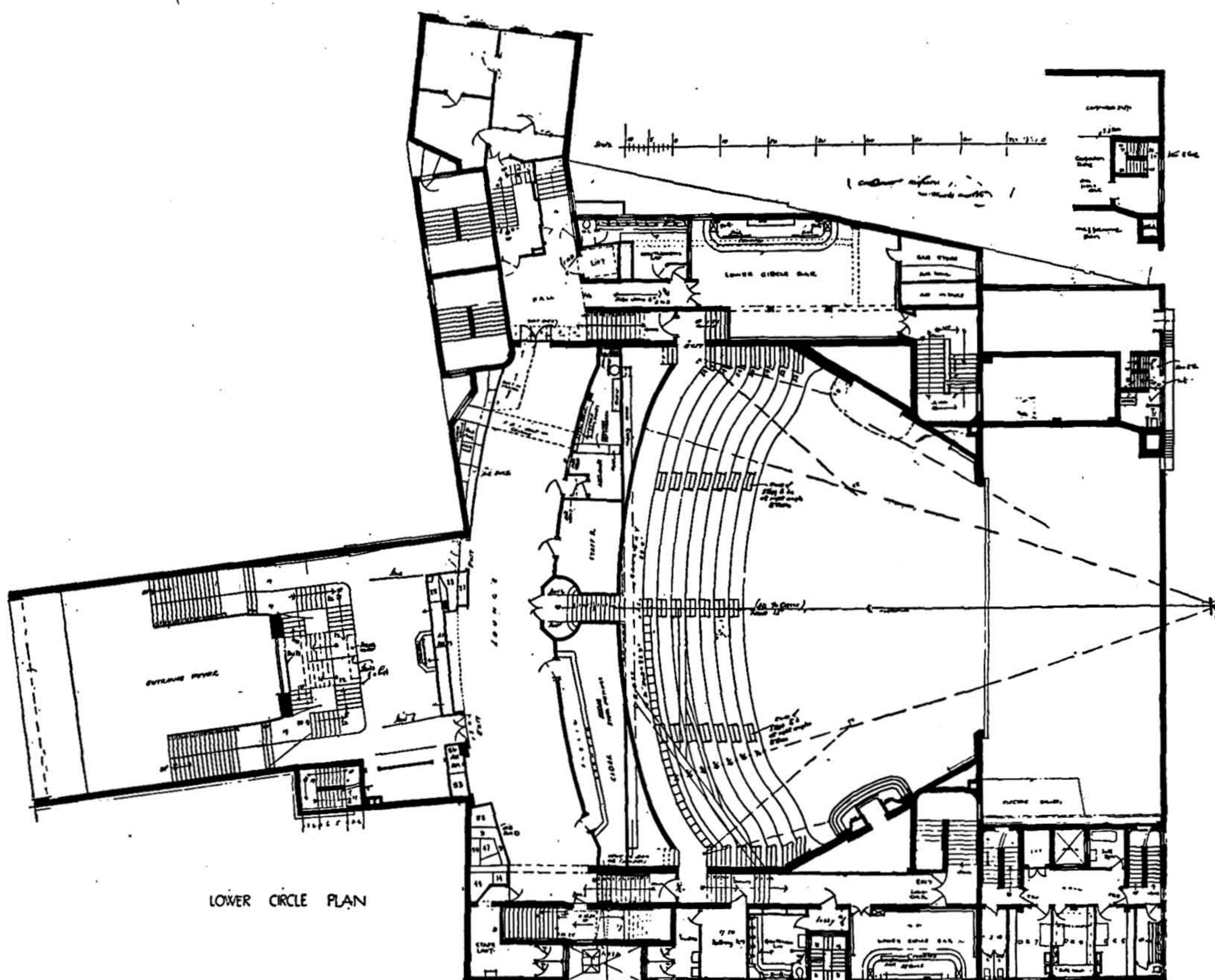


THE ELEVATION TO TOTTENHAM COURT ROAD.
Messrs. W. & T. R. MILBURN, F.F.R.I.B.A., Architects.

THE DOMINION THEATRE

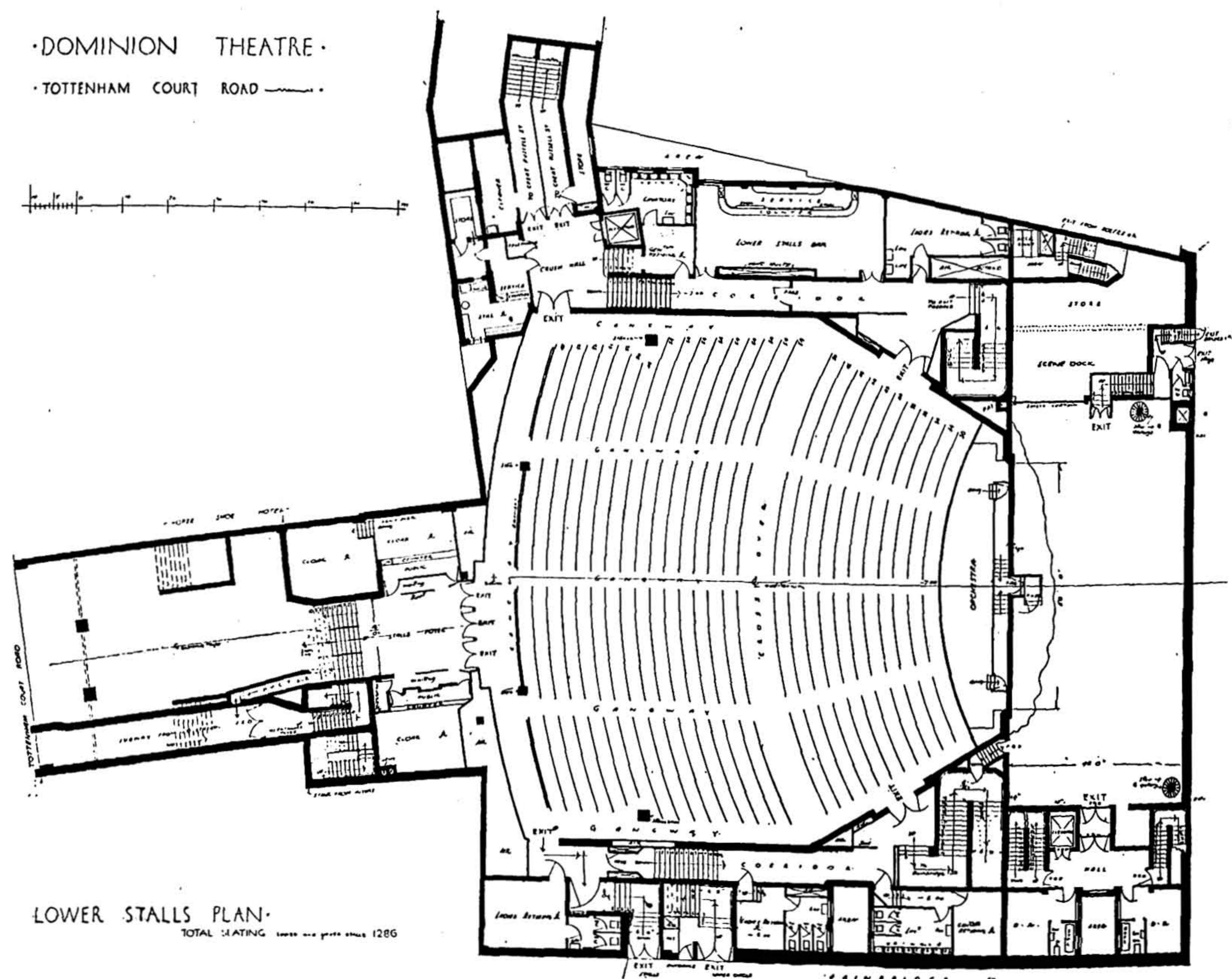
From time to time hard things are said about English theatres. Someone who has paid twelve shillings or more to sit behind a column, heard only a soporific murmur from the stage, been trodden on by late comers, waited patiently in a bar queue to quench a thirst engendered by inadequate ventilation or none at all, or listened to highly emotional passages punctuated by motor horns or passing electric trains, has expressed his indignation in public or in print. Indeed, there are few pre-war theatres in London without one or more of these vices in varying degrees of acuteness. Some even of the post-war theatres are

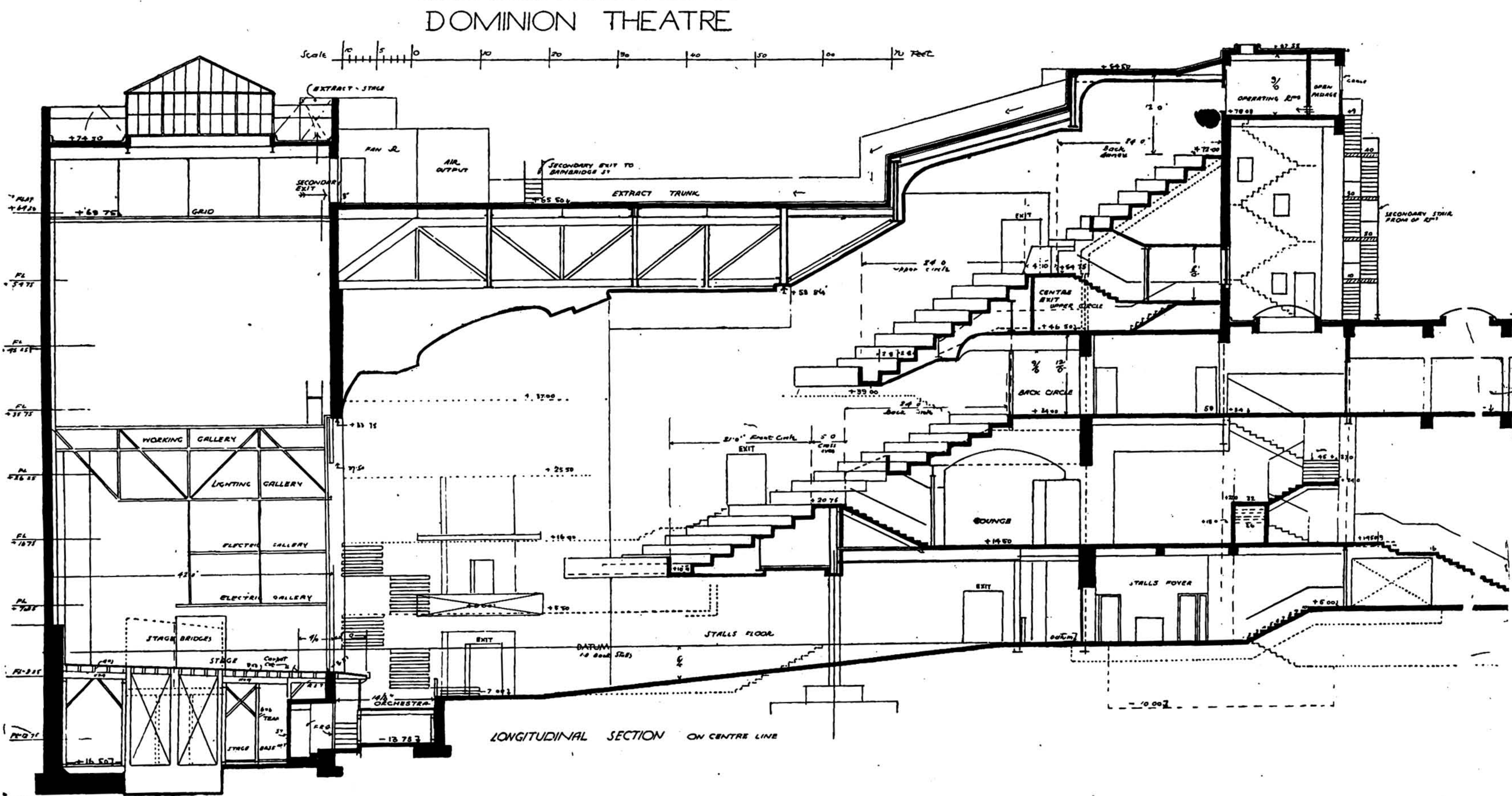
not blameless, and for them—or rather for their architects—there is no excuse. The resources of modern steelwork render the obstructive column entirely unnecessary; acoustics is now an exact science, and an expert for a relatively small fee will foretell with a surprising degree of precision how the building will behave; theatre owners are realising that it is bad business to crowd in the last possible seat to the detriment of general amenities; sound proofing is not difficult. It is an honest tribute to the technical skill of architects and the building industry to say that the most recent theatres are almost all free from these



• DOMINION THEATRE •

• TOTTENHAM COURT ROAD ——— •





THE DOMINION THEATRE, TOTTENHAM COURT ROAD, LONDON: LONGITUDINAL SECTION.
Messrs. W. & T. R. MILBURN, F.F.R.I.B.A., Architects.

defects; this is true of the new Dominion Theatre.

Technically, it is faultless. Every seat—and our representative sampled each group—has an uninterrupted view of the whole stage. This is partly due to the excellent fan shape as adopted in the best modern examples, partly

to very skilfully setting up of the sight lines, and partly to the layout of the seating curves, so that in all but a few seats near the centre line one looks *between* the heads of the seat-holders immediately in front. The floor rake flattens towards the front of the house and there is sufficient height under the galleries to give the back rows of seats a really good view of the proscenium. In many theatres one views the stage from these seats, as it were, through a horizontal slit. In spite of the great size of the theatre—approximately 2,700 seats—the supporting of the upper galleries has been well contrived. This is principally done by one stupendous lattice girder, 10 ft. 6 in. deep, which for some months formed an object of interest to the neighbourhood. It was fully described, together with the general construction, in our issue of December 7 last. The great span of this girder has been reduced to 100 ft.

by placing its two stanchions on either side of the auditorium between the seating and the gangways.

Acoustics, even in the empty theatre, appeared to be good. Here the greatest value of the fan-shaped plan is to be found. In addition, the walls and ceiling between the stage and galleries take the form of a curved splay providing a useful reflector for sound. This would be better were there fewer recessed panels and less decoration to diminish its reflective value. The uppermost block of seats would also have been improved by a curved reflector overhead but the cinema projection apparatus is placed here. External noises are excluded by the fortunate fact that the building—although possessing exits on north, south, east and west—is almost surrounded by other buildings.

The planning of the minor services is on a generous scale; foyers, cloakrooms, lavatories and bars are sufficient to prevent hurry and scrambling. This, unlike many other theatres, applies as much to the cheaper seats as to the more expensive.

A reasonably wide spacing between rows of seats, 3 ft. for the better seats and 2 ft. 8 in. in the case of the balcony, mitigates the nuisance of the late comer; moreover, every seat—even the cheapest—is of the upholstered tip-up variety. This reflects the attitude of the promoters towards their patrons. One seat is very much like another except that the cheaper ones are higher up and further from the stage. This is reflected in the published list of prices, which, with

the exception of the two boxes, range from two shillings and fourpence to ten shillings. The theatre in short, is moving with the times. There is nothing of that curious anomaly of the English theatre which makes the last row of the stalls four times the price of the front row of the pit. The Dominion is a comfortable theatre.

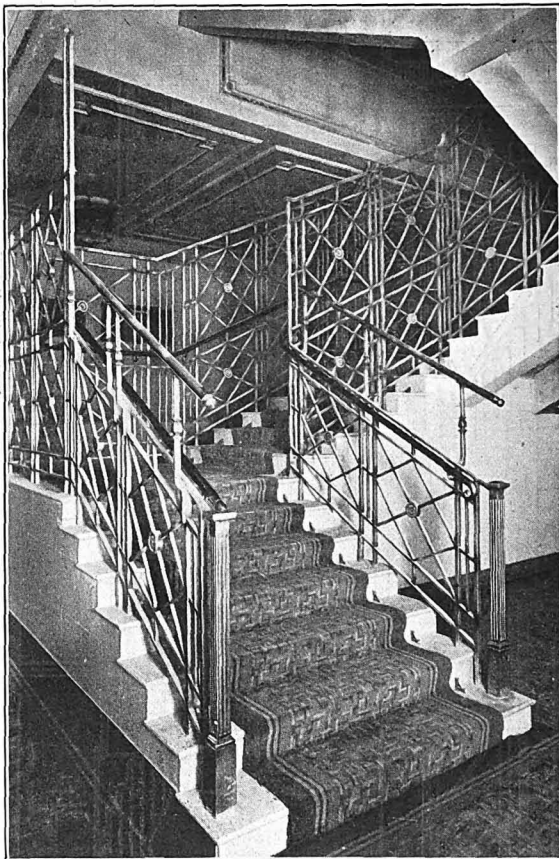
The technical equipment of the stage represents the latest practice. The proscenium opening is 50 ft. wide, while the stage is 100 ft. by 40 ft., which should make stage managers of other theatres very envious. Two electrically operated bridges allow large portions of the stage to be raised or lowered for spectacular productions. The lighting gallery is at two levels and provides, in addition to the usual equipment, a scheme of "Samoiloff" lighting and a panorama lit by 36,000 candle power.

The accommodation for the artistes is unusually good. For once, dressing-room accommodation is adequate and served by a lift. Bathrooms are provided, in the case of the stars one to each dressing-room.

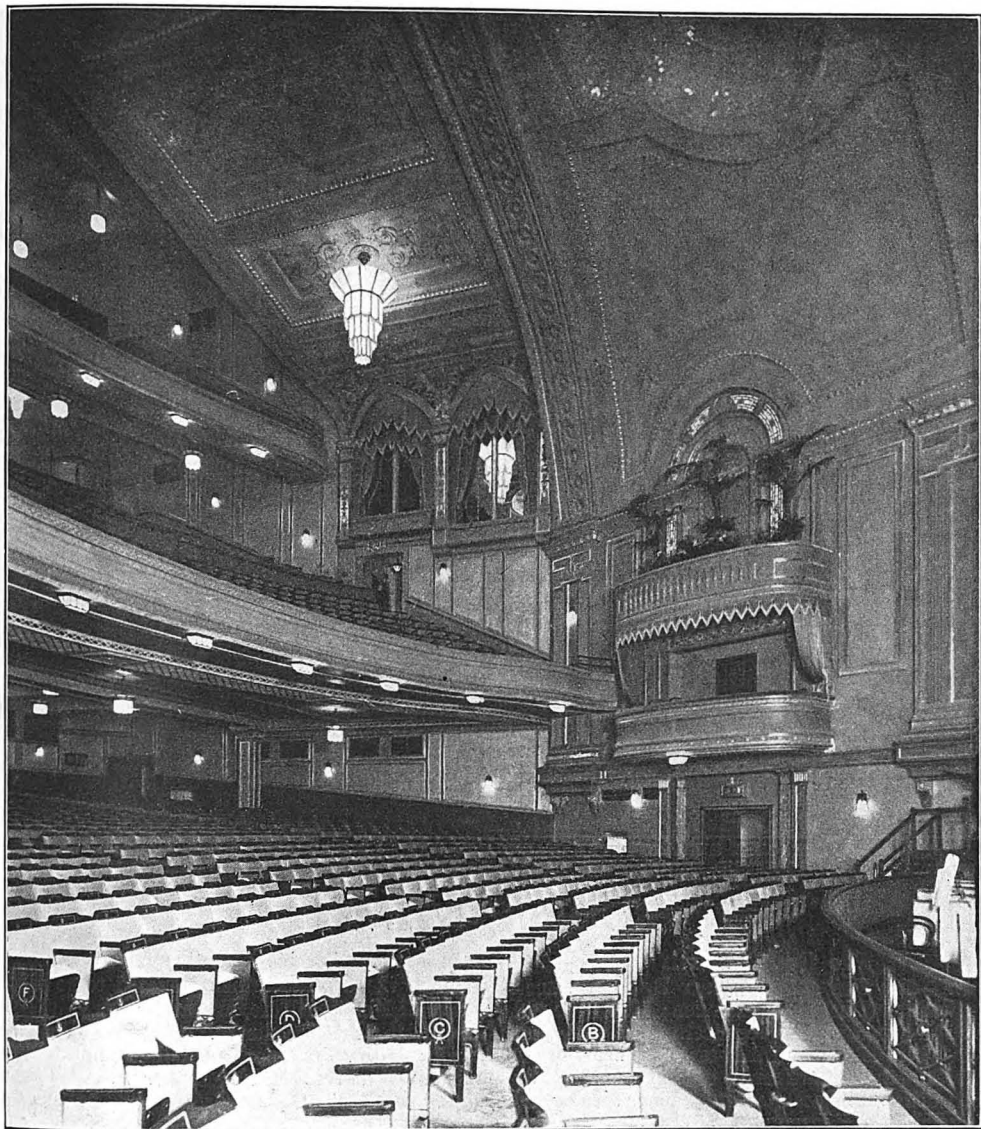
If the architecture of the theatre were merely a matter of technique of construction, equipment and application of fire escape regulations,

England, judged by its latest examples, would lead the world. Unfortunately, however, in design and decoration we are at least twenty years behind the times. In France, Germany, Sweden and Holland the necessary and characteristic shapes of the theatre are themselves used as a basis for a decoration which aims primarily at being appropriate. England and America still cover these surfaces with detail detached from other periods and as meaningless as would be candle lamps and a whip-socket on a motor-car, America doing this rather better than do we. This is a dreadful confession, but the truth of it cannot be denied.

Are the architects responsible? To some extent they are; but the root of the trouble lies in the uninspired and unimaginative ideas of theatre promoters. If these gentlemen were to expend on their theatre decoration one-tenth of the thought they expend on their stage *décor* something might be achieved. They say, and rightly, that the public wants a theatre to be a jolly place, blazing with cheerful colour and curly shapes; but they cannot see that this is to be obtained by any other method than a reckless splashing of Renaissance detail on any and every surface with a colour scheme, usually of cream, gold and red plush. To some extent they have been deterred from experiment by two or three fairly recent examples which, though well detailed, are 'sombre'. So they play for a mediocre safety, as they do in their plays—if we are to believe the dramatic critics.



ONE SIDE OF THE MARBLE AND SILVERED METAL DOUBLE MAIN STAIR.



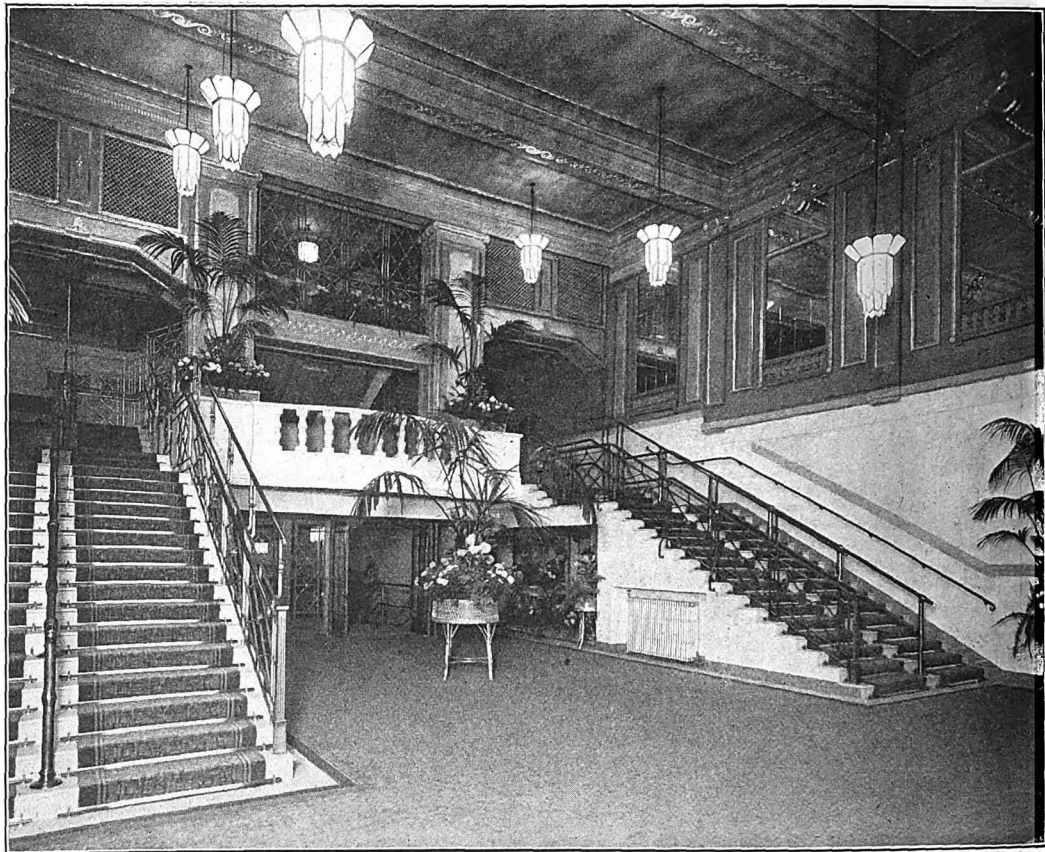
THE AUDITORIUM: IN GENERAL, THE COLOUR SCHEME IS A MOTTLED BLUE WITH SILVER RELIEF. THE LIGHTING FIXTURES ARE OF PINK GLASS AND THE SEATING IS MAHOGANY WITH FAWN UPHOLSTERY.

It is, therefore, disappointing to find that the Dominion theatre has been decorated throughout in the "style of the late French Renaissance"; particularly disappointing because the architects, Messrs. W. & T. R. Milburn, F.F.R.I.B.A., are capable of sound and thoughtful modern work—as witness the North-East Coast Exhibition. Their work at that exhibition, coupled with their cheerful colour scheme of blue, silver and pink glass in the Dominion, proves that they are entirely capable of decorating a theatre as it should be decorated. Of course, if only the theatre magnates knew it, the possibilities of the modern school of design are infinitely greater than those of period bowdlerisation. If they want an effect that shall be striking they are asking for something that all agree—particularly his enemies—to be the modernist's own peculiar *forte*. The pity is that so magnificent an opportunity for the designing of a unique theatre has been neglected in order to do the stock thing a little better than it has been done before. (For list of Sub-Contractors see page 429).

Personal

Messrs. L. M. Sen, D. K. Deb Barma, Sudhansu Chowdhury, and Ranade Ukil, the four Indian artists chosen by the Selection Committee in an all-India competition to undertake part of the decoration of India House, Aldwych, have arrived in London. It will, however, be some eighteen months before they commence work on the building, some twelve months of which they are spending in study under Professor W. Rothenstein at the Royal College of Art, and the remaining time in travel study in Italy. Sir Herbert Baker, A.R.A., is the architect of the building.

The Cathedral Church of Christ at Victoria, Vancouver, of which the foundation-stone was laid by the Bishop of London in 1926, has been consecrated by the Bishop of Winchester. The nave only has been completed, but the construction of the towers, choir and vestries will shortly be commenced. Mr. J. M. Keith, F.R.I.B.A., is the architect.



THE DOMINION THEATRE: MAIN ENTRANCE. THE STAIRS AND WALL LININGS ARE WHITE MARBLE, THE UPPER PORTION AND CEILING BLUE AND SILVER. THE HANDRAILS ARE OF BRONZE AND THE CARPET FAWN-COLOURED.

BOOK REVIEW

The Gothic North

Volume I.—*The Visit of the Gypsies*. By SACHEVERELL SITWELL. (Duckworth, London; 1929.) 8s. 6d.

Present-day books about architecture fall easily into groups. There is the kind that tears the heart out of the subject—the quintessence of, the soul of, the delicious delights of architecture. Then there is the “less well-known” group of Styria, of Illyria, of Ethiopia, of Finnmark; the better-known-but-seen-afresh-and-probably-through-German-spectacles group—Chinesische, Aegyptier, Gotische. There are plenty more groups, and they generally incline to be written by architects or almost equally right-minded and serious people. To come to another aspect of the case, architects of late years have in increasing numbers won enviable posts as the heroes of novels, and it is almost superfluous to refer to the extent to which poets have made use of executed work as their raw material. But as they rarely sing of anything less than two hundred years old we, as a profession, have little cause to be grateful to them; always excepting Wordsworth, whose profoundly understanding words: “Tax not the royal saint with vain expense,” must have occurred to many an architect as a suitable heading for his final account.

But one poet at least, when not singing, has occupied himself with subjects largely architectural. Some years ago Mr. Sacheverell Sitwell appeared on the scene with a volume entitled *Southern Baroque Art*. That promising subject gave full scope for an imaginative treatment, and few who read the book could have failed to derive pleasure from it and a fuller comprehension of the social conditions in which Baroque art flourished. I therefore took up with

keen anticipation his recently published book, *The Visit of the Gypsies*, which is stated to be part of a study of Mediaeval Life, art, and thought, to be completed in three volumes. A not-too-painstaking reader, however, is more than likely to miss this information and to assume that he has finished the *Study of the Gothic North* when he has barely begun it.

One may ask these questions of any book—why was it written, what does it aim at doing, and how has it succeeded? To the first of these questions it is rare to find the author himself providing an answer, but these are Mr. Sitwell's opening words—“I cannot be writing poetry the whole time, and must look about for a subject for prose.” Nor does he make any claim to the inevitability of the subject, but on the contrary entertains himself and us for almost a chapter by glimpses of luscious subjects on which he might have written but didn't—“The Black Empire of the Sahara,” “The Maya Civilisation of Central America,” or “The Reign of Napoleon III.” So it is clear that we have no Pugin or Ruskin with a mission, nor any informative guide to the architecture and arts of the Gothic era, but an artist with a personal necessity to transmute some material into literature, and a largely justified, certainly an unconcealed belief that every detail of the process will be interesting to his readers. Thus in the preface, he writes: “... I am shown at work on the first shaping of my facts and ideas, and in the course of this investigation I catch up with the characters and meet them again while travelling round on my search for material.” The two characters referred to are the pale and sad figures of his first drawing mistress and



THE DOMINION THEATRE: THE PROSCENIUM FROM HALF WAY UP THE CIRCLE. THE CHEVRON-PATTERNED CURTAIN IS HIGHLY COLOURED AND FORMS A FITTING CLIMAX TO THE GENERAL DECORATION.
Messrs. W. & T. R. MILBURN, F.F.R.I.B.A., Architects.

her brother. To the author their presence seems to give some sort of assurance that while projecting himself into the past he retains also some contact with the present. It is as if the painter of some ancient scene were to introduce round the margin of his canvas people gazing at it from a motor-car. It is satisfactory to know that painter or writer is aware of the delusiveness of the idea that he can truly project himself back in time, but for the spectator or the reader it seems unnecessary, and in *The Visit of the Gypsies* at all events, Miss Corder and her brother do not appear quite to pull their weight. On account of its jumping from subject to subject, Mr. Sitwell's book is not easy reading, but it shows no signs of having been easy writing. He has set himself a complex and difficult task—to recreate the past in narrative without characters and to comment on it without destroying the sense of its reality. In tapestries he has found the medium most suited to his purpose. The interpretation of their scenes provides a "story" that carries along with it easily the observations, descriptions and divagations, and leads up to an admirably contrived climax in which a further element is introduced to fulfil the present and to create a feeling of expectancy for the future. That further element is music—the music with which the gypsies surprise the feudal court, and it serves a double purpose—to supply and make evident a previous deficiency in the intensely isolated Gothic Culture, and to suggest the influence of the east that by means of the crusades was to break in and modify—perhaps corrupt it.

Such is the general course of the narrative. The presentation has a sort of inverted cinematographic character. The illustration of tapestries, etc., stands for the "captions," the narrative for the "pictures,"

and these pictorial captions have precisely the effect that their counterparts in the cinema produce. They detach us for the moment from the action of the piece even if they explain it, and in the book they have this special merit that they heighten our sense of the strangeness of the scene by arresting us for a moment as we dance along on the lively stream of Mr. Sitwell's prose. I am not sure that he furnishes any fresh facts about tapestries but he presents an excellent picture of their evolution from the intricate and crowded composition of Gothic times to the more pictorial and representative works of a later age. But fact and fancy are so blended that it is a constant puzzle to disentangle them. After a spirited description of the battle tapestries at Pastrana in New Castile and a lament on the neglect that is ruining them, he tells us how, at any rate, their colours can be restored by a simple process. "The tapestries," he says, "are tied with ropes and stretched through the waters of a river." This sounds like a straightforward description of a regular event. When he adds: "This (the river) must be specially chosen for its clearness . . . character of the source . . . nature of its bed," we begin to have doubts. After all, few tapestry-owning bodies have a large choice of rivers in their locality. And when he goes on to say: "It would be the most beautiful experience imaginable to float down the river and be brought by the stream against one after another of the tapestries . . ." we know that Mr. Sitwell has ceased to be the reporter of a picturesque but actual ceremony, or even an expert with a new and simple receipt for restoring faded tapestries, but has reverted to being a poet.

Some impression of his style may be gained from the following passage—"The King and his ladies are

(Continued on page 422.)