

# European and Slovak Examples of Pop-up Theaters

## Alternative Theaters Across Europe

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### ABSTRACT

A large group of emerging cultural spaces abroad and in Slovakia has the adjective independent. In this context, this means that they were not established by public institution and are looking for sustainable forms of funding themselves, operating on grants and volunteering system. The limited amount of funding also determined the architecture that covers such cultural centers. Historic ruins, neglected public spaces, abandoned industrial buildings are common factors that appear throughout Europe. Is there a difference between Slovak alternative and its foreign counterparts, or is it a global phenomenon with identical characteristics? And can it be established at all based on such a small sample as the independent cultural and theater centers are?

### KEYWORDS

theater, Europe, Slovakia, cultural, space

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The original intention of the research was to select three foreign and three Slovak examples of alternative theaters or stage spaces, submit them to a comparative analysis and to draw a conclusion. At the beginning of the research, many questions arose that negated the originally chosen method. What are the alternative theater spaces and from what point of view will we review the objects in order to avoid incorrect conclusions? How to select a sample of objects to compare? In the beginning, there was a need to define a group of alternative theater spaces, which is a relatively broad term, to divide them into subgroups according to various criteria and to narrow our scope to a specific type of buildings.

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Let us answer the question of what alternative theater spaces are and how we understand them in this research. An alternative theater space, from an architectural point of view, is a space that is mostly used for theatrical performances, its alternative lies in the experimental design that does not rely on established practices, or, from a social point of view, when we take into account its program and funding. As architecture is a multidisciplinary field, we could not exclude this view, which complements the overall picture.

After reassessing the original goals, the text builds on three examples of temporary theater buildings from abroad and on one domestic example of architecture that represents permanent buildings. This paper clarifies the situation of alternative theater spaces in Europe, presents its own categorization, or rather a division of this up until today not sufficiently mapped group, and seeks an explanation and the problem as well. By analyzing different types of alternative theaters in the relation of Slovak versus foreign, where there was always an equivalent to foreign building present in Slovakia, we found that in the category of temporality, this opposition was absent. From this finding, research questions were formulated. Can we find an answer why there is an absence of temporary theater buildings in Slovakia? And how could pop-up theaters be a valuable part of current architecture and urbanism?

## 2. CATEGORIZATION

Before we continue, we should clarify the concept of a building from the point of view of Slovak legislation. A building is defined by the Building Act as: "... a building structure built by construction works with building products, which is firmly connected to the ground or whose installation requires modification of the base ..." (Zákon č. 50/1976).

Based on this definition, some of our chosen theatrical buildings are buildings-non-buildings. Also, another division that would lead to the inclusion of our examples in a certain group is questionable. We can go one step further and classify them according to function, and thus among the "buildings for culture and public entertainment, for museums, libraries and galleries". Theaters can be further divided into three basic groups, as described by Jan Dvořák in his publication *AMU = DAMU + FAMU + HAMU, Chapters on the topic of theater realization*. Namely:

- theater as a public service,
- theater as a private enterprise,
- theater as an independent non-profit organization. (Dvořák 2005. 439–440)

This division goes further into the issue and brings us closer to the diversity of theater spaces based on their functioning. We need to create two more categories for our comparison. The category of temporality, and thus distinguishing between temporary and permanent buildings, and the category that will discuss the type of execution of the project, for example, in the form of reconstruction, extension to an existing building, new construction, etc.

The selected categories we focus on already have revealed that it will not be traditional theaters we will be comparing. Contemporary alternative theater buildings are our chosen subjects which we will submit to comparative analysis. The word contemporary is added to determine the time period of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on which we focus. Alternative is not something new, experiments in architecture appear regularly, but nowadays it seems as if they are taking up a major position, compared to the traditional forms of architecture and that is why our scope was narrowed on the last 20 years.



### 3. CASE STUDIES

After determining the basic division of theaters for our research and defining the terms, it is possible to make a narrow selection of case studies. In alternative theaters, we can think about their alternative nature from three perspectives, as stated earlier. Type of architecture, financing, and temporality. The reference group was quite numerous, the examples differed in all three categories, but for this article we reduced the sample in terms of architecture to new buildings and in terms of duration to temporary buildings. In Slovakia there was no distinctive temporary building for theatrical purposes and, therefore, from our background we chose a permanent building. The analysis of case studies is focused on determining the relationship between the invariant category of architecture, and two variables: financing, and duration of building.

Despite the fact that we no longer paid attention to them, it is also worth mentioning the buildings excluded from this narrow selection, most of them found in a register gathered by Vít Pokorný and Vojtěch Poláček in their book *Recycled Theater* (Pokorný–Poláček 2015). In England, the system of pop-up theater spaces is widespread, and many projects correspond to this. Among the exceptional ones there is Theater on the Fly from the Assemble group, which functioned as a summer festival theater in the city of Chichester or the Shed by Haworth Tompkins, which was located in central London. Khor I from the TAAT workshop, which stands on the border between theater architecture and visual art, also belongs to the temporary experimental theater spaces from abroad. In this Dutch experiment, which was built in the city of Venlo, the theater takes place without actors and without guidance, the actor is every single visitor who enters this almost meditative pavilion. From permanent foreign examples, we also focused on theaters where independence is manifested in the program and in financing rather than in the form of architecture. One of these examples is Maltfabriken (Denmark), the cultural space created by conversion. This type of cultural center, in which theater space is usually present, spreads through Europe, including Slovakia, in the form of Záhrada – centrum nezávislej kultúry in Banská Bystrica, and the Czech Moving station based at the railway station in Pilsen. These types are covered by the European non-profit organization Trans Europe Halles, which organizes various meetings where members can share experience, or even offers legal advice ([www.teh.net](http://www.teh.net)).

By analyzing these examples, we can notice two predominant types of alternative theaters. Permanent buildings created by the conversion of buildings with the previous other function, financially independent, operating through donations, grants, with the help of volunteers, or many times from renting their own premises and temporary buildings using architectural innovation as additional space to non-temporary theaters on various occasions or as an activator of neglected areas. Of course, among these most numerous types there are a number of hybrids that are more or less close to the types already mentioned.

#### 3.1. NO99 Straw Theater (EST)

The original building of the NO99 (*Fig. 1*) straw theater was designed and built in 2011 by architects from the Salto studio, as a temporary pavilion for the NO99 theater, to celebrate Tallinn as the European City of Culture 2011 (Frearson 2011). The temporary theater is located in the city center on the former top of Skoone bastion, one of the best-preserved baroque fortifications in Tallinn. At the time of construction, the area on which the unique public hay building stood was





Figure 1. Siplane, Martin: NO99 Straw theater. 2011.

Available at: <https://salto.ee/projects/no99-straw-theatre/> (Accessed 25 October 2020).

closed and neglected for a long time. In this context, the straw theater was an attempt to regain awareness of the temporary activation of the territory and to test its potential for future development. All this was done with regard to the historical layers of the site, which date from the Baroque period, through the Soviet era of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

The dramatic appearance of the building consists of an installation of the main volume at the top of the hill, which we reach by a covered staircase with a rugged roof, which is in contrast to the uncompromising form of the theater hall. It is also impossible to escape the effect of uncovered bales of straw sprayed in black, which, due to the absence of surface treatment, create an unusual structure in public urban space. An interesting and even experimental construction was made of straw bales reinforced with steel beams.

In terms of universal design, this building cannot serve as a model, from this point of view it is no longer extraordinary. The main entrance is formed by the original staircase. This is based on a sensitive approach on the site, but it forms an impassable barrier for the disabled. In this case, quid pro quo was put into effect and architects preferred an attractive concept to universality.

The theater was a temporary building with an expiration date of six months, created to host well-known theater ensembles from Estonia and abroad during the summer season from May to October. The project was commissioned by the well-known Estonian Theater NO99, after which the building was named. In the background, we can notice the motivation as mainly cultural and social. Also, according to the words of the artistic director of the NO99 theater Tiit Ojasoo: "We came to Skoone, built a building, brought children to play here, brought artists to create and exhibit art, and when autumn comes, we pack our things again, dismantle the straw theater and return to our normal lives."



### 3.2. Folly for a Flyover (ENG)

In 2011, the multidisciplinary team Assemble created a unique public space under the motorway in the city of London (Fig. 2), which was unused and neglected before this intervention (Frearson 2011). It was built by a team of volunteers in less than a month using recycled and donated materials. The structure of the imaginary “house that refused to surrender” consists of clay and wooden bricks, supported by a system of scaffolding. Complemented by a rich public space in contact with the water and the quay pier, from which it was possible to take trips to the nearby Olympic complex, it offered active urban space for six weeks. When project Folly was coming to an end, London Legacy Development invested in a permanent infrastructure that allowed the area to continue to function as a public space, designed by Muf architecture / art.

Folly was designed as a huge kit that allowed people with any level of building skills to get involved in the construction. The walls were woven like curtains from bricks supported on the inside by a steel scaffolding. At the end of the summer, it was unraveled and used to make new play or planting equipment for a nearby elementary school.

In this case accessibility is better. The main functions are located on the first floor, such as cinema, theater or sitting by the water, but you can still see some flaws in the upper additional level, which is accessible only by stairs, but allows view from another angle, which should be enabled for everybody.

This project was commissioned by the group Create London as part of the Create festival. In a short time, it hosted an extensive program consisting of cinemas, theater and performances. The program was created and administered by the Assemble in conjunction with the Barbican



Figure 2. Vintiner, David: Folly For a Flyover. 2011.

Available at: <https://assemblestudio.co.uk/projects/folly-for-a-flyover> (Accessed 25 October 2020).

Center and many local organizations and businesses. The total cost of the realization was GBP 40,000, covered by various grants, but the resulting profit from the action was only GBP 500. From this ratio it can be seen that the interest is far from financial, the benefit cannot be defined through the economic efficiency of the facility, the benefit is over-personal, cultural, with the aim to spread art, community values and activate the environment.

In this second example, we can notice the category of duration. From the point of view of temporality, we can divide temporary buildings into two groups, seasonal and festival. Festival types are tied to a certain event and usually last 1–8 weeks, whereas seasonal temporary buildings are erected for the summer or winter season.

### 3.3. Bouda III (CZ)

The first Bouda was built in 2003 by set designer Petr Malásek at Ovocný trh and legitimized by the context of the Prague Quadrennial. A year later, Bouda was designed by another set designer, the director of the National Theater, Daniel Dvořák. This one was already standing on the piazza behind the historic building of the National Theater in Prague. After a one-year break in 2006, Bouda returned to the very same spot. We are talking about Bouda III (*Fig. 3*) by the architect Luboš Svoboda, with a higher share of architecture, in a more universal form, to serve all ensembles of the National Theater and with a slightly higher comfort (Bouda III 2006). From 1 to 27 June, for almost four weeks, the opera of the National Theater performed Lúkáš Hurdík's multi-genre work "The Angels", a stage poem by Iva Klestilová's "Heroes" and a ballet performance called "Tanec v Boude".

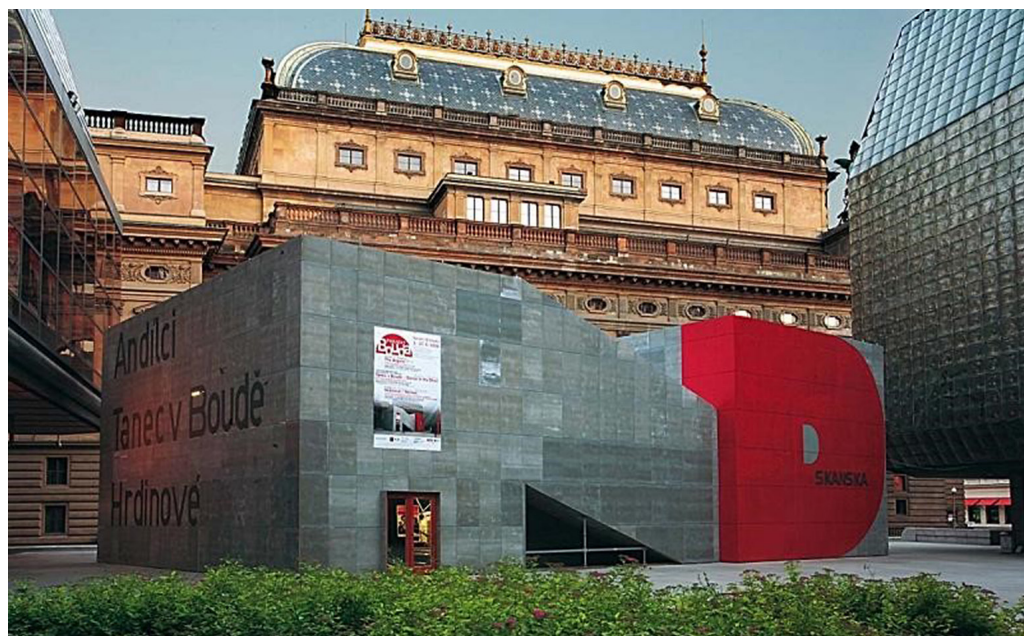


Figure 3. Hoffelner, Petr: Bouda III. 2008.

Available at: <https://www.stavbaweb.cz/bouda-iii-3454/clanek.html> (Accessed 25 October 2020).

The shape of the building reflects interior function and at the same time, in an architectural form, the initials ND meet the requirement for temporary buildings as attractors, certain billboards that are intended to attract a passing visitor. The chosen form also helps disadvantaged people and combined with the giant font on the front wall it easily guides them inside. Thanks to the perfect craftsmanship, Cetris boards proved to be an ideal material that does not deny the temporality of the building, but also does not acknowledge the permanent nature of the architecture. Summer Theater Bouda III had dimensions of  $16 \times 23$  meters and was hiding an  $8 \times 12$ -meter stage.

Project Bouda III took place under the auspices of the mayor of Prague 1, Vladimír Vihan, and the client was the National Theater. The construction costs were CZK 1,000,000 (approximately EUR 36,000), which were paid by the sponsor. As the space was used for theatrical productions that did not fit very well into the historic building and functioned as a banner of media attention, the stimuli for its creation were more of a marketing and artistic nature than social and ecological.

This example is the only one that stands out from the point of view of the client, which was the National Theater in Prague – undoubtedly a state institution. The alternative still lies in the architecture of a temporary building, neither ordinary nor common, hosting bold theatrical performances, as opposed to a historic building from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3.4. Žilina Záriečie Stanica S2 (SK)

In 2009, a new space for contemporary art and other events was built in Žilina, bearing the name S2 (Fig. 4), and the Culture Center Stanica doubled its capacity. The construction involved a group of members of the Stanica, which includes artists, designers, architects, and a wide field of volunteers. Together with the main consultant, the Dutch straw house architect Tom Rijven, they planned the project for about a year and in about 4 months they successfully completed the construction (Szalay 2010). The baptism took place during a meeting of the Trans Europe Halles organization, of which the Culture Center Stanica is a member.

The shell and the outer structure consist of beer crates Černá hora tied vertically by a kilometer of threaded rods and horizontally by two wreaths of OSB boards. From the inside, the walls are made of straw bales fastened between ordinary boards according to the method of the already mentioned Dutch builder, Tom Rijven. On them, a mixed clay plaster was applied by hand during the workshop led by Rijven. All this was built under the natural roof created by the Rondel overpass, but without the building being structurally connected to the flyover. This building-non-building has no foundations, it lies on a gravel base with old wooden railway sleepers. The entrance consists of an old shipping container.

The last example suits the principles of universal design the most, whether from the perspective of a visually or physically disabled person. With a strong idea to create a space where no one will be singled out, a space for all, we can speculate whether the barrier-free and visual simplicity have been the fundamental goal from the beginning or it came naturally during the process.

At a time when there is no money for independent culture and its infrastructure, such self-help creation of space is one of the possibilities. In this case, construction costs were reduced to a minimum. Only EUR 7,000 was enough to create a full-fledged cultural space used by a wide range of visitors, from residents of Žilina, through tourists to artists from different parts of the world.







Figure 4. Station archive: Stanica S2 2009.

Available at: <http://archiv.stanica.sk/2013/02/s2/> (Accessed 25 October 2020).

We can see a parallel with the English project Folly for a Flyover, especially in the choice of the location for the cultural center, whether temporary or permanent, in the most overlooked locations of the city. Also, the idea and motivation are similar: activation of a neglected space, creation of a place for a community of people, filled with a cultural program, as well as in a project from Tallinn, Estonia. With Tallinn, we can observe not only the above-mentioned similarities, but also straw as the main construction material.

Unfortunately, further ambitions and future development for the S2 project remained only in the form of plans, as in 2019 the building burned down for unknown reasons and the fire also damaged the statics of Rondel, as the people of Žilina call the overpass. It was confirmed that the fire did not occur inside the building, but in its vicinity outdoors (Rehák 2019). Here the investigation ends and we can only wonder whether this project ended due to the negligence of passers-by or a certain part of society could not deal with the local experiment, which provided many people with culture and a sense of community.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Recently, more attention has been paid to the aspect of accessibility than ever before. Buildings should be democratically accessible to all, without excluding people on the basis of physical or mental disability (CRPD 2016). Universal design should be automatically implemented, in order for us to make progress also in the perception of disabled people and understand that universal



design is not something extra for few, but it can make everyone's daily movement easier. Together with the to these days also ignored or misunderstood sustainability, universal accessibility has the potential to create a better-quality architecture, public space, or everything in between.

An essential research target posed in the introduction includes the question of why there is a lack of more significant pop-up theater buildings in Slovakia, whether of a festival or seasonal type. There may be controversy about the reasons. Despite the long period of time between the fall of the Iron Curtain and the present, there is still a noticeable difference in the development of cities, architecture and society, between the western countries and the countries of the former Eastern bloc, which also includes Slovakia. The Czech Republic and Estonia, which had a similar fate, were also intentionally included in the comparison to show that there are exceptions, although there is still a visible gap in the number of similar projects in England and the already mentioned Czech Republic or Estonia.

The theater is lagging behind and we are waiting for a theater revolution. Possibly also in the form of a global trend of pop-up architecture, which has already reached us, but so far to a very limited extent, in the form of commercial space. It can be more valuable than that. This type of architecture does not need to follow the boundaries set for temporary buildings, it can be bold, progressive, creative, it can test limits and approaches that we would not normally dare to try. Also, pop-ups have the power to inspire change in neglected or undeveloped areas, mobilize community and to be a catalyst for lasting change.

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# Pop-up színházak európai és szlovák példái

## Alternatív színházak Európa-szerte

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### ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ

A kulturális terek nagyobb csoportja külföldön és Szlovákiában is független jelzővel jelenik meg. Ebben az összefüggésben ez azt jelenti, hogy nem közintézmény hozta létre őket, maguk keresik a finanszírozás fenntartható formáit, támogatásokból és önkéntesekkel működnek. A korlátozott összegű finanszírozás meghatározza az ilyen kulturális központok építészetét is. A történeti romok, az elhanyagolt közterületek, az elhagyott ipari épületek Európa-szerte gyakran jelennek meg helyszíneikként. Van-e különbség a szlovák alternatív és a külföldi gyakorlat között, vagy ez globális jelenség azonos jellemzőkkel? És egyáltalán ez ki derülhet-e a független kulturális és színházi központok egy ilyen kis mintája alapján?

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### KULCSSZAVAK

színház, Európa, Szlovákia, kultúra, tér

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