

VANBRUGH'S CONTRIBUTION AT THE HAYMARKET RECONSIDERED

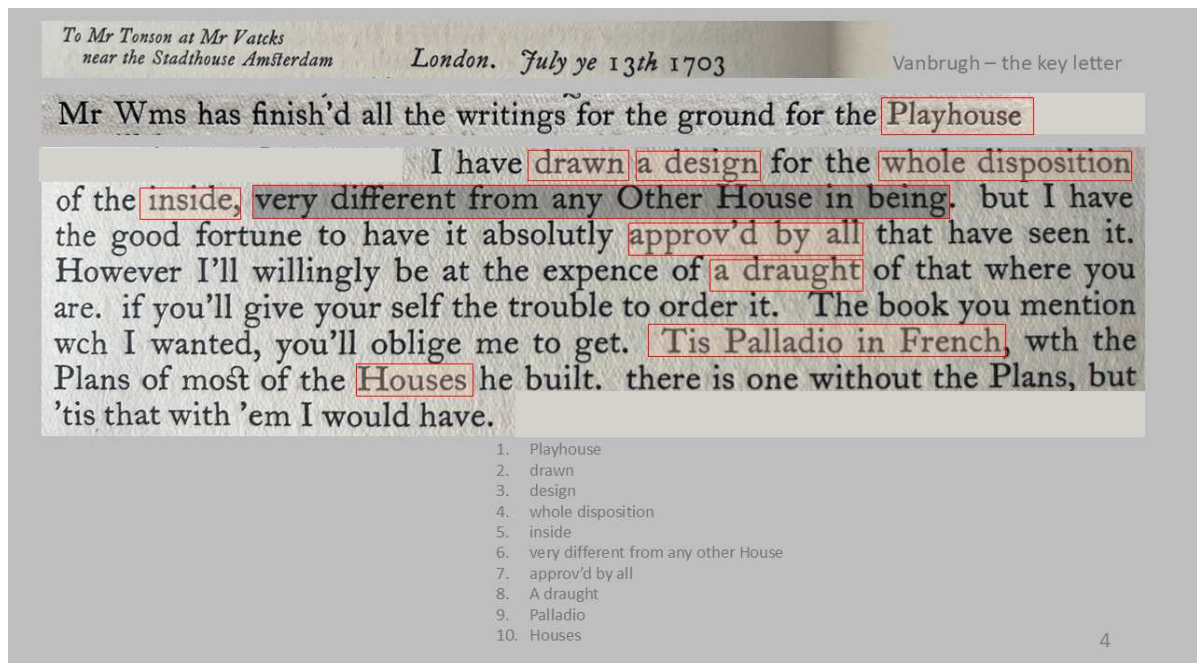
"the whole disposition"

In July 1703 John Vanbrugh wrote to his friend Jacob Tonson about the new theatre he had planned for the Haymarket, referring to it as "the Playhouse":

"I have drawn a design for the whole disposition of the inside, very different from any Other House in being..."

The words unfold as a scheme of thought more than they might appear to do at first sight: Playhouse. Drawn. Design. Whole disposition. Inside. Very different from any Other House. They lead us to ask: What precisely was Vanbrugh saying that he had created that was so different?

The Queen's Theatre opened in 1705, at the end of a century of English experimentation with scenic theatre, from Jones and Webb through Davenant, Killigrew and Wren — and behind them Palladio and the Italian tradition.



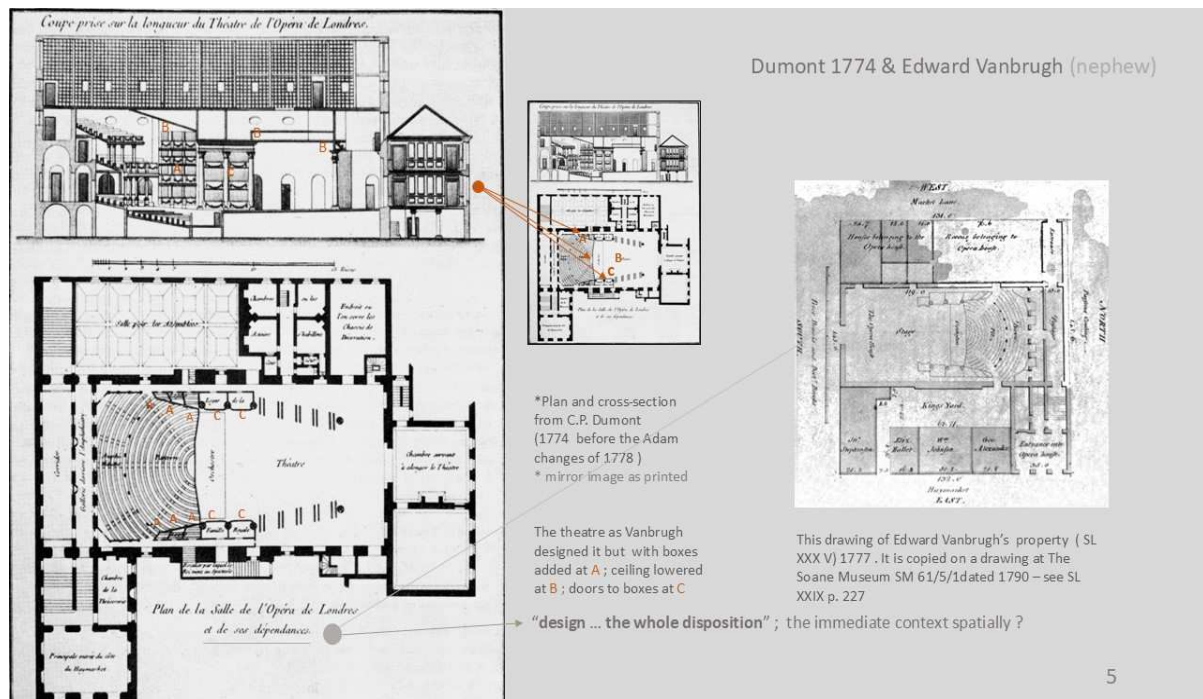
[Slide 4 from presentation— Vanbrugh to Tonson, July 1703]

No drawing of Vanbrugh's original Haymarket proposal is known to survive. Dumont, Edward Vanbrugh (his nephew) and Cibber nevertheless allow us to reconstruct something of the theatre as it opened in 1705.

What becomes evident is that the auditorium and stage array were not "very different from any Other House in being". Vanbrugh's design aligned remarkably closely with an older Palladian-English tradition and was of a scale similar to existing theatres. Graham Barlow's reconstruction suggests a more geometrically integrated conception, but the underlying species of theatre is quite recognisable.

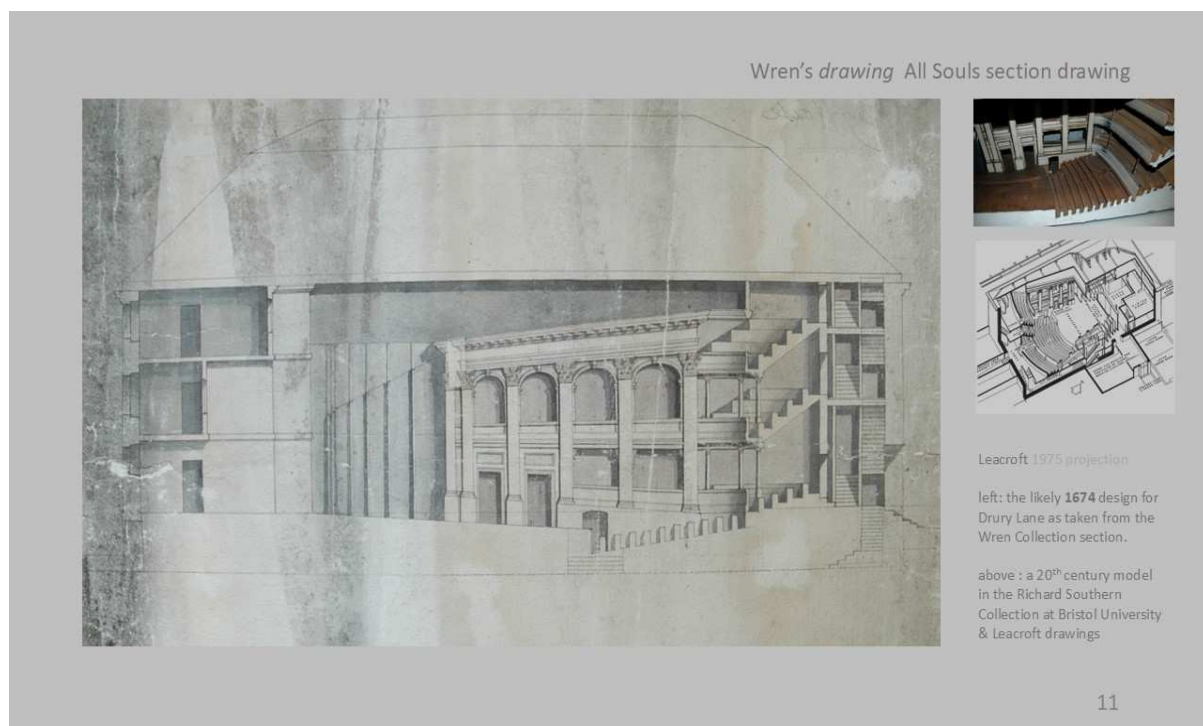
Beyond its clear genealogical identity as an English scenic "Playhouse" remains the fact that it did not work technically; to begin with, not at all well. Cibber records the problems: acoustics, sight-lines and the uncomfortable relationship of audience to stage. Vanbrugh's architectural choreography, even

within a known formula, had failed to resolve practical problems — problems Wren had addressed thirty years earlier in 1674 at Drury Lane — and with a radical solution.



[Slide 5 from presentation — Dumont / Edward Vanbrugh: reconstructing the 1705 theatre]

Wren's fan-shaped auditorium offers the essential counterpoint to the old line. It compressed the audience array as it faced the scenic stage and treated sight-lines, acoustics and performance as an integrated — and scientific — problem. Vanbrugh knew that theatre intimately, yet chose not to follow the same direction. His was a poetic conception concerned with Palladian notions, ideal geometry, balance and architectural effect.



[Slide 11 from presentation — Wren, Drury Lane 1674: the alternative English trajectory]

With this in mind I believe we have presumed that when Vanbrugh wrote of his design being “very different from any Other House in being”, he was referring principally to the theatre core itself — its auditorium and stage format.

But “**the whole** disposition of the inside” (my emphasis) suggests another possibility altogether.

Soldier, Playwright-Architect, Vanbrugh was in this case describing a building concept composed of many elements, and perhaps thinking of their disposition much as he might a military campaign, the plot of a play, the concept of an architect. The great country house — or Palace — offered another reference point: state rooms for grand — and royal — visitors, family rooms, service rooms, offices and courts; beyond them the farms and estate which supported the whole. Different elements, with different purposes, brought together within a larger architectural conception.

He was also talking to Tonson, his friend, and so inevitably thinking about his club, offering it spatial identity and political opportunity. I suggest he was being precise, and by the word “whole” he meant the arrangement at large.

There is an older echo here — albeit in inversion — of Henry Wotton. In 1624, in *The Elements of Architecture*, he described “Every Mans proper Mansion House and Home [as] the Theatre of his Hospitality” — indeed, “an Epitomie of the whole World”.

Seen in that light, the phrase describes not simply auditorium and stage, but Vanbrugh’s paradigm for the building as a whole — a setting containing different ingredients, relationships, opportunities — possibility.

The English version of an emerging new building type

Along the Haymarket frontage he constructed rental houses and a short entrance façade; behind them stood the great barn-like brick theatre enclosure; adjoining it at the rear was the relatively plain but important and grand long ‘Assembly Room’. There were other chambers and back-of-house facilities too. Behind the houses was the service access yard later called King’s Yard.

Multiple facilities within a theatre building were not a novelty. Venice already offered a larger urban culture of opera houses, ridotti, coffee houses, gaming and casini. But the Haymarket was not simply a London version of that institution. Vanbrugh was thinking of his club, his politics, his clients, of funding and future incomes — but over and above this he was projecting. Even the location depended on a gamble about the future.

After Vanbrugh withdrew from the enterprise in 1707, Heidegger in the 1720s made these ingredients operate in tandem with Handel’s music and opera events, and with somewhat greater financial success. The theatre at times operated as a whole site for masquerades — at times as an opera house.

The subsequent history demonstrates the opportunity latent in the original idea. Italianate boxes replaced galleries in 1778 and ancillary spaces were progressively absorbed into the operation.

Following the fire of 1789, Novosielski enlarged the theatre, and with successive alterations by others, the conglomeration as an urban block became an integrated metropolitan institution: the English Opera House.

drawing of the post-fire Novosielski design and subsequent architecture of the urban block – later architecture of ‘the outside’

Novosielski plan - eradicates Vanbrugh FOH rooms- Repton reinstates them on the Haymarket side

M. Novosielski scheme c. 1782-1790 following the fire of 1779 (left) enlarging the footprint and sitting over the Robert Adam layout of 1778. above is - I believe - the completed Novosielski scheme c. 1782-1790. both had clearly moved away from the Vanbrugh design and now had no galleries but Italianate boxes, and fan shaped parterre seats. see SL XXIX p.232 text (in Soane Museum collection) and images SL XXX

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[Slide 15 from presentation — Novosielski and the later Haymarket: from “whole disposition” to Opera House]

A final review

There is a final interest to this question, in Vanbrugh’s 1703 letter. Immediately after announcing his unique design, he asks Tonson, then in Amsterdam, to obtain a draught there — very probably of the Amsterdam Schouwburg theatre and in relation to its advanced technical stage. He then also asks for: “Palladio in French, wth the Plans of most of the Houses he built.”

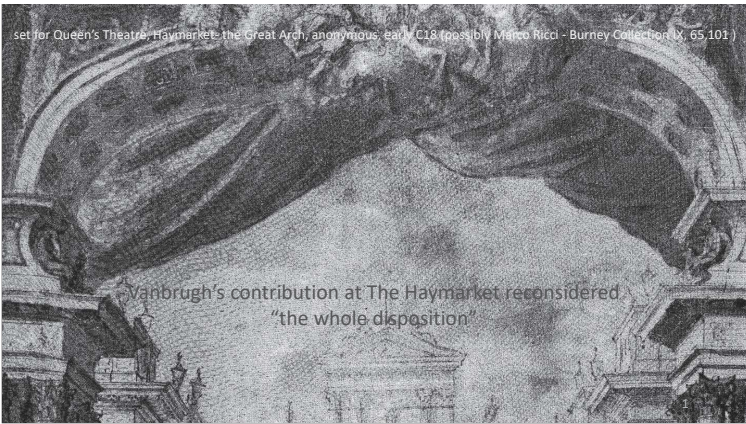
At the moment Vanbrugh confirmed he had designed a “whole disposition” unlike any other House, he was still seeking architectural information, still thinking about theatre – and “House”.

The Haymarket can therefore be understood both as the last great experiment in the English scenic theatre tradition and as something larger. It relied on the opportunity built into the idea; this enabled it to become the English model for an Italianate Opera House.

In conclusion — what was radical in Vanbrugh’s case was the breadth of opportunity and the assembly; Vanbrugh’s “whole disposition” — his *plot* as his own structure.

And perhaps, in giving architectural form to something of the social world of Tonson and his friends, potential clients, fellow members and subscribers, that notion of House/Mansion as institution also looks forward towards another emerging metropolitan building type of the eighteenth century: the members’ club — the Gentleman’s Club.

Nicholas Helm — Hand-out note accompanying a short talk on Vanbrugh’s Haymarket Theatre, Vanbrugh 300, Seaton Delaval Hall, 8 October 2026



To Mr Tonson at Mr Vauks
near the Stadthouse Amsterdamb London. July ye 13th 1703 Vanbrugh – the key letter

Mr Wms has finish'd all the writings for the ground for the Playhouse

I have drawn a design for the whole disposition of the inside, very different from any Other House in being, but I have the good fortune to have it absolutely approv'd by all that have seen it. However I'll willingly be at the expence of a draught of that where you are, if you'll give your self the trouble to order it. The book you mention wch I wanted, you'll oblige me to get. 'Tis Palladio in French, with the Plans of most of the Houses he built. there is one without the Plans, but 'tis that with 'em I would have.

1. Playhouse
2. drawn
3. design
4. whole disposition
5. inside
6. very different from any other House
7. approv'd by all
8. A draught
9. Palladio
10. Houses

4

Palladio & Scamozzi 1585

Teatro Olimpico Vicenza: Palladio study & below image as today

Palladio study of a Roman Theatre RIBA @ V&A (Box 6) 6th vol 20200110

2

Coupe prise sur la longueur du Theatre de l'Opéra de Londres.

Dumont 1774 & Edward Vanbrugh (nephew)

*Plan and cross-section from C.P. Dumont (1774 before the Adam changes of 1778)
* mirror image as printed

The theatre as Vanbrugh designed it but with boxes added at A; ceiling lowered at B; doors to boxes at C

*"design – the whole disposition"; the immediate context spatially?

This drawing of Edward Vanbrugh's property (Sl. XXX VI) 1777. It is copied on a drawing at the Soane Museum SM 61/5/1 dated 1790 – see Sl. XXXI p. 227

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Basil & Jones (not shown) 1605

Simon Basil's design and drawing: Inigo Jones was his accomplice for 'scenes and stage' (1605). A Serlian theatre - for Christchurch, Oxford

small drawing near left: cut and re-orientated drawing for easier reading

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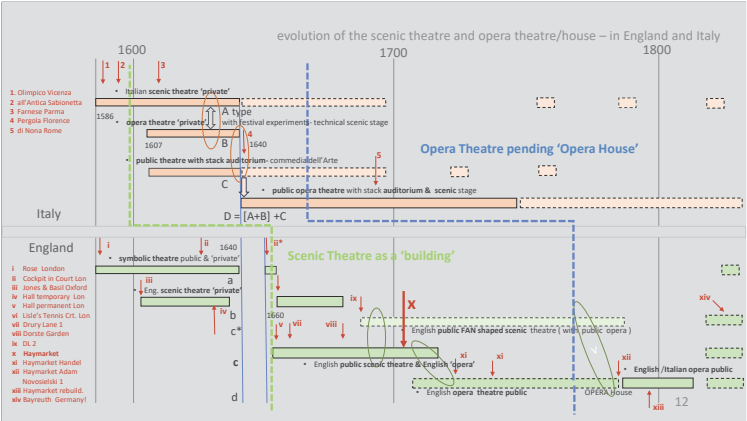
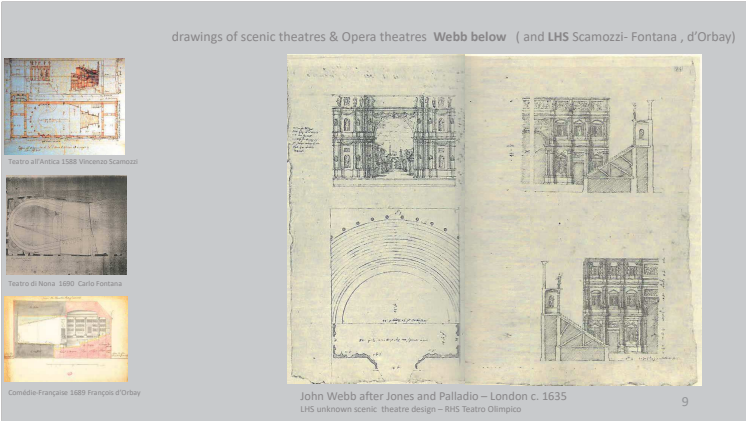
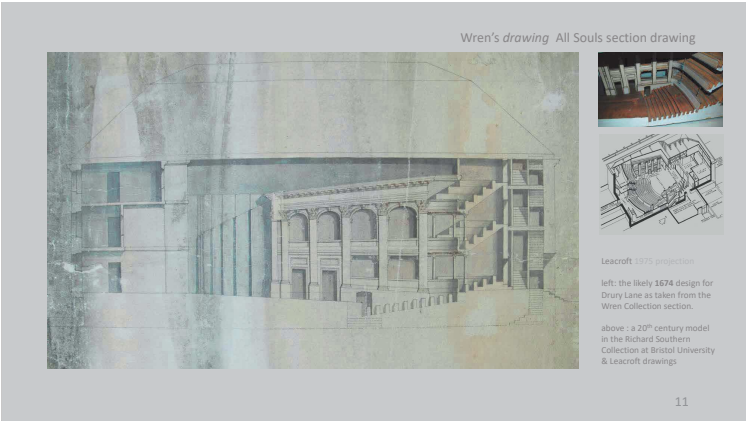
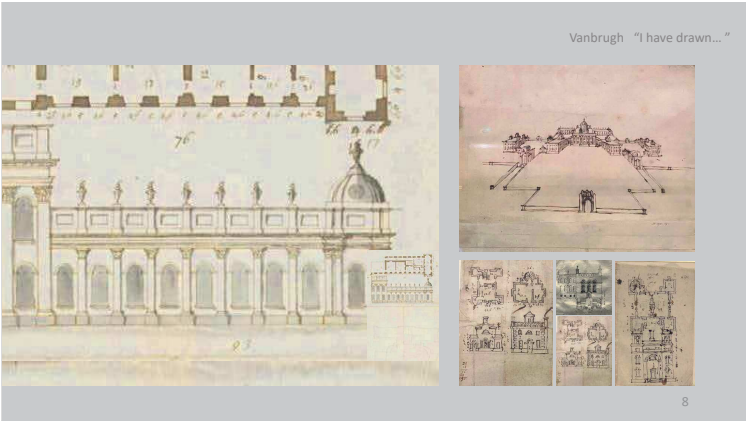
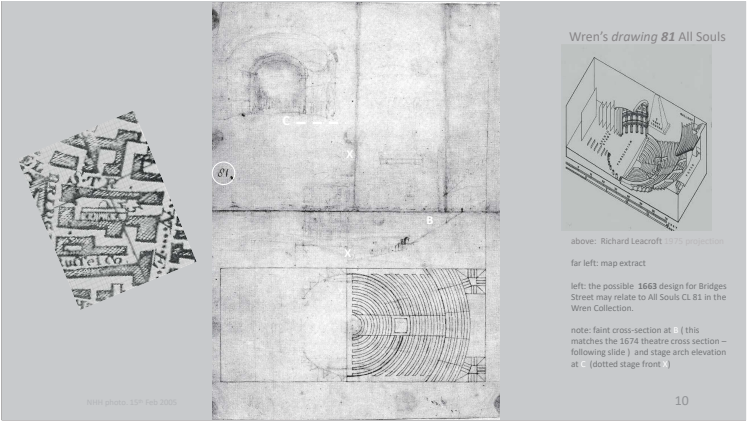
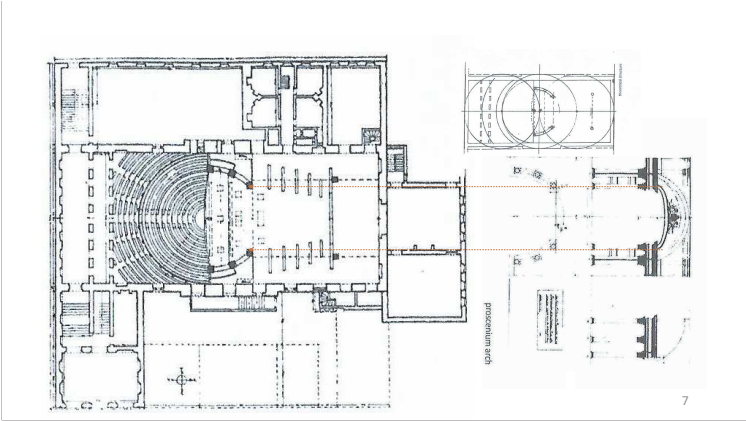
Colley Cibber's critical memoir published 1740 — experience & contemporary record from the outset

AN APOLOGY FOR THE LIFE OF MR. COLLEY CIBBER, COMEDIAN AND FAVORITE OF THE THEATRE ROYAL. WRITTEN BY HIMSELF. IN TWO VOLUMES. THE SECOND PART. A COMPLETE HISTORY OF THE STAGE FOR THE SPACE OF FORTY YEARS. A NEW EDITION, WITH MANY CRITICAL AND EXPLANATORY NOTES; BY EDMUND REELCHAMBERS. LONDON: PRINTED BY N. WINTER AND J. BARNARD, STATIONERS-HALL-COURT, 1740.

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Vanbrugh – the key letter 2

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[To the Earl of Manchester]

My Lord

I have rec'd your L^{ds}hips Letter of the 22th of June. I lost so Much Money by the Opera this Last Winter, that I was glad to get quit of it; And yet I don't doubt but Operas will Settle and thrive in London. The Occasion of the Loss was three things, One; that half the Season was past, before the Establishm^t: was made. And then, My L^d Cham^b: Upon a Supposition that there wou'd be Immence gain, Oblig'd us to Extravagant Allowances; An Other thing was, That the Towne having the Same Notion of the Profits, wou'd not come into Any Subscription; And the 3^d was, That tho' the Pitt and Boxes did very near as well as usuall the Gallery People (who hitherto had only throng'd out of Curiosity, not Tast) were weary of the Entertainment: so that Upon the Whole, there was barely Money to Pay the Performers & Other daily Charges; And for the Cloaths & Scenes they fell upon the Undertakers. I might Add a Fourth Reason which is. That I never cou'd look after it my Self, but was

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Vanbrugh – the key letter & "Palladio in French"

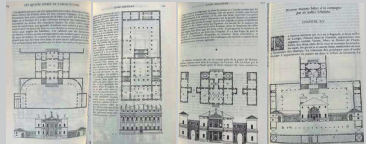


To Mr Tension at Mr Facks
near the Stadthouse Amsterdam

London. July ye 13th 1703

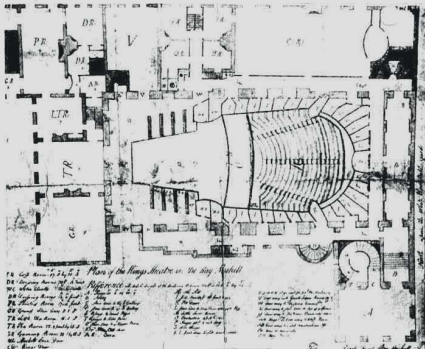
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16 end

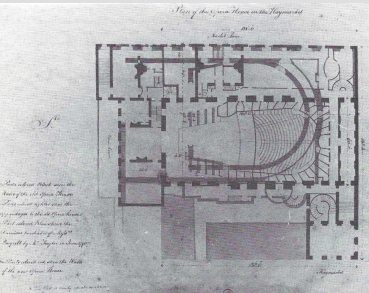
drawing of the pre-fire arrangement Adam or Novosielski alterations from c. 1780-89

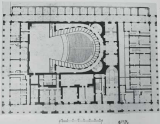


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Appendix slides further background & discussion period

drawing of the post -fire Novosielski design and subsequent architecture of the urban block – later architecture of 'the outside'




G.S. Repton 1822 with 1 (before) the Novosielski auditorium and stage and 2 (after) from 1822 SL XXX


A. Novosielski design for the Haymarket Theatre, 1790 (reinstated and stage restored) SL XXX

M. Novosielski scheme c. 1782-1790 following the fire of 1779 (left) enlarging the footprint and sitting over the Robert Adam layout of 1778. above is -I believe - the completed Novosielski scheme c. 1782 -1790. both had clearly moved away from the Vanbrugh design and now had no galleries but Italianate boxes, and fan shaped parterre seats. see SL XXX p.232 text (in Soane Museum collection) and images SL XXX

Novosielski plan - eradicates Vanbrugh FOH rooms - Repton reinstates them on the Haymarket side

Vanbrugh – theatre sizes

date	name	Size+*	impresario	context note / impresario / architect	model	
1	1630	Conquest in Court	56' x 58' octagon	King's Men	J Jones	Olimpico / Palladio
		Theatre Royal	11.5m x 17.5			Italianate hybrid scenae frons
2	1661	Lisle's Tennis court	39' x 75'	Dukes Men	J Webb involved	Italianate opera**
		Duke's Theatre	9m x 23	Dorset, Batherton		NS E1 Fit out frame only
3	1663	Bridges St / Drury Lane	39' x 90'	King's	C. Wren involved	Palladian Eng. Scenae***
		Theatre Royal (2)	12m x 27.5	Killegrew/ Rich		
4	1671	Dorset Garden	57' x 140' (147)	Dukes/then Kings	R. Hook, C.Wren involved?	Farnese Parma "v"
		Duke's Theatre (2)	17.5m x 43	Lady Dav. Batherton		Italianate scenic +
5	1674	Drury Lane	57' x 113'	King's M / Dukes	C. Wren	Wren's fan shape +
		Theatre Royal (2)		Killegrew/ Rich		NS E2
6	1705	Haymarket	60' x 130' (+10)	Queens	J. Vanbrugh	Palladian Eng. Scenae***
		Queens Theatre	18.3m x 39.5 + 9	Batherton, Vamb. Comp. Vamb. Comp.		Italian Opera hybrid***
						NS E3 as English Hybrid
		Webb's after Palladio		Not built but relevant	J Webb	Palladian Eng. Scenae***
	1654	Not scenic	88' x 38.5"			
			11.6m x 26.6			
1586	Olimpico		Academia	A. Palladio Scamozzi	Italian Palladian Scenae	NS I0
1590	Affonso's tabernacolo		Genoa	V. Scamozzi	Italian scenic #1	NS I1
1618/28	Farnese Piazza		Farnese	G. Alessi	Italian scenic #2	
1671/1695	Tor di Nona 2 nd		Queen Christina Sweden	C. Fontana	Italian Opera**	Tech & wider / NS I2

Vanbrugh Talk — People and Dates

Architectural, theatrical and institutional genealogy

Sebastiano Serlio (1475–c.1554)
Andrea Palladio (1508–1580)
Vincenzo Scamozzi (1548–1616)
Giovanni Battista Aleotti (1546–1636)
Simon Basil (c.1567–1615)
Inigo Jones (1573–1652)
William Davenant (1606–1668)
John Webb (1611–1672)
Thomas Killigrew (1612–c.1683)
Christina of Sweden (1626–1689)
Christopher Wren (1632–1723)
François d'Orbay (1634–1697)
Thomas Betterton (c.1635–1710)
Robert Hooke (1635–1703)
Carlo Fontana (1638–1714)
Jacob Tsonon (1655/56–1736)
Nicholas Hawksmoor (1661–1736)
John Vanbrugh (1664–1726)
Johann Jakob Heidegger (1666–1749)
William Congreve (1670–1729)
Colley Cibber (1671–1757)
James Thornhill (1675/76–1734)
Owen Swiny / Swiney (1676–1754)
George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)
Robert Adam (1728–1793)
Henry Holland (1745–1806) — Brooker's
James Wyatt (1746–1813) — Boodle's
Michael Novoseloh (c.1750–1795)
Humphry Repton (1752–1818)
Robert Smirke (1780–1867) — United Service Club
Charles Barry (1795–1860) — Travellers Club and Reform Club

Vanbrugh – people dates

Vanbrugh – Wren's progeny

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Wagner the Bayreuth
Festspielhaus of 1876