

THE MEDINAH ATHLETIC CLUB

THE LIFE OF THE AFFLUENT MAN: ASCENDING TO THE NARCISSISTIC PEAK

Date: 1929
Architect: Walter W. Ahlschlager

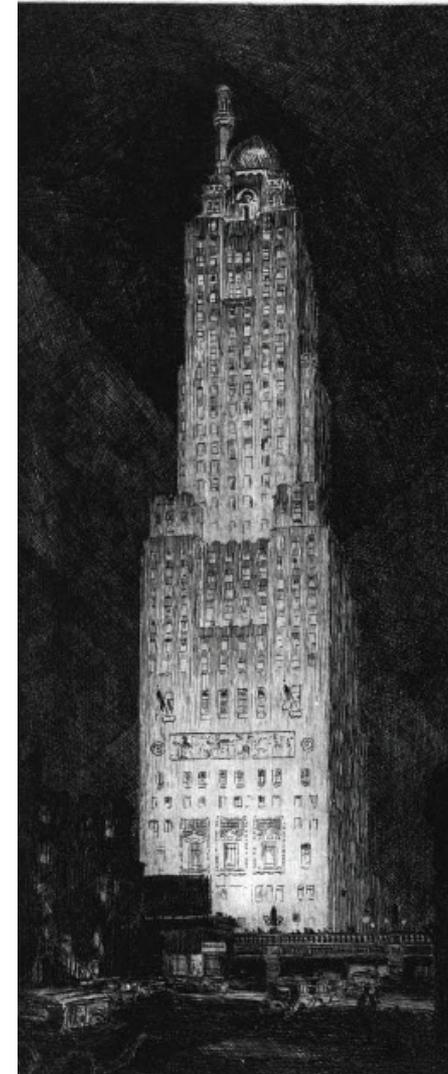


The Medinah Athletic Club stands in downtown Chicago, right on Michigan Avenue's most trafficked strip. The 42-story skyscraper was designed by Walter W. Ahlschlager, completed in 1929, and reaches a height of 471'. The building is clad in limestone and features a series of style-shifting relief carvings and a series of carved panels that tell the story of building in multiple artistic styles. On the top, the building features a Moorish dome, initially intended to be a dirigible dock, standing at the symbolic peak of the building – a direct expression of its members' desire to confirm their social superiority, and thus enter the building without ever laying their feet on the ground. The building could very well be any other art-deco building in Chicago; the outside isn't necessarily shapely. Its multicultural features, however, make it one of the most obtrusive elements on Michigan Avenue – fittingly accurate to its role as a multi-level, multi-program escapade in the city. The athletic club is a building of programmatic madness; a multi-level, ego-boosting machine of a proposed new lifestyle – one of masterful world overtaking and feeble misogyny. The club represents the social apparatus; it is a physical manifestation of ascension to the top, a climb only achievable to those privileged enough to be members. It represents the life of the metropolitan rich man; the one whose money can purchase multiple culturally rich, artificially implanted experiences. The club is also defiant; it defies the traditional mingling of the upper class – the tea and champagne-filled, overly dressed-up parties of cordial

social expression. Here, male narcissism, sexuality, curiosity, and overall masculinity can expand – and transcend.

As an expansive experience, the club has a wide range of programs instilled in its frame; each level is a somewhat repetitive version of its typical plan: a centralized core of six elevators, open floorplan towards the back, and bedrooms facing Michigan Avenue. The busting of Michigan Avenue left behind, the triviality of everyday life forgotten – through the doors of the Medinah was a refined alternative to social interaction, one in which the pleasure of egotistical, political and physical pursuits was enhanced by the multi-cultural, nuanced luxuries of the club.

The building is divided into two main parts: on the lower floors, the Michigan Avenue façade was used as a selling point for luxurious accommodations, while the remainder of the floor was an open floorplan of a multiplicity of athletic pursuits – golf, squash, shooting range, billiards hall, an elevated running track, gym, archery range, bowling alley, a two-story boxing arena – all geared towards the pleasure of male ego-boosting tendencies. On the upper section of the building, where its area is decreased a significant amount, the floors become fully residential and increasingly luxurious – upon being dropped off at the peak of the tower, by the means of a dirigible, one finds himself in an eclectically detailed elevator lobby, leading to a luxurious penthouse suite with overwhelming views of Chicago and the lake. He then loosens his tie and prepares to take the elevator to



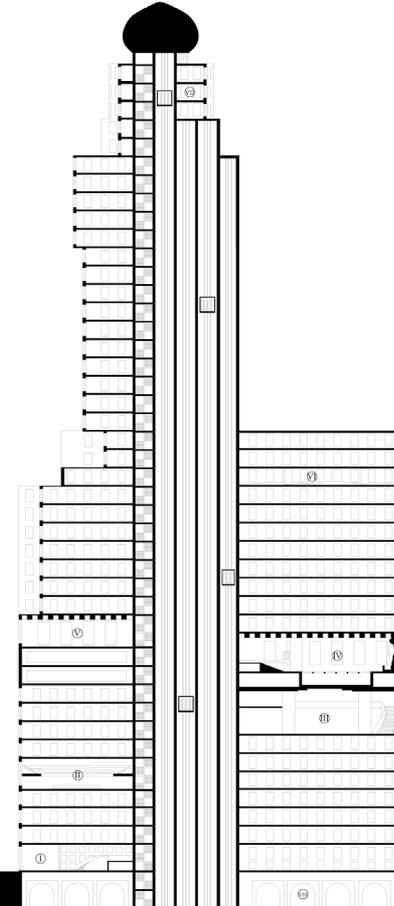
The Medinah Athletic club viewed from Michigan Avenue at night - the opulence of its multicultural features, mainly its Moorish dome on the top, making it an identifiable feature of the Chicago skyline, a point worthy of attention in the midst of the congestion of the city.

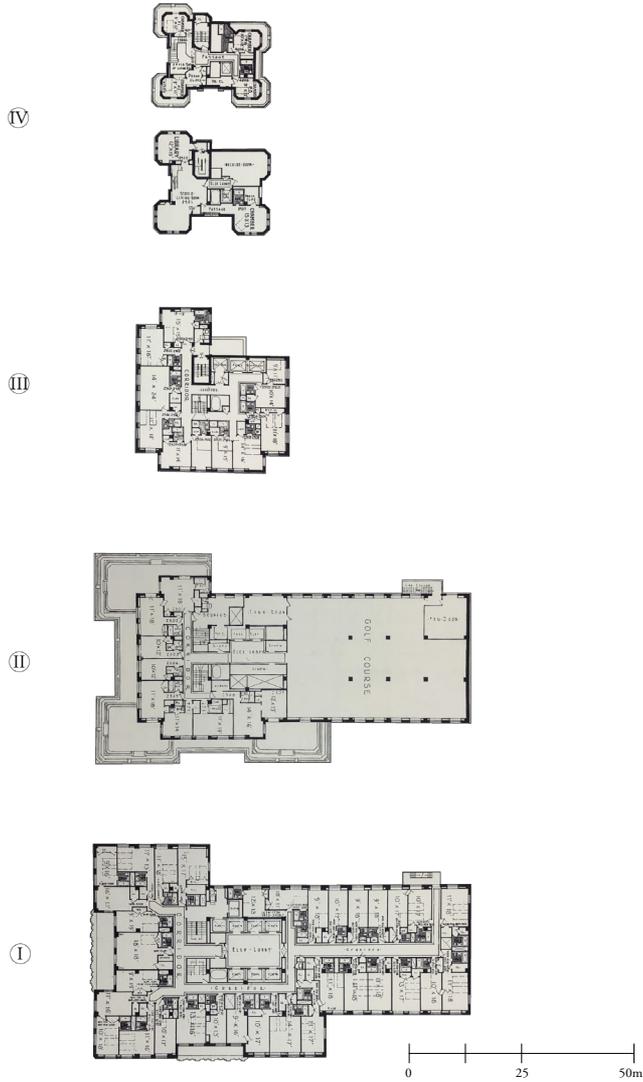
The section of the Medinah shows a relatively clear subsectioning of its levels; on the lower fourteen levels, the club amenities reside in multi-level rooms with mezzanines and double-story windows. For the next ten levels, the building is reserved for accommodations for its regular members. On the twenty third floor, as the program shifts to more exclusive and luxurious accommodations, the floor contains the golf course. For the next fifteen levels, the building offers larger accommodations for its members. And finally, the last four levels are private lounges and a penthouse studio for the highest level of membership.

- | | | | | | | | |
|----|-------------|-----|--------------|------|------------------|-------|-----------|
| I. | Lobby | II. | Boxing Arena | III. | Grand Ballroom | IV. | Pool |
| V. | Men's Grill | VI. | Golf Course | VII. | Penthouse Studio | VIII. | Boutiques |



This picture represents precisely the intended experience for the patrons of the club; the dirigible approaching the dome, ready to dock and dispatch its elite passengers onto the new multicultural world of the Medinah. Here they are welcomed by a series of Persian relief carvings and a Moorish dome while overlooking Art Deco Chicago.





I. Sixteenth through Twentieth Floor - Typical Accomodation Floorplan
 III. Twenty fourth through Thirty Eighth Floor - Typical Accomodation Floorplan
 II. Twenty Third Floor - Unique Accomodation Floorplan and Golf Course
 IV. Penthouse - Two-Story Studio Apartments

The floorplans of the Medinah showcase an increased exclusivity as one takes the journey to the top. Beyond that, it showcases the programatic organization of its floors, a strategic distribution of program in order to sell the most luxurious set of experiences - accomodations facing Michigan Avenue juxtaposed with an artificially implanted golf course across the hall.



The congestion of downtown Chicago and its pre-existing art deco buildings were the perfect background to showcase the brilliance of the Medinah - the club was a mind boggling expression of the current architectural style, seemingly fitting in with its counterparts, but, upon closer inspection, entirely setting itself apart: a paradoxical architecture.

the pool on the fourteenth floor, to swim in the sky. While he wonders through the limestone clad walls, the smoothly transitioned, albeit wildly different decorations in the hallways, cubicles and rooms take him on a series of culturally ambiguous travels: Turkey, Persia, France, Egypt, and then, at the pool, finally the Spanish Majorca tiles and terra-cotta fountain of Neptune take him to the Mediterranean world.

He sits by the pool, watching as other bodies grace the water, which now has a blue tint in response to the stained-glass windows that line the edges of the space. Now with vigor renewed by the sound of the water of the fountain, and the light rustling of the palm trees' leaves in the echo of the massive hall, he looks up in awe at the dark wooden beams lining the ceiling – which oddly remind him of his office at home – as he prepares to dive into the pool and swim at a pace of two laps in one minute for exactly twenty minutes. The sound of threading water echoes as he moves rapidly, filling the pool with loudness, and he beams in awe of his own physical excellence. As he completes the fortieth lap, he easily lifts himself out of the pool, now taking notice of the white and blue tiles lining the walls – the warmth of the Mediterranean now once again taking its effect on him as he carefully dries his limbs. His stomach rumbles, and he takes himself into the dressing rooms across the hall to prepare for lunch, suddenly back in 1929's art deco halls.

Upon entering the Men's Grill he now finds himself in awe; the building width mural of Saladin, the Saracen chieftain and Richard Couer de Lion, the Christian – armies in position, bodies expertly painted and sculpted, massacre beautifully depicted. Hastily sitting on the metal chain chairs, him and his fellows soak in the bravery of their ancestors, waiting while the shapely waitress cooked them a hearty meal, now also admiring the Romanesque columns structuring the room. While discussing politics, his hands brush over the carved metal of the bar, and he carefully takes in the medieval carvings covering the copper bands. Now physically inspired, and in the aftermath of fulfilling his basic needs, he excuses himself to play a bit of golf, only after promising to meet the other

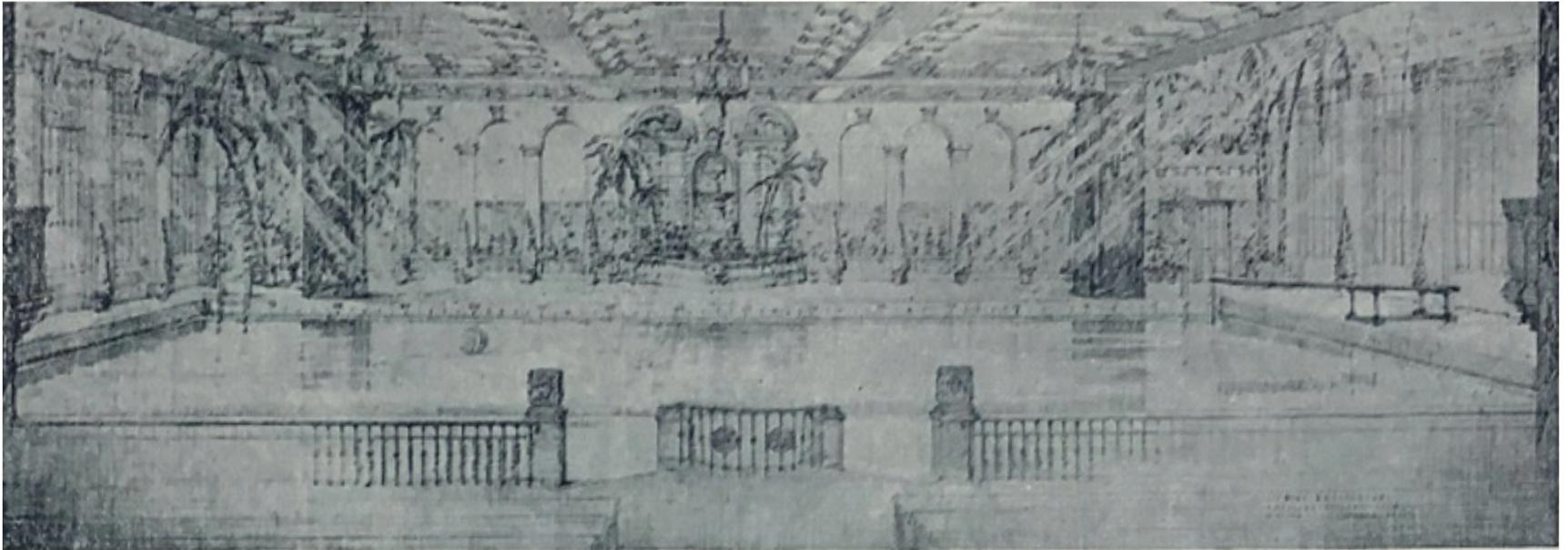
gentlemen at the ballroom for the evening's event – a masked ball.

Of all the pursuits enclosed by the limestone walls, the indoor golf-course is the one which fully embraces the extent to which the multi-culturalism and lavish ambitions relate to one another in the Medinah. As he walks in, his face twists in confusion – ahead is an English golf course, with artificially implanted grounds, but also cartoonish paintings of English landscapes lining the walls, obscuring the line between reality and fantasy. Here is where reality is the world of luxurious indulgence in which the patrons of the Medinah reside, and fantasy is the culturally ambiguous universe introduced by the architecture. The Medinah becomes the common ground between fantasy and reality, cultural cynicism and idealism – it is a tool to indulge in the dreams of social segregation and superiority that populate the minds of its patrons.

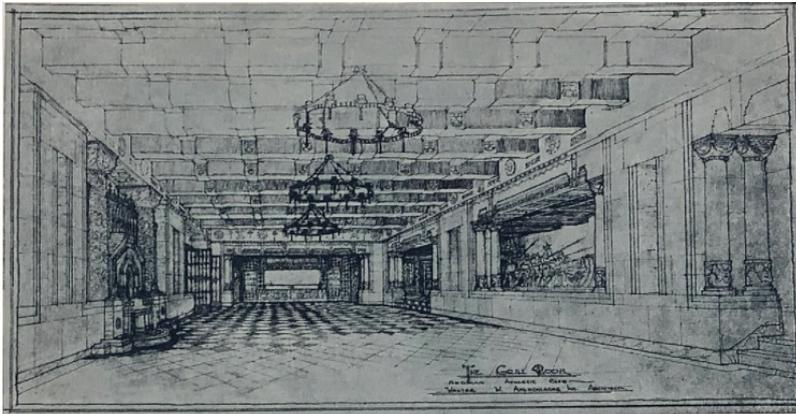
As the evening approaches, he retreats to the penthouse suite; the two-story apartment at the peak of the tower. While bathing, he looks out the window facing the soaking tub – watching as people walk below him, possibly towards their miserable jobs, and his chest puffs with pride over his own accomplishments. He slips on one of the fine suits hanging in the closet downstairs, alongside a velvety mask – his mysterious alter ego taking over his body's machine – and takes the private elevator down to the seventh floor. The ballroom was breathtaking – he had never been to Rome, but he imagined that this ballroom was fit for the Roman empire. It was the greatest room he had ever seen in the United States; an enormous, empire style, two-story hall with gold ornamented ceilings – supported by massive black marble columns, and decorated by renaissance paintings and several crystal light fixtures –, and a sweeping horseshoe-shaped mezzanine encrusted in ancient Greek art. The masterful transition between architectural styles in this room is pure splendor, and as the night progresses – the music echoes through the marble walls, and the light bounces off the crystal fixtures onto the ladies' ornamented gowns – so is the evening.



At the pool, the stained glass and wooden beams grounded it in 1929 - entirely contradicting the futuristic undertone of a pool that resides on the fourteenth floor. In addition, the intriguing confusion of its architecture became more evident as the cozy atmosphere provided by the dark and moody beams was juxtaposed with the mediterranean tiles and palm trees.



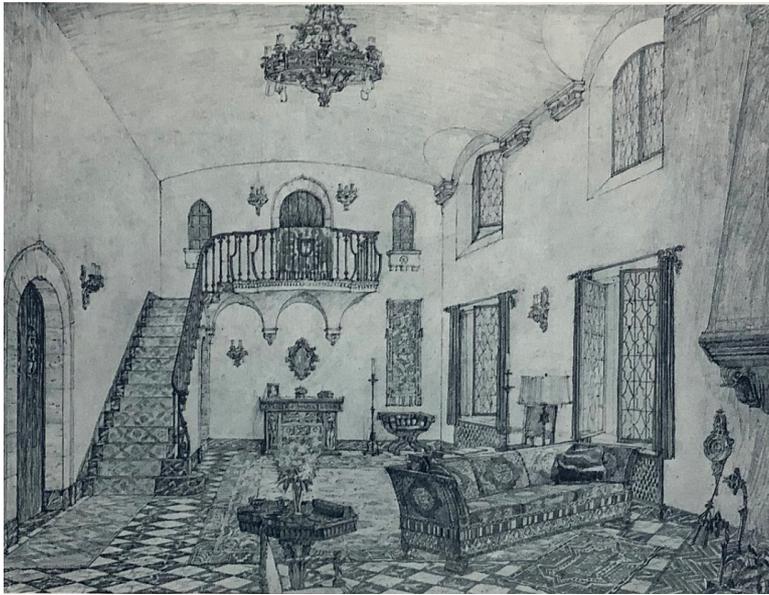
The fountain of neptune was the central piece at the pool, surrounded by palm trees - together, the two elements provide a real feeling of vacation: as he lays sits in one of the chairs by the pool, he closes his eyes and all he can hear are leaves rustling and water furiously splashing, like the sound of summer in spain.



At the Men's Grill the atmosphere invited male pride. The centralized mural of a bloody, crystal encrusted massacre between Saracens and Christians was a medieval reminder of male dominance and territorial conquests - perfectly aligned with the Athletic Club's primal ego-boosting machinery.



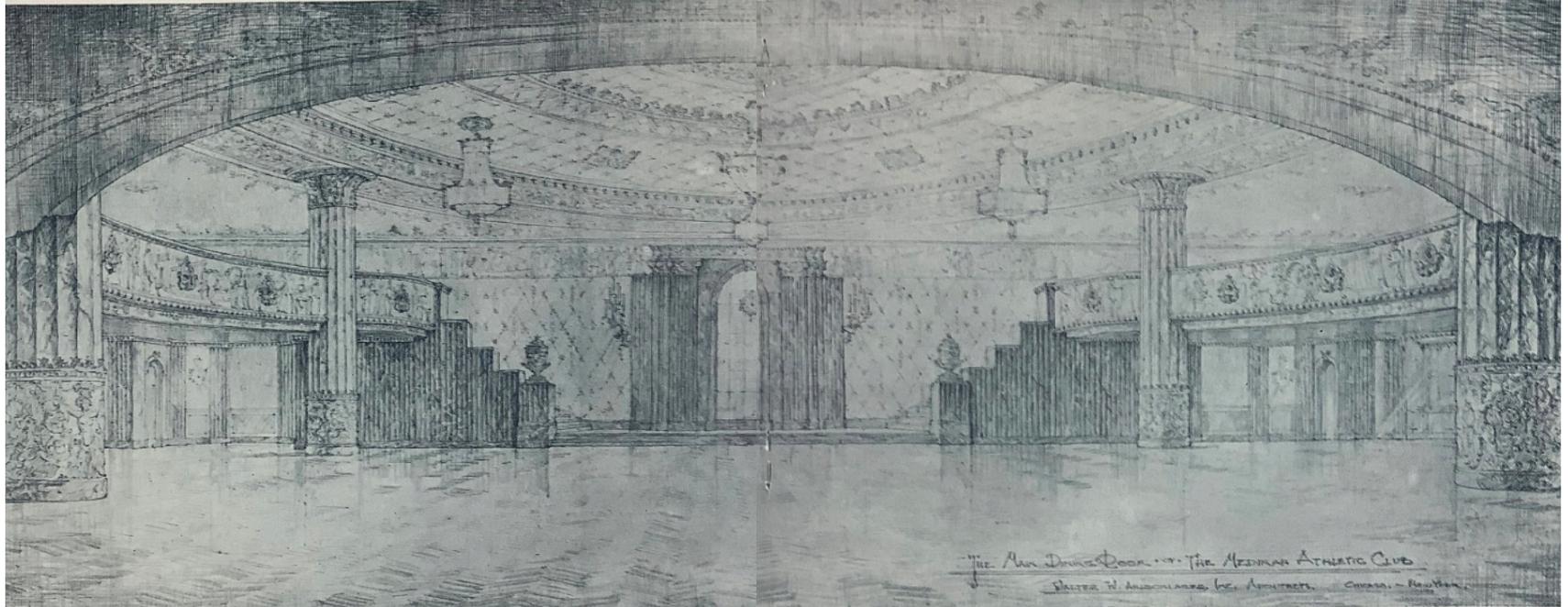
The strangest breathtaking view ever created: the indoor golf course was an odd piece of the athletic club. Even in section, while the other club amenities reside below the fourteenth floor, the golf course stands alone at the twenty third. It was the strangest type of reality vs fiction: an obnoxious use of grass fields, stones and water ponds juxtaposed by nature cartoons on the walls.



The penthouse studio was the epitome of Medinah luxury: embroidered furnishings and imported tiles, stained glass windows - all in a two level apartment at the top of one of the tallest buildings in Chicago. From the window, one could see people walking on the streets looking like ants - insignificant to the life of the club patron.



The Grand Ballroom was the destination at the Medinah. The empire style, double height room was covered in marble, luxurious wallpaper, extravagant paintings, and historical art. It was, without a doubt, the most impressive room in the Medinah - masterfully maneuvering several architectural styles into a seamless hall of pure extravagance.



In a typical evening of indulgence, the Grand Ballroom's crystal fixtures would light up and the light would bounce onto the chevron patterned wood floors. The marble of the massive ornamented columns would shine, and the golden decorations on the ceiling would create depth around the paintings. The slight stepping of the ceiling would echo the voices of the obnoxious women as they exclaimed "This evening is pure splendor!"



The Athletic club as an enabler of male narcissism - here, the club surrenders itself as a tool to the carnal needs and physical pursuits of its members, and becomes interconnected with the bodies of its patrons. The Medinah Athletic Club as a machine of human desire.

Dragging his exhausted limbs through the Nordic elevator lobby, he pulls out a cigar and hops onto the elevator, back to the penthouse suite. Slumping onto the encrusted elevator walls, he has a jovial laugh as he takes in the feeling of rising to the top. The gentleman is the prime example of the peak of the social apparatus that defines the athletic club. The Medinah represented a new way of living – an archetype that allowed for narcissism to transpire without the borders of social conventionalism. The club embodied human sin and social absurdity, it was an extension of the best and worst of the human body; it was a machine that enabled segregation: an incubator. Beyond that, the Medinah was a machine for the pursuit of carnal needs and desires; the ultimate male wet dream – the place where he was allowed to be enamored by himself.

References:

- Coelin, O. (1931). America's First Club: The Medinah Club of Chicago. Chicago: Millar Publishing Company.
- Fee, J. S. (1928). Medinah Athletic Club. Chicago Historical Society: 9F38HG-M46.
- Koolhaas, R. (1994). Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan. Rotterdam.
- Phillips, H. G. (1929). America's most distinctive club, the Medinah Athletic Club. Chicago.
- Pictorial views Medinah Athletic Club, Chicago. (1929). Chicago.
- Preciado, P. B. (2019). Pornotopia: An essay on Playboy's architecture and biopolitics. New York: Zone Books.
- The Medinah Club of Chicago. (1934). Chicago: MUNADI.
- The Scimitar, official publication of Medinah Athletic Club, April, 1930. (1930). Chicago: Medinah Athletic Club.