Theo van Doesburg's reviews on architecture collected in this volume give an overall picture of the most important developments of European architecture in the twenties, seen from an avant-garde point of view of a contemporary. Presenting them as a book constitutes the completion of a project considered by van Doesburg himself, namely to assemble the observations he published in „Het Bouwbedrijf“ from October 1924 on. He conceived this plan soon after completing the first four series of articles, namely the ones about France, Germany and Austria, Czechoslovakia, and an overview of exhibitions and demonstrations on architecture, culminating in a jubilant review of the Werkbund manifestation „Die Wohnung“ 1927 in Stuttgart. If this book had been published in 1928, van Doesburg would have asserted himself among the European avant-garde of architecture critics: it would have been the first ample and well-nigh comprehensive overview of this kind, and would have completely overshadowed publications such as Gropius’s „Internationale Architektur“. In 1928, van Doesburg resumed his publications in „Het Bouwbedrijf“ with a series of articles about the Soviet Union, Italy, Spain, Yugoslavia and Poland, publications which ended abruptly with his premature death on March 7, 1931, in Davos.
Theo van Doesburg, Cinema-Dance Hall in the Aubette, Strasbourg 1926–1928. View toward the entrance doors.
The structure on the Place Kléber in Strasbourg, named “Aubette” is the remnant of a large but straggling monastic complex, dating from the thirteenth century; most of the buildings were demolished in the sixteenth century (1552). The remaining ones were adapted to military use. In 1764, in connection with the construction of new highways, the French architect Blondel was commissioned to build a structure on the Place Kléber which could serve as a model for the style of that time. Blondel, nicknamed “The Straightener”, encompassed the entire straggling complex in the enormous façade, which even now occupies nearly the full Northern side of the Place Kléber. This complex was named “Obet”, later “Aubette”. For nearly a century the building was used for military purposes, until in 1845 a café (Café Cadé) was established there, to which in 1867 a concert hall was added, which served for quite a long time as a music school. In 1869 the Aubette was acquired by the city, which turned it partly into a museum in which paintings by famous masters were housed. A year later it was burned by the Germans, not a single artwork being saved. Only Blondel’s façade survived.

In 1911 the Place Kléber was to undergo an important renovation, in which no less than 46 architects would take part. However, the plans, now kept in the city archives, were never executed and thus the Aubette remained an undistinguished, neglected building, disgracing the square rather than enhancing it.

Just as the Aubette in Strasbourg was transformed in the course of time in accordance with the circumstances and the needs of the time, so the building presently has had to conform to contemporary needs. The Aubette, and primarily the right wing, has changed into an amusement center. In 1921 the developers Horn and Heitz Brothers leased the building from the city for a period of ninety years. The city stipulated, however, that no essential changes could be made in the façade, this being a Monument historique. Except for the marquee over the terrace, 35 m in length, which links the halls looking out on the square, and for the modern electric light sign on the façade, nothing on the exterior was changed. Nevertheless, the tall plate glass panes of the Five O’clock and the adjoining cafés, which are mounted in thin iron frames, give the façade a modern look. Originally, I had wanted the neon sign to run the length of the entire façade, but the city government, which is even now in litigation with the developers because the strictly horizontal, dominating marquee over the terrace does not correspond to the style of the eighteenth century, refused its permission.

The developers – one of them, Mr. Paul Horn, is himself an architect – originally did not know what to do with the many halls. The projects de-
signed during the first five years with the assistance of many architects-decorators were not executed. Among these there were all kinds of "modern" and "classic" style variations, with Biedermeier prevailing. On paper, the Aubette traversed all styles, from Empire to Jugendstil, and as they say, the realization was mainly prevented by the high costs and by the monetary instability of that time. Mr. Paul Horn had seen to it that the foundations were reinforced and had combined many smaller rooms into a few large ones. In short, the rough work had already been prepared when I got involved with the Aubette in September 1926. The Horn brothers invited me to come to Strasbourg and, encouraged by the possibility to realize my ideas about interior design on a grand scale and without restrictions, I accepted the commission to transform the principal halls in a modern sense, architecturally as well as esthetically.

The first task was the design of new floor plans in accordance with the location and purpose of the various halls. These designs were approved by the city as well as by the developers without important changes. Here I operated in the most functional manner, but how could one possibly define a priori the whole life and activities in such a building before learning how they actually develop. The floor plans undeniably bore the mark of metropolitan activities, while I avoided defining function and purpose too strictly. I set myself the task of creating a galeria, aiming at connections between the spaces, which would allow the public to come and go, without the necessity of remaining in any one of the halls for a long time. The existing arcade, which separates the right wing from the left, connecting the main entrance at the square with one of the main streets in the center, facilitated this task. This arcade gives entrance to the spaces on the ground floor: cafés, restaurants, the Five O'Clock (with decorations by Mrs. Täuber-Arp), pastry shop, bar, and service quarters with elevator. Also to the stairwell, leading to the Caveau-Dancing and the upper floors. In order to assist the public in finding their bearings I placed an information chart at the main entrance of the arcade. Every section bears a number of a definite shape and color, while this same sign is clearly visible at the entrance to each room.

Located on the ground floor are the arcade, café-brasserie, café-restaurant, tearoom, the Aubette bar and a service area. In the basement are the telephone booths, toilets, coat rooms, the American bar and the Cabaret-Dance hall, painted by Hans Arp. On the mezzanine are located: toilets, coat rooms and a billiards room. On the first floor above ground level are the Cinéma-Dancing-Cabaret, a small and a large function room, and a service area. On the level above that are located the apartments of the director and the permanent staff; also the store rooms for provisions.
In the adjoining rooms are the offices, while the enormous kitchens and the cooling installations are on the mezzanine.

The principal materials used for the interiors, in accordance with modern requirements, are: concrete, iron, plate glass, aluminum, nickel, hard caoutchouc (used for the first time by me for stair banisters and bars on doors), terrazzo, rabitz, linoleum, parquet, tiles, duralumin, lincrusta, ripolin, frosted glass, rubber, leather, enamel, silver leaf etc. I avoided the use of wood as much as possible: the doors are all executed in iron and plate glass without subdivisions. The windows and doors giving onto the arcade were extended up to the ceiling, making for maximal light, transparency and orderliness. Hereby the annoying space between ceiling and window and between ceiling and door was eliminated.

The lighting, being different in every hall in accordance with its purpose, required special study. We were aiming for an even, clear, yet gentle illumination, which should suppress shadows as much as possible. The old-fashioned central light sources were ruled out everywhere, while we employed direct and reflected light, depending on the purpose. In the large cinema-dance hall on the first floor above ground level, the lighting is indirect, accomplished by reflectors mounted on nickel rods, which are hung in space across the full length of the hall. In the large banqueting hall there is direct lighting, by way of normalized enamel plaques in which milk glass lamps are mounted. The same lighting method was employed in the small function room and the tearoom. Originally I intended to light the arcade as well as the various rooms by way of neon light bars (lumière froide), but had to relinquish that plan for lack of white neon light. In the café and the restaurant I applied light bulbs in horizontally and vertically oriented sockets.

Tables, chairs, sofas and other pieces of furniture are standardized in size as well as in shape. This furniture, in which all artisticity has been ruled out, is factory produced after my designs. I kept to the most elementary forms. Although the pieces are sufficiently stable as the result of a logical construction, I avoided weightiness. The chairs are of the Thonet type, but the proportions were changed in the execution. The legs of the red and black leather sofas (in the café and the restaurant) were replaced by thin nickel feet. This was done with the side boards and cabinets as well.

Notes on the paintings
The compositions on the ceiling and the walls of the large banqueting hall and the cinema-dance hall were executed en relief, for two reasons. First,
in order to achieve a stricter definition of the planes and to counteract interaction of the colors, and second in order to avoid incidental or arbitrary merging or changing of the planes. These planes are separated by 50-cm wide bands, which are raised 3 cm. In this banqueting hall light and color were of direct functional importance, and since tables and chairs are only put in on the occasion of a banquet, the fixed furniture actually consisted only of color and light. The latter became the “content” of the hall, and in order to avoid all restlessness I adopted a standard dimension for the arrangement of the planes. This dimension, 1.20 m by 1.20 m, was determined by the height of the radiators, which was proportional to that of the smallest enameled lighting plates and ventilation grids. The smallest color plane is 1.20 m by 1.20 m, while the larger ones are always a multiple of 1.20 m plus the width of the bands. I kept a neutral zone, separated by grayish or gray from the composition, at the altitude of the public. I used the same patterns at the entrances and exits, and, vertically, in the corners, where the switchboards, advertisements, clocks, emergency exits and service exits are located. These neutral fields should, of course, not give rise to empty spaces, and therefore had to maintain the equilibrium by the regularity of their location. The lighting plaques and ventilators were organically absorbed in the overall pattern.

Although the cinema-dance hall is generally assumed to be the most successful, it posed a much more difficult task than the banqueting hall, as I did not have a single wall at my disposal for the desired animation of this space by means of color. All walls were interrupted, one by five windows looking out on to the square, which occupy nearly the entire height, another one by the entrances and exits of the office, a third one by the entrance and the doors to the small function room, above which are located the unavoidable openings for the projectionist. The projection screen for the cinema had to be placed against the opposite wall; moreover, there was an emergency exit in this wall, on the left. The ceiling was partitioned by the lighting fixtures on rods. Because the windows, as well as the doors and all other elements disrupting the walls lent a strong orthogonal accent, this hall was very amenable to application of an autonomous, diagonal color arrangement capable of resisting the tension of the architecture. The planes themselves are raised 4 cm, and separated by bands 4 cm deep and 55 cm wide. The gallery, which occupies almost the entire right wall, is placed in such a location that it, like all the other elements, is in harmony with the overall pattern.

The solutions for the cafés and the restaurant on the ground floor are, as much as possible, in keeping with the objects there. Originally these cafés were intended to become conspicuous solely by means of their


Opposite page:
Theo van Doesburg, Monumental painting of the long wall in the Cinema-Dance Hall in the Aubette, Strasbourg 1926–1928. View into the hall and elevation.
function and their materials. After all, paint is but an illusionist material for achieving what ought to be achieved by the practical and esthetic properties of the materials themselves. I had to abandon this plan because of financial retrenchments, and the available material could only be used for the sofas, floor covering and tables. The mirrors which I placed over the red and black leather sofas are bordered on both sides by flat aluminum plates. These serve at the same time as reflectors for the socket lighting fixtures. The main illumination is indirect, by means of reflection against the shiny white areas on the ceiling. I put nickel grates in front of the undivided plate glass panes in the café for protection. In the café which runs parallel with the square, I kept the office open.

I had the signs in the whole building executed in the same print, and I used the same kind of sober lettering for the electric sign on the façade and the transparencies in the awnings.

"I started from a common Thonet chair, whose shape was modified in accordance with the modern dimensions and proportions."
Epilogue
Originally I had intended to construct the whole interior of the Aubette purely architecturally and with the use of durable materials. However, I soon discovered that I had fallen into the hands of speculators and that the city authorities as well as the developers, for very “personal” reasons, were pushing all the time for greater economizing. The money allotted by the city to the developers was not squandered on materials, nor on the installation. Everything had to be inexpensive. Therefore I was forced to resort to ersatz [substitute] materials, which could not benefit the appearance, certainly not in the long run. Although I do not want to disagree with the critics who considered many features to be very successful in architectural as well as in painterly respect (to the extent that the approximation of an ideal is at all possible in a transformation using the simplest of means), yet much of the plastic unity was lost here because of economizing and too much haste. The appearance is also impaired by the total lack of maintenance and by the rough ways of the Strasbourgers.

In any case this was the first attempt, in contrast with rationalism, to combine everything to create the atmosphere of a plastic architecture.