



**Byera Hadley Student Travel Scholarship Submission  
2004**

HOW DO ARCHITECTS APPROACH THE NOTION OF  
THE 'THEATRE RITUAL' IN CONTEMPORARY  
THEATRE DESIGN?

A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF TWO CONTEMPORARY  
THEATRES IN EUROPE

**Sarah Hearne, University of Technology Sydney**



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## **PRECIS**

A study was undertaken of two recent architecturally significant theatres, in relation to the ideologies of Walter Gropius as described in the 'Totaltheatre' concept of 1927.

The 'Theatre L'Eclat (2000) Pont Audemer, by Jakob MacFarlane and the New Luxor Theatre (2001) Rotterdam, by Bolles Wilson, were chosen as two pieces of architecture produced by two very different, but equally inspirational, firms working within Europe today.

The theatres were completed around the same time, allowing for a more balanced comparison, and represent different ideologies in regards to housing theatre in various aspects.

The study of the theatres did not reflect an influence of the thinking of 'Totaltheatre' in any direct way. However, the topic stirred up some intriguing conversations with the respective architects about the modes of theatre and the relationships between architectural space in the theatrical event.

The architects discussed other ways of subverting and looking at the relationship between the audience and actor in more subtle ways. Thinking about the end user and making a theatre to encourage patronage were influential on the form and concepts of both architects. It would seem that there are more important issues for the contemporary commercial theatre director than experimenting in the 'actor/audience' relationships.

The Nieuwe Luxor is a popular theatre facilitating large-scale productions mainly from Dutch companies. The building was designed to accommodate a high turnover of performances. A company can potentially arrive, play and depart all in the same night. The auditorium seats 1500 people, and there is a sense of creating a glamorous and, in many ways, populist experience for the people of Rotterdam.

In contrast, L'Eclat is a smaller theatre within a network of community theatres in rural Normandy. The refurbishment of this modernist theatre by Jakob MacFarlane has established the theatre as a 'no frills' theatrical event. L'Eclat supports an agricultural and industrial community outside of the town, as well as in, and has a much more intimate space of performance. The auditorium has a flexible configuration, which seats a maximum of 400 people.

I have attempted to explore how the task of designing a building for performance has been tackled in each case, and comparatively, through the analysis of each theatre and in conversation with the architects themselves.



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**How do architects approach the notion of the 'Theatre ritual' in contemporary theatre design?: A case study analysis of two contemporary theatres in Europe**

*"..the 'Totaltheatre' ..in terms of pure diagram the space is very dynamic...for me the only problem with the 'Totaltheatre' was in fact it was.... all too pre figured in some ways. You could see immediately there were certain kinds of theatre that could work in it... but you could imagine they almost had to be quite dynamic forms.... had to be at the level of just rotating all the time to make the space come alive. I think there's a big thing there where it still all has to somehow try and establish.... with then being a kind of a background machine and yet have the ability to be dynamic."*

*(Brendan MacFarlane interview 2004)*

The basis of this paper was, initially, a comparative analysis of two recent architecturally significant theatres, in relation to the ideologies of Walter Gropius as demonstrated in the 'Totaltheatre' concept of 1927. The theatres visited and studied were:

1. 'Theatre L'Eclat'(2000) Pont Audemer, Jakob MacFarlane
2. The New Luxor Theatre (2001) Rotterdam, Bolles-Wilson

These theatres had the advantage of a close age of completion. This allowed for a more balanced comparison. The buildings would have been conceptualised within the same context. They represent two pieces of architecture produced by two very different but equally inspirational firms working within Europe today. Further, both theatres represent different ideologies in regards to housing theatre in various aspects.

I hoped to discover, through this study, some sort of impression of the influence of ideologies of Walter Gropius' 'Totaltheatre' (1927) within the designs of recent theatre architecture in Europe. The theatres did not reflect an influence of the thinking of the 'Totaltheatre' in any direct way. However, I found it interesting that the topic stirred up some intriguing conversations with the respective architects about the modes of theatre and the relationships between the architectural space and the theatrical event. The architects discussed other ways of subverting and looking at the relationship between audience and actor in perhaps more subtle ways.

The concerns of theatre companies, thinking about the end user and making a theatre that encourages patronage, were influential on the form and concepts of

both architects. It would seem that there are more important issues for the contemporary commercial theatre director than experimenting in the 'actor/audience' relationships. This became apparent too in the selection of two theatres despite such widely differing contexts and users.

The Nieuwe Luxor by Bolles Willson is a large popular theatre facilitating many large-scale productions mainly from Dutch companies. The building is designed to accommodate a high turnover of performances. A company can potentially arrive, play and depart all in the same night. The auditorium seats 1500 people, and there is a sense of creating a glamorous and, in many ways, populist experience for the people of Rotterdam.

In contrast, 'L'Eclat' is a smaller theatre within a network of community theatres in rural Normandy. The refurbishment of this modernist theatre by Jakob MacFarlane has established the L'Eclat as a 'no frills' theatrical event. The theatre, which supports an agricultural and industrial community outside of the town, as well as in, has a much more intimate space of performance. The auditorium has a flexible configuration, which seats a maximum of 400 people.

Through the analysis of the above theatres and the accompanying quotes from the architects themselves, taken from interviews during my trip, I am seeking to explore how the two have tackled the issue of designing a building for performance.

## **The Nieuwe Luxor Theatre**

### **The Context**

*"Rotterdam has always been a city of work. It is after all, the place where shirts are sold with the sleeves already rolled up" (Rob Wiegman, Nieuwe Luxor p3)*

There is a particular history to the Nieuwe Luxor site, one that is strongly aligned to its dockland home. With the docklands goes a definite "working class roots" ethic. According to theatre director Rob Wiegman, the city relates strongly with this ethic. During the Second World War Rotterdam was heavily bombed, allowing the, arguable, luxury of rebuilding not only the urban fabric but the image of the city as well.

The dockland areas were a particularly interesting area of architectural ferment. The Nieuwe Luxor nestles into its surroundings as another contemporaneous object on the Kop Van Zuid's spacious horizon. The building fronts onto Wilhelmina Plein, an expanse of road sitting on the Maas River edge, attached to the 'old city' by the taut form of Ben Van Berkel's Erasmus Bridge. The old city houses the original Luxor, and Weigman points out the natural response of siting the 'new' to be existing across the water in amongst the 'young' and developing edge of Rotterdam.

Bolles Wilson was involved in the master planning of the Wilhelmina Plein, and the co-design of public space within the Wilhelmina Plein with Dutch firm DsV. During the master planning process the embryonic stages of the Nieuwe Luxor, pre-competition, suggested a red 'blob' like form perched on the site.

On approach to the building from the Erasmus Bridge, a great white façade panel with black smudged graphics dominates the approach. This is an anamorphic

cast depicting archival Luxor images. The smudges condense and form a completed image on closer inspection (and careful choice of vantage point). Initial ideas about this façade onto the Kop van Zuid, revolved around 'media walls', lights, action – more akin to the façade of the adjacent Renzo Piano building with its analogue type blinking illuminated façade.

The 'lo-fi' treatment that exists today creates a language and a way of thinking about theatre as an experience. Wilson calls this 'non electric virtuality'. The spectacle of the cast unfolds before the viewer without intermediate mediation of technology. The cast is currently a moot point for theatre director, Rob Weigman, who wishes to utilise the visibility-blessed space for advertisements. I would suggest that it is this kind of lack of preciousness about the building that in many ways allows it to sit so comfortably within its context.

According to Peter Wilson, an understanding of context meant that a building to be placed on the site would need to function as something that 'opened up' to pedestrian movement. The brief itself posed programmatic conflicts to this intention, given the vehicle logistics required for the contemporary theatre. However, the architects accommodated both requirements. It is this balancing act according to Wilson that becomes 'key' in making the building 'acceptable to the context'.

## **The Building**

*"I think our task was to interpret warm and friendly in an abstract way and not to resort to some kitsch hanging chandeliers and then doing some familiar motifs"*  
(Peter Wilson interview 2004)

When asked for a theatre design that was "warm and friendly" Bolles-Wilson responded with a building that delivers a sense of the unique in the generic. Working on this ideology and searching for a fresh response to the most staid of theatre requirements and expectations produced a complex brief with a surprisingly simple formal layout. According to Wilson, there was a feeling that the building needed to distance itself from 'abstract modern buildings' that ultimately may alienate the end user.

The building faces the street with a generous public forecourt, which sits under an enormous folded canopy defining, but not enclosing, space. The outside space becomes like a 'pre-foyer-foyer'; a place of social spectacle- a glamorous space with potential for a 'red carpet' type experience. A stage unto itself, with the vertical vastness of a flytower, this 'stage' is un-bordered by the symbolic proscenium arch. This space is another potential stage slipping amongst the pragmatic programme. The Concrete 'box', a structural element seemingly propping up the canopy, holds potential seating and frames the views. It becomes another play on the idea of the framed and directed view, adding layers of richness to choreographed viewed/viewer situations.

Edging the folded canopy is the luminous Luxor sign. This references JJP Ouds Café in Unie across the Maas. Wilson talks of the influence this small café reconstruction sitting across the waterway in the old city. There are definite playful references to Café Uud in the expression of the Neiwe Luxor.

The whole theatre experience of the Nieuwe Luxor exists as a deliberate series of events, which, together, produce a simple 'ritual' of each visit. The plan reflects this with its simple unfolding layout; not simply in the importance placed on the approach to the building, but also on the sense of 'arrival'. The ticket office becomes a separate element to actual theatre entry. It is off to the side of the forecourt. This could be a way of holding people outside the theatre for public display- think of Broadway and the street-side ticket box.

Indeed, Wilson talks of the desire for a theatre that 'held the aspirations of the city'. According to him, what the people were wanting was a more straightforward 'Hollywood like entertainment', rather than theatre with 'intellectual pretensions'. The building projects a sense of great openness. This building is a public room in the city. Essentially, Peter Wilson feels that this is primary theatre function and expression.

There are two basic modes of moving around the building; the 'choreographed' and the 'derive' or the 'drifting'<sup>1</sup>. It is possible to follow the sweeping promenade and then move off to one of the stairways hanging off the red shell about the auditorium. The promenade happens by way of a shallow stair ramp walkway winding upward against the warmth of the timber panelled inner face of the fabulous red shell. The stairs are lit at foot level where the outer skin is pulled away to reflect the line of the foyer/truck ramp/foyer/ relationship. Inversely at night the viewer becomes the viewed as the flicker of human traffic moves up the stairs.

For Bolles Wilson, the building becomes like a 'viewing machine' through its circulatory positioning. This strategic harnessing of views has a lot to do with the sequencing of the spaces- *"it is theatrical in the way it tried to make events for spaces, it's very like an English landscape garden really, to do with sort of a programmed unfolding of the space. And landscape gardens sort of have some rules like the foot should not travel where the eye has not been before and things like that. And the interior.... it's almost big enough to be seen as a landscape"* (Peter Wilson interview 2004).

Peter Wilson refers to the character of the internal spaces as being almost like a 'landscape'. For him the vast vertical voids that cut through the building are perhaps 'canyon-esque'. This visually connects those within the building and, pragmatically, acoustically disconnects the performance space with the foyer spaces. Interestingly enough, the 'viewing from on high' creates more layered reading of the space as somewhere to view and be viewed.

Below the promenade exists what I like to call a 'ramp sandwich'. What does this residue of efficiency, the sandwiching of a service ramp with 2 foyer spaces, metaphorically mean as an architectural move? The logistical traffic of the theatre company is happening out of view to those inside the building. However, it is obvious to those from the outside. So the subtle art of trickery, of hiding and revealing the mechanics of the production are denied internally to the public.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a mode of movement coined by the Situationists, in some ways this terminology for me comes to mind, when looking at modes of movement around the building, and in a sense this multiplicity of the assorted stairways, but also the directional ramp that suggests a primary mode of circulation.

For me, this reflects one of the most fantastic aspects of theatre. To partake in the theatrical event is to submit to the spectacle, or to withhold your own rational thinking. The magic of the theatre begins when we pass the entry threshold. At this point we must succumb to the most absurd and illogical constructs. We do this comfortably in the knowledge of the theatre ritual. It is this understanding of the proscenium threshold, and the unique notion of a theatre as a room that holds two very different zones. That is perhaps the subtlest subversion, which occurs in the Nieuwe Luxor Theatre.

## The Auditorium

*“the theatre is two totally different worlds of one so that it overlaps. It was the proscenium arch and one knows from theatre theory that the proscenium arch is like a conceptual border between the world of experience and the world of illusion. And we tried to....., well we purposely took the proscenium arch outside the building as just the sideline..... the line that you enter. So when you cross that line you are leaving the Proscenium and you’re entering the world of illusion. It means that the audience is, maybe the audience is just by entering the building crossing the barrier ... that the ‘Totaltheatre’ tried to breakdown..... well actually we’re putting it there purposely as the barrier to be transgressed....we’re saying that the transgression and returning back to the other side is.. part of a normal cycle..... it’s the knot that you break through and you’re totally free and liberated on the other side”*

*(Peter Wilson interview 2004)*

Spatially the auditorium is incredibly vast. The dark black of the surrounds is encased in softer and more tactile wood interventions. Curved battened screens cover the black foam acoustic baffles but also echo the maritime curves of the building exterior. There is a sense of identity within the Luxor auditorium that is strongly aligned with the theatre’s own identity within the city. The building is wholly cohesive. It is not a ‘nondescript’ egg of a theatre surrounded by a strong and unique ‘case’. Within what is a very ‘conventional’ or generic large theatre auditorium the interventions of Bolles Wilson define the Luxor.

Francis Yates<sup>2</sup>, in ‘the theatre of memory’ states that the actors in Shakespearian time would use the theatre as a memory trigger. For example, installing the image of a column with a certain line, thus directing the actor on the stage with the theatre itself as the prompt. There is a tongue in cheek reference to this with the light boxes above the audience head, displaying a strong graphic of quotes, lines and words. This also becomes a generous offer to the audience as some form of pre-performance occupation.

An oversized ‘game of dominos’ house the house lights and hangs from the roof. According to Wilson this was a response to the clients’ desire for a ‘chandelier’ type gesture of grandeur. This once again ‘lightens’ the theatre, as something more frivolous in a way, and fun. Once again, the ideological stance behind the building is obvious; there is a familiarity to the symbolism of the building. It challenges the notion of the theatre as ungraspable, ambiguous and at times self-indulgent.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Wilson, mentions this book as influential on the design of the auditorium

*The competition program states “the architect’s challenge will be to create a building to match the traditions of a Broadway theatre with modern feel for style, technology and material. In short, it shall be a building to appeal to the varied tastes of a larger audience, yet through its quality, visual impact, and sheer spatial authority, effortlessly exceed the compromise of the commonplace.” (p7 Nieuwe Luxor)*

Perhaps in some ways the theatre represents a sort of specifically Dutch ‘populist’ manner, if Bolles-Wilson was concerned with creating a building that appeals to people and is familiar. The form refers to something very recognisable to the contemporary Dutch identity, in the work of JJP Oud - a sort of pronounced graphic architecture of signage in some way. What was interesting about this move for Wilson was the fact that he felt in some ways that the building was never truly embraced in young Dutch architectural circles.

The structural logic and understanding that occurs in the building is in parallel with the notion of Yate’s ‘theatre of memory’. Just as the actors ‘read’ objects in the theatre as a way of interpreting and remembering text, the building is designed with a rationale that allows the building to ‘tell the story of how it’s made’. Structurally, the variation of column types (steel, concrete and skewed) really relates to the particular columns context within the building. This is obviously a pragmatic necessity, but the overall aesthetic affect becomes an interesting layering of systems. Unlike some post modern buildings, where columns may defy walls and potentially serve more as aesthetic markers, there is a move to allow the building to ‘be’. There is an unashamed acceptance that different column expressions exist due to their different capabilities, ‘and that is okay’.

Materiality plays a primary role in the narrative of the building. Shakespearean theatre is again referenced in the materiality of a wood – like product on the wrapping red façade. The wood cladding gives this a more intimate feel and potentially removes the building from Weigman’s fear of “architects abstract modern buildings” by using more humane or domestic materials. The building form and colour seems true enough to its ‘blob’ origins to allow many readings and understandings of the form.

*“And the red colour... that was to do with the comfort of the theatre we develop .. the idea of the red theatre curtain ... the most luxurious of the plushy period if we thematisized red rather than take velvet seats or something so.... we put in the major red architectural element which had the scale of the building. And then on the inside here with wooden walls also... and wood we often use..... it always has a very tactile positive affect on the space”  
(Peter Wilson interview 2004)*

The service spaces of the building find themselves tucked around the front side of the building facing the Kop van Zuid. The offices are represented to the front of the building rather than hidden away. This opens up the views to the water, but also creates a simple division between the service and the served. It is interesting to note that in this building the service spaces determined the form and layout. There is an acceptance of the nonnegotiable aspects of the brief. This is a pragmatically derived building, conceived of an incredibly tight site and a rather complex brief.

## **The Theatre L'Eclat**

*"We're extremely interested in trying to work with the situation that we find whether it's a physical one, psychological one, emotional one... we spend a lot of time analysing that, looking at it. And in a way our work is trying to create something that responds to that. Often, in a way, the problems given, and all the issues around ..... the answer's somehow [in it].... one of the richest answers actually lies with working as close as you can to that.*

*It isn't about bringing in an idea and just dumping it down or popping it down.... we're very interested in creating resonance in the work. Resonance being something where you enter the work or when you're in the work..... it kind of makes sense why they're there.... not just a rival at the last moment.*

*And the sense that each project generally starts to tell a story ..... we do it because we want things also to belong somehow. In some cases they shouldn't belong at all, you know, maybe the issue was actually not about belonging.....but it is an obvious choice".*

*(Brendan MacFarlane interview 2004)*

## **The context**

Brendan MacFarlane and Dominique Jakob's Theatre L'Eclat is an exercise in strategic intervention with an existing structure. The original post-war building was carefully 'operated' on to remedy what was, essentially, a building that was not performing optimally. It is interesting to see, not only the idea of the Luxor and L'Eclat as buildings of a different scale, but also essentially of a different nature. Particularly interesting with the L'Eclat is Jakob Macfarlane's medical type diagnosis of the theatre auditorium configuration and overhaul.

What are the outcomes of this?

## **The Old Theatre**

The old theatre was designed by Maurice Novarina, a renowned French 'master architect' and contemporary to Corbusier, in the French Cultural building 'boom' of the 1970s<sup>3</sup>. According to MacFarlane, the building carried the modernist lineage borne of the post war rigour – with ideas about taking the country back and somehow giving it a new birth.

Formally MacFarlane refers to the existing modernist building by Novarina as a 'parachutage'. That is, something which is seemingly sited as if it 'arrived from the sky'. In a sense he seems to be referring to the incongruity of a building and its surroundings. There was a sense that the concrete and tinted glass prismatic building stood on the periphery of the old town and without the openness of the current glass façade. Perhaps it is this brutal nature of the building that ultimately alienated the public. Whatever the cause the council in 1995 took it upon themselves to attempt to resurrect the invalid fringe dweller.

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<sup>3</sup> Florence Accorsi, Theatre L'eclat 2000

*"It was very brutal, it was a square and in plan. In the corner of the square near the triangle with its stage and the public....., interestingly enough the public was essentially a group of people .... more people than there is today going more or less to the sides of that square. So the public in a sense became the centre of the square and the theatre became up to the side... an unusual configuration.*

*It was obviously a highly deliberate choice by the architect, in a sense, to make the audience the centre, and the stage almost a secondary..... what it did I think symbolically in the plan was.... the theatre was on the periphery.... and the public was dictated as centre of the universe..... as the 'thing'. But the point of the geometry being Euclidean geometry which is not a critique in a negative way but .... that kind of geometry forced..... this relationship.*

*The idea that you could perform let's say in a triangle .... became an impossibility for the theatre..... if you had a smaller group of people inside this vast space it would be fairly uncomfortable..... in fact it was acoustically.... glass walls on two sides.... acoustically, climatically.....a disaster. So.... it was never a theatre that really works for the town so we had this object.... this great modern thing rising..... but the town had really not taken it on.*

*We were contacted to make a competition.... We won the competition..... the idea was, in fact, to restructure the theatre. Restructuration really meant that we had to work with all the problems, sightline, acoustic, climatic, the theatre itself, numbers. The city said to us 'listen we don't think there's that many people [it can serve] its absurd'..... we reduced the numbers of people by half. They also said that we have a major problem with accessing the stage..... what we proposed, and its fairly obvious I think, was to try as in a way keep as much of the building..... the budget was quite low..... as much of the building which was useful".*

*(Brendan MacFarlane interview 2004)*

## **The building**

Working with the existing skeleton of the old building, the floor plates and columns, Jakob MacFarlane inserts the 'orange volume' into the centre. The orange volume houses the new auditorium. This is the symbolic heart of the building and in many ways reminiscent of the auditorium/lobby relationship in Walter Gropius' 'Totaltheatre', if in a fairly superficial way<sup>4</sup>.

Like the total theatre, Theatre L'Eclat's orange skin becomes symbolic of the shroud around the theatrical event. It injects a sense of obscurity and mystery, a glowing form pulsating from the side of the 'old' town, offering a tantalising hint of the energy encased within.

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of the totally open glazed façade for Gropius signified an open face to the public and a visible social space. And within this transparent encasement exists the *yolk* of the theatre, shrouded in a kinetically flexible skin.

For MacFarlane the skin of the orange volume is richly loaded with symbolism. Colour and materiality of the wall speak of an overarching metaphor referring to the idea of 'construction'. The idea of construction, in a building sense, parallels his notion of theatre as something that is very much constructed anew each performance. To this end, the materiality is the rough corrugated iron of the building sites. The orange volume speaks of a rough and ready eagerness, rather than a sophisticated and refined detailing.

The building is sited on the edge of the Reisle River, which is relied upon by the tanneries and industrial sheds further down stream. There is reference to this in the choice of materials. Using materials familiar to the locals, allows the theatre to disassociate with the negative connotations of a bourgeoisie or elitist pastime. From an experiential point of view, to stumble upon the theatre, sighted peripherally down a tight and winding side street is fantastic- particularly if you are lost and trying to find it!

The experience of the theatre ritual is more of a 'grass roots' approach at the Theatre L'Eclat, than the more 'Hollywood glamour' of the Luxor in Rotterdam. The 'forecourt' functions as a 'skirt' to the building. It does not necessarily become an extension of lobby space. This is obviously not simply an architectural intention from Jakob MacFarlane but more of a response to physical context and the desire of the people of Pont Audemer. It would seem to me that the idea of a large and 'cosmopolitan' type of theatre building, such as the Luxor, may not transfer to what is essentially a rural theatre space. Though it should be noted that the productions at the theatre are adventurous and definitely at times 'cosmopolitan' in their content.

*"And it's important because essentially the big problem here was that the town had a terrible history of no one going to the theatre probably because the stage never worked but also culturally they never really went to the theatre...on the other hand our big problem was to originally create something which would be a living thing, that could keep on going right. And more important it would be actually accepted by the local community and accepted by the more distant community. And would be a place where people would want to come back to..."*  
(Brendan MacFarlane interview 2004)

For MacFarlane, the way the theatre is used and relates to the city is an important factor in the 'attitude' of the building. The forecourt to L'Eclat now visually flows into the theatre lobby. The glazed form sits gently on this surface, without obscuring this sense of the shared. The pre condition of the 'forecourt' was a small perimeter hemming the building with stairs. The notion of bringing the surfaces of the theatre floor and the public court together in some ways reconciles the theatre to the public. This intention for the architects was to represent a personal belief that this theatre is not about an elevated 'temple' or 'object'- like quality of building. So with small moves within the existing building frame the architects seek to push the buildings expression and subtly shift the ideology of the building, from modernist leanings, to a more egalitarian notion of the theatre.

The entry to the building is an intriguing architectural move. MacFarlane claims that the corner entry, with its address of two aspects, is the most 'democratic' entry. However, it is not just the doors that address this diagonal shift to the corner, the reception and offices echo this orientation. Democratic or not, there is a small sense of rebellion perhaps against the rigid geometry set up in the Novarina scheme.

The symmetry of the new plan is most likely another hangover from the existing shell of the Novarina building. There are moments of shift, such as in the reception. But the divisions are fundamental - ladies toilets to the left, men's to the right and two large staircases mirror each other on either side. The toilets and change rooms for the actors are sunken into the ground, underneath the stage. Connected back up to the stage area by a spiral staircase.

The service zones in this building or the 'back of house' are incredibly condensed at the back of the building, overlooking the waterway. This sense of 'tucking spaces away' differs from the Luxor where the service and office spaces are pushed onto the street edge, and the public lobbies are out toward the (admittedly more substantial and spectacular) water edge.

The glazing pattern of the curtain wall façade 'resonates' with the original building's window articulation. The rhythm has changed but in many ways still references what was. This, for me, is the moment that essentially captures what Jakob MacFarlane intend with 'resonance' in a building. The façade toes the line between a respect for and trace of the past building whilst enforcing a new expression and ideology.

There is also intended a reading of the window patterns which echoes the traditional Tudor house construction still evident in many surrounding shops and buildings. The rigid patterning of the facade is broken down by the use of opaque glass in certain points. From the exterior this denies a sense of total openness, which, much like the orange volume, alludes to a sense of that which is not revealed. The sheer material of the glass allows the lamp like ethereal glow at night, and internally it intensifies those views, which are intended by framing them.

## **The Auditorium**

*"I have a big problem with the split personally [of the theatre 'room']- too much of a division in a sense between the spectacle and the audience...its not as though you know all the rules... just because you're breaking that barrier somehow you still keep all the magic...., you don't need a frame that just treats it as a two dimensional thing... to reinforce that magic.... if we can get a theatre which is able to give the frame at times but also to be able to be remove it...."*  
(Brendan MacFarlane interview 2003)

The theatre could be called modest, or 'intimate'. The space between the orange volume and the glass encasement becomes circulation space essentially. However, there is a looseness of program that allows layered ideas of spatial acquisition for exhibition of people and artwork. This sense of looseness and transformation of space and program is echoed in the auditorium with flexible stage configuration.

The stage, which had been tucked into the corner of the theatre perimeter, is now celebrated, and has crept into the former audience space. There is a sense of theatrical liberation in the Jakob MacFarlane refurbishment. The stage, pre1995, tucked in to the corner of the room and was hemmed by excessive seating and was of a shape that, seemingly, is unusual to say the least.

The curious triangular shape of the stage most likely limited not only production types, but also the actor and directors' freedom to activate the spatial potential of the play. In a way, the most intriguing aspect to this particular theatre is the transition of stage configurations from a triangular form, existing somewhere closer to the 'proscenium' typology- to MacFarlane's tri-partite stage setup. The simple diagrammatic shift fans out to three possible outcomes, an orchestra formation, small ballets and a thrust stage for dramatic theatre.

It is this sort of flexibility of stage configurations that Jakob MacFarlane continues to explore, both in physical and symbolic manifestations. Another theatre proposal in St Lazaar by the firm is a more pointed attempt by the firm to explore the idea of reconciling the audience and actor relationship, without removing the ability to once again restore the proscenium framing. The frame folds back at the sides of the stage here, creating an interesting dichotomy between the conflicting stage configuration. Though subtle, the move is symbolically perhaps more significant. That the proscenium frame actually folds away is, in a sense, removing the symbolism of 'two dimensionalising' theatre. However, in many ways the ideas of transcending the '4<sup>th</sup> wall' are explored in theatre through the direct engagement of the actor with the audience, irrespective of stage configuration.

*"What we're trying to do here now is destroy completely the idea of salle/scene and create one space. So we're... talking about as one space..... if it wants to be interpretative then its literally fold that back into a relation that's anything more than, existing more traditional in a sense that this is the salle separate to the scene. And the sense of a space which is also a malleable surface so that we can actually put the public [in other configurations]... ..we're very interested in this idea that wouldn't it be fantastic if we can create a theatre, which isn't just necessarily split between the two".*

*(Brendan MacFarlane interview 2004)*

MacFarlane described another JakobMacFarlane theatre as a 'machine' for the city. This is a really interesting metaphor in relation to Gropius' 'Totaltheatre', which was 'a machine for theatre'. Does this description encapsulate or reveal a current strand of thinking about theatre architecture and the commercial imperative?

Perhaps the concerns of the mainstream commercial theatre never were engaged in the ideologies (of unifying the actor and the audience in the shared experience) of people such as Gropius and Piscator. The spaces of performance are certainly interrogated by Wilson and MacFarlane. Both cite the client as not particularly interested in 'utopian' visions of the 'Totaltheatre'.

It would seem, from my discussions with the architects, that the primary focus is more related to establishing an 'image' for the building in its context. There is much talk of a form and expression that is readable and meaningful for the public.

Perhaps there is a necessity for the commercial theatre to entice theatregoers, which surpasses, in some way, the experimentation in audience and actor configurations.

On reviewing collected material from the interviews and the trip itself, I noticed an interesting parable for the two buildings - a nice 'rounding up point' - not necessarily significant, but incredibly telling for both theatres:

Peter Wilson told me about the latest artwork to be 'installed' at the Luxor (during my visit). A Dutch artist was to carefully hand glue tiny red rubies into every air bubble in the surface of one concrete column in the Luxor foyer.

I think this small move by an artist infers an idea about the spectacle of theatre as glittering, glamorous and rich, perhaps. Compare this now with Brendan MacFarlane's descriptions of the columns at L'Eclat as 'rough as guts' exposed and sandblasted concrete, expressing a desire to represent the 'day to day' of the theatre experience.

\* \* \* \* \*

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FIGURE 1.1

*I have a big problem with the split personally (of the theatre 'room'): too much of a division in a sense between the spectacle and the audience... It's not as though you know all the rules just because you're breaking that barrier somehow you still keep all the magic, you don't need a frame that just treats it as a two dimensional thing that you're seeing in order to, I think, to reinforce that magic. But I think the some theatre recourse in that's where one company one done that it's absurd, is that some theatres that demands that frame. But if we could can get a theatre which is able to give the frame at times but also to be able to be remove it about wanting to get a number of things but I think, it's you know, it's always assessed*  
 (Brendan MacFarlane interview 2004)





FIGURE 1.2: FROM SIDE STREET



FIGURE 1.3: FROM CAR PARK



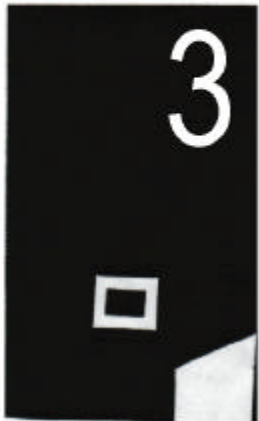
"Our big problem was to originally create something which would be a living thing, that could keep on going right. And more important it would be actually accepted by the local community and accepted by the more distant community. And would be a place where people would want to come back to"  
(Brendan MacFarlane interview 2004)

THEATRE ROYAL AT



FIGURE 1.4: AT NIGHT  
(image taken from [www.achimetal.com](http://www.achimetal.com))

EXTERIOR



THEATRE L'ECLAT

*We're extremely interested in trying to work with the situation that we find whether it's a physical one, psychological one, emotional one etc. And we spend a lot of time analysing that, looking at it. And in a way our work is trying to create something that responds to that.*  
(Brandon MacFarlane interview 2004)



FIGURE 1.5 PONT AUDEMER CANAL

CONTEXT

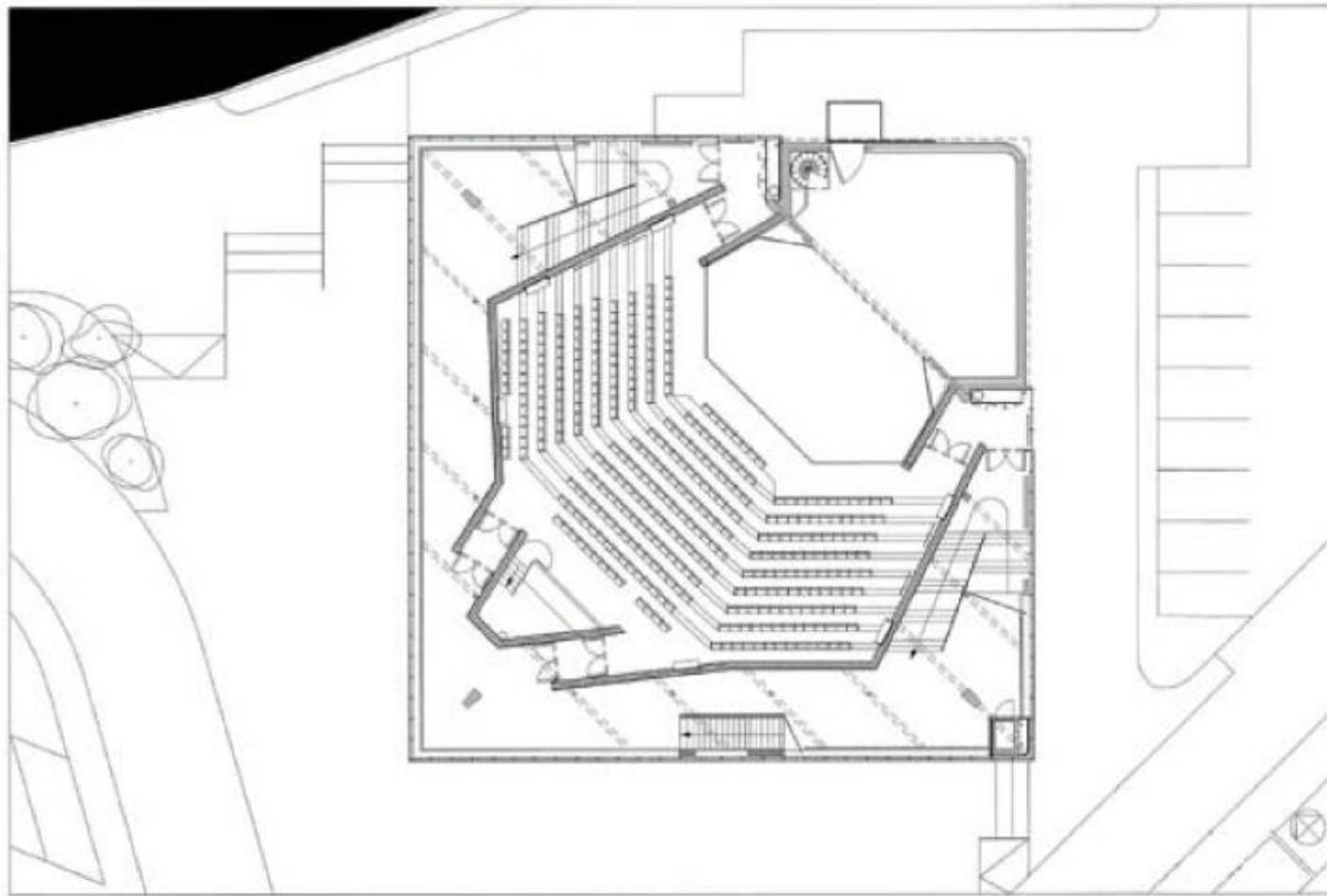


FIGURE 1.7: GROUND FLOOR PLAN  
(taken from [www.archimetal.com](http://www.archimetal.com))

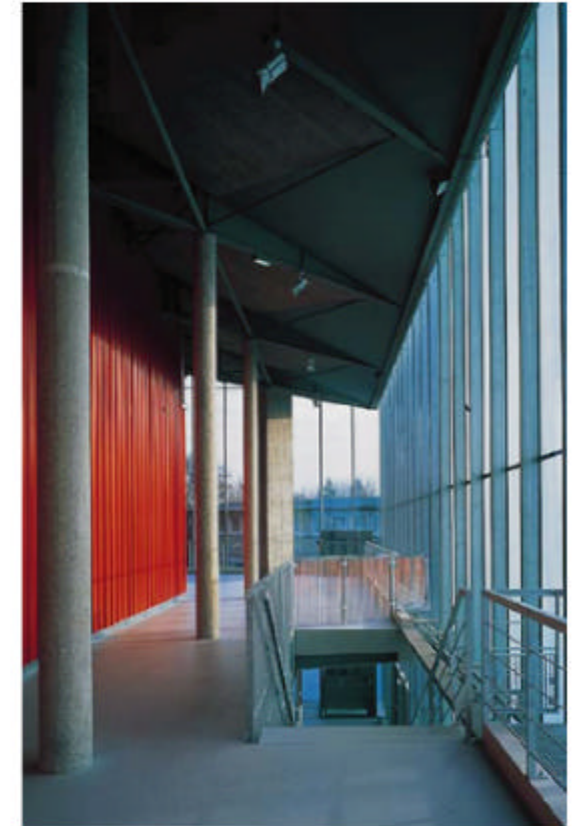
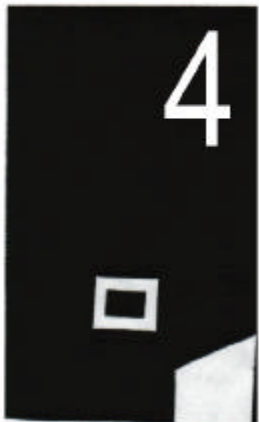
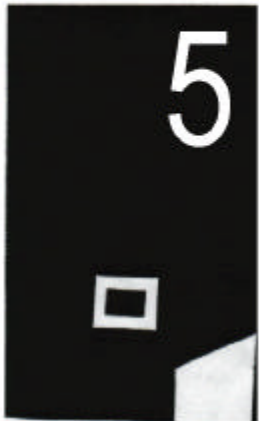
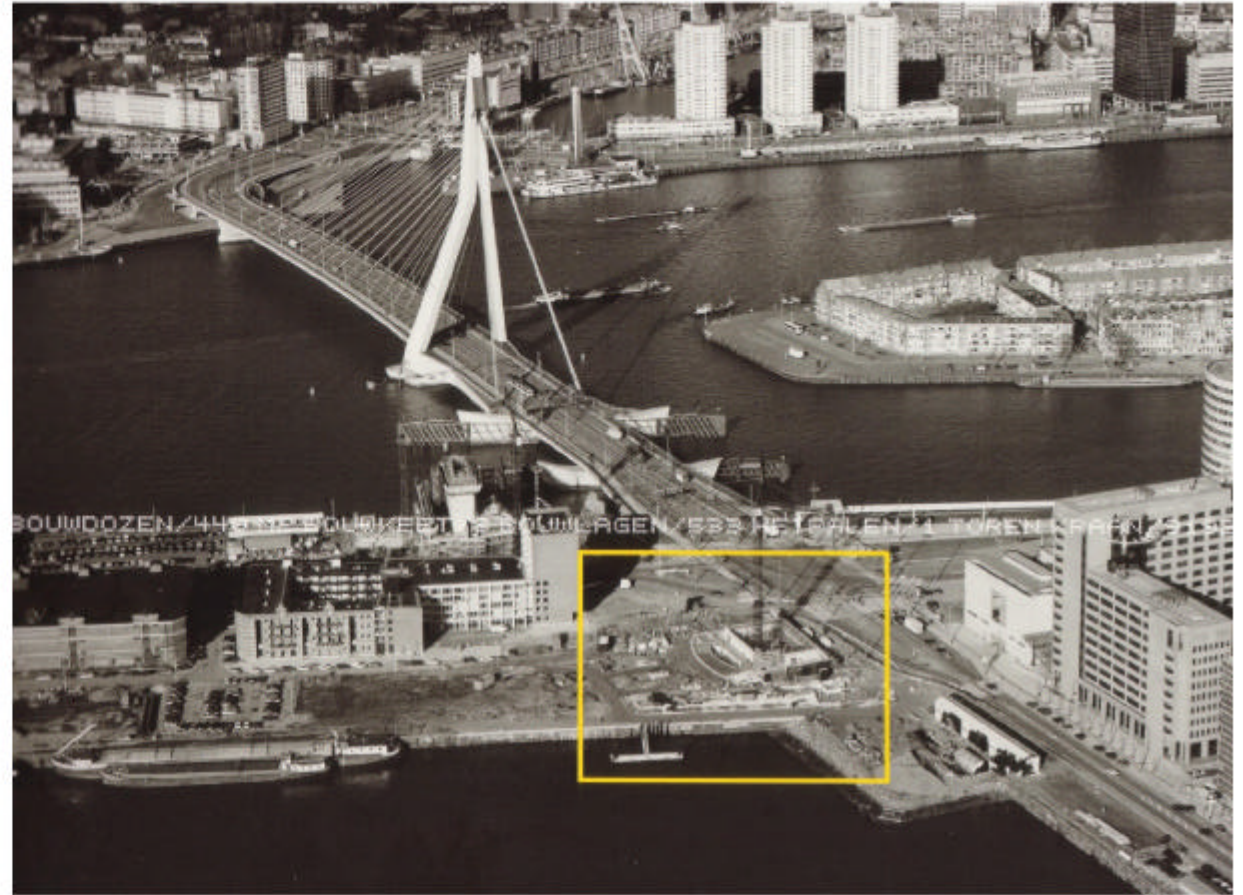


FIGURE 1.6: STAIRWAY TO THEATRE ENTRY  
(taken from [www.archimetal.com](http://www.archimetal.com))



*we knew the people coming from this region would be seeing materials that they knew that were for them associated with day-to-day stuff. Again it wasn't a pretentious bourgeois material; very important for us to break all of that down, we knew our clientele wasn't that anyway*  
(Brendon MacFarlane interview, 2004)

FIGURE 2.1 AERIAL  
(taken from New Luxor opening programme)



There is a particular history to the Nieuwe Luxor site, this is a history that is strongly aligned to its docklands home, and with the docklands goes a definite "working class roots" ethic. According to theatre director Rob Wiegman, the city relates strongly with this ethic. During the Second World War Rotterdam was heavily bombed, and like many cities that suffered the same fate, it has been allowed the arguable luxury of rebuilding not only the urban fabric but the image of the city.



*And the red colour that was to do with the comfort of the theatre, we developed, we were talking to Rob the idea of the red theatre curtain which is the most luxurious of the plushy period if we thematisized red rather than take velvet seats or something so we took the, we put in the major red architectural element which had the scale of the building. And then on the inside here with wooden walls so, and wood we often use it as, and it always has a very tactile positive affect on the space (Peter Wilson interview, 2004)*

FIGURE 2.1  
(photographer: Chrisian Richters  
taken from "The Nieuwe Luxor Theatre, Rotterdam"  
Opus No 42)





FIGURE 2.3 THE 'PROMENADE'  
(photographer Christian Richters taken  
from "Nieuwe Luxor Theatre, Rotterdam"  
Opus No 42)



FIGURE 2.4 STAIRS OFF THE AUDITORIUM  
(photographer Christian Richters taken from  
"Nieuwe Luxor Theatre, Rotterdam" Opus No 42)



THE NEIWE LUXOR

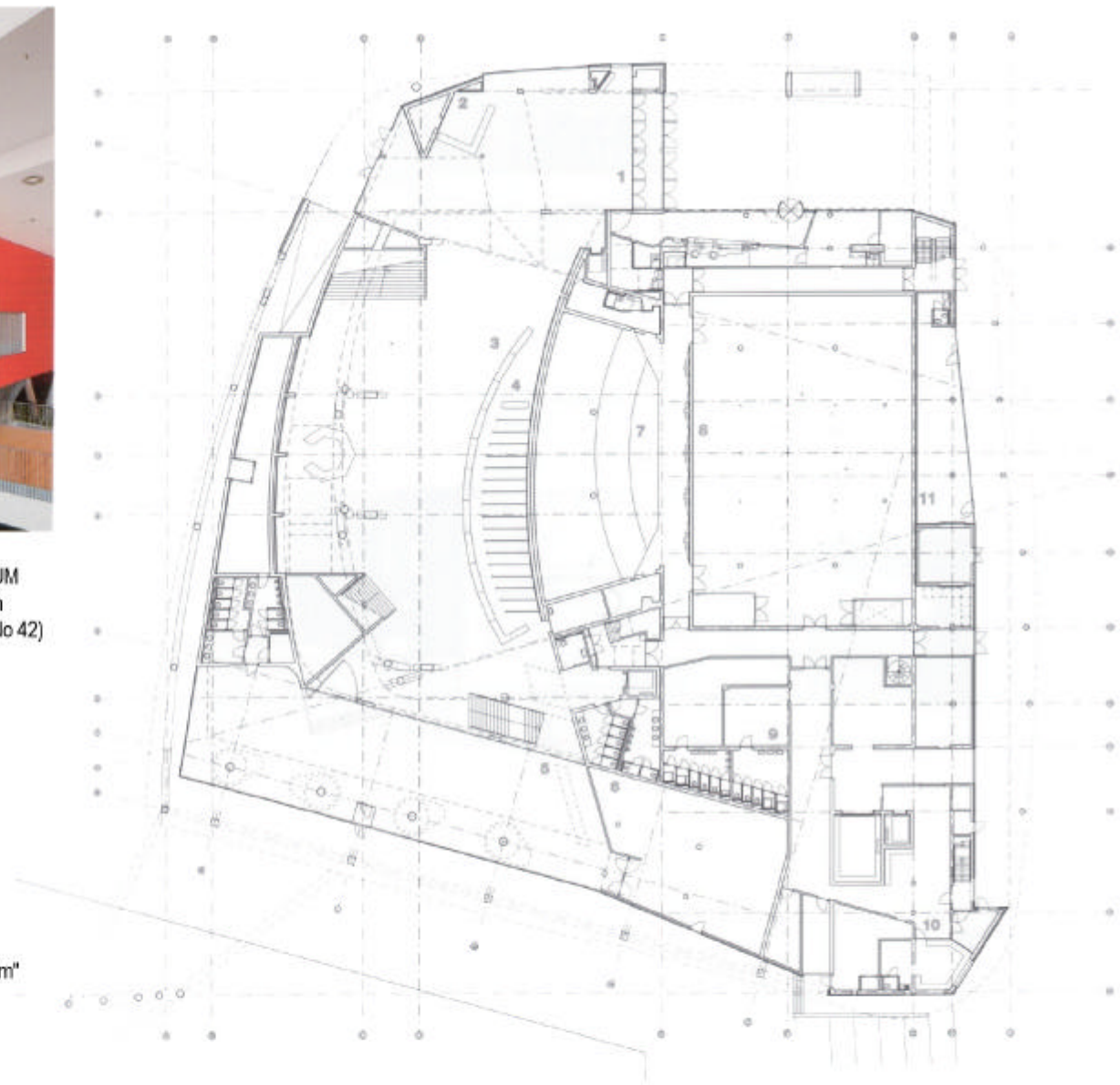


FIGURE 2.5 GROUND FLOOR PLAN  
(taken from "Nieuwe Luxor Theatre, Rotterdam"  
Opus No 42)

Ground floor (scale 1 : 500): 1 entrance, 2 information, 3 entrance hall, 4 cloaks, 5 restaurant, 6 kitchen, 7 orchestra pit, 8 under stage, 9 orchestra dressing, 10 stage door, 11 shop.

INTERIOR