

# Intermission

Between city and stage.

Research Plan

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**Research Plan**

COMPLEX PROJECTS  
Bodies and Building Milan  
AR3CP100

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# 01

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the evolving role of performing arts centres as civic infrastructures that actively engage with the public realm. While historically positioned as monumental cultural landmarks, such institutions are increasingly called upon to play a more integrated role in the lifestyle of the city. Drawing on Patrick Lynch's idea that the civic environment should be conceived as a continuum of diverse and overlapping settings, this research examines how performing arts architecture can operate across multiple spatial and social scales, enhancing not only the functional presence of the arts, but also their psychological and civic resonance.

Situated within Milan's layered urban context and operatic heritage, the thesis investigates how architectural design can blur the threshold between performance and city life. Rather than treating the edge of the building as a boundary, the project explores how transitional elements such as porticos, plazas, and arcades, can become active civic stages, inviting both everyday participation and ritual gathering; this deepens the building's connection to the community, thereby amplifying the cultural and civic role of the arts within. Through observation, analysis, and design, the project intends to reimagine the performance centre not as a retreat from the city, but as an extension of it; a place where cultural expression and civic life continually converge.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Opera, once a central part of public cultural life, is increasingly seen as a formal, exclusive experience with limited relevance to contemporary society. Changing demographics, shifting cultural interests, and the rise of more accessible forms of entertainment have contributed to its fading presence in civic life. As a result, opera houses risk becoming static cultural monuments. Milan, home to the iconic Teatro alla Scala, provides the context and site for this research, reflecting many of the same challenges faced by performance centres around the world.

Architecturally, these buildings often present themselves as monumental yet inward-facing. Despite their cultural significance, their architectural expression and public engagement tend to be confined to their decorative façades and enclosed interiors, lacking genuine spatial or social engagement with their immediate surroundings — a disconnect that risks diminishing the role of the performing arts in civic life. The thresholds and transitional spaces of the buildings envelope are typically underutilised, offering little in terms of public accessibility or informal interaction. As a result, there is minimal dialogue between the building and the street, weakening opportunities for civic participation and cultural spillover.

This reveals a gap in how performance centres can contribute to the vitality of the city beyond their interior programming. There is a need to rethink the design of architectural thresholds as active civic spaces that extend cultural life outward into the public realm. These transitional elements hold potential to bridge the gap between building and city, formality and spontaneity, audience and passerby.

This research is guided by the assertion that the civic environment should be understood as a continuum of diverse settings, not a binary between public and private. By designing across multiple spatial and social scales, architecture can restore the psychological and social significance of performance buildings and their role in civic life (Lynch, 2017).

The project aims to reposition the performance centre as a civic interface rather than a retreat; a space that supports daily interaction, cultural expression, and shared identity within the city, re-orienting the building as a place of continuous civic engagement.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

How can a performance centre participate as an **extension of the public realm** enriching its civic role?

## SUB QUESTIONS

- How do people currently behave around cultural buildings, and what spatial conditions naturally support gathering, lingering, and public interaction?
- How can architectural thresholds, such as entrances, edges, and transitional zones, contribute to informal public use and civic engagement around performance centres?
- In what ways can the relationship between performance centres and their urban context be reconfigured to support the appropriation of the buildings threshold and continuous public interaction beyond scheduled events?

# 02

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is framed by a multidisciplinary theoretical foundation that draws from architectural, urban, and sociocultural discourse. It investigates how performance centres, particularly opera houses, can regain civic relevance by re-engaging with the public realm through architectural design. The research begins with a fundamental question:

**How can a performance centre participate as an extension of the public realm, enriching its civic role?**

Opera houses and performance centres have historically been celebrated as grand cultural institutions—monumental in form and revered in function. Yet their architecture often reflects a logic of separation: performance is housed within, while the life of the city unfolds outside. Their civic presence is typically symbolic rather than experiential, defined by façades and formal entries, while everyday urban life flows around them, rather than through them. The question, then, is not simply how to modernise opera architecture, but how to re-orient it from monument to participant, from closed envelope to civic interface. This leads to a deeper design inquiry:

Can the edges, thresholds, and in-between spaces of a performance centre act as active civic grounds, rather than just transitions into an interior event?

A notable historical example of architecture negotiating between the private and public realm is Andrea Palladio's Palazzo Chiericati in Vicenza. In this project, Palladio extended a portico beyond the conventional boundary of the building plot, projecting it into the street. The boundary between private property and civic space became indistinct, effectively transforming the portico into a public gesture. Rather than being a formal extension of the building, the portico acted as a threshold space — a semi-public zone that provided shelter, invited gathering, and visually contributed to the life of the street.

This example introduces an important conceptual shift: that civic architecture is not defined solely by program or ownership, but by the presence of civic elements — spatial conditions that support openness, interaction, and collective use. Palladio's use of the portico demonstrates that a building can incorporate civic intent within its architectural language, challenging the binary notion of a building being either "public" or "private." Instead, it suggests a continuum, where architectural thresholds can carry civic meaning and invite public participation, even within traditionally enclosed or elite institutions (Lynch, 2017).

This research proposes a composite approach, constructed from spatial fragments and architectural episodes that unfolds over time. In this way, the research aligns with threshold theory, particularly in the writings of Herman Hertzberger, who argues that thresholds are not merely zones of passage but spaces of encounter, sites where formal and informal use intersect. These in-between spaces support informal gathering, visual connection, and the potential for layered interaction (Hertzberger, 2008). Similarly, Richard Sennett's reflections on the public realm suggest that the health of a city depends on spaces that allow for

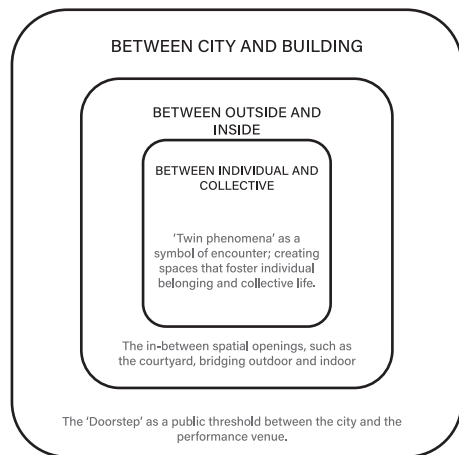


*Sketches of Santa Maria by Álvaro Siza showing the architect thinking simultaneously about the role of the horizon and topography in the design of the church and parochial centre, 1990. (Lynch, 2017)*

ambiguity, friction, and co-presence, qualities often excluded from formal cultural buildings. According to him, “buildings should function like cell membranes, porous and resistant at once combining form and change” (Sennett, 2008, p. 34). Aldo Rossi recognises cultural buildings like Teatro alla Scala not only as architectural artifacts but as essential components of the city’s collective memory and spatial identity. This perspective frames the design not as a singular intervention, but as a continuation of urban life across time (Rossi, 1966). Collectively, these theories reframe the design of a performance centre not around the spectacle of performance itself, but around the spatial choreography that surrounds it.

Van Eyck believed that architecture is not about choosing one quality over another — it’s about holding both sides of a relationship at once. He referred to these as “twin phenomena”. Aldo van Eyck’s concept of the ‘in-between’ provides a design philosophy in which transitional spaces act not merely as connections, but as sites of dialogue and belonging (Sack, 2024). Sack identifies three interrelated layers within this concept:

- Thresholds and doorsteps** - spatially mediating inside and outside
- Spatial interiorisation** - where enclosure and openness meet
- Design dualities** - like part/whole, mass/space, individual/collective



Together, these levels position the in-between not as residual or secondary space, but as a spatial and social condition capable of reconciling conflicting polarities and enabling human experiences of belonging, encounter, and co-existence.

The theoretical foundation also engages with relational urbanism, seeing architecture not as an isolated object but as an actor within a network of behaviours, flows, and social rituals. Cultural buildings, especially those with historical significance like Teatro alla Scala, must be rethought as performers within the city, not static icons, but adaptable interfaces that host a range of civic and cultural interactions. Based on this research, the design approach resists the binary of “inside” and “outside.” Instead, it intends to create the in-between as a civic condition, a series of spatial decisions that collectively reshape how cultural buildings participate in everyday life. From the portico that shelters the passerby, to the step that becomes a seat, to the foyer that dissolves into a public plaza, each intervention may be small, but accumulates into a larger civic act.

This thesis investigates how moments of gathering, waiting, passing, or observing can become opportunities for civic engagement; building a vocabulary of civic fragments, responsive to context, behaviour, and atmosphere, that together redefine the role of performance space in the city. **These moments are not secondary to performance; they are the performance - ephemeral, repeated, and shared.**

*Conceptual interpretation of Aldo van Eyck's "in-between" space (Self-made)*

## RELEVANCE

This research is timely and relevant across multiple scales from the specific site of Teatro alla Scala in Milan to the broader discourse on civic architecture and cultural institutions in contemporary society.

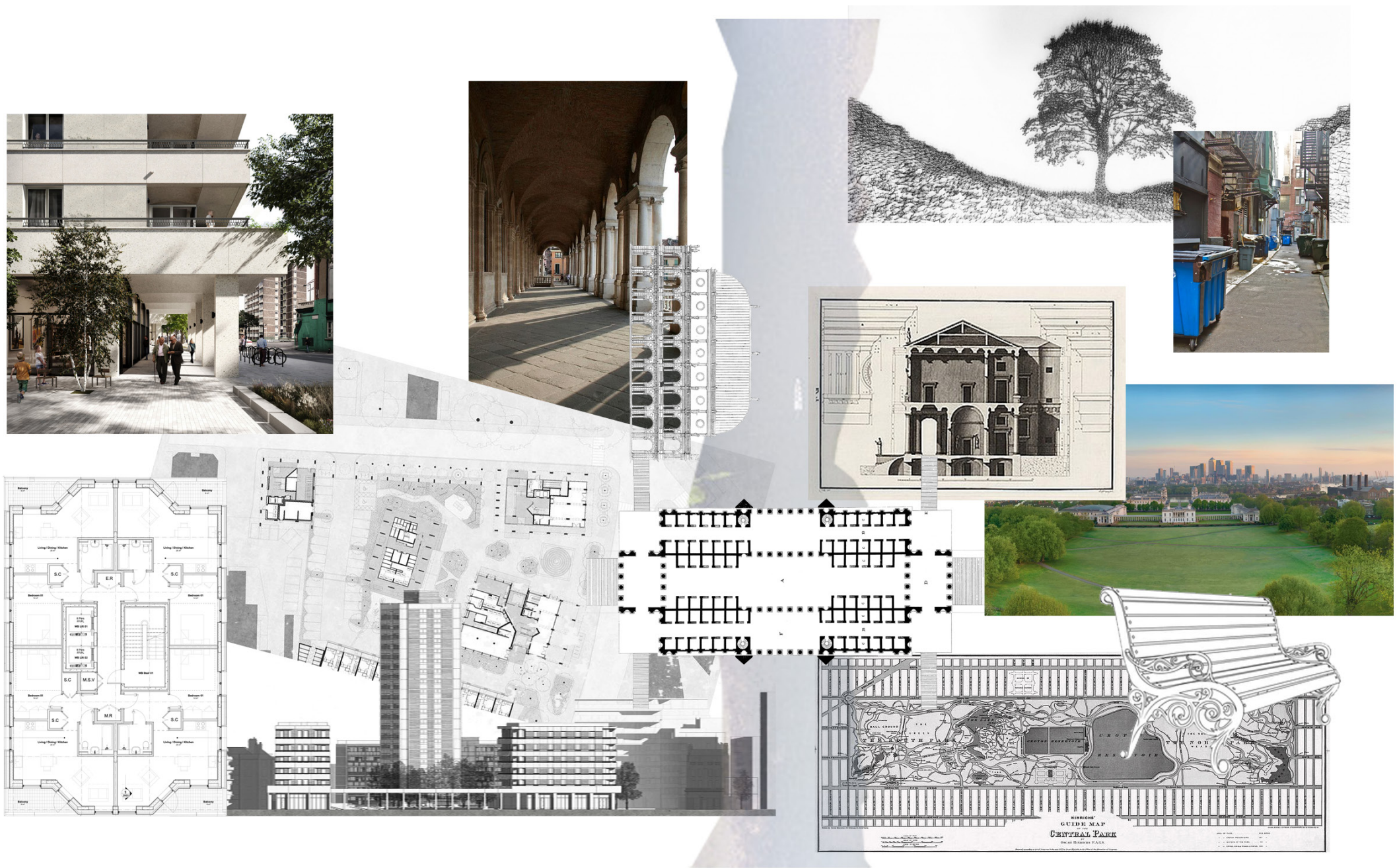
Teatro alla Scala holds symbolic weight in the city’s cultural and architectural identity, yet its current form reflects a historical model of cultural exclusivity and spatial separation. As Aldo Rossi suggests, enduring urban structures must be capable of absorbing new social meanings over time without losing their architectural identity (Rossi, 1966). This research asks how a renewed performance centre could act not just as a monument to the arts but as an active civic participant—open, porous, and responsive to the life of the city (Lynch, 2017). This aligns with Patrick Lynch’s notion that civic architecture should be understood not as “an object,” but as a communicative presence in dialogue with its surroundings (Lynch, 2017), and with Sennett’s view that openness and interaction are essential to sustaining vibrant public institutions (Sennett, 2008).

Architecturally, the project explores how architecture can generate civic value through relational spaces—what Hertzberger (2008) defines as the “in-between” that supports spontaneous use and social interaction. In doing so, the research contributes to discussions around human-scaled civic space, atmospheres of inclusion, and the cultural relevance of performance architecture in contemporary urban life, addressing the growing disconnect between cultural institutions and civic engagement in an increasingly globalized and dematerialized society, physical spaces risk becoming symbolic rather than experiential (Augé, 1992).

For performance centres, this project proposes a shift in civic role: from container of culture to host of civic life. Through the design of architectural thresholds that choreograph arrival, pause, and gathering, the project responds to van Eyck’s notion of “liminal space” as a space not simply of transition but of meaningful human connection (Smith, 2001). The work speculates on how the peripheral can become central, how the foyer, the step, or the portico might serve as stages of their own—places where the city performs itself.



*Architecture as a civic interface. View of Kings Gate. (Lynch, 2017).*



A collage inspired by 'Civic Grounds' shows an environment as a continuum of civic elements, transcending different scales. (Self-made)

# METHODOLOGY

## Main Question:

How can a performance centre participate as an extension of the public realm enriching its civic role?

## Sub-Questions:

- How do people currently behave around cultural buildings, and what spatial conditions naturally support gathering, lingering, and public interaction?
- How can architectural thresholds—such as entrances, edges, and transitional zones, contribute to informal public use and civic engagement around performance centres?
- In what ways can the relationship between performance centres and their urban context be reconfigured to support the appropriation of the buildings threshold and continuous public interaction beyond scheduled events?

This research utilises a qualitative methodology that combines theoretical grounding, contextual analysis, observation, and designed exploration to create and inform a design brief. The project is explored through the studio lenses of site, program, and client. Together, these approaches aim to develop architectural strategies that reposition the performance centre as an extension of the public realm, with a particular focus on the potential of thresholds and transitional spaces to act as an extension of the public realm.

## Client

The project should consider institutional and cultural stakeholders invested in the future of performance architecture, including the public.

## Site

Located at Teatro alla Scala in central Milan, the site will be studied through mapping, observation, and photography to understand its spatial and social dynamics. Focus will be on thresholds, edges, and the site's relationship to surrounding public life.

## Program

The program aims to redefine the performance centre as a civic interface. Case studies of cultural venues will inform how architecture can support informal gathering and urban integration.

## Literature Informed Theory and Framework

The project is grounded in the “Bodies & Building” theme, drawing on theoretical perspectives that explore the relationship between bodies, buildings, and the public realm. Literature which examines architecture's social, psychological, and spatial dimensions, including Patrick Lynch, Richard Sennett, Herman Hertzberger and Aldo Rossi, whose work informs the study's understanding of civic architecture, public space, and human-scale design. **These theoretical insights should guide the identification of spatial conditions that support engagement, inform design strategies for architectural thresholds and their subsequent appropriation, enabling a stronger justification for future design intentions.**

## Qualitative and Ethnographic Research

A component of the methodology is ongoing observation, carried out in Milan, as well as other cultural and public spaces encountered throughout the course. Resulting in a continuous, reflective engagement with how people interact with architecture in a variety of contexts. This includes: Photographic documentation, Sketching, notes and videography. **These observations will give insight into how people behave around cultural buildings and help identify the spatial conditions, such as thresholds, steps, edges, and open zones, that naturally support gathering, lingering, and public interaction.**

## Contextual Analysis

The project includes a spatial and cultural analysis of La Scala and its immediate urban surroundings, focusing on how the building's architectural history, typological evolution, and civic role have developed over time, this approach could be informed by the theory of Aldo Rossi. This analysis will examine how the site engages (or fails to engage) with the public realm today, identifying opportunities through maps, images, modelling and first hand experience. **Studying the relationship between La Scala and its context will help define strategies for integrating performance architecture into the everyday life of the city.**

### Precedent Studies

A series of comparative case studies will examine how performance centres address thresholds, public interfaces, and their relationship to the urban context. The research will also investigate relevant strategies from other building typologies to broaden the scope of spatial understanding. These studies will help identify spatial patterns and design approaches that support civic engagement through the appropriation of the a buildings envelope threshold. **Ultimately, the intent of the precedent study is to have a wide base of knowledge, a catalog of buildings and design strategies which can be applied and tested during the design process.**

### Design strategy development

Building on the research findings, a design strategy will be developed. Design iterations will be continually informed by the theoretical framework and insights gathered through observation and analysis. **The aim is to explore how a performance centre can be designed as an extension of the public realm, enriching its civic role through architectural thresholds and spatial transitions.**

### Summary & Expectations

The research is expected to result in a set of spatial strategies that can be applied to architectural thresholds and can foster civic engagement and reconnect the performance centre with the everyday life of the city.

- Read and analyse architectural theory to identify spatial principles that support engagement at the threshold.
- Observe and document public behaviour in the built environment through sketching, photography, videography and field notes to understand how people interact with edges, entrances, threshold and in-between spaces.
- Study the site and context of La Scala to assess its civic presence, spatial limitations, and opportunities for activation.
- Compare relevant precedents to gather a knowledge of design strategies, which can be applied and tested.
- Test and develop design strategies through drawing, modelling and other forms of speculation.

## CONCLUSION

This research aims to reframe the performing arts centre not as a sealed cultural monument but as an architecture embedded within the lifestyle of the city. By investigating how the design of thresholds, edges, and transitional spaces can foster civic participation, the project challenges the traditional boundary between performance and public life. Through an approach that integrates theory, observation, and design, the thesis builds a case for architecture that is relational, atmospheric, and inclusive; where culture is not only represented but lived.

Supported by literature such as Lynch, Hertzberger, Sennett, and van Eyck, the research explores how architecture can operate across multiple scales; urban, architectural, and human, to create conditions for shared presence, informal interaction, and everyday civic meaning. It sees the performance centre not as a destination apart from the city but as a civic interface that choreographs movement, encounter, and gathering both within and around its envelope.

The project is situated in Milan and focuses on the site of Teatro alla Scala, engaging with the urban qualities and history of the site. The research creates a design vocabulary of civic fragments that may inform how cultural institutions everywhere can reassert their civic value.

To summarise, this project proposes that it is not only the grand gesture of a building as an object, but the careful articulation of in-between spaces that can transform a performance centre into one that does not merely host culture, but helps perform the city itself; a platform where public life and cultural expression are no longer separate acts, but part of a shared civic performance.

# 04

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Smith, M. (2001). *Between inside and outside: Aldo van Eyck's spaces of memory*.

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## ADDITIONAL ARTICLES

National Theatre, London. (2019). *Arts Engagement Report 2019*. This report discusses strategies for increasing youth engagement in the arts, emphasising the importance of listening to young people's preferences and leveraging digital platforms to make cultural experiences more accessible.

Vogue. (2019). *Will Millennials Kill Opera, Too?* This article explores the challenges opera houses face in attracting younger audiences, highlighting the need for modernisation and increased accessibility to maintain relevance.

UNESCO. (2023). *Protecting and Preserving Cultural Diversity in the Digital Era*. This article discusses how digital platforms and social media are transforming cultural institutions, offering new opportunities for engagement while also presenting challenges in preserving cultural diversity.

# Intermission

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