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Theater as Illusion: An Architectural Project in Kansas City

Marsha B. Hale

The various levels of organization of the parts of this project presented some interesting difficulties. These parts, the auditorium, bar/restaurant, their supporting spaces and a required urban open space had to be arranged on a very confined site which sloped slightly to the east. The nature of the building type demanded a somewhat rigorous consideration of the critical functional relationships among the spatial components which comprised each part. The differing functional, processional, hierarchical and image qualities of these parts indicated the improbability of trying to subjugate their essential formal diversity to a rigid, total and purely diagrammatic building geometry. Opportunities for design freedom became apparent primarily with regard to the internal ordering of the individual parts and the articulation of specific junctures between these parts. It then became clear that the circulation systems both within and outside the building were the elements most likely to become invested with the expressive qualities which a theater should project. The circulation could take on a processional, ritual quality and be articulated as a series of stages which would serve to place the theater-going public on display. Overlaid on this very important design decision were other ideas equally as valid regarding aspects of the theater which opposed this tendency toward transparency. These are the qualities of theater as mask and illusion. These issues will be clarified later.

Carl Hinrich, a theatrical director and stage designer in the Kansas State Department of Speech and Drama, discussed with our studio on several occasions the possible images which a theater might attain. Particularly important was his concept toward the audience; from the time they enter the theater they must begin to identify themselves as a special temporary community. The fact that other constraints in the development of this design dictated that the order of the parts occur as a collection of small-scale pieces tied together by a common circulation element needed to support this notion of community. Also, the circulation systems had few specific constraints on their shaping which further supported the "community" parti. The circulation could be designed as a series of small-scale, well-defined spaces which would encourage the collecting and gathering of people. This "community" idea also seemed to have obvious value in terms of the development of the building exterior to strengthen a potentially cohesive local urban context.

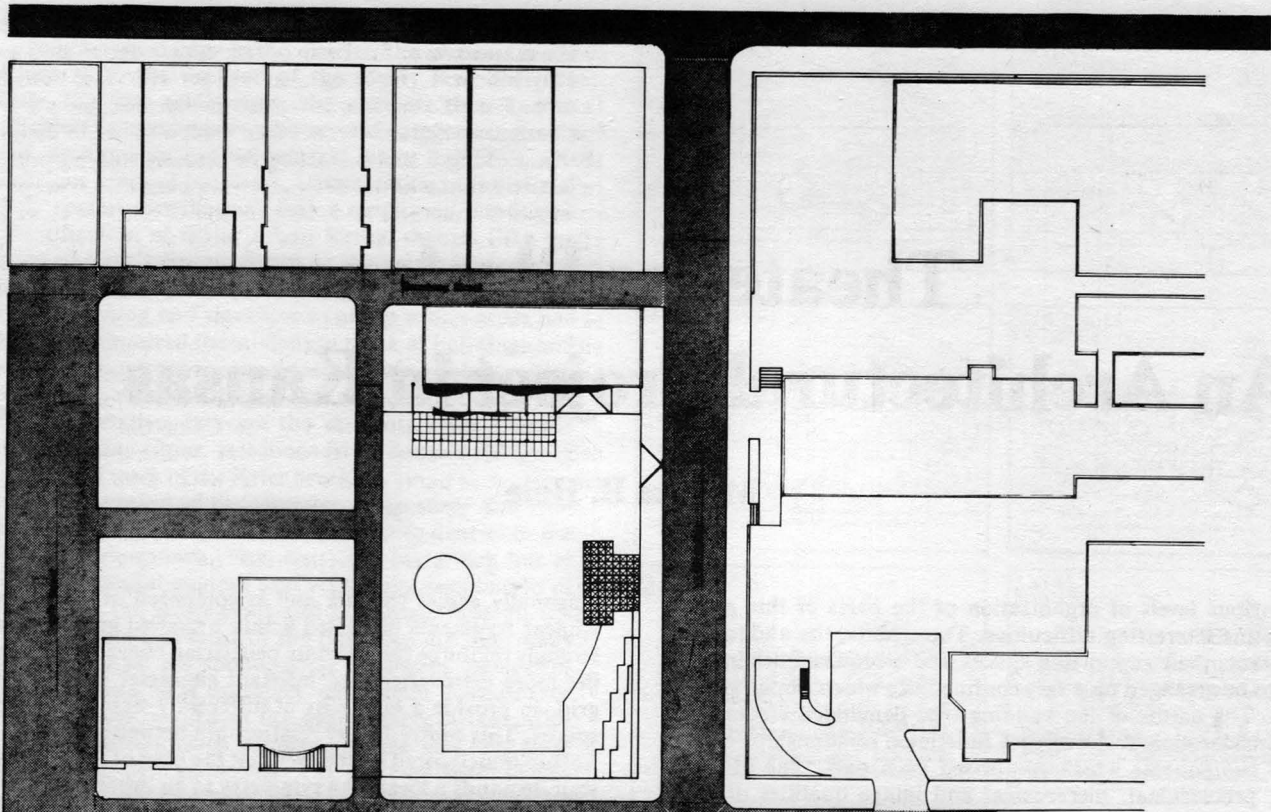
A primary concern in this design project was relating the building positively to the context in which it was to be placed, linking it to the existing urban fabric without compromising its individuality as a public building. The predominant order of the Kansas City, Missouri, downtown street pattern is a grid. The building repeats the regularity of this urban grid on its elevations. This grid is broken at one point on each of the elevations which face out to the city. Each of these breaks is a gesture to an important building in the context—the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception to the south across 11th Street and the Musician's Union building on the site immediately to the north of the theater on Washington Street. Both of these buildings are formally significant and memorable community landmarks. The urban grid which is foregrounded on the elevations is contradicted purposely by the plan order of the circulation which cuts

diagonally across the site and is composed of rectilinear and curvilinear fragments dispersed within a skewed grid. This was done to strongly reinforce the intimate pedestrian character of this space with the more extroverted and insistent character of the exterior urban grid, to provide a hierarchy of differently sized and shaped interior spaces. This contradictory relationship between elevation and plan is further underscored by the fact that the plan of the lobby at the major stair demands a local plan symmetry as an inflection. This symmetry, however, is not hinted at on any of the layers of the south elevation. This elevation then exists as a mask.

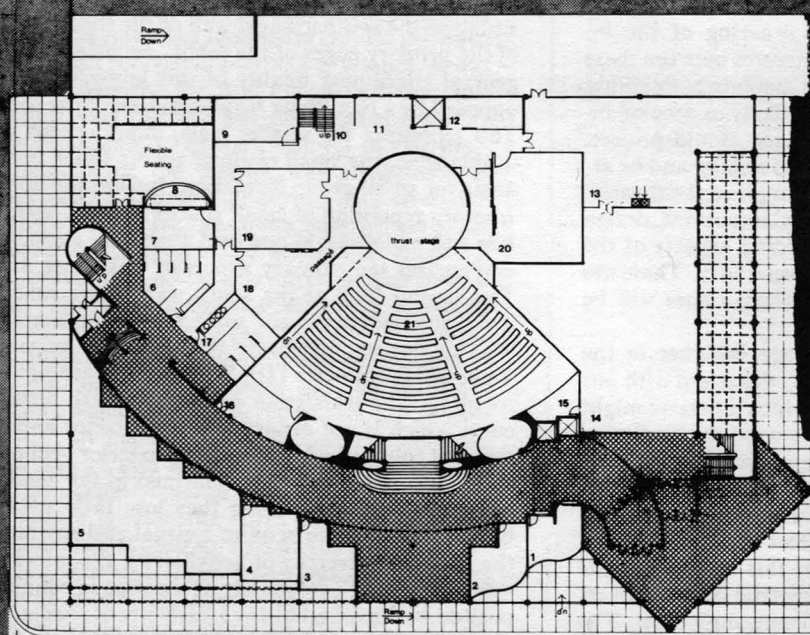
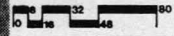
Because of the formal qualities inherent to a mass seating situation, the southernmost wall of the theater, which establishes one of the primary edges of the lobby, acquired a curvilinear shape. The general curvilinear quality of this lobby/communication space was opposed by a rectilinear fragmentation of the south wall of the lobby. This represents the smaller scale, individualized activities which occur in this zone, the small residual spaces which occur here also provide areas for small group formation, further the opposition between this *staccato* repetition of small spaces and the *legato* rhythm of the theatre wall establishes at one level a nervous, anxious spatial quality which emphasizes the primary aspect of this space as a movement space. The second level of the south wall of the main lobby space forms a continuous curvilinear soffit for the intimate spaces just beneath it. This device contributes to the overall curvilinear quality of this space which connects 11th Street with Washington Street through the building. The pedestrian enters from 11th Street on one end of this curve which is not exposed on the exterior and is confronted with a series of columns which recall the exterior grid pattern. This series of columns quickly becomes deformed to the conditions of the interior curvature and in so doing they lose their primary quality as load bearing structure to acquire a visual and rhythmic quality relative to the scale and diversity of activities on the interior. The use of such a "non-structural" colonnade as a device to connect the inside with the outside was inspired by the University of Virginia colonnades. There, Stanford White in 1895 extended the colonnade bordering the East and West Lawn northward past the east and west sides of the Rotunda to link the Lawn more strongly with the northerly developments of the university and the growing city of Charlottesville.

Investigation of Palladio's Teatro Olimpico was particularly important to the thematic order of this project. This well-known theater in Vicenza, Italy, employs a perspective foreshortening device, an illusion, in the construction of its permanent stage set. These ideas of "stage" and illusion became manifested in the Kansas City Theater building complex as a series of layers, like proscenia, which defined specific spatial increments. An example of this is apparent in the south elevation. This facade, a series of screens, appears to have indefinite horizontal and vertical boundaries with framed views into the interior. The facade becomes a spatial event rather than a surface event and consequently this re-definition of the facade as a spatial entity allows it to mimic the spatial depth of a theatrical stage. This allows the building to be seen as an essay of ephemerality and illusionary sequences.

The interior colonnade was organized to create the illusion of a



⊕ Site Plan

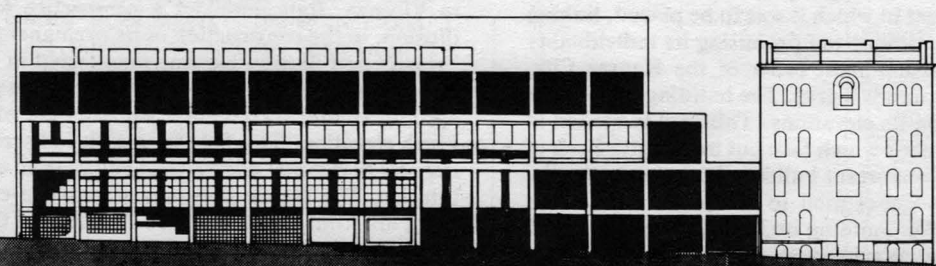
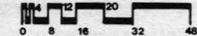


key

- 1 Ticket Office
- 2 Coat Storage
- 3 House Manager's Office
- 4 Manager's Office
- 5 Bar
- 6 Toilet
- 7 Storage for Amphitheater
- 8 Amphitheater
- 9 Control Room
- 10 Lift
- 11 Loading Dock
- 12 Dressing Room
- 13 Kitchen
- 14 Restaurant
- 15 Restaurant Storage
- 16 Storage
- 17 Toilet
- 18 Greenroom
- 19 Rehearsal Room
- 20 Scenery Construction and Set-Up Room
- 21 Auditorium

Apartment Building

⊕ First Floor Plan



forced perspective similar to that experienced when one walks in Bernini's colonnade at St. Peter's. This allows the user to experience a quality within the building that was not apparent from the exterior facade. The exterior facades of the theater become a mask in which the participant questions whether she/he is inside or outside. Was she/he looking into the building or actually looking into a perceived reflection? In the initial design development this concept emerged as an exposed structural grid, with enclosed reflective glass panels. This allowed a reflection of the total context on all facades, yet it lacked depth of views to the interior of the building. Further investigation revealed the impracticality of utilizing such a concept which would essentially create monotonous facades. This would also enable the participants to establish a sense of scale, and would be less overly theatrical and literal if one was somewhat uncertain whether she/he was seeing a reflection or an actual view of the inside.

The south facade, facing the Cathedral of Immaculate Conception, becomes a series of layers, which increases the sense of change due to parallax as one walks around the building. This transformation is appropriate to a theater, because stage sets always appear to be changing from specific viewpoints and can be perceived entirely differently from one vantage point to another. A dialogue is established between solid and planar elements through the structural cage with the layering of screens and the frame of the structure merging into the wall surface.

The east elevation continues the foregrounding present on the south facade, yet becomes fragmented with foliage and reflective glass block. This edge needed a very sensitive treatment since it marks the direct abutment of the new with the old. To link the existing apartment building to the theater, a colonnade covered with lattice was projected out, on the same structural grid pattern as the theater. Topiary was placed against the edge of the apartment building which is reflected off the mirrored east facade of the outside eating area. The walls in between the colonnade are glass block which at some places fragment into mirror blocks that create an exciting wall both to residents of the apartment building and also users of the restaurant. The lattice and foliage were used to create an illusion of depth within the spaces, as well as to imply the possibility of a previously ruinous state. The viewer might ascertain that the building had parts which were older collaged together with parts recently built to form a harmonious entity within the existing context. This idea is similar to Michelangelo's St. Maria degli Angeli built into the ruins of the Baths of Diocletian. Anyone who enters from the eastern edge is exposed to a series of ordered events created by a linking of dissimilar objects to form a beginning, a transitional zone, and an end.

Similar ordering elements are experienced on the western facade of the building. Since this edge also contains the outdoor amphitheater, views both into and outward from the seating area were of major concern. The participant is led through a series of spaces which change depending on the vantage point and the views. At one point the amphitheater appears to be a latticed garden, further into the space it becomes a stage for actors, and at yet still another point a series of pure glass blocks which reflect the viewer. The western facade is penetrated with a stair which projects thru the structure, not only as an inflection to the Musician Guild but also defying any constraints the "structural cage" may have upon it. The stairs are further articulated by having the connection of each tread visible from the exterior, indicating the placement of vertical circulation within the building. The next bay contains the side entrance which recedes inward and begins the inflection to the church tower.

Through this brief discussion I hope I have conveyed my initial thoughts of what a theater should be, and the development of these thoughts into tangible architectural elements. These elements attempt to embody the concepts of a pluralistic architecture; one which responds to a rich diversity of existing constraints through a correspondingly rich palette of architectural forms. I feel it is necessary that architecture be extended from simply a logical derivation of functional and technological facts. By elevating architecture to an art, it becomes experienced on the immediate level of sensual perception, and understood on the abstract level of intellectual cognition.

Marsha B. Hale is from Wichita, Kansas, and is a fifth-year student in architecture at Kansas State University.

