

**WALKING IN THE CITY:
AN OPERATIONAL THEATRE**

by

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ABSTRACT

The city is to be considered a site of power. Privileged, gendered, uneven, the city exercises authority and control over its inhabitants. What masks as public, in truth, is private. Its space and structures are fixed by its economic and political operations, impenetrable to the lived practices of its inhabitants. To transgress boundaries is to reclaim urban space for its residents. Urbanism is recast as a space of social production; the city is a contested site.

The city as theatre reveals a totalizing impulse. The theatrical city suggests a scopic tendency, an image of the city grasped as a whole. Theatre itself is much more elusive; its definitions multiply. As scenography, it reasserts authority; as performance it infiltrates; as spectacle; it alienates; as drama, it contests. Theatre in the city operates at this intersection; its stage is mutable, its architecture muted.

This thesis is then a strategy of inhabiting the city. Normal conceptions of the public city are set aside, the definition is appraised anew. To construct a momentary encounter that interrupts the familiar, reclaims territory. Occupying the unknown, viewing from below are tactics to remap the city.

The program is a constructed theatre, sited and re-sited in New York City. To be assembled in place, the project intends to appropriate given public space and redefine it as a public space for performance. The inherent transmutive qualities of the stage and performance are appropriated for the building. The question becomes: How does a theatre operate in the city?

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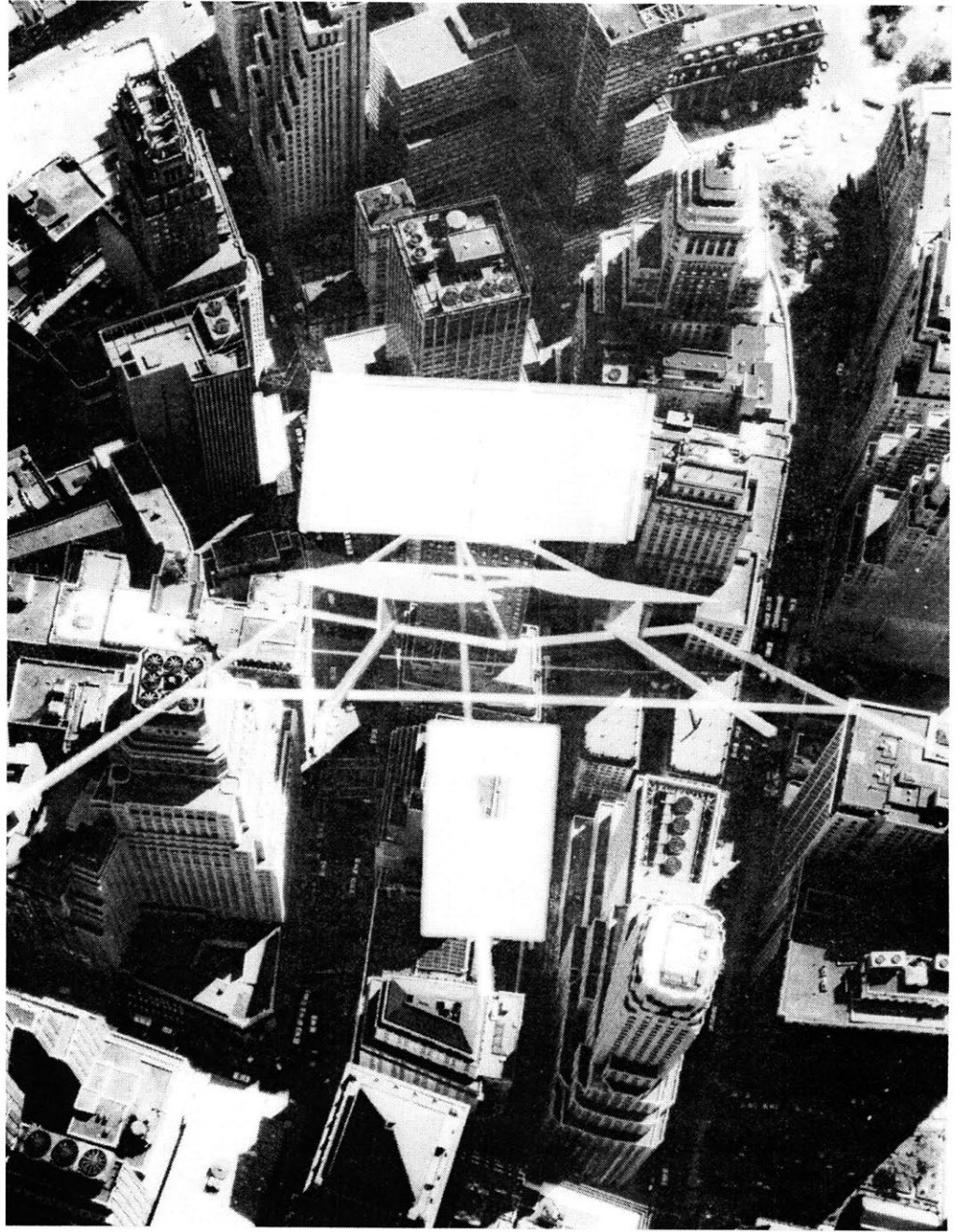


Fig.6

INTRODUCTION

The ordinary practitioners of city live "down below," below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk — an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmanner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms...It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness.

—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

THEATRE AS PUBLIC SPACE

The meaning of public space is to be considered contested. Yet numerous design projects are nurtured in the belief that its meaning is self-evident. Indeed, public spaces concretize images of "the public" as a unified democratic whole. But experience teaches us that every arena is a contentious venue, the scene of exclusionary authoritarian acts or competing interests in the private realm. This exclusivity and competition is made invisible under the guise of a democratic public, one that attempts to harmonize differences into a universal idea of society and perceives difference as alien. A more appropriate definition of democracy would include a conception of a heterogeneous public; or multiple publics engaged in debate with one another. Consequently, to serve the public, public space must be reformulated to render visible the difference and conflict intrinsic in democratic life.

Given this premise that public space must accommodate difference, one must abandon more accepted notions of public space. For example, public space need not take on perceived universal standards of programming: a park or square does not exist for prescribed park or square "activities." Instead, I have chosen to use an urban theatre as a public space to reconsider such issues.

Historically, theatre developments parallel those of the public sphere. Originally under the autocratic authority (and sometimes the direct control) of the monarchy, theatre quickly distanced itself from the crown as it was commercialized. New traveling theatres offered places for the public to critique the existing power structure. Similarly, the construction of a public sphere during the Enlightenment generated a realm in which citizens engaged in criticisms of the state; inherent in the public sphere's definition is an assumption of a political identity for individuals and an engagement with debate and democracy.

Consequently, the idea of the public sphere, and theatre as a materialization of

the idea, can be used as a means to reassess traditional conceptions of public space as a homogenizing place that erases multiplicity.

Theatre as an art has radically altered in the last two centuries to incorporate ideas of difference, contestation, mutability and interaction. Indeed, the idea of flexibility has been central to successive innovations in theatre stage technology. However, the form and space of theatre architecture has remained resistant to the transmutive quality of the stage, perpetuating fixed notions of a unified public space. To this end I propose to design a theatre that manifests the difference and conflict inherent in a democratic public space.

THEATRE, URBANISM AND THEATRICALITY

The theatre and the city have been intertwined for centuries, serving up representations of public life and each other. Both are spaces of assemblage and exchange between actors, audience, citizens, government; in short, the public. If theatre is a mirror to society, then it has metamorphosized continuously over the years to reflect the changing world. To enter the theater, is to engage in a public act. The collective experience of the audience witnessing a performance transcends the mere illusionism of the stage, but is to negotiate the meaning of society. Historically, theatre brings together a broader range of people from various social strata. The immediacy of the event can transform aesthetic experience into a political one.

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Outside the physical theatre, the city, itself is appears as the true site of theatre, and that citizens are the actors. Stage theatres mirror this tendency, so that foyers, processional spaces, balconies cast the entire experience as theatrical; the public is on display. In a system of global electronic capitalism and virtual worlds, we must confront a thoroughly architectural problem: the role of physical presence in constituting public space. According to Paul Virilio, “the open city” is a city that defies boundaries and solidity in the face of film, television and computers. Edges are effaced, centrality is dispersed, physicality is questioned. The theatre in the city must then question its place in the world. In short, what becomes a theatrical experience in contemporary society?

THEATRE TECTONICS

The final layer of this thesis is the designing of the architectonics of a specific theatre. This enterprise requires a rigorous examination of ideas of flexibility within theatre tectonics. Theatres are often closed, symmetrical, fixed forms that contain mechanical systems that allow for highly adaptable stage interiors. Often, facades offer only masks of immutability; lobbies and processional spaces resemble herding devices; seating arrangements reiterate class hierarchy, stages enforce separation between theatre and life. This project examines these

adaptable theatre tectonics (i.e. the inside of the box) as a strategy of exposing how other parts of the theatre (i.e. the box) can be exploded in order to make manifest the differences and conflict inherent in public theatre.

THESIS STRUCTURE

The format of this project is a layering of different strategies and approaches related to the issue of a public theater in New York. The book is structured accordingly. Each chapter can be read individually, while together they display the range of ideas explored in the project. Conceived theoretically and abstractly, the project gravitated towards specificity of site and program. The primary influential ideas of public space, urbanism and politics are located in the urban derive. Theatre was looked at historically, programmatically, tectonically and theoretically, with definitions of theatre pivoting between theatre, stage and the city. The chapters on the theatre/performance and modern vision/american stage touch on pressing issues of theater and stage design; together these sections reveal how changes in the city and society have influenced the design of performance over the centuries. New York sections tackle the city as a site, a set of structures to be infiltrated. The book reads as a combination of research and design responses to a range of issues. The thesis is an exploration into these ideas of how a theater operates into the city, and should be read as a series of investigations more than a set of concrete solutions.



Fig.10 Kazimierz Podsadecki, *The City-Mill of Life*, 1929, Sztuki Museum, Lodz.

NEW YORK

In the age of speed, the skyscraper has petrified the city. The skyscraper has reestablished the pedestrian, him alone....He moves anxiously near the bottom of the skyscraper, louse at the foot of the tower. The louse hoists himself up in the tower; it is night in the tower oppressed by the other towers: sadness, depression...But on top of those skyscrapers taller than the others, the louse becomes radiant.

— Le Corbusier

In a sense, modern America was invented by the skyscraper. The explosion of tall buildings created a radical vision of the United States until then previously unknown to the world. The skyscraper heralded the country as the ascendant commercial and cultural power of the twentieth century. In particular, it was New York architecture and metropolitan life that defined and epitomized American modernity. Unlike continental cities, New York's verticality was stunningly new.¹ Far from their dizzying heights, the image of soaring skyscrapers fueled the imagination. Indeed, some of the most evocative imaginings of the metropolis originated from those who never set foot on the continent. The force of the skyscraper emerged from myth and projection as much as from technological breakthroughs and economic advances. If modernity can be characterized as an adherence to the new, then American skyscrapers embodied this in appearance and function.

While the skyscraper's early history could be conceived as a contest between New York and Chicago, it was the Manhattan version of the tall building that quickly captured the imagination of the world. The zoning ordinance of 1916 limited New York's building bulk by requiring towers to set back at a fixed angle from the street. In effect, the law refigured the Manhattan skyscraper into the ziggurat towers that punctured the city's sky. Already circumscribed by the grid of city blocks, real estate now stretched and restretched the limits of the zoning envelope. To maximize building mass, the setback law allowed few variations; the design was preordained by the code. The skyscraper's form embodied maximum profit; an aestheticizing of commerce.² But the Gotham "race for the sky" demanded competing individualisms. In response to the implicit uniformity of the setback law, architects differentiated their buildings through highly visible and identifiable imagery. As the Chrysler Building, the Chanin Building, and the Empire State Building became recog-

nizable markers on the rapidly expanding skyline, corporate identity and building name became valued commodities. With each building vying for a unique pinnacle, an array of stylistic pastiche ensued: art deco, Gothic, Renaissance jumbled to form a spectacular urban image. The unconceived city now had the most recognizable iconography of the world.

Rising like an overgrown forest, skyscrapers seemed less like objects bulked up from the setback than as related parts of a unified city. As skyscrapers fashioned themselves into an urban scenography, the “skyline” concept came into existence. A conscious effort was given to understanding how buildings function together. Intended to solve the problems of skyscraper congestion, theoretical city planning began to connect individual skyscrapers together in mazes of walkways, terraces and bridges. The recurrent image of Manhattan as a New Babylonian city of towers³ evolved from from trite historical reference to be a radical expression of the city as a central and modern experience. More importantly, these plans conveyed a sense of continual movement through the city. If Paris was a series of composed processional vistas, New York was a perpetual kinetic encounter. In vision and steely reality, the skyscrapers of New York, were drawing closer to Le Corbusier’s conception of modern building:

*Architecture is judged by eyes that see, by the head that turns, and the legs that walk. Architecture is not a synchronic phenomenon but a successive one, made up of pictures adding themselves one to another following each other in time and space, like music.*⁴

Connected both vertically and horizontally, the idea of the public street, expanded the levels of viewpoints from which the city was observed. Viewpoints of the city layered and multiplied, changing from below to above, closeup to extreme distance. This shifts occurred because the public space of the city was envisioned as an integrated complex of transportation, streets and infrastructure, a synthesized city. Catalyzed by the skyscraper, a uniquely American sense of balance emerged between the anarchistic parts and the unified whole.

Because of their tremendous height, skyscrapers evoked strange and new views of the city. Modernism’s romance with the airplane had combined a fascination with flight with the omniscient viewpoint it brought. But the skyscraper encouraged looking not only downward, but upward as well. The height, the mass, the oblique angles created a new subjective viewpoint of the city, one that centralized man and his vision. Even Hugh Ferriss’s awesome charcoaled towers were backdrop to the eyes of a diminutive man. In *Amerika*, a photographic account of his journey through the States, Eric Mendelsohn writes:

In order to accustom people to seeing from new viewpoints it is essential to take pho-

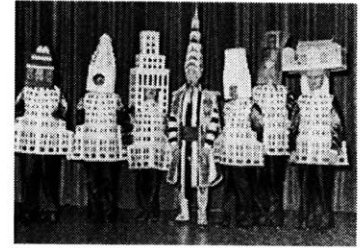


Fig.12.1 1931 Beaux Arts Ball

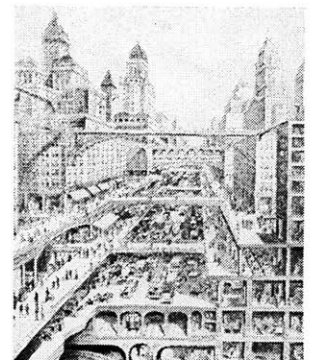


Fig.12.2 City of the Future
Harvey Wiley Corbett



Fig.12.3 Man Inside the Ferrissian
Void, the Womb of Manhattanism

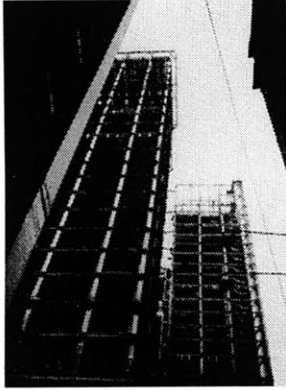


Fig.13.1 Knud Longberg-Holm photography reproduced in Eich Mendelsohn's *Ameika*

*tographs of everyday, familiar subjects from completely unexpected positions. New subjects should be photographed from various points, so as to present a complete impression of the subject.*⁵

Photography emphasized the scale and monumentality that had never before existed in cities. Careening facades and spiraling scaffolds were warped degrees more to convey the impression of gazing skyward at these new structures.

Finally, the skyscraper exemplified the machine age aesthetics that were central to modernism. While technology had influenced architecture in form and image, the skyscraper in its very production values embodied technological innovation. More than other modernist buildings, the skyscraper was stripped down to its structural components. Skeletal in appearance, with its frame as its skin, these tall buildings revealed an honesty in construction that the Europeans could not match. More than the success of modern industrialization, the skyscraper registers the triumph of those particularly American forms of manufacturing: Taylorism and Fordism. Scientific management and the assembly line combined to accelerate construction speed to new levels. Composed of standardized parts, skyscrapers were built with breathtaking alacrity. Buildings in New York City seemed to be erected being almost overnight, their progress documented by newspaper headlines and tabloid photographs. With the announcement of each new skyscraper, each taller than the previous one, the continual mutation of Manhattan's skyline became a theatrical experience. In a constant state of renewal and growth, New York was the ultimate "City of Tomorrow."⁶

The decade of the 1920s in particular, witnessed a general immersion in skyscraper culture in iconography, synthesis, structure and speed. At face value,

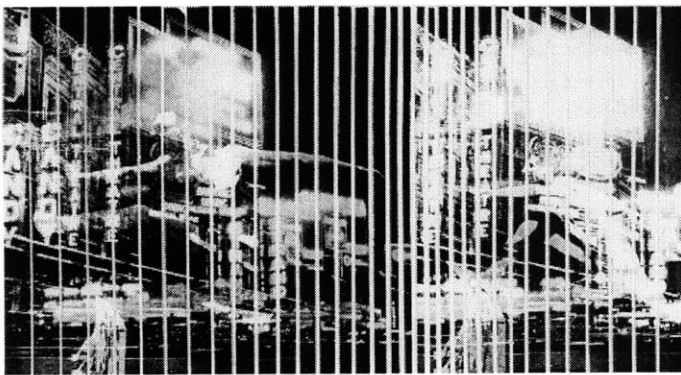


Fig.13.2 El Lissitzky, *The Runners*, after 1926.

New York can be defined in abstract terms: grid, density and height, capitalism unchecked. Combined, these vertical forces operated on Manhattan to create an urban vision unlike any other city in the world. The experience within the city can not be measured. Walking through Manhattan is an explosion of uncontrollable views, ways of seeing that foreground the pedestrian observer rather than the omniscient voyeur. Even early aerial views of the city were focused on the

idea of seeing from a unprecedented angle rather than observing the city as a whole. The radical nature of this vision at the beginning of the century can not be underestimated. Photography, film, stage, painting and architecture were all impacted by this sight. While this imagery impacted the metropolitan area, its effect was often redirected through the lens of European artists. Obliqueness,

reframing, extreme zooms, unrecognizable details were all hallmarks of being inside the city's terrain. More than an aesthetic shift, Manhattan signalled a focus on the viewing practices of the man on the street. While skyscrapers heralded the era of the city as an accumulation of capital, the everyday experience of walking through, once past the shadows of towers, the heat of the subways, the drudgery of the office work could be a positively exhilarating experience. Artists of the day tried to capture this vision of the city, a vision that suggested an alternative practice of operating in the city.

FOOTNOTES

1 The complex distinction in modern between horizontality and verticality deserves more delineation. Verticality has come to be associated with individual capitalistic concerns, while horizontality suggests a sense of civic mindedness. The horizontality of European cities is understood as a result of a planned urbanism. New York's verticality is viewed a result of unplanned capitalist forces. In actuality, the horizontality of the Haussman plan of Paris prepares the city for capitalist expansion. In fact, Walter Benjamin's essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" demonstrates how the forces of capitalism by his time had already grabbed hold of the city. Horizontality is a mask for capitalism. Ironically, it was the totally unveiled capitalism of the vertical skyscraper that seemed to offend Europeans when they first encountered the vertical cities.

Before the heyday of the capitalist 1920s, New York itself seemed self-conscious of the implicit meaning of verticality. The earliest skyscrapers raised were represented as horizontal as possible in order to emphasize their civic responsibility and connection to the street and city as a whole. See Thomas Bender and William R. Taylor, "Architecture and Culture: Some Aesthetic tensions in the Shaping of Modern New York City," in *Visions of the Modern City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 187-219.

2 Visionary architect Hugh Ferriss rendered a series of drawings on the evolution of a skyscraper's shape to show the limited role of the architect in designing these buildings. A famous image from the period, the architects at the Beaux Arts Ball, dresses the architects with identical setback costumes distinguished only by their hats. See Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 97.

3 Much of the 1920s interest in New Babylonian themes was fueled by the recent archaeological discoveries of King Tut's tomb. Images of Ancient Egypt permeated the popular arts, including one of the favorite entertainments of the day: the dance spectacles of Ruth St. Denis. The parallel historical themes is a compelling one as St. Denis has often been considered a primary catalyst behind the move towards synthesizing movement and theatrical design.

4 Le Corbusier quoted in Christine Boyer, *The City as Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1994), p. 52.

5 Quoted in Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995). Not to be underestimated is the effect that photography had on the image of the skyscrapers. Similar to the distribution of other architectural images, photography was key to the way skyscraper imagery was disseminated, but the two arts established a more reciprocal relationship during the boom years of the skyscraper. As skyscrapers fostered oblique views of the city, photography intensified the monumentality and scale of the city.

6 In his *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas's description of Hugh Ferriss's imaginary drawings of the New York landscape as being from the "womb" is intended to show the metropolis in a constant state of rebirth.

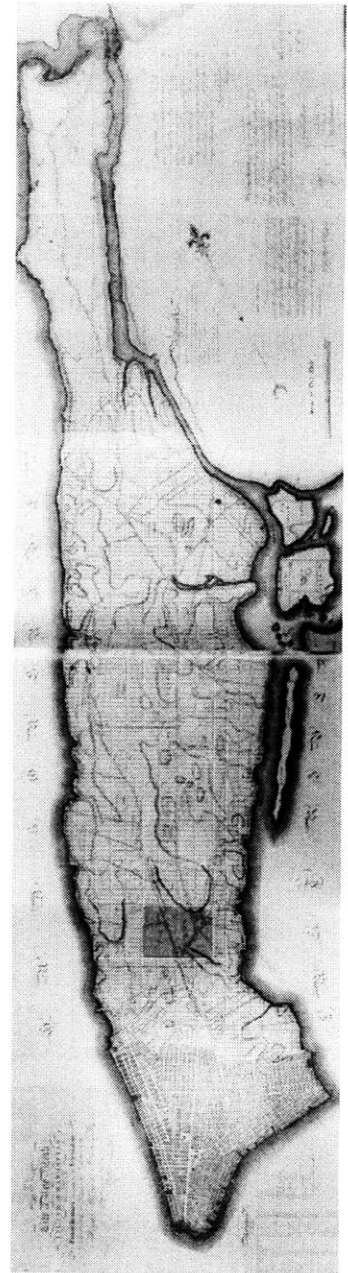


Fig.14 Commissioners' Proposal For Manhattan, 1811

The splendor, picturesqueness, and oceanic amplitude and rush of these great cities, the unsurpassed situation, rivers and bay, sparkling sea-tides, costly and lofty new buildings, facades of marble and iron, or original grandeur and elegance of design, with masses of gay color, th preponderance of white and blue, th flags flying, the endless ships, the tumultuous streets, Broadway, the heavy, low, musical roar, hardly ever intermitted, even at night...the assemblages of the citizens in their groups, conversations, trades, evening amusements, or along the by-quarters-these, I say, and th like of these, completely satisfy my senses of power, fullness, motion, etc., and give me through such senses and appetites, and through my aesthetic conscience, a continued exaltation and absolute fullfilment..

—Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, p. 326

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Fig.15 Berenice Abbott, *City Arabesque from Roof of 60 Wall Tower, Manhattan*

SEEING IN NEW YORK

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To see in New York is to look anew. Monumental scale, spiraling skyscrapers, extreme shifts. To walk through Manhattan is an unexpected vision. An insertion in the city should endeavor to capture this uniqueness. The following are spatial practices for infiltrating the City. As a collection, they extend, emphasize, reframe, shuffle. Intended to interrupt the totalizing gaze of above, the city as a whole, these experiments are about rendering visible the unseen operations of travelling within the city. The origins of these de Certeau devices are drawn from the breadth of visual responses to Manhattan with acknowledgements to the stage. If the theatre is a lab for the city, then the visual permutations of New York must be grasped to be inscribed on stage.

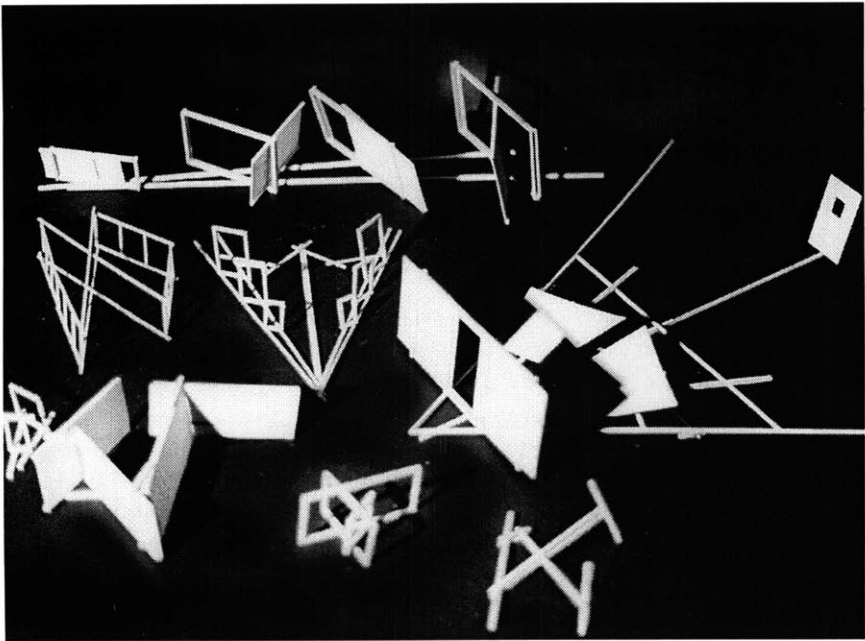


Fig.17

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes....

—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 92

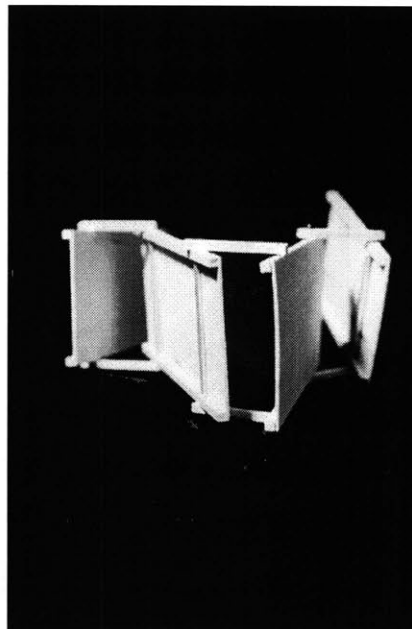
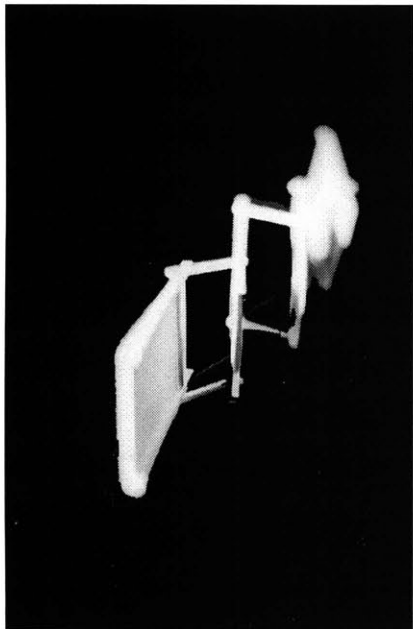
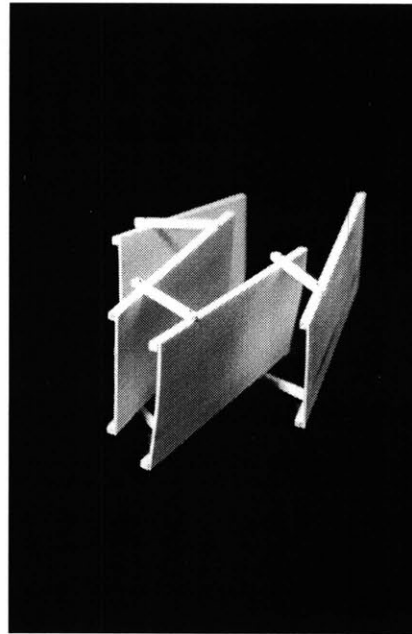
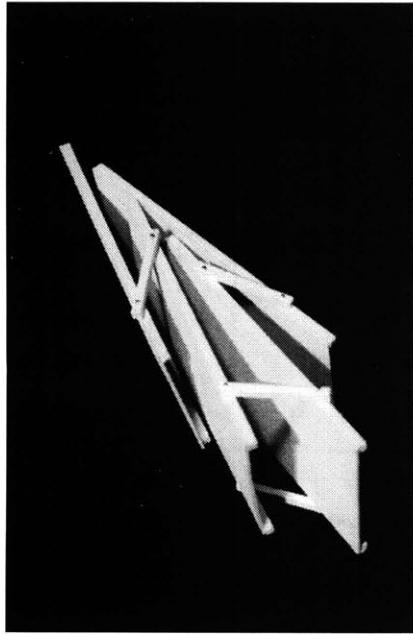


Fig.19 Folded View

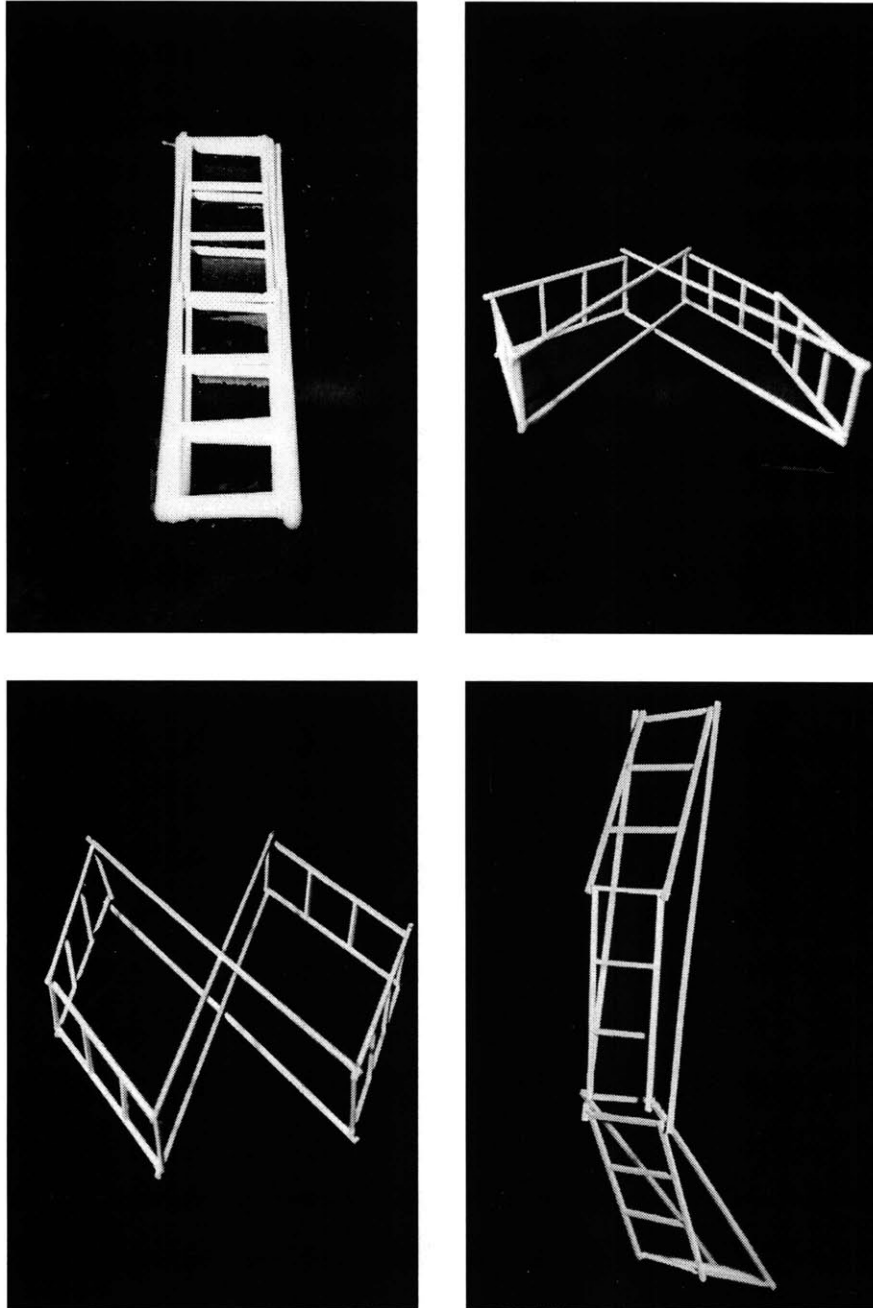


Fig.20 Film Form View

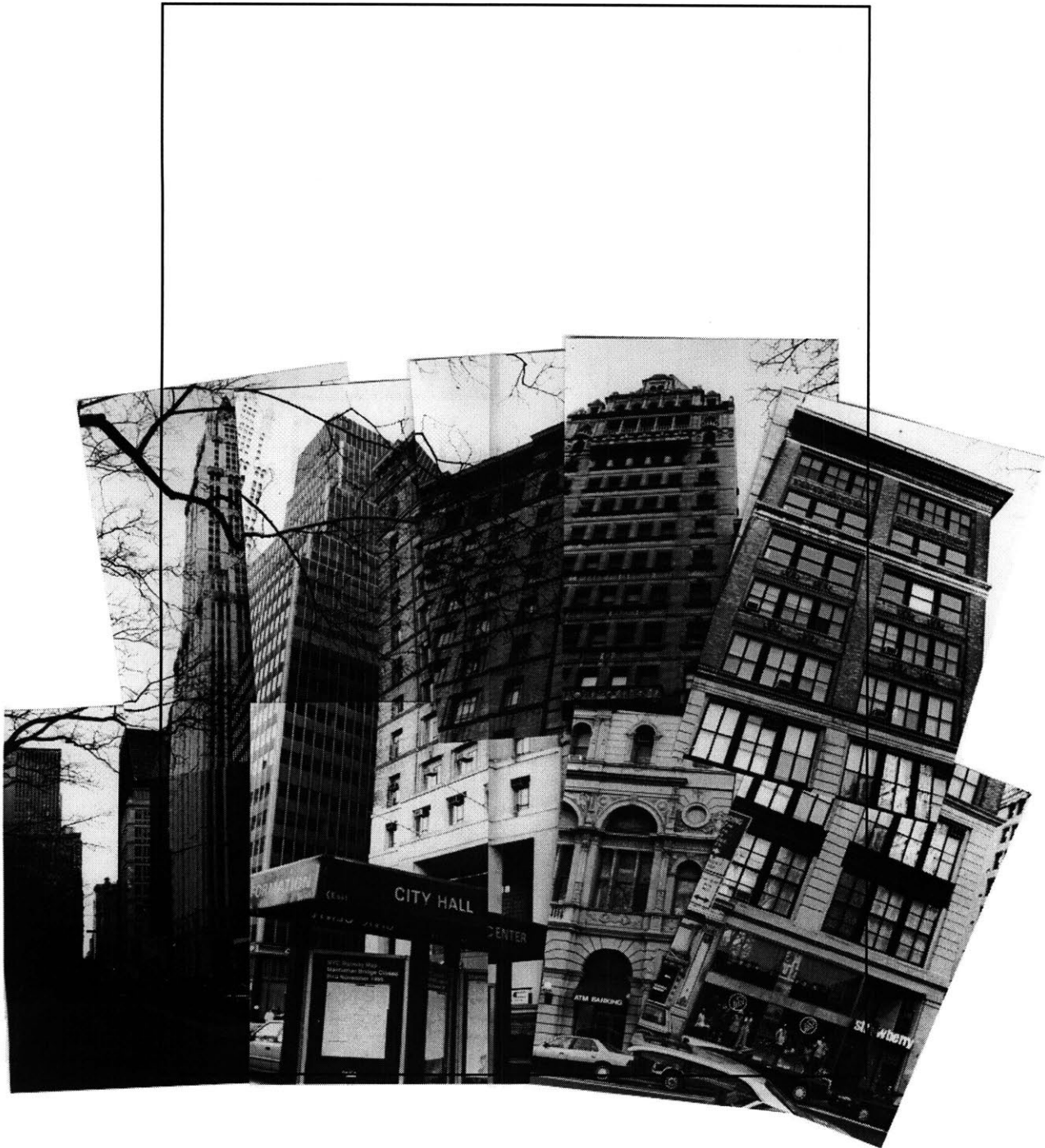


Fig.21

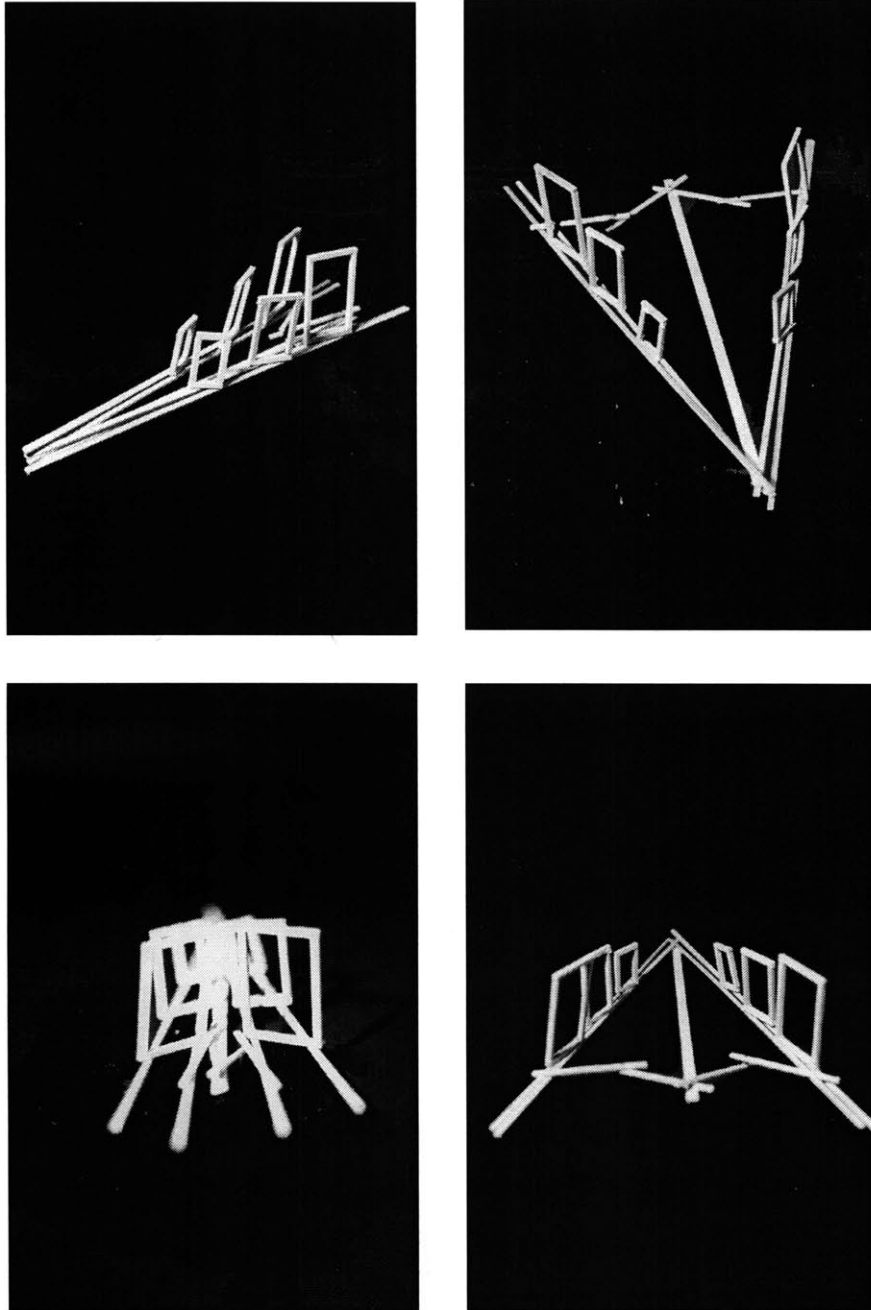


Fig.22 Bernini Stage Device

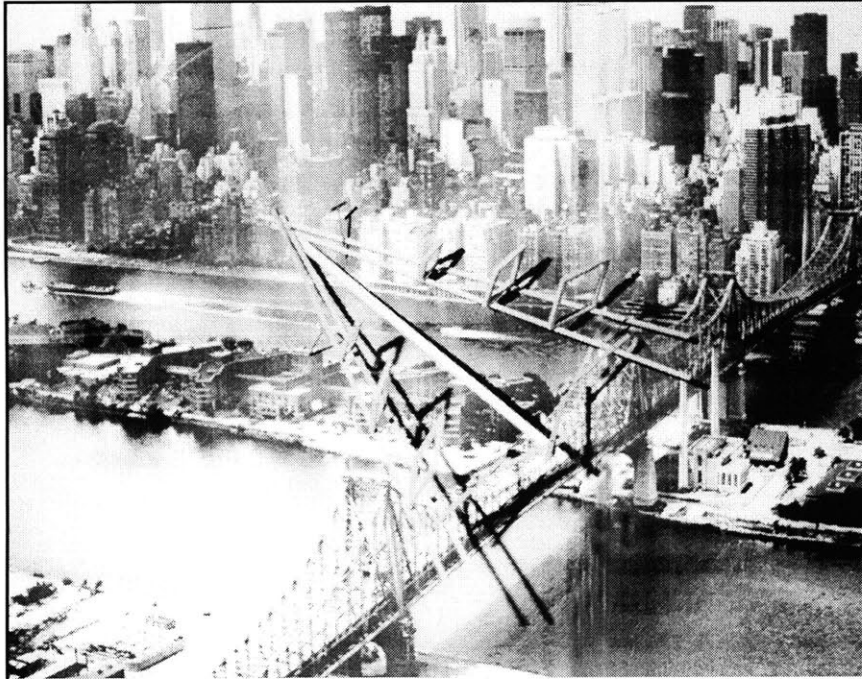


Fig.23

Must one finally fall back into the dark space where crowds move back and forth, crowds that, though visible from on high, are themselves unable to see down below? An Icarian all. On the 110th floor, a poster, sphinx-like, addresses an enigmatic message to the pedestrian who is for an instant transformed into a visionary: It's hard to be down when you're up....

Michel de Certeau, p. 93

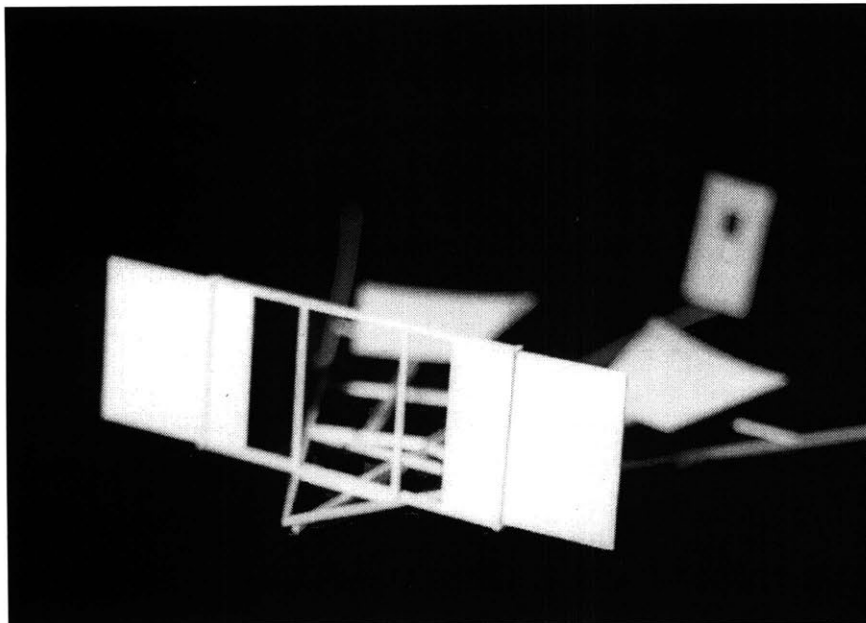
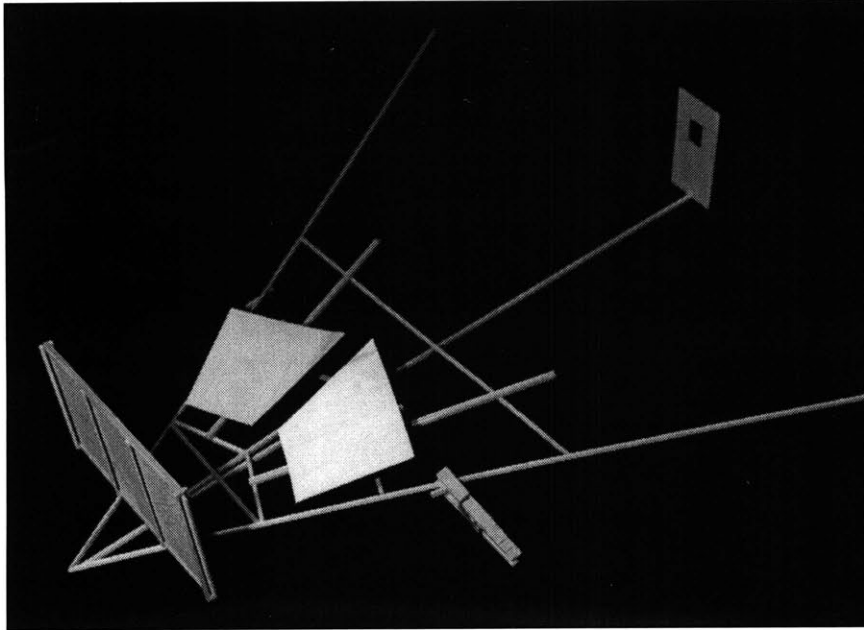


Fig.25 Aperspective Theatre Device

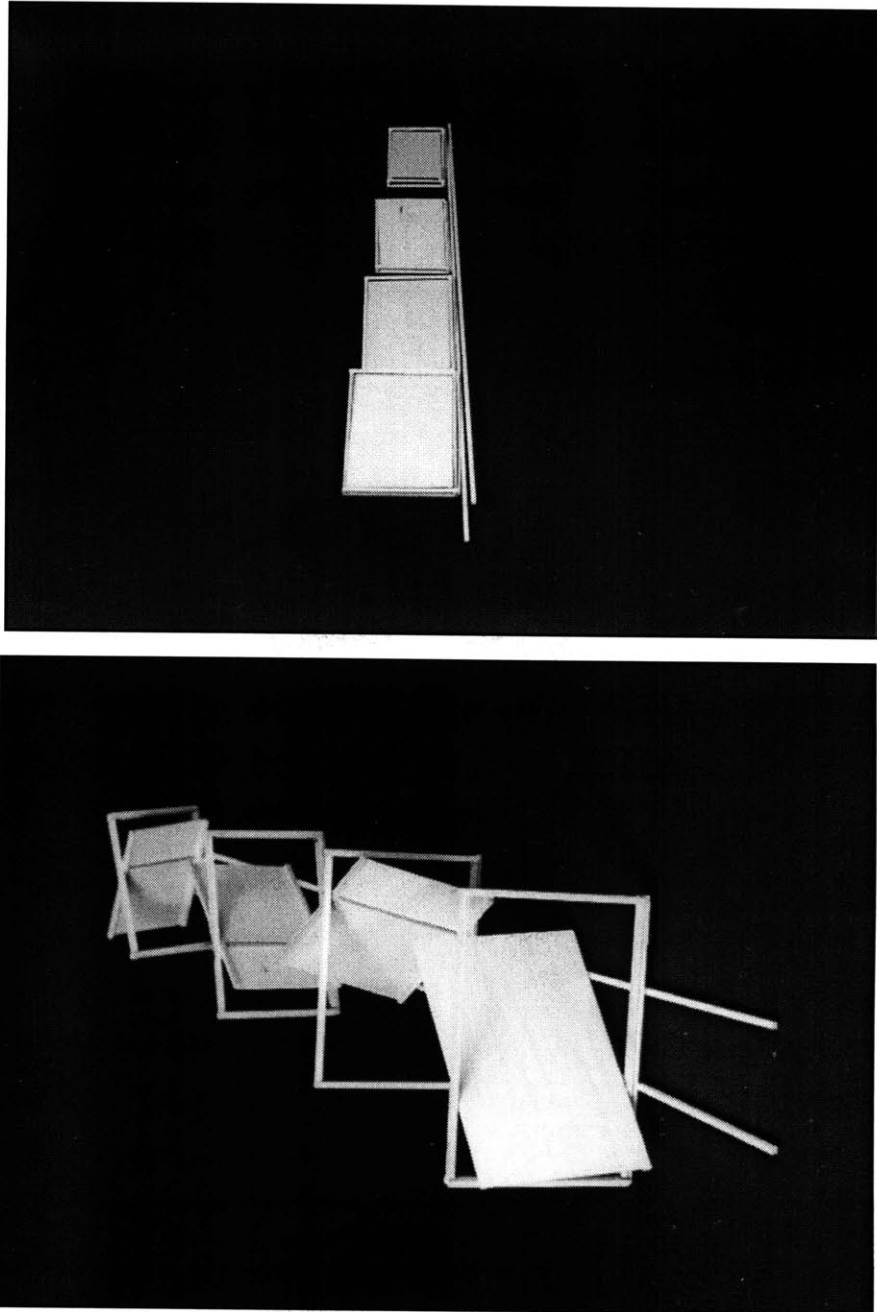


Fig.26 Extended Camera



Escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible.

—Michel de Certeau, p. 92

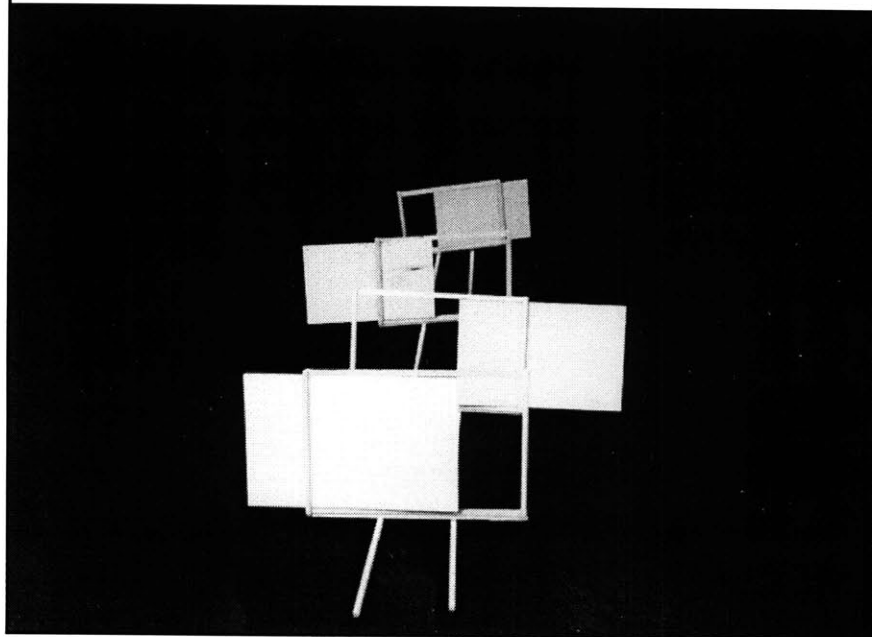
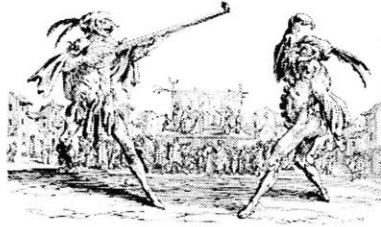


Fig.28



Fig.29



THEATRE/PERFORMANCE

30

As an urban artifact, the theater has always mediated between its exterior and interior functions. Inside, the theater is a container for the representations of the outside world. Externally, the theater is pure architectural form that masks its contested interior. To negotiate between these two worlds is to comprehend the position of the theater in the city. An examination of theater, both as performance and architectural form, is necessary to see how its program can be exploited for operating the city.

For the purposes of analysis, the theater was broken down into the following broad categories: The City and the Theatre; Perspective/Acoustics; Theatre Technology; Audience/Public Hierarchy; Performance; Total Theatre. These components were studied to understand how a theatre might operate within the city. The following pages are selections from the research conducted during the thesis.

An understanding of theater as architecture and theatre as performance was crucial to inserting a theater in the city. As site-specific work, the history of performance in the city can take a minimal approach, urbanism is an ample background for most actors. Theater as building, is sited urbanistically, but does not always forge strong links to the city; the connections remain stage-bound. The edge between these arenas (stage, theater, city) is the site for investigation.

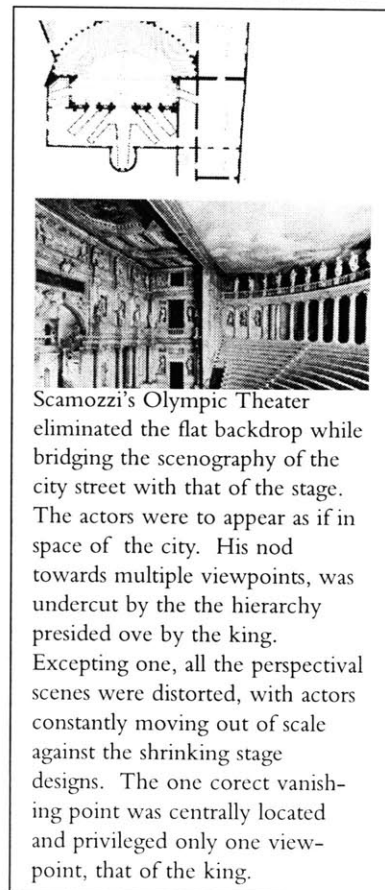


Fig.31 Performer, Triadic Ballet, Oskar Schlemmer

fig. 32.1



fig. 32.2



In any case, and I hasten to say so at once, a theater that subordinates mise-en-scene and production—that is, everything that is specifically theatrical—to the script is a theater for idiots, madmen, perverts, grammarians, grocers, anti-poets, and positivists, in short, a theater for Westerners.

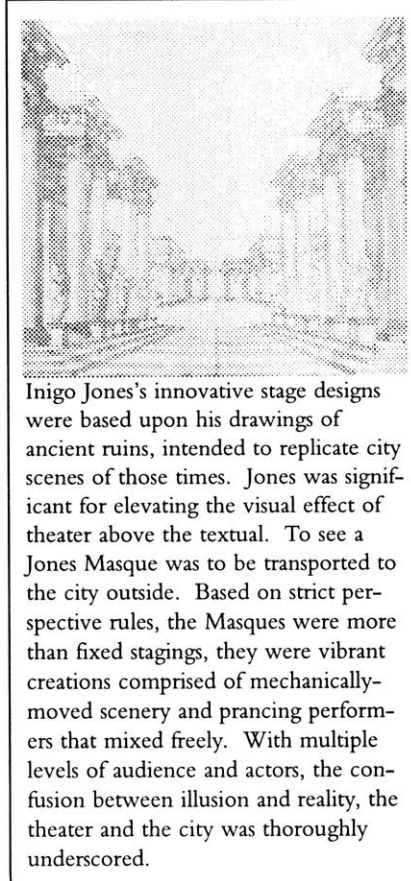
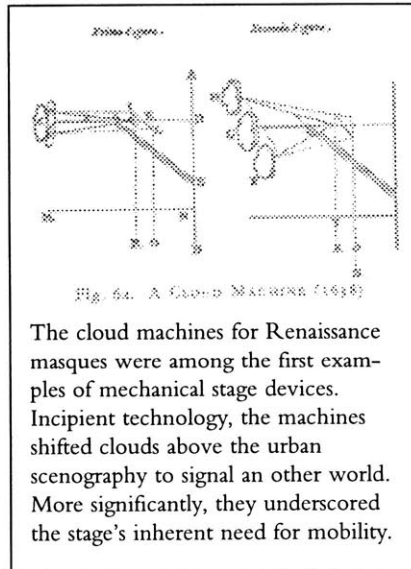
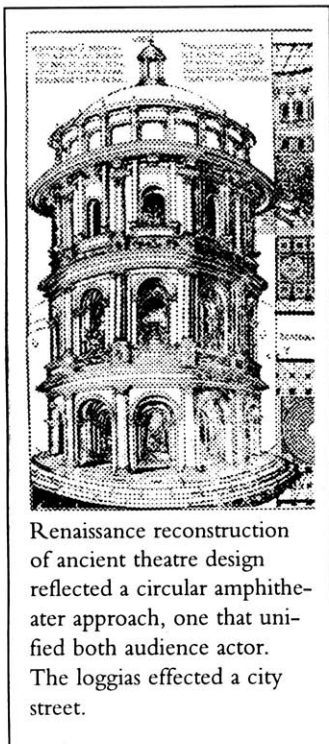
—Antonin Artaud

“The Theatre and Its Double”, *Selected Writings*, p. 234

fig. 33.1

fig. 33.2

fig. 33.3

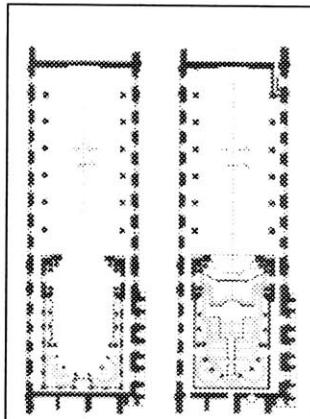


The abyss which separates the players from the audience as it does the dead from the living; the abyss whose silence in a play heightens the sublimity, whose resonance in an opera heightens the intoxication—this abyss, of all elements of the theater the one that bears the most indelible traces of its ritual origin, has steadily decreased in significance. The stage is still raised, but it no longer rises from an unfathomable depth; it has become a dais. The didactic play and the epic theater are attempts to sit down on a dais.

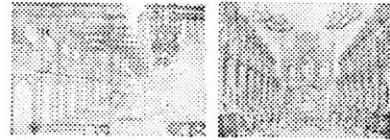
—Walter Benjamin
 “What is Epic Theatre”, *Illuminations*, p. 154

fig. 34.1

fig. 34.2



Vigarani's Salles des Machines at Versailles was among the most elaborate of temporary theatres. Inserting itself into a large rectangular interior space, the design transformed the court of the King into a temporary space for deep spectacles.



The most significant of the late Renaissance theaters, Teatro Farnese was forged the development of the deep proscenium stage and highly mechanical theaters of the Baroque era. A U-shaped design, the theater operated for either large-scale arena productions or at the proscenium level with a sophisticated stage machinery.

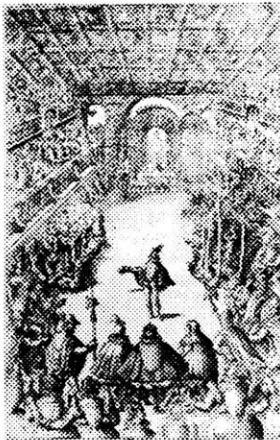
At the theater men of cultivation and of literary attainments have always had more difficulty than elsewhere in making their taste prevail over that of the people and in preventing themselves from being carried away by the latter. The pit has frequently made laws for the boxes.

—Alexis de Tocqueville
Democracy in America, p. 376

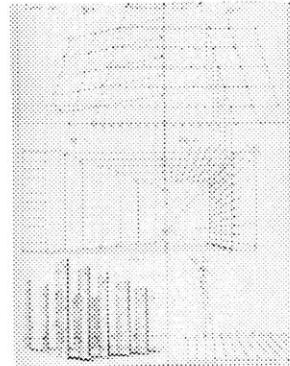
fig. 35.1

fig. 35.2

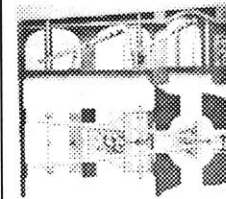
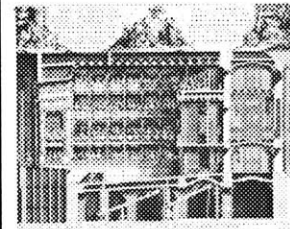
fig. 35.3



Performed in the Petit Bourbon in Paris, the Ballet Comique de la Reyne exemplified the hierarchy of seating arrangements. Organized along a central axis, the pageant was flanked by minor members of the court, with the King seated on axis. The sight-lines of such a long space, privileged the eyes of the ruler at the end.

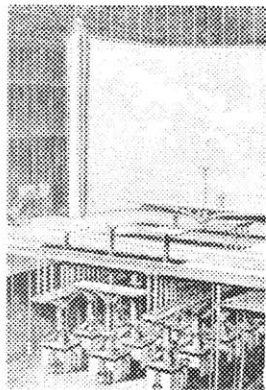


The stage designs of Bibiena in the 18th century furthered the illusionistic theatre based on perspective principles. Constructed from a series of flats, rather than alleys of fixed perspective, these designs solved the problems of scale. Widely influential through publication of his drawings, Bibiena fused perspective with theater while ushering in the age of purely illusionistic theater as spectacle, and consequently, detached from the audience.



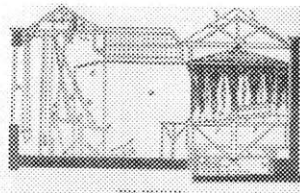
Although an extension of the scenographic ideas of the Bibienas, the Residenztheater at Munich as designed by Francois Cuvilles pushed the mechanical stage device into the theater itself. Rather than just moving scenery, the entire orchestra floor could be raised or lowered to accommodate either proscenium performances or a flat floor to allow for spectacles.

fig. 36.1



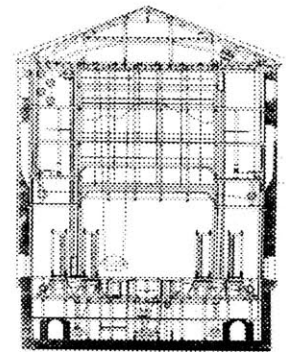
Adopted by the Budapest Opera House in 1881, the Asphaleia stage was heralded as the most sophisticated and flexible stage machinery in the world. Its most innovative element was the revolving stage, which held an uninterrupted panorama of scenery, marked by a horizon line.

fig. 36.2



The London Diorama of 1823 was founded on principles of the individual inside a machine that unfolded a visual experience. Placed in this machine, the lone audience member was sometimes rotated while the scenic panorama circulated. The Mechanical apparatus contained the audience, not the

fig. 36.3



Rapidity of scenery changes reached a new height with the 17th century Italian theaters. A sliding flat system was centralized and the stage wings extended to allow for simultaneous movement of multiple scenes.

Wilson exploits the technique of using each element on the stage to undercut, contradict or comment on the others. Unlike most directors, he is content for these separate expressive elements to remain fragmented. He resists the temptations to synthesis and in this he manifests his critical commentary on our fragmented age. His productions do not...end on an evocation of harmony and resolution.

—David Bradby and David Williams on Robert Wilson,
Quoted in *Robert Wilson's Vision*, p. 103

fig. 37.1

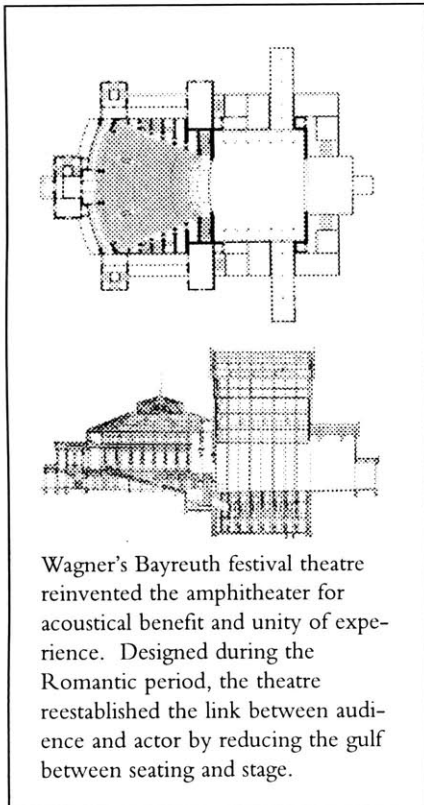
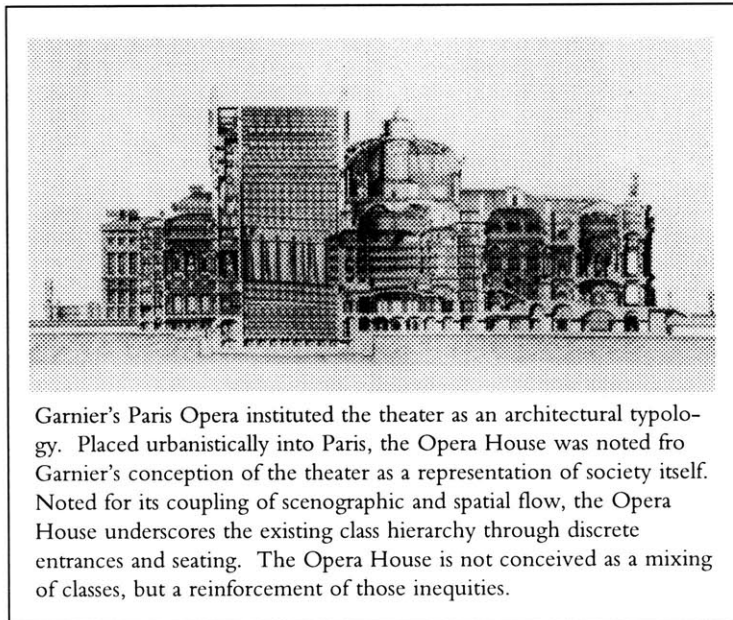


fig. 37.2



The Immovable Structure is the villain. Whether that structure calls itself a prison or a school or a factory or a family or a government or The World As It Is. That structure asks each man what he can do for it, not what it can do for him, and for those who do not do for it, there is the pain of death or imprisonment, or social degradation or the loss of animal rights.

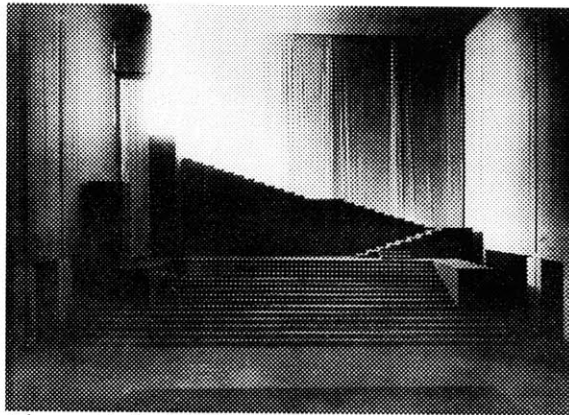
—Judith Malina

quoted in Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body*, p. 186

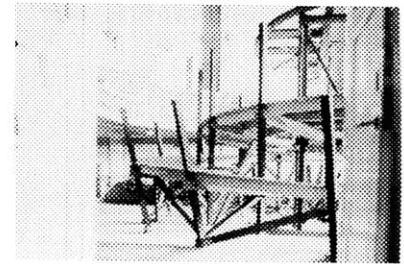
fig. 38.1

fig. 38.1

38



The most influential of stage designers, Adolphe Appia, from the flat picture backdrop and restricted proscenium into a spatial experience. For the first time, simple architectural forms and controlled lighting defined the stage. Illusionism was eliminated in favor of space and abstraction.



The Space Stage of Frederick Kiesler, stripped down the stage to its constructed parts and removed it from the proscenium completely. Movement though and around the stage was emphasized through the bareness of the structure. A dynamism of movement was implied through its construction and enabled through its spiralling ramp. A continuity of action was key.

There was a sense of mystery [in the environments] until your eye reached a wall. Then there was a dead end....I thought how much better it would be if you could just go out of doors and float an Environment into the rest of life so that caesura would not be there...

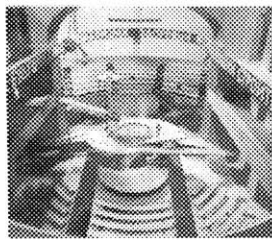
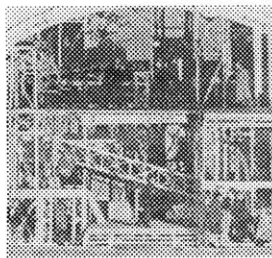
—Allen Kaprow

quoted in Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body*, p. 57

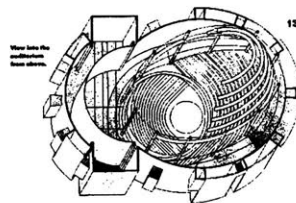
fig. 39.1

fig. 39.2

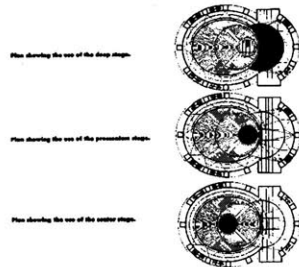
fig. 39.3



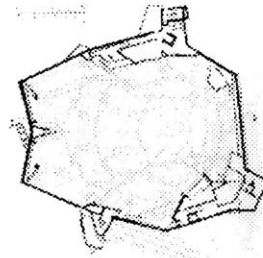
El Lizzitsky's Total Theatre was an attempt at synthesizing the openness of constructivist theater with the traditional proscenium stage. The ramps and ladders throughout the construction blurs the boundaries between stage and theater design, actor and audience



PLANS AND MODEL OF THE SYNTHETIC "TOTAL THEATER", 1921



The wholly unified and mechanized theater/stage was the subject of Walter Gropius's unrealized Total Theater project of 1921. The theater is able to be adapted the three common seating arrangements: deep stage, proscenium and in-the-round. The highly interchangeable proposal would maintain unity between actor and audience in all forms.



Hans Scharoun's Berlin Philharmonic was the built culmination of his ideas of society and theater. A staunch believer in the theater as a communal experience for a democratic society, Scharoun invested his music hall with ideas of contested boundaries and identities. Derived from acoustics, the interior hall contained called into question the unity of the theatre audience. The seating arrangement promoted individual identities of groups through shifted seat banks while permitting their engagement with the whole

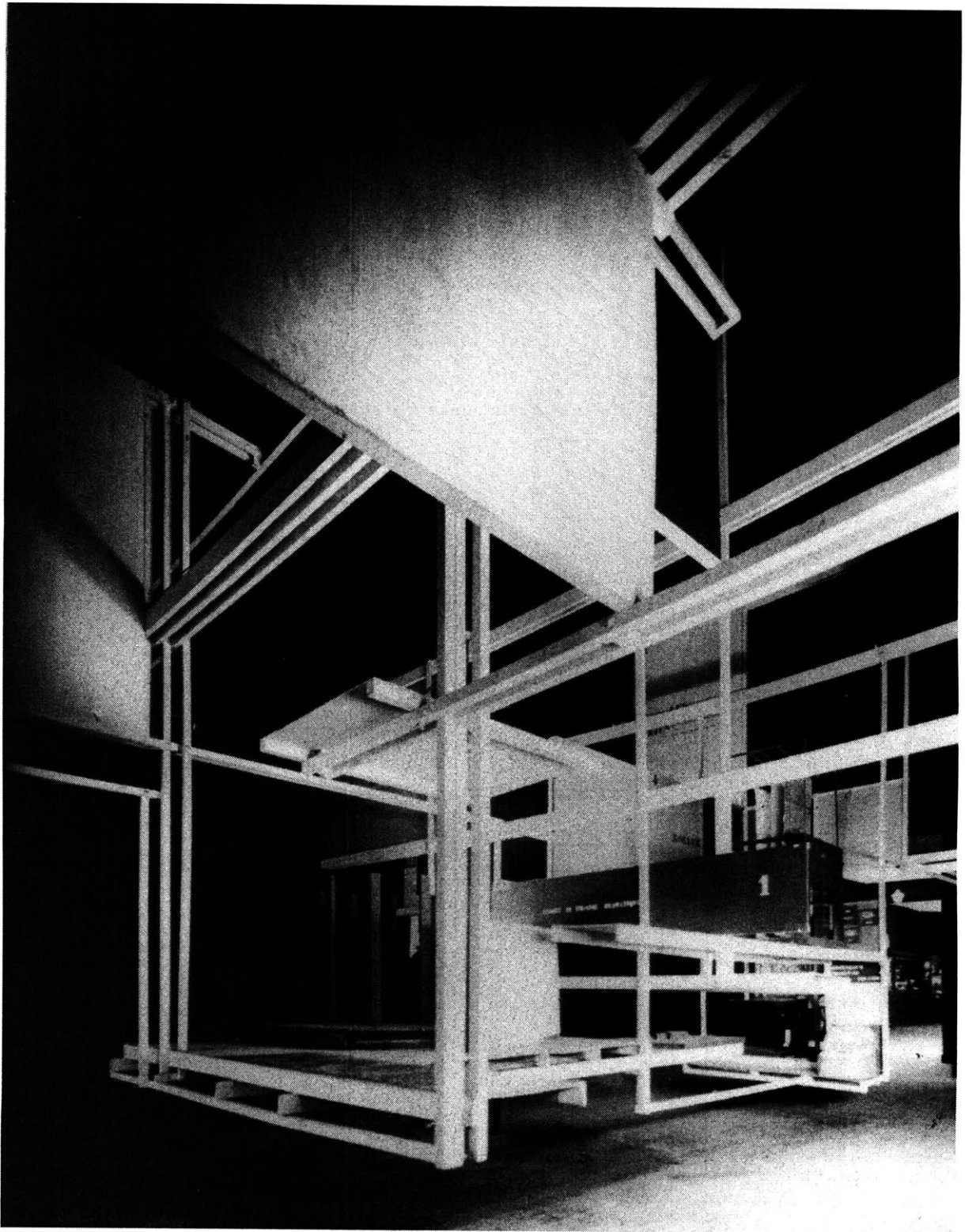


Fig.40 "International Exhibition of New Theater Techniques," Konzerhaus,Vienna, 1924.

MODERN VISION/AMERICAN STAGE

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1920s, theatrical design was revolutionized in America and abroad. More than scenographic innovation, this transformation signalled a radical shift in attitude towards theater as an art. Theater is far from transcendent. From its onset, the stage has been a laboratory for the city outside; theater in New York is no different. As tall buildings saturated the New York landscape, urban permutations were inscribed on the stage. The skyscraper was a major force behind a new global modernism. Part of this wide arena of modernism impacted by machine age aesthetics, the skyscraper embodied qualities that both differed from and intensified that "style." More significantly, the skyscraper was the preeminent symbol of America's entry into modernity. Influential in its iconographic form, the skyscraper's characteristics of speed, sparseness, flow, scale, integration and structural honesty have been its enduring legacy. As theater and the city synthesized, it was these qualities that were absorbed by and reformulated the stage.

THE THEATER AND THE CITY

By the 1920s, New York had become a world class theater city; its stages could not be considered pedestrian by any standard. Even a cursory survey of the city's theater scene reveals a striking diversity of productions available to the theatergoer. On Broadway, the commercial theater was dominated by the witty banter of Philip Barry and Noel Coward drawing room comedies. The remainder of the theatre scene was a lively mix of the experimental Little Theatre movement, comprised of such notable venues as the Neighborhood Playhouse, Provincetown Playhouse, and the Theatre Guild, as well as the burgeoning avant-garde scene offering New Yorkers the latest productions from

abroad. With such resident modern dance luminaries as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Helen Tamiris, the city provided an enlightened arena for this emergent art form. More than any other city, New York offered a teeming microcosm of contemporary theater.¹

To understand the state of theater at the time, it is necessary to comprehend its history. By the turn of the twentieth century, theater had been arduously reinventing itself into an art absorbed with vibrant issues of life. Design of the stage was an essential tool in this effort. Adolphe Appia, the most influential of stage designers, escaped into space from the flat picture backdrop and restricted proscenium. For the first time, coordinated, nuanced lighting and simple architectural forms defined the stage, emphasizing thespian presence and movement.²

In Appia's path, theater opened rapidly into experimentation. Much theatrical innovation came from abroad, particularly from Russia, Germany and Italy. Rigorously modernistic, this stage experimentation was fueled in theory and design by images of the skyscraper. The most influential of the avant-garde, the Russian Constructivist theater, had stripped down its stage to "the bones of the building." Girded, curtainless, the theater offered a complex of architectural elements for actors to move about. In Germany, Expressionist theater explored a stage of looming, out-of-scale, distorted architectural elements. Futuristic Italian productions utilized dizzying perspectives and even dizzy motion. What these theaters shared is a fixed stage that allows for exposure and movement, a preference for abstraction over the pictorial, an emphasis on the stage strategy over architectural mimesis, and a movement towards theatrical unity

Skyscrapers, those epitomes of technological promise and aesthetic veracity, appealed to political radicals and artistic primitives alike. One could compile a long and varied list of European directors who were influenced by these high rises: Meyerhold, Mayakovsky, Reinhardt.³ Their productions were routinely reported, reviewed and analyzed in the pages of New York newspapers and theater journals. Skeletons, constructions, towers and steel weep pervasive. Continental dramaturgs looked towards New York with envy, and New York theatre responded enthusiastically. On off-Broadway stages, experimental productions opened. Edward Faraogh's *Pinwheel* at the Neighborhood Playhouse, J.P. McEnvoy's *God Loves Us* at the New Actors' Theatre, and *The Tenth Commandment* in The Bronx immediately gained notice. Theater needed to be "an intensification of life"⁴ where it could "reflect and transmute the metallic violence of the physical world."⁵ Determined to mirror revolutionary imperatives, Russians staged vivid metaphors of political turbulence. But for them, skyscrapers were speculative dreams, not mundane icons of everyday life.

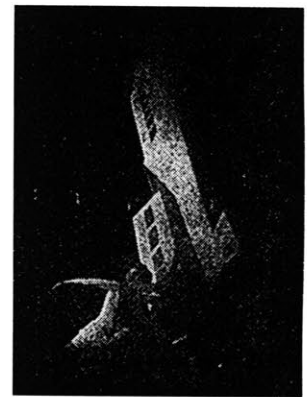


Fig.42
1927 Helen Tamiris

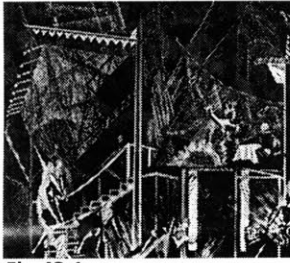


Fig.43.1
Pinwheel by Edward Farago
Neighborhood Playhouse, 1927
design: Donald Mitchell Oenslager



Fig.43.2
Flying Colors
Design: Norman Bel Geddes

Only in New York could the stage capture the true essence of living in the machine-age metropolis. The productions of Russian emigre director, Boris Aronson surged forward only after docking in New York. The poetic intensity of his theater is based on the “wild tumult in the air.” A profile on the director explains:

But when he went out of the theatre and into the streets and looked around him, he saw in contemporary Russia none of the physical realization of what was represented in the theatre. He had a vision of New York's sky-line which troubled and fired his imagination. He dreamed of New York as a vast and distant city of skyscrapers jammed together and soaring heavenward in an ecstasy of line, a complete actual reproduction of what impressed him in representative theatre. This early motivation for wishing to paint New York is really the clue to Aronson's identity as a an artist and designer.⁶

To many, abstract American sets revealed more about the urban condition than even the constructivists could offer. Borrowing from European Expressionists, American designers edged towards the sculpted stage, “architecture in the lump,” one critic called it. The sculpted stage began to strip away the residual “playhouse” representation. The sheer mass and monumentality of the skyscraper offered an abstract form to present a dynamic life. According to designer Norman Bel Geddes, “Those theatrical values that we talk about so much, that we want to re-enforce, intensify and heighten, are very vague thing; and I believe that somehow the shaped permanent stage gives them backbone, continuity and solidity.”⁷ Of course the smoothness of such stages had more in common with more malleable machine-age arts, but the monumentality of the new stage was pure skyscraper. And the dynamism of the theater came not from tilting stage pieces, but from the simple, uninhibited movement of the actor’s body across the open platform. Building up on Appia’s stage, Gordon Craig outlined the actor’s body against the size and mass of abstracted towers. Long an advocate of combining rhythmic light effects with simple architectural elements, Craig advanced towards a total theater of abstraction fed by an increasing sense of scale. A production of *Macbeth* designed by Craig, prompted an article by American critic Lee Simonsen arguing that the seminal stage designer has simply lost touch with reality. Indeed, when measured out for construction, Craig’s visionary sketches were as high as an eight story building.⁸ But despite such monumental posturing, Craig was seen as an artistic model for many.

But imitators of such “dynamism” were easy prey for critics on this side of the Atlantic. One pedagogical writer, juxtaposed an image of a bridge with the sarcastic suggestion that the engineer would make a superior set designer. Another photograph, this time by Ralph Steiner, of the Delmonico

Building is accompanied by this caption:

The scenery of the streets of NY is often more radical in form and composition than then most radical expressionist or constructivist settings. When caught by the camera of Ralph Steiner, and seen through eyes like his, that are willing to look for the theatre outside of the theatre, almost every street corner, properly composed, holds a kind of setting by itself, with its dizzy buildings, its light and shade and jagged lines. Believing this, Mr. Steiner takes his camera in hand and the result is something that not only proves his point, but that is also full of inspiration for scenic artists working both in the theatre and the motion pictures.⁹

To cultural observers of the day, the theatricality of New York seemed readily apparent. A *Theatre Guild Magazine* interview with Hugh Ferriss, suggestively subtitled “The Unfinished Drama of the Modern Metropolis,” almost seems scripted for Ferriss to expound on how architects approach “the theme of the human drama which it is their privilege to ‘stage-set.’”¹⁰ Repeatedly, architects were featured in theater journals, and the Louis Sullivan phrase “form follows function” was invoked often for application to the stage. Even art deco skyscraper interiors were analyzed as possible stage sets for conservative practitioners who still preferred realism. In addition to Ferriss, Joseph Urban, Frederick Keisler and Norman Bel Geddes were recognized as much for their stage designs as their architecture. Each used theater as another outlet for their architectural philosophies. Already converging in the day-to-day practice of designers, building and theatre began to merge in thinking.

This emerging interdisciplinary approach to the arts should not be underestimated. Similar to the theoretical conjectures of the architecture world, theater had been reeling in its own introspections since the beginning of the century. To redefine the theater, artists needed to redefine the art: is theater a separate art or a synthesis of many? how can theater mirror the vibrancy and concerns of contemporary life? how can theater transgress the barrier between audience and performer? how can theater transcend the illusionistic nature of previous eras to invent a more honest art form?

If theater of the period was suffering from an identity crisis, one had only to look at the emerging genre of film to understand why. Film was quickly supplanting theater as the art that could respond to and communicate a sense of being in the city. Indeed, the skyscraper was a formative inspiration for pioneering filmmakers, most notably Fritz Lang who writes “I looked at the street—the glaring lights and the tall buildings—and there I conceived *Metropolis*.”¹¹ The rapid shifting views and continual flow of movement was simulated more readily by montage than by theatrics. Cinema switched freely between the close-up, the wide angle, bird’s eyes views and tracking shots.

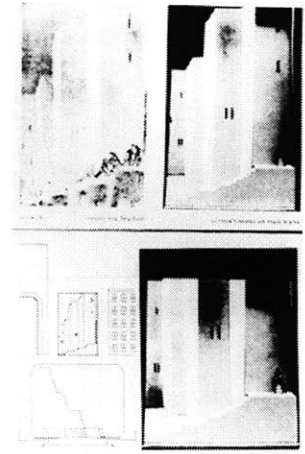


Fig.44
Macbeth
Design: Gordon Craig

Film was an almost building like structure, an assembly of discrete frames strung together to form a multifaceted whole, whereas theatre “reduces the richness of human feelings and the complexity of the inner life to a verbal debate, a contradictory argument.”¹² As though to underscore its frame-by-frame structure, an early Ralph Steiner film was published as a series of images from a clip. Similar to a skyscraper manufactured from prefabricated steel parts, montage emphasized subjectivity, a series of fragmented shots constructed in the audience’s mind to comprehend its meaning. The new city, the new theater centered on man, not external hierarchy. The sightlines of film were the opposite of theater’s. Theater’s “lines come from many points and converge on one. [Cinema’s] lines go from one point and diverge to many.”¹³ The only solution available to set designers was the same offered by skyscraper theorists: height. For his “theatre of the wheel,” critic Roy Mitchell proposed a spiraling staircase that extended the height of the proscenium. The stacking of altitude on the stage would allow multiple views and scenes to occur almost simultaneously.

How could theater compete with film for continuity of movement? If theater practitioners had been trying to reconnect with the audience through a new mix of expressiveness and emotion, film had already come up with a recipe. And for dynamic entertainment value, film won handily. As theater tried to break away from the traditional structure of dramatic writing (i.e. a few sets comprised of related scenes), experimenters came under harsh criticism for their inability to sustain the momentum of numerous, individual scenes. If life was dynamic, layered and fast-paced, the intensity of theater broke everytime the curtain fell to facilitate a set change. Constructivist influenced productions such as *Loudspeaker*, *Pinwheel* and George Kaiser’s *Gas* were lauded for their ability to transfer this screen ability towards a new theater. A reviewer of *Pinwheel* writes:

*A high, permanent, and usually very complex arrangements of steps, levels, runways, chutes, and platforms tries to reflect something of the mechanical, skyscraper quality of life about us, and tries also to combine with this means for theatrical entrances and exits, a continuous flow of actions without a pause for the ordinary changes of scene.*¹⁴

It was the prevailing lack of such adaptability that doomed serious theater and encouraged its opposite, those “the neat little comedies that can be reasonably free within the strait-jacket of our existing sightlines.”¹⁵ While constructivist sets and “space stages” (i.e., American-styled abstraction) aided continuity, there was even a stronger movement towards the moving sets exemplified in such productions as Waslaw Rychtarik’s *Richard III*, where simplicity and abstraction enabled quick scene changes. Thus, the emphasis shifted from stage sets to the actor. The new theater demanded dynamic and sustained



Fig.45
 Film
 by Ralph Steiner
 dancer: Sophia Deleuze

action in which “the actor becomes a complete form, conceived as motion and brought to birth as the play of movement of living bodies, of light and of color.”¹⁶

For years, dance and theater had been converging. In arguably the most indivisible art, dancer and dance, stage and performer seemed to merge. Theater journals regularly followed the work of dance innovators, such as Graham, Tamiris and Honya Holm, even devoting entire issues to their dances. Modern dance, this new genre, “demanded an appreciation of the full impulse of the motion.”¹⁷ No longer was a series of discrete gestures or attitudes sufficient to convey contemporary metropolitan life. In the convergence of theater and dance movements, Ruth Page is a seminal figure. A choreographer and scenographer for the Chicago Opera Company, Page composed dances for soloists and large opera productions alike, providing her with a unique range of knowledge of step, stage and costume design. Her work seems to flow seamlessly among these forms, incorporating skyscraper ideas into stage sets, costumes, and movement. Stage sets for Aaron Copland’s opera *Hear Ye, Hear Ye* are simply constructed with pictorial representation of skyscrapers. A dance such as *Euclid* borrows the oblique lines for costume decoration, while another, appropriately named *Ballet Scaffolding*, evokes the dynamic quality in gesture only. What emerges in Page’s work is a synthesis of movement and stage design.

SKYSCRAPERS: THE BALLET

The culmination of this move towards synthesis and movement, occurs with the production of the 1926 opera-ballet *Skyscrapers*. The production resulted from a collaboration of three artists: composer John Carpenter, choreographer Sammy Lee and set designer Robert Edmond Jones. Premiered at the Metropolitan Opera, *Skyscrapers* was written as a series of plotless scenes designed to capture the quality of American life. The structure of the production was wilfully based on the rhythms of everyday life in New York. The opera opens with the grinding routine of workmen, which yields to the play phase at Coney Island to segue into another work phase in which construction workers return to the unfinished towers that is their daily life. Intentionally plotless, the ballet was premised with the rhythms of the music rather than scraps of the libretto. The power of the ballet is its ability to suggest and embody, rather than simply depict. Following the opening night production, one review exclaims:

The different scenes bring sounds of our everyday American life, but transformed through powerful artistic imagination into something intensely suggestive of all the vital forces that lie beneath external things and that are forming our

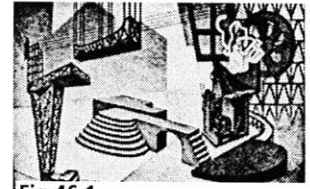


Fig.46.1
Gas by George Kaiser
Design: Louis Lozowick

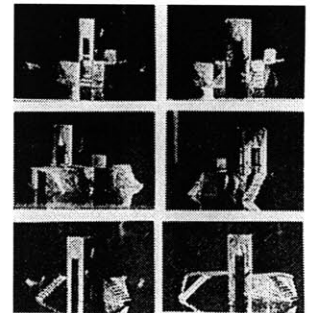


Fig.46.2
Unknown Shakespeare Play
Design: Waslaw Rychtarik

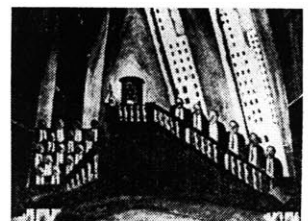


Fig.46.3
Hear Ye, Hear Ye
by Aaron Copland
Chicago Opera Company, 1929
choreography: Ruth Page

*distinctive national life.*¹⁸

In its confident blend of movement, modern music, opera, and sets, the production was unique. Even the titles of reviews published in its wake allude to its multiplicity: “The Descent of Jazz Upon Opera” and “Jazz Opera or Ballet.” Carpenter’s hand seemed so adept at combining forms, that the production resisted classification. According to the designer, it is “an interpretation through music and design of a feeling about the American scene today.” Even the choreography was considered “not only part of the music but of the whole stage setting, the first expressing in action the meaning implicit in the second.”¹⁹ The dance steps are modeled after the routinized actions of the workers, the set derived from the sense of cityscape, and the music from the syncopated rhythms of jazz and the noise of skyscraper construction. Even the score defied easy categorization as a symphony, opera or jazz suite. The synthesis of artistic genres that had evolved gradually over the years seemed best captured by *Skyscrapers*.

“The Ballet, with its kaleidoscopic freedom and rhythmic interest, easily appears to be the ideal solution for the creation of large-scaled musical works indigenous to America.”²⁰ *Skyscrapers* manifested the first glimmer of American regionalism which would come to the fore in the 1930s. An underlying theme of much dance and music at the time was the attempt to find a distinctively American voice. Skyscrapers were part of this thinking because unlike other modernist architecture, these high-rises were a truly indigenous architecture. Even the nationality of the artists seemed to be at issue. According to one article, Carpenter believed only an American-born choreographer could capture the essence of his music. With pieces such as *Transatlantic* and *Hear Ye, Hear Ye*, composers like emigre George Antheil and New Yorker Aaron Copland, brought a sense of the American to their music with skyscraper themes. Over the decade, American composers, dancers and designers had associated themselves with American modernity through the iconography of the skyscraper. In the dance *1927*, Tamiris performed in front of a mocked-up tower, while the designs of Jo Melzner’s *Little Show* and Norman Bel Geddes’s *Flying Colors* provided skyscraper backdrops for big-scale musical variety shows. To be an American modern, artists figuratively depicted the skyscraper. With Carpenter’s work, modern urban America departed from the painted flat to include the movement and music. The synthesis of music, dance, and sets evolved from the Egyptian pageantry of Ruth St. Denis into a synergy with the most advanced of engineering feats.

Constructivist, expressionist and futurist art had all been criticized for being a “dehumanizing non-American form,”²¹ though they had been influenced by reflected visions of the skyscraper. When European imports impacted



Fig.47.1
Ballet Scaffolding
Chicago Opera Company, 1929
choreography: Ruth Page

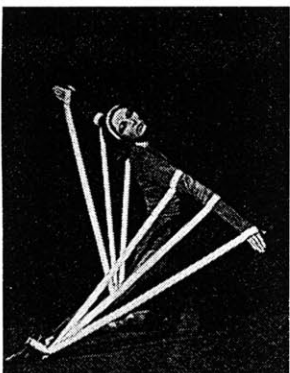


Fig.47.2
Variations on Euclid
choreography: Ruth Page

the American stage with modernist images of dynamism and abstraction, American theater and dance sought to merge the modernism with themes that were American in origin. The fake syncopations of jazz and the quick thrills of Broadway lights were not the answer either. What was required was a minimizing of the mimetic quality of theater and a resolute move towards a synthesis of arts. Although American regionalism was increasingly (and erroneously) identified with the broad expanses of western panoramas and broken-down depression themes, it was the skyscraper that had been the first truly indigenous landscape that had the power to be evoked in theater and dance. The urban skyscraper was the first and best tool for American artists to identify themselves.

THE CRASH

Among the important themes associated with skyscrapers is the deadening monotony of labor and the increasing alienation and violence of American life. If life in the United States was becoming more dynamic, it was also becoming more volatile. All those skyscrapers with their corporate domination and unvarying office spaces foreshadowed the disintegration of life. When the Stock Market finally crashed in 1929, the capitalism symbolized in these soaring structures was a recognized failure. Inextricably linked to capitalism, the iconography of the skyscraper was stripped away. (Not coincidentally, the image of failed investors flinging themselves from tall buildings became a symbolic representation of the collapse.) Having become a residual but still recognizable part of many theater works of the day, the skyscraper now disappeared. The once proud heads of corporate towers worn at the Beaux Art Ball had been turned almost overnight into emblems of corporate greed. The Russian production of *Jim Copperfield* shows abstract skyscrapers in the form of ladders topped by headless pinnacles, knocked down by the historically inevitable rise of socialism.²²

The iconography of the skyscraper was recognized again as part of the Social Realist drama and agit prop theater of the 1930s. Earlier and throughout the twenties, the political element of drama had been eclipsed by the radical invention of experimental theater. The emerging drama of the disintegration of life due to unchecked capitalism and urban growth made skyscrapers the tokens of capitalism. A play such as Elmer Rice's *Subway* had shown what life in the shadows of the skyscrapers was really like. Now as the industrial world came to a grinding halt, prescient works like Rice's would emerge to dominate the theater scene for the next decade.

However, diffuse and abstract, the impact of the skyscraper survived. Years later, *The Four Temperaments*, a ballet choreographed by George Balanchine, would still evoke a dynamism and flow unlike dance previous to

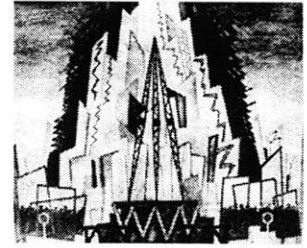


Fig.48
Skyscrapers
by John Alden Carpenter
Metropolitan Opera, 1926
choreography: Sammy Lee
design: Robert Edmond Jones

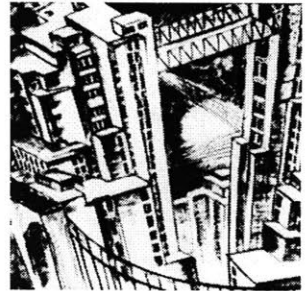


Fig.48
Transatlantic by George Antheil
Design: Ludwig Sievert

the skyscraper, prompting critic Edwin Denby to write: "The continuity is like nothing one has seen and it looks completely self-evident. Unpredictable and fantastic the sequences are in the way they crowd close the most extreme contrasts of motion possible."²³ Upon returning to New York City, Denby would begin an essay describing the pleasures of seeing the city's skyscrapers and end by describing how the dancers themselves were "natural New York," an outgrowth of the experience of being in the metropolis. If the skyscraper had reformed the cityscape, it had also reformulated the stage as an extension of that urban existence. Absorbed into the physicality of the movement of actors and dancers, a new American inspired art form was created, prompted by the skyscraper and marked by the new raw tension in work, radical shifts in architectural music, a large scale of movement and a spareness of language.

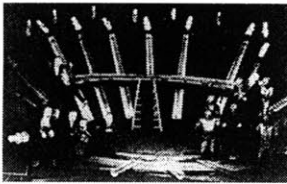


Fig.49.1
Jim Copperhead by Godiner
 White Russian Jewish Theatre,
 1931

FOOTNOTES

1 Theater publications abounded in the 1920s, but three magazines are most significant for their engagement with theatrical discourse of the time. *Theatre Arts Monthly* was the most important theater magazine of its day, writing serious articles about the history, philosophical debates and innovations of theater throughout the world. More than any other periodical, *Theatre Arts* regularly included articles on the importance and innovations of contemporary stage design. The writer who focused most on design, Sheldon Cheney, is noted for also publishing books on architectural history.

Theatre Guild Magazine was slightly more popular in tone and subject, focusing more on personality profiles, interviews and stage reviews. A note of interest; the architect Hugh Ferriss wrote several articles for the magazine. Edited by Minna Lederman, *Modern Music* largely covered the avant-garde music world, and by extension, the most experimental dance and theater.

2 Previous to Appia's innovations, theatrical debates centered on two competing design theories: the perspectival stage or the naturalistic theater. While the former was illusionistic in nature, and the later more realistic; both were essentially pictorial. More significantly, both schools failed to recognize the widening division between actor and audience. If late nineteenth century thinking called for the union of art and life, theater was pulling it apart.

In order to reconnect the players with audience, Appia reshaped the stage into a spatial experience. Using dramatic lighting and sculptural masses, Appia created an abstract stage that emphasized the actor's movement in order to recapture the emotional experience of the theater.

3 While both the Russian constructivist theater and the German Expressionist theater were influenced by American technology, each maintained different attitudes. With the 1917 revolution, technology appeared to offer promise to the constructivists whose whirling sets and actors were an aestheticization of machines. Expressionists, still reeling from the destruction of WWI, feared the danger of mechanization. Their distorted designs embodied the soulless domination of life by urbanization and machines.

4 Sheldon Cheney, "The Theater in the Machine Age," *Theatre Arts Monthly* (August 1926), p. 505.

5 Rosamond Gilder, "New Forms for Old," *Theatre Arts Monthly* (July 1927), p. 514.

6 Shepard Traub, "Boris Aronson," *Theatre Guild Magazine* (January 1931), p. 27.

7 Sheldon Cheney, "The Architectural Stage," *Theatre Arts Monthly* (June



Fig.49.2
The Four Temperaments
 Choreography: George Balanchine

1927), p. 485.

8 Lee Simonsen, "The Case of Gordon Craig," *Theatre Guild Magazine* (March 1931), pp. 29-33. Following Appia, Craig was perhaps the most influential stage designer of his day. While Appia mobilized the stage into space, he maintained decorative elements. Craig rejected illusionism entirely, and advocated for a pure abstracted, moveable stage to better synthesize the theater into a total art.

9 Caption, *Theatre Arts Monthly* (February 1927), p. 101.

10 Hugh Ferriss and Anne Herendeen, "Scene: New York. Time: Now. The Unfinished Drama of the Modern Metropolis," *Theatre Guild Magazine* (May 1929), p. 50. Throughout the pages of the *Theatre Guild Magazine* are photographs of the backstage technology taken by Margaret Bourke-White. More than just a nod to the mechanical quality of the stage, the pictures are interesting because of the dynamic and monumental quality conveyed and the identity of Bourke-White as a successful photographer of city scenes. The interchangeability of the subject matter and artist (Ferriss draws skyscraper proposals and stage sets as the same; Bourke White photographs the stage as though it were the city), exemplifies the total absorption of skyscraper culture into the arts.¹⁸ Quoted in Cohen, p. 87.

11 Andre Levinson, "The Nature of Cinema," *Theatre Arts Monthly* (September 1929), p. 690.

12 Roy Mitchell, "Dynamic Scene: The Theatre of the Wheel," *Theatre Arts Monthly* (January 1930), p. 55.

13 Kenneth MacGowan, "The Living Scene," *Theatre Arts Monthly* (June 1927), pp. 451.

14 Roy Mitchell, "Dynamic Scene: The Theatre of the Wheel," *Theatre Arts Monthly* (January 1930), p. 50.

15 Roy Mitchell, "Motion: The Essential Art of the Theatre," *Theatre Arts Monthly* (January 1929), pp. 38.

16 Hillel Schwartz, "Torque: The New Kinaesthetic of the Twentieth Century" In *Zone 6: Incorporations*, edited by Jonathan Crary & Sanford Kwinter (New York: Urzone, 1992), p. 88.

17 Minna Lederman, "Skyscrapers: An Experiment in Design, An interview with Robert Edmond Jones," *Modern Music* (January-February 1926), pp. 23.

18 Olga Samaroff, *New York Evening Post* quoted in "The Descent of Jazz upon Opera," *Letters and Art* (March 13, 1926).

19 Review, *The Greater New York Weekly*, May 5, 1934.

20 Thomas Craven, "An American Theatre," *Theatre Arts Monthly* (August 1926), p. 535.

21 The skyscraper could not have developed without the parallel innovations of the elevator and subway. While the building type was applauded for its technological innovations, it was too infrequently criticized for its attendant urban decay. Increased congestion and commuting time, lack of sunlight, and routinized office work deteriorized urban life. Throughout the period, the most vociferous critic of the skyscraper's effect on society was Lewis Mumford, who wrote: "In actuality, height in skyscrapers meant either a desire for centralized administration, a desire to increase ground rents, a desire for advertisement...and none of these functions determines a 'proud and soaring thing.'" See Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades*. (New York: Dover, 1971, p. 69

Even an article on theater design by Mumford appears to respond to the failings of the skyscrapers. Mumford advocates a new, smaller scale theater; he writes: "one breathes differently, feels differently, thinks differently in a room where one can almost touch the ceiling than one breathes, thinks, and feels in a room with a ceiling or roof that climbs into a spacious obscurity." See "Grub Street Theaters," *Theatre Arts Monthly* (August 1926), p. 531.

22 Edwin Denby, *Dance Writings* (New York: Knopf, 1986), p. 415.

STRATEGIES

52

The initial design strategies were attempts at program, viewing, structure and assemblage. Given the premise of site-ability, the project mediated between ideas of mobility. For a theatre to be sited around New York, there existed two primary solutions: the small box that moves or the big box that is assembled on site. The latter was chosen for the possibilities it offered for programmatic richness and public possibilities. To enlarge the theatre size allowed for larger assembles of audiences, suggestions for public engagement.

The siting strategy for the theater was based on multiple sites around New York City. Several small-scale public spaces were analyzed for their potential engagement with views, street relationships and building edges. Those sites chosen include: Wall Street, Jackson Park, The Seagram's Plaza and Th Chase Manhattan Bank Plaze.

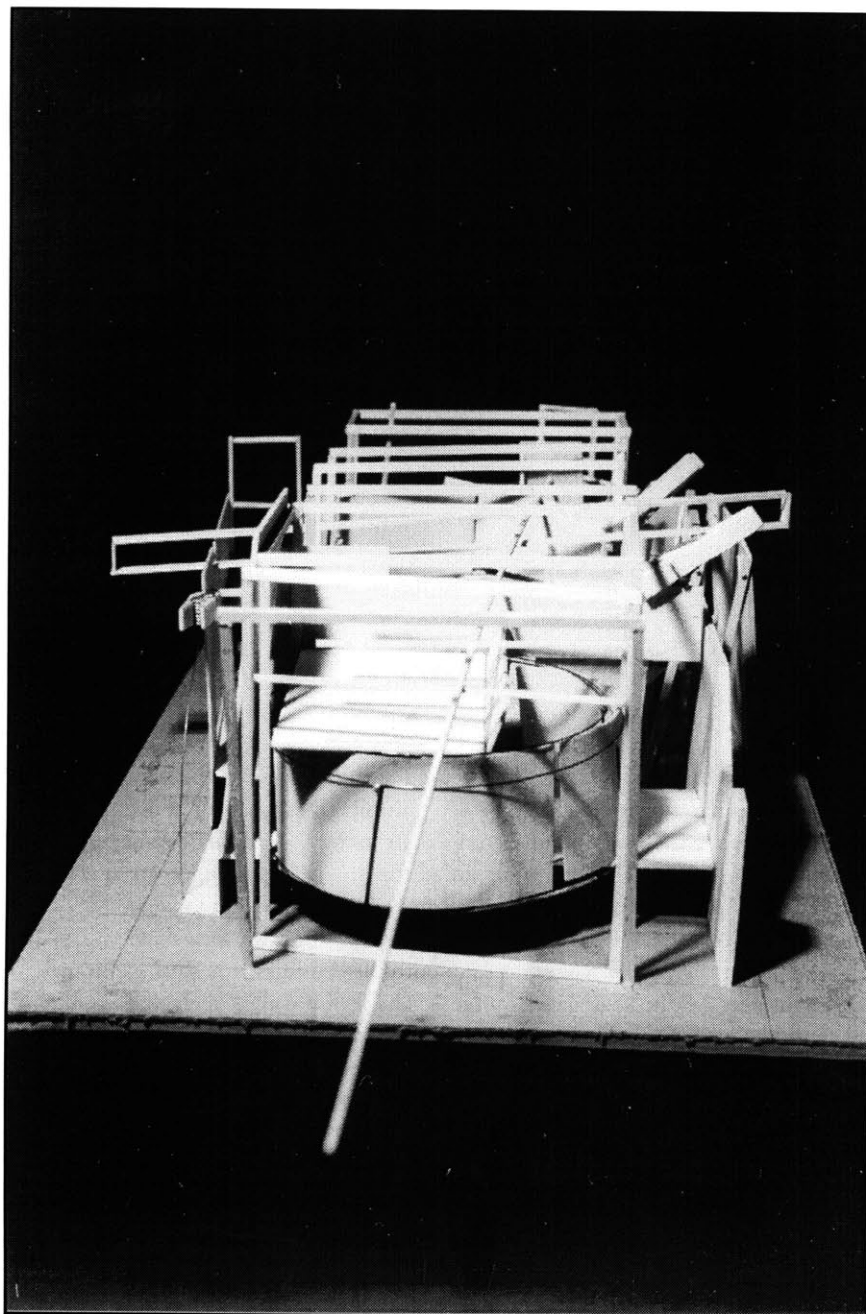
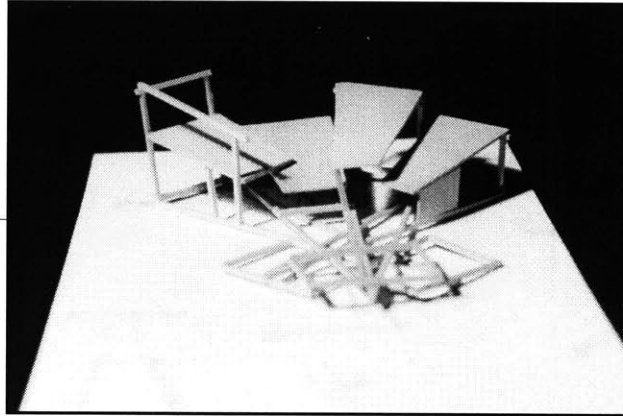


Fig.53 Study Model

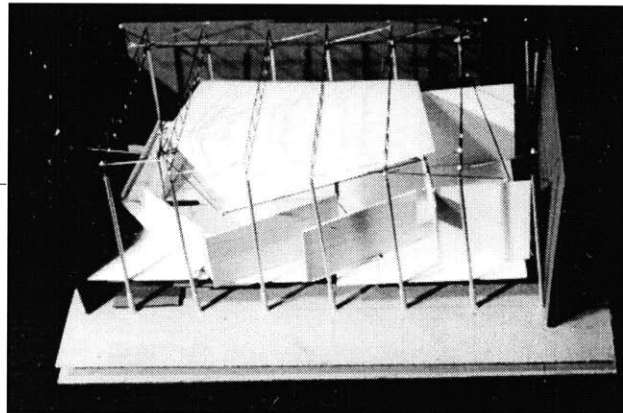
Perspective became the first strategy to use for the interior of the structure. If a fixed perspective suggested hierarchy and an unlikely unified audience, then a divided audience made visible the conflicts in society. Interior seating was assumed to be split. Balconies were added for the multilayering of perspective views and to allow for more fluctuations between audience members.

Hierarchies in the public realm are frequently determine through the entrance to the theatre and the segregated lobbies. The lobby was conceived as a unified space, with smaller balconies overhanging, but still connected to the primary foyer. The entrance was broken down into a multiplication of entrances into the foyer or directly into the interior theater, all passages were along an invisible circulation corridor that spiralled around and penetrated into all the spaces: backstage, foyer, balcony, orchestra. The effect was to allow for diversity but allow for conflict and contact through merging along this corridor.

multiple audience perspectives



interior v. exterior structure/skins



oblique nonhierarchical entrances

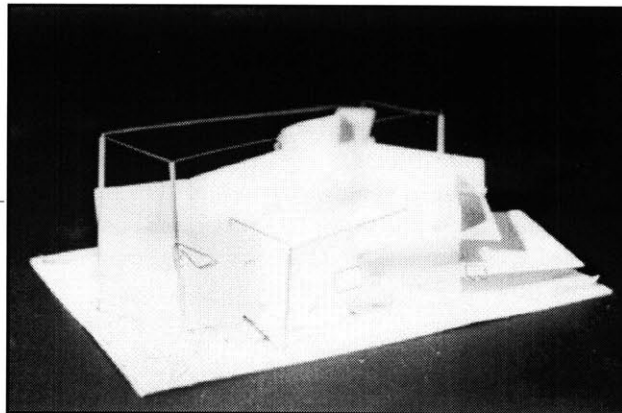
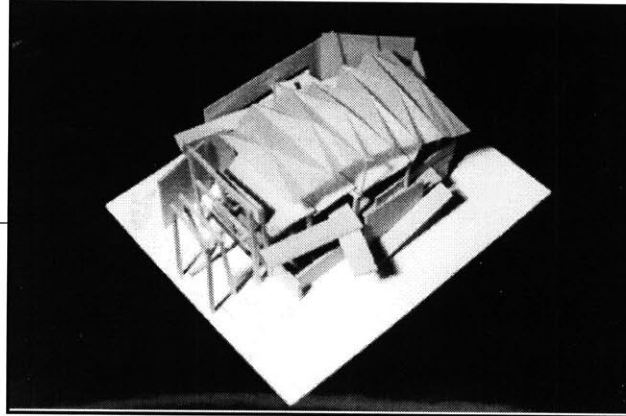


Fig.55 Study Models

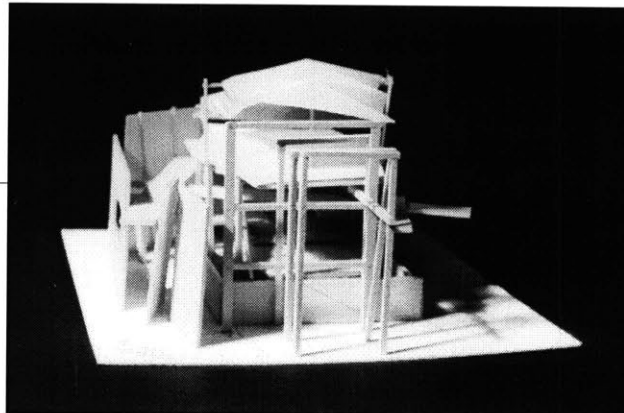
The relationship between the interior space and exterior space became a major component of the design strategy. An early study of theaters pinpointed this boundary line. The interior of the audience space must be based on sightlines and acoustical lines, frequently generating complex angular form. The interior stage houses an extremely high flytower filled with flies and traps for moving scenery. Urbanistically, the theatre must mediate between these extreme interior conditions and a more regular exterior condition.

Theater as building is grounded in this wrapping or boxing of the interior through different tactics. The strategy for this project became one of alternating revealing and concealing this relationship. The different parts of the interior (proscenium, acoustical panels and walls) were considered as a series of skins that unfolded inside or outside to form a varying set of relationships with the theater and the city.

unfolding form



extended proscenium



interior through exterior

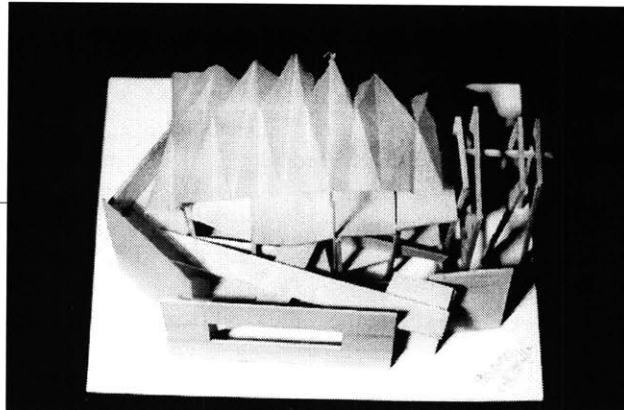
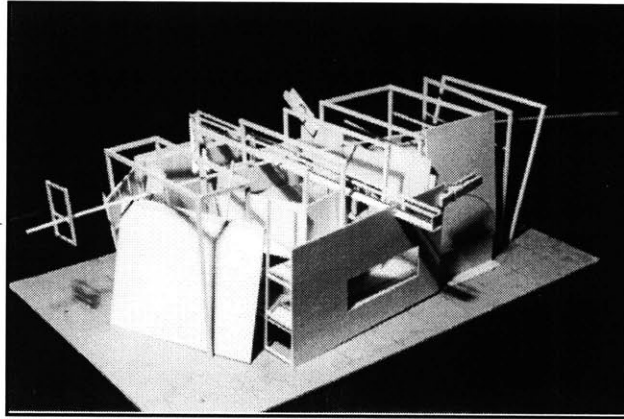


Fig.57 Study Models

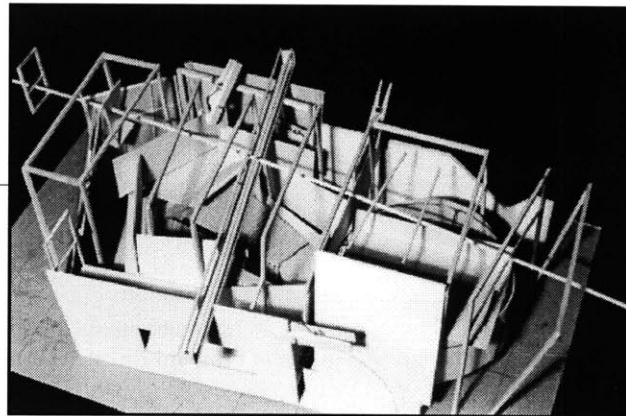
The issue of mobility became critical to establishing the parameters of the project. An early decision was made to move towards an assembly system to allow for larger programmatic considerations. However, mobility operated at several levels. Traditional theatre mobility is based on quick succession of scene changes over a few hours. Mobility in an architectural form was based on a longer duration. Rather than rotating, pivoting panels to be shuffled on a daily basis, movement is based on a longer period of time, a theatrical run. Panels and structure would be assembled on site.

The project then became a mediation between an assembly structural system based on regular geometries and an angular geometry founded on viewing angles and acoustical lines. A primary structure was formulated, with all skin systems (walls, roof, stage) hung or attached. The stage device was recast to extend beyond the perimeter of the structure. Rather than moving scenery, the flys would open and reframe views and spatial relationships with the sites.

assembled skins



proscenium/structural frame shift



constructed stage device

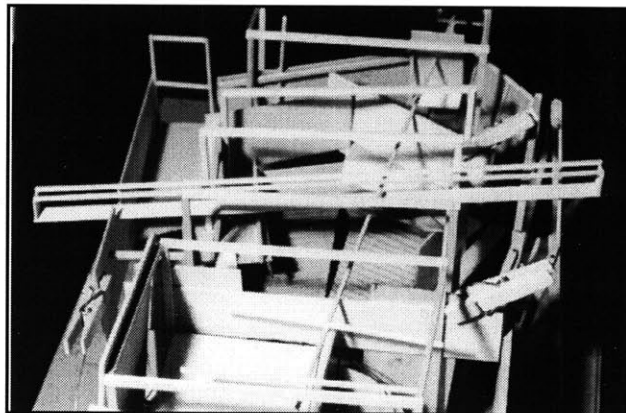


Fig.59 Study Models

PROJECT

60

The program is the infrastructure of the theatre, i.e., all parts that are necessary for performance. These include seating, stage, lights, public restrooms, changing facilities, and storage areas. The Program for the theatre is as listed below.

- stage
- seating galleries
- walkways
- lobby
- box office
- projection booth
- lighting and sound controls
- storage (props, scenery and costumes)
- backstage area
- dressing rooms
- rehearsal rooms
- restrooms

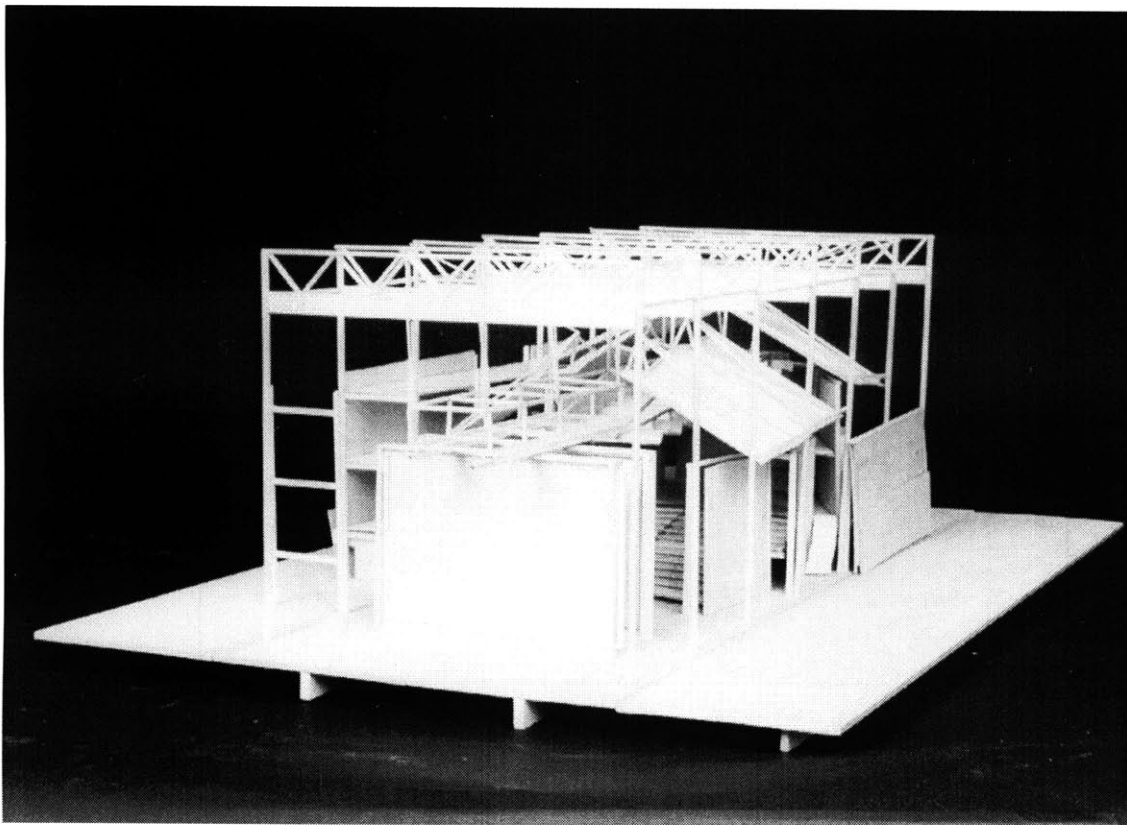
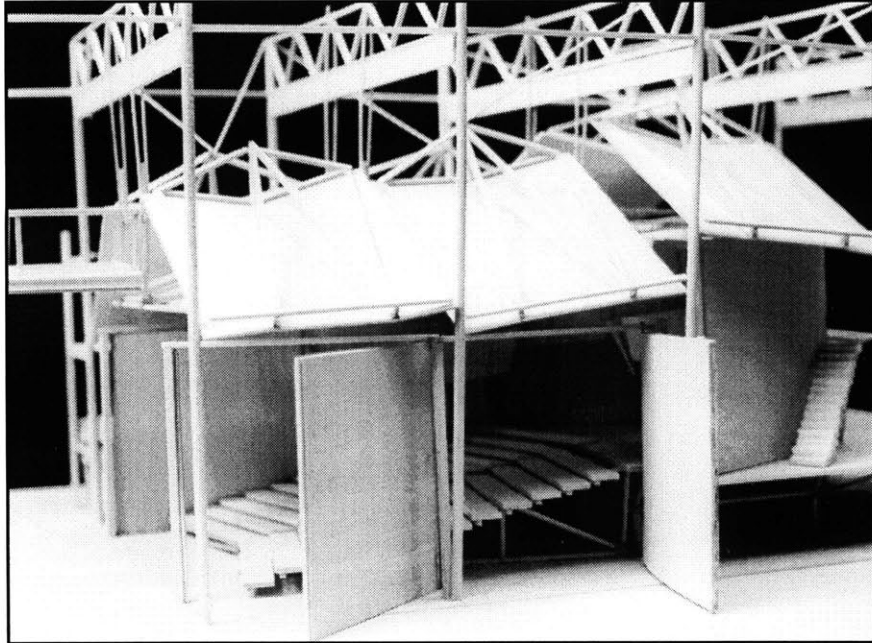


Fig.61 Final Model



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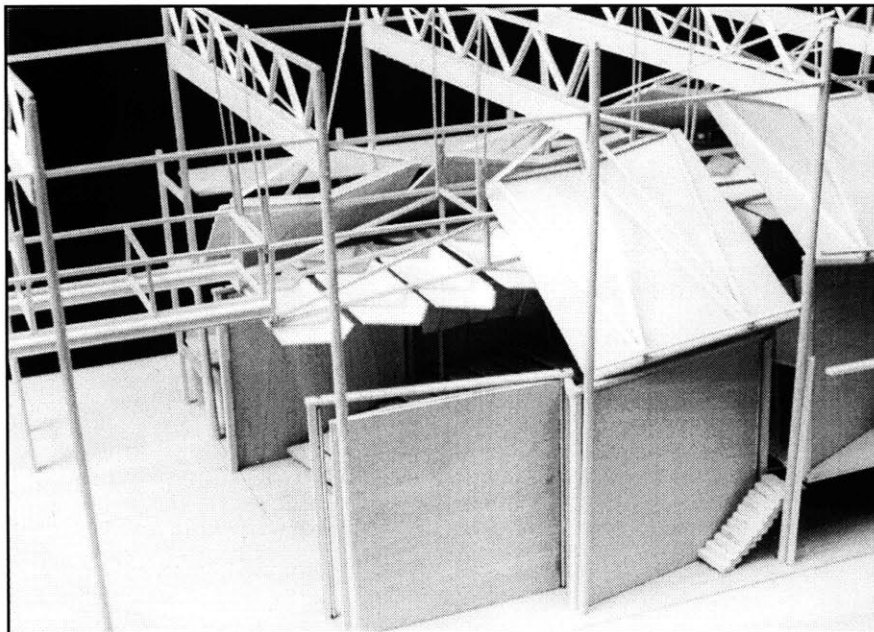
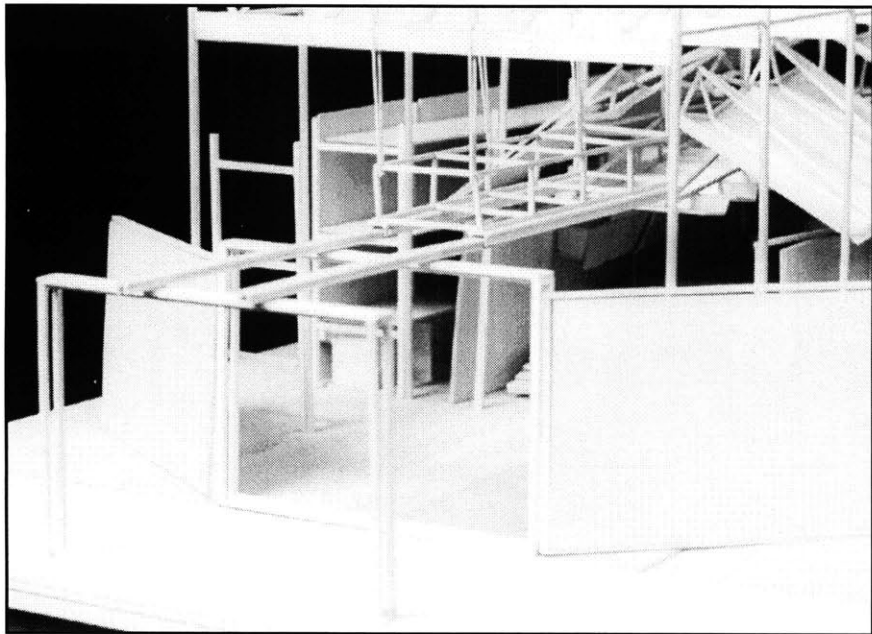
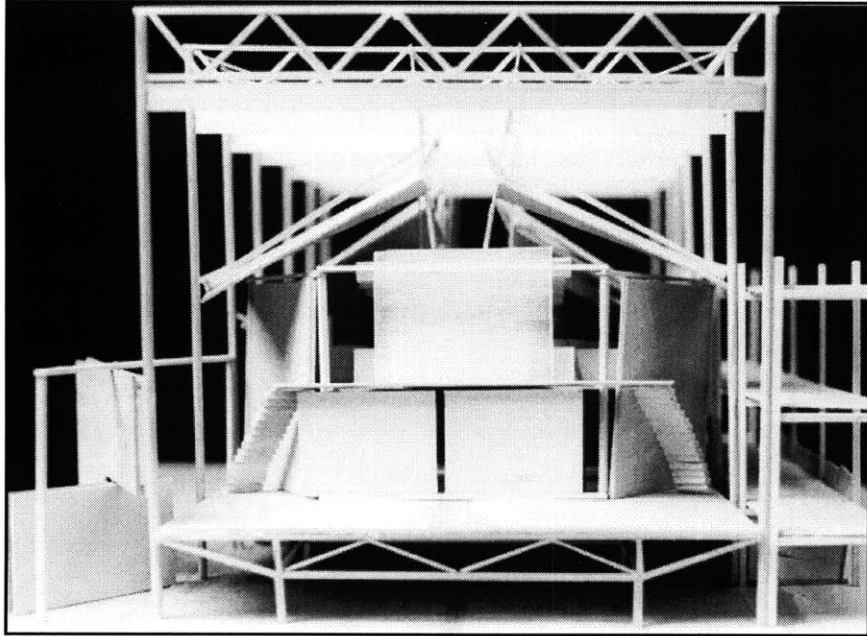


Fig.62 Final Model, Moving Panels



Final Model, Extended Stage **Fig.63**

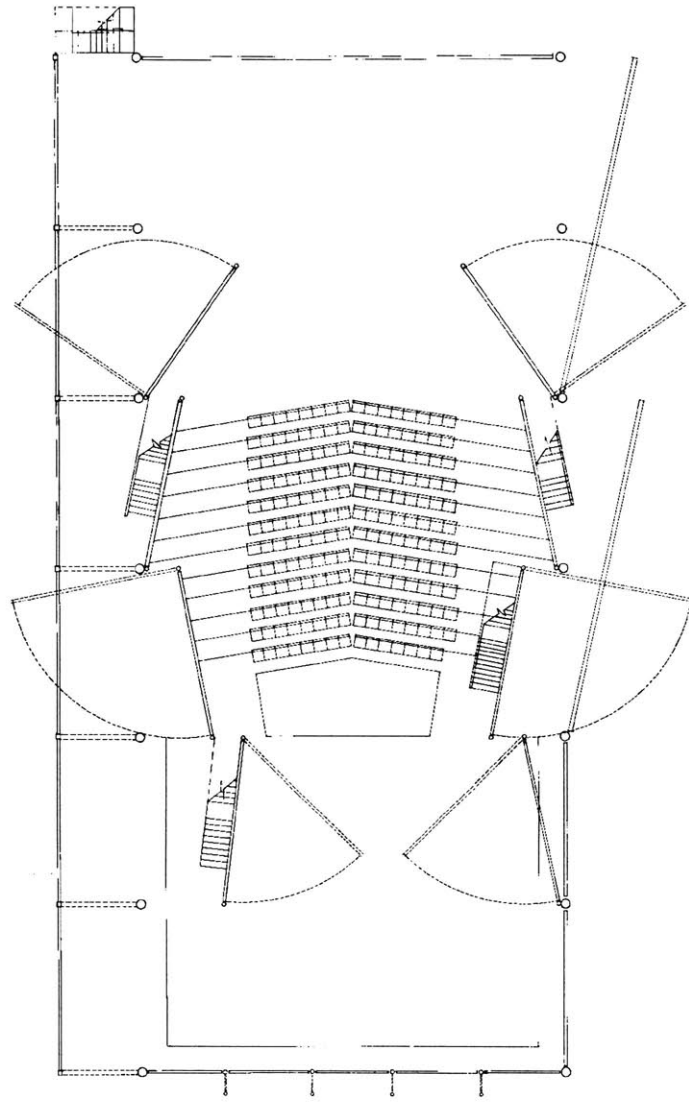


Fig.64 Orchestra Level Plan

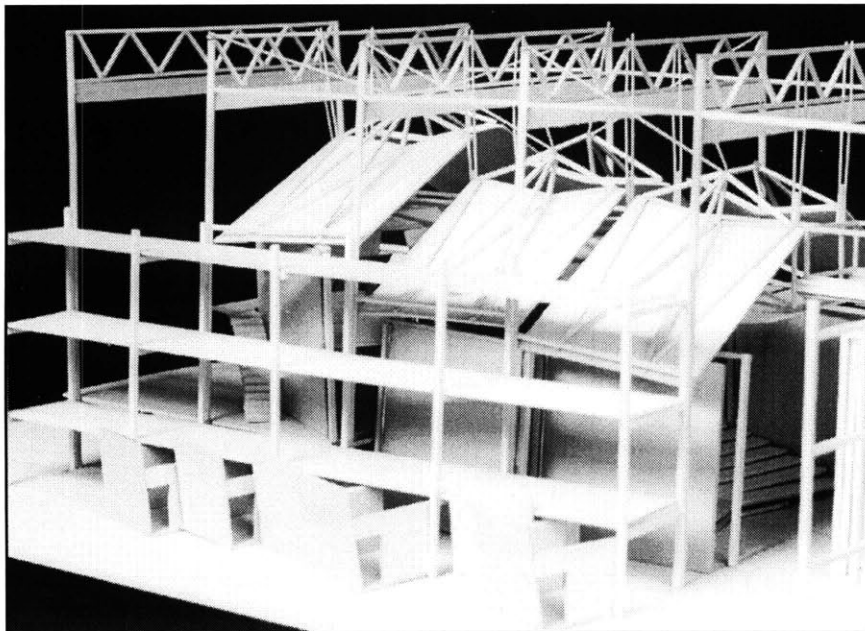
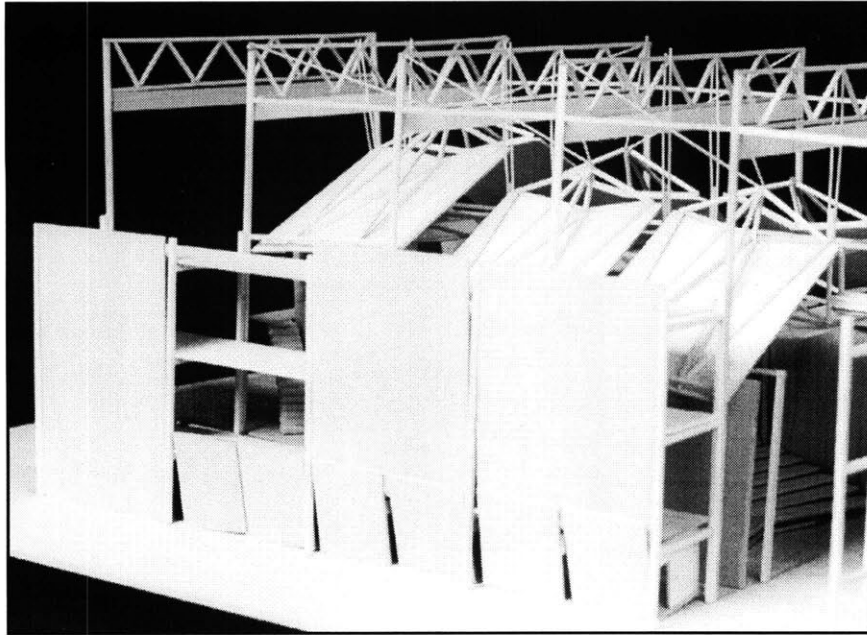


Fig.65 Final Model, Plug-In Program

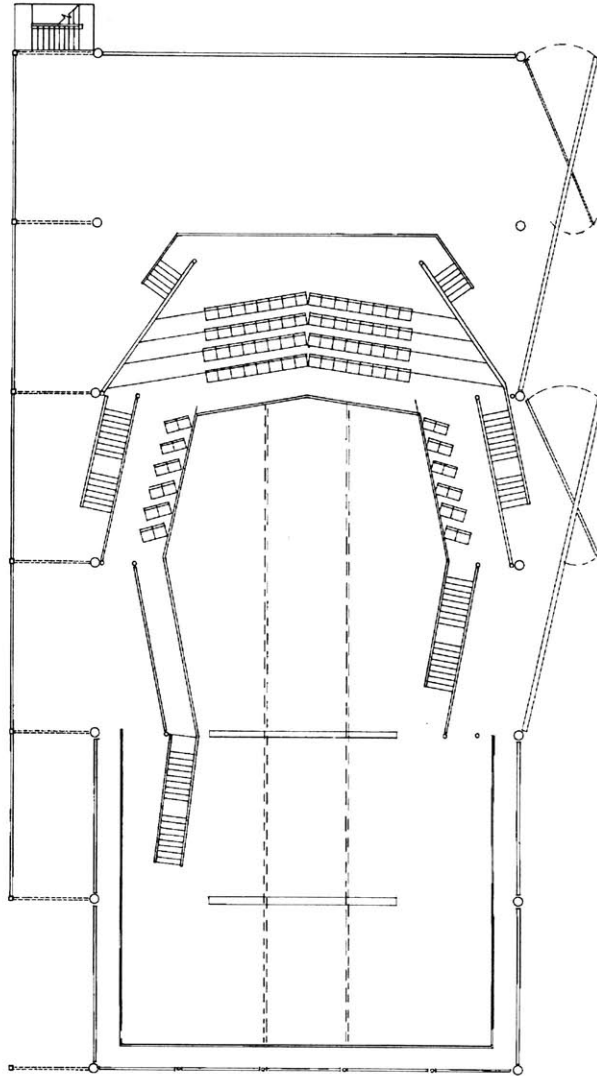


Fig.66 Balcony Plan

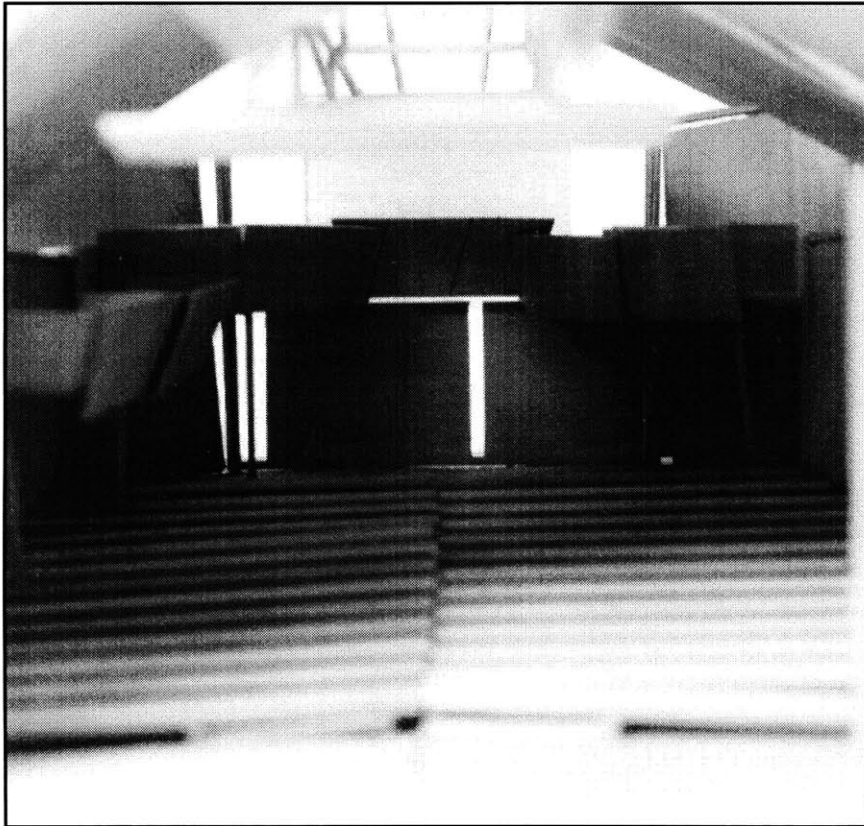


Fig.67 Final Mode, Interior View

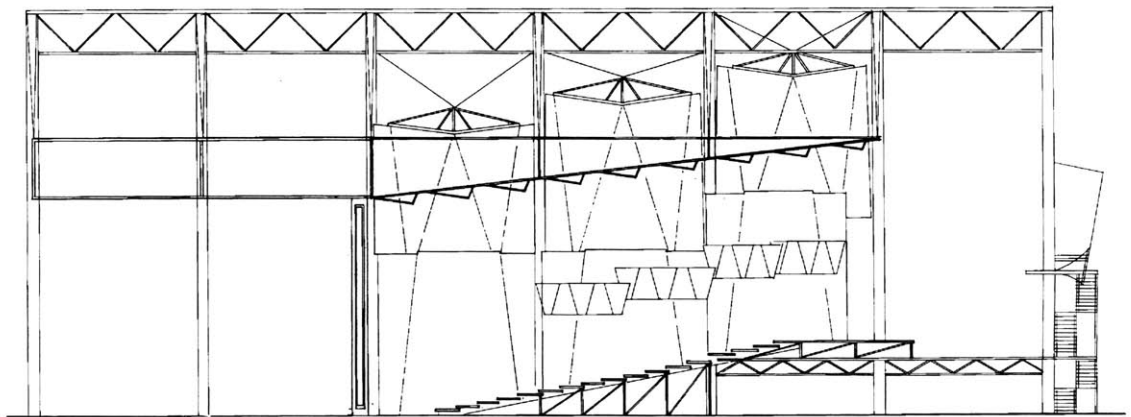


Fig.68 Long Section

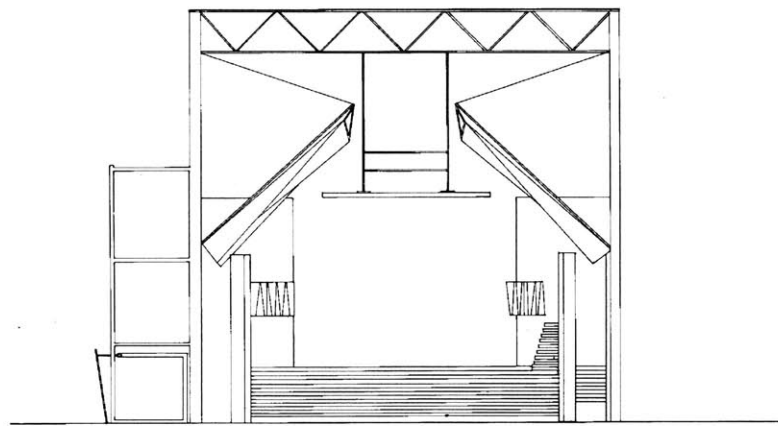
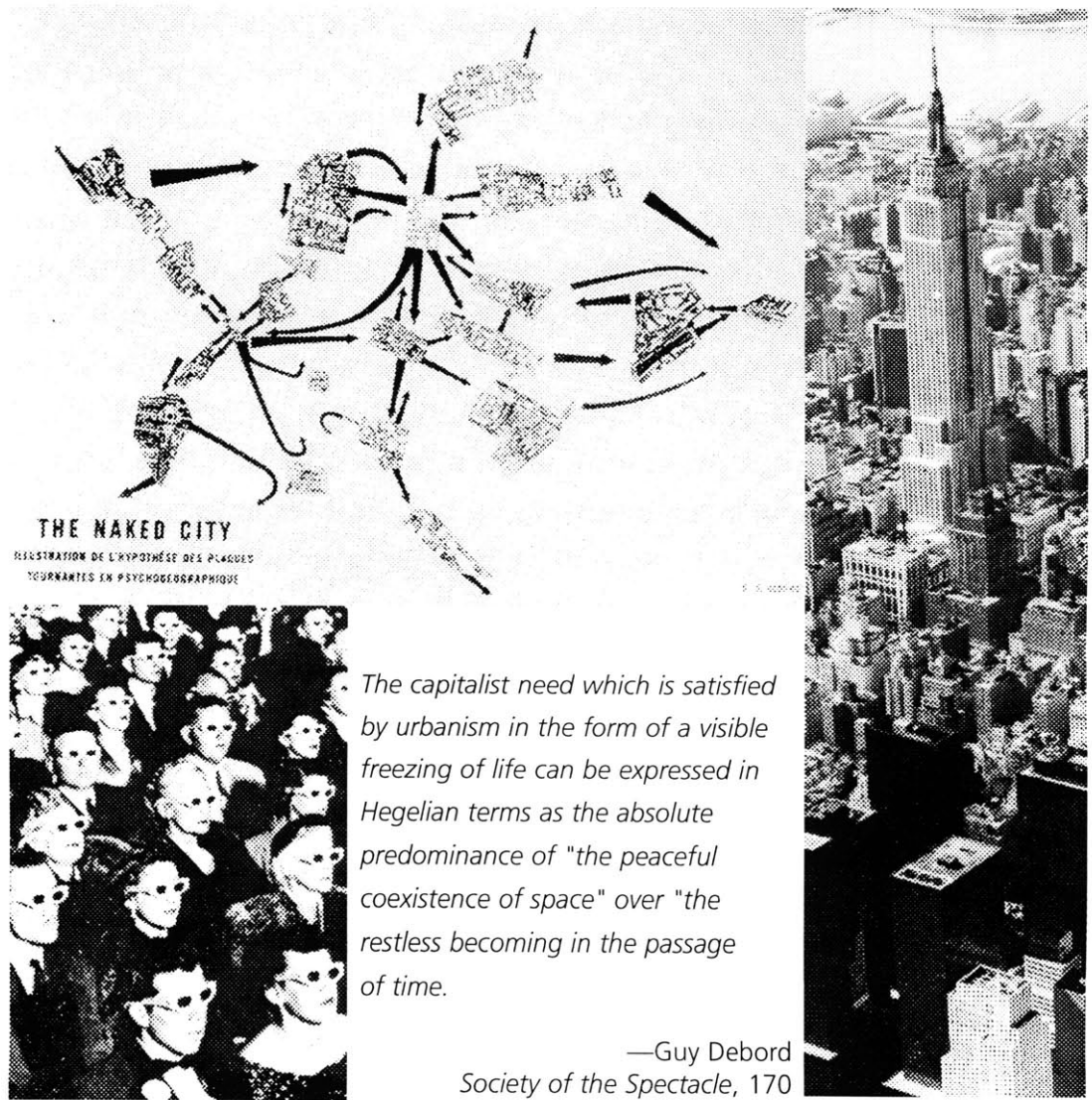


Fig.69 Cross Section



The capitalist need which is satisfied by urbanism in the form of a visible freezing of life can be expressed in Hegelian terms as the absolute predominance of "the peaceful coexistence of space" over "the restless becoming in the passage of time."

—Guy Debord
Society of the Spectacle, 170

Fig.70 Debord's Naked City, Cover of Society of the Spectacle, View of Manhattan

THE URBAN DERIVE

The aim of critical public art is neither a happy self-exhibition nor a passive collaboration with the grand gallery of the city, its ideological theatre and architectural-social system. Rather, it is an engagement in strategic challenges to the city structures and mediums that mediate our everyday perception of the world: an engagement through aesthetic-critical interruptions, infiltrations and appropriations that question the symbolic, psychopolitical and economic operations of the city.

—Krzysztof Wodiczko

Hal Foster, *Dia Art Foundation: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, p. 42

The conception of this project as a site-able structure in the city is grounded in Situationist philosophy. To conceive of urbanism as the culmination of capital is to consider the city as a weapon against its inhabitants. To “site” a structure in unexpected locations is to disrupt architectural authority and urban myths. The city is a monument to state and commercial power, built in contradiction to the everyday life of its inhabitants. Consequently, buildings are not to be viewed as isolated instances of capitalism's control of the public domain, but that urbanism, as a vast accumulation of capital and images, is complicit in the control and alienation of its inhabitants. The city, as a whole, is a monument to the interests of capital and the state.

Urbanism is a spectacle masking itself as a public space. The intention of this project is to reappropriate the public space for inhabitants.

Situationist philosophy, best traced through Surrealism, is founded on the transformation of everyday life.¹ As led by Andre Breton, the Surrealists believed that everyday life should be altered through the unconscious. If everyday life was somewhat unsatisfying, dreams could reorder it. But this, according to the Situationists, was too individualistic, too mystical. After all, Breton was a poet, and Surrealism worked better for artists than everyone else; Breton's revolution was always a poetic one. Not to be held hostage to the unconscious, SI proposed converting it to conscious desire in order to create practical, political acts.

Situationists were, strictly speaking, urbanists. Real life had been replaced by the spectacle. Increasingly, life had become fragmented and man had become alienated, but this condition was masked by a deluge of images that dominated life: the spectacle. In the words of Debord, “everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”² While the spectacle existed everywhere, it was evidenced most in the built environment. Urbanism was seen as capitalism's weapon against the masses, and SI rallied against its oppression. Situationist logic ran like this: to counter the spectacle, you must change everyday life; to change life, you must transform how you use the city; to transform use of the city, you must break down the division between art and life to

create situations. What are situations? constructed momentary encounters that transform the familiar. Your life would become a living critique of the city. Once metamorphosed, the city would be redefined in terms of unitary urbanism, an overarching theory that called for active participation in the creation of the social space of the city.³ To accomplish this, the SI introduced a few tactics, most notably, the *dérive*. The *dérive* was a means to experience rapid changes in environment by allowing individuals to take "transient passages through varied ambiances."⁴ To *dérive* was to break away from the habitual, to drift, to get lost. Earlier avant-garde movements had focused on the modernity of the city, street signs and public life, but the city had ceased to fascinate people. Modern life had grown boring as the spectacle colonized the city. The only way to discover new excitement in the city was to interrupt the routine.

More bohemian than guerilla, the *dérive* was a political act. To *dérive* means to inhabit the city in a manner which is not intended; it implies a space constructed by its user. How the *dérive* functions is perhaps best illustrated by *The Naked City*, Debord's peculiar map of Paris. A crystallization of Situationist theories, *The Naked City* map was fashioned out of nineteen cut-up pieces of Paris erratically linked by red arrows. *The Naked City* operated as psychogeographic map to "the spontaneous turns of directions taken by a subject moving through these surroundings in disregard of the useful connections that ordinarily govern his conduct."⁵ Anticipating the thought of Michel de Certeau, the *dérive* is a spatial practice that exists "below the thresholds at which visibility begins."⁶ The space of the city is invisibly appropriated by its user through the *dérive*.

FOOTNOTES

1 A much theorized concept in the 1950s, everyday life came to be understood as the lived experience of man. Henri Lefebvre's ideas, first put forth during the rapid modernization by France after World War II, were further developed into his more notable project: the social production of space. Its significance lay with its departure from accepted Marxist critique of alienation based on strict economic principles towards one based on other social relationships. The new post-war economy created a new sphere of leisure, one dominated by cars, magazines and lifestyle. However, this increase in consumption led to an increase in alienation. So much more time was spent commuting, housekeeping and buying that the actual lives of people were left impoverished, lost in the repetitions of commodity-using activities. Everyday life was somewhere between all these specialized activities, leftovers from the sphere of work and the sphere of leisure. Now, it had been colonized. For the Situationists, nowhere was "the colonization of everyday life" more apparent than in the built environment. See Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Volume 1* (London: Verso, 1991).

2 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1977), p.1.

3 The most forceful advocate of unitary urbanism was the Situationist architect Constant. His continuing architectural project, *New Babylon*, was a series of models, variations on a utopian city. *New Babylon* would offer changing zones for free play, where nomadic inhabitants would choose and construct their own environment. Based on the future elimination of alienated labor, *New Babylon* would be built when all time was leisure time. But rather than spending time in the banality of the spectacle, individuals could spend time in creative ways. Urbanism would be playful, not functional.

4 Guy Debord, "Theory of the Derive," in *The Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 52.

5 *ibid*, p. 52.

6 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 93.

That something like politics should have been circumscribed within social life at a given time has in itself a political meaning, and a meaning which is not particular, but general. This even raises the question of the constitution of the social space, of the form of society, of the essence of what was once termed the 'city'. The political is thus revealed, not in what we call political activity, but in the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured. It appears in the sense that the process whereby society is ordered and unified across its divisions become visible. It is obscured in the sense that the locus of politics (the locus in which parties compete and in which a general agency of power takes shape and is reproduced) becomes defined as particular, while the principle which generates the overall configuration is concealed.

—Claude LeFort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, p. 11

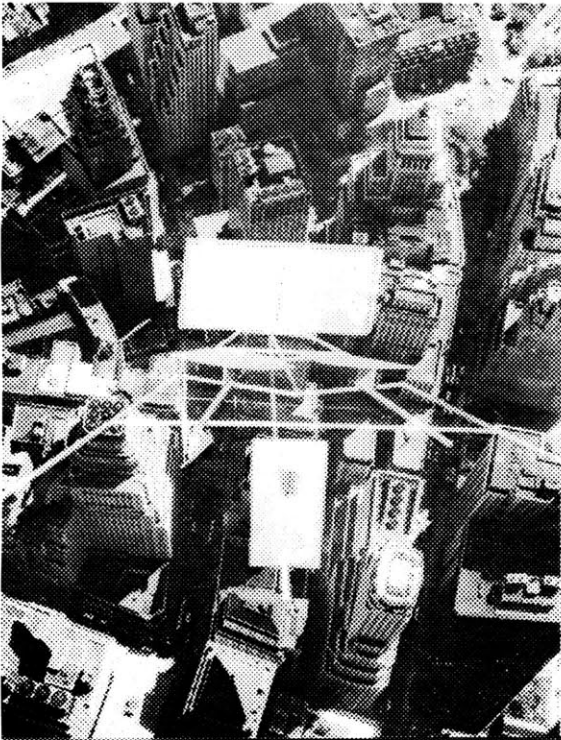


Fig.73 Montage

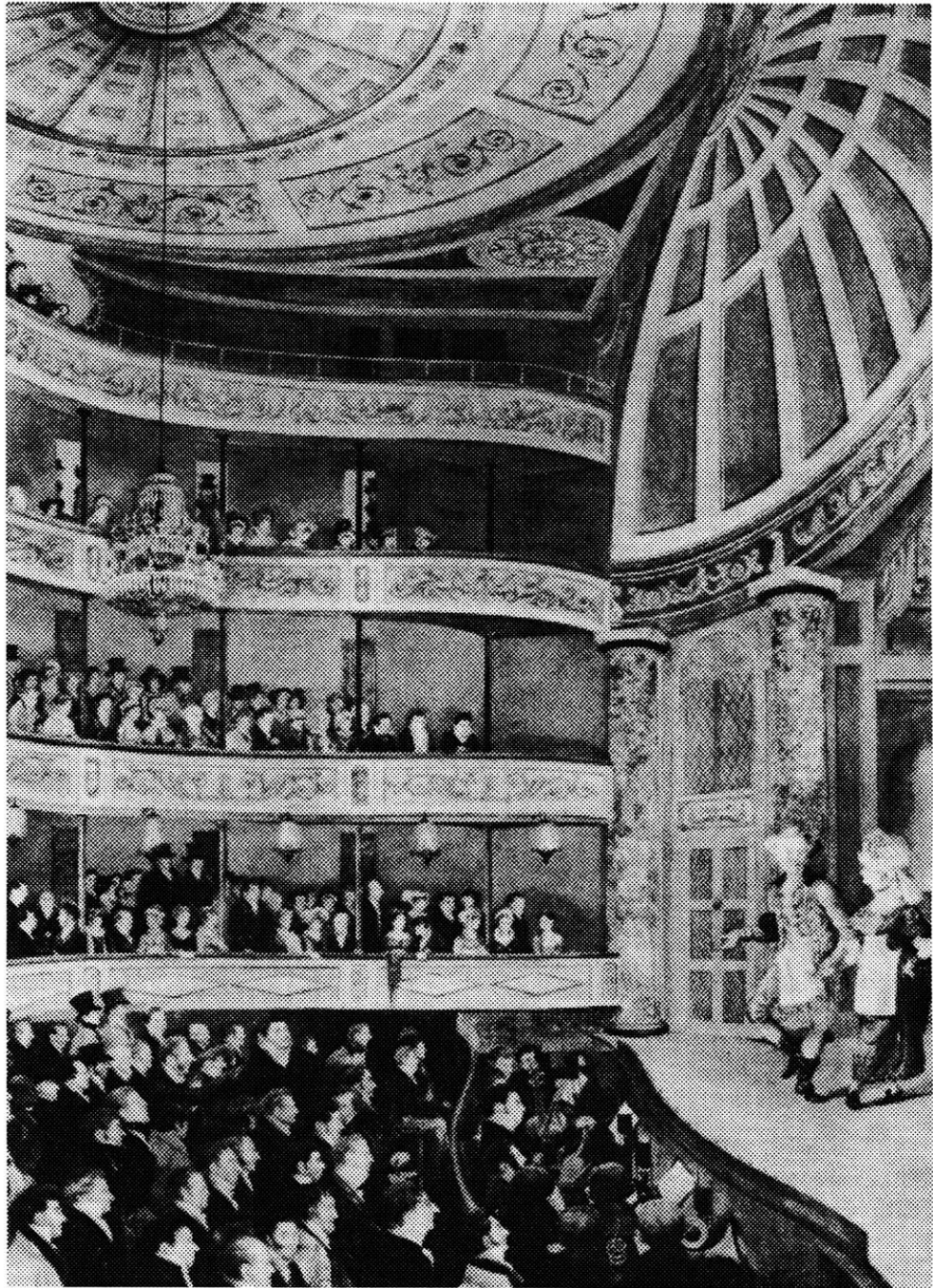


Fig.74 "Plat 18. Park Street Theater. Interior of the Park Theatre, N.Y.C., Nov. 1822, water color by John Searle. Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society. Prominent New Yorkers are portrayed in the orchestra section; the second-topmost tier is occupied by prostitutes."

ASTOR PLACE THEATRE RIOT

There is mischief in the parquette and amphitheatre.

—*Mr. Bowers, police official*
May 10, 1849

No incident in American history better exemplifies the tensions implicit in public space than the Astor Place Riot of 1849. On the night of May 10th, more than thousand people raged for five hours in front of New York's Astor Place Opera House, enacting with bricks and stones the fervency and frustraion of thir position. Issus of public privilege and access have never been so strikingly presented.. Or so tragically; When the mess was cleared and the bodies counted, it was discovered that at least twenty-two had died, and probably hundreds injured. The proximate cause was the appearance of a British actor as Macbeth.

It had started as that smallest token of societal pressure, a hiss. Three years before while performing Hamlet in England, Charles Macready, the actor in dispute, had been hissed at by a single distant patron. Before long, Macready established that the hisser was Edwin Forrest, a prominent American actor. In a gradually escalating dialogue of affidavits, letters, and reviews, the two stars accused each other of incivility and overacting. Not surprisingly, New York's nationalistic, scandal-mongering penny press pumped up the controversy into an international incident. When, apparently by coincidence, Macready and Forrest found themselves pitted against on another in competing New York productions of Macbeth, the public was galvanized.

The appraisal of acting methods, however obnoxious or compelling, registers other differences. As New York by Gas Light author Frank Foster wrote, probably in the year of the riot, styles of acting may be conceived from the catalogue of their audience. The devotees of the just constructed Astor Place Opera House were distinctive, certainly the most elite in American history. (Foster called the place the "resort of our exclusively aristocratic Upper Ten Thousand"). Those who demonstrated their displeasure at Macready's Macbeth

that overcast May night were revolting not only against his acting strategies (which most of them had never seen) but his venue as well. That the sumptuous Opera House was “a great favorite with the intelligent and ambitious among the great middle class” did not endear it either to the working class rioters.

The free-for-all was no surprise. In New York, theater riots were common; in one 12 year period, there were 27 such violent incidents. Many of the rowdy outbursts were directed at English actors. In addition to patriotism, these riots were probably as Gilje notes, directed “at societal pretensions of the middle and upper classes, who openly mimicked the trappings on English culture and society.” Even Macready had no easy excuse; in England, audiences too sometimes rioted against foreign actors, usually French.

Inflammatory handbills directed at Macready were anonymously placed everywhere. Alarmed by the likelihood of public disturbance at the theatre that night, Mayor Caleb Woodhull, in office only two days, called an emergency meeting. What followed can only be deemed the first theatrical performance of the day. In a kind of round-robin two-step, municipal officials, the proprietors of the theatre, and police and military commanders deftly sidestepped decision. The tickets had been sold, indeed oversold. The performance would go on.

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What transpired that night at Astor Place was masquerade. Police men played rowdies, rowdies impersonated gentlemen; milkmen and carmen mimicked soldiers. Excluded from the theatre, ten thousand rioters brought the theatre into the street. And, after it was over, everyone pretended that he had been only a bystander.

This was not a new development. Gilje and Ryan have chronicled in detail the symbolic quality of early American public display including disorder. What distinguishes Astor Place is that the equations of public discourse has been set askew. In the darkness of Lafayette Place, power and wealth could no longer offer the demonstrators any face-saving accommodation.

Early on, elements of the evening seemed comedic. Dressed perhaps in the signature red flannel shirts and tapered pants of the Bowery B'Hoys, New York police had tried, apparently not very successfully, to infiltrate the rabble outside the opera house. For their part, many protesters managed to circumvent attempts to limit the audience to the better sort. In some cases, simple disguise sufficed, at other times, force seemed necessary.

Inside the theatre, the disturbance seemed at first not more outspread than previous riots. Shouting; rotten fruit, eggs. Certainly, with the prior warning, the so-called holligans were thoroughly outnumbered by police. But outside, the dynamics quickly changed. Provoked perhaps by a hosing from an

from an opera house window, the milling crowd began to throw first stones and then bricks. A Tribune reporter the next day recognized the transformation: The theatre had suddenly become a fortress under siege. With this change, the event ceased to be a manageable tussle between police and public.

Among the first targets of stones were adjacent street lamps. Although Moody and other chroniclers document this sidewalk destruction, and even instances of the darkness and confusion it caused, they neglect its central import: For the rest of the night, the warring sides choreographed halfblind in mutual fear, shared ignorance. With the municipal constabularies unable to master their constituencies, the militia were quickly called. It was, as Ryan noted, “the first municipal recourse to outside military force in order to quell a riot.” It was also a great mistake.

If the assembled crowd needed confirmation of their fears of class suppression, the appearance of the militia moving rapidly up Broadway towards the Opera House would have provided it. Most visible of these were the silhouetted cavalry. But the fifty equestrians were not well-trained soldiers, but only horse-owning merchants eager for parade pay. In the gathering panic, old generals futilely deployed antique maneuvers. When they failed, they led their troops, stumbling in the dark, sometimes pathetically forced to wrestle the mob for their own weapons. Within forty-five minutes, reduced by casualties and panicking in the dark, the militia fired its first volley. Here again, mutual misapprehension comes into play: By bad aim or simple humanity, the weekday warriors fired over the heads of the mob. Many at a distance were hit. But the lack of visible damage only convinced the protesters that the militia was firing blanks. Incensed, they surged. Volley after volley followed.

Inside the theatre, at the banquet scene, as terrified actors begged him to quickly abridge the performance, Macready alternated impersonations of a hostile Macbeth with those of an indignant great actor impervious to the outer world. In the end, his transcendence was almost worthy of Lear: “The fifth act was heard, and in the very spirit of resistance I flung my whole soul in every word I uttered, acting my very best and exciting the audience to a sympathy even with the glowing words of fiction, whilst these dreadful deeds of real crime and outrage were roaring at intervals in our ears and rising to madness all round us.”

About the same time, down below, about thirty rioters, held in a makeshift opera house dungeon, attempted to break through the walls of the theatre. Whether seen as premature avant-gardists or desperate prisoners, these resourceful creatures battered down partition walls with their feet.

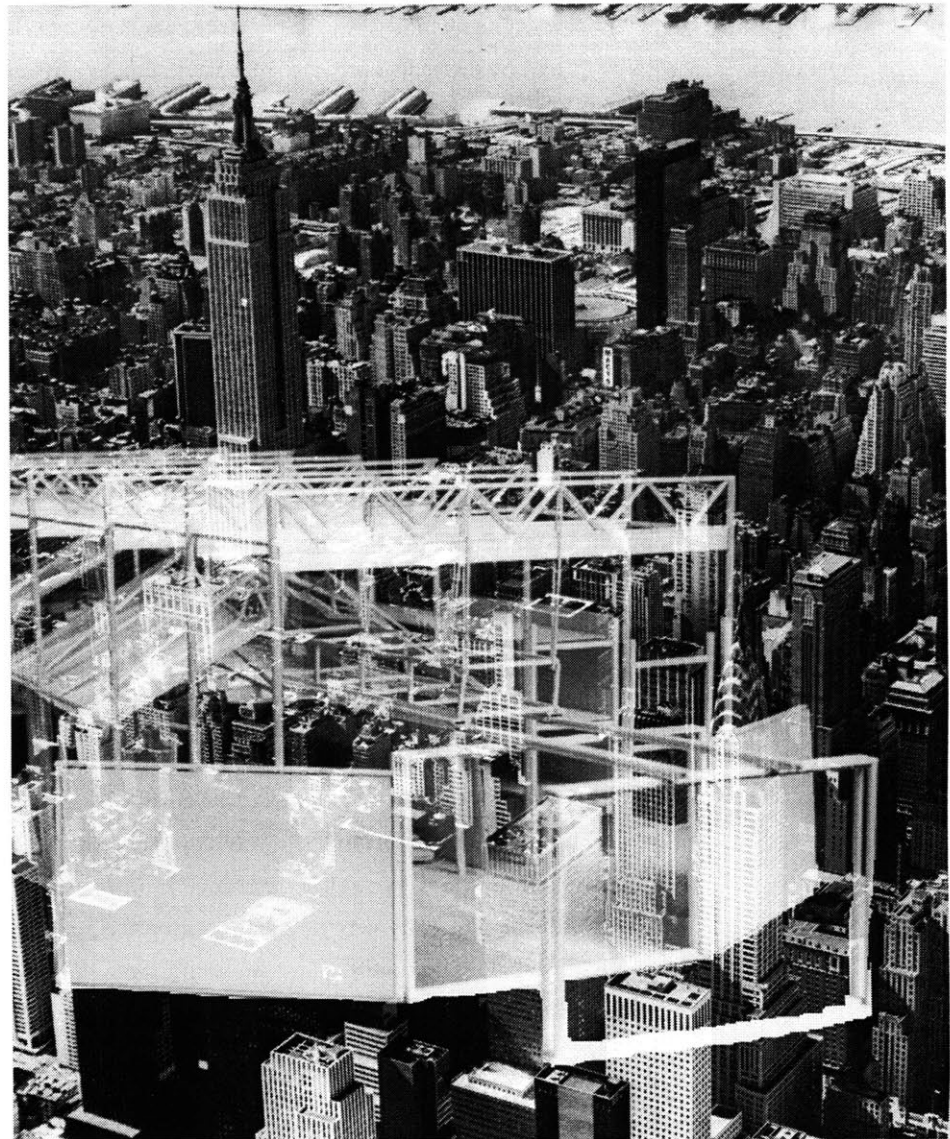


Fig.78 Montage

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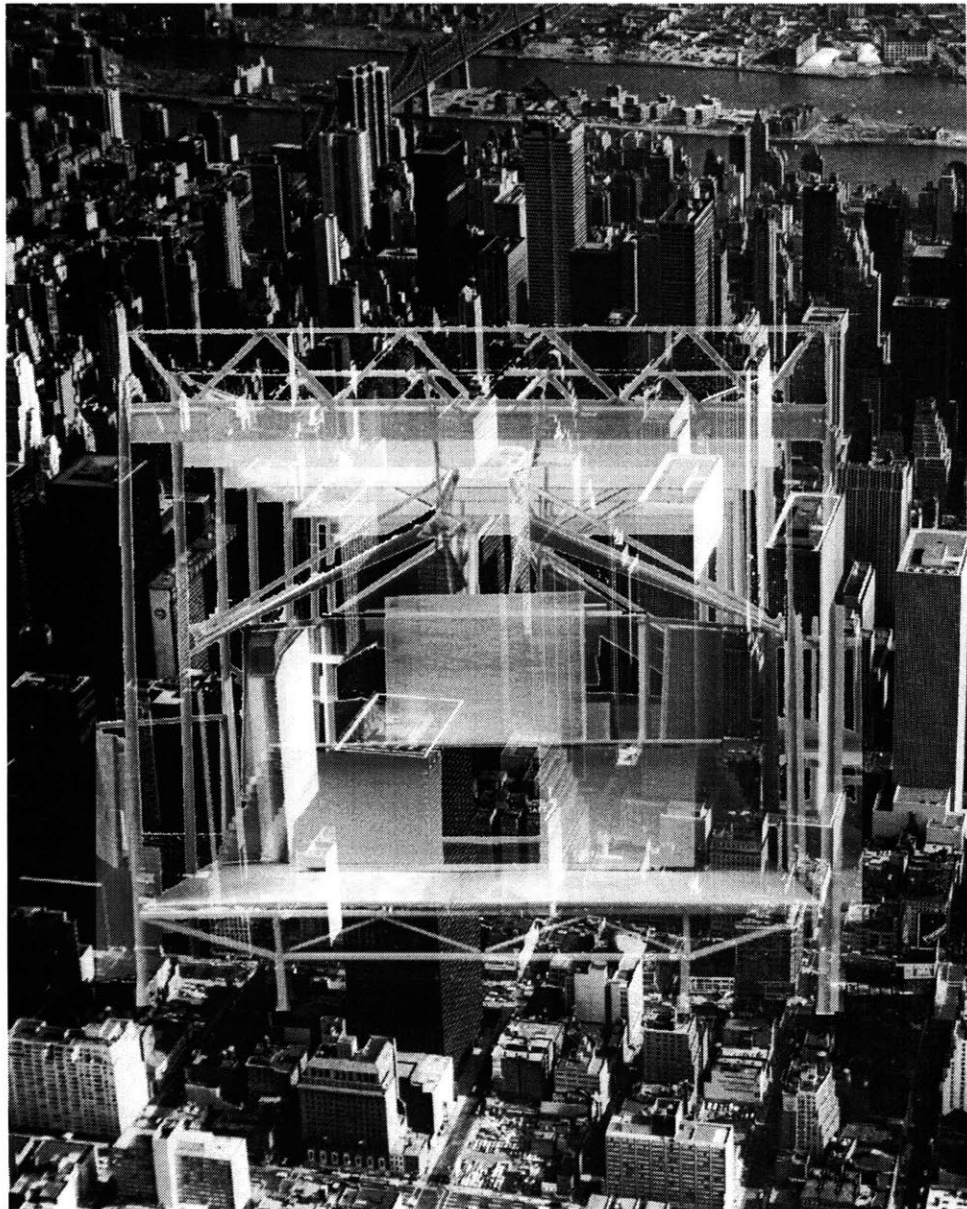


Fig.82 Montage

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"International Exhibition of New Theater Techniques," Konzerhaus, Vienna, 1924. Reprinted in *Kiesler*, p. 38.

Park Street Theater. Interior of the Park Theatre, N.Y.C., Nov. 1822, watercolor-by John Searle. Courtesy of the New-York Reprinted in Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, p. 250.

Subjection, aggregation of that sort, is impossible to America; but the fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunts me. Or, if it does not, nothing is plainer than the need, a long period to come, of a fusion of the States into the only reliable identity, the moral and artistic one. For, I say, the true nationality of the States, the genuine union, when we come to a mortal crisis, is, an is to be, after all, neither the written law, nor (as is generally supposed) either self-interest, or common pecuniary or material objects-but the fervid and tremendous Idea, melting everything with restless heat, and solving all lesser and definite distinctions in vast, indefinite, spiritual, emotional power..

I submit, therefore, that the fruition of democracy, on aught like a grand scale, resides altogether in the future.