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SPACES FOR CREATIVE PRODUCTION:

Experimental
Theatre, Adaptive
Re-use, and
Institutional
Identity

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between spaces for experimental theatrical production and the adaptive reuse of architectural spaces. Modernism generally supported the notion of the theatre as a neutral and flexible machine, as in Walter Gropius's Total Theatre. However, theatres which have emulated these goals often lack dynamics that support the creation of innovative theatre. Experimental theatre companies gravitate to found spaces not just for their affordability but also for the spatial specificity and indeterminate identity. This research focuses on the case study of St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, New York, with discussion of key precedents such as the Public Theater, The Performing Garage, and the Schaubühne Theatre. St. Ann's Warehouse's new theatre is constructed within the shell of a warehouse building embedded within Brooklyn Bridge Park. The design evolved out of the theatre company's decades of experimentation altering other existing spaces. The theatre, as exemplified by St. Ann's, is not a neutral volume, but functions as an existing site that provides the needed resistance for innovative creative production and, for these avant-garde institutions, the architectural ambiguity to free themselves from over-definition and stagnation. Thus, these spaces are essential to the vitality and relevancy of contemporary theatre.

Keywords: Experimental Theatre, New York City, Adaptive Re-use, Institutional Identity

Introduction

The audience swelters under a couple of lazy fans, their plastic seats nested tightly between the massive columns. The actress is about to exit the darkened stage in the final scene of a long aching drama. Suddenly, the wall-sized metal loading dock door opens with surprising smoothness. Cool air rushes into the theatre and the audience's eyes come into focus. What initially appears to be a flat backdrop or the aperture of a Turrell installation reveals itself to be the space outside of the theatre, a glowing white dress framed by the large boutique

window across the street. The entire depth of Wooster Street and the facing building has been drawn into the world of the play. The actress climbs out the loading dock and disappears into the city.

This theatrical device is generated from the eccentricities of a converted industrial space and not the fabrication of massive disposable scenery. It economically achieves the primary goal of modernist and avant-garde theatre which is — to heighten the engagement of the audience. The inclusion of the exterior urban space, the shifting of the wall of the theatre, and the awakening to a different climate — all of the components of the experience — serve to shake a complacent audience member into a greater state of awareness. The audience is presented with the ambiguity between reality and the constructed world of the play.

The site for this production was the Ohio Theatre in New York City, operating from 1984 until 2010 and now relocated. That night was the only time I ever saw the loading dock opened during a performance, although opening the doors after a show was a favourite ritual, allowing the audience to spill out onto the sidewalk with their drinks. The Ohio had all of the essential qualities of a "found" theatre space: a vast volume, extreme stage proportions, obstructions, worn materials, and spatial idiosyncrasies. The form of the theatre allowed for innovative reconfigurations such that each play reconceived the space. The materials, obstacles, and quirks connected the creators and audiences with the history of the space, a bond that endured for the duration of inhabitation.

It is the aim of this paper to discuss how the design of adapted spaces, specifically their paradoxical combination of highly specific formal qualities and also tremendous flexibility, provokes experimentation in theatre. Together, those spatial characteristics generate innovation that is critical to theatre maintaining vitality and relevancy with a broad audience. Through the lens of the architect, I investigate the spatial conditions that prove fruitful for these theatres. First, this paper will explore the reinvigorating force of these spaces as evident in the earliest and most canonical examples of converted theatre venues in New York City, The Public Theater

and The Performing Garage. Next, I investigate the productive characteristics of other user-designed spaces such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Building 20 and Peter Brook's Le Bouffes du Nord, and then the architect-driven solutions of David Chipperfield's Neues Museum and Jürgen Sawade's Schaubühne Theatre. Finally, the example of St. Ann's Warehouse synthesizes these design strategies producing a deeply contextual, public, and innovative theatre in the post-industrial fabric of Brooklyn as well as a model for design collaboration.

Found Space and the NYC Avant-Garde

The Ohio Theatre, the site of the example at the beginning of this essay, was and will continue to be one of many spaces supporting the creation of experimental theatre in New York. Nearly all of these spaces are adaptive re-use of existing structures including warehouses, oil tanks, schools, residences, even an abandoned swimming pool. A number of factors drove these practitioners from conventional theatres. A primary reason was affordability and availability. The number of Broadway theatres shrunk dramatically post-World War II as audiences were drawn to the movies and production costs rose significantly with unionized labour (Kenrick, 2008).

These alternative venues have been enduring spaces for creative production because they offer a certain resistance in the staging of performances that pushes the process of invention. The quirks – the columns, the limited sight lines, or the unconventional proportions – all necessitate specific responses that lead to new spatial relationships on stage. In contrast, these spaces also have generic and unprecious qualities that make them highly adaptable and encourage experimentation. In these spaces, it is typically cheap and easy to reconfigure seating, add lighting positions, or drill a couple of holes into the wall.

In New York City, two of the most significant and enduring of these adaptive re-use theatres are the Public Theater (1967-present) and the Performing Garage (1975-present). They are the grandparents of many more venues and spatial transformations. They were innovators providing a new model of

theatre production outside of the commercial Broadway system and have maintained their vitality after decades of use. Each space has unique formal characteristics that relate to their mode of creative production and institutional identity.

The Public, true to its name, has a large civic presence and produces a broad range of performances that hope to engage as much of the community as possible. Joseph Papp, the founder of the Public, was first known in the 1950s for his mobile Shakespeare productions that turned street corners and parks into stages. This evolved into the free Shakespeare in the Park still thriving and emulated across the country. Papp's profoundly generous vision of making theatre accessible to all people resonates deeply with the home the theatre found in the dilapidated Astor Library (1854). The Astor family created the library as the first public library for the people of New York City. Its collection became the seed for the New York Public Library that occupied the building until 1911. Abandoned by a second occupant, Papp found the sprawling derelict structure on the brink of demolition in 1965 (Dolkart, 2004). He convinced the City to purchase it for use as a theatre.

The civic nature of the institution marries well with the building's history and is carved into the grand Romanesque façade. The welcoming presence is reinforced by three two-story tall, boldly colored banners announcing the theatre's identity as well as broad, gentle stairs and ramps that stretch out into the sidewalk. Three fully glazed arched doorways draw people into the generous brightly lit lobby which is accessible all day for ticketing and lounging. The Public's mission to be open and inviting to all people while still producing innovative theatre is clearly expressed in this reinterpretation of the historic library.

Interestingly, the unified façade ties together three phases of construction from the 1800s which is reflected in the diversity and complexity of the interiors. Housed inside the labyrinthian building are five theatres and a cabaret. The audience journeys from the open lobby into a thick *poché* of circulation space. Each space is completely unique – variations approximating a black box, a proscenium, and a thrust. The spaces generated

new inventions from day one. In 1967, the rock musical “Hair” premiered in the Anspacher Theatre, the former library reading room, which is a narrow double height space. Ming Cho Lee’s set design stacked a raw two-story scaffolding at the back of a shallow thrust stage creating vertical playing space and a sense of the actors being above the audience. (Smith, 2009) Almost 50 years later, the spaces of the theatre have been reorganized continually to meet new needs and the performances to reach a more diverse audience than any other theatre in New York.

The Performing Garage is a much simpler conceit – a single bare volume in which the Wooster Group develops and performs their work. It is critical for their method of creating new work that the production grows in the same space where it will be performed, creating seamlessness between creation and presentation. This process is exemplified by their 1984 production “L.S.D. (...Just the High Points).” The production timelines clearly show the iterative process that generated the work – a sequence of readings, site visits, recordings – all of which become montaged into the final production (The Wooster Group, 2014). The primary element of the set is a long elevated table that runs the width of the audience it directly faces. The actors sit behind the table with microphones as if participating in a symposium. Video monitors sit beneath and behind the table, at times representing the action on stage or interjecting new elements. Other groups of actors perform underneath or beside the table (The Wooster Group, 2014). The table forms a linear blockade in direct confrontation with the audience denying any traditional stage movement, and the actors sit buried behind microphones like a droning academic completely upending expectations of engagement with an audience.

This unconventionality is echoed by the mute façade of this former flatware factory. It is understated and unpretentious to the point of incognito. The flat red brick is interrupted only by a large steel roll-top door, a small black steel door for entry, and a postage-stamp-sized sign announcing the theatre’s name. The immediacy of the interior theatre volume is echoed at the entry where the audience passes directly from the street entrance into this intimate performance space. The Wooster

Group’s institutional identity prioritizes the kind of privacy of an artist’s studio. It is a workspace or a laboratory that invites the public to join in the process of creation.

As practitioners watched and participated in productions at the Public, the Performing Garage, and other early innovators, the opportunities of unconventional theatres became apparent. From industrial to domestic, these found spaces allowed the performers to describe new relationships between actors and audience and to redefine the boundaries of a stage. Essential to its survival and growth, as theatre was being redefined by the audience’s immersion in film and television, these innovations emphasized the immediacy, unpredictability, and intimacy of live performance. Since the 1970s, converted performance spaces have flourished throughout New York City. Initially motivated by frugality, these achievements have been revolutionary in the construction of new theatrical experiences, primarily motivated by both the resistance and flexibility of the found spaces they used. Among the many diverse contemporary typologies of performance, they share an emphasis on exposing process and developing innovative spatial relationship to engage the audience.

Low Buildings and Anti-Architectural Impulses

The two essential elements in the success of these adapted spaces are that the original buildings are undervalued (they can be altered) and yet there is richness found in the physical evidence of their past. Building 20 on the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge is a key example of the productivity that an undervalued building can generate. Stewart Brand uses this building to define his concept of the ‘low road’ (1994, p.24) – the potential for malleable, generic spaces to stimulate creative production. Faculty member Morris Halle said, ‘If you want to bore a hole in the floor to get a little extra space, you do it. You don’t ask. It’s the best experimental building ever built’ (Brand, 1994, p. 28). Brand argues that the lack of value associated with the structure gave scientists the freedom that they needed to innovate. There were few amenities and poor climate control, but faculty and students chose

to stay in the space to be able to personalize their workspace whether that meant opening windows, running cables down the hall, or adding partitions. *'Smart people gave up good heating and cooling, carpeted hallways, big windows, nice views, state-of-the-art construction, and pleasant interior design for what? For sash windows, interesting neighbours, strong floors, and freedom'* (Brand, 1994, p. 28). It should also not be overlooked that the history of the building – the mythology of past successes – had a powerful influence, and traces of their presence were evident in the well-worn wood stairs and the generations of modifications.

Within theatre, Peter Brook has articulated similar aims for productive, vital spaces. He scouts specific sites around the world for each production. Except when required by local governments, he does not hire architects; but he and his team directly alter these spaces to support the performances. They preserve the texture and history of the theatre while unifying the stage and audience. When describing Brook's home theatre in Paris, Le Bouffes du Nord, Andrew Todd says *'it is perhaps an overstatement to speak of Brook as the author of this richly successful space; nonetheless it remains his space by virtue of the strategies of discovery and modification'* (1996, p.11). Brook and his collaborator, Micheline Rozan, discovered the derelict, forgotten theatre. The renovations were as minimal as possible – the stage was extended beyond the proscenium and the seating expanded around the stage to create intimacy between the audience and actors. Their aim was *'not to erase a single trace of the hundred years of life that had passed through it'* (Todd, 1996, p.11).

Brook's performance of specific alterations of old theatres and other found spaces around the world have led to some of these becoming permanent venues. Using similar restoration strategies to Le Bouffes du Nord, the BAM Harvey Theater in Brooklyn, NY was re-opened for "The Mahabharata." The alterations have been largely maintained, and it is an extremely active, intimate, and rich venue. In Copenhagen, Brook's team converted an abandoned gas reservoir. It operates as the Østre Gasværk Teater hosting a broad range of new work and touring productions. Todd asks:

What can we learn from the palpable success of these non-professionals [non-architects], whose spaces present a rich thematic of temporality, conviviality, and modifications. What principles motivate their cunning, modest, and conceptually honest schemes? What insights can be gleaned by looking at another discipline bound by space, time, and society? (1996, p.12)

One clear response to Todd's question is that as architects we all too often discard the element of time – imagining a singular end state for designs even when they are intended to house dynamic institutions. Whereas temporality is inextricable from creation for anyone engaged in the performing arts, architects place insufficient emphasis on considering the potential growth, reinvention, and reconfiguration of these theatres, museums, workspaces. If architects emphasize these considerations, there is the potential to have collaborative dialog with the client and the public that could lead to less deterministic spaces and more fluid re-inventions of buildings over time.

Architect Engaged

Two adaptive re-use projects offer a strong model for the role of an architect in collaborating with a dynamic institution and for the strategies deployed in St. Ann's Warehouse. Both projects are in Berlin, where the history of the buildings and the damage they have sustained gives the existing fabric a clear significance to the public.

Not unlike theatres, contemporary museums are institutions whose mission and audience are constantly evolving. David Chipperfield's renovation of the Neues Museum has a kinship with Brook's approach to maintaining traces of the building's history. The interior of the museum was devastated by World War II and further neglected while used as office space by the East German government. Chipperfield's approach clearly demarks new construction from the existing structure, often legible as an insertion within the massive brick shell that bears the marks of weathering and prior structures. There are locations where the damage opened up multi-story spaces; some of these have

been maintained with inserted new construction which is pulled away from the original walls. These demarcations between old and new construction and the lack of sanitization of the historic building provide an opportunity for the on-going development of the museum and create a powerful connection to the past.

In contrast, the Schaubühne Theatre offers a more severe partitioning between exterior and interior. The theatre was renovated and restored by Jürgen Sawade in 1981. The original cinema, designed by Erich Mendelsohn in 1928, was severely damaged in the war. The exterior is meticulously restored creating a record of the building's history. The interior is not treated with reverence, but is designed to be a dynamic space for the existing Schaubühne Company that was in need of a venue. The walls maintain traces of the former life of the space, but in general the former movie theatres and support spaces were gutted and unified in one large performance space. That singular volume can be divided into three distinct venues by an enormous soundproof metal door. The entire space is divided into 3m x 7m hydraulic lifts (Blake, 1984). This allows for a fantastic amount of variation in stage and audience configurations. The historic shell functions independently from the theatre spaces. It establishes the identity of the theatre company as an institution with an enduring presence in the community. The autonomy of the interior is unified by traces of its history, but is designed to heighten the productivity of the institution.

Both of these designs create a spatial language that links the past life of the building with the new institutions inhabiting them. Chipperfield intertwines the old and new systems allowing for future expansion or revision of the new. Sawade's design creates a division between interior and exterior, a loose fit that connects history with the possible future outcomes. The challenge as an architect is how to design for these properties that allow for multiple futures in renovations or new construction without caricaturing or fetishizing the textures and motifs of found spaces. Both designs avoid sentimentality through the strength and integrity of the new insertions which provide a spatial framework for innovative creative production.

St. Ann's Warehouse

The story of St. Ann's Warehouse begins in 2000 when the New York City Department of Parks cleared out trash, collapsing floors, and remnants of the roof from the structure now known as the Tobacco Warehouse on Water Street, in the Brooklyn neighbourhood DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass). What remained was a trapezoidal brick building envelope, two stories high with arched openings and one interior partition. This preservation effort came at the beginning of rapid development in DUMBO. Within a few years, the waterfront Main Street Park opened and residential and commercial tenants were moving into the area. The Tobacco Warehouse stood on the edge of this growth, over the years drawing festivals, wedding photographers, graffiti artists, and food trucks. It became an unintentional sculptural installation, a venue for commentary on the rapid, alternately thrilling and alienating development of the neighbourhood.

The theatre now known as St. Ann's Warehouse evolved from a group called the Arts at St. Ann's Church (1980-2001). Sited in a church, their early productions featured rock narratives by Lou Reed, the puppeteering innovations of Mabou Mines, and many others (St. Ann's Warehouse, 2014). They then converted a spice factory located at 38 Water St. in DUMBO into a theatre. It was intended to be a temporary venue for a year or two, but it evolved into a 13 year tenure. That attenuated residency allowed for significant experimentation that greatly informed the design of their new home.

These two entities, St. Ann's and the Tobacco Warehouse, came together as a new theatre venue designed by Marvel Architects and Charcoalblue Theatre Consultants. At the time of this writing, the project is under construction so this analysis is based on architectural drawings, renderings, and visits to the construction site. No performances have occurred in the space. The design of St. Ann's translates the years of experimentation in the previous warehouse space into a variety of conditions for the new space as shown in the infrastructure and urban sitting of the project.

The primary performance volume is bracketed on one end by a dense cube containing ticketing, control

booth, grid access, fixed platforms for the uppermost rows of seating, and storage (Marvel Architects, 2014). The density of these services produces the openness and unity of the performance space. The permanent seating platforms allows for additional audience at a height that is impractical for the temporary risers used elsewhere without intruding on the volume and forcing a single stage configuration.

The lighting infrastructure displays a similar mix of economy and flexibility. The lighting positions are evenly distributed throughout the performance area and lobby that could double as a smaller venue. Denser concentrations of circuitry are located based on use patterns from the past years in the Warehouse (Marvel Architects, 2014). These systems build on the testing in St. Ann's Warehouse and find the balance between infrastructures that provide functionality without impeding flexibility. One potential limitation seems to be that although both seating and lighting hope to allow for multiple configurations that there is a dominant orientation, the suggestion of which could be sufficient to discourage some experimentation.

This renovation hybridizes the strategies seen in the Neues Museum and the Schaubühne Theatre. For St. Ann's, the empty shell is the given condition, and, like Schaubühne, its materials and geometries are respected. Like Neues Museum, the theatre and its support spaces are treated as an insertion. This is coded in the materials and reinforced by their physical separation. Plywood, steel, and glass brick indicate new construction and are discrete from the existing weathered brick. The steel columns of the new structure are inset from the existing building envelope signifying the autonomy of the two systems. The building systems are economical and not overly mechanized solutions intended to provide St. Ann's with the ability to continue to grow and adapt.

St. Ann's relocation to this site is a strong indication of their evolving and increasingly public institutional identity. The adjacency to the Brooklyn Bridge Park and the visibility of the Tobacco Warehouse communicate a similar message to The Public's linkage to the democratizing Astor Library. Brooklyn Bridge Park has reclaimed the post-industrial waterfront for the public. Locating

an art institution in a primary location celebrates and concretizes the new agency the public has over these spaces. St. Ann's community room and their public triangular forecourt reinforce this interconnectedness.

Several suggestive spatial elements point to opportunities for innovation and a dynamic relationship between the institution and the city. One such element is a view corridor through the building which visually connects Water Street to the park. When unobstructed, this axis will link the city street to the waterfront. Often, the corridor will display intersections of scenery and rehearsals, creating a day to day engagement between the public and the artists that can be explored and exploited by both.

Conclusions

Theatres in "found spaces" made an unambiguous break from conventional theatres by creating intimacy between the audience and actors, challenging normative spatial relationships, and forefronting the process of creative production. The interior volumes of these performance spaces have generic, malleable qualities that provide flexibility while their specific existing spatial forms also generate a productive resistance. Both forces increase the opportunities for invention in theatrical productions.

Urbanistically, these qualities also help to shape the institutional identity which may emphasize either the anonymous or the more civic characteristics of the forms. These buildings are for institutions resistant to a static identity, ones that actively seek architectural ambiguity to free themselves from overdefinition and stagnation.

The history of these buildings is represented in their materials, residual forms, and cultural memories. These qualities connect the performances with a broader duration than the immediate world of the play which ultimately makes the work more deeply engaged with the public.

Architects and theatrical institutions have the opportunity to develop more collaborative relationships combining the strengths of each. Architects can learn from the experiments and practical testing of these institutions, improve

the qualities that make these spaces dynamic and adaptable, and, in new construction, seek to generate this marriage of flexibility and resistance in spaces for creative production.

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