Design Notebook

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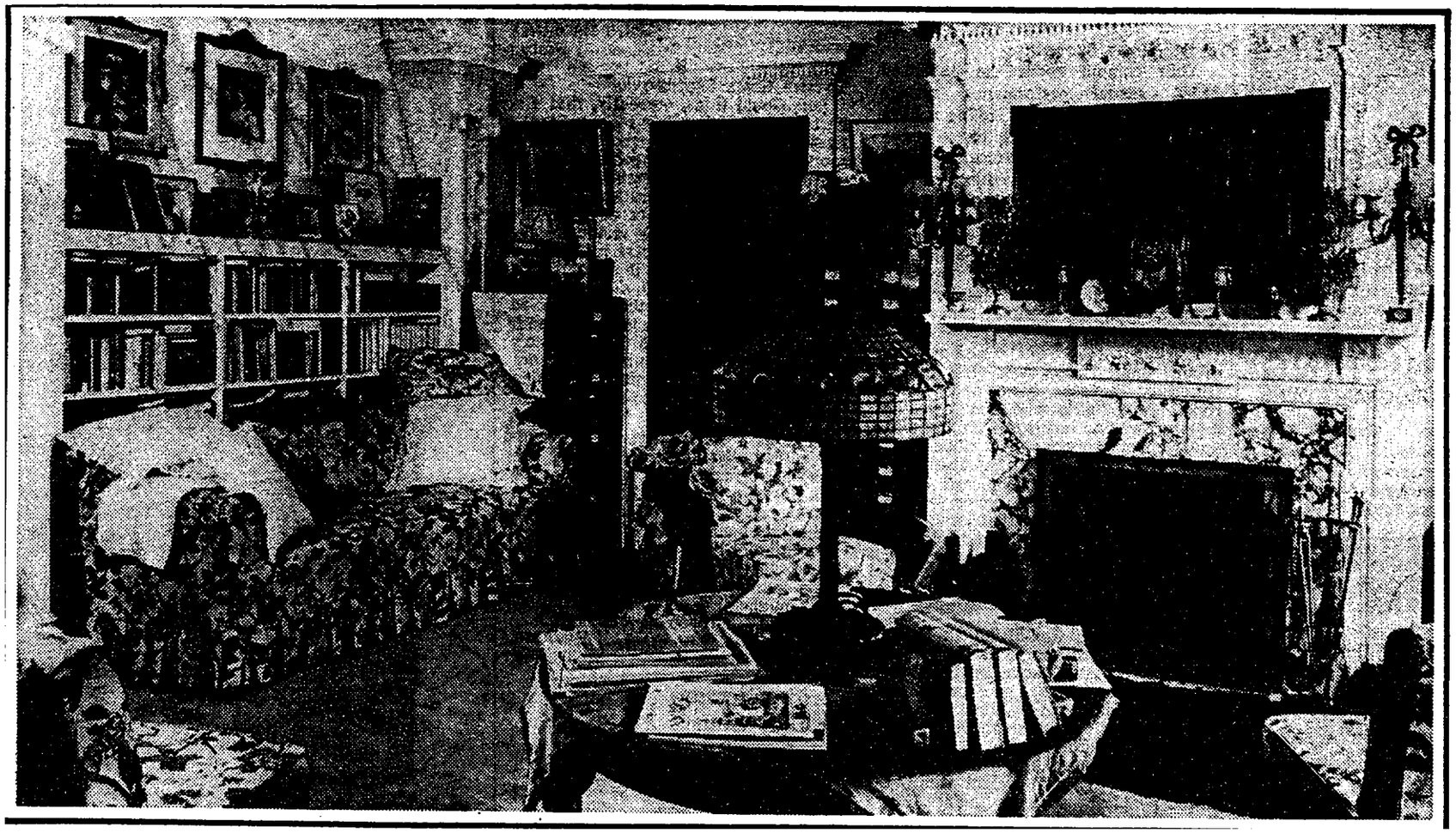
A Happy Birthday To the Carnegie Mansion



Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Design, Smithsonian Institution

Mrs. Andrew Carnegie's bedroom: "It was all singularly unlovely and there was an awful lot of it."

THE ANDREW CARNEGIE Mansion, on Fifth Avenue between 90th and 91st Street, is celebrating its 75th birthday and second reincarnation this year. To mark the occasion, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design, and the building's current occupant) has mounted a small exhibition on the history of the house.

The show could be called Upstairs, Downstairs, or From Boudoir to Boiler Room (phase one), Mansion or Monstrosity? (phase two) and Virtue Rediscovered, or All's Well That Ends Well (phase three). These three phases correspond to the building's successive lives as the Carnegie residence (1902-1946), the Columbia University School of Social Work (1946-1971) and its latest identity as the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, after restoration and remodeling last year.

A succinct sampling of photographs, plans and drawings from all three stages of the house, selected by Richard Oliver, the Cooper-Hewitt curator of architecture and design, can be seen through June 26. The show has been installed in a gallery in the former basement, where a staggering domestic staff once held sway.

The immediate fascination of the display is in the revelation of the intimate details of how the very rich lived—in this case, the family of the Scottish immigrant who built an American steel empire—and what kind of rooms and possessions were behind those ornate glass and iron doors. On a more philosophical level, the material is equally interesting as a gauge of how tastes and attitudes have changed toward these turn-of-the-century buildings, swinging from reverent admiration to dislike and near-total architectural devaluation, and finally to rediscovery. A lot of manners and mores and cultural history have been compressed into that three-quarters of a century.

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One Lucy Cleveland, for example, writing about the Carnegie house in an architectural journal in 1910, eight years after its completion, was absolutely carried away. In a paean to the pump room and boiler room and sanitary engineering (the bathrooms had silverplated fixtures), she described the sub-basement with its maze of white-tiled mechanical rooms as filling her with "a kind of awe."

After acknowledging kinship of spirit with the owner through Celtic ancestry on her mother's side, and thanking Mr. Carnegie for "the kindness he has done to the American people and to the cause of American home sanitation," she added, "We felt as if we could appropriately use the term 'Engineering Esthetics' for this splendid department of the Carnegie residence." One wonders how she felt when she got upstairs.

The engineering esthetics are still there—the Carnegie house had extremely sophisticated structural and mechanical systems for its time, which were among the most outstanding features.

This mechanical domain is still under the command of Manuel Perez, who came to work for Mrs. Carnegie after her husband's death and has maintained the subterranean motors and white enameled pumps and polished brasses in working order to this day. The boiler room functioned right through the Columbia years, and only with the recent conversion to the museum were new heating and ventilating systems installed.

Some people are convinced that this sub-basement world is the most beautiful part of the house. Devotees of the machine esthetic go frankly bananas. Later on, Cooper-Hewitt visitors will be given downstairs tours, and I will wager that those formidable rows of black iron furnaces served by a coal car that carried three-quarters of a ton of fuel on its own railroad track and turntable in a floor of Italian tile, and the glazed white brick space filled with elegant polished pumps and dials like the engine room of a giant ocean liner, will become New York's "in" art world attraction.

But I digress, as Lucy Cleveland would have said. Let us move up from the boiler room to the boudoir—and the library, the dining room, the breakfast room, the conservatory, the music room, the schoolroom, the sewing room, the trunk room, the gymnasium, the gallery, the guest rooms, the servants' rooms . . . there were 64 rooms in all.

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What Andrew Carnegie asked for, from his architects Babb, Cook and Willard, was "the most modest, plainest, and the most roomy house in New York." Curiously, he got it. This is not a house of pomp and circumstance, in spite of its enormous size. And to judge from the photographs by Richard Averill Smith that have been lent to the show by the Museum of the City of New York—taken in 1938 when Mrs. Carnegie still lived there, tending her conservatory of plants heated by two special boilers, and her garden of flowering fruit trees and wisteria that was, until now, one of New York's secret spring treasures—it was a homey and comfortable house.

It was not, by any stretch of the imagination, either elegant or beautiful. Upstairs, esthetics were conspicuously absent. There was a great deal of solidity, practicality and clutter. The house was more plain than grand, if you can use the word plain for the piling up of pictures, cushions, chairs, tables, cabinets and mementos, with framed photographs stacked on every level surface.

In fact, it was not until the building was cleared out to its walls for the Museum conversion last year, stripped of Columbia's fluroescent schoolroom lighting and standard green fire walls, that the really fine spaces provided by the architects were fully revealed and appreciated. These are well-proportioned rooms of generous size, skillful plan and felicitous outlook. There is no greater pleasure than the axial arrangement of these sunlit spaces leading to the conservatory at one end, and to views of the garden and Central Park on two other sides. Call it environmental design for the rich. And a priceless amenity for New York.

The Carnegies filled these rooms with a hodge-podge of truly repellent furniture: brocaded drawing-room French, hybrid baronial and velvet overstuffedugly. There was a disfiguring table in the center of almost every room topped by a tablecloth, Tiffany lamp and piles of books and magazines, barricaded by chairs and statuary. Files were jammed into the corners of Mrs. Carnegie's serviceable boudoir, where permanent disarray was united by flowered cretonne. It was all singularly unlovely and there was an awful lot of it. One suspects that there was even a little something tucked behind every door.

The entrance hall with its carved wood paneling of Scottish oak—now lustrous with new life—was dominated by an Aeolian organ at one end (which played wakeup music at 8 o'clock every morning) and a life-size bronze figure of Mercury running resolutely toward it. Assorted friezes hung artlessly on panels of Lincrusta (pressed composition board made to look like leather) above the oak. The breakfast and dining rooms, with fine carved walls, gilded and burnished ceilings and Tiffany chandeliers, were without grace—heavy tables square in the center and solid chairs four-square in the corners. It is hard to spoil a dining room, but someone succeeded.

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It can be said without too much fear of argument that anyone who would have wanted to "restore back" most of these interiors would have been of unsound mind, although they have a certain Venturian high camp-low camp fascination. I would like to have seen just one kept—the second floor library designed by Lockwood de Forest; it was consummate Carnegie. The elaborate carved teakwood trim and one cabinet remain, but the matching furniture, and a huge Tiffany chandelier, are long gone.

Still in the house are the carefully revitalized shells of the rooms, with their carved woods and gilded ceilings, the restored conservatory and monumental stair. The billiard-room on the second floor, which was open to the impressive stairwell but had to be closed off by Columbia with a fire wall, has now been opened again, and the screen of carved columns (thoughtfully stored by Mr. Perez) put back. Skylights that were beyond restoring except at enormous expense have been removed, and some areas have been simplified for exhibition space. The recycling judgment of the converting architects, Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer, concerning what to keep and how to use it has been sensitive and rational.

The current rooms are not only extremely handsome, but also receive exhibitions with charm and flair. The displays seem to gain from the domestic scale, the views of garden and park, and the sense of the city's past. There are subtle layers of design meaning interacting between container and contained, a mutual cultural enrichment shared by the architecture and the objects on view. As Richard Oliver writes in the exhibition text, the building now "reaffirms the values and uses of the past in the life of the present, with a congenial balance between the forces of change and tradition."

I wouldn't have wanted to live there, but it is a lovely place to visit. Still, I can't help wondering what happened to the Carnegie banquet tablecloths, autographed by famous guests after dinner and then sent out to be embroidered. What a coup they would have been for the Cooper-Hewitt design collection!