



The National Theatre paintframe.

Photo: Philip Vile

Blurred lines

A collective of theatres, international architects, and a few curious theatre consultants took part in a recent Charcoalblue roundtable discussing theatres across the globe and the changing nature of designing for artist use. Jerad Schomer, the New York Studio Principal, summarises the discussions.

The provocation from the extraordinary Stephen Daldry CBE, director and producer:

“A theatre with a foyer that is not connected to the work is over.

There is no foyer. There is no front of house...

There is no distance between artist and audience.

There is community. There is shared space.

Everything we understand about the relationship between audience and artist needs to be re-discovered.

That’s it.

Good luck.”

Anyone who has been to more than a handful of shows in the last several years will recognize something from those words in a production they’ve seen – theatre artists are pushing to engage their audiences from the minute they step off the street, blurring the lines between what used to be foyer and theatre. Theatres from Broadway and the West End to former industrial lofts in Australia and reclaimed factories outside Paris are responding to that push, allowing artists to craft detailed immersive experiences that can be used to acclimatise, surprise, educate, and disorient theatre-goers – all in the service of life-altering art.

From that provocation, the assembled group initially focused on a few significant examples.

The recent Broadway production of *The Great Comet of 1812*, designed by Mimi Lien, fully transformed their formal Victorian **Imperial Theatre** foyer into a Soviet era bunker, complete with concrete walls and fluorescent lighting, with the intent of audiences ‘turning their senses on’ from the minute they stepped inside.

The UK band The XX performed a series of shows, first at the Manchester International Festival, next at the **Park Avenue Armory** in New York, where they led audiences to a side entrance, through tunnels and back staircases, and into a tiny white room, where the band was already waiting. Only when the walls of the room dropped and the ceiling flew away, was it revealed that the audience was actually in the immense space of the Armory’s Drill Hall.

Taylor Mack’s *24 Decade History of American Popular Music*, performed for an audience of 700 by more than 100 performers continuously over a 24-hour period, took over the entire building at **St. Ann’s Warehouse, Brooklyn** – emptying storage spaces, turning seating risers into a sleeping area, an adjacent garden into a comfort tent, and the foyer into a gallery where costumes and props used earlier in the show were added and displayed.

These examples drive more questions than answers. How do you permit this for assembly? How do you give audiences transitional and comfortable space? How should the architecture serve the flexibility desired by artists without becoming a lost space most of the time? How do you create an immersive environment for one show when the public space might be shared with other venues?



The Cut Bar at the Young Vic.

St Annes Warehouse
in New York.

Photo: Dustin Nelson

“Theatre folk like to mess around with their buildings...They like to push the architecture, find the opportunities to create something special.”

Maybe most importantly, who should the architecture serve, the artist or the audience, and can it do both?

What we know is that theatre folk like to mess around with their buildings as much as they like to mess about on stage. They like to push the architecture, find the opportunities (usually in a nook, or a cranny) to create something special, to surprise their audiences, to challenge their audience and inspire them to return. As much as absolute freedom is a necessity for some artists, others produce their most interesting work responding to physical, and of course, budgetary constraints.

London’s Young Vic is always a benchmark for us – a compact and highly flexible theatre with a bustling foyer, bar, and good restaurant. But even at the Young Vic, there are certain boundaries.

Within the confines of each theatre space, the artists are given the freedom to craft the audience-to-actor relationship, but the secret to success is endowing the opportunity for change. After all, it can be a financial burden – no one should claim that flexibility comes cheap – but companies like the Young Vic find that it’s worth it.

With that lesson learned, how can we apply the concept of flexibility and the need to allow ample opportunity for change to the foyer?

The discussion moved to the other side of the blurry line, those traditionally private back of house spaces where it’s rumoured all the magic happens. In recent years, institutions like the **National Theatre** and **Leicester Curve** have opened their back of house, providing the public glimpses into scenery studios, construction and costume shops, and even rehearsal spaces. The **Theatre du Soleil at the Cartoucherie**, **Paris** divides their space to benefit the show, with auditorium, foyer, and even dressing rooms at times occupying the same essential volume. St. Ann’s Warehouse and The Park Avenue Armory in New York often employ the same trick.

But the feedback from theatre practitioners was that shared space doesn’t work for all, and sometimes the

surprise and privacy that controlled access provides are essential (you can’t watch the performers getting dressed!).

As inclusive designers, we have to allow for a generational change towards more openness while at the same time respecting boundaries of function, spirit, and societal norms.

The power of the inclusive over the exclusive is the source of great magic. When a building has the elasticity to stretch those boundaries to defy function, alter original spirit, and challenge societal norms, and still return to stasis, perhaps then it can truly be called a great theatre building.

So, how do we achieve that? The collective agreed a few helpful hints for the future.

Theatre buildings need personality and character, and over time they’ll develop a soul.

A theatre requires an extremely high level of functionality, but sometimes unprogrammed space is also really important – this means generous allowances, enough space for tweaks and temporary incursions, and also front and back stage areas for audience and artists to be social and relax.

It’s not glamorous, but we need some wires in the walls. The increasing use of digital technology in performance demands a response within the public space as well. This is not about investing in large screens – it’s about designing infrastructure to allow artists to tell their story, enhance a visit, and generally mess about.

Impermanence – can venues be designed with future renovations in mind? We shouldn’t make it so expensive to take down a wall or alter the size and shape of a bar, but we should maintain the ability to blur the lines between audience and performer. These fabulous buildings will (and must) evolve with time and we shouldn’t create architectural barriers which prohibit this change.

And finally, say yes to artists! But understand that sometimes saying yes means also setting boundaries.