

Scenic space in transformation

Contemporary theatre design in Budapest, Hungary

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Dramatis Personae

Architect : Luca Eva Bors (playful student at UCL, driven by her curiosity)

Scenographer: Luca Eva Bors (ambitious aquarelle painter)

Expert in field : Olivier Bastin (wise and experienced architect, raisonneur)

SETTING

A quiet and sunny day in the capital of Hungary, in the heart of Budapest in district VI. The shops are closed, because it is National Theatre Day and people are on the way to discover and participate in new adventures; the best place to do so is on «the Budapest Broadway », Nagymező street.

TIME

It is the perfectly fresh first day of October 2025, the atmosphere and the public are open to a new era, leaving behind the old bonds and rules and opening up to change, going from the opera to experimental theatre.



A night at the Opera, acrylic painting on canvas, Luca Bors, 2024

“The nature of theatre design

As an art form, theatre does not require a purposefully designed building in which to be presented. But when audiences gather regularly to experience a performance, attempts are generally made to organize the space in order to improve on the nature of the experience the audience can have, and this is the beginning of theatre design. The simplest are cleared areas of ground around which people can stand or sit to view a performance. Theatre design, however, is concerned with elaborating such space—first, to provide the optimum conditions for the audience to experience a theatre performance and, second, to aid the performers in achieving the fullest expression of their art.”

“Theatre design” by F. J. Hildy (Britannica, n.p.)

Abstract

“Architecture articulates space, giving it a particular feel. Staging a performance is about acting in architecture: it is a practice that demands we pay attention to distance, scale, style, person-to-volume ratio and the immaterial architectures of light, heat and sound” wrote Juliet Rufford in her book, *Theatre and Architecture* (Rufford 2015, n.p.).

As a student of architecture and a frequent theatre-goer who grew up in the close vicinity of Budapest where over 30 performing spaces operate in the 2000s, I already experienced that the built performing space influenced the drama performed. I particularly felt this when I visited theatres that were located in unlikely venues: inside residential buildings, third floor apartments, with uniquely small stages or without any stage at all. Yet, these spaces effectively function as theatres, or in Michel Foucault’s terminology, heterotopias, where some unique transformation takes place, where “to get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures.” (Foucault 1967, n.p.)

My research thus concerns site-specific stages, investigating how architecture articulates space, gives a particular feel, co-creates theatrical meanings.

Keywords:

theatre, stage, transformation, heterotopia, performance, act, curtain, scaffold, scene, site-specific, alternative, experimental, urban place, art, culture, free to all, accessible

1 ACT I. PROLOGUE

1.1 Dramatic rules

Establish the world and atmosphere with defining time and place as well as setting the tone. Tragic, comic or absurd? Then introduce key characters, audience meet the protagonist and the antagonist furthermore their motivation, conflicts and desire. Important not to overwhelm the audience with too many characters at once. As follows the central conflict or dramatic question. In this case, the question of public or private? With intrigue hook the audience, by not giving away too much information the audience will be invested. Show don't tell – leave things for later discovery and transition to the Main Act with a cliffhanger.

1.2 The Fool's journey

“Architecture articulates space, giving it a particular feel. Staging a performance is about acting in architecture: it is a practice that demands we pay attention to distance, scale, style, person-to-volume ratio and the immaterial architectures of light, heat and sound” wrote Juliet Rufford in her book, *Theatre and Architecture* (2015, n.p). As a student of architecture and a frequent theatre-goer who grew up in the close vicinity of Budapest, the Hungarian capital where over thirty performing spaces operate in the 2000s, I already experienced that the built/found/adapted performing space significantly influenced the drama that was performed. Interestingly, the influence of the architecture, including the location and the building of the performing space, appears to be quite wide, ranging from the message, acting style and reception of the play, through the repertoire of the theatre to the dress code of the spectator. The largest playhouses (such as Madách, Víg, the National, Operetta) with a seating capacity of 800-1200 require quite formal, fashionable and elegant dressing and often offer musical pieces and a more formal acting style. The formality in medium-sized (seating 400-500) and small (seating 25-380) performing spaces conspicuously diminishes, though it remains dependent upon the playhouse's distance from the city centre, and in general the repertoire consists of prose theatre and the acting style is more relaxed. The characteristics of dressing, acting and repertoire often pass unnoticed in everyday life. Similarly, the idea of theatre, which is most often a traditional, 19th century proscenium theatre, passes as an unnoticed framework or a neutral space. Having my own experiences in mind, I agree with Juliet Rufford's claim and emphasis that “even [the] theatre that is ostensibly unconcerned with architecture is powerfully conditioned by it.” (Rufford 2015, n.p.)

In fact, I particularly felt the influence of architecture when I visited theatres that were located in unlikely venues: inside residential buildings, in former cinemas, basements, ground floor or even third floor apartments, with uniquely small stages or without any stage at all. When I was searching for the necessary theatre terminology, I found in the glossary of the Theatres Trust that the “unlikely” performance space is called site-specific theatre that usually performs “in a non-traditional theatre space such as a pub, home or warehouse, often reflecting the history, atmosphere or experiences of a particular location” (Theatres Trust). While of course there are emphatically site-specific



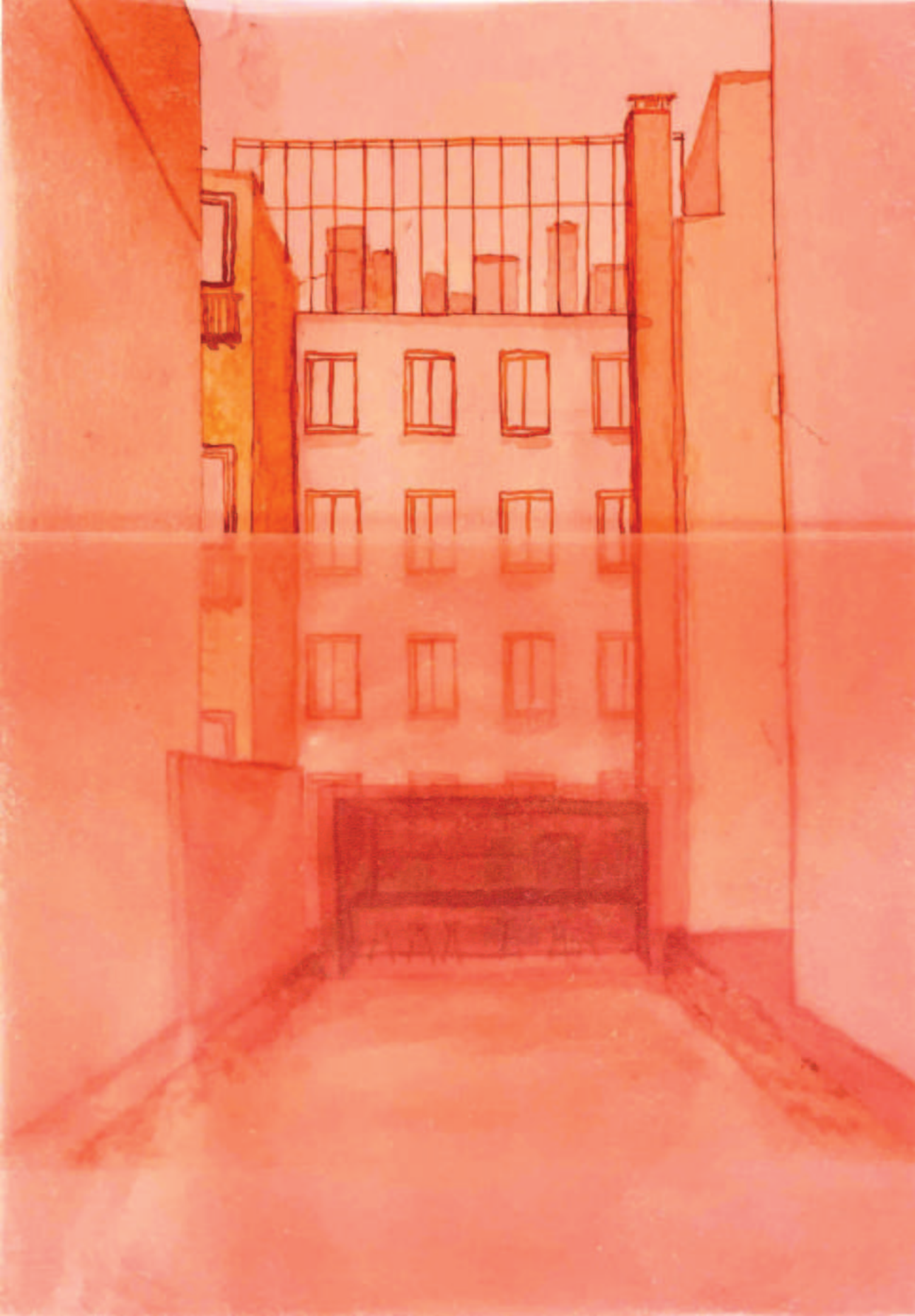


performance venues, such as the former Soviet rocket-base in Zsámbék, Hungary, I believe that we should be aware that the architecture of any space deeply influences us and our understanding whether we want it, notice it or not.

Exploring the relationship between the theatre as an architectural space, the performances and the theatre's profile is exciting due to a number of factors. Firstly, it evidently conjoins two disciplines: to dramaturgy in playwriting, and to dramaturgy in architecture that decomposes buildings to understand the sequence from the entrance to the seat (stage/auditorium). Secondly, the examination of performing spaces offers a variety of perspectives: e.g. social, cultural, historical, political, urban ones. Thirdly, it offers the possibility of investigating the research question 'Public or private?' in the context of built spaces.

All my selections of theatres are located within a few minutes' walk from each other in the dense urban fabric of Budapest, Hungary. The case studies are deeply rooted in the VI. district, at the intersection of Andrásy Avenue and Nagymező Street. My choice initially settled on the Hungarian State Opera, the Budapest Operetta Theatre, Radnóti Miklós Theatre and FILC apartment theatre. The first ones are classical, well-known theatre buildings, while FILC operates in the third-floor apartment of the famous conductor Iván Fischer. Finally I wanted to include a so-called promenade production. This project, produced by Jurányi House, takes place in Budapest with no theatre building of its own, using the city as its stage. Through these various playhouse/performance examples offered by their VI. district location, I had the opportunity to study all the six most basic typologies of theatre design.

I will discuss the location's significance and historical background in the chapter on the History of Budapest. During my site analysis, I realised that apart from FILC, I couldn't really find any alternative spaces of performance. Therefore I collected and studied examples from abroad to be able to take position as an architect with my own project of alternative theatre in Budapest.



2 ACT II. EXPOSITION

2.1 Dramaturgy in architecture

Designing a building requires an understanding of its dramaturgy—whether expressed through a defined program, a spatial scene, or, as in this case, an atmosphere to be captured. Dramaturgy, in architectural terms, serves as a conceptual framework that aligns spatial intent with experiential impact.

In theatre, the dramaturge plays a key role in coordinating creative elements, providing historical and thematic context, and shaping narrative structure. They mediate between text, performance, and audience—ensuring cohesion and fostering engagement.

Architecture operates similarly. Through the deliberate sequencing of spaces—street, foyer, auditorium—it establishes rhythm, anticipation, and emotional tone. This spatial narrative prepares the audience and enhances collective experience. Dramaturgy emerges through how architecture choreographs movement, perception, and interaction, reinforcing the relationship between performer and spectator.

While structured spatial progression is essential, it must coexist with the adaptable core of theatre: the stage. Constantly transforming, the stage represents potential—demanding architectural openness to imagination and change.

Architecture influences both performers and audience, not through rigid control, but by providing a framework that invites transformation. Like a play, architecture unfolds in time, shaped by presence, emotion, and interaction. Its dramaturgy creates tension and rhythm, encouraging attentiveness and enabling a shared, immersive experience.

Where does space end and performance begin? In terms of the dramaturgy of the built environment, this line can be drawn, just as the main entrance can be distinguished from the auditorium door or the artist's entrance. Yet the question arises as to whether there can be a functional intersection, whether these dramaturgical elements can be separated. The theatre is complete when its elements are not separate but one whole, a magical mass of elements, world that transforms the outside world into a space of performance. The question is which elements are endowed with the symbolic, visual power to enable the architect to create dramaturgy, a sequence. Engaging the audience in the transformation, the listener is aware of their presence in space - are they observers, or are they part of the scene/play

stage
proscenium arch
fly tower and grid
backstage and wing
seating arrangement
control booth
orchestra pit
catwalks and galleries
entrance and exit
curtain and drapery
box office
acoustic shells and reflectors
stage light
set design and scenography
bar buffet
seating auditorium
cloakroom
flooring

2.2 Sequences – decomposing / deconstructing theatre

2.2.1 What makes a theatre?

In my research I found two ways of decomposing and eventually understanding what makes a theatre. The first, and I would say, the most natural way for me was looking at examples of classical theatre architecture. Going from the nomadic way of performing on a podium inside of the city walls for a small community, touching on Shakespeare's Globe and Curtain Theatre in London, through the Parisian and Austro-Hungarian Opera buildings, and arriving to the currently most used black-box theatres.

I choose six typologies of theatre design, to help me understand the alignment through sequences and the relationship they create between audience and performer. By analysing the structures of the great theatres in history, I was able to unwrap what is hidden behind the fourth wall - actors, sets, lights and props. I studied the Greek theatre, the Amphitheatre, the Proscenium theatre, the Black-box theatre, the Thrust stage and the Site-specific theatre designs. These variations' different layouts and spatial forms uncovered the different atmosphere of each example.

roof
curtain
structure/skeleton
podium/ stage
auditorium/seats
ground/foundation

After understanding the sequences and built environment of the above-mentioned I looked for theatre, cinemas, spaces of performance where the location or the need determined the sequences, making them different in the classical sense. Collecting pop-up cinemas, transformed gas stations, light structure theatres located in festivals, multiple-use podiums embedded into the city fabric made me realize what the toolbox of theatre contains. I created a booklet with these classical theatre buildings and passion projects, in which space, people and architecture meet. The decomposition of these different buildings and structures led me to a re-defined collection of theatre elements. A toolbox that I used in creating my own experimental spaces of performance.

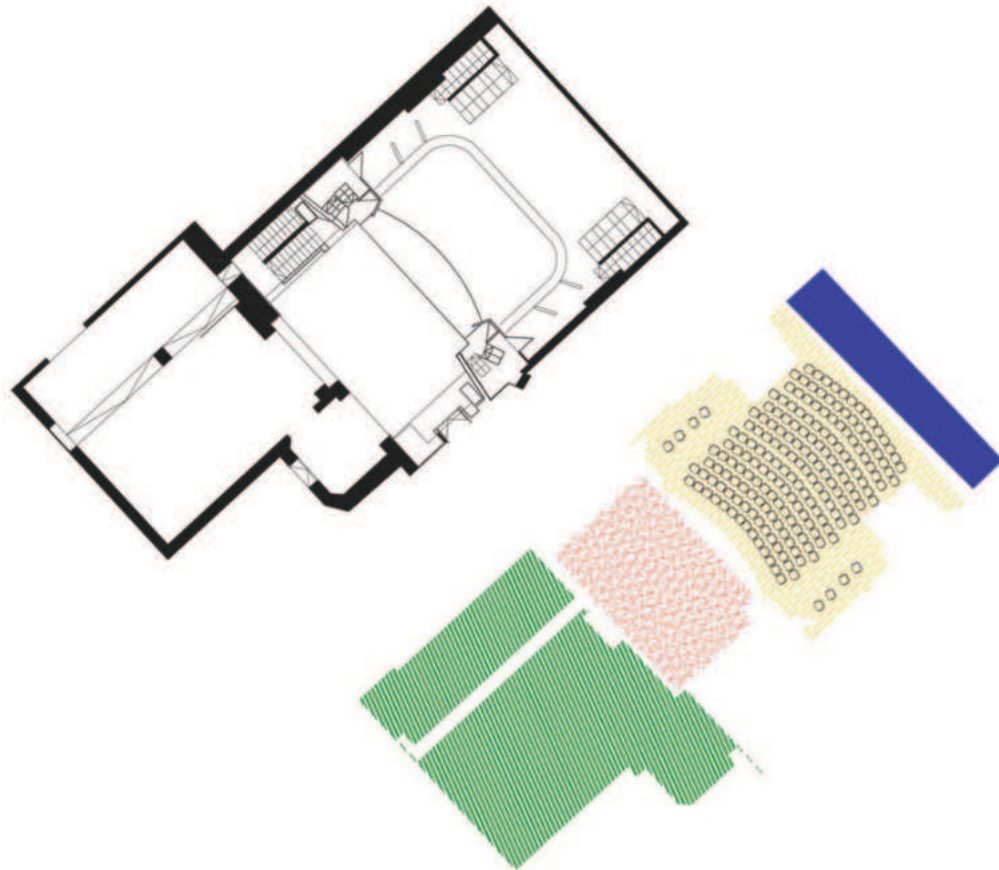
Question: How does architecture influence human behaviour in built spaces, through theatre architecture? What is an architect's place and position in theatre building, without being a scenographer? What is an architect job in creating space for creativity and play, through alternative and experimental theatre.

ACT III. CONFLICT

3.1 Classical theatre design, the understanding of the relationship between viewer and performer, theatre typology

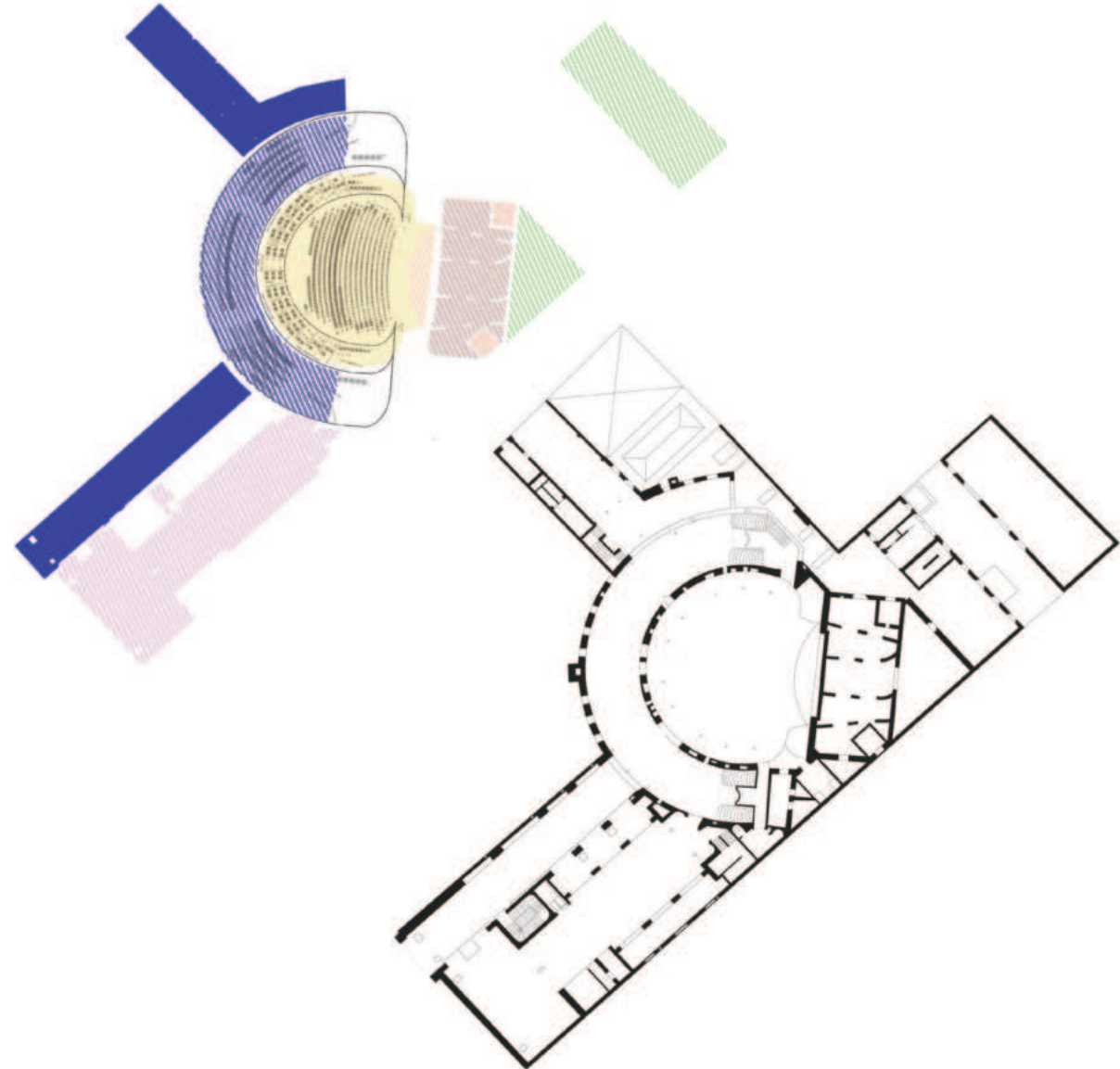
All theatres and stages in my architectural project were inspired by a classical typology of theatre architecture (you can here refer to the panorama of London's theaters defined on the website: <https://www.londontheatres.co.uk/timeline/> > to compose your specific one on Budapest > choose the ones that represent a specific type at a specific time). The classical layout and function of permanent and nomadic theatres led me to the performances invented below. The invitations welcome spectators, describing in detail the location, the nature of the play, the number of seats and their arrangements. In addition to that, each invitation includes a brief description of the ambience of the venue and the tools used to curate that atmosphere. This way the viewer can pay careful attention to details. As the venues are well-known public spaces in parts of the Budapest, they do not come as a surprise. In contrast, the architectural interventions are in the details, affecting the senses and demanding full attention. These experiences are not only experiences for the individuals, but a community activity that draws attention to the surrounding built and non-built environment. They affect all senses, not only sight, but also hearing and perception, and of course smell.





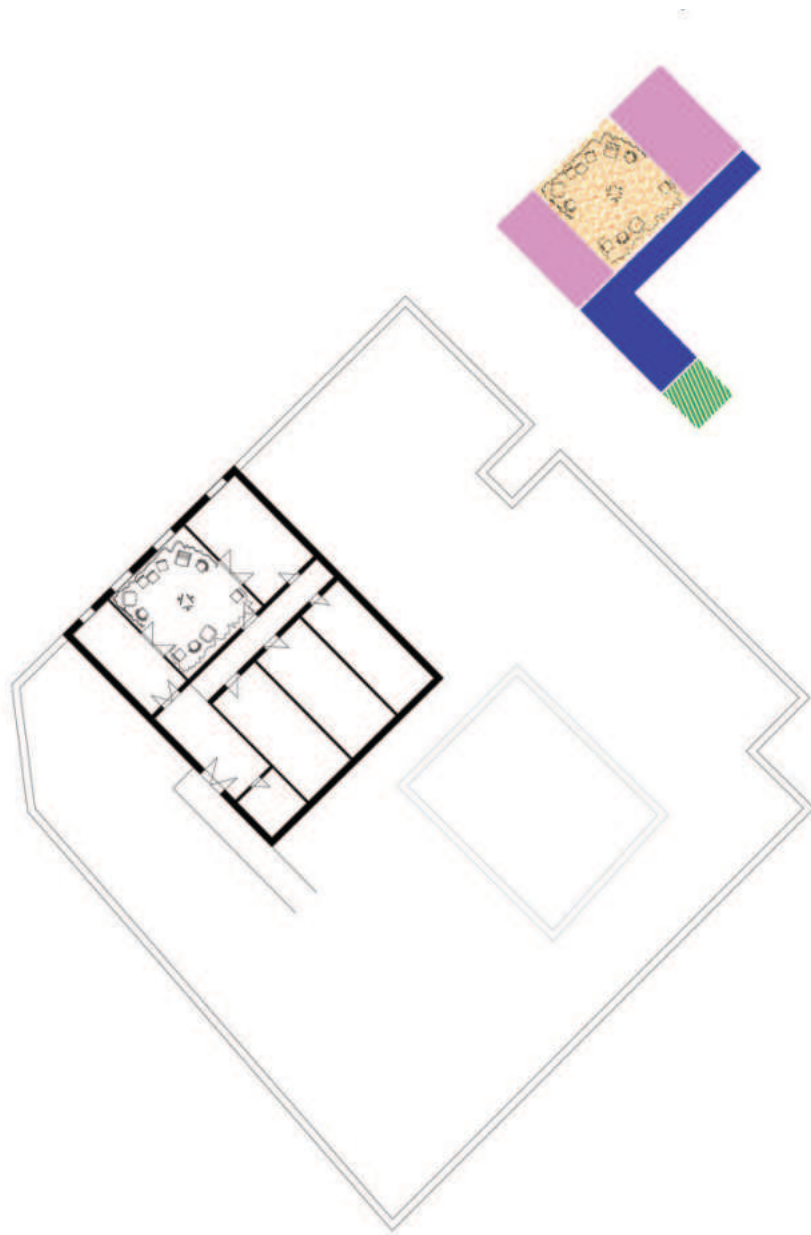
RADNÓTI MIKLÓS
THEATER

stage: 43.5 m²
seats: 320



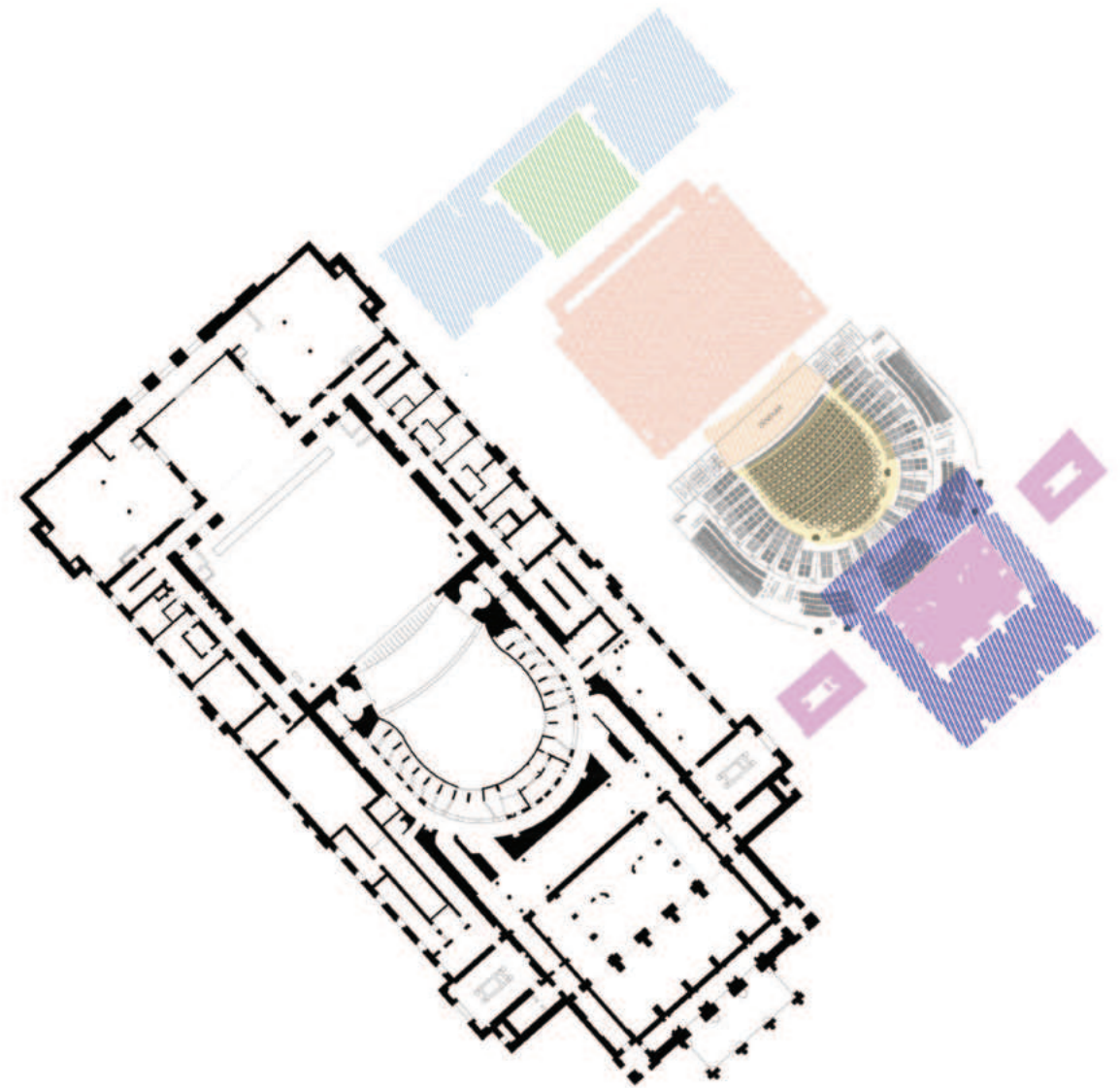
BUDAPEST OPERETTE
THEATER

stage: 55 m²
seats: 901



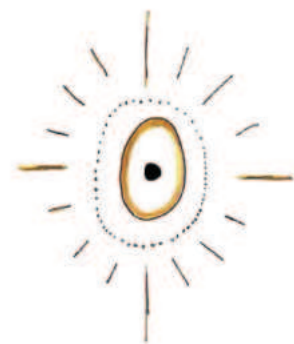
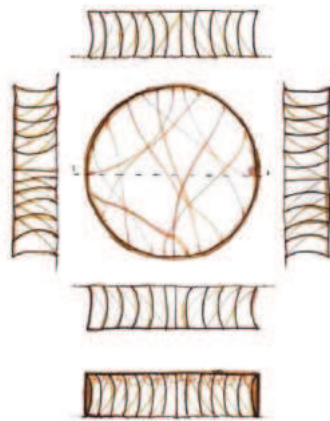
FISCHER IVAN'S APARTMENT THEATER
FILC

auditorium & stage: 12 m²
chairs: 25



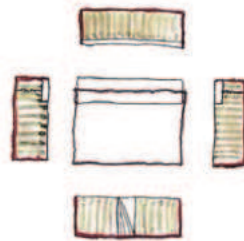
HUNGARIAN STATE OPERA
BUDAPEST

stage: 180 m²
seats: 1,261



3.1.2 Theater in the Round / Central staging / Arena Theater

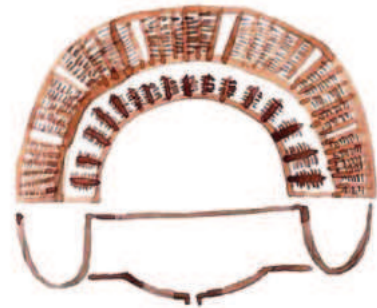
The essence of this theatre is that the stage - which is either elevated or on the ground - is surrounded by an auditorium. The 360-degree stage therefore has a real roman colosseum feel, creating a link not only between performer and spectator, but also between spectator and spectator. In this situation, each seat is confronted with someone on the opposite side. The viewers and their reactions create a unique backdrop/set design to the performance.



3.1. 3 Proscenium Theater

The classical theater setup, featuring a framed stage with the proscenium arch separating the stage from the auditorium. It comes from the ancient Greek word that was originally referred to a row of colonnades, supporting a raised platform. A great example is the Hungarian State Opera designed by Miklós Ybl Hungarian architect. The building became not only a major figure of 19th-century Hungarian architecture. The plans and location in the city is almost identical to the Vienna State Opera, thanks to the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

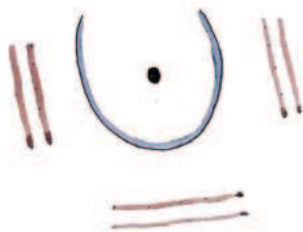
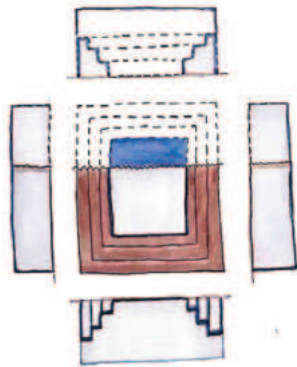
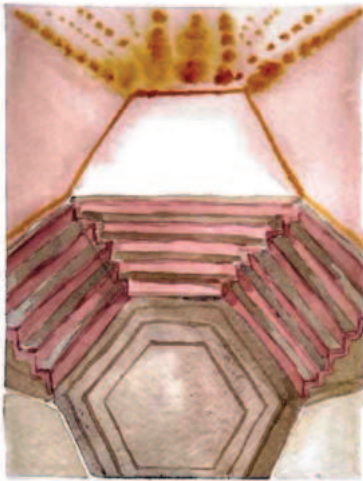
„The proscenium’s structure was first expanded by Squire Bancroft and his wife, Marie Bancroft, to enclose the lower side of the stage at London’s Haymarket Theatre in 1880, creating a “picture frame” or an imaginary fourth wall through which the audience experienced the illusion of spying on characters behaving exactly as if they were unobserved. With the advent of electricity, the illusion was further enhanced by controlled lighting, which made it possible to darken the auditorium where the audience was seated and create the illusion for the spectator that he was not in a theatre.” (Britannica, revised and updated by Richard Pallardy)



3.1.4 Greek Theater

The earliest theatres appeared from the 6th century BCE usually using the terrain to create the natural elevation from stage to auditorium. The auditorium may appeared in a rectangular shape but developed into a semi-half circle making the stage visible for more people seated. “According to 5th-4th century BCE Greek pottery decoration the stage was built around one metre above the ground and had steps at the front. Actors performed on the stage which had an entrance on the left and right sides and from a single central doorway (soon expanded to three) in the scenery behind, usually made to resemble a temple, palace, or cave. The use of painted scenery is also very likely. The stage scene could also have a top platform from which actors could play gods speaking down upon the audience and actors alike. The excitement of performances was enhanced with one or two technical additions. A wheeled platform (ekkyklema) was pushed out of the doorway and used to dramatically reveal new scenery, and a crane (mechane) was situated to the right of the stage and used to lift actors who were playing gods or heroes.” (World History Encyclopedia, Greek theater architecture by Mark Cartwright, published on 22 April 2016)

As we know from the historical times Romans were fond of Greek architecture and copying the idea of the crowded public space they created the colosseum for public performances. “They enlarged the permanent scenery behind the stages of Greek theatres making it into a multi-story backdrop (scaenae frons) that joined the sides of the cavea. Nero, for example, added a monumental Roman-style stage building to the Dionysos Eleuthereus theatre which reduced the now marble stage area to its semi-circular form still seen today. A low speaker’s platform (bema) was added to the enlarged stage too in the 2nd or 3rd century CE. The Romans also paved the orchestra, sometimes added an awning roof (vela), built substructures under the seating, and generally added more decoration to theatres by adding monumental statues, exotic marble columns, and relief carvings to the stage area. With their high backstage and covered roof, the enclosed and almost claustrophobic atmosphere of the Roman theatre would more and more come to resemble the modern theatres of today.” (World History Encyclopedia, Greek theater architecture by Mark Cartwright, published on 22 April 2016)

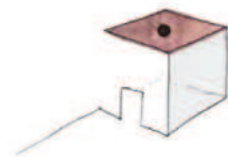
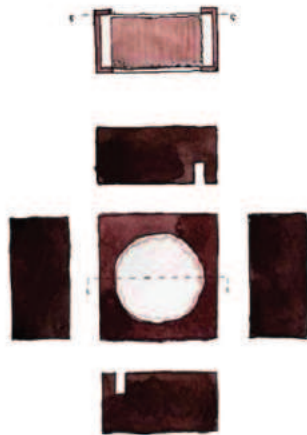
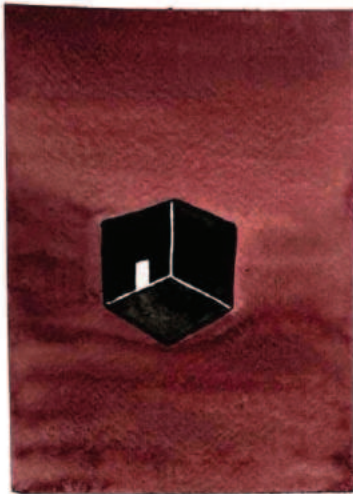


3.1.5 Thrust Stage

“At its core, a thrust stage extends into the audience on three sides, immersing spectators in the unfolding drama and blurring the lines between performer and viewer. Unlike traditional proscenium stages that create a clear separation between actors and audience, the thrust stage invites intimacy and engagement, allowing attendees to experience the production from multiple vantage points.” (Christie Snyder, May 3, 2024) ¹

The O'Reilly Theater gives a great example of blurring the lines between stage and auditorium. The building is designed by Michael Graves American architect and designer and opened its doors to the public on December 9, 1999.

¹ <https://ppt.org/blog/what-is-a-thrust-stage>



3.1.6 Black Box Theater

“The Black Box Theatre is a performance space that has become increasingly popular in recent years due to its intimate and versatile nature. Unlike traditional proscenium stages, black box theatres are usually small, square or rectangular spaces with black walls, floors, and ceilings. This blank canvas provides a unique opportunity for directors, actors, and designers to create innovative and immersive productions that engage and challenge audiences.” (Theatre Haus, April 17, 2023) ¹

¹ <https://www.theatrehaus.com/2023/04/black-box-theatre-an-intimate-and-versatile-space-for-innovative-performances/>



3.1.7 Site Specific Theater

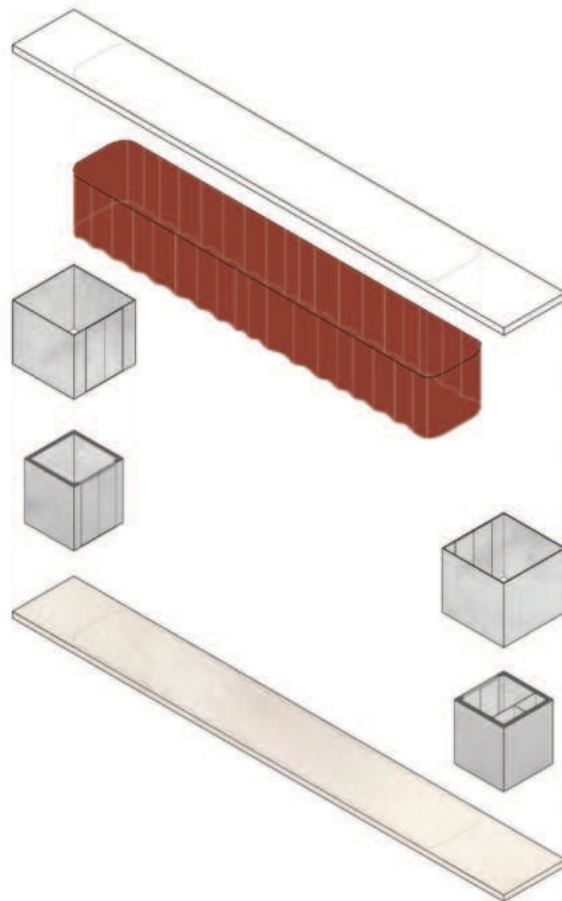
In this case the performances take place in non-traditional venues, such as apartments, warehouses, or public spaces, integrating the environment into the storytelling, with the great example of Fischer Iván's apartment theatre in Budapest Andrásy Avenue 27.

This is a tricky one based on the name, this kind of space can appear basically any shape or form. But to be precise there are things that are non-negotiable. To create an atmosphere in a built space where performer and audience can have the best experience technical nuances are pillars. Light and sound can transform a space completely. Soundproofing or using the existing noises can lead to a unique experience. Artificial lighting such as spotlight or stage light brings focus on the performer, while helps the audience to focus on the importance of the act. On that note, a roof or cover is essential as well as a podium. With these architectural elements, the actor(s) are elevated of the everyday, out of the crowd. Being only a few centimetres off the ground makes a significant difference on human behaviour, giving the feeling that something important is about to happen. Covering a space with a roof or from the sides is creating an inside and an outside. There is a line that must be crossed to reach one or the other. These small details come together into sequences, a real-life filter between the busy everyday/public space and the privacy of a theater. The combination of the mentioned architectural elements creates the toolbox of theater, where each appear as its own, but cannot create space of performance without each other. In materiality it doesn't matter what are the elements are made out of, but what is important is that they have to be cohesive. What I mean by that, is that creating a space and letting the actor, performance bring it to life, the architect's job to use materials that works well technically and natural enough to be the background. On the other hand, I think the complete opposite can also work, using materials that stand out, make a statement. In this variation, the architect must consider the fact that the show will be shaped by the material...

3.2 Change of Paradigm, the interpretation of contemporary spaces of performance

3.2.1 Open Air Theatre Grotekerkplein, Rotterdam, Nederlands ¹

The structure is a simple, open form oriented in two directions, allowing the space to be both sided by subtly dividing it. This openness is an invitation to the passbyers in the dense urban fabric, to stop and enjoy the smaller, more intimate zones created. By opening in two directions, it creates a spatial connection between the waterfront and the church (Grotekerk) linking two significant urban elements. Its spatial arrangement evokes the design of a proscenium theatre, where the elevated stage separates performer and audience. Creating distance between audience and performer, both physically and materially. The use of a curtain further defines the space, allowing an alternative backdrop as in the city itself or the drawn fabric. When used as a stage, allowing performers to enter discreetly from behind. When not used for performances, the structure serves as urban seating, functioning almost like an auditorium. Finally, the curtain softens the structure's rigid geometric presence, making the space more welcoming while adding a touch of softness and possibility of transformation.



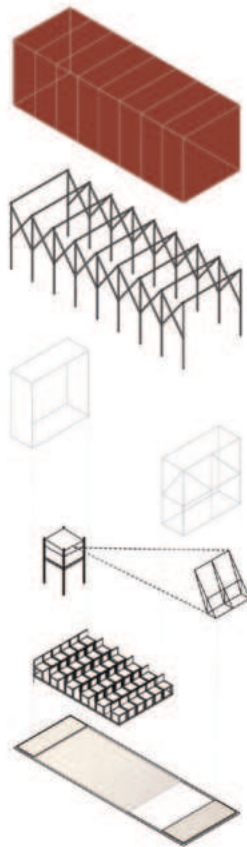
¹ <https://atelierkempethill.com/projects/0047-open-air-theatre-grotekerkplein/>

3.2.2 Pop-In, Pop-Out, Pop-Up: Collapsible Street Cinema, Venice, Italy

¹

This project was created to engage with the urban context of the Venecian canal and urban fabric. The light structured pop-up cinema features a flexible use with the possibility of expanding or closing the curtains. As the structure is wrapped in sail fabric, it marks the boundary between inside and outside, public and private. The curtain textile is waterproof and adjustable, letting the natural light in and shading the audience from it, when its needed. The curtain also acts as a windshild, protecting the inside enjoyers from the Venecian weather. When it is used as an urban space, no screenings are taking place, the base acts as public seating, emphasize the significance of local context: the sound of waves, the cries of seagulls, and the passing gondolas all contribute to the sensory experience.

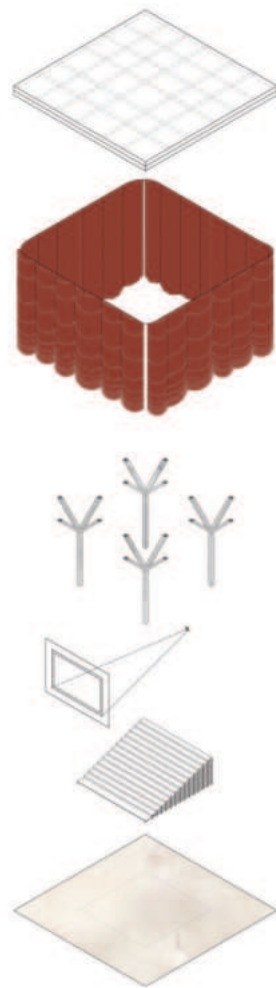
For me, this pop-up cinema closely resembles the site-specific theatres, where location plays a crucial role.



¹ <https://www.omrirezsz.com/work/street-cinema>

3.2.3 The Cineroleum, Clerkenwell Road, London, England ¹

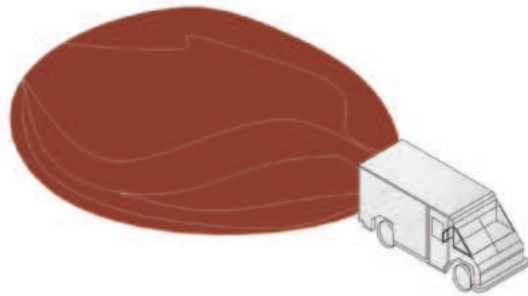
This project was created as a labor of love by non-professionals and centers around the adaptive reuse of an abandoned gas station in England. One of its most compelling spatial elements is the use of heavy curtain. To separate the interior from the noisy street, made from recycled, waterproof roofing membrane. Its dark, dense material serves a dual purpose: it provides both sound and thermal insulation, effectively sealing off the cinema space and creating a hidden interior world. Passersby cannot see in though they may catch faint traces of the film's audio, while the interior remains protected and atmospheric. This strategy aligns closely with the principles of black box theatre, where the interior space is entirely isolated from its surroundings and can be manipulated freely without external interference. The outside world, apart from perhaps the hum of passing cars, has little influence on the viewer's experience. Inside, the curtain functions almost like a wall, enclosing the space entirely. The seating constructed using scaffolding, arranged frontally to face the screen. This project is simple yet effective, emphasizing the direct and immersive nature of the viewing experience.



¹ <https://assemblestudio.co.uk/projects/the-cineroleum>

3.2.4 Spacebuster, raumlaborberlin, New York, United States ¹

The project is based on a van, used as a structure, and a slightly translucent balloon-like material. The seethrough material allows a subtle visual connection between inside and outside. From the inside shadows and silhouettes are seen just enough to intrigue passersby and draw them in. The boundaries of the space are soft and adaptable, enabling the interior respond to its surroundings. When placed under a bridge, the balloon material form to its context, allowing the external structure to shape the internal experience. Rather than isolating itself from the environment, the space engages with it, creating a new, more intimate setting. It evokes spatial qualities similar to a colosseum or round theatre, where both spectators and performers are exposed and visible to one another. This setting creates a shared, interactive experience. It also recalls Greek theatres, which were carved into natural landscapes and designed to harmonize with their topography.



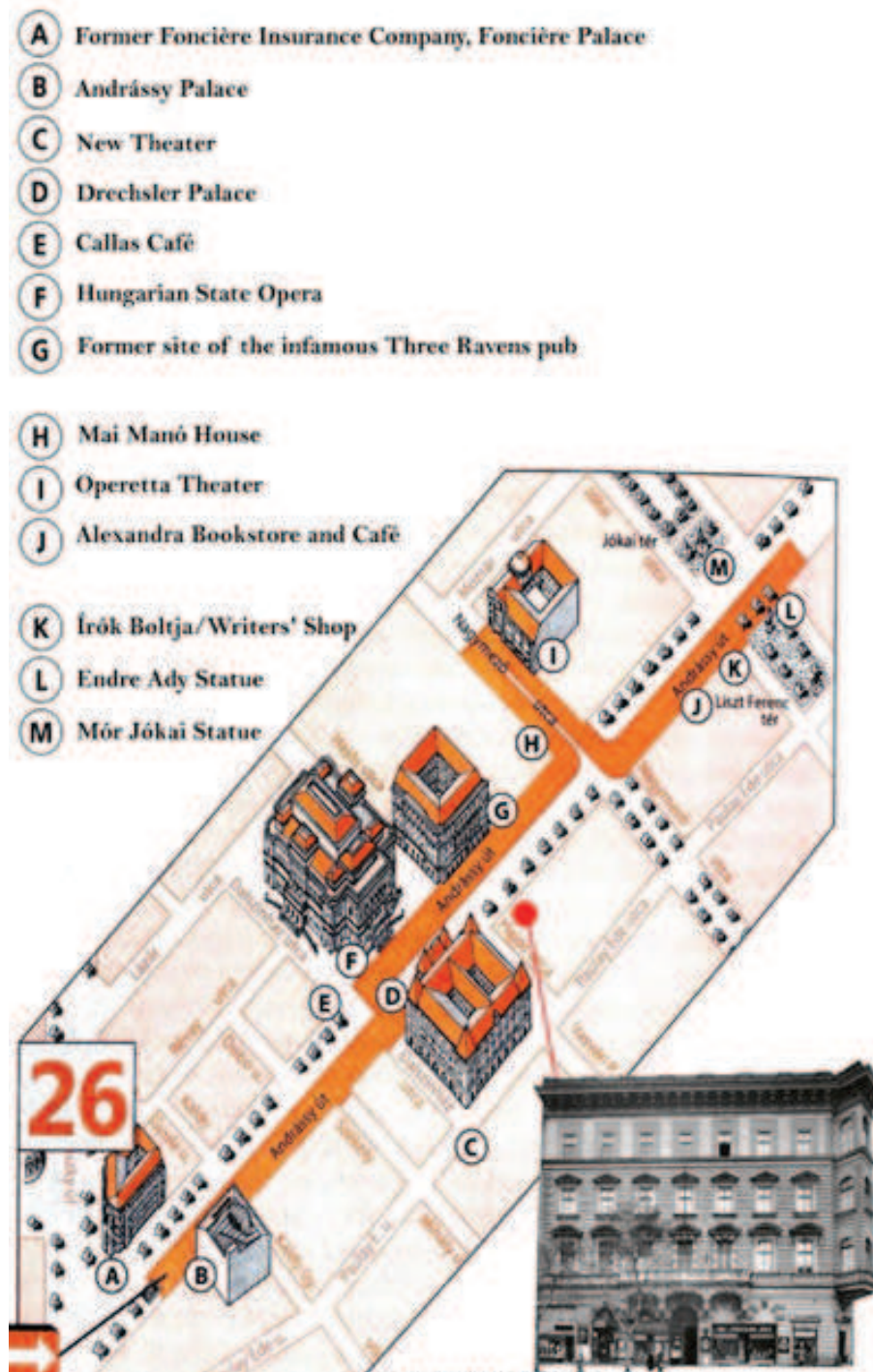
¹ <https://raumlabor.net/spacebuster/>

1 History of the VI. District of Budapest

Much of the contemporary city structure and the contemporary performing spaces were produced in the late 19th century, during a striving period when Budapest as a European capital was constructed. This descriptive section intends to accompany the map which situates the theatre spaces in today's Budapest, but only those parts of urban history will be outlined here that are relevant to understand the socio-cultural-economic aspects of the location of the chosen buildings within the city.

The golden age of residential building construction in Budapest took place 1867-1918: in this period today's Hungary and Austria constituted a dualist state, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which ended with the First World War. Zsuzsa Körner calls this period the "golden age" because during these decades Budapest enjoyed not only an economic boom, but also went through a stunning urban development. The large-scale tenement projects were preceded by a radical transformation of the urban landscape. The laws issued for the construction of railways and roads in 1868 greatly facilitated the rapid construction and the so-called general appropriation plan issued by the city's Council of Urban Planning. This process involved the city council's intervention, i.e. the demolition of entire neighbourhoods to create new avenues, boulevards, apartment blocks and residential areas. This provided a structure and opportunity for the development of future tram lines, public transport and public spaces such as cabarets and theatres (Vígsház, Madách Theatre, Opera, Operetta, Thália, Pesti etc, see map). As a result, the landscape of organically formed neighbourhoods, bounded by ground-floor houses and ramped dirt roads, was completely transformed to become a metropolis that resembles Vienna in its architecture and Paris in its street structure. In Budapest, the first avenue (today's Andrassy Avenue) and the Great Boulevard and the traditional black box theatres along them were planned and built to the scheme we know today. The axonometric plan below (Török, 2013:286) shows the general appropriation plan of the Council of Urban Planning and the completed Andrassy Avenue.

By 1885, the entire length of Budapest's first avenue had been built, lined by buildings on both sides of the Avenue. The optically pleasing design of the avenue contributed to its elegance: the houses in the city centre were 22m high (e.g. 1 Andrassy Avenue, in Lugosi, 2001: 33) and doors directly opened to the street; then the height gradually decreased and, as shown in the photographer Lugosi's book, Budapest 1900/2000, the space gradually opened up with trees and front gardens. At its Heroes' Square end the avenue was lined by villas surrounded by greenery. Near the Opera the avenue is pleasantly shaded by sycamore trees (see the axonometric plan, Török 2013:286 completed with a photo from the Fortepan Archives) - this is the rich and elegant environment where one of my chosen alternative theatres, FILC is located (Lugosi, 2001: 34).



Map by András Felvidéki, illustration by Luca Éva Bors 2024

Besides FILC there were other apartment theatres or at least performances that took place in large downtown flats in palaces similar to the ones in Andrassy út. They were created in the 20th century during the political repression of Socialism to secretly enjoy the freedom of speech/expression. The first known apartment theatre called Squat Theatre operated at 20 Dohány Street (near Andrassy). It was founded out of necessity by actors who were banned from playing publicly and thus needed a salary. The theater ran for a really short period of a rough four years (1969-74), before the actors were forced to flee Hungary and became political refugees¹ abroad. Unfortunately I found only one laconic website about their work.



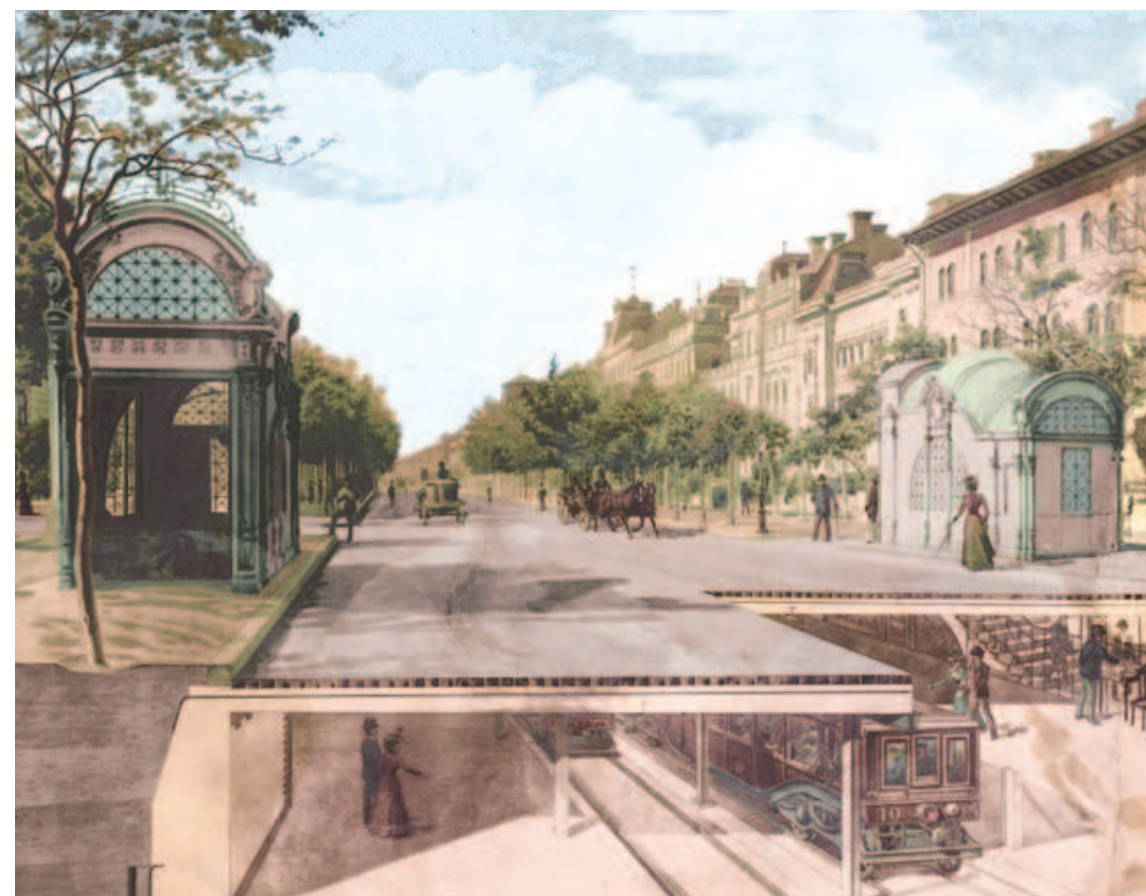
33 ANDRÁSSY ÚT I.
I ANDRÁSSY AVENUE



34 AZ ANDRÁSSY ÚT AZ OPERÁNÁL
ANDRÁSSY AVENUE AT THE OPERA

Photos taken by László Lugosi Lugó, Notes on the images by Pál Ritoók, Budapest 1900/2000, 2001. p.34

¹ The founding members of the theater are Peter Breznyik, Marianne Kollár, Péter Halász, Anna Koós, István Bálint and Éva Buchmüller - Kassák House Theater 1969-74, Budapest, Dohány street 20. Immigration. Squat Theater 1976-91, Paris, New York, website: <https://squattheatre.com/budapest72.html>



Painting of "Kisföldkalatti", from 1901

HUNGARIAN LITERATURE SQUARE

METRO STATION AT THE OPERA HOUSE

THE MISSING TOOTH

ACT IV. OUTCOME

4.2 Happy Ending

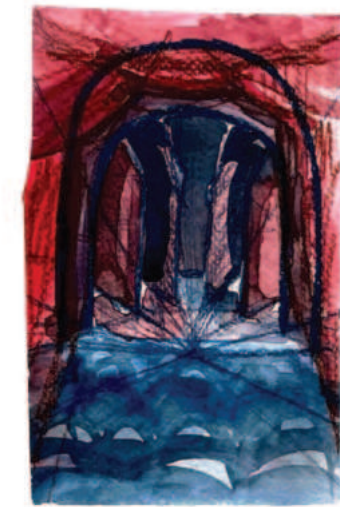
4.2.1 Breaking the Fourth Wall - The need of alternative theatre

In both theatre and architecture, breaking the fourth wall challenges the traditional separation between performer and audience, actor and observer, inside and outside. It is not only a dramaturgical technique but a spatial condition. Theatrically, it invites the audience into the narrative space, acknowledging their presence and dissolving the barrier between performance and reality. Architecturally, it manifests in open, adaptable spaces that blur the line between public and private, performer and spectator. This becomes particularly relevant in alternative, site-specific theatre settings, where traditional boundaries are already loosened, and the environment actively participates in the performance.

In my project, this idea materializes through fluid facades, curtain-like structures that serve as architectural tools and theatrical devices. These flexible, textile-based elements form layered thresholds. The curtain, as revealed through decomposing multiple case studies, is the only consistent element across various theatre types. It creates mystery, anticipation, and a moment of spatial and narrative tension what lies behind it is both hidden and revealed.

This modular, scaffold-based system was designed to suit three specific locations, speaking the same architectural language yet adaptable to each site's and Budapest VI. district character. The scaffold, always under construction, echoes the idea of ghost buildings, structures that seem incomplete, inviting the wanderer to come and look closer. Without the actor and audience, the architecture is not complete, the theatre is empty.

During The Festival of Transformation, these three locations activate simultaneously, allowing the public to flow between performances, experiencing each space as part of a cohesive theatrical urban landscape. The curtain becomes the visual and conceptual thread, breaking and forming walls, shifting atmospheres, and inviting audiences to enter.



4.2.2 “Budapest Broadway” – around Nagymező street

My research reveals that certain elements of theatre are essential and non-negotiable, while others can be adapted or emphasized to enhance the core experience. Based on this, I developed the Festival of Transformation, held annually in three distinct locations within Budapest’s vibrant VI district: the historic Opera Metro Station—Europe’s first underground metro line, whose small, surface-close structure creates a natural proscenium stage with rails acting as an orchestra pit; a unique “missing tooth” courtyard at Nagymező Street 23, offering an intimate black-box theatre atmosphere framed by surrounding buildings; and Jókai Square’s Park of Hungarian Literature, a tranquil green space enclosed by classical tenements and dedicated to storytelling, named after the celebrated 19th-century poet Mór Jókai. The festival route connects these sites through a rich urban fabric filled with cultural landmarks like the New Theatre, the National State Opera, and Fisher Iván’s Apartment Theatre. Architecturally, the project layers permanent and temporary layers: the permanent structures represent the need of the location and remain year-round, while the temporary festival installations are modular, lightweight scaffolding structures. The raw, industrial materials symbolising the way theatre, and eventually the play is always in progress, under construction.

The three locations I chose in the heart of Budapest VI. district, have a unique way of presenting different architectural challenges. How can I introduce something new as an architect in this completely built environment? What tools can I use and what are the possibilities in this highly structured setting? In the Opera metro station¹, as an underground, enclosed space, dealing with fully completed environment was a great challenge. On the second site, Lépték-Terv’s² newly renovated landscape, the Jókai Square provided greater flexibility in terms of built and non-built elements. I took advantage of the landscape design that focuses on seating surfaces while leaving the urban green space to organically grow. The challenge with this carefully considered site was to find characteristics without covering additional surfaces. The “missing tooth” phenomenon is rare in the inner city of Budapest, since the heavily bombed areas have been rebuilt since World War II. The remaining vacant plots are

usually converted into urban green spaces or occupied by commercial buildings. This case the empty space hides surprisingly well in the dense city fabric of Nagymező street. From either side surrounded by high firewalls while the back end faced with the unique sight of an inner façade. This placement led me to suspect that the tenement buildings original setup had an inner courtyard. Unusually the inner garden has been opened, facing Nagymező street, creating an intimate space between public and private. The sight of the inner façade brings curiosity and sends an invitation to the passerby. In the summer days the void is hosting the neighbouring café while in the wintertime it is closed to the public.

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opera_metro_station_\(Budapest\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opera_metro_station_(Budapest)) , visited : 2025 June 2

² <https://leptek.hu/project/51>, visited : 2025 June 2

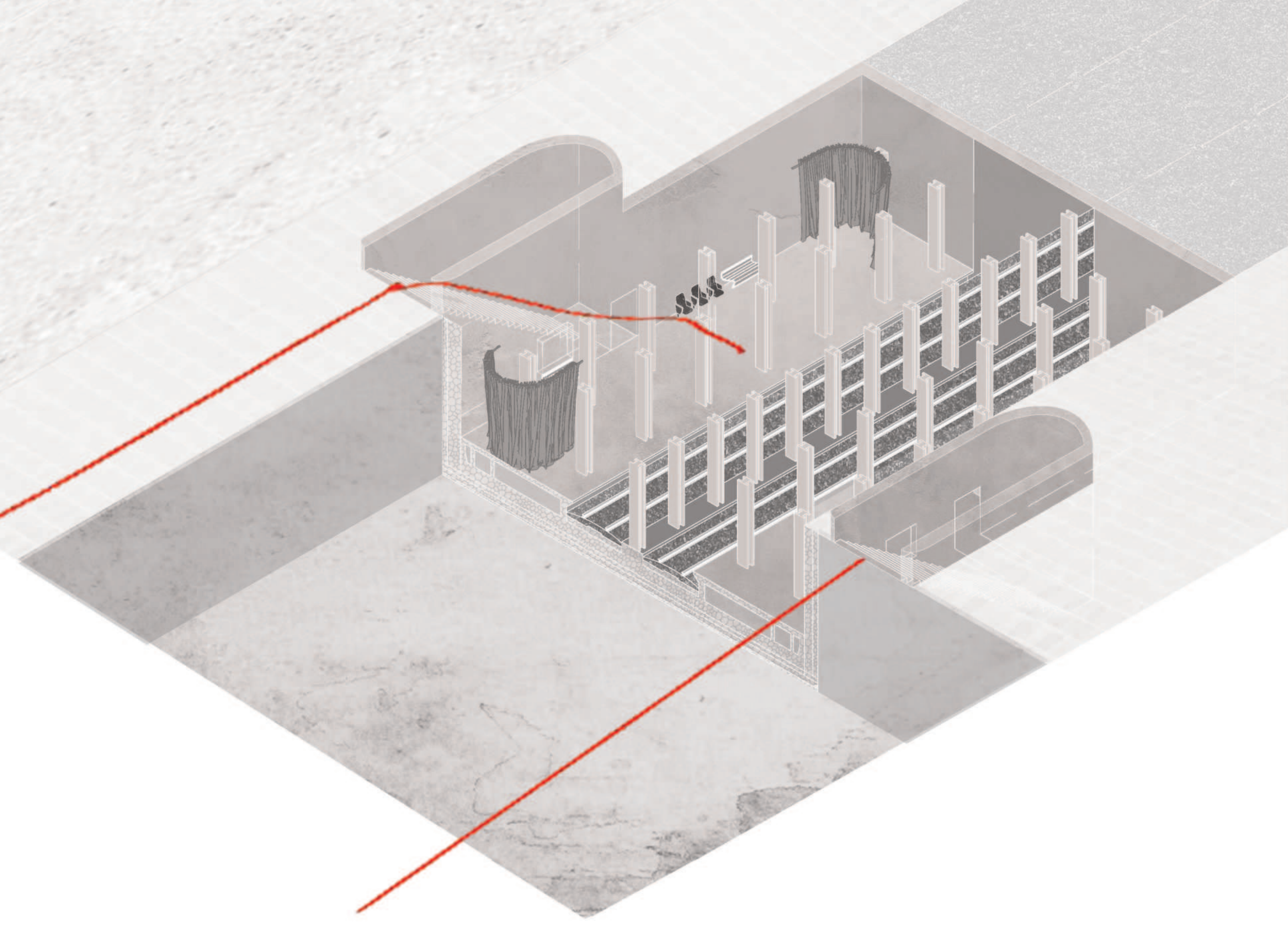
4.2.3 The Festival of Transformation - Contemporary theatre design

My perspective was to create functional yet unique architectural pieces that can remain relevant year-round. The locations diversity forced me to deep dive into the culture, city fabric and to study the locals' habits. What do they need? How can I make a difference that will bring positive change while achieving my goal of making culture and theatre accessible to everyone? I created a double layer project, the first one being a permanent and the second, a non-permanent intervention. The permanent interventions are carefully shaped to each location, starting from the Opera metro station requiring minor changes. As Jókai Square is newly refurbished the project only needed a few additional elements. The “missing tooth” has the largest scale structure. The architectural elements provide a sense of magic and anticipation, creating an atmosphere filled with tension throughout the year. When the non-permanent layer is added the whole creation really comes to life. The light scaffolding structures are to make each location into a stage, an auditorium and eventually a theatre. Using plain and rather tough materials to build these structures, is meant to highlight the difference between the luxurious, rather lavish opera-goer lifestyle and the general public. My main was to make theatre accessible to everyone who is open to it. Reaching this goal meant to tear down the conventional rules – in theatre, in art, in culture, in lifestyle – and to create a new, definitely not perfect space of performance. As the result of site analysis, the collection of characteristics helped to shape the permanent and non-permanent interventions for each location. The relations meant to emerge and bring a time filled with expectation, until the new layer arrives, The Festival of Transformation. A festival where public space transforms into theatre, a well-known metro station becomes a stage. To walk through the park of Hungarian Literature the viewer has to walk through a number of sequences related to classical theatre design. To arrive to the auditorium, in Nagymező street 23. the void is filled with heavy curtain, staircase and the mystery of the unknown.

4.2.3.1 OPERA METRO STATION

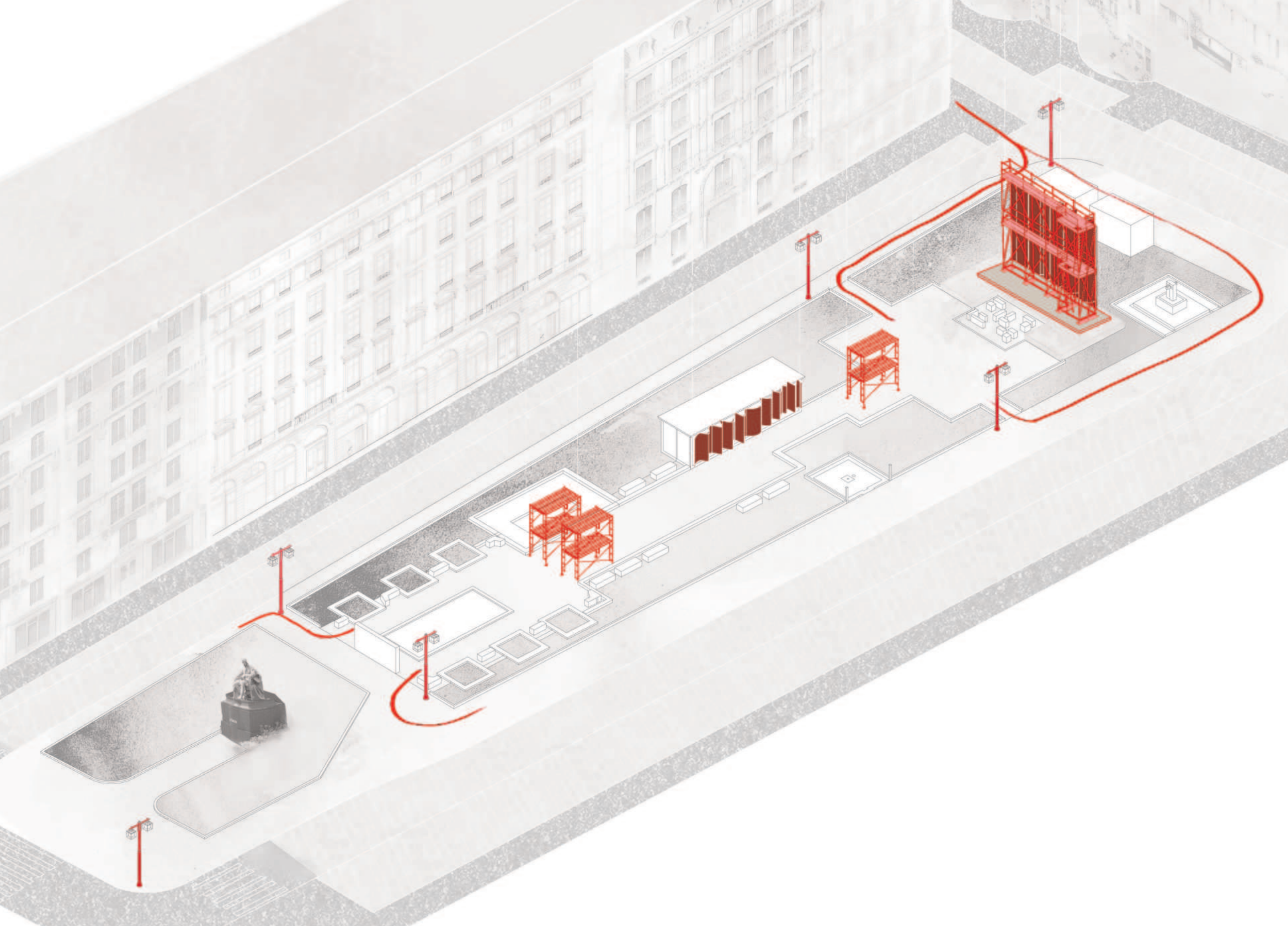
Beginning with the Opera metro station: at first glance, it appears complete, functional and safe. However, after a little observation my impression changed. The place felt like it lacks the opportunity to stop, to observe the surroundings and to notice the details. To reflect on the historical significance of the site being the first underground railway in continental Europe (opened on 2 May 1896¹) and a key node adjacent to the Hungarian State Opera. The station holds symbolic importance, representing cultural status and power; over time, it has been a focal point visited by rulers and dignitaries, embedding the space with layered histories. In this sense, the station functions as a heterotopia, where past and present, movement and stillness intersect. Bringing awareness to this pause with a permanent intervention of chairs. A trio of classical, red velvet upholstered opera chairs are placed for the passengers to sit, while wait for the metro. It is an intention to create a place of contemplation and observation, a stage or auditorium to slow down and to remain curious, as the location transforms... Using curtain variations to create and separate space, while taking advantage of the tight, almost suffocating metro station was a great challenge. The site uniqueness brings the feeling of a black box theatre, where the principal is to separate audience and actor from the outside world.

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground_Railway_Museum_\(Budapest\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground_Railway_Museum_(Budapest))



4.2.3.2 JÓKAI SQUARE – THE PARK OF HUNGARIAN LITERATURE

The second location is Jókai Square, where six convertible lamp posts are added. These function as year-round lighting but can transform into stage light during festival events. Painted red, the lamp posts serve as visual markers within the urban fabric, symbolising an event in preparation. Strategically placed at each entrance and at key corners of the park, from Andrassy Avenue to Mocsár Street, inviting passersby to enter. The main entrance, marked by a dividing stone, forms a distinctive double-sided entry. Following the pathway the placing of scaffolding elements makes the viewer to reroute and cross between structures. The thin filter prepares the viewer as it leads up to the next obstacle. The structure is carefully placed in the middle to arrive at the auditorium by going around from both sides. The side entrances are used for performers, the curtain behind the main stage and structure is the only backdrop that is covering the surrounding facades. Creating contrast between urban fabric and new inventions, the structures appear red matching the lamps, a red thread throughout.

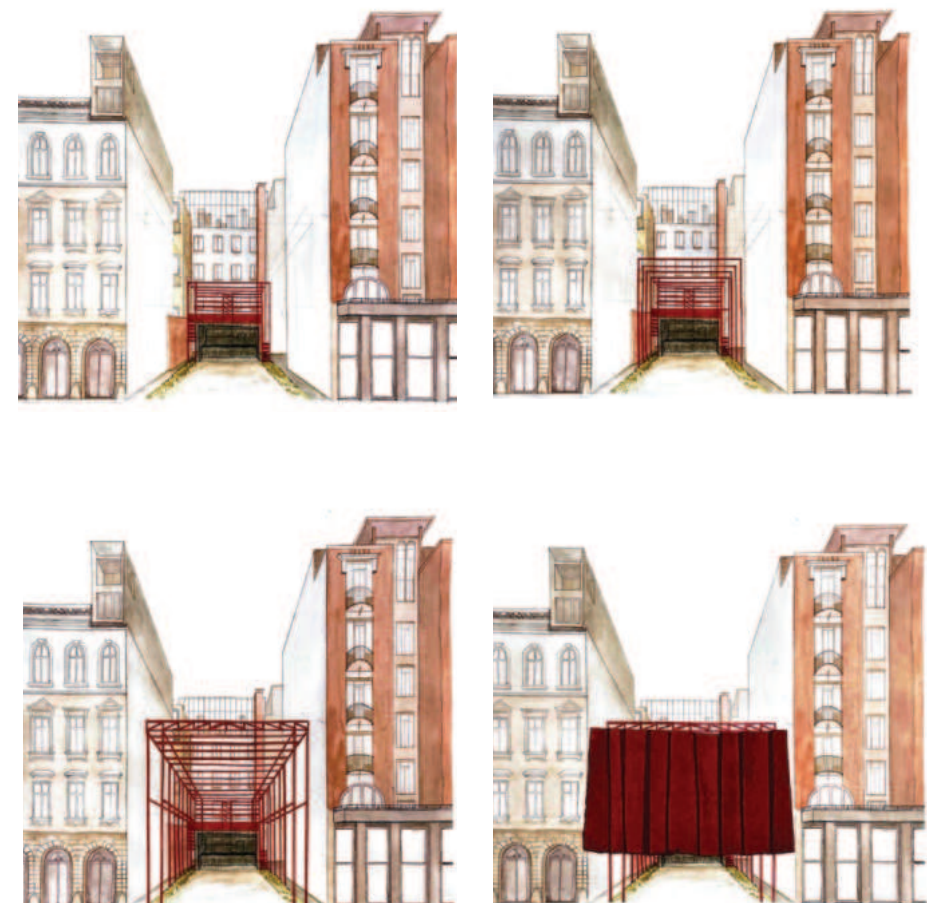


4.2.3.2 NAGYMEZŐ STREET 23. - THE MISSING TOOTH -

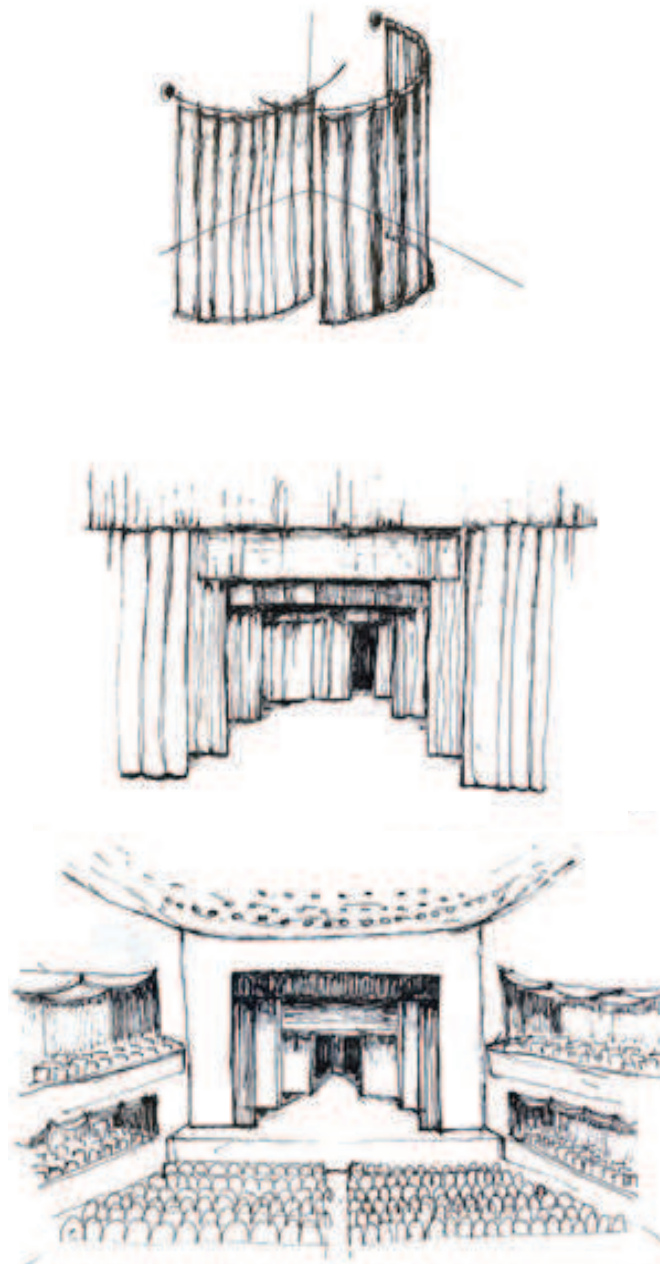
The third location on Nagymező Street includes the addition of a bar, responding to a clear need within the city fabric. Positioned in the rear tract of a long, deep plot, the bar faces the street but is set back to create a more intimate, inviting atmosphere. Behind the bar, a restroom and storage room are integrated, with the latter accessible from the side and closable during performances. The storage room transforms into a dressing room for performers offering a half-private backstage area that remains hidden from public. The scaffolding structure is placed above, creating a sequence of staircase and stage to reach the auditorium. The theatre itself is lifted from the ground, walking upstairs creates a shift from the material world. The filter that is to get to the stage and auditorium prepares the performer and the viewer to slow down, be present and enjoy the show.



- Nagymező street 23. -



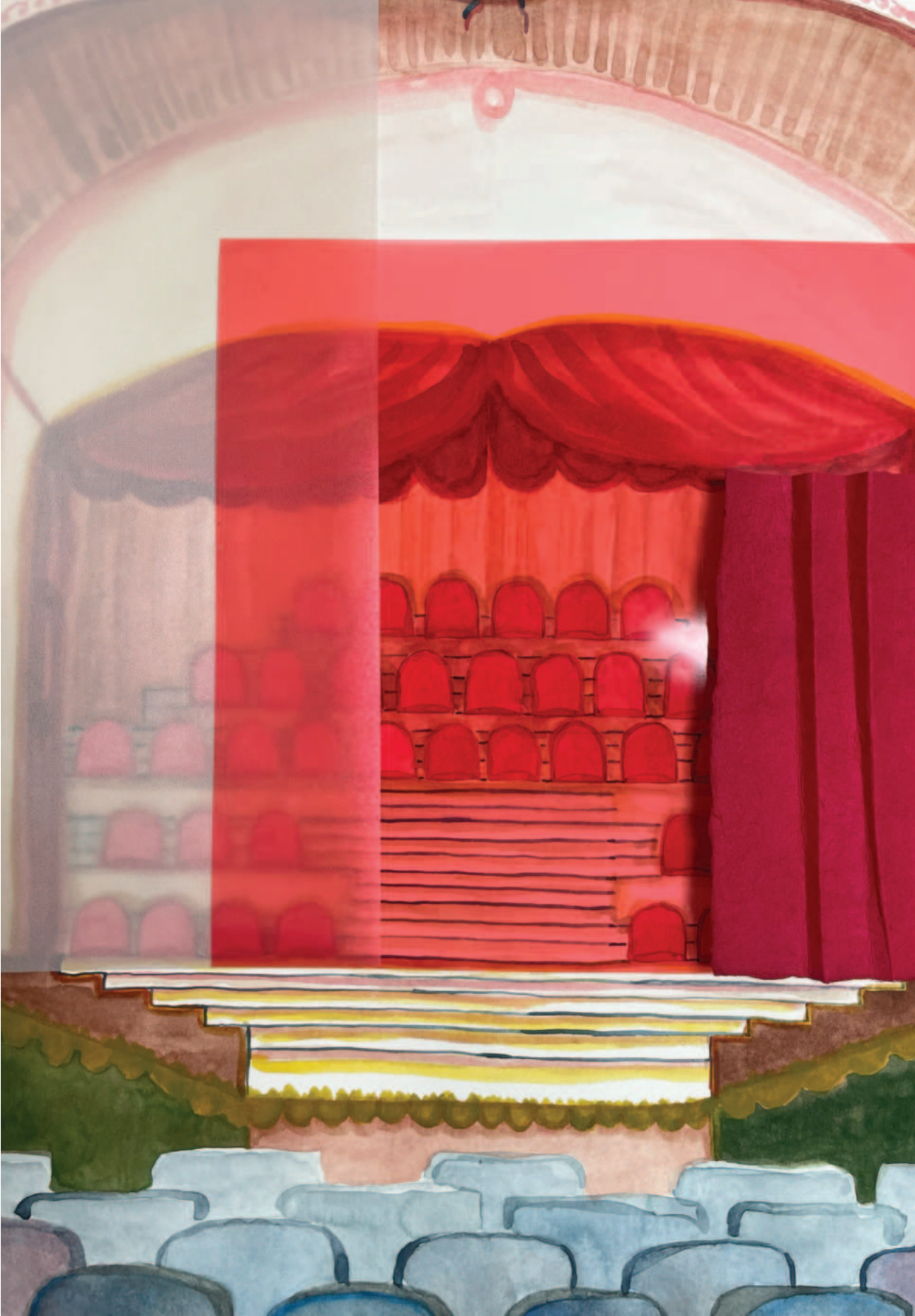
- Festival route -



4.2.5 Curtain studies

While researching theatrical and architectural elements, learning the dramaturgy of architecture, curtains stood out to me as a unique characteristic. It offers great possibility of dividing space while retaining semi-private, semi-public attributes. With materials like this light and shadow can be used to create mystery, bring another layer of understanding to space. Petra Blaisse's¹ work particularly inspired me, as her work as a designer is outstanding. Her studies of textiles and their weaving, using textile weaving as patterns inspired me to look deeper into fabric and textile as an architectural material. The airiness, or conversely, its heaviness and thickness, offers endless possibilities to create and easily transform a space.

1 <https://www.insideoutside.nl/Petra-Blaisse>



CURTAIN

When a scene ends, the Blackout or Curtain designation is the end of the scene.

BLACKOUT or CURTAIN

END OF SCENE or END OF ACT

ACT V. EPILOGUE

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5.2. Appendix A

IVÁN FISCHER'S APARTMENT THEATRE (FILC) ¹

This conversation was in Hungarian, for the sake of the research I made a few necessary changes, this is an edited version. Conversation with Márton Zeibig²:

Luca Éva Bors: What is the concept of the apartment theatre?

Márton Zeibig: The theatre is a labour of love—a passion project. Fischer Iván has loved theatre since childhood. As he mentions on the theatre's website: «We grew up here, watching the Opera from the window. We knew exactly when each performance ended and when the decorative lights were turned off.»

L.É.B: It's no surprise then, that the apartment is located in a building opposite the Opera on Andrásy Avenue...is it a coincidence? How did they come to own it? What is the history since it was built? Who were the previous owners?

M.Z: Ivan Fischer said that the apartment holds sentimental value due to the influential people who have been there, and the musical and theatrical works performed, making it priceless. But most importantly, and the reason for keeping it and transforming it into a theatre was his family.

The concept is best summarized in Fischer' words³: «The apartment theatre's goal is to provide a setting for extraordinary and unique theatre, where a small number of audience members have the opportunity not only to see a high-quality production, but to meet and talk with the creators after each performance. Thus, the concept is that visitors feel like 'guests' the moment they step into the personal space. After all, it is a truly shared experience that the artists and audience members enjoy, since the creators receive instant feedback from the viewers' spontaneous reactions. The apartment theatre seeks to create an artistic and intellectual centre in a liberated atmosphere, where visitors are always offered a one-of-a-kind event»

L.É.B: Is the apartment still inhabited? If so, how does it function as both a home and a theatre?

M.Z: Since its transformation into a theatre, the apartment has no permanent residents. One of the bedrooms is furnished for its original purpose, offering temporary shelter to artists in financial need.

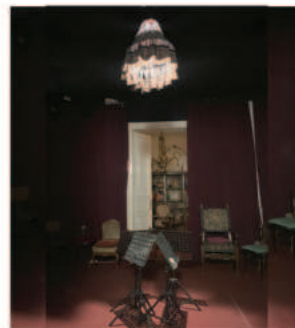
L.É.B: How does the audience learn about it? How is it advertised? Where can tickets be purchased?

¹ Location: Budapest, Andrásy Avenue 27, Fischer Iván Apartment Theatre (FILC), 29.12.2024.

² Márton Zeibig: PA to Ivan Fischer, Music Director at Budapest Festival Orchestra

³ <https://fischerlakas.hu/a-szinhez/>, last accessed 01.05.2025.





M.Z: The entrance resembles that of an ordinary apartment building, unlikely to catch the eye as a theatre. There's no sign or indication of its theatrical nature. A nameplate by the doorbell reads «Fischer» and pressing it emits a buzzing sound that grants entry.

Inside, a five-meter-high corridor leads to the inner courtyard. On the right side of the corridor is another gate with a doorbell, always locked. After buzzing in, one enters the building's main staircase. Visitors climb to the third floor or take the elevator.

On the third-floor corridor, they reach the apartment door. Anyone expecting clear signs of entering a theatre would be mistaken. A small paper slip on the door handle bears the owner's name. Guests feel as if they're visiting someone's home. Passing through two gates, reading the residents' names on the mailboxes, and climbing the stairs becomes a routine.

Knocking on the plain, unadorned door feels like coming home. The noise of the street—once a public space—fades away immediately upon crossing the first gate. The quiet staircase feels semi-private, accessible only with a purpose. Entering the apartment leads to a hall where guests hang their coats and adjust their attire in the mirror. Shoes can stay on, a bit surprising given the muddy winter weather outside.

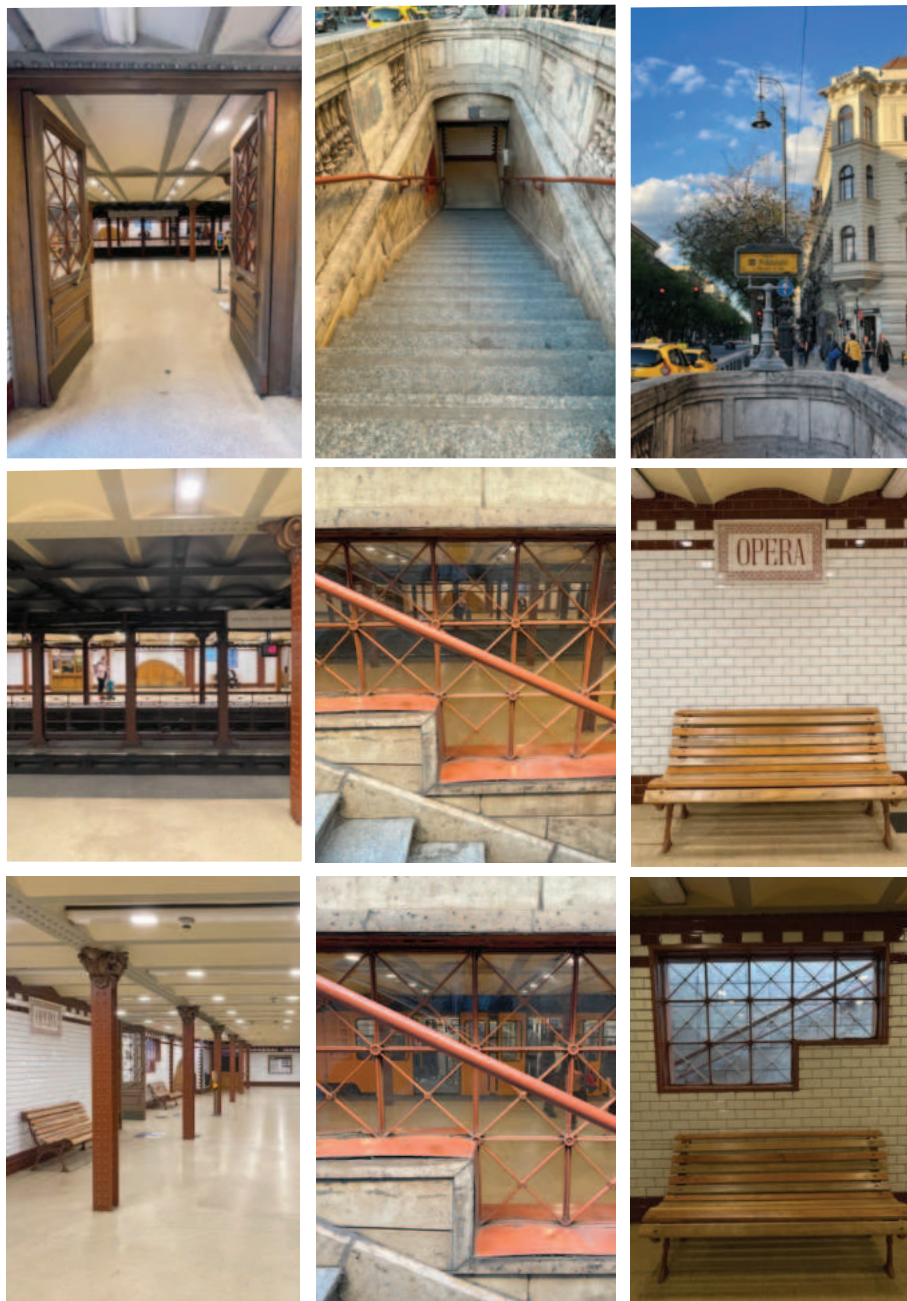
L.É.B: How do you select programs and performances?

M.Z: The plays performed here are adaptations of existing theatrical productions. These performances are selected and based on several criteria, a few to mention. Plays performed at FILC are often monodramas or involve a small cast of two to three actors. Typically, the productions feature minimal sets, which are stored in the apartment while the play is in the repertoire. Once a performance ends its run, the set pieces are returned to their original theatre.

The set's temporary nature parallels the actors' presence; they only perform in the apartment as long as the play remains in the repertoire, returning to their home theatres afterward. The only element fully present in the apartment throughout the whole process is the actors' costumes. Which aid both the performers and the audience in immersing themselves in the experience, usually using easy tools, symbols and conventional signs.

Each performance is more of an experience than just a theatrical event. It begins at the front door, with the arrival of the guests and concludes with a communal dinner for both actors and audience members. A glass of wine, a shared toast, and conversations follow the meal. The living room, which doubles as a performance space (both stage and seating area/auditorium), transforms into a salon. Here, the once-silent audience engages with the actors, reliving and reinterpreting the play. The apartment accommodates an audience of 25.

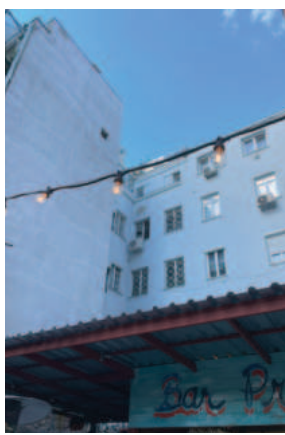
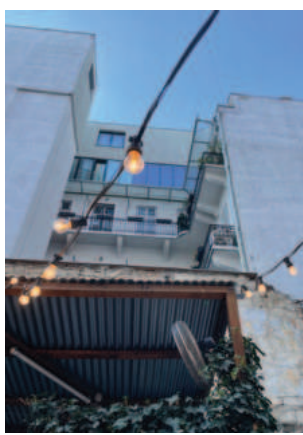
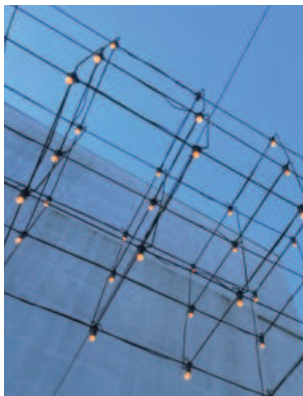
5.3 Appendix B



Opera metro station , photos taken by Luca Bors, 2025



Jókai square, photos taken by Luca Bors, 2025



Nagymező street 23. , photos taken by Luca Bors, 2025