



## Theatre spaces: an introduction

### Summary

This advice note looks at what constitutes a theatre under law as well as the key components that make up a theatre building. It also offers a guide to some of the different types of theatre buildings. This is one of a series of advice notes – others can be found on our website at [theatrust.org.uk/how-we-help/advice/advice-notes](https://theatrust.org.uk/how-we-help/advice/advice-notes) and we'll be adding more over the coming months.

### Who is this note for?

This advice note is intended as an introductory overview for anyone considering designing a new theatre building or making changes to an existing building, in particular theatre owners / operators, community / volunteer groups, local authorities and developers. It does not replace the need to seek specialist advice, but sets out the issues to consider.

### Contents

- [What is a theatre](#)
- [Theatre buildings](#)
  - [Auditorium](#)
  - [Stage house](#)
  - [Front of house facilities](#)
  - [Back of house facilities](#)
- [The need for expert advice](#)
- [Conversion of theatres to other uses](#)
- [Role of the Theatres Trust](#)
- [Useful publications](#)

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## What is a theatre?

The Theatres Trust Act 1976, which established Theatres Trust as the National Advisory Public Body for Theatres, defines a theatre as:

*'...any building or part of a building constructed wholly or mainly for the public performance of plays'.*

This may seem a broad definition but theatres come in many shapes and sizes. They can be new buildings or existing, they can be purpose-built, or converted from different uses. They can range in scale from small performance spaces up to large opera houses. They can be seasonal and removable; they can be temporary or permanent. Some are integrated with other facilities, such as cinemas, libraries or concert halls; some sit within arts / community centres; others are standalone. Theatres may form a prominent landmark in the townscape or be an important historic building and protected by statutory listing.

Theatre performance spaces also vary. Different types include proscenium arch, thrust stage and theatre in the round – for further descriptions of these types of auditoria refer to the Auditorium section of this advice note. Other theatre types include black box or studio theatres, site-specific theatre (i.e. a location other than a standard theatre which has been adapted for a performance), hippodromes (similar to circuses), and promenade theatre (where the audience move from place to place following actors and performance).

## What is a play?

The Theatres Trust Act gives 'plays' the same meaning as in the Theatres Act 1968. This defines a play as:

*(a) any dramatic piece, whether involving improvisation or not, which is given wholly or in part by one or more persons actually present and performing and in which the whole or a major proportion of what is done by the person or persons performing, whether by way of speech, singing or action, involves the playing of a role ; and  
(b) any ballet given wholly or in part by one or more persons actually present and performing, whether or not it falls within paragraph (a) of this definition*

The above definition embraces a wide genre of performance, from grand opera through to stand-up comedy – and, indeed, many theatres will cover a very wide range of uses. Traditional plays can range from one-man shows with no set, up to elaborate musicals with chorus, scenery and orchestra pit. Beyond the traditional, many theatres also now need to accommodate a very wide range of other performance, which might include stand-up, gigs, community events and performances etc.

## Planning use class

Theatres have their own use class *sui generis* under the General Development Order 2006, which means that any change of use requires planning permission. This special status is an important form of protection. Once a theatre moves into another use class, there is a possibility (dependent on use class) of further changes of use without permission, which may

lead to alterations harmful to future theatre provision – please contact us if you have any questions about planning applications.

## Theatre buildings

Theatres are complex buildings. The foyers, bar and auditorium seen by the audience tell only part of the story. Behind the public face is the theatre's engine room – the back of house. This may be as big as – or bigger than – the public spaces themselves. It is important to recognise this 'iceberg effect' when planning a theatre. Theatres can turn out a lot larger than expected. Auditoria need to be acoustically separated from their surroundings requiring lobbies and heavy construction. Stages need space all around them, including wings. Flytowers (see below) need height.

It is important that front and back-of-house areas are not considered in isolation of each other. A theatre operates as a whole with public and performer / staff areas interlinked in many different ways and movement between these areas is crucial to effective and efficient operation.

## Auditorium

The auditorium is the heart of any theatre and, arguably, the most difficult part to get right – in particular getting the perfect relationship between audience, performer and architecture. Contemporary theatre is technically complex, including intricate sound and lighting installations, and stage engineering such as stage lifts, revolves, and flying systems to lift scenery into the 'fly tower' – it is therefore vital that specialist advice is sought at an early stage.

The architecture of the auditorium needs to take into consideration:

- acoustics (both audibility of performance type and acoustic separation to the surrounding environment)
- sightlines (which will differ dependent on performance – e.g. for dance, it will be important to see the performers' feet)
- modern audience expectations in relation to heating and cooling requirements
- audience movement (both for safety and also to ensure a good flow to toilets and bars at interval times and the beginning and end of a performance)
- other technical considerations such as control rooms, lighting bridges, rigging points for sound and lighting etc.

Regarding the scale, while there are no hard-and-fast rules, but as a guide very small venues might have an auditorium of capacity of up to 200-250 seats and small-scale theatres might range up to 550 seats. Larger 'playhouses' (designed for spoken plays) can have up to 850-900 seats, whereas theatres designed for musicals will be larger still, up to 2,000 seats. In historic theatres, seating can seem cramped for today's audiences and wider seats with increased row widths for greater legroom may be desirable. Today's audiences also expect greater comfort levels and for historic theatres, updating mechanical systems for heating and cooling is often necessary.

The size and style of the stage will depend on the type and scale of shows required by the business plan – for further information refer to [‘the need for expert advice’ section](#). In a traditional theatre, the stage is separated from the audience by a ‘proscenium arch’. Theatres where the audience directly face the stage are known as ‘end-on’, where the audience wrap around three sides of the stage as ‘thrust’, and where the audience completely encircles the stage, as ‘in-the-round’. Directors may also want to use other formats and many new theatres aim for flexibility, so that different formats can be used for different shows. This also allows the theatre to cater for other events, for example, conferences, weddings, etc. Ensuring optimum sightlines for all layouts and selecting seating that can be quickly and easily reassembled will be important.

## **Stage house**

Stage house is the term used to describe the area above, below and around the stage, as well as the stage itself.

In proscenium theatres the stage house normally includes a flytower – a space above the stage that allows scenery to be flown in and out during performances. The flytower is fitted with a grid at high level, which forms the access deck for the stage suspension systems or bars for the scenery. Bars are also rigged for lighting, sound and audio visual. The flytower is usually the highest element of a theatre and it is recommended that the grid is set at a height at least two and a half times the height of the proscenium arch. The fitting out of flytowers and the specialist equipment within requires expert advice – Theatres Trust can provide a list of theatre consultants who will be able to help. For those theatres without flytowers, it is still important to maintain adequate space above the stage for technical facilities.

Wing space is another consideration. This is the space to either side of the stage, which allows performers to enter and exit the stage without being seen by the audience. It is also where large props and set are stored when not used, where quick changes might take place, the location for prompt corner etc. For dance, the wings allow a run off area for dancers exiting the stage. The height of the wing space should typically also allow for scenery to be moved easily on and off the stage.

Not all theatres require such specialist stage house facilities, for example studio and black box theatres. These are flexible performance spaces which when stripped to their basics are essentially a single room painted black, the floor of the stage at the same level as the first audience row. They will usually allow for the flexible seating arrangements to enable the room to be set up in a number of different configurations and enable a wide variety of productions to be presented.

## **Front-of-house facilities**

A spacious, welcoming and visible front of house area is a fundamental design requirement for any theatre. Theatres are increasingly reliant on income provided by their front-of-house space. The food and beverage offer will be an important consideration, as will the operating hours. Many theatres are now open throughout the day in addition to standard performance times, providing café / bar facilities for the public as well as spaces for community use /

rehearsal / conferencing etc. Visibility and accessibility will be key to all day operation – it is vital that this is not lost, particularly to those theatres that form a part of a larger, mixed use development. Signage and signposting are also important, particularly for theatres not on a main thoroughfare.

Adequate toilet provision is essential for modern audiences. The number and location need to be considered, particularly in relation to the high usage levels at intervals and pre and post-performance. Appropriate water pressures and refill mechanisms should also be considered.

Other areas for consideration include box office, cloakroom and merchandise outlets. Support spaces, such as offices, staff welfare facilities, bar and ice cream storage, kitchen facilities, cash up rooms may also be required.

## **Back-of-house facilities**

The back-of-house facilities are just as important to the success of a theatre design as the public-facing areas. Issues that need to be considered for backstage include:

- the number and location of dressing rooms including WC and shower provision
- allocation of green room space
- stage side facilities such as quick change and stage kitchen
- the nature and extent of wardrobe provision including wig and laundry rooms
- the requirement for office space
- location of the stage door for performers, technical staff and postal deliveries etc
- movement of larger items between back of house areas (flight cases, costume rails etc)
- access to the stage get-in for large vehicles
- the exclusion of modern traffic noise and the elimination of low level sounds from plant
- the safety and efficiency of modern stage machinery and scenery movement apparatus, and of lighting and sound systems
- the provision of storage and workshop space

Relationships and connectivity between back-of-house areas is important, for example allowing space for stage cross over, locations of vertical circulation, the proximity of WCs to dressing rooms etc. It is also important to ensure that corridor spaces provide adequate width and height to accommodate costumes.

A theatre stage must have clear access for vehicles delivering and carrying away scenery and apparatus. In some cases, it is necessary for long pantechnicons to back up to the stage 'get-in'. These activities will often happen out of normal working hours and at weekends, and can be noisy and disruptive. Theatres should be designed to ensure that these areas face away from any existing residential accommodation. Where new residential accommodation is being built alongside an existing theatre, the 'agent of change' principle should be taken into consideration within the new development (read more about agent of change in our advice note Promoting theatres through the planning system).

## The need for expert advice

Before designing a theatre, it is important to understand what kind of work will be shown in it – refer also to [‘What is a play’](#) section above. An arts consultant – a management consultancy that specialises in arts and culture – will be able to help determine what will be viable for your venue and provide support to enable you to draw up a robust and sustainable business plan. This will be an important factor in determining the brief for your theatre – the starting point for any capital works project. The brief will contain the goals and aspirations for the venue as well the practicalities relating to the building type and a schedule of accommodation. It will include every aspect of the theatre, from stage size, through to service yard arrangements and numbers of dressing rooms etc. For example, if the theatre’s viability depends on twinning it with conference or hire-out use, this will need to be factored in from the outset. We’ll publish advice notes on business plans and briefs later in 2019.

The design team (architects, structural engineers, cost consultants etc) will be an important part of any capital works project. Where relatively straightforward repairs or minor improvements are being planned it may be acceptable to employ an architect or a surveyor without specialised knowledge of theatres, and to rely upon the technical staff of the theatre itself to provide the expertise required. But anything more extensive – not least a new building – will need the advice of theatre experts. In addition to an architect, it is recommended that a theatre consultant is employed, preferably from the project inception. Theatre consultants will work with an experienced theatre architect both to help with the shape of the auditorium, and to provide expert advice on all the technical aspects of theatre design, such as lighting, sound systems, seating, and stage engineering.

The technicalities involved in theatre buildings do require an extensive design team and this must be taken into consideration when looking at overall project costs. The exact make up will vary, but a core team will generally comprise architect, theatre consultant, structural engineer, mechanical and electrical consultant, acoustic consultant, cost consultant and project manager. However, historical consultants, fire and safety consultants, catering consultants, access consultants, highways / traffic consultants, architectural lighting consultants, landscape architects and planning consultants are all consultancies may also be required. Due to the complex and specialist nature of theatres, it is always recommended that consultants who specialise in performance buildings are used. For example, consultants designing theatre ventilation systems will need to be experienced in making sure ventilation provides audience comfort without creating distracting noise.

Where a listed building is involved it is recommended that a conservation statement or even conservation management plan (dependent on the listed status and historical importance of the building) is undertaken at an early stage. This should be commissioned from an independent expert and will help determine the extent to which alterations may be permissible. It is important to commission a heritage consultants with specialist theatre knowledge.

Theatres Trust can provide a list of experts who have worked on similar, recent projects if required.



## The role of the Theatres Trust

Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres and a statutory consultee on theatres in the planning system. We provide a free advice service for anyone planning to build a new theatre, adapt a building to theatre use or looking to make changes to their existing theatre. Contact us at [advice@theatrust.org.uk](mailto:advice@theatrust.org.uk) with information about your project and how we can help.

For more in depth advice we also provide an Advisory Review service. An Advisory Review is a peer review process targeted at theatres developing capital projects. For a small fee, we will convene a group of appropriate experts and lead a discussion to review proposals for building projects at key stages of development, or to address issues encountered as your project develops. After the one-day panel session, you will receive a report setting out the main discussion points and recommendations, to support you to get the best result for your project.

## Useful publications

- [Theatre Buildings A Design Guide](#)
- [Technical Standards for Places of Entertainment](#)
- GLA Cultural Facilities Design Toolkit – coming soon