with foldable roof was used to create some shade

for visitors who wanted to sit and relax. The foldable roof was necessary to give the roof flexibility to adjust to wind direction in this windy space.

- v. Air/empty element. The design of this garden took full advantage of the vast empty space of the sky. When seating on the swing, the visitors would see nothing outside the garden except the white wall of the balcony and the blue sky above. This brought in the feeling of restfulness, a temporary, vacation-like break for residents working in the office next to the garden.



- vi. Inner Wisdom element. At the horizon view from the balcony, one of the most significant Buddhist stupa in Thailand could be obviously seen. This could bring in the light of philosophical mindfulness, reminding the viewer of Buddhist sacred energy. A sculpture usually used to decorate Buddhist temple roof called 'chor fa' was used to decorate the garden to draw in the remote view of the Buddhist stupa into the garden through this religious symbolic decoration.

## 2. The use of signs/symbols in designing.

### a. Visual symbols

In both case studies, Buddhist symbols like Buddha images, Buddhist stupa and Buddhist temple decoration were used to directly bring in the spiritual energy of Buddhist preaching. The patterns of the rock/brick garden in both case studies were created in the form of spirals which could be interpreted as the enfoldment or growth of the inner wisdom.

### b. Sound symbols

The wind chimes and metal bells could remind the visitors of the bells of temples. It could bring in the meditative atmosphere.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

From this study, it is found that certain key factors/points should be taken into consideration when applying performing artistic techniques into garden space design as following.

1. The harmonious balance of the dance among the 6 elements: earth, water, wind, fire, air/empty space, and inner wisdom. The designers should design the garden space with humble attitude and respect towards the Nature by deep listening to the balanced interaction among natural elements within and outside, for we are part of Nature and not vice versa.
2. The use of signs/symbols with consideration of the garden space as performing artistic settings. In performing arts, signs and symbols are used to convey deep meaning at mental and spiritual level. This could be adopted in garden designing.
3. Human visitors as actors, coming in to interact with the natural actors of the 5 elements in the garden. With consideration of the garden space as the dance setting, the inner wisdom resides within human mind could be evoked to become more mindful and awakened, as well as at peace in this garden space, the natural space closest to human residential area.

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