

PILGRIM BAPTIST CHURCH

Preliminary Summary of Information
June 1, 1981

Commission on Chicago Historical
and Architectural Landmarks

PILGRIM BAPTIST CHURCH
(formerly Kehilath Anshe Ma'ariv Synagogue)
3301 South Indiana Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Architects: Adler and Sullivan

Dates of Construction: 1890-1

The Pilgrim Baptist Church on the southeast corner of 33rd Street and Indiana Avenue is the last surviving example of ecclesiastical architecture by the firm of Adler and Sullivan. In addition, it is one of two remaining auditoriums designed by the firm. Basically unaltered over the years, the structure embodies the decorative and planning skills that characterize Louis Sullivan's contributions to modern architecture, and the accoustical principles that Dankmar Adler perfected in the construction of the Auditorium Theater.

The structure, which has housed the Pilgrim Baptist congregation since 1922, was built in 1890 for the Kehilath Anshe Ma'ariv congregation. Dankmar Adler's connection to the K.A.M. congregation is noteworthy because not only was he a member of the congregation but his family were important figures in its history. Abraham Kohn, Adler's father-in-law, was among the founders of the congregation, and Liebman Adler, Adler's father, was its rabbi from 1861 until 1881. It was not surprising then, that in 1890, when the congregation sought to build a larger synagogue to replace the structure at 26th Street and Indiana Avenue that had served them since the early 1870s, the partnership of Adler and Sullivan was chosen to design the new edifice.

The firm proposed at least two plans to the K.A.M. congregation, the one that was built being the second of these. Although the designs differed in their detailing and in the materials, both designs were similar in terms of form: a three-story rectangular block surmounted by a set-back clerestory with a steeply pitched hipped roof. The earlier scheme had a slightly pitched roof acting as a transitional element between the base and the clerestory. The earlier plan also called for the facade to be surfaced entirely with ashlar masonry. Because of the expense of this design, the congregation rejected it for the more economical one.

Sullivan produced a structure more modest in materials and cost and more successful in terms of its overall design. A large three-story rectangular block, 92 feet by 115 feet, covered by Bedford stone on its north and west facades and by brick on its south and east sides,

forms the base of the structure. The most imposing element of the base is the Romanesque entry arch on Indiana Avenue which a writer for *The Reform Advocate*, a Jewish newspaper, described in the June 12, 1891 issue:

This arch is one of the largest and most beautiful in the city. It springs from a low stylobate extending entirely round the building. The soffit of the arch is molded in the most beautiful and striking lines, repeating themselves deep into the reveal of the entrance, giving it an expression of magnificence and welcome, such that when one passes under it one cannot but feel a sense of awe and inspiration which at once makes this a masterpiece in the fine arts.

The expression of welcome is further enhanced by the Hebrew and English inscriptions over the arch, which read "Open for me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them, to praise the Lord." Flanking the entrance arch are two bays, each one consisting of a grouping of three recessed window openings at the first and second floors; panels of buff-colored, terra-cotta Sullivanesque ornament beneath the second-floor windows; and a large lunette at the third story. Four identical bays stretch across the 33rd Street facade.

Rising from the masonry base is the wooden clerestory pierced on each side by groupings of three arched windows. Although now covered with dark asbestos shingles, the clerestory was originally surfaced with a light-colored, patterned sheet metal, the decorative treatment of which was, according to Sullivan's biographer Hugh Morrison, "as beautiful as the pattern of an Oriental rug." Undoubtedly, the lighter color and the textured surface of the clerestory made the visual relationship between the base and the clerestory more harmonious than it is today.

The decision to use sheet metal over wood for the clerestory, rather than the solid masonry originally proposed, affected the planning of the large auditorium. The spaciousness of the interior results from the absence of large piers in the auditorium that would have taken up considerable portions of the available interior space. The earlier scheme, using the masonry clerestory, would not have provided as spacious an interior because its weight would have necessitated the use of large piers or masonry bearing walls to support the weight of the clerestory. Sullivan's manipulation of the building material in this case to produce the dynamic space within the Pilgrim Baptist Church is indicative of his complete control over a design and illustrates what William Gray Purcell, who worked in Sullivan's office,

once observed of Sullivan's architectural thinking. Purcell wrote that in Sullivan's mind a design "was never a 'plan and elevation' sequence"; rather, "his germinal thought articulated and expanded in all three dimensions from beginning to fulfillment." This reciprocal relationship between interior planning and exterior expression is illustrated well in the design of the Pilgrim Baptist Church.

The building has two principal interior divisions: the ground floor, which has offices as well as school and meeting rooms, and the main floor or auditorium. Old accounts of the interior of the auditorium praise its design and lavish decoration, both of which have remained largely unaltered over the years. Directly over the rostrum on the east wall and dominating the hall is a large arch, the borders of which are embellished by Sullivan's intricate foliage designs in plaster, and the tympanum, which is filled with a fretwork screen behind which an organ was originally situated. The space seats 1,500 people in pews on the main floor, arranged in a semi-ellipse around the rostrum, and on pews in the balcony running around three sides of the auditorium. The balcony is supported by a series of cast-iron posts with Sullivanesque capitals.

The arched ceiling of the clerestory structure dramatically enhances the expansiveness of the auditorium. As originally constructed, a column-free support of the clerestory was achieved by carrying it above the auditorium on concealed wooden trusses bearing on isolated masonry piers around the perimeter of the space. Later structural problems made it necessary to place cast-iron columns in the balcony for additional support. The introduction of these columns, however, does not diminish the open spatial quality that Sullivan was trying to obtain in his design.

Acoustic factors were the major determinant in the choice of a wooden ceiling, done in oak, rather than plaster. The increased resonance of the wood surface augments the acoustic properties inherent in the shape of the vaulted ceiling. The ceiling, which is suspended from timber framing above, is divided into three sections by two large ribs in which are embedded small ornamental squares. Now painted with a cream color, the ceiling was originally varnished to bring out the warm tones of the oak woodwork.

One of the most significant elements of Pilgrim Baptist Church is its ornament. The article previously quoted from *The Reform Advocate* spoke eloquently of Sullivan's work:

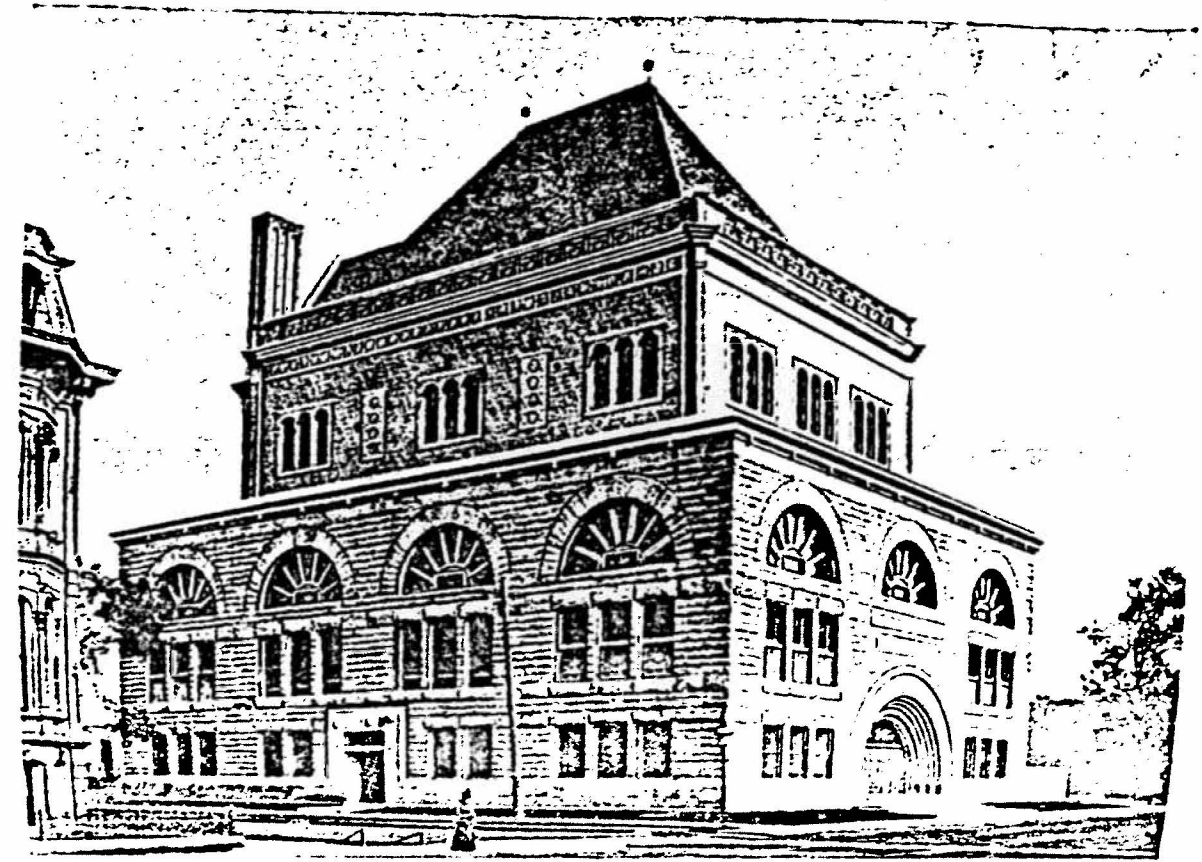
This decoration is most perfectly and delicately studied and consists of beautifully formed foliage

interlacing and intertwining on a background of geometric lines, and in every instance giving a mental impression of actual sprouting growth, creating a delightful life-like feeling, which, in harmony with the exquisite colors, creates a rich and yet most simple and delicate effect.

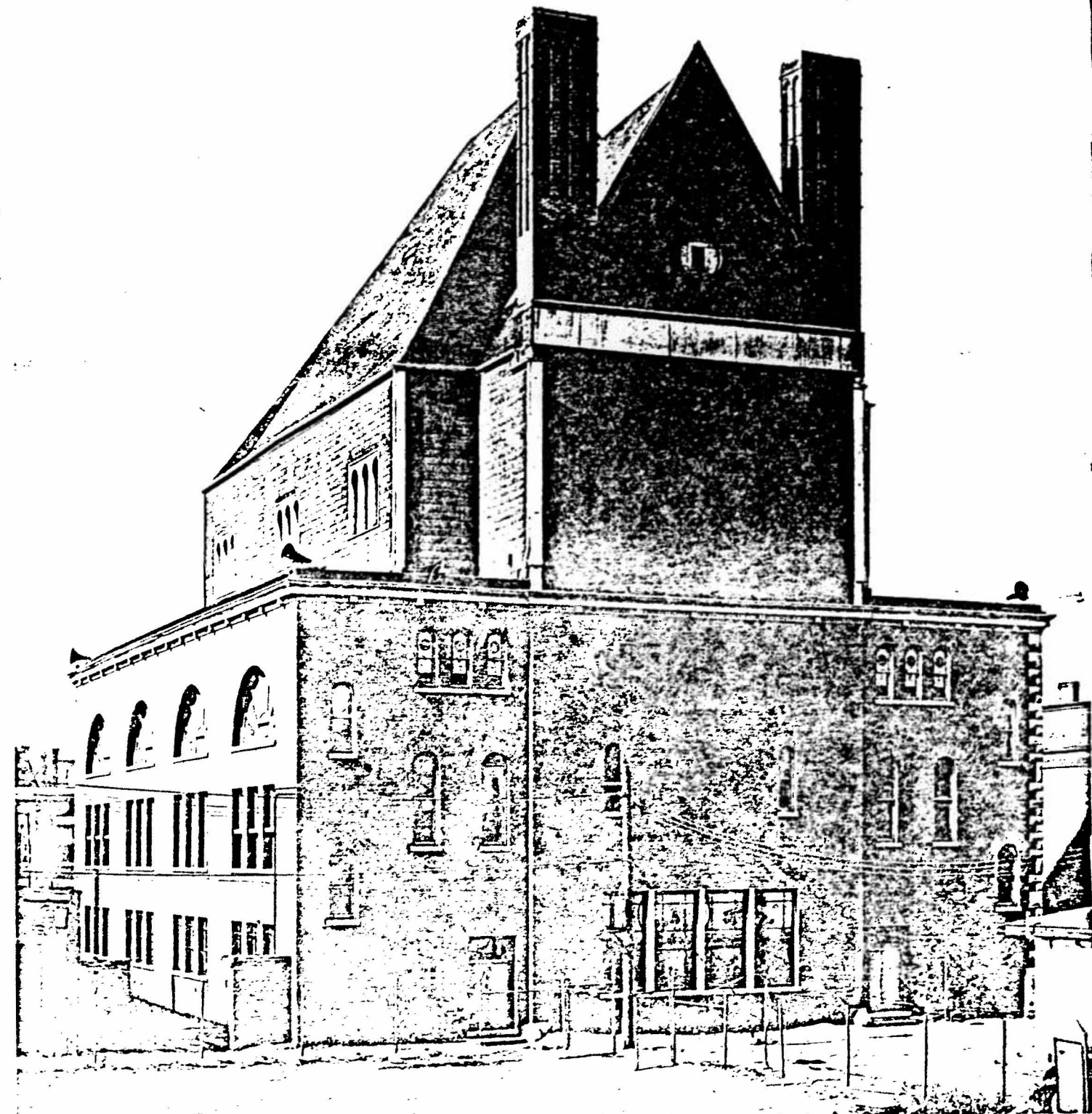
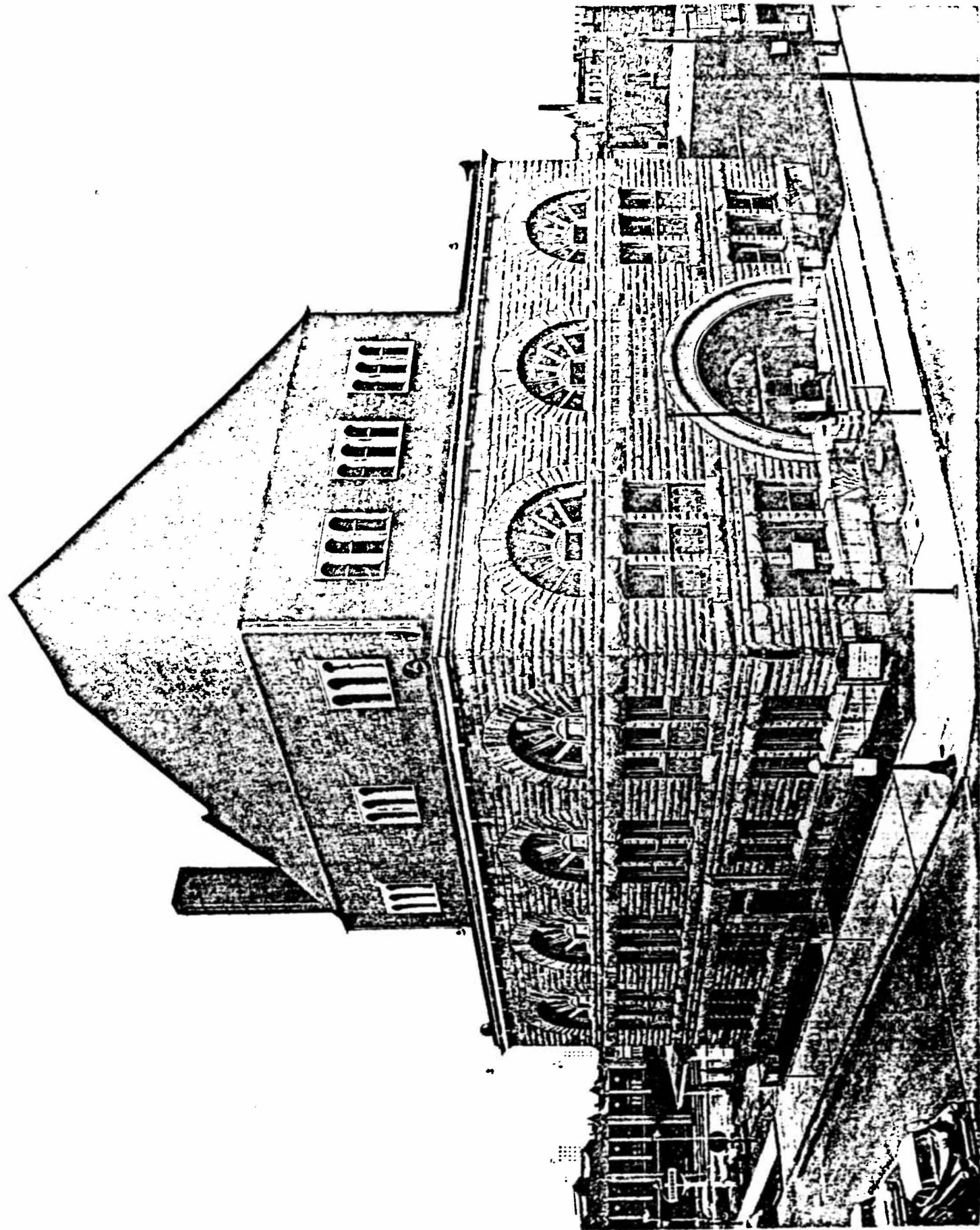
The ornamental detailing of the church is an important example of Sullivan's work of the period, representing a significant stage in the development of his personal philosophy of ornament. The ornamentation incorporates sinuous foliage closely integrated within a geometric matrix, which is a departure from the free-flowing intertwining spirals and acanthus-like leaves used in the decorative designs of the Auditorium Building and other Adler and Sullivan structures of the period.

Warm earth tones were initially used for color in the auditorium. The walls were painted with calcimine in a rich terra-cotta color on the lower portion of the hall while those in the balcony were finished in an ivory tint. The ornament was painted an off-white with gold paint applied to the raised surface, producing an effect similar to that now seen in the blended colors of the cast-iron ornament on the ground floor of the Carson Pirie Scott and Company Store. These paint colors harmonized with the antique finished oak woodwork used throughout the auditorium and with the earth tones in the stained glass windows produced by Healy and Millet. The original paint scheme of the hall has been altered over the years and it is now an off-white and aquamarine combination; a uniform covering of gold paint has been applied to the ornamentation. In addition, several murals depicting scenes from the New Testament were painted on the front wall of the auditorium by Edward Scott in the 1930s.

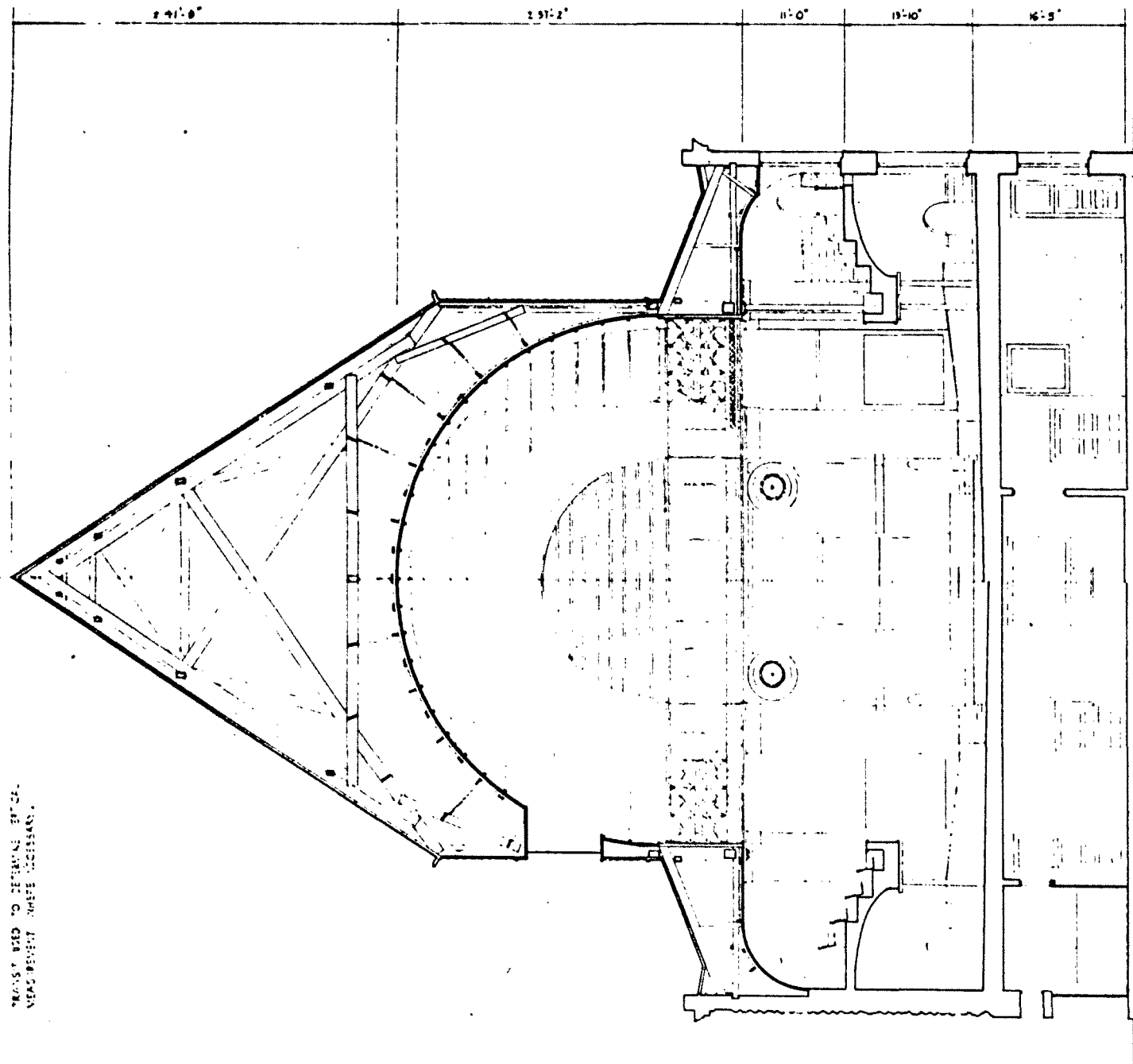
Pilgrim Baptist Church is the culmination of what Louis Sullivan once referred to as his "masonry period," which extended from approximately 1886 to 1890, and included designs such as the Auditorium Building, the Walker Warehouse, and the Getty Tomb. Superficially, all of these designs reflected the influence of the Richardsonian Romanesque; however, they are more accurately interpreted as Sullivan's personal expression of masonry bearing wall construction. These designs have none of the embellishments and romantic qualities that characterize so many Romanesque forms. Rather, the forms are much starker and draw attention to the structural function of the materials. This was an idea that Sullivan elaborated in 1892 in an essay titled "Ornament in Architecture," in which he stated that "it would be greatly for our aesthetic good if we should refrain entirely from the use of ornament for a period of years, in order that our thought might concentrate acutely upon the production of buildings well formed and comely in the nude." The mastery of scale and proportion that Sullivan achieved during his masonry period by limiting himself to basic forms and materials is evident in the Pilgrim Baptist Church.



A rendering of the former Kehilath Anshe Ma'ariv Synagogue taken from the December, 1895 issue of the *Architectural Record*. The building has housed the congregation of the Pilgrim Baptist Church since 1922.



Rear (east) elevation of the Pilgrim Baptist Church.



TRANSVERSE SECTION "A-A"

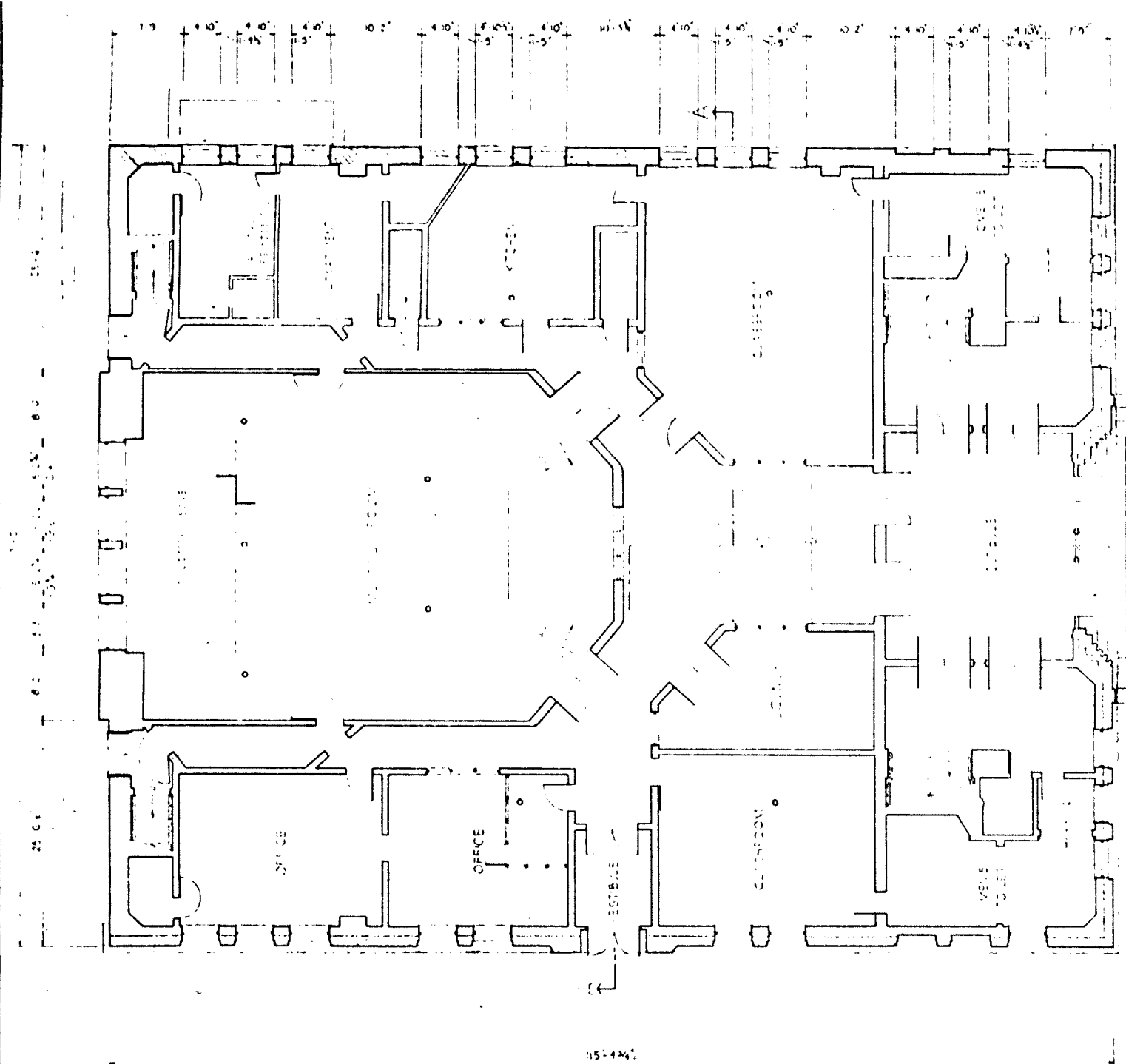
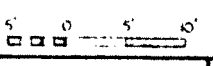
J. PEX ROGENPOLL 111.

CHICAGO PROJECT II 1964
 UNDER DIRECTION OF UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
 NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, BRANCH OF PLANS AND DESIGN

NAME OF STRUCTURE
 KEHILATH ANSHE MA'ARIV SYNAGOGUE
 3301 S. INDIANA AVENUE CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

SURVEY NO.
 111
 1054

HISTORIC AMERICAN
 BUILDINGS SURVEY
 SHEET 4 OF 5 SHEETS



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

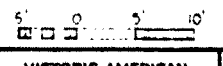
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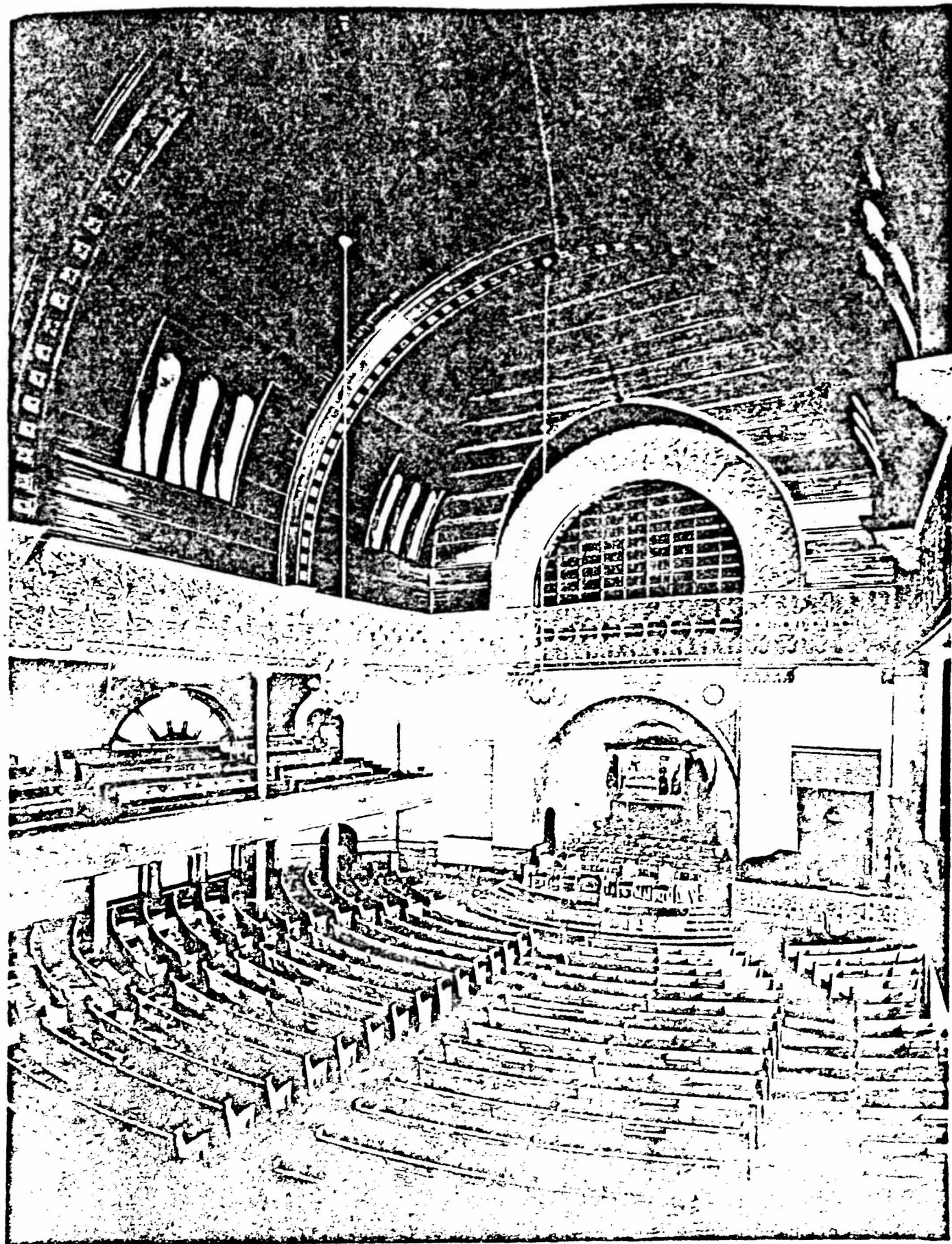
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Detail of plaster ornament designed by Sullivan

The interior of Pilgrim Baptist Church remains virtually unaltered from the time this photograph was taken in the 1930s. (Chicago Architectural Photograph Co.)

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.



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