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The Third Space of Theatre Architecture. Between the Stage and the City

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

Theatre design has always looked, through history, to its relation with the city. Recently, when much attention has been paid to the practices of cultural participation, architecture has consequently again changed its approach to theatre typology and its relation with the public urban space: the focus seems to have moved to the role of the entrance, the façade and the public spaces outside the stage in continuity with the public space of the street.

Through the use of selected case studies, this article investigates theatre places as they have been designed and occupied in the last ten years by analysing the relations between artists, architects, audiences and the city. The engagement with the idea of time and the tension between theatres' civic role and their provocative transformation are the core of this investigation.

Keywords: theatre, architecture, façade, public space, memory

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Theatre has spent most of its history outside buildings. We tend to see open-air performances as strange but we know that theatre has been enclosed in a built, hierarchical and constructed space for less than four centuries (Zorzi, 1977). Hence it is not strange that theatre design has always looked, through history, to its relation with the city.[1]

The contemporary discourse about the theatre and its space in the city should focus on its relationship with the audience. In recent years, when much attention has been paid to public engagement and the practices of cultural participation, architecture has consequently again changed (or should therefore change) its approach to theatre typology and to its relation with the urban space.

The two sides of the coin in the search for a new relationship between performance and space in the 20th century have been, on the one hand, the escape to the outside and, on the other, investigation of the flexibility of the interior of the theatre. I will concentrate instead upon a third space. This is a fully theatrical space but in a way that is in-between: between the interior space of the building and the exterior. Here lies my research into what I consider the new public dimension proper to the 21st century, responding to the needs of audiences and a relational artistic dimension.

I would like to deal with this theme through the common conclusions arising from an ongoing research project on contemporary theatre architecture and some interviews that I have conducted with architects who have worked with directors and theatre companies. There are not many design practices with specific expertise in performance spaces, and in this article I will mainly use as a reference the work of the British architecture firm Haworth Tompkins.

Founded by Graham Haworth and Steve Tompkins in 1991, in 1994 the office had only completed a small footwear factory. It was then that director Stephen Daldry selected them to redesign the Royal Court Theatre, under

1. I have written about the relations between theatre and the city in Serrazanetti, 2010.

his direction at the time. Since then Haworth Tompkins has developed a specific expertise and become a frame of reference for the design of entertainment spaces in historical buildings (not just theatres), in tune with some of the most vital and intriguing creative developments on the contemporary scene. The firm has come to grips with Georgian and Victorian settings — the restoration of the Bristol Old Vic, dating back to 1760, inaugurated in autumn 2018, while in 2020 work will be completed on the Drury Lane Theatre in London, located in a building from 1812 — as well as more recent examples of English architecture, such as the Brutalist National Theatre designed by Denys Lasdun in 1976. The work of Haworth Tompkins explores the capacity of listed historic buildings to yield innovative new spaces for public, cultural and civic use, investigating a new relation with the city.

Theatre and the City. In/Out

It seems that in theatre history the transformation and experimentation of the theatre typology have always been concentrated in the innermost part of the building. Considering the theatre as made up of three envelopes — the exterior (relation with the city), the inner core (the performance spaces proper) and the intermediate layer made of the back of house (for actors) and front of house (for audience) — the theatre research of the 19th and 20th century always concentrated on the inner core, the auditorium. From Walter Gropius' Total Theatre to Jurgen Sawade's Schaubuhne passing through a number of examples of flexible auditorium spaces that merge different typologies (front, arena...), we can consider the flexibility of the theatre auditorium has acquired.

The 21st century, by contrast, is devoting attention to the external parts, which are in direct contact with the city. I would say that this has been happening at least since 1999, when Rem Koolhaas used just a curtain to separate the theatre from the city: he opened a window onto the street in the Second Stage Theatre in New York (De Michelis, 2007).

The sketch made by Louis Kahn in 1973 for the Forth Wayne theatre, in which he represented the theatre as a violin in its case, seems effective: "[...] having observed theatres, I came to the conclusion that one must regard the auditorium and the stage as a violin, a sensitive instrument where one should be able to hear, even a whisper, without any amplification. The lobbies and all other adjunct spaces may be compared to the violin case. The violin and its case are completely different and they have to be designed with the same attention" (Breton, 1989).

Between the interior and the exterior of the building there is a space to cross, not just a wall, and it has a strong performative potential. This is what I would call the third space, and it marks the relation between the theatre and the city.

This space is explored in various ways: by accentuating the transparency of some parts to allow a partial vision of the spaces and internal activities; structuring some internal and external spaces without a break; making possible a real pedestrian crossing by the occasional passers-by, who find

themselves crossing the atrium or other parts of the building complex and observing the inside while remaining outside; or using the compositional features typical of the city, thus bringing forward with new terms a continuity that has continued for centuries (from the scenery by Palladio and Scamozzi in the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza to the Gardella-Rossi Teatro La Fenice in Genoa). These solutions make the theatre a place to stay, and not just a place to go in order to attend a performance.

But these are not just solutions made in order to attract new audiences. In Haworth Tompkins' projects, we see that the foyers are conceived as extensions of the street, sheltered plazas bordered by transparent and porous façades.

Haworth Tompkins, Young Vic Theatre, London ©Philip Vile.

Haworth Tompkins, Young Vic Theatre, London ©Philip Vile.

Haworth Tompkins, National Theatre, London ©Philip Vile.

Haworth Tompkins, Bush Theatre, London ©Philip Vile.

This aspect is evident in projects that renovate old theatres of different kinds: some “found spaces” like the Young Vic Theatre, or pre-existing theatres like the Bristol Old Vic or the National Theatre.

The foyers are here conceived as the extension of the street, not just in terms of materials but also of time: they are assembled in a certain chronological order that conceptually makes them a point of passage between the everyday life of the street and a more solid, permanent and sheltered area. The exterior envelope has to do with the fast rhythms of reality. For this reason, this porous quality is essential.

Haworth Tompkins, Royal Court Theatre, London.

Haworth Tompkins, Royal Court Theatre, London ©Andy Chopping.

Time and Reality. A Narrative Approach

The themes of time and reality are closely connected and are both central to performing arts projects. Time is a key factor in relationships among a group of individuals that share an event located in the "here and now", while at the same time being connected with the continuity of our collective memory: the history of the past, which is part of the space, and the evolving temporality of the city. All successful performance spaces are somehow connected with the idea of time: this does not imply that they have to be perfectly restored historical sites, or their copies. When the work starts with basic materials that have a past, it is more interesting to extrapolate their stories, to make the temporal nature of the space become more ambiguous and elastic, and to establish a connection between the real time of the street and the "suspended" time of the performance.

The theme of time really has nothing to do with ruins. In an allusion to the most important reference in this field, Tompkins says that "the Thêatre des Bouffes du Nord is conceived with extreme care and art. The choice of placing the stage further forward, or that of amplifying the theatrical characteristic of the space through the traces of its past, are practical tools aimed at intensifying the experience of the spectator and enhancing the capacity to communicate with the performance. These are carefully gauged technical interventions, the results of experience and research"[2] (Serrazanetti, 2018).

The most interesting examples of this relation with the historical traces and their connection with the city are the design of the Royal Court (London, 1994) the Bristol Old Vic (Bristol, 2018) or the work on the Battersea Arts Centre (London, 2018).

In the Royal Court[3] Steve Tompkins worked with sensitivity and determination in what for many was a theatre sanctuary, restoring to life its stratified history and making a delicate selection of what was to be preserved and

2. My interview with Steve Tompkins is published in *Casabella* (Serrazanetti, 2018).

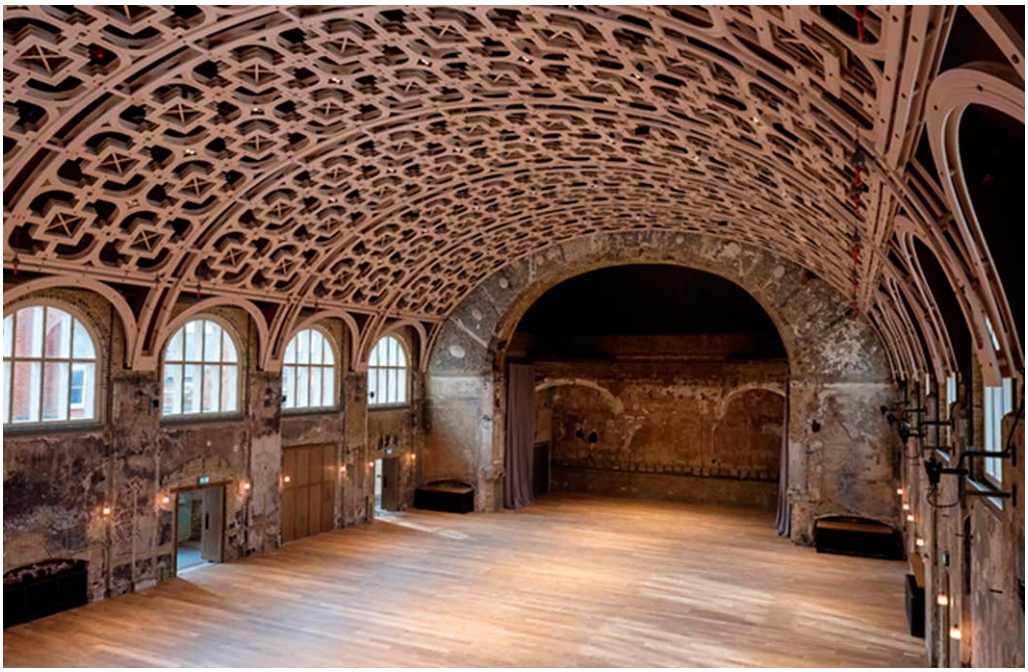
3. Full description and credits can be found on the Haworth Tompkins website <http://www.haworthtompkins.com/work/royal-court-theatre>.

valued and what was to be reconfigured, even in an invasive way. The historical dimension survives in the restored façade and in the central 400-seat auditorium, while the implementation of paths and services creates a fascinating contrast with the existing structure: the new 85-seat flexible studio-theatre, the hypogeum extension with café, restaurant and bookshop placed below the square in front of the theatre. From the square, through the increased transparency of the main front, it is possible to glimpse the large red mural on the wall around the auditorium, by the artist Antoni Malinowski: a wall drawing that optically enlarges the foyer.

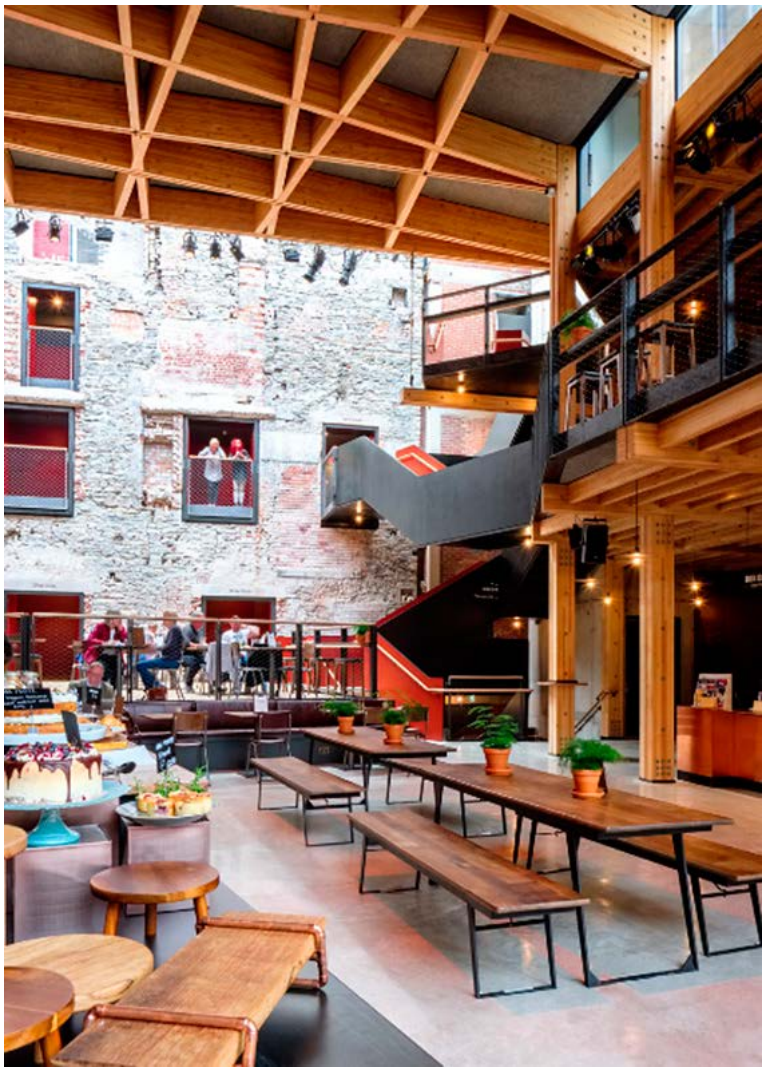
At the Royal Court many historical stratifications have been revealed in the front of house and the auditorium: the idea of a ruin is arbitrary, inevitable, left simply to the random passage of time, while here we see a very calculated focus on the balance between different layers of time, and it is there that the potential of the building starts to emerge.

The Bristol Old Vic and the Battersea Arts Centre[4] — Grade I and II listed — have been the subject of simultaneous, long-term conversations with local communities, artists and producers in order to bring existing arts buildings into a more creative relationship with social life and public space. Both are based on the desire to expand public engagement through a more porous architecture and the capability to host a more diverse programme of work involving a wider cross-section of society. The projects seek to reveal and amplify the layers of physical and political history encapsulated in the building. Responding to the specific circumstances, the intervention involved the full demolition and replacement of the front of house at Bristol — dating back to the 1970s — converted to a new covered and bright plaza

Haworth Tompkins, Battersea Arts Centre, London ©Fred Howarth.



4. Full descriptions and credits can be found on Haworth Tompkins website <http://www.haworthtompkins.com/work/bristol-old-vic> <http://www.haworthtompkins.com/work/battersea-arts-centre>.



Haworth Tompkins, Bristol Old Vic, Bristol © Philip Vile.

in continuity with the street, the reframing of the fire-damaged Grand Hall at Battersea alongside almost invisible adjustments, additions and stripping back elsewhere.

Tradition and Transgression. Between Identity and Rite

The theme of time has in a way to do with transgression: it is the transgression of something that already exists, with the aim of bringing it back to new life.

As Steve Tompkins says, "it is a complex question. On the one hand, theatre has the civil responsibility to represent a community, the multiplicity and diversity of contemporary society. The language of a theatre building has to be welcoming and open, beyond genres, it cannot be elitist. Instead we normally segregate historical buildings, from an architectural viewpoint, in their characteristics that represent the social structure of the time" (Serrazanetti, 2018).

The other aspect is that theatre has often had a provocative calling, against the establishment. Many of its most vital performance groups have operated in temporary settings, having to do with a sense of risk. There is an

Young Vic Theatre, London © Philip Vile.

interesting tension between the public, civic vocation of theatre and its more subversive side. Two energies that have to find a balance in the relationship with the audience, and the response to this dialectic seems to be the virtue of good designers of performance spaces.

In the project for the Young Vic[5] in London, this tension is evident. At the beginning of the process, the decision was taken to keep the architectural heart of the existing building — the auditorium and the adjacent fragment of pre-war building fabric, a former butcher's shop that still constitutes the theatre's access environment — rather than demolishing everything. The new spaces have been arranged around this core, so as to develop an architecture of continuity and growth, which responds to a stratification of layers of history rather than a single compositional intention. The goal was to create a space that would continue to be questioned, overwritten and interpreted by designers, directors and actors: a space that created a set of extended use possibilities, without any sacrifice of the experimental identity for which the Young Vic was known. The foyer is like a covered courtyard, a flexible and vital space embraced by a gallery that increases its theatrical dimension, which can be exploited by actors and performers to get the show out of the auditorium.

The Hegemony of the Spectator?

Piergiorgio Giacchè in the book *L'altra visione dell'altro* speaks of the "hegemony of the spectator": he argues that theatre typology, moving from the urban square to the theatre building in the 1500s, is based on the hegemony of who is seeing (Giacchè, 2004). In reality, it is the hegemony of the single viewer, which follows the development of perspective, and it is interesting to

5. Full description and credits can be found on the Haworth Tompkins website <http://www.haworthtompkins.com/work/young-vic>.

Haworth Tompkins, Everyman Theatre, Liverpool © Philip Vile.

analyse how today we are trying to cancel that hegemony, erasing the privilege of who sees.

It would be remarkable today to develop a history of the audience in relation with theatre architecture. But, focusing on recent years, what are we looking at?

We know that the indispensable conditions of the architects' work are the continuous dialogue with artists, administrators and the public. Collaborative processes that involve citizens and audiences, public consultations and participatory events, temporary occupations of space and experimental uses of the buildings allow the feel of the place to be established and for a response to a very wide variety of audiences and cultural positions. This civic role finds maximum expression in the façade of the Everyman Theatre[6] in Liverpool, an urban artwork that depicts the community.

After nine years of gestation, the new Everyman headquarters was inaugurated in 2014, replacing the historical site. The memory of the past remains thanks to the reuse of the bricks of the pre-existing theatre in the volume of the room, surrounded by public paths that, from the street, flow in a single fluid movement to the bistro, restaurant, bar and terraces. The main façade is a large work of art made up of 105 aluminium movable elements, each engraved with the real-sized profile of a resident of Liverpool. This "Portrait Wall" displays the collective identity of an entire citizenship: the inhabitants were involved (immortalised by the photographer Dan Kenyon, who produced over 4,000 portraits) through a series of public events aimed at including the urban community in its heterogeneity. The theatre thus shows its mission on the street: a public space for all, capable of shaping the values of cultural inclusion, citizen participation and industrious creativity. In the combination of historical heritage, new urban identities and performing arts,

6. Full description and credits can be found on the Haworth Tompkins website <http://www.haworthtompkins.com/work/everyman-theatre>.

the project remains open to continuous remodelling not only of the place of representation but also of the social role that theatre has in its relationship with the city.

Theatres, Third Places

In a book published thirty years ago, *The Great, Good Place*, the American urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg asserts that every person has a need for a third place, other than home and work, where each can feel welcome and comfortable. He lists some characteristics that third places, essential to the community, have in common: they have a neutral ground, they contribute to social levelling, the main activity in them is conversation and exchange, they allow people to go alone, they have an unimpressive appearance, they have a playful mood, and they allow people to act as they do at home away from home.

The theatre then seems to be increasingly seeking to be what the sociologist Oldenburg defines as a third place, on the borderline between public and private. This third space lies in the area between the interior and the exterior, between the stage and the city, outside of the "black box" of the theatre space.

The theatre should no longer be thought of as an enclosed box but as a place of connection with reality and with life, between public and private, porous not only in physical and architectural terms but also in terms of *mixité*. This is something not to be taken for granted: if we think about Italy, for example, there is still a submission to the rigid models (both institutional and architectural) inherited from the 20th century.

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