THE THEATRE PROJECTS OF WALTER GROPIUS

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Walter Gropius has been described as "one of the few actual inventors of modern architecture, the creator of the world famous Bauhaus and the most famous architectural teacher alive."[1] As head of the Department of Architecture at Harvard University from 1938 to 1952 he was the most influential single man in establishing modern architecture in the United States. For two decades American students have been inspired by his belief in the social mission of architecture, in the industrialization of building through standardization, and in the creative productivity of team designing in which personal ambitions are submerged in serving the needs of present day society.[2] Since among all the major contemporary American architects he has been most closely associated with dramatic productions and has designed more theatre buildings than the others, his projects should be of interest to everyone concerned with the form and structure of new stages and auditoriums.

Under his direction between 1919 and 1928 the Bauhaus in Germany became the leading school of modern design in the entire world, and its methods revolutionized the teaching of architecture and related arts.[3] A surprisingly large number of its faculty and students have held important positions in American architectural offices and American architectural schools. Mies van der Rohe, another great contemporary architect, epitomized the Bauhaus curriculum when he remarked that Gropius "wanted to have paintings, sculpture, theatre and even ballet on the one hand, and on the other, weaving, photography, furniture—everything from the coffee cup to city planning."[4] Gropius insisted that every student must learn to use his hands at some craft, yet his purpose was not to train craftsmen but to develop creative artists. "He aimed at avoiding both the boorish illiteracy of the modern craftsman and the irresponsible precocity of the academically trained artist."[5] A thorough training in workshops which were actually producing manufactured articles was required of every design student. This emphasis on understanding how to design for the machine and how to collaborate in the large and complex planning problems of the modern world eventually made his educational theories welcome in the

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[1] James Marston Fitch, *Walter Gropius* (New York, 1960), p. 7.

[2] John Burchard and Albert Bush-Grown, *The Architecture of America—A Social and Cultural History* (Boston, 1961), p. 436.

[3] Peter Blake, *The Master Builders* (New York, 1960), p. xi.

[4] Quoted in Siegfried Giedion, *Walter Gropius: Work and Team Work* (New York, 1954), p. 17.

[5] Fitch, p. 11.

United States, but only after an initial period of ridicule and opposition by traditionally minded teachers.

In his career as an architect he has designed fewer buildings which have been constructed than have other leaders of his profession, but several of those completed have been extremely significant. As early as 1912 his Fagus factory at Alfeld, Germany, with curtain walls of glass, corner windows and metal spandrels represented the most advanced industrial work in Europe; in 1926 for the new Bauhaus at Dessau he created the most forward-looking campus in the world. As recently as 1959, at the age of seventy-six, he collaborated on the plans for the enormous lozenge-shaped skyscraper—New York's largest office building—which is now being erected over Grand Central Station. Although the number of buildings he built was limited during his three decades as a teacher, his plans for public and private structures in many parts of the world have promoted the acceptance of contemporary architecture for more than half a century.[6]

Since the Bauhaus was a center for experiment in theatre and ballet, Gropius incorporated in the building built at Dessau in 1926 a platform stage placed between the assembly hall and dining room. Two structural columns on each side formed tripartite proscenium openings with traverse curtains closing off sections of the stage area. Screens and other pieces of scenery were suspended from four rows of overhead tracks in the stage ceiling. A set of modular platform units could raise the whole stage one platform height or could be assembled to form various levels. On this stage were performed such productions as Oskar Schlemmer's controversial *Triadische Ballet,* which had been presented for the first time in 1922 when the Bauhaus was still at Weimar. During this period Gropius was influenced not only by Schlemmer's ideas on "man in space"[7] but also by the theories of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy about the use of mechanical devices on the stage, the interpenetration of space by scenery and actors, and the development of vertical and diagonal stage movement.[8] The Bauhaus stage is Gropius' only executed design which illustrates any of his theatre theories. Some years before, in 1923, he had remodelled the City Theatre in Jena, installing staggered seating and stripping both interior and exterior of all decoration. Two theatres designed by Gropius actually have been built: a 360-seat hall for the Village College at Impington, England (1936) and a 450-seat auditorium for the Junior High School at Attleboro, Massachusetts (1948). Both have conservative proscenium style stages.

It is not his completed theatres, however, which have stimulated architects for more than thirty years, but his projects—particularly his Total Theater of 1926. This project was designed for the "Epic Theatre" director, Erwin Piscator, who had been the Regisseur at the Berlin Volksbühne since 1924. Piscator was famed for his productions employing vast crowds, actors mingling with the audience, turntables and treadmills, motion pictures and animated cartoons. Because he hoped to attract the proletarian class, he needed a 3,000 or 4,000-seat theatre to which admission prices could be low. In particular, he required the elimination of the proscenium in order to bring actors and audience closer together and in addition, "convertibility, flexibility and anonymity" in the archi-

[6] Burchard and Bush-Brown, p. 438.

[7] Lux Feininger, "The Bauhaus, Evolution of an Idea," *Criticism* (Summer, 1960), p. 273.

[8] Walter Gropius (ed.), *The Theatre of the Bauhaus* (Middletown, Connecticut, 1961), p. 68.

tectural design.[9] He sought a theatre "whose ventures in drama could be accompanied by ventures in its spatial setting."[10] The passive playgoer was to be turned into an active participant in the proceedings.

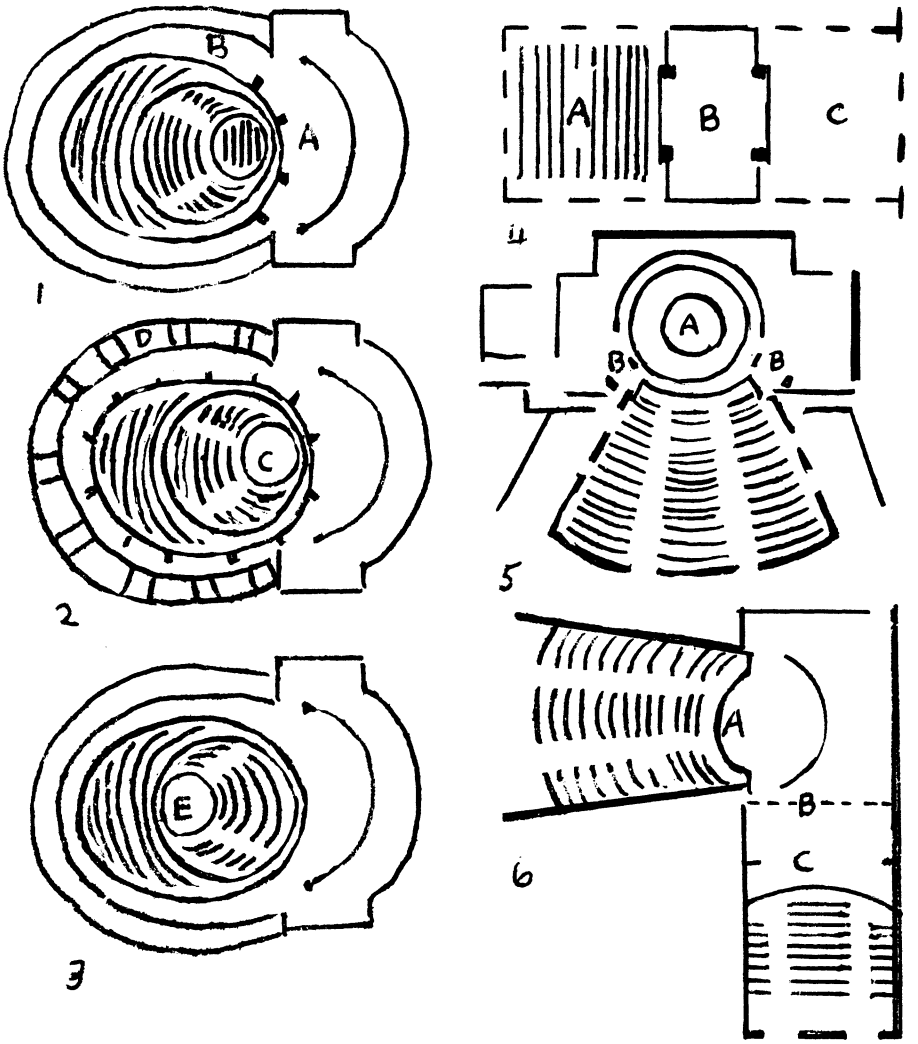
Gropius set himself the problem of creating a building which could respond in terms of convertible space and flexible lighting to every demand of the director. "The aim of this Total Theater is to draw the spectator into the drama," he declared in his paper for the Convegno di Lettere of the Reale Accademia d' Italia at Rome in 1934. "All technical means have to be subordinated to this aim and should never become an end in themselves."[11] Piscator's theatre, he continued, should be "capable of shaking the spectator out of his lethargy, of surprising and assaulting him and obliging him to take a real interest in the play."[12] Gropius was especially well qualified to undertake such a complex project. Not only had he been closely associated with theatre and ballet at the Bauhaus, but also he was a friend of many of the leading avant-garde theatrical figures in Germany.[13] In his paper for the Convegno di Lettere he acknowledges among the influences on his Total Theater project the tripartite stages by Henry van de Velde at the Cologne Werkbund Exposition (1914) and by Auguste Perret at the Paris Decorative Arts Exhibition (1925) as well as Hans Poelzig's Berlin Grosses Schauspielhaus (1919) which had both an arena and a proscenium stage.[14]

Gropius planned an oval auditorium joined to a rectangular stage house. His drawings and model show a large turntable within this oval upon which are rows of seats and another smaller turntable, placed eccentrically and touching the large turntable tangentially. The smaller turntable can be raised or lowered within the larger. At one end of the oval is a tripartite stage "which extends forward on each side of the front rows of seats enclosing them like a forceps."[15] The small turntable may become a forestage in front of this triple stage. A transformation into a circular arena is accomplished by rotating the large revolver through 180°. Then the small turntable becomes a central stage entirely surrounded by tiers of spectators. "The player reaches the arena either by steps from below, or by the middle aisle which now connects with the stage, or by means of scaffolding and steps which can be let down from above and which therefore permit of playing on more than one level above the arena."[16] Gropius planned to revolve the audience during the performance, and by thus unexpectedly shifting the spectators and the stage area, to alter the viewer's scale of values and force him to participate in the action.

An examination of photographs of the model suggests that when the small turntable is revolved into the center, sightlines from the fixed segment of steeply rising seats might be very unsatisfactory. Even elevating the small turntable does not seem to solve this difficulty. It would also appear that spectators in the "forceps" areas on each side could not see the action in the portion of the tripartite stage on the side where they are seated.

The auditorium roof rests on twelve columns. Behind these pillars and "con-

[9] Fitch, p. 22.
[10] Giedion, p. 66.
[11] Quoted in Giedion, p. 61.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Gropius heard Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill perform the score of *The Three Penny Opera* before it opened in Berlin. Fitch, p. 22.
[14] Walter Gropius, "Theaterbau," *Convegno di Lettere* (Rome, 1934), p. 159.
[15] Walter Gropius, "Modern Theatre Construction," *The Drama* (February, 1928), p. 136.
[16] Ibid.



GROUND PLANS

THE THEATRE PROJECTS OF WALTER GROPIUS
Plans are not redrawn to scale

Total Theater 1927
1A Tripartite stage
1B Sloping ramp
2C Forestage
2D Projection booths
3E Arena stage

Bauhaus 1926
4A Auditorium
4B Tripartite stage
4C Dining hall

Ukrainian State Theatre 1930
5A Turntable
5B Side stage

Wheaton College 1937
6A Semicircular forestage
6B Sliding partition
6C Concave forestage

tinuous with the side stages, there extends a wide encircling passageway which slopes with the auditorium floor. Wagon stages can be moved on to this from the regular stage so that certain scenes can be played around the spectators."[17] Details of this shifting method

[17] Ibid.

were not worked out, but it would seem that handling wagons on this sloping ramp encircling the audience would have been difficult and unnecessarily complex. Screens were to be stretched between the twelve columns and twelve films projected through them simultaneously; at the same time an auxiliary apparatus suspended from the center of the ceiling could project upon these screens from inside the auditorium. "I have not only envisaged the possibility of film projection upon the whole cyclorama of my three-fold stage by means of movable projectors," wrote Gropius, "but I can also set the entire audience *inside a film*, as it were, by projecting on walls and ceiling."[18] Instead of a single projection screen, the auditorium itself thus becomes a projection space. Again it is not clear from the drawings or photographs of the model where all of this projection equipment was to be placed. The concept of employing the auditorium walls as projection surfaces has been realized in several exhibition buildings in recent years, however, and is basic in one of the Ford Foundation Theater Design projects.[19]

The Total Theater project is indeed a compendium of the influences on Gropius and of his own theories on architectural design. He has incorporated the tripartite stages of Van de Velde and Perret, the arena of Poelzig, and the vertical, suspended acting platforms of Moholy-Nagy. His elaborate machinery for moving the audience and the stage settings reminds us of his recognition of the industrialization of architecture in the twentieth century.[20] The anonymity of the auditorium interior and the functional exterior as a logical expression of this interior are in accordance with his acceptance of the subordination of the individuality of the architect to team planning. It was particularly appropriate that the opportunity to design a theatre intended for the indoctrination of the proletarian class should come to an architect so conscious of the social mission of architecture.

Although the economic collapse of Germany in 1927 prevented the construction of the Total Theater, as a project it has inspired theatre people the world over since its conception. "It would have brought to full professional maturity a theater which, even thirty years later, is still unrealized."[21] It was even indirectly helpful in aiding Gropius in 1934 to escape from Germany. When he was permitted to go to Rome to discuss his theories at the international theatre conference of that year, the Convegno di Lettere, he and his wife seized the opportunity and fled to England. Several years later, the model of the theatre was destroyed in an air raid on Cologne.

While the Total Theater remains Gropius' most influential project, he has designed several others containing features which were to be incorporated into theatres built thirty years later. Among these projects was a prize winner in the 1930 competition for the Ukrainian State Theatre at Kharkov. The devices he employed are now familiar enough to us, but at that time no theatre with comparable planning had been erected. The auditorium seating 4,000 was fan-shaped with rows of seats forming arcs of a circle following the curved line of the forestage, and small side stages offered additional playing areas. Stage machinery included a turntable and wagons on tracks.[22] In 1931 Gropius was invited

[18] Ibid.

[19] A "2000-seat theater using new film-projection techniques" by Ralph Alswang and Paul Rudolph. *The Ideal Theater: Eight Concepts* (New York, 1962) p. 13.

[20] The entire building with its machinery was granted a German patent in 1929. Giedion, p. 63.

[21] Fitch, p. 23.

[22] Giedion, p. 65.

to submit a plan for the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow, but his project was not a prize winner. In his design a semicircular forestage with side stages was extended out into a 5,000-seat auditorium.[23]

In the late thirties, he produced a significant American theatre project. With Marcel Breuer, his associate at the Bauhaus and at Harvard, he designed an Art Center in 1937 for Wheaton College. In the large auditorium with steeply rising stadium seating, almost half of a turntable projected into the audience on a semicircular forestage. Nothing comparable was to be built in America until Frank Lloyd Wright's Dallas Theatre Center more than twenty years later. In the small theatre an open stage with a concave front curved around the first rows of seats. These two theatres were more unusual in form than any built on an American college campus by 1937. They illustrated very well Gropius' desire to integrate actors and spectators and to abolish the separation between stage and auditorium. By extending the stage into the audience in the large theatre and by curving it around the audience in the smaller, he was attempting to destroy the flat stage picture and to replace it with action in a three-dimensional space. It was obviously too early for such radical departures from conventional proscenium stages. There was a long controversy over the Wheaton competition but finally a very conservative building was erected.[24] Many American college theatres built in recent years owe some of their details to this project of a quarter of a century ago.

In 1957 Gropius and the Architects' Collaborative designed a convention hall for Tallahassee containing a 4,500-seat auditorium which was convertible for such diverse activities as skating, basketball and boxing.[25] By closing off segments of seating, a stage could be set up in the arena. Beneath the auditorium was placed a 600-seat theatre with a permanent stage curving out into the audience. In neither theatre was there a stage house. Both theatres seem adversely affected by the effort to combine so many entertainment functions in one building. This project is chiefly interesting for the exterior roofed by a double scalloped shell of folded concrete hung from a concrete parabola, recalling the design submitted by Le Corbusier to the 1931 Palace of the Soviets competition. Scalloped shells of folded concrete also are used to roof the two theatres in his 1958 plan with the Architects' Collaborative for the University of Bagdad. The two auditoriums are placed with the stage house between them. There is a good possibility that this project, which is not very advanced in design, may be erected.

Thirty-five years ago Gropius proposed building an experimental playhouse where audiences could participate with actors in "living" the drama; for many years to come his Total Theater will be mined for ideas by younger architects. A new generation is now enjoying opportunities to build theatres incorporating his theories. His influence is evident, for example, in the Loeb Drama Center at Harvard (1960) designed by his colleague and successor as head of the Department of Architecture, Hugh Stubbins, Jr. It is probable that his buildings have been less influential than his theories, his writings, and his teaching. While he has seen some of his theatre designs become reality, they have been only his minor efforts. His conception of a Total Theater remains un-

[23] Ibid.
[24] Giedion, p. 135.
[25] Plans, *Architectural Forum* (March, 1957), pp. 114-117.

built, but he has encouraged numberless architectural students to reject the proscenium theatre and to design more flexible forms. He belongs to that generation of the twenties which fought for better sightlines and better acoustics, the expression of structure on both exterior and interior, and multi-purpose space in which the audience became a part of the performance. That these innovations should now seem commonplace is due in no small measure to the influence Walter Gropius has had on our present-day theatre architects.

IN MEMORIAM

LAURENCE OLVIN

Larry Olvin had an illustrious career as teacher, theatre worker, and athlete. AETA is indebted to him for the demonstrations and speeches he gave at regional meetings and national conventions, for his organizing ability as Chairman of Region 14 of CTC, and editor of its first newsletter, and for his loyal service as member of the Governing Board of CTC and SSTC. He wrote an important article on improvisation for the new SSTC *Course of Study*. For many years before his sudden death, August 30, 1963, he supported vigorously Actors' Equity and ANTA.

He was an officer of the Greenwich Mews Theatre and production coordinator of many of its successful Off-Broadway offerings. As actor and technical director, he worked with numerous summer theatres in all parts of the country.

Although he literally never stopped learning, he studied formally at Cornell University, College of the City of New York, Columbia University, and the New School. As a student in the American Laboratory Theatre School he worked with Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya. He studied scene design and lighting under Norman Bel-Geddes, James Reynolds and Robert Edmond Jones. In addition to his gift in theatre he was a skillful fencer and an officer in the Amateur Fencers League of America.

He was a member of the faculty of the School of Performing Arts since it was founded in 1948. His ability as teacher, director, designer and counsellor were instrumental in making the drama department and the school unique not only in New York but in the world.

All of us who knew Larry will agree with one of his students who said of him: "We have been inspired and stimulated, which leads to a compulsion to reach out and get as much knowledge as possible. This we owe to you."