

03 | DESIGN APPROACH

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“I can take an empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (Brooke, 1968:11).

The aim of this study is to identify the elements that will play a pivotal role in the creation of a fully functional, well-informed dramatic arts Precinct on the University Campus.

The conceptual approach is based on the evaluation of what arts and culture means to society and how it is necessary in the daily lives of the everyday person as well as the student. It will take into account the methods to which optimal theatrical training is achieved and allow for the expandability of the existing curriculum.

This will be combined with the study of how the evolution of a dysfunctional existing space can lead to it being converted into a proactive positive place. This in turn would support the arts (dramatic arts in particular), but also promote social interaction and coherency of spaces.

### 3.1 | THEATRE THEORY

#### 3.1.1 THE MEANING OF THEATRE

Theatre is not simple and straightforward; it is a series of layers that convey meaning. Performances engender a method of allowing the viewer to see the literal story. Behind that there is an interlacing of phenomenal meaning; where there are values, morals and lessons to be learnt from the hidden meanings, stirring up deeper emotion within the person. Theatrical

performance is about what you see and what you don't see. This is what captures viewers' minds and enables them to generate more meaning from the single experience. Theatre removes the viewer wilfully from the real world into a place different from their own realities, and this allows for the freeing of the mind into a world of free thinking. The ideals behind theatre are to reinvent an event, be it factual or fiction. From this the audience perceives the art form which then generates their own ideas and perceptions based on their own knowledge. Theatre is a medium of exploration of forms, ideals, morals, virtues, history and basic social interaction.

Theatre in essence is a group of “doers” who cultivate a plot, breathe life into it and turn it into another world that is intensified and dense with information and emotion (Brecht, 1960:64).

In order to convey these ideals, a physical role has to be applied with the aid of devices that allow for the reinvention of the events. These devices allow for the creation of realms that remove the actor and spectator into another world of fantasy and illusion, a sort of conscious illusion.

*“The essential lies in the transfiguration of the ephemeral quality of the performance into a splinter of life that sinks its roots into their flesh and accompanies them through the years. The toxic secretion penetrates their psychic, mental and intellectual metabolism and becomes memory” (Barba, 1988:22)*

#### 3.1.2 THEATRE AND THE AUDIENCE

The effect of the arts on the spectator is important in shaping the expanding mind. Most art forms provide languages that shape and express our understanding of the world around us and allows for the development of the mind to absorb various information which is important to learning.

“Imagination makes empathy possible — to understand another we must be able to understand their lives” (Goodheart, 2000: 5).

Recent theatre has been confined by means of creating a frame around human experience distancing ourselves from the scene so that we gain a different perspective. This affects the viewer's frame of mind to be more focused and perceptive. The aim of the dramatic arts is not only to draw in the audience's attention to an event, but to position them in a precise relationship to it. *How* the audience sees an event is just as important as *what* they see.

Participatory theatre makes the audience crucial to the plot as though they were fellow actors. This allows for them to contribute to and absorb the performance at another level. Here the viewer attains a sense of ownership of the event and has an interest in the outcome. These situations act as devices to allow the audience to explore, deepen, and clarify their understanding of the real world; this is bound to leave a lasting impression on them: “We bracket off a section of human life to enable us to understand it better, often crafting it in narrative or visual terms to see it, approach it differently, more clearly, in other words we make art our experience” (Jackson, 1990:165).

From the early philosophers, artists and mathematicians, it was believed that the arts play an integral role in a person's perception of the world. The mere presence and emotions that the arts awaken in a persons mind causes them to absorb and think about their environments.

### 3.1.3 | THEATRE AND THE PERFORMER

Up until this point emphasis has been placed on the way in which the dramatic arts influence the spectator. The same aspects affect the performer, in this case the student. Education in the dramatic arts is not a method of training but more a method of education. Teachings are based more on models of drama and composition on an organic rather than on a narrative level. “They are pure forms, a linking together of dynamic elements, without a plot but infused with information which once embodied by the actor, constitutes the essence of the scenic movement” (Meyerhol, 1993:67).

Doing certain actions and exercises allows the intervention of a paradoxical way of thinking. In exercise, daily routines are challenged in various ways, using tension, intensity, rhythm and movement through space.

The aims of rehearsal and exercise:

- The aims of rehearsal and exercise:
- Facilitates the student to think outside of the box
  - (With a global body-mind);
- Allows for thinking through perception and realization through real action (Not necessarily realistic);
- Students start to respect the true beauty of the art form;
- Theatre is not about work on a text, but work on the self;
- Rehearsal and exercise result in self-discipline;
- Exercise is aimed at mental concentrations on a task;
- Exercise helps students think with their bodies, an exercise of individuality and personal growth.

The aim of exercise is to push the student into a stream of physical and mental obstacles and limitations in order to liberate them from the functional and

utilitarian categories of daily life: “Actors breathe life into stereotype patterns of exercise with endless energy” (Barba, 1988:25).

### 3.1.4 | STREET THEATRE AND INTERNALIZED THEATRE

Performance that takes place in the public realm feeds into the cultural network of city streetscapes, such as the street-mimes or fire acrobats that entice people with their imagination and are an influence on the vibrancy of a place.

Generally outdoor theatre is provided unknowingly; it is a very site-specific form of the dramatic arts that takes many forms of theatre and converts it into an occasion of everyday form, ever-changing due to the constant movement of the external location and spontaneity thereof. It is a form of theatre that is amalgamating with traditional theatre to become known as ENVIRONMENTAL ART (Mason, 1992:205) where elements of political theatre and radical theatre of other groups is taking form in a site-specific manner in order to be seen and create a sense of change in the basic everyday person.

Street theatre is incorporated into the design of the arts Precinct, because site-specific performance and street vibes add to the vibrancies of the space unifying it and creating outside interest. The aim of the design is essentially to be a unified space where theatre rehearsal and performance can take place both indoors and outdoors. This creates different atmospheres in the place at different times. The design will incorporate the idea of creating various backdrops for outdoor performances and will facilitate social interaction at the same time.



Figure 3.1.1: *Street theatre* Manchester International (Festival 2007)



Figure 3.1.2: *Street theatre* Manchester International Festival (2007)

### 3.1.5 | SPACES FOR PERFORMANCE

Space is a common ground for many encounters. Theatrical space is a place where encounters are practiced and carried out to an audience. A theatrical event can be seen as a dynamic process of communication in which the spectators are implicated. This forms part of a series of interconnected processes of socially situated significance and communication.

- The spaces in theatre that would be considered most important are:
  - The spaces of interaction between the performer and the spectator;
  - The energized space of the stage and off the stage;
  - The organization of on-stage and off-stage; and
  - The fictional places that are represented or evoked in relation to all the above mentioned areas.
- In theatrical planning vitally important aspects to consider are:
  - Occupation of spaces;
  - Entrances;
  - Exits;
  - Movement and gesture (these can only become meaningful when situated in a given space; this would activate the space and make it meaningful);
  - Relationship of movement and gesture between the audience and the performer; and
  - Objects and space [figure 3.1.3].

The classification of spatial functions in a theatrical performance needs to address a few major issues, mostly of the social reality of the theatre experience, the actual theatre building and how it relates to its urban environment as well as either the purpose-made building or the adapted building (McAuley, 1999:18).

Additionally, it is concerned with the relation to the surrounding buildings and the activities associated with them. The space needs to be regarded according to its history, its architectural design, and the kind of access it invites or denies.

**For the spectator** a theatrical performance is a social event and the reception of the performance plays a role in the theatrical experience. This is constituted as the areas within the theatre space that the spectators have access to. These spaces facilitate or discourage certain types of behaviour. These spaces are:

The access point of the building

- The foyer;
- The stairway;
- The corridors;
- The bar or restaurant;
- The box office; and
- The auditorium

These spaces imply social activity and are just as important as the performance.

#### The Theatre Worker

The theatre worker owns a different domain within the theatre. His/her access to the theatre is usually through a different door. The system of spaces for the theatre worker is mainly utilitarian and very different to the spaces of the spectator. The theatre practitioner uses spaces such as:

- The stage door access;
- The entire backstage area: dressing rooms, the green room, corridors, and stairways (which are designed according to a hierarchy of comfort), and the production service area; and
- The stage: the acting space that links the actor to the audience. This space is where the actor meets the audience and the experience is created, and can be called the “performance space.” (McAuley, 1999:27) [Figure 3.1.4].

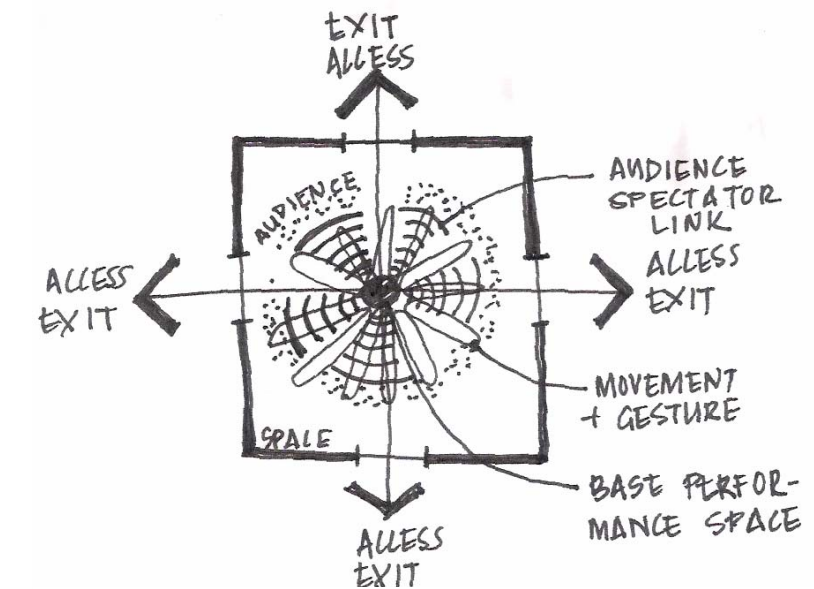


Figure 3.1.3: Functional spaces within a typical theatre, Chita M

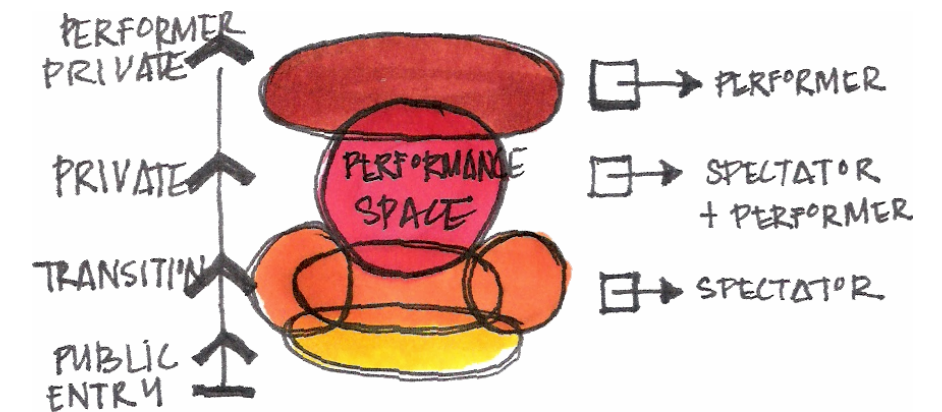


Figure 3.1.4: organisation of theatre spaces, Chita M

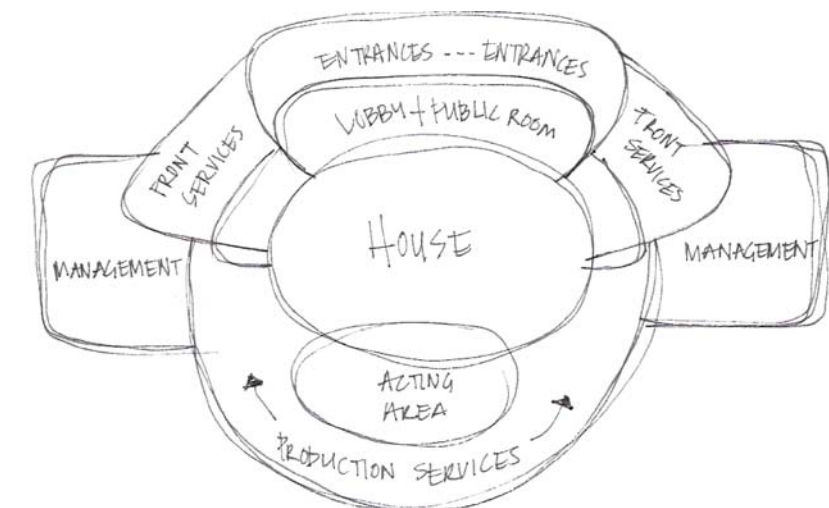


Figure 3.1.5: Spatial transition in theatre from public to private, Chita M

### Creating a performance space:

In creating a performance space three aspects need to be considered (McAuley, 1999:20), namely:

#### The stage space:

- designed to have its own physical characteristics (width and depth);
- The degree of penetration into the audience;
- The number and position of the exits;
- The nature of the back wall; and
- The nature of the division between the onstage and the offstage;

The basic architectural features of the building provide a physical grounding for the performance which plays an important role in the experience it creates.

#### The Presentational space:

- The occupation of the space by the actors, the set, the props and the spatial demarcations. Presentational space can be considered as perceived space.

#### The Fictional space:

- This refers to the spaces/places represented or evoked onstage and offstage. This type of space can be considered as conceived space. Fictional place functions according to its location in relation to the physical reality of the performance space.

The theatre building or designated place of performance provides a context for interpretation for the spectator and the performer. There is a certain ritual when visiting the theatre and therefore the exterior is just as important as the interior. The user of the building needs to relate the outside of the building, especially with inward-focused theatres.

Theatres want to encourage the visitor to enter the space. Once they enter they move through a series of

spaces that take them further and further away from reality into a magical area (MacIntosh, 1993:144). The theatre building can be considered as emphasizing a sense of inward progression [figure 3.1.5].

In the architectural design of the theatre building it is important to consider the relation of scale between the human body and the building in order to create a memorable experience (McAuley, 1999:52).

During a performance the spectator is involved in the performance and absorbs the experience through his/her body. Therefore the arrangement of the auditorium design is important. (Bennett, 1990:64) [Figure 3.1.6 & 3.1.7].

Backstage is the where the performance is practiced and put together. This setting is usually kept hidden from the front of house and less attention is paid to it (Burriss-Meyer, 1964:153).

The stage plays an important role by being the plane of interaction between the performer and the spectator. The physical aspects of the stage determine how the performance will be perceived. Examples include:

- The performance scale in comparison to the auditorium;
- The width of the stage opening;
- The degree of penetration into the audience;
- A flat or raked stage;
- The number and position of the doors in the auditorium; and
- The separation of the audience from the performing space by use of lighting or a curtain.

The performer is the one that activates the space by using movement, gesture, and energy that brings life to a space (Barba, 1985:369-382). The spectator experiences the space with all their senses and therefore theatre should be considered in terms of spatial experience rather than just visual experience.

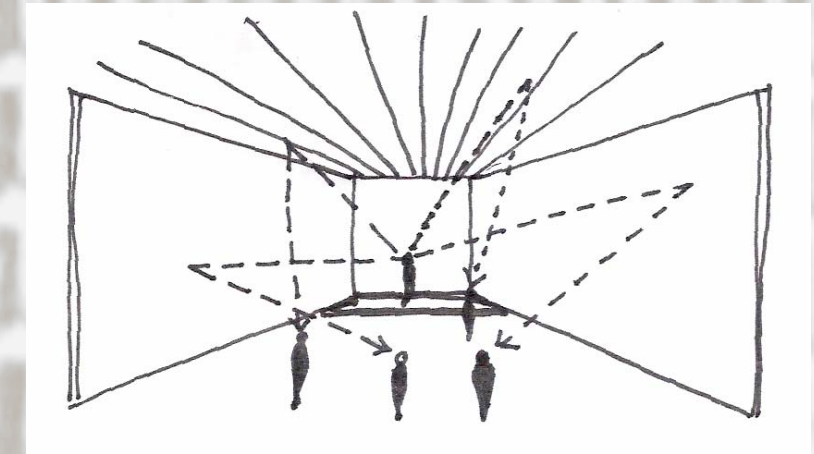


Figure 3.1.6: Sketch of a larger theatre volume and its effects, Chita M

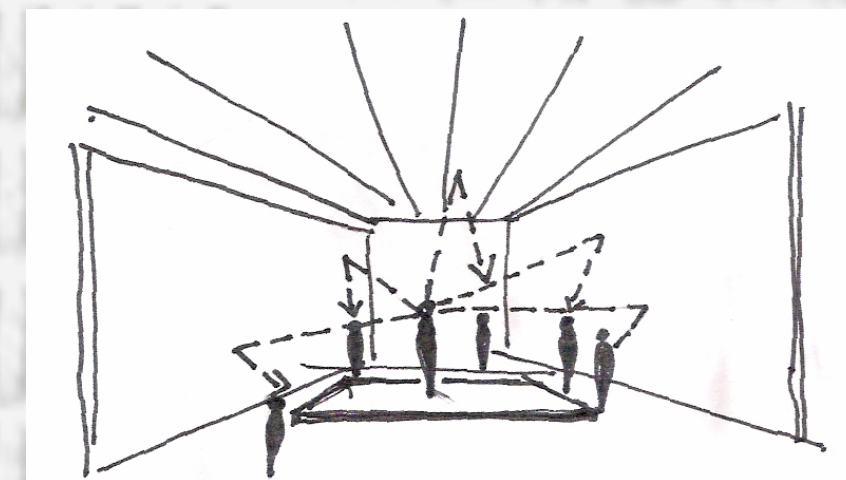


Figure 3.1.7: Sketch of theatre volume at a more intimate smaller level, Chita M

### 3.1.6 THEATRE CONFIGURATIONS

they can see. Because the proscenium is (or appears to be) an architectural barrier, it creates a sense of distance or separation between the stage and the spectators [Figure 3.1.8].

#### Thrust Stage

A thrust stage is a platform surrounded on three sides by the audience. A thrust may be backed by a wall or be appended to some sort of end stage. The upstage end (back of the stage, farthest from the audience) may have scenery and provisions for entrances and exits, but the thrust itself is usually bare except for a few scenic elements and props. Because no barrier exists between performers and spectators, the thrust stage generally creates a sense of greater intimacy, as if the performance were occurring in the midst of the auditorium, while still allowing for illusionist effects through the use of the upstage end and adjacent offstage space [Figure 3.1.9].

#### Arena Stage

The arena stage, or theatre-in-the-round, is a performing space totally surrounded by the auditorium. The necessity of providing equal sight lines for all spectators puts special constraints on the type of scenery used and on the movements of the actors, because at any given time part of the audience will inevitably be viewing a performer's back. Illusion is more difficult to sustain in arena, since in most set-ups, entrances and exits must be made in full view of the audience, eliminating surprise, if nothing else. Nonetheless, arena, when properly used, can create a sense of intimacy not often possible with other stage arrangements [Figure 3.1. 10].

Many earlier forms of theatre were performed in the streets, open spaces, market squares, churches, or rooms or buildings not originally intended for use as theatres. Frequently contemporary experimental theatre rejects the formal constraints of available theatres and seeks more unusual spaces. In all these "found" theatres, the sense of stage and auditorium is created by the actions of the performers and the natural features of the space (<http://pdf.rincondelvago.com/theatre-production.html>, 20 Sep. 2008).

Theatre can also be discussed in terms of the type of space in which it is produced. Stages and auditoriums have had distinctive forms in every era and in different cultures. These all evolved into a series of common theatre types, including:

#### End Stage

An end stage is a raised platform facing the assembled audience. Frequently, it is placed at one end of a rectangular space. The simplest version of the end stage is the booth or trestle stage, a raised stage with a curtained backdrop and perhaps an awning [Figure 3.1.8].

#### Proscenium Stage

The proscenium arch is the opening in that wall through which the audience views the performance. A curtain that either rises or opens to the sides may hang in this space. The proscenium developed in response to the desire to mask scenery, hide scene-changing machinery, and create an offstage space for performers' exits and entrances. The result is to enhance illusion by eliminating all that is not part of the scene and to encourage the audience to imagine that what they cannot see is a continuation of what

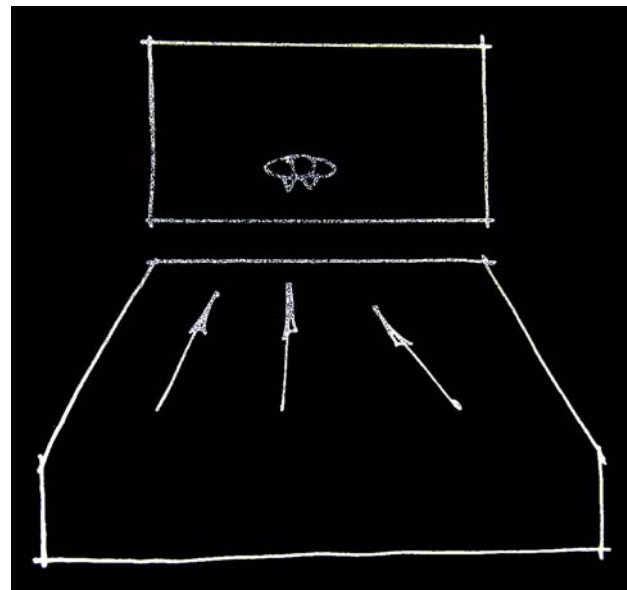


Figure 3.1.8: sketch of end stage, proscenium stage has the same concept

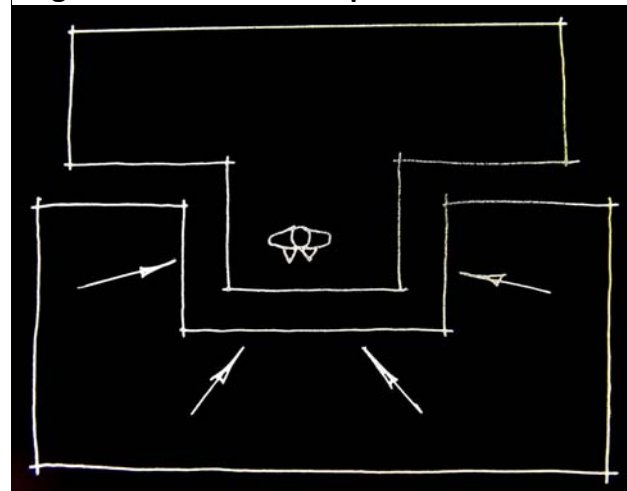


Figure 3.1.9: Sketch of thrust stage

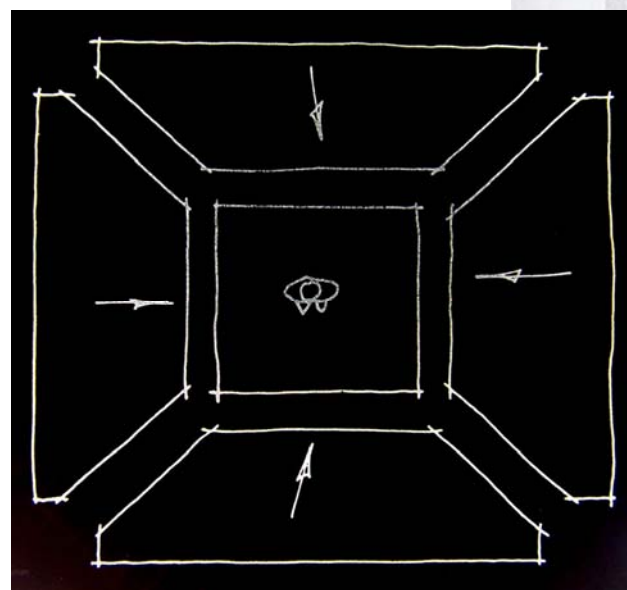
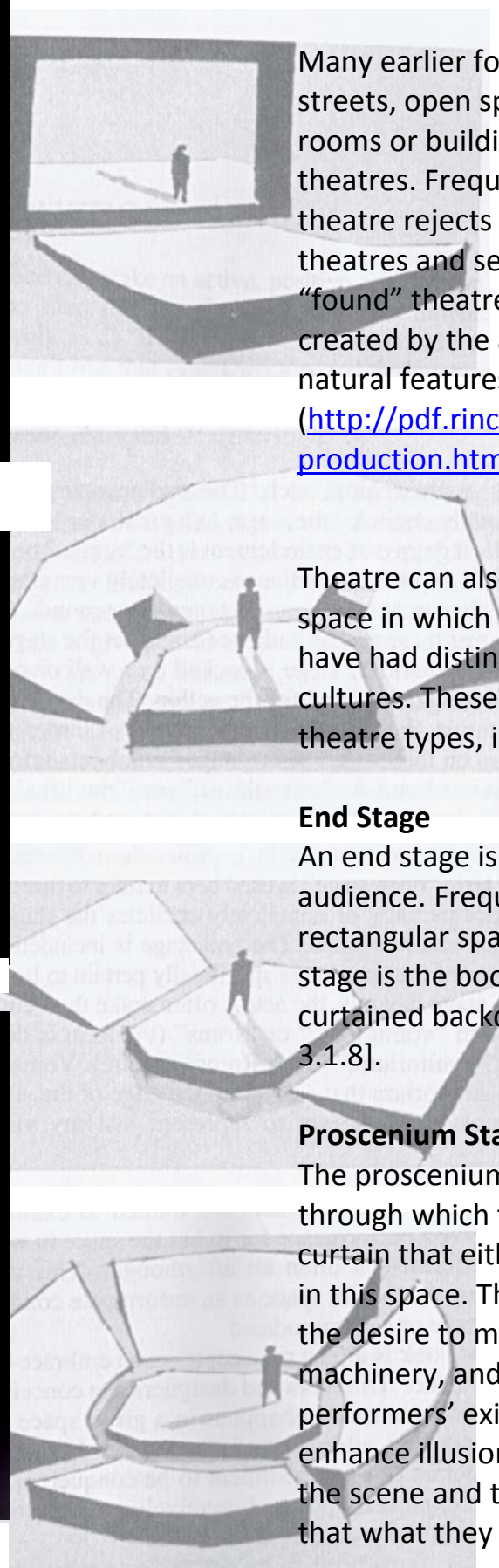


Figure 3.1.10: sketch of arena stage or theatre in the round



### 3.2 | BLACK BOX THEATRES: A VOID SPACE OF MEANINGFUL PRODUCTIONS



Figure 3.1.11: interior of the Kwai Tsing Black Box Theatre ([http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/archive/black\\_box\\_light\\_box.html](http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/archive/black_box_light_box.html) cited: 21 April 2008)

Black box theatres show the simplification of the contemporary theatre design. Material space has been fragmented and simplified down to a functional level. This may be considered as a space lacking architectural or interior design, but its true meaning conveys a void-space that embodies a performance-based approach to theatre design and then to the reading of the interior.

An auditorium is a complex room that unites the actor and the audience. It has evolved as an elaborate social instrument that houses performances, heightening the experience and involving the spectator. Modern theatre called for a reworking of the auditorium so that the performance itself could create the identity for the theatre and not the building. This resulted in the eradication of a more architecturally-based theatre design to embody a performance-based design instead.

A black box theatre may represent an absence of material, but through performance and rehearsal it embodies an essence of variable creations. Each production becomes an origin point born out of the darkness that brings life out into the void. This space breaks away from the confines of a conventional theatre and becomes a space where boundaries are broken between the actor and the participant; it becomes an enveloping space that engulfs those implicated within.

The theatre container itself casts shadows on its form where its boundaries are concealed. This suggests a limitlessness within which performances could be endlessly produced. The aim of the black box theatre is to remove the body from any particular space and centre the focus on the actor and the performance.

New century theatre became the means for the recovery of a collective relief of expression (Tafari, 1980:96); it allows an 'entering into' of the space which has no reference to the external environment. This type of theatre creates a focus and allows the absorption of what is happening in the play easily. The breakdown of the theatre is a form that eradicates the limiting proscenium arch and disrupts the boundaries between the actor and the spectator as well as the interior and exterior. This will intensify the experience as an engaging event. This can be achieved by moving away from the typical theatre design, removing all elements, such as the proscenium arch, the box seating, the galleries, the stage, the décor and any other element that depicts a typical theatre. This idea seemed to open up a limitless space for creation which essentially becomes the materiality of the space.

Functional elements and technological systems enhance the space to create the environments needed. They fit into the theatre and act as apparatus for production. The theatre is a dark space within which

machinery is used for the efficiency of its operation. The equipment contained in the space is functional and can be configured for any number of formats, thus making the space a "flexible" one. They act as a "prosthetic" element within the "wall-less" space of the black box, which allows performance to break through from behind the proscenium to be what it is meant to be.

Economically, black box theatres are considered cost-effective because costs are minimised by establishing the various performance layouts in a single space relying on specified equipment and labour. The actual theatre becomes a place where the experimental use of the space is designed by the user (director/designer/actor). They use design systems such as the seating, the staging elements and the lighting. These systems are designed accordingly to extend the relationship between the performer and the space by creating focus and giving the space a purpose. The apparatus used inside aids in creating the environments as well as various identities to what could be considered a stagnant space. The stage is no longer a framed scene into which the audience sees, but rather a platform where they are implicated and involved.

The theatre is named a 'black box' theatre because it is typically a darkened, simple rectangular volume, usually painted black to reduce the containment of the actual space. This suggests an infinite space for possibility. The technologies within define the physical space, and the performances produced therein are what brings life to the space. These productions within are the platforms used to bridge the gap between the audience and actor creating a space of contemplation and participation (Perez-Gomez, 1994:10). There is no distinction between the performer and actor and through participation both memory and imagination are ignited.

### 3.3 | SPATIAL THEORY

The chosen site is the current location for the Dramatic Arts Department. The provided spaces do not facilitate a meaning of place, because the buildings are very disjointed and self-contained. Other problems experienced by the Department are as follows:

- The space is not lively; meaning that there is a lack of facilities for events and education, but also that the space does not have the aesthetic value to make it a place;
- The space is not accommodating: the site is broken up by a road cutting through the space and the buildings are separated by a parking area;
- The spaces are ill-equipped to work as a school for The Dramatic Arts. The spaces have been adopted, which means that the spaces were not designed for the specific purpose of dramatic arts training; and
- There is very little visibility into the space and it creates no sense of interest in the passer by. This could be because accessibility is also a problem and the site remains quiet and unvisited due to the lack of pedestrian pathways.

The buildings are also self-contained and incoherent; there is no language between the buildings that allows them to work together; to make a place or have a single identity. Circulation within the site prohibits complete movement and accessibility between all three buildings. The aim of the study, therefore, is to take architectural place-making and the specific elements that make theatre place and convert the space into a drama-based node within the university.

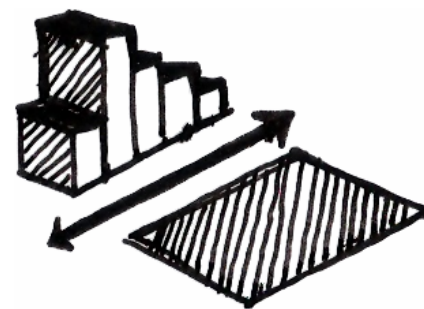
#### 3.3.1 | PLACE MAKING

Place is defined as a term for environment (Norberg-Schulz, 1979: 6), and is evidently an integral part of existence; relational, historical, and concerned with identity; that allows for urban relationships and identities. In order to take the existing site and buildings and create one coherent place with identity, guidelines from the theorist Kevin Lynch were adapted as follows (Lynch, 1962:47-48):



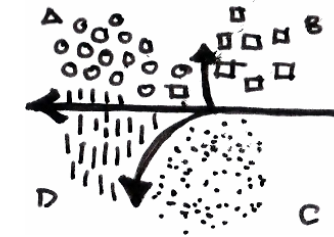
##### 1. Paths

People observe a space while in transition through it. Paths create channels for this movement as well as creating an axis around which other built elements are structured.



##### 2. Edges

Edges are boundaries between two phases or linear breaks in continuity. The boundaries act as barriers or act as a relation point between two places (either separating them visually or physically or joining them). Edges are used to define a space.



##### 3. Districts

A district is a place where people enter into and immediately recognize the place as having a common identifiable character.



##### 4. Nodes

A node is a place where the observer can enter into which is a point of intensive focus, the convergence of paths and a place of meeting; a break in the transportation or movement routes from one structure to another. Nodes are concentrations of one aspect in one place, for example, a street corner or a public square.



##### 5. Landmarks

Landmarks are usually external elements that give a place an identity. A landmark singles out the element from its surroundings and is a point for orientation. (Lynch, 1962:47-49)



### How architecture can add to place:

The job of a unifying design is to add to the space what is lacking in a given situation. It must make a site become a place by uncovering meaning potentially present in any environment. To make place, architecture must make a natural structure more precise by enclosing the space, or if any nature shows a direction architectural design must allow for a path. The understanding of nature must be symbolized and the built structure within that place must fit the character of the place.

The job of a unifying design is to add to the space what is lacking in a given situation. It must make a site become a place by uncovering meaning potentially present in any environment. To make place, architecture must make a natural structure more precise by enclosing the space, or if any natural entity shows a direction architectural design must allow for a path. The understanding of nature must be symbolized and the built structure within that place must fit the character of the place. An environment/space becomes meaningful, or a positive space, when a person can orientate and identify themselves in the place. This can be done using physical components and emotion. To make a place, space needs contextual meaning derived from its context. Every place has a story of movement, “a journey and arrival”, through a space.

### Three main aspects that enhance a place:

#### 1. Responsive designs:

- contextual content: space is legible to the user;
- varieties of possibilities of use; and
- experience and motivation for using the space

#### 2. Creating richness:

- Use of meaning and sensory applications that enhance experience, emotion and perception.

### 3. Order

- Structuring the public places in a system of hierarchy (a response to the cultural context); and
- Increasing the legibility of the space using local landscape and the symbolic content of the local community (Trancik, 1986:97).

A place is a space that has distinct character and the task of architecture is to take space and make it meaningful. Character is a description of a space that describes your experience in that space (Norberg-Schulz, 1979: 14).

Richness is added to spatial environments through the senses and the kinetic experiences that the inhabitant perceives. The spaces need to be studied and considered according to what is lacking through the study of the old. Enhancing the space by layering the new spaces above creates an intervention that involves the specific factors of place-making that will give the space meaning and character. This integration can cause synthesis between the spaces to create place.