

Sightline

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National Theatre – Open Access, Smart Capture
Darlington Hippodrome and The Hullabaloo
Two different aspects of Sir Peter Hall
Modern Theatres: The Royal Exchange
Theatres and Placemaking



Modern Theatres: Royal Exchange Theatre

Introduction

'First came the great plays.

...Then they built the theatres out of stone...'

Irving Wardle, theatre critic for the Times, has a personal and private passion for theatres that are provisional in nature.

In common with the Elizabethan Playhouses, those spaces built expected to last but a few years, have often housed the greatest theatrical productions.

From the 'Temporary' Young Vic, through Brook's Tramway, Kilburn's Tricycle, the RSC's Courtyard, the National Theatre's Shed, to the Jungle in Calais; the dynamic of a theatre that could disappear any minute and whose very presence seems to be the result of either some benign error of city planning or even a real subversive action by a community, seems to be essential fuel to the spirit of 'This-better-be-brilliant, 'cos-tomorrow-we-might-close ... forever!'

Accepting a direct relationship between a

venue's 'temporariness' and its pre-disposition towards striking theatrical brilliance – it's little surprise that Irving's experience of the Royal Exchange Theatre on his first visit for the Grand Opening was one that he describes as 'thrillingly jarring'.

As a local lad from neighbouring Bolton attending the opening night, he was at first delighted to see that the old trading hall – so long a monumental presence in the City of Manchester, and, able to accommodate 9,000 traders, once lauded as the biggest room in the world – had been preserved; even with the relic of the old trading board looming over the St Anns Square end of the Hall.

And there in the centre of the vast space was a 'spaceship from Pluto, that looked as if it was about to take off back into Space right up through the glass dome of the Hall'.

The shock of the 700-seat theatre Module in the centre of this massive Victorian trading hall still jars today.

It's a feat of gymnastic structural engineering,

The Modern Theatres series continues with Andy Hayles discussing the Royal Exchange, Manchester





a millimetre perfect fusing of theatrical density and architectural high-tech. Opening less than 6 months before Paris's Pompidou Centre; for many the benchmark for high-Tech architecture, here is a steel framed structure with glazed infill panelled walls that wears its vertical circulation and its servicing lightly and legibly on its exterior.

And like Pompidou, that still surprises and delights in its discovery buried inside the Parisian Streets, here's a theatre that over 40 years on, still feels like a spaceship that has just touched-down, but is yet to return to worlds unknown. Its aesthetic is certainly more moon-lander than space-shuttle – the architecture of space travel has moved on – and the 90s' colour-matching refurb probably strapped the module down too tightly to its host hall; but the current artistic director Sarah Frankcom is seeking to rediscover a way of celebrating the juxtaposition of this time-limited visitor from space and its inappropriate host. And more

importantly, how to re-capture a sense that this extraordinary theatre, welcomes ordinary people.

Context & Concept

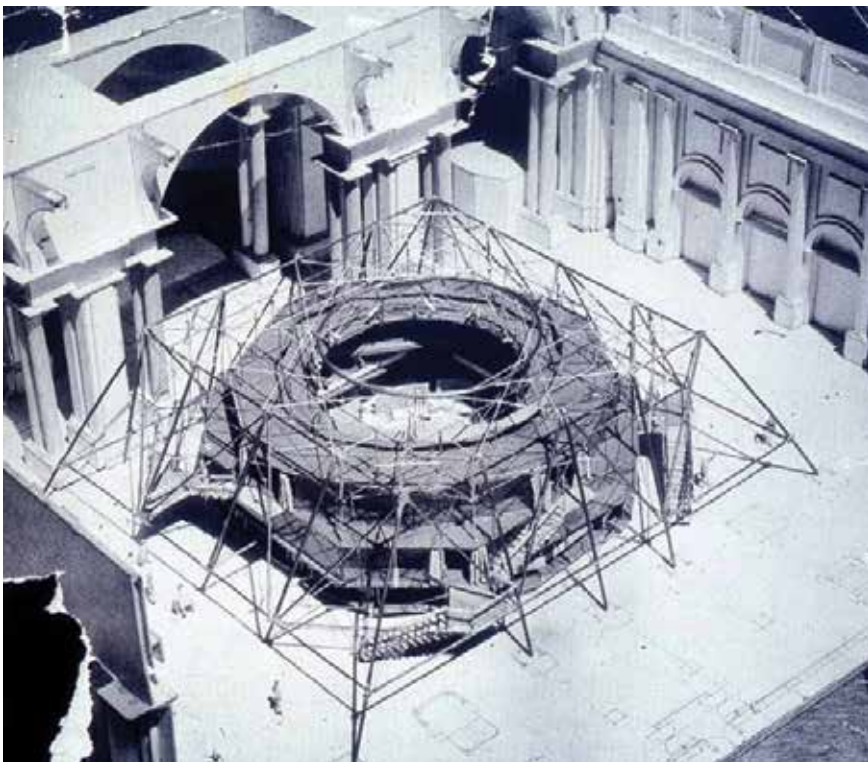
Much has been written about the dynamic teaming of theatre designer Richard Negri and the director Michael Elliott. This pair formed the heart of the theatre client body for the Royal Exchange.; and having shared the cut and thrust of production life together through the formation and operation of Theatre 59, they then collaborated with Casper Wrede and Richard Pilbrow, via Wimbledon School of Art, the RSC, Edinburgh Festival and Manchester University (becoming Theatre 69), eventually landing in the Exchange Hall in a 'tent'.

The tent was a temporary scaffold structure covered with old canvas floor-cloths that inhabited the middle of the hall, and its successful season gave the company the confidence to proceed with building a longer-lasting structure in the space.

£1.2m of funds were eventually raised including significant contributions from the Arts Council and Manchester City Council and from a long list of thirty architects, the then young and lesser known firm of Levitt Bernstein were appointed to collaborate with Negri in the design of the successor to the Tent.

Levitt Bernstein quickly realised that the theatre Module would need to be supported on large trusses spanning between columns (the floor having such poor loading capability due to the arcade of shops beneath.) Early 8-sided figures like this cat's cradle model from Axel Burrough's archive indicate how hard it would have been to transfer loads back down through the structure below.

Negri built models of the whole theatre almost faster than the architects could draw! Axel Burrough, the last surviving member of the architectural design team from the original concept meetings describes how Richard would bring immensely fragile card and rubber



band models to design team meetings few of which could stand up without the aid of human buttresses! Those spanning trusses became the frame that would hold Negri's vessel for people.

This vessel – The Module – stands alone as an island within the space of the Hall, there are none of the traditional backstage support spaces kept secret and physically concealed from the audience. No corridors or wings or scene docks.

Negri, Elliott and Pilbrow, together felt that they had an authority in departing from the traditional separations of backstage and front of house to lead the design team away from the standard theatrical conventions. This was the culmination of a theatrical journey that Irving Wardle believes can be traced directly back to the Vieux-Colombier school of Jacques Copeau and his ideology of 'two planks and a passion'. Peter Brook came to later define this stripping back of theatrical scenery, props, and devices to expose and celebrate the centrality of the actor as 'Holy Theatre'.

Copeau's school concentrated on physically reducing stage sizes and using a minimum of props and scenic devices, removing any obstacle between the actor and the audience so that the text could receive the audience's total concentrated focus.

As disciples of Michel St Denis (who not only attended the Jacques Copeau school, but was also Copeau's nephew); Negri, Elliott (and Frank Dunlop who of course went on to build the Young Vic) shared this deep conviction, honed on the continent, of the primacy of the text, the tight stage size, and the critical connection between performer and participating audience, sharing the same space.

Like the Young Vic, the Module became an exercise in getting as many people to see a modest sized stage at no more than 30' feet away on any level. And to put the actor at its centre literally, physically, and spiritually.

An early Negri sketch, again from Axel's archive demonstrates Richard's desire for the actor to be 'earthed' in the hall. The actor's delivery of the text likened to the sea washing up on the shore of the audience. And with those three levels of audience sat at the foot of the theatre being held in its heel, arch and toes!

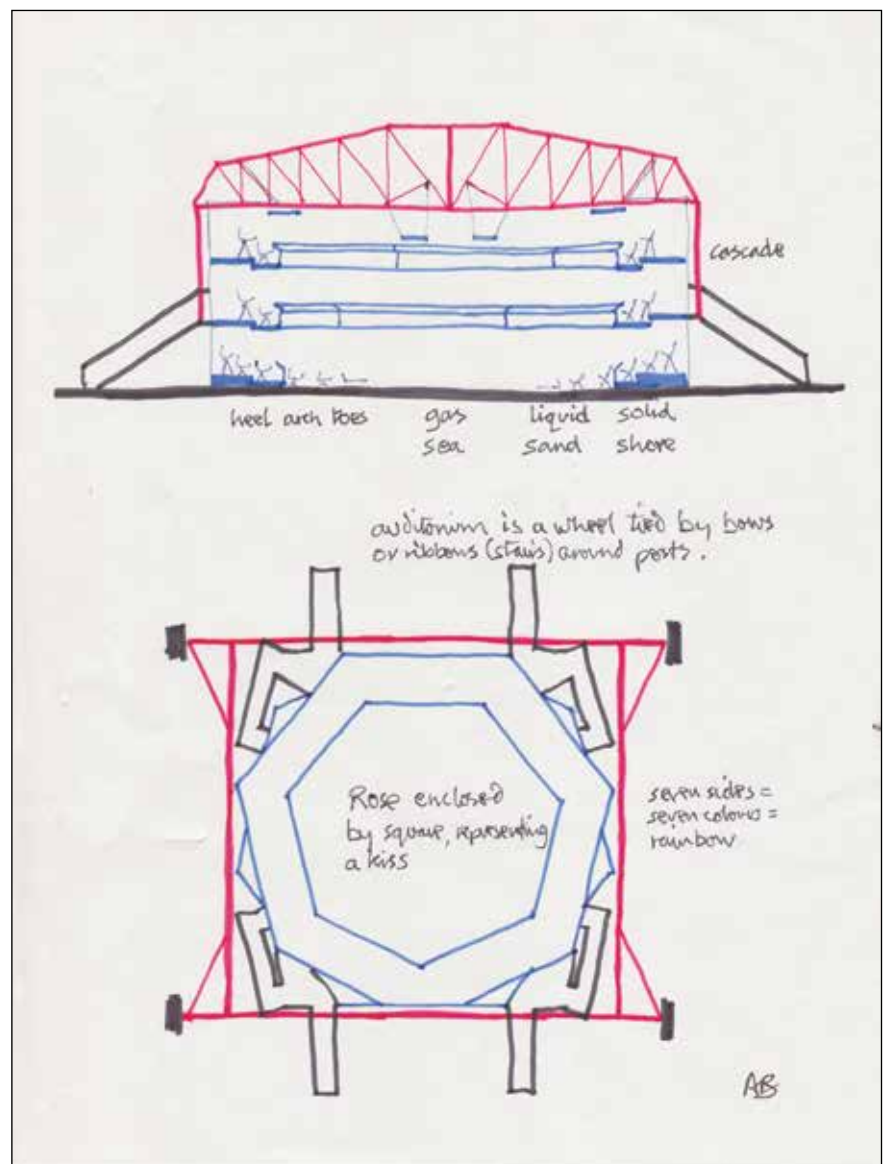
From Axel's recollections, those other elements of a theatre building (from the lobby to the load-in) were not even supporting cast to the main idea and bravura vision of the centrality of the actor, such was the laser-like focus of Elliott and Negri. The theatre module

had to be a perfect functional embodiment of these Copeau values, everything else would follow.

Design Development

The development of the module's eventual form was thus the result of a long period of experimentation between Elliott, Negri and Pilbrow.

During their tenure in Theatre 59 the team had been working on a theatre concept which comprised a thrust stage where the rear stage wrapped back around the audience chamber. Negri had experimented with the form using mobile scaffolding towers at the Wimbledon College of Art and later with Michael Elliott at Manchester University as Theatre 69, they continued to experiment with varied formats; sometimes changing the auditorium configuration between different productions on the same night.



The prototype for the Module was built after the discovery of the availability of the Exchange Hall, where another of the company's scenic designers, Laurie Dennett, designed the aforementioned 'Tent'. A scaffolding structure in the middle of the hall designed to further test not only their evolving concept; but also, the viability of a theatre in the Hall. Would the audience come? Would they accept an auditorium inside another space?

Unlike the Module which has no sub-stage; the Tent featured a stage and auditorium raised some 10' above the Hall floor to create a substage trap room. Low-tech, built from scaffolding with an old canvas floor cloth stretched over its frame to enclose the space, the Tent swallowed all of the available floor loading – and was therefore limited to a single audience seating rake, as there was no structural capacity remaining in the floor to support balcony columns.

In fixed thrust format, the Tent was a great success – though the memory of those who attending shows is very much the sense of occasion of the temporary structure within the hall rather than its interior which was apparently 'unremarkable'. It appears to have had something of a flavour of Guthrie's thrust spaces.

Enthused by the Tent's success (– it was meant to stay for 3 weeks but lasted 10 months!), the company embarked upon designing a more permanent condition. Interestingly however, as the lease granted to the theatre company for the Hall was to be for a maximum of 21 years; Architect Axel Burrough reveals that many of the company believed that they could take plenty of risks with the theatre building – as it was likely to

only last as long as the lease!

And until this point, as Theatre 59 and Theatre 69 they had not been resident anywhere for more than a few years.

The excitement of provisional theatres that Irving Wardle felt when he first visited the Module is therefore revealed. The Module's DNA is found not only in Copeau and St Denis, but also in provisionality, risk-taking and bold experimentation.

Bold, confident moves were the atmosphere of the time.

Human kind had stepped on the moon for the first time in 1969, just 4 years before the Module design commenced. Supersonic passenger flight on Concorde had just become possible; and the Pompidou Centre was in design at the same time.

Axel says that although High Tech was very much the zeitgeist, the architectural team didn't set out to specifically meet its conventions. Rather that it was this bold confidence of the time coupled with the constraints of building in the Hall and the very specific theatrical lead from the company that led to the bravura Module.

Early models featured curves rather than facets, and then Negri tried 6-sided and 8-sided forms overlapping, spiralling and twisting in plan as they rose through the chamber. The 8-sided forms were not pure octagons; but squares with lopped off corners, perhaps inspired by Frank Dunlop's Young Vic (Frank and Richard were at the Old Vic theatre school together and had worked together at the Little Piccolo theatre company in Manchester).

But as the theatre had to be supported by the spanning trusses – this helpfully defined the available area for the geometry in plan.

Inspired by rose petals and numerical sequences in nature; Negri attempted a 5-sided geometry within this framework of constraint. But the sides were too long to create a good relationship to stage, and the angled junctions were awkward.

A seven-sided form was proposed as the best fit by the architectural team; and Negri's ceaseless miniature models began to coalesce with Levitt Bernstein's 2-dimensional plan and section drawings and the Module was born. Each level twisted one fourteenth in relation to the level below to emphasise the sharing of one room.

Axel recalls broad acceptance of the structural hangers, the visible services, the



celebration of junctions and vents and shock-absorbers by the theatre company. This was a theatre that was proud of its workings. No secrets in its architecture or its theatrical processes. Everything was laid bare.

It must have felt entirely appropriate that the newest and most innovative architectural techniques of the day were the best way for the demanding combination of the theatrical function and the Hall's geometry to be met.

For all the architectural dexterity, the structural ingenuity, and the theatrical fine tuning – it is perhaps the sheer act of piracy of placing the Module in the Hall that gives Royal Exchange Theatre to its iconic status.

Significance to architecture and artists

I think there is a further fascinating context of a strand of 1960s/early 70s theatre designers that were experimenting with large open stages (The Olivier at the National Theatre - in design in early 70s, Sheffield Crucible '71, The Vivian Beaumont in NYC '65, Chichester '62) who had clearly been informed by the fan-shaped pros houses in design at the same time (Brum Rep '71, Colchester Mercury, '71, Thorndike Leatherhead '69,).

The Royal Exchange, the Young Vic and the Cottesloe represented a mid-70s turning point led by an emerging new vanguard of theatre directors and designers, back towards audience density and compression that then informed theatre design around the world for years to come.

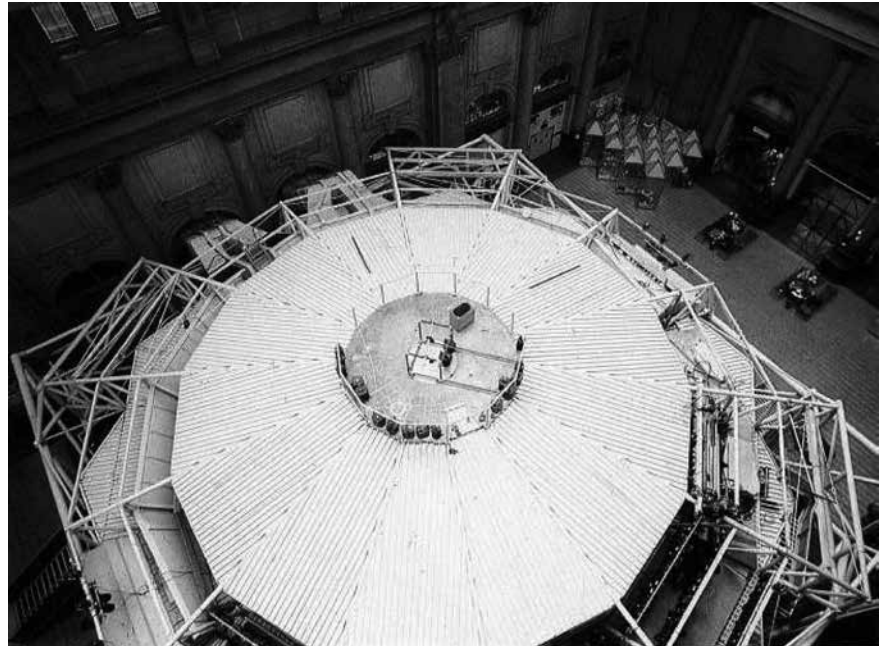
The subsequent Christs Hospital School, RSC Swan and Tricycle became the next generation inspired by this turning point.

Theatre design had changed forever. And the Module was the tightest, densest auditorium of them all.

Inch-perfect seating design and sightlines, densely packing the audience, it still sets a benchmark for compression and intimacy. And although history would seem to suggest that it's too particular a solution in too grand a collision of circumstances to be repeated, certainly – no one contemplating designing an In The Round space could do so without studying the Module.

Such is its significance for theatre architecture – but its impact on artists has also been profound.

Marianne Elliott (Michael's daughter) recently described at the Tonic Celebrates Symposium at Soho Theatre, how the Module more than any other theatre space, convinced her (as an



until then, reluctant theatre goer) of the vitality and immediacy of theatre production. And led her to pursue her career in theatre.

Impact

The RET is often in any theatre student's top 10 theatre buildings. It holds a special place in the heart of theatre designers and architects. It was selected by the Theatres Trust in 1999's 'Theatre' Magazine as the most important and influential theatre building of the 20th Century.

So it's perhaps something of a mystery that it has not been repeated, copied or improved upon anywhere else. No obvious successor. No evolution of the form





There's no RET v2 with a substage for example. No example using a town square instead of a big hall. No examples of a theatre surrounded by its own backstage (perhaps Ariane Mnouchkine's Theatre Du Soleil comes closest). Not even many seven-sided theatres...

However – so many realised elements of the 1976 Royal Exchange have found their way into critical theatre building vocabulary in subsequent decades.

The DNA lives on, even though a clone has not appeared. For example: within Levitt Bernstein's portfolio, Axel cites the celebration of exposed technical bridges and catwalks in their practice's subsequent work at St Lukes and the Kings Lynn Corn Exchange.

Pilbrow describes how the Module led to a re-discovery of the importance of 3-dimensional theatre, directly informing decades of development of the Georgian Courtyard form,

including the 1970s Cottesloe, the 1980's Tricycle and the 1990's Huddersfield Lawrence Batley Theatre. All of these examples featuring the insertion of a theatre frame inside a pre-existing volume.

The 2000's' Leicester Curve – draws on that inspiration of theatres surrounded by a lobby, with transparency provided by large opening walls rather than the Module's glazed panels.

The 2010's Royal Shakespeare Theatre – features backstage prop rooms and quick-change areas that wrap around the auditorium.

...and many more besides...

Perhaps after 40 years, something of the original rich influence is starting to fade. And as theatre continues to reinvent itself; other influences have a louder voice.

For example, the original Tricycle is now being altered; the frame removed, the hall that contains it addressed in a different and more direct way. Spaces that are 'found' are celebrating the original host hall in a more complimentary way – the loud insertion of an alien frame is perhaps more aggressive and less welcoming than the relationship between theatre and host than a millennial theatre-maker seeks.

Considering its DNA of provisionality, I wonder if anyone would ever dare to dismantle the Royal Exchange now?

... Based on their background in experimentation and provisionality; I wonder if Michael Elliott and Richard Negri would say that someone should...? Or if the essence of the bold original should somehow be re-examined and re-asserted?

What Next?

The current artistic team are battling with the 21st century political complexities of open and inclusive community access; seeking to demystify theatre and diversify its attendance.



A tough mission not helped by some of the hall's historical associations with the deplorable exploitation that occurred in the cotton trade.

There needs to be a rehabilitation of this space and a reminder to the city that, a theatre company reclaimed this building for the community many years ago with a world-class theatre design. The current team are dedicated to showing the community how accessible and fascinating and relevant the work the company produces in this peerless space is to them.

Sarah Frankcom and Mark Dobson's commitment to diversity and opportunity on stage and to the many diverse communities of Manchester is perhaps at least as inspirational and radical a move as the bravura of the original concept.

A building originally for wealthy merchants, that only admitted women in 1946, is open to all.

The spaceship is here for now – and it has claimed this space for you, whatever size, shape, or colour you are.

It continues to inspire and surprise, and though it could take off at any time, the current creative team hope to re-tune the Module and the Hall from the 1990's refurbishment to the jolt of juxtaposition of original state to really make it fly again.

Contributors

Irving Wardle, former drama critic for The Times who attended the opening night in 1976.

Axel Burrough – Partner of Levitt Bernstein Architects who led the auditorium design alongside fellow LBA partner Malcolm Brown for the original build in 1976, and stepped in when Malcolm became ill during the post-1996 refurbishment. Malcolm sadly died last year. Axel is the last surviving partner from the original design team.

Richard Pilbrow – Founder of TPC and original theatre consultant

Peter Longman – Former Director Theatres Trust (1996 – 2006)

Andy Hayles – Managing Partner of Charcoalblue and member of the theatre consultant team for the refurbishment in 1996

Bibliography

The Biggest Room in the World – RET
 Article by Richard Pilbrow and Michael Elliott
 Richard Negri website
 Manchester Royal Exchange Website



Images courtesy of:
 Manchester Royal
 Exchange, Axel Burrough