

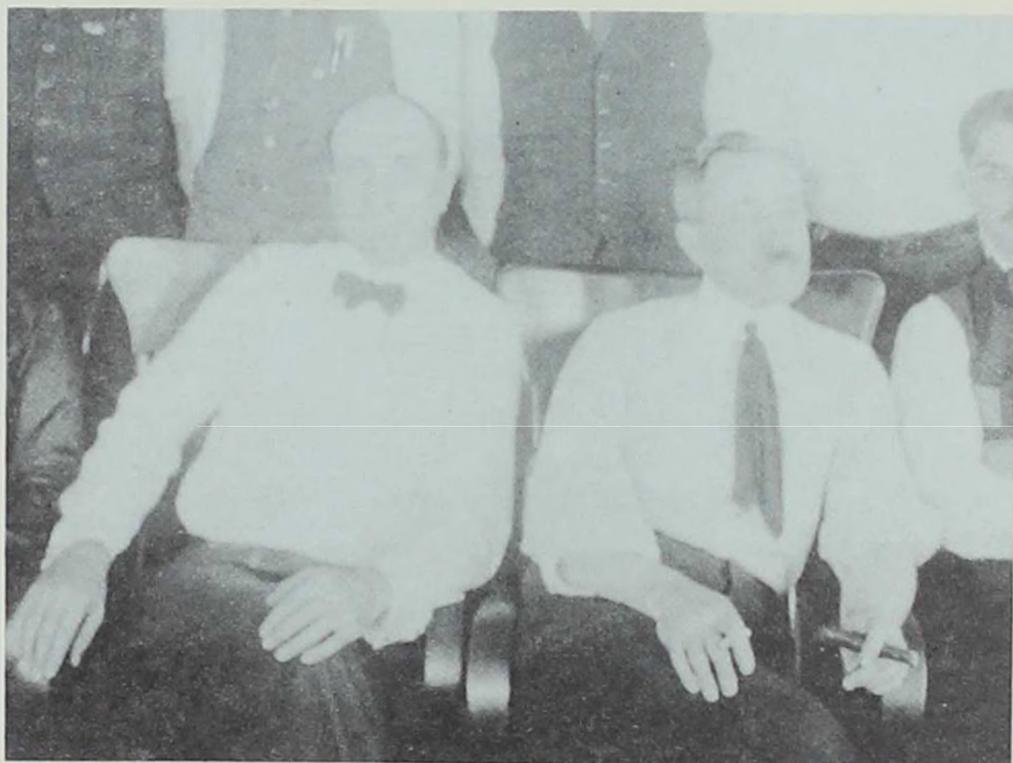
# William Steele's Silent Music

Photographs by Gerald Mansheim

In 1906, William Steele brought the architectural innovations of the Prairie School from the Chicago office of originator Louis Sullivan to the bustling streets of Sioux City. A decade later — after building up a successful Sioux City business with conventional designs — Steele paid homage to his mentor with the magnificent Woodbury County Courthouse, the largest structure built along Prairie School lines in the United States. Today, sixty years after its completion, the Steele courthouse remains a brilliant reminder of the richness of the Sullivan tradition.

William La Barthe Steele was born in Springfield, Illinois in 1875, attended school there, and then studied architecture at the University of Illinois. Upon graduating in 1896, Steele joined Louis Sullivan's staff as a draftsman. There he met George Grant Elmslie, another Sullivan assistant who in 1893 had succeeded Frank Lloyd Wright as the master's chief designer. Like Wright, Elmslie and Steele practiced Sullivan's new architecture, combining modern construction techniques with a naturalistic aesthetic. In his superb designs for St. Louis's Wainwright Building (1893-94), Chicago's Stock Exchange Building (1893-94), and Buffalo's Guaranty Building (1894-95), Sullivan had pioneered a style that offered a dignified alternative to mimicking the classical style in the design of public buildings.

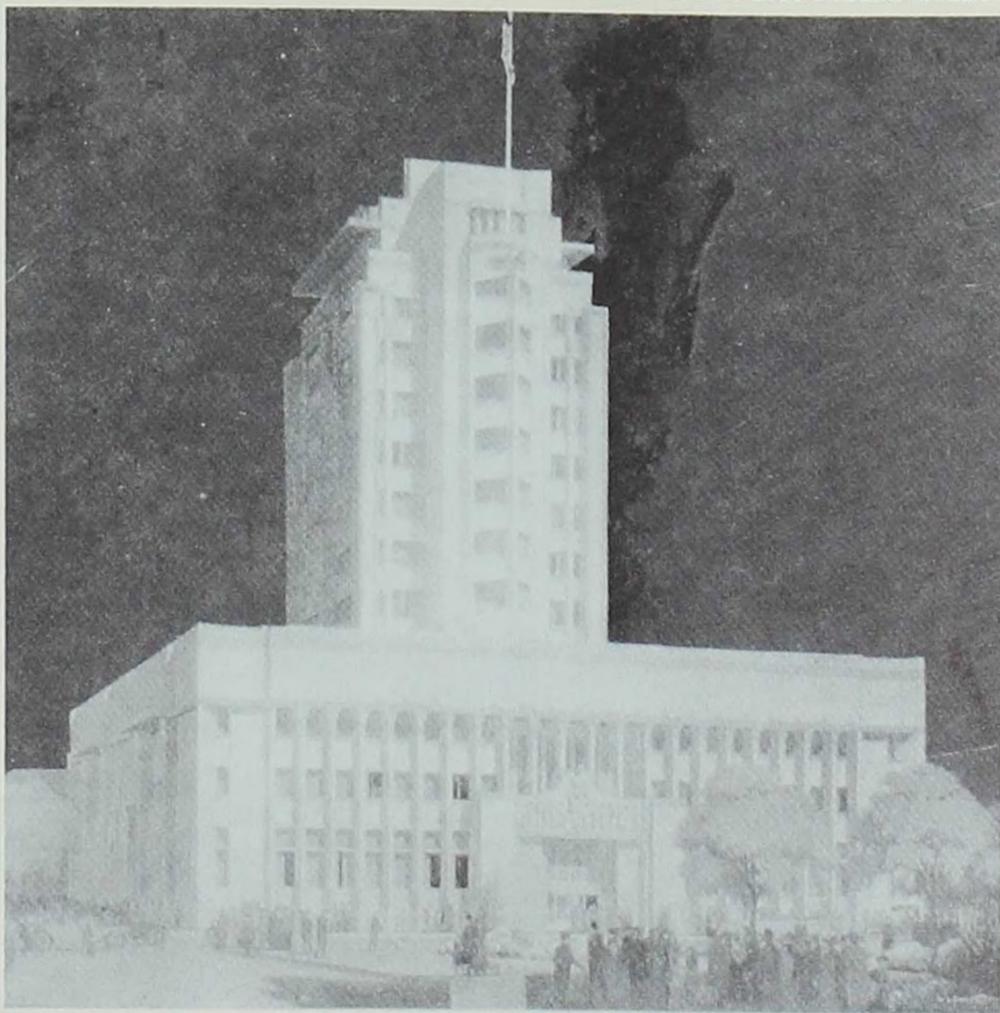
William Steele worked in Sullivan's office for three years. In 1899

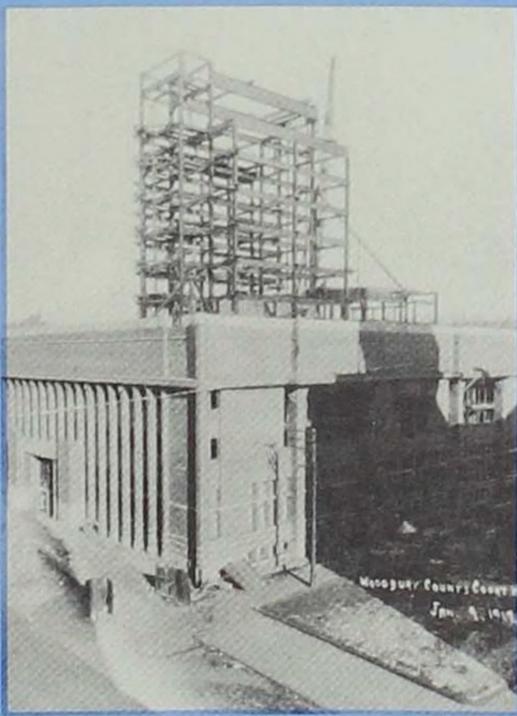


COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM

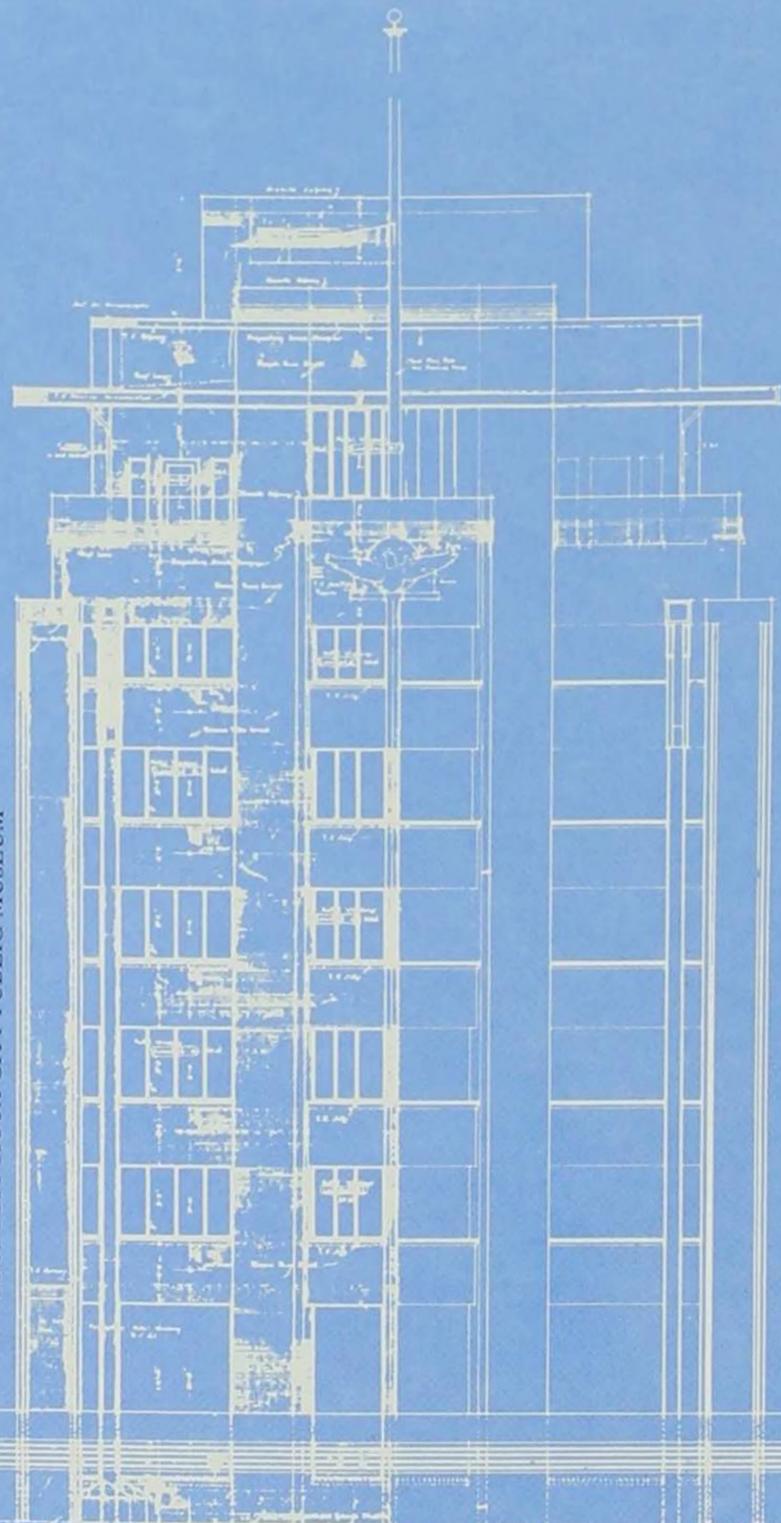
*Architects William Steele (left) and George Elmslie (right) collaborated on the design for the Woodbury County Courthouse. Both had worked in Louis Sullivan's Chicago office. Their drawing of the proposed courthouse — dated March 1915 — appears below. On the opposite page: the Douglas Street entrance in 1981.*

COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM

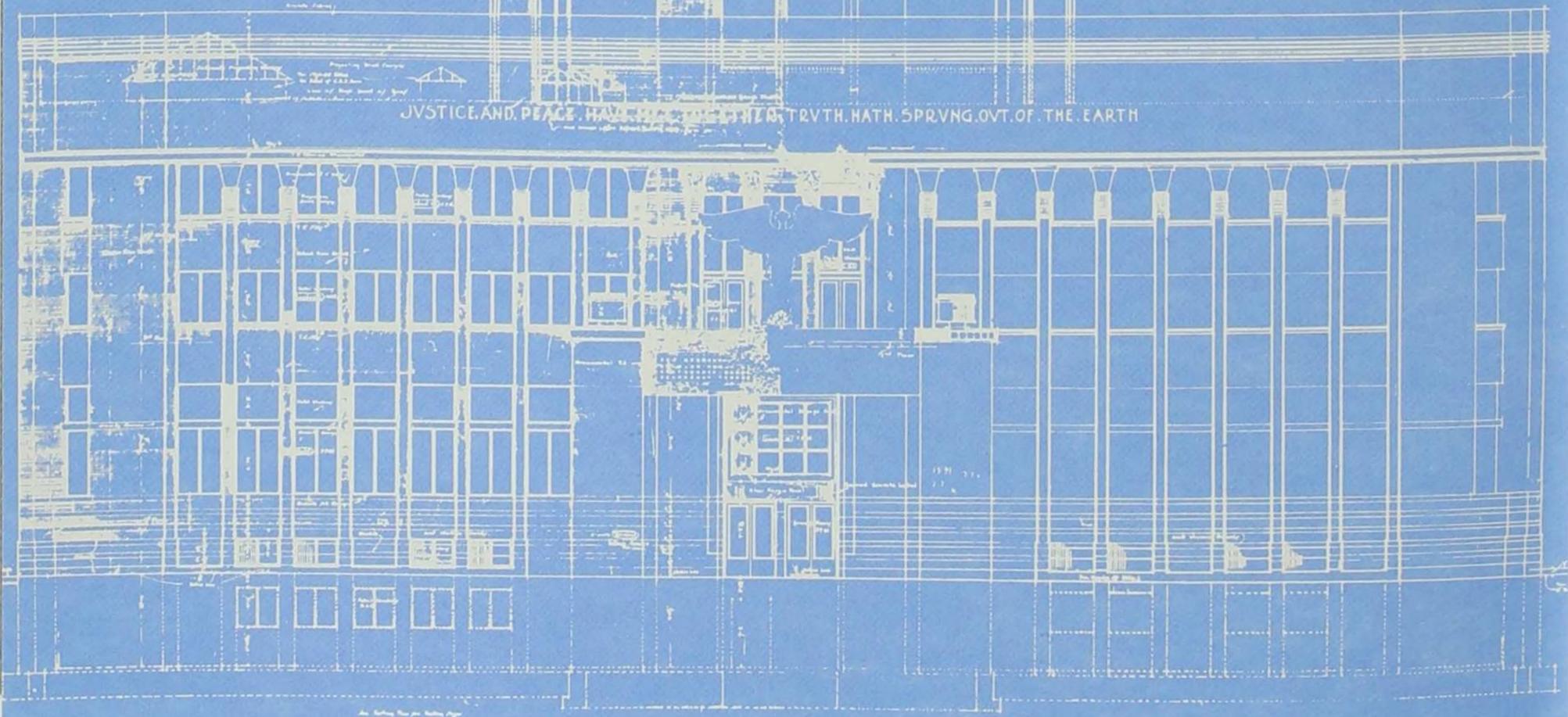




COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM



*The architect's drawing of the Douglas Street facade — and photographs of the courthouse under construction in the winter of 1916-1917, found in Steele's notebook and now in the collection of the Sioux City Public Museum.*



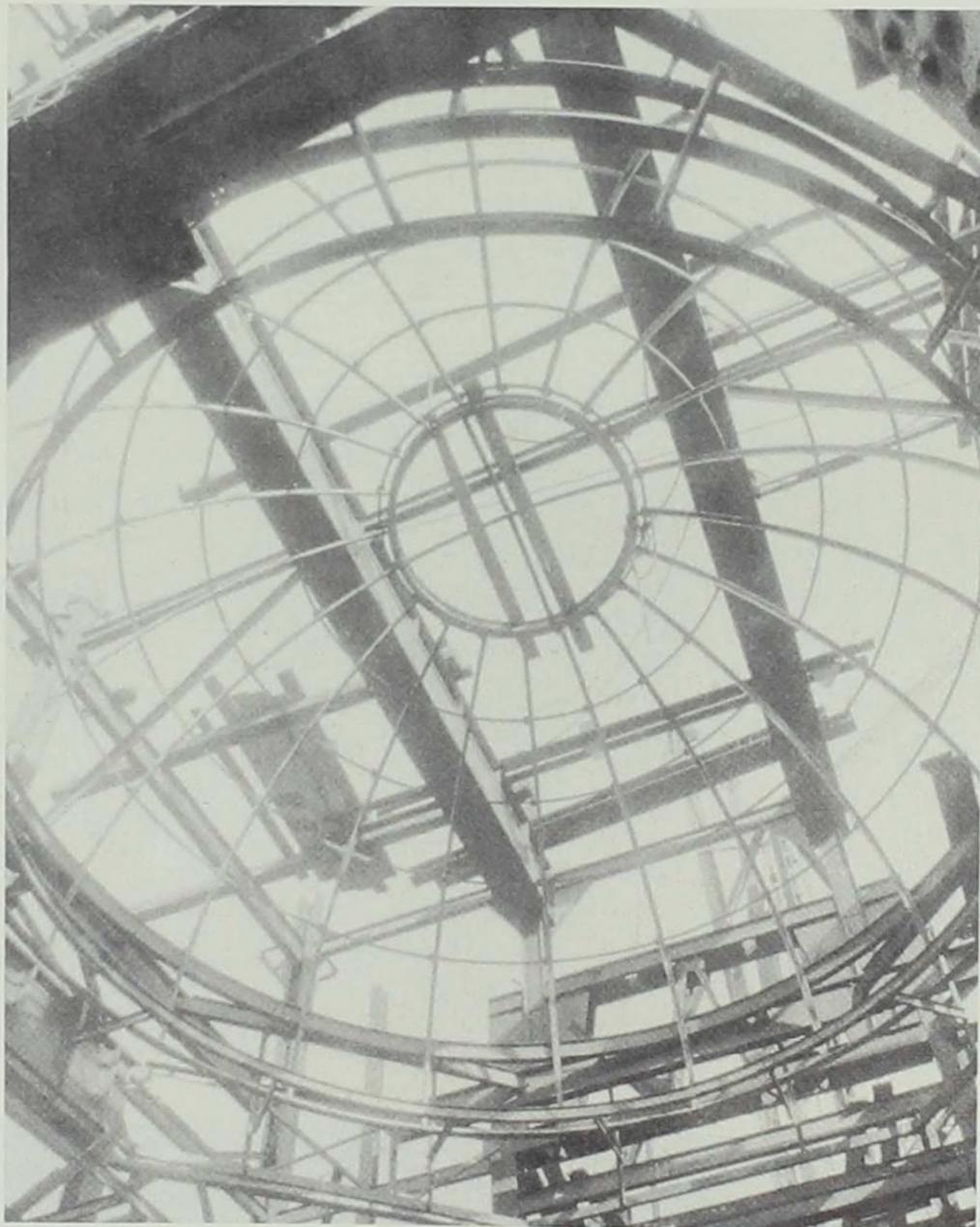
DOUGLAS STREET (WEST) ELEVATION

he moved to Pittsburgh, where he worked for a number of local architects, but later returned to the Midwest and opened an office in Sioux City. Steele found plenty of work in the Missouri River metropolis (the farm prosperity of the early 1900s sparked a building boom), but it was not until 1915 that his ties to the Prairie School became obvious in his Sioux City work.

In June 1914, the Woodbury County Board of Supervisors won voter approval to spend \$500,000 to build a new courthouse large enough to handle the public business of the county's burgeoning population. The supervisors' aim was not merely utilitarian, however, for they hoped to build a courthouse that would best — or at least match — the courthouses of county seats in northwestern Iowa and throughout the state. Such boosterism was characteristic of nineteenth-century Sioux City — the site of several corn palaces, an elevated railway, and a combination bridge — so it is hardly surprising that the supervisors limited entry of architectural proposals to designers whose work they respected, including the forty-year-old William Steele.

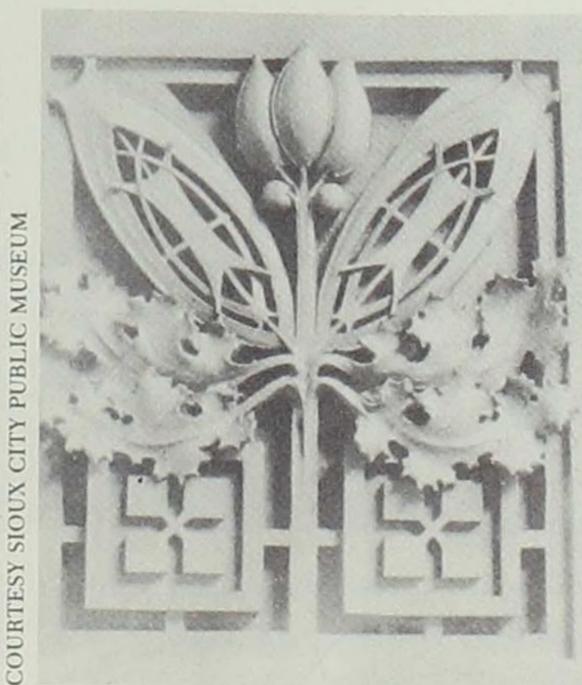
Steele won the competition with a Gothic Revival design, but as soon as he was awarded the commission — on January 5, 1915 — he asked the supervisors' permission to draw up an alternative plan for the proposed courthouse. When they agreed, Steele called in his friends George Elmslie and William Gray Purcell from Minneapolis; together the three men drafted a new proposal. On March 23, 1915, Steele presented

*continued page 51*



COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM

*Above, the dome under construction; below, castings of exterior ornament — including bison heads ("a gentle tribute to the earlier days") placed on the building's east side, and one of several floral patterns that appear throughout the structure.*



COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM



*On the building's second floor are several courtrooms, including this one for the Equity Court. Richly colored painting graces the wall above the judge's bench.*

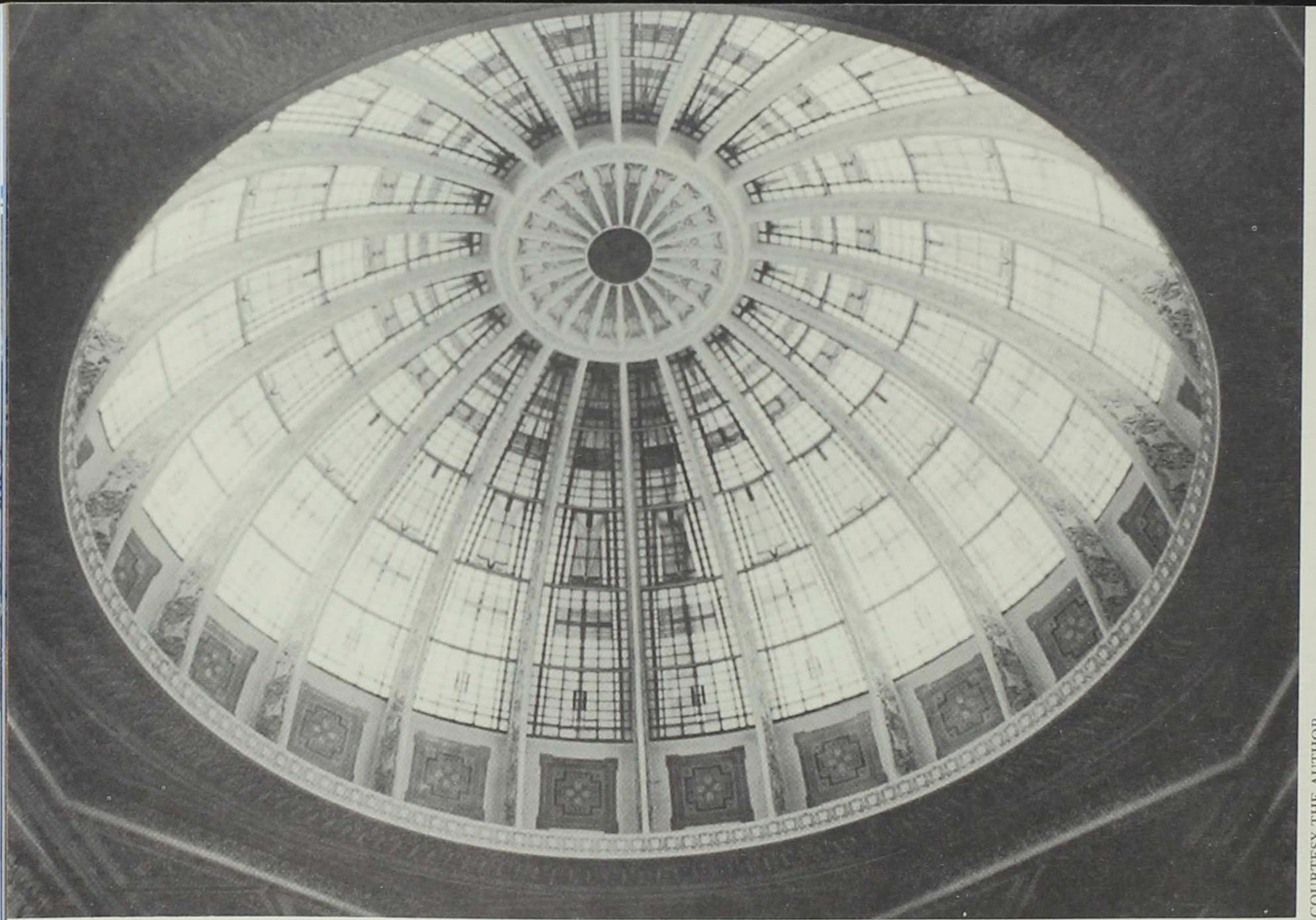
STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

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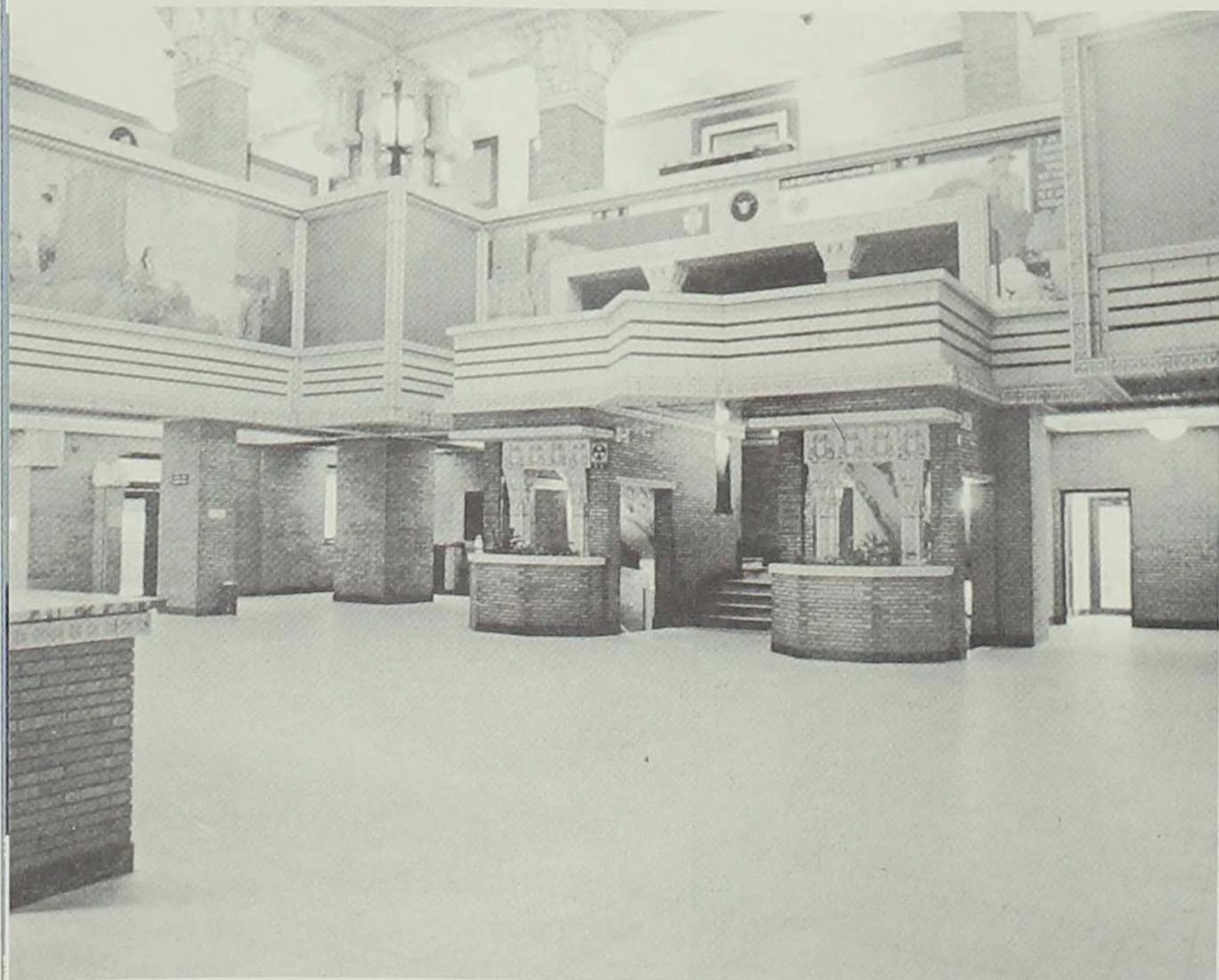




*Terra cotta ornament, glass mosaic inlays, tile floors, brick walls, vivid murals, all illuminated by light filtered through stained glass windows — the effect upon entering the courthouse rotunda can be staggering. Sixty-two years after the building's completion, the courthouse interior retains its original splendor. Perhaps the most arresting view is from the mezzanine, pictured on the top of the opposite page. The mural at the left, one of four commissioned from Chicago painter John W. Norton, depicts the cosmopolitan spirit of Sioux City at the turn of the century. Above, the quiet dignity of a large courtroom, handsomely appointed with fixtures chosen — and, in many cases, designed — by the architects.*



COURTESY THE AUTHOR



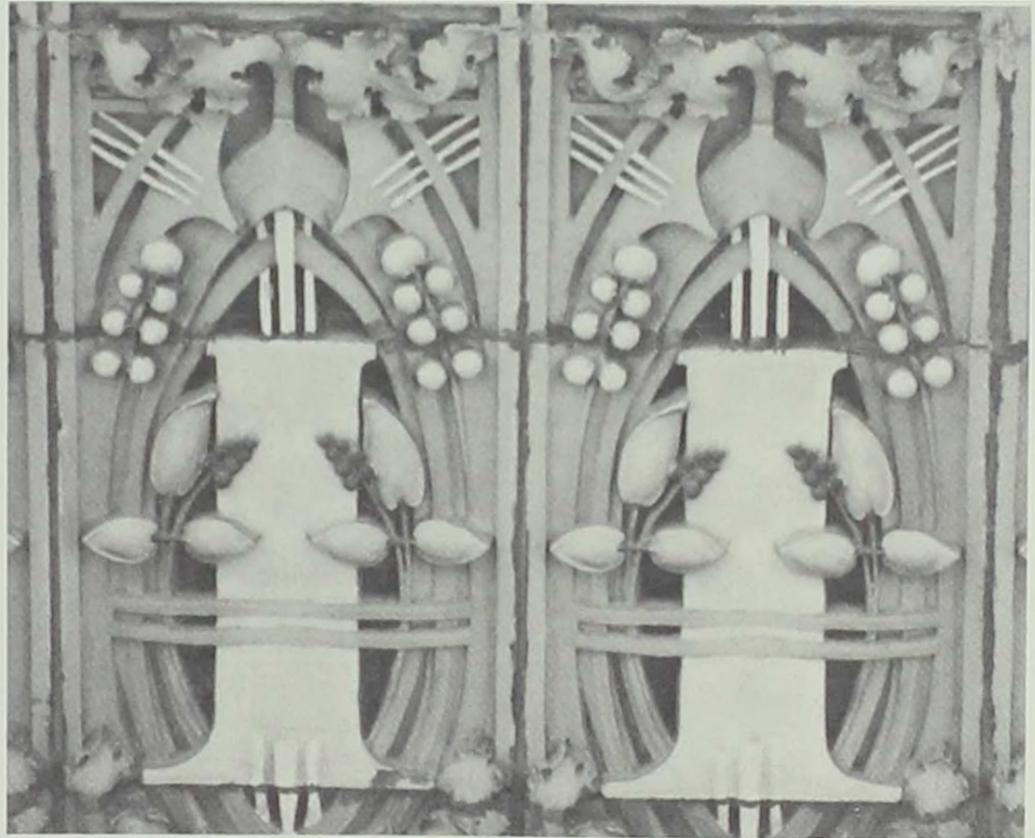
COURTESY THE AUTHOR

*A spectacular dome of stained glass dominates the rotunda on the courthouse's main floor. The dome itself is contained within the office tower's first story, where it is surrounded by ventilating equipment and large windows that admit sunlight to illuminate the stained glass. George Elmslie designed the dome and rotunda, viewed from the main floor in the photograph to the left.*

preliminary sketches to the Board. They showed a brick building rising above the street to a height of ten stories — the upper six contained in an elegant office tower, which rested on a massive sixty-foot high base housing courtrooms and the principal county offices.

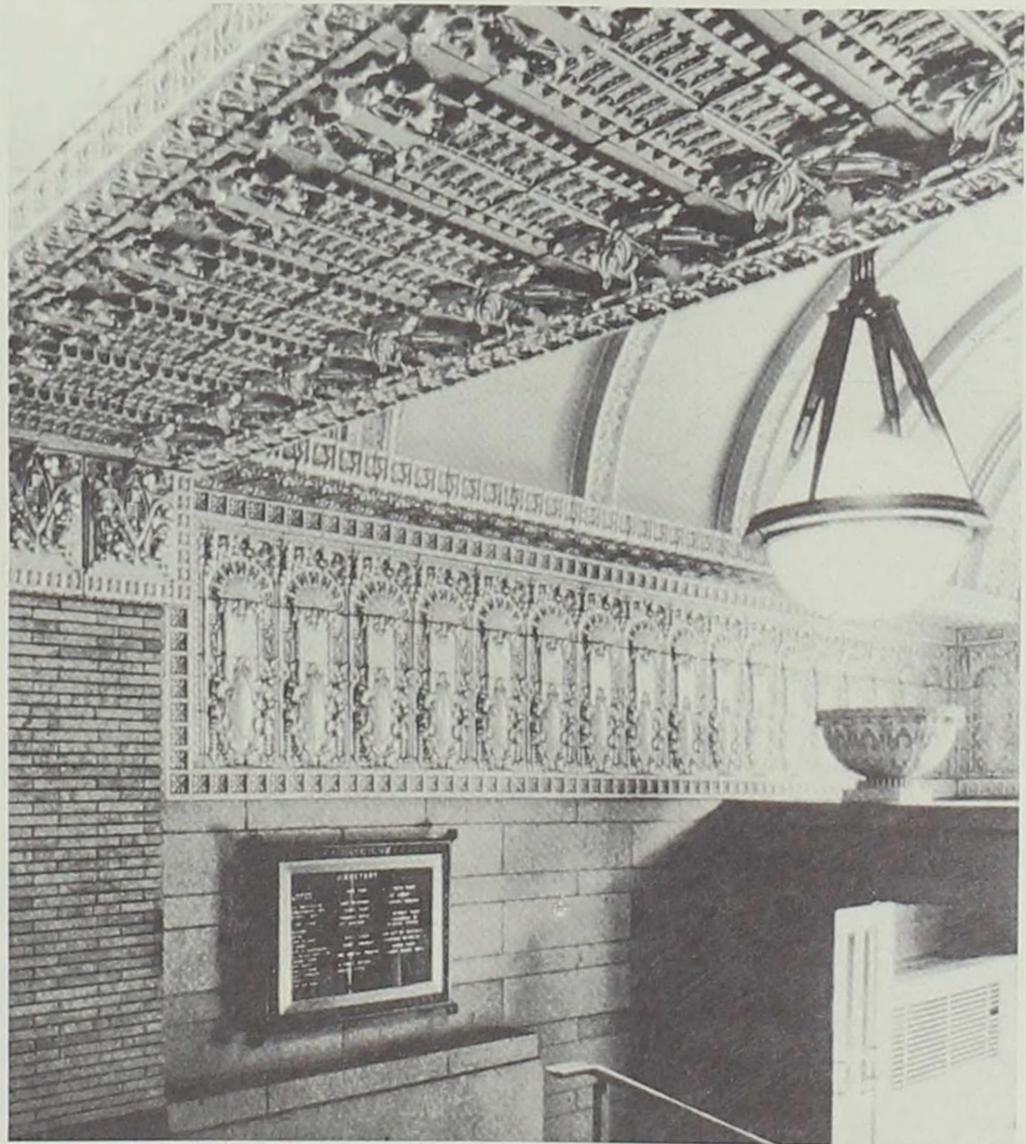
Apparently the supervisors responded favorably, for Steele spent the next eight months refining his plan, meeting with county officials, and discussing the design with local citizens, among them an informal committee of businessmen advising the Board on the proposed courthouse. But as Steele, Elmslie, and Purcell readied their plan for the Board's final approval, committee members began to criticize the new design and asked the supervisors to reconsider their decision of March 23.

The businessmen saw several problems with Steele's plan, some practical and others aesthetic. First, they charged, the courthouse would be built on quicksand that would probably not support the structure. Even if it did, Steele's plans called for offices in a windowless basement — a prospect the businessmen found intolerable. "There is no apparent reason why important public business should be transacted in a hot, stuffy, dark, and dirty basement," declared one critic at a public meeting. The advisors also condemned the office tower as an "architectural experiment . . . unusual and extreme" — and unwanted by the citizens of Woodbury County, most of whom, the critics claimed, would prefer "a courthouse of ordinary and usual design." "Ordinary and usual" here



COURTESY THE AUTHOR  
*The courthouse's terra cotta ornament — a sample appears above — exhibits the strong influence of Louis Sullivan, as does the ornament's placement in the stairway at the Douglas Street entrance, pictured below.*

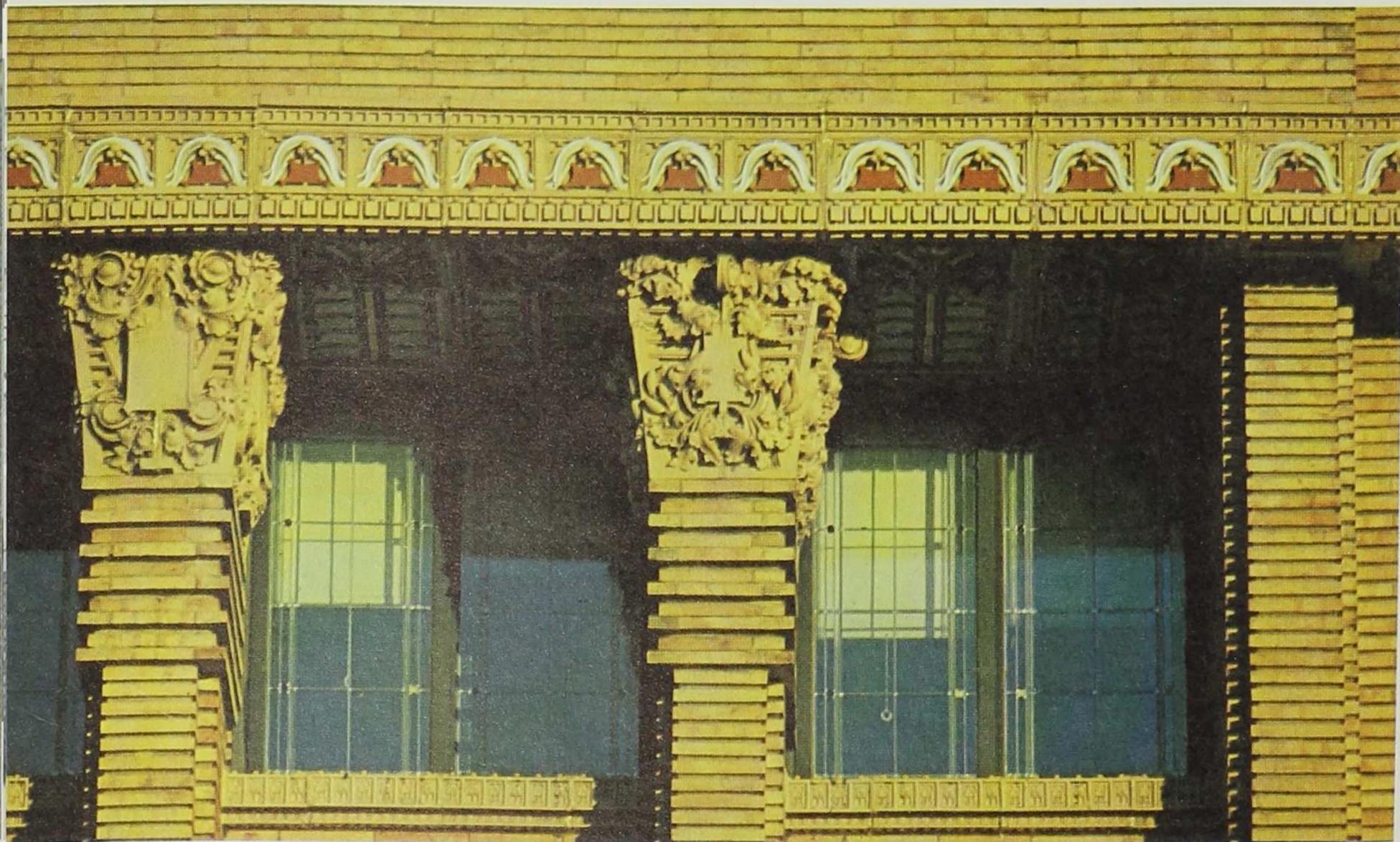
COURTESY DIVISION OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION





STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Few twentieth-century buildings display the craftsmanship and artistic vision of William Steele's Woodbury County Courthouse. Thrusting westward from the building's office tower is sculptor Alfonso Iannelli's bold eagle (opposite top), a symbol of Sioux City's ambitious spirit. Iannelli also produced the sculpture atop the Douglas Street entrance (front cover). Here the authoritative presence of the LAW — "aged and slumbrous" — looms over the rush of traffic on the street below. To the left and below are details of ornament placed along windows and at the top of the courthouse's brick piers.



STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

meant a towerless six-story structure built of familiar stone or granite, not brick.

The question of building material aroused other citizens, notably members of the Trades and Labor Assembly, whose representatives took issue with the businessmen's declarations. Responding to committee member E. A. Burgess' claim that taxpayers unanimously wanted no brick and no tower, E. J. O'Conner of the Assembly noted, "It is strange that none of the 3,000 union men of the city has expressed such an opinion." The laborers wanted brick rather than stone for a very practical reason: the Roman brick prescribed by Steele could be produced in Sioux City kilns by Sioux City workers. Indeed, the unions moved on several fronts to see that the courthouse project provided jobs for their members, including an effort to convince the supervisors that only local men should work on the building's construction.

By early December 1915, public discussion of the proposed courthouse had grown rather heated, and with a good deal of relief the Board of Supervisors finally settled the matter on December 7. Having received word from the architect that the businessmen's complaints could not be answered without total revision of the design, the supervisors voted unanimously to adopt Steele's plan without alteration. On February 15, 1916, the Board awarded the construction contract to the Minneapolis firm of Splady, Albee, and Smith. Two years later — on March 1, 1918 — the building was completed.

Praised by contemporaries, the Woodbury County Courthouse exhibited Prairie School principles in a

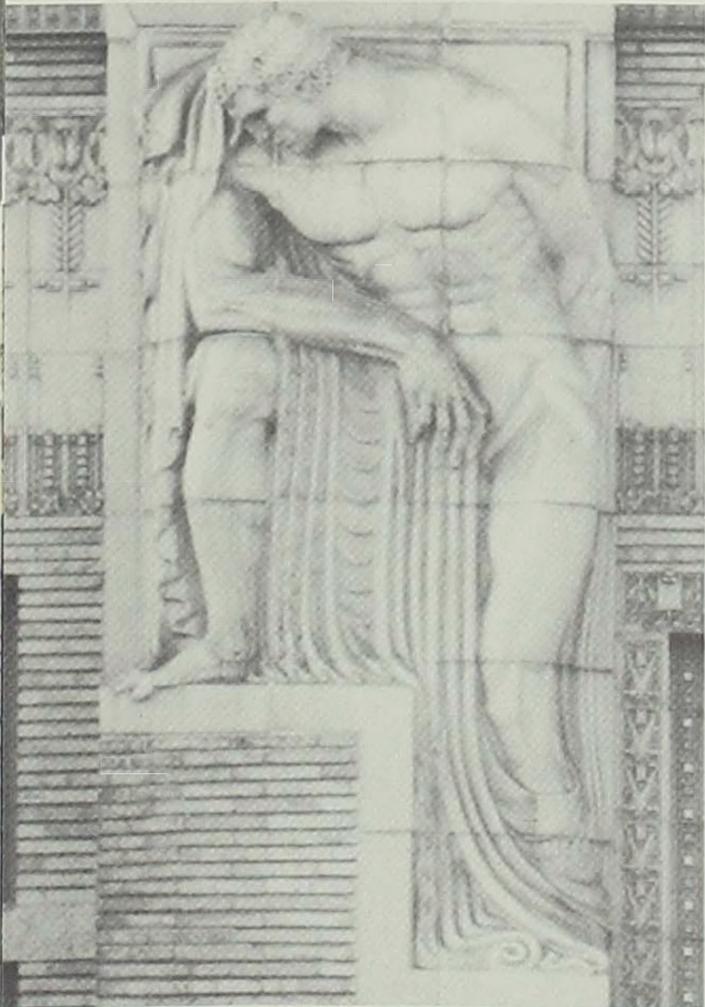


STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

WE BEAT ON DRUMS AND DULL OUR EARS  
TO SILENT MUSIC OF THE SPHERES. — WLS

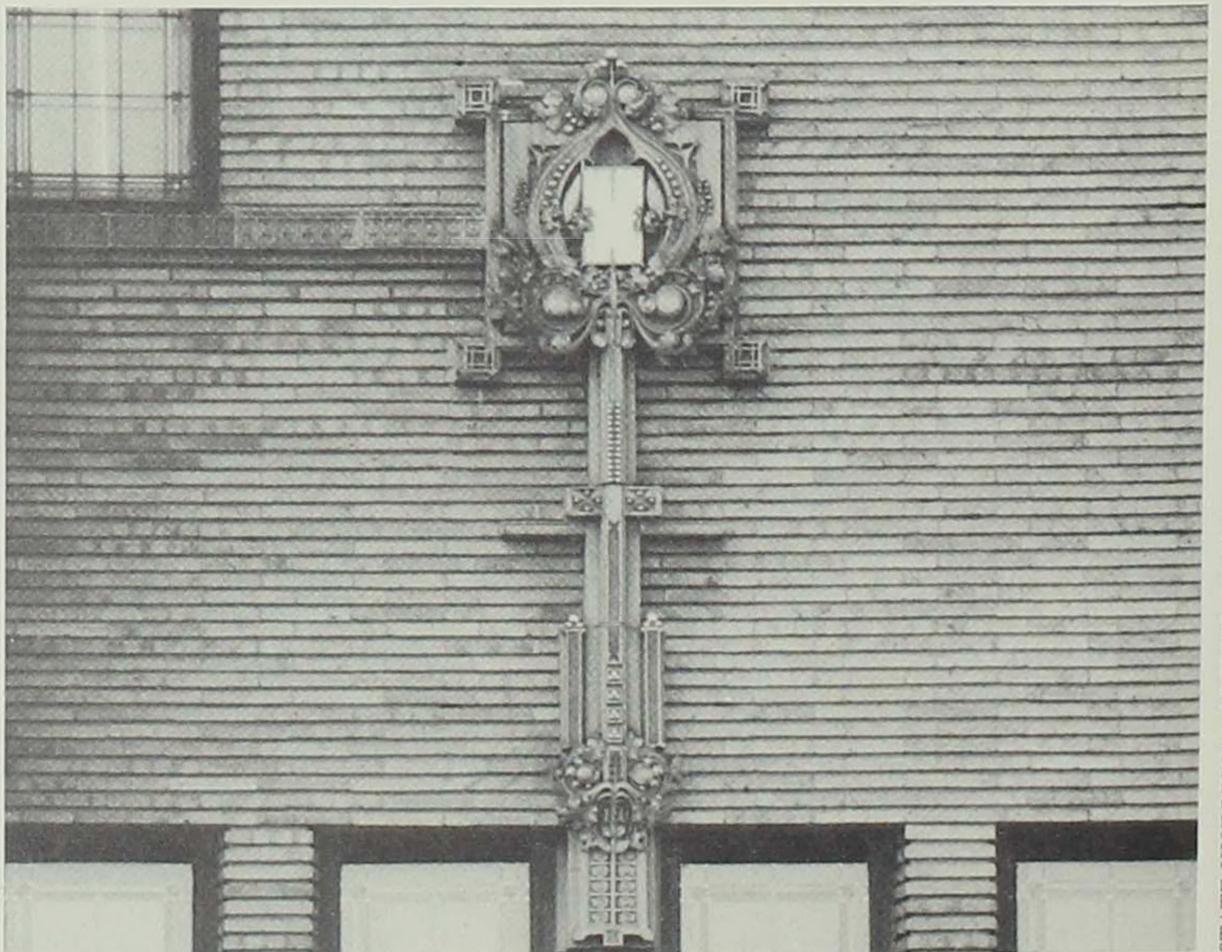
STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA





STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

*The windows pictured above and below suggest Louis Sullivan's influence on Steele and his associates. They bear a strong resemblance to the windows of the People's Bank building and St. Paul's Methodist Church, both in Cedar Rapids, which were designed by Sullivan in the early 1910s and featured in the March/April 1980 issue of The Palimpsest. At left, part of Iannelli's sculpture at the north entrance.*



STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

For their help in gathering information on the Woodbury County Courthouse, the editor wishes to thank Eugene Beam of Sioux City, Bruce Bienemann of the Sioux City Art Center, John Lawrence of Morningside College, Eugene Reich of Sioux City, Scott Sorensen of the Sioux City Public Museum, and Richard Guy Wilson of the University of Virginia.

building of unusual scale. At the outset, Steele had divided the labor among his distinguished associates — Elmslie took major responsibility for the design, Purcell supervised the painting and sculpture, Paul D. Cook handled the structural engineering, and B. A. Broom directed the mechanical engineering. Skillful combination of modern structural methods with naturalistic decoration produced a building that proved Sullivan's point about American architecture not needing to lean on classical anachronisms to achieve dignity. Brick facades, bordered by granite at base and copings, enhanced by polychrome terra cotta, polished quartzite tile, stained glass and mosaic inlay, bronze doors and grilles — “unusual and extreme” as its critics charged, perhaps, but nonetheless a triumph of taste and planning. A half-century later, county employees work comfortably in space designed before World War I. Few buildings of comparable vintage can make such a claim. Needless to say, the courthouse has not sunk into quicksand.

Today another advisory board looks out for the building's welfare, helping county officials to adapt William Steele's masterpiece to modern office procedures when necessary. Although the architect left an extensive body of work in and around Sioux City before he moved to Omaha in the early 1930s, his reputation rests on the splendid Woodbury County Courthouse — a fitting tribute to his talent and to the exciting work of the Prairie School generation of which he was part. — *William Silag*



COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM

*The courthouse, nearing completion in the winter of 1917-1918, viewed from the rear. The architect's original cost estimate fell within the \$500,000 appropriated by Woodbury County's Board of Supervisors in 1914, but details — such as the bronze grille designed by Elmslie to complement Iannelli's sculpture at the north entrance (below) — helped push up the building's actual cost to about \$850,000.*

COURTESY THE AUTHOR

