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Communicating Through Space: An Exploration of Interdisciplinary Relationships between Architecture and Theatre through Practical Application

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“Communicating Through Space”

An Exploration of Interdisciplinary Relationships between Architecture and
Theatre through Practical Application

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Introduction

Relationships between elements in space have the power to communicate ideas when designed with intention. Design is a higher power that unites many disciplines that can overlap and share ideas. Architecture and theatre both examine spatial relationships and the meaning behind them and strive to create new relationships based on the concepts behind a design. In both architecture and theatre, space is a representation of ideas. While the purpose of spaces may be different, the origin of theatrical space usually has roots in some sort of architectural typology. The relationships between elements in *American Idiot!* were designed with the intention of communicating major themes and emotions in the story using a combination of graphics, structural and architectural typologies, material choices, and spatial organization. The built environment of *American Idiot!* was designed using an architectural approach to expand the possibilities of what the set could be by thinking about the design on multiple scales, and the world that was created reflects the characters in *American Idiot!* and their attitudes towards society and the events in the story.

American Idiot! is the perfect show to demonstrate the rapport between architecture and theatre. The musical is set in an anonymous big city, which provides the opportunity to explore how a big city works, how the spaces of a city are connected, how scale affects spatial transitions, and how people interact within those spaces. This project became an experiment in urban form and urban identity by exploring various functions and definitions of urban space and how it is shaped by its surroundings. There are inherent architectural realities in big cities, and isolating certain smaller architectural components of a city as pieces of the whole and

abstracting them has led this experiment to become a new variation on the notion of urban space.

In big cities, there are millions of people, making anonymity a certainty. Things people have in common unify them, including the places they go and their architectural surroundings. Architecture in a city is a linking factor between everyone. The spaces people occupy in a city give them a certain amount of identity as a whole, uniting anonymous people by incorporating them into a greater sense of place. This project took some architectural components of a city, conceptualized them to create an anonymous place, and created a setting that relates to the subject matter, characters, and time period of *American Idiot!* and gives a group identity to the characters using their surroundings.

Argument

Just as architecture informs our lives, a set design informs the lives and actions of the characters. The built environment of a play shapes the way the actors interact within it, similar to the way surroundings affect the way people behave in the real world. The way people interact in public space can be very influential to how that space is perceived. By isolating specific characteristics of urban space that make people interact in certain ways, those relationships can be explored and duplicated in a theatre. Human interactions shape our ideas and perceptions of a space, and human interactions are usually a result of the architectural surroundings. How a space is used and lived in has a deep effect on the perception of it. Architecture affects us deeply in ways we do not usually realize. The theatre is a platform where architectural ideas can be explored on a real scale.

Similar to architects using a concept or a parti to develop buildings, set designers use the script as the starting point in divining what the set will be. Green Day's *American Idiot!* concept album sold upwards of 15 million copies, and the story it tells about a generation coming of age in the era of the Iraq War and the disillusionment of the characters serves as a powerful outline to develop ideas and themes to inform the set design. The surroundings of a play can do a lot to tell the audience about the story before the acting even starts. The scenery is just as important of a character as the actors.

In the theatre, nothing exists in isolation. Relationships between the elements of a performance create meaning and help portray the ideas of the story. The way the characters climb, jump, and run all over the set communicates their attitudes about their lives in the city. They think the world is theirs for the taking and nothing can stand in their way. Their movement is high energy. They are like children playing on a jungle gym. But by the end of the story, the world has rejected them, they realize that they have transitioned into being adults, and the energy calms down into a mournful sadness, lamenting their loss of innocence and naivety.

American Idiot! is full of lyrics about questioning "the man", the government, and everything in the media. The album was released post-9-11, when the mistrust of government and the authority of those in power spiked sharply. This mistrust is not new, and the paranoia and hysteria that accompanies it is not new either. The feeling that the nation is controlled by the media, that there is a predetermined path set out by those in power, and the anonymity of a small town kid moving to a big city are all themes explored by this musical. These are some of the themes that were directly translated into visual metaphors on the set. The music is very

loud and anti-establishment, and therefore, so is the set design. The design uses a combination of graphics, materials, and architectural typologies to help establish the tone and voice of the musical and communicate the themes to the audience.

A motif that is one of the most central to *American Idiot!* is the overload of media and information. Youth in American society are constantly bombarded with news, propaganda, and advertisements that attack from every angle. In precedents to this project (Broadway's *American Idiot!*), the walls of the set were literally plastered with media – newspaper clippings, magazine articles, TV screens flashing. While this is an effective way to communicate the metaphor, this project chose to go about the metaphor differently by covering the set with graffiti to graphically convey the same message. Reverting back to older, less formal forms of protest helps convey the message that society has been fighting the same battles for a long time. The graffiti portrays a lot of information. Some of it is relevant; some is just a jumble of nonsense, much like today's media. The graffiti also symbolizes the anti-establishment attitude held by the characters in *American Idiot!* Graffiti has a connotation in society that underlines this attitude: it is seen as vandalism, and is therefore disrespectful and mutinous. Combined with the projections of world events portrayed through alternative punk rock culture on the set and the lighting design that highlights critical moments, the graffiti is quite powerful in overloading your visual senses. Expressing perceived relationships with society on surfaces has been a practice for millennia, and documenting these characters' social status and feelings about society on the set is no different.

Another important metaphor in the script is the path these characters take to follow their dreams, the labyrinth of right and wrong, and the disenchantment when they find that the

world has failed them. The floor of the theatre denotes the path. It is a maze, a winding, circular labyrinth that symbolizes the path of life and the path these characters take only to realize that they were naïve to put faith in the world. The way the labyrinth image is positioned on the floor in an oblong circle forces perspective and makes the space appear bigger and longer. The maze directs the viewer to look deep into space in the direction of the band. Because the assumption is that the image is a circle while it is actually more egg-shaped, this causes the space to lengthen. The effect is enforced by the way the walls angle back in space. Forcing perspective is a way to make theatrical space appear as real architectural space by cheating proportions both horizontally and vertically. Creating illusions like this has been a practice in the theatre for centuries.

Visual metaphors in the theatre are important in communicating to the audience. Some metaphors are more literal than others. For example, the overwhelming abundance of media in the world has been translated literally onto the set using a combination of graffiti and projections, while the metaphor of the path of the characters' lives that is visually present on the floor is no less subtle, but is a much more abstract representation that could mean a number of things to any given person.

An important element in making the right statement about urban identity is the use of industrial materials. Steel pipe supports and corrugated tin walls establish the industrial, urban atmosphere. Common practices in theatre such as wood framing on the back of the walls and for all of the platforms allow use of lighter, cheaper, and easier materials to work with, and paint tricks can be used to create the illusion of steel and metal decking. Theatre sets have the luxury of being temporary, so builders often fake it and paint it to look right, rather than being

architecturally correct or complete. Paint is also a powerful tool for aging a set to look worn and used. By generally fading the originally very bright graffiti and applying a rust color over much of the set, the right amount of aging was achieved.

The beauty of architectural elements like fire escapes and scaffolding that served as starting points for this project is that they are virtually indistinguishable from each other when comparing material and structure. The anonymity of these structures lent itself to creating an unspecified location in an unspecified city for the characters to inhabit.

Architecturally speaking, fire escapes and scaffolding are everywhere in big cities. They constitute their own, often overlooked, “sub-typologies” of architecture. Fire escapes came about from a certain generation of building code that helped create the fabric of several modern cities, and they dot most buildings in big cities that were built around the turn of the 20th century and were retrofitted to those built before that time. Scaffolding on the sides of buildings indicates renewal and continual change. Scaffolding is a common nuisance on city façades when buildings are being restored or remodeled. Normally, people do not think of fire escapes and scaffolding as an essential part of architecture, and certainly not as a place to occupy and spend time. Both are essential, however, to the city landscape. By taking these two neglected “sub-typologies” of architecture, and conceptually melding them together, the big city alleyway atmosphere was generated.

The visual and spatial metaphor that fire escapes and scaffolding lend to this musical is also supportive. These elements are inherently on the outside of architecture, as supplements. Scaffolding is temporary by nature. They are important, but they are addenda. Cities of the world survived without them for a long time. These characters are the same way. They are

always on the outside, looking in. At first, they feel like a significant part of the fabric of the city, but they find out the hard way that the city doesn't need them, want them, or care about them. They will always be on the outside, reaching, longing for a life they will never have.

The design process began by developing spatial ideas with literal scaffolding, first as stand-alone towers, then as towers that could be linked by bridges. Early sketches and designs look like actual adult-sized jungle gyms. If it is an accepted notion that fire escapes and scaffolding are "sub-typologies" of architecture, part of the greater whole, and that they can be manipulated to fit each building they are applied to as needed, then it is a logical jump from adult-sized jungle gym to the final design proposal that replicates an abstract city alley. The set has levels connected by stairs, similar to a fire escape, and it has a platform along a wall like scaffolding along the outside of a building. After experimenting with scale, organization, and spatial relationships, the abstracted product of these two "sub-typologies" provided a great solution to the height, movement, and connectivity required to make the set practical for use in a musical like *American Idiot!*

Urban space takes form in two distinct ways: it is either designed or it is leftover. Designed urban spaces include urban plazas and streets that are intentionally shaped by surrounding buildings usually meant for gathering or heavy traffic of large numbers of people. Leftover urban space is everything else: the residual space between buildings, the air space overhead, the alleys, nooks, and crannies that stitch the rest of the big sections of the city together. The leftover spaces are forced into their shape by their surroundings and are not always ideal, organized, or intentional.

Architectural elements like fire escapes and scaffolding often shape city spaces, but not those that people usually think about inhabiting. They shape alleys and sidewalks, the in-between spaces that allow for transition between other larger, more significant spaces. Urban form is not just about the grand buildings and the artfully designed urban plazas, the big masses and voids. Most of city life is lived in cramped conditions and small, shared intermediate spaces. These small voids are shaped by “sub-typologies” like fire escapes and scaffolding, and this is where these characters live their lives. Spaces at this scale, the in-between spaces, can provide an examination of human behavior because the lack of personal space forces people to interact with each other. On this set, the city alley serves as a character itself, presenting itself as the city and providing an example of the relationship dynamic that the characters have with the city to supplement the story being told.

By utilizing the above graphic, material, and architectural elements, the set establishes a vague sense of a city alley. Creating this general “sense of place” helps audience members to place the story in their own minds, as well as willingly suspend their disbelief and place them in the world that was created for them to see.

Process

Following my prospectus being accepted, beginning in July of the summer of 2015, I began meeting with Michael Riha, the scenic designer, and conferencing with Gary John La Rosa, the director, to design the University Theatre’s production of *American Idiot!* What followed was several months of designing, sketching, building white models, and accommodating the blocking needs of the director. This included structural studies and finding

and making appropriate graphics. By November of 2015, we had settled on a final design proposal and started building the model that would serve as a visual guide when building and painting the actual set. Once the model was completed in early February 2016, I transferred my energy to helping in the shop full time.

My role as Associate Scenic Designer encompassed a number of things at this point. In the shop, I was able to brush up on basic carpentry skills by assisting with building the wooden framing. I learned to weld to build the rolling staircase piece, which turned into my special project. I learned several valuable painting techniques that I did not know already, including graffiti and aging techniques commonly used in theatre paint shops. Beyond that, I generally served as a liaison between the design team and the construction team. I also assisted the props master building, finding, and buying all essential show props.

During this experience, I learned a lot of the ins and outs of how theatre production works through my various jobs. I also learned the intricacies of each role in the theatre, from the designers to the stagehands, and more of what my role as a scenic designer entails specifically. This experience has been my first show to follow all the way through from start to finish, and it was valuable to my career development as a future professional scenic designer. The applicability of this project to my career goals is significant. I have gained immeasurable first-hand knowledge, and I feel confident in my abilities as I enter my professional life. My mentors and peers who have more experience in the theatre than I do have taught me a number of tricks of the trade, and while I still have a lot to learn, I have filled many gaps in my theatre knowledge since the beginning of this process.

Relevance

The content of *American Idiot!* is still incredibly relevant to today's culture. Because of many technological advancements in the last twelve years since Green Day released the album, society has become even more overwhelmed by media than ever. People must be more wary than ever of propaganda aimed at gullible audiences. The sheer amount of media now is enough to confuse anyone, and it is often difficult to discern what is true and what is false. Reliable sources are drying up, and politicians especially seem more adamant than ever that their side is correct and everyone else is wrong. It is almost impossible to know what is real anymore, making being able to think for yourself more important than ever. Twelve years later, the U.S. is fighting the same "war on terror" that began post-9-11 without a permanent and viable solution. The generation that came of age in this era has a deep mistrust of the systems in place in the country, whether that is banking, the bipartisan political system, or the housing market. The anti-establishment attitudes in *American Idiot!* may have been alternative at the time, but they have increasingly become a part of how people think and form opinions now.

The architectural relevance of this project may be on a small scale because of the components used to experiment, but the implications of the project for theatrical design may indicate a more diverse way of approaching future designs. By approaching set design from an architectural perspective, it opens new possibilities for what the future of theatrical design could be. Approaching design from a holistic point of view, where nothing is too big or too extreme, allows more creativity and does not narrow or limit the scope of what is possible. Architectural training encompasses conceptual, abstract, and big-picture thinking as well as real-world, practical, and specific application. Architects can usually jump back and forth

between these two different ways of thinking quickly, allowing them to design on multiple scales more easily. Bringing this diverse experience, knowledge, and attitude to theatrical design could introduce new concepts and variations in set designs.

Conclusion

The way architects think about space is diverse and incorporates many different scales of thinking. If this way of designing is applied to theatre, it could open up new possibilities for communicating to the audience through spatial relationships rooted in studies of urban space. Cities are great templates for understanding spatial flow and the effect that architecture has in influencing human movement and interaction. Incorporating real-world architectural concepts can make theatrical designs more believable in the way they affect character movements.

The amount of knowledge these two disciplines have to share is endless. Architecture often uses spatial relationships to convey meaning, and theatrical design is a way to explore those ideas further on a different scale. Building sets to be realistic is not always desirable, but by understanding architectural theory and conceptualization, elements can be manipulated to fit specific needs. By using existing architectural components as a basis for experimentation, this project was able to identify characteristics of space and transform the components into a viable way of communicating the essence of the space without replicating it. By creating the essence of place rather than trying to duplicate it exactly, the design for *American Idiot!* is more flexible and the space can be manipulated to stage a number of things inside the original concept using spatial relationships between the characters, set, and audience.