

WALKER THEATER INTERIOR, first floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby, foyer, twin staircases leading to the mezzanine, auditorium, and proscenium; second floor interior consisting of the mezzanine promenade, twin staircases to balcony, auditorium balcony, and the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, all lighting fixtures, columns, pilasters, wall surfaces, murals, ornamental plasterwork, floor surfaces, seats, ceiling surfaces, balustrades, railings, organ screens, and attached furnishings; 6401 18th Avenue, Brooklyn. Built 1927; architect Charles A. Sandholm.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 5547, Lot 6.

On April 13, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Walker Theater, first floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby, foyer, twin staircases leading to the mezzanine, auditorium, and proscenium; second floor interior consisting of the mezzanine promenade, twin staircases to balcony, auditorium balcony, and the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, all lighting fixtures, columns, pilasters, wall surfaces, murals, ornamental plasterwork, floor surfaces, seats, ceiling surfaces, balustrades, railings, organ screens, and attached furnishings, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 19). The hearing was continued to June 8, 1982, (Item No. 12), and to September 14, 1982 (Item No. 1). All hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There was one speaker in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Walker Theater interior is one of the few surviving neighborhood theaters in New York City designed in the tradition of the uniquely American institution, the movie palace. Designed by Charles A. Sandblom in 1927, the theater is an imposing space meant to create for the audience the impression that it is within a grand salon of a Renaissance palace. <sup>1</sup>

The American movie palace, a truly unique national institution, developed and reached its peak in the short period between World War I and the Great Depression. <sup>3</sup> Home for a

cross between music-hall entertainment and traditional theater, with the addition, as technology permitted, of movies, the movie theater emerged in the 1920s as a luxurious and often exotic palace. Designed to look like a Parisian boudoir, an old Spanish town, or an Indian, Chinese, or Egyptian temple, the theaters often seated several thousand people, and offered vaudeville, organ recitals, orchestras, comedians, magicians, and full-length film--all for twenty-five cents.

In the decades preceding television, the movie palace provided Americans with their major form of entertainment, and families returned every week to their neighborhood movie house to see the latest show. Almost every town in the country had at least one movie theater; larger cities had main theaters downtown and smaller neighborhood houses scattered around the city. In Chicago, the Balaban & Katz chain claimed to have six theaters, "five in the Loop and one near your home." In New York, the outer boroughs had major theaters as well as smaller neighborhood houses. Loew's, the city's largest chain, had, besides its flagship Loew's State Theater in Time Square, a series of "Wonder Theaters" outside of Manhattan: the Loew's 175th Street in Upper Manhattan, the Loew's Paradise in the Bronx, the Loew's Valencia in Queens, the Loew's Kings in Brooklyn, and the Loew's Jersey in Jersey City, each of which seated over 3000 people.

The movie palaces were built by a small group of people. Loew, Keith, Albee, Fox, Balaban & Katz, all started as small time entertainers, and gradually emerged as entrepreneurs controlling hundreds of theaters each in national circuits. The only major figure in the industry who never built an enormous chain was Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel; his Roxy Theater, however, the 6,000 seat "Cathedral of the Motion Picture" at 50th Street and Seventh Avenue, was the most famous theater in the country.

The number of architects who designed movie theaters was also small. By far the greatest number of the palaces were designed by a handful of specialists including John Ebersson, Rapp & Rapp, C. Howard Crane, Thomas Lamb, Walter Ahlschlager, B. Marcus Priteca, and G. Albert Lansburgh. Some of the architects specialized in certain styles, while others were attached, at first, to a specific chain or region. Thomas Lamb was partial to the Adamesque style, while Rapp & Rapp designed most of their theaters in the regal French manner. Rapp & Rapp were midwesterners and for many years were house architects for the Balaban & Katz chain in Chicago, although they eventually came to New York and designed Loew's theaters as well. C. Howard Crane, another midwesterner, did many of the Fox theaters, first in the Midwest and then elsewhere, before

working in England. Walter Ahlschlager designed the Roxy Theater, and also a smaller Roxy venture, the Beacon Theater on Broadway at 74th Street, a designated New York City Landmark.

Several of the movie palace architects started as designers of "legitimate" theaters on Broadway and their equivalent in other cities. Crane, Lamb, and Eberson all worked as legitimate theater architects, and it is not surprising that their early ventures in movie palaces were adaptations of the classical styles with Adamesque details common for the legitimate theaters of the 1910s and 1920s. Lamb, who designed a number of Broadway houses, not only brought the Adamesque style to his early movie palaces, but continued to use it well on in his career. The trend to more exotic architectural styles, however, was evident as early as 1913, when Lamb's own Regent Theater on 116th Street in Harlem was modeled on the Doge's palace in Venice. Designated as Roxy's first New York theater, the Regent has been claimed as the country's first true movie palace.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1920s, the great period of movie palace design, the styles became fantastically eclectic. Theaters called "The Rialto", "The Rivoli", "Tivoli", "The Granada", "The Oriental", "The Paradise", and similarly suggestive names, were designed in styles reminiscent of Baroque Spain, ancient Egypt, Hindu India, the Far East, southern Italy, and occasionally Colonial New England. The reasons for this explosion of exotic designs were many. A. J. Balaban, founder of the Balaban & Katz chain, wrote of bringing the fabulous sights of the world into the neighborhoods for the mass of people who could not otherwise see them, and of creating palaces where anyone with a quarter could feel like a king for a few hours.<sup>4</sup> Marcus Loew once remarked, "We sell tickets to theaters, not movies",<sup>5</sup> and the fantastic architectural settings of the theaters were unquestionably part of the fantasy or escape involved in going to the movies. To these observations it may be added that movie theater architecture flourished in the last decades in which derivation of architectural styles from historic sources was generally considered acceptable. The movie palace might best be understood as the last romantic fling of American eclecticism, before the emergence of "modernism" in its various forms.

The architect of the Walker Theater, Charles A. Sandblom (1879-1944), was born in Sweden and educated at the Sorbonne in Paris. He emigrated to this country as a young man and joined Thomas Lamb's office sometime before 1916.<sup>6</sup> In New York City, the most important and prolific architect involved in the origin of the movie palace was Thomas Lamb (1871-1942).<sup>7</sup> Born and educated in Dundee, Scotland, Lamb came to New York

and studied at Cooper Union. Although he spent a period working as a New York City building inspector, he soon established a practice as a theater architect. In 1908, Marcus Loew asked him to draw specifications for movie theaters. <sup>8</sup> This commission coincided with the beginning of the Loew company's growth into a major motion picture theater chain, and Lamb's association with Loew continued until his death. Along with the early motion picture theaters, Lamb designed many "legitimate" theatres in the Times Square theater district. At the time, the style most popular for Broadway theaters was the Classical or Georgian Revival with Adamesque plaster ornamentation in the auditorium. <sup>9</sup> Lamb's theatres were similarly designed and he enlarged upon it in a number of movie theaters built in the late teens along Broadway: the Strand (1914, demolished); the Rialto (1916, demolished); and the Rivoli (1917, now divided into two theaters); and the Capital (1919, demolished). Sandblom is said to have designed the interiors of the Rialto and the Rivoli. <sup>10</sup>

Sandblom left Lamb to begin his own practice about 1923 to specialize in theater design. <sup>11</sup> He then produced a number of interiors for the William A. Fox chain throughout the country as well as for independent theater owners. <sup>12</sup> The Walker was commissioned by independent owners but was leased to the Fox chain less than two years after it opened. <sup>13</sup> Stylistically the Walker is a rich blend of various architectural elements including Classical Greek, Roman, Italian and French Renaissance, all traditionally accepted historical styles. This conservatism may be the result of Sandblom's early work with Lamb who rarely left the Georgian/Adamesque tradition in his theater designs until late in his career. Sandblom continued to specialize in the design of theaters until his death in 1944.

The neighborhood in which the Walker is located is the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn which was once part of the Dutch colonial town of New Utrecht. The name Bensonhurst is derived from an 1887 real estate development built by James D. Lynch on the Benson family farm. <sup>14</sup> From the end of the 19th-century until about World War I, the area provided fresh produce from its many truck farms for the people of Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn and, because of its location on Gravesend Bay, a summer retreat for many urban residents. After the first World War, with the improvement in mass transit facilities and the great demand for housing, the area developed its present physical character with blockfronts of freestanding and row houses for one and two families. Eighteenth Avenue, the location of the theater, is a low-scale commercial street which serves this neighborhood.

Built as both a vaudeville house and motion picture theater, the Walker officially opened on January 5, 1928, with addresses by the Borough President, James J. Byrne, and

the Mayor, James J, Walker. The vaudeville acts included: Violet Ray & Norman in "Power Personified, a novel of offering"; "The Dancing Fools, Mosconi Brothers assisted by Miss Gaynell and Dorothy Van Alst featuring their latest dance creation 'The Gigolo' (pronounced jigolo)"; "Oscar Lorraine the Violin Nuttist"; a Walker newsreel: Earle W. Hammons' comedy "She's A Boy"; and Zukor & Lasky's Paramount Picture "Fireman Save My Child" with Wallace Beery, Raymond Hatton, Josephine Dunn, and Tom Kennedy.<sup>15</sup>

One enters the Walker through an inclined, low-ceilinged ticket lobby with a bank of brass doors that open into the theater foyer beyond. The ceiling of the ticket lobby is ornate plaster, dominated by three long oval recesses with deep reveals with griffins, shields and swags. The spandrels between the recesses are embellished by trellis work, rosettes, and bas-reliefs of classical motifs while the panels between each recess have elegant foliate detailing. The surface of the recesses have simple painted circles and centrally placed basket chandeliers of cut-glass.

Passing through the bank of brass doors, one enters the double-height foyer which contrasts markedly with the low ceiling of the ticket lobby and prepares the audience for the grand space of the auditorium. Opposite the bank of brass doors is the refreshment concession and the entrances to the orchestra. Directly above, the mezzanine level is characterized by an arcade of round and square columns of gilded plaster adorned with intricate bas-reliefs; lilly-like plants with curvilinear leaves on the square columns; and attenuated torch-like elements with urns and female figures in classical dress enframed by foliate designs on the round columns. The columns are joined by wrought-iron railings of circular shields flanked by foliate swirls. This railing continues on the two staircases leading up to the mezzanine at the far ends of the foyer. At the turning of the stairs are round-arched niches which once contained sculptured busts and still retain bas-relief lunettes of classical females playing lyres and double flutes. Next to each niche, the quoined wall surface is pierced by a bull's-eye with an urn. The wall opposite the mezzanine arcade and above the entrance from the ticket lobby is a lively gilded frieze of women in classical dress playing musical instruments and leading a troupe of naked children in an animated dance. Above this frieze is a false arcade of intricately ornamented gilded pilasters and a balustrade. The foyer is lighted by three brass chandeliers that hang from the cove ceiling.

The auditorium with its two levels, orchestra and balcony, is an imposing space designed to enhance the theatrical experience. The arched proscenium above the orchestra pit with its Wurlitzer organ is enframed by highly ornate gilded plasterwork in foliate forms. Flanking the stage are the elaborate organ screens with fire exits at the base. Above the exits are grilled balconies with twisted columns with gilded capitals. To either side are monumental twisted columns with entwining grape vines that support an entablature above which is the elaborate organ screen within a round-arched vault. In front of each screen is a richly embellished oculus with the bust of a Renaissance figure and flanking urns. Between the twisted columns and the fluted pilasters which carry the arched ceiling are elaborate gilded panels of urns, plants, and figures. The gently arched ceiling is of gilded coffers with rosettes and a large central rectangular recess.

The major portion of the auditorium is covered by a flat ceiling occupied almost entirely by a shallow dome with a smooth interior surface that carries up to a paneled oculus. Both the dome and the rectangular recess over the orchestra pit were fitted with hidden lights of different colors that were attached to a special dimmer switch which would allow the lights to be slowly changed from one color to another. This special effect, known as color harmonies, was invented by Samuel Roxy Rothafel for his Rialto Theater whose interior has been attributed to Sandblom.<sup>16</sup>

The side walls of this section of the auditorium are divided into an upper and a lower half by the balcony. The lower half is pierced by exit bays flanked by gilded foliate pilasters carrying brackets that support a cornice. The quoined wall surfaces to either side have small false windows just below the cornice. The separation of the exit bays is further emphasized by gilded foliate bas-relief panels. The balcony, carried on foliate modillions, has a frieze of classical figures interspersed with angels metamorphosing from vines and holding heraldic shields. The upper section of the side walls above the balcony is characterized by round-arched bays enframing murals depicting a romantic Italian landscape. Each mural is lit by a tall floor lamp and below each is a plaque of classical figures dancing and playing musical instruments.

The Walker Theater Interior is one of the few surviving neighborhood theaters in New York City designed in the tradition of the American movie palace. Built in the era when the motion picture was the major form of entertainment for most Americans, the interior design of the Walker still

retains that essential quality of transporting the audience to a special place far away from ordinary surroundings. It also reflects that belief by the original owners and architects of movie palaces that the architectural experience was an essential part of the total theatrical experience.

Report Prepared by  
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Landmarks Preservationist

Report Typed by  
Monica Codner.

1. New York City, Brooklyn Department of Buildings: New Building Number 8161-27.
2. The following history of the American movie palace is from, Landmarks Preservation Commission, RKO Keith's Flushing Theater Designation Report (LP-1257), report prepared by Anthony W. Robins, (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1984), 2-3.
3. David Naylor, American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981), 40.
4. Carrie Balaban, Continuous Performance (New York: Balaban Foundation, 1964), 100.
5. Naylor, p.10.
6. New York Times, 1/8/1944, 13:2, Sandblom's obituary.
7. New York Times, 2/27/1942, 17:4, Lamb's obituary.
8. New York Herald Tribune, 2/27/1942, Lamb's obituary.
9. Mary Henderson, The City & The Theatre: New York Playhouses from Bowling Green to Times Square (Clifton, New Jersey: James T. White & Company, 1973).
10. Sandblom's obituary.
11. New York City Street Directories, 1900-1925.
12. Sandblom's obituary.
13. Kings County Register's Office, Liber 5044, Page 463.
14. New York Times, 3/31/1895.
15. Program for the Premiere Performance, Walker Theater, Thursday Evening, January 5, 1928 (Landmarks Preservation Commission Files). We wish to thank Michael R. Miller of the Theater Historical Society for this information.
16. Ben M. Hall, The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), 51. Sandblom obituary.



## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Walker Theater, first floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby, foyer, twin staircases leading to the mezzanine, auditorium, and proscenium; second floor interior consisting of the mezzanine promenade, twin staircases to balcony, auditorium balcony, and the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, all lighting fixtures, columns, pilasters, wall surfaces, murals, ornamental plasterwork, floor surfaces, seats, ceiling surfaces, balustrades, railings, organ screens, and attached furnishings; 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.

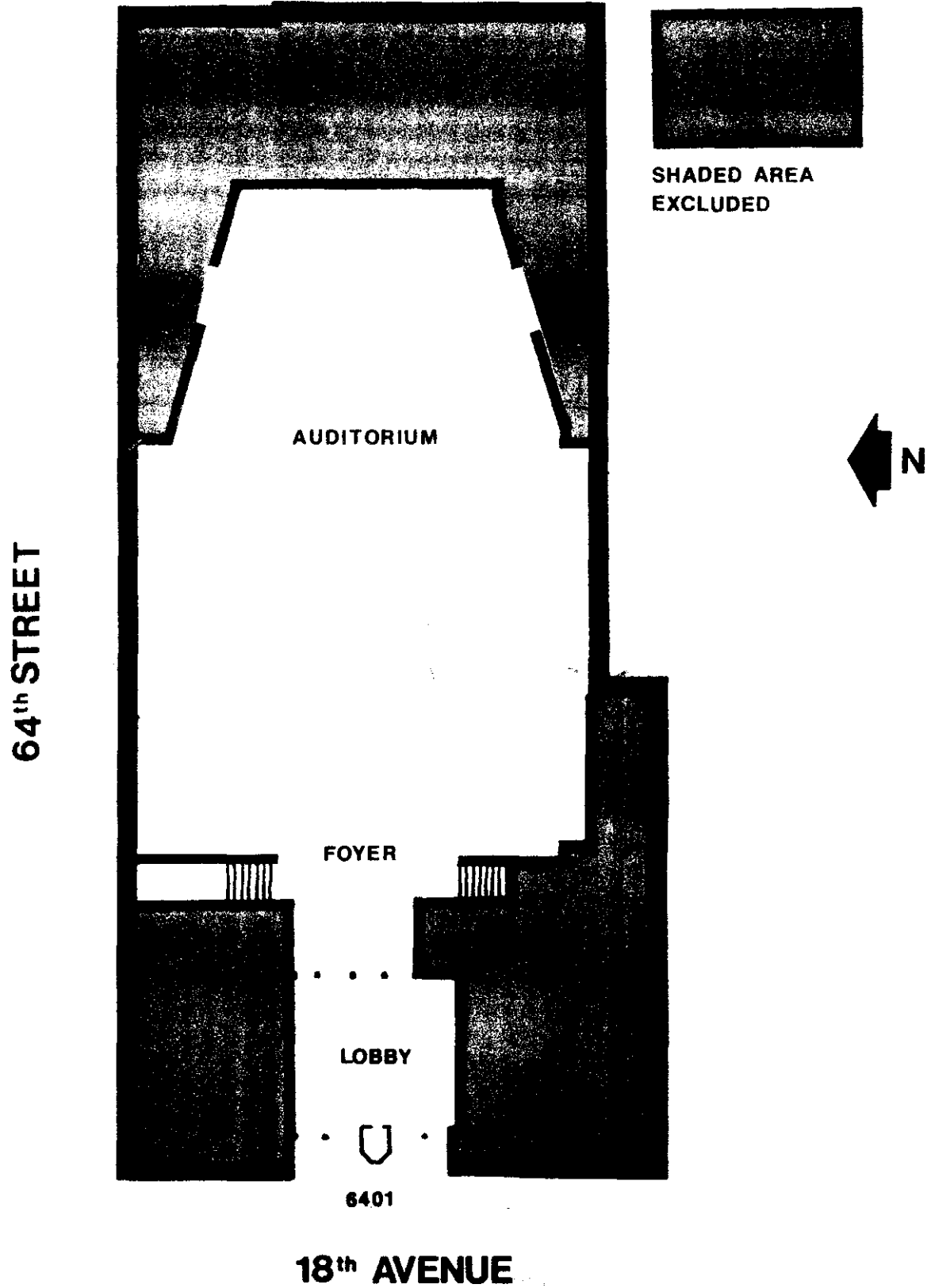
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Interior of the Walker Theater is one of the few surviving neighborhood theaters in New York City designed in the tradition of the uniquely American institution of the movie palace; that it was built as both a vaudeville and movie theater during an era when the motion picture was the major form of entertainment for most Americans; that the interior design of the Walker still retains that essential quality of transporting the audience to a special place far away from ordinary surroundings; that the architect, Charles A. Sandblom, used a rich blend of various architectural elements from classical Greek and Roman, and Italian and French Renaissance sources to create this lavish interior which gives the audience the impression that it is within the grand salon of a Renaissance palace; that Sandblom was a nationally known theater architect who designed many movie palaces around the country; and that the Walker Theater Interior continues to give vivid expression to the belief of theater owners and architects of the period that the architectural experience was an essential part of the total theatrical experience.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark the Walker Theater first floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby, foyer, twin staircases leading to the mezzanine, auditorium, and proscenium; second floor interior consisting of the mezzanine promenade, twin staircases to balcony, auditorium balcony, and the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited, to, all lighting fixtures, columns, pilasters, wall surfaces, murals, ornamen-

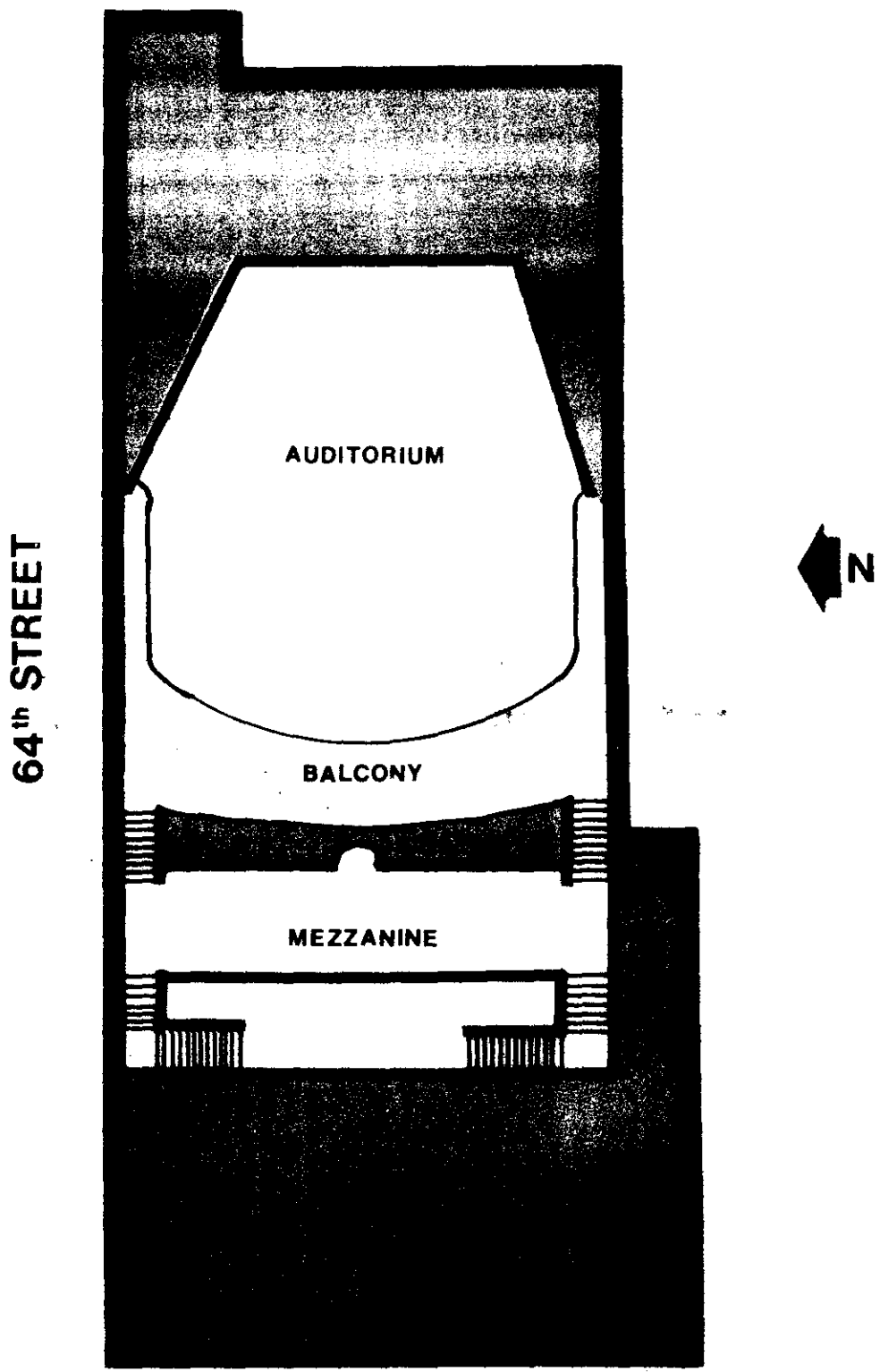
tal plasterwork, floor surfaces, seats, ceiling surfaces, balustrades, railings, organ screens, and attached furnishings; Borough of Brooklyn, and designates Tax Map Block 5547, Lot 6, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

- Balaban, Carrie. Continuous Performance. New York: Balaban Foundation, 1964.
- Hall, Ben M. The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace. New York: Bramhall House, 1961.
- Henderson, Mary. The City & The Theatre: New York Playhouses from Bowling Green to Times Square. Clifton, New Jersey: James T. White & Company, 1973.
- Kings County. Office of the Register. Liber Deeds and Mortgages. Brooklyn Municipal Building, Joralemon Street, Brooklyn.
- Landmarks Preservation Commission. RKO Keith's Flushing Theater Designation Report (LP-1257), February 28, 1984. Report prepared by Anthony W. Robins.
- Naylor, Peter. American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981.
- New York City. Brooklyn Department of Buildings. Plan Desk.
- New York Herald Tribune, February 27, 1942.
- New York Street Directories, 1900-1925
- New York Times, December 31, 1895; February 27, 1942, 17:14; January 8, 1944, 13:2.

# WALKER THEATER FIRST FLOOR INTERIOR



# WALKER THEATER SECOND FLOOR INTERIOR



6401

18<sup>th</sup> AVENUE

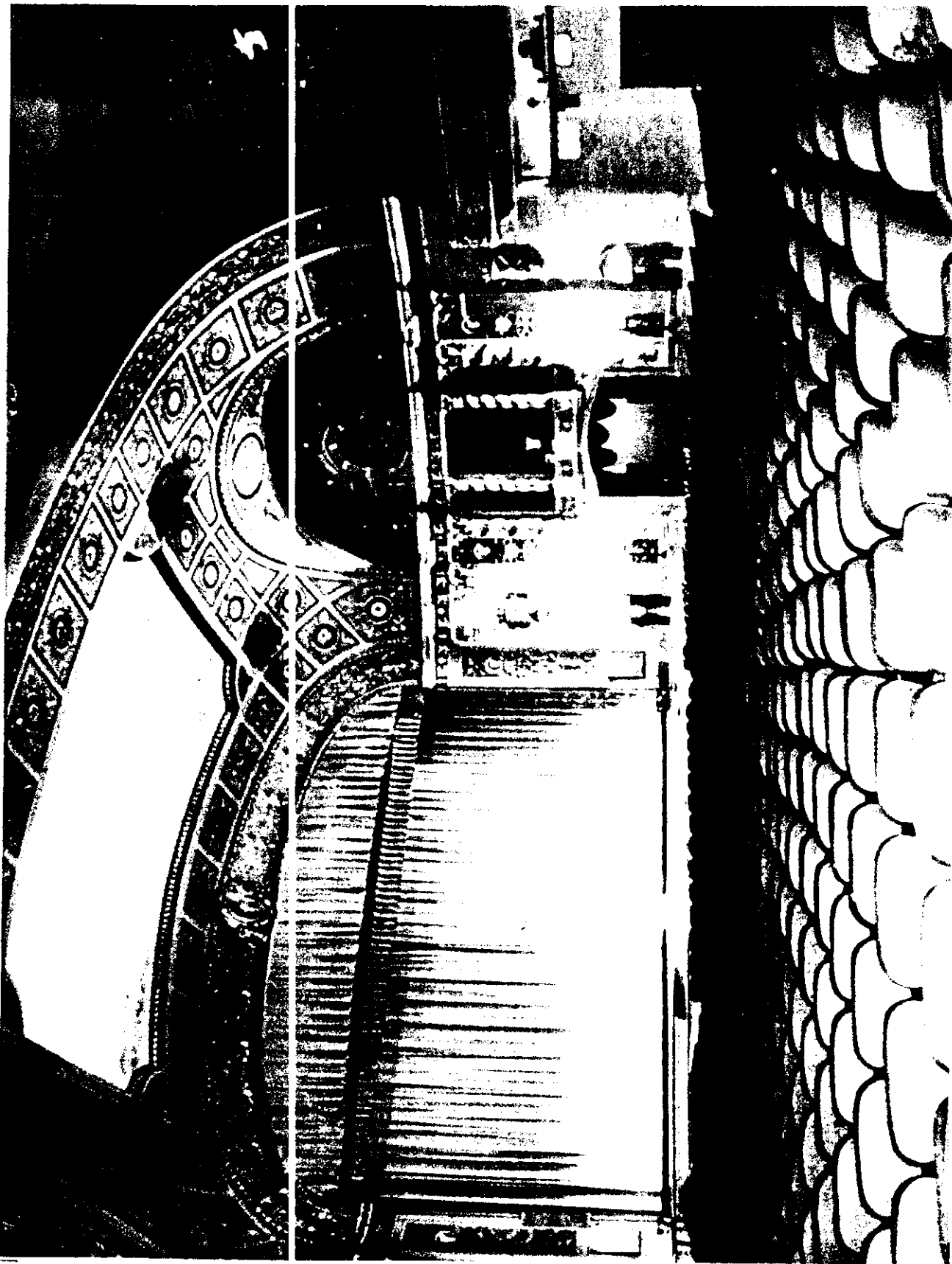


Photo Credit:  
Landmarks Preservation Commission

WALKER THEATER INTERIOR  
6401 18th Avenue  
Date: 1927

Architect:  
Charles E. Anderson

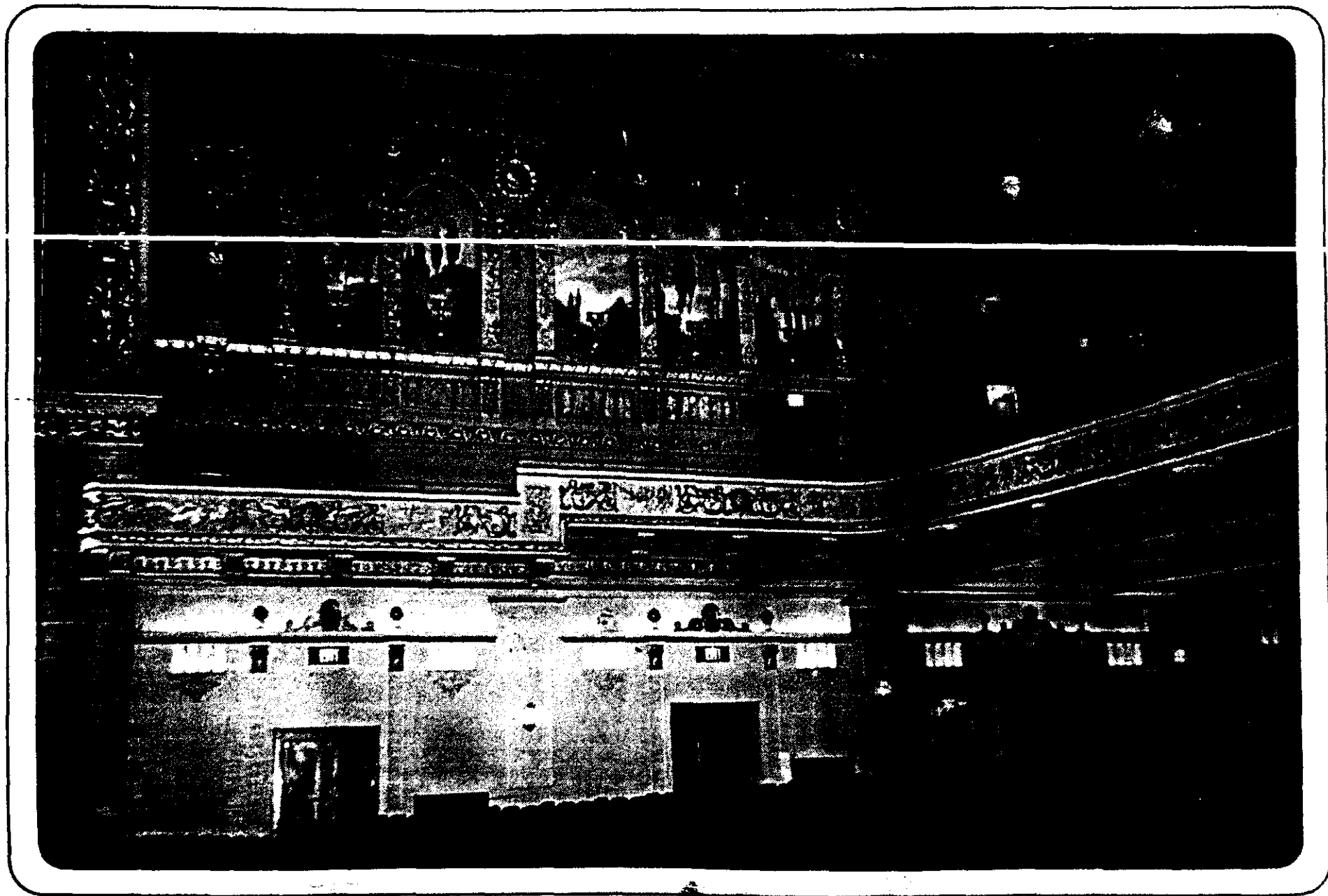


Photo Credit:  
Theater Historical Society

WALKER THEATER INTERIOR  
6401 18th Avenue  
(Side Wall and Balcony)

Architect:  
Charles A. Sandblom

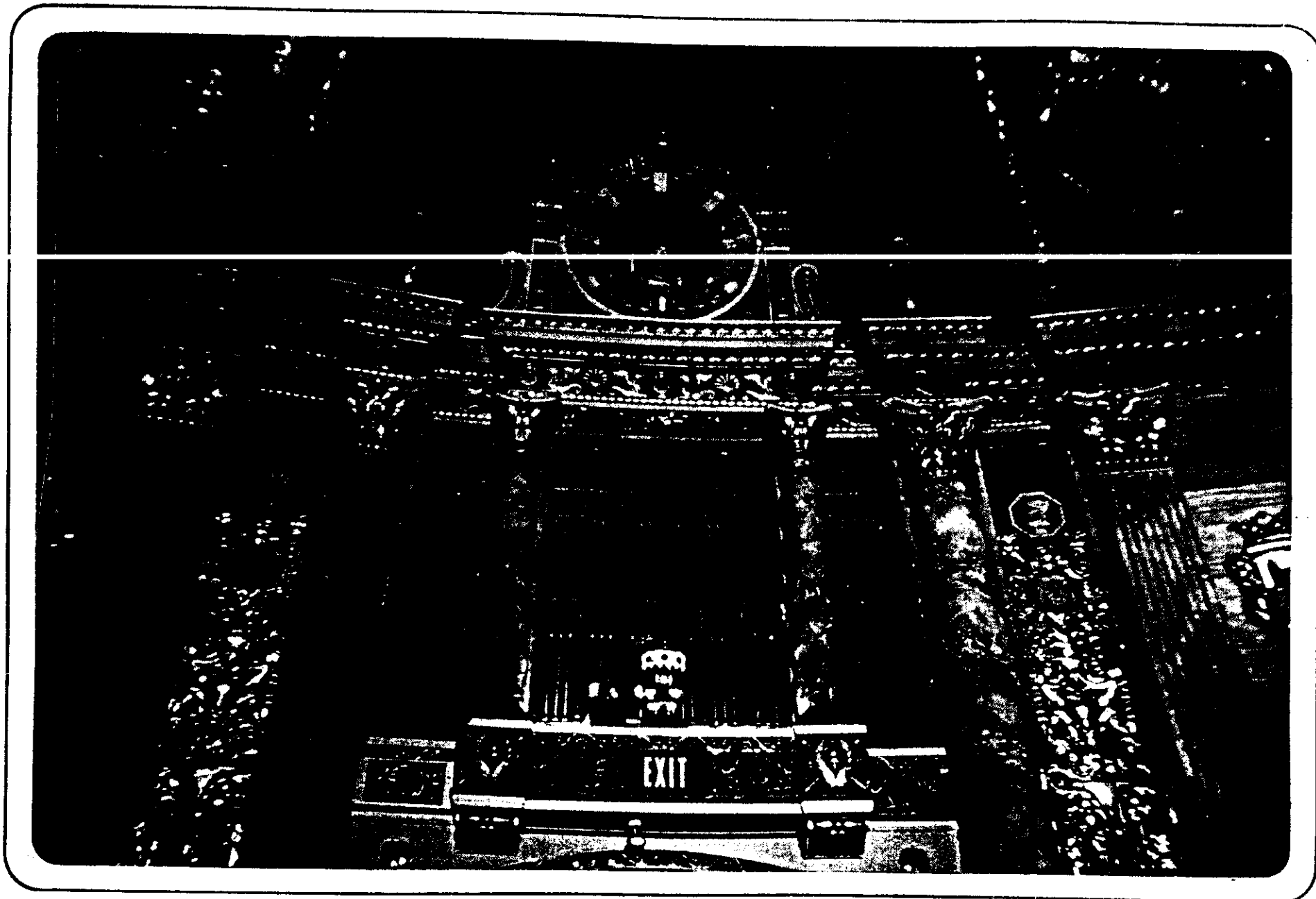


Photo Credit:  
Theater Historical Society

WALKER THEATER INTERIOR  
6401 18th Avenue  
(Organ Screen)

Architect:  
Charles A. Sandblom