

The Unfinished Theatre

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Published in *Architectural Review*, July 2007

Theatre architecture presents a paradox. Unlike most other building types that have developed new paradigms in parallel with corresponding institutional change (hospitals, churches, schools and so on), theatre's fundamental praxis - action and witness- has never changed. Theatre's essential programme involves encounter, narration and communion, qualities which defy purely technical resolution. Consequently, theatre makers have shrugged off attempts at innovation led by architects, technocrats and commissioning bodies whenever they have offered positivistic solutions to 'problems' that may not, in fact, have needed solving.

Successful theatre architecture has always been founded on a profound attunement to space, location, materiality and human behaviour. Too often in the last century however, new theatres, feted in the press and admired by other architects, have met with disquiet or even despair from actors, designers and directors. Successfully established companies have traded ramshackle premises for dazzling new homes, only to lose steerage. Municipal bodies have rushed to sponsor photogenic palaces of culture, but remain puzzled when their interiors prove to be culturally barren. The complexity in designing theatre space lies in the marriage of two art forms with overlapping agendas. Success depends on understanding and negotiating this shared terrain effectively.

Twentieth century architects consistently struggled to reconcile the apparently conflicting demands of great architecture and great theatre. Frank Lloyd Wright could not bear to part with his own spatial anecdotes in the Kalita Humphreys theatre; they ended up crowding out the stage. Kahn, likewise, created such an impressive concrete interior to the Fort Wayne Theatre that any stage world is upstaged, as it were, by the auditorium. Aalto's exquisite formalism and love of asymmetry was pursued often at the expense of density, focus and visibility. Le Corbusier hardly dealt with theatres per se, but did show a great sensitivity to the subject in an essay on spontaneous theatre -printed in these pages in June 1987. It says something about the question of theatre architecture that the most compelling statement on the subject by modernity's greatest architect is his rooftop theatre in Marseille, which is simply a platform with a wall behind.

The great Modernist creators of space seem to have been temperamentally unsuited to making buildings that should serve as incomplete, responsive vessels for other creators to fill. In the absence of convincing new paradigms from the great twentieth century architects, the theatre, almost uniquely, has seen its own practitioners – directors like Michael Elliot and Tyrone Guthrie, producers and production designers - taking the initiative in the debate around architectural space.

Many of the most influential theatre companies have found inspiration in historic, quotidian or found space alternatives. Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil company in Paris for example, which occupies four identical, linked industrial buildings, has the freedom to rebuild its performance space for each production, a freedom which would be impossible in any conventional theatre with high overhead costs and fixed technical equipment. The building has nourished her work for forty years.

Peter Brook has treated space like a costume, something that has to be formed around an individual work in an improvisational manner, transforming 'found' space rather engaging in the costly and lengthy process of building from scratch. His own base -the chameleon, partly-ruined Bouffes du Nord in Paris - is cited by many practitioners as their most inspiring theatre.

For director Deborah Warner the specificity of location is indivisible from her work. On one occasion her setting is a conventional theatre or opera house; on another a derelict music hall or railway station; on another, the top of an empty tower block before dawn. She will appropriate a 'proper' theatre during a state of de-stabilisation – under repair or

redcoration, for example - and use its ambiguity, its institutional uncertainty, as a positive factor in predisposing the audience to the drama.

In London, Cheek By Jowl have currently adapted the Barbican theatre to a more intimate, temporary format as an alternative to the scale and fixity of the permanent architecture. The theatre company Shunt inhabit the labyrinth of vaults beneath London Bridge station, reveling in an alarming acoustic and disorienting scale which might scandalise the authors of theatre design guides. Meanwhile the experimental group Punchdrunk have appropriated entire, non-purpose made large buildings for their deconstructed promenade events, upsetting our passive expectations of a frictionless evening out and (within their own narrative criteria) rendering specialised theatre architecture redundant.

The individualism of these examples is both their success and their limitation. When their creators move on or change their way of working, the sites can lose their reason for being (a notable exception being the BAM Harvey in Brooklyn, a derelict theatre originally converted for Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*). But as models for exciting space they remain nonetheless amongst the most inspiring both to theatre makers and audiences, and therein lies the profound challenge to our profession.

Architects generally serve clients who operate within a longer time frame, who need to see further than a specific work; theatres can accordingly become either ossified or blandly all-purpose. But is there an inherent, insurmountable contradiction between stable, civic character and the spark of the moment which all theatre makers seek? We need to examine whether the dynamic energy of an individual artist's vision is transferable to a more permanent institutional context. If the theatrical mindset draws its charge from conditions of instability and impermanence, shouldn't theatre architects be attempting to suppress the ingrained urge towards permanence and full resolution?

The conundrum of is not a new one. Michael Elliot, watching Lasdun's National Theatre taking shape, expressed serious misgivings about expressed permanence in theatre architecture in a seminal UK radio broadcast, subsequently transcribed under the title *On not building for Posterity*. Elliot's plea was for a more ephemeral, more demotic, loose fit theatre architecture, the antithesis of the cavernous municipal theatres then so much in evidence. His radical solution was the Manchester Royal Exchange theatre, conceived (with designer Richard Negri and architects Levitt Bernstein) as an autonomous, spidery alien form within the vast found space of an existing marble corn exchange.

Elliot's musings pinpointed a general shortcoming of the architecture of the last 100 years that is of particular relevance to theatre design: its reluctance to engage with time. David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi have argued in their book *On Weathering* that much early modern architecture was conceived as if time did not exist – a denial which has condemned canonical Modernist buildings to an expensive regimen of constant upkeep. But there are exceptions, such as Corb's later work at La Tourette and Ronchamp, Carlo Scarpa's elegiac Brion-Vega Cemetery and Castelvechio, or Sverre Fehn's superb anthropological museum in Hamar, by turns gentle and brutal with the medieval shell it occupies. Ironically the completed National Theatre is, at root, a timeless, and therefore theatrically supple building, despite the much-discussed eccentricities of its two principal auditoria. By inhabiting an elastic time-scale these spaces are capable of bringing into focus the presentness, the *thing-ness* of the elements that are placed within them. All of these cases involve some level of surrender, whether to the elements, to the contingencies of the construction process or to an existing structure.

Likewise, the battered walls of the Bouffes or the Almeida, the painted shell of the Theatre du Soleil, or the permissive frameworks of the Cottesloe and the Donmar – all found or adapted spaces - are malleable in their temporality, neither entirely of the present, nor historically specific enough to be dated. They have a chameleon ability to take on the shade of the world created on the stage and reinforce the current which links it with our own, present existence: they somehow make it easier to believe we are in

India, Tibet, Africa, nineteenth-century Russia, or, indeed, present-day Paris or London. In their shifty semi-authenticity they have the curious faculty of making their created contents seem more real.

They reinforce our perception of the theatre act as instantaneous and ephemeral, and yet they inhabit the thick time of an evolving present, gathering the traces of the life they have sponsored and contained. They help us to live more in the present, but also collectively to remember. As precedents for current practice they make a case for a more time-conscious, more evolutionary approach to theatre design, potentially at odds with the photogenic immediacy of much contemporary practice.

The original Young Vic of 1970, built as temporary theatre on a notorious bomb-site and incorporating a solitary surviving building as its entrance, is an object lesson. As architect Bill Howell's account makes explicit, the non-permanent character of the project allowed him to adopt a permissive attitude to posterity, removing the imperative for an architecturally iconic object in favour of a beautifully judged balance of ordinariness and oddness.

Paradoxically, this building became totemic as architecture as well as theatre space precisely because of its lack of rhetoric. It is exemplary as a case of limited resources being used only to essential ends. Key to this was the equality of architect and artistic director as the complementary, mutually reinforcing voices of a trusting relationship. The architect had not only the interest, humility and intelligence to listen to the Dunlop's specific programmatic needs but also the boldness to invent a supportive and original built language.

In mapping the project with David Lan and his team some thirty five years later, the issue of time has been central to our thinking. Our aim has been to extend the accretive, conglomerate process by which the original building was conceived and which liberated so much creative energy. We regard Howell's auditorium, one of the most successful performance spaces of the last century, as a repository of creative and civic memory, a still-fresh model for a theatre that invites democratic sharing and constant re-invention. Our decision was to maintain as much as possible of the auditorium's fabric along with the totemic entrance building, and to re-anchor the theatre's identity in the vital, cheerfully messy present through the heterogeneous spaces which surround and service the main auditorium and its two new satellite theatres.

We have sought to maintain the balance of relationships between past, present and future at every level of detail, through the choices of materials and their sequence from exterior appearance, through the foyer and into the performance spaces. The building is designed to belong in a specific street in a specific borough of London, but to accommodate any number of psychological micro-climates generated by the work on stage throughout the entire duration of its current configuration. Seated in one of the auditoria as a show begins, every member of the audience should be able to feel 'I am *here, now*,' a civic and temporal rootedness that allows them to take off with the drama, to venture somewhere else. Like its predecessor, the new Young Vic seeks to become 'civic' from the inside out. It radiates from core values expressed in the auditorium according to practical precepts of circulation, density and intimacy, and these values reach out and interlock with the surrounding local context.

As the imperative for more responsible and sustainable building becomes undeniable and the ability of creatively ambitious theatres to afford glamorous, revenue-hungry homes becomes less realistic, The Young Vic is one example of a questioning attitude to recent past. However, contemporary conditions have encouraged neither subtlety nor economy of means in publicly funded theatre architecture. The blind date of design competitions by which many theatres (particularly large ones) are still launched, along with the understandable regenerative ambitions of public funding bodies, have often conspired to encourage theatres to be regarded primarily as Landmark Buildings, the civic equivalent of churches or law courts.

But the idea of every working theatre as a Landmark Building, in the crude sense of a glamorous, headline-grabbing object, is neither relevant nor desirable. A more fruitful conversation with civic commissioners and competition juries might result if we were to re-qualify the 'Landmark' as a building that marks the land in such a manner that it genuinely establishes itself within our collective psychological map of the city. What if we redefine it as something which may well -on occasion- be show-stopping, but which may also be delicate, poignant, evocative, recalcitrant, allusive, or even plain, something which intelligently balances boldness and humility to achieve an authentic point of reference within its space and society?

There is increasing evidence of just such a changing sensibility. In the UK, Sarah Wigglesworth's beautifully conceived dance space for Siobhan Davis is both playful and practical. The RSC's Courtyard auditorium at Stratford (by Ian Richie and theatre consultants Charcoalblue) is a rough, full-scale temporary prototype, designed in intense collaboration with the client and completed with theatre industry can-do and speed. In France, Patrick Bouchain's intriguing critical position regarding conventional construction (revealed in his book *Construire Autrement*) is closely linked to his experience of low-budget, ephemeral performance art projects often on marginal urban sites (the Zingaro Equestrian Theatre, the Saint Denis circus school). In Italy the Stalker architectural collective has demonstrated that a light-footed programme of interpretations and ephemeral interventions can be fruitful in fostering a refreshed perception of civic space, a real -rather than metaphorical- theatre of the city.

All of these designers share an urge to engage in detail with the working practices and creative priorities of theatre makers. They acknowledge that the purpose of theatre architecture (and one might say of theatre itself) 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 convivial participation (both moral and emotional), and is quite different to the one-dimensional loss of individual identity that occurs in the hysteria of a football match or rock concert.

An architecture that can help to tell these stories and to foster these sensations should be our primary aim. Lights, pulleys, stage revolves and architectural metaphors about theatricality come second. As there are too many stories to be told for any one spatial language, it follows that we need different kinds of theatre buildings: some sophisticated, some rough, some big, some small, some sumptuous, some ascetic. In evaluating the right moves for a given set of circumstances, architects and theatre makers are beginning to develop a methodology of complicity rather than misapprehension. The need to be vulnerable, to trust peripheral vision, to change our minds, to explore obscure diversions and repeatedly to test our progress against an informing idea, is common to both fields, but too rarely do we share our creative processes with sufficient candour.

For only then can we properly perform the role of extrapolating the interior site of performance into urban manifestation, of making a civic architecture that can vivify qualities of grandeur and spectacle but also of otherness, empathy, wit, gawkiness, improvisation and accretion. A more engaged design process means neither an abdication of architectural authorship nor a brake on formal inventiveness. On the contrary, if theatre architecture is to evolve, we will need to become more experimental, more informed, more responsive, more communicative, and more aware of the real lives of our completed buildings.