

Life is Serious; **ART SERENE**

Biography

Darko Sekulić (Novi Sad, 1997) is a Master of Science in Scene Architecture and Technique. He completed his master's academic studies in Scene Architecture and Technique at the Faculty of Technical Sciences defending his thesis titled *In Search of New Interactions between Architecture and Theatre – Conceptual Design of the Dance Theatre Češki Magacin*. He completed his bachelor's studies in Scene Architecture, Technique, and Design in 2021. During his studies, he was a member of the technical team responsible for implementing extracurricular programs and other events organized by the Sub-Department of Art and Design. He worked as a student demonstrator for the subjects Scene Architecture 1 and 2 during the academic year 2020/21. He participated in the 43rd Belgrade Architecture Salon at the Museum of Applied Arts in the category of competition works. In 2022, he was part of the technical production team for the Scene Design Biennale. Additionally, he was part of the technical production team for the exhibition "Retailoring" at the Museum of Applied Arts. In 2023, he was part of the technical production team for Serbia's performance at the Prague Quadrennial, where the Republic of Serbia won two awards – one for the most imaginative concept of work (student exhibition) and one for community activation (exhibition of countries and regions). Since February 2023, he has been working at the Sub-Department of Art and Design, Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad as a teaching assistant.

FROM STAGE TO STRUCTURE: INVESTIGATING THEATRICAL INFLUENCES ON ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

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Abstract

The scope of this work aims to explore relations between architecture and theatre in the hope of discovering new interactions between these two interdisciplinary fields of research. Let us hypothesize that theatre has historically benefited more than architecture in terms of its overall development. Is this in fact the case? I believe that to even begin thinking about a possible answer to this question one must first define the scope of these phenomena in this contemporary setting. How can we define contemporary architecture and contemporary theatre? If we take Harman's approach, we can begin the research by answering two basic questions: (1) *What an object is made from, whether historically or compositionally, or (2) we can ask what an object does, whether to other objects or to our own minds and senses.* Afterwards repeating the same process for theatre, simultaneously developing our own discursive position. In search for possible answers to these questions this work inspects some philosophical reflections about the relation between politics and art in theatre by Alain Badiou and juxtaposes them with reflections of Reinier de Graaf on the transformation of architecture as a profession. Besides having philosophical and experiential reflections on theatre and architecture as the main research grounds, some theoretical assumptions taken from Graham Harman's method of analyzing architecture through Object-oriented ontology are also used in the comparative analysis of contemporary architecture and theatre practices. Eventually the main objective of this work is to confront ideas deriving from contemporary theatrical and architectural practices, using the Object-oriented ontology method to inquire about possible overlaps between the two professions. Moreover, to inquire how have the sensory qualities of theatre shaped the perception and creation of real qualities in architecture?

Keywords: architecture, scene architecture, theatre, scene, stage, art, politics, sensory qualities, real qualities, object-oriented ontology

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society with its many norms and ever-changing roles of culture and politics follows no singular rule. Rather it is ever-changing like the tides of a vast body of water. The theme of the conference is a very powerful statement. In conclusion of his essay *Atmosphere as the Subject Matter of Architecture* (Böhme, 2017), German philosopher Gernot Böhme¹ examined the relationship between architecture and scene design and concluded that “Architecture does not build for the sake of the engaged or detached spectator watching a play, but rather for people who experience, in spaces, the seriousness of life.” (Böhme, 2017, p. 135-141). Whilst we can agree that this statement is true, this research paper will try to examine the relationship between architecture and theatre, cross-referencing the works of Alain Badiou², Reinier De Graaf³ and Graham Harman with the aim of showing the benefits of analyzing and writing about architecture using the very same means Böhme rejects. Let us hypothesize that Life is serious, but on the other hand art as an intrinsic part of human existence is not serene. Because if it were serene then we would be a mere pawn of the ever more encroaching hyper-capitalist society.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As stated in the introduction, this research will refer to the work of three very different practitioners in their own respect. One part of the research will offer a glance at the current state of architecture, while another will let us peer through the grandiose theatre curtains in hopes that it will unveil that architecture and theatre are more alike than most people make them out to be. In doing so this paper will lay out the benefits of using a research methodology called object-oriented ontology (Harman, 2022), pioneered by Graham Harman⁴. Namely object-oriented ontology (OOO) is a contemporary philosophical movement that posits objects as the fundamental units of reality (equivalent with e.g. Chronotope), existing independently of human perception or relations. OOO is a branch of speculative realism that challenges traditional anthropocentric and relational approaches in philosophy. Core principles of OOO are:

- **Equal Ontological Status:** All objects, whether physical, conceptual, natural, or artificial, possess the same ontological significance. This “flat ontology” means that a rock, a tree, a fictional character, and a concept like justice are all considered objects with their own realities.
- **Autonomy of Objects:** Objects exist independently of their interactions and relations. They are not entirely defined by their relationships with other objects or with humans.
- **Withdrawal of Objects:** Objects have an aspect that is always withdrawn from complete access or understanding. No object can be fully known or exhausted by its interactions or representations.
- **Vicarious Causation:** Interactions between objects occur indirectly. Since objects withdraw, they cannot affect each other directly but do so through the mediation of their sensual (perceived) qualities.

Meanwhile Reinier De Graaf will offer us a view of the situation in contemporary architecture as a profession. Namely, his work *Architect, verb* deals with the 30 or so yearlong shift and degradation of the profession. His insights into the ever-changing landscape that is contemporary architecture, almost exclusively directed by the *ebb and flow* of the market, help contextualize this research. In his essay *Architecture without Architects*

¹ Gernot Böhme (1937–2022) was a German philosopher renowned for his work in aesthetics, particularly the concept of atmospheres in architecture and environmental design. He studied mathematics, physics, and philosophy, earning his doctorate under the supervision of philosopher Theodor W. Adorno. Böhme served as a professor of philosophy at the Technical University of Darmstadt. His interdisciplinary approach bridged gaps between philosophy, science, and art. He was instrumental in developing a new aesthetics that considers the sensory and emotional experiences of environments.

² Alain Badiou (born 1937) is a French philosopher, formerly chair of Philosophy at the *École normale supérieure* and founder of the faculty of Philosophy of the *Université de Paris VIII* with Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard.

³ Reinier de Graaf (born 1964) is a Dutch architect and writer. He is a partner in the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) and co-founder of its think tank AMO. He is the author of *Four Walls and a Roof* and the novel *The Masterplan*. He lives in Amsterdam.

⁴ Graham Harman (born 1968) is an American philosopher renowned for his development of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), a branch of speculative realism in contemporary philosophy. His work challenges traditional anthropocentric views by proposing that all objects—whether physical, conceptual, or fictional—exist independently of human perception and possess their own reality and agency. Harman earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from Pennsylvania State University under the supervision of philosopher Alphonso Lingis.

(De Graaf, 2023, p. 191-206) he remains skeptical of the notion of Allogocracy and poses two questions: “A tempting form of efficiency perhaps, yet pressing questions remain. In ascribing to algorithms the exceptional insight into problems of living once ascribed to architects, do we really rise above problems for business and prestige? Is the world indeed better off without architects?” (De Graaf, 2023, p. 206). Lastly overlapping the findings from the research about architecture this paper examines the use of Alain Badiou’s method of analyzing theatre through defining analytical and discovering dialectical elements of architecture and scene design (Badiou, 2013, chapter XV, p. 25-26). According to Badiou’s findings intricate interwoven network of analytical and dialectical elements is needed to explain emerging truths and their influence on how transformation occurs within established structures. The analytical elements provide the necessary framework for understanding the existing state of affairs. In contrast, the dialectical elements introduce dynamism, allowing for the recognition and incorporation of events that disrupt the status quo.

Following the previously laid out methodology this research will present a case study of two seemingly very distinct and unrelated real objects – structures – with a goal of finding a common foundation between the two. One structure could be considered as being solely related to architecture and the other could be considered as being solely related to theatre. However the case study will show that similarities between these two real objects does in fact exist. Furthermore this case study will show that both real objects have the same creation narratives, although sometimes having differing outcomes, ultimately resulting with both being able of being categorized as the same real object that has physical and tangible qualities.

3. CASE STUDY: FROM STRUCTURE TO STAGE AND VICE VERSA

3.1. Out of the Blue / Cirque immergé, 12th CirkoBalkana at the 58th BITEF

„Architecture has its own realm. It has a special physical relationship with life. I do not think of it primarily as either a message or a symbol, but as an envelope and background for life which goes on in and around it, a sensitive container for the rhythm of footsteps on the floor. “

Peter, Zumthor. (Thinking Architecture, 1999)

It’s September again, and time for BITEF, specifically the 58th edition of the festival, which defined its program under the slogan “Beauty (won’t) save the world.” This year, an opportunity arose to visit the festival’s accompanying program, which was impossible to ignore or decline. It was an incredibly spectacular underwater circus program by the contemporary circus troupe *Out of the Blue*. This troupe was formed as an idea to combine the bodies and journeys of two men, Sébastien Davis-VanGelder and Frédéric Vernier, two performers whose long-standing desire was to explore the possibilities and limits of the human body underwater. This two-year-long research culminated in the creation of a unique, unusual, and extraordinary stage space—an aquarium (figure 1).

What made it, in the context of BITEF, become scene architecture as an event and scene architecture for an event was the choice of location where the theatrical performance would take place—Belgrade Port, specifically Hall 1, which was selected as the venue for this underwater spectacle. At first glance, when entering the hall before the performance, from the perspective of an ordinary viewer, you must walk a longer path to the area where the performance will take place. Then, it is necessary to settle into the semi-circular audience seating, formed from movable stands, opposite which the aquarium is positioned. To complete the spectacle, it was, of course, essential to provide other theatrical elements—stage lighting and sound. It would be irresponsible to speak of the lighting design for this event as a separate part of the project because the interaction of water with light beams penetrating through the aquarium, in harmony with the monumental scale of the hall space, created a unique and unparalleled atmosphere (figure 2).



Fig. 1. photo of the finished aquarium still in the workshop (source: [Out of the Blue website](#))



Fig. 2. photo of one of the scenes from the performance (source: [Out of the Blue Circus Show](#))

Perhaps not immediately apparent, the planned consequence of certain decisions regarding the formation of the stage-audience space within Hall 1 was that the inner surface of one of the façade walls became a canvas on which an equally thrilling spectacle one could witness the interplay of light and shadow. It is likely that most of the audience did not notice this play, but this detail, at certain moments of the performance, combined with the meticulously planned and designed soundscape, elevated the experience of watching this spectacle to a metaphysical level, prompting the viewer to reflect beyond the boundaries and confines of the theatrical performance itself. The effect produced by the entire creative team of this performance acted on many different levels, and it is evident that it was incredibly powerful, or produced an immeasurable and vastly varied number of experiences. This space functioned and produced effects on the level of the space itself, on the level of atmosphere, on the level of scenes, on a metaphysical and philosophical level, etc. This list of levels of impact on which this event produced an effect is arbitrary and highly subjective. What is important to note is that there are spaces and events whose effects we can identify. Such spaces, the author Slađana Milićević refers to as architectural stage spaces (Milićević, Pešterac, & Babić, In preparation).

When discussing the dramaturgy of the event, the creators of this performance introduce the audience to the possibilities of their bodies. At the very beginning of the performance, Sébastien announces that he will attempt to stay underwater for about 5 minutes in a single breath. He truly accomplished this, while Frédéric animated the audience by occasionally diving to check if everything was fine with Sébastien. Thus, this fantastically physically prepared duo established a time unit of 4 minutes and 38 seconds as a baseline for the time the performers would spend submerged in the aquarium. After some time and several scenes of this truly incredible underwater spectacle, the audience seemed to become a single organism. It was possible to determine when the audience was worried and when they completely forgot that the entire event was happening under incredibly physically demanding conditions for the human body. In a certain sense, this event was both an experiment and a demonstration of the limits of human endurance. At certain moments, incredibly poetic scenes completely immersed the audience in thoughts that were almost metaphysical in nature, while at other moments, parallels could be drawn with the current destruction of physically constructed spaces, as well as spaces that are not immediately visible, spaces made up of various social, cultural, economic, political, and other contexts. Thus, in the truest sense of the word, this spectacle is indeed physical theater—interweaving the *mise en scène* in a very specific and unusual environment with various other theatrical elements. This is a spectacle that audiences worldwide will remember for a long time as a moment in time that will serve as a turning point between a world in which we would all like to live and a world that is rapidly being destroyed by various wrongdoings and malicious actors.

In this regard, the table (figure 3) below highlights the constitutive elements of the stage architecture and stage design of the performance *Out of the Blue*, grouped according to Badiou's (Badiou, 2013, p. 26) division into analytical and dialectical categories.

OUT OF THE BLUE / <i>Cirque immergé</i>	
<i>Analytical (elements) / real object</i>	<i>Dialectical (at-play) / sensory object</i>
Choreography (<i>mise en scène</i>)	In conjunction with sound, it tells its own story
Light design	The interplay of light and shadows creates a poetic atmosphere in the space where the event itself unfolds
Stage or Scenic space	An aquarium that represents the world around us, with water as a metaphor for the various intertwining events conditioned by the space in which they occur
Dramaturgy of the performance	It carefully guides the audience into reflection, contextualizing and giving meaning to the event
Sound design (Soundscape of the performance)	Since the event lacks dramatic text, sound replaces words and enriches the atmosphere of the event
Physical endurance of the performers	A direct indicator of the potential of human strength

Fig. 3. Tabular presentation of analytical elements of the performance and their dialectical pairs.

3.2. Sayamaike Museum

“Design in architecture must be a unique product representing culture, place, and time.”

Ando, Tadao. (Kenchikuka, 2008)

The Sayamaike Museum of Irrigation and Flood Control History in Osaka, Japan, was designed by the 1995 Pritzker Prize laureate, Tadao Ando. This award recognized his philosophy and innovative approach to architectural design, particularly his skill in blending traditional Japanese architecture with a contemporary minimalist design approach. Ando’s architecture often reflects his tendency to integrate nature and local culture through the precise and exceptionally clean use of concrete and very specific distribution of natural light. Visitors to the museum, though it is not large, often feel a strong sense of historical presence and isolation. Upon entering the museum, the visitor is greeted by a massive section of the old embankment wall (figure 4), having been carefully guided through the space beforehand.

The visitor enters the museum along an extended path that leads them from the lake, through the museum’s inner courtyard along the longitudinal axis of the space, past a large body of water.

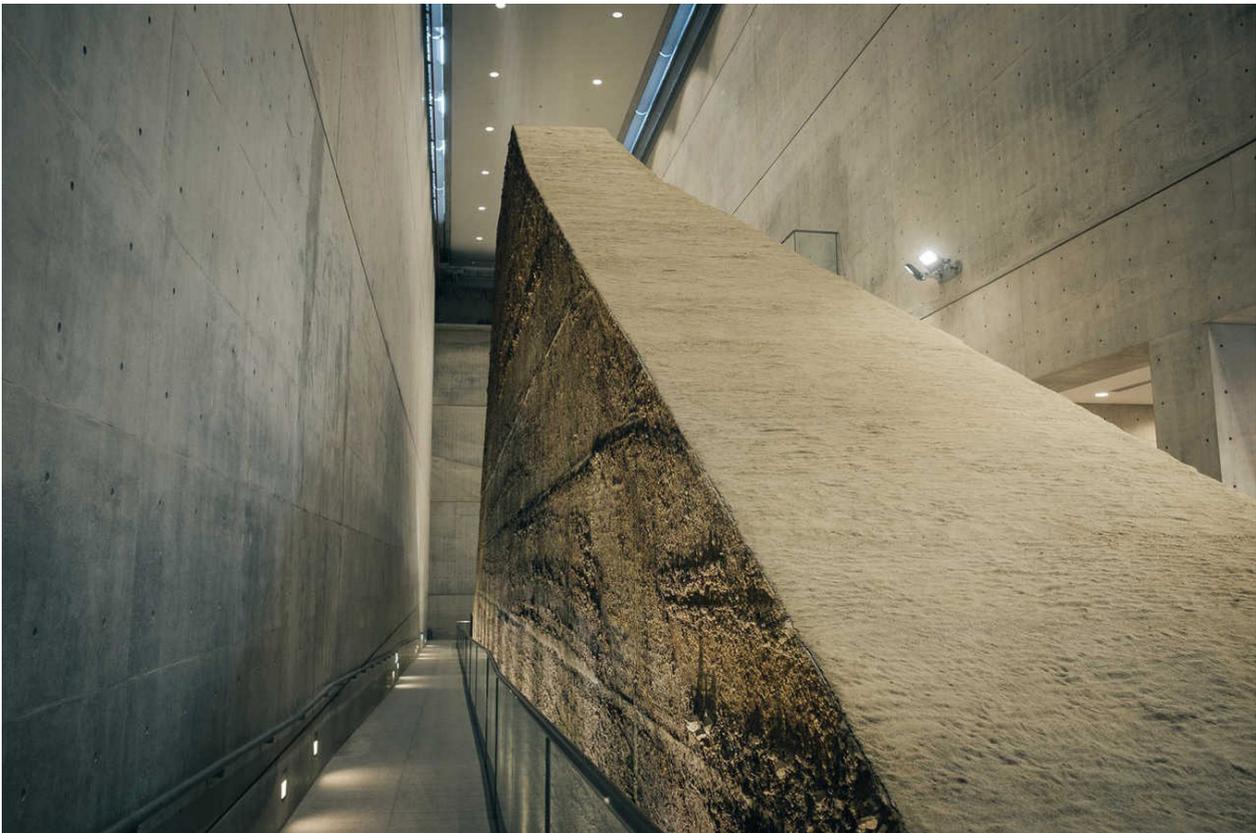


Fig. 4. – segment of the old lake Sayamaike embankment wall (source: [@voyapon.com](https://www.voyapon.com))

This courtyard is flanked by two monumental walls (figure 5) down which water flows every five minutes, creating a unique atmosphere—a space that is neither entirely natural nor entirely man-made. After this area, the visitor arrives at a circular courtyard, also surrounded by a very high wall that directs their gaze upward. Continuing along a ramp, the visitor reaches the segment of the old embankment wall, feeling incredibly small next to the structure. The height of this embankment dictated the building’s height, creating a symbolic connection between the historic lake and the newly constructed architecture. Throughout, the visitor is guided through a meticulously crafted spatial narrative.



Fig. 5. – photo of the first part of the atrium, water garden (author: Jasmine Sik Chi Chan, July 2016, source: [Modern Architecture: A Visual Lexicon](#))

In Ando's architecture, there is no need to search for comprehensive definitions of individual elements or architectural components, nor for the methods or principles referenced in the design of this museum. However, it is crucial to recognize, as in previous case studies, the cause-and-effect relationship between individual elements and the impact of the entire architectural experience on the viewer. It is unmistakable that Ando intended for museum visitors not to be passive observers but active participants, feeling the history of the place under their feet. From this perspective, Ando's architecture makes this museum a kind of stage, shaped by light and shadow.

Ando's remarkable dedication to finding the perfect geometry of space in the Sayamaike Museum results in varied nuances of shadow, or shadow quality, as described by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki in his essay *In Praise of Shadows*: "When I see an alcove in a beautifully arranged Japanese room, I admire our understanding of the secrets of shadow, and our sensitive use of shadow and light. The beauty of the alcove is not the work of any ingenious device. An empty space is bounded by ordinary wood and walls so that the light drawn into its shape creates dark shadows in the void. There is nothing more. And yet, when we look at the darkness gathering behind the large roof beam, around the flower vase, beneath the shelves, although I know full well that it is only shadow, I am overwhelmed by a feeling that in this little corner of atmosphere, perfect and absolute silence reigns; that here in the darkness, unchanging tranquility has the upper hand" (Tanizaki, 2001, p. 32-33).

It is more than clear that this space is shaped not only by light but also by materials that reflect or absorb it. The material in question is, of course, concrete—raw in some spaces but mostly polished to perfection, whose precise geometry emphasizes the interplay of shadow and light.

The way that the museum space was designed leads us to the possibility of analyzing and applying the principles of constructing similar spaces using selected analytical concepts of the museum's architecture and their dialectical pairs, which are presented in the table (figure 6) below. This table refers to Badiou's method of analyzing theatre (Badiou, 2013, p. 26).

Sayamaike Museum	
Analytical (elements) / real object	Dialectical (at-play) / sensory object
Raw concrete	Honesty in storytelling through architecture
Segment of the old lake wall	Connection to the past, a metaphor for traveling through time and space
Walking path through the museum (both exterior and interior)	The intentional slowing of visitors' pace, allows the space the opportunity to tell the story of the site's history
Planned use of water as a feature of architecture that creates specific ambiance	Reflection as a metaphor for the passage of time and the sound of water trickling down the walls of the courtyard creates a unique soundscape and contributes to the meditative qualities of the courtyard space
Framing of visitor's views upon the architecture	The intentional guiding of the visitor's gaze, which, in harmony with sound, makes this space not merely a form of communication but allows the visitor to daydream as they wander

Fig. 6. – Tabular presentation of selected analytical elements of the museum's architecture and their dialectical pairs (author: Darko Sekulić)

4. CONCLUSION

It is more than evident that the “age of abundance,” or the era of incredibly rapid technological development, cannot keep pace with the development and application of technology in other fields and spheres of human activity. In all areas of life, humanity encounters its greatest obstacle—the oversaturation of information received and processed within a single day. “We want a theater with a certain capacity, not a theater that is incapable” (Badiou, 2013, pp. 74-75). This thought reflects the situation in which architecture on a global level finds itself today—an abundance of space production; however, this space is created for the passive observer who will participate in someone else's life rather than building it for themselves. “Art is not eternal, just as the possession of treasures is not eternal” (Badiou, 2013, p. 13).

This work aimed to showcase the use of object-oriented ontology as a method of analyzing architecture and theatre and the benefits of its use. The case study offers a practical example of how this methodology is supposed to be used in independent research and offers insights into the benefits of employing OOO when writing about architecture. With that in mind, and considering all the previously laid out research, a theatre that will be capable of creating and nurturing an active participant, and not just a mere spectator, needs to approach the ideation and creation of scene architecture, or any architecture for that matter, by establishing a new discourse. A discourse that aims to disrupt the status quo. In doing so, this research shows that life is indeed serious, but so is art! Assuming this statement is true we could agree that the ephemeral nature of theatre and the use of it as a form of media entails that sensory qualities of a play and/or a performance could and do indeed indirectly produce real qualities which architects employ when creating existential space.

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