

# DOUBLE DUTCH

An account of two theatres in Enschede, Holland: the remodelling of an undistinguished 900 seat opera/playhouse of the nineteen fifties and the restoration of a magnificent 300 seat theatre of the nineteenth century.

IAIN MACKINTOSH of Theatre Projects Consultants.

"It does not interest me in the least what people want. What does interest me is why they want a thing." These are the words of Dutch architect Onno Greiner in an interview titled 'You must never do what a client asks', in *Bouw*, 13 November, 1982. This is a man who distrusts the ability of people to formulate what they want but is rather an architect deeply concerned with philosophy and dialogue. The philosophy is uncompromising: 'Engage my bureau, like my philosophy' could be the motto. The dialogue is extensive, exhausting and invariably successful. Again, I quote from the same interview: "What I would like is a continuous dialogue with my clients, a dialogue with brilliant partners so as to arrive ultimately at a controlled result."

At Enschede, we arrived at the completion of the project on the evening of 9th March, 1985 with a gala premiere by Opera Forum, the region's own opera company that is the only professional opera company in Holland outside of Amsterdam, of *Ariadne auf Naxos* by Richard Strauss. The preceding night the Nederlands Dance Theatre, with the new 65 piece orchestra in the pit, had danced three new Kylian ballets, one a world premiere. A week earlier the theatre had offered open house to every group in town with 20,000 visitors over a single weekend enjoying something somewhere in the centre. Yes, we had arrived, we being architect, a full design team state supported civic client and a trio of remarkably consistent users, manager Maarten Zweers, technical director Hans Bakke and catering manager Jele de Grauw all three of whom were involved in every decision taken over the five years of the project. Some explanation is needed of how these came together.

In Volume 12 No 2 (1978) of *SIGHTLINE* I wrote of my admiration of three distinguished buildings by Onno Greiner: the restoration of Holland's oldest theatre in Leiden; an arts centre at Biberach an der Riss in Southern Germany and another arts centre, this time in Holland at Amersfoort. In this article I described the generous open-hearted feel of Greiner's architecture which does not assert itself forward but rather gently guides the patron in the right direction encouraging the arts and theatre lover to participate in the life of these indoor towns which are Greiner's unique achievement. To those who want architecture for the performing arts to be exotic and exciting like an eastern bazaar the Greiner style will always feel cool. But to those brought up in the classical discipline his philosophy comes as a breath of fresh

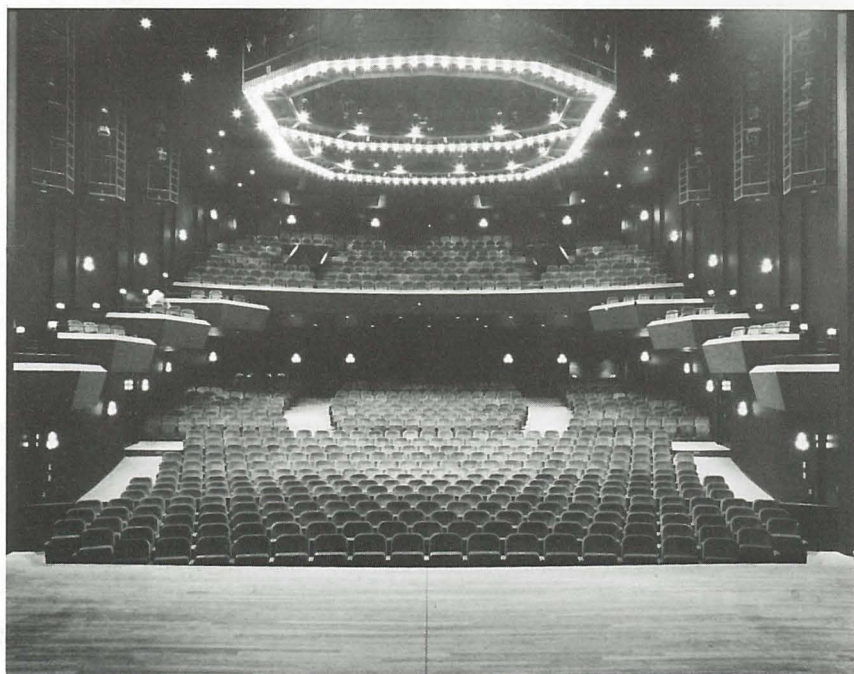
air: "You must give people a feeling of clarity. You must be able to orient yourself within a building, that to say consciously or subconsciously where you came from, where you are and where you are going".

Onno Greiner is a genuine internationalist who is prepared to conduct his dialogue in French, German or English as well as in Dutch. In 1947 he attracted attention at the Adelaide Conference on Building Theatres for Communities attended by our own Fred Bentham, Rod Ham and Richard Pilbrow. My introduction was the following year. In 1977 we shared a platform at the Munich Conference and in 1978 we collaborated in the National Theatre competition for Damascus and came third equal with Alvar Alto, the prize going to Renton Howard Wood Levin. Then early in 1980 came an invitation to Theatre Projects Consultants to advise in Enschede. Onno Greiner had done an initial scheme in 1976 which had been shelved. Enschede, a small town but also a regional centre a few miles from the German border, was once the centre of a once prosperous textile area but in the 1970's suffered severe financial problems. Yet in 1980 the project was revived thanks to generous central government support. Nevertheless there was only 15,000,000 guilders (approx £3.5m) to renovate an extraordinarily unattractive jumble of buildings which formed the regional arts centre, "Twentse Schouwberg".

The centre piece was an indifferent 900 seat tunnel of a theatre opened in 1954 rendered considerably worse in the mid 1960s by the slapping on of some cinema-like glitz finishes. The foyers had ominously low ceilings with, on each side, bay after bay of garderobes staffed with stern faced matrons ready to tear the coat off your back. The doors of the building were firmly locked until half an hour before the show when you might get a cup of coffee before the show provided you had booked your ticket in advance at the narrow guichet in the outer storm lobby. Upstairs there was a heavily decorated club room and space for functions that you could hire, for weddings or, possibly more appropriately, for wakes.

In all this dreariness two spaces shone through the gloom: a back stage bistro with the best steak I have ever tasted (Texas, Omaha, Calgary, Aberdeen and Melbourne included), and an exquisite galleried theatre space doing temporary service as a cinema - hardly recognisable for what it was, except to the 19th century theatrical tourist, which once meant Francis Reid but now includes most readers of *CUE*.

Inevitably, the involvement of the theatre consultant was primarily in the two auditoriums (the stages themselves were not touched, being satisfactorily straightforward already). Yet perhaps the most interesting part of the whole project concerned the foyers. In 1980 an independent appreciation had been written which endorsed Onno Greiner's intention to open up the theatre during the day. In October 1980 the Director, Maarten Zweers, and the City officer responsible, Mr Meijer, visited London to discover, amongst other things, how the bookshop and bars worked in the National Theatre foyers. Gradually a plan for Enschede's theatre emerged which retained the capacity of management to control the flow of people at all times without at any time losing the



The 900-seat large Opera/Playhouse