

The Royal Court Theatre –  
“Did we get our cake and eat it?”

Four speakers provide the low-down on the refurbished Regent Theatre in Hanley, the new Milton Keynes Theatre, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, the redeveloped Royal Court Theatre and three theatres in Hong Kong.

We were very fortunate with our design team. The architects, Haworth Tompkins, were a dream to work with. They were very interested in the organisation, they were very interested in how we worked; they spent a lot of time in the building, just talking to everyone who worked there, learning how the place worked, and they found solutions to problems that we didn't even know we had. Theatre Projects were consultants; again this worked very well relationship which was unusual for Max Fordham were the electrical and mechanical services consultants, again worked well within the team. Price & were the structural engineers. They also very good; they completely understood why we wanted to hang on any steel that they were going to put in building. We insisted that every rail, every bit of gantry, was rated, so that we could hang anything anywhere. Schal were the construction managers and Tony Hudson our in-house project manager. Citex, who were still known as Bucknall Austin at that point, were the cost consultants. And then there were the Royal Court technical staff.

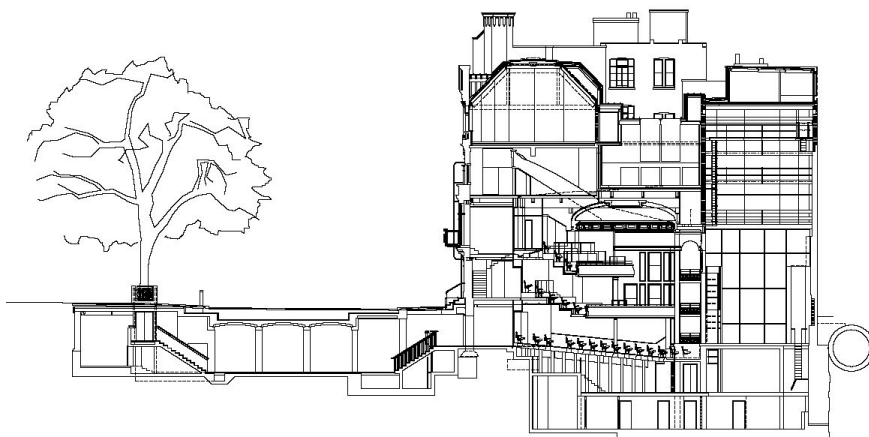
We identified very early on that if we were going to get the building we wanted then we should probably have a say in designing it. So we took our in-house technical heads of departments and gave them responsibility for writing the briefs for each of their own departments; sound, lighting, etc. They then took these briefs to Theatre Projects who turned them into a specification and advised us on how to make sure that we were going to get what we wanted. Our heads of departments

remained responsible for those packages, along with the theatre consultants, so they attended all the meetings, they were on site making sure the installations were carried out properly, they did the commissioning – they were actually there. They were also responsible for procuring all of their own loose-fit (plug-in) equipment at the end, because we were faced with a similar problem; we took all the loose-fit equipment out of the main contract packages and put it into a big FF&E (furniture, fittings and equipment) budget to buy at the end. Fortunately we still had adequate money at that point and we were able to buy significantly more and better equipment than we would have done if it had been bought at the time the contracts for the other packages were let. So that worked very well for us, but it did put a considerable additional load onto our staff who, at the same time as we were dealing with the construction project, had moved to two other venues in the West End and were producing more than the company had ever done before.

The theatre is on a particularly constrained site. There is Sloane Square in front of the building, the Ranelagh sewer directly behind in a brick enclosure that runs across the back wall, and buildings on either side. The small alleyway that runs down the side of the theatre to the get-in door actually belongs to London Underground. The Theatre Upstairs is on the roof, and the only access for scenery or equipment was a pulley with a bit of rope round it to gain access through a door four floors up. The only way we were going to get any additional space was to excavate, so we dug down – three floors in the end – and we dug out underneath Sloane Square. There is now a lovely restaurant, with bars and toilets, directly underneath the square and this incorporates the old lavatories that used to be out there. So you can come and dine in the ladies' lavatory!

The basements created under the stage have been used for storage, plant and workshop facilities. They are such a boon; it's great to have that space, it was never there before; it's brilliant. All the workshops were planned by the people who are using the workshops, and they also fitted them out; they were given a budget and allowed to do that themselves. So they've all ended up with spaces which work very well for each of them.

Section through the Royal Court showing the excavation and construction under Sloane Square on the left.



Drawing: Haworth Tompkins