Zeitschrift: Bauen + Wohnen = Construction + habitation = Building + home : internationale Zeitschrift

Herausgeber: Bauen + Wohnen

Band: 12 (1958)

Heft: 9: Theaterbau = Théâtres = Theatres

Rubrik: Summary

Summary

The film industry, radio and television have given much competition to the theatre, but they have not managed to smother it. They have taken away from the theatre a part of its function, but at the same time they have awakened a new craving for direct contact, for the feeling of personal sympathy. It is now a requirement of our theatres, and this directly concerns architects, that whether they be new buildings, renovations or restorations they come to meet this newly-sought for contact in a way appropriate to our age.
Of course, the theatre cannot cut itself off from its tradition and its historical evolution. But let us rather reach back toward those times in its history that have something really positive to offer us, e. g. to the Elizabethan age when Shakespeare and his contemporaries put on their plays in open-air buildings, in the oft-quoted "wooden O," unencumbered by machinery and an artificially gilded atmosphere. Or let us cast our eyes toward Japan, where at the same time the Kabuki dramas took their origin: in these a close contact between audience and actor was attained by performing on an open, wide stage and on flower-lined paths extending into the auditorium. Also at that time, Palladio built the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, which is still regarded as a model theatre building; but even to the present day no architect has attempted to reproduce this building with modern means.
The routine, practical sort of person is a hindrance to every step forward: the sort who shakes a prophetic finger, pulls time-worn blueprints and laws out of the drawer and warns of the dangers of rash experimentation. I therefore walked right into the lion's den and engaged myself in a conversation with the world-famous stage engineer, Prof. Unruh of Berlin, in order to discuss with him the practical, technical problems. It is apparent and can be clearly read between the lines of this discussion that the iron drop, the fixed stage boundary and the tall stage tower are all things that do not really belong in the modern theatre. We have also had enough of the "box" stage, or let us for once call it the "aquarium" stage—this latter designation is particularly appropriate when veil-like curtains are used within the stage frame—we would prefer to regard this now as only a historical reminiscence. What those of us interested in a living theatre are looking for today is the spatial experience of the performance, the drama in space, the integration of architecture with the actual dramatic production.

The Newly-constructed National Theatre, Mannheim (pages 289—292)

When two theatres, in this case a drama theatre seating about 600 and an opera house seating about 1200, are to be combined in one building, the basic pre-requisite is that the two stage areas border each other and lie on the same level. At the same time, however, the entrances and foyers of both theatres are to be connected to each other. At first glance these two pre-requisites seem to be contradictory, especially when it is required that the two theatres lie with their stages back to back, i. e. forming a continuous axis.
It must be pointed out that the stage level of this theatre had to be placed above ground, owing to the fact that there was a large air raid shelter underground which was not to be moved. The final and very simple solution was: to place the foyer under the stage area and make both theatres accessible from this foyer by means of wide stairways. The box office was located separately as a special block in this theatre complex.
In the smaller hall the untraditional step was taken of eliminating the burdensome separation between audience and stage, as well as the iron safety drop.
Thus for the first time in Germany a national theatre has been built without an iron safety drop. A totally different atmosphere reigns in the two theatres and it has been observed that the smaller hall, with its simple lines and clear unified spatial effect, makes a much more striking architectural impact than the large hall.

A new building for opera (page 293)

If the formal possibilities of opera are exceptionally rich, it also requires a correspondingly large amount of space to realise them fully. In grand opera there must be, in addition to a considerable number of soloists, a chorus of at least forty voices and a ballet troupe with its own solo dancers. There must be a sufficient amount of space for all of these people to move and act freely, without being cramped.
If a stage does not fulfill what is required of it, it restricts the artistic effectiveness of a work of art and detracts from its full value. An opera house constructed in such a way as to permit the presentation of all types of operas is a great stimulus to opera production and also encourages new creations of all kinds. The stage to which we are accustomed, i. e. with surrounding frame and curtain, is well suited for the production of a number of standard operatic works without great difficulty. But a large number of the audience could be won over to new works and new kinds of productions in a modern theatre: these are people who today shy away from the traditional as too stereotyped, who regard what is offered in the theatre of today as old-fashioned, ridiculous and stuffy. In a new, freely constructed building it should be possible to arouse the enthusiasm of a young and active public.

Stage Designing in Theatre Construction (pages 294—299)

In a discussion between architect Ernst F. Burckhardt, Zurich, and Prof. Walther Unruh, Berlin, the historical development of the stage from the Renaissance to modern times was covered. The main concern of this discussion was the implications for those who design modern theatres, and the following is a summary of the conclusions reached.
1 An essential requirement is that there should be sufficient vertical and horizontal space outside the stage area proper, otherwise operation will be clumsy and too expensive. It is a desirable objective to have, in addition to the main stage surface, three additional stage areas of the same size, each having ample storage space attached to it. It will be mainly the building site and the urban situation of the theatre which will determine whether there are to be two side stages and one rear stage, or some other arrangement of these additional stage areas.
2 The line dividing the audience seating area from the adaptable stage area is to be fixed at the front edge of the orchestra, in order to make it possible for the entire proscenium area to be used as part of the scenery when necessary. In this way it also becomes possible to do away with the traditional frame around the stage or, on the other hand, to erect one there when the type of production calls for it.
3 The stage machinery will consist, on the one hand, of horizontal means of transportation, i. e. stage vehicles of various sizes, and, on the other hand, of a series of movable floors by means of which the stage floor can be raised and lowered at various levels. Such an arrangement must, as indicated in Point 2, start at the front edge of the orchestra.
4 The space in the tower above the stage is no longer of vital importance, since the use of drops has receded greatly. But this tower space still cannot be completely done away with, because the creation of limited space effects, the round horizon, suspended lighting equipment and decorative shapes continue to be used, and raising these upward is the quickest and simplest way of removing such objects from the field of vision. In addition, an overhead area with the proper drop equipment makes it possible to make out of the stage a spatial area which can be varied in a vertical direction to form a continuation of the roof of the auditorium.
5 In contrast to the decreased amount of space taken up by machinery and technical equipment in the theatre, stage lighting equipment shows a marked growth in bulk when compared with former times. The overheads and wing lights of the old "corridor stage," with their multi-coloured system, were only able to illuminate the stage in an overall manner; but now it is reguired to provide light in various colours and intensities for every single square yard of the stage area, and to focus attention on the actors by means of highly technical lighting effects.
A theatre building constitutes a symbiosis of representation and invisible operation. Herein lie the difficulties, but herein lies also the special attraction of this type of construction.

Plan for a University Theatre in South Africa (page 300)

In Durban I noticed that the smaller and more simple a school of higher learning was, the more personal and unrestrained was its operation. With its lack of pomp and luxury, this auditorium building would be very well suited to Durban. It is designed for festive occasions and for concerts, ballet, fencing and jiu-jitsu presentations, and for theatre with or without framed "box" stage.
It is planned as a steel framework, filled out by wooden sheets. To alter the spatial arrangements, these sheets can be partly shifted around or removed.

Theatre Studies (pages 301—305)

The young French architect, Alain Bourbonnais, has made a name for himself by hissuccess in competitions and in theatre designing. In recent years he has busied himself exclusively with problems of theatre construction and he intends to specialise in this field. His winning entry for the Caen municipal theatre competition (construction begun last autumn) brought him into contact with French theatre authorities who gave him the assignment of drawing up plans for a standard French provincial theatre.
Architect Bourbonnais is convinced that only the architect who has participated in the running of a theatre is in a position to build a theatre which will function properly. Thus, during his theatre studies he was active as a set designer and put various scene designs into effect. As an example we show here a set from the open-air stage at the Carcassonne Festival.
In the last 50 years provincial France, by opposing the exertions required by every form of artistic endeavour, became a market for "white elephants" from Paris, an easy-to-please customer for unscrupulous theatre agents. In an effort to counter-act these ravages of over-centralisation, the various local governments caused the founding of the "Centres dramatiques," under the direction of Jeanne Laurent. Success came immeditely.
There are two types of theatres which meet today's requirements:
a) the theatre with its own productions, seating about 1200, i. e. a theatre that puts on dramatic, lyric and choreographic works with its own staff. Such an establishment requires rehearsal halls, workshops, studios, administration rooms, etc.
b) the guest-performance theatre which can put on the productions of the first-named theatre without basic reconstruction or staging changes. This, of course, calls for a stage design as close as possible to that of the first-performance theatre, as well as a standardisation of stage equipment and lighting. On the other hand, subsidiary areas are not as essential in this type of theatre.

Architect Bourbonnais suggests two solutions for these guest-performance theatres which are most lacking in France. Both have in their favour the fact that they are economical as well as practical.
First solution: a theatre with 700—800 seats, small, but with a very well-equipped stage, low in price and profitable because suited to all kinds of performances. Such a construction was projected and estimated in April 1957 at a cost of $ 21,000, of which approximately $ 8,000 were figured for stage equipment and seating.
Second solution: a multi-purpose building for 700—800 people. Here the audience can take part in the various events of a small provincial town: school festivals, awarding of prizes, election meetings, lectures, sporting events, film presentations, concerts, as well as drama, opera, operetta, ballet and variety performances. The cost of such a building, completely equipped, was estimated in April 1957 at $ 14,000.

Plan for a Municipial Theatre in Basle (page 306—307)

Although the original conception of this theatre was abandoned after the competition for designs, the competition was not without its fruits. First prize went to the design presented here, one that represents an important contribution to the development of theatre construction. What is new is the diagonal position of the auditorium-stage axis within a square of corresponding size. This results in a smooth edifice viewed externally and a new flexibility in the relation of audience to stage.
In a very simple way the framed box-type stage can be converted to make a theatre of unified spatial effect, and if still more of the stage area is turned over to the audience, there results a kind of arena with the audience grouped around three sides of the rotating stage.

Concert Hall and Theatre in Beirut (Lebanon) (page 308)

To be annexed to a radio building already under construction and in organic relationship to it, the projected building is to fulfill the functions of a theatre for 1000 people, a concert hall, a variety show auditorium and a television studio. These various uses are to be made possible in ample measure by an efficient system of re-arranging and moving, especially in the stage area. That no difficulties in re-arranging may be incurred because of a frame around the stage which is too small, though necessary for most dramatic productions, there have been designed moveable portals which can be opened wider than the total stage width and be used as a support for overhead lights in a position higher than the maximum stage height.

Sant' Erasmo Theatre, Milan (page 309)

This theatre is the first permanent arena-theatre that has been built in Europe. It consists of a small, intimate room; the term arena-theatre is perhaps a bit pretentious in this context. But whoever has seen a performance in this room with its central stage is convinced that even a theatre of much larger dimensions would only be able to afford the same experience.

Cultural Center in Helsinki (pages 310 to 311)

The cultural center is located in a western quarter of Helsinki. The auditorium was built in the style of an antique theatre. The stage forms an integral part of the total room.

Studio stage of the Municipal Theatre of Buenos Aires (page 312)

In Buenos Aires the municipal government has built a cultural center containing offices, club and meeting rooms for various intellectual groups, cinema, exhibition area, and, notably, a drama and ballet school with its own theatre. Formerly dependent on guest performances from Europe and the USA, Buenos Aires now has an intensive theatrical life of its own, supported by a great variety of theatre clubs and workshop stages.

Edificio Polar and Teatro del Este, Caracas (pages 313—315)

Assignment: to design an office building containing theatre on an irregular five-cornered property in a prominent position in the eastern district of Caracas.
A special characteristic of the auditorium is the arrangement of low-hanging spotlights: these are suspended from a network of steel tubing and illuminate the aluminium ceiling above. In addition, triangular openings have been cut in the roof, so that stage-directed spots can be erected there. The orchestra pit is moveable and can rise to stage height or remain beneath it. The stage can be used as a rotating stage.