

meet me at the barre

your guide to becoming a dancing designer

“The more skillful you are, the simpler you become.”

~Bonnie-Bainbridge Cohen

preface

5, 6, 7, 8

Dancers count beats in eights. The chapters are named 5,6,7,8 as inspiration from the counts that dancers use to prepare before the first beat of a performance begins. By the 8th count, you should be feeling more prepared to become the dancing designer *you were meant to be!*

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05 complexities of dance



Lights brighten and music slowly crescendos as dancers confidently move across the stage, like water transformed by music, limbs in constant motion, moving weightlessly and gracefully, partnered with vivid facial expressions to match each movement. Together, these details craft an elegant vision.

This is dance.



If you were to rewind back five minutes before the performance began, you would see something **completely different**.

Backstage, dancers are running frantically - some in the dressing room touching up their makeup and hair spraying every flying piece of hair down, others stretching out injuries and rubbing their calluses in the hallway praying that this next performance isn't a break in their careers, while others are desperately trying to remember choreography in their heads, furiously trying to hear the music in their plastic earbuds while there is **chaos ensuing** around them.

As dancers head backstage, their backs are lined with sweat and their fingers tremble - both with the excitement and anxiety to do well. As the darkened stage empties itself of previous performers, everyone scurries to their places on stage, trying to perfect their first formation before the bright lights go off.

These dancers have sixty seconds in a 20' x 16' space to prove hours of sweat and hard work.

To a dancer, even just **sixty seconds** on stage means:

1. understanding the beats and rhythm of the music
2. making sure facials appear at the right times in the music
3. executing concept
4. learning choreography
5. refining choreography
6. understanding formations
7. cleaning formations
8. costume decisions
9. hair & makeup
10. upping endurance
11. building agility
12. improving flexibility
13. attending multiple rehearsals
14. syncing with other dancers
15. recording over and over to get it right
16. storytelling in a meaningful way

16 steps for 60 seconds

AND much more if you were to think beyond the actionable parts of a performance.

Dance requires the development of a **strong mind-body connection** to be able to truly get a message across. To have that:

Dancers must be willing to **expose their rawest selves** through their expressions and body movements.

Dancers must be adaptable and be able to change their body language **on a moment's notice**.

Dancers must be able to **transform into storytellers**, protestors, advocates, thinkers, entertainers, actors, and innovators.

If something looks easy on stage,
it means that dancers have done their job
well. They have something crafted over hours
feel approachable and simple to grasp.

With such a misalignment between the process dancers go through and what the audience gets to see, there has been a constant level of **misunderstanding** as to what it takes to be a dancer, starting with the century old debate about **whether dance should be considered a sport**.

“All dancers do is tiptoe around in pink tutus and there’s nothing athletic about that.”

However, being a competitive dancer from a young age right up through college, I know that dance is most definitely a sport. It requires you to **balance flexibility, grace, and strength** in a manner unseen by any other sport and a stamina equivalent to that of a cross country runner to complete high-intensity sets.

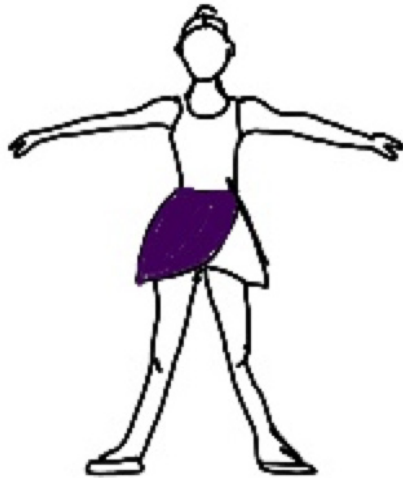
Recently, ballet has become a popular method to cross train, which, if anything, is an attestation to the athleticism associated with it. Across the country, **athletes are using ballet** to improve their flexibility, body awareness, agility, coordination, footwork, timing, and leg/core strength. **Specifically, football players** have started incorporating ballet into their schedules. Ballet's emphasis on precision helps players achieve a high level of control over the body and self-discipline on the field.

Although non-dancers are finally starting to reap the benefits of dance as a sport, there is still a **huge gap in understanding the complex nature of dance** and what it takes to showcase something on stage.



Design suffers from a similar problem.

06 designers are dancers



More and more companies are finally beginning to understand the **importance of design** in opening up valuable **opportunities** for the business. In particular, the design thinking process with its five steps [see below] has been used to generate new product ideas and quickly iterate on customer discovery.

Empathize

Define

Ideate

Prototype

Test

However, design is also the first to be criticized and often one of the first things to be eliminated during budget cuts or constraints.

When shown a design, people are **quick to judge** the color scheme, layout and overall aesthetic appeal. The assumption is made that this is fundamentally what designers do.

However, if all you did as a designers was focus on the visual elements, there would be no place for the design thinking process or the idea generation that occurs with it. It would be like **eating a sandwich that is only two chunks of bread with nothing in between.**

Like dance, design is **much more than what meets the eye.** Both forms of expression require great attention to detail and follow a logical approach to creativity.



But what they really excel at is simplicity or being able to pare down something elaborate into something straightforward.

As I furthered my dance training in college, I learned new styles of dance from collaborating with students from different dance backgrounds. As a result of our collaboration, I realized that dance is both a sport and an art form – a **physical exertion** that is thoroughly **capable of tapping into an audience's emotions**.

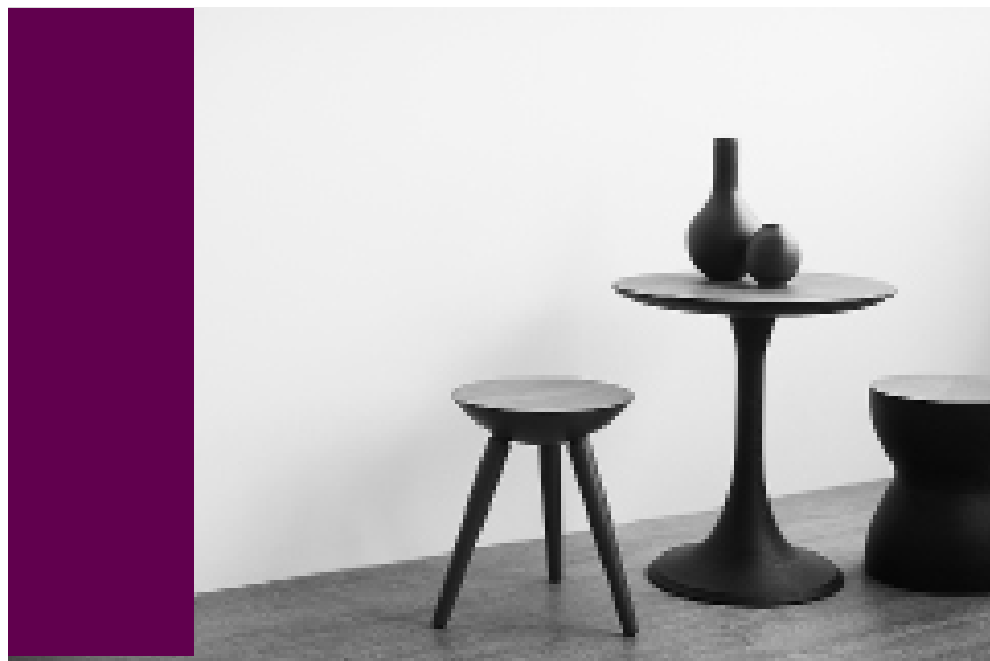
With every movement, dancers are bringing both themselves and their audience into an entirely different world. **Storytelling** is a big part of being a dancer and a big reason why dancers can maintain a facade of making things look easy.

It's the perspective from which they tell the story and relate to their audience.

Whether in design or in dance, a face value of looking “simple” and “easy” enables content to be more consumable and more relatable to a given audience.

Simultaneously, it is this same logic that has repeatedly made dance and design misunderstood. Simplicity does not imply a lack of refinement and thorough process, but it is made out to be that way.

In fact, the evidence shows that simplicity plays in our favor. Take a look at why the trend in minimalism is so successful.



According to the **Gestalt Principles of Design**, you tend to **simplify things** to a form that is easier to save in memory rather than remembering things as is. The reason being, you have **limited energy** that you can spend throughout the day. Thus, optimizing energy consumption is a basic characteristic of the natural world, starting from molecular and atomic levels. This coupled with society's burden of an **endless information overload** has provided the basis for minimalism to continue on the rise. With more and more information being thrown at us by day, you have less attention span for each task. Minimalism has become **a condition our society demands** as it makes it easier and more intuitive to obtain information.

As such, it is preferable to deliver complicated messages more succinctly and intuitively.

07 design your own dance



How do you really make something complicated look simple?

The answer lies in how **you cater to your audience** and how you **trick them** into seeing an opaque window, where things are effortless, rather than a transparent one, where they can see the inner workings of every decision that you have made as creators.

And, as a matter of fact dancers do this in a brilliant manner that could easily adapted to suit the needs of designers.

Thus, I introduce you to a new method for approaching design: **dancing design.**

Dancers **storytell throughout a piece.**

Even as the mood, music, and purpose change throughout a piece, facial expressions and audience interaction aid dancers in getting their message across, with the perfect balance of athleticism and art.

By contrast, designers need to do a more complete job in connecting with their users. In design, our **users are the music** that guide us in following the beat accurately. Without their constant reminder throughout our piece, it's difficult to understand **how to best connect with the audience** properly.

The lack of connecting to users in design stems from the rigid structure of the design thinking process tied with the forceful attachment design has to business goals.

In the design process, after going through one step, designers move on to the next step. Empathy or connecting with users is defined as the first step. While in this phase, designers go through an extensive research process to understand their users and discover their key wants and needs. However, once the initial idea has been formulated, they then move on to the next step – define, **without going back to think about how user needs may have changed.**

Like a choreographer needs to serve changing audience emotions with unique choreography and music, a **designer needs to adapt** as user needs change over time.

There is a massive opportunity to change this if you have **research embedded in the process of design** instead of just as its own research phase. In other terms, if you can employ the agile methodology, where you **continuously think about users** in incremental, iterative sequences instead of thinking of connecting with users as a “step” that you move on from.

For example, Dancers put on multiple shows to gauge audience reactions - starting with a first performance called “opening night”. Opening night is when they do a massive marketing push to gather as much feedback as possible so that future shows can be as effective as possible in storytelling. Similarly, **designers can try out their products or ideas at multiple times** or in multiple contexts to push the boundaries of their products and fine tune it to the needs of their consumers **during the testing phase.**

Some would argue that with budget and timeline constraints it's **difficult to continuously think about users** and change our perspective on them. However, evidence suggests that there can be **increased creativity within constraints**. When people face scarcity, they give themselves freedom to use resources in less conventional ways – because they have to. Dancers constantly face constraints in the form of performance decisions - like selecting one style of dance and one song to work with or time and budget constraints based on if they are freelancing or working for a theatre. These constraints forces them to innovate within the space that they must focus on for the moment. Designers also need also **shift their mindset from limitations to opportunities**.

So, how can you make design better embody dancing design?

The art of simplicity lies in relying on your audience or user much more frequently throughout the lifetime of a project, like a dancer would throughout a piece. This means

- 1) **being able to adapt** design thinking to continuously engage with user input
- 2) **removing the inhibitions** associated with business goals, and in turn, driving your ability to innovate. Or in dance terms, *pirouettes* for days!

08 design your own dance



Now that you have learned about how to incorporate dance into your design practice, it's time that you **try dancing design!**

Don't worry – you won't need to learn the *worm* or be *en pointe* for seven hours!

Instructions:

For starters, find a partner that is willing to take on this challenge with you. Watch the video that shows a few key salsa movements. Use the place mat to try to recreate.

What have you learned from this experience?

What was difficult to balance?

Did you think about anything beyond just the footsteps?

Moving your hips or facials?

Did you feel like you were able to incorporate choreography and design into one?

Feel free to take a Pocket Takeaway in the back cover of the book and reflect on your experience!