

# A mysterious profession

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**Collaboration is the name of the game when it comes to designing auditoria and at the heart of this are theatre consultants. But what do they do exactly? This personal survey attempts to explain the mystery**

**W**hen my partner Roger Morgan and I are seated next to a new acquaintance at a social gathering, the question usually comes at us in under a minute: "And what do you do?" (It doesn't surprise us, we are New Yorkers after all.) Our answer: "We design theatres."

This then elicits a number of responses:

"What – movie theatres?"

"Oh! Can you get me tickets?"

"You design sets?"

"You mean there are people who actually do that?"

"What is a theatre consultant anyway?"

Granted, this last query isn't immediately clear to a guest at a dinner party. Surprisingly, it is often a source of confusion to clients and architects who wonder what value will come from adding yet another member to a high-priced design team. What proof is there that a theatre consultant will even make a difference?

I imagine myself in my client's shoes and I understand the dilemma. Theatre consulting isn't even a licensed profession. Unlike doctors and lawyers and architects who must pass professional examinations for licensing and maintain board certification, you can't study theatre consulting. How is it possible to get behind the mystery of a non-profession that

many theatre industry insiders believe holds the key to the success or failure of a performing arts facility? To broaden and contextualize this question, Sachs Morgan Studio recently conducted an informal survey of top-tier theatre consulting firms to determine if others are challenged by quantifying what their companies do and defining why it matters.

## Beyond classification

Gathering information for the survey validated my own belief that theatre people are the most extraordinary people I know, with a religious zeal about theatre. Anyone who lasts more than a decade in this business is a consummate professional. There is no official categorization for what we do because it is such a niche within a niche within a niche, and the statistical data in our industry is "under the radar" according to Lori Rubinstein, executive director of the trade organization Entertainment Services and Technology Association (ESTA).

Asked to describe what his firm does, Michael McMackin, president of the American Society of Theatre Consultants (ASTC) and a longtime consultant at Auerbach Pollock Friedlander in San Francisco, says that he is a theatre architect (although he is not, he says it simplifies the conversation). He goes on to explain that most architects are generalists, and just as a hospital or restaurant building requires specialized knowledge from within those industries, his work serves that function.

When asked the "What do you do?" question, Joshua Dachs, principal of Fisher Dachs Associates in New York, responds in a concrete and straightforward manner. "We plan and design theatre buildings," he says. "We are responsible for the shape of the auditorium, the seating, sightlines and theatre technology."

And Robert Shook, founding partner of Schuler and Shook Theatre Planners in Chicago, offers an equally no-frills explanation: "We assist architects in planning and equipping live performance theatres."

In answer to the same question, Richard Pilbrow, chairman of Theatre Projects Consultants, states authoritatively: "We work with clients and their architects to ensure that

the building – from every theatrical point of view – works aesthetically, functionally, technically and economically."

I was struck by the similarity of Richard's definition to ours at Sachs Morgan Studio: "We design theatres that work for their owners, their patrons and the theatre professionals that use them. We design theatres people love." We make no apology for the love part, and it makes perfect sense that we share a common perspective with Richard; it is the authentic expression of working for decades in theatres that work and theatres that don't.

## Working together

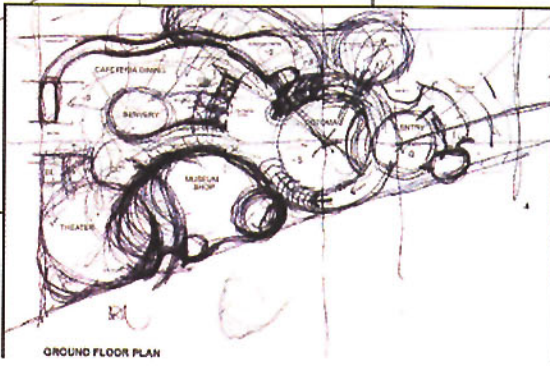
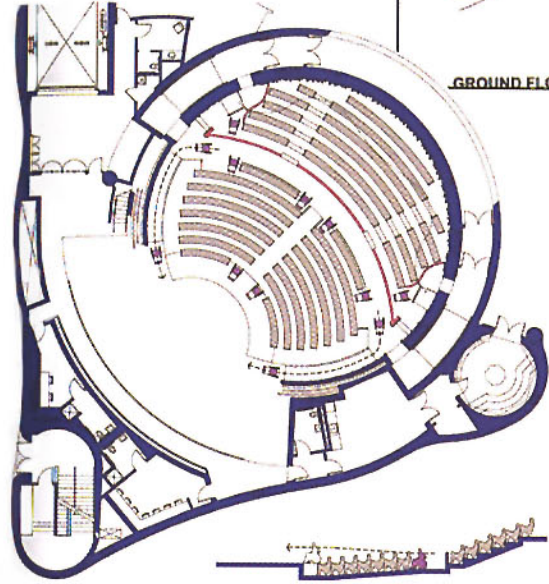
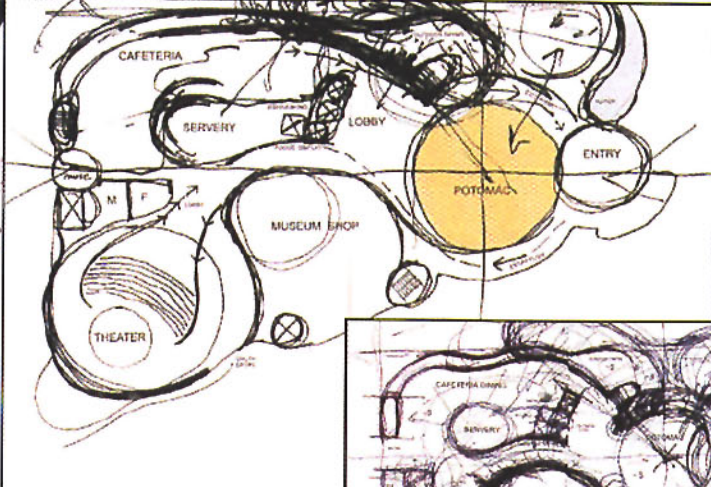
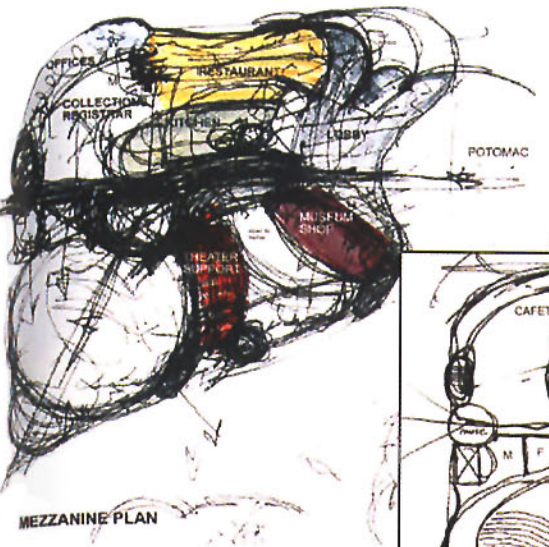
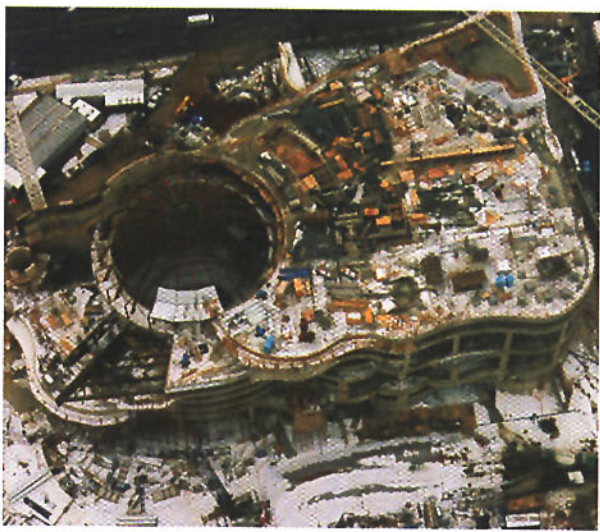
How does the work of the theatre consultant interface with that of the owner and the architect? The single word at the center of every theatre consultant's answer to this question is "collaboration". The collaborative process is so basic to working in the theatre that the mere mention of the word functions as a magic trigger in conversations with my colleagues. Say "collaborate" and like Pavlov's

Theatre consultants have one foot in the theatre and one foot in architecture

dogs – whoosh! – there is a re-release of passion from the core of our beings that was originally unleashed at some pivotal moment in our lives and changed us for ever.

Architect Damu Radheshwar from the world-class Polshek Partnership, refers to the collaboration factor as the most important ingredient in the success or failure of a project. Radheshwar, who has collaborated with Sachs Morgan Studio, Theatre Projects, Fisher Dachs and Auerbach Pollock Friedlander describes the infectious joy that exudes from all of the above-named firms. It is one of the reasons that

[Left and below] Early sketches of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian [right] show exchanges between original architect Douglas Cardinal and theatre consultant Roger Morgan



[Left] Building on the sketches above, Sachs Morgan Studio developed a plan for the 322-seat theatre in collaboration with the Polshek Partnership  
 [Right] Ann Sachs and Roger Morgan at the Palace Theatre on Broadway, an SMS interior design project



theatres are her favorite building type. My 20 years working as a professional actress is the base from which I enter every project. It is as if we and the client were producing a show. We imagine the finished building as if it were our own. Theatre buildings require this ensemble spirit because we know that none of us can do it alone.

The style and structure of architect-owner-theatre consultant relationships cover a wide range of principles and practice. For many years, owners hired their architect first, then the architect hired the theatre consultant later. These days, there is a developing trend that owners are hiring their theatre consultant first, bringing the architect on board after the parameters for the project have been established. The latter arrangement assures the owner direct communication with the theatre consultant, which many commercial theatre owners insist upon. It may or may not be of benefit to an owner who is not apt to repeat the theatre building process more than once.

"Whatever the contractual arrangements," says Roger Morgan, "good designers are good designers whether we are architects or theatre consultants. We create space for activities that human beings think up, and a couple of us end up in a room together to work out a problem. It's as if we're in the trenches and the world disappears as we battle the muse..."

"When it's over, you can't even remember whose idea went where and it doesn't matter anyway. You share a mutual glee when it's good because you've faced the abyss together and come out alive."

**Rise to the challenge**

So what is the most challenging or frustrating part of working as a theatre consultant? "Architects!" says Richard Pilbrow. "There are some who are passionately concerned about what their building is actually for – that the creativity begins after opening night. Then there are the others..." (Upon whom, diplomatically, he does not elaborate.)

"It is a central challenge," says Josh Dachs, "to help architects understand and address the importance of making the room feel good. They accept what an acoustician does is important, but what we do doesn't even have a word!"

Robert Shook believes without a doubt, that hanging on to the intimate relationship between audience and performers is the biggest challenge. How does he manage it? "Bring 'em in as close to the stage as you can," he says. "We all love designing small houses, but pretty often you end up with a double standard and find yourself saying: 'Wow – that's a pretty darned intimate 7,000-seat theatre.'"

Mike McMackin speaks with obvious pain about the point in the project when all the

dreams get put on the table and the gut-wrenching process of value engineering begins. It takes careful listening, he says: a clear understanding of the goals to survive intact. "We must be careful that after we walk away, other people will come and go for many years – we must honor the future."

Roger Morgan's greatest challenge is also his favorite part of being a theatre consultant: he loves designing the space. "I enjoy being the surrogate for actors and technicians and audiences, who will eventually come into the space and say, 'I love this place. This works for me – it's helping me, it's a friend.' They usually don't know who designed it, but who cares? It's here. And it'll be here for years to come. I love the challenge of designing that space."

As theatre consultants we have one foot in the theatre and one foot in architecture – we speak both languages. Our responsibility to our clients, whether they are owners or architects, is to speak whatever language it takes to make sure they get the theatre they want for the price they expect to pay. This kind of collaboration has a sublime pay-off: it results in the successful integration of all disciplines to create a workable facility about which all of us will say, "Come to my theatre!" And we will deserve to be proud. ●

*Ann Sachs is president and CEO of Sachs Morgan Studio*