

BUILDING/
INSIDE
**STUDIO
GANG**
ARCHITECTS

edited by **JEANNE GANG & ZOË RYAN**

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Writers' Theatre





OWNER: Writers' Theatre
LOCATION: Glencoe, IL, USA
SIZE: 41,500 sf
STATUS: Anticipated Completion 2015

Writers' Theatre

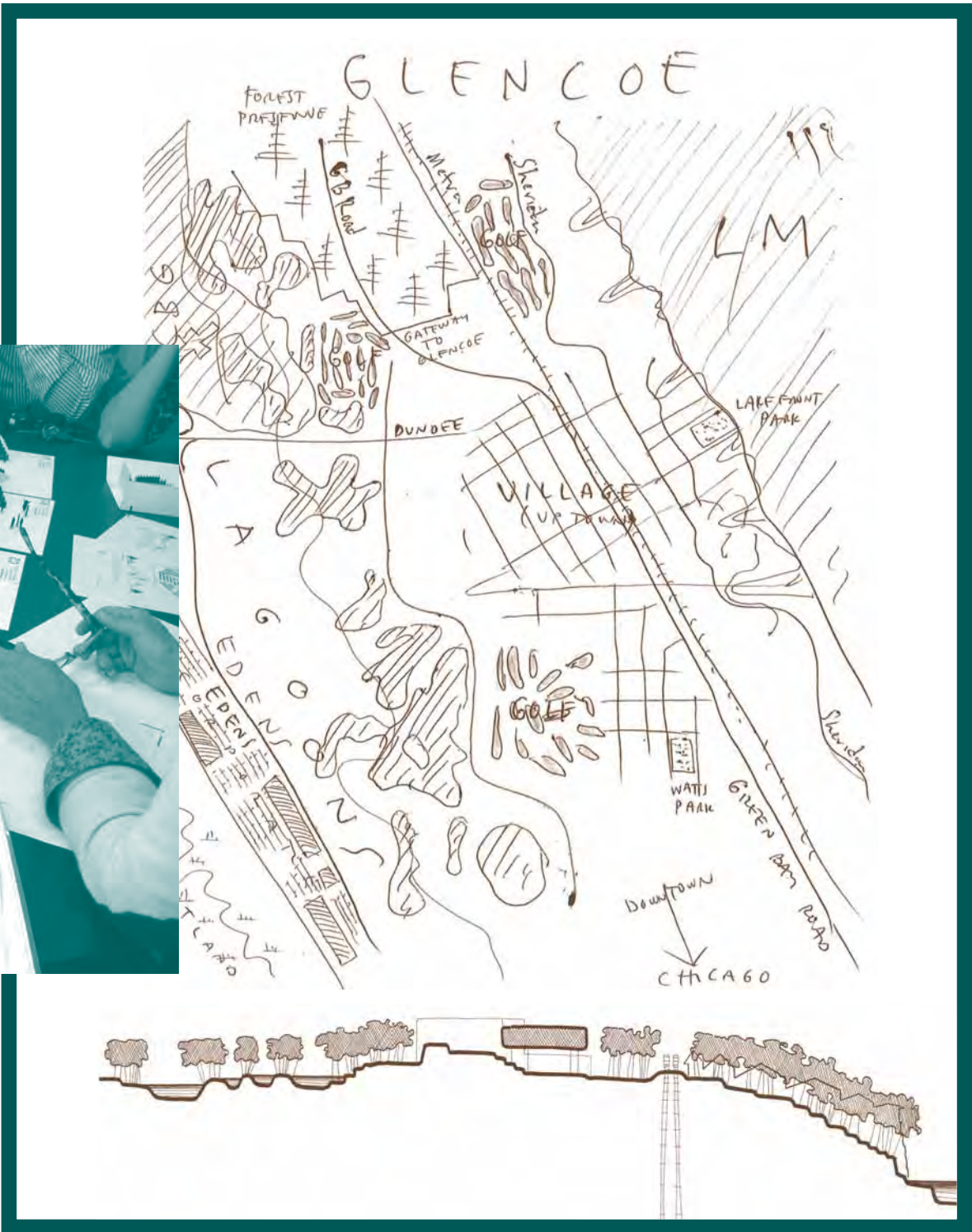
Founded in 1992 in Glencoe, a northern suburb of Chicago, Writers' Theatre has grown organically into a nationally acclaimed company. Choosing to invest primarily in “the word on the page and the artists who bring the word to life” rather than building a vast institution, Writers' is known for turning the provisional nature of the theatre spaces in which they perform into a company asset: amplifying the organic intimacy of these venues through their artistic choices, making each performance an immersive experience.

The new Writers' Theatre building will become the company's first permanent home. In designing it we faced the architectural challenges of reinforcing Writers' identity and mission (including maintaining the intimacy they're known for), now that they will have their own purpose-built space, and creating an energizing urban presence in the otherwise park-like setting of downtown Glencoe.

The design process has been built around a dialogue and interaction between our respective creative teams. We began by trying to understand each other—how we work and what we value—and to identify synergies between us that might yield key design ideas. On the following pages, a dialogue between Michael Halberstam, Writers' Co-Founder and Artistic Director, and Jeanne Gang highlights moments of our ongoing conversations as the project has taken shape. ■

Zooming in: clustering audience members into smaller sections yielded intimate connections with the performers on the thrust stage, as discovered through these study models.





Zooming out: Writers' Theatre occupies the high point on the bluff, with Lake Michigan to the east and a fluvio-glacial landscape to the west.

The modern thrust theatre form evolved from the informal, intimate setting of medieval performances in urban streets and inn yards. Its form is intended to maintain the power of these early performances within purpose-built spaces. The Writers' Theatre design brings the urban energy of the thrust stage to its lobby as well as its primary performance space.



street theatre



inn-yard theatre



Elizabethan theatre



Writers' Theatre

Michael Halberstam & Jeanne Gang in Dialogue

JG: For architects, “performance” has multiple meanings. On a technical level, performance has to do with the way a building behaves in response to a myriad of conditions—including the climate, its intended use, and its hardiness over time, to name just a few. As design tools become more sophisticated, it is easier to make a building responsive to these criteria, and as the climate becomes harsher, it is more urgent to do so. Buildings themselves must perform.

But “performance” in its more commonly-used sense—the act of presenting a play, concert, or other form of live entertainment—is also deeply interesting in the parallels it holds for the world of architecture,

urbanism, and the design process itself. Michael, I know that attending one of your live performances is incredibly moving, and the quality of your productions is very high. As we design a new theatre for your company, I am interested in what you think is essential about “performance”?

MH: It’s a great question. Performance—as we see it, at least—is at its core an organic conversation between audience and performer. Perhaps like a building, a performance without an audience is meaningless. At Writers’ we focus on creating what might be considered a very pure form of theatre, in which the word of the playwright and the creative process of the artist are valued above all other considerations. Furthermore, we believe that intimacy should form the core value of performance. Audience members should find themselves surrounded



This sketch contemplates a cluster of theatre volumes oriented around a central gathering space, imagining it as a stage surrounded by informal seating with the forest as its backdrop.

by and immersed within the world of the play. As they are more able to freely enter the world of the play, they can become more personally and emotionally affected by the circumstances of the drama.

JG: Intimacy is a key aspect of what we have been working on with you—and as we have found, intimacy is more than just creating a small space where the audience is close to the actor (though that is one important aspect). We have been discovering other dimensions of what makes intimacy possible. Now this seems more important than ever, as our society becomes more polarized and retreats from dialogue and face-to-face contact.

MH: Yes. Intimacy should absolutely not just be thought of as a function of space. It is also a function of the way we

engage with text. Our job is to remove distraction from the experience of the play in order that the audience may fully engage with the ideas of the playwright. It's not that the artists shouldn't have brave ideas, it's just that those ideas should always be grounded in the text. Ideas that compete with the text can draw attention to themselves. When ideas are more sublime, collaborative, and unmotivated by egotism, they provide conduits through which the audience can more personally and therefore more intimately experience the play—at which point the art has a real chance to effect change in the observer.

The impact of an artist's work is, in my opinion, viral in nature. We dig into the substance of our lives and reach out, through the medium of the texts we explore, for connection with our audiences. This is primal experience organized into artistic expression. Is it possible

that our ability to empathize, to share fundamental feelings and perspectives through the medium of art, allows us to evolve? As you say, the world is becoming increasingly polarized. So the work of the artist becomes as crucial to our survival as the work of doctors, scientists, and politicians. It is through art that polar opposition can be bridged. Art can effect change. To paraphrase Kafka, art must be an axe that breaks the frozen surface of the ocean inside us.

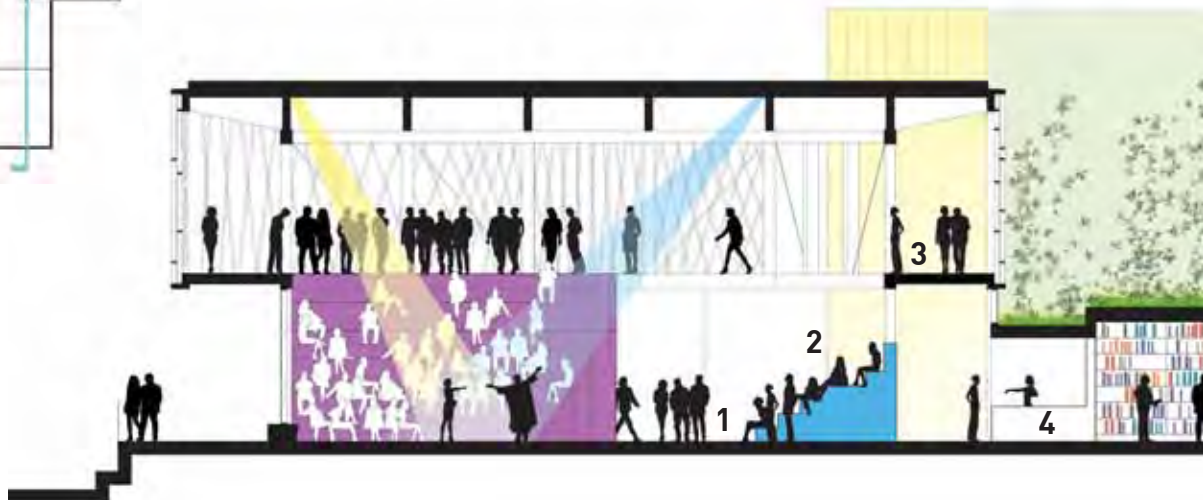
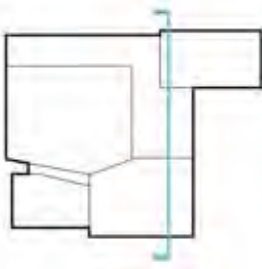
JG: It is important work. I think there are works of architecture that are incredibly moving as well, and can effect change. In this sense, architecture has the potential to be an “axe” and literally transform cities. Great architecture has the power to move us, but it also has an important role of setting the stage. Designing performance space is analogous to designing public space, where one is making a place for dramas to unfold. This is different than the architecture itself being the spectacle. The way

you describe theatre’s potential—to call attention to the often difficult relationships between people—is very relevant today. In a parallel way, public space could potentially explore everyday experience and create settings for daily encounters to make more of an impact.

On art, talent, and collaboration

MH: You and I share this aesthetic of collaboration very fundamentally and it has been evident throughout our work together. We value our artists at Writers’ Theatre enormously and give them a primary voice in the creative process, and in doing so we send them a very clear indication that they are our priority. When we value artists, in return they offer an absolute commitment to the work and take complete and appropriate ownership over the stage. We all seek to constantly evaluate and improve by listening to the needs of our staff, our clients/patrons, and our artists, then find tangible ways

A section through the lobby and gallery shows how this space can transform for educational outreach, audience enrichment, and celebration events. The black box theatre connects to the rest of the building through a passage lined with written volumes, including scripts and anthologies, that can be browsed by interested visitors.



for everyone to provide ongoing feedback. This feels very analogous to the Studio Gang/Writers' Theatre experience. Hierarchy is not something that seems imposed and permanent, rather it is organic to the moment and need—and consequently, our entire team contributes at the peak of their abilities.

JG: The conditions of ownership of design are interesting ones for architects as well. I have always felt that each project would turn out differently if any one of the team members were changed. Good design is only possible with talented individuals in every niche of the process, and each designer has the opportunity to imprint the work. This means there also needs to be a structure or method where ideas can come from any team member, not just from the top down.

MH: Yes yes, a thousand times yes. You made a beautiful analogy recently, stating that you saw the hierarchy of

your office as being constructed more like a tree than a pyramid. It is an inspiring and literally organic image. When everyone has a voice and sense of ownership, the work is always better. It's not that we don't need structure or someone to edit us, but we do need to be able to create in a safe environment where risk is encouraged and failure is looked upon as an opportunity to learn. This means we must create an environment in which we all feel confident enough to take brave leaps of imagination, but also in which the stakes are high enough to require it.

On form, text, and craft

JG: The value that Writers' Theatre places on a play's text strikes me as very interesting. Rather than overly stylizing a work, you dig into the original text. I would like to mine this for parallels with our work. Is this perhaps similar to an architecture process that emphasizes a project's criteria, as opposed to



1. Lobby
2. Lobby Seating
3. Gallery
4. Coat Check

5. Passage
6. Flexible Theatre
7. Roof Garden



imposing a preordained form onto it? I also think there is a connection between how you speak about the text and how we speak about material—the idea of making and craft being the genesis of design. Can you speak a bit about the craft of acting and its relationship to text?

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MH: What lovely parallels. Good actors are rare and precious. The best of them craft a moment-to-moment series of psychological choices that cohere entirely with the journey of the text. The creation of this journey is where the work of the rehearsal room lies. When it is most successful, the labor is entirely invisible and should

seem easy and effortless to the audience—and therefore often remains largely uncelebrated. So this requires us to shed ego in the rehearsal room and work entirely towards creating a seamless illusion of real human behavior under heightened circumstance. When we vie shamelessly for the audience's affections, or strive to show off our magnificent labor and craft, or soften conflict and blunt character defect in some misguided notion of being likable or relatable, we succumb to ego. It is at the heart of human frailty where truth reveals itself most vividly and dramatic conflict sparks most thrillingly.



Great timber Vierendeel trusses structure the lobby and create a portal through which the stages are entered. Hung in tension from the primary structure, a second floor gallery uses lighter wooden elements to create a delicate exterior screen. The transparency and luminosity generated by these structural systems creates a warm welcome for visitors to Glencoe's most important cultural anchor.

At Writers', therefore, we all collectively gather to harness our own defects and weaknesses as equally as our natural strengths and attractive attributes, in order to recognize them and craft them into the stories we stage. For it's only in the total rendering of the human condition that audiences can truly find themselves.

JG: We often begin with material, prior to form. Is there a corollary with beginning with the text? Though a play is also different than architecture, in that it is replayed over and

over by different artists with different directors in different spaces. Architecture, on the other hand, is only produced once.

MH: Perhaps the architecture of the play could be thought of as the text? And the ephemerality of repeated productions the habitation of the architecture?

The building may stay the same, but the people who live in it and decorate it can change it fairly radically. Would you say that the success of a building is its ability to withstand radical shifts in culture, and therefore tastes in interior design? A great play will certainly

The Tudor era of wood construction coincides with the early modern period of English drama. During this time, timber-framed theatres such as the Globe and the Rose hosted the debut performances of some of the seminal works of English-language theatre.

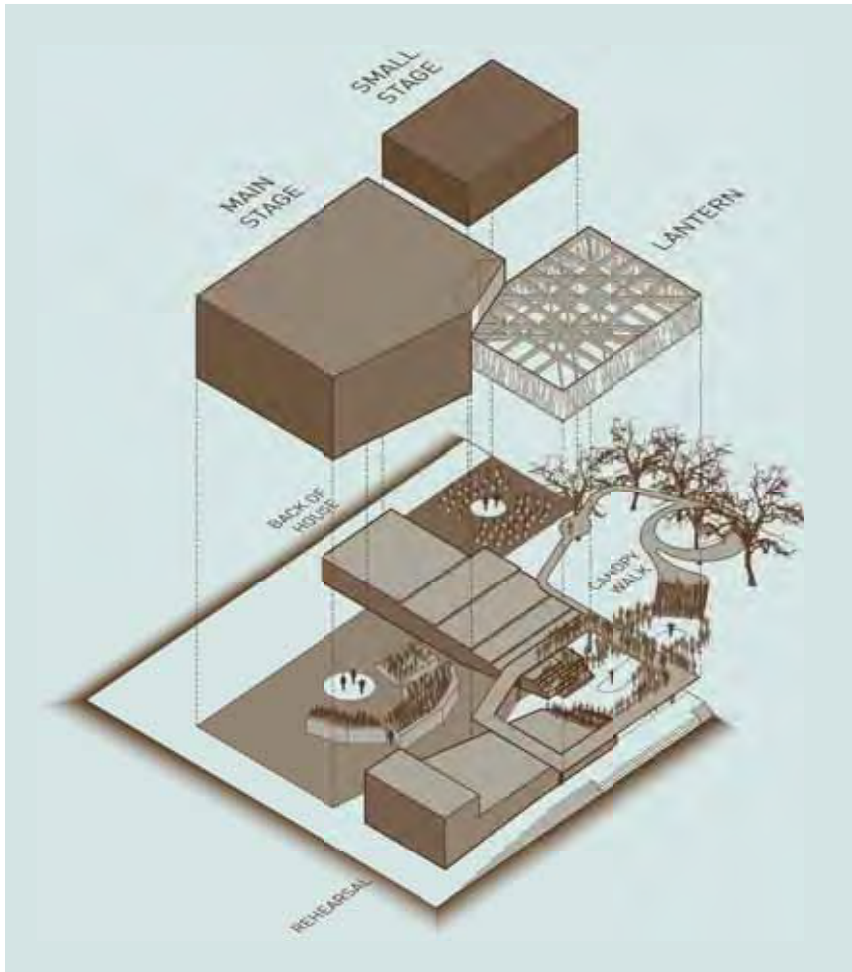


stand up to decades, if not centuries of re-invention in performance without radically changing the text.

JG: I'd say that could be argued, but we would also consider a design successful if you could not separate the interior from the exterior. Some buildings, though, do act more as infrastructure and can weather changes. I do like how you've described the creative process or craft being tied to a series of choices, yet those choices cohere to something greater. This is very much the way we work in studio, with the choices continuing from the diagram all the way down to the details.

MH: Oh, indeed. I think we are very much in alignment on this issue. In theatre, I would consider the interior

to be the text and the exterior to be the cast, the design choices, and indeed the theatre itself. When we engage with a text, we seek to reveal something greater than the sum of our collective, mundane personal experiences. The better the text and the more specific we are in our approach, the more likely we are to find a reading that has contemporary relevance, whether it be through a fresh reading of a classic text or a premiere staging of a new work. Within great text lies a universe of experience, and within a great production exists limitless entry points for the audience. So great theatre can eradicate the boundaries that exist between the truth of the audience and the artifice of the theatrical experience—leading to a limitless potential for revelation and transformation for all. ■



Distinct volumes of different sizes and shapes, each tailored to a specific function, are organized in a village-like cluster around a lobby, the building's central hub.



Liberating the seats from the walls behind them invites exciting actor entrances and lends an aural intimacy to the space. Materials reclaimed from the site's previous structure improve acoustic performance.

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Jeanne Gang and Zoë Ryan

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