

Packing and Packaging the Arts in New Centres

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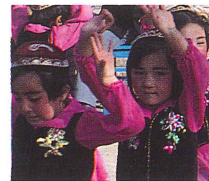
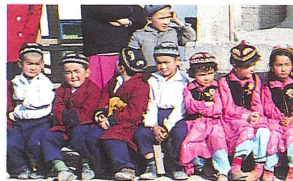
An open-air dance performance by Uyghur children in Kashi.

Public spaces for religious rites, mythological or popular performances have, from time immemorial, provided settings for collective expressions of cultural life. The participatory nature of such events, because they are live, in specific surroundings (sacred places, monuments, amphitheatres, ordinary streets) offer insights into the rich forms of communication generated by a society. If most of the secular forms of the performing arts as we know them today had their origins in religious rituals of some kind or another in the past, the types of spaces for such events have not changed all that much. What has changed radically are the means employed for illusion-making, thanks to modern technology.

In spite of mechanical techniques for enhancing production effects (which can be counted upon to be unvarying), it is still the performer(s) who is the key factor in a drama or musical recital. No live performance is ever the same, just as the audience's reaction is never exactly similar, no matter whether the event takes place out-of-doors or in a sophisticated built environment. In a sense, a play, a recital or a dance is ephemeral, fleeting, since it is different each time; and yet, it is still the most humanistic art form. A performance provides direct mediation

between the persons present, actors and audience.

To create new places for such things to happen, fixed in one locale (as opposed to being mobile or itinerant) and dependent upon limited material resources, is not an easy task. Much of the success of a given performance of any kind may hinge on the degree of improvisation. It is a crucial element in the interpretive arts, and the best manmade spaces destined for this use must take this element into account. Heavily-endowed mechanical equipment in a theatre or auditorium cannot compensate for poorly-conceived or inappropriate spaces for maximum improvisation. Simple solutions, allowing actors and spectators to exercise their imagination freely, often are more conducive to outstanding performances than over-designed or costly buildings.



The several examples included here of recently-completed settings for performances represent differing design intentions, from the almost 'minimalist' approach of the centre in Kandy, Sri Lanka to the strong formal statement (and technical capacity) of the Lahore building. The Indian projects, one built in Goa, the others proposed for New Delhi, succeed in intertwining references to the past with modern requirements and theory. Among these concerns, shared by all the buildings illustrated here, seems to be the need to *centralise* numerous activities, not just the performing arts, under a single roof. Crafts, exhibitions, documentation, and even commercial activities tend to be grouped rather than dispersed in the environment. One ought to look deeper into this trend, visible in many parts of the Western World as well as in the East, and inquire whether this is not the result of purely economic, or even political, considerations. Is this a necessity, or an advantage, culturally speaking? Is it not possible that the very participatory, collective and popular character of certain performing arts is likely to be attenuated or diluted by this emphasis on "centres" of culture, which may ultimately become prestigious symbols, frequented by fewer and fewer people?