

FILM CENTER BUILDING, first floor interior consisting of the Ninth Avenue entrance vestibule, the lobby, and the hallway leading from the lobby to the 44th Street entrance, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, ceiling surfaces, wall surfaces, floor surfaces, mosaics, radiator grilles, elevator doors, mailbox, and directory board; 630 Ninth Avenue, Manhattan. Built 1928-29; architect Ely Jacques Kahn.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1035, Lot 1.

On November 18, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Film Center Building, first floor interior consisting of the Ninth Avenue entrance vestibule, the lobby, and the hallway leading from the lobby to the 44th Street entrance, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, ceiling surfaces, wall surfaces, floor surfaces, mosaics, radiator grilles, elevator doors, mailbox, and directory board; and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Film Center Building has one of New York's finest surviving Art Deco style interiors, comprising its main lobby and related spaces. It was built in 1928-29 to the design of Ely Jacques Kahn, who was one of the city's most prominent architects working in modernist styles.

The Film Center interiors are the product of Kahn's highly individualistic version of the Art Deco style. The relatively small spaces are transformed into a highly decorative formal entrance through his unusual technique of treating walls and ceilings like woven plaster tapestries, and his polychromatic treatment of both individual elements, such as the elevator doors and mailbox, and strictly decorative additions, such as the elaborate mosaics and stylized movie cameras. Even radiator vent grilles and staircase risers are brought within the ornamental scheme.

The Film Center Building originally was built as a support facility for the motion picture industry centered in Times Square to the east. Although much of that industry has departed, the Film Center Building still serves the functions for which it was built. Its interior spaces are a rare intact survivor from the highpoint of the industry's history in Times Square, and one of the finest surviving Art Deco style interiors anywhere in the city.

The Film Center Building and its Site

The site of the Film Center Building was originally part of a farm belonging to John Leake Norton. Norton's property was subdivided in 1825; the Ninth Avenue frontage between 44th and 45th Streets was acquired in 1862 by John F. Betz, and stayed in the family's hands until its sale by Betz's daughters to the Film Center Company in 1928.¹

The general area of Ninth Avenue and 44th Street became part of the Hell's Kitchen tenement district towards the end of the 19th century, and Betz's property was developed with five-story walk-up buildings. Between 1895 and 1929, however, the area was affected by the development, two blocks to the east, of the city's new thea-

ter district in Times Square.

The early development of Times Square, and the blocks east and west of Broadway, consisted of new theaters for the "legitimate stage."² In the 1910s and 1920s, however, the new motion picture industry moved into the district. The industry at that time was headquartered in and around New York City. The Paramount Corporation built the Paramount Building (Rapp & Rapp, 1929) on the west side of Times Square at 44th Street to house its offices and its flagship Paramount Theater. The Loew's Corporation built its headquarters and flagship theater on the east side of the Square at 45th Street. Several other movie theaters were built on Broadway, and the legitimate theater soon shared the area with motion picture houses.

With so much of the motion picture industry concentrated in the area, it was not unnatural that support services would locate nearby, in the less expensive section west of Eighth Avenue. The Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation put its sites and distribution offices in a building at 345 West 44th Street; the Paramount Pictures Offices and Film Exchange was on the same street at No. 331, and nearby was Warner Brother's Vitaphone Building, at No. 315.³ The Film Center was built at the end of the same block, fronting Ninth Avenue with entrances on Ninth and on West 44th Street.

Ten years after its completion, the Film Center Building housed over 70 film distributors, who sent films to theaters all over the city. The offices were open all night, receiving films being returned from the theaters and preparing new orders. The Times Square area has remained a motion picture center, although it is no longer the headquarters of the industry, and the Film Center Building continues to serve the same functions for which it was built over fifty years ago.

Ely Jacques Kahn (1884-1972) and the Art Deco Style

Ely Jacques Kahn was a prominent 20th-century New York architect whose career spanned fifty years. His work included loft buildings (especially in the garment and printing districts), hospitals, restaurants, houses, office buildings, country clubs, warehouses, apartment buildings, specialty shops, factories, and department stores. Over the years, Kahn worked in a variety of styles; he was best known, however, for his modernistic "Art Deco" work.

Within a few years of receiving his architectural degrees from Columbia University (1907) and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (1911), Kahn became a principal partner in the firm of Buchman & Kahn, successor to the firm of Buchman & Fox. Kahn attributed this rapid rise to prominence to the timely retirement of Mortimer Fox, as well as to the important commissions that Kahn was able to bring to the firm. Albert Buchman died in 1936, and in 1940 Kahn formed a new partnership with Robert Allan Jacobs; their most famous work, the Municipal Asphalt Plant, is a designated New York City Landmark.⁴

The work for which Kahn is best known dates from the 1920s and 1930s, when he established himself as one of the most prominent New York architects working in the Art Deco style, alongside his colleagues Raymond Hood, Joseph Urban, and Ralph Walker.

The term "Art Deco," adapted from the name of the Exposition Internationale des Art Decoratifs held in Paris in 1925, is today used loosely to describe a number of architectural and decorative styles current in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere from the early 1920s until as late, in some instances, as the mid-1940s.⁵ In American architecture, the style was first popularized in designs for skyscrapers in New York and, shortly thereafter, became popular for apartment houses, resort hotels, restaurants, and movie theaters throughout the country. In the skyscrapers, Art Deco design

emphasized verticality, design by massing, polychromy, and modernistic ornament based on abstract floral or geometric patterns; these general characteristics then spread to other building types.

A hallmark of the Art Deco skyscrapers was the elaborate treatment given to the entrance lobbies. Dramatically lit and highly decorative, lobbies became a major component of most such structures, and the ornamental design was carried down to the smallest details, including radiator grilles, mail boxes, and elevator doors. For the Chrysler Building (1928), William Van Alen designed a triangular-shaped lobby, faced with marble and nickel-chrome steel, lit indirectly; ceiling paintings depicted the history of transportation.⁶ At the Daily News Building (1930-31), Raymond Hood saved the most dramatic decorative effects for the main lobby (now altered), composed of an enormous hemisphere of black faceted glass suspended over rotating globe.

Kahn enthusiastically embraced the Art Deco style, and helped promote and develop its vocabulary in the city. His commissions tended to be for smaller and less conspicuous buildings than the major skyscrapers, and their exteriors are sometimes plain, but their lobbies are elaborately decorative. Kahn's interior designs are among his most striking and important creations.

Kahn's involvement with the Art Deco style included both architecture and decorative arts. The 1925 Paris Exposition sparked a growing interest in design and in the decorative arts and the modern aesthetic, and Kahn became an active participant. He was directly involved in the 1928 exhibition of modern furnishings at Lord & Taylor, based on the store's purchases at the Paris Show,⁷ and later that year he was asked, along with Raymond Hood, Ralph Walker, Eliel Saarinen, John Root, and Eugene Schoen, to work on an exhibition of modern interiors and furnishings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁸ Kahn's father had been an importer of glass and mirrors, and his sister an importer of crafts, and Kahn himself was directly involved in the design of fabrics, mosaics, furniture, and glass and metal craft. He was particularly interested in textile design.

Much of Kahn's architectural thought was influenced by his interest in the decorative arts particularly his notions about color and ornament. In a 1929 essay, "On Decoration and Ornament," he wrote:

The new attitude in design proceeds to consider decoration from a new angle. Decoration is not necessarily ornament. The interest of an object has primarily to do with its shape, proportion and color. The texture of its surface, the rhythms of the elements that break that surface either into planes or distinct areas of contrasting interest, becomes ornament.⁹

Kahn provided "texture" to his buildings by treating the walls like woven fabric, an effect that became fairly common in Art Deco buildings. The idea that walls should be designed along the principles of textiles has been traced back to the German architect, Gottfried Semper (1803-1879), who included as one of the four basic components of architecture the "enclosure of textiles, animal skins, wattle or any other filler hung from the frame of placed between the supporting poles."¹⁰

Kahn's interest in color stemmed in large part from his early training at the Ecole in painting: "Whatever my enthusiasm for architecture per se appeared to be, I had - from my early years - never forgotten the original desire to concentrate on painting."¹¹ Color and its relationship to architectural space was a prime concern for him; his approach was to treat "color as part of a structure and not merely as applied ornament."¹² Leon Solon, a friend and colleague, shared this interest in color, published theoretical writings on the subject, and worked with Kahn on various projects. Together they tried to recreate what they thought were the original "Greek

primary colors."¹³

The combination of Kahn's ideas about color, textiles, and ornamentation produced a very individualistic version of Art Deco design. In his principal buildings in the style -- No. 2 Park Avenue (1927), No. 261 Fifth Avenue (1928-29), and the Film Center Building -- as well as in his elaborately conceived work in the garment district -- Bricken Textile Building (1441 Broadway; 1929) -- he treated all the walls as a surface composed of color, and of abstract vertical and horizontal lines in low relief. The effect is very much that of a woven wall, and it is difficult to distinguish the ornament from the wall itself.

At the same time he was designing such modernistic buildings, Kahn also worked in more conservative styles, such as that for the Bergdorf-Goodman store on Fifth Avenue at 58th Street. Similarly, the Sherry-Netherland Hotel at 781 Fifth Avenue, which he designed in collaboration with the firm of Schultze & Weaver, is an eclectic work combining elements of the neo-Romanesque and neo-Gothic styles. Although Kahn designed in different styles for a variety of architectural problems, he was, nonetheless, able to maintain a certain consistency in his approach to architecture. According to a contemporary biographer, Otto John Teegen, "Indeed it seems clear that only an artist with a fundamental point of view and a thorough cultural background could solve problems as diverse as these."¹⁴

The Film Center Building

All the various elements of Kahn's unique approach to modernistic design were brought to bear on the Film Center Building's interior. Its walls and ceilings are handsomely worked in the plaster tapestry effect, and the polychromatic and decorative schemes are broad enough to include mosaics, elevator doors, the directory board, vent grilles, staircase risers, and elaborate, purely ornamental, three-dimensional motifs of abstract cylinders and stylized movie cameras. The overall effect is one of Kahn's most striking interior designs.

The Film Center Building is a thirteen-story high office building that covers the entire frontage from West 44th to West 45th Streets on the east side of Ninth Avenue. The interior being designated consists of the lobby and related spaces. The main entrance on Ninth Avenue leads into the rectangular-shaped outer vestibule. The vestibule is dominated by an elaborate ornamental plaster band that runs across the ceiling and down either side wall as a stepped upside-down triangle. The band is composed of horizontal and vertical elements in varying relief; the effect is that of a modernistic woven plaster tapestry. At the base of each side wall is a vent covered by handsome cast-metal grilles in a geometric design of horizontals and verticals (a similar vent is in the smaller vestibule at the West 44th Street entrance). The ceiling in the outer vestibule is painted white, as are the other ceilings throughout the ground floor interior; it is unclear whether or not this was Kahn's intention.

A second set of doors, on axis with the first, leads into the lobby proper. As in the outer vestibule, the ceiling is articulated with a geometric pattern of horizontal and vertical bands that extends onto the side walls. The gray walls complement the muted polychromy of the floor, which has a tile pattern of pink, ochre, and gray geometric shapes. The colors and shapes used in the floor pattern lend a strong directional quality to the space, leading to the elevator bays that lie on axis ahead. The walls in the elevator bay area are banded with broad, horizontal stripes of alternating light and dark stone. The modernistic design is carried through to the elevator doors, and the adjacent directory board and mail box. These are all particularly striking details of the interior space, defined by horizontal and vertical bands. A limited amount of color is used on the directory board, accentuating its appearance. The elevator doors, unfortunately, have been painted in spots for the purposes of

highlighting, and not all the elevator cabs survive in their original condition. The narrow walls at the junction of the main lobby with the narrower elevator lobby are each adorned with a modernistic projecting relief suggestive of a movie camera. Next to them, at the corners, were originally seven projecting red marble cylinder ends, two of which have been removed on the north, and one on the south.

An outstanding feature of the interior is the polychromatic mosaic on the far wall of the elevator lobby, perpendicular to the cabs. It is striking both for its use of color, mostly blue, orange, yellow, and red, and for its play against the other geometric patterns found throughout the interior. While the mosaic is made up of horizontals and verticals, it does not have the strictly uniform and precise angles found throughout the rest of the interior; it is a more relaxed and seemingly spontaneous composition. A triangular ceiling projection in the elevator bay partially obscures the mosaic; it is unclear if this was the architect's original intent. This triangular projection is in keeping with the ziggurat-like form that extends over the directory board in the lobby.

From this main lobby, a wide straight hallway leads south. On its east side, just beyond the lobby, is a smaller hall and a staircase. The green staircase wall is articulated by a handsome vertical arrangement of red marble cylinders, adding color and variety to a secondary space. The arrangement of marble cylinders in the wall is similar to those used in the north wall near the directory board in the lobby; both give their respective walls a sense of three-dimensionality like a thickly-woven tapestry with projecting strands of colorful fabric.

The hallway turns at a 45° angle to the southeast, and continues for several yards before making another 45° angle to the south, leading to the West 44th Street entrance. This entrance is considerably smaller than that at the Ninth Avenue side of the building, and was clearly intended to be a secondary entrance to the building. Its ceiling repeats the plaster ornamentation found in the Ninth Avenue entrance vestibule.

Conclusion

Despite the great loss of Art Deco interiors over the past fifty years, the Film Center lobby has managed to survive, largely intact. One of the finest remaining interior designs of Ely Jacques Kahn, who was one of New York's most prominent practitioners of the Art Deco style, it exemplifies all the traits which made his one of the most unusual and striking interpretations of modernist design. Its decorative program still adorns a building serving the movie industry once centered in nearby Times Square, and today the Film Center Building stands out as one of the city's best Art Deco interiors.

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FOOTNOTES

1. New York County Register's Office, Conveyances. Liber 198, page 188; Liber 3616, page 440; Liber 3653, page 219.
2. A general history of the area can be found in Mary Henderson, The City And The Theatre (Clifton, N.J.: James T. White & Co., 1973).
3. For this and the following buildings listed as being in the neighborhood, and description of tenancy and operations, see New York City Guide (American Guide Series), originally published in 1939, reprinted (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), p. 158.
4. For Kahn see New York Times, September 6, '72, p. 48 (obituary), and Ely Jacques Kahn, unpublished Autobiography (c.1972), in the Drawings Collection of Avery Library at Columbia University, New York.
5. Although the range of modernistic, non-historicist styles included under the term has sometimes been divided into subgroups including Art Deco, Style Moderne, Modernistic, Streamlined, PWA-Moderne, Zig-Zag Moderne, Resort Moderne, and presumably others, and although the use of the term to denote architectural style of any kind has been questioned by some historians, it remains a convenient name to apply to the products of a relatively limited time-span which are associated with notions of progress, industrial design, and the "Machine Age." For a general discussion of the style in New York, see Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
6. The Chrysler Building and its Interior are both designated New York City Landmarks.
7. Kahn discusses this exhibition in his Autobiography, Chapter V, p.11.
8. Ibid.
9. See Kahn's essay, "On Decoration and Ornament," originally published 1929 and reprinted in Otto John Teegen, Contemporary American Architects: Ely Jacques Kahn (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1931).
10. Robinson and Bletter, p. 61, also discuss Semper.
11. See Kahn's Autobiography, Chapter II, p. 31.
12. Kahn makes this point in a 1928 essay, "On the Use of Color," reprinted in Teegen, p. 23.
13. For Kahn on Solon, see his Autobiography, Chapter II, p.4.
14. Teegen.

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 Film Center Building, first floor interior consisting of the Ninth Avenue entrance vestibule, the lobby, and the hallway leading from the lobby to the 44th Street entrance, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, ceiling surfaces, wall surfaces, floor surfaces, mosaics, radiator grilles, elevator doors, mailbox, and directory board, 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 that 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 Film Center Building interior is an exceptional design in the Art Deco style; that its architect, Ely Jacques Kahn, was one of the city's most prominent architects working in modernistic styles; that the interior exemplifies his unique version of the Art Deco style, incorporating a technique of "woven" plaster wall and ceiling surfaces, and a wide-ranging polychromatic program; that the building was built to service the motion picture industry then centered in Times Square to the east, and still serves the functions for which it was constructed; that the interior spaces survive largely intact; and that the Film Center Building interior today is among the finest, and one of the few such surviving, in the Art Deco style in New York City.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark the Film Center Building, first floor interior consisting of the Ninth Avenue entrance vestibule, the lobby, and the hallway leading from the lobby to the 44th Street entrance, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, ceiling surfaces, wall surfaces, floor surfaces, mosaics, radiator grilles, elevator doors, mailbox, and directory board; 630 Ninth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1035, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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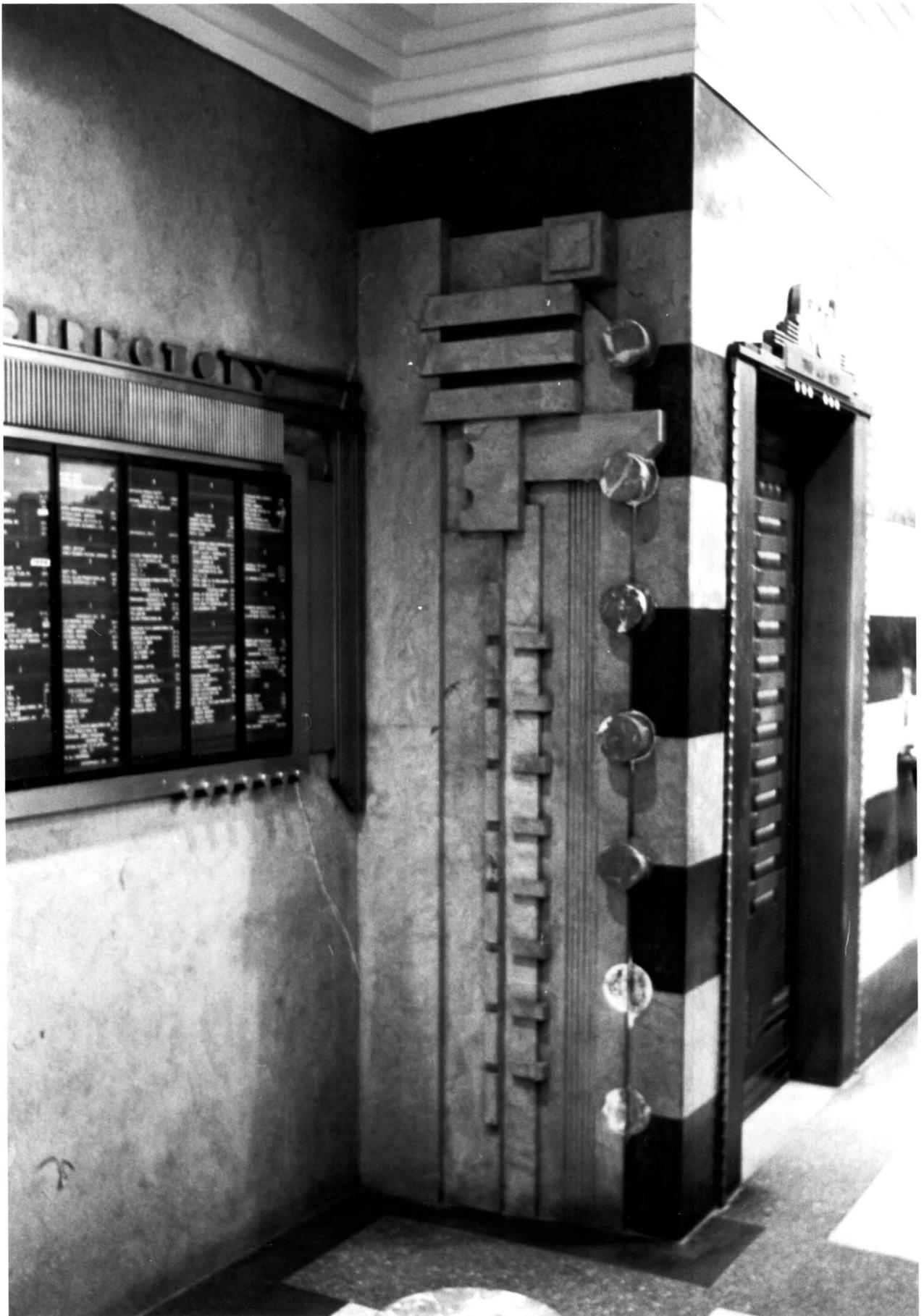
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FILM CENTER BUILDING INTERIOR
630 Ninth Avenue, Manhattan

Architect: Ely Jacques Kahn, 1928-29

Photo credit: Andrew S. Dolkart



FILM CENTER BUILDING INTERIOR
Detail