

The Theatre: Where Architecture and Culture Unite

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December 1, 2016

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The art of a culture is extremely important to its development and overall contribution to humanity. This is because art communicates the ideals and principles of a society, thus making art extremely important for the identity of a culture as well as the archival purposes of the history of that culture. Theatre has contributed no less to this concept. It is not only the content of the plays nor the purpose of the art that speaks to its relative culture, but also the architecture of its theatrical buildings. It can be said that the structures of the theatres of Ancient Greece and Rome, Medieval Europe, and the Italian Renaissance as well as modern day American theatre buildings each effectively encompass the societal values and ideals of their respective era and region.

The Ancient Grecian and Roman Empires were two of the most influential cultures in human history not only for their development in technology and education but also in how their values and beliefs shaped the architecture they built. Both cultures recognized religion as an important part of every day living and would pay homage to their respective deities. Both also placed heavy emphasis on the importance and strength of family and bloodlines. Perhaps their most important influence on humanity, though, was their firm principles of humanism. The people of Ancient Greece and Rome "...valued humanity in that [they] placed human beings at the center of moral and social concerns" (Cline). Their art did not deter from this

concept either and the more closely one observes the theatrical buildings each culture produced, the more it can be seen that these works of architecture are no different.

Much like their cultures, the structure of Greek and Roman theatres are incredibly similar with only subtle differences and can be observed for hints on the principles of each society. For instance, both styles of theatre are open without any roof or any sense of being indoors. This relates to the societies' respect for the gods and desire to be connected to them, hence the lack of a barrier between the people, such as spectators and actors, and the gods above. Additionally, the design of the thrust stage surrounds the performers with the audience, effectively encompassing the actors on all sides. This plan makes for an almost altar-like design, which suggests the equally prevalent celebration of man and the human form in each society.

Greek and Roman theatre buildings were not entirely the same, however, seeing as their cultures were also not the same. Roman theatres were adapted by designing the scene building upstage of the orchestra to be attached to the overall theatre as opposed to being a stand-alone building like the Greeks had built it. This created a tighter, more precise look of the stage, suggesting at the tighter and more precise nature of the Romans as opposed to the Greeks. Additionally, the foundations of the buildings were slightly different: "The seating area in the Greek

theater was supported against a natural hillside, whereas the Roman theater was carried at least in part on concrete vaults..." (Klar). This again is a salute to the famous advances in engineering the Romans made in their time by constructing their own foundations rather than allowing the landscape to decide where a theatre might best be positioned.

The fall of the Roman Empire made way for the medieval era in Europe, a time when Christianity became the core of Western civilization. The Byzantine Empire established a culture influenced by Christianity, specifically the Roman Catholic Church, and which shaped much of the era's society. Moreover, "...the Church provided some impetus towards the establishment of common social practices." (Fouracre 157). This included deeming what was appropriate for the general public to engage in personally on a daily basis, such as modesty, frequency of church attendance, and other such daily events. It also encompassed what was appropriate to be shown on the stage.

Though religious drama was not the only type of theatre during this time, the Church was largely responsible for the progression of theatrical art throughout this period. In fact, scholars have noted, "The remarkable fact that the revival of the drama in modern Europe was due to the Christian Church has been abundantly proved and illustrated" (*The Drama*). Although these plays were first done in churches as part of a service, religious dramas were soon "...played by guilds and

companies expressly organized for the purpose, and no popular festivity was deemed complete without one or more of these instructive entertainments” (*The Drama*). This meant that the Church’s influence on theatrical performance had effectively spread past its own boundaries into the regular secular events of towns and feudal guilds.

The heavy Christian culture and influence of medieval Europe made no exception for the structure of performance stages. During this time, stages were often raised in order to be better seen by people both sitting and standing. This created a symbolic lifting of the audience’s heads to literally look up to the actors portraying saints and biblical figures, characters who the Church taught were to be revered and worshipped. Also popularized during this era was the use of pageant wagons in order to bring theatre to the populace by town. This also is symbolic of this Christian culture as it references the calling upon all Christians to travel and spread the word of the gospel as these performing troupes did. Though these factors may not have been consciously employed, they certainly did much to communicate certain aspects of this highly religious culture.

The religious potency of Europe continued on into the Italian Renaissance, though the development of this era was also due to a desire to revisit Greco-Roman roots. Scholars and historians agree, “The idea that the Renaissance was a rebirth or rediscovery is best exemplified by how its greatest artists used the works of

ancient Greece and Rome as their base” (Demetri). This was prevalent especially in their art and architecture. They not only wanted to exemplify this heritage, they endeavored to improve upon it with more advancement of technology and technique. The adaptation of theatre buildings was no exception to this.

The most notable theatres of this time were certainly built with Ancient Greece and Rome in mind but with a fresh design that related more to the culture of the Renaissance. One of the most famous theatres of this time was the Teatro Olimpico which was “Modeled by Palladio after both his studies of several ancient theaters and his own illustrations of classical theater design” (“Teatro Olimpico”). This design uses the half-circle shape for audience seating but the stage is a rectangular proscenium similar to the stages of the medieval era. Theatres of this time were also built to be indoors rather than subject to the elements. In this way, theatres were built more practically and suited to the needs of the society.

There is no doubt, however, that the theatres of this time took their inspiration from more ancient sources, much like the developing culture did as well. The half-circle configuration of the audience seating is still indicative of a celebration of man and human progress. Archways and columns were also used decoratively and practically, which resembles the Italian Renaissance’s desire to return to ancient techniques. The stage, however, had adapted into a proscenium due to the influence of the church on theatrical performance. Additionally, these buildings were

constructed to be completely indoors, symbolically cutting off the religion of ancient gods in place of Christianity. Therefore, the designs of Renaissance style theatres were successful in indicating the culture of the day.

Humanity's history is the influencer that shapes the way the world works in today's societies. No country or region would be what it is now without the foundations of their predecessors. Specifically in the western world, one sees the impact Ancient Greece and Rome, the Medieval era of Europe, and the Italian Renaissance has made upon common values and principles. The emphasis of a strong family unit, the reverence of artistic genius, the desire to innovate and progress humanity to new ideas and technology – all are remnant ideals of these eras.

These remnant ideals, as well as newfound beliefs, can be found in our modern day American theatre structures as much as they were found in the architecture of humanity's ancestors. One of the most notable theatres to be built in the past century is the Radio City Music Hall in New York City, New York. The design of the performance hall is truly spectacular:

Geometric ornamentation is found throughout the theater, as is Deskey's central theme of the "Progress of Man." The famous Great Stage, measuring 60 feet wide and 100 feet long, resembles a setting sun. Its sophisticated system of hydraulic-powered elevators allowed spectacular effects in

staging, and many of its original mechanisms are still in use today. (“Radio City”)

Deskey’s inspiration of the “Progress of Man” could not be more suggestive of historical influence on American society. Ancient Greek and Roman progression of technology and education has long since been revered by American society. Additionally, the sheer size of the stage, let alone the building as a whole, is proof of the standard to strive for excellence and stupendousness in every aspect of American life and the message that through hard work and dedication, amazing outcomes will result. After all, the United States was not named the Land of Opportunity for nothing.

Additionally, modern theatre architecture resembles contemporary ideals of tolerance as standards have adapted and changed even recently. More and more, theatre companies and production teams are discovering new, inventive ways to produce theatrical art in venues other than traditional playhouses and auditoriums. One technique that has become more popular is producing a site-specific performance. Many use this form of theatre because “‘site-specific theatre’ helps...break with the conventions of the auditorium” (Field). Though site-specific theatre is as old as theatre itself, it has resurged by producing art that interrupts conventions, much like western culture has come to celebrate in modern day society. The rise of human and civil rights in the past 50 years has no doubt had an

impact on the social culture established today. Tolerance and the revelry of individuality have become praised attitudes. This recent shift in culture has most likely also affected the norms of theatre performance venues and where they are produced.

Cultural ideals and art, in all its forms, have an incredible, tightly woven relationship to one another. This is undoubtedly seen in conventional artworks such as paintings and music. It may occasionally be overlooked that it can also be seen in architecture, not simply regional landmarks, but specifically in the design and construction of theatrical venues. From Ancient Greece and Rome, Medieval Europe, and the Italian Renaissance all the way until our own modern day American society, culture has had, and continues to have, a heavy hand in shaping what our theatrical buildings look like. One can only imagine how culture will dictate theatres and art as a whole in the years to come.

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