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Reconstructing the Construction of the Royal Court

> Consult the genius of the place in all.
>
> —Alexander Pope

In the autumn of 1995 the Royal Court Theatre received notice that it would be awarded funds from the National Lottery that would enable it to address the rapidly disintegrating state of its 107-year-old building. Almost forty years earlier the English Stage Company (ESC) had moved into the Royal Court, cognizant of the building's inadequacies. During the intervening decades, management considered comprehensive plans to remedy the problems, as well as contemplated moving elsewhere, but never managed to raise the necessary funds to accomplish either objective. For forty years, makeshift solutions enabled the Royal Court to continue functioning without solving these problems. In 1994 the *New York Times* called the Royal Court (the company) the most important theatre in Europe the same week that, in London, *The Times* called the Royal Court (the building) "a dump."[1]

Aesthetically, any architectural changes to the building could potentially undermine its strengths. In the feasibility study for the reconstruction, Richard Eyre delineates those strengths: "The Royal Court is the ideal size for a playhouse. It boasts perfect acoustics, humane proportions and the best physical relationship between actor and audience in London."[2] Aesthetic problem solving and technical conundrums intertwined. Indeed, the decaying physical fabric of the building compounded engineering challenges like the awkward building site, the theatre's proximity to the Underground, and even an adjacent sewer pipe carrying the Westbourne Rivulet.

During its forty-seven-year tenure at the Royal Court, the ESC developed a reputation as the most important English-language theatre dedicated to the

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production of new plays. Such a reputation affects the expectations of current audiences, and the challenge of the renovation would be to retain the theatre's special ambiance. How much could the Royal Court be changed without losing its identity? How does the building's architecture speak to its audience? What is the identity of the ESC? How does the ESC balance past achievements, aesthetics of theatre buildings, and the company's need to transform a nineteenth-century facility into one suitable for the twenty-first century? Architect Steve Tompkins's desire to create a palimpsest in the current rebuilding project illuminates the idea of a narrative, of a theatre building and company revealed through a history of accretion.[3] Tompkins explains, "What's important about the Royal Court is not so much bricks and mortar as a sort of narrative continuity. We are trying to plug into that narrative sense: what's the theatre's story, what is the line of history, what is the story onto which one can write the next chapter?"[4]

On 17 February 2000, following the completion of a £26 million rebuilding program that lasted almost three and a half years and included substantial construction delays, the Royal Court Theatre reopened. The public and press responded to the rebuilding enthusiastically; nonetheless, a public debate as to whether the building has been improved or damaged by its extraordinary lottery-funded transformation is likely to ensue. The architecture of a theatre building can profoundly affect the work of its resident theatre company. The Royal Court's status derives from the durability of its architecture joined to the fame of the ESC, its subsidized, art-theatre management.

Given the current inextricable relationship between the Royal Court Theatre and the English Stage Company, the rebuilding tailored the Royal Court to meet the needs of its current tenant. Therefore, the stage boasts improved technical resources and spatial flexibility. Expanded office, workshop, and dressing-room space allow the building to house a producing management that functions as a national theatre of new writing.

The current Royal Court Theatre, built in 1888, is the second theatre to have borne that name; the first Royal Court lasted from 1871 to 1887. Theatre managers built each of the two buildings during a period when the "gradual accumulation of public wealth and a new national prosperity led to a building boom in West End theatres that started in 1866 and lasted to the end of the century."[5] The boom also included the building of provincial and suburban theatres, such as the Royal Court, which lie outside of the West End theatre district. The current building fits Marvin Carlson's definition of a facade theatre, which means that the brick and limestone facade harmonizes with the neighboring streetscape rather than drawing special attention to the theatre building.[6] No monumental structure, the Royal Court places itself within its community.

During the Harley Granville Barker–J. E. Vedrenne management of 1904 to 1907, the Royal Court achieved its first great period of prominence,

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producing plays by writers whose work fell outside the typical parameters of West End commercial repertory, including Shaw, Galsworthy, Barker, and Euripides. This management achieved widespread acceptance for the first time in England for productions of what we now term the modern drama. However, the long-term viability of such a noncommercial policy necessitated some form of subsidy, a concept that had yet to gain widespread support.

Nonetheless, the identity of the Royal Court became fixed in the public's consciousness during this management. During the next fifty years, virtually every newspaper article that mentions the theatre associated it with this famous art-theatre management. The Royal Court developed the identity of a theatre that challenged the status quo, celebrated new plays, represented a leftist–socialist political position, and featured especially fine realistic acting.

The failure of the Barker–Vedrenne management after it moved from the Royal Court to the West End's Savoy Theatre suggests that the theatre building itself played an important role in that management team's success. As Barker biographer Dennis Kennedy asserts: "Like many successful enterprises, the Court had acquired a mystique, vaguely defined but palpable, and the genus loci did not travel."[7] Over the following half-century (1907–1956) several others tried and failed to achieve the balance necessary to operate an independent theatre at the Royal Court successfully. Consequently, that *genus loci* remained largely quiescent until George Devine and Tony Richardson assumed the leadership of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court in 1956. As Devine himself said that year, "If this were easy, someone would have done it before us."[8]

The English Stage Company assumed the theatre's lease in 1955 and began to occupy the theatre in early 1956. The ESC's marriage with the Royal Court Theatre appears in retrospect to be serendipitous. Key elements of the ESC's mission correspond to characteristic events from the building's history that associate the name Royal Court with new plays, opposition to censorship, fine realistic acting, education, and leftist politics. During the following decades, the ESC battled to sustain the company, while remaining dedicated to producing new plays, opposing censorship, performing in a distinctive, realistic acting style, creating an active educational program, and keeping faith with its leftist social awareness. Those efforts eventually cemented the conflation of theatre and company. The institutionalization of the ESC at the Royal Court during the late 1980s and early 1990s ensured that the identity of theatre company and theatre building became indistinguishable. The rebuilding program endeavored to retain the ghosts of the building's past and the intimacy of its auditorium while transforming a late-Victorian receiving house into a flexible, modern, producing theatre capable of juxtaposing new plays against the context of the traditional proscenium stage.

The rebuilding sought to accentuate the building's history. The new version of the Royal Court juxtaposes elements of the building from its original

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Victorian construction, its Edwardian alteration, its 1920s rebuilding, its bomb damage and shoddy postwar repairs, and its current new construction, rather than attempting to disguise these various layers with a single homogeneous veneer. To evaluate or read such a complex set of architectural messages compels a return to the theatre's genesis in the mid-nineteenth century in an attempt to reveal which of the theatre's attributes may have contributed to its success in producing new plays.

The redevelopment of the Royal Court Theatre invites an examination of the history of the building. In 1995 after a more than a century of inadequate care, the theatre's stage house was in danger of collapse, the stage rotting, and the elderly grid no longer capable of flying heavy scenery. In addition, the technical, mechanical, and electrical infrastructure and hardware throughout the building was obsolete. Perhaps because the Royal Court had hosted the two most important managements for the production of new plays in English during the twentieth century, the building itself has received scant attention in the extant histories.

This essay aims to retrieve and reconstruct as much of the record of the building's origin as possible, in the hope of comprehending the context in which the theatre first appeared. A careful reading of the file of correspondence between the Department of Works and Walter Emden, the building's architect, explains the existence of multiple sets of building plans and provides clues to problems that shaped the building's development. Additionally, the research uncovered an important correction to the accepted attribution of the Royal Court's architect. Media reports contemporary with the theatre's opening and theatre histories that mention the building provide important additional information. Collecting and organizing this information into a single repository makes the information more accessible to other scholars. Some of the difficulties and advantages of the current rebuilding date back to decisions made during the original construction; thus, understanding the evolution of the Royal Court yields insights into the present rebuilding.

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At the same time, it is important to understand the larger social and urban landscape of the theatre itself. As Marvin Carlson contends:

> [I]n every historical period and in every culture the physical matrices of the theatrical event—where it takes place within the community, what sort of structure houses it, and how that structure is organized and decorated—all contribute in important ways to the cultural processing of the event and must be taken into consideration by anyone seeking an understanding of its dynamics.[9]

The Royal Court Theatre stands on the east side of Sloane Square in Chelsea, a few miles removed from the main London West End theatre district.

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The Thames forms the clear southern edge to the Chelsea district. The other edges tend to be less definite as Chelsea meets and merges with Knightsbridge and Belgravia. The train tracks leading to Victoria Station create an eastern edge. Chelsea Creek forms the approximate western edge to the district. The least distinct edge of Chelsea runs along the northern part of the district beginning at Chelsea Creek and traveling east-northeast more or less along the Fulham Road and Walton Street. Basically a low-rise district, no single building provides a dominant landmark to the Chelsea skyline. Nonetheless, the Royal Court and Sloane Square aside, Chelsea possesses a number of notable landmarks capable of attracting visitors. The Royal Hospital, Burton Court, and the Duke of York's Headquarters function as landmarks in providing orientation within the district. Just off the square, the 1890 Holy Trinity Church designed by John Dando Sedding, boasts well-known stained-glass windows designed by Byrne Jones and executed by the William Morris Studios. Across the square from the theatre, the smooth facade of the Peter Jones department store designed by William Crabtree in 1932 provides a sleek moderne contrast to much of the surrounding Victoriana.

The changes in modes of transportation over the centuries have played an important role in the development of Chelsea. Unquestionably, the combination of easy transport from other areas of London and Chelsea's artistic atmosphere must have made it an suitable location for the idealistic practitioners of 1956, led by George Devine, who constituted the English Stage Company. His biographer, Irving Wardle, reports Devine's attitude: "It was going to be an ordinary proscenium house; it's not in the middle of London, but it's all we can get, and it's large enough, and it's for a middle-class theatre population. If any one else wants to support it, fine."[10]

The Chelsea district in London has undergone several changes since the ESC took over the management of the Royal Court. Michael Hallifax, the original stage manager for the ESC, describes Chelsea as a backwater: "It was sort of the fading fifties. There were no restaurants, no life there. . . . It was a very barren area with no passing trade because nobody walked in Chelsea."[11] Within a decade, nearby King's Road became an important part of London's Swinging Sixties. It being an increasingly trendy place to go since the 1980s, the Sloane Rangers—a descriptive term given to young women of affluent backgrounds who frequent the area—have almost taken over Chelsea. The most prominent urban magnet on Sloane Square is Peter Jones, the upscale department store located on the west side of the square across from the Royal Court. In 2003, facing the square one finds a mixture of residential buildings and retail establishments including four banks, a chemist, several restaurants, a hotel, and a chain bookstore. Reflecting the current lively foot traffic for businesses located on Sloane Square, the ordinary King's Arms pub, adjacent to the Royal Court when the ESC moved in, has been transformed into a branch of the upscale bar-restaurant Oriel. Shortly after the ESC began producing at the Royal Court, the construction of a mixed-use office and residential building over

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the Underground station reflected the start of the surge in real-estate values that transformed the area since Hallifax's report on the 1950s.

Sloane Square itself presents what the borough planner calls an open, almost "continental" face to the community, unlike the typical, densely landscaped London square, such as nearby Eaton Square.[12] Modest in size, the small park in the center of Sloane Square functions primarily as a place around which people walk because the bustle of traffic surrounding the square deters the casual visitor from crossing into it. Visitors who cross into the square definitely feel like they stand on an island surrounded by pulsing streams of traffic. Thereon one finds the fountain designed by Gilbert Ledward, R.A., and erected in 1953 as a gift of the Royal Academy to the Borough of Chelsea.[13] A replica of the statue of Sir Hans Sloane, namesake of the square and former Chelsea resident, also graces the square. A third piece of monumental sculpture, dedicated to the dead of the two World Wars, stands at the end closest to the theatre.

Despite these pieces of sculpture, pedestrians have no compelling reason to enter the square, a problem that the recent renovation of the Royal Court sought to address. The theatre received permission to tunnel under the road in front of the theatre and to connect to an abandoned, subterranean restroom in the square in order to create sufficient space for a bar-restaurant. One of the unresolved items on the renovation plan remains the architect's plan to use the staircase leading up to the square to provide an alternative entrance to theatre and restaurant. In the warmer months, the restaurant could offer table service in Sloane Square. The current planning permission allows this stairway into Sloane Square to function only as an emergency exit, because of reservations of the landowner, the Cadogan Estate, about the sometimes raffish clientele the theatre attracts.

The Royal Court's location, away from the West End, while firmly attached to a middle-class district, may have affected the ESC's ability to transform itself into an artistic institution with a sense of permanence. Unlike later fringe or Off-Off Broadway theatres, which located themselves in run-down districts, the Royal Court, just slightly off-center and easily accessible to the city's power sources, occupies a *bohème* where a middle-class audience feels safe to venture. Such a location probably has a similar positive effect on the corporate and government funding organizations upon which all noncommercial late-twentieth-century theatres rely for their economic survival.

Idealists such as George Devine led the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre in London, and their vision sustains the organization today. At any given time at least three Royal Courts exist. First among these is the ideal Royal Court, a principled organization led by superheroic writers to achieve productions of the highest artistic standards. Second is the quotidian Royal Court, constrained by budgets, fallibly human, and yet, like a mutating

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signifier chasing a chameleon signified, aiming for each generation's version of those same ideal standards. Finally, there is the Royal Court of legend, drawn from those occasions in the past when the quotidian Royal Court and the ideal Royal Court merged into one organization. All of these identities prove unstable. Each generation of the forty-seven-year-old organization creates its own ideals, and its own version of the legends. Periodically, the Royal Court, like a snake, must shed one skin and emerge in another.

During the decade of the 1990s, the ESC confronted the necessity of metamorphosis in light of the transformations occurring in Sloane Square itself. Like any organization in the fast-changing world of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, the ESC has continually had to adjust its image in order to maintain its reputation as a cutting-edge institution. By the 1990s, Sloane Square had become one of the most affluent, trend-setting districts in the capital, in a world where Thatcherism had apparently vanquished socialist ideals.[14] Arty Chelsea had transformed from the dowdy backwater of 1956, when the ESC began operating at the Royal Court, into one of the most expensive and desirable areas in London. According to borough planner David McDonald, rich foreign nationals who prefer a part-time London address most frequently choose the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.[15] Current Executive Director Vikki Heywood amplifies this demographic reality with her 1998 report that virtually every member of the House of Lords with a London address maintains a residence in the London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.[16]

The contrast between this establishment neighborhood and the often scruffy presence of the young people congregating on the Royal Court's front steps underscores a dialectic that exists on many levels in the organization. The contrast between the Royal Court's traditional-style auditorium and the often unconventional new plays presented there also operates in the geographical contrast between establishment Chelsea and the brash, outspoken and often antiestablishment nature of the theatre company based there. Heywood explains that although the Royal Court's productions frequently scandalized establishment Chelsea residents, they tolerated the company much like a parent who will tolerate behavior from her own rebellious child that she might not tolerate from a stranger's child.[17] Like some of the boutiques on King's Road, the Royal Court provides the establishment with a peek at the avant-garde.

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The history of the building begins in the first quarter of the nineteenth century with the construction of the Ranelagh Chapel, a chapel for dissenters located approximately fifty yards off Sloane Square on Lower George Street. The first Royal Court Theatre occupied the shell of the Ranelagh Chapel. This connection between the building and an antiestablishment attitude foreshadows the importance of the element of dissent as an integral part of the identity of the contemporary Royal Court Theatre.

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The history of the Ranelagh Chapel began in 1818, when, on a site formerly occupied by a slaughterhouse, a Mr. Pinney built the chapel to plans of the architect Mr. Pocock for the pastor Mr. Shepherd. It opened on 2 July 1818. Shepherd professed the creed of a Calvinist Methodist connected to the group known as the "Lady Huntingdon Connection," a splinter group of traditional Methodists centered around the patronage of Lady Huntingdon, a prominent Methodist evangelist and Chelsea resident of the mid-eighteenth century. The anonymous author of "Reminiscences of Ranelagh" describes it as "one of the handsomest and most commodious chapels in the metropolis" accommodating twelve hundred persons.[18]

At the end of his life, Shepherd transferred the lease for the building to the English Presbyterian Church. Ranelagh Presbyterian Church opened on 3 August 1845. When the lease expired in 1866, the building needed repairs. The Presbyterian church attempted to extend its lease, but the landlord, the Cadogan Estate, informed the church that the lease would not be extended beyond the expiration of the main or head lease in 1887 because the estate intended to redevelop the site. Regarding it as unwise to invest money in a building that would be demolished in twenty years, the congregation moved to what became Belgrave Presbyterian Church. Ranelagh Chapel hosted its last church services on Sunday, 25 March 1866.

The landlord offered the building as assembly rooms, but no regular tenant emerged for some time. Although the church had decided against investing in a building with only twenty years left on its lease, in 1870 a theatre management decided to take the risk of transforming the chapel into a theatre with only seventeen years remaining. This short-term perspective may reflect the fact that the average life span of a Victorian theatre was only twenty-two years (largely due to the danger of fire), and it must have been possible to recoup the investment in transforming the building into a theatre during the remaining duration of the lease.[19]

The New Chelsea Theatre opened on 16 April 1870 under the management of Arthur Morgan and B. Oliver. They had made minimal changes to the building, perhaps a sign that they were less than confident of success in opening a theatre with a short lease located at a remove from the main London theatre district. Indeed, the opening-night notice in *The Era* of 24 April 1870 remarked on the "incomplete state" of the interior.[20] Prices at the new theatre were cheap,[21] however, which proved typical for suburban theatres that functioned economically more like provincial theatres than West End theatres.[22]

In 1881, Percy Fitzgerald reminisced about his visits to the theatre, describing the apparently modest interior:

> The decorations of the theatre were rather of a homely cast-room paper garnished with bead moldings, a ready style of ornament to be noticed even

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> in more pretentious theatres. The house contained one gallery for boxes, another overhead for the unwashed; a row of hard benches below, by an almost Eastern shape of complement entitled the 'stalls.' The number of private boxes was amazing, the flanks, as it were, of the house being set apart for the wealthy aristocracy, who preferred, at a moderate cost, to be secure of their haughty privacy.[23]

Morgan and Oliver conservatively chose to program the New Chelsea with the traditional mixed fare consisting of comedy, drama, farce, ballet, and burlesque. Despite prices below their West End competition, the New Chelsea failed to fill enough seats, and it soon closed. A new management changed the name to The Belgravia, perhaps in the hope that an association with the nearby fashionable neighborhood would prove attractive to theatregoers. The name change didn't improve box-office revenue, and that theatre too closed. As in its subsequent history as the Royal Court, the theatre proved more successful when it allied itself with new trends rather than replicating more traditional West End fare.

The genesis of the Royal Court itself arises from this tale of failed attempts to establish a theatre in Chelsea. In 1871 the actress-manager Marie Litton, whose experience in Brighton made her a more experienced and savvy manager than Morgan and Oliver, acquired the lease for the building and commissioned the architect Walter Emden to build a proper theatre within the shell of the building.[24] Emden eventually designed both the 1871 and 1888 Royal Court Theatres. Emden's plans of 1871, on file in the London Municipal Archives, include color renderings of the Regency-style exterior of the original building and of the new interior.

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Some biographical information about Emden bears relating. It helps explain Emden's success as a theatre architect, and why his pragmatic design approach proved successful for both Royal Courts. Emden apparently derived practical knowledge of the theatre through his theatrical family. His father, W. S. Emden, worked as a playwright and sometime theatre manager. His mother worked as a featured actress at the Olympic Theatre during her husband's management regime (August 1857–September 1864). His younger brother, Henry, developed a career as a well-known scenic artist.

The theatre's excellent actor–audience relationship, rather than its decoration or the appearance of the facade, produced the environment within which plays thrive. Perhaps Emden's understanding of theatre, gained from his theatrical family, enabled him to create a space designed to meet the practical needs of performer and audience. The almost perfect proportions of the auditorium and proscenium of the current Royal Court have remained intact during constant interior remodeling over its 115-year history. It is those proportions, the relationship between stage and audience, and the scale of the

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actor within the proscenium arch, that made this a successful theatre for the play and that the current renovation seeks to preserve.

Emden's qualifications as an architect, although typical for the day, appear slight by twentieth-century standards. He studied mechanical engineering and worked as a civil engineer before beginning to study architecture with the firm of Kelley and Lawes FFRIBA in 1870. That same year, he called himself "architect" and designed, first, the reconstruction of the Globe Theatre on Newcastle Street, and then the new interior that became the eleven-hundred-seat Royal Court. Emden's brief apprenticeship reflects the mid-Victorian laissez-faire attitude toward theatre architecture.[25] Emden's work has been described as "the epitome of charming architectural illiteracy."[26] Nonetheless, in 1883 Emden wrote articles in *The Architect* about his ideas for theatre design.[27] Reflecting his engineering background, Emden derived his strength as an architect from his knowledge of building techniques, as evidenced in an 1888 issue of *The Architect* in which Emden contributed an article about advanced safety features in the construction of theatres.[28]

A comparison between the plans for the 1871 Royal Court and the 1888 (or current) Royal Court reveals Emden's practical nature. The essential shape of the auditorium and its relationship to the stage remains basically the same, although the second theatre had to be shoehorned into a site with a smaller footprint than that of the first Royal Court. The difference in the interior decoration for theatres suggests that Emden matched his designs to his client's budgets. As an architect Emden reflected an integrally practical approach that repeated successful arrangements created for one theatre in the next one he designed.

Almost all of our knowledge of the appearance of the first Royal Court depends upon the opening notice accompanied by an engraving of the interior in the *Illustrated London News* of 4 February 1871. The printed descriptions correspond with Walter Emden's one-color rendering of the interior on file with the building plans. The *Illustrated London News* described the theatre on opening night:

> The Royal Court, as shown in our view of the interior, is a bright, brilliant little theatre, capable of seating comfortably 1,100 persons. It is gorgeous in gilding, profuse in ornamentation, and its hangings and box-curtains are of a pinkish-mauve satin, which has a novel and very satisfactory effect. Two huge griffins or dragons flank the proscenium boxes on each side of the house. The frescoes over the proscenium, by Mr. Gurden Dalziel, representing incidents in the life of St. George of England, are very skillfully painted.[29]

Although Dalziel's fame has not endured into the present, he was one of the more prominent London artists of the period. The reporter comments on the

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theatre's proximity to the Sloane Square station of the Metropolitan District Railway, which made the theatre convenient to all portions of London serviced by the Underground.[30]

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The Metropolitan Railway first opened in 1863, and the Inner Circle was completed in 1884. Traffic congestion was a chronic problem in Victorian London, and the Metropolitan Railway made it possible to travel around the city quickly and easily. No longer did a patron need to live within walking distance of a theatre in order to attend. Combined with the suburban rail lines, the Metropolitan Railway enabled a theatre to expand the geographical range of its audience to include almost all of greater London.[31]

The importance of public transit in delivering the audience to the Royal Court continues to the present. According to a 1996 audience survey, 50 percent of the Royal Court audience continues to arrive at the theatre by Underground, still the most popular method of travel even in the era of the automobile.[32] During the late twentieth century, alternative theatres such as the Royal Court have proven most successful when located near mass transit.[33] The theatre's location next to the Underground stop has undoubtedly contributed to its viability.

The theatre's Sloane Square location places it on a transportation node within Greater London for foot traffic, automobile traffic, and both bus and Underground mass transit. Several important streets feed directly into Sloane Square, including King's Road (leading west to the Thames crossing at Putney Bridge), Sloane Street (leading to Knightsbridge and Hyde Park), Lower Sloane Street (heading to the river and the Chelsea Bridge), and Eaton Square (heading to Belgravia, Mayfair, and Buckingham Palace).

Most of the early development in Chelsea related to the Thames, because the river provided the fastest and easiest means for transport. Currently, the area is largely residential. After the metropolis engulfed the district during the nineteenth century, the main commercial district developed during the late Victorian era along King's Road and around Sloane Square, placing the Royal Court in the commercial center. Mass-transportation paths make the Sloane Square node the obvious new gateway to the district. The location on a major transportation node undoubtedly contributed to the theatre's success because, as Carlson notes, easy access by mass transportation proves a crucial factor in predicting the success of a contemporary theatre's location.[34]

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Why Marie Litton chose to name the new theatre Royal Court, since she had no known connection to the court or to the royal family, remains an

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intriguing question not answered by the historical record. The Theatre Royals that exist in several British cities bear that title as a result of a specific charter from the monarchy. Similarly, in the twentieth century the monarchy granted the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal National Theatre specific charters permitting them the use of the term 'royal'. No record exists that the Royal Court received a special charter granting it the title. Both the 1871 and 1888 Royal Courts included a special box and retiring room for the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII), who apparently attended the theatre frequently. Other theatres that did not claim the title 'royal' also had special boxes for the Prince of Wales. Interestingly, the nineteenth-century press almost universally refer to the theatre as the Court Theatre, ignoring the word 'royal' altogether. Since observers in the late nineteenth century regarded the role of the monarchy more highly than those of the late twentieth, and sensitivities to the word 'royal' were correspondingly greater, perhaps the press's omission of the term 'royal' results from its knowledge that this usage has been claimed rather than granted.

Given the antiestablishment attitude of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court, it is interesting to consider that of the three contemporary 'royal' theatre companies (Royal Shakespeare, Royal National, and Royal Court), the oldest of these theatres, the Royal Court, cheekily claimed the title for itself. The name Royal Court proved significant during the 1996–2000 refurbishment. Queen Elizabeth II herself assisted in resolving a renaming and funding conundrum.

Marie Litton opened the Royal Court in January 1871 with a comedy by W. S. Gilbert entitled *Randall's Thumb*. The *Illustrated London News* praised a "company of more than usual merit."[35] From its opening, the Royal Court proved an important venue in establishing Gilbert's reputation as a playwright, demonstrating an almost intrinsic suitability for productions of new plays. Although for posterity Gilbert's reputation rests on his collaborations on operettas with Sir Arthur Sullivan, he initially achieved success as a playwright. Indeed, some critics regard Gilbert as part of the movement to raise the level of seriousness of writing for the stage. Gilbert provided another early hit for the Royal Court with his adaptation of Labiche's *Un Chapeau de Paille D'Italie*, entitled *The Wedding March* (1873). Michael Booth contends that this production helped establish the trend toward "three act farce or 'farcical-comedy,'" which reached its height with Arthur Wing Pinero's farces at the Royal Court in the eighteen eighties.[36]

In 1873, Gilbert, writing under a pseudonym F. Latour Tomline, adapted his fairy play *The Wicked World* (also 1873) into a biting, political satire attacking the government called *The Happy Land*. This notorious production began the association in the public's mind of the Royal Court with plays that challenge and mock the establishment. Apparently, the opening-night performance met with the approval of the Prince and Princess of Wales and the Duke of Edinburgh, who, among others, attended in a packed house. Unaware

of the plan to imitate through the actor's makeup, dress, and manner Prime Minister Gladstone and two of his Cabinet members, Lowe and Ayrton, the Lord Chamberlain licensed the play. Gilbert allegedly added some lines borrowed from contemporary political speeches after the play had been licensed. Therefore, the Royal Court attracted the nation's attention when, after three performances of *The Happy Land*, the Lord Chamberlain, under pressure from the Prime Minister, rescinded the license to produce the play.[37] Gladstone, not amused at being made the butt of satire, objected to the clearly identifiable depiction of himself and his cabinet members, despite Gilbert's changing of the character's names. The theatre received the notice that the license had been rescinded shortly before the beginning of fourth performance and decided to present that performance in defiance of the ban.

Although they regretted the delayed action, the *Saturday Review* approved of the censorship.[38] The *Illustrated London News* of 22 March 1873 postulated, "[w]hether it is proper for the functionaries of the state to be placed personally on the stage in such ridiculous attitudes and engaged in such whimsical action, may be left to the good taste of the public."[39] *The Penny Illustrated Paper* of 15 March 1873 tended to side with the Royal Court, calling the Lord Chamberlain's decisions "capricious and shortsighted."[40] Miss Litton canceled the fifth performance but managed to reopen the next night by agreeing to alter the actor's makeup and cut a few offending lines of dialogue. The *Penny Illustrated* portrayed the changes as slight and described the caricatures as still recognizable. The play had a successful run of two hundred performances. Thus, the first Royal Court management foreshadowed both its early-twentieth-century descendant, the Barker–Vedrenne management, and its late-twentieth-century descendant, the English Stage Company. The ESC's ongoing battles over censorship in the 1960s contributed, in large part, to Parliament's decision to end the power of the Lord Chamberlain to censor theatre.

The Builder of 6 January 1872 provides the next news of the building, a letter complaining about the alteration to the stairs leading from the street entrance to the pit, which resulted in the construction of wooden stairs on top of the stone ones required by the Building Act.[41] Emden, who developed into something of an expert on fire safety in theatres, defended the safety of the stairs, although the writer for *The Builder* disagreed with him.[42] The letter reveals a central truth: throughout the Royal Court's history the immediate need to save money often contributed to shortcuts in required building alterations.

Another complaint about the theatre reveals how sensitivities to the social and economic distinctions of the audience often led to awkward internal arrangements in theatres. A writer complains that the entrance to the stalls requires a substantial trek: "[T]o enter the stalls you have to first climb thirteen steps, and then two steps before you reach the dress-circle. Then there are first five steps and then nineteen more to descend and then two to ascend before you reach the stalls on the Prompt side."[43] This circuitous route to the stalls via the

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dress circle segregated the middle-class audience in the stalls from the working-class audience seated on the same level in the pit. The middle class's social unease when attending the theatre dictated such a distinction. Emden may have created such an arrangement as part of a compromise between the need to acknowledge social distinctions and the need to adhere to a budget.

In response to the theatre-building boom and the constant danger of theatre fires, Parliament in 1878 authorized the Metropolitan Board of Works to supervise the construction of London theatres, with special emphasis placed on the importance of fireproofing and providing adequate exits.[44] In response, the Royal Court made structural alterations and erected a new porch.[45] A letter in the archive reveals that the board required the portico changes to bring the Royal Court into compliance with the Building Act Amendment Acts of 1878. The alterations were scheduled to take less than a month, and on 31 October 1882 the management invited the Municipal Works Department to inspect the completed addition.[46] No architectural record of the changes has been found.

An interesting footnote accompanies this change: a note in the correspondence file reveals a decrease in the capacity of the house. The Royal Court opened claiming 1,100 seats but reported a capacity of only 773 at the time of these alterations.[47] This reduction in capacity represents another result of the Building Act Amendment Acts of 1878. Virtually all London theatres had their capacities diminished during the decade following its enactment because of the requirement to place safety ahead of the desire to maximize seating capacity.[48]

Several other managements succeeded Miss Litton's, most notably that of John Hare (1875–1879), who was knighted in 1907 for his work in making theatre respectable. In 1875 Hare engaged the Kendals to join him at the Royal Court.[49] Hare and the Kendals had worked for the Bancrofts, and together they brought T. W. Robertson's "school of natural acting" to the Court.[50] Thus, early in its history, managements capitalized on the Royal Court's intimate stage by promoting greater realism in acting. Fine acting developed into a Royal Court characteristic during later regimes, including Barker–Vedrenne (1904–1907), Barry Jackson (1922–1929), and the English Stage Company (1956–present). Individually and collectively, these managements at the Royal Court changed the parameters of "good acting" on the English stage. Hare's desire for respectability also imitated the Bancrofts "when in place of the stronger drinks of the early Victorian theatre, he provided coffee and tea during the intervals."[51]

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Although the Royal Court responded to directives pertaining to code changes, management apparently ignored basic building maintenance. An 1887 article in the *Saturday Review* describes the Royal Court as shabby, probably because of the combination of the wear and tear resulting from Arthur Wing

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Pinero's three successive hit farces and the postponement of building maintenance because of the impending end of the theatre's lease. The *Saturday Review* describes the theatre as being "in a very bad state, and . . . the sooner the Court is pulled down the better for everybody."[52] That wish was accomplished soon when the Cadogan Estate redeveloped the land south of Sloane Square, demolishing the entire block. The Cadogan Estate redevelopment scheme reconfigured the existing street grid, eliminating the portion of Lower George Street on which the original Royal Court stood. One must imagine Lower George Street and the old Royal Court as running between two current streets, Sloane Gardens and Holbein Place. Concurrent with these developments, Walter Emden designed the current Royal Court Theatre for a plot of Cadogan Estate land on the east side of the square. The first Royal Court Theatre witnessed its final performance on 22 July 1887.[53]

Actor-manager John Clayton's decision to build a second Royal Court made sense. Clayton obviously planned to continue his successful working relationship as both actor and manager with the prominent playwright Arthur Wing Pinero. The Royal Court's record of successful productions proved that a theatre in Chelsea could attract an audience, and the patronage of the Prince of Wales gave attendance at the Royal Court a social cachet. Clayton's father-in-law, the famous manager and playwright Dion Boucicault, provided a possible mentoring relationship for this venture. Although the nearby site offered a slightly smaller footprint, it possessed the advantage of a location right on Sloane Square adjacent to the recently opened Metropolitan District Railway station. Clayton then engaged Walter Emden, designer of the first Royal Court and now a well-known theatre designer. The Cadogan Estate's redevelopment of the land south of Sloane Square promised a more upscale residential neighborhood. The prospects for the theatre in 1887 appeared secure.

Additionally, Chelsea developed the reputation as an artistic enclave during the late nineteenth century when a self-consciously artistic community including Thomas Carlyle, James Whistler, Leigh Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Oscar Wilde, Walter Greaves, and George Eliot settled there.[54] The organization of the Chelsea Arts Club in 1891 provided the area something of a respectable, middle-class artistic atmosphere, and in such an environment the current Royal Court Theatre arose. The migration of artists into the district continued at least into the early twentieth century, when sculptor Jacob Epstein moved his studio to Chelsea.

A letter to the Board of Works from Walter Emden and Bertie Crewe dated 29 July 1887 accompanied their submission of a set of drawings for the building, numbered A1–A6. The letter reveals that they wish to open the building in January 1888 and that the plans for the 770-seat theatre resemble those for the recently completed Terry's Theatre, also designed by Emden.[55] Clayton appears to have asked Emden to create a new theatre with approximately the same audience capacity as the old one. *The Builder* of 13 August 1887 reported that "the new theater will be almost wholly constructed of fire-resistant materials."[56]

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The prominent mention of the use of fireproof materials is not coincidental. Earlier that year, the new Theatre Royal Exeter burned with an accompanying loss of more than one hundred lives. That tragedy provoked a public outcry for improved fire safety in theatres.[57]

On 5 August 1887 Emden and Crewe applied for a building certificate for their theatre, and on 9 August 1887 an internal memo from the supervising architect, L. Blashill, recommended approval of the plans; however, circumstances delayed final approval until 9 March 1888. Another internal memo of the Works Department calls attention to a clipping from the *Kensington News* in which Walter Emden complains that holidays taken by members of the Board of Works held up approval of the building and that the delay will add about £1,000 in extra expenses to the project.[58]

On 21 September Emden wrote a letter withdrawing the first set of plans due to an error in measurement of the site, and on 24 September he submitted a revised set of drawings, numbered B1–B6. An internal memo of the Board of Works dated 30 September indicates that there were problems with the plans. However, supervising architect Blashill, perhaps annoyed over Emden's complaints in the press, waited until 20 October to notify Emden that the drawings did not comply with regulations. Rather than delineating the problems, Blashill suggested that the architects consult the building regulations in order to discover the shortcomings. Emden's immediate reply, dated 21 October, stated that he consulted the regulations and cannot identify the problems. On 27 October the Works Department replied detailing fifteen specific shortcomings, mostly minor in nature. Emden submitted a set of amended drawings numbered B1–B10 on 22 November.[59]

A letter from Emden dated 14 December informed the Board of Works that Bertie Crewe "is no longer associated with the project."[60] Although the early announcements for the building credit Bertie Crewe as the coarchitect, the discovery of this letter in the correspondence file for the Royal Court explains why none of the reports of the completed building mention Crewe's involvement. Yet the letter fails to explain why Crewe and Emden parted ways. Some architectural historians assert that Emden learned much from Crewe about the principles for the interior decoration of theatre.[61] The absence of any detailed descriptions of the interior decoration of this theatre may indicate that, if Emden learned about theatre decoration from Crewe, he did so after the Royal Court project. Back in September, Emden complained about the added costs associated with delays in the project. Perhaps those costs contributed to a decision to simplify the interior, which eliminated the need for Crewe's services. The board conditionally approved the plans on 16 December, and Blashill wrote Emden to inform him that plans B2–B10 received such approval.[62]

While Emden negotiated the building approval with the Board of Works, he also attempted to publicize the plan and his role as theatre architect. The

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Building News of 27 January 1888 printed a front elevation of the building along with a longitudinal section and plan at ground (dress circle) level and details about the building. The fireproof construction of the building was to be similar to, yet an improvement upon, that in the recently opened Terry's Theatre. Two exits would be provided from each section of the auditorium, the largest number of exits yet installed in a London theatre. The article reports on the inclusion of an asbestos fire curtain, a double lighting system of electricity and gas, hot-water heating, and the elimination of columns that might impede the audience's view. It continues: "The front in Sloane-square is in a free, simple style and the interior will be in a treatment of the French Renaissance."[63] The *Pall Mall Budget* of February 23 confirms this report.[64]

Work on the building apparently began in January 1888, a month after the originally proposed opening date. While the initial prospects for the building suggested an easy completion for the theatre, the pattern of obstacles that delayed the preliminary approval of the building continued during the construction, resulting in additional delays. The excavation for the foundation revealed the first problem. A letter from Emden to the Board of Works requested permission to raise the building two feet because construction work revealed that the Ranelagh sewer was closer to the surface than originally thought. Emden included a fourth and final set of drawings numbered C1–C10 along with some drawings that detailed the building's cast-iron skeleton. These drawings establish that, although most architectural historians credit Frank Matcham with creating the system of cantilevering balconies in order to eliminate columns in theatres, Emden's engineering background enabled him to make a similar improvement based on a slightly different set of engineering solutions.

On 3 February 1888 Emden again applied for the certificate enabling him to open a theatre. Blashill and Emden exchanged several more letters over the next month. On 9 March the board decided that, provided the completed building corresponded to the plans, the certificate would be issued, and on 14 March they wrote to Emden informing him of their decision. The board, apparently concerned about possible damage to the Ranelagh sewer, stipulated that the back wall must be built on a base four feet wide and ten to twelve feet deep.

The sudden death of John Clayton at age forty-three while on tour in Liverpool in March 1888 must have created problems with the building schedule for the Royal Court. Clayton, whose real name was John Alfred Clayton Calthorpe, left a widow (Boucicault's daughter) and a family.[65] No information about the problems this created for the construction project have been discovered. Early reports mention that the proprietor, John Clayton, intended to open the theatre in May with a new play by Pinero; however, the postponement of the opening from May to September and the absence of a new play by Pinero for the opening indicates the need for adjustments.[66]

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The *Building News* of 30 March 1888 reports on a recent visit by the Society of Architects to the building site at which time the shell of the building was nearing completion. The report says: "The great feature of the building, and the one which attracted the most attention from the visitors on Saturday, is the large use made of iron encased in concrete for construction. . . . The seats are carried on a skeleton of iron girders encased in breeze concrete of the proportions of 4 to 1."[67] The 1996–2000 rebuilding chose to expose the beauty of this iron superstructure in several places. Other notable information includes that "[t]he stage floor is as usual of wood and it was noted by the visitors as curious that the gridiron over the back of the stage for the drawing up of the cloths was of wood. Several members suggested that iron lattice work would have given greater safety, but it was explained that the stage carpenter reigned supreme here."[68] The indication that Emden deferred to the stage carpenters in the choice of a wooden grid represents perhaps another reflection of his theatrical background. Additionally, Booth contends that throughout the nineteenth century "the English theatre was highly traditional and resisted change especially in the area of technology."[69] The wooden grid remained the standard in theatre construction into the next century, and some stage carpenters still prefer the flexibility of a wooden grid. The need to replace this wooden grid, still in use in the 1990s, though no longer able to sustain its original load, represented one of the driving forces behind the 1996–2000 renovation.

The building's site of ninety-one feet by fifty-five feet created certain difficulties. The expense of London real estate and the absence of a genuinely planned street system forced many managements during the late-century building boom to choose limited and irregular sites.[70] Most notable for the Royal Court was the difficulty in providing adequate underpinning to the rear wall of the stage house, which immediately abuts the Ranelagh sewer. The Ranelagh sewer contains what had formerly been called the Westbourne Rivulet, the stream whose damming forms the Serpentine in Hyde Park prior to draining into the Thames. The back wall of the theatre had to be built without disturbing the sewer. The *Building News* reports that "[t]he wall is carried 12 feet below the sewer; the lower portion is of concrete and varies in thickness from 4 feet to six feet; the upper portion is of brickwork set in cement."[71] (One of the engineering problems the recent rebuilding program faced was how further to support this same wall so that it could be raised to provide sufficient headroom to allow crew persons to stand at grid height.) The estimated cost of the original building is £15,000.[72] Perhaps Emden scheduled this visit by the Society of Architects and its report in *The Building News* soon after Clayton's death to help attract a new manager who would see the project to completion. The writer's mention of a completion date of the second week in May proved to be optimistic.

An interesting side bar to the building's progress concerns the problematic nature of the theatre's heating system. A memo to the Theatres Subcommittee of the Metropolitan Board of Works dated 30 April 1888 reports to have received a letter from Walter Emden dated 25 April stating that he did not at first intend to

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heat the building. Emden now proposed to heat the building with a hot-water system supplied from a slow combustion boiler located at pit level, with coils in cases for generating the heat to be located in various parts of the house. The heating plans accompanied Emden's letter of 25 April, an indication that the decision for the heating system was a late one.

The Board of Works regarded the location of the heating system as a possible safety problem. Emden sent a follow-up letter on 15 May that sought to allay their concerns, saying, "As the stove is a small one, there will not be much heat." He also reported that the work had already been completed.[73] After an inspection of the installation on 19 June the Board of Works deemed it satisfactory. One must wonder if they had really intended not to heat the building despite the earlier press reports that mentioned a heating system.

Inadequate heating remained a problem at the Royal Court into the 1990s despite several attempts during the intervening years completely to revamp the heating system. Haworth–Tompkins and their heating contractor Max Fordham and Partners finally provided adequate heating for the entire building.

On 3 August Emden wrote a letter to the Board of Works informing it that the construction of the building, except for the installation of seats and some painting, was completed. He requested an inspection of the final work. An inspection on 10 August certified that, although incomplete, the building complied with regulations. A final survey on 12 September judged the work completed, and the board issued Emden his building certificate on 18 September.

The most complete report about the new building can be found in *The Builder* of 29 September 1888. It reports that the plan and arrangement resemble Terry's Theatre, as does the fireproof construction, and praises the panic hardware on the doors and the spacious stairways. In order to preserve the social and economic separation of the audience sections, each section of the auditorium had its own entrance and individual pay area rather than a central box office. Since Emden provided no real lobby space, he crowded service areas, bars, and toilets into corridors, cramping the front of house. This type of arrangement, in which "circulation and lounging space [were] kept to a minimum," represented a solution typical for the period.[74] The inadequate space for lobby, bars, and toilets contributed to the decision to embark on the recent rebuilding project. Despite the limited space, the Prince of Wales received a private entrance, retiring room with WC, and a Prince's box.

Emden chose to sink the theatre into the ground so that no part of the house required more than a single flight of stairs to reach a ground-level exit. *The Builder* acknowledges this advantage, but the reviewer doesn't agree with the decision.[75] Emden anticipated a trend; within a few years J. G. Buckle's book on safety in theatre buildings recommends this arrangement as standard for

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new construction.[76] In the recent rebuilding project, the decision to sink the building proved fortuitous, because it permitted raising the flytower, the addition of a rehearsal room over the dome, and an enlarged Theatre Upstairs without blocking too much light for the neighboring residential buildings.

The Builder also praises the "practical planning and construction" of the theatre. However, "[f]or the architectural characteristics of the house we fear much cannot be said." The interior decoration is called "not better than theatre decoration usually is," and although the early descriptions of the proposed building mention a French Renaissance interior, no mention of that style actually having been built has been located.[77] Perhaps budgetary constrictions caused adjustments to the budget for interior decoration that had not been started at the time of John Clayton's death.

The prebuilding reports of a simple exterior proved correct; indeed, the built exterior proved to be even simpler than the first drawings, because it lacked the large statues present on the earlier rendering of the front elevation. Little wonder, then, that *The Builder* considers that the details on the facade belong to the "most commonplace order of architectural accessories."[78] The Royal Court has never been prized for the quality of its architectural detail. The choice not to create an impressive facade proves curious. An advantage that the site for the second Royal Court holds over the site for the first is the prominent location on Sloane Square; but Emden did not provide a facade that might have enabled the theatre to dominate the square. A shortage of money seems to be the most likely explanation.

The review in *The Builder* also acknowledges that the constricted building site caused difficulties for the architects. These difficulties were magnified during the present reconstruction, transforming a difficult refurbishment into a major engineering challenge. As current architect Steve Tompkins reports, "keyhole surgery" was required to reconstruct the interior of the building while maintaining the facade of a Grade II Historic building located on a small site surrounded by a busy thoroughfare, a major sewer line, the tunnel for the Underground, and residential buildings.[79]

None of the 1888 critics commented on the Royal Court's small stage, with the proscenium opening given as twenty-one feet, twenty-four feet to the rear wall, almost no wing space, and footlights lining the front edge of the stage. The limited building site did not allow for workshop space. With no room for grand scenic effects, clearly Emden conceived only painted drops as scenery. The 1888 'get-in' (i.e., the door through which scenery could be loaded into the theatre) located three meters above floor level and less than a meter wide, reinforces the idea that painted scenery was intended to predominate at the Royal Court.[80] Although the transition from two-dimensional to three-dimensional scenery had begun by 1887, most notably in London at Henry Irving's Lyceum Theatre, the managers of the Royal Court clearly intended to

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continue to use the older technology, perhaps for reasons of economy or because the small stage house and limited offstage space would not allow for the use of bulky scenery.

The severe space limitations have challenged Royal Court designers to the present. The 1996–2000 refurbishment makes major improvements to stage, fly, and wing space. Emden included star traps and a grave trap, standard features of Victorian stages, as well as a small orchestra pit. According to Michael Hallifax, the first stage manager for the ESC, the traps remained functional when the ESC took possession of the theatre in 1956.[81]

On 24 September 1888 the theatre opened to the public when the new joint managers, Arthur Chudleigh and Mrs. John (Matilda Charlotte) Wood, presented *Mama*, an English version of Bisson and Mars's *Les Surprises du Divorce*, adapted by Sydney Grundy (1848–1914). Grundy, a prolific and popular writer whose fame has not endured, typically wrote strong drama rather than this type of light comedy. Some critics regard Grundy as perhaps one of the most significant dramatists in the twenty years that followed T. W. Robertson's death in 1871.[82] For this important event the Royal Court again aligned itself with progressive trends in playwrighting. Chudleigh and Wood's eighty-year lease from the Cadogan Estate commenced on 29 September 1888.

None of Emden's original interior remained in the current Royal Court when the 1995 decision was made to renovate, and no one seriously considered an attempt to return to the "original" decor. Indeed, no detailed information about the interior decor is known to exist. In their book *The Theatres of London*, Mander and Mitchenson call the decoration Empire style. They derived that information from the unpublished manuscript of Arthur F. M. Beales, "London Playhouses," which formed the basis for their book and which remained incomplete at Beales's death in 1949. Beales writes that "the entrance hall was paneled in oak and had a fine painted ceiling. The interior was decorated in Empire style."[83] Beales could have had first-hand experience attending the original Royal Court; otherwise his source remains unidentified. Notices in *The Builder* during 1888 state that the interior will be decorated in the style of the French Renaissance. Since both Empire and Renaissance styles have classical roots, the descriptive terms may refer to the same decor.

Victorian theatres frequently sacrificed exterior detail in order to increase the elaborate decoration of the interior. The unusual factor in descriptions of the Royal Court derives from the absence of a discussion of the theatre's lobby and auditorium, which a Victorian audience member would have regarded as the most important elements in the theatre.[84] The writer of the article in *The Builder*, in the only specific mention of the interior, complains that "nothing could look more un-architectural and un-constructive" than the way the dome is hung in front of the gallery. The writer reproves Emden and suggests that "he endeavor to improve this method of designing the

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interior."[85] No aspect of the interior decoration of the second Royal Court receives positive mention.

However, a comment by architect Steve Tompkins about the auditorium dome demonstrates the awareness of the dangers inherent in trying to improve or fix the original architecture possessed by the recent team supervising the rebuilding. "The hanging of the dome is ugly, part of the daftness of the auditorium, but also part of its charm. We don't want to lose the poetics of the space."[86] While the elements that comprise the surfaces of the auditorium lack individual value—bad textures, indifferent moldings, drab decoration—their sum remains iconographically potent because of their association with the history of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court. The Royal Court management, supported by the Arts Council, decided that the invaluable potency of the iconography of the prereconstruction building must be maintained.

The absence of a discussion of the interior represents the most puzzling aspect of the second Royal Court. Emden designed the first Royal Court with an elaborate interior that included frescos by an important contemporary artist and carved griffins or dragons on either side of the proscenium. Novelty characterized the interior's pinkish-mauve color. Clearly Emden possessed the capabilities to create an elaborate interior, but most likely budget constraints limited him. The need to compress the shape of the first Royal Court into the smaller footprint of the second Royal Court contributed to the exceptional, intimate proportions of the theatre auditorium. For the contemporary rebuilding project, the lack of an interior deemed worthy of historic preservation proved advantageous because it granted the design team much greater freedom in deciding how to handle the interior. They chose to paint the entire auditorium a deep Venetian red, further minimizing the effect of the decoration. Consequently, when the house lights dim, the auditorium disappears from the audience's consciousness, focusing the patron's attention on the stage—an ideal situation for a theatre company dedicated to serving the writer.

Changes to the building began less than a decade after its construction. The more important of these can be briefly summarized. In 1904 the addition of a rehearsal room and dressing room annex altered the facade, raised the roof line, and maximized the building's footprint. In 1920 the interior of the auditorium was altered bringing it close to the form it exhibited at the beginning of the 1996–2000 rebuilding. The conversion to a cinema in 1935 made few changes to the building. In 1940, the adjacent Underground station received a direct bomb hit, causing extensive collateral damage to the Royal Court. A 1947 building department memo detailed an extensive list of repairs to be required for the reopening of the theatre. However, the theatre reopened in 1952 as a club theatre, which enabled the management to avoid making all of the improvements required for a public theatre. Indeed, some requirements dating to 1947 were not met until the 1990s rebuilding. The history of the building's changes resulted, in architect Steve Tompkins words, in a 1990s theatre that, aside from auditorium

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and facade, "is unremarkable, a series of not very beautiful domestic scale rooms with indifferent decoration connected by confusing stairways."[87] The Gazetteer in the book *Curtains!!!* rates the Royal Court "a theatre of some interest and quality" awarding it one of a possible three stars.[88]

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The architectural history of the Royal Court Theatre reveals a short-term perspective during construction and implies that budget constraints may have driven many of the choices made in the original building. A perpetual shortage of funds has much to do with the building's condition in the 1990s, characterized as it was by a litany of unresolved problems dating back to the first decade of the century. Short-term thinking financed cosmetic changes but rarely fixed any of the building's flaws. The 1990s rebuilding finally fixed problems in the theatre because of the funding opportunities provided by the existence of government- and corporate-financed capital subsidy. Such subsidy distinguishes the contemporary rebuilding from all previous building programs including the original construction. With adequate financing for the first time in the more than century-long evolution of the building, the architects could operate with the luxury of a long-term perspective.

The Royal Court Theatre did possess certain advantages. Emden's need to compress the auditorium design of the first theatre in order to fit it into the smaller footprint of the second theatre compressed the horseshoe-shaped auditorium and enhanced the audience's focus on the stage. The simplicity of the auditorium's decor also contributed to that focus and the ease with which a single figure can dominate the stage. The spatial limitations of the stage fostered the creation of a design aesthetic, exemplified in the work of Jocelyn Herbert, that made a virtue of simplicity. Emden's decision to sink the building made possible for the current renovation to increase the building's height. The code changes, which forced reductions to the seating capacity, resulted in a theatre too small for a commercial management yet ideally sized for a company producing new, experimental plays. These building attributes proved advantageous for the rebuilding, whereas others created problems.

The decaying physical fabric of the building compounded the technical engineering challenges faced by the project, which include the awkward building site, the proximity to the Underground, and an adjacent sewer pipe carrying the Westbourne Rivulet. To maximize use of the limited site, rational order needed to be imposed on the piecemeal additions and alterations the building received over more than one hundred years. These factors increased the cost of refurbishment exponentially. The Arts Council invested more than £26 million in a theatre where the two performance spaces offer a total of fewer than five hundred seats. On a per-seat basis, the commercial theatre's traditional means of evaluating cost, the expense is astronomical. However, the Royal Court clearly now possesses an identity that justifies such an expenditure.

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While the original building contained no distinctive architectural identity, a century of artistic production provides the current Royal Court with a semiotic singularity distinguished by important productions of new English-language drama, a principled stand against theatre censorship, a leftist political orientation, and a tradition of fine realistic acting. The history of funding shortfalls contributed to the absence of elaborate interior detail, and facilitated the development by Jocelyn Herbert of a characteristic and influential visual aesthetic for the ESC that highlights open space within which the imagery and detail stand sharply defined. Whether in visual design or acting the Royal Court maintained its focus on the primacy of the writer and the word.

The plan for the rebuilding, devised through extensive consultations between Royal Court artistic director Stephen Daldry and his staff, theatre consultant Iain Mackintosh of Theatre Projects, and Steve Tompkins, lead architect from the architectural firm Haworth–Tompkins Associates, chose to demolish and replace everything upstage of the proscenium as well as the adjacent building annex added in 1904 and the rehearsal room added in 1993. The desire to preserve the traditional actor–audience relationship contributed to the rejection of the radical option of removing the proscenium arch (which was, however, replaced with a stronger structure). Indeed, the planners insisted on maintaining a dialectic between past and present in the refurbished Royal Court.

In 2003 the auditorium retains a palpable sense of the past, despite tweaked sightlines, more comfortable seats, and simplified decoration. The new building creates additional basement levels in the area of the stage house as well as raising the flytower and replacing the grid. The new stage features a sophisticated set of lifts capable of quickly altering the stage height, and new wing space offstage left. The under-the-road addition, incorporating a bar-restaurant and public toilets, enables a major improvement in the size and orientation of front-of-house space. The rebuilding achieves complete wheelchair accessibility to the building. Major expansion of all ancillary space, toilets, offices, workshops, and dressing rooms transforms a receiving house into one more suitable for a producing company. The ultimate success or failure of the design will be revealed in the continued success of the Royal Court as a base for producing new plays. Following the 17 February 2000 reopening—with Conor McPherson's *Dublin Carol* at the Jerwood Theatre Downstairs—that tale continues.

Endnotes

1. Haworth Tompkins Architects and Theatre Projects Consultants, *Royal Court Theatre Feasibility Study* (London: n.p., 1995), 10.

2. Ibid.

3. David Lan, raw footage of Planning Meetings for Royal Court Theatre, no day or date stamp, Tape 13.

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4. Stephen Tompkins, telephone interview with Wendy Lesser, unpublished transcript, 24 July 1996.

5. Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 7.

6. Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 107–08.

7. Dennis Kennedy, *Granville Barker and the Dream of Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 28.

8. Irving Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1978), 167.

9. Carlson, 204.

10. Gresdna A. Doty and Billy J. Harbin, eds., *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956–1981* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 41.

11. Ibid., 197.

12. David McDonald, interview by author, 22 July 1998.

13. John Bignell, *Chelsea Seen From 1860–1980* (London: Studio B, 1978), 16.

14. Ironically, Mrs. Thatcher herself resided in Chelsea in the years prior to her lengthy residence at Downing Street during her tenure as prime minister.

15. McDonald, interview.

16. Vikki Heywood, interview by author, 9 July 1998.

17. Ibid.

18. Chelsea Library, Local Collection, Royal Court Theatre Archive [hereafter Chelsea Archive].

19. Sean McCarthy, "Safety, 'Gorgeous Advertisement' and Variety." Brian Mercer Walker, ed., *Frank Matcham Theatre Architect* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1980), 64.

20. Chelsea Archive.

21. H. Barton Baker, *History of the London Stage and Its Famous Players (1576–1903)* (1904; reprint, London: Benjamin Blom, 1969), 501.

22. Booth, 15.

23. Percy Fitzgerald, *The World behind the Scenes* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1881), 219.

24. Unfortunately, little information about Marie Litton's career is currently known. She managed other London theatres after her tenure at the Royal Court.

25. Ian Mackintosh and Michael Sell, eds., *Curtains!!! or, A New Life for Old Theatres* (London: John Offord, Ltd., 1982), 212.

26. Ibid., 212.

27. As quoted in Richard Leacroft, *The Development of the English Playhouse* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), 234.

28. Walter Emden, "The Construction of Theatres," *The Architect* (20 April 1888), 231.

29. *The Illustrated London News*, 4 February 1871, 120–21.

30. Ibid. The Metropolitan District Railway (or "the District") was the world's second underground passenger railway, opening late in 1868; the similarly named Metropolitan Railway was the first (1863).

31. Booth, 15.

32. "Royal Court Theatre Audience Data," n.p., 22 March 1996.

33. Carlson, 112.

34. Ibid.

35. *The Illustrated London News*, 4 February 1871, 111.

36. Booth, 192.

37. Baker, 510.

38. "The Happy Land," *The Saturday Review*, 16 March 1873, 351.

39. Chelsea Archive.

40. "*The Happy Land* Sensation: The Court Theatre," *The Penny Illustrated Paper*, 15 March 1873, 170.

41. "The Wooden Stairs in the Court Theatre," *The Builder*, 6 January 1872, 14.

42. Curiously, the current refurbishment covers its concrete stairs with salvaged lumber.
43. *The Saturday Review*, 2 July 1887, 15.
44. Booth, 68.
45. Ibid., 542.
46. London Municipal Archives.
47. London Municipal Archives.
48. Booth, 68.
49. William Hunter Grimston and Margaret Robertson—sister of the dramatist.
50. George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre 1792–1914: A Survey*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 82.
51. T. Edgar Pemberton. *John Hare, Comedian* (London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1895), 92.
52. 2 July 1887, 15–16.
53. James, 260.
54. Elizabeth Longford, *Images of Chelsea* (Richmond-upon-Thames: Saint Helena Press, 1980), 96.
55. London Metropolitan Archive.
56. "The Court Theatre, Lower George Street, Chelsea," *The Builder*, 13 August 1887, 256.
57. Booth, 68–69.
58. London Metropolitan Archive. Interestingly, the current building scheme also was delayed when a series of holidays by members of the Kensington–Chelsea council delayed consideration of the project for several months and almost forced major changes to the plans.
59. London Metropolitan Archives.
60. London Metropolitan Archives.
61. Mackintosh and Sell, 212.
62. London Metropolitan Archives.
63. "The Court Theatre," *The Building News*, 27 January 1888, 143.
64. "A New Theatre for London," *Pall Mall Budget*, 23 February 1888, 17.
65. That Clayton had changed his name when he became an actor reflects the relatively low social status of a Victorian actor. A middle-class person would protect his family by changing his name. His sons worked as actors under the name Calthrop.
66. James, 255. Godfrey James, a school friend of Clayton's son Donald Calthrop, reports that Clayton's family still had some sort of financial interest in the theatre in 1904 when William Poel presented *Everyman.*
67. "The New Court Theatre," *The Building News*, 30 March 1888, 480.
68. *The Building News*, 30 March 1888, 480.
69. Booth, 79.
70. Hugh Maguire, "The Architectural Response," Richard Foulkes, ed., *British Theatre in the 1890s: Essays on Drama and the Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 149–164, at 154.
71. *The Building News*, 30 March 1888, 480.
72. Ibid.
73. London Metropolitan Archives.
74. Maguire, 154.
75. "Notes," *The Builder*, 29 September 1888, 225–26.
76. Leacroft, 265.
77. *The Builder*, 29 September 1888, 226.
78. Ibid.
79. Stephen Tompkins, interview by author, 18 June 1998.
80. The same get-in was still in use in 1996 prior to the rebuilding, which provided a modern get-in with an elevator.
81. The working parts of these traps were removed for preservation and possible reuse in other Victorian era theatres prior to demolishing the stage for the current rebuilding of the theatre.

82. Rowell, 90.

83. Arthur F. M. Beales. "London Playhouses" (n.p.: Mander & Mitchenson Collection, 1949), 212.

84. Maguire, 154.

85. Ibid., 226.

86. David Lan, raw footage of Planning Meetings for Royal Court Theatre, no day or date stamp, Steve Tompkins, Tape 10.

87. Ibid.

88. Ian Mackintosh and Michael Sell, eds., *Curtains!!! or, A New Life for Old Theatres* (London: John Offord, Ltd., 1982), 212.

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