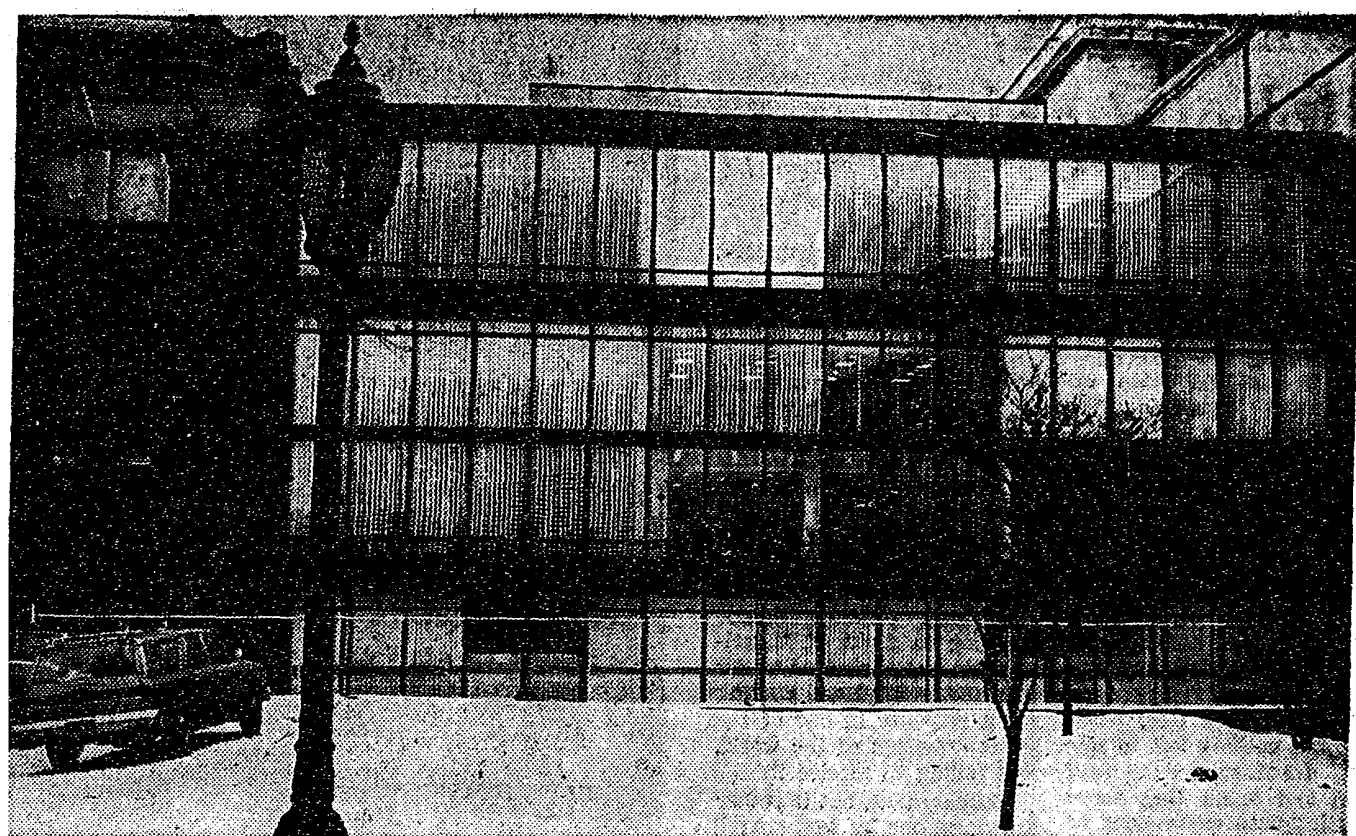


Seasoning the Witches' Brew

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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The Metropolitan Museum's Thomas J. Watson Library.
"... a completely contemporary glass and metal connecting wing."

Richard Saunders from Scope

Architecture

Seasoning the Witches' Brew

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

How do you join a Ruskinian Gothic building, circa 1880, to a Classic Revival building, circa 1905, when there are only 107 feet between them and the former presents a rugged red polychrome facade and the latter offers a plain yellow brick behind?

You build a completely contemporary glass and metal connecting wing, according to James J. Rorimer, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Brown, Lawford and Forbes, architects for the Thomas J. Watson Library. This is the museum's newest addition in a building program approaching the hundred-year mark, a feat of continuous construction rivaled only by medieval cathedrals.

Mr. Rorimer was right. The neat glass wing, which takes full and logical advantage of daylight and spectacular views of Central Park and the city's skyline, provides modern library and print and drawing collection facilities in an appropriate and functional modern shell.

The addition is well scaled to the colorful Victorian eccentricities of the original 19th century Vaux and Mould building to the west, providing a sleek, simple foil for the older, landmark structure. As for the rear of the main building to the east, nothing could help or harm the lumpish non-style of this totally undistinguished back that hides behind the pom-

pously monumental Fifth Avenue front. But the new wing doesn't hurt.

Giddy with eclecticism? We have only begun. If we approach the modern library through the inside of the classic museum, we enter by way of the recently installed 16th century Spanish court, the Blumenthal Patio. This Renaissance gem has been lovingly reconstructed with its original carved marble door and window frames and arches of incredibly crisp and elegant intricacy. The main frame contains the unadorned plate-glass doors to the library.

Sleight-of-Hand

This particular ploy, which might be called the esthetics of contrast, can jar or delight, and here both the intention and effect are laudable. The same thing is done better abroad, and particularly in Italy, where less rigid building codes make it possible for architects to fasten clear glass panels to ornate baroque openings with virtually invisible hardware — a stunning esthetic sleight-of-hand that combines two or three centuries with impeccable bravura.

Here that flair is lacking, as seen, for example, in the medieval-modern combination of the remodeled museum in the Castello Sforzesca in Milan, or the Palazzo Bianco in Genoa. But there is firm, conservative good judgment in the Metropolitan's approach to the problem, ob-

viously dedicated to the idea that it is wise to build for today in today's terms, with care and sensibility, enriching the past and the present and the institution's history with a full range of vigorous contemporary styles.

In these terms the building is a good job, at a reasonable cost: just under \$2½ million. It uses standard storage and shelf systems and partitions for the carrels, or study alcoves, with their enviable park views, as well as the luxury of solid teak tables and fine Danish chairs. But it would have been even better if it had cost more. A sinful suggestion? It is simple fact.

If the anodized aluminum framing of the exterior had been bronze, instead of bronze-colored, if the budget had permitted more special detailing, tasteful serviceability could have become jewel-like distinction. If the city, which contributed approximately half the cost, had authorized something better than the commonest standard steel fencing (other cities have an "art" allowance for public projects that could have been applicable here) the facade would not have been defaced by a prison-camp approach.

If the building, like many other new museum structures around the country, had been a private project without any city funds, this kind of quality might well have been attainable. But in New York,

the poorest of rich cities, it is not.

Because the Metropolitan Museum is partly public-supported, and the city paid some of the bill, it meant stringent economies. Every detail of design and construction had to get the Budget Bureau's approval.

Budget Building

Every detail of the design and construction of every municipally financed or aided capital improvement or public project in New York must have this approval. Every design detail, therefore, is passed on or modified for immediate costs, and no other long-term or qualitative values are involved. This, in effect, makes the Director of the Budget the city's chief architect and planner. It also makes for severely limited standards, few beautiful buildings and a great deal of monotonous mediocrity.

Fortunately, a persuasive museum director with additional sources of private funds set superior standards and achieved optimum results. It has also been made clear that a new wing may be added to an older landmark without resorting to academic copying as the only solution, as in the case of Gracie Mansion.

The Metropolitan is an interesting conglomerate of styles and periods; a virtual architectural witches' brew. Mr. Rorimer's new library is a fine and lively gift of modern seasoning.