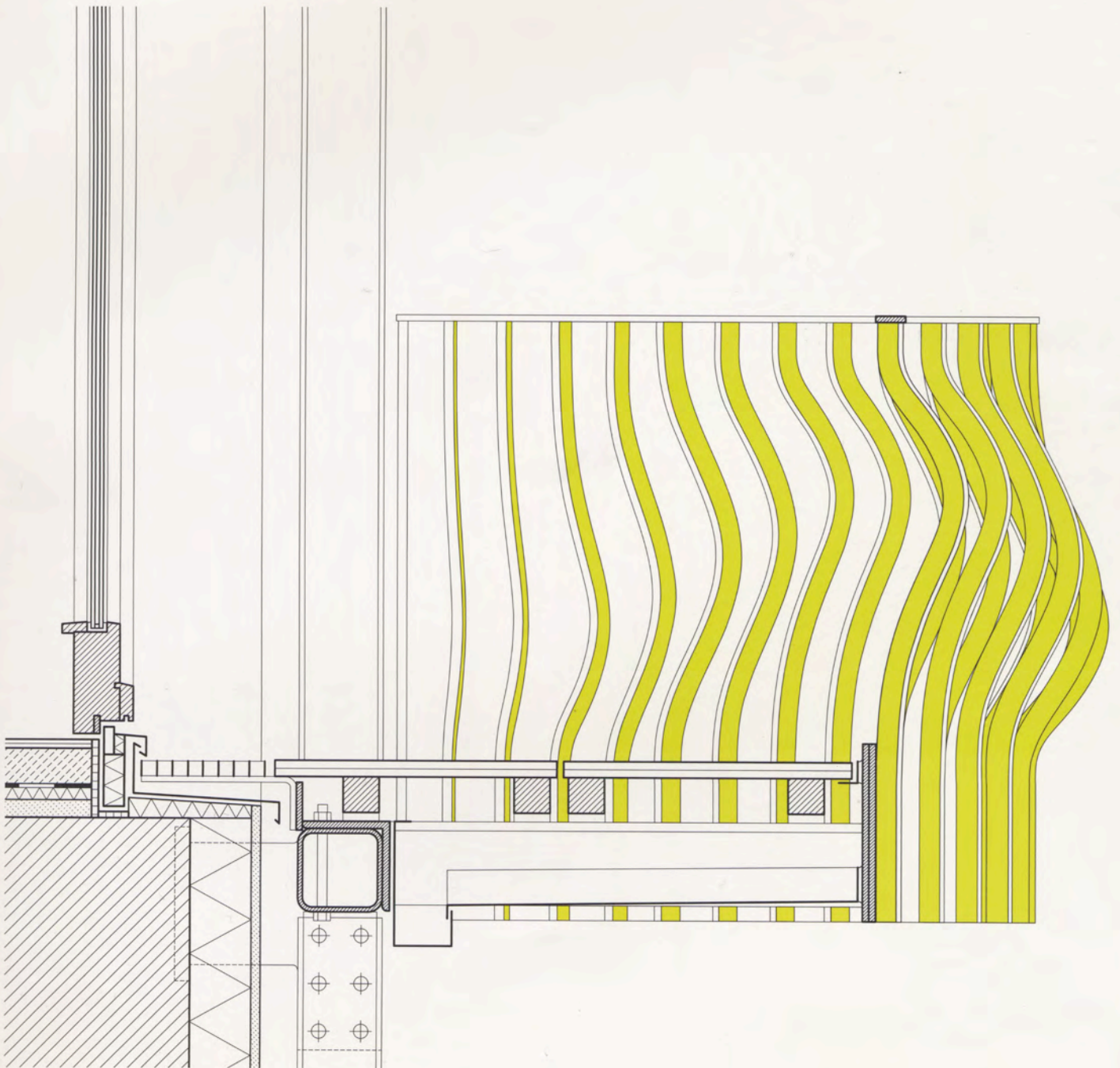


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# DETAIL

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## Queens Theatre in the Park: Breathing new life into Philip Johnson's World's Fair legacy

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Architects:  
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[www.queentheatre.org](http://www.queentheatre.org)

The 1964 New York World's Fair was a frenetic architectural celebration of the wonders of mid-century America. Set in Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens, the fair enthralled visitors with its post-war idealism and ebullient vision of the future. None of the pavilions were as majestic, extroverted or technologically advanced as the New York State Pavilion, designed by Philip Johnson. The elliptical plaza at the base of the "Tent of Tomorrow" was flanked by three towers bearing a series of concrete, circular, pod-like observation platforms; the ensemble seemed to embody the futuristic ideals of the era. The pavilion's carcass survived 40 years of neglect, its sculptural form an enduring presence in the heart of the city's most ethnically diverse borough. Beside this structure was a smaller, circular building originally called the Theaterama. A

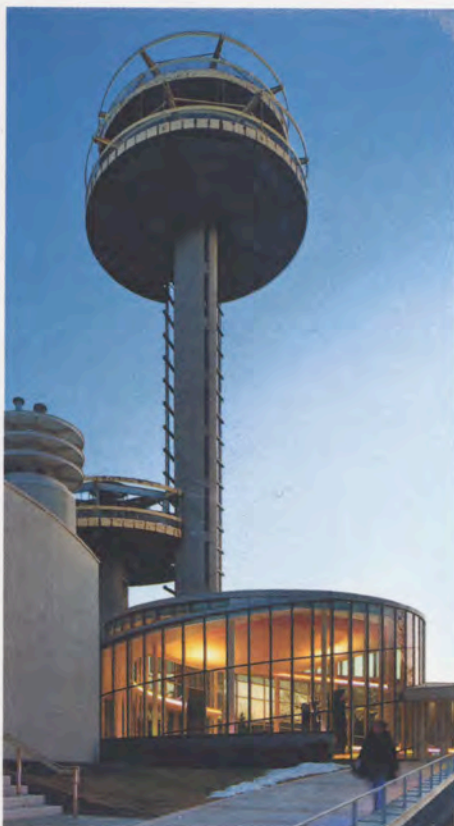


1991 renovation converted this drum-like space into a 500-seat theatre, which has been immensely successful in bringing a variety of productions into the park. In 2002, a much-needed renovation and expansion project was begun. It included the re-editing of the Theaterama building, expanding and replacing mechanical systems, restoring windows and lines of sight that predated the previous renovation, as well as replacing the roof and structural elements.

The architects also created two new additions to the project. The first consists of a concentric structure wrapped around the existing concrete cylinder of the Theaterama building. It includes a 75-seat cabaret performance space, management offices, service rooms and a large theatrical elevator. The second addition, dubbed the Nebula, consists of a new circular pavilion. The re-

ception space for up to 600 people embraces its site with delicate, playful details, paying distinctly understated homage to the grandiosity of Philip Johnson's pavilion. Geometrically, it sits on the fourth arm of the crossed axes formed by the three Philip Johnson structures. The walls are made entirely of glass, conceptually embracing both theatre and park. This draws in viewers from the park side, who naturally gravitate to the building, particularly at dusk.

Two main entrances, located approximately 160 degrees from each other, provide access from the street. Emulating the existing geometries on site, the approaches into the building swirl concentrically around the central glazed drum. Their dynamic form culminates in the middle in an inverted hemispherical ceiling. The elegance of this solution belies the complexity of creating a

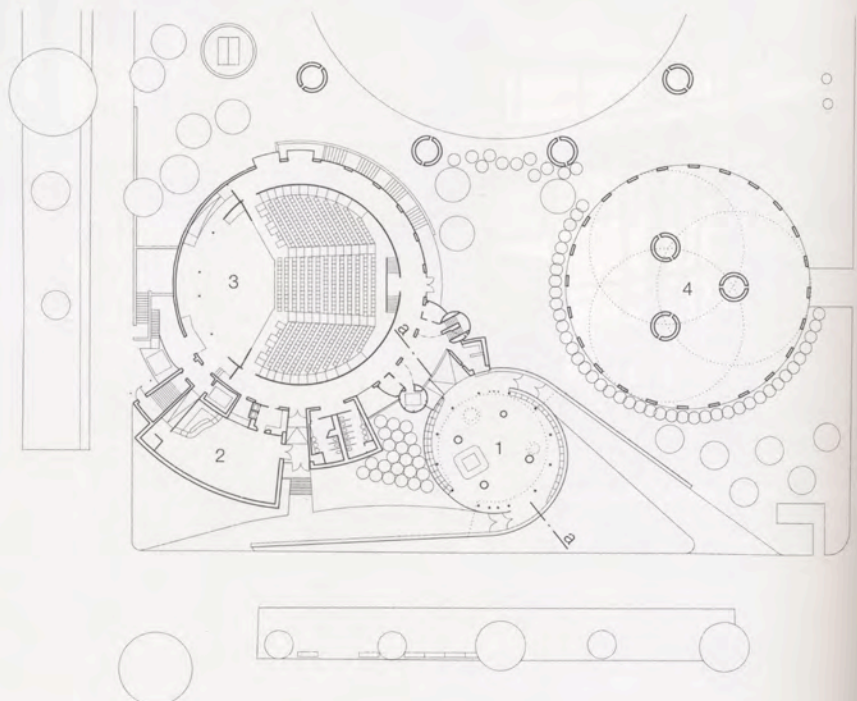


Site plan scale 1:1000  
Section scale 1:400

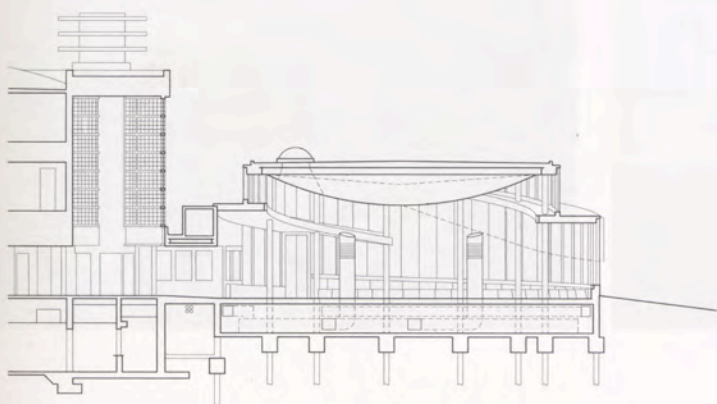
1 New pavilion  
("Nebula")

2 new Cabaret  
("Wrap")

3 Theatre  
4 Observation Towers







seamless-looking cylindrical building. The rounded, suspended ceiling ties in with the original World's Fair concept while creating a powerful yet understated presence. As late-afternoon sunlight grazes the hemisphere, the space is pierced by long shadows. The effect is reminiscent of a sundial, and very theatrical in its own right. To add to the drama, two inverted conical holes were bored through the roof. These can look like circles or ovals, depending on one's point of view. Standing directly underneath them, one can catch glimpses of the Johnson pavilion's observation decks, the sky and the trees surrounding the site. As one mingles with others in the open reception space, one's eye is drawn naturally to explore the cathedral-like ruins through these openings. Budget constraints prevented the use of curved insulated glass panes. Instead, the

architects added exterior fins that project from each vertical mullion, creating the illusion of a continuously curved glass wall (see p. 357). The effect of overlapping fins vanishing in perspective also allows the eye to perceive the drum of the pavilion as circular. Seen from the street, the sweeping forms of the new building act as a timeless complement to the existing structures. The Sicilian marble floors and brass-clad internal columns convey a sense of classic opulence, a rarity in modern public spaces. The richness of these materials is enhanced by the warm, yellow-toned ceiling. Its shape and construction – acoustic plaster on sound insulation attached to an inverted gypsum dome – drastically diminish the echo associated with circular, glass-clad domed buildings, creating a pleasant, natural soundscape. The choice of materials

was also influenced by the desire for longevity, as the building was designed for a 200-year life span. That in itself makes it green, even if it is not LEED-certified. In addition, the exterior is clad in a selectively placed perforated stainless-steel mesh. This mesh is positioned so as to partially reflect direct hard sunlight, while at the same time preserving a sense of transparency and views in key directions.

The presence of theatregoers in the lounge at dusk creates its own natural theatre, bringing new life to an ensemble of once forlorn ruins. Through their keen cultural and historic sensibilities, Caples Jefferson have succeeded in creating an understatedly powerful building, which re-establishes the relevance of the Philip Johnson pavilion and embraces it as part of the new Queens Theatre in the Park.

