

Body. Spatial Transitions in the Scene Architecture between Space, Event and Movement



D. Crippa

Abstract The chapter ranges between the music that marked an era and the architectural spaces that witnessed this cultural revolution. We will discover that the musical performance is made not only by sound, but also by a deep study of one's own image and the occupied space. The musical landscape of a twenty-year period that has changed shape, appearance and thought will be considered; we will make a journey on the stages of the sixties and seventies, between pop culture and psychedelia, the artist centrality and his absence. We will analyse the space that some characters have occupied over the decades and how it has influenced their stylistic and musical choices. We will see how the cultural influence of those years marked the stylistic choices of some of the greatest world artists.

Keywords Beatles · Genesis · David Bowie · Body · Pink Floyd · Set-up

1 Introduction

End of 1800, Bayreuth, Germany: the composer Richard Wagner decided to revolutionise the Baroque concept of theater. The new theater had to flatten social differences by placing everyone on the same level; places of honor and seats dedicated to officials disappeared, as well as the split between social classes, in all respects. The light disappeared, in order for the attention to be focused on what was happening on the stage.

The basic concept of Wagnerian theories was the idea of a theater as a total work of art: in order to represent man in his totality of mind, feeling and sensoriality, the theater must use all forms of expression and especially poetry, music and dance. For the first time, the venue for a performance was no longer a rich passive envelope but a space that was shaped by what was reproduced inside. It was the triumph of the real over the symbolic (Wyss and Bratton 1990, 57–78).

D. Crippa (✉)

Design Department, Politecnico di Milano, Via Durando 38/a, 20158 Milan, Italy
e-mail: davide.crippa@polimi.it

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However, the way of making music changed radically in the twentieth century with the advent of amplification. From this moment, even the thinnest hiss, the farthest note or the faintest breath could become conductive motifs of the musical piece and could be received in a crystalline way by any spectator, making its distance from the stage irrelevant. Therefore, unlike what happened in the theaters, where the structure played an important role in acoustics, the physical environment of concerts no longer had to perform this role; it became an integral part of the scenography, an element that reflected the artists' search for spectacularism.

Since the early seventies, entertainment places have experienced an uninterrupted development, which has led them to distinguish enormously from those of the past. These changes are given by the advent of new technologies, a change of dynamics between spectator and artist, the ever-increasing number of spectators, the differentiation of their requests. These and other needs gave rise to an architectural strand called *live Architecture* (Kronenburg 2010), which was based on live performances with the presence of the public. In design terms, *live Architecture* identifies three distinct categories: adopted spaces, adapted spaces and dedicated spaces.

Adopted spaces are those designed for other uses, which informally host musical performances; adapted spaces are those whose nature has been changed from their previous use and now host musical events; dedicated spaces are those specifically created to host the performances. Their architecture can play a decisive role on the character, power and importance of the performance, adding levels of meaning for both the musicians and the spectators. The geographical site and the architectural environment in which the performance takes place greatly influence the artists' stylistic choices, change their shape and thought.

In the late eighteenth century, pop musicians, if we can call them that, to be able to perform, very often they had to move around, reach private homes or courtyards, sometimes squares. Very rarely they were assigned a suitable space for instrumentation and acoustics. Only later, already at the turn of the nineteenth century, adequate spaces could be used by costume designers or local groups; the concept of dressing room for the artist was born and a more concrete relationship began to be established between a place and a musician.

2 Pop Music

All pop music was born in small and informal places, often in the streets, but its rapid diffusion guaranteed its movement in larger spaces that could properly accommodate musical performances.

This phenomenon inevitably led to monetization of the musical performance which was formalized in an income process. The great urbanization of those years allowed the construction of real places where making music and where all the other functions were secondary, supportive. Simultaneously, places for outdoor entertainment emerged, such as gardens, squares, parks, amphitheatres, where small stages were set up for orchestra performances. The use of these architectures is the evidence

of a social and political change that has taken place in society, especially over the last 50 years.

The marketing of pop music made possible large-scale outdoor events, such as music tours in stadiums. Inaugurated in the 1950s by Elvis' experience in American baseball stadiums, the stage and suitable infrastructure for spectators required the design of urban-scale structures that could be assembled and disassembled, transported and stored. These, and others, are some of the features that differentiate static from mobile architecture. In particular, *live Architecture* must pay special attention to the transport, installation and reuse of construction elements; a scrupulous care is given to the weight and nature of the construction materials, their flexibility and durability, the moving parts and assembly techniques.

As a result of these factors, the relationship between the designer and the builder is obvious; in turn they are often supported by a number of collaborators.

In parallel, mobile architecture and live performances share the same ephemeral nature. Their relationship is peculiar; apparently, both are the same for the duration of a tour, but every place, every day, every schedule and every breath make them different from all the others. Although they are fleeting events and non-lasting constructions, they create a permanent presence in the memory of those who take part in the event, whose perception of the place is changed forever.

The transience of this architecture, it's so dreamy aspect and apparent lightness must not make us trivialize its nature; "this must be considered 'real' architecture and not simply construction, since the people who use it come into its contact in the same way they approach traditional architecture, and since the quality conditions of space, environment, shape, image are as important as they are for other architectures" (Kronenburg 2010, 309).

The sixties and seventies of 1900 are characterized by a very lively cultural ferment that revolutionised all the western countries. The economic and industrial boom, the end of the Second World War and the beginning of a period of peace and prosperity favoured the media diffusion of ideological currents, cultural models, but above all the image of the United States of America as a hegemonic power not only in the military, but also in the cultural field. During the sixties, one of the imported trends that most influenced the English landscape was *pop Art*. From then on, the word "pop" has been used to outline a creative panorama more and more vast and diverse, including numerous forms of expression. The "pop" movement tends to focus its attention on objects, myths and languages of consumer society, finding its strength in the "module" and the multiplication, metaphors of man and a standardized society with a strong American inspiration. In this movement, emerges with great relevance Andy Warhol, a multifaceted American artist, painter, sculptor, creative mind. His contribution to music and music related creativity was evident with the first release of the Velvet Underground's works, for whose discs he edited the graphics.

In those years, beside pop Art, minimal art developed which was born and formed on simple geometric patterns, such as the circle or the triangle. Starting from simple shapes, complex abstract compositions could be created. A few years later, a return to ancestral forms was a key element for Pink Floyd. *Body art* was born, with David Bowie and Peter Gabriel as the greatest exponents. The body is the only element

on which the exhibition is based, totally centred on the individual appearance. The tendency to combine the different artistic forms in a unitary expressive dimension has its roots in a sort of theatricalization of art, inclined to cultivate intermediary experiments. A complex expressive method called *happening* develops, in which the first experiences related to the mixing of different languages are realized and which gives body to the first collective experiments.

In the 1960s–1970s in London the *Swingin' London* (Sandbrook 2006) was born, which indicates a mix of arts on the English territory, often accompanied by an uncontrolled social life that greatly influenced the artists' stylistic choices. At this point, it is interesting to analyze some of the personalities that characterized those twenty years and, although living in the same cultural context, developed very different expressive tendencies.

We are talking about Beatles, David Bowie, Genesis and Pink Floyd, who will be analyzed in a deliberately non-chronological order, to highlight the relationship they had with the space they occupied on the stage.

3 The Beatles: the Music

It is 1965 and for the first time the Beatles find themselves performing in a stadium. They are at the Shea Stadium in New York, and there are 55,000 spectators. As in all their performances, the English quartet decides to present itself without any scenography, only with a bare stage, some amplifiers and a sober sand-colored coat. The stage at the center of the baseball field is shy, almost non-existent if compared to the crowded steps inhabited by very young girls who loudly invoke their idols. The choice of having nothing ancillary to pure musical production is classic of the British group; they never felt the need to capture attention except with music and with their presence on the stage.

“What happened on that stage was quite accidental: just like the show, the Beatles did not have much to offer” (Sutherland 1992, 14). This comment by Robert Sandall, on the one hand is critical about the performance, on the other hand highlights the need for a greater amplification of the expressive channel.

They are generational idols, real pop icons, born and formed in the dark and narrow rooms of the Cavern Club in Liverpool, which led them to be legends in just a few years of activity. “Our image is simply us, what we were, we have not tried to create an image, it simply happened”.¹ Since all the attention was focused on them, individuals, idolized men, it was unnecessary to set up a stage with additional elements, since they could have diverted attention from what, in this case, turned out to be the main expressive vehicle of the musical message: the musicians themselves. The composition of the group does not include a frontman, on the stage each actor's position is designed so that each of them has the same importance, the same level of expression. The pattern followed by the group in the arrangement on the stage is

¹Ringo Starr, STV, Glasgow, 30/04/1964.

very simple and classic; the string instruments on the front and the percussion set a few meters back or elevated by a structure that allowed the public to see all the components. It should be emphasized that this type of performance had guaranteed the Beatles a huge live success; but after the concert at the Shea Stadium, they considered necessary to change their communication strategy, by expanding it with a visual, scenic and narrative apparatus. From the *Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album of 1967, in England a type of work called *concept album* starts to develop a work around a single idea, on several levels. "The phrase concept album is inextricably linked to the late 1960s, when rock & rollers began to broaden the limits of their artistic forms".² Since music is pure art, almost fluid, with the *concept album* the message that wants to be expressed is clear: the real work of art is "the sensitive appearance of the idea" (Hegel, *Aesthetics*). The way it is expressed is almost accessory and, at the same time, necessary to express it in all its facets. All forms of expression through which the album is presented are closely linked. There is a strong unity and the narration is always homogeneous and well told. If we theorized this approach to stage occupation, three reading codes could be introduced: *background*, *set-up* and *object*. The background code is expressed by the place; it is the simple box where the performance takes place which lives and is fed thanks to the set-up code and the object code. The former is masterfully expressed by the stage set where the musicians narrate; the latter is the music itself. The parallelism with a traditional setting is now clear and shows how the performance itself is nothing different than the staging of a work of art in a museum. In the specific case of the Beatles, we note that there is only the background code given by the place: the outline varies according to the concert location. There are no scaffoldings and scenic stratagems. The set-up code is eliminated to give strength to the sole message that music (the object code) wants to give through its musicians.

4 David Bowie: the Body

Let's forget for a moment the Beatles' sobriety to introduce a real protagonist of the stage: David Robert Jones, better known as David Bowie. An eccentric and undoubtedly talented character, he is a singer, musician, painter, sculptor and actor. Endowed with an enormous potential, in just a few years Bowie managed to become a true icon of world pop and rock. He was the inventor of *glam rock* and his polyhedral and chameleon-like nature led him to create different alter egos that he kept alive for most of his musical career. Bowie matured his scenic nature after meeting a mime, who taught him the body language. Every movement, although natural, is now full of drama, expressive pathos and great communicative power. The scene is dominated by the eccentricity of his figure. The place no longer matters, it becomes non-existent; only the singer is present to support the entire scenography through his disguises since, as Bowie often said, "music is the mask that hides the message" (Pegg 2002, 392). He

²All Music Loves Concept Albums. In: *AllMusic*, 10 February 2014.

himself becomes the stage, “thus intercepting an idea of architectural immateriality that is identified in the contemporary” (Crippa and Di Prete 2011). Also in this case, the artist plays the role of main protagonist, but in a totally different way! Here, the artist projects the set-up code onto himself, he is the one who becomes the staging itself which, in concerts such as the Pink Floyd’s ones, is governed by a colossal scenic machine. As an intrepid experimenter, Bowie also adopts the *concept album*, remaining consistent with the multiple personalities he personifies. Starting from Ziggy Stardust, passing through the White Duke and reaching the last years when he presented himself more human than ever, each piece of his career was a small story studied in detail, everything was coherent and thought out. “I find that I am a person who can take on the guises of the different people that I meet, I can switch accents, in seconds of meeting I can adopt their accents. I’ve always found that I collect, I’m a collector. And I’ve always seemed to collect personalities, ideas. I have a hotchpotch philosophy that really is very minimal”.³ He was able to catch in advance the air of change and, like a chameleon, he adapted to what was around him, before the others noticed the change taking place. David Bowie is chameleonic and absolutely avant-garde; he becomes and remains an icon of style for decades, leaving a new way of making and expressing music imprinted on future generations.

5 The Genesis: Toward the Scene

The *concept album* formula found great followers, such as the Genesis group, authors of long and complex compositions, narrated interludes, songs full of numerous rhythm changes and lively solos. Their desire for experimentation is also expressed in the language being used; neologisms are coined and, in some ways, a new communicative language seems to be created, made of sounds, squawks, noises. For these artists, more than others, the shape of the *concept album* is fundamental to artistically express the great research done by the group. The scene, on stage, gradually begins to take shape with the Genesis, though remaining secondary to the true narrator, the frontman Peter Gabriel. His communicative power lies in his ability to relate to the public, using his body as an interaction tool. Still, the scenography remains passive, a silent witness in the performance. However, unlike Bowie, the Genesis do not cancel the architectural aspect (set-up code) but bring back to the stage a theatrical and dramatic dimension abandoned for a long time and for some totally unknown. The pop icon loses the attributes earned by Bowie; they are outside the box, but remain far from the commercial, completely original, always difficult to frame within a musical category. With the Genesis, the stage equipment is enriched, diversified and colored so to maximize the performance expressiveness. “In our culture, masks are seen as something to hide behind, but in other cultures they are the vehicle through which we come out in the open, and that’s how I came out” (Zoppo 2015, 6). The combination and mixture of several elements made the group’s work fascinating even in

³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQyRt3f1SNI&feature=youtu.be>.

the eyes of artists from different fields. They strongly befriended with the Hipgnosis duo, avant-garde graphic designers who followed the Genesis in the realization of their most famous successes. In a sense, the transformism and dynamism of their performances are the first step towards a dialogue with the stage architecture, while still remaining far from what the Pink Floyd revolution will be.

6 The Pink Floyd Revolution

Pink Floyd were born in the mid-sixties by three architecture students and one art student. The environment in which they met was fertile, creative, revolutionary; in those years, it was in the *art schools* that the theatrical, musical and audiovisual tensions found a meeting point. The group, formed by Roger Waters, Nicholas Mason, Richard Wright and Syd Barrett, immediately showed interest in technological experiments. The union of multiple arts and multiple artistic expressions is for Pink Floyd the best method to express their complex dimension where “The container has always become part of the scenography” (Moltisanti 2019). It is precisely in *live* shows that the combination of image and sound reveal their strength. Communication is totally different; no longer we see in the foreground the idolized pop icons, rather we see lighting effects, repeated graphic elements, shapes research and the study of new technologies. The first fundamental moment to understand the close link between sound and an abstract musical vision dates back to the *Swingin’ London* period, when the Group interfaced for the first time with *light-shows*. Almost by chance they interacted with this world, being involved by a friend during an installation project of “luminous sculptures”. They began to experiment in absolute freedom and soon realized that the visual element would be the one that would distinguish them from the others; from then on, they started a research on a new type of live. Their first great invention, created with the stage technicians, were the “liquid slides”, an element destined to become a distinctive brand of the first part of their career. These slides were produced by inserting ink between two films, thus obtaining abstract, random chromatic patterns. Continuous research led them to rediscover ancestral figures, such as the triangle or the circle, which were emphasized and given a totally different dignity. Just the circle, initially expressed through a gong on the stage, will become a constant element in every concert of the Group. The use of a large circular screen allowed the ever-changing projection of graphic elements, which became a true accompaniment to musical narration. Undoubtedly, their work that more than others embodies a continuous research, experimentation and introspection is *The Wall*. The protagonist of this incredible concept album is Pink, Roger Waters’ alter-ego and most likely the reincarnation of Syd Barrett, the group’s historic founder. Pink is a problematic rock star, addicted to drugs, characterized by a very complex relationship with his own interiority and the public. It was precisely this journey of introspection and escape from reality that led to the creation of the album. The wall erected by Waters is not only mental, but also physical with the public, with whom, for some time, he had developed a very conflicting relationship. In all the tours, on the stage began to appear

a gigantic wall made of polystyrene bricks which, in the middle of the show, would completely divide the musicians from the audience. “The project was always divided into three distinct parts: the design of the bricks, the wall construction process and how to make it collapse”.⁴ In the background, on a huge circular screen, frightening cartoons were projected that intensified the narration of *The Wall*, the *concept album* par excellence. As a multi-level communicative construction, the concept album in the hands of Roger Waters and his companions was conceived as a container for a range of diverse interpretative codes, which extended from the verbal text to the stage and dramaturgical dimension. In the listener’s perception of the disc or the live show, the different communication layers result not as isolated elements, but as parts that the listener/spectator should summarize in relation to the overall work structure. The ontological disparity between the constituent levels of the concept album, as well as being the triggering characteristic of the dramaturgical mechanism, also causes a series of consequences that affect the global disc shape, both in its construction as a musical object, and in its material presentation and the live show (Sforzi 2015, 50). Therefore, to interpret the general message of this type of disc, an “entirely structural” approach will need to be used, recognizing that: “the meaning of particular units does not lie in their substance, but in their relationship” (Middleton 1994, 305). Therefore, in a concept album, what is interesting to analyze is the integration of its elements within a unitary communication process, looking at the totality of the work components; it has blurred boundaries and, at the same time, it does not end in the disc and is more than what is presented during live performances. Normally, in Pink Floyd’s performances, the background code (Rome, Berlin, Venice, etc.) merges with the extraordinary strength of the set-up code (always very strong but reaching its peak precisely in the scenography of *The Wall*) and with the music (the object code) which is integrated and gives the scene timing. With *The Wall*, a complex game between parts is born, an extraordinary balance takes the spotlight off the musicians and focus it on the idea itself. The Pink Floyd are the perfect synthesis of a turbulent and creatively active period that characterizes the sixties and seventies. They are unique, complex and decisive in defining the relationship between the musicians and the mobile architecture they live in. Still today, Floyd’s scenography is an example of innovation and great genius; they are pure expressive force, the protagonists of an animated stage. Pink Floyd’s musical project captures the true essence of conceptual art, bringing the concept as the only useful and necessary element; everything pivots around this, starting from music up to the place chosen to play, the scenography of the performance, the graphic choice and the narrative storytelling composition of the project.

⁴Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*, TPI Magazine. https://www.tpimagazine.com/editors-choice/classic-productions/9077/pink_floyds_the_wall.html.

7 Conclusions

Looking at the history of contemporary music, we have identified four main attitudes: the Beatles' (all focused on the music power), David Bowie's (who managed to project the scene on the singer using himself and his music as the only vehicle for the show), the Genesis' (who adopted some of Bowie's strategies by mixing them with the use of scenography) and finally the Pink Floyd's (who, through the use of scenography connected to the background code, created their musical storytelling tool).

Looking at the contemporary, perhaps we can identify a new way of living on the stage: that of not dwelling it. For some years now, more and more artists have decided not to show themselves to their audience, for various reasons. Among those who have made anonymity their own emblem, we cannot fail to mention Sia, an Australian singer-songwriter who, only recently, has decided to show up. Her presence on the stage is often insignificant, sometimes even absent because of walls behind which she can hide. Therefore the object code, music, assumes a double value: it must be so effective that it can be convincing even though it does not have a face. The background code is cancelled and the set-up code is often bare, but it is enriched by dance performances without lighting or special effects. It is a simple, almost futuristic scene. The set-up choice, for Sia and the other artists who decide not to show themselves, is extremely important and must be immediately ascribable to the artist. We see repeated elements, stylistic tones, such as the choice of always having dancers with a "bob" hairstyle, or the use of pastel colours. This artistic experience, this choice not to show herself in order not to be the obligatory object of her art is certainly the trump card of the singer-songwriter. By carefully observing her live performances, we cannot fail to notice how the almost non-existent setting manages to live thanks to choreography and stratagems meticulously studied to keep the attention of the public alive.

Another case, even more extreme, is that of the Gorillaz, a non-existent English group; yes, they do not exist. They only appear in the form of cartoons and often, in live shows, they use the hologram technique so as not to show themselves to the public. Gorillaz are the "smartest project of our time" (Primi 2018), they were desktop designed by multi-instrumentalist Damon Albarn, and cartoonist Jamie Hewlett, and they entered the Guinness world record as the most successful virtual band. Their live shows are incredibly involving, their cartoons are not at all realistic, have accentuated physical characteristics, almost ape-like, making their look not far from monsters' images. On the stage, the space is entirely occupied by the cartoon projection, in some cases there are lighting effects and choreography, especially in the case of featuring with real artists actually present. Their expressive strength lies in their absence on the stage, and in the playfulness of their performances which, to date, are inimitable and unique.

They are far from the frontman Bowie and from the incredible Pink Floyd's set-ups; we are facing a new case of experimentation: a rejection of the artist's idolized image.

The different approach shown by these artists in the stage occupation shows how society, culture and customs can more or less influence stylistic and artistic choices. The response to external stimuli produces a desire to know and experiment, use new technologies or cancel them.

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