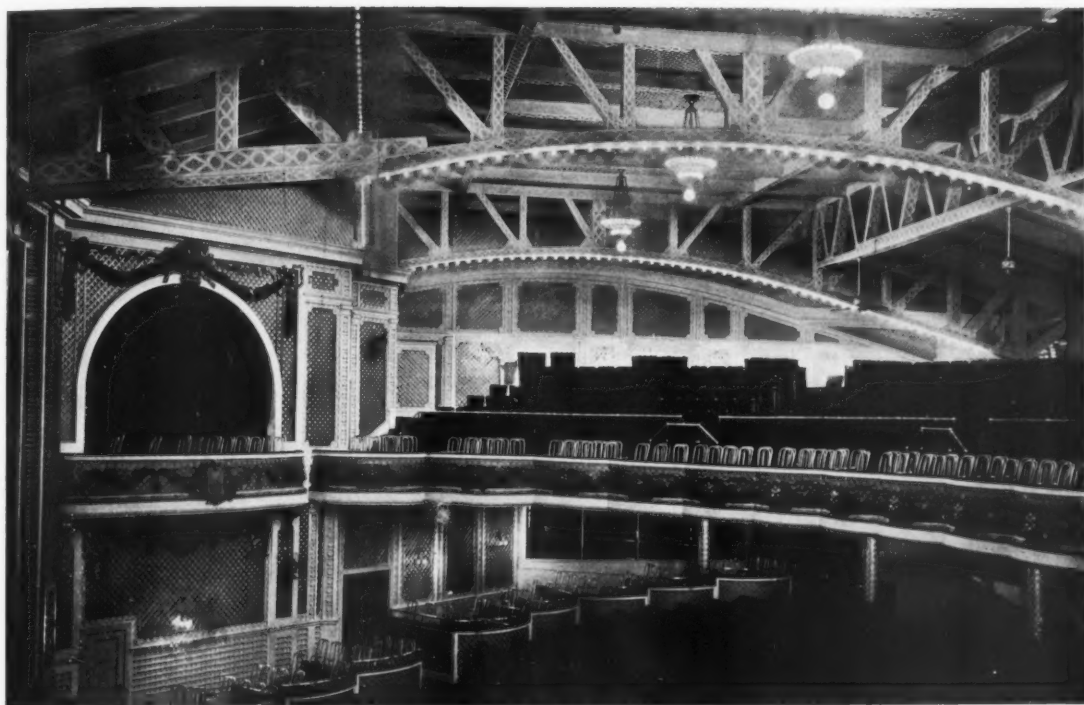


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NUMBER 1935



INTERIOR OF WINTER GARDEN, NEW YORK. MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, *ARCHITECT*
View after alteration. See view from same point on following page before alteration

A FEW ESSENTIALS IN THEATRE CONSTRUCTION

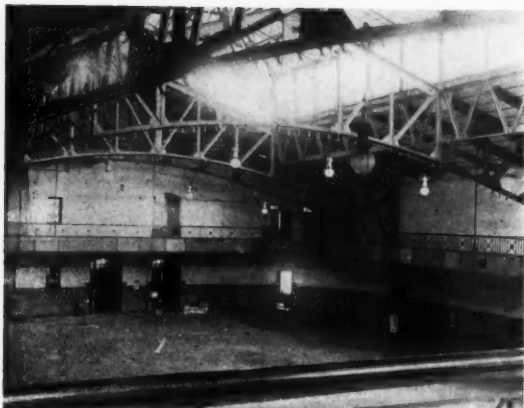
By WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, F. A. I. A.

IN writing of theatre construction it is not my intention to go deeply into the subject, but to give a few general points which may be of interest to those who have not had the practical experience which is necessary in order to understand the requirements for successful results on both sides of the curtain.

Perhaps the same thing applies to every building problem presented to an architect; though it is seldom that the salient points can not be acquired by competent prac-

titioners with the aid of architectural or engineering books, except in the case of theatres; the reason for this being changing demands of the public added to the variability of the site selected, and difference in building restrictions and requirements which would necessitate a library in itself, with constant supplements.

By way of illustration: Only a few years ago large auditoriums with generous balcony and gallery capacity were essential. Now the demand—in New York City at



INTERIOR OF STABLE AND HORSE EXCHANGE AS IT LOOKED BEFORE REMODELING FOR WINTER GARDEN

See preceding page for view after alterations from same point

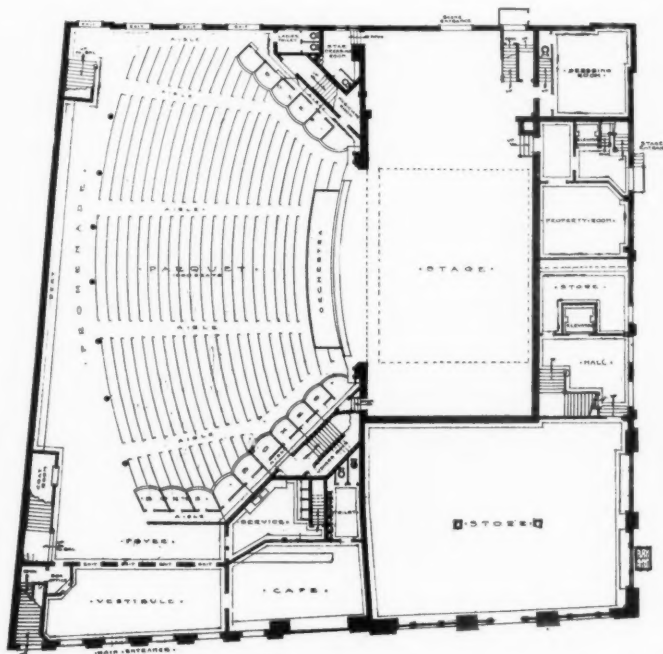
least—is for small theatres, while the moving picture craze has so diminished gallery patronage that their expensive construction is not only unnecessary but a poor investment. For awhile spectacular productions ran their course, succeeded by early English comedy, then the light opera craze; at the present time the problem play of social and political life is supplanting tragedies, specialties and buffoonery, though the last occasionally finds its outlet in some vaudeville house.

If the amusements of our cities could be controlled by an advisory committee and the various attractions allotted to theatres best suiting their requirements for stage and auditorium, the problem would be simple; but with so much competition among theatrical managers and syndicates, there can be no more actual knowledge of the success and adaptability of the playhouse than of the performances to be held within it. A play that has sought favorable consideration for months may meet tremendous success in one night through unforeseen local conditions. A theatre for years favored by public opinion and patronage is side-tracked and forgotten in a single season through a few fail-

ures or a change in the street improvements and transit facilities.

With these kaleidoscopic conditions confronting the architect and his theatrical client, it is only possible to make the best of the essential features and trust to luck that the other items of design and equipment may take care of future requirements. The first and most important of these is the protection of the audience and actors against fire and panics. In large cities absolutely fireproof construction can be added to adequate stairways and exit facilities, but in smaller towns, where possible rentals can not give proper financial returns on the increased cost of such construction, the various means of exit and fire protection between stage and auditorium are the only safeguards. With these items properly planned and maintained, there should be ample time between the appearance of smoke and the actual blaze to completely empty the theatre, so that fireproof construction is immaterial as far as public safety is concerned.

At the first appearance of smoke any portion or all of the audience should be allowed to leave the building, and it is a mistake to ask them not to do so, for with

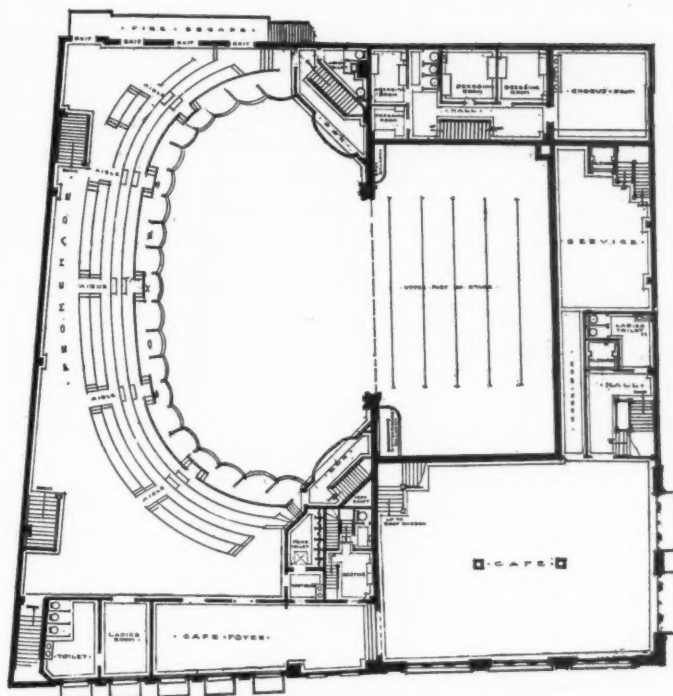


FIRST FLOOR PLAN, THE WINTER GARDEN, NEW YORK

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proper aisles, adequate stairways and exits, and other important features in connection with them, a panic can be avoided. To allow a crowd of people to pass easily through a generous doorway only to find steps on the other side, is like putting them in a boat with no bottom; and to start them down wide stairways without rails to keep the crowds in line and thus prevent pushing—the usual form intense mental excitement assumes in crowded places—is merely inviting disaster.

The bottom of the stairs should not lead to more crowds, but to separate points of safety. With side and rear exits for parquet floors, danger is minimized provided the exits are practically on sidewalk level. It should not be necessary to refer to building laws respecting these points in theatrical construction, and an architect ought not to depend upon them for his censure or commendation in caring for the safety of the public in buildings of this character. Common sense and casual



SECOND FLOOR PLAN, THE WINTER GARDEN, NEW YORK

observance of crowds in confined places should be enough to insure proper planning and consequent safety.

It is a deplorable fact that we are constantly reminded of the simple things that might and should have been done, only after some terrible disaster. The appalling loss of life in the Iroquois Theatre catastrophe started such a crusade in theatrical laws that some of the demands of various building departments have been overdone, and are not only ridiculous but an imposition on both owner and manager. On the other hand we will frequently find on upper floors of large department stores crowds many times larger than a theatrical audience, with only elevators and one or two stairways for exit; while in churches with wooden pews and other combustible material there is often only one exit.

In comparing these strange inconsistencies we find in modern factories and school buildings a law that should be adopted for theatres. I refer to the fire-proof towers for stairways. With large double doors on each level, opening onto generous landings with panic bolts, we



MEZZANINE FOYER, FORTY-FOURTH ST. THEATRE

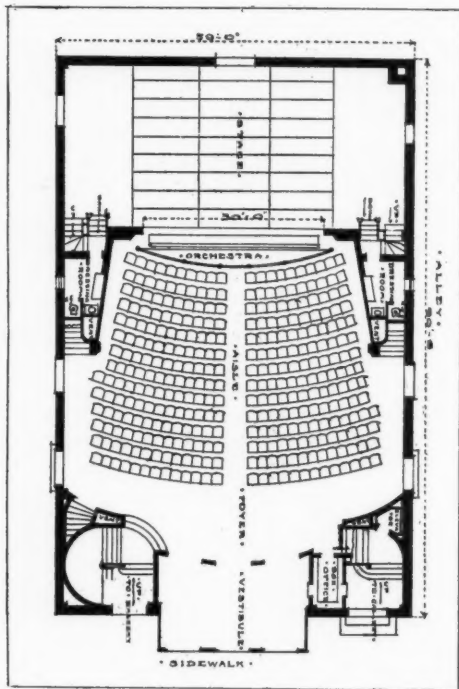
THE AMERICAN ARCHITECT

would have far better emergency exits for balconies and galleries than the outside fire escapes now made compulsory. While the practicability of these has never been put to a severe test, icy steps and railings in freezing weather, interfering firemen and fire hose, and danger from flames through openings below, or falling material from above, might prove their inefficiency. All of these dangers would be avoided by the stair towers leading through fireproof passageways to the street. By this method, too, the side courts could be abolished, giving wider auditoriums with more seats near the stage and less distance to the entrances at the back,—always the most practicable, since most of the danger from fire comes from the stage.

This fact should emphasize the importance of isolated dressing rooms for performers, who run much greater risks than the audience. The present requirement in New

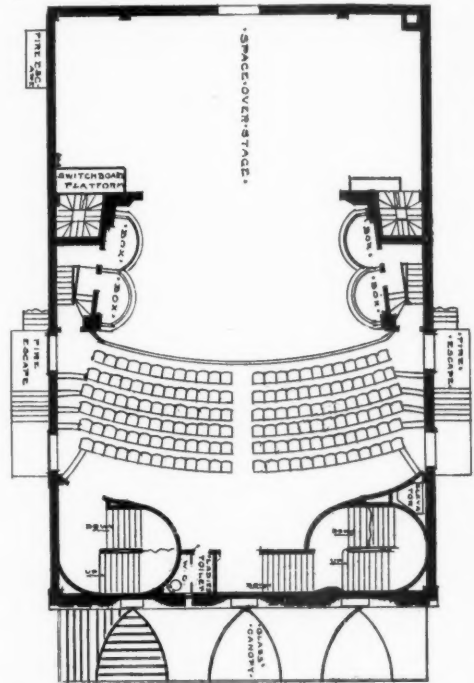
and doors and with fireproof passageways and steps leading to the street. Certainly one flight up is not so hazardous as several down, terminating in courts far back from the front sidewalk.

The requirement in some cities for a court at the back of the stage is useless and un-



PARQUET PLAN, THIRTY-NINTH ST. THEATRE

York of providing rooms for the actors in the rear or side of the proscenium opening above the basement does not seem as safe as dressing rooms under the parquet floor shut off from the stage by fireproof walls



BALCONY PLAN, THIRTY-NINTH ST. THEATRE

necessary, for inside lots at least, and an imposition, since the space allotted to a theatre must depend entirely upon its rental for the investment return,—additional rooms or renting space being prohibited over the auditorium or stage. Take, for instance, a lot 100 by 100, or a ground area of 10,000 square feet, valued at \$300,000. With ten foot side and rear courts deducted, the building area is reduced to 7,200 square feet, leaving the other 2,800 square feet with a value of \$84,000 unproductive, at least to the lessee, who has to pay a fixed charge of interest and taxes on it, for which he can get no return.

Before passing to the next important item of construction, we must not forget the heating apparatus, which should, of course, be isolated and its enclosure

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made entirely of fireproof material; the stage opening, protected by an automatic fire curtain, and the electric equipment of iron conduit work throughout, with all stage lines, switches and electrical appliances exposed and controlled from its switchboard. With these essential safeguards added to the others, the next important item—that of properly seeing and hearing the performances—can be considered.

Sight lines and the elimination of columns and other obstructions can and should be planned for, but the matter of acoustics is not so easily calculated or so sure of successful results. But to consider the sight lines first:—

To see two-thirds of the entire stage, which should be the minimum view from each seat in the auditorium, the side seats require the most careful calculations. On the parquet floor the obstructions of the pro-

jecting balcony front and proscenium boxes are often lost sight of, with the result that fine scenic effects are not obtained by those in the back rows, while the sight lines under the boxes frequently permit only a partial view of the actors. If desirable parquet



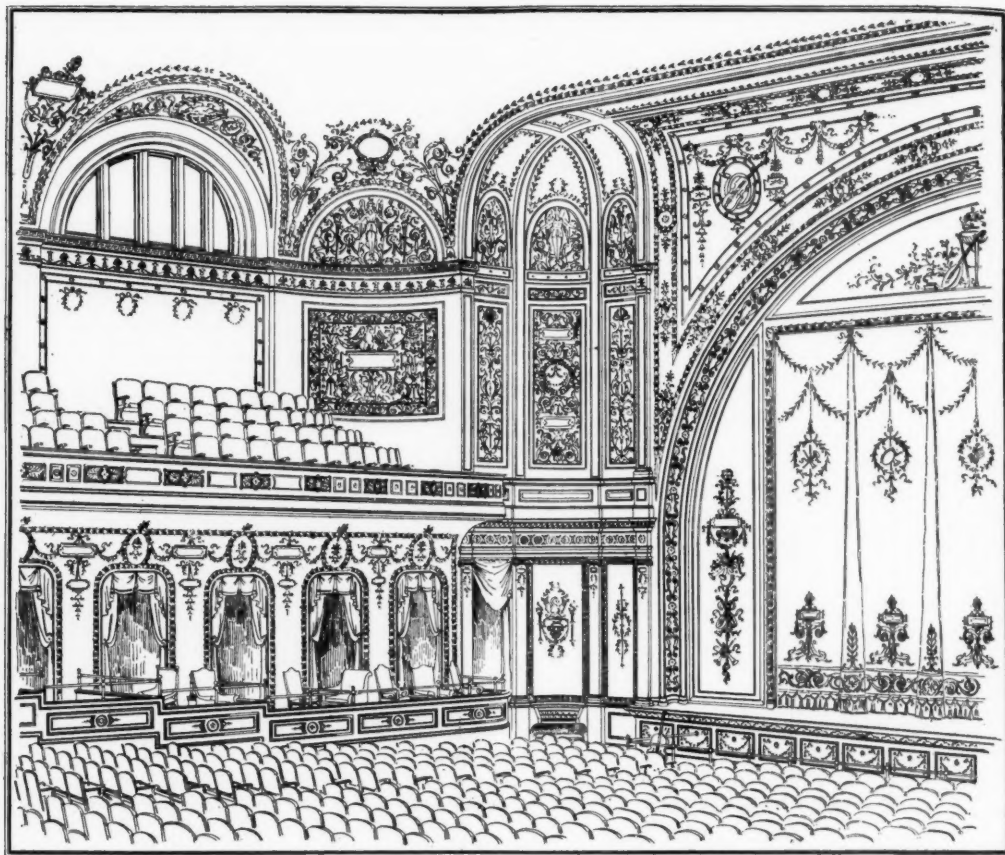
CORNER IN THE ODEON, ST. LOUIS



THE ODEON, ST. LOUIS
MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT

and upper boxes are considered of more importance by the client than parquet seats, those in the rear should be omitted, for the disgruntled spectators in the poor seats will air their grievance, while those in the box, who have had the unusual experience of a fine view of the stage, will make no comment whatever. Experience also proves that upper boxes are frequently vacant when every seat on the parquet floor is taken. Their relative value is therefore obvious.

To get the two-thirds sight line from the extreme side seats of an auditorium it is of course important to have the proscenium opening of generous width if large seating capacity is desired, and the size of the opening naturally depends upon the width of the auditorium, since good working stage space each side is essential. A question constantly asked by the prospective theatre



INTERIOR OF ODEON, ST. LOUIS, MO., LOOKING TOWARD THE ORGAN
MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT

owner is: What is the best size for such a building? This is easily established where the proscenium opening and stage requirements are designed for the usual dramatic and light opera attractions.

For a stage from thirty-five to forty feet in depth an opening of the same dimensions is ample and allows for three banks of seats with four aisles. As no seat in the auditorium should have more than six intervening between it and an aisle on either side, it will be seen that only fourteen seats can be placed in each row. Taking a minimum width of twenty-two inches for each seat and an average of four feet for the two centre aisles and three feet for the side aisles, we have ninety-one feet between the walls so that for a building of this character from ninety to ninety-five feet in width is ample.

The depth of course varies with the amount of space allotted to the foyer and

lobby, but for general practice twenty-four rows for theatres of this width should be the maximum number. Allowing thirty-two inches from back to back, and for stage apron and orchestra, we have a depth from curtain line to the last row of seats of seventy-five feet, or a total depth of 130 feet for the entire theatre building.

The grade of the floor should not be an even slope from the front to the back because the people in the first few rows must look up, while those in the back look down; and as the sight line from each row is consequently at a different angle, the slope of the floor should change accordingly, and be so adjusted that each spectator can see over the head of the person in front of him. The eye level for the first few rows should clear the stage apron; otherwise the actors standing back from the curtain line are seen only above their waists,

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making what should be the most desirable seats in the house, almost the worst.

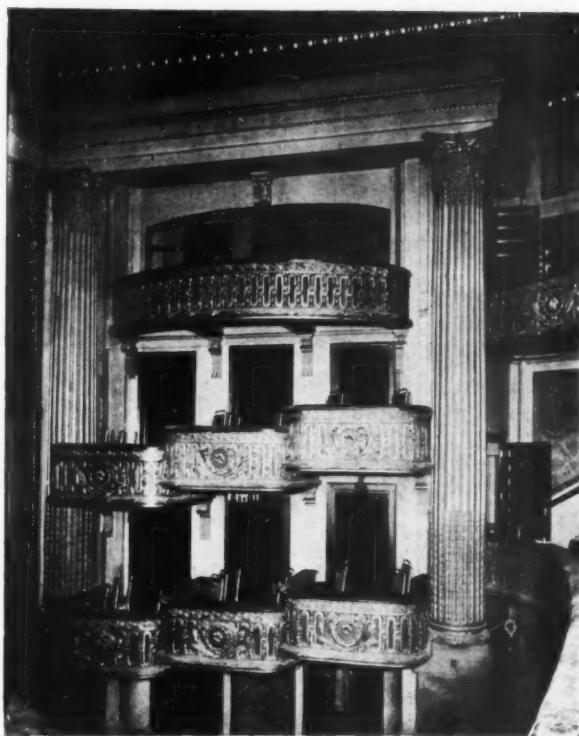
It is hard to believe that so simple a matter could be lost sight of in planning, and yet it is constantly occurring through over anxiety to get good sight lines for the back rows. The depth of the parquet floor from the stage level, therefore, should not be below the sight line of those sitting in the first row, and the reflector over the footlights a very little above it, though it is frequently made so high that those in the first five or six rows see only footless performers, while all effects of grass plots and marble floors are left for the delectation of the balcony and gallery.

Centre aisles ought to be avoided, because they occupy the most desirable seating space besides giving the actor a difficult task in facing the audience.

The question of placing boxes at each side of the parquet or starting them three or four feet above the stage level, is about evenly divided and can best be determined by the probable patronage of the house. If the former plan is adopted there are more box seats and fewer parquet seats, and vice versa;



INTERIOR, MINNEAPOLIS THEATRE



PROSCENIUM BOXES, MINNEAPOLIS THEATRE

but whenever two or more boxes are designed in a row, one must be elevated above the other so the occupants of inside seats can see as well as those at the rail.

The balcony and gallery sight lines depend entirely upon their required seating capacity and consequent distance from the curtain line; but as steps are necessary on account of their elevation, the problem of looking over the heads of those in front is eliminated. It is important, however, that each seat should have a clear view of at least the orchestra pit or stage apron over the balcony rail. The seats should be curved so that they are at right angles with the sight lines. There is nothing so uncomfortable as sitting sideways or turning the head during a long act. They should also have generous room from back to back, for

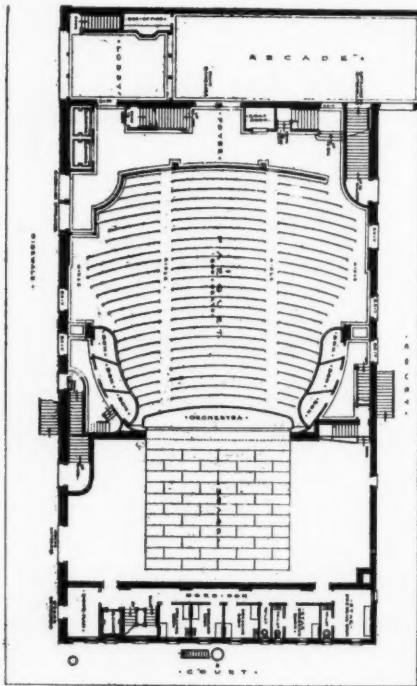
with so much difference in the levels the inconvenience to those already seated by those being seated is most annoying in cramped spacing. Special care should also be observed for the side seats, giving the rows a dip as they get nearer the stage and keeping their view clear of the upper boxes.

The distance from the curtain line to the front of the balcony or gallery, and the height between them, depend entirely on the available space for the number of seats desired, though it should be remembered that those clear of the balcony or gallery are most desirable and much better ventilated. If the lot is a deep one, the gallery can be kept well back of the balcony and a separate entrance and foyer provided for each.

Extreme height, especially above proscenium opening, is to be avoided, as for

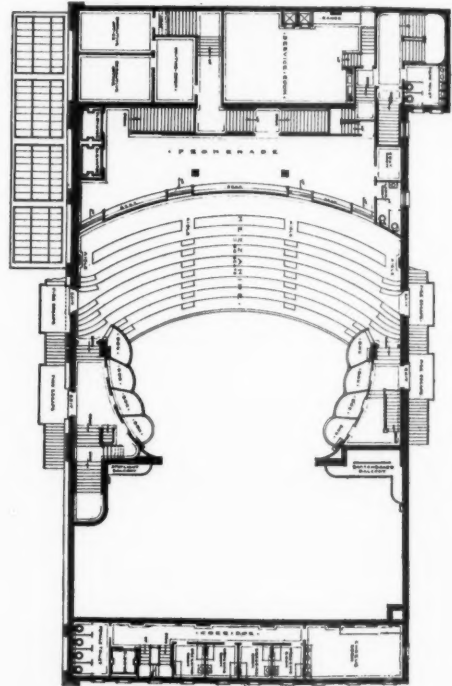
order to have a low ceiling, keeping the balcony at the back and sides, and omitting a gallery altogether unless it can be planned behind and above the balcony.

Coved ceilings and rounded corners and angles are also essentials for good results,



PARQUET, FORTY-FOURTH ST. THEATRE

good acoustics it is a disturbing feature. The voice will carry a much greater distance if the sound waves are not lost in space far above the audience. When a large auditorium is desired, it is better to get the majority of seats on the ground floor in



MEZZANINE FLOOR, FORTY-FOURTH ST. THEATRE

and keeping the foyer and side aisles shut off by boxes, each with its own anteroom, is not only a desirable prevention against outside disturbance, but a beautiful feature of the design. The St. Louis Odeon acquired its reputation for perfect acoustics from these features—though it has a depth of 120 feet from the curtain line to the last row of seats by the unusual width of 116 feet. But in spite of these generous dimensions, both Madame Nordica and Paderevski have said: "One can hear a pin drop on the stage from any part of the house."

Space does not permit a fuller discussion of this important feature, but in designing an opera house or theatre for monumental as well as practical purposes it would be better for the architect of limited experience in this class of work to submit his plan and auditorium proportions to an expert in order to be sure that in his desire to create

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a masterpiece in architectural design he has not overlooked the most essential feature for its success.

The same thing would apply to the electrical work, stage equipment and heating and ventilating; the added fee for such expert advice is paid many times over when mistakes have to be rectified.

The third and last items to be mentioned in this article are the operating necessities. These include essentials for the comfort and convenience of patrons, the practicability of the stage requirements, and efficient means to properly manage and economically direct both the stage and front of the house. The main and carriage entrances should be kept separate and so arranged that people will not cross or crowd each other after performances; and in the general foyer arrangements a space for carriage patrons

where they can have numbers announced from the inside, is most desirable. Two sets of doors should be planned for all vestibules, and light screen doors at the ends of aisles offer the best protection from drafts.

Coat rooms should be in available corners on the parquet floor and where they can be reached without obstructing the main exits; the corridors behind boxes must also have generous spaces for coat hooks. Basement retiring rooms are not objectionable if reached by convenient, well-lighted stairs, and should include a large smoking and lounging room. Let the ticket office have ample space for a safe and desk in addition to the racks for daily and advance sale tickets, and the usual panel boards controlling light switches in the front portion of the house. Its window into the

corridor should be so located that a line of people can form without interfering with the ticket entrance. In addition to this office, a manager's room for the counting of tickets and general direction of the theatre is a much needed adjunct, as well as rooms for ushers, musicians and cleaners, the last with all vacuum appliances and lights for cleaning purposes.

In the stage end of the house the door man ought to have a room serving as a vestibule—always better when opening directly into the dressing room building. On the stage every inch of available space should be retained for scenery, and in addition to the movable trapped floor back of the curtain, a large electric lift to take bulky properties to the basement is most desirable. Revolving stages are sometimes used to good advantage, though their initial cost and operating expense are matters for careful consideration.

The place for the switch-board is on a balcony at the side of the curtain, with a



DETAIL OF PROSCENIUM, GARRICK THEATRE, ST. LOUIS, MO.
MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT

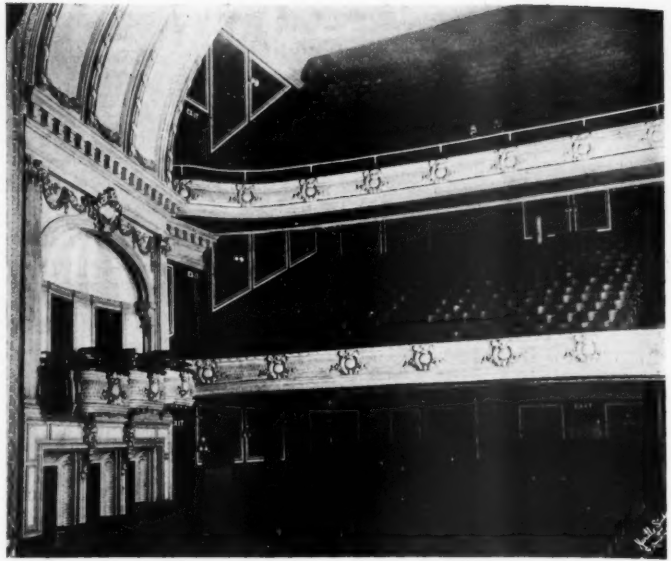
THE AMERICAN ARCHITECT

recessed space in the proscenium wall to allow for the mechanism and easy access to the back of the board. Spotlights should not be operated from the fly galleries, but from hanging platforms under them, so that their operators will not interfere with the scenery hands; and the spotlight balcony at the back of the house should, for the same reason in respect to the audience, be above and independent of the seats. The old method of placing it in the front gallery is unsightly as well as a useless loss of valuable space.

To prevent disturbing noises the pumps, motors for ventilating fans or other machinery should be isolated.

In considering the lighting, it is far better to have too much than too little for the stage, while in the auditorium it is better to have diffused lighting rather than direct. The old-fashioned method of providing a large centre chandelier is not desirable, as it interferes with the gallery sight lines and is apt to centralize too much the lighting effect of the auditorium. In any event, wherever chandeliers or ceiling lights are provided, accessibility for renewing the lamps is absolutely imperative.

Many of these suggestions can be better understood by reference to the plans and views of the theatres reproduced with this article.



INTERIOR, GARRICK THEATRE, ST. LOUIS, MO.

For both design and decoration, the architect should find his inspiration in the best examples of the various styles. He should avoid coarse ornament and blatant or bizarre effects, remembering that his work is to decorate construction, rather than construct decoration, and that a building should illustrate as well as serve its purpose. With refined surroundings the efforts towards elevating the character of stage productions are materially assisted, and if "architecture is frozen music," the same sensitiveness which detects discord in the one, should be educated to recognize it in the other.



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THE MODERN THEATRE

APERUSAL of Mr. Swasey's article on "Theatres," printed in this issue, results in the realization of a fact that has probably not impressed itself upon the mind of the average architect, unless he has been recently employed in the designing of theatres. This fact may be stated as a fickleness on the part of the amusement-loving public requiring ever-changing facilities for the production of the class of entertainment demanded. The forms of amusement that served to satisfy not more than a decade ago, are no longer popular. In fact, the American public has shown a volatility and inconstancy in its taste for amusements perhaps unequalled by that of any other nation. Naturally changing demands have necessitated modifications and prompted new departures in theatre construction. The high state of perfection attained in moving picture productions, for example, has resulted in a type of theatre entirely devoted to this form of entertainment, interspersed with vaudeville acts. Manifestly, that portion of the theatre behind the curtain is constructed on radically different lines in such a theatre from what would be required for the presentation of light opera or what has been styled "legitimate" drama. Again, the rapid advance in electric lighting making possible

effects which may be described as little less than wonderful, has contributed no small part to the equipment of the modern theatre.

The proper ventilation of a theatre is a matter of very real importance, and one which with the aid of modern apparatus has only within a few years become entirely feasible. The health of theatre patrons is of first importance and obviously this cannot be safeguarded without adequate means of heating and ventilating an auditorium in which some two or three hours are spent, often without even a few minutes intermission during which a measure of natural ventilation is sometimes secured by the opening of exit and other doorways.

AFURTHER direction in which we have undoubtedly made great progress in recent years, is that of safeguarding the lives of theatre patrons as well as those engaged in the production of the entertainment. It is regrettable that sufficient attention was not generally given to the matter of safety from fire and panic, until the public conscience was stirred by a fearful loss of life in a theatre disaster. But largely as a result of the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago, theatres throughout the country have since been made comparatively safe. Rigid laws affecting the construction and equipment of theatres are now in operation in practically every city of any importance in the country, and while they have doubtless, in the majority of cases, been drawn with a view to safeguarding human life by embodying the experience and judgment of men well qualified on the subject, they should not be considered as entirely relieving the architect of responsibility, if his plans are drawn in compliance with the law. Building laws invariably indicate minimum requirements and architects should not be satisfied with barely complying with an ordinance, if in the fullness of their experience they can devise additional or greater safeguards. An architect who undertakes the design of a theatre assumes a heavy responsibility, which he has only discharged when, regardless of municipal regulations, he has made the building absolutely safe as far as human ingenuity aided by modern appliances and equipment will permit. Wherever possible, fire towers should be

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used rather than outside stairways. Additional exits over and above those required by law should, whenever feasible, be provided. Every means for extinguishing an incipient fire should be installed. In fact, nothing that will add to the safety of either the audience or players can be omitted if the architect performs his full duty.

AND, while theatres have undergone a change in plan and arrangement, have been greatly improved in equipment and have been made places of com-

parative safety as regards fires or panic, their design from an artistic viewpoint has not been neglected. The garish and bizarre façade which fifteen years ago almost invariably marked the location of a theatre, is now seldom seen. Examples gaining general commendation are to be seen in such increasing numbers each year that it seems not improbable that in the near future the architecture of the American theatre will occupy a place easily and rightly comparable with that of other public buildings.

RECENT LEGAL DECISIONS

INCOMPLETE ARCHITECT'S AWARD

A building contract provided that all matters in dispute should be referred to the architect, whose decision should be final and conclusive. The owner sued the contractor for damages for delay upon an award of the architect. The award showed that the architect did not consider and pass upon three items, the claims of the lumber company, the plumbing company and for brickwork, as to which mechanics' liens had been filed. It was held that the architect's certificate was incomplete and could not be sued upon, under the rule that an award of an arbitrator which is not final is void altogether, not being admissible even as an account stated. The owner, it was said, should have waited until the mechanics' lien cases had been finally adjudicated, or, had he seen fit, he might have waived all his rights against the contractor as to the three items omitted by the architect, or with the contractor's acquiescence, he might have waived the submission of these items. Having done none of these things, he could not sue upon the incomplete award.

The architect was selected by the parties as the one to whose final decision they were willing to submit both the preliminary question of the contractor's default and the ultimate one of the determination of the account between them. Under the Pennsylvania cases, that was a bar to a common-law action, so long as the architect acted

independently, without fraudulent collusion with the owner. Mere general allegations of fraud, without stating the facts constituting it, were not sufficient.

Kann v. Bennett, Pennsylvania Supreme Court, 82 Atl. 1111.

ILLEGAL AGREEMENT TO COMPENSATE ARCHITECT

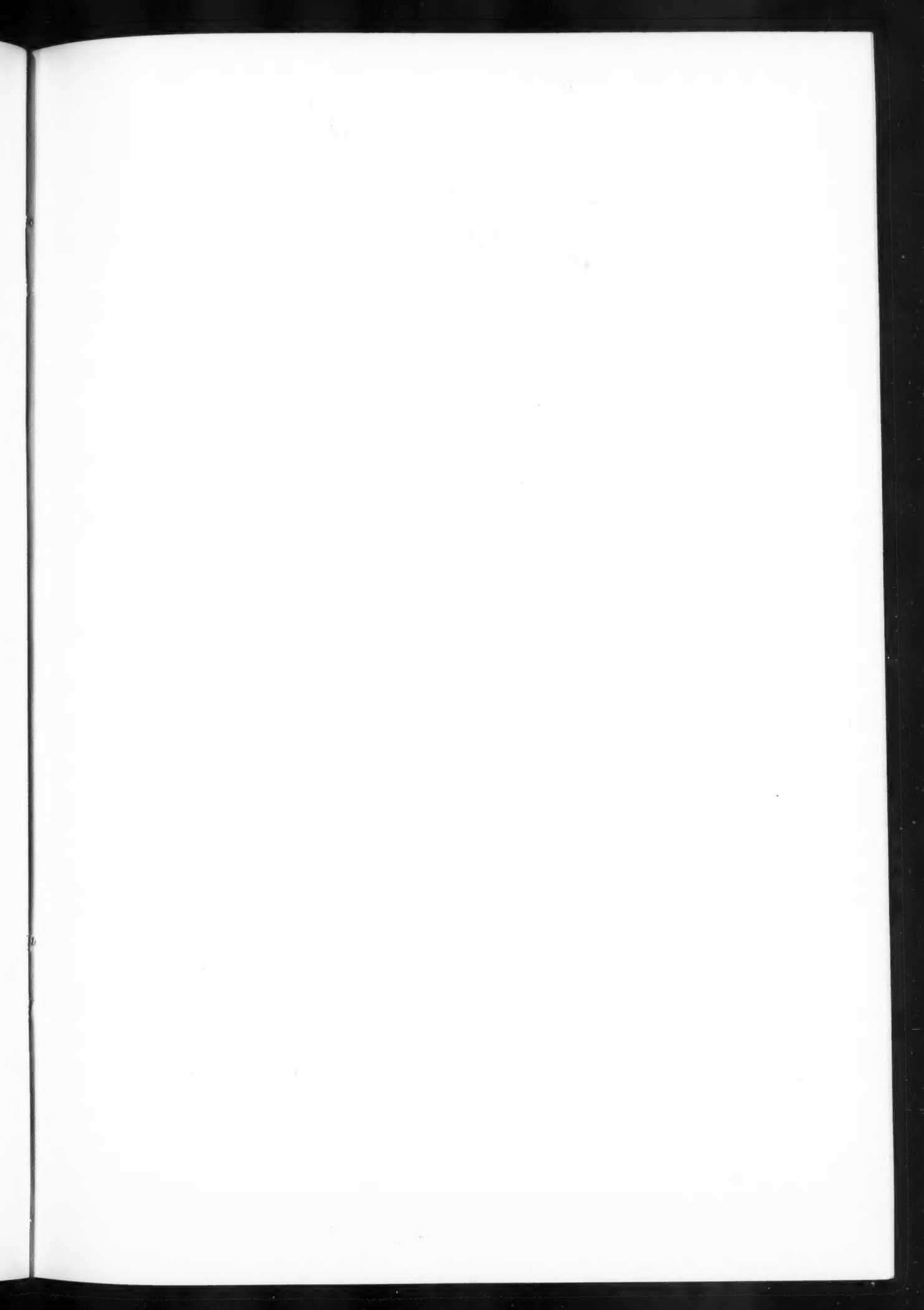
In an action by the trustee in bankruptcy of a contracting firm against one of the partners of the firm to recover the value of certain bonds assigned by him to an architect, it was held that an agreement by a contractor to pay bonds to an architect for services in overseeing his work, or for securing the award, would be illegal.

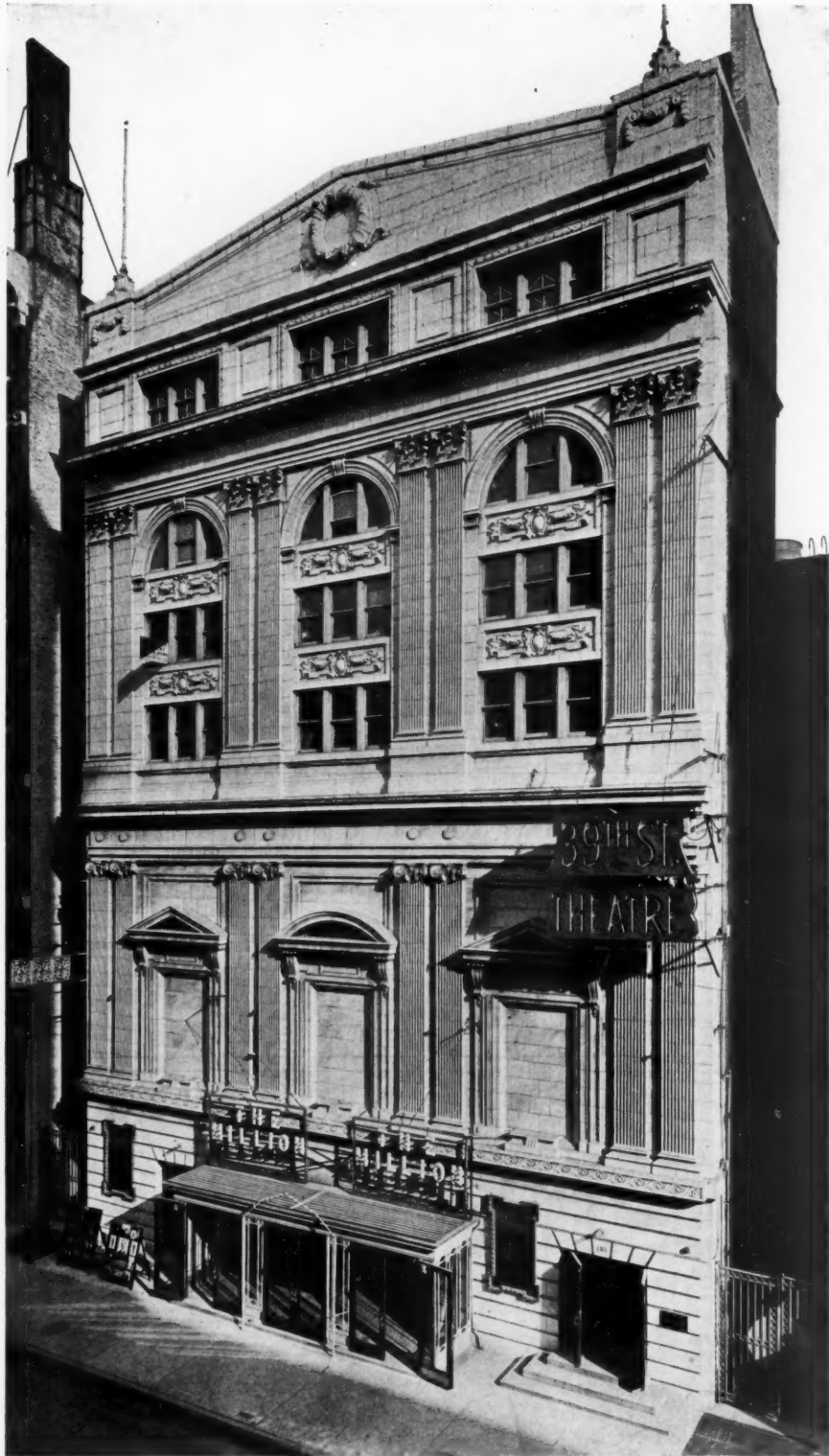
Page v. Moore, Pennsylvania Supreme Court, 83 Atl. 580.

BASIS FOR CALCULATING DAMAGES

In an action by a builder against an owner upon a building contract it was shown that the plaintiff was wrongfully prevented by the defendant from fully performing his contract. The contract contained a schedule of payments to be made at different stages of the work. It was not claimed that the payments in that schedule were in proportion to the cost incurred up to the several stages of progress of the work. It was held to be error to adopt this schedule as the basis for calculating the damages.

Westlecraft v. Barry, New Jersey Supreme Court, 83 Atl. 501.

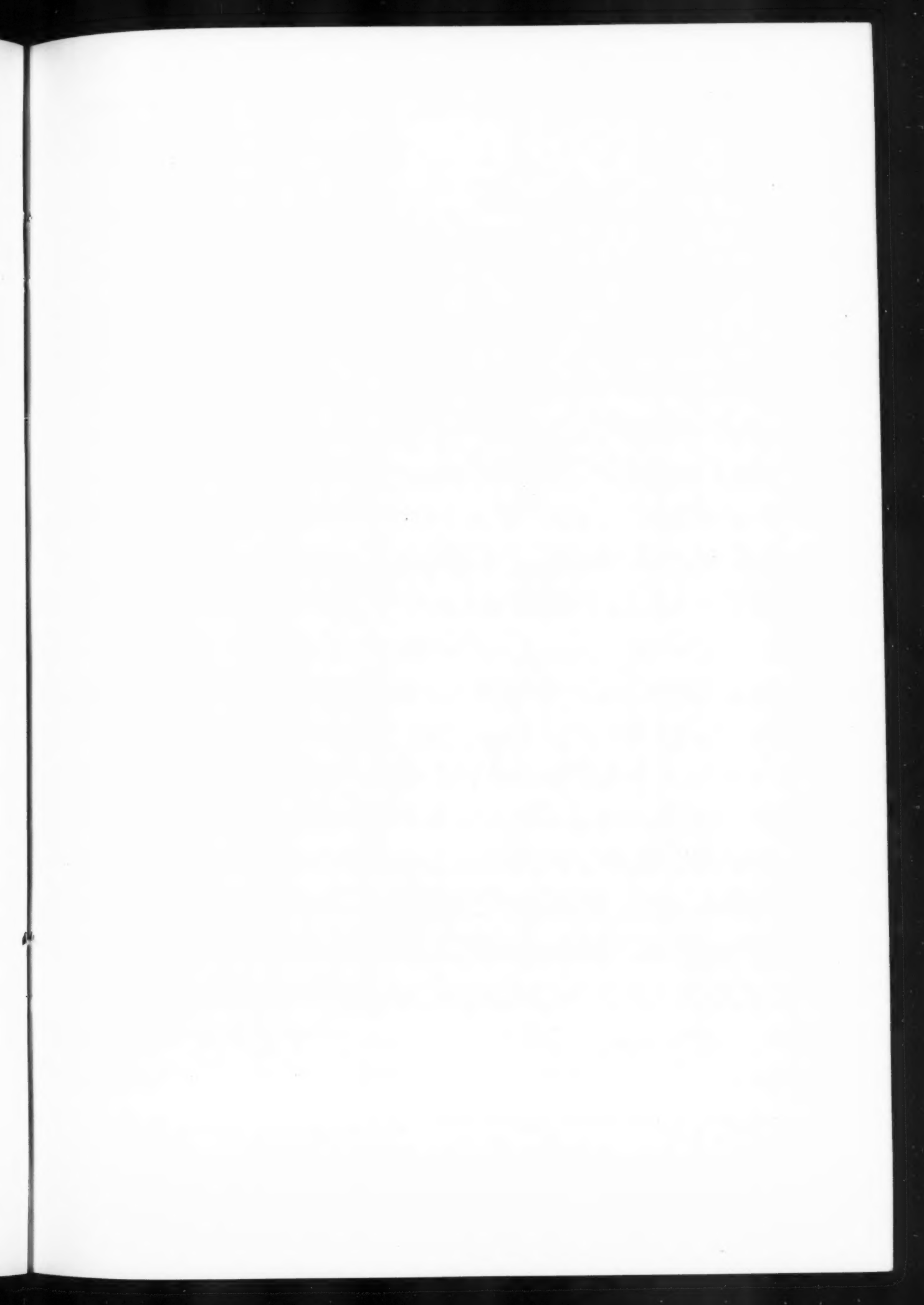


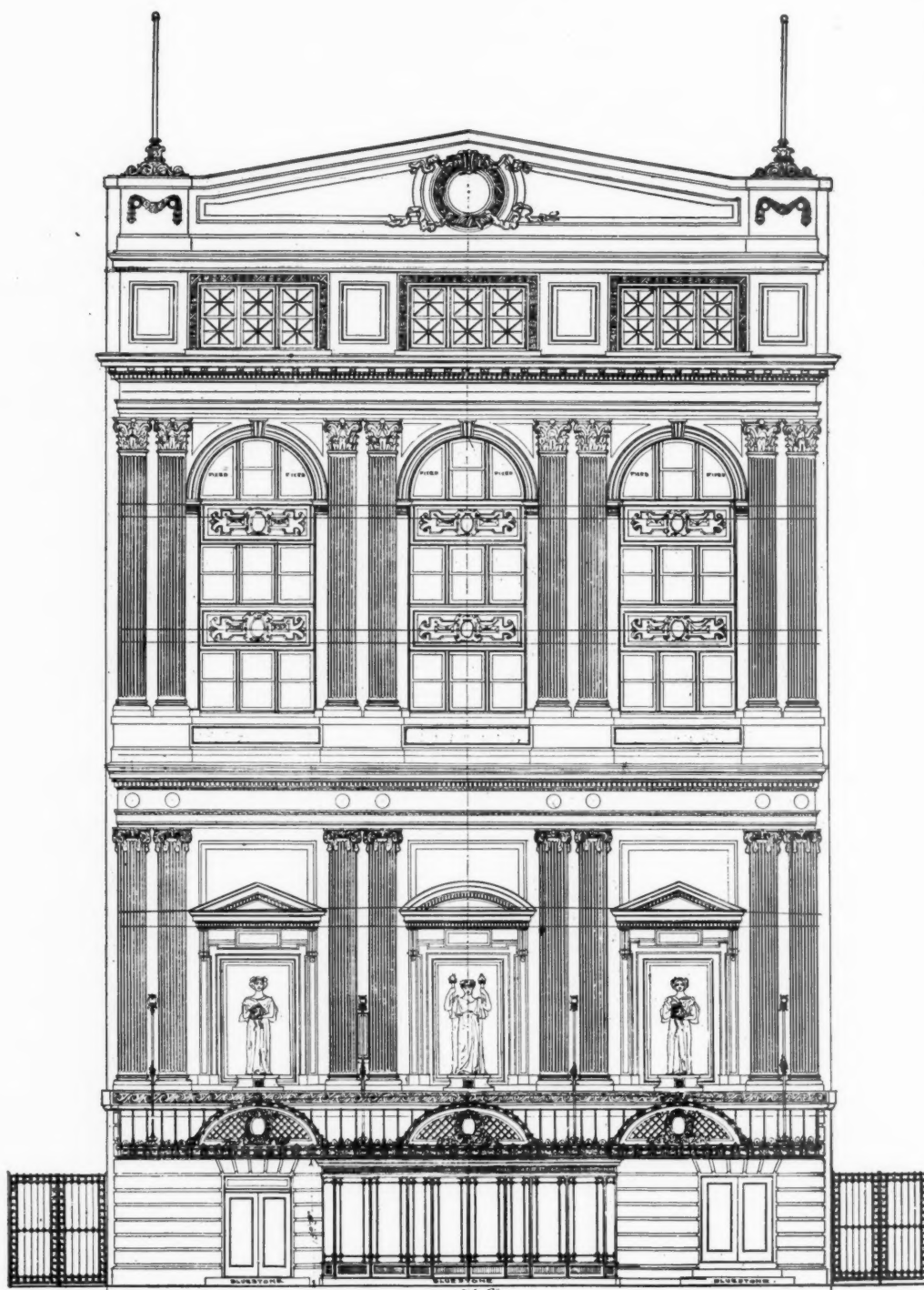


THIRTY-NINTH STREET THEATRE, NEW YORK

(See text for floor plans)

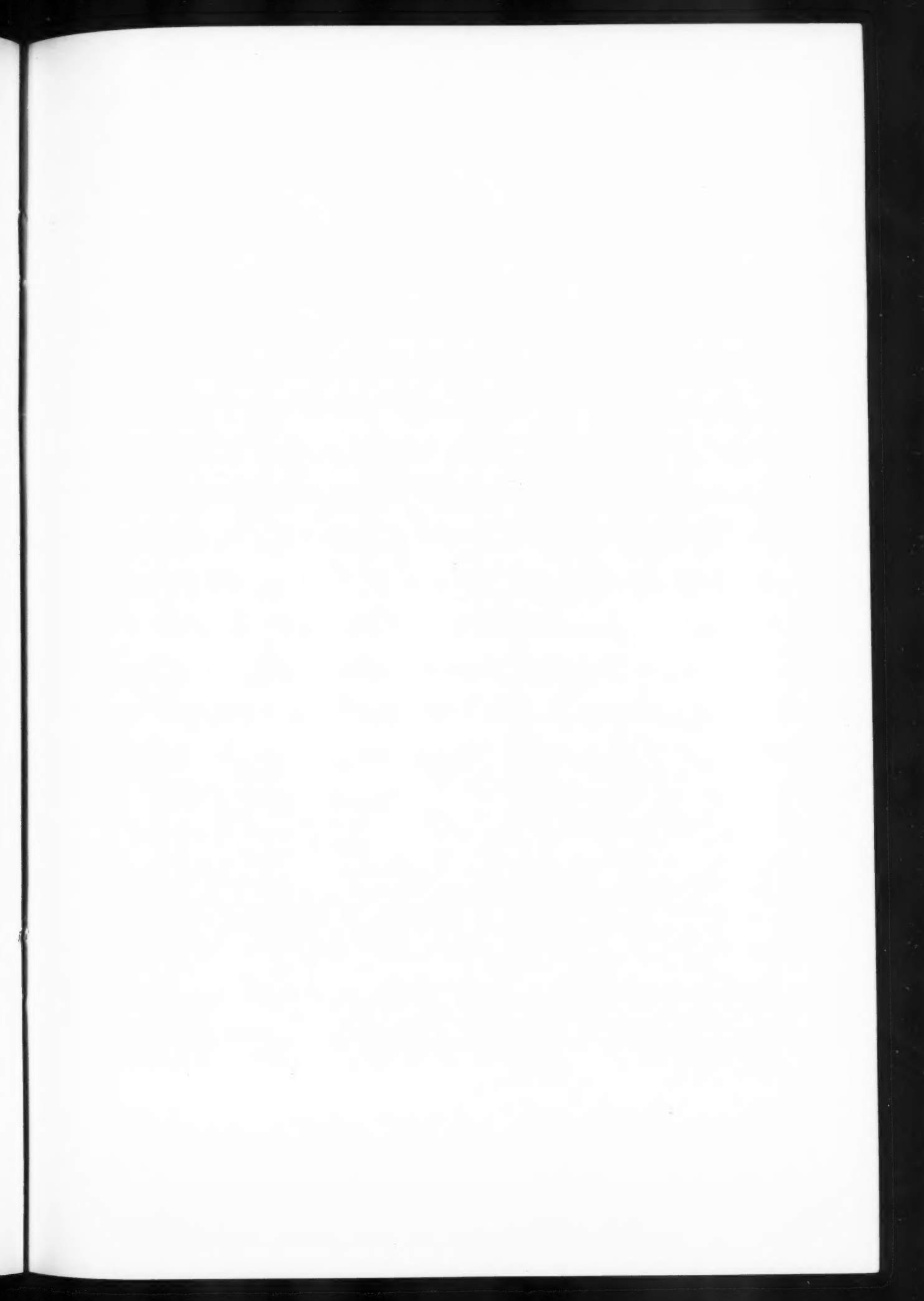
MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT





FRONT ELEVATION, THIRTY-NINTH STREET THEATRE, NEW YORK

MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT



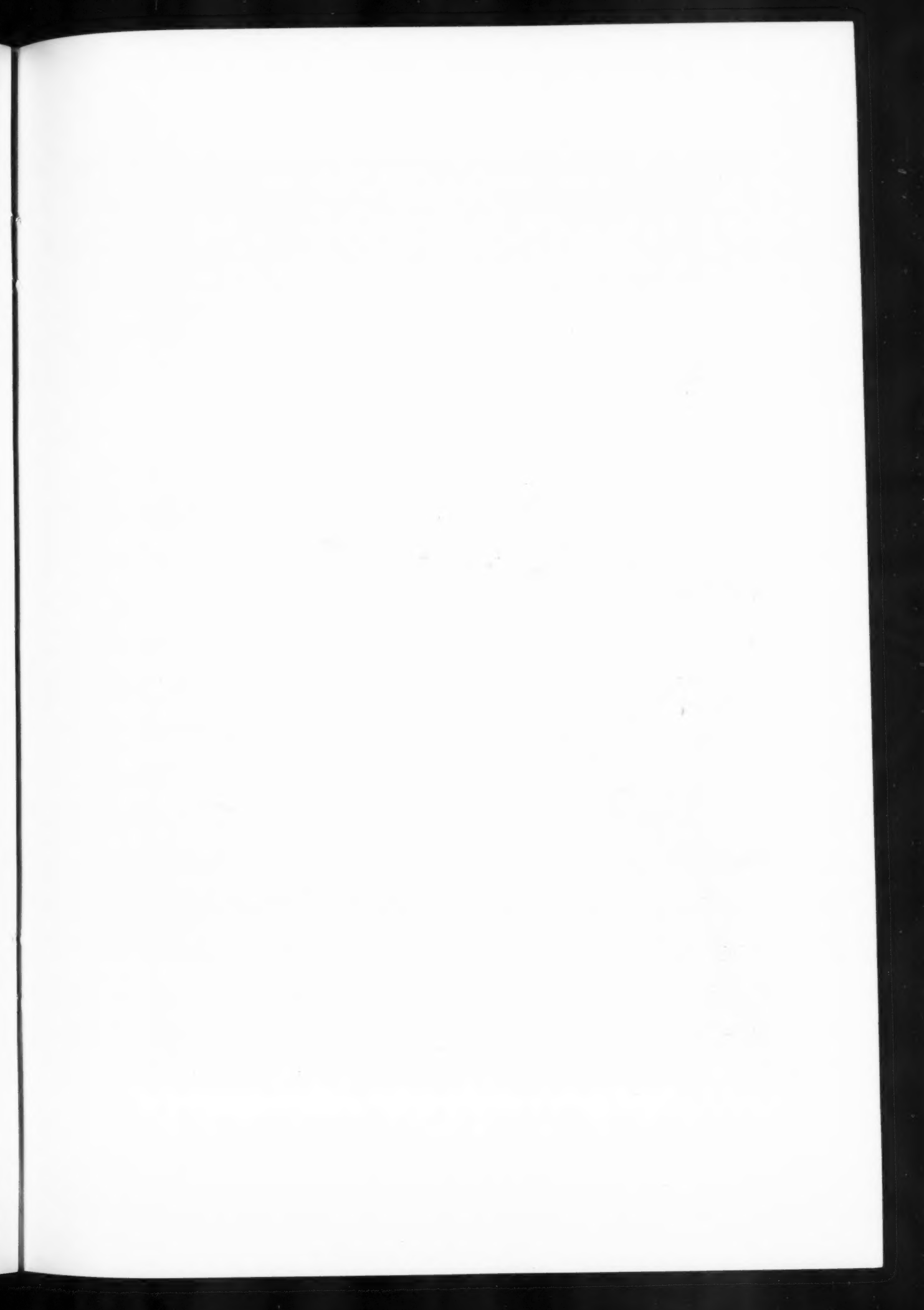


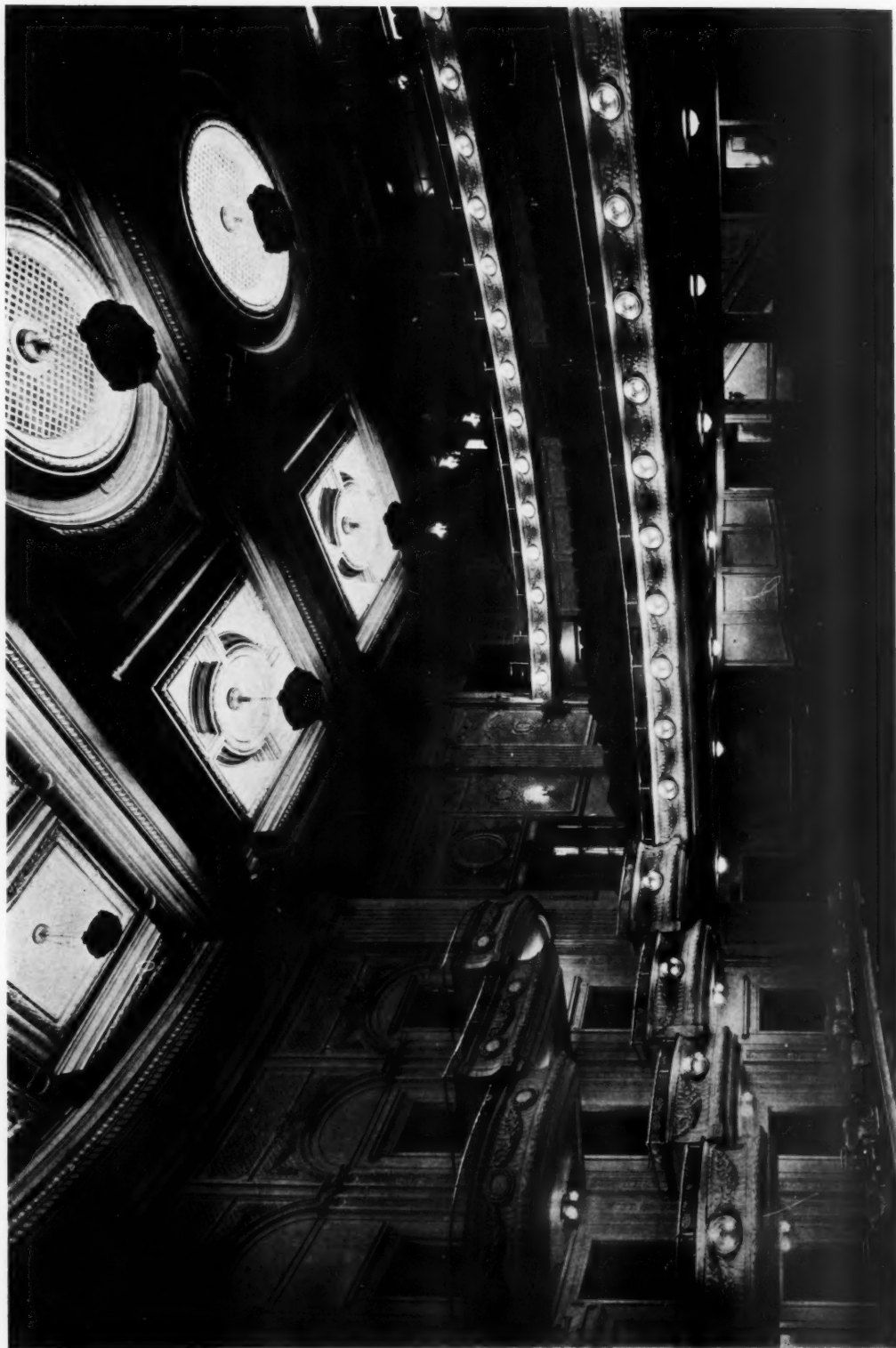
DETAIL OF BOXES

FORTY-FOURTH STREET (WEBER & FIELDS) THEATRE, NEW YORK

(See text for floor plans)

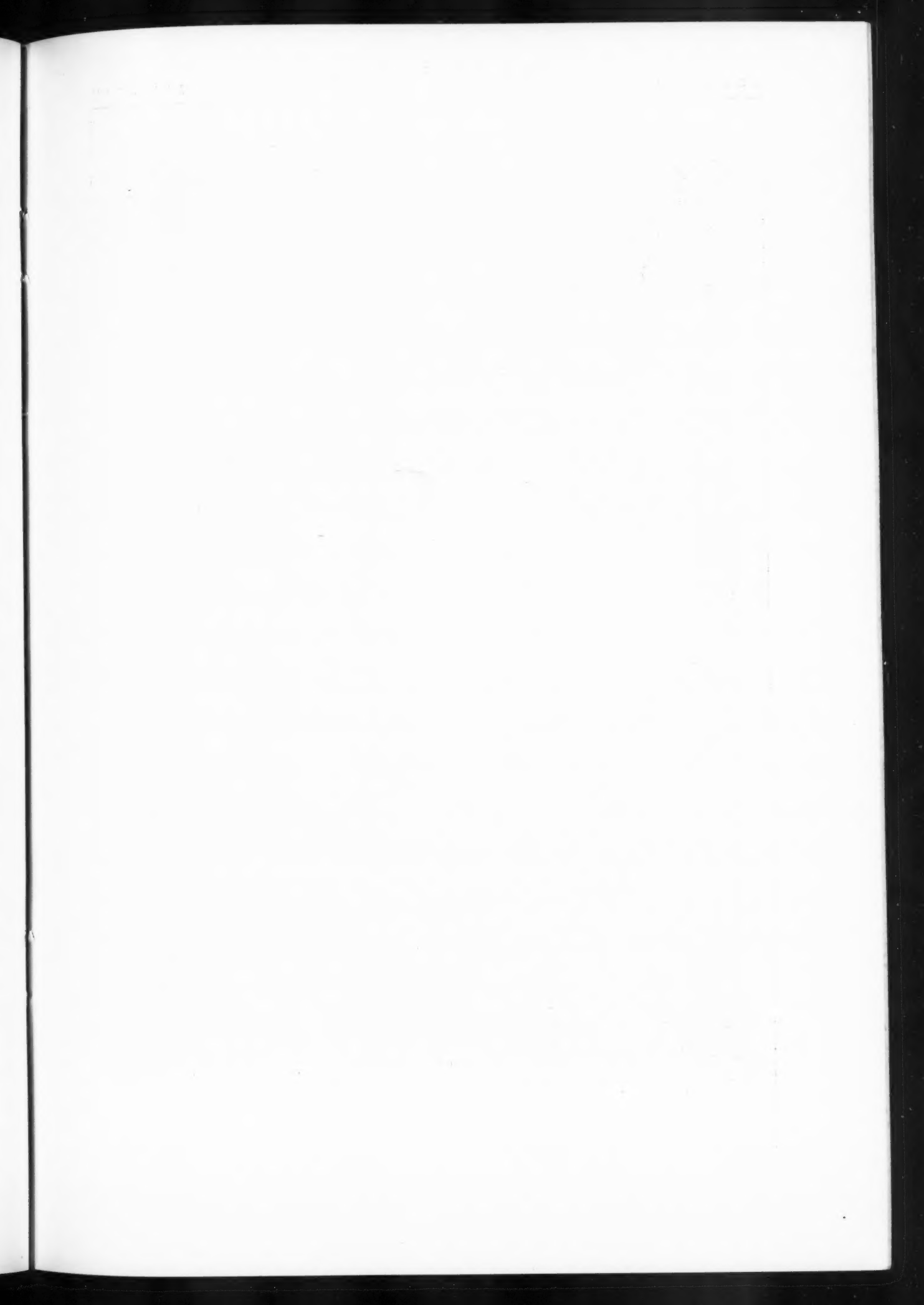
MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT





VIEW FROM STAGE

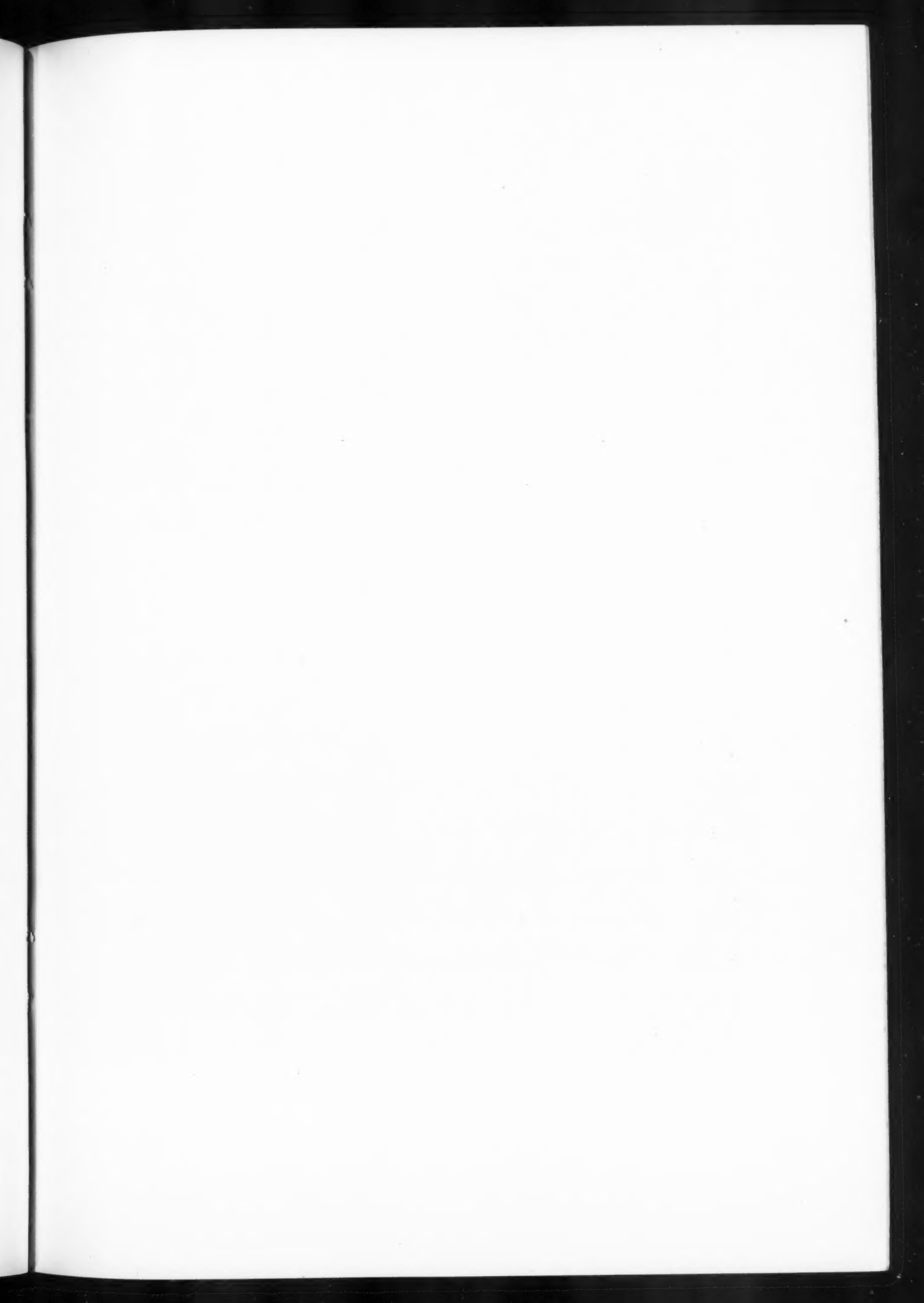
FORTY-FOURTH STREET (WEBER & FIELDS) THEATRE, NEW YORK
MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT



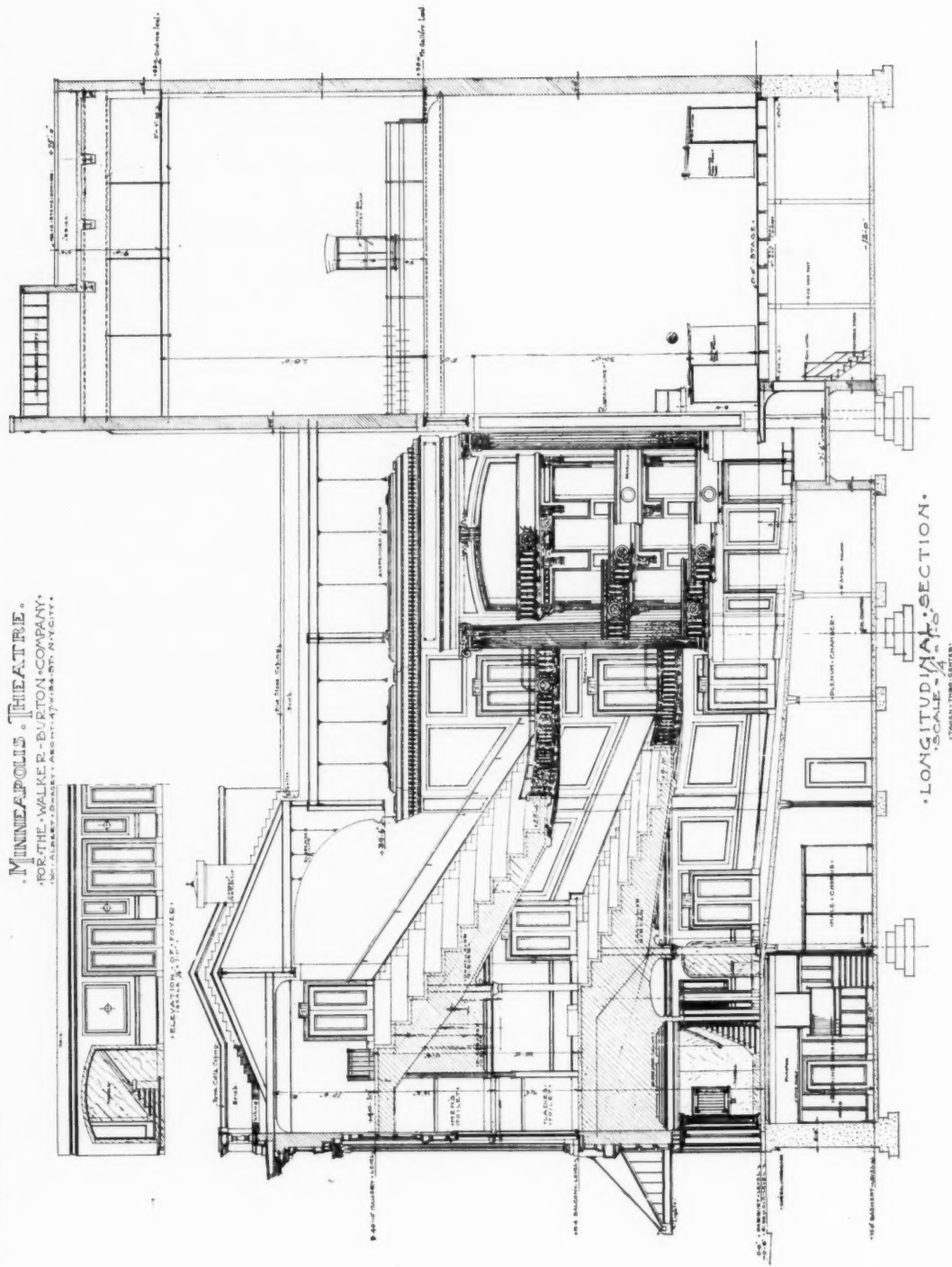


SAM S. SHUBERT THEATRE, MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.

MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT

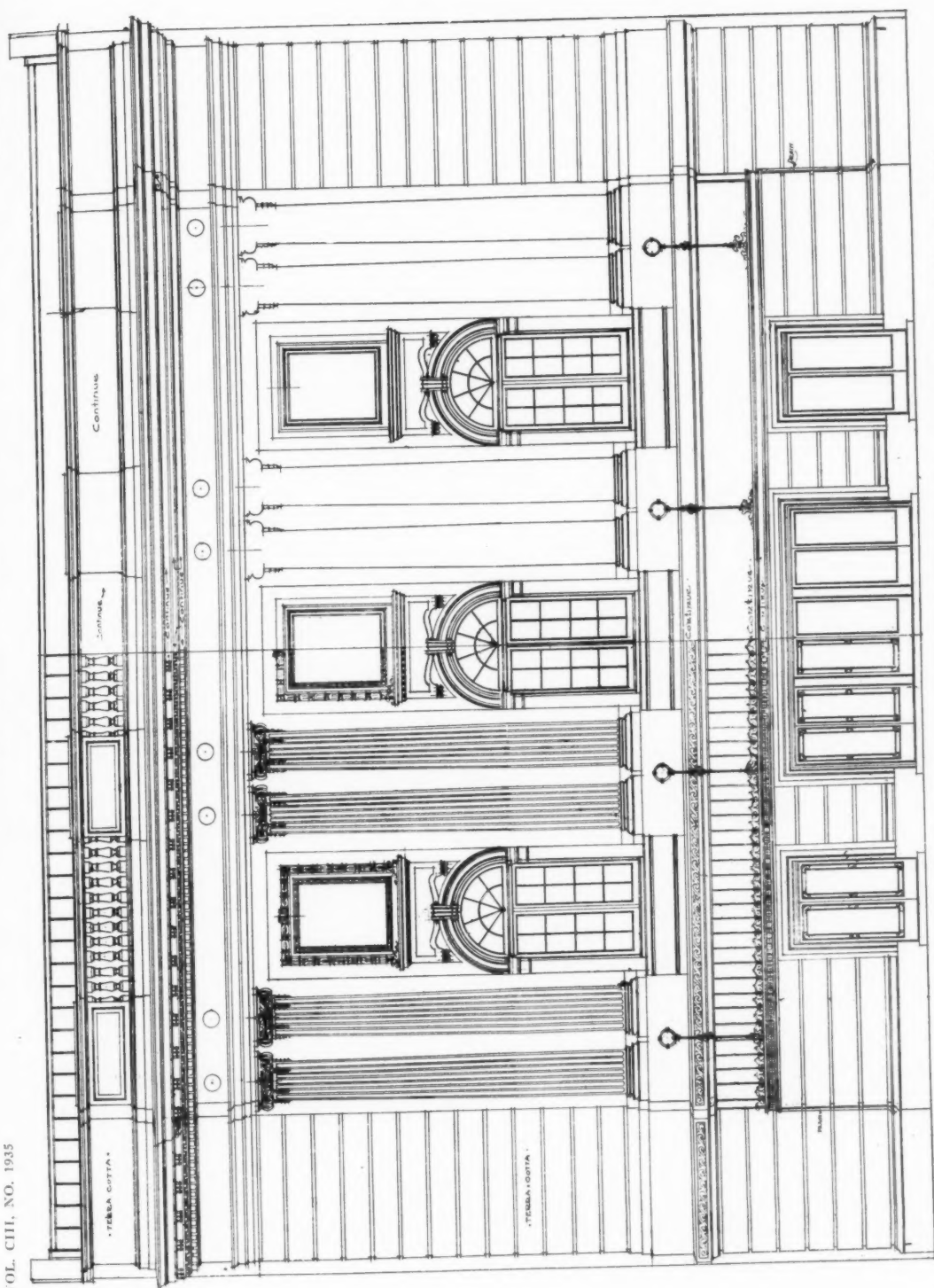


MINNEAPOLIS THEATRE.
FOR THE WALKER-BURTON COMPANY.
MR. ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHT. 47 W. 4TH ST. N.Y.CITY.

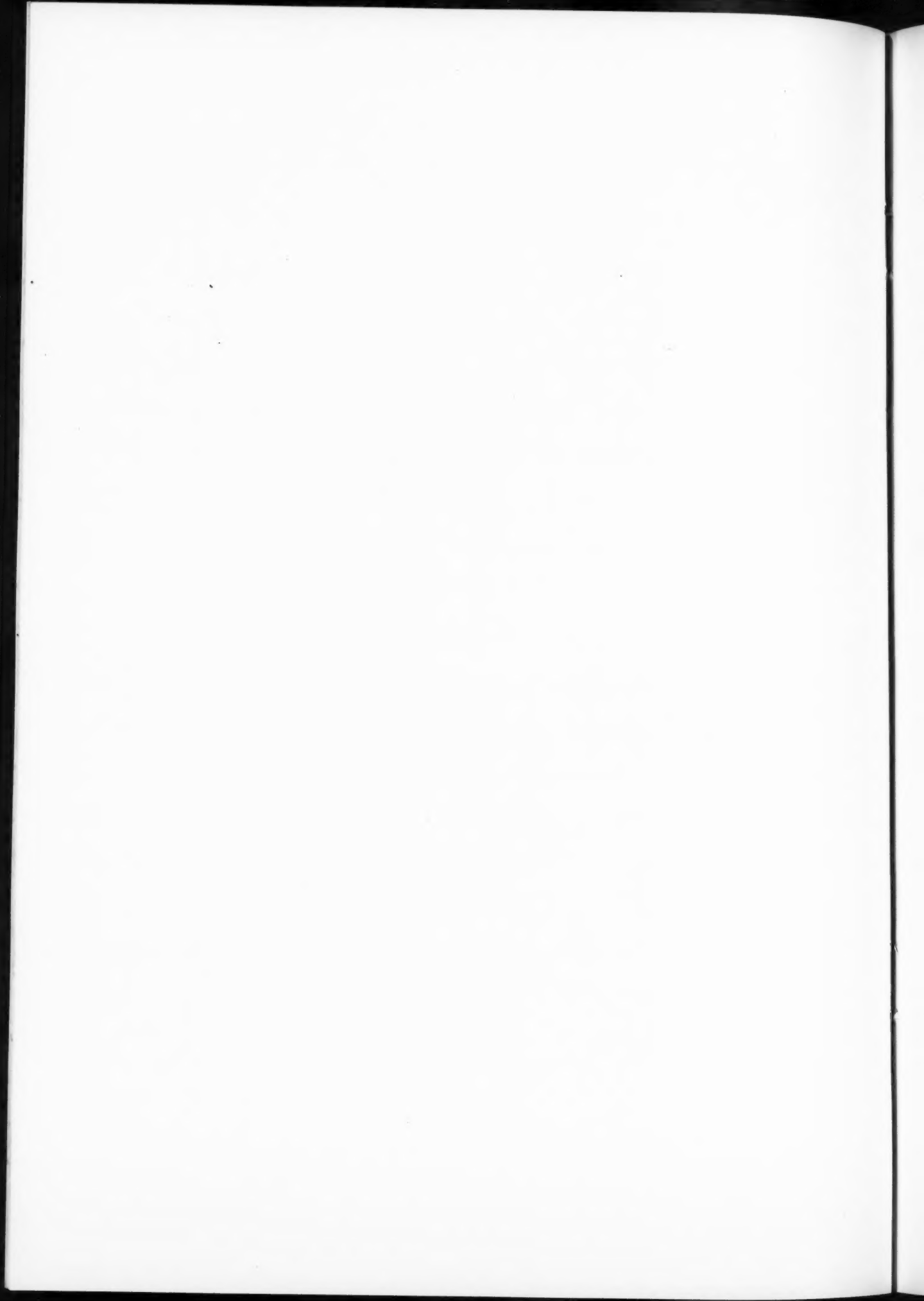


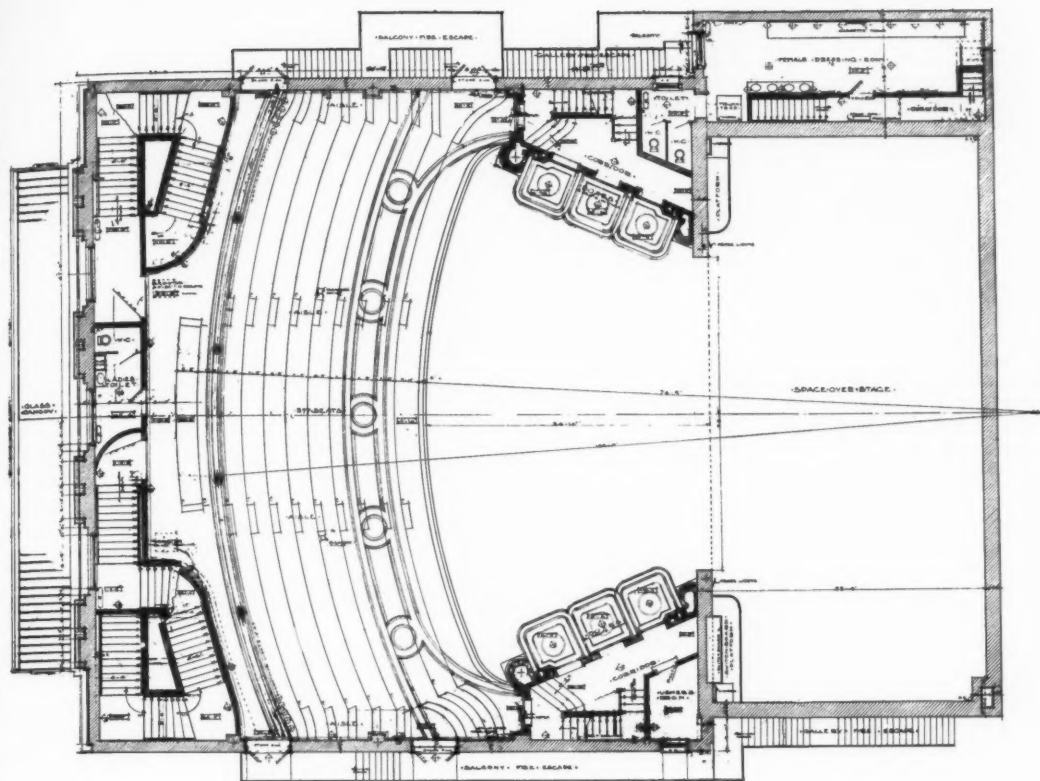
LONGITUDINAL SECTION.
SCALE - 1/4" = 1'-0"

SAM S. SHUBERT THEATRE, MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.
MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHT

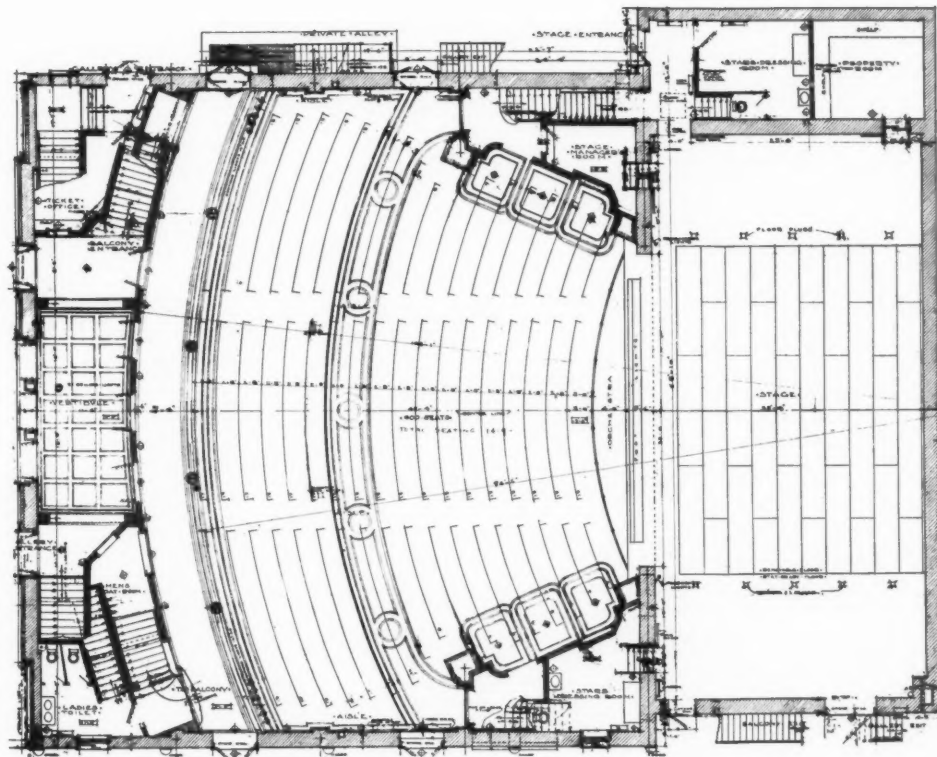


FRONT ELEVATION, SAM S. SHUBERT THEATRE, MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.
MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT





BALCONY PLAN

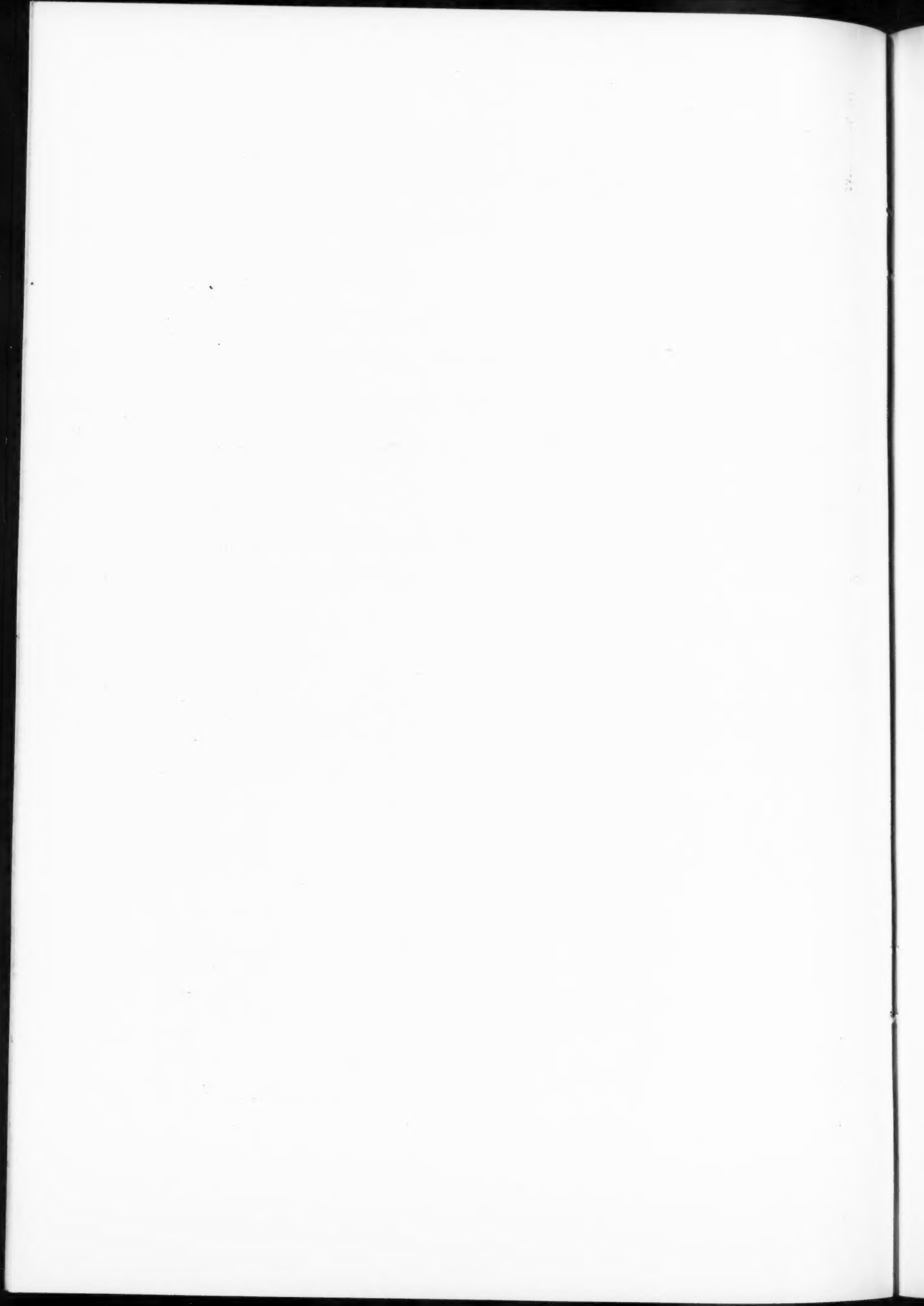


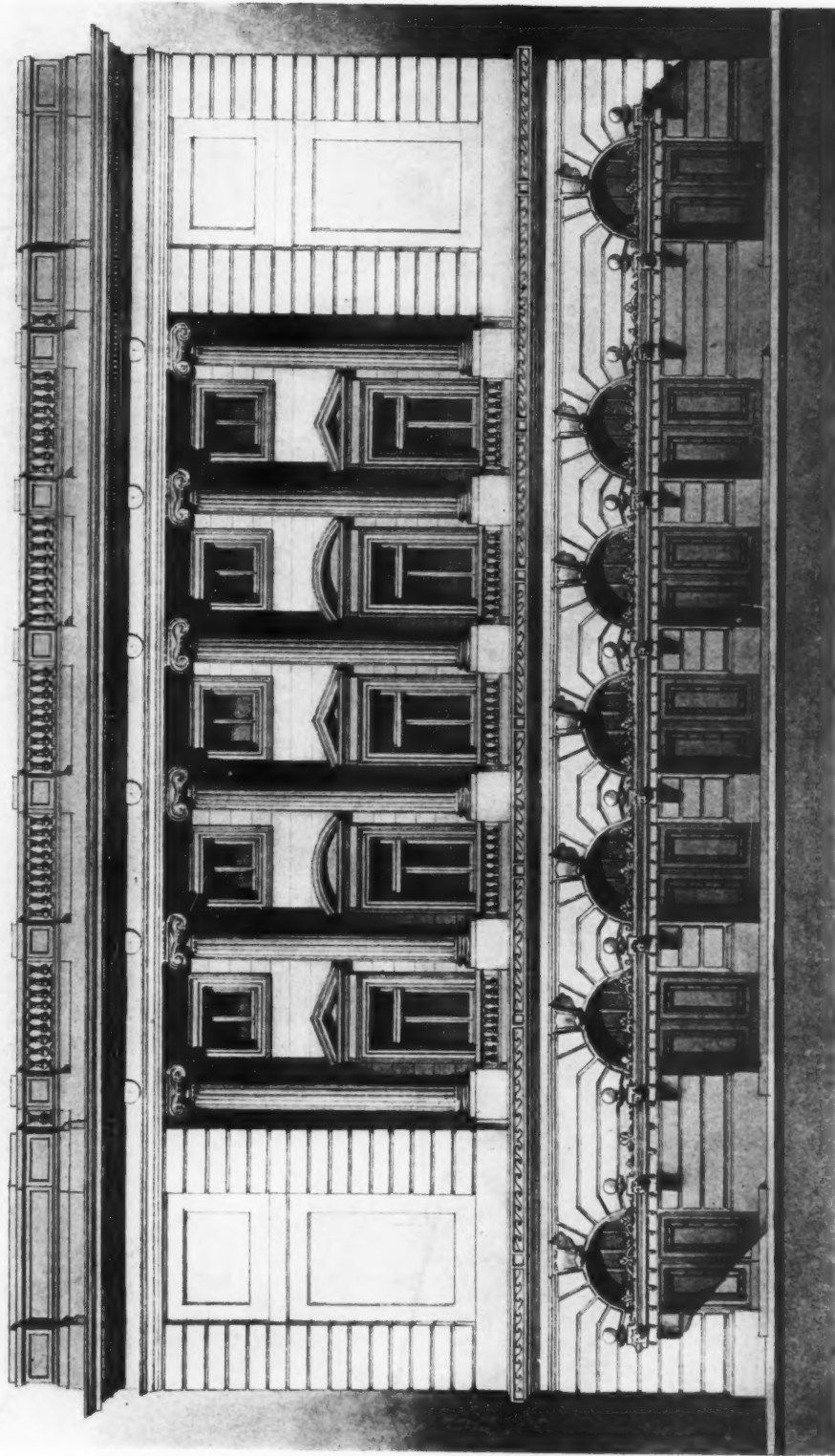
PARQUET PLAN

SAM S. SHUBERT THEATRE, MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.

(For exterior and interior views, see text)

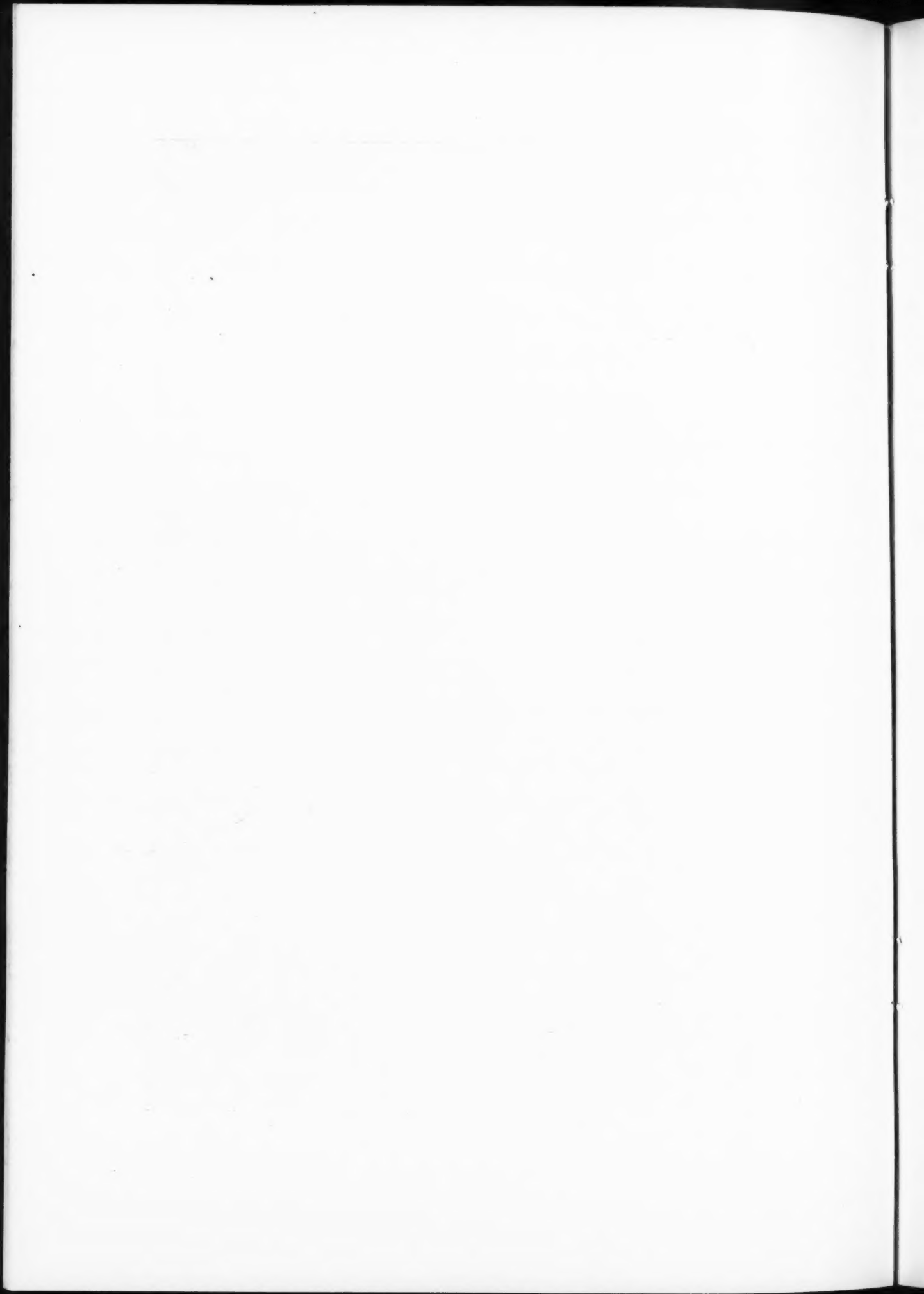
MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT

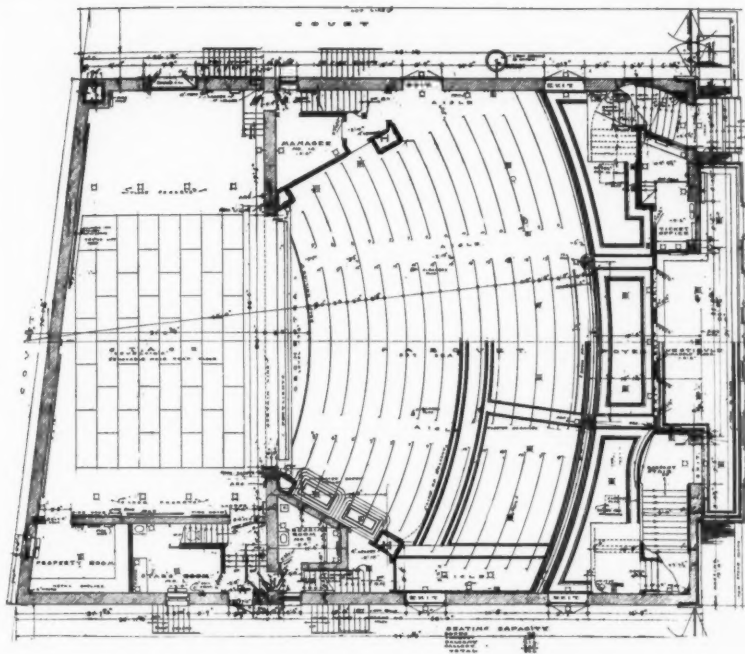
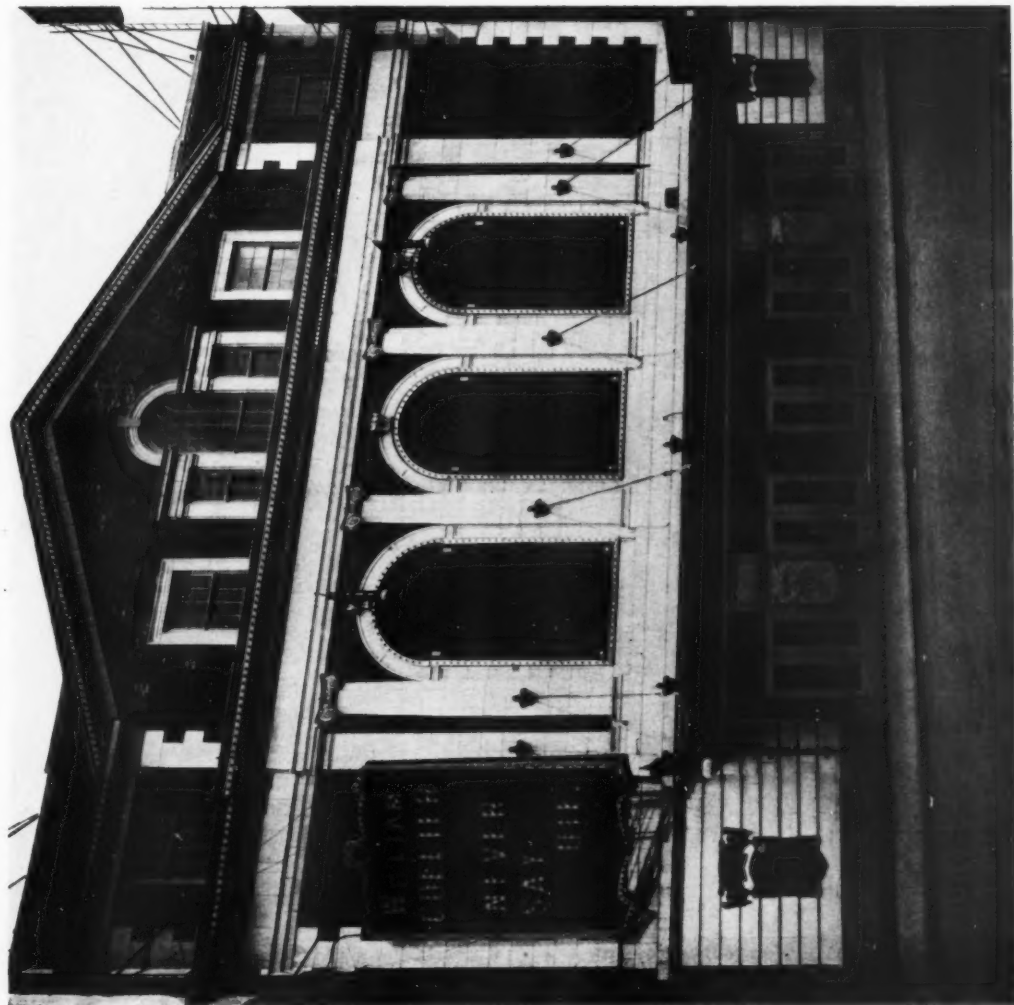




NEW BROAD STREET THEATRE, PHILADELPHIA, PA.

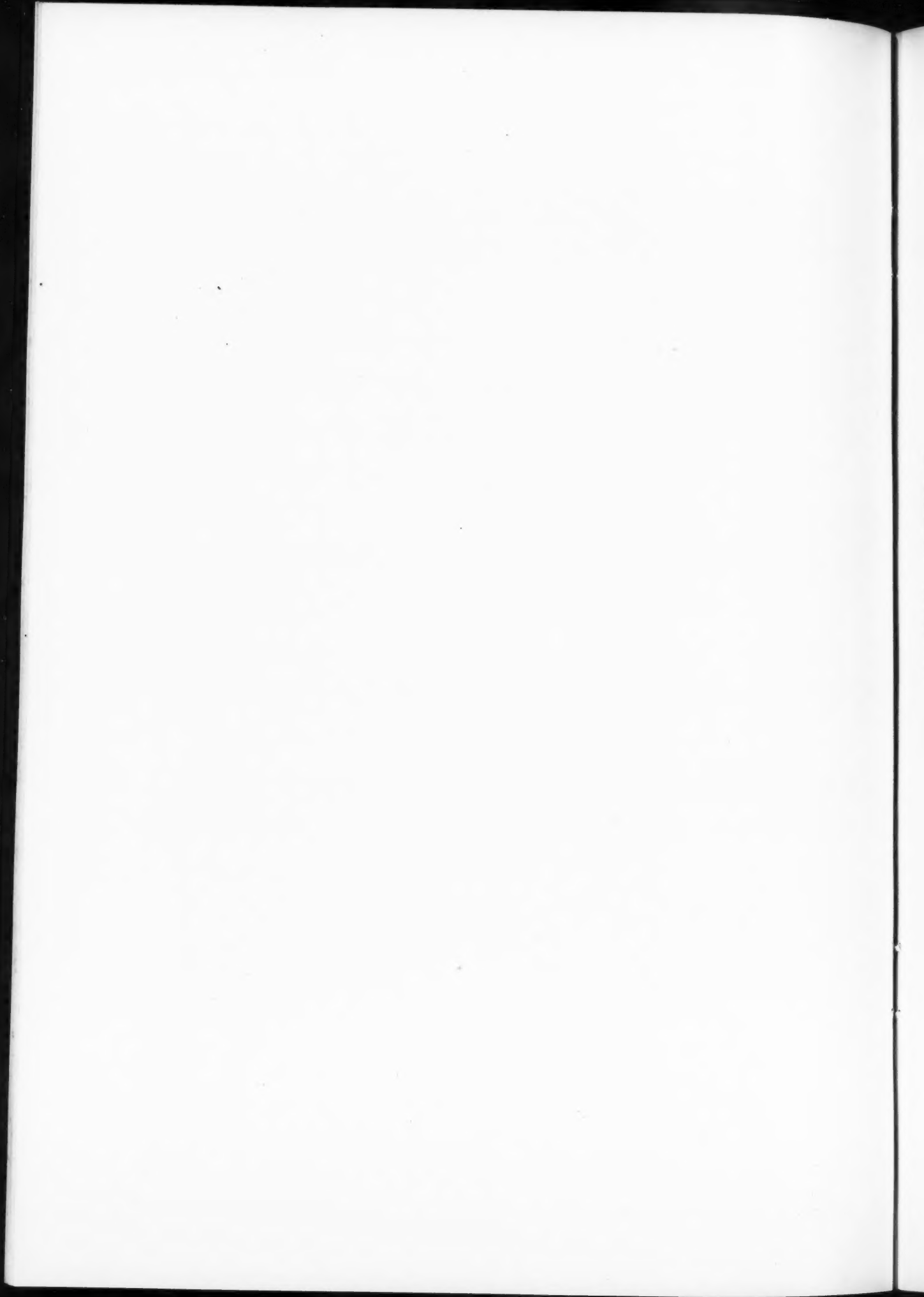
MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT





THE FORTY-EIGHTH STREET THEATRE
NEW YORK

MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT

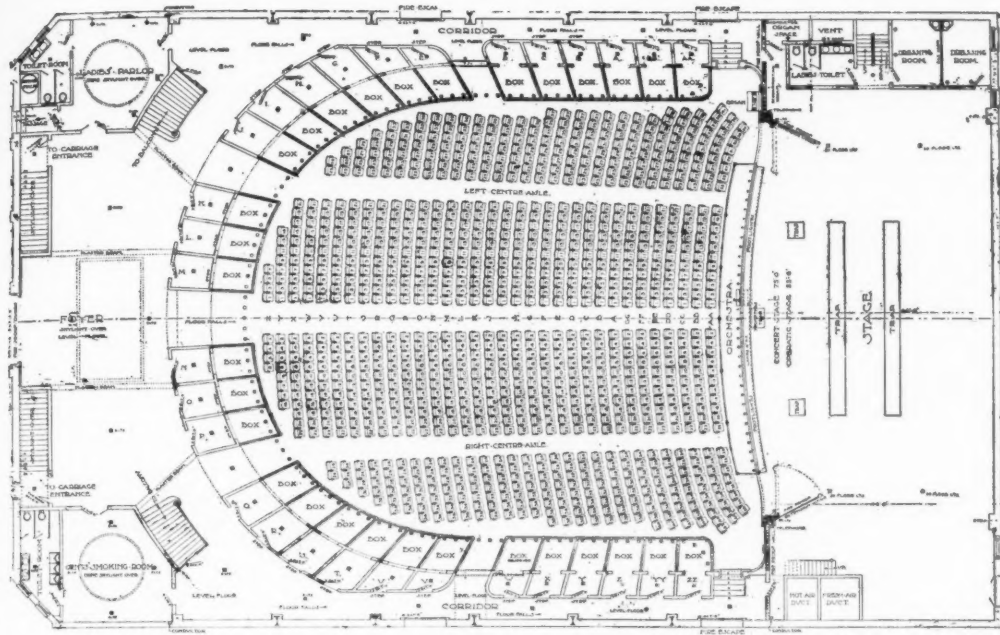
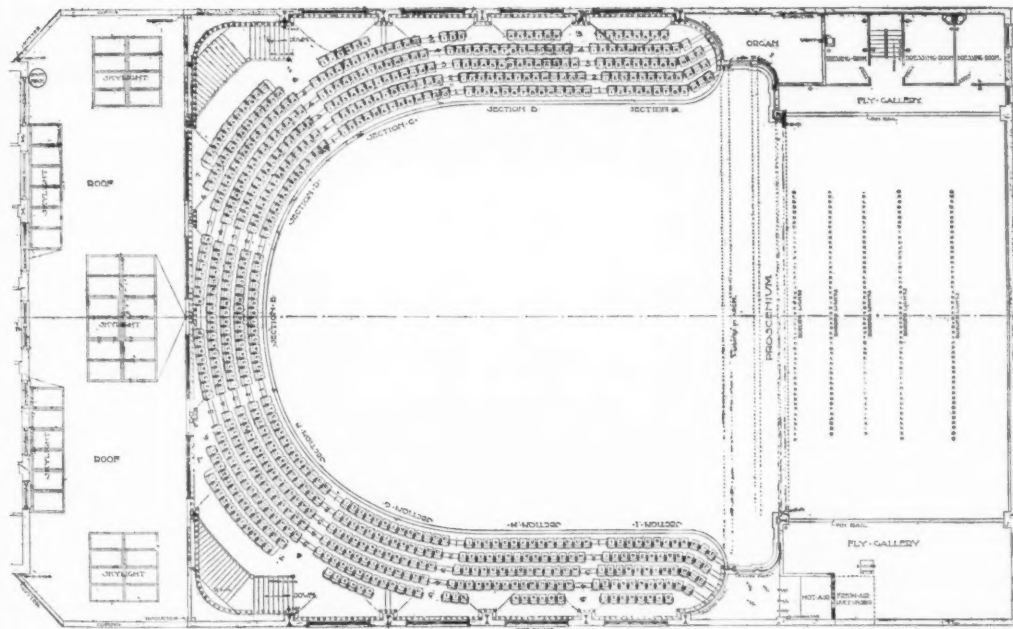




CAFE

THE WINTER GARDEN, NEW YORK

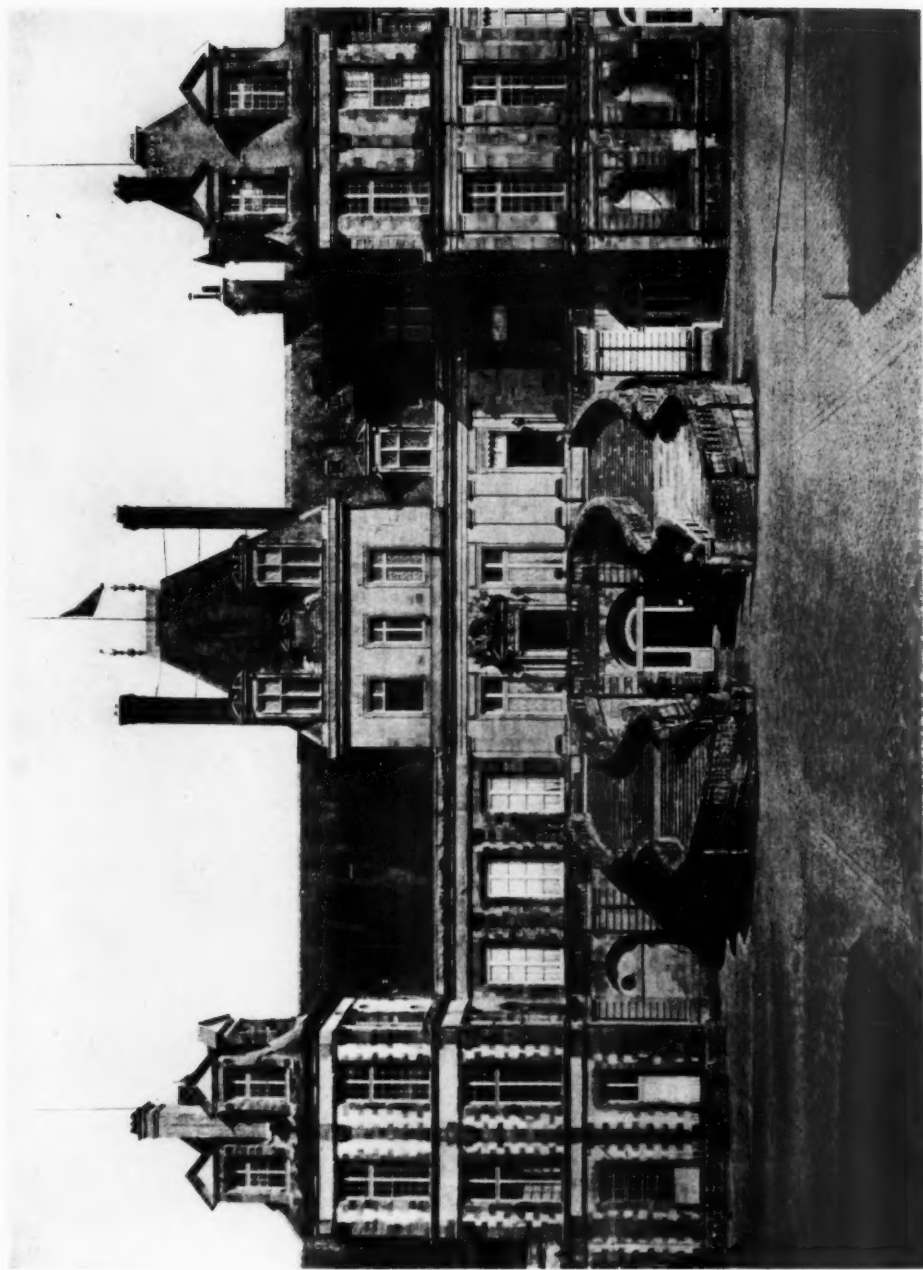
MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT



THE ODEON, ST. LOUIS, MO.

MR. WILLIAM ALBERT SWASEY, ARCHITECT

THE AMERICAN ARCHITECT



STAIRWAY IN COURTYARD OF THE PALACE, FONTAINEBLEAU