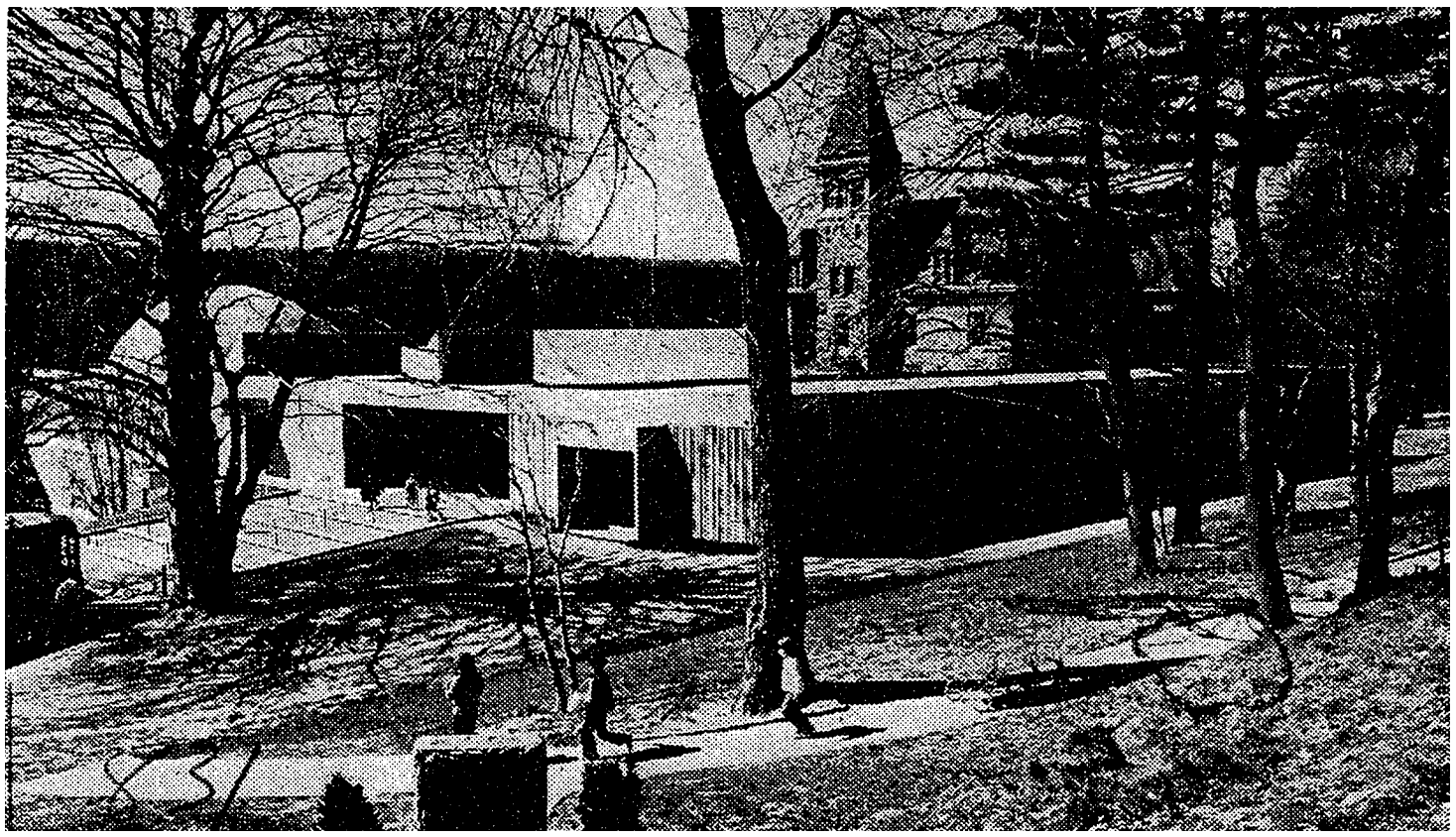
Article 1 -- No Title: A Happy Marriage on the Hudson
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Apr 26, 1970; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D29

A Happy Marriage on the Hudson

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT is a small museum at a time when large museums are vying to get larger. It is an all-purpose, local museum, presenting low pressure shows on almost any aspect of art, science or history, when museums are intensifying specialization and the pursuit of possessions. It is the Hudson River Museum, a half hour from mid-Manhattan in Yonkers, a city of about 200,000 more generally known for political, economic and municipal management troubles than for culture, and it is a lesson in what a community museum should be.

It is also a lesson in how sensitive, sophisticated architectural design can serve the purposes of a community museum, which are both simple and enormously complex. Such institutions usually began in the late 19th or early 20th century as genteel educational aspirants to cultural uplift, acquiring motley collections of curiosities and valuable local archives. They are strong on charm, regional nostalgia and good intentions.



Vernon L. Smith from Scope

New construction joins a Victorian mansion in Yonkers to form the Hudson River Museum
Geared to the community, under a new set of rules

*

Today, in more difficult times, they reach out to the community, under a new set of rules. They move their activities into the ghettos (the Hudson River Museum has an Art Cart program) and they concern themselves as much with sociology as with the arts. This is not only justifiable; it is necessary. What these museums offer to both the privileged and underprivileged is a cultural-environmental experience that involves the eye, the mind and the human spirit through responses to a set of superior stimuli. Or they should. It is a kind of life-enrichment that the community museum must deal in now.

The Hudson River Museum has just added 40,000 square feet of space and passed its annual attendance figure in the first three months of this year. The new construction, the work of the Sherwood, Mills and Smith Partnership of Stamford, Conn., is the chief attraction. It is unusually handsome and geared toward providing those cultural-environmental experiences.

The occasion for this report is spring and the success of the new building. Spring is an irresistible lure along the Hudson River. The valley's Olympian beauty has been scarred by the greed, waste, harsh economic pressures and brutal lack of vision of the communities strung along one of the most remarkable riverscapes in the world, but the Palisades still rise in painterly magnificence, and the valley is awakening, with grandeur and delicacy, to the yearly miracle of life. The great river, polluted, flows superbly on.

Overlooking the Hudson, in a park rich with copper beeches edging into black bud, is the museum, set carefully into the steeply sloping riverbank on three levels. The striated, grayish natural concrete walls of the new construction embrace a towered Victorian mansion of local gray stone. This is the Trevor house of 1876, the historic structure that has accommodated the Hudson River Museum (originally the Yonkers Museum of Arts and Sciences) since the city acquired the estate, for a park and museum, in 1924. The relationship between the new and old buildings is a model of sympathy and integrity.

*

The new, $1.8-million building wraps around the old one in an open U-plan. At the main entrance level it is a respectful single story in height; the additional two stories are below in the slope of the land. A covered "porch" on the south leads into two wings, the museum at the left and a library at the right. Between them is a quarter-acre court fronting on the old building.

The library and museum are related, but independent facilities. This 25,000-volume branch public library includes a rare local history collection that can be perused in a study room with views through the courtyard, to the river. At present, the court is garnished with sculpture; it is intended equally for open air activities.

*

The museum entrance, to the west, leads past a sales desk to the exhibition areas. (Instead of those tired old, "tasteful" museum copies, Victoriana was brought in from local shops for sale in connection with a recent Victorian show.) Because of the sloping site, the exhibition space is on two levels, with a central, double-story well.

Just beyond the exhibition area is one of the museum's main attractions, a 135-seat planetarium with something called a Space Transit System, one of 11 in the world, used in astronaut training to show the skies as they would appear from a body orbiting in space. A more elementary planetarium was a popular feature in one of the parlors of the old house. The 40-foot dome makes a fine counterpoint to the picturesque silhouette of the Victorian mansion's roof.

Below all this, there is a lecture hall for an audience of 275, which also serves as a lunchroom-lounge and leads to a terrace over the park and river. An instruction wing has painting, sculpture and craft studios.

Don't move through the building too quickly; every bit as significant as what may be on display (at present, a frothy spring thing of posters, pots and posies) are the revelations and pleasures of the space itself. There is the nature of the light, often from unexpected sources; the placement of glass for views and reflections of the old building and river so that the impact of both is played for full theatrical effectiveness; the quality of design detail.

*

One high window reveals sky and the Trevor tower from the bottom of the exhibition well. A glass-sided connecting ramp between the new building and the Victorian house joins what was a parlor window to a spectacular river vista at the end of the link, before turning one politely toward the new spaces, across a sculpture court that is also a river-viewing platform.

This is a direct experience of what art and culture are about, and by natural extension, environment. Far more important than exposure to works of art (heresy, if you will) is exposure to the sensitive relationships of the buildings and their setting and uses, as something understood and controlled by the sensibilities of man. Structural pollution wastes the land as surely as water pollution defiles the river. We know many ways to destroy.

There are more masterpieces in the museums a half hour to the south than anyone can absorb. But if this basic lesson of environmental beauty and utility can be learned, the community museum has done a major job.

*

Architecturally, there are shades of Paul Rudolph here, and if one can breathe the hated name, of the Yale Art and Architecture Building. Whatever the debacle at Yale, the devices — surprise views, transparency and voids where solidity is expected, light treated almost as plastically as form—work well for the museum. The old building, by careful contrast, gains new drama for its Eastlakian woodwork of ebony and birdseye maple being rescued from institutional remodeling. Someone must have a set of Victorian chandeliers that needs a home.

The next show, this summer, will be a space travel exhibition lent by NASA. But it really doesn't matter. This is a nice place to visit (Call 914-964-4550 for hours and directions) for anyone who likes the proper uses of art and nature and the present and the past. It celebrates the happy marriage of contemporary excellence and the Victorian esthetic that have been mutually motel-mutilated along the Hudson now.