Introduction: The Play’s the Thing

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What if buildings were considered not as objects but as actors in the city, which perform with and among people in the small improvisations of urban life? What if design focused on how architecture acts, even without moving, in a thousand stories depending on the people, the place, and their interactions in the moment? From this point of view, an architect is akin to a theater director for he or she develops a building within a narrative of use, so that it may interact meaningfully with people and place. If director and architect embrace their multivalent ethical roles within a community, both aim for more than simple enactment or fulfillment of a functional “need.” Both have the power to craft situations that invite flashes of real understanding to ignite between people, so they may act thoughtfully in their own lives. Both architect and director set up the broad conditions of a situation, and then focus tightly on the details in order to open up events, like a well-made dinner party can open to free-flowing conversation that has nothing to do with food. A well-wrought performance seeks an ineffable chemistry, both planned and unplanned, so spectators and performers alike come away having shared something real together, while a well-wrought building opens to the events of life, both planned and unplanned, so that people can make the choices that define their lives.

The essays presented here collectively explore the deep tradition of thought that casts architecture as both set and player in the ongoing theater of social life. They offer historical analyses of how architecture acts in the social world as well as examples of architectural experimentation in theater with real people in real time, which might enrich contemporary design practice. In these studies, memory and imagination merge, so looking back is a means to look forward and to speculate on how architects might act now.

In this collection, we focus on how people, places, and things interact in time in relation to each other, rather than on their separate identities, thus developing a heuristic approach associated with ecological thinking. First, we observe that architecture acts, albeit not as a human actor. Buildings are created things or, to use sociologist Bruno Latour’s term, “non-humans,” that act socially with people in
place. Secondly, we understand “performance” to include the social role-playing and negotiation of everyday life as well as formal, staged presentations. This definition is consistent with the work of contemporary scholars of performance who consider any action that is contrived to be seen (or read or heard or measured) by others as performance. So the swish of a dress on a summer day in the city is a performance by the person wearing the dress and by the dress itself. The city also has a role, as well as those who notice the subtle rustle that might be a flirt. From this point of view, the architect works behind the scenes, directing some of the non-human actors who perform everyday in the city. Each decision by an architect, like those of a director affects what happens in ways that he or she can intuit but not determine. A director’s vision emerges with and through actors, while an architect’s vision evolves within the social and physical practices of drawing and construction that create buildings, which act in the city.

This point of entry draws on ideas of “event” and “situation,” which continue to accumulate a rich meaning in many fields including architecture. An event is simply something that happens in a place and for a duration of time, so the emphasis is placed on action rather than object. “Situation” summons Jean-Paul Sartre’s assertion that freedom is meaningful only through choices made in a resisting world. In and through situations, one chooses what one will be. Sartre’s ideas extended into the Situationist movement in art and literature in the 1950s and 60s, which influenced a group of leading architects including Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas in particular, who build to provoke meaningful events among people.

A situation includes all those present as well as the objects, phenomena, and circumstances that play a role. From this point of view, the same movie seen on successive nights is a series of distinct events because the audience and the moment change. Likewise, the habitual activities within a building may have a cycle and rhythm, but are continually remade by the inhabitants who choose how they will use the spaces, even as the physical construct remains the same. The movie and the building perform in many events with a changing cast of active participants. From that point of entry, the intellectual project proposed by the essays presented here considers buildings not as objects in relation to other buildings or even as expressions of social structure or cultural aspirations, but primarily as actions in the world that make a difference in the social life of a place.

So how does architecture act? Theater director Peter Brook tells a story at the beginning of a treatise on theater that recognizes the power of architecture and of choice. He recalls trying to speak at a university on a stage in the glare of lights where he could not see his audience. Suddenly he stopped, realizing that his words made no sense cast out into the darkness to no one in particular. At his request, Brook and the audience moved to a classroom, where they packed in together, in close contact with each other. By sharing the space Brook could recognize the audience, not as an anonymous mass but as a group of students, and his talk became a conversation. As soon as he escaped the “one-way glass” of the stage, Brook could give his attention to the students, while they gave theirs to him, and talk could flow with ease. Brook stressed that attention is the most valuable gift.
that one person can give to another and also the most difficult gift to hold. Actors who ask for attention are continually at risk of the sly creep of boredom. In his story, the classroom acted with Brook and the students to keep boredom at bay.

Brook writes, “The essence of theater is in the mystery called ‘the present moment.’” He designs performances as structured conversations that emerge among actors and audience in a well-defined place and time. He challenges actors to speak with their bodies face-to-face with spectators, so they might feel every movement together in the moment. In 1972 Brook and his troupe visited desert towns in Africa, performing on a carpet they laid out on the ground. By stepping on the carpet an actor asked for the attention of those gathered and carried the burden of holding it. Stepping off the carpet, he or she became a spectator alongside others and re-entered the social role of being a stranger in the town. On the carpet a gesture or word could summon a fictional world that townspeople could embrace as a story, laughing with the slapstick and feeling with the characters, as they responded to both the actors and their neighbors. The carpet almost magically empowered actors to construct an imaginary elsewhere within the intense presence of townspeople gathered together, an elsewhere that was not exactly superimposed on the architecture of the town, but there nonetheless.

Laying down a carpet, or even drawing a circle in the dirt to designate a space, is a primary act of both theater and architecture. That act demarks a doubleness in the present, so that being there can be understood as simultaneously in a landscape and set apart from it, in the immediacy of time and set apart in an alternate time of a story, conversation, or other interior. Brook describes theater as a multi-layered, human connection in the present moment that “releases the hidden collective potential of thought, image, feeling, myth, and trauma … so powerful that it can be dangerous.” In this sense, theater both opens up time and compounds space. To create this doubleness Brook argues that theater needs only an empty space, someone who walks across it and someone who watches. The space, by its emphatic emptiness, stands open to imagination.

In this conceptual framework, Brook’s work as a theater director is architectural. He creates a place and atmosphere, a situation, where the creative imagination of both actors and spectators can flourish. Brook’s carpet also gives the empty space of theatre an edge, a threshold that one can leap or straddle, thus making the doubleness of theater tangible through an architectural gesture. Similarly, the threshold of a room defines a realm apart from its surroundings, for example a meeting room, dining room, or garden, where events can unfold with an independent sense of time and purpose, even while remaining in place and on the clock.

Much of modern theater focused on drawing spectators into the ambiguity of acting in the story and acting in the social world simultaneously, highlighting the roles of the “real” world as performance and conversely casting theater as real, social action. Parables, parody and political theater in particular walk this line, so actions on stage directly affect actions in life. For example, when director Augusto Boal returned to Argentina in the 1970s, governmental repression made meaningful traditional theater impossible, so he acted in the streets, devising events, in which
actors played in and on everyday life with the purpose of making the effects of political oppression felt. In this “invisible theater” passersby who watched or participated were provoked to think about their own situation, yet they might learn only later that the actions were pre-conceived. This form of theater clearly can be manipulative. Yet it occupies the same territory as architecture for it engages people unawares in the actions of daily life, and can invite them to see their own actions in an alternate story of “reality,” like opening a window can suddenly bring in the scents and sounds that remind us where we are. Boal effectively snapped open the narrative of daily life and cast passersby as “spectactors” (his term), erasing the distinction between actor and spectator. He acted so that the shock of double vision might spur citizens to action.

WHY THE ART OF ARCHITECTURAL PERFORMANCE IS IMPORTANT NOW

Most immediately, the skills to create theater are the skills of urbanism, the deft creation of places where people come together to speak and listen in the many forms of social encounter. Buildings play a part every day in the actions of those who inhabit them, often at the boundary of awareness, like Boal’s invisible theater. Metaphorically the city has always been the theater of urban life, the built microcosm where people act socially and strategically, often so that others will watch. The quality of urban life and the choices people make has much to do with how architecture organizes and presents people to each other and how it opens to the improvisations of life or resists them, for example Peter Brook insisted on finding a room better suited to the conversation he had in mind. Luckily the building was flexible enough to offer an acceptable room, although a nimbly designed building could act with more character, than flaccidly accommodating his request. Brook’s empty space of performance only works when surrounded by people. Its emptiness actively presses into the fullness of the city to make a place for thought and action. In desert towns in the Sahara, Brook learned by trial and error where and when to set out his carpet so an event would work well. In a notable failure, Brook laid the carpet in a narrow street and drew a crowd that was too big. The actors found themselves aggressively squeezed on all sides so they could neither think clearly nor connect with the spectators. Even the slapstick fell flat. The next day, they chose a public square on the edge of town where they drew a crowd mostly of children, so the improvisation took a different direction and everyone had fun. Throughout the trip, Brook experimented with the place and time of carpet plays, and each choice emerged in the character of the improvised event. Through these experiments, Brook learned to read city structure and the urban life it holds, so he could place the carpet strategically. Similarly, architects can hone urban sensibilities through observation and experimentation in the city, so the architectural spaces they press into the city might act skillfully with people in the performances of urban life. Such urban knowledge was long a part of an architect’s intellectual heritage, yet the erosion of cities in the twentieth century also eroded that base. Rebuilding now requires constructing anew the practice
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of urban thinking. To remember historical urbanism through study and to learn contemporary urbanism through experiments that engage real people and places can enrich architectural imagination and build urban skill.

At a deeper level, thinking of architecture as performance reckons with the real by placing buildings back into time, focusing on how the physical design plays out among people—in the instant and over a long duration. To cast buildings as players in urban life suggests that their primary value is not in what they are but in what they do, as acts of imagination in and of the world. This shift from identity toward action turns away from treating buildings as autonomous objects to be seen or experienced by well-behaved viewers. The thing-ness of buildings seems to fade into the flow of events that subsumes them with people, systems, and phenomena.

Consider a street market, for instance, which changes from week to week and season to season. Which part is architecture? What is infrastructure and which part display, performance, or urban event? When architecture is an action, then it does not have to be a building. Currently, the profession is broadening to include practices that act solely in the virtual realm and those that reach out into the city to modify infrastructural systems in ways that may not leave a visible trace.

In this change of focus, the role of buildings broadens to become more social partner than disposable product. Bruno Latour half-jokingly calls everything that is not a human being “non-humans,” thus backhanding the social sciences for excluding the ecological/material world from studies of social behavior, “like the missing masses for a cosmologist trying to balance out the weight of the universe.” He enters the question by considering how designed objects act socially, for example he writes in detail about the mechanical chivalry of the door-closer, which acts with at least part of a doorman’s courtesy, yet extracts the person from the task. In his discussion, Latour queried the door-closer in an effort to propose an intellectual structure that gave non-humans an equal role, as actors who affect other actors, whether they engage humans or not.

The action-oriented shift in thinking, which Latour pursues in studies across several disciplines, demands that social actions be considered in the same terms as physical and ecological actions, for none are truly separable. From this base, one might ask how does architecture act in relationships between people and species other than human, or what is the smallest modification in a landscape that might spark a new situation. Thinking ecologically, all actions make changes in relationships that can induce other changes in a cascade or flow of effects, rippling far beyond the source. In this sense, design is a well-studied action embedded in a web of previous actions that coalesces in an identifiable thing, a building, which is then let loose from its architect to affect the continuing present, and open like a question for other actions to follow. In Latour’s terms, architecture acts across many arenas of description—political, social, cultural, theatrical, technological, medicinal, artistic, material, poetic, etc. Its actions have real consequences that can be observed and measured, limited only by the questions we ask.

The shift of thought that refocuses architects on making things happen rather than making things brings together two, seemingly contradictory, meanings of the words “performance” and “act.” In one sense, a car, an employee, and a building...
“perform” insofar as they “act” effectively in the physical present. The car goes fast, the employee meets objectives and the building shelters and protects people as it was designed to do. Performance is measured against a standard: 0–60 acceleration time, miles-per-gallon, sales-per-month, and many other criteria that show changes to the physical and social world. This sort of performance is often called function. Alternatively an actor or musician “performs” insofar as he or she “acts,” representing something not present by telling a story or creating an ephemeral experience in a bracketed world identified as “not-real.” A musician’s performance may be measured in terms of right notes and wrong notes in following a score, but surely the truer judgment emerges in opening the mind and the heart to a shared spirit, across the threshold of “what if?” This kind of performance is usually called art.

A focus on actions rather than objects trumps this division by encompassing people and situations together in narratives of desire. A driver and car go fast together (also depending on a good road and gasoline, etc.) and a poetic desire to fly as old as Icarus; an employee works a job, so person, task, and the things affected by the work conflate with a narrative of the company mission and personal identity; and the act of sheltering depends on the stories of both building and inhabitants. Similarly, a play or concert includes the actions of those presenting a narrative or song and those watching and listening, as well as the actions of the place, the set, and the story. Among them, the event opens to shared imagination and real choice. The performance of architecture with people in place is both physical and narrative. It plays a significant part in events that make measurable changes in the world and reflect on them simultaneously, often in the same move.

This collection of essays on architecture, the most “real” of the arts, explores its intersection with the most “unreal” of the arts, theater, to find them wrapped around each other. The essays are presented in two groups. In the first, “Designing Performance,” authors consider the act of making architecture. They focus on how architects work behind the scenes in the process of design to create entities that perform effectively either on stage or in daily life. This process reveals a rich negotiation between many actors, both human and non-human, that continues in the performance of the finished work. The second group of essays, “Performing Design” explores how buildings perform in the city with and among people. In particular, authors consider how both architecture and theater create the ambiguous thresholds that frame play as life and life as play, and look at how people straddle and cross them. As playwright Tom Stoppard bluntly observes, every exit is an entrance somewhere else.19
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Recall Peter Brook’s paean to the mystery of the present moment. Recall also Latour’s philosophy that validates non-humans as actors that make a difference both socially and physically. Each of the stories presented here acts in the present moment that you read it, invoking histories and buildings that you might know. Each modifies those histories and buildings by proposing another way to understand them. Together they lay out an approach to design and architectural analysis focused on how buildings act as competent non-humans that are part of the city and the landscape. They spur us to ask: how do buildings interact with people, how do they interact with other non-humans, including living beings and vital systems, such as water, air, soil and sunlight, and how do they act within social constructs and institutions? Finally how do they touch us in the moment, like acts of theater, to spark connections among us, human and non-human, and open up real choice?

Finally, an image of Charlie Chaplin and his cane might crystallize the question. Charlie’s cane, a length of bamboo crooked at the top was a highly responsive partner integral to the character of the little tramp. The cane was part of Charlie’s gait, his gestures and his persona to the point that it was less an object or symbolic “attribute” than wholly subsumed in the character. The cane does not represent Charlie, nor give him special powers. It does not work for him; rather he plays with it to strut like a dandy, hobble like an invalid, fight like a swordsman, poke his rivals, and hook the beauty. In one scene he uses it to catch a fish. The cane was Chaplin’s partner over many years of creative practice, in which they explored the pathos of a modern everyman. The little tramp reached out from the stage in earnest playfulness to address some of the most pressing ethical issues of modern life in the city. The cane, through
InTroduc TIon: The PLA y’s The ThIng 11 its design, acted with Charlie, resisting some movements and strengthening others, beautifully open to improvisation. Could architects design buildings to perform in that spirit?

NOTES


3 Sartre was referring to moral situations and the radical freedom of choice. See Jean-Paul Sartre, “For a Theater of Situations,” in Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka (eds.), Sartre on Theater (New York: Pantheon, 1976), p. 4. Guy Debord and the Situationist movement in the 1950s and 60s defined art as the creation of situations, extending the idea into urban events and architecture’s role in them.


5 Peter Brook, The Open Door (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p. 3.

6 Brook, The Open Door p. 14 ff.

7 Environmental psychologists study the effect of architecture on social behavior. See the Journal of Environmental Psychology.

8 Brook, The Open Door, p. 97.

9 John Heilpern, Conference of the Birds (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1977), pp. 83–94. Describes one of the improvisations Brook’s company developed during the carpet tour of the Sahara desert. Brook launched the tour as an experiment in theatrical communication across boundaries of language and culture. The company improvised scenarios with pantomime, nonsense words and slapstick that evolved with the responses of impromptu audiences in desert towns.

10 Brook, The Open Door, p. 98.

11 Bruce Wilshire clarifies this point. When a character is murdered in a play, the actor is not harmed, so the action within a story is not the same as an action in fact. Yet drama is meaningless if it does not impact attitudes, feelings and actions outside the playhouse. The boundary between performance and ethical, existential actions is always negotiated. See Bruce Wilshire, ‘The Concept of the Paratheatrical,’ The Drama Review 34, no. 4 (1990): 169.


14 Mostafavi calls this back and forth of improvisation a bottom-up logic of urbanism. See Mostafavi and Doherty, Ecological Urbanism, pp. 36–8.

15 See Heilpern, Conference of the Birds, pp. 73–94.


19 Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead (New York: Grove Press, 1994), p. 28.


21 Utopia literally means no place. Architecture and urban design have long been studied for the ideal plans they embody and for how the physical situations they create correspond with those ideas. Latour considers both ideas and physical things as independent actors that can affect other ideas and things. See Harman, Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics, p. 16.

22 Sebastian Serlio, The Five Books of Architecture (1611). His plates of the three stage settings are widely reprinted.