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# INTRINSIC JUXTAPOSITIONS ON THE FAÇADE OF THE ALHAMBRA THEATER, TALTAL, CHILE

YUXTAPOSICIONES INTRINSECAS EN LA  
FACHADA DEL TEATRO ALHAMBRA, TALTAL,  
CHILE

JUSTAPOSIÇÕES INTRÍNSECAS NA FACHADA DO  
TEATRO ALHAMBRA, TALTAL, CHILE



**Figure 0.** Façade of the Alhambra Theater and its relationship with the square. Source: Preparation by the Author.

## RESUMEN

El Teatro Alhambra de Taltal constituye una significación histórica y patrimonial relevante para la ciudad, su fachada presenta un lenguaje arquitectónico heterogéneo implícito en sus proporciones, accesos y elementos ornamentales, que configuran una expresión volumétrica unitaria. Hasta el momento, se han realizado diversos estudios y publicaciones que relevan su historia, materialidad e imagen urbana, generándose informes técnicos de diagnósticos sobre su situación actual, con levantamientos críticos del inmueble y propuestas de alternativas de uso para su rehabilitación. Siendo de interés abordar mediante un análisis exploratorio las peculiaridades de su frontis. Esta investigación se centra en la develación de ordenes intrínsecos, como expresiones originadas desde su volumetría, el estudio de la distribución y dimensión de programas arquitectónicos que se yuxtaponen en el mismo plano, como la pastelería y la residencia familiar. Mediante el método de la observación, comparación y análisis de las expresiones geométricas presentes en la fachada del edificio, se abren las posibilidades de indagar en las singularidades arquitectónicas que lo relevan y unifican, lo que permite encontrar contenidos en las proporciones y disposición de los vanos como se redibujan y enuncian las geometrías estructurales de la sección transversal del edificio. Asimismo, los programas de usos integrados vienen a extender y amplificar la imagen de su fachada rectangular hacia el espacio público circundante, que complementan las actividades particulares del Teatro, que generan diversas simetrías verticales en la fachada propias de la arquitectura georgiana, estructurándose una unidad reconocible de mayor magnitud escalar; que contribuye a la puesta en valor de un Monumento Histórico.

**Palabras clave:** arquitectura, geometría, monumento histórico, patrimonio urbano, simetría

## ABSTRACT

Taltal's Alhambra Theater has a relevant historical and patrimonial meaning for the city. Its façade has a heterogeneous architectural language implicit in its proportions, entrances, and ornamental elements, configuring a unitary volumetric expression. Several studies and publications have revealed its history, materiality, and urban image, generating technical reports about its current state, with critical surveys of the property and proposals for alternative uses with its rehabilitation. However, it is interesting to address its façade's specificities through an exploratory analysis. This research focuses on intrinsically unveiling, from its volumetry, a study of the layout and size of architectural programs juxtaposed on the same plane, such as a pastry shop and a family residence. Through observation, comparison, and analysis of the geometric expressions in the building's facade, possibilities of investigating the architectural singularities that reveal and unify it are opened, which allows finding contents in the proportions and arrangement of the openings as the structural geometries of the building's cross-section are redrawn and enunciated. Similarly, the integrated uses extend and amplify the image of its rectangular façade towards the surrounding public space, which complements the Theater's activities, generating diverse vertical symmetries on the Georgian style façade, structuring a unit recognizable by its magnitude, which contributes to its valorization as a Historical Monument.

**Keywords:** architecture, geometry, historical monument, urban heritage, symmetry

## RESUMO

O Teatro Alhambra de Taltal possui um significado histórico e patrimonial relevante para a cidade. Sua fachada apresenta uma linguagem arquitetônica heterogênea implícita em suas proporções, acessos e elementos ornamentais, que configuram uma expressão volumétrica unitária. Até o momento, foram realizados diversos estudos e publicações que destacam sua história, materialidade e imagem urbana, gerando relatórios técnicos de diagnóstico sobre sua situação atual, com levantamentos críticos do edifício e propostas de usos alternativos para sua reabilitação. É de interesse abordar as peculiaridades de sua fachada por meio de uma análise exploratória. Esta investigação centra-se no desvelamento de ordens intrínsecos, como expressões originadas a partir de sua volumetria, no estudo da distribuição e dimensão de programas arquitetônicos que se justapõem no mesmo plano, como a confeitaria e a residência familiar. Por meio do método de observação, comparação e análise das expressões geométricas presentes na fachada do edifício, abrem-se as possibilidades de investigar as singularidades arquitetônicas que o destacam e unificam, permitindo-nos encontrar conteúdo nas proporções e na disposição das aberturas, na forma como as geometrias estruturais da seção transversal do edifício são redesenhadas e enunciadas. Da mesma forma, os programas de usos integrados expandem e ampliam a imagem de sua fachada retangular para o espaço público circundante, complementando as atividades particulares do Teatro, que geram diversas simetrias verticais na fachada típica da arquitetura georgiana, estruturando uma unidade reconhecível de maior magnitude escalar que contribui para a valorização de um Monumento Histórico.

**Palavras-chave:** arquitetura, geometria, monumento histórico, patrimônio urbano, simetria

# INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on the compositional elements of the facade of Taltal's Alhambra Theater. Located in the Antofagasta region, Chile, this is an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century building of historical heritage and architectural relevance in northern Chile. It was built in 1921 as a response to an evident need for entertainment, fostering cultural development for the commune's inhabitants and for the large number of workers who arrived from various parts of the country due to the saltpeter boom. At the time, there were two theaters, the first being the Municipal Theater; demolished in the 1950s, which became a comparative reference for the design and definitions of the proportions of the entrance to the new building.

The opportunity arises, within this context, to study the Alhambra Theater building as a significant place within the town that contributes to the valorization of the Historical Monument, according to Decree 79 (2009) of the Ministry of Education. This will be done by analyzing its facade, volumetry, and openings, with a critical and reflective approach that reveals unprecedented geometric relationships between its hidden and juxtaposed elements.

Currently, a series of publications is focused on the historical background regarding the building's origin, heritage, and urban value, as well as the typologies and construction techniques used, such as balloon frames, and the use of different types of wood in its supporting structure and foundation, types that arrived at the port as ballast in the boats transporting the saltpeter. The urban image that its façade projects from its location in front of the Plaza de Armas stands out. In addition, a series of technical reports have been generated with onsite surveys for the building's fitting out. Commissioned by the Directorate of Architecture of the Ministry of Public Works (MOP, in Spanish), they included critical and pathological assessments of the current situation, including proposals for alternative uses with its rehabilitation.

Among this study's objectives is to look closer at the geometric, volumetric, and architectural intentions in the facade, vertical symmetries, and compositional elements, which previous studies have not addressed. The idea is also to reveal how the different structural proportions of the cross-sections of the theater have directly match the facade. On the other hand, the plan is to determine the coexistence of complementary architectural programs, which have the potential to configure a large facade that transcends and magnifies the image with which this building's guise is recognized today.

Observing and analyzing the rectangular frontality of the Alhambra Theater raises the question: Why was the building's programmatic reality hidden behind a unitary facade? The research focuses on recognizing the presence of architectural elements that manifest binding languages, which need to be revealed, to uncover a new approach embodied in its structure.

A way to immerse oneself in the search for these formal intentions and features in the building is to reflect on and review images, photographs, and planimetry that allows comparison with the Municipal Theater, and architectural observation, leading to possibilities for new geometric discoveries and programmatic orders.

The approach to this research is based on showing the qualities found on the Alhambra Theater's façade, through architectural observation, and its use is as a language that can recognize and investigate its singularities. In this regard Puentes Riffo (2013) states that "(...) the sense of observation is itself a structure of perceptions and analysis that formalize a criterion or point of view as a judgment about something (...)" (p.62), in turn, this expression is complemented, taking into consideration the personal interests and concerns of the person making the observations: "This observation is a subjective language that accounts for how its observer thinks (...)" (Vergara-Valverde & Pérez-Lancellotti, 2024, p.124), by generating a methodology of study and approximation to a new reality contained in the building's formal configuration. Cruz Prieto (1993) states the following,

"Observing would then be an activity of the spirit (and body) that allows us to access, over and over again, a new, unprecedented vision of reality. Observing, in the sense we are considering it, truly becomes an opening."

Observation necessarily requires some time to contemplate carefully what one is facing. It considers diverse resources and formats, from planimetric surveys, photographic records of the period, and from today, with an analytical, but at the same time reflective view. Here, Cruz Prieto (1993) also points out that: "Because Observation – as we said – is that penetrating look that will reveal the reality in which the work will be inserted and that it must house" (p.3), to try to generate a finding or discovery of orders that may be contained on the facade, demands the ability to name it and make it tangible through the construction of a drawing and annotations: "It is not then about looking to draw; it is first about admiration, about looking to observe and drawing to notice the observed" (Silva, 2016, p. 66), so that, in this way, it can be retained and made its own, show it and make it evident to others. Thus, it is necessary to consider some definitions offered by Boris Ivelic: "Observare observare, ob is equivalent to 'there', 'in front'; servare, 'to keep something intact without it being lost'; ob-serve is also to contemplate. Observation is a contemplative act" (Ivelic, 2022, p.23). Consciously, this act of contemplative observation should lead to a kind of praise about these newly revealed realities, which allows developing the capacity for reflection and wonder.

On the other hand, the Georgian style, representative of England from mid-1714 until 1830, exhibits elegance and symmetry as its greatest characteristics: "And the Georgian style, albeit noble and solemn, is of a

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

manifest and deliberately modest simplicity. (...) The facade is organized symmetrically around the entrance, which is usually at ground level or slightly above it (...)” (Ching, Prakash & Jarzombek, 2013, p. 152).

Regarding the series of juxtapositions, it is necessary to investigate the meaning and origin of the term, which in Raffino, Editorial Team, Etecé (2021) is defined as recognizing that:“(...) it comes from two different Latin voices: iuxta, translatable as 'next to', and ponere, 'to place'. Thus, the things juxtaposed are somehow coordinated, annexed, integrated, or simply one placed on top of the other” (para.2).

This opens the possibility of asking about the meaning of architectural observation, which can investigate and expose the uniqueness and virtuosos orders contained in the facade of the Alhambra Theater. This allows one to identify the Georgian symmetries, the programmatic juxtapositions complementary to the theater, such as the residence and the pastry shop, as well as the structural geometries that are redrawn through the profiles of the openings, revealing how a series of intrinsic languages linked to a unitary volume converge.

## METHODOLOGY

This study will use a qualitative methodology. The observation results will be systematized from the three perspectives presented by the study: the geometric analysis, the symmetry patterns of Georgian architecture, and the complementary programmatic juxtapositions. This allows elucidating how a larger façade, recognized in a unitary way, is achieved.

On the other hand, in addition to the information obtained from the cited bibliographic sources, a semi-structured interview was held with one of the theater manager and builder’s grandchildren. Information was collected about the family’s daily activities to support each screening or show.

Planimetric surveys were also carried out based on photographs from the time (Figure 1). Superimposed plans contribute to the comparative analysis and revision of the geometric orders presented by the Municipal Theater of Taltal’s facade with the current Alhambra Theater, where the similarities in the configuration of the entrances and differences in proportions and magnitudes between the two venues are recognized.

Figure 1. Group of people celebrating September 18<sup>th</sup>, in front of the city’s Municipal Theater: Source: Photographic Archive (n.d). Chilean National History Museum.

The planimetry and structural profiles in various cross-sections of the theater were also examined, along with their relationship with the proportions and rhythms proposed in the façade’s design through its doors and windows.



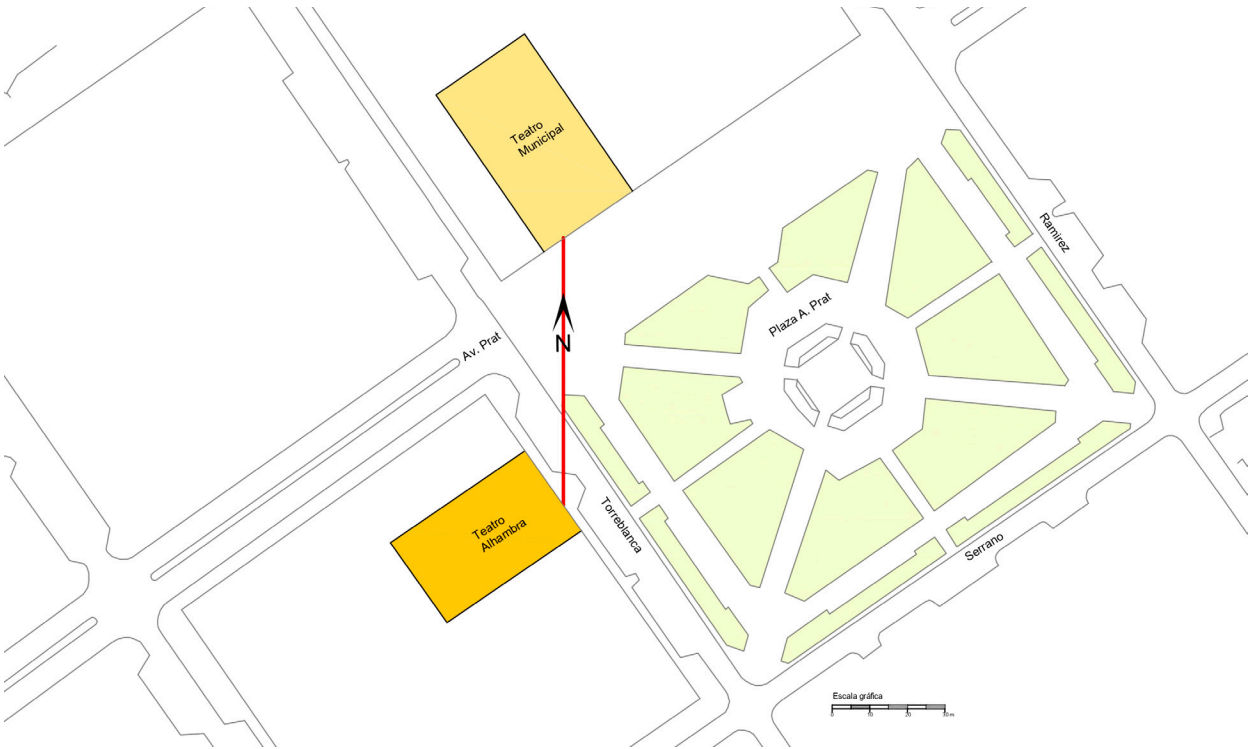


## DEVELOPMENT

Since the incipient exploitation and export of saltpeter and the subsequent foundation of the Port of Taltal in 1877, the town grew rapidly, becoming a place with urban infrastructure, trade, services, and commercial exchange. This place also welcomed many people searching for work: “people came there to stock up on provisions or, simply, to socialize in its streets” (Godoy Orellana, 2022, p. 191). This progress was crowned with the construction in 1888 of the Taltal Municipal Theater, located on the corner currently occupied by the Town Hall, in front of the Main Square, the central meeting place of its inhabitants. The early construction of the premises manifests a longing of the community to have a meeting space, capable of convening and connecting with cultural progress, which contributes to covering the needs of entertainment and film screenings for the new residents, linking them with the world: “From the Greeks to the present day, inhabitants of towns and cities have turned to theaters, because they have always hosted shows and socio-cultural activities” (Olguín Durán, 2021, p. 21-22).

At the beginning of 1894, a couple, Raniero Perucci and Emilia Giacagli, arrived at the Port from Ancona, Italy. After a while, Raniero would become the administrator of the Municipal Theater. However, after some disagreements with the council of the time, his contract was

**Figure 1.** Group of people celebrating September 18th, in front of the city's Municipal Theater: Source: Photographic Theater: Source: Photographic Archive (n.d). Chilean National History Museum

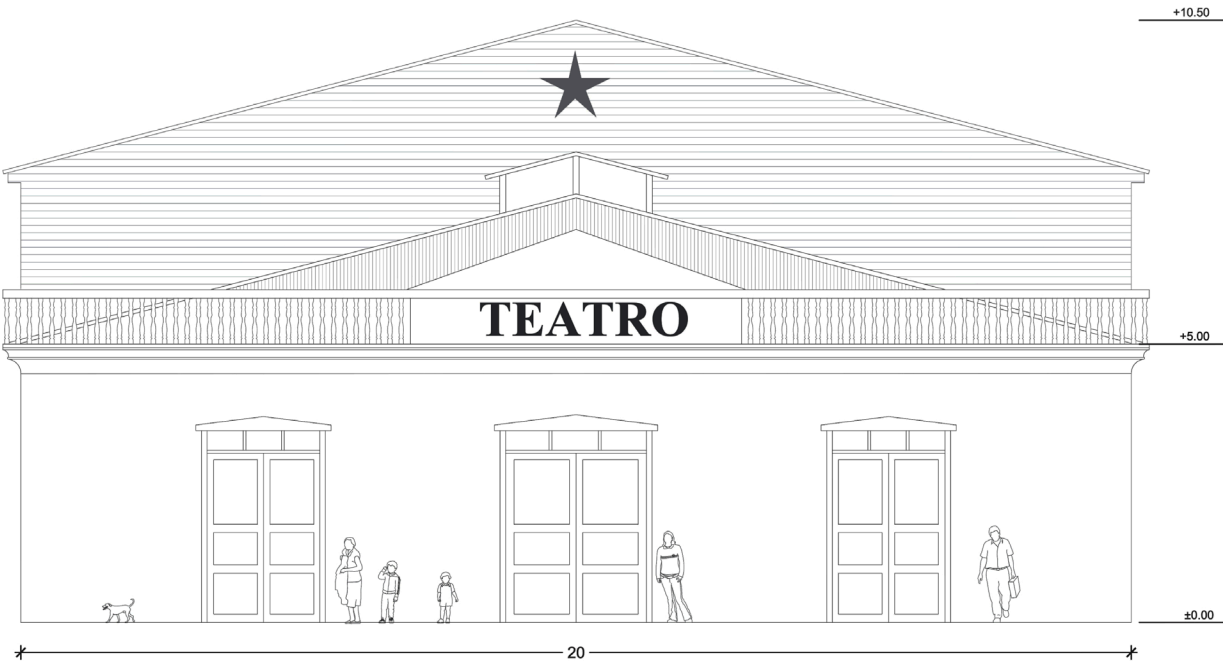


**Figure 2.** Location of the projects around Taltal’s square, binding the facades along the north-south intersection. Source: Preparation by the author.

terminated. As a result, he decided to build his own performance hall, calling it the Alhambra Theater, alluding to a theater in his hometown. This new building would face the square, on a piece of land he had previously acquired.

The Alhambra Theater was influenced by Georgian architecture, incorporating different types of wood in its construction, as described by Aguirre Rojas (2021), “Wood brought as ballast by the ships that came to Taltal to load saltpeter was used for its construction, not only Oregon pine, but also eucalyptus and white pine” (p. 65). The so-called Balloon Frame technique was used, consisting of a structure that has great constructive speed and solidity, using numerous thin slats fixed by nails: “In the “balloon” type structure, which eventually reached an area of 1,500 mt, the subtle two-inch-thick slats seem to lack weight compared to the typical and traditional wooden construction” (Giedion, 2009, p. 368).

Considering that the facade is the first image a building projects, as a representative icon of its exteriorized architectural expression, it presents and continuously projects its vertical volumetry, to recognize its qualities and particularities: “(...) consider the exterior of our buildings, that part that is common to passers-by, and that no man can convert into private property (...)” (Morris, 2023, p. 162). It becomes an opportunity to look closer into studying the singularities and relationships of architectural orders hidden in the Alhambra Theater’s façade from a view that investigates its rhythms and configurations, which are probably conceived from its origin. Recognizing new meanings that can appear from its location



in front of the square: “A building is not an end in itself; it frames, articulates, structures, gives meaning, relates, separates and unites, facilitates and prohibits” (Pallasmaa, 2019, p. 75). It provides a reference place for residents to meet and for their entertainment.

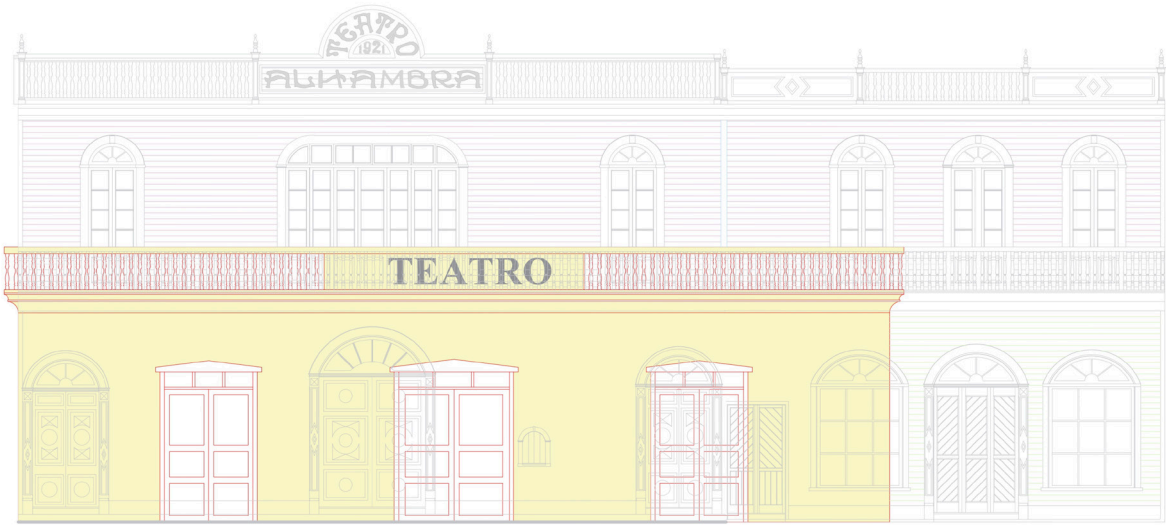
**Figure 3.** Façade of the Taltal Municipal Theater. Source: Preparation by the author.

**The binding origin of Taltalino Theaters**

The conception of the Alhambra Theater is intimately linked to the Municipal Theater; not only by the typological equivalence and proximity, both are located perpendicular to the square, but also their facades were connected virtually, through an imaginary line given by the geographical north–south orientation (Figure 2). A binding that allows building and recognizing a particular corner of the Square with a vocation for entertainment, accentuated by the intersection of the town’s widest street, Avenida Prat: “All of us, to inhabit, need to identify and find ourselves, we need these two dimensions of recognizing ourselves belonging to something...” (Roca, 2006, p. 32). On the other hand, Raniero Perucci, the Municipal Theater’s former administrator, would become the builder and owner of the new venue in 1921. From that date, and for approximately three decades, both venues competed to provide entertainment to the inhabitants of Taltal and the saltpeter workers of the interior. This finally relegated the old building to a second plane, being demolished in the 1950s.

As part of this research, the arrangement of the architectural elements that accentuate the Municipal Theater’s symmetry is considered, starting





**Figure 4.** Comparative superimposition of the Municipal Theater's facade over the Alhambra Theater's. Source: Preparation by the Author.

from a gabled roof. Its vertical plane built a continuous single-level rectangular volumetry façade, crowned with balusters. It had three entrances (Figure 3) for the audience attending the functions, allowing them to enter the different spaces selectively, the central door being the largest, leading to the stalls and the two lateral ones to the respective boxes “(...) the art of any era must necessarily be the expression of its social life” (Morris, 2023, p. 129). This balance proposed by the openings gives a hierarchical character to the facade, which brings with it the concept of internal longitudinal axis, around which the premises are programmatically structured, from the crossing of the threshold to access the lobby, then to the seating sector, located in a broader space, facing the stage: “The organizing axis is not necessarily that of a real movement; rather it represents a symbolic direction that unifies a given number of elements among themselves and often relates them to form a broader whole” (Norberg- Schulz, 1975, p 58). These architectural references allowed examining how this volumetric order was extrapolated, almost literally, in the design and subsequent construction of the Alhambra Theater; mainly regarding its facade, where similarities in the volumetry and configuration of the accesses are recognized. (Figure 4)

**Programmatic diversity of the Alhambra Theater**

Under this premise, the geometric language proposed by the openings on the Alhambra Theater's facade has dimensions of 26 m across from the front by 11.6 m high. It shows two horizontal traits formed by the windows and doors, for each of the floors, separated by a line of balusters that try to be a running balcony, in which it delves reflexively into the proportions and uses, where the programmatic sense appears within its architecture: “Through these detailed forms,



**Figure 5.** Façade of the Alhambra Theater and its relationship with the square.  
Source: Preparation by the Author.

the subtle intermediate stages are organized within the building's large proportions. The particularities determine the formal rhythm and the fineness of the building's measurement (Zumthor, 2004, p. 14). These formal virtues can be recognized through the commercial and residential use programs contained in the facade. These programs complement the theater's activities, where the family is integrated in collaborative participation. This condition of work and family commitment contains in itself part of the reflections that are incorporated in this research, which are described below:

A.- Access to the theater. This dimension considers the occupation of a limited extension of the façade's ground floor, which contains three doors to enter the premises. These doors equally collect the distribution proportion and order of the entrances proposed in the Municipal Theater's façade. This reveals a similarity in how to conceive the way people enter. It was probably a way of appealing to the memory of an identity image of these venues as part of the competitive strategies to capture the public.

B.- Trade area. This place was called the Pastry Shop. It was an adjoining space independent of the theater's entrances that complements the width of the facade on the ground floor. Vertical symmetry is again established in this section of the building, with two side windows as the main points of light entry and a central door, maintaining the same language of the openings. This venue came to integrate and strengthen the vocation of the Alhambra Theater by being a social and cultural meeting center, which complements the promenades

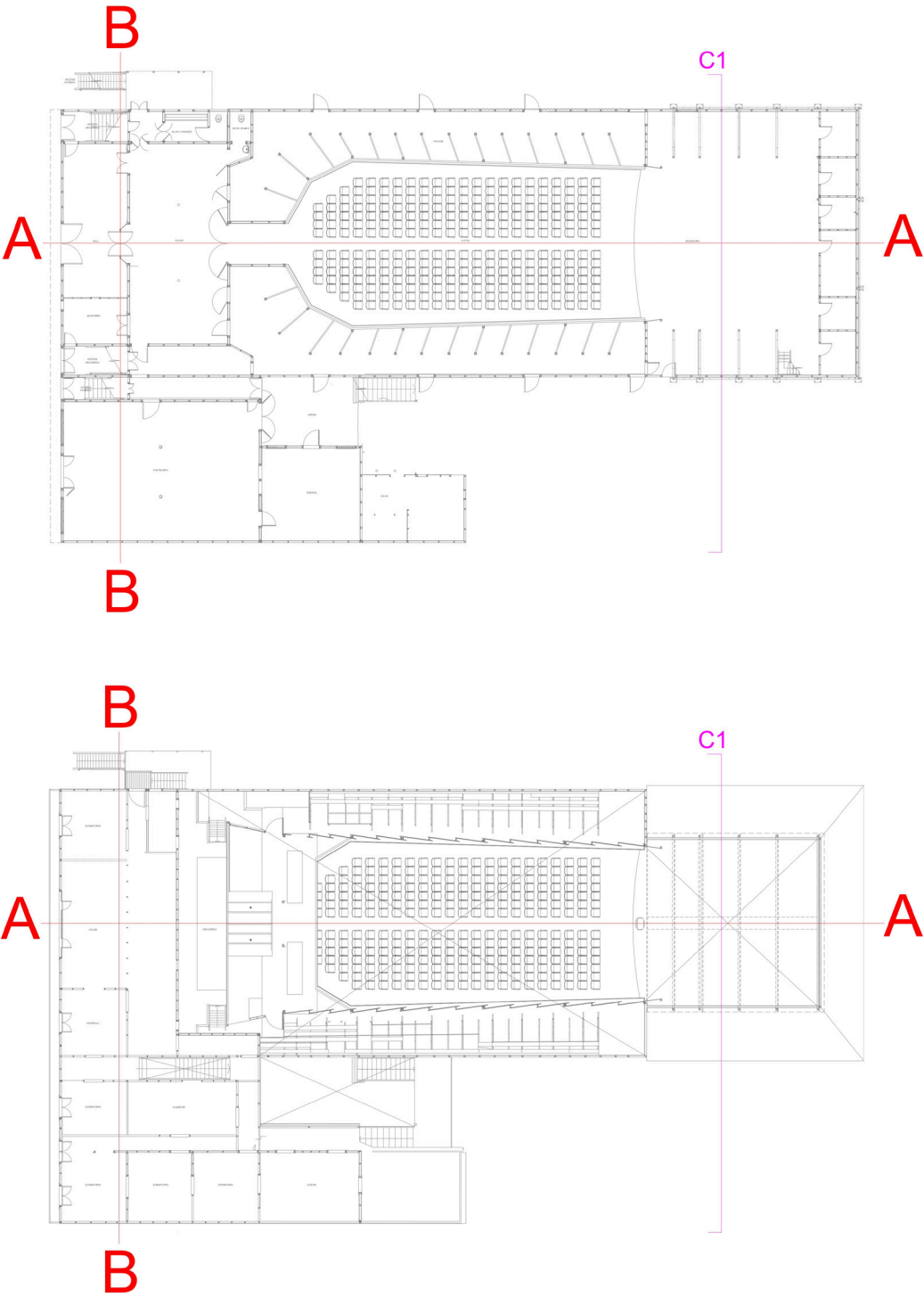


**Figure 6.** Unitary facade of Taltal's Alhambra Theater. Source: Preparation by the author.

of young people next to the square (Figure 5), with the possibility of having an ice cream or a beverage, where children could buy cakes and sweets, and adults, cigarettes, before entering each of the functions on show.

C. - Residence. The volume containing the enclosures for family rooms is located on the second floor, directly above the Theater and the Pastry Shop entrance, parallel to the street, which occupies the entire width of the facade.

As part of the facade's language, a door different from the others appears in the central part of the first floor. It is "out of place," smaller, and rectangular in configuration. This door reveals the private access to the family residence by connecting directly with the second floor through a linear staircase.



**Figure 7.** Programmatic floor plan of the ground floor and structural lines of the Alhambra Theater. Source: Catálogoarquitectura, Floor plan: La Alhambra Theater / Taltal. (n.d.). Edited by the Author.

**Figure 8.** Programmatic floor plan of the second floor and structural lines of the Alhambra Theater. Source: Catálogoarquitectura, Floor plan: La Alhambra Theater / Taltal. (n.d.). Edited by the Author.



The windows of the residential volume are configured by recognizing the location and geometries and the openings on the ground floor, by generating concordant axes in their verticality, whose wider window manifests the space where the salon was located, being located on the main access of the Theater, which accentuates its hierarchy.

In conversation with one of R. Perucci's grandchildren (personal communication, May 16, 2023)<sup>2</sup>, he mentions that, as a child, *he would go to visit his "Nonos" (Grandparents) at the theater, going to the home that was on the second floor called "el Alto". From the salon, through a door that connects with the stalls, you could see and hear the movies projected on the curtain while he had tea with his Nona (Grandmother). This allows you to know whether the movie is about to end so that Nono (Granddad) can go up to eat. Or to recognize if there was a problem with the projection, listening to the audience's noise, or protests by stomping on the wooden floor.* This story shows the close connection between the intimacy of family life and everyday activities. All the family members were committed to the different functions, from the construction to putting up posters to collecting money at the ticket office, attending the bakery, etc.

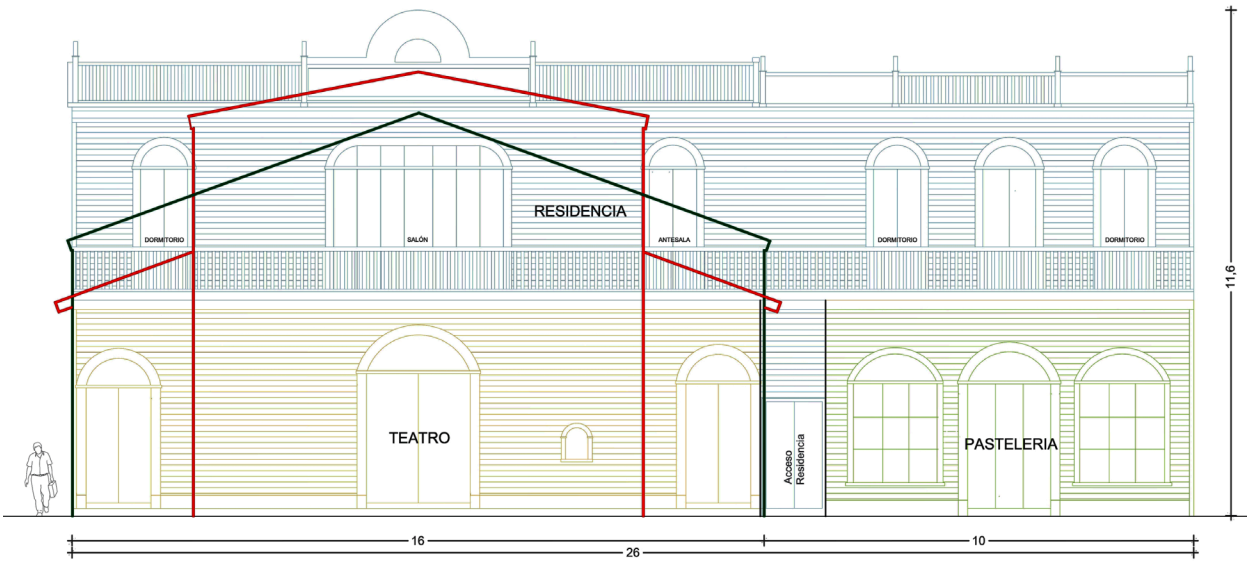
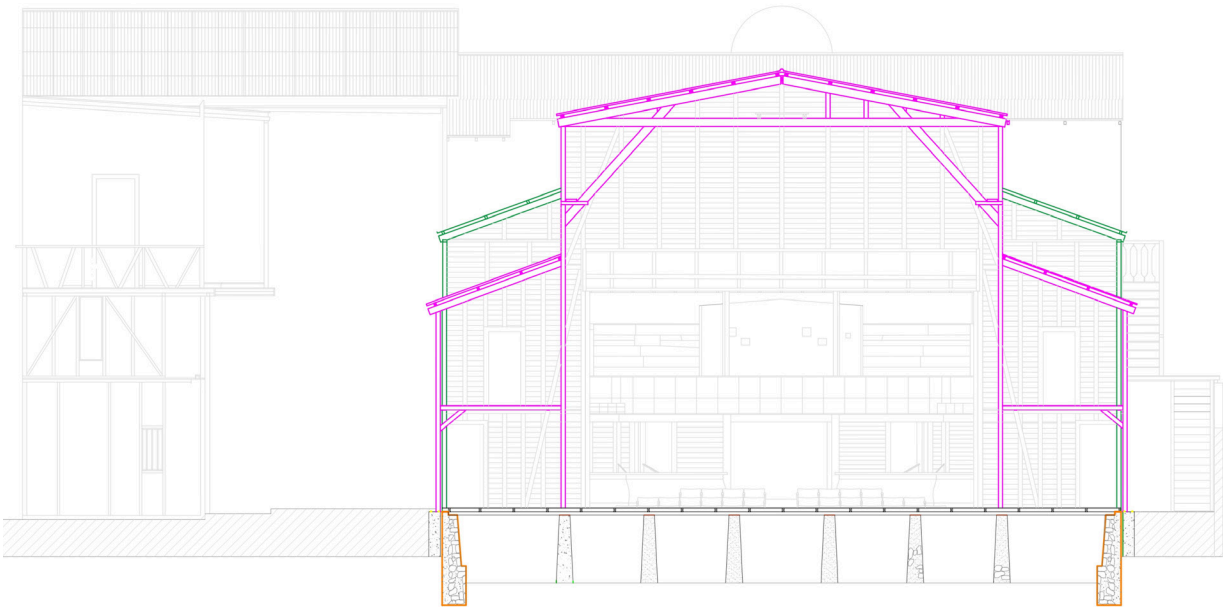
With this, a unitary image of the front volume of the building appears, based on three juxtaposed architectural programs, where the use of wood manifests horizontal textures that stand out through the application of paints, following the constructive identity of the era: "Natural materials express their age and history, as well as the history of their origins and that of human use" (Pallasmaa, 2019, p.37), which come to reinforce a formal uniformity of the facade, crowned by balusters throughout its horizontal extension (Figure 6). This strategy of complementarily adding several venues constitutes a much larger unitary architectural dimension than the Municipal Theater.

### Structural drawings contained in the facade

A second analysis, referring to the Alhambra Theater's architectural floor plans, has two perpendicular lines that programmatically organize the building. A longitudinal one that considers the hall, foyer and the nave of the area that houses the stalls and the stage (line A), and a second transversal line (line B) parallel to Torreblanca Street, that contains the facade of the building facing Prat square, that is, it supports the most public dimension of the premises, which encompasses the hall, foyer and the pastry shop on the ground floor and the family residence on the second floor (Figures 7 and 8).

The transversal supporting structures of the central nave are recognized from the C-I cross-section made in the architecture plan (Figure 9). The lines of the structural geometric profile are identified

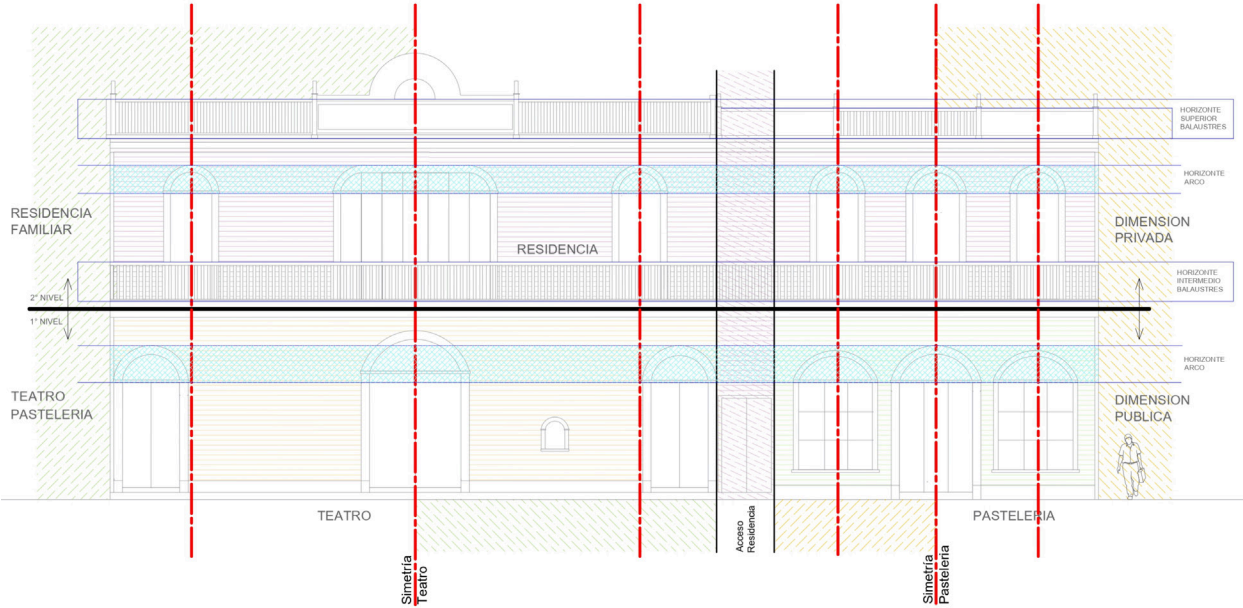
<sup>2</sup> Conversation with the grandson of R. Perucci, on a trip to the city of Taltal



**Figure 9.** Programmatic floor plan of the second floor and structural lines of the Alhambra Theater.  
Source: Catálogoarquitectura, Floor plan: La Alhambra Theater / Taltal. (n.d.). Edited by the Author.

**Figure 10.** Juxtaposed redrawing of the structural transversal profiles on the facade of the Alhambra Theater. Source: Preparation by the Author.





**Figure 11.** Vertical and adjoining symmetries and horizontal lines of Taltal's Alhambra Theater. Source: Preparation by the author.

from which the superposition exercise is performed on the Theater's facade, revealing that these are implicitly contained in the profiles and levels of the openings, i.e., the transversal structural geometry reappears in juxtaposition on the facade.

When observing the rectangular volume of the front of the building, only one section is for the access; the rest is for the business, and mainly the owners' residence. However, in its architectural conception, there is a willingness to compromise and involve the structural proportions of the nave, bringing them to the fore on the visible side of the theater (Figure 10).

The Theater's design was influenced by the Georgian style, whose main feature is a strict symmetry of its facade, i.e., its predominant order is based on a vertical central axis, accentuated by an access door in the middle and identical and equidistant side elements; in addition, this arrangement extends to the upper floors. This brings a new set of juxtapositions. These two symmetrical and contiguous vertical orders can be read on the facade, where the central axis crosses the facade area for the Theater entrance and part of the family residence. The second axis of vertical symmetry appears in the entrance to the pastry shop and the bedrooms' windows in the upper part of the residence. Two vertical lines are complemented by lines corresponding to the horizontal spans and trellises of the balusters and arches, coming together in a geometric order to constitute a unitary facade (Figure 11).

CONCLUSIONS

The Alhambra Theater has accompanied the inhabitants of Taltal through a very relevant historical and cultural period, witnessing the city's progress and growth. This research contributes to building a

reflection on the diversity of formal and geometric expressions, which recognize various implicit meanings from its facade, arising from architectural analysis and observation. These reveal a series of juxtapositions of hidden internal architectural programs contained in a unitary image, from which the activities directly related to the theater transcend, uniting in one place the possibility of sustaining family life and work, by demonstrating an ability to constitute a binding totality, virtuously expanding the building's rectangular volumetric image.

On the other hand, there is a subtle desire to make the structural section profiles of the central nave appear on the visible side of the theater, through the strategic arrangement and size of the openings' contours.

There is an evident will that this was conceived as a significant urban element, through a vertical frontality that exalts its magnitude facing the public space, which encompasses the horizontal extension of the square, incorporating itself into the recognizable image of the promenade as a meeting place for the *Taltalina* community.

However, some signs manifest this hidden programmatic diversity, subtly enunciated within the facade, such as the height difference in the balusters, appearing in various sequences in the distribution and sizes of the windows and doors, the horizontal layouts, and the hierarchical vertical symmetries that house characteristic elements of Georgian architecture.

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## CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS- CRediT

This research arises from the course "Anatomy of Buildings" conducted in 2023, as part of the Master's program "Architecture in Arid Zones (MAZA)" of the School of Architecture of the Catholic University of the North, through the critical analysis of a relevant building in the north of the country.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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