



Fig. 1: Interior of Théâtre de l'espace based on Edouard Autant's plan and section. Actors play improvised scenes in lower area between audience bleachers and choreographed drama on upper surrounding stage. Tilted mirrors reflect action behind spectators. (Drawing rendered by Eduardo Luna and author based on sketch by Edouard Autant).

Theatre of Public Space: Architectural experimentation in the *Théâtre de l'espace* (Theatre of Space), Paris 1937

Architect Edouard Autant and actress Louise Lara used theatre to investigate architecture as an art of situation, of placing people in meaningful spatial relationships with one another. Autant designed the *Théâtre de l'espace* to model the experience of an urban plaza with multiple, simultaneous scenes that both surrounded and were surrounded by the audience. Performances juxtaposed fictional narratives, improvisation, and real situations to propose a paradigm for public space in a modern, collective society. Through theatre, Autant and Lara investigated architecture not as form but as action, a practice particularly relevant to design in cities.¹

Every room is a stage, every public space is a theatre, and every façade is a backdrop. Each has places for entry and exit, scenery, props, and a design that sets up potential relationships between people. In this sense, architecture and theatre are sister arts, creating worlds where people interact in studied spatial relationships. However, to call architecture 'theatrical' is often meant as a criticism, implying that it is showy and shallow. Shopping malls, themed villages, and Postmodernism in general are regularly

dismissed as theatrical. Yet the noble, subtle, and human art of theatre is perhaps architecture's most powerful ally in exploring the social impact of design: how space shapes actions and relationships. Theatre offers a manipulable realm of make believe that can reflect on real situations, characters, and places. In this protected field of play, an architect and director may set up situations that actors explore emotionally in movement and gesture. In this sense, theatre demonstrates architecture, playing on exactly the issues of interpersonal relationships in space that architects engage most pointedly in designing buildings for public space and urban life. Through theatre, a designer may explore physical and social space in real time, at a real scale, and with real people.

In the 1920s and 30s, modern architecture and modern theatre were closely linked yet their interdependence was short-lived. Many progressive theatre directors embraced abstract architecture as a means to modernize theatre.² Directors rejected painted backdrops in favor of three-dimensional stage sets that offered actors dramatic spatial contrasts: above and below, near and far, in shadow and in light.³ They also reconfigured theatre buildings, rejecting the proscenium arch to bring actors and audience into closer contact.

Architect Edouard Autant embraced theatre as a means to explore how buildings act rather than how they look. In 1919 after twenty years designing and building, Autant and actress Louise Lara, opened an experimental company, *Art et Action* (Art and Action) in a small loft in Montmartre, Paris where they staged performances until 1933. *Art et Action* developed a repertoire of poetry, music, and classical literature interpreted through

Theatre	Genre of Performance	Architectural Situation
1. <i>Théâtre Choreique</i> (Choral Theatre)	Choral Poetry, Vocal Music	Atmospheric Space, Constructing space through sound
2. <i>Théâtre de l'espace</i> , (Theatre of Space)	Improvisation	Public Plaza, (presented in this article)
3. <i>Théâtre du Livre</i> (Theatre of the Book)	Literary Readings with Commentary	Facades, Display Space, framing and windows
4. <i>Théâtre de Chambre</i> (Chamber Theatre)	Introspective Drama Experiments in set design	Contrasting spatial positions: High/low, Near/Far, or separated by a wall.
5. <i>Théâtre Universitaire</i> (University Theatre)	Intellectual Drama	Space of Analysis (Lab)

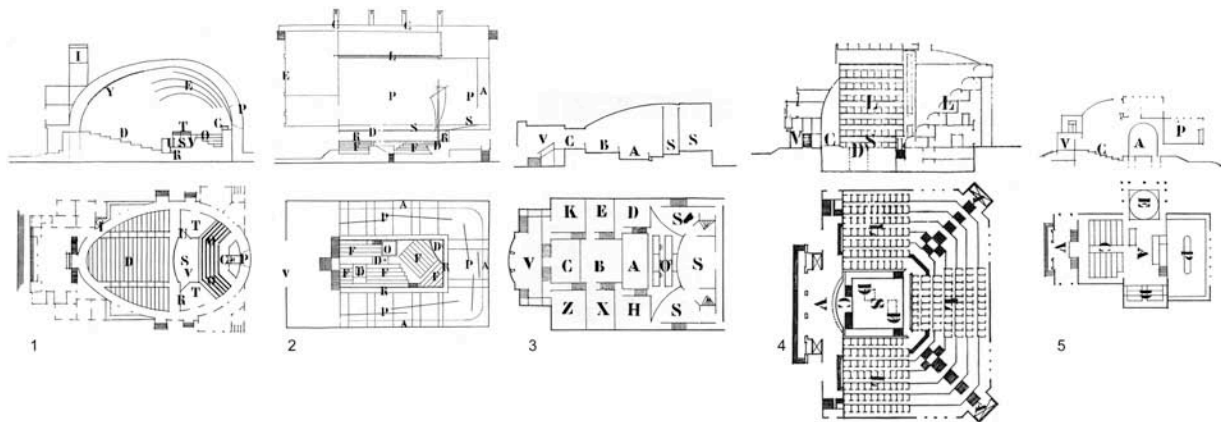


Fig. 2 *Art et Action*'s Five Conceptions of Dramatic Structure. Autant designed five theatres that established spatial relationships between audience and actors specific to five types of drama. Each theatre also represented a common architectural situation and proposed a modern spatial solution. Performances enacted how the space might work both socially and symbolically in plays that told mythic stories.

poignant spatial relationships between characters.⁴ Autant designed simple architectural sets while Lara trained a troupe of actors, the *Comédie Spontanée Moderne* (Modern Improvisation Players) in a method of improvisation based in intuition and gesture. In many performances, Autant's sets demonstrated the central tensions of a story by placing actors in opposing positions so they could respond expressively in motion. Together, the abstract sets and the spontaneous method of acting played architectural situations as a generative game. *Art et Action's* experiments also suggest that theatrical play in space might be integrated into architectural design studios.

In the later 30s, Autant organized *Art et Action's* performances into five types of drama or "conceptions of dramatic structure," some of which were based on performances he and Lara had seen on a trip to Soviet Russia (Fig. 2).⁵ For each dramatic type, he drew plans, sections and elevations for a different theatre building that placed the audience in a unique relationship with the actors. In each of the theatres, performances were to absorb spectators in a complete experience of action in space.

Autant's methodical approach to theatre design for the five types of drama can also be understood as a larger exploration of architecture for common urban events. Each type of drama addressed a spatial situation characteristic of urban life. For each, Autant designed a theatre that proposed how architecture might shape those situations in a modern city. In the experimental realm of theatre, actors and spectators could then test the space poetically in performance. The five theatres and the performances associated with them present a little-recognized approach to design within modernism, an approach which defines architecture neither as an art of composition, nor as engineering, but as a performing art.

This paper examines one of the five, the *Théâtre de l'espace* (Theatre of Space).⁶

In 1937, Autant built the *Théâtre de l'espace* performance hall within a larger structure designed by Paul Tournon for the Paris International Exposition, which stood for one year (Fig. 1 & 3). He also wrote a cycle of plays for the space that *Art et Action* performed.⁷ Autant specified that five independent scenes proceed simultaneously, two scattered among the audience and three on a raised stage surrounding them. In two of the scenes, Lara's *Comédie Spontanée* actors improvised situations that were open to imaginative interpretation by both actors and audience. Actors explored contrasts of position while speaking either to each other or to the audience.

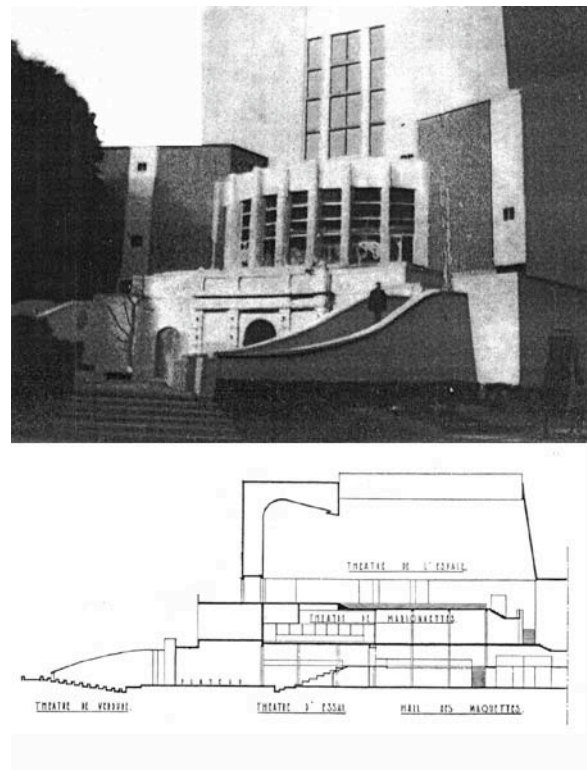


Fig. 3 Building containing the *Théâtre de l'Espace* designed by Paul Tournon for the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Metiers*, Paris, 1937. View of garden façade and section showing the *Théâtre de l'Espace* on top floor. Four other experimental theatres filled this section of a larger building. (*Art et Action, Cinq conceptions de structures dramatiques modernes*)

Performances in the *Théâtre de l'espace* also placed spectators in between independent genres of art: music, poetry, drama and dance. Each stage engaged spectators differently, dividing their attention among the senses, so what they saw often followed a different story than what they heard. Spectators experienced the scenes juxtaposed with one another, whether in a planned confluence or a chance intersection of sights, sounds, and narrative. In this sense, their experience of the play was not dictated by the playwright, but constructed in each spectator's imagination from the fragments that he or she saw and heard.

The design of the Théâtre de l'espace

As built, the theatre comprised a rectangular hall fifty meters in length that contained the audience in a smaller rectangular pit at the center, surrounded on three sides by a fixed, raised stage (Fig. 1, 5 & 6). The exterior walls of the hall were pierced with glazed doors and windows that reached from the floor of the stage to a high ceiling (Fig. 4). Panels of scenery were hung in front of the windows yet they never entirely obscured a view to the outside. Most of the roof



Fig. 4 Tall windows in Théâtre de l'Espace overlooking the fairgrounds and Paris. (Art et Action, *Cinq conceptions de structures dramatiques*)

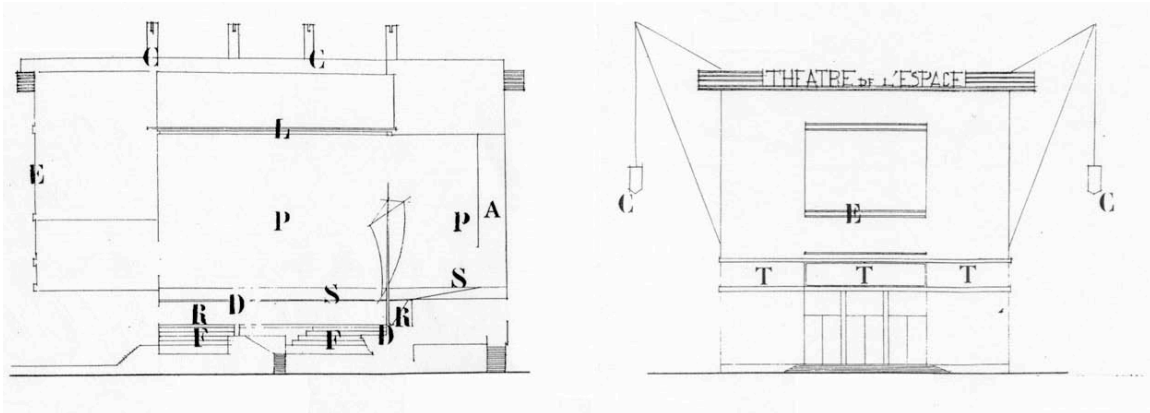


Fig. 5 Théâtre de L'espace Plan, Section and Elevation drawn by Edouard Autant (Art et Action, *Cinq conceptions de structures dramatiques*)
 A - Transparent Atmospheric Band (open to fresh air)
 C - Counterweights for moveable ceiling
 D - Scenery (Improvised)
 E - Closed-circuit television screen showing performances in progress
 F - Seating for Audience
 L - Moveable Ceiling (Fresh air and weather protection)
 O - Orchestra funnel
 P - Panoramic Stage
 R - Mirrors
 V - Entry Hall
 T - Advertising Posters

was a skylight that could be opened completely in good weather, releasing the hall to the sky.

Years before the 1937 Paris Exposition, Autant had drawn plans for the *Théâtre de l'espace* as a complete building (Fig. 5). In this sketch, Autant designated the perimeter of the hall as a 'transparent atmospheric band,' continuous with the outside (see Fig. 5, Key: A).⁸ In the center of the hall, Autant's plan shows the audience divided into banks of seats that faced one another, with small spaces between them designated for performers (Fig 5, Key: F and D; Fig.

6). A corresponding section shows the surrounding stage raised above the highest level of the seats, and scenery hung still higher, above the heads of the actors (Fig. 5, Key: P). The section and elevation show a retractable ceiling operated by a system of counterweights, which are displayed on the outside (Fig. 5, Key: L & C).⁹ Between the audience and the panoramic stage, the sketches show long, tilted mirrors that would allow spectators to see action on the stage behind them in reflection (Fig 5, Key: R, and Fig. 7). This device did not appear in the built project, however one commentator noted that the seats swiveled and had some sort of rear-view mirrors attached to them.¹⁰ These architectural arrangements and devices distinguish positions for actors, audience, and views to the outside, composing them in overlapping layers from near to far so a single glance would take in multiple views.

Autant wrote that scenes in the lower areas among the audience should be improvised and engage spectators directly.¹¹ In performance, *Comédie Spontanée* actors played in between the bleachers, face-to-face with spectators, either speaking to them directly or conversing with each other as if alone.



Fig. 6 Isometric view of *Théâtre de l'Espace* showing spectator bleachers which face one another surrounded by large stage with small area for improvisation actors in between. (Drawing by Eduardo Luna and author).



Fig. 7 Spectator's view. Improvisation actors in front of facing audience, a scene reflected in mirror, another scene on upper stage, a view through windows, and scenery. (Drawing by author)



Fig. 8 View from stage showing scenery panels overlapping windows above the heads of actors. Retractable ceiling and skylights flood theatre with sunlight during the day and frame view of heavens at night. Layered scenes, views and light proposed spatial experience of a modern public plaza.

From a minimal script, actors created characters familiar to spectators: a husband and wife or a tutor with students (Fig 7 & 9). At such close range, an actor's gestures and facial expressions had to be both realistic and precise, their language colloquial as if they were ordinary people. Surrounded by spectators, the actors appeared close up, in the round, and lit from the skylights above. Their physical presence was emphasized by proximity and consistent shadows so the audience saw their movements in three-dimensional detail.

Behind these two scenes, spectators looked across to the other bank of seating. They could see expressions of others in the audience facing them, and reciprocally that audience saw them. In strong light from skylights and in full view, they were integrated into the performance.

On the upper surrounding stage, three scenes appeared: one beyond the facing audience, a second scene to the side requiring spectators to turn, and a third going on behind them, reflected in a mirror so it seemed quite distant. Autant wrote that scenes on the upper stage, in contrast to those below, should be choreographed to create an overarching rhythm. Raised above the audience,

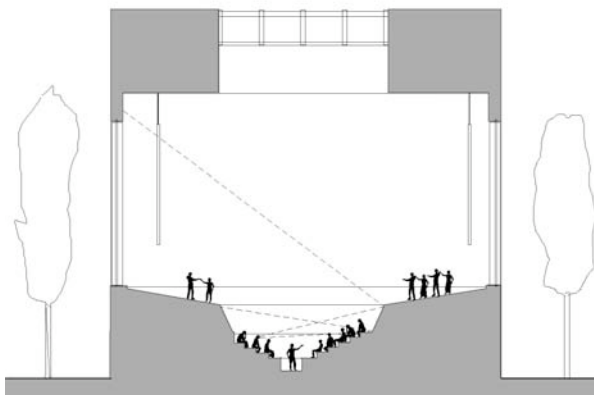


Fig. 9 Cross Section of Théâtre de L'Espace based on Autant's sketches and photos of the built hall. Actors perform at the lowest level between sections of spectators and on the upper surrounding stage. Dotted lines show the view reflected in the mirror. Note that the audience would not see the floor of the upper stage. (Drawing by author)

actors performed in a theatrical style, moving in choreographed dance, song, or chant to create visual tableaux or atmospheres of sound. Actors on the panoramic stage would perform with scenery above them as well as a view through the windows to trees and sky beyond. In this upper realm, dancers and choruses moved freely around the audience in an expansive world open to the sky. Autant's section shows the stage floor sloped to create traditional up-stage and down-stage positions. However, the effect was the opposite of a traditional stage. The floor was not visible to spectators and its slope followed a spectator's line of sight (dotted lines in Fig. 9), so actors' positions in depth would be difficult to read. They would appear superimposed on one other.¹² In addition, bright light from the windows behind them would cast actors into silhouette as they passed by, so they would seem two-dimensional and almost weightless, their faces invisible.

Finally the open ceiling allowed a view of the sky that established the play's position under the heavens, a position the script sometimes mentioned directly (Fig. 8). This layered set of spatial relationships from personal conversation to public performance to cosmic locale, recalls simultaneous experiences one might encounter in a city square. The staged interactions that took place in the theatre resonated with day to day experience in the city: café conversations, overheard discussions, an awareness of being seen as one watches others promenade, and the sky framed by buildings. In the parallel world of the theatre, *Art et Action* heightened the formal qualities of these urban experiences so conversations were more vivid, distant scenes more composed, and the views of landscape and sky more lyrical. In the *Théâtre de l'espace*, these urban moments were layered in depth architecturally so a spectator saw most of them juxtaposed in one view as if the city were compressed. Performances also made connections between the scenes, so words and gestures in one were answered in another scene beside or behind it, to build a web of correspondences that reflected poetically on similar correspondences one might encounter in the city.

Art et Action built this layered architectural/theatrical model of urban life at the same time that many modern architects proposed similarly layered cities that separated pedestrian and vehicular traffic. However, their respective purposes were different. In the *Théâtre de l'espace* Autant separated the elements (the scenes), then juxtaposed them so they might interact visually and poetically. He located drama in actions that crossed boundaries.

In design and performance, the *Théâtre de l'espace* also played on the boundary between the theatre and the city, constructing a fictional scene within a real place. In all of *Art et Action's* work, neither the script nor the spatial situation were designed to sweep the audience away into a fantasy or to place the audience as voyeurs behind a camera as in cinema. Rather, their plays invoked a fictional elsewhere while the theatre maintained a view of the Parisian landscape. This doubling of locale rubbed the story against reality, placing spectators both there and here, inviting them to speculate in between.

In this sense, plays in the *Théâtre de l'espace* recalled ancient epic dramas staged outside in natural landscapes or city squares, where the moral and spiritual dilemmas explored in the story were played within the settings of civil society and under the heavens.¹³ Autant and Lara played this dual awareness at several levels in the composition of the performances. In the *Théâtre de l'espace*, scenery was juxtaposed with views to the surrounding garden so it read simultaneously as flat paint and as

illusory space. The small scenes played among the audience were so close that actors appeared both as characters and as people in costumes. Their artifice showed. And the audience never lost social contact with each other and never forgot their positions as spectators within a collective group.

Environmental Theatre

In 1916, poet Guillaume Apollinaire imagined a theatrical performance like a festival or market day in a public plaza. He wrote that his play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (the Breasts of Tiresias) should be performed in a:

Circular theatre with two stages
One in the middle and the other like a ring
Around the spectators permitting
The full unfolding of our modern art
Often connecting in unseen ways as in life
Sounds gestures colors cries tumults
Music dancing acrobatics poetry painting
Chorus's actions and multiple sets.¹⁴

Apollinaire's vision of a multifaceted performance on a stage surrounding the audience was developed by modern directors in the 1920s and 30s as "environmental theatre."¹⁵ They challenged spectators with multiple simultaneous events around and among them, events that might connect 'in unseen ways.' Apollinaire, who defined Surrealism in similar terms, argued that art's most powerful moments are not lodged in premeditated form, but ignite spontaneously between seemingly disparate things in the imagination of the spectator. Art, theatre, and architecture should neither mirror nature, nor construct an ideal, but draw back the veil of the ordinary by juxtaposing images that open viewers' imaginations at a higher level. Autant and Lara knew Apollinaire through a circle of artists and writers that met at architect Auguste Perret's house in Paris during World War I.¹⁶ Their design of a *Théâtre de l'espace* building and performances not only responds to Apollinaire's vision, but expands it, suggesting that the purpose of architecture is to create poignant juxtapositions, not of form, but of life.

These ideas were linked with a Socialist philosophy of art in which theatre and architecture were closely associated as models for a new society.¹⁷ In theatre, Erwin Piscator in Germany and Vsevolod Meyerhold in Russia lead a movement to do away with the box stage, to cross the proscenium arch, and to bring performances into the hall with the audience. They engaged architects Walter Gropius and El Lissitzky respectively to design environmental theatres that would engulf the audience spatially, erasing theatric distance. Spectators, they argued, should no longer be induced to project themselves into an enframed fictional world but should live theatre as they live in public in the city. Bringing audience and actors into the same space challenged the boundary between fiction and reality and constructed plays not as fantasy, but as meaningful stories, parables, or allegories that have a real effect in the world.¹⁸ This role for art was particularly pointed in post-revolutionary Russia where theatre specifically strove to engage the spectator both physically and intellectually in revolutionary cultural dialogue.¹⁹ Theatre cast both actors and audience in roles that modeled the new society in which daily work was heroic and meaningful. Meyerhold wrote, "We have a new public

which will stand no nonsense – each spectator represents, as it were, Soviet Russia in microcosm.”²⁰ In this type of theatre, neither the audience nor the actors respond as individuals but as universal character types whose actions are real and present. The emotions of both audience and actors should be roused, not by losing themselves in fiction, but by sharing passions revealed in the drama. In modern theatre, the actors were tangible and their actions were larger than life. They stood among people to represent Everyman, exposing truths embedded in spectator’s lives that touched a higher level of reality.

Autant and Lara were well acquainted with Meyerhold’s work.²¹ They also had seen two examples of environmental theatres designed by director Szymon Syrkus and theorist Zygmunt Tonecki in a visit to Poland in 1933 (Fig. 10).²² In design, the *Théâtre de l’espace* seems to combine Apollinaire’s artistic vision with Syrkus and Tonecki’s theatrical ideas, while performances embraced Meyerhold’s social purposes.

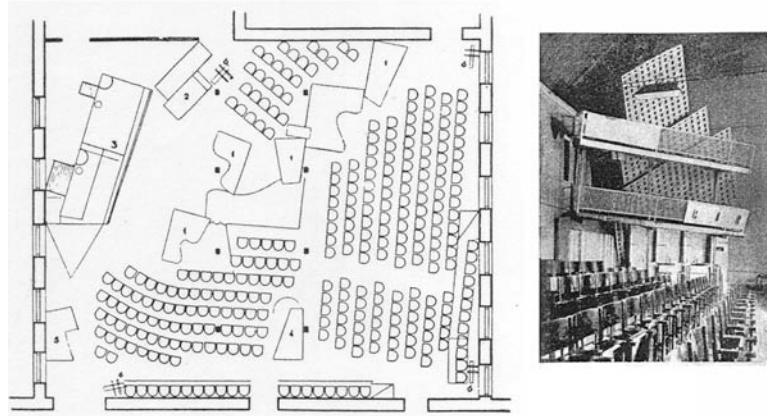


Fig. 10 Szymon Syrkus, Remodeling of Irena Solska theatre to create an environmental theatre. Scenes took place both between banks of audience seating and in narrow stages surrounding them. The set for “Boston” 1932. represented a two level prison where Sacco and Vanzetti were held. (Art et Action, Cinq conceptions de structures dramatiques)

Structure of a Modern Public Space

Art et Action shared Meyerhold’s view that theatre could model the essential structure of a modern life through representation.²³ In that case, the architecture of the *Théâtre de l’espace* might be read as a demonstration – a testing ground – for modernity that stands opposed to both traditional theatres and urban spaces. For example, traditional urban plazas defined the theatre of public life in a sharp hierarchy which elevated and enframed public figures so their words could be heard and their actions appear large and significant. Traditional proscenium theatres then mirrored urban squares by separating a large audience from few actors who performed from a script written by an invisible author. On the other hand, the design and performance of the *Théâtre de l’espace* presents an alternate situation. The five scenes were equally weighted in importance, yet in different genres: music, dance, or drama. No single scene offered a total experience. In between the scenes, spectators discovered compound rhythms and poignant concurrences, like in a festival as Apollinaire had suggested. The scenes on the lower stages modeled the casual, even private interactions of the city while the upper stages raised actions to the level of performance where they became symbolically significant. On the upper stage, a variety of architectural tricks such as sloped floors, mirrors, and backlighting crafted how the performances looked. However the two areas remained linked. A word or action on the lower stage could affect actions

on the upper stage, and characters could traverse from one to the other, changing their roles in the story. In the *Théâtre de l'espace*, modern public urban space was still hierarchical yet a hierarchy broad enough to include many different kinds of actions by many different authors. And the boundaries between strata were permeable enough for drama in motion from one to another. In Autant's plays, both spectators and actors had parts facing one another in conversation, while some rose to the upper stage to set the rhythms that ordered life and made it meaningful.

In performances, *Art et Action* expressed the dynamism of modern life by translating visual techniques of modern cinema into theatre. In the *Théâtre de l'espace*, they coordinated actions in the five scenes to create cinematic narratives: montage, close-ups, panoramic, and tracking shots. For example, the five scenes distributed throughout the hall presented contrasting situations simultaneously but only one actor spoke at a time, so spectators' attention could be drawn reliably from scene to scene. In several of his plays, Autant specified that dialogue from two independent scenes be interposed with one another to draw attention quickly from one to another and back again. Two conversations thus mingled implied a third level of meaning in their relationship, a montage, similar to photomontage in cinema, yet lodged in real space. Similarly, the surrounding stage presented a panorama that the audience could survey as a camera might scan across a landscape. Or the audience could follow a character moving from scene to scene as a cinematic tracking shot. In movies, these effects serve to separate a viewer's active eye from a passive body. In the theatre, however, they reinforce the spectator's bodily presence. Autant and Lara remained dedicated to theatre, even as cinema rapidly gained popularity, draining their audience.²⁴ Their performances centered on face to face exchange between actors and spectators, a quality of both theatre and public space, but impossible in cinema.

Art et Action embraced media enthusiastically but used cinema and radio on their own terms, to extend the scope of architecture. In his sketch design for the *Théâtre de l'espace*, Autant included a large screen on the building façade so performances in progress inside could be projected by closed-circuit television, although this technology was wishful thinking at the time (Fig 5, Key: E).

Autant's desire to project the performance into the city speaks of the link between theatre and city that *Art et Action* developed consistently in their work.

Art et Action also mined the recondite architectural qualities of radio in several theatrical pieces broadcast from the *Théâtre de l'espace*. They performed Rimbaud's "*Sonnet des voyelles*" (Sonnet of Vowels) in the theatre, coordinating projections of colored lights with specific vowel sounds as suggested by the poem and in accordance with a theory of synaesthesia, or cross-sensory perception.

Simultaneously, they broadcast the performance to radio listeners who, they maintained, would perceive the colors through sound.²⁵ *Art et Action* developed an operative theory of synaesthesia for radiotheatre, arguing that true synaesthetes should be able to perceive entire spatial environments through the interactions of multiple rhythms.²⁶ They wrote that



Fig. 11 Set for "Cain" showing two levels that distinguish a terrestrial and a celestial world. Performed at Art et Action's home stage in Montmartre, 1929 (Drawing by author)

radiotheatre could construct virtual spaces for a distant audience using the cadence, tone, and timbre of voices as elements in polyphonic relationships. In this sense, *Art et Action* used both radio and television architecturally to place listeners/spectators in a fictional space that proposed another, ostensibly modern reality.

***Théâtre de l'espace* in performance**

Autant wrote that plays for the *Théâtre de l'espace* had “two scenic elements: 1) A written play centered on a ritual event, and 2) one or two interventions by the *Comédie Spontanée* having a quotidian theme.”²⁷ These two elements defined the upper and the lower stages of the *Théâtre de l'espace* respectively, identifying two experiences familiar in public urban space (Fig. 11). At one extreme, distant scenes surrounding the audience were choreographed as ritual. They evoked one’s view of the lives of others, which often appear scenographic and well-ordered. The promenade of others going about their work appears as a rhythmic order that supports and defines urban society. At the other extreme, scenes close to and surrounded by the audience, unfolded spontaneously and unpredictably, like events in one’s own life. Such scenes suggest the chance encounters, gossip, negotiations, and confrontations of daily life. Autant wrote that the lower positions amidst the audience were “destined to receive the public and to play scenes which comment on, analyze and link the action of the public to a universal action. In a word, it is the call of Corybante, priest of Cybele, from the orchestra.”²⁸ In other words, the *Comédie Spontanée* actors amidst the audience were to play scenes that engaged the daily life of spectators and to link those actions with the choreographed performance proceeding on the upper stage. Their job was to reveal resonances between the day-to-day work, gossip, and negotiations of the audience and the higher world of ordered ritual.

Autant’s texts play on the boundary between upper and lower realms, defining moments of particular intensity when scenes interact or characters or step from one into the other. In one play, for example, the three upper stages depict: (i) two shipwrecked sailors who enter a cave and are attacked by a bear; (ii) a festival in a village largely enacted in mime by the *Comédie Spontanée*; (iii) a shepherd who whistles a few notes of jazz on his flute to signal the orchestra which plays a pastoral symphony. On the two lower stages, a sailor and cabin boy have a disagreement on board a ship, while a journalist returns to his wife who is just getting out of bed. The two discussions on the lower stages are interlaced in words that echo from one to the other, each in the contexts of their separate situations - “why do it? / why do it?” Suddenly, all scenes are interrupted by an SOS call for help sent by the sole surviving shipwrecked sailor. All characters pause to listen, then one by one each responds to the cry from within their various narratives. The leader of the village assembles a scout troop and talks importantly about heroism but remains in the village while an old man quietly goes to aid the castaway. The shepherd remains with his sheep while the journalist and the cabin-boy leave their scenes, their lives, to climb a set of steps toward the shipwreck. In moving from lower to upper stage, they are transformed, joining one another to become a chorus seen in silhouette while all chant the moral of the play:

There are those who succeed and those who fail; those who fail, like the dead in relation to the living, are much more numerous. However, some that fail enrich human thought. Let us glorify those who fail and encourage them – for it is

they who create life. I will try again, he will try again, we
will try again, to persevere, to persevere.²⁹

The language of this chorus is rhythmic and grand, addressing the audience in poetic words that resonated with ancient theatrical traditions. This play, “*Les Prévisionnaires*,” (the innovators) was the first of a six-part cycle that presented a mythic transformation of the traditional building trades in the face of modernity.³⁰

In this play, the upper realm juxtaposes scenes that act on each other across distance, both real and imagined. The castaway sends his SOS in the language of a telegraph – a modern medium. The village festival, the scout troop and its bombastic leader can be read as conventional rituals and characters, which are revealed as ineffectual. The shepherd and his music establish the rhythm of the play as a whole. He stays with his sheep. The journalist and the cabin boy, however, rise from the lower stages to form part of a chorus, their actions synchronize with others and their words change from prose to poetic chant. The SOS represents the call of inspiration that some heed, leaving their lives behind, and some do not. Some do not ask, “Why do it?” they simply go because they are called, taking roles in the larger performance to speak of a larger truth.

Another play within the cycle, “*Les Métaux*” (The Metals), carries the game further to link the rituals of social life to the cosmos. The play summons alchemical correspondences between the planets and the various metals: Sun-gold, moon-silver, Mercury-mercury, Saturn girded with infinite rings, Jupiter-tin, Mars-iron, Venus-copper. In one scene, dancers give gesture and motion to the elements to music, which includes Wagner’s “Incantation of Fire” (Fig. 12). Beams of light in gold, silver, and purple moved on panels behind them in undulating patterns following rhythms of the dances. If *Les Métaux* were performed at night in the *Théâtre de l’espace*, through the open roof, perhaps spectators could have seen the moon.

Both these plays reveal the significance of work, specifically construction, within a poetic cosmology. Autant wrote that theatre’s role was to remove the mask of ordinary events and to make visible underlying correspondences in a meaningful universe. Performances in the *Théâtre de l’espace* represent the structure of public life. The singular events of quotidian experience, the cyclical patterns of work and social life, the city, the natural world and the heavens are linked with one another both poetically and materially.

Through theatre, the art of situations, *Art et Action* set up relationships between people, both spatial and dramatic, so that they could act, both in the sense of playacting and real actions that matter in the world. Each of Autant’s five theatres was designed as a laboratory to explore how space shapes social discourse. The *Théâtre de l’espace* in particular hones skills applicable to design in the city, shaping social spaces that may enliven our streets and kindle the pleasures of urbanity.

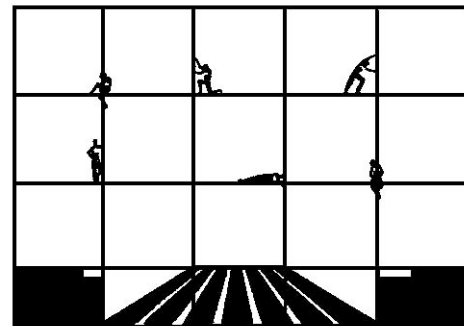


Fig. 12 Sketch of set for dancers on the upper stage of the *Théâtre de l’espace* in performance of *Les Métaux* (the Metals). Set designed by Claude Autant-Lara. Not built. (*Art et Action*, *Cinq Conceptions de Structures Dramatiques*).

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² The best review of modern theatre set design in France is Danièle Pauly, *La Rénovation Scénique en France* (Paris: Norma, 1995). For innovative Russian set design and theatre design see Nancy Van Norman Baer, *Theater in Revolution: Russian Avant-garde Stage Design 1913-1935* (San Francisco: Thames & Hudson, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1991).

³ Edward Gordon Craig argued that a set designer should imagine the emotional essence of a play as a spatial contrast. Edward Gordon Craig, *On the art of the theatre* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1960 (1911)) p. 22.

⁴ *Art et Action* published several small books including plays, descriptions of five theatrical types, and a course in improvisation. Most of these are collected in *Art et Action, Cinq conceptions de structures dramatiques modernes*, 13 parts in one volume vols. (Paris: Corti, 1952). The only comprehensive study of their work is Michel Corvin, *Le théâtre de recherche entre les deux guerres: Le laboratoire Art et Action, Théâtre années vingt* (Paris: La Cité-L'Age d'Homme, 1976). I have found only one mention of their work in English: Arnold Aronson, *The History and Theory of Environmental Scenography* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1977) p. 128. The principal resource for this work is the *Art et Action* archive located at the *Archives des Arts du Spectacle, Bibliothèque Nationale de France*. This archive includes typescripts of plays, a treatise on theatre by Autant, models of five theatre buildings, and scrapbooks containing notes and photos of performances. *Art et Action* performed modern works including plays by Paul Claudel, Max Deauville, René Ghil, and Louis Aragon. Autant wrote plays that reinterpreted classic literary characters and stories including Voltaire's *Micromégas*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

⁵ Autant and Lara went to Moscow in 1928. They describe Russian theatre dedicated to recitals of literature, "Theatre of the Book" in *Cinq Conceptions de Structures Dramatiques*. Lara described improvisation and children's puppet theatre in Louise Lara, *L'Art dramatique russe in 1928* (Paris: Bergerac; imprimerie de la Lemeuse, 1928). They saw Chamber Theatre presented by Alexandre Tairov both in Moscow and when Tairov's company performed in Paris. In 1933, they visited Poland to see an environmental theatre (or Theatre of Space) designed by Szymon Syrkus and Zygmunt Tonecki.

⁶ Autant described the Théâtre de l'espace, and explained his intentions and precedents for the design in *Art et Action, Cinq conceptions de structures dramatiques modernes*. *Art et Action* also collected manuscripts for the plays, correspondence, and photos of the building in a scrap book: *Art et Action, "Theatre de l'espace," in Fond Art et Action, Archive des Arts du Spectacle, Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (Paris: n.d.).

⁷ While Autant's texts were preserved in the archive, there are few photos of the performances. The *Théâtre de l'espace* did not receive the budget or attention of other areas of Tournon's building. It was finished late and the performances were underfunded and rushed.

⁸ *Théâtre de l'espace* in *Art et Action, Cinq conceptions de structures dramatiques modernes* n.p.

⁹ The built project had operable skylights but not the system of counterweights that would draw back the ceiling (and skylights) completely.

¹⁰ Corvin, *Le théâtre de recherche entre les deux guerres: Le laboratoire Art et Action* p. 300

¹¹ *Art et Action, "Theatre de l'espace,"* p. 46.

¹² In a 1929 performance of "Cain" by Lord Byron, Autant built an upper platform for celestial scenes and specified that a skirting board should hide the actors' feet so they would appear suspended in air. *Art et Action, "Cain," in Fond Art et Action, Archive des Arts du Spectacle, Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (Paris: n.d.), p. 30.

¹³ Autant acknowledged influence by British director Edward Gordon Craig in Edouard Autant and Louise Lara, "La philosophie du théâtre," in *Fonds Art et Action* (Paris: 1925). Craig wrote repeatedly, 'we should play in open air.' See Edward Gordon Craig, *The Theatre--Advancing* (London: Constable, 1921), p. 19. Meyerhold also wrote that theatre should get out into the open air, "we want our setting to be an iron pipe

or the open sea or something constructed by the new man.” Vsevolod Meyerhold’d, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, trans. E. Braun (NY: Hill & Wang, 1969), p. 174.

¹⁴ Apollinaire, “Breasts of Tiresias” in Jacques Guicharnaud, ed., *Modern French Theatre from Giradoux to Beckett* (New Haven: Yale, 1961), p. 66.

¹⁵ Aronson, *The History and Theory of Environmental Scenography* p. 19. Frederick Kiesler drew an “Endless Theatre” in 1923 and designed a “space stage” for the 1924 Vienna Music Festival. Walter Gropius designed a ‘Totaltheatre’ for director Erwin Piscator in 1927. El Lissitzky designed a surrounding stage in 1926 for Vsevolod Meyerhold for an unrealized production of “I Want a Child” by Tretyakov. See Aronson.

¹⁶ In 1917, Autant and Lara joined a group of artists, *Art et liberté* (Art and Liberty), started by Apollinaire. Autant and Lara founded *Art et Action* to continue the group’s work when it disbanded in 1919. *Art et liberté* included modern poets painters and musicians: Barzon, Voirol, Carol-Bernard, R. Duchamp-Villon, Albert Gleizes, Carlos Larronde, Alexandre Mercereau, Amédée Ozenfant, Sévérini. They met at Auguste Perret’s house until 1917 when they moved to Autant and Lara’s house. *Art et liberté* staged several choral and music performances including Apollinaire’s “Les mamelles de Tiréus,” and hosted the Italian Futurists in Paris. See Corvin, p. 76

¹⁷ Roann Barris, “Culture as Battleground: Subversive Narratives in Constructivist Architecture and Stage Design,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 52, no. 2 (1998) See also Catherine Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City* (London: Academy Editions, 1995), p. 17.

¹⁸ Barris. “Culture as Battleground” p. 111. Vsevolod Meyerhold used such techniques in the early 1920s. “Epic drama” was developed as a theoretical genre by Erwin Piscator in the 1920s in Germany and is better known in the US through Bertoldt Brecht’s plays. See C. D. Innes, *Irwin Piscator's Political Theatre: the development of Modern German Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972)

¹⁹ In the context of Soviet Russia, Meyerhold asked how theatre could “imbue spectators with that ‘life-giving force’ (to quote Comrade Stalin) which will carry the masses forward to a world of new revolutionary creative effort?” In “The Reconstruction of the Theatre” in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p. 270.

²⁰ Meyerhold, “On the Staging of Verhaeren’s The Dawn” (1918) in *Meyerhold on Theatre* p. 170.

²¹ Later that year, Meyerhold visited Paris. He was honored in a banquet hosted by Francis Jourdain, a close friend of Autant and Lara and their companion on the trip to Russia. Corvin, *Le théâtre de recherche entre les deux guerres: Le laboratoire Art et Action*, p. 44.

²² In his description of the Théâtre de l’espace, (Cinq conceptions du structures dramatiques modernes) Autant reproduced a plan of Syrkus’ renovation of the Irena Solska theatre in Zolibor near Varsovie, Poland. He also showed a photo of Syrkus’ set design for “Boston” a drama based on the Sacco and Vanzetti trial. In Poland, Autant and Lara saw a model for a massive environmental theatre, “the Theatre of the Future” designed in 1929 by Syrkus, Tonecki and Andrzej Pronaszko. Tonecki wrote a short history of environmental theatre in which he cites Apollinaire’s poem (quoted above), reproduced in Aronson.

²³ Autant and Lara, “La philosophie du théâtre,” p. 5. He was referring to the broad role of art as an experimental field that seeks truth. He quoted Oscar Wilde, “There are times when art attains the dignity of manual labor.”

²⁴ Art et Action incorporated cinema into theatrical performances and their son, Claude Autant-Lara became a film-maker.

²⁵ Performances such as Rimbaud’s Sonnet des Voyelles coordinated visual and aural elements using synesthetic correspondences between sound and color. According to this scheme, listeners who heard the performance on radio would “see” with their ears. Art et Action, “Synesthesie,” in *Fond Art et Action, Archive des Arts du Spectacle, Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (Paris: n.d.)

²⁶ Ibid. Autant developed a series of synaesthetic principles based on similar work by Futurists. He maintains that a sonic décor, either realistic or figurative, could be created by the interaction of rhythms.

²⁷ “1. Une composition écrite ayant pour thème une actualité hebdomadaire et

2. une ou deux interventions de Comédie Spontanée ayant pour thème une actualité quotidienne” Ibid p. 46

²⁸ “Le Théâtre de l’Espace conçoit une dramaturgie à deux plans dont l’un soit le corollaire de l’autre. Au centre un plateau rectangulaire ou parvis scénique, est destiné à recevoir le public et à réaliser les scènes qui commentent, analysent et relient l’action publique à l’action universelle, en un mot c’est le rappel du corybante dans l’orchestra.” Art et Action, “Theatre de l’espace,” p. 46.

²⁹ *Il y a ceux qui réussissent et ceux qui échouent. Ceux qui échouent, comme les morts par rapport aux vivants sont de beaucoup les plus nombreux. Mais ce sont ceux qui échouent qui fertilisent la pensée humaine. Glorifions ceux qui échouent et encourageons-les car ce sont eux qui créent la vie. Je repartirai, il repartira, nous repartirons, perseverer, perseverer, « Les Prévisionnaires, » Art et Action Ibid. p. 50.*

³⁰ Autant's cycle of plays were staged as modest performances for a limited audience, not the grand spectacles that he and Lara had imagined. The grid for dancers sketched in Fig. 9 was cut from the budget.