

The Architecture of the Circus. Graphic Analysis of Circus Spaces in Today's Society

Juan José GONZÁLEZ FERRERO

Technical University of Madrid (UPM). Higher Technical School of Architecture of Madrid (ETSAM).
Department of Architectural Composition. Madrid, Spain

ORCID: 0000-0001-6335-1041

juanjose.gonzalez.ferrero@gmail.com

jj.ferrero@upm.es

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Architect specialised in Architecture and Contemporary Art (2013) and doctor architect (2021) at the Technical University of Madrid. Associate professor in the Department of Composition at the Higher Technical School of Architecture of Madrid. His research relates teaching of a graphic methodology of composition analysis with his work as set designer and assistant in the theatre and audiovisual field.

English translation, Neil CHARLTON.

Abstract

The performing art of circus creates a particular architecture due to its function as a physical variety show. The original image has managed to endure, while developing new spatial alternatives to adapt to the changes caused by the artist's experimentation, audience tastes and fulfilment of institutional values.

The documentation on the circus has a historical and social foundation, but there is little academic research that analyses it in artistic, aesthetic and spatial terms. Thus, the objective of this research is to identify the different circus typologies that exist today from an architectural perspective, analysed through a methodology of visual decomposition of each of the spaces by means of a graphic representation by the author. The result is the comparison of the particularities that define each of the models in common terms, to conclude with the characteristics that distinguish and consolidate a particular staging location and a more favourable spatial environment for the circus show to be recognised within the performance culture integrated into the society of the future.

Keywords: society, city, architecture, public space, performing art, circus, performance space, graphic analysis

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Circus. Def. 1. A building or enclosure covered by a tent, with tiers of seats for the audience, which has one or more rings in the middle where jugglers, clowns, tightrope walkers, trained animals, etc. perform. 2. A show performed in a circus. 3. A group of artists, animals and objects that form part of a circus show. 4. A group of seats arranged in a certain order for those who attend a performance. 5. A group of people who occupy the circus (a group of seats for guests). 6. In ancient Rome, an elongated arena intended especially for chariot and horse competitions. [...]

(Spanish Royal Academy of Language [RAE])

A set of seats arranged in a certain order for those who are going to attend certain performances. / A set of people who occupy said seats. / A building or other theatre venue or space, with seating for spectators, which has one or more spaces in the middle, generally circular, where equestrian and gymnastic exercises are performed, trained animals are exhibited, and juggling, clown, balancing, illusionism acts, etc. are performed. [...]

(Gómez, 1997, p. 177).

[...] Common sense suggests that [circus] comes from 'circular' [...]. I would suggest another explanation. Might not the word *circus* come from Circe [...]? [...]. The Latin word *circus*, describing the circus games, makes this hypothesis even more tempting, for what were the sorceress' tricks but circus acts before their time? [...] the natural order of things is inversed to produce an exciting spectacle. This desire to turn things upside down is the essence of the circus. [...] The circus is the world back to front. Whatever is unusual, eccentric, or disturbing, whatever is, so to speak, a challenge to us, has always found an ideal refuge there. Moreover, this is not a purely European phenomenon; circuses are found all over the world.

(Pereira, 1988, pp. 35-36).

The existing definition of circus is rooted in its origin, but is insufficient to encompass the totality of how it is performed today. Although each region has a particular identity, the conceptual change in the art of the ring is the same in all countries due to the nomadic life that the trade implies, both in the physical sense and as a result of the new technological platforms of diffusion and performance: on the one hand, cultural exchange between companies involves learning new techniques and designing novel rigging and, on the other, social contact with the audience promotes the adaptation of the discourse and the specialisation of the show. Consequently, “There is no such thing as ‘pure’ circus” [...] (Saxon, 1988, p. 31).

The new meaning must embrace the appearance of a variety of formats arising from the experimental interaction of traditional circus with other visual practices, spatial installations and technological arrangements throughout its recent history. Hybridisation with other artistic concepts has blurred the boundaries in favour of the cultural and social integration of a multidisciplinary show. Consequently, we must analyse the different stages in their artistic, aesthetic and spatial lines in order to delimit each of the architectural typologies in a precise and clear manner, because, in their design of performance and insertion in the environment, mutable and dynamic, they apply different determining factors depending on the period in which we find ourselves.

The beginnings of the art of circus, first manifestations

Although “[...] it is impossible to determine a specific period and birthplace for this art [...]” (Tildor, 2018, p. 15), the first manifestations of several circus disciplines can be found in ancient times: in Egypt, illusionism and juggling; in Greece, tightrope walking; and in China, acrobatics. These local disciplines expanded due to the political dynamics of exploration and conquest of territories of different civilisations.

These physical feats reached Rome, where they became a form of social entertainment with the display of people performing gymnastic and acrobatic exercises in Roman circuses.¹ At the same time, exotic animals, such as elephants, lions and tigers, were brought into the amphitheatres² in gladiatorial shows.³

In the Middle Ages, the disappearance of venues forced artists to survive by showing their art in the streets, squares and public fairs, and on certain occasions they were required in the castles of the nobility. This new activity incorporated colourful costumes and musical accompaniment to attract the audience, as well as the new artistic expressions of illusionists, jesters and minstrels.

1. The typological form of the Roman circus replicates the antecedent of an elongated circular space with tiers of seats for the audience at horse races in Greece.

2. The typological form of the amphitheatre extends the antecedent of a semicircular space with seats for the audience in the theatre in Greece to a complete circle.

3. The combination of the name, structure and construction of these two shows can be considered the precursor to circus.

During the Italian Renaissance, artistic individuals were grouped into companies to form a heterogeneous group in order to present a varied show, where each person was characterised according to their specialisation.⁴

First names

During the 18th century, local fair events began to disappear, forcing artists to seek alternatives to the public spaces of the built-up areas. It was in England that in 1768 the cavalry Sergeant Major Philip Astley set up a riding school for teaching aristocrats to ride, with a space for public performance: a ring inspired by Roman amphitheatres, 42 feet in diameter, roofed and surrounded by tiers of seats. Travelling artists from other disciplines and more animal species joined the equestrian exercises: “[...] this small group gave birth to the first true circus⁵ [...]” (Revolledo, 2004, p. 51). Astley exported this building-with-a-show structure to several countries, managing to build a total of 19 permanent circuses, notably those in France and Russia.⁶

At the same time, John Bill Ricketts⁷ took the English model to the United States. As few cities had the resources to support a permanent circus, impresario J. Purdy Brown replaced the wooden construction with a canvas tent in 1825 in order to make it easier to transport and make it itinerant. This design became common and was exported to England by the Sanger brothers, who turned a triangular, striped tent into the identifying image of the circus throughout the world.

Typologies of current circus

Since its origin in 1769, circus has been a performing art characterised by being performed in a circular open-air space surrounded by an audience in tiers of seats.⁸ Later, this place was covered by awnings supported by a structure, usually made of wood, until it was completely covered, creating permanent buildings integrated into the urban structure of cities.

The great success among the audience encouraged the inclusion of new acts⁹ during the 19th century. The original space was consolidated while the need to reach more places arose, which required a new removable and travelling design: an awning attached to poles and stretched with ropes called a *big top*, thus creating the *traditional* or *classic* image of this show in our

4. Germ of the creation of the characters of the circus world arising from the theatrical genre of the *commedia dell'arte*.

5. A disciple of Astley called Charles Hughes created his own equestrian show in association with Charles Dibdin, who first coined the word circus. Astley created the form and Dibdin the name.

6. In France in 1782, Astley sold the model to Antonio Franconi, who made it prosper and created a history of French circus. In 1793, Astley founded a permanent circus in Russia, but it was Jacques Tourniaire who developed the model which in 1927 passed into the hands of the state to create the first circus school.

7. Astley's disciple. He performed in his mentor's show and in the Hughes-Dibdin show.

8. Cavalry Sergeant Major Philip Astley created in London the first circus show based on acrobatics and balancing in equestrian acts. Then, he introduced clown and pantomime acts. Later, he included tightrope walkers, jugglers and domesticated animals.

9. Illusionism, magic lantern, cinematograph and exotic animal taming acts.

civilisation. Over time, this model has endured due to its easy adaptation to the needs of each circus show, both due to its dimensions and the materials and construction elements for raising, stretching and supporting the structure.

The change in cultural consumption by society in the mid-20th century produced a crisis in the entertainment model, so some companies created the new circus: a travelling show focused on the public space of streets and squares in built-up areas,¹⁰ which coexisted with the emergence of other groups that maintained the traditional space. Both types of circus coincide in the introduction of social themes for greater audience involvement, beyond the spirit of entertainment and spectacularity. This new concept required circus techniques to be expanded to create new acts, which is why artists began to experiment with other artistic and visual disciplines.¹¹ The incorporation of these performing arts at the end of that century promoted the change of name to *contemporary circus*, whose main characteristic is experimentation with a narrative where body expression predominates over textual expression, based on a dramaturgy with an emotive, sensorial and personal language, in an empty and unlimited space.

From the 21st century onwards, these new dramaturgy and language tools provided training while granting greater creative freedom to the artist, without losing the nomadic spirit of the shows in the first performance spaces and extending to halls, arts centres, theatres and flexible auditoriums for all the performing arts, making it difficult to recognise the limits between the genres of the show and to give them a name. Each group chose a different and particular type of aesthetic expressed through specific techniques to approach the themes close to its line of thought, as a way to delimit contemporaneity to *auteur circus*. The facts of performing in a permanent venue provided a new meaning to an adaptable performance model:¹² both for the artists on stage because it conditions the way they transmit their acts, and for the audience in the place where they are located because that audience experiences that performance in different ways.

Traditional or classic typology

Since the beginnings of Phillip Astley in London in 1769 and his disciples Antonio Franconi in Paris in 1783 and John Bill Ricketts in the United States in 1793, the circus has consisted of a circular performance space that made it easier for the audience to see the show and that also allowed the centrifugal force of the ride to be used to maintain balance on the saddle. The subsequent covering with a “permanent” or easy-to-build structure integrated the building into the most important urban centres.

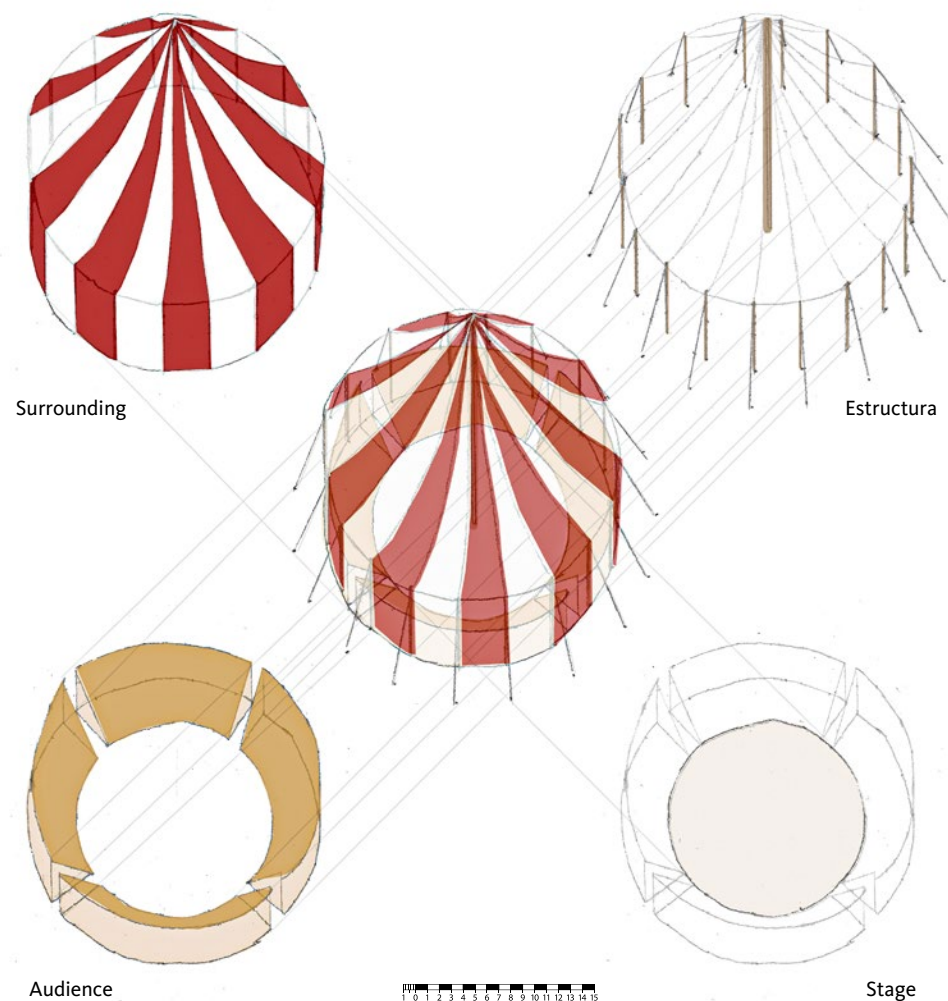
10. Started in the 1960s in France following the cultural and artistic movement created by the social uprising of May 1968.

11. This happened gradually. First, incorporating the genres most closely related to circus — theatre, dance and music —, and later other more specific genres.

12. In addition to those already mentioned, there is a movement of experimentation in less usual places such as abandoned buildings and those related to nature.

The development of transport infrastructure and the discovery of new construction materials facilitated copying the permanent model through the design of a travelling ephemeral architecture: awning made of fabric or plastic, mast and perimeter posts made of wood or metal, and rope or steel guy wires. The interior is made up of a ring with perimeter tiers of seats. The big top is located on the outskirts of towns “set up in the fairground with its lights, its flags, its colours and its façade, [...] juxtaposed with the architecture of the buildings [...] it becomes a heterogeneous object and announces the wonder of the show. We understand that it is more circus-like than a so-called permanent monument made of stone or wood” (Dupavillon, 2001: 230).

Drawing 1. Graphic analysis of the traditional circus, produced by the author.

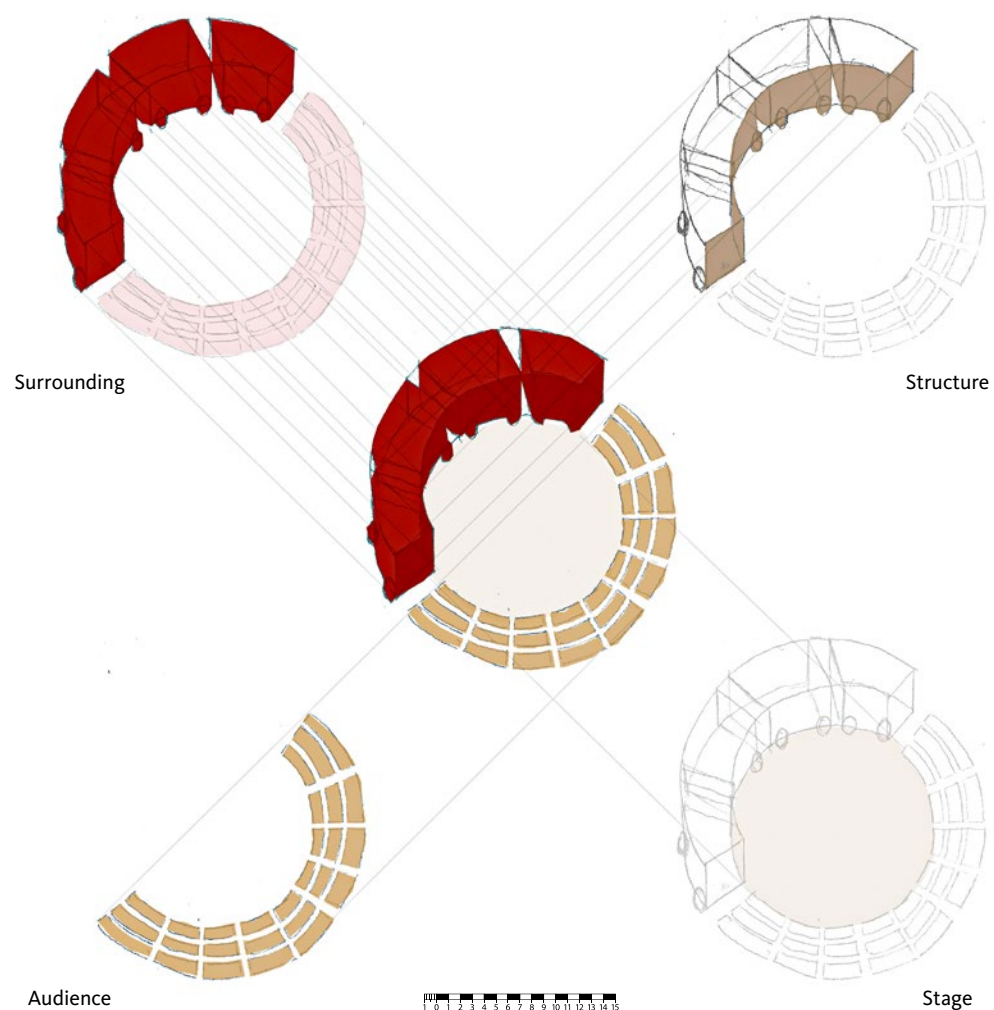


New typology

The end of the great circus performance coincided with the protests of May 68, when a movement led by acrobats and agitators began to become involved with the space, the audience and the show with the desire to return to the popular festive forms of circus, similar to those performed in medieval times.

Nomadic artists from diverse backgrounds occupied both the city and the countryside in the form of informal groups with a live show of street experimentation, in order to define new circus techniques, thus challenging the supremacy of the text and direction outside established venues. “To discover the Cirque Romanès, the spectator leaves behind place de Clichy and its crowded boulevards, enters an insalubrious passage and finally discovers a vacant plot inhabited by a small blue marquee with a capacity of about a hundred seats” (Barré-Meinzer, 2004, p. 147), where the spatial construction is improvised with carts or found materials, arranged to bring the audience closer to the artists.

Drawing 2. Graphic analysis of the new circus, produced by the author.

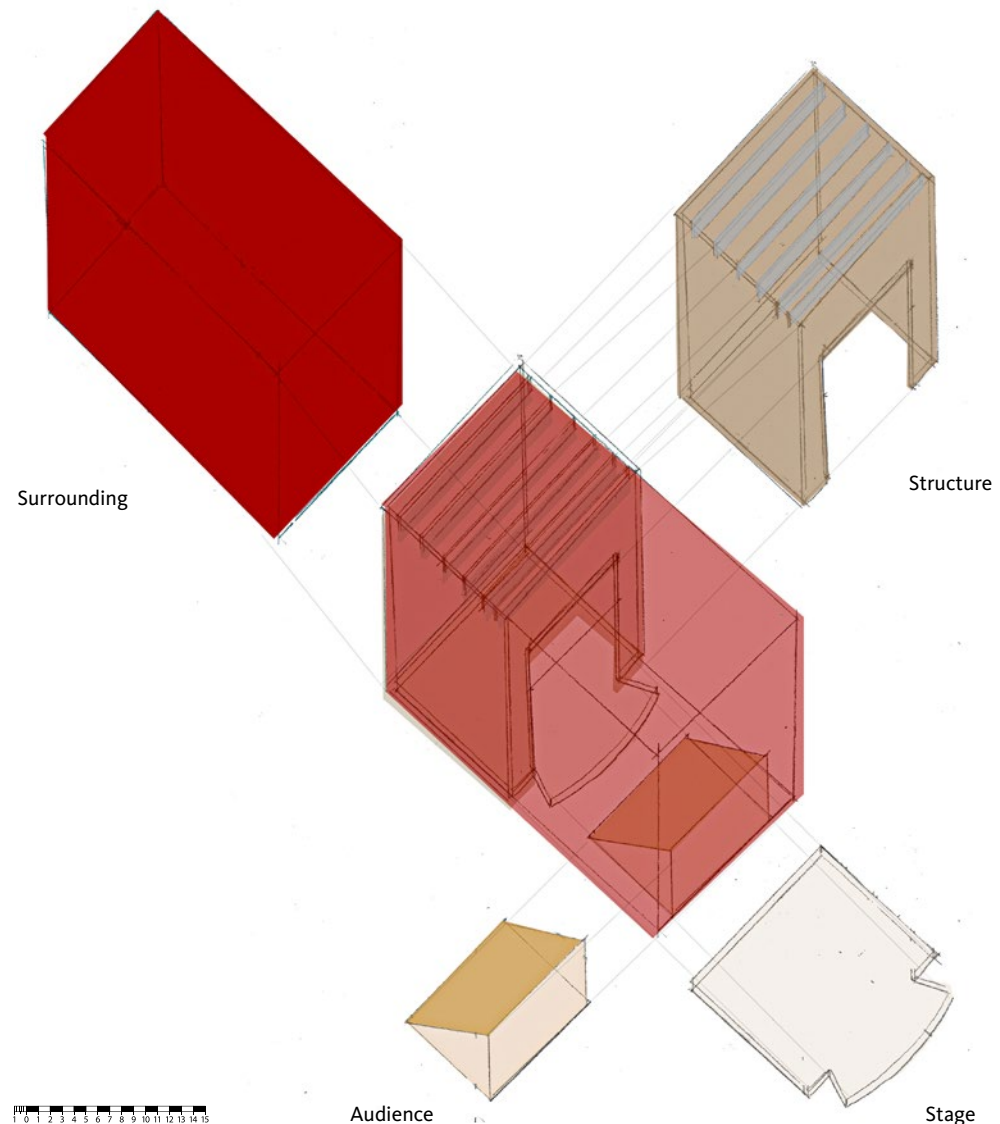


Contemporary typology

Since the 1990s, the experimentation explained above has reflected the difference with the traditional modality in terms of format and aesthetic approach, which announces a circus that loses the canonical form because it is part of a new and current trend in the sphere of performance but with the essence of circus, but translated into a succession of different acts taking into account a coherent entity recognisable in a show that tells a story with a social theme. This artistic intention builds a show integrated with other

performing, visual and digital arts in a plural architecture, dimensioned by the elements in movement and the elements in movement-tension. Although some companies are attached to the format of the ring, other groups inhabit halls, theatres, auditoriums and arts centres with a generally frontal arrangement of the audience imposed by the respective architectural spaces, which adapts to these places previously foreign to circus but characteristic of the performing arts.

Drawing 3. Graphic analysis of the contemporary circus, produced by the author.

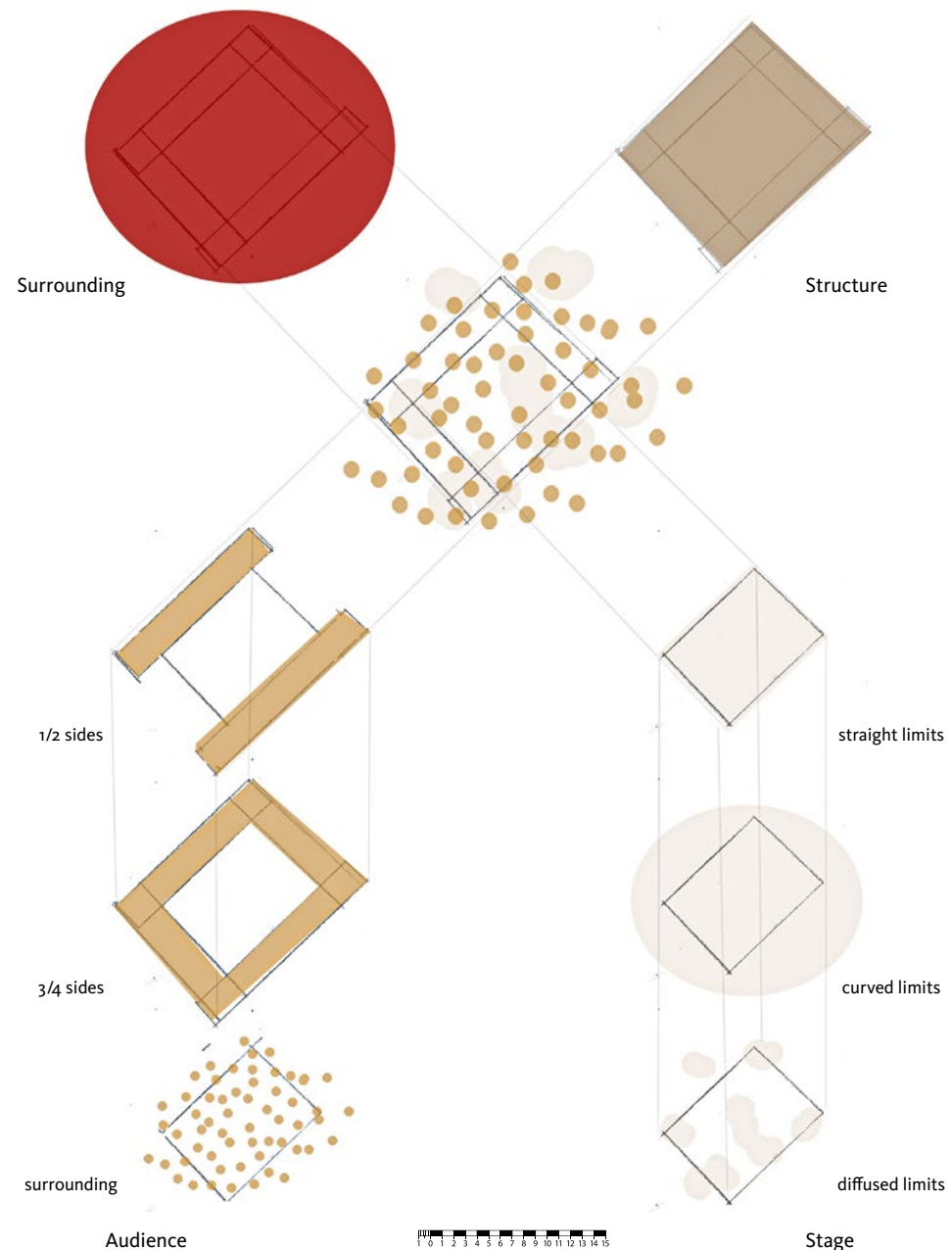


Auteur circus typology

The circus artist specialising in the performing and visual arts of today erases the limits of each show by offering a diversity of circus creations that will transcend what is generally called the circus arts. The show has multiple new identities because it mixes these arts in order to seek the new frontiers of technical circus savoir-faire in a direct contact between the artist and the audience according to where they are. The possibility of putting on a show in

any empty place chosen by a group facilitates the setting up of the necessary equipment for performing and watching their skills in a more essential vision of the values that they seek to transmit to the people attending because it adds a social connection with them.

Drawing 4. Graphic analysis of the auteur circus, produced by the author.

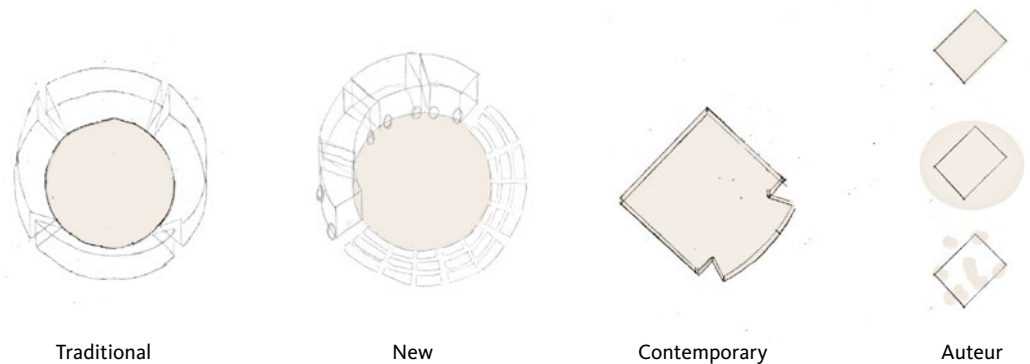


Comparative analysis of current circus typologies, form of the performance space

The boundaries of the form of the performance space are gradually blurred in favour of the needs of the intended show. While the traditional circus maintains a circular space, the new circus offers new alternatives, from the ring to the parade. This liberation favours both contemporary and auteur

circus because it frees them from strict forms by offering a large empty space where the spatial limits are self-imposed by the companies according to the model they are performing.

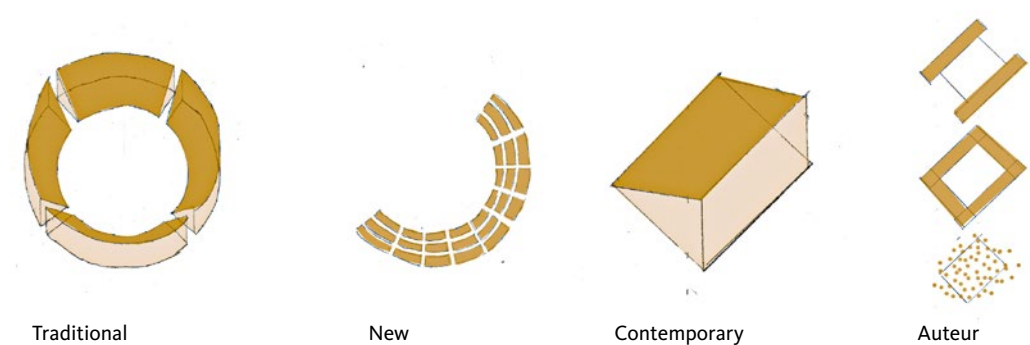
Drawing 5. Graphic comparison of the different performance spaces, produced by the author.



Audience arrangement

The shape of the performance space determines the location of the audience. The circus is characterised by the surrounding presence of the audience to favour both viewing and proximity and the relationship with the artist, whether in the big top, the public space or the interior of an architectural structure. However, this arrangement is forced to change to a frontal view when the show is performed in the architectural typology of a theatre which, depending on the size and technical resources, could use different arrangements to adapt to needs.

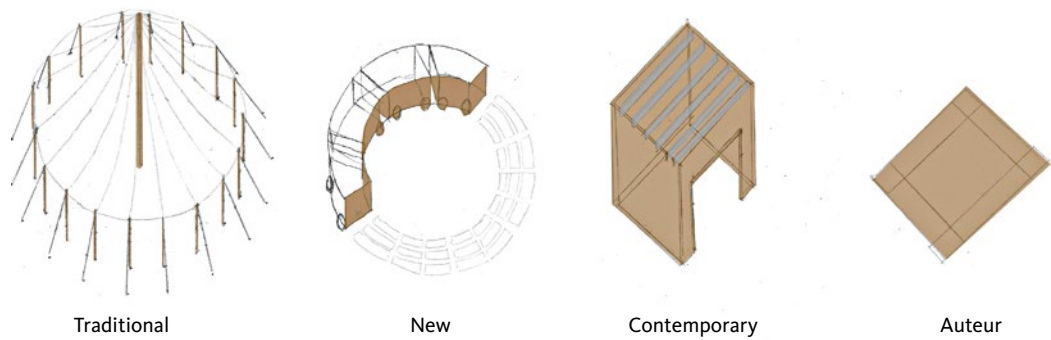
Drawing 6. Graphic comparison of the different audience arrangements, produced by the author.



Structural system

A travelling circus requires a specific design in the arrangement, order and materials of the set up. The traditional circus has been the place of experimentation with systems that have lasted throughout the history of construction, adapting to changes in size, transport and needs. The new circus simplified the scope of this system by placing itself in the public space with poorer materials, while contemporary and auteur circus manage to eliminate the structural system because it is incorporated into the place where they perform.

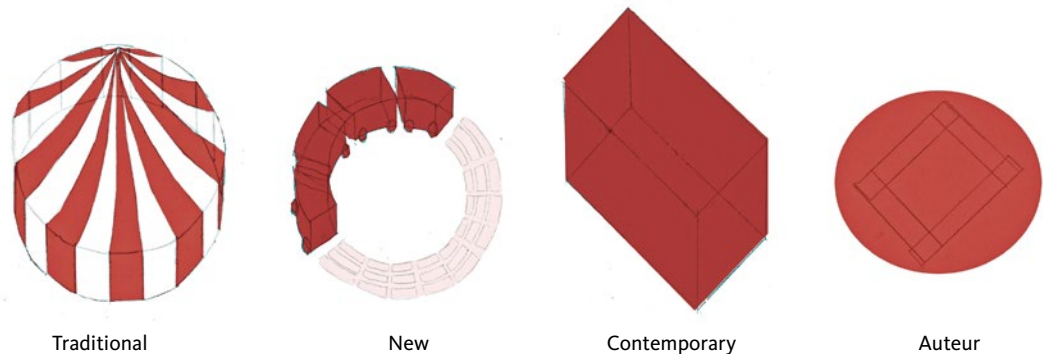
Drawing 7. Graphic comparison of the different structural systems, produced by by the author.



Arrangement of the surrounding structure in the setting

The prevailing exterior arrangement as an image of circus over time is that created by the traditional typology of the big top. Its triangular shape with coloured stripes is a symbol attached to historical memory on the outskirts of urban centres. The integration of new circus in the public space of population areas allows for alternatives of both physical and virtual boundaries. These options are adapted to contemporary times with the reincorporation of the show into a permanent building with marked boundaries, while in the arrangement of auteur circus the border is blurred for the best adaptation of the performance.

Drawing 8. Graphic comparison of the different surrounding structures, produced by the author.



Conclusions

The evolution of terms implies a change in form with a resulting new look, but the name circus is an array of different expressions: “‘new circus’, ‘contemporary circus’, ‘current circus’, ‘creative circus’, ‘circus arts’, so many names that since the 1970s have tried to identify and account for the intentions, approaches and shows materialised by the new generations revisiting, not a priori, the open paths of different circuses” (Maleval, 2014, p. 9), where each one has its own variations and adaptations, which follow similar paths due to the validity of traditional circus.

This conceptual variety of the types of circus performance is currently mainly consolidated in two spaces: on the one hand, in the travelling big

top with the traditional ring and, on the other, in the permanent public arts building with the free stage. The big top is a figure loaded with meaning, an ephemeral architecture etched in the collective memory generation after generation that remains over time as a symbol of circus, with the difficulty of thinking about the experience that the circus show entails outside of this space; however, the classic image is displaced by a functional ease of free spatial adaptation in permanent cultural constructions, where the artist who acts on stage can give meaning to the performance for an audience attending.

Both spatial-architectural concepts will continue to be linked to the circus genre in the future, but the recent change in alternative platforms for cultural consumption, which began with the emergence of digital formats, must be taken into account. New media facilitates the recording of documentation and dissemination while eliminating physical location, social interaction and live experience. In any case, “We must consider current circus as an autonomous and heterogeneous form, although the different aspects it can adopt share the use of body practices and savoir-faire that were born or developed in the ring” (Maleval, 2014, p. 9).



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