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***The House is Now Open: Re-imagining theatres for the 21st century***

**Author:** Jonathan Lloyd

**Supervisor/s:** Stephen Gage,  
UCL, Bartlett School of Architecture

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***The House Is Now Open:***  
**Re-imagining theatres for the**  
**21<sup>st</sup> century**

A research paper for the Clore Leadership  
Programme

By Jonathan Lloyd

Supervised by Professor Stephen Gage, Bartlett School of Architecture,  
University College London.

## 1. Dead spaces

Theatres, on the whole, aren't used enough.

They are places for watching plays in, and little more. Yes, you can enjoy a glass of wine in the interval, a coffee or an ice-cream. You can book tickets, use the toilet, buy a programme. But what else is there to do?

Some theatres don't open until shortly before a performance, and close soon after the show's over. Others may open in the daytime but not much happens, apart from the odd flurry of activity at the box-office or café. Some tickets may be sold, sandwiches eaten, but the building as a whole rarely comes to life. It's open to the public but the public keeps its distance, wary and unsure.

So what? Why should theatres be used more? They have always been just places for watching plays in, so why change now?

The past few years have seen a wider debate about cultural value, and the difficulties of defining, measuring or capturing it. Many organisations have commissioned impact studies, market research, extensive audience surveys, in order to help them make the case for increased funding. But all too often, this case is made solely to funders. The public – the source of legitimacy for any public funding - is left out.

*'The value of culture cannot be expressed only with statistics'*. (Demos Report: 'Capturing Cultural Value', 2004)<sup>1</sup>

In June 2003, Demos organised a conference called 'Valuing Culture', sparking a debate about the use of solely instrumental arguments to justify public funding. In June 2004 Tessa Jowell published a personal essay in which she asked: 'How, in going beyond targets, can we best capture the value of culture?'<sup>2</sup> Last year, two publications: *Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy* by John Holden<sup>3</sup>, and Policy Exchange's *Culture Vultures: Is UK Arts Policy Damaging the Arts?*<sup>4</sup> both challenged the over-reliance on instrumental values and questioned the usefulness and reliability of such

evidence gathering. At the launch of Holden's book, the then Culture Minister David Lammy gave a speech arguing that cultural organisations needed to shift their focus: '...the defining value of cultural democracy is the quality of the relationship between cultural professionals and the public.'<sup>5</sup>

In short, the problem is this: since the 1990s, in order to make the case for funding, cultural organisations have increasingly had to justify their work in terms of its ancillary benefits, i.e. its economic and social impacts, rather than its *intrinsic* value, namely the potential of the work to affect people. Hence the many reports on the impact of culture in areas such as urban regeneration, social exclusion, health and education. The dangers of this approach are:

- Difficult to establish a causal link between culture & the beneficial social/economic outcome
- No long-term evidence to back up claims
- Evidence and advocacy get confused (so 'evidence' is often selective)
- Virtually impossible to prove that culture is the most direct, cost-effective way of achieving that outcome
- The public doesn't care about such arguments anyway

The difficulty is that the language used around intrinsic value is often vague and reliant on scanty anecdotal evidence. The challenge is to find ways to express the value of things that are impossible to measure. By intrinsic, I don't mean art for art's sake, that a work has an objective value in and of itself. Rather, it's about the encounter *between* the public and the work. How does it move us, what does it mean to encounter this work? Audience surveys can be useful here, but they need to be extensive and detailed to gain an insight into a) who your audience is and b) what they think of you, and a range of your work.

Peter Hewitt, Chief Executive of the Arts Council, England, said in a speech in 2006 that he prefers the term 'personal' value to intrinsic, and that personal value should lie at the heart of any attempt to evaluate what the arts do:

*'If it is essentially personal, we need to talk more about personalisation and bring it back to people. Many artists and arts organisations already recognise this and engaging with their audiences on this level is central to what so many have done and to what they continue to do.'*<sup>6</sup>

An often neglected area is how to create a strong sense of *institutional* value. What does your theatre stand for? Why should people care about it? How, in practical terms, can you 'bring it back to people'?

As a theatre, your most valuable asset in making that case, I would argue, is your building.

I run a building. As Artistic Director at Polka Theatre, a children's theatre in Wimbledon, I run a building that is more than just a place where plays are staged. The site includes a café, a garden, a playground, exhibition spaces, a reading corner and an education annexe, as well as two performance spaces. It's a child-centred, family-friendly venue that is also alive outside of performance times. Our audiences like to arrive early or linger after the show, or sometimes just visit without seeing a performance.

I want the building to develop even further along these lines. There are certain aspects of it that need updating and serious technical and artistic restrictions that need to be addressed, and so we are planning a major refurbishment. But at Polka we have a vision of a theatre that is interactive and welcoming, that encourages children and their families to play in surprising, imaginative and unexpected ways, and I want to ensure our refurbishment creates a building in which this vision can flourish.

To help shape this vision, I sent members of staff out to various family-friendly venues across the UK. Places they visited included museums, galleries, cafes, story-telling centres, libraries and city farms. The reason for this was simple: we felt there were very few, if any, theatres that provided the kind of inspiration we were looking for.

This worries me. At a recent conference at the Young Vic, organised by the Theatres Trust: *Performing Theatres?* David Rosenberg from Shunt (the site-specific theatre collective) commented on how museums have had to re-think how their exhibition spaces engaged the public, and questioned why

theatres had not done the same. He argued that a theatre needed to do for theatre what Tate Modern had done for contemporary art.

That's the heart of my argument. Just as museums, libraries and galleries have been doing over the past decade, I believe we need to re-imagine what a theatre is for, and how a theatre building can play an integral part in the life of its community by engaging the public more deeply, in a wider range of ways. If we don't, then theatres will seem increasingly detached and irrelevant to contemporary audiences.

*"If you set up the conditions whereby the building will generate its own vitality, that's the ultimate interior decoration..."<sup>7</sup>*

This challenge is partly an architectural one. How does the building itself create the right conditions? What sort of things can a building do to encourage and welcome a deeper sense of public engagement?

But it is also a challenge for those running the buildings. Bricks and mortar, steel and glass don't make a building come to life. People do. The work that happens in it, what the public are encouraged or enabled to do there, matters just as much. And *that's* what needs re-thinking. What role can a theatre play in the life of its community? What is it for and how else can people use it?

What's needed is a leap of imagination.

## 2. Stuck in a bubble?

Why have a special building for theatre anyway? Throughout its history, theatre has taken place in dedicated performance spaces but also in more communal sites such as market squares, streets or the courtyards of inns. Medieval English theatre began life in the church, but later moved outside, spilling out into the market square, parading through a town, performers and audiences mingling:

*...each scene in the production was mounted on a two-storey 'pageant' or cart, like those used in royal processions and triumphal entries, and a succession of such carts then paraded round the town. The actors repeated the play at each stopping-place in front of a group of spectators who remained where they were to await the next pageant. When plays were no longer acted in churches they were taken over by the secular authorities, and by the trade guilds...<sup>8</sup>*

In Renaissance Italy, celebrated buildings such as the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza (1580-84) were the flowering of an academic tradition; the Olympic Academy of Vicenza built it, inspired by the idea (based on scanty evidence) of what the classical Roman theatre was like.<sup>9</sup> But during the same period, troupes of performers from the Commedia dell'Arte flourished, setting up platform stages and performing outdoors in towns and villages. In 17<sup>th</sup> century France, companies had to be flexible: performing at court for the King, travelling round market towns or setting up residencies in theatres in Paris.

And today, as well as our many, many theatre buildings, there have been performances such as Royal de Luxe's *The Sultan's Elephant* taking over the streets of central London in May 2006, or a whole summer of free 'Watch This Space' shows in the piazza outside the National Theatre, or the BBC's version of *The Passion*, performed and broadcast live from the streets of Manchester, Easter 2006.

There has always been a creative tension between a messy, unpredictable theatre that insists itself into people's lives and a more controlled, focused theatre in its own special space. The appeal of a dedicated space is obvious. You can control the environment more readily, and focus the audience's attention on the performance. That is why they are there, after all. You go to a swimming baths to swim, dive or paddle. Likewise, you traditionally go to the theatre to see a play, and everything in that building should heighten your experience of that play.

But with the control comes a certain isolation. You can focus too much on creating the ideal conditions for a performance and neglect the outside world and your theatre's connection to it. If you're not careful, you can cut yourself off.

In the 1960s, theatre director Joan Littlewood and architect Cedric Price drew up plans for a very different kind of building. The 'Fun Palace' was intended to be a 'laboratory of fun' in east London, where local people could watch or take part in a wide range of activities such as drama, dance, art, debate, firework displays or scientific experiments. The building would be made up of what Cedric Price described as a 'kit of parts': walls, platforms, stairs and ceilings that could be moved about, creating a flexible structure that could frequently be re-configured to suit its uses.<sup>10</sup>

Joan Littlewood wrote an article for the 'New Scientist' in May 1964, in which she imagined it in the following terms:

*In London we are going to create a university of the streets – not a gracious park but a foretaste of the pleasures of the future... Knowledge will be piped through jukeboxes. In the music area – by day, instruments available, free instruction, recordings for everyone... - by night jam sessions and festivals, poetry and dance. In the science playground – lecture demonstrations, supported by teaching films, closed-circuit television and working models... An acting area will afford the therapy of theatre for everyone – men and women from factories, shops and offices, bored with their daily routine, will be able to re-enact incidents from their own experience... act out their subconscious fears and taboos... A plastic area will be a place for dabbling in*

*paint, clay, wood, metal, stone or textiles... But the essence of the place will be informality – nothing obligatory – anything goes...<sup>11</sup>*

Hugely ambitious, perhaps utopian, the 'Fun Palace' was never built. Complex planning and financial challenges proved insurmountable, though Price's plans have been influential, inspiring for example Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano's early 1970s building, Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

But there's something in the vision of the 'Fun Palace' that's valuable, I think: a desire for the building to be really *used* by the public, for entertainment and education, for recreation and debate. Rooted in a community, genuinely open to the public, in ways that might have been hard to predict or control, it would have been at the very least a place to play.

From the introduction to the book *Community Theatres* by Percy Corry:

*The term "Community Theatre is not yet self-explanatory in Britain. The name is used here to describe a theatre-type of building provided by the community for use by all sections of the community both as audiences and as performers. The Community Theatre must serve not only as a playhouse but for a number of very varied activities and, because there is an obvious need, many such theatres will be built.*

That was in 1974, and although a handful of such theatres were built, most regional reps tended to follow a different path, focusing on the public purely in terms as an audience. But this focus on play-going tended to ignore the wider role of the theatre's role in its local community. The growth of theatre in education in the 60s also helped to create a divide between community 'outreach' and that community's connection to the theatre building itself, a divide that still exists in many theatres today. It is all too easy to delegate the responsibility for connecting with the public to the education department, as if a theatre's artistic programme or its building exists in splendid isolation from the same people you are trying to reach.

But maybe, like the Fun Palace, this vision of a truly public, open theatre is utopian, a nice idea but impractical and naïve. After all, a building in itself is unlikely to create a sense of community amongst an audience of disparate individuals. How public can any theatre truly be? Who owns it, controls what goes on there, who can and can't use the spaces?

It could be argued too that the very idea of 'open-ness' works against an important aspect of theatre: mystery and surprise. A theatre visit is special because it *isn't* part of everyday life. It is a heightened experience, a ritual or celebration that imprints itself on the memory precisely because it is set apart. Make it as ordinary or accessible as a library, say, or the supermarket and you spoil the magic, you shine a light where shadows should be.

I believe you can do both. Theatres today need to be welcoming, open spaces, easy for their local audiences to visit and connect to, but they should also hold something back. There should be hidden places within them, where things can later be revealed, or which allow a more personal space for play or reflection. This is a crucial combination, one which any space used by the public needs to negotiate – that between privacy and commonality. Richard Sennett, in *The Fall of Public Man* writes how the private and the communal can paradoxically work well together:

*...only through the first-hand experience that privacy gives, can health and sanity be brought back to the world of mass culture.<sup>12</sup>*

Striking the right balance won't be easy, but there are encouraging signs of change, of theatres beginning to open up and engage their audiences through the use of their buildings.

At the 'Performing Theatres?' conference on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2007, there was debate and dialogue about who theatres are primarily for. Jonathan Church, Artistic Director at Chichester Festival Theatres, argued strongly for a need for buildings to support artistic excellence. He felt that the new theatres of the 1960s and 70s were built for artists to make work in. However, in later years as those companies grew, both in turnover and staffing, the infrastructure of their buildings was run down – converting rehearsal rooms to offices or selling

off workshops to finance a deficit. Customer care had become too dominant, he argued, and increasing attention on the audience experience at the expense of artistic facilities was damaging the quality of the work.

Kully Thiarai, theatre director and one of the speakers, wrote in an accompanying article about the need for theatres truly to connect with their communities:

*In my view, our theatre buildings are failing not simply because of their design inadequacies, but because many of our theatre organisations only look inwards and fail to grasp that theatre is an evolving organism that requires us all to remain alert and push the boundaries of our craft and pursue new ways of working and engaging. Despite the learnt rhetoric of ‘theatre for all’ or ‘access’ or ‘community engagement’, some of our theatres feel to me like mausoleums, where only the knowing or brave can enter.<sup>13</sup>*

Judith Isherwood, Chief Executive of the recently opened Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff talked of the difference between audiences and visitors. She saw her venue as a place that people wanted to visit in its own right, but also acknowledged that attracting visitors is one thing, engaging them something else. She highlighted the free concerts, education events and interactive exhibitions that take place in the venue, and its spacious, open concourses. She admitted the importance of such ‘open-ness’ in terms of additional income it generated, but argued that it also gave people a sense of ownership, creating a building with a buzz that she felt was identifiably Welsh.

Ian Brown, Artistic Director of West Yorkshire Playhouse – a regional theatre with a good track record of opening up its building – talked in his summing up of how important it was for a theatre to be alive in the daytime as well as in the evening. A successful regional theatre, he argued, is rooted in its community.

There are other signs of change, in certain new or refurbished arts buildings across the UK. The re-opening of the Royal Festival Hall this year and the launch of a new programme for the South Bank Centre was significant and exciting.

The newly refurbished SBC complex contains cafes, bars, restaurants and shops; spacious, well-lit foyer spaces in which regular free exhibitions and concerts are held; bustling terraces that overlook the Thames. The whole site is Wi-Fi enabled too, so people can access the internet for free. A programme of free foyer events and site-specific exhibitions has brought these public spaces, both indoors and outdoors, to life over the summer and prior to re-opening. The interactive installation *PLAY.orchestra*, for example, created on one of the terraces a stage area and on it a group of flat seats, each representing an instrument in a classical orchestra. When someone sat on a seat, it triggered that instrument's part in a set score. The more people sitting on seats, the more the piece of music was revealed. Linked to his exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, artist Antony Gormley created a work called *Event Horizon*, which consisted of 31 casts of his body, placed at various sites around the South Bank. I've seen people nearly walk into one on Waterloo Bridge, or look up from their lunch at a figure gazing out from the roof of the National Theatre.

At the press launch on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2007, Jude Kelly talked of the SBC's roots in the Festival of Britain in 1951 and spoke of its current commitment to 'a permanent sense of festival...'.<sup>14</sup> As part of a public consultation exercise, the SBC drew up a series of key requirements for their refurbishment, one of which was:

*A complete experience that creates a desire to visit beyond attending a performance, exhibition or particular venue.*<sup>15</sup>

This has been a fundamental aspect of the mission of the Royal Festival Hall since 1983, when as part of the Greater London Council's radical open foyer programme it opened up its foyer spaces during the day, all day, seven days a week, with free exhibitions, lunchtime concerts, evening jazz performances, shops, bars and buffets. Before then, the upper levels of the hall had remained closed until a few hours before a performance.

The spirit of the 'open foyer' is also something that struck me, albeit on a smaller scale, when I visited the North Edinburgh Arts Centre in May this year. Opened in 2002, it is a multi-arts venue located in Muirhouse, a

disadvantaged estate in Edinburgh. To get to the entrance, you walk through the Muirhouse shopping centre, a small, run-down parade of shops, some of which are boarded-up. Next door to a library, it houses a 150-seat theatre, two studio spaces, a recording studio, gallery, café and garden with a play-structure, and is open all day. It states that its mission is: 'to actively work to democratise culture and cultural experiences for the widest possible public...'16 North Edinburgh Arts Centre currently employs two artists-in-residence. One of them, Andy Manley, creates theatre for and with an Early Years audience, working with local children and their families. The other, Rosie Gibson, has converted her studio into a children's art studio, where art summer schools and puppet-making workshops take place; but it is also open and available to anyone who wants to drop in with their children and use the facilities. This simple opening-out of professional practice, alongside an inexpensive and friendly café, and a location close to shops and a library, have helped make the Arts Centre part of the day-to-day life of the local community.

Two new buildings under construction suggest other strategies for attempting to create stronger links between a theatre and the community it serves. Due to open in September 2007, the Bernie Grant Arts Centre in Tottenham, designed by architect David Adjaye, is a building dedicated to both the showing and making of new work, and to an extensive programme of training and development in the arts and design. It plans to offer courses in acting, arts producing, digital media, the technical side of theatre, as well as residencies and commissions for emerging artists, and workshop and office space for new and emerging companies. This promises to help create a busy, purposeful building, linking training opportunities to chances to see high-quality work. Again, its location, next to the town hall, a college and leisure centre should prove useful in attracting local people through its doors.

Leicester's Performing Arts Centre, due to open in Autumn 2008, is seen by the City Council as crucial to a major regeneration project, creating a Cultural Quarter in the run-down St George's South district of the city centre. It is too early to know the details of the artistic plans, but a striking aspect of this project is the building's 'inside-out' design by architect Rafael Vinoly. A curved, transparent, fully-glazed facade, which lights up at night, allows the

public to see what's inside. A five-storey open foyer space, including cafes and bars, allows views into the workshops, backstage areas and offices – spaces traditionally thought of as behind-the-scenes. The main stage can also be revealed so it can be viewed from the foyer and the street outside.

What's perhaps striking about the above examples is that they all define themselves as arts centres, rather than theatres. In the case of Leicester, the new name of the venue is still to be confirmed, but the fact that its working title (when the company at its heart was previously based in the Haymarket Theatre) is the Leicester Performing Arts Centre reveals a shift in attitude and emphasis. Is the word 'theatre' seen as too exclusive, too narrow? The arts centres described above certainly take an approach that is more eclectic, open and embracing of a wider range of activity than theatres traditionally have accommodated.

In a recent article in *The Guardian*, theatre critic Michael Billington bemoaned what he saw as a crisis in West End theatre. Although most of his concerns were with the work, he also wrote about the theatres themselves:

*What the West End needs is a radical makeover, even a minor revolution, in the interests of both quality and variety. I'd like to see Sunday openings, lottery money for the rotting fabric, more imaginative use of the buildings themselves: in particular, pre-show talks, jazz and poetry recitals, stand-up comics in the dead hours before the 7.30pm opening.<sup>17</sup>*

If most theatres in the UK are still stuck in a bubble, this needn't always be the case. It is possible, simple even, to shift their identity, while still retaining the essence of their buildings – their theatricality. In the fourth chapter, I will outline ways in which I believe this is possible. Before I do so, I would like to examine some cultural buildings that aren't theatres, to see if there are ideas and approaches that might be of help in re-imagining what a theatre is for and how it might be used.

### 3. A community resource

UK libraries are re-thinking their role and purpose. In a recent paper for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, John Dolan outlines three key roles for the public library, the first of which is:

*Community Place: a place for the whole community to come together as individuals, in families and as a community to read, learn and discover – providing books, newspapers, magazines, information and study resources, learning and communications technologies with help from trained staff, a place to meet, learn and discover.*<sup>18</sup>

This desire for libraries to go beyond their traditional role, is made apparent in the new IDEA stores in Whitechapel, Canary Wharf or Bow, or the new Jubilee Library in Brighton. For example, in Brighton, three art installations were commissioned for the new building under the city council's Per Cent for Art Scheme. One of these, 'Wall of a Thousand Stories' by Kate Malone is in the Children's Library. It displays hundreds of bright, colourful objects – such as a jellyfish, a teapot, a piece of fruit, a snail or a ladder - which span the entire width of the sea-blue wall. At storytelling events, children can choose objects from the wall, and use them as the basis for a story. Other things you can do at the Jubilee Library, apart from read or borrow books, include:

- Use a computer in the IT suite, or book an internet tutorial
- Enter a Playstation tournament
- Join a reading group
- Attend a Pensions Surgery every Tuesday
- Get Careers Advice
- Take your child to a story session or a baby boogie dance session
- Read a newspaper or magazine
- Borrow a DVD or CD

There are two approaches here that I think are worth noting. The first is a willingness to stretch the traditional identity of a library, by bringing under one roof a range of local information and services usually found elsewhere. Secondly, although the building itself is airy, welcoming and a shared space, it also provides more personal, private areas, and caters for a variety of individual needs. This personalisation is something that theatres, more used to shepherding groups of people to and from an auditorium, are less adept at.

In his 1998 report for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, *Centres for Curiosity and Imagination*, John Pearce explored the need for a children's museum in the UK, and how such a museum might also provide the kind of services that children's museums in Europe and the US frequently offer. He argued that such an organisation could bring together a range of activities and services such as those offered by a playgroup, after-school club, nursery school or adventure playground and weave them into the tradition of a museum or gallery.

The storytelling centre Discover, in Stratford in East London, was inspired by this report. Opened in 2003, it is a creative learning space designed for children and their carers to make stories together. It is hard to categorise – it's not strictly a museum or gallery, though there are plenty of playful, interactive exhibits. It's not a theatre, though it's certainly theatrical. In thinking about my own theatre, Polka, my visits to Discover were inspiring, particularly in imagining what else our building could offer.

The focus of Discover is stories. It is a space for learning, fun, play and creativity. Outside is the Story Garden, which is free, and includes sturdy things to climb, swing or slide on such as a spaceship, a boat, a monster, car or house. Inside, the Story Trail (which you have to pay to enter) includes the Lollipopter – a machine in which children can fly, sail or drive to imaginary places; a Secret Cave – both a den you can hide in and a hill you can climb up; a dressing-up box; a puppet theatre, for which you can make your own spoon puppets; Polka Dot Sounds – an interactive installation, in which breaking a coloured beam of light triggers a note or noise; and a Sparkly River which tinkles as you step over it. All along the trail are Story Cones, which children can speak into and record their own stories, and hear what others

have recorded. It is a hands-on space but everything is robust and for the most part low-tech, and looked after by staff who gently encourage children to play with each part of the Trail. This summer a new studio in its basement has opened, which will host temporary exhibitions and installations. The first is about the sights, smells and stories of the Caribbean.

There are challenges and drawbacks too. The entrance is hard to find (no access is allowed from Stratford High Street, which would greatly improve visibility and local presence), the café is small and perfunctory, and the fact that entrance isn't free can deter some local families. But the playful exhibits and the vision of Discover as a creative learning space made me think how a theatre building could be a busier, more hands-on, engaging space while still being true to its identity as a theatre.

What, after all, makes something theatrical? An interest in stories, in the power of the imagination, and above all in the value of play, I would argue. By questioning what's at the heart of your theatre's mission, it is possible to think more creatively about what else could happen in the building - activities which could support and strengthen, rather than dilute, that mission.

Finally, I would like to highlight two collaborations between an arts organisation and a library service – the first in the UK, the other in the US.

The Sage Gateshead, the music venue which opened in 2004, states that learning and participation are at the core of what they do, the world-class performance strand of their work connecting with and supporting their extensive programme of participation. In the concourse at the Sage is a library and information service, ExploreMusic, provided by Gateshead Council Libraries. This offers a lending and reference service of a wide range of music books and publications; local independent music information for the north of England, including details of concerts, gigs, tutors, folk clubs, instrument repairers, amateur orchestras and more; 18 computers with free internet access, plus training on how to use music software; CD listening posts to preview upcoming artists at the Sage. What's crucial is that ExploreMusic fits the mission and identity of the Sage. The library service offers the Sage's visitors an opportunity to engage more deeply with the music performed there,

but provides an additional reason to visit in the first place, extending the possibilities of what a music venue can be.

Taking the collaborative approach a stage further, in Charlotte, North Carolina, a unique partnership between a children's theatre and a library brought to life a new kind of venue in 2005: *ImaginOn*.

***ImaginOn: The Joe & Joan Martin Center***, began in 1997 when two colleagues had an idea. Bob Cannon, the former Executive Director of the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County (PLCMC), and Bruce LaRowe, Executive Director of Children's Theatre of Charlotte (CTC) each led organizations with great programs for young people...and both were running out of space. Bob and Bruce thought it would make sense to consider creating a new, shared facility, to meet the growing needs of both organizations. But not just a combination library/theatre – they imagined a new type of facility, and an original approach to education, learning and the arts. The more they thought about the possibilities, the more they realized PLCMC & CTC shared much more than a need for more space – they also shared a powerful mission: *bringing stories to life*.<sup>19</sup>

The range of activity provided on the same shared site is impressive: year-round children's theatre productions, theatre classes and workshops, a dedicated loft space for teenagers, with books, laptops, magazines and comics, scavenger hunts and games tournaments; a children's library with listening stations; a section for parents and carers; a multi-media production studio; interactive exhibits revealing behind the scenes of an in-house show; and a huge StoryJar and StoryLab, encouraging children to make their own stories.

These kind of bold cross-sector partnerships suggest ways to re-think what a theatre building is for, if theatres are truly to engage their local communities and be a creative resource for the people they serve.

## 4. A 21<sup>st</sup> century theatre?

What might a thriving 21<sup>st</sup> century theatre – properly used, supported and celebrated by its local community - look like? And what could you do there?

I would like to outline the kind of theatre I have in mind. This theatre would be shaped by two contrasting yet complementary sets of values:

- Welcoming, accessible, convivial
- Mysterious, surprising, a place of wonder

It would be a communal space, where you could feel part of something, but it would offer more personal, secluded spots, nooks and dens. It would feel connected to the outside world, letting in the light, but not completely transparent - there must be shadowy, subdued areas. In spirit, it would be a cross between a pub, a chapel, a library and a playground. A place for debate, entertainment, conversation and reflection; a place for learning and a place for play. It would open from 10am to midnight Monday to Saturday, and 11am to 5pm on Sundays.

In taking a tour of this imaginary theatre, I will focus on how it would be experienced by the public, rather than by professional artists or theatre staff:

### Exterior

The relationship to the street is crucial. It's in a central, busy location in the town, a place where people walk by throughout the day, near shops and good transport links. It doesn't feel set apart from the life of the street and its façade does two things:

- It clearly tells you what it is (ie. a theatre)
- It inspires and reassures you to enter, creating a sense of anticipation that inside is something special, and that it's ok to come in.

### Box-office and entrance foyer

- The first encounter between a visitor and theatre staff feels easy and natural. The staff know what they're talking about, and care about it.
- This threshold space is a point of sale, but also information and orientation. You can find out quickly what's going on today in the building and what's coming up.
- You feel like you've entered somewhere where there is lots to do; this space and its staff guide and encourage you where to go next.
- If it's busy, you can pick up or buy your tickets from a self-collection machine, like in the cinema.

### Main foyer & connecting spaces

The hub of the entire building, the foyer acts like a piazza, a place to linger that also connects you to other parts of the theatre. It is a place to meet, relax, talk or play. In this space or its adjoining areas you can:

- Read or borrow a book, CD or DVD from the theatre library, or find out more information about local events, groups, services. Listen to the radio or to recordings of plays or musicals at digital listening posts.
- Eat or drink in the bar and café areas, where there is plenty of room and an overspill space for when it's especially busy.
- See a rehearsal in progress through the glass wall of an upstairs rehearsal room; or see what's going on behind the scenes in the theatre's office and workshop spaces.
- Watch on monitors what's happening on-stage in the two performance spaces. There is a peep-hole/periscope into the main theatre too.
- Use a computer in the IT corner to access the internet for free (if you have a laptop, there is also free Wi-Fi access) or take part in a computer skills course provided by a local college.

- Sit or relax in the theatre garden, or let your child play in the children's playground or indoor playspace, or dressing-up area, or learn with them how to make a puppet.
- See an exhibition related to the current show in the exhibition area, or see art work created by local families, in collaboration with a professional artist.
- Listen to a free story-telling event, or lunchtime concert.
- Use one of the community rooms for your band or play rehearsal, or a meeting, dance class, or child's birthday party.
- Take part in an afternoon tea-dance in the main foyer itself, with tea and cake. Or join the morning bingo club, or the monthly play-club, where you join theatre staff to discuss a classic play-text.
- N.b. there is no separate 'education space' – rather, there are many spaces that can contain this work, including youth theatre workshops and rehearsals; it is all part of the day-to-day life of the building.

### The auditorium / performance spaces

Focusing on the audience's experience:

- The way-up to the auditorium and the way-out are different routes.
- The way-up builds anticipation. The feel of the handrail on the stairs, what you see on the walls, what you hear, the lighting - all help tell a story, create a mood.
- In the auditorium, the back of every bench-seat has a touch screen with information about the show and its background. This switches off when the show starts, unless you require sub-titles. N.b. backs of the seats are not too high, so you are aware of the audience around you.
- Under every seat is a padded cushion which can fold over if you have a small child with you who needs to sit higher in the seat.
- When you leave, the way-out takes you past the backstage area. You can see the dressing-rooms, green room, the props and costumes waiting to be tidied up.

- Use of the Studio space is divided 50/50 between professional work and shows by local amateur companies, or schools, colleges or drama schools. The main auditorium is used in this way too, for at least one month a year.
- These community shows are supported artistically and technically by in-house staff.

### Other facilities

- In the toilets are murals or cartoons. On the backs of toilet doors or above urinals are short snatches of dialogue from great plays.
- The cloakroom is free and includes a buggy park.
- There is a Quiet Space, where you can read or sit in silence, with free newspapers and magazines to read, and a Book Exchange.
- Children can play in the dens that are scattered around the building.

In conclusion, theatres need to open themselves up, in the fullest sense of the word, to their public. They need to be used and loved by local people in a way that rarely happens in many of today's theatres. Although I am advocating a more eclectic building that embraces other art forms and activities, I don't imagine a bland, all-things-to-all-people space. Theatres must still be theatres. It's vital to remember the power of a great play to engage people's emotions and spark their imaginations. Theatre buildings must still be able to deliver these unique, live experiences as effectively as ever.

But every theatre building in the UK also needs to ask: what role do we play in the local community? Who uses this building? Who *doesn't* and why? Are we stuck in a bubble of our own making? How could this building be as much a part of local life as a school, library, community or leisure centre?

It is this day-to-day use of your building, its purposeful, playful bustle, that will more than anything make the case for the value of your organisation, and connect you to the world outside. I believe such a re-invention to be perfectly possible, to create a theatre where the everyday and the extraordinary sit side-by-side.

All that's needed is the will to change, and a little imagination.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> John Holden, *Capturing Cultural Value* (London: Demos, Dec 2004)
- <sup>2</sup> Tessa Jowell, *Government and the Value of Culture* (London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2004)
- <sup>3</sup> John Holden, *Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy* (London: Demos, 2006)
- <sup>4</sup> Munira Mirza (ed.), *Culture Vultures: Is UK Arts Policy Damaging the Arts?* (London: Policy Exchange, 2006)
- <sup>5</sup> David Lammy, *Cultural Democracy*: speech given on 29 March 2006 to Demos.
- <sup>6</sup> Peter Hewitt, *Arts in the Core Script – Writing Ourselves In*: The New Statesman Arts Lecture, 12 July 2006 (available on Arts Council England website)
- <sup>7</sup> Steve Tompkins, architect on Young Vic refurbishment, *Time Out* interview, 26 September 2006
- <sup>8</sup> *The Theatre: A Concise History* by Phyllis Hartnoll, p. 44 (Revised edition, London 1985)
- <sup>9</sup> *Theatre and Playhouse*, Richard and Helen Leacroft, p.47 (London 1984)
- <sup>10</sup> Article on 'Fun Palace – Cedric Price' by Ruari Glynn; [www.interactivearchitecture.org/fun-palace-cedric-price.html](http://www.interactivearchitecture.org/fun-palace-cedric-price.html)
- <sup>11</sup> Quoted in *Joan's Book: the autobiography of Joan Littlewood*, p.704 (London 1994)
- <sup>12</sup> *The Fall of Public Man* by Richard Sennett (London 1986), suggested by dissertation 'Cultivating a Gathering Space for the University of London' by Vasiles Polydorou, Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, 2007
- <sup>13</sup> *Thinking Outside the Box*, article in *Theatres Magazine*, Issue #12, summer 2007
- <sup>14</sup> Press Conference for the Re-opening of the Royal Festival Hall, South Bank Centre: Tuesday 29 May 2007, p.28. Available on [www.southbankcentre.co.uk/assets/press/releases/press\\_conference\\_pack.pdf](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/assets/press/releases/press_conference_pack.pdf)
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p.18
- <sup>16</sup> [www.northedinburgharts.co.uk](http://www.northedinburgharts.co.uk)
- <sup>17</sup> *Crisis in the West End*: article by Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 2 August 2007.
- <sup>18</sup> *A blueprint for excellence: Public libraries 2008-2011*, by John Dolan, 2007 (available from [www.mla.gov.uk](http://www.mla.gov.uk))
- <sup>19</sup> [www.imaginon.org](http://www.imaginon.org)