

What is Theatre Design?

Theatre design is the art and science of creating auditoriums for live performance.



Photo: Michael Masengarb/Architekten

A theatre – and by “theatre” we mean all forms of auditoriums for live performance – is not simply a space for looking at or listening to a performance. A theatre is fundamentally different from a cinema or any auditorium meant only for presentation, because it’s a space where performers and audience create the performance together, actively exchanging attention and energy. A successful theatre supports and enhances this exchange.

Clearly, more is involved in designing a successful theatre than just providing good sightlines and acoustics. We’ve outlined what we see as four basic principles of good theatre design.



Photo: Mike Hoban

The audience must feel closely linked with the performers and each other. So, size is important—smaller theatres with fewer seats are almost always better at establishing rapport. How closely spaced should the seats be? Provide enough room for comfort and safety, but no excess space. Place the audience as close to the performance as possible.

The audience should be clustered around the performers, within the limits of good sightlines. A good design places spectators where they can connect intimately to the performance, and where they can see each other respond to it.

The auditorium must be scaled to sustain and enhance the performance. There is no live performance without the performer. Every detail in the design of the auditorium must support (not dwarf) the performer.



Photo: Steve Rosenthal

The architecture should encourage a sense of excitement and community. Audiences often see spaces with dark finishes, uniform and undifferentiated seating, and high unlit ceilings as unpleasant or even depressing. Rich colors and distinct seating areas offer more layers to the experience, creating dynamic spaces that encourage an active response from the audience.



Photo: Richard Bryant/Arcaid

Theatre design can be a lifetime study, so these four principles are only a brief introduction. Look in our reading list for texts on the subject. To enhance your understanding of good theatre design, observe the theatres you visit and pay attention to the details that make them successful (or not!) for you.