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MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN THEATRE

The Experiments of
Art et Action

Gray Read



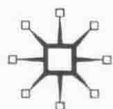
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Modern Architecture in Theatre: The Experiments of Art et Action

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MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN THEATRE

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Modern Architecture in Theatre

Also by Gray Read

ARCHITECTURE AS A PERFORMING ART (*edited with Marcia Feuerstein, 2013*)

THE MINIATURE AND THE GIGANTIC IN PHILADELPHIA ARCHITECTURE: Essays
on Designing the City to Human Scale (*2007*)



For Marco Frascari

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Introduction: Architecture as a Performing Art

Abstract: Architecture and theatre have long been allied in creating the characteristic events of the city. In the 1920s Parisian architect Edouard Autant explored the art of architectural design through a series of modern theatrical performances presented by Art et action, a company he formed with actress Louise Lara. Together, they merged British director Edward Gordon Craig's strategies for architectural set design with an approach to performance emphasizing multi-sensual simultaneity. In five types of modern theatre, they created spaces and performances that anticipate the architecture and actions of an ideal, modern city.

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The city and its architecture have often been likened to a theatre, in which we play the roles of daily life, seeing and being seen in a minor frisson of urban pleasure. British theatre director Edward Gordon Craig put it thus, “There is something so human and so poignant to me in a great city at a time of the night when there are no people about and no sounds. It is dreadfully sad until you walk till six o’clock in the morning. Then it is very exciting.” When people fill the city, the architecture transforms, as it takes many and various roles in the thousand stories that people play out in their actions. Craig found poignancy in the city and excitement, not in the visual image of the buildings as objects of art but in their potential for drama. In designing sets for the stage, Craig constructed architectural spaces that gave actors positions and spatial relationships that they could use expressively, sometimes in graceful concert and sometimes with physical strain and resistance. Craig brought architecture to the stage out of the city and then returned dramatic narratives to the city, giving back the echoes of many stories. Through his work the dramas of the city accumulated from street to stage and back again in the characteristic events of urban life.

This book centers on the work of architect Eduard Autant and his wife, actress Louise Lara, who seized Craig’s challenge to explore the actions of architecture in theatre. They developed a systematic approach to the design of spaces that act with people to spark events.¹ In 1919 they formed an experimental theatre company, *Art et action* (Art and action), in Paris, where they worked with a group of progressive artists, poets, and musicians to develop performances that spanned the arts.² Autant’s calling was architecture. “Each drama,” he wrote,

needs its proper scenic situation. To determine this is to envision the means of production that can release the spirit, affirm the character and develop the discussion. The lighting of a painting and the aeration of a statue, to the acoustics of a room, reinforce the primary purpose of the piece, giving it a vital atmosphere, like the fish, bird, worm need water, air, earth—not to be confused with aquarium, cage, and flowerpot.³

Autant proposed architectural spaces to create these “vital” atmospheres; specifically, he and Lara explored how spaces place and frame people in relation to each to create distinct kinds of events that could open to creative contact. Autant and Lara’s work in the mirror world of theatre addresses the spatial qualities of watching and being watched

that are integral to the performances of social life. Their experiments in theatre reflect back on the characteristic social events in Paris of the 1920s, the city they knew, and project forward to envision the spaces and events of an ideal city that they imagined for the future.

Autant and Lara merged Craig's spatial sensibility with an artistic philosophy of simultaneity, first articulated by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, that modern artistic experience is constructed by an active spectator stimulated by disparate, simultaneous sensations and narratives.⁴ This approach to art shifted focus away from creating a unified art object and toward giving spectators a multi-sensory field of experience rich with poetic potential. For many artists associated with Apollinaire, including Autant and Lara, modern, simultaneous art was allied with a Marxist political stance, specifically a vision of a collective society in which each person would act according to his or her spirit and calling. Many disparate, creative actions answering the human spirit would coalesce in unforeseen ways to move society forward. Architecture, as an affirmative vital atmosphere, was crucial to artistic events and, by extension, to social events of a new society.

Some of Autant and Lara's ideas emerged into the design of buildings in Paris through the work of likeminded colleagues such as Auguste Perret and Robert Mallet-Stevens, well-known architects who defined modernism along similar philosophical lines.⁵ Their approach to design was distinctly progressive yet differed pointedly from the dominant voices then defining modern architecture. Perret in particular, who had been a classmate of Autant at the *École des Beaux Arts*, designed and built a broad range of public spaces and buildings that supported an urban life of active citizens in a society conceived collectively.⁶ He stood in opposition to the version of modern architecture championed by Le Corbusier and spoke his mind in print and through his work.⁷ Whereas many modern architects looked to the fine arts for inspiration, Autant, Lara, Perret, Mallet-Stevens, and others offered instead a clear statement of modern architecture as a performing art.

The city as theatre

This study began as a search for architectural strategies that might enhance the social life of the city, a goal that has become increasingly

urgent for contemporary architects. Building habitable cities that are inviting, efficient, and poetic is key to sustainability. Reviving public space, designing for a changing mix of uses and populations, and creating places for urban life challenge contemporary architects to invent new forms and glean what they can from the beloved cities of the past. Most architects embrace the challenge of urbanity but find few models to guide them. On the one hand, the commercial razz-ma-tazz of shopping districts and staged “communities” revive historical forms such as town squares that no longer function as they once did: the fake-ness grates. On the other hand, the dominant, modern tradition that contemporary architects have inherited distains overt “theatricality” and is notably lean on advice for designing urban buildings. Modernists of the mid-twentieth century had so effectively rejected classical design that architecture’s long-standing link with the art of theatre grew thin. Contemporary architects are now inventing anew the art of urbane design and are again reaching toward theatre, not for showiness but rather for human substance.

Autant and Lara’s work and that of their architect colleagues was squarely rooted in the Baroque metaphor of *theatrum mundi*—that the world is a stage. This deep metaphor, familiar from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, casts human choices and actions in life as a drama directed and watched over by God within the Globe Theatre of the universe.⁸ The world was a large theatre reflected in miniature in the small theatres where actors play roles that reveal the human condition. In the most ancient expression of the tradition, theatrical performances and the theatre buildings that house them were understood as places of vision (Greek: *theatron*) where spectators watch as a god might watch the dramas and follies of human life. Theatres are microcosms that offer a view through to the macrocosm by way of stories. The metaphor also places theatre directors and architects in a presumptuous and potentially dangerous position as pretenders to divine wisdom.

Autant and Lara took up the mantle of both theatre director and architect but constructed a role less as priestly conduit to understanding than as a minister who sets up conditions in which spectators may find their own path. Art et action’s performances included many simultaneous elements juxtaposed with each other, so multiple and indeterminate meanings could be creatively constructed by those participating in the artistic caldron of each event, actor and spectator

alike. Autant and Lara's task as architect and as director was to open a space by means of the performance, so that flashes of spirit might ignite in the moment.

In this sense, the architect's art parallels that of a theatre director. Both work beforehand to contrive the conditions of an event so that it might open to real experience. Whereas the director prepares the actors, so they may perform well in a theatrical event, the architect prepares the place, so that it may perform as a kind of non-human actor in the events of the city. Both anticipate what will happen and plan from a narrative of use—a script or scenario for the director and a program in the case of the architect—yet neither can determine an outcome. They prepare, yet they cannot control events as they unfold. Neither do they act in the events themselves. Director and architect step back. Ultimately, the actor and the building must perform on their own, interacting in real time with people and elements of the scene in the moment. Director and architect may fret in the wings, but they can only watch to see whether the scene takes poetic flight or not. Their art lies in setting up the elements so that that sparks of true contact can fly.

Theatre itself originated in the social events and architecture of the city. Historian David Wiles traces the roots of theatric forms to urban rituals and festivities.⁹ Greek theatre arose out of the festival of Dionysus and took place in front of her temple following the ritual sacrifices and dances of the rite. Spectators witnessed the sacrifices and the plays as part of a spiritual communion with the gods and with each other.

Wiles traces another genre of theatre, cabaret, to short entertainments that accompanied feasts, which were often hosted by a king or nobleman in the main hall of his manor. Songs, clowning, and feats of skill filled the time between courses amidst the dining tables, while a master of ceremonies kept up a patter and guests added witty commentary. In sum, Wiles found that each theatric form holds a distinct character and place in the city, and each depends on a distinct relationship between those who act and those who watch.

Most social events incorporate an element of theatre, in which some people perform while others watch. Catholic mass, for example, is a highly choreographed performance with symbolic costumes and fixed roles. The narrative of communion is always the same, yet its very repetition draws the congregation together in ritual. An urban festival, on the other hand, such as Carnival also has choreography and costumes, yet it

includes many stories and spontaneous performances that take place all around spectators, absorbing them in the general festivities. Everyone sees and is seen simultaneously.

The historical give and take between theatric events and social events informed the architecture of both. The depth of this tradition is probably best expressed in drawings published by Sebastiano Serlio in his sixteenth-century treatise, *Tutte L'Opere D'Architettura et Prospetiva* (*All the Works on Architecture and Perspective*). Serlio distinguished three types of theatre: tragedy, which took place among kings in the city's public square; comedy, which revealed the foibles of nobility in the private rooms of palazzi; and farce, which took the form of Saturnian romps in the woods.¹⁰ The balance of Serlio's treatise follows the same logic: that each aspect of life (such as worship and dwelling for example) should take its place architecturally within an orderly city. An architect's role was therefore to design the city and its elements with proportional precision to elevate the theatre of social life in each of its aspects to create a unified, urban entity.

The classical, theatric tradition of architecture instructed by treatises such as Serlio's became increasingly codified through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly in the French *École des Beaux Arts* and in the city of Paris. By the 1920s Paris was wholly identified with classicism in all aspects of social life. Theatre, cinema, and fashion thrived. Cafés provided open-air meeting places on every corner where passersby could see each other and be seen in turn.¹¹ Parisian urbanism, as *mise-en-scène*, became a potent model for cities around the world. However, the rise of a modern sensibility out of the same urban scene presents a conundrum. At the same moment that architects and urban planners around the world were looking to Paris as a model of fashion and order, the most progressive and vocal architect in Paris, Le Corbusier, condemned the streets as dank corridors that denied the city's population adequate air, light, and greenery. He famously proposed tearing down a section of Paris to erect apartment towers in a park, a graphic demonstration of a theory of urbanism that has since become a defining element of modern architecture's legacy. How could Paris be perceived as so culturally urbane and yet so oppressive at the same time?

The debate among architects concerned the proper role of architecture in staging urban life. The strategy for classical design as it developed in the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris, paralleled traditional Italian theatre