ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Can New York Save the Schomburg Center?

No one is asking whether New York is anything more than a debt structure or a credit rating these days, and what, precisely, is being saved from a fate worse than default. One has the feeling that the money men at City Hall are dealing in fiscal card tricks—not in a place. The cuts being made hurt most heartbreakingly and immediately in human services. But where they are going to hurt the worst, in the long run, is in their damage to the essential nature and quality of the city—those areas of art and commerce, culture and communication, that give New York its traditional style and strength and that provide its competitive edge for business, talent, leadership and money. This truth occasionally glimmers through the dismal trick figures: it is the city's real bottom line.

The constituent elements that feed into that bottom line now have the very lowest priority. It is disturbing to feel that one must apologize for speaking up for art and culture—although it is the quality of the city's life that ultimately establishes New York's appeal and prosperity, which in turn support its social services. Its creative culture and its humanity are closely linked.

That is why it is so distressing to write about what is happening to the Schomburg Center, the internationally known collection that is the world's most comprehensive and distinguished documentation of black history, literature and art. The Schomburg Collection is both splendid and symbolic. It has just celebrated its 50th anniversary in the New York Public Library in Harlem at 103 West 135th Street. The original collection brought together by Arnold Schomburg was acquired for the Library in 1925, with a Carnegie grant of $10,000. Today it includes books, manuscripts, periodicals, clippings, photographs, tapes, records, motion pictures, microfilm, archives, art and artifacts.

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To visit the Schomburg in its 1905 McKim, Mead and White building, and the 1940 Countee Cullen branch that connects through from 136th Street, is to be assaulted by hope and despair. The care and determination with which this remarkable resource is nurtured and protected by Jean Hutson, director of the Center, is an obvious cause for joy. The conditions in which she struggles for preservation against an ever-increasing avalanche of donations (the collection doubles every 10 years with no purchase funds at all) defy credibility.

There is no air-conditioning and no humidity control; if it gets too hot or too cold union regulations simply call off all work. That's fine for people but not so great for priceless documents. Acquisitions wait in string-tied or boxed piles on the floor. Book stacks are double-ranged against the walls where floors are strongest; the building will take no additional loads. Often there are not enough chairs in the one reading room, which is an even 80 degrees in winter and higher in summer. Thirty thousand visitors come every year.

Even with these incredible conditions, the Schomburg is a place where you want to linger. There is a sense of books as friends, of treasures to be enjoyed and discoveries to be made, that has led young New Yorkers (the distinguished educator, Kenneth Clark, for example, befriended by Arthur Schomburg many years ago) to learning and self-knowledge.

The Schomburg Center was designated a Research Library (it was formerly a Branch Library) in 1972, joining such research facilities as the Science and Technology Center at 42d Street and the Performing Arts Research Center at Lincoln Center. Its support comes from the underfunded and understaffed Public Library system, New York State educational funds, matching grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and private donations. This makes it possible to bring a staff of six up to 40, to catalogue and microfilm records and archives, and to restore and preserve the most fragile materials. But it is a losing battle.

The real tragedy of this story—if it were not disturbing enough—is that the Schomburg had just come within an eyelash of salvation when financial disaster hit New York. After six years of planning for a desperately needed new building, the project was almost home. It had taken two years of complicated contractual negotiations with the city, once the firm of Bond, Ryder and Associates had been selected as architects in 1972-3. (There was an earlier, excellent, privately commissioned scheme by Roger Glasgow that did not go ahead for a variety of reasons.)

The work on phase one of the contract—a master plan and library design—was almost finished when catastrophe struck. In August, 1975, when it was being reviewed by the Bureau of the Budget, the whole project simply disappeared. The budget item for construction was dropped, and in October, the city cancelled the architects' contract for lack of funds.

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This is even more unfortunate because Bond, Ryder had come up with a very good scheme. First, they had changed the program they were given from a large demolition and rebuilding project to something far more sensitive and sensible by calculating the future maintenance and staffing cost for what would have been an overambitious museum and library combination. They cut down the museum space and suggested that the McKim, Mead and White building be saved and recycled for the art and artifacts displays. The process was started for having the old building placed on the National Register, which would make it eligible for Federal rehabilitation funds.

The new building was to be on Lenox Avenue, with an open, arcaded front, and the new and old buildings were to be connected by a garden court within the block. A service core for elevators, air-conditioning, etc., would replace the old structure's party wall. It is a simple, rational design, rich in neighborhood amenity, at once economical and potentially elegant. Its loss is incalculable for the collection, the city and the local community.

There are money losses as well, both in design costs to date and in land acquisition. The city has already purchased the property reaching from the library buildings on 135th and 136th Streets to Lenox Avenue and all along the avenue itself, and relocated most of the tenants. Those buildings stand empty now, boarded up and off the tax rolls, blighting the neighborhood and inviting vandalism. There have been three fires so far, close enough to the Schomburg to be hideously frightening. There will be more.

Bond-Ryder is just $100,000 short of being able to complete the design, and any thought of getting it from the city now is akin to squeezing blood from the proverbial stone. The alternative is clearly a grant from some city-interested foundation, such as the Fund for the City of New York, or another New York-based philanthropy—the amount is far less than a fraction of a typical New York-based advertising campaign for a redundant non-necessity. (There would be nothing wrong with a corporate grant, either.)

Design completion would include a printed report and presentation model that would, in turn, make it possible to raise working drawing and construction funds in the private sector. While palaces are built for collections downtown at extravagant expense, this superb city and national resource is more endangered than ever. New York's ironies are perpetual and profound.