

RKO KEITH'S FLUSHING THEATER, ground floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby and original ticket booth, grand foyer, twin staircases leading to the mezzanine promenade, women's lounge, men's lounge, auditorium (now divided into two spaces) including organ screens, proscenium and exit halls; second floor interior consisting of the upper level and ceiling of the ticket lobby, the upper level and ceiling of the grand foyer, the mezzanine promenade and its ceiling, the lounges adjoining the mezzanine promenade, the upper part of the auditorium (now separated from the lower sections), including the organ screens, wall openings, proscenium arch and exit halls; and the fixtures and the interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, all lighting fixtures, columns, wall surfaces, murals, ornamental plasterwork, floor surfaces, ceiling surfaces, statues, attached furnishings, drinking fountains, and metal grilles; 135-29 - 135-45 Northern Boulevard, Flushing, Queens. Built 1927-28; architect Thomas Lamb.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 4958, Lot 31.

On August 11, 1981, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the RKO Keith's Flushing Theater, ground floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby and original ticket booth, grand foyer, twin staircases leading to the mezzanine promenade, women's lounge, men's lounge, auditorium (now divided into two spaces) including organ screens, proscenium and exit halls; second floor interior consisting of the upper level and ceiling of the ticket lobby, the upper level and ceiling of the grand foyer, the mezzanine promenade and its ceiling, the lounges adjoining the mezzanine promenade, the upper part of the auditorium (now separated from the lower sections), including the organ screens, wall openings, proscenium arch and exit halls; and the fixtures and the interior components of these spaces including but not limited to, all lighting fixtures, columns, wall surfaces, murals, ornamental plasterwork, floor surfaces, ceiling surfaces, statues, attached furnishings, drinking fountains, and metal grilles, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 13). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were two speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The RKO Keith's Flushing theater is one of a small number surviving in New York City, of the uniquely American institution of the movie palace.¹ Part of the vaudeville circuit founded by B.F. Keith, later the "Radio-Keith-Orpheum" circuit ("RKO"), the Keith's opened in 1928 to an audience of subscription holders. Thomas Lamb, who designed the theater, was one of the country's most prolific theater architects, having several hundred to his credit. The Keith's, however, is one of the handful which Lamb designed in the "atmospheric" style, a type of theater design which aimed to produce an illusion of open outdoor space. The walls of the Keith's were built up as stage sets showing a Spanish-style townscape in the Churrigueresque style while the ceiling was painted blue and given electric "stars"; a special machine projected "clouds" moving across the ceiling, completing the illusion that the audience was sitting outside in a Spanish town on a warm evening.

Located in the heart of downtown Flushing, at the intersection of Main Street and Northern Boulevard, the 3000-seat theater was for many years the major entertainment center for the neighborhood. Today, although divided by partitions into three theaters, the Keith's continues to serve Flushing as a movie theater, and retains almost all of the fabulous interior design which once distinguished thousands of movie theaters, both in New York and across the country, which have long since disappeared.

The American Movie Palace: Theater For Everyone

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.² 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 a full-length feature 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 Lowe's State Theater in Times 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.³ The only major figure in the industry who never built an enormous chain was Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel; his Roxy Theater, however, the 6000-seat "Cathedral of the Motion Picture" at 50th Street and Seventh Avenue, was the epitome of the type, and his greatest creation, Radio City Music Hall, 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 Interior Landmark).

Several of the movie palace architects started as designers of "legitimate" theaters on Broadway and its 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. Designed as Roxy's first New York theater, the Regent has been claimed as the country's first true movie palace.⁴

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.⁵ Marcus Loew once remarked, "We sell tickets to theaters, not movies,"⁶ 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 the derivation of architectural styles from historic sources was generally considered acceptable. The movie palaces might best be understood as the last romantic fling of American eclecticism, before the emergence of "modernism" in its various forms.

The "Atmospheric" Type

The most romantic or fantastic of the movie palace designs were those of the so-called "atmospheric" type. This was the invention of architect John Eberson, an Austrian who had immigrated to the Southwest and who had for twenty years designed theaters and opera houses in a more or less classical style. His first atmospheric design was for the Majestic Theater in Houston (1923, demolished) where, instead of a domed classical ceiling, he created a blue plaster "sky," with electric lightbulbs simulating stars, and arranged for a hidden machine to project "clouds" moving across the ceiling in an effect not unlike that of a planetarium. The walls of the auditorium were built up as stage sets suggesting an Italian garden, and the total effect was of being outside, in the evening, in a garden, watching a show.⁷

Atmospheric theaters soon became extremely popular, and as a type were easily recognizable: each included an open, lit evening sky with stars and clouds; each had walls built up as stage sets suggesting a foreign setting; and each was asymmetrically designed. In Eberson's words, "We visualize and dream a magnificent amphitheater, an Italian garden, a Persian Court, a Spanish patio, or a mystic Egyptian templeyard, all canopied by a soft moon-lit sky."⁸ Although Eberson was the inventor and a specialist in the type, other architects also designed atmospheric, including Thomas Lamb.

Thomas Lamb (1871-1942)

Thomas Lamb was quite possibly the most prolific theater architect in the United States; his designs for theaters, movie palaces, and auditoriums number in the hundreds, and include major theaters in almost every major American city, as well as in Canada, England, Australia, South Africa, India and Egypt.⁹

Born and educated in Dundee, Scotland, Lamb came to New York as a young man and studied at Cooper Union (B.S., 1898).¹⁰ Although he spent a period working as a New York City building inspector, he soon established a practice as a theater architect. He was working on theaters as early as 1904, when he undertook alterations to the Gotham Theater at 165 East 125th Street,¹¹ but does not seem to have opened an active practice until about 1908. In that year, Marcus Loew asked him to draw up specifications for movie theaters.¹² 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's continued until his death.

Besides Lamb's early connection with Marcus Loew, many of his first theater designs were for the so-called "legitimate" theaters in the Broadway-Times Square district, including the Eltinge (now Empire, 1911-12) at 236-240 West 42nd Street, and the Cort (1912) at 138 West 48th Street. The style most popular for Broadway theaters at that time was Classical or Georgian Revival,¹³ with Adamesque plaster ornamentation in the auditorium, and Lamb's early theaters were similarly designed. He enlarged on this style of theater design in a series of movie houses built in the late teens along Broadway: the Strand (1914, demolished), the Rialto (1916, demolished; on the site of Hammerstein's Victoria at 42nd Street), the Rivoli (1917, now divided into two theaters), and the Capitol (1919, demolished). The Capitol was a 5000-seat theater built for Major Bowes's vaudeville, but it was run by Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel; the radio broadcasts Roxy made from the Capitol made him famous across the country.

Unlike other major movie palace architects, Lamb did not abandon the Adamesque style until the late 1920s, preferring to design larger and more elegantly appointed versions than were possible in small Broadway houses. His affinity for the style might have derived in part from personal knowledge of buildings designed by the Adams in his native Scotland; for some of his larger theaters Lamb went so far as to import Scottish craftsmen.¹⁴

As was customary for movie theater architects, Lamb designed series of theaters for the owners of chains. An early group of Adamesque designs in New England was built for the Poli chain.¹⁵ Lamb's most important client was Loew,

whose empire eventually stretched half-way across the country, but he also designed theaters for the Proctor's and Keith's vaudeville circuits, as well as for Stanley and Fox.

Lamb's most important Adamesque style commissions in the early 1920s include the Loew's Ohio and State Theaters in Cleveland (both 1921), the Loew's State in St. Louis (1924), the Brooklyn Albee (1925, demolished), and Proctor's 86th Street in New York (1927, demolished). In the late 1920s he began to design in a more elaborate Baroque style; the Loew's Midland in Kansas City (1927), the Keith's Memorial Theater in Boston (1928), and the San Francisco Fox (1929, demolished) were among the most sumptuously designed and furnished movie palaces ever built. In 1928 Lamb finally departed from classical styles to design what his office called a "Mexican baroque" interior for the Loew's Ohio in Columbus.¹⁶ A few other Lamb designs contained similar Mexican or Spanish elements, including the Stanley in Utica, the Keith's in Huntington, West Virginia and the R.K.O. Keith's in Flushing, all designed in the same year as the Ohio. Lamb moved on from the Mexican/Spanish to the Oriental, however, for his final group of theaters. The Loew's State in Syracuse (1928) was a spectacular Indo-Chinese design, which he repeated two years later in the Loew's 175th Street in Upper Manhattan. His last oriental design was for the Loew's 72nd Street Theater (1932, demolished), the last great movie palace to be built in New York; its design is said to have been based on the Great Tower of the Pagoda Wat Ching at Bangkok and the Temple of Nakhon Wat in Siam.¹⁷ When the Depression put an end to major movie palace building in the United States, Lamb turned to work outside the country and designed theaters for the Metro chain in South Africa, India and Australia.

From the Regent in 1913 to the Loew's 72nd Street in 1932, Lamb's movie theater output was vast and varied. New York-trained and based, and the architect of the city's first and last movie palace, as well as hundreds both in New York and across the country, Lamb is largely unchallenged as the pre-eminent movie-theater architect in New York. Although many of his theaters in New York and elsewhere have been demolished, others survive, in various states of repair. In New York the major survivors include the Regent (now a church), the Embassy (a small Times Square house still in use as a movie theater), the Loew's Pitkin (closed), the Loew's 175th Street (now a church), the Hollywood (now the Mark Hellinger Theater), and the RKO Keith's in Flushing.

The Keith-Albee Vaudeville Circuit

Benjamin Franklin Keith (1846-1914) and Edward Franklin Albee (1857-1930) were circus men who together built the country's largest vaudeville chain.¹⁸ Albee, from Machiasport, Maine, joined P.T. Barnum's circus in 1876; B.F. Keith, from Hillsborough, New Hampshire, opened a museum and curio hall in Boston in 1882. The two men met in Boston in the mid-1880s and started business doing inexpensive versions of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. To their first theater in Boston, the Bijou, they added the Gaiety Museum in Providence, Rhode Island (1887); shortly thereafter they built the Bijou in Philadelphia. By the 1890s they had established a reputation for having made music hall entertainment respectable and vaudeville an entertainment fit for the family, and their circuit began to include larger theaters. In 1894 the Keith's chain came to New York and took over an old playhouse, the Union Square.

Although the circuit bore Keith's name, Albee was generally considered to be in control. Around the turn of the century, Keith, Albee, F.F. Proctor, and several other theater owners formed the United Booking Office which, under Albee's direction, controlled Eastern vaudeville for the next several years. With the U.B.O. as a power base, the Keith's circuit continued growing. In 1912 Keith and Albee arranged a merger with the Orpheum chain, and created the Keith-Orpheum Circuit.

Following Keith's death in 1914, the circuit continued expanding under Albee's direction; by 1925, when the circuit's name was changed to Keith-Albee-Orpheum, it included over 350 theaters. During most of its existence, the Keith's circuit was vaudeville, and had very little to do with the movies. By the mid-1920s, however, it was apparent that movies would have to be included for the operation to stay competitive, and in 1926 Albee bought the Pathe and F.B.O. film companies. In 1928, with sound movies becoming popular, a merger was arranged which included the Keith-Albee-Orpheum circuit (KAO), the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), F.B.O., Pathe, the RCA Photophone sound system, Victor Records, and N.B.C; the resulting conglomerate was called Radio-Keith-Orpheum, or "RKO." Albee, near 70 at this point, retired, and vaudeville was soon largely replaced by movies in the Keith's chain. The Flushing Keith's theater was built during the same year in which the merger took place; it opened as a vaudeville and movie house under the name Keith-Albee-Vaudeville.

The Flushing RKO Keith's Theater

Flushing, one of the oldest settlements on Long Island, has long been a major residential and commercial center in Queens. Originally known as Vlissingen, the town was settled by a group of English Colonists who were granted a patent on October 19, 1645, by William Kieft, the director general of the Dutch colony of Nieuw Amsterdam. The settlers, many of whom were Quakers, came to Flushing seeking religious freedom, and in 1657 issued the famous Flushing Remonstrance, one of the earliest Colonial pleas for religious freedom. Two important buildings from this period, the Friends Meeting House (1694-1719) on Northern Boulevard and the nearby Bowne House (1661-1696) survive as major local landmarks.¹⁹ During the 18th and 19th centuries, Flushing gained renown as the site of major plant nurseries including that of William Prime which, at its founding in 1737, was the first such establishment in America. In the early 19th century Flushing became a major regional village: in 1800 a stage line opened connecting Flushing and Brooklyn, and in 1837 the village was officially incorporated. As the population increased, substantial new buildings were erected including the Town Hall on Northern Boulevard in 1862.²⁰ Flushing was annexed to New York City, along with the rest of Queens, in 1898, and in the early 20th century became a major residential and commercial neighborhood of the city.

In 1927, the Keith's chain acquired a site in the heart of Flushing, at the intersection of Main Street and Northern Boulevard, and commissioned a 2974-seat vaudeville and movie theater from Thomas Lamb, at an estimated cost of \$750,000.²¹ The Keith's was built as a subscription house; Queens residents bought season tickets and returned each week to see the new show on the Keith's circuit coming to Flushing. Although films were offered, the main attraction, as at all Keith houses, was vaudeville. Shows ran twice a day, reserved seats only, the same policy as Broadway playhouses.²² The Keith's opened under the

name "Keith-Albee-Vaudeville," but was later renamed "RKO Keith's." Besides housing the theater, the building also included storefronts and two stories of offices. As a major regional theater at downtown Flushing's major intersection, the Keith's took its place as a 20th-century Flushing landmark, along with those of the 18th and 19th centuries, along Northern Boulevard.

Lamb's design for the Flushing Keith's theater is a variant of his "Mexican baroque" design of the Loew's Ohio Theatre in Columbus, also built in 1928; unlike that house, however, the Keith's is an atmospheric theater. The Ohio was a sensation at the time and the Keith's management must have been aware of it. Since Lamb designed a similar "Mexican baroque" atmospheric the same year for a Keith's theater in Huntington, West Virginia,²³ and as he did very few atmospherics at all, it seems likely that the choice of design and type was made by the Keith's corporation.

RKO Keith's: One of the Few Surviving "Atmospheric" Theaters in New York

Following the end of World War II, with changing theater economics and the rise of television, a wave of theater alterations and demolitions began to claim large numbers of movie palaces across the country. The larger theaters were particularly vulnerable, either to subdivision into smaller theaters with accompanying loss of interior ornament, or to demolition for reuse of their valuable large sites. In New York, most of the large Manhattan movie palaces disappeared, while those surviving in the other boroughs suffered either from subdivision or abandonment and subsequent vandalism.

The most complete and recent survey of the country's movie palaces²⁴ cites twenty-seven major New York examples. Seven of these were designed as "atmospherics" out of thirty-four listed from across the country: the RKO Keith's, the Triboro (in Astoria, Queens), the Valencia (in Jamaica, Queens), the Loew's 72nd Street (in Manhattan), the Pitkin (in Brooklyn), the Paradise (in the Bronx), and the Brooklyn Paramount. Of these, according to the same source, the Triboro and the Loew's 72nd Street have been razed, and the Brooklyn Paramount heavily altered and converted into a gym; the Pitkin has been heavily vandalized, the Valencia converted for use as a church, and the Paradise converted into four theaters.

The RKO Keith's has been subdivided into three theaters, but in such a way that all its interior ornament has remained intact. Along with the Valencia, it appears to be one of two surviving "atmospheric" theaters of note still standing in New York in good condition.

Description

The main interior spaces of the RKO Keith's theater are the auditorium, the grand foyer, the ticket-booth hall, the men's and women's lounges adjoining the grand foyer, the mezzanine promenade, and the lounges adjoining the mezzanine promenade.

The auditorium has been divided by partitions into three smaller theaters; a horizontal partition running from the edge of the balcony to the proscenium divides it into an upper and lower space, and a vertical partition divides the

lower space into two smaller areas. These are simple partitions which appear not to have damaged the interior in any way.

The theme of the theater is a series of outdoor Spanish or Mexican facades, in the Churrigueresque style, set in a garden. The Churrigueresque style, named after the Spanish architect J.M. de Churriguera, was an 18th-century modification of the Italian Baroque, incorporating Moorish and Gothic decorative elements. The gilded plaster and wooden facades are built up against the walls and run around three sides of the auditorium at the balcony level, meeting the organ screens at the sides of the proscenium arch. The arcades and broken pediments end at the ceiling, where their tops form a romantic outline against what became a lit evening sky. The ceiling itself has been altered to permit the installation of vents. The rear wall is enclosed by a rounded arcade formed by arches supported on double columns, which are wrapped in studded spirals made to look like embossed leather. The capitals have baby- or angel-faces in them. Each side wall centers on a large triple-opening with spiral columns framing Spanish-style murals; typically for an atmospheric theater, the designs of the walls do not match. The opening in each wall is framed by elaborate gilded plaster work, all indirectly lit. The elaborate organ screens are covered with spiral columns, niches, volutes, and similar Churrigueresque ornament; like the side walls, they also do not match exactly. The balcony comes down very close to the proscenium, closer than in most movie houses, because in a vaudeville theater it was important to bring the audience as close to the stage as possible. The proscenium arch, flanked by the organ screens, is an elaborately worked out gilded wood and plaster design. An enormous pier on either side, each capped by a niche with an urn, supports the heavily ornate Churrigueresque arch; a tall niche projecting upwards in the center is capped by a broken baroque pediment topped by an urn. Three original cut-glass chandeliers still light the lower exits of the balcony. The balcony seats, with cast metal ends, still remain. Beneath the balcony are suspended panels in the shape of eight-sided stars, from which hang original cut-glass light fixtures. Exit halls on either side of the main auditorium floor are reached by side openings with spiral columns; the exit halls are lit by original metal "torches" suspended from the walls, and adorned with tapestries and Spanish-style murals. In the now divided theater, the lower portions of the proscenium arch and the organ screens are in the lower theaters.

The "Mexican Baroque" atmospheric design of the auditorium is carried through to the grand foyer and mezzanine promenade and the adjoining lounges. The grand foyer is a semi-oval hall, two stories high, and is framed at the second-story level by elaborate gilded spiral arches forming an arcade. This arcade, adorned with Churrigueresque urns and grilles, is surmounted by gilded plaster carvings rising to a blue atmospheric sky. At the first floor level, two doors, now closed but originally leading to the auditorium, have elaborate gilded plaster surrounds. To their right is an elaborate wall-mounted polychromatic terra-cotta drinking fountain, mirroring the theater's Baroque forms. (An elaborate marble fountain which originally stood in the center of the foyer has been replaced by a candy concession.) Staircases, with elaborate bronze railings, lead from either side of the grand foyer up to the mezzanine level and through gilded plaster entrances to the mezzanine promenade.

The mezzanine promenade, which continues the "Mexican Baroque" theme, is a long rectangular space with an elaborate carved wooden ceiling, Moorish arches with spiral columns, original cut-glass light fixtures, and some of the original wrought-iron furniture. (The furniture is not included in this designation.)

Connecting the grand foyer to the street entrance is the ticket lobby. This is a square, two-story high room, the upper story of which is composed of a series of columns and gilded plaster carvings rising to a flat, blue-sky ceiling. An original ticket booth survives, and is still in use.

There are four lounges in the theater, and the "Mexican Baroque" theme has been carried through to all of them. A men's lounge on the ground floor opens off the east side of the grand foyer. A square room, it retains much of its original tiled floor, gilded plaster moldings, and a carved wooden ceiling, as well as a large hooded fireplace. Its walls are of rough stucco. An original metal chandelier survives, as well as wall sconces flanking the fireplace. In each corner is a niche within spiral columns. On the south wall is a painted plaster and wood altar-like ornament. In the small space between the grand foyer and the men's lounge proper is a wall-mounted polychromatic terra-cotta drinking fountain; this space also has a small original hanging lamp, and gilded plaster moldings.

A women's lounge on the ground floor opens off the west side of the grand foyer. A circular room, it is entered down marble stairs flanked by iron railings. Its walls are of rough stucco, and are lined with niches adorned by iron grillework and carved gilded plaster molding. The floor is now carpeted. The round ceiling is painted plaster, suggestive of intertwining vines, with an eight-pointed star at its center; a wrought-iron chandelier hangs from the pointed star. The ceiling is ringed by plaster polychromatic molding. In a small adjoining vestibule is a polychromatic terra-cotta wall-mounted drinking fountain.

A women's lounge on the mezzanine level opens off the east side of the mezzanine promenade (directly over the men's lounge on the ground floor). The irregularly-shaped main lounge has a handsome hooded fireplace in one corner, adjacent to a window set in an arch supported by gilded columns with stylized "crown" capitals. Opening off the main lounge is a small room with a wall-mounted polychromatic terra-cotta drinking fountain, similar to those in the other lounges. Also opening off the main lounge is a powder room, entered through an arched opening similar to the arched window opening; a wrought-iron chandelier hangs from the ceiling.

A men's lounge on the mezzanine level opens off the east side of the mezzanine promenade (directly over the women's lounge on the ground floor). Entered through a small vestibule, the lounge has a wooden ceiling, with a wrought-iron chandelier, and a hooded fireplace; its floor has been changed. An adjoining small vestibule contains a wall-mounted polychromatic terra-cotta drinking fountain similar to those in the other lounges.

Stairways and halls connect the mezzanine promenade with the upper portion of the auditorium; they are not included in this designation.

Conclusion

The RKO Keith's Flushing theater survives almost completely intact as one of the last fine movie palaces left in New York City. Its ornate Churrigueresque or "Mexican Baroque" style, done in the atmospheric manner, still creates the sense of illusion -- of a summer evening in an exotic setting -- that made the theater as much an attraction in its day as the vaudeville shows and movies which it housed. The theater's location at the major intersection in downtown Flushing, and its history as a major entertainment center for Flushing and the surrounding region, make it an important local landmark. Its status as one of the few surviving examples in New York of the uniquely American institution of the movie palace, and one of the very few surviving atmospheric designs, gives it citywide significance.

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FOOTNOTES

1. It is also one of two major examples left in the Borough of Queens; the Valencia, in Jamaica, is the other. Until its demolition in 1974, the Loew's Triboro in Astoria was a third.
2. The two basic works on the history of the American movie palace, on which the following account is largely based, are Ben M. Hall, The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), and David Naylor, American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981). The quarterly issues of Marquee, the publication of the Theatre Historical Society since 1969, are another invaluable source.
3. For a typical history see Carrie Balaban, Continuous Performance (New York: Balaban Foundation, 1964), the biography of A.J. Balaban, founder of Balaban & Katz.
4. Naylor, p. 40.
5. Balaban, p. 100.

6. Naylor, p. 10.
7. Naylor, p. 67-68.
8. Naylor, p. 68.
9. The following account of Thomas Lamb's life and works is based on Naylor, and on Lamb's obituary in the New York Times, Feb. 27, 1942, p. 17:4.
10. Information on Lamb's years at Cooper Union courtesy of the Cooper Union Archives, New York.
11. Special thanks to Michael R. Miller, of the Theatre Historical Society, for this information.
12. Obituary, Thomas Lamb. New York Herald Tribune, February 27, 1942.
13. For a survey and history of playhouse architecture in New York see Mary Henderson, The City & The Theatre: New York Playhouses from Bowling Green to Times Square (Clifton, N.J.: James T White & Company, 1973).
14. Not for an Adamesque-style house, but for the Oriental-style Syracuse Loew's State; Naylor, p. 125.
15. Naylor, p. 44.
16. Naylor, p. 120.
17. Frank Cronican, "Loew's 72nd Street Theatre," in Marquee, 8, no. 2 (1976); Cronican thinks that the interior of Lamb's theater might have been designed in part by John Ebersson.
18. The following account of the Keith-Albee circuit is based on Donald C. King "Keith, Albee, et al, from Circus to Cinema," in Marquee, 7, no. 3 (1975).
19. Both are designated New York City Landmarks.
20. A designated New York City Landmark.
21. Queens Building Department, new building application 8061/1927.
22. A photo of the Keith's in 1929 is on the cover of Marquee, 7, no. 3 (1975). Theatre Historical Society member Jack Robinson attended the early shows at the Keith's and described the policy.
23. For a photo see Naylor, p. 123. The Huntington Keith's was neither as imaginative nor as ornate as the Flushing Keith's.
24. Naylor.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

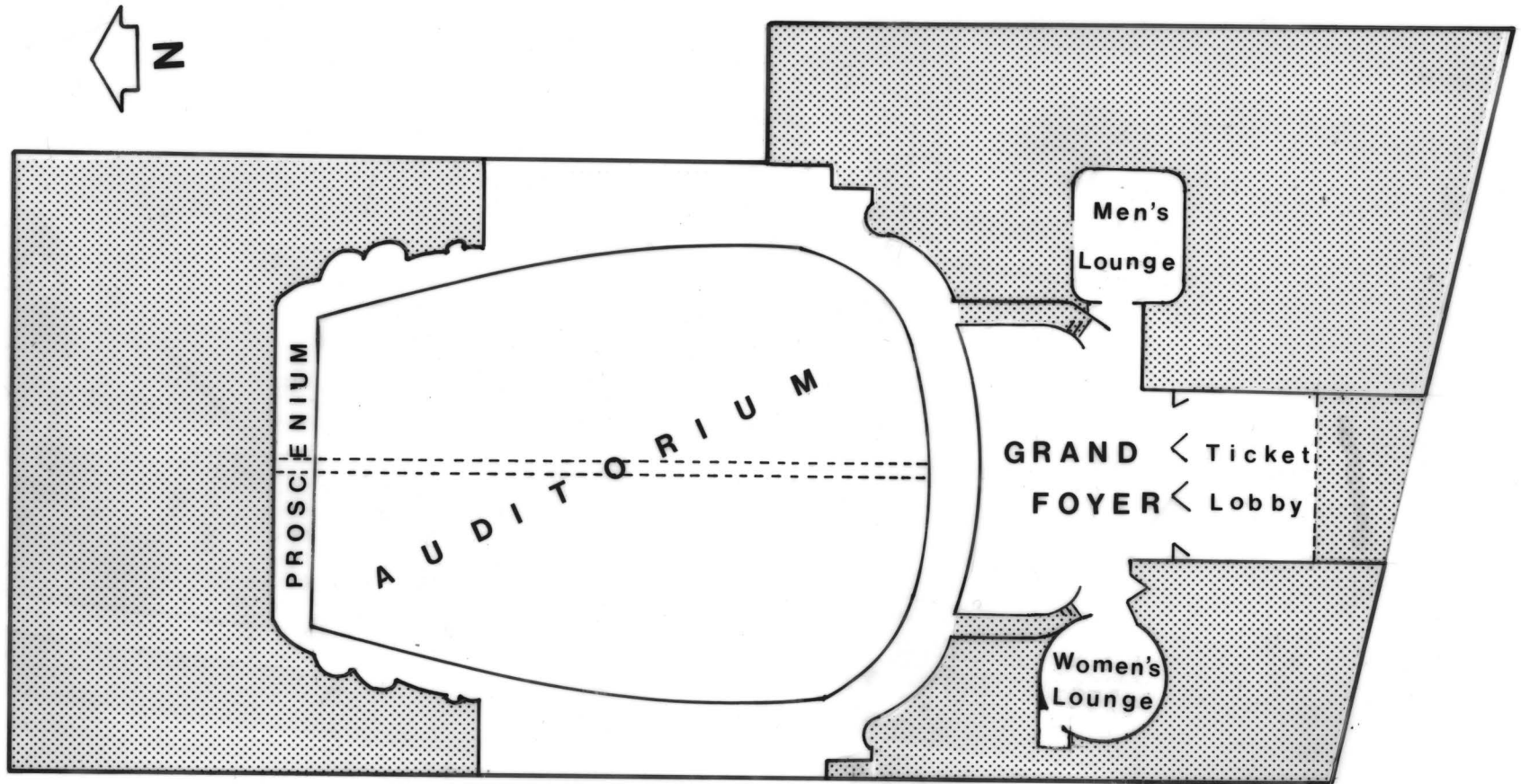
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the RKO Keith's Flushing Theater, ground floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby and original ticket booth, grand foyer, twin staircases leading to the mezzanine promenade, women's lounge, men's lounge, auditorium (now divided into two spaces) including organ screens, proscenium and exit halls; second floor interior consisting of the upper level and ceiling of the ticket lobby, the upper level and ceiling of the grand foyer, the mezzanine promenade and its ceiling, the lounges adjoining the mezzanine promenade, the upper part of the auditorium (now separated from the lower sections), including the organ screens, wall openings, proscenium arch and exit halls; and the fixtures and the interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, all lighting fixtures, columns, wall surfaces, murals, ornamental plasterwork, floor surfaces, ceiling surfaces, statues, attached furnishings, drinking fountains, and metal grilles; has 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 RKO Keith's Flushing Theater, ground floor and second floor interiors, is one of the few surviving examples in New York of the uniquely American institution of the movie palace; that it was designed in a "Mexican Baroque" or Churrigueresque style, in the "atmospheric" manner by Thomas Lamb, one of the country's most important theater architects and the most important one based in New York; that it was built as a vaudeville house for the country's largest vaudeville chain, the Keith-Albee circuit; that its "atmospheric" design still creates the sense of illusion -- of a summer evening in an exotic setting -- that made the theater as much an attraction in its day as the vaudeville shows and movies which it housed; that the design of the theater is a totality which encompasses the auditorium, grand foyer, ticket booth hall, mezzanine promenade, and adjoining lounges; that the theater's fifty-year history as the major entertainment center both for Flushing and the surrounding region, at a pivotal location in downtown Flushing, makes it a significant local landmark; and that it is one of the very few "atmospheric" type theaters surviving in New York.

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 RKO Keith's Flushing Theater, ground floor interior consisting of the ticket lobby and original ticket booth, grand foyer, twin staircases leading to the mezzanine promenade, women's lounge, men's lounge, auditorium (now divided into two spaces) including organ screens, proscenium and exit halls; second floor interior consisting of the upper level and ceiling of the ticket lobby, the upper level and ceiling of the grand foyer, the mezzanine promenade and its ceiling, the lounges adjoining the mezzanine promenade, the upper part of the auditorium (now separated from the lower sections), including the organ screens, wall openings, proscenium arch and exit halls; and the fixtures and the interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, all lighting fixtures, columns, wall surfaces, murals, ornamental plasterwork, floor surfaces, ceiling surfaces, statues, attached furnishings, drinking fountains, and metal grilles; Borough of Queens, and designates Tax Map Block 4958, Lot 31, Borough of Queens, as its Landmark Site.

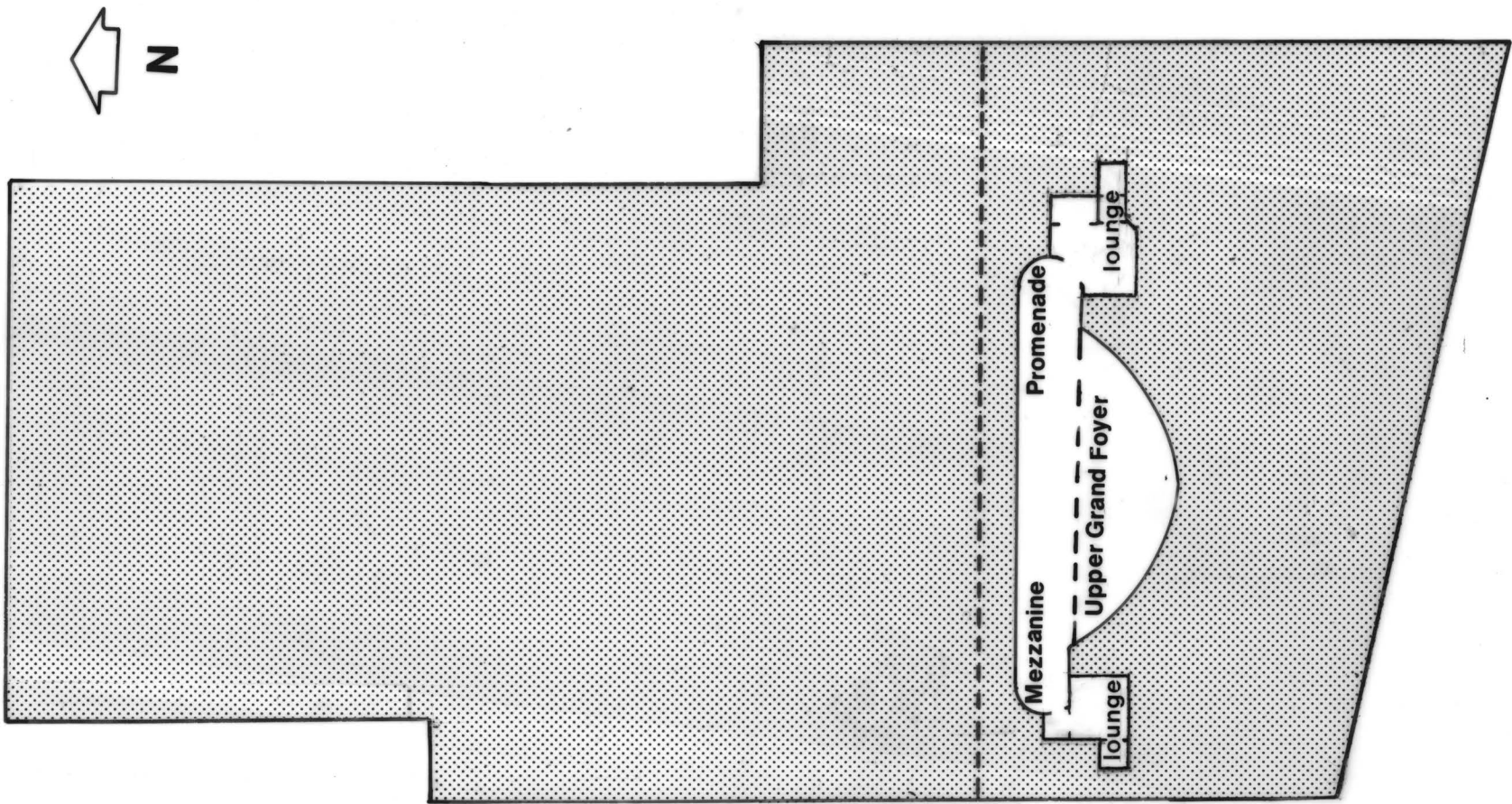
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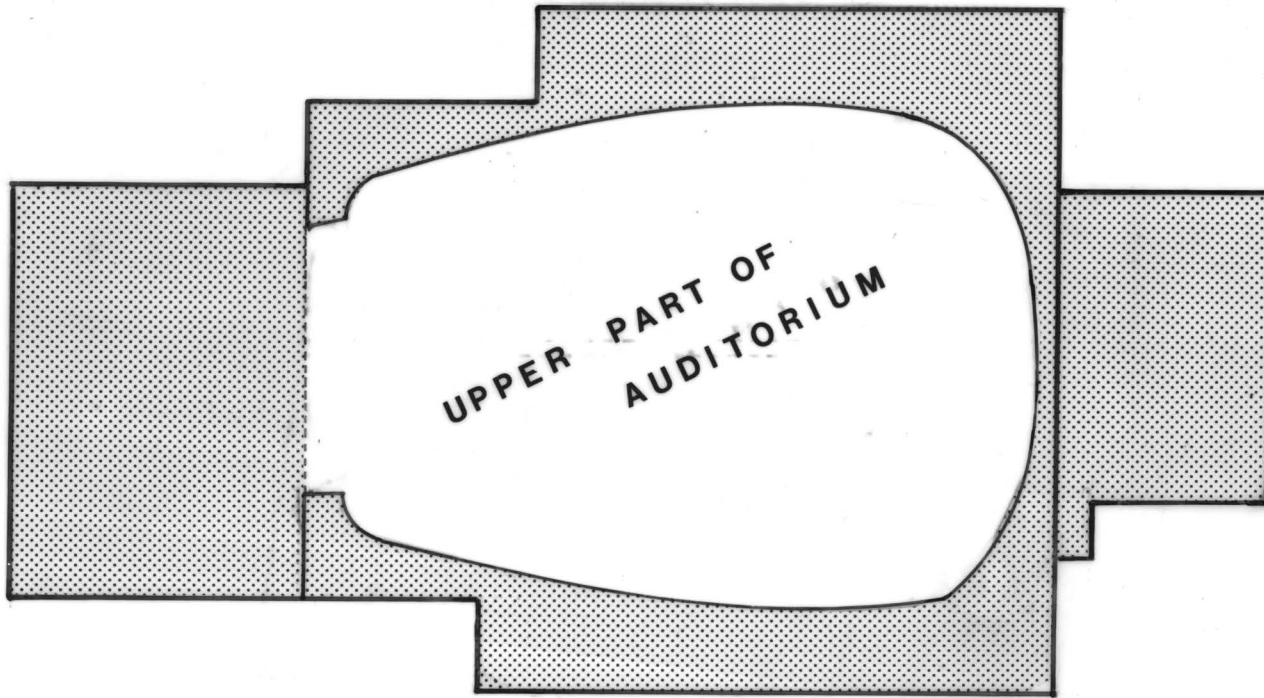
GROUND FLOOR LEVEL

R K O Keith's Flushing
Theater Interior
Northern Boulevard
Flushing, Queens



MEZZANINE LEVEL

R K O Keith's Flushing



BALCONY LEVEL

R K O Keith's Flushing

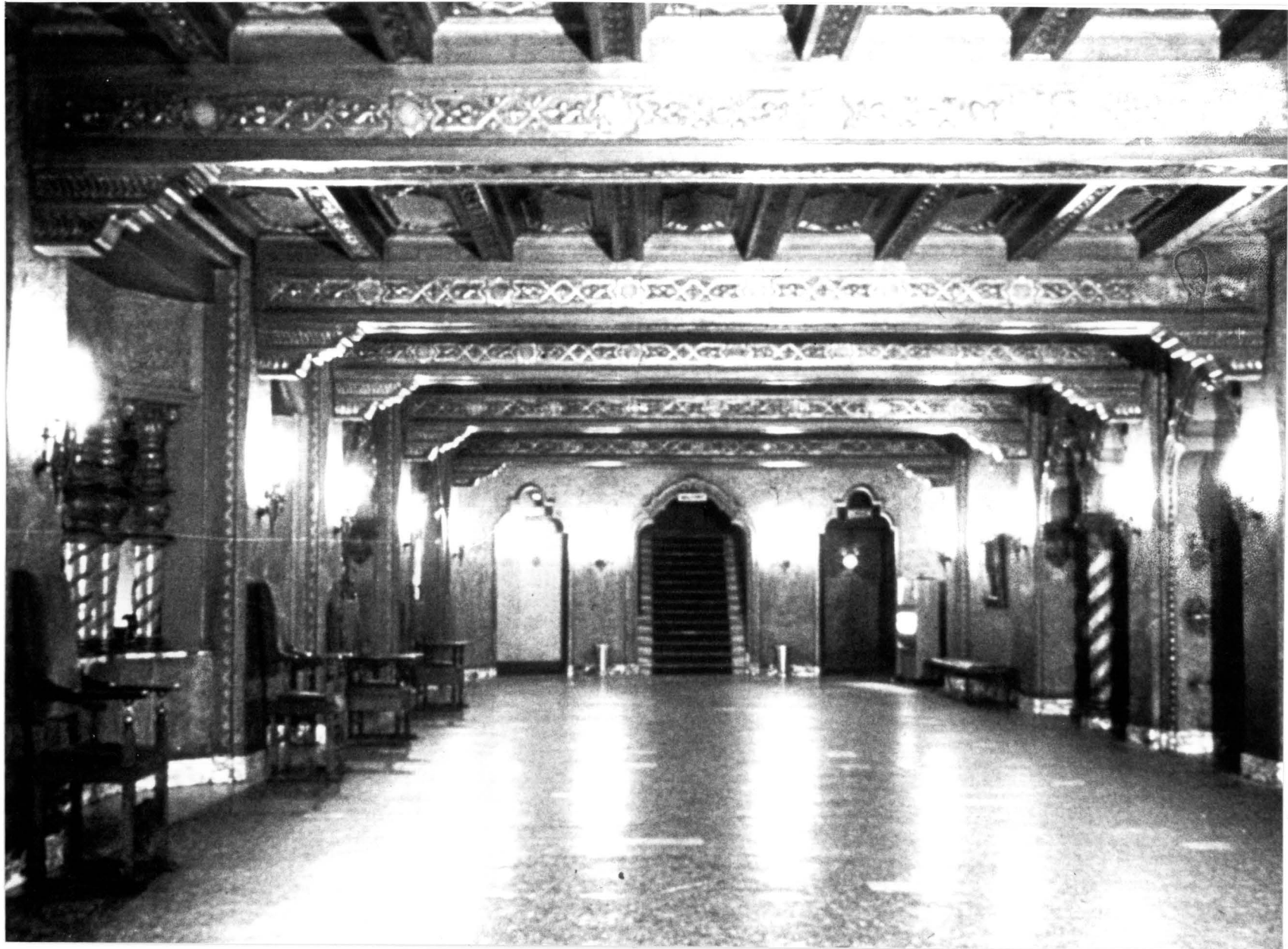
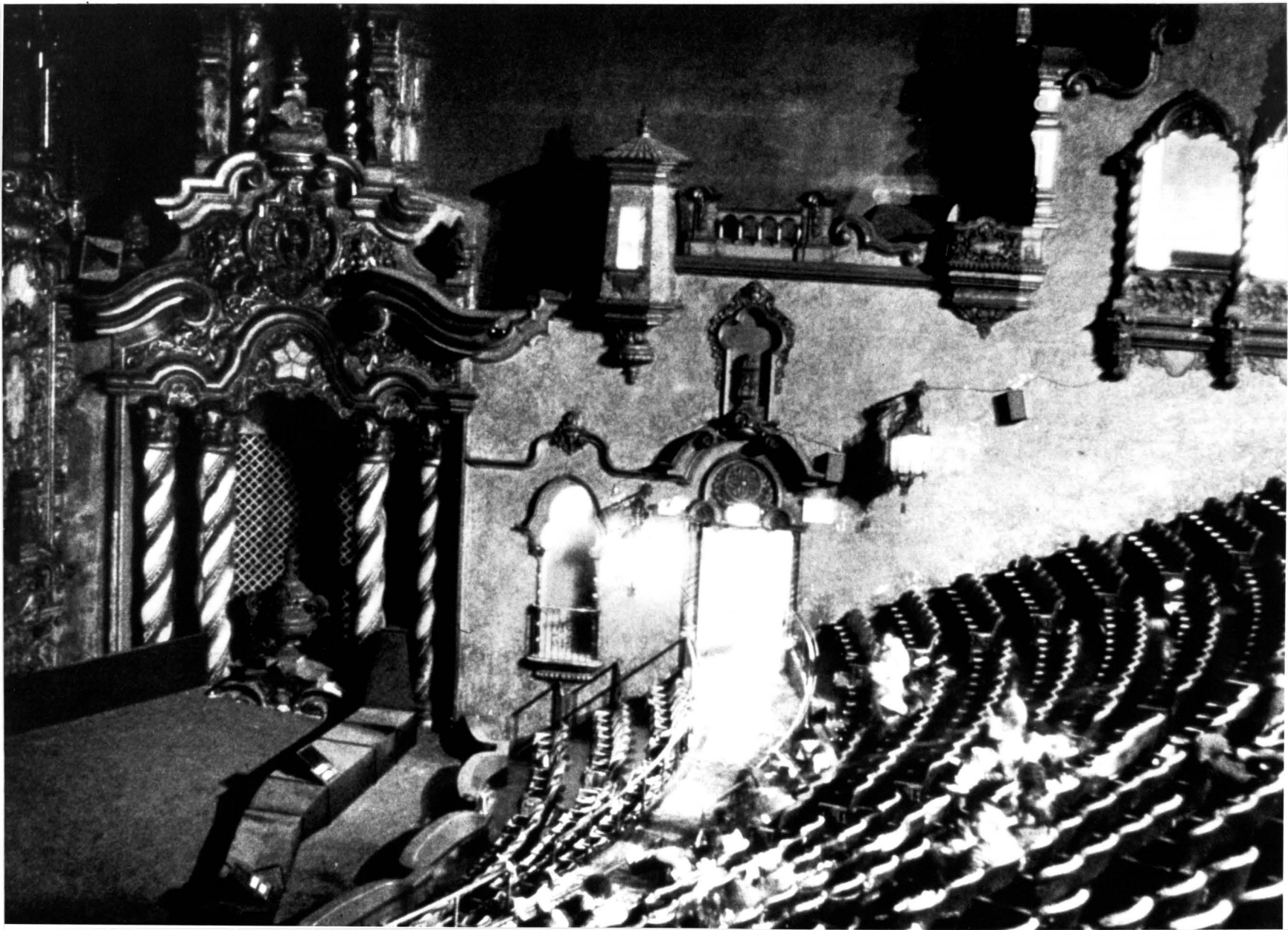


Photo Credit:
Landmarks Preservation
Commission

(Mezzanine Promenade)
RKO FLUSHING KEITH'S THEATER
135-29--135-45 Northern Boulevard
Flushing, Queens

Architect: Thomas Lamb
Built: 1927-1928



(Balcony)

Photo Credit:
Landmarks Preservation
Commission

RKO FLUSHING KEITH'S THEATER
135-29--135-45 Northern Boulevard
Flushing, Queens

Architect: Thomas Lamb
Built: 1927-1928

ADDENDUM to the RKO KEITH'S FLUSHING THEATER INTERIOR designation report:

On July 12th, 1984, the Board of Estimate modified the designation by the Landmarks Preservation Commission of the RKO Keith's Flushing Theater Interior to include only the following:

"That portion of RKO Keith's Flushing Theater consisting of the ticket lobby and original ticket booth, grand foyer and walls, twin staircases leading from the grand foyer, the ceiling of the ticket lobby and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, all lighting fixtures, columns, wall surfaces, murals, ornamental plasterwork, floor surfaces, statues, attached furnishings, and metal grilles, if any."

Source: Board of Estimate, City of New York, Cal. No. 38, July 12, 1984.
Notice received by Landmarks Preservation Commission, August 23, 1984.