



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1993 Volume I: The Symbolic Language of Architecture and Public Monuments

Building as Backdrops

Guide for Curriculum Unit 93.01.02
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Often, in a room or building, a single element might dominate or perform with such underlying subtlety that the imagination is ignited. My exploration of architecture and its symbolic language will attempt to isolate such elements and use them as inspiration for young playwrights and aspiring actors. The students will learn the interplay of languages — the symbolic language of architecture intertwined with dialogue as architectural elements precipitate not only the mood but the narrative, and therefore the action, of the play.

In the first part of the process, students will be encouraged to nurture an understanding and appreciation of architectural language via an exploration of the world outside their door. They will first be guided in differentiating between the five orders of classical architecture, drawing columns or perhaps modeling them out of clay. We will further discuss the importance of “intercolumniation” or the spacing of columns and how they set the “tempo” of the building.

This analogy could be made from the standpoint of theatre and drama, with certain styles influencing certain moods in terms of setting. Visits will be made to the Yale campus and downtown New Haven area to explore various examples of classical architecture and monuments. Students will then select a particular building or monument which they will sketch, photograph or diagram and use it as the basis of a monologue, which they will write and then perform. Students will also work with a “Kit of Parts” which will include both structural and decorative elements such as arches, fireplaces, columns, frescoes, friezes, windows, which will be used as a basis for set design. Students will individually design their own “backdrops” or sets (to scale) based on these elements or, if they have the ability and desire, draw their own with sourcebooks or architectural images as their guide. The backdrops will first be used first as the basis of improvisational theatre, following improvisational theatre games in order to marry acting and architectural elements.

Finally, based on the students’ knowledge of architectural language, they will further interpret their set designs through the use of narrative. One-act plays will be developed and performed, taking into account the intertwining of architecture and action as well as the melding of the two languages, one symbolic and the other ultimately spoken.

(Recommended for Drama, Grades 5-7)

Key Words

Drama Architecture

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