

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
July 12, 1988; Designation List 206  
LP-1536

THE LINCOLN BUILDING, 1-3 Union Square West, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1889-90; architect, R. H. Robertson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 842, Lot 21.

On May 14, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Lincoln Building (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Thirty-six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. The owner expressed support for the designation. The Commission received several letters in support of designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

##### Summary

A classic example of the layered arcade design solution, a solution in which New York pioneered, the Romanesque Revival Lincoln Building is representative of an important transitional phase in the history of tall buildings. It was constructed in 1889-90<sup>1</sup> and was designed by the well-known New York architect R. H. Robertson. Using interior metal skeleton skyscraper construction in combination with traditional masonry bearing walls, the building is executed in limestone, granite, and brick, and has exceptionally fine carved and terra cotta detail -- which includes the corner griffin, acanthus scrolls, Byzantine capitals, crisp moldings, human and lion heads -- that is effectively placed on both the Union Square West facade and on the 14th-Street elevation.

##### The Development of Union Square

The Commissioners Map of 1807-11, which first laid out the grid plan of Manhattan above Houston Street, allowed for certain existing thoroughfares to retain their original configuration. Bloomingdale Road (now Broadway), and the Bowery intersected at 16th Street. The acute angle formed by this "union" was set aside by the Commissioners and named Union Place.<sup>2</sup> Initially Union Place extended from 10th to 17th Streets, on land owned by the Manhattan Bank:

It then presented to the eye of the tourist and pedestrian a shapeless and ill-looking collection of lots, where garden sauce flourished -- devoid of symmetry, and around which were reared a miserable group of shanties.<sup>3</sup>

In 1815, the state legislature reduced the size of Union Place by making 14th Street its southern boundary.<sup>4</sup> As the city expanded northward and land use intensified, the need for open spaces became apparent. A report drafted by the street committee in 1831 states the need for public squares "for purposes of military, and civic parades, and festivities, and ... to serve as ventilators to a densely populated city."<sup>5</sup> Designated a public space in 1832 at the urging of local residents, additional land was acquired so that the area could be regularized.<sup>6</sup> Graded, paved, and fenced, Union Place was finally opened to the public in July 1839. Throughout much of its history, the square has been used for public gatherings, political rallies, and demonstrations.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1850s, Union Square (as it came to be known) was completely surrounded by buildings including some of the city's most splendid mansions; but, "already by 1860, the dramatic march of commerce had begun."<sup>8</sup> Theaters, hotels, and luxury retailers predominated in the 1870s.<sup>9</sup> By the 1890s, the vestiges of the fashionable residential area, as well as the elegant stores and theaters, had been supplanted on Union Square by taller buildings that catered to the needs of publishers and manufacturers who had moved uptown.<sup>10</sup>

The block on which the Lincoln Building stands was originally part of the Henry Spingler farm, and the land, which was let on long leases, remained in the Spingler family's possession until 1958.<sup>11</sup> The Lincoln Building, which replaced four smaller structures, was constructed for a Mr. Crawford, who was listed as the "owner" on the New Building Application and who may have been a trustee for the Spingler-Van Buren family's interests or connected with the lessee.<sup>12</sup>

The Lincoln Building is prominently situated on the northwest corner of 14th street and Union Square West, considered the most desirable side of the square "probably because for all practical purposes it really was Broadway."<sup>13</sup> Its early tenants included a wide variety of businesses and occupations -- from the Eyelet Buttonhole Attachment Co. to a number of firms involved in building trades, as well as the offices of architects, including that of Alfred Zucker.<sup>14</sup>

#### Robert H. Robertson (1849-1919)<sup>15</sup>

A successful and prolific architect, the Philadelphia-born Robert Henderson Robertson employed the major popular styles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Montgomery Schuyler noted that Robertson had "taken part in every one of the successive 'movements' that have agitated American architects in his time" -- from the High Victorian Gothic to the Romanesque and later the neo-Renaissance.<sup>16</sup>

Educated in Scotland and at Rutgers College, Robertson was first employed in the Philadelphia office of Henry Sims from 1869 to around 1872. After moving to New York, he worked briefly in the offices of the noted architect George B. Post and in 1873 and 1874 for Edward T. Potter. During these years he designed the Phillips Presbyterian Church in New York, a High Victorian Gothic structure which displays the influence of Potter, who was an early advocate of the style. From 1875 to 1881, he formed a partnership with Potter's younger half-brother William A. Potter, who also favored the High Victorian Gothic style. Together they designed a number of early Shingle Style houses. In later years Robertson was occasionally associated with others, including his son T. Markoe Robertson. Robertson joined the AIA in 1873, the New York City chapter in the following year, and was elevated to the status of Fellow in 1885; he became a member of the Architectural League in 1886.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1880s, Robertson employed the Romanesque Revival style, an especially fine example being his Mott Haven Railroad Station (1885-86). Although the noted New York critic Montgomery Schuyler observed that Robertson "took up the Romanesque in his own way and arrived at his own expression in it," the Lincoln Building (1889-90) shows the influence of H. H. Richardson and especially his later use of light stone for Romanesque designs, such as the Allegheny County Buildings in Pittsburgh (1883-88).<sup>18</sup> Robertson's other Romanesque Revival designs in New York include St. Luke's Episcopal Church (1892) located in the Hamilton Heights Historic District, and the YWCA at 7 East 15th Street (1883). The Lincoln Building is apparently his first skyscraper, soon followed by the McIntyre Building (1890-92), the Corn Exchange Bank Building (1893-94, now demolished), the American Tract Society Building (1894-95), and the twenty-seven story Park Row Building (1896-99), for a time the tallest building in the world.

Other notable commissions include St. James's Church (1883-85, rebuilt in 1923-24 by Ralph Adams Cram) in the Upper East Side Historic District; Saint Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church and Parish House (1895-97; now the United Church of Saint Paul and Saint Andrew), a designated New York City Landmark; Hammersmith Farm (1887-89) in Newport, Rhode Island for John W. Auchincloss; William Seward Webb House and Farm Buildings (1887-1902) in Shelburn, Vermont; The Margaret Louisa Home (1889-91) in New York; The Rutgers Riverside Church (1889-90), New York; Hodge Hall, Princeton Theological Seminary (1893-94), New Jersey; New York Bank for Savings (1896-98); the Chas. T. Yerkes House (1896), New York; Lying-In Hospital of New York (1899-1902).

### Design of the Building

The Lincoln Building is a transitional skyscraper incorporating load-bearing masonry walls along with an interior

metal skeleton consisting of steel beams with steel girders and columns of cast iron.<sup>19</sup> By the 1890s Robertson was employing the metal skeleton alone, often considered one of the essential criteria for a true skyscraper.<sup>20</sup>

The arcaded elevations of the building visually suggest the hybrid nature of its construction. The two-story arcades relate to the verticality and height which skeletal construction permitted, while the layering or stacking of floors provides a horizontality associated with traditional masonry construction. In addition, while the Lincoln Building does have a defined base, shaft, and capital -- thus embodying the tripartite columnar skyscraper analogy favored by contemporary critics for tall buildings -- the layering of stories nevertheless predominates.<sup>21</sup> An interesting and important stage in the evolution of the skyscraper from the modern point of view, this emphasis on the horizontal led the famous nineteenth-century critic Montgomery Schuyler to chastise the architect:

In the Lincoln building, the subordinate division is carried so far as to confuse the principal division ... The architect's power of design is shown in the parts [of the tall building], rather than in the whole, in the picturesque features in which his ... work abounds.<sup>22</sup>

Within the context of the evolution of arcaded buildings in New York during the later nineteenth century, the Lincoln Building is a classic example of the layered type, a design solution in which New York pioneered. Other comparable examples include McKim, Mead and White's Judge Building (1888-90) and George B. Post's New York Times Building (1888-89), an arcaded structure in the "popular Richardsonian style."<sup>23</sup>

Despite Schuyler's reservations, he conceded that the ornament and detailing -- "the picturesque features" -- of Robertson's work are exceptionally fine; those of the Lincoln Building are particularly good. Moreover, Robertson's handling of textures in the design of the Lincoln Building -- smooth and rusticated limestone, brick and terra cotta -- is subtle, as is the placement of the extremely handsome carved and terra-cotta ornament, which includes acanthus scrolls, Byzantine capitals, crisp moldings, human and lion heads, and the fantastical and ferocious corner griffin. Many of the buildings qualities -- such as the rich textural contrasts, the massive stone arches, piers and columns, complex Byzantine and Celtic style carving, Norman zigzag moldings -- are characteristic of the Romanesque Revival as it was employed after the Civil War.<sup>24</sup> Schuyler judged Robertson's Romanesque work to be his best, observing that "the Romanesque, or at least the Romantic, phase of his design seems to be so much the more characteristic and important as to constitute artistically the bulk of his work."<sup>25</sup>

The use of historical styles for modern tall buildings posed certain problems of adaptation. The Romanesque Revival style could be adapted to arcaded designs, even if the massiveness and heaviness traditionally associated with it were less suited to the verticality demanded by the skyscraper and by open shop-fronts with their wide expanse of plate-glass windows.<sup>26</sup> And indeed -- as skyscrapers grew ever taller and the arcaded type was abandoned, architects who favored medieval styles turned to the Gothic for inspiration, going on to create soaring spire-like towers, such as Cass Gilbert's famous Woolworth Building (1911-13)

### Description<sup>27</sup>

The Lincoln Building is a nine-story<sup>28</sup> structure, which combines iron- and steel-framing with masonry bearing walls. Faced with light-colored smooth- and rock-faced Indiana limestone, light brick, and granite, the Union Square West facade is divided into four bays, the 14th Street elevation into seven. Except at the ground floor, all the windows and arches at each story of the 14th Street elevation appear to be the same but wider than those of the Union Square facade. Located in the northernmost bay on the Union Square facade, the main entrance to the offices above is composed of a massive round arch with engaged columns and ornamented with a Norman zigzag molding; the arch spandrels contain Byzantine acanthus scroll carving. Although the ground floor has been substantially altered, the original engaged colonettes with Byzantine detailing remain on six of the seven 14th-Street bays and on one side of the southernmost bay on the Union Square facade. The commercial bays on 14th Street and the southernmost bay on the Union Square West facade are flanked by the original rock-faced limestone piers (four now have display windows which are later additions). These piers rest on granite bases. The final westernmost bay on this elevation contains a service entrance that retains its cast-iron frame ornamented with bosses. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century photographic views show the original design.<sup>29</sup>

The first three office stories are faced with smooth- and rock-faced limestone. The second- and third-story windows are set within a double-height arcade demarcated by smooth limestone piers with rock-faced arches. The pier capitals, arch spandrels, and imposts are ornamented by Byzantine foliage, Celtic intertwining bands, bunches of grapes, Norman zigzags, and expressive human heads. On the second story are pairs of windows separated by piers with Byzantine capitals. A molding of counterposed triangles decorates the chamfered upper edge of each window enframingent. Smooth rectangular panels outlined by bands of small square indentations separate the second-story windows from the round-arched third-story openings. A band of these indentations runs between the third and fourth stories. At the fourth story, paired round-arched windows are separated by squat



Byzantine columns. Elaborately embellished imposts and corbels support the smooth limestone voussoirs which have simple molded enframements. At both Union Square corners of the building, very slender three-story colonnettes rise from the base of the second story ending in flaring foliate capitals that support bulbous cartouches surrounded by foliate decoration.

A crisp cornice of dentils placed within indentations surmounts the fourth story and articulates the transition to the simple brick and limestone fifth floor, with paired rectangular windows separated by piers with Byzantine curvilinear terminations. Surmounted by a protruding band of small square indentations, the fifth story forms a transition between the double-height arcades of the lower section and those above. The design of the sixth and seventh stories echoes that of the second and third; however the upper stories are faced with brick and smooth limestone, and the architectural forms are lighter and more restrained. The sixth story has corbels at the corners of the windows which are separated by piers again with Byzantine capitals. The seventh-story windows are round-arched. These two stories are divided by spandrels with recessed rectangular panels with terra-cotta egg-and-dart moldings. The moldings of the seventh story arches rest on corbels ornamented with human faces; at the corners, the moldings extend into rich acanthus scrolled banding at impost level. A stylized variant of a dentilled cornice runs above the seventh story. At the corner this cornice is accentuated by a flagpole base in the form of a large and impressive griffin. The paired round-arched windows of the eighth story are faced with terra-cotta panels. Those of the upper half are cast in complex Byzantine guilloche and Celtic patterns. Above is a band of stylized triglyphs and metopes surmounted by a heavy projecting cornice consisting of moldings, a band of bosses, and a smooth band supported by a row of human and lion headed corbels. The ninth story, a loggia with paired terra-cotta spiral columns separating the small rectangular windows, is shorter than the stories below. Handsome strapwork embellishes the Union Square West corner. The attic is topped by an ovolo molding with recessed panels and incising.

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## NOTES

1. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits, and Dockets, Block 842, Lot 21. NB 1759-88, Municipal Archives, Surrogate's Court, clearly indicates that the plans for the Lincoln Building were filed in late December 1888, although Montgomery Schuyler in "The Works of R. H. Robertson," Architectural Record 6, no. 2 (Oct.-Dec. 1896), 214 and the History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture in New York City During the Last Quarter of a Century (1898; rpt. New York, 1867), 69 incorrectly date the building as 1885.
2. I. N. Phelps Stokes, The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909 vol. 5 (New York, 1915), s.v. 1808.
3. David Thomas Valentine, ed., Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York (New York, 1857), 480.
4. Stokes, s.v. 1815 Apr. 11; Sophia Schachter and Elsa Gilbertson, "Union Square," (unpub. manuscript submitted to the Program in Historic Preservation, Columbia University, A8790, June 1982), 3.
5. Stokes., s.v. 1831 Nov. 7.
6. Valentine, 480; Schachter and Gilbertson, 5.
7. Stokes, s.v. 1833 Apr. 4,; 1833 Apr. 20; 1833 Nov. 12; 1834 Jan. 14; 1834 May 30; 1835 May 14; 1836 Aug. 3; 1839 July 19; 1842 Oct. 11, 13; on use of the term "Union Square" see: Schachter and Gilbertson, 7.
8. M. Christine Boyer, Manhattan Manners: Architecture and Style, 1850-1900 (New York, 1985), 45; for the development of this area, see: Charles Lockwood, Bricks and Brownstones: The New York Row House, 1783-1924: An Architectural and Social History (New York, 1972), 132, 135-136; Charles Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown (Boston, 1976), 165-171.
9. A History of Real Estate, Building, and Architecture in New York City, 129.
10. The section above is based on research by Gale Harris and Lisa Koenigsberg, which was revised by Elisa Urbanelli.
11. "Block 842," (unpub. manuscript submitted to M. Christine Boyer, Preservation Program, Columbia University, 1982), np.
12. NB 1759-88.
13. Schachter and Gilbertson, 30.

14. "Block 842," np; Schachter and Gilbertson, 35; Dennis Steadman Francis, Architects in Practice, New York City, 1840-1900 (New York, 1980), 85.
15. For additional biographical information, see: Withey and Withey, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects, Deceased (1956; rpt. Los Angeles, 1970), 516; Sarah Bradford Landau, "Robertson, R. H." Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects, ed. Adolf K. Placzek vol. 3 (New York, 1982), 591.; Francis, 65; Schuyler, "The Works of R. H. Robertson," 184.
16. Schuyler, "The Works of R. H. Robertson," 184.
17. Francis, 65.
18. Landau, "Robertson," 591; Schuyler, "The Works of R. H. Robertson," 187; National Register of Historic Places, The Lincoln Building. Department of the Interior, Heritage, Conservation and Recreation Services (Form prepared by Andrew S. Dolkart), 2.
19. Burnham and Root's Monadnock Building (1889-92), which Marcus Whiffen and Frederick Koeper, American Architecture, Volume Two: 1860-1976 (1981; paperback ed. with new material, Cambridge, 1983), 246, term "the last of the great masonry load-bearing skyscrapers in Chicago", was also a transitional skyscraper incorporating load-bearing masonry bearing walls with an interior metal cage.
20. Leland M. Roth, A Concise History of American Architecture (1979; rpt. with corrections, New York, 1980), 372, defines the classic skyscraper as a structure "in which all building loads are transmitted to a ferrous metal skeleton, so that any external masonry is simply a protective cladding."
21. For an elaboration of the "columnar" analogy, see, for example: Montgomery Schuyler, "The Sky-Scraper Up-to-Date," Architectural Record 8, no. 3 (Jan.-Mar. 1899), 231-257.
22. Schuyler, "The Works of R. H. Robertson," 215-217.
23. Sarah Bradford Landau, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Reconsidered: Arcaded Buildings of the New York School, c. 1870-1890," in In Search of Modern Architecture: A Tribute to Henry-Russell Hitchcock, ed. Helen Searing (New York, 1984), 155-156.
24. On the Romanesque Revival, see, for example: John C. Poppeliers, S. Allen Chambers, Jr., and Nancy B. Schwartz, What Style Is It? (Washington, 1983), 62-65; Marcus Whiffen, American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to the Styles



(1969; first paperback edition, Cambridge, 1981), 61-67, 133-141.

25. Schuyler, "The Works of R. H. Robertson," 202.
26. Schuyler, "The Romanesque Revival in New York," Architectural Record 1, no. 1 (July-Sept. 1899), 26; in "The Romanesque Revival in America," Architectural Record 1, no. 2 (Oct.-Dec. 1891), Schuyler also noted the impossibility of accurately employing this historical style in a commercial structure with an elevator, although he certainly felt that elements of that historical style could be incorporated into the structure's design:

it is in 'elevator architecture,' however, that the test of the applicability of a style to commercial uses must be sought, while it is in elevator architecture that it is most clearly out of the question to produce examples of Romanesque or of any other historical style. ... One can of course use Romanesque details, and even Romanesque features in unmistakably modern buildings; and one can, if he have skill enough, give a Romanesque character, the character of massiveness and simplicity, of "rest and immobility," even to a modern warehouse or office-building." (186, 174)

27. Much of this description is based on: Dolkart, "item 7, Description."
28. Although the NB initially called for a ten-story building, subsequent correspondence indicates the height of the building was reduced by one story; in a letter to Albert F. D'Oench dated January 26, 1889, NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 842, Lot 21 Folder, Municipal Archives, Surrogate's Court, Robertson stated: "I have advised my client to reduce the height of the proposed building ... one story, making now the total height of the wall from the line of the curb 122 ft. 8 in. and the total depth between walls 111 ft. on the 1st story."
29. For contemporary photographs of the Lincoln Building, see: J. C. "The Havemeyer Building, -- A Type," Real Estate Record and Guide 51, no. 1311 (Apr. 29, 1893), 656; Schuyler, "The Works of R. H. Robertson," 214; History of Real Estate and Architecture in New York, 574, and a 1905 photograph of Union Square West featuring the Lincoln, Spingler, and Tiffany Buildings in the New York Historical Society collections, reproduced in "Goodbye to Union Square?" Village Views 1, no. 2 (Sept. 1984), 34.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 Lincoln Building has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

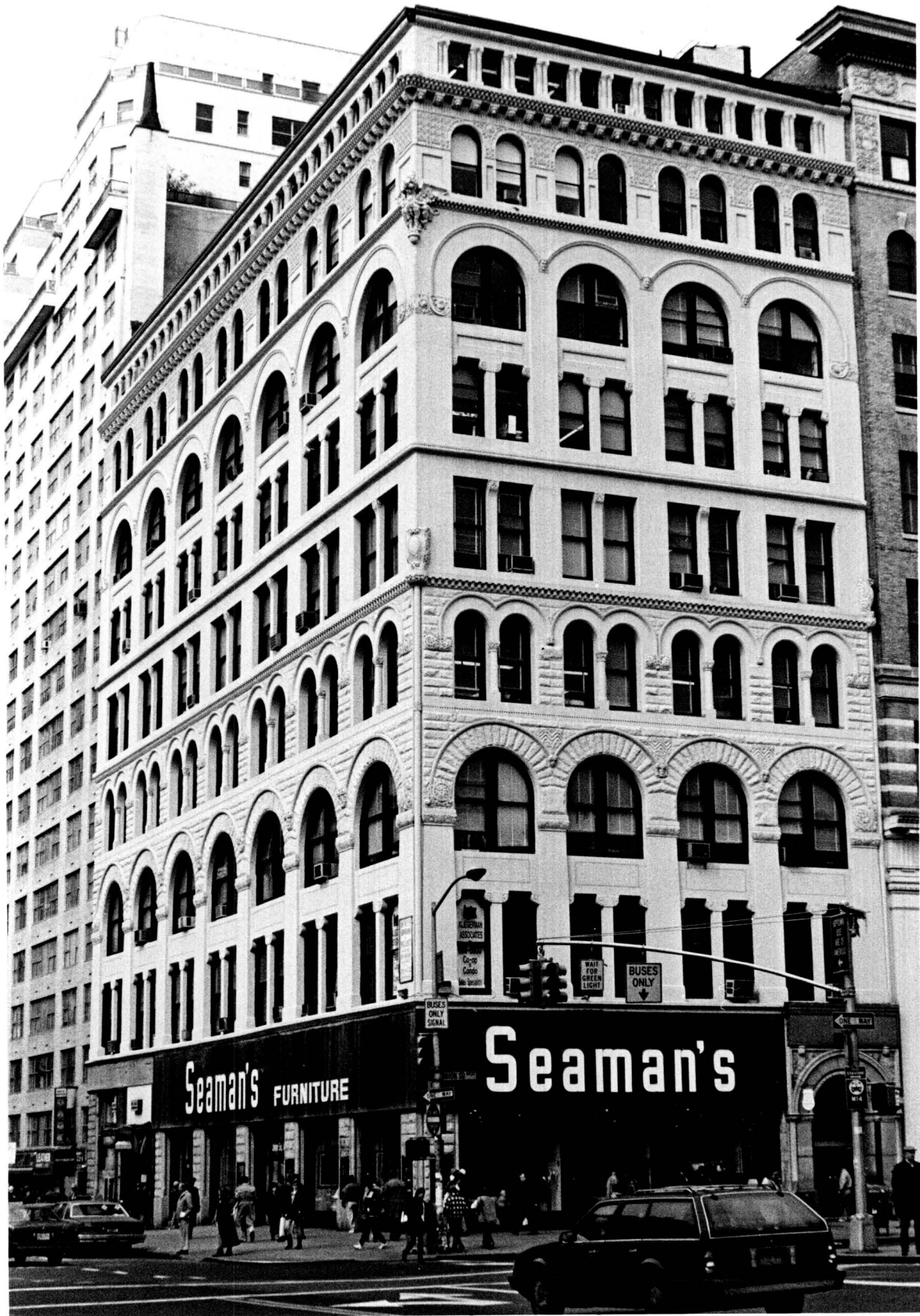
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Lincoln Building, a classic example of the layered arcade design solution, a solution in which New York pioneered, is representative of an important transitional phase in the history of tall buildings; that it was constructed in 1889-90 and was designed by the well-known New York architect R. H. Robertson; that interior metal skeleton skyscraper construction was employed in combination with traditional masonry bearing walls; and that the building is executed in limestone, granite, and brick, and has exceptionally fine carved and terra cotta detail -- which includes the corner griffin, acanthus scrolls, Byzantine capitals, crisp moldings, human and lion heads -- that is effectively placed on both the Union Square West facade and on the 14th-Street elevation.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Lincoln Building, 1-3 Union Square West, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 842, Lot 21, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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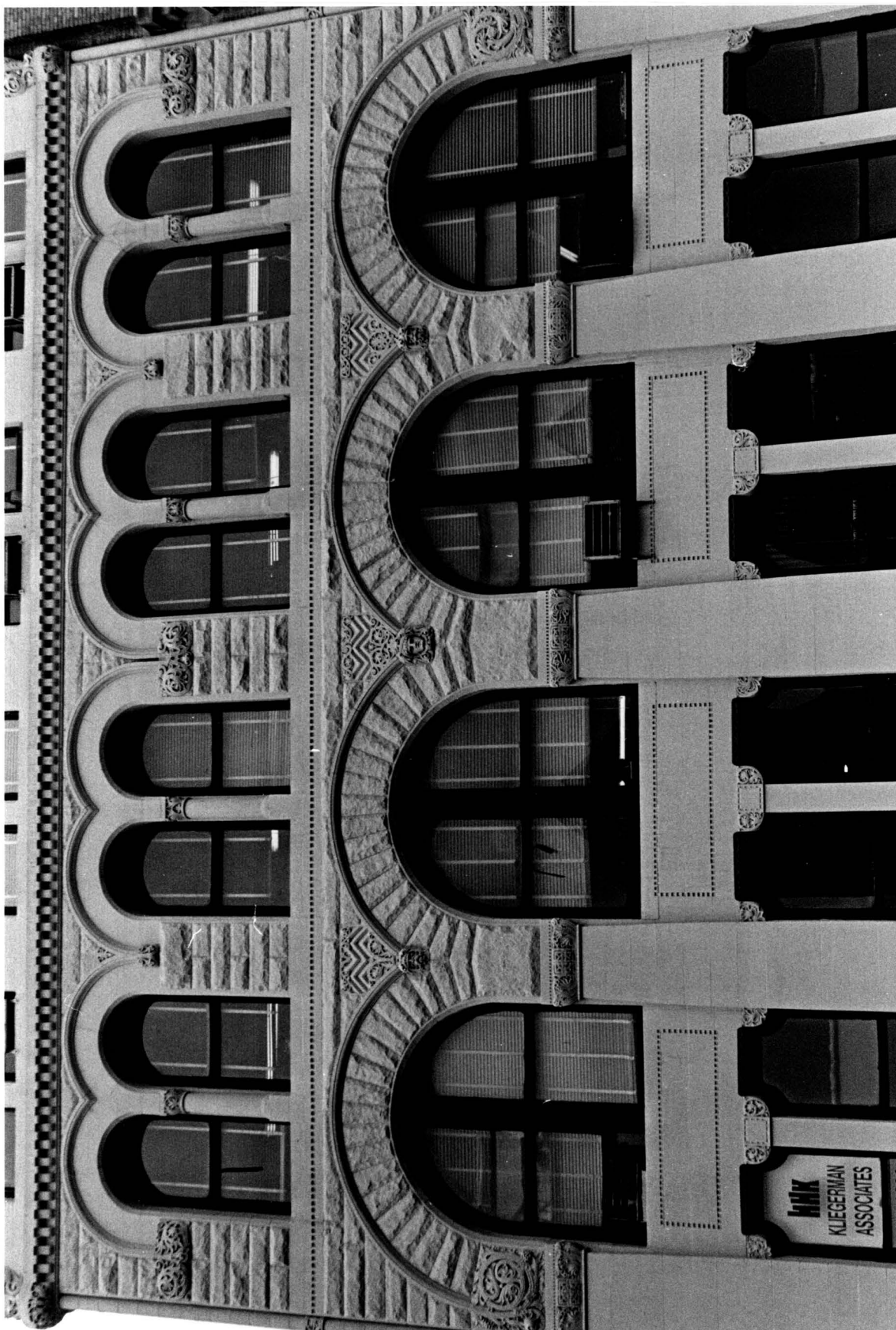
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The Lincoln Building  
1-3 Union Square West

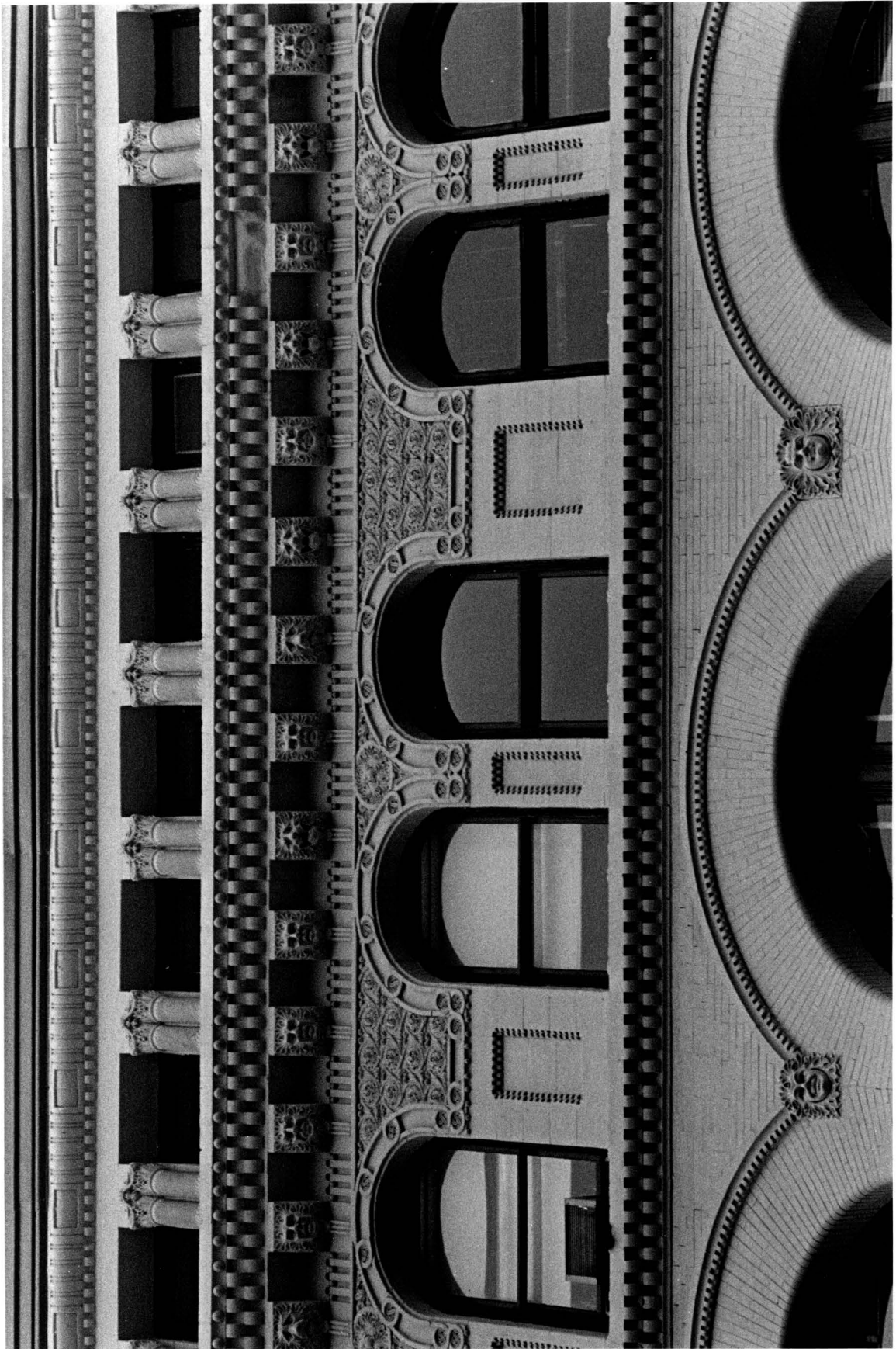
Architect: R. H. Robertson  
Photo credit: Carl Forster





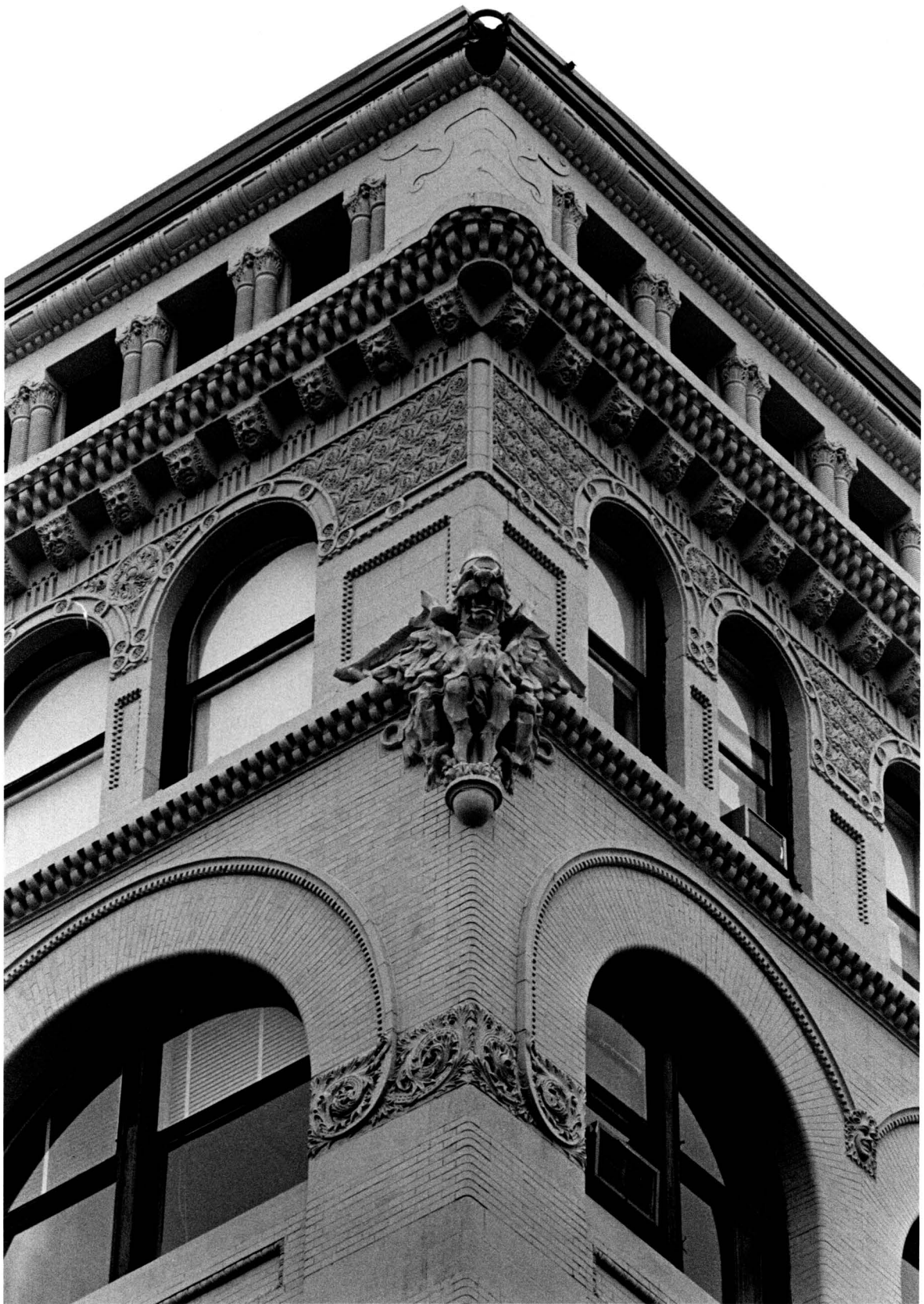
The Lincoln Building  
detail, second, third, and  
fourth stories

Photo credit: Carl Forster



The Lincoln Building  
detail, upper stories

Photo credit: Carl Forster



The Lincoln Building  
detail, southeast corner

Photo credit: Carl Forster





The Lincoln Building  
main entrance, Union Square  
West

Photo credit: Carl Forster