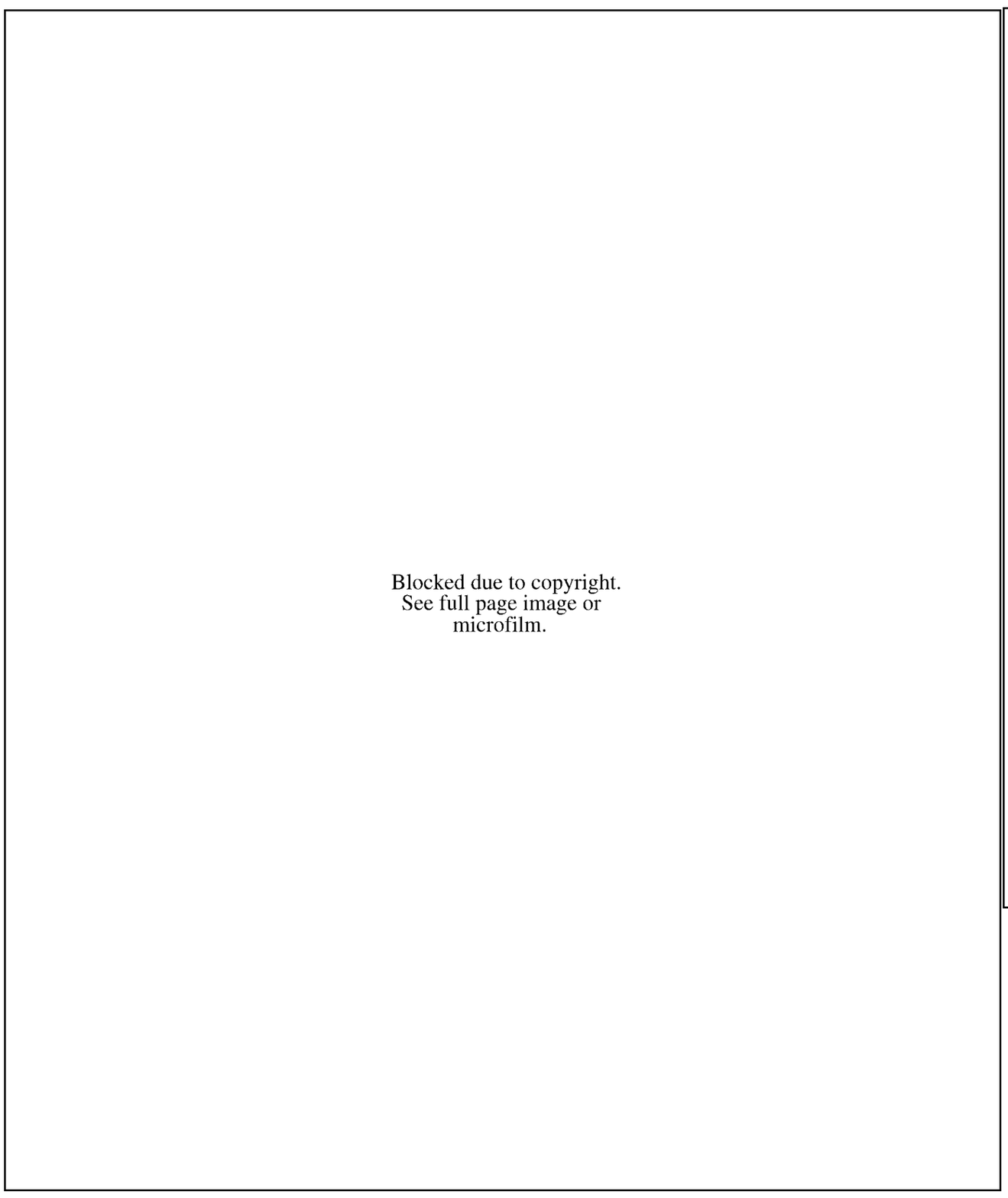

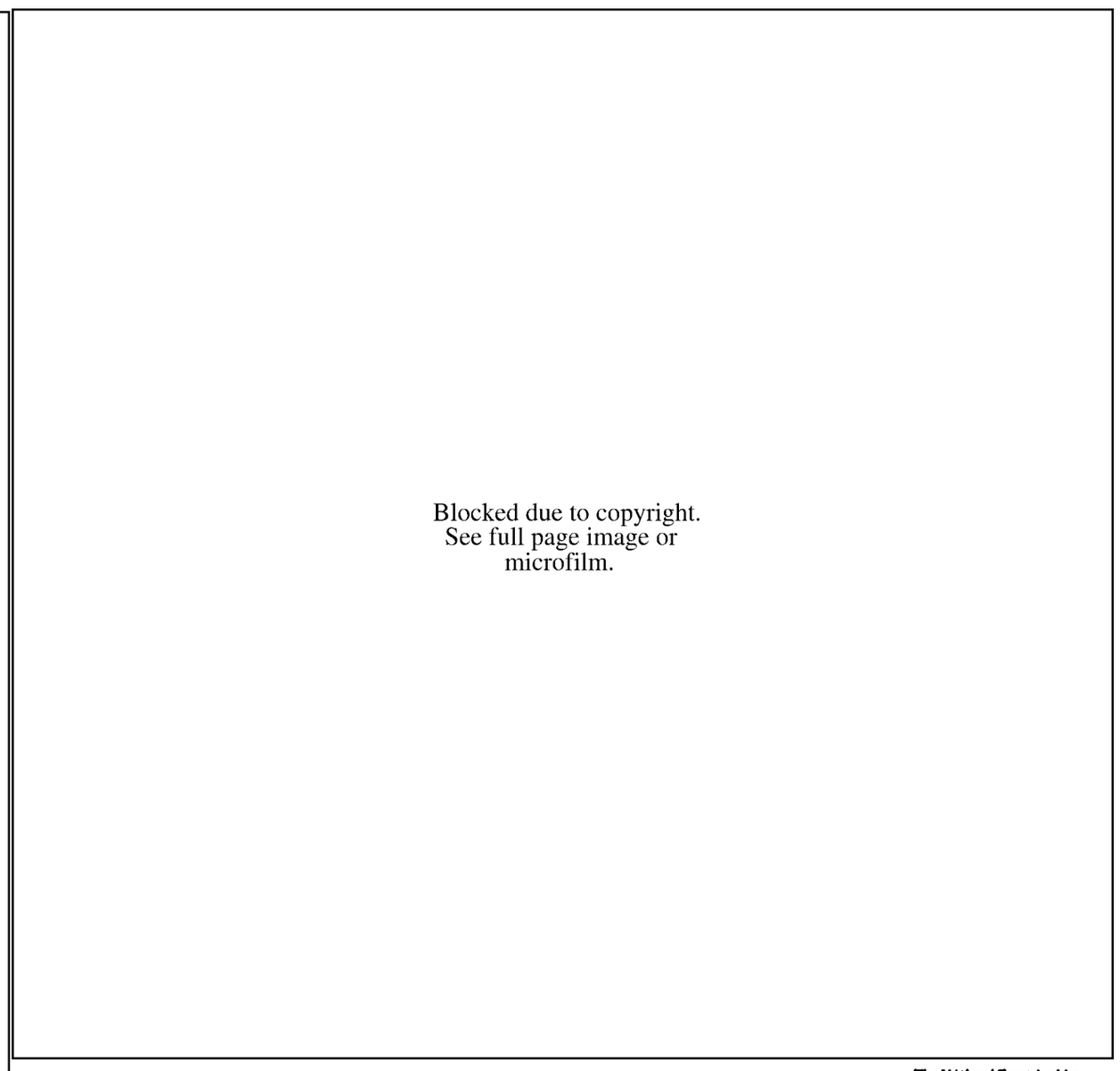

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The 1785 drawing room ceiling at left was destroyed last year during a house demolition. Above, detail of plasterwork from 1765 is representative of Dublin work in that period.

Behind Dublin's Georgian Facades, Gay and Elegant Ceilings

TO wake up under a ceiling of goddesses reclining on rosy clouds against a cerulean sky, chariots drawn by putti racing across the heavens, or to gaze up at chastely draped maidens tending delicate white garlands — this is not the rising experience, as a rule, of less than dukes or kings. To start the morning with the visual fanfare of frescoes overhead, foreshortened figures plunging down to earth in gilded cartouches, or with the snow-and-lace fantasy of sculptured and molded plasterwork emulating nature and ancient Rome, is a very special way to greet the day.

The experience may be familiar to anyone who happens to live in a palazzo, or is lucky enough to have friends who do, or to those who have stayed in a palazzo-turned-hotel or stately home discreetly opened to paying guests. How wise the architects and owners of these great houses were to leave nothing to chance in the satisfaction of the senses, even to the half-open eye. Neither Tintoretto nor Veronese spurned a ceiling. Robert Adam, a plasterwork artisan, attached great importance to their decoration. "A gay and fanciful diversity of agreeable objects," he wrote in 1778, "well composed and delicately executed in stucco or painting, attains a wonderful power of pleasing."

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What pleased the aristocracy was bound to please the merely rich as well. No proper 18th-century mansion had naked ceilings. And the wonderful power of pleasing was not denied to a good part of the 19th century either; it only ceased to be a stated aim of architectural design in the 20th century with the modernist revolution. Instead of swags and allegories, there were the uplifting objectives of social welfare and a salutary and sanitary life style for all, with a spare esthetic expressed through structure and function. A ceiling is a ceiling, obviously, without Daphne or Apollo. Particularly when it has shrunk from 18 to *eight* feet in height.

Nowhere is there a greater richness of ceilings than in the city of Dublin, in terms of sheer numbers and consistency of style. This is partly because 18th-century Dublin has survived in entire streets of town houses; only now has the erosion of this heritage speeded up as a result of prosperity and speculation. But Dublin is still a unique Georgian city — surely one of the most useful and pleasing styles ever devised — even though its character, and its ceilings, are increasingly threatened.

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With land prices rising and inadequate procedures for preservation, much of Dublin is being destroyed. Development has already devastated Mountjoy Square and mutilated the blocks around St. Stephen's Green; Harcourt Street, still beautiful, is an immediate endangered area. The signs are neglect, abandonment or marginal uses, and notices announcing future development of sites where the handsome houses are being encouraged to quietly decay.

An Taisce, the National Trust for Ireland, is fighting a brave holding action. Its members, with other concerned organizations such as the Dublin Civic Group, are battling for streets, squares, houses — and ceilings. Some of the finest plasterwork has been saved, some has been carefully demounted as a last resort, and a great deal has been smashed to powder and shards.

But behind the many Georgian facades that still stand in Dublin, these lovely ceilings are legion. The thought of the larger number that existed earlier in this century is staggering. When the Georgian Society Records of 18th Century Domestic Architecture and Decoration in Dublin were published in five volumes from 1909 to 1913, there was a great deal more to document than there is today. Page after page of illustrations in these handsome volumes are accompanied by descriptions of the houses' architectural features, including an account of the Irish plasterer's art.

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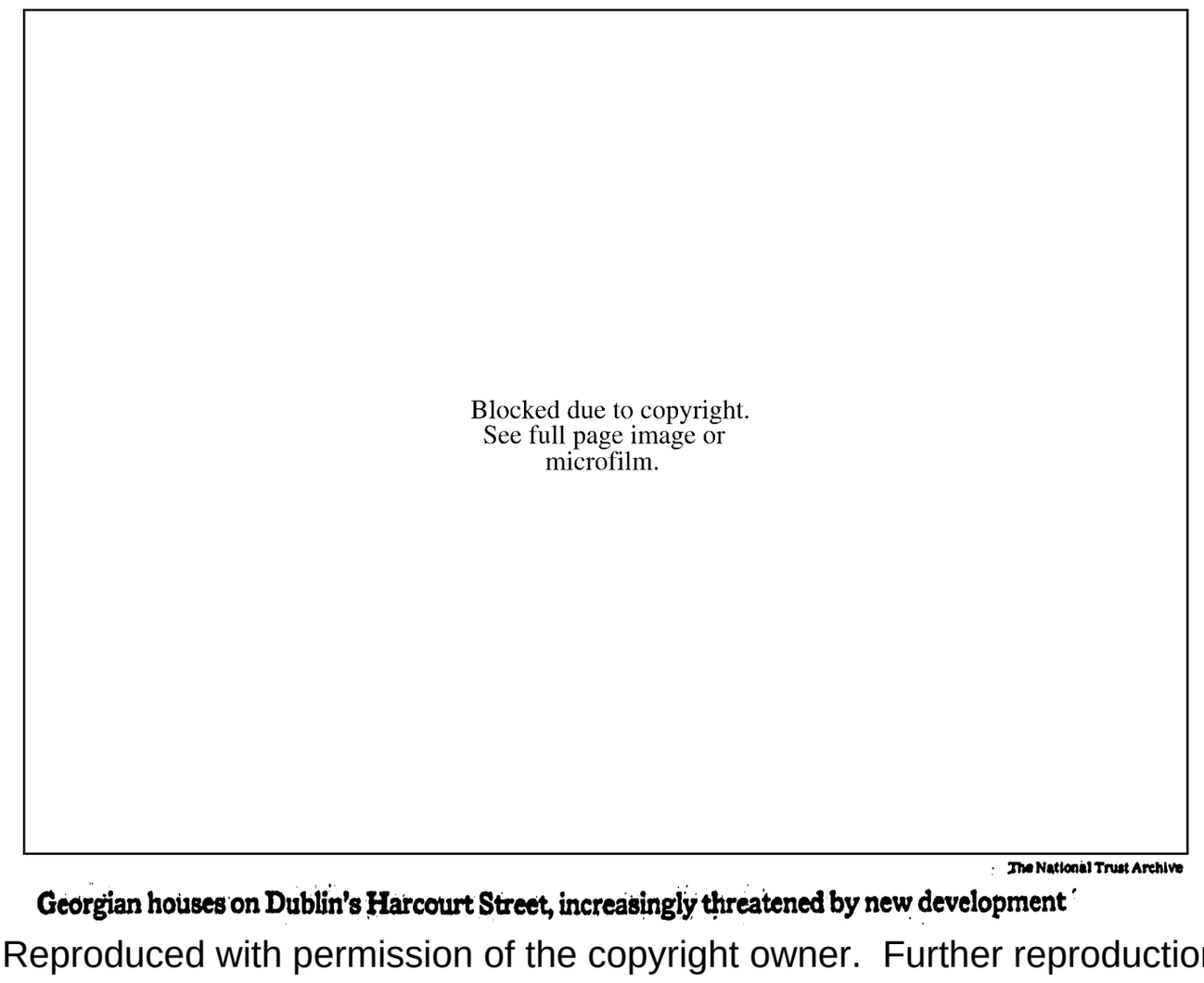
"At the commencement of the great building period in Dublin," we are told, "the brothers Paul and Philip Franchini, and perhaps other Italian plasterers, introduced the use of modeled plasterwork in Dublin." Before long, the skills were learned by Irish artisans. The ceilings were rococo in style, with flowing, foliated curves in the form of acanthus scrollwork, leaves and flowers of elegantly stylized naturalism. There were also lyres, flutes and songbirds — particularly popular motifs in Dublin houses — portrait heads and busts, and a full complement of gods and goddesses navigating clouds built up in billowing layers like meringues and pastry cream. Every bit of the work was hand-modeled by plaster artists; each one had his recognizable style. And each ceiling was an individual work of art.

The rococo style reached its high point from about 1750 to 1765 in the work of stuccodores like Robert West. By 1770, however, the new, lighter, classical style of the brothers Adam was the rage. Robert Adam called the earlier work "ponderous." The publication in 1776 of the "Book of Ceilings" by the architect George Richardson, devoted to Adam motifs, had considerable influence on Dublin plasterers.

The Adam style was much more symmetrical, delicate and archeological, with borrowings from Herculaneum and Pompeii, and the adoption of conscious Grecian graces. It was a completely new look that ravished everyone of taste. And it had the advantage that these highly regularized and less plastic motifs could be cast, rather than hand-modeled, requiring only hand-finishing. The artist-plasterer became extinct. But ceiling art was not lost; the plasterwork artisan continued to do exquisite work.

Robert Adam was his own best publicist. "The classical style of ornament," he wrote, had not only withstood the test of ages, but was "by far the most perfect that has ever appeared for inside decorations." Used properly, with "fancy and imagination, taste and judgment" — obviously in the fashion of the master — the result promised was a "gay and elegant mode capable of inimitable beauties."

Gaiety and elegance are rare enough; gay and elegant ceilings are even rarer. I admit that I am partial to such ceilings; they are a kind of lagniappe for living. I spent 14 years under a synclastic barrel vault in the bedroom of a New York brownstone and contemplated Diana the Huntress — poised eternally with bow in pursuit of her quarry — on arising and retiring. She couldn't outrun the bulldozer. But I found her again in Dublin this year.



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Georgian houses on Dublin's Harcourt Street, increasingly threatened by new development