

Professor Alan Short

MA(Cantab) Dip.Arch RIBA FRSA. Following education at both Cambridge and Harvard, Alan worked with Edward Cullinan on a number of Civic Trust Award winning projects before starting his own practice in 1992. He has handled a wide range of building types including performing arts spaces such as the Contact Theatre, Manchester; Coventry Arts and Media Centre; Poole Arts Centre and the Garrick Theatre in Lichfield. He is Professor of Architecture at the University of Cambridge and is currently undertaking the first studied approach to evaluating the factors which make theatre buildings successful.

First speaker: Alan Short

I have 15 minutes which is the shortest time in which any architect has ever spoken about anything so I will have to be very, very disciplined! Thank you very much for inviting me to this enormous gathering of the theatre friendly. I am an architect and my practice, Short and Associates, has reconfigured several theatre buildings. I am also the Professor of Architecture at Cambridge University. I am very unusual in being a practitioner who is also quite deeply embedded in a higher education institution. This is really terrible; there used to be many more people doing this, and I am very interested in bringing the worlds of practice and research together for their mutual benefit. As practice becomes more congested, with greater complexity, risk avoidance and smaller margins, the time to speculate becomes very squeezed. As a result the top end of the research community should be becoming more and more called upon, trying to provide more extended, more detailed, more speculative thought about the very practical business of making buildings. In a sense this project is, hopefully, going to set a precedent for encouraging people to do that.

Building for the arts, and perhaps building particularly for the performing arts, is a particularly rich subject of study. We are starting to think that this is a building type for which there is no single convenient template; it is very difficult to pursue the analogy of car manufacture, as you really cannot churn out theatres efficiently in the way that you can cars, standardised and mass produced, and the relevance of that is that there have been various attempts, of course, to reform construction here in Britain so that it relates to that idea.

The project that I am describing is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Prof Alan Short introduces the emerging findings of the study he is undertaking into the factors affecting arts building projects in the UK. He describes the process for the Contact Theatre in Manchester, The Lowry, Poole Arts Centre and Leicester Performing Arts Centre. Management consultant Howard Raynor addresses the factors for success after the project is completed, and consultant David Staples presents the results of sounding the delegates opinions.

The buildings that we are looking at are the ones shown opposite, and these studies are very detailed. The idea is to compile a complete history of the design and construction of these buildings so we look through all the meeting minutes, right from the beginning, all the cost plans, all the budgets, all the difficult correspondence and we interview everybody we can possibly find who was connected with the project. It takes a very long time! I thought the one thing that would go completely wrong with the project would be that people would be inclined not to tell us everything and not to show us all the documentation. To our great astonishment everyone has been very forthcoming. Even though you would think a lot of the information is commercially sensitive, people have been fantastically helpful.

We are looking at Hackney Empire which, as some of you will know, is an intense revivification of an Edwardian theatre with a new-build extension. The Contact Theatre is a project on which I was the architect; the reason that there are two projects that I was involved in is I thought that I might be the only person prepared to tell the whole story, however embarrassing it might be! The Contact Theatre was a major reconstruction and addition to a 1963 building. It was attempting to be very sustainable which caused difficulties as I will explain in a moment.

The Lowry is an arts building which has really been used as a weapon of regeneration. It does not have a permanent theatre company. This is another very interesting story and involves probably the most famous architect in the world at the time, James Stirling. Another scheme is the new Performing Arts Centre in Leicester which replaces the Haymarket and is an extraordinary vision of a building. Rafael Viñoly is a world superstar architect with a very audacious idea which was described in a presentation earlier in Conference¹. Then we have the Poole Arts Centre, the other project in which I had some involvement. What is really interesting about Poole is how the clients rigorously defined and defended their vision, certainly without telling me or any of the consultants and that has been a very fascinating discovery. Finally the Belgrade in Coventry, which is a hugely interesting post-war building, the first post-war theatre building in Britain. It was also intended to be iconic at the time; a social condenser in a kind of vigorously socialist way, which is now receiving a second auditorium.

¹ National and Civic Showplaces, Volume 6 pages GM6-15 through 6-21