

The East Side Branch Library Project  
725 - 743 East Fifth Avenue

“KNOWLEDGE IS OF TWO KINDS, WE KNOW THE SUBJECT OUR-  
SELVES, OR WE KNOW WHERE WE CAN FIND INFORMATION UPON IT”

- SAMUEL JOHNSON

(originally printed on the northern frieze of the main reading room)

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preservation specialist  
Spring 2001

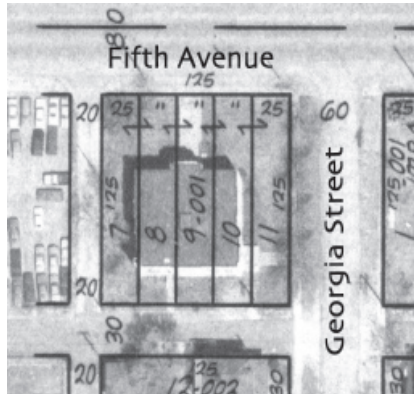


fig. #1:  
1979 Sidwell Aerial

On the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and Georgia Street sits the former East Side Branch of the Gary Public Library System. The East Side Branch is a rare example of an Art Deco designed library. This branch is one of only nine local buildings realized in the Art Deco style. In Gary, four buildings were constructed in this architectural style including the former Sears & Roebucks' Broadway flagship, the United States Post Office, and the Kennedy and East Side Branches of the public library. Outside of Gary, five buildings were completed in the Art Deco style including Hammond's City Hall, the East Chicago Headquarters of Inland Steel, Hobart's Art Theatre, the Michigan City Naval Armory, and Longbeach's Town Hall.

As with many structures within the historic Gary downtown core, the East Side Branch has sat abandoned for nearly two decades. Over the past ten years, the library's condition has progressively deteriorated due to water infiltration and a general lack of maintenance. The building's roof and mechanical systems have altogether failed, thereby greatly accelerating deterioration.

In 1998, the Gary Urban Enterprise Association (G.U.E.A.) purchased this former branch library. G.U.E.A. envisions rehabilitating this pivotal historic structure and using it as the organization's neighborhood headquarters.

A Brief History of the Gary Public Library: "the People's University"

In March 1908, a mere two years after the grading of the land for the First Subdivision, the Gary Public Library was established. The first library was housed in a storefront at 31 West Seventh Avenue with a "small collection of books."<sup>1</sup>

In 1910, Andrew Carnegie gave the city government \$65,000 to erect a permanent main library structure.<sup>2</sup> The Gary Land Company, a United States Steel

subsidiary that was charged with overseeing the town's development, matched Carnegie's gift and donated ten lots for the new building worth \$35,000 on Fifth Avenue between Adams and Jefferson Streets.<sup>3</sup>

Within a two-year time span, the main library was completed. Architect Henry Whitfield of New York supplied the design for the neo-classical building while Gary architect, J.J. Verplank, oversaw construction.<sup>4</sup> Whitfield's three-story, limestone clad library was laid out to hold a capacity of 60,000 books.<sup>5</sup> The building's first floor possessed a 300 seat auditorium, work rooms, and shelving. The library's reference department, main reading rooms, children's department, and delivery rooms were housed on the second floor. The third floor of the building possessed a large club room, art rooms, and additional book storage.<sup>6</sup>

During this era of civic improvement and prosperity, the Gary Public Library likewise decided to expand its services to the community by opening its first branch library. This proposed expansion was devised to better serve the city's citizens by offering convenient, neighborhood access to the library system.

The Gary Public Library began its expansion plans by opening the first branch library on the southeast

corner of 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Taft Street in Tolleston. Gary architect Joseph Wildermuth formulated the design for this branch. Wildermuth created a one-story, brick building that possessed an architectural styling highlighting elegant, yet subtle detailing and ornamentation. Wildermuth was influenced by the Italian villa and Renaissance styles. Wildermuth's Tolleston branch possessed arched masonry window openings, corbeled detailing, a skylight, parapet wall, and tinted mortar joints. This branch helped to serve the surrounding community of Tolleston by offering "1,500 volumes accessible three days in the week."<sup>7</sup>

Within a few years of opening the Tolleston branch, the Gary Public Library continued its expansion by opening "library stations" in the Emerson and Froebel Schools. These "library stations" were created to provide a "direct service to the public school system."<sup>8</sup>

As the city and its library needs continued to grow, the Gary Public Library selected to transform its public school "library stations" into neighborhood branch libraries. The Froebel School station was transformed into the Bailey Branch, built on the southeast corner of Madison Street and Fifteenth Avenue, while the Emerson School location became the East Side Branch Library, the building highlighted in this analysis.

### "Knowledge is Power" : Emerson's New Branch Library

In the spring of 1929, the Directorate of the Gary Public Library again called upon Joseph Wildermuth to provide a design for a one-story branch library. This new building would be officially named the East Side Branch Library and serve "the district east of Broadway."

Wildermuth was hired as the East Side Branch's project architect since he had previously worked with the Gary Public Library on its Tolleston Branch. Furthermore, Wildermuth was chosen because he had overseen the completion of his design for the Gary Public School's Memorial Auditorium, located at Seventh Avenue and Massachusetts Street. Memorial Auditorium illustrated Wildermuth's design talent and his hope to bring newer forms of architectural styling into his commissions and the city.

The new East Side Branch would become the seventh branch in the public library system. For this new building, the Board of Directors approved the acquisition of five lots, at the cost of \$15,000, along the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and Georgia Street.<sup>9</sup> Each lot was 25 feet wide by 125 feet deep, thus allowing the new building to possess a considerable 125 foot frontage along Fifth Avenue.

H.H. Olney of East Chicago was hired as the project's general contractor and Lighthouse Electrical of Gary was selected as the electrical subcontractor. Construction of the East Side Library began with the excavation of the building's foundation in July 1929.<sup>10</sup>

As the new branch possessed a "conspicuous location" on Fifth Avenue or the Dunes Highway, then a major east-west vehicular artery between Chicago and the East, Wildermuth specified a Bedford limestone exterior envelope. Wildermuth primarily chose this material due to its quality and durability. In addition to the material's physical characteristics, Wildermuth understood that this type of limestone was highly sought after for its aesthetic value. Countless grand architectural designs had been completed with this material and were generally looked upon as the architectural "ideal." By possessing an exterior of Bedford limestone, the branch's location and use would unquestionably be highlighted.

By late fall, work on the exterior shell of the building was complete. The exterior was realized at a cost of \$32,000.<sup>12</sup> With the completion of the exterior, focus now shifted to finishing the interior. Interior plaster work began on January 20, 1930.<sup>13</sup> Soon after work commenced, the Board of Directors for the Library sent the general contractor an order to put a rush on

finishing the plaster work “ in order that the interior woodwork may be finished in short time and the building (be) put into service by early spring.”<sup>14</sup>

City Librarian, William J. Hamilton, was put in charge of selecting the furnishings for the East Side Branch. Hamilton stated in a period newspaper article that furnishing the branch library would cost \$4,000.<sup>15</sup> Hamilton also stated that “the new branch will contain some of the latest innovations in reading room facilities and will be a model of modern library efficiency.”<sup>16</sup>

The East Side Branch Library was opened for circulation on May 19, 1930. This branch was initially scheduled to be opened to the surrounding community every day with limited hours on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday.<sup>17</sup>

#### Art Deco: A Modern Style

At the 1925 Paris International Exposition of Decorative Arts and Modern Industrials, a fresh and revolutionary decorative movement was introduced. Entities such as the French government, industry, and designers formulated pavilions, interiors, gardens, and

fashion that expressed a new sense of post-war design and ornamentation.

The Art Deco style, whose name is derived from this pivotal 1925 exhibition, was an artistic movement that existed between World War I and World War II. Art Deco was conceived from a mixture of post World War I reaction, avant-garde European art styles, the rejection of classical forms, and the introduction of new technology and materials.

Architects and designers who created in the Art Deco style used clean lines, streamlining, symmetry, new materials, abstraction, vivid coloring, geometric shapes, and repetitive patterning to express simplified, modern aesthetics. The Art Deco aesthetic was based on decorative embellishment, the mixing of building materials, and the interplay of mass and volume.

As with a majority of American architects, Joseph Wildermuth learned about the Art Deco style through architectural journals, exhibitions, lectures, and documentation of construction. During the late 1920s, construction of several key designs in New York City, including the Chrysler, Empire State, McGraw Hill, and Daily News Buildings, helped to disseminate this style to the American masses. These buildings were documented in architectural magazines and newspapers,

right  
fig. #2, historic photograph, northern exterior



The East Side Library Branch

thereby highlighting each as key American examples. In addition to these New York City skyscrapers, Wildermuth was greatly influenced by two local Art Deco buildings: Sears & Roebucks' Broadway flagship and Inland Steel's East Chicago Headquarters.

An architectural analysis of the East Side Branch Library

Wildermuth designed a simple, yet elegant branch library. Wildermuth fused his knowledge of classical architecture with his understanding of the Art Deco movement. Wildermuth's combination of architectural styles is commonplace as many architects of the late 1920s and 1930s appropriated to meet their design needs. For this branch, Wildermuth used Art Deco design concepts such as mixing building materials, highlighting the interplay of the building's volume and mass, and incorporating modern decorative patterning. These characteristics helped to create a truly modern library branch.

Wildermuth specified materials such as glass, Bedford limestone, and metal to create a subtle and playful Art Deco character. Wildermuth incorporated Bedford limestone cladding, hung over masonry, to create a luxurious, rectilinear emphasis. Through the use of buff

colored limestone, the building's mass became a continuous, nearly smooth or streamlined surface. In juxtaposition to the continuous limestone envelope, Wildermuth incorporated large windows to break the continuity of the exterior shell. These windows, which contained numerous glass panes, are set back or "punched" into the exterior. Wildermuth designed two styles of windows: divided lite, metal casements and double hung wooden examples. The divided lite casement windows further expressed the mixing of materials due to their metal muntins and circular decorative ornament, see fig. #2. By using large glass panes in the casement and double hung windows, Wildermuth was able to use the materials' properties to create a transparent space that helped to further emphasized the window's "punched in" character. During daylight hours, the windows would reflect bright sunlight, creating a shimmering or liquid patterning effect. Also, these amply sized windows helped to illuminate the interior and its reading areas with natural light during the day. In contrast to the daytime qualities, the windows would become portals into the interior of the building when electrical lighting was utilized during the evening. In order to unify the northern exterior shell, Wildermuth incorporated these aesthetic characteristics into the main entry and its doors. These doors were constructed of cast metal and possessed decorative muntin separation and ornament.

Besides featuring building materials and their characteristics to create a dramatic interplay, Wildermuth used volumes and massing to highlight the building's exterior. For the main entrance, Wildermuth created a portico that projected away from the building's main rectilinear massing. This entry possesses a subtle two-tiered vertical setback. This setback helps to emphasize the building's main entrance. Recessed repetitive floral and acanthus leaf patterning frames the entry.

The branch, if bisected, would possess nearly identical floor plans, elevations, and ornamentation. On the exterior envelope, Wildermuth formulated detailing that is based on classical motifs. Upon analyzing these details, one can see that Wildermuth created highly stylized and abstracted ornament. Wildermuth's details express a simplicity of form and realization. In comparison to classical details, Wildermuth's ornament is non-functional and does not refer to an intended context; rather these details are simply reflective of a decorative ideal. In classical architecture, the majority of the ornamentation refers to a function, either construction or myth oriented. Though aesthetically similar, the East Side Library's ornament reflects Wildermuth's desire to bring a simplified, modern style into his commissions and to create a method of detailing that is fairly liberated from classical connotations. Details such as bracketing, fluted torus, flora,

fret work, rosettes, and cartouches are found on the exterior of the library, as viewed in fig. # 7 - fig. #11.

In these various details, Wildermuth included iconography that symbolized the acquisition and transfer of knowledge. Wildermuth incorporated opened books, torchieres, and lit candles to represent enlightenment or the procurement of knowledge. To emphasize the exterior decorative motifs and the idea of learning, Wildermuth created five bas-relief panels to personify the library and its mission. These three-dimensional, sculptural panels illustrate the acquisition of knowledge through listening and reading. Each of these panels reflect Art Deco styling in that they are highly stylized. The figures depicted in each of the panels are rendered in an abstracted, almost wind swept manner. Each figure's face is shown only in profile with an accentuation of the hair, eyes, and ears. On the eastern façade, a bas-relief spandrel panel, see fig. #16, depicts the dawn of learning during the classical age. A hand written scroll is being read by a male figure to two females. This panel illustrates learning via listening. Also in this same panel, the sun is rising above the mountains and symbolizes the bringing forth of enlightenment. In addition to this panel, Wildermuth created a related or sister spandrel allegory for the western exterior, see fig. #17, that represents modern times. In this panel, two female figures are reading



books in front of an industrial complex; this complex is presumably United States Steel's Gary Works. A large, burning sphere featuring an opened book is the focal point of this panel. This sun-like element again represents learning and knowledge. In this panel Wildermuth documented the possibility of acquiring knowledge through reading. In contrast to the eastern panel, the western panel features the acquisition of knowledge through reading printed books. The western panel personifies the advancement of mankind through education, technology, such as the printing press, and industry, such as the Gary Works. To further complement the eastern and western panels, Wildermuth used two supplementary panels to reflect the theme of acquiring knowledge. Two sister spandrel panels, that face Fifth Avenue, illustrate a grouping of figures reading. The figures, as viewed in fig. #18 and #19, are rendered in seated positions with opened books in their hands. The focal point of each of these matching panels is a table possessing books standing between two bookends. Surprisingly, the book end details used in these two matching panels are miniature brackets such as the ones used in the exterior shell. To complete the allegory of the library's purpose, Wildermuth created a frieze panel, see fig. #13, above the main entry that reads "Knowledge is Power." This panel symbolizes the transfer of knowledge from educated, older generations to youth. A

male figure, with a full beard, is featured on the left side of the panel poised to give a chalice a young, female figure. The female figure's hands are positioned in an opened gesture, waiting to accept the chalice. The chalice represents knowledge. These figures are kneeling in front of a fire and are below another glowing sphere.

#### The Interior of the East Side Branch

Wildermuth divided the interior into three sections: the main reading room, the reference section, and the children's department. The main reading room, designed specifically for use by adults, was located in the eastern half of the building. This space housed both fiction and non-fiction titles. On the western half of the branch, one would find the children's reading room that featured books and interactive displays. Located between these two reading rooms, one would find the main desk and reference section. Wildermuth created this central reference area to differentiate and separate the two wings. In the rear of the building, Wildermuth laid out two additional spaces: a clubroom for neighborhood meetings and a work room for the librarians. The clubroom was located on the eastern side of the building and possessed its own entrance and porch. The librarian's workroom and an

entry to the basement boiler room were housed in the rear of the western section. In order to provide maximum floor space, Wildermuth designed the library's bookshelves to be recessed into the walls. Wildermuth additionally maximized space by positioning the radiators behind the interior walls.

As seen on the exterior, Wildermuth mixed building materials to provide a luxurious Art Deco interior. Wildermuth incorporated wood, metal, linoleum, plaster, and glass. Wildermuth specified that the interior masonry walls would possess a smooth plaster application. In order to unify the building's overall design, Wildermuth had the interior plaster painted a buff coloring to match the exterior limestone envelope. Moreover, the recessed bookcases and smooth buff-colored plaster helped to create an interior that was smooth and uninterrupted. In numerous spots, see fig. #23, Wildermuth incorporated well-known quotes with corresponding decorative plaster panels. For example, over the main entry area, a triptych was formulated to celebrate the library with the inscription "the true university is a collection of books." In this three-panel piece, two women, possibly muses, are depicted playing instruments, a flute and a lyre, near the flame of knowledge. The concept of "knowledge" is again depicted with an accompanying lit candle and opened book. Wildermuth likewise incorporated various

decorative plaster details on the interior including griffins, four leaf clovers, sinuous floral modillions, continuous architectonic entablatures, floral capitals and fluted columns, and patterned bordering. Wildermuth contrasted the plaster walls with lightly stained wooden bookcases, built-in seating, and millwork. Dark pink and black contrasting linoleum checkerboard tiles helped to tie together the interior space.

#### Existing Conditions and Design Scenarios

As viewed in fig. #26, the former East Side Branch Library is opened to the elements and entry. The building's roof system, wooden frame construction resting on steel I-beams, has thoroughly failed. Without a functioning roof, the building is subjected to massive water infiltration. Depending on the time of the year, the building may have several inches of standing water, snow, or ice. Due to the roof's failure, much of the building's interior elements have been irreplaceably lost. In 1997, a local religious congregation unsuccessfully attempted to turn this building into its new sanctuary. This attempt further compromised the interior's integrity as the group removed key architectural elements. Today extant original plaster and wood details are no longer in place. Remnant sections of plaster and wood can be found littered through out

the interior. The building's linoleum checkerboard tile floor has also been lost. Small, sporadic clusters of original tile can be found in the southwestern section of the building. As viewed in fig. #33 - fig. #36, several original windows are additionally found in situ. These original windows, including casements, transoms, and double hung, should be removed and either conserved or replaced with historically appropriate examples.

As the interior's historic integrity is minimal, the Gary Urban Enterprise Association hopes to create a modern interior space that is consistent with the building's exterior and 21<sup>st</sup> Century interior design. Probable design scenarios for the rehabilitated interior include modular office spaces and furniture, loft style floor plans, exposed masonry walls, and Art Deco inspired decorative details and lighting.

In sharp contrast to the interior, the exterior shell is currently in fair condition. The Bedford limestone has held up well over the years. The limestone details are still crisp with minimal weathering and discoloring. Due to the building not being maintained and periods of continuous water infiltration, numerous limestone sections are pulling away from the building's skeleton. One can view these pieces pulling away in the chimney, eastern parapet wall, and the front porch. Water infiltration and weathering has likewise eroded

many of the joints. As depicted in fig. #37, numerous blocks do not possess mortar joints. Without mortar joints, the limestone cannot properly shed water or account for freeze and thaw cycles.

G.U.E.A. intends to restore the exterior envelope. Repair and conservation of the exterior limestone is a crucial component of the building's rehabilitation plan. The scope of work on the exterior envelope would include a gentle cleaning of the limestone, repair of the blocks' fasteners, and new mortar joints; thereby resurrecting a significant Art Deco envelope.

In addition to working on the building itself, exterior landscaping is needed. The East Side Branch was originally amply landscaped. Deciduous shrubs and trees were planted around the library to act as bordering and decorative devices. One section of the site's original landscape design stills remains: the tree line along Georgia Street. These trees should be trimmed and maintained as to keep this significant historic element. New shrubbery should be planted along Fifth Avenue once the building's rehabilitation is complete.

The East Side Branch Library: “New Century, New City”

The East Side Branch Library project is a crucial component in the redevelopment of the downtown core and the Emerson community. Presently the Fifth Avenue business corridor is under utilized and sits nearly abandoned. A successful rehabilitation of this building will help return density and business related activities to the community. The rehabilitation of this building reflects a multi-tiered redevelopment initiative. This project will return G.U.E.A.’s offices to its target zone, help formulate a stronger community presence for the organization, and illustrate that adaptive reuse projects are a viable component to the city’s future. By returning G.U.E.A.’s offices to its target zone, the organization will be in close proximity to its residents, target neighborhood, and city government. G.U.E.A.’s offices are currently located in the Miller section of the city, approximately three miles east of Emerson. Even more important, a successful reuse project will preserve a rare example of an Art Deco designed building. Interestingly, the original purpose and function of the structure will not be modified. The Gary Public Library created the East Side Branch to educate, enlighten, and advance the citizens of the city. G.U.E.A.’s purpose similarly reflects these goals and aspirations for Emerson. The building’s decorative details will again reflect the warehousing and

transfer of knowledge, now through the process of urban enterprise development and neighborhood improvement.

“Knowledge is Power”



## Appendix A : Photographic Documentation and Comparisons

January - February 2001

right:  
fig. #3, northern envelope





left:  
fig. #4, southern envelope

The East Side Library Branch



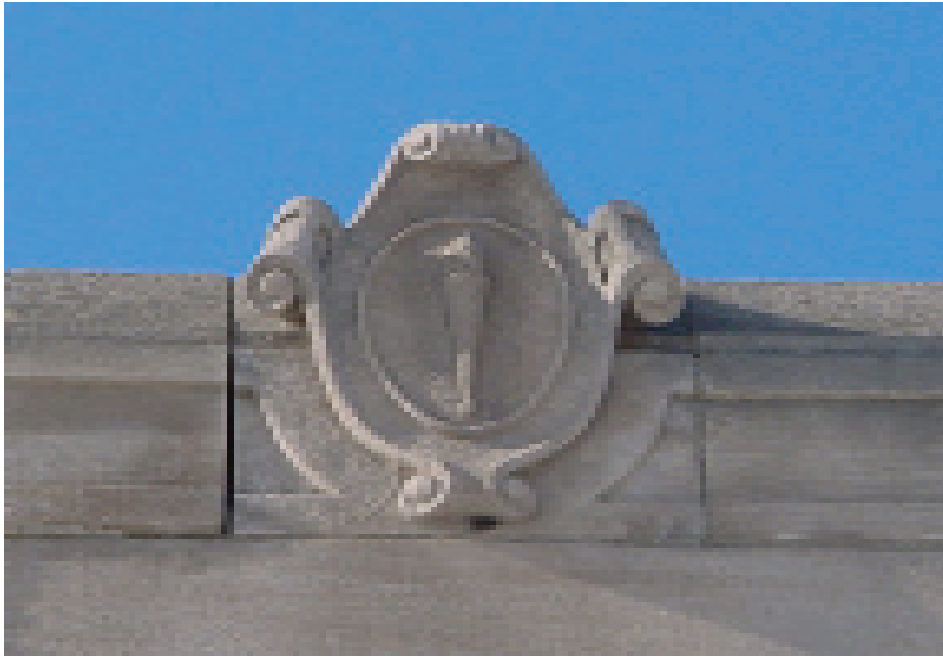
right:  
fig. #5, eastern envelope





left:  
fig. #6, western envelope

The East Side Library Branch





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opposite page

left:

fig. #7, cartouche detail, eastern envelope

center:

fig. #8 door surround detail, eastern envelope

right:

fig. #9, fret detail, eastern envelope

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left:

fig. #10, ornament, northern envelope

right:

fig. #11, bracket, northern envelope





opposite page

left:

fig. #12, building name plate, northern envelope

right:

fig. #13, frieze bas-relief panel above main entry,  
northern envelope

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left:

fig. #14, door surround detail, clubroom entry  
eastern envelope

right:

fig. #15, exterior wall sconce detail, clubroom  
entry, eastern envelope



fig. #16, detail of eastern spandrel panel



fig. #17, detail of western spandrel panel



fig. #18, detail of northeastern spandrel panel



fig. #19, detail of northwestern spandrel panel







fig. #20, contemporary photograph of the northern façade



fig. #21, historic photograph of the northern façade



fig. #22, contemporary interior photograph of entry and reference desk



fig. #23, historic interior photograph depicting entry and reference desk



fig. #24, contemporary interior photograph of clubroom and adult reading room



fig. #25, historic interior photograph of clubroom and adult reading room







fig. #27, contemporary interior photograph depicting roof members



fig. #28, contemporary detail showing roof construction





The East Side Library Branch



opposite page

far left:

fig. #29, detail showing original metal hangers  
for vault and plaster work, main entry

far right:

fig. #30, detail of recessed bookcase opening  
and steel beams for hanging plaster  
ornament, eastern wall

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fig. #31, limestone door surround, west entry

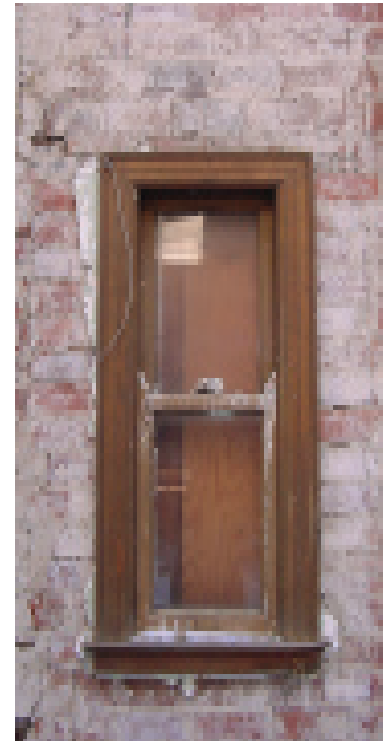
right:

fig. #32, detail illustrating ornament in the  
door surround, west entry



right:  
fig. #33, extant window grouping, northeast  
envelope

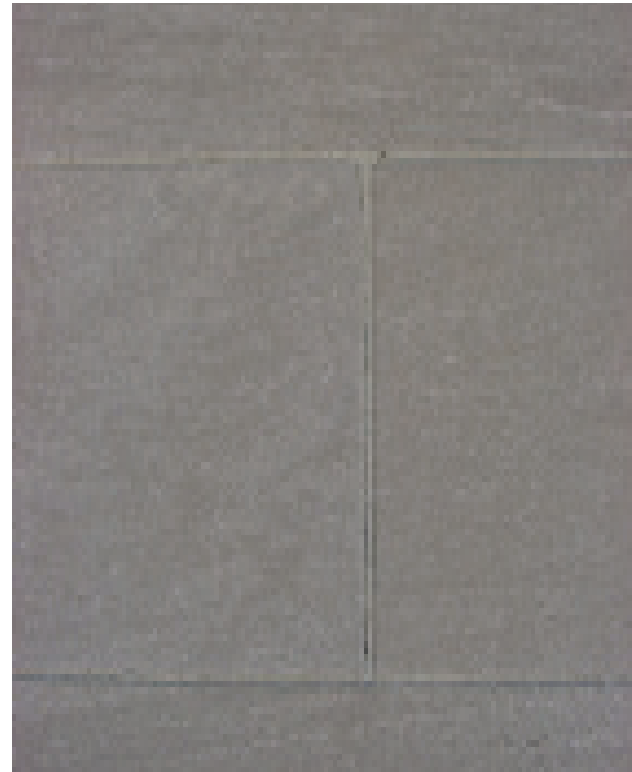
far right:  
fig. #34, extant doublehung window, south  
west envelope





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fig. #35, extant window, western envelope

far left:  
fig. #36, extant window grouping, western envelope



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left:

fig. #37, weathered joint

right:

fig. #38, existing original joint

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far right:

fig. #39, existing Georgia Street tree line

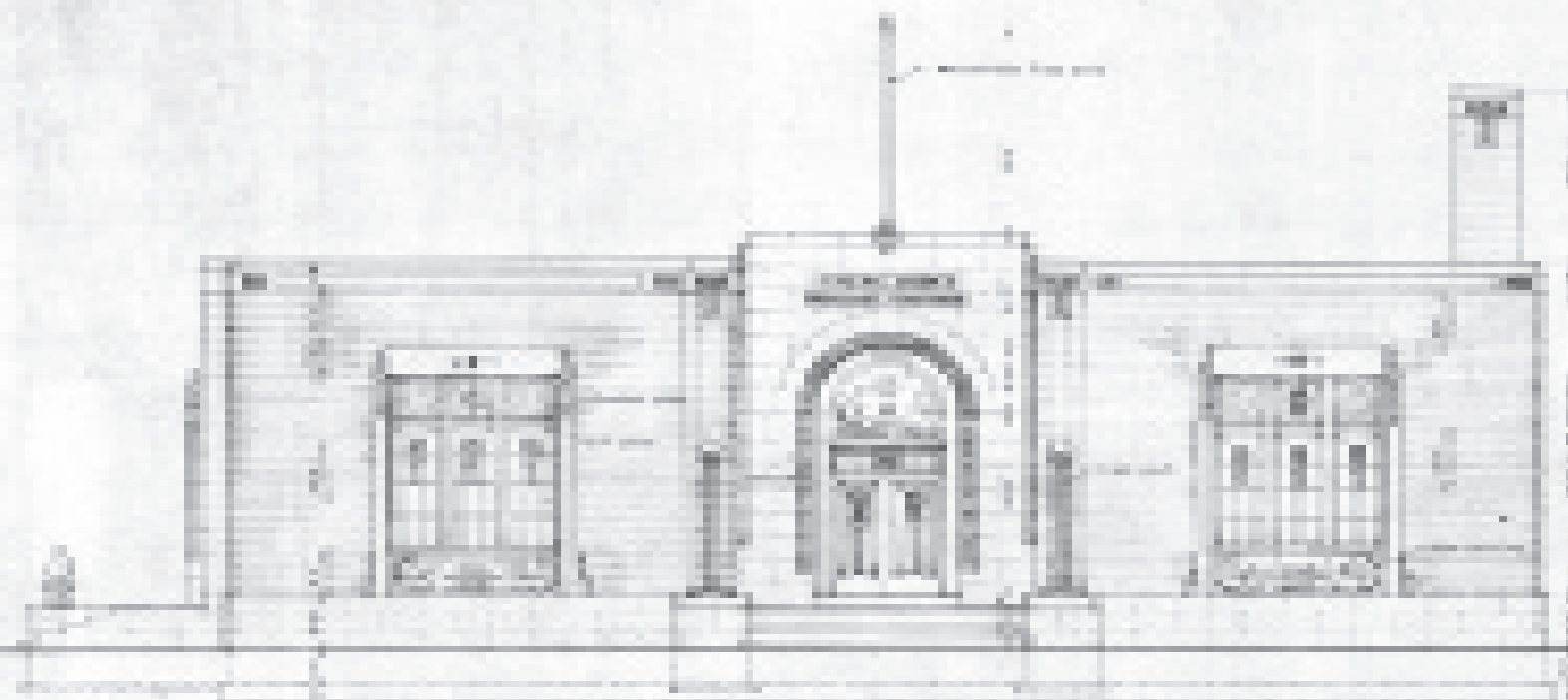


The East Side Library Branch



## Appendix B : Original Blueprint Set

drawings depict the building's exterior elevations, interior floor plans, interior cross sections, and landscape planting



- FIFTH AVENUE ELEVATION -

Scale: 1/4" = 1'-0"

- EAST SIDE BRANCH LIBRARY -

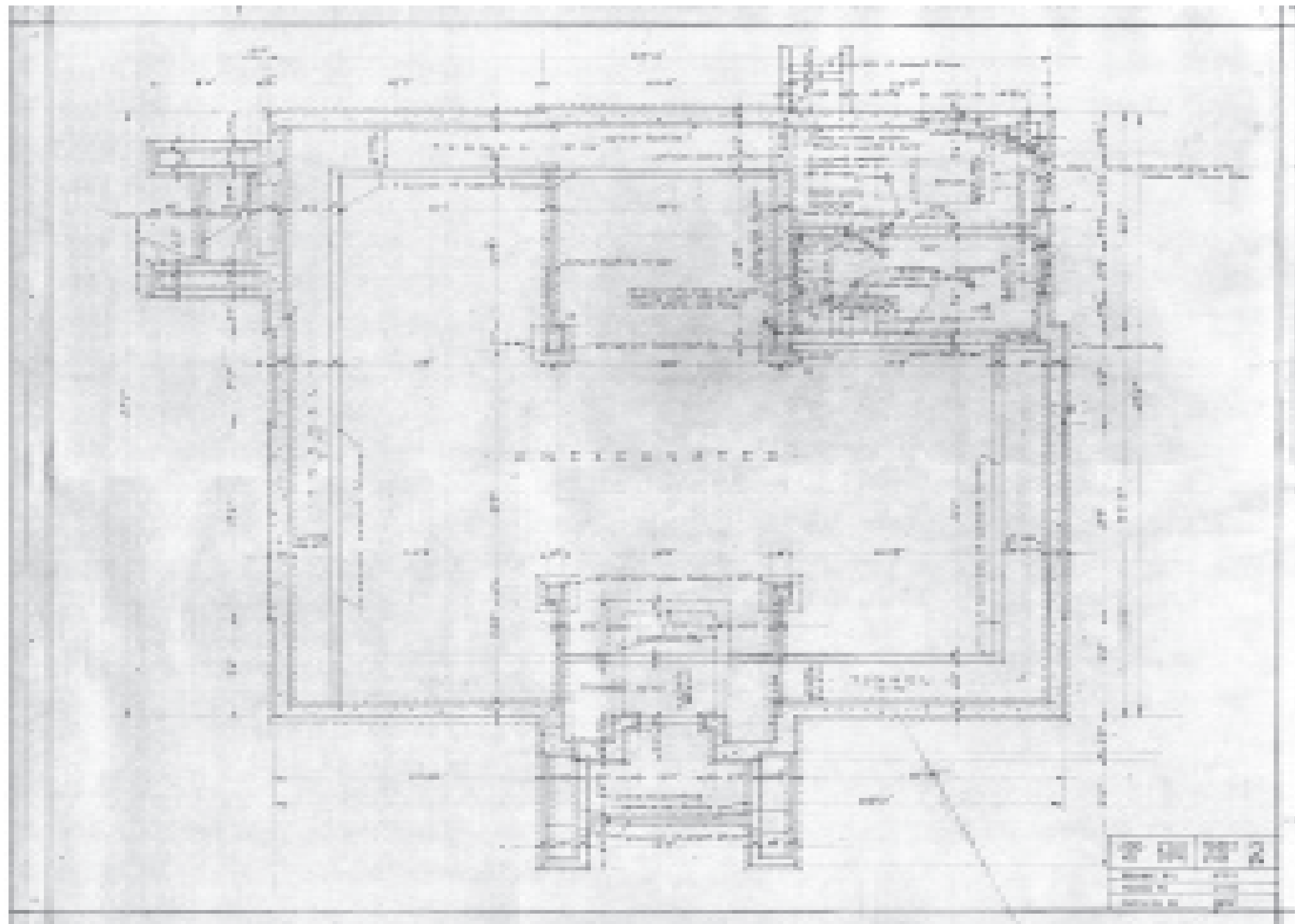
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ARCHITECT

NEW YORK, N.Y.

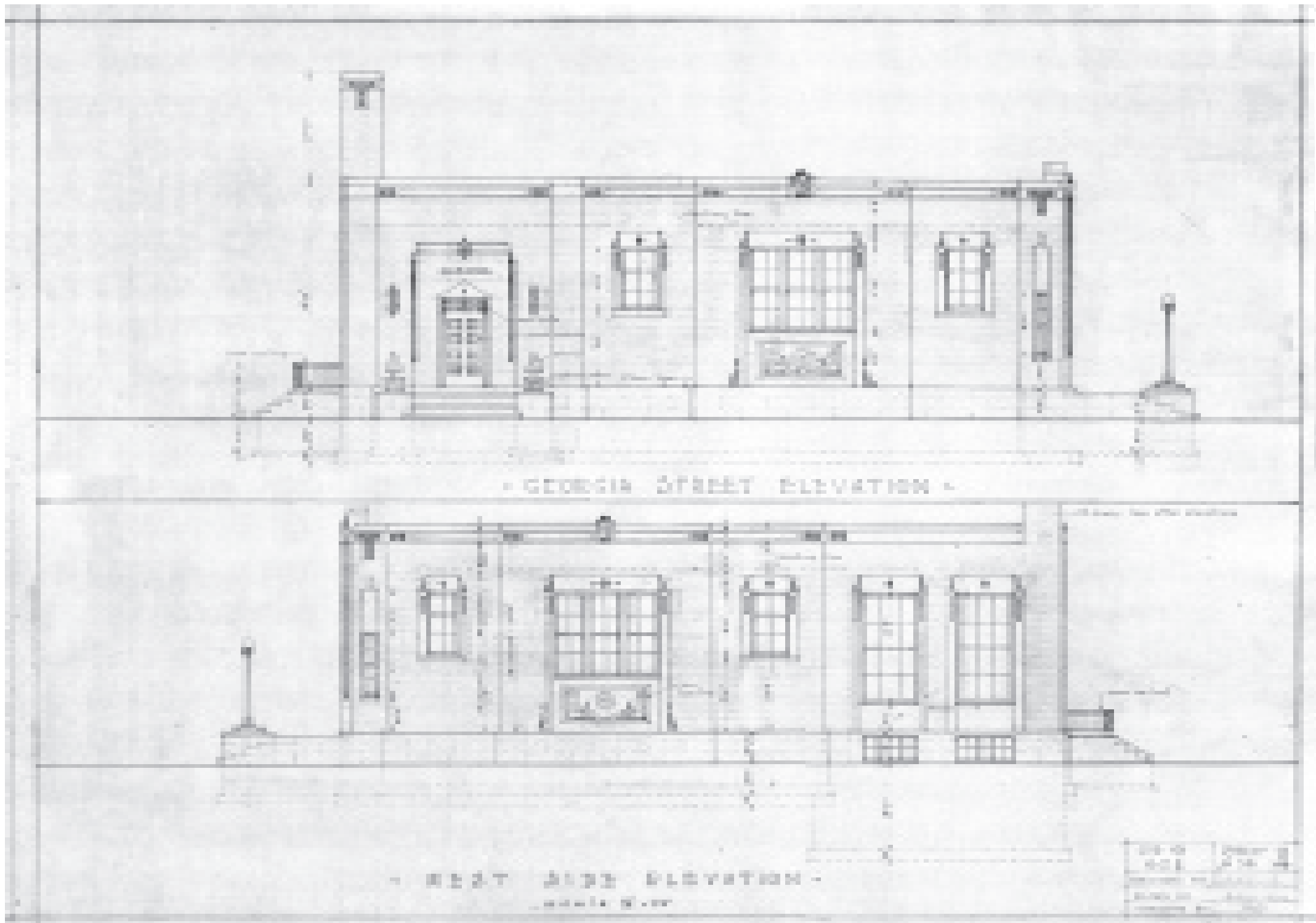
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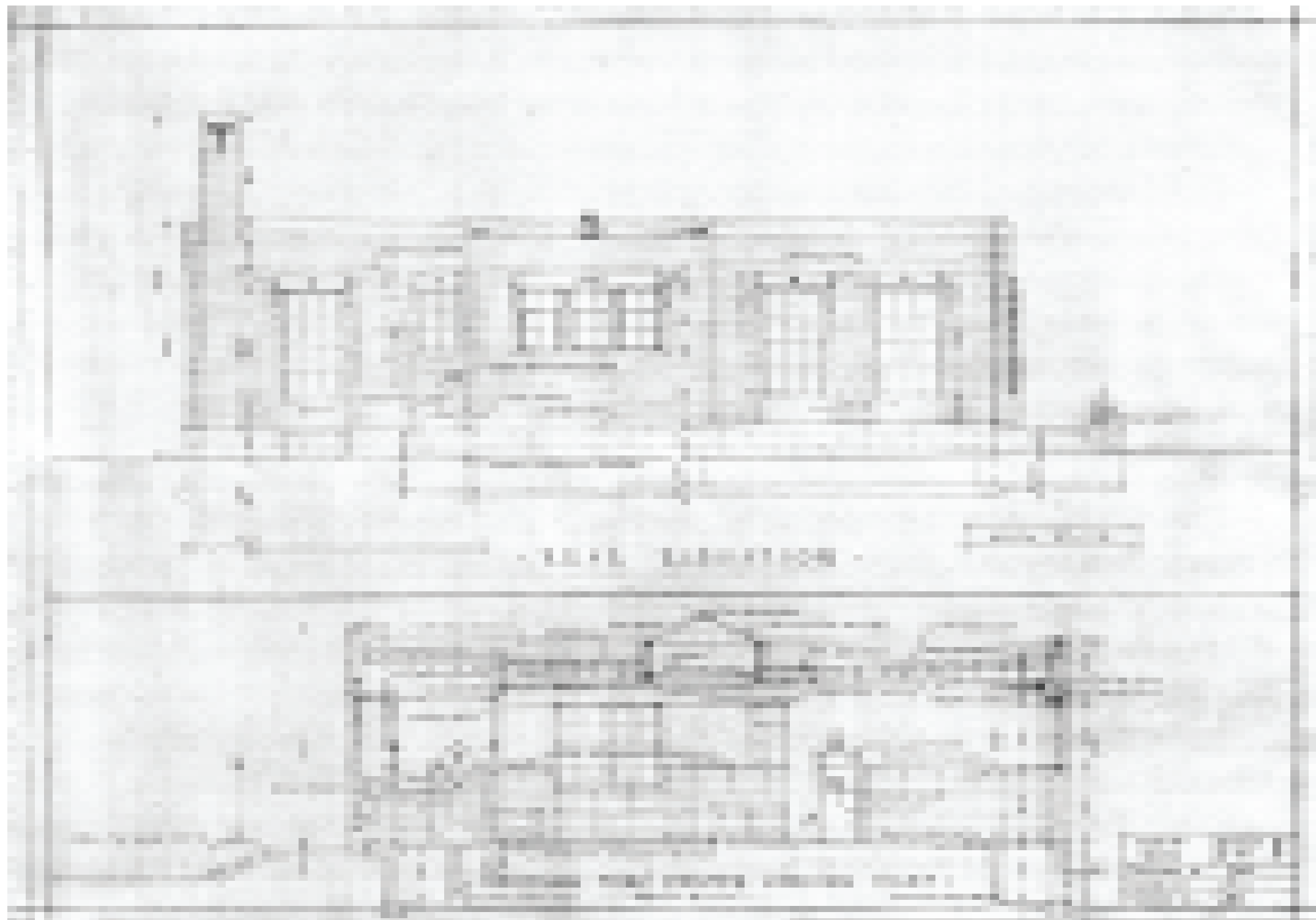
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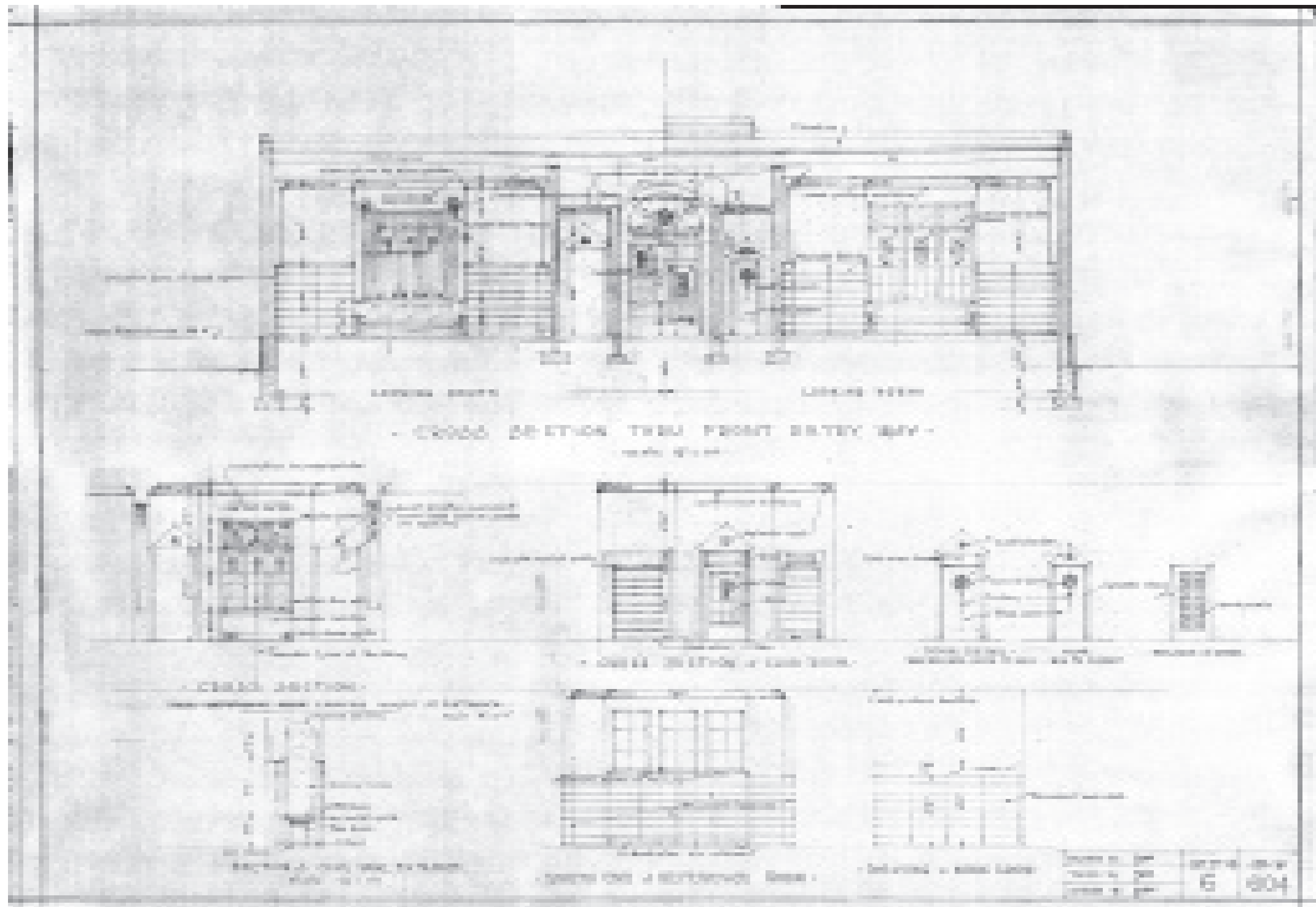


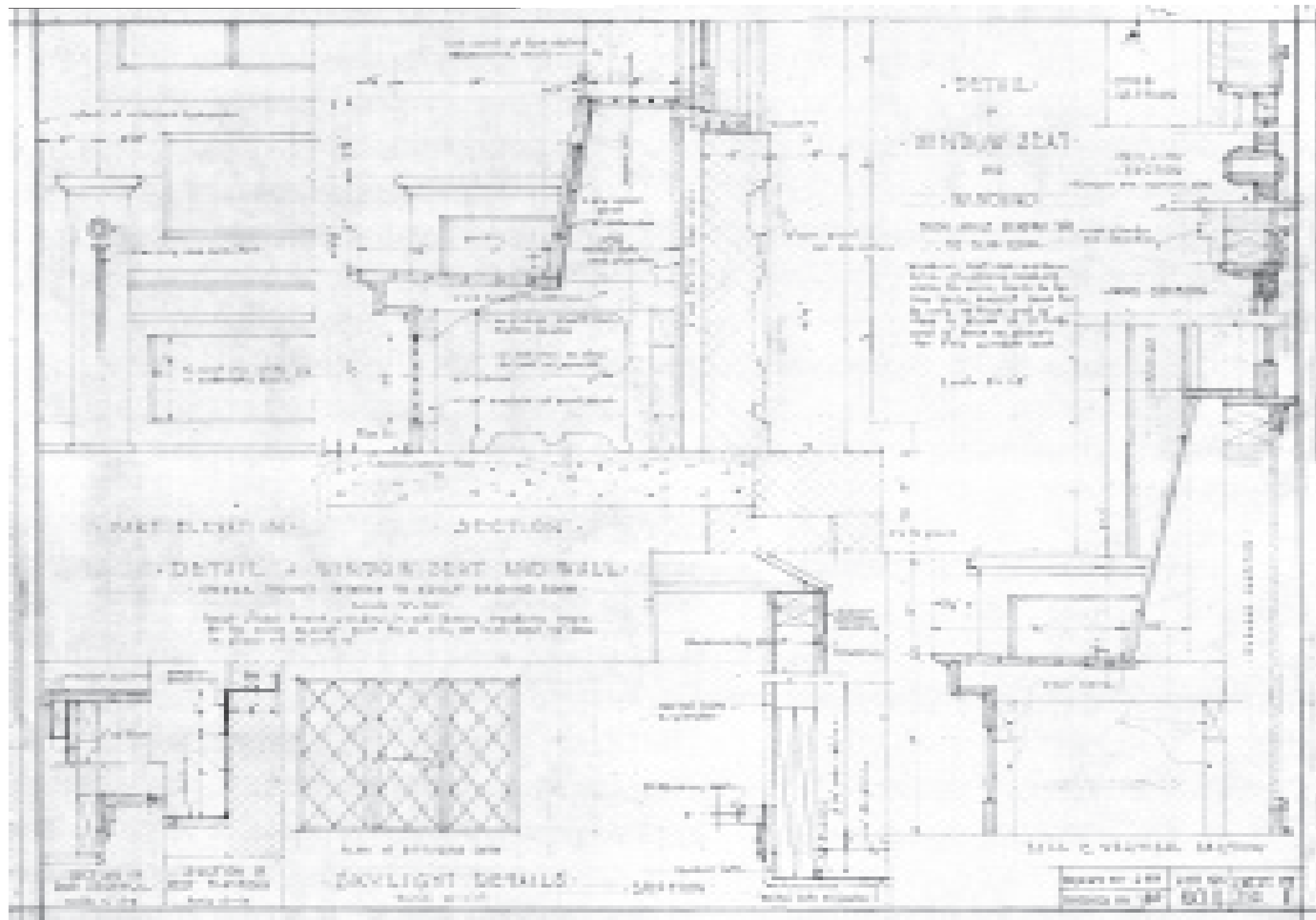


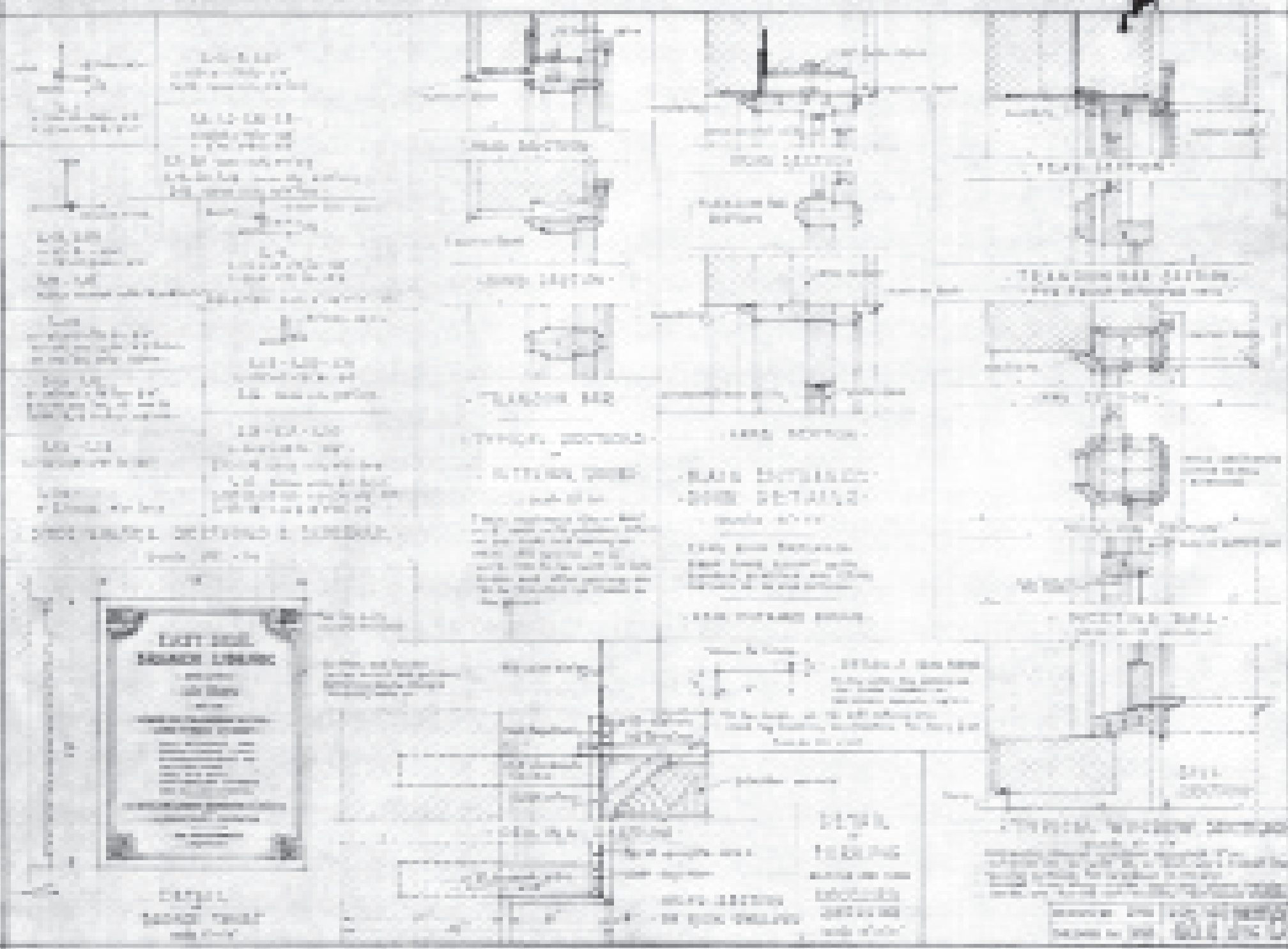


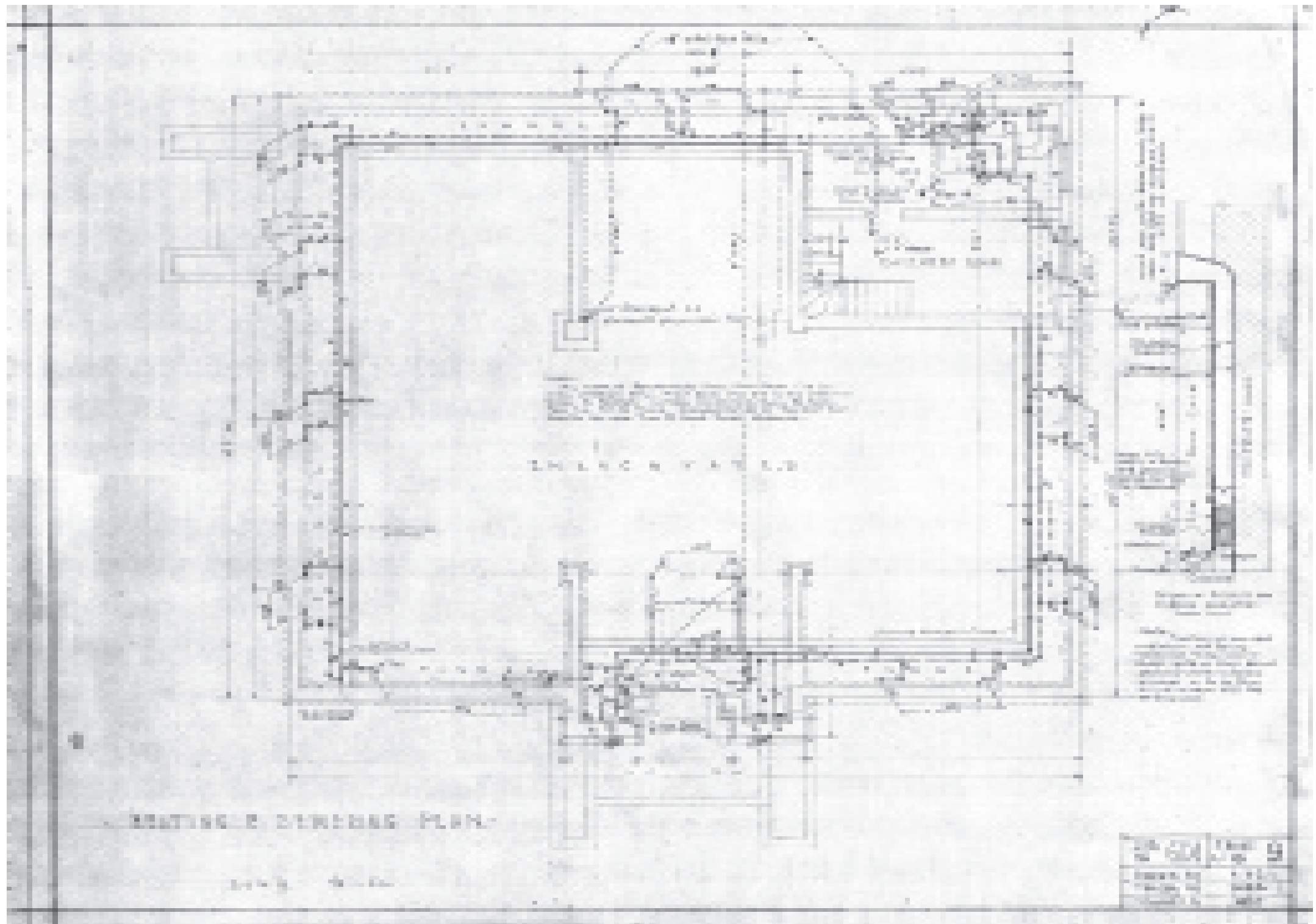


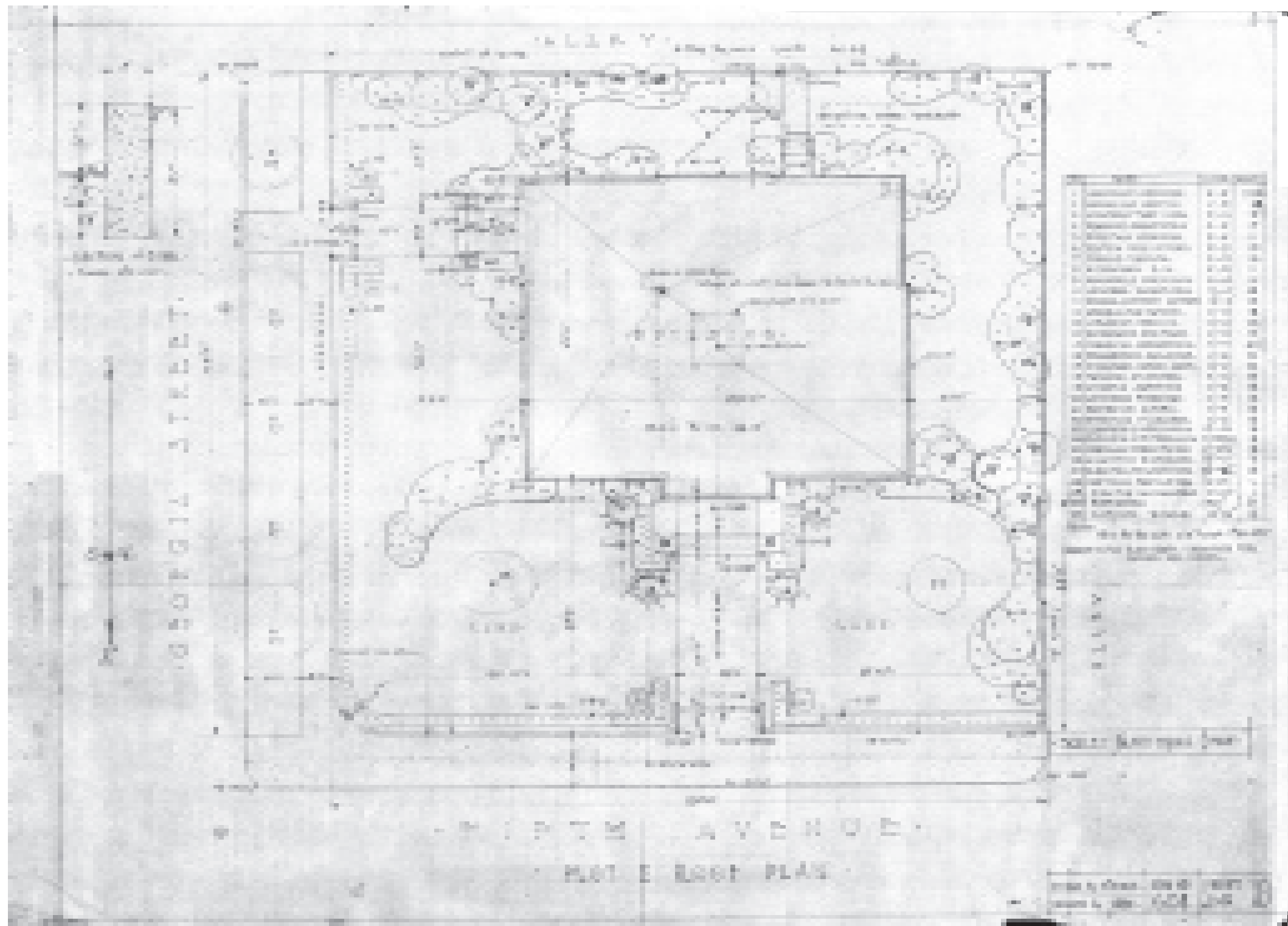
















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1. Thomas Harvey Cannon, editor, History of the Lake and Calumet Region of Indiana Embracing the Counties of Lake, Porter, and LaPorte: An Historical Account of Its People and Its Progress from the Earliest Times to the Present, p. 781.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. William Fredrick Howat, A Standard History of Lake County, Indiana and the Calumet Region, p. 396
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. "New \$32,000 Library Ready for East Side," Gary Post-Tribune, May 14, 1930, p. 13.
10. "Begin excavation for New East Side Library Building," Gary Post-Tribune, July 10, 1929, p. 2.
11. Ibid.
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14. Ibid.
15. "Librarian Makes Plans for Furnishing Branch Room at 5th, Georgia," Gary Post-Tribune, October 3, 1929, p. 24.
16. Ibid.
17. "New \$32,000 Library Ready for East Side."

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I would like to thank the Main Branch of the Gary Public Library and the Calumet Regional Archives for their assistance in providing supporting documents for this assessment.

The Gary Public Library supplied rare historic photographs and a blueprint set for the East Side Branch. The library provided a week long loan of these materials. G.U.E.A. extends its thanks to Mrs. Moore, Mr. Hess, and Mr. Green of the Reference Department.

The Calumet Regional Archives and Archivist, Mr. Mc Shane, provided historic biographical accounts of the Gary Public Library and an historic image of the East Side Branch.



