

Designing School Theatres

Theatres in schools are often disregarded by the world of professional theatre, and even by schools themselves, seeing the provision of theatre spaces as a 'fluffy' luxury. However, not only do school theatres often provide useful community facilities, they are an important part of encouraging the next generation of performers and backstage staff. School theatres are at the heart of the whole school, as a meeting place and shared facility, and provide a showpiece for the school in the wider community, often providing much more than a performance venue for the occasional school play.

Drama is an important subject for developing confidence, communication and team-working, as well as performing and backstage skills. Dedicated school theatres have long been a part of the independent sector, and more recently in maintained schools with specialist performing arts status and the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme. However, there has never been any specific guidance available for architects and those responsible for specifying school theatres, so quite often the resultant facilities are less than adequate, and in some cases, woefully lacking.

The annual conference of The Theatres Trust recently took place in Leeds with 'Designing School Theatres' as the topic. The audience included architects, theatre and education consultants, teachers, technicians and students. Sessions considered whether it is possible to define an ideal school theatre, the procurement process under the BSF scheme, and how to assess the educational benefits of a theatre. Examples of school theatres were shown from both the independent and maintained sectors. It was clear how good design could allow students to develop into professionals, whereas bad design could hamper the process and focus the teachers and pupils on having to 'make do'.

The conference was presented with two schools where the end-users (drama teachers) had not been involved in any part of the design process – leading to appallingly unsuitable theatre spaces. In one, the so-called theatre is no more than a lecture hall, with the only entrances for both audience and cast being onto the stage. Backstage is non-existent, and when the tiered seating is retracted there is no access from the hall to the control room at the rear of the seats. All of these problems could have been avoided if the design team had taken advice. Ironically, this particular building has won awards for its design.

Of course, in a conference full of theatre consultants, it was to be expected that the use of a consultant was deemed essential – something which is omitted from the BSF procurement process. However, the benefits were in evidence by the presentations from other schools where they had used a consultant and were very happy with their new facilities.

The key is to get the brief correct from the start. To do this, consultation and clarity of purpose are essential. Firstly, it is important to involve the whole school community – teachers, support staff, students – so that everyone can feel ownership of a building which is often the showpiece of the school in more ways than just for performances. It is often equally vital to engage the local community outside of the school, in order to maximise the opportunities for public benefit.

More practical design principles were discussed, such as the need for multi-use and flexibility. Dedicated spaces are obviously desirable, but at a premium when every square-metre has to be justified. Many school theatres also have to provide for assemblies, exams, receptions, meetings, concerts, rehearsals and

classrooms. The least fortunate also double as sports halls! Making sure these different uses don't clash is a specialist skill!

Staffing is another point to consider in the building design. Infrastructure elements, such as power supplies, lighting bars and network outlets, should be carefully incorporated into the project, but specifying the latest all-singing, all-dancing technology is pointless and wasteful if the end-user is a drama teacher or caretaker without the time or knowledge to use and maintain the equipment. With cuts looming, it is optimistic to hope that every school will employ a technician, however sensible this seems. After all, you wouldn't expect to find a science department without a support technician.

One of the conference's conclusions is the need for a design review to be undertaken. Both the Theatres Trust and the ABTT offer similar review services, which brings a much-needed external viewpoint into the process.

It's important to remember that school theatres are primarily teaching spaces, which sounds obvious, but sometimes can be lost. The core business is always education. A larger-than-normal control room is just one example – where a teacher may want a group of pupils around the lighting desk together. Teaching the rigging and focusing of lanterns while perched up a ladder is almost impossible. Safe access to height for the students is vital – only really achievable with walkways, bridges or a tension wire grid. Those of us who first found our passion for theatre in school will no doubt fondly remember climbing ladders and rigging lights unsupervised, but of course that is not possible these days. By ensuring that school theatres provide suitable facilities, we can foster the same passion in the next generation.

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