

Man of the people

Rafael Viñoly, the architect behind Curve, envisages his creations as democratic, open spaces that bring people together to share and reinterpret the arts

Right: Rafael Viñoly

New York architect Rafael Viñoly is respected the world over for his considered approach to building design. Yet surprisingly it's only in the last five years that he's really made his mark on British architecture. Curve is the first of five ongoing projects by Rafael Viñoly Architects to open in the UK, giving British audiences an opportunity to experience first hand the impact his buildings can make.

Born in Uruguay to a stage director father and an architect mother, by the time Viñoly was 20 he had set up Estudio de Arquitectura, which would later become the largest design studio in Latin America. Softly spoken with a distinctive accent that combines Latin American with New York, Viñoly comes across as a passionate and social man; he certainly loves to talk! With a central office in New York and affiliate operations in London and Los Angeles, Viñoly's unusually diverse portfolio, developed over a 45-year career, includes a number of landmark cultural and civic complexes – notably the Tokyo International Forum in Japan, Kimmel Center for Performing Arts in Philadelphia and New York's Jazz at Lincoln Center.

His philosophy for building design appears centred around a collaborative and interactive

relationship with both client and end user. It is Viñoly's belief that the essential responsibility of architecture is to elevate the public realm. Using Curve as an example, he puts great store in the end user – who they are, what they want, how they think and how they can benefit and develop from his design.



Open space

If Viñoly's buildings have any kind of signature it has to be the promotion of natural daylight; they literally burst with it. Often very open, they demand social interaction, remove traditional barriers and promote democracy. In theatres and places of entertainment Viñoly believes environments should encourage those people open to learning to mix easily with those who have something to share. It's about opening up the process, giving audiences unlimited, unfettered access to the art form and the people who produce it – it's about sharing.


"My fascination with designing theatres and performance buildings came from my father. He was a stage director and over many years he worked not only in the theatre, but also in opera and film. From an early age I harboured this curiosity about what went on behind the scenes. Of course I visited back stages throughout my childhood and it really made me appreciate the



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places, embraced into general society. They should be made accessible to the public and have their doors open all day to anyone who cares to meander in,” he says.

Shared experience

For him the pleasure of live theatre comes from a collective, immersive and shared experience. “I believe there is a great future for theatre. Tradition is not a bad thing but it's also not bad to try and be a bit more adventurous. I've always felt that the notion of secrecy when it comes to the process of production is something based on the ideas of magic and illusion – things that were really quite potent elements of the 18th and 19th centuries, but not so relevant today.”

If Viñoly is right then maybe the time is fast approaching where we will see the escalation of this, currently bubbling under the surface, natural revolution in live performing arts. Look hard enough and you will see it is actually happening all over the world. One of the greatest things about this impending evolution is that numerous barriers in the complex layer cake of celebrity; artistic interpretation and production will hopefully be smashed down to be reconstructed any way we like.

“To me it's a hugely progressive idea to know how the play is set up and directed. It has tremendous appeal. I go to rehearsals and when I go back to see the finished production, as a member of the audience, I truly believe I've gained from observing the process, I understand the nuances of the production.”

Clearly then, for Viñoly, theatre production is not simply about two hours in a comfy seat, nice clothes and a gin and tonic in the interval! “A theatre production is not just a moment, completely diachronic and separate from the cause of life. That's surely why we watch the classics over and over again? That type of re-addition and reinterpretation is really where the culture of performing arts has to go.” ■

rigour, risk and sense of elation people get from working in such environments, be it on the stage or behind it. When you watch someone being applauded, even from behind, you really feel some of that extraordinary bliss they experience.”

In his time Viñoly has also designed the occasional theatre set: “When you work on these productions you're exposed to an environment and atmosphere that is so collegial, so wonderful and so improvisational. So many people don't have a notion of that feeling. It seems to me that to increase the perception of the risk, which is very much part of the experience of art, particularly performing art, it is essential for audiences to understand it.”

To that end many of Viñoly's venues encourage that collegial feeling to spill out from the backstage and into the front-of-house areas. “In reality an informed and educated public make for a better public both in the form of critics and in terms of applause! The life of the theatre is so immensely absorbent, it is a community that has patterns and relationships and values that are not common in general society. I think exposing the public to this type of communal experience can have a tremendous sociological impact,” he says.

Obviously then Viñoly is opposed to the concept of theatre as a temple of culture or a museum. “Theatres should be participatory