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The Athens Conservatory Concert Hall by Jan Despo: Restoration, Reuse, Research.

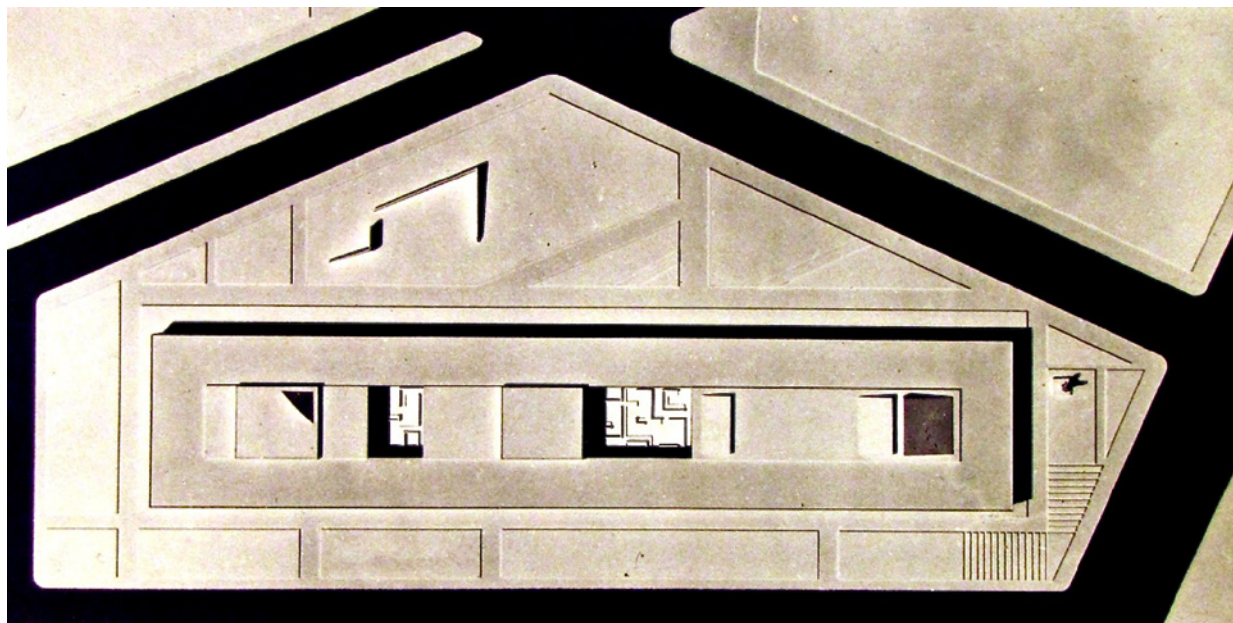


1. OPUS

Architect, theorist, and professor Jan Despo or Ioannis Despotopoulos (1903-1992), the only Greek student of the Bauhaus, a second-generation militant modernist, a socialist, and a founding member of the Greek CIAM team – produced an extensive but relatively unknown oeuvre. Numerous urban design and planning projects in Greece and Sweden – where he stayed in self-exile for a period of 15 years – witnesses the centrality of the urban condition in his thought. In 1959 he was awarded the first prize in a competition for the Athens Cultural Center. As modified in 1966, the Athens Cultural Center comprised of a large square, a concert, dance and conference theatre, a lyric and drama theatre, a conference hotel, a library, a museum, and the Athens Conservatory. This complex urban design project remained unrealized with the exception of the music academy (1969-1978). The building of the Athens Conservatory is 160 meters long and has only one above-ground floor. Its bold proportions host two atrium spaces as well as two open galleries of a skillfully austere structure, reminiscent of ancient Greek stoa. Despite its obvious, dynamic linearity the modernist prism's section reveals an elaborate interior that also expands in two underground levels. Two main spaces for music performances were created: a uncompleted amphitheater of 800 seats on the ground floor and a Hall of 200 seats on the upper floor.

Frontispiece The Athens Conservatory,
Restored Upper Concert Hall, 2018.
Source:T.Andrianopoulos.

Fig. 1 The Athens Conservatory, model, c.1970.
Source: The Neohellenic Architectural Archives
(ANA), Benaki Museum.



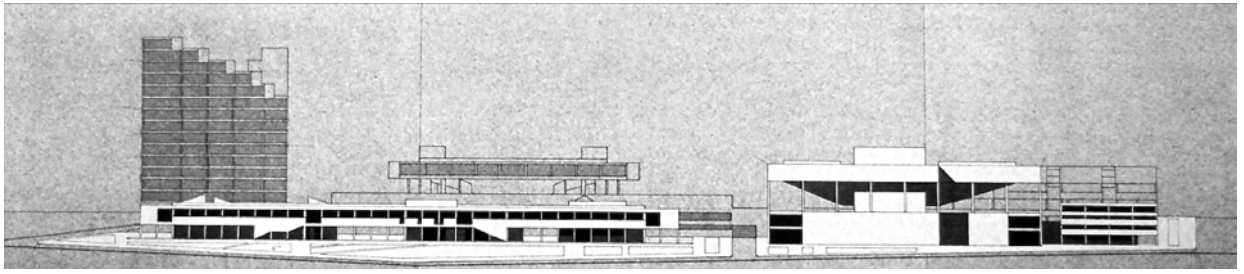


Fig. 2 The Athens Cultural Center, Elevation, 1966. Source: The Neohellenic Architectural Archives (ANA), Benaki Museum.

Fig. 3 The Athens Conservatory, model, c.1970. Source: The Neohellenic Architectural Archives (ANA), Benaki Museum.

Fig. 4 The Athens Conservatory, Restored Upper Concert Hall, 2018. Source: T.Andrianopoulos.

Fig. 5 The Athens Conservatory, Northern Elevation, 2009. Source: T.Andrianopoulos



2. FRAGMENT

The latter served as the Conservatory's space for the teaching of lyric art as well as its main music venue for 40 years, though it also remained in an incomplete, decadent state due to lack of funding. The Concert Hall forms a whole with a more closed, quadrate space for theater performances – separated by common supporting facilities. A grid of concrete beams runs through both roofs, though the one of the music hall is dramatically different: an almost 4 meters-high twin beam of a length of 15 meters divides the space in two areas, forming an impressive non symmetric skylight. The roof is constructed by exposed reinforced concrete while one of the white-plastered lateral walls conceals another unique 5 meters pre-tensed beam that spans a length of 35 meters and permits the circular-like set up of the subjacent amphitheater. The gradual wear of time, the additive arbitrary interventions in terms of furnishing and decoration, and the unfinished state of the mechanical equipment urged for a restoration which was furthermore demanded, according to the School's decision to present a more extrovert public activity. The restoration was commissioned to tense architecture network, led by the writer, and atelier66, led by Dimitris and Suzanna Antonakakis. The restoration's main aim was to retrieve the splendor of the Hall's structure while removing the dull interventions of almost half a century.

Fig. 6 The Athens Conservatory, Upper Concert Hall before restoration, 2017. Source: T.Andrianopoulos.



Fig. 7 The Athens Conservatory, Upper Concert Hall before restoration, 2017. Source: T.Andrianopoulos.



Fig. 8 The Athens Conservatory, restored Upper Concert Hall, 2018. Source: T.Andrianopoulos.

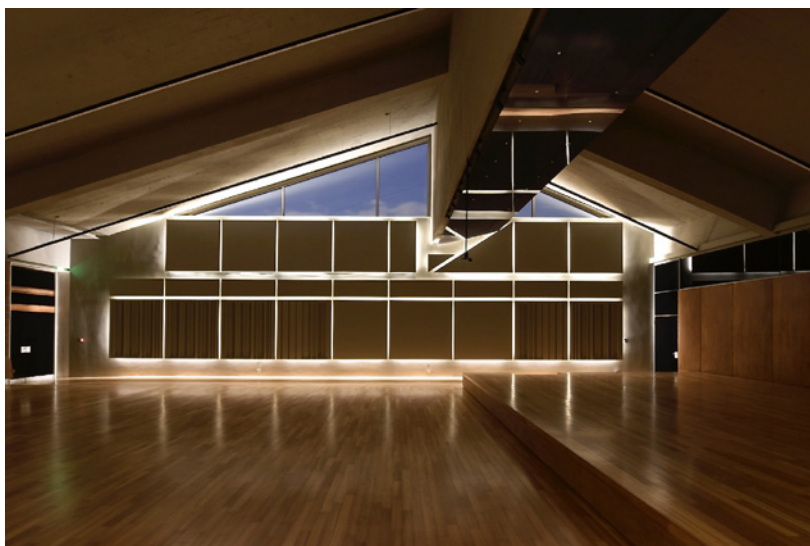


Fig. 9 The Athens Conservatory, floor plan (detail). Source: The Neohellenic Architectural Archives (ANA), Benaki Museum.

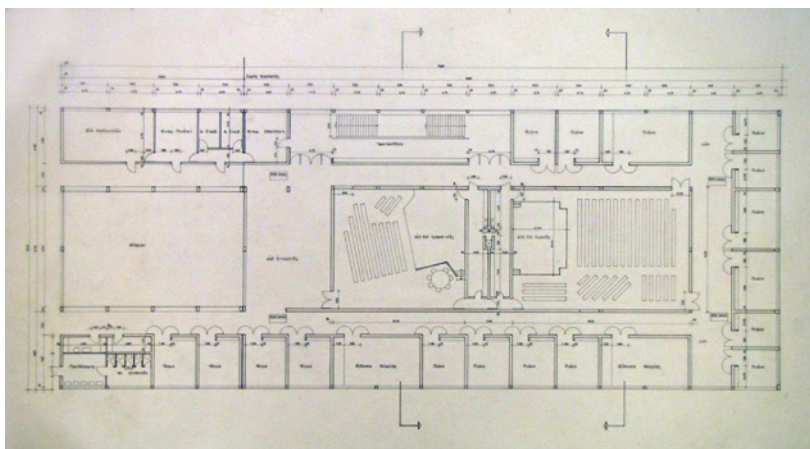


Fig. 10 The Athens Conservatory, Upper Concert Hall section (detail), 2018. Source: atelier66 and tense architecture network.



3. REUSE

The disposition of the seats in Jan Despo's plan is non symmetrical, remaining subordinated to the equally non-symmetrical longitudinal beams. Since the space was mainly used for academic purposes and the School wanted to open up the Hall to the public, it was decided that the stage should be wider in order to be able to host bigger music ensembles and that the new symmetrical seats should be comfortable enough, but at the same time moveable. The new pedestal occupied therefore the maximum width but also extended to the limit of the transversal beam, furthermore in order to improve the way music would reach the audience. Two main new spatial elements were inserted: the new wooden flooring and a composition of acoustic panels on the lateral walls. Replacing the timeworn moquette, the deep red-brownish iroco flooring extends also to the pedestal which defines a central zone of paving perpendicular to the one of the corridors. The silent operation of the floor heating reduced the air-conditioning load and consequently ensured better acoustics which were studied by Gottfried Schubert – who demanded a combination of new reflective, absorbing and diffusing surfaces. Completely altering the appearance of the Hall, the composition of acoustic panels replaced a series of miserable portraits of important tutors and famous composers that had gradually covered their unprotected, receptive surface. This imposing composition of panels was essentially not our own.

Fig. 11 The Athens Conservatory, restored Upper Concert Hall, 2018. Source: T.Andrianopoulos.

Fig. 12 The Athens Conservatory, restored Upper Concert Hall, 2018. Source: T.Andrianopoulos.

Fig. 13 The Athens Conservatory, Floor plan (detail). Source: The Neohellenic Architectural Archives (ANA), Benaki Museum.

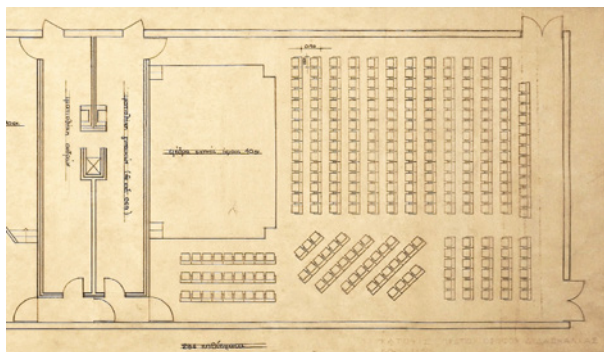
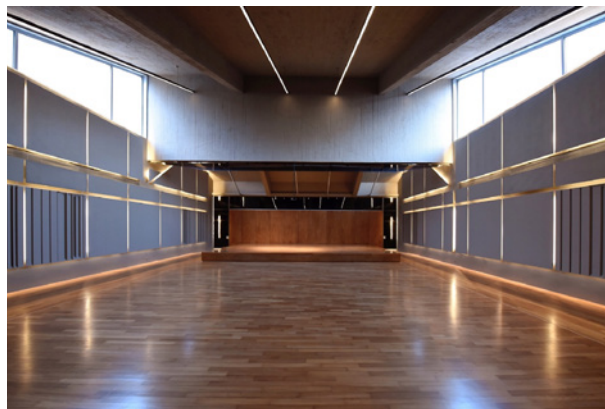


Fig. 14 The Athens Conservatory, Upper floor Concert Hall-Acoustic panels, northern elevation. Source: The Neohellenic Architectural Archives (ANA), Benaki Museum.

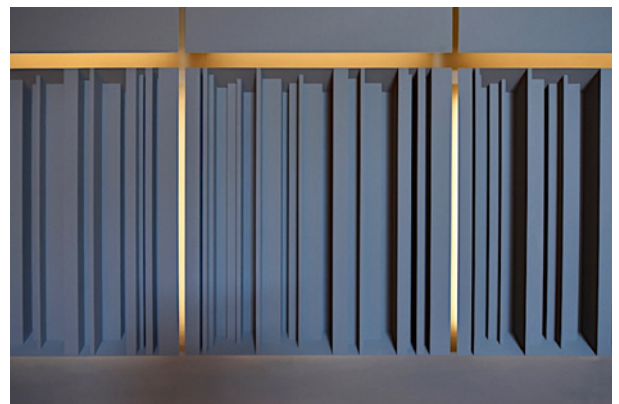
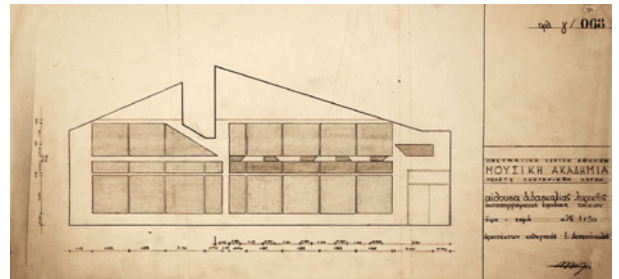
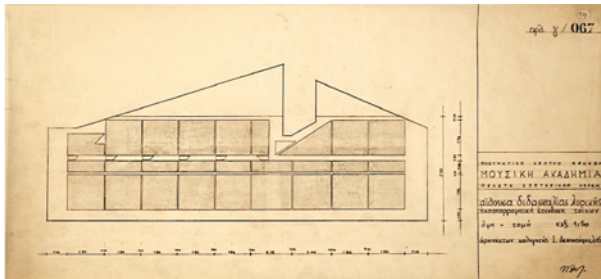
Fig. 15 The Athens Conservatory, Upper floor Concert Hall-Acoustic panels, southern elevation. Source: The Neohellenic Architectural Archives (ANA), Benaki Museum.

Fig. 16 The Athens Conservatory, restored Upper Concert Hall, 2018. Source: T.Andrianopoulos.

Fig. 17 The Athens Conservatory, restored Upper Concert Hall, acoustic panels detail, 2018. Source: T.Andrianopoulos.

4. RESEARCH

Jan Despo's archive comprises of 15.000 drawings, 2.000 of which were made for the Athens Conservatory; its execution's study is extraordinarily meticulous – comprising hundreds of details and furnishings. Before attempting the restoration, a thorough research of the archived drawings was considered necessary: It revealed a series of elevations of a promising composition of acoustic panels – that was never realized. The fact that the two long sides are different, since the one hosts the main entrance, led Despo to different dispositions of the panels – especially obvious at the point of contact with the transversal twin beam – an artistic, visually intense synthesis. The construction drawings indicate that the panels' acoustic operation was mainly reflective. Apart from the necessary adaptation of their dimensions to the real dimensions of the Hall, that led to a 95% shrinkage of their surface, an important change was made to their geometry: following a decision to incorporate at the perimeter of each panel a led lighting strip, their 15cm width was chamfered at 45 degrees, thus achieving an optical dissolution of their mass – that is further accentuated by the warm, indirect lighting. To restore (verb), c.1300 is “to give back”, also “to build up again, repair”, from old French restorer. Through a series of radiant, dimmed lighting scenarios, these newly constructed panels are ‘given back’ to the Concert Hall, as restored according to those original, forgotten drawings.



5. RESTORATION

Changes and design interventions were necessary in terms of lighting, stage design and furnishings. By enlarging the scene's pedestal and consequently by moving the sound source forward, a suspended glass surface was required in order to optimize the sound's reflection towards the audience. Through its trapezoid shape, the latter's edges are appropriately refined in order not to derange the composition of the lateral panels. The dark tinted glass at the side of the backstage facilities was replaced by a sound-proof one – now operating as the semi-transparent diaphragm of the sound control room, created on a new mezzanine above the dressers. In order to amplify the sound diffusing capacity of the exposed brick wall, vertical narrow wooden elements following the brick's width and are complemented by a new wooden reclining bench in 8 pieces. The skylights were restored to the original framing of only two pieces for the small and three pieces for the large one, as found in the drawings – replacing the smaller, recent subdivisions. Four linear lighting fixtures at the lower level of the beams achieve adjustable, general lighting – without contact with the roof. Stage sound reflecting panels, flooring and exposed bricks were similarly tinted aiming at introducing a sharp polarity between the impressive roof and the new floor. The brick wall's color is consequently not the original one. Restoration was approached in a non-conservative manner: vigilant restoration as adaptive reuse.

Fig. 18 The Athens Conservatory, Upper Concert Hall, Plan.
Source: atelier66 and tense architecture network.

Fig. 19 The Athens Conservatory, restored Upper Concert Hall, 2018.
Source: T.Andrianopoulos.

Fig. 20 The Athens Conservatory, Upper Concert Hall, Section.
Source: atelier66 and tense architecture network.

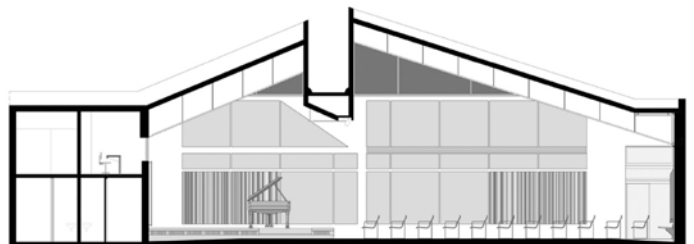
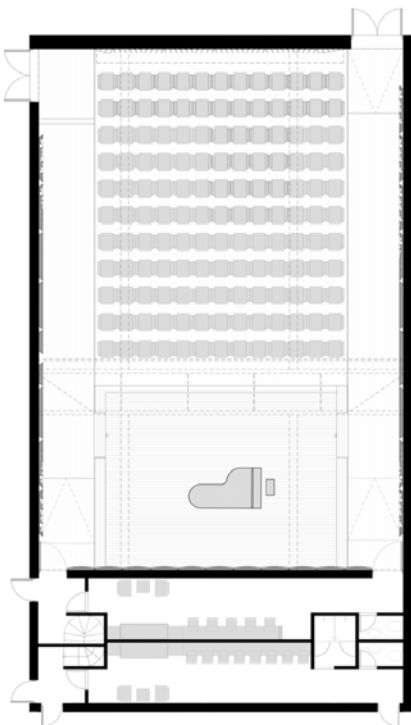


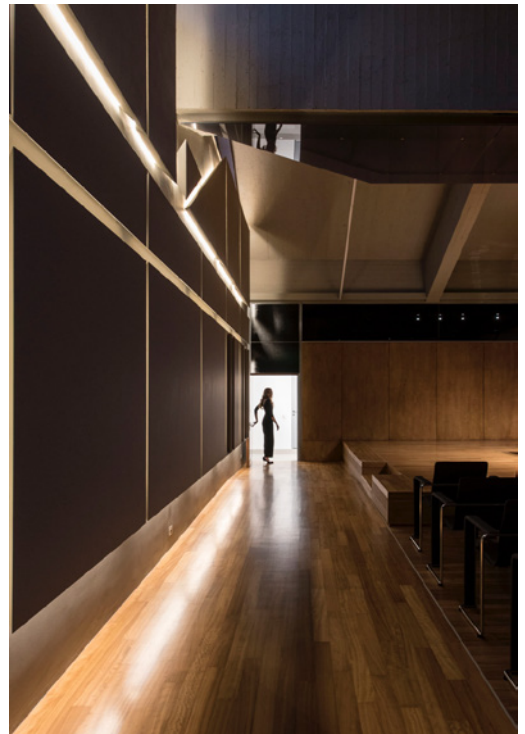
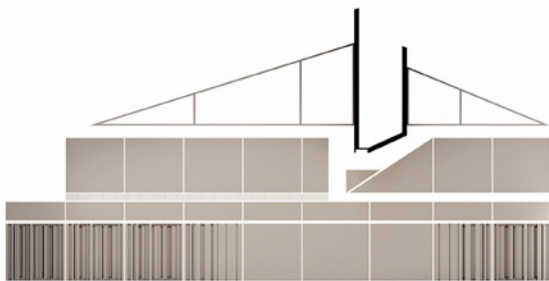
Fig. 21 The Athens Conservatory, restored Upper Concert Hall, 2018. Source: T.Andrianopoulos.

Fig. 22 The Athens Conservatory, Upper Concert Hall, Elevation drawing (detail). Source: atelier66 and tense architecture network.

Fig. 23 The Athens Conservatory, restored Upper Concert Hall, 2018. Source: T.Andrianopoulos.

6. FRAGMENT_II

The transformation of the Hall into a contemporary space for music asked for the adaptation of Despo's sculptural composition to current acoustic requirements: The panels should simultaneously deal with specifications of sound reflection, sound absorption and sound diffusion. Depending on their distance from the stage, the reflecting or absorbing requirement of the panels could easily be achieved by changing both their interior filling and their surface – the sound diffusing requirement though posed an important problem: How to make the lower panels of the edges diffusing while retaining their square geometry and respecting the sculptural integrity of the whole? Vertical, uneven carving of their surface and retaining of the overall framing was the only valid solution, as it achieved a gradual dissolution of their mass and their surface. Continuous linear slots for the air-conditioning replaced the original trapezoid ones, while the sound boxes were incorporated in two of the narrow panels, one for each side. The side walls were not kept white: panels and walls were painted in a concrete-grey in order to be unified with the roof, that along with the golden flooring act as complementary U-shaped surfaces that interconnect. The realization of this omitted design fragment, decades after its conception, is what finally makes the Hall alive, what makes it breathe: It's nature is inherently decorative, born from within, necessary, expressive of the spirit of the whole. A beautiful surface, allusive of its depth, as according to F.Nietzsche: "There are no beautiful surfaces without a terrible depth."



7. OPUS_II

What characterizes an opus is unity. And unity is what essentially is emerging through depth. Depth is the consistent interweaving of scales – let us consider their usual proceeding: urban design, to building design, to interior design. The Athens Cultural Center, to the Athens Conservatory, to the Concert Hall. The Athens Cultural Center was not realized, though it was passionately studied over a course of 15 years. The Athens Conservatory is a fragment of this greater vision, though it was also not completed – over a course of 40 years. The upper Concert Hall is a realized fragment of the fragment, fragment of a greater crystal – and the intensity of its restored vitality gives an idea of the vitality of the whole. Even closer, the omitted composition of the acoustic panels is like a crystal in a crystal, in a crystal, a necessary musical theme that was omitted – a materialization of design depth. For an opus to breathe, nothing can be omitted, and the interpenetration of scales is never a linear one – at least in Despo's mind. The rehabilitation of a lucent fragment of an emblematic building of Greek modernism called for the interweaving of both modern, adaptive reuse and careful, respectful restoration. None of these two essential notions would be of a finally valid spatial result if those original drawings by Jan Despo had never been discovered, shifting the importance of the whole venture to the central, crucial one: Research.

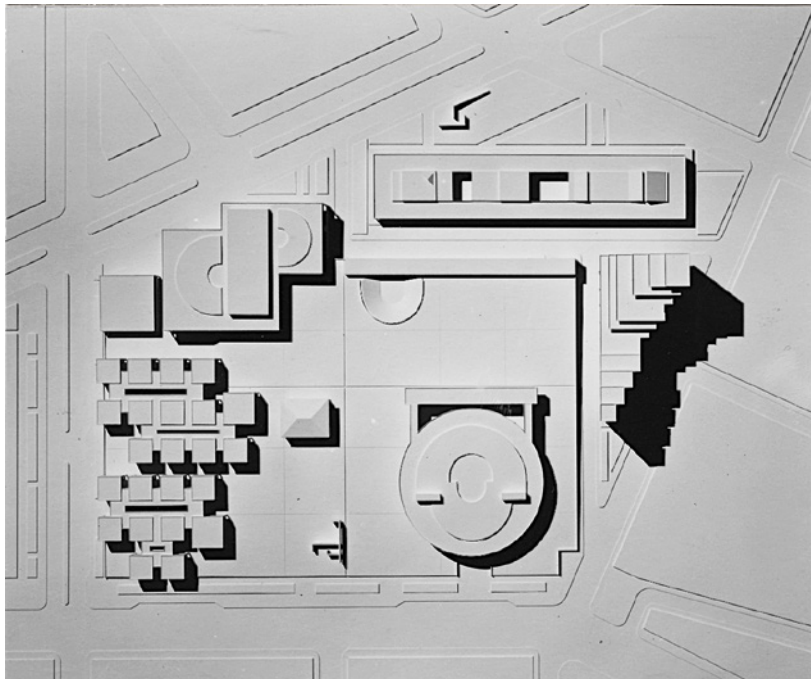
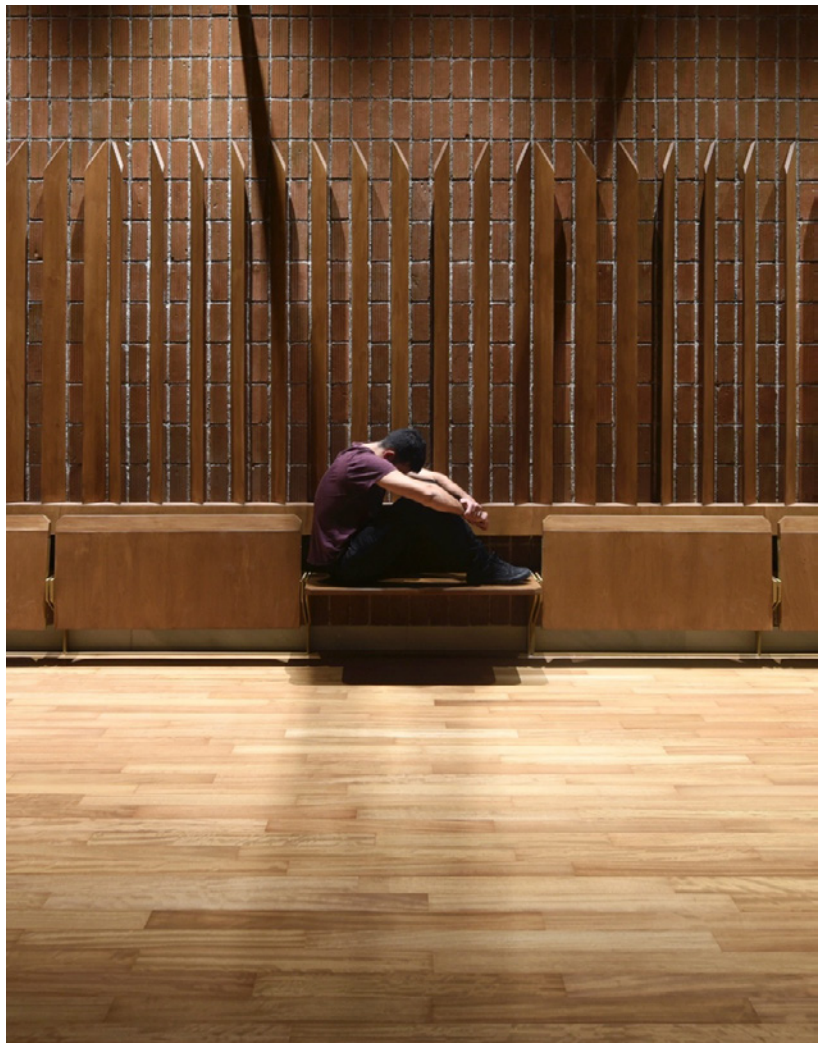


Fig. 24 The Athens Cultural Center, model, 1966. Source: The Neohellenic Architectural Archives (ANA), Benaki Museum.

Fig. 25 The Athens Conservatory,
Restored Upper Concert Hall, 2018.
Source: T.Andrianopoulos.

Fig. 26 The Athens Conservatory,
Restored Upper Concert Hall, 2018.
Source: T.Andrianopoulos.



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1 → Jan Despo studied in the Weimar Bauhaus for one year and a half and in order to obtain a diploma that was recognized in Greece continued his studies in Technische Universität Hannover (1924–28).

2 → Following his dismissal from his professorship in the NTUA due to his political convictions, Despotopoulos left in self-exile for 12 years in Sweden (1947–1959) where he adopted his abbreviated name: Jan Despo. He returned as a professor at the School of Architecture in Athens just after winning the '59 competition for the Cultural Center.

3 → At the end of the 1950's, Jan Despo worked in both Sweden and Greece. A series of civic centers in the former country laid the groundwork for his only corresponding composition in Greece, the Athens Cultural Centre. See also his article Jan Despo, "Die Agora, das neuzeitliche Kulturzentrum". Bauen + Wohnen, 17:2/1963, 49–61.

4 → This version was briefly presented at the end of a lecture for the Berlin Academy of the Arts: Despo, J. (1966) Die Ideologische Struktur der Städte. Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 164–167.

5 → Constructed between 1969–1976, though incomplete.

6 → Atelier 66 (architects: Dimitris and Suzanna Antonakakis, collaborator Efi Iliadou) and tense architecture network (architect: Tilemachos Andrianopoulos, collaborators: Konstantinos Kosmas, Nestoras Skantzouris).

7 → Nietzsche Friedrich, Λόγισσος Κατά Εσταυρωμένου, Δοκίμια και Σημειωματάρια (1869–1873), Κατόπρι, Athens 2009, p.232, my translation. Nietzsche uses the word "schreckliche" for terrible in the original text.

8 → 1959–1974. The last building that Despo designed for the Athens Cultural Center to an almost execution-study level was the Lyric and Drama theater (The Neohellenic Architectural Archives (ANA), Benaki Museum.)

9 → This constant interpenetration of scales is particularly proven in his urban design projects, especially for Cultural Centers in Sweden, whose preliminary versions were elaborated in diagrammatic form through numerous comparative tables (scale 1/400) for which he also prepared at the same time close-up sketches of decorations, as well as structural diagrams.