

Amongst Deferential Trees

The Milbank Mausoleum, Woodlawn Cemetery

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Historic Preservation Studio I: Reading Buildings
Project 3

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*Sic vive cum hominibus tanquam deus videat,
sic loquere cum deo tanquam homines audiant.*

*Live thus with people as though God witnesses it,
speak thus with God as though people hear it.*

Seneca

These are the beneficent words that adorn the Milbank mausoleum.

At Woodlawn, the Milbank mausoleum occupies a prominent site at the intersection of two main thoroughfares, *Hawthorne* and *Park*, here having found their way into a shadowy corner of the cemetery amongst deferential trees and ancient azaleas. The mausoleum has settled into its landscape – there has formed a volunteer allee of sorts along *Park*, running from the South, that serves to frame the warm limestone that so eagerly catches the passing sun. The other monuments in contrast seem to rot like water lilies under the dense shade cast by the shadowy trees that have grown larger than their original intention. Yet, somehow, the Milbank mausoleum, with its noble countenance, seems only more seated in its landscape, the dense shrubbery at its base softening it – in a way presenting the gracious flight of steps that leads to its finely wrought bronze doors, pierced and airy – more of a protected suggestion of life rather than a funereal vaulting. Aspects such as these, from the bronze grille-work, the pierced marble screens, to its close resemblance to a quadrilaterally symmetrical garden folly in a picturesque landscape, make it glint in a completely different manner.

Having passed monuments of a lesser tone, one recalls that of the Julliard. Though similar to that of the Milbank, it is without any plinth of any great height or a gracious flight of steps leading to its entrance. In observing the two so similarly related mausolea (twin columns *in antis* / solid corner piers / employing the ionic order, etc.) one is struck by necessity of the liminal space. The flight of stairs and the height of the plinth at the Milbank mausoleum agilely transfer one's frame of reference to another plane – from one understanding of space to another. The visitor is transferred from limitlessness and vulnerability to the new scale set by a heavy entablature that cuts the sky – the simple flight of steps ushering one into an interior that is at once part of the landscape it has positioned itself in, but also an interior/ a structure that has a rationale and order all its own – a focused sense of being that the architecture itself establishes.

Through the heavy branches and the waxy leaves of the flowering magnolia, laurels are visible in the hands of a Grecian maiden – the crowns of a life well lived. The infinity of the labyrinthine band that wraps the mausoleum's plinth – suggesting time and eternity – adding further to questions of the nature of a well-lived life. The architecture of any funerary monument attempts to stand proxy for the lives of those who have passed, so mightily

attempting to approximate a life, or a collection of lives. And as the inscription etched into the massive stone roof reminds the passerby, lives that are to be lived plainly and honestly — with great integrity — probing the nature of a life well lived — the rhythm of great ambition and deep-seated resolve.

An August Monument

The York and Sawyer-designed mausoleum was commissioned by Joseph Milbank (1848-1914) in the year of his wife Ella's death, 1912, with the mausoleum being completed in 1913. The mausoleum is composed in such a manner that there is a pronounced gracefulness, a countenance possibly informed by the use of the ionic order — the most “feminine” order — or the broad use of Tennessee pink “marble” — provided by purveyor Batterson and Basek of Newport mansions *The Breakers* and *Marble House* fame — its pale rose color having the slightest hint of mauve in a cool shadowy light and glowing a warm gold in the radiant sun. This pervasive gentility and delicacy is possibly further informed by the six maidens of the four reliefs, the four with funerary urns on the South and North elevations, and the two with *laurels of the victor* on the East and West elevations. One can only conjecture as to the true intent of this monument — to the voice with which the designers and the patron desired it to speak. It cannot be denied that the wife, in an almost forty year marriage, having died three months before the lot was purchased, might have been the subject of such an incomparable tribute.

Joseph Milbank, who rests next to his wife, the pair occupying two of the most prominent eye-height sepulchers, was the son of Jeremiah Milbank, a prominent New York City merchant and investor. In the 1850s he financed inventor Gail Borden's New York Condensed Milk Company (later Borden Milk Products), a venture that galvanized the canned food industry and helped ensure distribution of unspoiled foodstuffs to the Union Army during the Civil War. Through this partnership Milbank secured the government contract for canned milk during the war — a commission that lifted the Milbank name to the leading ranks of Gilded Age society.

Yet, the Milbank name did not splash across the society pages or make fodder for idle gossip. The family's lifestyle included the best schools, debutante balls and charity galas, but the Milbank name was seldom in the news. The name makes appearances in period reporting, quietly and with great composure — always tied to generous institutional endowments and

charitable pledges. Jeremiah Milbank's daughter Elizabeth Milbank Anderson made headlines with her endowment of Barnard and Teacher's Colleges, as well as her donations to citywide health and education services.

In the tradition of his aunt and his father Joseph and his grandfather before him, Jeremiah Milbank, was a man of remarkable accomplishments — and arguably one of the most prolific philanthropists of the twentieth-century. A businessman and financier, he developed an intensely personal interest in health and rehabilitation after losing his mother, father, wife, and a son to disease and premature death in the five years before his 30th birthday — all of whom are interred together, including Jeremiah Milbank in the Woodlawn mausoleum.

... tanquam homines audiam. ... us though god witnesses it.

Motivated by a desire to help disabled World War I veterans, he collaborated with the Red Cross to found the first comprehensive rehabilitation center in the United States to address their needs. The professional standards and rehabilitative techniques pioneered there were adopted throughout the world. The facility still operates in Manhattan as the ICD-International Center for the Disabled. Jeremiah Milbank led efforts to eradicate diphtheria and organized the International Committee for the Study of Infantile Paralysis in 1928. Because of his active interest in a cure for polio, President Franklin Roosevelt asked him to chair the organization that was the forerunner of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis. A lifelong volunteer, Jeremiah Milbank helped President Herbert Hoover to develop the Boys & Girls Clubs of America into a strong organization that provides supportive services for disadvantaged youth. He served as Treasurer of the national organization for 25 years.

Deeply held spiritual beliefs led him to finance the first film about the life of Jesus Christ, Cecil B. DeMille's epic *King of Kings*. Jeremiah Milbank instructed that all income derived from the film should be used to make it available to new audiences. DeMille later wrote, *There is a persistent myth that capitalists think of nothing but capital. . . . I have known a certain number of very rich men who were scamps and a larger number who were just dullards; but two of the finest men I have ever known, with the largest minds and highest ideals, were also men of great financial power. One of them is Jeremiah Milbank.*

Jeremiah Milbank Jr., followed in his father's footsteps in regard to his professional and philanthropic endeavors. He promoted voluntary service, and focused his efforts on improving the lives of underprivileged youth, and the disabled — not on the well being of

cultural and artistic institutions. "Jerry Milbank was a true gentleman — principled, patriotic, committed, moral, and upright — and we admired him tremendously," the president of the Manhattan Institute, Lawrence Moe, said, noting that Milbank supported the Manhattan Institute's work on school choice and The Institute's Empire Center for New York State Policy.

In placing the Milbank name in contemporary society — one need not look further than the litany of philanthropic organizations that this generous and benevolent lineage has assembled. Their mausoleum stands as a quiet tribute to their good works and acts of charity — it stands with a quiet dignity — without even a fringe of haughtiness, vulgarity, or pretension even though it stands in stature above those around it. It does, however, stand exquisitely lined and appointed, the impeccable carvings quietly adorning the threshold and the sheltered portions of its cornice — all as finely executed as the acts of humanity and compassion of those who are laid to rest within.

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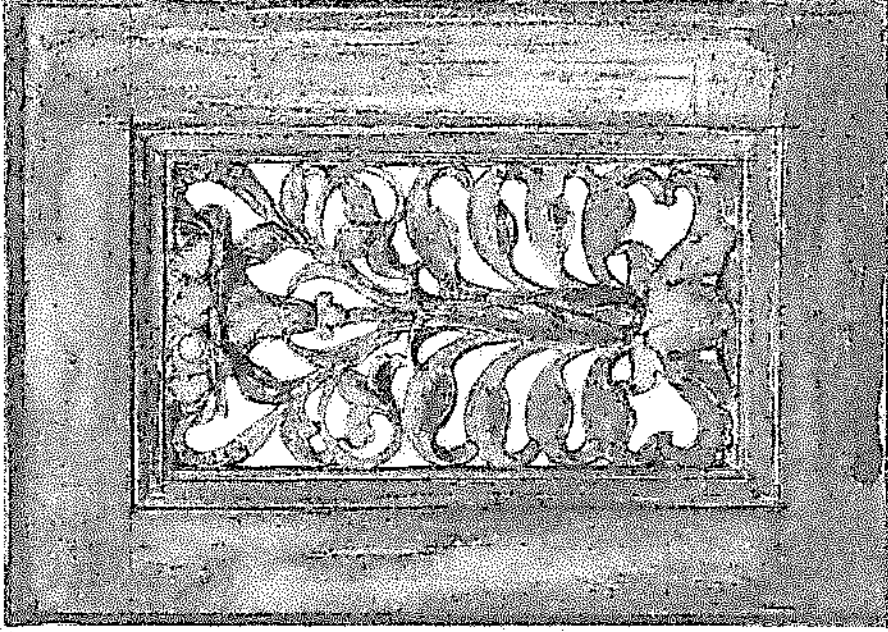
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Note:

An Overlooked Masterpiece

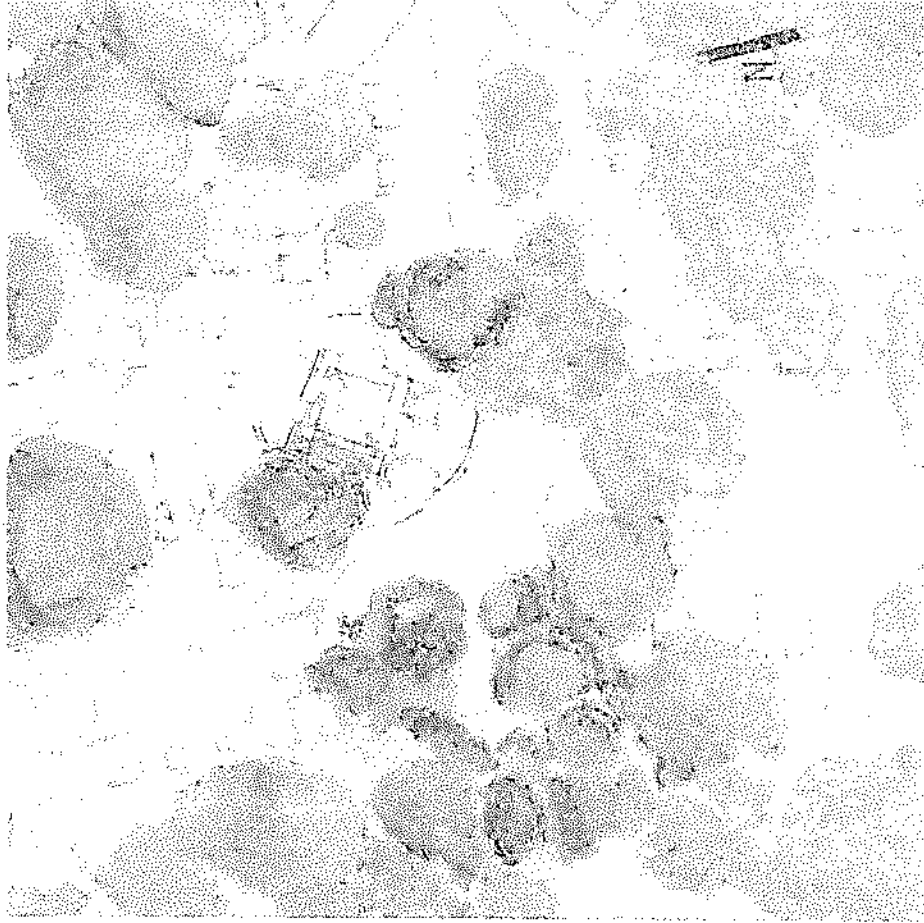
The interior floor of the Milbank Mausoleum is in the manner of *Cosmatesque* work, a technique of *opus sectile* ("cut work") formed of elaborate inlays of small triangles and rectangles of colored stones and glass mosaics set into stone matrices or encrusted upon stone surfaces, popularized by the Cosmati family of Rome in the early 12th century. Bands, panels and shaped reserves of intricate mosaic alternate with contrasting bands, gilloches and simple geometric shapes of plain white marble give a movement and vitality to an otherwise austere interior.



The Millbank Manuscript - Woodblock Carving, New York
Book and Paper, Inc.

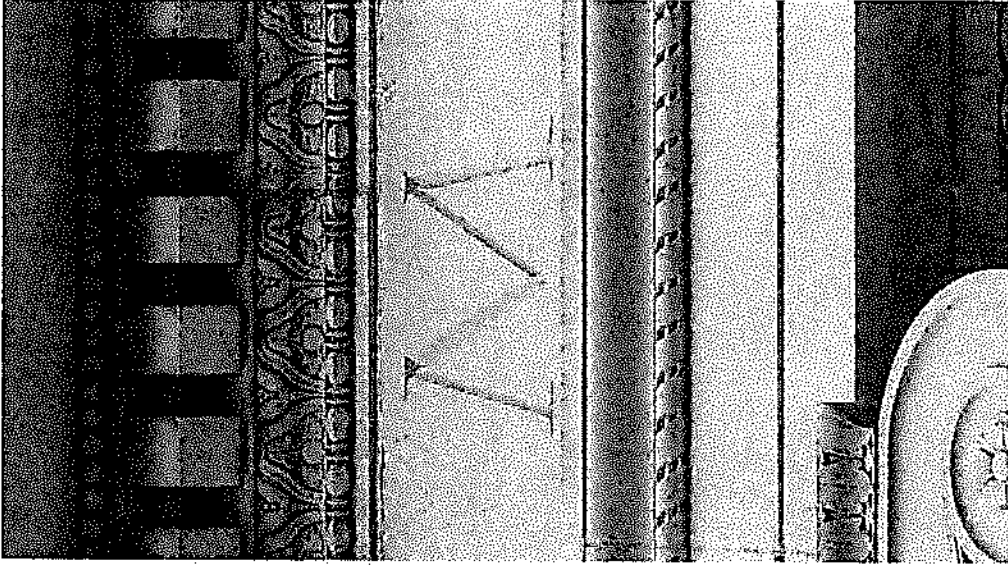
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Peter Kwarcia, Harper
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Amongst Differential Trees

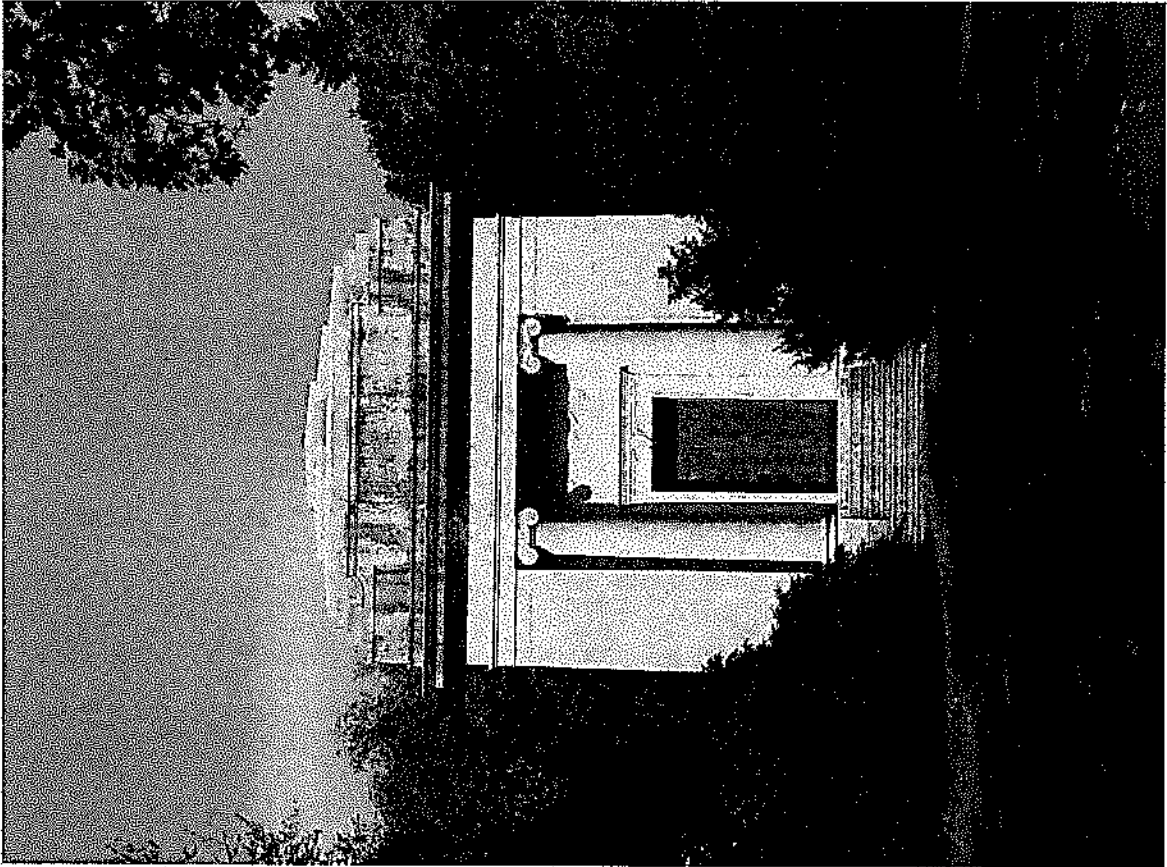
The Millbank Mausoleum, Woodlawn Cemetery

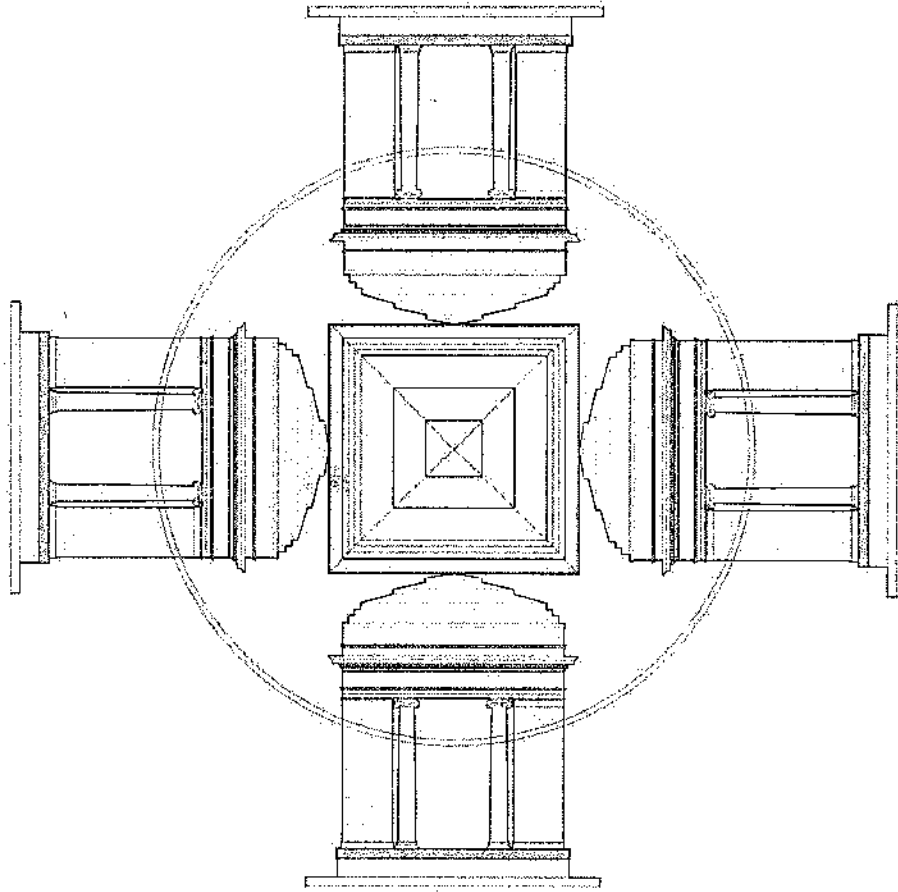


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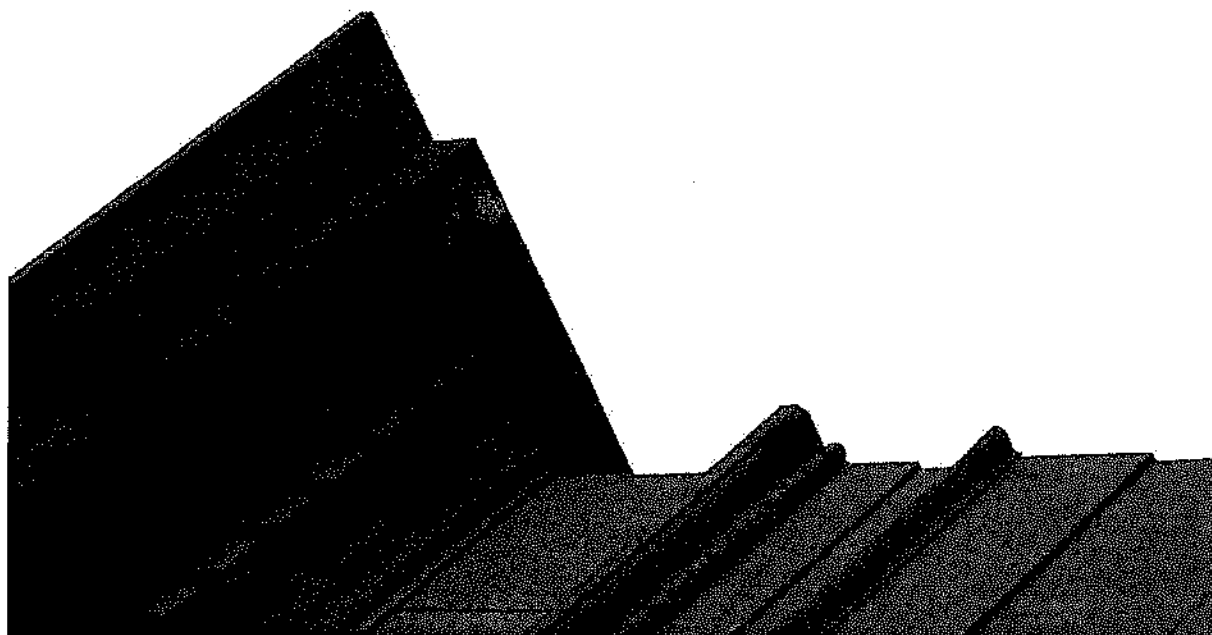
Seneca





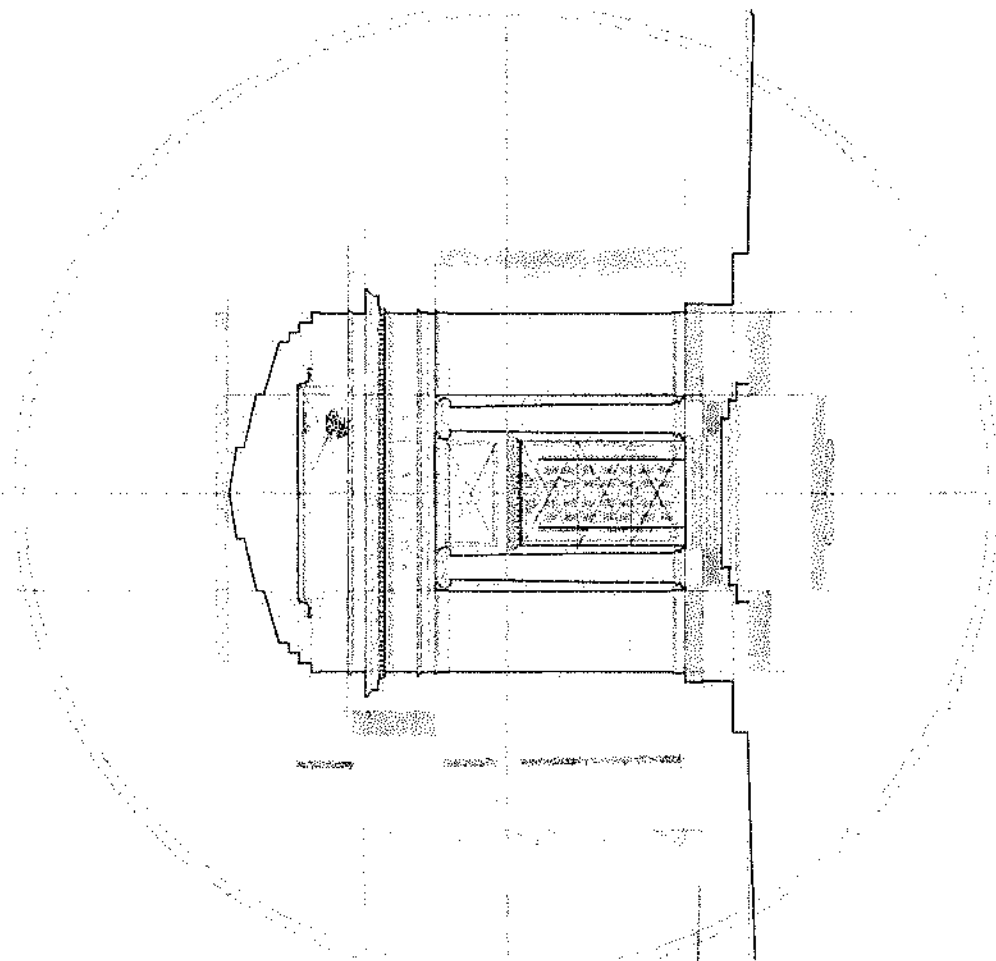
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Architectural drawing with technical annotations.

