

The specificity of the circus space: the paradox of stable circuses

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Abstract

As a traditional nomadic trade and art that created ephemeral spectacles for millennia, the circus did not leave archaeological records. Like all oral cultures, the circus did not produce a history. We find only elusive traces of its presence through allusions in literary texts and judicial records. However, this situation changed dramatically toward the end of the 18th century when industrialization and urbanization provided nomadic entertainers with new economic opportunities to secure sizeable audiences with disposable income. From then on, buildings exclusively devoted to circus performances were built in all major cities in Europe. The circus became landed, at least in part, and started producing written and visual archives that document its urban existence as well as, incidentally, its performances and its artists. However, the structure of these new venues is markedly different from the spatial organization of mainstream urban architecture. They are, in many respects, at odds with the geometrical norms and create a different kind of space. I will show in this paper how circus architectures tended to create an experience of space that is disorienting and re-orienting with the result of creating a ritual environment adapted to the constraints and significance of the traditional skills and arts of the immemorial nomadic circus. The example of the Blackpool Tower Circus in England will illustrate my argument.

Introduction: What is the circus?

The circus is not defined only by the sum of the feats of strength, balance, and courage it displays in its spectacles. It also creates its own peculiar performing space that is a part of the unique experience it offers (Bouissac 2010: 11-20). The most basic ground acrobatics that allow a nomadic family to secure their vital income require a sufficient, albeit minimal, vacant place. The entertainers must first carve their performing space out of the common space of the village or the city they visit. Traditionally, they call the attention of the people who were engaged in their usual chores, by rolls of drums and typical actions that signal the beginning of a show. They cause a rupture in the fabric of everyday life, and interested people spontaneously form a circle around them (Bouissac 2022: 11). The pedestrian traffic is momentarily stopped and reorganized. The undifferentiated common space is suddenly transformed for a while into two different areas: the performance space that is distinct from its surroundings and the audience space that must not spill over into the performance space. This endows the performance space with a kind of taboo not to be transgressed.

The performance itself in this primal form is rather brief. It may consist of a contortionist, a juggling episode, a hand balancing feat, and conclude with a dancing bear or a goat balancing on a high pedestal, or any combinations of two of the above, depending on the willingness of the temporary audience to interrupt their activities, watch performers, and drop a coin in the drum or the hat. It may vary from location to location, time of the day and the week, and must arouse enough interest to justify a monetary donation, as small as it may be, that will cumulatively secure a living for the performing family without disturbing too much the good order of the otherwise uneventful life of villagers or city dwellers.

Larger family troupes and associates have traditionally produced more substantial performances by staking out a wider space, providing some seating facilities for their audience, and enclosing the place by a canvass or a wooden wall in order to demarcate the circus space from its surroundings, thus setting up itself as a special place with respect to the outside world and, at the same time, controlling the admission into this temporary enclosure through charging a more substantial fee.

In modern times, imposing tents have been used to take advantage of the presence of larger urban populations, at times staying a single day in the town. Always, mobility has been indeed the essence of the circus. Novelty and exoticism can quickly wear out. Performances of dreamlike experiences must vanish as fast as they have appeared in order to preserve their economic value for the performers. Familiarity with the relentless training of people and animals in the backstage would deprive the tricks of their magic. The irruption of colorful, olfactive, and sonorous information must be ephemeral to be effective.

The production of circus space

As a part of its brief and disruptive presence within urban space, the circus imposes on their audiences a different perception of space that plays an important part in the de-familiarizing experience that subtends its radical otherness. A city square, a market place, or a parking lot are common, all-purpose areas that can be crisscrossed at will or occupied for various transactions following their own civil rules. The temporary implantation of a travelling circus imposes upon this common space a differentiated spatial structure that overrides its previous functionalities. It creates what is called metaphorically a “heterotopy”, a spatial

“otherness” that obeys the circus’ own rules. It literally means a space out of place and comes from the ancient Greek *heteros* [other] and *topos* [place]. This term belongs to the medical vocabulary in which it refers to an organ that has developed at a place on the body plan that is at odds with the biological norm. It has been extended in contemporary criticism (e.g., Bakhtin 1981, Foucault 1986) to designate a representation of space that is not congruent with the spatial norms of a culture as they are embodied in urban layout and architectural design, thus providing a roadmap for orientation and expectation. A *heterotopy* creates a unusual kind of place, a spatial “otherness” defined by its own norms and requiring a peculiar behavior (Bouissac 2013).

In the traditional circus, a circular spatial and visual logic overtakes the quadrangular substrate of the modern urban space. As a circus irrupts among a sedentary population, three concentric zones are fenced off both physically and symbolically: the performing ring, the audience area, and the enveloping circus territory the whole structure being embedded more or less centrally within the city. The axis of this staked out area ignores the North-South reference and the beacons that allows local people to orient their displacements in their urban environment. The circus axis joins the audience entrance and exit to the artists’ entrance and exit, a polarity that does not necessarily coincides with the geomagnetic polarity. Once spectators have penetrated in this area through the admission gate, they have to find their way, or they are guided to their seat through a convoluted space that is differentiated by arbitrary constraints and prohibitions. A common experience felt by the audience is that from inside the circus one would probably need a compass to determine the North and South directions. The central circular arena, like the sacred ritual area in a temple, is reserved for the performing

artists and their animals, and is taboo for the audience. The various socio-economic conditions of the members of the audience are organized in mandatory concentric zones that the circus axis differentiates further into variously privileged spectators and others. In the traditional circus the backstage and the mobile living of the people are off-limit for the audience except under special invitations. The animals quarters are usually accessible for a fee at specified time slots but the smells that emanate from their presence saturate the ambient air, thus markedly transforming the quality of the spatial atmosphere. Within the circus's temporary compound access is strictly controlled. In general, intruders learn quickly that they are not welcome. A saying goes that circus kids learn how to fight before they can walk.

Nomadism, convoluted topology, and ephemerality are the defining properties of the circus trade and art. One may wonder, then, how is it possible to conceive of a circus as a permanent building? A stable circus is a contradiction in the terms or an oxymoron. However, the 19th century in Europe witnessed the relentless building of stone, steel, and wooden circuses in the center of major cities. Many of these buildings have preserved the circularity in their outside architecture and have reproduced the differentiated convoluted inner space. The frequent changes of programs they featured provided the nomadic and ephemeral qualities that are essential to the ancestral nature of the traditional circus.

Some buildings, though, have complied with the quadrangular norms of their urban setting by appearing as straight façades that blend with the surrounding architecture. In a modern city, space is money. Rotundity creates empty spandrels that must be put to commercial use. The Medrano Circus building in Paris was hidden by a row of shops] but they have found ways of marking the logic of the circus space as soon as the threshold is crossed.

Modern circus buildings manage to create the “heterotopy” that is the essence of the circus.

They disrupt the assumed continuum of a city spatial fabric.

Circus space involves detour and compulsory meanderings within its confines, and imposes its own timing, rhythms, and schedules for the duration of its presence. The time of the labyrinths or the mirror galleries is typical in this respect. All these features of travelling circuses and fairgrounds create a contrived universe defined by curves and convolutions, dead ends and entrapments. These properties tend to be implemented in the layout and design of stable circus buildings.

The Blackpool Tower Circus

The celebrated Blackpool Tower Circus offers a good example of the creation of a permanent structure that achieve, by chance or by design, the type of heterotopic space that is specific to the circus. Blackpool was a small seafront village when, in the late 18th century, it progressively became the first seashore resort catering to the working class of North-Western England at a time of intense industrialization. Families used to spend a week-long summer vacation there and the place was quickly transformed into a kind of urban fairground providing popular entertainment for all ages (Walton 1998). Circuses pitched their tents there among other booths and merry-go-rounds. The Blackpool Tower was a relatively late addition, constructed in 1894 on the edge of the city facing the sea (Toulmin 2011). It is an ostentatious monument, like the Eiffel Tower in Paris, a gratuitous technological display of bold engineering, an emblem of the new Iron Age, as well as a money-making enterprise. The tower emerges from a huge undistinguished building like an oversized beacon on top of it. Seafront lots are too

precious in Blackpool for wasting this space on grand perspective. The whole compound is packed with halls and rooms of various sizes and purposes, inspired by industrial profitability. The entrances are very close to the sidewalk. There is no intimidating threshold to cross. Once inside, an oversized, disproportionate, and majestic flight of stairs leads to the first floor on the left, then to a buffer waiting room where even a small crowd saturates the available space. Today, visitors who have purchased admission tickets are made to wait for a while in this place. They can contemplate the walls adorned with historical posters of the famous circus acts that have been featured during over a century of past programs. When spectators are let in, they enter the circus from the upper level and have to walk around and down to the rows of seats to find their place. This huge inner space is nestled within the four legs of the tower. Decorated in red with gilded iron cast pillars, this inner space cannot be intuitively related to the drab outside appearance of the whole building from which it seems to be disconnected both physically and symbolically. Circus was then considered a major cultural asset. Historian Brenda Assael (2005) has documented the way in which circus entrepreneurs in the Victorian era efficiently promoted the circus as an educational institution. It is thus hardly surprising that the decoration, completed in 1899, is the work of the famous British theatre architect and decorator, Frank Matcham (Walker 1980; Wilmore 2008). The circus inner space looks and feels like a temple or a pagoda, all the more surprising as it does not relate to its external appearance. It is a self-contained place with its own logic, structure, and atmosphere, seemingly cut-off from, and nested within the outside world. When spectators are asked in which direction is the seafront, as I often did with the person seated next to me, they look puzzled, hesitate, and confess that they are unable to decide.

At the end of the performance, the ring floor automatically sinks and fills with water for the aquatic theme of the last act followed by a display of fountains that concludes the show. The dazzled audience is let out of the premises through a maze of dimly lit aquariums with full walls of bluish water and placid fishes, that is one of the exhibitions featured in the Tower . Going down more convoluted stairs to reach the street level it is hard to predict on which side of the building the exit is going to be because the experience of the circus's inner space has been overwhelming and disorienting. This might be considered to be an extreme case of experiencing a *heterotopia*. However, this typical disorienting effect can be observed in many stable circus buildings, notably those that, from outside, appear to conform to the rectangular norms of the urban architecture. But, even for those buildings whose front is curved, once the spectators step inside, they are confronted with a different logic of mapping organization that replicates the spatial experience of the nomadic circuses.

It is interesting to note that the imposition of differences, both physical and symbolic, on the continuum of space by the architectural logic of the circus is in part similar to the foundation of temples in most religions in the world as far as the qualitative determination of two distinct areas are concerned whatever their actual geometry may be. Places of worship and sacrifices also create a *heterotopia* endowed with their own cosmology embedded within their urban environment. The paradigmatic example is the typical Roman temple in antiquity. At its foundation, the priests first delimited the area of the temple then separated the sacred space where sacrifices were to be performed (the *fanum* [shrine]) from the profane space (*pro – fanum* [profane]) where the attendees participate to the rituals from a distance. There were also some off-limit backstage space from which the officiants emerged to perform their rituals

and some front plaza transitioning from the common space to the *profanum*. The same structure can be observed in traditional Catholic churches and in Hindu temples.

The challenge of building stable circuses was, and still is, to bend and twist quadrangular architecture to create the concentric kind of inner space in which the rituals of circus can be performed with all their transformative powers .

Concluding remarks

In summary, the primal circus space as it is created in open space is grounded in antinomies with respect to civil or common space. Once the algorithms, that is, the tacit rules or explicit instructions specifying how to create such a specific spatial structure, are transferred to the construction of a stable edifice within a city, the symbolic matrix of circus space must be adjusted and harmonized with its surroundings without losing its specificity. It must negotiate some relevant contradictions with respect to architectural norms.

First, there is a demographic density challenge: in normal city life, the optimal relationship of the population to available space allows free circulation and freedom of movement. This is denied by the temporary compacting of maximum audiences in minimum space in which spectators have to be frozen in place for a duration of time like in a church or temple.

Secondly, the circus space must be allowed to both show and hide itself. It must visually tease the potential audience but not fully disclose too much of its wonders. It must also balance what it displays with what it hides. It must keep a part of its workings opaque.

Thirdly, the logic of circular architecture combined with the above constraints clashes with the quadrangular logic of modern urban norms. The circle of yurts, huts, or tents has to be forced into the universal square of the modern built environment. This latter constraint accounts for the strong contrast between the flat and square front of some circus buildings, as in Blackpool, for instance, and the convoluted inner space that defamiliarizes, like a maze, the usual perception of common civil space and the way we orient ourselves in our familiar geo-cultural space.

Like a ritual initiation, the audience has to loose itself in a labyrinthian space before reaching the inner shrine to experience the ritual power of the immemorial circus and the human fusion it achieves.

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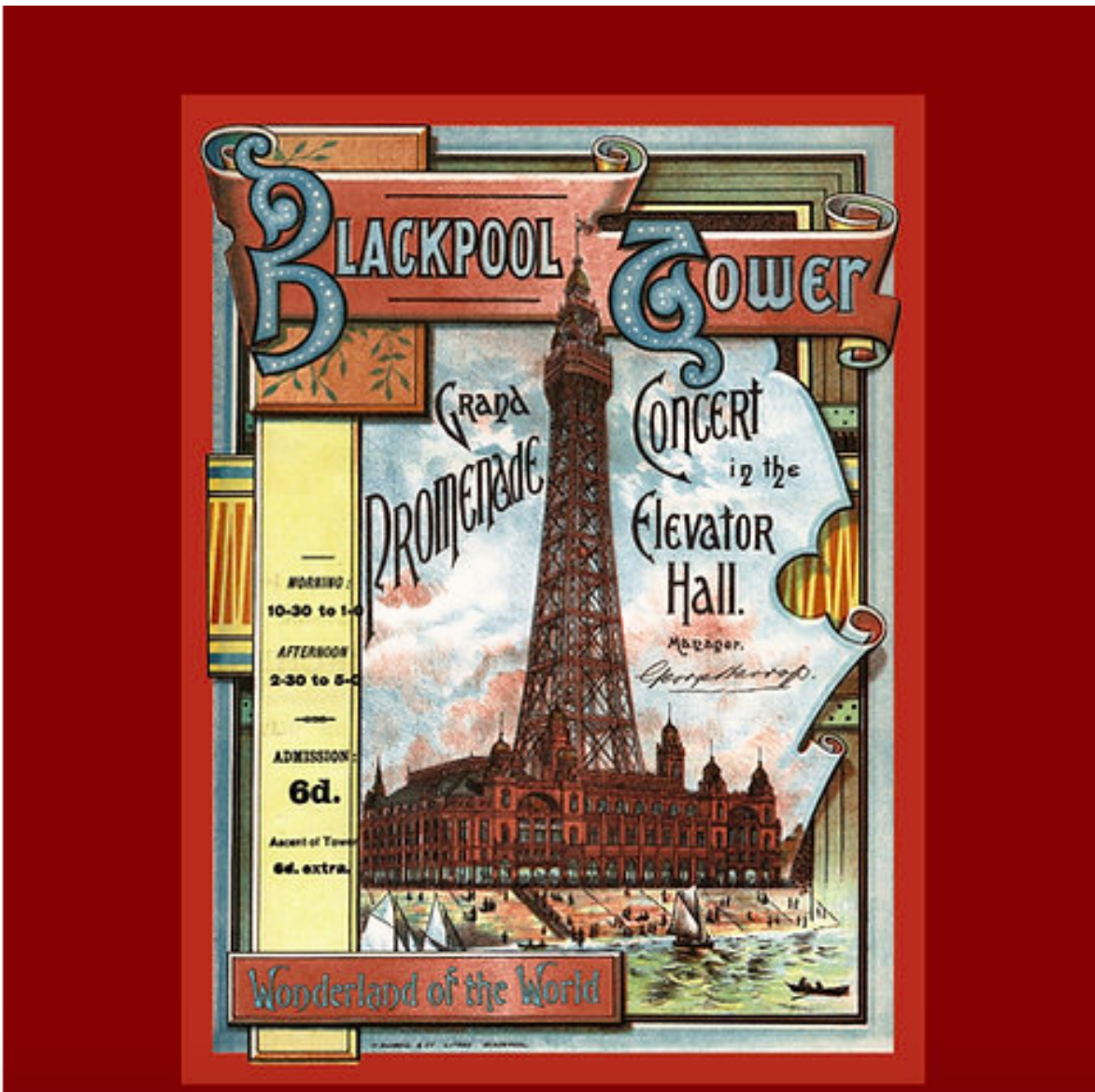


Figure 1. The cover of Vanessa Toulmin's book features a view of the Blackpool Tower as it is perceived from the nearby North Pier.

Original Circus 1894

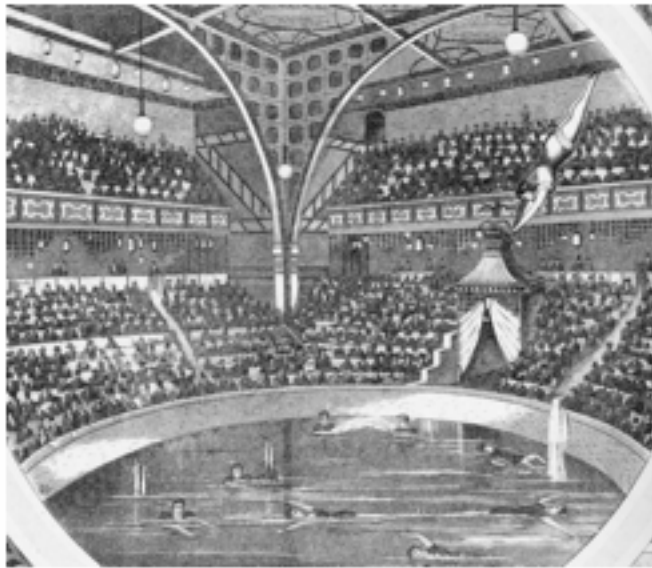


Figure 2. Inside the Blackpool Tower Circus before it was decorated by Frank Matcham.

Source: Vanessa Toulmin.



Figure 3. The Blackpool Tower Circus in 1899.

Source: Vanessa Toulmin.



Figure 4. The Blackpool Tower Circus today.

Source: Vanessa Toulmin.