

A Word

'Theatre'

A landscape architect who found the profession after tiring of working as a building architect recently told me he had started to see buildings as nothing but 'boring utensils'. Still, the reality of creating buildings as tools means that architects are highly aware of the performative and instrumental functions of both buildings and of their profession. They see not just the programmatic possibilities of built spaces, but also the theatrical possibilities within them, whether this be the dramatic play of light across a wall surface or the potential for a person to appear, vaunted and elevated, at the top of a flight of stairs.

The idea of the *theatrum mundi* is a very old one, certainly predating William Shakespeare's verse from *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances, / And one man in his time plays many parts ..." In Shakespeare's time the roles that people played on the stage of life would be clearly delineated, with public dress, speech, and mannerisms reinforcing class and other hierarchies such as those of the trades. Each individual would be acting out a role on the public stage. Though this is less true in an age where we value individualism and self-expression and in which we like to pretend that we are still not bound by hierarchies of wealth and class, there is still great value in thinking about our public roles and how we play them.

Building architects are often great actors with a clear understanding that they inhabit a role. Think, for example, of Le Corbusier's great stage presence as evidenced by films of his lectures. Or perhaps Philip Johnson's chameleon-like adaptations of both his public role and his style throughout his career. For more contemporary examples, we might point to Richard Rogers' pink and acid-green ensembles, or to the great swirl of hair, cloth, and haughtiness that is Zaha Hadid. When a client procures the services of an architect, they are also paying for a performance, and the better an architect delivers a showstopping presence, the better they are paid, and the better their services are seen to be. Though to be sure the majority is not composed of celebrities, many architects carry off their roles with a certain élan.

Possibly because of the vast range of our profession, landscape architects aren't nearly as good at 'owning a room'. There are few landscape architects cast in the 'starchitect' mould. Notable exceptions might be the formidable Martha Schwartz or the colourful Ken Smith, but of course it is of note that they are exceptions. If we grumble about being asked too little to lead projects, or that we receive too little media attention, then in many ways we have ourselves to blame for not mastering the performance of design and putting ourselves in the public eye. We needn't appropriate either the arrogant egos that are building architecture's stereotype or try to be starchitects. Then again, those of us who are capable should work towards creating an image in both dress and action that creates the theatre of power and of the lightly exotic that gives spice to the performance of our professional lives.