"The auditorium is often considered a static object designed to contain performance. But performance cannot be contained... it exceeds architecture, especially in this age of media spectacles, fluid technologies and uncontainable bodies. So what role does the auditorium now play other than forcing us to perform as well-behaved spectators? If we acknowledge that architecture itself performs, as space-in-action, then perhaps we can explore new strategies for experiencing live performance as a more dynamic, creative and communal spatial event."

Provocation by Professor Dorita Hannah,
Architecture Commissioner for PQ 2011-OISTAT Theatre Architecture Competition

The central theme of this competition as expressed by the above provocation is a call to re-imagine theatre in fundamental ways that extend to the role of architecture in the experience. Architecture is re-imagined as an active participant in theatrical phenomena and can even be viewed as a generative force in the process and not merely a venue for the event. This provocation is further amplified by the challenges inherent in the site itself: a modestly proportioned yet significant 12th Century gothic cathedral in Prague, St. Anna's. A successful proposition would address both the ambitions and challenges of contemporary theatre and the weight of the historical significance of the site in a way that will enable the building to contribute its historical character to the ambitions of contemporary theatre.

One aspect of the approach to the design provocation of this historic site involved the notion of a palimpsest, "a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing"[1] This concept, when extended to physio-cultural phenomenon, refers to an accretion of forms in which traces of the original are still present. In this project, St. Anna's church will form the original layer, as well as layers of successive repairs and renovations. The proposal for this competition will form the contemporary layer through which the theatre program will be a lens through which past, present and future can co-exist as a complex aggregation of forms and meanings. It was clear early in the design process that neither a reverent

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[1] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2000 ed., s.v. "Palimpsest."

maintenance of historic forms nor an entirely contemporary *tabula rasa* theatre design would satisfy the potential depth and richness of the site and program. The goal was, henceforth, to create a dynamic armature that would enliven and inform the ambitions of the experimental contemporary theatre program while retaining the weighty atmosphere of the historic site.

The two precedents that informed the design strategies of this competition envision theatre as an all-encompassing experience that incorporates the best historical approaches with an unwavering commitment to cutting-edge multimedia technology and avant-garde theatrical strategies. Walter Gropius conceived of the 'Total Theatre' in the 1920's; a provocative, flexible conception of theatre that incorporated a multimedia strategy sixty years ahead of its' time. Robert Lepage's Ex machina theatre company realized these multimedia ambitions in a way that is provocative, emotional and challenging.

Gropius' 'Total Theatre' hinged around two central concepts: a flexible configuration that enabled a classic proscenium theatre as well as a three-sided Elizabethan arrangement and an immersive theatre-in-the-round configuration. The other enlivening concept that informed our theatre design was the intrinsic nature of the multimedia experience.

"In my Total Theater…I have tried to create an instrument so flexible that a director can employ any one of the three stage forms by the use of simple, ingenious mechanisms. The expenditure for such an interchangeable stage mechanism would be fully compensated for by the diversity of purposes to which such a building would lend itself. An audience will shake off its inertia when it experiences the surprise effect of space transformed. By shifting the scene of action during the performance from one stage position to another and by using a system of spotlights and film projectors, transforming walls and ceiling into moving picture scenes, the whole house would be animated by three-dimensional means instead of by the " flat" picture effect of the customary stage." [2]

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[2] Gropius, "Introduction." In Gropius and Schlemmer, *Theater of the Bauhaus*, pp. 12-14.
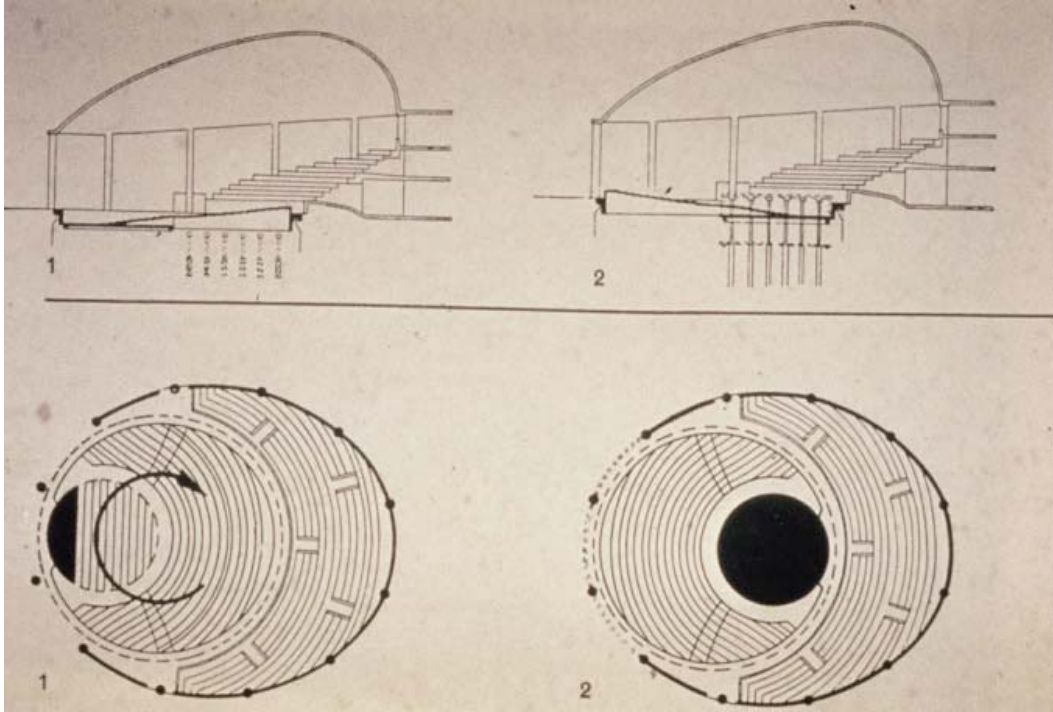
Total Theater, Walter Gropius[3]

The flexibility imagined by this proposal informed our strategy in the design of the theatre. Extending the seating into the courtyard of the church allowed for a configuration in which the seating could be exclusively indoors, outdoors or both. The mechanism that enabled this transformation was another important element of our design, both formally and functionally.
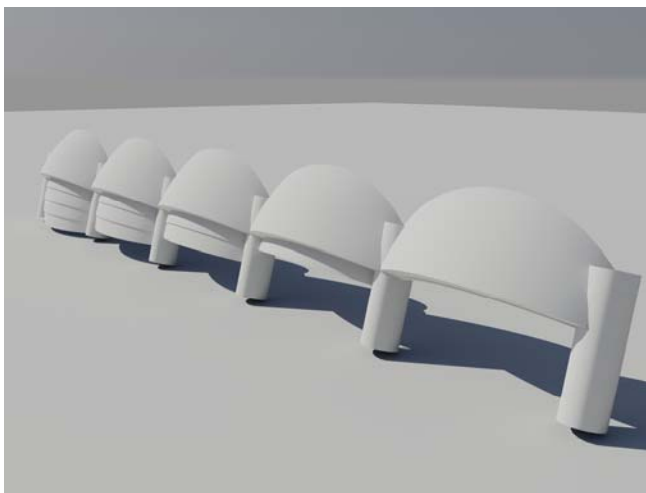
"Armadillo" aperature-design for OISTAT Theatre Architecture Competition by Andy Oh and Scott Turner

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[3] Hekman Digital Archive: Gropius' design for Total Theater. http://library.calvin.edu/hda/node/1442

Walter Gropius never realized this ambitious vision of theatre, but his ideas survived and resonated with future generations of architects, directors and theatre designers. The form of the theatre would henceforth become as much a field for innovation and experimentation as the performance itself.

Robert LePage is an icon of Canadian theatre. He is an actor, director, writer and designer. He has written and directed critically acclaimed plays and films, designed award-winning productions for Cirque de Soleil and tours for Peter Gabriel. It is not his acclaim that interests us, but his approach to the theatrical experience. He believes that all instruments at the artists' disposal should be employed to create an experience in which "…theatre, like the world itself, evolves very rapidly, as do its practitioners and its audiences. The influence of film and television and the new dramaturgical possibilities offered by multimedia have turned narrative conventions upside down, opening the way to new forms of expression and new languages of staging that have only barely been explored."[4]

The Blue Dragon, Theatre Ex machina. 2009[5]

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[4] LePage, Robert, 2009, *Ex machina: Creating for the Stage*, pg. 7
[5] Live Design Blog: Ex Machina Selects Lectrosonics Wireless Technology
http://blog.livedesignonline.com/briefingroom/2009/04/23/ex-machina-selects-lectrosonics-wireless-technology/

These two seminal figures of architecture and theatre have opened up the avenues that this competition challenges. Our response to this was to create a theatre in which the beauty of a medieval cathedral could melt into an engaging multimedia experience, rich with historical resonance and a contemporary, surrealistic experience that could transcend space and time. We felt that a multimedia armature that was transparent could allow the power of the historic building to resonate with the audience while allowing the possibility of an aggressively avant-garde theatre to build another powerful layer into the theatrical experience.

Our idea was simple, yet provocative-build seating into the cathedral along the north-south transepts and build a curved steel armature that can house a transparent LED screen and more conventional theatre lighting. In additional to the sophisticated technical infrastructure this armature would provide, it would also be a striking sculptural object in its own right. We envisioned that it would set a powerful dramatic tone for the spectator even before the house lights dimmed and the performance on stage commenced.

"multimedia armature" for OISTAT Theatre Architecture Competition by Andy Oh and Scott Turner

In purely formal terms, this sculptural armature is designed in a contemporary architectural language employed by architects such as Norman Foster, Co-op Himmelblau, and Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas. Structural steel formed in complex, irregular curves with glass infill is a fairly recent development made possible by advances in digital modeling and fabrication.

British Museum Great Court Roof by Foster + Partners[6]

These examples are especially relevant to our design, not only formally, but in the manner in which they create new spaces and programmatic relationships within the

[6] Wikipedia: British Museum Great Court Roof
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/19/British_Museum_Great_Court_roof.jpg

existing architectural contexts in which they are placed. These interventions, like our multimedia armature, significantly modulate the architectural experience through the relationship between new and existing structures.

Milan Trade Fair by Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas[7]

Our design for the OISTAT Theatre Architecture Competition attempted to address two separate yet intimately connected issues: to retain the historical resonance of the site, St. Anna's church in Prague, while creating a contemporary theatre that would foster experimentation and innovation and be an iconic architectural experience. We feel that the theatre configuration and infrastructural armatures we designed engaged these fertile and challenging issues in a provocative and potentially successful manner.

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[7] Designboom: Massimiliano Fuksas http://www.designboom.com/eng/interview/fuksas.html

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