

CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING  
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)  
12200 East Jefferson Avenue  
Detroit  
Wayne County  
Michigan

HAER No. MI-24-B

HAER  
MICH  
82-DETRO  
61B-

~~PHOTOGRAPHS~~

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
National Park Service  
Northeast Region  
U.S. Custom House  
200 Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19106

HAER  
MICH  
82-DETRO,  
61B-

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING

(Chalmers Motor Corporation) HAER No. MI-24-B

Location: 12200 East Jefferson Avenue  
Detroit  
Wayne County, Michigan

UTM: 17.330300.4692480  
Quad: Belle Isle, Michigan, 1:24,000

Dates of Construction: 1933, with alterations in 1947, 1948, and ca. 1960

Architect: Albert Kahn  
Builder: W. E. Wood Company, Detroit, Michigan

Present Owner: The Chrysler Corporation  
12000 Chrysler Drive  
Highland Park, MI 48288

Present Use: Demolished in 1991

Significance: Albert Kahn designed this building, which was completed in 1933. The first floor served as a show room for the Chrysler, Plymouth, and DeSoto lines from 1933 until the early 1960s, when Chrysler converted the space into offices. The second floor was a general sales office for most of the life of the building. This is an excellent example of the art moderne style.

Project Information: This documentation is the result of a Memorandum of Agreement among the Chrysler Corporation, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the State Historic Preservation Office, and the City of Detroit as a mitigative measure prior to demolition of these buildings. It was completed in March 1993 by Charles K. Hyde, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan 48202

CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING  
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)  
HAER No. MI-24-B (Page 2)

Physical History

Albert Kahn designed this building for the Chrysler Corporation (Job No. 1646, 31 July 1933) and W. E. Wood of Detroit was the general contractor. Groundbreaking for the \$350,000 building took place on 6 September 1933, with Walter P. Chrysler personally operating the giant steam shovel that broke ground for the project. This was the first automobile industry construction project begun under the supervision of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), which had implemented its automobile industry code on the same day.<sup>1</sup>

When completed in late 1933, this structure dominated the Jefferson Avenue frontage of the Chrysler manufacturing complex because this extremely long, narrow building blocked the plant from public view. When completed, the Office and Display Building was 501 feet in length. The first floor originally consisted of three functional parts. In the middle was a 333-foot section which served as an automobile show room for the Chrysler, Plymouth, and De Soto lines. It was flanked on either side by wood-panelled circular lobbies, measuring 45 feet in diameter, which served as customer waiting areas. Retail sales offices occupied the extreme ends of the building. The width of the building varied--the middle part of the building was 56 feet wide, but the total width of the building from the front of the circular lobbies to the rear of the building was 78 feet. The building had no basement and was two stories high, with the second story housing offices, file rooms, and conference space. Most of the forty offices were the same size (16 feet by 18 feet).

The building remained essentially unchanged until 1947, when Kahn designed several alterations, mainly to the first floor (Job No. 1646-BN, 20 June 1947). Two sections of the show room, each 48 feet long, were converted to other uses, reducing the overall length of the show room from 333 feet to 237 feet. The section at the east end was turned into a conference room, while the one at the west end became a general sales office, with spaces set aside for a sales manager and cashier. Kahn also changed the windows for the two altered segments. He replaced the very large individual panes with steel sash with smaller vertical windows with bases and sills of marble and mullions of Macotta stone.

CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING  
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)  
HAER No. MI-24-B (Page 3)

Physical History (Continued)

Originally, there were two main entrances to the building--a revolving door located along the front of each tower section, leading directly into the lobby. Each entrance had a porch area, which began four stairs above grade and was protected by a stainless steel awning. The entrances were framed in marble. Kahn's 1947 alteration included the addition of two doors which allowed direct access to the show room from Jefferson Avenue. Each of the new doors was framed in stainless steel. A narrow band of dentils, also of stainless steel, adorned the space above the door frame.

The first floor show room windows along Jefferson Avenue originally consisted of fourteen sections, each containing three large panes of glass. Each window section was separated from the adjoining one by a grooved stainless steel column that rested on a black marble base that ran continuously along the bottom of the main facade. Kahn redesigned the show room windows in 1948 (Job No. 1646-BN, August 1948). To reduce reflections on the windows, which often made it virtually impossible to see the cars within, Kahn split the window space in half vertically, leaving the upper half vertical, while inclining the lower half inward to reduce glare. As part of this alteration, a horizontal stainless steel beam dissected each window section into an upper and lower area. The upper area was filled by a set of seven narrow windows, while the lower area was filled in with three large panes of glass, which were set at an angle in order to reduce glare. The bases and sills of the redesigned lower windows were made of marble.

The next major alteration came in the early 1960s, when the Chrysler Plant Engineering Department converted the west end of the first floor, including the lobby, into offices. The payroll and employment departments occupied the extreme west end of the building, while the middle part became office space and conference rooms for labor relations operations. Toward the eastern end of the building, an additional 44-foot section of the show room was converted into a "Mockup Room." At some point in the late 1960s, the rest of the show room was subdivided into smaller rooms. The building spent its final years as a dealer training center.<sup>2</sup>

CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING  
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)  
HAER No. MI-24-B (Page 4)

Architectural Description

The Office and Display Building exemplified the Art Moderne architectural style that became popular in American commercial structures of the 1930s. It was fitting that this particular building, the middle section of which functioned as an automobile showroom, embodied a style that was drawn from contemporary streamlined industrial designs for ships, airplanes, trains, and especially automobiles. The Art Moderne features of the building are visible in its horizontal streamlined appearance; its smooth exterior wall surfaces; the pattern of continuous windows, window sills, and lintels; the horizontal grooves in the stainless steel lintel over the first-story windows; the narrow stone coping at the roof line; the roof-line balustrade; and the rounded tower sections treated with glass panels at the top.

This was a steel-framed building with a concrete foundation and floors, enclosed by twelve inch curtain walls of brick. Kahn finished the Jefferson Avenue facade, as well as the two ends, with yellow sandstone blocks, each measuring two feet by three feet. The south or rear facade was dressed in yellow brick.

Windows covered extensive sections of the rest of the front and side facades of the building. The fenestration consisted of steel-sash windows, which were separated by narrow stone blocks. Second-floor windows, including those on the rear facade, consisted of eight rectangular panes of glass. Photographic evidence suggests that the second and fourth panes from the top pivoted and swung open vertically. First-floor windows on the wings of the building contained twelve panes of glass and therefor were taller than the second-floor windows. Continuous stone lintels and sills bordered the windows on the front and sides of the structure. However, second-story windows on the rear of the building had individual stone lintels and sills.

CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING  
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)  
HAER No. MI-24-B (Page 5)

Architectural Description (continued)

The roof of the building was flat, with a steel balustrade surrounding the roof section over the end sections. Behind each tower section and connected to it was a rectangular penthouse structure which contained ventilating fans. Each of the towers contained third-floor storage area. Without doubt, the most alluring feature of the building was the extensive use of glass-panelling to create the upper ten feet of the towers. Three distinct courses of glass, separated by stainless steel sash, form what appeared from the street to be a complete circle, but in fact extended for only 300 degrees. The glass-panelled wall was about one foot thick, did not enclose a useable space, and was simply a decorative feature. Finally, a flag pole was positioned in the middle of each tower roof.

CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING  
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)  
HAER No. MI-24-B (Page 6)

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Walter P. Chrysler Expresses Faith in Detroit, Dedicates Site of Auto Office: Chrysler Handles Shovel as Ground Is Broken For New Administration Building," The Detroit News, 6 September 1933, p. 12

<sup>2</sup>Chrysler Corporation Plant Engineering Department drawings, "1st and 2nd Floor of Sales Building," 12/2/1958, revised 5/2/1960 and undated drawing labelled, "Administration Building," both found in the Chrysler Historical Collection.

CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING  
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)  
HAER No. MI-24-B (Page 7)

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings: Original drawings have survived and are preserved in the corporate archives of Albert Kahn Associates, Architects and Engineers, the Albert Kahn Building, 7430 Second Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48202. The Chrysler Historical Collection, 12000 Chrysler Drive, Highland Park, Michigan 48288 has drawings of alterations designed by Chrysler's plant engineering department.

B. Historic Views: Historic views can be found at the Chrysler Historical Collection and in the corporate archives of Albert Kahn Associates in Detroit.

C. Bibliography

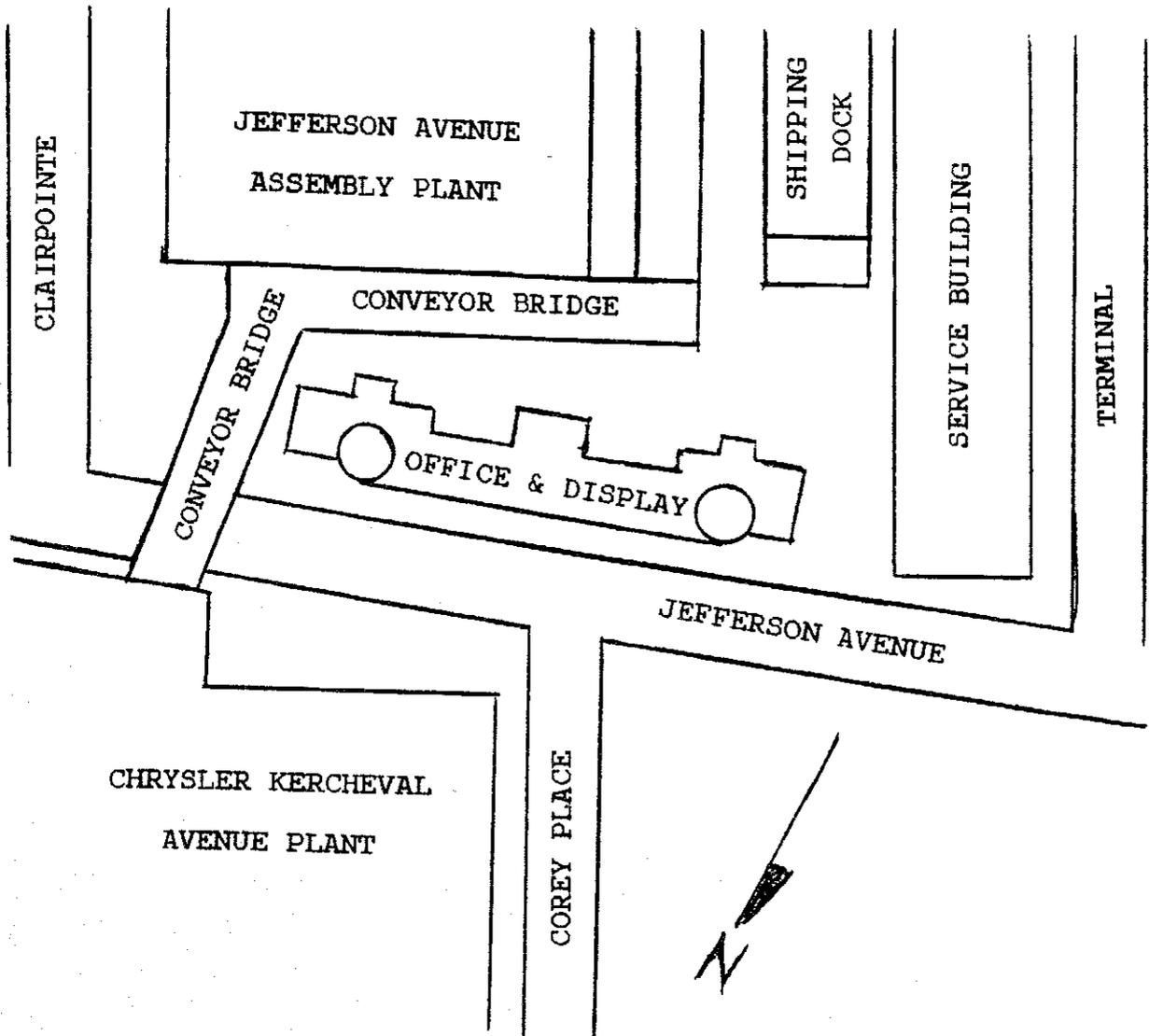
1. Secondary and Published Sources

"Walter P. Chrysler Expresses Faith in Detroit, Dedicates Site of Auto Office: Chrysler Handles Shovel as Ground Is Broken For New Administration Building," The Detroit News, 6 September 1933, p. 12.



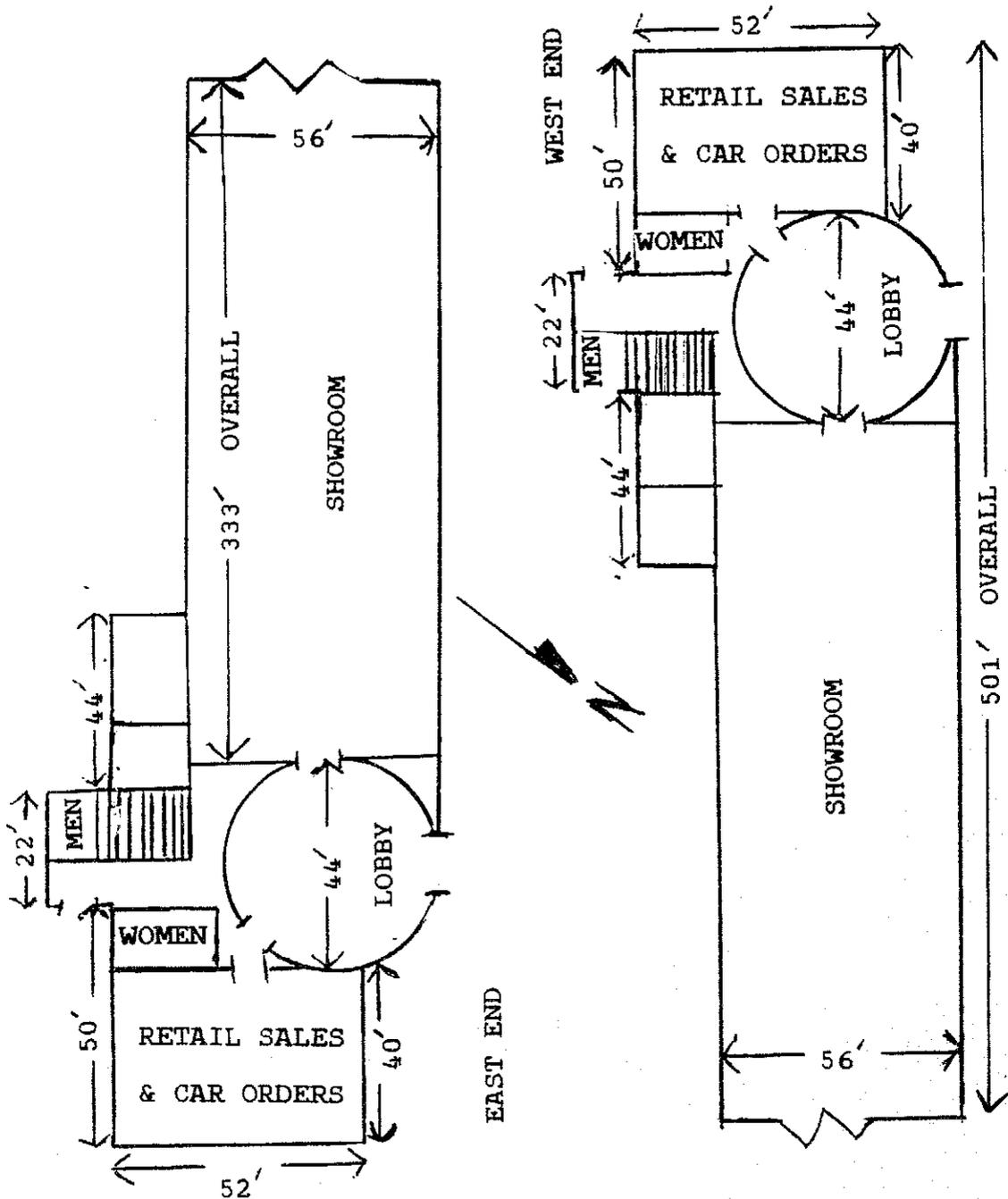
CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING  
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)  
HAER No. MI-24-B (Page 9)

SITE PLAN



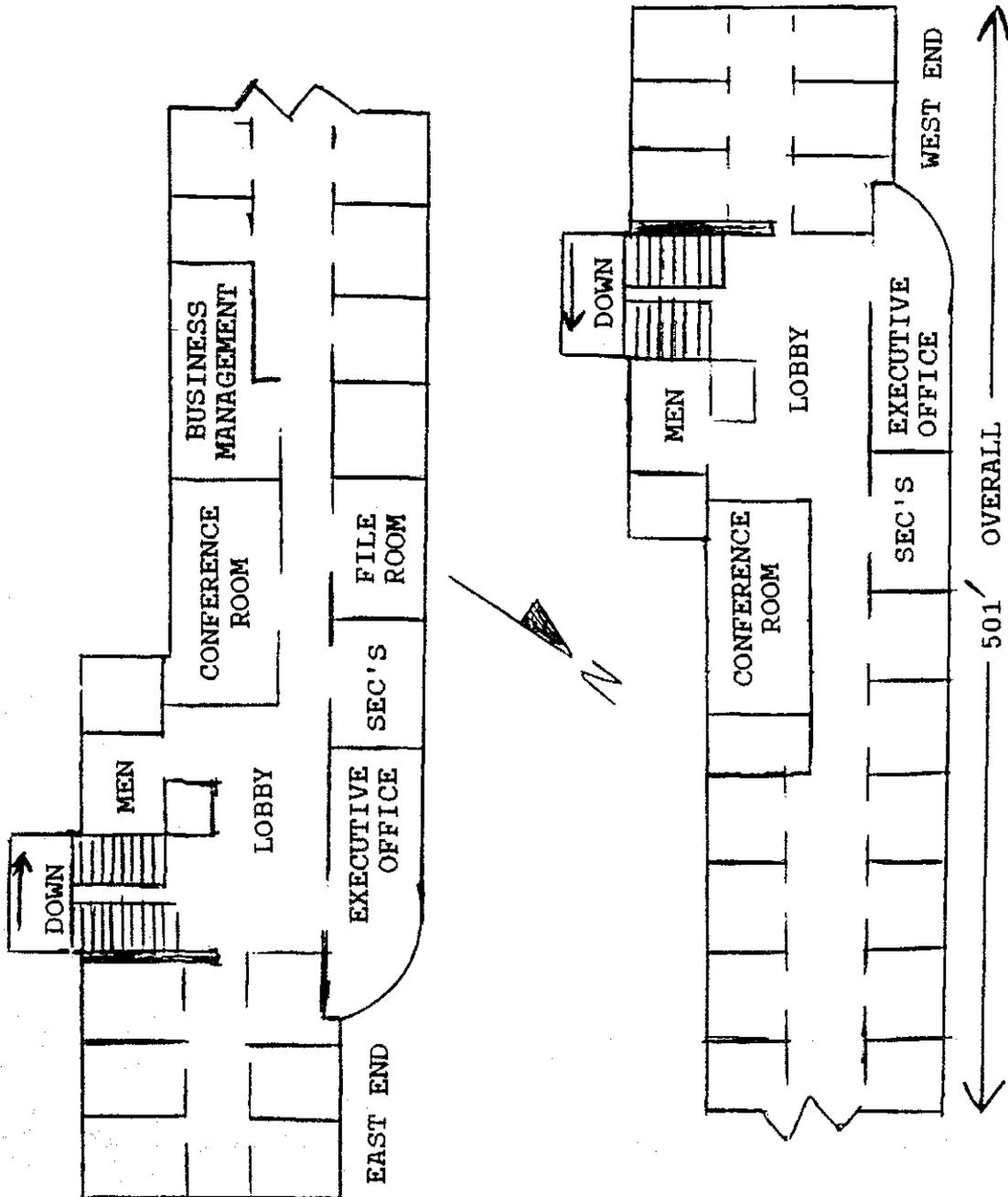
CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING  
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)  
HAER No. MI-24-B (Page 10)

FIRST FLOOR PLAN, AS BUILT



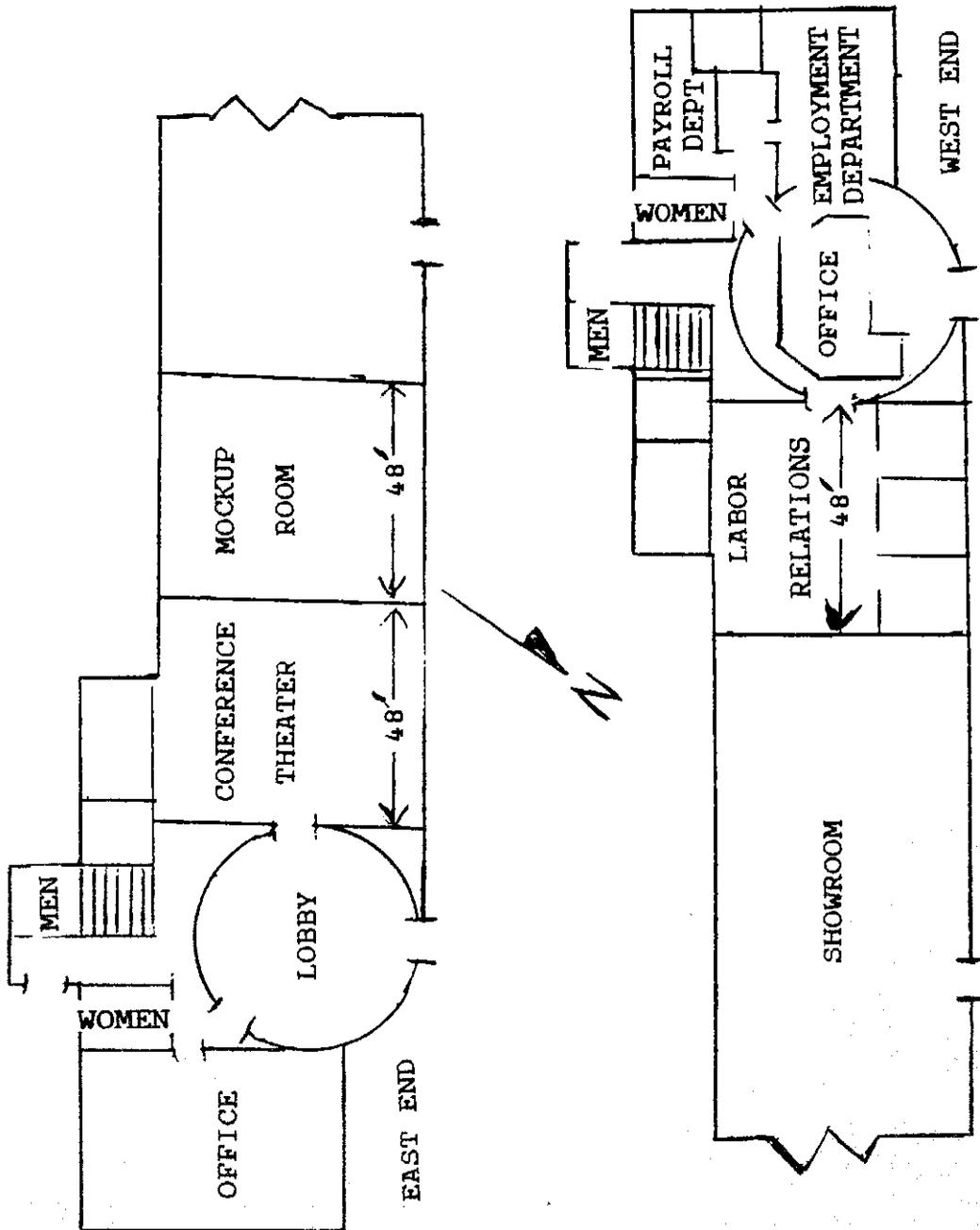
CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING  
(Chalmers Motor Corporation)  
HAER No. MI-24-B (Page 11)

SECOND FLOOR PLAN, AS BUILT



CHRYSLER CORPORATION, OFFICE AND DISPLAY BUILDING  
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HAER No. MI-24-B (Page 12)

FIRST FLOOR PLAN, ca. 1965



ADDENDUM TO:  
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*HAER MICH,82-DETRO,61B-*

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001