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College of Art



# Understanding and working with post-War theatre buildings

c. 1950-1985

A workshop report by Alistair Fair



## Introduction

**The Post-War theatre building boom brought new theatre buildings to communities nationwide. These buildings were statements of functional architecture and civic pride, they attempted to reimagine what a democratic space could be. Looking at the stock of theatres from that period the architecture divides people but they often remain thriving centres for their local area. Whilst we still view many of these venues as modern some are approaching 60 years old and in need of substantial works and maintenance. Renewals of the National Theatre, Chichester Festival Theatre and Liverpool Everyman have taken place over the past few years. Theatres Trust has recently supported the planning application for Warwick Arts Centre's refresh and given a small grant to the Leatherhead Theatre for works on its concrete exterior. These theatres are a vital part of the cultural infrastructure and so Theatres Trust looks to pool the experience of operators and specialists to protect their future use.**

**Working with Alistair Fair, the University of Edinburgh and the Twentieth Century Society, we convened a group of people with an interest in this field to explore the context and particular challenges facing theatres of this era. This joint publication summarises what this group discussed over the course of the day. This is an ongoing dialogue and one that will continue to be relevant throughout the lives and refurbishments of these theatres.**

Jon Morgan, Theatres Trust

**In April 2017, a workshop at Theatres Trust brought together people who work in theatres built between the 1950s and the 1980s with others interested in the history and conservation of these buildings. The aim was to put post-war theatre architecture in context and to explore the opportunities and challenges it poses. The event was led by Dr Alistair Fair, an architectural historian at the University of Edinburgh, which generously supported the cost of the workshop through a Knowledge Exchange grant.**

## Historical context

Alistair Fair began the day with a brief history of post-war theatre architecture. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, the landscape of regional theatre in Britain was transformed by the construction of new buildings, many of which were subsidised by the public purse. The arts became, in effect, a cultural arm of the Welfare State. The Arts Council of Great Britain was founded in 1945 and provided a steadily increasing amount of funding for the country's Repertory companies. The Local Government Act of 1948 allowed local authorities to use a portion of

their 'rates' income to support not only the practice of the arts but also the buildings in which the arts were housed. The Belgrade Theatre, Coventry (1958), was the country's first new civic theatre, and the first all-new professional theatre to be built in Britain since the 1930s.

However, local spending on the arts remained patchy during the 1950s. Central government and the Arts Council were increasingly keen to encourage local authorities to spend more. To that end, the Labour government of 1964-70 oversaw substantial increases in the Arts Council's budget, including the introduction of the 'Housing the Arts' programme as a way to part-fund capital projects. 'Housing the Arts' grants rarely covered more than 20% of a project's total cost, and so were usually coupled with funding from local government and grant-giving foundations. Many Repertory companies also proved successful in raising substantial sums from their audiences and the wider community.

The completion of the Belgrade Theatre inaugurated a wave of theatre construction which continued until the early 1980s. In 1981, the architect Roderick Ham, who had made a specialism of theatre design, noted that 'there has been a boom in theatre building which has tailed off not only for the obvious economic reasons, which have affected all kinds of development, but because most of the existing repertory companies have been rehoused in this period.' Between the early 1960s and 1980, the Theatre Planning Committee of the Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT) commented on more than 200 projects.

The new civic and repertory theatres were conceived locally rather than being 'planted' by the Arts Council, but they shared some common assumptions. It was often argued during the 1950s and 1960s that the kind of work they staged was culturally valuable and that it should be made accessible to as many people as possible. Although this definition of 'good' theatre might now seem narrow and perhaps paternalistic, egalitarianism was an important consideration and was genuinely meant. There was a real sense of optimism, and a belief that the arts had a central role to play in the development of a modern, culturally literate Britain.

The potential for a new theatre to embody civic pride was also much mentioned. Accordingly, some theatres were conceived as substantial public buildings, including not only the National Theatre but also major regional venues such as Nottingham Playhouse (1963) and the Crucible, Sheffield (1971). Sometimes a 'civic centre' location was deliberately selected to suggest the idea of the subsidised theatre as a public amenity, as was the case for the new Birmingham Rep (1971) or Theatr Clwyd, Mold (1976). Other theatres, however, were embedded in larger developments: Leicester's Haymarket Theatre (1973) was, like Derby Playhouse (1975), constructed within a shopping centre. Universities often built theatres and arts centres. At a time when many universities sought to move away from narrow subject specialisms, it was frequently suggested that drama education and the experience of professional performance would enrich students' educational experience and broaden their cultural horizons.

Foyers were often generously sized and open all day, typically including a coffee bar, restaurant, and space for small exhibitions. The idea that the theatre would become a 'community centre' was frequently mentioned, but selling drinks and food also brought useful income, and was important in attracting visitors in the case of those theatres like Eden Court, Inverness (1976), which had a regional catchment. Auditoria varied in their design, with some theatres notably rejecting the previously dominant proscenium-arch format in favour of 'open stage' arrangements. These layouts were intended to bring actor and audience into a close relationship; it was thought that they would also productively emphasise the 'live' nature of theatre. However, new proscenium-arch theatres continued to be built, and attempts were made to down-play the arch by, for example, introducing adaptable 'forestage' areas.

The new post-war theatres were the work of a wide range of architects. Some designers, notably Roderick Ham and Peter Moro, specialised in theatre architecture. Ham's first theatre was the well-received Thorndike in Leatherhead (1969); Moro, meanwhile, had overseen the detailed design of the Royal Festival Hall (1951) before cementing his reputation with Nottingham Playhouse (1963) and Hull's Gulbenkian Centre (1969). Ham and Moro produced a number of important publications and contributed to the ABTT. Several other architectural practices built up a portfolio of theatres: among them we might include Howell Killick Partridge and Amis (beginning with the Young Vic in 1970), Law and Dunbar-Nasmith (Inverness [1976], Pitlochry [1981]), and Renton Howard Wood Levin (Crucible, Sheffield [1971], Warwick Arts Centre [1974]). The profession of the theatre consultant also played an increasingly important role, especially when an architect was new to theatre. In such cases, the consultant might not only specify technical equipment but also advise on conceptual matters. Richard Southern, a historian, was one of the first to work in this way in the late 1950s.

Nearly sixty years after the opening of the Belgrade Theatre, many of the major civic and Repertory theatres of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s remain important venues. Changes in theatre funding as well as changing fashions mean many are now used in ways that contrast with the intentions of their designers and initial managements. Some have become tired and not all are loved by their audiences. Yet many have proved resilient in being able to accommodate change. More generally, the public architecture of this period is increasingly well-regarded and, indeed, fashionable. A number of theatres are now 'listed' as structures of special architectural and historical interest, and some have been creatively refurbished.

## Client and architectural perspectives

The workshop then turned to consider the experience of working with post-war theatres in the twenty-first century. From a client's perspective, David Beidas

(New Stages Ltd) outlined his career running the Roses Theatre, Tewkesbury (1975), and the Belgrade, Coventry (1958), where between 2005 and 2008 he oversaw the refurbishment and extension of the theatre. The £10m project, which added a second auditorium and rehearsal room and extended the theatre's foyers, included the restoration of the public areas of the original theatre. Informed by a Conservation Management Plan, several decades' worth of accretions were stripped back to reveal the clarity of the original design, as is detailed by Alan Short and others in the book *Geometry and Atmosphere* (and as is also featured in the film of the same name, which can be viewed online). Since the completion of the Belgrade project, David has worked as an independent consultant specialising in the management of Arts capital projects. He has been client representative for the recent refurbishment of Birmingham Repertory Theatre (1971) and is currently working with the West Yorkshire Playhouse (1990).

David outlined ten key principles for clients which, he suggested, are especially pertinent to post-war buildings:

- 1. Always start with a vision for the building and the organisation**
- 2. A capital project will cost more and take longer than you anticipate**
- 3. Survey the building before you start: there will always be things that aren't on the drawings you already have, if, in fact, you actually have drawings**
- 4. Get your appointments right at the start**
- 5. You will drown in consultants**
- 6. Don't underestimate the extra workload that a capital project will generate. Secure extra resources if you can.**
- 7. 'Accessibility' isn't simply a matter of meeting the regulations but should be embedded in both the building and the organisation**
- 8. Building services can be incredibly complicated. Will you be able to run a highly complex Building Management System?**
- 9. The construction world has its own language**
- 10. However bad things get, they can and will get worse...but don't give up as the result will be worth it.**

Paddy Dillon (Allies and Morrison) then offered an architect's perspective on the process, based on his work with Haworth Tompkins architects on the

refurbishment of the National Theatre. With three auditoria, extensive backstage areas, and public foyers arranged as 'strata' that continue into the surrounding cityscape, the theatre is now regarded as a key work of British Brutalism. Its interior planning is complex and sophisticated; the board-marked concrete surfaces are extremely refined in appearance. However, the building has not always been popular. It has attracted criticism from prominent figures including the Prince of Wales, and the two larger auditoria are not universally loved by actors and audiences.

By the early twenty-first century, a number of issues had emerged. The National's physical context had changed. New buildings and the removal of surrounding roads had altered the approaches to the theatre. Additional space was needed backstage. In addition, the National was typical of its era in guzzling energy: it was built with the assumption that energy was cheap and with no thought about the environmental implications of burning fossil fuels.

The refurbishment project began with a Conservation Management Plan which set out to understand the significance of this now-listed building. Key stakeholders including English Heritage (now Historic England) and the Twentieth Century Society were invited to contribute to this process in order to reach a consensus about the building's importance.

The refurbishment works have opened up the building, both front of house and backstage. A backstage extension provides much-needed space and softens what had been a bleak elevation. A former loading bay was reconfigured as a café/bar whose design re-interprets the original 1976 design principles. The foyers of the National's smallest auditorium, re-named the Dorfman, have been reconfigured, and the auditorium itself has been re-fitted in order to enhance its flexibility.

## Heritage processes as a tool for understanding

William Filmer-Sankey, a heritage consultant at Alan Baxter and Associates, discussed a project where radical alterations had been made to a listed building: the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. Between 2007 and 2010 this theatre of 1932 was transformed by a design team led by Bennetts Associates.

William explained how an understanding of the RST's significance was developed through research, dialogue, and close study of the building itself, and demonstrated how the significance of different parts of the building could be mapped. As at the National Theatre, a formal Conservation Management Plan was drawn up. Such documents, William explained, are typically a required element of applications to the Heritage Lottery Fund. A shorter 'Heritage Statement' can be used to outline the history and significance of a listed building in support of an application for Listed Building Consent.

William concluded with two points. First, 'the listed status of a building will only be a nuisance if you want it to be'. If the process of developing design proposals and securing consent for changes to a listed building is seen as a way to understand and enhance the building, it can become an intellectually stimulating exercise. Second, the process of understanding a building's history and significance need not be confined to examples that are listed but can be a sensible way of approaching any historic theatre.

The final speaker was Catherine Croft, director of the Twentieth Century Society. She explained the role of the society as a statutory consultee in the planning process where major listed post-1914 buildings are concerned. The society also has a programme of publications and events dedicated to improving understanding of twentieth-century architecture of all styles and types. In addition, it has built up a considerable body of knowledge of the ways in which the technical challenges that these buildings present have been resolved. Catherine talked through Historic England's *Conservation Principles* as a way to understand historic buildings. The document sets out a series of 'values' which can be used to develop a holistic understanding of a building's significance.

## Conclusions

A number of themes emerged from the speakers' contributions and the concluding discussion:

- the importance of seeing post-war theatre buildings as examples of a significant moment in the histories of British architecture and theatre.
- being able to communicate the values which these buildings represent to audiences, staff, the local authority, and funders.
- conservation does not mean preservation, but rather relates to be process of well-informed change which ideally preserve and enhance the significance of a building whilst transforming it in potentially radical ways
- theatres are bespoke buildings and every project is unique, but a significant body of expertise and knowledge exists in the academic and heritage sectors which can help theatre managements and their designers not only find solutions to the technical, material, and sustainability challenges of post-war architecture but also the broader conceptual and organisational opportunities that a capital project offers.

### Further reading

Alistair Fair, *Modern Playhouses: an architectural history of Britain's new theatres, 1945-1985* (forthcoming, 2018)

Elain Harwood, *Space, Hope and Brutalism: English Architecture, 1945-1975* (New Haven and London, 2015)

Barnabas Calder, *Raw Concrete: the Beauty of Brutalism* (London, 2016)

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