

## A re-evaluation of the theatrical spaces of the avant-garde in *Event-space: Theatre Architecture and the Historical Avant-Garde*, de Dorita Hannah

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### Abstract

Review of a very daring book by Dorita Hannah, entitled *Event-Space: Theatre Architecture and the Historical Avant-Garde*. The author is one of the recognized authorities on recent transformations in Performance Design and Space and introduces new space concepts based on Artaud and Bataille, of great interest for contemporary art.

**Keywords:** Contemporary art. Theatre architecture. Performance.

Few architects have published theories specifically on theatre building in the West. Regarding theatre architecture historiography, the main works are theatre theorists' books such as Marvin Carlson's *Places of Performance* (1989) and papers on *The Changing Places of Performance* (2012, 2017), updating the concepts to the 21st-century, and David Wiles' *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (2003), encompassing from Greece theatres to the twentieth century 'found spaces'. To enlarge the bibliography, Dorita Hannah's new book *Event-Space: Theatre Architecture and the Historical Avant-Garde* – published by Routledge and released in July 2018 – brings a well-grounded and original contribution to the field of specific studies on theatre architecture and performance.

Focusing on performance space and spatial performativity, Hannah's new book is in the convergence between architecture theory (space discourse) and performance theory (the discourse of events), aiming to review the crisis of the twentieth century when theatre building began to be abandoned as theatre directors looked for less conventional spaces.

Hannah identifies three attitudes to performance space that emerged between 1872 and 1947, calling them 'Absolute', 'Abstract,' and 'Abject', in correspondence with Symbolism, Constructivism, and Surrealism. As the symbolists, constructivists, and surrealists of the historical avant-garde began to abandon traditional theatre spaces, which no longer matched theatre and technological achievements, these attitudes led to more contingent venues for

theatrical and political events, so that the constructed performance environment became not only part of the event, but an event in itself. The book *Event-Space* examines several spatiotemporal models central to that revolution, both illuminating the history of avant-garde performance and inspiring contemporary approaches to performance space.

Having taught architecture and design for over 25 years, Dorita Hannah has been Research Professor of Interdisciplinary Architecture, Art & Design at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) and Adjunct Professor of Stage & Space, at Aalto University, Finland. She has led many international initiatives, such as being Research Curator for World Stage Design (WSD 2013), Theory Curator for the Prague Quadrennial (PQ 2015), and Co-Curator for Fluid States (PSi 2015). She has gained *New Zealand Architecture Awards* and *Designer Institute of New Zealand Awards*, as well as a UNESCO Laureate (1999) and World Stage Design medals (2009). She currently co-chairs PSI's Performance Design Working Group and co-convenes the Theatre and Architecture Working Group from the International Federation of Theatre Research. Finally, she is the author of various articles on theatre architecture and co-editor of many books. Her brilliant scholarship helps to bring together the essential argument of the book, based on solid research and much knowledge.

Reflecting her vast experience in a coherent analysis, this book is a result of attentive historical research, and of investigations and surveys carried out in the field. Hannah expounds a detailed study of the theatrical venues and of her active participation in the spectacles that support the theoretical proposal. For the book, she worked in partnership with photographer Marc Goodwin, who took well-chosen photos of the theatres analysed to illustrate the book and elucidate the argument.

The book is organized in four chapters, each corresponding to a historical period beginning with the inauguration of Wagner's theatre in 1872 and running until contemporaneity. The theoretical framework is based on Friedrich Nietzsche's discussion of the creative and powerful encounter between the forces of Apollo and Dionysus (2008 [1872]). The first chapter 'Disciplining the bourgeois glory machine' demonstrates the exhaustion of the model of the Italianate theatre, in which the proscenium arch separates the audience from performers. In this chapter, Hannah examines the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth (Fig. 1) as an example of the conclusion of an era and *Opéra Garnier* as an apotheosis between spectacle and vigilance with its sumptuous foyers destined for the event of social integration (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Richard Wagner's *Festspielhaus* built by Otto Bruckwald inspired by Gottfried Semper's unrealized projects. Bayreuth, Germany. 1876. Courtesy of photographer Marc Goodwin, 2014.



Fig. 2. Charles Garnier's *Opéra Garnier*, Paris, 1875. Hannah considers the various foyers as 'more opportunity to present his architecture as an event-space for multiple scenarios' (p. 73).  
Courtesy of photographer Marc Goodwin, 2014.

The next three chapters focus separately on the three spatial models identified by Hannah. In Chapter 2, entitled 'Absolute space: universal landscapes', she explores the atmospheric and universal landscapes of set designers Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia (Fig. 3). She argues that the scene proposed by Craig, inspired by late nineteenth century symbolism, echoed Appia's scenographic proposals reinterpreted in the last quarter of the twentieth century by Robert Wilson's Theatre of Images and by Peter Brook's empty space, in special in the Bouffes du Nord in Paris (Fig. 4).

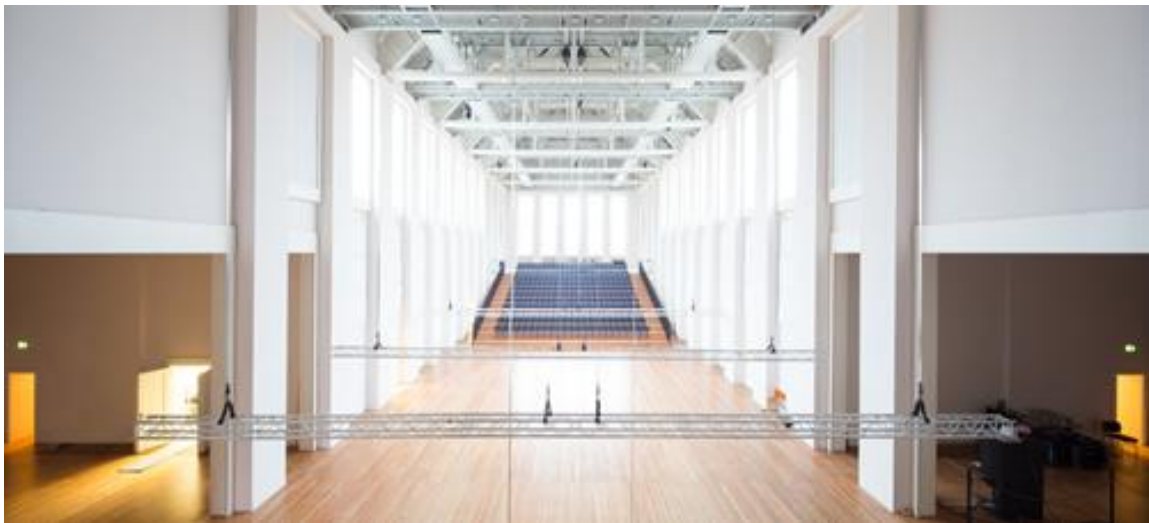


Fig. 3. Adolphe Appia's *Hellerau*, Dresden, Germany. 1911. Built in 1911, it was an important centre for early modern theatre up until the rise of the Nazi party. Courtesy of photographer Marc Goodwin, 2014.

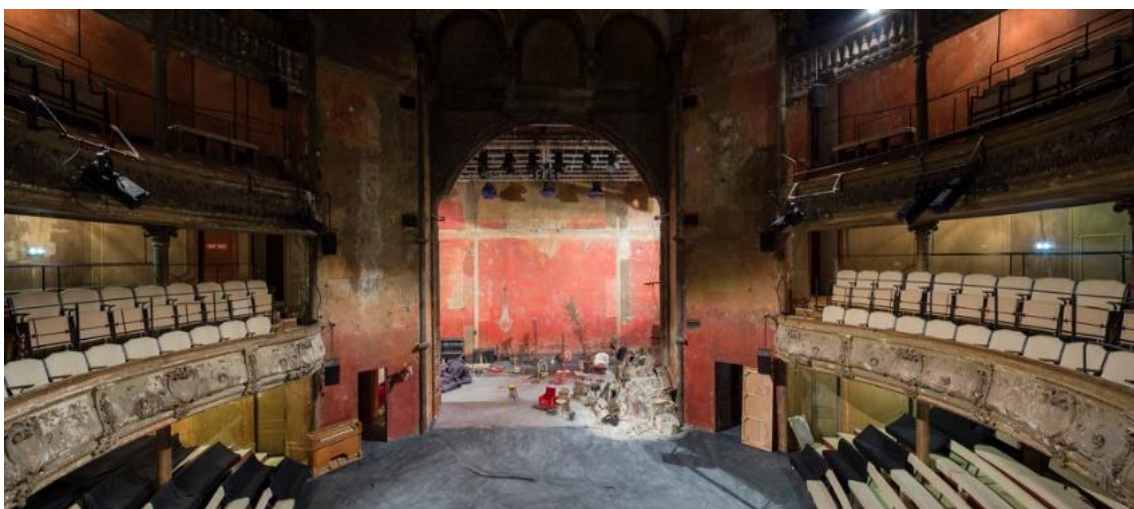


Fig. 4. Louis-Marie Emile Leménil's *Bouffes du Nord*. 1876. Peter Brook reopened the theatre in 1974, and 'successfully transformed the baroque U-shaped auditorium into a dynamic venue' (p. 87). Courtesy of photographer Marc Goodwin, 2014.

In the following chapter on 'Abstract Space', the focus is architect Walter Gropius' Total Theatre, designed for the conductor and theoretician Erwin Piscator and never built – a project that according to Hannah transformed the theatrical building into an architectural machine. Based on Henry Lefebvre's theories of the production of space (1991[1974]), for her, the archetype of 20<sup>th</sup>-century theatre architecture proposes a supposed homogeneity of modernist abstract space to which she associates a practice of spatial reduction that follows a functional logic, neutrality, and transparency.

However, the most challenging chapter is the fourth, entitled 'Abject Space – toward the Architecture of Cruelty,' in which the author confronts Piranesi's eighteenth century drawings, presenting numerous overlapping perspectives that challenged the perspective and the Renaissance framework of a single vanishing point, with the language of space proposed by Antonin Artaud in *The Theatre and Its Double* (1958 [1938]). The term 'abject-space' arose from the theories of Artaud and George Bataille, which demonstrated a physical revolt against rationalist architecture due mainly to the absence of a harmonious relationship with the visceral and unconscious body, signalling the failure of utopian projects, both in architecture and theatre.

One of the most remarkable examples is the paragraph Hannah points out the inherent brutality of public gathering spaces when Moscow's Dubrovka Theatre was seized for three days by Chechen rebels, illustrating how a traditional theatre architecture provided an ideal site for "barricade hostage-taking".

It is explicit that a rigid and closed architecture with Italian stage does not fit any further and does not offer protection to the spectators. Quoting Solà Morales (1984), Hannah defends a more ephemeral theatre architecture, aiming at a dynamic and eventful character. She emphasizes that as performance became visceral, architecture became more disembodied. She also identifies the use of this 'abject space' in Le Fresnoy's project conceived by the architect Bernard Tschumi (Fig. 5), also a defender of the event-space, amongst the other examples she analyses, which include the Oficina Theatre by Lina Bo Bardi and Edson Elito.



Fig. 5. Bernard Tschumi's Le Fresnoy (the National Studio for Contemporary Arts). Tourcoing, France, 1997. The design established 'a vertiginous and fragmented spatiality for creative encounters...' (p. 278). Courtesy of photographer Marc Goodwin, 2014.

The interdisciplinary nature of the book, involving not only architecture, theatre theories, art history, and most of all philosophy, scenography, and dramaturgy, among other disciplines, is sure to attract readers from different fields of study. Practitioners and theorists of these areas and surrounding areas should benefit from the courageous and daring proposal of this book in their future investigations.

The author re-evaluates the avantgarde's championing of nonrepresentational spaces, drawing on the specific fields of performance studies and architectural studies to establish a theory of 'performative architecture'. She explains that this notion of the 'evental' emerged from spatiotemporal revolutions in 20th-century science, arts and communication, whereby the static spatialization of space that emphasized movement, relativity and duration.

Grounded in different sources and theories, Hannah maintains the focus of her argument, leading the reader throughout the chapters in a thought-provoking and fascinating journey and throwing new lights on a theatre architecture that performs as real events.

As more and more schools of performing arts and architecture create postgraduate courses, in addition to undergraduate courses in these areas that are already subdivided into different domains, the readers who will benefit most from this analysis will be the university students and scholars from these areas. Nevertheless, as subfields have expanded greatly with the interrelationships between different areas, especially with performance studies and,

consequently, anthropology, this thoughtful research is a valuable contribution to the academic world, and also to practitioners of the different areas covered by the present book.

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