Architecture and Drama: The Theatre of Public Space

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Many have commented on the essentially theatrical quality of urban life. Here, I offer a model of modern urban life developed in theatre, which explores how architecture might stage events of the city. The Theatre of Space (Théâtre de l’Espace) built for the 1937 Paris International Exposition and the performances played there can be read as a demonstration of spatial principles for modern public space (Figure 1 & 2). Designed by architect Edouard Autant and actress Louise Lara, performances in the theatre modeled the experience of an urban plaza by juxtaposing fictional narratives, improvisation, and real situations in multiple, simultaneous scenes that both surrounded and were surrounded by the audience. Based in modern performance techniques, the theatre proposed a means to stage urban life that challenged both traditional plaza design and the open-space plazas promoted by modern architects such as Le Corbusier. In the Theatre of Space and other
projects, Autant and others such as August Perret and Robert Mallet-Stevens developed an alternative modern architecture, which was allied with theatre and emerged out of an optimistic vision of a creative collective society. Ultimately, this vision of an artistic utopia did not prevail and Autant’s poetic interpretation of urbanism has been largely overlooked until recently. This paper will describe how Autant’s Theatre of Space defined a modern experience of urban life, touch on its historical significance, and finally posit why this particular model is relevant to the design of public space now.

In twenty years of work in theatre between the world wars, Architect Edouard Autant embraced performance as a means to explore how spaces act rather than how they look. In the context of their experimental company, Art and Action (Art et Action), Autant and Lara developed a repertoire of poetry, music, and classical literature interpreted through poignant spatial relationships between characters. In the later 30s, Autant organized Art and Action’s performances into five types of drama or “conceptions of dramatic structure,” some of which were based on performances he and Lara had seen on a trip to Soviet Russia (Fig. 3). For each dramatic type, he drew plans, sections and elevations for a theatre building that placed the audience in a strategic spatial relationship with the actors. In each of the theatres, performances were to absorb spectators in a complete experience of action in space.

Autant’s methodical approach to theatre design can be understood as a larger exploration of urban architecture. Each type of drama addressed a spatial situation characteristic of urban

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theatre</th>
<th>Genre of Performance</th>
<th>Architectural Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Théâtre Choreique</td>
<td>Choral Poetry, Vocal Music</td>
<td>Atmospheric Space, Constructing space through sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Choral Theatre)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Théâtre de l’espace,</td>
<td>Improvisation</td>
<td>Public Plaza, (presented in this article)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Theatre of Space)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Théâtre du Livre</td>
<td>Literary Readings with Commentary</td>
<td>Facades, Display Space, framing and windows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Theatre of the Book)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Théâtre de Chambre</td>
<td>Introspective Drama</td>
<td>Contrasting spatial positions: High/low, Near/Far, or separated by a wall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Chamber Theatre)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Théâtre Universitaire</td>
<td>Intellectual Drama</td>
<td>Space of Analysis (Lab)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(University Theatre)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 3 Art et Action’s Five Conceptions of Dramatic Structure. Autant designed five theatres that established spatial relationships between audience and actors specific to five types of drama. Each theatre also represented a common architectural situation and proposed a modern spatial solution. Performances enacted how the space might work both socially and symbolically in plays that told mythic stories.
life and each theatre proposed how architecture might shape those situations in a modern city. In the experimental realm of theatre, actors and spectators could then activate the space poetically in performance. Among these five, the Theatre of Space explores the spatial performance of the public realm.

For the 1937 Paris International Exposition, Autant built the Theatre of Space performance hall within a temporary exhibition building, which stood for one year (Fig. 1 & 2). He also wrote a cycle of plays for the space that Art and Action performed. Autant specified that five independent scenes proceed simultaneously, two scattered among the audience and three on a raised stage surrounding them. Each stage engaged spectators differently, dividing their attention spatially as well as among genres of performance, so what they saw was often a different scene than what they heard. Spectators experienced the scenes juxtaposed with one another, whether in a planned confluence or a chance intersection of sights, sounds, and narrative. In this sense, their experience of the play was not dictated by the playwright, but constructed in each spectator’s imagination from the fragments that he or she saw and heard.

The design of the Theatre of Space

As built, the theatre comprised a rectangular hall fifty meters in length that contained the audience in a smaller rectangular pit at the center, surrounded on three sides by a fixed, raised stage (Figure 1, 4 & 5). The exterior walls of the hall were pierced with glazed doors and windows that reached from the floor of the stage to a high ceiling. Panels of scenery were hung in front of the windows yet they never entirely obscured a view to the outside. Most of the roof was a skylight that could be opened completely in good weather, releasing the hall to the sky.
Years before the 1937 Paris Exposition, Autant had drawn plans for the Theatre of Space as a complete building (Figure 4 & 5). His sketches suggest that spectators would have experienced seven distinct layers of performance around them, which would have produced a complex spatial interplay (Figure 6).

First, spectators would have seen two improvised scenes immediately in front of them (D in Figure 4, also see Figure 7). Autant wrote that scenes in the lower areas among the audience should be improvised and engage spectators directly. Louise Lara trained a troupe of actors, the Comédie Spontanée Moderne, to play from a minimal script, taking roles familiar to spectators: a husband and wife or a tutor with students. At such close range, an actor’s gestures and facial expressions had to be both realistic and precise, their language colloquial as if they were ordinary people. Surrounded by spectators, the actors appeared close up, in the round, and lit from the skylights above. Their physical presence was emphasized by proximity and consistent shadows so the audience saw their movements in three-dimensional detail.

Second, behind these two scenes, spectators looked across to the other bank of seating. They could see expressions of others in the audience facing them, and reciprocally that audience saw them. In strong light from skylights and in full view, they were integrated into the performance.

Third, on the upper surrounding stage, three scenes appeared: one beyond the facing audience, a second scene to the side requiring spectators to turn, and a third going on behind them, reflected in a mirror so it seemed quite distant as a fourth level of action. Autant wrote that scenes on the upper stage, in contrast to those below, should be choreographed to create an overarching rhythm. Raised above the audience, actors performed in a theatrical style, moving in choreographed dance to create visual tableaux in an expansive realm around the audience. Actors also sang or chanted to create atmospheres of sound.

Autant’s section shows the stage floor sloped to create traditional up-stage and down-stage positions. However, the effect was the opposite of a traditional stage. The floor was not visible to spectators and its slope followed a spectator’s line of sight (dotted lines in Fig. 7), so actors’ positions in depth would be difficult to read. They would appear superimposed on one other. Windows behind the actors on the panoramic stage threw the figures into silhouette, further abstracting their movements. The windows also offered a view through the windows to trees and sky of the local landscape.
constituting a fifth layer of view. Above the actors, painted scenery presented a fictional setting as a sixth layer in juxtaposition with the real scene outside. Finally the open ceiling allowed a view of the sky that established the play’s position under the heavens, a position the script sometimes mentioned directly (Fig. 8).

This layered set of spatial relationships, from direct conversation to public performance to cosmic locale, recalls simultaneous experiences one might encounter in a city square. For example, the improvised scenes close at hand might be considered parallel to café conversations or discussions overheard at the next table, yet emphasized and explored in performance. The audience seated on the opposite bleachers heighten the sense of the reciprocal quality of seeing others and being seen. The choreographed scenes on the upper stages represent the repetitive daily rhythms of life in the city that form a background for what we perceive as our own spontaneous movements. The view out the windows is a reminder of the theatre’s location in Paris, while painted scenery, like building façades, refer to distant places and ideas. Architecture implicitly juxtaposes the here and now with formal or figurative references to elsewhere. Finally the skylights opened to the cosmos, locating all action in a real world ordered by the universal cycles.

In the parallel world of the theatre, Art and Action heightened the formal qualities of this layered urban experience so conversations were more vivid, distant scenes more composed, and the views of landscape and sky more lyrical. In the Theatre of Space, movements were composed in depth architecturally so a spectator saw most of them juxtaposed in one view, as if the city were compressed. Performances also made connections between the scenes, so words and gestures in one were answered in another scene beside or behind it, to build a web of correspondences that reflected poetically on similar correspondences one might encounter in the city. Performances had the quality of urban festivals, both in the experience of being surrounded by multiple scenes and in the drama of performance.

*Art et Action* built this layered architectural/theatrical model of urban life at the same time that many modern architects proposed similarly layered cities that separated pedestrian and vehicular traffic. However, Autant’s purposes were poetic rather than utilitarian. In the Theatre of Space Autant separated the elements (the scenes), then juxtaposed them with each other and with real views so they might interact to comment upon urban life. In this sense, plays in the Theatre of Space recalled ancient epic dramas staged outside in natural landscapes or city squares, where the moral and spiritual dilemmas explored in the story were played within the settings of civil society and under the heavens.

**Environmental Theatre in the 1930s**
Autant’s construction of performance and of public space were linked with a Socialist philosophy of art in which theatre and architecture were allied as models for a new society. In theatre, Erwin Piscator in Germany and Vsevolod Meyerhold in Russia lead a movement to do away with the box stage, to cross the proscenium arch, and to bring performances into the hall with the audience. They engaged architects Walter Gropius and El Lissitzky respectively to design environmental theatres that would engulf the audience spatially, erasing theatric distance. Spectators, they argued, should no longer be induced to project themselves into an enframed fictional world but should live theatre as they live in public in the city. Bringing audience and actors into the same space challenged the boundary between fiction and reality and constructed plays not as fantasy, but as meaningful stories, parables, or allegories that have a real effect in the world. This role for art was particularly pointed in post-revolutionary Russia where theatre specifically strove to engage the populace both physically and intellectually in revolutionary cultural dialogue. Theatre cast both actors and audience in roles that modeled the new society in which daily work was heroic and meaningful. Meyerhold wrote, “We have a new public which will stand no nonsense – each spectator represents, as it were, Soviet Russia in microcosm.” In this type of theatre, neither the audience nor the actors respond as individuals but as universal character types whose actions are real and present. The emotions of both audience and actors should be roused, not by losing themselves in fiction, but by sharing passions revealed in the drama. In modern theatre, the actors were tangible and their actions were larger than life. They stood among people to represent Everyman, exposing truths embedded in ordinary lives that touched a higher level of reality.

Structure of a Modern Public Space: Lessons for Today

Autant and Lara shared Meyerhold’s view that theatre could model the essential structure of a modern life through representation. In light of this agenda, the architecture of the Theatre of Space might be read as a demonstration – a testing ground – for modernity that stands
opposed to both traditional theatres and urban spaces. For example, traditional urban plazas defined the theatre of public life in a sharp hierarchy which elevated and framed public figures so their words could be heard and their actions appear large and significant. Traditional proscenium theatres then mirrored urban squares by separating a large audience from few actors who performed from a script written by an invisible author.

The design and performance of the Theatre of Space presents an alternate situation. The five scenes were equally weighted in importance, yet in different genres: music, dance, or drama. No single scene offered a total experience. In between the scenes, spectators discovered compound rhythms and poignant concurrences, like in a festival. The scenes on the lower stages modeled the casual, even private interactions of citizens while the upper stages raised actions to the level of performance where they became symbolically significant. On the upper stage, a variety of architectural tricks such as sloped floors, mirrors, and backlighting crafted how the performances looked. However the two areas remained linked. A word or action on the lower stage could affect actions on the upper stage, and characters could traverse from one to the other, changing their roles in the story. In the Theatre of Space, modern public urban space was still hierarchical yet a hierarchy broad enough to include many different kinds of actions by many different authors. And the boundaries between strata were permeable enough for drama in motion from one to another. In Autant’s plays, both spectators and actors had parts facing one another in conversation, while some rose to the upper stage to set the rhythms that ordered life and made it meaningful.

The theatrical, urban model offered here by Autant, Lara and Art and Action raises several questions for contemporary architects. I have focused on two of them: How might architecture more effectively, or honestly, stage contemporary urban life to make our roles and relationships more vital? How might theatre and performance serve architecture as a testing ground for ideas?

1. *Art et Action* published several small books including plays, descriptions of five theatrical types, and a course in improvisation. Most of these are collected in *Cinq conceptions de structures dramatiques modernes*, 13 parts in one volume vols. (Paris: Corti, 1952). The only comprehensive study of their work is Michel Corvin, *Le théâtre de recherche entre les deux guerres: Le laboratoire Art et Action, Théâtre années vingt* (Paris: La Cité-L’Âge d’Homme, 1976) I have found only one mention of their work in English: Arnold Aronson, *The History and Theory of Environmental Scenography* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1977) p. 128. The principal resource for this work is the *Art et Action* archive located at the *Archives des Arts du Spectacle, Bibliothèque Nationale de France*. This archive includes typescripts of plays, a treatise on theatre by Autant, models of five theatre buildings, and scrapbooks containing notes and photos of performances. *Art et Action* performed modern works including plays by Paul Claudel, Max Deauville, René Ghil, and Louis Aragon. Autant wrote plays that reinterpreted classic literary characters and stories including Voltaire’s *Micromegas*, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, and Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

ii. Autant and Lara went to Moscow in 1928. They describe Russian theatre dedicated to recitals of literature, “Theatre of the Book” In *Cinq Conceptions de Structures Dramatiques*. Lara described improvisation and children’s puppet theatre in Louise Lara, *L’Art dramatique russe in 1928* (Paris: Bergerac; imprimerie de la Lemeuse, 1928). They saw Chamber Theatre presented by Alexandre Tairov both in Moscow and when Tairov’s company performed in Paris. In 1933, they visited Poland to see an environmental theatre (or Theatre of Space) designed by Szymon Syrkus and Zygmunt Tonecki.


iv. While Autant’s texts were preserved in the archive, there are few photos of the performances. The *Théâtre de l’espace* did not receive the budget or attention of other areas of Tournon’s building. It was finished late and the performances were underfunded and rushed.

v. *Art et Art et Action, "Théâtre de l'espace,"* p. 46.


Barris, “Culture as Battleground” p. 111. Vsevelod Meyerhold used such techniques in the early 1920s. “Epic drama” was developed as a theoretical genre by Erwin Piscador in the 1920s in Germany and is better known in the US through Bertolt Brecht’s plays. See C. D. Innes, *Irwin Piscador’s Political Theatre: the development of Modern German Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

In the context of Soviet Russia, Meyerhold asked how theatre could “imbue spectators with that ‘life-giving force’ (to quote Comrade Stalin) which will carry the masses forward to a world of new revolutionary creative effort?” In “The Reconstruction of the Theatre” in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p. 270.


Autant and Lara, “La philosophie du théâtre,” p. 5. He was referring to the broad role of art as an experimental field that seeks truth. He quoted Oscar Wilde, “There are times when art attains the dignity of manual labor.”