

Conference 11 Report

# Converting Spaces ~ Creating Theatres

14 June 2011

The  
Theatres  
Trust



Protecting theatres for everyone

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Conference 11

# Converting Spaces ~ Creating Theatres

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## Conference chair

**Joyce McMillan** The Scotsman

## Session chairs

**Billy Differ** Operations Director, Delfont Mackintosh

**Dan Watkins** Project Director, Chichester Festival Theatre

**Deborah Aydon** Executive Director, Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse

## Contributors

**Neil Wallace** Head of Programmes, De Doelen

**James Sargant** Former owner, Watermill Theatre, Newbury

**Alexander Wright** Co-Artistic Director, Belt Up Theatre

**Alex Marker** Associate Designer, Finborough Theatre, London

**George Ferguson CBE** Ferguson Mann Architects and Founder, Tobacco Factory, Bristol

**Jessica Sutcliffe** Architect, Square Chapel, Halifax

**Lyn Gardner** Theatre Critic, The Guardian

**Pauline Nee** Head of Historic Buildings, John McAslan and Partners

**Andy Arnold** Artistic Director, Tron Theatre, Glasgow

**Christopher Richardson** Director, Theatre Futures

**Mike Knowlden** Director, Blanch and Shock Food Design

**Eddie Redfern** Little Theatre Guild and Archway Theatre, Horley

**Jez Bond** Artistic Director, The Park Theatre, London

**Dave Hughes** Director, Hughes Jones Farrell

**Jon Satow** Senior Project Manager, Cragg Management Services

**Dr Ben Todd** Executive Director, Arcola Theatre, London

**Neil Woodger** Director, Venue Planning and Design, Arup

**David Jubb** Joint Artistic Director, Battersea Arts Centre, London

**Steve Tompkins** Director, Haworth Tompkins Ltd

**Marcus Davey** Chief Executive and Artistic Director, Roundhouse, London

## Reporter

**Dr Alistair Fair** University of Cambridge Department of Architecture

## Photographer

**Laura Braun**

## Production Manager

**Andy Shewan**

## Assistant Production Manager

**Chris Stone**

## Development Consultant

**Caz Williamson**

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## Theatres Trust Staff

**Mhora Samuel** Director

**Suzanne McDougall** Marketing and Development Officer

**Kate Carmichael** Resources Officer

**Damian Le Sueur** Designer

**Fran Birch** Records Officer

**Paul Connolly** Operations and Development Administrator

**Mark Price** Heritage and Planning Adviser

**Rose Freeman** Planning Policy Officer

**Tim Atkinson** Theatre Buildings Services Adviser

**Clive Dixon** Finance and Monitoring Officer

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# Mhora Samuel

Director, The Theatres Trust



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Bringing the theatre industry together to develop a deeper understanding of what makes a good theatre is an important part of the Trust's work. This year's conference at the Pleasance on the 14 June looked at theatres that have been converted from other buildings and considered their value in the theatre ecology.

It was a really positive day. It established a number of important areas that make a converted theatre special. In this excellent report by Alistair Fair he summarises the contributions of our speakers and draws together their experiences and those of many of the delegates along with 'design' principles that emerged from the day.

We tested the question of when a found space becomes a theatre. Neil Wallace commented that you can only ever find a found space once. Another observer noted that once there is a commitment to the building and it undergoes the act of conversion, it has become a theatre, and should be treated with the respect that goes with any other theatre. At the end of the day I felt we had only started exploring the nuances and subtleties in the relationship between a found space and the potential for its more permanent legacy as a theatre.

We wanted to look at this subject in part, as a response to these times of austerity where costs matter and viability and sustainability are key. There was also the question of the extent to which theatres design is now influenced by the vernacular of the found space. The Theatres Trust has started to see an increase in interest in the conversion of other buildings into theatres and those that are already converted are also looking at to how they can retrofit and re-imagine their spaces to meet

rising costs and artistic requirements. The question of sustainability and how it is defined is also one that is central to the work of the Trust. The definition of sustainable development is also being tested through the new National Planning Policy Framework which will guide the way in which the built environment is utilised to achieve economic growth. It promotes the view that the presumption for decisions on planning applications should be based on sustainable development.

The Theatres Trust's conference next year on 12 June 2012 will look at the question of 'Delivering Sustainable Theatres' and will examine how theatres meet the challenges of the four pillars of sustainable development – economic, social, environmental and cultural. It will draw on the experiences of the theatres participating in our Ecovenue project and look at how all theatres need to be managed and maintained to fully participate in the sustainability agenda.

My thanks go to everyone that helped to make this year's conference such a success including the many attenders, Trust staff, conference production team, and our sponsors – without whom the event would not take place. My special thanks go to our contributors who gave excellent accounts of their trials, tribulations and triumphs, our Keynote Speaker Neil Wallace for his insight and our Conference Chair Joyce McMillan who so wonderfully steered the development of the conference and kept us focused on the day.

I look forward to seeing you in 2012.

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# Joyce McMillan

Conference Chair



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It was an inspiring day, when we gathered at Pleasance, Islington in June for this year's Theatres Trust conference on Converting Spaces - Creating Theatres. The weather was beautiful, and the venue perfectly chosen; the Pleasance itself, after all, is an old London Bus Company timber store turned theatre, a building with almost a century of history behind it, a place in the story of its community, and a structure that is always demanding new ideas and new solutions from the people who run the venue.

And if the setting was right, then the contributions from those who spoke at the conference were even better; a sustained, day-long meditation on the qualities of passion and determination needed to turn neglected, discarded, unfunded and often threatened buildings into places full of creative life, where the stories of the communities in which they sit can be retold, celebrated, and expanded to embrace the world, rather than swept away by the tide of history.

So we heard about the need for persistence, the "can-do" attitude that keeps working away at a conversion project, even when the practical and bureaucratic difficulties seem insuperable. At the beginning of the day James Sargent, the former owner of the Watermill Theatre, wondered whether the conversion of such a building would be possible today, given the weight of official regulation; by the end of the day, it seemed clear that almost anything is still possible, given enough determination and resilience.

We heard about the need for flexibility, the almost infinite capacity to listen to the space in hand, and to adapt projects to what the space is telling you. George Ferguson of the Tobacco Factory talked of "slow architecture"; others of the building as

an extra creative partner in the project. But all agreed that found spaces are never completely "empty"; and Lyn Gardner reminded us that while many found spaces become permanent creative centres, sometimes, when they have had their say, they must be allowed to fall silent again.

And then lastly, across all the contributions, we heard of the way in which creating theatres by converting spaces reaffirms the deep connectedness between the theatre world and the rest of society, as theatre moves through the communities it serves, occupying abandoned spaces, and providing new centres for shared experience when old ones have gone. In the course of this conference, we heard how found spaces developed as theatres or arts centres can reaffirm and celebrate vital aspects of history, save much-loved buildings that have lost their original function, provide new centres of creative life for fragmented communities, attract new audiences, and look forward to a world of new, sustainable models of building and enterprise.

Few of the projects we discussed fulfilled all of these functions; but all fulfilled some of them. And although the development of found spaces, and the work created within them, is just one part of the theatre scene in the UK, it was clear - after this fine day of discussion and reflection - that the processes involved in finding, loving, developing and using such buildings provide a rich source of new inspiration and thinking for our whole theatre culture; and brings a powerful new sense of connection and possibility back into our work in purpose-built theatres, when we return there from the converted mills and barns, factories and tramsheds, churches, town halls and railway arches, that have now become such a vital part of our theatre life.

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# Introduction

Islington's Pleasance Theatre – a converted warehouse – formed an appropriate setting for theatre makers, architects, managers, consultants and technical specialists to discuss the challenges and rewards of converting and putting on performances in buildings not originally designed for theatre. The UK has many successful and loved examples of converted buildings that are used for performance, but it is comparatively rare that their specific qualities (or the specifics of creating them) are discussed.

Steering us ably through this complex subject was Conference Chair Joyce McMillan, drama critic for *The Scotsman*. She was supported by session chairs Billy Differ, Dan Watkins, and Deborah Aydon, and by our keynote speaker, Neil Wallace.

The day was shaped by four themes: 'dreams and realities', 'short life or long life', 'managing the conversion', and 'architects of the found space'. Discussion of these themes brought together an impressive array of speakers who shared their experiences of creating innovative performance spaces in converted buildings. We heard of magical discoveries of forgotten buildings and spaces, of positive (and negative) encounters with the planning and licensing processes, of re-fashioned creative working relationships, and of the potential of performance venues to contribute to the regeneration and cultural life of our neighbourhoods and communities.

This report offers a selection of highlights from the day's presentations and the lively discussions that followed. It concludes with a number of design principles drawn from the day.

A number of important themes emerged: the extent to which the original buildings impose

on the act of conversion; the extent to which theatre should take ownership of the converted building; the relationship between theatres and their surroundings; the chance to use theatre as a catalyst for change; the opportunities to rethink working practices; and the relationship between converted and purpose-built theatres.

This subject is well worth our attention. As Joyce McMillan pointed out, converted buildings are intimately connected to society. They tell a story of their communities, revealing something of their present condition as well as the past.



Joyce McMillan

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# Opening Address

Neil Wallace, De Doelen

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Before introducing our Keynote Speaker, Neil Wallace, Joyce McMillan set the agenda for the conference, noting that she had, in her capacity as drama critic, seen many shows in converted spaces, and that many of these venues had been 'brilliantly chosen'. She suggested that a key theme of the day would be to consider the kinds of spaces used for theatre, and the rationale for the use of these spaces. The colonisation of abandoned buildings by artists, she continued, tells a story of society more generally: churches being available as congregations dwindle; inner-city schools becoming redundant as populations decline; town halls being closed upon local government reorganisation; and factories abandoned as the pattern of industry changes. Converted spaces, she continued, offer a chance to think about the relationship between art and the city, and to reflect on the meaning of performance venues of all kinds.

McMillan then introduced Neil Wallace, noting that his work in creating performance venues in existing buildings had provided her with an induction in the subject. Wallace was Deputy Director of Glasgow's 1990 Cultural Capital of Europe programme. He opened and programmed the Tramway. This venue, a former tramshed that had subsequently been used as a museum, was taken over for performances of Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, and continues in use to the present day. Now based in the Netherlands, he produces work in converted buildings alongside his role as Head of Programmes at De Doelen.

Wallace noted that a found space can only be found once; after that, one has to find new ways of working with what becomes a converted building. His address focused on three key areas. The first was the legacy of Peter Brook on the creation of performance venues in converted buildings. Wallace suggested that Brook's work offered a series of principles for success: resilience and the need to keep looking for possible spaces; the value of working with a team of experts; the need for clarity about one's own instincts and values; the possibility to achieve a lot with a little money; and the contribution of good luck.

*"If there are people who don't have space, but are looking for it, keep looking."*

Neil Wallace

He went on to consider the liberating quality of converted space. The act of creating space, he suggested, begins in the mind and so is unbounded. But it must then navigate the real world of legislation and licensing. Wallace questioned the gap between the mind and the real world. How can the two be brought together?

Wallace's third theme was entitled 'posterity and anti-posterity'. Citing Howard Barker, he described theatre as the 'last illegitimate space in society'. He asked how we create spaces that comprise real and meaningful environments for artistic and social experiences. He used the example of Ricardo Bofill's Catalonia National Theatre, where construction delays meant that the backstage areas were complete long before the auditorium. These spaces were used very successfully for performances. Eventually, when the auditorium was completed, the actors and directors were 'dragged into the building'. How do we capture the fleeting energy, danger and rowdiness that had been felt in those backstage spaces, far removed from the grand and beautifully designed space of the theatre 'proper'?



Neil Wallace

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**Chair, Joyce McMillan**

**James Sargant**

Former owner, Watermill Theatre, Newbury

**Alexander Wright**

Co-Artistic Director, Belt Up Theatre

**Alex Marker**

Associate Designer, Finborough Theatre, London

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## Dreams and realities

The first session explored the artistic visions that shape and drive the use of converted spaces, and the relationship between initial dreams and the art of the possible. Chairing the session, Joyce McMillan asked what the converted space offers an artistic director.

### *A strong vision delivered through an ad-hoc process*

The session was begun by James Sargant, who in 1981 bought the Watermill Theatre, Newbury, with his wife, Jill Fraser, and sold the freehold to a Trust in 2008. The building had first been established for performance in the mid-1960s through the vision of David Gollins. Sargant began by suggesting that the Watermill perhaps offered an example of how not to manage a conversion.

*“The Watermill was achieved with little regard for rules and regulations, a certain amount of ignorance, and a lot of luck.”*

**James Sargant**

Yet a number of important points emerged to explain why the theatre has been a success. A series of ad-hoc interventions by an army of friends, family and volunteers over several years created a courtyard-type auditorium; an adjacent barn provided some front-of-house facilities, though in the early days female patrons found themselves required to use the toilets in the nearby farmhouse. Likened by Sargant to the painting of the Forth Railway Bridge, the story was one of constant change and improvement, year on year as resources became available and needs changed. Essentially, this example demonstrated how a strong initial belief in the potential of this atmospheric building had, through hard work and careful negotiation of an ever more complex landscape of rules and regulations, generated a special venue. Sargant concluded by questioning whether this kind of accretive project could happen today.

### *Immersed in space and co-existing with it*

Alexander Wright continued proceedings by considering the particular attractions of performing in buildings not originally designed for theatre. He is Co-Artistic Director of Belt Up Theatre, a group based in York that has made work in buildings across the country. It recently staged *Macbeth* in the Clerkenwell House of Detention. Wright described the ‘childish sense of adventure’ that leads him to seek out these venues, and the opportunity that ‘immersive theatre’ offers for

audiences to become fully involved in a work. If theatre is about pretence, then, he argued, surely one should come into full contact with the work rather than watching it from a distance. He asked whether converted venues hold memories within their walls, noting of his experience of the House of Detention that an initial desire to ‘take ownership’ of the space had given way to the wish to co-exist with it. The evidence of the prison’s gruesome past had been humbling, reminding Wright and his collaborators that this was a place with a human past, that it was perhaps somebody else’s space belonging to another time.

*“How do you make theatre in a found space which isn’t your space, which is someone else’s, which belongs to history and time and everyone else who’s been in it?”*

**Alexander Wright**

### *The uniqueness of the converted space*

Alex Marker was the third speaker of the session. He has been for nearly ten years the Associate Designer at the Finborough Theatre, an intimate venue located above a pub in Earls Court, London. This venue is one to which he is constantly drawn back on account of its unique qualities; whereas touring shows have to be designed to fit a multitude of venues, the Finborough offers a chance to engage with one specific space. Marker described the constant evolution of the venue, likening it to the process of moving into a new house and letting things ‘find their natural place’. The experience of presenting and seeing a play here is an immersive one. The small scale of the venue means that





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audiences in effect 'step into another world', with design all around them, and the resulting sense of contact, inclusiveness and connectedness generate a sense that they are 'stakeholders' in the play and experience the 'close-up magic'. He noted that need for creative design solutions where intimate spaces and small budgets are concerned, and the need to distil the essence of a play text. A single object can hold the key to a scene.

*"The audience is so close, sometimes you could bring on something as big as this water bottle, and it has a significance, it has a physical presence that will be far greater than if it appeared on stage at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane."*

**Alex Marker**

Marker concluded by suggesting that it might be interesting to work to a larger budget, but he questioned would more money have had a negative impact on the special qualities of the venue?

#### **Rounding up**

The presentations led to a lively debate, focusing on some of the themes that had been raised. From the floor, Ben Twist reminded us that converted spaces need not be small but that they can operate at a variety of scales. However, he continued, what links many of these spaces is the possibility that they offer to rethink relationships between actor and audience, as well as between actors and between audience members themselves. Thus perhaps the defining quality of a good converted space, whatever its physical size, is its ability to create an intimate relationship founded on an appreciation of and engagement with the appearance and history of the space.

Michael Holden developed James Sargant's emphasis on the need for a committed team by suggesting the value of expert advice.

Joyce McMillan asked the panellists how much the act of conversion is led by the needs of an artistic project, and how much it is a response to place. James Sargant suggested that successful designs at the Watermill engaged fully with the building, and Neil Wallace similarly argued that performances begin as soon as one enters these venues; content and space cannot be distinguished. Indeed, as Alexander Wright concluded, the unique attraction of the converted theatre is that the performance space acts as 'another member of the production team'.



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**Chair: Billy Differ**

Operations Director, Delfont Mackintosh

**George Ferguson CBE**

Ferguson Mann Architects; owner and founder, The Tobacco Factory, Bristol

**Jessica Sutcliffe**

Architect, Square Chapel, Halifax

**Lyn Gardner**

Theatre critic, The Guardian

**Pauline Nee**

Head of Historic Buildings, John McAslan and Partners

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**Short life or long life?**

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The second morning session gave us some inspiring insights into the value of buildings converted into theatres. Do they have a shelf life? What should be protected when they no longer meet needs?

**Slow architecture**

First to speak was George Ferguson, an architect and former President of the Royal Institute of British Architects. He spoke about the Tobacco Factory, an arts venue created within part of a redundant nineteenth-century industrial building in inner-city Bristol. The surviving building was once part of a vast factory for Wills Tobacco. Although Ferguson's ideas for the transformation of the whole site as a 'sustainable city village' were not taken up, he was able to purchase one building, some 45,000 square feet, without initially much clear idea of how it might be used. He offered a group of artists the use of part of the space, not least as a means of protecting it from vandals. Soon a theatre company had expressed an interest in working in the building and the idea crystallised of a permanent arts venue. Walls and suspended ceilings were stripped out, exposing open floorplates. Their scale, four metres from floor to ceiling, turned out to be ideal for theatre, enough to allow the installation of technical apparatus whilst still feeling intimate for actors and audiences.

*"It wasn't just a theatre in an office block, it wasn't a theatre in a block of flats, it was a theatre that everybody somehow contributed to, and the theatre contributes to everything else that was going on."*

**George Ferguson**

Ferguson believed it to be essential that the revived building experience the same close links with the local community that had once been enjoyed by the factory, whose workers historically lived locally. The agenda was set by the first play to be staged, Wills Girls, which took as its theme the lives of those who had previously worked there in order to make clear the theatre's community intentions. Commitment to the creation of a strong local economy (the 'Bristol pound') also led to the inclusion within the complex of facilities such as a café and a market.

Echoing one of the themes that emerged from the first session, Ferguson suggested that 'the walls do speak'. Having been

told that the structural columns that marched across the floors could not be easily removed, the theatre company came to accept their insistent presence and the way that they defined the space. Ferguson suggested that it was important that clients and designers learn when to stop when dealing with this kind of building, lest its special qualities be lost. Thus the staircases and detailing that were introduced during refurbishment in the 1950s remain, offering evidence of previous changes. 'Don't try too hard,' he advised, dubbing the results 'slow architecture' as a counterpoint in their constant evolution to the completed 'iconic' structures beloved of much of the architectural press.

**Evolution and luck**

Many of the same themes also emerged in the second presentation of the session, in which architect Jessica Sutcliffe discussed the Square Chapel, Halifax, a late eighteenth-century Non-Conformist chapel on the English Heritage Buildings at Risk register that had by the 1980s fallen into disuse and was threatened with demolition. Sutcliffe and her fellow Trustees were convinced not only by the building's aesthetic merit and its historical significance, but also by a belief that it might work well for performance, especially music. The process of conversion has lasted more than two decades – another example of 'slow architecture' – and has been founded on a combination of meticulous research and good fortune. A Building Preservation Trust was formed and funding sought from English Heritage. Progress has been characterised by fortunate discoveries: for example, a window hidden behind a screen of bricks revealed the original glazing pattern, which has now been reinstated. Gradually a building that was close to collapse has been rescued. It has built an audience and is now exploring avenues for further expansion and improvement works as part of a bigger scheme that includes the adjacent Piece Hall, a vast Victorian structure originally built as a market that will include provision for outdoor performances.

**The shelf life of the converted space**

Lyn Gardner, theatre critic for The Guardian, introduced herself as a 'heretic'. Denying the possibility of the truly 'empty space', she considered that all buildings contain the ghosts of their pasts; moreover, it is easy for them to become institutions that keep people out. Gardner cautioned against nostalgia, pointing to the value of theatre that connects with the community, and suggesting that reinvention can be a timely way of renewing that connection.

*"Loss is an important part of life and renewal."*

**Lyn Gardner**

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Southwark Playhouse and the Arcola Theatre, for example, are exploring the possibilities of new buildings, while the temporary venues that functioned as the Almeida during its reconstruction similarly offered exciting opportunities, and the National Theatres of Scotland and Wales have been liberated in being conceived without a single building as a focus for their work. Loss may well be more appropriate than attempting to mothball and preserve a venue that has lost its artistic *raison d'être*. For a generation that has never worked in a conventional theatre and is engaged in temporary 'pop up' work, it may seem less relevant to try to protect these spaces. Indeed, she continued, the growth of site-specific work and the creative use for individual productions of buildings of all types, including the backstage areas of conventional theatres, the idea of a converted space itself may now be redundant. While she recognised that buildings were needed in certain contexts, what matters, she concluded, is that projects are driven by the needs of artists, for they (working with experts) 'are the only reliable architects' of conversion.

#### **Buildings that appeal**

Pauline Nee from the architectural practice John McAslan and Partners made the final presentation of the morning, focusing on one recent project, the restoration of the Roundhouse at Camden, and one that is ongoing, Hornsey Town Hall. The town hall, made redundant by local government reorganisation in the 1970s and gradually run down since, is cherished by local people who are keen to 'get their special building back'. The Roundhouse similarly appealed to a wide group of people. Constructed as a railway shed and later used as a warehouse, it had first been used for performance during the 1960s and had built up a considerable mythology, having staged performances by artists including Jimi Hendrix. The recent restoration works have added much-needed front-of-house areas, new backstage facilities, plus spaces for local young people. Nee noted the length of time that these projects had needed.

*“Working on buildings like this you’ve got to go for the long haul, it’s not just a snap.”*

**Pauline Nee**

She also noted that although one can only discover historic buildings once, they may contain a variety of different spaces, each of which can be 'found'. Nee questioned the oft-held view that listed buildings can be difficult to work with.

*“Don’t be frightened by listed buildings; if it’s going to work, and it’s going to bring the building back to life, the local conservation*

*people will be on your side, because they want it to be brought back to life.”*

**Pauline Nee**

Conversion can, she concluded, offer a valuable opportunity to bring valuable at-risk buildings back into use and therefore to safeguard their future.

#### **Discussion and conclusions**

The open discussion session reiterated several themes from the presentations. Reprising a point made by Neil Wallace and Pauline Nee, George Ferguson stated the importance of continually finding new ways to work with a converted building.

*“I think that it’s absolutely vital that the project never finishes.”*

**George Ferguson**

This idea was developed by Lyn Gardner, who suggested that, while theatre may be better served by avoiding fixed venues, there is considerable value in continually looking to use spaces in and around existing venues in new ways. She cited the example of the National Theatre, whose outdoor café and external performance areas may well inculcate a sense of ownership amongst their patrons, who might in time attend a performance in the main auditoria.

Jessica Sutcliffe, asked by Billy Differ to consider what drew her to Square Chapel in the first place, noted that that she had at first felt great attraction to the building, its history and its special qualities. An arts use was one way to ensure that the chapel survived.

Two important themes then emerged. The first related to the extent to the flexibility of converted spaces. Echoing George Ferguson's idea of an evolving 'slow architecture', architect Steve Tompkins posed a question: 'how we can start to imagine new buildings perhaps or new situations which help us not to lock down the space for artists?' The second theme was that of vision and succession. Another architect, Mark Foley, highlighted the curiosity that drives artists to move forward continually, to seek out new spaces – large, small, intimate and 'alien' – and to work in them before wanting to move on to try something new. One speaker reiterated the importance of an individual vision to the acts of finding a space and starting the process of conversion, suggesting that 'when that building continues or doesn't continue is a question of whether somebody else finds that same





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**Chair: Dan Watkins**

Project Director, Chichester Festival Theatre

**Andy Arnold**

Artistic Director, Tron Theatre, Glasgow

**Christopher Richardson**

Director, Theatre Futures

**Mike Knowlden**

Director, Blanch and Shock Food Design

**Eddie Redfern**

Little Theatres Guild and Archway Theatre, Horley

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**The road to Damascus: managing the conversion**

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The first afternoon session examined ways of planning, managing and implementing conversions.

**Determination**

Andy Arnold outlined the process by which the Arches, a major arts venue (and nightclub) located below Glasgow Central railway station, was brought into being. This vast complex of arched and vaulted spaces first came to public attention as an exhibition and performance venue during Glasgow's year as European City of Culture in 1990. Subsequently Arnold pleaded for the seating banks to remain, and a twelve-month theatre licence was secured, although it later turned out that the city had intended to grant only a temporary licence. Funding from the local development agency was secured to pay the rent and a nightclub was opened to generate income. Subsequently a major Lottery grant funded damp-proofing and other essential works, the aim being to improve the venue without compromising its character. As Arnold put it:

*"I'm an old fashioned theatre person who likes the old speakeasy thing of going into a dark space and disappearing into the seedy atmosphere."*

**Andy Arnold**

Managing the Lottery-funded works offered the client team a crash course in the murky world of the construction industry and the difficulties of managing a building project on a scale far removed from the experience of most theatre people. An initial low tender seemed promising, but rising costs forced constant 'value engineering' and the scope of the project was whittled away. A further challenge was that of running the theatre and nightclub whilst construction work continued; the Arches could not afford to close or to work elsewhere. Always having to secure licences to operate the venue as a theatre (and later also as a nightclub) also presented a constant learning curve. On one occasion, it was announced at 4.30pm on a Friday afternoon that a timber dancefloor was required if a licence extension was to be granted. Timber was sourced, delivered, installed and painted, the licence was granted at 10.30pm, and at 11pm the club opened for the night, the paint still drying on the floor. The venue's ultimate success can surely be attributed to single-minded dedication on the part of its management and staff. Arnold stressed the value of a positive 'can do' attitude.

*"If you want it to happen, it will."*

**Andy Arnold****Living on site**

The creation of the Pleasance Theatre similarly resulted in the need for 'on the spot' learning. Christopher Richardson described a somewhat serendipitous set of circumstances. The company, which had grown from its successful venues at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, needed a London office and realised that it might not cost much more to acquire a building that could also be licensed for performance. Having 'gatecrashed' the opening of a bar and restaurant in a former warehouse near Caledonian Road tube station, Richardson realised the potential of the adjacent space, which had previously been used by the organisation Circus Space. In altering the building, decisions were shaped by the flow and availability of money. The first step was to move the office to the site:

*"We knew it wasn't going to work unless we lived on site."*

**Christopher Richardson**

Richardson offered a piece of friendly advice: buy a dog, so that 'when meetings go wrong, you've got somebody to talk to.' When it came to doing the work, a friendly builder was enlisted but as much as possible was undertaken by the theatre's own technicians. Design meetings were held on site; the local planning officers were brought on side to the extent that they were on occasion found helping with the construction work.

**Repurpose**

Mike Knowlden of Blanch and Shock, an artistic catering company, took the floor as the session's third speaker. He shared the experience of creating an evening event for eighty people incorporating food and performance in a former industrial building in the Midlands. This building – known as Unit 4 – had been chosen less for financial reasons than aesthetic ones: it offered a 'blank canvas'. The essentials of the work were concerned with tidying up the building, installing additional electrical services and some minor alterations.

*"Everyone involved knew that it would be a completely new experience for us, completely out of the remit of what we normally do."*

**Mike Knowlden**

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Although much of the work was done by the company's own technicians, some aspects lay beyond their expertise and here a stroke of good fortune meant that Blanch and Shock was able to draw on the resources of a local property management/ construction company, who carried out the work at reduced cost because it tallied with their own vision for the building (which they already managed). The event was ultimately judged a success, and although the total cost (excluding food and fees) was around £4500, a massive outlay compared with the cost of hiring a room for the evening. It seems to have been justified as Unit 4 has since remained in use. Conversion and construction was a new experience for the group; their experience is captured in a guide, Repurpose, which can be downloaded from their blog.

#### Capturing and disseminating advice and expertise

Eddie Redfern of the Little Theatres Guild shared his experience of the Archway Theatre, Redhill, a 95-seat non-professional, non-commercial venue created in a series of eight railway arches with an extension that houses the stage. Like the Arches at Glasgow, this kind of space presents particular challenges, including restricted height and pervading dampness. The limitations of the venue precluded the award of a public theatre licence for many years, and while the Premises Act now means that the public can be admitted to shows, the venue is still run as a club. Nonetheless, the theatre members are fond of their space, and have sought to maintain its character and integrity. A significant number of the 105 amateur-run UK venues that make up the Little Theatres Guild use converted buildings.

*"I personally enjoy visiting many member theatres where they'll say 'this is our rehearsal arch'. 'This our wardrobe kiln'. And it's these things that make our theatres unique."*

**Eddie Redfern**

The Guild offers advice and disseminates knowledge about the practicalities of running these buildings so that organisations do not have to start from scratch every time.

#### Summing up

Three points emerged from the presentations and the discussion sessions. First, that designs can be fluid. Christopher Richardson described the Pleasance as having been designed 'in the wet plaster', noting that, while a Masterplan had initially been devised, subsequent decisions had been iterative, guided by the availability of funding and modified by the experience of using the

building over time. Second, the need for advice and guidance from those who have undertaken this kind of project before. Mike Knowlden's Repurpose guide and the Little Theatres Guild both offer information to their respective constituencies; Andy Arnold went further in stressing the value of a full-time Project Manager. The third theme was the importance of clients holding on to their original vision, defending it against the machinations of the design and construction processes. Capturing and articulating an exciting vision can be a way to rally volunteers; indeed, volunteer and in-house labour can be an economical way to realise a converted space as well as giving staff and the community a stake in the venue before it opens.



Andy Arnold

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**Chair: Deborah Aydon**

Executive Director, Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse

**Jez Bond**

Artistic Director, Park Theatre, London

**Dave Hughes**

Director, Hughes Jones Farrell Architects

**Dr Ben Todd**

Executive Director, Arcola Theatre

**Jon Satow**

Senior Project Manager, Cragg Management Services

**Neil Woodger**

Director, Venue Planning and Design, Arup

**David Jubb**

Joint Artistic Director, Battersea Arts Centre

**Steve Tompkins RIBA**

Director, Haworth Tompkins Ltd

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**Architects of the found space**

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The final set of presentations asked the question 'who is the architect of the found space?' Directors, engineers and architects examined their working relationships and the influence of the theatre practitioner on conversion. The session was chaired by Deborah Aydon, Chief Executive of the Playhouse and Everyman theatres at Liverpool, the latter currently being rebuilt.

**Sharing a vision**

Jez Bond of Park Theatre and architect Dave Hughes of Hughes Jones Farrell began the session by describing the new venue on which they are working at Finsbury Park, which will provide a 200-seat auditorium and a 90-seat studio. Five flats within the site will help to fund the development. The design stems from Bond's very personal vision of a new theatre, akin to a scaled-up theatre production.

*"It's the biggest show of my life."*

**Jez Bond**

The parallels that Bond and Hughes saw between theatre production and construction were summed up in a quotation from the film *Shakespeare in Love*.

*"Mr Fennyman, allow me to explain about the theatre business. The natural condition is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster."*

**Philip Henshawe, played by Geoffrey Rush, Shakespeare in Love**

It was necessary that all involved in the project shared the vision, and that all were prepared to work to overcome the 'insurmountable obstacles' that it might present.

*"It's about the team members having passion and optimism. We would send a photo with the quote from Shakespeare in Love to our potential consultants, and we would say if you can't embrace Geoffrey [Rush], we don't want you in the team."*

**Jez Bond**

Bond and Hughes described a close working relationship, avoiding the complications that might result from a large team but one which, in requiring considerable time, may well be uneconomic in conventional terms. For Hughes, the experience has been a learning curve as he was new to theatre; for Bond, this was ideal, as he believed that the design would be less constrained by the architect's previous experience. Indeed, both architect and client have committed to an innovative way of working. Bond admitted that while 'theatre people aren't very good at following rules; here at the Park we're bending a few and I think we might make a better theatre for it.'

The design was informed by a number of visits to other theatres. It has been broken into three components. First, the building itself – fixed, permanent and expensive. The second layer comprises the finishes and fittings, which can be changed but only with a degree of expense, while the final layer is made up of the furnishings. Hughes admitted that, where the second and third layers are concerned, 'we don't know what we are going to do.' When the structure has been built, Hughes and Bond will inhabit and examine the spaces that have been created, and will then decide whether to follow their original ideas or whether to make changes to, for example, the layout of the auditorium. In essence, therefore, the building, though largely a new construction, will become something of a 'found space'.

**"Led by the building"**

Ben Todd is the Chief Executive of the Arcola Theatre, which recently moved from one converted warehouse in Dalston to another. The concept, project manager Jon Cragg told us, 'was very much led by the building and by what Arcola knew they wanted to do... the spirit of the old Arcola was to be transferred to this new building.' Todd remarked on the challenge of retaining that vision in the face of 'hand to mouth' conversion, with a tiny amount of public money and a lot of goodwill from volunteers. In fact, groups of bankers were asked to come and help for a day. The availability of money dictated progress, ideas changed as the possibilities of the building became clearer, and at times the team had to manage without a full range of professional inputs.

Todd offered a number of strategies for success.

*"Be unreasonable...but pay the price for being unreasonable."*



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### Ben Todd

Take advice, he said, but then 'do it your own way'. Work as a team; talk to each other, and to the planning authorities. Get to know the building before you decide to do anything. Change your mind. Have meetings in the building, or in spaces of a similar size to what you want, so that you can understand the design in three dimensions. Use a local contractor if you can't do the work yourself, as they are more likely to feel that they have a stake in the project and they'll come to the building when it is complete.

### 'The future of theatre'

David Jubb and Steve Tompkins offered a third way of managing the conversion process. Battersea Arts Centre has over the course of several years seen a number of performance projects which incrementally comprise a significant transformation of the building. Each intervention was guided by the artistic and practical needs of a particular production. For Tompkins, this process offered a glimpse into the 'future of theatre', re-examining the conventional working methodology of architecture by working more iteratively, like artists, in a process of 'managed instability'.

*"BAC asked us to invent the future of the theatre with them. To transform the Town Hall for improvisation and experiment by theatre artists, but also to work like theatre artists ourselves. Artists-in-residence, in fact. So on the one hand, we've begun to take the listed building back towards a more authentic incarnation as a town hall, removing generic arts centre overlays and remapping technical infrastructure so that the whole building can operate more as a found space once again. On the other hand we've been adding to the building, with production-specific intervention. Redecorations, refittings, demolitions, new theatrical layers of production for shows."*

### Steve Tompkins

Collaboration ran to the heart of the project, with Jubb describing the project team as a 'coalition of different skills'

rather than an assembly of hired experts. External parties including representatives of the local authority's Building Control department and English Heritage were treated similarly, as participants in an artistic experiment, and the result was generally positive: one show review praised the input of the Health and Safety officer. Tompkins advised those converting spaces to spend time at the start of their project really interrogating their ideas and their implications; funding should be assigned to this. He stressed the value of a full survey, detailed collaboration agreements, and communication. At Battersea, this process has allowed the creative team to continue working in (and to enhance sympathetically) a building that they loved, at a fraction of the £22 million price tag assigned to a more conventional capital project by an early feasibility study. They have, Jubb concluded, rethought the building from within rather than having a solution imposed on them.

### Discussion: constraints and opportunities

Deborah Aydon invited the panellists to consider how existing buildings dictate in the act of conversion: when does the building say 'yes' or 'no'? In the case of the Park Theatre, the narrow site has limited the number of people that can use the building on account of the need to plan adequate fire exits. At Battersea, it is the texture and layout of the building that both constrains and liberates, and the building project has acted to 'edit' these qualities. At Arcola, the size of the floor plate dictated the capacity of the venue.

From the floor, theatre consultant Andy Hayles added that money could surely be considered as much a constraint as the building. Jez Bond agreed: it would have been nice to have left more decisions open at the early stage, but to have retained flexibility and the ability to make late decisions would cost more money. In this respect, he thought, the marriage between 'vision' and money was more pressured than that between 'vision' and building. Ben Todd thought that the outcome at Arcola might not have been different with more money. His project was characterised by trying to do more with less, but he accepted that volunteer labour, though extraordinarily helpful, must be strictly controlled to avoid exploitation.

In conclusion, all agreed on the opportunities presented by converted theatres, not least for practitioners to design and create spaces to which others aspired. They can be exciting, innovative projects. Improvisation and experiment can be contagious. The challenge is to capture these qualities whilst

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**Chair, Joyce McMillan**

**Dan Watkins**

Project Director, Chichester Festival Theatre

**Marcus Davey**

Chief Executive and Artistic Director, Roundhouse

**Neil Wallace**

Head of Programmes, De Doelen

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## Reflections and next steps

Before taking questions and points from the floor, Joyce McMillan re-introduced Dan Watkins and Neil Wallace. Marcus Davey also joined the panel on stage for the final debate.

Dan Watkins began by reiterating the point that the converted building can act as another member of the production team: it can function as an extension of the set. He stressed that in any theatre project – either conversion or changes to a purpose-built venue – it is necessary to spend time in the building and to understand its significance and qualities.

*“Part of that is establishing at a very early stage the core of the project. That bit that needs to remain no matter what, no matter what financial pressures the project goes through or legislative pressures. Hold on to that for dear life.”*

**Dan Watkins**

Yet Watkins also stressed the need to keep an open mind, to allow for change as the implications and possibilities of the building become clearer.

Marcus Davey offered some thoughts on the restoration and enhancement of the Roundhouse. Beginning by pointing out that it is never wise to publicise the re-opening date until it is certain that it can be met, he continued by discussing the recent drive to create more sustainable theatres. He advised those embarking on these projects to look as far ahead as possible.

*“Try and think ten years out as much as you possibly can.”*

**Marcus Davey**

Echoing earlier contributions, he also suggested that clients should always consider whether they really need to build at all; that they should not start construction until funding for at least the initial stage of work is in place; and that community interaction is key. He further stressed the need for empathy between client and design team members, and for clear leadership.

*“It’s got to be embodied in one person, who may have lots of other people supporting them, they have lots of responsibilities, but one person has to know exactly what’s going on.”*

**Marcus Davey**

From the floor, Judith Strong stressed that it is important that bureaucracy doesn’t undermine ‘informed instinct’, as sometimes happened in the case of the complex Lottery funding procedures.

Developing the theme of ‘informed instinct’, Alex Wardle suggested that the successes of converted spaces are often because they are artist-led; in contrast, when new buildings are criticised, it is often because the brief has been changed during design or construction by a client who is not a practitioner, such as a local authority. It is sometimes easier for a client to work with a building that already exists. Similarly, Deborah Aydon commented that the Everyman project had been informed by a real understanding of what worked in the old building. These things might not work on paper but had done in practice.

Ben Twist raised the question of how funders might work in a more creative way, as ‘impresarios’. Also on the theme of funding, Jason Barnes thought conversion could well be cheaper than new construction. At the same time, Mark Foley suggested that the vast sums of money that had been available from the Lottery had undermined the creative journey that designers and visionaries need to take to realise a successful building.

Neil Wallace remarked that he had not come seeking inspiration, but that he had enjoyed it ‘in abundance’ from the day’s discussions. He noted that the ‘supply chain’ of ‘connected minds’ from initial vision to realised building was in good shape – better shape than he had imagined, even.



Marcus Davey

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*“I’ve been extremely impressed by the respect and sensitivity which has been evident in dealing with the characteristics, the personality, the spirit and the history of many of these buildings; it’s really made a big impression on me. Someone was once stupid enough to ask Henry Moore before he died the blunt question ‘what is the essence of your work, Mr Moore?’ A very brave interviewer. But he gave a wonderful answer. He said ‘truth to material.’”*

Neil Wallace

Joyce McMillan then brought the day to a close. She thanked all those who had spoken, those who had organised the conference behind the scenes, and those who had made it possible by sponsoring it. Summing up the day’s themes, she concluded: ‘Theatre responds to the drama of people’s loss by moving into these spaces and doing what human beings do best, which is reflecting on what’s happened. Reflecting on loss and finding ways of moving on, creating environments that are fit for the twenty-first century.’



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## Key Points

This final section draws out best practice and conclusions that emerged in the presentations and the discussion sessions

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### Value of converted theatres

Converted theatres can be large or small, modern or historic, but their common hallmarks are intimacy, flexibility and the opportunities they present to rethink actor/audience relationships and the interaction between performance and architecture.

Converting buildings for performance can safeguard and revitalise spaces with unique architectural features and which embody the history of communities.

Performances in converted buildings can draw in new audiences and encourage them to also attend 'conventional' theatres.

Converted theatres can act as catalysts for community regeneration. Attracting audiences to the theatre can develop markets for other business opportunities including cafés, bars, markets, shops, or units for artists and craftspeople.

Converting a building into a theatre creates more opportunities for rethinking the way the space is used. Though a found space can only be found once, the act of converting a building into a theatre can be accomplished in a single step or as a piece of 'slow architecture' over many years. A conversion provides a space which can continue to change and develop according to the needs of successive productions and generations of staff, enabling the space to be 'found' over and over again.

Approaching a building as a 'found space' opens up an aesthetic relationship with the building's former uses. If a space is considered 'another member of the production team' then every nuance of it can be explored and become integrated into the design. The experience for practitioners of working in such converted buildings can stimulate new responses to contemporary and former purpose-built theatres.

If the building is in good condition and if the capital work is managed well a conversion can be cheaper and more creatively stimulating, than new construction. By reusing an existing building it is also a more environmentally sustainable use of resources.

### Design principles

#### Starting off

**Be led by the vision.** The best converted spaces are borne of a strong vision. In some cases, conversion will be led by theatre practitioners, keen to engage with the aesthetic and spatial qualities of a particular building. In others, the vision may come from a desire to preserve a building; in such cases, an artistic use, developed with people who have sympathy with the space, offers a means to achieve that goal. In both cases, the theatricality of the space should guide what should be kept and what might change.

**Finding a space requires 'informed instinct'.** Visit potential buildings; assess what they offer in artistic terms and what other (income-generating) activities they might be able to support.

**Embrace historic or listed buildings** but be aware that they require specialist input plus timely negotiation with the heritage and planning authorities.

**A full appreciation of the age and environmental condition of the building at an early stage is important.** Undertake a full survey. What will the building need to make it manageable? It can be helpful to think about water ingress, rot, heating and cooling, drainage and plumbing, and noise. Do these areas need attention? Will they need ongoing attention in the future? How will such attention be financed?

**Visit existing theatres – both converted and purpose-built – to understand what works and what doesn't work, and to see ideas in action.**

**Don't assume that conversion will be cheap or quick.** It can be possible to realise a lot in a short space of time with a little money, but the outcome will depend on the scale of the project and the nature of the building itself.

**Get the community involved from the outset** as they will be crucial to the success of the venue. Conversion offers the opportunity to return a building to the community.

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## Developing a design

**If possible, live with the building before committing to anything.** Evaluate its qualities, both positive and negative.

**Get expert advice** from people who have done this before – as clients, technicians, theatre consultants and designers – and from specialist organisations such as The Theatres Trust, the Association of British Theatre Technicians, and the Little Theatres Guild.

**How much building work is necessary?** Prioritise required work. Decide what needs to be done now (for technical or licensing reasons, e.g. electricity, toilets), what might be done in the future, and what might be 'nice to have' but isn't essential.

**Develop a design brief that relates a schedule of accommodation to available spaces in the building.** Be clear about the spaces required for front of house and hospitality, auditoria, stage, backstage, access, education, offices and production and match these to what the building already offers. This will also help to identify what will need to change, be adapted or added.

**Forge a close team** and appoint design/construction professionals who share the vision and who work at this scale. Devise a client structure that allows easy decision-making and keeps the project manageable.

**Allocate funding to the early stages of the project** so that ideas can be fully explored and costed and to avoid storing up problems. Be aware of what hasn't yet been finalised and allocate funding (and time) accordingly.

**Be aware that there is no formula.** The geometry and aesthetic of the space, as well as the creative vision, will be the key driving factors, along with money. Think about materials, textures, the 'ghosts' of the space. How much does the creative vision depend on them? How strong will the theatre's relationship be with the building's former uses?

**A converted theatre can be a continuous project.** But at each stage, know when to stop, and listen to the building.

**Be flexible and expect iteration:** Limited funding may well necessitate a phased project over many years, but the resulting breathing points can be helpful in allowing you to evaluate work so far. Be aware though that changes can cost money and can be wasteful.

**Maximise the opportunities presented by the building,** for example including a café or community facilities can plant the seed from which further activities will grow (as well as potentially subsidising the maintenance and further development of the building). They will add value to the venue.

**Be open to new ways of working** as a design team, client team, or as funders.

**Take up offers** of materials and labour. Volunteers and theatre staff can make important contributions: think about how the project can be structured to involve their expertise.

**Hang on to your vision** through cost-saving exercises ('value engineering') and other turbulence. Be aware of what is essential. Don't lose features that are essential to a successful outcome.

## The building in use

**Allow time for things to settle and to 'find their natural place'.** You can find the building only once, but you can keep on finding new ways to work with it.

**Be open to further change** and new responses to the building.

**Maintain supportive relationships with the local authority and heritage authorities** as they can be helpful allies.

**Think about the future.** As those with the original vision move on consider who will take on the leadership of the organisation and what impact this will have on the protection and potential development of the space. Think about how to maintain and manage the space so that it can be 're-found' by successive generations.

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# Attendees

Jonathan Adams Capita Symonds Architecture  
Sian Alexander Julie's Bicycle  
Andy Arnold Tron Theatre  
Deborah Aydon Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse  
Matthew Baker Foster Wilson Architects  
Jason Barnes Freelance Production Manager  
Darren Beckley Stage Electrics  
David Beidas New Stages Ltd  
Sheila Benjamin Shoreditch Town Hall Trust  
Ken Bennett-Hunter Journalist  
Ken Berreen Cooper Controls Ltd  
Petrus Bertschinger Theatre Projects Consultants  
Peter Bingham Central School of Speech and Drama  
Fran Birch The Theatres Trust  
Chris Bissett Student  
Sandy Blair Creative Scotland  
David Blyth Ambassador Theatre Group  
Suzanne Bochmann AMPC  
Jez Bond Park Theatre  
Paul Braddock Wigwam Acoustics  
Laura Braun Conference Photographer  
Joseph Burke Draper Group Ltd  
Kate Carmichael The Theatres Trust  
Roland Chadwick Audio Light Systems Ltd  
John E Clarke Acuity Management Solutions  
Tony Coates White Light Ltd  
Mike Cook Acuity Management Solutions  
Richard Couldrey Battersea Arts Centre  
Paul Crosbie Charcoalblue Ltd  
Trevor Cross Audio Light Systems Ltd  
Ashley Davies Austin-Smith:Lord  
Rob Dickins CBE The Theatres Trust  
Deborah Dickinson Freedom Studios  
Billy Differ Delfont Mackintosh  
Ruth Eastwood The Theatres Trust  
Alistair Fair Conference Reporter  
Giles Favell Charcoalblue Ltd  
George Ferguson Tobacco Factory  
Rob Firman Austin-Smith:Lord  
Charles Fisher Student  
Mark Foley Burrell Foley Fischer  
Paul Franklin Charcoalblue Ltd  
Andy Fretwell Bonnington Theatre  
Lyn Gardner The Guardian  
Brian Gavin Greenock Arts Guild  
Elena Giakoumaki Charcoalblue Ltd  
Matthew Gibbs Student  
Gavin Green Charcoalblue Ltd  
Fiona Greenhill The Albany  
Ben Hanson Charcoalblue Ltd  
Byron Harrison Charcoalblue Ltd  
Andy Hayles Charcoalblue Ltd  
Helen Heathfield Julie's Bicycle  
Michael Holden Michael Holden Associates  
Clare Hughes Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios  
Dave Hughes Hughes Farrell Jones  
Arnot Hughes Lawray Architects  
Peter J Wilson The Theatres Trust  
Steve Jones Student  
David Jones South Downs College  
David Jubb Battersea Arts Centre  
Lesley Kelly Purcell Miller Tritton  
Richard Kingdom Arts Council England  
Mike Knowlden Blanch & Shock Food Design  
Mark Lewis Levitt Bernstein Associates  
Robert Longthorne Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse  
Chris Maddocks Farnham Maltings  
John Marsh MEB Design  
Tim Masters BBC  
Suzanne McDougall The Theatres Trust  
Joyce McMillan Conference Chair  
Alex Marker Finborough Theatre  
Judith Mellor The Theatres Trust  
Allan Miller Lawray Architects  
Martin Moore  
John Muir Foster Wilson Architects  
Pauline Nee John McAslan and Partners  
Eddy O'Hare Audio Lighting Systems Ltd  
Gavin Owen Charcoalblue Ltd  
Michelle Owoo Freelance Director  
Martin Palmer White Light Ltd  
Alexander Parsonage Artists Anonymous Theatre Network  
Diana Pao The Theatres Trust  
Ian Perry Arts Council England  
Mark Price The Theatres Trust  
Czarina Ray Foster Wilson Architects  
Eddie Redfern Little Theatre Guild  
Deborah Rees Roses Theatre  
Tyrone Rhoomes Battersea Arts Centre  
Bill Richards Philips Entertainment Lighting  
Christopher Richardson Theatre Futures  
John Riddell Theatre Projects Consultants  
Jeremy Roberts ETC Ltd  
Matthew Rooke The Theatres Trust  
Sophie Rose Student  
Lynsey Rowe Arts Council England  
Jeff Salmon Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse  
Mhora Samuel The Theatres Trust  
James Sargant Propeller Theatre Company  
Jon Satow Cragg Management Services  
Dawn Schuette Threshold Acoustics LLP  
Nikki Scott Stage Technologies Ltd  
Andy Shewan Conference Production Manager  
Chloe R Skry Student  
Philip Sparkes Maltbury Staging  
Chloe Spiby-Loh Student  
Joel Staley ICIA, University of Bath  
Jon Stevens Charcoalblue Ltd  
Ian Strickland Charcoalblue Ltd  
Chris Stone The Theatres Trust  
Matt Stridgen White Light Ltd  
Judith Strong Arts & Architecture Projects  
Jessica Sutcliffe Architect  
Flip Tanner Fisher Dachs Associates  
Cherng-Min Teong Student  
Dan Thompson Empty Shops Network  
David Tinto Student  
Ben Todd Arcola Theatre  
Steve Tompkins Haworth Tompkins  
Tim Turner Girls' School Day Trust  
Ben Twist The Theatres Trust  
Anthony Vine White Light Ltd  
Neil Wallace De Doelen  
Ben Wallace The Albany  
Nicola Walls Page/Park Architects  
Dan Watkins Chichester Festival Theatre  
Mark White ETC Ltd  
Sarah Wickens Chats Palace  
Edmund Wilson Foster Wilson Architects  
Neill Woodger Arup  
David Wright Arts Architecture International Ltd  
Alexander Wright Belt-Up Theatre

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