

Mounting, Lifting, Staging: or Mehr! Theater in Hamburg, 2015  
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Demountable structures, temporary interventions, transient constructions, mobile architectures: these spatial typologies are marked by the idea that they can be built and later removed, that they are a scenography of sorts. However, a scenography depends upon certain conditions in order to come into existence. A scenography requires a space of intervention, a context, or – in a word – a stage. A scenography also requires someone who is organizing appearances and disappearances, i.e. a scenographer or director.

A demountable structure (read scenography), then, can be understood within the context of a stage under the control of a director. I'd like to consider this idea of context in the broadest terms: from the show that takes place on a literal theater stage, to urban engagement, to interventions in infrastructural networks, to changes in society. Rather than looking directly at demountable structures, I'd like to focus on what it is that makes them possible, what conditions need to exist, or need to be created, to determine a space for mounting and staging in which new, alternative, subversive, or exciting scenographies can come into existence. How can we think about the contextual space of staging?

I come to these thoughts because I have been working on a theater project in Hamburg, Germany, during a time when it is necessary to stop looking at architecture as autonomous constructions, but instead as parts of material, social, and cultural networks. So, in that vein, when I think of all of the aspects of this theater in a harbor city, I am led (perhaps what will initially seem tangentially, but is in fact fundamentally) to the second part of Goethe's *Faust*.

Many people are familiar with the first part of the famous German play, in which a middle aged and successful man feels that he has been caught up with a solitary academic life and that he still knows nothing – he has not actually lived. He meditates on the first line of the Gospel of John in the Bible. In an inspired moment he translates it as, "In the beginning there was deed" rather than "In the beginning was the word." In this very moment, Mephistopheles (the devil) appears to him and reports of the destruction inherent in creation, and thus the destruction inherent in the divinity of God. Mephistopheles makes a deal with Faust: since Faust is so dissatisfied, Mephistopheles will do his bidding on earth to create the world anew. If Faust achieves satisfaction to stay in one moment forever, then Faust will do the devils bidding in hell forever after.

In part two of the play, Faust has taken on acts of creation at a global scale with Mephistopheles at his side. Marshall Berman claims that *Faust* is the first tragedy of development. In his book, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, Berman reflects on *Faust* as the prototypical story of Modernism; modern society is caught up in change and forward progress with so much pressure, that it cannot stop, even for a moment (1). By the end of the play, Faust determines that mankind should assert its power over

the forces of nature. He takes on a program to harness the sea for human purposes, developing the coastlines into productive harbors and effectively turning the edge between water and land into a catalyst for the modernization of all populations.

This modernization, which could also be called the development project of industrialization, has become our reality since the time of Goethe. We are globalized; there is hardly a patch of earth left that has not been touched by the destruction and creation of modern society. Society as we know it, has become the overarching and incessant project that Goethe predicts – everything must be pulled into this dynamic creation, even if this means a tragic amount of destruction.

Modernization has been accomplished in great part through the power of steel as a material. Steel has been transformative in military and infrastructural technological advances. Its innovation was fundamental to the extraction of resources and to the development of trade, and must be understood in the historical context of colonization as well as globalization (2). Steel machinery transformed agricultural villages into industrial cities with factories. Steel provided the malleable substrate to create the transportation infrastructure of ships, trains and trucks.

The harbor is a pinnacle of the incessant movement of modernity made possible by steel. Composed of an entangled network of infrastructures, it never interrupts the story of steel as the conveyor of men and goods. On the sea, steel ships have free reign over the horizon. On land, by laying steel tracks and roads down, trains and trucks move across space at high speed. However, at the coastline, there is a moment when these infrastructures break. The steel harbor crane acts as a threshold or juncture between otherwise incompatible worlds of sea and land. The steel crane – almost an extension of the human capability to grasp and move (3) – picks up the shipping cargo *vertically* in order to place it onto the opposing carrier infrastructure.

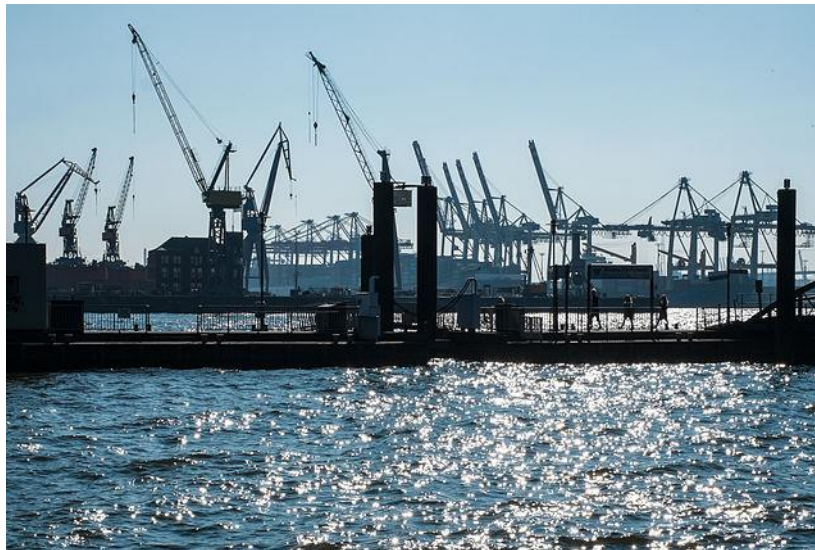
There is something fantastic in the moment that the containers become airborne under the power of the harbor crane, swinging above their cargo-ships and flat-rail-cars. As the cargo moves from sea to land, or land to sea, there is an insinuation of the puppet-master in the crane: an insinuation of something that is analogous to an exposed theater. In all the speed and incessant horizontal movement of production and trade going on in the world, this moment of lifting vertically into the air is exposed as a moment of human decision and fallibility.

These cranes are the hands of the larger body of the harbor city built up behind them. It is not just trade networks that have come of modernization, but also urban centers that now (affirming Goethe) dot the coastlines of the planet. The harbor city, as a condensed agglomeration of people, material and money, is the marker of industrialization: a logistics node that gathers the strings of the business players.

I don't think it goes too far to suggest a comparison between the technical stage and the heavy lifting machines of harbor logistics. In a way, the mechanical stage of the

harbor is much more visible than in a theater. Once on location, we can watch the material exchange of goods play out underneath the cranes in the port. When the harbor cranes lift, they are staging the story of development. However, the fluctuations of the stock market (scripts) are silent and the investors (writers) are unseen. The classical theater stage tower, on the other hand, is concealed to the audience. We look through the stage portal at a controlled view. Above and below the visible stage is a massive amount of mechanics. Twenty meters above the stage, a series of cranes – also known as hoists and winches – are positioned to lift backdrops, lighting, and materials for special effects. Both the port and the theater provide a spectacle.

Hamburg, in particular, can support the correlation of theater and harbor: it is the third largest port in Europe and also one of the biggest theater cities in the world – only New York and London run more musicals. The harbor area of the city of Hamburg, in fact, hosts several theaters: a pair of musical theaters are accessible by ferry, not to mention the highly iconic (if not yet finished) Elbphilharmonie designed by Herzog and de Meuron. Even the people of Hamburg seem to be well aware of the theatricality of their harbor. Once a year they celebrate the Hafengeburtstag, or the harbor's birthday. Along with expected fair-like festivities, there is the unusual tradition of the Schlepperballet: a choreographed dance of tugboats. These boats drive out into the harbor to show off synchronized movements and pre-arranged figures for the audience. The harbor is a stage in itself, and not only on the Hafengeburtstag. Every day the harbor cranes are constantly in motion with loading and unloading. They are reminiscent of strange characters. They evoke a super strength that appears to mimic and eclipse the power of something as old as dinosaurs, at the same time they are as magical as an elaborate troupe performing their own dance.



The harbor cranes of Hamburg.

Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hamburg\\_Hafen\\_.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hamburg_Hafen_.jpg).

Author: Konrad Lischka. Last Access: February 15, 2015.

The crane has become a basis of altering space in building construction today. If you look at an urban skyline, the number of cranes offer an indication of the momentum of the city. The urban capacity of the crane can also be thought of as a theatrical device: it can create an intermediary between worlds by lifting objects and scenarios into an uncertain condition. The context of staging, or mounting & demounting, is a key component of a theater. Not only that, but revealing the framework of the theaters' stage tower, the framework that allows for staging, can become culturally important.

Historian Léa-Catherine Szacka links theater to the socio-political in Italy. She terms this post-modern Italian condition "Effimero" (4). In the middle of the dubious political era of the 1970s and 80s, theater opened up urban experimentation through the use of transitory structures. The theater was an insertion into the daily lives of the people to poke fun and question social forms. The temporary theater structures lifted discourse off the ground into the unknown, reversing values from the ideological into a playful escape. The most iconic project that Szacka presents as part of the Effimero movement is a Pink Floyd Concert in the San Marco Basin in Venice in 1989. The band played on an ephemeral floating stage and attracted 200,000 viewers, which created massive overcrowding problems for the city. By putting the magnetic performance on the water, the spectacle opened up a precarious historic space between collectivity and urbanism.



Pink Floyd performs on a floating stage in the San Maco Basin in Venice.  
Source: <http://socks-studio.com/2014/06/16/effimero-or-the-postmodern-italian-condition-14th-venice-biennale-of-architecture-2014>. Last Access: February 15, 2015.

Another relevant example and attempt to manifest the theater as an urban forum can be found in the BMW-Guggenheim Lab, as designed by Atelier Bow Wow. They conceptualize their temporary lightweight structure (actually made of carbon fiber, though with the appearance of steel), as a mobile toolbox. A black framework filled with technical equipment and rigging, is raised on a series of columns so that

various scenarios can be raised and lowered for the players underneath. The structure is effectively a mobile stage tower, or a technical grid filled with small cranes. This tool-box was planned to activate spaces in New York, Berlin, and Mumbai as an educational laboratory for discussing urban life (5).



The BMW-Guggenheimlab designed by Atelier Bow-Wow as Urban Forum for discussion.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/barolo/7445852832>.

Author: Erik Borälv. Last Access: February 15,2015.

The Effimero structures and the BMW-Guggenheim Lab examples allow us to understand the social space of theater as part of urbanism. The placement of a theater in a city can build connections and have resounding effects. The theater, a stage for appearances and disappearances, raises awareness for collectivity as well as historic narration and questioning. While both the Effimero theater interventions and the BMW-Guggenheim Lab worked on seasonal timescales to insert themselves into urban spaces, it might be possible or even necessary to widen the scope of temporality for a city seeking answers to changes in industrialization.

All of this comes to a head in the theater project I've been working on: the recently finished Mehr! Theater in Hamburg's Großmarkthalle. The Großmarkthalle, or large market hall, is situated in the industrial harbor of the city. It is connected by rail to the harbor and serviced by the likes of semi-trailer trucks. Incoming fruit and vegetables arrive close to midnight and are sold to small-scale grocers in the early morning, fresh every day. However, this commercial sector has changed immensely since the market was built in the late 50s. Hamburg, as most of the developed world, is going through deindustrialization as well as large-scale transitions in commercial activity. This means that the Großmarkt doesn't function in the same way it used to.



Today, the logistics for ubiquitous chain grocery stores do not depend upon the public market that this building initially housed (6).



The market hall in the industrial harbor of Hamburg.  
Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gro%C3%9Fmarkt\\_\(Hamburg-Hammerbrook\).hf.phb.ajb.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gro%C3%9Fmarkt_(Hamburg-Hammerbrook).hf.phb.ajb.jpg).  
Author: Ajepbah. Last Access: February 15, 2015.

In order to make use of this incredible market building while its original use starts to wane, the city and market have sought new opportunities. After being approached to use the parking area around the building for a large theater tent, the Grobmarkt became amicable to the idea of reusing the building's interior. About one ninth of the hall was put up for rent for the completely different program of a theater in an effort to re-imagine the role of the building. In fact, a theater fits complementarily to the use of the industrial market, utilizing the building during the afternoon and evening. In other words, the theater is active when the market function itself is normally closed.

The theater in the Grobmarkt is framed by the unusual tempo of the existing market hall. Additionally, it faces a similar sort of temporality that the Effimero structures and the BMW-Guggenheim lab faced in their temporary urban insertions, because the space in the Grobmarkt is only being rented for 20 years. While this seems like a relatively long period of time (and there is a chance that the period can be extended), it comes with the requirement that everything built must be able to be removed at the end of the term. On top of that, the existing building is landmarked, so alterations are restricted in many ways. It is, in the end, also an insertion into the existing tempo and structure of the Grobmarkt and the harbor.

F101 Architekten designed the "Mehr! Theater Hamburg" to create space for a variety of performative uses. It extends the definition of a theater into a full-fledged multi-function hall. It can house a musical with over 2,150 seats. Alternatively, its seating can be rearranged for viewing a boxing match from all four sides or the seating can be removed for a rock concert with standing room for up to 3,600 people. It does not have the traditional separation of audience and stage: the

technical grid is visibly extended out beyond the edge of the classical stage over most of the hall.

However, the fact that the impressive concrete arches and thin shell concrete roof of the existing building could not be loaded with heavy theater equipment created a particular challenge. The technical rigging of the hall was accomplished by re-imagining standard construction logic in terms of the curved and ribbed methods of shipbuilding. Steel arches were built to encase two of the existing concrete arches, so as not to change the overall historic shape of the interior of the hall. These arches and the back wall of the theater were then used as the vertical structures to hold an immense technical grid that extends out from the stage over the first 20 rows of normal theater seats. When someone walks into the theater, the steel that has been inserted into the building surrounds him or her. In effect, the arches and trusses form an extensive stage tower, or a series of cranes that can lift up to 115 tons up into the air.

The conditions for staging, lifting and mounting are revealed in the theaters' exposed technical crane. The separation between permanent structure and temporary scenography is blurred; the audience and the stage inhabit the same space. The 550m<sup>2</sup> under this steel structure can be used as a laboratory to re-imagine the future of the Großmarkt, but also of Hamburg. I'd like to think that as we continue in the (most likely tragic destruction and construction) project of globalized development, it is perhaps in the temporal space of the stage where new narrations and projections can be tested.



Exterior view of Mehr! Theater Hamburg. Author: Andreas Meichsner, 2015.



Interior view of Mehr! Theater Hamburg. Author: Andreas Meichsner, 2015.

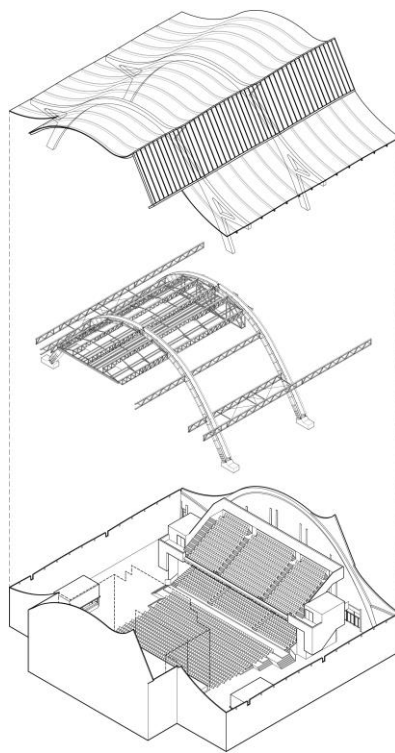


Interior view of Mehr! Theater Hamburg. Author: Andreas Meichsner, 2015.





View of the Technical Grid and Stage. Author: Andreas Meichsner. 2015.



Exploded axonometric view. Author: F101 Architekten, 2015.

## Notes

(1) Berman, Marshall. *All that is Solid Melts into Air*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.

(2) Scientist and Geographer Jared Diamond claims in his book “Guns, Germs, and Steel” that geography is at the root of progress. Through geography we find the limits of the possible; relations to the material, biological, and technological are tied to geographical fact. Steel, as a material developed in Europe, is seen almost teleologically as a fundamental tool in the possibility of European conquest. See Diamond, Jared M. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: Norton, 1999.

(3) I am thinking about Heidegger’s conception of things as either ‘ready-to-hand’ or ‘present-at-hand’. Things that are in use are ‘ready-to-hand,’ acting inconspicuously or as extensions of the body. If a thing breaks, then a person must reflect on that things’ existence, to theorize it as ‘present-at-hand.’ The interesting thing about the crane is that it is inconspicuous (ready-to-hand) in a system that is at a juncture or breaking point. The infrastructural systems reach a stopping point at the coastline and are thus always being analyzed (present-at-hand) and then fixed by the crane. The threshold, or space of adaptation, is indeterminate; it is somewhere in between the ‘ready-to-hand’ and the ‘present-at-hand.’

(4) The exhibition *Effimero: or the Postmodern Italian Condition* was a contribution to Moditalia, 14<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Exhibition, Biennale di Venezia, and has a website: <http://www.effimero.info> (Last Access: Feb 15, 2015)

(5) While the BMW-Guggenheim Lab as a multi-functional structure is innovative, successfully creating a discursive forum proved difficult as the politics of naming and material had mixed results in the planned cities. In New York, the intervention fit effortlessly into the commercially driven lower-east side of Manhattan. In Berlin, the initial site for the intervention was protested by citizens for fear of gentrification through connection with the organizations of BMW and the Guggenheim. It eventually took place in a less conspicuous courtyard location in a more gentrified neighborhood. In Mumbai, the structure was totally re-built out of bamboo. One can only surmise that expensive technical equipment and the carbon-fiber structure did not fit BMW-Guggenheim’s idea of public discourse there.

(6) The Großmarkthalle (1958) is an historic landmark designed by Bernhard Hermkes, one of Germany’s distinguished modern architects. It is a reinforced concrete barrel vaulted shell structure with 21m interior heights, built originally in three bays and covering about 40,000m<sup>2</sup>. See Baller, Inken. *Architekt Bernhard Hermkes*. Cottbus: Brandenburgische Technische Universität, 2003.