Architecture and Human Event:

a Theatre for The Consortium
Architecture and Human Event:
a Theatre for the Consortium

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Architecture is an interaction, a marriage between human event, human need, human spirit and built form. Architects range along the line of this interaction from those that embrace the complexity of humanity and struggle with form to those that embrace only form and cause humanity to struggle with the results.

Is it possible to stand in the center of the creative tension of this struggle, embracing and recognizing the power of built form to support, shelter, enliven, confront, uplift and even bring transformation, healing and poetic transcendence to the human event and therefore to life while simultaneously embracing the rich complexity, contradiction and paradox of human event which informs and interacts with the place of happening; to recognize and wed the power of both?

This thesis is an exploration which questions the relationship of human event and the architectural response to that event. Perhaps it may serve to stimulate discussion of the vital bond between human beings and the places they design for themselves to inhabit.
To my father and my mother for support unfailing
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A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

Although the process of creating a work of this sort is often lonely and solitary it cannot be accomplished alone. Gratitude is extended to all that have helped me throughout the term of my graduate studies. First and foremost to my parents, Eugene and Barbara Keeling, who have stood firmly behind my efforts even, and especially, when I could not find the courage to stand there myself. To all my friends (and foes) in the studio at Cowgill Hall who have walked a similar path of learning and who understand completely the first sentence of these acknowledgments, with a special nod to Jeff Berghage who kept us laughing at the lovely foolishness of it all and who was stubborn and generous in the ultimately, and quite sadly, futile search for our lost colleague, Rob Kovack.

Of course the faculty at the College of Architecture and Urban Studies must be acknowledged for their persistent skill in remaining elusive and recondite while somehow illuminating the path and patiently allowing us each to find our way through the labyrinthine study of architecture. Most particularly I would like to thank the members of my committee: Bill Brown, Bill Galloway and Marcia Feuerstein for their interest and availability (or lack thereof at the moments I really needed to figure it out for myself). A special thanks to Marcia for all the excellent meals shared while discussing everything under the sun.

I would also like to thank Robert Leonard and Randy Ward in the Theatre Department for helping me in my second year to begin to define a way to combine my two passions, theatre and architecture, into a reasonable thesis project. It is to them that I owe the focus and title of this thesis.
There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and awake to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open.

Martha Graham

Blood Memory
I came to the study of architecture from an active career in the theatre, working as an actor. My life’s work until now, at center, has been about the intense study of human behavior. This study has lead me to question the foundational aspects of this most perplexing topic. One of the cornerstones to human behavior is place. Place deals with the connectedness of the character to their physical, emotional and spiritual environment. It is general knowledge to the actor that place is vitally important to the creative center of the work; physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually.

Place must be examined deeply in order to find ways to root the character in a physical existance. Behavior is affected by all dimensions of place and so the actor works his lifetime through his art to become more and more sensitive to the complexities and ambiguities of the history, myth, spirit, metaphor, tone, mood, haptic quality, geometry, and physicality of any given theatrical setting or space.

From the complex training and experience as an actor in the theatre emerges the core of my exploration for this architectural thesis. Just as place and character is a fundamental relationship in a theatrical setting, architecture is a powerful force in a real setting in its ability to shape and confront human behavior and human event. It is my search to understand and perhaps uncover new ways to see the eternal conflict between man and his built environment; between built or imagined form and myth, psychology and the paradoxical and contradictory nature of human behavior; between geometry and life.

Out of human need, intelligence and creativity comes the built form. Man exists and from his existance comes the desire and need to express, create, build. The thing once built then confronts the life of the builder and proves itself a formidable opponent and wise teacher. This relationship between architecture and humanity is powerful and perplexing. Human life and the creative impulse is primary and yet it is also ephemeral and vulnerable. The built form is secondary and yet it is tangible and powerful in the mere fact of itself and its ability to shape the events around it. Man shapes architecture from his imagination, with his hands, and then that architecture shapes his life, activities and finally his imagination. A true relationship and dialogue of equals is experienced. The one informs and teaches the other in an ever spiraling dance.

If human event can be likened to “the fire” then I see architecture as the “fire place”. Can the “fire place” be an event in itself? Is event ever a place? These are questions that I feel cannot be easily answered but which open a door of inquiry to this thesis. My theatrical experience tells me that they must be seen separately. Event is not place and place is not event. They are in relationship to each other and depend upon each other, but they are not one.
The thing once built then confronts the life of the builder and proves itself a formidable opponent and wise teacher. This relationship between architecture and humanity is powerful and perplexing.
However, there is no reason to enter into an inquiry if the question is already answered. Bernard Tschumi insists in his book *Architecture and Disjunction* that

“there is no architecture without program, without action, without event. ...architecture is never autonomous, never pure form...”  p.3

“Spaces are qualified by actions just as actions are qualified by spaces. ...Remember Kuleshov’s experiment where the same shot of the actor’s impassive face is introduced into a variety of situations, and the audience reads different expressions into each successive juxtaposition. The same occurs in architecture: the event is altered by each new space. And vice versa: by ascribing to a given, supposedly ‘autonomous’ space a contradictory program, the space attains new levels of meaning.”  p.130

and later he states:

“... it could be said that there must be no identification between architecture and program.”  p.204

and

“The new questioning of that part of architecture called ‘program’, or ‘function’, or ‘use’, or ‘events’, is fundamental today. Not only is there no simple relation between the building of spaces and the programs within them, but in our contemporary society, programs are by definition unstable.”  p.20

Tschumi first strongly links event or program and architecture and then works to disassociate them from each other. This is an important but not altogether new idea. Bertolt Brecht worked to do exactly the same thing in theatre during the 1930’s and 40’s with his “theatre of alienation”. His ambition was to give new meaning and purpose to what he saw as the “dead” theatre of his day. The language is strikingly similar to the language of deconstruction used by Tschumi. It was strongly political and nihilistic yet holds optimism and new possibilities. It is quite interesting for me to find this connection across time and disciplines.
The relationship between architecture and event must be held in question. That is the passionate position of this paper and the germ of my own searching. I do not see it in the political context of Tschumi or Brecht. My context is more individual and idiosyncratic. Through the sincere questioning of the relationship of place and event, of the “fire” and the “fire place”, through the attempt to understand the complexity of this relationship by honoring both the ambiguous nature of human event and the ineffable and yet eloquent nature of form combined with the individual artistic vision and capacity of the architect, a strong and telling architecture can emerge.

This is the thrust of my work within this document, within the chosen project and within my studies as a graduate student in general. I see it as a quest that will fuel a long arc of inquiry.

Architecture does not exist of itself. Architecture is not best seen from Architecture but from the wider perspective of life. Human beings enjoy creating boundaries, categories, limitations. Art crosses boundaries, desolves categorization and defies limitation. If Architecture is Art then it must learn from Art and embrace life, embrace other disciplines and look outward toward the world with openness and healthy humility.

My best acting teachers always sagely said to never look to other actors for the meaning of acting, to never look to theatre for theatrical meaning but to look to life. The new way comes from an honest examination, within the context of Art and Imagination, of human beings as they move through their days. I see no reason this advice should not pertain equally to my examination of Architecture.

For just as Theatre speaks to the evanescent moment of human truth, Architecture speaks to the lasting expression of that same poetic honesty. I do not know if these art forms have the power to *change* or *advance* human beings or society but they certainly have the power to express the best and worst of humanity and its reflection which we call our world. For my own part I want to stand between these powerful means of expression and find a way to marry them within my own ability to communicate their manifestation through me into the world beyond. I want to keep myself

“...open and awake to the urges that motivate ...”

My ability to do this will greatly impact my ability to design. I tend to synthesize, to pull together rather than pull apart. I intend to use this natural inclination to find the pathway within each project that leads me to a vision of the design by defining the separate aspects of the human event and joining them in their ambiguous nature, then responding with an architectural idea. This has been the sequence of the exploration of this thesis project.

The ghosted image to the left begins to illustrate the moment of exploration of the architectural response to the already established concerns of event. It is a sketch of a bridge or path through the length of the site. This image of path comes from the joining of the concept of the peripatetic nature of theatre-folk and the need to create a link or bridge between the University and the town. Ultimately the bridge motif proved quite important to the final form. This was only a first stab at the bringing of form to the event. Inside of the sketch lay hints of the form that desired to be made manifest.
The creative process is a palimpsest or layering of experiences, thoughts, personality, research, talent, analysis, intuition, reactions and effort all combined in some mysterious way within the subconscious to bring forth something new. This new thing may enter as an image, or a thought, or a feeling but it is communicated from a place that is not intellect. Intellect is the tool that allows this new thing to be acted upon in some way. Intellect may do the research or analysis but it is another part of perception which opens to the new thing.

Is there a perfect atmosphere for creativity? The thoughts and actions of creative people throughout history would deny it. Goethe claimed he could not be creative unless he was in solitude. Shakespeare created his plays in collaboration with his players and the reaction of an audience that by all accounts was none too polite. Verse has been written in the trenches of war or under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Masterpieces have been painted while the artist is at the doors of starvation or madness as well as in the elegant surroundings of a wealthy patron. I have witnessed students working in architectural studios without guidance and suffering the frustrations of neglect. Still work is done, the lessons are learned and the creative process progresses.

In Taoist thought creativity is simply the physical manifestation of the intangible. It signifies the presence of another existence. If we create something that did not exist before in our physical reality then it must have existed in an unseen world, and we are the communicators of that intangible reality into tangible reality.

“God is present in the actualization of the intangible to the tangible. It is the act of manifestation that proves the existence of the intangible world and vise versa.”

Amos Ih Tiao Chang
The Tao of Architecture

“It is discouraging to think how many people are shocked by honesty and how few by deceit.”

Noel Coward
Blithe Spirit Act 1 scene 1
An Architectural act is a creative event and therefore it is natural to begin by examining the process that brings it forward. Architecture is a multi-faceted discipline and affects every aspect of our lives, both grand and intimate. **We are constantly confronted with the built environment.** That built environment, in turn, is constantly confronted by us. The relationship spirals forward.

“I never dealt with myself as an artist. I dealt with myself as a person who had an infinite number of details which suddenly demanded to be revealed. I made no effort to be other than what I believed to be honest.”

*Martha Graham*

*Blood Memory*

The image of details demanding their revelation illuminates the idea of a palimpsest or layering along with the intangible becoming tangible. The details are **demanding**. They have their own life, their own volition which acts upon the abilities of the person who places themselves in the pathway of their manifestation.

Placing myself in this pathway and being open to the demands of these details is exactly where I wish to be when I am absorbing the information about the event for which I am attempting a design. It is exactly where I want to be when I am struggling to see the idea for the form of the space which will contain the event. It is exactly where I want to be when I take a pencil in my hand and put it to a piece of vellum. It is exactly where I want to be when I then look at the image that I have rendered upon that vellum. I want to be open to the whispered demands of that thing which desires to emerge into the physical realm.
The Theatre is a place and an event. It is the building and the spirit of that space as well as the happening which takes place there. The very word “theatre” conveys both of these images. We go to the theatre to see theatre being done. It is an interesting juxtaposition within a single word, especially so when viewed within the thrust of this thesis exploration.

The essence of theatre is communal storytelling, the occurrence of people gathering to hear and see played out for them something of importance. It is a basic human need common to all people and all cultures from the most primitive to the most sophisticated. The fundamental nature of this event is probably the reason that live theatre still exists in our multi-media world. Doomsayers have foretold the end of theatre for the last seventy years. Yet it still survives and in many ways is stronger and more alive than ever.

Whether sheer entertainment or a device of political propaganda, whether comic or tragic, there exists in us a desire to gather with our fellow human beings in a place and witness an event that brings us individually and collectively to another level of understanding: intellectual, spiritual or emotional. Theatre occurs in daily life, in churches and temples, in hospitals and courtrooms as well as within the buildings specifically designed and built to house it. It is part of life and must first be perceived and respected as such in order to truly understand its significance.

My work in Theatre prior to my studies in Architecture placed me directly within this significant world and allowed me the opportunity to experience first hand the power of the communication that occurs within the event of theatre. That communication between the storyteller and the gathered people is the heart of the theatrical experience and must be examined as primary to the intent of the design of any space that will hold such an event. It is the essential question that must always stand at the door to any design decision: is this decision serving to illuminate the act of communication?

This act of evaluating this essential aspect of the event in question is key to my approach. It can be translated to the preliminary work needed for any project from the design of a birthing room in a hospital to the design of a mausoleum. I see it as an incredibly exciting and interesting springboard for my work as an architect.
About this room, which was plunged in utter darkness. I knew everything, I had entered into it, I bore it within me, I made it live with a life that is not life, but which is stronger than life, and which no force in the world can vanquish."

Maurice Blanchot
_L’arrêt de Mort_
The Theatre is a place and an event. It is the building and the spirit of that space as well as the happening that takes place there.
I had defined for myself the importance of the relationship of human event and architecture during the course of my second year of studies. However, I was not convinced until late that year that the design of a theatre would be appropriate to my development. I was concerned that I was too close to the topic of theatre and had too many set opinions about it to fairly test my thesis idea through the design of a theatre. I worked within the Theatre Department to test my experiential knowledge against the faculty’s more theoretical and academic knowledge. This testing served to open me to thoughts and possibilities about theatre that I had not considered before. I became quite sure that my theatrical background, rather than being a hindrance to my work, would be a great asset. I could use one passion to begin to define another.

During this cross-disciplinary self-testing I began to discover a possible focus for the work that I would complete in my thesis year. I discovered that there was to soon exist on campus an organization which would serve to bring together many theatre artists from around the country into a consortium which would be centered here in Blacksburg. The Consortium, as it would be named, would serve as a place of cohesion and strength for a large number of groups which were involved in a type of theatre self-described as “community outreach”. These theatre companies varied widely in their approach but had a common purpose of direct involvement with the communities within which they existed. For instance, a company in East Los Angeles cast members of two warring gangs into an initially improvisational evening of scenes in order that they might know each other outside of violence. The experiment was a success and some modest step was taken toward mutual understanding and peace. In another company the actors and director went into the community and listened to the stories of an underprivileged group within the town. Then the actors wrote a play about these people and their lives. Usually the companies have a social or political agenda and are not trying to be commercial entities. They are attempting to use theatre to reflect and perhaps improve the conditions in the towns and cities where they live and work and make theatre.

This emerging organization would eventually need a place here in Blacksburg where they could meet and share their discoveries by talking, rehearsing, holding lectures and giving performances. I decided that I would like to design a theatre that would provide such a space while giving a physical identity to the organization. I decided to create, in theory, a Theatre for The Consortium.

The Consortium had their first organizational meeting in late May of 1998. I was invited to attend this meeting and was present during an exercise done specifically to begin to delineate their aspirations for a theatre space. Everyone lay on the floor relaxed, breathing and clearing their minds. The facilitator of the meeting then asked everyone to think of their image of a perfect gathering and performance space for this new organization and then to simply say what came to their mind in a word or short phrase. I sat with pen in hand and recorded their words. This list of words became the seed which germinated into the program for the project.

The list is sometimes quite specific, sometimes abstract. It is ambiguous and conflicting. Yet it gives a quality that became the essential idea of my design. To combine strength and variability. To have architecture that both strongly and immovably embraced the actors while also being transparent and malleable to their creative whim. To stand firm in its commitment and to fly with imagination.
Blacksburg was to be the location for the meetings of The Consortium, so the next step was the choosing of an appropriate and interesting site.

Blacksburg lies in a high plateau in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Southwest Virginia. It is presently the largest incorporated town in the state and is the home of Virginia Tech, Virginia’s Land-Grant University and the largest University in the state. This connection of town and university would become an important consideration in the ultimate choice of the site as well as the configuration of the design itself.

A brief history of the area

The town was first deeded in 1797 by a landowner in the area named William Black (hence the name of the town) and was officially established by an act of the Virginia General Assembly on January 13th, 1798. The original limits of the town were set around sixteen squares (thirty-eight acres) of land bordering a brook named Stroubles Creek to the Northwest and another creek to the southwest which divided William Black’s land from the land of his brother.

In 1851 a College called the Olin and Preston Institute was established in Blacksburg. The College was contained in a single building located close to the intersection of Main Street and Stroubles Creek. This building later became the first building of the new Land-Grant University of Virginia in 1872. First called Virginia Mechanical College, it eventually became Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. The original building burned near the beginning of this century, but it served to establish the original line between the town of Blacksburg and Virginia Tech. This line is marked now by College Avenue (following closely the line of Stroubles Creek which has been mostly enclosed under buildings and pavement).
context
The path of Stroubles Creek (blue-green) along the Northwest edge of the original sixteen squares (red grid) of Blacksburg as laid out by William Black in 1798.
Since The Consortium was to be organized at Virginia Tech under the auspices of the University, yet was made up of groups which focused almost completely upon community concerns, I felt it was important and appropriate for the site to be one that was somehow contained by both town and university.

The downtown area of Blacksburg at the intersections of College Avenue and Main Street as well as College Avenue and Draper Road is the heart of the town. This is where the interaction of residents and students is at its most active. This is the location of several street fairs during the year as well as a high level of daily use by the Tech students and the Blacksburg Community. I began my search for an appropriate site here where the two entities collide.

At the very tip of the Southwest corner of the original sixteen squares, at the intersection of Jackson Street and Draper Road, is located The Armory Building.

This brick building was constructed in 1936 as a WPA project for use as an armory and training center for troupes stationed within the area during World War II. It later became a property of the town and was used as a recreation center and meeting place for any number of activities. It was almost demolished in 1982 but was saved at the last moment by the University. It now houses studio space, offices and a gallery for the Virginia Tech Art Department. This use creates a source of activity in and around the building. Art students are often sitting outside in good weather sketching or visiting with friends in the coffeeshops and restaurants across the street. Its facade serves as a backdrop for street festivals, like “Stepping Out”, which often include that part of Draper Road.

These street festivals are important and active gatherings for the town. It is at these times that people from the University, the town and the surrounding areas come together to mingle and celebrate. There are booths set up all along the main thoroughfares: Main Street, College Avenue and Draper Road. There is live entertainment and food, wares and crafts, and information about the different organizations which are part of the town and the university.
The chosen site is located adjacent to the Armory Building to the Northwest and is presently an asphalt parking lot. It is sandwiched in between the Armory and a brick commercial building (211 Draper Road) which occupies the Southwest corner of the intersection of Draper Road and College Avenue. This site is, at present, an ill-used yet important moment in this busy area of downtown Blacksburg. It is held between a building used for Art by the University and a building used for Commerce by the town. It also serves as an informal passage along its eastern/western axis for people walking from the town to the University. A large asphalt parking lot holds the southwest boundary of the site and is used by the University.

Since the theatre companies of The Consortium seek to establish a communicative bridge between people, and the site is used as an informal passage between the Town and University the thought of seeing the building functioning as a bridge to link the two became an image worth exploring and ultimately became a strong metaphor in the meaning of the building on the site.

Another compelling aspect of the site is the fact that Stroubles Creek runs through it along its eastern/western axis. The creek has been paved over and now resides below ground in a four foot culvert. The site is considered a flood plane for the creek. This creek which served to mark the original edge of the town has all but disappeared from sight. It became my intention to release it from its culvert and allow it, at least for the length of this site, to re-emerge into the sunlight.
context
Site (in yellow) located between the Armory Building to the South and 211 Draper to the North showing the path of Stroubles Creek from East to West. It is presently a parking lot used by the Town of Blacksburg.
“...the brook was thrown
Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone
In fetid darkness still to live and run-
And all for nothing it had ever done
Except forget to go in fear perhaps.
No one would know except for ancient maps
That such a brook ran water...”

Robert Frost
A Brook in the City

The creek and its underground journey through the site became an important poetic image, a metaphor for my attempts to seek the questions that would open up and bring to light an architectural idea that would encompass and flow through the complexity of the event. I felt that this hidden stream must be released into the sunlight and run alongside whatever idea came forward.

Water is symbolic of emotional flow, of healing and of mystery. The theatre artists of The Consortium are deeply aware of the importance of these qualities in their work. They strive for emotional honesty and integrity. Their work within communities often offers the opportunity for healing and they understand the mysterious nature of the creative process as well as the mysterious nature of theatre itself.

As Troubles Creek helped delineate the original edges of the town and the University, it also helped to delineate a site for the project. The creek beckoned me to the site, and then the further analysis of the site showed that it had the resistance and meaning I needed to proceed with the first stages of the design.
“Oh I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space...”
William Shakespeare
Hamlet Act 2 scene 2
In order to expand and reframe the site I took panoramic photographs and from these photographs I made the sketch which is reflected across these two pages. It “sees” the site from both sides at once while ridding the view of automobiles and other obstructions.

This seemed necessary to me in order that I might obtain a clearer understanding of the possibilities the site might hold, possibilities I could not see through the hard lens of a camera or through visits to the actual parking lot. I wanted to see it empty of the meaning that it had as a parking lot, see it full of “infinite space”.
Exploration
“Je suis l’espace où je suis.”

Noël Arnaud

dans L’etat d’ébauche
During the search for a site and while listening to the different constituents of The Consortium I was also developing the programmatic concerns for the project. I approached the program in a fluid manner. I was really looking for the essential qualities which would start to dictate architectural conditions. Qualities of certain members of The Consortium, qualities of the site, qualities of the event of theatre.

I proceeded to explore these concerns by taking on a small design exercise tangential to the main thesis project. I gave myself the exercise of designing a theatre for a Samuel Beckett play. The theatre was to house no more audience members than the play had characters. I chose *Endgame*, which has four characters. I have long been fascinated by the peripatetic nature of the actors’ life and the pilgrimages of the devout of all faiths across time. I felt the audience and the actors should approach the theatre by a path which passed alongside the theatre before entering the space upon which the ritualized evening would take place.

I arrived at a design for this theatre which consisted of a long ramp approaching a raised platform holding a stage which was also a chess board. The whole of the theatre was set in a pool of water. The pilgrims to this theatre approached down the ramp toward the water then ascended in a spiral up to the level of the stage (chessboard).

From this exercise I brought several concerns to my thesis project. Procession and ascension, the importance of the process of approach to the event during which the outside world is left behind and the imaginary world is approached with expectation. All of these concerns could be translated into specific architectural conditions.
plan and section of the theatre for Endgame by Samuel Beckett
These sketches were the first exploration into the spatial aspects of the project. Within the confines of the two existing buildings to the north and south of the site the linearity and layering of the project began to announce themselves. The idea of a strong architectural element or condition working against a more transparent or malleable set of elements or conditions was at the forefront of this initial searching.
Eventually the image of a line of discrete, repeated elements began to take shape. This repeated element announced itself as a set of tall masts which would serve as a spine for the entire project.
As the idea of the mast developed it became the structural spine of the project as well as the delineator of the edge of the volume of contained space. I began to develop it as a structure to hold the roof as well. This row of masts gave a very strong built line along the site and a rhythm for the processional of a bridge element which would then run alongside the masts and above the exposed creekbed. The suspension cables would act to enclose the processional bridge giving it a discreet presence while still being open to the sky.
“...an infinite number of details which suddenly demanded to be revealed...”

Martha Graham
Blood Memory

more detailed studies of the masts and the proces- sional bridge contained under the suspension cables
For just as Theatre speaks to the evanescent moment of human truth, Architecture speaks to the lasting expression of that same poetic honesty.
“...Shelter ... should not be an anchor but a mast.”
Kahlil Gibran
These pages show, in photographs and with a partial views of the plan, the paths on the either side of the Theatre which connect Draper Road to the large parking lot on the western side of the site.

From Draper Road along the northern side of the Theatre a wooden bridge follows along the line of masts from the eastern to the western end of the building. The bridge overlooks Stroubles Creek as it runs the length of the site. The creek resides in a cool green grotto area edged by a twenty foot high wall of ivy. The top ten feet of the commercial building at 211 Draper can be seen beyond the ivy wall.

After the bridge reaches the lobby entrance it becomes a ramp connecting the level of Draper Road with the lower level (a four foot difference) of the parking lot.
There is a wide mews area paved with brick or stone between the Armory building and the southern side of the Theatre. This area is more public than the grotto side and would allow for members of the town and students to gather on sunny days.

From Draper Road the mews is approached down the amphitheatre steps as well as from the sloping drive in front of the Armory itself. The mews opens generously and is partially protected by the eight foot wide roof overhang of the theatre.

The Theatre Lobby is accessed from the mews and grotto. During breaks in performances the audience members can enjoy this area for a bit of fresh air or conversation.

With the mews and the grotto there is ample east/west passage through the site.
The reinforced concrete of the masts which reaches toward the sky also reaches beneath the platform of the performance space and the lobby to support these areas. There are concrete beams which extends from each mast across the width of the building to hold wooden floor joists which, in turn, support a resonant, wooden deck for the Lobby and Performance Space. The floor deck would be mounted so that it could flex and give spring under the weight of the performers.

The street level is followed along the Processional Bridge onto the Lobby and the Performance Space Platform. All of these areas are reached without having to move up or down.

The Actor Preparation Space is on the Ground Platform Level (four feet below the Lobby Platform) and accesses the Performance Space Platform by a half-flight of steps. Another half-flight of steps descends to the Mews from the Lobby Platform. Adjacent to this latter half-flight is a full flight which ascends to the Second Level Platform of the theatre. This area holds the Control Booth for the Performance Space, a Lobby Bridge and a Meeting Room for the theatre-folk. The sketch below of a section taken through the Lobby helps to illustrate the relationship of the three levels: Ground Platform, Performance/Lobby Platform and Second Level Platform.
These two pages contain sketch ideas of the general profile, roofline considerations and structural thoughts about the project.

The theatre space required a clear span across its entire area. The sketches above show an exploration into different possible configurations that would allow the clear span using the masts as simple columns supporting beams or trusses.

None of these ideas were quite in keeping with the initial image of a bridge. While living in New York City, I would, from time to time, walk across the Brooklyn Bridge. The image of its massive piers and cables gave me the thought of suspending the roof from the masts on cables.

This idea was perfectly in keeping with the bridge metaphor, as well as creating a dramatic profile for the building which hints at the image of a bridge as well as the images of circus tents and medieval festivals. It also allowed the roof to seem to fly. A fitting metaphor for the spirit and imagination of the performers and the theatrical event.
Once the suspended roof was decided upon, the next question was how to accomplish this feat. I found that if the cable was brought up and over the mast I would create a situation of compression on the mast itself.

I was also continually working with the actual size, height and frequency of the masts. How would these masts communicate with the scale of the existing buildings and the site? How tall would they need to be to be seen and announce the theatre without overwhelming the surrounding buildings. I took careful site measurements and many photographs to work within the existing context of scale and rhythm. All these considerations were coming together to inform the ways that mast, roofline, cable and beams would finally join to create a strong and fitting presence for the building on the site.
The roof configuration is relatively complex. It required cables to be connected to the main beams, pulled over the top of the masts and then down to the ground where they would be tied into concrete anchors. The roof would also need to be tied down by cables which anchor it to the ground on the side opposite the masts.

Richard Rogers has a similar situation in his PA Technology Building in Princeton. This served as an example of the feasibility of my design. The PA Technology Building is much larger in size and scale and the system, therefore, is quite a bit more complicated than was necessary for the Consortium Theatre.

The overall design as well as a detail of the Rogers building are provided here as illustrations juxtaposed against a photograph of the final model of the theatre.

“To mount too high or descend too low is allowed in the case of poets, who bring earth and sky together.”

Gaston Bachelard

_The Poetics of Space_
Le Corbusier’s Heidi Weber Pavilion provided an image of separation between the roof and the building. Although the roof is physically connected to the building in The Consortium Theatre, the idea of the roof being an element separate from the wall is functioning in an important way. The roof flies over the body of the building. The walls only support themselves. The roofline provides a strong separation between earth and sky.

Ken Yeang’s Guthrie Pavilion in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia has a very similar tie-down idea to the design for the Consortium Theatre. A simple cable attached above to a fitting which corresponds to the top cable is taken directly down to the ground and anchored in concrete. I provide four such tie-down cables in this design.
The architects on these two pages, Peter Zumthor, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron bring a sedate, abstract quality to the forms of their work by the imaginative use of materiality on the exterior of the buildings they design. The example on the right is the Kunsthaus Museum by Peter Zumthor. He has encased the entire structure in sandblasted glass creating a mysterious and reflective identity for the museum.

The Stone House by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron has a curtain wall of natural stones and dry masonry work within a concrete frame. This almost paintlike use of stone allows the otherwise strictly abstract geometric volume to find its place on the rugged mountainous site.

Reflecting upon these abstractions of materiality and meaning, they remain quite evocative for me and are something that I have tried to emulate in the design of the Theatre for The Consortium.
Again Herzog and De Meuron use materiality to sculpt and cause effect in their Apartment Building Schützenmattstrasse in Basel, Switzerland (photographs to the left). As well as another use of a sandblasted glass exterior curtain wall in their Technological Development Center, also designed for Basel (model photograph in lower left corner).

These qualities helped to influence me in the design for the wall surfaces and construction of The Consortium Theatre. In the Theatre the walls consist of sandblasted glass over a steel frame. The frame also supports opaque panels (where needed for light control) in bright colors which would glow through the glass.
openings
The eastern and southern facades of the theatre would activate toward the street and the Armory Art Studio. From Draper Road an amphitheatre steps down to the theatre front. The theatre's entire eastern facade is a door which opens to create a stage for the outdoor audience. The southern facade of the performance space was also a series of openings which would offer a tremendous diversity of use during rehearsal and performance. With a double system of doors (shown on the following two pages), this wall could be shut tightly for light control during performance, opened to the light but kept private (through the use of translucent glass panels) for rehearsals and work sessions or opened completely to the mews for audience access or special performance effects.

I felt my task was to offer the creative minds of the actors and directors as much flexibility as possible while still being responsible to the more traditional uses of a performance space.

“If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would tell the story of one’s entire life.”

Gaston Bachelard
The Poetics of Space
These photographs of the final model show some of the possible ways of opening and closing the walls of the Performance Space. On this page, above, are two photos of the eastern facade with the two large doors closed (left) and then opened (right). With the doors open the Performance Space becomes an outdoor stage for festival events and performances.

Here the large doors on the eastern facade as well as the smaller set of doors on the southern facade are visible. The photo to the left below shows all the doors closed and then to the right they are open. This situation would allow outdoor performances to include the mews area beside the Armory Art Studio and Gallery. With these doors open in the spring and summer the actors could work in sunlight and fresh air while rehearsing.
The set of five smaller openings on the southern wall of the Performance space are shown on this page. These openings consist of a double set of doors, a solid door and a translucent glass door which slide up into the wall cavity. All the doors can be hand operated by the performers. With all the doors closed there is light control and privacy. With the inner (solid) doors open there is sunlight and still privacy. With both doors open there is sunlight, air and access to the mews by performers and audience.

The photo on the right below shows the glow of the Performance Space at night with the inner doors open but the translucent outer doors still pulled down. From outside the view would be one of shadowplay within the space.
The drawings and photographs in this section illustrate the final form of this Architectural response to the Event of Theatre. The building would sit longitudinally upon the site separating it into three parts: the processional bridge and grotto, the building volume and the mews. The expression of the building itself would hint at the form of a suspension bridge and would physically link the eastern and western edges of the site, the row of masts providing a strong, defining edge, character and rhythm. This row of masts and the suspension cables for the roof provide an arcade for the processional bridge, the formal (or northern) entrance to the theatre.

The approach to the theatre from Draper Road would be made at the eastern end of the row of masts at the beginning of the processional bridge. Here the cool grotto and the sound of the running water of the creek beckons the public along the bridge toward the canopied main theatre entrance located at the widest section of the bridge. The low canopy and the two masts on either side of the entrance as well as heavy doors compress space and provide a dramatic entrance into the lobby area.

Once inside the building another bridge is seen across the Lobby. This bridge, located at the second level, serves the actors and technicians and forms another canopy at the more informal mews (or southern) entrance. The Lobby is like a clear glass path between the Performance Space and the Actor Preparation Space.

Tickets are purchased at a booth contained within the wall which separates the Lobby from the Performance Space. The public would then enter the Performance Space through doors located to either side of the ticket booth. The Performance Space seats about one hundred people in flexible seating which can be adjusted for each particular event.

The Actor Preparation Space contains dressing rooms, business office, green room and mechanical room on the first level with a meeting room and large terrace upstairs. A fireplace and concrete hearth separates the Lobby from the Actor Preparation Space. There is a fireplace facing into the lobby on the first level and one facing into the meeting room on the second level. Chimneys for these fireplaces rise up from the concrete mass of the hearth through the suspended roof.
project
“Architecture ... always is a confrontation of use and activity and form.”

Thom Mayne

The arrangement of spaces is unconventional in that the Actor Preparation Spaces are separated from the Performance Space by the Lobby. This was quite purposely done to bring the actors in direct contact with the community they are serving. It allows the actors a place of privacy to prepare but then they must ascend to the level of the Performance Platform and cross the lobby in order to enter the Performance Space.

This connection would bring a great deal of vitality to the performance, allowing the audience to share more directly with the storytellers, all very much in keeping with the philosophies of the various companies of The Consortium. It would also give the actors a short transition from the world of their dressing rooms to the world of their performance.

On the site the building serves to unite the western edge of Draper Road. It announces itself as an individual yet remains within the scale of the buildings to either side. It provides access through the site while improving the use of the open areas of the site on either side. The southern edge of the building forms a generous mews with the wall of The Armory and would be available to the art students for the placement of sculpture as well as being a place to gather and sketch. The Festival Seating of the amphitheatre would function as a pleasant gathering place for people during times that the theatre facade remained closed. When the theatre facade was opened these steps would be the place for witnessing the event of Theatrical Exploration. This event would enliven the entire street and would bring a focus to an important intersection of downtown Blacksburg.
roof plan on site
project plan second level

211 Draper

mews

Draper Road

Stroubles Creek

performance space (below)

processional bridge

meeting room

terrace

lobby (below)

bridge

mews

Armory

plan second level
A

B

C

D

211 Draper

processional bridge

grotto

act preparation space

lobby

performance space

mews

festival space

festival seating

Stroubles Creek

Draper Road

Armory

plan first level

plans
sections

section E-E

section F-F
northern elevation

southern elevation
The axonometric drawing to the right is pulled apart at each level to show the spatial aspects of the building as a whole and in part.

The bottom drawing shows the Processional Bridge and the Mews in relationship to Draper Road, the Lobby, Performance Space (in yellow) and the Actor Preparation Space. Within the Lobby can be seen the ticket booth, hearth and bathroom facilities for men and women as well as stairs leading down to the Mews, stairs leading up to the Lobby Bridge and stairs leading down to the Actor Preparation Space.

The middle drawing shows the Lobby Bridge which connects the Meeting Room and Terrace (all in yellow) to the control booth. The light grid (deep yellow) which is suspended from the roof is also depicted, as are the ladder-like stairs across from the control booth which are used to access the grid.

Finally the top drawing shows the roof, the tops of the masts and the cables as they connect along the roof. The two chimneys are also seen piercing through the roof and rising slightly above the cable height.
eastern facade

east corner

photographs
southern facade

south corner
“I have learned that a good question is greater than the most brilliant answer. This is a question of the measurable and the unmeasurable. Feeling and dream have no measure, have no language, and everyone’s dream is singular. A man is always greater than his works because he can never fully express his aspirations. To express oneself in music or architecture one must employ the measurable means of composition or design. The first line on paper is already a measure of what cannot be expressed fully. The first line on paper is less.”

Louis Kahn
What Will Be Has Always Been
Selected Bibliography


Papadakis, Andreas C. (editor), *Deconstruction in Architecture*, Academy Group, 1988


Image Credits

page one - Bay Island, Christina Moscone, 1996.

page seven - Chrysler Building. NYC. VCU Fine Arts Building & Wall, Richmond. Photos by the author.


page thirteen - Blacksburg, aerial view. Town Architecture, Donna Dunay.

page fifteen - Armory Building, Blacksburg, photo by the author.

page nineteen - Bay Island, Christina Moscone, 1996.


all photographs of The Consortium Theatre (model) are by the author
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Completion date: September 1999

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Honors
Served on The Honorifics Committee, 1996-97, as the representative of the Graduate Architecture Program. This committee determines annual faculty awards for the College of Architecture.

Member: Phi Kappa Phi National Honor Society, 1997

Member: Tau Sigma Delta National Honor Society, 1998

Experience

Responsibilities included:
- working with the resource librarian to organize and maintain an extensive materials library,
- working with architects and designers to assemble presentations,
- meeting with manufacturers' reps to screen new products and collect new samples for the library

Education and Background
BFA Cum Lauda in Musical Theatre, College Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati

An extensive career as an actor, singer and dancer with roles in productions such as Les Miserables, Cats, Evita, Grease, On Your Toes, The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Chaplin, as well as appearances on General Hospital, All My Children and Fame with concert and cabaret appearances in such venues as Town Hall and The Oak Room at the Algonquin in New York City.

Experience producing, directing and choreographing in New York and Los Angeles as well as teaching and coaching actors and singers.

Member of all the professional actors’ unions: AEA, SAG, AFTRA and AGMA.
Thomas Quenten Keeling

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two years of study at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia transferred to The College Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio to complete a Bachelors of Fine Arts Degree in Musical Theatre (cum laude) in 1981.

two years of part time study at The New School for Social Research and The Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City studying French and Interior Design. Masters Degree in Architecture from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia, September 1999.

experienced: eighteen years of work as a professional actor in New York and Los Angeles playing many roles on stage and on television including: “Tom Wingfield” in The Glass Menagerie, “Che Guevera” in Evita, “Jesus” in Godspell, “Marius” in Les Miserables, “Skimbleshanks” in CATS, and “Sydney Chaplin” in Chaplin as well as appearances on General Hospital, All My Children and Fame. Concert appearances around the U.S. and Canada with The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber and cabaret and concert appearances in New York City at such prestigious venues as Town Hall and The Oak Room at the Algonquin.

six months of experience working at the firm of Kohn Pedersen Fox Interior Architects in New York City as assistant resource librarian in their extensive materials library.