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Pantages Theatre, Toronto

This 1920s vaudeville theatre was carved up, painted over, and almost forgotten until last year. Now restored, but with some structural changes, it draws patrons back into a world of glittering opulence.

David K. Mesbur Architect Ltd.

The original Pantages theatre was built in 1920 to designs by the celebrated theatre architect Thomas W. Lamb of New York as part of the continent-wide theatre chain developed by Alexander Pantages of Seattle. With 3,626 seats, it was the largest vaudeville palace in Canada. The interior was designed in the Adam Revival style that was Lamb's hallmark.

From the west entrance on Yonge Street a 36.5-m (120-ft.) long, elaborate hallway and flight of stairs crosses over St. Joseph's Lane and leads into the oval mezzanine lobby. From this link patrons can either enter the balcony or descend a grand staircase to the auditorium level. This level is also accessed directly from a second east entrance, originally intended for motorists, on Victoria Street.

Shortly after opening, the theatre was renamed the "Imperial." It operated as a cinema from 1930 until 1972 when it became the "Imperial Six" and was divided into six small-screen cinemas. Large portions of the balcony were removed to make way for stairwells, ramps and exit passageways. In the auditorium, the box seats and their support framework and much of the decorative plasterwork around the balcony and the proscenium arch were destroyed. The great ceiling dome had also sustained considerable damage.

A few months after Cineplex Odeon took over the theatre in 1988, the building was protected under the Ontario Heritage Act. The new owner set about restoring the entire theatre back to its original condition as a permanent venue for live theatre. "The Phantom of the Opera" musical was scheduled to open at the theatre in September 1989, giving only 15 months for the reconstruction program.

Approach

It was decided that restoration to the 1920 appearance would be the first objective, but that rehabilitation for contemporary use would take precedence over restoration where this was necessary for fire and life safety reasons, for the effective operation of live commercial theatre, or when there was no reliable documentary or structural evidence of the original.

Restoration

To ensure the accuracy of the restoration, Thomas Lamb's original drawings were obtained from Columbia University, and archival material was supplied by the Toronto Historical Board and other sources. In the auditorium, details of lost elements such as the proscenium arch, the boxes and balcony fronts and other ornate plasterwork were carefully extrapolated from original photographs and drawings, then sculpted and re-cast as large prefabricated units off-site. One of the most challenging tasks was determining the original colours and textures, all of which had been hidden beneath over-painting. A total of 1500 paint samples from the auditorium, lobby and link were taken and analyzed, along with fibres from surviving fragments of the original wall coverings. Particularly fine details in the lobby include the scagliola columns, wainscotting, porphyry and caen stone finishes. Much of the original balustrade was able to be restored.

Exterior

Extensive changes were made to the east facade on Victoria Street. A new

continuous canopy lit by gaslights extends along the entire frontage, intended to be in keeping with the city's plan for a "theatre block" in this area that will extend from the Pantages, south to include Massey Hall and the Elgin-Winter Garden complex (due to open in December). Between the Victoria Street entry lobby and the stage tower, a false facade was created to conceal fire exits formerly exposed to view. On Yonge Street the original facade, canopy and signage were reconstructed from photographs and Lamb's drawings.

Structural Rehabilitation

Adapting the building to meet the functional requirements of contemporary live theatre involved extensive re-planning. As well, The "Phantom" production required unusual increases to the stage wing space, depth and grid height. To raise the scenery gridiron, the stage tower was extended up 3 metres. The beams of the original tower were providing lateral bracing, so they were left in place and used to support the new gridiron, which left a 2.4-m high fly loft below the new roof.

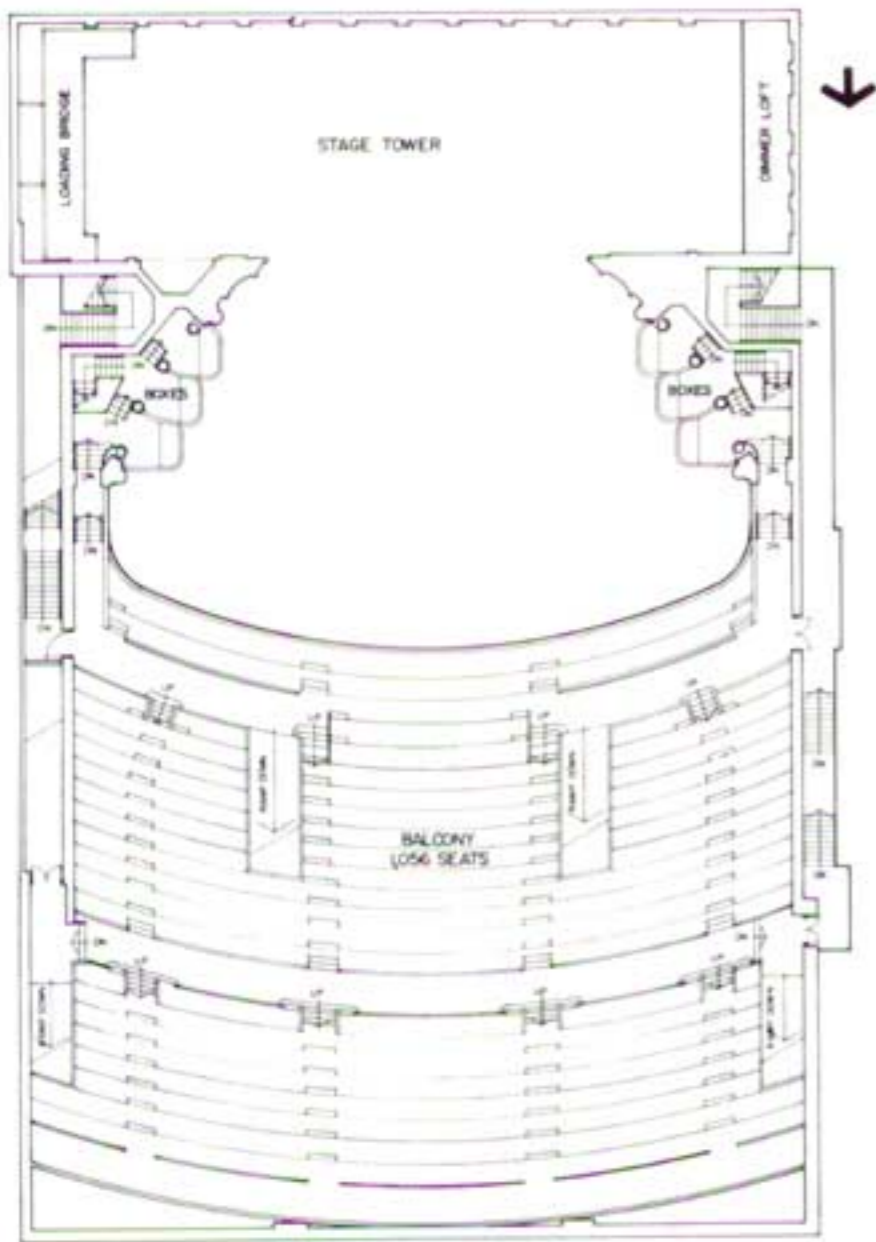
The original theatre had no basement, only two shallow tunnels for pipes and heating ducts. A new 929-m² basement level was excavated below the entire auditorium floor, and a new main floor was constructed in reinforced concrete. Existing walls were shored and foundations 1.2 m thick in some places had to be extended downwards by as much as 2.7 m, entailing a difficult underpinning operation. Below the stage, the basement is 5 m deep. The new level houses dressing rooms for a cast of 70, wardrobe and wig facilities, musician areas, lounges, a press room, carpentry shops, and sophisticated sound and electrical services. An orchestra pit for 40 musicians was constructed with an automated pit lift which provides flexibility to enlarge either the auditorium seating level, or to serve as an apron extension for the stage.

The auditorium floor and balcony were re-raked to dramatically improve sight lines, and the seating capacity was reduced to 2,100, improving patron comfort and resulting in a much more intimate audience-performer relationship. Bars and boutiques were installed in the lobbies, and a new advance ticket office installed adjacent to Victoria Street that can also be used as an adjunct to the lobby during busy intermission times.

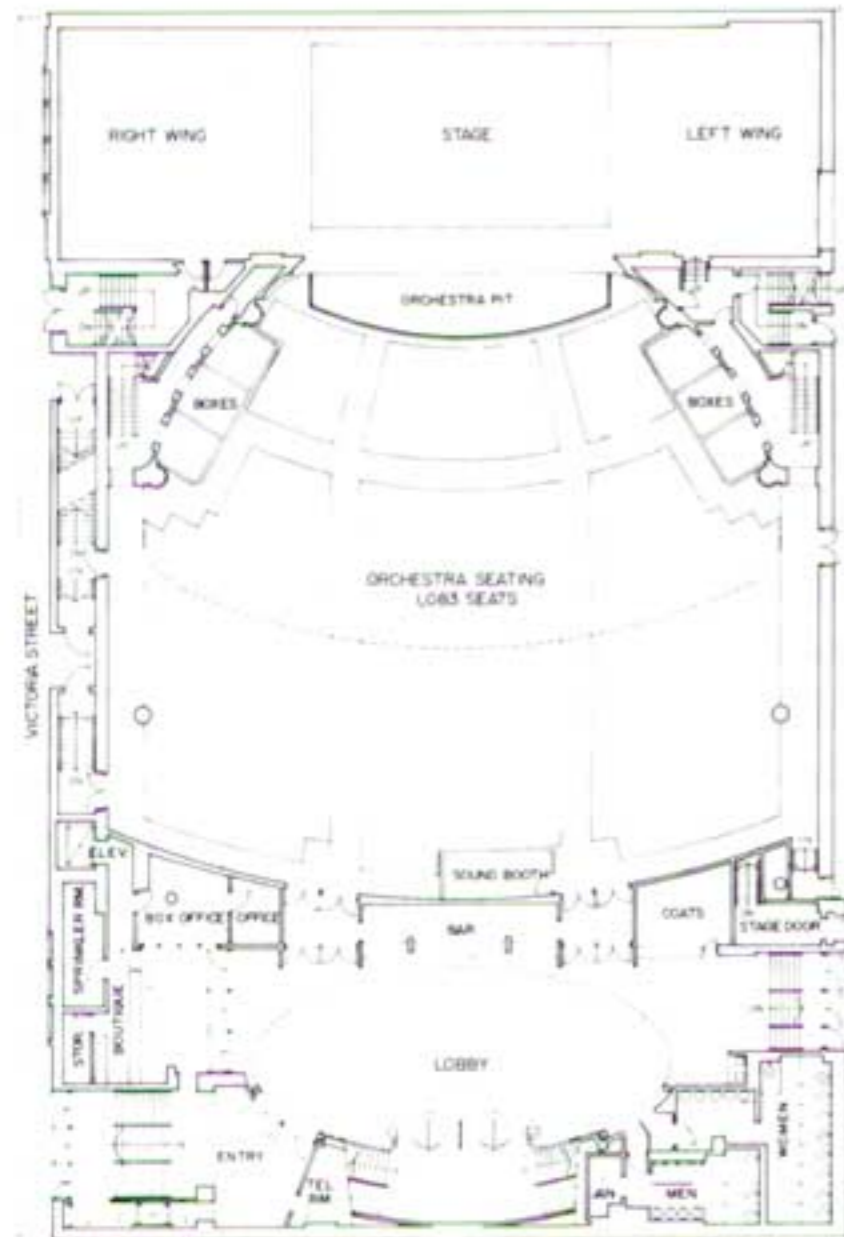
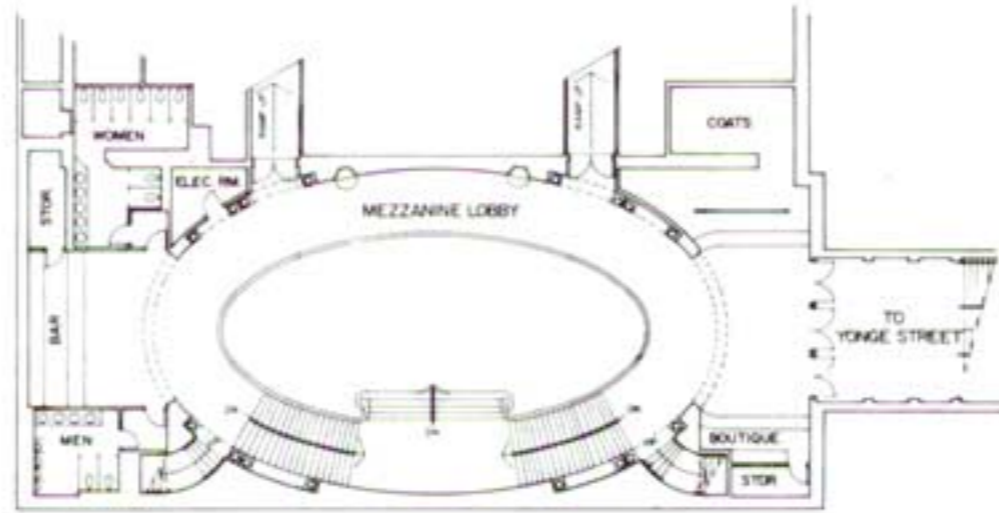
To conform with building regulations all the original exit stairs were rebuilt and a new major exit stair was added to O'Keefe Lane from the lower lobby. Fire sprinkler lines were threaded through attic spaces, and sprinkler heads were covered with brass plates and integrated as closely as possible with the plaster ornamentation. Air conditioning and heating systems were upgraded and individual induction units concealed behind scagliola wall panels in the Yonge Street link.

In July 1989, the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, Toronto branch, presented the owner with an Award of Merit for the project. □

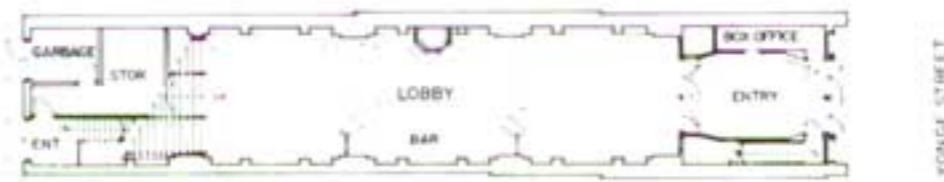
(From a statement by the architect, with thanks also to Hal Kalman of Commonwealth Historic Resource Management Limited and William Leung, structural engineer.)



MEZZANINE PLAN



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



1 Yonge Street entrance, reconstructed from photographs and Lamb's original drawings.

2 The lobby in 1920.



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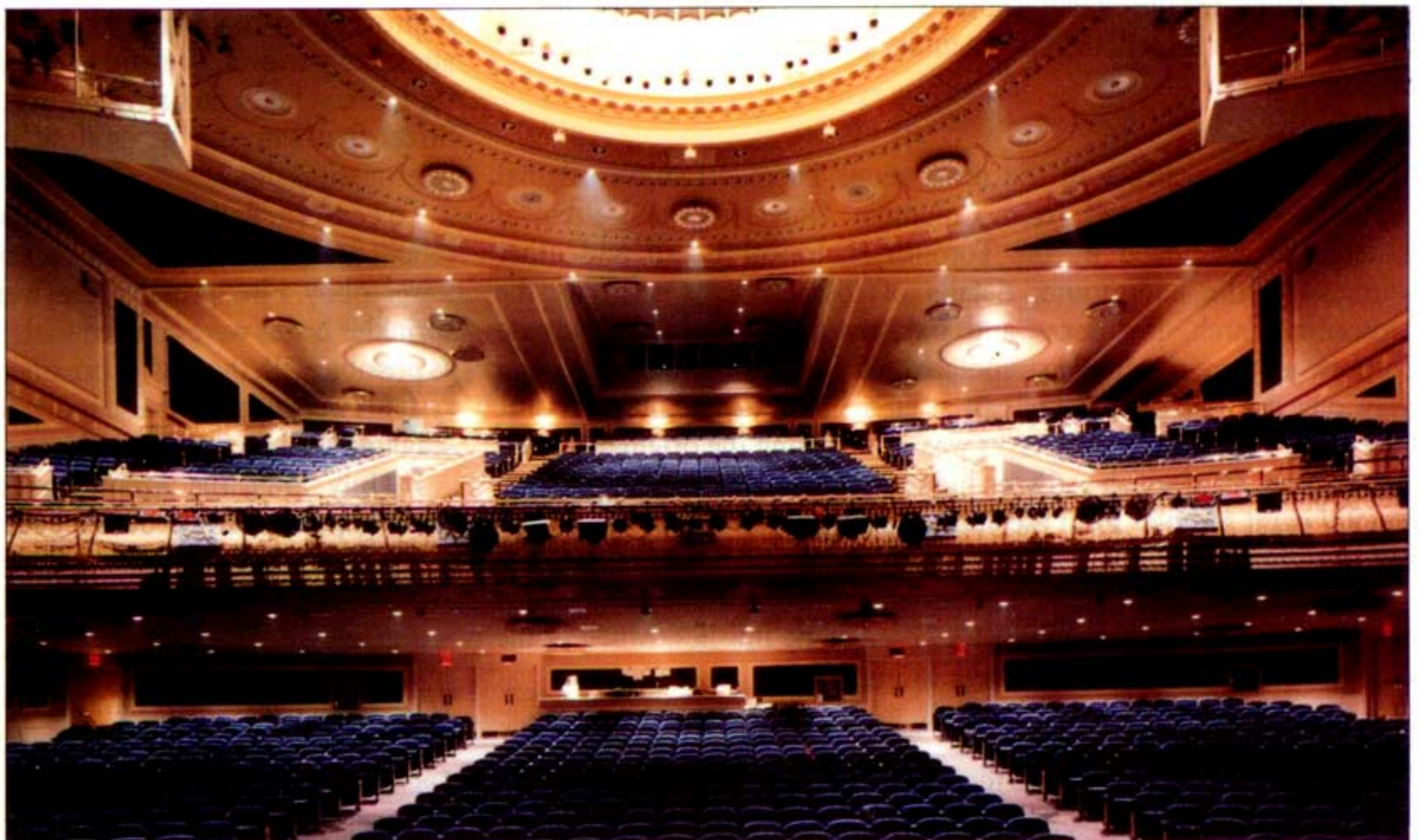
3 The auditorium in 1920.

4 Auditorium as restored. Significant structural changes had been made in this part of the theatre when it was converted to six small cinemas in the 1970s, including removal of large portions of the balcony. In the restoration the balcony and auditorium floors were re-raked to improve sight-lines.

5 Victoria Street entrance. A new false facade was constructed here between the fly tower and the entrance lobby to cover up exposed fire exits.



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6 The luxurious 36-m link from Yonge Street, approaching the stairs over O'Keefe Lane and the entrance to the mezzanine lobby. Sprinkler heads are covered by brass plates to help them integrate with the ornate plasterwork, and individual heat and air induction units are concealed behind scagliola wall panels.

7 Mezzanine lobby. The medallions and detailing in the ceiling were recovered from under thick layers of paint. Over 800 plaster casts and 1500 paint samples were taken in the restoration program overall.

8 Ground floor lobby looking east to Victoria Street entrance. Floor space was taken from the rear of the auditorium to expand the lobby area and enable installation of boutiques and bars (being of Prohibition era, the theatre had none). The mural over the grand staircase is a reinterpretation of the original. The original stained glass window below it was rediscovered by accident in a Toronto house.

Client/ Owner: Cineplex Odeon Corporation
 Design Team: David Mesbur Architect; Andrew Fox (project manager), Julia Strutt (interior designer)
 Project management: Kofman Engineering Services Ltd.; Andrew Fox (project architect)
 Structural: William Leung & Associates Engineers Ltd.
 Restoration consultants: Commonwealth Historic Resource Management Ltd.
 Electrical: The ECE Group Ltd.
 Mechanical: The Mitchell Partnership Ltd.
 Acoustical: Barman, Swallow Assoc.
 Life safety: Leber, Rubes Inc.
 Theatre design: Roger Morgan Studios Inc.
 Photography: Fiona Spalding-Smith

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Bay 2



Bay 1 - Side Wall



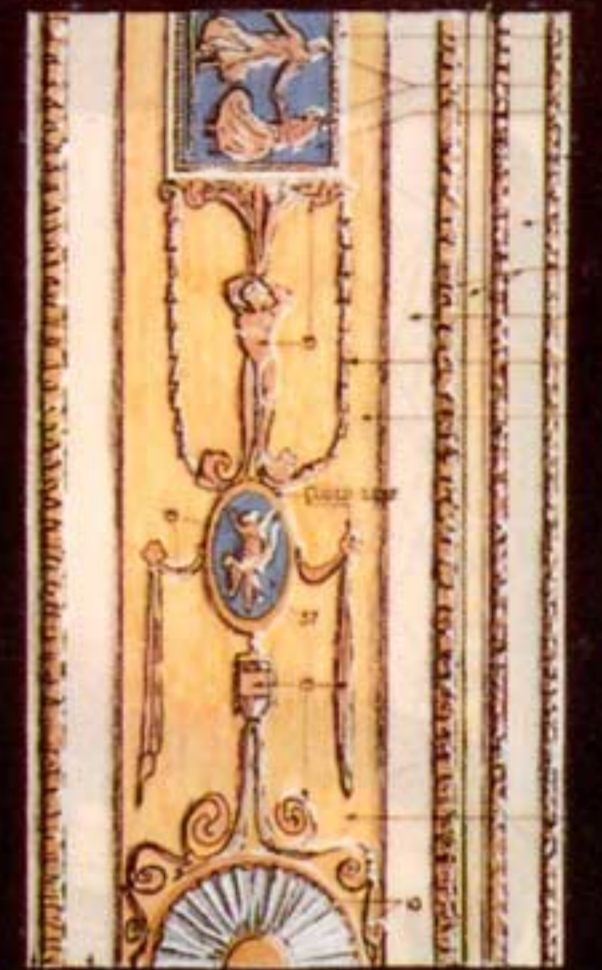
Bay 1



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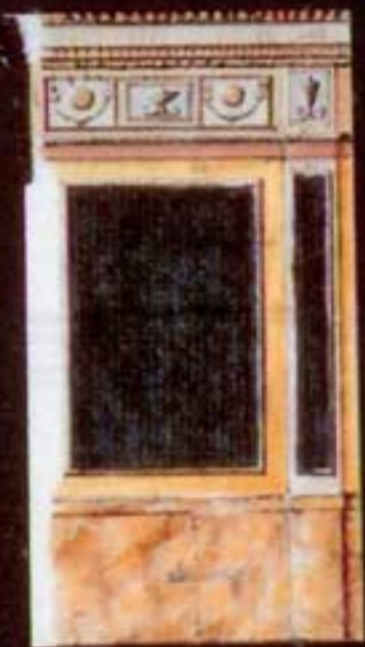
Bay 1 - Intados



Bay 3



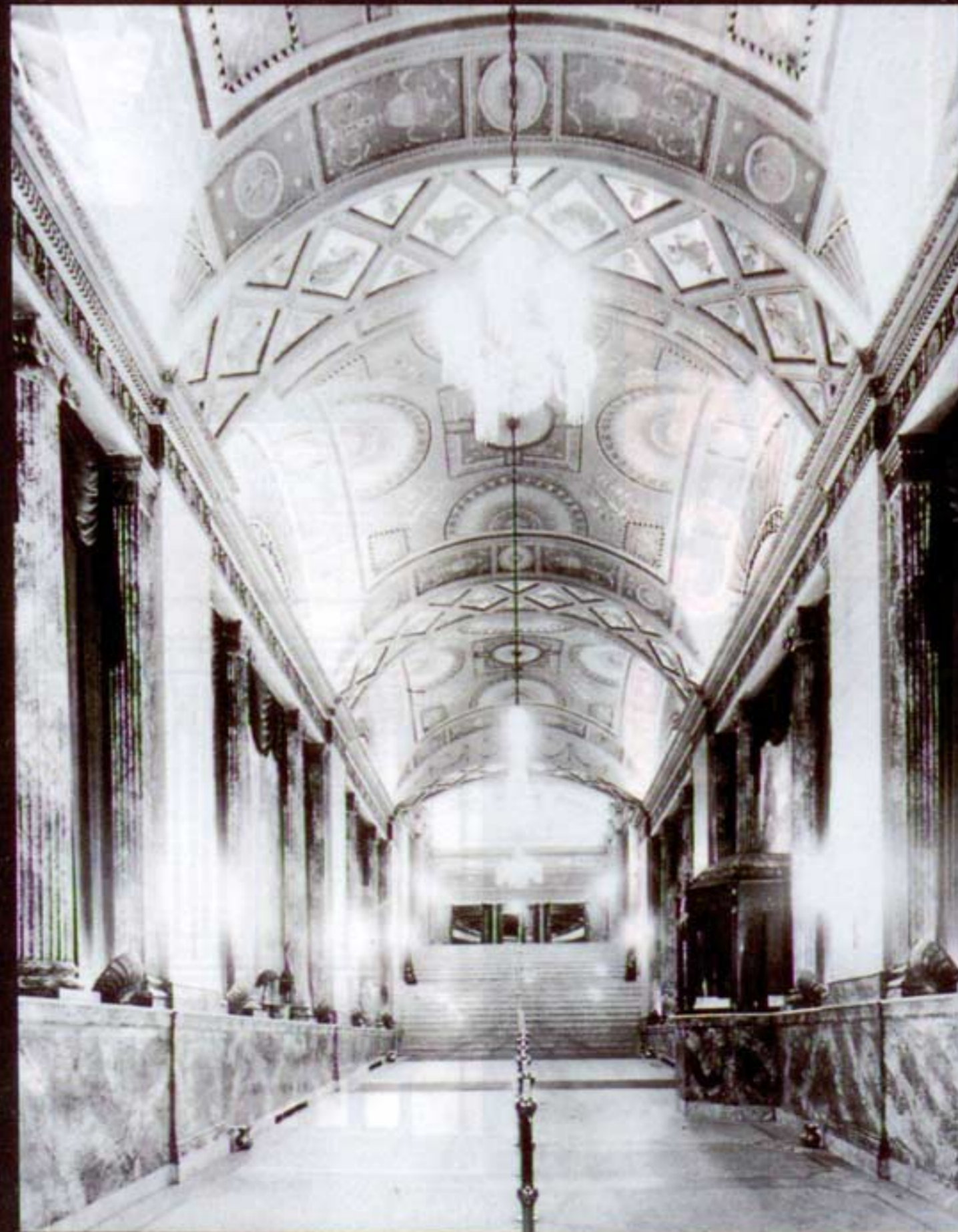
Entablature



Lobby Side Walls



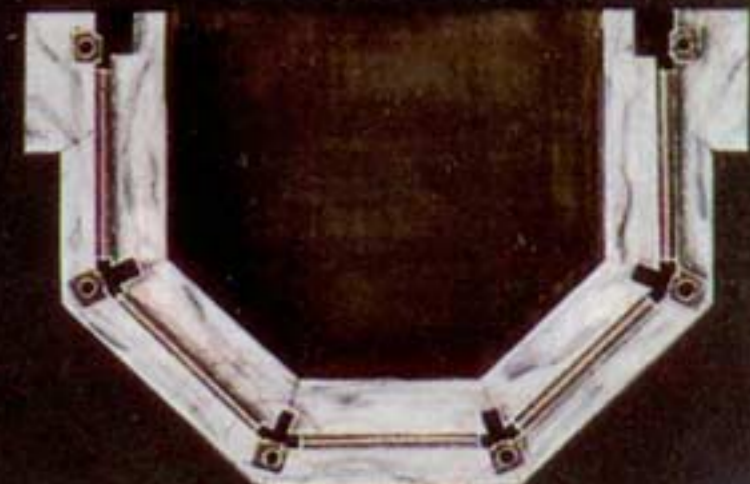
Main Lobby Entrance



1920 Lobby



Ticket Booth

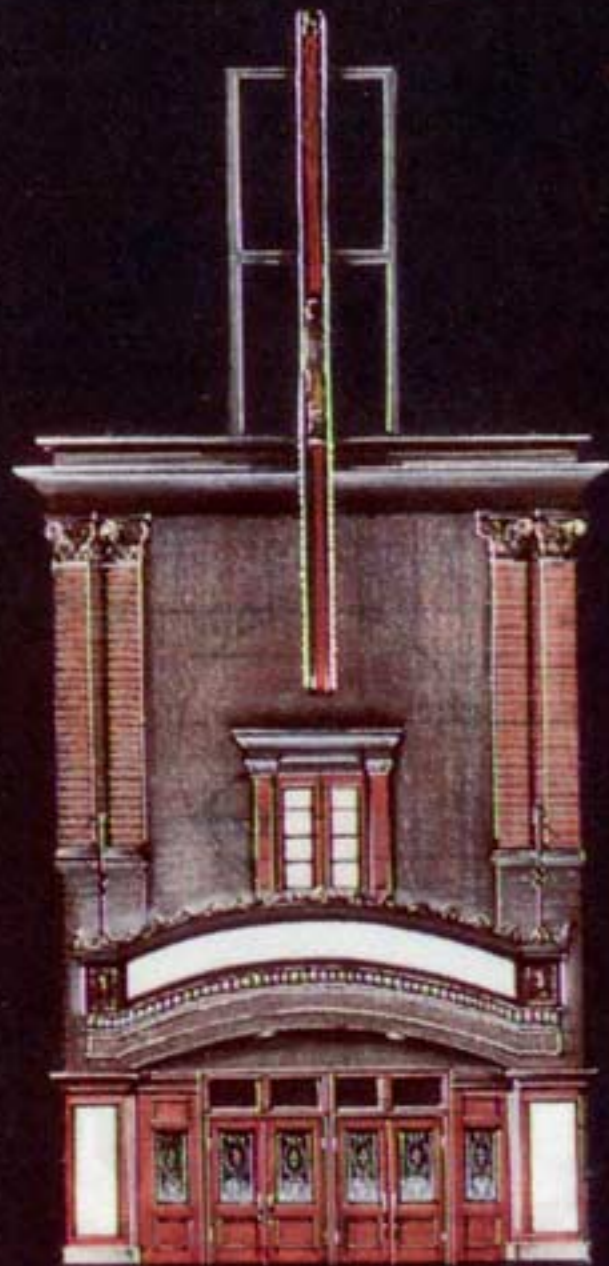




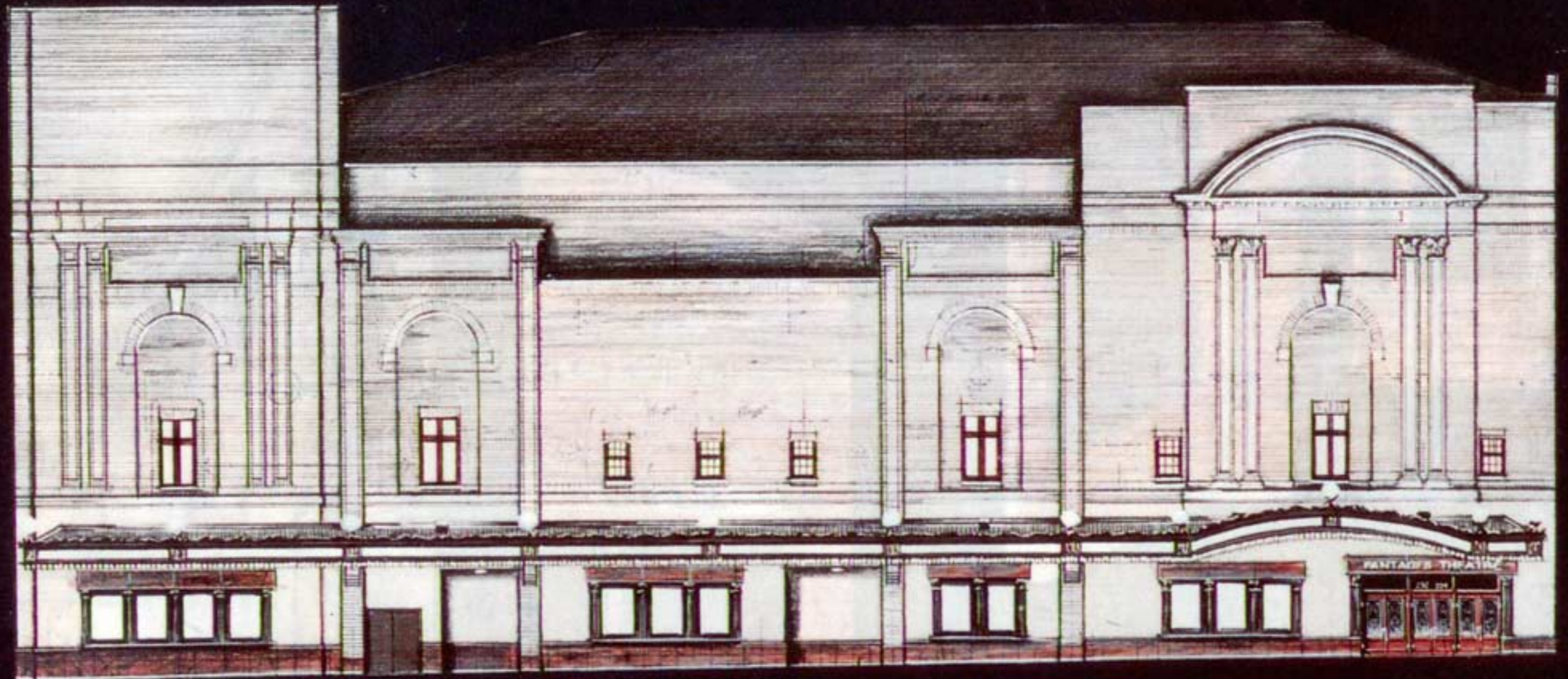
1920's Signage



1920's Victoria St. Elevation



Yonge St. Elevation



Victoria St. Elevation

EXTERIOR ELEVATIONS

YONGE STREET ELEVATION