

## REFLECTIONS UPON THE GREAT THEATRE AT EPHEBUS

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1. This paper was provoked by Kurt Forster.  
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Of all the archaeological remains from antiquity one of the most impressive is the Great Theatre at Ephesus (1). A view of it along the principal street of the city from what was once the harbor gate is spectacular (Figure 1). The simple sweep of its geometric form that cuts into the contour of the land accentuates the play of light across its tiers of continuously curving seats, varying from being in full shadow on its southern side to being in full reflection on its other. One cannot help but try to imagine its vacant presence at the dawn of a new day or its radiance at dusk. The view when sitting in it is equally spectacular (Figure 2). It offers a panoramic vision of the city, the level plain where the harbor once existed, a hill, the distant mountains, and the horizon beyond. There is more here than a mere theatre or arena for gladiatorial shows and animal fights. It is a spectacular communal room that endured in the very heart of the city and was actively used for possibly 1500 years, an existence that is virtually identical with the birth and death of the Hellenistic city itself.

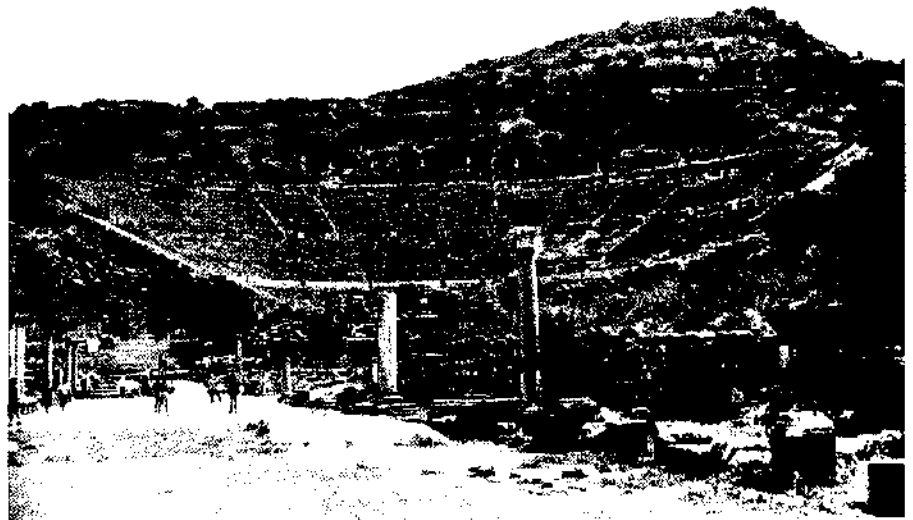


Figure 1. View of the Great Theatre from  
the west.

In Antiquity Ephesus, one of the twelve Ionian cities of the Panionic League founded in the valley of the Cayster River, was renowned for its prosperity, because it became the greatest trading center in western Asia Minor due to its location at the western terminus of the main Roman trading route up the Maeander Valley, and of the Persian Royal Road along which one could travel in ninety-three days to Mesopotamia (Akurgal, 1980, 43). It prospered in Greek, Roman, and Byzantine times, but it also suffered significant incursions, such as the invasions by the Ostrogoths in 262 A.D. and by the Persians and Arabs in the seventh century (Foss, 1979, 3-4). Another adversary was the river. Its deposits of silt gradually rendered the harbor unusable, which eventually led to the city's demise. With the exception of the Great Theatre, the history of the city's architecture is testimony to its pattern of prosperity, incursion, and decline.

The most famous architectural monument at Ephesus was not the theatre, but the Hellenistic Temple of Artemis designed by Chersiphron. As one of the Seven Wonders of the Antique World, it was praised for both its size and splendor, particularly for thirty-six of its 127 columns, which had sculpted drums at their bases, but its history was tempestuous. Construction of the first temple on the site began in 560 B.C., but it only survived for 160 years. The second one lasted only forty-four years. The Hellenistic temple itself, begun in 356 B.C., was severely damaged by the Ostrogoths in 262 A.D. and eventually totally abandoned in 401 A.D. after having survived for almost 750 years (Foss, 1979, 86). In 535 A.D. it was pillaged by the Byzantines when they built the nearby Basilica of St. John, and some of its columns were transported to Constantinople for use in the Hagia Sophia. In later years it was pillaged by the Turks when they constructed two nearby mosques. Today little is left except for the stone paving, because the few remains that were excavated in the 19th century were relocated to the British Museum.



Figure 2. View of the Great Theatre looking west.

Other buildings in the city suffered similar fates. The *gymnasia* and *thermae* fell into functional disuse and houses were built over them. The Acropolis was replaced by Byzantine fortifications and churches, which in turn were replaced by residences (Wood, 1987, 165). The old market basilica, burned in 262 A.D., was transformed into the Cathedral of Ephesus, the Church of the Virgin Mary, which in turn was later destroyed probably in the seventh century (Foss, 1979, 52). The Library of Celsus with its famous facade, which was originally constructed in the early second century A.D., fell into ruin in the third century and was rebuilt as a monumental fountain in the fourth century, which in turn was destroyed in the tenth or eleventh centuries (Foss, 1979, 65). In 614 A.D. all the monuments in one section of the city were abandoned after an earthquake, but the Great Theatre endured (Foss, 1979, 107). It was included within the seventh century Byzantine walls, and appears to have been used for as long as the city remained inhabited (Foss, 1979, 144).

Why this theatre endured is particularly puzzling if one recalls the fate of other ancient theatres. Typically the specific functional nature of theatres precluded their long life. Those located on the periphery of cities appear to have been abandoned. Those located in the continuously populated areas of cities were overbuilt with residences. One need only recall the Theatres of Marcellus or of Pompey in Rome, which even today are occupied by residences. Why then did the theatre at Ephesus endure, and why does any building endure?

One could suggest a variety of explanations as to why a building might endure. A functional argument might suggest that a building must be designed in such a manner that it can be readily transformed and that it should not be overly prescriptive, but the explicit functional form of the Great Theatre directly contradicts this. A technological argument might suggest that a building must be constructed firmly to endure, but even the best built building will crumble over time if it is not well maintained. Therefore, this argument must be subordinated to one that stresses man's will, not only to build but to preserve. An aesthetic argument might suggest that, if a building is perceived to be beautiful enough, it will inspire men to preserve it, but the destruction of the spectacular Temple of Artemis argues against this. We are, therefore, left in a dilemma. Seeking an answer according to the categories of Vitruvius, *utilitas*, *firmitas*, and *venustas*, appears to have failed us on all three counts. We must look elsewhere. A more careful analysis of the theatre in its context may offer a better explanation.

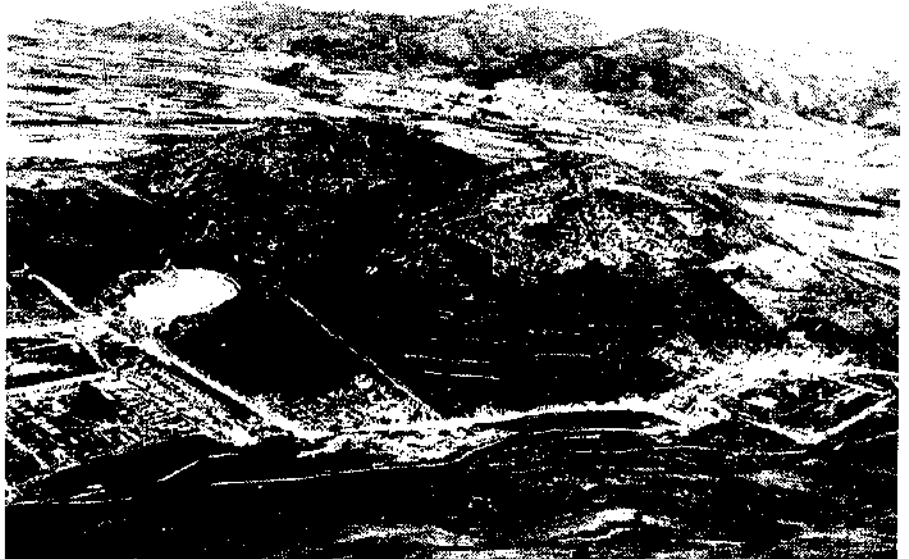


Figure 3. Aerial view of Ephesus from the southwest; reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press from Foss, 1979.

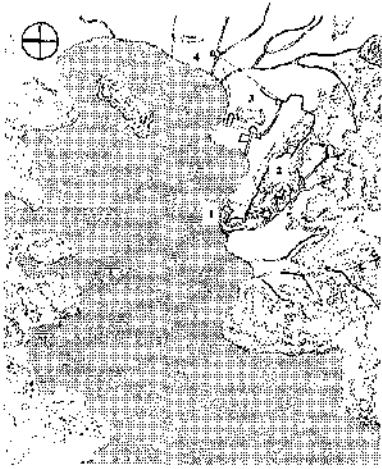


Figure 4. Plan of Ephesus and its surroundings. 1. Hill of Astyages, 2. Mt. Coressus, 3. Mt. Pion, 4. Temple of Artemis.

The excavations of the Hellenistic city of Ephesus, which have exposed approximately 5 percent of what is presumed to have been the entire city, reveal a gridded plan (Figures 3-5). Laid out around 280 B.C. by Lysimachus, one of the generals who succeeded Alexander the Great, it is located approximately 1.2 kilometers southwest of the pre-Hellenistic city, because of silting problems in the city's harbor (Bean, 1966, 163). A major street, the Arcadiane, runs in an east-west direction between where the harbor was, which is marked by the remains of a gate with Hellenistic foundations, and the Great Theatre, its oldest parts also being of Hellenistic origin, which is shifted to the south slightly off axis. Perpendicular to this at the foot of the theatre runs another major street, the Street of Eutropius, with the Stadium at its north end and the Library of Celsus at the south. The agora is located to the west of this street between the library and the theatre. These streets mark what was apparently the center of the Hellenistic city.

The building fabric relates to the topography as follows. The theatre is cut into the west slope of Mount Pion, a hill with two humps and a saddle between, upon which the Acropolis was located (Wood, 1987, 6). Some distance to the west beyond the harbor and on axis with the theatre along a line parallel to the Arcadiane is another small hill, the 'Hill of Astyages', on which there is the tower of 'St. Paul's Prison', a name for which there appears to be no basis. This tower is part of a Hellenistic wall that runs along the crest of Mount Coressus, forming the southern boundary of the city, and continues down the mountain running north along the eastern slope of Mount Pion.

Major public buildings are located along the principal streets. Numerous *insulae* are set farther back, although they still conform to the orthogonal grid. Buildings and an upper agora that date from Roman times are built on the southern slope of Mount Pion. Interestingly they also conform to the grid despite the direction of the topography which runs at an acute angle to them. The only reference to the topography is the direction of a street, the Embolos, which cuts diagonally through the gridded fabric, and a few Roman buildings that face directly upon it.

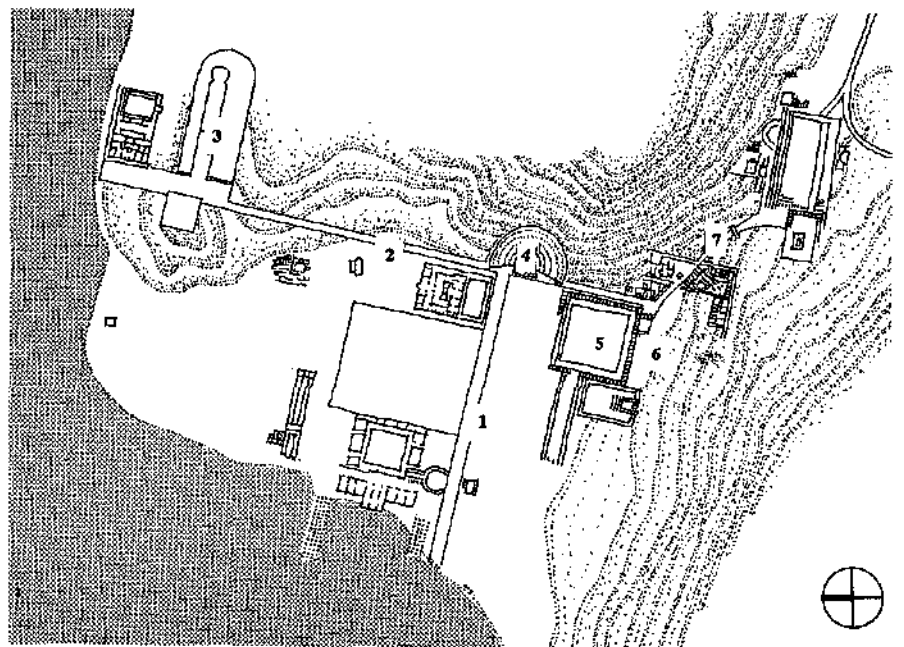


Figure 5. Plan of Late Antique Ephesus. 1. Arcadiane, 2. Street of Eutropius, 3. Stadium, 4. Theatre, 5. Agora, 6. Library of Celsus, 7. Embolos.

The excavations of the Great Theatre reveal that it was first constructed about 250 B.C. and had a raised platform with seven *thyromata*. Its west facade had a colonnade. It was remodeled and enlarged to seat 25,000 people around 44 A.D., by moving the front *proskenion* wall forward, thereby creating a deeper Roman type of stage, and by vaulting the entrances and main room of the stage building. These modifications gave the theatre a more enclosed form. In about 140-144 A.D. the orchestra was enlarged by removing the front rows of seats. In the third century A.D. a third story parapet was added to the *scaenae frons* (Bieber, 1961, 116-117, 218).

The city of Ephesus was founded where the goddess Artemis was presumed to have been born, and the city was believed to be protected by her. The devotion of the Ephesians to her is well-known to Christians from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter nineteen, which describes a spontaneous assembly in the Great Theatre, instigated by Demetrius, a silversmith who made shrines for the goddess and who feared a loss to his trade because of St. Paul's castigation of gods made with hands. For two hours the multitude cried out, 'Great is Diana (Artemis) of the Ephesians' (2). In the account we learn that the theatre was the place of communal debate and acclamations, that the city of that time, 57 A.D., worshipped the great goddess whose image fell down from Jupiter (Zeus), and that such assemblies were not regarded as lawful. Inscriptions found in the theatre confirm it to be a place of acclamations. They also suggest what constituted a lawful assembly, since they relate that gold-bearers were to carry to public assemblies and games in the theatre certain effigies and statues out of the *pronaos* of the Temple of Artemis. Such a procession was to come from the temple via the Magnesian Gate and return to it via the Coressian Gate, a route that in its entirety would have encircled Mount Pion (Wood, 1987, 33-43). This suggests that the theatre had a sacred role in the city and a specific relationship to the Temple of Artemis, which would be consistent with the conception that Greek tragedy had its genesis in religious cultural practices.

Artemis, daughter of Zeus and Leto, twin sister of Apollo, was the virgin goddess of wild animals, the hunt, vegetation, chastity, and childbirth, who danced, usually accompanied by nymphs, in mountains, forests, and marshes. She is said to have been very popular with the ordinary worshipper, particularly the rural population, since her behavior was drawn more from cult and poetic imagination (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 550-551). In sculptures found at Ephesus (Figure 6) she is represented as a massive pillar and dressed in a costume bedecked with wild beasts and ostrich eggs (symbols of fertility). Below her neck are figures of Nikes, a garland or necklace, and signs of the zodiac. According to an inscription found in the Great Theatre, she was born on 'the sixth of the first decade of the month Thargelion' (May) (Wood, 1987, 5, 17). By my calculations, the signs of the zodiac on the sculptures with Scorpius in the center, Sagittarius and then Capricornius to the left, and Libra and then Virgo to the right, represent the position of the zodiac constellations in the night sky on the goddess' date of birth. Such astrological observations also suggest that the Temple of Artemis, which is oriented slightly north of west, is oriented to the position of the setting sun on her date of birth. The Great Theatre itself, is similarly oriented, corresponding precisely with the orientation of the temple. In fact the Arcadiane, and consequently the orthogonal grid of the entire city is so oriented. Thus the theatre and the city are associated with the celestial domain of the goddess. This helps explain why the grid does not defer to the changes of the topography in the newer section of the city along the Embolos. On the other hand the grid does relate to the topography in the older section by corresponding to two different lines- one being the axis between Mount Pion and the 'Hill of Astyages', the other being the lower edge of the western slope of Mount Pion. Furthermore, the Great Theatre, the central element of the Hellenistic composition, reflected the con-

2. The New Testament, King James Version, The Acts of the Apostles, chapter nineteen, verse 34.

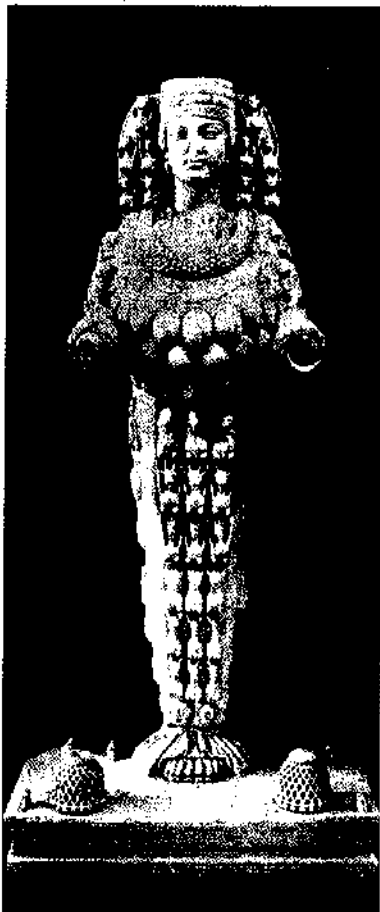


Figure 6. Statute of Artemis

3. This combines the arguments of Dinsmoor and Scully

tour of the hill. It appears that the design of Lysimachus' city clearly intended to bring into harmony the celestial and the terrestrial domains of the goddess (3).

In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder gives an account of a sculpture competition to make statues of Amazons for the first Temple of Artemis at Ephesus that took place between 440 and 430 B.C. (Jex-Blake and Sellers, 1968, 41). It has been suggested that copies of these formed the stage of the Great Theatre during Roman times (Richter, 1959, 111-115). This in turn suggests, though somewhat tenuously, that the theatre itself could possibly have been an analogue for the temple of the goddess, an interpretation that is strengthened by inscriptions found in the temple that commemorate acclamations made in the theatre, and by the previously described procession from the temple. The words spoken in the theatre, which was open to the heavens above as the temple itself is presumed to have been, would thereby have been associated with the goddess.

Generally, Greek theatres had no recognized place in the Greek city. They tended to be placed where topographically convenient, and they faced all points of the compass (Wycheley, 1969, 162-163). This suggests that the creation of the Great Theatre at Ephesus in such close accord with the form of the city is unique, and I suggest that its durability is primarily attributable to this 'fact'. I further suggest that its urban role was so embedded within the city, the topography, and the heavens that it never had to be radically transformed. It was so much a part of the daily public life of the city, a communal outdoor room much like the agoras or the streets, that it was never consciously perceived to be the institution that it was, the repository of the city's oral tradition, which was continuously reinterpreted within its walls. As such it was unnecessary for it to be given an iconographic designation. Its placement within the city where it could be seen from the harbor along the Arcadiane with light reflecting off its expectant form was designation enough to give it a universal meaning. It was elemental enough and therefore non-prescriptive enough for it to be meaningful to Greek, Roman, Jew, Christian, or Byzantine.

In comparison to the other institutions of the city the Great Theatre can be seen as the only one that on the one hand attained a universal significance as opposed to remaining restricted to a particular use which would eventually fall into oblivion, such as the *gymnasia* and *thermae*, and that on the other hand did not claim the legitimacy of authority by means of iconographic designation and thereby bring about its own demise, such as the Temple of Artemis or the Cathedral of Ephesus.

By contemporary standards the survival of all the institutional buildings at Ephesus is impressive whether they endured for one hundred years or fifteen hundred, especially in comparison with much of the apparent depthlessness of today's pluralistic architecture. But if we wish to transcend the limits of pluralism, the pattern of durability of the architecture of Ephesus can be very instructive, especially today when we have entered a period of questioning the ideological basis of modern architecture. It is clear that those works whose primary purpose was to serve functional needs such as the *gymnasia* and *thermae* were the most vulnerable to change and became obsolete as soon as society no longer needed such institutions. This tends to verify the post-modernists who are preoccupied with 'reading' architecture. Those works which were primarily explicit representations of a specific culture's values such as the Library of Celsus, the Temple of Artemis, or the Cathedral of Ephesus, were also particularly vulnerable. They were set ablaze by individuals rebelling against society. They had to be destroyed or radically transformed when new cultural values became dominant either through a gradual cultural shift within the society, such as the shift from paganism to Christianity, or through conquest by another culture such as occurred when

the Ostrogoths or Turks invaded Ephesus. On the other hand in the Great Theatre functional necessity was elevated to the level of cultural aspiration wherein it assumed an essential but less explicit role ingrained in the very structure of communal existence. In this respect the Great Theatre bespeaks of a certain kind of truth of human existence, the search for which appears to be absent today from most architecture in a relativistic world.

The argument of this paper should not be conflated into a nostalgic one nor into one for precedent. Rather the argument is for deeply embedding societal myths or 'truths' by thematizing them broadly and deeply within their situation, so much so that there is no need for architecture to 'tell' you explicitly of its importance, which only serves to curtail experiencing its deeper implications. In our modern world such broadening and deepening is best pursued through a honing of doubts and persistent critique rather than through the verification of our beliefs, because we can thereby uncover that which is hidden from our consciousness.

## ANTİK EFES TİYATROSUNUN DÜŞÜNDÜRDÜKLERİ

### ÖZET

Efes kentinin tarihi boyunca geçirdiği dönüşümlere baktığımızda tiyatro dışındaki diğer kurumsal-sembolik yapıların zaman içinde değiştiğini, terkedildiğini, unutulduğunu ya da yakılıp yıkıldığını görüyoruz. Kent yaşamının sürdüğü tüm dönemlerde önemini hiç yitirmeyen bu görkemli tiyatro, mimari yapıların, nasıl yüzyıllara meydan okuyup sürekliliğini koruyabildiği sorusunu tartışmak açısından son derece öğretici. Bu tarihsel süreklilik/geçerlilik sorusu karşısında Vitruvius'un üçlemesinden kaynaklanan açıklamaların (yani işlevsel, teknik ve estetik açıklamaların) yetersiz kaldığını pek güzel örnekleyen Efes Tiyatrosu, sadece işlevsel, sağlam ya da güzel olduğu için değil kent içindeki fiziksel konumu ve kültürel/törensel rolü nedeniyle ait olduğu tarihsel dönemi aşan ve adeta evrenselleşen bir niteliğe kavuşmaktadır.

Tarihsel belgeler bize tiyatronun koruyucu tanrıça Artemis'in kültüründen kaynaklanan bir kutsal-törensel rol oynadığını gösterirken, tiyatronun konumlanışı ile kentin izgara (*grid*) planının, Artemis'in astrolojik işaretlerine denk düşecek biçimde yönlendiğine de dikkatimiz çekiliyor. Bir başka deyişle, tiyatronun, günümüze kadar ayakta kalmayı başaramamış olan Artemis tapınağına dolaylı bir 'analog' oluşturduğunu söyleyebiliriz ki kültürel anlamın bu dolaylı/örtük aktarılmasının tarihsel sürekliliği sağlamakta en önemli paya sahip olduğu savı bu yazının ana temasını oluşturmaktadır. Öte yandan, kent dokusunun tam ortasında yer alan tiyatronun bir kamu dış mekanı niteliğine

kolayca katılması da hiç kuşkusuz söz konusu sürekliliği olanaklı kılmış ve pekiştirmiştir.

Modern Mimarlığın ideolojik tabanının enine boyuna sorgulandığı günümüzde Efes tiyatrosundan öğrenebileceğimiz çok önemli dersler var. Herşeyden önce, sadece çok belirli işlevlere cevap vermek üzere tasarlanmış yapıların (*gymnasia* ve *thermae* gibi), toplum bu kurumlara artık ihtiyaç duymayınca tüm geçerliliklerini yitirip unutulduğunu gözlemleyerek, dar bir işlevsellik anlayışının yetersizliğinden bir kez daha söz edebiliriz. Öte yandan, anlamını en bariz ikonografik biçimde yansıtan ve belli kültürel değerlerin sembolü olarak inşa edilen yapıların da (Celsus Kütüphanesi, Artemis Tapınağı, Efes Katedrali gibi), toplumsal/politik/ideolojik dönüşümler karşısında (çok tanrılıktan hıristiyanlığa geçişte olduğu gibi) terkedilmeye ya da yakılıp yıkılmaya mahkum olduğunu düşünebiliriz. Tiyatro ise, bunlardan çok farklı bir biçimde, sanki insan varoluşunun kolayca tanımlanamayacak bir gerçekliğini hayata geçirmektedir ki böyle bir evrenselliğe günümüzün çoğulcu/göreceli (pluralist/relativist) dünyasında pek kolay rastlayamıyoruz. Bundan, yazının bir nostalji ya da model arayışı ile tarihe baktığı sonucu çıkarılmamalıdır. Sözü edilen arayış, mimarlığın, toplumsal mit ya da 'gerçekleri', dolaylı ve örtük biçimde tematize ederek, yaşamla bütünleşecek biçimde konumlandırılması düşüncesidir ki bu başarıldığında (Efes Tiyatrosunda olduğu gibi) karşımızdaki yapı, kendi önemini yüzümüze bağirmaya gerek duymayacaktır.

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