Many times, change in architecture is bolstered by circumstances beyond an individual’s control. Discussing the reforms to the Santiago Municipal Theater building, from its inauguration in 1857 until almost a century later, Germán Hidalgo recounts many forces that drive change: natural disasters, stylistic debates, urban modernization, among others. The foyer occupies a central role in this narrative, as a space for presentation and representation: where the technical demands of the theater meet the aspirations of an institution, a city, and the building’s successive architects.

**Keywords:**
Renovations, accesses, adaptation, history, conditions for change

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**BETWEEN THE STREET AND THE MAIN HALL**

**THE FOYER OF THE MUNICIPAL THEATER OF SANTIAGO, 1857-1952**

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A New Building in the City

Built under the presidency of Manuel Montt Torres (1851-1861), but first proposed in the previous decade under Manuel Bulnes Prieto’s (1841-1851), the Municipal Theater of Santiago is a statement that confirms that modern societies—which emerged with the birth of nation states and capitalism—are characterized by the ambiguity of their values, conditioned more by procedures than by true convictions. Each of the important changes made to the building during its first 100 years of existence—with or without grounds—was a critical instance that questioned the original design precisely where it establishes a closer relationship with the city: the foyer, a place specially destined to express the dreams and desires of every society. This results from the fact that buildings, necessarily, fulfill cycles, trace vital trajectories that provides them with meaning and identity, and, to no lesser extent, undergo important, sometimes even radical, changes; because, as Rafael Moneo (2017:18) pointed out, “change, continuous intervention, is the fate, whether you like it or not, of architecture.” In this sense, the trajectory followed by the building of the Municipal Theater of Santiago was strongly conditioned by the qualities of the place where it was built. Indeed, the theater we know was largely defined by the foundational urban practices derived from the block’s subdivision into four lots when it was residential, or into three long strips when its proposed usage was institutional. Originally, the Theater’s block was part of the first group.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the site that the Theater would occupy years later a large casona, built to house the Real Universidad de San Felipe (Medina, 1928:164). For these purposes, several smaller plots were bought and consolidated into the site that remains to this day, 58 m front by 69 m deep (Peña, 1960:25). That is, the western half of the block comprised by the current Agustinas, Mac Iver, Moneda and San Antonio streets. Both the University’s building, and later the Theater itself, were arranged following the order imposed by the streets’ east-west hierarchy. This is a relevant fact, because it determined that the front of the building was oriented to the north, that is, facing the Plaza de Armas, as well as its main access through Agustinas street. The Theater’s destiny was shaped by this fact. With each alteration, no matter the catalyst, there was an unspoken understanding that the primary goal was to enlarge its façade or enhance its urban prominence. These modifications were far from minor, as they aimed to elevate the status and significance of one of the building’s most vital spaces: the foyer. This area served as a reception and mediating space between the city and the performance hall. Since their construction, the Theater’s hall and boxes, designed by Claude-Francois Brunet de Baines between 1853 and 1855 (Peña, 1960; Jüngersen, 2012; Hidalgo, 2020a; Hidalgo, 2022), appeared to satisfy both the technical and symbolic prerequisites expected of them. However, for one reason or another, the foyer and its relation to the city remained an unfinished task.

The Opening of the Main Façade

On the tragic night of December 8, 1870, a devastating fire destroyed the Theater. A photograph taken after the accident reveals that only the building’s structure prevailed [Fig. 01]. Fortunately, the fire broke out after the show had ended, preventing a much larger tragedy.

Subsequently, changes were made to facilitate the evacuation of the building. Measures such as widening corridors and stairs were taken to achieve this purpose, as well as the opening of new
01. Teatro Municipal después del incendio de 1870. Fotografía de autor desconocido. / Source: Centro de Documentación de Artes Escénicas, Municipal de Santiago, Ópera Nacional.

02. Teatro Municipal reconstruido luego del incendio de 1870. Fotografía de autor desconocido. / Source: Archivo fotográfico del Museo Histórico Nacional.

03. Fachada principal proyectada por Doyère en obras, c. 1909. Fotografía de autor desconocido. / Source: Centro de Documentación de Artes Escénicas, Municipal de Santiago, Ópera Nacional.

connections between the main hall and lateral courtyards, and from these to the two new entrances opened on each side of the portico towards Agustinas street. The outcome was no less significant, as it allowed the body of the building—which Brunet de Baines had designed in a neutral style to blend in with the colonial forms prevailing in the rest of the city—to receive a more intricate compositional and decorative treatment. Extending the motifs to the entire width of the building, the new doors were inscribed in apses, ending the rows of the façade with greater depth [Fig. 2].

This reconstruction coincided with the transformation of Santiago, led by its intending Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna between 1872 and 1875. He actively deployed every effort to rebuild the Theater. Due to the relevance of the work, the most outstanding architects in the country participated, starting with the Frenchman Lucien Hénault—who had assumed the position of Government Architect after the untimely death of Brunet de Baines—with his disciple Ricardo Brown. According to Vicuña Mackenna (1873:142), the Italian architect Eusebio Chelli, who had been in Chile since 1853 dedicated to ecclesiastical works, also participated. It has also been mentioned that even the Frenchman Paul Lathoud intervened in the reconstruction of the main hall after Hénault returned to France (Peña, 1960:42), and it is likely that Manuel Aldunate would have participated, as he was a disciple and continuator of the works left unfinished by Brunet de Baines (Hidalgo, 2022:30-31).

Besides its importance for Santiago's society, who reacted swiftly in order to recover it, the reconstruction of the Theater offered an opportunity for the mayor to include it in the city's modernization process. As we have noted elsewhere (Hidalgo et al, 2020b:61-74; Hidalgo et al, 2021a:151-156), the modernization that took place in Santiago during this period was likely the most significant in its history, given the scale and importance of the projects involved relative to the city's size. These projects included parks, avenues, squares, and promenades, alongside the projects involved relative to the city's size. These projects included parks, avenues, squares, and promenades, alongside the opening of new streets and the renovation of buildings, among several smaller initiatives. While some of the plan's projects were completed in this period, others would take years to materialize, such as the construction of a canal in the Mapocho river. The goal of modernizing the Chilean capital led to a vast undertaking that culminated in the International Exhibition of 1875, held at the Quinta Normal, another vital place that was transformed for this occasion. Therefore, the reconstruction of the Theater was well-timed, as it joined this broader social and cultural initiative that aimed to showcase what Chile was like at the time.

The Monumentalization of the Foyer of Agustinas
The Municipal Theater underwent its most significant changes at the beginning of the twentieth century, which ultimately determined—and defined—the building that stands today. These changes mainly impacted the way in which the theater opened up to the city, characterizing a new approach to welcoming and accommodating the public.

In all likelihood, this intervention was conceived in tandem with the celebrations of the Centenary of the Republic, during which iconic urban facilities were constructed, with the aim of leading the country into the new century. These included the Mapocho and Providencia railway stations, as well as the Museum of Fine Arts, all designed by Emilio Jequier, an architect born in Chile but trained in Paris (Pérez, 2016:55-65; Hidalgo, 2021b:139-163).

The changes made were indeed significant, and due to the scale of the intervention, the aim was to carry out a radical transformation. It was therefore decided to give the Theater greater urban presence, enhanced its overall look, and above all, to monumentalize the main foyer, which had retained the austere
color of the original project. The works were entrusted to the French architect Emilio Doyère, who, like Jequier, had trained at L'École des Beaux-Arts. They were undoubtedly the two most prestigious architects in the country at that time, which explains why they received the main commissions* (Hidalgo, 2021b:141-143).

No effort was spared to ennoble the Agustinas foyer and explains the entrance to the upper rows with distinction and solemnity. The most impressive operation in this regard was the addition of an imperial staircase at the center of the foyer. This was no small feat, as it required the entire front of the building to be rebuilt [Fig. 05]. The process involved demolishing the Philharmonic Hall located on the second floor above the foyer and constructing a new façade, advancing a module on the Plazuela de Agustinas, which covered the one that Brunet de Baines had previously built and modified after the fire of 1870. While the few photographs that remain indicate that the imperial staircase occupied an excessive amount of space [Fig. 04], it cannot be denied that the transformation of the main façade was effective in giving the building monumentality, achieved by incorporating an imposing loggia with four freestanding columns on the front portico [Fig. 05].

To complement the radical transformation, the idea of creating a second foyer was proposed. However, its implementation required an even more significant intervention than the previous one, as it involved opening a new street on the east side of the building [Fig. 06]. This operation was carried out with the express purpose of isolating the Theater (Sucosos, 1909) and was part of a real estate strategy to increase the efficiency and profitability of the central part of the traditional block, which was generally underutilized. It kept pace with a trend of similar interventions, such as the one carried out in the block of the Augustinian nuns, which resulted in the creation of Nueva York street.

The new foyer was built on one of the lateral courtyards of the original theater and somewhat surpassed the spatial qualities of the existing foyer. Partly because there were no height limitations and the stairs leading to the upper boxes were incorporated into the walls, creating an unobstructed space that was relatively wider and better lit. It was soberly decorated following the Beaux Arts style [Fig. 07]. In addition to generating a complementary or alternative foyer, this intervention allowed the isolation of the building from its neighbors, improving its operation substantially. However, two aspects remained unrealized: first, the connection between the two foyers, and second, the façade towards Tenderini street, where “the masonry was not left exposed for many years” (Peña, 1960:48). One could infer from this that Doyère arranged a kind of general distribution of the masonry work that—according to Peña—“evinced an intention [.] of continuing the main façade.” The façade towards Tenderini was finished years later by the architect Carlos Swinburn, Director of Municipal Works, who “did not know how to interpret Doyère’s idea as this façade lacks any architectural value” (Peña, 1960:78-79). Indeed, as one of the oldest photographs of this side of the building shows [Fig. 08], its style is largely different from that of the main façade and the foyer. Finally, it should be noted that the space available on Tenderini street was not adequate for a major intervention, as a second foyer would require, such as reconciling the interior level with that of the street while following monumentality of the interior.  

A Frustrated Third Foyer
Soon after these radical changes, a new concern grew among municipal authorities. It’s possible to imagine that the foyer remodeled by Doyère did not satisfy the Theater’s regulars. Eduardo Secchi (1957:s/n), an architect who also later intervened in the theater, wrote, “The wonder that Doyère had created lasted...
06. Apertura de la calle Tenderini aún en obras. En el primer plano se puede ver parte de la construcción de la nueva fachada del teatro proyectada por Doyère. Bajo la imagen se indica: “Apertura de la calle entre San Antonio y Claras, para aislar el teatro”. / Opening of Tenderini street, still under construction. In the foreground, part of the construction of the Theater’s new façade designed by Doyère. Under the image it reads: “Opening of the street between San Antonio and Claras, to isolate the theater.” Fuente / Source: Sucesos, no. 340 (1909).

08: Vista del teatro en escorzo, que permite apreciar la fachada hacia la calle Tenderini, c. 1930. Adviértanse las angostas veredas y el tránsito vehicular. Fotografía de autor desconocido. / View of the foreshortened theatre, which allows you to appreciate the façade towards Tenderini street, c. 1930. Note the narrow sidewalks, and vehicular traffic. Unknown photographer. Fuente / Source: Centro de Documentación de Artes Escénicas, Municipal de Santiago, Ópera Nacional.

09: El foyer principal, ya sin la escalera imperial, 1928. Nótense las gradas en la transición hacia la platea baja. / The main foyer, without the imperial staircase, 1928. Note the set of stairs in the transition to the lower stalls. Fuente / Source: Boletín Municipal no. 938.
until 1924 when the Mayor, Mr. Phillips, believed that the staircase dominated the capacity of the foyer and wanted to eliminate it.”

In addition to this key antecedent, another factor that likely influenced the removal of the imperial staircase was that its location prevented direct entry to the stalls (Peña, 1960:71). Furthermore, it’s reasonable to assume a growing need to reinstate the Philharmonic Hall since it had provided an important source of revenue to the Theater administration in the past, as a popular events venue for rent.9

This concern came to fruition sooner than expected due to a new fire that affected the Theater on May 27, 1924 (Secchi, 1957: s/n). While the incident didn’t cause significant damage and only affected the stage area adjacent to San Antonio Street, it was reason enough to promote new changes. The project was led by young architects Fernando Valdivieso and Fernando de la Cruz, the former trained in France and the latter at the Universidad de Chile. As one could rightly assume, their proposal revolved around recovering the already mentioned conditions of the main foyer, eliminating the imperial staircase, and rebuilding the Philharmonic Hall. This required reintroducing, once again, the problem of the Theater’s accessibility. According to Eduardo Secchi (1957:s/n), Valdivieso and De la Cruz conceived a beautiful idea: to surround the main hall on its three sides with a foyer in a ‘U’ shape, connecting Agustinas, San Antonio, and Tenderini streets, and returning to the original idea of building a Philharmonic Hall on the second floor, facing Agustinas street.

However, this “beautiful idea” could not be realized mainly because implementing it required significant changes in the building’s layout, such as relocating the activities that took place facing San Antonio street—aan area that would have to be emptied—which would not have fit elsewhere. Additionally, the high cost of the intervention might have also been a factor. As a result, only the removal of the imperial staircase [Fig. 09] and replacement of the Philharmonic Hall [Fig. 10] were possible. As Federico Peña (1960:78) noted, this intervention was poorly planned and lacked provision, to the extent that the stairs to access the second-order boxes in the Agustinas foyer could not be reconstructed, relegating this function to the stairs in the Tenderini foyer. This fact confirms that funds were prematurely exhausted. Another detail worth noting is that, as a result of rebuilding the Philharmonic Hall, the height of the foyer below was substantially reduced. Probably to mitigate this situation, the original steps of the front portico were moved to the interior of the building, almost on the entrance to the main hall where they remain to this day. However, this operation did not substantially improve the feeling of compression caused by the foyer’s low ceiling.

The Suppression of the Tenderini Foyer

The last significant renovation of the building occurred almost two decades after Valdivieso and De la Cruz’s intervention, in the context of the theater’s centennial anniversary. The architect in charge of the project, as we have previously hinted, was Eduardo Secchi, who had a keen interest in Santiago’s architectural heritage and had already produced significant publications based on his own drawings (Secchi, 1941). As previously noted, Secchi admired Valdivieso and De la Cruz’s proposal to transform the Theater, describing it as a “beautiful idea.” Therefore, when it was his turn to intervene, he did what he could to see their vision realized:

During the tenure of Mayor José S. Salas, […] plans were made to carry out significant renovations to restore the Theater’s lost beauty. The mayor and the theater council […] commissioned

the architect Eduardo Secchi, who was responsible for municipal works, to draw up the plans […] These works included relocating the entrance to the upper stalls on the main Agustinas foyer, placing the stairs to the second floor at the east and west ends, and connecting the Agustinas and Tenderini foyers to create a large reception hall in the latter (Secchi, 1957:s/n).

Secchi did indeed build the stairs that Valdivieso and de la Cruz had been unable to incorporate. However, he did not place them in the same location where Brunet de Baines had originally intended them to be—at both ends of the foyer. Instead, Secchi installed them in the corners of the foyer’s enclosing wall taking advantage of the greater depth available there. With this new configuration, Secchi opened up the foyer, but the stairs were somewhat obscured by the columns attached to the walls, making them inconspicuous and, at worst, difficult to locate.

After resolving the entrance to the second-order boxes, Secchi proceeded to remove the stairs from the Tenderini foyer—which had previously served this function—and repurposed the space as a large reception hall. While the reasons for this decision are unknown, it is likely that Secchi had a greater vision for the Theater, as evinced in his statement (Secchi, 1957:s/n)

There’s still much to do for the building to achieve the conditions proper to Chile’s most important theater, and we believe that this goal can be fulfilled in the near future, as a comprehensive plan is in place for this purpose.

Based on the information above, we can infer that the modifications made to the Tenderini foyer were part of an “overall plan” that Secchi himself had envisioned for the theater. Indeed, between 1947 and 1952, Secchi drew up various plans to transform the theater, including a new reception hall [Fig. 11] and a proposal to raise the Philharmonic Hall to create a “great hall” [Fig. 12], a proposal that did not come to fruition.10

In the realm of speculation, it is possible to think that the Tenderini foyer never worked as intended, and instead served as a transitional space between the theater and the city. This could be due to the practical issues mentioned before, like the constraints of Tenderini street in the realization of a foyer appropriate to its functions. Along these issues, we should add practical and economic considerations, such as the arrangement of control points, which could have influenced the decision to minimize the theater’s entrances.

Between the Street and the Main Hall

The diagrams [Fig. 13] provide a clear view of the most important changes that have occurred in the Municipal Theater’s floor plan over its first century, serving as testimony of their scale and their emphasis on the reception areas. Nevertheless, significant changes were also made to the performance hall, stage, and service areas, such as the introduction of the back alley, which has been essential for assembly, loading, and unloading of scenery and other materials. However, the service installations located behind it could be better integrated programmatically and functionally with the rest of the theater.

Despite some blurring, the current building still reflects the voluminous central body originally designed by Brunet de Baines, containing the foyer, hall, and scenic box, flanked by two narrow and elongated courtyards around which the smaller programs are distributed. In this sense, this volumetric differentiation is still perceptible in the current building mainly as a result of the opening of Tenderini street, which isolated the building from neighboring structures. Furthermore, the original principles

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10. El salón Filarmónico recién repuesto de acuerdo al proyecto de Valdivieso y De la Cruz, 1928. Los motivos decorativos son los mismos dispuestos por Doyère en la parte alta del foyer. / The Philharmonic Hall as replaced according to the project of Valdivieso and De la Cruz, 1928. The decorative motifs are the same as those arranged by Doyère at the top of the foyer. Fuente / Source: Boletín Municipal no. 938.


Diagrams exhibiting the changes made in the entrances to the theater. Drawings by Anais Rodas.
behind the broad façade conceived after the 1870 fire, still stands. The aforementioned opening of Tenderini street granted the building a modern monumentality by introducing a lateral, dynamic, and three-dimensional view, which the original building did not have, highlighting its volumetric definition. Similarly, the Doyère’s façade, with its loggia and monumental colonnade, still stands. In the current Arrau Room, corresponding to the Philharmonic Hall restored by Valdivieso and De la Cruz, the decorations on the upper ends of the foyer walls, designed by Doyère, were maintained. Finally, the ambitious project of Valdivieso and De la Cruz, which aimed to bring together three foyers in a single space, opens up series of questions about its eventual effectiveness in light of the performance of the current connection between the main foyer with the one on Tenderini, known today as La Capilla Room.

As a space of transition between the street and the main hall—between real life and its representation—the foyer was, still is and will be, a place destined to absorb the changes that occur in the city, which are—partly—an expression of the advance of time and the replacement of dominant ideologies. Undoubtedly, as demonstrated by this historical reconstruction, the foyer of the Municipal Theater, in its first hundred years, has been responsive to these changes, acting as a mirror in which the city and society as a whole can be reflected. For this same reason, its destiny has been—as a kind of eternal return—to represent these changes and, therefore, remain forever unfinished. **ARQ**

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**NOTES**

1. This article presents a part from the results of the research Fondecyt, Folio n°580007, “La vida del Teatro Municipal, a través de su planimetría histórica,” directed by Germán Hidalgo with the collaboration of Magdalena Montalbán and Anais Rodas. The research was funded by the Fondo Nacional de Desarrollo Cultural y las Artes 2021 call, and had the support of the Centro de Documentación de Artes Escénicas, Municipal de Santiago, Ópera Nacional, and the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urban Studies of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

2. In the fire firefighter Germán Tenderini and stagehand Santos Quintanilla died in an attempt to put out the flames. The events were described by the volunteer Arturo Villarroel, who was unharmed, in the Libro de Novedades de 1870. This document is preserved in the library of the Sexta Compañía de Bomberos.

3. The main building of the exhibition, today the Museum of Natural History, was designed by Paul Lathoud, who later also built the Cousiño Palace.

4. Doyère was considerably older than Jéquier, and apparently exerted an important influence on the latter. Both architects worked together, particularly in the building of the Courts of Justice.

5. Law No. 1832, February 13, 1906. The newly opened street, received the name of the martyred firefighter, Tenderini.

6. According to a report in Sucesos, no. 323 (1908), this foyer was “for ladies.”


8. Originally, Tenderini street had vehicular traffic, and its sidewalks were not very wide.

9. In a note of the Municipal Bulletin, it is reported that, between acts of the opera, the Philharmonic Hall was used for dances.

10. So far, not enough material has been found to clarify Secchi’s intentions, beyond what Federico Peña managed to collect at the time.

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