

Architecturally, A Promise in Use of 'Found Space'

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Cinematheque will not be just for cinema buffs—it will be for architecture buffs, who are often cinema buffs as well. And yet, at a time when cultural centers frequently emphasize marble and concrete over cultural contents, it will not be a building at all. It will be in "found space" under the Queensboro Bridge. Architecturally, this is a lot more exciting than it sounds. The space is a dramatic series of cathedral-like vaults and arched openings of landmark quality below the bridge structure at First Avenue between 59th and 60th Streets.

In 1910, when the bridge was new, the vaulted aisles served as an open market. In 1918 a fountain was added, and in 1919 the area was glassed in. Now it is used for municipal storage of signs and police barricades. In its new incarnation it will con-

tain three movie theaters, a museum and exhibition area, and a restaurant and cafe.

Among planners and preservationists, the idea of converting an older space or structure to contemporary functions is called "adaptive use," and it is an increasingly popular concept today. This is one of the most sensitive and sensible ways of assuring the city's architectural continuity, and it usually presents a special challenge to the architect.

In this case, the architectural firm of I. M. Pei and Partners is faced with putting the documentary and active-program functions of a cinematheque into a present space of strong structural and esthetic character. Mr. Pei's solution is to do so as dramatically as possible, with maximum contrast between new and old.

Mr. Pei, a designer of major monuments, such as the addition to Washington's National Gallery of Art, is equally enthusiastic about this conversion.

In "found space," there are found advantages and found problems. The vaulted construction makes a romantic interior that would not be duplicated today. Because it follows the slope of the land and the bridge, it varies in height from about 60 to 30 feet from east to west.

This makes ramps and multilevel spaces an attractive and natural way to accommodate a varied program. The restaurant, for example, will be on a lower level, with audio-visual exhibitions, as well as other exhibit areas, requiring controlled lighting.

Interior to Be Visible

Most of the interior will be clearly visible through new glass in the handsome exterior arches.

Because of the columns, the theaters will have to be dug 10 or 15 feet into the ground. The largest will be constructed both below and outside of the existing structure.

On the model, this theater

appears on the 59th Street side as a low, semicircular projection that serves as a kind of kiosk boldly proclaiming "Cinematheque."

The style of the architect's additions, using stainless steel and supergraphics, is strikingly contemporary. The intention is a planned esthetic counterpoint with the almost medieval quality of the old structure.

"Film is a 20th-century art form," Mr. Pei says of the design solution, "and we want it to look that way."

Other "found" problems in addition to columns on 30-foot centers are acoustics, waterproofing and the structural soundness of the vaults. Through studies with a Ford Foundation grant, the Pei firm believes it has evolved satisfactory solutions.

Digging the theaters into the ground to avoid the columns has the additional advantage of leaving a sound-insulating space between them and the bridge roadway above. This is believed to eliminate structural loading vaults, a new system of construction perfected in Spain and imported enthusiastically from the eighteen-eighties onward, will be cleaned, pointed, strengthened and made leakproof. Guastavino is to architects what Eisenstein is to cinema fans.

Outside, the present parking lot will be transformed into a landscaped public park maintained by the Cinematheque.

Six years ago, another "adaptive use" project was undertaken—Joseph Papp's conversion of the old Astor Library on Lafayette Street into the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater. It was an idealistic excursion from grime to glory that has paid off handsomely in the revitalization of a neighborhood and the enrichment of the city's cultural assets. The Cinematheque holds the same promise for



and Henri Langlois of the French Cinémathèque, who will be artistic chief.