Theatre in Domestic Space

The 1926 Gropius-Piscator Total Theatre &
Richard Neutra's Zehlendorf Type e Houses, Berlin 1923

Modern trends in the arts in 1920s Berlin called for a re-evaluation of the performance space amidst a drastically changing post-World War One urban landscape. Following the demise of the 'utopian, revolutionary phase' of Expressionist productions from 1918, it was felt that a new emphasis on naturalism and objectivity on the stage would reflect the current socio-political climate with necessary sobriety.[1] In his 1919 concept of the 'total work of art', Bauhaus school director Walter Gropius affirmed the essential relationship between 'stage' and 'building'.[2] Establishing a stage workshop at the Bauhaus school in 1921, he asserted that the architectural space of the theatre was central to the ongoing experimentation with flexible and functional spaces in modernist design. Moving away from traditional staging by radically re-interpreting the relationship of the figure within a space, the innovative set-designs of Bauhaus stage director, Oskar Schlemmer were highly influential to Gropius's architectural design for a new theatre in Berlin – the immersive, multistage Total Theatre. Gropius began this project in 1926 as a commission for Berlin *Volksbühne* regisseur and Epic Theatre director, Erwin Piscator.[3] Piscator saw the radically modern stage design of his newly politicised theatre productions as a platform from which to convey prevailing socialist messages. The Total Theatre, whose modern staging was to overcome the technical and spatial limits of conventional court-style architecture, was never built. However, it remains, with its progressive technology and flexible use of space, 'one of the most revolutionary designs' to re-evaluate the relationship between actor and audience 'in the history of the reform theatre movement'.[4]

Against the cultural backdrop of this 'fresh spirit in the arts', in 1923, Richard Neutra designed ten radically modern detached family houses in Zehlendorf, Berlin for the

[1] John Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), pp. 84-85.
[2] Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 51.
[3] The 'People's Stage' was a theatre in Berlin, which Piscator led as artistic director from 1924.
[4] Erwin Piscator and Hugh Rorrison, *The Political Theatre* (New York: Avon, 1978), p. 175.

building contractor, Adolf Sommerfeld (Fig. 1).[5] These dwellings were part of

Sommerfeld's wider scheme to urbanise and modernise the Berlin suburbs. They would

later be home to AHAG board members involved in the neighbouring Onkel-Toms-

Hütte housing project.[6] In the central living area of Zehlendorf Type e houses 85 and 87,

Neutra designed a tripartite revolving stage, known as the *Drehbühne*. This theatrical

structure provided a 'flexible extension and reorientation' of the fixed living room to the

music room, dining area or library (Fig. 2).[7] Neutra's highly experimental project

promoted the dynamic synthesis of theatre and architecture, by turning domestic space

into the stage of family drama. In this paper, I analyse and determine how the

Drehbühne functions not merely as a modernist innovation in domestic design, but as a

dynamic theatrical space. Taking the view that theatre is a reflection of life itself, I

propose that the radical stage concepts of the Total Theatre should be viewed as a model

to explore the two-fold relationship between the architectural space and the inhabitants

of Neutra's Zehlendorf houses. Both the Total Theatre and *Drehbühne* projects explore

flexible spaces and the interrelationship of modern theatre and architecture, illustrating

how the inhabitants of space become integral to the stage 'drama' as co-workers rather

than mere spectators. If the Total Theatre is considered to be a 'mirror of life and the

social behaviours of a period', Neutra's *Drehbühne* is surely too a social experiment

that tested the boundaries and limits of the living space.[8]

Flexible Staging in the Total Theatre

Following the First World War, modern architects of the German *Neues Bauen* cohort

felt that architectural space should have a new versatility to reflect the rapidly changing

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[5] Willet, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic*, pp. 84-85.
[6] AHAG is an abbreviation for *Allgemeine Häuserbau AktienGesellschaft* (Berlin General housing company).
[7] Thomas S. Hines, *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture: A Biography and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 35.
[8] Walter Gropius, *Scope of Total Architecture*, World Perspectives, 3 vols (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954-55), VIII (1955), p. 70.

patterns and phases of the interwar years. Gropius maintained in his design for the Total Theatre that the stage too should be flexible, since human life, the measure of all things, including space, is a changing process. The stage form should be 'an expression of a new social and dramatic situation.'[9] With this assertion, Gropius embraces spatial concepts pioneered by Schlemmer, whose work more specifically describes the stage as a platform for the weight and tensions of the human figure. Advocating the synthesis of man and space, Schlemmer professed that the human being 'follows his sense of himself as well as his sense of space'.[10] His every movement permeates the space around him. In the 1925 drawings for his essay, *Mensch und Kunstfigur*, Schlemmer demonstrates how Man as Dancer is guided by an 'invisible linear network of planimetric and stereometric relationships' that correspond with the 'inherent mathematics of the human body' (Figs. 3-4).[11] The linear sweeping arcs denote the natural extension of the figure in motion and illustrate the kinaesthetic experience of man in a clearly defined theatrical space. Through the Total Theatre, Gropius could explore in theatrical production, concepts of uninhibited movement in architectural space, which were essential to the free-flowing open-plan interiors of his earlier 1925 Dessau Masters' Houses and Bauhaus Building.

Previous theatre staging in Germany had predominantly been confined to the traditional *Guckkasten* box-design, which restricted the actor's movements and the audience's field of vision to the limited framework of the proscenium arch. This rigid form of staging was still common in Expressionist productions from 1910 and in the Theater am Nollendorfplatz, which Piscator leased for the *Volksbühne* in 1927. Gropius asserted that the Total Theatre should resist this mono-functional design and build on flexible staging concepts, such as Henry van de Velde's 1914 tripartite sliding stage and Oscar

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[9] Piscator and Rorrison, *The Political Theatre*, p. 181.
[10] Oskar Schlemmer and others, *The Theater of the Bauhaus* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 25.
[11] Ibid, p. 23.

Strnad's 1918 rotating annular stage (Fig. 5).[12] Aiming to 'spring and extend the limits imposed on the performable by period and convention', the Total Theatre stage comprises two tangentially adjoining larger and smaller revolving platforms.[13] These would rotate to convert the space into three main configurations – proscenium, central or deep stage (Fig. 6). Gropius's use of multiple mobile stage platforms draws on Piscator's treatment of the play as a formal exercise of 'dramatic montage', where staging could be altered without disrupting the flow of a performance.[14] This is a clear allusion to Schlemmer's notion of space as the 'Fluidum', an extension to the figure's movement on stage. By embracing the versatility of space within dynamically structured limits, the 'interchangeable stage mechanism' could accommodate multiple types of performance; from 'drama, opera, film and dance', 'sports events or assemblies', to Piscator's epic or political theatre, for which the Total Theatre was originally intended.[15]

Gropius and Piscator saw in the flexible staging of the Total Theatre an opportunity to dismantle the 'gulf between stage and auditorium' that had shaped dramatic staging for three centuries.[16] They supported director Max Reinhardt's belief that by reducing the spatial distance between actor and audience, these two realms could be united. Reinhardt's pioneering 1919 deep U-shaped forestage at the Berlin Großes Schauspielhaus instigated the design concept for the tripartite central stage of the Total Theatre, which would extend each side into the seating area and physically immerse the audience in the drama by 'enclosing [them] like a forceps'.[17] Whilst the deep stage

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[12] Piscator and Rorrison, *The Political Theatre*, pp. 175-176.
[13] Toby Cole and Helen Kirsch, 'Objective Acting', in *Erwin Piscator: Political Theatre 1920-1966*, ed. by Ludwig Hoffmann, trans. by Margaret Vallance, exhibition catalogue, *Deutsche Akademie der Künste zu Berlin* (London, 1971), p. 66.
[14] John Willett, *The New Sobriety 1917-1933 Art and Politics in The Weimar Period* (USA: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p. 153.
[15] Schlemmer and others, *The Theater of the Bauhaus,* p. 12.
[16] Piscator and Rorrison, *The Political Theatre*, p. 189.
[17] Ibid, p. 176;
Walter Gropius, 'Modern Theatre Construction', *The Drama* (February, 1928), p. 136.

could provide actors with 'spatial protection' from the audience, a smooth rotation, placing the actor on the smaller platform in the centre of the auditorium, would expose the actor to the closer, more immediate gaze of the audience (Fig. 7).[18] This emphasis on circularity within the 'concrete, domelike shell' of the auditorium would force the audience to look physically and metaphorically inwards, gaining a sense of 'oneness with the theatrical event' (Figs. 8-9).[19]

Piscator affirmed that it was through live performance and close proximity to the actor, that the audience would most readily engage with the left-wing socio-political messages of his productions.[20] The immersive and radical style of staging, incorporating the entire auditorium, would encourage the audience to become an integral and active part of the dramatic process. This concept derived from Brecht's Epic Theatre *Verfremdung* effect, which denied the audience their passive position as a mere 'consumer' of theatre entertainment. Similarly, Piscator believed that estrangement in theatre demands an intellectual response that 'brings [the audience] into closer contact with the facts of life.'[21] The close relationship between 'onstage' and 'real' life was characteristic of Piscator's earlier Agitprop Theatre and its intense indoctrination of the proletarian class. The Total Theatre too would introduce drama as a microcosm of the real world, empowering the audience as an emergent 'political being' to actively 'change the course of political reality' and the social destitution of the interwar years.[22] The stage actor was a crucial and objective vehicle for promoting the utopian vision of this reformed modern figure, coined by Gropius and *Neues Bauen* architects the 'New Man', a representative

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[18] 'räumlicher Schutz' and 'behütete Atmosphäre'. Woll, *Das Totaltheater,* p. 142.

[19] 'Eine betonierte kuppelartige Schale'. Woll, *Das Totaltheater*, p. 125;
Silvija Jestrovic, 'The Theatrical Memory of Space: from Piscator to Brecht to Belgrade', *New Theatre Quarterly* 4, no. 21 (2005), p.366.

[20] Piscator's political theatre explored themes of disillusionment with the SPD party, bourgeois mentality, democracy, the workers' political struggles and the daily hardships of the impoverished masses in Berlin.

[21] German playwright, Bertolt Brecht worked closely with Piscator after joining Piscator's dramaturgical collective from 1927 to 1928 as a writer and director.

[22] Piscator and Rorrison, *The Political Theatre*, p. 187;
Jestrovic, 'The Theatrical Memory of Space', p. 365.

of their hope for cultural regeneration and societal wholeness after the chaos of war.[23]

Indeed the actor, whose functional role demonstrated the objective quality of art in the 1920s realist movement, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, would be the 'mirror' through which the audience could reflect on their lives.[24] It was the actor's duty to help restore social conscience to an audience whose primary focus was on the self. This bourgeois subjectivity, preserved by the conservatism of 1910 *Deutsches Theater* audiences was, according to Piscator, no longer relevant with the declining values of the Wilhelmine elite following the war.[25] The mutual existence of actor and audience, bound by their spatial proximity in the theatre, would cast back the role of 'actor' to the audience collective. This would destroy the subjective individual and empower the audience as a performative 'living force' to act beyond the realms of Piscator's political drama, in the 'theatre' of Weimar society itself.[26]

Technology was essential to the audience's spatial and ideological immersion in the Total Theatre. It manifested in the hydraulic mechanisms of the mobile stage platforms, as well as in the photographic images, films and drawings to be integrated into the live performances. Documentary and nonfigurative film would be projected onto screens stretched between twelve columns, transforming the auditorium into a three-dimensional space of filmed real-life action sequences.[27] The incorporation of technology embodied the spirit of Gropius's 1923 slogan, 'art and technology – a new unity', formulated in recognition of the emergence of industry as the defining force of the modern age. Thus, the Total Theatre became not only a paradigm for the formal innovations of modern architects, but also for a society 'transformed by the uninhibited

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[23] Mark Peach, '"Der Architekt Denkt, Die Hausfrau Lenkt": German Modern Architecture and the Modern Woman', *German Studies Review* 18, no. 3 (1995), pp. 441-442.

[24] 'The New Objectivity'. Erwin Piscator and Ludwig Hoffmann, *Theater, Film, Politik: ausgewählte Schriften* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1980), p. 225.

[25] Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic*, p. 23.

[26] Piscator and Rorrison, *The Political Theatre*, p. 189.

[27] Wendell Cole, The *Theatre Projects of Walter Gropius*, <http://espaciosescenicos.org/The-theatre-projects-of-Walter-Gropius-Wendell-Cole> [accessed 23 November 2018]

devices of mechanical and technical means of production'.[28] The public audience would 'meet again' in documentary images of the fast-paced life of the 'converging crowds', an immersive visual and spatial encounter, which would convey to the audience the tangible political power of the collective.[29]

Form and Function of Neutra's Domestic Stage

The devotion of stage form to function in the Total Theatre provides a model through which the *Drehbühne* (revolving stage) in Neutra's Zehlendorf Type e houses may too be understood as a functional theatrical device (Figs. 14-16). If Gropius's theatre staging is to be equated to Neutra's domestic stage, it is important to examine how Neutra, like Gropius, sought to reassess the static framework of domestic architectural space in relation to the inhabitants' needs. Playing on the modernist design principle that 'form follows functions', Neutra asserted that human function in fact takes after the form of architectural space.[30] The architect must therefore anticipate human need in the design of a building, to ensure that its form served as a natural continuation, or as Schlemmer described, a 'Fluidum' of human lifestyle. This predominantly architectural concept can also be considered through a theatrical lens, applying the vocabulary used in the 'World Theatre' publication's description of 1920s epic and political theatre as 'analytical theatre of almost scientific precision.'[31] For Neutra ultimately designed a dramatic stage that functionally organised human activity within a three-part set. Furniture in each section would act as a prop to spatially guide the inhabitants through their domestic routine. Embodying the modern drive towards practical domestic interiors, the *Drehbühne* was a significant precursor to Grete Schütte-Lihotsky's 1926 Frankfurt Kitchen. Similar to the efficient mechanic's 'assembly shop' Piscator aspired

[28] Graham Holderness, *The Politics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), p. 100.
[29] Schlemmer and others, *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, p. 14.
[30] Walter Gropius, 'Principles of Bauhaus Production [Dessau] 1926', in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, ed. by Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 95.
[31] 'Totaltheatre und totales Theater', *Le Theatre dans le monde. World Theatre*, Brussels 1, no. 15 (1966), p. 5.

to in the Total Theatre, this kitchen reduced the time needed to complete domestic tasks by the careful grouping of its units.[32] The domestic space was in essence, like Neutra's *Drehbühne*, theatrically designed for precise, functional use, converting 'human life into a set of spatial measurements'.[33]

In his autobiography, Neutra describes how the revolving stage was partitioned according to three domestic functions – music room, dining area and library. The adjoining living room would be given 'flexible use' when aligned with one of these three furnished bays.[34] Neutra's phrase 'flexible use' crucially points towards the Miesian concept of architecture as a 'vacant frame containing something potential'.[35] Indeed, the *Drehbühne* demonstrates that the function of a building does not just consist of its structure alone, but in the undefined 'potential' use of its internal space. Human movement within the dwelling may be finite due to the inevitably enclosed nature of the space. Yet, the multipurpose sections of the *Drehbühne* pushed the possibilities of finite space to its limits.[36] The three easily accessible areas engendered a more dynamic, fluid relationship between person and domestic space.[37] In line with modernism's 'eternal quest' to 'make space work harder for everyone', its functional areas were made instantly available to the inhabitant when required, simply 'upon pushing a button'.[38]

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[32] Leif Jerram, 'Kitchen Sink Dramas: Women, Modernity and Space in Weimar Germany', *Cultural Geographies*, 13 (2006), p. 545;
Piscator and Rorrison, *The Political Theatre*, p. 193.
[33] Ibid, p. 544.
[34] Richard Neutra, *Life and Shape* (Los Angeles: Atara Press, 2009), pp. 159-160.
[35] Ransoo Kim, 'The Tectonically Defining Space of Mies van der Rohe', *Architectural Research Quarterly* 13, no. 3–4 (2009), p. 255.
[36] Flexibility and depth of space are also reflected in the exterior façade of the Zehlendorf Type e houses (Figs. 10-11). They appear to swivel on their axis due to the asymmetrical offsetting of the porches on the ground floor and balcony levels. Additionally, the oxblood coloured band of grooved plaster wrapped around each house laterally protracts its otherwise austere cubic façade.
[37] I purposefully use the word 'area' instead of 'room' to describe the *Drehbühne*'s open partitions, to reflect Georges Perec's concept of the modern one-room dwelling, in which there was 'not a kitchen but a cooking-area, not a bedroom but a sleeping-area, not a dining-room but an eating-area.' Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and other Pieces* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 31.
[38] Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), p. 43;
'Muss der Nutzer stets zum Raum kommen, oder kann nicht je nach Bedarf der Raum zum Nutzer kommen?'. Bernhard Wiens, 'Eine "Zigarrenkiste" macht Karierre', *Der Tagesspiegel* (22 October 2016),

The tripartite structure can thus be understood in relation to Piscator's 'multiple setting' used in his 1927 production of *Hoppla, Such is Life!,* in which every scene can simultaneously be viewed in small open stage booths (Fig. 13). Just as the staging in *Hoppla* and the Total Theatre adapted to different production requirements, Neutra's open, mobile structure could accommodate different functions or 'performances', to adapt to the residents' changing needs. For example, the dining area of the *Drehbühne* could be joined to the fixed living room to extend the eating area for guests and more comfortably cater for larger groups. In both cases, the 'stage' space performed a social function, in preparing its inhabitants for a practical and inclusive experience.

The *Drehbühne*, with its economical mastery of space, was a mechanical feat in staging that alleviated the need for manual effort in the home. In a similar vein, the modern staging technology in the Total Theatre offered a solution to the labour-intensive scaffolding-set used in Piscator's Nollendorfplatz theatre. Gropius described technology in the Total Theatre as 'natural and necessary to real life', referrring to the use of mobile staging and integration of topical documentary footage.[39] Firmly rooted in modern lifestyle, the Total Theatre demonstrates how the theatrical *Drehbühne* could similarly be considered a mechanical aid to domestic life, supporting architect Le Corbusier's notion of the home as a 'machine for living in'.[40] The revolving stage embodied the new spirit of industry in Weimar Germany – rationalised, simple and easy to use. Its mechanics consisted of a turntable on a staff pin, hidden in the basement of the house, like the underground workers powering the city in Fritz Lang's 1927 film, *Metropolis* (Fig. 12).[41] The structure itself could disappear from view as the partitions realigned and

Online edition <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/bezirke/steglitz-zehlendorf/fruehes-beispiel-des-neuen-bauens-eine-zigarrenkiste-macht-karriere/14665708.html> [accessed 14 November 2018].

[39] Woll, *Das Totaltheater*, p. 226.

[40] Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic*, p. 96.

[41] 'Das Gesetz der Sparsamkeit', *Weltrundschau, Universum Jahrbuch* 24, no. 9 (1924), quoted in Harriet Roth, *Richard Neutra in Berlin: Die Geschichte der Zehlendörfer Häuser* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2016), p. 185; *Metropolis* dir. by Fritz Lang (Eureka Video, 2003).

blended with the framework of the house, its seamless workings corresponding to the smooth rotation of the Total Theatre staging during a performance (Fig. 15). As such, the *Drehbühne* partitions can be considered a mechanical version of the space-defining screens used by *Neues Bauen* architects to organise and modify modern interiors. This innovative technology is dramatised in Hans Richter's 1930 promotional film, *Die neue Wohnung*, whose narrative is punctuated with multiple dynamic shots of opening and closing windows, doors and curtains. Captioned in the intertitle as flexibility 'on demand', their automatic function is wedded to the mechanical achievements of German industry and modern theatre (Fig. 17).[42]

Inhabitants as Performers

Whilst Neutra's staging mechanism offered its inhabitants flexible space, they too, like the Total Theatre audience, played an active role as actors in the stage 'performance'. In investigating this relationship, it is crucial at this point to re-evaluate contemporary art historian Harriet Roth's reading of the space. Roth asserts that the domestic space in the Type e house is an example of the classical proscenium stage. She describes the pleated curtain between the *Drehbühne* and living room as a 'Society curtain' and divider, with the 'fixed living' room as a permanent audience area, and the adjoining *Drehbühne*, the sole performance realm of the actors. The 1924 series of photographs of the Zehlendorf Type e interior, on which Roth bases her interpretation, are in this context, somewhat problematic (Figs. 14-16). For as once Neutra asserted, space offers more than just a 'frame for a family's single snapshot.' Indeed, the photograph implies a fixed spatial relationship between subject and observer, with the beholder becoming the implied audience, and the occupants of the revolving stage, framed by the 'proscenium' curtain, becoming the performers. However, this reading of the *Drehbühne* does not take into

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[42] Hans Richter, *Die neue Wohnung,* Praesens Film, 1930, Schweizer Werkbund, SWB, Zürich, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAUhQHRANj4> [accessed 12 November 2018].

account the fluid interrelation between actor and audience common in modern staging, which provided the creative backdrop for Neutra's design innovation. The Total Theatre, in which the audience was actively absorbed by the on-stage performance, provides a more useful theatrical model to shed light on the fluid 'actor-audience' relationship of inhabitants in Neutra's domestic space.

Gropius and Piscator's rejection of the passive theatre audience helps us to understand how, contrary to Roth's suggestion, it was also not possible to draw the pleated curtain and escape from events as a passive spectator in Neutra's 'domestic theatre'. If the entire Total Theatre space, comprising its stage and auditorium, is considered the scene of action and creative production, so too is the Zehlendorf domestic space, comprising its revolving stage and adjoining living room. In her essay on domestic voyeurism, Beatriz Colomina explores the 'theatre box' design in Adolf Loos's 1930 Müller house, to elucidate on how different perspectives of space can complicate the purely observational position of the occupier. She suggests that inhabitants are 'both actors in and spectators of the family scene, involved in, yet detached from their own space. The classical distinction between inside and outside, […] object and subject, becomes convoluted.'[43] To apply these dichotomies to the Zehlendorf houses: the open partitions of the *Drehbühne* enabled the inhabitant to access and traverse all domestic spaces. By moving between and within the revolving stage and living room, the inhabitant would break down the conventional boundaries of inside and outside, what is on-stage and what is off-stage, just as the actors in the Total Theatre could move freely between stage platforms and through the auditorium. There was no fixed frontal perspective or backstage due to the *Drehbühne*'s mobility and its multiple interconnecting doors, which allowed for a 'whole suite of entries' and exits.[44] This resembled not only

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[43] Beatriz Colomina, 'The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism', in *Housing and Dwelling: Perspectives on Modern Domestic Architecture*, ed. by Barbara Miller Lane (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 83.
[44] Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 43.

Gropius's Total Theatre, but also his 1925 Dessau Bauhaus stage, which, situated between the cafeteria and auditorium, allowed audience and actors to access the stage from either side.

The inhabitants of Neutra's living space came arguably closer to the role of actor than the Total Theatre audience, whose performative role was limited by their status as paying theatre customers. Neutra referred to household residents as 'consumers of design', but also 'members of its production team – its co-performers and working crew'.[45] Indeed, the girl depicted in the photograph manually rotating the *Drehbühne*, can be compared to an actor in the Total Theatre, whose performance was similarly 'enriched' by his interaction with the stage-set and its props (Fig. 14).[46] The girl explicitly demonstrates the performative role of the inhabitant through the concept of play. According to Piscator, the actor was not merely the objective bearer of messages, but was indeed the subjective creator of his own theatrical 'Spielstätte' or playground.[47] Similarly in Richter's film, *Die neue Wohnung*, a child playfully demonstrates how the living-dining room partition can be compressed into an accordion-fold (Fig. 18).[48] In both scenarios, children demonstrate Piscator's desire to force the audience out of their role as 'passive consumers of dominant ideology' and into the position of 'producers of theatrical space'.[49] While children are arguably the greatest consumers of space, eager to 'absorb' their material surroundings, they are also its most creative explorers and players, and thus represent the 'totality' of a fully immersive spatial experience.

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[45] Richard Neutra, *Survival Through Design* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. v.
[46] Piscator and Rorrison, *The Political Theatre*, p. 213.
[47] Woll, *Das Totaltheater*, p. 119.
[48] Hans Richter, *Die neue Wohnung,* Praesens Film, 1930, Schweizer Werkbund, SWB, Zürich, YouTube (2:35), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAUhQHRANj4> [accessed 12 November 2018].
[49] Monika Bregovic, 'Erwin Piscator's Russia's Day: Agitprop Between History and Myth', *Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation* 6, no. 1 (2015), p. 6.

Gropius and Neutra's stage projects both aspired to an all-consuming totality, informed by the wide-reaching devastation of the First World War, which struck Germany in its entirety and called for en-masse re-evaluation of society.[50] Whilst the Total Theatre aimed for a 'stage-rendering of the totality of the world', its drama nonetheless required each audience member to consciously pause and reflect.[51] It is through the political lens of the Gropius-Piscator theatre that we can understand how the spatial structure of a performance can 'transform the mind', and in the case of the Zehlendorf houses, make the inhabitants conscious of the 'totality' of their existence in space, albeit on a domestic level.[52] Here, the human habitat was more than a mere sheltered interior, but a place where man became most aware of the self – his movements and 'performance' in a defined space. As Ludwig Marcuse suggests in his 1924 essay on Expressionist theatre, 'space is the materialisation of existence'.[53] The projection of the self in this environment can create either 'harmonizing or fighting spaces'.[54] There is indeed a chance that an inhabitant becomes uncomfortably aware of his surroundings as being a theatrical construct, designed to frame his very existence. Neutra himself acknowledged how the human 'habitat' is carefully organised by the architect, its design or 'scenery' like a stage-set in its 'constructed, fabricated, and consequently – well or poorly designed' form.[55] Whilst Neutra characteristically noted the obligation of an architect to interpret the 'innermost organic lives' of the inhabitants when designing a dwelling, he realised too that design may not always be able to accommodate the 'facts of life'.[56] As flexible and functional as the *Drehbühne* may be, it placed unfamiliar demands on the inhabitants of a home environment. Indeed it necessitated the active involvement of its users, who must consciously rotate the structure, either manually pushing its partitions

[50] Peter Loewenberg, *Fantasy and Reality in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 111.
[51] Cole and Kirsch, 'Objective Acting', p. 66.
[52] Schlemmer and others, *The Theater of the* Bauhaus, p. 14.
[53] 'Der Raum ist die Materialisierung der Wesenheit'. Ludwig Marcuse, 'Das Expressionistische Drama', in *Der neue Merkur*, ed. by Efraim Frisch 8, no. 1 (1924), p. 118.
[54] 'Der Inbegriff diesser harmonisierenden oder kämpfenden Räume ist der Bereich des Dramas'. Marcuse, 'Das Expressionistische Drama', p. 118.
[55] Richard Neutra, *Life and Human Habitat* (Stuttgart: Verlagsanstalt Alexander Koch, 1956), p. 20.
[56] Ibid, p. 22; 20.

or clicking a button. The inhabitants were thus prevented from becoming fully immersed or lost in the drama of their lives. Instead, just like the audience and actors in the Total Theatre, they remained very much aware of the part they played in the live performance, on this constructed stage-set.

Zehlendorf residents and period critics perceived the radically modern 'fabricated' staging of the *Drehbühne* as an 'invasion' of something new and foreign into the familiar world of the home.[57] Sigmund Freud used the close proximity of the German terms, *heimlich* and *unheimlich* to demonstrate how the homely and familiar can unfold into the unhomely or strange.[58] According to Daniel Sander's 1860 *Wörterbuch*, *heimlich* constitutes the secure and comfortable, its meaning inherently linked to the domesticity of the home, but also something concealed and out of sight.[59] For, what is contained and safe is inevitably hidden or *uncanny*. A homely interior can just as quickly become a vehicle for *Verfremdung*. The Brechtian 'distancing effect' aptly describes the alienation felt by Neutra's inhabitants in their own home, and resembles too, the unsettled apprehension of audiences watching Piscator's highly charged productions. It was the dichotomous character of the *Drehbühne* structure on which critics focused in a 1924 article in the *Vossische Zeitung*. The revolving stage was considered 'convenient' yet 'out of the ordinary', with the uncanny disappearance and re-emergence of dining tables and pianos, the work of a 'subservient ghost' – 'just like in a fairy tale'.[60] Its rotating movement would 'usurp' the rooted centre of the house, forcing inhabitants into a circular movement that would always inevitably return to the same position.[61] This dramatic spatial instability was perhaps too radical and modern

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[57] Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny,* p. 23.
[58] Ibid, p. 23.
[59] Ibid, p. 24.
[60] 'Man söhnt sich mit ihrer Fremdartigkeit wieder aus, wenn man die Innenräume kennen lernt, deren praktische Gestaltung außerordentlich ist […] Wie im Märchen steht plötzlich der gedeckte Tisch da, verschwindet durch die Drehung nach hinten und kam abgedeckt werden.' 'Das 'Drehhaus'', *Die Vossische Zeitung* (9 March 1924), pp. 1-2.
[61] Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 42.

for the private realms and the traditional tastes of middle-class Zehlendorf inhabitants.

In 1928, architect and former colleague of Gropius, Fred Forbát, removed the

Drehbühne from both Zehlendorf houses under the instruction of the Sommerfeld

Company.

Space was a principal concern in the constantly changing urban landscape of Weimar

Germany; the radical reinvention of space by German modernists was inextricable to

the on-going architectural and ideological rebuild during the interwar years. Political

theatre productions of 1920s Berlin by directors such as Piscator newly determined the

advanced technical and economic age, where utopian ideas and concerns of modern life

were consciously played out and explored. If drama was rooted in the social epoch, then

the stage is to be considered a projection space for human life and its demands for

functional and versatile environments.[62] The Gropius-Piscator Total Theatre

demonstrates how spatial alterations in dramatic staging can encourage the active social

engagement of an audience.[63] Analysing Neutra's Zehlendorf houses through the

framework of Gropius's radical theatre, it becomes clear how a domestic realm too, can

function as a theatrical space with a tangible impact on daily life. The multipurpose

Drehbühne went beyond meeting domestic needs, since it shattered the inhabitants'

illusion of 'being present' at an authentic and 'unrehearsed event'.[64] Daily family life

was elevated to the realms of the performance, and the residents, rendered its players.

Whilst critics of the period dismissed the *Drehbühne* as an uncanny architectural

'blemish', this profoundly modern theatrical structure provides insight into the complex,

varied and often elusive qualities of the 1920s human dwelling space.[65] Neither the

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[62] Piscator and Rorrison, *The Political Theatre*, p. 180.
[63] Schlemmer and all, *The Theater of the* Bauhaus, p. 12.
[64] Steve Giles, Tom Kuhn and Marc Silberman, *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama), p. 217.
[65] 'Verunstaltung der Gegend', 'Construction document, Civil Engineering department', No. 85 (Steglitz-Zehlendorf, 1923-24), quoted in Harriet Roth, *Richard Neutra in Berlin: Die Geschichte der Zehlendorfer Häuser* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2016), p. 110.

Total Theatre nor the *Drehbühne* were lasting projects. However, their design concepts remain important formalist exercises in the changing dynamics between space and its inhabitants. They are experimental prototypes in theatre design, which testify to the vital and rigorous attention paid to 'space' in modernist projects in German theatre and architecture.

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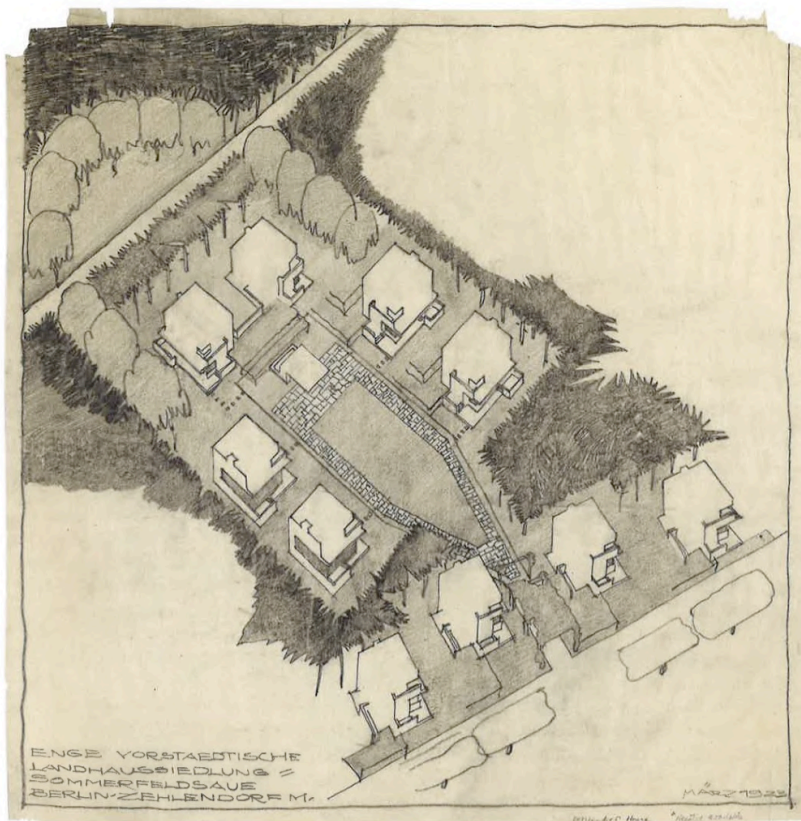
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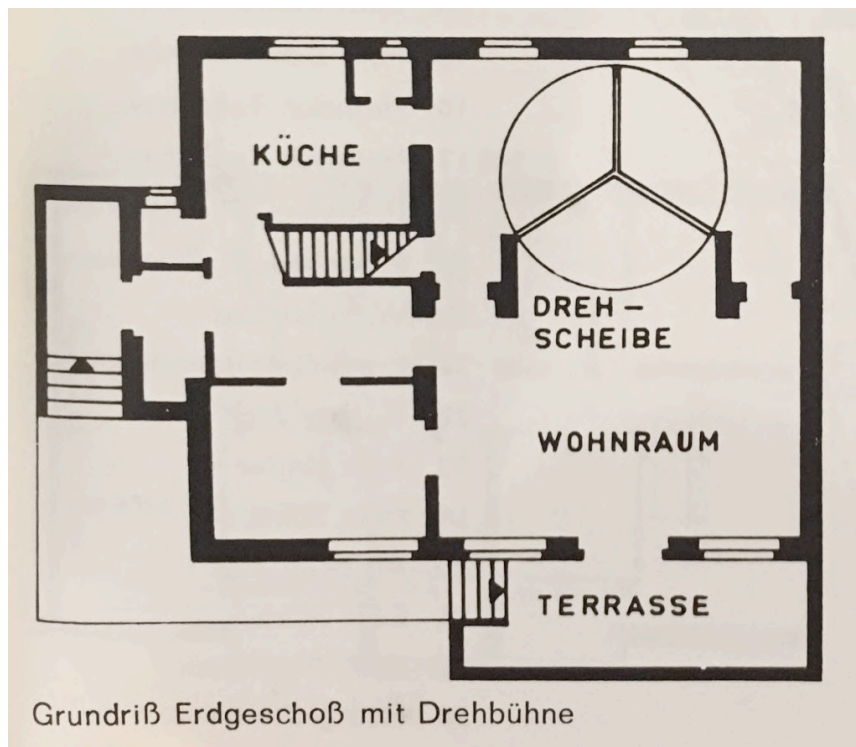
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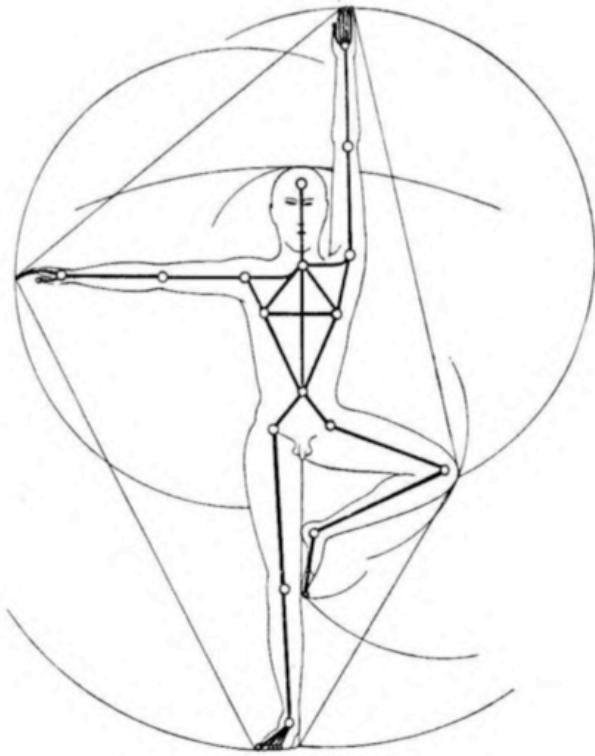
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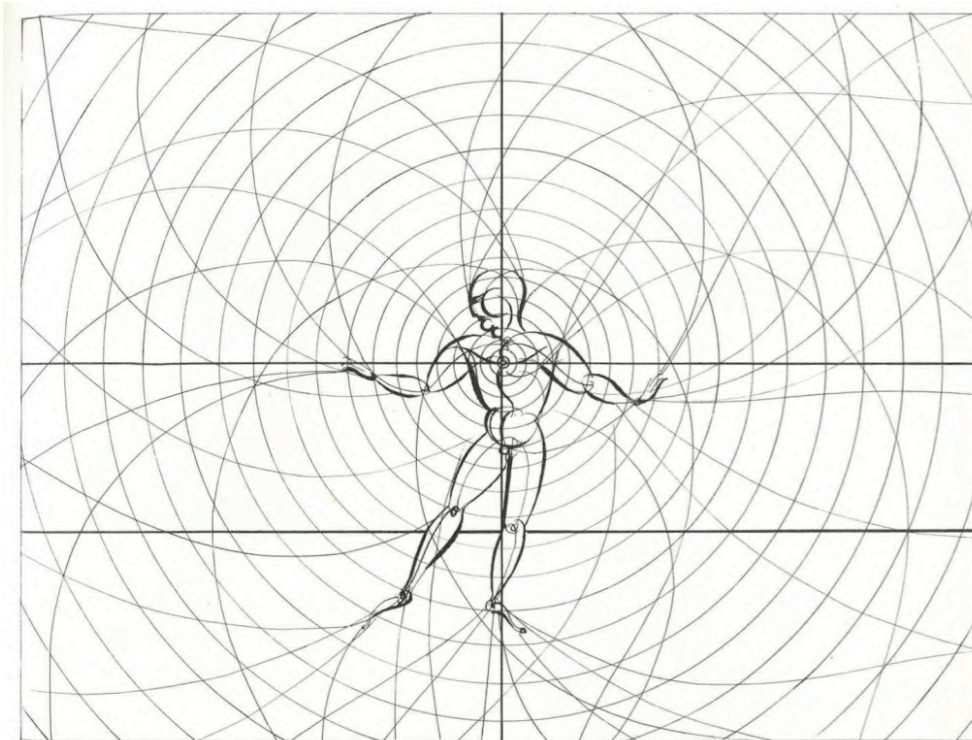
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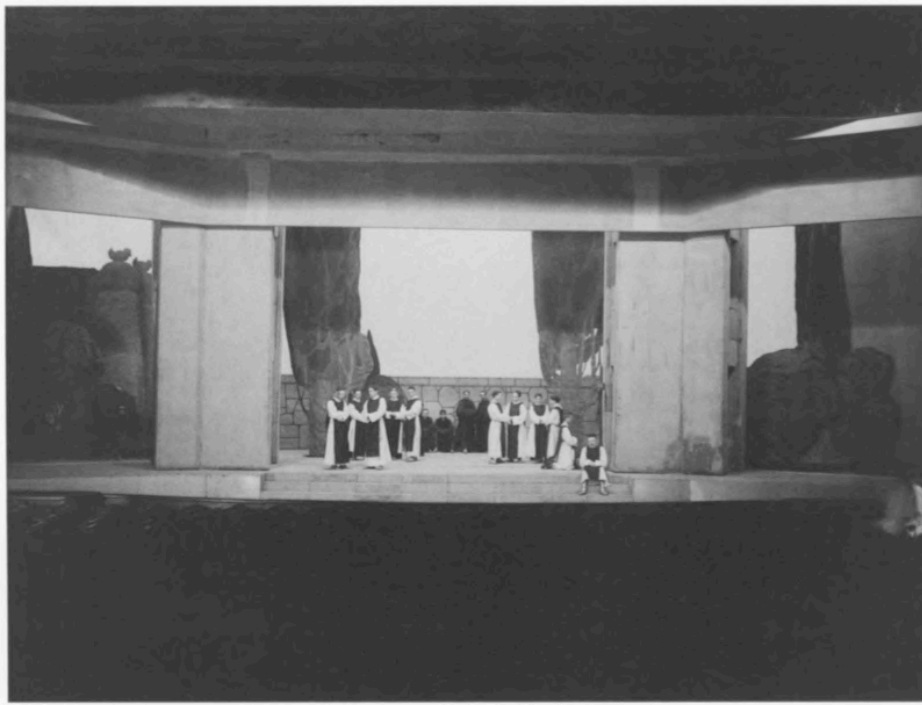
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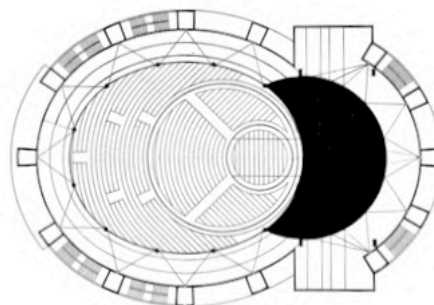
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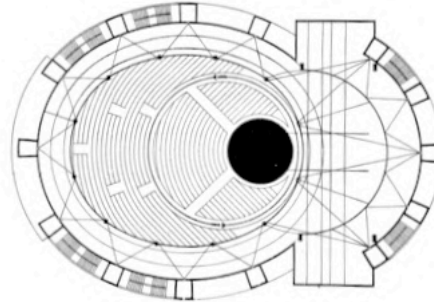
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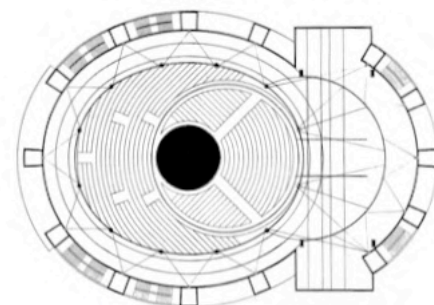
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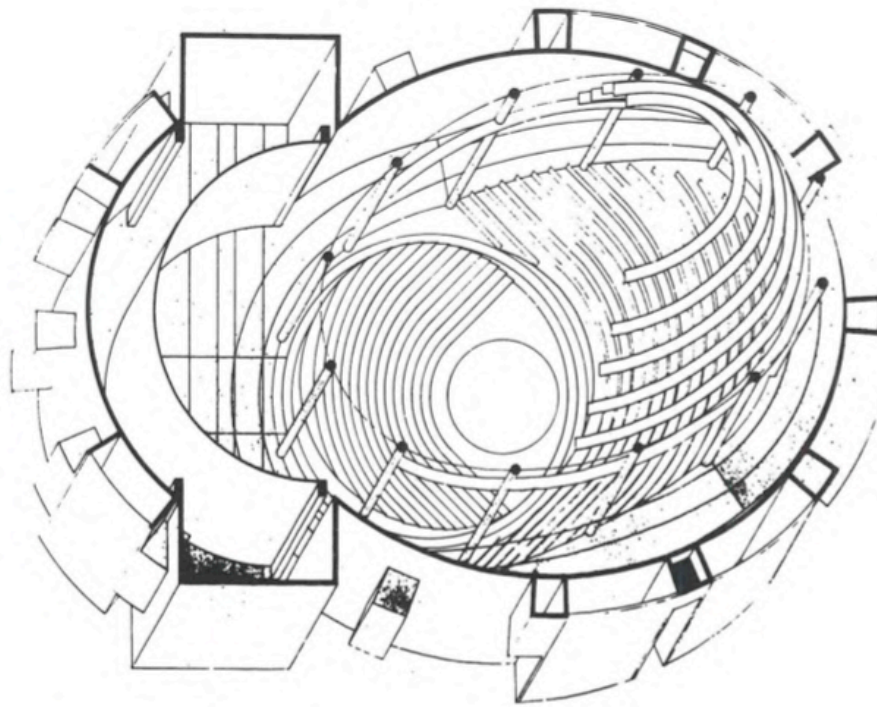
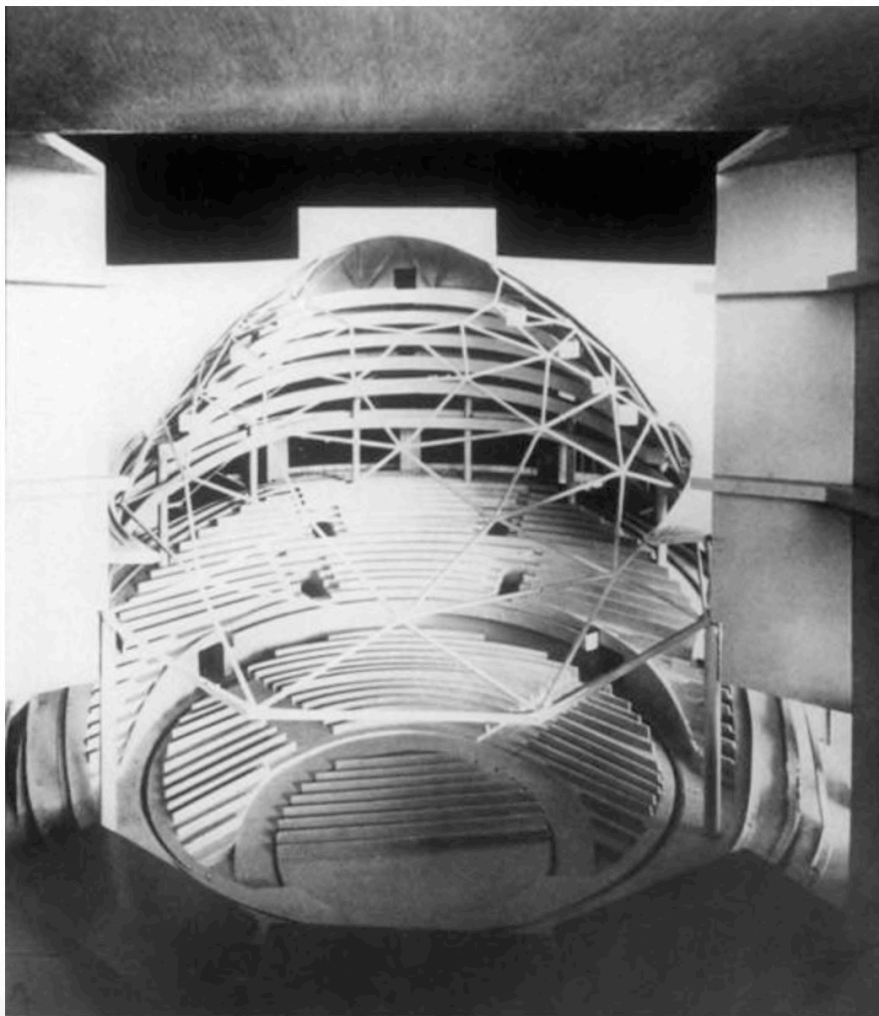Figure 7. Walter Gropius, Total Theatre, rotating central stage position

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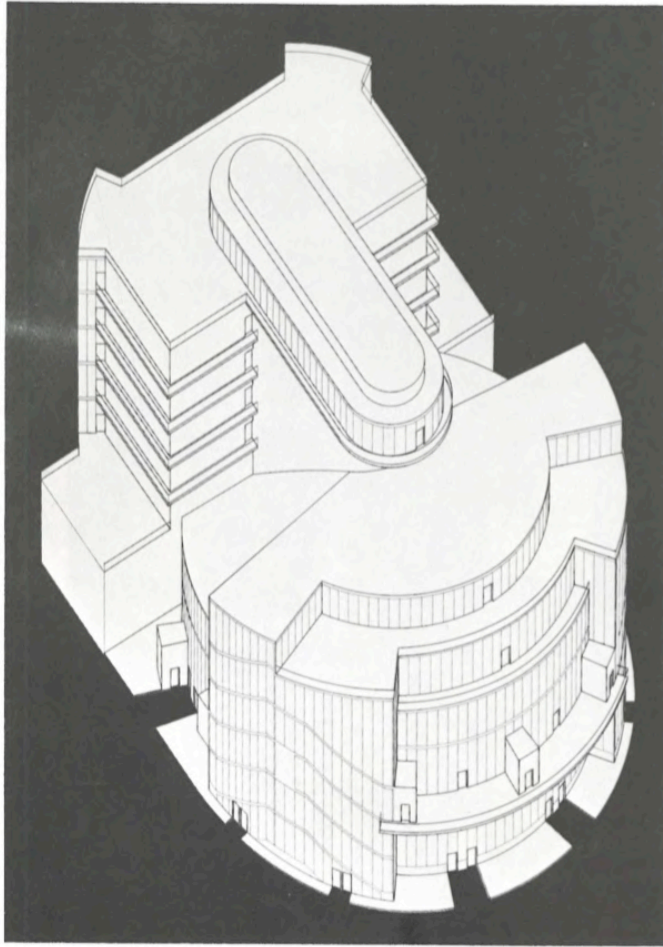
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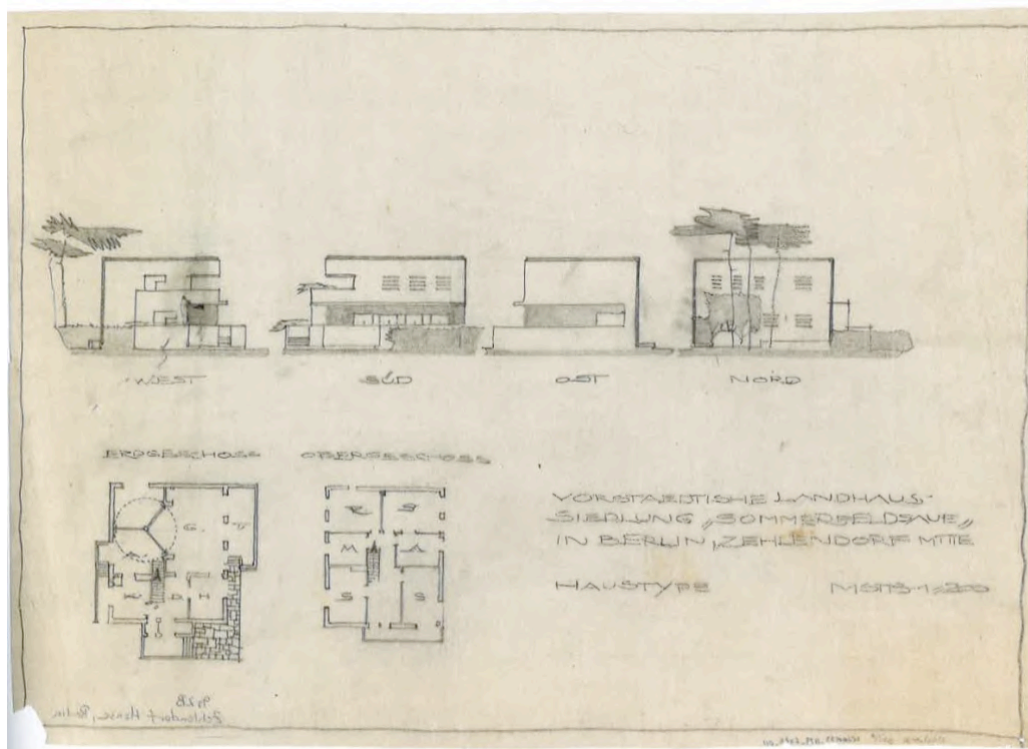
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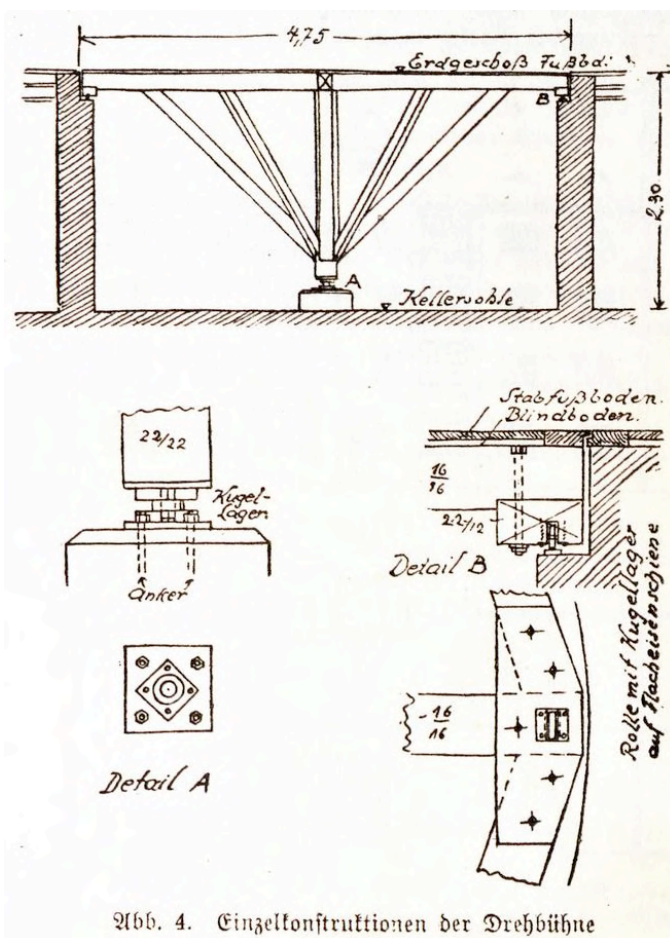
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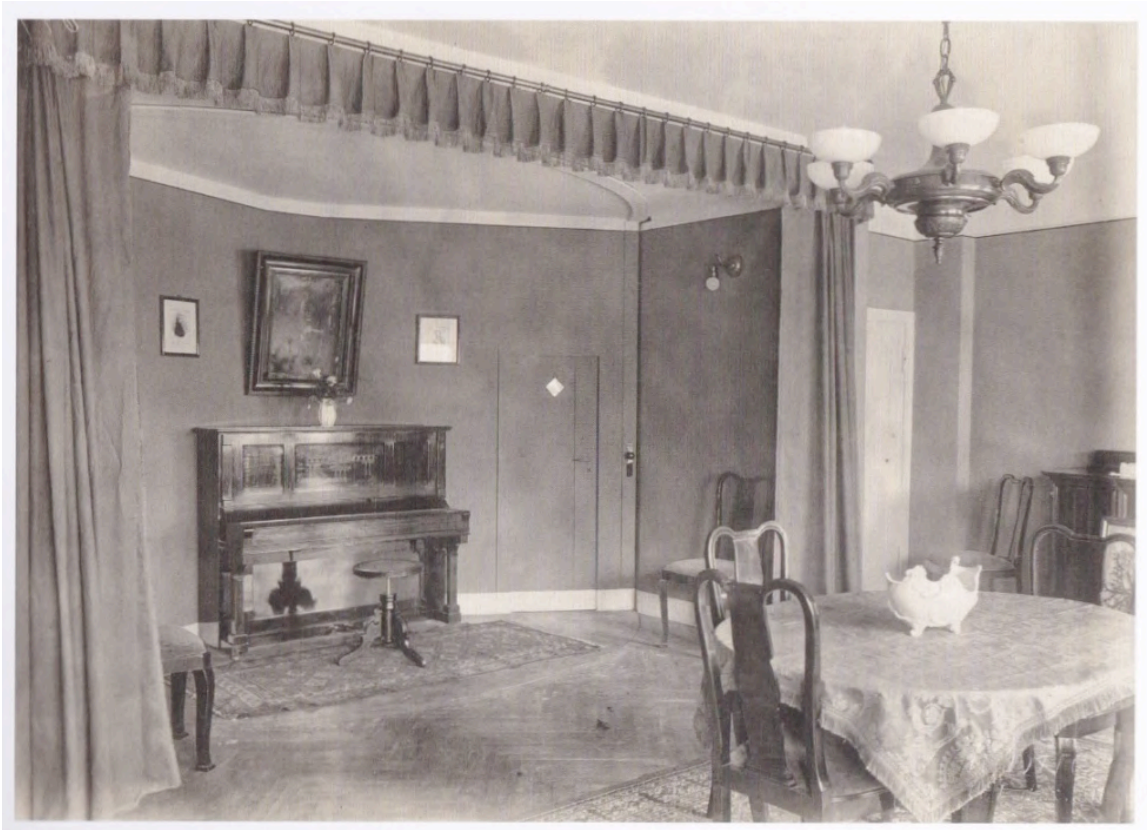
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