

A black and white photograph of a multi-story urban building. The building features external metal staircases with railings leading to different levels. A balcony with a metal railing is visible on the right side. An air conditioning unit is mounted on the wall above the balcony. The building's facade is made of brick and concrete, showing signs of wear and aging. The overall scene is a dense, multi-level urban environment.

# theatre of the city

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*No tribute to the latent power of the theatre is as telling as that paid to it by censorship. In most regimes, even when the written word is free, the image free, it is still the stage that is liberated last. Instinctively, governments know that the living event could create a dangerous electricity—even if we see this happen all too seldom.*

*Brooke, 1996, p.122*

## Introduction.

From its emergence in the 17th century, scenography – or the art of scene design – has caused theatre to embrace contradictory impulses. Throughout its history, the theatre has tried to alternatively embrace the confines of the stage or attempt to reach beyond its bounds<sup>1</sup>.

1. McKinney, 2017

This oscillation has been acutely changing the ways in which theatregoers engaged – with each other, with the performers, the material of the performance, and its setting. The theatre has gone through periods when it served as a community-building exercise<sup>2</sup> and utilised surrounding scenery as its backdrop, to the periods when performers were most disconnected from the crowd, interested not in seeing the performance but in showing themselves, in auditorium decorations most distanced from the surrounding city scenery.

2. Wiles, 2011

Michel de Certeau famously described space as a ‘practiced place’, by which he meant how an urban landscape becomes a city through human activity and behaviour<sup>3</sup>. In the same way, human activity, and the sites of it, become performance through the application of scenography – the process of transforming a landscape into an environment imbued with meaning<sup>4</sup>. In the times when theatre has tried to break out of its formal bonds, it gained a larger-than-show quality. It became a method of connecting with the present moment, the surrounding humans, and the surrounding landscapes.

3. Certeau, 1984, p.117

4. Aronson, 2017

Understanding theatre as a method of engaging with the city can help us find ways to foster interactions in spaces where it has been lost. This introduces the second plotline of my story – regional Russia.



5. Linder, 2013

6. As a witness of large protests of August 2019 and January 2021 in my hometown, Rostov, I could see that the message of the protest was muffled compared to the news of police misconduct and fear of repercussions, which travelled faster and rang louder.

7. I refer to the theatre company's comments on historical events from an "unofficial" position in the plays like "The Funeral of Stalin" (2016), or its other statements, like "I do not participate in the war" (2022).

8. Gogol Centre's art director, Kirill Serébrennikov, has been under house arrest for more than 1.5 years following accusations of stealing funds from the state budget (Verdict in the Seventh Studio Case. How it was." 2020). Lots of evidence suggested the case to be political.

In June 2022, in total 4 theatres had seen a change in leadership (Aldasheva, 2022)

9. North of The Water, 2019

The authoritarian state in Russia has seen little resistance to its internal and external politics in recent years. Political passivity, inherent to post-authoritarian states<sup>5</sup>, has not had the time to subside in the relatively free 1990s-early 2000s. The lack of political engagement is most apparent in the regional Russia. Protests show that while Moscow and St. Petersburg display their political will, the message rings more hollow the further you look away from the capitals<sup>6</sup>.

Free(er) thinking is localised to event spaces and cliques. One such place was the famous Gogol Centre, a theatre in Moscow, which often exercised its freedom to criticise the government<sup>7</sup>. But amid the invasion of Ukraine, along with other liberal theatres in Moscow, it predictably saw its directors forced out of their positions, out of the country, and even persecuted<sup>8</sup>. Such desperate official measures against theatre art form mean only one thing – a theatre has a solid political sway in Russian society.

Can theatre address the issue of passivity in the civil sphere? While people in the cities grew disconnected from each other, they distanced from the city itself. In the case of Rostov-on-Don, a regional city in South-West Russia, the municipality gained a strong foothold in what happens to the city fabric development. The lack of public action prevents a joined response against the city authorities. The losses of historic developments ensue in exchange for highly valued real estate.

In this study, I would like to analyse the theatre as a model for spaces of engagement and a citizen institution. That is, an institution of citizens, or city-people, that make the urban landscape into a city.

Designing a place in the city means navigating tensions: private and public; busy and quiet; maintenance as a feature and over-design as a flaw<sup>9</sup>. The role of a designer is not to choose one or the other, but to balance within the spectrum; provide affordances for people to make their own choices. No strict choices in the design should mean no hard boundaries in the space. Blurring the edges, creating transition zones within the city that negotiate public and private is required for a cohesive interaction.

Encouraging interaction of people with and within spaces is in large part also about creating an atmosphere of possibilities for agency. Places that are easy to adapt and that invite to do so are more engaging than stationary pre-designed environments. Features that show the wear and tear of spaces come across as informal.

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According to Peter Brook, the most vivid relationship between the people brought out by theatre is intensified by human imperfections. In his words, “rough” theatre lacks a style and is at the same time closer to people<sup>10</sup>. Purists can consider the imperfections noise or dirt, but they are what should appeal to a designer. On the city scale, the historic city fabric is a patchwork of such imperfections; impure in their physical form, they create a vivid relationship unimaginable elsewhere in a (planned) city.

10. Brook, 1996, p.79

With this idea, I set forth looking at the oscillations in theatre history, where it connected with and disconnected from the city the most, to see what it can teach us about the ways we should engage with our cities.

This essay is split into four parts. Part I presents a storyline of the connections that theatre has historically made with the city. This is theatre in history.

Part II explains the methodology for a more detailed case study and presents a few cases. Those range from when the theatre has most connected to and distanced itself from the city. I draw conclusions on the interactive processes between the two. This is theatre in the city.

Part III presents the current state of affairs in the city of Rostov in terms of engagement. I study interactive spaces, such as playgrounds, public venues, and squares, in the city centre. Hard and unused existing spaces are also investigated to find potential for a future intervention. This part is about the city.

Part IV discusses how we can treat the lost city space. I provide a vision of how to bring a monumental ruin to life. The city people are reminded of their rights to the city and their agency within in. This is about theatre as a part of the city, and the city as a part of the theatre.



## Part 1. Timeline. Theatre and the city.

The following is by no means a comprehensive history of theatre. It is merely my attempt to overview it through a lens of interaction – that of performance with its audience and surroundings. This relationship has been complicated and meandering. I aim to show how it shifted through history, and how these shifts affected the city and its people.

### Greek

The relationship between actors and spectators fundamentally changed over the years. At the beginning of the European theatre tradition, the Ancient Greek theatre started without the ideas of a stage and an auditorium as we know them now. It began as an open structure, incorporating in its scenography anything within the visual landscape<sup>11</sup>. As the role of the actor grew, from a person telling stories, to a group of people participating in a re-enactment, the action started to focus more and more on the *skene*<sup>12</sup>. A mere hut to store the masks for performance, with a door from which the actors appeared (a prototype of the modern backstage), skene first started as a functional building. Its wall, a literal backdrop to the action on the stage, slowly turned into a scenographic instrument – a temporary façade was erected every year with the help of the structure of the skene to compliment the play<sup>13</sup>.

The spectators originally stood or sat on the slope of a hill. With time, steps were cut deeper into the slope to form a hollow auditorium. Its original name *theatron* (from *theasthai*, to see) was gradually transferred to the whole building<sup>14</sup>. The shape of a half or three-quarter circle is reminiscent of a natural formation that a crowd takes when it circles a street performer, or how crowds form around traditional choral dances (Figures 1, 2). Importantly, not only is the performer visible, but spectators also get to see people on the other side of the improvised stage. This intra-spectator interaction was key to the role of theatre as a community-building democratic institution in Ancient Greece<sup>15</sup>. Public events served as moments of unity for the citizenry.

11. Aronson, 2017

12. Bieber, 1939

13. Ibid

14. Ibid

15. Wiles, 2011

16. McKinney, 2017. Pelletier, 2006



Figure 1. Sacred dance and a circle of spectators. Island of Bali.



Figure 2. Dance of Romanian peasants and spectators.

## Roman

In Roman theatre, skene, now *scaenae*, became multileveled. It blocked out the world, enclosing the theatre space with *scaenae frons*, and invented more elaborate contraptions for changing backgrounds<sup>16</sup>. A more complex semi-circular auditorium gained corridors for easy circulation but did not change the relationship between the spectator and the performer. The narrative was still one-directional – from stage to the audience. Though interaction with fellow spectators was important for the spirit of the community, theatre was still a linear speaking structure, with a producer and a recipient.

## Middle Ages

The Middle Ages, or the Dark Ages, as Renaissance scholars referred to them, were not as dark for theatre as it may seem. The loss of Roman tradition brought changes to the audience-performer and theatre-city interaction.

With historical traditions lost, theatre was at one point confined to churches in the form of Biblical plays in Latin. With time, local languages overtook. The stories were brought to local, understandable context. The theatre spilt out into the streets. Plays could be performed on a platform stage or on movable carts, and gained a form of a procession. It transformed entire cities into its scenic landscapes<sup>17</sup>.

17. Aronson, 2017

The interaction with a spectator now had a different dynamic – theatre has probably become the most accessible it has ever been and would be. Its occupation of the streets and squares meant the actors were mixing in with their audience. The theatricality of the city opened up. The nomadic nature of theatre meant changing scenery, and performances could utilise a dynamic, temporary quality of the setting. Connection with the surroundings, which was lacking since the Roman times, was restored to a greater extent.

Many centuries later, modern avant-garde directors and performers would aspire for the freedom of form and setting that Medieval city-theatre showed.



## Renaissance & Baroque

Renaissance brought theatre indoors again. Renewed interest in Vitruvius in Italy shaped a semi-circular seating of the auditorium, while in England new theatre forms gave rise to circular open-air auditoriums with galleries (Figure 3). Both directions that theatre architecture took showed signs of a different spectator-actor relationship. They introduced elements of a framed stage, which gave priority to the performance<sup>18</sup>.

At this point, theatre often took place in existing buildings. The format of a stage on one side and seating on the other three, in a rectangular hall, was very common in these “renovations”. Rules for seating were not universal. Later in the Baroque, when theatre gained its own domain, the U-shaped auditorium prioritised social order over play visibility. The *social play* defined the arrangement of the seating. In theatres in France, the proximity to the king’s box, not the stage, was important<sup>19</sup>. While the connection with the city outside was lost, the inner workings of a theatre building became important for the interaction between people.

### Early 20th century avant-garde. Dynamic theatre.

The end of the 19th- beginning of the 20th century marked the beginning of rapid social changes. Continuous industrialisation and urbanisation, as well as growing nationalistic tendencies in Europe, anticipated large societal events that soon were to follow. The avant-garde art movement has grown strong in response to institutionalisation, as well as the tragic events of WWI. Form has been put under question. In the case of theatre, it attempted to break out of its physical ties.

The fixed form of the theatre became limiting to the freedom of artistic expression. Friedrich Kiesler would toy with ideas of theatre as a machine. Early Soviet theatre would experiment with kinetic architectures. Moveable structures would not only shift during the play but also move out of the theatre building entirely<sup>20</sup>.

These early challenges of form aimed to enable more immersive experiences. They questioned the importance of theatre typology, so ingrained in the European culture since the Renaissance. The experiments overtook the young American scene by storm, which would be influential in participatory performances that evolved in the second half of the century<sup>21</sup>.



Figure 3. A drawing of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre

18. Pelletier, 2006

19. Ibid.

20. Adaskina, 1978

21. Clayman, 2019

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## 1960s - present. Environmental theatre and experimentation.

The late 20th century only caused theatre to question its form even further. Counter-cultural movements challenged the established institutions to the breaking point.

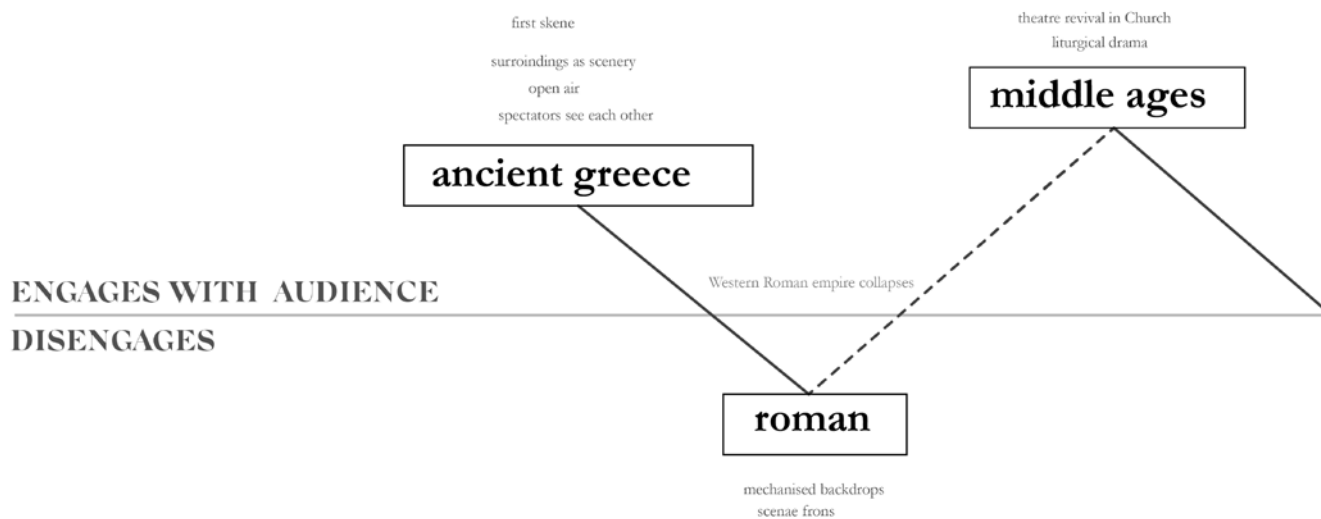
22. Clayman, 2019.  
Krasnoslobodtseva, 2020

European site-specific theatre may have been reborn in France in 1968 with the greatest civil unrest of the century as a backdrop<sup>22</sup>. *Théâtre de l'environnement* or *théâtre in situ* took place outside of any traditional venues. Quite naturally, it seems, the political life that spilled on the street connected to the forms of art that supported its movements. Streets were again re-occupied, reminiscent of the street theatre of medieval times. City as a backdrop, streets as a stage (and a political statement, instead of a religious one, as a message).

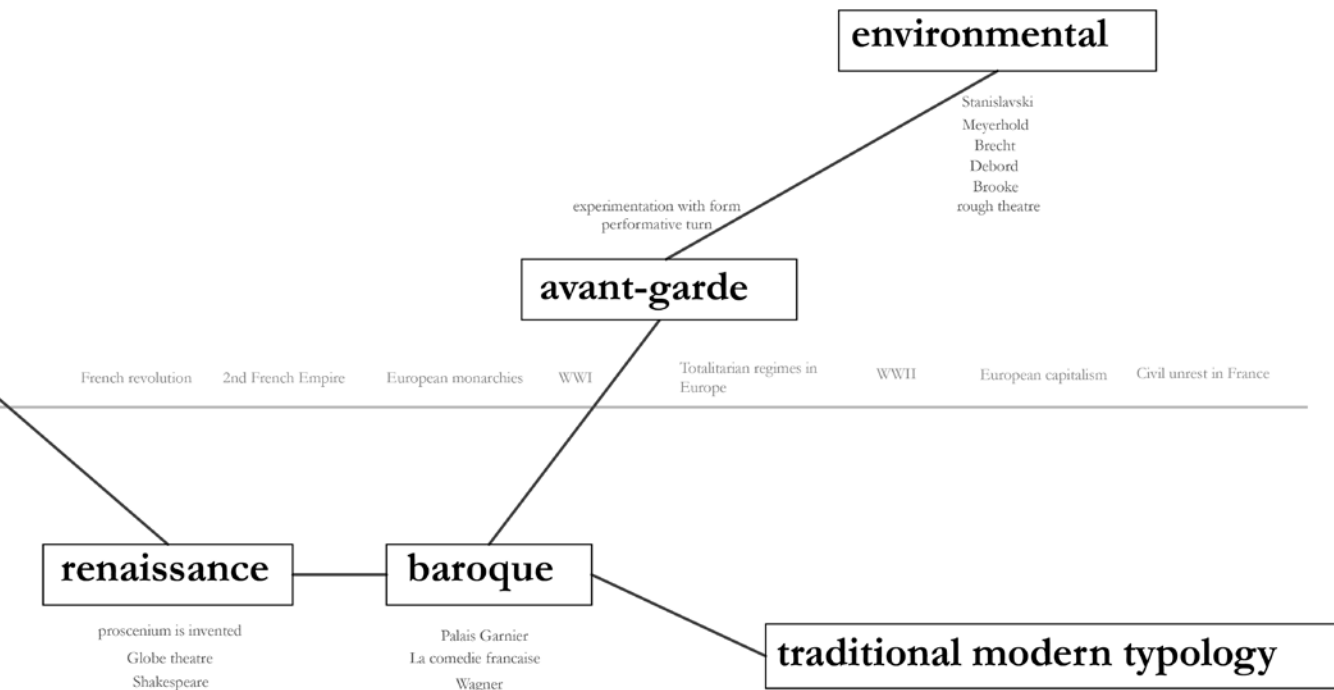
The propagation of site-specific performance brought emphasis on audience participation. The 1960s witnessed a growing interest in audience participation and interactivity in the arts overall, as performances in non-traditional spaces allowed for a closer and more interactive relationship to form.

## Summary

The multifaceted relationship of theatre and city developed through a series of oscillations, from a deep link between the two to a complete disconnection. When the city and the theatre were most connected, so was their audience. And in its most inward-looking periods, the performance strived for formalisation and distanced the audience from the action on stage.



Next chapter defines the spatial qualities that are common for the most-engaging and least-engaging theatre. These principles can be then used to address the issues of an existing urban fabric.



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## **Part II. Case studies. Theatre.**

In this chapter, I outline the diversity of the modes of interaction between audiences, performers, and a city that theatre offered at specific points in its long history.

The cases of theatres that follow span a few centuries, many countries, and diverse morphologies. What unites them for this research, is that they considered interaction as a fundamental value of a theatregoing experience. The modes of interaction in the examples range from engaging with the surrounding city fabric to inward-looking engagement between the audience members. I deal with them individually in chronological order and analyse their historico-political background, their key spatial and social features, and their impact within the field of participatory theatre practices.

### **Methodology of selecting the cases.**

Theatre typologies and movements that focused on engaging with the surrounding city or with the audience were the primary focus of this research. Diversity in the cases aimed to generate sufficient tangible data. The following factors contributed to the final selection of case studies.



## **1. Interaction as the key principle**

The case must deal with “engagement”. This includes participatory performances, typologies that bring the audience together, or those that consider and react to their urban context.

## **2. An example of a trend**

I selected the cases which represented a movement or their contemporary thinking. In this way, I could study the spatial qualities of a specific theatre performance/typology but also understand it as a point in a wider movement<sup>1</sup>.

1. For example, Popova’s “Earth on End” represents Soviet Avant-garde’s tendencies for dynamic theatre.

With that said, I open up my cases with “Medieval theatre” as a generic movement. This is because I consider it essential to include the medieval period as a turning point when theatre connected to the city like never before. However, there is very little evidence, especially pictorial, to a particular performance of the time; thus, I study its history and speculate about its spatial characteristics.

## **3. A variety of international contexts (and zeitgeist)**

Theatre is a reactive form of art. To learn as much about its potential as a tool for engagement, it was important to study it in different political and social contexts. Theatre for the illiterate, theatre that praised the new proletariat in the Soviets, and theatre that opposed Brazilian dictatorship – all responded differently to their respective contexts.

## **4. Variety in modes of operation**

To inform my reader on the broadness of theatrical arts, I have selected cases which may not seem “traditional” to a general audience. Hence, this is why a street theatre, a theatre that is trying to be a street, and a theatre that disconnected itself from the street as much as it could – all made it into the shortlist.

## The cases.

The timeline in the previous chapter gave a brief overview of the theatre's trends towards more or less interactivity. In this chapter, I go in-depth with five cases, which happen to lie on both sides of the timeline. I will hence consider:

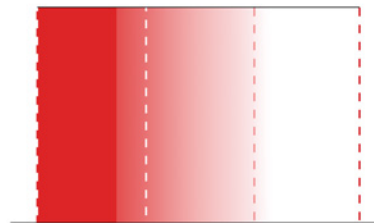
1. **Medieval theatre revival.** Mystery plays and liturgical dramas.
2. **Baroque.** Opera Garnier.
3. **Dynamic theatre.** Popova, Meyerhold, Kiesler.
4. **Teatro Oficina.** Bad theatre. Great living room.
5. **Site-specific performance.** Theatre takes over the city.

## Overview of the findings.

From the case studies, the following general suggestions can be formulated. The detailed study can be found after this short overview.

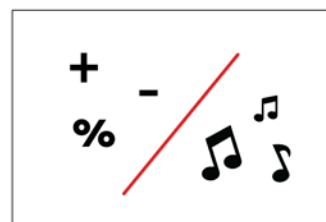
### Blur boundaries. Lower barriers of entry.

Street theatre within no ticket – more democratic. There is more participation where the crowd is larger.



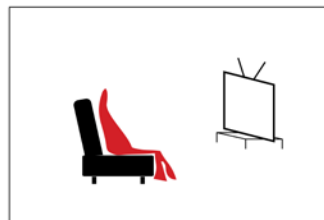
### Provide a learning value as well as an entertainment value.

Appeal to a wider audience through the mix of content and/or functions. People are more engaged when they enjoy it.



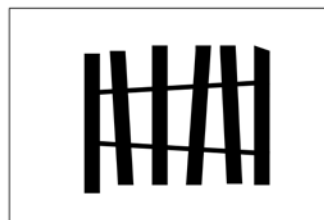
**Too comfortable = less engaged.**

A comfy couch is the place of a consumer, not a participant. Make your visitors comfortable, but not too comfortable, so they do not dose off.



**Tactile materials expect interaction.**

People are more at ease interacting with spaces that have a little grit. In this way, they are not scared of breaking something.



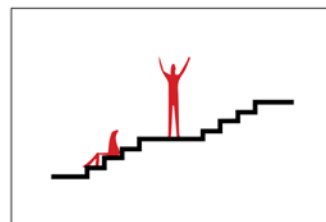
### **Make the interaction seem possible.**

If architectures are built with change – even theoretical – in mind, it allows people to think the interaction with the architecture is possible – even if they never test it. Such “possibility for flexibility” affords agency in thinking.



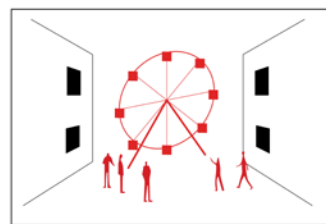
### **Wide spatial landscape = wide social landscape**

Diverse spatial settings create a wider landscape of affordances for interaction. Stairs, steps, landings, and balconies – a multiplicity of social scenarios can play out here. This also allows different levels of commitment for those, who are making up their mind about joining or leaving the engagement.



### **Unusual in the usual.**

Performance in non-performative spaces reflects on the surroundings it appropriated. Adding a new function to an old place makes one rethink familiar places in unfamiliar scenarios.

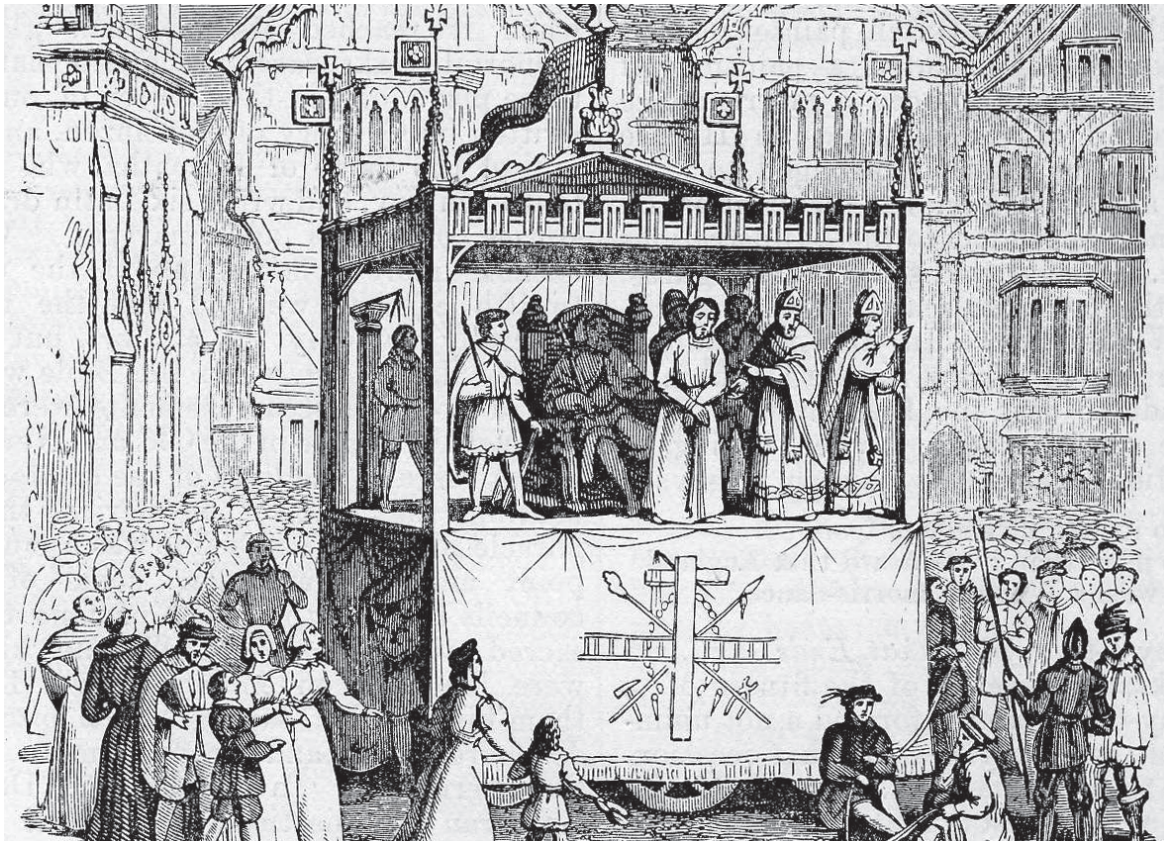


### **Some friction is helpful.**

Friction brings attention to the happening. Neutral is bland. No need to make everyone angry; but it is in contradictions we find compromises.







*“But the word ‘popular’ doesn’t quite fill the bill: ‘popular’ conjures up the country fair and the people in a jolly harmless way. The popular tradition is also bearbaiting, ferocious satire and grotesque caricature. This quality was present in the greatest of rough theatres...”*

Brook, 1996, p.82

## Case 1. Medieval theatre revival. Liturgical & vernacular drama. Mystery plays.

The Middle Ages span a period in Europe from the fall of Rome in the 5th century to the beginning of the Renaissance around the 1400s. Despite the general malaise of the people, one bright spot in these Dark Ages still shone – the Church<sup>1</sup>. The Church had a virtual monopoly on education. No one except churchmen and clerks could speak or read Latin. The congregation was listening to services in a language they did not understand<sup>2</sup>. To make the sermons more understandable for the illiterate congregation, the priests had to become inventive. And this was the beginning of the theatre revival.

Cover figure. Engraving of a performance of a mystery play.

1. Ray et al., 2014

2. Ibid.

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3. Pelletier, 2006; Ray et al., 2014

The cantor, the choir, and the priests would start playing out passages from the Bible in the form of liturgical drama. As it developed, alternative plots appeared – a so-called morality and mystery plays. Such were the stories based on Biblical events, but often brought into a more local context, relatable for the layman. Most importantly, they were now performed in local languages. As this would not be permitted within the church walls, the theatre spilled out into the streets<sup>3</sup>. Plays could be performed on a platform stage, with no backdrop, and an audience sitting on three sides. Or, it was transferred onto movable carts and gained a form of a procession, it transformed entire cities into its scenic landscapes<sup>4</sup>.

4. Aronson, 2017

At this moment, theatre has probably become the most accessible it has ever been and would be. Its occupation of the streets and squares meant the actors were mixing in with their audience. Anyone could watch. The theatricality of the city opened up. The nomadic nature of theatre meant changing scenery, and performances could utilise a dynamic, temporary quality of the setting. Connection with the city, which lacked since the Roman times, was restored.

As Figures 1 & 2 show, the city becomes the background of a stage. No matter whether the play refers to it or not, the city is everpresent; and in a mystical setting, it gains new layers of meaning. The performance is all the more attractive now it is set in a familiar context. The “structure” of it allows any passersby to join; no barrier is there to separate citizens; everyone is entitled to participate in city life.

## Impacts

Rebirth of theatre as an art form. Unified community for a common topic, mostly revolving around Biblical salvation. Mixed serious lessons with comic events to make it more entertaining. Slowly grew more secular, with a goal of entertainment.

## Key features:

**Social:** The audience grew through the openness and entertaining value of a street theatre; performers share the stage-streetscape with the crowd.

**Spatial:** city as a backdrop; moveable cart = easy change of scenery.

Figure 1. City as a backdrop in Medieval street theatre.





## Outcomes

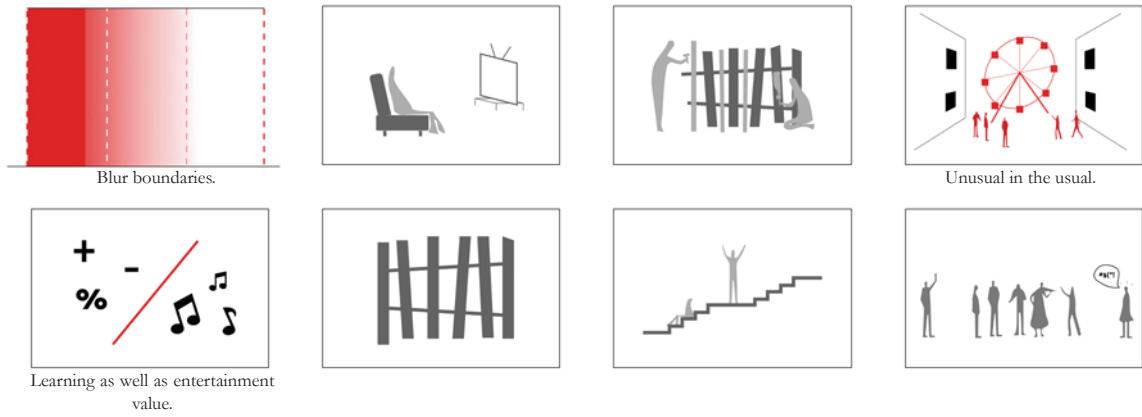


Figure 2. The elements of Medieval theatre.





*A theatre type is not solely focused on the auditorium and the stage. “Theatre begins with a hanger”, Stanislavski has been said to proclaim. Cloakroom, ticket office, foyer; many spaces precede the auditorium. Spaces that prepare the audience for the performance. Spaces that tame the audience. Spaces that let the audience play.*

## Case 2. Baroque.

### Opéra Garnier

Palais Garnier – Opéra Garnier in Paris – exemplifies the notion of “play beyond the stage”. The sequence of spaces between the entrance and the auditorium is carefully directed – the entrance, avant-foyer, grand-foyer, and Grand staircase – spaces unravel as they compress, expand, and present the visitors (Figure 3). The visitor is taken away from the city.

Cover figure. A drawing of inauguration of Opéra Garnier, 1875.



5. Pelletier, 2006

In baroque theatres, the social role is acted out. The theatricality of the event covers the public areas and the main staircase, which serves as a stage where the public performs<sup>5</sup>. The grandeur of the stairs elevates and displays its climber to the crowd below. Each in turn, member of the audience becomes the performer; each in turn, becomes a spectator once again.

The monumental staircase is a centrepiece of a hall that is surrounded by balconies and galleries (Figure 4). These become places for the “audience” of the social performance. Height difference creates a clear actor-spectator relationship. Below, on the first step, there is a figure of attention, the *actor*—one who *activates* the space. Above are the spectators, looking down from all four sides, indistinct in their mass. The uniqueness of the climber is amplified by their prominent centrality, while the individualities of the crowd are blended in the periphery.

The climber’s commanding position of space reaches its climax in the middle landing of the staircase. High above and central, they are visible from every balcony. Then, they are swept to the side with either of the double side staircases that lead to the top landing (Figures 5-6).

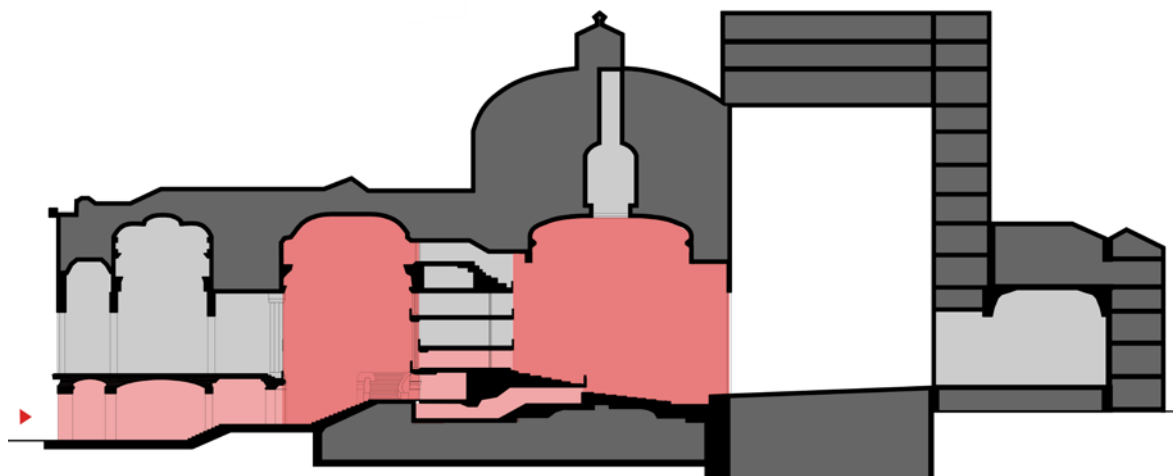


Figure 3. Transitional spaces compress and expand as they lead the visitors further from the city to the hall.

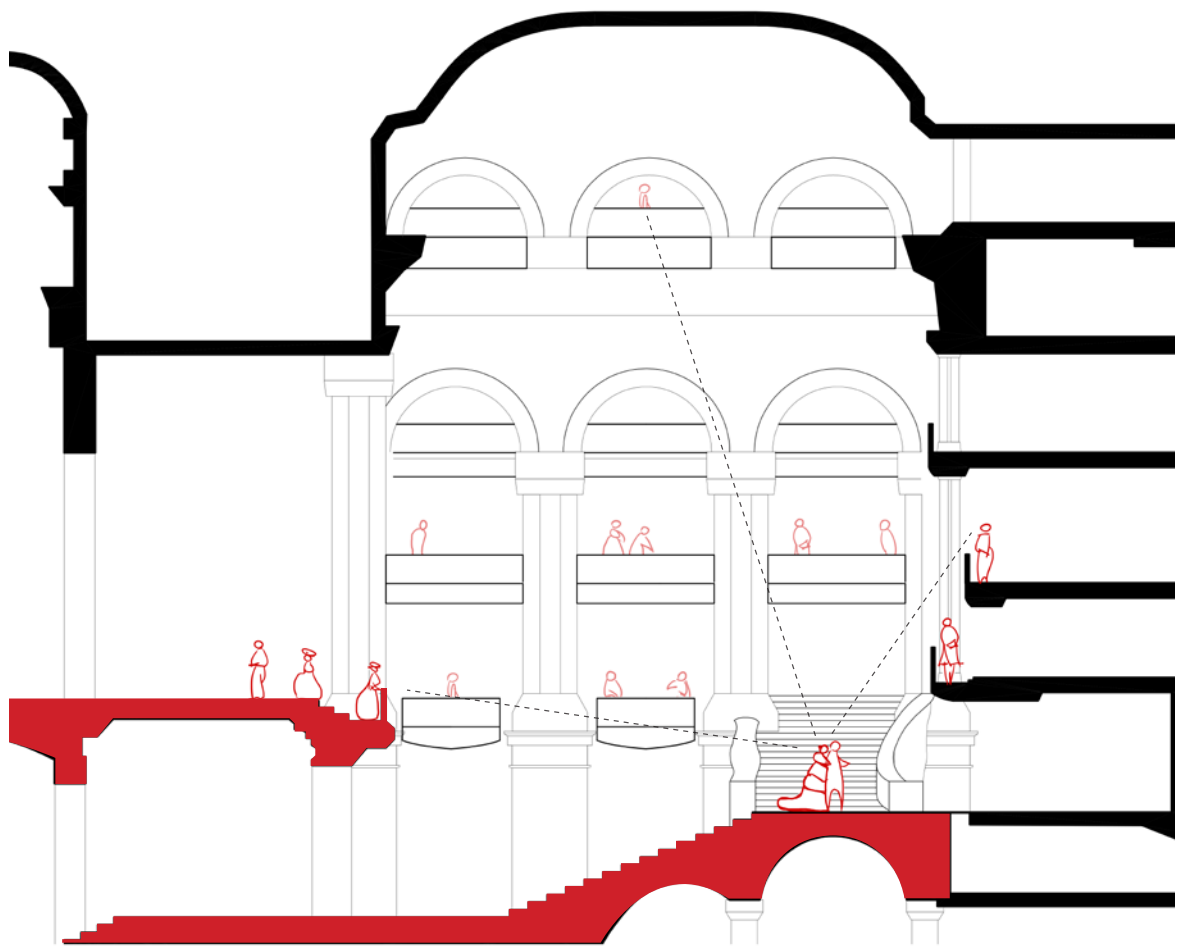


Figure 4. The staircase as a *stage* of the hall. Section drawing.

Figure 5. *The actor of the space gets all the attention from their audience.*

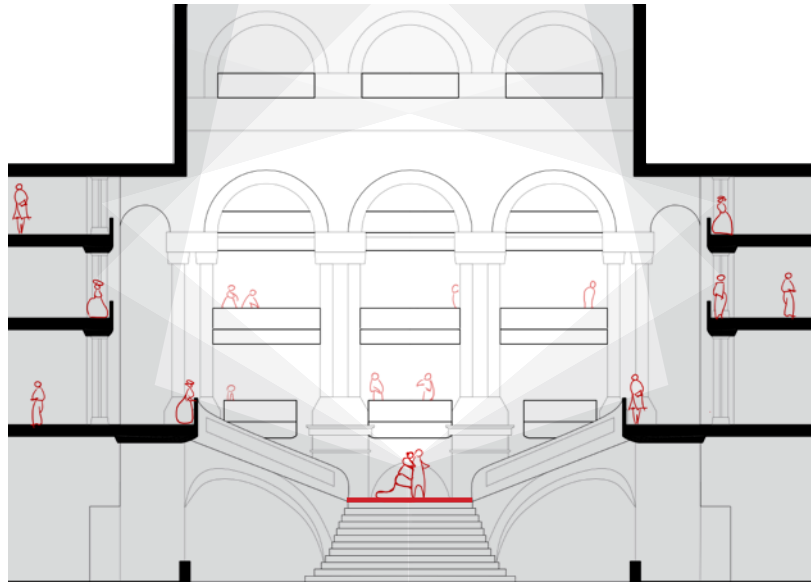
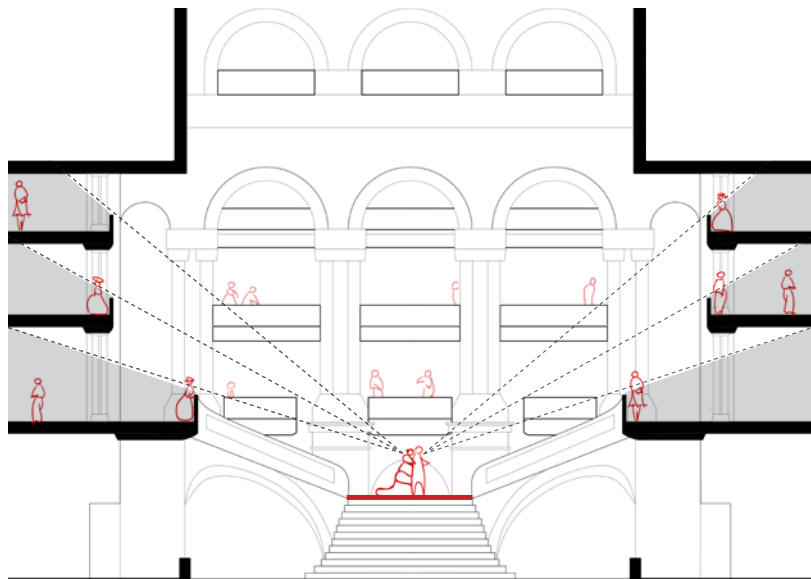


Figure 6. *Audience blends together in a crowd on the balconies.*



As our study focuses on how spatial characteristics create or negate affordances for interaction, a brief history of parterre is worth mentioning. As a “traditional” shape of the auditorium was developing in France in the 18th century, the parterre for a while remained a place for the most engaged audience. Standing spaces for students, intellectuals, and the middle class – the *lowest* classes of the audience – parterre has been a place of commotion<sup>6</sup>. It encouraged all sorts of disturbance but at the same time produced engagement with the performers on the stage nearby.

6. Pelletier, 2006

In a new radical proposal for the Comédie française by De Wailly and Peyre, parterre seats were introduced. The entire audience was now seated, no matter their class. The change met many critics. Diderot, the famous philosopher and writer, commented that the new change brought “deadness” to the theatre<sup>7</sup>. Although the parterre often wreaked distraction, its active engagement helped the performers judge the success of the play. The crowd’s excitement used to be palpable.

7. Ibid.

The taming of parterre marks the end of the transition of theatre from a communicative platform, open to multi-faceted interaction of the performer and the spectator, to a linear-speaking structure<sup>8</sup>. As such, the roles of the producer and the consumer were solidified. Co-creation was lost.

8. Marion van Osten in an essay “Politics of the White Cube” (2005) considers the way that art galleries engage (or rather, disengage) their visitors. She put forward the idea of *communicative spaces* as opposed to *linear-speaking structures*. The latter confine themselves to conveying information one-way, from the institution to the audience, while the former integrate the audience in a collaborative process.

## The box – a private stage

But parterre is not the end of the story. A seating arrangement with boxes or balconies that surround the stage in an oval has become common in France during the Baroque. Unlike the English Elizabethan theatres with walk-through galleries that were directed towards the stage, French theatregoers enjoyed contact *within* the audience.

As an example of the performance by the audience, Louise Pelletier mentions a peculiar account of Montesquieu in Persian letters (1721). In the novel, a Persian prince visiting Paris describes his experience of the Opera and its visitors:

*“The main action is on a platform, called the stage. At each side you can see, in little compartments called boxes, men and women acting out scenes together [...] Here there may be a woman unhappily in love, who is expressing her amorous yearnings [...] Every emotion is displaced on the face of these people, and conveyed with an eloquence which is all the more effective for being silent”.* (Pelletier, 2006, p.59).

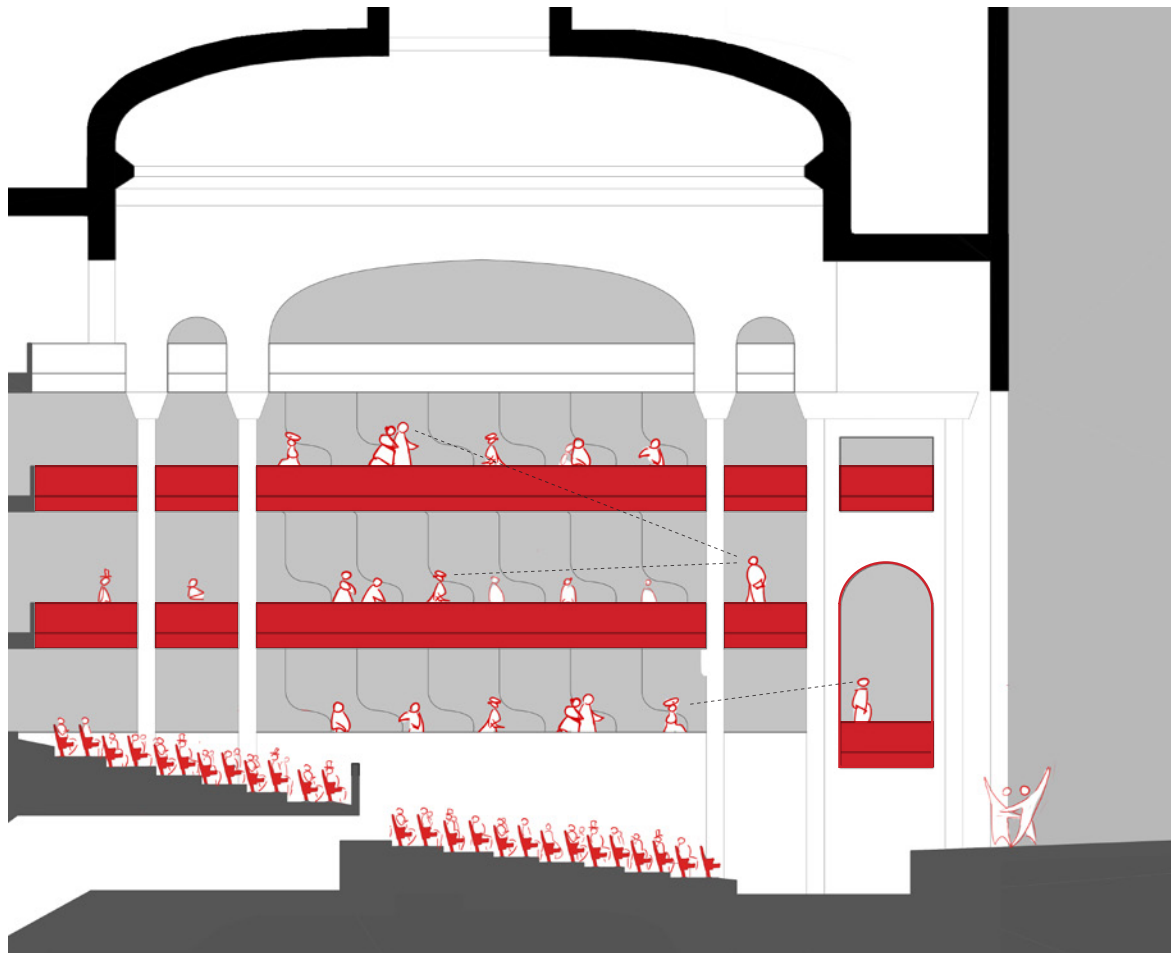


Figure 7. Seated parterre. Balconies as little stages.

Through the eyes of a naïve visitor, Montesquieu was describing the social behaviour of many of his contemporaries. This social exchange in 18th century France feels outdated today. But despite the exaggeration, the role of theatre as a place to see others and show oneself cannot be underestimated. And the balance of the spaces of Baroque theatre typology (and its followers) – the stage and the boxes alike, provides a multitude of settings for interactions to unravel.

---

Unlike the balconies in the staircase hall that accommodated the observers of the ascent up the Grand Staircase, the auditorium boxes functioned as miniature stages where guests transformed into performers.

Previously, we discovered that privacy and blending were attributes of a balcony. But the lesson of a balcony is its duality. Its high placement attracts attention to its occupants, yet its depth facilitates concealment. To create conditions that allow both drawing attention and concealing spectatorship, its interactional duality, we must heed the lesson of the balcony.

## Impacts

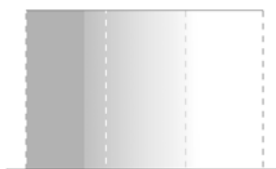
The notion of theatre as a high-brow, noble art form, comes from this era. Structure of the hall is inherently classist. Spaces are created for the audience members to show themselves' off and to watch others. Performance is as distanced from the viewer as it can be; lighting effects and (multiple) prosceniums disconnect one from another, creating a sense of larger-than-life effects.

## Key features

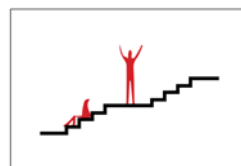
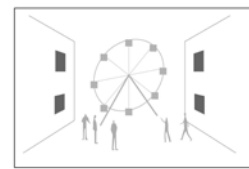
**Social:** orchestrated seating order according to social standing; theatre as a display of political life. Seated parterre solidified the position of a “quiet spectator” for the audience (forever?).

**Spatial:** balconies and landings act as “stages” for the audience; the hall is disconnected from the street by many transition spaces.

## Outcomes



Too comfortable = less engaged.



Wide spatial landscape = wide social landscape





*"...theatre in back rooms, upstairs rooms, barns; the one-night stands, the torn sheet pinned up across the hall, the battered screen to conceal the quick changes—that one generic term, theatre, covers all this and the sparkling chandeliers too."*

Brook, 1996, p.79

### Case 3. Dynamic theatre

Popova, Meyerhold, Kiesler.

The temporality of theatre and its dynamics often seem to be inhibited by its bulky and stationary physical type. Unchanging, inflexible halls, fixed stages, and complicated lighting apparatus may apply limits to creativity just as well as channelling it. During the early 20th century's avant-garde era, however, the fixed form of theatre has been challenged.

Cover figure. The poster for Popova's "The Magnanimous Cuckold" stage design.



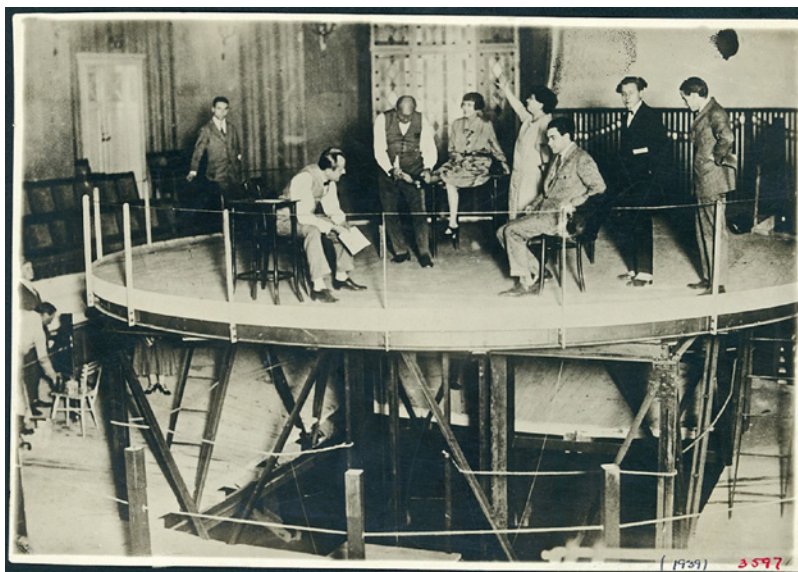
9. Brejzek, 2017

An Austro-American architect-scenographer Friedrich Kiesler toyed with the idea of theatre as a machine in the 1920s. His Railway Theatre, a prototype for his vision of Raumbühne (Space Stage), comprised a scaffolded spiral ramp leading up to a circular performance area (Figure 8). If his vision for performance materialised, an improved dynamic and mobile Space Stage would fully encompass audience and performers. A utopian space where the act of looking and the space of action become permeable and converge as a dynamic experiential space<sup>9</sup>. His vision of an autonomous theatre machine influenced his successors in both theatre and architecture, namely Joan Littlewood and Cedric Price, who developed a collaborative performance Fun Palace.

10. Adaskina, 1978

Russian theatre avant-garde has experimented with kinetic architectures. The most notable examples were developed by Lyubov' Popova for the plays "The Magnanimous Cuckold" and "Earth Rampant" by Vsevolod Meyerhold. In "The Magnanimous Cuckold", constructivist structures on stage could transform dynamically to represent different settings. In "Earth Rampant", a crane-like stage structure and moveable tribunes could not only shift and alter during the play but also be moved outside of the theatre's confines. Theatre was jumping out of its walls through its function<sup>10</sup>.

Figure 8. Rehearsal on a Raumbühne in Konzerthaus, Vienna, 1924. Credits: Kiesler-Stiftung, Vienna. Courtesy of la casa encendida



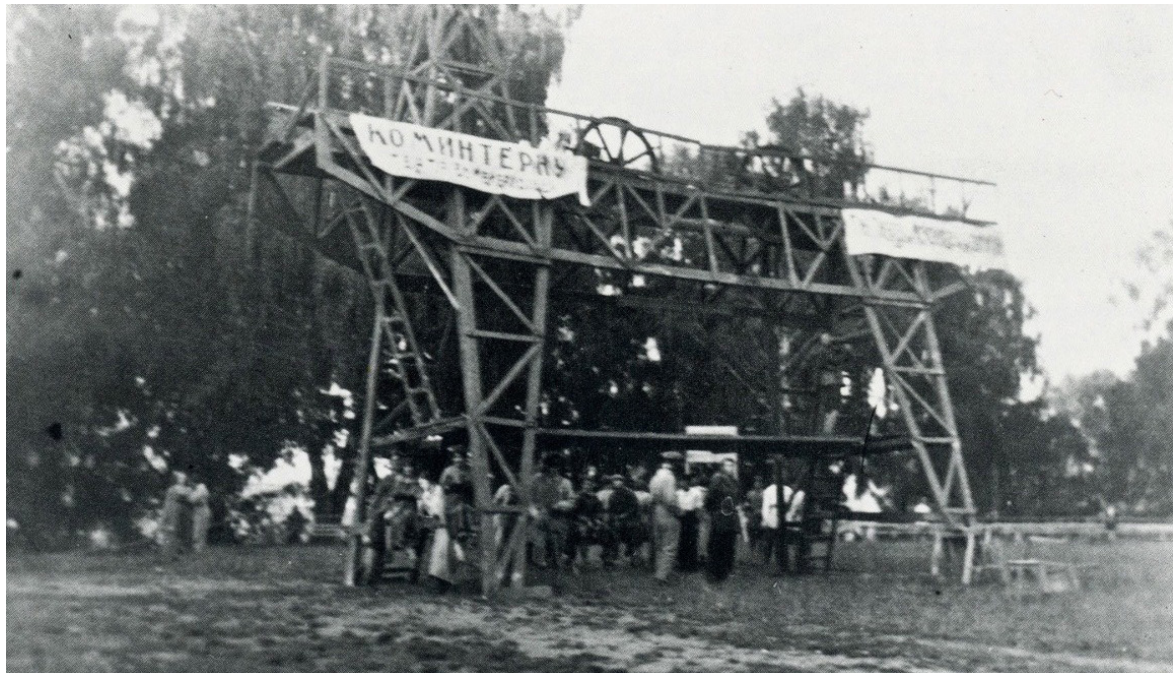


Figure 9. Popova's movable "crane" stage for "Earth Rampant"

All these large-scale structures-organisms, both constructivist and organic in their spatial dynamics, aimed to enable performative and kinetic architectures. Although some were never carried out, they strived towards more immersive visitor-spectator experiences. Their tendency to place the audience amid the action aimed to make theatre art a participatory cultural creation rather than an entertaining one-way display.

## Impacts

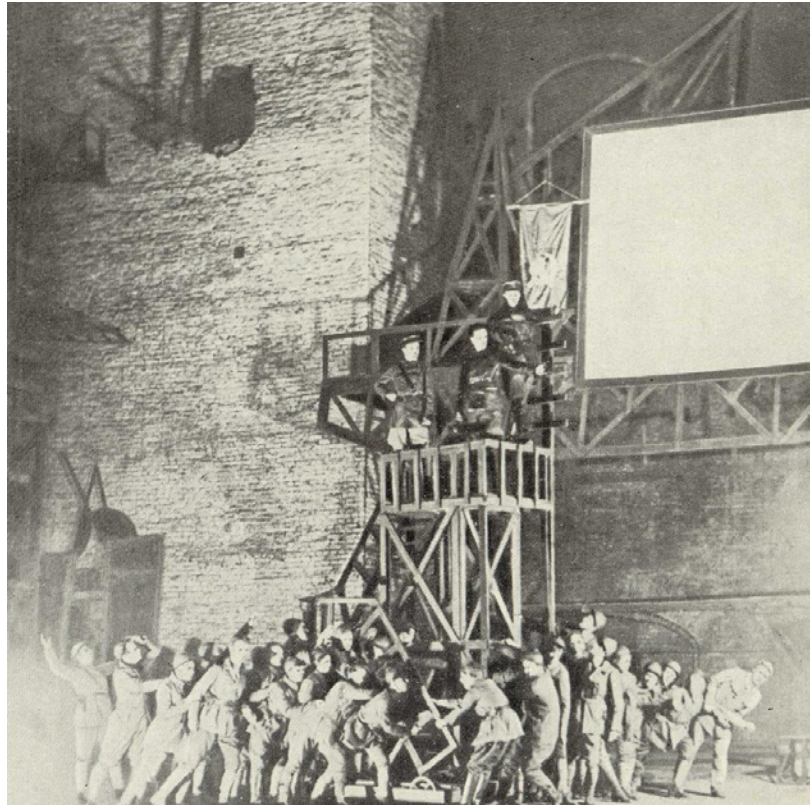
Opened up a field of experimentation with dynamic architectures. Rode on a trend of form-breaking, common to the interwar period and Soviet avant-garde era.

## Key features

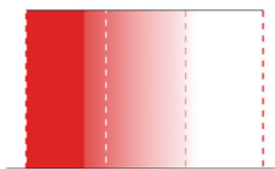
**Social:** attempted to unite the audience and the performers into one common experience.

**Spatial:** experimented with forms of the stage and the seating to blur the boundaries in-between; broke out of traditional typologies and out of a theatre building itself.

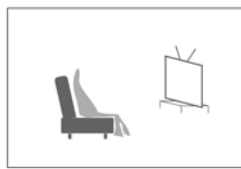
Figure 10. Popova's movable "crane" stage for "Earth Rampant"



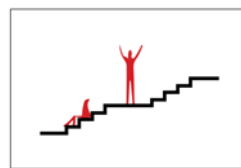
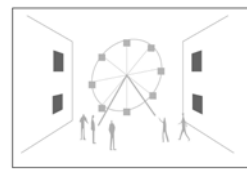
## Outcomes



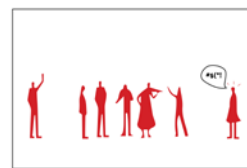
Blur boundaries.



Make interaction seem possible



Wide spatial landscape = wide social landscape.



Some friction is helpful.





Figure 12. Dynamic biomechanic stage that adapts as the performance develops. Concept collage made with posters and photographs of Popova's and Meyerhold's plays.









*“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.”*

Brook, 1996, p.7

## Case 4. Teatro Oficina

### Bad theatre. Great living room.

Avant-garde movements gave birth to many protest theatres – theatres against regimes, against institutions, against limitations of civil rights. One protest theatre that deserves attention for its spatial experiments to connect with the audience and the city is Teatro Oficina in São Paulo, Brazil. Since it was established in 1958, it has been a laboratory of both theatre and architecture that reflected upon the urban changes of the city around it<sup>11</sup>.

Cover figure. Teatro Oficina during a performance.

11. Stevens, 2022

The theatre has gone through a few architectural incarnations throughout its life. It was founded in a vacant bare brick box of a building. Joaquim Guedes turned it into a so-called “sandwich theatre”: two opposing tribunes with performers in between. Spectators rose over the stage, like in the old Greek and Roman amphitheatres. And just like in an amphitheatre, people sitting on the two opposing tribunes watched each other watching the performance – the audience was as exposed as the actors.

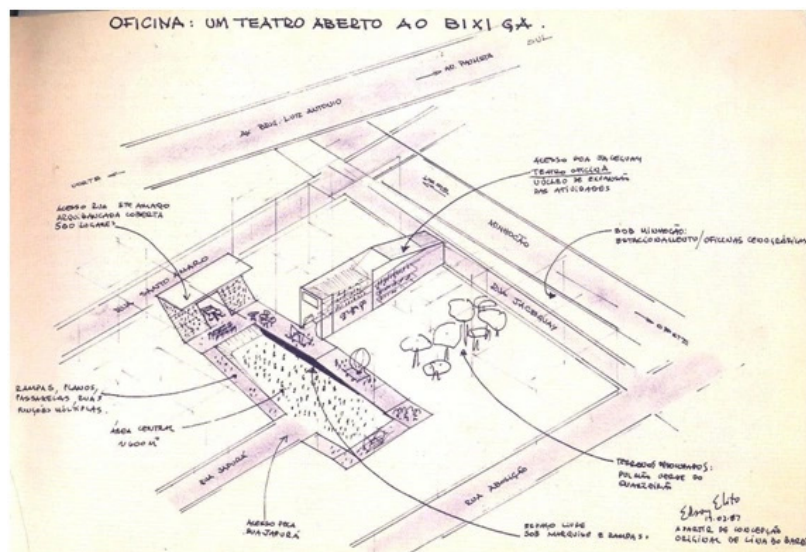
During the period of military dictatorship in Brazil, Teatro Oficina company, like many other artists, has suffered the consequences of free speech. The company was in exile for a few years; the building was burned down by the military junta. After a few iterations, its latest form, designed with the help of Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi, dissolved the traditional notion of enclosure.

Old urban tissue around the theatre was under huge pressure from the municipality; many structures suffered from attempts to profit from real estate. To reconnect the theatre building to its surroundings, the idea of continuing a street through the building was born. Largely influenced by street theatre during their exile, the team Oficina took up the idea of bringing the city into the building<sup>12</sup>. It was transformed into a linear structure – a street-stage, lined with three levels of metal scaffolding. The roof slid open. The theatre turned inside out.

12. Ibid.

The original vision had the street lead through the theatre and culminate in a public square on the other end of the building’s volume (Figure 13). The plans for the landscaping and open-air performance spaces sadly never materialised; the land behind the building remains vacant to this day.

Figure 13. The original urban concept proposed outdoor spaces around the theatre.



On the inside, the name *Oficina – workshop* – is very accurate. Three levels of scaffolding galleries line the walls, leaving the centre of the volume roof-high. As different performances show (Figures 14), theatre directors experimented with all the possible configurations this allows. Performers on the ground level, spectators seated on both sides; spectators bunched up in the passage, performers running around the galleries. Transformable space allowed extensive experimentation with interaction. At one point, a trench was dug up in the middle of the floor for a showing of Brecht’s “Jungle of Cities”. The state of “incompleteness”, which defined *Oficina*’s architecture, created room for permutations. Its users felt comfortable messing with the building as they would with a tool, not a completed work of art.

Backstage spaces are eliminated as the entire building becomes a stage. The honest theatrical experience encourages direct interaction between different social groups, temporarily brought together by the theatre’s enclosure. *Teatro Oficina* does not distinguish much between the spectator and the performer – both are actors; it is their interaction that activate the empty shell of the theatre box. Its materiality allows the feeling of agency – even if the users never actually unbolt the scaffolding.

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13. Ibid.



Figure 14. Various performances in *Teatro Oficina*



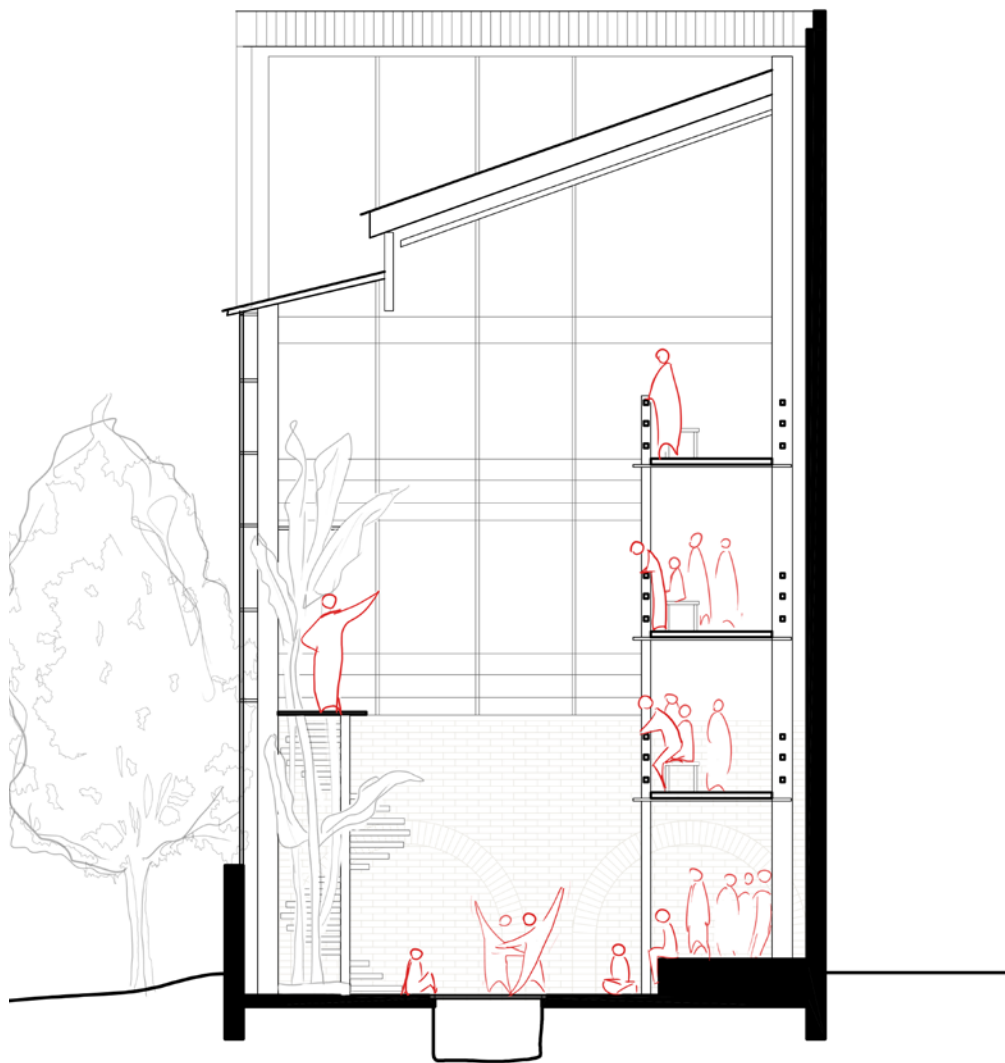


Figure 15. Sandwich theatre reimaged.

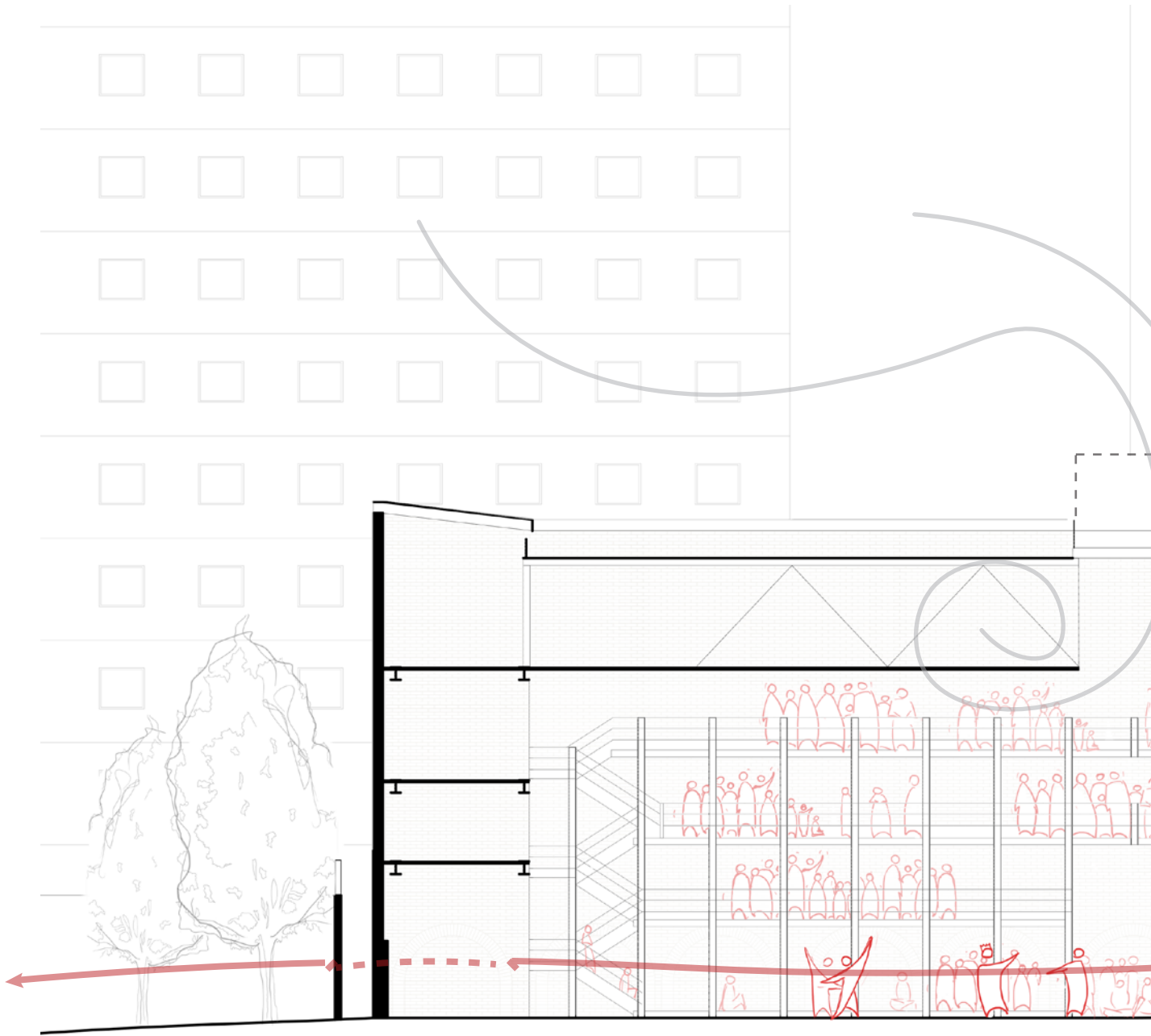
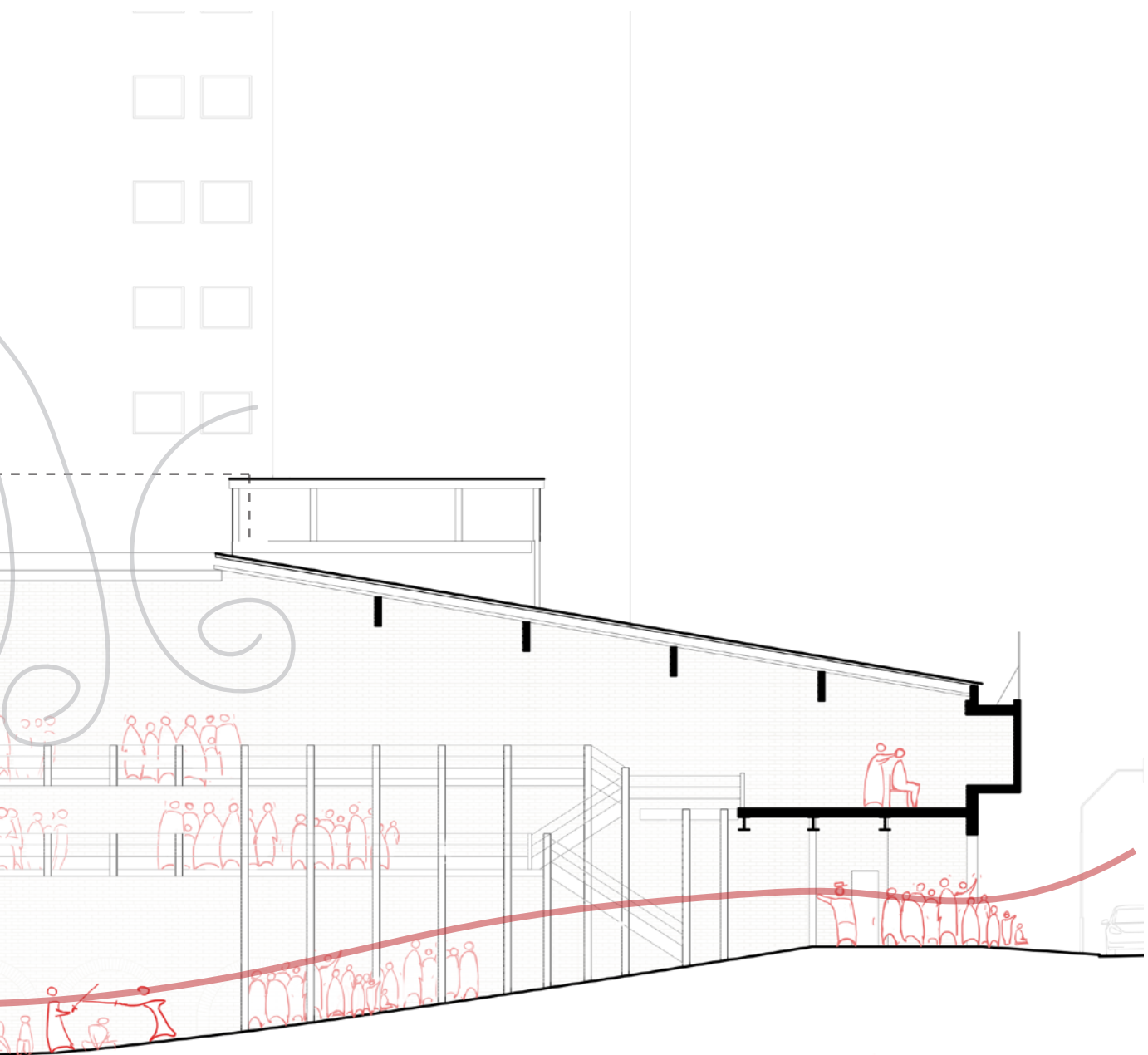


Figure 16. Theatre-street brings the city indoors.



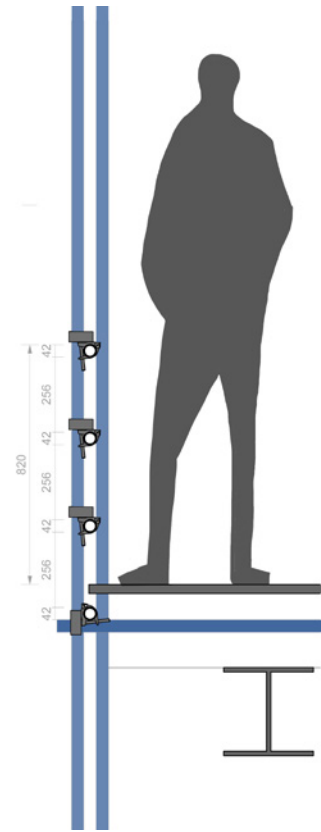
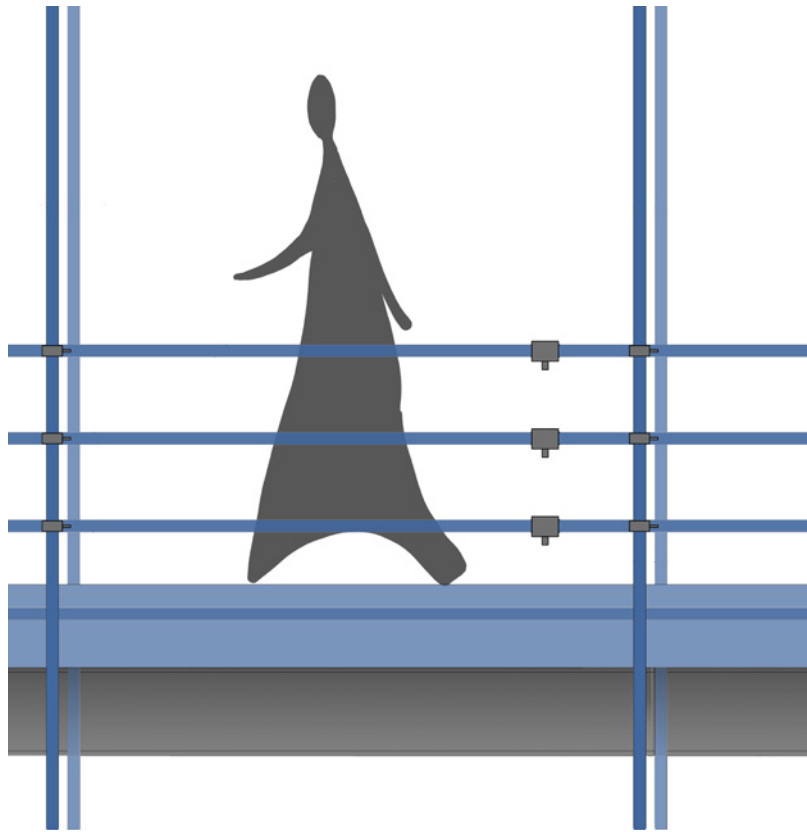


Figure 17. “Open” scaffolding railing. Hardly a boundary, and seems transformable.

## Impacts

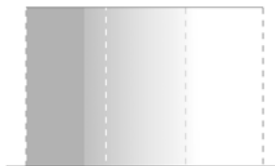
Experimented with form in a space unsuitable for a “traditional” theatre. Built a community around itself. Has been a centre for free speech during many periods of political turmoil. Reflected on its role within the urban fabric.

## Key features:

**Social:** Brings the audience and performers into one mixed space. No private spaces.

**Spatial:** Draws inspiration from processional street theatre. Lacks backstage. The roof can be opened for a deeper blend with the environment. Uncomfortable benches – no need to let the audience relax.

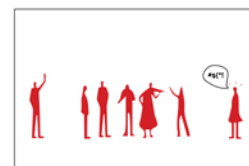
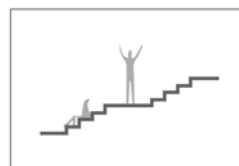
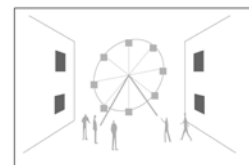
## Outcomes



Too comfortable =  
less engaged.



Make interaction seem possible.



Some friction is helpful.



*“...era after era the most vital theatrical experiences occur outside the legitimate places constructed for the purpose... [Rough theatre] is usually distinguished by the absence of what is called style. Style needs leisure: putting over something in rough conditions is like a revolution, for anything that comes to hand can be turned into a weapon.”*

Brook, 1996, p.79

## Case 5. Site-specific performance.

### How theatre broke out of a building again.

The turn from the theatre box to a “performance” happened in both America and Europe at roughly the same time, around the 1960s. At that time, different artists and performers began to focus on engaging the viewers; they omitted the frontal mise-en-scène to search for new ways of interacting with the viewer and the space around them. In America, street theatre was reborn on the wave of public performances and happenings, the main goal of which was to show that the viewers were not mere consumers-bystanders of the society of the spectacle but the

Cover figure. Theatre-promenade  
*Volshebnyaya strana* (2018). Rostov-on-Don

14. Ray et al., 2014

reason the act existed in the first place. Touches of mystique and ritual were somewhat common in these performances (e.g. *Paradise Now* by the Living Theatre), reminiscent of the Medieval theatre revival<sup>14</sup>.

15. Clayman, 2019;  
Krasnoslobodtseva, 2020

In France, what we can call site-specific theatre, was likely born in 1968 during the mass protests<sup>15</sup>. To an extent, *théâtre de l'environnement* or *théâtre de l'espace publique* is a development of spatial art movements of avant-garde, and counterculture movements, such as situationism.

### Further developments.

16. Demidkin, 2019

In Russia, site-specific has experienced massive growth in the last decade, with popular festivals of site-specific theatre, such as *Tochka Dostupa* [Access Point] in Saint-Petersburg<sup>16</sup>. I connect its prominence with the delayed de-institutionalisation that European theatre experienced in the last century, but which Russian theatre is going through now. Promenade theatre – a performance that happens on a walking tour through city streets or corridors of a building – is gaining traction.

### Spatiality.

Just like with the Medieval street theatre, this case deals with a trend rather than a specific type of performance. To define its spatial characteristics in more detail, I opted for an example that connects to Part III of this research.

17. Lisovskiy & Sapozhnikov, 2018

In the figures that follow, I graphically analysed a site-specific theatre-promenade *Volshebnyaya strana*<sup>17</sup>, which played out as a walking tour through the hidden courtyards of Rostov. I investigated its interaction with the city-specific typology of a gallery building.





Figures 18-20. "Volshebnyaya strana" in different locations around Rostov city.





Figures 21-23. The courtyard used in “Volshebnyaya strana” to be analysed through drawing.

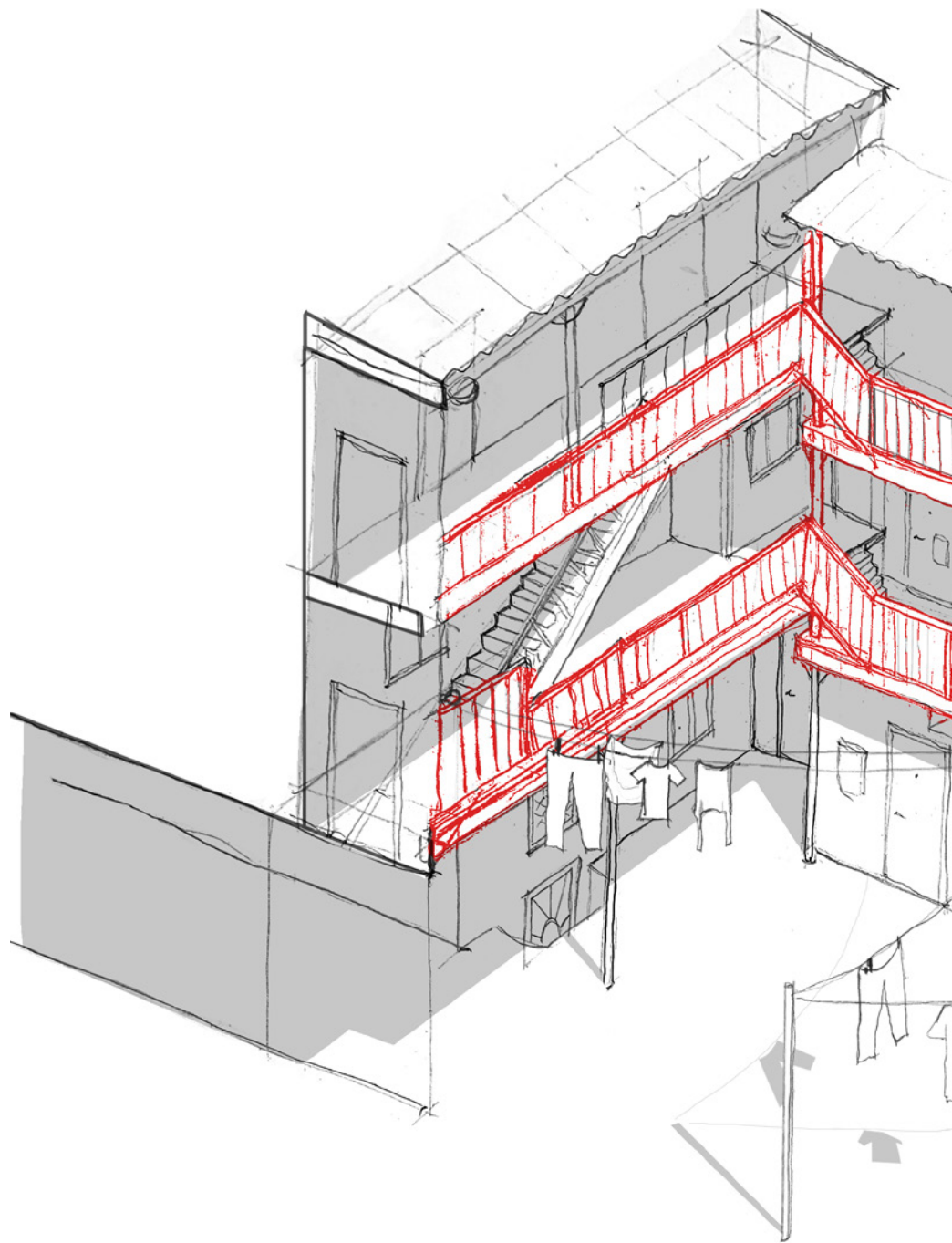
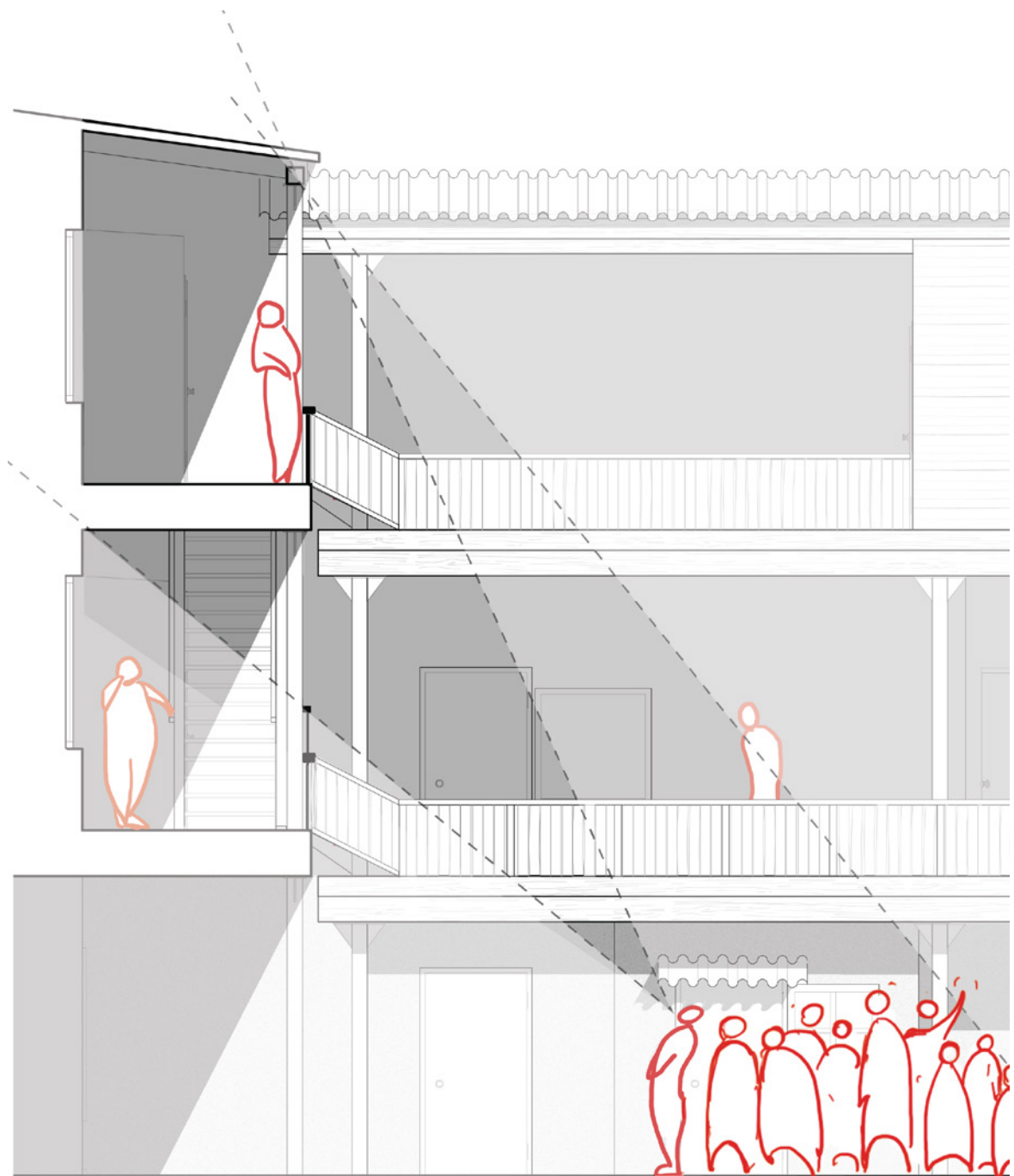


Figure 24. Gallery-house - a common typology of Rostov, which "Volshebnyaya strana" used as its stage.

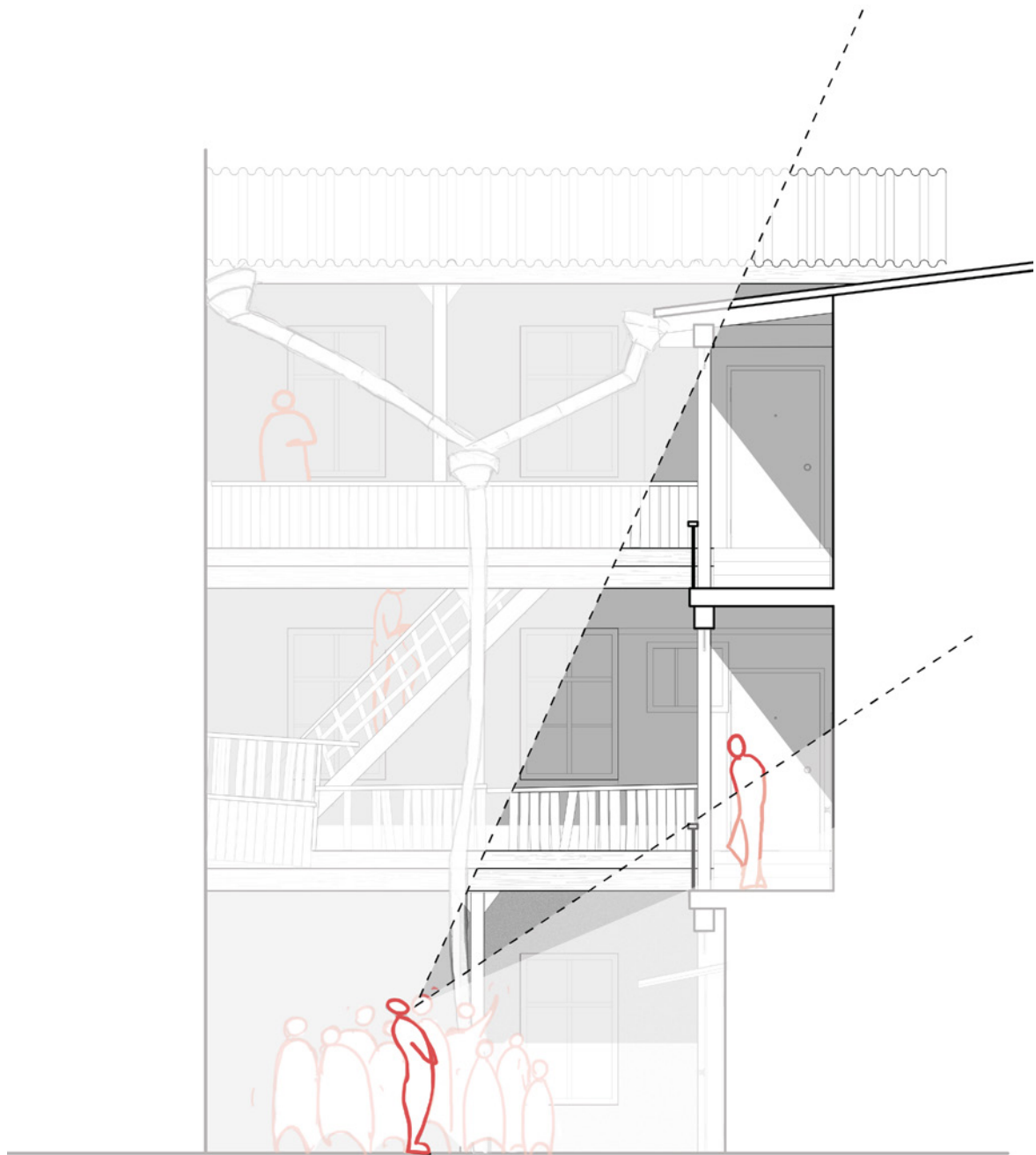




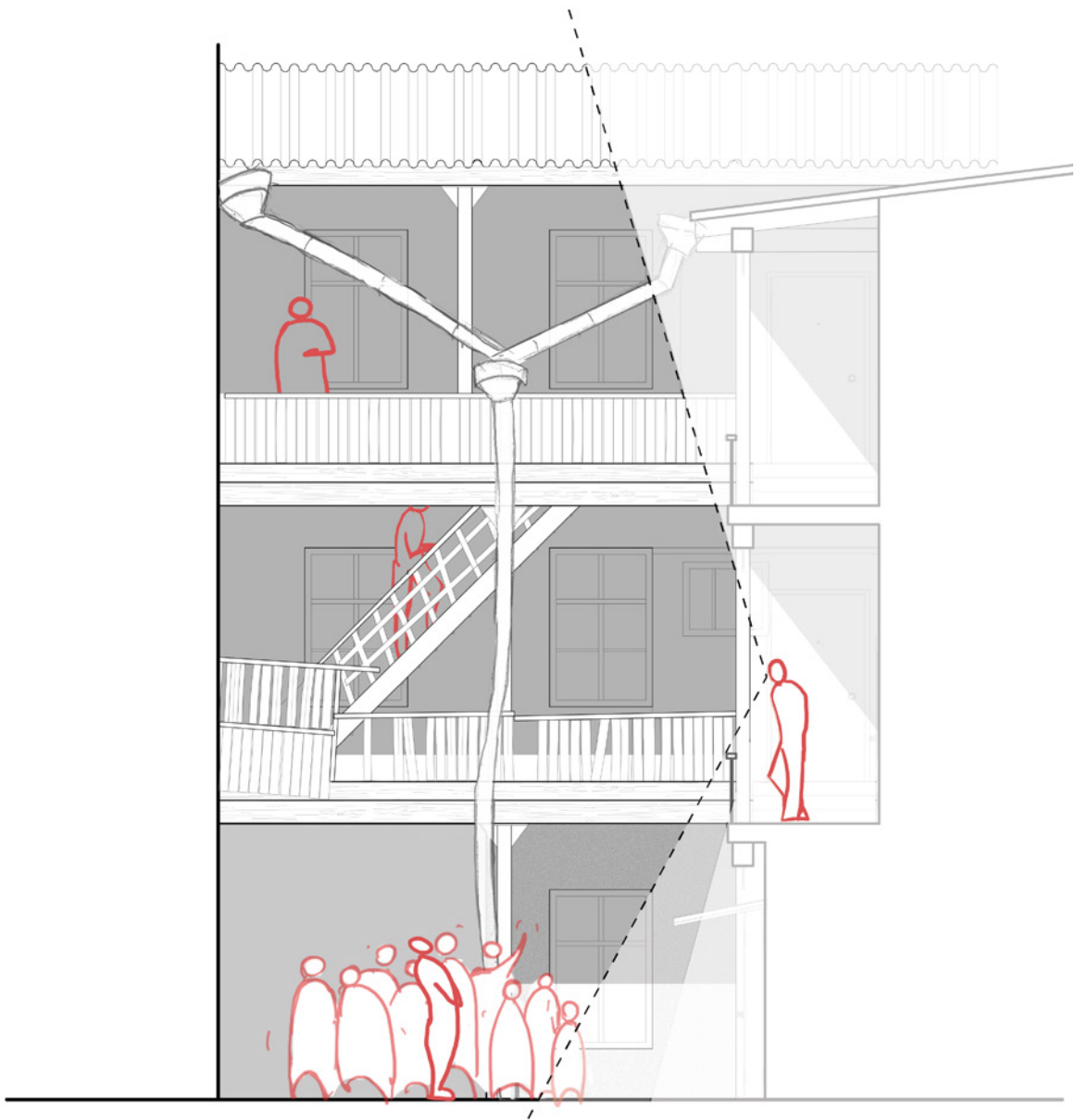
Figures 25 & 26. The depth and shadow of the gallery obscures the performer.







Figures 27 & 28. More narrow gallery allows a more direct connection between the crowd the performer.







A window, not unlike a box in Opera Garnier, is both a stage and a place for audience.

As *Volshebnyaya strana* realised, windows are visible from almost everywhere in the courtyard. This prominence and lack of visual barriers makes them a great candidate for an activator of the space.

Loud music or singing could spill out to the street; smell of cooking would travel around the yard; flowers on the window sill would be a part of the street greenery as much as the apartment's own décor.

Figure 30. A trusty railing as both a city artefact and a part of the stage.



## Impacts

Brings awareness of the surroundings. Makes notice of common objects that surround us daily. The audience is taken on a literal journey.

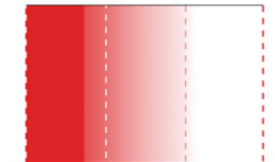
Democratic – often no tickets are required, which means anyone can join. The barrier of entry is lower compared to the institutional high-brow theatre, which is open to a select few.

## Key features:

**Social:** Clear de- or even counter-institutionalisation as one of the key objectives. Audience engagement through direct communication, physical involvement, and requirement of reaction from the viewer for the performance to take new routes.

**Spatial:** Works on a blend of artistic and non-artistic; uses non-performative spaces for the act. Streets, squares, apartments, vacant buildings – space influences what performance is meant to be. Strongly tied to the city as it turns the city into its stage.

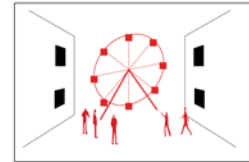
## Outcomes



Blur boundaries.



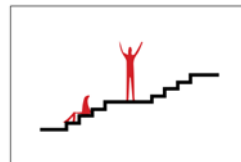
Make interaction seem possible.



Unusual in the usual.



Tactile materials expect interaction.



Wide spatial landscape = wide social landscape



Some friction is helpful.



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*“Taganrog is a very good town. If I were such a talented architect as you, I would break it down”.*

*A. Chekhov in letters to F. Schechtel, 1887.*

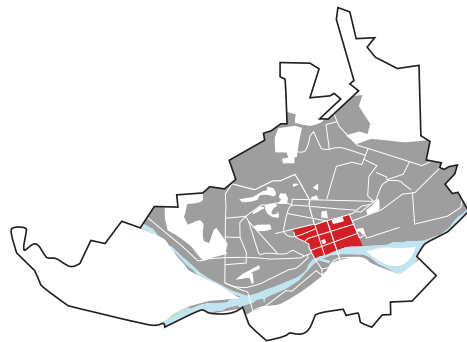
## **Part III. City.**

Now that we have our theatrical toolkit of interaction, it is time to meet the city in which to apply it.

Rostov-on-Don, or simply Rostov, is a city in southwest Russia. It is a port city, historically important for trade over the river Don, and Azov and Black Seas, to which it flows. With a population of over a million people, it is an administrative centre of the Southern Federal District of Russia and an important cultural hub of southern regions.

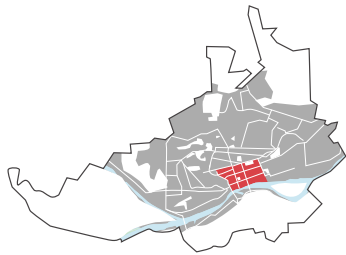
As seen in Map 1 in the following spread, the part of the city now considered a historic centre developed during the 1800s; rapid expansion happened in the era of “the first Russian Capitalism” of the early 1900s and post-revolution urbanisation.





Figures 1-3. Positions of Rostov region, Rostov-on-Don city, and its historic centre in their larger contexts.

Map 1. Historic growth of Rostov's city centre.



- 1800s
- 1880s
- 1900s
- 1920s and later



0 100m 1km





## The city through a lens of engagement.

A city is a complex system of interactions and a difficult one to dissect. As the primary goal of this study is to analyse the ways citizens can engage with their city, through a lens of theatricality, I shall limit my brief description of Rostov to this frame – engagement points within the city.

I can further narrow it down using the principles of engagement from Part II. As two of them state: “Place unusual in the usual” and “Lower barriers of entry” – I decided to limit my urban study only to the historic city centre, shown in Map 1. An intervention in the heart of the city would create new unfamiliar scenarios in the well-known context. And as I am certain that every city dweller has a right to the identity-formulating historic centre, an intervention here would be more open for any citizen to partake, as opposed to one in a gated neighbourhood elsewhere.

With these limits in mind, I first set off to find as many “points of engagement” within the city as possible. These included cultural venues, both public and private, playgrounds, retail areas, dining places, as well as green spaces. At first, I aimed to broadly outline many ways, in which dwellers of Rostov engage with the city centre (Map 2). Now armed with this knowledge, I can also conclude – for a space as large as this city centre, there are not many places that afford engagement!

If we confine our findings to publically accessible areas, excluding private galleries and cosy bars (debatable which of the two is a more engaging attraction), the city centre becomes rather bare. Predictably, people leisurely occupy areas which provide ample seating, and where there are already people present. In Jan Gehl’s words: “*Something happens because something happens because something happens*”<sup>1</sup>. City engagement is thus a self-reinforcing process, where people are attracted to other people that are already in the space. Hence, the “lively areas” appear in the Map 3.

1. Gehl, 2011, p.75





Map 2. Engagement map of the city Centre.

- Park
- Cultural venue (public)
- Cultural venue (private)
- Playground
- Market / Retail?
- Bars/Cafes/Restaurants





Map 3. Most lively - and not - areas of the city centre.

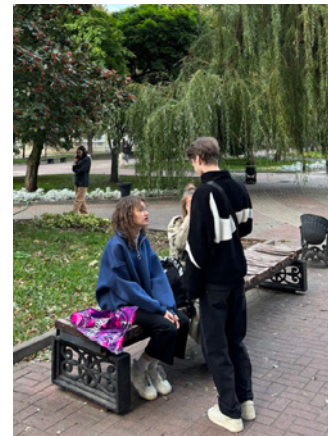




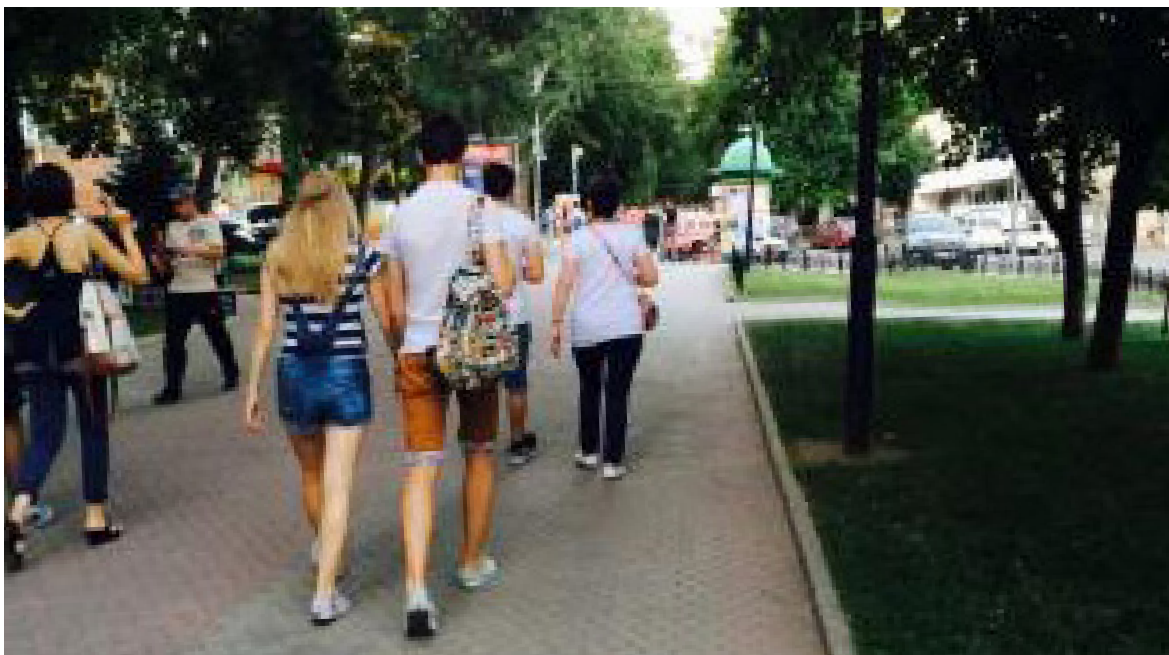
Following Gehl, the pedestrian zones can be classified by the two main types of activities that occur: necessary and optional<sup>2</sup>. In the pictures below and on the right, we see Pushkinskaya bd. (Figures 4-5, A on Map 3) and Soborniy ln. (Figures 6-7, B on Map 3). Puskinskaya is known for its activity in all seasons. It serves both the necessary activities of through-traffic for pedestrians (as it doubles Sadovaya st., the main artery of the city centre), as well as optional and social activities. People mingle and take seats to chat and watch passersby. Soborniy ln., on the other hand, is an example of a relatively recent regeneration effort made by the city. In 2015, it was converted into a pedestrian-only street. As the photos show, despite the ample street furniture, it lacks the popularity of Pushkinskaya.

Similarly, Sovetov Square (C) – probably the most central square of the city – lacks activity, despite the seemingly wide opportunities for interaction. The restoration of its grounds in 2016 brought around “infinite” benches in red marble, as well as a restriction to touch the monument in the centre of the square. New seating spots are barely used, as they are too cold even in the hottest of summers. Their shiny surface shows the city dust so well, that they look much dirtier than the old wooden benches used to show. The monument, which used to be the most attractive spot for schoolchildren after hours for as long as I remember, now stands resolutely alone.

2. Gehl, 2011

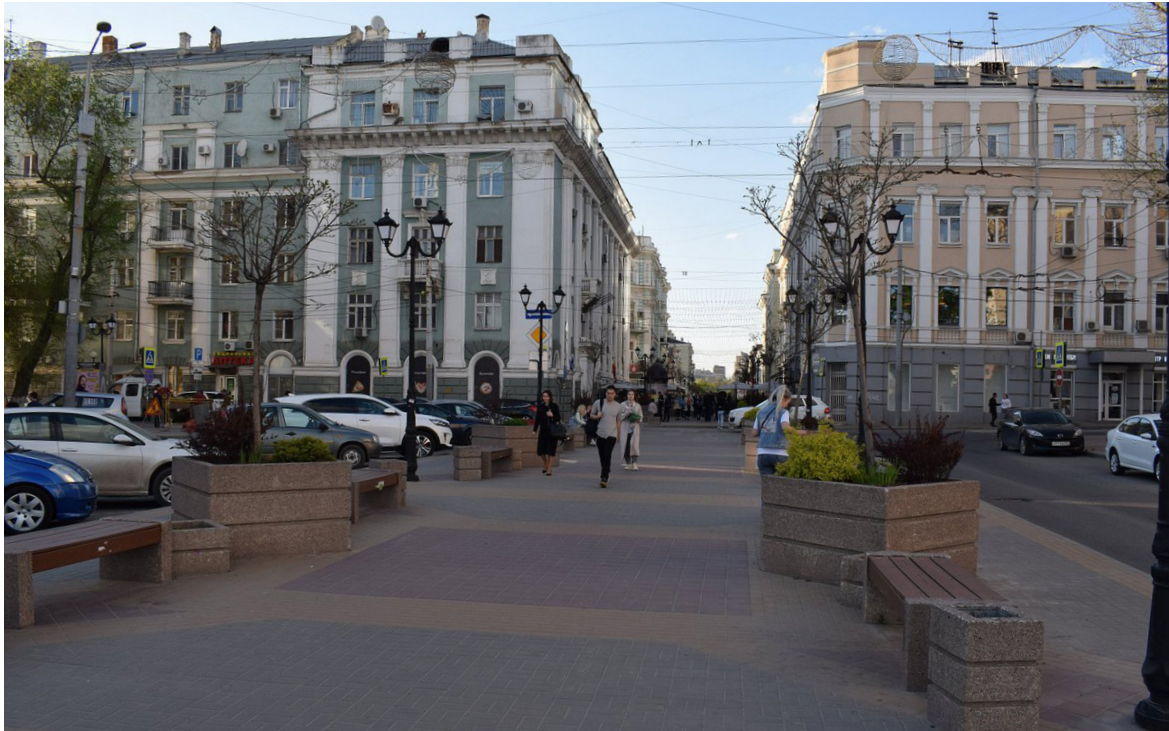


Figures 4-5. Puskinskaya bd.. Lots of optional activity as well as a through traffic.





Figures 6-7. Soborny ln.  
Lots of through traffic, not much  
optional activity despite the ample  
seating.







Above: Figures 8-9. Symbolic (and empty) Sovetov Square. After renovation.

Right: Figures 10-12. Pre-restriction activities on the monument.



## Institutions as attraction points.

Something has to be said about the institutions, which manage to engage the citizens. Art clusters Makaronka and C52 (Figure 11) present a multifunctional mix of recreational activities, co-working spaces, small black box theatres, and many more. “Gallery Rostov” has recently joined the list, to become a modern art exhibition in the city centre. However, what unites these abundant spaces of the city is their commercial nature; though often free to entry and host open activities, they cannot be considered “the place for the city”. The barrier to entry they present is too high.

A unique case I would like to mention is Rostov Public Library. It is what is often called a “hidden gem”, and a building that deserves a research paper in its own right. Following a belated modernist approach, its atrium is drowning in lush greenery. Cosy seats are spread around the place, creating a beautiful landscape. However, it is not a bustling interactive space; a simple requirement to have a library card becomes an unbearable barrier to entry for most, and rather conservative management preserves the central atrium as a quiet reading area, not a city’s living room. Annual events called “Biblionights”, in which the library opens its doors to citizens until the hours of early morning, always gather large audiences.

The institutions that aim to engage the public in Rostov also present barriers to direct interaction. Most are private and commercial, and cannot become the “living room of the city” that I am after.

But perhaps it is not the permanent institutions that provide the city with such a function. In the following section, I discuss the lively event scene of Rostov.

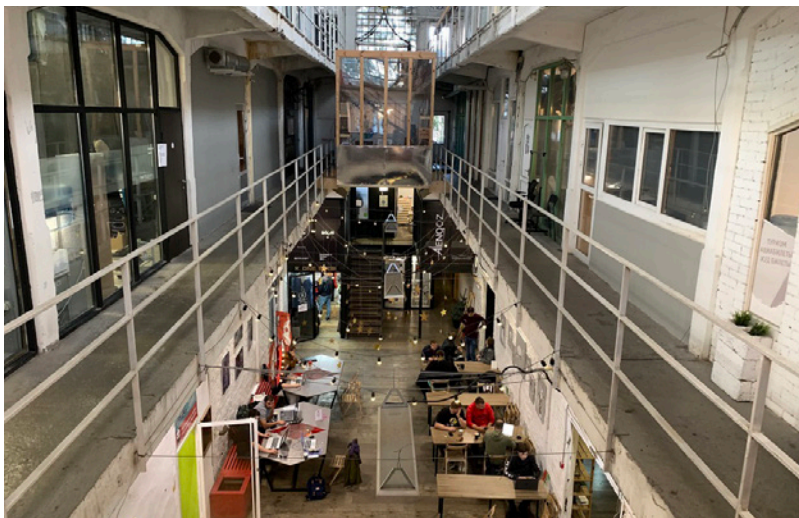


Figure 13. Creative cluster C52 was the first of its kind in Rostov and is now a popular spot. Local events often take place here, and it is made lively by a variety of small businesses that rent a unit here.



Right: Figure 14. Public library in its usual quiet beauty.

Below: Figure 15. Biblionight 2019, and the library is as lively as it can ever be.



## Events as a way to engage with the city.

As opposed to the permanent cultural citizen institutions, temporary events and festivals operate with relative success in Rostov. For example, the festival of street art *Nichego Strashnogo* [It's okay/Nothing bad] has been running since 2020 and has become an important city interacting event. The festival was organised to support and develop the street art space in Rostov, as well as to study the interaction of text and public space. As a part of the festival, weathered street artists give workshops and lectures, as well as take guided tours around the city. According to its founders, the key goal of the project is to create new attraction points in the city space<sup>3</sup>.

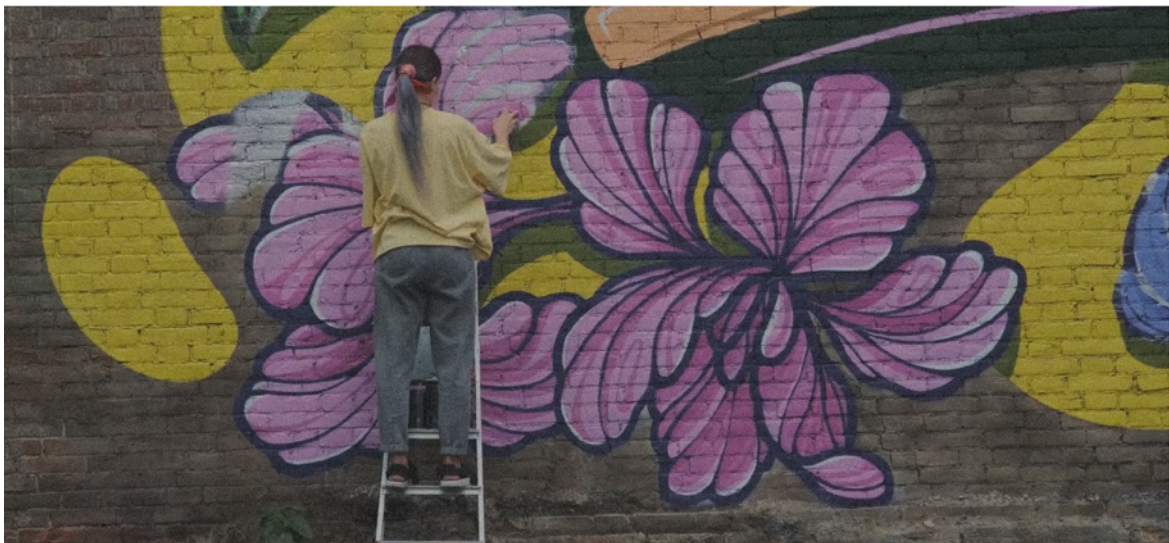
3. Nichego Strashnogo, 2023

It is not easy to judge the effects of such a festival. The feedback that the artists received in person and on social media *seems* to be overall positive.

Funnily enough, critical feedback is often presented in the form of question, such as “do you have a permission for this?”<sup>4</sup>. This seems to be a showing of the passivity of citizens in regards to what is happening in their city; urban changes are delegated to some form of “city authority”, which is *entitled* to command such changes. *Regular* men need not apply.

4. Shmalz, 2022

Figure 16. A mural by a duet “Couple of Creators” as a part of Nichego Strashnogo 2022.





5. Krasnoslobodtseva, 2020

Alternatively, a festival of site-specific theatre *Transformatsia* [Transformation] has taken place in Rostov in 2019. Its curator, Yuri Muravitskiy, has called it a failure<sup>5</sup>. Although the performances went as planned, and the overall impressions were left positive, the festival failed to engage with the city dwellers, according to Yuri. To him, it felt that a group of invited directors, coming mostly from Moscow and Saint Petersburg, did not manage to forge a connection with the citizens through their city. The democratisation, which I describe in the section about site-specific theatre, has not been achieved. “For whom are we doing this? [...] Tourists came and entertained themselves”, the curator laments<sup>6</sup>.

6. Ibid.

These two examples are interesting to me for their attempts to bring (mostly) external people to create engagement in the city. *Nichego Strashnogo* has featured local artists, as well as those from all over the country. I feel that this and the collaboration with the local art gallery, has helped the street art festival to feel as “good invasive”, not “bad invasive”. In the case of *Transformatsia*, all of the directors were invited from elsewhere. It was a project of “Theatre 18+”, art-director of which is aforementioned Yuri Muravitskiy - also an invited Moscovite.

Figure 17. A performance during Transformatsia festival.





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The current state of affairs in Rostov through a lens of engagement presents a sad picture.

Hard and unused public spaces add to the problem of lack of interaction between the city and its dwellers. Private “public” spaces are unfit for the purpose. City-wide events present an interesting case for temporary activities within the city, but only as long as the effort and their initiation come from within.

In the next and last part, I attempt to bridge the Theatre and the City parts of my study, and formulate a design vision for a “theatre of the city” – a living room for Rostov that it is missing so badly.



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*“...in any community, theatre has either no particular function – or a unique one”.*

*P. Brook, 1996*

## **Part IV. Theatre of the City.**

The last chapter assessed what issues persist in the current socio-urban structure of Rostov-on-Don. This chapter outlines a vision of how to change it.

### **Problem of engagement.**

Though originally the research started with a political definition of “civil engagement” in mind – one of interaction between the citizen and the state – I quickly learned that the lack of engagement in the Russian periphery persists in all manners of intra-city interactions.

One such missing – or poorly present – interaction is engagement with historic city architecture. While the city centre consists largely of pre-Revolution buildings, their conditions range from moderate to appalling. The potential for heritage loss is growing exponentially with years. But the citizen involvement in preservation is disappointingly little, and the efforts of the municipality are consistently misplaced.

In Map 2, a list of heritage buildings is cross-referenced with the list of buildings slated for demolition in Rostov’s centre. We see many red circles. These are the buildings in legal limbo; those which must be demolished as they are a danger to public safety, but those which are historically important and thus must be preserved.

In the end, many of such buildings await their fate for so long, that they crumble before they see any restoration effort.

This is where my project lies. Abandoned heritage structures, with rich pasts and gloomy futures.

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## Something old, something new.

Many historic buildings in Rostov can become a fruitful ground for a revitalisation project.

Proximity to the most popular areas in the centre, street facades rich in detail and attractive to passersby, and scales ranging from small houses to huge multi-storey complexes – these buildings imply a large network of currently lost spaces with a potential to turn into focal points within the developing and bustling city.

My project is an example of how one such building can be ‘reactivated’. In Scheme 1, I selected three urban situations, which present similar opportunities for revival.

To limit the project’s scope, I chose the building colloquially known as “Guderman’s House” for its smaller scale. However, my decision-making process is aimed at generalising my approach, so it can be extended to other cases in the city.

Guderman’s house is located on Sobornyi Lane – historically one of the central streets that begins at the city’s cathedral and ends at Don riverside (Map 2). With time, it has lost its prestige and is now a quiet residential street a few blocks away from the central market and the riverbank.

The ruinous monument is lost within the city blocks. Though there is some activity all around (Map 3), there are no attraction points in its direct vicinity. We must fix this.

Map 1. Vacancy, condition, and heritage in the city centre,

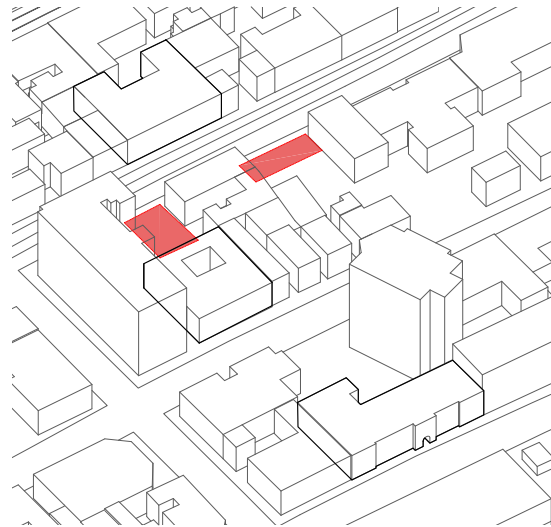






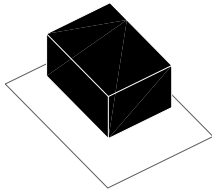
Scheme 1. Possible cases for revitalisation.

Turgenevskaya st., 23



*NAME*

Paskvilini's house; Bolova's house.



*DISTANCE TO THE CENTRE*

Site 2900 m<sup>2</sup>  
(unbuilt 700 m<sup>2</sup>)  
GFA 4500 m<sup>2</sup>

1.7 km

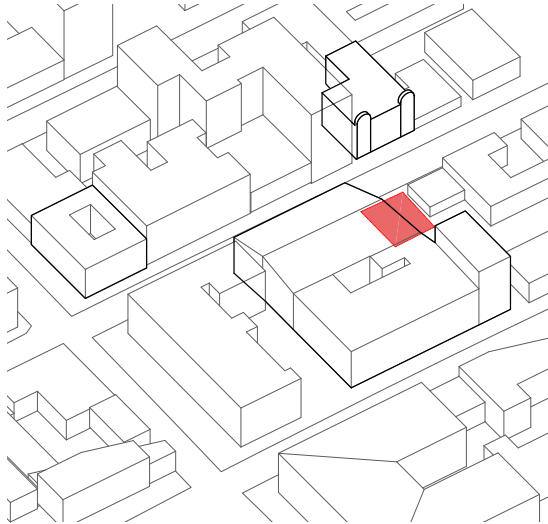
*HISTORIC IMPORTANCE*

- XIX century apartment buildings

*CONDITION*

- medium to dangerous

Serafimovicha st., 88



Clerk's Club; Trester's Mansion.

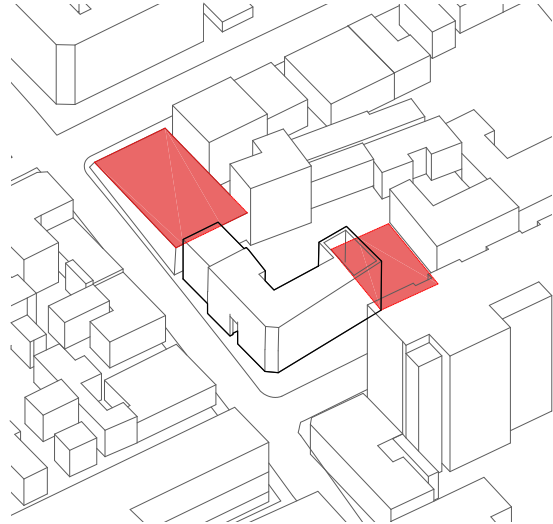
Site 2000 m<sup>2</sup>  
(unbuilt 500 m<sup>2</sup>)  
GFA 4500 m<sup>2</sup>

0.3 km

- Early XX century theatre / club
- XIX century private mansion
- XIX century courtyard building

- poor to dangerous

Sobornyi ln., 8/15



Guderman's house.

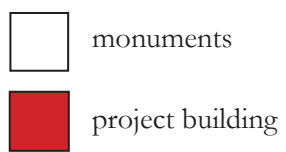
Site 2100 m<sup>2</sup>  
(unbuilt 1000 m<sup>2</sup>)  
GFA 900 m<sup>2</sup>

1.3 km

- XIX century apartment building

- dangerous

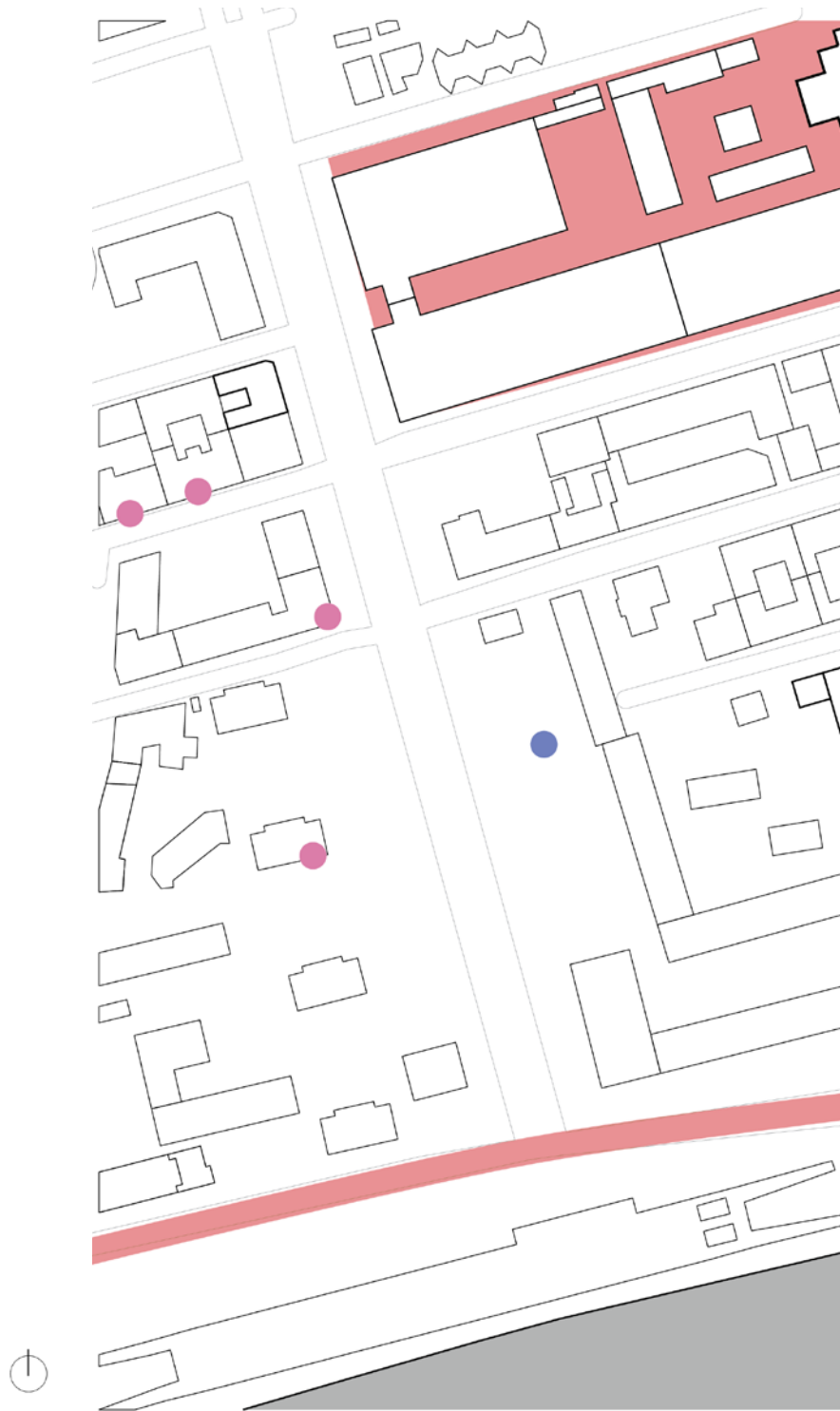
Map 2. Guderman's House in its context.





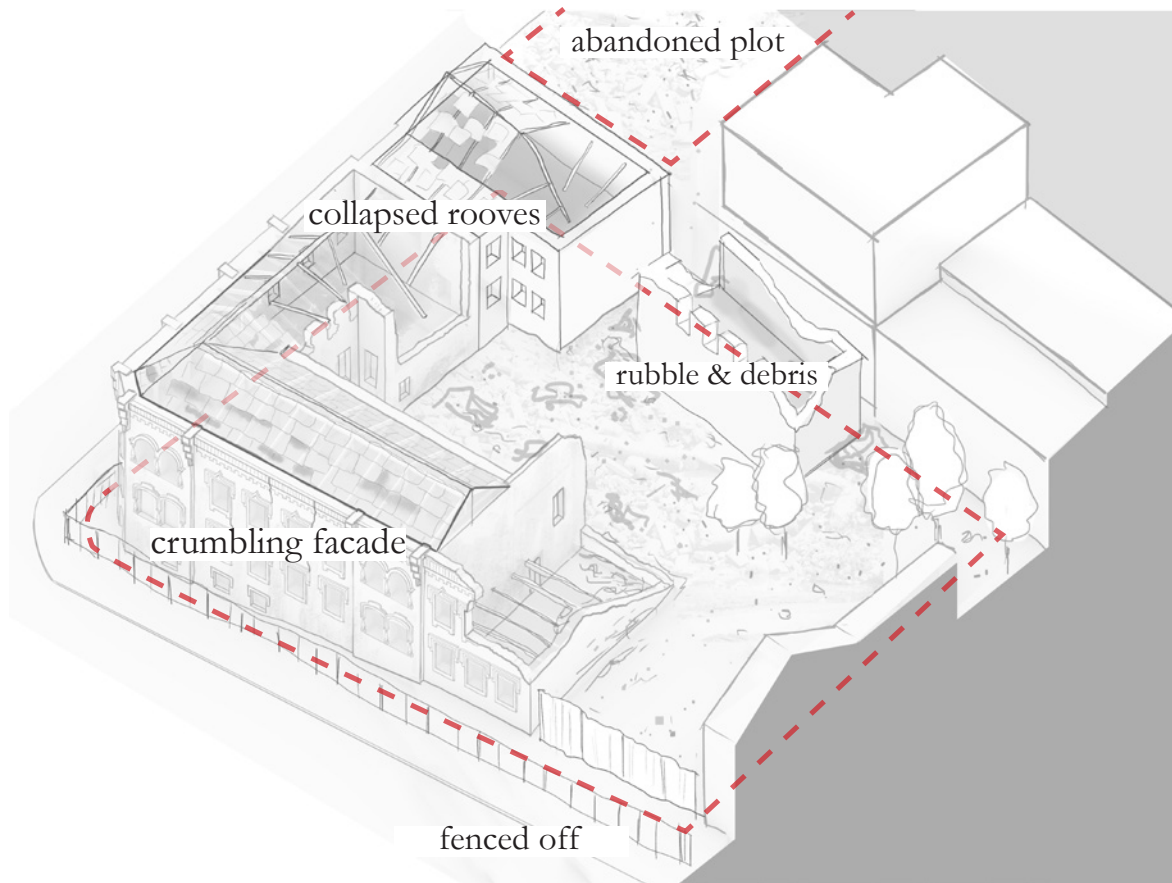
Map 3. Lively areas and activities around the site.

- cafe/bar
- playground
- lively areas





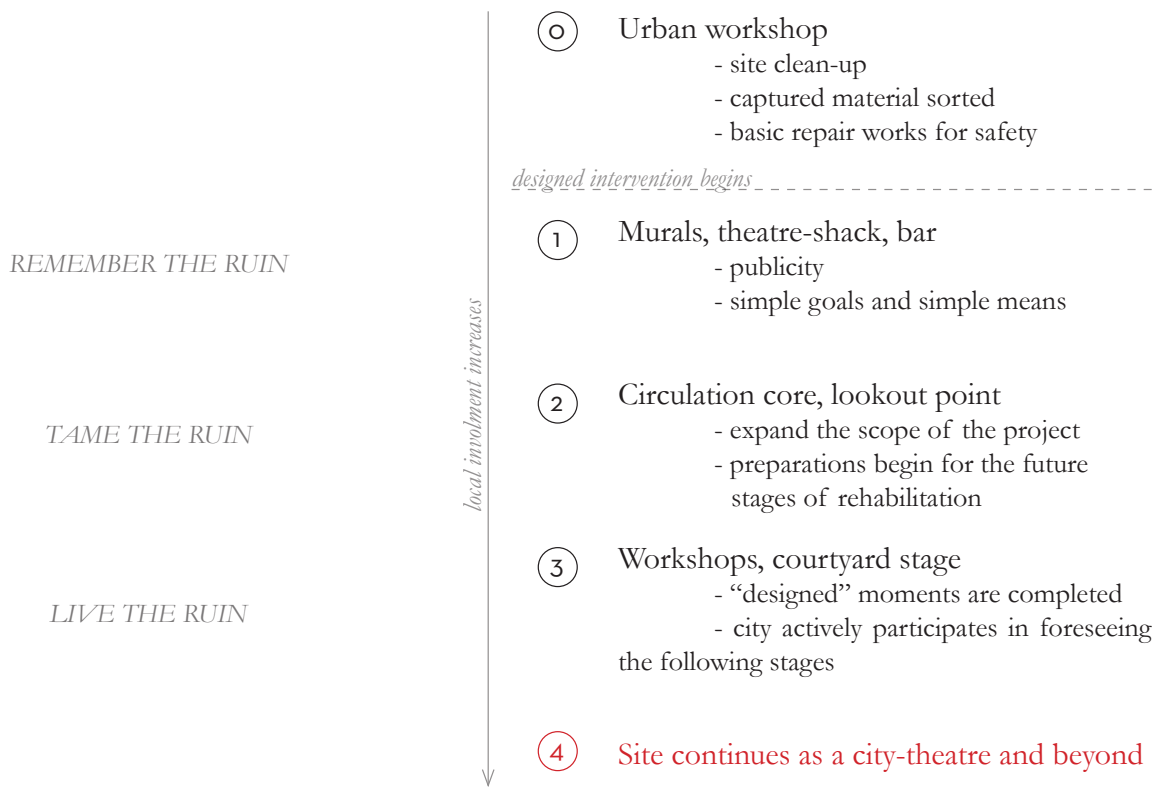




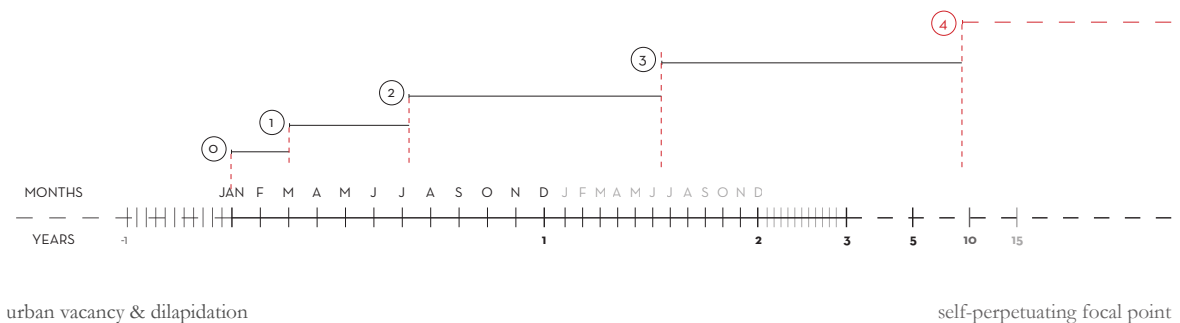
*Issues*

- *danger to public safety*
- *complete disconnection from the city*
- *loss of historic identity*
- *urban voids and urban negligence*

Scheme 2. Current state of the site.



Scheme 3. Project phases.



Scheme 4. Phases through the years.

## Occupy.

*Unusual in the usual.*

*- Adding a new function to an old place makes one rethink familiar places in unfamiliar scenarios.*

The addition of the new programme will reimagine the future of the plot.

Theatre has historically acted in opposition to the trends. This project is no exception; its goal is to challenge the current state of heritage vacancy that current politicians do not wish to address. It is fitting here to imagine a programme of an artist colony – a centre of performance arts, led by a theatre company. Protest lies in the nature of the project: a building that *should have died* rejects its gloomy outlook and plans a new one in retort.

## Create publicity.

The civic nature of the project must be public from the moment of site acquisition. Active involvement starts at day zero. City people are welcome on site all year round.

*Make interaction seem possible.*

*- “Possibility for flexibility” affords agency in thinking.*

The agency starts with an urban workshop. This concept is not new to Rostov; “Tom Sawyer Fest”, a festival that brings volunteers together to make a better urban environment and to help others understand the value of the urban historical artefacts, has acted here since 2020<sup>1</sup>. It is easy to imagine such a festival to call townfolk into action, clean up the site, sort through the rubble, and make the first simple repairs to the crumbling facade.

This, and hosting a simple program, such as a café or bar in one of the suitable areas of the building, starts generating publicity around the “forgotten treasure” of architecture. It also brings the first income<sup>2</sup>.

1. Tom Sawyer Fest, 2023

2. Given the highly commercial nature of real estate in Rostov city centre, it is important to have this in perspective. The site must start generating income – not only to sustain itself short-term but also to attract investment for its future phases of revitalisation and expansion.

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The interventions must be easy to implement at first. Live next to the ruin –the first additions are perhaps next to the monument, so as to not disturb the dilapidated structure. The focus is not on fixing the ruin. Inform the visitors about the ruin and the plan to make the ruin a part of city life, once again.

*Tactile materials expect interaction.*

- *People are more at ease interacting with spaces that have a little grit.*

Simple materials. Light construction techniques. Paint.

The first opportunity to involve the local makers arises here – blind walls that surround the abandoned plots are perfect canvases for street art. With the rich history of street art festivals, like Nichego Strashnogo, take seriously the notion that paint is the simplest intervention. *Tactical* murals define the boundaries of a project and create interest around its new life. It is a giant sign that reads “NO LONGER ABANDONED”.

*Blur boundaries. Lower barriers of entry.*

- *There is more participation where the crowd is larger.*

Next to Guderman’s house, the empty plot uphill is an opportunity for a project-city interface. A pocket park treats the local lack of green spots and public spaces. A new leisure spot near the site should get citizens “on board” the upcoming revitalisation. A soft green boundary defines the project’s scope for the future. It shows new care is given to the area.

High ground is a vantage point. Park’s visitors see how the construction of *their* theatre is going. Later, they will enjoy the performances from up here, without even entering the site. Invite people in, but allow them to decline the invitation.

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*Some friction is helpful.*

*- Friction brings attention to the happening. Neutral is bland. It is in contradictions we find compromises.*

As city dwellers grow accustomed to the activity around the ruin, some will get inevitably annoyed. In a city, where everything is made with permission from authority, radical changes will encounter friction. Such an effect may be desirable if kept at an appropriate level. The project must embrace the friction with façade braces and extensions that interfere with the street walkway. Façade additions themselves are not unusual in the old centre of Rostov; irregularities in the street profile are commonplace. New irregularity, if it helps the old building to survive and thrive, must be accepted, for it attracts attention to the new urban phenomenon. Advice here is only to be reasonable – friction is helpful, but too much annoyance will jeopardise the occupation.

### **Involve at every step.**

The process of occupation will take years to complete. It must work in phases, slowly accelerating in complexity, and bringing citizens to terms with the monument's new life, to give birth to a self-sustaining initiative-based project.

*Wide spatial landscape = wide social landscape*

*Diverse spatial settings create a wider landscape of affordances for interaction. This also allows different levels of commitment for those, who are making up their mind about joining or leaving the engagement.*

The role of the architect is to strategise the first stages. It is to plan for the *moments of involvement*. New construction gives life to the building; it is also an open invitation to join. Plan your additions open-ended. Locals will choose how to complete it in their own way – do not guess for them.

Guderman House's interiors need a designer's touch to become liveable. But its street facades have been a property of the city for a century; let the local makers find their new expression.



### **Then broaden the scope.**

3. The growth of public education sector has been tremendous in the last years in Rostov. Art and poetry lectures, painting and potter masterclasses are booming; the province has economically grown, and a wider group of citizens use their disposable income for fun educational activities in spare time.

With time, add functions. A bar and a theatre are a loud start. But if the abundance of public lectures and courses in Rostov is anything to go by<sup>3</sup>, the audience also loves to feel smart. Add workshops and spaces for talks and lessons. Our revived monument is not only for evening fun. Daytime work and education reside here, too.

*Provide a learning value as well as an entertaining value.*

*- Appeal to a wider audience through the mix of content. People are more engaged when they enjoy it.*

### **Theatre as a part of the city. City as a part of the theatre.**

Buildings collapse. Heritage is lost. A ruin is now taken for granted. But an alternative exists. Let us then embrace this alternative, and change the gloomy future of our heritage for a bright one. Let us reconnect the abandoned monument with the city before it is too late. And let us make the city become a part of this process, so it continues after we go.













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### **Part IV. Theatre for The City**

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