A mobile theatre for Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

February 2002

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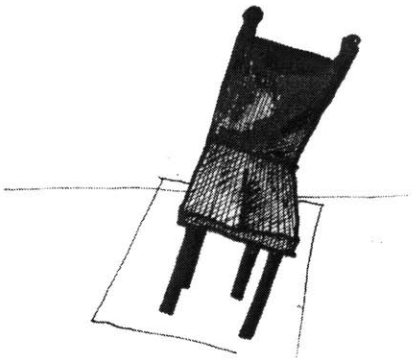

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Abstract

A mobile theatre for Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*

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This thesis shows the possibilities of staging operas in unexpected yet accessible places. The location, no longer neutral, as most theaters try to be, becomes an important factor in each performance. It affects the development of the narrative, the relationship of the audience to the performance, and the technical requirements of the stage. Like the stage sets, musicians, and costumes that are renewed seasonally for the staging or an opera, the site and architecture constitute another, dynamic component in the creative process, while giving a new form and meaning to a familiar site.

Three places in Tokyo are the site of the project: 1. an urban lot (Shibuya Ward, commercial and residential neighborhood) 2. an open riverbank (Tama River, Western Tokyo) and 3. an interior space (the glass hall lobby, Tokyo International Forum).

The staging of one opera, Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, provides the project's program.

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Associate Professor of the Practice of Architecture

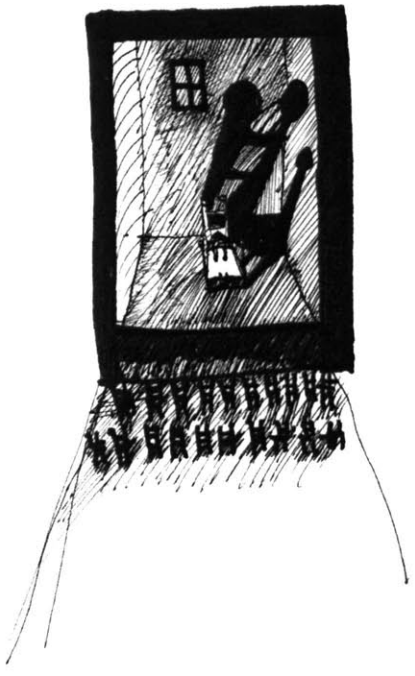


figure 1 a chair
figure 2 scene 12: Melisande in bed

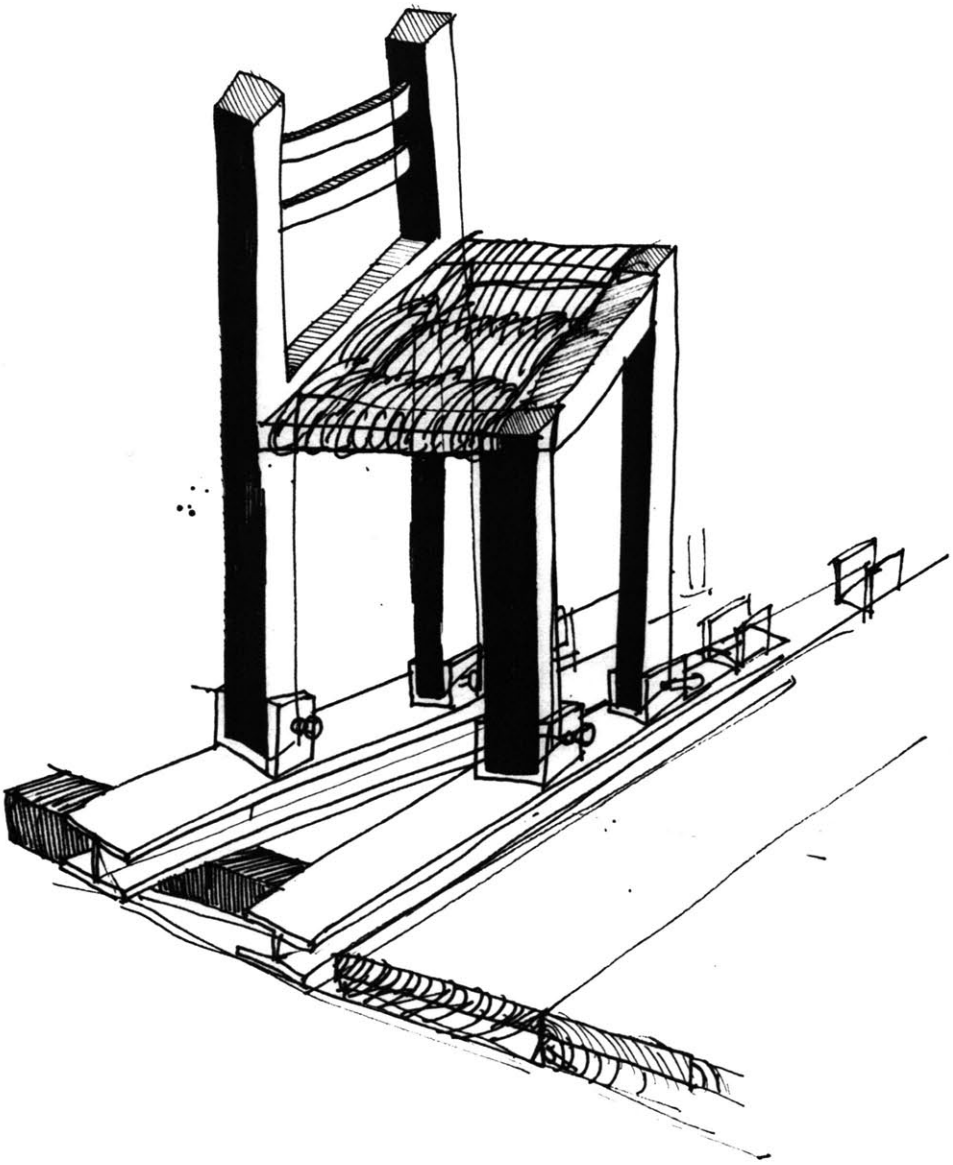
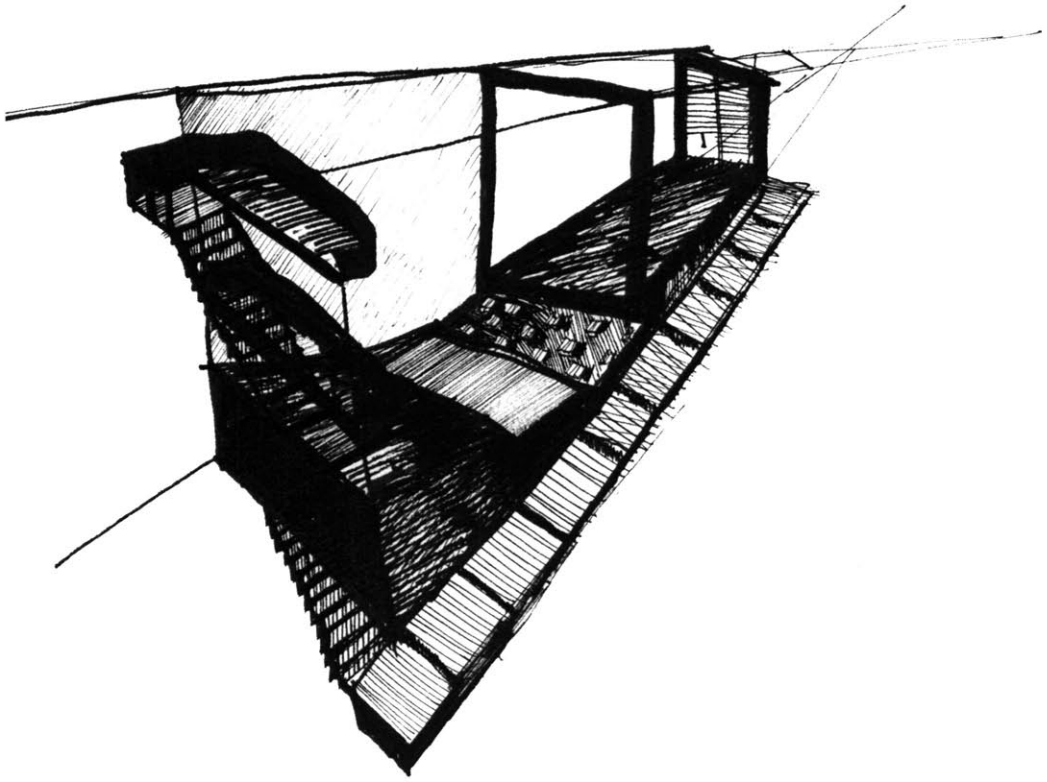
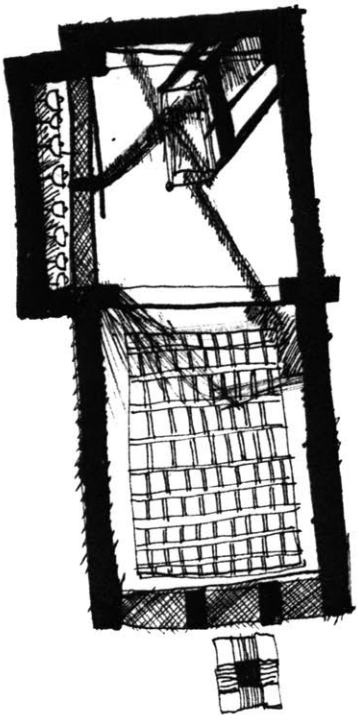
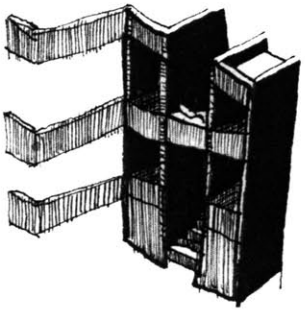


figure 3 chair module (an abandoned idea)
figure 4 another chair

My warm thanks to Carlos Carbonell, Heny Chang, Kavita Srinivasan, Kyoko Tamari, Mariam Tamari, Soo Im, Vladimir Tamari, Zach Kramer and Jorge Carbonell for their generous help in this and other adventures.







figures 5-8 early sketches for a proscenium, loges

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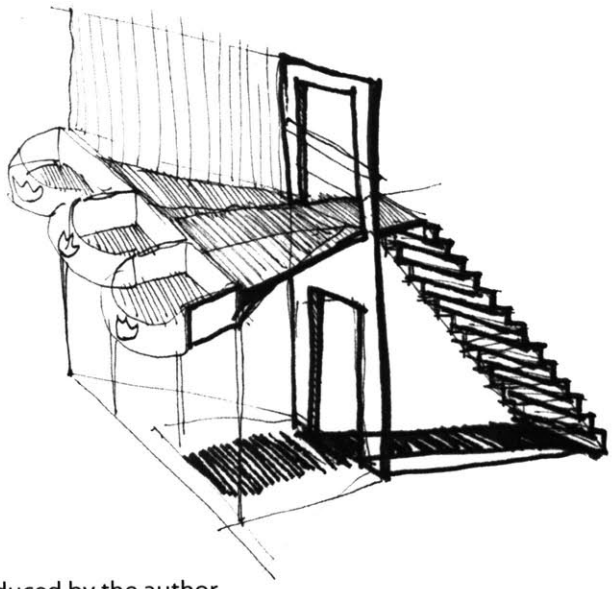

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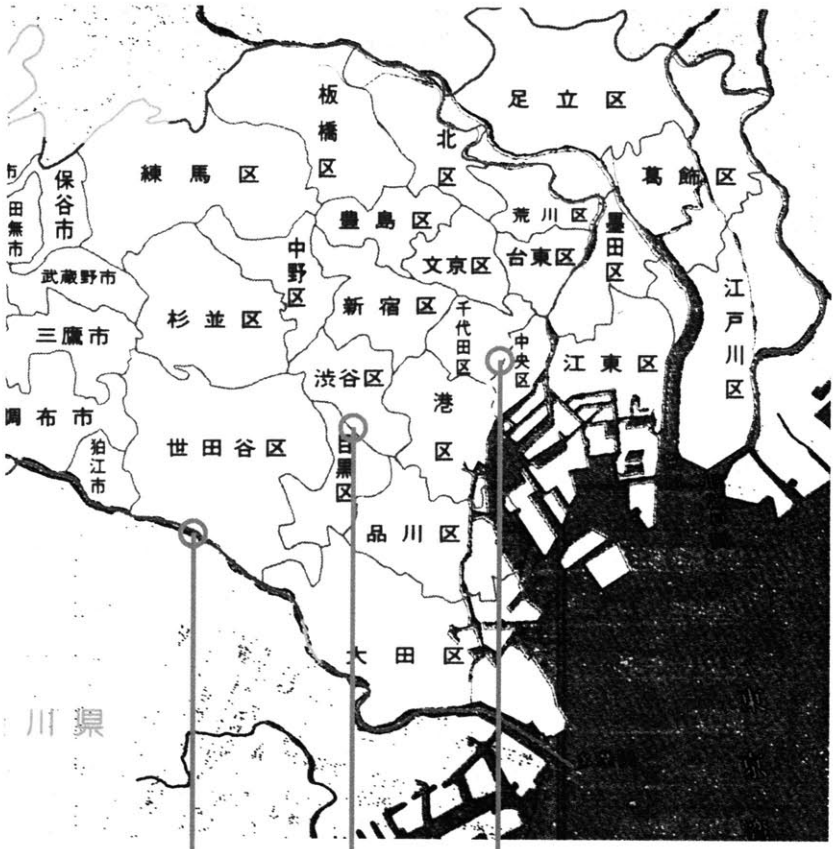


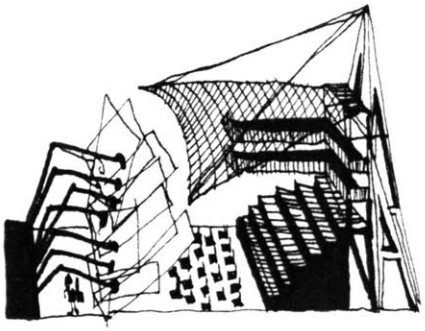
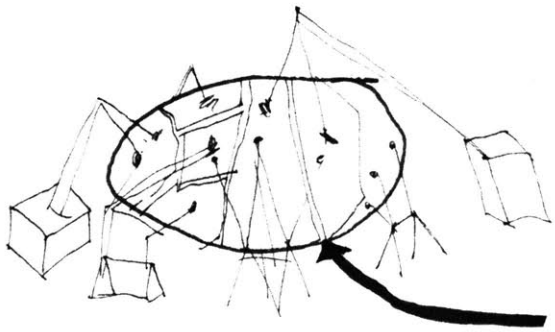


figure 9 map or Tokuyo municipality (altered from the Hi-Map series) 1:32,000
figures 10-13 early sketches of the mobile theater



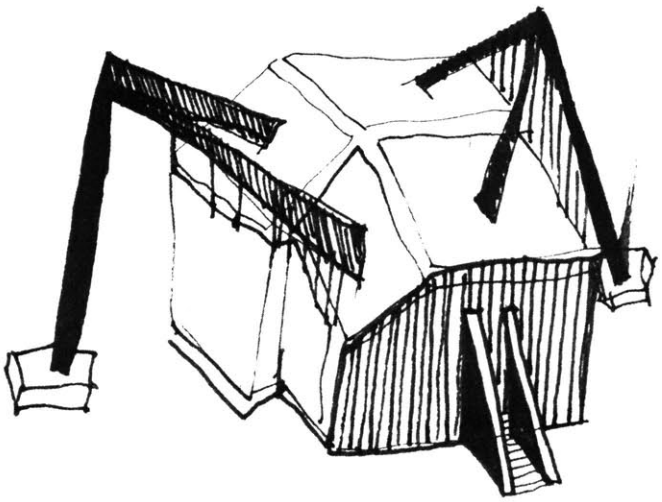
Introduction

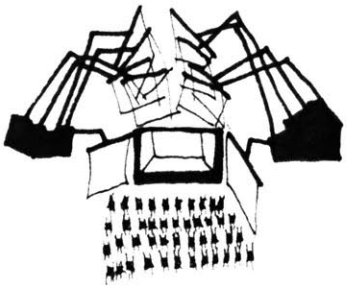
An opera performance is an ensemble of many parts: singers, orchestra, audience, props, lighting,--and on another level the elements of narrative, music, and text. These elements come together to create a fictional space and time within the performance, which intersect with the real space and time needed for live performers to be seen and heard. This intersection, and the relationship among the elements, is the site of my project.

The theatre, like the opera, is different every time it is performed. It is composed of a number of key parts: the props, stair unit (6'x20'), columns (40'), bracing, pulleys, and cables. These relatively small, portable elements serve different funtions in each site.

Each of the three sites is an urban public space in Tokyo. Each is, in its own way, underused. The urban lot awaits construction as a bare gravel gap in a desirable street. The Tokyo Forum is a well-loved but functionally puzzled space. It is, perhaps, the role of the Tama river to be underused: its grassy banks lend one the illusion of being in a jungle, except during the summer fireworks festivals when they are overrun with merrymakers from all over the city.

The theater uses these spaces. For a time, the collection of architectural fragments becomes a whole world.





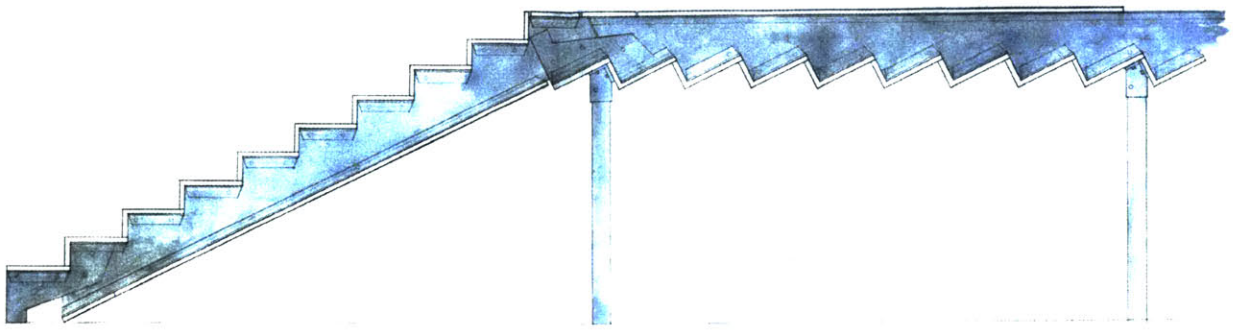


figure 14. a unit of twenty steps measuring 6'X20' can be joined along either edge. It provides both access and raked seating, emulating the most basic kind of public theater.

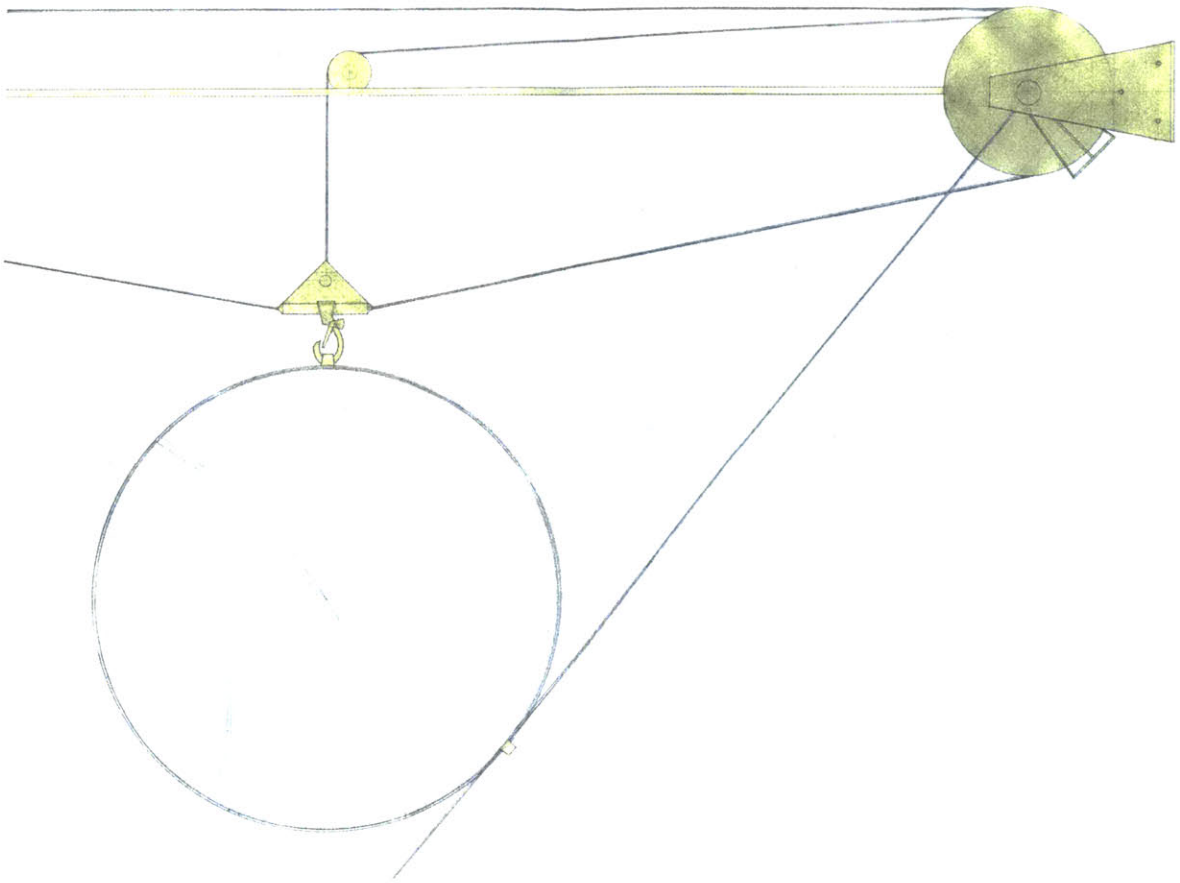


figure15. a pulley and cable system for moving props. The mysterious workings of off-stage machines are put on display.

figure16-17. early trees
figure 18. the three beggars sleeping at the grotto

Props

One of the interesting things about the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* is the way in which objects (a ring, the sun, a well, locks of hair among them) take on a strange, symbolic importance like objects in a recurring dream.

I have imagined the 'set' for the opera as a collection of these objects. Four of the six I have chosen below are important because, while each appears (or is meaningfully referred to) in scenes that take place in several different places, each object represents a specific place in the landscape of the narrative. The props and their settings are:

the fountain	*forest*
the bed	*castle interior*
the rocks	*grotto*
the tower	*castle exterior*

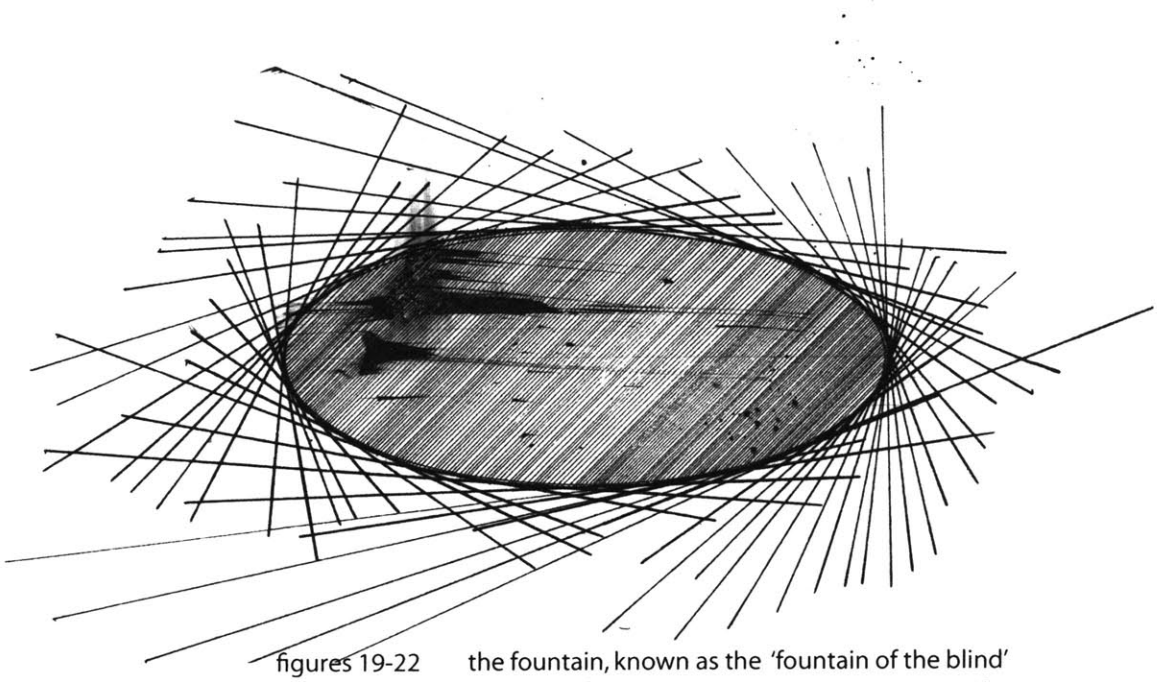
The other two objects appear in every scene of the opera:

the sun-moon
the tree

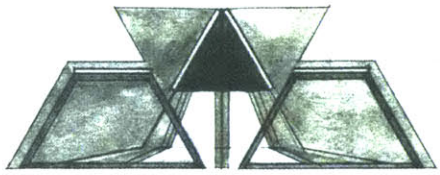
The tree, or rather a forest of them, characterizes the melancholic nature of the physical and psychological environment of the narrative. The forest is ancient and covers everything. The sky is always glimpsed through its shadows.

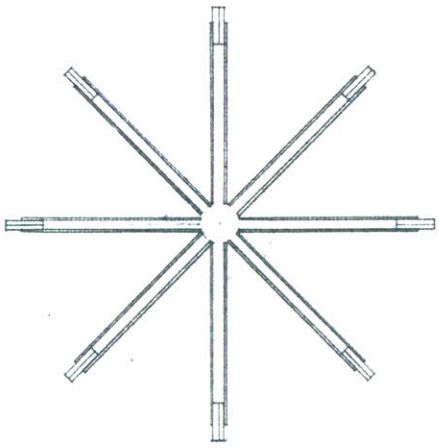
The sun-moon appears in each scene because, throughout the opera, the characters speak about light: the light of the rising moon, moonlight obscured by clouds, light as it is caught on the surface of a deep well, the glow of the setting sun. This prop, sometimes represents the sun and at other times the moon. In one scene of almost unbearable tension, it falls to the ground and becomes an immovable stone that has trapped a child's toy.

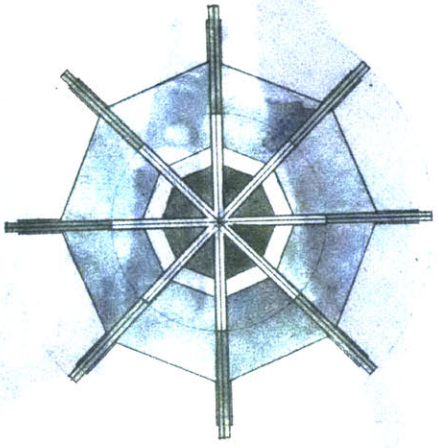
I have been presenting these objects as 'props' throughout the thesis semester, and have continued using the term, but technically a prop (property) is an object that an actor will actually pick up onstage. None of these props are of portable size, but neither can they be considered 'sets' that stand in for buildings or vistas. They are, rather, only slightly bigger than the scale of a person. Pelléas looking up at the tower might be compared to a boy standing among playground toys.



figures 19-22 the fountain, known as the 'fountain of the blind'
(steel and fiberglass) 1:43







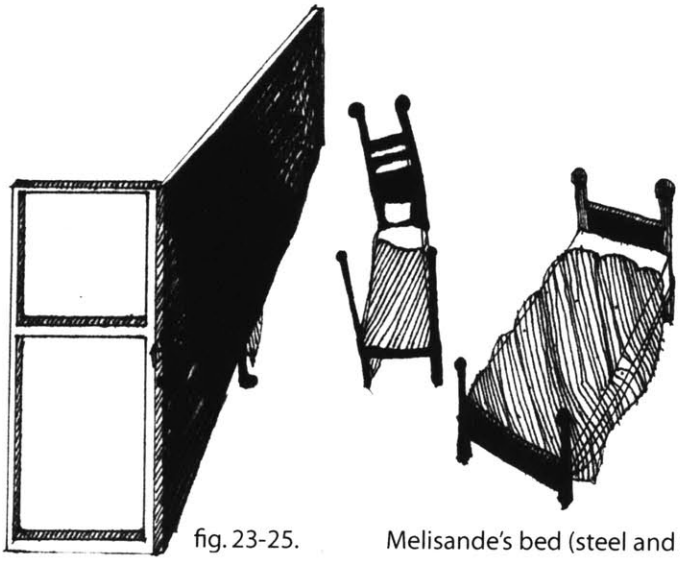
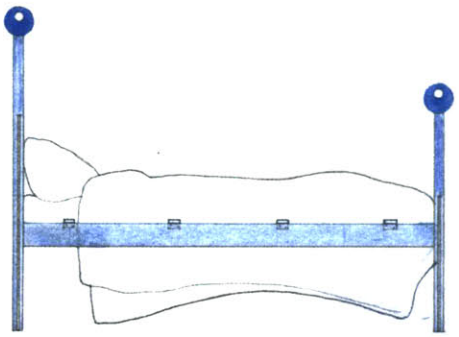
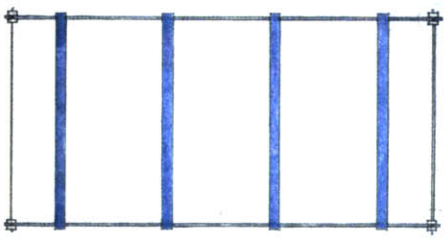


fig. 23-25. Melisande's bed (steel and cotton): a site of some suffering 1/4:1





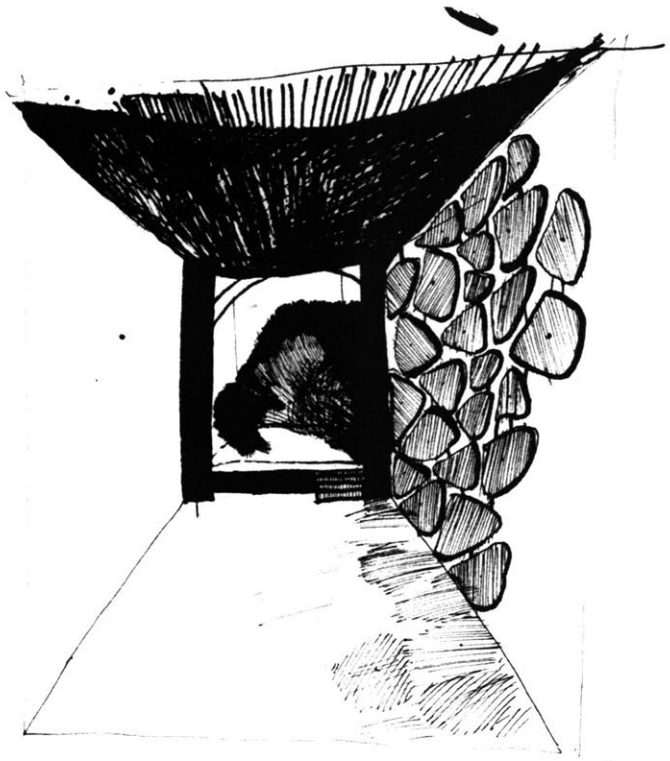
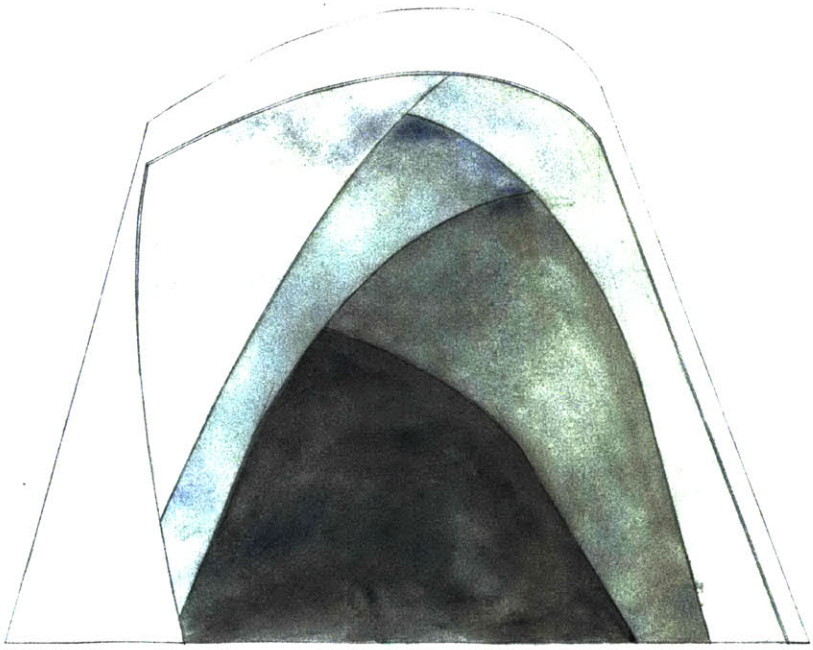
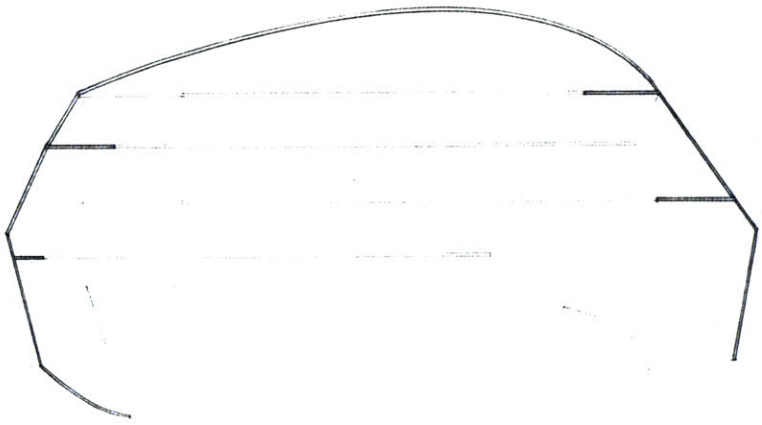


fig. 26-28. the rocks (steel): a seaside grotto 1/4:1





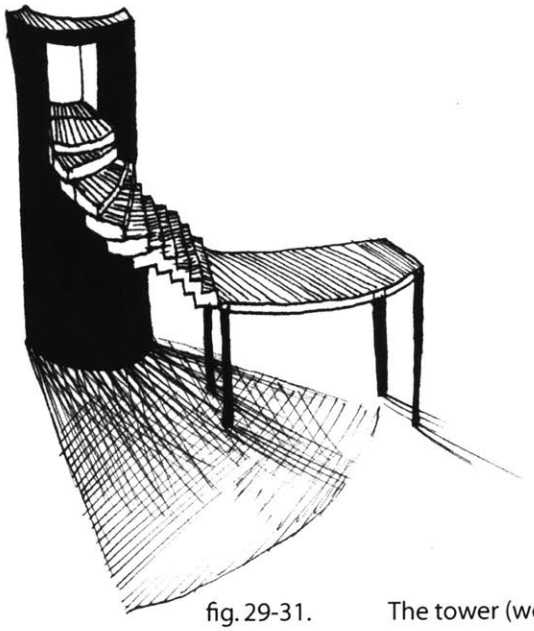
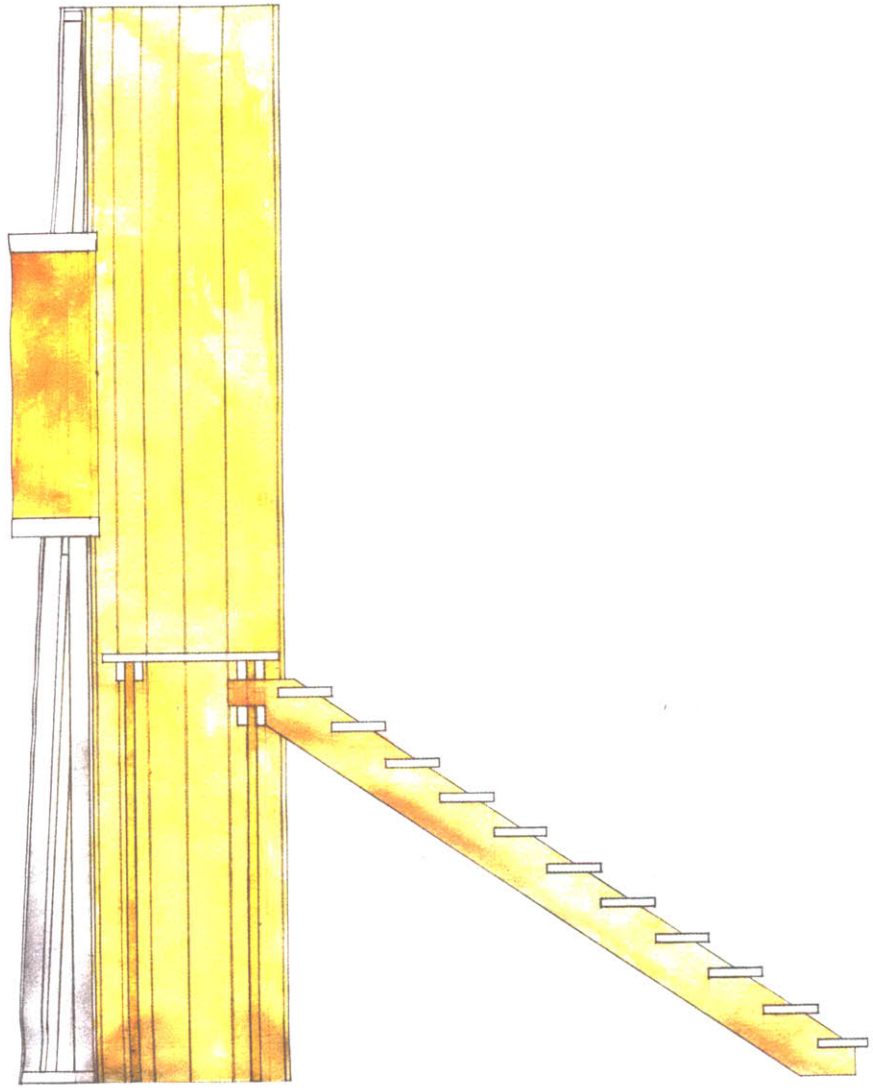
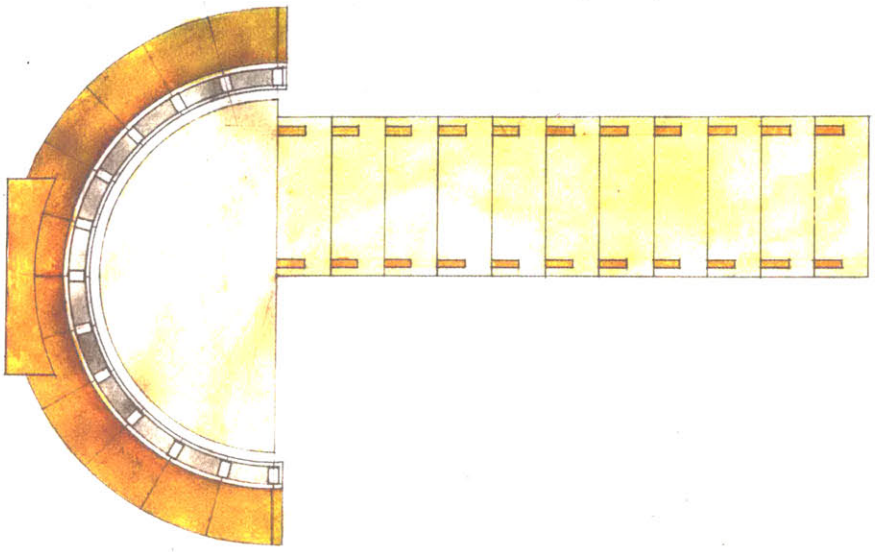
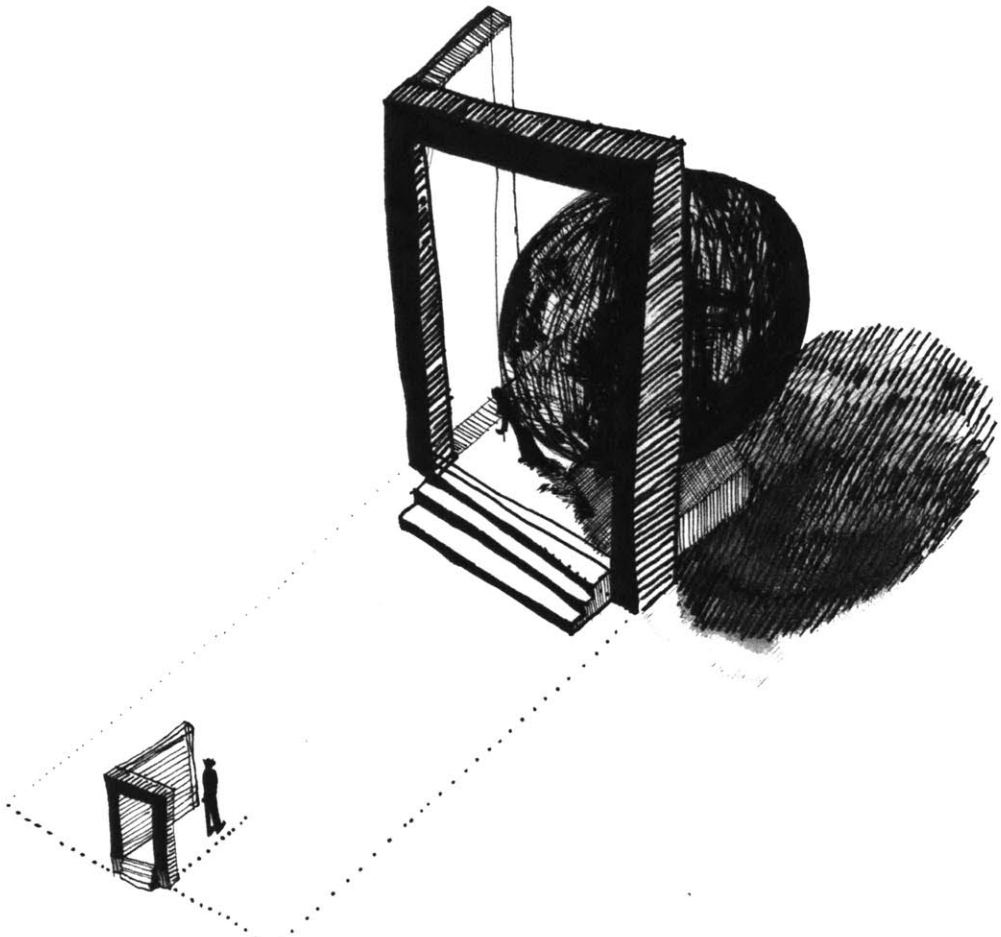


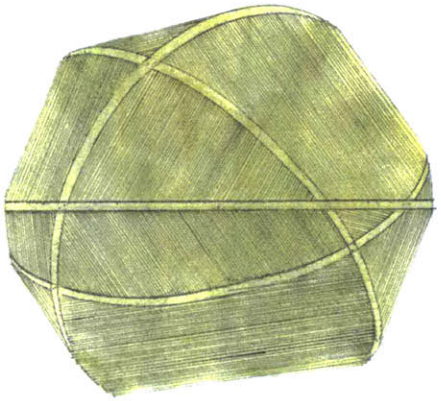
fig. 29-31. The tower (wood): its two sides are connected by a window 1/4:1

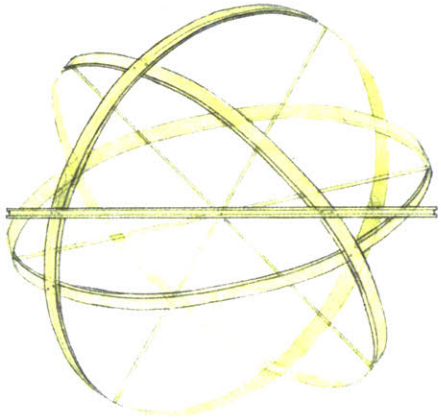






figures 32-34 The sun, also the moon, and a stone
(aluminium strips and wire) 1:43





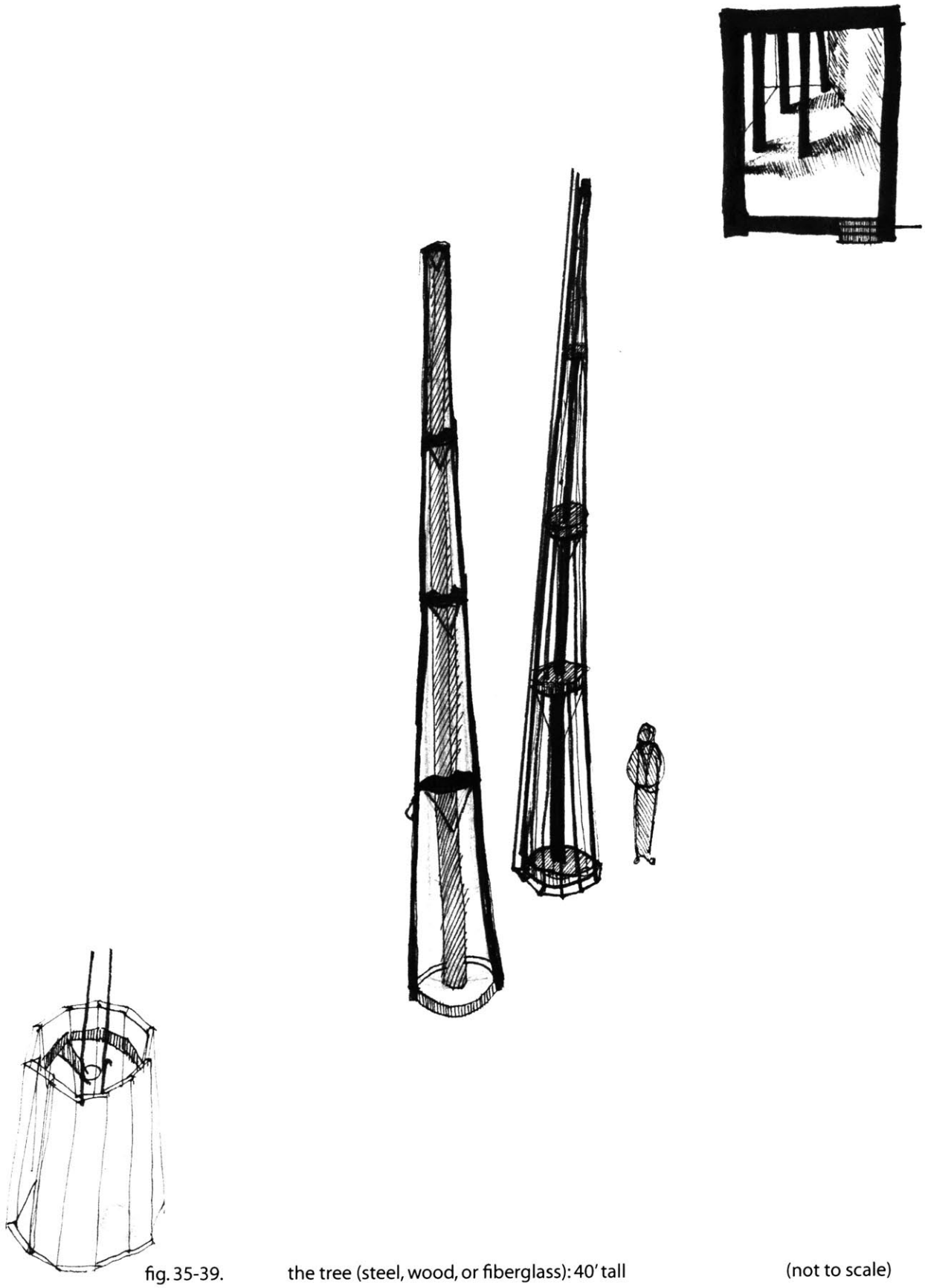
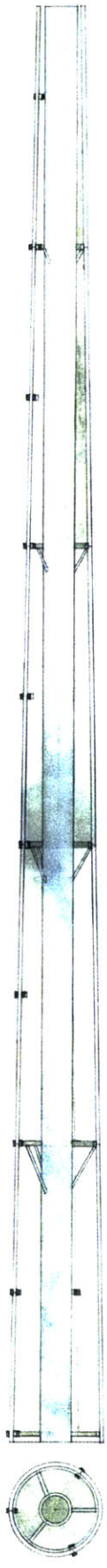


fig. 35-39. the tree (steel, wood, or fiberglass): 40' tall (not to scale)



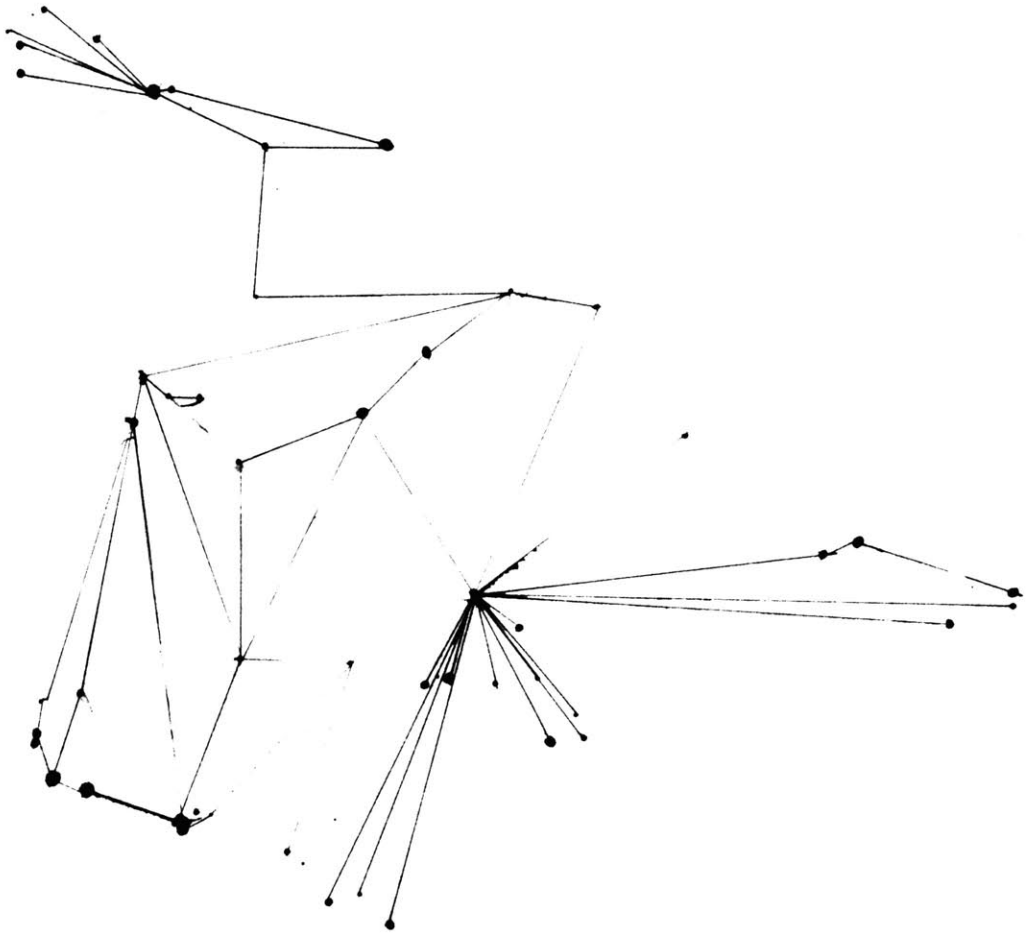


fig. 40 stars, like other sources of light, haunt Debussy's opera.

The opera

Pelléas et Mélisande
Composed by Claude Debussy
Libretto by Maurice Maeterlinck
Premiered in Paris, 1902

An opera in five acts, 12 scenes

The opera takes place in the symbolist landscape of 'Allemonde', the kingdom of All-the-world. Characters are revealed not through arias, but through poetry and orchestration. Although the opera is woven around a plot of love and jealousy, it is most importantly a drama about the fragility and beauty of the human spirit.

Singers:

Arkel, King of Allemonde	Bass
Geneviève, Daughter of Arkel	Mezzo
Golaud, Son of Arkel and Genevieve	Baritone
Pelléas, Son of Genevieve	Tenor
Mélisande, Wife of Golaud	Soprano
Yniold, Son of Golaud	Soprano
Shepherd	
Doctor	

Props:

fountain
trees
sun
tower
bed
rocks

Settings:

Forest
Castle interior
Park
Grotto
Castle exterior

figure 41.

Scene 1: Forest
Golaud and Mélisande meet.

fountain
trees
setting sun

Golaud
Mélisande

figure 42.

Scene 2: Castle interior
They read Golaud's letter.

tower
bed
trees
moon

Genevieve
Arkel
Pelléas

figure 43.

Scene 3: Park
Pelléas and Mélisande talk.

well
trees
stormy sun

Mélisande
Genevieve
Pelléas

figure 44.

Scene 4: Park
Mélisande loses her wedding ring.

well
trees
midday sun

Mélisande
Pelléas

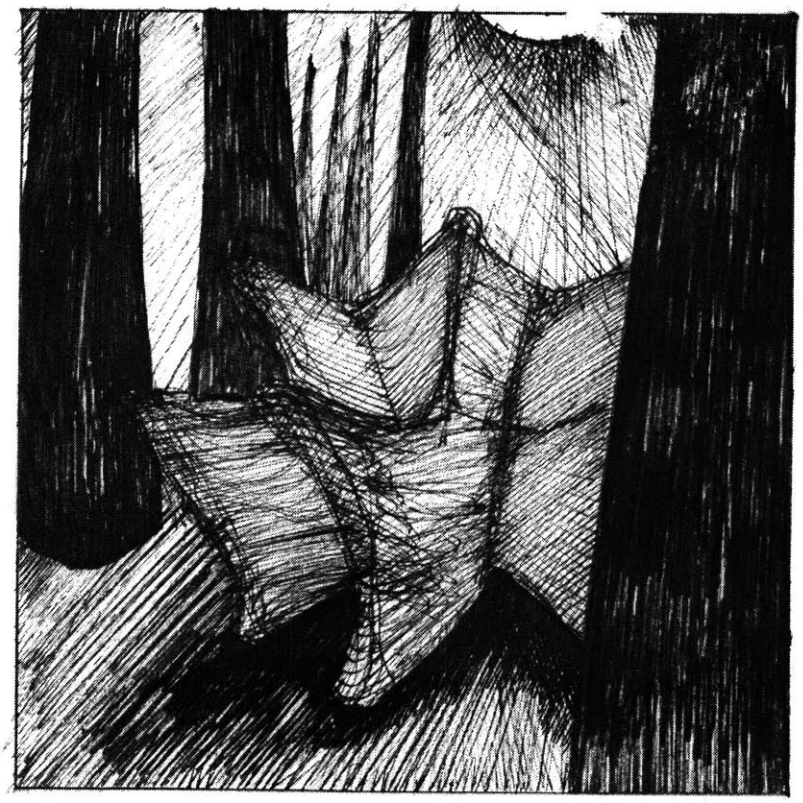


figure 45. Scene 5: Castle interior
Golaud tells Mélisande to find the ring.

tower
bed
trees
moon

Golaud
Mélisande

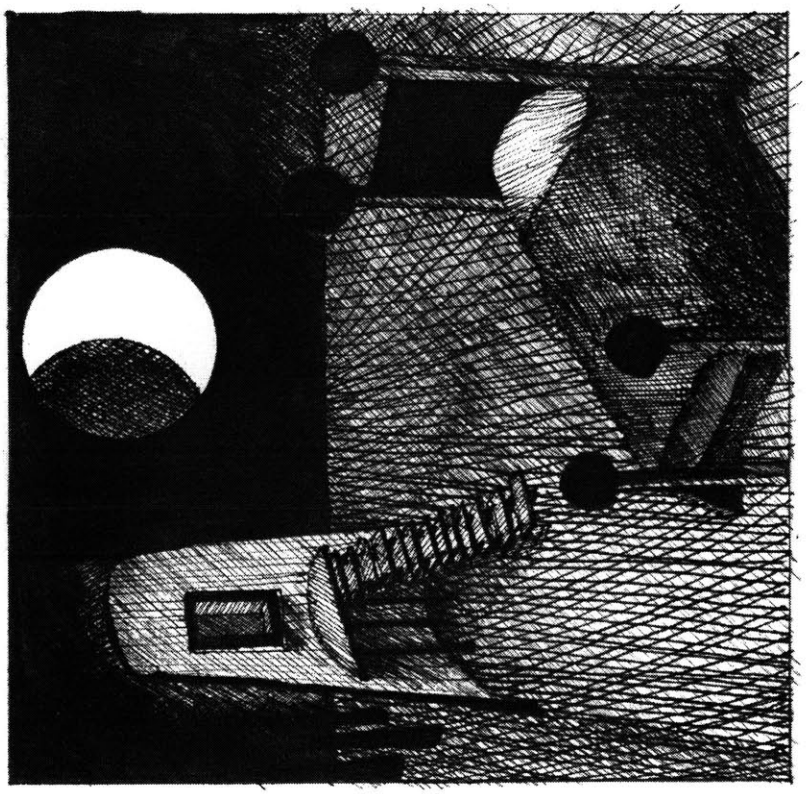


figure 46. Scene 6: Grotto
They pretend to search for the ring.

rocks
trees
obscured moon

Pelléas
Mélisande

figure 47.

Scene 7: Castle exterior
Pelléas plays with her hair, Golaud is jealous.

tower
trees
rising moon

Pelléas
Mélisande
Golaud

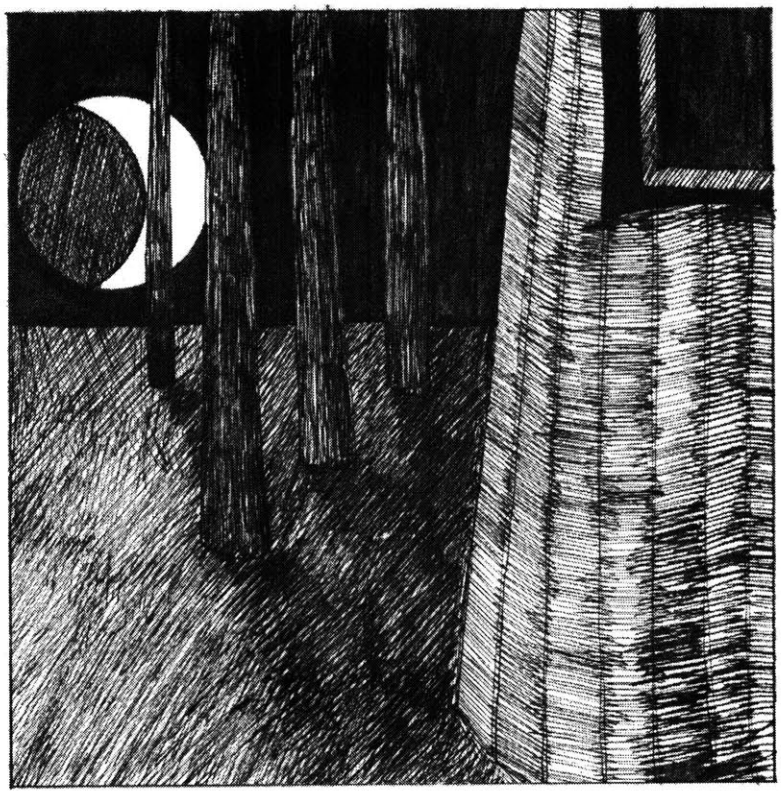


figure 48. Scene 8: Castle exterior

Golaud spies on Pelléas and Mélisande.

tower
trees
setting sun

Golaud
Yniold

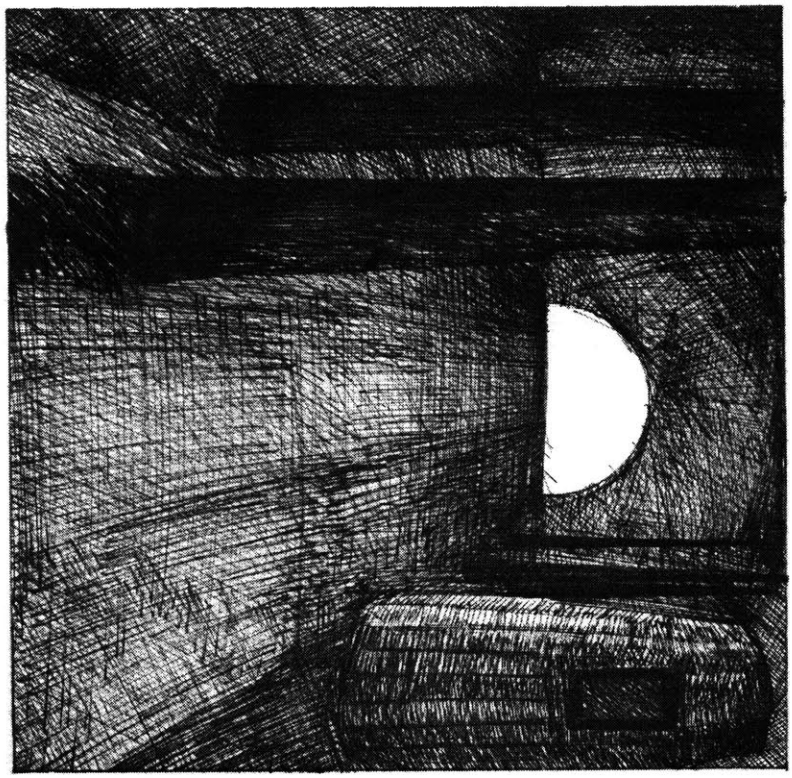


figure 49.

Scene 9: Castle interior
Pelléas and Mélisande plan to meet secretly.

tower
trees
afternoon sun

Pelléas
Mélisande
Arkel
Golaud

figure 50. Scene 10: Park
Yniold tries to lift a massive stone.

well
trees
stone

Yniold
Shepherd

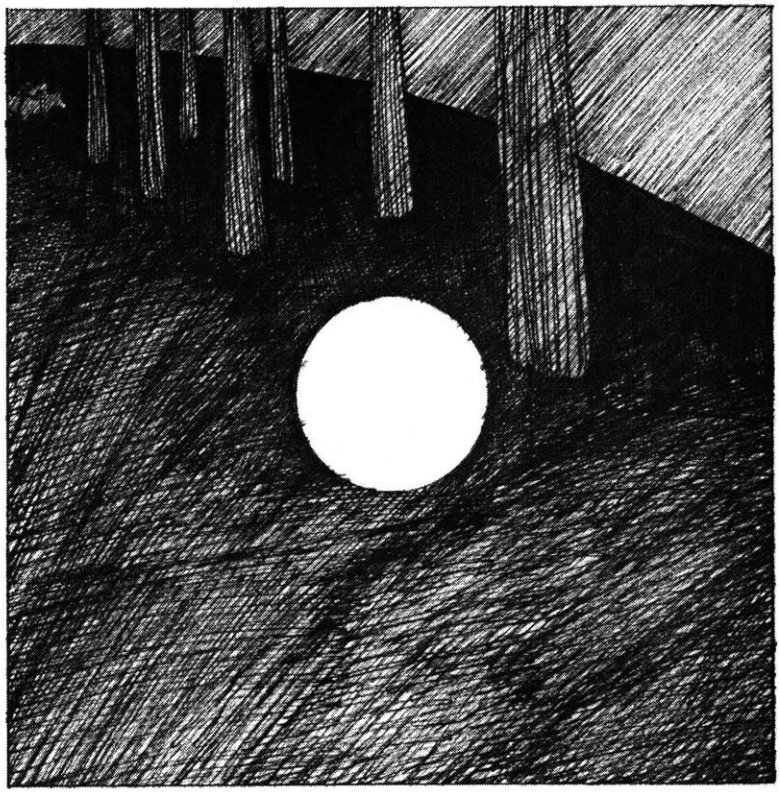


figure 51.

Scene 11: Park
Golaud kills Pelléas.

well
trees
moon

Pelléas
Mélisande
Golaud

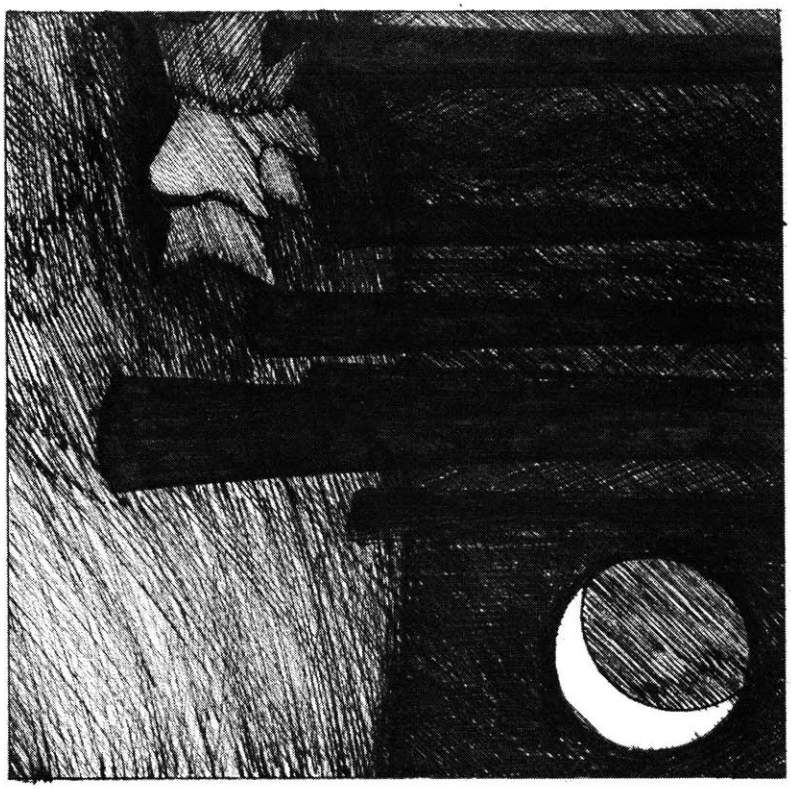
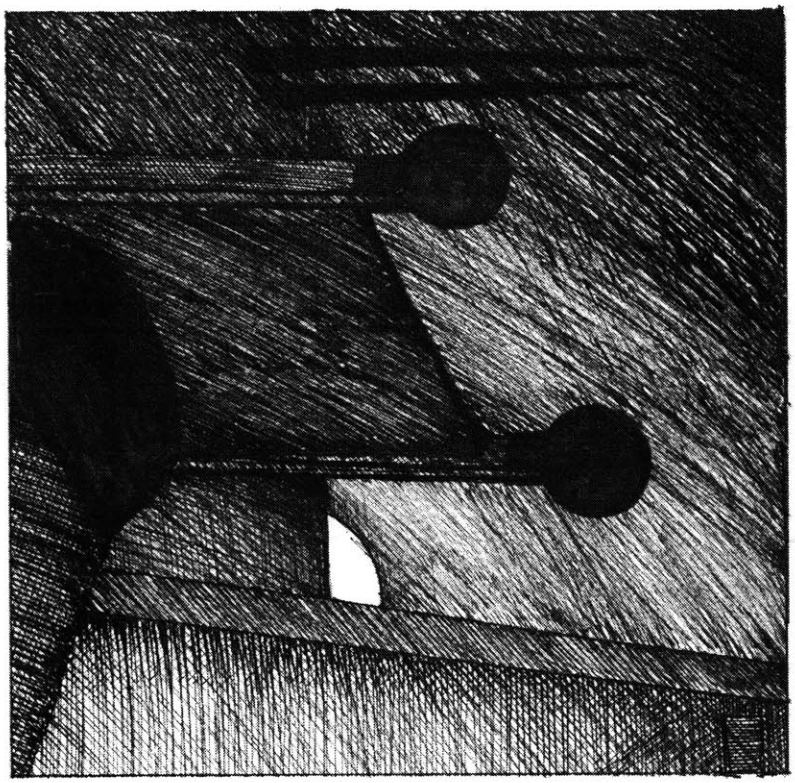


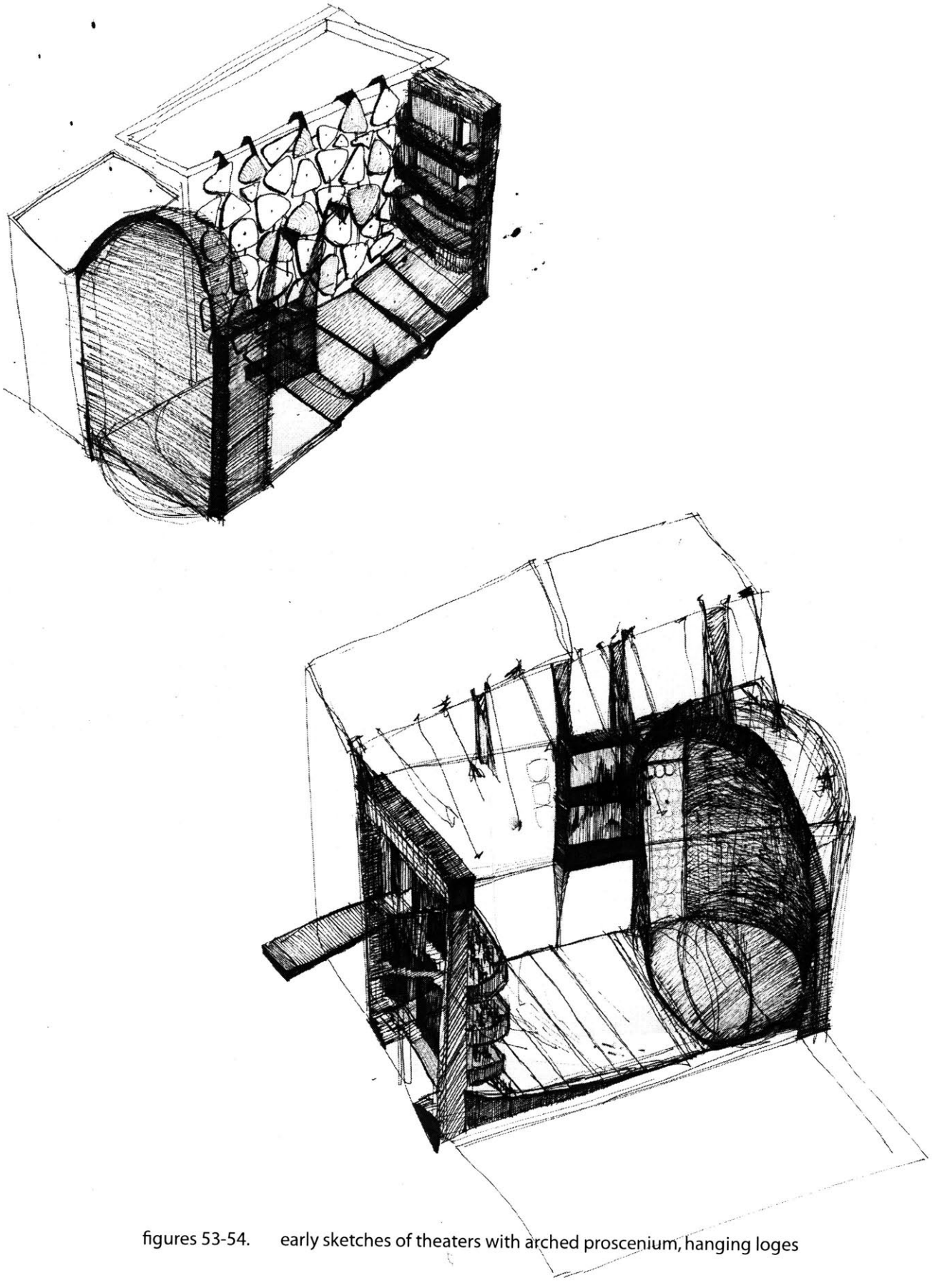
figure 52.

Scene 12: Castle interior
Mélisande dies.

tower
bed
setting sun
Mélisande

Golaud
Arkel
Doctor





figures 53-54. early sketches of theaters with arched proscenium, hanging loges

the theater

The mobile theater is developed in the three sites (Shibuya, International Forum, Tama River). The same set of parts is assembled differently at each site. Both the form of each instance of the theater and its treatment of the narrative settings reflect the nature of the space it occupies.

At the Tokyo Forum, the settings take the stage one by one.
In Shibuya, they share one space.
At Tama river, each setting stands separately, a 'real' place as well as a fictional one.

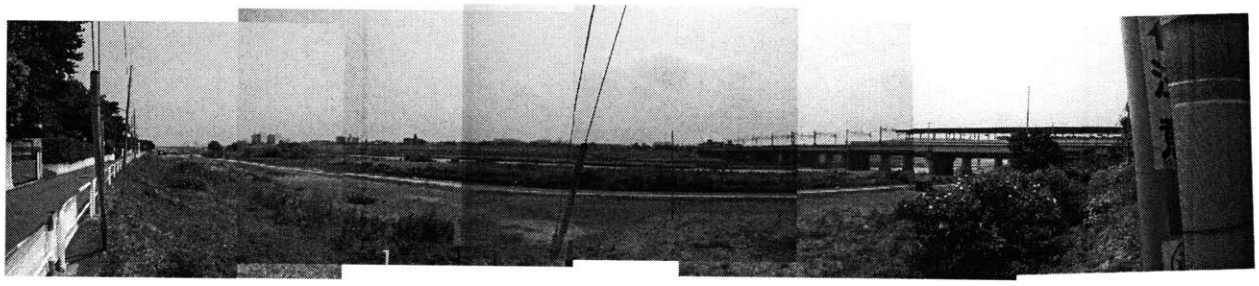
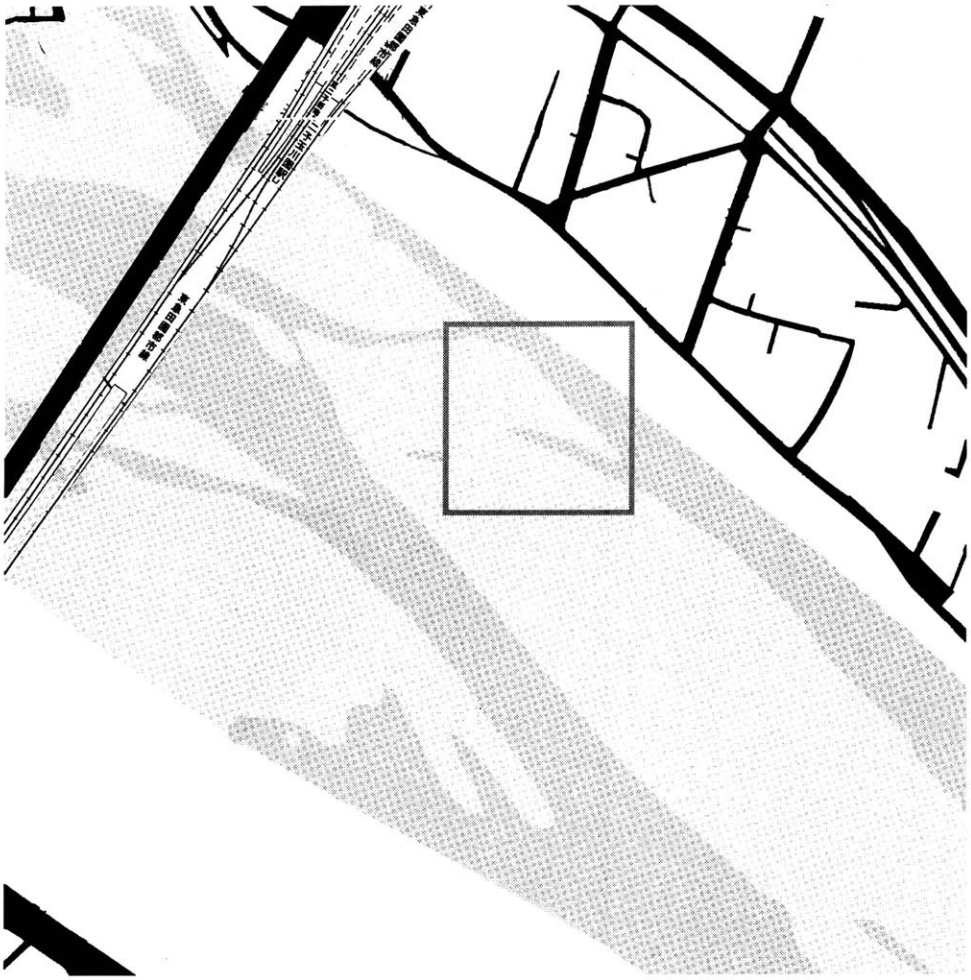


figure 55 grassy river bank with a sall street along its edge
figure 56 'island' site, with the grid of what appears to be concrete breakwaters
figure 57 concrete bank that lines the edge of the water
figure 58 Map of the Futako Tamagawa area of the Tama River, altered from the HI-Map series

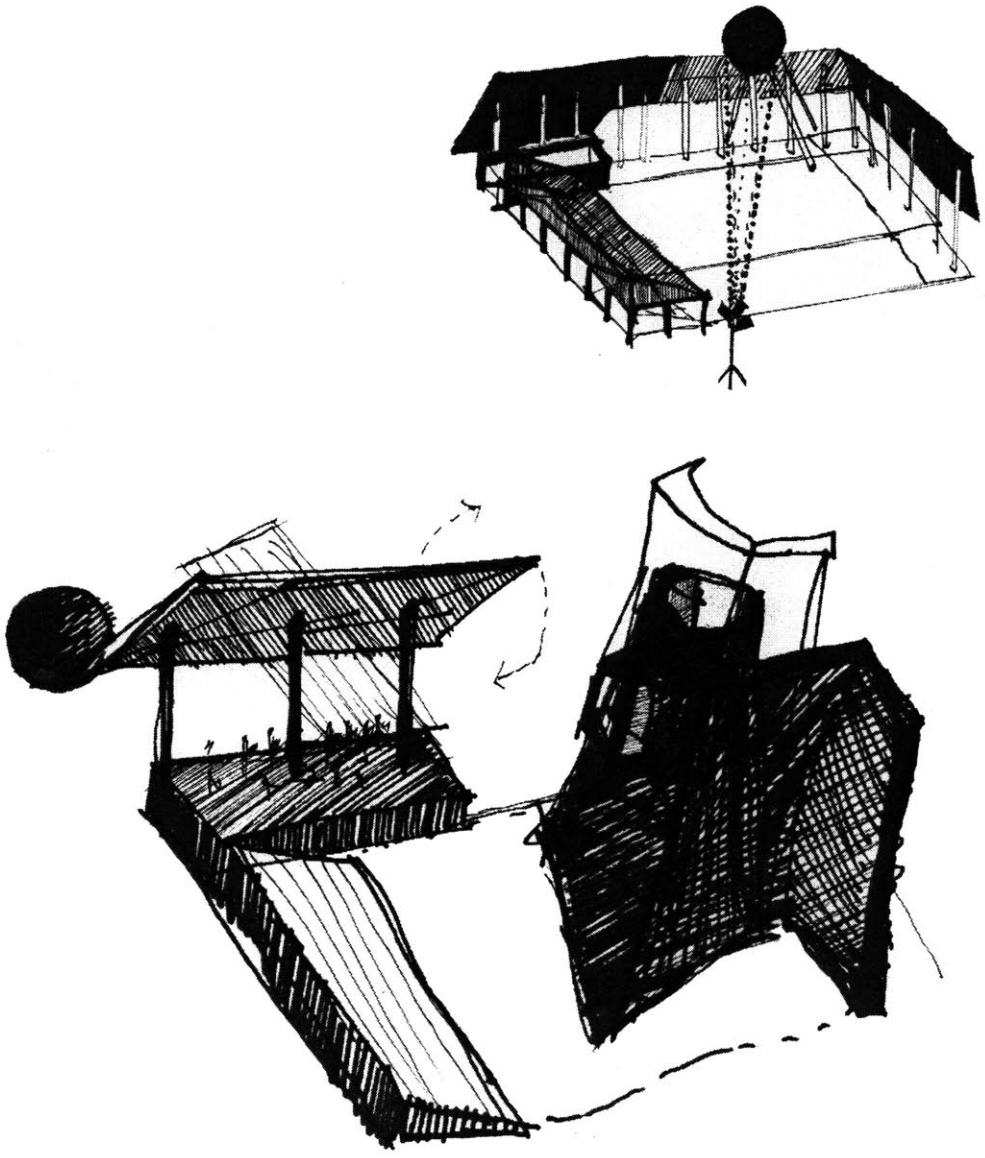


The Tama River

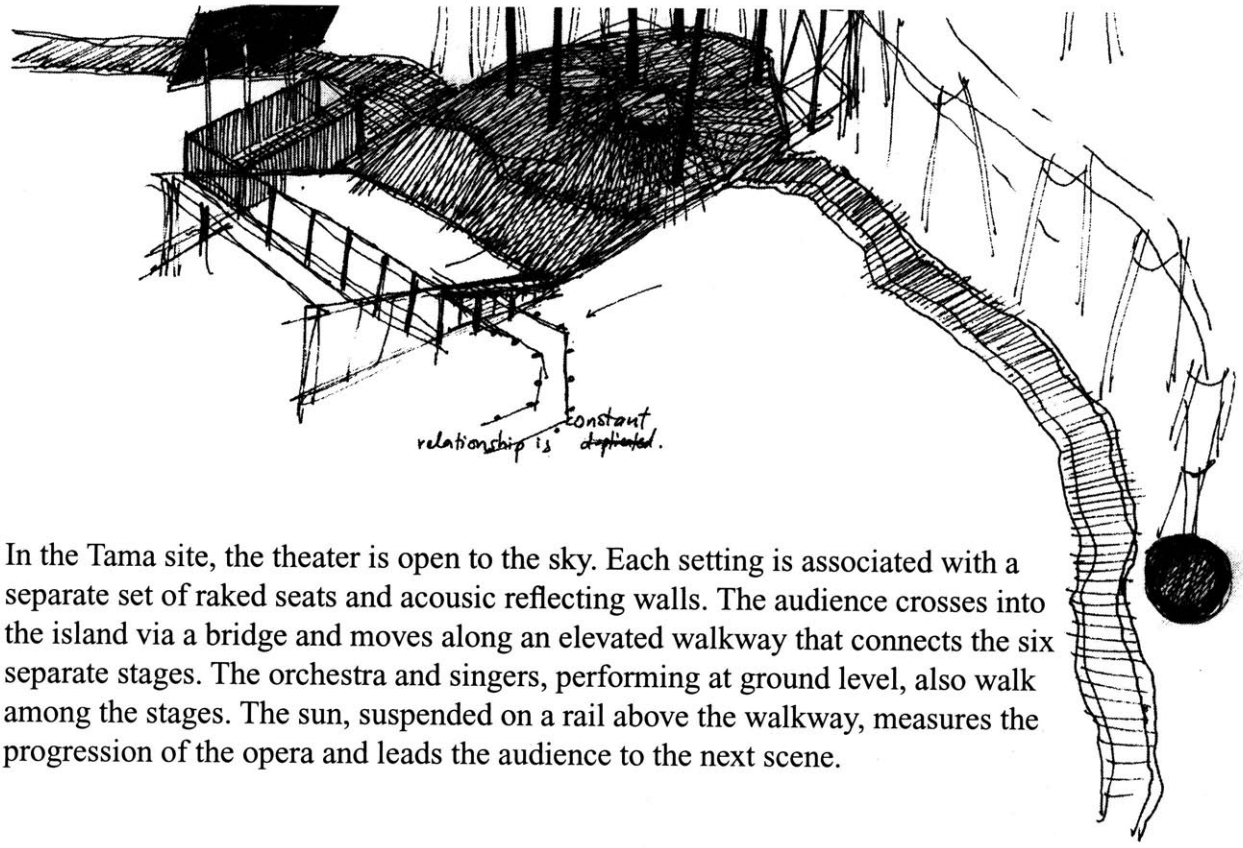
The Tama River is the western border of Tokyo, dividing the city from Kawasaki Prefecture. On both sides, wide banks control the flooding that occurs during the typhoon season, and provide a reserve of natural recreational space. The site, an island close to the edge of the river, is ordinarily accessed by using the regular grid of concrete bollards as stepping stones (it takes some jumping).

The site is fairly well frequented by joggers, children, fishermen, and dog walkers during the week. On weekends, in good weather, more people descend upon the river.

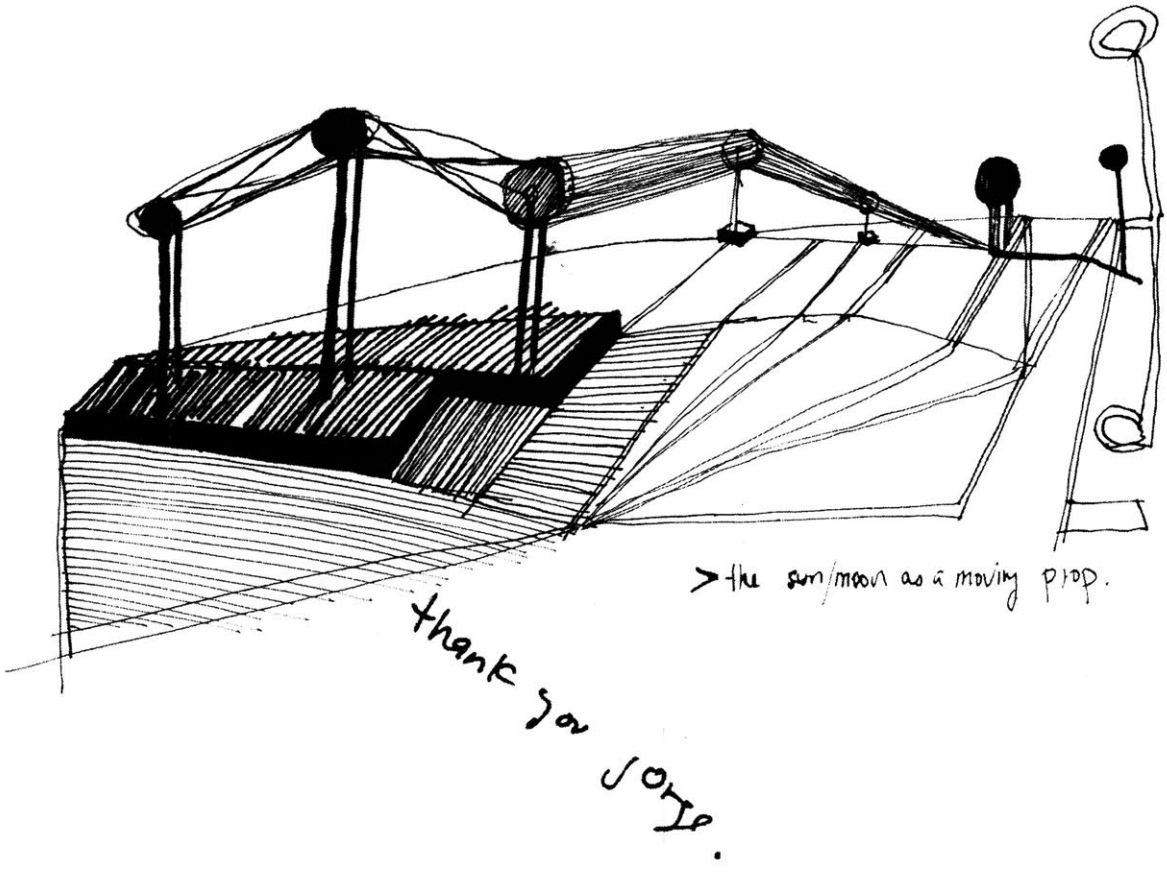
It is, though, even then the best place to get away from the crowds of the city. The River is the only place where one's eyes can stretch to the horizon. The sense of openness as one approaches the bank, contrasted with the confinements of the dense city streets, can be breathtaking.



figures 59-62 sketches of the Tama sceme. Audience seating and sound-reflecting panels surrounding a setting. The sun moving on its separate track.



In the Tama site, the theater is open to the sky. Each setting is associated with a separate set of raked seats and acousic reflecting walls. The audience crosses into the island via a bridge and moves along an elevated walkway that connects the six separate stages. The orchestra and singers, performing at ground level, also walk among the stages. The sun, suspended on a rail above the walkway, measures the progression of the opera and leads the audience to the next scene.



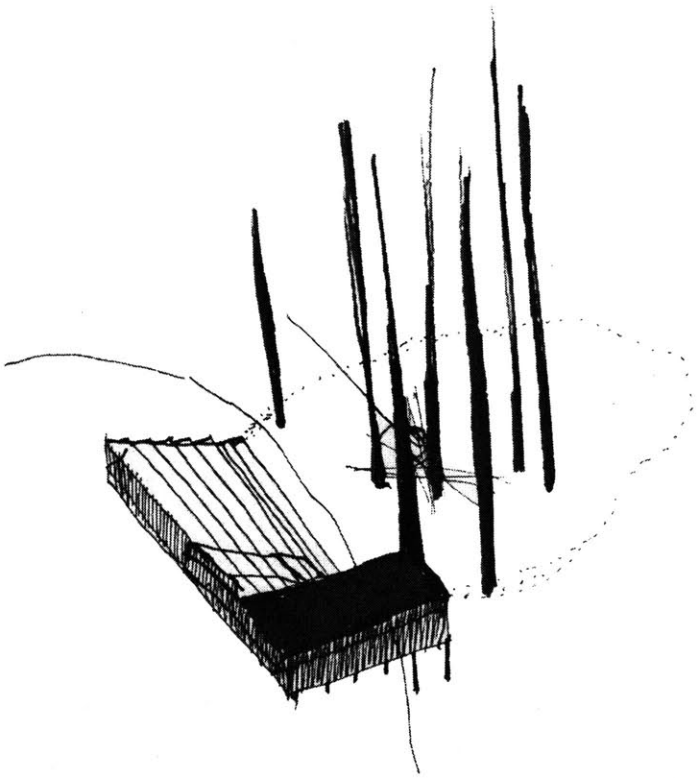
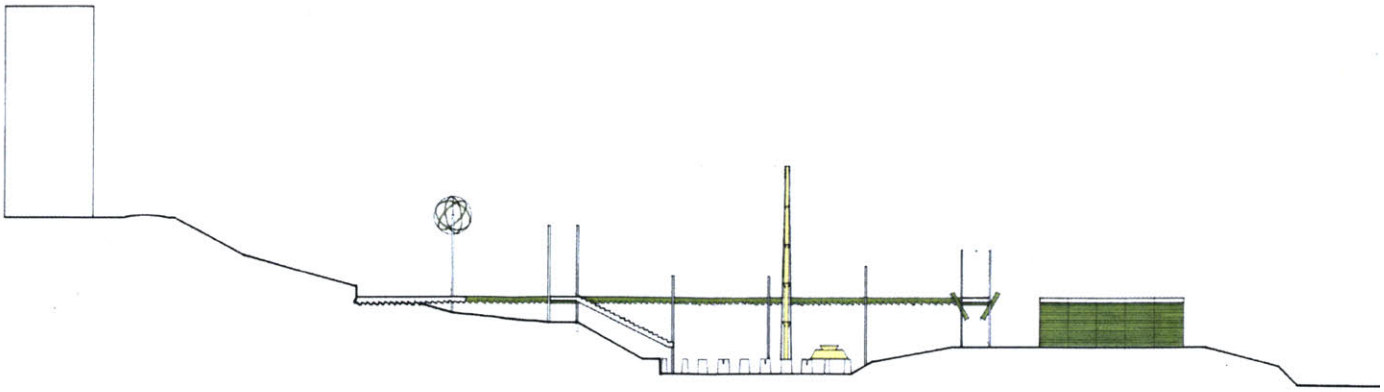


figure 63 sketch of forest setting in Tama
figure 64-65 plan and section of the theater at Tama River 1:480



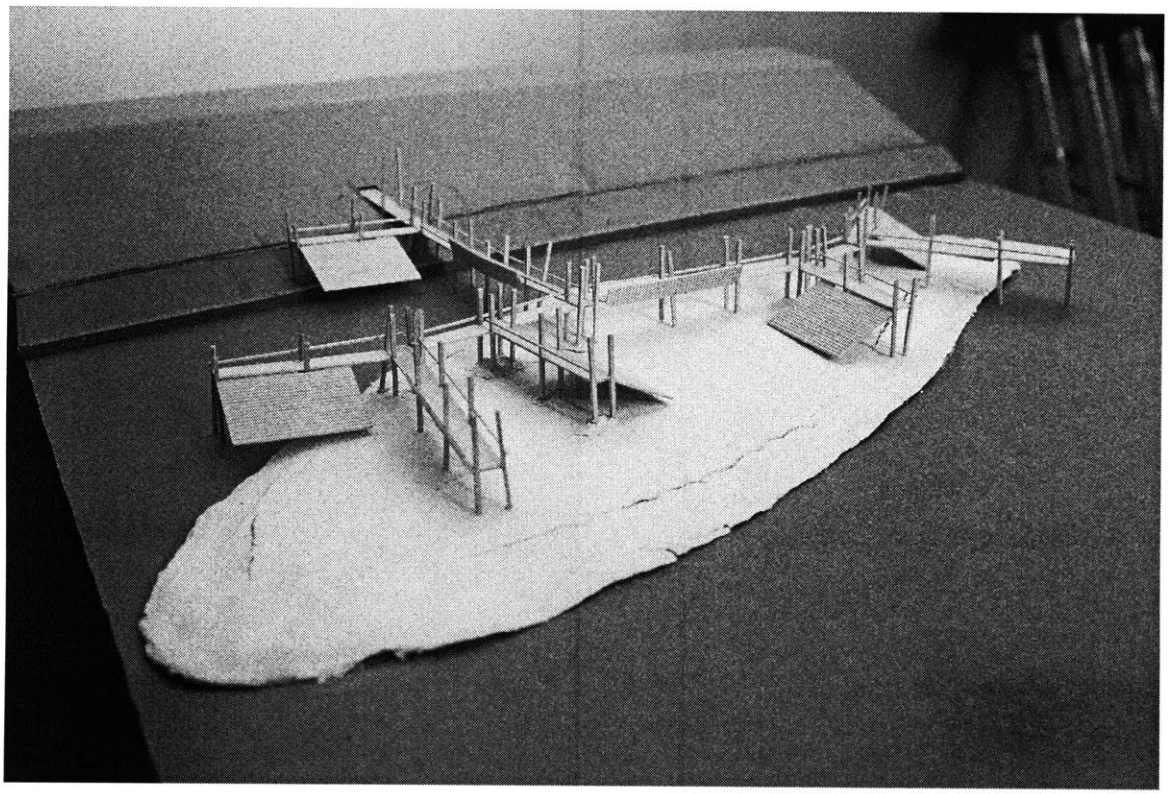
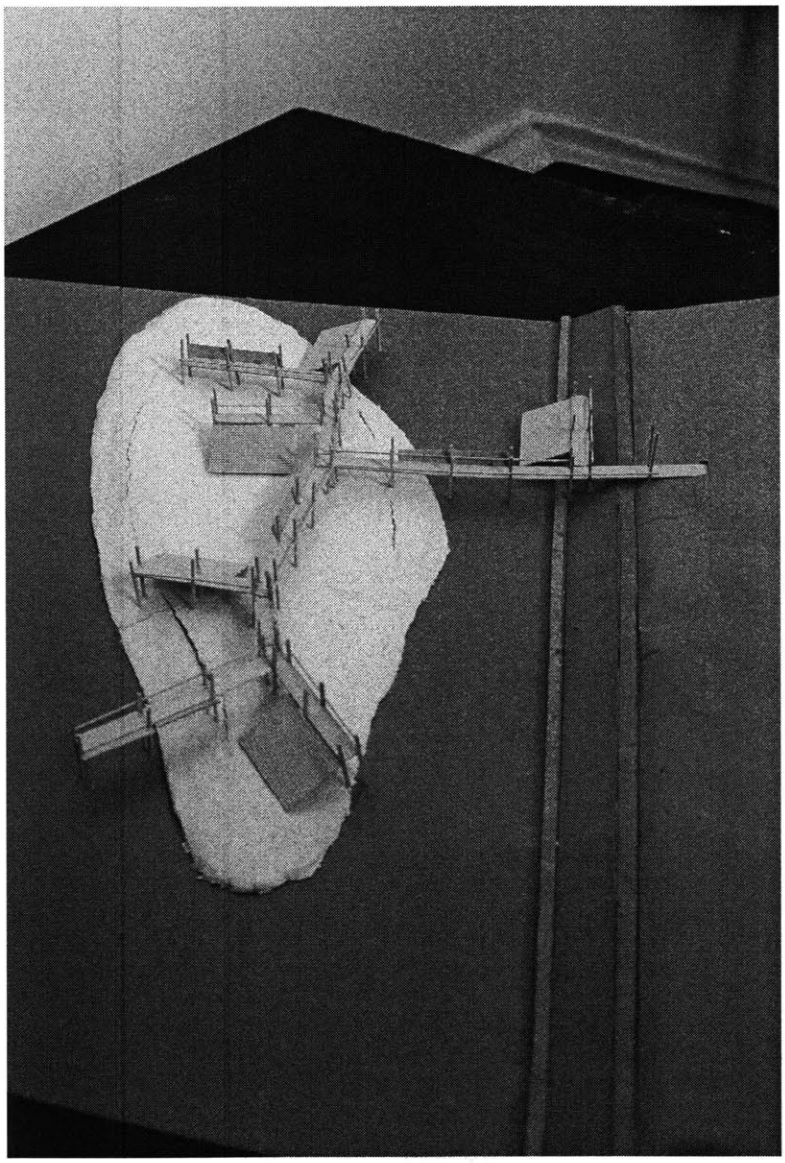
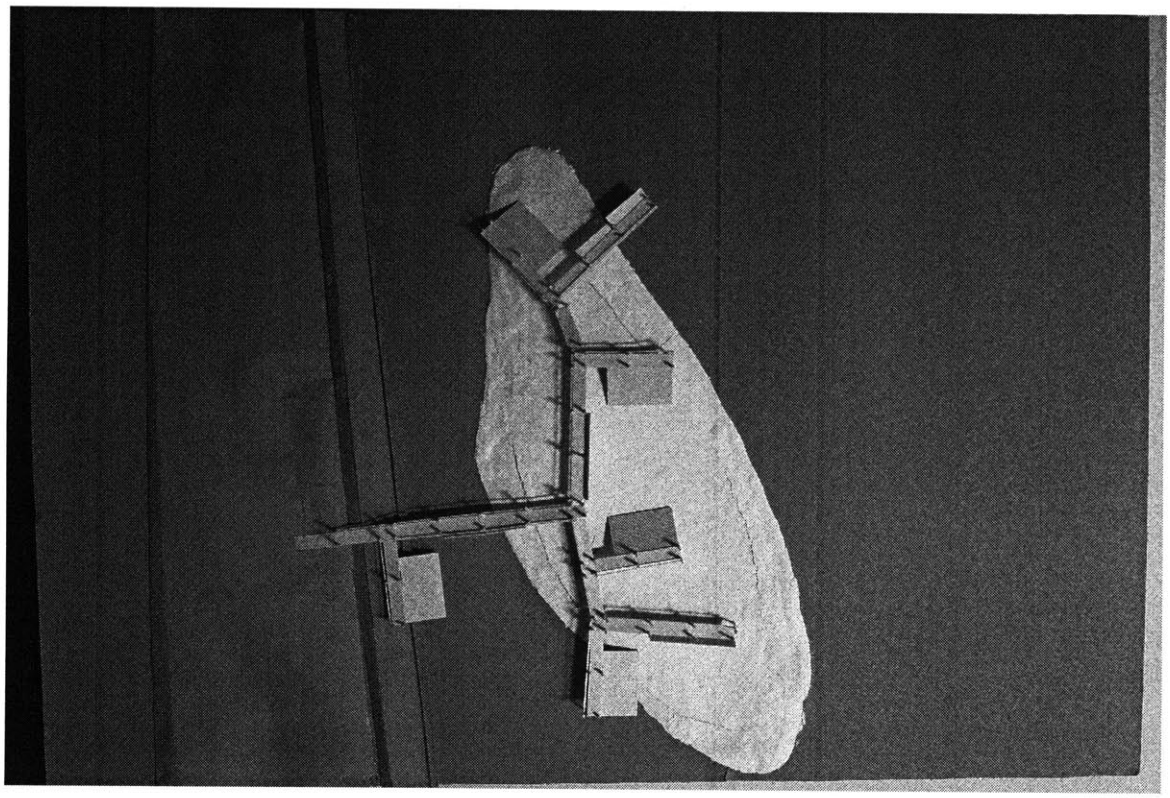
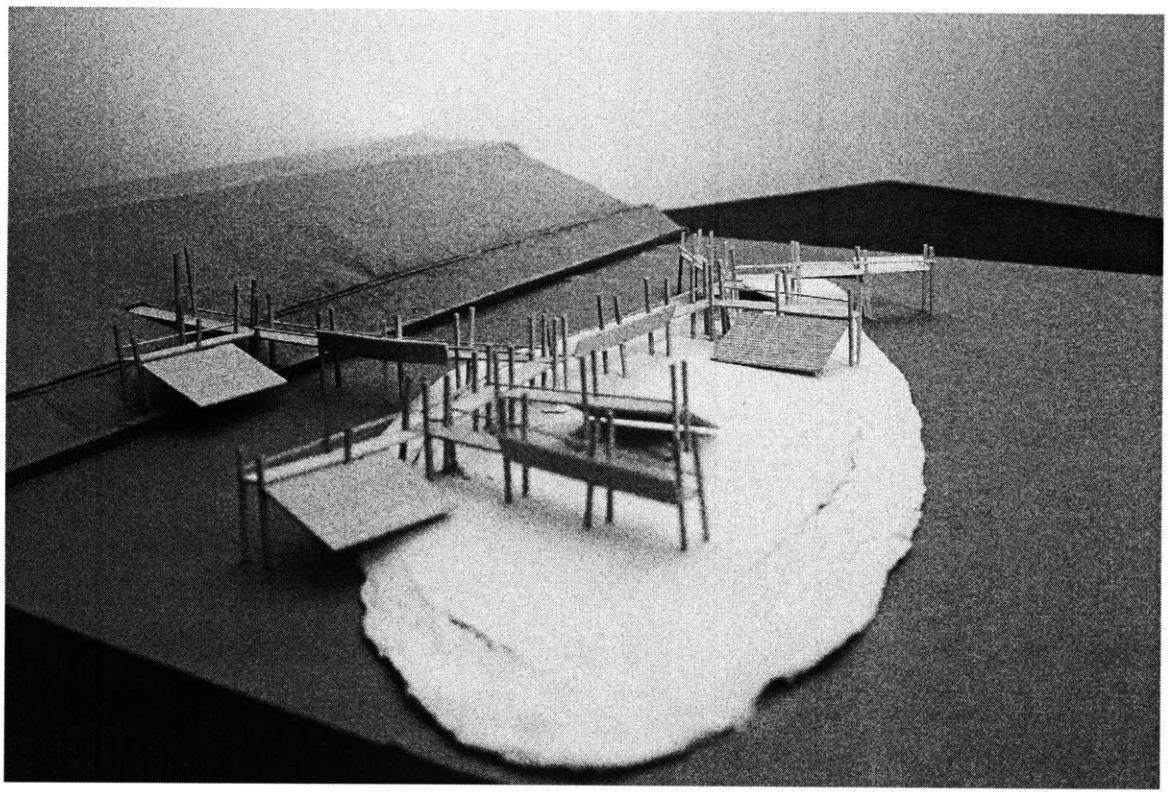


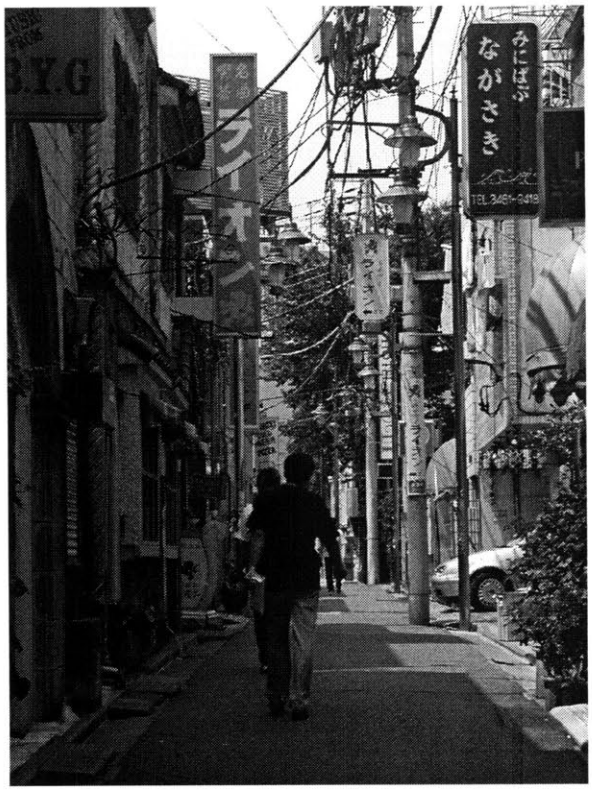
figure 66. Tama Riiver: model, looking towards the bank



figures 67-69. Tama River: model of bridges, audience seats, acoustic reflectors





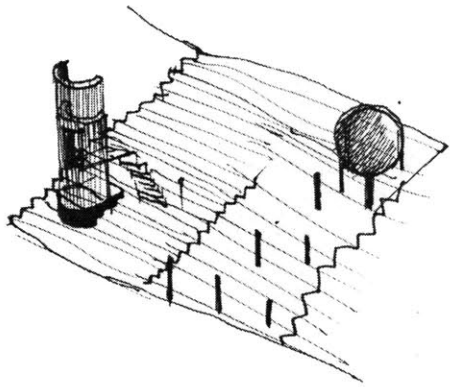


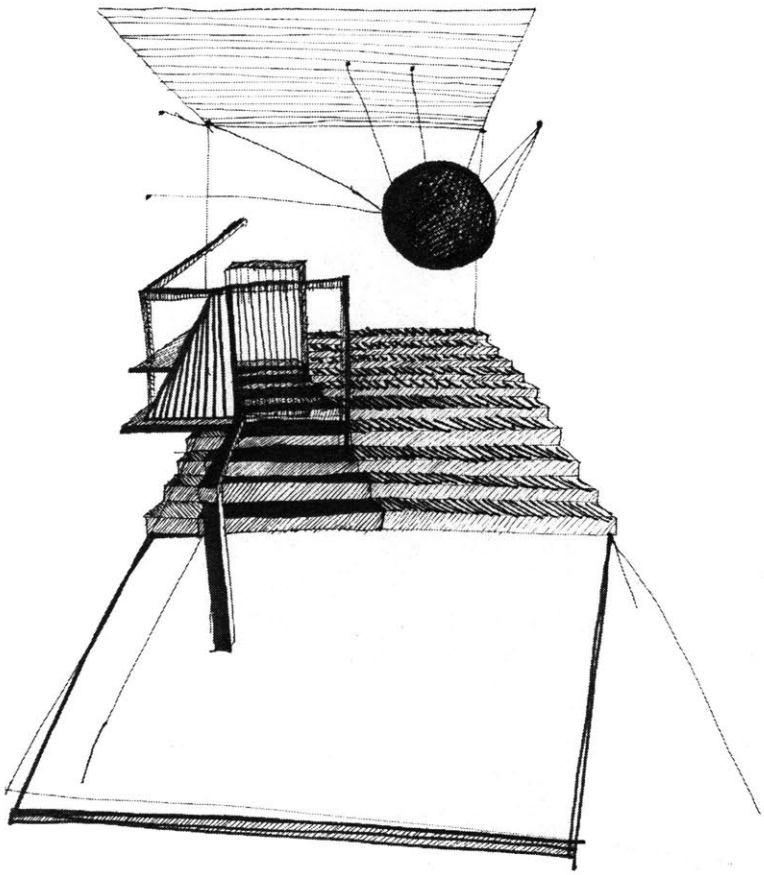
figures 70-71. view of the streets flanking the site
figure 72. view of the entertaimment venues of the street
figures 73. map of Shibuya site, altered from Hi-Map series

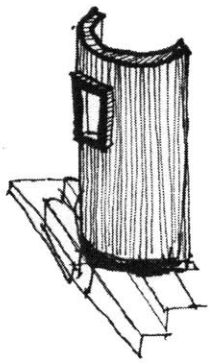
Shibuya

Shibuya is one of the most important commercial and cultural centers of Tokyo. It is the epicenter of Japanese trends and fashion, especially among teenagers. It is too one of the most popular after-work entertainment areas for people of all ages. The district also has a large number of formal cultural venues, including three of the finest concert halls in Japan, and numerous small theaters.

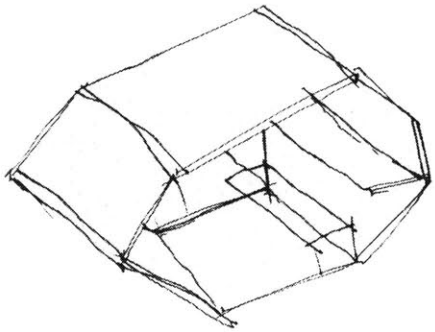
The site is small; it opens to two small streets (what would be called alleys in most other cities), and is flanked on its long sides by apartment buildings and houses. The use of the street is a combination of commercial and residential, and both the small and large residences house pubs or cafes on the first floor. The site is a brisk 5 minute walk from Shibuya station, a major, loud hub. Even for Tokyo standards, the public spaces around the station are flooded with people. Further into the older, more dense fabric of streets, however, it is relatively quiet despite the occasional pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

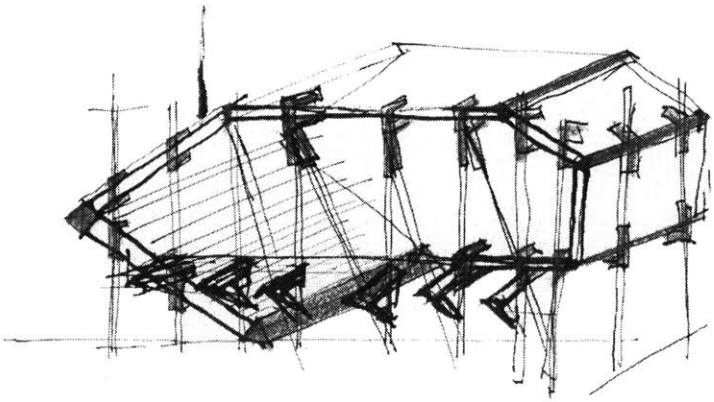


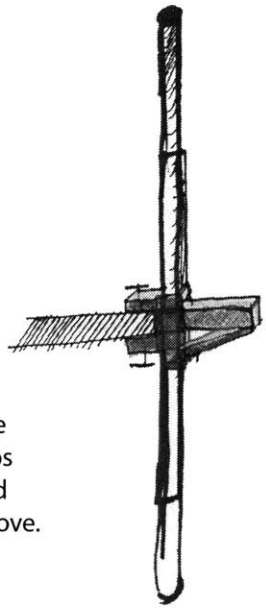




figures 74-76. sketches of the Shibuya scheme with props
figures 77-80. sketches of the Shibuya scheme







The theatre in Shibuya is characterized by the small size of the space, and the bulky concrete buildings that constrain it. Here, the 'stair' element, held up by masts and tension cable, wraps around itself to form the seats, walls, and roof of the theater. The space of stage is juxtaposed with the space of the audience; the props stand as markers around which the performers move. A balcony provides space for the orchestra.

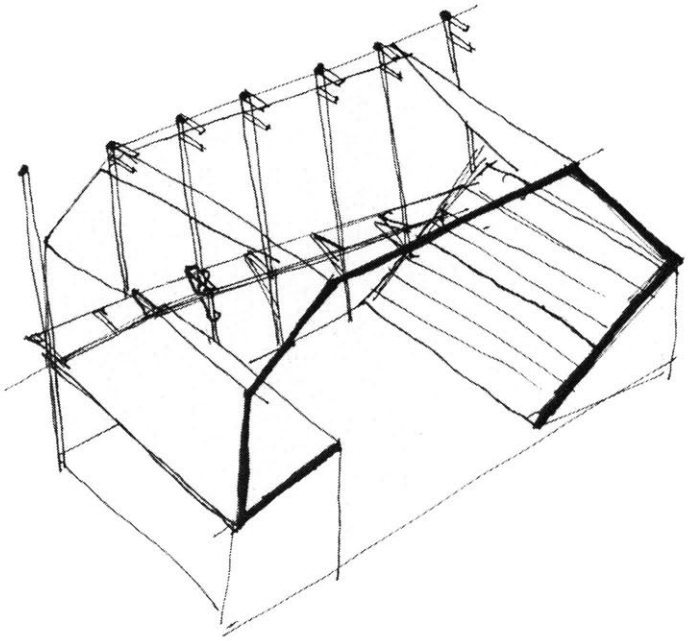
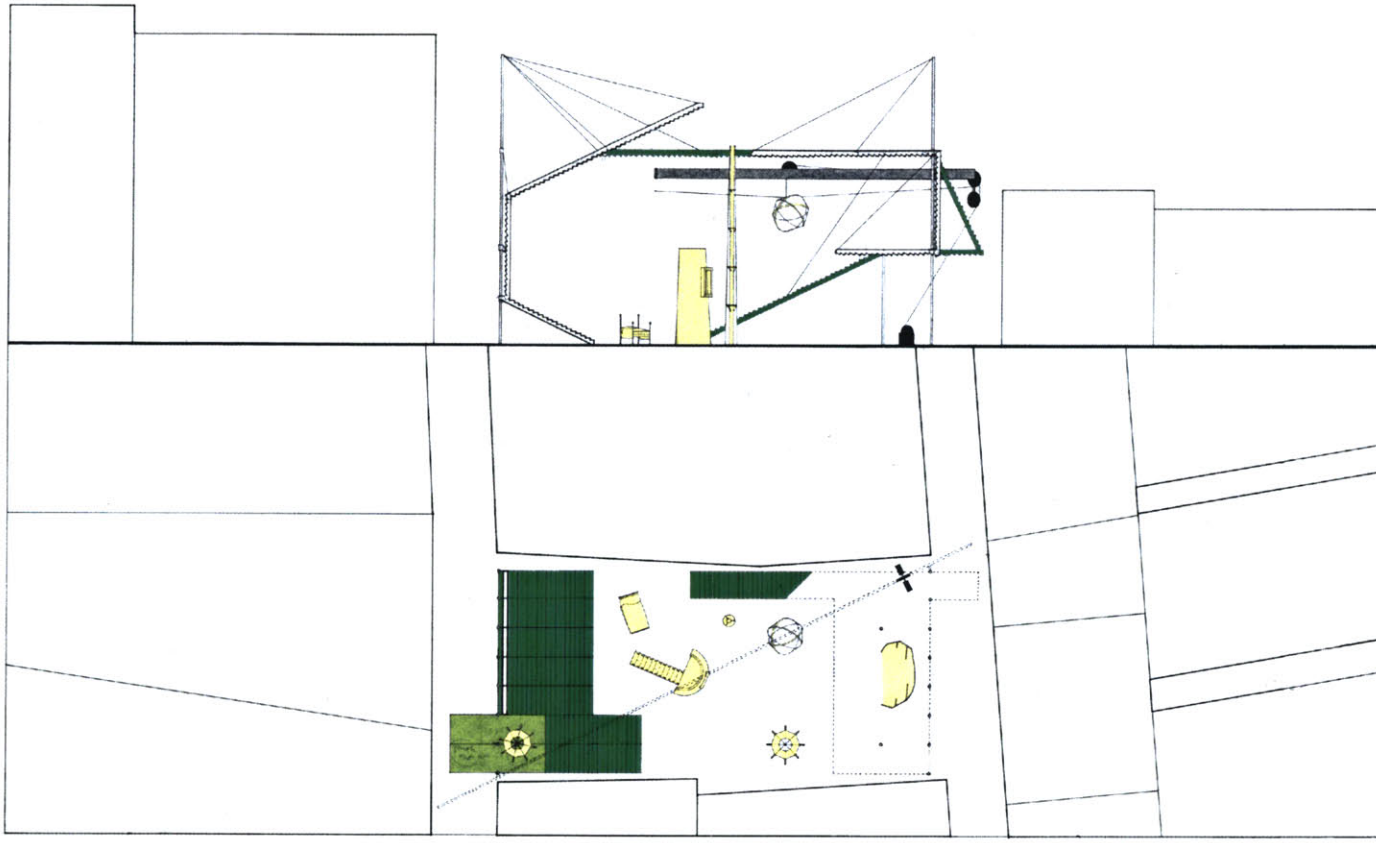


figure 81-82 plan and section of the theater at Shibuya 1:480



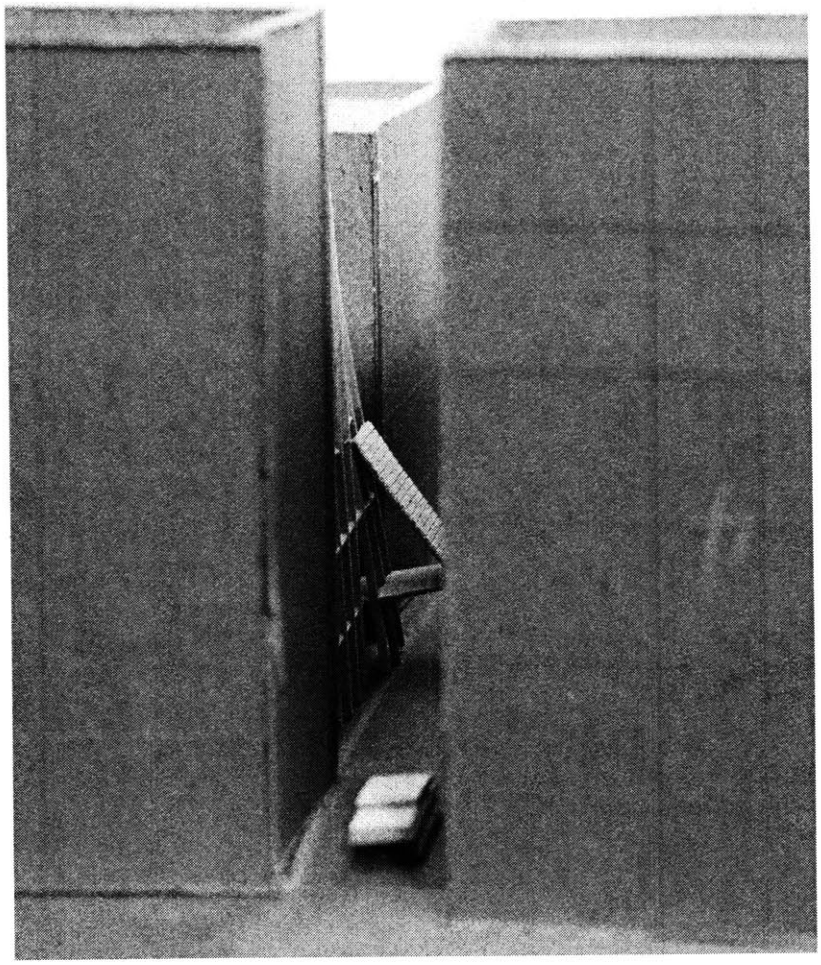


figure 83. the theater at Shibuya: street view
figure 84. the structure wrapping to protect the interior
figure 85. plan view

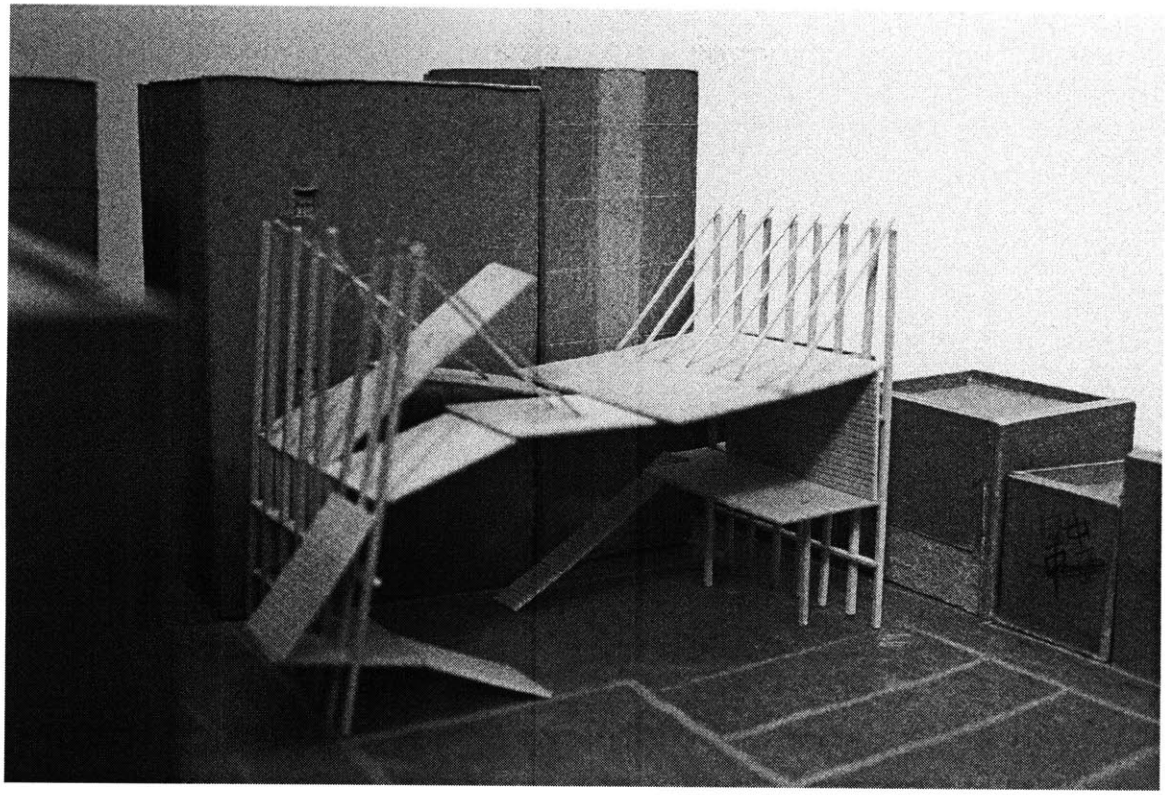
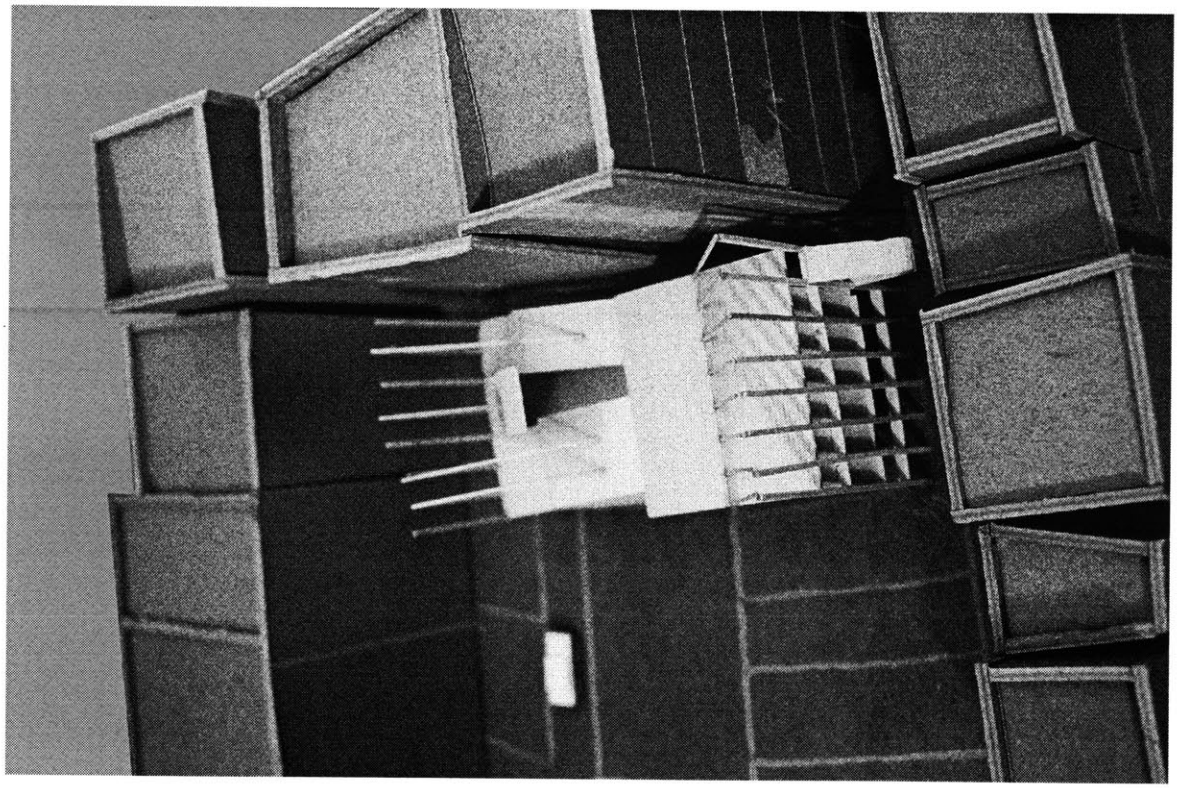
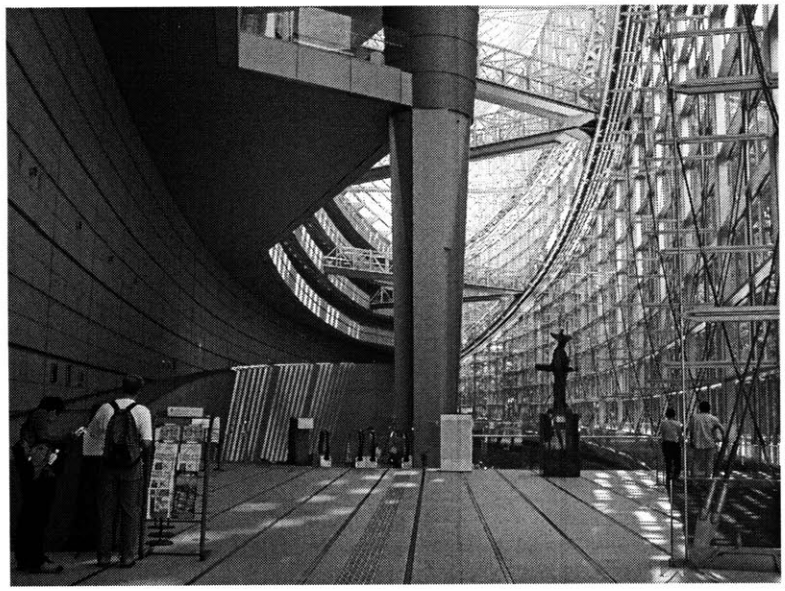


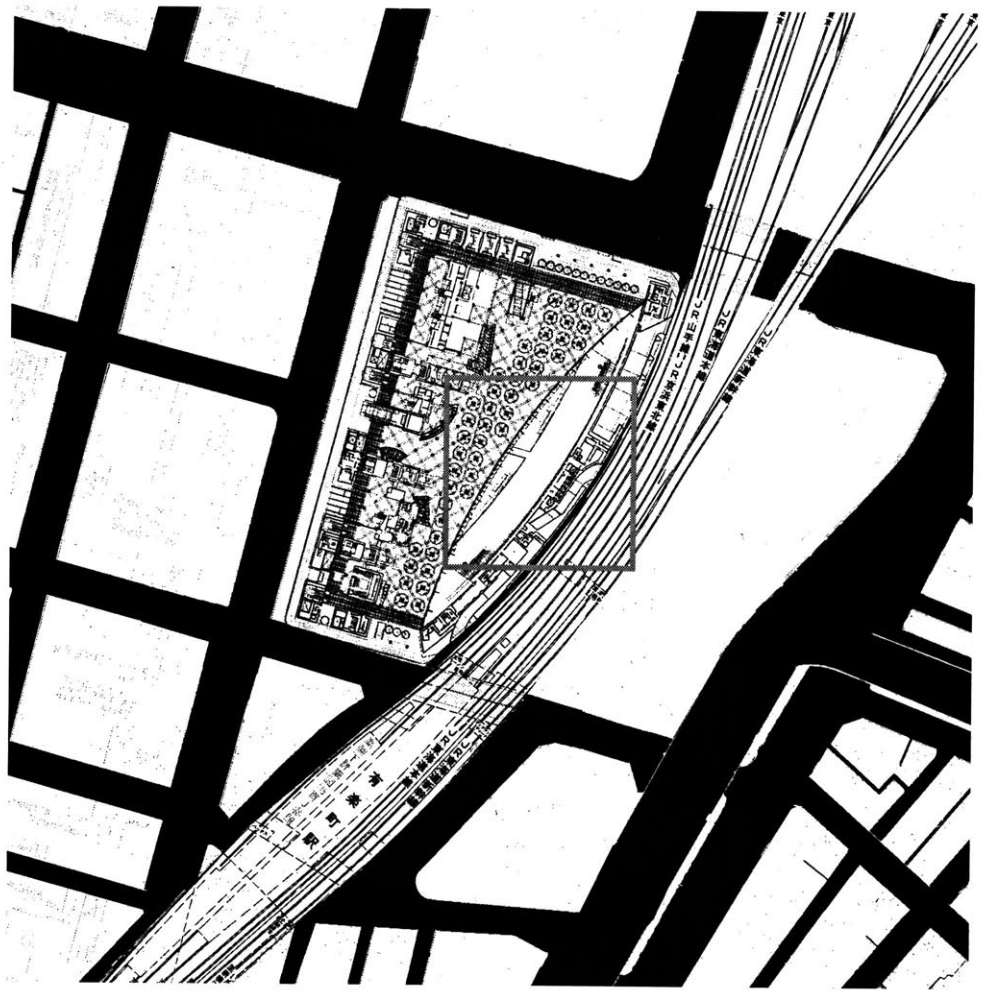
figure 85. the theater at Shibuya: facade with masts
figure 86. elevated view





figures 87-89. the glass hall lobby of Rafael Vignoli's Tokyo International Forum (photographer: Soo Im)

figure 90. map of Yurakucho, Tokyo Forum, adapted from the HI-Map series and A+U



The glass hall lobby of the Tokyo International Forum

Rafael Vignoli's Tokyo International Forum stands in the heart of Tokyo, a short mile from its center, the Imperial Palace. Nearby is the traditional theater district, as well as several lively commercial areas.

The Forum houses several excellent performance venues, three of them full sized theaters, one equipped for large operas. The most 'dramatic' part of the Forum, however, is the glass hall lobby. It is a large, open, extremely tall space flooded with changing light. The curving, long walls create deep, perspectival views. Entering the hall reminds one of the sensation of fligt.

The theater will occupy all of the main floor of the lobby, using its height to suspend props in a manner analogous to the use of fly spaces in traditional theaters. The raked seating reaches perilous heigts, promising an even more spectacular experience of the space.

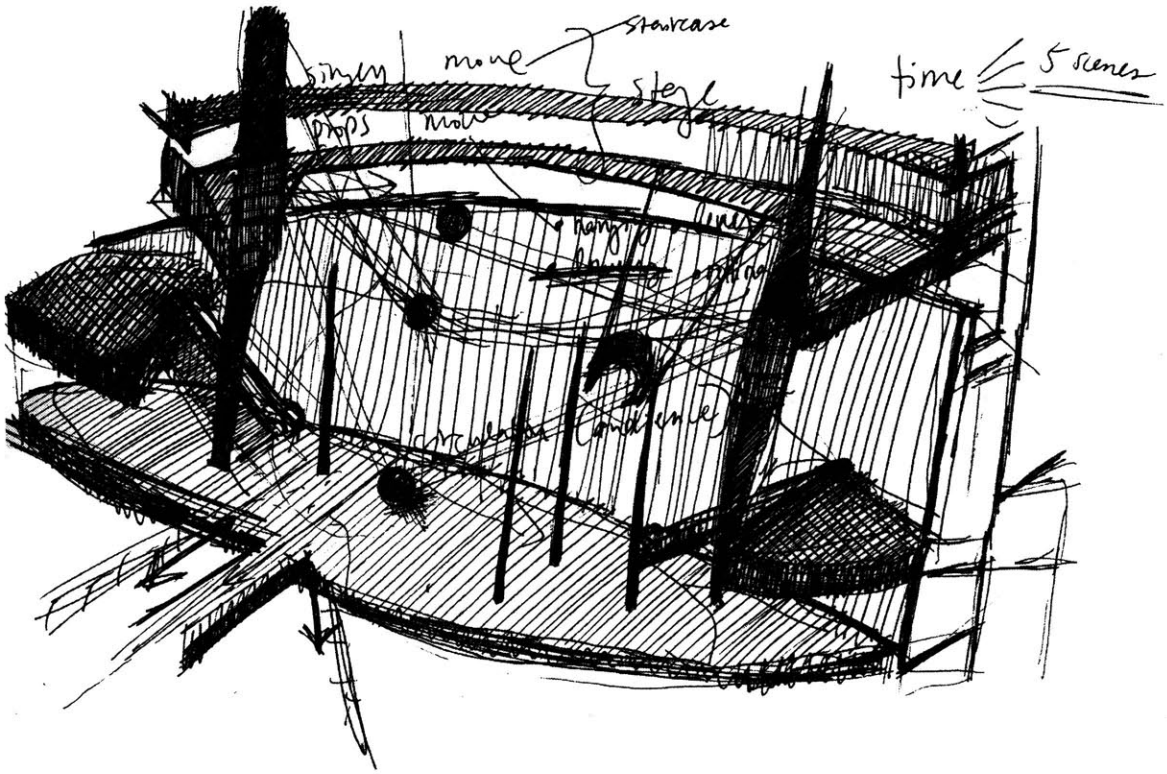
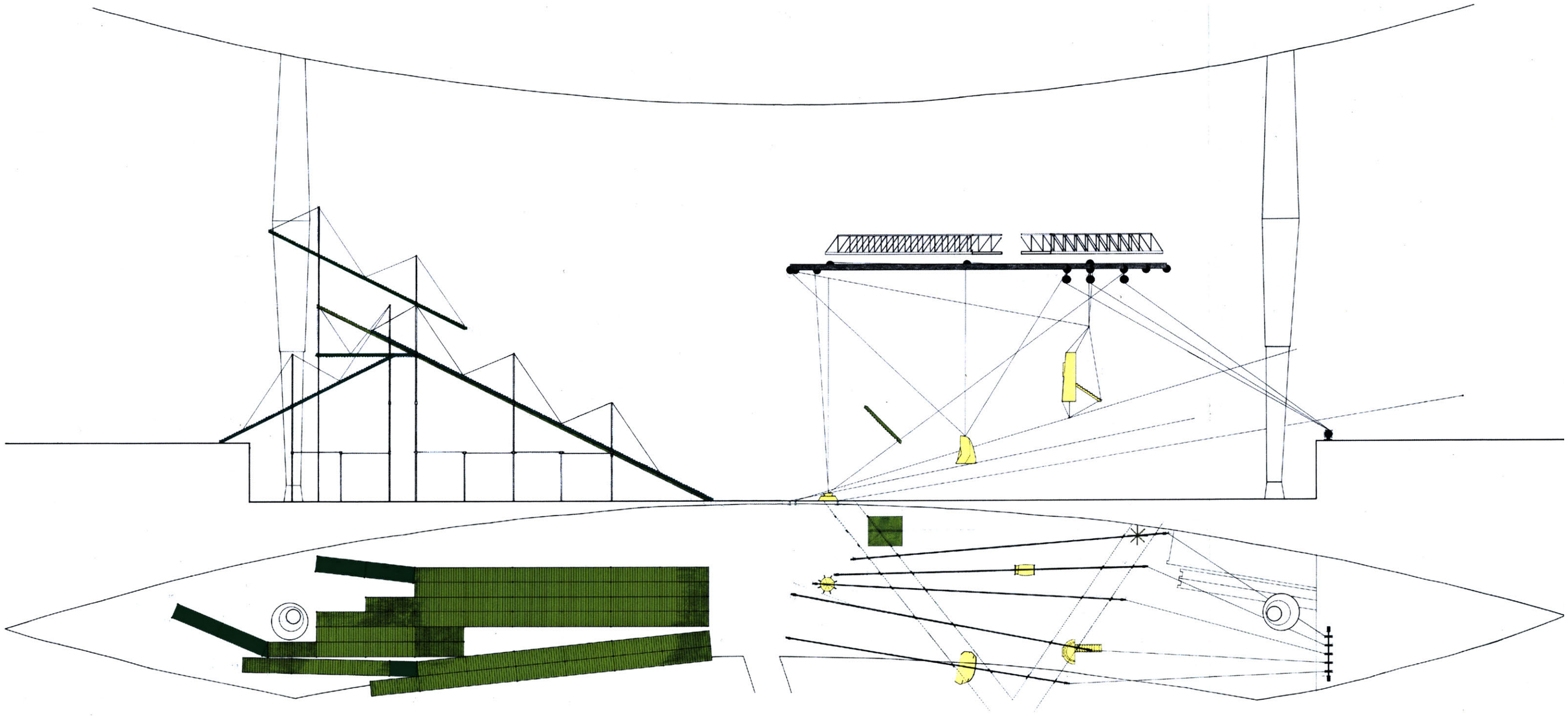


figure 90. early sketch of the suspended props
figure 91-92 plan and section of the theater in the Tokyo Forum 1:480



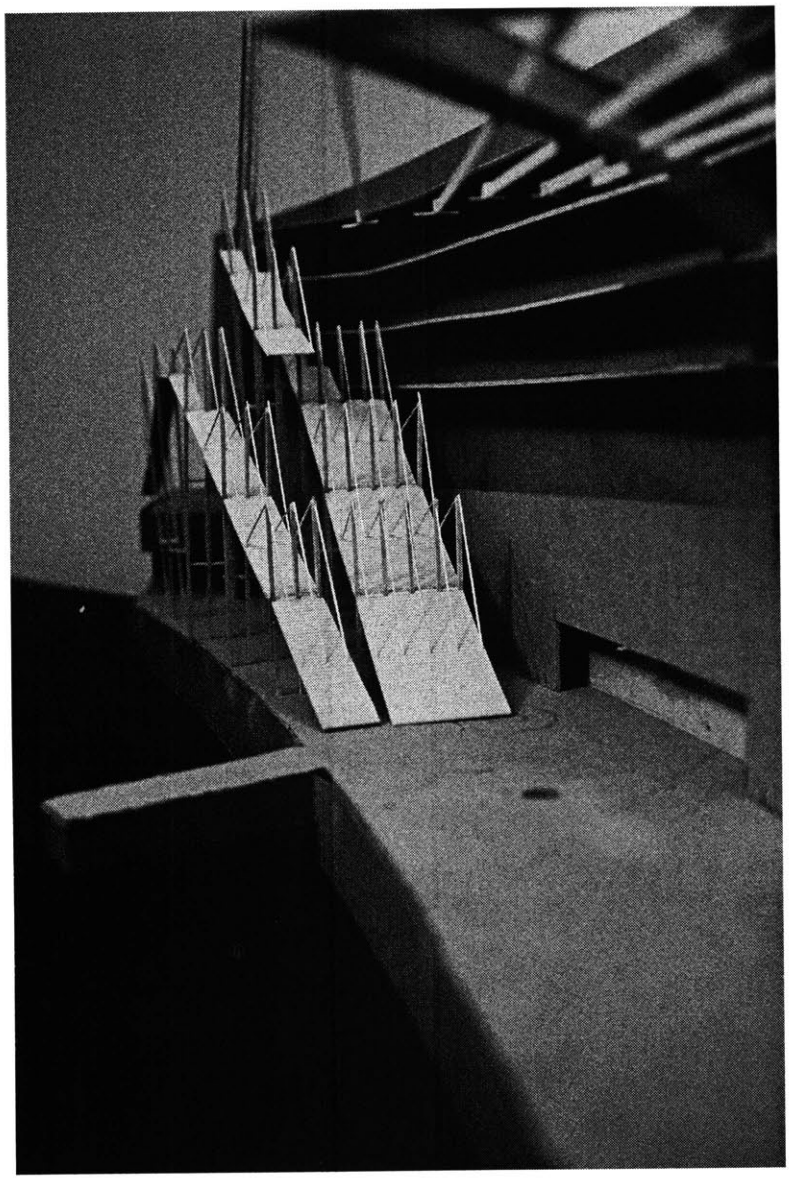


figure 93. the theater in the Tokyo Forum: raked seating with masts and cables

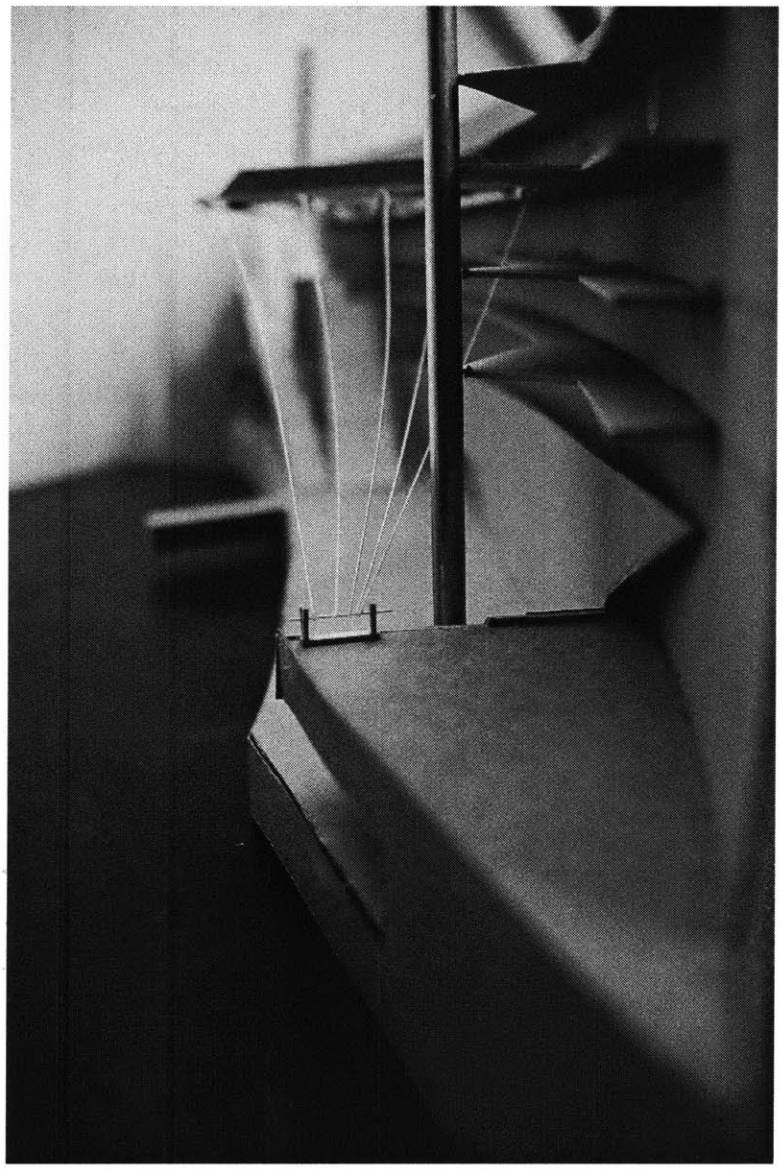
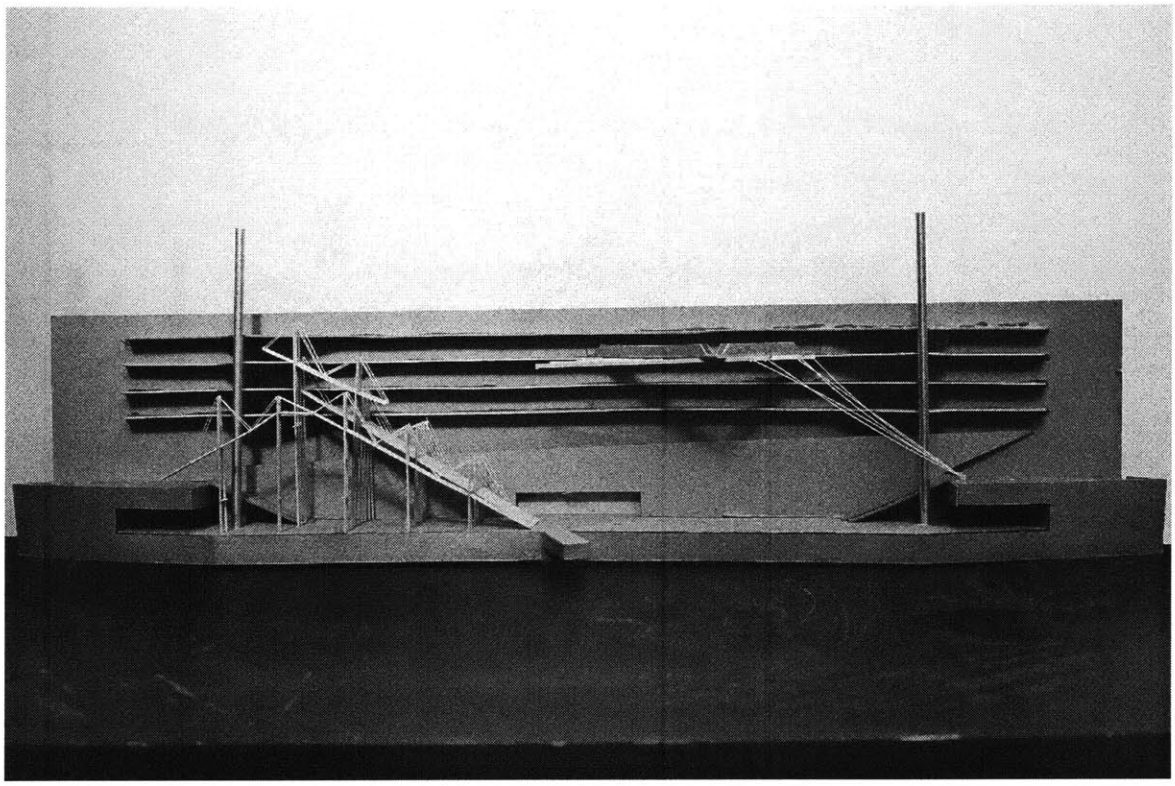
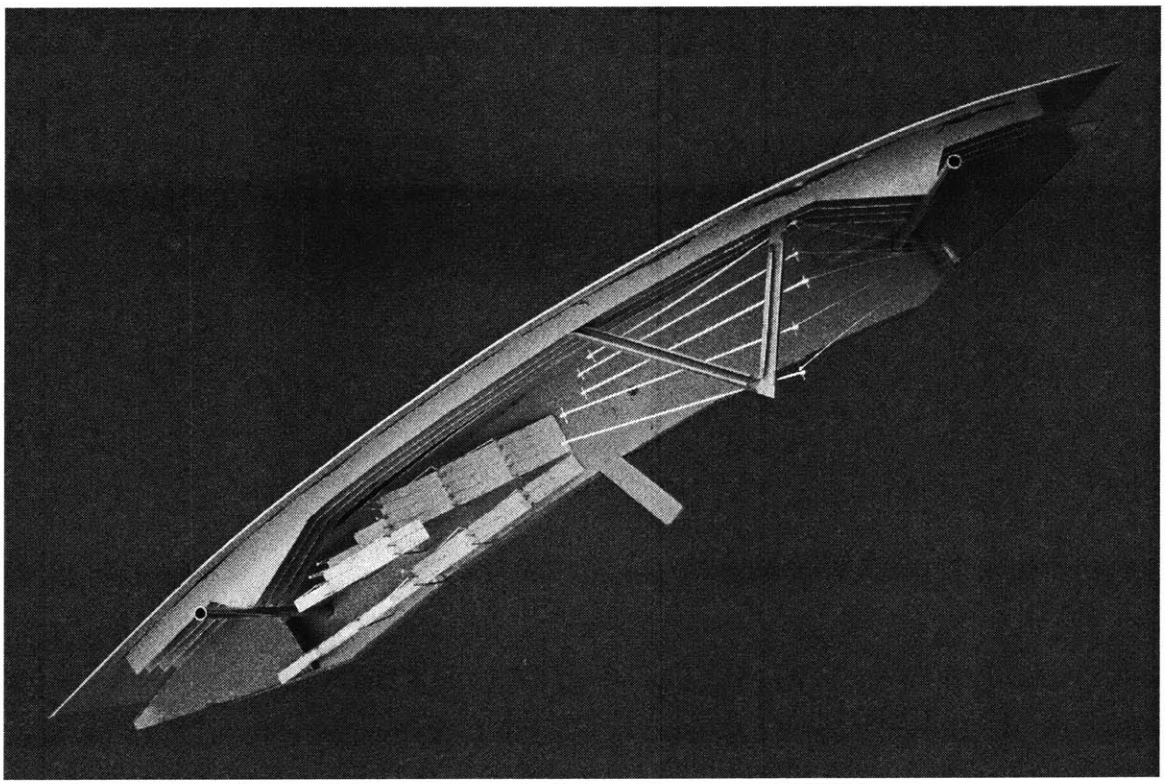
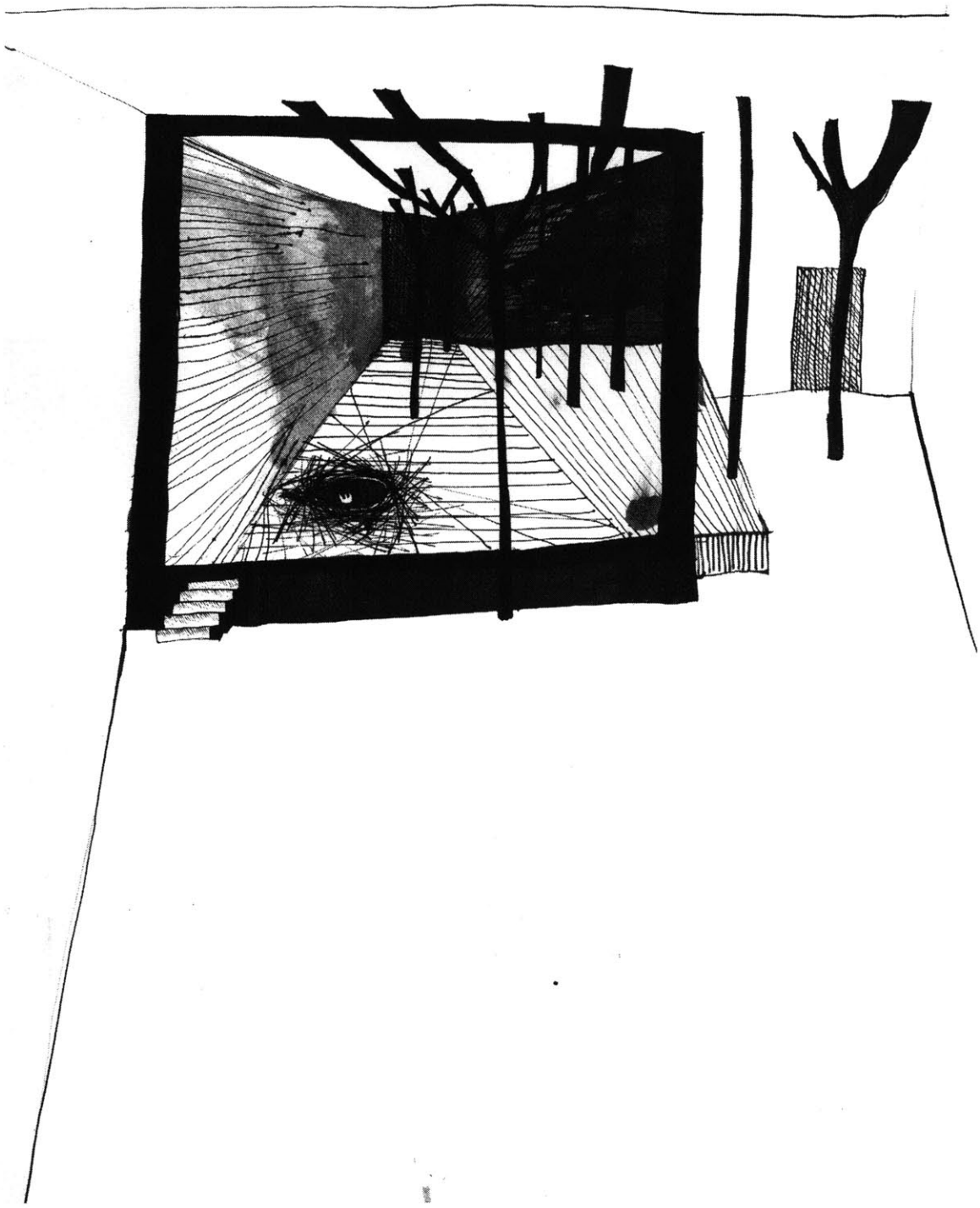


figure 94. the theater in the Tokyo Forum: 'backstage' pulley system for the props
figure95. section
figure 96. plan view







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Pages 85 - 97 have been ommitted due to a pagination error by the author.

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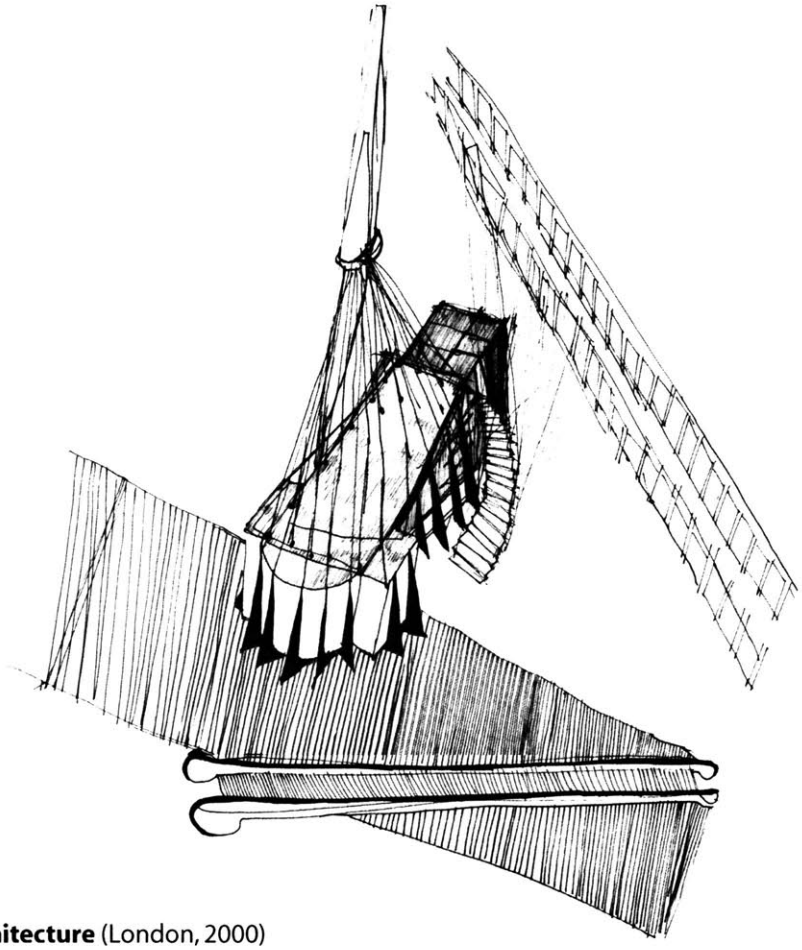

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figure 97 early sketch of the theater in the Tokyo Forum, hanging from the column

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