

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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"Scenographic Architectures"

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41

"Scenographic Architectures" (Re)Questioning the Relationship between Spectators and Actors

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Abstract

The history of performing arts venues is told through various diagrams and generally plans (rarely cross-sections, still less axonometric or other perspectives) that summarise the spatial organisation between auditorium and stage according to models reduced to architecture, to the perennial; but this does not consider the contribution of scenic devices and scenography. Doesn't the etymological meaning of the word theatre (*theatron*) refer to the place from which we watch, suggesting that we should think of spaces adapted for creation rather than creations to be fitted into constrained spaces? The formula for the place and the action that takes place there invites us to think not only about the stage set, above all about the way in which the audience is organised in relation to the action. We ask these questions within the speculative framework of our academic research work, focusing on the context of the teaching experiments we carry out in architecture schools. Our practice as assiduous spectators and as critical journalists specialising in theatrical venues and scenography is also part of this examination, which crosses the rules of visibility and listening to performances.

In this proposal, we intend to share our experiences of the *Des Architectures scénographiques* design studio (2024-25), which combines theatre architecture and stage design, at the École nationale supérieure d'architecture Paris-Malaquais, in partnership with the Comédie Française. Based on Paul Claudel's *Le Soulier de satin*, this was an opportunity to combine confrontation with reality (professional investigations) and fictional experimentation (educational explorations) to enrich the range of scenic spatial situations, going beyond the morphologies of what the building offers. It's a question of the creative space, of the relationship established or to be developed between actors and spectators, of the spaces of performance. Teaching is seen as a way of researching, practising and questioning the scenic space.

Keywords: scenography, theatre architecture, scenery, academic, ENSA Paris-Malaquais, Comédie-Française.

Scenographic Architectures

The history of performing arts venues is told through various diagrams and generally plans¹ summarising the spatial organisation between auditorium and stage according to models reduced to architecture, from the Ancient Greek and Roman models until the Italian horseshoe model, including the Elizabethan and medieval models. These have been reproduced in main books dedicated to theatre and dramaturgy, they neglect the fact that scenography has contributed to the evolution, transformation, even some revolutions of the existing models. The history of theatre architecture has never fully considered the dialogue established with the stage thinkers and designers. In this context, the Master design studio *Scenographic Architectures* at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-Malaquais (ENSAPM) is an experimental pedagogical stone and a researcher development to try to link the two disciplines, the building and the staging. Its aim is to better understand how the two disciplines interact or could interact each other. Formed as an architect, teaching theatre architecture and scenography at a French school of architecture, here I will share the evolution of my academic approach, in partnership with some of the main French venues.

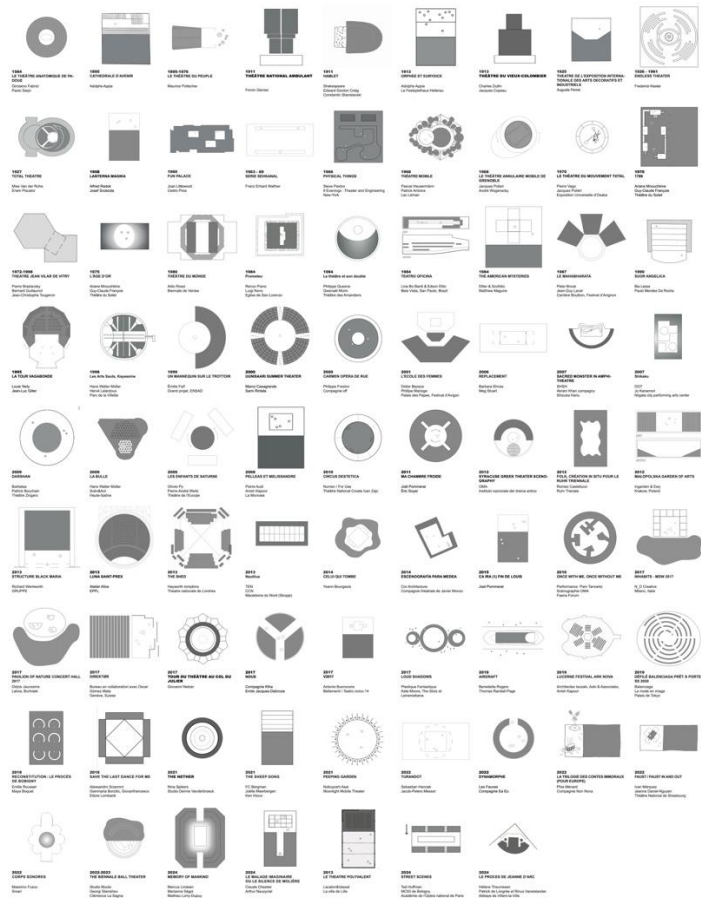
At its starting point, the theatre architecture design studio that I led at the ENSAPM focused on building a theatre, a multiveneue construction. In 2016–17, *Entre abris et édifices* experimented with some various temporary scenic locations scattered around the city of Nanterre, in collaboration with Les Amandiers-Théâtre de Nanterre. In 2017–18, *Une cité du Théâtre* proposed a complex of venues to be shared by the Comédie-Française, the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, and the Conservatoire national supérieure d'Art Dramatique, at the same time of a competition that didn't reach the end. A partnership was then established with the Comédie Française to create a design studio I entitled *Des Univers scénographiques*, mostly focused on scenography. Students were invited to create scenography based on repertoire plays on the Vieux-Colombier stage, a former from Jacques Copeau and Louis Jouvet legacy founded in 1913. The stage was mostly frontal, but could be bifrontal, with a flying tower and dessous: an ideal instrument for learning about theatre architecture and stage devices. From 2018 and running a course until 2024: *La Vie de Galilée* (Brecht), *La Conférence des objets* (Montalbetti), *Bajazet* (Racine), *Le petit Maître corrigé* (Marivaux), *Le Mariage forcé* (Molière) and *Lucrece Borgia* (Hugo). Our special guest and main lecturer was Éric Ruf, an actor, director, and stage designer, as well as the general administrator (i.e. general director) of the Comédie-Française. Students worked on the scenography of a play alongside the Comédie-Française own design project on stage, with

¹ As we can find in the works of Sabbatini & Jouvet (1942), Sonrel (1943), Izenvour (1977) or Lori (2014).

the support of Éric Ruf and his team (including dramatic councillor, technical director, pedagogical staff).

Figure 1

Petit atlas des architectures scénographiques, inventory work dedicated to identifying diverse stage typologies © ENSA Paris-Malaquais.



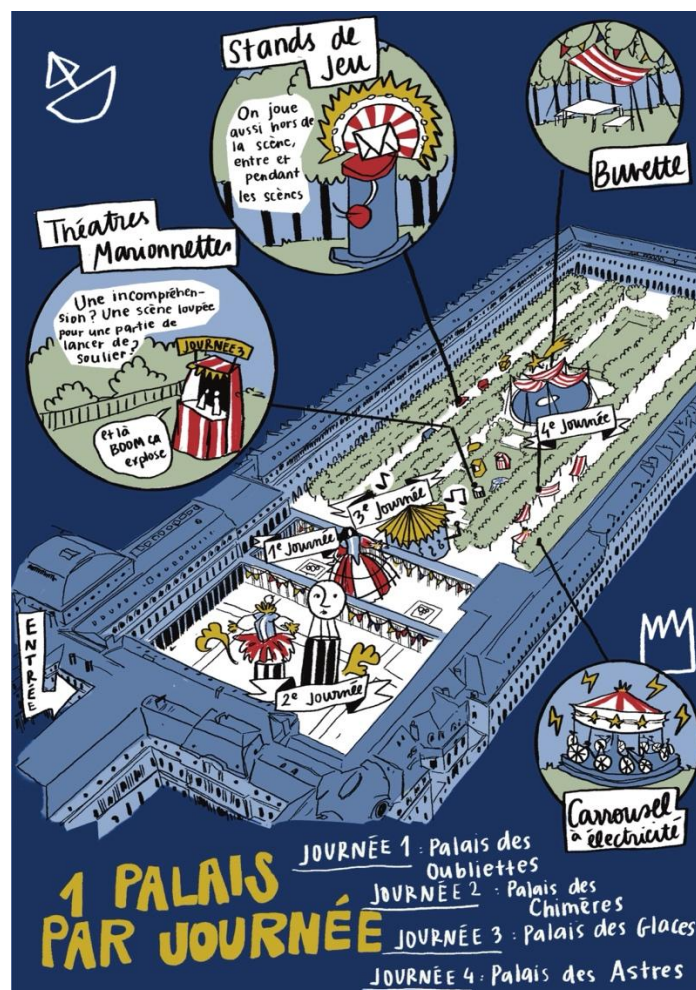
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During the semester (fall or spring depending on the plays), at a certain point in the creative process, the students could see in real the result of the stage designer Éric Ruf's proposal and react to it, adjusting or resisting it in order to develop their own design. Several meetings were organised and visits of the main halls (the historical Salle Richelieu and the Vieux Colombier, of course, as well as the scenography workshops, exceptionally open for us on this occasion). Ultimately, the final jury comprised Ruf and his team, occasionally joined by the play's director (Clément Hervieu-Léger for *Le Petit-Maître corrigé*, who will become the new general administrator in August 2025), the lighting designer (Bertrand Couderc for *La Conférence des objets* and *Le Mariage forcé*), and other Comédie-Française team members. They sometimes found that some student projects were sometimes more

interesting than their own. Impressed by these proposals, they decided to renew the experience each year, as the students' projects were very stimulating for their own design. It is also important to keep in mind the main pedagogical aim of this design studio is to teach theatre architecture and develop student' scenography skills and critical thinking. This necessary distance from the history of theatre architecture led them to consider the contribution of scenic devices and scenography to the transformation, conception and mutation of performance spaces.

Figure 2

Poster of the "Vogue la galère" project into the Palais Royal gardens (Iman Pekdemir, Capucine Magadou, Simone Leblanc and Paolo Saillard).



What form should the theatre space take? While awaiting a dramaturgy, should it not remain as flexible as possible, not impose pre-established constraints, leave the field open to all kinds of research, allow the use of all modern techniques, and offer a useful and effective tool?

At the Théâtre de Royaumont symposium in early 1960s, the theorist Denis Bablet said:

What form should the theatre space take? While awaiting a dramaturgy, should it not remain as flexible as possible, not imposing pre-established constraints, leaving the field open to all kinds of research, allowing the use of all modern techniques, and offering a useful and effective tool? (Bablet, 1963, p. 25).

Figure 3

Presentation for the final jury of the “Vogue la galère” project (Iman Pekdemir, Capucine Magadou, Simone Leblanc and Paolo Saillard).



Following this mark, I may ask: doesn't the etymological meaning of the word “theatre” (*theatron*) refer to the place from which we watch, suggesting that we should think of spaces designed for creation rather than creations to be fitted into constrained spaces? This was the central question of my PhD *The Spatial Dimension in Stage Writing: The Scenographic Architecture Resulting from the Compositions of the Author-Director Joël Pommerat (Compagnie Louis Brouillard)*. I took this case developing “stage writing” (*écritures de plateau*) in which the performance spaces, the set design and all its components are developed in a different order to the conventional system as the text is completed at the end, after rehearsals. My research aims to shed light on the challenges of such an approach and trying to understand the way in which the spatiality of the Louis Brouillard company's plays come to the stage considering shows such as: *Cercles/Fictions* (2010) and *Ma Chambre froide* (2011) which are both theatre-in-the-round productions; the traverse stage created for

La Réunification des deux Corées (2013), and the whole theatrical space (hall and stage) for *Ça ira (1) Fin de Louis* (2015). Indeed, the methods, techniques and tools deployed during the exploration on stage are ending up with a device at the service of the text. More generally, the object of this thesis was to explore a territory of encounter between theatrical architecture and scenography, between the perennial and the ephemeral — a troubled and under-researched zone.

The formula for the place and the action invited me to consider not only about the stage setting, but also the organization of the audience in relation to the action. I pose these questions within the speculative framework of my academic research work, focusing on the context of the teaching experiments I carry out in the ENSA Paris-Malaquais, as developed before.

Figure 4

Presentation for the final jury of the “Toronogachi” project (Camille Duhamel, Méline Frank, Julie Ferraro and Vincent Delattre).



Then, my Master design studio' seventh year of collaboration with the Comédie Française, 2024-25 took a new turn from “Des Univers scénographiques” to become “Des Architectures scénographiques”, a formula I borrowed to Jacques Gaulme's book (1985). In this publication, this teacher and stage designer developed the conventional history of theatre architecture. He gave some examples of diverse constructions, melting architecture and scenography, for specific situations such as a theatre for an author (Racine for instance), a play or creating some new patterns that are not part of the Jouvet's nor the Izenour's theatre schemes.

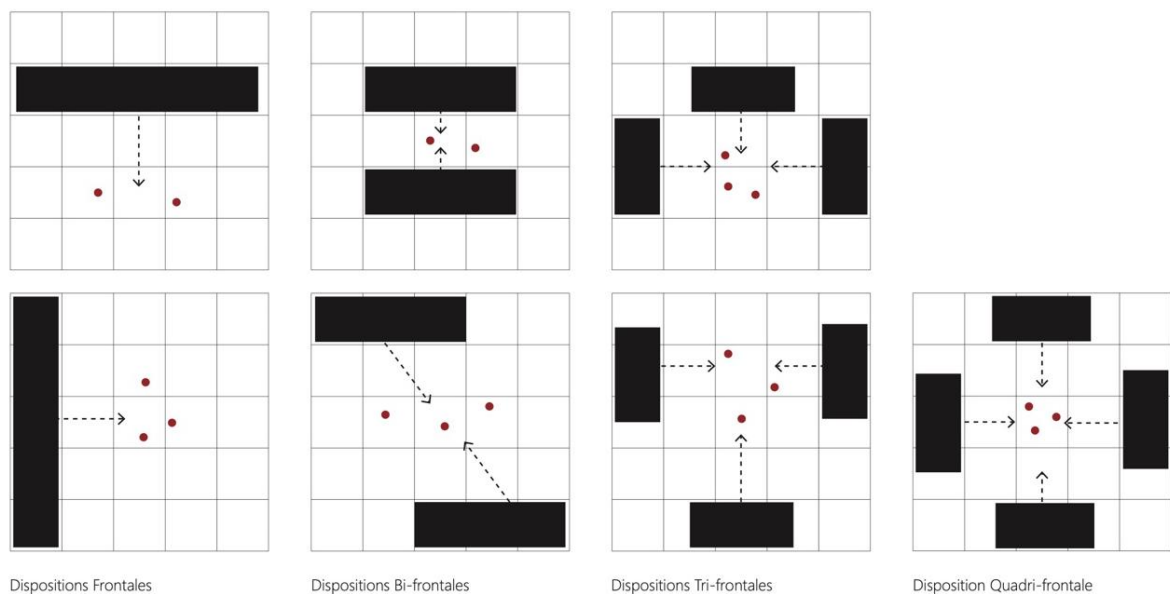
The first development of this new formula was the 2024–25 project design studio that I directed. It started with previous research on theatre typologies combining architecture and scenography, to widen the range of spatial scenic schemes. It was organised in a poster and calling for completion considering the different plays organisation between stage and were the same as in previous years: a repertoire play gives the opportunity to design these “scenographic architectures” and, for this year, *Le Soulier de satin* by the French author Paul Claudel was particularly adapted, as it lasts more than 10 hours, split into four acts. To implement the temporary scenographic architectures, I suggested two sites: Beaux-Arts (where the ENSAPM is based) and the Palais Royal gardens (where the Comédie-Française’s Salle Richelieu is located). Finally, 2024–25 was supposed to be the last year of close collaboration with Éric Ruf as he was leaving the Comédie-Française at the end of his mandatory. This event was the perfect opportunity to share a more architectural approach with him and to rethink the relationship between spectators and actors.

Figure 5

A selection of plan organization of bleachers in the “Toronogachi” project (Camille Duhamel, Méline Frank, Julie Ferraro and Vincent Delattre).

GRADINS

Liberté de dispositions dans la trame - Spectateurs assis



The main idea was to treat the spectator's experience as a journey. Working in groups of four students, each group had to imagine their own stage for one of the four acts in the play. For instance, the group consisting of Iman Pekdemir, Capucine Magadou, Simone Leblanc and Paolo Saillard imagined in the Palais Royal as a series of “palaces” for their “Vogue la galère” project. It’s combining big tops and carousels to create diverse mechanisms and structures that would offer the public a variety of experiences, like a Luna

Park, including food trucks and fairground stalls (Figures 2 and 3). Meanwhile, Camille Duhamel, Méline Frank, Julie Ferraro and Vincent Delattre proposed a single pavilion in the Beaux-Arts, “Toronogachi”, like a *lanterna magica* based on a Japanese wooden construction (Figures 4 and 5). Shojis, textile panels and organic mesh screens transformed the space into (like) a Villa Katsura theatre, relating to Claudel’s diplomatic position in Tokyo. On the same site, Ines Petit, Sjaan Rossi, Elsa Kalifat and Hugo Wacrenier split the play renamed “Une vie en plus” into seven pavilions located around the Beaux-Arts site, using the Chapel, courtyards, Palais des études, etc (Figures 6, 7 and 8). They explored several typologies of theatre relationships, using the same construction vocabulary, declining materials for the envelop and protections. Finally, with “Le monde est un jeu de formes”, Romane Fauzic, Maria Tedesi, Rim Sahli and Rebeca Motta Gomes’ post-constructivist project used a scaffolding composition to guide the audience to a central space where bleachers could be assembled in different ways (Figures 9, 10 and 11). Surrounded by galleries, for players and musicians, the audience was literally enveloped by the performance.

Figure 6

Presentation for the final jury “Une vie en plus” into the Beaux Arts (Ines Petit, Sjaan Rossi, Elsa Kalifat and Hugo Wacrenier).



The scenography students’ proposals for *Le Soulier de satin* pleased the jury members, as it led them in other discussions with the students and a critical distance to their own work. The students’ proposals explored diverse combinations of spatial organisation, audience seating and participation, and even immersion in several moment in the play — some serious, some more fun — with the aim to create various positions for audience in relation

to the stage, echoing with the Paul Claudel's idea, as a serious analysis is supporting the scenographic architectural proposals. Indeed, the author foreword:

Everything must seem temporary, in progress, sloppy, incoherent, enthusiastically improvised, and the result must include some successful parts, if possible, to avoid being tedious even in agitation. Order is the delight of sound minds, and mess is imagination's treat (Claudel, 1912, pp. 11-12).

Thus, the variation in the relationship between hall and stage gives the opportunity to explore this spatial and temporal dimension, formal or informal, sometimes combining them. It gave a space of freedom for the imagined director and actors and contributes to the existing models identified in the poster, enriching the range of scenic spatial situations. It went beyond the morphologies that a building can offer. Finally, this research has been a great opportunity to combine confrontation with reality (professional investigations) and fictional experimentation (educational explorations), related to the creative space and what could happen in such disposals. It is also acting in the public space, with other constrains than the stage. Finally, it made the existing and non-neutral space to resonate, for instance the use of the Beaux-Arts Chapel in the scenography, creating sense with Claudel's mystical approach.

Figure 7

Detail of the presentation "Une vie en plus" showing position and typologies of stages (Ines Petit, Sjaan Rossi, Elsa Kalifat and Hugo Wacrenier).

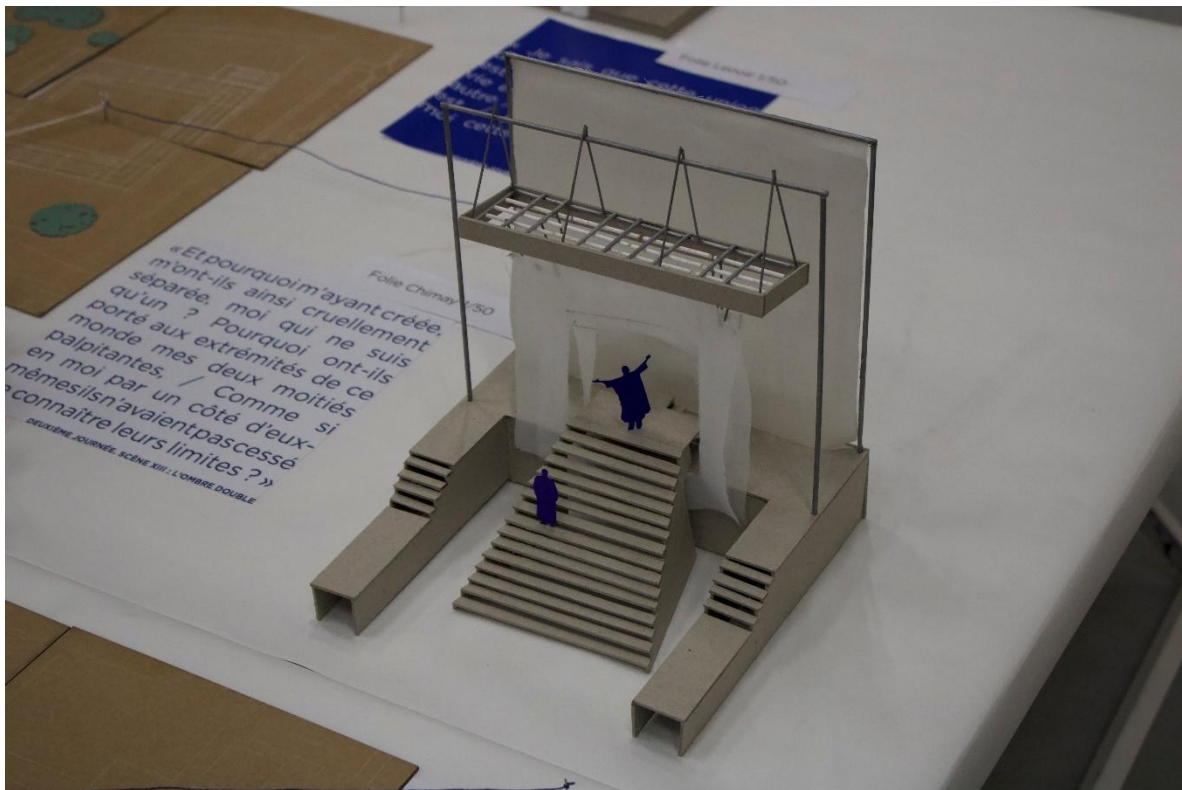


In 2025–26, this design project studio will continue with the Comédie-Française's new general director, Clément Hervieu-Léger. Based on the Carlo Goldoni's play *La Scuola di ballo* (*The Dance School*), I organised a "travelling theatre" program, inspired by the Théâtre

national ambulant (Firmin Gémier, 1911–12), the Teatro del Mondo (Aldo Rossi, 1979) and the MobilTeat' (Raymond Sarti with Art&Oh and CNOI, 2025). I was also influenced by the utopias of the British 1960s group Archigram and Cedric Price and Joanne Littlewood's Fun Palace. This is the excuse for bringing shows to places without venues. We expect to see some other inventive proposals for this new session, with the travelling theatres. We will be pleased to share them with you next year.

Figure 8

Detail of the presentation "Une vie en plus", final stage of the play (Ines Petit, Sjaan Rossi, Elsa Kalifat and Hugo Wacrenier).



Conclusion

This development demonstrates teaching as a way of researching, practising and questioning the scenic space. It involves experimentation, sharing experiences and seeking to delve deeper into theatre, space and performative arts. Performing arts can take place in an appropriate building such as Theatres, and it can also happen in any shelter, wasteland, urban or rural situation, Vitez developed giving two types of theatres, the shelter and the edifice (Vitez, 1978, pp. 24-25). These distinctions have less to do with architectural quality than with a way of using space. The former allows a variety of uses, while the latter permits only some form of production. The edifice states "I am the theatre", while the shelter suggests the transitory quality of performance conventions. A significant example of this was

provided by the Théâtre du Soleil in the late 1960s gave at the Cartoucherie de Vincennes, a former gunpowder warehouse, where they succeeded in inventing and hybridising historical stage sets beneath the huge metallic industrial nave. Following these approaches, considering the ENSAPM design studio “Des Architectures scénographiques” as a laboratory to explore these developments is also a way to engage in critical reflection on the current production of theatre architecture and to be align with the humanistic and environmental approaches. Creating a play or a theatre is a political action, echoing with the instability of the world. As the director and researcher Frédérique Ait Touati, close to Bruno Latour philosophy, demonstrates:

On stage, in a place that is either constructed from scratch or imagined, the forces of the world are distributed, arranged and negotiated. It is one of the spaces where a society, an era, a worldview — a cosmology — can represent to themselves. This cognitive and modelling power of theatre makes it a place for reflection and experimentation capable of questioning our present, marked by the transformation of our perception of the Earth, but also a historiographical tool — a practice as much as an object of research (Ait Touati, 2024, p. 10).

Figure 9

3D model of proposal “Le monde est un jeu de formes” (Romane Fauzic, Maria Tedesi, Rim Sahli and Rebeca Motta Gomes).

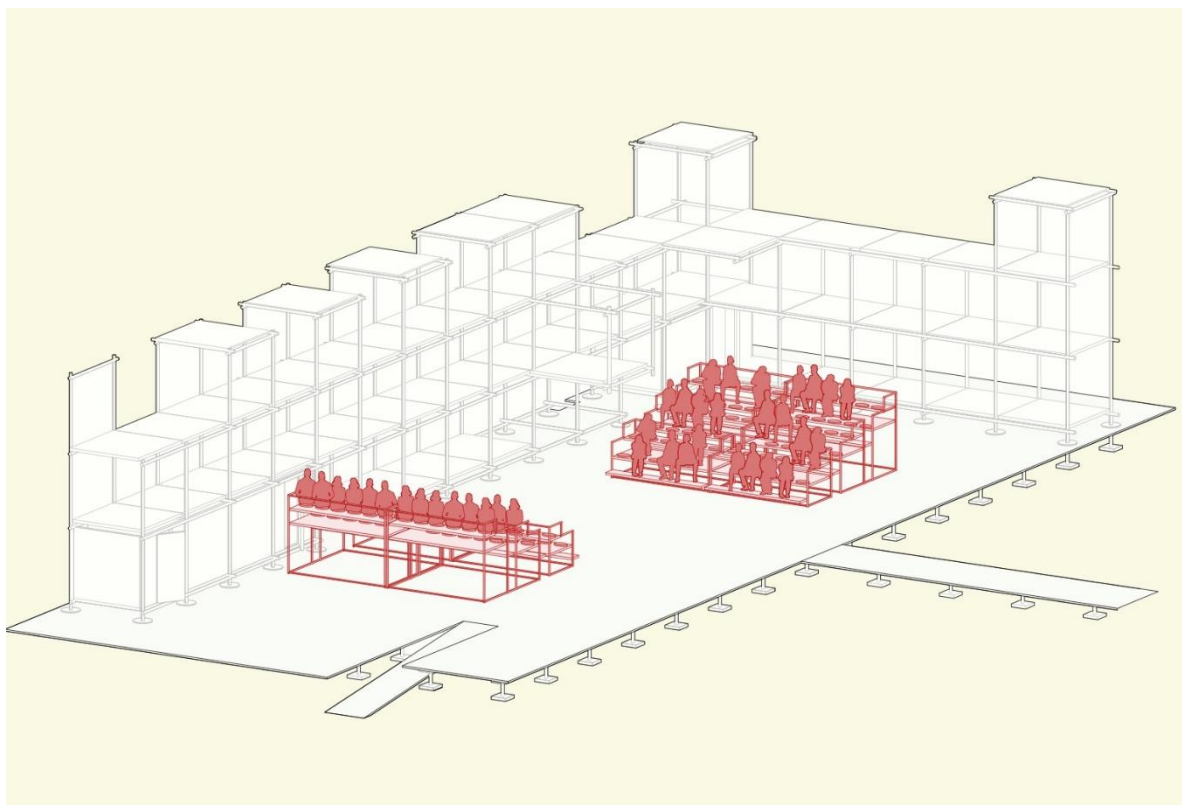
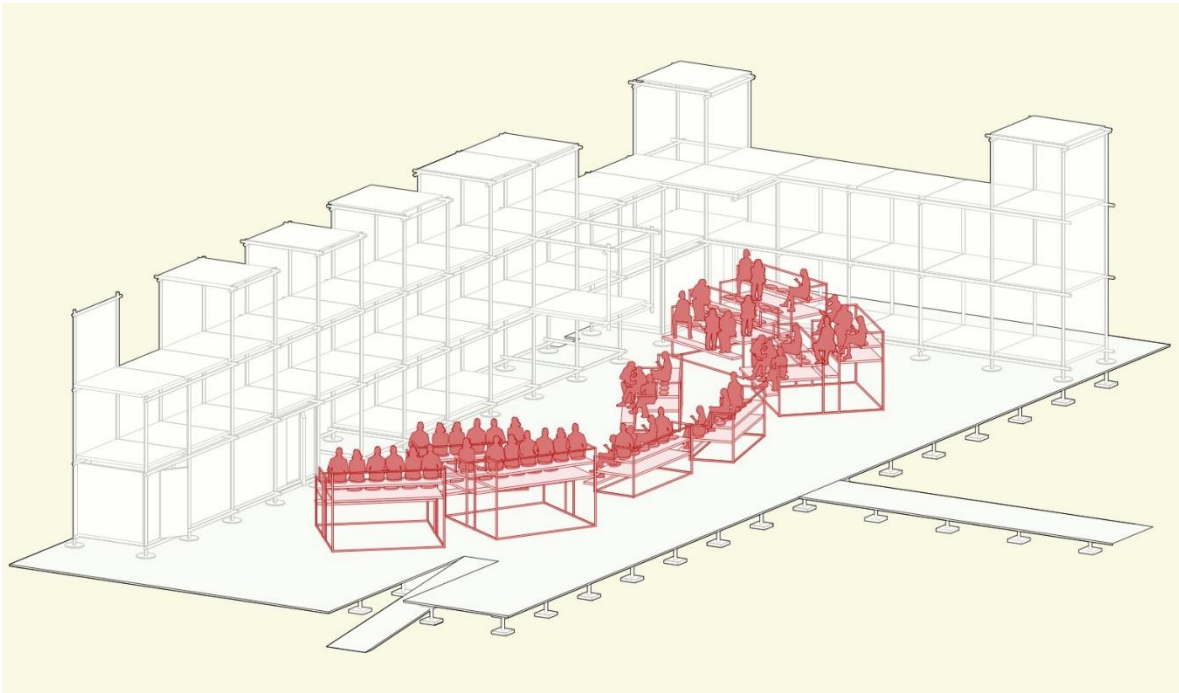


Figure 10

3D model of “Le monde est un jeu de formes” (Romane Fauzic, Maria Tedesi, Rim Sahli and Rebeca Motta Gomes), showing another organization bleachers-stage (amphitheatre).

**Figure 11**

View corresponding to the amphitheatre organization of “Le monde est un jeu de formes” (Romane Fauzic, Maria Tedesi, Rim Sahli and Rebeca Motta Gomes).



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