

## Literature Review

I began my design journey through the study of Architecture, drawn to how people experience a space and how size, colour and texture can work together to create a world that can impact mood, emotional and physical. In architecture I enjoyed designing the in-between spaces between buildings which people experience walking to work or to school. The journey itself became the story of a city. These are shared experiences lived in individual ways with the intensity negotiated with their own histories and stories. 'There was a time when I experienced architecture without thinking about it', ponders Architect Peter Zumthor, (p9, 1998)<sup>1</sup>, in his collection of lectures 'Thinking Architecture' a book that I long forgot about and has re-emerged with poignancy.

It has been over twenty years since I first found this book in a small bookshop at the 'Mies Van De Rohe Pavilion' in Barcelona, a place I have revisited several times as a beautiful reminder of how the right combination of architectural elements and spaces can connect with a person's soul. I would sit in the quiet balmy Spanish air and relish in the perfectly placed reflections on the marble surfaces, the shallow pool of water and the walls of glass.

Zumthor begins to describe childhood memories, of his aunt's house 'That door handle still seems to me like a special sign of entry into a world of different moods and smells.'(p9) He continues 'memories like these contain the deepest architectural experience that I know. They are reservoirs of the architectural atmospheres and images that I explore in my work as an architect'(p10).

This discreet book describes his common thoughts and reflections of design and practice commenting on fundamental aspects such as composition, logic, invention, problem solving and construction, not only in architecture but in music, poetry, and film. In his final chapter 'Teaching Architecture, learning architecture', Zumthor states 'The strength of a good design lies in ourselves and our ability to perceive the world with both emotion and reason'. This I take from my architecture practice into theatre design where spatial rules can be broken and reimagined, but the truth of my intention remains in the pursuit of that emotional connection between stage and audience.

Little did I know when I read this book for the first time, that my design journey into Theatre had already begun. Design for theatre is like fantasy architecture, where thoughts can take flight to lead an audience by their senses with characters, light, sound, space, and imagery. Everything on stage becomes symbolic of a time, a place, a context and how we frame those symbols depends on the journey we're leading them on.

My first introduction to theatre was a lecture given by visual artist and Theatre designer Robert Wilson whose lecture I attended whilst on an Erasmus scheme in Lund, Sweden in 1999. At the time, I didn't know who he was or what he did. I recently found an article online for Theatre Art Life<sup>2</sup> by Liam Klenk (2020) who describes brilliantly the effect of attending one of Wilson's lectures at the University of Arts, Zurich, Switzerland, describing how he 'will never forget seeing his [Wilson's] eyes sparkle in the lecture, when he described a specific scene'. Wilson describes 'one actor would stand completely still. Over the course of four hours only his little finger would slowly move from being extended to re-aligning itself with the other fingers'. This is where our design practice differs. I believe in narrative, storytelling, and

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<sup>1</sup> Zumthor, P. (1999), *Thinking Architecture*; Second Edition; Switzerland: Birkhäuser

<sup>2</sup> Klenk, L. (2020), *Robert Wilson: The Master of experimental theatre*, Theatre Art Life, Sept 9<sup>th</sup>, available at: <https://www.theatreartlife.com/artistic/robert-wilson-the-master-of-experimental-theater/>

a logic that an audience can relate and connect with. Where I find him inspirational is his perspective outside of traditional theatre, playfully juxtaposing visual, spatial, and audible elements that create tension and fluidity, stretching and concertinaing time like it's putty.

Coming fresh to his work through the lens of a student architect, I was mesmerised to see how far a visual language could be taken. I didn't know much about Postmodernism or Postdramatic theatre as Hans-Thies Lehmann's study (2006)<sup>3</sup> describes as 'Theatre after drama. Despite their diversity, the new forms and aesthetics that have evolved have one essential quality in common: they no longer focus on the dramatic text.'(p1). My work is mostly grounded in text, though my move to opera and dance has opened a new vocabulary and I find myself enjoying the abstract and ephemeral but still in the context of storytelling. There is something interesting in creating a space where there is 'a kind of universal history that appears as a multicultural, ethnological, archaeological kaleidoscope. Without restraint his [Wilson's] theatre tableaux mix times, cultures, and spaces.' (Lehmann, p78)

I visited an exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery *Barbara Kruger: Thinking of. I Mean AA. I Mean You* 'American artist Barbara Kruger was born in 1945 and has in incredible way of using text, images, memes, and soundscapes in a politically impactful way. Kruger developed an iconic visual language that frequently borrows from the techniques and aesthetics of advertising and other media. Since the 1970s, her artworks have continually explored complex mechanisms of power, gender, class, consumerism, and capital.' (2024)<sup>4</sup>

I found her work evocative, current, and horrific yet because she uses simple frames to surround her montages of porn, billboards and newspaper headlines, they make the viewer/voyeur somehow obfuscated of responsibility in its enquiry. People were looking at this barrage of imagery conveying vulgar consumerism, close-up with the same intent as if they were looking at a Monet.

There can be beauty in horror, theatre has the ability to connect the two, beauty can be a channel for giving challenging works space to breathe and process. *Silence*, (Tara, 2024)<sup>5</sup> with its sensitive stories of those who experienced the 'unspeakable violence' during India's partition, needed to be framed in a way that highlighted and contained the stories. Like remnants of a valuable historical object displayed in a museum the background noise melts away in its black velvet abyss and we see the beauty and story in what's left.

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<sup>3</sup> Lehmann, H. (2006), *Postdramatic Theatre*, First Edition; Oxen UK: Routledge

<sup>4</sup> Kruger, B. (2024), *Barbara Kruger: Thinking of. I Mean AA. I Mean You*, Exhibition of works, blurb from website: <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/barbara-kruger-thinking-of-you-i-mean-me-i-mean-you/>

<sup>5</sup> *Silence*, created by Tara Theatre, (2024), Directed by Iqbal Khan, National Tour, Apr