

Magic Forest: Stara Zagora Experimental Puppetry Arts Center

'The puppet, much like in shows for children, is the protagonist in the shows for adults. Its function though is no longer didactic but metaphorical. The audience's reaction to the puppet is taken into account and their ability to understand associations and references to imply the production's coded message.'

A forest is mysteries . . .

. . . to be explored and discover . . .

. . . scary . . .

. . . where one goes to do the things frowned upon . . .

. . . full of varied secrets . . .

. . . and shadows . . .

. . . that evoke emotions . . .

. . . and stir the imagination.

The role of any art institution is to be a supportive structure that offers a haven and nimbly responds to the ever-changing artistic practices of its artist, curators, and practitioners. The role of any art institution is to also be an evocative environment that breaks the everyday routine and stimulates overwhelming emotions, questions, and reflection. The layered history and varied contemporary activities of the Stara Zagora Experimental Puppetry Art Center demonstrates just such an institution with an emergent set of heterogeneous demands.

I. Open-Ended Art Infrastructure

The emergent creativity of artists can never be planned for in advance and should not therefore be limited by a set of spatial limitations. 'Magic Forest' is a proposal that therefore imagines the Stara Zagora Experimental Puppetry Arts Center not as a discrete building, but as an open-ended art infrastructure. Taking landscape and the 'Forest' as a literal and conceptual starting point, this is an open-ended environment of loosely connected spaces offering a varied set of spatial condition for artist. Instead of designing a set of strictly designed single-use spaces, the project suggests a set of interchangeable spaces (Yard, Lobby, Rehearsal Space, Main Hall, Warehouse, and the Existing Building Performance Hall) of varying dimensions and spatial qualities that can all support a full range of activities. A performance can happen in the darkness of the Warehouse surrounded by the

remnants of past productions just as much as it could take place in the light-filled sunshine of the Yard surrounded by nature or the controlled environment of the Main Hall. All services (dressing rooms, administration, restrooms, stairs, elevators, etc.) are therefore pulled to the edges of each floor allowing for maximum flexibility in the center of each floor.

II. Multiple Environments

'Magic Forrest' takes the six main spaces of the program (Yard, Lobby, Rehearsal Space, Main Hall, Warehouse and the Existing Building Performance Hall) and imagines that they can all support a myriad of functions. The spaces are designed not for one function, but around a set of unique spatial qualities. These include the Yard as a light-filled outdoor spaces surrounded by nature; the Lobby as an indoor-outdoor space flexible to be part of the Yard or not; the Rehearsal Space as a womb-like cave that can connect to the Lobby space to make a second larger space similar in size to the Main Hall; the Main Hall with the full range of technical capabilities; the Warehouse as a mysterious and suggestive archive of the history of the Art Center full of remnant that offer a unique setting surrounded and the existing building Performance Hall. It is imagined that nimble infrastructural components such as movable chairs, portable lights, portable AV systems, etc. can be quickly reconfigured anywhere within these spaces for an impromptu performance, event, or rehearsal.

III. Landscape Over Building

A second conceptual idea of the project is that landscape and the 'Forest' should be the main expression of the Experimental Puppetry Art Center to the surrounding city. The project is therefore pulled away from the street edge on all sides allowing for a thick zone of layered trees and landscape. This is a thick slice of real nature around all sides of the addition with a rich mixture of plant and animal species. The zone screens the projects for a layer of mystery, offers a setting for outdoor performances surrounded by nature and orchestrates a procession entry sequences where visitors slowly discover the projects within this forest setting.

IV. Entry Sequence

The proposal moves the main entry for both the existing Experimental Puppetry Art Center building as well as the new addition to the intersection of Tsar Ivan Asen II Street and General Gurko Street. Visitors slowly move toward the central landscaped Yard at which point they can either go into the existing Art Center building through a new western entry or into the new spaces directly south. The sequence is another part of the visitor experience that can be designed and curated by performers and artists as a visitor leaves the everyday life of the city and enter a new world of artistic ideas. Pieces of the performance can be located along this entry sequence like breadcrumbs in a forest offering suggestive clues and setting the atmosphere of what is to come inside.

Building Organization

The Experimental Puppetry Arts Center addition is organized in a compact building form intended to maintain as much of the site for landscape and outdoor activities. The site is predominately organized with a public side to the north and a private/service side to the south.

The Lower Level is dedicated to the Warehouse and Heater Room. This level takes advantage of the site grade change by integrating a loading dock at the lower SE corner of the site off from Tsar Ivan Asen II Street. A large service elevator for scenery and large deliveries is located directly off from the loading dock connecting to all levels above. The Warehouse is imagined not just as a place of storage, but as a unique setting for performances and other events surrounded by remnants of past Art Center performances.

The Main Level connected to the Yard includes the Lobby, Rehearsal Space, Residential Block and Administrative Spaces. The Lobby and Rehearsal Space are connected by a retractable center wall allowing the two spaces to be either separated or connected into one larger space similar in size to the Main Hall above. While the Lobby space is a light-filled environment connected to the outside through a series of large retractable glass doors, the Rehearsal Space is a darker womblike space offering privacy and secrecy for artists when the two spaces are not connected. The Residential Block and Administrative Spaces make up a private zone with private views to the south directly connected to the Rehearsal Space. The entry to the existing Experimental Puppetry Art Center building is reconfigured to the west now from the central Yard space in the center of the site. The new Box Office serving both buildings is located in the renovated lobby space. The previous main building entry can now serve as a back-off house entry for artists and staff off from the existing building parking lot to the east.

The Upper Level of the Art Center addition is predominately dedicated to the Main Hall, surrounding wings, off-stage Dressing Rooms/RR and additional off-stage storage space. A service block dedicated to Dressing Rooms/RR and storage is along the south stacked above the similar block on the Main Level. All support infrastructure is pulled to the edges of the floor like all floors below.

The total building area combining the three levels is +/- 1,520 m² with an additional 380 m² of landscape and hardscape work at grade around the building addition. The project is organized as a simple 3-level vertical stack allowing for simple constructions with simple vertical MEP and infrastructure stacks. A predominant component of the design is the presence of a dense landscape as the main architectural expression allowing for a modest building skin consistent with local craft and available subcontractors.