

# Prevailing Themes In 20th Century Theatre Architecture

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# Prevailing Themes In 20<sup>th</sup> Century Theatre Architecture

By Joshua Dachs

**T**heatre architecture, to state the obvious, is a product of its times.

Buildings designed for performance are the result of a confluence of social, economic, artistic, political and aesthetic forces specific to the time and place of their conception, and that's what makes them some of the most interesting buildings there are to look at or work on. We tend to think that architects shape buildings (and often willfully at that), but in a way they are simply responding to forces much larger than themselves. Some of them respond with clearer vision, greater originality, or more skill than others, and it's their work that we come to treasure most. Perhaps it's because they've captured something about what we aspire to be, rather than what we are, and found a way to express it in a way that inspires us.

Books have been written about the semiotics of Architecture – the idea that the overall spatial conception and aesthetic expression of a work of architecture can be read as a text describing the specific social order and value system of the culture in which

it was created, and the same is obviously true of Theatre Architecture and always has been. Just think of the *meaning* of the form of the Greek Amphitheatre, developed simultaneously with democracy, and the social hierarchy enshrined in the great Globe itself or any Italian opera house. Theatre holds the mirror up to life both on and off the stage. Theatre architecture in the 20th C, upon which *Bühnentechnische Rundschau* is reflecting in this series, was arguably subject to more change, and faster, than was experienced in many preceding centuries. Some of the reasons for this are obvious; technological advances in steel construction, electric lighting, a concerted effort to develop building safety standards, and so forth.

But the 20th C was also turbulent. There were two world wars, a crushing depression, and massive social upheaval, with a reordering of borders, economies, lifestyles and governments. This can't have helped but be reflected in the choices that were

made in cultural projects over the course of that century, and most of all in the work of the theatre artists themselves, who are the true innovators of theatre architecture, and always have been.

But theatres are more than just signifiers – they structure activity. David Wiles, in his wonderful books on theatre, reminds us that the theatre is fundamentally a spatial practice – a theatre artist devises ways to occupy space, and devises movement and actions within this format to convey meaning, provoke thought and elicit emotion. In this way, the space itself is both the artist’s container and part of the text.

Well, I’m not a sociologist or a historian, but I’m convinced one must reflect on the evolution of theatre architecture in the 20th C in light of all of this. As a 60-year-old New Yorker I can only do this within the context with which I am acquainted, but I’m sure that Europeans will find these trends familiar even if the details differ, and those in Asia, and especially China, may think of them as more of a 21st C phenomenon. These century demarcations themselves are arbitrary. Some 20th C phenomena have their roots in the 18th C and will persist into the early decades of the 21st C. In any case, I think one can speak in terms of 10 key themes that drove and shaped theatre architecture in the 20th C and continue to shape it today. They fall into some broad categories:



Looking into the 21st C: The Shed will open in 2019 in New York. The space will be used for to all kinds of arts, culture and entertainment.

## Artist-Driven Initiatives

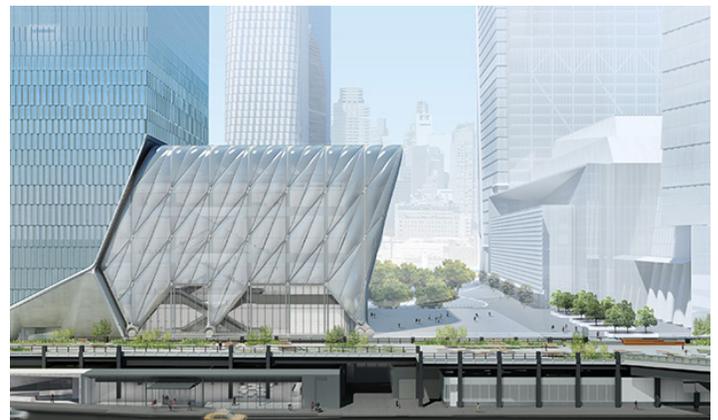
### 1. A Profusion of Alternative Forms

The 20th C experienced a sort of Cambrian Explosion of Theatre forms. Theatre Artists are the principal drivers of innovation and change in theatre architecture. At the beginning of the century, the proscenium Theatre was effectively the only form of theatre in the west. Itself an innovation of artists dating to the late 16th C, the formal, frontal form had propagated all over the western world and its colonies and imitators, even while diversifying in scale, decor and stage capability for various performance types and commercial settings. Whenever there is a rigid straightjacket of this sort artists seek to escape it – it’s a natural law of some kind – and the 20th C saw a parade of intriguing artists seeking alternative ways of working. Their motivations were as varied as the artists themselves, and most focused on new ways of writing, acting and producing that would transform what we

saw on our stages. But others felt compelled to struggle with how to use space itself. They explored forgotten old forms, or improvised entirely new ones. Think of Guthrie and the Thrust; Grotowski and the production-specific environment; Glenn Hughes, who built the first purpose made arena stage in Seattle in 1940; Stephen Joseph and his advocacy of the Open Stage in the UK in the 1950s; and, of course, Peter Brook and the idea that ANY space can be a performance space if one finds the right way to occupy and activate it. Their experiments have led to the profusion of theatre typologies that we have today.

### 2. The Search for A Truly Flexible Theatre

This explosion of theatre forms came along just at the time that Jerzy Grotowski was devising environments specifically tailored for his performances, and Peter Brook’s book *The Empty Space* popularized the phrase “any space can be a theatre,” and these ideas inspired artists all over the world. If we can make Theatre frontally, in the round, in a thrust, in a devised environment or in ANY space at all, what’s an earnest young Theatre artist to do? One obvious response was to attempt to make an EVERY-Theatre; a space that was flexible enough to become anything you needed it to be. Many have struggled with the seeming paradoxes: permanent yet flexible; easy to rearrange but without a constraining system; a blank slate that is imbued with meaning; institutionalized yet experimental. It has been



The Shed in it’s ‘nested’ state. The canopy deploys on railroad tracks to cover the plaza space to the east.

a great source of exploration and produced some interesting – and many depressing – results. There were some unique projects like the Modular Theatre at Cal Arts, great books by Per Erstrom “Why Not Theatres Made for People” and “Rum och teater” with their fabulous cartoons and diagrams, and many amazing experiments in geometry, platform systems and mechanization peaking perhaps in the 70s. Flexibility as an idea was especially appealing to universities and conservatories that wanted to provide students with the opportunity to experience many ways of working, and Empty Spaces of all sorts proliferated, most very low-tech and labor intensive. This experimentation led to the discovery of a set of natural laws that are Newtonian in their scope: A Body At Rest Will Remain At Rest Unless Acted On By An External Force (flexible spaces are often left in one configuration for years at a time because its just too much trouble to change them around), The Law of Conservation of Resources (flexible systems that are inexpensive are labor-intensive; mechanization that saves labor

costs a lot of money), and the Cartesian Paradox (anything that is systematic is inflexible, anything that is truly flexible cannot be systematized). Many theatres have been created that provide a limited range of reconfiguration, hoping to trade breadth of flexibility for actual utility. Some think a completely flexible theatre is like a unicorn – you may believe they exist, but you are unlikely to see one in your lifetime.

### 3. A Migration to Found Spaces

As I mentioned at the outset, artists are the real theatre architects, and the way they choose to select and occupy space for performance is what sets the course for new waves of development (shameless plug – I’ve written an article about innovation in theatre architecture that will be appearing almost simultaneously with this one in *American Theatre Magazine*). Many theatre artists have decided to reject purpose-built theatre spaces, preferring to work in spaces that were built for some other purpose. It may be that in these spaces they find a directness and simplicity that establishes a better bond with their audience. Perhaps they are appealing because they are free of the trappings of a social order that they reject, or because in the age or history of a particular building they find a special emotional resonance that enriches the work. It is a direct manifestation of the power of the semiotics of theatre architecture, and the special way that place conveys meaning.



Horseshoe 2.0: The Tobin Center in San Antonio, TX, built in 2014. The modern hall draws on the building tradition of the 19th C.

### Economic and Political and Social Pressures.

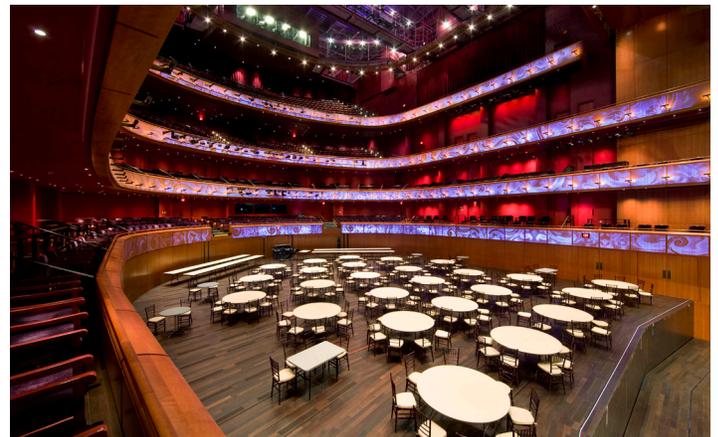
**4. Bigger is Better** – Another course of development that began arguably in the era of Edwin O. Sachs’s great three-volume tome “Modern European Opera Houses” in 1890 is the way advances in engineering, amplification and lighting made larger and larger halls possible. Encouraged by commercial interests, philanthropic organizations like the Ford Foundation, and even governments (and abetted by George Izenour of Theatre Architecture and Engineering fame, who treated it as an engineering problem, rather than as an experiential one), the post-WWII west embraced Culture and its values in a big way. In part this was because Culture had become a tool in the propaganda war between the west and the Soviet Union, a rare non-lethal weapon in the Arsenal of Democracy. But also because the post-war mid-century period was an era of unbridled optimism and prosperity that seemed as though it would never end.

Shining white marble theatres, concert halls and opera houses were built with larger and larger capacities, especially in the US. It was an era of big cars, big hair and big Theatres. Concert halls were routinely sized between 2,500 and 3,000 seats. The 1966 Metropolitan Opera House was built with 3,800 seats, and commercial producers insisted that it didn’t make sense to build touring venues for Broadway shows with less than 3,000 seats. Oversized venues proliferated.

While older halls also reported enormous capacities, they did so in amazingly small containers. Contemporary halls, built to contemporary standards for safety and comfort, required auditoriums that were 40% to 50% larger to accommodate similar capacities, and hall dimensions ballooned. Actors and musicians didn’t get any bigger, but the people trying to connect to them were farther and farther away.

It wasn’t long before it became clear that this produced awful experiences. Scale, it turns out, is perhaps the greatest determinant of a theatre space’s success in supporting powerful, meaningful, impactful performances.

Happily, after a lot of money was wasted, the error of this approach was realized at nearly the same time that things started to decline economically in the west and for its large traditional cultural institutions. It slowly became clear that

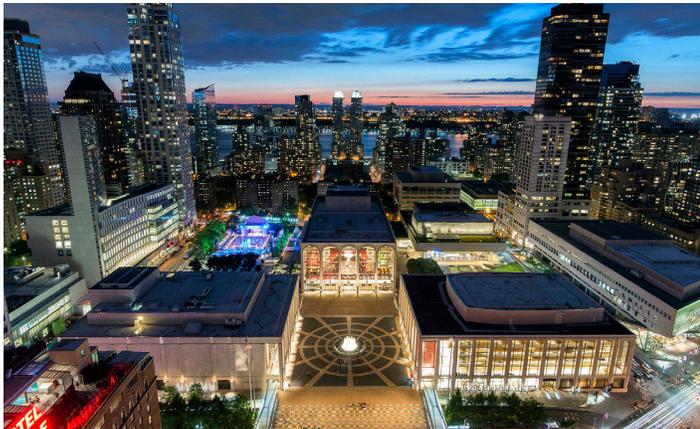


The room can transform from an 1,800-seat performance hall into a flat-floor ballroom making it suitable for music and special events.

audiences would not grow indefinitely, particularly if the experiences being offered were in cavernous places where the human connection could no longer be felt. In the last two decades of the century theatre capacities finally started to drop, and this trend has continued to the present day.

**5. The Emergence of the Performing Arts Center** – The seminal 20th C idea of gathering all your high-brow arts organizations into a large marble pile caught fire about a decade after the war. What was the match that kindled it? In the US in the late 1950s it was clearly the powerful New York City official Robert Moses, who instigated Lincoln Center in 1955 as an urban renewal project, to sweep away the entire gritty neighborhood on the West Side of Manhattan where the movie version of *West Side Story* had been set and filmed. Its first venue, the 2,800-seat Philharmonic Hall (now David Geffen Hall) opened in 1962 and was followed over the next seven years by the Metropolitan Opera House, The New York State Theatre (now

the David Koch Theatre), the Juilliard School, the Lincoln Center Theatre, and the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts. This begat the Music Center in Los Angeles and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C, and the wave swept through large American cities beginning in the 60s, and eventually reaching smaller and smaller markets over the next 30 years. The grand thinking behind the entire South Bank area of London, with Royal Festival Hall, Heywood Gallery and the NT, and later the Globe, British Film Institute, and Tate Modern is a manifestation of this same idea, to say nothing of the Barbican Centre. Its roots and its justification throughout the century, at least in the US, were hard-nosed, practical, Urban Renewal and Economic Development, rather than squishy Arts and Culture.



Lincoln Center in New York, NY. One of the original performing arts centers, it includes multiple performance spaces for drama, music and dance, and the Juilliard School.

**6. The Evolution of the Multi-Use Hall** – A related 20th C theme, particularly as the PAC phenomenon reached cities too small to warrant multi-hall complexes, was the significant advance of our ability to produce halls that actually were very good for a wide range of art forms. In place of some of the over-large mid-century barns which targeted an acoustical environment that split the difference between what was needed for symphony and amplified programs like musicals (thereby pleasing no one), we learned to make smaller rooms with extra volume for reverberation and clever systems of variable absorption that could be deployed or retracted to tailor the acoustic to the art form on stage. This has produced a number of fine halls in the US, that are very effective for the local symphony, opera, ballet and Broadway touring presenters. If you are a theatre consultant you start to wonder if, with the tremendous advances in audio systems these days, we will one day be able to do this even more easily and effectively entirely with electronics in rooms designed as acoustically dry containers. If you are an acoustician, you don't entertain absurd suggestions that grumpy Theatre Consultants make.

**7. The Rebirth and Nearly Simultaneous Death of the Single-Purpose Hall** – Some orchestras and opera companies eventually outgrew the quality or scheduling constraints of the multi-use PACs they shared with other organizations and commercial presenters, and decided to leave the homes that they had grown up in and develop their own dedicated facilities. In other cases they were forced out by their PACs because they were consuming valuable dates that could earn

more revenue if used for Broadway or popular entertainment. In both cases these organizations set about making new buildings for themselves, graduating from multi-purpose halls to single-purpose halls tailored to their specific art form, just like in the old days; purpose-built opera houses, theatres or concert halls. These buildings were designed to do just one thing VERY well – until the reality of having to operate them sunk in, at which time organizations began to try to do one thing VERY well and accommodate a whole lot of other things, too. It turns out that in practice few halls can afford to do only one thing, and there really is no such thing as a single-purpose hall. Symphony halls get used for other forms of music, special events, corporate meetings, film premiers, even church services



**Multi-Use:** Schermerhorn Symphony Center in Nashville, TN. Looks old-fashioned, but its ability to transform into a flat-floored hall could not be more contemporary. Shown here is a side-by-side comparison of both modes.

– anything to pay the bills and fill the empty dates. This is why in places like Schermerhorn Symphony Center in Nashville, TN, transformable floor systems have been incorporated into the design, and the flexibility this provides has proven to be enormously beneficial to the business model.

### Advancements in the Theatre Planning and Design Profession

**8. The Rise of Acoustics** – This profession didn't really exist until the 20th C, and its rise has had a deep impact on performance spaces in profound ways; some good, some less so. Figuring out a successful approach to multi-purpose halls in the last decades of the century is one of its great accomplishments. As acousticians have come to wield enormous power on design teams, a sad tension can develop between being close/seeing well and absolutist pure-physics-experiment acoustic "requirements" which can result in distant balconies and blank surfaces where people should be. Many of you have heard me rant on that theme before. I will spare you. But Acoustics has unquestionably played an enormous role in shaping the architecture of the 20th C's spaces for live performance, and hearing well is actually a good thing.

**9. Dusting-off Good Old Values** – Back to the Future, as Richard Pillbrow dubbed it long ago, was the thoughtful study by theatre consultants of pre-modern theatre spaces, applying key learnings from the past to contemporary projects. It emerged in reaction to mid-century misdeeds in order to re-learn what was once common knowledge but now was lost, and to remember what it was that we actually value in theatre spaces in the

first place. The entirely healthy idea of looking to the past for inspiration has led to a variety of good to great projects and raised the bar generally, and together with acoustics, is one of the factors in successfully driving seating capacities down. For me, the frequently seen Courtyard Theatre typology (such as the Dorfman ne Cottesloe at the NT) is a pure expression of this desire; dust off an old model to recapture what has been lost – in that case a typology that sat at a unique historical juncture between the Elizabethan courtyard “amphitheatres” and the Italianate proscenium theatre, so a kind of ‘Roots’ thing for the English proscenium theatre folks. In my own practice, we’ve enjoyed learning from old Opera Houses and Broadway theatres and applying those lessons to our contemporary venues. While this has led to some wonderful 20th C buildings executed in a proudly 19th C architectural idiom, it has also led to wonderful buildings in which the best-practices from historical theatres with respect to geometry, seating envelopment, scale modulation, and their capacity to instill a sense of visceral connection and intimacy among people are applied and expressed in a completely contemporary language by architects willing to engage with this central challenge.

## The Impact of Architectural Professionals

### 10. Classical Modernism and Fashion in Architecture

During the early heroic early days after the first World War, modern architects were afire with revolutionary fervor. They set about rejecting the stylistic trappings and organizing principals of architecture made for 19th C Imperial societies. Instead they had a desire to develop a new vocabulary based on contemporary materials and technologies, reflecting the new age of flight, of power stations, and a romantic view of industry.

They also had a great passion for inverting figure and ground. No more would buildings be made of discrete rooms strung together like jewels, with large important ones connected to each other by smaller more intimate chains of connective tissue. Instead space would flow continuously – through the landscape, through cities, from outside to inside and back again, directed and punctuated by planes and objects implying spaces, view lines, and patterns of movement along the way. Instead of figural rooms in a solid matrix we have figural objects in free and open space, with fewer opaque walls and much more glass. Transparency was almost a call to arms.

Sadly, for theatre practitioners, this approach did not easily produce great theatres. By eliminating overtly hierarchical seating plans with their compact footprints, side walls lined with viewers, and vertical organization in favor of large “democratic” fan-shaped rooms, and by rejecting decoration and other measures that could help modulate the visual scale of over-large rooms and surfaces, modernism produced some of the worst theatres seen in centuries – perhaps ever.

Fashion plays a role in architecture also. Certain tropes sweep their way through the profession, and the 20th C’s speed disseminating of ideas vastly exceeded the past. Some of the ideas that were picked up and copied in 20th C theatre projects – over and over again – included:

*The Hall as Object* – I wish I had a dollar for every performance space that’s been built that expresses the hall as an object sitting within a glass atrium. I’d be as wealthy as an 18th C Italian architect would have been earning royalties on every horseshoe-shaped opera house ever built. This was a logical, if now trite, consequence of the figure-ground reversal I described earlier. Its hard to reconcile the concept of continuously flowing space and transparent buildings with the fully enclosed, complex and generally windowless mass that most theatre spaces are, so one arrives at the decision to treat the auditorium itself as an object in space, smoothing over its bumps and grinds with a large simple form of some kind – a cube, an egg, etc. Having made the object, you set about displaying it; thus a glass wrapper and the endless metaphors about the violin in the violin case.

*The Formless Lobby Wrapper* – The lobby, too, was subsumed into this same spatial concept. The old notion of discrete spaces organized by function was gone – entry foyers, impressive stair halls, narrow circulation corridors, suites of entertaining spaces of various kinds and scales with hidden support spaces filling the gaps in between. Instead, modern lobbies were often treated as large circulation pieces, losing specialized local characteristics and becoming open, singular, wrappers that sat between the object – auditorium and the exterior skin. The skin itself invariably featured lots of glass to put the audience on display (for about an hour each night) and, most importantly, reveal the crown jewel within.

The wheel of time keeps turning, and culture keeps evolving. New building types are emerging in response to the interests of the new century’s artists. The older traditional art forms are evolving too, in response to new economic and social pressures, and the differing social habits and expectations of new generations of cultural consumers. Architecture is more fashion-conscious than ever and theatres designed by architects uninterested in engaging with the core issues of theatre architecture are turning some theatres into unfortunate fashion victims. As always, it will be interesting to see where the new theatre architecture meanders next and where theatre artists, economic and social changes will lead us in this new century. *Watch for the next installment in this series in 2117.*

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