

How the Committees and Consultants Hijacked Theatre Architecture in the '60s plus a rescue plan for the late '90s

An extended version of the article entitled "On not building for Posterity" in the December issue of Theatre Crafts by IAIN MACKINTOSH, design director of Theatre Projects Consultants of London, New York, Los Angeles & Toronto

Most modern theatres were and still are conceived by committee and designed by committee. The director, unless a guru like Peter Brook in Paris (Bouffes du Nord, the late 70s or, most recently at the Majestic in Brooklyn for 'The Mahabharata'), Peter Stein in Berlin (the Schaubühne, mid 70s), Richard Schechner in New York (the Performing Arts Garage late 60s), or Michael Elliott in Manchester (the Royal Exchange, early 70s), gets shut out by the Building Committee while the architect is often neutered by a committee of consultants. The committees rule. Is this OK?

Perhaps we can best answer this by asking further questions. What today do we think of this first generation of committee designed theatres which opened in the 60s and early 70s? How do they differ from the pre-committee, pre-consultant theatres?

Make no mistake, this is the first generation where control of theatre architecture has been taken from both the leaders of the profession and the architects. Once before, in the late 18th century, the design consultant tried. Algarotti in 1767, Dumont in 1774, Roubo in 1771, Patte in 1782, Noverre in 1783 and Saunders in 1790 lectured patrons and architects equally on what made a good theatre. The effect was to encourage increases in capacity and to emphasise the romance of the scenic picture at the expense of the humanity of the individual performer.

Once the upheavals, both aesthetic and social, of the early 19th century were over, theatre architecture settled down into an almost universal mode which lasted for nearly a century to be ended by the First World War in Europe and the Moving Picture in America.

Eighteenth century theatres being sadly rare, the theatrical inheritance in both America and Britain largely consists of those theatres built between 1870 and 1914 in Britain, 1890 and circa 1925 in America. Between 1930 and 1970 80% to 90% of these buildings were destroyed. Today what remains are generally treasured. It is worth recalling how these pre-committee theatres were built and who called the shots.

Secrets of Success

The architects then were specialists.

J B McElfatrick (1829 to 1906), who built or worked on well over 300 theatres in North America, and Frank Matcham (1854 to 1920), who built nearly 200 in Britain plus a few in the colonies, were also in charge in that they were ruled by neither committee nor consultant. But they were supported by an army of craftsmen and a web of practices which, because they were not questioned, enabled the architects to have such a phenomenal high output of buildings.

The owners who employed them, although concerned about capacity, also recognised the limits imposed by technology, safety, real estate prices in city centres and most of all the craft of acting itself. The technical needs of the great touring companies, whether interpreted by the Syndicate in America or managers like Moss in Britain, were straightforward: thus in America it was simple to state the physical needs of a house if one hoped to qualify for a place on Henry Irving's next tour. Machinists backstage got the installation they needed and plentiful labour was employed to fit a quart of scenery into a pint pot of a stage. The house itself matched precisely the powers of projection of the actors and singers. Here the specialist plasterwork contractors offered a range of styles so that the astute architect could rapidly ring the changes from 'Louis XIV' to 'Second Empire' to 'Italian Renaissance' but, despite their different decorative liveries, these theatres were remarkable for their homogeneity as well as for their practicality.

The architects of such theatres were rarely thought of as serious architects by other more academic architects. In Britain only Phipps made it to the DNB. Few of the theatres devised this way are masterpieces. The exceptional quality of theatres such as the new Amsterdam in New York or Wyndham's in London is only now just beginning to be recognised, the architectural press's adulation for the restoration of Semper's Opera House in Dresden being a significant departure. But although not great architecture these buildings constituted successful architecture, if success is to be measured by the extent to which the building enhances the activity it houses and the frequency the architect is asked to repeat the same formula elsewhere for somebody else.

No committees here and no prima donnas

either. Rather a consensus on what a theatre auditorium should be: a festively decorated room with, at one end, a gilded and curtained proscenium arch. Beyond lay the magic of the actors' world which, when the great curtain was raised, would engulf and transport the audience. Nothing much had changed in the treatment of the room since 1767 when Algarotti had written "in fine the architects principal care should be to leave no article unremedied that might in any way impede the view; and at the same time to let no gaping chasm appear by any space remaining unoccupied and lost to every serviceable purpose. Let him also contrive that the audience may appear to form part of the spectacle to each other, ranged as books are in a library."

Yet, after all that plethora of design advice at the end of the 18th century, nobody in the 19th century wrote down what a theatre should be, they just built them and used them, over 500 in Britain and 2000 or more in America. Even the innovators at the turn of the century spent little time in questioning the buildings themselves. Shaw, Chekhov, Ibsen and O'Neill were campaigning for a New Theatre not new theatres and even Gordon Craig, who was a fervent admirer of the theatre of Irving which Shaw decried, was concerned with new scenography rather than new buildings.

Changes in the Twenties and after the Second World War

Two traumas changed all this: the first World War, which swept away so many traditions and social conventions in Europe, and the Moving Picture, which altered the geometry of the room to emphasise sight-lines to the screen with its consequent demotion of the audience from an active to a passive role. In post first World War Europe the contrast between an unbroken tradition prior to 1914 and a drastically reduced rate of theatre building when prosperity at last returned in the late 20s, is obvious. The 'CURTAINS!!!, or a New Life for Old Theatres' naturally took 1914 as its cut off date.

In North America the change in room architecture, brought about by the moving pictures at a time when live theatre was still booming, is less easy to perceive. The League of Historic American Theatres considered both 1910 and 1915 before