“Special Proportions of Height and Depth:”
Antonin Artaud and the Search for a Grammar of Space

by

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Introduction

A special place is reserved for Antonin Artaud in the annals of critical thought on theater. He was an unsuccessful director, an actor of some skill but little enduring fame, and spent much of his later life in psychiatric asylums. *The Theater and Its Double*, however, his 1938 collection of essays, galvanized a generation of theater practitioners and Artaud’s influence was to extend far beyond the limited scope of the performances he staged during his lifetime. His ideas prefigured not only environmental theater, but also later concepts of ritualized theater, using the tools of ritual to induce distinct psychophysiological effects in an audience. He suggested that the structure of space could be one of these tools, but did not pursue this idea to any concrete conclusions. In this project, I seek to take up where he left off in an attempt to develop the outlines of a grammar of sacred space, and its potential applications to performance spaces and theater design.

Despite Peter Brook’s dictum that “Artaud applied is Artaud betrayed,” the suggestions that he put forth for a new direction for the theater were to find great popularity in theater design over the course of the ensuing sixty years.¹ The contemporary “black box” design owes much to Artaud’s initial proposal for a “single site, without partition or barrier of any kind.”² This radical suggestion for a malleable theatrical space, one which could immerse the audience completely in the action of the performance, surround it with movement, sound, color, and light, marked a near-complete departure from the conventions of traditional theater design of the time.

Indeed, by proposing to envelop the audience with action, Artaud has been widely taken to prefigure the environmental theater strategies devised by Richard Schechner in his work with designer Jerry Rojo in the 1960s.

However, Artaud’s vision went far beyond a mere spatial reconfiguration of performance; the theater theorist aimed to fundamentally change the nature of theater as experience. From the age of the tennis court theaters into the grand, opulent playhouses of the late nineteenth century, theater had offered passive and distant entertainment to its (comfortable) patrons. Artaud, however, thought that theater as an art form had the potential to profoundly affect its audience, effecting personal change and even leading to social upheaval. He saw in the experience of theater the possibility to touch people in a way that no other art form could—bodily, sensorially, and emotionally. Thus, the creation of an extraordinary and transformative experience for the audience became more important to him than the staging of an illusory performance.

Taking up Artaud’s vision, theater theorists and practitioners after him looked into ways to viscerally engage audiences; designers in particular found inspiration in Artaud’s scenographic suggestions. The mainstream idea that a performance ought to showcase a Realist reflection of the outside world, a complete illusion supported by mimetic design, characters, and staging, was the principle against which much avant-garde theater revolted. Not all of its theorists went as far as Artaud—Brecht, for example, sought to disrupt Realism by training actors to show self-awareness to the audience, breaking the illusion of the fourth wall in a call for socio-political reflection.
German theater theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte locates the origin of the actor’s break with the tradition of Romantic theater a number of years prior to Artaud, in Gertrud Eysoldt’s eponymous 1903 performance in Electra, directed by Max Reinhardt.¹ She argues that the actress “transgressed” the audience’s expectations of acting and performance by engaging her physical body in her acting in a way that made maintaining the theatrical illusion impossible. By the force of her performance, Eysoldt induced a “kind of hypnotic state” in the audience, which all felt though even the critics in attendance were unable to describe exactly.² It is this sort of physical effect that Artaud sought to have on his hypothetical audiences—passive spectators no longer, but witnesses to something close to ritual, yet deeply rooted in the performative traditions of the theater. Much of avant-garde theater since has sought to bring about that sort of “hypnotic state” in their audiences. Although most contemporary theater runs towards the standard proscenium stage, leaving Happenings and environmental theater almost as relics of a bygone age—even Jerry Rojo now designs for the proscenium—the idea that a performance should seek not only to present a crafted illusion but also should have a tangible effect on its audience is widely in evidence.

Whether or not it constitutes a “hypnotic state” in physiological terms, it is understood that performance can attain a very definite psychophysical hold over the audience. For many theatergoers, this sort of surrender to an experience controlled by the object of their attention is not unique to theater, but bears some resemblance to other facets of their lives, particularly participation in the ceremonies of the religion

² Ibid.
to which they ascribe. The tangible effect that theater can have on an audience can result in the sense that they have stepped out of the realm of everyday life. Not only have they been presented with a spectacle that they can believe in and appreciate, but they have also experienced something that temporarily removes them from the normal flow of time and an audience’s usual aesthetic detachment.

This sort of extra-daily experience shares much with the detachment from the everyday and the profane that characterizes religious rituals. Ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, in his seminal 1908 work *Rites de Passage*, identified three distinct phases in the rituals he studied: separation, transition, and incorporation. These, later elaborated upon by Victor Turner in *From Ritual to Theatre*, are characteristics not only of rites of passage in the sense of initiation rituals, but of nearly all social rites and ceremonies.\(^5\) The intermediate, transitional period has been termed a “liminal” phase, from the Latin *limen*, or threshold.\(^6\) This liminal phase is what Fischer-Lichte contends the audience of *Electra* experienced: a moment set apart not only from their normal social routines but also from the customary patterns of theatergoing. The extraordinariness of Eysoldt’s performance had the effect of an enacted ritual, for it created a temporary “aesthetic community” grounded in shared experience of the transcendent—much like religious worship creates a community of believers grounded in common prayer.\(^7\)

This notion of liminality is one which has also fascinated theater theorists, if not since van Gennep’s time at least since Turner’s. Many practitioners of

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6 Ibid.
7 Fischer-Lichte, 7.
experimental theater have sought to create something more than an aesthetically beautiful illusion, and have seen ritualized experience as something to be emulated in their staging of performances. Most notably, Jerzy Grotowski sought to create a “secular sacrum” in the theater, using rigorous physical training combined with ritualized directorial choices to work towards a transcendent experience for actor and audience alike. While Grotowski’s work and writings articulated most clearly a search for transcendence through the techniques of theater, the explicit or implicit attempt to induce a liminal experience in the audience has underscored much of experimental theater throughout the twentieth century. Although most artists sought to achieve this goal through actor training and the crafting of performance texts, theater architecture has also played a necessary part in this process, as it was crucial to the spatial mediation of the audience/performer interaction.

One of the sections of Artaud’s essays on the Theater of Cruelty that has been given the most critical attention over the years has been his discussion of its space. In the “Second Manifesto,” he proposes that:

abandoning the architecture of contemporary theaters, we shall take some hanger or barn, which we shall have reconstructed according to processes which have culminated in the architecture of certain churches or holy places, and of certain temples in Tibet. In the interior of this construction special proportions of height and depth will prevail.

He seeks to create a new type of performance space to match his conception of a new theater. The space he envisions is flexible and able to accommodate a variety of performances, but using elements of sacred architecture to enable the space to have a

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9 Artaud, 96.
specific kind of power over the audience.

Marvin Carlson, writing in *Places of Performance: the Semiotics of Theater Architecture*, quotes this proposal of Artaud’s and goes on to comment that “the idea of such a neutral space, possessing no decorative features of its own … has become enormously influential in modern experimental theater design, and the flexible “black box” has become one of the most common theatrical configurations of our time.”\(^{10}\) While Carlson is correct in citing the popularity of the “black box” at least in the world of non-commercial theater, his summary of Artaud’s proposal fails to take into account the full extent of the theorist’s suggestions, more specifically the idea that the space should be “reconstructed according to processes which have culminated in the architecture of certain churches or holy places.”\(^{11}\) The theater Artaud proposes may be neutral and featureless in its decoration, but to assert that the decorative features that may or may not be present in a space are equivalent to the semiotic characteristics of a space is somewhat problematic. In fact earlier in his treatise on theater architecture, Carlson asserts that “architecture might almost be defined as the creation of a specific articulation of space; indeed, some recent architectural semioticians in … Naples have called the internal space the “signified” of a building rather than simply one of its various morphological features.”\(^{12}\) If architecture has as its primary concern the internal space created within a building, then a space designed with deliberate spatial reference to places of worship, with “special proportions of


\(^{11}\) Artaud, 96.

\(^{12}\) Carlson, 128.
Although the walls of the space that Artaud describes may be featureless blank areas for the presentation of an innumerable variety of visual effects, and it may be devoid of the carved and gilded decorations that historically characterized theaters, it is nonetheless semiotically charged in a way that Carlson fails to address. However incomplete and potentially problematic as Carlson’s argument may be, Artaud is no more helpful in explaining himself: it is never clear just what he sees as the “processes” which have resulted in effective sacred architecture, nor is it clear what the “special proportions of height and depth” which he proposes for his theater are. This ambiguity is hardly a surprise to anyone familiar with Artaud’s writings; in his manifestos he is less concerned with the means by which his vision is to be realized than he is swept up in imagining his theater’s power and necessity. In *A Short History of Western Performance Space*, David Wiles observes that, “though he rejected the ‘dictatorship of words’ and wanted to substitute the ideal of ‘spatial poetry’, the precise material details of architecture did not concern him.” This vagueness does not stop one from agreeing with Artaud in the main; why not structure theater spaces like any of a number of sacred spaces? If the way in which a religious experience is facilitated by the architecture of a church is akin to the way a performance is mediated by its site, could theater architecture in some way be imbued with sacredness and thus help to sacralize a performance?

The majority of sacred spaces in the Judeo-Christian tradition provide the opportunity for what Carlson terms “the meeting of the secular celebrant with a

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13 Artaud, 96.
sacred celebrated.” In religious ritual, this encounter follows van Gennep’s tripartite structure, many of whose attributes and characteristics last century’s avant-garde sought to utilize in various experiments in ritualized experience and “holy” theater. The history of twentieth-century avant-garde theater is rife with attempts to bring theater further into the realm of the sacred. Practitioners like Appia, Craig, Schechner, Brook, and Grotowski, among many others, all sought in their own ways to introduce ideas of the sacred into the secular realm of theater. Carlson makes only passing reference to the architecture of sacred spaces, concluding that, as “the sacred may be only spiritually or symbolically present, not spatially, as a player must be,” places of worship have little correlation to performance spaces. His opinion on the issue, especially given his previous assertion that “the church or temple has perhaps the closest systematic architectural relationship to the theatre,” seems to speak more to a reluctance on his part to delve into a potentially complex comparative analysis than to the impossibility of tracing similarities and differences between these two types of environments.

To an extent, the characteristics of spaces that enable extra-daily experiences can be analyzed by referring to their ritual function, whether the events they host are religious or theatrical in nature. Additionally, with the growth in popularity in this past century of the open auditorium form for both theaters and religious sites, many of the architectural characteristics of the contemporary church are reflected in theater

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15 Carlson, 129
16 Wiles, 53.
17 Carlson, 129.
18 Ibid.
design, and vice versa, although their uses have remained disparate.\textsuperscript{19} From the points of view both of ritual studies and architectural analysis, Artaud’s idea of utilizing the principles of sacred architecture to create a theater of visceral influence and psychic power is reasonable, if ambitious. However, as Artaud’s proposition is unfortunately lacking in detail or exactitude as regards the application of his suggestions, an analysis of their implications will have to begin elsewhere.

The spatial structure of any place of worship is determined by the nature of the religious rituals it houses and, while in a theatrical event the production’s design elements are partners in creating the audience’s experience, there is undoubtedly a relationship between the performances that take place within a space and the characteristics of its building. The performances that occur in black box theaters, for example, offer their audiences a significantly different experience than those that take place on proscenium stages. It seems that, on the whole, twentieth-century attempts to utilize specific ideas of sacred space for theatrical ends have suffered from what Wiles characterizes as “a desire for the sacred, but an unwillingness to harness themselves to any specific code of belief complete with a liturgy that involved shaping space in a specific way.”\textsuperscript{20}

The idea that a space must be complemented by the themes of the experience it contains is not a radical or new one, but it has traditionally been viewed far more as a practical concern of theatrical design—matching the set design to the needs and style of the performance—than as a means to enhance a ritualistic experience.

Whether or not there are definite and definable traits that make a space effective as


\textsuperscript{20} Wiles, 53.
either a place of worship or a performance space is an open, interesting question, as is
the interplay between those two types of space. Artaud asserted that there were
definitive spatial traits which characterized the kind of sacred space he sought to
create, but did not elaborate. Although he dismissed details of architecture and
construction, these specifics – the spatial, scenographic, tectonic, and material
considerations and details – are crucial to the creation of a sacred or extra-daily space,
whether theatrical or religious. The question remains, however, of whether or not one
can draw from certain aspects of the architecture of religious spaces in theater design
in the same way one can use aspects of liturgy and ritual action in a theater
performance. In what ways does a space facilitate separation from the profane,
transition to a liminal state, and reincorporation into the everyday—van Gennep’s
three phases of ritual? Are the “processes which have culminated in the architecture
of certain churches and holy places” really processes, or are they figments of Artaud’s
imagination? Is there a grammar of sacred space, or merely the random effects that
certain configurations have on the audience?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I will examine both the elements that
make a space sacred and their possible application in theater. I will do so by
analyzing six sites of extra-daily experience in the city of Middletown: three
performance spaces and three places of worship. They were chosen with the intent of
exploring the intersections of ritual and theatrical spaces by providing a wide range of
locations, religious traditions, and theatrical styles, within a specific social context
and geographic area.
The performance spaces are: the theater in the Wesleyan University Center for the Arts, a 400-seat auditorium space, during its staging of the faculty production of *Oedipus Rex* in the fall of 2007; the Patricelli ’92 Theater, also at Wesleyan University, while housing *Labyrinths*, a student-written adaptation of the stories of Jorge Luis Borges, in the spring of 2006; and the Oddfellows Playhouse, a children’s repertory theater in downtown Middletown in the run of a performance of *Treasure Island* in the spring of 2008. The set designs have been considered here as much as possible as an integral part of the theaters’ architecture, as they shape the space to fit the liturgy and iconography of the performance.

The places of worship are: St. Sebastian’s Roman Catholic Church, a church in downtown Middletown built in 1930 and modeled after the Chiesa di San Sebastiano in Melilli, Italy; Congregation Adath Israel, a Conservative Jewish synagogue in downtown Middletown; and South Congregational Church, an affiliate of the United Church of Christ across the street from Adath Israel.
Analytical Methodology

I have approached my analyses by discussing five specific characteristics of the spaces, and the ways in which each mediates the performance that it hosts: the spatial configuration of the structure, the way in which the structure enables a transition from the everyday into an extra-daily experience, its scenography, its tectonic character, and its symbolism.

Spatial configuration here means the basic elements of the building’s layout as it pertains to the event it hosts. I looked not only at the structure and organization of the interior space, the mediation of that interaction by means of vertical or horizontal separations, and the “proportions of height and depth” with which Artaud was concerned, but also at the location of the audience in relation to the performers or the officiants, and whether there are clear sightlines from all locations within the space or whether some seats were visually privileged.

The way in which a structure facilitates a separation from daily life is an integral part of its function as a ritual or extra-daily performative space. In van Gennep’s ethnographic research, the separation phase in the rites of initiation he studied often took the form of a literal separation of the initiands from their daily lives, social setting and former roles.\(^{21}\) He found that the physical shift from the spaces of everyday life to that of the ritual site was crucial to the participants’ full engagement in the experience. In the same way, to enter a performance space is to welcome the possibility of transformative experience, and the way in which this entrance is structured can have much to do with the subsequent experience.

\(^{21}\) Turner, 24.
Scenography is a disputed term—sometimes it refers to the set design of a production, and sometimes the entire visual concept. As I will use it, it describes the mise-en-scène of a performance: its visual composition and aesthetic qualities rather than its three-dimensional interaction with the space or its symbolism.

Tectonics are a set of theories in architectural criticism concerned with the way in which a building’s structural features are made explicit to or hidden from its users. The primary purpose of a building—even before fulfilling its explicit function—is to remain standing. Tectonics relate to one’s perception of its ability to do so, and the transparency or lack thereof of its structure and structural details.

Lastly, symbolism refers to the ways in which meaning is encoded in both the spatial configuration and the decoration of the building, whether through features of the space that have a specific relation to religious traditions or to established theatrical vocabularies, or through the creation of a set of symbols and meanings for a specific performance.

For the purposes of this project, as discussed in the introduction, religious worship is considered as a performative act and theatrical performance as a ritualized experience. The terms of analysis above come from various different branches of performance studies and architectural criticism; they are applied here as references to an area of exploration rather than in their original theoretical or critical contexts, to usefully indicate and differentiate ways in which space mediates performance.
Preface:

The performance locations described here vary widely, from the tectonic straightforwardness of the CFA to the rough-hewn adaptability of Oddfellows to the flexibility of the ’92 Theater. The sets that each contain are even more disparate, and in light of this different aspects of the analysis will be applied to greater or lesser degrees to each of the spaces.

The CFA Theater has the most elaborate entrance scheme of any of the venues examined. Moreover, its tectonics and structure are inextricably entwined, and both strongly influenced the set design for Oedipus Rex. The scenography of the performance took those and many other concepts and created a symbolically rich world. In my description of Oedipus Rex I will discuss all five of the points of analysis I listed.

The ’92 Theater, both in the architecture of its entrance and in the set design for Labyrinths, is less concerned with transitional spaces and more with the presentation of a performance. For this reason I will address the spatial configuration, the scenography, and the symbolism of the design more than its tectonic features or the way in which it enabled a transition from the everyday.

As a community theater, Oddfellows is in a unique position; the performances there have significantly different stakes than those at the ’92 or CFA. In examining this community-oriented space, I will address the performance somewhat generally, with more attention paid to the spatial configuration and the transition from the everyday that the space facilitates than to the scenography, tectonics, or symbolism.
Oedipus Rex:

The theater at Wesleyan University’s Center for the Arts (CFA) is a modern building of simple layout and stark in decoration and detail. The theater itself is a large single room, rectangular in plan, with seating taking up approximately 2/3 of the space and the stage the remaining 1/3. The seating is raked, such that the back row of chairs is approximately 11 feet higher than the stage. There are square stone columns along the side walls of the theater, which support the galleries that run around the space at two levels and provide vertical lines in architecture that otherwise tends towards the horizontal. Even with the most minimal of sets, the simplicity of the theater’s decoration and the deliberate plainness of the interior space tend to focus one’s attention on the stage. The stage can be diminished in scale by flying in the mobile panels that frame it, in which case it acts as its own world, a complete illusion presented to the house through a proscenium frame. When the panels are entirely out, the stage still commands attention, due both to the decorative simplicity of the interior and the amphitheatre-like seating arrangement.

Figure 1: The CFA Theater; Oedipus Rex

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22 Figures are not to scale; dimensions are approximations based on site visits and observation.
The set for *Oedipus Rex* was comprised of a number of foot-square plywood columns spaced eight feet apart, treated with plaster to resemble the concrete of the CFA and rising to heights between two and seventeen feet above the stage. Crossbeams of similar composition 12 feet in the air linked the columns horizontally, as did connecting beams 9 inches high resting on the floor. The visual composition of vertical and horizontal lines—as well as the materials of which the beams were made—reflected the architecture of the space, diminished in size slightly so as to frame the actors in a more human scale. Much of the floor downstage was removed, as well as the front rows of seats, and the area between connecting beams there was filled in with metal grating, extending into the house and often lit from below.

A large ticket area and anteroom forms the primary entrance to the CFA theater. Artifacts from past productions and from the university’s collections decorate the walls, and unobtrusive stairs provide access to the bathrooms and coatracks downstairs. The entrance to the auditorium proper is a long, descending ramp, setting up for the audience a transition from everyday experience into the world of the performance. This ramp also provides an architecturally striking entrance scheme—a vestibule, followed by a narrow passage, dramatically opens out into a view of the entire theater. A narrow strip of the set is visible from the foyer at the top of the ramp, but its full extent is not seen until one passes under the lighting booth. By the time spectators enter the house itself, they are already well separated from the everyday world.

The tectonics of the entire CFA complex are simple, uniform, and massive—limestone blocks measuring 2’6” by 7’4,” with reinforced concrete bands
where more strength is required at balconies, roofs, and columns. The blocks, in plain view, are the actual structural support for the walls. Other materials in the theater are used similarly visible and bare: the pipe railings and metal grid are devoid of ornamentation and simply fulfill their respective functions in an unobtrusive way.

The tectonic character of *Oedipus Rex*’s set, however, despite its similar appearance, was completely different from that of the CFA. While the slender columns and onstage beams were treated to look much like the limestone and cement walls of the CFA, they were in fact made of plywood and two-by-fours. This construction was made apparent in several spots on the set: the plywood fronts of the columns were removed and the unpainted wood inside exposed, in some cases with wooden crossbracing made visible as well. Rather than detracting from the visual composition of this set, this choice called its materiality into question in a more subtle (and slightly unsettling) way. Other sections of the set used more basic and straightforward materials; the metal grating that replaced the stage floor downstage was functional, as it supported the weight of the actors and allowed them to be lit from underneath, and the portable lanterns used by the chorus as additional illumination and props were functional, hardwired lights.

The aesthetic and scenographic tone of the set design for *Oedipus Rex* owed much to the ambience of the empty CFA Theater. The delicate surface texturing and color treatment, the massive architectural forms rendered in concrete-like smoothness, the steel grid, and the lanterns (modeled after the theater’s ghost light) were all taken directly from the visual vocabulary of the theater when empty. The monolithic design and its strikingly spare visual composition made it possible to see
the student-actors as players in tragedy on a grand scale, participants and actors in an ageless story in which the audience was complicit.

The use of simple structures on a grand scale was only one of the levels on which the set operated, however. The visual and symbolic instability created by the deliberately unfinished look of the set and the revelation of its real materials contributed to the tension between the actors-as-students (as subtly signified by the plain clothes visible underneath their elaborate costumes) and the actors-as-Thebans, formally masked and participating in the story of Oedipus’ downfall. The use of elements that directly evoked an unfinished theatrical environment—bare wood, scaffolding, and ladders—made it clear the performance took place in the context of a theater, rather than demanding the audience believe that they had been transported to a different time or place. Such aesthetic choices did not mean that the space was not transformed, merely that no attempt at concrete representation was made. This abstraction of the CFA theater’s already imposing architecture, combined with the monumental proportions of the set that spilled over from the stage into the house, gave the actors a strong aesthetic presence that supported their transformation into vehicles for the tragedy of the play.
Labyrinths:

The Patricelli ’92 Theater is the principal student theater space on Wesleyan’s campus. With a proscenium stage and adaptable seating, it can function either as a traditional theater or as a black box space. In the spring of 2006, it hosted Labyrinths, a senior thesis production written and directed by Lily Whitsitt ’06. With a script adapted from the plots of several of Jorge Luis Borges’ short stories, Labyrinths was a nonrealistic production, meditating on the philosophical implications of Borges’ Library of Babel and using the Library—an imaginary site containing all possible books—as a setting and primary plot device. The set design of the performance did not interact directly with the interior of the ’92, instead utilizing the space as a black box. While most of the analysis here is directed at the set and the playing space created therein, the architectural space of the ’92 is mentioned as well for the sake of a more complete perspective.

The ’92 Theater is not configured like the CFA, with its deliberately sequenced revelation of the theater’s interior space, but is instead a large open room. An external anteroom (the Zelnick Pavilion) serves as simple shelter from the elements and a waiting area rather than a place of separation from the everyday world. In the set for Labyrinths, the transitional space was actually inside the theater proper, in the area outside of the hexagonal enclosure of the set. Upon entering the theater, the glowing hexagon was an inscrutable object; only upon approaching it more closely could one see the risers and chairs within. The act of traversing the theater to get to the playing space within it separated the audience from the everyday, as did the complete enclosure of the six walls of paper.
The theater itself is an adapted space; built as Rich Hall, a library, it was a three-story building with stacks occupying the first two floors, an open timber ceiling above and Gothic arched windows along the side walls. The open timber ceiling and numerous windows are nearly the only elements of the interior decoration that remain, and both are often obscured by the technical adaptations necessary to transform the space into a theater. The same extensive grid system that makes the '92 such a usable space for student theater largely hides the timber ceiling from view, and motorized shades frequently cover the windows. Nonetheless, the ceiling is a feature of the building that designers and directors often wish to highlight—the large timbers with their intricate joinery and warm patina are somehow compelling. A keen observer will realize that it is in fact a false ceiling, supporting itself and little else—the grid is actually held up by massive steel beams hung on rafters in the theater's attic—and this tectonic conflict seems not to detract in the slightest from its contribution to the atmosphere of the space.
When the space is in use, however, the ceiling, and indeed the architecture of the building, is often ignored completely. It is easier to take advantage of its considerable technical capabilities than to try to engage with its somewhat distant architecture. The set and scenography of *Labyrinths* were no exception, consisting of a hexagonal enclosure of paper strips twelve feet high and nine inches wide suspended from a dark-stained wood framework, containing risers, seats and hexagonal paper lamps hung from the grid. Clip lights on music stands were the only feature of the set outside of the hexagon, standing between the paper walls and the outside walls of the space. The configuration of the audience was unique and tailored specifically to fit into the requirements of the space: spectators sat in three sets of trapezoidal risers, in an arena configuration along every other wall of the hexagon. Coffee-stained and hung in domino-like rows, the paper strips themselves were both a visual and an architectural feature of the set. They caught light from both inside and outside of the hexagon, allowing periodic glimpses of the theater walls beyond as well as demarcating the performance space.

Though the spatial attributes of the ’92 were almost entirely concealed by the paper walls, the ceiling remained visible, highlighted by the hanging lamps. Divorced from the larger space of the theater, the hexagonal playing area became a world unto itself. Some action did take place outside the boundaries of the hexagon, but was deliberately staged to be viewed through the paper—nothing was intended to be hidden from the spectators’ sight, rather, the shadows produced were intentional and desired. The arena arrangement made the audience an integral part of the performance: even though the lighting placed the focus on the performers, the
audience was always in view on the opposite side of the playing space. Rather than the specific hexagonal layout of the performance area, the atmosphere of the performance space was created in large part by the tactile and visual qualities of the hanging paper, as well as by its interaction with the lighting.

The luminous walls of densely spaced paper, though unfathomable from the outside, began to make sense as the play unfolded; spectators felt as though they were inside a glowing book. The vertical “pages” of the set came to symbolize the innumerable pages of the Library of Babel, referring to the world that Borges created with his books as well as themselves creating a self-contained playing space.
**Treasure Island:**

The Oddfellows Playhouse is a children’s theater housed, with its administrative offices, in a converted historic building on Washington Street. The Playhouse provides Middletown children with the opportunity to act in full-fledged shows, as well as becoming involved in theater through classes, workshops, and demonstrations. As such, its primary mission is education and community outreach, and thus theater productions are viewed more as a means to accomplish these goals than as artistic ends in and of themselves. In March of 2008, the children’s repertory company put on a production of *Treasure Island*, directed by Kim West from a script by Eric Schmiedl, with set design by Dan Mellitz.

The Oddfellows building was not initially built as a theater, and so its configuration is rather unconventional. Similarly to the ’92 Theater, it started out as a multi-story building, but unlike the ’92, the original levels were kept intact when the space was renovated. The outcome of this is that audiences have to walk up a flight of steps to get to the theater proper. The stairway is decorated with brightly colored murals, harlequin themes, and masks left over from previous classes and productions. The theater itself is a fairly small room, with perhaps half of the ‘92’s total floorspace.

*Treasure Island* was adapted directly from Stevenson’s book—simplified to serve the purposes of children’s theater—with representational set and costumes including pirates, sailors, ships and taverns. The set was laid out in a tennis-court arrangement, with a narrow strip of stage between two facing blocks of risers. There were two main playing spaces, one larger and one smaller, on each side of a large-
diameter cardboard tube eight feet high centered between the risers. One of the playing areas had a box roughly three feet on a side that served as the middle deck of a ship and one wall of the various taverns portrayed. A higher platform was wheeled up behind this one—larger, enclosed by railings, and featuring a ship's wheel. Along with the floor space, the boxes were used together to signify the sailing ship upon which much of the action took place. On the other side of the mast, a low rolling platform surrounded by a crude picket fence was brought in to represent the stockade.

The stage being the top floor of an old building, the 8 by 8 inch beams of the timber roof trusses are visible just above the lighting grid. They are painted a bright but not glaring red, but seem to be largely overlooked as a potential feature in the set design, and indeed in the design of the space. It is strange that they were painted brightly, given their potentially intrusive visual mass, but it is almost equally strange that, being painted, these tectonic features were not made a more prominent design feature of the finished space. The theater as a whole seems to offer the impression of immense possibility—a nearly raw space fitted with essential elements for producing performances, but there is no attempt to square off its rough edges and hide its
inconsistencies, nor much attention paid to the focusing of the audience’s attention. While far from realistic, the set pieces for *Treasure Island* used simple lumber, rope, plywood, and cardboard to effectively and functionally represent what the designer sought to depict.

The scenography of the show was not its most striking facet; nonetheless parts of it were very well executed. The ensemble, for example, used opened umbrellas spun at waist level to effectively represent the spinning wheels of a carriage on which the characters were traveling. The most aesthetically interesting moment in the show occurred when two actors, as sailors, raised the British flag on the mast in the middle of the space. Done in silence and accompanied by subtle lighting, this had the potential to be intriguing, even moving. Unfortunately, the children clipped the wrong corner of the flag to its lifting line, so that it folded as it was raised. Although the moment was not all it could have been, the concept in itself was quite something. The performance may not have been ultimately successful in maintaining a theatrical illusion, but it was nonetheless charming.

While the Oddfellows Playhouse does not seek to provide the same sort of complete, compelling artistic experience as the other venues I have looked at, it does involve a distinct transition from everyday life. The experience of attending a theatrical event there starts when one follows the brightly painted footsteps on the sidewalk outside, and even these give a clue as to the content of the performances within. The audience is made up almost entirely of the parents and friends of the children in the shows. They require a different sort of transition than the paying audience of a professional theatre or the congregation of a place of worship. The
Oddfellows Playhouse presents itself as a place for lighthearted performances. The
decoration and structure of the building allow parents and friends to separate
themselves from their daily lives and jobs and worries, and transition to a space
where they can focus on their children and the theater. Here, theater focuses on its
social and civic engagement, rather than on the creation of a beautiful illusion or a
transformative experience.
Preface:

The places of worship selected from Middletown’s profusion of churches and temples represent a cross-section of denominations and devotional styles, from Roman Catholic to Jewish to a Protestant sect (Congregational).

St. Sebastian's is an edifice—massive, imposing, and somewhat impersonal. By sheer force of physical presence it renders worthy of attention whatever events take place within it. Its decoration marks it clearly as a Catholic Church, and the structure is tailored to the specific requirements and traditions of that faith, rather than being designed with comfort and sightlines in mind. As such, my analysis of it will focus on it spatial configuration, the way it mediates the congregation’s transition from the everyday, its tectonic character and its symbolism, and will devote less attention to its scenography.

Adath Israel is an efficient space; a fairly small, spare sanctuary with nearly undecorated walls and ceiling. In its paucity of decoration and simplicity of layout the symbolism of its space is necessarily limited, and the spatial configuration, transitional space, scenography, and tectonic character will be given more attention.

South Congregational Church is a graceful building, with a community of worship that clearly values the church’s beauty. The presence of a "visual arts committee" speaks to their concern for the aesthetics of their religious experience, and this is reflected in the architecture as well. Its tectonic character will correspondingly be addressed in less detail than its scenography, spatial configuration, transitional spaces, and tectonic character.

Places of Worship
St. Sebastian’s Church:

St. Sebastian’s Roman Catholic Church is one of Middletown’s most distinctive places of worship, although it is one of its newer churches. Overlooking Washington Street, its elegant façade commands the attention of passersby. Outside the church, there is a white marble statue of the martyred Saint Sebastian—classical and simple, with no arrows in evidence, it is evocative of the Italian tradition that the church seeks to replicate. The building itself, constructed in 1931 by Italian immigrants to Middletown is a replica of the 18th century Church of St. Sebastian in Melilli, Italy.

The church’s interior space is configured as a large hall with two sets of pews on either side of a central aisle. Two narrower rows of pews are tucked under lower ceilings to the sides of the main space. These side arcades are divided from the higher center section by repeated arches and columns. The ceiling is flat in all areas of the church, and carries a profusion of surface decoration. The walls are essentially flat, but also adorned with applied plaster. Following the traditional arrangement of Catholic churches, St. Sebastian’s entrance is located in the rear of the church’s space, on the Washington Street side of the building, and one comes into the sanctuary itself through doors at the end of each aisle. The space is significantly longer than it is wide, resulting in a sense of distance from the altar. The altar itself is raised above the level of the floor by approximately two feet, setting the priests high enough for visibility but not too far above the congregation. A high pulpit at the rear of the altar, however, approximately six feet off the ground, is used for readings of the Bible and sermons. An enormous marble arch demarcates the apse of the church,
framing it but not cutting it off from the seating area, and crowns the entire altar. Under this is a carved marble panel with a crucifix depicting an agonized Christ, which is less than half the height of the archway but still more than three times as tall as the priests. The crucifix is close to life-size, at the same height (roughly 15 feet) as the chandeliers ringing the space.

![Figure 4: St. Sebastian's Roman Catholic Church](image)

The pews in the center section have an uninterrupted view of the altar, but the large columns frequently block the sightlines of those sitting in the side pews. There is no balcony or visible choir loft, but the space is nonetheless sufficient for many hundreds of congregants. The large, open sanctuary with its reflective materials and flat walls lends itself well to echoes and resonance, which adds a portentous tone to
hymns and speeches but requires the spoken voice to make use of artificial amplification to be heard effectively.

The entrance doors off of Washington Street lead to an anteroom, obviously little more than the receiving room for a larger space. It serves as a place for social interaction, for the church to post bulletins and handouts, for people to collect themselves and transition between the profane and the sacred worlds. However, this is accomplished less by a specific use of space than by the behavior of all church members when they step into the church’s nave—the most widely observed convention being that one kneels, crosses oneself, and rises to make one’s way to one’s seat. The anteroom itself has high ceilings and large doors, but is tiny in comparison to the grand interior space of the sanctuary. To some extent, it serves as a spatial transition out of the everyday, but also more importantly as a meeting place before and after the service, where people can greet, mingle and bid each other farewell.

The side arches are a dramatic architectural statement, as is the arch that surrounds the sanctuary, but there is no visible support for the roof—the absence of a tectonic statement is curious. While the columns along the sides of the space appear functional, supporting arches that hold up the raised center ceiling, there is nothing in the walls or the roof of the space to indicate its construction. Unlike the original church in Melilli, whose complex barrel vaults show its stone construction clearly, this wood structure is reticent to display its bones. Constructing such a space must have been quite a feat for the craftsmen involved; apparently, however, they saw
more value in covering over their work with decoration than showcasing its achievement.

The massive altar panel is lit more brightly than the surrounding marble, highlighting the area from which the priests conduct the various parts of the Mass. A single spotlight was used to illuminate the Eucharist as it was held aloft for veneration, and although that was the only use of focused lighting, it is the most explicitly scenographic element in any of the places of worship. The brightest area in the church is the altar section, specifically the marble crucifix panel, and this is lit with simple sodium-arc fixtures set near the floor. Otherwise, the chandeliers that hang along the side arches cast a gentle illumination on the whole space.

This soft overall light enables one to see quite clearly the surface decoration that is in evidence to an extraordinary degree. Nearly all of the visible interior surfaces of the building are ornamented in some way. The interior is brightly plastered, and complex moldings, ceiling details, ornamental painting, and gold-leaf are all present in abundance. Most notably, the centerpiece of the painted ceiling is a portrait of the martyred Sebastian, with all the gory detail that the sculpture outside omits. This depiction of a tortured human figure, repeated in the large crucifix at the focal point of the congregation’s attention, marks a dramatic departure from any of the other spaces studied. St. Sebastians’s embodies a specific concept of what a church ought to be—ornate, elaborate, bordering on the baroque in its complexity of detail, and somehow managing a sort of ersatz grace despite its overabundance of decoration.
Congregation Adath Israel:

As places of worship go, Adath Israel is a small and fairly inconspicuous building. Sitting on the corner of Church and Broad streets, its two-story brick façade is ornamented only by a few stained-glass windows and a small brass menorah above the entrance, and its most distinctive feature is not a tall tower but a rather small dome crowning the building. Inside, the primary sanctuary is similarly sized—not small, as it could certainly fit several hundred people, but intimate in scale.

The configuration of the synagogue is essentially square—a large open room with a single set of pews in the center and two narrower rows along both walls. There is a balcony that runs along the sides and back wall of the space, providing additional seating without compromising the sightlines of the larger audience below. The large dome that is a distinctive feature of the exterior of the building is centered between the balconies, approximately two-thirds of the way towards the back of the sanctuary’s space. Double doors at the rear of the space, left open throughout the service, create the single entrance to Adath Israel. As there is no center aisle, these doors do not serve to frame any procession—in fact, the only procession that occurs during the Jewish service winds its way around the area outside the center block of pews and along the side aisles. The resting place of the Torah, the Aron Hakodesh or Ark of the Covenant, consists of a curtained cabinet centrally located in the wooden panel behind the raised bimah, the stagelike platform two feet high upon which the rabbi and those conducting the service stand.
Despite the presence of balconies—a unique feature among the three places of worship—the building’s tectonic structure is not visible to the eye. Its walls are smoothed with plaster, and the balconies are completely devoid of visible support. The most notably visible features of the building’s infrastructure are the ventilation ducts under the balcony. Other than this detail, there is no indication of how this building is put together. The interior surface is entirely covered in smooth white plaster, hiding (it is safe to assume) the brick that comprises the walls and the joists that supporting the ceiling. The smoothness of finish and detail and the absence of tectonic characteristics makes the space visually uncomplicated and unobtrusive. With so little to draw one’s eye away from the action of the officiants, they almost automatically become the center of attention.

As the sanctuary is located on the second floor of the synagogue, one has to enter the building, move past the smaller sanctuary/classroom on the lower level, hang one’s coat on the rack at the foot of the stairway to the upper level, and then either walk up the steps or take the elevator to get to the main sanctuary. This spatial
and social transition—for one encounters fellow congregants along the way—enables one to move slowly into the sacred space as well as into the community of believers. The doors at the rear of the sanctuary function as entryways, but the congregants’ transition out of the everyday is already well underway by the time they pick up a prayer book outside the sanctuary. There is also a secondary transition within the sanctuary, from the seating area to the bimah. At least four times during the service, a member of the congregation will ascend to the bimah to hold or read from the Torah, or to recite prayers. The bimah is a clearly delineated space where all sanctified events in the service take place, and the act of ascension marks a clear physical transition from observer to participant in the ritual.

The bimah is visually framed by a dark wood panel on the rear wall, containing three primary elements: the ark and two fabric panels of bright patchwork. One of these panels contains a stylized image of a hand and a shofar, and the other a representation of the Ten Commandments. The only other ornament of note consists of numerous memorial and donation plaques along the side walls, speaking to the practical philanthropic concerns inherent in sustaining a small congregation, and small brass light fixtures mounted on the undersides of the balconies. The dome, so distinctly visible on the exterior of the building, represents the heavens, to which prayer should be open (indeed some constructed ritual spaces, the sukkot booths, must have permeable roofs), but is not visible from the majority of the sanctuary, being so far back in the space. This is the extent of the decoration visible in the interior of the sanctuary.

There is no iconography in the synagogue, the Old Testament injunction
against the creation of graven images having persisted in the Jewish tradition. The Torah, its resting place in the ark centered in the rear of the bimah, is the sole object of veneration in the space. During the service, the congregation stands as the ark is opened to bring out the Torah, and a congregant on the bimah holds it above his head in an action strikingly similar to the presentation of the Catholic Eucharist at St. Sebastian’s. As with the Eucharist, however, the value of the Torah lies not in its status as an object to be worshipped, but as part of a set of interactions that fulfill the obligations of the religion.
South Congregational Church:

Standing at the south end of Middletown’s Main Street area, the aptly named South Congregational Church is a handsome brick building, built the year before Rich Hall (1867). Though the interior space is treated in a completely different way, its exterior features a similar use of brownstone for architectural detailing. Unlike the transformed Rich Hall, now the ’92 Theater, South Church was built for its congregation and has remained a functional church since its construction, even though the congregation has left their original Separatist affiliation to join the United Church of Christ in 1965.

South Congregational Church is a deceptively long building, due to the expansive open width of its interior space—actually deep and narrow, it gives the impression of being the squarest of the spaces studied. It has two blocks of pews in the center of the space, with a central aisle and open sides. The sanctuary is entirely open, with no columns or walls to break up the space or sight lines. The middle section of the ceiling is significantly higher than the sides, resembling the structure of St. Sebastian’s Church, but the lack of columns means that the side arcades function as elements of the same internal space, rather than being set apart. There is a choir loft that wraps around the north end of the sanctuary, above the entrance, holding the choir and the organ. The altar is recessed into the south end of the church, with a wood-framed fabric panel between it and the wall, on which is hung a large cross of plain wood between two tapestries currently depicting Easter lilies. Lamps hang down from the edges of the center section of ceiling, drawing one’s eye upwards, and
stained-glass windows adorned with simple geometric patterns line the walls, casting colored light across the pews nearby.

There is an anteroom between the sanctuary and the street entrance, providing a place to hang one’s coat, not only literally, but figuratively as well. There is a coat rack, of course, but the room also functions as a transitional space outside the confines of the sanctuary where one can remove the trappings of the outside world and prepare for worship. Such a space minimizes the interference of the outside world in the extra-daily experience of worship, and helps to set the stage for the experience itself. The area between Pleasant Street and the sanctuary serves as a spatial transition between the profane and the sacred, with some of the architectural characteristics of the interior space but not the same grand scale or overall structure. The secondary, internal transition within the sanctuary from the congregation’s space

Figure 6: South Congregational Church
to the priest’s, as in Adath Israel, is marked with steps up to the raised altar three feet above the floor.

The surface decoration of the interior space is executed entirely in plaster. However, unlike in the sanctuary of Adath Israel, here the material is used to sculptural effect. The design of the ceiling is derived from Gothic arches and vaulted cathedrals, and white plaster is used to cover the vast curved surfaces, resembling stone in its color and texture. Slender interlacing lines of brown-painted plaster echo the stone arch detailing of cathedrals, and the places where the ceiling terminates at the walls and where the arches change direction are treated as if they were built in stone, with applied plaster “blocks” and keystones. The tectonics of a building undoubtedly executed in timber and lath are thus hidden completely behind a veneer of painted plaster, which itself is treated to resemble stone. While the simulation is not ultimately convincing, it is applied thoroughly and skillfully enough that it becomes effective in its own way, lending a graceful air to the space and breaking up what would otherwise be a featureless ceiling.

Scenographically, the fabric panel behind the altar frames the pastor and readers, bringing the audience’s eyes down from the stained glass window high on the south wall. The panel is set at least eight feet from the rear wall, pushing the altar farther forward in the space, closer to the congregation rather than set back in its alcove. The pastor’s chosen seat behind a large rectangular table in the center of the altar seems to present an egalitarian message; eschewing the podium for the majority of the service, she puts herself nearer the level of the congregation and in a position of openness rather than authority. She nonetheless sits at the focal point of the
altar—or rather, immediately in front of it, the focal point being the full-sized wooden cross on the panel behind her. While, due to the Congregational tradition, the tortured Christ that adorns the crucifix at St. Sebastian’s is absent here, the cross is nonetheless clearly the object of veneration.

The sanctuary, despite being wide, tall, and open, contains a distinct central corridor. This, demarcated by lanterns, a raised ceiling section, and a central aisle, directs attention towards the altar and the actions taking place there. The choir loft in the rear of the space reinforces that corridor, establishing an interaction between the altar and the loft. It is interesting that the church was built for a Separatist congregation; eschewing as they did the pageantry of Catholicism, they nonetheless built a church with remarkable visual presence and elaborate ornamentation and decoration. Notably, however, none of the decoration is representative (with the exception of the lilies on the tapestries), and iconography is almost entirely absent.
Conclusion

The six sites that I studied varied widely in their function and the nature of the events they hosted: the abandoned construction site of Thebes, the Library of Babel, an English boy’s adventure, Sunday mass at a Roman Catholic church, Saturday morning worship at a Conservative Jewish synagogue, and Easter services at a Congregational church. Few of the buildings look similar from the outside, encompassing as they do a broad range of architectural styles and original functions, but all currently serve a similar purpose: the enabling of extra-daily experience. Each attempts to create an experience for their participants through a set of performative acts, some more closely linked to ritual than others, but all involving an interaction between an audience or congregation and a set of performers. While the reasons for this vary between locations, the aim of some being entertainment and others salvation, the methods by which they seek to create liminal experience are not too dissimilar.

The spaces themselves, however, remain widely different—a modern concrete theater and an 80-year-old synagogue would seem to have little to do with each other. In fact, when I first posed a set of questions about the potential links between sacred space and performance space, I did not know what the results of an aesthetic analysis would be. With the analysis completed, however, certain notable similarities and patterns have emerged. All the places of worship have a similar spatial configuration, strongly resembling theater’s conventional proscenium stage. All contained mediating, transitional spaces, something that has not been discussed extensively in theater theory. Most interestingly, it appeared that Artaud’s idea of “special
proportions of height and depth” was represented in the spaces studied, and additionally may have been linked to the Golden Ratio and its connection to the human body.

All of the places of worship contained fixed seating deeper than it was wide, with aisles as necessary to ensure sufficient access to seating, which was the first clue to their resemblance to the configuration of traditional proscenium stages. There was uniformly a raised area set apart for the enactors of the ceremony, two to three feet off the floor, and some sort of visual framing mechanism to draw attention to them. While this did not take the form of a frame that physically divided the audience from the officiants as in the classical proscenium stage, all three places of worship utilized a panel or backdrop against which the participants were highlighted and which made them more clearly visible. This visual frame brought the grand scale of the buildings down to a more human level. The boundary between the raised area and the remainder of the floor was marked by steps in all three spaces. This formed a more permeable boundary than the raised edge of a proscenium stage, but to ascend to the raised area was to involve oneself in the ritual; audience participation in this way was nonexistent in the Catholic Mass, infrequent in the Congregational service, and routine in the Jewish service.

Although none of the theater spaces utilized a proscenium stage, all made use of some type of scaling technique. The set for Labyrinths was only twelve feet high, eight feet under the grid and some 25 feet lower than the ceiling of the ’92. The crossbeams of the set for Oedipus Rex were only 12 feet off the stage, while the balconies they echoed were almost 18 feet high and the grid some 40 feet up. And
while the lighting grid at Oddfellows was no more than 18 feet above the floor, the set nonetheless incorporated a number of raised platforms that gave the child actors added presence. This utilization of architectural elements to bridge the gap in scale between buildings and the people who act within them seems to be an example of the cross-pollination of techniques for directing attention and presenting performance between sacred spaces and the theater.

Another similarity among the venues studied was the presence of a transitional location between the entrance and the space itself. This area ranged from a simple coatroom to an elaborately planned entrance ramp, but was always present in some form or another. The practical concerns of theatergoing certainly contribute to the necessity for such a space—there must be a place to buy a ticket, there must be somewhere to hang one’s coat, and there must be a way to buffer the performance space against the unwanted intrusion of light, sound, and the elements. The practical necessity for such a space in places of worship is less clear: there is no need for tickets or controlled admission, and many people take their coats into the service with them, especially in the drafty winter months. It does seem, however, that this space nonetheless serves a useful purpose in allowing congregants to leave the outside world and prepare themselves for the experience of worship. While the process of separation described by van Gennep was far more involved and significant than the simple act of stepping across the threshold of a house of worship, if one considers worship a ritual, then it must involve some kind of separation from the profane. The interesting fact remains that the places of worship examined had two thresholds: one
that led into the building and one that led into the sanctified space within. The sanctified space, like the performance space, was never presented unmediated.

This observation in and of itself is not a conclusive argument; there are countless sacred spaces with no such mediating zones, and even more experiments in theater presented unmediated to an audience—street theater, Happenings, and guerilla performances, among others. However, the presence of a distinct transitional space in all six sites studied seems worthy of note. Artaud, in all his suggestions for a renewed theater invigorated with the power of ritual, made no mention of the process of entering his proposed space. Even if he simply wanted to use tools that had proven effective in ritual, rather than looking at the theater performances he was proposing as actual ritual processes, one would imagine that this process of transition would have found its way into his theories.

Perhaps the most intriguing of Artaud’s proposals is his cryptic remark, from the “Manifesto on the Theater of Cruelty,” that his theater would utilize “special proportions of height and depth.” While his suggestions for applying the design of places of worship to theater are on the whole less practical than philosophical and conceptual, here was a concrete spatial detail. And although Artaud does not describe exactly what these proportions are, the fact that he considers them to be important provides an interesting perspective on the way he thinks about the space of his theater. It is no surprise that his thinking should run in this direction; the importance of specific geometric proportions in art and architecture has been recognized as long as these fields have been studied. Perhaps the most famous of these is the Golden

\[23\] Artaud, 96.
Ratio, or $\approx 1.618:1$, which has been recognized since the time of the Greeks as a way of achieving harmonious proportions in paintings, sculpture, and buildings. It has also been found to relate to the proportions of the human body and face. The majority of its application in architecture, however, was directed towards the visual, rather than the spatial, characteristics of buildings. The Golden Ratio has been used to calculate the height and width of façades and entryways and the width and length of rooms—in plan and elevation. I have found no evidence, however, that it has ever been used in section—that is, that this pleasing proportion was ever applied to the height and depth of a space. While I do not think that Artaud was suggesting that his theater be built according to the Golden Ratio—it seems that he would have said so if that were the case—its use in architecture highlights the uniqueness of his suggestions. For it is not the floor plan of his theater that he is concerned with, nor its façade, but its internal space.

The building he suggests as the ideal site for his theater—a “hanger or barn”—are both examples of a specific kind of architecture: that which seeks to maximize the volume within while using the minimum of material. Farmers, not known for their architectural flights of fancy, have built barns for hundreds of years, these huge timber-framed structures answering their needs for storage space and animal quarters with the minimum of expense. Hangers would have been a new architectural concept when Artaud wrote his manifesto, as the infrastructure of commercial aviation was in its infancy and these vast structures, built to shelter equally vast but surprisingly fragile airplanes, were built with the same economy that characterized barns. These spaces were generally surmounted with an arched roof, as
arches are the most efficient way of spanning large distances, and were longer than they were wide, as it is easier to span a shorter distance and utilize repeated arches to gain depth. The twin demands of cheapness and strength result in buildings with extraordinarily obvious tectonic features. Designed purposefully, they have an elegant economy of form and structure. This may have been part of what attracted Artaud to these spaces to begin with. The way in which they respond to the simple requirements of span and support lends them their own distinct internal logic, different from anything created specifically for the theater. It is worth noting that he did not suggest building new structures, as the proponents of the black box space did, but rather adapting existing structures, presumably keeping many of their original features intact. These simple forms, developed in response to structural necessity, were what Artaud saw as the ideal starting point for his theater.

They are also, I discovered, more similar than one might expect to the structure of the places of worship that I examined. All are nearly as high as they are wide, and deeper than they are high. St. Sebastian’s and South Church, notably, both feature raised ceilings in the center of their spaces, resembling the ceiling profile of barns and simple arches in form if not in structure. Adath Israel is closer to a plain square room, and the ceiling is nearly flat, but the balconies overhanging the edges of the sanctuary have a similar effect to the columns and side arches at St. Sebastian’s, making the space appear wider at the floor and narrower at the ceiling.

The theatrical spaces are more varied than the places of worship, but the outlines of their spaces are generally similar. The CFA’s auditorium is square in elevation, with a flat ceiling—the structural possibilities of reinforced concrete
having rendered arches superfluous—but nonetheless shares a common shape, both in
plan and in section, with the other buildings studied. The ’92 Theater is a more
complicated building: its shell is that of a barn or great hall, with mortared sandstone
walls and a simple timber-framed roof, concealed by the more elaborate false ceiling
and timber work visible from within. In the case of *Labyrinths*, an entirely separate
hexagonal enclosure was built within the interior space. The full space within the
’92, however, is fairly similar in shape to that of the other locations, and in structural
terms the building is very nearly a barn—indeed, the timber-framed queen post truss
that holds up the grid and ceiling was likely by the fabricated by the same craftsmen
that built barns in the Connecticut area. Lastly, though the actual roof at Oddfellows
is at least high, and the interior space quite extensive, the lighting grid effectively
lowers the ceiling height considerably, and the “wings” curtained off at either end cut
into the floor space considerably. For *Treasure Island*, the audience was situated in
two sections, facing each other across the playing area—much like *Labyrinths*, a set
design and adaptation of the space that had little to do with its broader spatial
characteristics.

Overall, despite the variety of function and intent, the internal space of the
venues studied showed remarkable consistency in plan and section. Whether they
were open halls or split by columns, they more or less shared a common shape, which
resembled a simple barn unexpectedly much. The proportions of the spaces,
moreover, demonstrated a remarkable adherence to the Golden Ratio: while none
could be said to reflect precise proportions of 1 to 1.618, the ratio of width to depth
was never less than 1 to 1, and never more than 1 to 2. So, although specific
dimensions were not obtained, the observed ratio of height to depth likewise adhered
to similar proportions. Artaud himself may not have meant to address the Golden
Ratio in his theories, but it nonetheless seems to be present in the architecture of all of
the locations I studied in investigating his theories, both in width and height and in
height and depth.

The larger question of a grammar of extra-daily space is still unanswered.
While there are notable similarities in the design and spatial configuration of sacred
spaces, these appear to follow as much from the practical necessities of worship as
from the desire to produce specific effects in an audience. The visual frame that
surrounds the officiants in all the places of worship analyzed is effective in directing
the audience’s attention. Mass worship requires large covered spaces, which are most
efficiently built with repeated arches. It seems that concerns such as these, rather
than mystical processes, drive the incorporation of these features into the spatial
vocabulary of ritual spaces. This is not to say that it is impossible to apply such
features to theaters. Indeed, some aspects of the architecture of places of worship,
specifically the transitional spaces, are already incorporated into theater design, in
some cases in even more complex ways.

The overall effects that sacred spaces have on their congregants seem tangible
and replicable, but what makes each space uniquely suited for the enactment of its
specific ritual is crucial. In Grotowski’s words, “the essential concern is finding the
proper spectator-actor relationship for each type of performance and embodying the
decision in physical arrangements.”24 To this I would add the necessity of developing

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24 Grotowski, 20.
a coherent iconography of a production. That is: a spatial and performative rationale for the design choices made, according to a common understanding of the performance and a belief in its effectiveness. It is necessary to overcome the “unwillingness to harness [oneself] to any specific code of belief complete with a liturgy that involve[s] shaping space in a specific way”—if theater is to touch the sacred, then the play-text must become the liturgy, its spatial considerations must be precisely embodied in the set, and the play’s space must be shaped in an appropriate way.25 The incorporation of transitional spaces, a spatial configuration that focuses attention in the desired areas, and a structure with a strong internal logic are all elements that can be used to aid in the creation of liminal experience, but they are crude tools, and ultimately dependent on the strength of the performative techniques. In Peter Brook’s words, “it is the ceremony in all its meanings that should [dictate] the shape of the place, as it did when all the great mosques and cathedrals and temples were built …[but] the outer form can only take on real authority if the ceremony has equal authority.”26

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25 Wiles, 53.
26 Brook, 45.
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Kilde, Jeanne Halgren. When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of

Turner, Victor. From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play. New York:

Wiles, David. A Short History of Western Performance Space. Cambridge:
Locations

The Center for the Arts Theater
Built 1973; Architects, Kevin Roche/John Dinkeloo
Oedipus Set Design (2007): Zachary Bruner
275 Washington Terrace, Middletown, CT 06459
(860) 685-3035
http://www.wesleyan.edu/cfa

The Patricelli ’92 Theater
Built 1868 as Rich Hall; Architect, Joseph Cummings
Renovated 1930 and 2003; Architect Unknown
Wesleyan University, Wesleyan Station, Middletown, CT 06459
(860) 685-2787
www.2ndstage.org

Oddfellows Playhouse
Built 1900, Renovated 1994; Architect Unknown
Treasure Island Set Design (2008): Dan Mellitz
128 Washington Street, Middletown, CT 06457
(860) 347-6143
www.oddfellows.org

St. Sebastian’s Roman Catholic Church
Built 1930; Architect Unknown
155 Washington Street, Middletown, CT 06457
(860) 347-2638
http://www.stsebastianct.org/

Congregation Adath Israel
Built 1929; Architect Unknown
8 Broad Street, Middletown, CT 06457
(860) 346-4709
http://www.adathisraelct.org/

South Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Built 1867; Architect Unknown
9 Pleasant Street, Middletown, CT 06457
(860) 346-5006
http://www.southchurchmiddletown.org/