4 Theatres ...

By

James Randolph Ruhland III

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

Steve Thompson, Chair
Hunter Petman
Donna Dunay
Hans Rott

April 2006
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Architecture, Blacksburg, Town Hall, Theatr

4 Theatres ...
4 Theatres...

James R. Ruhland III

Abstract

This Project culminates in a folio of drawings. The object of study is a renewal of Blacksburg’s old Town Hall on Church Street. The proposed new program for the existing structure is a studio theatre, addition and working areas.

The fundamental purpose of this project is to renew Blacksburg’s vision of ‘Theatre’ through the building and use of a small theatre house.

Suggesting to completely change what is now thought of, but rarely considered, as a local cultural icon almost automatically brings high level of local conservative scrutiny. The wonderful instance about this project is that merely suggesting a renewal of this magnitude could spur an incredible debate from the word, “Action.”

The point is not that the entire production be reduced to a marketing stunt. The point is this: Building is, in part, a public spectacle which is charged by local levels of involvement. This spectacle component to building can be highlighted or subdued through several mediums, but the overarching message is the same.

A projected future for the existing icon is a series of four theatres.

The first, and foremost, theatre is the town itself. By covering the building, scaffolding and construction staging area with a veil, the existing structure is reduced to a larger-than-life object within the townscape. The new object rests on the platform of Blacksburg during its own construction stage. While not within the scope of this project, it is entirely legitimate that the veil itself could be designed through a local competition. The purpose is to gather curiosity by wrapping the building.

The remaining three theatres are more explicit.

The cortinified façade may be removed, revealing a covered entry similar to a typical stage set. The articulation of the walls, ceiling and floor resemble a much larger room with an acute perspectival illusion. This is the main street level entrance to the building. The new façade-room may also be used as a stage. The intersection in front of the building could be blocked off from vehicular traffic to provide house seating for a public performance.

The Studio theatre is the main “stage” which could be used to facilitate a majority of productions. This abstract cubic space may be manipulated as the house manager and production director see fit. This space is surrounded by occupiable marginalized mechanical volumes. Those volumes are for any equipment, or individuals, necessary to maintain the illusion of the theatre. The finished surfaces of the studio should be completely assembled from panels and modular. Every surface, at every moment, in the Studio may be changed.

An addition lies directly adjacent to the Studio through a roll-up garage door. This two-story area provides work areas, and rehearsal space in addition to storage. This area may also be manipulated as the house manager and production director see fit. The finished floor of the addition is shared with the large public parking lot behind the existing building. This back lot is also shared with a number of local businesses, and one of Blacksburg’s underground streams. This bowl-like space is the lowest elevation near the town’s original sixteen squares. The back doors of the Shop are oversized to receive any large shipments or materials and/or equipment. When completely open, these two sixteen foot high doors double as a proscenium stage. The pair of doors, in cooperation with an overhead canopy, resembles a typical theatre stage opening. This stage could be used for less formal occasions.

It has been worthwhile to remember that a studio theatre type depends on maintaining a high level of abstract qualities, tremendous versatility and the ability to have the performance as the audience on the same level. The inherent difficulty is that a useful theatre space tends to find values and orientations that carry it away from total abstractness and versatility.
I wish to express a profound gratitude to all the individuals and institutions which have helped me to find my way, I owe them all a great intellectual debt. Their collective efforts have made possible this gathering, arrangement and play.

To Jennifer Ruhland, my wife, to whom this book is dedicated, for her love, affection, sacrifices and understanding. Without her endeavor this would have scarcely been possible. Also for her constant measure to be sure I did not overwork or overstep my physical limitations. Living life with her has been a more valuable enlightenment than any other.

To Steve Thompson, for his ever present guidance, often startling clarity and personal acumen. Especially for taking the time to give me his undivided attention amidst his administrative responsibilities.

To Hunter Pittman, for his stern questions, directness and undiluted honesty.

To Donna Dunay, for her particular expertise on Blacksburg, refreshing outlook and for the pleasure of a ‘bookended’ educational experience.

To Hans Rott, for keeping me honest, his well read insight and for organizing the journey into the National Gallery of Art. I will never see daDa the same way again.

To Colin Arnold, Janaka Casper and the Community Housing Partners Corporation and Community Design Studio at large for their patience during my ordeal.

I wish to express a profound gratitude to all the individuals and institutions which have helped me to find my way, I owe them all a great intellectual debt. Their collective efforts have made possible this gathering, arrangement and play.

To Jennifer Ruhland, my wife, to whom this book is dedicated, for her love, affection, sacrifices and understanding. Without her endeavor this would have scarcely been possible. Also for her constant measure to be sure I did not overwork or overstep my physical limitations. Living life with her has been a more valuable enlightenment than any other.

To Steve Thompson, for his ever present guidance, often startling clarity and personal acumen. Especially for taking the time to give me his undivided attention amidst his administrative responsibilities.

To Hunter Pittman, for his stern questions, directness and undiluted honesty.

To Donna Dunay, for her particular expertise on Blacksburg, refreshing outlook and for the pleasure of a ‘bookended’ educational experience.

To Hans Rott, for keeping me honest, his well read insight and for organizing the journey into the National Gallery of Art. I will never see daDa the same way again.

To Colin Arnold, Janaka Casper and the Community Housing Partners Corporation and Community Design Studio at large for their patience during my ordeal.

To my contemporaries, for their dedication, creativity, and mere presence. Although our views may not always coincide, you continually provide me with an unending source of energy, drive, and inspiration.

To my brother Clark for his skills and assistance in documenting a few of my committee meetings, helping me with proofreading, and particularly for being a willing sounding board over several meals.

To Bro. George Arthur and Dr. Lisa Warren for their intellect, useful advice, the temporary use of the Roanoke College Theatre Department’s main stage, and the use of their equipment for my final public defense.

To Kelly Mattingly and the Blacksburg department of Public Works, for their assistance, readiness to help, and special interest in this project.

To those who read this, for your willingness to take the time.
Respect is given to how the existing building address Church street. The brick walls of the existing building have their openings filled. The raised corridors continue around the Studio and bridge through to the full mezzanine and balcony. The mitigating connection between the addition and existing building columns and isolates all vertical exterior glazing. The mezzanine may be divided and arranged as such production/director see fit. The mezzanine reserve an open off-center volume for later set construction. The oversized double doors facing the parking lot stand slightly taller than the mezzanine finished floor.

XIV. Partial building plan - Parking lot level

The basement level of the original building easily makes way for the necessary toilet facility, and room for the storage of janitorial supplies. The main staircase and elevator stand in the space. The doubled walls of the main stair reveal light from the atrium windows to the lower floor. The double envelope of the Studio is flanked by an expanse door to the alleyway.

XV. Partial building plan - Parking lot level

The opening in the existing brick wall for the roll-up door is drawn aligned to the modules of the planished skin of the Studios. The corner joining the mitigating connection, existing building, and shell of the theatre reveals the careful considerity of each element. The tensions of each one attempting to accommodate the other two is evident in a shift from orthogonal. The wall construction of the addition’s lower half is continuously load bearing to make a platform for scenic play. The blocking of the balcony behaves similarly. The plan of the oversimplified doors displays a smaller door opening within each panel. The pair of doors facing the parking lot have been allowed to accommodate the need for an additional door to provide access to the loading dock. The double envelope of the Studios is flanked by an expanse door to the alleyway.

XVI. Partial building plan

The sections of the roof indicate the area and pattern of the skylight over the volume of the addition. This opening not only accommodates natural lighting, but so the work there may literally be exposed to the sun.

XVII. Site Plan

The project is designed with minimal impact on neighboring buildings, and slight adjustments to traffic patterns. The existing alleyway to the southwest of the existing Hall is modified by slated planks, sidewalk and a few steps. The intersection of Jackson and Church streets is designed removed with pavers in the pavement materials.

XIX. Town Plan

The project location is illustrated as part of a figure/ground depiction of the 16 squares and bounding structures. The project is outlined in its final footprint.

Monologue / Epilogue

25

26

Specific books and articles referenced during this project

Appendix

29

A collection of cartoons, sketches, drawings and digital photographs noting important moments during the project
Theatre is remarkable. When creating worlds to amuse, enthral and exhibit to us, Theatre suspends our senses as easily as it suspends its drapes. Whether in the round, behind a proscenium, or beside us, a Play somehow relies on illusions of heightening our senses and also devaluing them to near elimination. It is exceptional, amazing and spectacular.

Fundamentally, a modern theatre is a framework, explicit or implicit, that provides a setting for plays which aim to exemplify the ideals of a particular age and culture. Appropriately framed actions have the potential to change the way we see our own frameworks, actions and ideals.

Theatre is framed to simultaneously show us the artwork and protect us from the power of the Art. This simultaneity mirrors our place in the world. It mirrors our role to concurrently evaluate and participate.

The framing institution must be designed to play a subservient role to the display of the artifact -- so as to not impede its full potential. The framing institution must also be designed to keep us from getting too close -- to protect the art from our clumsy mishaps. The framing institution is often designed to keep the art from hurting our world view -- frequently on an implied level, the audience members must be reminded that they should be willing to suspend their disbelief, but the Art is not “real” either.

There is a tremendous weight which supports the curtains and veils. The Play happens under balanced tension.

Things are on show, and not. Things should interfere, and should not.

Only a slight adjustment in a world view is needed before the platforms of Politics, Economics and Routine become venues for some of the most unique plays which could bear public witness, and each of us are invested players. Only a similarly slight adjustment in a world view is needed before the general public becomes a coincidental gathering of nationally divided witnesses, as passive spectators to an uninteresting and repetitive motion.

Architecture within the public realm can become a stage.

Given these circumbulations to making sense of the world of Theatre, this Project will no longer recite, retrace or add to the sometimes unbridled musings about the more romantic notions surrounding these relationships.

Given these circumbulations to making sense of the world of Theatre, this Project will seek to play with the lines and lineaments which guide, frame and rule my default notions of a small community theatre.

Calling things into appearance … if only we are open.

A town model of central Blacksburg was built in 1985-86 by the College of Architecture & Urban Studies. It sat in places of prominence in the Municipal Building before it was forgotten. It was found in the basement of the old Town Hall, and recovered before being thrown away. It has been cleaned and repaired as part of this thesis project.
Blacksburg Diagrams

These reconstructions of critical diagrams in Town Architects draw out specific patterns of development found in Blacksburg. They specifically indicate two predominate patterns within the town - the location and arrangement of the original 16 squares, and an open intersection of two significant thoroughfares.

The story and significance of the 16 squares is well known in Blacksburg. The entire area, rotated approximately 45 degrees from North, was divided into 4 equal squares by two main streets and again divided by alleyways. The intersections remained open, and did not belong to a single individual. A by-product of this development was a number of ‘T’ shaped intersections.

The largest, and more recent, pattern indicated here shows two connections. A path can be drawn from Southwest to Northeast connecting the Virginia Tech campus to residential Blacksburg. A second avenue can be seen traveling Northwest to Southeast, connecting residential areas to Downtown developments. These two paths intersect in a comparatively large, and largely undeveloped, open area. This area tests immediately adjacent to the 16 squares.

This area is also one of the lowest topological locations within walking distance of the 16 squares. This bowl-like opening in the town is home to one of Blacksburg’s now underground streams. This same stream contributed to why the 16 squares was located as it was.

These three patterns share a common boundary. The edge of buildings along Jackson Street form one facet of the ‘bowl’ and the Northwest side of the 16 squares. The most prominent of these buildings is the Old Blacksburg Town Hall - resting on the centerline of a ‘T’ intersection and the centerline of the 16 squares.

Not only is this humble building significant because of its historical use, but it tests at the intersection of three important patterns and holds a unique place of prominence by ending the original Main Street of the town.

All these facts are noteworthy, generally understood by the town’s citizens, and accepted by civil leadership as important information, but rarely recognized as an opportunity. The Old Town Hall is perceived as a potential liability by the municipality, and does not fit anywhere in the town’s management. Those municipal agents who occupy the building rarely stay there for long, and frequently battle the apparent isolation from remaining local offices.

Because of the historic use of the structure, and for politically motivated reasons, the town management is unwilling or unable to liquidate the real estate. They want to let it go, but choose not to do so.

Subsequent patterns of commercial and social development since the original survey of the 16 squares has given reason to extend only some of the original streets. This pattern has left only a few ‘T’ intersections remaining, and even fewer still which are ended by buildings. Some intersections have no structure at all. The only street bounded by buildings on both ends is Church Street (the original Main street and central Northeast/Southwest axis). The street is bounded by the now unoccupied Old Middle School at the south end, and the Old Town Hall at the north.

The adjacency of the topographical features, original 16 squares and the social thoroughfares, in addition to the historic value of the Old Hall, makes it a very unique opportunity to strengthen several patterns of development at once.
The parking lot level of the building stands as a maze of both wood and concrete block bearing and non-bearing partitions, and a network of pipes and abandoned wiring. The room used it for municipal storage.

Church Street was once Main Street of Blacksburg. It is clear that this facade was erected to provide a visual stop at the end of the street.

As-Built drawings

An "As-Built" set of drawings was made as part of this project. Blacksburg had no record of the dimensional aspects of the building.

These drawings indicate only physical measurable portions which were readily accessible. Basic materials and composition are indicated. A number of assumptions were made, which are indicated on the record set of drawings.

The final version of the drawing set was submitted to the town for their records.
Construction Staging

The theatre is based around the spectacle of the construction stage of the renewal.

The general footprint of the screened construction site should be twice as long as the existing building and twice as tall as the front elevation. The centerline of the screen facing Church Street should remain on the centerline of the existing building. The entire screen should be divided into a four foot square module to allow for any site specific deviation from the outlined plan.

Four openings should in the screen should allow for different types of traffic. A pedestrian path along the sidewalk in front of the existing building for those travelling on foot. A tall opening in the center of the back elevation would accommodate deliveries and access to the construction staging site. A fourth opening in the veil, eight feet wide and twelve feet tall should be made as a signal of the front recessed door of the existing structure.

The net effect of a screen such as this is multifaceted.

The construction site remains protected. The now larger-than-life outline of the existing building appears as an object within the townscap. For the duration of the construction stage the general public would be more curious about the event because it has been hidden from view. The citizens of Blacksburg would be bluntly reminded of a building which has slowly been forgotten. Finally there should be a pair of orchestrated events based on the erection of the screen, and the final unveiling of the completed project.
4 Theatres...
Structure can sometimes be completely unimportant when it comes to the suspension of our disbelief. For the attenuated perspectival games a great deal of structure must be employed for the mechanism and the proper frame. However for the illusion, the structure does not matter. In this instance the construction of the stairwell's risers, treads, and built materials are of little consequence since such a greater emphasis is placed on the surface. The appearance of material finishes is important.

This is not to say that the employed materials for framing the building are useless. Utilitarian, pragmatic and technologic questions may not get to the basis of the project.

There is a curious reversal when structural play can insist on being on show, and simultaneously having to serve a working role. Akin to our frequent role as Architects, we are to participate in the world around us, and at times we must also recede into the background.

Within this project this game of role inversions is drawn out in the apparent differences and similarities of the perspectival play in the stairwell and the fabrication of the addition. In both cases the structure is somewhat unimportant, but the medium of 'expression' is very different.

This reversal is one facet of a much larger play. Many of the other facets must be actualized – and may not be described except directly from one person to another.

These four theatres are each important because they are exemplars. There are inversions, reversals and reflections evident in each. Through these sometimes strange translations we can catch a glimpse of the bizarre spirit of Theatre by calling it into appearance.

Things are on show and things are not. Things should interfere and things should not.

The words to explain, clarify and describe this project are heavily weighted; they are not so easily disposed. They aide and support this project and, in some way, legitimize it. The several tensions between the School, the University and Academia et al stand in support of this project.

It could go on.

Think of this project itself as a stage for a host of plays. Every detail is an opportunity for the larger Play to continue.

Think of the nearly inordinate opportunities as an important well of intellectual and architectural inspiration. These opportunities, which have only been highlighted as such within the duration of this project, make it clear that practicing means questioning every moment, and continuing to sharpen a heightened architectural sense. That acute sensibility will require deep and substantially focused discipline.

The questions asked here are the inspiration for future projects. It is important to maintain a strong drive and energy.

Be open. Act. This gift will continue to be revealed.
Typesetting & Production Notes

An original print of this book, 4 Theatres ..., by James R. Ruhland III resides in the Art and Architecture Library of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. This PDF document differs greatly in format and resolution from the originals.

This document is set in Garamond. *Monotype Garamond™,* the font used for this publication, is an OpenType, Digitally Signed, TrueType Outlines typeface and is a trademark of Monotype Typograpy, Limited.

The trademarked font is based on the work of Robert Slimbach, who designed the font face *Adobe Garamond™* in 1991. His digital font is based on the work of Robert Granjon who paired the Roman serif and Italic typefaces in 1574.

The Roman and Italic typefaces were the work of 16th century French type designer Claude Garamond. Who designed the Grajot type cut in 1455, based on Aldus Manutius’ type IV-leta.

The selected color for the text elements of this document are printed as Pantone™ 5743 PC. Which is simulated via CMYK in an “open color environment” process colorfast system {73:48:96:52}.

The pages of this document are printed on French Paper Company © Smart White 80# Cover.

Assembled using:
Adobe® InDesign® 4.0.2 CS2
Adobe® Photoshop® CS2
Adobe® Illustrator® CS2
Adobe® Acrobat Professional 7.0
Autodesk™ AutoCAD release 14.01
Adobe® Flash Professional 7.0

Drawn using:
Sharpie® Permanent Markers (Fine, Extra Fine and Ultra Fine point)
Prismacolor® Cool & Warm Grey Markers

Photographic Permissions

From the desk of James Ruhland ...
Dear Mrs. Jennifer Ruhland:
I would like your permission to reprint in my thesis document excerpts from the following:
Any or all digital photographs taken while documenting existing condition of the Old Blacksburg Town Hall.
Any or all digital photographs taken while documenting the staged model of this Thesis project in Roanoke College’s Theatres.

The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my thesis document, including non-exclusive world rights in all languages, and to the prospective publication of my dissertation by UMI Company. These rights will in no way restrict republication of the material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you.

Your signing of this letter will also confirm that you own the copyright to the above-described material.

If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated below and return it to me. Thank you.

Sincerely,
James R. Ruhland III

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

Signed / Dated

From the desk of James Ruhland ...
Dear Mr. William Ruhland:
I would like your permission to reprint in my thesis document excerpts from the following:
Any or all digital photographs taken while documenting committee meetings of my project.
Any or all digital photographs taken while documenting the final public defense of my project.

The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my thesis document, including non-exclusive world rights in all languages, and to the prospective publication of my dissertation by UMI Company. These rights will in no way restrict republication of the material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you.

Your signing of this letter will also confirm that you own the copyright to the above-described material.

If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated below and return it to me. Thank you.

Sincerely,
James R. Ruhland III

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

Signed / Dated

Curriculum Vitae

James Randolph Ruhland III
26 July 1976

Master of Architecture
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Blacksburg, Virginia
May 2006

Bachelor of Architecture
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Blacksburg, Virginia
May 1999
"Theatre..."
Theatre...
The perspectival illusion hinted towards in the proposed facade proved to be difficult to draw. Orthographic sketches, and hardline drawings barely suspended the illusion. Small models were no help in investigating the spatial qualities of the covered area. Computer models were not only difficult to construct, but also no help in finding the right view of the space.

Attenuated perspectival suspension is very elusive.

The faculty and staff of the Roanoke College Theatre department gave me permission to stage a full scale model of the proposed facade for the project. The Theatre department’s technical director assisted me to locate the main drape, legs and masks. We used two flats as the rear wall of the facade. An auxiliary main drape was employed to make a false rake on the stage. In place lighting was adjusted as necessary to support the illusion. The entire build took about 90 minutes.

Only for a brief moment during the build, while standing in the house, gazing into a dark stage could I see it. Those who helped also saw the illusion. But it lasted only a moment. These pictures act only as a record of the event. The illusion could not be captured.

The assemblage was struck in a little over ten minutes. The technical director opened the door to his shop and stowed the materials for a future stage.