Wilbur Theatre

Boston Landmarks Commission Study Report

Petition # 39, 244-248 Tremont Street, Boston

Report of the Boston Landmarks Commission

on the Potential Designation of

THE WILBUR THEATRE

as a

Landmark Under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975

Approved: _____ OCT 04 1983
(Executive Director) (Date)

Approved: _____ OCT. 04 1983
(Chairman) (Date)

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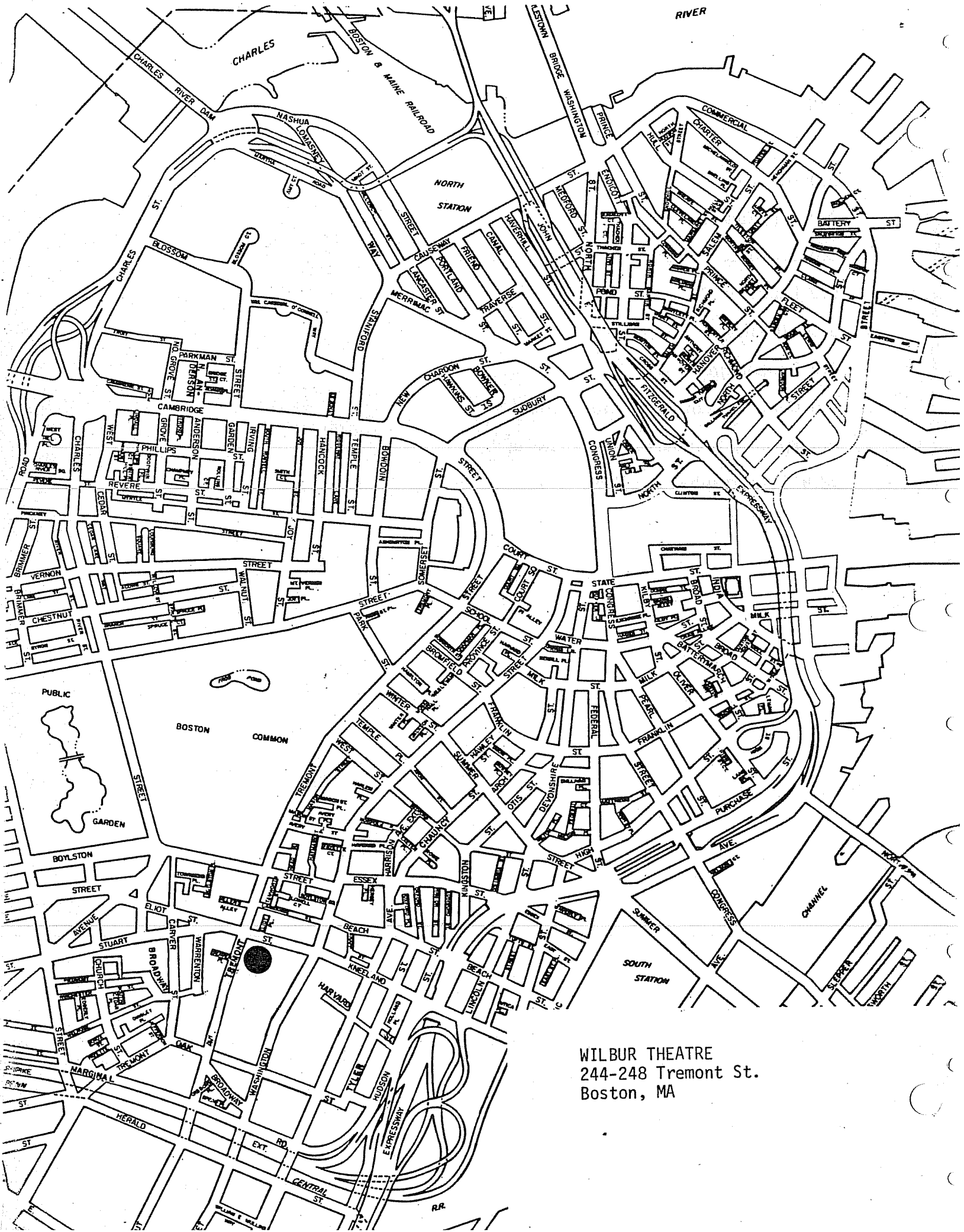


WILBUR THEATRE
244-248 Tremont St.
Boston, MA

1.0 LOCATION OF THE PROPERTY

1.1 Address and Assessor's Parcel Number:

The address of the Wilbur Theatre is 244-248 Tremont Street. It is in Ward 3, Precinct 8. The assessor's parcel number is 5645.

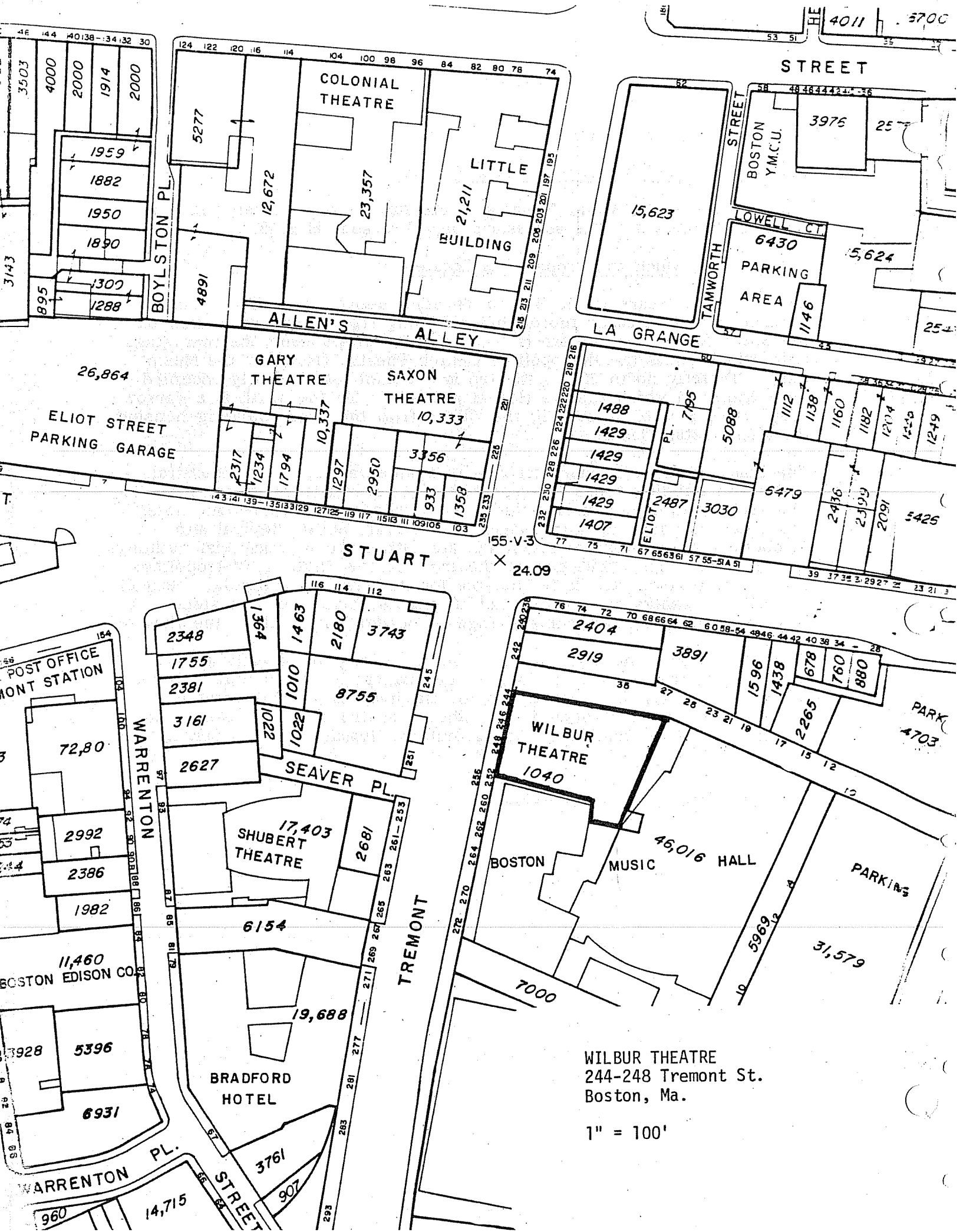
1.2 Area in Which the Property is Located:

Located in the heart of the Boston Theatre District, the Wilbur faces Tremont Street, a major thoroughfare leading from downtown Boston to the South End. The theatre is freestanding except along the rear stage wall, which abuts the Metropolitan Center Theatre (formerly the Music Hall). Directly north of the theatre is a vacant lot presently occupied by a trailer in which theatre tickets are sold. To the south is a narrow alley, Dore Street, separating the Wilbur from the office building housing the Metropolitan Center.

The immediate area is characterized by a wide variety of architectural styles and building types interspersed with several large vacant parcels. The architectural potpourri includes early 20th century ten-story hotel and office buildings in the Renaissance Revival, Gothic Revival and Jacobethan styles; four-to-six-story late 19th century commercial buildings; and theatres. The three closest theatres are the Shubert, Metropolitan Center, and Saxon, the latter notable for its terra cotta facade. Most of the other buildings are constructed of granite, brick, or cast stone. A large modern concrete parking garage is located just south of the theatre.

Vacant parcels in the area include a large parking lot directly across from the theatre and a block-long parcel diagonally across Stuart Street, where construction is underway on the massive State Transportation Building. To the east behind the Wilbur, construction is complete on the 15-story U.S. Department of Agriculture Human Nutrition Center.

1.3 Map Showing Location: attached



WILBUR THEATRE
244-248 Tremont St.
Boston, Ma.

1" = 100'

2.0 DESCRIPTION

2.1 Type and Use

The Wilbur is a theatre constructed for dramatic performances and still used as such. The basement lounge has housed a small restaurant.

2.2 Physical Description

Exterior

The Wilbur Theatre was constructed in 1913 in a style blending Georgian and Federal Revival motifs. The two-story, 1,221-seat theatre is free-standing on three sides and entirely covers its 10,401 square foot lot, which is roughly rectangular in shape. The roof is flat except at the rear stage house. The exterior is of red brick laid in the English bond pattern with randomly-spaced black headers and trim of white marble. It is virtually intact and in excellent condition.

The five-bay principal facade on Tremont Street measures 78 feet wide and 80 feet high. Design emphasis is on the center three bays, which project slightly. At ground level, three center entrance portals are marked by freestanding Greek Ionic white marble fluted columns set in antis within marble frames with triangular-pedimented entablatures. The original walnut double-leaved French doors have leaded glass sidelights and transoms. Between the doors are two carved wooden "Federal style" poster display cases set off by elongated colonettes. Openings at bays one and five are cut clearly from the brick and have splayed marble keystone lintels. These openings were originally windows with small glass panes, but are now used as poster display areas. A contemporary canvas canopy over the center entrance portal is sympathetic in style.

A marble band divides the first from the second story, where the center three bays are emphasized by three large semi-circular arches. The arches have marble surrounds, a large marble console bracket at the keystone, and marble tympanums carved with theatre masks. French doors inside the arches appear to open out onto a delicate wrought iron balcony. Above the arched windows is a long horizontal inset marble panel inscribed with the name of the theatre. On either side, at bays one and five, are small inset marble panels ornamented with Adamesque festoons. The building is capped by a marble modillion cornice and marble parapet. The center three bays of the parapet have sections of open balustrade separated by pedestals.

The north elevation of the theatre is irregular in fenestration and plain in character except for the bays closest to Tremont Street, the only portion of the north wall intended to be visible from the street. The first floor has an arched doorway flanked by two smaller doors with marble splayed keystone lintels. Above the arch is a small window with a splayed lintel and wrought iron balcony/fire escape. At level two, a pair of French doors accented by a splayed keystone lintel is set within a recessed arch. The south side of the theatre was not intended to be viewed and is of plain brick traversed by fire escapes.

Signage on the exterior includes small wooden signs which hang from wrought iron brackets between bays one and two and four and five, as well as an upright sign giving the name of the current production.

Interior

The interior of the Wilbur is Federal Revival in style and is characterized by a quiet simplicity and intimate, almost homelike atmosphere. Public spaces are modest in number, and scale and decoration is restrained rather than lavish. Federal motifs such as swags, urns, oval medallions and reeding are frequently employed, and colors are restricted to a delicate range of pinks, blues and grays. The interior is virtually intact and in generally good condition.

The narrow, one-story vestibule is entered through three pairs of walnut French doors with leaded glass sidelights and transoms. The vestibule floor is of gray and pink marble squares, which are also used in the lobby and basement lounge. Walls have veined white marble wainscotting divided into bays by pilaster strips. Walls terminate in a reeded frieze and simple cornice. Ribs outlined with gilded moldings divide the vaulted ceiling into three sections. In the center of each is a ceiling medallion from which hangs an original entry lantern. At each end of the room is a ticket cage framed by a Colonial entablature with a broken triangular pediment and urn finial. Above each pediment is a blind arch ornamented with an Adamesque oval medallion painted in a manner of Wedgewood china and accented by swags.

The lobby is a one-story space of modest scale with a symmetrical arrangement of doors along the long sides and staircases and exits at each end. Three sets of French doors lead to the vestibule and three sets of brown leather-covered double-leaved doors lead into the auditorium. Each leather door has a single oval cut out at eye level and filled with leaded milk glass. The staircases at each side have graceful railings with turned balusters and an unpainted wooden bannister and curved newal cap. Walls are divided into bays by fluted Corinthian pilasters with gilded capitals, supporting a Federal style architrave of alternating reeding and diamond patterns, followed by a simple frieze and cornice. Wall surfaces are ornamented with a subtle stencil pattern in ivory and white imitating damask fabric. The slightly-vaulted ceiling is unadorned except for low-relief plaster medallions from which hang four original brass and leaded milk glass lamps in the shape of hanging bowls. Exit doors at each end have eliptical fanlights.

The auditorium is roughly rectangular in shape and has a balcony/mezzanine plan. There are no visible support columns. The plaster and wood Federal style interior is in good condition. The proscenium arch is squared at the corners and framed by a raised-field panel border outlined with classical moldings. Above, a frieze with a low relief design of alternating gold-leafed urns and palmettes is followed by a dentil cornice and a central medallion with the initial "W" set off by swags.

On either side of the stage opening are single mezzanine-level boxes cantilevered out on two large console brackets. The side of the boxes are decorated with a low-relief gold-leafed fishnet pattern and a central

medallion initialed with a "W" and flanked by swags. The same pattern is used along the sides of the balconies. Both boxes and balconies are edged with brass railings. Above the boxes, a semi-circular arch is flanked by fluted Corinthian pilasters with capitals accented with gold leaf. The pilasters support an entablature with an Adamesque frieze of alternating gold-leafed urns and palettes followed by a dentil cornice.

One of the most elaborate features of the auditorium is the ceiling, which features a large oval medallion encompassing a smaller Adamesque oval medallion, from which hangs the magnificent original crystal chandelier. The medallions are surrounded by gilded coffers outlined with Greek key patterns painted in beige, brown and gold tones.

The upper wall surfaces are ornamented in typical Federal style, with walls divided into distinct rectangular units using simple moldings like the egg and dart or leaf and tongue. Walls at orchestra level are covered by raised field paneling terminating in a frieze with triglyphs. Doors have classial entablatures terminating in either dentil cornices or scroll pediments. At the rear of the orchestera section is a shoulder-high natural wood raised-field panel divider separating the seats from a rear aisle.

Original lighting fixtures are used throughout the auditorium. These include the central chandelier and wall sconces along rear walls. Seats are original and consist of cast metal and wood sides and wooden arm rests. Seat coverings are of recent vintage, as is the carpeting along the aisles of the sloping orchestra floor.

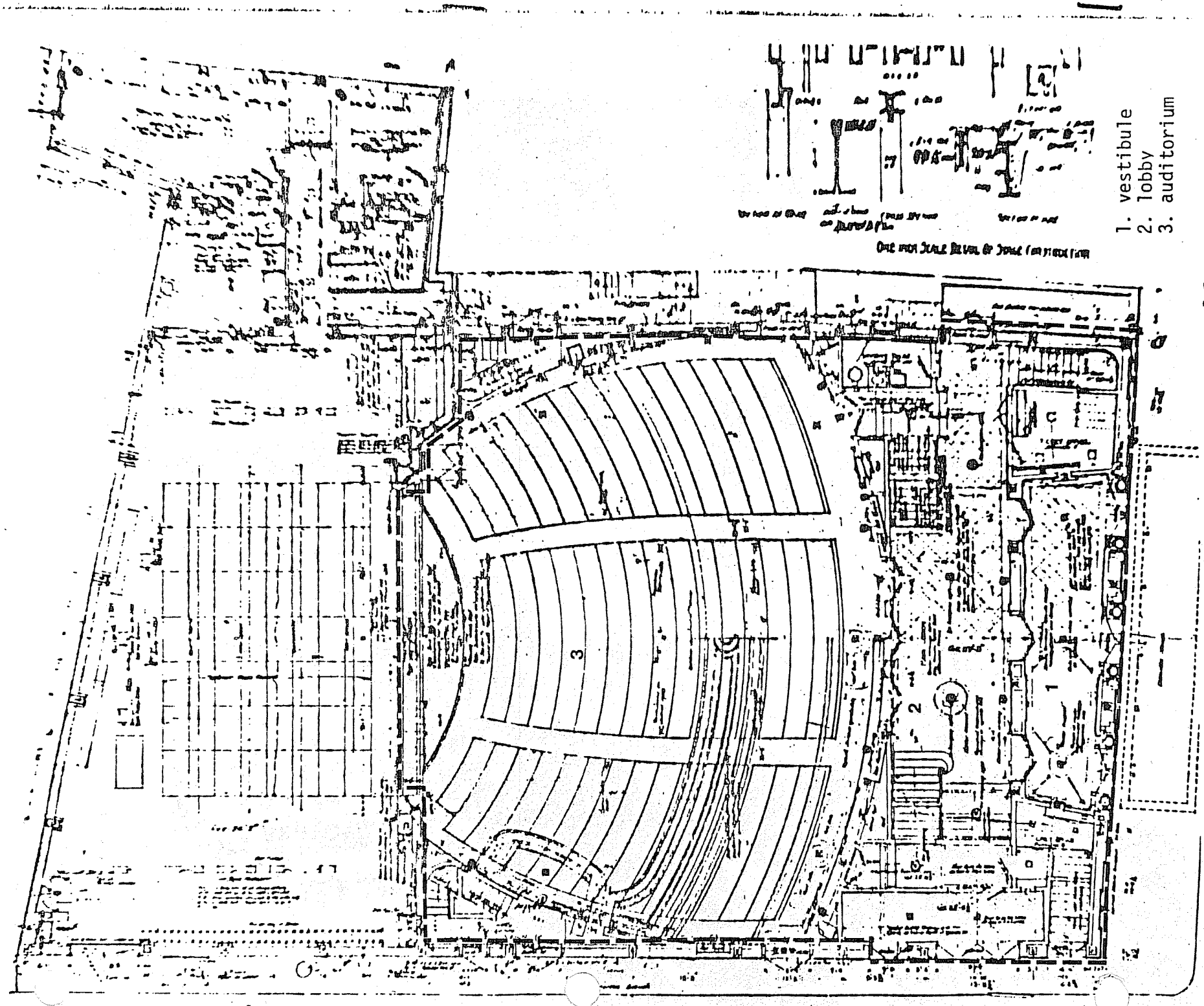
The basement lounge, presently used as a restaurant, is an intimate one-story space which very successfully evokes the spirit of the Federal period home. The Adamesque fireplace mantel at one end has reeded pilasters supporting an entablature with a central urn in the frieze, a dentil cornice, and a mirror above. The paneled dado along the walls is terminated by a Federal style chair rail. Doric pilasters support a frieze with triglyphs and a modillion block cornice. Utilitarian spaces used for coat rooms and a bar are located behind the east wall, which is ornamented with leaded glass panels flanked by paired fluted posts. The ceiling is divided by twisted quilloche moldings into three rectangular sections, in the center of which are low relief circular plaster medallions painted in pink and gold, from which hang the original "hanging bowl" lamps. The floor is constructed of the same pink and gray marble squares found in the lobby above.

The ladies' room, entered from the west side of the lounge, consists of a sitting room and modernized bathroom. The sitting room has a pink and gray marble floor, wainscotted walls and an Adamesque fireplace with paired colonettes at the jambs and delicate urns and swags along the entablature. The ceiling has an oval central medallion and quarter-oval medallions in the corners. The original brass hanging lamp is the same bowl shape found elsewhere in the theatre.

The mens' room, entered through an archway at the stair landing just above the lounge, also includes an anteroom and modernized bathroom. The anteroom has the same gray and pink marble flooring, as well as

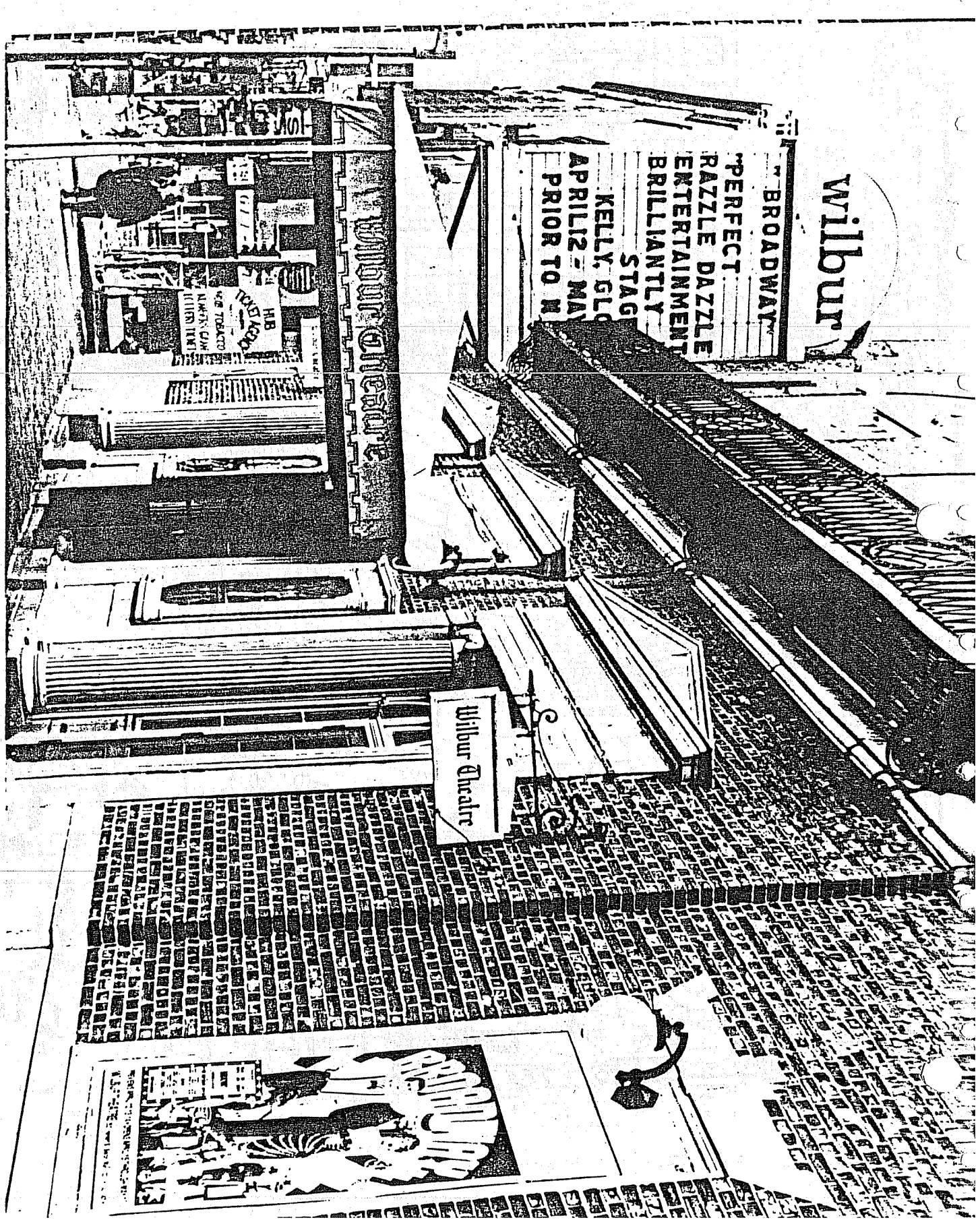
gray marble wainscotting and a gray marble fireplace with Federal style lines but no ornamentation. Walls are plain above the wainscotting and the cornice is simple in style. One molding frames the ceiling, from which hangs an original brass fixture of nautical design. A leather covered double door leads into the bathroom.

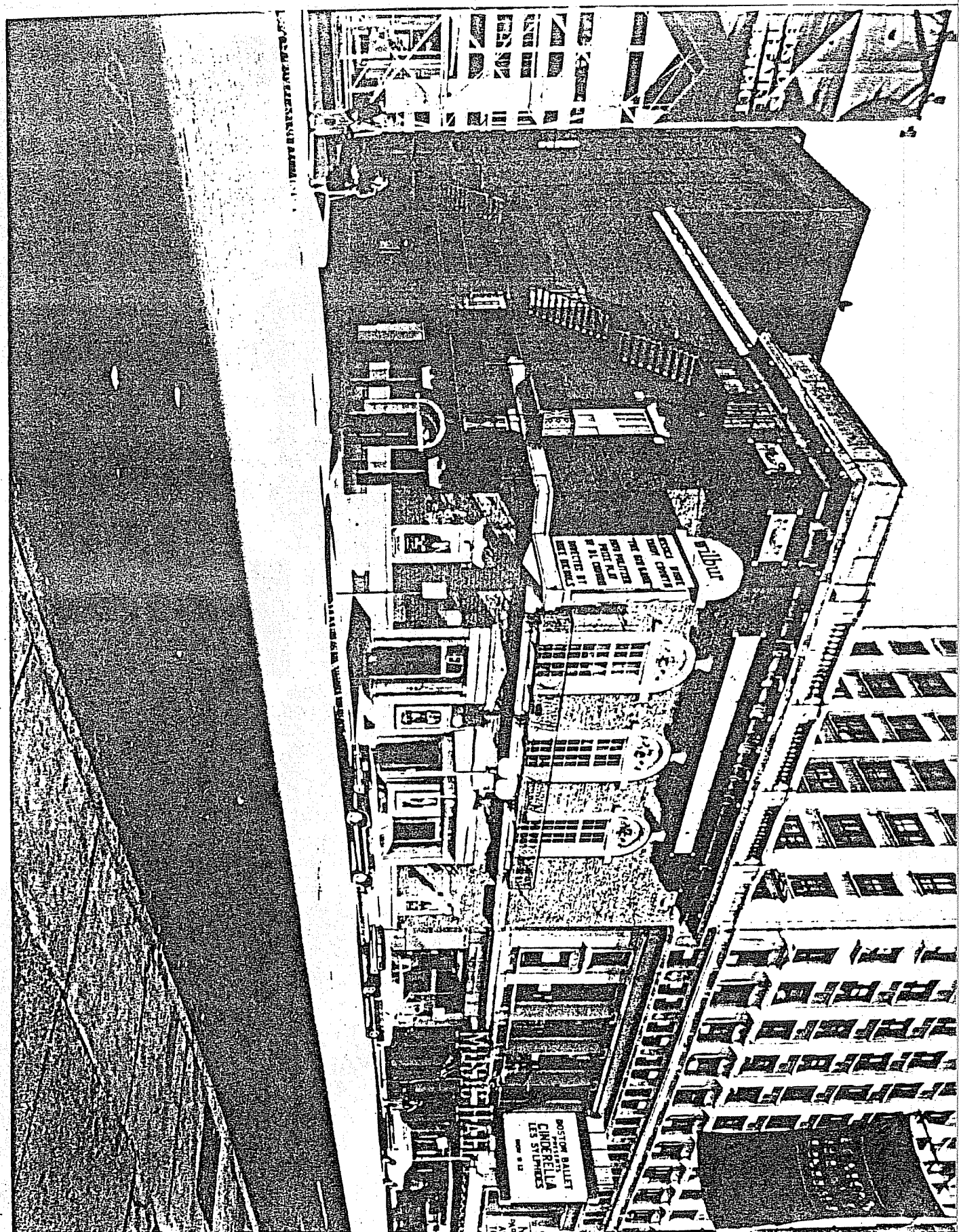
2.3 Photographs: attached



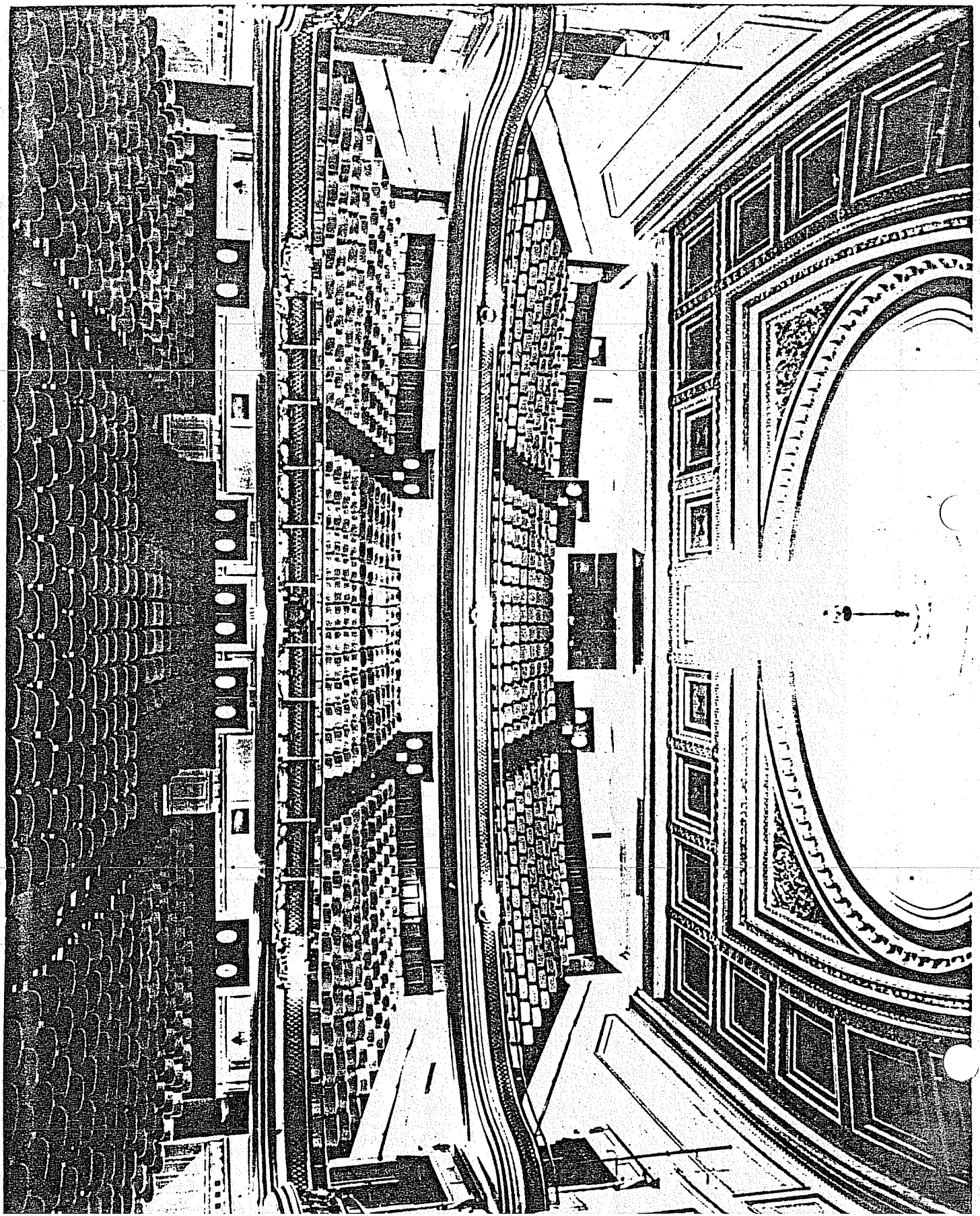
THE WILBUR THEATRE—C. H. Blackall, Architect

Original Photo by Jon Platt

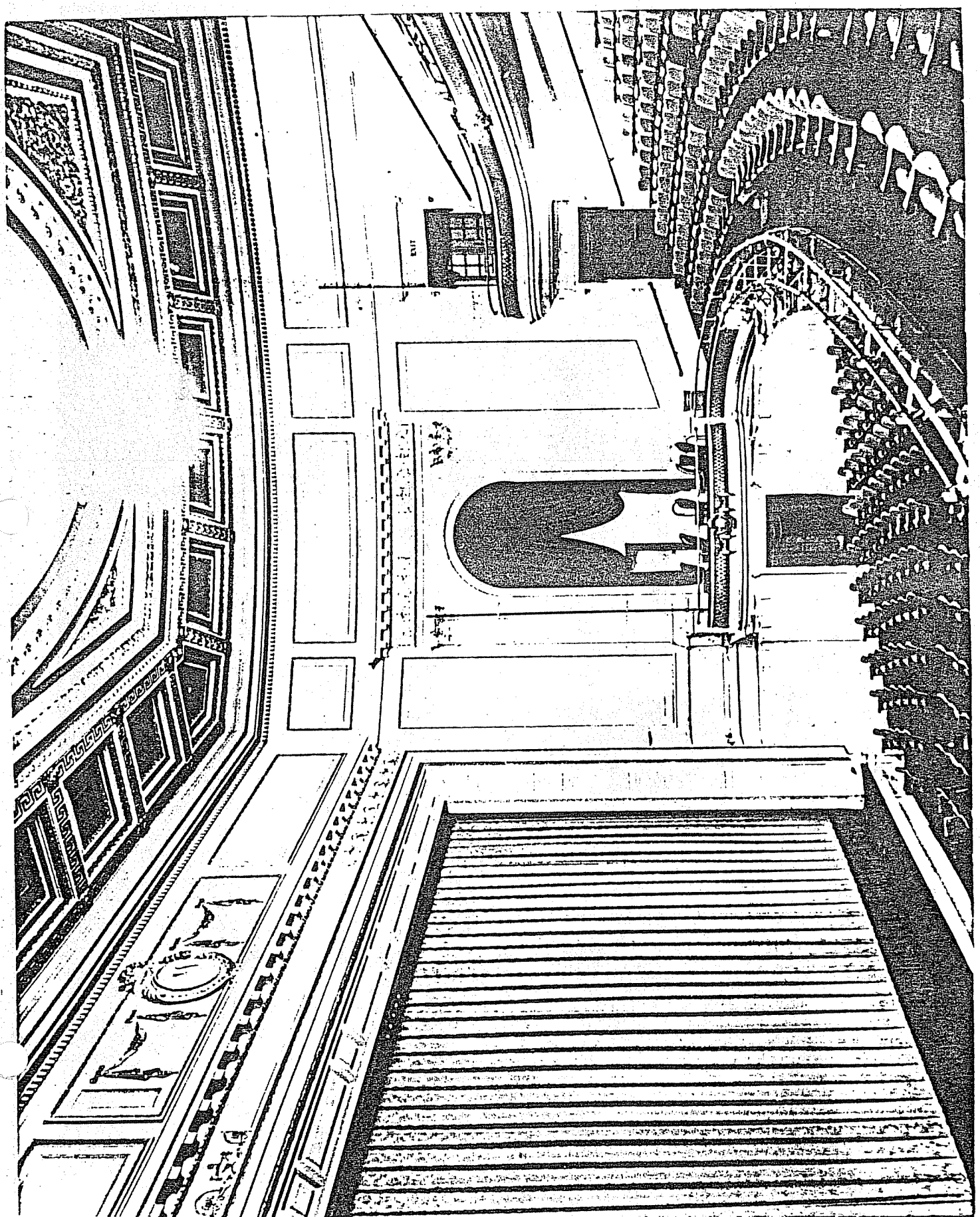



Wilbur
BOSTON BALLET
CINDERELLA

Original Photo by Jon Platt



Original Photo by Jon Platt



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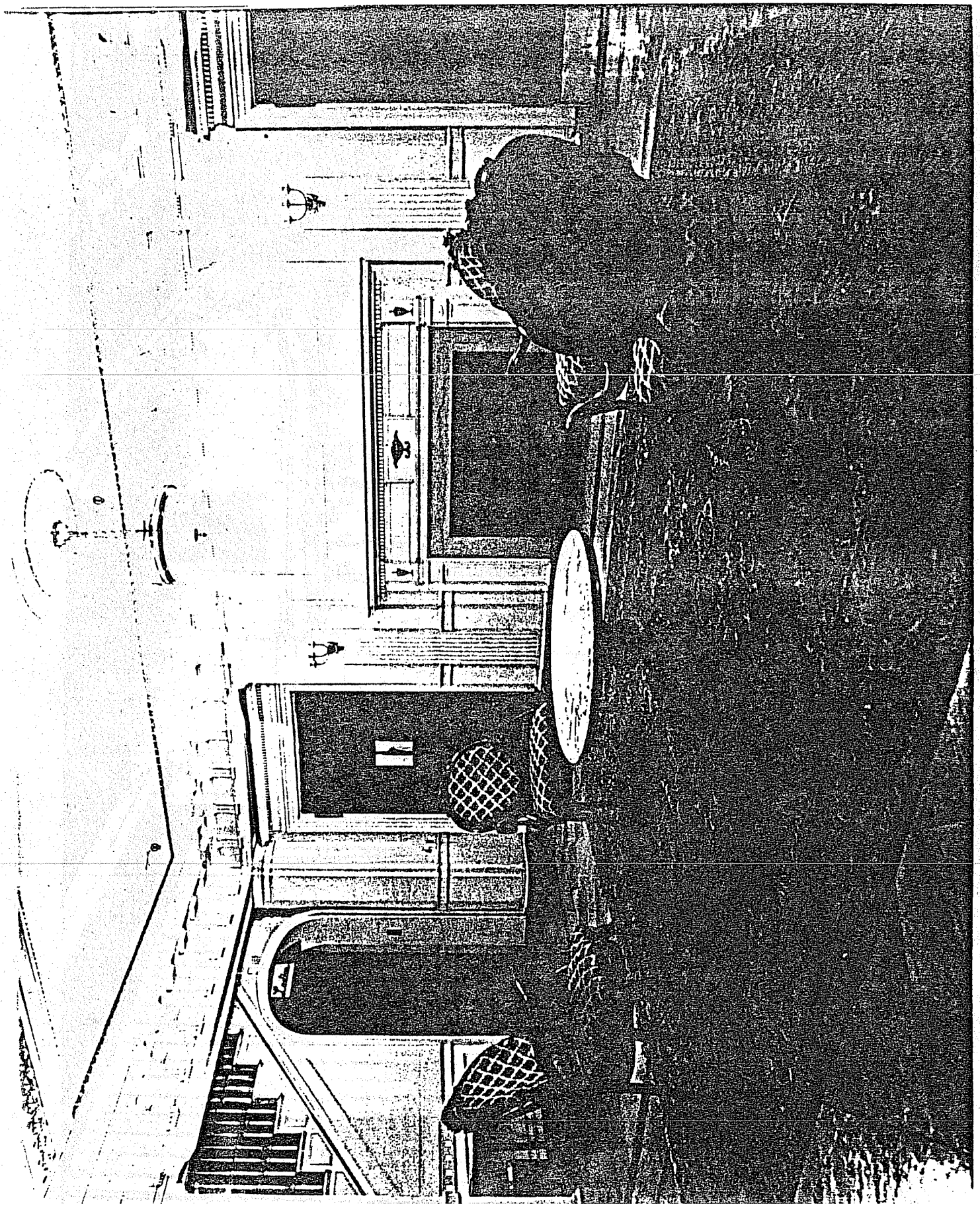

3.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPERTY

3.1 Summary of Historical Significance

In its 67-year history, the Wilbur has been associated with many of the great theatre personalities of the 20th century, including the original partners, the Shubert Brothers and A.L. Wilbur, and a panoply of stars who have performed here in some of the great dramatic works of this century.

The Wilbur was one of several Boston theatres controlled by the Shubert brothers, a team of theatrical impressarios who became the dominating force in American theatre of this century. The three brothers, Samuel, Lee and Jacob, were theatre managers in upstate New York before moving to New York City at the turn of the century. At that time, New York theatres were dominated by several syndicates, the most powerful of which was the firm of Klaw and Erlander. Lead by the dynamic older brother Samuel, the Shuberts challenged the syndicates and before long these "Independents" had created their own monopoly. In 1905 Samuel was killed in a train accident, but the surviving brothers continued their meteoric rise. It has been said that "no theatrical endeavor seemed too large, intricate or difficult for the Shuberts".[1] For example, in 1906 they took over management of the New York Hippodrome, a 11,000-seat playhouse where two complete circuses could be performed simultaneously on stage.

In 1910, the brothers built the Shubert Theatre in Boston, named for Samuel. The manager was Arthur L. Wilbur (d.1917), a colorful showman who had achieved his initial success with popular comic opera companies, particularly the touring Wilbur Opera Company.[2]

By charging audiences only 10-25¢ each rather than the usual $2.00, Wilbur set records for long and profitable engagements. Before becoming associated with the Shuberts, Wilbur had also been a partner in the firm of Stair and Wilbur, owners of one of the largest turn-of-the-century theatre chains. When the third Shubert theatre in Boston was under construction, the brothers decided to name it for their friend and manager, who is also described in newspaper accounts as the "resident partner."

The theatre was completed in 1914 and opened with the drama "Romance" starring Dorothy Keane. Over the years the Wilbur has been the scene of many memorable productions, including Streetcar Named Desire (1947), in which Marlon Brando become an overnight superstar, My Sister Eileen with Betty Furness (1941), A Bell For Adano with Frederick March, The Belle of Amherst with Julie Harris, A Long Day's Journey Into Night with Frederick March and Jason Robards, Jr. (1956), and Dear Liar, in which Catharine Cornell gave the last performance of her distinguished career. In 1938, Thorton Wilder's Our Town opened here, an event often referred to as a world premiere, although the play had been performed once a few days previously.[3] Although Our Town went on to win a Pulitzer Prize, it closed in Boston after only one week. Other stars who have appeared on the Wilbur stage include Ethel Barrymore, Fred Astaire, Claire Luce, Jessica Tandy, Montgomery Clift, Catherine Willard, Joan Blondell, Karl Malden and Brian Bedford.

The Wilbur was erected on the site of the Winthrop School for Girls.

3.2 Summary of Architectural Significance

The Wilbur is architecturally significant as the first and best example in Boston of Colonial Revival theatre design and as the work of the nationally-known Boston theatre architect C.H. Blackall. The theatre has been justly praised over the years for the simplicity and quiet distinction of its interior and exterior. In addition, the Wilbur is notable for its intact quality, having experienced few changes in over 60 years as a landmark of the city's theatre district.

When it was constructed in 1914, the Wilbur was the first Boston theatre to draw its inspiration from American Colonial architecture rather than from European sources. Newspapers commented that "in a city that prides itself on its associations with a Colonial past, at last will stand a theatre in the Colonial style of architecture."[4] The adaptation of Colonial Revival motifs to theatre uses reflects the increasing popularity of this style in early 20th century Boston commercial as well as residential buildings. The Wilbur is typical of the Colonial Revival in its rectangular plan, strict symmetry and minimal number of projections. Colonial Revival architects generally worked in two distinct modes; the Adamesque, which drew its inspiration from American Federal architecture of the period 1790-1820, and the Georgian, with sources in the earlier American and English Georgian period. Details at the Wilbur, such as the leaded glass windows, festooning, and oval medallions on the interior are typical of the Adamesque mode.

The Wilbur is the only Boston theatre with a true Colonial Revival exterior. Other Boston theatres, including the Orpheum (1915) and Strand (1917) have Adamesque interiors, but the Wilbur's exterior is unique among area theatres in plan and detailing. The exterior was originally completely freestanding. It is constructed of brick laid in the English bond pattern, with occasional black-glazed headers used to give the brick a more "antique" appearance. The porticos were copied directly from the 1837 Thomas Bailey Aldrich House at 59 Mt. Vernon Street on Beacon Hill, exemplifying Blackall's attempt to introduce authentic early American elements, in this case from the Greek Revival period. Above the portals, on the second level, Blackall cleverly used blind windows to break up the theatre wall. The resulting structure is not intended to be an exact replica of a period building but rather to successfully evoke the spirit of an earlier age.

Architectural historian Douglass Tucci has said of the Wilbur, "The interior is as fine; the auditorium is in its chaste way the handsomest of any Boston playhouse".[6] In its scale and decoration, the theatre suggests the intimacy and comfort of a conservative club or distinguished home. The small size of the auditorium contributes to its cozy atmosphere, as does the imaginative adaptation of Georgian and Federal style architectural elements such as the raised field paneling used for the proscenium frame. According to contemporary newspaper accounts, the Wilbur was the first Boston theatre to have a lounge where patrons could mingle and enjoy light refreshments.[5] The Federal style mantel and details such as the chair rail and cornice give this room the feeling of a Federal period drawing room.

The interior of the Wilbur was decorated by the well-regarded Boston firm of Pennell, Gibbs & Quiring, whose senior partner, architect H.B. Pennell, also worked on the interiors of the Colonial, Shubert and Saxon/Majestic Theatres. Ornamental plaster work was executed by John Bowen.

Technically, the Wilbur is ideally suited for drama. Because of its small size, the sight lines are uniquely short. No seats are obstructed by supporting columns.

In its technical excellence, the theatre reflects the experience of the architect, Clarence H. Blackall (1857-1942), a man who devoted much of his career to theatre building and worked tirelessly to incorporate technical innovations. Viewed in comparison with his other major Boston theatres, the Colonial and Metropolitan, the Wilbur also exemplifies Blackall's facility in a wide variety of architectural styles. Blackall was born and educated in New York and studied architecture at the University of Illinois and for three years at the Ecole des Beaux Arts of Paris. In the early 1880's, while in the employ of the distinguished Boston firm of Peabody and Stearns, Blackall became the first American student to win the Rotch Traveling Scholarship providing two years of travel and study in Europe. In 1889 he joined James F. Clapp and Charles A. Whittemore in organizing a firm with which he was associated for nearly half a century of practice. Among the firm's important early commissions was the Bowdoin Square Theatre, and over the years Blackall was associated with the construction or remodelling of some nineteen Boston theatres, of which ten remain today. Of these, the most important are the Colonial (1900), Metropolitan (1925), and Wilbur (1914), all of which have been recommended for designation as Boston City Landmarks. The other remaining Boston theatres or similar spaces by Blackall are the Gaiety/Publix (1909), Modern (1914), Washington Street Olympia/Pilgrim (1912), Exeter Street Theatre (remodelling of 1913), Broadway Theatre (South Boston, 1921), National Theatre (South End, 1911), and Tremont Temple (1895), home of the Baptist Church in Boston.

With his partners, Blackall also designed a number of outstanding Boston commercial buildings including the Carter/Winthrop Building (1894), the first steel frame skyscraper in Boston, and the Little Office Building (1917). He also served as Consulting Architect for the Copley Plaza Hotel.

Blackall's architectural writing and organization work made him a prominent member of the architectural profession. He was an early member of the Boston Society of Architects, A.I.A. and one of the organizers and first president of the Boston Architectural Club. He was also a founder and first secretary of the Architectural League of New York. His contributions to professional journals included articles on architectural education, housing for the poor, theatre laws and theatre fires. He also served for a time as an editorial writer for Brickbuilder Magazine.

3.3 Relationship to Criteria for Landmark Designation

The Wilbur Theatre meets the criteria for Landmark designation, as defined in Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975.

- as a structure prominently identified with the cultural history of the City, the Commonwealth and the New England region.
- as a structure embodying the distinctive characteristics of the Colonial Revival style adapted to the needs of a commercial theatre.
- as a notable work by a Boston architect who was nationally-known as a designer of theatre buildings.

4.0 ECONOMIC STATUS

4.1 Current Assessed Value and Property Tax:

Total	534,500
Tax:	$ 38,098.50

4.2 Current Ownership and Status

The Wilbur was purchased in July, 1981 by the Wilbur Theatre Trust, a group which plans to continue its operation as a commercial theatre.

According to Assessor's records dated August, 1983, the Wilbur is owned by Charles Parker Trsts, 171 Harrison Avenue, Boston,MA 02111.

5.0 PLANNING CONTEXT

5.1 Background

During the Colonial period, the present theatre district was a marshy, sparsely settled area outside the original town center and close to the "neck," that slender stem of land connecting the Shawmut peninsula to Roxbury and the mainland. Washington Street and Frogg Lane (now Boylston Street) were the principal public ways, and important landmarks included the Common, the Common Burying Ground (originally the South Burying Ground), established in 1754, and the Hollis Street Meeting House of 1732.

Because of its strategic location on the neck, the area's commercial importance increased during the early 19th century. The Bulfinch-designed Boylston Market was constructed in 1810 at the corner of Boylston and Washington Streets to serve farmers bringing produce to market. The coming of the railroads during the 1830's and 1840's increased traffic in the Park Square area, where the Boston and Providence terminal was located, and in the newly-filled South Cove area, location of the Boston and Worcester and Old Colony terminals. By mid-century the edge of the Common was becoming a favored location for large residential, commercial and institutional structures such as the first Boston Public Library (1855), the Masonic Temple (1864) and the Hotel Pelham (1857), Boston's first "French flat" or apartment house.

The streets just east took on a different character, as the expansion and displacement of businesses following the Fire of 1872 forced a southward shift in the more marginal wholesale and light industrial uses such as sweatshops, shoe sticheries, and wholesale clothing stores. Many of these moved to the upper floors of buildings in the lower Washington Street area, forming the present Garment District.

By the turn of the century, the area south of the Common had begun to develop as a theatre district. The third building of the Hollis Street Meeting House had been converted to a theatre in 1885. This was followed by the construction of the Tremont Theatre in 1889, the Colonial in 1900, the Majestic in 1903, the Shubert in 1910, the Wilbur in 1914 and the Metropolitan in 1925. The area has continued throughout the century to be characterized by a mix of small-scale retail and entertainment uses on the street level, with office, residential, wholesale and light manufacturing uses above -- a diversity of uses which has its origins in the somewhat haphazard growth of the 19th century city.

To this mix has recently been added an influx of adult entertainment establishments which moved here after the razing of Scollay Square in the early 1960's. In an attempt to restrict the spread and upgrade the quality of these uses, the City of Boston enacted a special Zoning Code amendment which allowed X-rated adult entertainment uses only within a special zone located along the two blocks of Washington Street between Boylston/Essex and Stuart.

5.2 Current Planning Issues

Much of the theatre area has been declining economically since the late 1960's due, in part to changing entertainment patterns and the blighting influence of nearby adult entertainment uses. Current planning efforts involve the coordination of a number of planned and proposed development projects and the encouraging of additional investment in order to reverse the decline. Major planning issues relate to the desired location, scale and uses of new development and the manner in which this development is integrated with the area's uses and structures.

Two developments certain to have an impact on traffic volume and land values are the State Transportation Building, scheduled for completion in 1983 as an element in the Park Plaza Urban Renewal Plan, and the privately-sponsored renovation of the former Music Hall. The State Transportation Building, an L-shaped, 600,000 square foot mid-rise office building with a walk-through street level shopping arcade and enclosed parking for 350 cars, will occupy a site fronting along the new line of Charles Street along Stuart to the corner of Tremont Street. A number of public and pedestrian improvements are planned in conjunction with the new building, including the straightening of Charles Street, sidewalk repaving and tree planting along Charles and Stuart Streets, and a pedestrian artery along Boylston Place and Warrenton Street to Eliot Norton Park.

The Wang Center (formerly the Metropolitan), built in 1925 as a lavish "movie palace", was taken over in 1980 by the non-profit Metropolitan Center, Inc. , which has thus far expended some $7.5 million on the interior including restoration work and construction of an expanded stage and dressing rooms. The theatre, which reopened in December, 1980, has been booking Broadway musicals, dance, opera and other attractions, and its regeneration is seen as an important catalyst for the renewed vitality of the theatre area as a whole.

Development of subsidized Section 8 housing on the site between the Bradford Hotel and Eliot Norton Park has been completed. The project has produced some 79 units of housing for the elderly Chinese community. The neighboring Bradford Hotel continues in use as a tourist class hotel.

Two new buildings are now completed just east of the Wilbur in the Chinatown area. A 96-bed replacement for the Boston Floating Hospital for Infants and Children of the Tufts-New England Medical Center is has been constructed over Washington Street. The MBTA has constructed a special hospital stop on the Orange Line. Also completed is the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 15-story Human Nutrition Center at the corner of Washington and Stuart Streets.

The BRA is currently developing a concept model for Parcel 31, the area bounded by Boylston, Tremont, Stuart and Washington Streets, involving a mixed use development combining rehabilitation and new construction. Suggested uses include a combination of offices, restaurants, general commercial uses and a media center.

Long-range BRA plans for Parcel P-7, the vacant lot adjacent to the Wilbur Theatre to be developed as a commercial property, possibly in conjunction with the Wilbur, are in final stages of developer selection. Preliminary concept plans for Parcel C-4, the large parking lot at the corner of Stuart and Tremont Streets, have been completed and include parking and retail and commercial space.

Two major development projects which will also have an impact on the area are the Park Plaza Project and Lafayette Place. The revised version of the Park Plaza Project has resulted in the 400 room Four Seasons Hotel now under construction on Boylston Street and a soon to be designated residential and retail development from Hadassah Way to Arlington Street. When completed, Park Plaza will upgrade and stabilize a long-declining area and increase traffic and development pressure in the nearby theatre area. In the meantime, the uncertainty surrounding the project is prompting property owners to defer investment decisions, thus accelerating the area's decline.

Lafayette Place, a Mondev development to include a hotel, 200,000 square feet of retail space, and an underground city-owned parking garage, is under construction with completion slated for February of 1984. It will serve as a major element in the BRA's Downtown Crossing Economic Strategy plan, which has sought to upgrade retail space and improve pedestrian and vehicular circulation as steps toward reinforcing the area as the region's retail center.

6.0 ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

6.1 Alternatives

The Wilbur Theatre is currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Theatre Area Multiple Resource nomination. National Register status provides a limited degree of protection as well as tax incentives for rehabilitation.

The language of the Boston Landmarks Commission enabling statute, which precludes all but Landmark Designation in the central city, limits the possible designation category to that of Landmark.

The Commission also retains the option of not designating the building and its selected interior spaces as a Landmark.

6.2 Impact of Alternatives

Landmarks designation under Chapter 772 would require the review of physical changes to the building interior and exterior in accordance with standards and criteria adopted as part of the designation.

The building is within the Theatre Area Multiple Resource nomination listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Protection from federal, federally-licensed or federally assisted actions is provided by the inclusion of the building in this National Register District and is undertaken by the Section 106 Review process. National Register listing also provides various federal income tax incentives for rehabilitation under the provisions of the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981. Properties within a National Register Historic District are eligible to take advantage of these provisions once it is determined that a) the rehabilitation can be certified according to the Tax Act and b) that the building contributes to the historic character of the district; this building clearly meets that criteria.

Similar protection from state-sponsored activities is achieved by the concurrent listings of all National Register properties in the recently created State Register of Historic Places under Chapter 152, General Laws.

Failure to designate the building as a Landmark would mean the City could offer no protection or guidance to present or future owners.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The staff of the Boston Landmarks Commission recommends that the Wilbur Theatre, including both the exterior and selected interior spaces be designated a Landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975. Specific interior spaces recommended for designation are the vestibule, lobby, auditorium, basement lounge and anterooms to restrooms.

The Standards and Criteria recommended for administering the regulatory functions provided for in Chapter 772 are attached.

8.0 BOSTON LANDMARKS COMMISSION - STANDARDS AND CRITERIA

.1 Introductory Statement on Standards and Criteria to be Used in Evaluating Applications for Certificates

Per Sections 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 of the enabling statute (Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975 of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts) Standards and Criteria must be adopted for each Landmark Designation which shall be applied by the Commission in evaluating proposed changes to the property. Before a Certificate of Design Approval or Certificate of the Exemption can be issued for such changes, the changes must be reviewed by the Commission with regard to their conformance to the purposes of the statute.

The Standards and Criteria established thus note those features which must be conserved and/or enhanced to maintain the viability of the Landmark Designation. The intent of these guidelines is to help local officials, designers, and individual property owners to identify the characteristics that have led to designation, and thus to identify the limitation to the changes that can be made to them. It should be emphasized that conformance to the Standards and Criteria alone does not necessarily insure approval, nor are they absolute, but any request for variance from them must demonstrate the reasons for, and advantages gained by, such variance. The Commission's Certificate of Design Approval is only granted after careful review of each application and public hearing, in accordance with the statute.

As intended by the statute a wide variety of buildings and features are included within the area open to Landmark Designation, and an equally wide range exists in the latitude allowed for change. Some properties of truly exceptional architectural and/or historical value will permit only the most minor modifications, while for some others the Commission encourages changes and additions with a contemporary approach, consistent with the properties' existing features and changed uses.

In general, the intent of the Standards and Criteria is to preserve existing qualities that cause designation of a property; however, in some cases they have been so structured as to encourage the removal of additions that have lessened the integrity of the property.

It is recognized that changes will be required in designated properties for a wide variety of reasons, not all of which are under the complete control of the Commission or the owners. Primary examples are:

a) Building code conformance and safety requirements.

b) Changes necessitated by the introduction of modern mechanical and electrical systems.

c) Changes due to proposed new uses of a property.

The response to these requirements may, in some cases, present conflicts with the Standards and Criteria for a particular property. The Commission's evaluation of an application will be based upon the degree to which such changes are in harmony with the character of the property.

In some cases, priorities have been assigned within the Standards and Criteria as an aid to property owners in identifying the most critical design features.

The Standards and Criteria have been divided into two levels: (1) those general ones that are common to almost all landmark designations (with three different categories for buildings, building interiors and landscape features); and (2) those specific ones that apply to each particular property that is designated. In every case the Specific Standard and Criteria for a particular property shall take precedence over the General ones if there is a conflict.

BOSTON LANDMARKS COMMISSION

8.2 General Standards and Criteria

A. APPROACH

1. The design approach to the property should begin with the premise that the features of historical and architectural significance described within the Study Report must be preserved. In general this will minimize the exterior alterations that will be allowed.

2. Changes and additions to the property and its environment which have taken place in the course of time are evidence of the history of the property and the neighborhood. These changes to the property may have developed significance in their own right, and this significance should be recognized and respected. ("Later integral features" shall be the term used to convey this concept.)

3. Deteriorated material or architectural features, whenever possible, should be repaired rather than replaced or removed.

4. When replacement of architectural features is necessary it should be based on physical or documentary evidence of original or later integral features.

5. New materials should, whenever possible, match the material being replaced in physical properties, design, color, texture and other visual qualities. The use of imitation replacement materials is generally discouraged.

6. New additions or alterations should not disrupt the essential form and integrity of the property and should be compatible with the size, scale, color, material and character of the property and its environment.

7. Contemporary design is encouraged for new additions; thus, they must not necessarily be imitative of an earlier style or period.

8. New additions or alterations should be done in such a way that if they were to be removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property would be unimpaired.

9. Priority shall be given to those portions of the property which are visible from public ways or which it can be reasonably inferred may be in the future.

10. Color will be considered as part of specific standards and criteria that apply to a particular property.

B. EXTERIOR WALLS

I. MASONRY

1. Retain whenever possible, original masonry and mortar.

2. Duplicate original mortar in composition, color, texture, joint size, joint profile and method of application.

3. Repair and replace deteriorated masonry with material which matches as closely as possible.

4. When necessary to clean masonry, use gentlest method possible. Do not sandblast. Doing so changes the visual quality of the material and accelerates deterioration. Test patches should always be carried out well in advance of cleaning (including exposure to all seasons if possible).

5. Avoid applying waterproofing or water repellent coating to masonry, unless required to solve a specific problem. Such coatings can accelerate deterioration.

6. In general, do not paint masonry surfaces. Painting masonry surfaces will be considered only when there is documentary evidence that this treatment was used at some point in the history of the property.

II NON-MASONRY

1. Retain and repair original or later integral material whenever possible.

2. Retain and repair, when necessary, deteriorated material with material that matches.

C. ROOFS

1. Preserve the integrity of the original or later integral roof shape.

2. Retain original roof covering whenever possible.

3. Whenever possible, replace deteriorated roof covering with material which matches the old in composition, size shape, color, texture, and installation detail.

4. Preserve architectural features which give the roof its character, such as cornices, gutters, iron filigree, cupolas, dormers, brackets.

D. WINDOWS AND DOORS

1. Retain original and later integral door and window openings where they exist. Do not enlarge or reduce door and window openings for the purpose of fitting stock window sash or doors, or air conditioners.

2. Whenever possible, repair and retain original or later integral window elements such as sash, lintels, sills, architraves, glass, shutters and other decorations and hardware. When replacement of materials or elements is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence.

3. On some properties consideration will be given to changing from the original window details to other expressions such as to a minimal anonymous treatment by the use of a single light, when consideration of cost, energy conservation or appropriateness override the desire for historical accuracy. In such cases, consideration must be given to the resulting effect on the interior as well as the exterior of the building.

E. PORCHES, STEPS AND EXTERIOR ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS

1. Retain and repair porches and steps that are original or later integral features including such items as railings, balusters, columns, posts, brackets, roofs, ironwork, benches, fountains, statues and decorative items.

F. SIGNS, MARQUEES AND AWNINGS

1. Signs, marquees and awnings integral to the building ornamentation or architectural detailing shall be retained and repaired where necessary.

2. New signs, marquees and awnings shall not detract from the essential form of the building nor obscure its architectural features.

3. New signs, marquees and awnings shall be of a size and material compatible with the building and its current use.

4. Signs, marquees and awnings applied to the building shall be applied in such a way that they could be removed without damaging the building.

5. All signs added to the building shall be part of one system of design, or reflect a design concept appropriate to the communication intent.

6. Lettering forms or typeface will be evaluated for the specific use intended, but generally shall either be contemporary or relate to the period of the building or its later integral features.

7. Lighting of signs will be evaluated for the specific use intended, but generally illumination of a sign shall not dominate illumination of the building.

8. The foregoing not withstanding, signs are viewed as the most appropriate vehicle for imaginative and creative expression, especially in structures being reused for purposes different from the original, and it is not the Commission's intent to stifle a creative approach to signage.

G PENTHOUSES

1. The objective of preserving the integrity of the original or later integral roof shape shall provide the basic criteria in judging whether a penthouse can be added to a roof. Height of a building, prominence of roof form, and visibility shall govern whether a penthouse will be approved.

2. Minimizing or eliminating the visual impact of the penthouse is the general objective and the following guidelines shall be followed:

   a) Location shall be selected where the penthouse is not visible from the street or adjacent buildings; setbacks shall be utilized.

   b) Overall height or other dimensions shall be kept to a point where the penthouse is not seen from the street or adjacent buildings.

   c) Exterior treatment shall relate to the materials, color and texture of the building or to other materials integral to the period and character of the building, typically used for appendages.

   d) Openings in a penthouse shall relate to the building in proportion, type and size of opening, wherever visually apparent.

H LANDSCAPE FEATURES

1. The general intent is to preserve the existing or later integral landscape features that enhance the landmark property.

2. It is recognized that often the environment surrounding the property has a character, scale and street pattern quite different from that existing when the building was constructed. Thus, changes must frequently be made to accommodate the new condition, and the landscape treatment can be seen as a transition feature between the landmark and its newer surroundings.

3. The existing landforms of the site shall not be altered unless shown to be necessary for maintenance of the landmark or site. Additional lnadforms will only be considered if they will not obscure the exterior of the landmark.

4. Original layout and materials of the walks, steps, and paved areas should be maintained. Consideration will be given to alterations if it can be shown that better site circulation is necessary and that the alterations will improve this without altering the integrity of the landmark.

5. Existing healthy plant materials should be maintained as long as possible. New plant materials should be added on a schedule that will assure a continuity in the original landscape design and its later adaptations.

6. Maintenance of, removal of, and additions to plant materials should consider maintaining existing vistas of the landmark.

I EXTERIOR LIGHTING

1. There are three aspects of lighting related to the exterior of the building:

   a) Lighting fixtures as appurtenances to the building or elements of architectural ornamentation.

   b) Quality of illumination on building exterior.

   c) Interior lighting as seen from the exterior.

2. Wherever integral to the building, original lighting fixtures shall be retained. Supplementary illumination may be added where appropriate to the current use of the building.

3. New lighting shall conform to any of the following approaches as appropriate to the building and to the current or projected use:

   a) Accurate representation of the original period, based on physical or documentary evidence.

   b) Retention or restoration of fixtures which date from an interim installation and which are considered to be appropriate to the building and use.

c) New lighting fixtures which are contemporary in design and which illuminate the exterior of the building in a way which renders it visible at night and compatible with its environment.

4. If a fixture is to be replaced, the new exterior lighting shall be located where intended in the original design. If supplementary lighting is added, the new location shall fulfill the functional intent of the current use without obscuring the building form or architectural detailing.

5. Interior lighting shall only be reviewed when its character has a significant effect on the exterior of the building; that is, when the view of the illuminated fixtures themselves, or the quality and color of the light they produce, is clearly visible through the exterior fenestration.

J. REMOVAL OF LATER ADDITIONS AND ALTERATIONS

1. Each property will be separately studied to determine if later additions and alterations can, or should, be removed. It is not possible to provide one general guideline.

2. Factors that will be considered include:

a) Compatibility with the original property's integrity in scale, materials and character.

b) Historic association with the property.

c) Quality in the design and execution of the addition.

d) Functional usefulness.

9.0 SPECIFIC STANDARDS & CRITERIA

WILBUR

A. GENERAL

The intent of the guidelines is to preserve the restrained visual character of the exterior and interior of the theatre, which is virtually intact and in excellent repair. The commission recognizes the need to make alterations as a theatre functions and encourages the level of restoration and maintenance evident be continued.

B. EXTERIOR

1. Front Facade

1. All existing masonry surfaces will be retained and restored.

2. No existing openings will be closed without specific written approval. If approval is given, it will be for a design that clearly distinguishes the alteration from the original fabric.

3. No new openings will be allowed in the front or finished side facades. Openings and alterations may be made to the other facades without specific review and approval. The commission encourages alterations consistent with and supportive of the original design and appearance of the building.

2. Windows and Doors

1. Existing windows should be retained or replaced to match the original design. Replacement windows may be in a material different from the original provided the appearance of the window is not altered.

2. The existing grilles will be retained. The metal may be cleaned and coated with a paint that preserves the detail and appearance of the original. NB: The visible structure behind the screens (including walls) should be painted a dark, recessive color to prevent usual competition with the grills.

3. The existing doors are original and will be retained and restored. Any repair or replacement of detail will carefully and accurately done. No alteration to the design will be approved, although a more secure glazing material and locking device may be approved after review.

3. Other Facades and Roof

1. Routine maintenance and any necessary alterations may be made on these surfaces without the specific review of the commission.

2. The commission encourages the design and execution of any alterations be done in a way to reinforce the original design.

4. Display Systems.

There are two existing systems for advertising and publicity: display cases either attached to the facade or set within original window openings, and a large modern backlit sign attached to the facade at the upper left. Both may be retained.

1. Alterations may be made to the display cases without review provided the basic appearance is not altered.
2. The use of opaque background and lighted letters is urged to strengthen the visibility of the graphics and reduce the modern impact of the existing sign on the facade.

5. Additional Exterior Items.

1. The existing canvas awning may be retained. Consideration of a less opaque canopy that exposes the architectural detail is encouraged: such a canopy must be proposed over all three entrances. In any event, all alterations to the existing canopy and proposed canopies must be reviewed and approved.
2. Exterior lighting may be installed provided the lighting source is shielded and not visible from the street, and the color and pattern compliment the facade.

INTERIOR.

All the interior spaces except for the lower lobby, the second floor offices and the backstage spaces will be subject to review and approval. Routine maintenance and repair may be done without review, provided no original finish, material or detail is removed, damaged, or concealed in the process. All alterations and additions must be reviewed and approved. The commission encourages restoration of the interior to the maximum extent possible and recognizes the need to make sympathetic change.

1. Volume.

The full unobstructed volume of the interior spaces subject to review will be maintained unless written approval for alteration is given prior to any work being done.

1. Vestibule, lobby, lounges, auditorium and promenades: No change will be allowed to the volume and arrangement of these spaces.
2. Backstage and service areas: No review of changes in these areas will be made.

2. Finishes.

All materials and finishes within the designated areas are subject to review.

1. No original finish or material will be altered, covered or removed without prior written approval. This includes wall, floors and ceiling surfaces, railings, grilles, etc.
2. Original material (wood, metal, paints, etc.) will be restored to the greatest extent possible. Retention in current condition is usually preferred to replacement or covering.
3. When replacement materials are allowed, they will match the original as closely as possible in appearance. Carpeting and wall covering should match or evoke design of the original or period.
4. All materials and finishes which were intended to be left natural, wood and metals particularly, will be restored or repaired in kind. No finished wood or metals will be painted.
5. Painted surfaces, plain or decorative, will be restored or redone to match exactly the original. Gilded surfaces will be restored or regilded. Paint colors must be based on analysis or accurate documentation and must be approved by the commission.

3. Fittings and Furniture (including lighting devices).

All remaining items which are original to the building should be retained. These include tables, consoles, upholstered furniture, vanities, mirrors, seats, lighting fixtures, etc.

1. All items which are removed will be thoroughly documented by photographs filed with the commission with details of their disposition.
2. Replacement items should be selected to reinforce the Georgian Revival design aesthetic of the building. Whenever possible, the items should match the original in design and location.

4. Lighting.

Original lighting fixtures exist throughout the interior and must be retained. Any required replacements should exactly match the original designs. Any required, supplemental house lighting should be sympathetic to color and quality of original and should not mimic the original in design.

5. Theater Equipment.

Equipment which is integral to the function of the theater and does not damage the interior may be installed without review. Items which are more related to the image and perception of the theater will be reviewed and approved by the commission. These latter items include:

1. Fire screen. The design of the fire screen must closely match the original.
2. Curtain. The front curtain which is perceived as part of the house must match the original.
3. House seats. The design and placement of seats should resemble the original as closely as possible, especially on the orchestra level.

10.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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10.1 FOOTNOTES

1. Paul T. Ford, "Brief History of the Wilbur Theatre," P.2.

2. Ibid.

3. "Important Dates and Events at the Wilbur Theatre".

4. Boston Transcript, 4/9/1914.

5. Ibid.

6. Douglas Tucci, "The Boston Rialto: Playhouses, Concert Hall and Movie Palaces," P.11.

4.0 ECONOMIC STATUS

4.1 Current Assessed Value:

$681,600.00

4.2 Current Ownership and Status:

The Wilbur is owned by Charles Parker Trsts., 244 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02111

5.2 Current Planning Issues (1985)

Much of the theatre area has been declining economically since the late 1960's due, in part, to changing entertainment patterns and the blighting influence of nearby adult entertainment uses. Current planning efforts involve the coordination of a number of planned and proposed development projects and the encouraging of additional investment in order to reverse the decline. Major planning issues relate to the desired location, scale and uses of new development and the manner in which this development is integrated with the area's uses and structures.

Two developments certain to have an impact on traffic volume and land values are the State Transportation Building, an element in the Park Plaza Urban Renewal Plan, and the privately-sponsored renovation of the former Music Hall. The State Transportation Building, an L-shaped, 600,000 square foot mid-rise office building with a walk-through street level shopping arcade and enclosed parking for 350 cars, occupies a site fronting along the new line of Charles Street along Stuart Street to the corner of Tremont Street. A number of public and pedestrian improvements are underway in conjunction with the new building, including the straightening of Charles Street, sidewalk repaving and tree planting along Charles and Stuart Streets, and a pedestrian artery along Boylston Place through the atrium of the State Transportation Building to Warrenton Street to Eliot Norton Park.

The Wang Center (formerly the Metropolitan), built in 1925 as a lavish "movie palace", was taken over in 1980 by the non-profit Metropolitan Center, Inc., which has thus far expended some $7.5 million on the interior including restoration work and construction of an expanded stage and dressing rooms. The theatre, which reopened in December, 1980, has been booking Broadway musicals, dance, opera and other attractions, and its regeneration is seen as an important catalyst for the renewed vitality of the theatre area as a whole.

Development of subsidized Section 8 housing on the site between the Bradford Hotel and Eliot Norton Park has been completed. The project has produced some 79 units of housing for the elderly Chinese community. The neighboring Bradford Hotel continues in use as a tourist class hotel.

Two new buildings are now completed just east of the Wilbur in the Chinatown area. A 96-bed replacement for the Boston Floating Hospital for Infants and Children of the Tufts-New England Medical Center has been constructed over Washington Street. The MBTA has constructed a special hospital stop on the Orange Line. Also completed is the U.S Department of Agriculture's 15-story Human Nutrition Center at the corner of Washington and Stuart Streets.

The BRA is currently developing a concept model for Parcel 31, the area bounded by Boylston, Tremont, Stuart and Washington Streets, involving a mixed use development combining rehabilitation and new construction. Suggested uses include a combination of offices, restaurants, general commerical uses and a media center.

Long-range BRA plans for Parcel P-7, the vacant lot adjacent to the Wilbur Theatre to be developed as a commercial property, possibly in conjunction with the Wilbur, have undergone tentative developer selection. Preliminary concept plans for Parcel C-4, the large parking lot at the corner of Stuart and Tremont Streets, have been completed. The proposed 40,000 square foot, 10 level, building for that site includes ground and lower level retail activity and upper level office use.

Two major development projects which will also have an impact on the area are the Park Plaza Project and Lafayette Place. The revised version of the Park Plaza Project has resulted in the nearly completed 400 room Four Seasons Hotel on Boylston Street and a soon to be constructed residential and retail development from Hadassah Way to Arlington Street. When completed, Park Plaza will upgrade and stabilize a long-declining area and increase traffic and development pressure in the nearby theatre area. In the meantime, the uncertainty surrounding the project is prompting property owners to defer investment decisions, thus accelerating the area's decline.

Lafayette Place, a Mondev development which includes a hotel, 200,000 square feet of retail space and an underground city-owned parking garage, serves as a major element in the BRA's Downtown Crossing Economic Strategy plan. The plan has sought to upgrade retail space and improve pedestrian and vehicular circulation as steps toward reinforcing the area as the region's retail center.

In addition, Phase I construction of Avenue de Lafayette, a major vehicle link between Dewey Square and Washington Street, has been completed.