The elimination of stage-auditorium dichotomy is not the important thing— that simply creates a bare laboratory situation, an appropriate area for investigation. The essential concern is finding the proper spectator-actor relationship for each type of performance and embodying the decision in physical arrangements.

-Jerzy Grotowski, Towards a Poor Theatre

Because the essence of theatre lies in the interaction of performers and audience assembled in the same place at the same time, the physical space in which a performance occurs is a crucial element in the theatrical experience. Like other elements, the theatrical space can be organized in several ways, each with its own potential and limitations.

The Influence of Theatrical Space

The characteristics of the theatrical space influence both audience response and the way production elements are used. First, the degree of formality acts as an influence. An elaborate theatre building with carpeted lobbies and auditorium, fixed comfortable seating, and complex equipment creates a different set of expectations than does a theatrical space improvised in a warehouse, where the audience sits on the floor, wooden platforms, or folding chairs, and in which the equipment is minimal. The former suggests refinement, permanence (including continuity with the past), and extensive resources; it may arouse expectations of elaborate design, skilled acting, and polished productions. The latter suggests roughness, temporariness (perhaps a deliberate break with tradition), and limited resources; it may arouse expectations of experimentation and the need for imagination to supply what can only be suggested. An indoor theatre usually seems less festive than an outdoor theatre.

Second, the size of the theatrical space exerts an influence. Very large spaces make it difficult for all members of the audience to see and hear all that the performers are doing or saying; small details are likely to be lost; stage business may be simplified or enlarged, spectacle may be given increased emphasis, and sound may need to be amplified. More intimate spaces permit greater subtlety in the use of voice, gesture, and facial expression; more detail in dress and properties can also be used effectively. Intimate spaces are now generally preferred over large ones, in part because close-ups and sound tracks in television and film have conditioned audiences to expect to see and hear everything clearly. The influence of size (overall scale) on the total theatrical experience accounts for many of the differences among theatres of the past and present. A Greek theatre holding fifteen thousand people demanded conventions quite different from those used in today's theatres intended for a few hundred.
Third, the arrangement (or configuration) of theatrical space is an important influence. Not only does it define the physical relationship of the performer and the audience, but also it determines how production elements can be used.

There are four basic physical arrangements: (1) The acting area is placed at one end of the space, with all of the spectators facing it -- long the most common arrangement, the one used with the picture-frame or proscenium-arch stage; (2) the acting area is surrounded on two or three sides by the audience--the arrangement used with the thrust stage; (3) the acting area is completely surrounded by the audience--the configuration used with the arena stage (or theatre-in-the-round); and (4) the relationship of performer to audience is flexible and variable--an arrangement that may change from one production to another or even during the same performance; in such an arrangement, spectators and actors may be intermingled in multiple playing and seating areas, or the place of performance may shift, as when scenes are played at various sites along a procession route (as in medieval theatre or in some contemporary street theatre), or there may even be a different audience for each scene or at each site, although the configuration of the theatrical space may not have changed.

Overall, then, theatrical space creates an environment that influences the theatrical experience. Let us look more closely at the typical configurations and their influences.
The Proscenium-Arch Theatre

Probably the most familiar type of theatre is still that with a raised stage framed by a proscenium arch, although other types have become increasingly common. In the proscenium theatre the division between stage and auditorium is clearly marked by the proscenium arch, although some part of the acting platform may extend forward of the proscenium. (This extension is called the apron or forestage.) In the auditorium, all of the seats may be on the same level (though usually with the floor raked upward toward the rear to improve the view of the stage), or there may be one or more balconies. In the proscenium theatre, the stage is designed to be seen from the front only. This affects the director's use of actors in creating stage images; the uses of movement, gesture, and business; and the means used to achieve emphasis and subordination. It also affects the actors' bodily positions, their use of voice and speech, and all other aspects of their performance. Because the stage action is oriented in one direction, the designer may utilize three sides of the stage for the scenery, entrances, and exits. The scenery may be as tall as the designer wishes and may consist of few or many units. There is only one fundamental restriction: The view of the audience must not be blocked. The lighting designer needs to be concerned with giving three-dimensionality to actors and objects only as dimension is perceived from the auditorium.

The proscenium stage is usually equipped with a curtain that may be used to conceal or reveal the playing space (although today the front curtain is infrequently used). The stage ordinarily has an overhead system of ropes, pulleys, and battens that permit drapes or scenic pieces to be hoisted into the space above the stage or lowered to stage level; there is usually offstage space on either side to permit the shifting and storing of scenery. There also may be other machinery for shifting scenery, such as hydraulic lifts (elevators, on which portions of the stage are mounted, thus permitting them to be lowered or raised), or turntables (revolving stages, which permit portions of the stage to be revolved). Such complex machinery is not common because of its cost.

In the proscenium theatre, the action and scenery are usually farther from the audience than in other types of theatres. There may be an orchestra pit or forestage between the first row of seats and the acting area. Because scenery and costumes typically are not viewed at close range, they may be less precisely detailed than in other types of theatres.

The Thrust Stage

In a theatre with a thrust stage, the seats are usually arranged around three (or occasionally two) sides of a raised platform. The thrust stage brings the audience and performers into a more intimate relationship than does the proscenium theatre, because more of the audience is closer to the action than is possible in a proscenium theatre of the same size. Because it is usually seen from three sides, the acting area is a more three-dimensional space than the proscenium stage; the director, actors, and designers must seek to project in three directions simultaneously rather than, as in the proscenium theatre, only one.

The thrust stage discourages realistic spectacle of the type made possible by the picture-frame stage. Its use of scenery must be restricted. Tall units must be kept to the rear of the platform so as not to interfere with sightlines. Although some thrust stages are backed by an area equipped with flying facilities like those of a proscenium stage, extensive use of scenic effects there divides audience attention between the action on the main stage and scenic or lighting effects on a rear stage. Most thrust theatres make no provision for flying scenery, drops, or curtains above the main platform, although lighting instruments are usually mounted in recesses in the ceiling or on a grid above the stage. As a rule, furniture, properties, and scenic units are shifted by hand. Some furniture or properties may be mounted on wheeled platforms and moved on and off the stage from the rear of the platform. A few thrust stages have some portions mounted on hydraulic lifts, and there may be several traps in the stage floor. But all on-stage units must remain simple to avoid interfering with audience sightlines.
The Arena Stage

The typical arena theatre has no stage as such (that is, there is no raised platform). Rather, an open space is left at floor level in the middle of the auditorium. In some arena theatres, the floor of the performance area can be raised or lowered in segments to provide variety in levels or to differentiate locales. The seating is usually a stepped arrangement on four sides of the acting area. In some theatres of this type, the seats are not permanently installed, and the configuration may be varied at will, but in others comfortable armchair seating of the kind typical of proscenium theatres is used.

Because the arena theatre provides a three-dimensional playing area, the director, actors, and designers must be concerned with expressiveness from every angle. In an arena theatre, the costumed actors, lighting, furniture, and properties are emphasized much more than the scenery to avoid obscuring the audience's view. The scene designer may use a few open structures, such as trellises and pavilions, through which the audience can see, but ordinarily depends on furniture and properties. Provision is seldom made for flying scenery, although a few architectural fragments may be suspended overhead.

Occasionally, multi-leveled settings are used, but they must be constructed so that the audience can clearly see the action on all levels. Screens for projections are sometimes hung at various spots over the acting area, over the audience, or around the walls (the same image maybe projected on different screens simultaneously so that all members of the audience can see it), but usually the set designer must suggest locale, period, mood, and style with a few touches.

Because there is no curtain, all changes are made either in full view of the audience or in semidarkness. All shifting is usually done by hand. Many arena theatres have passageways (vomitorta) running under the seating and opening onto the acting area. These serve as exits and entrances for actors and as means of getting scenic units or properties on and off the stage. Most arena stages are relatively small and intimate but make special demands on staging because all elements are viewed and must communicate from every angle.

The thrust stage at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival Theatre in Canada. Designed specifically to accommodate Shakespeare's plays, it incorporates features of the Elizabethan public stage. (courtesy of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival Foundation of Canada)
Flexible Space

In modern times, the intermingling of performers and audiences has occurred primarily since the 1960s. This arrangement usually requires an open space without fixed seating or stage. Many regional and university theatres have such a space, usually in addition to a proscenium or thrust stage. Often referred to as a "black box" (because it is basically a bare room with black walls), it is most frequently used for productions with limited or special appeal—nontraditional works or performance modes, new or untested plays, low-budget or student productions.

A flexible space may be indoor or outdoor, small or large. The areas used by the performers or by the audience may be varied from one production to the next or even during the course of a single performance. In this type of arrangement, different scenes are sometimes performed at various places within the space simultaneously. Unlike most theatrical performances, which seek to have all members of the audience see and hear the same things at the same time, the intermingled arrangement may use multiple focus. Some spectators may be watching one scene while others are watching another, or spectators may be able to choose which scenes they will watch, moving about in the space in order to see the scene that has attracted their attention. Sometimes spectators participate in the action and are asked by the performers to move or to assist with some task. In other instances, the distinctions between performers and spectators remain clear, and the space each group occupies remains distinct; in still others, the entire space becomes both acting area and spectator space. Flexibility also encompasses processional staging, with the performers moving from one location to another (usually outdoors). The key is flexibility in the use of all theatrical elements.
Beginning in the 1960s, there was a movement to reject theatre buildings altogether. Some argued that, like museums and concert halls, theatres discourage all except a cultural elite. These innovators sought instead to take performances into parks, streets, and other places where theatrically unsophisticated spectators might discover the theatre. Instead of a building, they advocated the use of "found" space, either adapting a production to fit existing areas or altering existing areas to fit the needs of the production. The variety of audience-performer configurations was great, but all could be reduced to one or some combination of the four basic types of theatrical space. Experimentation with performance spaces reminds us that theatre does not require a permanent structure built especially for it and that all spatial arrangements are merely ways of facilitating the interaction of performers and audiences.

Flexible space used in the staging of "Everyman in the Mall", an adaptation by Shishir Kurup and Bill Rauch of the medieval play, "Everyman." Here Kindred and Cousin converse with Everyman while walking down an up escalator at an actual mall where the play was performed. (photo by Jan Mabry)

**SIDEBAR: Theatre Architecture**

In *The Shapes of Our Theatres*, Jo Mielziner writes: "All theatre interiors consist of two essential areas: one is 'the auditorium,' which is designed specifically for the audience; the other, designed for the production, we know as 'the stage.' . . . Independently they have no life; together they produce a living theatre. It is therefore the sensitive interrelationship of the two that makes a theatre design either a success or a failure."

In the twentieth century, however, many persons have objected to the dichotomy between auditorium and stage and have sought means to bridge them. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy writes: "Stage and spectator are too much separated, too obviously divided into active and passive, to be able to produce creative relationships and reciprocal tensions. It is time to produce a kind of stage activity that will no longer permit the audience to be silent spectators." He suggested building auditoriums with "suspended bridges and drawbridges running horizontally, diagonally, and vertically"; segments of the stage capable of moving toward the spectators to create effects similar to those of close-ups in film; runways that extend completely around the seating area; and other devices that place the spectator in a dynamic relationship with the action.

Marvin Carlson concludes in his *Places of Performance* that, as a result of twentieth-century experiments with theatrical space, "Never before in history has a public had available for its
consideration" so many diverse "physical spaces in which theatre today may be presented . . . In addition to this huge selection of historical spaces, the twentieth century has produced experimental directors who have explored the possibilities of an almost infinite variety of nontraditional spaces": streets, parks, woodlands, factories, warehouses, and "all manner of public and private buildings."

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**Auxiliary Spaces**

In addition to the performance space, theatre buildings usually have a number of auxiliary spaces. Several of these are intended to serve the audience - lobby, restrooms, corridors, exits, and refreshment stands. Others are spaces for theatrical personnel, such as box office and other work space.

The amount of work space provided in theatres varies widely. A well-designed, self-contained theatre (one with facilities for preparing productions as well as performing them) will include all or most of the following: a scene construction shop (with space to store equipment and materials) painting facilities an area for assembling scenery sufficient offstage space for storing and shifting scenery during performances and permanent storage space for scenery not in use; a property room near the stage and another area for the permanent storage of furniture and bulky props; a costume construction shop, with laundry, dyeing, cleaning, and pressing facilities, and an area for permanent storage of costumes; a work space for lighting personnel, a storage area for lighting equipment, and a lighting booth for the control board operator during performances (ideally with full view of the stage); multiple large rehearsal rooms; several dressing rooms, each with makeup facilities (unless a separate makeup room is provided); adequate showers and restrooms for the actors and crews, and an area (the green room) where all of the actors and crew members can assemble to receive instructions or relax; space to house sound equipment and from which to operate it; and adequate office and work space for such personnel as dramaturgs, artistic directors, and business managers.

Many theatres, especially those on Broadway, as well as many of those used by low-budget companies, do not include the full range of work facilities listed here. On Broadway, most theatres provide performance space only; productions are rehearsed elsewhere, costumes and scenery are built in studios far removed from the theatre, and backstage space is often minimally equipped. Broadway theatres host productions rather than serve as the permanent home of a company. Many small companies, such as Off-Off-Broadway groups, even if they are permanent, often function in very limited facilities. Regional and university theatres usually have more extensive facilities.