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Temporary venues are popping up at all our performing arts festivals

OF all the generic names for buildings — from tent to terrace house to office tower — pavilion is the word that puts a smile on your face. Pavilions are places of pleasure: you possibly have been to a party in one, or an agricultural show, or a cool contemporary art installation. One of the most famous pavilions is the orientalist fantasy built in Brighton, England, for the future George IV: a “stately pleasure-dome” like something conjured from Kubla Khan.

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Pavilions and the like have made a comeback in the arena of performing arts festivals. Spiegeltents have been doing the rounds for at least a decade, and audiences do not seem to tire of these Belgian mirrored dance halls, reinvented as cabaret-vaudeville-concert venues. They have history, charm and sexy intimacy with the stage and with one’s neighbour. Sometimes the most fun to be had at a festival is at one of those late-night shows, the audience boozy with beer and wine, and ogling the buff gymnast in the bath or the tattooed lady sword-swallower.

The injection of novelty is important. Festivals have a hard time breaking through the clamour of capital-city entertainments: temporary venues such as pavilions, pergolas and pleasure gardens are a welcome disruption in the landscape, a detour from the everyday.

Adelaide, still the best festival city, makes a virtue of William Light’s urban plan by using available spaces within the city blocks and the parklands that surround it, from the Garden of Unearthly Delights at Rundle **Park** to Lola’s Pergola erected last year at Elder **Park**.

Next year’s event in March will turn part of Elder **Park** into the Blinc Bar, an enclosure set among an outdoor exhibition of projections and laser illuminations.

The nation’s other summer arts festivals in Sydney and Perth also rope off festival gardens with food, drink and entertainment: Sydney’s next year will have not one but two spiegeltents.

In Melbourne, the former YMCA**site** behind the arts centre has been turned into a temporary outdoors venue, a sometimes lively, sometimes desolate block called Testing Grounds.

The Melbourne Festival, which concluded at the weekend, had three pop-up venues, from the plywood-clad Quartetthaus and Foxtel Festival Hub designed by festival regulars Bluebottle, to the austere elegance of the MPavilion designed by Sean Godsell.

The MPavilion, which has landed like an exotic winged insect in Queen Victoria Gardens, was commissioned by Sussan **Group**’s Naomi Milgrom and will remain through the summer. It is clad in perforated aluminium panels that close down at night-time, and open upwards and outwards in the day, forming a shelter for talks, performances and coffee-drinking.

The project was inspired by the Serpentine Pavilions at Hyde **Park** in London, an annual architecture commission that since the first in 2000 has featured work by figures such as Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry and Rem Koolhaas.

Julia Peyton-Jones, director of the Serpentine Galleries who visited Melbourne for the opening of the MPavilion, describes the London series as an exhibition of architecture, more concerned with formal invention than function. Some of these exotic structures are like modern variants of the follies built on the grounds of aristocratic estates: classical temples and Bedouin tents sprouting like mushrooms on the lawn. The folly best known to architecture students is William Chambers's 1762 **Chinese** pagoda, a 50m tower at Kew Gardens in London. Pretty as a postcard, and quite useless.

Godsell originally had considered an ornamental design for the MPavilion. Taking a cue from Chambers's pagoda, Godsell designed a 60m tower in the form of a truncated cone with an open oculus at the top.

"The idea was that it was a place to go and sit, and the oculus would track the sun during the course of the day," Godsell says.

A second idea was a doughnut-shaped structure with an inner courtyard. Pragmatism won out. The MPavilion needed to be a working venue for talks and events, and be operational independently of any neighbouring building. Godsell's design is based on the simple structures that can be found throughout rural Australia: sheds, shelters and lean-tos.

The architect evokes Patrick White and The Tree of Man, describing shelter in almost metaphysical terms, as if a salvation.

Bluebottle's boxy structures for the Melbourne Festival have pragmatism stamped all over them but reveal their magic inside.

The Quartetthaus is a 55-seat purpose-built venue for chamber music, in which listeners sit around a circular stage with a string quartet in the middle. This year it popped up outside the South Melbourne Town Hall, home of the Australian National Academy of Music, and ANAM students played inside. I went to a lunchtime concert of Haydn and Beethoven, and the little plywood and hessian auditorium was a revelatory concertgoing experience, not least because the stage slowly revolves while the players are on it. The Quartetthaus will next be used by the Australian Art Orchestra for a series of solo performances on November 5 and 6.

Bluebottle also designed the Foxtel Festival Hub, a more conventional structure but one made for foot-stomping fun. The design **firm**'s co-director, Ben Cobham, says he likes his structures to have a handmade or portable quality: put them up and pull them down. They should be interruptions in the everyday landscape and appear in surprising locations.

Next year he would like to have the Quartetthaus floating on the moat outside the National Gallery of Victoria.

Pavilions and other temporary structures may be ephemeral experiences that last for a summer or a festival, but many find a permanent home. The Serpentine Pavilions — each one planned and built within about six months — are **sold** after the event and have popped up in the south of France and Ireland, among other places.Milgrom has committed to four MPavilions and each one will find a home after its four-month stay at the Queen Victoria Gardens. The temporary-permanent nature of the commission made it one of the more difficult that Godsell, an award-winning architect, has worked on. "It's often the way that the small, apparently simple projects are the most difficult to achieve," he says.

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