

URBAN STAGES: WHEN CITIES AND ARCHITECTURE BECOME A THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, the theatre has played a decisive part in urban space configuration, not only because of the location of theatre buildings within the city. Outdoor performances in squares, streets and community facilities have also assumed an essential role in the organisation of public space. In this sense, touring theatre must be understood as a resource for transforming and revitalising cities. Festivals such as Avignon, Bilbao and Tárrega are clear examples of how theatre can appropriate the urban or architectural context and generate new atmospheres. The study of these three cases aims to show how performing practice finds or makes its place in the city, adapting itself to existing urban structures and enhancing their value. In addition, the purpose is also to analyse some buildings and public places that have been designed with an evident scenographic vocation. From Piazza di Sant'Ignazio (Rome) to Can Sau (Olot, Girona), several constructions are conceived as street stages, where everyday life becomes a live performance.

KEYWORDS

Architecture; city; theatre; touring theatre; urban space.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between theatre and urban space can be analysed from different points of view. As far as the historical evolution of Western cities is concerned, the origin of this connection is often traced back to the times of Ancient Greece. From Delphi to Epidaurus, Greek theatres were an extension of the landscape. The location of these buildings defined, to a large extent, the characteristics of their surroundings. Another aspect to be considered is the celebration of events such as the Lenaia and the Dionysia, in which some performances were held all over the polis. The latter was a great festival in ancient Athens in honour of the god Dionysus, based on theatrical performances of dramatic tragedies and comedies. It consisted of two related festivals, the Rural Dionysia and the City Dionysia, taking place at different times of the year.

Similarly, in the period of Ancient Rome, structures for the performing arts were proper symbols of the cities of the empire. Roman theatres, amphitheatres and circuses were decisive elements in the urban fabric and landscape configuration (Morris 2018). The Colosseum and the Circus Maximus insertion around the Roman Forum clearly exemplify that. Nevertheless, there was no exclusive theatre venue during the Middle Ages. Performances took place in buildings initially intended for other uses, such as religious temples and palaces, or in public places such

as squares and streets. It must be said that, in all these spaces, the ecclesiastical authorities used the theatre to spread the Bible's messages and the Christian values among the people. However, later on, minstrels gave touring theatre a ludic and entertaining character, using music and poetry.

With the end of medieval times, Spain began its Golden Age. The beginning of the colonisation of America brought about the Spanish political and military rise, favouring the flourishing of its arts and literature. The corral de comedias established itself as a relevant theatrical space in this context. It was, in fact, a theatrical courtyard delimited by the typical residential buildings of the main cities (Nieva 2000). Regardless, this open space had nothing to do with the model that became popular during the Renaissance and Baroque periods: the Italian-style theatre. In this building, which is still a reference model today, the stage is separated from the auditorium by the proscenium arch, and the audience is distributed in a horseshoe-shaped enclosure. Some of the most famous Italian-style theatres in Europe are the Comédie-Française in Paris (1680), the Teatro Comunale in Bologna (1763) and La Scala in Milan (1778).

It was undoubtedly during the Enlightenment that theatre buildings began to play an essential role in urban regeneration and growth (Ramon Graells 1997). From the 18th century onwards, the performing arts began to have buildings designed exclusively for them. Therefore, performances no longer took place in spaces conceived for other uses. Enlightened intellectuals identified the theatre with cultural development, which is why they gave it a privileged place in the city. The Opéra Garnier in Paris (1875), built as part of Haussmann's renovation plan, is only one example of this new urban planning trend. In other words, a strategic position would be chosen for the great theatres in the urban fabric (Gravagnuolo 1998). The Royal Theatre in Madrid, inaugurated in 1850, and the Vienna

State Opera, which opened in 1869, are other cases in point.

Nowadays, most theatre events are not linked to the social elite as they were in the past. Moreover, conventional theatre does not usually receive large audiences either, as spectators have other interests related to new forms of consumption, such as television and digital audiovisual platforms. According to the atlas drawn up by the Observatory of Scenic Spaces, eleven theatres and performance halls have recently disappeared in València. These closures are not isolated, as the same thing is happening in most Spanish cities.¹ Theatres are part of the urban landscape and remain iconic in many municipalities. However, the fact is that the projects for new theatre buildings are rare, and their impact on the urban fabric is not as significant as it used to be. Today, the transformative power of theatre lies not in the construction of large structures but in the appropriation of public space. In this sense, popular theatre and street performances become a powerful tool for promoting culture, making a firm commitment to social and urban regeneration.

This study aims to show how touring theatre can transform and enrich the public space, making art and culture accessible to all. Through street performances, the city's spaces undergo a continuous transformation. The change of priorities in today's society has attracted the population to the ephemeral and spontaneous. For this reason, the relationship between theatre and urban configuration nowadays involves itinerant theatre. Thus, the festivals of Avignon, Bilbao and Tàrraga will be analysed. These are three successful events where the performing arts take over streets, squares and emblematic buildings yearly. In addition, the purpose is also to make known those spaces that constitute an urban scenography due to their architectural characteristics. This will make it possible to approach the relationship between theatre, architecture and urban planning from a more human dimension. After all, theatre is a

human activity, an artistic manifestation that not only occupies a place but often gives it meaning. Spaces conceived with an evident scenographic vocation will be studied, from Piazza di Sant'Ignazio in Rome to the modern structure built in Can Sau (Olot, Girona) by the studio unparelld'arquitectes. The chosen case studies constitute a diverse sample with differences in form but similarities in substance. Although festivals and spaces from European cities are analysed, the study focuses mainly on the current context in Spain, where some cases are not yet sufficiently documented.

2. TOURING THEATRE AS A TOOL FOR URBAN TRANSFORMATION: THREE EXAMPLES

2.1. Festival d'Avignon

Established as one of the leading performing arts events in the world, the Festival d'Avignon has been held every year in July since 1947. This French city is located south-east of the country, on the left bank of the Rhône River, and is the capital of the department of Vaucluse in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region. It hosts several urban performances in places as varied as the Church and the Cloister of the Célestins, the Jardin Ceccano, the Maison Jean Vilar and the Boulbon quarry, among many others (Loyer and de Baecque 2016). Specifically, and according to the organisation's data, the festival transforms more than 20 historical and outdoor locations into scenic venues, diverse in terms of architecture and maximum occupancy, from 50 to 2,000 seats. In the last few editions, the number of spectators of shows with paid admission exceeded 100,000 people, including both French and foreigners. In addition, free events attracted around 30,000 visitors. The total number of shows is around 50, translating into 300 performances and

more than 400 cultural activities (Le Festival d'Avignon 2022).

Two of these places transformed into urban stages stand out because of their characteristics, history, and disparity. On the one hand, there is a renowned ecclesiastical construction. The Convent of the Célestins in Avignon is a predominantly Gothic monument built between the 14th and 15th centuries. The complex includes the church and the cloister, enclosures for artistic and performing events during the festival. The former is often used for exhibitions, while the latter becomes a veritable open-air theatre every summer. The cloister is one of the most singular spaces due to its architectural value. It has become an ideal setting for theatrical experimentation year after year, with a seating capacity of 500 people. It is, after all, an area enclosed by a gallery of slightly pointed arches from which two giant plane trees emerge. The stage is set up between them, where the live performances occur (Fig. 1).

On the other hand, the stagings carried out in such a particular location as the Boulbon quarry are worth mentioning. Just 15 kilometres southwest of the city lies this now disused quarry. It is a human-made intervention in the landscape that has changed its meaning instead of remaining abandoned. The festival celebration has given an unexpected function to a place initially created for extracting stone (Fig. 1). As the organisation describes, the first time it was used was in 1985 for the staging of Mahabharata by Peter Brook. Moreover, it should be noted that "everything has to be set up in it, from the electricity to the stage" (Carrière de Boulbon 2022, online). Indeed, stage productions outside the city and in a natural context require technical resources to guarantee the performances' correct development and the audience's comfort. Undoubtedly, the transformation of this place into something similar to a natural theatre in the mountains is one of the great successes of the Festival d'Avignon.



Figure 1. Performance in the Cloister of the Célestins (left) and staging in the Boulbon quarry (right). (Christophe Raynaud de Lage 2018)

2.2. Bilboko Kalealdia

The Theatre and Street Arts Festival in Bilbao, known by its Basque name Bilboko Kalealdia, brings together different street performances covering theatre, circus, dance and clowning. It has been taken annually since 1999, making the last edition the 23rd (Kalealdia 2022). The principal sites converted into street theatres are the estuary of Bilbao, the San Francisco urban orchard, Casilda Iturrizar Park, the side of the Arriaga Theatre and other public places such as Arriaga and Convivencia Squares. Perhaps the well-known Doña Casilda Park is one of the locations where most activities take place. It includes many other settings, from the popular Pergola to the Museum of Fine Arts area and the pond. The construction of this municipal garden, which has been the only green lung of the city for a long time, began in 1907. It is an icon of the Biscayan capital. Over the last few years, dozens of productions have been staged in its facilities, which can accommodate a large number of spectators.

The estuary of Bilbao and the San Francisco urban orchard have recently been added to the list of festival venues. As for the former, the aim is to revitalise further the areas

linked to the river (López 2022). The fluvial landscape is a relevant element in the urban space configuration. Last interventions around it prove that, such as the insertion of the Guggenheim Museum and its surrounding areas. The latter is an ecological space managed by some city's residents, in which agricultural work is carried out. The Bilboko Kalealdia's incursion into this place encourages other neighbours and outsiders to get to know it. In other words, art and culture are used as sustainability's loudspeakers. Popularising such spaces and initiatives through the performing arts is very beneficial. It is another example of how touring theatre can influence urban regeneration and thus the transformation of cities. The connection between the San Francisco urban orchard and the street theatre festival is an example of culture's commitment to society, in this case in the vindication of more sustainable urban and productive models.²

2.3. FiraTàrrega

Elsewhere in the Iberian Peninsula, 500 kilometres southeast of Bilbao, there is the municipality of Tàrrega in the province of Lleida. Its street theatre fair, known as

FiraTàrrega, has been held since 1981. This event was born to turn the town's main festivity into a cultural event that would transform urban spaces through a cultural manifestation, as is theatre (Llacuna, Otal and Ribera 2003). Unlike the cities analysed above, Tàrrega does not have a large population. Its urban configuration has nothing to do with Avignon or Bilbao. However, the fact that it is a small municipality makes it an interesting case study. With just under 18,000 inhabitants, Tàrrega has managed to keep alive and consolidate one of Spain's leading urban theatre festivals. The event intentionally takes on a character more typical of a fair than a festival, just like something similar to a cultural market where performing arts are the matter of interest. This circumstance is motivated by the local context and the way of understanding theatre. Either way, throughout its long history, the fair has evolved to its current state.

Touring theatre makes its way throughout the town, occupying representative spaces such as the Main Square, the church, the schools, the local theatre, etcetera (Què és FiraTàrrega 2022). The former is the most emblematic place in the city's historic centre. A series of buildings of significant heritage value converge here: the Town Hall (17th century), the Church of Santa Maria de l'Alba (17th-18th centuries) and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (19th century). As for the religious temple, it is a listed building in the category of historical monuments. Its baroque style with some neoclassical features and its façade become one of the backdrops for live performances year after year. Pictures from different editions of the fair show the main stage built in front of the Town Hall. For this reason, its front wall is in the background, while the church remains on the right (Fig. 2). The audience takes up the venue standing together in front of this removable stage.



Figure 2. Comedians in the Main Square of Tàrrega. (Pau Barceló 1981)

When FiraTàrrega is on, the Main Square is transformed into a different place than usual. It goes from a space for social gatherings and commercial relations to an open-air theatre flanked by heritage architecture and traditional dwellings. Moreover, celebrating this event is a defining factor in the town's contemporary history and urban planning. Here, street performances determine the evolution of the public spaces. A clear case is that of this square, whose construction works and modifications must be carried out considering its theatrical function. Ultimately, through the study of this fair, the transformative power of the street performing arts in today's urbanism is confirmed. As has also been seen in the cases of Avignon and Bilbao, such cultural events have several positive consequences on the configuration of urban space. These include the recovery of disused spaces and the revitalisation of those in danger of abandonment. Other results are revaluating public space to the detriment of private facilities and making culture accessible to everyone. Travelling theatre, together with other tools, favours the construction and growth of cities based on social needs and not on speculation and private interests. In this sense, it is part of these changing priorities that are setting the course for a better future.

3. ARCHITECTURE AS URBAN SCENOGRAPHIES GENERATOR

The relationship between theatre and urban configuration can still be analysed from another point of view. This connection, however, goes far beyond the location of theatre buildings within the city or the transformation of public space through street performances. The fact is that urban landscape sometimes contains architecture designed with a clear scenographic vocation. But what exactly does this mean? An illustrative example of this concept is the Piazza di Sant'Ignazio in Rome, designed by Filippo Raguzzini and built between 1727 and 1728. It is one of the most iconic spaces of Baroque Rome, even defined as "the most spectacular scenography of urban rococo" (Blasco 2013, online). This square is in front of the Church of St. Ignatius of Loyola at Campus Martius, becoming a necessary prelude to access the temple. A group of peculiar buildings with curved façades face the monumental church (Fig. 3). They are the result of a design in which geometry regulates every detail. The importance of the geometric layout in this project, based on the outline of ellipses, aims to generate a contrast that highlights the presence of the religious construction.

The truth is that both the shape and the position of the buildings in Piazza di Sant'Ignazio generate a kind of urban scenography, assuming the role of backdrop in a public space that resembles a theatre scene. In places like this, the conjunction between buildings and open space takes on the appearance of a street stage, where everyday life becomes a live performance. In Spain, other more recent architecture cases that also generate urban scenographies can be found. In the northern zone, some of the squares planned by Luis Peña Ganchequi have this character too, as for example the Plaza de la Trinidad (Donostia, 1963), the Plaza del Tenis (Donostia, 1975) and the Plaza de los Fueros (Vitoria-Gasteiz, 1979). They all generate a scenographic atmosphere due to their forms, in which the staggering is a crucial element. In addition, its link with the surroundings is also an important issue (Sangalli Uggeri 2015). This can be seen especially in the latter (Fig. 4), where the relationship with the sea and Chillida's sculptures is highly relevant. In such a context, human activity is theatricalised. The routine is framed in a space that expresses a message of its own.

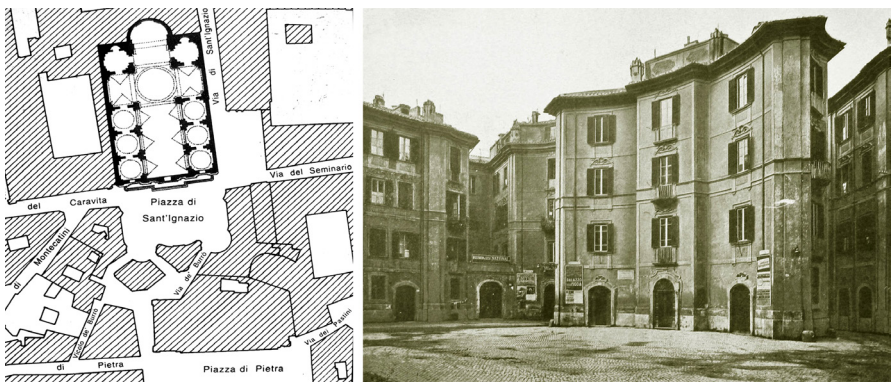


Figure 3. Piazza di Sant'Ignazio. Urban fabric (left) and appearance in the 1930s (right). (Unknown authors 20th century)

Something similar happens with the intervention undertaken by the studio unparelledarquitectes in a city in Girona. The team of architects resolved a party wall that had been left exposed in an urban void by designing what they call "an emergency scenography" (Callís and Moliner 2021, 50-51). The project consists of the adaptation of this party wall, located on a vacant lot where there used to be a house called Can Sau. This space overlooks the side of the Verge del Tura Sanctuary, a church dedicated to the patron saint of Olot (the town where the intervention is located). Thus, with the transformation of this vertical element, a deteriorated place has been turned into a meeting point, very attractive for neighbours and visitors. The design of the new façade gives shape to a previously neglected urban space. In the authors' own words:

"Con ladrillo hueco, se construye una escenografía de urgencia que completa lo que insinúan los contrafuertes, dejando ver en el fondo las huellas de la actividad doméstica marcadas en la medianera. Una construcción de tres bóvedas y cuatro nichos se ofrece al

espacio público como una fachada porosa, acompañada de un mínimo graderío. Es una estructura inacabada y apropiable. El artista visual Quim Domene interviene a posteriori en los nichos, con elementos alegóricos a la historia del barrio (Callís and Moliner 2020, online)."³

This new structure for the enjoyment of citizens takes on different functions. Firstly, it is an urban and architectural landmark that enhances the space around the church. It also assumes the role of a meeting place where people can sit and socialise. Furthermore, it creates a venue for street performances (Fig. 4). This is another case where architecture has a poetic meaning, transforming a public space into a stage for life. Nevertheless, there is still a much more groundbreaking example in which the urban landscape literally becomes a stage. It is a recording room where artists sing and perform in a showcase. Located in Poblenou, Barcelona, Acid House is an Innovation Centre designed by the studio Arquitectura-G. The project is based on transforming an old factory into a cultural centre where different businesses



Figure 4. Plaza del Tennis in Donostia (left) and Can Sau in Olot, Girona (right). (Respectively: unknown author and date; José Hevia 2018)

converge (Arnabat, Ayala-Bril, Fuentes and Urdampilleta, 2020). One of them is Window Gallery, where well-known singers and musicians record video clips performing in front of people passing by on the street (Fig. 5). In this case, the architecture takes utmost eagerness to theatricalise the city. Each performance is integrated into the hustle and bustle of the public space. In conclusion, it seems appropriate to quote a reflection by Professor Antoni Ramon on this subject:

"Els vincles del teatre amb la ciutat no es limiten a qüestions estructurals, urbanístiques. A la ciutat, el teatre no sols és un edifici, més o menys significatiu, monumental. El teatre és una activitat pròpia de la població, que omple de vida alguns espais urbans, els dona sentit i, a vegades, fins i tot n'és l'origen (Ramon Graells 1997, 14)."⁴

4. CONCLUSIONS

As explained, the theatre has been connected to the urban space configuration throughout history. Although this relationship has traditionally been associated with the construction of buildings and structures for theatrical performance, nowadays, this link has an entirely different meaning. The relationship between the theatre and the city is no longer determined by its imprint on the urban fabric exclusively. The transformative power of theatre today lies in activities such as street performances, and the festivals analysed here are proof of this. Although Avignon, Bilbao and Tàrrrega are very different cities, the touring theatre fulfils the same function: to participate in urban regeneration and the evolution of public space. Whether a square, a religious temple, a garden or even a quarry, the performing arts can revitalise and re-signify the space in every place. Art and culture can adapt to every context and



Figure 5. Performance by Rigoberta Bandini at Window Gallery in the Acid House Innovation Centre. (Gallery Session 2021)

increase their value. With tools such as these, the present and future urban planning must be conceived. Future cities must be built according to the real needs of the population and not to individual power or private interests. This is one of the commitments of these cultural events.

Another interesting approach to the relationship between theatre and urban space is the study of architecture projects with a scenographic vocation. These places sometimes go unnoticed by the unobservant eye because of their integration into the cities. However, they are spaces with their own personality and message, which contribute to improving the urban landscape. In them, the city becomes theatre, and everyday life is the play to be performed. The Piazza di Sant'Ignazio in Rome, the projects of Peña Ganchegui, the Can Sau intervention and the experimental space in Acid House are just a few examples that illustrate this concept. Each one is different from the last, but all generate theatrical atmospheres in the city. Whether they are heritage architecture, new projects or refurbishments, they all constitute urban stages. Here, the population is the absolute protagonist, and their needs must be the urban planning priority. In summary, it seems clear that, as some researchers dedicated to the study of the scenic space point out:

"Theatre is happening all around us while we, the actors, keep playing out our roles in the surrounding existential space (Kołodziejczyk 2019, 19)."

NOTES

¹ Among the work carried out by the Observatory of Scenic Spaces, it is worth highlighting the creation of an atlas of active, abandoned and disappeared theatres in different Spanish cities and the rest of Europe. Available online: <https://www.espaciosescenicos.org>.

² For more information, the activities developed by this neighbourhood platform can be found on their social networks. It is worth noting that similar initiatives exist today in many of Spain's principal cities.

³ "With hollow bricks, an emergency scenography is built for completing what the buttresses insinuate, revealing the traces of domestic activity marked on the party wall in the background. The construction of three vaults and four niches offers a porous façade to the public space, accompanied by a minimal grandstand. It is an unfinished and appropriable structure. The visual artist Quim Domene intervenes a posteriori in the niches, with elements allegorical to the neighbourhood's history." Own translation.

⁴ "The theatre's links with the city are not limited to structural, urban issues. In the city, the theatre is not only a significant or monumental building. The theatre is an activity of the population, which fills some urban spaces with life, gives them meaning and, sometimes, is even their origin." Own translation.

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