

La Mama Theatre

Architectural Design Notes

6th May 2019

Remembering

La Mama Theatre is an unusual proposition, a tiny theatre space housed in an old brick factory. Art meets industry. The theatre space has 5 windows, 5 doors, a set of stairs, a hatch, and a fireplace. The walls are textured, hundreds of layers of paint over the brickwork. These features challenge the normal expectations of a theatre space, give a homely feel and, added to its diminutive 55m² footprint, lend a sense of intimacy. It is a tiny bubble in which stories are shared with the outside world ever present, lapping at the doors and windows, light, sounds and smells of pasta trickling in. These features are key to the La Mama experience. They must and will be reinstated.

If you ever ventured upstairs you would discover a chaotic and cluttered space, a hive of activity, welcoming to all. Artists and staff stepping around each other, each on their own trajectory towards the supporting of and making of art. The intense use of the space has become more challenging with the increase of staff and show numbers. The potential for interactions between staff and artists must be maintained but extra space must be provided to support both groups to do their jobs in a more conducive setting.

The courtyard space with its myriad of pot plants, left over parts of theatre sets and found objects is a delight for staff, artists, patrons and curious members of the public alike. It's offer of 'country garden' like refuge in an urban setting is as important as the theatre space itself. This is where the pre and post show theatre happens.

The cultural significance of La Mama, for which this site has been added to the Heritage register, resides both in the physical aspects of the site and in the philosophy of La Mama. The restoration and new build have engaged with both the physical and the philosophical to arrive at an outcome that respects and supports both.

Proposal

Re-shaping (Form, Function and Ornamentation)

A new building has been released by the fire event. A germination of the original La Mama, but a diminutive version, rotated 180 degrees. The new building offers new spaces for administration and rehearsals, relieving the pressure on the original footprint to house an ever-increasing demand for space.

There is a contrast between the two buildings, related in form and material but different in colour. The charcoal bricks of the new draw the eye to the lightness and mottled texture of the red bricks of the old. The two forms are interconnected but independent. Like old La Mama, the design of new La Mama is simple and restrained. Ornamentation only resides in the elements that are engaged with; the doors, windows and shutters. The theatre is in the every-day.

Opening up and Welcoming

The design desires to speak to La Mama's philosophical stance of being open, open to all.

Steps roll out of new La Mama, inviting people to come and sit. New planter seats to the Faraday St boundary offer more places for people to come and reside. The gate opens and the fence can fold back to increase the connection between the courtyard and the forecourt. The rehearsal room bifold shutters and doors open up to further increase the connection between the courtyard and the forecourt for larger functions. A refreshed and reconstituted box office has tilt up panels, clad in humble corrugated iron, that are visible from the street. Shutters, doors and windows can open-up or close-down depending on the weather and what is happening in each space. Lifts provide universal access to the theatre and the first floor.

Evolving and Growing

Since it's inception in 1967, La Mama has been evolving. In its first year, 8 productions were staged. In 2017, 47 primary productions were staged. Over the years the La Mama offering has expanded to include La Mama Poetica, La Mama Musica, La Mama Kids, an Explorations season, play readings and more. The Carlton Courthouse has become a second venue, increasing the number of productions that can be produced.

As the offerings have evolved, so too have the spaces. The theatre space was white for its first 10 years, since the white period it has been painted many hundreds of times and every colour imaginable. An office was built then rebuilt in a larger form on the first floor. Air-conditioning was added. Door swings have been reversed. A deck was built for a show, was kept and then enlarged over the years. A number of box office set ups have erupted on the deck and in the courtyard. Trees have been planted, removed and replanted. The fence line has subtly crept northwards to harness more space for the courtyard.

The proposal for New La Mama continues this 50-year long tradition of evolution. The architecture aims to respect and support the multitude of daily activities of this little village with nooks for reading scripts, couches for conversations and cake, a gathering table for group meals and working sessions, a dedicated office for the enablement of art, a rehearsal hub for the creation of art, undercover areas for patrons on rainy days, troughs for washing paint brushes, storage, a platform for announcements, and lifts for including everyone.

The desire for a differentiation in the brick work to denote the 'fire line' is as much about marking the fire event, as well as accepting we don't have the number of face bricks required to rebuild the facades, as celebrating the opportunity that the fire has brought to this unique little theatre.

Thank-you,



Meg White

Architect

Registration number: 18264

B.Arts (University of Melbourne)

B.Des, M.Arch (RMIT University)