

TOWN HALL, first floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby, foyer, curved staircases leading to the first mezzanine floor, the auditorium, including the seats, and stage or platform; first mezzanine floor interior consisting of the promenade, reception room, passages to the loges, and staircases at the eastern and western ends leading to the balcony floor; balcony floor interior consisting of the balcony and loges including the seats, projection booth and the upper part of the auditorium and the ceiling, and the upper part of the passages to the loges; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, all lighting fixtures, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, railings, doors, and organ grilles; 113-123 West 43rd Street, Manhattan. Built 1919-21; Architect McKim, Mead & White.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 996, Lot 21.

On September 12, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Town Hall first floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby, foyer, curved staircases leading to the first mezzanine floor, the auditorium, including the seats, and stage or platform; first mezzanine floor interior consisting of the promenade, reception room, passages to the loges, and staircases at the eastern and western ends leading to the balcony floor; balcony floor interior consisting of the balcony and loges including the seats, projection booth and the upper part of the auditorium and the ceiling, and the upper part of the passages to the loges; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to all lighting fixtures, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, railings, doors, and organ grilles (Item No. 11). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Nineteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were three speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Characterized by one contemporary observer as "an idea with a roof over it" Town Hall was built in 1919-1921 as a meeting hall for the city of New York. The architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White was asked by the League for Political Education to design a structure to accommodate the organization's needs for a speakers auditorium, a concert hall, a movie theater and clubhouse. A versatile and functional design was demanded, not an architectural conceit. Because of the versatility of its design, Town Hall, as perhaps no other hall in the city, has been able to keep pace with changing needs. Following its beginning as a forum to educate the city's men and women in political issues, Town Hall attained national importance in 1935 when radio spread "America's Town Meeting of the Air" across the country. Concurrently the auditorium became highly acclaimed for its excellent acoustics and intimate atmosphere. For these reasons Town Hall was selected for most New York musical debuts. One music critic explained:

Both to the ear and to the eye Town Hall remains unrivalled among New York's auditoriums. Artists singing or playing there start with an advantage—heard at their best, seen at their best, and in close, easy contact with an audience predisposed to enjoyment by the pleasant ambience.¹

Begun as an outgrowth of the defeat of the women's suffrage amendment to the New York constitution in 1894, the League for Political Education was founded by six prominent New York women who had lost in their effort to obtain suffrage but who were determined to educate more women in political issues so that they might not continue to be excluded from town meetings and other forms of government. The idea of a political education program had originated with Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi, the daughter of George Palmer Putnam, the publisher, and the first woman to be admitted to the French Ecole de Medicine. Dr. Jacobi's address before the Albany constitutional convention in 1894 was reprinted and used as a document in the successful suffrage efforts in 1915. The other founders of the League included: Lucia G. Runkle, a member of the editorial staff of the New York Tribune; Adele M. Fielde, a missionary and translator; Catherine A.B. Abbe, President of the City History Club; Eleanor B. Sanders; and Lee W. Haggin. The League which was founded in 1894 drew experts in many fields to "town meetings" where the audience was encouraged to ask questions following the lecture. The programs were successful, and by 1899 the League boasted 600 members. Contacts at Harvard University were especially helpful in providing speakers and guidance to the program. After lecturing to the League for several years Professor of Education, Robert E. Ely, decided to leave Harvard in 1901 and become Executive Director of the program. From the beginning the League had been open to both women and men, but because of the routine of morning lectures few men had been able to attend. In 1907 Ely and J.W. Beatson founded the Economic Club of New York which was an outgrowth of the League and which offered dinner meetings. Former President of the Economic Club, Wendall L. Wilkie, described it as "the foremost non-partisan forum of men in the country."²

The early meetings of the League were held at the home of Eleanor B. Saunders but as the size of the group enlarged it became necessary to rent space in different halls around the city for the lectures. Every morning from Monday through Saturday lectures were held in various locations: the Ladies Athletic Club, Aeolian Hall, Carnegie Hall and the Berkeley-Lyceum Theater. Following one such lecture in 1912 at the Berkeley Theater, formerly on 44th Street, Anna Blakslee Bliss made the point that the League needed a permanent hall of its own. Mrs. Bliss initiated the building drive with a generous check but it was not until 1917 that a site was selected. Several members of the League formed a corporation called the Societies Realty Co., and purchased the lot on the north side of 43rd Street for \$425,000. One reporter described the location as "the fastest-growing civic and commercial centre of the city,..."³ but only as recently as the 1880s it was adjacent to the notorious district known as Hell's Kitchen. During the 1890s, however, such foresighted men as Charles Frohman and Oscar Hammerstein I had gradually built theaters in the area. By 1904 when the subway was built near Adolph Ochs' New York Times Building, the area became known as Times Square. Town Hall was built in a prime location. The hall moved onto a stretch of 43rd Street which was already distinguished by the George M. Cohan Theatre, the Henry W. Miller Theater, and the New York Elks Club.

The League's building committee, which was headed by Robert E. Simon, had selected the nationally prominent architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White to execute the design of the new headquarters and in April of 1919 the New York Times published an early rendering. In July, contractor Russell B. Smith set to work demolishing the six dwellings which occupied the site and construction was commenced on October 10, 1919. In January 1920 Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., laid the cornerstone of the building for his wife who was the grand-niece and name-sake of the original founder, Eleanor Butler Sanders who had died in 1905.

By 1919 the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White was being run by a younger group of designers. Stanford White (1853-1906) and Charles F. McKim (1847-1909) were dead, and William R. Mead had withdrawn from active practice. Four new partners were responsible for the work of the firm: William M. Kendall, William S. Richardson, Burt L. Fenner and Teunis J. van der Bent. New York City Building Department Records indicate that Van der Bent was responsible for the design of Town Hall. Teunis J. van der Bent (1863-1936) came to the United States from the Netherlands where he had studied architecture and engineering at the University of Delft. In 1887 at the age of 24, he secured work as a draftsman with McKim, Mead & White where he worked on such New York projects as the Hotel Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Terminal Station, Columbia University, the Metropolitan Museum additions, the old Madison Square Garden, and the Cornell University Medical School. In 1909 Van der Bent was made a partner in the firm, and in 1928 he officially succeeded Mead as head of the Office of Business Management.

Drawings published in 1921 and Building Department Records reveal that McKim, Mead & White was contracted for \$500,000 to erect the structure of the building and to finish the lobbies and the auditorium. On January 12, 1921, the auditorium was completed and opened to the public but the remainder of the building was left incomplete for lack of funds. It was estimated that \$1,100,000 was needed to finish the remaining interiors which were to be given over to a library, lounge and restaurant. In 1923 Mrs. Bliss again came to the rescue of Town Hall and gave \$500,000 towards its completion. New York architect Louis E. Jallade was retained to complete the job even before the remainder of the money had been raised. Born in Montreal, Jallade came to New York as a child, received his training at the Metropolitan Museum Art School and graduated from the Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1902. In 1923 he was a partner in the firm of Lindsay & Warren but later formed a partnership with his son at 597 Fifth Avenue. In 1924 he was the partner in charge of building the International House, 500 Riverside Drive. Finally in 1925 with the help of many loyal subscribers, Town Hall completed its mortgage payments.

From the beginning Town Hall became a popular forum for airing many of the nation's most pressing issues. Over the years, Director Ely had attracted such international speakers as: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Henry James, Thomas Mann, Jan Masaryk, Booker T. Washington, Winston Churchill, Jane Addams and William Butler Yeats. Prominent international figures frequented the new hall. By virtue of its open forum, the events at Town Hall sometimes caused controversy. An early incident occurred when Margaret Sanger attempted to give a lecture on birth control. The New York Police stopped the lecture, arrested Mrs. Sanger and took her to the 47th Street Police Station. Members of the League followed in pursuit and soon secured her release. In 1929 a memorial gathering for Sacco and Vanzetti brought much criticism to the hall.

In 1930 Robert E. Ely brought some new, vital blood into the organization. George V. Denny, Jr., former head of the Institute of Arts and Sciences at Columbia University, was hired as associate director. Described as "a man with a passion for education and a flair for showmanship,"⁴ Denny was the creator of "America's Town Meeting of the Air" in 1935. The idea of a nationally broadcast presentation of many sides of a particular issue had come to Denny in 1934 after hearing a man say he would "rather be shot than caught listening to Roosevelt on the radio."⁵ Denny was shocked by this narrow-minded attitude. He took his idea to the National Broadcasting Company which agreed to test out his plan. Beginning on May 30, 1935, on Thursday evening from 9:30 to 10:30, the familiar sound of a town crier and his bell reminded the people of America to tune into the "town meeting" broadcast from Town Hall in New York City. The show was not set up as a two-sided debate, but offered the listener four points of view. As radio communications grew more sophisticated, questions from all over the country were relayed back to the speakers for their comments. For 21 years the program drew an enthusiastic audience. When Denny finally succeeded Ely as director of the organization in 1937, the name was changed from the League for Political Education to Town Hall, Inc.

In 1921 the firm of McKim, Mead & White wrote to Robert E. Ely that "The Town Hall was erected for public meetings, lectures and the like, with an educational purpose, and is designed to be rented for concerts, moving pictures exhibitions and similar entertainments."⁶ There can be no doubt that one of the purposes for which the Town Hall auditorium was designed was that of musical production. One month after the auditorium was officially opened, a young Spanish violinist, Juan Manen, was invited to give a concert and two weeks later Martin Lisan became the first pianist to use the hall.

Tradition has it that the internationally-famed acoustical engineer, Wallace C. Sabine of Harvard, was consulted in the design of the Town Hall auditorium. The League's strong connection with members of the Harvard faculty might suggest the likelihood of such an arrangement. However, at the time that the plans were being developed by McKim, Mead & White, Sabine was deeply involved with work in Europe during the war. In fact Sabine died in January of 1919 before the construction of Town Hall was commenced. However, a connection between Sabine's successful scientific analysis of acoustical and the auditorium at Town Hall undoubtedly exists. In 1900 the firm of McKim, Mead & White was the first architectural firm to follow Sabine's acoustical instructions in the design of a concert hall. Their design for Symphony Hall in Boston was thus the first based on scientifically-derived principles of acoustics, and it ranks among the three or four best auditoriums in the world for symphonic music. After years of painstaking experiments with various materials and shapes Sabine had developed a precise formula for the building of an acoustically perfect hall. Sabine himself stated that "While the problem [of securing fine acoustics] is complex and, for the best results, extremely difficult, yet it is perfectly determinate, and the solution arrived at is the exact result of the architect's plans and specifications, if these are accurately followed in the building."⁷ Sabine had subsequently

worked with the firm of McKim, Mead & White on many other projects. If any firm truly understood Sabine's acoustical principles and how to implement them it was the firm which designed the auditorium at Town Hall. With this in mind it is no wonder that the New York Times critic Harold C. Schonberg, following at least one piano concert, remarked that "Town Hall still provides some of the best listening in New York: its acoustics are exemplary."⁸

Soloists have flocked to Town Hall for the unique qualities of fine acoustics and intimacy it affords. During its first concert season Richard Strauss, played a program of his songs and was accompanied by Elisabeth Schumann and Elena Gerhardt. Town Hall sponsored Sergei Rachmaninoff, Mischa Elman and Margaret Matzenauer in 1931-32. Eddie Condon's jazz concerts filled the years of World War II. The years of 1946-48 were the peak musical years at Town Hall. In October of 1947, 52 concerts were given. The "Town Hall debut" became a part of the country's vocabulary. Among the most memorable of the debuts were those of Lotte Lehmann, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Joan Sutherland and Marian Anderson.

The entrance lobby of Town Hall is a longitudinal space adorned with pilasters and a terrazzo floor. A tripartite columnar screen with engaged Ionic columns separates the lobby from the auditorium beyond, and the interstices of the screen are filled with double doors. The screen is flanked by broad staircases leading to the first mezzanine floor with its promenade and reception room. The stairs have slender cast-iron balusters, walnut handrails and a marble face string.

The auditorium, which has a rough semi-circular plan, has two levels—a main floor and a cantilevered balcony. The walls are composed of a marble base with torus molding which supports rusticated artificial stone. It is interesting to note that McKim, Mead & White used a similar rusticated effect in the main auditorium of the Eastman Theater in Rochester, New York, which also dates from this period. The angles of the hall are accented by monumental gilded pilasters with composite capitals. A gilded cornice incorporating dentils and acanthus leaves joins a plaster guilloche and fretwork band at the ceiling level. Crystal chandeliers hang from a panelled plaster ceiling which is centrally adorned by an Adamesque ceiling ornament. The shallow stage is set behind an ornamented elliptical proscenium arch which is supported by pilasters decorated with a neo-Classical arabesque pattern. The arch treatment is similar to that used by the firm at Kilbourn Hall in the Eastman Theater complex. The proscenium arch is echoed by a shallow relief in the hall's lateral walls. Perhaps the most decorative features of the hall are the arched organ grilles which flank the stage on the diagonal walls. Here a tabernacle motif is suggested and the carved screen is patterned with arches and garlands reminiscent of the work of the 17th-century English woodcarver Grinling Gibbons. The neo-Classical architectural ornament, while typical of that used in many auditoriums and theaters of the period, adds to the visual ambience of Town Hall. Such factors as the plan of the auditorium, the types of materials, and the placement and design of architectural detail are important in determining the acoustics of the space.

The Town Hall interior and auditorium has provided an ideal setting for the debuts and performances of some of the country's most outstanding musicians. In 1958 Town Hall, Inc., merged with New York University which took over management and operation of Town Hall for 20 years. In the summer of 1978, the University ceased its management of the hall and sought to transfer title to the property. While the future use of Town Hall has not yet been determined, its fine facilities offer the potential of a remarkable performance space to future generations.

FOOTNOTES

1. Andrew Porter, "Musical Events," The New Yorker, 2 December 1974, p. 129.
2. Claire Courteol Deane, A Short Story of Town Hall (New York: Town Hall, Inc., 1946), p. 5.
3. "Time Square to Have a Million-Dollar Town Hall," New York Times, 27 April 1919.
4. Deane, p. 8.
5. Ibid.
6. McKim, Mead & White to Robert Erskine Ely, 20 May 1921, New York City Building Department Records.
7. Russell Sturgis, A Dictionary of Architecture and Building (New York: Macmillan Co., 1904) 1:23.
8. Harold C. Schonberg, "Music: Masselos's Ives Pianist Plays 'Concord' Sonata at Town Hall," New York Times, 6 October 1971.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Town Hall first floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby, foyer, curved staircases leading to the first mezzanine floor, the auditorium, including the seats, and stage or platform; first mezzanine floor interior consisting of the promenade, reception room, passages to the loges, and staircases at the eastern and western ends leading to the balcony floor; balcony floor interior consisting of the balcony and loges including the seats, projection booth and the upper part of the auditorium and the ceiling, and the upper part of the passages to the loges; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, all lighting fixtures, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, railings, doors, and organ grilles; have a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City, and the Interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more, and that the Interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public, and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds, that, among its important qualities, the Town Hall Interior was designed by the prominent architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White to meet the needs of the League for Political Education for a meeting hall; that the auditorium has achieved international renown for its excellent acoustics; that the acoustics are a reflection of the architectural design which was based on the scientific analysis of acoustics by Wallace C. Sabine in the early 20th century; that for solo performances and small music groups, the auditorium has provided an unrivalled intimate and acoustically fine atmosphere; that it has become the chosen hall for countless musical debuts; and that the auditorium has been the scene of many notable speeches and lectures, including the radio program "America's Town Meeting of the Air".

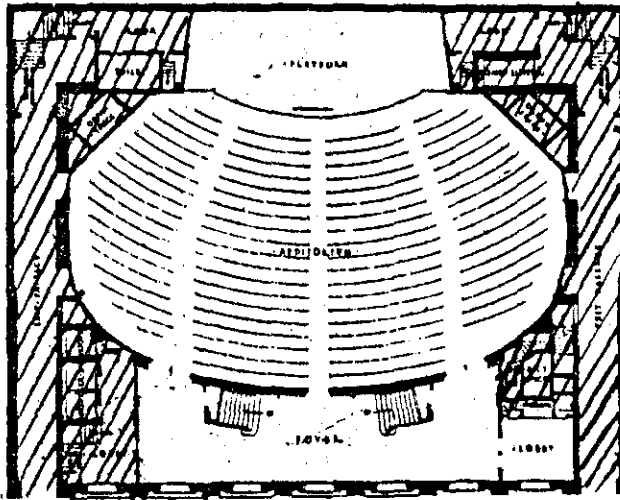
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark the Town Hall first floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby, foyer, curved staircases leading to the first mezzanine floor, the auditorium, including the seats and stage or platform; first mezzanine floor interior consisting of the promenade, reception room, passages to the loges, and staircases at the eastern and western ends leading to the balcony floor; balcony floor interior consisting of the balcony and loges including the seats, projection booth and the upper part of the auditorium and the ceiling, and the upper part of the passages to the loges; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, all lighting fixtures, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, railings, doors, and organ grilles; 113-123 West 43rd Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 996, Lot 21, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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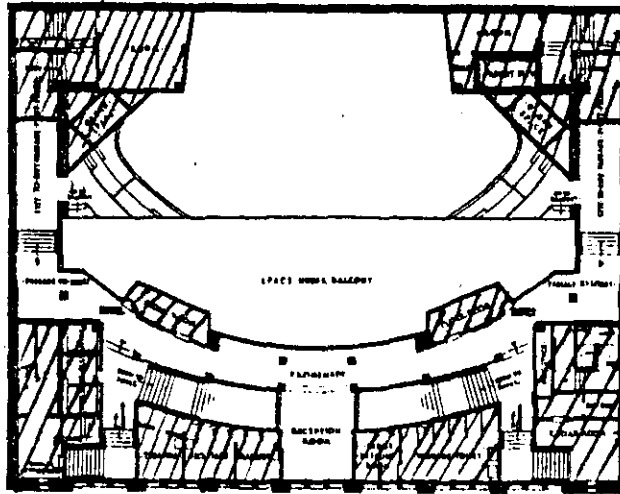
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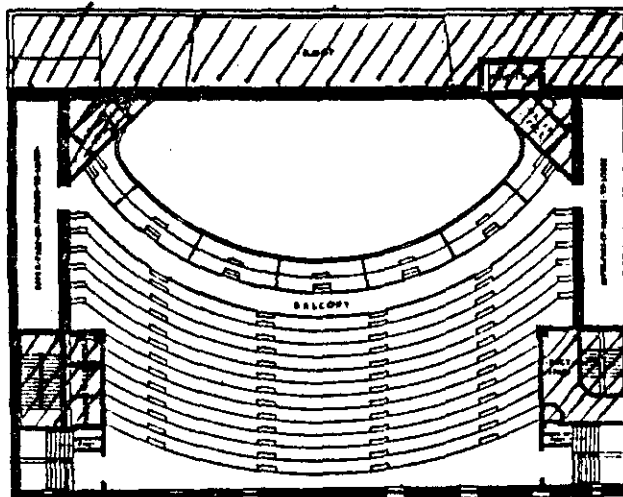
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FIRST FLOOR

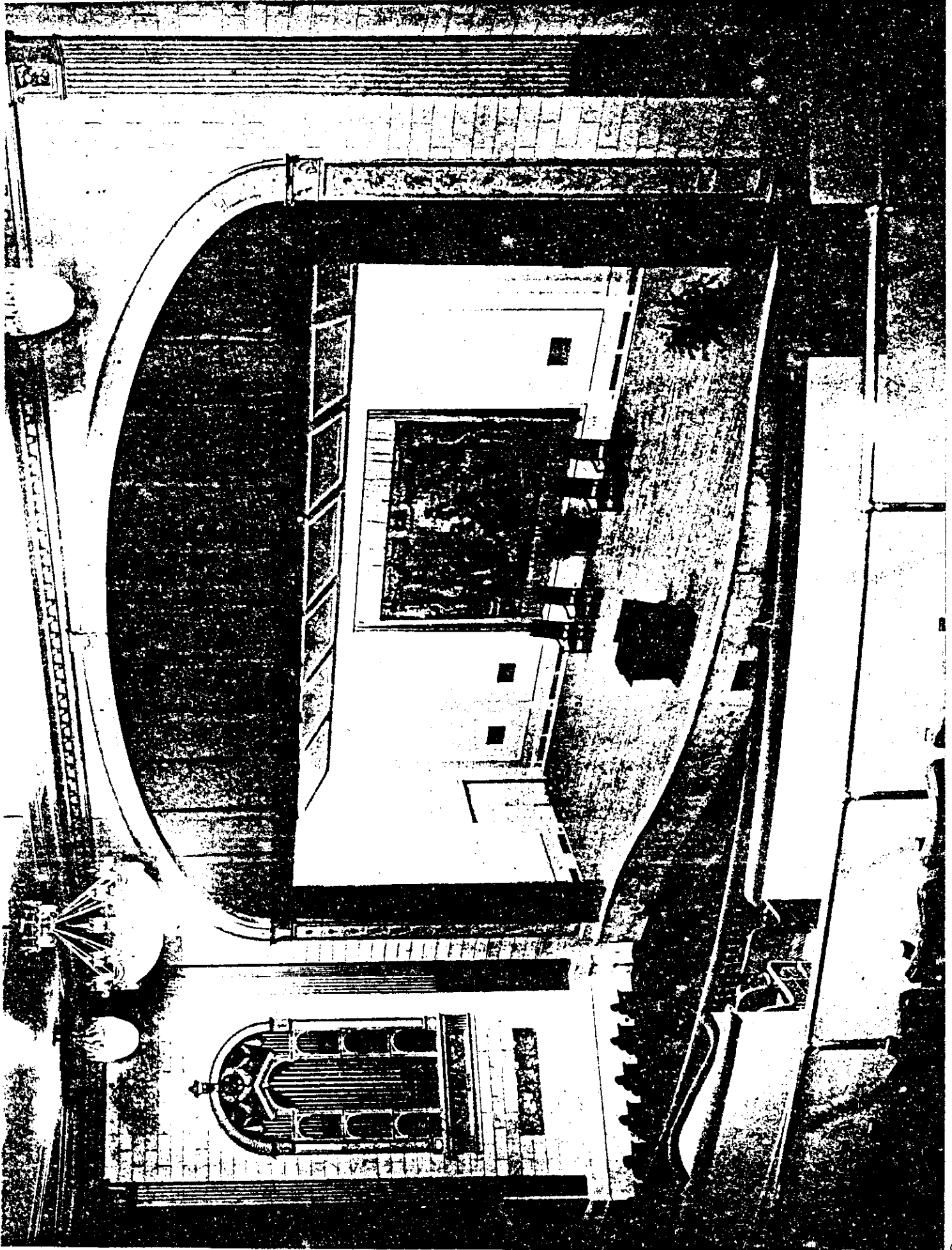


FIRST MEZZANINE FLOOR



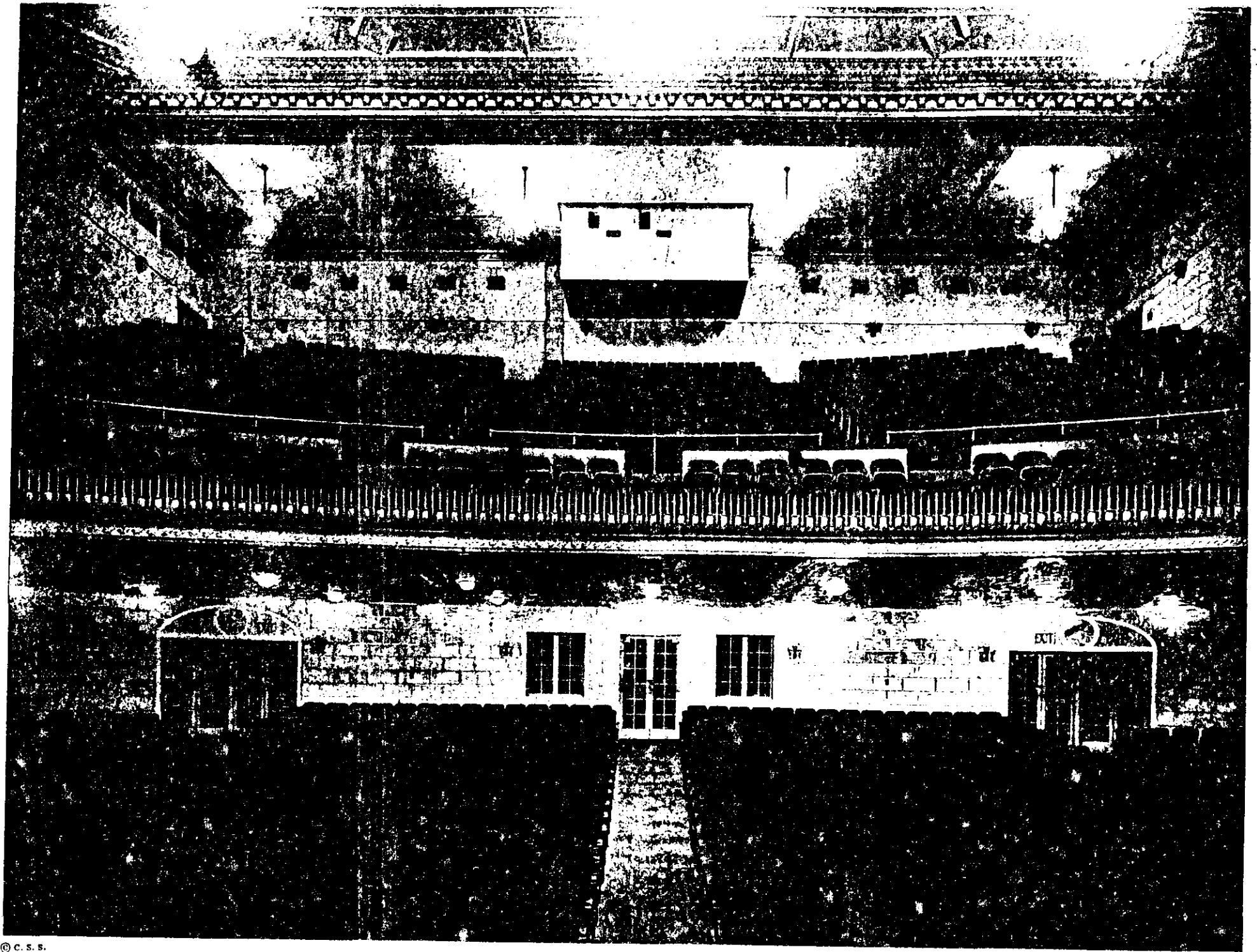
BALCONY FLOOR

TOWN HALL INTERIOR
 113-123 West 43rd Street, Manhattan



McKim, Mead & White, Architects.

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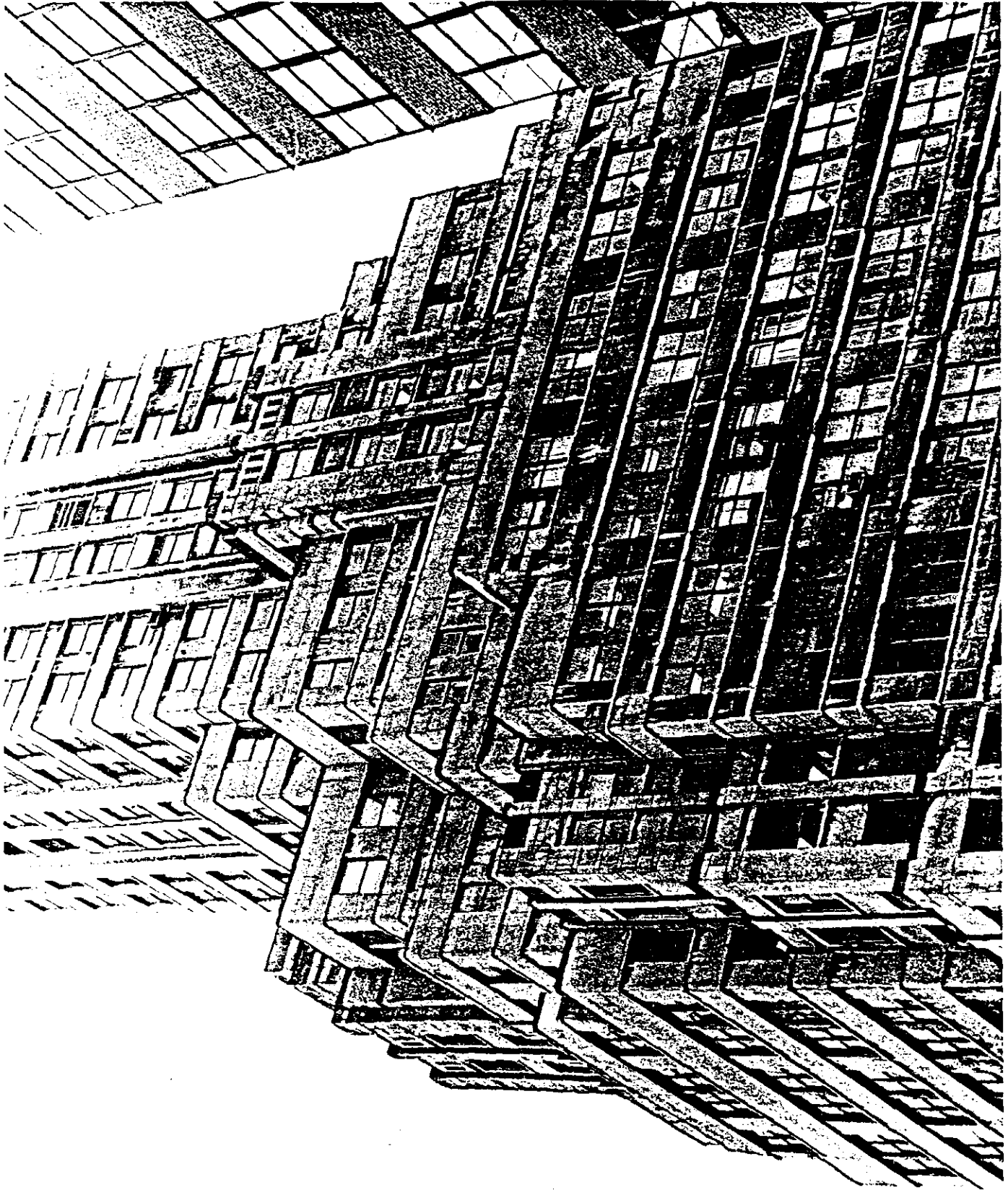
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THE AUDITORIUM, FROM THE PLATFORM, THE TOWN HALL, NEW YORK CITY.

113-123 West 113rd Street
Manhattan

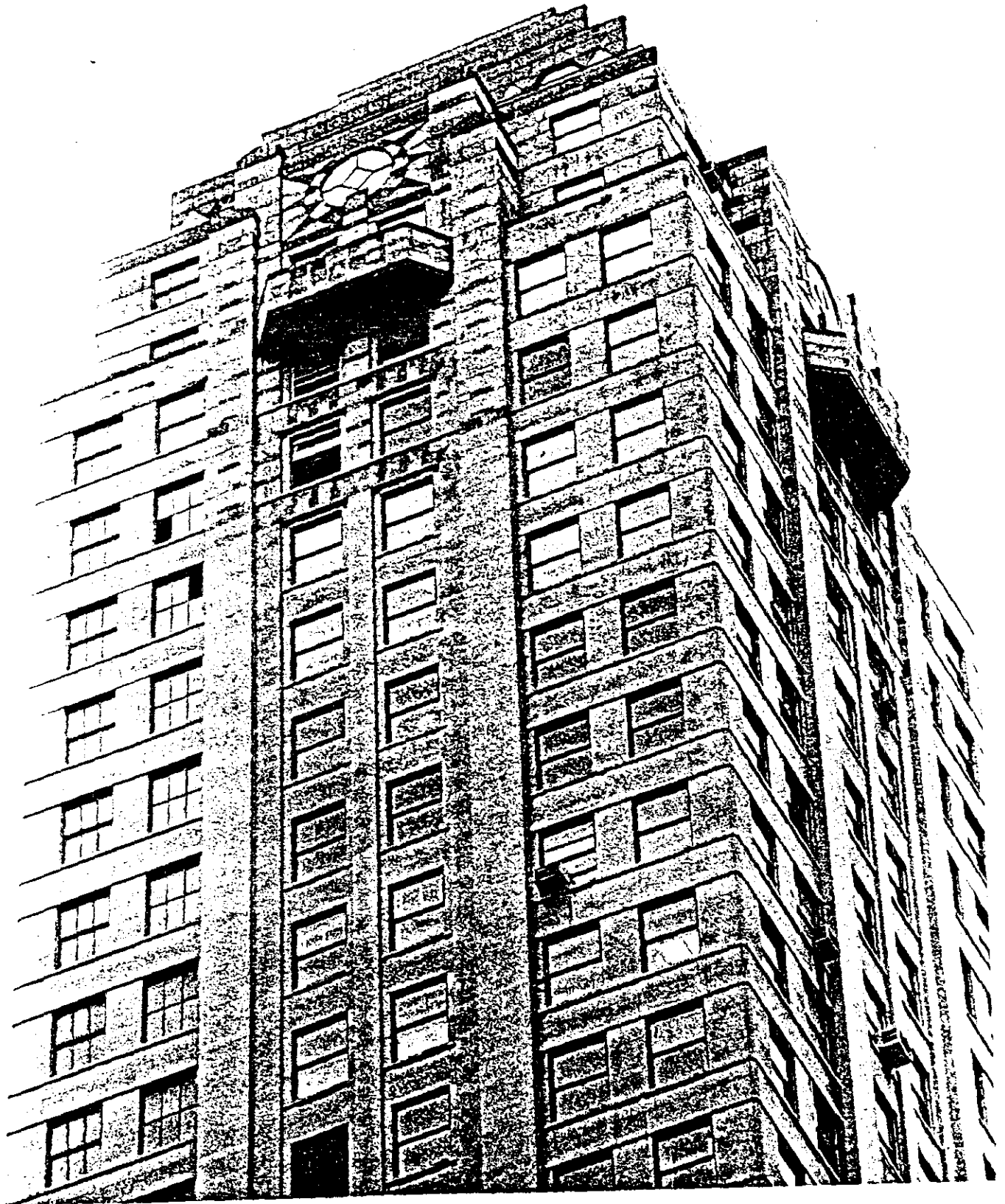
McKim, Mead & White, Architects.

1919-1921



THE FULLER BUILDING

Detail of Setbacks



THE FULLER BUILDING

Tower Detail