

PHOTO: MICHAEL O'NEIL. STYLING: MARGARET S. MOORE.  
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Inasmuch as the *New Yorker* has kept its readers up-to-the-minute on the state of the squeak in the Olivetti showroom's 16-foot door, it should not be necessary for this professional publication to announce that the design is a great piece of showmanship, a stupendous display, and wonderful theatre. In any case, saying something that is true is not the same as getting at the truth. One could go on and call the Olivetti showroom one of the most successful collaborations between artist and architect in modern times. Or state that its furniture is masterfully designed. But this showroom is not furniture and it is not musical comedy. It is a work of architecture.

A daring one, and complex—simultaneously achieving effects on more than one level of consciousness. As a showplace for big business it is the smartest of them all. Yet also the setting for a legend.

The passerby comes upon a sudden gap in the continuous stone and glass surface of Fifth Avenue, to find himself peering

feet in diameter, painted bright yellow and churning or parting away. The paddles, which always swing horizontal, circulate a continuous round of Olivetti machines, apparently dunking them into the marble depths.

Over each marble-borne typewriter hovers a lamp almost as big as the narrow marble pedestal and of a similar cone shape. It is heavy Murano glass, striped in sea-jewel like colors, and above each are looping wires like fishing lines.

There is furniture to serve every practical purpose. Commodious beige leather sling chairs—the proper wooden kind that really fold up—that are nice to lounge in, easy to move around, and seem to take up little space. Neat blue-black chairs to type in, and designed by the architects. They have an interesting wrought iron frame, very light, fine, and simple, with the foam rubber upholstered seat and back held well away from the frame, and well separated from each other, reinforcing the impression of lightness. Translucent

# olivetti

new york

beyond a big pillar and through a sign, into a world astoundingly remote from the street. Marble the color of water, flecked with foam and golden bubbles, surges from the depths of the interior right out under his feet. A Mediterranean sky inside also ignores the steel-rimmed glass boundary. A crowd has gathered around a girl who is typing on an Olivetti portable outside of the store; it is poised on a steep crest of the marble. Other models, and several calculating machines, are up on waves eddying inside. The enormous walnut door, which is the only way past the glass, opens easily when someone decides to ask the price of the portable.

The analogy of the interior does not read very explicitly, but it is unmistakable. The sand mural must go with a beach. There is some kind of balcony or deck further inside. From it falls a stair with solid sides like a gangplank. The deck rail is walnut as strong and smooth as a ship's rail. There is a knobbed metal picket fence below it—as spanking white as the edge of the deck itself. Towards the front near the plain (left) wall is a great wooden wheel perhaps five

pink-beige tables to type on, with surfaces softly indented and thinned away, as though worn smooth by water. The double tier of files neatly fitted into the north wall is neither too high nor too low.

The over-all space is so simple a rectangle that one feels securely oriented in it. However, lines of light at floor and ceiling along the side walls, visually destroy the corners. The walls, apparently not meeting, do not seem to enclose the space. Impossible to convince oneself that beyond the wall is a tangible Fifth Avenue neighbor, not sea and horizon—a grotto perhaps.

Nivola's beautiful bas-relief has a richly variegated surface suggesting, in some areas, the mark of rilling water left in sand, of leaves, twigs, thorns, seaweed, and crushed flowers caught by the tide with sea birds and starfish. In the rich and complicated surface stand great primeval figures making gestures of welcome, and sexual symbols all intertwined. Can this be the grotto from which Venus floated into Botticelli's painting? Or a secret harbor she still swims into occasionally, climbing the gangplank and drawing it up after her, to assure privacy?



a entrance  
b marble display  
c display wheel  
d sales table  
e typewriter test  
f mezzanine rail  
g employees' desk  
h recessed files  
i stairs to basement  
k employees' entrance  
l mural  
m elevators



STUDIO ARCHITETTI BBPR: LUDOVICO BELGIOJOSO,  
ENRICO PERESSUTTI, ERNESTO N. ROGERS,  
SAND MURAL BY COSTANTINO NIVOLA.

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**olivetti**

new york



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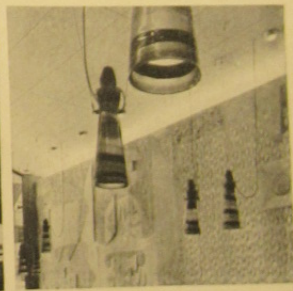
pink-beige tables to type on, with surfaces softly indented and thinned away, as

entrance





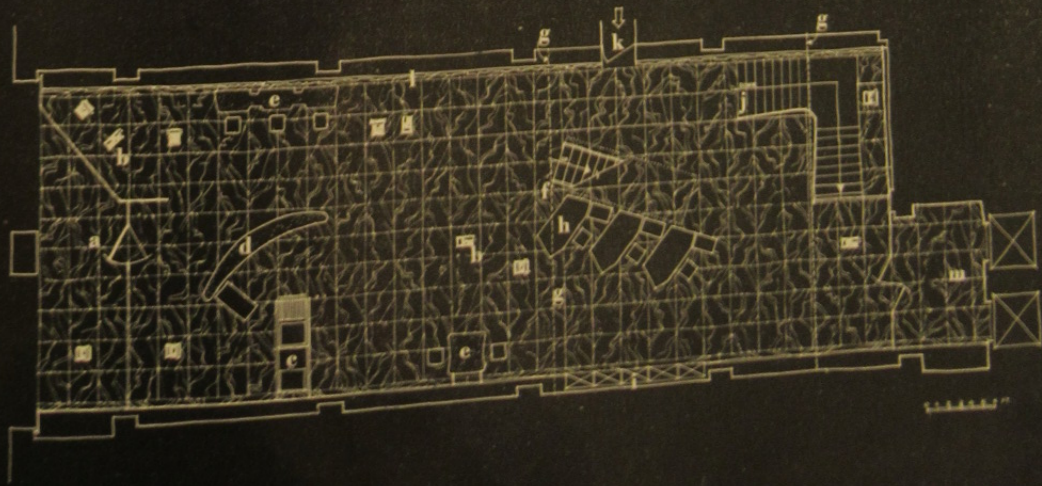
peressutti



2 of left: peressutti

reens

- a entrance
- b marble display supports
- c display wheel
- d sales table
- e typewriter test table
- f mezzanine stairs
- g mezzanine rail
- h employees' desks
- i recessed files
- j stairs to basement
- k employees' entrance
- l mural
- m elevators

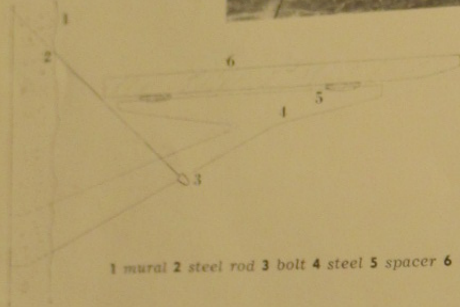






reens

The ceiling, marble floor, plain side wall and back wall were shipped from Italy. Hence the modular system of panels and marble squares. Later Niola made his concrete-toughened wood dimensions. It was installed frame by frame.



1 mural 2 steel rod 3 bolt 4 steel 5 spacer 6 Candoglia marble



georges



photographs at left and right: reens









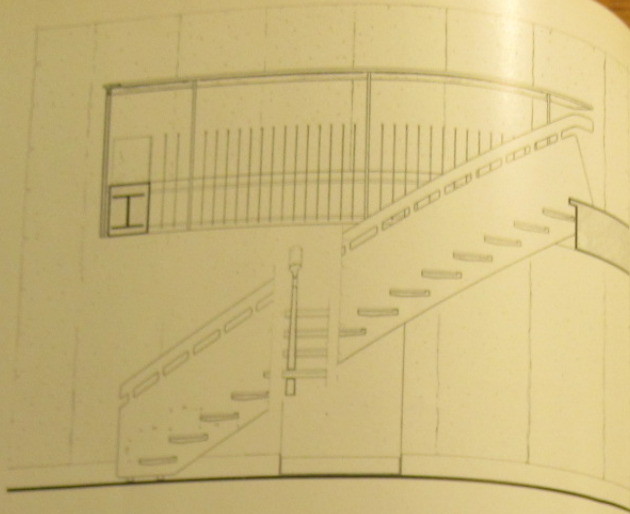
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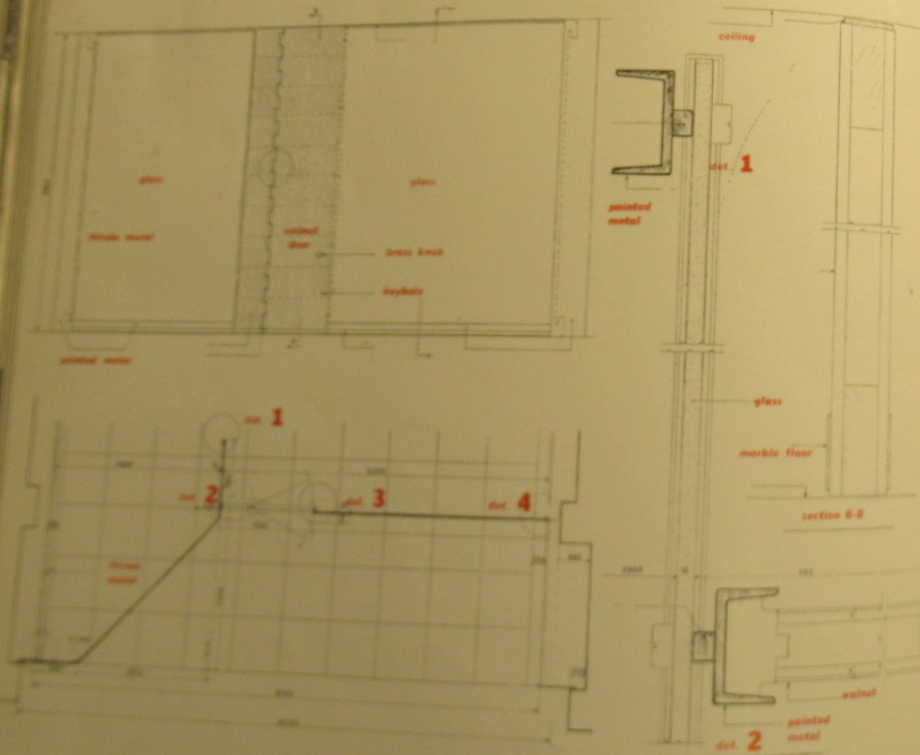
STAIR TO MEZZANINE



SECTION

FRONT WINDOW

Steel strips at base of window are alternately painted and exposed, just cover the metal grilles over radiators.



Building department insisted on lowering mezzanine floor, placing steel plates under the marble treads, running steel below lower edge of stairs. The furious architects left the extraneous material unpainted. Room proportions and float of pale marble treads are slightly altered from original design (in section).



architectural photographs

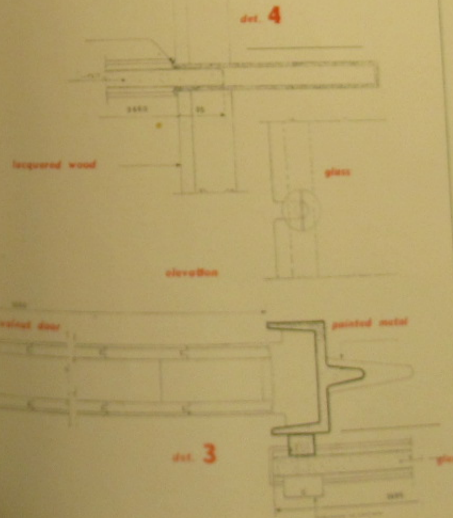
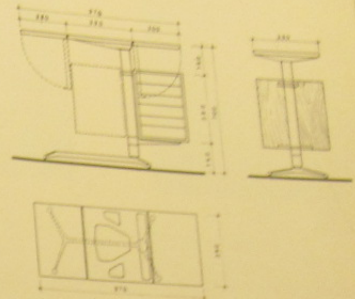
Slings rest on brass plate in marble.



photographs: back view



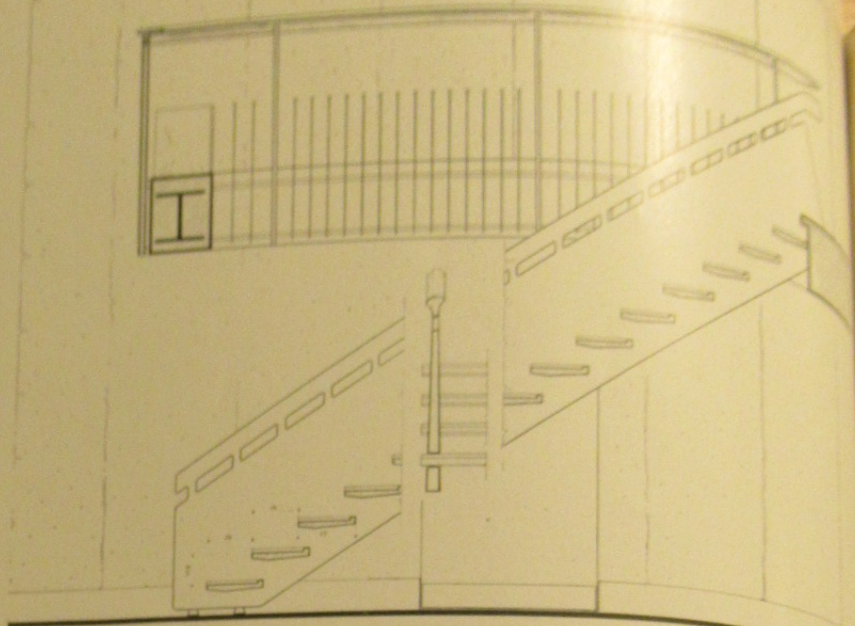
TYPEWRITER TABLE



Anyone who types for extended periods knows the value of a single pedestal typewriter table which permits crossing and stretching the legs. Also appreciated is the ridged rubber slush strapped around the foot bar, making a work, firm foot rest. Other virtues are ample surface and storage space, compressibility when not in use. Very firmly balanced on powerful steel rod, strong hinges under drop-leaves, which are laminated plywood surfaced with beige plastic, resistant to most anything.



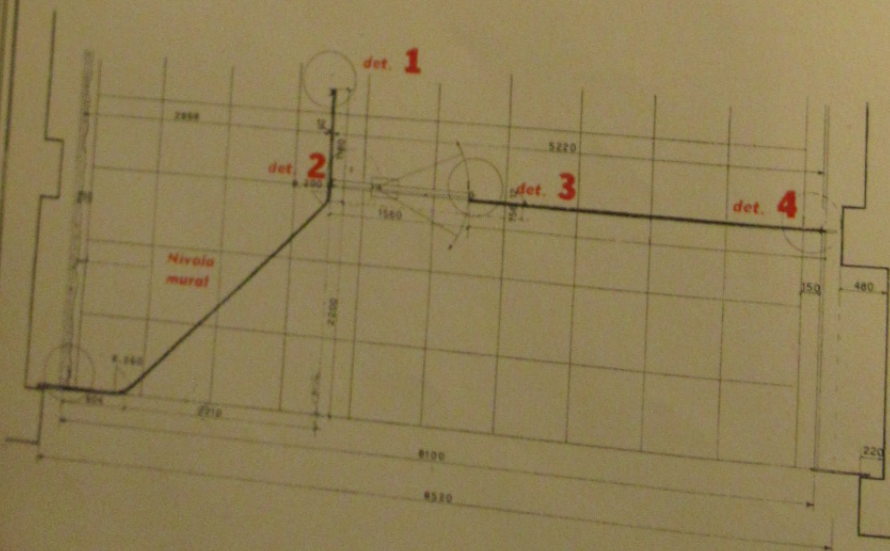
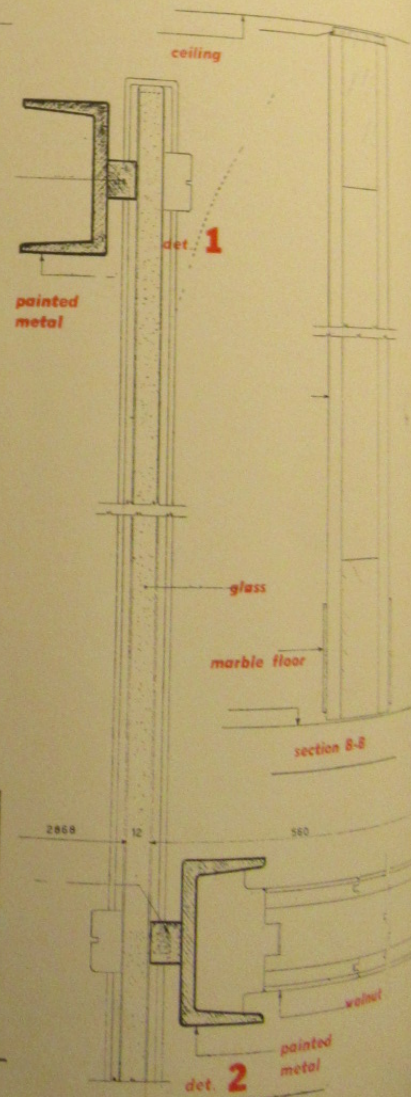
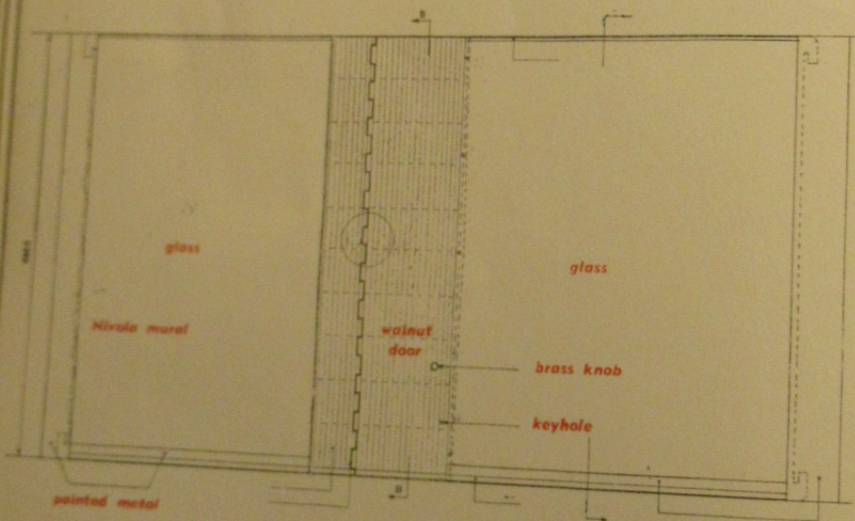
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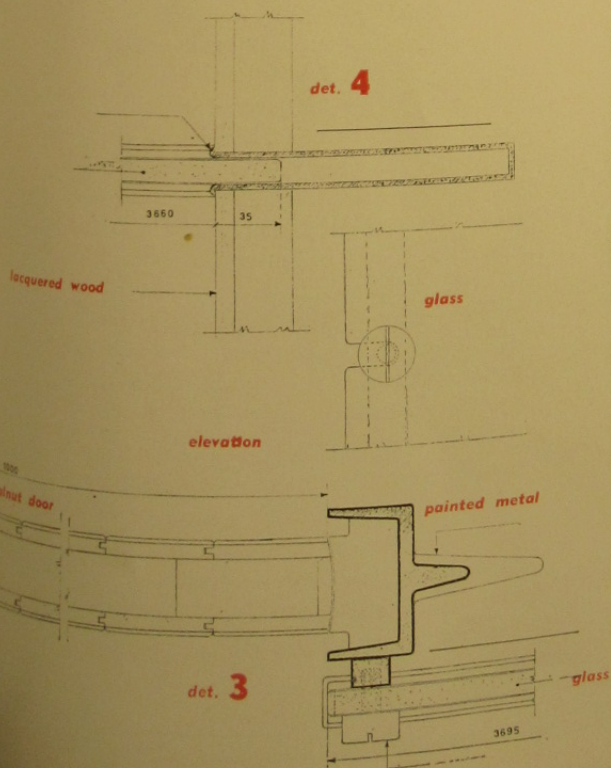
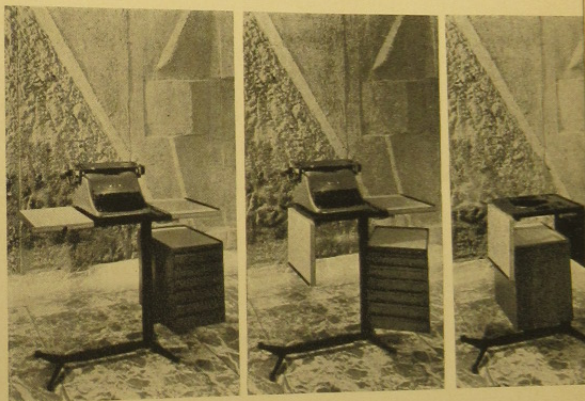
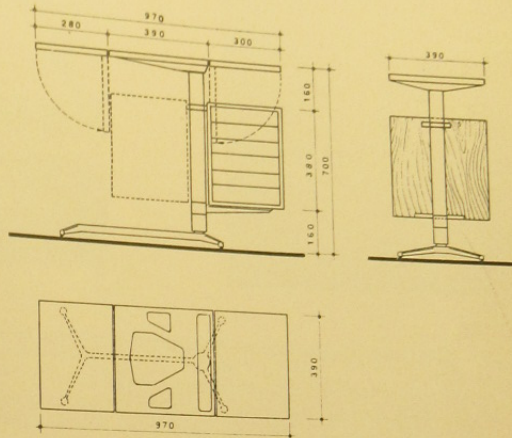
alexandre georges

Stair rests on brass plate in marble.



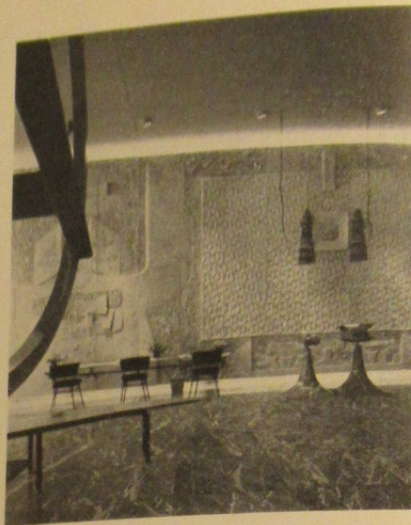
4 photographs: louis reens

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all photos this page: georges

Across the swirling marble tide we follow the 70-foot length of Nivola's sand mural from the machine-bearing marble crests behind the entrance to the



Stairs to the mezzanine vaguely resemble a gangplank lowered from a ship of some kind, an impression reinforced by their angle. The floor here is of handsome wood, in distinct contrast to the sea-like marble into which the gangplank dips. The mezzanine is furnished with ingenious display screens for typewriters, and trapezoid-shaped office tables. One interesting detail of the stair rails are their shape in section, which is shown on page 128. Slightly, asymmetrical, they are designed to conform to the grip of left and right hands.

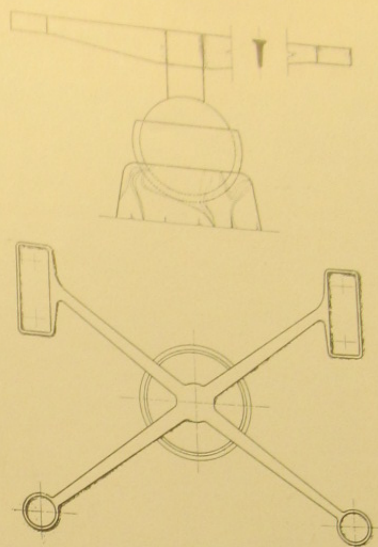
Assignments where all the emphasis is on getting a S M A S H hit are among the severest tests to which a designer can be put. The big gesture must not be mere flamboyance. The conception must be developed consistently and in detail.

The Olivetti showroom details are overwhelming, first of all, because each is an authentic invention: the sign which is a banner stretched out on the street—of weathered bronze evoking the antique legend of the grotto, but gleaming where the inner surface of the cut-out letters has been polished . . . metal-framed furniture and the dark sides of the stairs lacquered not black but dark blue . . . simple field flowers—daisies—on tables cut by special permission from the pink Candoglia quarries reserved for the Duomo of Milan. The architects have neither denied nor confirmed the analogy of the grotto. But we know for a fact that they did not originally intend the sky blue ceiling in the first place. They had panels of olive wood—russet veinings on a warm natural ground—shipped from Italy. The building department ruled that fireproofing *under* the panels would not be sufficient, and the panels were not installed. As far as one can judge from a sample, the wood would have made a more material covering than blue sky, but not a heavy one—and extraordinarily luxurious. But an alternative solution is not necessarily worse than the original—at least in this case, it does not seem possible for it to be.—O.G.





all photos this page: georges



Above: Brass screw elements and steel supports that poise the machines securely on the marble stands.

Below: Heavy steel reinforcement demanded by the building department thickens the stairs in profile view. Marble treads, supposed to have been lightly suspended in the sides have been unnecessarily reinforced with steel plates underneath.

ndow, to the

glass-sided stair, and yellow back wall.

