

Blake, Moffitt and Towne Building
41 First Street
San Francisco
San Francisco County
California

HABS No. CA-2204

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
BLAKE, MOFFITT AND TOWNE BUILDING

Historic Name: Blake, Moffitt and Towne Building

Location: 41 First Street
Assessor's Block 3709, Lot 11, San Francisco
UTM Reference: 10 553040 4182580

Present Owner: Regents of the University of California

Present Occupant: Vacant

Present Use: Vacant
Currently slated for demolition in early 1983

Statement of
Significance:

The Blake, Moffitt and Towne Building was designed by Willis Polk, a renowned San Francisco architect with such landmark structures as the Hallidie Building to his credit. The BMT Building was built for the Regents of the University of California, the governing body for the University of California system, and subsequently contained the offices of the Blake, Moffitt and Towne Company, a San Francisco-based paper distribution company.

The BMT Building is rated "B" in Splendid Survivors, the comprehensive historic resources survey of downtown San Francisco. A "B" rating indicates eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Although not evaluated in the San Francisco City Planning Department's 1974-76 Architectural Inventory, it is included on the city's list of "Architecturally and/or Historically Significant Buildings in the C-3 Zoning Districts" endorsed by the City Planning Commission on May 29, 1982.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Physical History

Date of Erection: 1911
Architect: Willis Polk (D. H. Burnham & Co.)
Original Owner: Regents of the University of California
Subsequent Owners: None

Original Plans
and Construction:

A photocopy set of the original drawings exists for the BMT Building. Twelve sheets showing elevations, floor plans, sections, and exterior and interior details are in the possession of International Land Inc. (111 Pine Street, San Francisco, California). A representative sample has been reproduced for archival purposes and accompanies this report.

Alterations and
Additions:

The building permit files are not explicit as to the major changes to the ground floor, exterior, and interior. In 1948, the northernmost pair of exterior doors were removed and replaced with plate glass and a base to match the existing; the original base in this case would have been cast iron. Later, in 1952, reference is made to "removing doors, installing plate glass front and marble bulkhead."

In 1967 and 1968, a major remodeling was undertaken. New elevators were installed requiring new floor openings, new roof opening, and new machine room on the roof. Rather than retaining the existing elevators at the two sides (north and south) of the building, two new elevators were placed side-by-side along the south wall. Additional remodeling included new office partitions and dropped acoustical ceilings.

Historical Context

After the 1906 earthquake/fire rapid rebuilding occurred in the devastated areas. The Blake, Moffitt and Towne Building was built during this post-1906 building period and characteristically used a construction method suddenly made extremely popular in the wake of the destruction--reinforced concrete. Prior to the earthquake/fire only two structures in San Francisco were constructed of reinforced concrete. Afterwards Architect and Engineer magazine stated in their June 1907 issue, "It is safe to say that there never before has there been near as much work of this character going on in any one city at one time."

The design for the six-story structure is a handsome, well-proportioned building using a classical order to produce a strongly articulated facade. This design by Willis Polk was done during a period of great opportunity for this architect as the post-1906 period offered many commissions both for reconstruction (the Merchants Exchange Building, Mills Building, and the Flood Mansion/Pacific Union Club and Kohl Building) and for new works such as the Hobart Building on Market Street, numerous residences in and around San Francisco, and the BMT Building.

Willis Polk (1865-1924) was a native of Kentucky, the son of a southern architect whose practice ended with the advent of the Civil War. He worked initially in the office of D. H. Burnham prior to coming to San Francisco in 1886. He returned to the Burnham Chicago office in 1900 for a short period before again coming back to San Francisco and rising to prominence prior to and after the 1906 earthquake/fire. His obituary in Architect and Engineer of September 1924 states: "The death of Willis Polk on September 10th removes one of the most important and outstanding architectural figures the Pacific Coast has known. Polk was one of those few architects whose name became familiar to the community at large."

Polk also began a publication devoted to architecture called Architectural News in November 1890. "Though his magazine went through only four issues before Polk skipped to Carmel with the subscription money, it prepared the

way for the Mission Revival and set the tone for sophisticated building in California for a quarter of a century".¹

The BMT Building was built by the Regents of the University of California. The significance of this client is apparent now, but in 1911 the University was still in its formative years. Only a decade had passed since the international competition for a new campus plan in Berkeley and although a number of significant structures had been built, the university system as a whole was just beginning to take shape. The Regents now govern one of the world's great educational systems for higher education. They have been the continuous owners of the BMT Building and its site.

The first and most significant tenant is one after whom the building is named. Blake, Moffitt and Towne began as BMT in 1884 after the death of Charles F. Robbins resulted in the dissolution of Blake, Robbins and Company and the incorporation of the three remaining partners. Steady growth of this San Francisco-based paper distributing company resulted, in 1891, in the opening of a Los Angeles branch and subsequent branches in Tacoma, Washington (1910), San Diego (1915), Sacramento (1924). Today BMT divisions and branch offices are located in most major West Coast cities in Washington, Oregon, Nevada, California, Idaho, and Arizona.

In 1906, Blake, Moffitt and Towne had their headquarters at 55 First Street, just adjacent to the present BMT Building. The earthquake/fire completely burned out the building and the company was forced to operate temporarily out of Oakland, California. In 1907 the company moved back to San Francisco to a Fourth Street location and in 1911 moved into the building built by the Regents of the University of California at 41 First Street. The company occupied the building for twenty-six years until 1937 when it moved to Eighth and Brannan streets.

¹Harold Kirker, California's Architectural Frontier, Style and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century, Russell and Russell, New York, 1960, p. 115.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

General Statement

The Blake, Moffitt and Towne Building is a six-story office building with a basement. It originally had two exposed facades making up the front and rear of the building. The front facade is divided into five vertical strips of windows and three horizontal divisions including the ground floor and mezzanine, three-story shaft, and one-story cornice or attic floor. "The mezzanine level, articulated by piers, forms a base for the giant order of fluted Corinthian pilasters extending through floors 3-5 and paired at the corners. The attic level with similar fenestration (as the floors below) rests on a classical entablature and is crowned by a denticulated parapet" (Architectural Survey Form, 8-31-77, Charles Hall Page and Associates, Inc.).

The rear facade is punctured with pairs of casement windows at regular intervals, four horizontally, five vertically. The ground floor is a blank wall. Windows were made possible by a rear wall set back of 12 feet, 5 inches, forming a light well of that depth running the full width of the building (refer to floor plans).

The front and rear facades are intact except for the remodeling of the ground floor portion of the front facade. The interior has been completely remodelled with little, if any, of the original fabric left.

Description of Exterior

1. Overall Dimensions: 68'9" wide by 137'5" long, at the ground floor. The upper floors are 68'9" by 126'.
2. Foundations: Reinforced concrete.
3. Walls: Reinforced concrete with stucco finish.
4. Structural System: Reinforced concrete.
5. Porches, Stoops, Balconies, Bulkheads: Not applicable.
6. Chimneys: Not applicable.

7. Openings: Original ground floor was one large expanse of glass framed between massive corner piers. Plate glass windows were held by cast-iron moldings and rested on a cast-iron base. The doors are presumed to have been of metal construction with plate glass panels.

The front windows are typically double hung, four over four, with two side panels, two over two. They were specified as being made of wire glass although they are not that way today. The frames are metal. The rear windows are casements with two fixed lights above and below the two moveable lights. Construction is metal frame with wire glass.

8. Roof: A flat, composition roof. Two elevator penthouses and a gravity water tank sit on the roof.

Description of Interior

1. Floor Plans: Existing floor plans show only undivided floor space for all floors. Since all the original partitions were all removed previously, specific office configurations are not known. Since the building was designed to be flexible, specific layouts are not significant. The ground floor was longer by approximately twelve feet than the upper five floors. The rear portion extended to the property line while the upper floors were set back to form a light well. A skylight covered the ground floor extension.

No formal lobby was indicated on the drawings, but two elevators existed on each side of the building. In 1967 the elevator configuration was changed and a pair of new elevators installed on the south side. A new lobby space was created at that time leading from the front of the building.

2. Stairways: Two minor stairways exist, one in the southeast corner of the building and one near the northwest corner.

3. Flooring: Original plans show 1" cement finish for all floors. Presently covered with asphalt tile.

4. Wall and Ceiling Finish: Interior partition walls were indicated as being plaster with wood doors having glass panels and glass transoms. Most of the

original interior has been removed by subsequent remodelling. No partitions of any kind currently exist. The ceiling is dropped acoustical panels.

5. Openings: Only as described for the exterior.

6. Mechanical and Electrical Equipment: Original plans show coal-fired low-pressure steam heating system.

Site and Surroundings

The Blake, Moffitt and Towne Building faces west on First Street. It was a major facade for the block between Market and Mission Streets. After its demolition along with its two neighbors to the north, only one post-1906 building will remain on this side of the block. The area is now generally characterized by modern 1970s high-rise office buildings.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

Current plans call for the demolition of the Blake, Moffitt and Towne Building in early 1983. This historical documentation was prepared by Hisashi B. Sugaya of Sugaya and Frej and Jane Lidz, Photographer, in November 1982, and includes a historical report, photodocumentation, and documentation of photocopies of the original drawings for the building.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Architect and Engineer. Volume 78, No. 3, September, 1924.

The Architect and Engineer. April 1911.

Blake, Moffitt and Towne History--Commemorative Booklet.

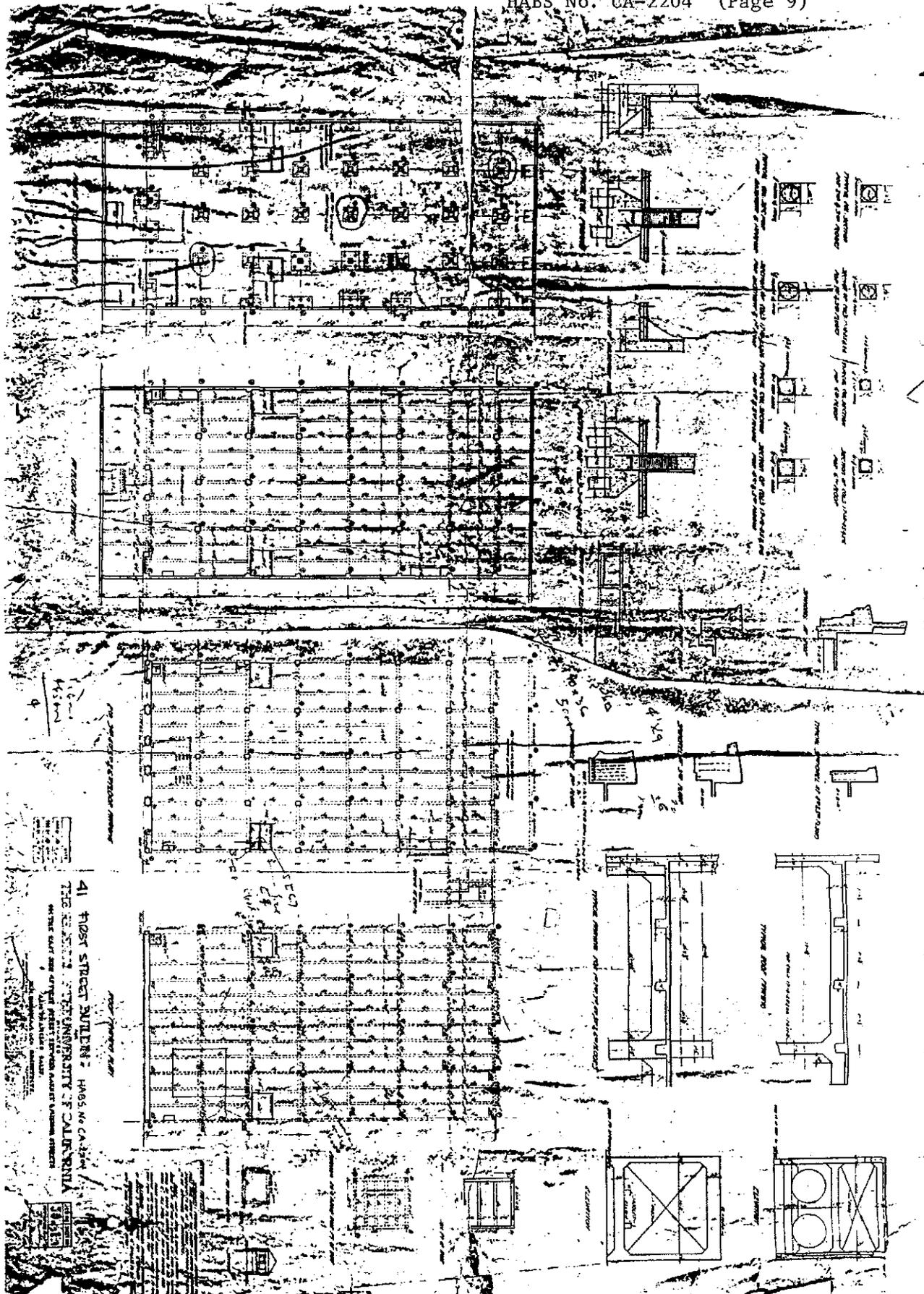
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Jordy, William H. American Buildings and Their Architects, Volume 3, Progressive and Academic Ideals at the Turn of the Twentieth Century. Doubleday and Co., Inc., New York. 1972.

Kirker, Harold. California's Architectural Frontier, Style and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century. Russell and Russell, New York. 1960.

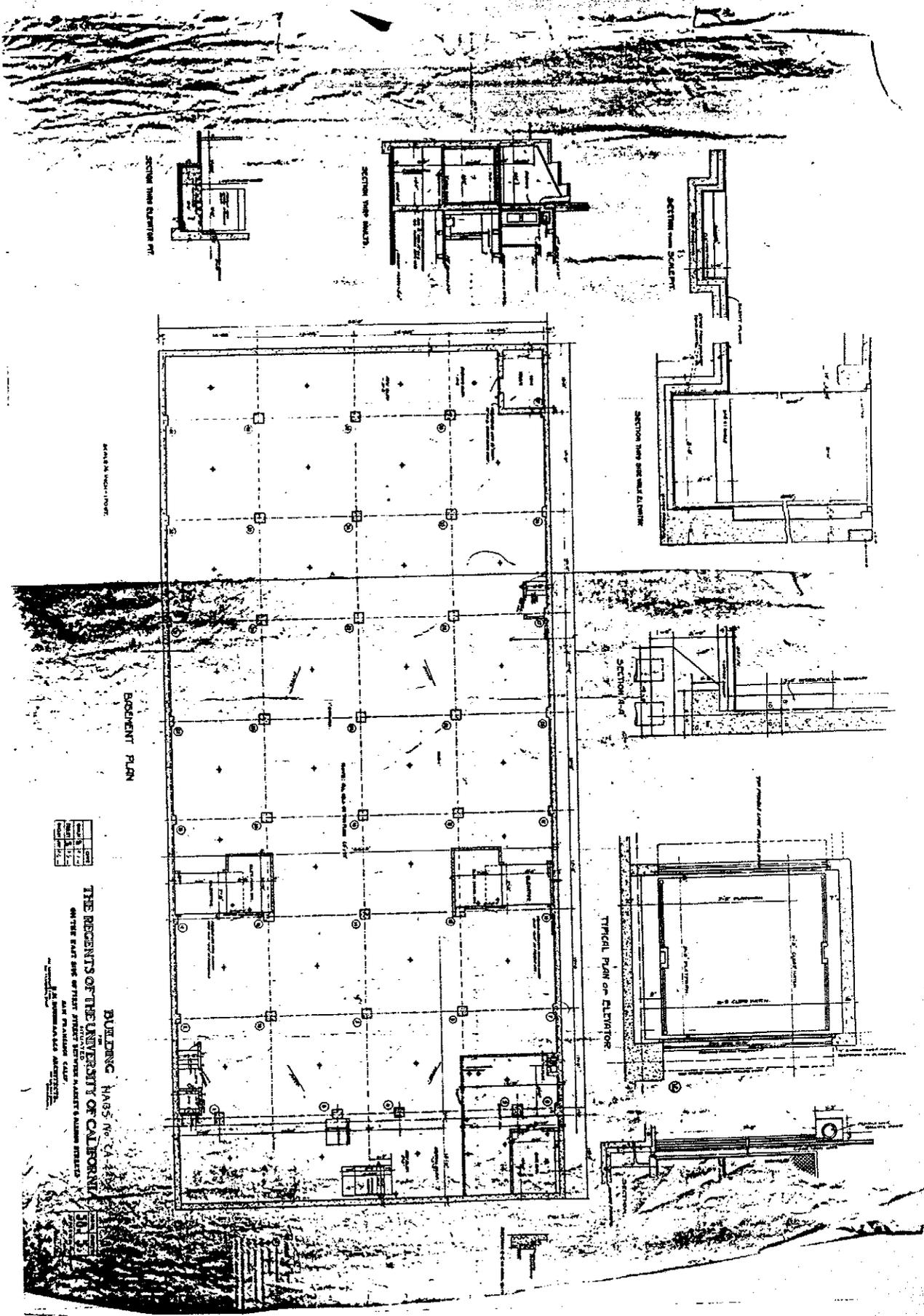
San Francisco City Planning Commission. Central Plaza Project Environmental Impact Report. 1982.

Originals for the following reduced copies of drawings can be found at the Library of Congress.



41 FIRST STREET BUILDING - HABS No. CA-2204
THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
ON THE EAST AND WEST SIDES OF THE BUILDING



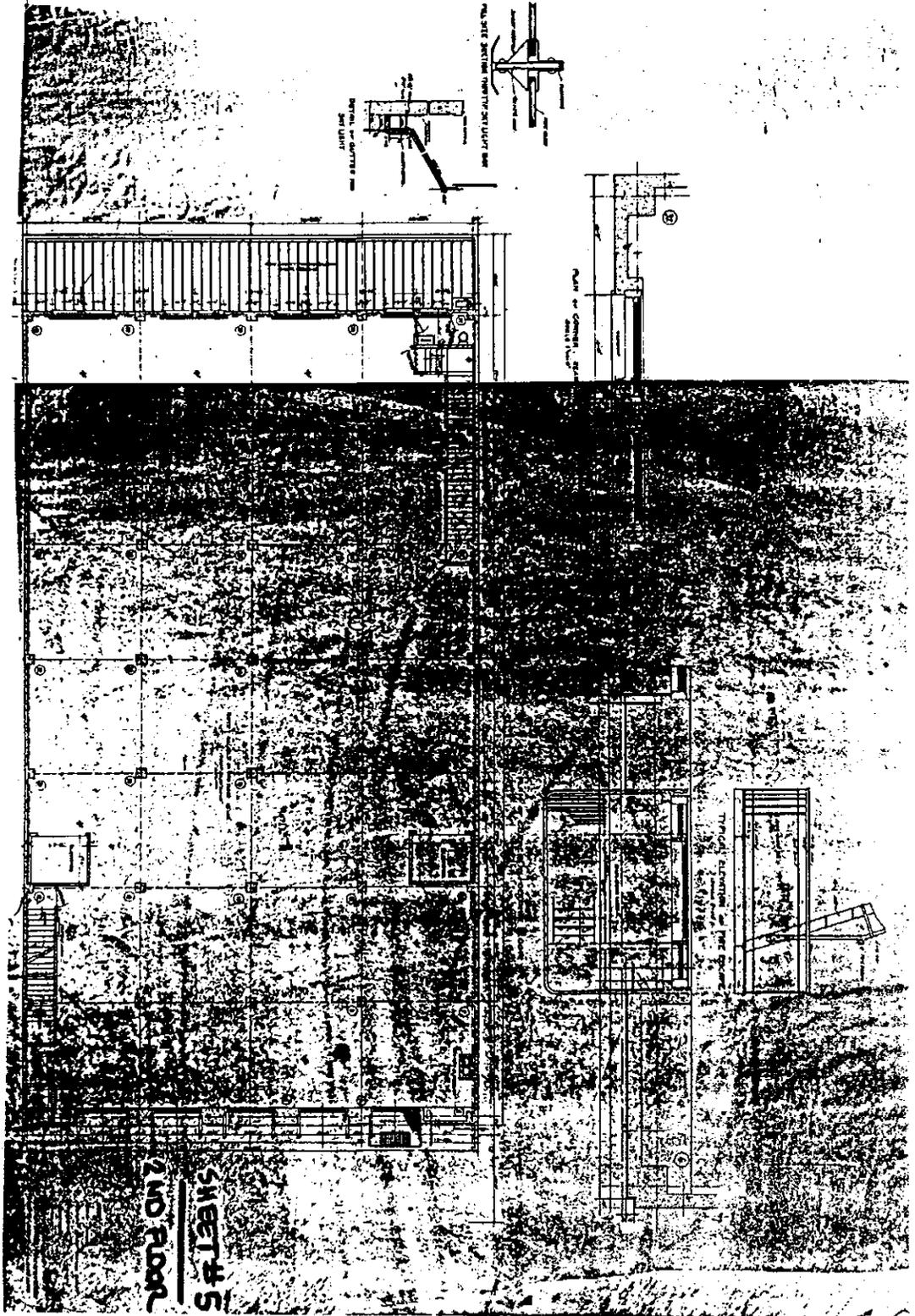


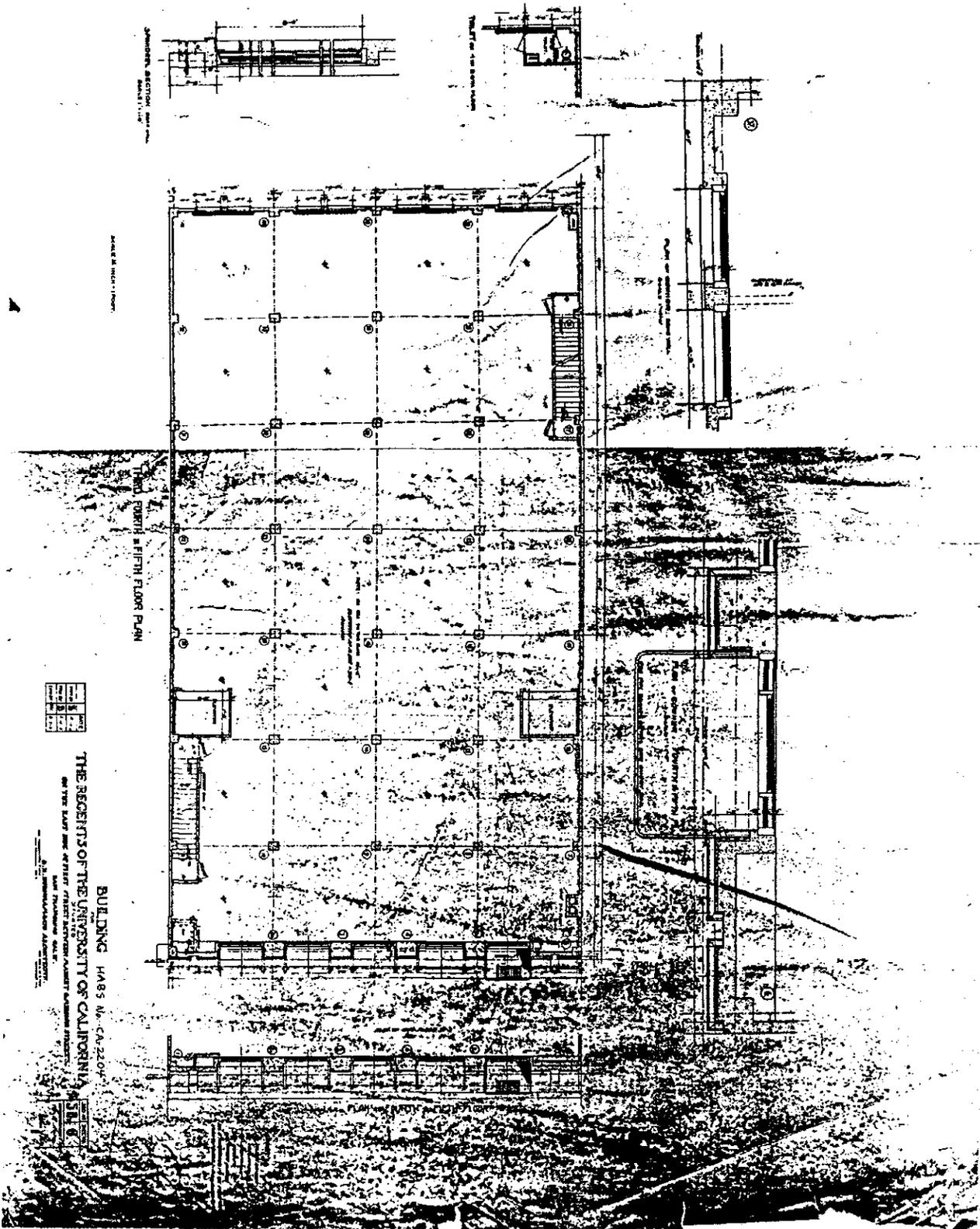
BOOMER PLAN

AS SHOWN IN SECTION

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102 1/4"	34 3/8"
102 1/2"	34 1/2"
102 3/4"	34 7/8"
103"	34 3/4"
103 1/4"	34 7/8"
103 1/2"	35"
103 3/4"	35 1/8"
104"	35 1/4"
104 1/4"	35 1/8"
104 1/2"	35 1/4"
104 3/4"	35 3/8"
105"	35 1/2"
105 1/4"	35 3/8"
105 1/2"	35 1/2"
105 3/4"	35 7/8"
106"	35 3/4"
106 1/4"	35 7/8"
106 1/2"	36"
106 3/4"	36 1/8"
107"	36 1/4"
107 1/4"	36 1/8"
107 1/2"	36 1/4"
107 3/4"	36 3/8"
108"	36 1/2"
108 1/4"	36 3/8"
108 1/2"	36 1/2"
108 3/4"	36 7/8"
109"	36 3/4"
109 1/4"	36 7/8"
109 1/2"	37"
109 3/4"	37 1/8"
110"	37 1/4"
110 1/4"	37 1/8"
110 1/2"	37 1/4"
110 3/4"	37 3/8"
111"	37 1/2"
111 1/4"	37 3/8"
111 1/2"	37 1/2"
111 3/4"	37 7/8"
112"	37 3/4"
112 1/4"	37 7/8"
112 1/2"	38"
112 3/4"	38 1/8"
113"	38 1/4"
113 1/4"	38 1/8"
113 1/2"	38 1/4"
113 3/4"	38 3/8"
114"	38 1/2"
114 1/4"	38 3/8"
114 1/2"	38 1/2"
114 3/4"	38 7/8"
115"	38 3/4"
115 1/4"	38 7/8"
115 1/2"	39"
115 3/4"	39 1/8"
116"	39 1/4"
116 1/4"	39 1/8"
116 1/2"	39 1/4"
116 3/4"	39 3/8"
117"	39 1/2"
117 1/4"	39 3/8"
117 1/2"	39 1/2"
117 3/4"	39 7/8"
118"	39 3/4"
118 1/4"	39 7/8"
118 1/2"	40"
118 3/4"	40 1/8"
119"	40 1/4"
119 1/4"	40 1/8"
119 1/2"	40 1/4"
119 3/4"	40 3/8"
120"	40 1/2"
120 1/4"	40 3/8"
120 1/2"	40 1/2"
120 3/4"	40 7/8"
121"	40 3/4"
121 1/4"	40 7/8"
121 1/2"	41"
121 3/4"	41 1/8"
122"	41 1/4"
122 1/4"	41 1/8"
122 1/2"	41 1/4"
122 3/4"	41 3/8"
123"	41 1/2"
123 1/4"	41 3/8"
12	

HABS No. CA-2204





SECTION A-A
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

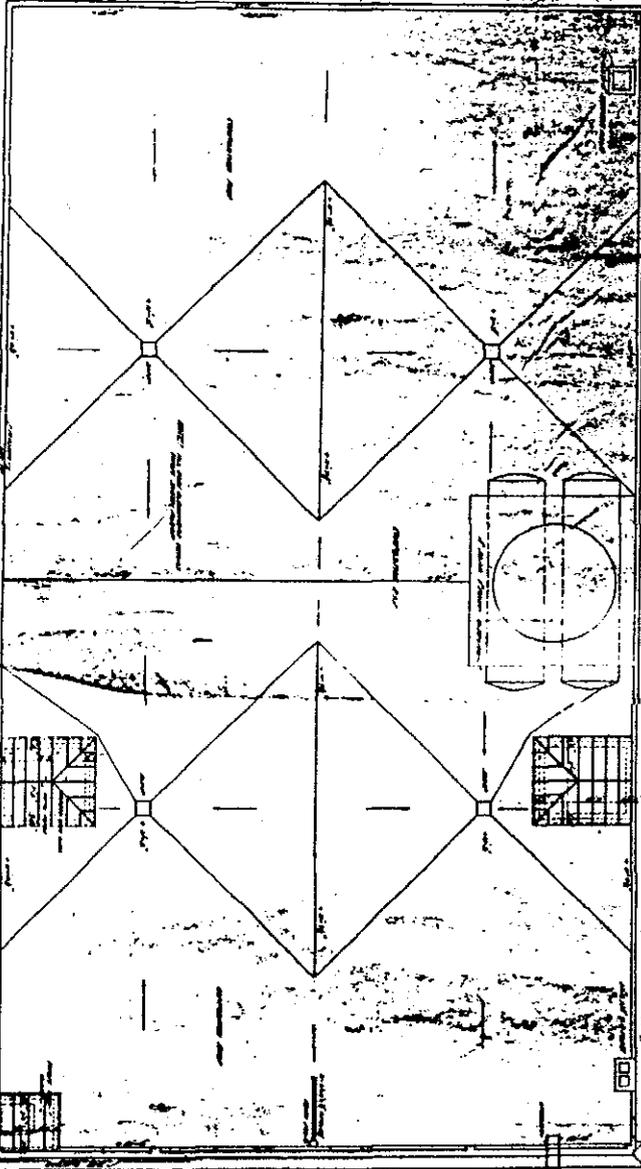
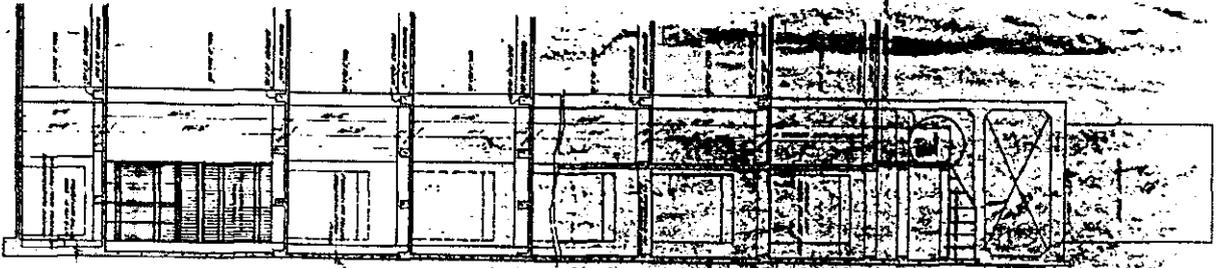
FIFTH FLOOR PLAN

NO.	DESCRIPTION
1	...
2	...
3	...
4	...
5	...

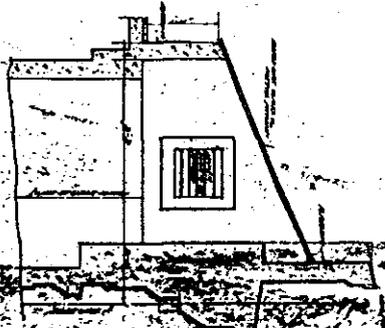
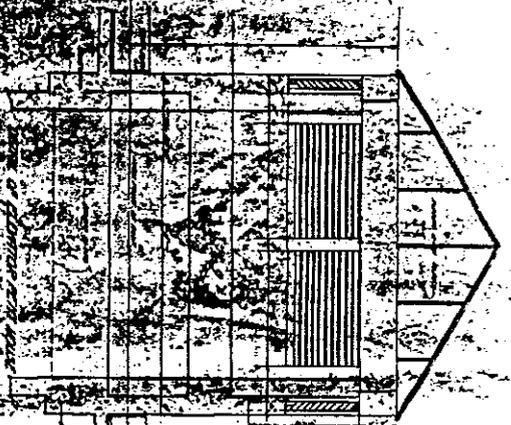
BUILDING HABS No. CA-2204
THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
ON THE EAST SIDE OF FIRST STREET, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA
BLAKE, MOFFITT & TOWNE ARCHITECTS
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

NO.	DESCRIPTION
1	...
2	...
3	...
4	...
5	...

ARCS SECTION



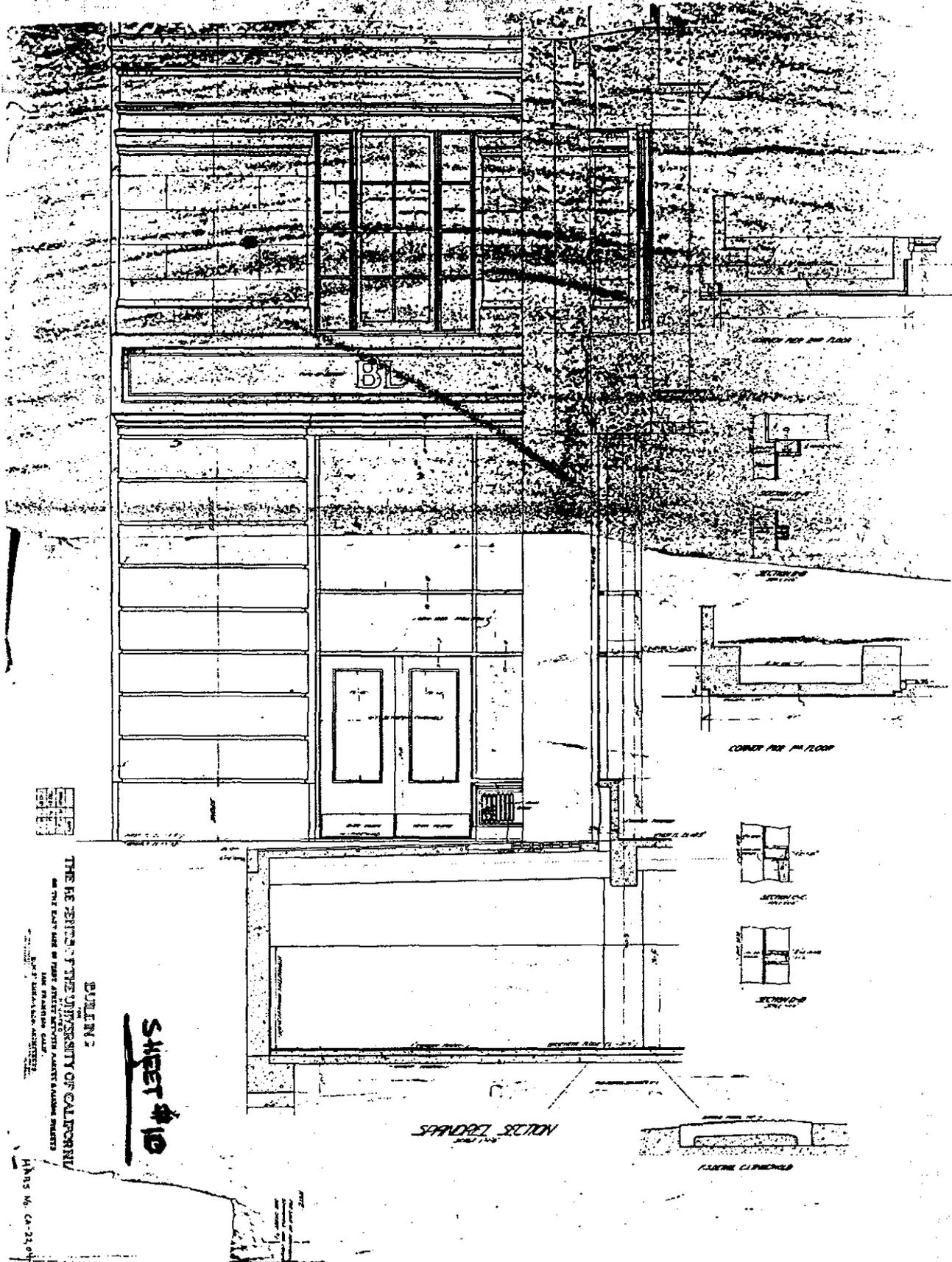
FLOOR PLAN



ELEVATION OF ONE CORNER

DATE	1911
BY	BLAKE, MOFFITT & TOWNE
FOR	THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
NO.	CA-2204

BUILDING HABS No. CA-2204
THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
ON THE EAST CORNER OF THE STREET BETWEEN THE ALABAMA AVENUE
AND FRANCISCO AVENUE
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.



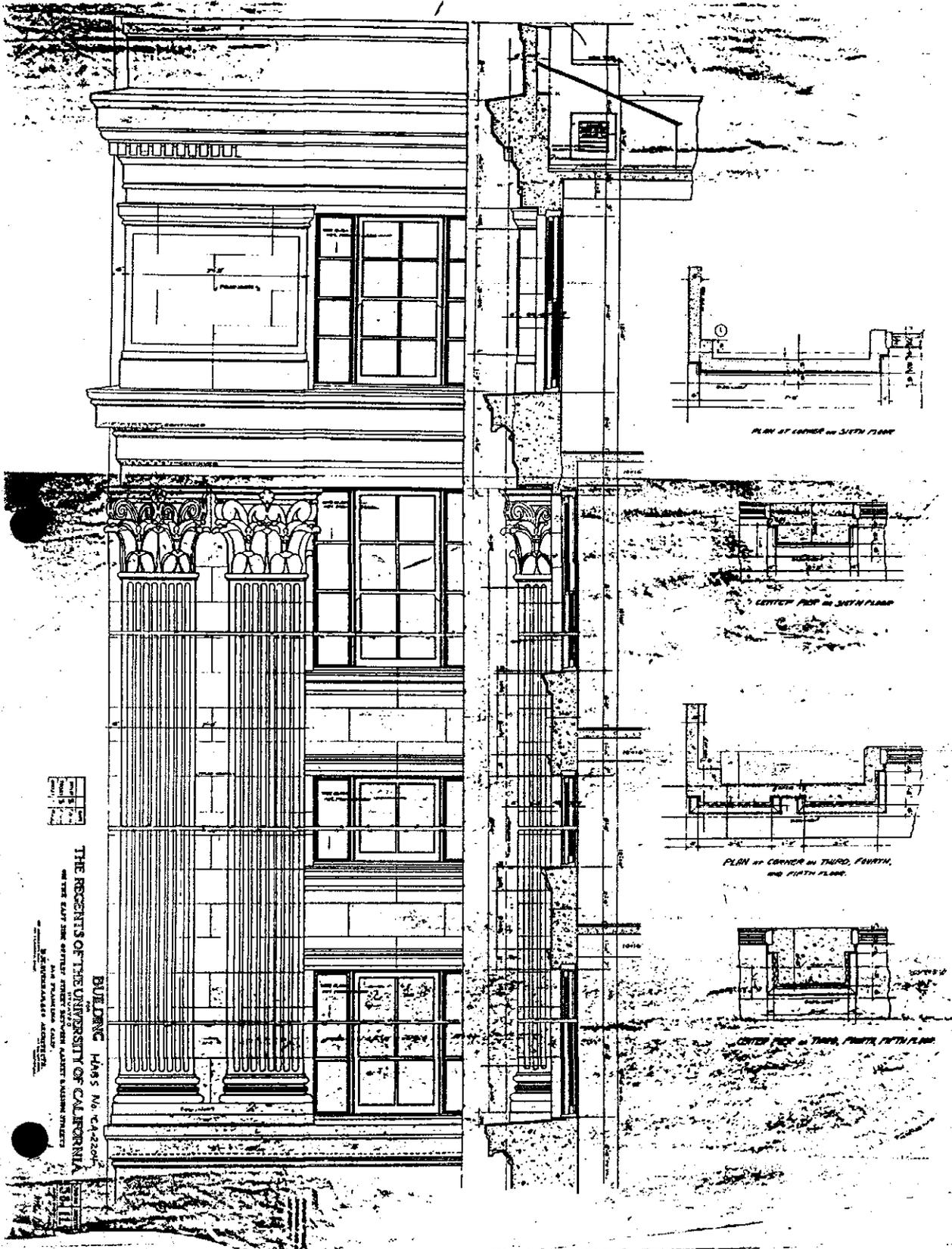
DATE	NO.	BY
1911	1	...
1912	2	...
1913	3	...
1914	4	...
1915	5	...
1916	6	...
1917	7	...
1918	8	...
1919	9	...
1920	10	...

BUILDING
THE RECORDS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
AND THE EAST SIDE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SAN FRANCISCO CALIF.
HABS No. CA-2204

SHEET #10

SECTION

SECTION



PLAN AT CORNER OF SIXTH FLOOR

CENTER PIECE OF SIXTH FLOOR

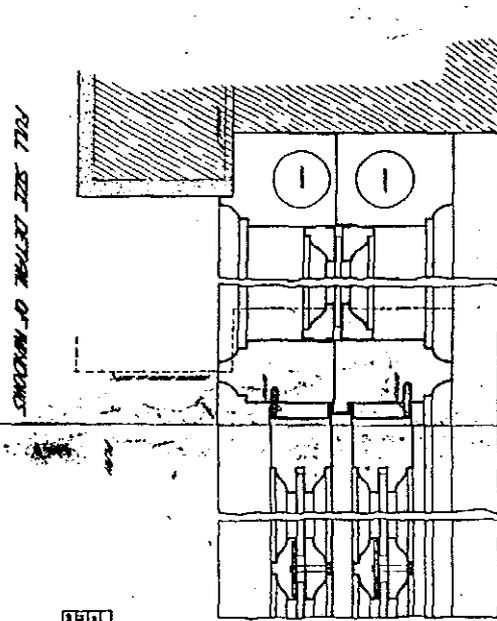
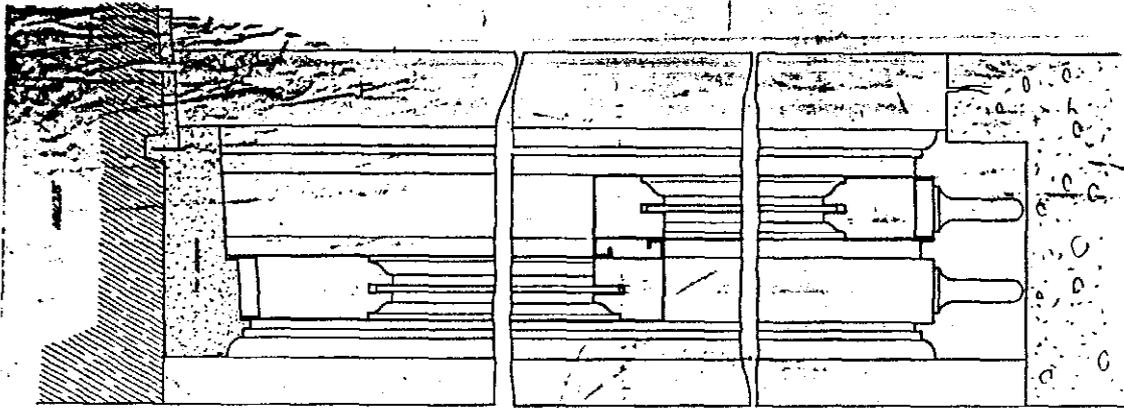
PLAN AT CORNER OF THIRD, FOURTH, AND FIFTH FLOOR

CENTER PIECE OF THIRD, FOURTH, FIFTH FLOOR

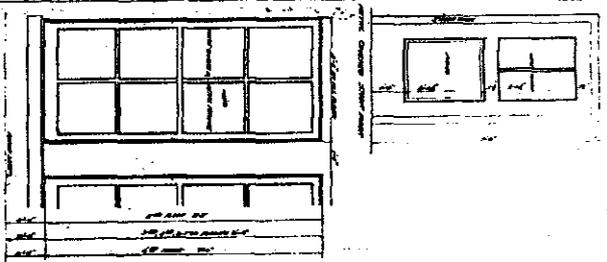
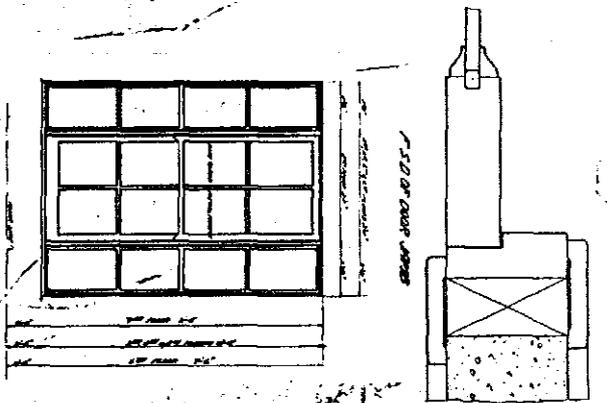
Scale	1/4" = 1'-0"
Sheet	15
Project	CA-2204

THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
ON THE EAST SIDE OF THE STREET BETWEEN CALVERT AND UNION STREETS
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

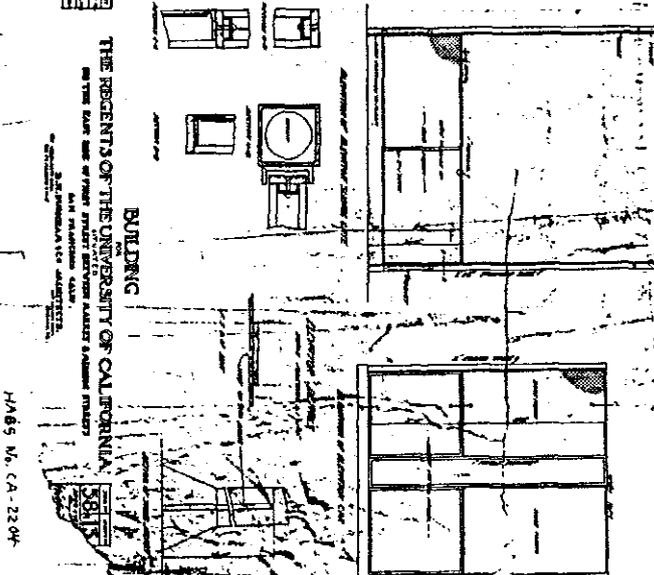
BUILDING HABS No. CA-2204



SECTION OF WALLS



NO.	DATE	BY
1		
2		
3		



BUILDING
THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
ON THE EAST SIDE OF FRONT STREET BETWEEN CALHOUN SQUARE AND
14th STREET, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.
BLAKE, MOFFITT & TOWNE ARCHITECTS
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.

HABS No. CA-2204