The last hundred years have seen architects create inspiring new paradigms for many building types such as housing, museums, churches, hospitals, and schools. Many of these activities have undergone corresponding institutional change, and have mutated and grown in parallel with the creation of their new built forms. The theatre, though, is a special case: the physical prerequisites of encounter (seeing, hearing, sensing…) between performing and witnessing bodies have not changed over time. We architects have failed to comprehend the territory of performance, offering positivistic, technology-led reactions to perceived problems that may not in fact have needed solving. The real action in theatre building has been elsewhere, non-‘professional’, led by practitioners – directors, designers and scenographers. The following observations seek to examine this dilemma and to propose various strategies for improving our working practice.

1) Theatre practitioners have fashioned their own architectural worlds with great success.

There are many reasons for this. We could talk firstly of the quality of an institution’s aura. Every practitioner knows that if the primary signal of a theatre is that of the beneficent mayor, ministry or government that commissioned the building, or of the architect who designed it, the work inside is likely to be compromised. Certain theatre directors and performers have therefore sought to appropriate space outside of conventional construction industry and real estate paradigms, giving it their own ‘smell’ first and foremost. This immediately brings us closer to the work.
For example, the remarkable Cartoucherie complex in the Bois de Vincennes east of Paris, a former munitions factory, houses five theatres in vast industrial hangars. Ariane Mnouchkine’s Theatre du Soleil, which occupies four identical buildings each measuring 18 by 40 metres, is anything but a monument: the company, run like a commune, have the freedom to rebuild completely their performance space for each production. They have dug pits, made earthen landscapes and built flooded ditches; they can rehearse for years or put on two shows at once in separate buildings, a freedom which would be impossible in any conventionally thought-out theatre building with high overhead costs and fixed technical equipment that determines that the space can only be used in a limited way. For the audience the out-of-the-ordinary experience of leaving the city, traveling through the woods and being welcomed into a protected environment where there is no clear distinction between back and front of house is liberating, and means that the (often political) themes of Mnouchkine’s work are not confined to a distant stage, they invade the world of the audience and thereby gain in power and relevance.

Peter Brook treats space like a costume, something that has to be formed around an individual work in a improvisational manner, a process that relies on what he calls ‘the rule of luck’ in guiding the frantic search for spontaneous touring venues. These normally have a certain throwaway quality, as they are created with a very specific temporal purpose in mind. Efforts to preserve his spaces have usually resulted in confusion (the Brooklyn Majestic being a notable exception), because one cannot keep alive artificially the spark which was the *raison d’etre* of a one-off installation. The re-appropriating power (municipality, state, etc.) actually seeks often to smother this spark, to impose permanence.

Deborah Warner is promiscuous in her approach to space; on one occasion a conventional theatre with all its stuffy associations fits the bill perfectly; on another, she will take us to the top of an empty tower block before dawn, or drag us through the bowels of the city to a forgotten space for
a twenty-minute show; this serves to smash our preconceptions and open our eyes. On other occasions she will appropriate a ‘proper’ theatre during a state of destabilisation —under repair or redecoration, for example— and use its weakness, its institutional uncertainty, as a positive factor in predisposing the audience to the drama. She is not creating space so much as constantly re-framing it (which, one could say, amounts to the same thing).

There are many other examples of companies moving outside of the mainstream, working in quotidian spaces as an alternative to newly constructed, expensive institutional structures. Underlying all of this is the fact that the theatre doesn’t fundamentally require a sophisticated purpose-built space (unlike housing or hospitals); how then have architects addressed the problem of the theatre, how can they be relevant?

2) Modern architects have rarely made great theatres. Why?

Post-renaissance theatres were traditionally built or adapted by masons or carpenters as an empirical, vernacular response to a demonstrated need. The infrequent essays into theatre design as an abstract, intellectual process generally failed by comparison. The nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw the development of a group of specialist architects, dismissed by the architectural establishment, attempting once more to design space to establish the essential conditions of making theatre (glamour, audibility and breaking even). By the standards of the time they were hugely successful. Great architects of the last hundred years have generally done theatres quite rarely, and quite badly. Le Corbusier built only a rather steeply-sloping auditorium in the Firminy Youth Centre (although he did reveal a great sensitivity in an essay on improvised theatre space (published in English in the Architectural Review in June 1987)); The Finnish architect Alvar Aalto designed several performance spaces, but his love of asymmetry meant that an body on the stage can never occupy a natural position of
command; things are always off-kilter, biased towards the architecture. Frank Lloyd Wright’s Kalita Humphries Theatre in Dallas is excessively horizontal and far removed from this architect’s habitually stunning integration of material, proportion and use; he created a fiddly, fussy space with Juliet’s balcony already built, idiosyncratic asymmetries (again), and little steps up to the stage. The architecture is everywhere; good luck to the theatre designer. Louis Kahn’s theatre in Fort Wayne tries to carry through the monumental exterior to the auditorium – not a bad idea in principle, as most theatre auditoria have nothing to do with their outsides, the parts that usually end up being photographed for architecture journals— but the space is very wide, and tells such a strong story in itself that the story being told on the stage gets upstaged, as it were. Denys Lasdun’s elegant National Theatre is one of the great metropolitan congregation spaces, but the principal auditorium is compromised by its self-consciousness and scale: there is too much architecture and not enough theatrical possibility.

We can perhaps conclude that the great creators of space were temperamentally unsuited to making buildings that should really serve as incomplete, responsive vessels for other creators to flesh out; the architect’s inbred urge towards resolution and permanence was at odds with the theatre, which continues to thrive on indeterminacy and possibility. (One British modernist architect rose to the challenge, however, as we shall discuss below.)

Another failing of the architecture of the last 100 years has been its reluctance to engage with time, and this is of direct relevance to our theme, as theatres are of necessity highly temporal buildings. David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi have pointed out in their book On Weathering that early modern architecture was conceived as if time did not exist – a denial which led canonical 1920s buildings to show signs of ageing very quickly, condemning them to an expensive regimen today of constant upkeep, of suspended animation (Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye is a case in point).
There are, though, positive exceptions to this rule, as represented by Le Corbusier’s late work (such as the monastery of La Tourette), the Italian architect Carlo Scarpa (in the elegiac and time-drenched Brion-Vega cemetery) and the Norwegian Sverre Fehn, whose anthropological museum in Hamar is by turns gentle and brutal with the medieval shell it inhabits. Inhabiting an elastic time-scale, these buildings are more capable of bringing into focus the presentness, the thing-ness of the elements that are placed within them, whether they be paintings, ancient domestic artifacts or indeed the bodies of performers.

In all of these cases there is a surrender at some level -to the elements, to an existing structure - but also an unsentimental manipulation of temporality: this is not supine historicism and imitation, the present time is stated strongly and reciprocally with the past. There is an emphasis on the potential of surface to provide a shifting temporal background, rather like the walls of Peter Brook’s partially-ruined Bouffes du Nord theatre in Paris, which are neither entirely contemporary nor historically correct; they are somewhere in the middle of time, which is the key to their theatrical flexibility.

3) How do theatres function as Civic Architecture?

After the Renaissance specialised theatre architecture gradually replaced found situations (courtyards, large-scale building interiors) in order to be provide better conditions for live performance in terms of acoustics, visibility, safety and stage technique. Its exterior iconography, its urban presence, had little to do with its primary function of reinforcing the relationship between performance and audience. Whereas an Elizabethan courtyard theatre was recognisable from the outside as a specific urban object, 18th and 19th-century theatres look like palaces or administrative buildings, not ‘theatres’ as a recognizable typology.
Contemporary conditions have not improved the situation: the ‘aura’ of patronage we referred to earlier, together with the well-known problem of the architectural ego, have conspired to present theatres as special buildings, standing out self-importantly from their urban context. Metaphors of ‘showiness’ and ‘performance’ abound as justifications for polished architectural set-pieces. A different paradigm could emerge, though, if we consider the peculiar character of the theatre act itself. We could say that the highest aim of theatre is to transform a randomly-assembled group of unknowns, with all their traits of gender, race, class, sexuality and so on, into a coherent, unselfconscious society in microcosm. This goal is attained by undertaking a journey together in accompanying, in becoming implicated with, a story which is laid out by other people, the performers. It results in a sensation of true democracy, of having created new conditions through consensus, engagement and participation (both moral and emotional), and is quite different to the one-dimensional loss of individual identity that occurs through the hysteria of a football match or rock concert.

If theatre space is to nurture this transformation, it has an interesting set of challenges. It is relatively easy to imagine a space which reinforces social distinctions (either vertically, through a spatial imposition of class hierarchy, or through the codes of ‘rich’ or ‘special’ materials) and such spaces are relatively constant around the world. Spaces which attempt to do the reverse tend, though, to be surprising, diverse, and related to intimate circumstances of site, time and culture. To take the example of two spaces we know from practice, London’s Young Vic and Royal Court, both aspire to reinforce the democratic sharing described above, and both belong to their urban settings in an intimate way. If one were to transpose them by the short distance that separates them from Chelsea to Lambeth, both would lose something because they would no longer be buildings in tune with their micro-local vernacular, both physical and cultural. One would feel insincere going into a direct, basic structure such as the Young Vic in Chelsea; the Royal Court might seem too urbane, too sophisticated (at least for the time being...
in Lambeth. The balance of relationships one is attempting to conserve here has to be seen through to the level of detail, through the choices of materials and their sequence from exterior appearance, through the lobby and into the performance space. Seated in the auditorium, one should be able to feel 'I am HERE,' and this civic rootedness is what allows one to take off with the drama, to venture somewhere else.

4) How can architects add quality to theatre space?

Our experience, and certain observed cases, point to the fact that, if architects are really to be of use in the creation of theatre spaces, we will have to open ourselves to unfamiliar ways of working.

To return to the Young Vic, the original 1970s building attained an attuned ordinariness resulting from the conversations between modernist architect William Howell and director Frank Dunlop, a dialogue which required the radical stripping away of ‘architecture’ as a self-referential discipline. The temporary character of the original project allowed a permissive attitude to posterity, removing the imperative for an architecturally iconic object. Paradoxically, this building has become totemic as architecture as well as theatre space precisely because of its repudiation of unnecessary rhetorical baggage – it is exemplary as a case of limited resources being used to only essential ends. Key to this process was the equality of architect and director as complementary, mutually reinforcing voices - the eventual architecture was a result of detailed dialogue rather than stylistic trademarking, the architect having sufficient humility and intelligence to listen to the programme and develop a specific, tailored space for a specific artistic desire.

The Young Vic (and, in our opinion, any good theatre) becomes ‘civic’ from the inside out, it radiates from core values expressed in the auditorium according to fairly practical precepts, and these values reach out and interlock with the surrounding local context. Thereby it can avoid the fallacy of the
‘landmark’ building as a prerequisite for successful theatre - ‘landmark’ in the
sense of a headline grabbing, radically novel object – an object which aspires
to not much more than the glib branding of urban fabric as a consumable
product. What if we re-qualify the ‘landmark’ as a building which marks the
land in such a manner that it genuinely anchors itself within our own
psychological map of the city - as something delicate, referential, evocative,
recalcitrant, allusive, or even plain ugly, but, above all, displaying a pleasing
degree of inevitability in its space and society.

A number of examples from our own practices help to illustrate our
point. The two projects for the temporary Almeida theatre spaces in London
were generated through low cost, fast track processes more akin to set
design than building – a mertzbau approach to recycled found materials
(including borrowed turf for acoustic wall and roof coverings) and an
acceptance of difficult existing building forms, making lively virtues of
eccentricities which can easily be tolerated in a short-lived venue, but which
would seem merely awkward in a ‘permanent’ building. Loose fit, ambiguous
space planning and lack of conventional finish throughout resulted in a
flexible, adaptable environment for theatre, opera, conferences, fashion
shows and partying. The building became, accidentally, emblematic of an
alternative redevelopment strategy, representing a more resistant,
opportunistic urbanism - a leavening rather than an obliteration of the existing
fabric and patterns of inhabitation.

The experimental Nomad Theatre attempts to apply a similarly
unsentimental ethic, but from a completely different direction. Recognising
that theatre building is slow whereas theatrical creation and theatre careers
run very fast, this project engages sophisticated construction technology,
logistics and engineering in order to produce fast and cheap (but artistically
acceptable) temporary performance spaces. It tries to mine standard
components (scaffolding and cheap, off-the-peg envelope materials) for their
poetic value within the constraints of a rational building system, and allows
the core logic to be adapted to various programmes and sites. The aim is to
produce spaces that are effective but not static, buildings that invite tinkering and further improvisation, and even easy disposal when their artistic relevance comes to an end.

The restoration of London’s Royal Court was a partly archaeological exercise inspired by Carlo Scarpa’s respectful, precise and unsentimental restoration of the Castelvecchio in Verona. The building was selectively demolished then stripped, propped, patched and restructured, excavated away to give more generous and unexpected circulation and congregation spaces. Extensive new interventions were placed alongside original fabric, each made of robust, durable materials that would continue to patinate and mellow as a coherent environment. The consequences of these acts were laid bare: old walls were left juxtaposed to new interventions (such as Antoni Malinowski’s red-painted drum around the auditorium) with a careful notation of the interstitial spaces – the myriad edges, layers and joints generated by this exercise. The heart of the project remains the auditorium – a ghost-filled, well-proportioned bourgeois room, whose comfort was amplified to reinforce the familiar contrast between the space and the radical work presented there.

The examples above are familiar to the authors through professional involvement, but many other architects are beginning to question the assumptions and professional methodologies that have delivered a whole generation of uninspiring, institutionalized theatres into our cities.

This re-appraisal of priorities is crucial if theatre is to continue as a point of resistance to the image-dominated culture we live in; it remains one of the very few refuges for the human imagination, which, despite a century of bombardment by mediated experience, and dire predictions from certain quarters, can regenerate itself easily if given the right stimulation and respect in contexts such as the theatre. The fundamental requirement for a theatre building is that it should provide a protected place in which to tell a story; lights, pulleys, stage revolves and architectural metaphors about theatricality come second. As there are many stories to be told, it follows that we need
many kinds of theatre buildings: some sophisticated, some rough, some big, some small, some sumptuous, some ascetic. Architects have a crucial role to fulfill, a playful, mould-breaking role which we have resisted exploring sufficiently. We should take the lead in extrapolating the interior site of performance into urban manifestation, a civic architecture which can vivify qualities of otherness, empathy, wit, gawkiness, improvisation, accident and accretion. We should be sufficiently self-confident to abandon the facile ‘landmark’ and explore a more ambiguous, conglomerate architectural identity, at the expense both of nervous historicism and of arrogant form-making.