EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE
IN OLD TOWN, ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

by

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(ABSTRACT)

"Theatre would be radical, arousing, inspiring, challenging popular emotion, presenting native problems. Human strength and aspiration would go there for inspiration..."

- Frank Lloyd Wright -

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Old Town Alexandria, established in 1749, is located by Potomac River close to Washington, DC. The city plan of this old colonial port was based on a grid with rectangular blocks. Most of the buildings were 2-4 stories high red-brick houses. Nowadays the historic district is mainly a residential area - only the main streets (perpendicular to each other) and the river front are for shopping and entertainment. The site is located next to a historic landmark - Christ Church built in 1773. Currently it is used for surface parking.
The landmark of the Old Town has its historic value with its weekly services and ceremonies. It is also a famous tourist attraction, while it has preserved most of its interior and exterior as original. The location of the church is emphasized by placing it at the end of the axis of Cameron Street both East and West - an exceptional location in the city grid where all the other streets continue straight from East to the West. The Church is surrounded by an old grave yard with trees and planting serving as an entrance to the church and a silent park to the neighborhood.
To be, or not to be, that is the question:

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark,
Claudius, King of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle.

The Ghost, the spirit of the late king.

Gertrude, the Queen, Hamlet's mother, now a widow.

Polonius, councillor of State.

Laertes, Polonius's son.

Ophelia, Polonius's daughter.

Horatio, friend and confidant of Hamlet.

Rosencrantz, a courtier, former schoolfellow.

Guildenstern, a courtier, former schoolfellow.

Polonius, Prince of Norway.

Voltemand, a courtier.

Cornelius, a courtier.

Marcellus, a courtier.

Barnardo, a courtier.

Francisco, a courtier.

Osric, a jester.

Reynaldo, a servant.

How strangely limber these actors are!
How good they are at living for us with their shirtsleeves rolled up!

Measureless destiny of tragedy, measured destiny of man,
we find you here and elsewhere,
exhaling silence in a timeless universe.
GATE - an entrance to a courtyard

Different elements of Old Town with their public and private character have influenced my architectural design.

MAIN ENTRANCE - an invitation to a building.

COURTYARDS - the lungs in the middle of the block

ALLEY - for pedestrians and service: a visible connection between two parallel streets inside a block.
- a gap: connection between a street and a court yard.

ELEMENTS OF OLD TOWN ALEXANDRIA
PLANTS - space creators, showing the change of seasons

STREET "WALL" - a row of town houses or a brick wall between a court yard and a street

BRICK - sense of material
- sense of scale
- individual character for each building
PARTI model in the city grid including six blocks of the neighborhood.

To the EAST - N. Columbus St. - a transparent pavillion: across the street from Christ Church.

The gate/ the main entrance - through the North wall to the court yard - an exceptional way to enter in Old town, influenced by the Church.

To the NORTH - Cameron Street- enclosed wall for the acoustic and climatic protection including both administrative part and gallery part for public use.

To the WEST - N. Alfred St. - private part for personnel facing the town houses.

In the middle, the "heart" - the auditorium, hidden by other elements closer to streets.

To the SOUTH a theatre alley separating the theatre building from the next door neighbors

Parking underground.

A plant wall - conceals the auditorium behind it.

A courtyard - extension to the Church courtyard on the other side of the street.

To adapt the new theatre building into the old city context by not breaking the existing scale dramatically the parti model consists of different elements which appear in Old Town. These elements are Walls, A Courtyard, A Pavillion and An Alley. These elements create a series of spaces between the walls which have a character of their own.
PROCESS - rehearsals
Part model (original in 1:500 scale) shows the basic concept with different elements related to each other. The location close to Christ Church has an impact to the whole design from the beginning.

In the final model (original in 1:200 scale) the relation between different elements has developed yet the basic concept remains unchanged.

The building resembles a medieval city in a small scale, with its private and public buildings and city walls with narrow streets and town squares.
The working model during the process (original in 1:200 scale) contains the original elements with more specified characters and functions.
PRODUCT - performance
Following the order of entering the church, the theatre repeats this theme in the similar way: through the wall to the courtyard and into the Pavilion.

The transparent Pavilion, the lobby, reminds of the presence of the river and extends the interaction of the courtyards between the theatre and the church.

The Theatre Alley serves as a semi-private connection for the service and pedestrians.

The row of glass block towers, the House of Actors, is populated by the administration part, dressing rooms, studios, workshops and property rooms; in this house the transparent glass of the Pavilion has been replaced by glass blocks, giving more intimacy to the people inside.

In the middle of the site the auditorium, the House of Performance, connected to the south wall, hides the performance inside.

The underground parking includes four parking levels - space for 140 cars.
GALLERY
201 theatre gallery - foyer
202 theatre bar
203 theatre library, meeting room

PLACE OF PERFORMANCE
204 auditorium
205 exit staircase

HOUSE OF ACTORS
206 dressing rooms, make-up
207 laundry service
208 green room
209 storage

210 scenery, property
211 public restrooms
212 exit staircase

SECOND FLOOR
ELEVATION TO NORTH COLUMBUS STREET

SECTION B-B

MATERIALS:
1. brick
2. concrete
3. steel
4. glass
5. glass blocks
6. steel roof element
ELEVATION TO NORTH ALFRED STREET

SECTION D-D

MATERIALS:
1. brick
2. concrete
3. steel
4. glass
5. glass blocks
BLACK BOX - silence
The flexibility of the Black Box depends on how the removable seats and floor elements are organized.

The circulation between the audience and the performers is separated from each other.

The public entry sequence to the auditorium starts from the main entrance at Cameron Street through the Gallery gate to the Courtyard and further on to the Pavilion. From the Pavilion, following the stairs of the Gallery, you will end up at the House of Performance.

The entrance to the underground parking exists also at Cameron Street. Elevator from the parking levels leads to the Pavilion.

The staff entrance is from N. Alfred Street to the House of Actors. The staff and the performers/visitors circulate in "private streets" into the House of Performance.
The Black Box is only a frame to a performance. The flexibility gives an opportunity to vary the appearance of the stage for each performance.
The interaction between the silent space and the open air is possible by opening the acoustical sliding doors to the Courtyard. The plants growing along cables and covering the sliding doors to the Courtyard can be raised up. The Courtyard creates a stage and the courtyard of Christ Church behind the transparent Pavilion becomes part of the scene.

The satellite dishes on top of the roof reach performances / performers on the other side of the world. In that way the performance communicates with sound and picture regardless of time or place. The individual elements - Pavilion, Courtyard, Gallery, House of Performance - may serve as places for performances.
INTERVIEWS

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stage manager,
Intimiteatteri,
Helsinki, Finland, 1991

Patricia J. Bradford,
The Little Theatre of Alexandria,
Alexandria, VA, 1991

Anu Karlsson,
production manager,
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