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'An audience not only goes to the theatre; it does to the particular part of the city where the theatre is located, and the memories and associations of that part of the city help to provide a reception context for any performances seen there.' Evaluate this statement in relation to at least two different sites used for dramatic performance during the contemporary period.

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In drama, theatre space has been the subject of much critical study, but it is the auditorium of the theatre – the place where the actual theatrical event takes place – that has been the normal locus of such work. This long history of critical focus on staging and the *internal* design of the theatre has meant that much less attention has been paid to the performative aspect of the *external* [1] – not just in terms of its design, but in terms of the area a performance space is situated in as well.[2]

In recognition of this critical black-hole, there has been a trend in recent years for investigating outside of the stage-space itself, and exploring the dramatic effect the surrounding environs might have on the audience (Knowles, McAuley, and Carlson all explore this in detail). This is representative of a growing recognition that the performance of a play is one part of a much larger social and cultural event – that of 'going to the theatre'.[3] Schechner, too, notes "the importance of the underlying social event as a *nest* for the theatrical event"[4] [my emphasis], an importance which he claims is borne out in the tradition of intermissions, where the audience are allowed to mingle, to see themselves and each other, and to recognize their proximity in a shared cultural occasion.[5]

If the theatrical event is thus recognized as stemming beyond the auditorium itself then we can assume, as Knowles argues, that "the geographical location of the space in the city or elsewhere is therefore significant for the understanding of theatrical production and reception alike".[6] Audience members are already in a receptive frame of mind as they approach the event, charged with the energy created by anticipation of the approaching performance. The process of their journey to the theatre may therefore have a distinct impact on their experience of the performance.[7]

This growing recognition of the bond between theatre design, theatre location, and dramatic production has meant that for some – like Jacques Copeau - "the architect's contribution to the theatre experience is as crucial as that of the poet."[8] Marvin Carlson, quoted in the title to this essay, is one of the forerunners in exploring this architectural

[1] Richard Paul Knowles, *Reading the material theatre,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p.70
[2] Marvin Carlson, 'The Old Vic: A Semiotic Analysis', *Semiotica* 71(3-4) (January 1988), pp.187–212
[3] Knowles, p.79
[4] Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory,* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.195
[5] Ibid., pp.195-6
[6] Knowles, p.79
[7] Ibid., p.80
[8] Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance*: *Making Meaning in the Theatre*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p.51

contribution fully. For Carlson, urban spaces are universally 'haunted'.[9] They create and embody cultural pasts and presents, and the semiotics of a theatre building, Carlson argues, are crucial to the semiotics of a performance inside it.[10]

We can conclude, then, that both theatre location and theatre design are consistently recognized as potential signifiers, and thus as an important part of the theatrical experience as a whole, by theatre practitioners, architects, and critics alike. But it still remains to determine exactly how the 'memories and associations' that Carlson speaks of are produced, and how they encroach on the actual performance itself. I will focus on two theatres in my exploration of this problem – the Royal National Theatre in London (RNT), and the Nottingham Playhouse (NP). Both theatres are relatively recent constructs – construction of the RNT began in 1969,[11] while the Playhouse opened its doors in 1963[12] - and much thought and planning will have gone into their design and placement. My analysis is concerned with the potential results – in terms of audience response – of the choices made by architect and planner.

I should note, before I begin, that I am eliding a large portion of possible spaces by focusing on buildings designated as theatres. I am ignoring 'site-specific' performance, for instance, which is theatre that takes place in locations intended to broadcast the appropriate cultural connotations.[13] I have done this in order to remain as focused and in depth as possible in my analysis, and because I am more interested in how architects consciously try to shape and build spaces, rather than the utilisation of existing ones.

The design and construction of arts buildings such as theatres has been considered peculiar in comparison with other types of buildings.[14] There is a heavy focus (encoded in guidelines and regulations) on the importance of both public and professional input in the planning and construction of arts buildings,[15] and this in itself is an acknowledgment of the substantial cultural energy such buildings possess in the public imagination.

Lasdun, the architect behind the National Theatre, consciously sought to take advantage of this performative aspect of space in his design for the building. "Exhibition was Lasdun's intention. He described the space as 'a fourth theatre' … 'with the city as a backdrop'".[16] For Lasdun then, the space outside the auditorium becomes an extension of it, a theatre-in-itself which uses the city as scenery – a scenery that naturally carries its own cultural hauntings and resonances. The conception of the space as an impressive one – a symbol of historicism and culture courtesy of its associated landmarks – was clearly an important part of Lasdun's designs. However, drama is of course an art of the human body, and architecture, too, often evokes the "memory of body states" such as emotions and moods.[17] Lasdun, conscious of this, designed the National to be on a 'human scale', so that it would not seem to intimidating or large.[18] This, he hoped, would avoid it becoming a forbidding 'mausoleum'.[19] Critics, however, perceived the result as unwelcoming,

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[9] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*: *The Theatre as Memory Machine,* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p.132
[10] Carlson, 2003, pp.131-164
[11] John Elsom and Nicholas Tomalin, *The History of the National Theatre* (London: Cape, 1978), p.210
[12] Elsom, p.70
[13] Carlson 2003, p.134
[14] Pat Sterry and Monty Sutrisna, 'Briefing and Designing Performing Arts Buildings: Assessing the Role of Secondary Project Stakeholders', *Architectural Engineering and Design Management*, 3(2007), pp. 209-221, p.211
[15] Ibid.
[16] Peter Lewis, *The National: A Dream Made Concrete*, (London: Methuen, 1990), p.91
[17] Donald M. Kaplan, 'Theatre Architecture: A Derivation of the Primal Cavity', *The Drama Review,* 12(3)(Spring, 1968), pp.105-116, p.105
[18] Elsom, p.188
[19] Ibid., p.187

cumbersome, and monolithic.[20] This is just one example of the way spaces carry different cultural associations for each individual, and of the difficulty in successfully controlling the way an audience conceives space.

The importance of the 'façade' becomes relevant here. The façade of a building is often highlighted as crucial to the expression of cultural and "visual" identity.[21] The public face that both the RNT and the Playhouse present to their audience via their external design, combined with their physical environment, is thus crucial to the cultural associations people derive from them.

For example, architecture can be used as a demonstration of power – by erasing old traditions and constructing new ones, by converting or changing old traditions, by importing alien ones, and by recreating existing 'superficial' trends.[22] The steel and glass construction of the Playhouse, for instance, is a clear break from the predominant architectural styles of the surrounding area. This intentional break with tradition makes a powerful statement, and the use of glass also promotes "powerful socio-economic and political gestures", as it is associated with capitalist ideals and authority.[23] But the design also represents a clear commitment on the part of the theatre to produce modern, creative work, a manifest underlined by the inclusion of Anish Kapoor's 'Sky Mirror' – once voted Nottingham's most recognizable landmark[24] – adjacent to the main entrance. While some visitors will be attracted to the Playhouse by its clear modernity, then, others will be deterred by its association with the "architecture of power".[25]

The concrete façade of the National Theatre is also charged with meaning. In their history of the National Theatre, Elsom and Tomalin describe the philosophy behind the conception of the building, claiming that its planners didn't want a "massive monument reeking of civic pride and national jingoism", but wanted a building that "reflected the deeper values of the age…a new seriousness" and "an awareness of how people actually live in towns and what actors really require on a stage." (165)

This original proposal is reflected to some extent in the buildings final incarcertation. Its heavy, straightforward, and practical build is in the Brutalist architectural style – a style that consciously rejects the 'frivolous' nature of 1950s British architecture,[26] appealing to the 'new seriousness' of the age. However, this seriousness also poses an artistic problem. The reactionary Brutalist trend was intended to produce buildings with an 'aura that is cold and dour', hence the creation of functional but perhaps characterless buildings and 'monolithic concrete erections of great mass.'[27] The National Theatre, built in this style which – by the time it was finished – was sadly *out* of style,[28] thus risks an association with soullessness and functionalism which might impinge on the artistic aspirations of those who practice within it.

Behavioural scientists have suggested that the commonly dark and repressed interiors of modern theatrical spaces lower the potential for the arousal of the audience, making it difficult to elicit powerful emotional responses.[29] This process is arguably underway outside

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[20] Lewis, p.92
[21] Hisham Elkadi, *Cultures of Glass Architecture.* (Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), p.1
[22] Ibid., p.48
[23] Ibid., p.47
[24] Nottingham Playhouse Website, 'SKY MIRROR ACCOLADE COMPLETES HAT-TRICK FOR NOTTINGHAM PLAYHOUSE' <http://www.nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk/index.cfm/page/news.detail.cfm/navid/144/parentid/141/id/331>[Accessed: 22 December 2009]
[25] Elkadi, p.56
[26] Michael McClelland and Graeme Stewart, 'Why Conrete Toronto?', in *Concrete Toronto: a guidebook to concrete architecture from the fifties to the seventies,* ed. by Michael McClelland and Graeme Stewart (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2007) pp.12-13, p.12
[27] D. J. M. Van der Voordt and Herman B. R. Wege, *Architecture in use: an introduction to the programming, design and evaluation of buildings*, (Amsterdam, Architectural Press, 2005), p.57
[28] Lewis, p.92
[29] Ian Mackintosh, *Architecture, Actor and Audience* (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1993), p.79

a theatre as well – with the towering and dark space of the National and its concrete surroundings possibly proving detrimental to audience interaction. This propensity is challenged by the use of bright, effervescent lighting on the outside of the building. The Playhouse, too, is brightly lit and this, combined with the glowing metallic sheen of Kapoor's sculpture, helps to alleviate any oppressive or restrictive ambience produced by the cold steel and glass structure of the building.

Lasdun originally intended for the stark concrete exterior of the National to naturally weather, growing lichen and moss until it became "part of the riverscape",[30] thus blending it with the city and with the Thames itself – London's artery. As it transpires, the concrete has remained relatively unblemished, inside and out, and it is still stark and uncompromising, resulting in some considering it to "lack a heart."[31]

The idea of the 'monumental' is also frequently associated with concrete.[32] The term monumental refers to a style of theatre architecture that is meant to establish the theatre as a 'civic monument', a revered place of public importance. Monumental theatres are characterised by their prestigious location – usually holding "prominent positions in the urban text",[33] as the National does, - and by their "formidable exterior decoration", usually exemplified by the inclusion of a portico.[34] The National has no portico, but it is in all other ways unarguably a 'monumental' theatre, despite the intentions of its original proponents. As such, it is intended to inspire public pride – a pride that will possibly render its audience's more forgiving and amenable than they would be normally.

Lefebvre links space to social forces, associating it with socio-political power struggles. For him, those who control space are usually those in power – hence the 'monuments' of capitalism.[35] While the Playhouse is not a 'monumental theatre', it still necessarily embodies and reflects those contemporary power struggles that Lefebvre is discussing. Funding for the construction of the Playhouse was at the centre of a political power battle between Conservative "utilitarian financial imperatives" and Labour support for the arts. The Playhouse, argued Labour, would be symbolic of Nottingham's civic pride and cultural status.[36] Ultimately, the latter argument won out, and Nottingham's critically successful theatre company was rewarded with a "civic amenity of equally high architectural stature"[37], designed by the architect of the Royal Festival Hall, Peter Moro.[38] The Playhouse, then, is – while not 'monumental' according to Carlson – still clearly a civic monument, a structure that is intended to inspire pride and reverence. This civic pride, of course, is expected to be upheld through critically lauded performances, so while the audience might be initially supportive, there is an onus on the actors to produce what is expected. Audience members associate the Playhouse with vast public expenditure, and they expect a return on their investment.

While we must acknowledge that the frame of a venue is never fixed, in a philosophical sense, and that space is flexible, it is still an 'active agent' that has a noticeable effect on what happens inside it.[39] Both the Playhouse and the National Theatre are 'edifice'

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[30] Lewis, p.91
[31] Ibid., p.94
[32] Peter Collins, *Concrete: The Vision of a New Architecture*, (Montreal: McGill Queens Press, 2004), p.149
[33] Marvin Carlson, 'The Theatre as Civic Monument', *Theatre Journal*, 40(1) (March 1988), pp.12-32, p.16
[34] ibid., p.23
[35] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp.47-9
[36] Nick Hayes, 'Municipal Subsidy and Tory Minimalism: Building the Nottingham Playhouse, 1942-1963', *Midland History,* 19(1994), pp.128-46, p.143
[37] Ibid.
[38] Elsom, p.170
[39] McAuley, p.41

theatres, meaning they advertise a public association with certain kinds of traditional (often commercial) performance.[40] The large, domineering frame of the National theatre, for example, lends itself most readily to large, epic performances – such as the theatrical interpretation of Terry Pratchett's *Nation* which is currently being staged there, or the previous staging of *War Horse* (now moved to the West End) and of Phillip Pullman's ambitious *Dark Materials*. The venue is in a way "causally connected" to the plays within it.[41] It would be almost impossible to successfully stage a particularly intimate drama inside the National not just because of the cavernous size of its main auditorium, the Olivier, but because of the epic proportions of its façade. As McAuley notes, a bigger auditorium often calls for 'big' productions, and a big building perhaps has equal effect – "it is usually the building itself that, having been built, needs to be filled."[42]

Only the Cottesloe Theatre, perhaps, spatially divided as it is, can provide a space with sufficiently 'intimate' atmosphere inside and out. The National's pursuit of grandeur is almost exemplified in the treatment of the Cottesloe theatre, at one point removed from the architectural plans entirely, which was designed for small-scale plays or new productions.[43] The Cottesloe is tucked away behind the main building, requiring its audience to circumvent the main entrance and foyer, remaining outside. This creates a feeling almost of being hidden from the main theatre, of being away from true, great, epic productions. You expect something niche or new at the Cottlesloe because the theatre is quite literally stored in a niche.

Just as important as the architectural façade of a building, perhaps, are its surroundings. As Schechner points out "The pattern of gathering, performing, and dispersing is a specifically theatrical pattern"[44] – it is part of the makeup of performances both in how stories are commonly told and created on stage, and in how people come together for a performance. Actors are not only active when they are on stage, emotionally they are active as they wait nervously in the wings, or mentally prepare before entering the main area. Audience members, too, are not passive. In many ways their preparation mirrors that of the actors, and their emotional preparation for the event takes place before they are seated in the theatre itself.[45] This process of 'gathering' is inseparable from that of 'performing'. So, while McAuley concedes that situating a theatre in a certain location does not necessarily mean that it will attract a particular audience, she argues that"…the location nevertheless makes some kind of statement about who is expected or encouraged to participate and who might feel discouraged from attempting to do so."[46] It is difficult to dismiss this in the case of either the RNT or the Nottingham Playhouse. Both are located in districts that have definite implications for the way they are perceived.

Theatres often become associated with the particular district they are in – for example, Carlson notes the tendency to refer to 'West End Theatre' or 'Broadway musicals' as a collective, defined by their physical location.[47] They affect and are affected by the location around them. Pinder describes the various processes of exploration that have taken place in order to map the cultural resonances of urban areas and the everyday associations people have with their environments – safe/unsafe, expensive/cheap, and so on. Through this process researches are able, to some extent, to interpret the link between environment and behaviour[48]

[40] McAuley, p.38
[41] Ibid., p.42
[42] Ibid., p.55
[43] Lewis, p.88
[44] Schechner, p.176
[45] Susan Bennett, *Theatre audiences: a theory of production and reception*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), p.125
[46] McAuley, p.46
[47] Carlson, 2003, p.140
[48] David Pinder, 'Arts of Urban Exploration', *Cultural Geographies*, 12(4), pp.383-411, pp.388-90

– a link that has a powerful bearing on people's interaction with theatres. Visiting a theatre in an area that people identify as unsafe or run-down, for instance, is likely to inspire a feeling of 'thrill-seeking' that is more conducive to independent, new, edgy, and challenging work.[49] On the other hand, attending a performance at the National will – in most – inspire feelings of safety as they walk through the (fairly) well-policed and well-lit nearby environment, and of being near the heart of a particularly bourgeois district (the South Bank), meaning more conformist or traditional work could be more readily expected and enjoyed.

In the case of The RNT, the surrounding area also has a powerful cultural resonance because of its identity as a 'national' institution. In the 19th century, theatre responded to the growth in nationalism by establishing performance spaces that were a repository of national character,[50] something that continues with the establishment of venues such as the National. It is deliberately situated on the banks of the Thames - a "cultural centre",[51] surrounded by the iconic panorama of waterside London – within visible distance of the Houses of Parliament, the London Eye, the 'Gherkin' and so on.[52] The theatre becomes a part of that recognizable image of the city – it embodies and blends with the culture, history, and modernity of England's capital. (I have already noted how Lasdun intended the building to physically merge with its environment over time, in order to cement its connection to the surrounding cultural signifiers). The connotations of prosperity and modernity are obvious in the surrounding buildings and structures, but the historical facades of 'Big Ben' and the Houses of Parliament also help imbue the RNT with a sense of tradition and historicity that is notably fitting to a 'national' theatre. It is, after all, a mainstream theatre, and – as Bennett notes – the audience for such theatres "largely enjoy a sense of visiting a district where culture is privileged and an important part of established social activity."[53] The cultural associations evoked by the location help to enhance both enjoyment and semiotic receptivity for the audience.

Although it was originally conceived as a symbol of 'civic pride' for Nottingham,[54] the Playhouse's location away from other culturally symbolic buildings – such as the town hall or iconic castle – perhaps has a slightly adverse effect. Its proximity to Pugin's famed Gothic cathedral, for instance, labelled one of his most important works,[55] is only notable because of the clear contrast between the two designs, a contrast that seems to emphasise the difference between the Playhouse and Nottingham's historical cultural locations. The theatre seems to consciously reject its artistic heritage.

Furthermore, as Carlson notes, some performance sites are not ghosted only by artistic memories but by social ones as well – such as the opera house. Its traditional opulence and usually distinguished positioning often leads to an association of the opera house with the most well-refined of the upper-classes, restricting it to the preserve of the wealthy few.[56] The physical location of the Playhouse in a fairly middle-class area, as well as its design (incorporating an upmarket bar and restaurant, extravagant external sculpture, and fountain) give it a similarly refined social aspect which might carry threateningly elitist connotations for some. Its located leads to an association with the nearby residents, mostly middle and upper class, and students. Such an audience *might* be expected to prefer serious drama and recognized works, making it difficult for the theatre to maintain its commitment to a broader

[49] Knowles, p.81
[50] Carlson 2003, p.147
[51] McAuley, p.45
[52] Bennett, p.125
[53] Ibid.
[54] Hayes, p.143
[55] Desmond Forristal, 'Homage To Pugin', *The Furrow,* 45(10) (October 1994), pp.584-587, p.585
[56] Carlson 2003, p.144

programme incorporating music, comedy, and dance. The possibility for diversity is severely limited by the social ghostings that accompany its physical space.

Although recent analysis of the audiences for theatre and associated art forms seems to indicate that income has little impact on attendance – other features, such as education, social status, and ethnicity – the first two of which are closely linked with income - were regarded as the most relative to arts participation, with more highly educated people of prominent social status being most likely to visit the theatre.[57] The physical location of the Playhouse away from poorer areas does little to buck this worrying trend. Indeed, as Carlson notes, theatres are often used as the stimulants for urban regeneration – frequently a euphemistic term for the bulldozing of low-rent housing in favour of more upmarket apartments.[58]

In her discussion of the theatre as a social event, McAuley touches on the "risk" of a performance being "overtaken by the social."[59] She highlights the issue of the performance being swamped by signals picked up from *outside* the stage space itself. The semiotic intention of a piece might be – unknowingly for its director or cast – perverted or manipulated in some way by the semiotic structure of the external environment. Those attending a play dealing with extreme poverty at the RNT, for instance, might see it as hypocritical or insincere in the face of the lavish surroundings of central London and the expensive bars and restaurants nearby. "The social experience enhances, even accentuates the individual's response to the performance."[60] Several practitioners have attempted to utilize this effect – Adriane Mnouchkine, for instance, commonly attempts to involve the audience in a kind of performance before the start of the actual even itself, blurring the horizons between theatre and non-theatre.[61]

However, there remains the possibility that we are overstating the significance of these cultural memories audiences associate with place. We can claim that the effect of haunting exists, but quite how important an effect it is is hard to say, and whether practitioners take much account of it (outside of 'site-specific' performance) is difficult to know. This is one criticism Burian flags up in his brief review of Carlson's work, and it is a difficult one to respond to.[62] Carlson's description of the audience as though they are a single mass is also misleading. An audience is always made up of smaller groups and individuals, each of whom will arrive at the theatre a different way and will bring different memories and associations with them – memories and associations, furthermore, that are constantly being shaped and reshaped.

Undoubtedly, "meaning in the environment is inescapable, even for those who would deny or deplore it."[63] However, the very plethora of individual environmental meanings is so vast that it becomes difficult to determine which is the most relevant or important. The 'multicoding' of cityscapes makes "semiotic analysis of the modern city somewhat arbitrary"[64] so the conclusions we can draw about the possible memories and associations audience members might have are, therefore, somewhat limited and prone to a certain amount of assumption and bias. While it is useful to note the way location and architecture *might*

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[57] Catherine Bunting et al., From Indifference to Enthusiasm: Patterns of Arts Attendance in England (1 April 2008) <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/indifferencetoenthusiasm.pdf> [accessed 2nd Jan 2010], pp.41-61
[58] Carlson 'Civic', pp.28-31
[59] McAuley, p.248
[60] Ibid.
[61] McAuley, p.43-44
[62] Jarka M. Burian, 'Review: Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture by Marvin Carlson', *Theatre Journal*, 42(3) (Oct., 1990), pp.395-396
[63] *Signs, Symbols, and Architecture*, ed. by Geoffrey Broadbent, Richard Bunt, and Charles Jencks. (New York: Wiley, c1979), p.7
[64] Mark Gottdiener, 'Urban Semiotics', in *Remaking the City: Social Science Perspectives on Urban Design*, ed. by Pipkin et al (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), pp.101-114, p.111

affect the reception context, therefore, it is by no means an exact science, and the conclusions drawn from such a study aren't easy to apply in the conception of future performances.

In all fields then, beyond that of just theatre development and design, "architectural theory is taking into account the effects of built form on perceptions and behaviour as well as the ways in which individuals and social groups will transmute the meanings and functions of built form."[65] However, the field of urban semiotics (as Carlson describes it) is still in its infancy, and both its wider applicability and its accuracy are yet to be fully assessed. Throughout my application of it in this essay I have been fully aware that I have not been able to take all the aspects and possible repositories of cultural memory into account, and therefore my assessments of meaning and place are highly individualized and exclusive. The most I have achieved, perhaps, is to restate the fundamental subjectivity of the theatre experience. Ultimately, then, while I will conclude that Carlson's original statement is undeniably true, I think it is an extremely difficult theory to apply accurately or objectively in practice, and therefore should be used with trepidation.

[65] John Pipkin, Mark La Gory, and Judith R.Blau, 'Introduction', in *Remaking the City* (see Gottdeiner, above), pp.1-16, p.18

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