

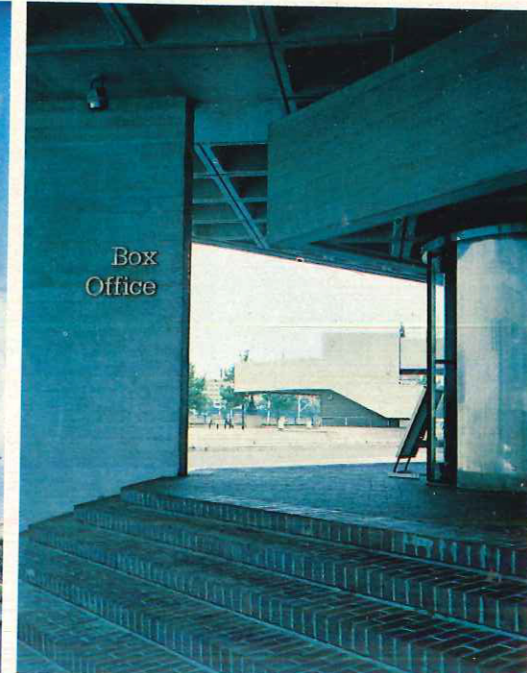
and interpretation a solution gradually emerged.

Thus the original premise of a single national theatre gave way to a scheme incorporating three auditoria offering a flexibility undreamt of in the fifties. That in itself is a landmark in international theatre architecture.

A picture on the wall of Lasdun's office shows the cast-off design models for the auditoria, thrown into a great heap; it also shows, claims Lasdun, "the relationship with the building committee". He recalls the many dialogues that he and his partner had with the building committee: "We set out to search for the meaning of second half 20th century theatre in terms of actor/audience relationships. This was fundamental to our thinking and took about two years, which is what that photograph is about - trying to understand just what that meant before the



design of any building at all. In fact the Olivier theatre is the nucleus. The whole building is generated by the Olivier and by that particular room. The building committee met every month. Everything they said was thought about, translated into model terms and re-discussed. The whole spatial feeling of course was not discussed - that's an architectural matter. What they were searching for was discussed in terms of nobody feeling over- or under-privileged - a sort of egalitarian theatre where everybody had a reasonable view and could hear properly. These were rather the mechanical sides of it. The issue itself was what was the dynamic of the theatre; what was the spirit of it? Should one have scenery, shouldn't one have scenery? It was really going back to square one in terms of thinking and it was only after we had spent probably two years in finding out just what that did mean that we accepted the fact that there would have to be a proscenium theatre as well, and then after that an experimental theatre. The designing and the briefing were going simultaneously all the time. It was an enormous strain because we were dealing with intellectual matters, literary matters and theatrical matters, which had to



**Opposite page**  
Far left: The pile of working models which, according to Lasdun, represents "the relationship with the building committee."  
Right: The National Theatre from a neighbouring tower block.  
Top left: Rooflights over the scenery workshops.  
Bottom left: Exterior of the building not seen by visitors - the light-well to the dressing rooms.

**This page**  
Far left: Precision exterior concrete work along the river frontage: "they put really first class people on the concrete".  
Left: Lasdun sees the theatre's external spaces as an extension of the riverside promenade.  
Below: The upper terraces are public spaces which mediate between the foyer interior and the panoramic views of the river.

## DESCRIPTION

The National Theatre consists of three theatres. The two biggest theatres, the 1150-seat Olivier and the 900-seat Lyttelton, occupy the main part of the building and have foyers off which overlook the river. They are approached from a shared entrance accessible from car park, road and terrace. The smaller 400-seat Cottesloe Theatre is completely self-contained with an entrance on the east side. All three theatres are air-conditioned and provide accommodation for disabled people.

The two main theatres are designed to complement each other giving the widest possible range of dramatic possibilities. Each is provided with the considerable amount of mechanical equipment, backstage space and rehearsal facilities needed for the efficient and economical presentation of a wide repertoire. The stage machinery allows for the changeover from one production to another without the need for a large staff to work long and anti-social hours thus saving valuable time and giving the maximum use of stage and auditorium for both performances and rehearsals.

The Olivier Theatre auditorium and flytower, poised high over the main entrance on an axis inclined diagonally towards Waterloo Bridge, are the dominant elements in the design of the building. The Lyttelton Theatre which is situated at a lower level has its flytower expressed as a subsidiary element serving to modulate

the scale to that of the adjoining buildings. Around these elements terraces with richly modelled diagrid soffits build up layer by layer. The terraces become a "fourth theatre" for events and happenings as well as promenades for the public, places of relaxation for those working in the building and essential fire escape routes.

### The Olivier

The Olivier Theatre has an open stage and the auditorium is arranged in two main stepped tiers linked by intermediate tiers which extend forward on each side of the acting area. The resultant bowl-like configuration of the seating embraces the stage and focuses the attention of the audience on to it. The ceiling consists of groups of suspended elements inclined to reflect sound or mask lighting bridges. The angularity of these elements, aligned at right angles to the axis of the stage, contrasts dynamically with the curving rows of seating which are set out from multiple centres to control sound reflections.

The back of the stage can be opened up or closed off to suit the scale of different productions. Behind the stage and separated from it by soundproof doors are scene assembly spaces from which scenery can be moved on motorised wagons. A large flytower, equipped with a system of power-operated spot lines, covers most of the stage. The stage itself incorporates a "Theta Drum" revolve. This is a revolving drum containing two semi-circular elevators and partly covered by a semi-circular

disc which can rotate independently. One elevator completes the stage surface while the other is below the disc at workshop level where scenery can be moved on or off. The drum can be used as a conventional revolving stage or as a means of removing scenery and properties downwards through the floor of the stage and replacing them with a new setting, either in the same or another part of the stage. The surfaces of the disc and the elevators contain a number of traps which, since the whole drum can be rotated to any angle, allow exceptional freedom for positioning understage entrances. The elevator in the forward position can also be lowered to the auditorium floor level so that the front part of the stage can be rebuilt to a different shape to suit a particular production. A separate scenery lift connects the storage dock behind the stage with the workshops.

### The Lyttelton

The Lyttelton is arranged in two tiers in direct confrontation with the proscenium stage. Its parallel side walls are heavily modelled to prevent the cross reflection of sound. The proscenium opening, which is adjustable in both height and width is protected by a two-part safety curtain. The main part of the stage incorporates an elevator which enables its level and rake to be adjusted. A group of smaller elevators in the fore-stage area can be lowered to form an orchestra pit or can be used in conjunction with the main elevator. Full-sized rear and side stages, separated from the



main stage by soundproof doors, are equipped with motorised wagons to move scenery.

### The Cottesloe

The Cottesloe Theatre is a flexible area. There is seating on three gallery levels as well as on the main central floor. The galleries are on three sides of the space and the stage is normally on the fourth side with or without a proscenium. A moving wall will eventually be provided to close in the fourth side and adjust the shape of the room when a centre stage is required.

### Ancillary accommodation

The main restaurant, which is close to the main entrances, will accommodate about 80 diners. There are also self-service buffets within the foyers of the two main theatres which can each accommodate about 100 people.

The air-conditioned dressing rooms overlook a small internal courtyard and can accommodate up to 135 actors. Workrooms for making and maintaining costumes and wigs are immediately above the dressing rooms. There are rehearsal rooms of various sizes, the two largest - one for each main theatre - can also accommodate scenery. The workshop block provides facilities for constructing and painting scenery and making large properties. The administrative offices are placed on the upper floors and together with the green room and staff canteen they overlook the river. The basement area contains parking space for 415 cars.