THEATRUM MUNDI

Good homes for art

Format Article
Published 17 July 2013
Author Richard Sennett
See

In June this year, I attended at the Barbican Centre in London a revival of Einstein on the Beach. This five-hour, multi-media collage of music, dance, and scene-making first appeared at New York's Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1978[1], setting a Wagnerian standard for modern performance art. Among its other provocations, 'Einstein' encouraged people to wander in and out at will during its five hours,—take a coffee or cigarette break or, today, check your mobile phone.

This invitation to the audience is a small signal of a much more sweeping idea about the experience of theatre. Today, we want to draw performer and public closer together than in the past; in particular, modern ideas of performance space seek to break the rigid, nineteenth century etiquette of a passive, silent, still spectator focused on the stage; instead modern performing stages celebrate informality. Dancers, musicians, and actors routinely do pre- and post-performance chats; again, when I was a working musician forty years ago, we never spoke to the audience during a performance, while today young musicians sometimes act like talk-show hosts onstage. Informality has a political undertow: because experience in the theatre is looser, it seems freer, and therefore more democratic.

There's an architectural side to loosening up, drawing closer the performer and the public. Informality is a quality designers seek by breaking down the boundaries between stage and street, by designing theatres which are intimately related to their surroundings in the city. I'm going to explore this informalising, melding impulse, both inside and outside the concert hall. I'll show how designers work with two issues to make relaxed homes for art; in technical jargon, achieving this goal involves the design of porosity and of presence. I'll show how these architectural concepts apply particularly to music venues. But I want to conclude with some reasons why, even so, a good home for art should not feel like your own home.

The Temple of Art

The first thing to be said about the impulse to experience art informally is that it is nothing new. In eighteenth century theatres

people chatted amongst themselves or munched on the odd chicken-drumstick during the course of a performance, they wandered 'Einstein'-fashion in and out of theatres at will, yet were also deeply engaged with the drama or music performed whenever they attended to it, shouting out comments to actors or calling musicians to repeat a movement, aria, or even a particularly choice phrase. Informal meant engaged, with the audience in control.

Performing artists increasingly took back control as the nineteenth century progressed. Even in Beethoven's day efforts were made to stop audiences talking while musicians were playing. The advent of gas-light in the nineteenth century meant it became easier to darken the hall and light up the stage, and so focus audiences on the performer rather than on each other. As the size of concert halls increased, so did their impersonality; by the time of the Palais Garnier in Paris [2] and the Ringstrasse theatres built in Vienna, these halls were truly monumental edifices in which thousands of people attended in the dark, silent and unmoving, to the art of a relative few or to just a single individual.

Changes in the status of the performer were bound up with these theatres. The performer's status rose; this was particularly true by the 1830s for musicians, who in that age of high Romanticism were more treated as seers than as servants of the public. If you believed, as Victor Hugo did, that 'music is our window on the soul,' then it became possible to declare, as did Franz Liszt, that 'the concert is … myself.' The technical demands of music in the Romantic era helped widen the gulf between artist and public; an amateur pianist can sort of scrape his or her way through a Mozart sonata, but is defeated at the outset by the Liszt b-flat sonata: the artist inhabits a sound world you cannot. This gulf translated into theatre architecture like in the mystische Abgrund Wagner designed for Bayreuth; [3] a leather hood covers the pit so that unseen and 'mystically' the orchestral sound floats into the hall.

For dramatists like Brecht early in the twentieth century, or choreographers like Tino Sehgal early in the twenty-first century, making performing spaces more informal is their refusal of the Romantic cult of the supreme artist; they want to take down the temple of art, and to return to the spectator his or her primacy, such as existed in the eighteenth century. For modern theatre architects, it's not so much a matter of either-or, a question of who is in control. Rather, informality has translated into two truly vexing problems, those of designing porosity and presence.

Porosity

This word means in design making the skin of a building porous between the inside and outside; a sky-scraper with a ground-level entrance is not porous, a sky-scraper with many entries and exits on the ground is. Porosity has come to be associated also with flexibility, so that space inside and outside can be configured and reconfigured in many ways. That combination of permeable and

flexible has particularly marked the modern design of performing-arts spaces.

An example comes from projects of the architect Andrew Todd, who has worked for a long time with the director Peter Brook, and who recently made an enormous performing-arts space on the docks of Marseilles. Here's a prototype of a new, simple structure, made entirely of sheets of high-tech plywood, meant for dance, music, or theatre, flexible and porous in character, since the panels can easily be re-configured inside and outside and allow people to move around free before, during, and after a performance. One virtue of this theatre is that you can dismantle the panels, load them on a flat-bed truck, and take the theatre anywhere. Florian Beigel's Half Moon Theatre in Mile End Road in London is a fixed structure similarly seeking to create a porous relation between the street and the stage.

When the doors are open in structures like these two, musical performance radically changes its character for those listening outside; reverberation return – the reflection from walls of sound coming back to the listeners – diminishes, and the music heard outside begins to mix with ambient sounds in the environment. If you are a composer like Brian Eno, who works with ambiance expressively, that's fine, but would you like to listen to Schubert's 'Winterreise' mixed in with honking autos or, more kindly, accompanied by birds singing at dusk? Perhaps indeed you would; my own most intense experience of this song cycle occurred lying on the grass outside a rehearsal studio with its doors open, looking up at the stars while the music floated out into the night. In any event, this is the kind of question that informal architecture poses to listening.

There are ways of creating a sense of visual porosity even while hewing to the theatre as an acoustically sealed space. A brilliant example is Eric Parry's new music hall made in Wells. Parry is perhaps best-known as the architect who has remade the St. Martins-in-the-Fields complex in London. In Wells, by sinking the stage below grade and surrounding the hall with windows at grade level, Parry seeks to make the listener aware of the outside even when insulated from its sounds.

The tie between inside and outside that modern design seeks is an urbanistic as well as architectural matter, which means the role a building plays in its surroundings. The Barbican Centre[4] in London exemplifies ground-zero in this regard, a perfect example of how not to make a good modern home for art in the city. Its concert halls are buried deep inside a housing complex that in turn shuns any embrace of the surrounding city; these are dungeons for art. By contrast, the terracing surrounding the South Bank Centre in London, a renewal project of many hands, now embraces the outside, and promotes informal lounging about, eating, skate-boarding, shopping for books, and the like, even though the South Bank architect is of the same concrete-brutalist sort as the

Barbican.

An exemplary American example of drawing in the public is the renovation done by Elizabeth Diller of Alice Tully Hall,[5] the chamber music venue for Lincoln Centre in New York. The glasswork here is particularly impressive in dissolving the divide between inside and outside, even though Tully Hall itself remains an artificially-lit closed chamber; a particularly nice touch is the 'prough' on the street which creates an outdoor sitting space looking in.

'Porosity' has become a visual benchmark for success in designing cultural centres; free-flow seems to be a card inviting the public to hang out on a Sunday afternoon at these places. Sponsors have hoped, moreover, that informal space will draw new audiences to artistic events within. Even in a rarefied venue like Tully Hall, devoted to classical chamber music, this can in fact happen, as when a young man encrusted with nose, lip, and ear studs told me at an evening devoted to songs of Duparc and Faure that he was ' checking out' what was on offer. But the design of 'presence' for a performing arts space works against such hopes; it involves technical issues which work against porosity.

The Design of Presence

'Presence' means feeling engaged right here, right now; in the theatre it can feel something like sitting expectantly on the edge of your seat; 'right here, right now' is the sensation philosophers name 'immanence.' In music, the technological revolution of our times seems to take away that urgent immediacy.

I've about two thousand CDs downloaded on my Apple iTunes; this music is instantly available to me whenever I want to listen, which I do intently on airplanes, but casually when doing the dishes or reading the newspapers. To the critic Walter Benjamin, the modern 'age of mechanical reproduction' threatens to diminish the gripping power – what he called the 'aura' – of art, so that music in particular is reduced to mere ambient background, Mozart becoming like sonic wall-paper.

What does live performance do for us that Apple iTunes cannot? What is presence about in a live performance? One element is contrary to the ethic of relaxed informality. Anxiety rules many if not most performers back-stage before a performance: will he or she suffer a memory lapse? An equal, if more subterranean, unease pervades the audience: will someone suffer a heart attack, or just as bad, will a mobile phone go off? Paradoxically, tensions of these sorts contribute to the sense of occasion, of presence, on both sides of the footlights. Uncertainty plays a positive role in making performance come alive – which is why many musicians prefer to make live recordings, even though they could achieve more surgically-precise results in the recording studio.

For the designer, though, presence involves calculating certainties in the theatre. We've seen the problem of sound rebound appear in Andrew Todd's design for a knock-down theatre. More technically, in one aspect this involves the 'initial time-delay gap,' a phenomenon first studied by the mid-twentieth century acoustician Leo Beranek. This is the gap between the initial arrival of sound to a listener's ears and its first reflections from the other surfaces in a room. The gap is good, since it provides us the sense of being enveloped stereophonically by sound, as one acoustician puts it by feeling 'inside' the sound rather than outside 'observing it through a window.'

How long should this gap be? In great nineteenth century venues like Boston's Symphony hall[6], it was more than 2.2 seconds; in a small venue like King's Place[7] in London, it can be reduced to under 1.5 seconds. New materials in the walls, ceiling, and floors today help acoustic designers like Paul Gillieron manipulate the 'initial time-delay gap;' others who remade the New York State theatre in 1999 provided compensating resonance by hidden electronic means, a much-debated 'wired live' technique.

The point here is that we are designing presence in ways which are flexible yet anything but informal. Artifice provides the sensation of immediacy; calculation produces presence. Once his or her nerves are conquered, I'd say a great singer is as much the designer of presence, of the gripping moment, as is the acoustician. In theatre design, moreover, we are trying to manipulate phenomena like the initial time-delay gap to unify time and space in the hall; you feel in your ears more fully what you see onstage. With the result that the players loom larger in our experience, as close to us sonically as visually.

Seeing clearly is the other way architects seek to design presence. Rather than perforating a membrane, as in porous design, the goal here is to make all visual obstacles between disappear, to remove any hint of a membrane or visual filter. As with acoustics, the designer needs to cope with the propensities of the spectator's body, notably its cone of vision. Human eyes can focus on objects as coherent ensembles within a 60-degree cone but stages permit people to use only the upper half of this cone, seeing 30 degrees around. Still, were an auditorium entirely and evenly lit, the eye would take a lot of material extraneous to the stage. We can use lighting to focus the view; by seeing less fully, they can concentrate more. Yet there is a more difficult issue of visual intimacy which architects deal with in terms of sight lines.

The interior of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden[8][9] is a prime example of the traditional horse-shoe theatre; by the late seventeenth century in northern Italy this kind of theatre became nearly synonymous with opera as an art form. The social idea embedded in the horse-shoe is that the audience has as clear a sight of itself as of the stage – but only some of itself. You were meant to see rulers in a high, central royal box, aristocrats in

lesser boxes ringing them; stalls in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were for fashion-spectators of a lesser rank; no one look up to the masses of poor people in the amphitheatres, who had poor views of the stage and no view of the kings, aristocrats, and fashionables below.

One extreme corrective to the status-bound sight-line is the Teatro Della Compagnia designed by Adolfo Natalini for Florence in 1987. The sight-lines here are all orientated forward rather than laterally, giving an equally clear view of the stage and no view of your neighbour; the few boxes to the side are the cheapest seats in the house because vision is restricted. It's in my judgement a bare, grim space of visual equality, rescued outside by its discrete insertion into the street-fabric of Florence. An opposite extreme is theatre in the round [10] [11] – more usually today theatre in the square – where audiences sit on three or four sides and players either fill in the centre space or complete the fourth side, as a modern adaptation of the old Elizabethan thrust stage. In this solution to the socially-exclusive sight-lines, the audience is put on an equal footing, seeing each other equally clearly, but at a price; the experience of connection is diminished, at least in musical performances.

Whereas actors and dancers can feel comfortable filling up the central space theatre, moving around constantly, musicians are stationary creatures. Thus, if you are performing dead-centre, half the audience sees you in profile, or worse, has a clear sight only of your back. If you perform at an open slide, many in the audience will have to twist their necks to see you, which is not comfortable for long periods of time; people start to twist and squirm in their seats.

Banishing social hierarchy is a good idea in general, but is visual democracy what theatre is all about? Natalini's theatre is a rigidly uniform version of equality; there's no mutual awareness. Theatre in the square is looser in form, and the audience is much aware more of one another on the same footing, yet in a musical performance the players as well as the audience pay a price for this kind of equality; the difficulties of sight-lines diminish his or her own presence.

The design of porosity and of presence show that intimacy is full of ambiguity and inconsistency – this is as true onstage as it is in bed. Moreover, there's an argument to be made against drawing performer and audience too close, not a Romantic argument about the supremacy of art, but one based on the ordinary, universal experience of performing. I'll conclude by showing what it means in the design of stages.

Distance

The eighteenth century philosopher Denis Diderot was the first to argue that a certain distance between performer and public is

necessary for a musician or act to do his work well. Diderot advances this view in a brief essay, ‘The Paradox of Acting’; he writes that the performer has to learn to manage his or her own emotions, listening to the music he or she makes and judging it, without being swept away as an audience might be. Which is perhaps just to say, performing requires self-control. But Diderot goes a step further: the musician needs to learn to relax on stage, to banish nerves; that, too, can be achieved only by stepping back from the public, forgetting that a thousand people are listening — a matter of feeling alone with oneself on stage, free from self-consciousness. These two elements, listening to oneself critically and banishing nerves, combine to create Diderot’s paradox, embodied in the phrase ‘expressive distance.’

It’s a phrase which translates into action. People fortunate enough to hear Arthur Rubinstein play saw a man who put everything into his hands, made no facial grimaces, conveyed, as he once said to me, that ‘in public I am still alone with the music; the audience is both there and far away.’ Diderot’s paradox. Pianists who move around a lot when they are playing, like Martha Argerich, are releasing tension; she says she does it to relax her body rather than show the audience how much she is feeling. Diderot’s paradox.

For actors, the wearing of a mask is an artifice which can particularly aide in relaxing the body. The mime/dramaturge Jacques Lecoq explored how to make this happen in modern theatre by contriving a neutral mask for performers. He trained first fellow mimes and then actors like Ariane Mnoutchkine to release their bodies by wearing this mask, pouring all their energy into hand, arm, and leg movements – the actor’s equivalent of Rubenstein at the piano. The formal, rigid mask enabled them to perform more expressively.

The current ethos of informality and intimacy treats such impersonal behaviour as cold. But if formality distances people, it also can join them together in rituals, which are a kind of shared performance. Think of taking Communion; anyone can do it, but they have to do it just right; the rules of the ritual have to be rigorously observed. In secular rituals, too, distance and rigor rule, as in the dressing up for a performance. Though traditional concert tuxes for men are a nightmare, with their vented armpits and strangling bow ties — still, we want to dress up in some way for the occasion; dressing up is part of the ritual of performing. Indeed, the rituals of dressing up, silence, and stillness are behaviours which link the audience to the performer, and these formalities heighten the experience of music; no one puts on a suit to listen to a CD at home, and in that ritual-less state the music is less gripping / by chance, informally.

These, then, are reasons for thinking of the theatre or concert hall as a special place in which Diderot’s paradox comes to life and in which a formal ritual envelops our experience of art. The cult of

informality, with its dark sister ‘accessibility’ – so favoured by arts administrators – may actually do damage to art. This view would argue against much of the current effort in design to make good homes for the performing arts. How could the alternative, art as ritual, translate into physical space?

One stunning traditional model haunts the modern imagination of how to create such a space: Richard Wagner’s creation of a theatre at Bayreuth, a temple devoted to his own operas designed to lift the audience out of its everyday pre-occupations. Let’s glance briefly at one physical move he made to create this temple to art: it is the leather-covered hood he placed over the orchestra pit, a device he named mystische Abgrund, the mystical abyss. This device creates a physical, impenetrable distance between audience and orchestral performer; the orchestral sound comes from somewhere un-seeable, seeming to envelope the theatre magically. The Wagner hood was a musical equivalent of the Lecoq mask. Indeed, the hood has Lecoq-like effects on the performer. Playing underneath this hood was in my day an almost unbearably sweaty experience; still, protected from the public, we felt a certain freedom to do the arduous work Wagner demanded of us, focused on the music alone. Bayreuth also created a physical mis-en-scene for audiences, like its hard benches, which made people feel that they were at a demanding occasion; unlike the ‘Einstein’ performances, there was no physical relief.

The temple of art is the traditional model, and I’m not arguing that we should return to it, either in its physical details or its mystique. I am saying that there are good reasons for thinking that the porous, informal spaces designers want to make today may miss something essential about the experience of performance. There must be a way to combine the visual virtues of porosity and the clarity of sight lines with Diderot’s idea of expressive distance, combine these architecture virtues with the ritual character of musical performance. I’d like to conclude by showing just one musical space which does in fact reconcile the visual virtues of openness and informality with the peculiar experience of making and listening to music.

This is Hans Scharoun’s Philharmonie in Berlin. The sight-lines problem is brilliantly resolved so that the audience can see one another equally, yet focus on the stage. Acoustically, the hall is a marvel; without Wagnerian trickery, the sound appears to come from everywhere. Perhaps the most experimental aspect of Scharoun’s design is its version of porosity; the theatre can be entered in many ways, and the building reaches tentacles, as it were, to the outside, yet, for ease of access, a clear differentiation is made between stage and street. Like Frank Gehry’s Disney Hall in Los Angeles[12], which is the architectural child of the Berlin Philharmonie, the specialness of an open, easily penetrable space is emphasised.

As an urbanist, I believe that informal, often messy conditions are

key in bringing streets to life. As a one-time performer and now listener, I've come to appreciate that music requires more formal and hermetic space. The architectural issues touched on here, reflect a much greater problem: what kind of community do we experience in art? Perhaps, opposed to the dictum the more informal, the more mutually engaged, we need to contemplate another version of community in the performing arts: the more formal the roles of performer and spectator become, the more they are bound together.

---

1. Premiered in July 1976 in Europe at Avignon Festival in France and in America in November 1976 at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York. Sources Wikipedia and Washington Post.
2. Credit: Scarlet Green, profile: http://www.flickr.com/people/9160678@N06/
3. Source: www.rizi-online.de, credit: Rico Neitzel
4. Credit: Andy Roberts http://distributedresearch.net/blog/
5. Credit: FLYPmedia source: www.flypmedia.com
6. Credit: Malcolm Bull, profile: http://www.flickr.com/people/22310427@N08/

1. Credit: King's Place London. Profile: http://www.flickr.com/people/kingsplace/
2. May only be locals that know Covent Garden refers to the Royal Opera House.
3. Credit: Marylebone RS, profile: http://www.flickr.com/people/25455214@N08/
4. Credit: Josh D Brown, profile: http://www.flickr.com/people/89407885@N00/
5. Credit: www.royalexchangetheatre.co.uk
6. Credit Fvancini, profile: http://www.flickr.com/people/filippovancini/