

Architecture as a Performing Art



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Studies in Architecture

Turned Tables: The Public as Performers in Jean Nouvel's Pre-performance Spaces

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The theatrical experience begins long before any curtain rises. It begins with the participatory performance along the trajectory from the street to the performance space entry. It exists in its own right in the liminal spaces and moments between the city and planned event. These liminal spaces offer architects opportunities to construct experiences of heightened sensory awareness that engage the public not only as spectator but also as performer. These pre-performance spaces prime the theater-goer to sense, to engage and to reflect upon the world through visual and spatial distancing, through vertiginous immersion, and as emancipated spectators, to borrow French philosopher Jacques Rancière's term, and invite the public to make their own performance. The sites examined in this chapter are these liminal spaces between everyday city life and the designated performance space—the building approach, threshold, foyer space, and passages that lead towards the performance hall entry.

Two performance buildings by Ateliers Jean Nouvel—the Opera de Lyon (1993) and the Danish Radio Concert Hall, in Copenhagen (2009)—will be unpacked to reveal how the design of their pre-performance spaces heighten the theater-goer's experience, visually, viscerally and haptically, to turn the tables, casting theater-goers as performers, empowering them to create their own heightened theatrical experience independent of the planned event and its space.¹

Two points must first be made regarding the 1875 Opera de Paris, by Charles Garnier, which may be considered the utmost architectural model for the conflation of performer and spectator. First, the development of the Avenue de l'Opéra and the opera house at the end of this axis were linked projects. Thus the vista and promenade through urban space towards the opera were of paramount importance to the design of the total theater experience, an experience that begins and exists in its own right outside of the performance space. Second, the Opera de Paris can be read as Garnier's constructed manifesto on society, theater,

and the architectural structuring of that social theater. In the introduction to *Le Théâtre Garnier* offered a space-by-space explanation of design principles realized in the opera house; he stated, "to see and to make oneself be seen, to understand and to make oneself be understood, that is the fated circle of humanity; to be actor or spectator, that is the condition of human life."² The "theatrical sentiment," or impulse, Garnier argued, was fundamental to human nature, placed third in importance after the "desire for affection and self preservation."³

To see and to be seen, in a specific light, place and context, underlies the structure of the Paris Opera's public spaces. Plan and section reveal a hierarchical layering of space that distributes theater-goers according to economic class and gender. Although arriving by separate prescribed access points, all entered the cubic space of the grand stair, only to split again according to class—the majority in the thick of things at the *parterre* level while the privileged took their places in private, tiered *loges*. The spatial hierarchy of the tiered galleries, wrapping and seen through porous archways that surround the grand stair volume, identified the social hierarchy of the all-too-visible onlookers.

Ascending the grand stairs located theater-goers as performers at the focal point of the space, with the greatest concentration of eyes upon them. The stairs, like a *haute-couture* catwalk, demanded graceful control of one's forward, climbing, and turning movement at each of the marble treads and landings. Each change in level and forced rotation functioned as a device to bring the theater-goer's awareness back to their own performed movement through space, amplified by eyes focused on them, ascending through this gilded cage. Thus attention doubly rested on the ascending theater-goer: the performance resided in their action from the view point of the onlookers as well as the highly self-conscious movement experienced by the person moving.

The importance of the social theater played out in the pre-performance space and time of Garnier's grand stair is well recognized. The arched openings that surround and overlook the grand stair reflect in miniature the large proscenium arch of the theater, but draw into question where and who the performers are. Through the repetitive archways Garnier critiqued the paradigm of opposing the performer's space and the spectator's space while perpetuating that paradigm in the opera house proper. In the theater of the grand stair all participated at some point; in the opera house no one crossed the threshold from spectator to participant.

The opposition between performer and spectator and the paradigm of non-participating spectators increasingly drew critics, as evident in scenographer and lighting designer Adolphe Appia's 1911 essay "Eurythmics and the Theater." He wrote:

*Up until now, only quiet attention has been required of the audience. To encourage us, comfortable seats have been provided in semi-darkness, to encourage a state of total passivity—evidently the proper attitude for spectators. In other words, here as elsewhere, we have attempted to separate ourselves from the work of art; we have become eternal spectators!*⁴

Two generations later in the *Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord further critiqued a society of passive spectatorship, consumption and mediated experience; this critique continues today in the form of debates around participation and performativity in theater and other spatial and cultural disciplines. Jacques Rancière, French philosopher and advocate of radical democracy and equitable participatory society, reflected on the potential for an "Emancipated Spectator" in his essay of that title. Rancière claimed that the generally accepted modern paradox of the spectator assumed that on one hand there is no theater without the spectator, but on the other hand that being a spectator is "inherently bad (as) viewing is the opposite of knowing (and) spectating is the opposite of acting ... To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act."⁵

Rancière continued by pointing to two mid-twentieth-century theater directors—Bertold Brecht and Antonin Artaud—who attempted to transform the spectator into an active agent. For Brecht spectators were to be activated through defamiliarization and intellectual engagement, provoking an emotional *distance* from the action and actors while raising their "conscious(ness) of the social situation." Artaud's model of activation was founded on the *forgoing of distance* between actor and spectator. The spectators were "drawn into a circle of action that restores their collective energy."⁶ Modeled after the Greek chorus, Artaud posited that theater would be rooted in participatory movement, which included the entire citizenry.

Rancière, however, argued for a third approach, stating "being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our *normal situation* ..."⁷ As such, Rancière's emancipated spectator is one who participates in a ceaseless exchange of roles, not the obliteration of difference between the positions of actor and spectator, seer and seen. He argues:

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting ... It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms [the] distribution of positions. The spectator also acts ... observes, selects, compares, interprets ... [and] composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way ...⁸

Thus the performance does not offer a singular message or predictable effect upon the spectator, but rather is one part of a network open to interpretation and to be completed in a heterogeneous fashion by a multitude of spectators.

These three models for an augmented experience—as the distanced, immersed, and emancipated spectator—are particularly interesting in respect to the performances that we enact and witness in the spaces outside the theater proper, in our normal situation. We will turn our attention to the public's augmented experiences that Nouvel has constructed in the pre-performance spaces of the Opera de Lyon and the Danish Radio Concert Hall.

Jean Nouvel's Opera de Lyon consists of a new horseshoe opera house suspended within the shell of an existing neoclassical structure. The lobby is



11.1 Opera de Lyon.

Above: columns and elevator track running from subterranean amphitheater to top of lobby. Below: perforated metal gangways at the edge of the void that bridge to upper balconies.

tightly packed into the interstices compressed between a black-lacquered vessel that contains the new opera hall and the preserved outer walls, and it winds its way upward nearly a hundred feet, criss-crossed by bridges and escalators. In comparison to Garnier's highly defined cubic volume and clearly defined balconies that frame the action and instruct the spectator where to look, the vertical ascent in the Opera de Lyon begins via exceptionally narrow escalators from the street level, across compressed interstitial voids, to peripheral platforms with scattered focus (Figure 11.1). After obliquely approaching the Opera through city streets, adjacent plazas, and its surrounding arcade to ascend to the historic *grand foyer* and new suspended *parterre* level, the body of the theater-goer is passive—not moving but rather being moved. In addition, elevators transport stationary bodies up through the compressed, vertical lobby from a subterranean amphitheater to the sixth balcony level while the escalators carry passive theater-goers across the center of the space. Meanwhile the place of the active body is pushed to the upper perimeter. Along these upper edges of the void, theater-goers tenuously make their way on perforated metal gangways towards the opera house's *grande salle*. The uppermost of these metal gangways overlooks a precipice of nine stories. If not overwhelmed by vertigo from these scattered prospects, one can glimpse other people. The contorted shape of the void crops the view of platforms, obstructing the view of those occupying them.



Visual contact is fleeting as one moves quickly from the crowded street level towards more dispersed, remote, and intimate spaces.

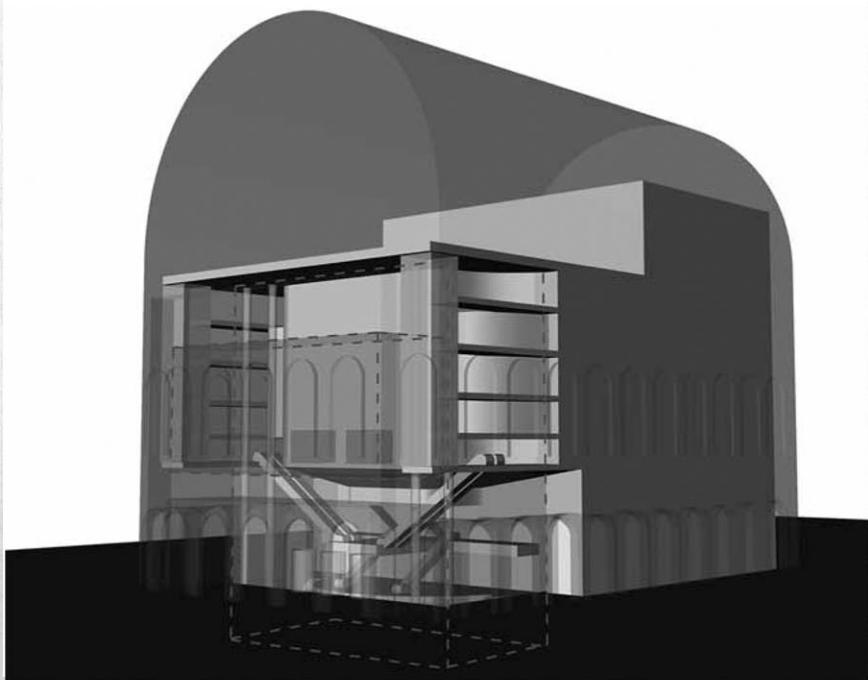
If light from the windows of the neoclassical shell abounds, it does not help the theater-goer see clearly—either the space to be navigated, the individuals present, or the collective society in which he or she takes part (Figure 11.2). Glare and reflections off the black lacquered vessel confound reality, doubling, distorting, and mirroring the already complex play of volumes that interrupt the narrow space bounded by the preserved walls. One loses oneself in a disorienting void, in which the spatial and social structure dissolves into literal smoke and mirrors.

In contrast to the comprehensible order of Garnier's Paris Opera House, Nouvel's space is troubling—confounding, disorienting, vertiginous. Extremely compressive spaces—between lacquered vessel and the stone historic enclosure, within the narrow escalators, and the two lobby levels tightly tucked below the *parterre* level—are counterpoints to the vertical hollow that winds its way from the subterranean amphitheater to the cornice line of the historic outer shell (Figure 11.3). One space preserved from the Opera's 1831 configuration, the *grand foyer*, elevated above the entry portico, offers a counterpoint to Nouvel's world in the form of a clearly defined and illuminated space permitting one to orient oneself in the building and in the city. Here one may also satisfy other senses with food and drink.

11.2 Opera de Lyon.

Upper and lower left: intermediate lobby level tucked under the *parterre*, with arrival and departure by escalators. Top right: connecting new opera vessel to historic foyer by a glass bridge across the narrowest part of the void. Below center and right: lacquered opera vessel and escalators.

11.3 *Opera de Lyon*. Perspective diagram of foyer and circulation.



The theater-goer's experience of Nouvel's pre-performance space does not center on a singular space and action. No singular message is offered for interpretation. Nor does the experience rely on distancing the theater-goer from the performance in a Brechtian manner. One can barely see. Nor is one immersed in the swoon of Artaud's choristic society. Immersed in a spatial swoon perhaps, but devoid of society. Rather, as a geometrically ungraspable space to be navigated, lacking focus, in several senses, the theatrical experience that precedes the planned event is constructed of the theater-goer-as-spectator's own aggregation of visceral and visual sensations, termed proprioceptive experience. Engaging more than just the eye, Nouvel's space is equally sensed in the muscles, the ear, the gut.

This perception—*proprioception*—predominantly has its nerve receptors within the interior of the body, such as joint and muscle receptors and the vestibular receptors of the inner ear, as opposed to being located on the body's surface or in specific sense organs. Messages originate in the muscles, joints, and vestibular receptors to communicate the position of limbs as one shifts weight and adjusts balance in relation to gravity. Proprioception contributes to kinaesthesia, or the sense of movement, through these internal signals in combination with information from visual and cutaneous receptors.⁹

The eye's role, however, is not limited to the contribution of retinal imagery. Within the proprioceptive web of information, receptors in the extra-ocular muscles register the direction of gaze and thus help sense the direction and location of objects, surfaces, and edges in space.¹⁰ The muscles focus the individual eyeball and binocular eyes together, offering bodily cues about distance. Thus muscular information, in addition to the retinal image, communicates the depth of space,

and one's position within it. Conflicting proprioceptive and visual information about distance, particularly the distance to the ground below one's feet, triggers a sensation in the gut—vertigo.

Nouvel is a master of vertigo as exemplified in the *Opera de Lyon*'s dizzying and disorienting alternation between physically engaged motion and passive motion, compressive space and immeasurably expansive space. The perception of unfathomable depth through the perforated surfaces of the gangways, the vibration of these gangways underfoot, the inverted and distorted reflections on the lacquered vessel, the indistinguishable edges of black-on-black volumes focus the theater-goer's attention—proprioceptive, kinaesthetic, and retinal—on the sensing and negotiation of space. Both immersed within and forced to map the space, the theater-goer is obliged to make sense of their position and movement. This heightened awareness, I would argue, demands that theater-goers become attentive, engaged, actively participating, even emancipated spectators. A passive or distracted spectator would be in danger of stumbling or succumbing to dizziness.¹¹

One could argue that this play on the senses that induces theater-goers to focus on the spatial experience is solely in service of preparing the theater-goer for the opera they are about to perceive. The space certainly participates in that preparation. However, I argue that in the work of Jean Nouvel these effects are not unique to performance buildings. Intense plays of compression and vertiginous spaces can be found across the range of Nouvel's projects, from the Arab World Institute and Galeries Lafayette to the Gasometer Housing and Judicial Center in Nantes. The play on the senses that contributes to the theatrical experience in Lyon calls us to attention both in and out of the performance space. It awakens us to being present in whatever space we inhabit.

A related play on the senses characterizes the public space of Nouvel's Danish Radio Concert Hall (DR) on the outskirts of Copenhagen. In contrast to Lyon's confined site, which left no opportunity for an extended axial approach through urban space, the approach to the DR, in the developing Universitetet area, stretches beyond the building's limit. The compressive experience begins with the above-ground metro-ride to this outlying part of town in a car crammed with theater-goers. Once released, the out-of-place audience traverses a wide path towards the DR, an illuminated blue cube. To enter, one passes through a low, compressive threshold that opens into a vertical space, hoisting the gaze skyward. Situated similarly over the entry to Lyon's *grand foyer*, the restaurant extension of the DR foyer compresses the threshold, overlooking the approach and providing a place for eating, drinking, and general warming up for the show.

The meteor, as the concert hall is affectionately called, floats above the ground-level entrance and elevated foyer plinth, spanning between several roughly textured concrete stair cores. Its scaly brown surface earned it its intergalactic name. Once theater-goers emerge from under the foyer, illuminated lines in the underbelly of the meteor draw the gaze up. With heads tipped back theater-goers are also offered glimpses of sky through slivers of space between the meteor's hovering mass and the multi-layered building envelope. Barely through the door,



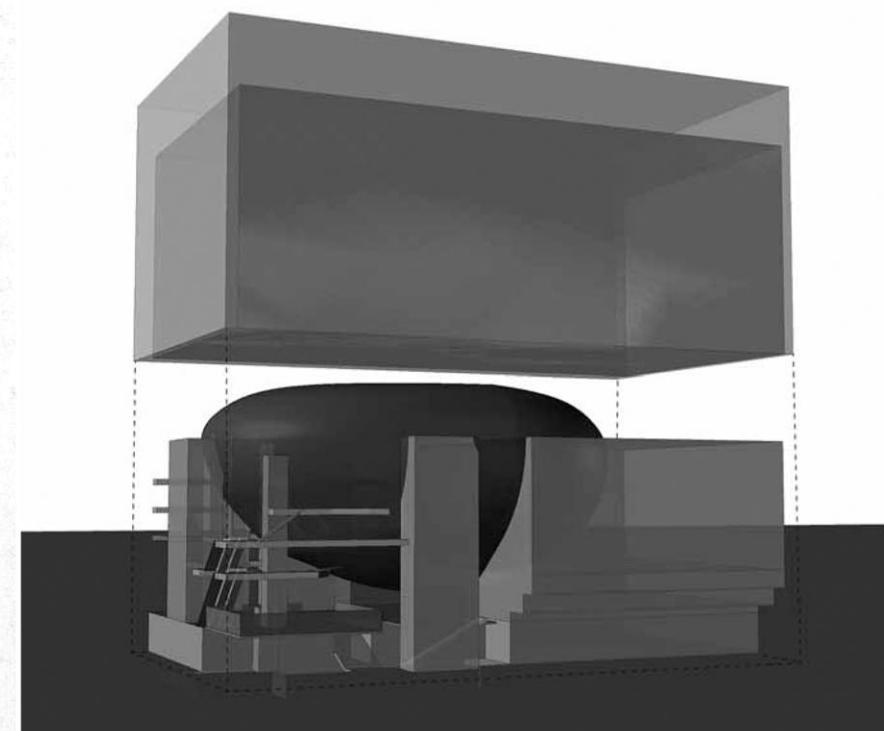
11.4 Danish Radio Concert Hall.

Above: approach via metro, entry tucked below the foyer/restaurant. Below left: entrance lobby space with view of the meteor. Ahead is the stair, and to the right the escalator, leading onto the plinth. Below right: view up into the slot between the meteor and the double layer envelope.



11.5 Danish Radio Concert Hall.

Left to right: theater-goers orienting and investigating balconies above a mini-foyer; orienting in the entry lobby space; looking down from the first balcony to the foyer/plinth.



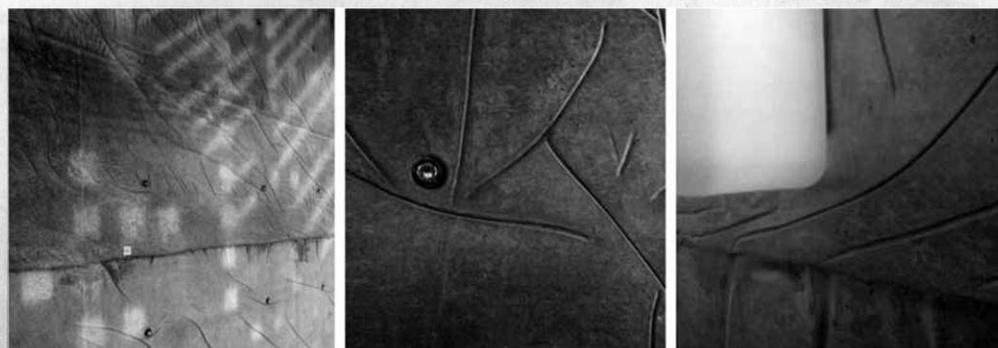
11.6 Danish Radio Concert Hall, perspective diagram.

the immersive space demands an effort to establish orientation. Newcomers take time to determine where to go, lured in several directions by scattered balconies and lighting effects drawing their attention. Frequenters of the hall commonly turn 360° to take in the full space and the gawkers who entered just after them (Figures 11.4–11.6).¹²

In contrast to the distant meteor and its access balconies that demand visual scanning, local details, such as the contoured concrete of the stair cores and plywood panel railings, lure one's hands, bringing one's sensation of the space back to one's own body, to the tactile experience, to immediately tangible surfaces (Figure 11.7).

From the entry lobby one continues onto the foyer plinth by actively traversing a moat that surrounds its volume, then climbing a broad stair, or alternatively, to the right, by being passively moved via escalators hovering over this moat up through a narrow slot. At the top of the escalator one turns by 90°, and then again through 180° into the tightest and most remote spot of the now horizontally expansive, vertically compressed space between the foyer plinth and the meteor of the concert hall above (Figure 11.8).

Across, at the greatest distance from the compressed edge, one can see a luminous vertical expanse of glass overlooking the metro by which one arrived. At the opposing corner, nearly hidden from view, is the restaurant, overlooking and compressing the entry. From this remote, compressed edge the underbelly of the meteor arcs up and away creating the generous gathering space of the



11.7 Danish Radio Concert Hall, typical textured concrete conditions, marked by colored light and projections.



11.8 Danish Radio Concert Hall, the Foyer Plinth, at the top of the escalator, its most compressed edge.



11.9 Danish Radio Concert Hall, Foyer Plinth volume.

Left: looking towards the restaurant and main escalators. Center: the gravitational center of the foyer, looking towards the metro. Right: view from the elbow of the first balcony.

foyer, the likes of which could not have been accommodated within Lyon's tight neoclassical container.

The limits of this foyer space, caught between the plinth and the meteor above, are further defined by thin, plywood-clad, horizontal balconies giving access to the concert hall. Behind these galleries are the textured concrete cores and escalators. Behind these, a glass fishnet enclosure and behind this, the outer most blue scrim. From the plinth all members of the public ascend via adjacent escalators and stairs to the first and subsequent balconies. Along these balconies that lead into the hall one encounters other smaller, multi-level salons. From any single point within or around the foyer one is confronted with multi-level carved or aggregated spaces, diverse programmatic elements (concessions, coat checks, lounge seating, bar-height tables ...), and diverse lighting conditions. The space asks to be discovered step by step; no single glance can capture it; there is no singular quality (Figure 11.9).

Similar to the ubiquitous glare, reflection, and distortion off of the lacquer in Lyon, the entire meandering volume of the foyer is splotched with intense patches of white and colored lights, vague projected patterns and images, and their reflections off the polished concrete floor, chrome mullions, and glass enclosures (Figure 11.10). Squinting, the distribution of color, light, and darkness recall rainy-night headlights and neon on the boulevard of a metropolis. During an intermission one spectator commented that the DR is a "night building." The foyer, she stated, is meant to be a dark space as it is most beautiful in darkness when the colored lights and projections are brightest. Ironically that was the longest day of the year and thus still bright until well after the concert had ended.¹³

From the beginning of the trajectory to the moment one enters the concert hall the theater-goer moves and is moved, literally and viscerally. Alternating between active explorer and stationary observer the space demands conscious engagement. Moving and being moved, one is lured through layers of space, some aggregated, some carved out from below the feet and above the head. From the foyer plinth and balconies one looks up, down, into the crowd, and



11.10 Danish Radio Concert Hall.

Projections, slots of light, luminous rectangles, and their reflection and mirroring on polished concrete and glass surfaces.

out to the metro and landscape, and reorients. Rotations, revealing what is hidden, lead one on, disorienting and demanding re-orientation, compressing and releasing that compression, ascending and turning again and again, until one is pushed, quite literally by the ticket-holding crowds, down narrow galleries overlooking deep slots of space and into the symphony hall itself.

Not unlike Garnier, Nouvel contests that "everything is theatrical" though with a subtle difference. Nouvel states that "Scenography ... is not a question of producing a spectacle ... but simply bearing in mind the fact that there is somebody who is looking and something being looked at ... in accordance with the precise knowledge of ... the emotions you want to trigger."¹⁴

Note the clear intention to provoke an emotion, in the public in general and the theater-goer specifically. Yet the focused experience with clear spatial and social ordering found in Garnier's Opera is broken up in Nouvel's space into a multiplicitous, layered, and vertiginous space. It is intentionally labyrinthine, Piranesian.¹⁵ The theater-goer is propelled through this multiplicity to explore and construct their own understanding.

Several things are at play here; first the physical registration—the proprioception—of compressive space and release. The three-dimensionally carved volume of the foyer space and the aggregation of vertical and diagonal elements that traverse it disorient and destabilize, registering viscerally. At the same time fathoming layers of depth engages the eye, retinally and proprioceptively, as one seeks to measure and decipher the space. Textures bring the gaze and consciousness down to the immediately surrounding surfaces, and plays of light draw the attention towards sometimes near, sometimes imperceptibly distant surfaces. Nouvel aims "to provoke a disturbing, even moving experience ... which facilitates one's awareness of light. The movement and the vibration of time."¹⁶

Secondly, as in Garnier's grand stair, on the DR's foyer plinth and in the smaller salons one is in the thick of things. Yet one is not surrounded in section by singularly focused onlookers nor participating in a singularly proscribed action. The clear positioning of the theater-goer as performer within a hierarchy of social role-play found in Garnier's Opera is undone in both these works by Nouvel. The clear opposition between performer's space and spectator's space is dissolved. In these pre-performance spaces focus is scattered, action multiplied. One is surrounded in layers of space to be fathomed. One moves through an extreme gradient, between exploration and reflection, of near surfaces and far destinations, the constant fluctuation of attention between one's bodily navigation through space and visual fathoming of its complexity. This actively engages and augments awareness of "movement and the vibration of time." Awareness and engagement in the making of one's own experience, I would argue, renders the public as performer, as conscious participant, as emancipated spectator with the "capacity to (find out) and the power to act."¹⁷

The DR's raised foyer, with the galleries that overlook it and the public that lingers there and moves through it, constructs an interior urban plaza, a distributed and diverse space of engagement, not a focused, differentiated stage. What the Opera de Lyon's urban site offered as an extension of the theatrical experience,

Nouvel constructed for Copenhagen's colder climate and not-yet-urban site. As in the public squares and arcade wrapping around the Opera de Lyon, the space of the foyer plinth meanders, containing diverse activities distributed across its surface, framing no one in particular, allowing everyone to explore, to observe, to engage in the active making of their own experience, not performed for anyone in particular.

Drawn into the center of their own action, theater-goers traverse the space, experiencing alternating extremes in orientation and dimension, ambiguous reflections and layered depths. They are engaged, vertiginously, groping in the darkness of both the Lyon and Danish Radio foyers, employing proprioception to viscerally find their place in space. Independent of the planned performance that occurs in the adjacent performance space, Nouvel's play on the senses in these pre-performance spaces heightens awareness of the immediate participatory performance, the present moment.

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NOTES

- 1 Earlier versions of "Turned Tables," presented at the Performance Studies International Annual Conference (June 2010), the PQ's Expanding Scenography Symposium (July 2010) and the ACSA Annual Meeting (March 2011) contrasted the role of visuality and proprioception in the "pre-performance" spaces of Jean Nouvel and Diller Scofidio + Renfro. While revisiting the theaters discussed here, and others including the Festspielhaus in Hellerau, where choreographer William Forsythe is currently in residence, I discovered dramaturge Freya Vass-Rhee's 2010 essay "Turning the Tables: William Forsythe's Antipodes I/II" on audience perception of Forsythe's performances. The similarity in title and content is purely coincidental, though it is evidence of a network of ideas shuttling between various spatial and performative disciplines.
- 2 Karsten Harries, "Theatricality and Re-Presentation," *Perspecta: Theater, Theatricality, and Architecture*, 26 (1990): 23.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Adolphe Appia, "Eurhythmy and the Theater," in Walther R. Volbach (trans.) and Richard C. Beacham (ed.), *Adolphe Appia Essays, Scenarios, and Designs* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1989), p. 137.
- 5 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London, 2008), p. 2.

- 6 Ibid., pp. 7–8. The specific texts that make these claims are Antonin Artaud's "The Theater of Cruelty," *The Theater and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York, 1958); and Bertold Brecht's "Alienating Affects in Chinese Acting," *Brecht on Theater*, trans. and ed. John Willett (New York, 1957).
- 7 Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 17. Author's italics.
- 8 Ibid., pp. 12–13. Author's italics.
- 9 According to the Michel Millodot, *Dictionary of Optometry and Visual Science*, 6th edition (Edinburgh, 2004), p. 253, proprioception is the "awareness of posture, balance or position due to the reception of stimuli, produced within the organism, which stimulate receptors (called proprioceptors) located within muscles, tendons, joints and the vestibular apparatus of the inner ear." Other medical dictionaries refer to this as a kinesthetic sense, and thus motion in addition to body posture, balance.
- 10 I.L.M. Donaldson, "The Functions of Proprioceptors of the Eye Muscles," *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences*, 355/1404 (December 29, 2000): 1693.
- 11 The author's interview and building visit with Opera de Lyon backstage hand Francois Rico (July 6, 2011) revealed that theater-goers frequently stumble while negotiating the glass bridge between the vessel and historic foyer, and suffer dizziness, vertigo, and other "malaise" negotiating the perforated metal gangways. The author can attest to suffering from vertigo on these gangways.
- 12 Author's interview with architect and former Copenhagen resident Jon Mayfield, April 19, 2010. Author's impromptu interviews with various members of the public during the June 22, 2011 performance intermission.
- 13 Author's impromptu interview with one member of the public during the June 22, 2011 performance intermission, who happened to also be an employee of the DR.
- 14 Cristina Díaz Moreno and Efrén García Grinda, "A Conversation with Jean Nouvel," *El Croquis: Jean Nouvel 1994–2002*, 112–13 (2002): 25. Author's italics.
- 15 Ateliers Jean Nouvel, "Architecture is like music," *Press Release: Opening, Concert House Danish Radio*, January 17, 2009.
- 16 Ibid., p. 17.
- 17 Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 2.