

Biography

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ENVIRONMENTAL SCENOGRAPHY AND THE EVOLVING ROLE OF SPECTATORS

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Abstract

The paper explores the influence of scenographic principles on the selection and transformation of urban spaces into scenic images, and on the transformation of spectators into performers. Through an analysis of site-specific settings for two classic plays and one poem, this study examines the interplay between spatial configurations, the textual material intended for these spaces, and their integration. Scenography is emphasized as an independent entity in its engagement with authentic space, underscoring its visible logic and invisible dramaturgy. It actively models the space, the narrative, and the events intended for presentation in a triadic manner.

This approach produces an evolving event that alters the role of spectators, facilitating their direct involvement in the scenery. Contrary to being a static, isolated entity, the stage is depicted as dynamic and present within each image. Environmental scenography offers a technical support and methodology for the realization of the text, proposes interpretative frameworks, governs movement within the scene, and contributes to the construction and delineation of (constructed) reality. By dissolving the boundaries between the performance and observation spaces, the illusionistic barriers are also removed. Spectators, by engaging with the metaphor, are afforded the opportunity to shape it, experience it as their own reality, and physically identify with the scene presented. Their role evolves from passive viewing to active participation, wherein they become co-creators of the performance experience.

Keywords: environmental scenography, urban spaces, site-specific narrative, active spectators

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the boundaries between performance, spectators and the space that unites them have been radically reimagined. No longer confined to the traditional stage, scenography has emerged as a transformative force that shapes not only the visual and spatial language of performance but also the roles of those who observe it. This paper investigates how environmental scenography—when integrated with authentic urban or architectural spaces—redefines the spectator's function from passive observer to active participant. By examining site-specific installations inspired by classical texts and poetry, this study reveals how space itself becomes a dramaturgical agent, co-creating narrative meaning and inviting the spectators to engage with the performance on a psychological, emotional, kinesthetic and imaginative level. It helps position the spectator at the center of the event, frees or directs movements, encouraging them to experience the stage space as the performers does. Through this lens, scenography is not merely a support for storytelling but a central authorial voice, articulating new relationships between space, text, and spectatorship.

The interdisciplinary installations analyzed in this paper aim to highlight the potential of environmental scenography and reconsider the role it can play, expressing itself independently outside the conventional theatrical context. Through scenographic interventions, authentic spaces become both the inspiration and collaborators in the development and shaping of the narrative intended for them. Found urban spaces were not physically altered; instead, they served as the setting for writing and staging a play, emphasizing their role as active participants in the creation of the narrative. These installations provide practical evidence of how environmental scenography emancipates itself through the selection, adaptation, and staging of a particular text. "The fullness of space, the infinite ways in which space can be altered, articulated, and set in motion—these form the foundation of environmental scenography. If the audience is one medium in which the performance unfolds, then the existing space is the other." (Schechner, 1992, pp.6)

This paper explores the evolving role of spectators in environmental scenography, examining how the works presented challenge traditional boundaries between audience and performance. They aim to support and enhance the autonomy of spectators, ensuring that no performer acts as an intermediary. Spectators are transformed into performers, incorporated into the scene with a new, more responsible, and active role. In this process, the authentic environment plays a significant role—it enables, directs, and shapes their actions. Their movements develop the performance area, actively participating in the transposition of the presented images into scenes. Environmental scenography is not an isolated, framed reality, nor is it an untouchable one; it is offered and displayed live, with the focus shifting from the aesthetic to the phenomenological, physical, and emotional experiences. It is projected onto, rather than being the site of projection, and assumes the definition and organization of the image. Spectators are no longer positioned in front; instead, they are incorporated within the scene, taking on a more responsible and active role.

The works will be analyzed through the theoretical lens established by Professor Arnold Aronson in *History and Theory of Environmental Scenography*, a foundational text for understanding contemporary performance and visual art practices. Practically, they are based on and developed from the theory of Professor Pamela Howard, as expressed in her book *What is Scenography*.

2. JIGSAW BASED ON SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS REX

This was a master's degree project in scenography, realized at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London under the mentorship of Pamela Howard. The project assessment required the realization of the entire production, from the independent choice of text to the selection of the performance style and the space in which it would take place, offering complete freedom of expression and means of selection.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* was chosen not only for its timelessly inspiring images, metaphors, and its eternally relevant themes of ancient drama, but also because of the familiarity of the story to the audience. To fully engage with the performance and decode the images, the audience had to be familiar with the text. The Cochrane Theatre, a classical black box, was used as the initial space, but only to guide the audience through to the workshop space located directly behind the stage. In this way, the "workshop of imagination" was

revealed for many for the first time, opening doors to a space previously unknown to the wider public, which was being used as an exhibition space.

2.1 In Front of the Imperial Palace

The audience gathered in the theatre foyer. When the Leader appeared among them, dressed in a long red leather coat with a torch in his hand, it symbolically marked the beginning of their journey. This served as a sign for the spectators to follow him, taking on the role of the ancient chorus and beginning to interpret the images presented to them.

2.2. City - Contagion, State of Emergency

The audience passed through a darkened auditorium, moving cautiously through the darkness with only red position lights illuminating the space. They climbed onto the empty stage, where a starcloth was set in the background. After a moment, alarm sirens blared, and a fire curtain descended, separating them from the auditorium. They remained on the darkened stage for a while, heightening the tension. As the sirens faded, side doors near the stage opened, and the audience was allowed to enter the theatre workshop. The Leader was gone.

2.3. Workshop – Oedipus Palace

Upon entering, the audience received a paper with the names of images, numbered for them to connect. The basic working light was used, dimming at certain points to create atmosphere. The environment—both the workshop and the palace—appeared deserted, with machines left unfinished and work abandoned. Sawdust covered the floor, dirty walls bore the remnants of previous work, and the smell of machine oil lingered in the air. The distant sound of cicadas added to the eerie atmosphere of a once-lived-in space now forgotten.



Fig. 1. *JIGSAW*, based on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, interdisciplinary art project, *Cochrane Theatre, London, 1996*.

Once within the space, spectators were free to move anywhere, allowing them to define the performing area for themselves. They found themselves at the center of the event, perceiving the environment as an integral part of the total space. Spectators were encouraged to physically experience the environment, much like the performers. These characteristics align with the principles of environmental scenography, as defined by Aronson in his work. (Aronson, 2018)

3. CHEKHOV-MOTIFS

The Chekhov-Motifs environmental scenography project invited spectators to physically engage with a settings inspired by motifs from Chekhov's plays. Designed as a series of interconnected images, the installation drew on well-known motifs from Chekhov's plays, which served as the narrative backbone, linking the dramatic and scenographic spaces. In this work, language is not conveyed through dialogue but through the titles of the displayed images, each derived from Chekhov's iconic dramas. Even in the absence of spoken words, a shared script emerges, communicated visually through familiar motifs. The environment created was both temporally and spatially distinct, yet seamlessly united by the chosen motifs.

The museum itself takes on the role of the distant family estates that serve as the settings in Chekhov's plays. The historic Military Academy building, which houses the museum, was constructed in 1899—during the period when Chekhov was writing his plays. With its strict neoclassical design and imposing scale, the building

offers a spatial-temporal parallel to the distant estates of Chekhov's works. These estates, once described as "oases of life in the endless emptiness and desolation" (Hristić, 1994, pp. 141), have long been lost to history but are momentarily revealed to the present-day audience. The museum, with its physical traces and patina of past times, evokes the impression of a decaying, neglected space from which its former inhabitants long ago retreated. Nature has begun to quietly reclaim the building, symbolizing the slow, peaceful process of decay.

It is left to the public to discover this dormant place, to wipe away the dust with their passage and attention, and to awaken the images so they can tell their story of the former inhabitants who once called this space home. In its new, unexpected, and familiar role, the museum becomes both imaginary and final. It takes on a concrete form while simultaneously evoking memories of the past. This exemplifies one of the tasks of scenography: to create a space that fits the event. In this environmental setup, scenography goes even further, actively shaping the event, the narrative, and the space intended for it.

The exhibition was open during the dusk of a long summer day, marking the transition between day and night, and between natural and artificial light, lasting only a few days in the summer. This created a unique, ephemeral moment for the event—one that mirrored the essence of theatrical performance and set it apart from everyday life. Special emphasis was placed on the fleeting, the unrepeatable, and the celebratory—elements central to both theatrical art and Chekhov's plays, which unfold in a distinct time and place. These plays, rich with moments of celebration, offer rare opportunities and festive experiences that distinguish them from the routines of everyday life.

3.1. *The Hall - Can't do without theatre (A.P.Chekhov, The Seagull: Prologue)*

Visitors gather in the central hall, ascending to the first floor via a staircase with two orientations, passing the porter's room. All of these spaces—the hall, the staircase, and the porter's room—remain untouched, preserving their authenticity. In this way, the audience is introduced to a theatrical situation: a long-abandoned family residence, a house imbued with the memories of a former life. The porter (Firs, the old servant in *The Cherry Orchard*) carries a flashlight and discreetly directs the audience, guiding and dispersing them as needed. Without speaking, he uses just the light, embodying a character from a different world and time—one whose language no longer belongs to the present.

At this point, visitors ascend the stairs and pass through an open architectural portal, which resembles a theatrical entrance—a "temporal membrane" separating the present from the past. They enter an emotional and intellectual atmosphere of their own making. As they continue through the hall and the staged setting, they are free to explore further, independently choosing their direction. From this moment on, they become part of the scene itself, immersed in the unfolding images.

3.2 *New Forms Are Needed (The Seagull, Act 1)*

The staged setting takes place in a section of the park surrounding the family estate. A wide avenue stretches into the distance, leading toward a lake, but the view is obstructed by a hastily assembled stage for an amateur family performance, as depicted in the drama. The audience enters a hall with two long hallways leading to the left and right wings of the building. The stage, positioned centrally, serves as the focal point. The left hallway doors remain closed, and the audience is guided by both the stage and lighting toward the right-hand hallway—a wide avenue.

Visitors climb onto the stage and descend from it, moving through rostra set across two levels. Two rusty iron sheets, peeling and layered with paint, hang from an iron pipe construction, symbolizing a torn curtain. This imagery serves as a metaphor for the small family stage, worn down by time and neglect. In the background, a swing is placed—an echo from the childhood of Treplev and Nina. Two old iron lanterns, borrowed by Treplev from a nearby railway station, hang on the stage to light the family's premiere of his play.

On either side of the stage, wooden benches and small stools are provided for the audience, along with a sound mixing console that controls the lighting and projections. The audience is free to sit on the stage itself or around it, integrating themselves into the scene.

In this space, all the elements of a traditional theatre scene are referenced with minimal intervention: the portal, stage, curtain, spotlights, audience seating, and the substructure of the scenery. Through the stage,

the audience is invited to step into the narrative itself, becoming part of the unfolding story.

Sound & Light, Projection: Human chatter and voices, in Russian (with text that remains incomprehensible to the audience), gradually transition to the sound of wind and distant thunder, signaling an approaching storm. Two red lights flicker on, symbolizing decadence and signaling alarm. This marks the disruption of the performance, as the audience is guided to the next space, signaling the need to leave.

3.3 Corridor 1: *The Alley in the Park in Front of the House*

This image functions as an intermezzo, utilizing an authentic interior without modification. It offers a long-distance view that stretches toward an infinite depth, blurring planes and softening the focus. From the corridor, the viewer moves through a series of scenes where the distance gradually shortens, and the space “zooms in,” becoming more intimate and enclosed. The journey begins with the estate, the park, the alley, the porch, the dining room, the children’s room, the wardrobe, the orchard, and an alley with cut trees—ultimately leading to the intimate disappearance of the space itself. As the space shrinks, large furniture and props give way to smaller objects, which gradually vanish completely, disintegrating into dust. The space (and the time it once contained) fades away.

Along one wall, windows frame the scene through which pigeons fly in, while petrified tree roots push against and break through the façade. The walls, though solid, are decayed and crumbling, giving the entire setting a porous, fragile feel. Once a lavish alley, it is now a neglected wasteland. Thorny bushes and dry, leafless branches press into the building’s façade like visible veins and arteries, serving as a posthumous monument to a time that no longer exists.

This is a hidden place, difficult to locate, camouflaged by nature, which relentlessly destroys the last remnants of life, soon to completely overtake it.

3.4. *The Porch of (The Seagull, Act 2; Ivanov, Act 1; Three Sisters, Act 4...)*

A long, shallow room with parquet floors and white walls, along which runs a wall representing the porch of the house. The house’s façade, with its shallow porch, is depicted almost as a two-dimensional collage, with arabesque lines and surfaces, suggesting a short distance. The porch functions as a proscenium in a theater, still a boundary space between the interior and exterior, realized through elements of the décor that also serve this boundary function—windows, doors, and railings. This is where much of Chekhov’s drama unfolds. The walls, doors, and windows materialize boundaries between the open and the closed, the free and the isolated, between dream and reality. “Windows are very important in Chekhov’s works. The thoughts and desires of his characters fly out through windows, while life and reality enter through them in the opposite direction. Windows guide us through Chekhov’s atmosphere; they do not limit the interior, but open it” (Svoboda, in Aronson, 2005, pp. 124).

The scene simultaneously represents both a salon and a courtyard, achieved through the symbiosis of the exterior and interior, signaled by a few pieces of furniture and fragments of the comfortable life of rural aristocracy—a rocking chair, a carpet, a chandelier, a coat rack, deteriorating iron railings, and a peeling wooden fence. With minimal furniture, this two-dimensional, almost abstract display moves away from a naturalistic impression and reveals the magical allure of a classic theatrical environment. It does not offer an illusion of reality but rather an allusion to a specific reality.

Sound & Light: The sound reflects the ambivalence of the space, blending music from inside the house with the quiet of a summer night: the hooting of owls, the chirping of crickets, and the distant sound of a passing train. As the sun sets, long shadows stretch across the décor, and the lights inside the house flicker on—a large chandelier with only two working bulbs.

3.5. *Dining Room – Left and Right Doors, a Table in the Center furniture and properties of the family estate (The Seagull, Act 3; Cherry Orchard, Acts 3 and 4...)*

The second room in the sequence, located along the corridor, offers a central setup that allows visitors to move around it in a circular fashion. At the center, a gathering of furniture—suitcases, carts, and fragments of the dining room—evokes the sense of things hastily packed. The furniture appears to be loaded onto large cargo carts, as if ready to be taken away as excess baggage, bound for a nearby train station or shipping

port. Many unnecessary little items, which their owners carry as mementos rather than as essential luggage, resist being packed and fall out of the carts onto which they were hastily loaded. From real furniture to the memory of it (such as the outline of a piano, sketched quickly into the display), the installation plays with small, playful props from Chekhov's dramas—playing cards, chess pieces, crystal glasses, a siphon bottle, a guitar, an umbrella, a walking stick, a wall clock, an upside-down picture of the Eiffel Tower (symbolizing Treplev's relationship with Maupassant's text), a half-cylinder, boxes, suitcases, chairs, an armchair...

On the wall of the second part of the room, divided by a partition, a projection shows images from a family album—yet another intermezzo, a brief pause, a comma in the installation's narrative, offering a different form of expression (photographs, sound). Paradoxically, a room with two lounge chairs and an old projector showing slides feels fuller and warmer than the dining room, where belongings are hastily gathered, ready to be cleared out.

The stretch film, symbolizing the packing of suitcases and baggage, subtly links these two related spaces. It discreetly limits the display, which seems to resist being confined and packed into the designated space, as though parts of the luggage awkwardly spill out—like an overstuffed, hastily selected item..

Sound & Light: The sound of movement—the creaking of the parquet floor, dragging and pushing furniture, human voices, greetings, chatter, and the sound of the projector and its projections—fill the space.

3.6. *The Room Still Called the Children's Room (The Cherry Orchard, Act 1)*

This magical and dreamlike image seeks to evoke distant childhood as a universal motif. A closed and secure space is filled with the music of old carousels, music boxes, and wind-up toys. Thin, translucent curtains gently caress, rustle, and blur the view, subtly guiding the eye in a circular motion, suggesting rather than commanding attention. This is the epicenter of the (family) home, the cradle, a shelter that encapsulates the mysteries of happiness (Bachelard, 2006, pp. 70)—a large cradle that protects both the dream and the dreamer, as well as the viewer's encounter with memories. "Life begins well; it begins closed, protected, completely immersed, in the embrace of the house" (Bachelard, 1969, pp. 34).

The space is viewed and interpreted both from the perspective of the newborn and from those who were once newborns and, after many years, revisit the room of their childhood—places where daydreams were lived, now return in a new daydream. This image translates the dramatic space into one that can resonate with the audience through its immediate, visceral accuracy—the symbolism of the children's room, the ceremonial salon, the piled-up furniture, and the packed suitcases on an empty stage (Strechler, 1979, pp. 26).

Sound & Light – Children's chatter, music, strobe lights, light effects...

3.7. *A 100-Year-Old Wardrobe (The Cherry Orchard, Act 1)*

A small, dark room that visitors enter and move through as though inside a wardrobe. The space is filled with old clothing (witnesses to times past), shoes, and boxes on the floor, some containing Christmas ornaments, sleds, and other forgotten items. A deep, ancient wardrobe holds the unique scent of dried fruit and mothballs. From outside, the sounds of a family celebration filter in — the clinking of cutlery and the sound of a piano.

The audience, still immersed in childhood from the previous scene, is transported into a moment of hidden playfulness. This image evokes the sense of children hiding inside the wardrobe during a family celebration, playing quietly while the adults carry on outside.

The wardrobe is a monument, full of evidence of multiple lives. The room itself becomes a kind of graveyard of time. It is a metaphor for intimacy, secret treasures, and hidden conflicts, all stacked or accumulated deep within. Like drawers, trunks, and wardrobes, it is both object and subject, carrying an abundance of memories, intimacy, and deep inner spaces. The wardrobe is the keeper of family secrets, much like the cherry orchard is the guardian of family history and legacy. Both metaphors offer a glimpse into the unknown, into what is hidden from view — a dignified object, closed off from strangers, yet offering refuge to the family and their intimacies and secrets.

Sound & Light – Sounds of a family celebration: cutlery, glasses, voices, piano, billiard balls...

3.8. *How Beautiful the Trees Are (The Cherry Orchard, Act 4)*

This image symbolically represents the passage of time, which, in collaboration with nature, will gradually overtake the space. The nature surrounding the house, indifferent to the lives of its inhabitants, relentlessly infiltrates and fills the interior. It is implied that soon, nothing will remain of the house — a structure that has long since lost its purpose. This metaphorical image highlights the temporal limitations of spaces that have already been overtaken by time.

The pouring sand symbolizes the irreversible flow of time, steadily encompassing, completing, severing, and transporting the story to another world. Through time, space itself becomes an active dramatic force, influencing the events unfolding within it. The continuous sound of a chainsaw serves as the backdrop, signaling that trees are being felled to clear space for land development and new construction.

Sound & Light – The sound of the chainsaw, with a beam of light focused solely on the pouring sand.

3.9. *The Alley, Corridor 2 – The End*

The old inhabitants have left the property, the new ones have not yet arrived, and preparations are underway for new construction. The trees have been felled, the former orchard is gone, and fallen branches now block any further movement through the space. Visitors can view the second hallway, but progress forward is no longer possible. At the far end of the hallway, a projection of closing credits appears on the wall, listing the names of the authors and participants.

This final image underscores one of the initial concepts of the project: “there is no dead space, nor an end to space” (Schechner, 1992, pp. 6). The space, now closed off, is accessible only to the eye — to our experience, memory, and imagination.



Fig. 2. *Chekhov – motifs*, interdisciplinary art project, Belgrade City Museum, 2020.

4. APPARITIONS - THE POETICS OF ITAKA BY MILOŠ CRNJANSKI

The old, abandoned platform at Belgrade’s Danube Station endures as a romantic, fragile, and porous relic of a bygone era that has left its indelible marks. The rich patina, the exceptionally harmonious relationships between graceful and sturdy elements, and the discreet colonnade of columns are some of the platform’s most striking features. The space offers an uninterrupted, focused view stretching along both sides of the platform — a feature that amplifies its inherent beauty. This platform requires minimal artistic intervention to shine with renewed brilliance and to be reactivated for public use. It was this unique space that sparked and directly influenced the project *Apparitions*, which draws inspiration from the poetry of Miloš Crnjanski.

Apparitions is a visual interpretation of Crnjanski’s poem of the same name, which is part of his collection *Poetics of Itaka*. The decision to pair this text with the space of the old platform was driven by the recurring theme of travel in Crnjanski’s work, as well as the historical role of the station itself. For over 70 years, it has connected Banat and Vojvodina with Belgrade and the rest of the country. Crnjanski, born in Banat, frequently returned there until his mother’s death. His life was defined by travel, and he often found himself in spaces much like the platform at the Danube station.

Beneath the roof and around the columns, a network of stretch foil is woven, subtly guiding and influencing the movement of the audience. Lighting interventions draw the viewer’s gaze, highlighting and enhancing

the “long-distance” perspective that stretches on one side toward Belgrade, and on the other toward Banat. Through the design of light and sound, the installation evokes a sense of speed, transience, and an invitation to movement, change, and the passage between spaces. The transparent stretch foil directs both movement and vision, ensuring the isolation of the moment and the singular experience of being on the platform and passing through the installation.

In this way, the platform becomes *Itaka*—an isolated island of memory and imagination, symbolizing the themes of travel, longing, and reflection. The audience is invited to experience the installation as a passage through a dream, with photographs serving as proof that they physically inhabited the dream.



Fig. 3. *Apparitions – The Poetics of Itaka*, interdisciplinary art project, Platform, Danube Train Station, 2023.

5. CONCLUSION

All three projects share a common thread: the use of environmental scenography to create spaces that engage the audience not just as passive observers but as active participants in the unfolding narrative. Each project merges space, memory, and time to evoke profound emotional responses, creating immersive experiences that allow participants to physically experience the themes of the artwork.

The *Jigsaw* project based on *Oedipus Rex* engaging the audience in ways that go beyond traditional performance. The audience is not merely observing the play but actively involved in its unfolding, and participating in the emotional journey of the characters.

Chekhov's-Motifs highlights the decay and loss of time, encouraging an interaction with spaces that feel both historical and eternal, drawing a powerful parallel between the past and the present.

Apparitions – The Poetics of Itaka focuses on transition and journey, allowing the platform to become a symbolic passage between worlds, reflecting both the physical journey and the inner journey of longing and reflection.

Together, these projects demonstrate the potential for environmental scenography to shape and deepen the audience's engagement with both the text and the physical space, offering a fresh perspective on a timeless story.

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