



One Show, One Audience, One Single Space.

Jean-Guy Lecat.

RESTORING

“A magnificent era where the arts flourished without artists finding themselves in the presence of completed artistic theories”.
Nietzsche

Should we be restoring dilapidated theatres, abandoned ones or ones entirely destroyed by a fire? Will the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris and New York’s Harvey / Majestic one day be restored? In the long run, the distance between the contemporary world and the aesthetics of these theatres from past eras will only get farther apart; one day, they will probably be nothing more than museums.

Should we be putting aesthetics before functionality and practicality? In 2002 in Paris, in an office at police headquarters, two police officers interrogated a man who had killed eight elected representatives and injured nineteen in a few seconds in a Paris suburb. He was calmly narrating his report when he ran towards a window, opened it and threw himself out, head first, into the empty space. Both officers hurled themselves at him, one of them grasping the man’s shoe, but as the laces had been taken out as a precautionary measure, it remained in the officer’s hands. The other nearly tripped in the void. The baffled by the lack of bars on the windows, the director of the criminal squad stated that the French building architect had told him that bars would have disfigured the site.

famous cathedrals. When he arrived at Reims, where the kings of France were consecrated, he was shocked by the restoration that it had gone through. "I am shocked by the restorations. They are from the 19th century but do not deceive. These ineptitudes would like to take rank amongst masterpieces! All the restorations are copies which is why they are condemned in advance as you should only copy nature; the copies of masterpieces is forbidden by the very principle of art. The restorations are always soft and hard at the same time, you will recognize them by this sign. To repair these figures and ornaments that have been brutalized by centuries as if it were possible! Such an idea could only be born in the minds of those that are strangers to nature, art and all truths. How else can we explain the decline in the intelligence of these claimed artists –architects, sculptors, glassworkers- who do these restorations with the wonders that fill these cathedrals right under their eyes?"

Jean-Guy Lecat.

Un spectacle, un public, un seul espace.

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Cover: La Tragédie de Carmen in Rome after the transformations of Teatro Argentina.

Recently, the director of a theatre, astonished at the delay of the restoration work in his theatre, was told by the architect responsible for the monument: "that before anything else, it was a historical monument that he was restoring and that if a bit of acting was to be done in this monument, it was not his problem!"

In a Moscow suburb, a small, 18th century theatre was restored and the rotten boards of the stage were kept under the pretext that they were original pieces. Anecdotes like these are plentiful and are there to remind us that times have changed. In the past, when a theatre burned down (approximately twice or more per century), it was rebuilt according to the trends of the era, while today, it is restored by keeping sections of the building's history, whether or not its previous restoration was deemed hideous. Today, our repertoire has grown considerably, from Greek tragedies to contemporary theatre. Some of the theatres in which these shows are performed are 250 years old but the majority of them are more than 150 years old.

As I was searching for a space to perform "Ubu aux Bouffes" in San José, Costa Rica, we would pass by the city's Theatre/Opera several times a day. We couldn't visit it, as it had been destroyed by a fire following an earthquake if I remember correctly. I finally found a circus tent that would be very interesting for our project. That same day, I was invited to visit the National Theatre. The theatre was intimate and had a patina that all monuments destroyed by a fire share. It was brother. It was a brother to the Bouffes du Nord in Paris, was very beautiful and would have been perfect for Ubu. The person who was accompanying me asked me:

“You like this theatre?” –yes-

“If you could have, you would have chosen this space?” –yes-

“And the performance would have been perfect in the space?”

-yes-

“And it would have been very beautiful as it was in your theatre in Paris?” –yes-

“So, if you had been able to perform it here, how would we then have been able to explain to the public that it was necessary to restore the theatre?”

I finally understood why I was not able to visit it before!

We know that contrary to the past, the majority of existing theatres, especially “historical” theatres will not be demolished or transformed as quickly today. Yet some recent examples, such as the work of Jean Nouvel in Lyon or Minneapolis, show that it is possible to modernize an old place with intelligence and taste. A theatre like the National Theatre in London is an indestructible concrete block and nontransformable for a long time to come and so we must work with it. The first question for us is to determine if the aesthetic of these theatres is useful “as is” for a particular project, or if we would need temporary to transform them. We have developed, since 1976, different types of adaptations that are now used here and there as systems that are more or less recurring:

-Come down into the parterre on top of the first rows of seats and mask off the lateral walls of the theatre (wood, curtains, tulle, etc.).

-Cover the space completely, without removing the seats, close off the stage and perform in the centre of the space.

-Reduce the overall size of the space by raising the level of the stage to the same level as the first balcony, which is more economical and technically-speaking easier to accomplish than stepping down the ceiling. This solution is called “The Majestic Theatre System” by certain architects and is presently used in one or two theatres in London.

-Join the stage and the balcony with a tier. This solution has been adopted in a quasi-permanent fashion by the Théâtre National of Strasbourg, and the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, or for a temporary time at the Teatro Español in Madrid amongst others.

-In events where the stage is large enough and has character, put both the public and the performance on stage by closing or not closing off the proscenium arch and allowing the public to enter via the auditorium. This is what I had recommended for the new Almada theatre in Lisbon.

This type of modification may appear radical, difficult and onerous for a temporary adaptation, but in reality, it has proved for us often to be simpler and more economical than the transportation and mounting of sets. In Rome, at the Teatro Argentina, covering the space with a floor and with sand only required three days of work; in Hamburg, the same scenario minus the sand and with two basins filled with water was done in twenty-four hours.

In his famous book (*Les cathédrales de France*, 1914) the sculpteur Auguste Rodin recalls his visits in a few of France’s most