

Herbert Wright reports from Lisbon, where the surviving walls and facade of a 19th-century theatre form the core of a crisp and minimalst new multipurpose venue by **Gonçalo Byrne, Patricia Barbas and Diogo Lopes**

Monkeys whoop and chatter through the trees as if to proclaim a remarkable event: after 150 years, the empty shell of a legendary theatre next door to their enclosure at Lisbon Zoo is coming alive again.

The Teatro Thalia was once synonymous with drama and decadence, even spawning a word in Portuguese for wild partying. In a stunning transformation, the result of a collaboration between Gonçalo Byrne, a big name in Portuguese architecture, and the emergent practice of Patricia Barbas and Diogo Lopes, it is now reborn as a contemporary multipurpose venue. Byrne sums the project up as ‘the

recycling of the ruin of the magic box’.

The original Teatro Thalia was by Italian architect Fortunato Lodi, a neo-classicist whose National Theatre is in Lisbon’s central square. Teatro Thalia, named after the Greek muse of comedy and joy, was built for Count Farrobo, a romantic who funded the Liberals in the Portuguese civil war in the early part of the 1800s, directed opera and taught his servants to play musical instruments. The Portuguese partying word ‘forrobodó’ came from the revelling around the theatre.

But fire destroyed it in 1862, leaving just walls and Lodi’s handsome Palladian facade with its sphinxes and a poignant Latin portico inscription,

meaning ‘Here men’s deeds will be punished’. Farrobo’s were – his fortune went and Teatro Thalia was left to rot.

It faces the side of Farrobo’s former palace across a courtyard, now occupied by the Portuguese Ministry of Education and Science, which commissioned the new works. The restored theatre facade is like a mask concealing the contemporary behind it, just as it was in Farrobo’s time, when it interfaced the social whirl outside and the world of make-believe inside. Byrne describes the theatre’s front as ‘a little bit Venturi’.

A new foyer is a tall, narrow, pristine white space, where marble skirting gives way to limestone and floating friezes of compressed styrofoam. It is crisp and minimalist, but not like a contemporary white gallery box or traditional Portuguese white architecture. Rather, Byrne calls it ‘a small homage to Asplund’ [the Nordic classicist-turned-modernist].

Beyond is the very different space, dark and bound by the raw masonry walls of the ruin, infilled where necessary with concrete. It feels like an ancient church. A cylindrical

auditorium joins with the bigger stage box, rising into a new ceiling of spray-on papier maché on plasterboard, which has acoustic properties and the same colour as the ruin. A new steel frame has been mounted for lighting rigs. The walls are indented with arched recesses where apertures such as doors had been. ‘We toyed with the idea of making openings, but that would be a sign of historicism, something post-modernist about it’, Lopes comments. ‘It’s a fantasy of architects to make something without doors or windows, like a pyramid’.

Even so, there is one aperture – a chink in an upper corner, open to the sky, from which a sunbeam sometimes falls. Byrne recalls Louis Khan’s observation that to see the darkness, you still need some light. He also sees the chink as part of the whole ethos ‘to preserve this eroded tectonic... All the decoration had gone, the tectonics were very dramatic because you could still see the results of the fire. This was a very important issue we talked about a lot – the notion of thickness

of the time, erosion of time, the real value for architecture...’

The new exterior is also in maximum contrast to the romantic facade – an opaque form as featureless as a Rachel Whiteread cast, but in shades of ochre. It expresses the interior plan as simple, solid, geometric volumes, and is effectively a sarcophagus for the ruins.

A pitched roof of pre-cast panels rises 23m. The structure was engineered by Rui Furtado who worked with OMA on its seminal Casa de Música in Porto. Lopes calls it ‘bland and hard... a monumental landmark in a semi-suburban street’. This strange form rises above two new components in the composition: a single-storey

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transparent outbuilding with a corridor from a new street entrance, and a similar building behind the theatre for a cafe. These are very Miesian, all bronze, glass and steel.

‘One of the conditions of the project in architecture is it is really a contemporary action’, muses Byrne. He’s talking theoretically, but the words are apt for what the Teatro Thalia could host. Its dark, gritty interior feels as perfect for a doom metal gig or trance club as for a fashion shoot or drama. An early chance to see the space should come as 50 or so architectural gems open to the public for Open House Lisboa in the first weekend of October.

Meanwhile, Lopes and Barbas have designed a moveable pavilion for the Goethe Institute, inspired by Cedric Price, and Byrne is busy with a housing project in Venice. His long portfolio of works, which stretch back to the seminal 1972 ‘Pink Panther’ social housing estate in Lisbon, has always defied consistency of style.

His massive Estoril Sol apartments in Cascais (2011) look as if Superstudio embraced stack

architecture and descended on a small seaside town, while the Maritime Control Tower (1997) outside Lisbon, his most iconic work, is like frozen motion – a rectangular tower skewed keenly off-vertical towards the sea.

Perhaps his Municipal Theatre in Faro (2005), an opaque volume that floats above dark glass, hints at Teatro Thalia’s solidity of form. ‘For me the essence of the transformation is more important than discussing a fixed

style’, says Byrne. He contends that ‘architecture has always dealt with recycling. Even a house in a desert is a piece of recycled landscape.’

The Teatro Thalia expresses Byrne’s concepts – transformation, recycling and ‘contemporary action’ – with an almost metaphysical effect. Spirits of its past seem to have a presence embedded in its walls, but now they invite new magic and spectacle in the void between them.



Left: Shown L-r, Patricia Barbas, Diogo Lopes and Gonçalo Byrne, collaborated on the theatre project

Below: Left, the new featureless exterior, ‘a sarcophagus for the ruins’

Below: Inside the Teatro Thalia the original openings are infilled with concrete



Above: Fortunato Lodi’s facade still stands. The pitch of the new exterior wall rises behind it

Right: ‘An architect’s fantasy of building without windows or doors, like a pyramid’

Far right: A steel frame has been installed to hold the lighting rig



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