DOGWOOD DELL: A REPERTORY THEATRE
OR A THEATRE OF PROSCENIA

by

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The possibility for a design of a performance theatre to emerge from the following statements was explored and investigated.

The proscenium plane is an essential structural element of the theatre: it is the heart of the theatre artistically, philosophically and physically in all of its manifestations.

The building is conceived from this element, it is also made of this element.

The proscenium plane is repeated and paired in a series to form the dialogue of the theatre.

The proscenium, physically, is the opening or surround that separates the audience from the stage. It acts as a window or frame for the audience to view the action of the play through. A proscenium does not have to be a physical manifestation, it can be, literally, the separation between the actor and the audience.

The proscenium plane is the wall, visible or invisible that separates and defines the actor and the audience. It becomes the symbolic frame for the action of the play; the audience is seated in reality, the dramatic event is not. Philosophically, the proscenium plane defines a relationship of an author to his characters, and the actor to the audience. It presents the threshold between the place of viewing and the place of narration. It becomes a portal through which the audience must go mentally and physically to comprehend the story and characters of the play.

With this design, I present to both the actor and the audience a place to pass through the multiple planes of proscenia to play their respective parts in the event known as THEATRE.

The design proposal takes into consideration the chosen site's existing conditions, relationship to the topography and future potential as a performance center in the city.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank:

My committee for their time, encouragement, cajoling and understanding. If it had not been for them, I would have been on stage without a script and without direction.

My fellow students and friends at the Washington-Alexandria Center for their encouragement and never ending quest for the best of Architecture. No one can work in a vacuum. They helped set the stage.

The studio crowd in Cowgill for teaching me the true meaning of the word pygalgia.

Nancy, for a home away from home.

My parents, for their support and overwhelming encouragement in this endeavor. They lived vicariously through my tales of graduate school and they always knew when to be there.

\( \therefore \) my wife. With out you this would never have been done. This is for you -- the last curtain is yours.
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INTRODUCTION:

The oldest permanent theatre structure was the classical amphitheatre. Built into the natural slope or bowl of a hillside, amphitheatres provided a natural setting for the presentation of dramatic plays. This configuration represents the beginning for the evolution of the theatre house. With each new theatre and stage built, new ideas and forms were created to improve upon the past. The diversity of theatre configurations today reflects this evolutionary process. This project started with an existing amphitheatre of classic form and endeavored to extend the evolution of theatre and stage forms.

One of the physical elements that developed early in the evolution of theatres was the proscenium. The proscenium was originally the front wall of the building that formed the backdrop of the stage platform. As theatres developed, the proscenium wall was brought forward to hide the increasing amount of machinery used on the stage. It became a wall with a large opening or arch through which the audience viewed the dramatic performance. Today the sight of machinery and lighting equipment is an acceptable convention and in many newer stage houses is left exposed eliminating the need for a proscenium wall. Also actors are now playing closer to the audience, breaking the proscenium line and allowing themselves to become more intimate with the audience. These recent trends in theatre production have let the proscenium become a symbolic part in the staging of live performances.
As a symbolic element, the proscenium is more than just an opening; it is an essential "structural" part of theatre -- both the production and the building. It is a conceptual spatial plane -- a threshold or transition point that has the ability to define and differentiate. It can also be a spatial plane which distances the dramatic action from the audience. A proscenium plane thought of in this manner can also be more than an actor-audience separation. It can become symbolic of the action in a play and of a play's relation to real life. It can define and set the boundaries of the actor and his work, the audience and its participation, and the play and its interpretation into a dramatic event. It can become the threshold between the reality of an audience and the created world of the stage. In a way, the proscenium becomes a portal through which ideas are exchanged. The proscenium plane can become the heart of the theatre, representing in its many manifestations artistical, philosophical and physical transitions.

In this project the proscenium becomes the theatre. The building was conceived from this element and is created from it. The building provides many spaces and proscenia to pass through mentally, spiritually and physically, so that one may assume his or her respective role in the event known as theatre.
SITE:

The site is in Byrd Park, a large city park in Richmond, Virginia that is the transitional zone between three distinct areas of the city. To the north and east of the park is the historic Fan District; to the west, the exclusive neighborhoods of Windsor Farms; to the south, the James River and the suburban areas of Richmond known as the *South Side.* Byrd Park itself is divided into several different areas. The city's water reservoir is in the center of the park and is surrounded by four distinct sections. In the northwest section there are baseball and soccer fields and tennis courts; to the northeast are the lakes: Boat, Swan, and Shields; the Victorian mansion and gardens of Major James H. Dooley, known as the Maymont Estate, are to the southeast of the reservoir. The mansion is now an historic house museum and on the estate grounds is the city's zoo. Located in the southwest section of the park is the Carillon/Dogwood Dell area. The Carillon is a 240 foot high bell tower that was built in the early 1930s as a state memorial for the soldiers of Virginia who gave their lives in World War I. Dogwood Dell, approximately 200 feet to the southeast of the Carillon, is a natural glen that runs down to the north bank of the James River, where the pumphouse for the city reservoir is located. At the head of the glen is a natural amphitheatre that was terraced and formalized with a stage platform in 1957 to provide the city with an out-door performance space. The amphitheatre has been the site of an annual summer season of dramatic productions, concerts and dance productions for the last thirty years. This is the site for the building proposed in this project. The amphitheatre is retained and used as the uphill anchor for the theatre complex.
PROGRAM:

The Dogwood Dell amphitheatre has been the site of hundreds of dramatic, music, and dance events. Each year the City of Richmond’s Parks and Recreation Department hosts an annual program of performance activities. These events are held in the summer months and generally start at dusk. The performances range from local high school productions to big bands to touring dance companies. These events have set the precedent for theatre and performance in the park.

The program for this project takes the above precedent and expands it to a year-round schedule by providing the facilities necessary to house and operate an educational repertory theatre. The basic requirements for a building to accommodate this program are as follows:

1. 900 seat main stage theatre.
2. Experimental theatre space. (ie. black-box theatre)
3. Improvements to the Amphitheatre stage.
4. Scene shop for the production of sets.
5. Storage for stock scenery, lumber, furniture, properties, lighting equipment and tools.
6. Costume shop for the production, maintenance, and storage of a costume collection.
7. Dressing rooms; three *star* rooms and two general rooms for 15 actors, with showers and personal lockers.
8. Rehearsal space (larger than active main stage area.)
9. Offices for designers, directors and support personnel.
11. Loading dock for receiving supplies, equipment and traveling companies.
12. Script library.
14. Audience lounge for refreshments
15. Audience amenities (ie. coat room, restrooms.)
16. Ticket booth and House Manager’s office.
17. Parking for 275-300 automobiles.
THE DESIGN:

For the theatre complex the proscenium is paired and the pair repeated to create segments on a linear axis. These segments form the outer shell of the main block of the building. Within this portion of the building are the main stage and auditorium, the scenery shop and back stage storage, the stage of the amphitheatre, the public toilets, the dressing rooms, and the mechanical systems for the building. The individual segments are made of two paired proscenia consisting of vertical elements of poured-in-place concrete with large steel trusses spanning and completing the opening between the two sides. The individual segments are connected to one another by smaller steel trusses that support the interstitial roofs and a system of metal grids that support the side curtain walls between the vertical concrete elements. The larger or primary trusses of the proscenium segments carry all of the roof loads with the upper cord supporting the flat roof of the individual segment and the lower cord carrying the curved interstitial roof. The three trusses of the large central segment not only support the segment's roof but also carry the fly loft and the grid that are above the main stage. The fly loft has a distinctive metal roof to signify the importance of this unique feature.
As the building fills and follows the down hill terrain of the dell, the primary axis is terminated at the center point of a circular entrance pavilion. This pavilion contains the grand staircase, the lobby and the administrative offices. The lobby and grand staircase space is topped by a glass atrium. At night the atrium is lighted to signify a performance. From the inside, at night, the sloped glass roof of the atrium reflects, like a large mirror, the image of the audience as they ascend and descend the staircase. At the point where the outer circular wall of the pavilion crosses the primary axis of the main stage, scene shop and amphitheatre, the secondary axis of the experimental theatre begins. The shift in axis at this point is a response to a curve in the dell as it flows down toward the river. It is also the point where the materials of the building are transposed. For the portion of the building that houses the experimental theatre, the proscenia are made from the metal grid and curtain wall system and the interstitial walls are of poured-in-place concrete. The building terminates in a large structural glass wall to allow the experimental theatre a view of the dell and its wild dogwood trees. This connection to the natural backdrop of the dell is symbolic of the memory of the original 1957 amphitheatre stage and of the natural backdrops of the ancient amphitheatres that started the evolutionary changes that have become embodied in our concepts of theatres today.
1. COSTUME SHOP
2. TRAP ROOM
3. LIFT PIT
4. GREEN ROOM
5. ACTOR AND CREW LOBBY
6. STAR DRESSING
7. SCRIPT LIBRARY
8. STORAGE FOR COSTUMES
9. DRESSING ROOM
10. STORAGE FOR HAND PROPS
11. STORAGE FOR FURNITURE
12. STORAGE FOR SETS
13. STORAGE FOR SCENERY FLATS
14. STORAGE FOR HAND PROPS
15. STORAGE FOR FURNITURE
16. STORAGE FOR SETS
17. STORAGE FOR SCENERY FLATS

SCALE 1:40

BASEMENT PLAN
CONCLUDING QUOTES:

But the moment that the conditions of weight are comprehended, both truth and feeling require that the conditions of support should be also comprehended.

John Ruskin
The Seven Lamps of Architecture

A valid order accommodates the circumstantial contradictions of a complex reality.

Robert Venturi
Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture.

Any theater form - like all serious art forms - is born of deliberation, self-discipline, and creativity. To rely of improvisation, no matter how talented the actor, or how receptive the audience is to misunderstand freedom.

Jo Melziner
Time-Saver Standards for Building Types
BIBLIOGRAPHY:


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