

REVIEW ARTICLE

Opera and the Built Environment

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Suzanne Aspden, ed., *Operatic Geographies: The Place of Opera and the Opera House*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 320pp.

Eugene J. Johnson, *Inventing the Opera House: Theater Architecture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 348pp.

In June 2020 one more video was released into the all-accommodating cloud. This one shows a concert addressed to 2,292 plants, one in each seat of a red velvet-lined auditorium at the Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona. These hand-selected plants are the leafy audience at a performance of Puccini's 'Crisantemi' string quartet, conducted in honour of healthcare workers amid lockdown measures to slow the spread of COVID-19. Once the usual announcements about silencing cell phones have been made, the camera closes in on four musicians as each bows to the verdant audience and takes a seat. When the music starts, our view advances from behind the musicians into the opera house: the camera scans the initial rows of the orchestra stalls, then moves into the boxes and balconies. In each successive section of the theatre we see the avatars chosen to listen in place of us. Our representatives are docile and beatific – Puccini seems to soothe them. For a moment the wondrous intrusion of the outside world indoors even starts to seem natural, as if the auditorium can hold the whole world within it, as if there is no outside to this windowless world.

Opera houses were for most of their existence microcosms to which one could retreat. This has at least been a tenet of their architectural construction. As Eugene J. Johnson tells us in *Inventing the Opera House*, when the dramatic scene underwent a renaissance in the late 1400s with revivals of ancient Roman comedies, these were soon mounted indoors (12). At the court of Ercole I d'Este in Ferrara in the 1480s, a room was repurposed for drama in which 'curtains were drawn over the windows to make the hall dark, and torches lit to illuminate the scene'. At Mantua in 1501, meanwhile, a theatre was built *ex novo* that featured a turquoise cloth 'starred with those signs which that very evening were appearing in [the] hemisphere' (16) pinned across the ceiling, thus creating the illusion that the theatre indeed contained the whole world within it. In the decades that followed, theatres were constructed that did sometimes have windows in their auditoria. These tended to be added for ventilation purposes and covered with cloth during performances (40). In the absence of natural light, theatre designers have experimented with various means of illumination and various ways of distributing the light between the auditorium and the stage. By the late 1800s, however, most artificial illumination in the hall during performances had been eliminated. With near-total darkness comes disorientation, the sensation that it is almost impossible to measure where one is in relation to another. In the most

extreme cases, it can seem possible to lean forwards in the auditorium as if slipping into a pool of ink.¹

If theatres have been constructed as microcosms to which audiences can retreat or escape, the installation at Barcelona nonetheless takes the idea of the world-within-the-theatre to a new level. The Liceu's auditorium is constructed to provide the ultimate sustenance. Those plants cleanse air of accumulated toxins (CO₂) and infuse it with O₂, the substance so desperately depleted in those claimed by the coronavirus. In such an Eden, one wonders whether the sick might even be able to breathe again. The auditorium is turned into one enormous ventilator, one which does not whirr or beep, as in an intensive care setting, but rather operates with the silent assurance of nature: the ultimate breathing apparatus.²

However much the camera seems to lure us into a terrestrial paradise, though, there is an out-of-placeness about these shrubs that cannot in the end be overlooked. Opera houses do not hold the whole world within them: there is a world outside them, and the shrubs no more belong here than lions at a childcare centre, or live antelopes at a restaurant. Plants are almost never welcomed into auditoria. This would not even be worth comment save for the fact that we have banished so much more besides. The odd intrusion of the outside inside at the Liceu is in other words a bold reminder that there are *always* rules about what – and who – should remain outside the doors of the opera house, rules that have been naturalised with time. (How else did we reach a situation in which the remark 'the homeless? Aren't they the people you step over coming out of the opera house?' could be bandied about parliament, as occurred in 1980s Britain?)³

Rules need enforcement, however, and it is here that architecture comes into its own: the built environment has tremendous abilities to divide forms of life from one another. Walls in all their ponderous thickness are tremendously effective barriers. Much recent work within architecture studies has accordingly focused on how built environments partition the world. But contradictions abound. Walls are boundaries, but boundaries are where selves are defined. It is at and across the boundaries of our selves – our skin – and the veneer of the material world that relations occur. Walls – as architectural surfaces – have therefore come to seem as much sites of interaction as barriers to it.⁴

For this reason, it is now common to refer to the 'architectural skin' of a built environment. The term is a reminder that however self-contained architectural structures can seem, there is unavoidable motion between inside and outside. Architectural structures draw locations far removed in both time and distance into contact, beginning with construction, when materials formed across millennia may be sourced from across and beneath the earth. Because the maintenance (and ultimate destruction) of architectural structures creates a constant flow of emissions into the air, built environments even account for some 50 per cent of climate deterioration. As Esther da Costa Meyer has put it, if there is no outside to the Anthropocene – that is, if there is no place on earth in which mankind does not exert considerable climatic influence – there is also no stable interior to architecture.⁵

¹ For a recent take on darkness within theatres, see Noam M. Elcott, *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media* (Chicago, 2016).

² On ideas about performance venues, ventilation and 'rarified' air, see above all James Q. Davies, *Creatures of the Air, 1817–1913* (Chicago, forthcoming).

³ These are, reputedly, the words of former Tory MP Sir George Young.

⁴ For recent work that discusses the complexities of walls, see for instance Thomas Oles, *Walls: Enclosures and Ethics in the Modern Landscape* (Chicago, 2014) and Irene Cheng, Charles L. Davis II and Mabel O. Wilson, eds., *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present* (Pittsburgh, 2020).

⁵ Esther da Costa Meyer, 'Architectural History in the Anthropocene: Towards Methodology', *The Journal of Architecture* 21/8 (2016), 1206.

So architecture is nowhere near as neat or bounded as it can at first seem. The challenge for scholars is to take all this into account: to enter into the microcosm of a built environment, stand at its edges and view it from a twenty thousand-mile distance.

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I linger on these directions in scholarship about the built environment because both books under review here bear marks of their influence. The extent and limits of that influence on *Inventing the Opera House* are most clear-cut. An architectural historian, Johnson offers a detailed account of theatres that crumbled into the air centuries earlier, in total, some three dozen theatres for which narrative traces are almost as scattered now as the dust formed in their wake. His book starts in the 1480s and closes with an account of the Teatro Tordinona in Rome, a theatre built and rebuilt across the last decades of the 1600s. The book is bold in ambition and beautiful to look at.

The opera enthusiast soon learns that inventing the opera house was no fast historical process. The reader must wait some 200 pages for a discussion of the first theatre built *ex novo* for operatic spectacle: the SS. Giovanni e Paolo in Venice, erected in 1639. The patience needed from us is, however, nothing relative to that which Johnson must have exercised when he undertook the fastidious work undergirding the earlier chapters. Almost none of the theatres Johnson discusses has extant architectural sketches. His account therefore relies on verbal descriptions, in letters between members of court or their functionaries, and official records. Some of these sources are cited here for the first time. Others have formed the basis for earlier scholarship – most of it in Italian – undertaken by scholars who examined individual theatres or clusters of them; none has attempted anything approaching the comprehensive scale of Johnson's study.

Inventing the Opera House is a tour de force of detail. The book contains chapters on venues used for the revival of ancient comedies and to celebrate the union of nobles or carnival season at locations including Ferrara and Mantua, Rome, Florence, and Venice and the Veneto; and chapters on the theatres built within the Italian peninsula for *commedia dell'arte* troupes, drama-tourneys and opera. As the author moves between clusters of theatres, he examines how the interests of those in local power influenced the use of theatres – in particular, who had access to them and which areas of the theatre were theirs to enjoy. Throughout, Johnson attends to architectural variations, but the overall thrust of the book is that theatres moved towards a stable design, one we now associate with the horseshoe-shaped *teatro all'italiana* in common use for opera.

Each chapter assumes a standard form: the author introduces a handful of theatres, then examines the circumstances under which each was constructed, the interests of those involved and their architectural form. There is little relief from this formula. We seldom move even to the immediate environment outside the walls of these theatres, even more seldom to 'loftier' theoretical realms. This does, however, render the book usable in a manner most are not: the reader can scan the index for a venue and read about that theatrical structure alone; individual sections in the book are informative in and of themselves. The reader is meanwhile immersed in a sea of information, but this of course is no bad thing, and can even start to feel rhapsodic. One reads *Inventing the Opera House* as one watches a time-lapse: the evolution across the long range of course matters, but what makes the book work is our enchantment with the abundance of discrete moments *en route*.

When we reach page 211, the SS. Giovanni e Paolo appears on the landscape with a majesty that will now be familiar. The *teatro all'italiana* – or *teatro all'italiano*, as Johnson idiosyncratically calls it – is after all one of the most successful building types of modern times: some prominent innovations notwithstanding, these theatres have remained

remarkably unchanged over the past four centuries.⁶ For one commentator in the 1600s, the Giovanni e Paolo was 'beautiful, extremely deep ... painted and gilded' (222).⁷ Around 120 feet long, it was divided down the middle into the auditorium and the stage and could accommodate around 900 audience members. As patrons entered the theatre at the level of the parterre (or platea), the curved apron of the stage bowed out towards them at about 60 feet distance. Framed with proscenium arches, the stage extended back to the rear of the theatre a further 60 feet. As its floor sloped upwards towards the rear of the theatre, the side walls came closer together creating the illusion of a vanishing point in the distance. There was an area for the orchestra in front, demarcated from the parterre first by a low wall and then a deep groove in the floor, similar to a 'dry moat'. Turning to the sides of the theatre, one would have seen five rows of boxes extending from floor to ceiling; each contained thirty-one individual boxes (of which two were behind the proscenium arch and known as proscenium boxes), organised in a horseshoe pattern. The partitions between boxes were tilted towards the centre of the stage. Circulation of the audience was facilitated by two staircases to the immediate sides of the entrance; a third at stage left led to the proscenium box and stage (217–22).

Johnson is of course not the first to relate these details. Like other theatres built in Venice in the same moment, this building has been much discussed, not least because it was the venue for the premiere of Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in 1642. It is also the sole theatre from the 1600s for which we have an extant architectural sketch. Drawn in the hand of Tommaso Bezzi and bound into a volume of drawings related to the construction of the Teatro Tordinona in Rome by architect Carlo Fontana, the sketch has sustained numerous discussions in architectural and musicological literature.⁸

What, then, does Johnson's discussion bring to the table? As the author himself makes plain, his book stands firm on the shoulders of others. It is in an important sense a compilation – a synthesis of information scattered in diverse sources – and Johnson adds sometimes small amounts of new information to the established ideas about each of these theatres.⁹ But the real value of this book for an opera scholar is all that comes before this moment. In other words, it is the inventing more than the invention of the opera house that fascinates most. If the most characteristic feature of the *teatro all'italiana* is its stacked boxes (or 'palchi'), Johnson quietly sets down information across the book that transforms our sense of how these came about. His is a tale of endless permutations in how audience members were seated at theatres. Architects aimed both to accommodate a multitude and to divide classes and sexes from one another. These manifold permutations became possible because architects exploited the full vertical and horizontal extensions of a theatre: with inclined floors, risers, steps and balconies, audiences could be fractured. Theatres with boxes formalised the claims of the noblest audience members

⁶ On the *teatro all'italiana* as a building type, see in particular Georges Banu, *Le rouge et or: Une poétique du théâtre à l'italienne* (Paris, 1989). On the precipitous replication of the *teatro all'italiana*, above all in the nineteenth century, see Fabrizio Cruciani, *Lo spazio del teatro* (Rome, 1997), in particular the chapter 'Il teatro che abbiamo in mente', 11–45, and Carlotta Sorba, *Teatri: l'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento* (Bologna, 2001), in particular the section 'La diffusione della sala all'italiana', 56–61.

⁷ This description was by a visiting Frenchman, Jacques de Chassebras de Cremailles, and dates from 1683. See 'Relation des opera representez à Venise pendant le Carnaval de l'année 1683', *Mercurie gallant* (March 1683), 202–3.

⁸ Discussions about this opera house are too numerous to list, but for a much-read account of this theatre, see Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley, 1991), in particular the chapter 'Da rappresentare in musica: The Rise of Commercial Opera', 66–110. The sketch is held at Sir John Soane's Museum, London.

⁹ In this instance Johnson smoothes over important confusions in the literature, as when he establishes a new date range for Bezzi's sketch of 1691–5 based on his examination of contemporary events. He also renders these theatres in three-dimensional digital reconstruction. These are all welcome additions, even if it is at times unclear to the non-architect how Johnson moves from two to three dimensions (217–22 and 300n52).

to dedicated areas of the theatre and even afforded them the ability to move around undetected, to be invisible – cloaked amid the masses. At the Teatro di Baldracca in Florence, constructed in 1576 behind the Medici Palazzo degli Uffici for *commedia dell'arte*, a series of small rooms or *stanzini* were each under the permanent control of an individual with a key. While considerably larger than typical private boxes, these seem to have been the earliest ever box-like structures. A corridor linked the ducal palace with these rooms so that those who possessed the keys – the Medicis and their inner circle – could enter them without encountering the wider audience (115–18). Once inside, screens ensured their presence was not revealed to those within the theatre, even as the auditorium remained visible to them.

Boxes used at the SS. Giovanni e Paolo some six decades later retained many of these same features. The theatre's 150+ boxes would have been accessed via individual doors, while curtains could be drawn across them. Even if the secret corridor was now absent and box patrons' means of access more communal, these boxes functioned as domestic, private spaces within an otherwise public realm. Families could now sit together – which meant the sexes were now allowed to mix. This also of course meant boxes became home to behaviours between the sexes that exceeded the bounds of most domestic arrangements.

The invention of boxes came not with the SS. Giovanni e Paolo, however, but – Johnson reveals – with two theatres built in 1580 for *commedia dell'arte*: the Tron and Michiel theatres in Venice. These were wooden structures erected within an existing built environment (now obliterated and untraceable) that featured multiple levels of superimposed boxes. Neither had been described in detail until Johnson located information about them in the Venetian *archivio di stato*; these now seem to be the first ever theatres to feature boxes on the small scale found at later opera houses, housing around four to six people.¹⁰ Johnson makes several related important points. One reason the archives contain material on the Michiel and Tron theatres is that construction of superimposed timber-framed boxes raised concerns about structural integrity. (Such concerns would become common coin: it was not until ferrous metals became plentiful in an industrial economy in the mid-1800s that boxes could be reinforced and cantilevered balconies built that could hold hundreds of people.¹¹) Boxes also commodified the skies – since Venice was 'restricted to islands surrounded by water', 'stacking people in tiers of boxes fetched a greater return from a small piece of real estate, just as skyscraper office buildings did in late-nineteenth century America' (120). The notion that the design of the *teatro all'italiana* stemmed from Venetian exigencies is compelling, but what prevented this architectural solution from coming about earlier? Did the invention correlate with advances in structural engineering? And did these advances realise architectural dreams or create the conditions under which new architectural dreams became possible? Did counting, in other words, precede the abacus, or the abacus counting?

To put this another way: to what extent did materials and construction techniques set the conditions for the form theatres took? If such a question has a media studies ring to it – if it channels someone such as Lewis Mumford when he noted that 'm[e]n be[came] mechanical before they perfected complicated machines to express [this] new bent' – that is because there is a complex set of influences at work here: questions about what determined the form the *teatro all'italiana* would take, and – no less – the form of the music composed for performance within it.¹² Fast forward three centuries and the extent

¹⁰ For the fullest account of these theatres, see Eugene J. Johnson, 'The Short, Lascivious Lives of Two Venetian Theaters, 1580–85', *Renaissance Quarterly* 55/3 (2002), 936–68.

¹¹ George C. Izenour, *Theater Technology* (New York, 1988), 3.

¹² Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York, 1934), 3.

to which the *teatro all'italiana* set the conditions for opera becomes undeniable when one compares the likely acoustics of a theatre such as the Teatro alla Scala in Milan (opened in 1788 under the watch of architect Giuseppe Piermarini) and the Bayreuth Festspielhaus (opened in 1876 under the watch of architect Otto Brückwald and – of course – Richard Wagner). The distinctive feature of the Festspielhaus was (and remains) its long reverberation time – some 1.55 seconds relative to the 1.2 seconds at the average *teatro all'italiana*. As architectural historian Joseph L. Clarke has proposed, this reverberation – a product of the vast distance between floor and ceiling – seems to have fascinated Wagner, who went on to repeatedly score sounds that were liable to reverberate for some time at the theatre in *Parsifal*, his final music drama.¹³ Indeed, to understand *Parsifal* is in an important sense to understand how the acoustics of the Festspielhaus left their mark on the composition. (Whether either Brückwald or Wagner wanted or anticipated such an acoustic is unclear; reverberation is, however, what they got.) La Scala has a much drier acoustic, and it is no coincidence that the music written for it sounds quite different. One wonders indeed whether the sounds of operas composed for the classic Italian horseshoe-shaped theatre, such as Rossini's *Semiramide* (La Fenice, 1823) or Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (Teatro Regio, Turin, 1893) would even have been conceivable had these composers had different theatres at their disposal.

My point is that the invention of the opera house is in an important sense the invention of an entire musical tradition: the form of one cannot be divorced from that of the other. But the theatres Johnson describes almost never sound for him; he wanders around them with the visual acuity of an architect but with ears closed. There is inevitably a vast difference between historical access to acoustic information for theatres in the 1600s versus those in the 1800s. But it is still possible to draw inferences about the earlier buildings, not least that boxes were acoustic absorbers, that they removed variations in air pressure from circulation and so 'dampened' acoustics. The *teatro all'italiana* was a theatre that limited reverberation from the start. In this sense, it made many of the hallmarks of Italian opera – such as fast recitative and ornamentation – possible.

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Theatres are sometimes disassembled at a rapid pace (as were the Michiel and Tron theatres), sometimes burnt to ashes and sometimes abandoned, deteriorating over time.¹⁴ Once electric illumination was introduced in the late 1800s and opera houses ceased to be so vulnerable to fire, however, the main threat to a theatre became its acoustics. Per one account, those whose acoustics were deemed disastrous tended to be torn down within five decades; those that outlived this marker tended to stand for considerable stretches of time.¹⁵ In other words, opera houses are not destined to die; they are less vulnerable to architectural obsolescence than most other built environments.

All this has a notable impact on the work theatres do. In the words of Thomas Gieryn, built environments 'stabilize social life', 'giv[ing] structure to social institutions, durability

¹³ Joseph L. Clarke, 'The Architectural Discourse of Reverberation, 1750–1900' (PhD diss., Yale University, 2014), 155–205. Leo Beranek has analysed the cause of this reverberative acoustic. See Leo Beranek, *Concert Halls and Opera Houses: Music, Acoustics, and Architecture* (New York, 2011), 231–6.

¹⁴ The Venetian Council of Ten ordered their demolition in 1585 (Johnson, 120).

¹⁵ '[Acoustically] good and bad halls exist in every age, and good and bad halls have probably been built in every period. It is more than likely that the old halls that are still standing are among the best that were built. Very few halls that compared badly with their contemporaries are still with us. In fact, poor halls are often destroyed or replaced before they are 50 years old, as Boston's most recent Opera House (1909–1958) and New York's Italian Opera House (1833–1839) remind us. On the other hand, heroic measures are often taken to preserve good halls.' See Leo L. Beranek, *Music, Acoustics and Architecture* (New York, 1962), 11.

to social networks [and] persistence to behavior patterns'.¹⁶ As we have seen, theatres function as places of escape or retreat: microcosms or dreamworlds from which the outside world can be banished. Theatres have also enabled families, friends and lovers to meet; served as destinations and sources of income for workers; and become fixtures in a landscape around which commutes and even mealtimes are planned. Theatres stand tall within their immediate environments, lending a sense of permanence and importance to the surroundings. They orient travellers, create routines for locals and function as loci to which individuals continue to return.

Contributors to the impressive collection *Operatic Geographies: The Place of Opera and the Opera House* are for the most part on board with these theoretical concerns. Editor Suzanne Aspden promises the reader a new orientation towards the 'situatedness' of opera, an examination of how *where* operatic interactions unfold influence its impact.¹⁷ The notion that location matters is at first blush rather familiar. Some of the most common constructions in book and article titles these days are 'opera in x' or 'opera and x' – where 'x' is a location with coordinates on the earth. But focus on somewhere with coordinates in the world does not in and of itself amount to a sensitive account of place, as can be seen (for example) in studies of opera and national sentiment that treat 'nation' as a mere container, unconnected to material or architectural structures or to the realities of those spaces in the nation where such sentiments form.

Operatic Geographies demonstrates that location can be understood in much more powerful ways than this. The volume's contributors aim to better understand the architecture of the world – or at least, those sites within it where opera was consumed – via close attention to physical spaces and environments. To be sure, not all realise this in practice. Some fine contributions would, for instance, be more at home in a volume on cultural transfer: at least one which, while concerned with how ideas attached to opera in one location intersect with those elsewhere, is otherwise unburdened with material invocation of those locations. Others, however, embrace the theme of the book. What constitutes site in their contributions is a matter of definition and there is no standard here. But most consider site at two levels of magnification: that of the urban centre and that of the more immediate built environment of the theatre.

Inclination towards the urban centre here flows from the fact – as Aspden reminds us in the book's Introduction – that 'opera and its urban environment developed side by side throughout the genre's four-hundred year history' (2).¹⁸ This much is incontestable. At issue is nonetheless whether the urban can ever be a meaningful boundary, since it is the continual movement from and to urban centres that makes them centres at all. If the urban is relational in essence, then it is also a container that cannot hope to – well, contain – its contents.

Put otherwise, societies 'secrete' space via their motion within it: the formation of space is dialectical.¹⁹ The first contribution to this volume is nonetheless a reminder that urban entities have at times enacted important limitations on that movement and as such need our due consideration. In 'The Legal Spaces of Opera in the Hague', Rebekah Ahrendt draws attention to the manner through which local legal frameworks

¹⁶ See Thomas F. Gieryn, 'What Buildings Do', *Theory and Society* 31 (2002), 35.

¹⁷ Aspden identifies this as a guiding maxim of the book when she cites the words of geographers Barney Warf and Santa Arias: 'geography matters, not for the simplistic and overly used reason that everything happens in space, but because *where* things happen is critical to knowing *how* and *why* they happen' (3). Also see Barney Warf and Santa Arias, eds., *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York, 2009), 1.

¹⁸ In this sense, the book continues the work begun in Anselm Gerhard's *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (Chicago, 1998).

¹⁹ Per the formulation of Henri Lefebvre. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991), 38.

determined how favourable conditions were for opera performance in 1700s Europe. On the one hand, Roman and canon law meant musicians should have been able to move between European locations and be assured that contracts made elsewhere would be enforceable. Certain civic institutions nonetheless limited the enforcement of these contracts, as occurred in Amsterdam. As a result, operatic troupes tended to make detours around the city in favour of other destinations. Ahrendt's contribution is a reminder that however far and wide networks can extend, institutions at the civic level have nonetheless sometimes dramatically altered their course.

Local policies also have immense influence on built environments, as Klaus Van Den Berg reminds us in 'The Opera House as Urban Exhibition Space'. Construction of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York in the 1960s was made possible when New York officials exploited Title 1 of the Federal Housing Act (1949) to 'condemn' townhouses that countless New Yorkers called home. If the formulation to 'condemn a building' (222) deserves extensive discussion in its own right, we can for now note that the actual condemnation was of the residents who were dislocated: above all Puerto-Rican and African-American New Yorkers whose homes were declared slums that needed to be cleared.²⁰ Those who oversaw this urban renewal meanwhile allowed an arts centre to be built that aestheticised exclusion. As Van Den Berg narrates, the older Metropolitan Opera theatre at Broadway and 39th Street was so blended into the commercial district around it that it 'failed to articulate a vision' for the opera house within Manhattan (219). Lincoln Center, in contrast, was to consume a superblock within New York, with the Metropolitan Opera House allocated prime position. There is a spaciousness about the area around the theatre – a fountain alone intersects the view across the plaza towards the Metropolitan Opera from Columbus Avenue. But while air and water – some of the last common properties on earth – define the approach to the theatre, Lincoln Center does not provide a true shared area, even in an urban environment notorious for how breathless it can feel. For one, there is nowhere to rest, no benches in the approach to the theatre. The Metropolitan Opera's oversized glass windows meanwhile associate opera with the consumerism that sustains it. Or, as Van Den Berg puts it, 'their logic of display recalls not just the department store, but Benjamin's dramaturgy of the exhibition space' (224). Those inside are offered to the rest of the New York as an enticing vision: the select few who move within a theatre most will never enter.

There is of course another means to frame all this. We could remember that to simply hold a built environment in one's field of vision can be a powerful experience. There are, for instance, intricate neural connections between vision and touch such that to behold a built environment induces what we could term an affective cascade.²¹ It is the sort of cascade that allows us to experience awe or excitement or beauty when we encounter an opera house. It is moreover a cascade predicated on distance, because distance is what enables us to see vast structures all at once. But if exclusion is never absolute – if built environments draw onlookers into an aesthetic experience whether inside consuming opera or not – the distance needed to behold a theatre is often secured at a steep price. Real estate as we find at Lincoln Center – in a word – costs. Whatever affective experience the space around theatres affords onlookers, that spaciousness is one more reminder that opera is bound to wealth.

The latter is indeed a theme that Aspden explores in her own contribution to the volume, 'Pastoral Retreats: Playing at Arcadia in Modern Britain'. As she relates, in 1900s Britain a market developed for opera staged at manor houses. The Glyndebourne

²⁰ See also Samuel Zipp, 'The Battle of Lincoln Square: Neighborhood Culture and the Rise of Resistance to Urban Renewal', *Planning Perspectives* 24/4 (2009), 409–33.

²¹ See, for instance, Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago, 2014).

Festival, established in 1934 and still ongoing, draws audiences to a Tudor manor in rural Sussex. Those who attend purchase a potent combination of opera and space: the expansiveness of a rural environment (the countryside is often said to boast ‘pure air’ that enables ‘clarity of insight’ (199) and thus a form of mental space), the exclusivity of the manor grounds themselves (which hark back to an era in which landownership was the means to assume social power), and the luxury of personal space (the idea behind Glyndebourne was from the start to ‘cater for the few at correspondingly high prices’ (206)). Space, air and location once more bind opera to a rarified existence.

These and other contributions are informative reads. Yet it is notable that for all the attention to site, *Operatic Geographies: The Place of Opera and the Opera House* in the end tells us little about the actual architectural structures associated with opera. Most contributors situate us in the immediate locale of a theatre but leave us out in the cold: we strain to visualise (or indeed hear) what it is like inside these structures. This is perhaps a marker that theatres are hard to talk about, that they do not lend themselves to smooth narrative forms – at least not for those untrained in architecture. But it could also be a marker that ‘standard’ *teatri all’italiana* have tended to be considered too conventional to be commented on. It is at least notable that those architectural structures that do come into focus in this book are above all ones that are unusual.²² In a contribution that forms a valuable counterpart to Aspden’s, for instance, Katharine Ellis describes Roman ruins and other outdoor venues in southern France. At Béziers a vast recreation of a Roman arena accommodated tens of thousands. Opera was performed there in the afternoon, in order to ‘allow sunset and dramatic peroration to fuse’ (184) while enormous forces were harnessed in order to achieve acoustic plenitude in such an enormous space. Fauré and Saint-Saëns even experimented with compositions for this site that had simplified melodies and harmonies that would be heard in this space, compositions soon dubbed ‘slow opera’ (188). Van Den Berg meanwhile describes the unusual architecture of the Winspear Opera House in Dallas, Texas. Designed by Norman Foster, the theatre ‘la[ys] bare the traditional container of operatic performances, the horseshoe auditorium, exhibiting it as a large red drum that glows at night inside a glass case’ (230). There is something sexual about the result, the traditional red of the opera house turning opera into a seductive marker on the horizon (232).

The contributions to this volume all breathe new life into our sense of what opera means. Interestingly, almost none considers musical scores – or indeed musical details – in order to do this. In this sense, *Operatic Geographies: The Place of Opera and the Opera House* demonstrates how hermeneutics can live on even as the musical work is set aside: all the contributions here examine how new ideas and values become attached to opera as a result of location. To be sure, consideration of the full three-dimensionality of operatic meaning is refreshing. As we have been reminded with the development of sound studies, the minimum criterion for music to come into existence is that there must be spatial coordinates within which it does so: until air vibrations come into contact with the transducing ears of listeners, there is no music.²³ Under the influence of a hermeneutic bent within the humanities, music historians have long tended to stress the end point in this process – how the listener extracts meaning from music – while skimming over the actual mechanisms that enable us to receive information in the first place.²⁴

²² There are nonetheless exceptions to this, not least Michael Burden’s fine discussion of London’s King’s Theatre in his chapter, ‘London’s Opera House in the Urban Landscape’.

²³ Thus, as Jonathan Sterne points out, that old philosophical quandary about a tree falling in the forest is resolved. In the absence of someone within earshot, it makes no sound. See Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC, 2003), 10–12.

²⁴ For lively takes on this hermeneutic bent, see Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’, *Representations* 108/1 (2009), 1–21; Rita Felski, “‘Context Stinks!’”, *New Literary History* 42/4

There have been decades of resistance within the humanities to the simple notion that humans receive information in material form, that existence – as Martin Heidegger understood it – is ‘always already in a substantial and therefore in a *spatial* contact with the things of the world’.²⁵

But consideration of location and the built environment need not necessarily function as one more tool in a hermeneutics of opera. Indeed, the field from which the book takes its cue and title – cultural geography – provides numerous models for other routes that can be charted. Geographers have, for instance, pondered the local accumulation of artefacts and asked: what can we learn from the concentration of these artefacts, in this location, at this time?²⁶ Such lines of enquiry can lead in manifold directions that do not entail elaborate hermeneutic conclusions. In the case of *teatri all’italiana* we could, for instance, observe that these opera houses are at once destinations for much that circulates around the earth (musicians, instruments, audiences) and necessitate movement of the earth itself, movement that is moreover no less social.²⁷ Accumulation of timber or stone construction materials demands movement of materials over sometimes improbable distances; for example, placing people in locations where they otherwise would not be and – in the case of forced labour – do not choose to be. Each time a theatre is redecorated, meanwhile, vast amounts of fabric have to flow into them, fabric that needs to be both woven and coloured. Until the mid-nineteenth-century establishment of chemical colouration industries, the latter entailed extraction of colour from animal, mineral or plant sources drawn from across and beneath a vulnerable earth. The list could continue, but the important point here is that these are stories that still need to be told: stories focused not on what opera means to us – or how it has moved us – but on how we have moved the earth for opera. For all the valuable ideas in *Operatic Geographies*, when we start to do such work, ‘the place(s) of opera and the opera house’ that matter most could turn out be those where scholars have yet to look.

(2011), 573–91, and Heather Love, ‘Close but not Deep: Literary Ethnics and the Descriptive Turn’, *New Literary History* 41/2 (2010), 371–91.

²⁵ The words are Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s, used to summarise the core thesis of Martin Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*. See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, 1984). Cited in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA, 2004), 66.

²⁶ See, for instance, Kay Anderson, Mona Domosh, Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, eds., *Handbook of Cultural Geography* (London, 2003).

²⁷ I borrow this incisive formulation and the conceptual framework for this paragraph from Kyle Devine’s important work on the shellac trade. See Kyle Devine, *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music* (Cambridge, 2019), 79.