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LETTERS

THE EDITORS:

The Spring 1968 TDR (T39) contains a great deal of material whose main function is to fire the revolutionary spirit, to accelerate the demise of the theatre of dead ideas. But whatever their literary merit, the validity of most theoretical writings cannot readily be tested. However, "A Theatre, designed by Fuller & Sadao, Inc./Geometrics Inc.," can serve for more concrete testing and evaluation. No doubt its authors conceived this project as a potential model form of the new revolutionary theatre. They turn away from the past, with its "reliance on real props, etc. . . ." and offer instead electricity, optics, and new perception, all through projections.

Theatre projects fall into the following two classes with their own conventions: (a) proscenium oriented projects; (b) motion picture oriented projects. In (a) we have all the Art Centers, which are obsolete even before their completion. . . . In (b) we have a special group of projects oriented toward film, which offer an opportunity for at least theoretical experimentation and criticism. But any technique of flat presentation (the negative characteristic of film from the point of view of theatre) is in serious conflict with the theatre's spatial dynamism. And even if one discounts this negative element, there remains one overriding problem: How many (b) projects have been completed in contrast to (a) projects? Very little time and effort has been spent in taking such projects beyond the preliminary model stage. We need massive experimentation in theatre technology and aesthetics to test the value of film-oriented projects.

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theatre, which (in theory) efficiently combines enclosure and performing art functions, by utilizing the chamber envelope as a giant cinemascope-type screen. Any coupling of the flat screen (with an implied flexibility added) with the standard modes of projection (moving or still pictures) calls for a relatively simple technical framework. Nevertheless there are a number of points which should be carefully studied. The authors say: (1) "The actual theatre space, as envisioned, requires an enclosing wall (here a back-projected cyclorama). . . ."; (2) "Modern technology allows the creation of purely illusory dramatic effects . . . Rear-projection screens . . . can give the illusion of objects and space, often more vividly than 'real' objects and 'real' space. Because depth is an illusion . . . backstage areas . . . are no longer necessary . . ."; (3) ". . . projection capacity is what gives the theatre its [dramatic—E.M.F.] flexibility." This clearly implies that rear-projection permits the reduction of conventional architectural space requirements,

saving building costs, permitting greater audience participation, etc., and is an unlimited blessing. This is somewhat far fetched. Fuller and Sadao recognize, for instance, that backstage areas are still indispensable: they simply call them access space. The indicated depth of this access space is in conflict with the requirements for optimum projection results, which would be achieved with the minimum number of projectors; the laws of geometric optics state that the distance for front- or rear-projection is a constant, totally independent of the preferences of individual planners.

The authors refer to the flexibility of their theatre. In terms of the visual data offered, this claim of adaptability (localization of individual playing areas within the total space?) seems to be related to the battery of 10 rear-projection units which are located in the access area/backstage portion of the building. But tying the degree of flexibility of a theatre to its equipment per se, is as misleading in terms of maximum effectiveness of

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projection, as is the selection of rear-projection in this planning situation.

Rear-projection is clearly the least efficient type of projection. (1) In rear projection the loss of light is a very important factor because with the best plastic screens available a minimum of 50% of light energy impinging on the screen will be absorbed. (2) A rear-projected image only under certain conditions can have a degree of intensity, clarity, definition, and contrast that is satisfactory; that is, when the viewer is facing the screen parallel to the optical axis of the projector. If this relationship is altered, the fall-off (loss of intensity) will increase rapidly except in the center of the screen. With curved screens, the problem can be multiplied. (3) The main factor which determines the low efficiency of rear-projection screens is that the screen has to be of a certain density in order to eliminate the visible lamp-filament, the so-called hot-spot. The loss of light and the low efficiency factor in rear-projection can not be altered presently.

The multiple coupling of rear-projection units increases the difficulties. While the lack of available projection distance, which would permit greater area coverage with fewer units, and the dangers of fall-off, seems to call for a larger number of units, the problem has to be solved by altogether different means. Certainly, placing the 10 projectors in 5 concentric pairs, at 5 different screen distances (creating a 5-fold increase in the problems of focusing, image-matching, and co-ordination) contradicts the authors' hopes for reduced cost in operation.

The best solution for any projection problem lies in front-projection from a central ceiling or bridge position. The question of large or small envelopes of space is not as important as the intensity of the image. Nearly any projection problem can be solved effectively with three projectors (utilized in pairs—that is, six units—for dissolves and transitions from one to another scene). Three pairs of projectors centrally mounted and equipped with rotating front-surface mirrors will cover any given arc of 45-135-175 degree length within the 360 degree envelope. Front-projection cancels out the disadvantages of rear-projection. The image produced will have greater intensity, better definition and contrast, no danger of

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fall-off. Front-projection, unlike rear, can be employed on scrim-like transparent surfaces. In fact, front-projection is the cheaper approach to building a theatre, because there is no need whatsoever for back stage space.

Beyond this, the planners of a new theatre should not think only in motion-picture terms, however advanced. If Appia's postulate for the first transformation of the theatre in this century was the concept of Living Space—the actor's living body surrounded by organic space—then the second transformation must be the conversion of static space into dynamic space.

*Erwin M. Feber
Metropolitan Opera
New York City*

THE EDITORS:

It's good to see all those opinions side by side in the architectural issue [T39, Spring, 1968]. I am disappointed, however, that Richard Schechner's manifesto, the "6 Axioms" (for all its patient work) has so little to do with the creating potential of architecture.

If the real point of environmental theatre is its use of "totally transformed or formed spaces," then it's really unnecessary to have all those pictures of turning building shapes and words about "a consummatory completion of the cycle."

The tough question is whether architecture is impotent in the face of the 6 axioms. Obviously, all that fun in the bus terminal depends upon the fact of its use as a transportation center. The fact that it looks so drab and conditions people to avoid awareness is part of the game. There's a conscious choice on Schechner's part to exploit its reality as a bus terminal as part of the environmental piece. To construct a theatre specifically for this piece by making a bus terminal would also be a conscious choice, but one that reaches too far back into time and makes the whole event a ridiculous art of super-institutionalization.

Any architecture worth the dislocation of light and air it causes must be based upon the need to intensify some human activity. After all, you can catch a bus in the street without any assistance from a building. The environmental theatre pieces you mention

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