



Types and Forms of Theatres

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Types and forms of theatres

Theatre has been around since people first gathered together to listen to someone else tell a story. Friends and family shared the responsibilities of audience and player, trading roles back and forth as long as someone had a story to share. Modern theatre may be more formal, with trained actors providing the story and sophisticated theatre-goers supplying the reactions, but the idea of sharing energy between a live actor and a live audience remains just as it ever was. The biggest difference is in the building where theatre happens.

Theatre buildings evolved from the open-air amphitheatres of the Greeks and Romans to the incredible array of forms we see today. Though some forms work better for particular types of performance, there is no ideal shape of a theatre. A theatre may house drama, classical or popular music, opera, musicals, ballet, modern or folkloric dance, cabaret, circus, or any activity where a performing artist communicates with a living audience. How could any one kind of building work for all these different types of performing art?

There is no ideal size of a theatre. The scale of a theatre depends on the size of the staging required by the type of performance and the number of audience to be accommodated, with each variable influencing the other as they change. No one-size-fits-all formula works with that kind of nuance.

A theatre is not simply a space for looking at or listening to a performance. A successful theatre for live performance supports the emotional exchange between the performer and the audience, and between members of the audience. All that said, we've outlined the typical theatre forms for different performance types.

**indicates venues that weren't designed by Theatre Projects

Spaces for drama

Drama—comedy or tragedy—can be performed in many different types of theatres, as well as outdoors, in warehouses, stairwells, and other unusual places. Many of these spaces and forms also support musical theatre, which is discussed separately under “Spaces for entertainment.”

For simplicity, we've divided this discussion into smaller drama theatres—which include flexible and courtyard theatres—and larger drama theatres, which include thrust, open, and proscenium stages. But keep in mind, no discussion like this can fully describe the many types of spaces where theatre happens.

Smaller drama theatres

A small drama theatre usually seats between 50 and 300, with an upper limit of perhaps 400. It often doesn't have a separate stage house—meaning the stage is within the same architectural space as the audience. These small theatres often feature a unique or especially intimate actor/audience relationship. This may be defined by a fixed seating arrangement, or the relationship may be created by temporary seating set up in a found space or in a flexible, purpose-built space. We've described popular forms below.



Photo: Carlton Studios, Courtesy of the Royal Exchange Theatre

Arena

A theatre in which the audience completely surrounds the stage or playing area. Actor entrances to the playing area are provided through vomitories or gaps in the seating arrangement.

- Bingham Theatre, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA
- Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, UK (image shown)



Photo: Jeff Goldberg/Esto

Thrust

A theatre in which the stage is extended so that the audience surrounds it on three sides. The thrust stage may be backed by an enclosed proscenium stage, providing a place for background scenery, but audience views into the proscenium opening are usually limited. Actor entrances are usually provided to the front of the thrust through vomitories or gaps in the seating.

- Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Chicago, IL, USA
- The Playhouse, Overture Center for the Arts, Madison, WI, USA (image shown)



Photo: Theatre Projects

End stage

A theatre in which the audience seating and stage occupy the same architectural space, with the stage at one end and the audience seated in front facing the stage.

- The New School for Drama, Westbeth Building, New York, NY, USA (image shown)
- Playwrights Horizons, New York, NY, USA**
- Studio Theatre, The Lowry, Salford, UK

Flexible theatres

Flexible theatre is a generic term for a theatre in which the playing space and audience seating can be configured as desired for each production. Often, the theatre can be configured into the arena, thrust, and end stage forms described above. Environmental, promenade, black box, and studio theatre are other terms for this type of space, suggesting particular features or qualities.



Photo: Michael Mayhew

Environmental theatre

A found space in which the architecture of the space is intrinsic to the performance, or a theatre space that is transformed into a complete environment for the performance. The audience space and performance space are sometimes intermingled, and the action may be single-focus or multiple-focus. In environmental theatre, the physical space is an essential part of the performance.

- Mysteries productions at the Cottesloe Theatre, Royal National Theatre, London, UK (image shown)

Promenade theatre

A theatre without fixed seating in the main part of the auditorium – this allows the standing audience to intermingle with the performance and to follow the focal point of the action to different parts of the room. Multiple-focus action and a moving audience are the primary characteristics of the promenade theatre.

- *De La Guarda* and *Fuerzabruta* productions at the Daryl Roth Theatre, New York, NY, USA**



Photo: Tim Griffith

Black box theatre

A flexible theatre usually without character or embellishment—a “void” space that may indeed be black, but isn’t always. Usually, audience seating is on the main floor, with no audience galleries, though a technical gallery may be provided.

- Flanagan Studio Theatre, Grinnell College, Grinnell, IA, USA
- Kogod Theatre, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA
- Regis Philbin Studio Theatre, Marie P. DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN, USA (image shown)
- Theatre Studio, Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, Singapore



Photo: John Edward Linden Photography

Studio theatre

A flexible theatre with one or more audience galleries on three or four sides of a rectangular room. The main floor can usually be reconfigured into arena, thrust, endstage, and flat floor configurations. The room usually has some architectural character.

- Centerstage, '62 Center for Theatre and Dance, Williams College, Williamstown, MA, USA
- Clore Theatre, Unicorn Children’s Centre, London, UK
- Lee Theatre, Blanche M. Touhill Performing Arts Center, University of Missouri, St. Louis, MO, USA
- Studio Theatre, RiverCenter for the Performing Arts, Columbus, GA, USA
- Studio, Tempe Center for the Arts, Tempe, AZ, USA (image shown)
- Studio Theatre, Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, UK
- Theatre Studio, Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, Singapore



Photo: Mark Tupper

Courtyard theatre

The term *courtyard theatre* embraces a range of theatre forms, all with the common characteristic of at least one raised seating gallery surrounding a central area. Often this central area is flexible, and can be configured into arena, thrust, end stage, and flat floor configurations. Sometimes the central area has fixed seating that faces a proscenium opening and stage. Inspired by the Shakespearean theatre of Elizabethan times and the English Georgian Theatre, the much loved Cottesloe Theatre at the National Theatre in London is the granddaddy of contemporary courtyard theatres. Interestingly, a courtyard theatre does not need to be rectangular. Hall Two at The Sage is a striking example of a 16-sided courtyard theatre.

- Arthur Miller Theatre, Charles R. Walgreen Jr. Drama Center, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA
- Cottesloe Theatre, Royal National Theatre, London, UK
- Hall Two, The Sage, Gateshead, UK
- Jarson-Kaplan Theatre, Aronoff Center for the Arts, Cincinnati, OH, USA
- Martha Cohen Theatre, EPCOR Centre for the Performing Arts, Calgary, Alberta, Canada
- Wilde Theatre, South Hill Park, Bracknell, UK
- Woolly Mammoth Theatre, Washington, DC, USA
- Jerwood Vanbrugh Theatre, Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, London, UK (image shown)
- Tricycle Theatre, London, UK

Larger drama theatres

Larger drama theatres seat audiences in the range of 300 to 900, with an upper limit of about 1,100. Larger drama theatres are usually some variant of the proscenium form. However, some feature a thrust or open stage.



Photo: Alan Karchmer/Esto

Proscenium theatre

In a proscenium theatre, the stage is located at one end of the auditorium and is physically separated from the audience space by a proscenium wall. This is sometimes called a “two-box” arrangement—the auditorium and stage occupy two separate “boxes” or rooms. The stage box (stage house) provides fly space and wings and permits a wide variety of scenic and lighting effects. The auditorium box is the audience chamber, which may take many forms—fan-shaped, courtyard, lyric, etc.

The opening between the auditorium and stage is called the proscenium frame, proscenium opening, proscenium arch, or simply the proscenium. In its earliest forms, the heart of the proscenium theatre was the forestage in front of the proscenium. It wasn't until the middle part of the nineteenth century that performers were confined with the scenery behind the proscenium arch. Contemporary proscenium theatres try to provide a flexible transition zone between stage and audience, adaptable to suit the needs of each performance.

- Albert Ivar Theatre, Goodman Theatre, Chicago, IL, USA
- American Airlines Theatre, Roundabout Theatre Company, New York, NY, USA
- Argyros Stage, South Coast Repertory, Costa Mesa, CA, USA
- Dubai Community Theatre, Dubai, UAE
- Kay Theatre, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, College Park, MD, USA (image shown)
- Le Quai, Angers, France
- Mainstage, '62 Center for Theatre and Dance, Williams College, Williamstown, MA, USA
- Max Bell Theatre, EPCOR Centre for the Performing Arts, Calgary, Alberta, Canada
- Paul R. Cramer Center for the Arts, Steward School, Richmond, VA, USA
- Royal Court Theatre, London, UK
- Sandvika Theatre, Sandvika, Norway
- San Jose Repertory Theatre, San Jose, CA, USA
- Douglas L. Manship, Sr. Theater for the Visual and Performing Arts, Shaw Center for the Arts, Baton Rouge, LA, USA
- Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago, IL, USA
- Suzanne Roberts Theatre, Philadelphia Theatre Company, Philadelphia, PA, USA
- Thompson Theatre, Louise and David Roselle Center for the Arts, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, USA



Photo: Richard Einzig, Arcaid

Thrust and open stage

Some larger drama theatres take the form of a thrust stage, with the audience surrounding three sides of the performance platform. The term open stage can be used interchangeably with thrust, but implies a more frontal arrangement. These and similar forms can accommodate a high seat count within an acceptable distance to the stage. Audience balconies can increase the intimacy of the room.

Tyrone Guthie's thrust spaces in Stratford, Ontario, and Minneapolis, Minnesota are notable examples of the thrust stage. The Olivier Theatre in the National Theatre in London is a modified thrust, with the audience arrayed in a 110° arc around the front of the stage.

- Angus Bowmer Theatre, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland, OR, USA**
- Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Birmingham, UK
- Festival Theatre, Stratford Shakespeare Festival, Stratford, Ontario, Canada**
- Olivier Theatre, Royal National Theatre, London, UK (image shown)
- Original 1963 thrust stage and new Wurtele Thrust Stage, Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, MN, USA**

Spaces for acoustic (unamplified) music

Concert and recital halls are theatres for the performance of music. The requirements of acoustic (non-amplified) music determine the volume, shape, and even the architectural detailing of the hall. At the same time, the hall must support the visual presentation of the performance and provide an intimate patron experience. A universal characteristic of these buildings is that performers and audience share the same space—there is no architectural separation between stage and auditorium. Today, concert halls aren't used exclusively for acoustic music. A new hall must have enough flexibility to allow other uses, like popular (amplified) and ethnic music, dance, lectures, meetings, and film presentations.



Recital hall

A space designed for soloists and small ensembles (up to chamber orchestra size), with a seat count typically in the range of 150 to 800. This form is a descendant of the court music rooms of the Renaissance. It is often rectangular in plan, with an open concert platform at one end of the room and seating galleries on the other three walls.

Photo: Scott Frances

- Dewan Filharmonik Petronas Concert Hall, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Gildenhorn Recital Hall, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, College Park, MD, USA
- Legacy Hall, RiverCenter for the Performing Arts, Columbus, GA, USA
- Mixon Hall, Cleveland Institute of Music, Cleveland, OH, USA (image shown)
- Recital Hall, Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, Singapore
- Recital Hall, Irish World Academy of Music & Drama, Limerick, Republic of Ireland
- Studzinski Recital Hall, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME, USA
- Robert J. Werner Recital Hall, College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA

Concert hall

A space designed primarily for symphonic music, with a seat count typically in the range of 1,100 to 2,000. The upper limit for a successfully intimate room is about 2,200 seats.



Photo: Tim Griffith, Courtesy of The Esplanade Co. Ltd.

Shoebox concert hall

The classic concert hall form is the shoebox, named after the rectangular shape and approximate proportions of a tennis-shoe box. The shoebox form has high volume, limited width, and multiple audience levels, usually with relatively narrow side seating ledges. The Musikvereinsaal in Vienna, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, and Symphony Hall in Boston are classic examples of this form.

- Chan Shun Concert Hall, Chan Centre for the Performing Arts, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
- Concert Hall, Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, Singapore (image shown)
- Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, Netherlands**
- DeKelboom Concert Hall, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, College Park, MD, USA
- Hall One, The Sage Gateshead, Gateshead, UK
- Jack Singer Concert Hall, EPCOR Centre for the Performing Arts, Calgary, Alberta, Canada
- Musikvereinsaal, Vienna, Austria**
- Royal Concert Hall, Nottingham, UK
- Symphony Hall, Boston, MA, USA **
- The Music Center at Strathmore, Bethesda, MD, USA
- Verizon Hall, Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, Philadelphia, PA, USA

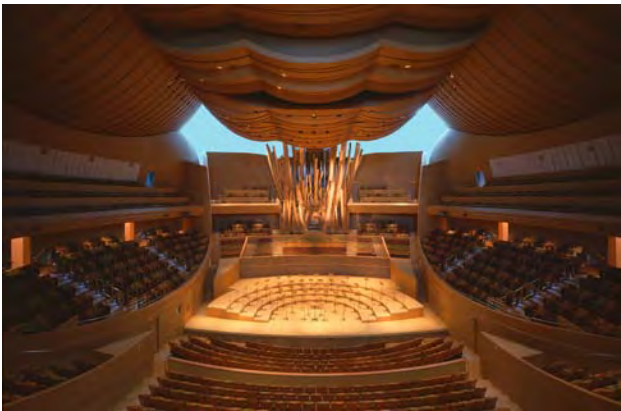


Photo: Hufton & Crow / View Pictures / Rex Features

Vineyard concert hall, surround hall

Some modern concert halls have audience seating in terraces reminiscent of a vineyard. The seating may completely or partially encircle the concert platform. An important early example of the vineyard form is the Berlin Philharmonie. A hall with partial encirclement may be called a modified vineyard. The Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles is a contemporary example of this form.

- New World Symphony, Miami Beach, FL, USA
- Philharmonie, Berlin, Germany**
- Walt Disney Concert Hall, Music Center, Los Angeles, USA (image shown)

Spaces for opera and dance

The opera house developed as a specific theatre form in the late Renaissance and persists to this day. Historically, opera and ballet performances coexist in these spaces, but beginning in the twentieth century, dedicated dance spaces began to appear.



Photo: Richard Davies

Opera house

An opera house is a proscenium theatre in form. Seat count ranges from 1,200 to 2,000 with an upper limit of about 2,400 seats. The auditorium is almost always multilevel with side tiers or boxes to enhance visual and aural intimacy. The stage is usually large, with extensive machinery. It sometimes has separate auxiliary stages in a cruciform, six-square, or other arrangement to enable the opera company to perform in repertory. European opera houses generally have smaller auditoriums and more elaborate stages, as compared to opera houses in the United States.

- Oslo Opera House, Oslo, Norway
- Glyndebourne Opera House, Glyndebourne, UK (image shown)
- Margaret McDermott Performance Hall, Margot and Bill Winspear Opera House, Dallas Center for the Performing Arts, Dallas, TX, USA
- Ningbo Opera House, Ningbo, China



Photo: Tim Griffith

Dance theatres

Other than the tradition of ballet performance in opera houses, there is no strongly identifiable theatre form for dance performance. Smaller, 100 to 300-seat spaces designed for dance are usually end stage or proscenium. The design of the auditorium emphasizes frontal sightlines and a clear view of the stage floor. Sometimes the seating is on telescopic risers that can be retracted to allow the whole space to be used for rehearsal or instruction.

- Mary Anne Fox Martel Theatre, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY, USA
- Dance Theatre, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, College Park, MD, USA
- Glorja Kaufman Hall, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA (image shown)
- Toronto Ballet School, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

A few spaces seating 300 to 1,200 have been designed specifically for dance. Examples include the Lucent Danstheater in The Hague and the Joyce Theatre in New York City.

- Lucent Danstheater, The Hague, Netherlands**
- Joyce Theatre, New York, NY, USA **

For larger seat counts, the opera house form generally prevails. For example, the New York State Theatre at Lincoln Center was initially designed specifically for dance and ballet.

- New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center, New York, NY, USA **

Spaces for multiple uses

Almost every theatre will be put to many uses, but here we discuss two particular types of multiuse theatres—the multipurpose theatre and the multiform theatre.



Photo: Jeff Goldberg/Esto

Multipurpose theatre

The contemporary multipurpose theatre is commonly found in medium to large US cities and occasionally elsewhere around the world. These proscenium theatres are designed to accommodate a range of activity—symphonic music, opera, musical theatre, ballet, and touring productions. Seat count is in the range of 1,200 to 2,400 with an upper limit of about 2,800 seats. The auditorium form is heavily influenced by the acoustic requirements for symphony, while the stage house is designed to meet the needs of opera and musicals. These rooms are designed with the ability to change configurations (especially in the forestage area) and to adjust the room acoustics to the needs of each performance type.

- Anheuser-Busch Performance Hall, Blanche M. Touhill Performing Arts Center, University of Missouri, St. Louis, USA
- Belk Theatre, North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, Charlotte, NC, USA
- Bill Heard Theatre, RiverCenter for the Performing Arts, Columbus, GA, USA
- Lyric Theatre, The Lowry, Salford, UK
- Mead Hall, Benjamin & Marian Schuster Performing Arts Center, Dayton, OH, USA
- Overture Hall, Overture Center for the Arts, Madison, WI, USA (image shown)
- Sosnoff Theater, Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, USA
- Theatre, Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore



Photo: Martin Charles Architectural Photography

Multiform theatre

A multiform theatre can be reconfigured to change the actor-audience relationship and the seat count. By moving large architectural elements, the one-room form of the concert hall can be transformed into a two-room theatre—an auditorium and stage with a proscenium. Side wall seating towers can be positioned to narrow the room, or otherwise change its proportion. Often the orchestra (stalls) floor can be leveled and the seats removed to create a large, flexible flat floor area. (Many of the theatre forms described here can be designed with this flat floor capability. It was a common feature of eighteenth and nineteenth century opera houses.)

The primary contemporary examples of the multiform theatre are Derngate Auditorium in Northampton, England and Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts in Cerritos, California. The Cerritos theatre can be reconfigured from a 970-seat drama theatre to a 1,400-seat multipurpose theatre, an 1,800-seat concert hall, an 1,800-seat arena, and a 6,400 square foot flat floor space for banquets and exhibits.

- Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts, Cerritos, CA, USA
- Derngate, Northampton, UK (image shown)
- Potter Rose Performance Hall, Dee and Charles Wylie Theatre, Dallas Center for the Performing Arts, Dallas, TX, USA

Spaces for entertainment

Venues for popular entertainment can take many forms. Here we discuss two important types—the multiuse commercial theatre and the showroom.



Photo: Russell MacMasters Photography

Multiuse commercial theatre - a “Broadway theatre” form

This is a proscenium theatre designed primarily for amplified sound. The room acoustics are usually “dry” with little adjustment available, making these rooms unsuitable for un-amplified acoustic music. Seat count is in the range of 1,200 to 2,500 seats with an upper limit of 10,000 seats. A reasonable degree of intimacy can be achieved with multiple cantilevered balconies, bringing a large portion of the audience as close to the stage as possible. The stage is usually sized and equipped to receive large scale touring musicals. Other uses are headliners, pop music performances, and award ceremonies.

- Auditorio Telmex, Guadalajara, Mexico
- John A. Williams Theatre, Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre, Atlanta, GA, USA
- Kodak Theatre, Hollywood, CA, USA (image shown)
- Proctor & Gamble Hall, Aronoff Center for the Arts, Cincinnati, OH, USA



Photo: Wynn Design and Development

Showroom

The term *showroom* usually implies an entertainment venue connected with a casino, hotel, or resort. A showroom may be designed to accommodate variety or headliner acts, or it may be purpose-built for a specific production, such as a circus show, that will reside in the space for years or even decades. A smaller room may seat only 600, but seat count is more often in the range of 1,200 to 4,000 seats. The theatre may take the form of a proscenium, thrust, or arena stage. Showrooms may introduce elaborate stage machinery, including “water stages” and other specialty mechanics.

- Wynn Resorts, Macau (image shown)
- City of Dreams, Macau

Spaces for media interaction



Photo: Gehry Partners

Of course all theatres are spaces for interaction, but since the late twentieth century a new type of space has developed. Artists and scientists are using these media-intense spaces for performance, research, and instruction.

These spaces are highly flexible, usually with no fixed seating, and almost always with a high degree of acoustic adjustability. Other features may include extensive media recording and playback capability, immersive environments, and electronic communication with remote spaces for distance learning, distributed ensembles, remote performance, and other opportunities.

Among the earliest spaces of this type are IRCAM Espace de Projection at Centre Pompidou (1977) and the Philippe Villiers Experimental Media Facility (the “Cube”) at MIT’s Media Lab (1985).

- Espace de Projection, IRCAM, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France**
- Mixon Hall, Cleveland Institute of Music, Cleveland, OH, USA
- New World Symphony, Miami Beach, FL, USA (image shown)
- Philippe Villiers Experimental Media Facility (the “Cube”), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA **
- Sonic Lab, SARC, Queen’s University, Belfast, UK



Spaces for meeting and worship

Convention congress theatre

This is an auditorium, usually connected with a convention center or meeting facility, for plenary sessions, lectures, symposia, product launches, and simple presentations. The auditorium is often fan-shaped, facing an open platform with limited rigging facilities. The auditorium may be divisible into smaller spaces to accommodate simultaneous meetings with fewer participants.

Photo: Nigel Young for Foster and Partners

- Palacio de Congresos, Valencia, Spain (image shown)
- Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Houses of worship

Recently, theatre forms and technologies have been used more and more in the design of houses of worship. Typically the room is designed for spoken word, music, drama, and multimedia presentations. The seating areas are quite varied in form, with seat counts ranging from 500 to 5,000 or more. The worship area may range from a simple platform to a full stage house with extensive theatre equipment.

Spaces for teaching

Almost any of the theatre forms described here might be part of an academic building—excepting maybe the casino showroom. Additional considerations arise in the design of performance spaces for students, some of which we discuss below.

Single purpose spaces

Performing arts venues on a campus are more likely to be single purpose, since it is more likely that the academic program tied to the space occupies it at least for the full school year. (A college theatre department, for example, will likely keep their small drama space continuously in rehearsal or performance.)

Instructional spaces

Performing arts venues on campus must be designed as instructional spaces. Auditoriums should be compact and intimate, scaled to—and supportive of—the student performer. Control rooms and other support spaces must have appropriate equipment and sufficient room to serve as class labs.

Stage technology

The theatre and stage are also class labs. The theatre equipment must be suitable for the productions, but also appropriate for teaching. Consideration should be given to who operates and maintains the equipment. Economical, simple, and safe equipment is usually best.