

Modern Theatres –

Musiktheater im Revier, Gelsenkirchen, Germany

Elain Harwood



*Musiktheater im Revier
at night
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Theatre and opera offered a highly visible repository of moral conscience and cultural reflection to West Germany as it sought to claim political respectability after the Second World War. This was encouraged by the first president of the republic, Theodor Heuss, and by local politicians. The municipal theatre (Stadttheater) had held an important place in German culture from the early nineteenth century, and some 200 were rebuilt between 1946 and 1967 following war damage, with competitions providing exceptional opportunities for young, local architects to make their name. Funding came mainly from city and regional (Länder) councils, with the federal government contributing only about five per cent of the costs.

The Origins of the Design

Harald Deilmann, Max von Hausen, Ortwin Rave and Werner Ruhnau, a group of young architects working locally, won a competition in 1950 to rebuild the war-damaged Münster Theatre, but construction was delayed until 1954-6. Deilmann quickly left the team, but the other three were still nominally in partnership when in 1954 the city of Gelsenkirchen announced a competition for the rebuilding of its municipal theatre, a 1930s' building that had been completely destroyed in the war. Werner Ruhnau produced a design which was declared the winner in September, but the city council then worried that it was too expensive to build, and quietly turned to the

design placed second, by Fritz Bornemann of Berlin. When he learned of the change, Ruhnau protested and was allowed to produce a revised scheme which he proved was more economical to build.

Whereas the first rebuilt theatres, around 1950, incorporated the remains of their previous structures for reasons of economy and austerity, later in the decade complete rebuildings in a modern style took hold. As restrictions on steel and stone were lifted, the young architects took as their models the sleek modernism of the United States, and in particular the buildings by the expatriate Mies van der Rohe – one of their own to admire within the dominating, occupying American colossus. Mies himself was invited to produce a design for the Mannheim Nationaltheater as part of a competition in 1953, but his scheme suspending two auditoria within a wholly glazed foyer was passed over at a second stage in favour of a less radical and transparent version by Gerhard Weber, completed in 1957. There were local objections to so much glass, and Mies could not produce accurate costings for the scheme from the United States. The experience led Ruhnau to take the precaution of moving to Gelsenkirchen to oversee his project and he made the city his permanent home.

Ruhnau sought to regain something of Mies's radical design, whose influence is palpable in the revised scheme for Gelsenkirchen, which – although reduced from that of the



competition – retained its original layout and is very large by non-German standards. The site lies across a dual carriageway from a large open square that closes a long (largely pedestrian) promenade through the rebuilt town centre. The American magazine *Arts and Architecture* (vol.77, no.3, March 1960, p.18) commented that ‘the integration of the theater with this new plaza has been considered [as] important as the integration and spectators within the theater’. The building is 250m long, and while the competition design featured a

steel screen, as built the frontage comprises a fully-glazed foyer on two main levels raised over a cloakroom and mezzanine bar that are deliberately kept low. It surrounds the dark drum of the main auditorium, with behind it the main stage and extensive backstage facilities. Ruhnau saw the foyer as a stage for the audience, to be seen both from within and as a spectacle from outside that would attract passers-by to venture in. By day the glass is reflective, and it is possible to see in only when the foyer is illuminated from within at night.

Description of the Building

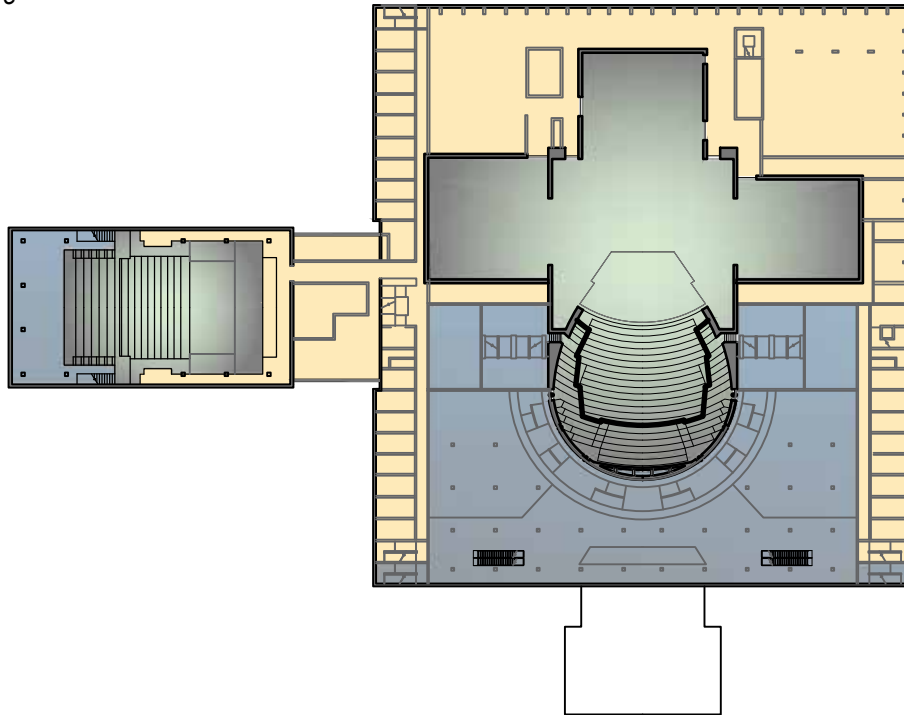
The theatre was constructed between 1957 and 1959. The main auditorium in the central drum seats 1,050 people in steeply-sloping stalls and in two balconies, revised from three in the original scheme. Each has slips formed of linked *schlitten* – the name given the staggered sledge-like boxes that are a feature of 1950s’ auditoria, at the Royal Festival Hall and Coventry Belgrade Theatre as well as throughout West Germany. Their fronts are finished in glistening aluminium leaf to contrast with the back lining of the rest of the hall that for Ruhnau served to unite the auditorium and stage. The proscenium is 13 metres wide and 9.5 metres high but can be made smaller if required. Behind, a long slab incorporates the flytower within six storeys of dressing rooms, workshops, a scenery construction room, rehearsal space and a ballet studio. On the lowest level stores and a canteen complete a complex that operates for most hours of the day; the atmosphere backstage is somewhere between a small factory and Broadcasting House. The structural engineer was Guido

Auditorium following 2010 renovation
Pedro Malinowski/MiR



Musiktheater im Revier
Exterior
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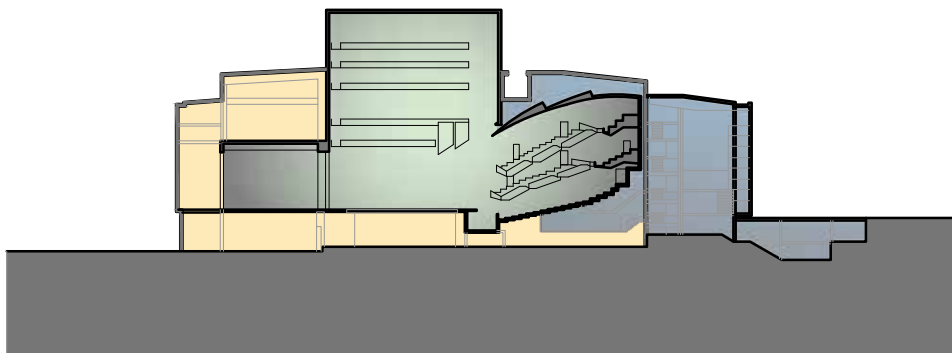
*Musiktheater im Revier,
Gelsenkirchen, comparative
plan*



Plan of theatre auditorium, stage and foyers

0 10 20 40 metres

*Musiktheater im Revier,
Gelsenkirchen, comparative
section*



Long section through theatre auditorium and stage

0 10 20 40 metres

Schoen, who devised a series of expansion joints along the frame, dividing it into separate sections as some settlement was expected across the site, with deep foundations for the flytower. The building was fully air-conditioned, also a response to the heavy industry and coalmining in the area, for the area suffered severe problems of air pollution at the time (*Architect and Building News*, vol.227, no.10, 10 March 1965, pp.463-71).

Externally the studio theatre or Kleines Haus, seating between 350 and 400 people, appears dark where the main theatre is light, but it is glazed at its far end where the foyer makes a visual link to the street as well as a physical one with the auditorium immediately behind. A bridge links it to the main building, with parking between the supporting pilotis. The form of the small theatre is indebted to Adolphe Appia's pioneering open space theatre at Hellerau from 1912 and is unusually flexible, for the stalls and apron areas can be adjusted, theoretically even in the course of a performance. There is one broad tier of seating across the rear.

Ruhnau brought in several major artists to decorate the foyers and exterior. They stayed with him and his family in a three-bedroom flat over the architect's office in a nearby former fire station, which was dubbed the 'Bauhütte' by a local journalist. There, Ruhnau claimed in his autobiography, *Der Raum, Das Spiel un Die Künste / Space, Play and the Arts* (Berlin, Jovis/ Gelsenkirchen, Stadt Gelsenkirchen, 2007, p.149), 'we achieved the ideal of engineers and artists designing a building together. It was no longer just a question of the individual artistic disciplines – we were building together.' The English sculptor Robert Adams created a concrete relief on the outer wall of the low box office wing that sits in front of the main façade, a foil to the latter's transparency. Most remarkably, Ruhnau was introduced at a gallery opening in Paris to Yves Klein, who produced six blue murals in the foyer after a formal competition was held in October 1957. Two of these are a monumental 21 metres wide by seven metres high, while two more of similar height were made at Ruhnau's behest using the sponges Klein normally used to apply his paint fixed into gypsum plaster on a wire mesh. They make dramatic splashes of colour in contrast to the deliberately monochrome auditorium. Paul Dierkes decorated the external drum of the main auditorium. Ruhnau's friend Norbert Kricke produced a relief of long, horizontal aluminium tubes for the exterior of the small hall, but his designs for fountains were never

realised. Jean Tinguely progressed from the task of acting as Klein's translator to making the mobile behind the bar of the small theatre. Ruhnau himself designed distinctive chairs for the foyer, which have padded leather seats and arms but no backs. They were remade as part of the restoration of the theatre under Ruhnau's supervision in 2008-9, when the ceiling was raised in the main auditorium to improve the acoustics and new lighting was installed. He retained a keen interest in the theatre and was a regular visitor until his death. The building has been used almost entirely for opera, musical plays and ballet since 1968, as reflected in its modern name, the Musiktheater im Revier.

Assessment of the Building

Gelsenkirchen is the most published and widely admired of Germany's post-war theatres, described by Hannelore Schubert as 'the happiest and most thoroughly integrated example to emerge during the first decade of post-war theatre-building', as well as a dramatic advance on the traditional auditorium at Münster (Hannelore Schubert, *The Modern Theatre, Architecture, Stage Design Lighting* (London, Pall Mall Press, 1971), p.7 (originally *Moderner Theaterbau*, Karl Krämer Verlag, Stuttgart, 1971)). For G. E. Kidder Smith, 'it abounds with ideas: its over-all planning which includes the eventual development of the entire area; its art which was carefully integrated with the theatre design from the beginning; its clever architectural marriage between auditorium and stage.' ('New German Theatres and Concert Halls', *Architectural Record*, vol.134, no.10, October 1963, p.183.) Victor Glasstone described the foyers as the 'finest, most successful, in Europe' ('Auditoria Galore', *Architectural Design*, vol.33, no.11, November 1963, pp.555-6). Gelsenkirchen offered a successful main auditorium that brought actor and audience close together, together with a very flexible studio theatre. It is also remarkable for the close relationship of artist and architect, for while the French and English artists were personal friends the programme is contemporary with the rebuilding of Coventry city centre using art students from Dresden. Its influence was limited, however, because of its very size – Peter Moro visited it before designing the Nottingham Playhouse in 1960-1 but found it too large and its stage facilities too technical for a British budget, although he repeated the basic concept of the auditorium as a decorated drum set within an open, rectangular foyer (personal comment, April 1994).