

# Beyond the Proscenium Wall

The first theater said to have had a clear separation between the stage and the house is the 1618 Theatre Farnese in Parma. Since then, the proscenium has become a common element in most theaters: the central arch frames the perspective that the set creates while the wall on either side hides the mechanisms and artifacts necessary to provide special effects and dramatic entrances. As a result, while the theater as a whole is by essence an interior space, the area beyond the proscenium can be an interior, an exterior, an imaginary place, with which directors and designers transport actors and spectators into a different space and time altogether.

As a specific type of constructed environment, the stage offers particular ground for the exploration of architectural principles and concepts. When architects have worked as scenographers and understand what the proscenium wall is concealing, they seem to gain a particular realization of how the real and the imaginary can coexist within one harmonious space. They are able to measure the amount of order that is necessary for understanding and fascination to prevail even when chaotic actions take place and random objects appear on stage. The proscenium wall and arch evoke two worlds beyond the space of the stage itself: the imaginary world that the action conjures and the technical world of smoke and mirrors, pulleys and rigging ropes. How do these translate into architectural terms? By looking at a few examples, we can learn how the “real” and the “unreal” worlds collide and/or merge in the theater and be inspired to apply the same ideas outside of the theater, in our cities and buildings. As architects study stage set design, or work for the theater, they deal with the hidden dimension: the representation of specific memories, cultural, and social abstractions. They build philosophical and mathematical mechanisms that allow them to conceive rational spaces. The necessity to create forms that use not only physical materials but also memories and expectations is expressed in the architect’s Aldo Rossi’s analogy of a building to a sea shell:

**The sea seemed to me a coalescence capable of constructing a mysterious, geometric form made up of every memory and expectation. Perhaps it was really a verse from Alcaeus that led me to architecture: "O seashell / daughter of stone and the whitening sea / you astonish the minds of children." The lines go approximately like this, and in them are contained the problem of form, of material, of imagination—that is, of astonishment. Rossi. (*A Scientific Autobiography*, 25)**

The world of theatre is built upon a comparable necessity to give materiality to ideas, poetry and thoughts and as far back as the Greek antiquity; architects have concerned themselves with its design. Vitruvius in 70 BC, Alberti in 1450 and Palladio a century later have written rules in their treatises, for the construction of the perfect stage. But the first to address the design of scenery itself was Inigo Jones, in England in the early seventeenth century. The English classical architect, Jones, came back from a two-year tour of Italy in 1615, his sketchbook filled with observations of ancient and classical architecture. He had a particular interest for Palladio's buildings, whose secrets he received from Palladio's own pupil, Scamozzi. On January 20, 1615, he wrote that the Italian mannerism inherited from Michelangelo was a detriment to architecture and that buildings, as people, should keep a solid, grave appearance to contrast and highlight the internal extravagance that one's imagination can set on fire. Before Jones's trip to Italy, he was famous, essentially, for the sceneries that he designed for the Royal Masques, a sort of entertainment on which he collaborated with poets and bards for the English court. Jones's sets and costumes had been inspired by an earlier trip he took to Italy, while in his 20s, and bore the influence from Italian Intermezzo, which were magnificent, elaborate, and lavish. The architecture represented was fantastic, sometimes vernacular and always rich and filled with ornaments. Upon returning from his second trip to Italy, Jones, already forty years old, saw his practice expand as he began to apply the principles he learned from Palladio and Scamozzi to actual architecture. Surveyor of the King's Works, Jones designed and oversaw the construction of important buildings such as the Covent Garden façade and church, Whitehall Banqueting House, The Queen's Home in Greenwich, and Saint Paul's Cathedral's West front and portico. While doing so, Jones continued to design sceneries for the Court's Masques, working mostly with the poet Ben Jonson, whose writing contained much political subtext and satire. It is through a well-documented quarrel between Jonson and Jones that we can best understand the architect's position on design and the meaning of the statement he wrote in his "Italian Sketchbook." As his partnership with Jonson progressed, the two had constant arguments over what constituted the soul and what constituted the skin of the Masque. Jonson insisted that the poetry should reside solely in the text, while Jones argued that his own craft, sceneries, and costumes were just as instrumental in providing spirit to the entertainment. During Jones's voyage in Italy, he had found in classical architecture and its juxtaposition to mannerist details the arguments to make his point more astute, referring to Palladio and Scamozzi's architecture to give his own designs more intellectual meaning. The controversy ended in

1631 when the poet and the architect had a final dispute. Jonson's thinly veiled attack was included in one of his poems, where he compared the architect with a cook, affirming that the recipe was more important than the tools to give the meal its taste. Jones continued to design sceneries for masques that included an intricate layering of architectural details, while he gave his buildings the ordered form that his studies of Palladio had inspired. With its simple shape, and clean Doric order, Saint Paul Church at Covent garden, for example, presents what Jones described as a façade, that "carrieth a gravity in Publicke Places," allowing the imagination to create its own interior extravagance.

Two and a half centuries later, in Venice, the Italian architect Aldo Rossi used a theatrical scene to describe the chiasm between the shell and the soul. The Teatro del Mondo, which he designed to float in the lagoon for the 1980 Venice Biennial is the expression of his lifelong interest for an architecture that could express meaning and science, philosophy, and craft. The presence of the water surrounding the theater rendered it yet more similar to the seashell from Alcaeus poem: mysterious and made up of every memory. At about the same time, in his Scientific Autobiography, Rossi described two kinds of conditions where disorder could be perceived: one, which he detested and called forgetfulness, resulting from plain indifference for any system, and another one, which he described as a natural state of mind, that results from an honest discomfort with a system. He saw the latter as a sign of humanity that allowed for imagination and fascination to develop, as in the seashell he so admired. Borrowing from the theater experience and from the proscenium's ability to separate the real from the fantastic, Rossi described that in architecture, as on the stage, the wall, any wall, marks the boundary between order and disorder. The wall is mathematical and contains what Rossi called "small things": memories, collected objects, everyday actions. Rossi had always been interested in the relationship between those "things and situation" that are about to be stated and the mechanisms by which they are stated. All of his buildings were simple in appearance, they obeyed to a strict geometric rule, just as Jones's Covent Garden did, to allow for the astonishment to reside inside: within the mind of the visitor as well as within the walls of the building. As an architect, Rossi always oscillated between the strict geometry of the envelope and the "quasi-naturalism of the objects within" and this oscillation resulted in buildings as apparatus, machines for recalling memories. His theater in Venice was one such machine: at the same time a place of science and a place of memory, the place where architecture ends and the world of the imagination—or even the irrational—begins.



Centre Pompidou Mobile, Cambrai - Construire Architects, photography Studio Déclic, February 2012



Centre Pompidou Mobile, Chaumont - Construire Architects, photography Cyrille Weiner, November 2011

Today, Patrick Bouchain, a French architect, principal of a practice called CONSTRUIRE, has developed alternative ways of producing buildings, involving future users as actors in the construction process and builders as actual users of the construction sites. Bouchain is equally interested as Jones and Rossi, in the discourse between the freedom of objects or people to change and the rigor of the envelope. In 2006, at the Venice Biennial, Bouchain and his team lived inside the French pavilion during the whole duration of the show, to address and illustrate his approach to dwelling and appropriation of space. Bouchain has worked for many years with artists and performers and he speaks about the relationship between an artistic concept and its realization in a public space. This inspired the architectural concept of the *non fini*, a design method, which establishes a new order, where objects and buildings can be organized while giving the users complete freedom to change, move, alter, and reorganize everything. For Bouchain, architects are not mere overseers, but de facto types of users: together with all other users of the space, they are actors whose performances are never finished. The realizations are always in progress, and necessitate a kind of nomadic being. Bouchain and his partner Loic Julienne designed a museum for the Centre Pompidou, which was made of three movable tent structures that could be assembled and installed in various manners depending on the sites that they were brought to and the content that they housed. As Aldo Rossi's floating Teatro del Mondo, which navigated from city to city before being taken apart, Bouchain's Centre Pompidou Mobile also took on different roles, told various stories. From one place to the next, the form remained the same allowing the content, and the context to trigger the imagination of the visitors.

Jones, Rossi, and Bouchain have included themselves among the users of their own designs. As they shared their own memories and narratives, they have created places that others can "appropriate," they made buildings that evoked both respect and humanity, bringing together craft and intellectual thinking. All three architects have contributed to the understanding that architecture should reside between art and technology, and be at the intersection between liberal arts and mechanics. They have shown us to use the stage as a precedent for the defiance of canonical rules, the challenge of perspective and gravity, and resistance to given tenets. While doing so, they have succeeded in transporting the audience, and the users into a subtle world that is more than the sum of its part, and plays with familiar, often overlooked realities. The buildings they have given us recreate this world: microcosms flexible enough for the interior to become exterior, the exterior interior, for the shell not only to surround the soul, but to also contain it. Inigo Jones's Masques are present in his design for Covent Garden; Aldo Rossi's public spaces evoke entrances and exits of prima



Centre Pompidou Mobile, Le Havre - Construire Architects, photography Bertrand Prévost, February 2013

donnas and luminaries. Patrick Bouchain plays with buildings as if they were stage properties and we the actors. They all translate into the "real" world some of the trickeries of the "unreal" one. Covent garden, Teatro del Mondo, and Centre Pompidou Mobile are all envelopes whose strict geometries and simple forms allow for spiritual content to develop, apparatus for events to take place, and intrigues to unwind.

The collaboration between the poet and the cook, between the actor and the craftsman has given the buildings their forms: just as the sea, for Aldo Rossi, gave the shell its shape, made of memories and surprise.

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