

PIETER VERGEER



**A NEXT STAGE
FOR THE VOLKSBUHNE**

a research into the architectural transformation of
the Berlin Volksbühne's performance space



complex projects

Opera as a form of performing arts was the outcome of an experiment; an attempt to combine all types of performing art into one piece. Part of the appeal of opera is described to be that:

“as with tightrope walking or motor racing, there is a constant sense in a live performance that something might go wrong. Or spectacularly right.”

(Snowman, 2010)

A personal fascination for this experimental approach to the performing arts led to the discovery of the Volksbühne, a theatre in Berlin that's described to be Germany's most experimental due to the way they combine types of performing arts, implement new media and challenge the relationship between performers and audience. This experimental character is confirmed in an anecdote about (former) Volksbühne intendant Frank Castorf:

“Isn't that a bit dangerous? What if they slide down into the orchestra pit?” Castorf replied that that was precisely what he liked about it. “He thought the risk of an accident made it more interesting. Things spinning out of control – that fascinates him.”

(Volksbühne prop maker Frank Mittmann, 2016)

This research will touch upon experimentation in the performing arts through the lens of architecture, with the Volksbühne in Berlin as a case study.

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INTRODUCTION

01

thesis topic

The Volksbühne in Berlin was founded in 1890 as a theatre *for and by the people*. Literally translated, Volksbühne means *People's Stage* and was started as an initiative for the working class. Although the Volksbühne movement came up throughout all of Germany during the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the Volksbühne in Berlin to date is Germany's most renowned one, known for its experimental performance and described to hold the same cultural status as Berghain (Oltermann, 2016).

The Volksbühne is housed in a monumental theatre venue at Rosa Luxemburg Platz that was built in 1913-1914. It is a repertory/production theatre, meaning that besides the direction of performances, they also design and make their own their sets and costumes. These production activities moved out of the venue in 1939 and since then happen at a workshop in an external location in Pankow, Berlin. Besides theatre and drama, the Volksbühne houses other types of performing arts as well, such as concerts (classical, jazz, club music) and dance. They experiment through cross-pollination between the genres and combining types, as well as through the implementation of new media and challenging the relationship between performers and audience (Behrendt & Müller, 2016).

problem statement

As it was founded in 1890, the Volksbühne has been shaped by its context: the city of Berlin during the turbulent 20th century. Located in the epicenter of the first and second world war and on the east side of the divided city during the Cold War, the institute has had to constantly position itself in its changing context (Davis, 1977). After the fall of the wall, under intendant Frank Castrof, the Volksbühne was celebrated for its experimental theatre.

In recent years, the Volksbühne has encountered challenges, exemplified by

the 2017 controversy surrounding the appointment of Chris Dercon, the former director of Tate Modern, as the institution's new intendant (Behrendt & Müller, 2016). Struggling to balance between preserving its traditions and embracing necessary changes, the Volksbühne faces criticism from various fronts. On the one hand, proposals to re-invent the Volksbühne like the appointment of Dercon are criticised, on the other hand, visitor number are going down and their newest productions are critiqued for their lack of inventiveness (Schaper, 2022). Originally established as a socialist initiative, the Volksbühne now finds itself at the heart of a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood and city. This evolving context presents a new reality that the Volksbühne must adapt to, while simultaneously warranting its unique role as a socially and culturally valuable institution. Besides, the Volksbühne faces a spatial problem. Despite the institute's ambition for experimental theatre, it is currently limited by its conventional performance space. Technical advancements have changed the world of the performance over the past decades and to stay competitive and inventive, the Volksbühne needs to adapt.

research question

The combination of these two problems resulted in the following research question for a case-study based research:

Can the design of a new performance space help the Volksbühne re-invent itself in a changing societal context?

To answer the main research question, three sub-questions were formulated through the lenses client, program and site:

Client:

What are the core values of the Volksbühne's identity that should guide an architectural intervention?

Program:

What spatial and technical properties of a

performance space stimulate experimental performance?

Site:

What elements of the existing Volksbühne venue bear architectural, emotional, and historical value?



Figure 1.1 Volksbühne as seen from Rosa Luxemburg Strasse



Figure 1.2 Volksbühne up close

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

02

theoretical framework

To answer the research questions, it is important to understand existing theories and previous research that was done in this field. This theoretical framework is structured along the three sub-questions.

sub-question 1: client

The aim of the first sub-question *What are the core values of the Volksbühne's identity that should guide an architectural intervention?* is to develop a better understanding of the Volksbühne and what the institute stands for. The book *The Volksbühne Movement: a history* by Cacil Davis written in 1998 provides insight into the origins of the Volksbühne movement and describes it as something that "could not have arisen in any other country [than Germany]", due to the moral and educational role theaters fulfilled in Germany. Besides, the rise of worker-class movements and occasional theater visits being regarded as normal were influential factors. It is also described how the movement has always been subject to critique and discussions due to conflicting political, economic, and intellectual convictions.

In the book *Contemporary European Theatre Directors* Volksbühne intendant Frank Castorf's influence on the institute is described. After the fall of the wall, Berlin's cultural world faced a problem. Due to the division, there were too many theaters for one re-united city to be funded. The Volksbühne faced closure but instead it was decided to appoint Frank Castorf director with the aim of putting together "a young ensemble with a thirst for artistic innovation and the courage to create contemporary, political relevant theatre". This appointment was successful and was the starting point of Castorf's 25-year directorship during which he managed to create revolutionary theatre for a diverse crowd of theatre-goers, unemployed students and the working class, trying to uphold Eastern values. This audience was described to be "active,

engaged, often shouting out their approval or disapproval".

sub-question 2: program

The second sub-question *What spatial and technical properties of a performance space stimulate experimental performance?* should help define the requirements of a space for performance in the Volksbühne. The books *Building for the Performing Arts* (Appleton, 1996) and *Theatre Buildings, a design guide* (Strong, 2010) offer extensive documentation on matters to be considered when designing a performance space, like seat arrangements, stage design, sightlines, and acoustics. Each type of performing arts has different requirements, which result in different spatial applications. For this reason, multipurpose venues tend to fail, although they can offer a solution when the priority is not on offering the optimal conditions (Strong, 2010). The relation between the audience, the seat and the performer has been previously researched by *Complex Projects* student Edwin Scharringa (2023) and offers valuable insight. For instance, about the relevance of intimacy and immediacy for audience cohesion, which relates to the audience's feeling of being part of a shared experience.

Bertolt Brecht is an important name in the world of theatre when covering the relation between audience and performer, as he broke what was called "the fourth wall of theatre". He used the technique of speaking straight to the audience and as such breaking the boundary between performer and audience and did this with political, social and philosophical implications. This was the start of so called 'epic theatre' (David, 2015).

Peter Brook, a theatre director and cofounder of Royal Shakespeare Company wrote a book about performance and the stage called *The Empty Space* (1995). In the book he describes four types of theatre: *deadly theatre*, *holy theatre*, *rough theatre* and *immediate theatre*. *Deadly theatre* being

passive an un-engaging theatre and *holy theatre* being spiritual but unengaging due to a lack of relatability. He describes the third, *rough theatre* to be based on spontaneity, impulse, and raw emotional expression, which risks lacking depth. *Immediate theatre* is combination of the best of the *holy* and the best of the *rough* to create the best theatrical performance. Brook is also known for the quote "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged." (1995), in which he deconstructs the act of performance to its essence and claims that performance can take place in any empty space with an observer.

An example of architecture that is described to stimulate experimentation is the *Fun Palace* concept by Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood (1961). Through designing a framework which allowed freedom for personal interpretation and interaction they "...synthesized influential ideas about how architecture could leverage advances in science and technology to encourage social participation, personal initiative, and playful improvisation." The Fun Palace is even

described to represent the 'ideal theatre', creating a Brechtian environment where the audience would become integral to the action. (Mathews, 2016)

sub-question 3: site

When dealing with the transformation of an existing building, knowing about its values and potentials is important. That is the aim of sub-question 3: *What elements of the existing Volksbühne venue bear architectural, emotional, and historical value?*

Due to its institutional and architectural significance, the Volksbühne is quite well documented and described in literature. The building was designed by German architect Oskar Kaufmann who is known for his theatre-design and construction was finished in 1914. When built, the building was literally in the "hands of the people" as the 14,500 shares were owned largely by small contributors (Davis, 2000). Architecturally, the building is characterized by its monumental shell limestone pillar façade, which due to its rounded shapes expresses Jugendstil features. The building is monumental in its positioning as well, situated at the end of an axis on the Rosa

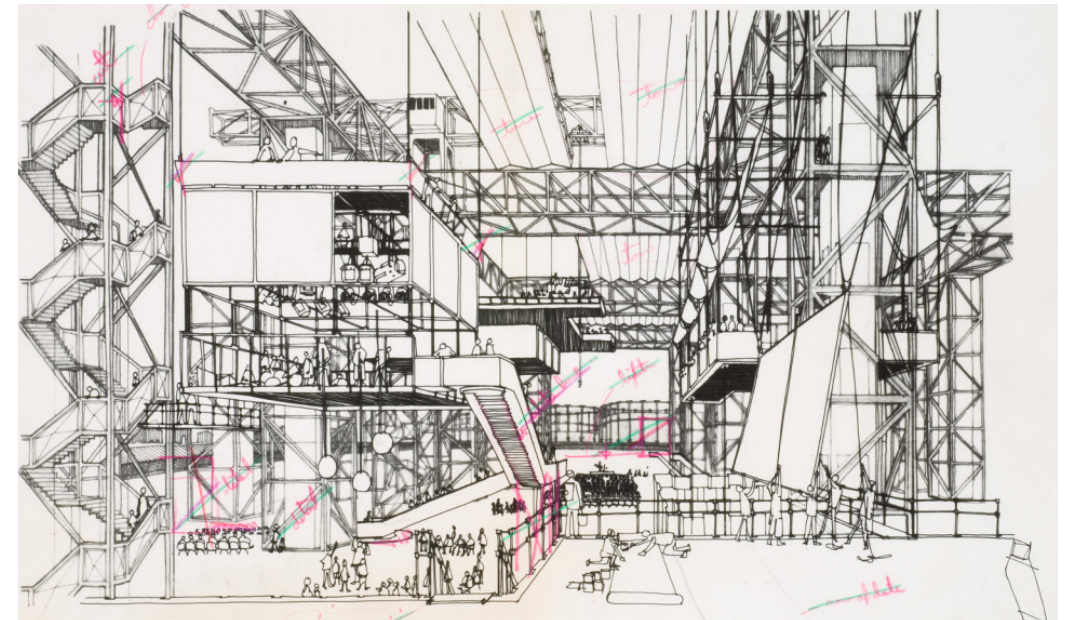


Figure 2.1 Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood's Fun Palace concept

Luxemburg Strasse. Originally Kaufmann designed buildings to both sides of the theatre (see image 2.2), but this plan was discontinued with the start of the first World War, right after the opening of the main venue.

Throughout time, multiple adjustments to the building were made. For instance, the grand hall, which was originally designed as a horseshoe opera-style auditorium (image 2.3) was after its destruction during a World War II bombing (image 2.4) redesigned into its current theatre-layout. Kaufmann's unconventional choice for a horseshoe form, which is known as a 'rang theatre' and does not fit the character of a *people's theatre* was originally motivated by an aim to create a larger capacity. The Red and Green Salon, the Volksbühne's two multi-purpose halls for small scale performance are post-war additions from 1954.

When dealing with an architectural monument, there are different positions an architect can take. Depending on the existing building, approaches can be *conservation, preservation, renovation, and restoration*. In the book *Old Buildings, New Forms* (Bollack, 2013) restorative reuse is distinguished into the strategies *inserting, wrapping, juxtaposing, weaving and superimposing*.

Besides the approach to reuse from the perspective of monumentality, there are also theories on the material reuse of buildings. *Reduce, reuse, recycle* (Petzet & Heilmeyer, 2012), and *Reuse in Construction, a Compendium of Circular Architecture* (Stricker, Brandi, & Sonderegge, 2022) being two examples of this. Both emphasize the importance of a critical assessment of the existing material potential to stimulate circularity.

relevance

In light of sustainability, it is important to prevent the demolition of buildings and instead focus on the reuse of existing structures. One should not always wait for these building to be abandoned but rather during its lifetime question if improvements could be made to extend its lifetime. Particularly large scale (monumental) public buildings which are prone to societal and technological change and have very specific spatial conditions should be assessed before a new building is constructed. Besides the positive impact this reuse approach can have from a sustainability point of view, it can also help an organisation to position itself within a changed societal context and make the building fulfil a better role in society. This case study research can act as an example for the reuse of highly specific existing public buildings before they fall out of use, to sustain its specific functional lifespan and re-invent its function in a changed context.

Within the *Complex Project studio*, the research into the reuse of an existing building is valuable as it fits strategy of the energy group to make use of existing potentials in the city. Besides, the research is an investigation into performance spaces, therewith building upon previously investigation into the relation between the audience, the seat and the performer that was conducted by one of the studio's previous graduates.

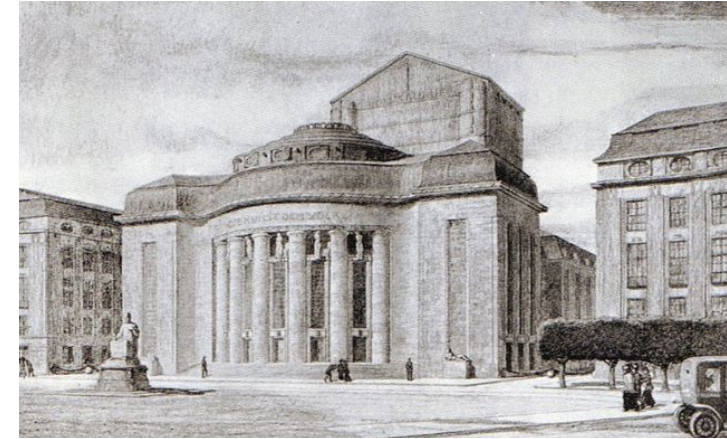


Figure 2.2 Volksbühne drawing as planned with neighbouring buildings (1914)

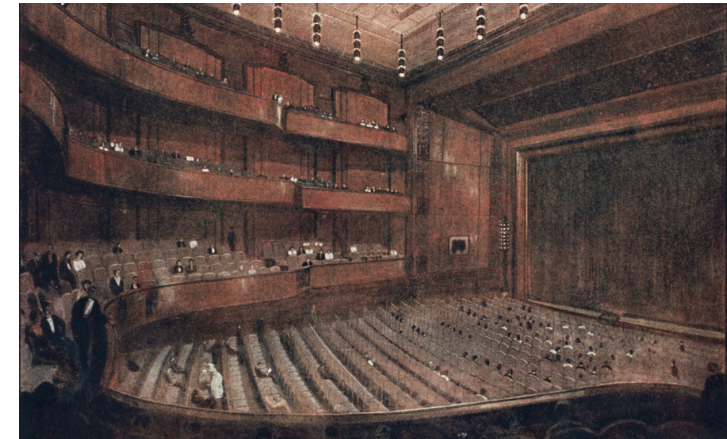


Figure 2.3 Volksbühne grand hall with horseshoe setup



Figure 2.4 Volksbühne destroyed after the second world war

RESEARCH METHODS

03

research methods

The overall methodology is the development of a design brief that will guide the architectural design of a transformation of the Volksbühne venue. The sub-questions, which are defined according to the topics client, program and site cover the most important aspect within each topic. Besides, other investigations will be conducted to define the design brief.

client

The sub-question *What are the core values of the Volksbühne's identity that should guide an architectural intervention?* is meant to create an understanding of the Volksbühne's identity and goals. This is researched through literature and archival studies and an extensive investigation into recent affairs at the institute through (newspaper) articles and interviews with stakeholders. Besides, on-site interviews are conducted with members of the Volksbühne ensemble who fulfil different roles in the institute, such as acting, directing, production, and service. Visiting shows in the different genres the venue has to offer and documenting these shows is another important method to get to know the client and describe its core principles.

program

The definition of the program of the transformed Volksbühne starts with an investigation into the program of the existing building, which also involves research into the existing Volksbühne Workshop in Berlin Pankow. Aim of this investigation is to get an understanding of the processes that take place within the venue, the size of the spaces and how these spaces should be connected.

The properties of the key space of the transformed Volksbühne are to be defined through the sub-question *What spatial and technical properties of a performance space stimulate experimental performance?* This research is done through a literature

study, as well as an investigation into case studies of experimental performance spaces. The case studies are: *Aviva Studios* in Manchester by OMA (figure 3.2), *The Shed* in New York by Diller Scofidio + Renfro (figure 3.1), *Teatro Oficina* in São Paulo by Lina Bo Bardi and Edson Elito (figure 3.3) and the 60's *Fun Palace concept* by Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood (figure 3.4). Due to the repertory/producing nature of the Volksbühne, a good understanding of the processes involved in this type of venue need to be obtained. For this plans of *REP Repertory Theatre Birmingham* and *Norwegian National Opera and Ballet* will be used as reference.

site

Considering the design revolves around an existing monumental building, it is important to understand its value, which led to the third sub-question: *What elements of the existing Volksbühne venue bear architectural, emotional, and historical value?* For this, literature- and case study research is conducted into the work of architect Oskar Kaufmann. This is accompanied by tracing of plans, photography, and on-site documentation. Immaterial value will be assessed by speaking to Volksbühne members, after which their stories are to be documented in plans. An investigation into the different theoretical architectural approaches to reusing a building will help to take a position into the relation to the existing monument. Besides, the site should be investigated to according to the requirements as they are described in the energy group work. These requirements are geothermal potential for the building's energy usage and testing the site on the proximity to mobility requirement.

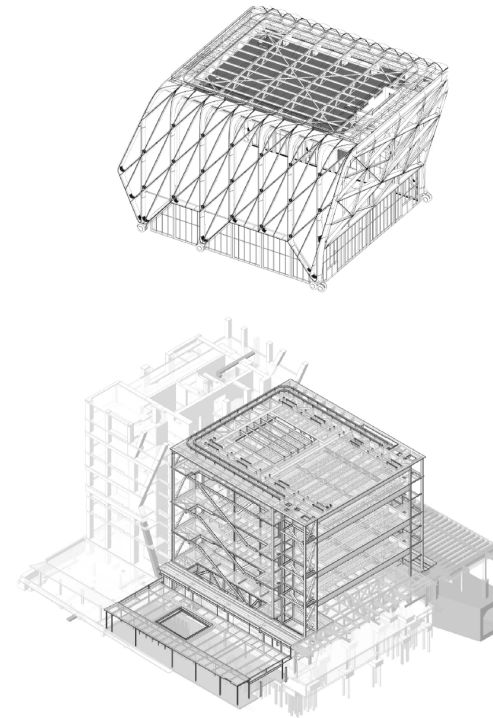


Figure 3.1 Structure of theThe Shed, New York



Figure 3.3 Teatro Oficina by Lina Bo Bardi & Edson Elito

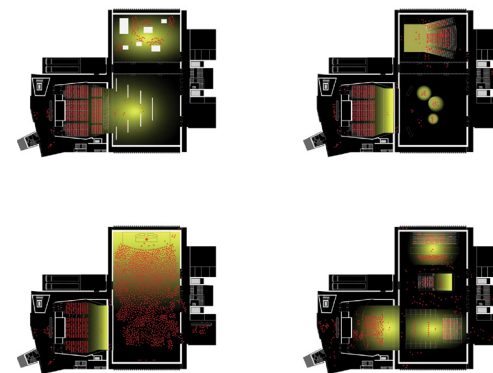


Figure 3.2 Aviva Studios, Factory International, Manchester

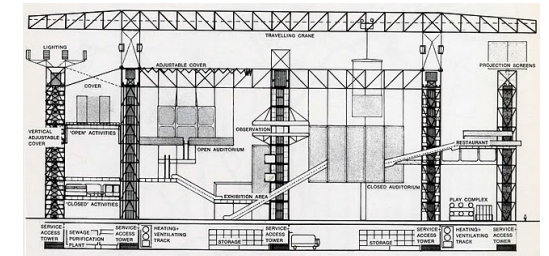


Figure 3.4 Cedric Price's Fun Palace concept

DESIGN BRIEF

WORK IN PROGRESS - TO BE FURTHER
DEVELOPED FOR P2 DESIGN BRIEF

04

client

Based on the research that was conducted as described in the previous chapter, the following six core values of the Volksbühne have been defined. These core values have been described in a personal manifesto for the Volksbühne and are *experimentation, invitation, collaboration, production, equality and history*.

Each value will be elaborated upon in the following part.

lot of social and cultural value in historical sense.

Besides the Volksbühne, an important stakeholder in the project is the Berlin and German government. Due to the large subsidies the institute receives and the vital role it plays in the cultural scene, the government wants to be involved. Through active participatory involvement, previous mistakes like the controversial appointment of Chris Dercon can be prevented.

Experimentation

The Volksbühne should reposition itself as the most experimental venue in Berlin, through inclusion of many different forms of performing arts, combining them, and seeking the boundaries of what's possible.

Invitation

Instead of standing as a fortress on Rosa Luxemburg Platz like it does now, the Volksbühne and its venue should invite people to take a look inside. This will not only increase visitor numbers, but also positively impact the venue's productions and create a lively vibrant atmosphere.

Collaboration

The Volksbühne wants to and should open up to other artists and creators. This will not only positively impact the performances of the Volksbühne ensemble, but is beneficial for Berlin's entire performing arts industry.

Production

What makes the Volksbühne unique is its repertory character. The conservation of this approach is important and was one of the largest reason for the opposition against Chris Dercon.

Equality

The Volksbühne strives for equality among all members of the ensemble, no matter if you are a star performer, cleaner or produce the decors. The ensemble is seen as a collective in which everyone takes up a crucial role.

History

The Volksbühne is an old institute with a

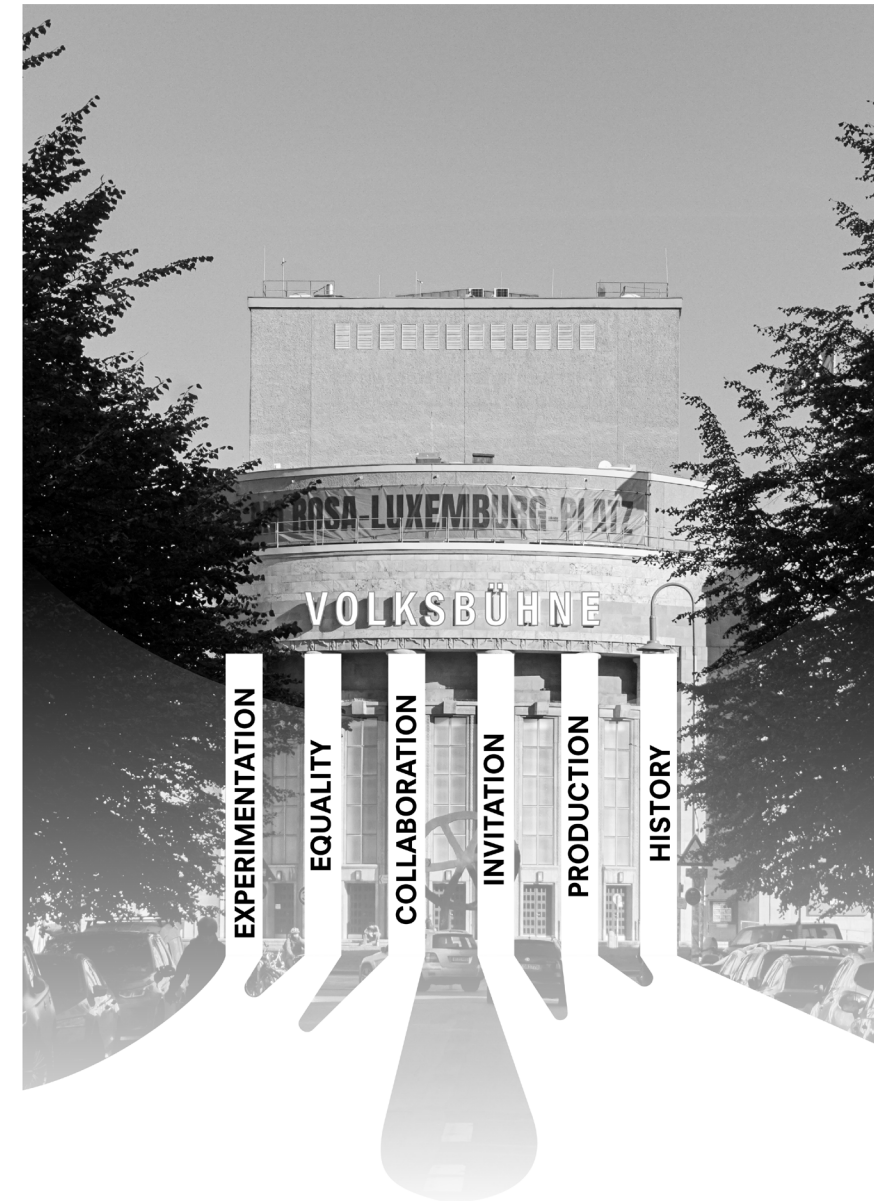


Figure 4.1 a manifesto of the Volksbühnes key values

program

An analysis of the existing program of the Volksbühne provided insight into its programmatic organization and size. Although further investigation of the building is necessary (which requires still to be obtained plans of the building after its renovation in 2004), the first conclusions can be drawn. The venue is structured as most performing arts venues are, with a front of house and back of house which surround the auditoriums in the middle. The gross floor area of the building is 14.300m². Currently the Volksbühne's production of decors and costumes takes place at a workshop in an external location in Pankow.

The programmatic ambition for the transformation of the Volksbühne is based on the institutes six core values that are described in the previous section. These

values are translated into the following ambitions in relation to program:

- 1) Diverse functions to provide activity throughout the day and open up to outsiders
- 2) All activities of the Volksbühne under one roof
- 3) An open configuration of program to spark curiosity and stimulate encounters
- 4) Keep functions with important historical value related to a space in the existing building
- 5) Provide space throughout the building that can be interpreted and used freely by the Volksbühne ensemble and visitors, to encourage performance in the whole building

These ambitions have resulted in a first proposal for the program of the transformed Volksbühne which is described in figures 4.4 to 4.6

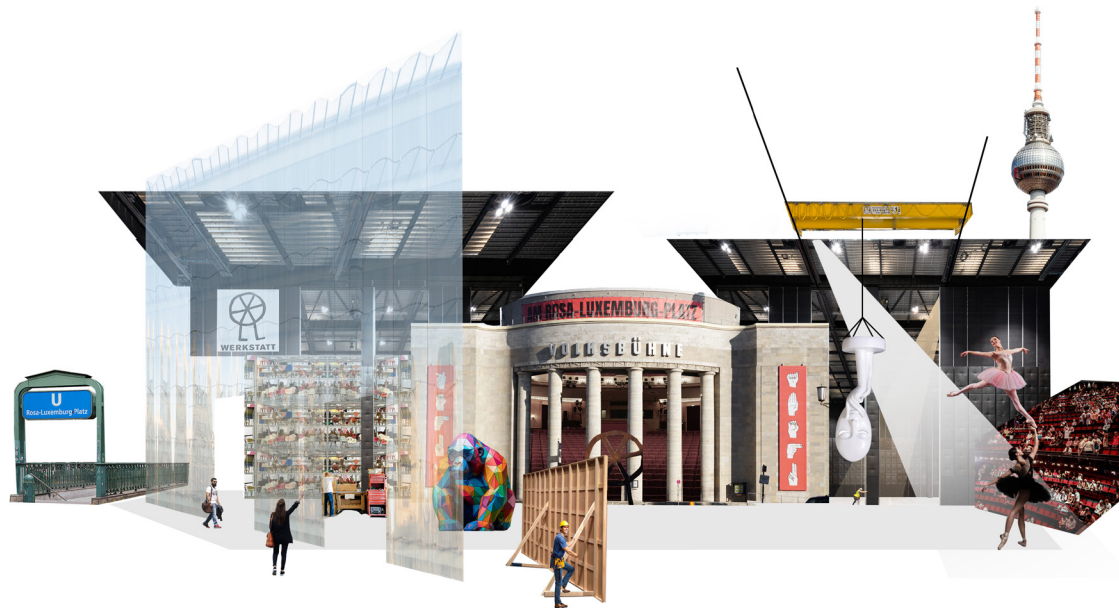


Figure 4.2 collage of intended diverse program

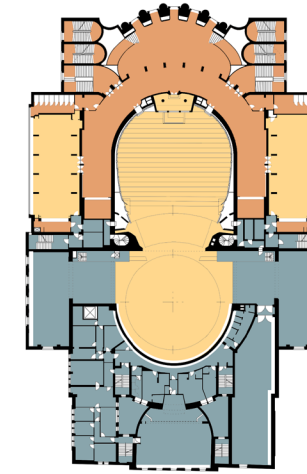


Figure 4.3 front of house, back of house scheme existing

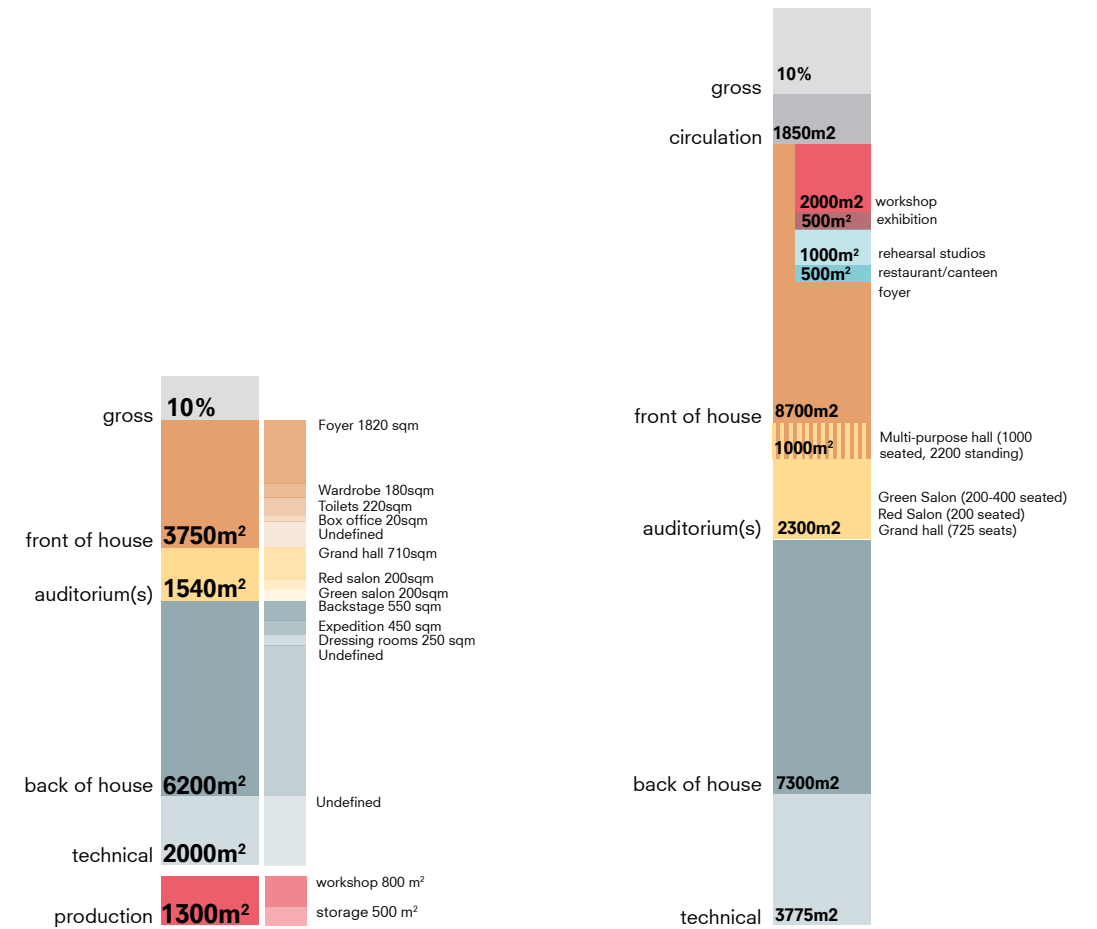


Figure 4.4 program bar existing Volksbühne

Figure 4.5 program bar transformed Volksbühne

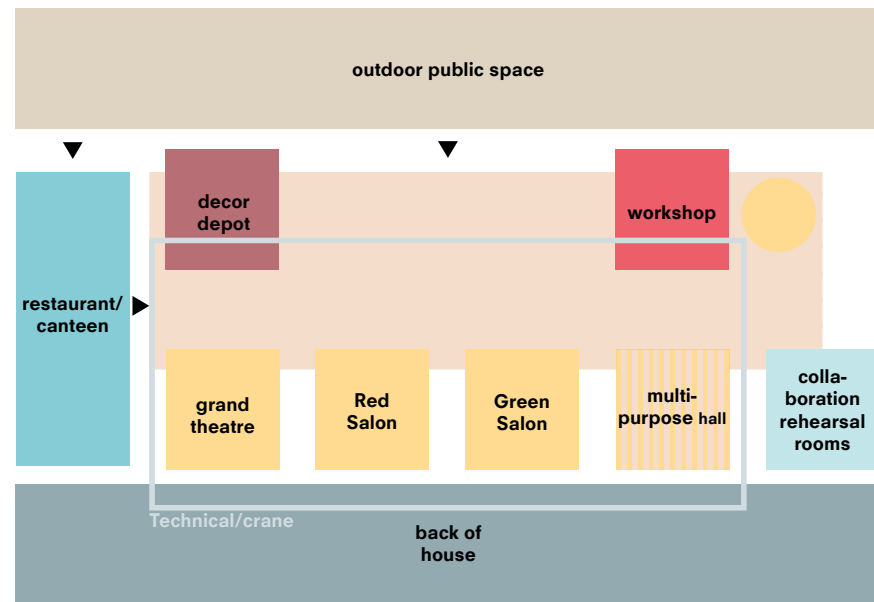


Figure 4.6 program relation scheme

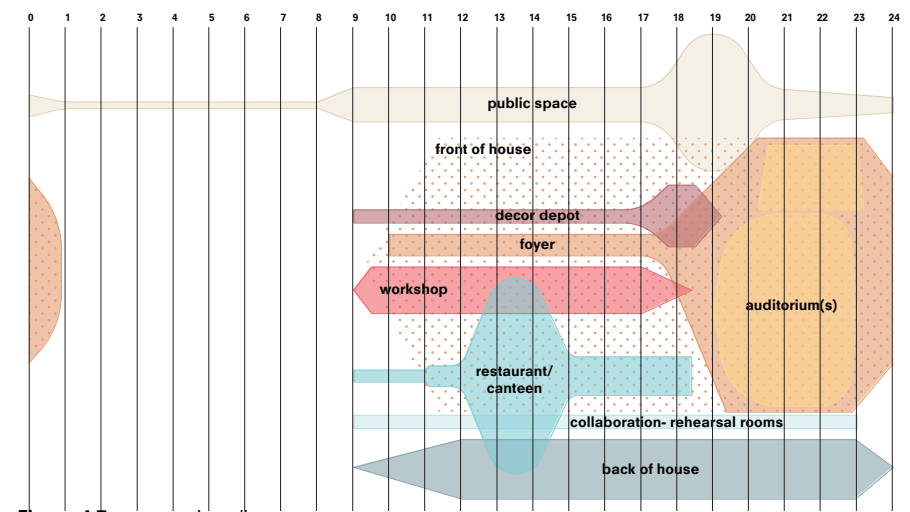


Figure 4.7 program-time diagram

site

Considering the project deals with the transformation of the existing Volksbühne venue, the site is clear: Rosa Luxemburg Platz. However, this site also meets the requirements of a contemporary centre for performing arts, being situated at a central location in the city, right at a U2 U-bahn station one stop away from Alexanderplatz.

Site ambitions:

- 1) Compensate public space that is removed due to the extension
- 2) Increase visibility of the building from major streets
- 3) Reduce the boundary between inside and outside

A thorough analysis of the existing structure has led to a value assessment and the following ambitions with regards to re-use and architectural heritage.

Ambitions existing building

- 1) To be determined
- 2) To be determined

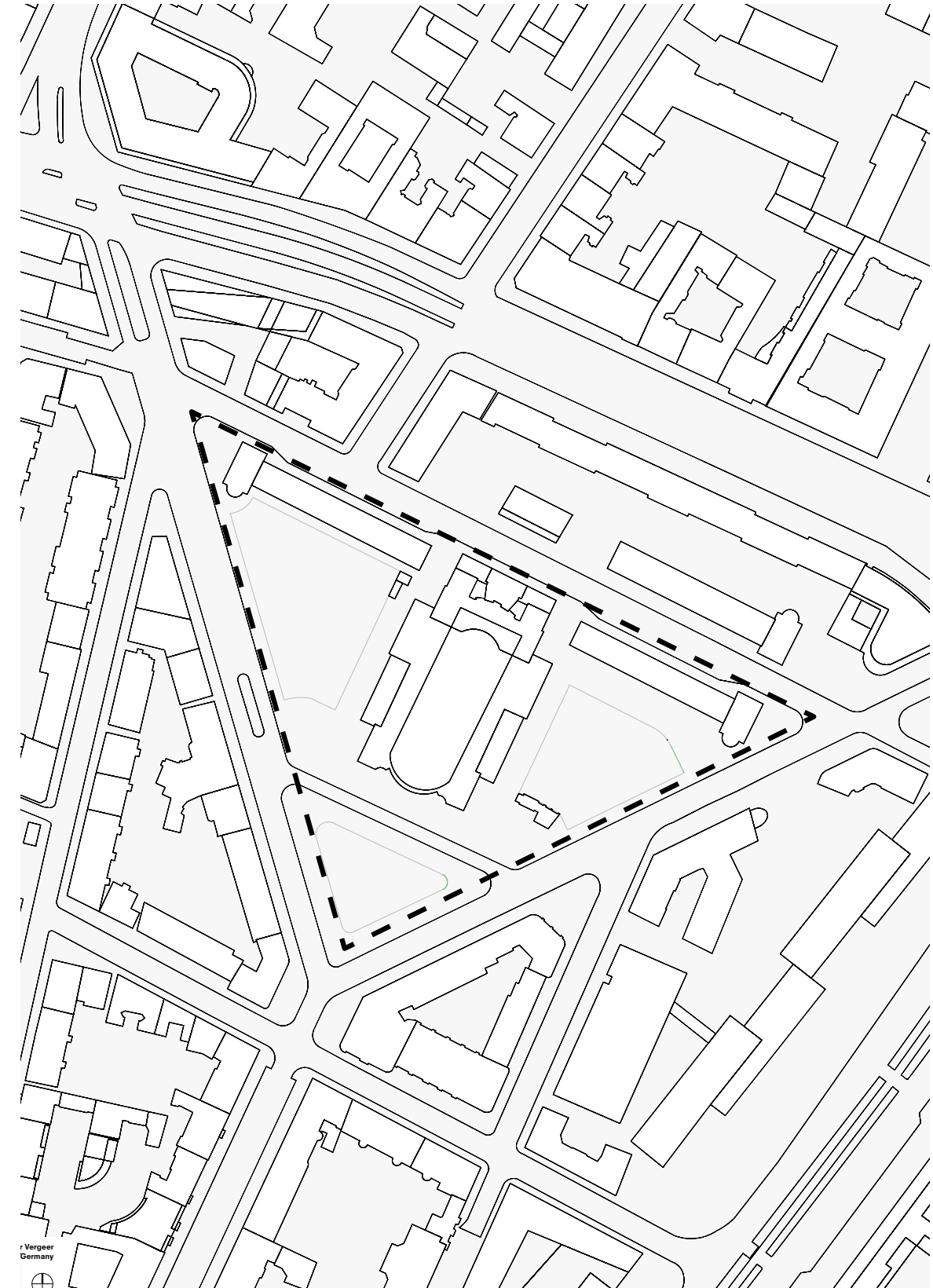


Figure 4.8 site: Rosa Luxemburg Platz

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figures

title page

Figure: own work

chapter 1

Figure 1.1: own work

Figure 1.2: own work

chapter 2

Figure 2.1: University Of Brighton. 2014. Exemplary Project - Cedric Price. <https://folio.brighton.ac.uk/user/km226/exemplary-project-cedric-price>.

Figure 2.2: Hansen, A. (2001). *Oskar Kaufmann - Ein Theaterarchitekt zwischen Tradition und Moderne*. Berlin. Gebr. Mann Verlag p. 269

Figure 2.3: Hansen, A. (2001). *Oskar Kaufmann - Ein Theaterarchitekt zwischen Tradition und Moderne*. Berlin. Gebr. Mann Verlag p. 269

Figure 2.4: unknown

chapter 3

Figure 3.1: *Diller Scifidio + Renfro (.n.d)* retrieved from <https://arquitecturaviva.com/works/centro-cultural-the-shed-nueva-york-2#lg=1&slide=12>

Figure 3.2: OMA, (n.d.) retrieved from <https://www.oma.com/projects/aviva-studios-factory-international>

Figure 3.3: Nelson Kon (n.d.), retrieved from <https://www.nelsonkon.com.br/en/teatro-oficina/>

Figure 3.4: University Of Brighton. 2014. *Exemplary Project — Cedric Price*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://folio.brighton.ac.uk/user/km226/exemplary-project-cedric-price>.

chapter 4

Figure 4.1: own work

Figure 4.2: own work

Figure 4.3: own work

Figure 4.4: own work

Figure 4.5: own work

Figure 4.6: own work

Figure 4.7: own work

Figure 4.8: own work

