Performance Venue for the Magical Arts

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"Master of Magic"
Performance Venue for the Magical Arts

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I would like to thank Professor Ron Spangler for encouraging me to follow my dreams. I would like to thank my parents for giving me the opportunity to do so. I would also like to acknowledge my friends in the Muncie Mystifies, Ring 310 of the International Brotherhood of Magicians for supporting my magical interest and teaching me that magic is more than a hobby. It’s a way of life for those who dream it.
Abstract

The Magical Arts Performance Venue is located in Colon, Michigan, the “Magic Capital of the World.” The project is specifically designed for magicians to perform close-up, stand up and stage illusions. When there is no venue partaking, such as the Abbott’s Summer Get-Together, the site will be used as a passive recreational park, with a mystical atmosphere for inspiration and meditation.
Introduction
Why have a Magical Arts Performance Venue?

Magic has been performed on the streets since before written language yet there are no street environments specifically designed for magical performances. Abbott’s Summer Get-Together in Colon, Michigan hosts over 1,200 magicians from around the world. There is no suitable area to accommodate that number of participants and activities in a manner that is conducive to the needs of the participants.

Designing a magical arts performance venue created sub-problems that needed to be understood and solved through proper design. The sub-problems that accompany the design of this project are:

Creating a unique and dramatic environment for the performance of magic requires analyzing space in relationship to human perception.

Discovering what magic means to the self in relationship to magic performed for the whole needs to be interpreted to design for the proper environment.

Reviewing, analyzing, and understanding the history of the Magical Arts and why it thrives in today’s society.

Understanding the problems and sub-problems incorporated in designing a Magical Arts Performance Venue required me to make some assumptions about the project. These assumptions were:

A place / space can change with individual perception to create a unique and magical environment for each individual.

Performing magic has specific spatial and environmental needs that are different from those watching magic.

The word ‘Magic’ has changed its meaning and impact on today’s society, influencing the interpretation, and feeling of magic.

Analyzing the problems and understanding the assumptions required an in-depth study of the word ‘magic’. Only after the commitment of knowing the vocabulary and its historical and modern day meaning did I design a venue respectable for magical performance.
What is Magic?

Magic, “an attempt to control nature by means of spell and incantations” (Randi, p.xi). This was one dictionary’s attempt at defining the word ‘Magic’. But I believe it can not be defined for the universal language. Like the word ‘Love’, its’ definition can be vague and misleading depending on the user. So I make this disclaimer now, the description I give the word ‘magic’ is my biased opinion. As I grow and learn how the world changes around me, my definition of magic will change and grow with me. I define the word based on how it is relevant to my subject, which is designing a performance venue for the magical arts.

Since it is a performance venue, this implies acting, and the theatrical term for performing magic is ‘conjuring’. According to Randi that same dictionary defines ‘conjuror’ as one who [summons] spirits and pretends to perform miracles by their aid” (Randi p. XI). According to this definition the word spirits is used which implies religion. I believe this is the ultimate originator of the meaning behind magic. Religion is not magic but it is its equal and opposite counterpart. Like the Ying and Yang, you can not have one without the other.

The word ‘abracadabra’ is a Hebrew nonsense word to cast a spell. Even ‘hocus-pocus’ is fractured Latin for a religious ceremony which translates to “For this is my body” (Story of Magic, video). These words make defining the meaning of magic so mysterious and difficult. These religious words were manipulated under the magicians tongue to enhance his power and deception. To understand the meaning of the word magic we need to know where and why the word originated.
Background

“In the sixth century B.C.E., a priestly clan from ancient Iran arrived in Greece. The Greeks called a member of this group a magos (plural magoi). This word was Latinized and eventually Anglicized as magus (plural magi). Simply put, the Greeks called what the mago did magic (mageia)” (Burger p. 62). They related the summing of spirits with wizardry and witchcraft, which were taboo words and a foreign religion to the Greeks at that time. The Greeks saw Magi as “powerful, ancient, mysterious and oriental cast about whom strange and scandalous stories circulated” (Morton Smith, p. 71). From the beginning the meaning of the term ‘Magic’ has been defined ambiguously. The word magi or magician has been defined rather well. We know who they are and where they came from, but why are they called magicians? What they do, which they call magic is poorly defined and vaguely understood. Magicians and magic were given a negative connotation, just like most people today put negative words and feelings to entities they don’t understand or can’t explain.

This puts a time frame and a feeling to the modern usage of the word magic; unfortunately it still does not explain what it means. I’ve asked other magicians and layman their definition of magic and each one is a bit different than the next. So we need to dig deeper into history to discover its’ true meaning.

According to Webster “Magi are members of a priestly cast, magician, such as in ancient Media and Persia. Magic is the use of charms, spells, and rituals in seeking or pretending to cause or control events, or govern certain natural or supernatural forces. ‘ Conjurer’ is a person skilled in Legerdemain. ‘Legerdemain’ is slight of hand, trickery of any sort: deceit.” (Webster New World Dictionary, Second College Edition, Prentice-Hall Press. 1986) From the given historical definitions, we know magic is associated with deceit, spirits, and the apparent control of the supernatural forces. These three words are good starting points in deriving a meaning behind magic.

What does magic mean?

So what does magic mean? Magic is power in knowledge, knowing that you see something that defies your understanding of reality, yet you won’t allow this new event to become reality. It is the suspension of disbelief, but you have to consciously know what is reality and what is not. Magic is living between those two worlds, between the natural and spiritual world. For a performer it is a very thin line, yet powerful line. Magicians want to deceive the audience, to fool them, to let them think that what they are witnessing is real, yet magicians can not let them slip into total believability. So how can magicians walk this ethical line of magic and religion? We will come back to this question later in explaining the theory of my design.
I believed in Santa Clause as a child and only now, knowing that Santa does not come down the chimney Christmas Eve to deliver gifts for good little boys and girls do I see and understand the magic. As a child I thought that he was real, as real as the picture of him on a card, to me he was reality. I used the phrase “He used magic to make Rudolph fly,” but I didn’t truly know what it meant. It’s what the grown-ups, the wise people told me. This is one of our rituals, as magicians, from passing down a secret from generation to generation. The adults were being the magicians, they manipulated my perception of reality and as a child, I believed in it. As an adult, or conjuror we think we see the magic in the child’s eyes when they truly believe in something to be real. That is seeing magic to the performer, not the child or audience.

Magicians give a false definition to people who don’t understand what they see. Just as the Shamans or Native American medicine men did in their rituals. I will talk about Shamanism now because through my research this seems to be the true origin of my meaning of magic. Not the origin of the word, but the concepts behind the word magic.

Concepts of magic’s origin

To understand the meaning of magic and its’ concepts, we need to understand the origin of magic. We need to know how and why the word was used? Even before the modern word of magic is used the meaning of the word was used in shaman rituals. Shamanism is “one of humankind’s most ancient traditions” that spans tens of thousands of years (Walsh). The word shaman “comes from the language of the Tungus people of Siberia. It means ‘one who is excited, moved, raised.’ The name is now used by anthropologist to refer to a variety of healers in many different cultures around the globe who have variously been called medicine men, witch doctors, sorcerers, wizards, magicians and seers” (Burger p. 30).

“Tus Ojibwa shaman is causing the two dolls before him to move at his command. He accomplishes this through invisible thread connected to the dolls and his toes.” (Bureau of Ethnology, 1896).
Shamans were the hearers of the community. Members of the community believed the shamans had the knowledge and power to reach into the spiritual world. Shamans shook tents, made clay dolls dance and escaped from tied up ropes using their powers. They beat drums as they danced around fires in attempts to summon the spirits. Knowing the true secret behind magic can be a rite of passage, such as in the case of the bull-roarer. This child’s noise maker was used in shamanist rituals to teach children deception. Which is a key concept in creating magic. A bull-roarer is a flat stick of wood attached to pieces of string. When it is whirled around in the air it makes an eerie sound that is associated with the wind and rain to summon and frighten away spirits. This ritual involves a conflict between a good and bad spirit. Boys are told by their elders that this bad spirit, who is a giant, has destructive behaviors and likes to eat little boys, then try to revive them. As they are telling this story the bull-roarers are herd in the distance. The boys are covered with blankets to hide from the evil spirits and the noise gets louder. The elders reach under the blankets and use a hammer and chisel to knock out a tooth of each child. The boys think they are saved from being eaten by giving up a tooth. On the last day of the rite, they are once again covered by blankets. A fire is made and the bull-roarers once again are heard. The cracking of the fire and the awesome noise is heard loudly. The elders tell the boys the evil spirit will burn them, when the boys are terrified, the elders pull back the blankets to show the actual bull-roarers making the sound. The instruments are then broken and destroyed in the fire. The boys have become men, and are instructed to keep the bull-roarer a secret from women and children (Haddon p. 219-58).

'Various bull-roars (taken from Haddon's 'The Study of Man. 1898)'
Background

This is an act of passing knowledge from master to pupil and generation to generation. I believe this story shows just how difficult it is to prove an exact date when the idea of magic began. This story shows one of deception and trickery, which are elements in creating magic, but is not the same magic we are used to today. The children believed there was a giant spirit about to eat them because the elders told them so. This was reality to the children. They were scared for their life. Until the secret was reviled to them did they understand deception and the power of knowledge. Only after they understood the giant wasn’t real can they look back on the event and see the magic.

A new wisdom and tradition was reached in the community. A new level of understanding and spiritual growth was received. The children were not audience members in today’s sense, rather they were participants of a religious, spiritual rite. Those who lack the knowledge of the secret behind the deception, will either bow down before their powerful god, or prosecute conjuror at the stake. If they truly know they are being deceived, but can not find the secret, then it is magic. Magic is a sophisticated form of art. The audience members need to be educated to understand the difference between reality and supernatural world.

Harry Blackstone, Jr. said, “The essence of magic is fundamental deception.” You know your being deceived, and thus the outcome, the product of magic is fun, entertaining, educational, enlightening, spiritual. If you truly believed humans can levitate, it’s not magic, it’s religion. The magician just became a god and he performed a miracle. This is scary and unethical for modern magicians to portray. That is why mentalists, psychic readers and fortunetellers have large followers that believe their powers are real. Such as the Israeli mentalist Uri Geller had in 1972. The reason this is so powerful
Background

is that it touches the audience directly. They are not just watching a trick, they are experiencing it and becoming part of the ritual, again like the Shaman children did. People will believe what you say to them. Only the priest knows it is just trickery.

Before the year 1651 AD, magicians, witches, wizards, were burned at the stake because people believed magic acts to be reality, which went against the normal religious status-quo. The magicians knew the real definition behind the term magic, only they couldn’t tell anyone. Reginald Scot’s Discovery of Witchcraft, written in 1584 started to change this public cruelty of conjurors by educating the public about the superstitious belief in witchcraft. He reviled how to burn a playing card and re-produce it from a spectator’s pocket, make a coin appear in a spectator’s hand, and decapitate a person and then restore him. King James I of England ordered all copies of Scot’s book burned so he could carry on his reign of torture and murder of misfits and conjurors in 1603 AD. It wasn’t until 1651 AD, well after James I death, that Scot’s book appeared again (Randi p.18). It’s neat to see that many of these tricks are still used today. That just goes to show how well guarded secrets are in the fraternity of magicians.
The meaning of magic

So once again I'll ask the question of how can magicians walk this ethical line of magic and religion? For starters time has changed. We do not live in the 1600's. People are more educated about science, psychology, physics, and acting and respect alternative forms of religion. Today people pay money to witness the tricks and experience the art of a magic show. The audience knows they are going to a theater to see a show, not a church to experience religion. So today magicians can fly over a stage and have full confidence that the audience doesn't know how the trick is done, which brings them into a supernatural world. A surrealist world that defies their logic's of reality. Once they leave the ambiance of the performance they are back to reality, and then they understand it was just magic.

Magic gives a message to its witnesses. Magic is a struggle between good and evil, right and wrong, reality and imagination. Magic allows the audience to live vicariously through the illusion. The classic cut and restored rope, or sawing a woman in half symbolizes death and resurrection. If the magician can make this happen with a rope, this may give the audience the confidence they need to make positive changes in their lives. In this form magic is a spiritual, religious motivator. This is why magic is still practiced today. People need this spiritual wonder. Seeing someone being decapitated on stage heightens your scenes. Your heartbeat accelerates, you start to sweat, you fear for that assistant. Yet you know you are safe sitting in the audience. It's like riding a roller coaster. The excitement, the adrenaline rushes, your body produces chemicals to help protect you, and this is a pleasurable experience.
Has magic changed its meaning in the last few years?

Has magic changed its meaning in the last few years? Yes and no. For the magician, no it hasn’t. The meaning is the same although there are fewer people today abusing the power of magic by making people believe its real. To the audience, it most definitely has. They are more educated, and magic’s negative feeling has been replaced by a fun, entertaining, and spiritually enlightening feeling.

So how does all this relate to my project?

I need to understand the true meaning of magic. To discover the meaning I needed to know its origin, and concepts behind it. With these core concepts a unique feeling is achieved experiencing magic both in performance and as a witness. I took these emotions and manipulated the landscape to create these same feelings of wonder and spiritual enlightenment. I converted the landscape into the magician. I have done this by using the theatrical and art movement of surrealism.

Performing or witnessing a magic show is an active process. The performer is there telling you what to see and how to see it. A performer can’t be on the site 24 hours a day making the site magical so it is up to the audience to witness and experience what his or her own imagination will allow. The best way to trigger the imagination into the subconscious world between reality and supernatural ideas is through surrealistic suggestions. Simple structures that create shapes and forms that leaves your imagination to wonder and explore the reality of perception. I used basic and classical optical illusions to suggest changes in scale, time, and place. These same principles are found in surrealist artist’s like Salvador Dali and M.C Escher. Simple placements of trees, structures, and rocks makes you question yourself if what you see is real or just your imagination. You have the freedom in this environment to find the answer. It is up to the audience of the site to move in and out of there subconscious.
Deriving the appropriate magical venue for a village like Colon, Michigan will demand a deep understanding and sympathy for the meaning of ‘Magic’ and how it relates to the people affiliated with Colon. Knowledge and design ideas came from a variety of literary references and people. These example quotes reflect the attitude, ideas, and feelings I created from the landscape in Colon, Michigan.

History of Colon, Michigan

“In the study of history, one of the most interesting questions to investigate is, ‘How did it happen?’ In this paper the writer will consider the unique subject of how Colon, Michigan came to be known by magicians and laymen alike as ‘Magic Capital of the World’.”


“Magic is a mind-expanding art form because it demonstrates that the boundaries of perception aren’t necessarily the boundaries of reality”.

Jay Scott Berry, California magician, at the Fifty-third Annual Magic Get-Together, 1990

“I was the easiest kid in the world to fool, for a while, I cherished the notion that I had a head full of nickels, because my father could produce them so easily from my ears. In those days, I was a pushover for the public performances held in Colon in the evenings during the Get-Togethers’. I can remember the aura of those evening shows, that I attended forty years ago and more: the dark stage, the bright colors, flowers, floating scarves, capes in black and red, and the daring, slightly wicked quality of dying vaudeville”.

Harry Blackstone Jr.-Our far-flung Correspondents.-The New Yorker

Magic and Meaning

“Magic is the greatest form of escapism around”.

Tony Spina, the owner of Tannen’s magic store in New York City

“Magic, sorcery, in one form or another, is perhaps as old as the human race, the word magic itself deriving from ancient Greek and Persian roots”.

Gubinick and Newcomb-Now you see it, now you don’t: Forbes. 1993

“The principles of magic are not new developments in physics. They are subtle, simple mechanics that aren’t revolutionary in any way. The fact is, magicians are guarding an empty safe; it’s valuable only as long as it’s guarded”.

Jim Steinmeyer-Magical Designer

An Indian Head?

An Eskimo?
Why Colon, Michigan?

Colon, Michigan is the ideal site for a magical arts performance venue because of its rich history in magic. Its' rich history of two famous men, Harry Bouton, (Boughton) whose stage name was Harry Blackstone and the history of Percy Abbott. However, it was Blackstone who brought magic to this quaint, rural, mid-western village first. Blackstone was born in Chicago to the son of a hat maker. "He and his brother Peter began their stage careers doing comedy magic. Gradually, the act evolved into a full evening show of illusions with Harry doing the performing and Peter working behind the scenes building the illusions. Blackstone's show grew in size and by 1927 a crew of a dozen people worked and traveled with Blackstone" (West pp.1). Blackstone and his crew would retire to West Lake near Kalamazoo, Michigan in their off-season. This was usually in the summer months because most theaters were too hot to be bearable for performers and audience members. This was in the early 1920's, by 1927, his crew became too large for the accommodations at West Lake, so Harry's wife, Inez drove her car through Colon in the summer of 1926 and by chance she noticed Angel Island in Sturgeon Lake. The property had a frame house, a large barn, and numerous cottages around the area up for sale. She put the down payment on the land and magic began in Colon that summer. The barn was used to build and store illusions as well as the animals and bunnies Blackstone used in his show. The cottages housed his crew; it was a perfect match. Colon was even an equal distance between Chicago and Detroit, which Blackstone used the Penn Central railroad to travel.

The "Oriental Nights" poster represented the Blackstone full evening show.
In May of 1927, Blackstone’s crew was busy at work preparing for the second annual convention of the International Brotherhood of Magicians in Kenton, Ohio. It was there that he rekindled a friendship with an Australian magician named Percy Abbott. Blackstone invited Abbott to Colon to enjoy some fishing and the relaxing environment of this small town. During his visit he met a local girl named Gladys Goodrich, fell in love, got married and stayed a lifetime in Colon.

During the year of 1927, Blackstone and Abbott established ‘The Blackstone Magic Company.’ Percy had owned the ‘Abbott Magic Novelty Company’ back in Sydney Australia so he provided the business backing and with Blackstone’s name and reputation it seemed like a good partnership. But only after 18 months, there was a disagreement with business ethics and the shop closed down. Little record is documented on why the two argued. In Abbott’s biography A Lifetime in Magic, he skipped over this time in his life because it held unpleasant memories and thought it would not be good for the reader. Talking to Greg Bordner, son of Recil, Abbott’s partner and current owner of Abbotts, says the disagreement was over an illusion. Abbott didn’t travel during the off-season so he could run the business and stay with his wife. Meanwhile Blackstone traveled the circuit. While Blackstone was on the road, he “traded” a handful of merchandise from the magic shop for an illusion a man had. This man sent the illusion to the Blackstone Magic Company along with a list of tricks Harry Blackston had promised him. Abbott sent the merchandise and assumed the illusion then belonged to the company. Abbott then sold the illusion to another magician interested in it. When Blackstone returned after his tour, he found his illusion had been sold. Because of the personalities of these two men, the conflict was not
resolved. According to Bordner, Blackstone was bigger than Percy Abbott was and one night came over to Abbott’s house and beat him up. When Abbott called the police, Blackstone walked back in and greeted Percy as if nothing had happened. The town loved Blackstone and this deceived the police. Blackstone remained angry with Abbott and even threw canned goods at Abbott whenever they saw each other in the local grocery store. Consequently the Blackstone Magic Company closed (Hubbell).

Percy and Gladys performed at schools and auditoriums for the next five years to make a reliable income in this time of financial disaster because of the 1929 stock market crash. In February 1934, Abbott’s first child was born. He stopped his touring so he could raise his child. In January of 1934, he opened his own shop in Colon, named after the shop he once owned in Australia, ‘The Abbott Magic Company’. It was first located above the A&P Grocery. Abbott had printed a 20-page catalog listing of merchandise and sent it out by mail. In March 1934, a farmer by the name of Recil Bordner, received his catalog in Eaton, Ohio. Recil knew farming wasn’t for him and he felt magic was. He wanted to enlarge his act to include illusions so he could get booked for county fairs and carnivals, so he went to Colon to get lessons from Percy. 3 lessons for 10 dollars which was a sizable amount considering this was a time of depression. In 1934, Recil went to Colon for his final lesson. Abbott was still in debt from printing the catalog and he recognized an economic opportunity in Recil, so he offered Recil a partnership. Recil invested $1,000 in the company and became a partner. On Saturday September 15, 1934 the partners held an open house to help increase sales. They put on a show and had a lunch buffet for the audience and performers. They made $88.00 and called it a success.
On November 3rd and 4th, they gave a public performance charging 10 cents for children and 35 for adults. In 1934, they moved their factory to a two-story frame building where they could put on the shows up stairs. Again the public show was a success. The success of the two public shows and the open house convinced the partners to host the first annual Abbott Get-Together in the autumn of 1935. That year it was a one night meeting held in the Abbott Theater for an audience of about 100 people. "It was during this convention that Lester Lake (Marvelo), an escape artist, coined the phrase 'Magic Capital of the World'. He chose this phrase to describe Colon because Abbott's Magic Novelty Company was fast becoming a leading producer of magical apparatus in the United States; because the Great Blackstone made his home in Colon; and because the Abbott Get-together was becoming a major attraction for magicians" (West pp.4).

In 1936, the Abbott Theater was too small to hold the increased crowds so the Saturday evening show was followed by impromptu shows on the sidewalks and in the street in front of the factory. In 1937, they rented out the gymnasium of the local high school to seat the 500 registered magicians plus 500 public non-magicians for the evening show. In the years to come they had their ups and downs. In 1938, a fire gutted their shop and they lost a lot of their files. They bounced back only to loose many of their workers to the draft in 1941. Persistence and a love of magic kept the Get-Together strong. During the war years, Abbott's continued the Get-Together. In 1942, there were three public shows held in the opera house, now abandoned and closed off sitting above a bank off State Street. In 1943 and 1944, the shows were hosted under tents on the vacant lots situated on my current site. The tents were purchased from Skippy LaMore's road show after his death.

In 1945, the Get-Together public show was cancelled due to uncertain conditions concerning the war. The post-war years brought expansion to the factory and more people to Colon. "The big tent was especially suited for the Get-Together activities and helped create a carnival atmosphere. Saturday night performances were followed by special midnight spook shows." (West pp. 7). Things were going great for Abbott and Recil until the early 1950's when the interest in magic was overcome with the interest of television.

Original site of tent shows and current project site
Sales were declining, there was a lawsuit against the company, another fire destroyed the metal shop, and Abbott was upset with local businessman for not helping subsidize the Get-Together. Local citizens were doubling their room rents during the Get-Together to take advantage of increased population. So they moved the Get-Together to surrounding communities the following years. In 1955 it was held in Sturgies, Battle Creek in 1956, Niles in 1957 and 1958, and Coldwater in 1959. Percy Abbott chose to retire from the business following the 1959 Get-Together and sold the rest of his shares to Recil Bordner. Recil, now owning the entire business chose to return the Get-Together to Colon in 1960, but had to cancel due to Percy Abbott’s death that August. Recil patched ties with the businessmen of Colon and got the Lions Club to co-sponsor the Get-Together. Extra bleachers were brought in to high school gym to seat the 2,000 attendees for the 1961 Get-Together. Harry Blackstone was invited to perform since Abbott was no longer there. With Blackstone receiving a standing ovation from his peers, the Get-Together and Abbott’s Factory was back in business. Blackstone died in 1965, and was one of the first magicians to be buried in the local cemetery.

To this day the Get-Together is growing and some of the best performers from around the world have visited Colon. Abbott’s has over a 450 page catalog listing their props and illusions which includes Houdini’s underwater torture box; Blackstone’s buzz saw; and David Copperfield’s straightjacket. There are more magicians buried in the local cemetery than any other place in the world. Now Greg Bordner, Recil’s son runs the business and Colon is still ‘The magic capital of the world’.
**Where is the venue?**

Colon lies in Southern Michigan and is approximately 35 miles south of Kalamazoo. Colon is located on the eastern border of St. Joseph County, founded by the Schellhouse family in the 1831. Colon is mapped as a 1 mile square village and 6 mile square township. The small rural village has a population of 1,224 people and one magic factory.
There are more magicians resting in Lakeside Cemetery than any other place in the world. Lakeside Cemetery is heavily visited during the Summer Get-Together by visitors who pay respects to some of the greatest entertainers that ever lived. Some of the magicians never really grew up in Colon, but still they called Colon a home and Abbott's a family.
Site Information

Blackstone's former home. Photo taken from the back yard (left) and front (right) in 1998.

Side yard in 1998

There are no historical markings or signs that indicate that the Blackstone family once lived in this cottage. The home's current condition is in good shape and some of the original landscape features, such as the stone walkways and fountains are still on the property.

Harry Blackstone Jr. carried on his father's legacy and name performing his father's material with style and grace around the world. He too called Colon home.

Side steep to get to back yard in 1998
Standing on the corner or Blackstone and State Street looking North at various dime stores and cafes.

Above the bank is Hill's Opera House where Blackstone used to perform and practice new material. There is no electricity running to that part of the building and the bank has tight security on who can enter it. The 600 seats have been removed and windows blocked and sealed.

Curly's bar and the American Legion are two gathering spots for close-up magicians to perform during convention time.
Additions have been made to the factory during its growing years. Remnants of the fire are still visible on the south side. This photo is on the north side of the building. This view is visible from the project site. Below is the show room and stage in the factory. Close-up shows and lectures are held here every year. Creaking wooden floors and original production posters wallpaper the ceiling in this magical room.

See Site map
Colon High School currently hosts the evening show and dealers room for the Summer Get-Together. The whole town of Colon is centered around the theme of magic. The universal icon of a top hat and rabbit are on the street signs, even the school mascots are the Magi. The Summer Get-Together has been held in both the Elementary School and the High School in years past. With the convention held in the schools, there is adequate parking but you'll find the majority of the participants will walk from town or even park along side streets.
Colon Historical Museum houses artifacts regarding Colon's birth and magic memorabilia from Abbots and the Opera House. It's a neat little building that's great for school field trips on educating the children and the general public on Colon's background and its place in history.

Current brochure for the museum.

Picture taken in March 1999
Inventory

The Magical Arts Performance venue is located on the Southeast side of Sturgeon Lake off of West State Street in Colon, Michigan. Just a few hundred feet west of the downtown strip and across the street from Abbott’s magic factory. The Penn Central Railroad used to run through the site and a rundown, abandoned grain mill structure is still located on the site.
The abandoned grain mill is littered with birds and bird droppings. There is controversy over ownership of this land and building. No one has paid taxes on this strip of land in over 50 years according to Ted Gilding the City Government President. The structure has a nice secluded, eerie feeling but possess a potential hazard if left on the site. This area is nice with its tunnel like feel between the east and west tree patches. There is also a private storage barn for Golden Harvest grain. This building is used and maintained but relocating the structure will be necessary for this project.
Sturgen Lake is the site where Blackstone Sr. performed his underwater subtrunk escape and enjoyed fishing. During the winter months, the lakes freeze over on areas for ice fishing, skating and hockey activities. The St. Joseph River flows into Sturgeon Lake and then on into Lake Michigan. Canoe trips down the river are common summer activities. The state conservation department maintains three public fishing sites in the township, one is found on Sturgen Lake just northeast of the site. Sturgen Lake is known for some of the best fishing in the state of Michigan. Although there is no access to the water on the site due to the 15-20% slope to the water and overgrown trees and brush blocking the interaction. Partial clearing is necessary for proper views in this project.
The Pennsylvania Central Railroad Right-of-Way used to run through the site. The tracks have been removed and no real evidence remains on the north side of State Street. A dirt mound with vegetative brush remains on the northeast side of the site just past the grain mill. Walking on the mound and between the mound and the trees creates a feeling of privacy and the area really allows your imagination to drift. The train depot was recently moved to a new location in Colon.
State Street is also Colon Road. It is one of Colon’s busiest roads. To the east the road goes to the central business district and changes to E. State Street or M-86. The site has a great opportunity to be a gateway into Colon on the west side. This area is only 2 blocks from the downtown. State Street is busy for a small village like Colon, but no heavy, constant traffic is seen. Open views into the site are visible heading east or west. Residential housing is located on the south and east sides of the site. Consideration concerning their views and safety from drawing more people to this site has been accounted for in the master plan.
The intersection of State Street and St. Joseph makes the ideal entrance to the site. Most people visiting the site will walk from town, side roads on the east side, or from Abbott's on the south. This allows for open views as well as draw attention into the site. The site has many challenges and wonderful opportunities for dramatic views, intimate, and public spaces and deferent levels of circulation in, around and through the site.
The natural topography on the site slope west towards the lake. The majority of the site is flat open grass field, perfect for large gathering spaces and potential cabaret performing style. The gentle 10 and 20% slopes are nice for elevated viewing, which opens up more angles for the magical performers to be aware of. The trees on the east side should be utilized for its shade and wind protection.
Chapter V

Goal & Terms
GOAL:
Create an outdoor performance environment that is magical, alters one’s perception and is inspirational for the performers and audience members.

OBJECTIVES:
- Provide landscapes situated for discovery.
- Provide landscapes for individual perception.
- Provide landscapes for individual interpretation.
- Provide proper access for challenged individuals.
- Dedicate the park as a memorial to all the entertainers of Colon, Michigan.

REQUIREMENTS:
- Utilize existing site features.
- Provide an area to perform close-up, cabaret, and stage illusions.
- Provide for a comfortable space while no performance is partaking.
- Provide year round access to the park.

USERS:
- Beneficiaries of the Magical Arts Venue will ultimately be the village of Colon, Michigan. The users may be anyone interested in performing or watching magic, juggling, or any form of theater. Users may be hearing, seeing, and/or physically challenged during a performance and while park is inactive. Abbott’s Magic Company may use the area to host the Summer Get-Together shows, Close-up convention performances, and the “Triple Play Lecture”.

ASSUMPTIONS:
- I am assuming magicians and theatrical performers need and will use this outdoor venue as a place to share, perform, create and inspire during Abbott’s Close-up Convention, Triple Lecture, and Get-Together. I am also assuming the village of Colon will maintain and use the venue as a park and educational classroom for local schools.

DELIMITATIONS:
- I do not intend on creating or recreating an historical structure or venue area specifically for the Blackstone family or for Colon, Michigan. I do not intend on mending any conflicts the village of Colon has with Abbott’s and/or with magic.
DEFINING THE TERMS:

**Venue:** A plaza area that will accommodate three performing styles, that of close-up, cabaret, and stage.

**Magic:** The act of changing one's perception of reality through deception.

**Perception:** Translation of what one sees into what one knows to be reality.

**Close-up magic:** An intimate experience with a group of one to fifty persons watching a performer work a small table and / or a small stage. The audience is usually elevated slightly higher than the performer for better angles.

**Cabaret magic or stand-up magic:** Deals with a crowd of fifty to 100 persons with the magician on the same level or slightly higher than the audience. The audience can gather around the performer such as in street performing if the performer so intends.

**Stage magic:** Deals with a crowd of 100 persons and up. Illusions, juggling, and ventriloquism can be performed on an elevated stage.

**Mystical atmosphere:** An area sympathetic with its surroundings yet unique in appearance and feel even while no performance is scheduled.
Concepts

Trinity

Relationship Concepts

• Focus of audience towards the stage with Sturgen Lake as backdrop.
• Clear view sheds for dramatic views towards Sturgen Lake.
• Create access to water surface.
• Use the water for physical interaction and spiritual reflection.
• Natural slope puts the audience higher in elevation than the stage.

Views to see all three venue areas create attraction and interest as a major focus for the west side of town.

Cabaret magic is more traditional of a street performance gathering. This puts the venue closer to the road intersections and creates two side of the boundary for people to gather around the central performer. The sloped hillside helps for seating and views. This venue is also an important entrance area.

Close-up venue in this concept has seclusion which creates privacy for this intimate performance area. Separating the areas allows for discovery and perception opportunities walking from one area to the next.

Stage

An area large enough to seat 1500 people comfortable for a theater style show.

Cabaret

Or stand-up style show. An area large enough to handle 100 people standing and/or sitting on the ground.

Close-up

Intimate style of magic for small groups up to 50 people.
Concepts

Unity

Relationship Concepts

- Focus of audience towards the stage with Sturgen Lake as backdrop.
- Clear view sheds for dramatic views towards Sturgen Lake.
- Create access to water surface.
- Use the water for physical interaction and spiritual reflection.
- Natural slope puts the audience higher in elevation than the stage.

One unit allows for all three performance areas to take advantage of the water and interact with it. Unity shares boundary’s to help guide the audience’s perception of and threw the site. Allowing more close-up areas gives more people the opportunity to see more close-up performers comfortably. The focus of the audience is north west towards Sturgen Lake.

Stage
An area large enough to seat 1500 people comfortable for a theater style show.

Cabaret
Or stand-up style show. An area large enough to handle 100 people standing and / or sitting on the ground.

Close-up
Intimate style of magic for small groups up to 50 people.

North
2.75 Acres
Concept one plays with the idea of unity. Keeping everything in a tight proximity with one another. Grading of the earth on a natural curvature. Using a large rectangular stage with public restrooms added to the backstage. Fixed radius seating with a natural curve. Drop-off area in front.

Concept two pulls the close-up areas away from the main stage. There is still access to backstage for the performers but there is no drop-off. The front area is used as a pedestrian entrance and cabaret performing area.

Concept three makes a better connection of the close-up areas to the main stage yet, there is still separation. Drop-off access is back plus a large cabaret performing area with natural seating. No real focus on pedestrian entrance and circulation.

Concept four has a formal feel to it. Sight lines are used to direct pedestrians towards the close-up areas. One-way drop off plus cabaret area more defined. No main pedestrian access.
Final concept takes a little bit from every concept and relationship concept. Main stage is larger to hold a variety of acts backstage. Performance drop-off with turnaround is added, plus the one-way pedestrian drop-off in front remains. The cabaret area is a traditional circle as well as an entrance plaza during non-performance times. Natural mound seating on two sides of the cabaret area and a formal pedestrian entrance with cross-walks bring spectators from town and from Abbott’s to the area safely. Stronger connections to the close-up areas were also created with tree groupings and sight lines. Secondary pedestrian paths were also added to create stronger connection to the close-up areas yet still keep an intimate distance from the main stage. Passive recreation nodes were added for the performers to prepare themselves as well as visitors to relax during non-event times. Dramatic views to Sturgen Lake were opened up but access to the water surface is limited to small groups along a path to prevent large gathering spaces along the water. This visual connection has a greater appeal to the imagination and magical spirit than actually touching it.
Key

1. Main Stage
2. Close-up
3. Open Air Theater Seating
4. One-way vehicle entrance/ Drop-off
5. Pedestrian Entrance & Crosswalk
6. Cabaret
7. Performance Unload Area
8. Close-up
9. Abbott’s
This section through the site shows the relationship of the site features to the topography of the land. This also gives a sense of verticality of the structures through the site. The stage is the highest element standing at 45 feet high with the grid system. A large portion of the land is taken up by the open-air theater seating but the seating slope is limited to 8% for accessibility.
A proscenium stage with extended wings will be used. Proscenium stages are the most common for theatrical productions. The action on stage appears to take place in a room with a fourth wall removed. Opposed to an end stage style with an open stage in front. The extended wings can be used for MC work during variety shows as well preventing unwanted sight lines for the magicians which an open stage would do. The frontal relationship with this set up is well suited for magicians and variety shows. This stage set up also allows for more flexibility for the performer since proscenium stages are more sophisticated regarding its rigging of the fly loft, wings and backstage facilities.
The area directly above the stage where scenery, curtains and lighting instruments are hung is called the Flyloft. Battens are the metal pipes that are attached to the onstage lines from a counterweight system. Scenery is attached to the battens. The rear stage door can be raised or lowered for viewing of Sturgen lake or to keep privacy for the backstage. The trap in the stage floor can be used by the magicians as well as for storage space during the off-season. The lighting grid houses the majority of the lighting instruments and it serves to protect the magician from unwanted rain and wind. The proscenium arch is the frame in front of the stage that is the opening for the stage. The thrust is the extend stage where action can occur.
The dimensions of the stage and its work space is adequate for the type of variety shows that will perform on this stage. The 35' X 40' rooms to the right and left of the stage will act as dressing rooms and rehearsal space for the performers. Public restrooms will be located in the wing on the south side of the stage. The proscenium arch opening and stage width is 30' with two 5' front wing additions making the apron 40' wide.
Stage lighting will be housed on the grid above the stage and on an awning in front of the stage. There will be a walkspace above the grid for maintenance of the light fixtures positioned on overhead rigging. All fixtures will be adjustable and movable. The optimum angles for lighting the actor's face, is a 90 degree maximum spread and a 45 degree maximum height as shown in the figure above. There will also be flood or foot lighting on the front of the stage when proper mood lighting is required. The proscenium material is made out of simple wood panels painted mat black to be non distracting. The wood panels are painted black to control the focus of the audience towards the stage and not so much on its surrounding environment while a show is being performed. The panels can be removed during the off-season to leave a metal skeleton of poles and one brick structure on the south that remains a restroom. This opens up the views to Sturgen lake for the passive recreational park.
Close-up performing is intimate and relaxing. Audience participation and interaction is critical during a successful close-up show. This layout allows for comfortable seating spaces. Stone slabs are used for seating which is sturdy enough to put chairs knowing that the stone can become cold and hard to sit on for extended lengths of time. Using the stone over wooden benches allows for a natural feel and is conducive to spontaneous performances. Large shade trees such as Oaks are used to create a private, intimate space that helps block out noise and keeps the acoustics within the designated area. Wind is also reduced with the tree blocking which helps out the performer. Shade is also a comfort during the hot summer months. The area can be easily lit with tree lights at night for evening performances. The stage is made out of wood and is large enough to put a table surrounded with chairs on it comfortably to create an even more intimate close-up environment.
Sight lines are essential for an enjoyable close-up show. There is nothing worse for a close-up worker enthusiast to attend a show and not be able to see over the person in front of you because their head is in the way. This venue has stacked seating 2'6" above the seat in front. This allows for great sight lines and visibility. The space is also limited to 25' in length so everyone has a fair view of the performer. The angle of the seating is also limited to 60 degrees to control the unwanted side views of the performer. This space will seat 75 people comfortably.
Knowing that center stage seating provides the most enjoyable viewing for almost any performance, I provided the most seating within a 50 degree angle of the rear of the stage. The two side isles are at 85 degrees from the center of the stage. This is where most of the stage action takes place and 85 degrees still allow for adequate coverage and protection for the magician on stage. The seating compactly designed for 9 square feet of room per person is 1,148 people. The seating is staggered for optimum viewing. Each row is steeped up 6 inches. The staggered seating allows for a foot difference which allows for viewing over the persons head two rows in front.

Staggered seating

(pictures provided by Time Saver Standards)
One-way vehicle entrance/ Drop-off

There is no parking on the site. Visitors will have to walk from the Central Business District or from neighboring side streets. There is a drop-off for physically challenged individuals in front of the Cabaret performing area. The drop-off area is a one way running from State Street North-east to St. Joseph Street.
Pedestrian entrance with crosswalks allow for a safe crossing of State Street, which creates a stronger connection to the site with its surrounding context. This also creates a wonderful gateway for the West side of Colon as visitors travel towards town. The lighting ballards are black with white tips that light up the footpath for safety and ambiance for the site. The ballards are to abstractly and surrealistically represent magic wands. Just as the town has done with magic top hats for planting beds.
Master Plan

Cabaret

Section

This section shows the vertical and horizontal relationship of the land with its function. The natural seating mounds up for better viewing and the bowl allows for a wonderful area to perform Cabaret style of magic.
Cabaret

Below are two optical illusions I used in designing the cabaret area. Although the rectangles and the figures appear to be of different sizes they are in fact not. When there are several clues to depth which are consistent with one another and one which is not, the inconsistent clue is “forced” into consistency by the brain and seen in a fashion which is distorted from reality. Since there appears to be depth, the brain assumes that if two objects look the same and one is further away, it must be larger. In the Cabaret area, two flag poles 17 feet high are set in the bowl and can be draped with curtains for a formal performance area. This also sets up the illusion for the second set of poles. They are only 5 feet high but look the same in detail and structure. This, combined with the perspective of the ground plane using brick pavers allows for a wonderful illusion of the land. The mind is tricked into believing the person standing next to the smaller poles is huge compared to the person standing next to the first set in the bowl. Plus, the first poles are set in the bowl which aids in the illusion of the first person being even shorter.
Performance unload area is located on the north side of the stage. This hides the road from State Street and gives more privacy for the performers to unload. There are also little nodes for passive recreation and contemplation for performers to get ready before a performance. The area can also be used during non-event times for inspirational views towards Sturgen lake.
The Village of Colon, Michigan has a uniquely magical past due to two dramatic individuals, Percy Abbott and Harry Bouton, better known as Harry Blackstone. With its rich history and dedication to the art of magic, Colon is the site for The Magical Arts Performance Venue. The site is located as an extension to State street and sits on the shore of Sturgeon Lake, a few hundred yards south of where Blackstone used to live. The site is also the exact location were Abbott’s Get-Together used to be. Tents were set up for the evening shows on these very banks when the Get-Together first started. Thousands of performers from around the world have come to this small village to partake in the summer convention for 61 years. The Magical Arts Performance Venue will give these performers an area to showcase their talents in a setting designed specifically for them. This area will bring the tradition of wondering minstrels, and street magic back to the open air environment and back to the people.
Meaning of Magic

Primary Source:


Blum, David. “The Ace.” New York Vol. 27, No. 6 (February 7, 1994): p.g. 54-56. Ricky Jay and his 52 assistants in a tiny theater on upper Broadway. PERIODICAL


Gubernick, Lisa and Peter Newcomb. “Now You See It, Now You Don’t” Forbes Vol. 152 No. 7 (Sept. 27, 1993): p.g. 88-92. David Copperfield has modernized an ancient art with theatrical drama. PERIODICAL

Annotated Bibliography

Meaning of Perception

Primary Source:


History of Magic

Primary Source:


**History of Colon, Michigan**

*Primary Source:*


Annotated Bibliography

http://www.connectors.com/harryjr.html Harry Blackstone Jr’s family clears some of the inaccuracies in the Associated Press.

Stage Design and Construction

Primary Source:

