THEATRE PLANNERS / LIGHTING DESIGNERS
Schuler Shook

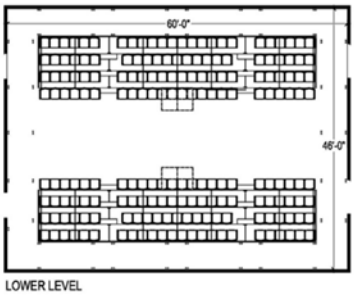
FLEXIBLE THEATRES: MEASURING THEIR VALUE

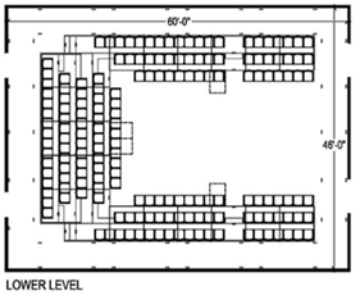
An Examination of Flexible Theatre Forms, Attributes and Uses

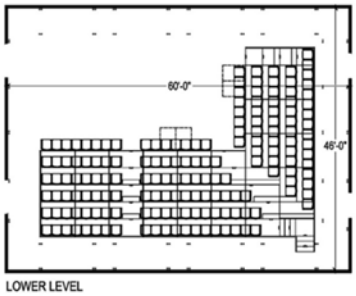
Flexible theatres offer a superior tool for teaching and performing theatre. Whether they are referred to as Black Box theatres, Studio Theatres, Lab Theatres, or Experimental Theatres, these spaces support a great range of productions and audience arrangements in a relatively compact and configurable area. They are malleable rooms that deliver an endless number of theatre shapes, allowing students to explore stage acting, directing, and design in all its forms.

This form has been a staple on college campuses, and many professional companies value the flexible theatre as a potent way to connect with their audiences. Civic organizations also use the form to support a wide array of uses.

Schuler Shook has provided theatre consulting for flexible theatres from the beginning of our 29-year practice. We recently researched flexible theatres in North America to confirm these values and to measure elements of their effectiveness.







Initial Assumptions

Flexible theatres all benefit from these common attributes:

- Sufficient area for seating and staging
- Sufficient volume to allow productions to flourish
- Access completely around the space, for true flexible use
- Seating systems that readily accommodate change-overs
- Theatre equipment systems (lighting, audio, and curtains) to support truly varied productions
- Storage to accommodate equipment that can often leave the theatre
- Control positions that see the large majority of the theatre area

Advanced flexible theatres may also provide:

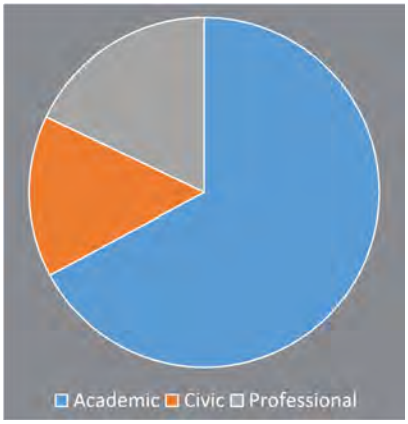
- One or two raised galleries for audiences and/or performers
- Stage rigging of some type, furthering the impact of productions
- “Working” floors and walls that allow attachment of production elements
- Details that give the space more “character,” but allow it to be malleable
- Mobile self-contained seating elements for increased flexibility and setup speed
- The benefits of daylighting, with systems to block the light completely during productions

With these attributes in mind, we engaged with a variety of theatre teachers, staff, and production managers to learn more about their use of the flexible form.

Researching the Uses

Through surveys and interviews, we gathered data from over 65 flexible theatres from Academic, Civic and Professional groups in the U.S. and Canada. We examined size, shape, and equipment setups. But our primary goal was to test for the real use of these spaces: How frequently were their shapes being changed? Could those changes be considered full-scale, or were they merely variants on a basic shape? And were the shape changes achievable with available labor, or were labor budgets and scheduling limiting the aspirations of their users?

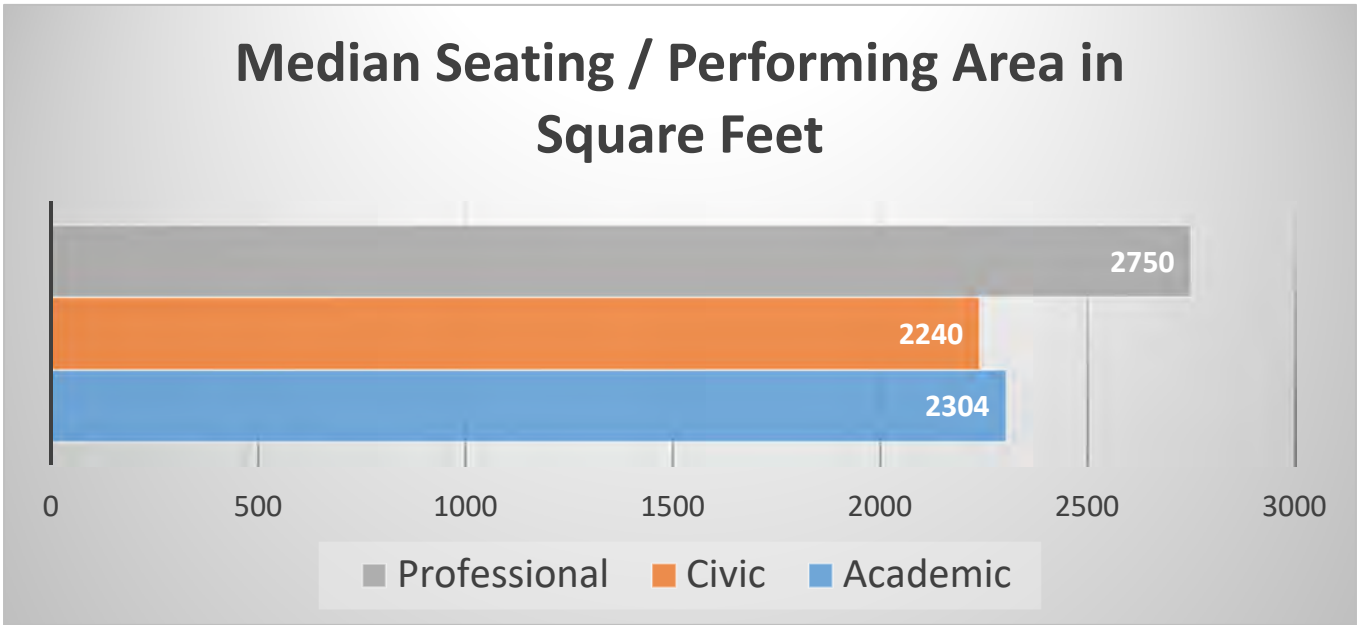
Locations of Theatres Providing Feedback



Categories of Theatres Providing Feedback

Shapes and Forms

We found an average theatre area slightly above 2,400 square feet. The theatres showed a two- to three-story volume, with an average height just under 20 feet to the stage lights.

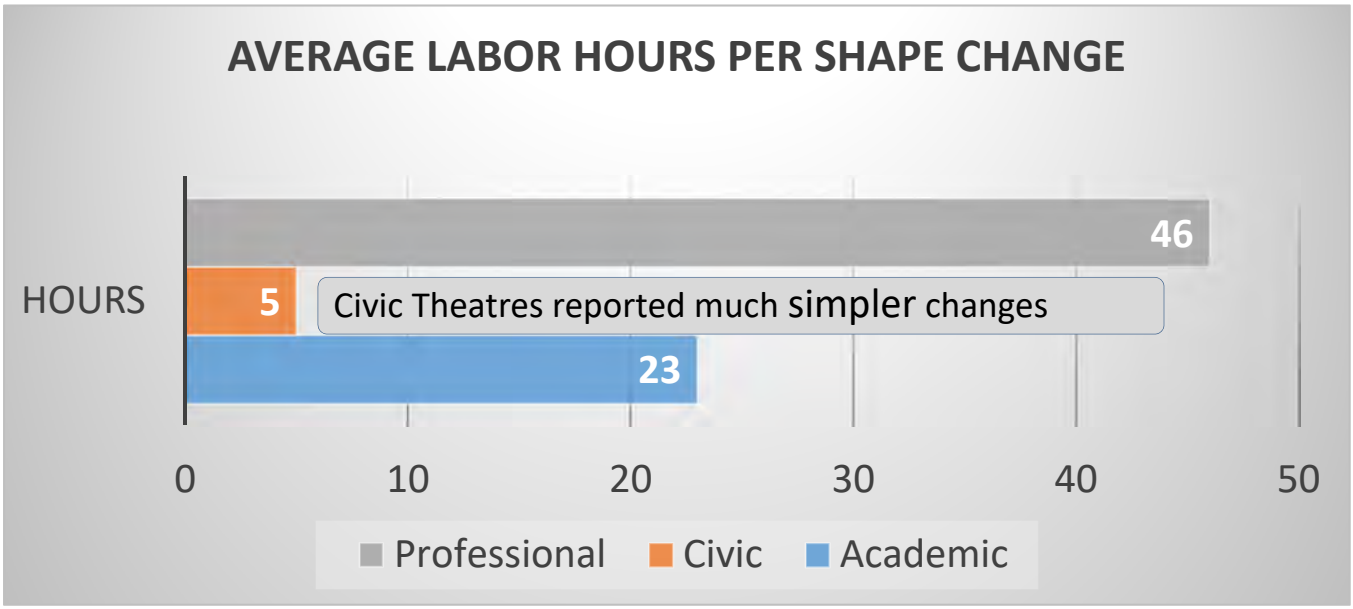


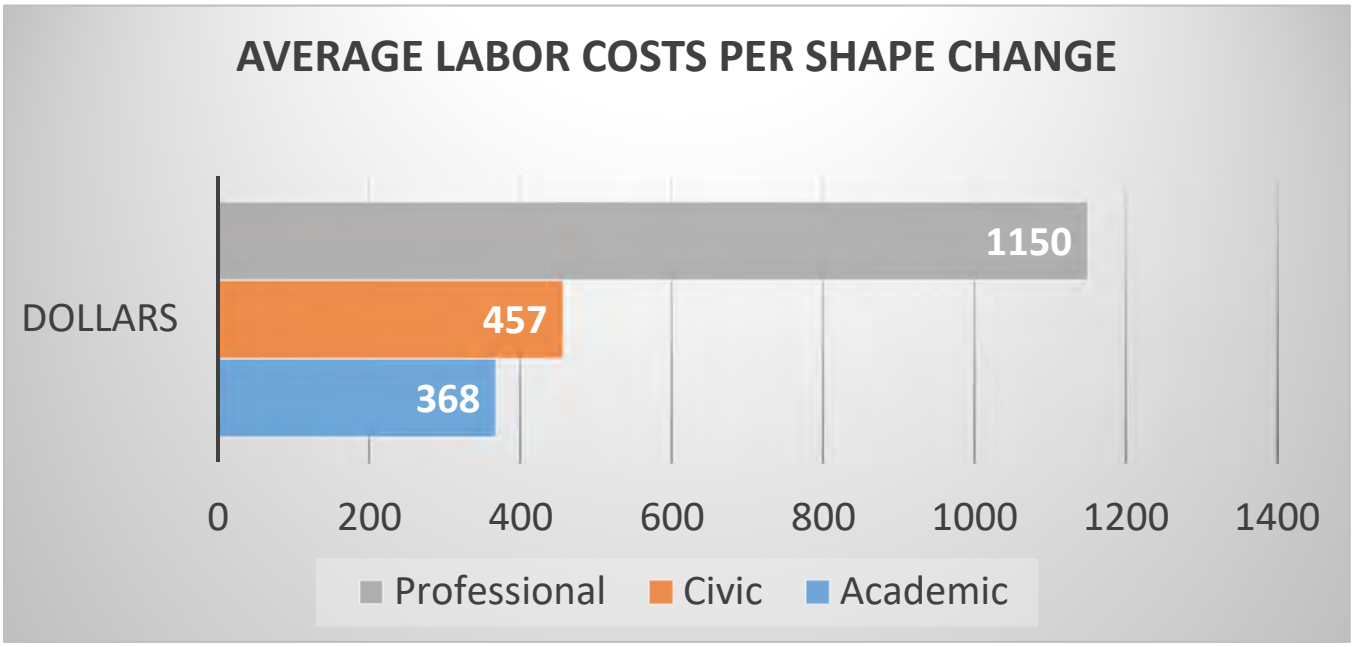
Most theatres employed a rectilinear shape – with a ratio of more than 1.2 to 1 between the adjacent sides.

Theatre Plan Aspect Ratios

Costs of Changing the Theatres

Transforming the theatre shapes proved to be modest in terms of labor hours and costs. Professional companies had the highest labor budgets. Civic users controlled hours and costs by limiting their shape changes. Academic theatres made use of paid student labor, which helped them control their overall costs. They did not include labor cost of staff supervision (typically included in faculty salaries).

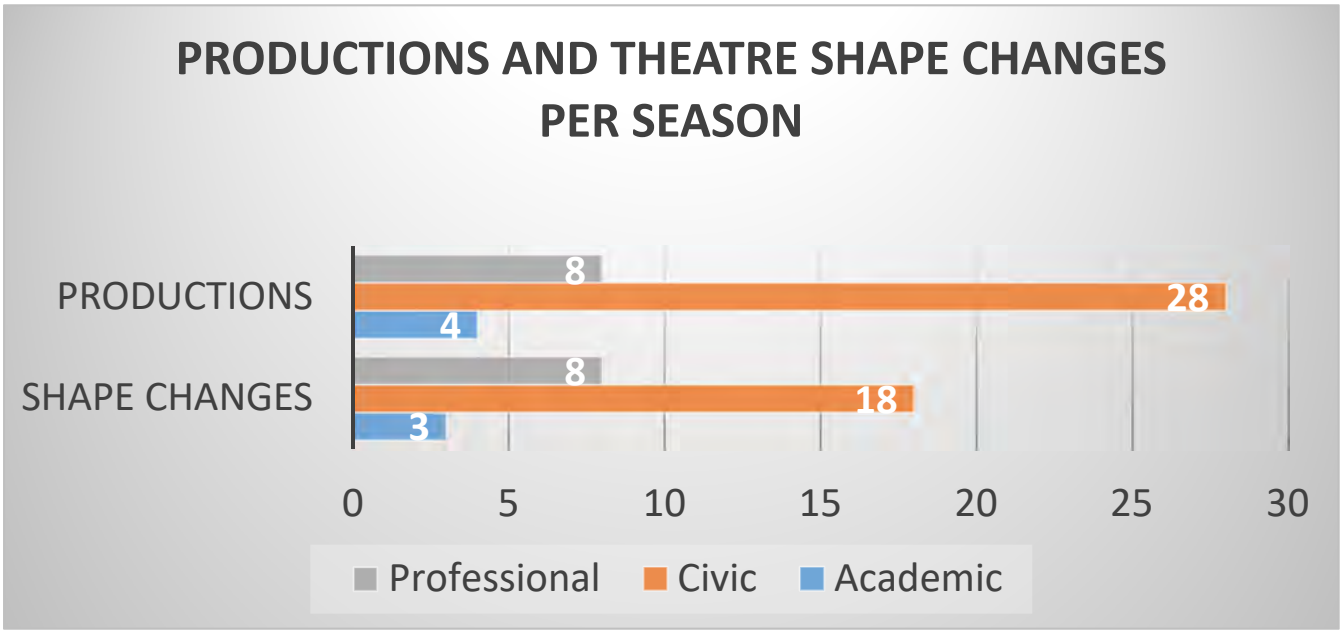




Complete Shape Changes

Finally, users are reporting robust schemes for changing their flexible theatres. We asked users to report the number of productions mounted in a season and to note whether their shape changes were an incremental variant of a layout (*e.g.*, a change from six rows of end-stage setup to 10 rows of an end-stage setup) or a complete change (*e.g.*, from end-stage to thrust stage).

We found that two-thirds of the shape changes are complete shape changes.



Conclusions

This research encourages us to further advocate for the flexible theatre form. The companies we studied are changing their theatre shapes frequently and are employing a high degree of shape change. They have found an adequate balance between production needs and available labor, realizing the benefits of the flexible relationship between the audience and the production.

We will further this research by examining a greater number of flexible theatres and by investigating the links between these theatres' capabilities and the complexity of productions mounted in them. We will detail our ongoing research in further publications.

This white paper represents a summary of key points made in the full-length report, “Flexible Theatres: Challenges, Opportunities, Feedback,” presented by Todd Hensley, ASTC, at the International Theatre Engineering and Architecture Conference, London, UK, 2014.