introduction

The "first frame" of Enlightenment theatre space

Historians of France refer to the eighteenth century as the "century of
theatre" because it saw both a surge in theatre spectatorship and an enor-
mous proliferation of new dramatic works in a widening array of genres
and styles.[1] French enthusiasm for the stage spilled into multiple areas of
cultural life. Playhouse scenes appeared in novels by Marivaux, Rousseau,
and Laclos. Debates about dramatic form, theatre's moral effects, and the
qualities possessed by good actors filled volumes. When, in the second half
of the century, artists and intellectuals turned their attention to the con-
dition of France's theatre buildings, popular *théâtromanie* drove a market
in architectural drawings of playhouses. By the time the Royal Academy
of Architecture announced a prize for designs of a "theatre for a big city"
in 1768, Paris booksellers had already begun to stock engravings of ancient
Greek and Roman theatres, modern Italian opera houses, and hypothetical
new theatres. Plans, sections, and perspective views of real and imagined
playhouses soon appeared in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopedia* and
on the walls of the *Salon carré* at the Louvre. Architects promoted their
own designs, hoping to help build a new home for the Comédie-Française
or a new opera house in the heart of Paris. Drawings of promising theatre
projects in all stages of planning circulated in the administrative chambers
of Versailles, Paris, and provincial capitals.

Of the hundreds of theatre images architects created during this era,
one stands out as unusually conceptual in nature and uniquely resistant to
quick comprehension: Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's "Coup d'oeil du théâtre
de Besançon" (View of the theatre of Besançon) (Fig. 1). It presents a close,
frontal view of a human eye, complete with brow, lids, iris, and pupil.
Heavy lines and smooth shading give it the look of a statue or anatomical
study. The circle of the iris, however, encloses a perspective view of the
multi-tiered auditorium Ledoux designed for his only fully realized public
theatre, which was completed in 1784 and whose façade still stands in the
capital of the Franche-Comté region. As twentieth-century commentators

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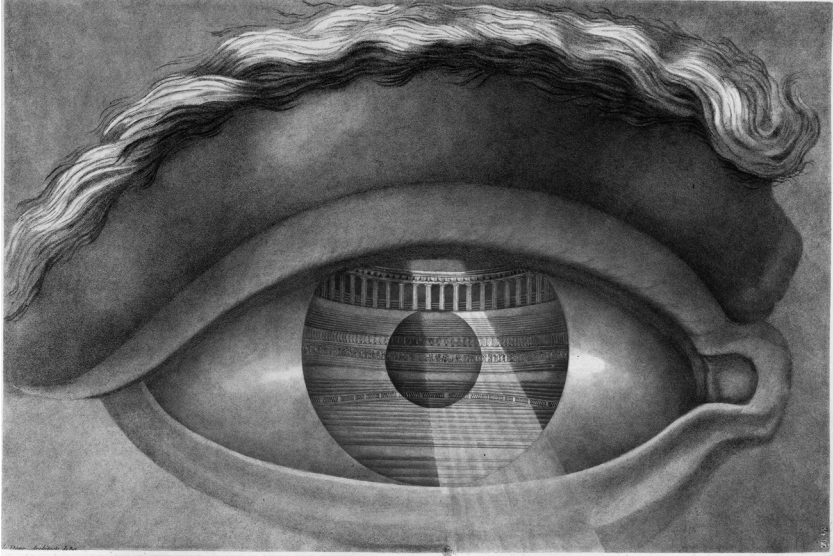2   The "first frame" of Enlightenment theatre space

Figure 1 "Coup d'oeil du théâtre de Besançon." *L'Architecture considérée* (1804).
Claude-Nicolas Ledoux.

have pointed out, the vantage from which the auditorium is drawn suggests that it might be reflected in the eye of an actor on stage. But the "Coup d'oeil" also lends itself to a contrasting interpretation. A shaft of light emanating from the upper recesses of the eye traverses the iris and pupil, signaling that these circles frame a transparent area rather than a reflective surface. According to this reading, the image conveys a striking analogy between theatre architecture and ocular anatomy. That is to say: at the peak of French efforts to modernize theatre practice, the playhouse is understood as a giant architectural eye.

Ledoux alluded to a comparison between theatre's architectural frame and the anatomical basis of vision, which he calls "the first frame," in an essay published with the "Coup d'oeil" engraving:

> One does not wander from the principle by adopting the forms that nature mandates. The first frame was without a doubt that which you see; it receives the divine influences that inflame our senses and reflects the worlds that surround us. It is this that composes all beings, embellishes our existence, supports and exercises its empire over all that which exists; without this vivifying ray all would be in languid, painful obscurity.[2]

Ledoux clearly meant to compare the contours of the eye with the curve of the proscenium arch. As Anthony Vidler has pointed out, the quasi-circular shape of the ocular opening – formed where the curve of the upper eyelid covers the uppermost region of the iris – mimics the form of the Besançon theatre's proscenium arch.[3] But Ledoux's oblique language prompts puzzling historical questions: How did it become possible to think of the theatre's architectural support as an analog for vision, for sensory perception, or for the organic structures that underlie human knowledge in general? What implications does this notion of theatrical framing hold for theatre history and for histories of eighteenth-century French intellectual and visual culture?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary first to situate Ledoux's engraving in the context of the most intensive period of theatre architecture reform in France's history. Beginning in the late 1740s, a concerted movement to modernize the nation's playhouses completely transformed the built environment of public theatre. Buildings dedicated to theatre and opera multiplied in response to demands heard from many sectors of society. Playwrights, critics, philosophers, scientists, and municipal officials joined prominent architects in efforts to replace old, cramped theatres that had come to be seen as an embarrassment to the nation. Treatises, hypothetical building plans, and public letters fueled a wide-ranging debate about theatre design that continued into the early years of the Revolution. While it encompassed divergent theoretical views, the push to reform French playhouses was remarkable for uniting the discordant voices typical of Enlightenment polemics. *Philosophes* and *anti-philosophes* agreed on the need to modernize French theatres; the movement transcended social strata, enlisting the support of both anonymous spectators and the upper echelons of Royal administration, including Louis XV himself.

As a result, French theatre space was not just remade; it grew substantially. In the second half of the century, well over 100 new playhouses were built nationwide.[4] Many old theatres were abandoned or renovated, and fire consumed the Opera in 1763 and again in 1781, hastening new construction in Paris. But the overall effect was an expansion of French theatre spaces individually and in aggregate. Including non-licensed fairground and boulevard venues, the number of permanent public theatres in Paris increased between 1750 and 1790 from four to twelve.[5] After the privileges of the licensed theatres were abolished in 1791, that number quickly doubled.[6] Outside the capital, theatre architecture reform progressed with similar intensity. By the mid-1780s, new buildings had replaced old playhouses in Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux, Besançon, and dozens of other cities.

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This wave of theatre construction has a manifold historical legacy. First, it immediately transformed both the internal and external features of French theatre space. Capacious, elegant new halls rendered tennis court theatres and other modified spaces obsolete. Freestanding buildings reduced street traffic, making it easier to go to see a play on foot or by coach. Accessory spaces like staircases, foyers, and commodes grew and became more accessible. Heating, lighting, and fire prevention measures improved. Wider stages redrew the limits of scenic possibilities and placed spectators where they could better see and hear the action. Architects also successfully combatted practices that impinged on the stage picture, including the seating of spectators on the sides of the stage itself, the use of revenue-generating boxes in the sides of the proscenium arch, and the maintenance of a boisterous standing pit, or *parterre*, in front of the stage.[7]

The advocates for new buildings were not just concerned with the experience of seeing a play. As Daniel Rabreau has shown, Royal and municipal authorities also sought to embellish French urban centers.[8] Many architects saw new public theatres as secular temples to arts and morals that should, in accordance with this vital civic function, produce spectacular urban vistas. The most prominent new playhouses were placed in open plazas that helped stage their monumental façades. New playhouses thus remade the urban environments in which they were situated. They also brought on the unpredictable effects of shifting the locales of spectatorship from certain parts of the city to others. Commentators by and large praised the commodious and visually sumptuous new playhouses, but some also lamented the changes in audience and atmosphere that followed relocation to new neighborhoods.[9]

Today, the tangible results of late eighteenth-century theatre architecture reform persist in a handful of buildings such as Charles de Wailly and Marie-Joseph Peyre's 1782 Théâtre-Français (today called the Odéon) in Paris and the Grand Théâtre de Bordeaux designed by Victor Louis and completed in 1780. Having adapted to changing aesthetic norms, social forces, and technology, these structures still serve as active playhouses and monuments to late neo-classical architectural practice. They also stand as the first prototypes of a distinct playhouse style that outlasted the eighteenth century. The Italian baroque opera houses that impressed French architects joined a roughly square stage to one end of an oval or oblong hall ringed with rows of boxes stacked vertically five or six levels high. Ledoux, de Wailly, and Louis modified this template. They each preferred a fundamentally circular auditorium plan, and rows of boxes – or *loges* – that retreated slightly on each ascending level. These features

inspired nineteenth-century architects including Charles Garnier, whose grand opera house stands imposingly in the ninth *arrondissement* of Paris, and Gabriel Davioud, whose Haussmann-era playhouse still overlooks the Place du Châtelet.[10]

The most pervasive effect of these reforms, however, was not the propagation of a particular architectural style. As Ledoux's engraving suggests, reformist architects also formulated new ideas about theatre space. They reconsidered core assumptions about theatre design and generated a new body of theatre architecture theory. One of the central arguments of this book is that the reform movement's theoretical writings and drawings bore profound, but heretofore neglected, consequences for Western theatre practice. Enlightenment-era theatre architects represented theatre space in a new way that borrowed from optics, the physical study of light and vision. They began to think of the stage as a transparent field through which light physically moved. While this conception of theatre space may strike modern readers as natural, for the eighteenth century it amounted to a departure from established norms, and it had major repercussions. Optical representations of theatre space led architects to discount the importance of linear perspective, which had been the dominant architectural abstraction of theatre space since the mid-seventeenth century.

The marginalization of linear perspective in theatre architecture theory laid the foundation for one of the definitive features of modern scenic aesthetics: discontent with the superficial depth of field produced by single point perspective scenery. But this new way of thinking about theatre space was just one part of a broader revision of ideas about the nature of theatrical representation itself. The contrasting optical phenomena encoded in Ledoux's "Coup d'oeil du théâtre de Besançon" – reflection and transparency – encapsulate an under-examined tension at the heart of eighteenth-century theatrical aesthetics. What I call a *reflective conception* of theatrical representation was a fundamental seventeenth-century notion that had burrowed deeply into neo-classical dramaturgy. The idea that the stage ought to frame a transparent view of things, on the other hand, was more in line with eighteenth-century aesthetic ideas that had incorporated elements of empiricist philosophy. As reform progressed, the idea of a transparent theatrical frame, one that opened up a candid view of its objects free of conspicuous artificiality and distortion, gained currency in both dramatic and architectural theory. Both of these conceptions of theatrical framing drew from several areas of thought: dramatic theory, aesthetics, and several branches of philosophy including epistemology and natural philosophy.

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It is in part because ideas about theatre space drew upon diverse artistic and intellectual traditions that theatre space's ideological transformation has largely evaded scholarly attention. Optics infiltrated theatre architecture theory in the third quarter of the century, but the prevailing conception of theatrical representation that allowed for this was rooted in philosophical, aesthetic, and dramatic discourses that began to mutate much earlier in the eighteenth century. The idea of a transparent stage corresponded with dramaturgical trends, such as the growing popularity of the hybrid genre of *drame bourgeois* and the consolidation of what Pierre Frantz has called the aesthetics of *tableau*, which integrated the visible effects of the stage into dramatic poetics.[11] But the unique features of theatre space as a historical category have also kept it somewhat hidden. Theatre space is not a thing that can be adequately grasped either by the conventional methods and sources of architectural history or of theatre history understood as the history of dramatic literature. Theatre space is a real, albeit transitory, historical entity produced through complex social activity. It is formed by the concepts, tools, and habits of architecture and encoded by the devices that dramatists use to signify spatial relationships. It is also produced in concert with spectators who engage with a space's sights, sounds, smells, and somatic properties, and who activate the symbolic and mnemonic resonances that give individual places of performance indelible qualities.

Theatre space's multiple determinants and effects challenge attempts to describe an instance of its transformation. In writing this book, I have made decisions that I hope will shed light on the philosophical, theatrical, and architectural developments that drew French theatre space into its fundamentally modern form. For one, I have concentrated my attention on changes in the concepts underlying theatre space – examining diagrams, drawings, and theoretical texts somewhat at the expense of documenting the characteristics and public reception of the new buildings architects produced. I am nearly as concerned with geometric studies and hypothetical building designs – what T. E. Lawrenson called the "ideal theatres" of the eighteenth century – as I am with structures that were actually built and used as public playhouses.[12] This book is foremost an interpretation of the evolving spatial ideology beneath a profound mutation in theatrical aesthetics, not a descriptive history of French theatre architecture, though I have also tried to show readers the particular contours and qualities of many active theatre buildings before and after the reform movement.

Secondly, I have organized the book in such a way that the individual chapters separate the components of this shift into topical, semi-chronological chapters, rather than divide the years of intensive reform into compartmental phases. The reformulation of ideas about theatre space

did not unfold wholly within dramatic theory or theatre architecture the-
ory, but was instead carried out in transactions between these two areas of
thought, and in concert with the discursive, graphical, and performed com-
ponents of what is broadly thought of as Enlightenment philosophy. At its
core, the shift explained in the foregoing chapters comprised three mutu-
ally reinforcing trends: (1) dramatic theorists abandoned the seventeenth-
century rationalist concept of the stage as a limitless domain set apart from
reality, and began to treat theatrical representations as discrete fragments
of the actual world available to the senses, (2) social practices native to
theatre spectatorship were embraced by experimental natural philosophy,
so that the spaces belonging to theatre and experimentation came to be
treated as though they were compatible with each other, and their respec-
tive objects of representation mutually aligned, and (3) theatre architecture
reformers overhauled the spatial abstraction at the heart of theatre design,
replacing the baroque symbolic field constructed by linear perspective with
the motion-capable space of physical optics. Most of the chapters to come
examine corresponding developments in multiple areas of Enlightenment
knowledge and culture, pairing examinations of dramatic literature and
philosophy, theatre and physics, and architecture and visual culture.

One result of this approach is that this study engages with topics in a
targeted and non-comprehensive fashion. It offers an account of the way
that the notion of theatrical representation changed between the mid-
seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, but it is not a survey of neo-
classical dramatic theory. It describes pre-reform French public theatres,
but it does not give a thorough account of the refashioning of French
theatre's built environment. It examines what theatre architecture reformers
took from physics and optics, but it does not systematically explain the
science that informed new theatre buildings. I have attempted to trace
crucial lines of thought that established modern ways of thinking about
and creating theatre space, without observing the boundaries that separate
discrete areas of knowledge any more than eighteenth-century thinkers
were inclined to do. The remaining sections of this Introduction provide
preparatory discussions of each of the five chapters, with attention to terms
that perform special duties throughout the book. Foremost among them
is one that has already been introduced and needs elucidation.

Theatre space

Enlightenment theatre architecture reform resulted in a new physical
theory of spectatorship and a profoundly reformulated idea of theatre
space. But in spite of their importance to the history of modern Western

theatre, these developments have received relatively scant attention. This is due in large part to the way historians of architecture and theatre approach the subject of theatre architecture.[13] Architectural histories have seen theatre as a special type of public building, with little concern for the way theatre generates unique kinds of space, while theatre historians have, with some important exceptions, left aside the methods and sources of architectural history. Certainly, this is partly explained by the demands of disciplinary specialization, but it is also the result of a frequently overlooked distinction between theatre architecture and theatre space. As anyone who has seen a play performed outside of a playhouse can attest, theatre space is not the same as theatre architecture. The latter is crucial to the institutional creation of the former, but the two are not co-extensive, nor is one merely a function of the other. Nonetheless, theatre architecture and theatre space are important components of each other's historical development. Scenic designers, performers, and spectators collaboratively create theatre space, but their work is almost always shaped by architectural conditions. Likewise, theatre architecture has responded to shifting aesthetic ideas and adapted, at times, to political uses of theatrical spectacle.[14]

Even the most sophisticated architectural histories have overlooked theatre architecture's response to shifts in eighteenth-century philosophy and dramatic theory. Twentieth-century histories of architecture explain changes to playhouse design in terms of broader architectural trends.[15] For Allan Braham and Wend von Kalnein, the new theatres reflected a stylistic transition in architecture from the decorative excess of rococo to the relative austerity and functional thinking of neo-classical revival and the *goût grec*.[16] More recent studies of Enlightenment theatre architecture have shown that architects were receptive to both diverse intellectual currents and the lessons offered by fine arts. Daniel Rabreau draws attention both to the rich symbolism that informed eighteenth-century theatre design and to sensationist philosophy's influence on architects.[17] Michèle Sajous D'Oria, in a thorough study, has richly documented the design and construction of theatres with an eye toward the way new buildings supported dynamic social interactions.[18] These works disclose previously neglected forces that shaped eighteenth-century French theatre design, but within them, theatre is treated as a particular problematic that confronts the architect, rather than as an engine of a particular type of space.

American historians have been more inclined to see the history of theatre architecture in technical and empiricist terms. George C. Izenour, the American architect and historian, sees the long history of theatre design as the evolution of solutions to a set of engineering problems. Because

the late Enlightenment era preceded important advances in theories of architectural acoustics, Izenour finds it unremarkable. In his narrative, for which the rational application of physical knowledge is the principle vector of historical change, the eighteenth century is a period of exuberant but misguided experimentation.[19] Izenour's techno-positivism stands by itself in theatre historiography, but his disregard for French eighteenth-century theatre architecture is common among Anglophone scholars. In the pages of standard theatre histories and theatre architecture histories, buildings like Ledoux's Besançon playhouse and de Wailly and Peyre's Odéon are odd hybrids stranded from "the main line of development" between Italian baroque opera houses and the triumph of the Wagnerian fan-shaped auditorium.[20] Architecture and theatre historians have thus written the French Enlightenment into an undeserved marginal place within the broad scope of theatre architecture history.[21]

To properly account for the impact that late eighteenth-century architectural reforms had on the subsequent development of Western theatre practice, it is necessary to treat theatre space as something distinct from theatre architecture. In this book, theatre space is understood as a synthetic social product whose realization involves architects, theatre artists (dramatists, performers, scenic artists), and spectators in implicit collaboration. That is to say that, like all kinds of space, theatre space arises out of different types of human activities. Architects, theatre artists, and spectators were all deeply involved in producing theatre space in eighteenth-century France, but their activities contributed to it in different ways. Theatre space, like all modern space, is an assembly of mental, material, and symbolic elements. A bit further on, I will elaborate upon the nature of these different aspects of space. For the moment, however, the point I would like to draw from these premises is that, in contrast to the portrayal that emerges in existing histories, theatre space in the eighteenth century was constituted by ideas, discourses, artistic activity, and social practices whose histories have usually been written separately. Theatre space was as much a product of dramatic theory, aesthetics, philosophy, and stagecraft as it was the result of architects' attempts to design a particular type of public building.

My approach to theatre space in this period is novel, but it has been guided by pioneering works in a number of scholarly fields, including French theatre historiography, interdisciplinary cultural histories of eighteenth-century France, and studies of historical performance space. As Jeffrey S. Ravel has recently reminded us, since the early twentieth century, French theatre historians have embraced a field of inquiry that goes beyond dramatic literature.[22] Max Fuchs' insight that theatre history concerns all

aspects of theatre practice-led French theatre historians to examine the act-
ing profession, administration, policing, and theatre's material conditions.[23]
Fuchs influenced subsequent landmark works such as Martine de
Rougemont's *La Vie théâtrale en France au XVIIIe siècle*, but his work also
suggested that French theatre history is inseparable from intellectual and
political history. Influential studies of Enlightenment and Revolutionary
political culture, notably by Ravel, Marie-Hélène Huet, Paul Friedland,
and Susan Maslan, have bolstered this view by showing that theatre –
understood as a cluster of poetic and theoretical discourses, material con-
ditions and practices, and loosely organized social dynamics – provided a
medium in which French political and intellectual culture was synthesized,
rather than a screen upon which wholly formed opinions were projected.[24]

These works have shown that the intellectual and political aspects of
the French Enlightenment are woven deeply into theatre history. They
also suggest that the era's evolving debates about theatre design illuminate
matters that transcend architectural style and the aesthetic tastes of theatre
audiences. The philosophical, social, and political resonances of theatre
history are often legible in theatre's spatial dimensions. This is true not just
of plays and debates about the way theatre should represent spatial relation-
ships, but also of a whole range of practices that made dramatic literature
and theory sensate. The placement of prominent audience members, the
strategies employed to group and divided spectators by class and gender,
the management of audience visibility and field of view, the situation of
playhouses with respect to other urban institutions – all of these factors
demonstrate the centrality of space to the meanings that can be found in
theatre history. The phenomena that scholars in many fields have detected
in ancien régime theatre culture – stage depictions that fostered popular
social awareness, mass spectacles designed to reinforce political order, a
sphere of sometimes unruly politicized communication – have form and
experiential ground in the spatial relationships among bodies.

The view that theatre history needs to be understood through expansive
analyses of space has gained acceptance in theatre and performance studies.
Whereas older studies of playhouses and theatre audiences, such as T. E.
Lawrenson's indispensable study of seventeenth-century French theatre
architecture and John Lough's still useful examination of French theatre
audiences, primarily saw their subjects as ways to open up new perspectives
on the history of dramatic texts, theatre history is increasingly seen as a
spatial as much as a literary tradition. Marvin Carlson, in a pioneering
book, proposed to treat theatre buildings, including their markings and
situation in urban environments, as texts in themselves.[25] Carlson used