

TODAY'S TYPE OF SMALL SCREEN THEATRE

Discussing the present tendencies in construction in general and the new Music Box theatre in Chicago in particular

By GEORGE SCHUTZ

PRESENT tendencies in theatre construction make a new theatre in Chicago, the Music Box, one of the most interesting to be found. It is to a large degree representative of a whole class of motion picture theatre buildings which is growing larger and larger and which we may expect will be the dominant one in the United States within relatively a very short time. It is small—and there is no reason in either its design or cost why it could not be even smaller. It is as decorative within its space as a motion picture theatre need be. And it is entirely competent, both in design and equipment, to function as a hall in which to present the highly special kind of mechanized entertainment which is the modern motion-talking picture.

There has been the question, more and more persistent as motion picture theatres have grown more and more ornate, as to just how much the structure itself contributes to the success of the theatrical enterprise operating it. In the early days, the picture was truly "the thing." Crude, inadequate to its purpose as it was, it was the only thing that drew people into the hall in which its vague shadows jerked through streaked antics of little rhyme and less reason. When the pic-

ture had developed to a state approximating its present ability to tell convincingly fine stories in pantomime, the theatre as a structure was still plain and unnoteworthy. There is reason to believe, from the chronology of the development of picture and theatre, that betterment of the former produced a movement toward betterment of the latter. On the other hand, the view is tenable that the theatre developed separately from the picture, that the "palace plus museum" idea in architecture and furnishings, arose directly from a desire to exploit the theatre itself and its allied structural features. In other words, it may be argued, the intention was far less to aid and abet the drama on the screen, than to sell the public a unique physical luxury.

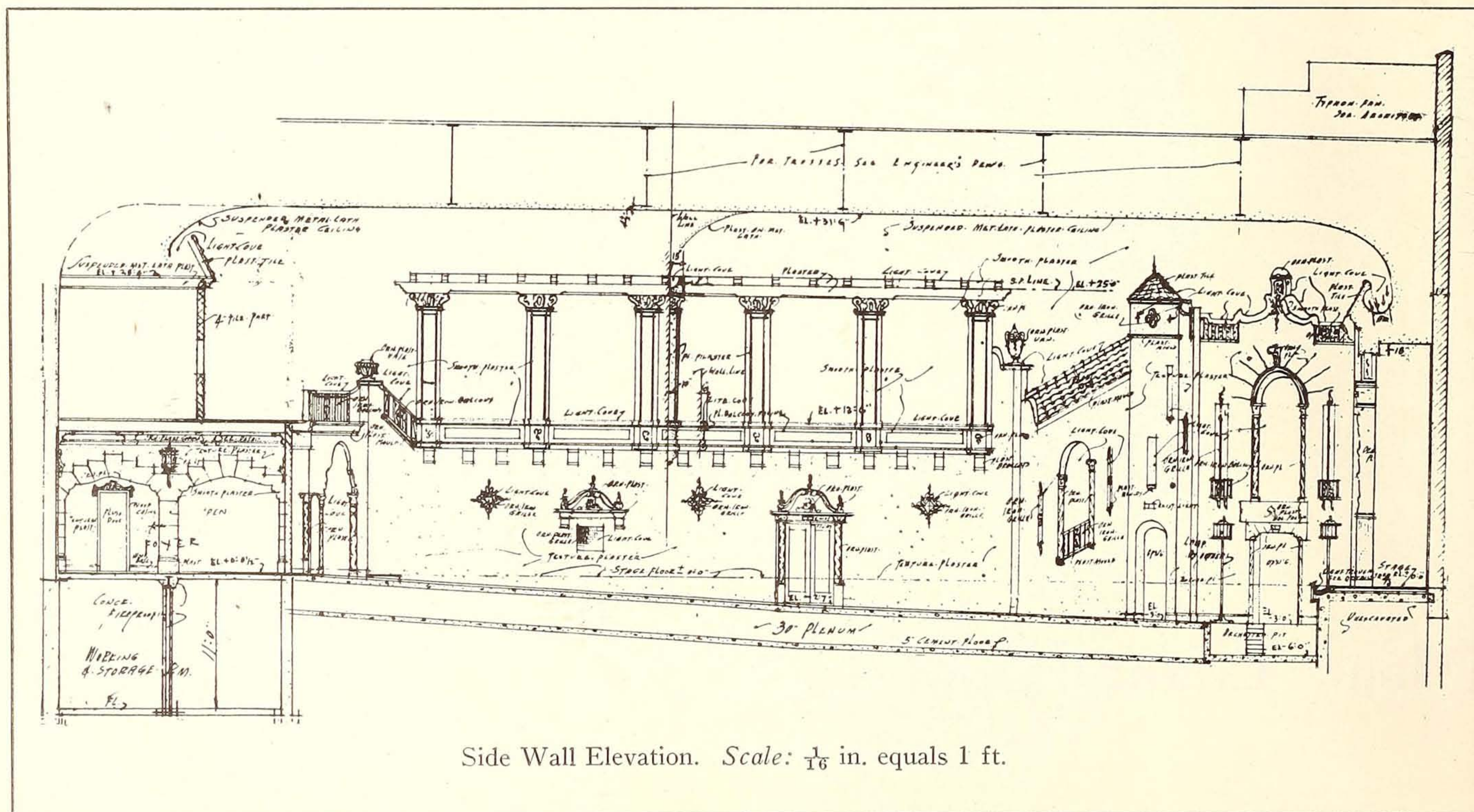
Because of financial necessity as well as the justifiable desire to get all the profits possible, theatres grew and grew in size until the idea of great magnitude was rather generally inseparable from the success of the theatre as an architectural work. The "deluxe" performance had been added to the picture program, splendor was on sale in foyers, lounges and auditorium. Thus the whole tendency was toward a vast building with end-

less soft-carpeted corridors, chambers full to overflowing with the luxury of ancient kings, and an entertainment at least a half of which consisted in non-cinematic elements.

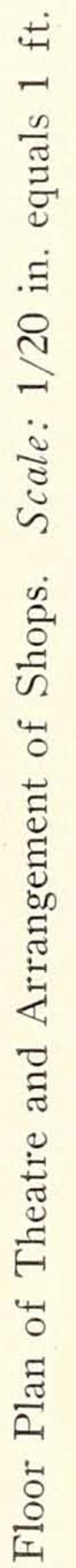
The Music Box, which was designed by Steinborn & Simon of Chicago, is constructed for only motion picture shows. Naturally, for sound pictures. The auditorium is rectangular and well over half as wide as it is long. All seats are completely upholstered, there are a few drapes forming an integral part of the decorative scheme. Both acoustics and vision in the special degree required for motion pictures with sound, are good.

The Music Box seats 800 on one floor. Although there is a narrow balcony, it is unseated and now serves only the dual purpose of affording a means of access to the projection room and of contributing to the decorative motif. It would, however, hold 200 chairs if these were needed.

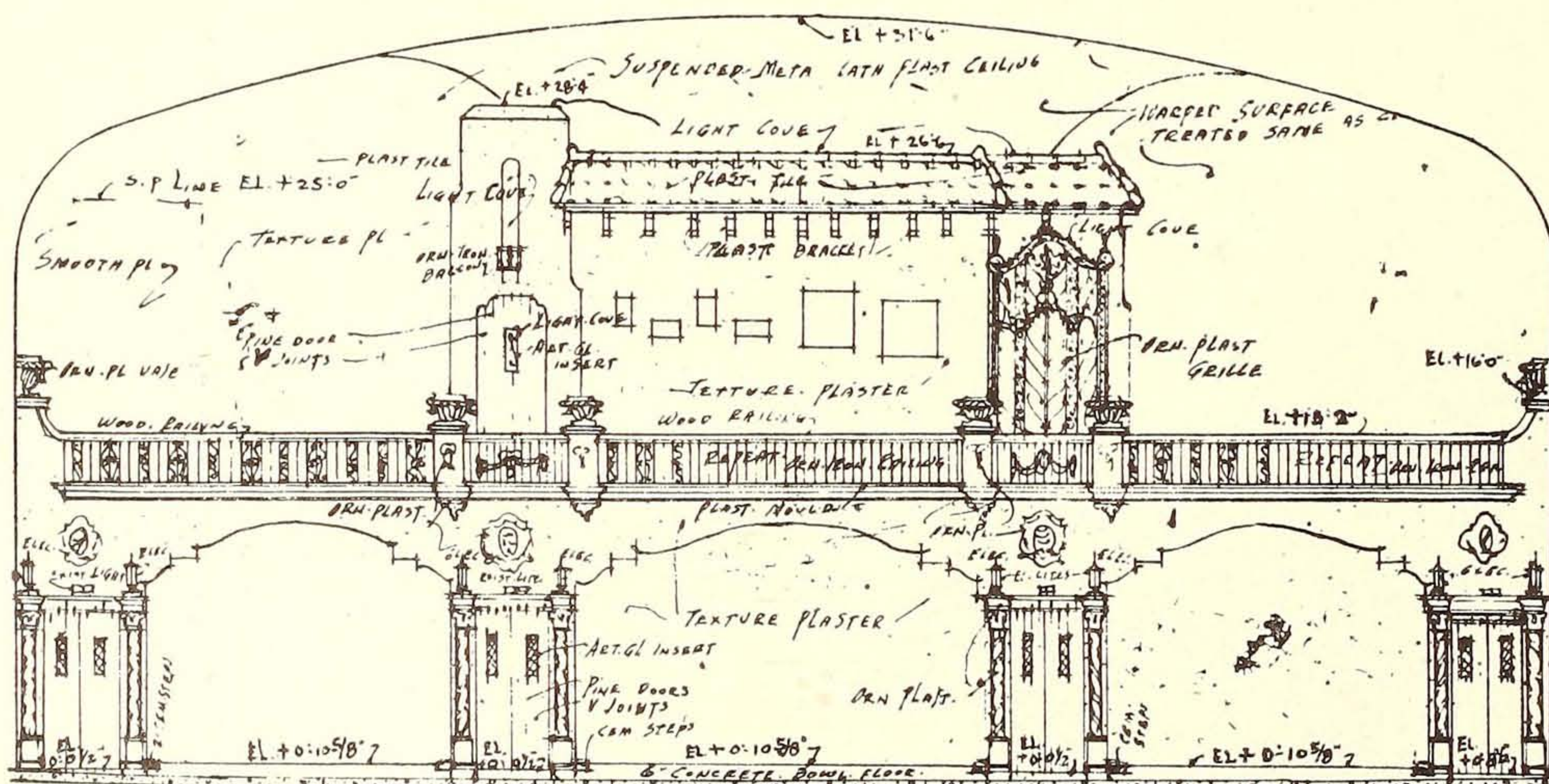
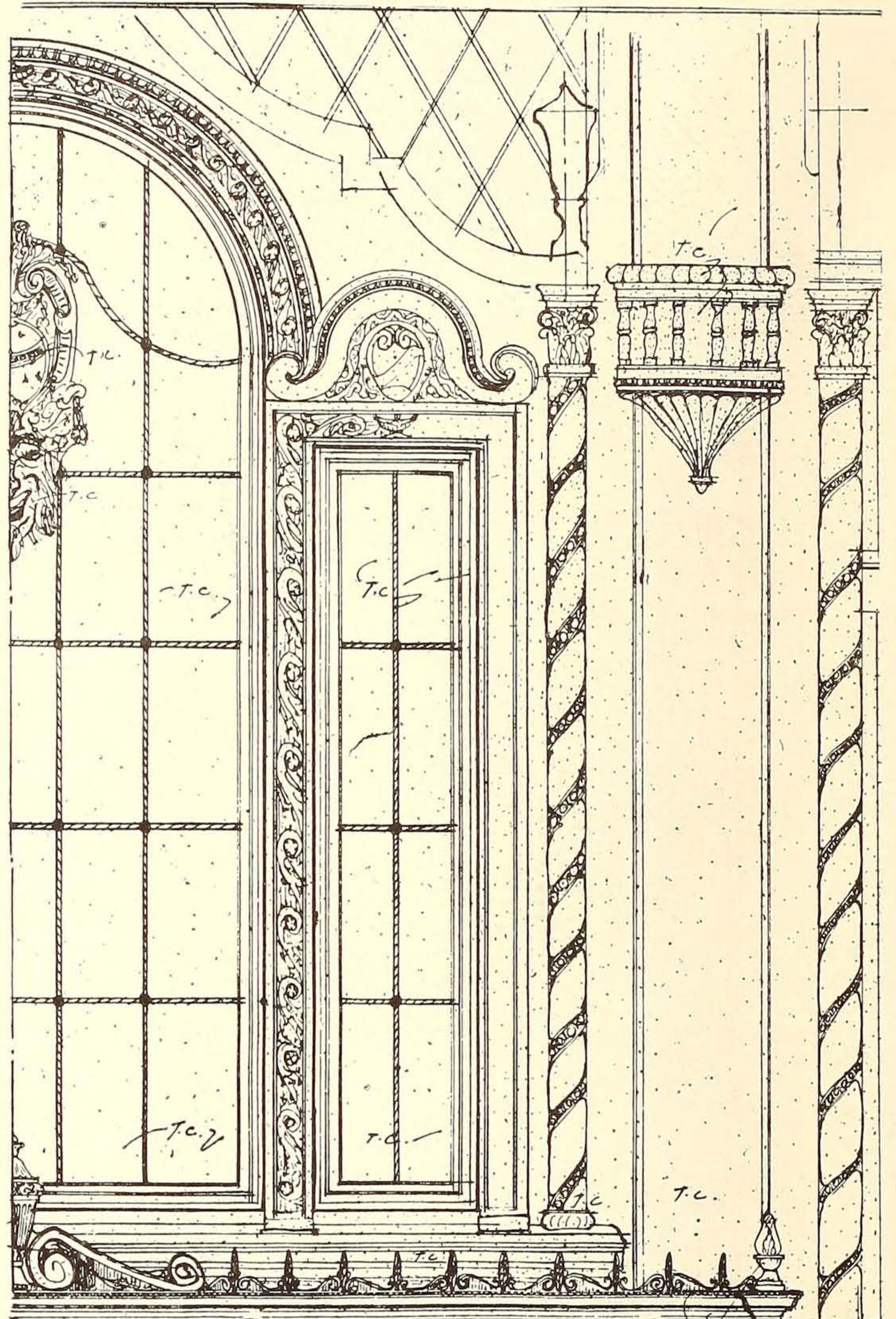
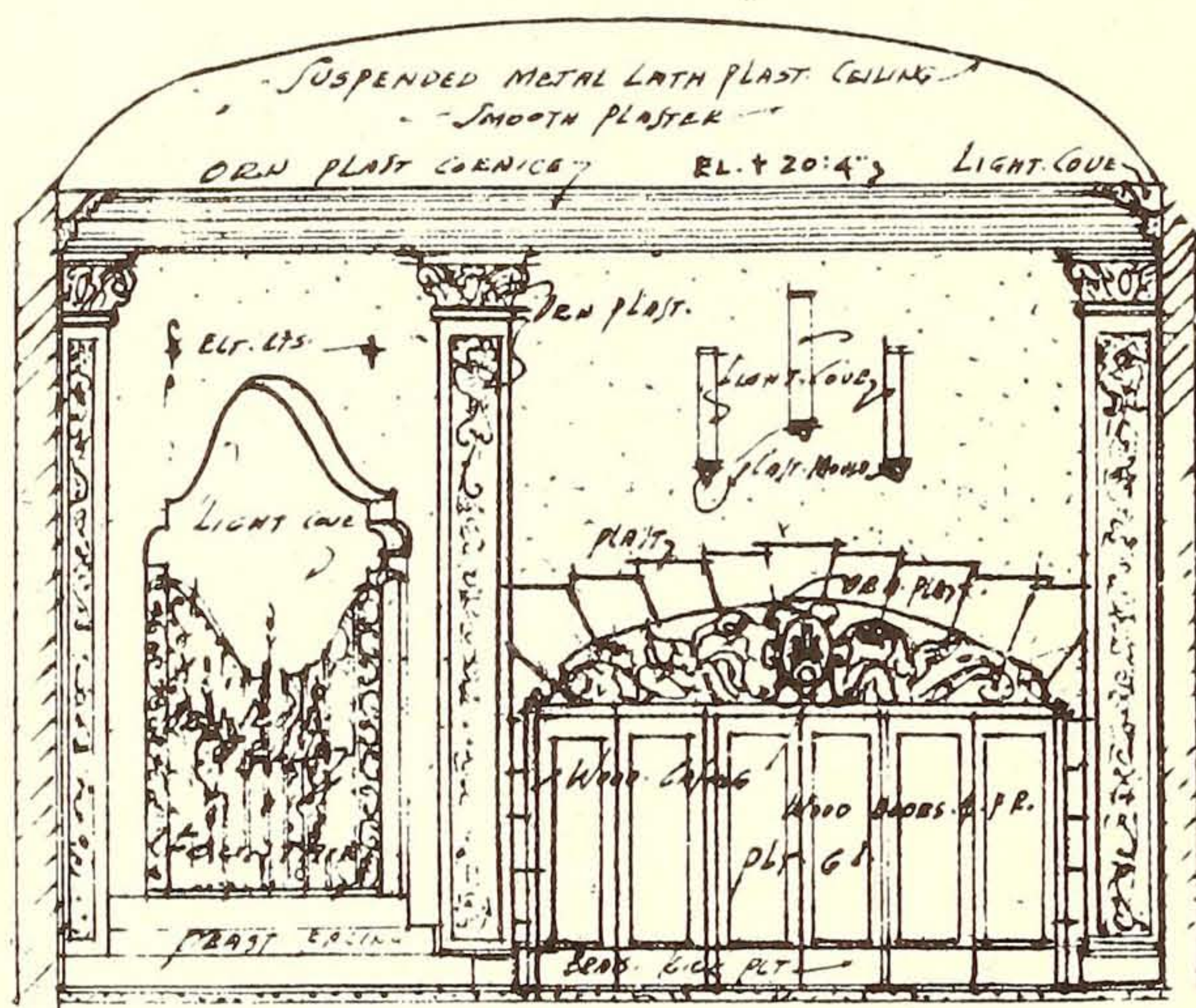
The theatre is part of a structure having eight stores, and on the second and third floors, apartments. Entrance to the theatre is at the extreme end of the building, and admission to the auditorium is through a shallow lobby, foyer capable of holding 200 standees, and an inner foyer directly in line



Side Wall Elevation. Scale: $\frac{1}{16}$ in. equals 1 ft.



Floor Plan of Theatre and Arrangement of Shops. *Scale:* 1/20 in. equals 1 ft.



Upper Left:
Section Through Lobby
Scale: $\frac{1}{8}$ in. equals 1 ft.

Upper Right:
Detail of Decorations
Above Marquise
Scale: $\frac{1}{4}$ in. equals 1 ft.

Left:
Elevation Looking
Toward Rear
Scale: $\frac{3}{16}$ in. equals 1 ft.

with the prior chambers, the auditorium being to the right, forming the longer arm of an "L" behind about five of the stores, though separated from them by an alleyway.

The theatre itself is Spanish, and the theatre front is a modification of this motif. The rest of the building is not so definitely motivated, though various decorative touches draw it into harmony with the front.

The box office is close to the sidewalk, and at each side are four doors of art glass. The box office has an ornamental plaster dome, while the basal part is in terra cotta figures. Above the entrance doors, the wall is decoratively worked out in ornamental leaded glass resting on a panel of carved wood. The lobby floor is notable. Colored tiling was cracked indiscriminately and the pieces laid without any design. The result is a variegated broken faience tile floor of simple, lasting beauty and great durability. The floor of the foyer is the same.

Above the marquise, a decorative feature of considerable effectiveness which was economically achieved, is a tall, arched "window," flanked by two shorter and narrower ones, made of terra cotta shaded to give the impression of plate glass. These "windows" are "leaded" with a darker shade of terra cotta. This entire upper part of the theatre front, which rises in a broken arch considerably above the rest of the building, is extensively treated decoratively, practically the entire treatment being in terra cotta. Even three urns atop the front are of terra cotta.

The foyer is rectangular and of good width. The walls are of rough finished, two-toned glazed plaster, with pilasters similarly treated. The floor is bright with the broken faience treatment previously noted. In the corner to the left of the entrance to the inner foyer, is a built-in decorative fountain, in the basin of which swim gold fish. Through three doors to the right, patrons are admitted to the inner foyer, which curves around behind the auditorium. This is carpeted and furnished as a general lounge. The walls are done as elsewhere in the theatre, in rough-finished plaster, and above is an ornamental plaster beam ceiling. Toward one end of this foyer, which is more appropriately a corridor, and toward the outer side, is the men's retiring room, and at the other end, that for the women. There are four pairs of doors leading to the auditorium, the aisles being equally divided, starting at the extreme sides.

Definitely, though simply, Spanish is the auditorium, which is also atmospheric. The walls are worked out in a series of columns and intervening panels on the upper part, with decorative light coves set at intervals against the rough-finished wall surface along the lower part. There is no stage other than a small platform for the screen and horns, and no organ loft as such. However, there is a

proscenium arch and the usual type of treatment at the adjoining sides. This treatment consists in a Spanish building effect achieved by a doorway with balcony and arched window above, at the point closest to the stage, then a tower and then, to connect the whole with the series of columns, a declining Spanish tiled roof effect, beneath which, set in the wall, is a small grille-balconied arch. The proscenium is unvaulted. Two ornamental plaster figures supporting a decorated beam, forms the design.

At the rear of the auditorium, the balcony enters into the Spanish motif by means of a grilled railing across which hang here and there, Spanish shawls and pennants.

The ceiling is treated as a sky, with twinkling stars in front of which pass clouds supplied by two Brenkert cloud effect machines.

All, or practically all, lighting in the Music Box is of the cove type. The only exceptions are a few bracket fixtures.

The heating and ventilating system is of the upward type. The air enters the heaters through ducts from the roof, is admitted to the auditorium through mushrooms, and rising, is drawn off by fans located behind the arches (the usual position of the organ loft) adjoining the proscenium. Air is introduced at the rate of 22,000 cubic feet per minute, and is drawn off at the rate of 16,000 cubic feet. Thus there is a complete change of air six times an hour. No cooling system has

been installed, though means of cooling the air before introduction to the auditorium can be easily added to the present system. The air is automatically humidified in the heating apparatus.

This house was built at a cost (including the seats) of about \$110,000. The total building cost about \$260,000. Theatre equipment, exclusive of seats, cost approximately \$35,000.

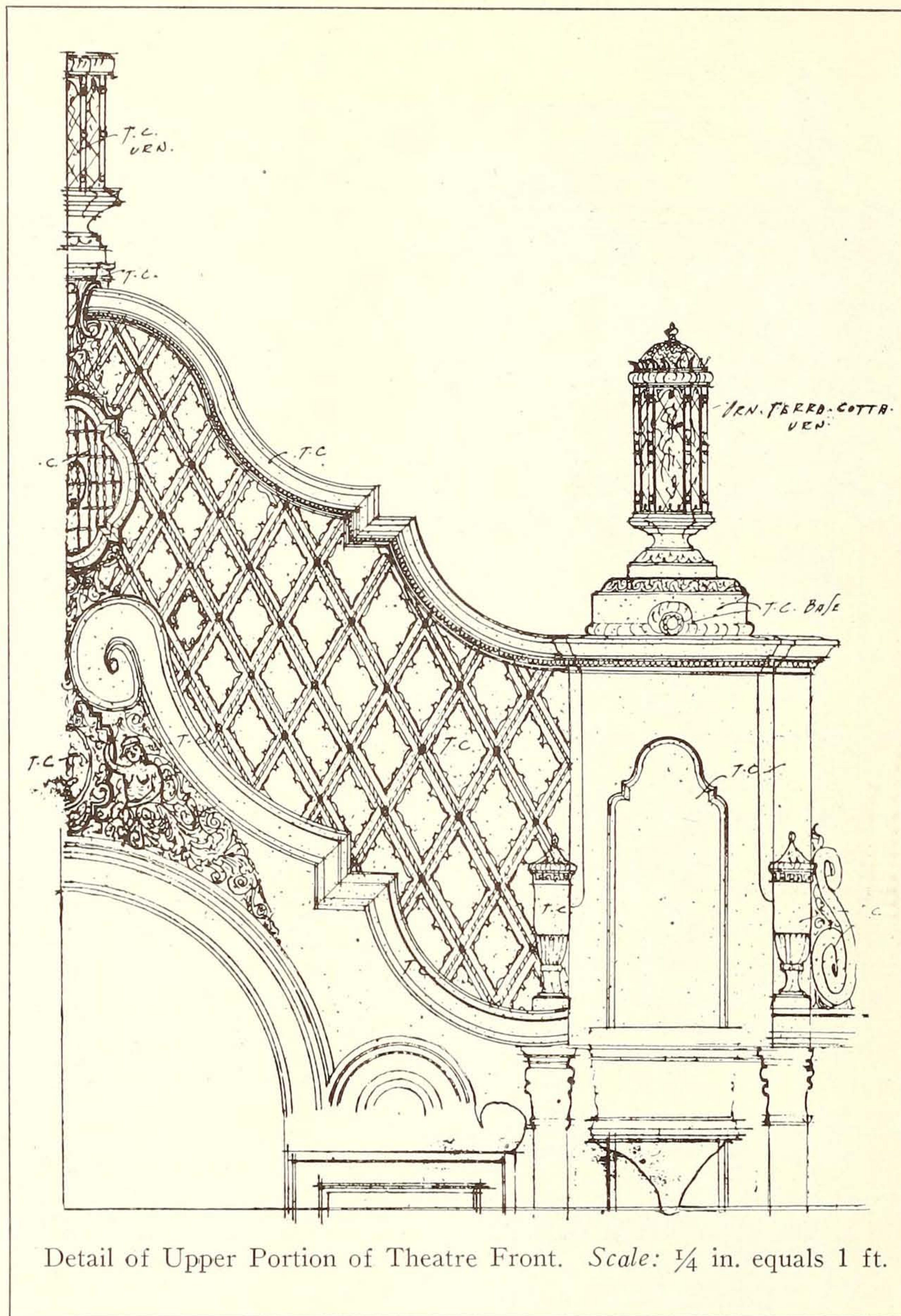
The building was erected by a regional business organization, the Southport Avenue Businessmen's Association. The theatre is operated by Lasker & Sons, which firm operates several of the smaller neighborhood houses in Chicago.

The accompanying plans indicate the layout of the theatre and the details of some of its more interesting decorative features. Applicable, of course, to no other project specifically, they yet show the method employed by the architects in planning a theatre which, both aesthetically and mechanically, is eminently adapted to the business of presenting motion picture entertainment, and which in its general aspects, at least, represents the smaller, though charming and well equipped, sound picture theatre which is rapidly taking the place of the "deluxe" palace in the larger proportion of theatre construction activity.

There will always be a demand for the super-theatre, of course, in the principal business sections of the large cities. And cities grow still

larger, principal business sections increase. But while the great centers were getting their present palatial theatres, the former, less modern type of small theatre remained much as it had been. It is the latter which is changing, even though it still must be comparatively small. The talking picture unquestionably refocused public attention on the screen, and it necessarily must be screen entertainment which the smaller theatre can sell. Logically, this means an increase in the public appeal of the smaller house, with the possible greater intimacy which it affords. What is required is that it be as complete aesthetically and mechanically, within its own space, as its huge modern brother.

As to the drawing power which a theatre has as a monument to architecture and decorative arts, this must be considerable, less, perhaps, to the extent that the public is permanently attracted by these things than because things contribute to a theatre's whole personality. But the idea of magnitude is not an essential one even to the architectural success of a theatre. The lavish, the overwhelming repletion of costliness marked an era in theatre design when all this decorative display formed a large part of what the theatre had to sell. It would seem that we have returned to a time when the picture is "the thing," and even the small house can be as architecturally completely adapted to that purpose as the large.



Detail of Upper Portion of Theatre Front. Scale: $\frac{1}{4}$ in. equals 1 ft.