

Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce

ARCHITECTURAL ASPECTS OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE

Author(s): DENYS LASDUN

Source: *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, Vol. 125, No. 5256 (NOVEMBER 1977), pp. 780-792

Published by: [Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41372718>

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ARCHITECTURAL ASPECTS OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE

A talk by

SIR DENYS LASDUN, CBE

given to the Society on Wednesday 25th May 1977

*with Sir Trenchard Cox, CBE, MA, FMA, FSA,
in the Chair*

THE CHAIRMAN: At my time of life it isn't very often I have the pleasure of feeling really excited, but I was when I received the invitation to take the chair for Sir Denys. He has given us so much that has contributed to our visual excitement. To attempt any kind of overall picture of his achievements would be inappropriate now, but I think it is right to record how many splendid buildings, among them the College of Physicians, he has made in recent years. In my own field we are very lucky to have

him as a member of the Advisory Council of the Victoria and Albert Museum. I am one of the people who have been fortunate enough, thanks to the privilege of being connected with this place, of having seen the National Theatre (the Olivier Theatre), before it was upholstered. It is splendid, now, but when I first went into it, it was bare and empty. My thought was of Epidaurus, and I don't think I could possibly pay a more appropriate compliment to our distinguished lecturer than to make this comparison.

Sir Denys Lasdun then spoke ex tempore. What follows is an edited and abbreviated version of the tape recording. Many more illustrations were shown than can be accommodated in these pages.

WHAT I should like to try and do is tell you why the National Theatre is the way it is. It has been an idea in England for about a hundred years. The reason it has taken so long is partly explained by something that Bernard Shaw said when he laid the foundation stone on the second or third of the five sites intended for the theatre. 'Do the English people want a National Theatre? Of course they do not: they never wanted anything. They have got the British Museum, the National Gallery, Westminster Abbey, but they never wanted them. But once these things stood as mysterious phenomena that had come to them, they felt that the place would be incomplete without them.'

It has now come into being at a moment of scepticism about the nature of institutions generally and certainly about institutions which deal with art—the feeling that institutions ossify art. There is also a scepticism about what might be called architect-

ural language—and certainly modern architectural language—and there is even greater scepticism, now that it is there, as to whether it really should be there because it costs so much to keep it there.

I shall be speaking tonight essentially as a practising architect, although this must include references to a range of fantasies, feelings, attitudes. These, in my view, nourish the deep levels of action in architecture, particularly when faced with a problem as formidable as that posed by the new National Theatre building.

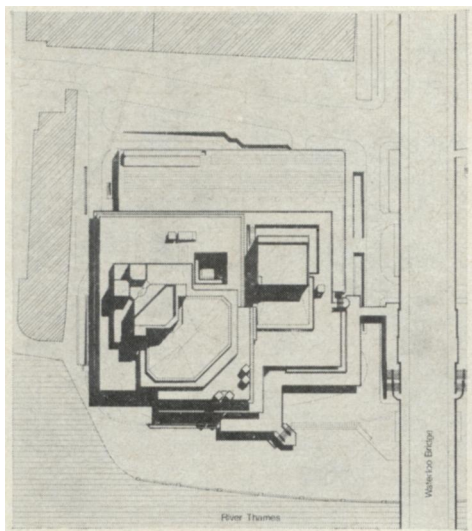
First I am going to describe the building very briefly with a few slides of what it looks like. Then I feel I must pay tribute at least to the early traditions of what is called the Modern Movement. I then go on to discuss the rôle and function of the National Theatre because it is slightly different from the rôle and function of ordinary theatres.

The fantasies to which I referred are mostly to do with a concept of architecture

which is no longer concerned with architecture as a cult object or a temple, but as an extension of context. I have called this an architecture of urban landscape and I shall show you a demonstration of this way of thinking with the original scheme for a National Theatre and Opera House on a different site.

The next section deals with something that I call the Fourth Theatre. The reason it is so called is because there are three auditoria in the National Theatre, but there is the whole building in its relationship to the city as well. This deals with the concept of theatre, and its relationship to the community.

The five-acre site stands next to Waterloo Bridge with St. Paul's to the north. This part of the river is known as King's Reach and it is quite one of the most beautiful stretches of the river in London. The theatre is conceived as an extension of the bridge, and inseparable from it, because I look upon architecture as an extension of the city, indivisible from it. The Olivier flytower dominates the composition. Inland near the Hayward Gallery the building presents a sort of rocky outcrop of stratified concrete, blank flytowers. Behind, in a rather desolate area, very shortly there will be, I hope, a housing scheme, a school, shops. The building at present is a blank impenetrable facade. If you are hostile to it you will say 'lumps of concrete in the form of towers' or if you are in my mood of fantasy, 'mountain peaks over a geological formation'.

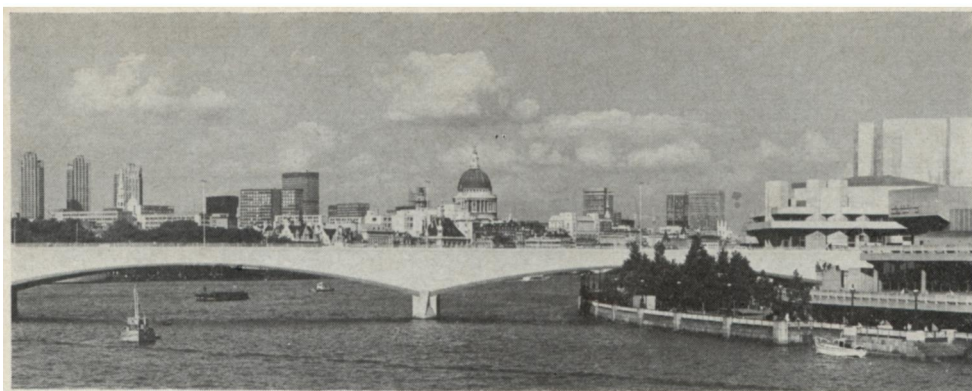


National Theatre site plan

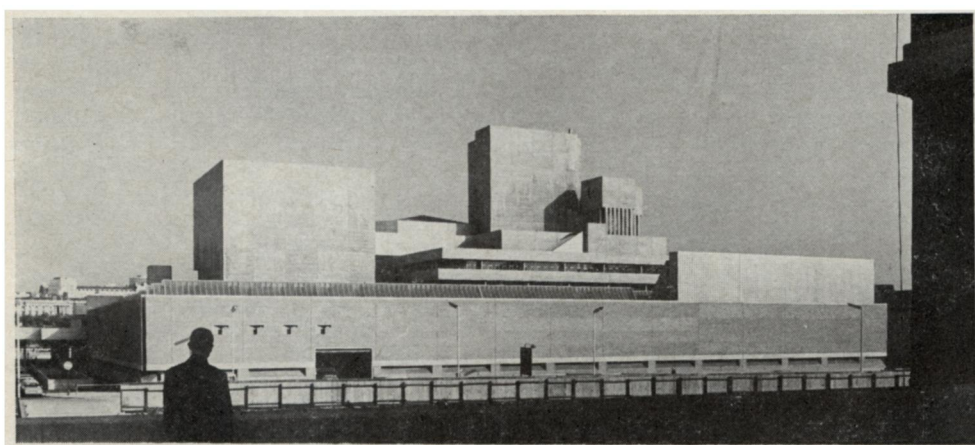
Viewed from the opposite side of Waterloo Bridge, the building presents very marked characteristics. The flytower of the Olivier is inflected at 45 degrees to Waterloo Bridge with the Lyttelton Theatre, smaller and lower, modulating the scale of the building to the bridge. The rest of the composition is a series of terraces with minor towers. The terraces are physically connected, both to the riverside walkway and to the bridge. People can walk off the bridge and on to the terraces. During the day, and more so at night, people can be seen inside, moving around, so in a sense the building is self-advertising. Finally, I suppose you might say that it is a building without facades in any normal sense but with layers of building, like geological strata, connected in such a way that they flow into the surrounding riverscape and city. The building is thus an extension of the theatre into the everyday world from which it springs. The basic material inside and outside is unadorned concrete. Reinforced concrete was first used in France in about 1890, which brings me for a moment to the early chapters of what is called the Modern Movement.

A primary source of my ideas about architecture was the result of a visit to Chicago in 1954 to have a look at some of the very early skyscraper buildings there which have come to be known as buildings of the Chicago school and in particular the Reliance Building. This is an historical period between 1880 and 1898 when land in Chicago was very expensive, when buildings therefore went high, and the moment came in the technology of buildings when the steel skeleton frames were exploited and lifts were used for the first time. This Reliance Building has an elegance and simplicity which I find absolutely breathtaking: light, airy, beautifully proportioned, with the solid parts of the building reduced to the minimum required for fire-resistance. The building can be seen as a comment on the social values that produced it, a demonstration of technology and a symbolic awareness of the aspirations of the clients.

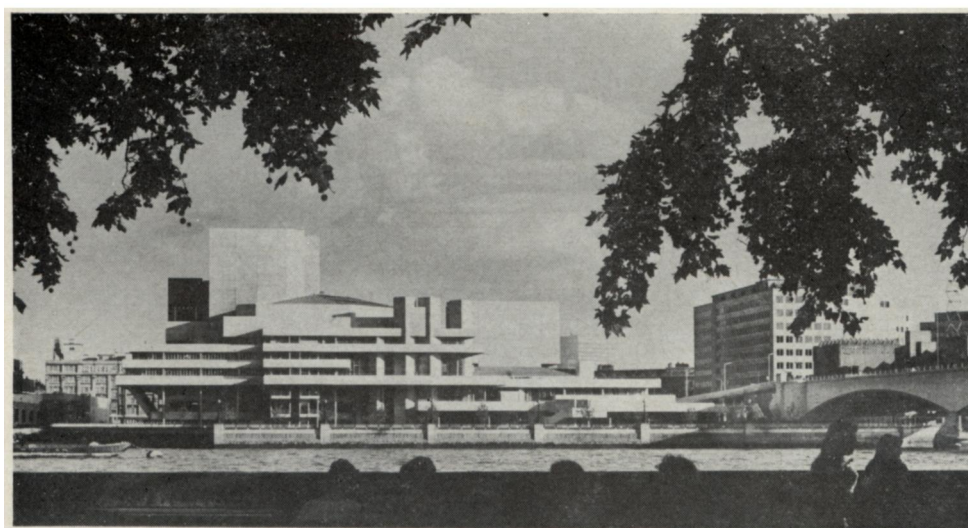
1890 was about the time when William Morris in England died. He represented the social conscience of modern architecture which rejected an economic system which produced drudgery, slums, stunted bodies and minds. He feared that the genius of the Renaissance might detract from the simple unadorned vernacular buildings which had been built up by use and habit. He looked



The Theatre seen up-river from Waterloo Bridge



'A sort of rocky outcrop of stratified concrete . . .'



The Theatre from the opposite Embankment

for purity in the use of materials and honesty and truth in structure, and for a reduction of ornament. He reluctantly accepted the machine if it could be shown to lessen the burden of life.

While William Morris can be seen as a founding father of the Modern Movement in architecture, mention must be made of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the originator of Art Nouveau and architect for the Glasgow School of Art. He pioneered in a single building the idea of the interpenetration of space and his spatial concepts lead straight on to Le Corbusier.

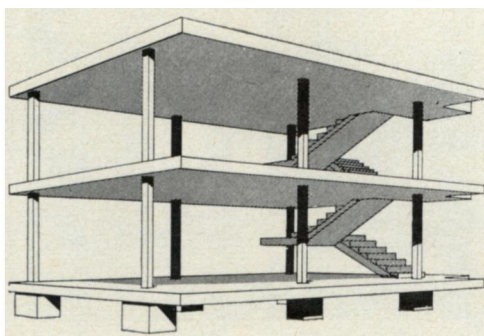
Many of the ideas of William Morris were later synthesized in the Bauhaus round about 1920. The central proposition of the Bauhaus, very close to the feelings of this Society, was the uniting of art and industry, art and daily life. The heritage of the Bauhaus for my generation of architects was to teach, in the name of a sane and purposeful architecture, a way of forgetting about styles and substituting a conscience about one's work, and above all a rational procedure.

The second primary source of my ideas was a visit in about 1934 to Paris. The three buildings which I visited there, all designed by Le Corbusier, were the Pavillon Suisse, the Maison Cook and the Salvation Army building, all concrete structures. Of the three, the most significant was the Maison Cook—a little house in the centre of Paris, about four storeys high, which embodied what Corbusier called the five points of architecture: raising the building off the ground so you could drive under it; making a roof garden; the planning of the building freed from the structure; long horizontal windows, possible with reinforced concrete; and together with this a free facade, independent also of the structure. This garden

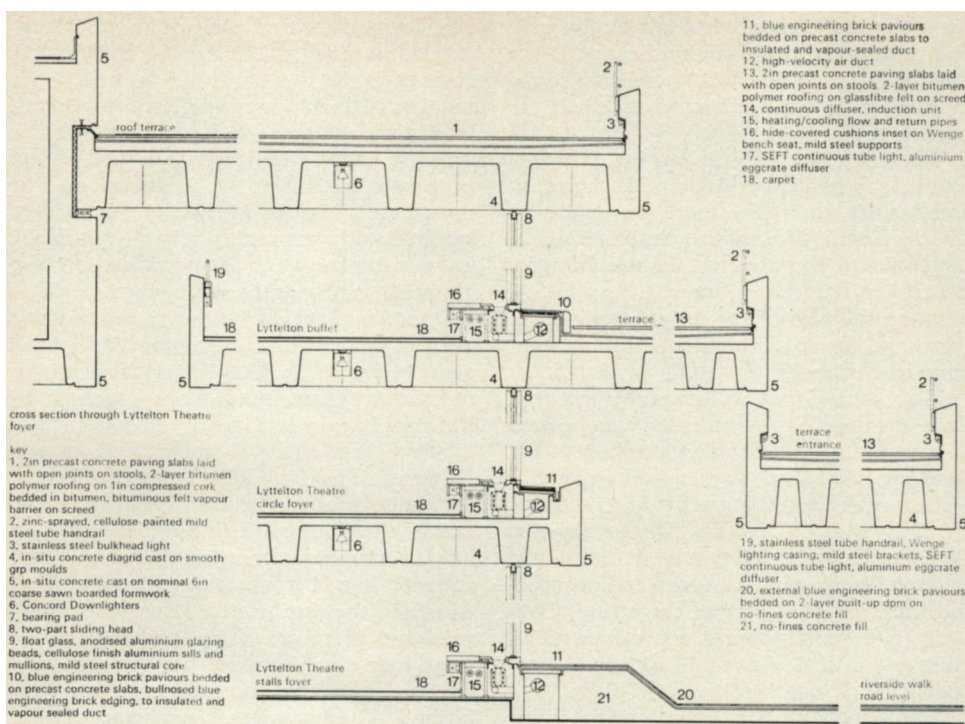
on the top of the roof made quite an impression at the time and so did the DOM-INO diagram which he produced in 1914, of a standardized structure consisting of prefabricated columns, concrete floors and a staircase. Around this you can build your own walls with windows in them and put them end to end or at right angles so that you make a pattern not unlike dominoes. It was a metaphor for the standardized process of building and was the setting for a mechanized Utopia. I regard Corbusier as one of the greatest architects of this century but I have never accepted his Utopian urban planning philosophy. I am much more interested in the organic growth of cities.

Slowly but surely I am coming to the National Theatre. This simple diagram should be compared with a typical section of the National Theatre. The floor slabs no longer terminate in a single plane. The columns have become huge, big enough to take lifts, they are turned at irregular intervals, and there are large overhangs which keep your eyes down so that you can concentrate more on the landscape and city beyond. In my view the metaphor has shifted from a mechanized Utopia to one of landscape. And with each stratum it is possible to plan lots of different sorts of rooms. You can have small intervals or big intervals, you can express the public domain of the building and you can, in my view, make a kind of simple architecture out of it. The strata can provide roofs, walkways, planting areas. They are carefully proportioned and cantilevered from dark recesses of shadow and glass and are made to interlock interior with surroundings. The strata can work on the formal, functional and symbolic level. They support the interior functions flexibly, they provide cohesion to a large scheme broken down to human scale, they give visual expression to the essential public nature of the institution where human contact is enriched and a common experience is shared.

The actuality is very close to that section and shows you a simple vocabulary of buildings, of slabs and towers. There it is, all unadorned concrete. So why build in concrete? Why was concrete chosen? Deliberately, for fantasy reasons. Of course there are also practical and structural reasons, but concrete was chosen inside and outside so that it would evoke warm stones, ancient ruins, the non-slick and the permanent, irrespective of whether it streaks, grows warts,



Le Corbusier's DOM-INO diagram



Cross-section of Lyttelton Theatre foyers



Olivier Theatre from the terrace



'It is simply light, space, people, concrete'



'Horizontal lines . . . great simplicity and an energetic exposition of construction and materials'

or has lichen growing on it. A great deal of care was taken in the mixing of the concrete: white cement and ordinary cement, white Leighton Buzzard sand and aggregate from the Thames beside which the building sits.

Inside, the spaces become more dominant but the language does not change. I think that graphics and lighting help enormously at the decorative level. But there is no attempt to apply decoration. It is simply light, space, people, concrete.

One of the pioneers of modern architecture, Otto Wagner, who worked around 1890, prophesied what buildings might look like in the future—'Horizontal lines, such as were prevalent in antiquity, table-like roofs, great simplicity and an energetic exposition of construction and materials.' This might well be a description of the Theatre.

The National Theatre has to accommodate the two great traditional styles of drama which constitute the mainstream of European theatre: the open tradition which comes from the Greek and Elizabethan theatre, and the proscenium tradition for

which playwrights have written for the last three hundred years, and will continue to write.

Lord Olivier, in the many long discussions we had about what the theatres were to be like, considered the proscenium theatre to be a more discursive type of theatre where the actor and audience face each other, whereas in the open theatre the action appears in your midst in a much more three-dimensional way. Like any big organization which needs to keep in touch with changing developments, it had to have an experimental theatre, and that is why we have three theatres. The fourth theatre is very much to do with all these foyers and experiencing the city beyond, but I shall be talking about this in greater detail later.

One of the longest and most difficult debates we had in the early days was about the capacity of the two auditoria. If theatre is to survive in an age of mass communication, of radio and television, then it can only perform its magic to a limited number of people; there is a limit through distance; and that is what theatre is about, and so the capacity of the Lyttelton is about 900 and



Lyttelton Theatre, showing the heavily striated concrete

*Flats in St James's Place*

the Olivier 1150. Apart from maintaining the two traditional mainstreams of drama, the National Theatre has also got to play host to national companies from all over the world, many of whom will only have played on one kind of stage, not two. It also plays host to the regions, who may have quite different views about which theatre they want to play in. And finally, it has to present not only new works to the public but old classics as well, in new guises, and it has to run a repertory system.

I slipped this slide in rather quickly because I shan't be referring again to the Lyttelton Theatre, except to go on repeating that concrete is outside and inside. This concrete is heavily striated, which people have remarked might have been done for decorative reasons but which, in fact, was done for acoustic reasons, to stop sound bouncing from one side of the room to the other and to try and stop cross-path reflections.

The section builds up step by step from the river to the promenade to the terraces and finally to the summit of the building—the Olivier flytower. The Olivier will be the first open theatre in the world to provide the possibility of three-dimensional scenery. This is a significant technological innovation.

Certain fundamental architectural ideas which have been embodied in the conception of the National Theatre have been drawn from

some of our earlier buildings. For instance, the flats in St. James's Place which stand next to eighteenth-century Spencer House demonstrate the importance of *context*, of making a relationship with other architects who may be close in space, however far off in time. You can, it seems to me, put new buildings next to old buildings without too much disgrace.

In the case of the Royal College of Physicians, the dominant concern is with the notion of *assembly* and so the staircase in the

*Staircase, Royal College of Physicians*



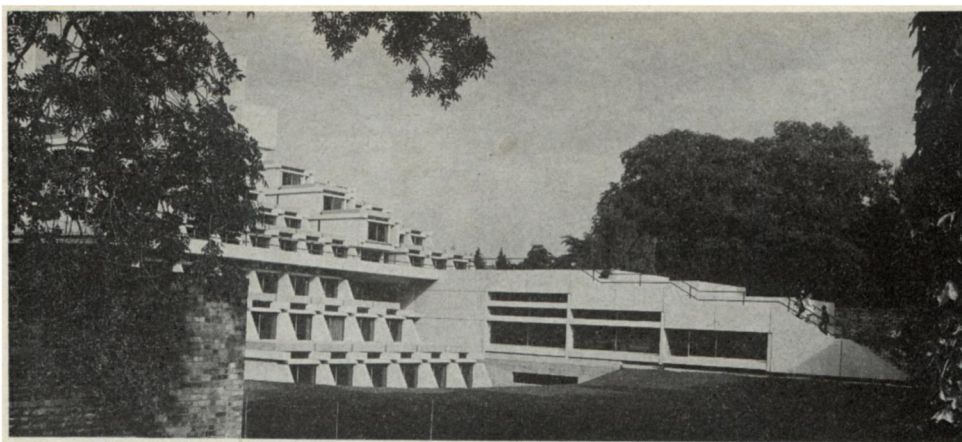
Two views of the University of East Anglia



entrance hall is the important feature. It winds slowly round a dynamic and expanding central space in which are hung portraits on receding galleries. For me, architecture only makes sense as the extender and promoter of human relationships. I don't believe it is about technology—it is about people getting together. I think architecture is about space, light and shadow, and the sort of movement which you get on this staircase and which is seen in the National Theatre.

The third example is to do with *landscape*. East Anglia University is on a site which rises seventy feet from the River Yare and is on a south-facing slope in a fine landscape with Norwich two miles to the east.

The Development Plan is really a map of human relationships in Rashdall's sense—relationships between teacher and teacher, teacher and student, student and student. It is a very compact plan where activities merge. Looked at from the air it is like an outcrop of stone. From the land, it hugs the landscape. It allows the individual to sense his identity with the whole. The buildings are conceived as architectural hills and valleys. By their use of materials, the juxtaposition of concrete and grass, the ordering and articulation of architectural elements, they create an ambience which, while drawing little from classical academic practice, reveals latent classical qualities—proportion,



Christ's College, Cambridge, extension building

rhythm, repose. In terms of fantasy the architecture can be seen now as a metaphor for landscape. And this applies very much to the form of the National Theatre and its relationship to the river and the bridge.

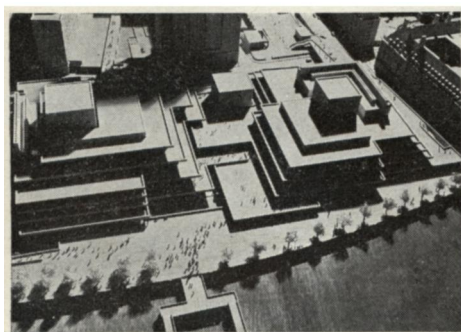
Finally there is the extension to Christ's College, Cambridge. Its design recalls hills and caves. Halfway up the building is a broad landscaped terrace which constitutes the public realm. And this is a very strong motif in the National Theatre. The form of the building protects this planted terrace from the Siberian winds that blow across Cambridge, and the hot air that students talk in their rooms gently warms the earth of the terrace and allows tropical plants to grow.

To recapitulate, there seems to be a possibility, in the use of strata in the St. James's Place flats, that allows buildings to fit into their *context*. In the College of Physicians there was a strong sense of *assembly*

and in the University of East Anglia and Christ's College extension there is the concern for public places and *architecture as a metaphor for landscape*. As I have said, these notions have been embodied in the National Theatre and indeed were in existence in an earlier scheme for a National Theatre and Opera House on a site opposite the Shell Tower. Here the design was dissolved into a series of terraces on which people could congregate. These terraces or strata could have accommodated shops, pubs, restaurants, on all levels. It was in a sense an architecture of urban landscape, of foothills and terraces descending down to the river and reconciling the Shell Tower with the riverscape. It is a reminder that much of our happiness in cities is conditioned by the spaces between buildings: its parks, rivers, observation platforms, all of which help make comprehensible the city's landmarks, organization and focal points of memory.

I come now to what I call the 'fourth' theatre. This concerns what theatre was originally about. In addition to the three auditoria there is the whole building and its relationship to the city and the consideration of the theatre as some kind of place where people assemble as a community. In Athens in the fifth century, when drama reached its peak, going to the theatre was not a fringe activity, but central to the daily life, the religious life, the economic life of the community. The question arises, can one recapture this quality in our different and more complex situation to-day?

The first supreme stage was the street or place where public ceremonies occurred and



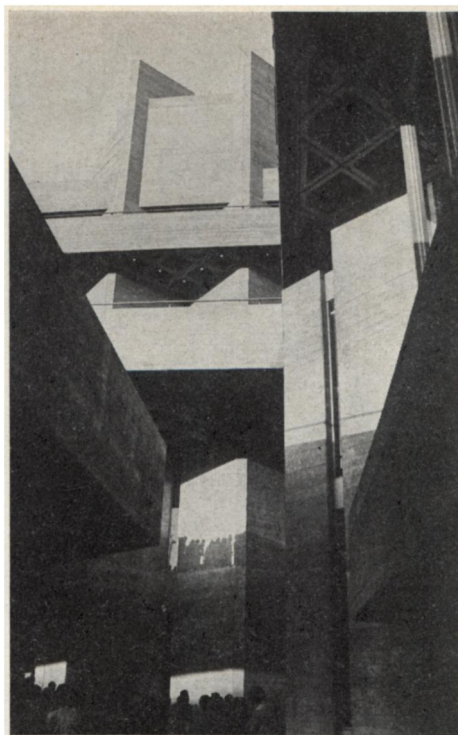
Model for earlier National Theatre and Opera scheme

where private transactions were enacted. In the life of the theatre the street or public place was as central as the hearth is in family life. With the street as stage, the city became a backdrop, a theme continued in the permanent setting at Teatro Olimpico, Vicenza, and in Serlio's *Scena Tragica*.

Piazza San Marco is a good example of what I mean and seems to capture that quality of diversity about which René Dubos wrote as follows: 'All successful human settlements have included malls, piazzas and other public grounds. The malls and piazzas of Europe, like the dancing grounds of Indian villages, are the spatial framework of the tribal spirits, where the human encounter can be enriched by contact with crowds of strangers. They have always included ready access to gardens, parks and natural environments, in which to experience animals, plants and the pageantry of life; a variety of settings to provide stages on which different kinds of people can act out their own lifestyles. And last but not least, the opportunity to experience as often as possible the magic of infinite perspective.'

The external terraces of the National Theatre provide places for many activities such as busking, kite flying, dancing, music, steel bands, events, and so the building performs much the same function as the piazza. Inside in the foyers there are also events going on: exhibitions, madrigals, bars, places to browse, stalls selling magazines and books. All these things help to break down the barrier between ordinary people going to the theatre and the past tradition that it was something only for the élite. People sit on the floor and enjoy this and use the foyers like the ancient hypostyle. The floor seems to evoke warm and lively participation and all the time on different levels there are glimpses of the city beyond and the large cantilevered concrete overhangs keep your eyes focused on the riverscape.

Finally I come to the heart of the whole complex and the point of departure—the Olivier Theatre itself. The design was the outcome of a two-year dialogue with some of the most outstanding figures in English theatre to-day: people like Olivier, Devine, Norman Marshall, Peter Hall, Peter Brook, Gaskill, Dexter, St. Denis, Benthall, and other people whose names I no longer recall. We met each month and tried to hammer out with the use of simple models the nature of theatre in the second half of the twentieth century.



External terraces

William Curtis, writing on the function of models, said: 'Models have a social function as a basis for dialogue. Most laymen cannot read plans but can understand a model which stands in three dimensions. The model serves to embody a visual hypothesis based on available evidence to date. It can stimulate the client to examine his assumptions and clarify his needs through a sense of the available alternatives, for it is rare that either client or architect knows exactly what is required in advance.'

This sharing of knowledge was a vital aspect of the work. The Olivier is an innovative stage. There is all sorts of machinery which will raise and lower scenery. The revolving drum can be raised and lowered, either wholly or partially. When all the machinery is working, it will be a great challenge to dramatists and designers. There is a strong feeling in the Olivier of awareness of people around participating in the act of theatre.

I have talked about *context*, *assembly* and an *architecture of urban landscape*. These notions really take us back to Greece. The Greeks always thought of their buildings in relationship to the hills, the sea and the arch



Scrap-heap of models for the National Theatre

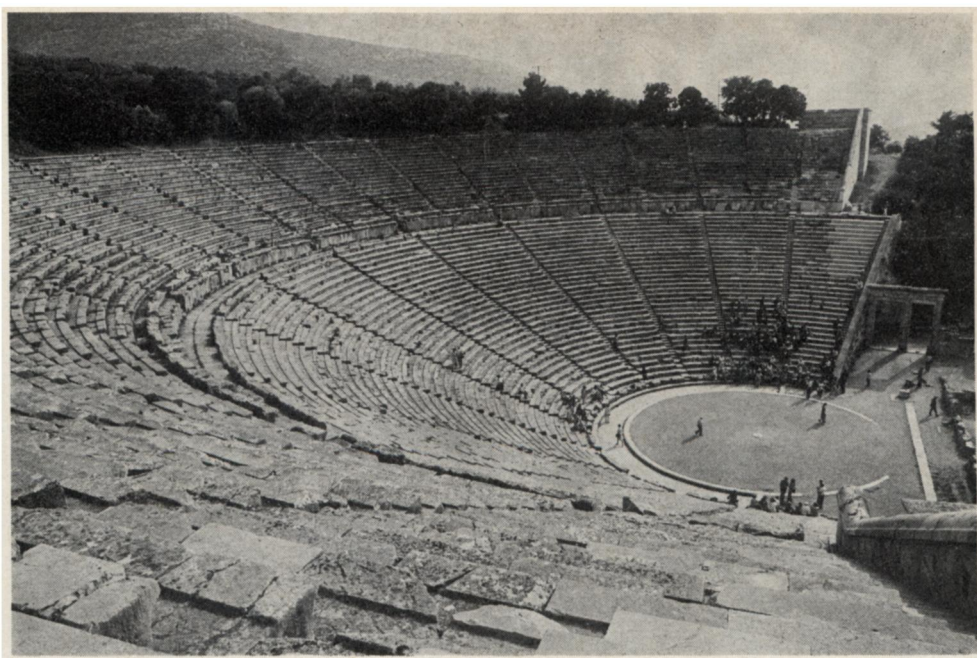
of the sky. The landscape was considered to be inhabited by divine forces. In Epidauros, for instance, there is an exquisite relationship between the setting and the form built at the scale of the landscape. It seems at home in the world—both epic and intimate. It has a sense of belonging to time, place and people.

I'd like to end by quoting from a letter from a Japanese to Frances Yates, perhaps one of the greatest Shakespearean scholars in England to-day. His English may be a little quaint, but the sentences sum up all our aspirations concerning the design of the National Theatre: 'Somebody like a Japanese may more easily understand the National Theatre perceptively or intuitively because it has something resembling the Noh theatre in its ambivalence of intimacy and severity. In its intimacy of raw humble features and forms, based on the river bank, evoking hillsides of ancient Greece, it can most naturally allure and absorb every class of people into it. In its severity of abstract geometric forms and spaces, indicating the numinous of the primitive people, those

entering unexpectedly encounter the time and space of a kind of ritual. They gaily enter the theatre and go out transformed in serious terms.'



The Olivier: 'awareness of people around participating in the act of theatre'

*Epidauros*

DISCUSSION

DR. S. H. HOLLINGDALE: The lecturer stressed the architectural significance of the horizontal slabs at various levels. I should like to ask him about the effect on the vertical dimensions. When I go into the National Theatre, particularly into the foyers and buffet areas, I get a certain sense of oppression; the slab above me seems too low, too close. The lecturer's study bedrooms at Christ's College Cambridge gave me the same impression, that I was almost touching the ceiling.

THE LECTURER: The ceiling heights of the National Theatre vary all the time, and that is deliberate. I showed you a little diagram of low spaces leading to high spaces. And my answer to you must be that if you are standing in a part which depresses or oppresses you, I suggest you move ten paces to the part where it is considerably higher. It is very strange, but they happen to be lowest by the bars! And in the foyer of the Olivier, for instance, there are some magnificent views of London at the moment where the height is a triple volume and very high. People still linger by their drinks, but as the summer comes on I think they will move out of the building altogether and have the sky as their ceiling, which they will be encouraged to do.

As to Christ's College, they are little rooms whose ceilings are an appropriate height in

proportion to the average person. Is there anything wrong with a low ceiling? I think they are rather nice.

MISS LUCINDA BREDIN: The Olivier and Lyttleton Theatres are completely separate, there is no linking walk way between the two. I wondered what was the reason behind that?

THE LECTURER: Criticism has been made of this. The fact is that there isn't, except a very tortuous one. I can't think of a very good answer except to tell you that the amount of accommodation generally packed into that five acre site is enormous. When you take the rehearsal rooms, the work shops, the sheer amount of stuff that has been crammed in, it has meant a very compact sort of planning. There is no natural connection, but you are free to wander. And the best way of using the National Theatre is to go to the Olivier and have your drinks in the interval in the Lyttleton, and go to the Lyttleton and have your drinks in the interval in the foyer of the Olivier. And in this case you connect right through the building and you get a series of panoramic views and little squint views of London which I think are very good. So it is connected in that way, but you can't walk across the floor from one to the other. It had to be planned this way for vertical circulation.

MR. JOHN ASBRIDGE (Central School of Art and Design): How well does Sir Denys consider that the stage designers have used the National Theatre so far?

THE LECTURER: Well they have had to work against very great difficulties because a lot of the stuff that they want to get their hands on is not working. It started off very badly because the sheer political pressure to get that building open was absolutely enormous, and that meant that sets which were designed for the Old Vic were adapted for the new building, and the first season showed that very badly. But I thought *Julius Caesar* looked extremely good, I think *Volpone* looks good. I long to see much more invention, much more daring, particularly in the Olivier, but it is a bit unfair to blame the designers now because they can't use it properly. This comes about not through faulty design, it is simply that because everybody wanted the theatre to open, none of the machinery was commissioned or tested, and it has to be done while they are using the theatre and at night and at weekends.

MR. TOM ROBB, ARCA, MSIAD, FSAE (Middlesex Polytechnic): In designing new buildings does Sir Denys give any consideration to what they will look like in fifty years' time? I ask that because many large buildings, especially ones used by the public, look fine when they are first opened, but once they have been used for a while they start looking rather dilapidated with all kinds of extraneous signs added. I am thinking especially of government departments and offices.

THE LECTURER: Yes, we did consider the building in the long term. It is not a very brightly lit place so the signs are perhaps a bit too misty, but that is part of the atmosphere of the place. Now the theatre has been in action for a year. I think it is quite liked by the public, and if a building is liked by anybody it will be looked after and respected.

As to what it will look like in fifty years, it will be very streaky, with nice white streaks all over it like whiskers. There may be lichen or indeed virginia creeper if I feel tempted to go and plant some. I don't actually mind, because it is part of a riverscape; it is not meant to be a glossy hotel, looking shiny and polished, it is an architecture of landscape, and like rocks and human faces it

takes on the ravages of time. There is nothing more indecent than a human face that doesn't. I think ageing can be very beautiful and it should happen in buildings. Concrete will never be as gracious in its weathering as stone. On the other hand in the National Theatre, apart from the fly-towers, there are no sheer walls of concrete, it is a very broken up building, so that I don't think the weathering on little bits here and there, streaky or otherwise, will matter.

MR. JOHN H. WILSON (Department of History of Art, University College London): If it does get dirty would the lecturer consider cleaning it, or would he like it to stay the way it is?

THE LECTURER: I want it to stay the way it is going. It is a natural thing that has to happen. If you look at the buildings that you love in London they are often soot-laden and crummy because they have shifted from fashion time into history time into landscape time. And that is what I like about buildings. So if the concrete gets streaky and dirty the architect must take this into account in the form of his building. It was very important to me to make a building that would not have a skin on it, that was something on the outside and something different on the inside, so we chose concrete. I have seen people go and stroke the concrete inside. There is a neurosis about concrete at the moment because it has often been very badly used. But it can be a very beautiful material. I shouldn't recommend it for domestic use at all, but for a public building, by a river, in a landscape situation, I think it suitable.

THE CHAIRMAN: I am second, I think, to none in my enjoyment of the National Theatre and all it has to offer. Although I must say (this has nothing whatever to do with our lecturer or his subject) I do wish the system of getting the tickets were different. But the fact that the theatre is packed every night shows that the standards set by our lecturer and by the artistic organizers of this great institution are what people value most. So we thank you very much, Sir Denys, for giving us such a thought-provoking talk about this new creation which has enriched our lives in London.

The meeting concluded with the usual expressions of thanks.