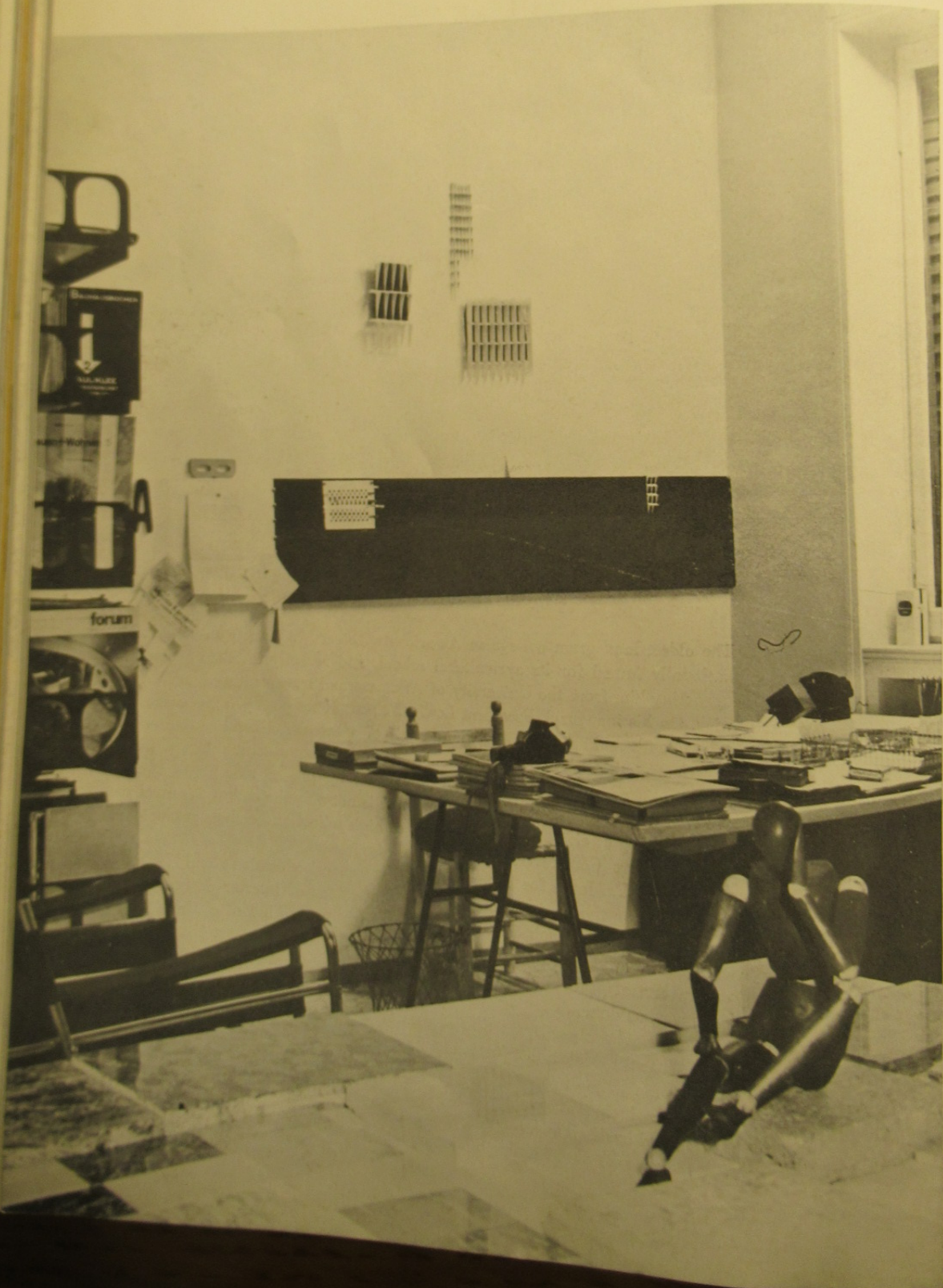


CHESSA

ARCHITETTO

: A PROFILE IN THREE DIMENSIONS



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CHESSA

ARCHITETTO : A PROFILE IN THREE DIMENSIONS



Last month *Interiors* received a visit from an architect with portfolio, a young man from Milan whose name, furniture, and chiselled features have been familiar to us, in a photographic way, for some time. Paolo Chessa's in-person appearance, and the portfolio bulging with fruits of a recent season in his studio, added new dimensions to our picture of him, his colleagues, and their peculiar dilemma. Like many Italian architects, Chessa's reputation as a designer, at 30, straddles half a dozen fields, a fact which tags him neither as a boy wonder nor a man of mercurial habits, but simply as the product of an integrated education. Architecture, in Italy, spans the whole fascinating business of shelter and environment. The *architetto*, open to any design problem, can accelerate from the frivolous to the monumental without any audible grinding of gears. If he builds a house, he prob-

ably designs the interiors and furnishings too, not as a labored afterthought but as the logical expression of a mind with a single purpose. The unity (Chessa calls it structure-decoration) with which Italian architecture hangs together points up how often our amalgamations hang separately.

Chessa came here at the invitation of a prominent furniture manufacturer — one of several who have recently felt irresistibly attracted to the uninhibited, experimental (and increasingly baroque) furniture designs of Italian architects, much as they succumbed to the soft allure of Scandinavian designs a few years back. Like his compatriots', some of Chessa's chairs reflect the new flamboyance, while others retain their straightforward if restless gaiety. In dreaming up a metal frame chair (above) for instance, he would pad it not only with slats, canvas

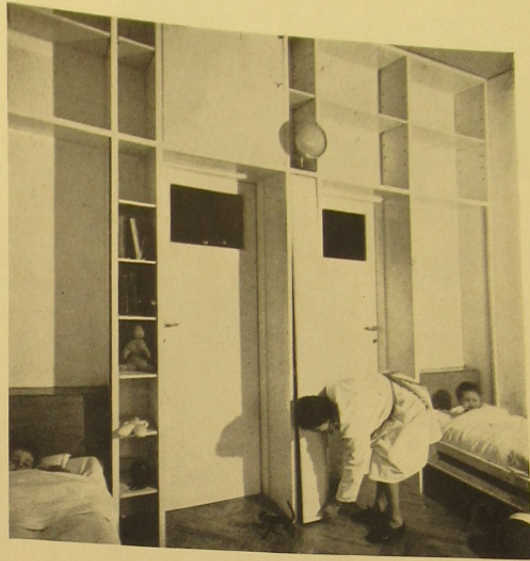
or foam rubber, but with sausages, beads, spaghetti and balloons. With our Teutonic regard for reality, we may laugh at this fantasy, but we underestimate him if we laugh it off. These gentle jokes have a Chaplinesque grain of real plausibility. Tempered by poverty, drastic shortages, frustrations, the resilient imagination of the *architetto* has survived on the knowledge that there is always a way, a hundred ways; why take fact for an answer? What a help this mettle has been you may judge from this cross section of Chessa's recent work. In the seven years since war ended, locusts and Americans have begun new building cycles, but the Italian architect must still invest much of his talent into hand-me-down, make-over jobs that barely have seam allowance for originality. If he lacks resources, he makes up for it in resourcefulness; he does the most with the least, and does it *con brio*.

The modern bedroom—when it survives at all—barely squeaks by without an indignity. As essential as a room for private repose may seem to human civility, it is a part-time room; and to the average Italian, squandered space is in a class with the Bugati as a dissipation of practical values. Accepting the fact that the boudoir's status will never again be *quo ante bellum*, Chessa plans a vestpocket bedroom which concentrates on making the present exigencies more tolerable. This one would ease the pinch in an apartment, diminutive house, or an otherwise adequate dwelling which needs a place to lodge guests and relatives. In answer to the last problem, it seems to be a masterpiece of Machiavellian functionalism, doing the trick without the forthright hospitality which might incur extended visits.

The patterned wall, realized in wood from the sketches on the facing page, unfolds its paraphernalia layer by layer, like ripening rose petals: a bed, two tables, closet, ironing board, and several drawers and shelves with their concealed hinges and inconspicuous pull tabs. The parts work easily, quietly, and independently of each other—a subtlety never grasped by those past masters of compact efficiency, Messrs. Murphy and Pullman. Out of this placid panel first comes a table leg and hinged table top; next a bed slab drops into place and the table flattens under it. With a hamper to the left, closet to the right, a bed table at hand, man, woman or guest is dispatched, at an emergency's notice, to meet Morpheus.

With concessions to the temperament of youth, Chessa plants this idea in a double-duty nursery (right). During the day, with beds in the wall, the floor is cleared for action and bedsprings are spared the merciless rehearsals of would-be acrobats. At a highsign from an omnipotent adult (tall enough to reach the pull slots), beds leap from the wall in time for Lights Out. We perceive psychological as well as spatial triumphs: children, with their hankering for the unobtainable, may be conditioned in no time to anticipate, rather than resist, bedtime and its open-sesame routine.

A doctor living in a modest villa in Varese wanted an equally modest addition: another bedroom, a living-dining area, a service room. Two modesties don't make an extravagance, at least not in Varese, but they can produce a uniquely compounded design—one in which structure and decoration coincide with explosive clarity. Exemplifying this unity,



The nursery wall yields two good-sized beds which lower like drawbridges and come to rest on an inconspicuous rubber-sheathed chrome bar. The wall, designed as a complete storage unit, also contains adjustable shelves, a closed cupboard at the top (out of harm's way) and a thin man's closet between the doors. The wall is painted white, yellow, gray, baby blue and purple.

For daytime duty, beds fold back into the wall, putting out of sight any messy bedclothes and recalcitrant bambini.





the living room of the addendum is two stories high at one end, a rhomboid of a room with a sloping roof. The end wall, by cutting in at a severe angle, performs both architectural duties (it supports the roof) and interior functions: it acts as a reclining back for a wall bench.

The bright, linoleum-covered mound piled in the middle of the room like jumbo toy blocks is, to begin with, a sculptural partition between living and dining areas. Each block is also a closet, with small units for random storage, man-sized ones for clothes. Out of the colorful closets, arranged in a cubistic progression, Chessa built a stair to the bedroom above. One

ascends it like an alpine trail of hairpin curves. It is a devious route, to be sure, but circumnavigation is sometimes fun, especially when there's no place in particular to go except back again. Even so, with our harried elevator habits, even we buried our prejudices, retrained our muscles and gripped the climbing iron, might be capable of enjoying a leisurely climb with a view sprawling in three directions.

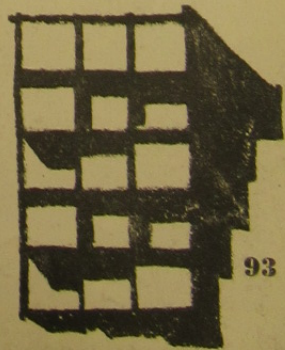
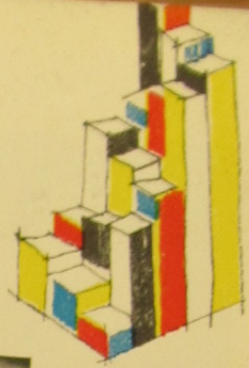
There have been lots of closets and multitudes of ways to scale a wall, and much knowledge no one has brought the old closet-under-the-stair to this purposeful and colorful culmination.

CHESSA
ARCHITETTO

CHESSA'S SPIRAL STAIRCASE: THE FIFTEEN GIANT STEPS OF VARESE



Though bare of rich appointments, the room has the luxury of three dimensions used to heighten human scale. Studio height at one end, the room drops to an intimate level at the other. Variety within the space is accentuated by a play of light from changing levels. By paneling all surfaces with wood flooring, Chessa achieves continuity as he stakes out the limits of a volume-to-live-in. Another kind of continuity occurs in the presence of old furniture. Even if they were not economic necessities, antiques would be accepted, and used, as discreetly as modern furnishings.





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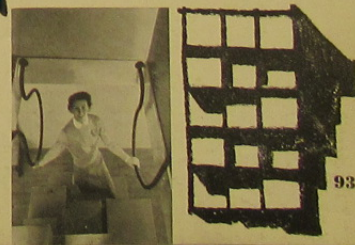
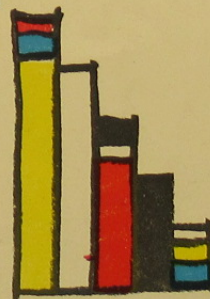
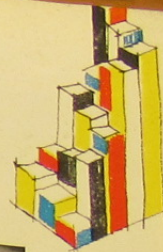
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New annexes behind the original theater

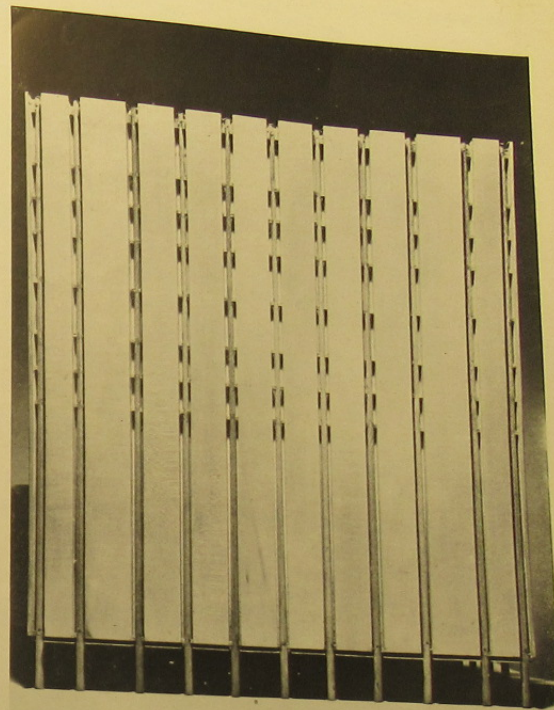
Hotel annex, from southwest



CHESSA
ARCHITETTO

PLOTS NEW THEATRICAL DIRECTIONS

East annex, containing stage facilities.



ON AN OLD GENOESE SQUARE

Il Teatro Carlo Felice, on the Piazza Ferrari in Genoa, was one of Italy's most distinguished opera houses. At the hub of five converging streets, it was also—despite its harmonious endeavors—a focal point of city traffic congestion. The Carlo Felice was damaged during the war, so severely that the city faced an issue not unlike the one which apparently stumped Washington when the White House began to decompose: should an historic building be restored as an obsolete monument or as an expression of modern needs? The Genoese government made the more courageous decision. It announced a national design competition for the Felice's restoration, its sole stipulation being that contestants retain the shell with its two pedimented facades built in 1824.

Chessa took first prize in the competition, no small tribute to either the judges or himself considering that he, from the rival city of Milan, was attacking some of Genoa's intimate urban problems. He could justify the building's renovation into a center of theatrical life only if he unspooled the urban as well as the architectural imbroglio. He uncorked the bottleneck by drawing pedestrian traffic off the square into an arcade sliced out of the center of the Felice, with traffic from other directions siphoned into passages at four levels. Also within the old shell, around these arcades lined with shops, services and exhibitions, he wrapped a 2,000-seat auditorium, a 1200-seat movie theater, a restaurant, foyer-meeting room, and in-



New annexes behind the original theater

Hotel annex, from southwest

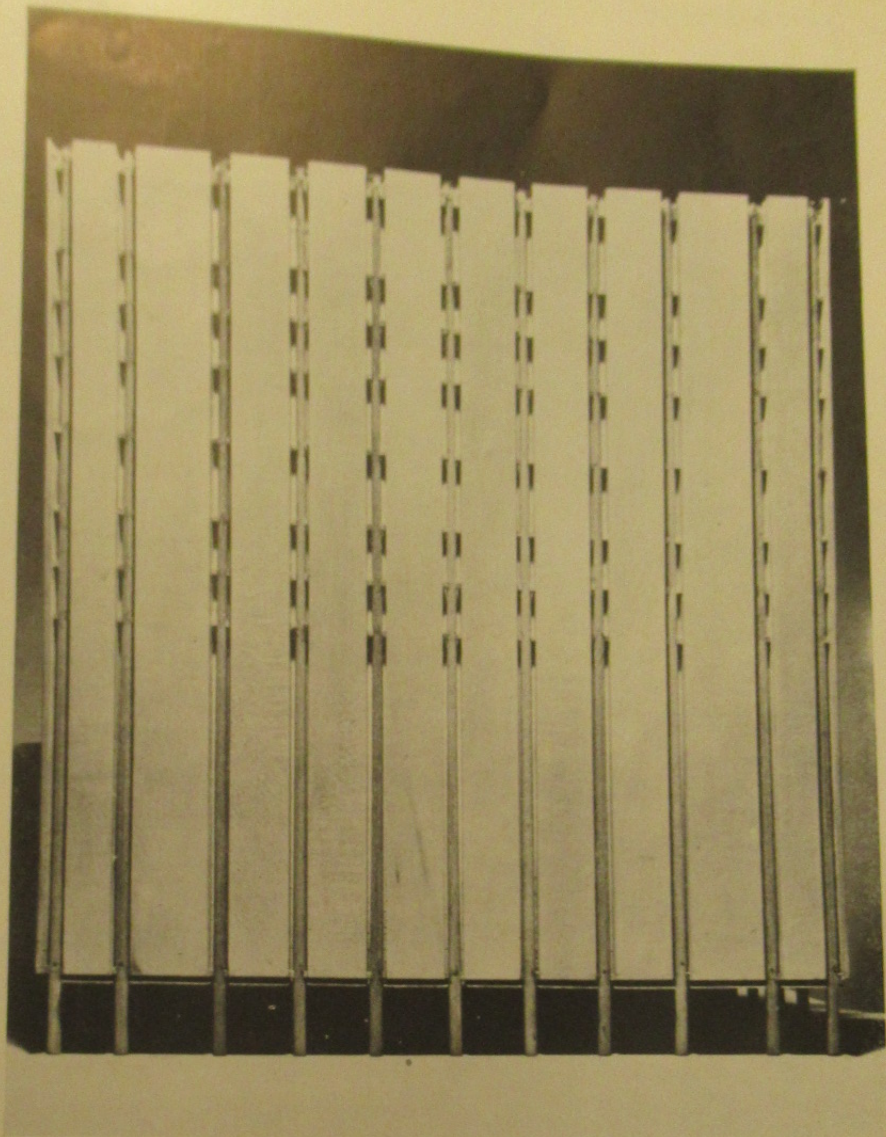
CHESSA
ARCHITETTO

PLOTS NEW THEATRICAL DIRECTIONS

ON AN OLD



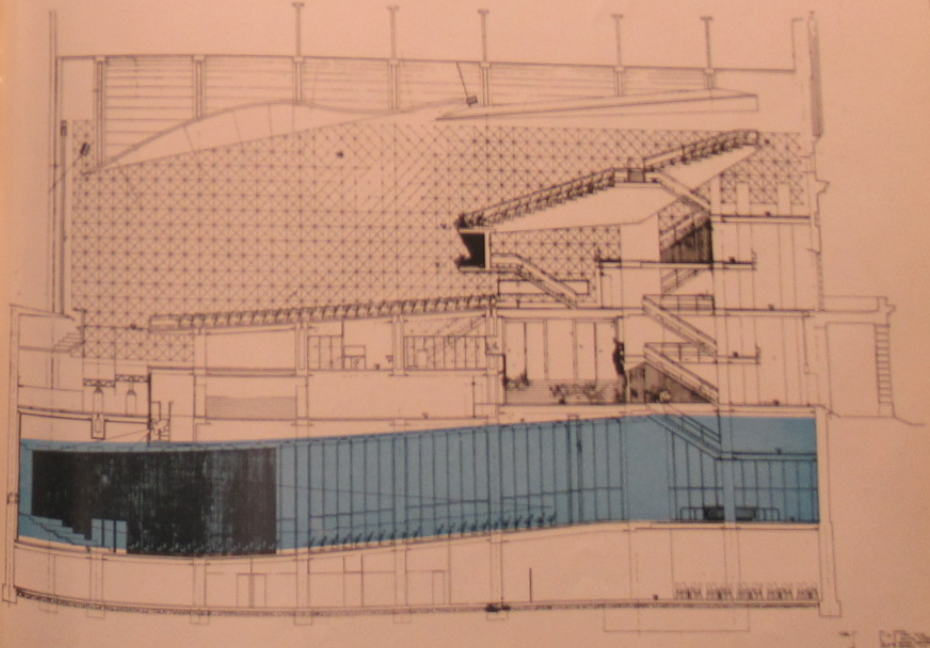
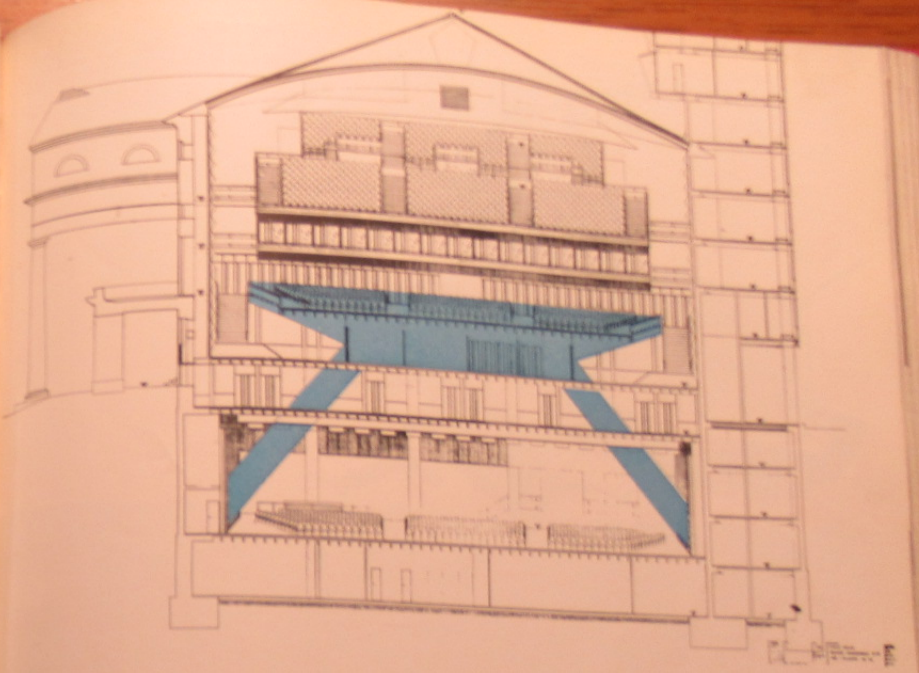
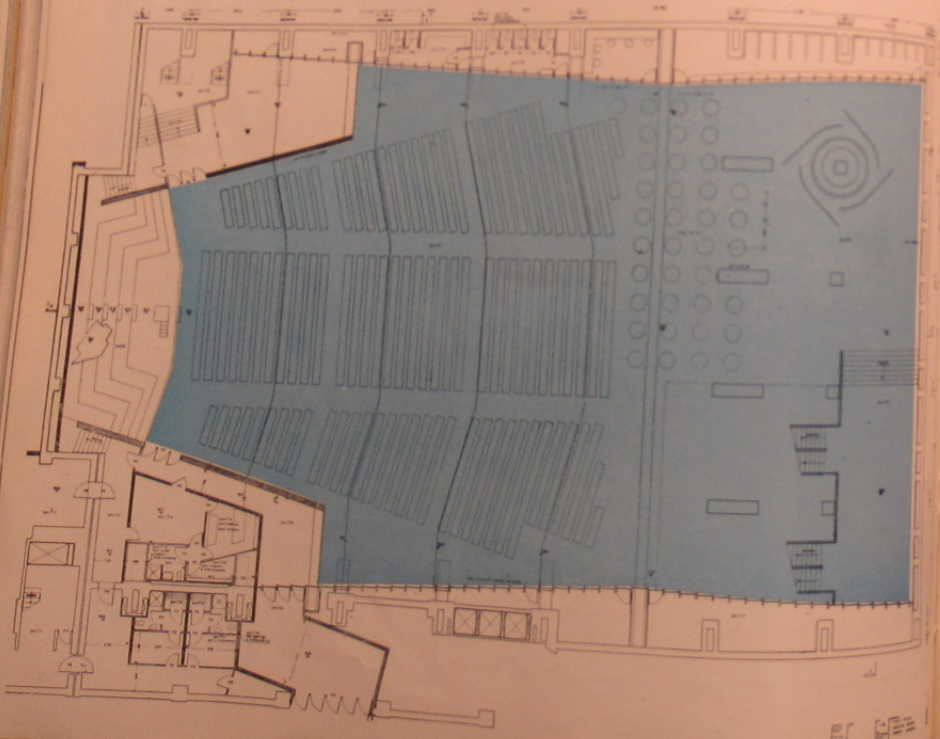
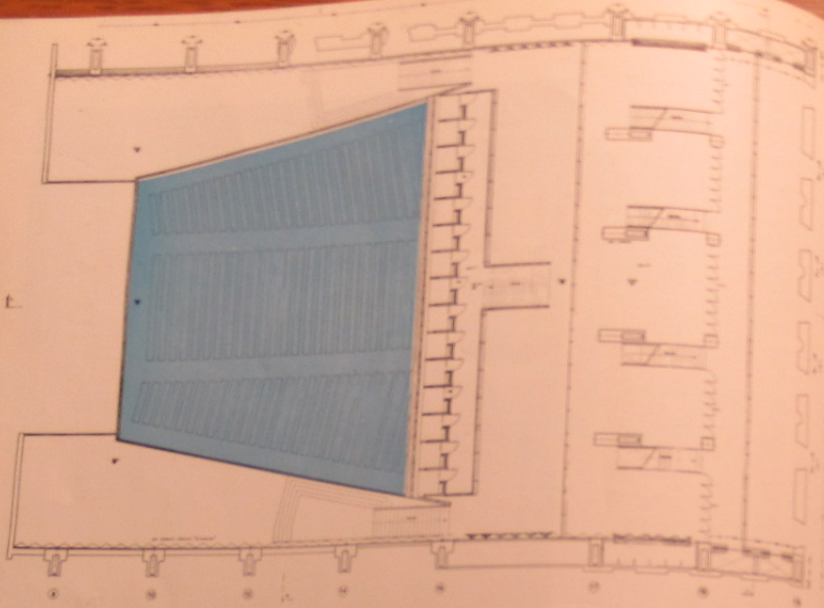
East annex, containing

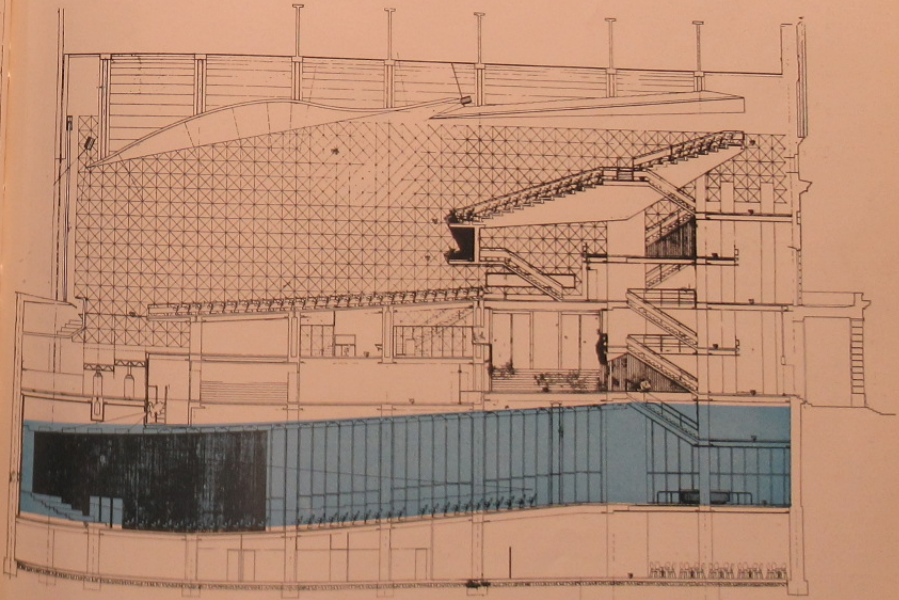
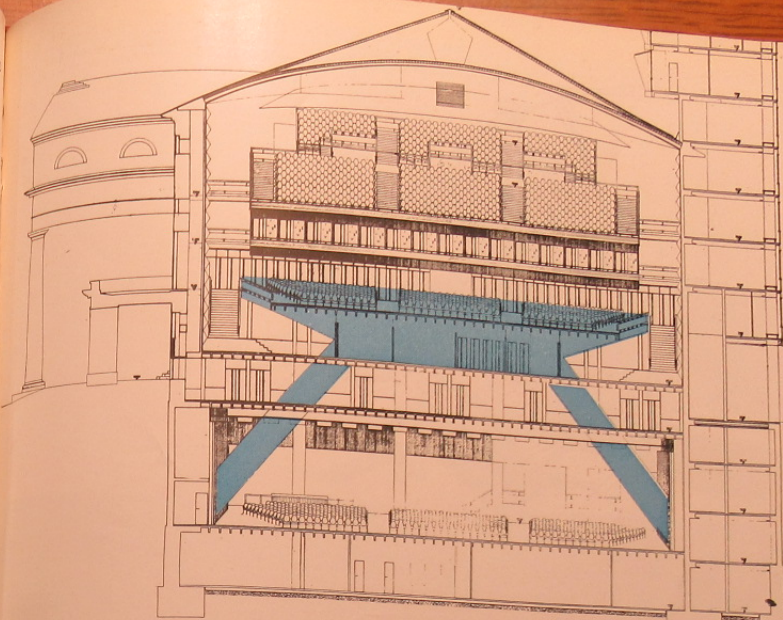
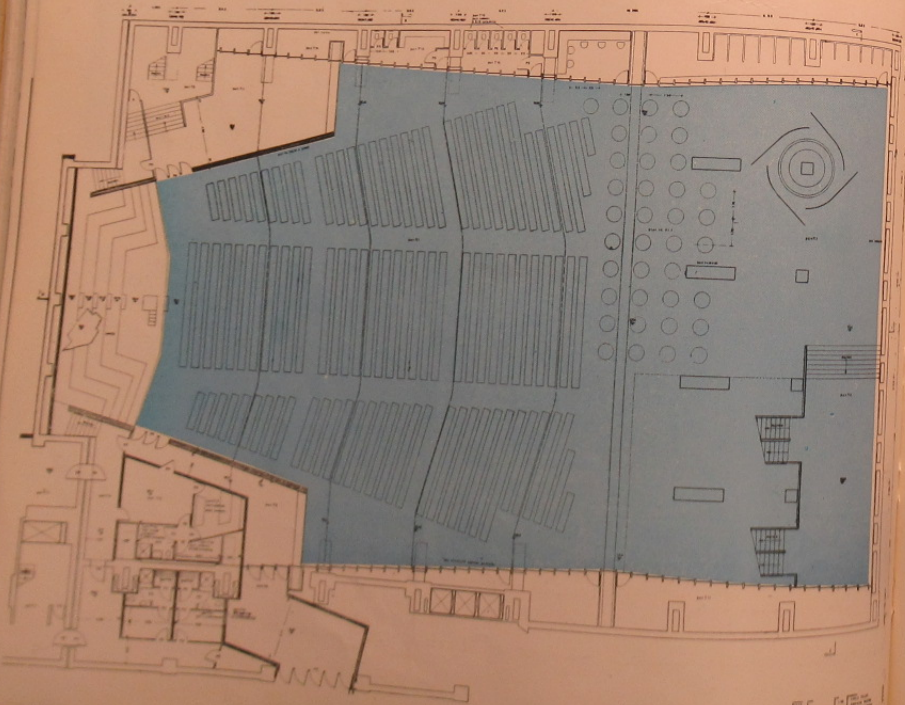
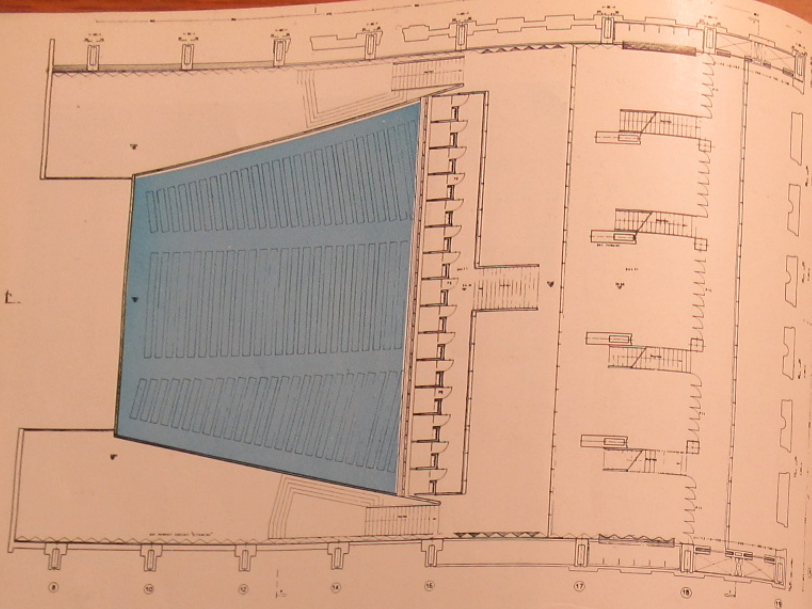


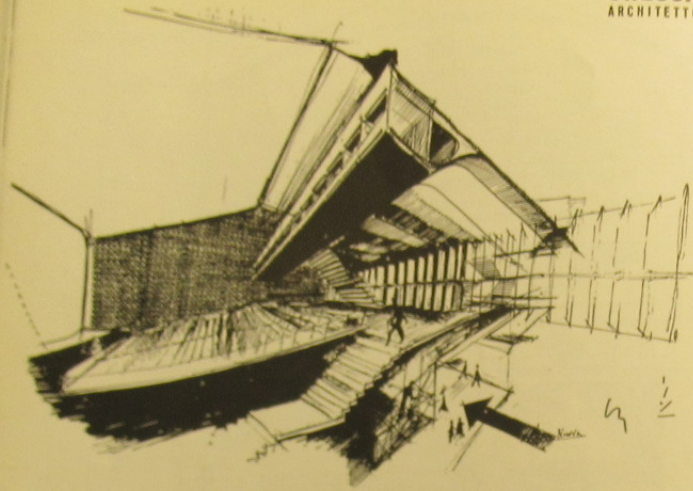
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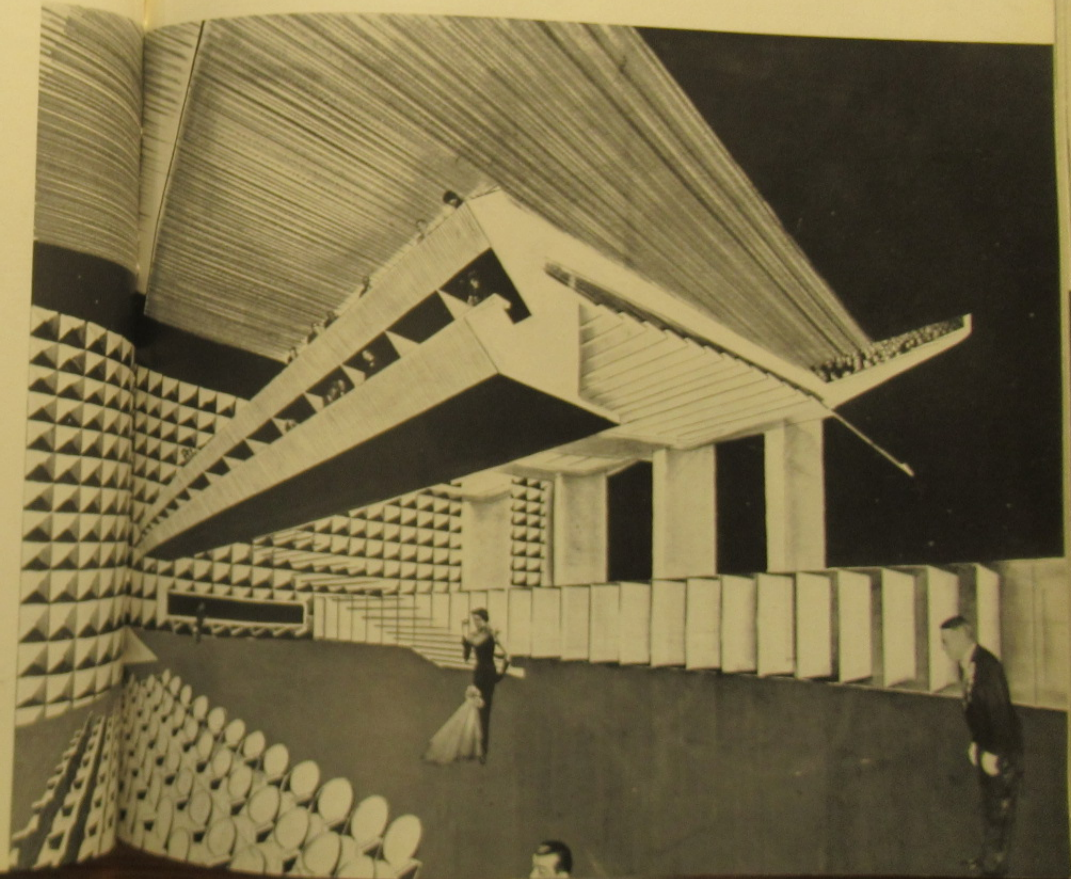


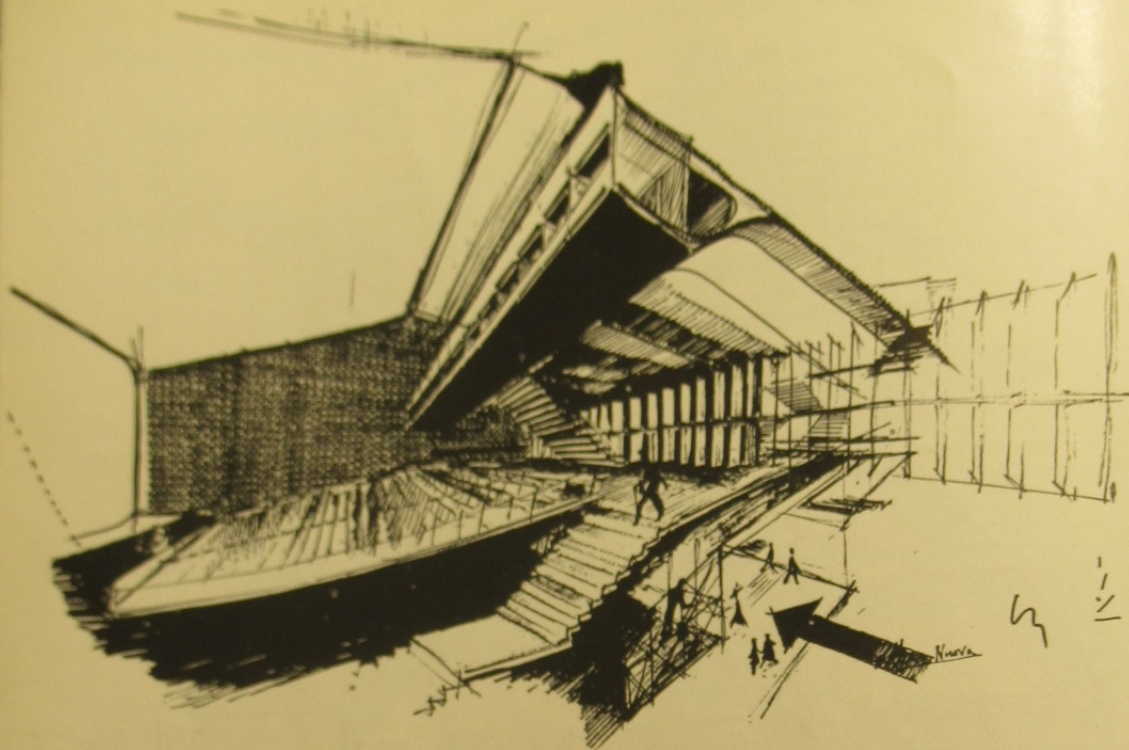
A perspective sketch of the auditorium interior dramatizes, perhaps actually, the relation of levels. Showings handling from the orchestra to balcony and arcade levels are exposed, a reassuring and logical link between dramatic horizontal forces. Arrows show the north-south pedestrian arcade.

numerable theatrical facilities. In two adjacent annexes, modern nine-story slabs, he housed administrative offices, a 100-bed hotel, schools of dance and scenic design, and the stage itself. A static piling up of floors in the old building (via Metropolitan Opera House) would have wasted coveted space and materials, and ruled out the pedestrian arcades and services which have so smoothly been accommodated. Chessa's brilliant exploitation of a limited space pivots on the way he organized structure to serve economy. The interior elements, or levels, are entirely independent of exterior walls and roof. They grow from the ground—where the weight is logically borne—like tiny galls on thick concrete stems. By a fluid succession of intermeshing layers, every pocket and corner is utilized. Note how the arcade, above, glides beneath the elevated end of the auditorium; the orchestra section itself, continuous with its buttressing concrete piers, stabilizes the space below it to leave room for a cinema. (See sections, previous page.) Chessa not only created an independent enclosure within the old shell, but he honored the fact by exposing its struc-

ture. Perhaps this is for esthetic reasons; it also testifies that two architects, and two centuries, are in compatible but detached coexistence here. As an approach to theater design, this aggressive statement of structure is singularly, even unnervingly, appropriate. The orchestra section is a bristling peninsula suspended in open space. The brazen balcony, as safe to sit in as it is startling to look at, props its load of spectators toward the stage in a herculean cantilever, ending in a band of cubicles. Here the boxholders dangle, enjoying all the traditional privileges of being seen, and also, perhaps for the first time in their existence, seeing the show from the best vantage in the house. In designing a room primarily for the auditory arts, Chessa made acoustical innovations. Paneling the side walls in primitive metal squares, he covered all other surfaces in sound-absorbent material. The walls alone, with their deflecting planes of specially compounded metals, control the harmonious concentration of sound, and sound experts control the adjustable panels. Aside from these unvelled decorative primes, the auditorium is purposely som-

Plans and sections on the previous pages; Top Left: plan of the orchestra section of the auditorium; Top Right: Cross section, showing the buttressed foundations of the orchestra level. Bottom Left: Plan of cinema level, showing large foyer which is separated from the theater by a movable double curtain; Bottom Right: Longitudinal section delineating the cinema and foyer. Note concrete acoustical ceiling suspended from the roof.





A perspective sketch of the auditorium interior dramatizes, perhaps unjustly, the relation of levels. Stairways hurdling from the orchestra to balcony and arcade levels are exposed, a reassuring and tangible link between dramatic horizontal forces. Arrow shows the north-south pedestrian arcade.

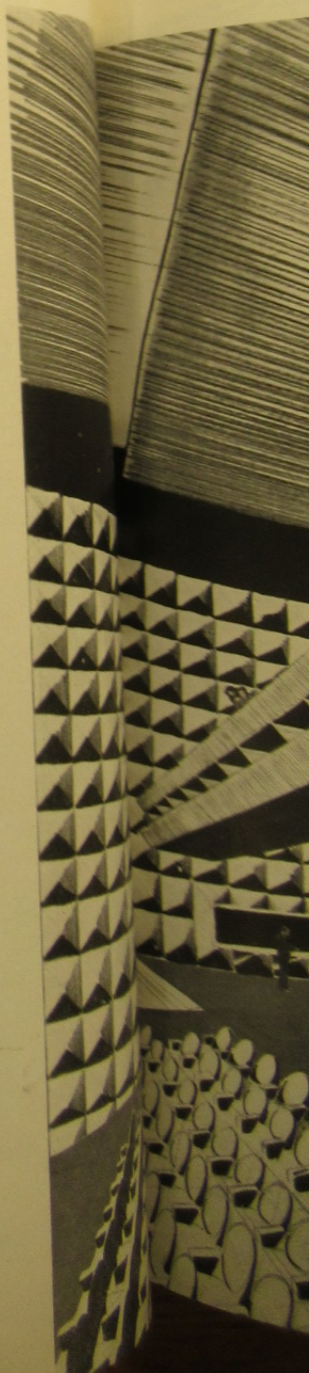
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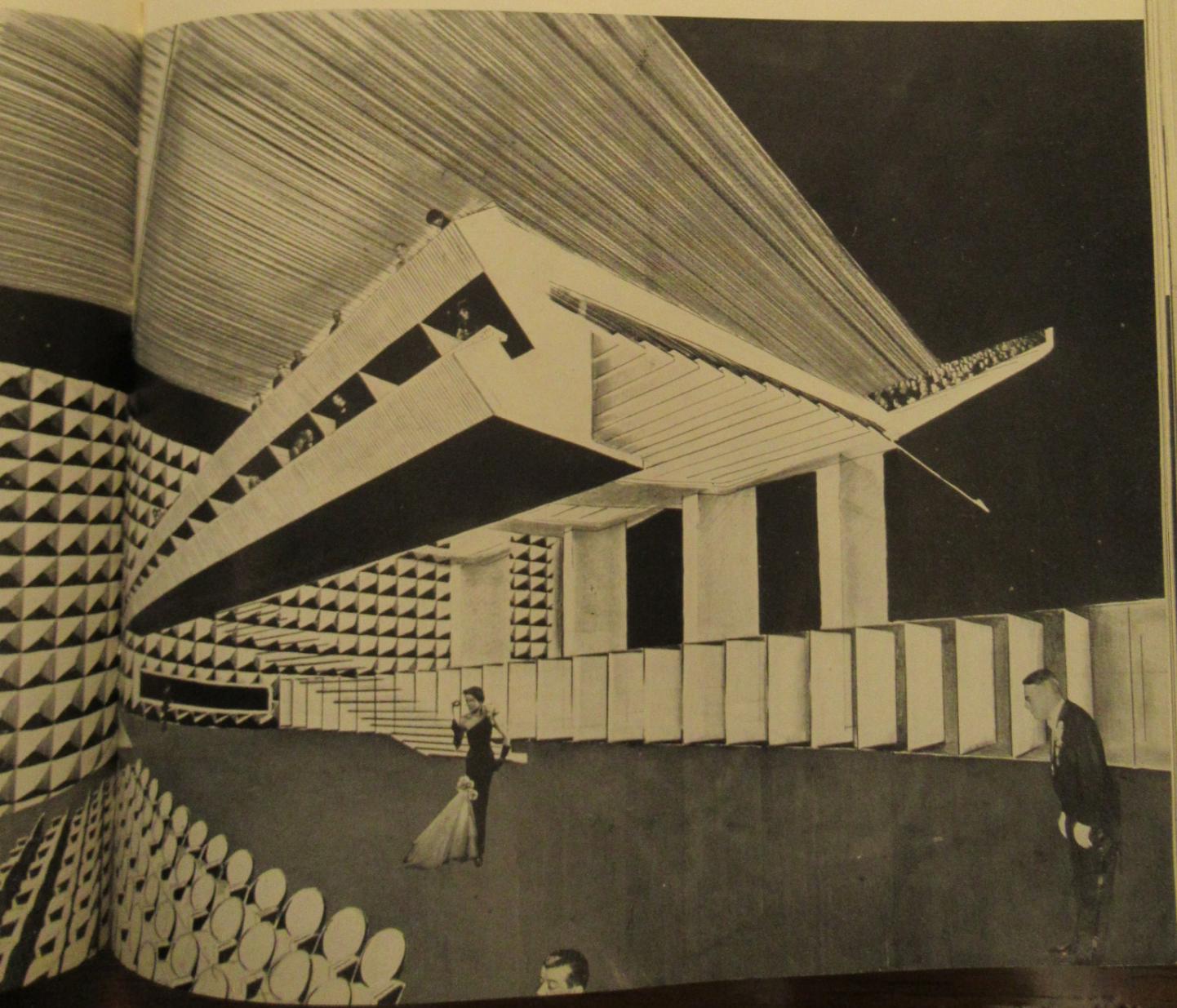
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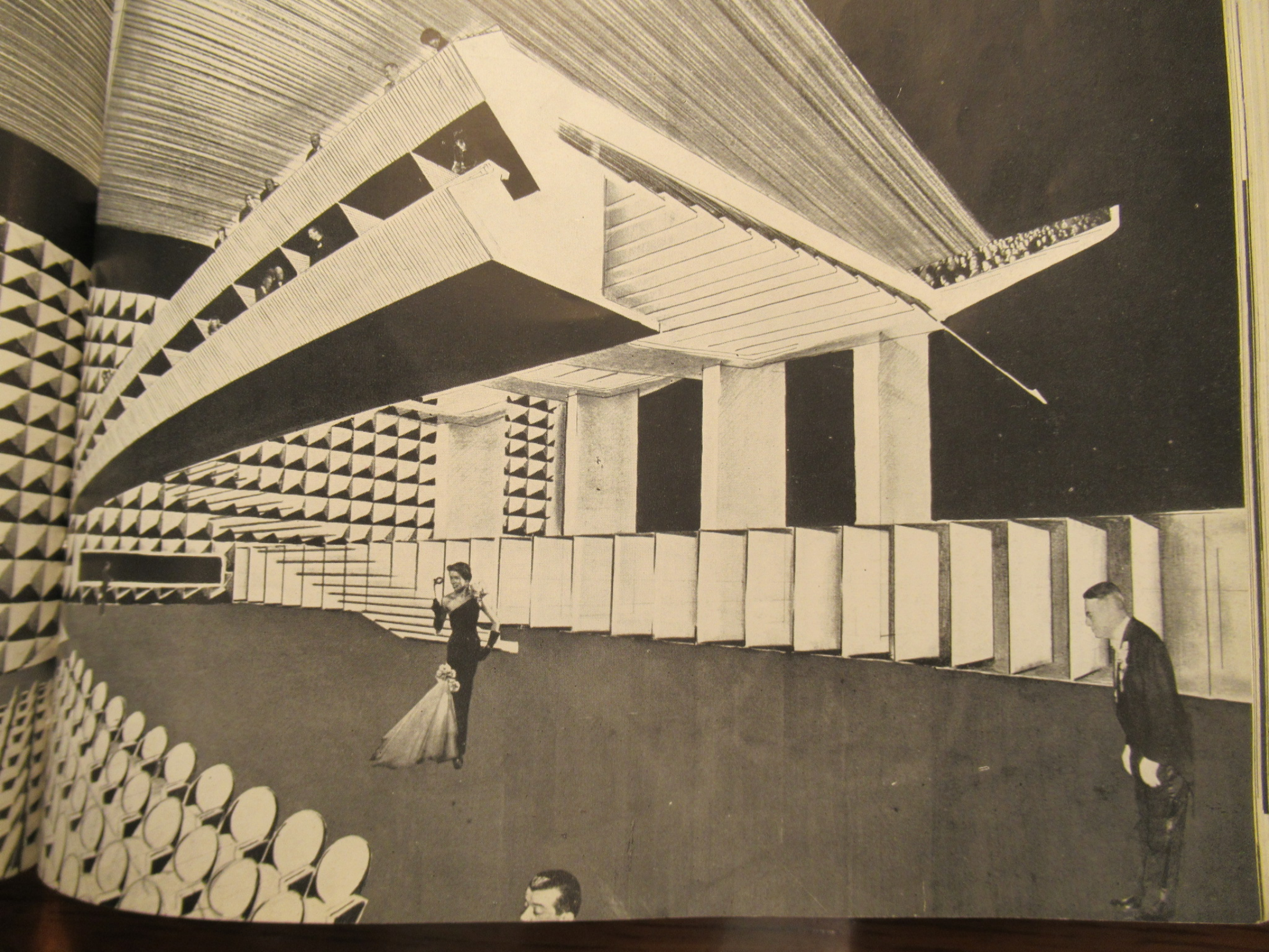
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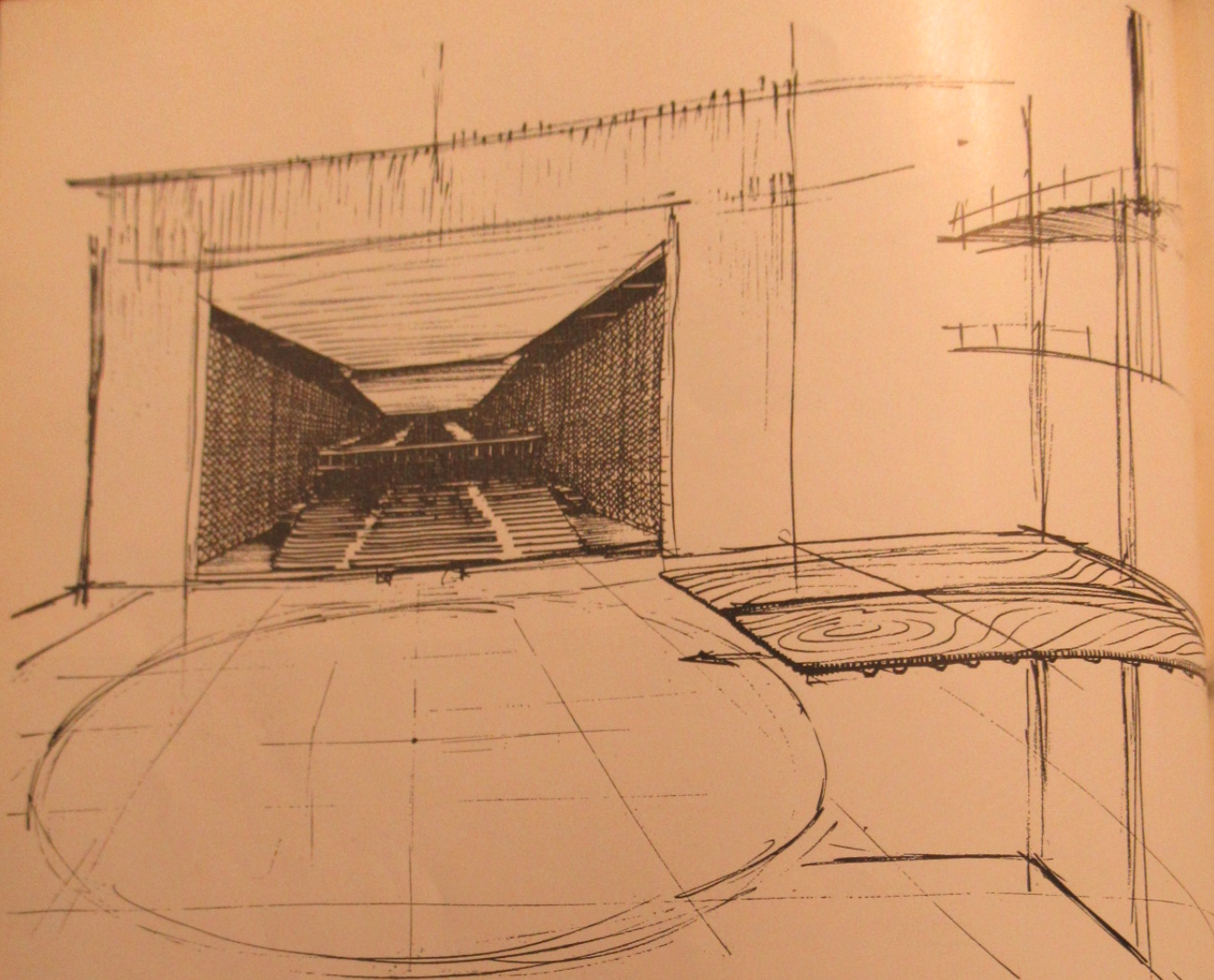
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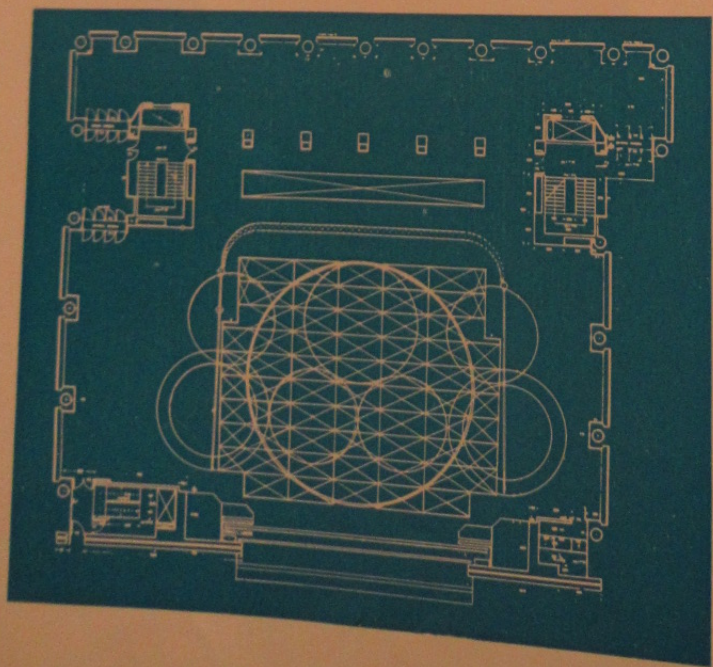






Auditorium viewed from the stage

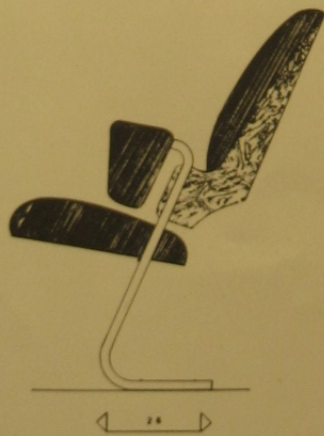
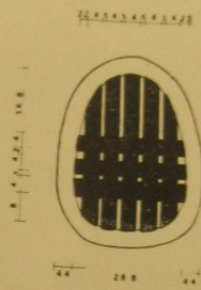
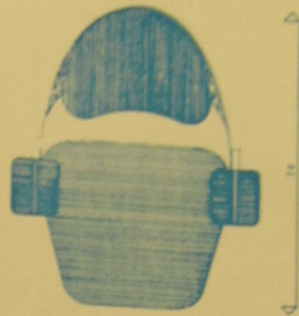
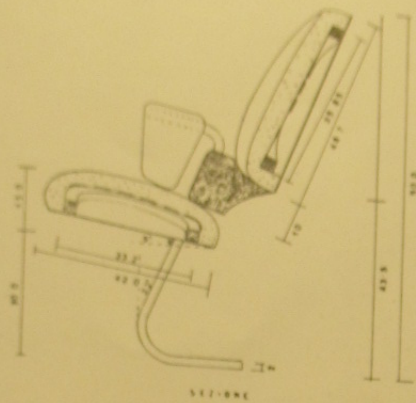
Plan of adjoining east annex at stage level



bre in tone and texture, to play down the architectural excitement and focus the audience's attention on the large, unadorned window of light where the play is the thing. Housed in the adjoining annex, the stage itself is an incarnation of architectural possibility. A network of revolving planes, rising and falling, tilting and slithering to the side, and a labyrinthine system of equipment for scene changes, will make this a consummate arena for the mobile Muse.

The Felice competition was not one of those municipal gestures which ends with the winning plan has been filed away under "Currently Unfeasible." Work has begun. The city of Genoa is bringing about, according to Chessa's winning design, a dramatic metamorphosis inside the cocoon.—J.F.

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Down to the seats in the theater and cinema, the Carlo Felice is the product of Chessa's punctilious detailing. The chairs rest on a pair of bent metal tubes, the rest of the construction being wood, foam rubber, and fabric. The webbed seats and backs are foam rubber padded and upholstered in one of the sound absorbent materials in which Chessa covered the auditorium surfaces for acoustical control. The wood arm rests which link the seats are similarly covered.

