“At the beginning of the nineteenth century the theatre catered to a wide range of social and economic classes, which were distinguished within the theatre—by where they were seated; each section of a theatre formed a society of its own.” - Robert Toll

The architecture of the theatre and the circus arena or amphitheatre was very similar. In fact, the circus is said to simply be “a theatre with the ring scooped out of the middle.” An 1836 description of the National Theatre provides a glimpse into what the interior of a theatre or circus might look like:

“The interior comprises a pit, with 500 seats, three tiers of boxes with 336 seats each and a gallery with 200 seats. The boxes have five rows of seats each... The proscenium presents an opening 40 feet wide and 33 feet high. It is composed of pilasters, having ornamented capitals and bases, which support a beautifully enriched arch, crowned with the American eagle. The depth of the stage is 61 feet. The circle of boxes is so arranged, that in every part of the house a full view is had of the stage.”

The interior was designed to accommodate 1,000 people. The cost of admission at the Warren Theatre in 1832 was 50 cents for a box and 25 cents in the pit. Later in 1847 the National Theatre charged $1 for a private box, 50 cents for a box seat, 25 cents in the pit and the 1st gallery 25 cents with the 2nd gallery costing a mere 12.5 cents. The difference in pricing strictly divided the space by class. The boxes were reserved for the wealthy, separating the middle and upper classes from the crowd and providing comfortable seating, which attracted “gentlewoman.” In the riotous pit, evidence suggests there was prostitution, shouting, fighting and whistling. One could sit on the ground, and drink, eat or smoke in the pit. To prevent disruptive behaviors, the police presence in the arena was often announced before the performance started. Surprisingly, there were not many children in a circus audience at the time, if any; entertainment was a rare commodity, and was not wasted on children.

Although the pit and third tier could be riotous, the circus, unlike the theatre was well regarded.

“It is possible that the single event in circus history most often referred to is George Washington’s visit to Ricketts’ Circus in April 24, 1793...Certainly, if the President of the United States allows himself to be seen at an equestrian performance it speaks well for the social acceptability of the entertainment.” - Stuart Thayer

By the 1890s, this clear differentiation of space in the circus amphitheatre would disappear. With the innovation of the ‘Big Top’ circus, the circus had a new architecture. The seats could no longer be divided by class, and the only distinction to be made was between reserved seats and general admission unlike most theatres which retained the same, or a similar division of space. The circus also decamped from the city for smaller towns, attracting a different audience.