Take a bow

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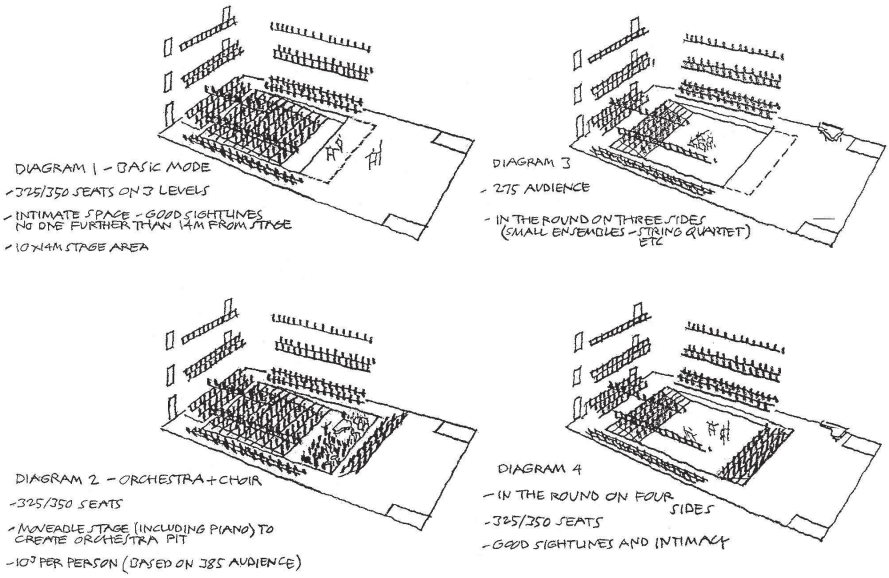
Many schools find that the original sports hall is no longer fit-for-purpose and this can be ***a natural fit*** for a theatre conversion

Performing spaces for school and community

Niamh Cronin, associate, van Heyningen and Haward Architects, lays the foundations for school theatre design that will not only benefit the school and its pupils, but it's local community too.

The value of performing arts is well researched and acknowledged. Exposure to performing arts contributes to a well-rounded education; it promotes creativity, wellbeing, confidence, and personal growth. These diverse skills acquired at school will extend far beyond a child's formal education and will serve them throughout their lives and chosen careers, outside of performing arts.

What is less often discussed is the significant value in the opportunities that the performing arts create for schools' outreach and engagement with their local communities. Performing arts buildings are complex and expensive, but are not used continuously. Allowing the local community to use them will enhance the profile of the school, generate goodwill and social value, and help pay for their expense and operation. For example, our 350-seat theatre at Alleyn's School, the Michael Croft Theatre, is regularly used by the National Youth Music Theatre for its professional-quality productions, bringing new audiences to the school and providing wider social value.

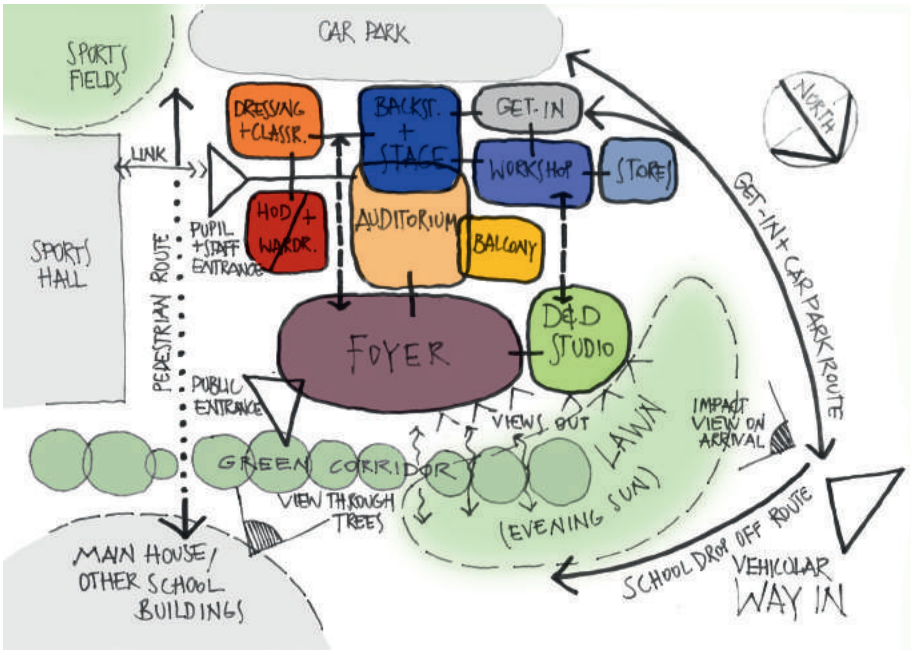


▲ Sketches of potential stage configurations for our design at Michael Croft theatre, Alleyn's School

First steps

When considering embarking on a performing arts building, it is important to be innovative in writing your brief: to tailor it to your specific needs, and to be ambitious about the connections you want to make with the community. Whether a new build project, or a refurbishment/conversion of an existing building, your brief should consider the facilities required in the building, access to them, and their operation and staffing. It is important to understand the competition and what existing spaces are available for hire in the area, to identify a gap in the market and then refine your brief and business plan accordingly.

This type of building is a long-term investment for a school and requires long-term thinking. It is likely that fundraising will be necessary for the project to be viable, and to do this you need a clear vision of the value this building will create for the community as well as your school. It is important to review the ambitions of a benefactor or donor, and how well these will fit into the realities of running the building in the future. If your budget doesn't fit the brief, consider a phased approach, but always keep in mind the value proposition as well as the key goals and ambitions of the project.



▼ Adjacency diagram of our early concept design for the Whitty Theatre, Luckley House School

Best design for a commercial asset

A building offers best value when it is highly utilised, and performing arts spaces are no exception. To maximise utilisation, in our experience performing arts buildings need to be carefully designed so they cater well for both school and community users, have modest operational and maintenance costs and dedicated staff. These staff need appropriate job descriptions to make them responsible for the smooth running of the facility, including managing and supporting both the school and community uses. Considering the position and layout of the building, and built-in safeguarding considerations with effective zoning and access control, will make it much easier for your school to let it out.

Considering shared use from the outset allows the building to be a ●▸

positive commercial asset. Performing arts buildings can be hired out for productions from external companies (touring theatre companies, local music, dance, drama groups or film clubs for example), and for events, and this revenue can cover much of their operational and staffing costs.

If a performing arts building is to be commercially let, there are three key items to the success of the letting:

- employing a full-time theatre technician who is responsible for lettings and technical support;
- a clear access strategy to ensure safeguarding; and
- good transport links and adequate parking.

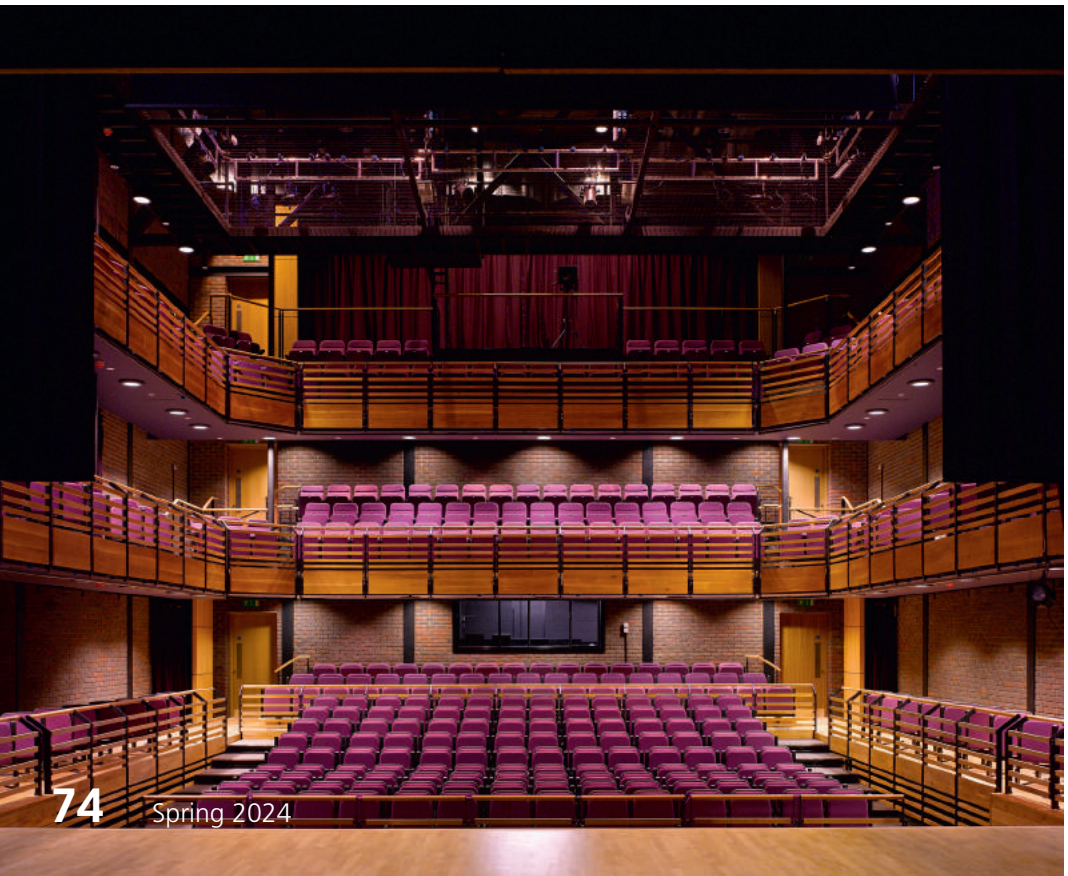
Luckley House School commercially let their performing arts building, The Whitty Theatre, very successfully. The theatre had an ambitious brief with a modest budget. The school's approach was to spend money wisely on the quality of materials and creation of exciting places that are multipurpose. The local town, Wokingham, has no venue for touring theatres, and so the school theatre has become the regular venue for local companies and touring shows who come to the town:

"Our vision with regard to external use was to balance events which contribute to marketing the school by raising our profile and reputation in the local area but may raise less revenue, with purely commercial events to generate income. Two years on the bookings have far exceeded our expectations. We have not had to incur any costs on marketing the premises as we have more enquiries that we can manage. School numbers are rising rapidly and we know that the theatre has been a very significant contributor to the growth". **Norman Patterson, former bursar, Luckley House School**

The design of a performing arts building requires thoughtful integration of lighting, acoustics, flexibility of use and cutting-edge audio-visual technology, while creating an intimate space for performance with good sight lines and ergonomic seating for the audience. The front of house spaces need to be seamlessly served by the back of house spaces. Careful space planning is required to ensure the smooth running of the facility.

Acoustics

Finishes to a performance space should not only serve an aesthetic purpose but also contribute to acoustic conditions. The form of the space, along with the material choice will profoundly affect acoustic performance. To achieve this at the Whitty Theatre, while creating a welcoming and intimate environment, brick was used as a structural and finishing material. The octagonal orientation of the brick walls paired with the acoustic material to the soffit and sound absorption of the slatted timber guardrail, creates an exceptional acoustic space which is ideal for speech and music.



▼ Michael Croft Theatre, Alleyn's School, used by the National Youth Music Theatre among the other community groups

Flexibility

For a performing arts facility to be truly flexible, and for it to be utilised in a variety of ways by both school and community, it does need proper facilities in terms of lighting and audio visual equipment. However this doesn't need to blow the budget. At the early stage of a project it may be advisable to consult with a specialist theatre consultant to get a robust audio visual (AV) brief that is within budget.

The AV specification goes hand-in-hand with the appointment of a theatre manager. It is important that the person managing the building has the correct technical ability to ensure the building is used to its full potential.

To unlock the commercial potential of a performing arts building, due consideration must be given to positioning on your school site, to ensure that there is easy access for visitors, and that there is the ability for the facility to easily be used out of hours, with no risk to safeguarding. This is not possible on all sites, but with good planning and a robust access control strategy it is achievable in most cases.

Flexibility is almost always a requirement for a performing arts building, due to a tight budget and space. For the design of the Whitty Theatre, this was considered for every space in the brief to maximise potential.

Multipurpose foyer

Designing a pit in an auditorium allows for the possibility of extensive options for stage set ups, from end stage format, thrust or flat floor. The stage and pit area are thought of as a kit of parts that allow for multiple configurations, depending on required use and type of production. At the Whitty Theatre the theatre consultant designed a highly flexible, manually operated stage and seating arrangement.

A theatre foyer is often an under-utilised space in a school. At the Whitty

Theatre the space was designed for multipurpose use. Simple additions such as power and data to allow for a mobile screen means the space can be used for teaching different group sizes or as conference facilities. An added benefit is that the foyer space is large enough for the school to have their full governors' meetings, instead of needing to meet off-site. Folding timber screens can be opened out and the foyer becomes a gallery space to display pupil artwork or host an event. The foyer is equipped with a small bar and cloakroom which is used for both theatre performance and as a gathering space with refreshments for other occasions. This dramatically increases the lettable potential of the building.

▲ Foyer, Whitty Theatre, Luckley House School

Ancillary rooms

The Whitty Theatre brief included two dressing rooms and a drama classroom. As these spaces are never used at the same time the solution was to combine them. The drama classroom can be divided with a folding sliding screen into two dressing rooms. Bespoke joinery conceals a mirrored wall to the dressing rooms, while also doubling as a storage area for tables if the drama classroom is used for rehearsals. By making the spaces versatile this keeps the building affordable.

Circulation space in a performing arts building is an inefficient use of space. To deliver the brief on this small footprint the design decision at Whitty was made to increase the width of circulation areas to allow these spaces to be utilised for other activities. The circulation area that links the foyer to back stage is used as a wardrobe and costume alterations area, and the circulation area between auditorium and dressing room doubles as a green room.

Repurposing existing buildings

Another option to explore is if an existing, underused, building on the site can be repurposed. Many schools find that the original sports hall is no longer fit-for-purpose. This can be a natural fit for a theatre conversion, due to the proportions of the hall, however, the brief requirements to ensure that the space has excellent acoustics, sightlines, AV, as well as good access for visitors, generous front of house and well positioned support spaces still apply. Often the best solution is a well-positioned extension to the sports hall to create the additional spaces required, and to unlock issues with circulation areas and back of house connection. A building conversion can be a more economic option, as well as having a lower carbon footprint, and gives an underutilised building a long-term viable use.

When embarking on this type of project schools should firstly ascertain the value of their proposal, taking a holistic approach, and considering the value for education, school ethos, income generation, and social value.

When setting the brief of the project, don't shy away from ambition. Set a brief that is bespoke for your estate that can serve the school community for future generations. Do your market research and establish how your facility will become a valuable asset to the community, and a commercial asset for you.

Remember that people make a place, and this is paramount to a performing arts building. The building's frequency of use will make it a more valuable asset to the school. The theatre manager is the person that will be key to this high utilisation.

Performing arts facilities allow a school to reach beyond itself to benefit pupils and the community.

◀ Entrance and foyer to the Whitty Theatre, Luckly House School

Author
Niamh Cronin
Associate, van Heyningen and Haward Architects

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