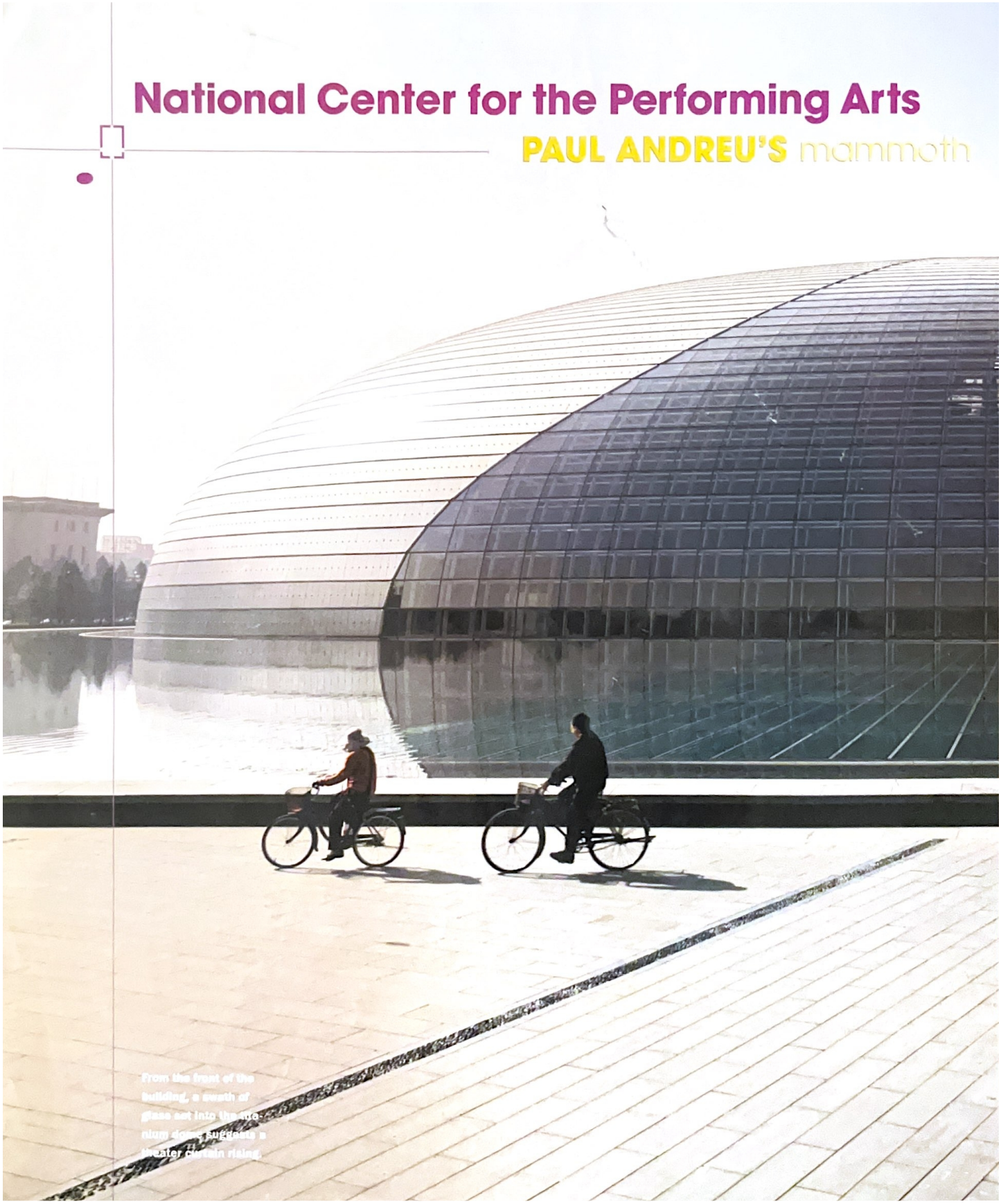
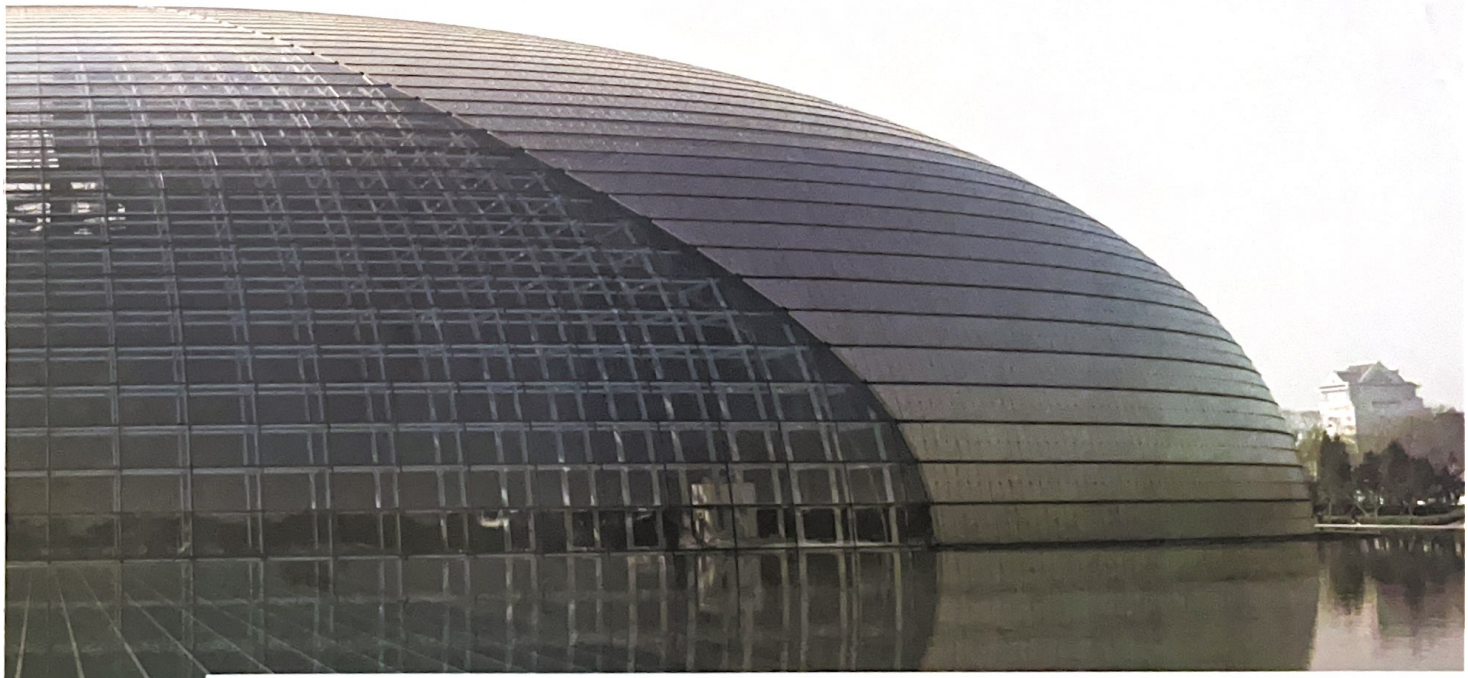
National Center for the Performing Arts

PAUL ANDREU'S mammoth



From the front of the building, a swath of glass set into the titanium dome suggests a theater curtain rising.

"Egg" shelters three theaters under one domed roof



By Fred A. Bernstein

If ever a building were ripe for second-guessing, it is Paul Andreu's National Center for the Performing Arts, near the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, and the cavernous Grand Hall of the People. Andreu, the winner of a government competition designed to give Beijing a cultural complex equivalent to New York's Lincoln Center, placed three separate performance halls beneath a glass-and-titanium roof. The roof reduces the complex, containing an astonishing 2.4 million square feet, to a single form, widely known as "The Egg." Clearly, some kind of unifying gesture was needed. How else could the building hold its own against its monumental neighbors?

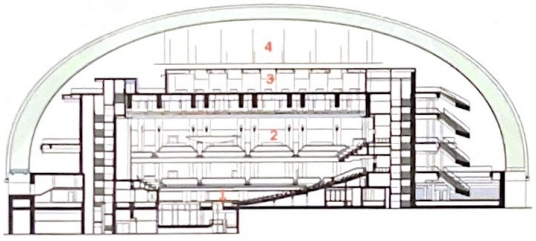
Fred A. Bernstein, a New York–based writer, won the 2008 Oculus Award for excellence in architectural journalism.

But Andreu's Egg is flat, both in shape and tone. (The titanium has a brushed texture, perhaps to prevent glare—though Beijing's polluted air usually does the trick.) And it is so carefully detailed that its surface is scaleless; except when window washers are climbing the exterior, it is impossible to grasp the building's size. Ultimately, for all the time (eight years) and money (at least $400 million, in a country where construction costs are minimal) that went into it, The Egg doesn't pack much of a punch.

Worse, the building, which was originally called the National Grand Theater, may induce a sense of déjà vu. The city's new airport, designed by Foster + Partners (see page 112), includes a subway terminal under a flattened glass dome. Millions of people will see that dome before they see this one. True, Andreu's version, supported by welded steel trusses, is particularly elegant from inside. But most visitors will never get inside (to Andreu's disappointment, velvet ropes prevent crowds from getting past the ticket windows). Indeed, given the modest size of the three theaters, the dome is far larger than it would be if the goal were merely to shelter, rather than to dazzle, theatergoers. Meanwhile, the environmental costs of heating and cooling this city under glass are vast—The architect says that a zoned HVAC system cuts energy use, but he admits that the building is not green by Western standards.

Andreu positioned The Egg, which he refers to as a cultural island, in the middle of a wide reflecting pool. The island metaphor required hiding the entrance to the building, so a large stair at the front of the site leads down to a long, below-grade passageway, suggesting

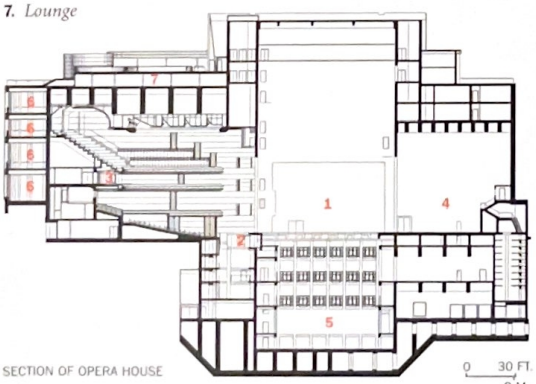
1. *Stage*
2. *Balcony*
3. *Library*
4. *Technical ceiling*



SECTION OF CONCERT HALL

A long passageway (above) runs under the reflecting pool and leads from the street to the building's main lobby. (Opposite, from top left): The opera house, with its walls of metal mesh; the concert hall, with its undulating ceiling; and the theater for traditional Chinese opera, with its striped silk walls, are all freestanding pavilions, built before the egg-shaped dome that now envelops them.

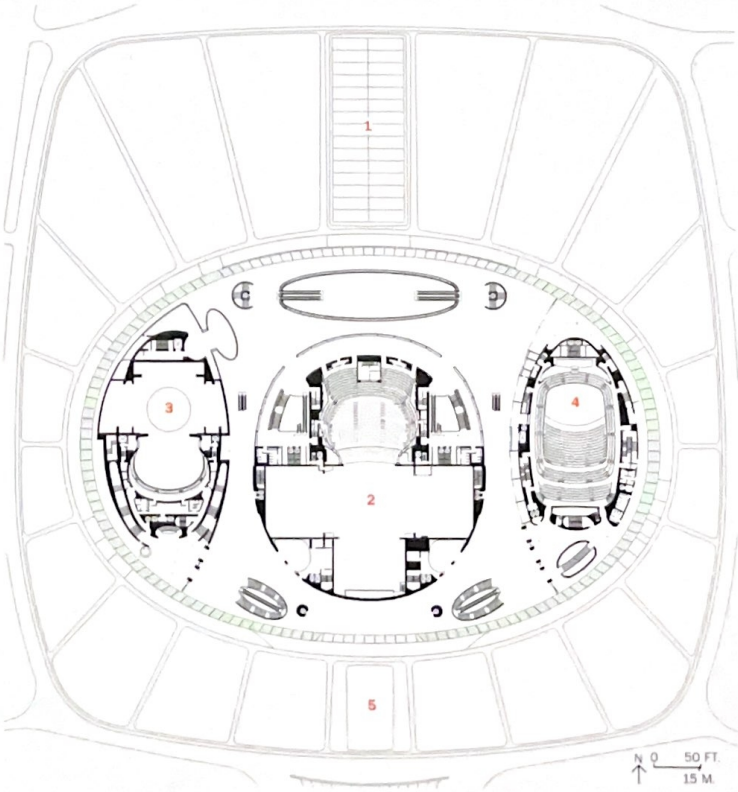
1. *Stage*
2. *Orchestra pit*
3. *VIP balcony*
4. *Backstage*
5. *Technical space*
6. *Public circulation*
7. *Lounge*



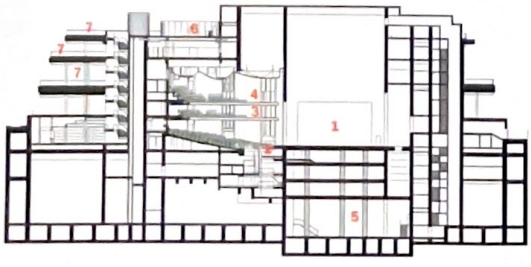
SECTION OF OPERA HOUSE

0 30 FT.
9 M.

1. *Underwater gallery*
2. *Opera house*
3. *Concert hall*
4. *Theater*
5. *Basin*

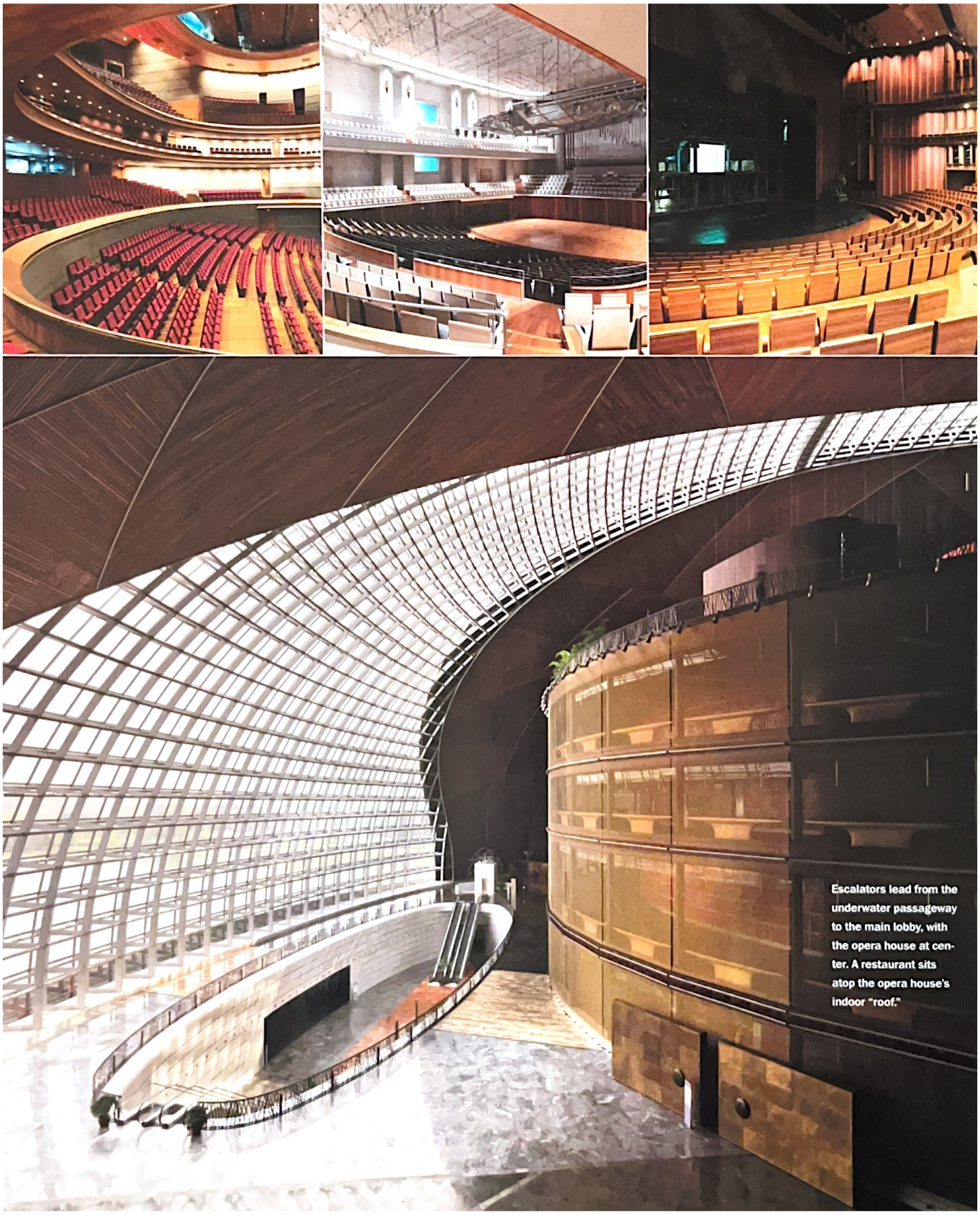


1. *Stage*
2. *Orchestra pit*
3. *First balcony*
4. *Second balcony*
5. *Technical space*
6. *Exhibition space*
7. *Public circulation*



SECTION OF THEATER

PHOTOGRAPHY: © ANDY RYAN PHOTOGRAPHY, EXCEPT AS NOTED



Escalators lead from the underwater passageway to the main lobby, with the opera house at center. A restaurant sits atop the opera house's indoor "roof."


Andreu himself sculpted
the bronze dividers
separating different
varieties of marble in
the lobby floor.
Overhead, Brazilian
mahogany panels
soften the expanses of
glass and metal.

Escalators carry passengers from the middle lobby to the upper stories of the largest (left) and smallest (right) of the three theaters.

PHOTOGRAPHY: © PAUL MAURER (THIS PAGE)

the coin slot on a bubble-gum machine. The passageway has a glass ceiling, but looking through the shallow pool is less exciting than it sounds.

At the end of the passageway, escalators carry visitors up into the dome. In covering the lobby's floors, walls, and curving ceilings, Andreu seemed determined to use every type of marble, wood, and metal he could find. True, the domed ceiling, which is clad in richly grained wood, is a powerful unifying element. And if there are lots of surfaces to decorate, it's because everything undecorative—the building's guts—is underground. Of course, the labyrinthine "back of house," really three basement levels, had to be connected to the upper floors. Thus, the building required 78 passenger elevators and more than 30 escalators, according to Andreu.

Luckily, the theaters themselves are lovely. The opera house, with more than 2,400 seats, is wrapped, inside and out, in gold-toned aluminum-and-stainless-steel mesh (made by Germany's GKD); the effect is soft and elegant. The second-largest space is a concert hall with about 2,000 seats arranged around a central "pit." Its ceiling is an undulating fiberglass surface sculpture, based on a plaster model by Andreu. In the smallest of the three venues, a 1,000-seat theater for traditional Chinese opera, walls are upholstered in Chinese silk in shades of orange, purple, and red. To this listener, who heard rehearsals in all three halls, the acoustics were terrific. (In the case of the opera house, Jean-Paul Vian, of French acoustic consultant CSTB, described an artful compromise between Andreu's desire for curved surfaces and the acoustical advantages of rectangular forms: The architect draped metal-mesh surfaces—which are acoustically transparent but visually opaque—over a masonry shoebox.)

Andreu, who has spent much of his career designing airports, was a logical choice to design a building as big and ambitious as this one. And his Egg contains some winning elements. But his client—a China in thrall to Western architecture—didn't know when to stop. ■

Project: *National Center for the Performing Arts*

Architect: *Paul Andreu Architect Paris—Paul Andreu, principal; François Tamisier, Serge Carillion, Olivia Faury, Mario Flory, Hervé Langlais, project architects*

Associate architects: *Aeroports de Paris Ingenierie, Beijing Institut of Architecture & Design*

Consultants: *Centre Technique et Scientifique du Bâtiment (acoustical)*

ONLINE: To rate this project, go to ***architecturalrecord.com/projects/***.