

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
July 12, 1988; Designation List 206  
LP-1537

THE BANK OF THE METROPOLIS, 31 Union Square West a/k/a 19-23 East 16th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1902-1903; architect, Bruce Price; builder, George Fuller Company.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 844, Lot 17.

On May 14, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Bank of the Metropolis (Item No. 3). The hearing was continued to September 17, 1985 (Item No. 1). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Forty-two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. One witness took no position. The Commission received several letters in support of designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

##### Summary

A limestone-faced bank and office tower, the Bank of the Metropolis, a columnar tripartite skyscraper, is a representative example of the major New York architect Bruce Price's neo-Renaissance commercial architecture. The design incorporates classical elements which were traditionally associated with American bank architecture. Notable features include the bowed two-story portico with monumental polished granite columns, lions' heads, consoles, foliated spandrels and spandrels with open-mouthed lions. Built in 1902-1903,<sup>1</sup> the bank occupies a commanding corner location on Union Square West and demonstrates the architect's ability to adapt a building to both the requirements of function and the dictates of site. Created to serve the needs of businesses on the square, the bank had members of the local business community on its board of directors.

##### 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 Bank of the Metropolis stands on Union Square West, which was the most lucrative and popular side of the square since it was the continuation of Broadway, on a site previously occupied by a building that housed Brentanos, a retail bookseller.<sup>11</sup>

### The Bank of the Metropolis

Founded in 1871, the Bank of the Metropolis was always located on Union Square, serving the needs of the nearby businesses. Originally located at 31 Union Square, the Bank was "a flourishing outgrowth of the movement of business to the up-town section of New York."<sup>12</sup> Having moved in 1877 to 17 Union Square, the bank relocated once again in 1888 to larger quarters at 29 Union Square. Perhaps because the bank's "business ... is derived from their requirements, and ... is conducted in a manner to attract the custom and support of the dry-goods, furniture, jewelry, and other classes of merchants whose places of business are in the vicinity," the board of directors included representatives of businesses located on and near the Square.<sup>13</sup> For example in 1902, the Board included the decorator, glass-maker and philanthropist Louis C. Tiffany, jeweller Charles T. Cook, publisher Charles Scribner, and George McNeir, a lawyer and "manufacturer."<sup>14</sup> "An institution of ... solidity and enterprise, and with ... widely and favorably known officers and directors ... [and] of great benefit to business in the up-town district,"

the bank continued in business until February 1918 when it was absorbed (to be operated as a branch under the same executive officers) by the Bank of the Manhattan Company, which in turn merged with Chase National Bank to form Chase Manhattan Bank in January 1955.<sup>15</sup>

### Bruce Price (1845-1903)<sup>16</sup>

Bruce Price, a native of Maryland, briefly attended the College of New Jersey (now Princeton). Price then studied architecture in the offices of the leading Baltimore firm of Neirnsee & Neilson, where he subsequently became a draftsman (1864-68). After a trip abroad, Price returned to Baltimore to open his own office late in 1868,<sup>17</sup> moving to New York in 1877. Price, whose staff "sometimes included fifty experienced men," had brief associations with Ephraim Francis Baldwin, Edwin J. Parlett, George A. Freeman, and -- late in life -- with Henri de Sibour.<sup>18</sup>

Price was active in professional organizations, among them the American Institute of Architects and the Architectural League, serving as its president from 1897 to 1899. He was also director of the Municipal Art Society at one time.<sup>19</sup>

Price's early commissions, which were primarily residential, culminated in the design and layout of Tuxedo Park, New York (1885-90), a suburban community financed by Pierre Lorillard IV with many buildings executed in the Shingle Style.<sup>20</sup> Around 1890, Price turned his attention to the urban setting. Samuel Graybill, in his doctoral dissertation on Price, credits the architect with becoming "one of the leaders" in the development of the tall commercial building in New York.<sup>21</sup> Price was involved in the early development of the "'tower' skyscraper."<sup>22</sup> The Sun Building Project (1890), a four-sided neo-Renaissance skyscraper with a base, shaft, and a capital, displays this tower solution. This was followed by the American Surety Company Building (1894-96, extant), "in many respects the most consistent and certainly the most interesting tall building in the country,"<sup>23</sup> and by the St. James Building (1896, extant) at 26th and Broadway, a brick and terra-cotta neo-Renaissance office building. The International Bank and Trust Building (1899, now demolished) at Broadway and Cedar bears close comparison with the Bank of the Metropolis. Other commissions include: The Hudson Terminal Building, New York (c. 1900); Osborn Hall at Yale University (1888); Windsor Station (1888-89) in Montreal; the Chateau Frontenac (1892-93) in Quebec City; "Georgian Court," the residence of George Gould near Lakewood, New Jersey (1897-1901); and dormitories at Barnard College designed in collaboration with A. M. Darroch (1900).

## Design of the Building

When viewed from the street the Bank of the Metropolis appears to conform to a "slab" configuration, although in reality the building is an "L" in plan. The site demanded a long and thin building. Price employed a narrow entrance facade in order to capitalize on the desirable Union Square West address; contemporary commentators had observed that "the advantage of a high-priced, prominent corner lot upon which to build a bank is generally appreciated."<sup>24</sup>

Price had employed this corner formula before. The International Bank and Trust Company Building was similarly located on a narrow, long site and also appears to have conformed to the slab configuration but was actually an "L" in plan. Moreover, the International Bank and Trust's lot had also required a narrow facade on Broadway with the longer elevation on Cedar Street.<sup>25</sup>

In his design for the Bank of the Metropolis, Price employed his personal approach to the skyscraper as a classical column. This tripartite scheme was, for Price, a visual -- rather than a functional -- solution to the problem of organizing the tall structure.<sup>26</sup> In 1899, the noted architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler summarized the columnar treatment of the skyscraper in a manner that is particularly applicable to the Bank of the Metropolis:

The essential point is that there should be a triple division, and that the three parts should both assert themselves as parts and combine into a whole ... It is founded upon the analogy of a column, with its division into base, shaft, and capital ... It is, of course, possible to introduce at the bottom and at the top of the shaft a story recalling the transition, in the actual column, to the base and to the capital ... the shaft is impressive by its extent and its monotony of repetition, and as an interval of plainness and repose between the more elaborate base and the elaborate capital ... ornament which is meant to be worthy of the closest inspection is naturally given to the base, although the capital is properly the more ornate member.<sup>27</sup>

Price had employed this columnar approach as early as 1890 in his unexecuted designs for the New York Sun Building, modeled after the campanile at the Piazza San Marco in Venice. In the American Surety Company Building, Price again employed the concept of the tripartite column.<sup>28</sup> The Bank of the Metropolis Building is comprised of a rusticated base, a transitional story and a nine-story mid-section, another transition story and a "capital" with a prominent copper cornice complete the whole. The prominence of this "capital" recalls Price's own observation about the nature of the skyscraper:

Our commercial buildings are, almost without exception, designed wholly with reference to their relation to the street, while, as a matter of fact, they have no such relation at all, their aerial aspect being of more value to the city as a whole than the distorted partial values that, as a rule, are all we can obtain from the street.<sup>29</sup>

In the bank's design, Price also employed a classical vocabulary characteristic of American bank buildings, including his own earlier banks: the American Surety Building, the International Bank and Trust Company Building, and his "Competitive Design for the National Commercial Bank, Albany, N. Y."<sup>30</sup> Such neo-classical vocabulary elements have traditionally been incorporated in the design of American bank buildings beginning with the First Bank of the United States. Commenting on the Bank upon its completion, the Architects' and Builders' Magazine noted, "the exterior architecture is classic and well adapted for a building of this character."<sup>31</sup>

Price's design fuses this neo-classicism with the dictates of the skyscraper, a distinctly modern and urban building type. By employing a two-story portico to transform a narrow facade into an imposing entrance and coupling it with classical ornament, Price heeded Schuyler's injunction that the ornament that would receive the most attention should be placed on the "column's" base. Like the American Surety, the design for the Bank of the Metropolis is vertical. The spandrels between the windows in the shaft do not extend past the outline of the window apertures; these aligned rectangular openings can be seen as forming a vertical element. As Price himself noted with respect to the American Surety Building, the idea evoked is that of the "arris of a channel."<sup>35</sup>

This multi-purpose building nonetheless proclaimed the bank as its primary function. Symmetrically disposed at either side of the central doorway, a large window (on the left) and a doorway leading to offices and apartments in the building's upper stories (on the right) are protected and screened by the classical portico, which thus serves to enhance the impression that the building is exclusively devoted to the Bank of the Metropolis. As one critic noted: if a bank was to be housed in a skyscraper, the architect's design for the "building of many stories ... [must have] the essential characteristics of a bank building ... [while] the offices [must] have the appearance of being only parts of one big institution."<sup>36</sup>

#### Price's Influence as a Skyscraper Architect

Price was seen as an influential architect of skyscrapers by his contemporaries and by later critics. Discussing the American Surety Building, "so notable an edifice and so conspicuous a

monument in its author's artistic career," the architectural critic Barr Ferree observed: "that fine structure will hold its own after many a more pretentious building has become a weariness to the flesh."<sup>37</sup> Describing Price's contribution to skyscraper design in 1938, Claude Fayette Bragdon observed that Price's "mind still unemancipated from Greece and Rome" conceived of the treatment of the skyscraper as columnar and noted that "in New York, where it originated, this sort of thing became almost canonical, since it fulfilled the fancied aesthetic requirement of a beginning, a middle, and an end."<sup>38</sup> Paul Goldberger has called the Bank of the Metropolis, "one of the city's more appealing smaller towers, a lovely eclectic creation." In particular, Goldberger praised the "wonderful, gently bowed Ionic portico at the bottom," the "slender, almost sleek shaft," and the "enormous, elaborate cornice."<sup>39</sup>

### Description

Prominently located on the northwest corner of Union Square West and 16th Street, The Bank of the Metropolis is a sixteen-story, limestone-faced, steel-framed building with brick curtain walls. The Bank conforms to the lot line being 32'6" front; 92' at the rear; and 175' deep. The Union Square West elevation is three bays wide, while the 16th Street facade consists of sections--three, nine, three and three bays wide.

On the Union Square facade, a bowed two-story portico with a broken pediment and ball-like finial is supported by two polished granite monumental Ionic columns and frames the pedimented central entryway. Two small lion-headed waterspouts appear on the cornice of the bowed portico. Beneath the cornice on the frieze, two swags frame each side of a rectangular panel (the outer edges of which are aligned with the waterspouts above) which bears the building's name "BANK OF THE METROPOLIS". A large window (at the left) and a doorway leading to offices and apartments in the building's upper stories (at the right) are symmetrically disposed at either side of the doorway and are protected and screened by the portico, as are the second story's square-headed windows which surmount the central and side doors and large window. Beneath the portico, the first and second story windows are separated by rectangular panels which are set within larger framed rectangular panels and embellished with flowers.

A transitional story containing square-headed windows leads from the rusticated two-story base to the smooth-faced nine-story shaft. This shaft is punctuated by square-headed windows and is ornamented by handsome foliated spandrels of two types (those centered by acanthus leaves and those centered by roundels) and by spandrels with open-mouthed lions set within rectangular panels at the tenth story. The thirteenth story, the transition from the shaft to the column's capital, is articulated with windows which alternate with boldly scaled scrolled consoles;

above each window, at mid-point, an applied circle containing a drop-like boss appears. This transitional story is demarcated below by a stringcourse with an incised wavelike or "running dog" motif (beneath which circular bosses are aligned with the consoles above) and by a projecting bandcourse above supported by the consoles. Panels with palmettes centered between scrolls appear between the windows of the fourteenth and fifteenth stories. Atop the fifteenth story, four lions' heads rest on pilasters with floral pendants and lead the eye to the uppermost story itself crowned by the heavy and elaborate dentilled copper entablature.

When viewed from the south, Price's design for the 16th street elevation can be seen as two short sections containing three bays enframing the long central nine-bay section with an additional three bays at the westernmost end. On both elevations, the copper entablature that crowns the building projects where the bandcourse above the thirteenth floor is smooth and the spandrel panels are ornamented; where balconies project at the tenth story, the cornice recedes and the spandrel panels are smooth and unadorned, thus counterbalancing the building's projections. For example, above the tenth story on the central portion of the 16th Street elevation a bracketed limestone balcony projects; in response the corresponding section of the copper cornice recedes.

The ground floor of the bank building has subsequently been converted into a restaurant and many of the upper floors have been transformed into apartments. Round-headed arches and multi-paned French doors with sidelights similarly divided by wood have been inserted into the original square-headed window openings of the ground-story's central section on the 16th Street elevation, which are framed by smooth-faced pilasters. The base of the 16th Street elevation is, like the Union Square West facade, rusticated. On the 16th Street elevation, the central window of the three-bay section closest to Union Square West is framed by smooth pilasters, each with an egg-and-dart echinus and an applied flower centered on the neck of the capital. Echoing the cornice of the facade, a rectangular panel is centered by a swag on each side. The two three-bay shaft sections of this elevations are ornamented by spandrel panels like those on the facade. Consoles, like those on the facade, support the fourteenth and fifteenth stories. Supported by these consoles, in the central and last sections at the fourteenth story, sections of geometrically configured iron railing alternate with rectangular, limestone balusters ornamented by laurel wreaths. Atop the fifteenth story in the first and third sections, lions heads repeat the design of the facade and lead the eye to the sixteenth story, also similar in treatment to the facade.

Although the original dentilled copper cornice survives, the cresting was removed in 1951.<sup>40</sup> The doors on the Union Square

West facade have been replaced, although it appears that the central doorway's original iron grille remains. An ornamental iron areaway fence with floral motifs runs parallel to 16th street, and at the southwestern end of the building, a loading dock with a handsome set of iron gates remains. The north and west elevations, which are composed of plain exposed brick, are visible.

Report prepared by  
Lisa Koenigsberg, Research Dept.

Report edited by  
Nancy Goeschel, Research Dept.



## NOTES

1. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits, and Dockets, Block 844, Lot 21. NB 1751-01, Municipal Archives, Surrogate's Court.
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 (1898; rpt. New York, 1967), 129.
10. The section above is based on research by Gale Harris and Lisa Koenigsberg, which was revised by Elisa Urbanelli.
11. Schachter and Gilbertson, 30-31; for a photographic image of the site in 1895, when it was occupied by Brentanos, see: King's Photographic Views of New York (Boston, 1895), 522-523.
12. King's Handbook of New York City (Boston, 1893), 689.
13. Ibid.

14. Reports of National and State Banks in New York City At the Close of Business, National Banks September 15, 1902; State Banks September 6, 1902 (New York, 1902), p. 134; George McNeir obituary, New York Times, June 16, 1941, p. 15.
15. King's Handbook of New York City, 689; "Banks Ask Approval to Consolidate Here; Manhattan Company to Absorb Metropolis and Establish Latter as a Branch," NYT, Jan. 19, 1918, p. 15; "Bank Merger Approved. Stockholders of Metropolis and Manhattan to Take Action," NYT, Feb. 7, 1918, p. 18; "Merger of Chase Into Bank of Manhattan Is Approved By Directors; Would Produce 2nd Largest Bank in U.S.," Wall Street Journal, Jan. 14, 1955, p. 3.
16. Samuel Huitt Graybill, Jr. "Bruce Price: American Architect, 1845-1903." Ph. D. dissertation, Yale University, 1957; T[albot]. F[aulkner]. H[amlin]., "Price, Bruce." Dictionary of American Biography vol. 8, ed. Dumas Malone (New York, 1935), 210-211; Timothy Rub, "Price, Bruce," Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects vol. 3, ed. Adolf K. Placzek (New York, 1982), 476; Bruce Price obituary, The Brickbuilder 12, no. 6 (June 1903), 112.
17. Graybill, 5.
18. Graybill, 201 on the partnership and 4, 6-7 on the office.
19. Graybill, 6; Brickbuilder, 112.
20. Rub, 476; Vincent J. Scully, Jr. The Shingle Style and the Stick Style, (1955; rev. ed., New Haven, 1971), 126-129.
21. Graybill, 181.
22. Graybill, np.
23. Brickbuilder, 112.
24. "The Bank in the Skyscraper," The Architect and Engineer of California 45, no. 1 (Apr. 1916), 39.
25. Graybill, 198.
26. Graybill, 185.
27. Montgomery Schuyler, "The Sky-Scraper Up-to-Date," Architectural Record 8, no. 3 (Jan.-Mar. 1899), 231-257.
28. Brickbuilder, 112.

29. Barr Ferec, "A Talk with Bruce Price," The Great American Architects Series, The Architectural Record, # 5 (June 1899), 76; in Great American Architects Series Nos. 1-6; May 1895-July 1899 (rpt. New York, 1977).
30. "A Competitive Design for the National Commercial Bank, Albany, N. Y.," American Architect and Building News 81, no. 1440 (Aug. 29, 1903), np.
31. "Bank of the Metropolis. Bruce Price, Architect," Architects' and Builders' Magazine 4, no. 7 (Apr. 1903), 293-295.
35. Ferree, 78.
36. Charles Peter Weeks, "Monumental Bank Buildings," The Architect and Engineer of California 45, no. 3 (June 1916), 39.
37. Ferree, 75.
38. Claude Fayette Bragdon, More Lives Than One (New York, 1938), 147, quoted by Graybill, 185: "[Price] conceived of a skyscraper in the semblance of a classic column or pilaster, consisting of a base, shaft, and capital. This resulted in a building with the first storey or storeys marked off from those above by a different material and treatment; the mid-portion an unadorned stretch of wall, regularly fenestrated; and the top again differentiated by making the windows part of an ornate crowning feature."
39. In The City Observed: New York, A Guide to the Architecture of Manhattan (New York, 1979), 93; Goldberger continues: "It feels like a building Louis Sullivan would have designed had he been a Beaux-Arts architect; some of the ornament seems a watered-down version of Sullivan's, although the overall aesthetic is clearly more a classical and academic one."
40. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits, and Dockets, Block 844, Lot 21. BN 936-1951, Apr. 4, 1951, Municipal Archives, Surrogate's Court. Filed for the erection of an "approved Cheseboro-Whitman Company standard tubular steel outrigger scaffold ... for the purpose of removing the cornice."

## 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 Bank of the Metropolis 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 Bank of the Metropolis, a limestone-faced bank and office tower, of the columnar tripartite skyscraper type, is a representative example of the major New York architect Bruce Price's neo-Renaissance commercial architecture; that the design incorporates classical elements which were traditionally associated with American bank architecture; that its notable features include the bowed two-story portico with monumental polished granite columns, lions' heads, consoles, foliated spandrels and spandrels with open-mouthed lions; that built in 1902-1903, the bank occupies a commanding corner location on Union Square West and demonstrates the architect's ability to adapt a building to both the requirements of function and the dictates of site; and that created to serve the needs of businesses on the square, the bank had members of the local business community on its board of directors.

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 Bank of the Metropolis, 31 Union Square West, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 844, Lot 17, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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The Bank of the Metropolis, 1902-03  
31 Union Square West a/k/a 19-23  
East 16th Street

Architect: Bruce Price  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster





The Bank of the Metropolis  
Main entrance

Photo credit: Carl Forster



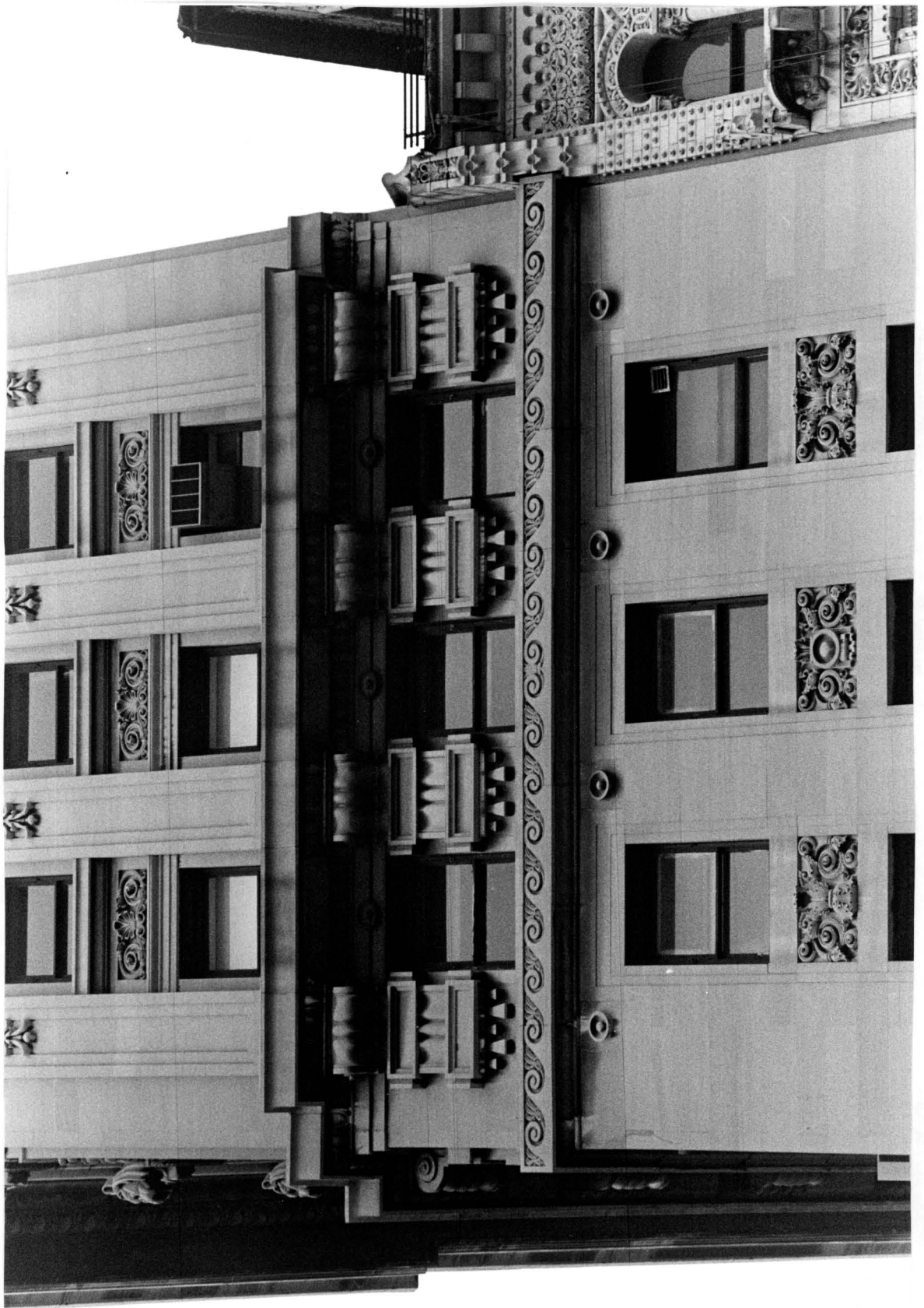
The Bank of the Metropolis  
16th Street elevation, two-  
story base

Photo credit: Carl Forste



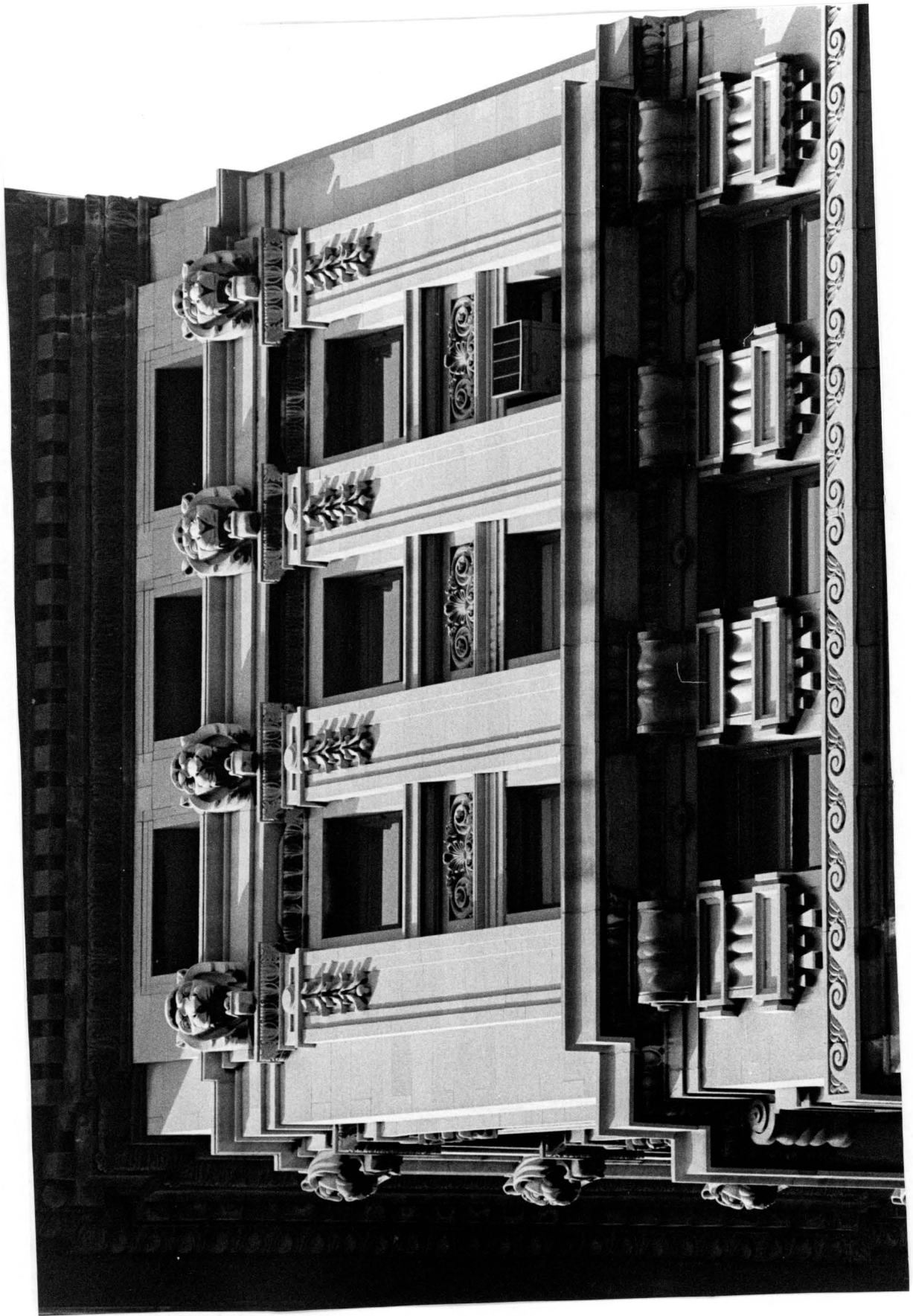
The Bank of the Metropolis  
16th Street elevation, two-story  
base, detail

Photo credit: Carl Forster



The Bank of the Metropolis  
Facade, upper stories

Photo credit: Carl Forster



The Bank of the Metropolis  
Facade, upper stories, detail

Photo credit: Carl Forster



The Bank of the Metropolis  
16th Street elevation, middle  
stories

Photo credit: Carl Forster



The Bank of the Metropolis  
Detail, spandrel panels

Photo credit: Carl Forster

