

# GIULIO CAMILLO: SCENOGRAPHER OF MEMORY IN A DRAMATIC ARCHITECTURE

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The art of memory is a technique of European tradition inherited from ancient Greece, commonly used by Roman orators and passed on to the following generations. Whoever desired to train their faculty of memorisation learned to place images of strong impact – *imagines agentes*<sup>1</sup> – in rooms of a virtual architecture. They could then walk around this virtual building, enter the rooms, and visualize the images that would stimulate their memory. This spatial technique, known as the *Palace of Memory*, allows one to move virtually from one room to another, and consequently from one idea to another without becoming disoriented in one's speech.

The printing industry in the Renaissance could have eradicated this kind of artificial memory technique; paradoxically, this is when *Ars Memoria* reached

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of *Imagines agentes* in *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* 'We ought, then, to set up images of a kind that can adhere longest in memory. And we shall do so if we establish similitudes as striking as possible; if we set up images that are not many or vague but active (*imagines agentes*); if we assign to them exceptional beauty or singular ugliness; if we ornament some of them, as with crowns or purple cloaks, so that the similitude may be more distinct to us; or if we somehow disfigure them, as by introducing one stained with blood or soiled with mud or smeared with red paint, so that its form is more striking, or by assigning certain comic effects to our images, for that, too, will ensure our remembering them more readily. The things we easily remember when they are real, we likewise remember without difficulty when they are figments. But this will be essential-again and again to run over rapidly in the mind all the original places in order to refresh the images'.

its peak with a profusion of machines, systems and techniques invented to improve the capacity of learning. One man stood out from this profusion of inventions. His name was Giulio Camillo and he offered to build a universal memory system containing all the knowledge of the world in the shape of a small wooden theatre.

This paper proposes to look at Giulio Camillo as a scenographer of memory, to examine his reasons for choosing the architecture of a theatre, what this architecture was like in the Renaissance and what it meant. Here, the theatre is not only used as a system but as a dramatic architecture in which the spectator, or in this case, the user, becomes a performer who creates, imagines, remembers and embodies knowledge.

### **Historical Landmarks**

The Renaissance is marked by the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Latin texts (Cicero, Plato and Aristotle) and the rebirth of the ancient classical arts, sciences and philosophy. The modern perspective techniques revolutionize the arts but also the way that people look at the world. On another level, Copernicus heliocentric theory is reconfiguring the universe, opening thought for even deeper spatial questionings. The renaissance humanist questions the position of the sun in relation to the earth but also his/her own place in relation to god and the universe. These are times of profound questionings related to place, emplacements and viewpoints. In that sense, the Renaissance is embedded in a scenographic rationale “that redefines the world through new place orientations” (Hann, 2018).

The Renaissance world is highly codified. It is organized and orchestrated according to certain principles and laws. The capacity to learn and memorize, becomes an important asset, promoting a powerful position in society. At this time, Venice is known for its publishers who distributed their editions all across Europe. The city was an important intellectual centre of the Renaissance and Giulio Camillo was a man of his time.

Born in Friuli, in the North East of Italy, around 1480, Camillo later lived in the region of Venice where he studied philosophy and jurisprudence at the University of Padua, and taught eloquence and logic at San Vito. Between 1521 and 1525, he held a chair of dialectics at the University of Bologna. Considered as a genius by some and as a perjurer by others, his charismatic personality did not go unnoticed. Lina Bolzoni described him as '*a scholar and philosopher, both a Friulan and a cosmopolitan, a master of rhetoric, a fat man with a stutter who nevertheless knew how to fascinate his audience*' (Bolzoni, 2005, p.8, author's translation). Camillo had many illustrious acquaintances, such as the publisher Aldus Manutius<sup>2</sup>, the philosopher Erasmus, the painters Titian and Salviati, and the architect Sebastiano Serlio, who was appointed by the King Francis I of France to become the supervisor of the construction and decoration of the Fontainebleau castle. Giulio Camillo made his own way to King Francis I with two manuscripts *Theatro della sapientia*, and *Trattato dell'imitazione*, and eventually convinced him to finance the construction of a machine that would allow its user to reach the knowledge of the entire universe and access all the treasures of eloquence.

Memory systems and rhetoric machines were very popular across Europe in the Renaissance, but none equalled the success of Camillo's theatre whose structure was based on the study of Vitruvius's theatre plan. Dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, Vitruvius's treatise on architecture was printed in Rome in 1486. For almost one century his work was studied by architects and scholars, illustrated and translated from Latin into Italian.

The fifth book of his treatise covers public buildings and is largely concerned with theatre. Renaissance architects such as Andrea Palladio drew theatre plans according to Vitruvius's descriptions (fig. 1). The drawing starts with a circle in which four equilateral triangles are drawn, while two parallel lines on either

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<sup>2</sup> Humanist and founder of the Aldine press. He is well known for having invented the *enchiridia*, a small portable book.

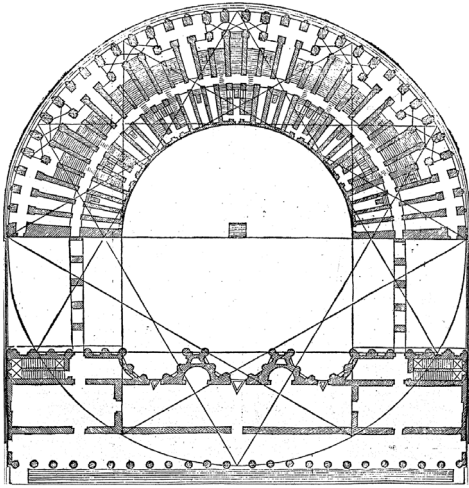


Figure 1. Andrea Palladio. Reconstruction of the plan of a Roman theatre for the edition of Vitruvius's "I Dieci Libri dell' Architettura" translated by Daniele Barbaro (Venice, 1556)

side of the circle determine the positions of the proscenium and the orchestra. The four equilateral triangles also divide the circle via twelve equidistant points that indicate the positions of the seven exits in the auditorium and the five stage entrances. On the stage a palace with a central door and two side doors must be represented. Vitruvius also indicated that the four triangles divide the circle into twelve parts according to the cosmological principles of the twelve signs of the zodiac.

In 1540, Sebastiano Serlio wrote an architecture and perspective treatise<sup>3</sup> based on Vitruvius's writings, and adapted to the Renaissance. The second book is entirely dedicated to theatre architecture. What he proposes is not an archaeological reconstitution, but an adaptation of Vitruvius's Roman theatre for the Italian aristocracy of the Renaissance. The development of perspective techniques has

<sup>3</sup> *All the Works of Architecture and Perspective.*

contributed to the re-organization of the classical Roman theatre with new forms and principles, namely a motionless spectator looking at a framed image constructed by means of perspective, so as to produce a resemblance between the representation and the vision that a spectator can have of reality. The Italian Renaissance theatre is organized around the stage, which is the place of fiction, fable, and knowledge. The Prince has the privilege to have a special place in the audience that dominates the stage. He sits in the focal point<sup>4</sup> right in front of the centre stage. According to the perspective technique, *the Prince's eye* is actually the painter's eye.

The history of theatre architecture teaches us how art and technology seek to express life and thought through matter and form. Theatres reflect the philosophical and scientific thought of their epoch and are also the expression of political power. The circular theatre inherited from Vitruvius and adapted to the Renaissance epitomizes the questionings of its time. If the world is a sphere, what place should I occupy in this sphere, who am I and what does this place mean, what role does it assign to me?

### **A Theatre for wisdom**

French theatre historian and scenographer Anne Surgers (2007) has observed that Renaissance scholars, and artists who reflected on the theories of language and knowledge, also organized staged forms of academic gatherings. These academies often took place in large rectangular halls, but their spatial organization mimicked the theatre. The audience was spread out in such a way as to surround a focal point where the Prince, or the most important person in the audience, was seated in front of a decorum, ideally ordered according to his frontal perspective. This spatial disposition created a mirror effect in which the

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<sup>4</sup> *L'œil du Prince*, which means *The Prince's Eye*, is a French expression proposed by theatre architect Nicola Sabbatini (1574–1654) to evoke an imaginary point in the audience of a theatre, located in its central axis, where all the objects onstage appear better than from any other place. This place was reserved for the nobility, thus the reference to the prince.

Prince had a pivotal role between the stage where the idea, the speech, or the scientific knowledge was presented, and the audience. This spatial organization placed the Prince in the centre of all attentions as the epicentre of power and that is important for our understanding of Giulio Camillo's theatre of memory. In a speech addressed to the French court, Camillo promoted his theatre as such:

*If men's mind had a window (as Socrates desired), we would certainly see that innumerable forms of things are imprinted there... I have built a great external mind, a mind that contains the forms of all things and all words, but the natural mind is different from my artificial mind because the former can be triggered by the senses, while my artificial mind commands not only the senses, but also of the inner mind through the senses themselves. (Camillo in Bolzoni, 2018)*

King Francis I became passionate about Camillo's project and granted him an advance payment of 500 ducats to guarantee his own exclusive use of the machine. The theatre of memory thus became a political project. We know that at least one sample of the theatre was built in Italy and another one in Paris, but no material evidence is left from these constructions. In 1544, Camillo died without finishing his masterpiece. However, during the three months prior to his death, he dictated a text describing his project. Published posthumously, *L'Idea del Teatro* is the only remain of the theatre of memory. The original version of the text that contained illustrations by the famous painters Francesco Salviati and Titian, disappeared. It seems to have burned in the fire of the Spanish Escorial Library in 1671. To this day, we believe that only the King of France and Camillo himself knew all the secrets of the system.

The descriptions and writings that have passed on to us from Camillo's theatre leave a wide margin of interpretation concerning its precise architectural form and the scholars who have studied it (Frances Yates, Lina Bolzoni, Bertrand Schefer and Christine de Léotard-Sommer) have often made their own plans of

the building. I will describe some of these plans to make my point, namely, how Camillo designed his memory system into a theatre architecture to be used as a performative tool where the spectator becomes an active participant, a user, a performer.

The theatre was circular, and made of wood. The interior resembled the architecture of the Roman Theatre, with the difference that it was intended for a solo spectator standing onstage and looking at the 'spectacle' in the auditorium. A letter dated 1532 addressed to Erasmus and attributed to Viglius Zuichemus describes the theatre as follows:

*The work is of wood, marked with many images, and full of little boxes; there are various orders and grades in it. He gives a place to each individual figure and ornament, and he showed me such a mass of papers that, though I always heard that Cicero was the fountain of richest eloquence, scarcely would I have thought that one author could contain so much or that so many volumes could be pieced together out of his writings. He calls this theatre of his by many names, saying now that it is a built or constructed mind and soul, and now that it is a windowed one. He pretends that all things that the human mind can conceive and which we cannot see with the corporeal eye, after being collected together by diligent meditation may be expressed by certain corporeal signs in such a way that the beholder may at once perceive with his eyes everything that is otherwise hidden in the depths of the human mind. And it is because of this corporeal looking that he calls it a theatre. (Viglius Zuichemus in Yates, 2008)*

All the reconstructions agree on the fact that Camillo built his theatre according to Vitruvius plans of the Roman theatre. More precisely, the theatre consists of a hemicycle of seven rows corresponding to seven degrees of reality.

|                           |                                      |   |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| <b>1<sup>st</sup> Row</b> | The planets                          | The divine and the principles of the universe         |
| <b>2<sup>nd</sup> Row</b> | The banquet                          | Knowledge and the intelligible world                  |
| <b>3<sup>rd</sup> Row</b> | The cave or the Nymph's den          | The natural elements                                  |
| <b>4<sup>th</sup> Row</b> | The Gorgon sisters                   | The soul of man and the inner world                   |
| <b>5<sup>th</sup> Row</b> | Pasiphae or the bull                 | The embodied soul, man and his relation to the cosmos |
| <b>6<sup>th</sup> Row</b> | The heel straps or Mercury sandals   | Human actions in the world                            |
| <b>7<sup>th</sup> Row</b> | Prometheus and the technique of fire | The arts, sciences and techniques                     |

The seven rows are crossed by seven aisles forming sectors corresponding to planets. In accordance with the astrological tradition well known at the time, the planets are represented by human figures, producing a very effective connection between the microcosm and the macrocosm: namely, the human body – its parts, moods and psychological characteristics – and the natural and celestial world. In accordance with the Kabbalistic tradition, Camillo relates the seven planets to the first seven of the ten Sefira<sup>5</sup>. To each combination of planet and sefira, also corresponds an angel.

| <b>Planets</b> | <b>Sefirot</b> | <b>Angel</b> |
|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Luna (Diana)   | Marcut         | Gabriel      |
| Mercury        | Iseod          | Michael      |
| Venus          | Hod and Nisach | Honiel       |
| Sun (Apollo)   | Tipheret       | Raphael      |
| Mars           | Gabiarah       | Camael       |
| Jupiter        | Chased         | Zadchiel     |
| Saturn         | Bina           | Zaphkiel     |

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Sefirot, also spelled sephiroth, (sing. sefira or Sephira) are the 10 emanations, or powers, in esoteric Jewish mysticism (Kabbala), by which God the Creator was said to become manifest.



Arranged in a semicircle around the orchestra, the seven rows are multiplied by the seven aisles making a total of 49 points or *loci*. At each point, Camillo places one to seven images corresponding to different levels of knowledge: physical, metaphysical, divine. Because there are seven degrees of reality, the same image can be used in different places to signify something else. On each panel, there are one to seven painted images. At the base of each panel, there are boxes filled with papers containing extracts of texts, mostly from Cicero, as well as diagrams that stimulate knowledge, eloquence and memory. Camillo mentions the existence of 211 images, painted by Titian or Salviati, the meaning of which are explained in detail in *L'Idea del Teatro*.

Camillo adapts the Vitruvian theatre stage to his mnemonic project. Scholars who have studied *L'Idea del teatro* and redrawn the plans of the theatre (Yates, Schefer, Bolzoni, Léotard-Sommer) propose that its architecture relies on seven columns that represent the seven pillars of Solomon's house of wisdom. In relation to the plan drawn by Frances A. Yates and taken up by Bertrand Schefer (2007) (figure 2), French art historian Christine de Léotard-Sommer proposes a new draft (figure 3) that she has designed following the observation of a fresco located in a gallery of the Château de Fontainebleau<sup>6</sup>, residence of King Francis I. According to Léotard-Sommer, the seven columns do not directly face the rows, which would obstruct the view of the spectator, but are located behind him/her, reproducing the semicircle of the hemicycle. This new spatial arrangement, which traps the spectator in a narrow semi-circular corridor, led me to redraw the plans of Camillo's theatre of memory (figure 4). What I suggest is to redraw the orchestra in a full circle where the seven columns are still facing the alleys but behind the spectator, allowing an unobstructed view of all the tiers. This draft deserves further study and research. What I am suggesting is that Camillo's theatre could also have been organized in a full circle like the Vitruvian

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<sup>6</sup> *L'Eléphant Fleurdalisé* (1535-1537) The Royal Elephant decorated with a lily representing the King is a fresco by Rosso Fiorentino in the Francis I Gallery, Fontainebleau Castle, France.

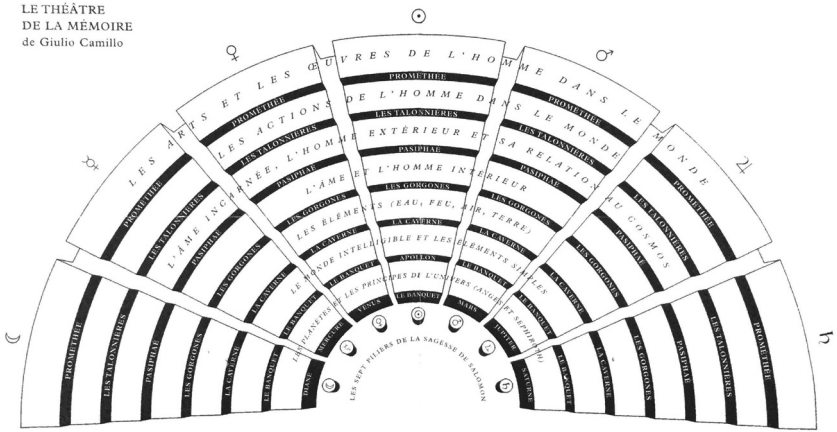


Figure 2. Drawing of Giulio Camillo's theatre of memory by Bertrand Schefer, 2007

theatre and not just in a semicircle. The spectator was thus standing at the centre of the orchestra with the seven columns in his back, protected from the gaze of others, inside the temple of Solomon, like the Prince in the center of the academiae.

Camillo's description of the theatre remains obscure as it often refers to hermetic and magical terms inherited from medieval traditions. By so doing Camillo *'selects his audience: there is a path to the increasingly hidden senses, whose levels correspond to different capacities of reception'* (Bolzoni, 2018). The theatre allows Camillo to establish a certain relation of power. The difference between the theatre of memory and other memory systems is that the places and images are not arbitrary but divine in nature, linked to a deep and hidden structure of the Renaissance encoded reality influenced by hermeticism, magic and the Kabala. The theatre of memory aimed to be larger and bigger than anything else... and that is probably the reason why it was never finished.

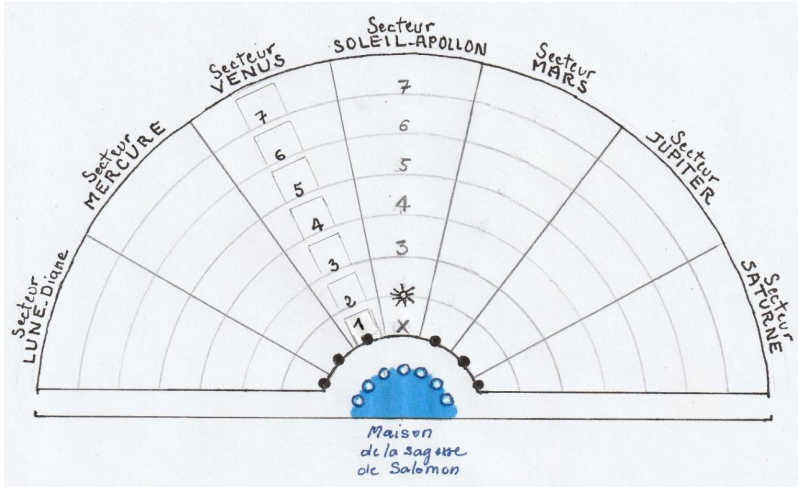


Figure 3. Giulio Camillo's theatre plan according to Christine de Léotard-Sommer, 2019.

○: 7 Columns delimiting Solomon's House. Each column is related to a planet. The user stands in the space between these columns and 1<sup>st</sup> degree; • and ◻: 7 planets determining the sectors of the creation of the universe, except the sun; 1 to 7: order of degrees in all sectors; X: special degree called "Apollo's Banquet" which precedes the planet Sun in the central sector

### Giulio Camillo, a scenographer of memory

In Camillo's theatre, the spectator stands alone onstage, facing the semi-circular tiers where 49 panels are standing supposedly vertically, at the intersections of every row and aisle. By placing significant images in a theatre architecture, Camillo invites his spectator to translate images into words and words into images, and by so doing, to be active in the interpretation of semantic signs. The traditional art of memory, refers to *'imagines agentes'* meaning *'active images'* that strike the mental eye and excite memory. Here the spectator, or shall I say the user, operates within a matrix of 211 *'active images'* using his/her reasoning, imagination and creativity to perform the knowledge of all things.

Anne Surgers reminds us that the Italian theatre commonly served as a model for the academies of scholars during the Renaissance (Surgers, 2007). These small-scale theatrical academies were invented for an elite in a very hierarchical society. All spectators were oriented towards a central, focal point of the stage and the

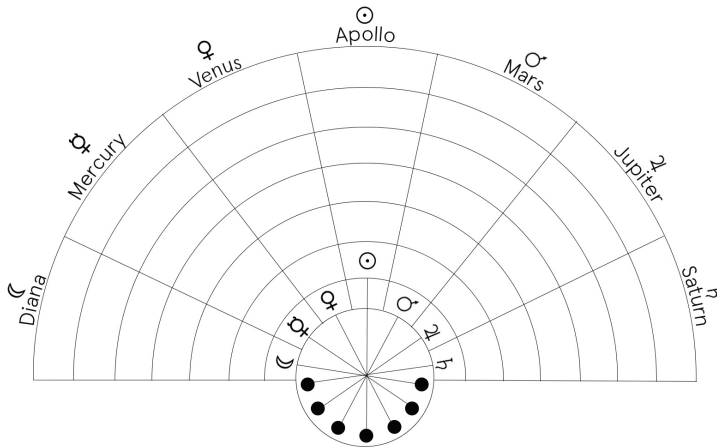


Figure 4. Author's personal draft of Giulio Camillo's theatre of Memory. Carolina E. Santo, 2020

auditorium had one ideal seat facing the stage intended for the King or Prince. In the theatre of memory, the user/performer, who is supposed to be the King of France, faces the sun, represented on the tiers, precisely at the usual place of the Prince according to the perspective rules of the Italian court theatres. With this inversion of places, Camillo proposes an inversion of values. Standing alone onstage before the tiers that represent the memory of the world, the user/performer takes the place of the creator. Here the King defies the place of god. By insisting on the artificial aspect of his device, Giulio Camillo appears as a scenographer who orchestrates the performance, both as a guide and a manipulator. He controls everything through an extremely encrypted reality. But without the user, the theatre of memory is nothing. Camillo is a scenographer of memory in the sense that he re-organizes the world into a dramatic architecture, using the appropriate leverage of the theatre architecture of his time and recombining it to create a unique transformative experience: a

performance of memory in a dramatic architecture. Looking at Camillo's theatre today, we can understand it as a participatory performative device that appeals to both emotional and rational intelligence. The device is not intended to remember something but to excite the human cognitive system and to produce new knowledge through an organic and intuitive embodied experience. But let us not forget that in the Renaissance, the acquisition of knowledge was a way to impose power. In that sense, the theatre of memory was also an instrument for the performance of power.

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