

# **Buildings for Theatre: space and function**

**A presentation and panel discussion on architecture and the physical space required for a theatre. Under the spotlight: the extension of the Lyric as a community resource for the people of Hammersmith; the creation of the Unicorn Theatre, designed specifically for children; and conceptual models by students at the Bartlett School of Architecture.**

This event took place at Central School of Speech & Drama on  
18 November 2009

## **The Panel:**

**James Blackman** (JB), Director of Strategy and Communications, Lyric Hammersmith, London

**Petrus Bertschinger** (PB), Project Manager, Theatre Projects Consultants Ltd, and Planning and Operations Director for Unicorn Theatre for Children

**Bob Sheil** (BS), Director of Technology, The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London and a member of the multidisciplinary practice Sixteen\*(Makers)

## **Chair:**

**Simon Shepherd** (SS), Deputy Principal, Central School of Speech & Drama

## **James Blackman: ‘The Lyric Hammersmith capital development project: building a teaching theatre for the performing arts’**

If you know Hammersmith, the best way to describe where we’re going to build is to say, stand outside Marks & Spencer and look up. Suspended above the Kings Mall shopping centre is a big piece of unused land where we can build an additional 60,000 sq ft so we will essentially build the Lyric again next door.

Across the sector, within Central Government and the Arts Council, there’s a desire to find a cultural project which will fly the flag for West London in the lead up to 2012. The economic regeneration that is happening across East London often leaves us in West London feeling rather sorry for ourselves; this project will strengthen our franchise stability and success. We currently turn over about £4.5m a year and our expectation is that we will increase our turnover to about £7m a year once we build our building.

Why is the building unique? Well it meets the needs of young people – there’s not a better way to describe it really. In a building like this, it’s interesting to talk broadly about the ways in which the next generation of theatre makers and artists enter our sector. There is a feeling both within the sector and at policy level that our sector is graduate-saturated, that there are a number of roles and jobs that do not need to be filled by graduates, but if we want to diversify our sector – and I use the word ‘diversify’ in all of its different meanings – then we need to find new entry routes into our industry, and that’s something that we are incredibly passionate about. We are keen to work with a wide range of partners to ensure we find ways to do that.

Young people love participating in the arts and there are thousands of young West Londoners that need places to go and things to do outside school hours; the Lyric is a place for them to do that. Something that allows us to

change hearts and minds and get people to understand what we do is to think broadly about the context of young people in London. I feel quite passionately that young people in London exist in ghettos. If you take Hammersmith & Fulham for example, we've got many, many independent schools with a population that is predominantly white British where achievement is very high, as well as a large number of state schools which are failing, where the population of those schools is predominantly black, and minority ethnic and where achievement is low. Young people in London exist in these fairly enclosed environments and do not get to mix with young people from different backgrounds. There's something quite odd about that. We think the only place that it can happen is in Primark or McDonalds, or at places like the Lyric. Local Authority youth services just do not do that; young people that attend youth service provision are not predominantly high achieving, are not young people who are doing well at school.

So the plan is to establish the Lyric as an internationally recognised home for nurturing talent and the potential of young people. The business model is based around three key areas: accredited vocational learning, positive activities, and information advice and guidance. Accredited learning, all sorts of pathways and opportunities for young people to get involved in what we're doing and a qualifications framework which will go right from entry level and, we hope, all the way through. We've done some very loose work around how we could provide a ladder of opportunity all the way through, so that's very much a virtuous circle of artists, young people and/or teachers. Again briefly touching on this notion of positive activities, there's a desperate need for more places for young people to go outside school hours. We're working in partnership with lots of different providers, Connexions (the service for young offenders), and the Primary Care Trust which I think will broadly help identify what the needs of young people are, and how we can we provide services within our building to meet those needs.

So what will it look like? Well, we've already got a beautiful Frank Matcham auditorium with 550 seats that our marketing team have got to fill every night, so we don't want to build another theatre. But we do need to build some more

flexible rehearsal and dance spaces. Some initial drawings have been done by the architect Rick Mather. We are going to build a recording studio, some music practice rooms, a fully functioning 60 seat cinema, an ICT suite, editing and production studios, production workshops and storage, a shared canteen, social spaces and meeting spaces, and staff offices. Staff offices are important because I've never worked in a theatre where the architect has remembered that people need to work there. I think when they rebuilt the Lyric in 1979 they built it for four people to work there; we're now 49, and we exist in... 'pods' is probably the nicest way to describe what we exist in.

We're also working in partnership with the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham to explore the possibility of relocating Hammersmith Central Library into the new building which we think is an exciting proposal and will also widen the types of cultural and creative space that we will be providing at the Lyric and open up lots and lots of possibilities in terms of building users and service providers. There's a big move at government level to 'co-locate services' – that's the official term – but we also want to look for how the Lyric can change and evolve.

How far have we got? Well, we've secured £3million from the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and we're hoping that all of those other people will give us £3million as well, so it's all rather tidy. We're in very detailed negotiations with all those partners and we're hoping that we'll secure all of that funding very, very shortly. Everyone wants to know how you are going to support yourself from a revenue perspective. We think that the reason our revenue funding model is so strong is that, regardless of who is in government, young people will always need to get qualifications and we are positioning ourselves at local level, regional level and national level to ensure that we are able to draw down funding either from the local authority or from central government to deliver learning programmes for young people.

Consultation, I think, is really important and is an important place to start moving towards the end of speaking this afternoon. In the context of thinking about buildings and theatre spaces, I think what theatre buildings are, and

who they're for, is going to need to evolve massively over the next 10 to 15 years. The days of organisations, successful organisations, that are funded from one or two places, I think will be over very soon. The Lyric is successful because we are funded from many different people and many different places, so when starting to plan for this building, we've consulted first and foremost the young people, artists, our strategic partners, local people, local businesses, councillors and VIPs. We've quite simply asked them, 'Do you love our plans? Do you hate our plans? Tell us!' And we've done that in a variety of different ways. We've had open days, we've had our staff in for a huge number of hours talking to local people and all of the other stakeholders. This extraordinary thing happens when you invite the public to tell you what they think about their local theatre: the great and the good, the mad and the sane of Hammersmith come out in their droves and have the most extraordinary stories. At 8am on our first day of consultation an incredibly old man came in who was in his nineties. He was chairman of the Lyric in the 1930s. No one had ever seen him before that day and he had the most extraordinary stories to tell and had a lot to say on our plans for the future.

As part of the public consultation, we put these big boards up on the wall listing different types of activity, then gave everyone a load of stickers and asked them simply to put stickers on what they wanted to see happening in the building. Then we provided this big wall where we asked them to make comments and tell us what they wanted to happen inside it. 'Lots of activities for older people' was a key message, which when you're publicising that you're building a building for children and young people does rather question the business model, but it did make us ask ourselves some really important questions. There was a point last year, I remember, when there became more over 60s than there were under 16s in the UK for the first time ever. For organisations like ours, which are publicly funded and have a public service remit, that really did make us question what we're doing and who the building will be for, and we're certainly adapting our plans to do that.

To give you a sense of our rather mad ambitious timeline, we're appointing architects at the moment and we will submit our planning application next

week. The plan is to go onsite next year [2010], to have a September [2011] opening. Why are we doing it? We think we will increase the numbers of young people that we work with from 10,000 to 25,000 a year, with more than 500 achieving a nationally recognised qualification, and increase the number of artists that we work with from 200 to 500 a year.

I mentioned before some of our strategic partners – these are all the different people that are going to help us make this building happen. We're uniquely blessed in Hammersmith, we're surrounded by other creative and cultural sector providers and we're working very, very closely with them on the developments for this building. Here's a very, very rough sketch of what the building might look like:



King's Street, our existing building, is on the right and the extension will be on the left; the plan is for a big central atrium off which all of the activity happens. All of our props and wardrobe and costume stores will move into the new building. The plan is to expose the process of theatre making as much as

possible. Lots of people, even in our end, oddly, think that's an absurd thing to do. Maybe we can debate that later.

I just want to finish with some provocations. Will our new building change what we are? Will we still be a theatre? There are often more young people in our building than there are artists, there's certainly always more young people in our building than there are staff. Does it often feel like a school? Yes. Is that ok? Who knows? Do artists think enough about public value? Do artists even know what public value means? How will our arts organisations need to change to start thinking about that question and what will our buildings and activities look like in ten years' time?

SS: Thanks, James. Any questions for clarity or points of fact anybody wants to ask at the moment?

Audience Member: I have one question. The vision that you presented to us, is that a vision that you are going to relaunch, or is that the present vision? And also, excuse my ignorance, in this country what's the age range of 'youth'?

JB: Well there are lots of different words that are used to describe children and young people. 'Young people' is probably 14 to 19/21-ish; in law, 'children' is anyone 0–18. If you ask an 18 year old do they consider themselves a child, they'd probably say no. There's also this other phrase that we use which we shouldn't, and the sector uses it a lot, which is 'emerging artists'. I don't think I used it today, but I see it way too much because, you know, when does an artist stop emerging? There's an Arts Council definition of an 'emerging artist', which is anyone up to the age of 30. If you've had a career in hairdressing and then go and dance, does that mean you're not an emerging artist? But I think the term 'youth' changes all the time – up to 21, 24, 25-ish.

AM: So your target will be someone from...

JB: 0-24, but then we've just done a consultation, we've got to work with 60+ as well, so we'll see.

SS: Thank you. I'd now like to introduce Petrus Bertschinger, who is project manager with Theatre Projects Consultants Ltd.

### **Petrus Bertschinger: 'The Unicorn Theatre: designing a purpose-built theatre for young children'**

As operations directors for Unicorn [Theatre, a purpose-built theatre for children in London], I worked with this project all the way through from its conception to opening. Having been with the company for ten years, it's great to see a project that they'd been trying to build for about 15-20 years finally emerging.

Unicorn is a company that only does work for 3- 12 year olds. One of the big questions that came up from the very beginning was what is the difference between adult theatre and children's theatre? We discovered that the answer was actually not very much at all, except that children are smaller. They want the same sort of thing as adults do, they want a good show and they want a good show done well, and for children you have to do it even better than for adults because their level of attention is a lot lower. They are often more picky. If you're up there as an actor and you get it wrong, you don't half know about it, so you have to really, really design well and think how they are going to behave and what they do.

We approached a local primary school, Tower Bridge Primary, and got them on board as junior consultants right the way through the process. We had a whole bunch of sessions with them very early on about what they thought theatre was about and what should happen in a theatre. There was a very good provocation that came out which was that the floor should be made of

chocolate, which was their idea of what they thought theatre should be. It was pointed out to us by the architect, Keith Williams, quite accurately that it wouldn't be very practical and might be quite messy. However we did suggest there were some principles of theatre for children:

One is that you need direct engagement between the audience and performer. You don't want any idea of a stage front. The whole concept of the performers there and the audience here doesn't give you direct engagement between your audience, especially your children, and the show that was going on. So we really felt that there should be no stage front as such.

We also thought there should be equal accessibility, the idea of a storytelling circle. Children are very used to the idea that, at primary school, you sit down in a circle on the carpet around the story teller who sits in the middle. We needed to keep the audience close, and by this we mean no more than 6m from the back row to the stage, the reason being of course that if we put children further away they don't engage. They go to the cinema, they talk to themselves, they eat crisps and sweets, and they don't get involved in what's going on. But as soon as they get close to the action, they get emotionally engaged and then they stay with it. So it was key not to make a very deep stage, but to keep it very, very shallow.

There needed to be a sufficient rake within the auditorium to put adults and children sharing the experience together without obviously blocking the view, so that children can look over the heads of adults without feeling that they were then stuck in an adult space, which is what they normally do when they go to a theatre.

The next most important point was that we wanted a grown up space that wasn't for grown ups. You can't do an infantile space for children. You don't want lots of pastel colours and cute little things because they don't really want that, they actually want to feel as if they are going to a grown up space, but they want it to belong to them and not to the adults. The philosophy was that

adults sort of came along with the children and were let in, if they were allowed.

And then, finally, we wanted theatrical flexibility. There's a whole question of whether you're going to a one room space, like a black box studio, or a two room space where you have an auditorium and a stage. We wanted one that could be both; you could actually take it into two different positions. The danger there is that you might end up with a 'sofa bed', and as you all know, a sofa bed is a crap sofa, pardon the expression, and a very bad bed.

Quick bit of history, I'm sorry. You all probably know this, but from 2million years ago to just before Jesus Christ as it were, the natural gathering was circular – you had your storyteller in the middle and you were quite often in a dip so you had an angled space around it. We then go on to the Greeks who created the first sort of amphitheatre, and again you had much more of a thrust stage with the audience all the way round. And then obviously the Romans next and you had a little bit more of a volume there and a height and a ceiling, and again you had a raked stage coming down to a more central stage that's coming on from that. Over here in the UK we carried on then into the Shakespearian times and created basically the courtyard theatre which has been the model most copied over the years until this century, and in many ways the most effective.

In London we have the Globe, which is a modern reinterpretation of the original, where the audience are right round the actors and the actors are right in the middle of it. With the principles of courtyard theatre as the other traditional form of storytelling that has emerged in many different cultures, you have a gallery room to keep the audience close, but it is essentially one room, and you have a flexible central area. You have no rear stage; you're right in the middle of it all. Then you have the Georgian Theatre in Richmond, which obviously carried on with the structure – a beautiful theatre, quite small and unique. Later on you had a Victorian interpretation, the Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds (recently refurbished), again a very beautiful

space, and a modern interpretation, which is the Wild Theatre in Bracknell, again a courtyard theatre.

So having looked at those, we decided to talk about what we thought was the ‘sweet spot’, the place on the stage where an actor stands to engage an audience best. I’m sort of trying to do it now actually, from a chair. I’m sort of almost there. So you have a classic end stage where the actors are standing and you have a small fan around it, and then you have a thrust stage where there is a complete circle around it and you’re right in the middle of it – difficult to perform because you’ve got half your back to the audience. And then of course you’ve got the apron thrust, which gives you the ability to move into the audience and really engage with them to do an aside in the Shakespearian sense or to stand further back and take a wider picture and tell a bigger arc of the story. So these different shapes were really what we were working with – how to engage with children, and what they’re going to relate to in a very direct way, rather than a classic ‘there they are over there and here we are over here’ way.

We did a rather comprehensive study tour. The Royal Court, as we all know, rebuilt both its beautiful spaces and installed the most expensive seats known to man – I think they’re about £800 a seat, but very very comfortable, though there’s a danger you might fall asleep. With this, you’ve got again quite a classic space, you’ve got a two-room space – you’ve got a front room where the audience sit (it’s circular but has standard stalls), you’ve got a gap which is your fore-stage and then you have your rear room which is your stage. So even though it looks engaging, it is really a statement of ‘they’re there and we’re here’. It’s a two part space.

At the Quays, the smaller theatre at the Lowry in Salford, it’s the same sort of principle: you’ve got the boxes and galleries, and you’ve got stalls seating in front. But they’ve got a little bit more scope to experiment there. You’ve got a little bit wider stage, your fore-stage is definitely coming out, and you’re starting to engage from the rear room into the front room. There is a connection between the two, but it’s still pretty much two rooms and has that

feeling. Occasionally they do have shows where they take the stalls seating out and play right into the middle.

Cottesloe – the home of Mr Barnes! [Jason Barnes, former production manager of the Cottesloe] I'm not going to say too much because he's here and it's his beauty. Again, a brilliant flexible space, a sort of early 60s design isn't it Jason? 70s? 1977 it was built. And again you have much more of the same thing – a courtyard, different galleries, stalls seating – but much wider so you're going straight from the back room into the front room. In fact there is very little rear room at all, you're really quite engaged. Actually the great thing about the Cottesloe is that it's very, very versatile and you can play it in a number of different ways. That being said, you've got much more of a one-room feeling rather than a two-room feeling.

Young Vic – again another beautiful theatre that's been redone. Here you really do have a sense of a much, much wider room. You're right into it. You do have a back room behind, but it's not quite the same. It's much more developed and you're much more in the round.

Then finally, the ultimate is the Swan Theatre in Stratford, which really is a one-room space. Again, there's no back room at all and you're right in the middle of it with all of the audience surrounding you. So again we've gone through a journey from classical theatre, where you don't engage, to a very, very thrust theatre where you're right in the middle of it.

We went to explore those theatres to have a look at which is the best version to work with children, which would get that dynamic going and create the emotional engagement between the performer and the audience. The final one we went to on this journey became our model and our favourite one of all, and that's Peter Brook's Bouffes du Nord in Paris, which is an absolutely gorgeous gem of a theatre.

It was originally an Opera House and they filled in the pit and stalls to make a flat floor all the way through. You can just about see the lower raked seating

and you do have two tiers there. It's a rough old building but I should let you know that the dramatic distressed paintwork is actually a trick – if you get up close you realise it's quite a nice con, but it does work really, really well. The auditorium has a cylindrical shape, it does have a front room and a back room but they are much more engaged. At the back of the house there is no grid, no flying system. There's a bit of suspension but nothing else.

It's a very grand circular space, old but beautiful. That auditorium shape is the standard opera shape. Acoustically it's much further round, you wrap round a lot more but you do have a back room and front room of almost equal dimensions and the idea is that you play from the back into the front and you spend most of it in the middle area – you don't actually use the back room much at all.

Following that we defined some more of what we call the *Bouffeian* principles which we wrote down. First it's a single room but it is divided in two, so you have a feeling of a single room in two halves. Now change your maths – it's actually divided into thirds! You have an audience surrounding, the play in the middle, and a hidden bit of magic behind. The idea is you come from the magic back room into the middle room, which the people in the front are engaged with. You need a flat floor again from seats to back wall so that there's no sense of stage separation between the performer and audience. You need raked seating and an upper balcony to bring you closer to the action, closer to what's happening, and again to be at an angle so you don't have any sightline problems with people sitting behind others. It's egalitarian but unprecious. There's no sense of 'haves and have nots' in it. It's a very equal space, equal for the people that are watching the performance, and equal between the performers and the audience. And it's terribly flexible. You can do anything you want – except the structure itself is very rigid, basically concrete and brick, and you can't really change much of that – but anything within that you can do as much as you like with.

So we did our own initial version of it with a third for the audience, a third for a playing area, and a third (though there isn't a structural proscenium) behind, and that defined for us how to go forward with this project.

Right, concept sketches! I always like to put an architect's squiggle up because it always looks good. But if you want to get across the idea of what it's going to be like standing on a stage with these tiers around it then that sort of graphic drawing is very good at getting across the idea of the energy and the emotional engagement that you need. It works better than plans. The second drawing shows the opposite perspective, when you're sitting in the audience looking down towards the stage.

The next idea we picked up on was the cylinder with levels of galleries that keep going up. You've got a sort of cathedral volume that not only gives you a very good acoustic but also gives you a sense of majesty. In the concept drawings you can see that defined shape with the curve coming round, the central pit area which could be with seats or without – for a more traditional end-on arrangement or with the audience in a circle. Part of the reason we had to concentrate on the end-on as well as the circular configuration is because we were going to take in touring shows, and if you're bringing in a touring show, most of them tour end-on. You have to give a certain amount of flexibility but try not to make a 'sofa bed'. So you can see in our early concept plan the circular and the square of the back end of the stage, the rear section, second half of the room and the circular front bit.

Where did we go from there? We were on a very tight site so we put our amphitheatre in first, with cushion seats, then added the cylindrical galleries going up above to give 340-360 seats and a 'thrust' format. We could then add the fore-stage seating which is sunk into the floor. You don't get a feeling of a stage front any more; the performers will quite often perform right around the ring. You can put in a proscenium when you need it and this gives you several options: you can have your thrust stage, which is definitely much more of a *boufféian* version with a third behind and third in the middle and a third for the audience; you can have an end stage which is your classic performance

for touring shows. Or you can take away the proscenium completely and have an open thrust stage – we did a rather eccentric diamond shaped one for a collaboration with London Contemporary Dance called *Red Red Shoes* which was a version of *Red Shoes* set in Bosnia. And then of course you've got an open-end stage, which is as wide or as big as you want for a very large spectacle.

The architects built up their renderings from our original drawings. The use of timber louvers was crucial. It gives you a different material which makes it feel like quite a grown up space, though it's really there for acoustic reasons to get your absorbency and reflection exactly balanced so that you have the same clarity of spoken word in any part of the auditorium. Again for children you want to get to the point where the actor can speak quite quietly and still everyone can hear them without the actor having to overthrow it. The moment you overplay your voice children disengage because they feel that you are being a teacher telling them what to do, rather than a person they are listening to in the street.

The central D above is quite interesting as it is a technical area that reflects the shapes further down. The upper gallery is also a technical gallery, the control room is on the third level and the very top is grid. We needed to be able to hang anywhere we wanted in the building so that you could get Peter Pan flying anywhere from backstage to front of house.

Obviously being a performing company we made our own model, not quite as well as the architects' version, but it was 1:25 which meant that our designers could start working straight away on the first range of shows that came through.

It's proved a very adaptable, very big space to work with and we've been able to stage a huge range of shows from *Red Fortress* to *Twin Stars, Jemima Puddle-Duck*, an excellent one-woman show, a Summer youth project and *Looking for JJ* – a hit novel that went out on tour and was a very successful show.

SS: Any questions or points of fact, information, clarification?

Audience Member: I'd just like to mention how very well it also works in the round. I'm not sure how good the acoustic is if you're sitting on the stage end though.

PB: Yes, it works very well. They did a show quite recently where they did it in the round and it looks great.

Audience Member: It looks good if you're sitting in the main bit of the auditorium.

PB: Yes it worked well.

Audience Member: Would you like to say anything about the Clore?

PB: Well the Clore Theatre, the studio space downstairs at the Unicorn, is much more of a black box type of theatre. Very good proportions though. In a lot of them the ceiling is too low for the size of the box. It's a completely multifunctional space. It works very well for smaller shows and for work with younger children where you need to have a much smaller volume in order to engage with them because a bigger theatre is too frightening, you get too many people there.

SS: Thank you. Our final speaker is Bob Sheil who lectures at the Bartlett School of Architecture and runs Unit 23, which explores 'proto-architecture'.

### **Bob Sheil: 'Prototyping an experimental theatre space'**

Good afternoon everyone. I'm from the Bartlett and I'm going to talk a little bit about a project that we've been doing in collaboration with the Centre for

Excellence in Training for Theatre [CETT] and Central School, which has been a very exciting project for us.

For those who don't know us, the Bartlett School of Architecture is part of University College London and has a very strong reputation for experimentation, for ideas, for debate, for discourse, for pushing the idea of architecture beyond what is regarded as its normal territory. We don't really deal with the real world, so we're ideal partners in many ways to collaborate with a theatre institution! For us there are huge overlaps between theatre and architecture. In many ways both are about space and the illusion of space. But the question that was put to us in the foreground of this project was about the sustainability of theatre buildings.

Sustainability is a word that gets kicked around a lot; it's used in good ways and bad ways, but it's a word that doesn't always capture the essence of the problem. You cannot just go ahead and design any architectural project with just sustainability as the brief: that is not going to create a good project. And you're not going to get a good project if you just have experimentation as your brief. I think any architectural project has to deal with a huge range of potential meanings, uses, outcomes and flexibility.

Just on the flip side of the presentations we had before, I suppose architecturally we deal with the problems that surround the rather fundamental aspect of building theatre space. In doing so, we create this huge separation between the environment, or the external world, and the controlled environment within. I'm going to be very careful how I describe theatre in a room full of experts – but we can talk about theatre as open space and we can talk about theatre in the black box, but for it to become a pressing architectural exercise for our investigation, we thought we ought to do it around the realm of the box, in terms of the architectural challenges that face us as architects and perhaps you as user of theatre space, to think very differently about how theatres deal with the issue of energy consumption and usage, and so on.

At the Bartlett you're just not going to get students interested unless there's a major hook for them to play off, so being a student-led project the hook was that it was potentially a live project. We were approached by Jess Bowles of CETT with very simple questions at the very beginning: 'Would you like to get involved in designing and constructing a temporary space with a very, very low budget for a short period of time, associated with an event here in Swiss Cottage?' But it was actually a meeting in this room about four weeks later, between the students who had responded in a really positive way, and members of staff from Central, where the conversation kind of blew that idea apart. The mood in the room seemed to be, 'There's so many good ideas here, the brief isn't big enough!' So it was a remarkable response by Central and CETT to say, 'Let's pause and let's think bigger.' It was thrown back into the Bartlett's court and we both left feeling very excited with the idea that over the course of five or six months the students were to take on board the idea of building a small theatre space. Working as a group, they were all encouraged to take different positions – it's very much a cultural theme of the Bartlett that diversity and polemic fuels the machine – and so were working off each other and working against each other in order to build material which would form the basis of the debate. From the beginning we also had Rob Packman, who of course worked on the Cottesloe, and an engineer involved as well.

One final thing to say is that the Bartlett had this reputation, this sort of international reputation, for ideas, but it has hardly any reputation that I know of for taking on live projects. There are other schools of architecture in London that have a very strong reputation for that. There are schools of architecture in the States that are founded upon that as an idea. There's one particular little satellite school called the Royal Studio that builds extraordinarily innovative experimental buildings. But in many ways the Bartlett thrives on *not* building, it thrives on that period in an architect's early life of stretching ideas way beyond reality. The business of practicing architecture now is so immensely compact in terms of time, in terms of expertise, in terms of budget, in terms of what's required from buildings, that the relative freedom of being a student is an extraordinarily precious time so we really push that as hard as we can, but it's refreshing to bring in the idea of

a live project into that culture. A culture that purely looks at ideas away from the world that we're building, away from reality, will eventually implode, so the live building project in the Bartlett raised a lot of eyebrows but moved on to being accepted as a positive shift for the school.

What I'm going to do now very quickly is run through the projects that came after that conversation in CETT. I don't want to go on too long so I'm just going to introduce them one at a time and talk about the ideas. The important thing to stress here is that these eight projects were of course for the students their academic work and when you're taking live projects into the academic framework you transgress a number of thresholds. The student isn't in a position where they're operating in a world of consultancy or practitioner, they're not in any way being exploited by either institution or client or whatever. So each student had other requirements to meet in the course of this academic period but it was all built around a larger project.

1. James Barrington's take on the idea of the theatre is to build on the notion of promenade so he picked up on the idea of a theatre made out of vehicles. This was fed by François Delarozière's workshop on La Machine at the Bartlett and his company's relationship with another French performing art company Royal de Luxe. He gave a fantastic talk about constructing his giant marionettes, the performance and what we all immediately liked about that, apart from the extraordinary physical and creative endeavour of La Machine, is the effect of theatre upon the city, the theatre as an object, as an artefact in the city itself, as well as what goes on in it. So being very keen on technology, stuff, cars (he's a big *Top Gear* fan, he loves bits, gears, chassis, movement) he went into tremendous detail on a notion of two vehicles, one called 'Perch' and one called 'Perform', which can be assembled at sites across the city or across the city's environments, and be set up so as to perform as a theatrical event or space.

2. The next project was by Frank Gilks. Speaking of the whole idea of two spaces sort of twinned, Frank took on this kind of schizophrenic space so the theatre would be split in two. He made these dinky little models, then very

quickly with the new digital fabrication facilities we now have at the Bartlett, managed to develop a 1:20 model which just shifts it into the world of becoming a plausible, buildable, standupable structure. He took on board the idea of two spaces facing an audience that can be orientated in all sorts of different manners.

There's a level of naivety and ignorance that is key to all of this. We had a crit around about December time, down in the bar, and lots of people from Central came down and there was a clear look of surprise and excitement on their faces, combined with horror and shock that we were just waltzing into ideas about how to construct theatrical space, performance space, without any expertise in the territory. But within itself each of the projects was there just to provoke, take a position and provoke.

**3.** Justin Goodyer, a very technical student, got into the world of parametrics. There are shifts taking place in architectural practice and architectural theory all the time, but there's a very, very big one that's been taking place over the past ten years in how computation and computational design techniques and computational fabrication techniques have radically altered the way in which we design. So one of the themes and one of the questions that we put to our students in this unit is that it's equally as important now to figure out *how* you design as well as *what* you design.

It's always been important how you design in architecture, but now there's so many different ways that you can design that in a way the decision of how to design has a huge effect, not just in terms of the works technology or aesthetic, but in many ways to do with the end result. For instance, this year we started off with a life drawing class, followed by a body scanning class, in the space of 48 hours in the unit we were trying to address the world of the analogue and the digital and how one traditional format produces a certain type of result. It had been many years since I had seen life drawing at the Bartlett, and some of these students had never done life drawing at all. And it was a fantastic conversation of the intuitive and the role of observation in design. Then suddenly body scanning appeared to be invasive and quite

blunt, so you know, we were trying to challenge the kind of shine of technology, and how we as designers can pick up tools and not question them and think they're great and not really think through the effect that might have upon the space one designs. Justin's project is all about the algorithm that designs this space and his position is 'you tell me what you want and I can squeeze this thing into any shape at all.' Technically quite challenging but in terms of the theatrical, his response to the brief was essentially is quite conventional.

4. Ric Lipson was probably the most expert on performance in the unit. Well, not probably, let's say definitely. Ric works for StuFish, the Mark Fisher studio, and he's one of the key guys in the office. He's been working for StuFish since he was a second year student I think. He's in a different city every couple of weeks. In Part I of architectural education, the first three years, students are introduced to the notion of what architecture is, then you go into practice for a year or two and you come back with lots of questions, lots of contentment, perhaps frustration, but certainly lots of questions about where you want to take your work. The final two years of the diploma, or masters, is all about resolving where you want to take your work in terms of your career. So ideas in fourth year projects are very much more matured by their experience in practice. StuFish always deal with the logistics of designing so Ric's approach very much began from the idea of a component upwards and his vertical theatre space is developed around conversations he had earlier about vertigo and a very compressed, almost depressive, space.

Part of the brief was also that the users of this space would be young theatre performers, young theatre designers, young theatre users... the theme of youngness is interesting. The Young Architect of the Year, I think the age threshold for that is 45. Professor Mark Ridley gives a fantastic lecture about what it is to be a young architect. In architecture, the idea of being young is being stretched to quite extreme limits essentially because it takes so long before you can start building mature works. So I think the concept of youth is interesting. All these projects are definitely done by very young architects, very little experience in building, very excited by the idea that maybe, just

maybe their idea might influence Jess, and that maybe, you know, they could get a gig out of it. So Ric did these first level models and then took it into quite an elaborate level of detail.

5. Matt Shaw proposed this very, very highly tailored skin, a very mechanised space, an architecture that would respond to the site. One or two projects out of the eight took the position that architecture is made by its place as much as by its materiality, so this was a project based around the idea of the tendered skin, an architecture which would be malleable and even throughout the performance starts to kind of challenge. I know for theatre people that is quite a step, a point too far perhaps. You know that it could be disruptive. You know there's this conversation that is taking over your ideas and exaggerating them, because we have to get some fun out of it after all! It's only a drawing/model project, but you know there's an interesting conversation there. To what extent should the building, the envelope, be part of the performance? Or should it just be this mute, bland, I'm-not-here black box? This is definitely one of those projects that takes that on board and asks whether in putting together theatre performance, one might need to programme the building as well as programme the space. In using lower levels of technology, this project kind of deals with similar ideas that the building would operate like a loom, would weave a space.

6. One of the sites that all of the students took on board was the space right outside this building that's currently being dug by contractors. Because at Central you've got this fantastic set painting workshop, Tim Tasker thought that the set could be produced during the performance, rolled out with the set makers responding to the performance and then designing a new set. It's a bit Rolf Harris but at the same time, there's a nice idea there. You [PB] talked about the space in Paris, how the way in which the illusion is constructed is both vivid but at the same time created the illusion.

7. Katrina Varian's project, Parasite Performances, takes a much more radical position in relation to the site. She says that there are enough buildings built already, so why do we need to build more? What we should be

doing is making prosthetics for the existing buildings and getting more out of them. So her idea is that she would respond to any site and she took this site, the kind of back of house, the kind of nooks and crannies at the back of the Central School of Speech & Drama, and enclosed and enveloped that space with the skin and then started using the interior of the building as sort of back of house. So someone's office might suddenly become a changing room, or performance space. What currently is an outside courtyard space suddenly starts to be inverted. Katrina used a really nice set of drawings to explore that through line and through tone, leading to the radical idea that you can build a theatre out of very little, you can just start to augment and alter the building stock that we already have.

**8.** Andrew Yorke again took one of the sites here in Swiss Cottage and got into a very strong architectural conversation about pre-fabrication. His proposition is a very structured resolution responding to a very specific site formula condition and building a very, very effective and robust architectural solution which would be temporarily installed.

So that was all done in the year '07/08. Then those students went into their fifth year. Ric made his proposition for his final year to build his own space, his own pavilion, in consultation with Paul Bavister, It's the first time that I've ever seen a Bartlett student build a building and submit it for their final exams; quite a radical step. It's all prefabricated.



The project's about sound. It's called 'Hear Here' – as in I'm hearing where I am – and it takes on the idea that particularly in architect schools (perhaps particularly at the Bartlett) the visual dominates how we design and perhaps we don't spend enough time concentrating on the other senses. And if there's any programme that ought to do all the senses it's theatre. His project starts by creating an acoustic environment, in a sense like a hearing aid for the city, which you could walk into and pick up a very complex acoustic map generated by ambient sounds. It responds to a raft of projects based around sonic geographies and acoustic ecologies. It's an extraordinary individual endeavour and that is again part of this conversation with Central. That raised the bar.

Where we are right now is that we've formed an agreement with Central to start a project with Matt now as the primary research assistant. Over the next nine or twelve months we'll be working up a feasibility study to build a mobile theatre addressing ideas of sustainability and some of the ideas of these projects.

SS: Thank you very much.

## **Questions from the floor**

SS: I'm going to throw this open to the room to begin with.

Jessica Bowles (Head of CETT): It's a question about the accidental and it's not to Bob because we probably have lots of conversations, but I'm interested in what you [JB] find about the spaces that work, and which spaces you might have found to be accidentally successful, even though a particular space might not have been designed for that specific function. I'm asking partly because the Hampstead Theatre [opposite CSSD] has accidentally become our staff room extension, so it has this fantastic lively atmosphere that wasn't necessarily intended to work in that kind of way.

JB: Well that's completely what we're thinking about at the moment in the context of the extension. That word in itself is interesting because we've for a long time we were calling it the 'Centre', what we were building, and then we got a new artistic director who said, 'No, we mustn't consider it as a new building, it's just an extension of what we already are.' During the day, the theatre itself is mostly empty and all of the spaces around the auditorium are full. We often – I do it, I do it all the time – have to just go and remind ourselves, 'Oh yeah, there's a theatre in there,' because we don't go in it enough. The public spaces are the spaces that are most highly populated and cause us the most grief and anxiety in terms of getting them right and thinking most broadly about what we want the space to do and what we want the space to be. Our studio and rehearsal spaces and our backstage spaces are the spaces that have the highest footfall. We've learnt a lot of lessons. Our 2003 extension, also by Rick Mather, is architecturally fairly beautiful, but is a real problem for us in other ways. It's where our ticket office and welcome is at the moment, but the acoustic is terrible. Our audience are always going, 'Can't hear you,' and the staff are going, 'Can't hear you.' In terms of the functionality of what the space needs to do, we've learnt a lot of lessons of having fairly recently had an extension in the first place. So yes, I

think talking to the users is key in terms of making sure you don't make those types of mistakes.

Nick Moran (senior lecturer in Lighting Design, CSSD): I'm intrigued by how the feedback you've had from the community is going to change the way you think about your project, that older people are thought to be an important part of your work going forward and think of themselves as being important.

JB: Yes, I think we have to ask ourselves some questions about why the community is saying those things, and it's to do with the fact I think that older members of the community have a very long, chequered and emotional connection to our building and feel a sense of ownership of it. I think there's something really fascinating about community and public. When you dig down there's a lot of that feeling around wanting stuff going on for older people, but it's more about them ensuring that they still feel like they belong rather than actually wanting stuff to do. If you ask them what they want to do, those older people, they mostly want to come and see work, and when I say 'work' I mean plays. It's not necessarily about delivering community interventions for them, which is basically some form of performing arts. It's brought in all sorts of different perspectives.

NM: But does it change ideas, for instance, about accessibility?

JB: Well we're committed to making a building accessible whether you're 13 and wheelchair bound or 74 and wheelchair bound.

NM: Accessibility goes far beyond wheelchair use.

JB: Absolutely, absolutely.

PB: Can I just interject as a note? At the Unicorn, we found that accessibility for smaller children and for older people are very, very similar. For example we've got double hand rails so you have different heights on hand rails and different ways for different people to hold them. On another tangent, in terms

of demographics, we found that a lot of primary carers for younger children now are grandparents and therefore get involved in their activities. One of the things we did at the Unicorn was the Grand Day Out where grandparents would come with their kids and spend a morning doing workshop day with them and then see the show in the afternoon. So you do have a much better bond now between and older generation and the younger generation than you've ever had before.

Audience Member: I'm interested to know about both projects and the consultation process, the Lyric and the Unicorn. How were consultation sessions carried out? Were they held mostly in the mornings? In the day time when most families and elderly people will be available and therefore their voice was being heard more than other people's? For the Unicorn, I'm very interested to hear more about this Junior Theatre Consultant scheme, or whatever you called it. How did it work? If their ideas turn out to be absolutely crazy, like the chocolate floor you mentioned, then how do you manipulate their comments?

PB: One of the problems is that it takes five or six years from conception to end result, so the kids that we first talked to who were probably six or seven, by the time the theatre opened were twelve and thirteen. In fact most of them have now come back in the formation of the Youth Theatre Group. Unicorn has a very, very long history, like the Lyric, with involvement with schools – in fact that's our bread and butter, it's everything we do – and a huge education programme that's involved in that as well. So feeding and getting feedback directly from classes, schoolrooms and school children was very easy to do, whether we went out into the classroom and spoke to them or whether we had teachers responding about how they felt, it worked. And of course we had a body of work in terms of shows where we could have responses from children to get an idea of what they like to see and what they like to do.

But the Young Consultants initiative was pretty special because we just went and spoke to the local primary school nearest to where the new theatre was being built and engaged with a particular year to get them on board and get

feedback from them. A bit like the older students at the Bartlett, we didn't give them any preconceptions – half of them had never actually been to a show before. It was more, 'What do you think a theatre is? What do you think happens inside it? And, if you went, what would you want to happen and how would want to engage with it?' Which is why you got things as extreme as 'we want the floors made of chocolate' because they thought in that sort of way. But in the end they actually wanted a good story told well and it came back to that very, very simple structure of a storytelling format where you are there to tell a story and you are there to engage with it.

Audience Member: Can I have a follow up? When you took the group of young consultants to the construction site, did they make any more comments?

PB: Well, like everything else, you can't build a building by committee and there are actual things within a building project that are beyond them. It's not so they can come and say, 'Oh we don't like that, you've got to change that, or we can't get involved.' It was more to give them a sense of ownership and in fact they do feel as though they own it, more than I do even though I've been involved in the project for ten years. They felt it was a theatre that was being built for them and they were very, very proud of the fact that their ideas and some concepts worked very well. They can play and do what they want in it, and they had a freedom to go with it. But, as I said before it wasn't an infantile space, it was a grown up space and therefore it's a blank canvas for them to do what they want in.

Sally Mackay (Deputy Dean of Studies, CSSD): It's a reasonably pragmatic question actually. Do you have, James, a record of them? Because I think it would be very interesting for our students in the Applied Theatre strand of our work to see that direct consultation process and the responses of your youngsters and elders and their feelings about a theatre space that is in the middle of Hammersmith and yet one doesn't think of as a community owned theatre.

I'm also interested in the elders' response particularly and, as Nick sort of raised, to what extent you're saying they're talking about the plays that they come and see. But is there something about the theatre extended into the theatre building as a space of safety, and space that has a set of values about it, that signify safety or familiarity?

JB: Definitely we recorded the whole of the consultation process and we entered the consultation process, if I'm being really honest, with the ideas of people who had just got to the point where we needed to do a consultation. We started the process, appointed our own consultants to help us, and then discovered this wealth of incoming communication from the community which, to be honest, knocked us off our feet. Now, with colleagues, I'm in the midst of a five year Heritage Lottery Fund application to capture the history of the Lyric both aurally and in terms of our archives, and do some work around that notion of connection. Community connection to theatre buildings – what is that? We also need to do some really important work like restoring the Frank Matcham auditorium – the Heritage Lottery Fund could pay for that. But more broadly, how do we record it? How do we own it? How do we share that sense of connection that the community feels towards our organisation? How do we acknowledge it both publicly and privately? We are thinking about all of those things at the moment, because we've got a commitment to do that whilst we double the size, double the footprint of the organisation.

PB: Can I just add an aside? A thought came up. Especially working with young people and children, if you create a safe environment that they feel comfortable with in terms of the building and auditorium, you can do quite dangerous work, you can actually tackle some very difficult subjects. If you create a place that feels alien, you can't do difficult work, you'll scare them and you'll introduce fear. So some of the topics that we could do and some of the really challenging work that we've done, we could do because we had a very safe environment that they then felt ownership to.

Audience Member: My question, I suppose, is probably primarily to Bob, but there's probably other people in the room who might want to come in on it.

You talked about the huge number of overlaps between theatre and architecture. I think this is something that's gaining a lot currency now, but it's not the conventional viewpoint that those two things are as similar as you suggested. I wondered whether you could expand on that and perhaps talk a little bit more about the idea of architectural performativity that you touched on in connection to one of the students' projects, where you said the skin of the theatre was created as a kind of live space with the architecture part of the performance event.

BS: It's a great one and both Paul and Matt would know that there's a very big conversation, certainly between the people that we know very well at the Bartlett, about architecture and performance, right back to the notion that to build is a performance. I think from the very first levels of the human act of developing enclosures, envelopes to live and work and perform and do whatever in, that in itself is a form of performance. So, there are conversations that get deadened in the world of putting buildings together that are sort of central to what it is.

One of the things that makes us unique is that we're not a practice in the real world and in a way this project is a great opportunity for us to say things which are difficult for practitioners to say – their insurance companies won't let them say it or they won't let them do it. So there's a huge level of making the conversations and consultations really fascinating because yes, it's a great thing that you've been open to the response, that's a really terrific thing, but there's also Petrus' point about design by consolation being a difficult concept because a playwright consults with potential audience when they're setting out and designing their project so it's important that the project has an idea.

Performance in relation to architecture is a huge idea. The building doesn't sit alone, the idea doesn't reside in the object, the idea of the building resides in the space, it resides in its occupation, it resides in its lifetime. There's a big conversation in architecture about designing for time. Architects are such a diverse profession, there are positions to take in it that are specialised as kind of polemic and they push the agendas and one of the things that needs to be

addressed is the idea of designing for change, buildings that design and cope with change.

I'm sure many people in the room know about that great example of the building in Brick Lane that started out as a Methodist church, then became a synagogue and now a mosque – it's been all sorts of different things and that happens to so much of building stock, the idea of re-use. So designing for change is a technical and practical thing but there is a kind of an underlying conceptual idea that relates to theatre that I was hinting at right at the beginning that is – what is reality? I suppose, that's what it stems from – how do we perceive space? How perception is constructed is an incredibly important starting point in designing buildings and I would have thought it's a big starting point in designing performance too, in how we perceive the performance, how we perceive space, so there's huge overlap there in the way in which the eye and the brain work.

In terms of the technology of buildings well, again, you can go from the practical through to the visionary in terms of technologies that can respond to behaviour, and then start to read behaviour and predict behaviour, stimulate behaviour, provoke behaviour... We've done a number of projects, and some people in the room have done them too, where there's this idea that architecture is interactive and is also active in its own terms. But of course somebody wrote the programme to make it programmable, so the human dimension is built into the script, but there's a tremendous scope, both technically and also conceptually, for us to relax a little bit at what we think about space in terms of shoe horning function into it and thinking much more about architecture being a set of tools to adapt to change in circumstances. You know theatre is a fantastic building type to explore that idea.

It's a great question; you could set a whole independent conference around it.

SS: Do either of you two want to come in on that before we leave it?

PB: Well the only thing I'd say is that there's been a big move towards theatre done in found spaces, and that's been going on for years. It's amazing that 'found' spaces from 10, 15 years ago – places like the Donmar and the Almeida – have now become very staid normal ones. It's very cyclical. We've now got Shunt doing pieces of work and adapting to the space around it. I like the concept that you actually make the building part of the show and actually the idea of these small projects is very, very exciting because you could then actually design the show to fit the space. But if you're building a theatre that's going to be capable of putting on a number of different types of show then it's very hard to build an organic space. Instead you have to find a common denominator in order to satisfy all the different types of art that go in, so it's pushing in different directions.

SS: Last question.

Audience Member: My question is to James Blackman. Is your funding for the Lyric conditional on BRE [Building Research Establishment] excellence or anything like that? And, if so, do you have any plans in place to deal with that? It's a condition a lot of public buildings are having nowadays – if they're getting government funding or local funding the they have to achieve a certain level of sustainability and it's quite difficult in your site, especially where it's a very noisy inner city site where you can't have natural ventilation, where you can't do many things that you normally would do.

JB: There's not only a massive design challenge with our site, but a massive construction challenge because we're not building from ground level. The majority of the building will be built with public funds and as a result of that we have a huge number of challenges and hurdles to overcome with our architect. We want to create an excellent building for the building users, but we're struggling at the moment with just finding the right links from our existing building into the new building, so we're taking each hurdle one at a time. Just on Monday we were having a crisis sort of back-to-the-drawing-board meeting because the link through from the existing building to the new building just didn't feel right, it just didn't feel accessible enough, it didn't feel

like it was joining the two buildings together significantly, it felt like a difficult journey through into the new building. We're also encountering at the moment the fact that our current building does not hold heat well at all, it's not sustainable, it's appalling. There are elements of the design of the 1970s building which are just an absolute nightmare and what we're grappling with at the moment is, we've got to allow a percentage of the cost of the new build to make the old building more sustainable. We're actually now feeling like we're on the verge of probably a £30 million project of which our £15 million extension is Stage One of what needs to be a much bigger plan because for someone who imagines themselves at the Lyric for a number of years, I don't want to be the guy that's in five years time saying to someone, we need to mend the roof, because they'll say, 'We've just given you £15 million, go away!' So I'd much rather now start framing it in terms of a much bigger project, than doing that bit and then having to solve the next bit. But you know, it's hugely challenging.

SS: We ought to bring things to a close. I think fascinating juxtaposition one with another, sometimes pulling against one another in quite provocative ways. I'd like to thank Petrus, James and Bob again on your behalf.

Further information:

[www.lyric.co.uk](http://www.lyric.co.uk)

[www.theatreprojects.com](http://www.theatreprojects.com)

[www.unicorntheatre.com](http://www.unicorntheatre.com)

[www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk](http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk)

<http://unittwentythree.blogspot.com/>

[www.sixteenmakers.com](http://www.sixteenmakers.com)

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