



MOTIVE 1

ARCHITECTURE

AS THEATRE

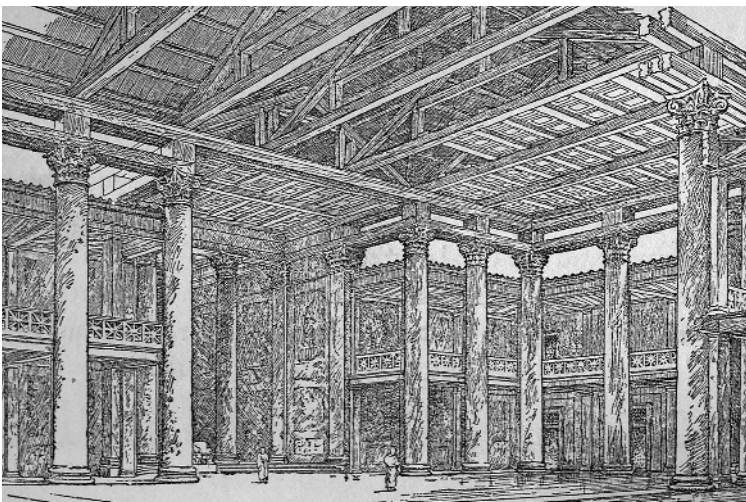
previous spread
Peter Behrens, administration building, Hoechst
Chemical Works, Frankfurt am Main, Germany,
1924: main hall.
An artist-turned-architect, Behrens created not
only a dramatic – almost Gothic – space, but
accentuated its sense of ‘theatre’ by an assiduous
use of stratified colour.

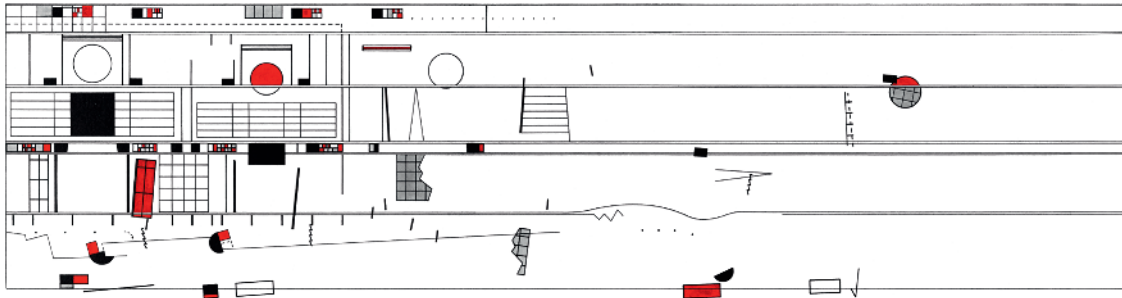
Thinking about architecture, I have rarely felt the need to detach myself from the circumstances around me – and certainly not by recourse to any system of abstraction. For this reason, most of the work discussed in this book is influenced by the episodic nature of events, by the coincidental, the referential, and is unashamedly biased. It seeks no truths but it enjoys two parallel areas of speculation: the ‘what if?’ and the ‘how could?’ that can be underscored by many instances of ‘now here’s a funny thing’.

Thus each chapter revolves around a motive – acting as a catalyst or driver of the various enthusiasms or observations, clarifying the identity of those same ‘what ifs?’ and ‘how could?’. In each case the motive is elaborated upon by a commentary that tries to observe the world around us and the ironies and layers of our acquired culture. This precedes the description of the work itself. Of course there are times when such observations do or do not have any direct

reference to what follows: yet I would claim that they sit there all the time, an experiential or prejudicial underbelly without which the description would lose dimension.

I do have a core belief, which I introduce here as the first motive: that for me, architecture should be recognised as theatre, in the sense that architecture should have character. It should be able to respond to the inhabitant or viewer and prepare itself for their presence, spatially; in other words, it should have that magic quality of *theatre*, with all its emphasis on performance, spectacle and delight.





INDULGING IN DELIGHT

Bernard Tschumi, National Theatre and
Opera House, Tokyo, 1986.

A competition project that demonstrates
Tschumi's often-demonstrated ability to
create a very clear concept and strategy for
a building; a figure that also recalls 20th-
century musical scores.

If the Ancient Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius came out in favour of 'firmness, commodity and delight' as the key elements of architecture in his celebrated treatise *De architectura (Ten Books on Architecture)*, we are by now, in the Western world, so statutorily bound into systems of checks and balances – standards, codes and building inspections – that non-firmness is unlikely. Yet commodity can be more: it is not just the common-sense placing of things, for these can also be placed wittily – and thus lead directly to the experience of delight. It is only dull architects who are immediately happy if buildings just have everything in the right place and leave it at that. But *delight*. This is a contentious beast; it involves evaluation, sensitivity, and even that difficult issue: taste.

What delights one irritates another, but both are alerted: their world is for the moment extended, identified, stopped in its tracks. If buildings are the setting for experience, then we may ask: can they influence that experience? It could be argued that people who are totally self-obsessed, or under extreme pressure, or blind, or in an extreme hurry ... may not notice where they are. But for the rest, the combination of presence, atmosphere, procedure and context add up to something that architecture should be aware of.

It is challenging to the notion of delight when the architect and writer Bernard Tschumi asserts the predominance of 'concept' to design in architecture, which seems to suck all the pleasure out of it. It immediately prompts me to substitute the word 'concept' with 'idea' – which is of course more emotive and less controlling than concept, or maybe comes a little before it. I would claim for 'idea' that it can be very affected by those same layers of 'what if' and 'how could' that may then sway or load up upon a concept and cause it to be unevenly but interestingly unbalanced. In the end, of course, Tschumi has wit and taste, as demonstrated by his unexecuted competition design for the National Theatre and Opera House, Tokyo (1986).

opposite

Vitruvius, basilica at Fano, Italy, 19 BC.

This is the only known built work of Vitruvius, effectively the first architectural theorist. If the visualisation is to be believed, it suggests that already by this time 'classical' mannerisms had already established themselves.

Partisan abstraction seems so often to be the province of the pious or the creatively untalented. It is so easy for them to wave a finger at us indulgers and enthusiasts, to constantly ask us to define our terms of reference and then posit some unbelievably dull terms of their own with (if at all) unbelievably boring architectural implications.

DISCOVERING NOVELTY IN THE KNOWN

I was always fascinated by the very creative mythology and spirituality of the New York architect, poet and educator John Hejduk (1929–2000) – who was Dean at the Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture for 25 years. In his investigations of freehand ‘figure/objects’, which expressed his own poetry, and his rare built works, like *Security* for Oslo (1989), I admired his ability to gaze beyond the logical world. The latter structure, originally conceived for Berlin, was erected by staff and students of the Oslo School of Architecture and placed on a site that had been heavily used by the Nazis when occupying Norway. However, I remain a little squeamish about symbolism and the unknown, and so I tend to retreat back into the comfort of tangible reference.

At this point the observer might ask how it is then possible for such a mind to suggest the new or the less-than-usually-likely. Naively, I would answer that almost every project is suggesting the possible and has its hind legs in the known. In fact those that don’t are the ones that tend to be forgettable. The interesting thing is that the references can be scrambled, the antecedents taken from anywhere; they just have to contain enough consistency to make the scene.

For so long I trod the corridors of schools of architecture, and served as Chair and Professor of the Bartlett School of Architecture (UCL), creating an architectural milieu. Even now that I am back in practice with Gavin Robotham at CRAB (Cook Robotham Architectural Bureau), having 95 per cent of my conversations with other architects (including those at home), the danger



John Hejduk, *Security*, Christiania Square, Oslo, 1989.

Designed for the City of Oslo and constructed by faculty and students of the Oslo School of Architecture, Hejduk's brooding creation symbolised a series of conceptual layers appropriate to a place that was the Nazi headquarters during Norway's occupation between 1940 and 1945.

is that one makes too many assumptions and moves within a referential comfort zone. In this circumstance, the theatre of architecture could easily become a run longer than Agatha Christie's play *The Mousetrap* (which at the time of writing is celebrating its 63rd consecutive year of performances in London's West End), in which every move and every nuance is predicted by the audience. Such a condition might dangerously lead to a tradition or a system.

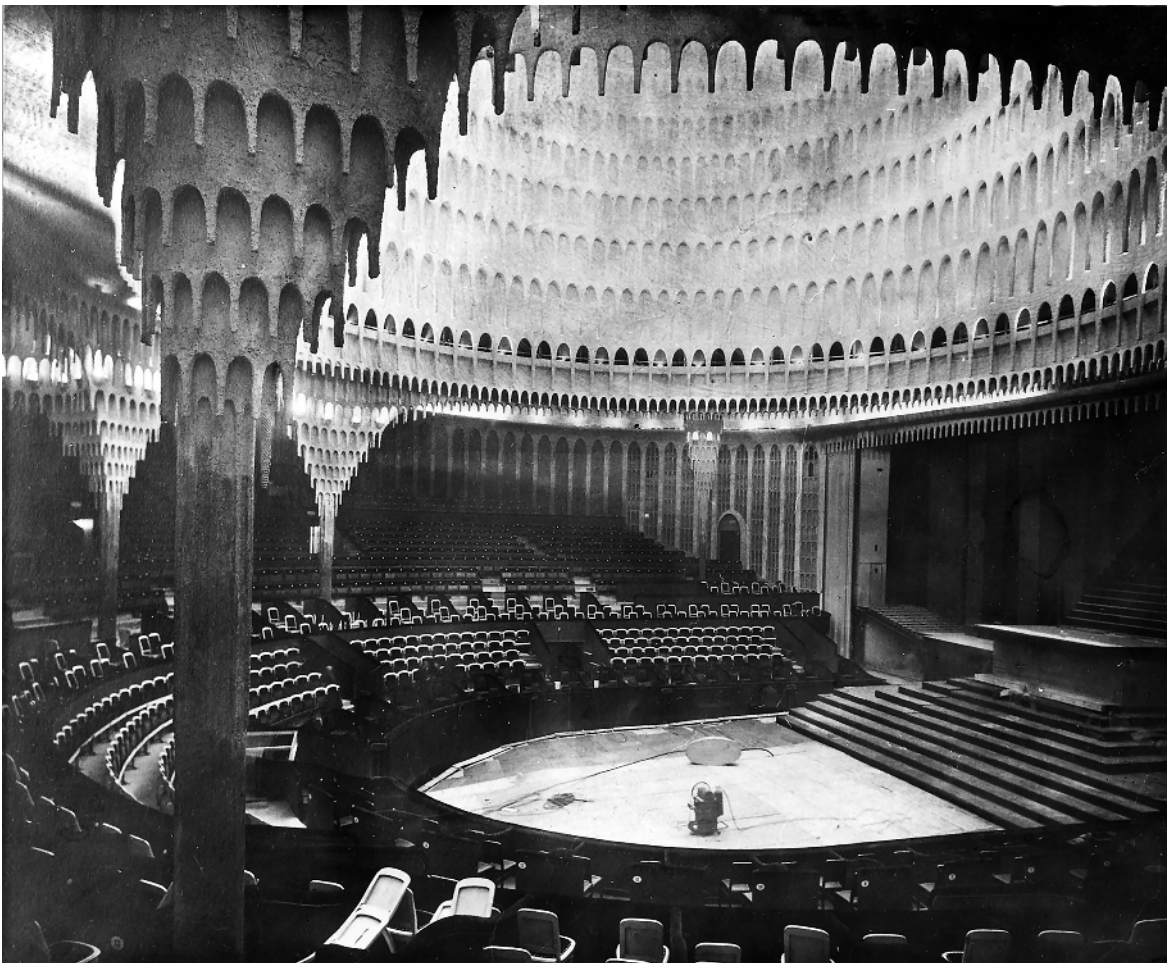
Thus there is a conscious intention to look at each task afresh and, if the projects themselves fall into a certain pattern, to invent other tasks that are not on offer from anywhere, but intriguing nonetheless. Hence there is a link over time between 'commissioned' and 'off-the-cuff' projects and a definite creative relationship between them.

Looking at each task afresh leads, unselfconsciously, towards a non-partisan interest in the contextual; though along the way I cannot help a tendency to poke fun at the self-importance that local 'worthies' and bystanders place upon things that are rather obvious and quite universal.

What conclusions can be drawn from the votes made by the readers of the local newspaper in Graz, for instance? On seeing the early renderings of the Kunsthau Graz (2003), which I designed with Colin Fournier (see Motive 6), they voted 70 per cent 'don't like' to 30 per cent 'like'; and then, three years later voted 70 per cent 'like' to 30 per cent 'don't like'. The built project was very close to the competition version, and during the process the reality of a filmy, blue surface and 920 light pixels crawling around among it were certainly no sop to tradition. So maybe they just got caught up in the intended atmosphere of celebration, dynamic, galvanisation and realised that this newcomer, rather than being a threat to this quite complex little city, was in the tradition of its complexity and collective *theatre*.

Hans Poelzig, Grosses Schauspielhaus, Berlin,
1920: reconstructed interior.

A long-since destroyed piece of 'total
architecture': the insistence and large scale
of the stalactite-like fretwork must have
created a sense of the unreal even before any
performance started.





HONING IN ON THE THEATRICAL STATEMENT

Enric Miralles and Carme Pinós, Igualada Cemetery, Barcelona, Spain, 1995.

Excavation as much as construction was used in the creation of the Igualada Cemetery – a giant earthwork in an arid river valley in the hills outside Barcelona. Blended into its natural setting, it makes use of a tiered landscape to spectacular effect, unfolding a visual and physical experience for mourners and visitors.

Every time I walk just behind King's Cross Station in London I become very depressed by the new English architecture of foursquare, mostly grey blocks: worthy, impassive, and – if made of brick – sitting there like dry shortbread biscuits. I contrast these in my mind with the lost moments of architectural creativity around a century before. The wonderful space created by the combination of audacity and originality that caused Hans Poelzig, in his design for his Grosses Schauspielhaus in Berlin (1920), to set out rings of stalactite-like frets that must surely have created a sense of theatre even when there was no performance on below. Or the circumstances in which a surely sensible and hard-headed organisation like the Hoechst chemical company in 1920s Frankfurt encouraged Peter Behrens to send cascades of colour down the walls of their main entrance hall. Or how a competition win in the mid-1980s enabled the fresh talent of someone like Enric Miralles to entirely reimagine the form that a cemetery might take for the living in the dramatic earthworks of the Igualada Cemetery, outside Barcelona.



Peter Cook, *A Predilection for Noses*, 2015. A collage admitting to a recurrent idea or even, simply, a taste that did not occur to me until the advent of the third example: the Abedian School of Architecture at Bond University, Queensland (2014, left) (the other two being the Kunsthau Graz (2003, bottom right) and the Department of Law at Vienna University of Economics and Business (2014, top right)). Yet is this a question of style or quaintness? Theatre is full of rhetoric, after all.

The theatre of architecture is also the theatre of life. When commissioned in 2008 to make a block of 100 apartments in the new Madrid suburb of Vallecas, we wished to bring it to life: with sports action on the roof, community action in the kiosks underneath, a liveliness of coloured shuttering and a bright blue form. Then the Spanish financial meltdown came and all these features disappeared. Which leaves the building as a hulk, no doubt enjoyable for the private lives within, but offering little to the sense of *theatre*, so desperately missing from this vast new dusty suburb.

Some might read the bright coloration of CRAB's Law School (2014) at Vienna University of Economics and Business as a theatrical statement, but they need to look inside, where the *theatre* is that of the incidental, the gossipy, the casual, the essentially non-curricular potential of bright people in proximity – and our spaces celebrate this.

So at this moment, CRAB's furthest claim for the theatre of architecture lies in the Abedian School of Architecture at Bond University in Queensland, Australia (2014), for like many novelists, we concoct a series of potential scenarios within a world that we grew up among. The idea for the street-based shed with a loose side and a tight side might come under the category of 'concept'. But a loose-limbed, fold-over scoop-collecting interpretation introduces a series of ideas that are immediately referred to the gaggles and scatterings, the formality and the informality or simply the vagaries of architecture school life. If you are aware, there can be at least six theatrical situations a day in such a place.

All this, without mentioning light, sound, peering, gazing, clustering, hiding, shouting and much else, and neither with any explanation of my curious architectural predilection for 'noses'.