

International Architectural Competition

Experimental Puppetry Arts Centre

Stara Zagora, Bulgaria.

*If you are not willing to see more than what is visible,
you won't see anything.*

– Ruth Bernhard.

The architectural concept for the Experimental Puppetry Art Centre (EPAC) in Stara Zagora proposes, by default, exposing its programming to the exterior. It allows the movements happening inside to be visible from the outside during its operation. It aims to experiment with the temporality of actions in a diffuse manner, erasing the physical barriers that would traditionally enclose it, presenting alternative realities to curious observers of what truly happens inside.

Taking the initial departure point of a Black Box and its direct relationship with two welcoming and gathering spaces, it is located within the site as a direct reflection of the adjacent theater. It is from this location that the programming will revolve around.

EPAC divides its programming into two main areas that serve as organizers for the proposal: 3 EMPTY VOLUMES (Main Hall, Entrance, and Yard) interconnected, allowing flexibility in their uses and the possibility of functioning simultaneously or together. Surrounding them is a perimeter area that wraps around like a belt, housing the remaining programming (Entrance zone and Offstage spaces).

The Main Hall, Entrance, and Yard are situated on the main level, at the same elevation as a respectful homage to the neighboring theater, the elder brother. To access them, one must first pass through a corridor that is visible from the outside through a transparent glass wall. This space, like many others in the proposal, serves a dual purpose. In this case, it not only serves as an entrance but also as a space where visitors to any activity can take a break between the exterior and the interior.

This welcoming corridor showcases the materiality, both external and internal, of the project. Its vertical and upper horizontal surfaces are covered with a metallic mesh complemented by indirect lighting, allowing controlled glimpses of the different systems that power the project. The floor surface is finished with a reddish wood, countering the metallic material and brightness of the space. It extends onto the solid wall of this threshold, creating a folded volume that serves as seating, an intermediate point between inside and outside. This space becomes not only a passageway but also a space for contemplation and rest.

The access threshold leads to two important areas of the project. The first area is the main entrance space, and the second area leads to the beginning of the primary circulation of the project, crucial for understanding the venue.

The main entrance space is treated as a white void with a vertical height of 5 meters, allowing partial views of different EPAC programming. Its interior is finished with light-toned, reflective, and transparent surfaces, resulting in a flexible, ever-changing, and vibrant space. It adapts not only to the activities scheduled for the day but also the natural temporality of Stara Zagora. This inclusion

injects the context into the interior of the project. The space is strategically located so that the offstage programming can surround it, creating indirect, sometimes discreet, visual connections to these uses, and vice versa, through organized openings at different heights in the surrounding planes.

Adjacent to this space, through a fully vertically sliding glass panel that allows uninterrupted passage is the Yard, a semi-open space with three levels of height. It opens toward the southern side of the building, establishing an indirect relationship with its surroundings. This design allows the passage of air and natural daylight into the interior of the center. It functions as an open area resembling a plaza, with robust materials on the ground level such as concrete tiles, reminiscent of the existing courtyard, with controlled spacing between them for the growth of vegetation. Along its perimeter, a series of platforms serve as stepped seating, also functioning as the physical boundary towards the exterior.

Embedded adjacent to the Yard and the Entrance is the cafeteria. It is a warm and intimate space that, due to its spatial organization, can simultaneously serve both adjacent areas. Its interior is entirely clad in the same wooden finish as the entrance corridor, highlighting the cohesive materiality, tones, and textures of the auxiliary spaces within the building.

The Main Hall is located next to the open space of the Entrance, mirroring the neighboring theater. To enter it, one must gradually uncover it through the operation of a wall composed of eight different panels, covered with the same material appearance as the surroundings. These panels close an opening measuring 9.60 meters in length by 5 meters in height, allowing different types of access configurations and the opportunity to create an extension and a new space between the Entrance and the Hall when needed.

The Main Hall is a space measuring 12 meters x 22 meters x 10 meters in height. Its interior is clad with vinyl and wooden acoustic surfaces, finished in dark gray and black tones. The materials' characteristics allow interior light to bounce and reflect, creating different atmospheres according to the production in use.

There is no fixed seating area; instead, the seating is organized as needed, thanks to the selected system. Its location is temporary within the space, and it can be re-arranged for conventional mass experiences, as well as for more experimental or intimate performances. The chosen system is the one that best adapts to the established guidelines and is flexible enough to be used in any necessary space.

In line with the flexibility allowed by the seating system, the lighting system in the venue also possesses the same characteristic. A suspended grid composed of stainless-steel modules with a 3 x 3-meter habitable mesh is proposed, initially positioned at a height of 8 meters. The grid features channels that allow lighting and sound elements to move up, down, and be grouped as required. Above it, there is an operating space, similar to a fly loft, with a 2-meter internal height for optimal and safe maneuverability. Access to this operating space is provided by a corridor in the Offstage area, created on the side of the Main Hall on the third level.

In the perimetral area, like a belt embracing the Main Hall on two sides, the auxiliary spaces to the stage are located. A space dedicated to equipment storage, accessories, and scenography is situated in the southeast corner of the project, with a lift connecting to the Warehouse and Heater Room in the basement, as well as direct access to the parking and unloading area. It also connects to the exterior of the building, adjacent to the alley between the neighboring theater and the new building. The Wings are located on a middle level, directly connected by an internal circulation to the

upper floors where the Rehearsal rooms, dressing rooms, and residential block are situated. This path leads to the technical booth located on the south side of the Main Hall on the third level. This triple-height offstage space with visibility between its levels has an enclosure composed of a glass facade and perforated metal mesh, allowing glimpses of the adjacent building and establishing a direct relationship between the two.

The rest of the offstage programming is distributed on intermediate levels as a result of the spatial intentions and internal heights of the first level, always within the perimeter belt. The program is organized sequentially, from public to private, on the North and West sides of the project. On the second level, above the Cloakroom and cafeteria, the project's bathrooms are located, followed by them and following the route are the administrative offices.

The offices have a treatment of floor-to-ceiling glass partitions, with a translucent finish with the intention of perceiving the administrative block as a single space with the possibility of privacy through roller shades when needed. The administration has a vestibule that serves as a landing for the stairs of the vertical circulation. From this space, one can appreciate what is happening both below in the Entrance and Yard, and the actions taking place in the Rehearsal space above through openings between the levels with glass enclosures.

The Rehearsal space and dressing rooms are located on the highest level. The main space has a height of 4.50 meters, with openings on the sides that face the street and park to the South, and a clerestory window along and above the Main Hall wall illuminating the space naturally. The space has a mirrored wall along it and a system of glass doors that lead to an internal balcony. This high-ceilinged space with a palette of light finishes aims not only to function as a rehearsal space but also as an alternative performance space. Using a system of rails and perforated grids at ceiling level for the temporary placement of curtains, lighting, and sound to create flexibility and different atmospheres within the space.

On this same level, there is also the residential block of the project, which is organized on two levels. The residences can be accessed through two means of entry. The main entrance is private and is located at street level on the west side, through a dedicated duct that goes up to a second level, which houses the social area and kitchenette, while on the third level, there are three bedrooms, each with double beds and a full bathroom. In this area, there is a small hallway that leads to the Rehearsal space and dressing rooms through a semi-external balcony. This would be the second means of entry to the residential block.

The project has an enclosure with a translucent system on all four sides, allowing different layers of visual permeability in both directions. From the inside out, we find glass enclosures, floor-to-ceiling panel-type surfaces with operable openings to achieve natural ventilation. After this system, two different enclosure treatments are placed. The first, located in the spaces where the use becomes more private, consists of perforated metal panels directly fixed to the main structure, projecting diffused shadows to the outside. The second system, predominant in most of the facades, is a system of fins of different heights and spaces between them, creating rhythm, hierarchy, and a clear and direct view of what happens inside the project.

The EPAC is set back 2 meters from the neighboring theater to give it a breather and show respect for what has been done so far. The proposal takes as a starting point, to define the horizontality of the elevations, the predominant lines of its immediate context, which extend to the four sides of the volume, defining its internal heights and the limits of where the fins reach.

The proposal is an architectural exercise in understanding physical and virtual boundaries and how they can be blurred to the point of eliminating them completely when needed, distorting the idea that a space can only accommodate one use, and how these spaces can transform according to everyone's needs.

At the end, the project has a Building Density of 64.3%, as a result of a coverage area of 709,98m² (elevation 0+0.00m). The project has a total built-up area of 1342,63m² and 858,47m² of landscape area. Considering all the systems a theater needs; in terms of sound, lighting, moving platforms, acoustical requirements, hvac system and others, the proposal has an estimated cost of 2.800.000EUR.

Proposal Shadow Light