

Theatres for Drama Performance: Recent Experiences in Acoustical Design

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Introduction

In any synergy the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. No place is this more true than with theatre productions, theatre design and, as is our hope, this publication. Considering the number of contributors, many representing design teams, this book is a collaborative effort indeed.

This book grew from a special poster session organized by the Technical Committee on Architectural Acoustics of the Acoustical Society of America. In spring of 1985, acoustical consultants from North America, Japan and Europe met in Austin, Texas, to present their recent theatre design. These posters have been supplemented by additional contributions submitted during the past year. The range of scale is broad--from modest educational and community spaces to grand theatres in major performing arts centers. The scope of use is equally large--from dance and mime to Shakespeare and Noh.

While many halls dedicated to a single use have been constructed, economics and the needs of users have placed additional demands on the design of most of our theatres. Once an assembly space exists, owners and users often test its capacity to host music, musicals, comedy, magic, dance, assembly meetings, television and audio/visual presentations and numerous other events. Of course, some of these activities can be accommodated easily in a theatre environment, however, acoustical and physical criteria for many performance types do differ from the requirements of legitimate theatre. The success of a multi-purpose theatre relates directly to the vision and accuracy of the written building program, the arrangement of priorities and, of course, the quality of the design. The contributors have elaborated on special uses indicating what flexibility has been provided.

While the whole is greater than the sum of its parts so, too, the whole is different from each of its parts. While good hearing conditions are a prime concern in a theatre, achieving acoustical quality should not and need not, be at the expense of proper sight lines, good theatrical lighting, quality architecture, ease of movement and the functional aspects of the theatre. Conflicts arise, and these are best solved when representatives of these major concerns have the opportunity to offer input. Enter, the designers. Enter, the owners. Enter, the users. The "team" generally goes beyond the list of credits.

To place the consultants' work in the proper perspective, and to articulate the many special interests that a theatre must satisfy, we invited essays from persons involved in the design use and management of theatres. Candid discussion was encouraged. Of course, theatres and acoustics were the underlying themes; but those invited were free to expand on working relationships, economic realities, and the use of theatres.

Since theatre design is an event (much as theatre itself is an event), we have asked architects to discuss the relationships between simple shelter and quality architecture. Paul Saporito, Architect and Educator, offers a historical background, giving instances where form prevailed, function was misguided or the two were properly married. Brian Hall, Architect, questions priorities and suggests that perceptions can play an important role in perceived "quality" of acoustics. Costs, often the "tail which wags the dog," are discussed by Steward Donnell, Cost Management Consultant, who offers a process for bringing the project in on budget.

Theatre consultants and acoustics consultants in unison most often are the primary forces guiding the design. S. Leonard Auerbach and Robert Wolff, Theatre Consultants, discuss priorities in the design process and differing types of working relationships. Having witnessed and guided the building process on numerous occasions, Dixon Bond, Facilities Manager, offers a personal viewpoint of his experiences. A glimpse of the present and future audio needs is presented by Richard Thomas, Educator and Sound Designer.

The book concludes with a bibliography which offers a list of further reading to those wishing to pursue individual topics in depth. Also listed in the bibliography are two recent publications by the Acoustical Society of America--Halls for Music Performance: Two Decades of Experience: 1962--1982, Talaske, Wetherill, Cavanaugh and Acoustics of Worship Spaces, Lubman, Wetherill.

Clearly, volumes are needed to express fully all of the practical, artistic, scientific, financial and political sides of theatre design. And, as time moves on, things change and the story must be told again. Perhaps, though, this book will raise as many questions as it answers, urge readers to consider alternative viewpoints and, ultimately, instill even greater quality into our theatres.

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