

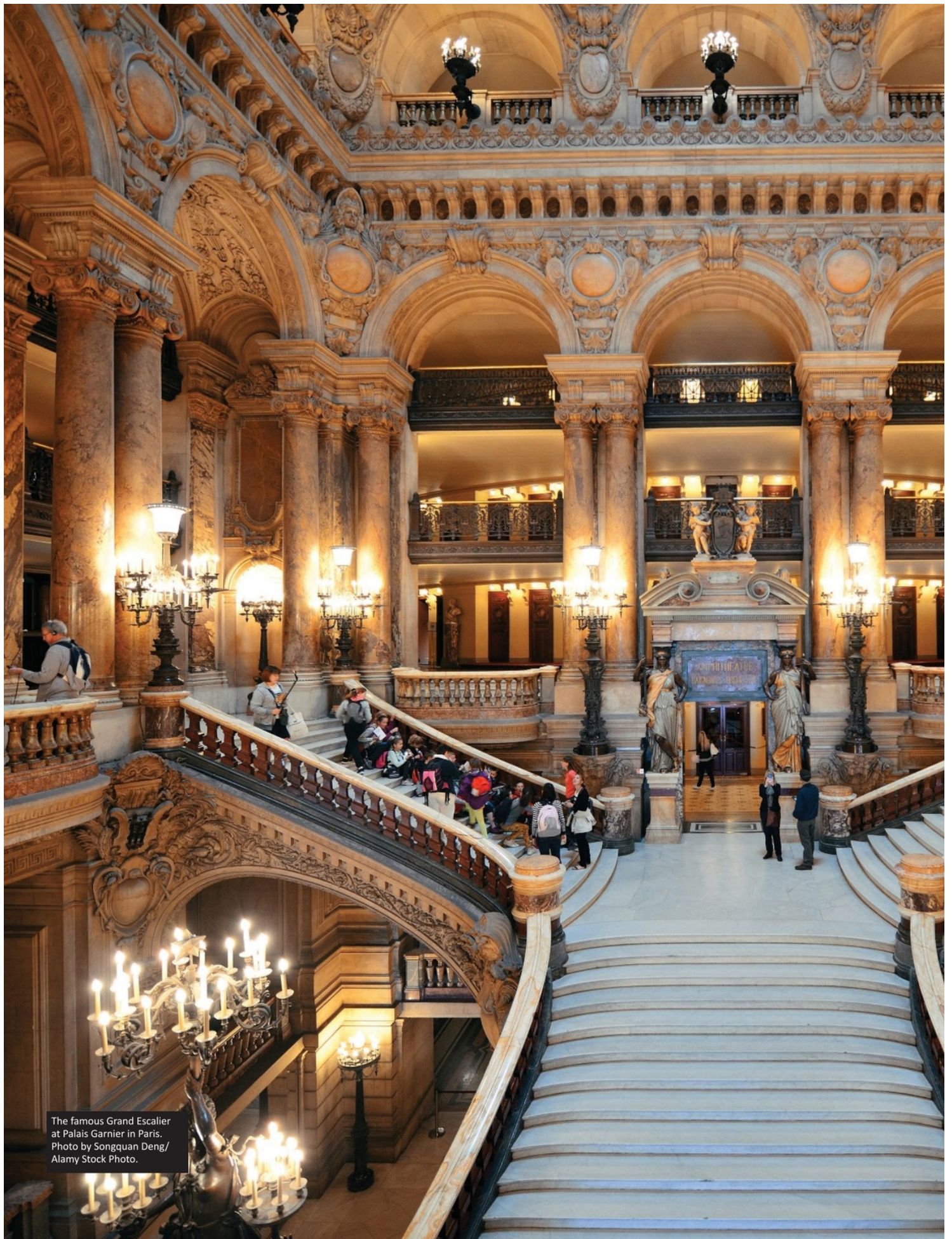
# Front of House in the Forefront

Consider the possibilities when the lobby becomes a 'third place,'  
where enriching things happen at any time

BY ROBERT SHOOK

Many of the iconic theatre buildings that serve as architectural benchmarks are grand, imposing structures that serve as cultural epicenters in their communities. Palais Garnier, Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Vienna Staatsoper (Vienna State Opera), and Carnegie Hall are all examples of high-minded architecture in the service of artistic performance. Such institutions historically provided spectacular spaces to welcome the public, but at no small expense. Further, they have rarely been open to the public for any reason, and at any other time, than immediately before and during a performance. Perhaps because of this lack of access, and perhaps because adequate funding has more recently become less available, many theatres built in the last century provide a minimal amount of audience space. Nowhere is this truer than in West End and Broadway commercial theatres.





The famous Grand Escalier  
at Palais Garnier in Paris.  
Photo by Songquan Deng/  
Alamy Stock Photo.





Southbank Centre in London draws an active crowd at all hours of the day. Photo by Matthew Chattle/Alamy Stock Photo.

### LOBBY AS ATTRACTOR, PROFIT CENTER

Throughout most of the 20th century, theatre builders rarely regarded the audience lobby as much more than a sort of support space for patrons to stretch their legs during intermissions. All pertinent lobby planning revolved around intermission occupancy, attempting to provide barely sufficient floor space for standing and socializing, plus circulation to and from restrooms and food and beverage stands. Only rarely did these lobbies survive the planning process to be of truly adequate size. Theatre planning experts frequently and dutifully manned the barricades during value management exer-

cises in often vain attempts to protect the lobby from the ravages of inadequate budgets. We were told, "Look at Broadway theatres, they have almost no lobby space at all," and "The audience doesn't decide which theatre to attend based on lobby size." So we frequently built modest lobbies, and those spaces continued to be unlit and unoccupied for most of the day, providing no clues to the passers-by as to the potential excitement beyond.

Early in the 21st century, however, theatre lobbies have come to occupy a new place of importance in the planning of a performing arts building. The industry has awoken to the possibilities—indeed, the joys—of the lobby-as-attractor, as well as lobby-as-profit-center. This new way of viewing all aspects of the front of house parallels a radical change in audience attendance trends.

The old model of audience attendance was based on the public considering a theatre as a destination. Plans were made days or weeks in advance—actually, months in advance for subscribers—and the paying guests showed up at the theatre's doorstep shortly before the opening curtain, coming from a restaurant meal that was also considered and booked in advance. Coats were checked, auditorium entry doors located, and the audience was seated for performance with barely any acknowledgement of the transitional chamber through which they had just passed.

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The new attendance model involves much less advance planning. Modern audiences have so many quality entertainment options, literally at their fingertips, that little thought is given to anything beyond, "What shall we do tonight?" These short planning horizons demand architectural options that fulfill a wide gamut of needs: parking, eating, socializing, participating, and more socializing. This is not an evening built around a specific event. In fact, where a theatre performance is part of the event, the theatre experience can often be the most restrictive—no phones, no texting, no talking, and please stay put—and for many the least attractive.

This new model suggests that many phases of a night's entertainment be captured within a single building. A theatre lobby might now include lounge and gathering space, event space, bar, coffee shop, fast food (i.e., grab-and-go), and potentially several types of retail, including general, theatrical, and show-related. Some or all of these enterprises might be tenants leasing space from the theatre operator, and some might be operator owned. In either case, all of this related activity need not restrict its operating hours to nights of per-

formance only. The theatres will certainly benefit from these various enterprises being open all day, particularly in locations with healthy foot traffic during the day.

The American sociologist Ray Oldenburg has for decades chronicled the modern human desire for a "third place." In *The Great Good Place*, he writes, "...daily life, in order to be relaxed and fulfilling, must find its balance in three realms of experience. One is domestic, a second is gainful or productive, and the third is inclusively sociable, offering both the basis of community and the celebration of it." (Oldenburg 1997, 14). Historic examples of Third Places include the United Kingdom's pubs and France's cafes. More recently in the United States and Australia, coffee shops are now successfully catering to this need. The attributes that Oldenburg assigns to the third place include:

- On neutral ground
- Inclusive
- Supportive of conversation
- Accessible and accommodating
- Playful
- A home away from home

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One need only look at some existing examples to realize how theatre lobbies can be successful Third Places when they are open all day. Both the Royal National Theatre and the Southbank Centre in London attract a lively and sizable crowd at all hours of the day and night. Not only do theatres realize some profits from their retail operations, but more importantly the very existence of these semi-related retail activities goes a long way toward removing barricades that often restrict the first timer from entering an artistic endeavor.

Both the National and the Southbank Centre are readily permeable, inviting visitors in without a thought toward crossing a threshold toward a higher level. With less reliance on the old subscription model, performing arts institutions must become more reliant on attracting passers-by and on word-of-mouth and social media connections. Super-fast internet connections, lots of power points, a variety of lounging and grouping spaces, access to coffee and snacks, and a supportive, informal atmosphere all have great potential for keeping theatre lobbies animated throughout the day. And when more guests are visiting the lobby, it seems likely that more interest is created.

### DESIGNING A BETTER LOBBY

Selling admission to events is changing. Though the term "ticket" may remain in use for the foreseeable future, the actual piece of card stock is quickly disappearing. Guests are more likely to obtain admission via an app and carry the evidence on a personal electronic device, or print a ticket at home. We no longer need elaborate facilities for vending tickets as part of our front-of-house components, and once we acknowledge the lack of need for a Box Office, we can begin to re-think the visitor experience completely. Theatres are now moving toward a concierge-style system, which might typically involve a Guest Services counter where patrons can purchase admission, check parcels, and procure assistive listening devices and child booster seats, all at a single location.

At Hamer Hall in Melbourne, Australia, each of the main lobby levels includes a long counter with changeable signage indicating which portion of the counter is in use for which activity on different days, and at different parts of the day. During non-performance times, portions of these counters might be used for sell-



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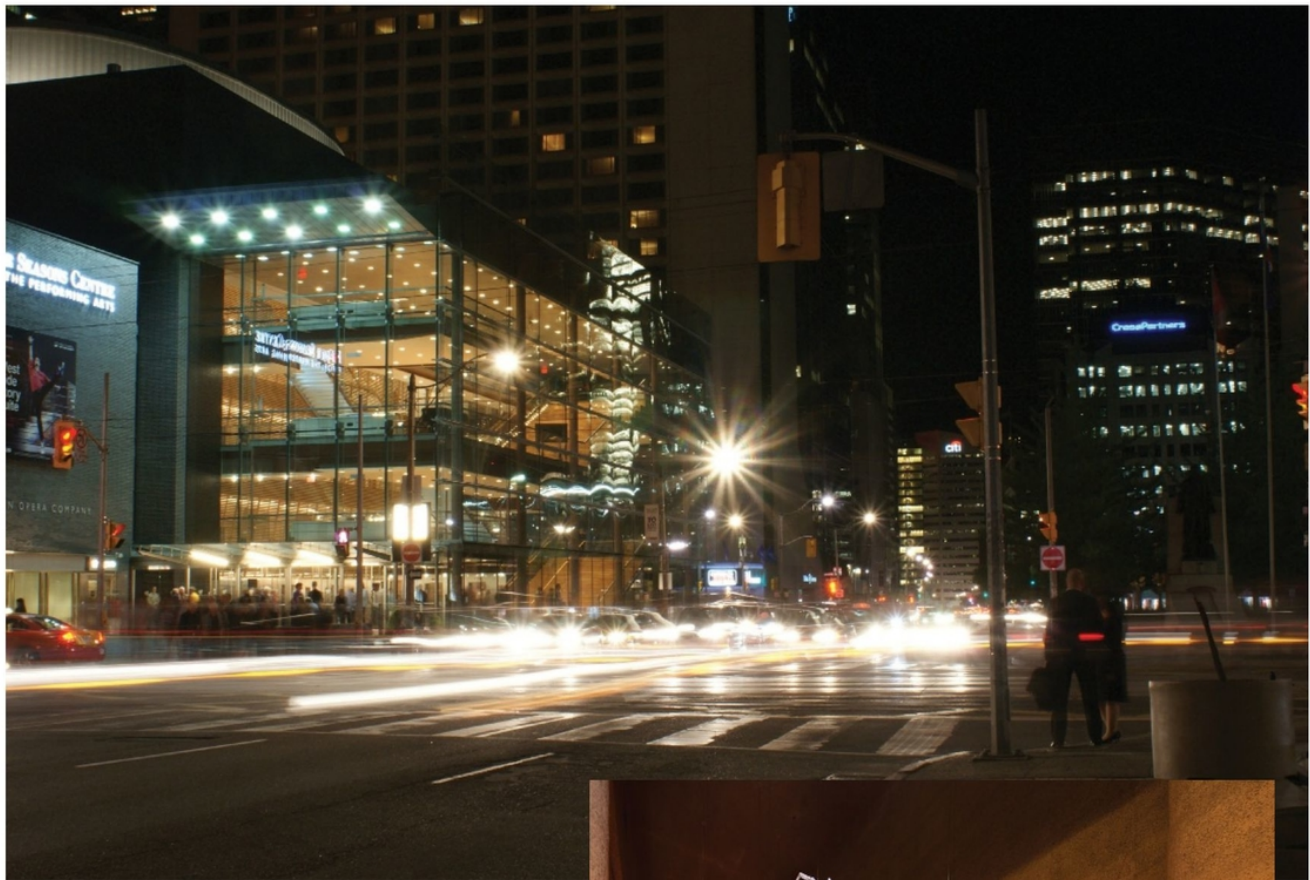
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The lobby of the Four Seasons Center in Toronto is a gleaming, transparent beacon after dark. Photo by FunkinsDesigns/Thinkstock Images.

ing coffee and snacks as well as disseminating information and admissions for future performances. Prior to a performance, a large portion of the counter is dedicated to Guest Services, with the balance for coffee, food, and bar sales. During an intermission, the entire counter length becomes bar and snacks, and the counters are long enough to accommodate a sufficient number of bartenders to ensure short queues, which translates into more sales. The flexibility afforded by this “long counter” concept is also useful for supporting future operations as well; we can’t pretend to know what kinds of activities might need support 30 years from now, but the long, open counters should be able to adapt without requiring major re-construction.

The planning and design of the front of house spaces are critical to their success, and there are several aspects of the planning to be considered:

- **Transparency and permeability:** The primary lobby space should be inviting and conducive to anticipation. It should be tall and open and transparent to the exterior. The walls should be brightly lit to make the lobby a welcoming beacon from without. Primary public entries should be clearly obvious and thoughtfully located. For many theatre buildings, completely separate entries are required for pedestrian/drop-off



The “long counter” in use during an intermission at Hamer Hall in Melbourne. Photo courtesy Arts Centre Melbourne.

and for adjacent parking and/or mass transportation.

- **Size and scalability:** For lobbies with multiple levels, upper floors with view-out and view-down opportunities will help enliven and unify the audience. The majority of the lobby space should be open and unobstructed so as to more easily accommodate special events such as banquets and exhibitions. At the same time, it can often be helpful to provide opportunities for smaller areas to be temporarily cordoned off to accommodate groups who may be attending a performance and desire their own gathering space before, during, and after the show.





London's Southbank Centre offers a variety of large and small spaces for the public. Photo by Aardvark/Alamy Stock Photo.



Movable seating and tables in the transparent lobby at The National Art Center, Tokyo, provide visitors with a "third place" to converse, read, or socialize. Photo by HAIYUN JIANG/Alamy Stock Photo.

- **Flexibility and support:** Patrons appreciate generous amounts of seating along with drink tables, all of which should be transportable to allow event set-ups with banquet tables and the like (and requiring adequate storage space as well). Lobbies that will accommodate special events should include well-integrated technical infrastructures to allow rapid and efficient deployment of theatrical lighting and audio systems, including a flexible arrangement of "strong points" in the ceiling to allow theatrical equipment, banners, and the like to be temporarily suspended. Catering support facilities in close proximity are also extremely important, even if they are no more than a room with running water and lots of power points.
- **Way-finding:** Architectural graphics for way-finding are generally required but often result in a high degree of visual clutter. A well-designed lobby will instinctively guide patrons to the critical destinations with a minimum of signage required.

Many of these planning issues specifically relate to uses of the lobby space for events other than pre-performance and intermission. Most theatres can realize the full potential of their front of house spaces by making their lobbies available for banquets, receptions, exhibitions, and even small-scale performances. In order to make this arrangement work well, it is sometimes



necessary to build more area and support it with more staff than would be required otherwise, but in most cases, these additional costs can be more than offset by the many inherent advantages.

In addition to the generated income, and perhaps more importantly, the open-all-day lobby, combined with special event uses, serve to support one of the key missions of most theatres: audience development. They attract potential patrons who might not otherwise have ever entered the front door. If theatre buildings are to return to being the cultural epicenters of their communities, they must do more than present formal performances within a restrictive calendar. The public must come to view the theatres as places where exciting and enriching things happen at any time, without advertisement, and with the potential to exceed expectations.

*Under the leadership of David Staples, TD&T has teamed up with Bühnentechnische Rundschau, the journal of the Deutsche Theater-technische Gesellschaft (Germany's Theatre Technical Society) and Sightline, the journal of the Association of British Theatre technicians to present a series*

*of articles which reassess examples of significant theatrical architecture. This multi-year research collaboration will examine theatres built between 1950 and 2010, in advance of the International Theatre Engineering Architecture Conference (ITEAC) in 2018. Prospective authors interested in contributing to the series should contact David Staples at [iteaceditor@abtt.org.uk](mailto:iteaceditor@abtt.org.uk).*



*Robert Shook, FASTC, is a director and founder of Schuler Shook Theatre Planners. He has been instrumental in the design and renovation of scores of performance spaces during his 40-year career. Current projects include Sydney Opera House, Lyric Theatre Sydney, Arts Centre Melbourne, Goodman Theatre, DePaul University School of Music, and Columbia College Chicago.*

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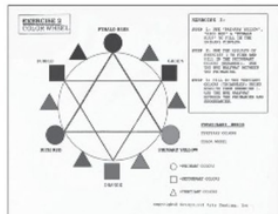
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