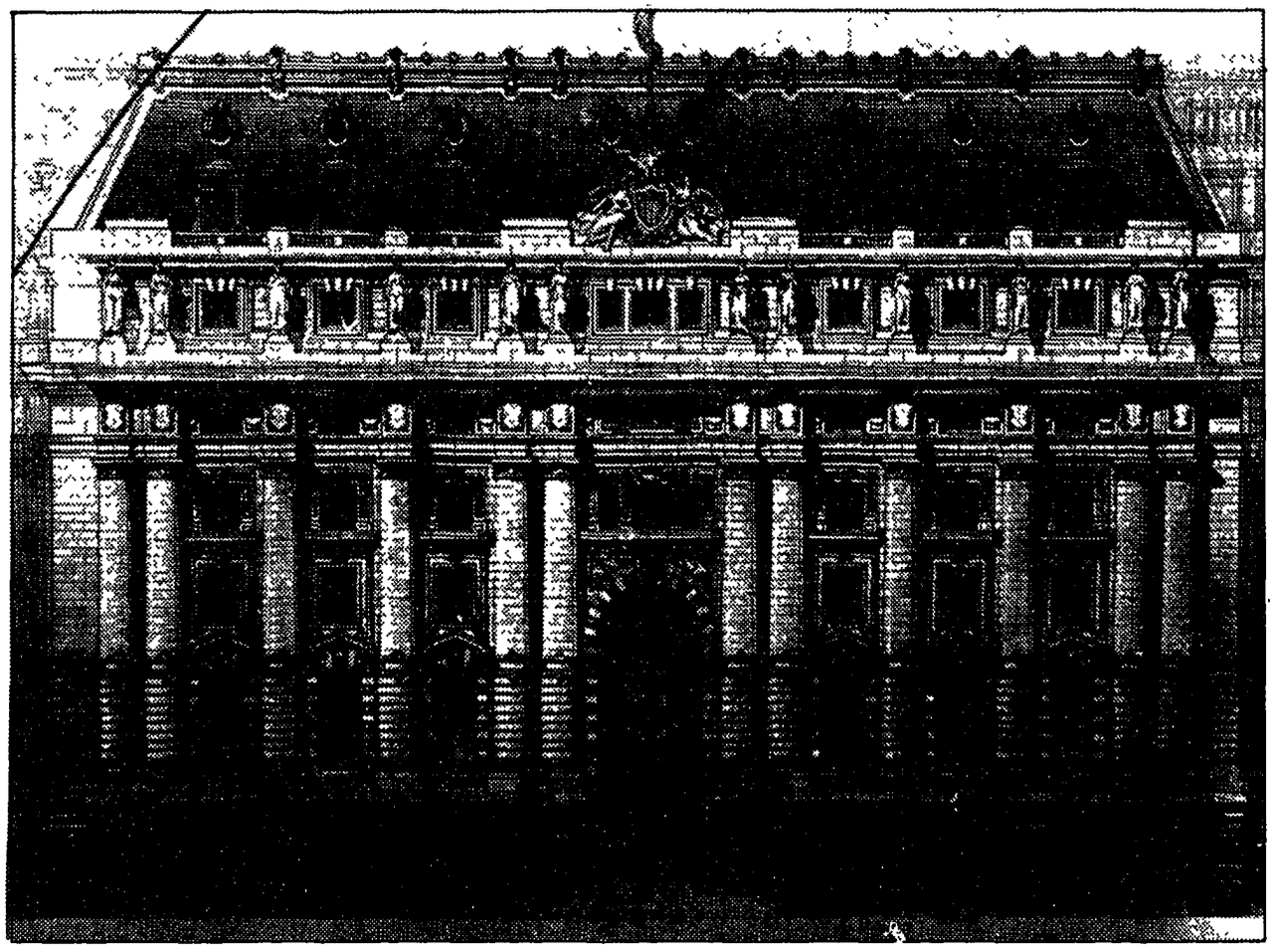
ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE



The Old Custom House at Bowling Green, which will be restored and remodeled for Federal offices—"Acoustics, light and flexibility have been the chief concerns."

TREASURES OF MOMA—Nearly 130 works from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, which currently houses the Picasso exhibition, are on loan to the Brooklyn Museum, including, above, Richard Lindner's "The Meeting."

An Enlightened Plan for Converting the Custom House

It is almost seven years since the United States Customs Service moved out of the Old Custom House at Bowling Green to new offices in the World Trade Center. Since then, a reuse for the old building has been sought. For those who are familiar with this distinguished New York landmark and have followed its fortunes, we offer a progress report. For those who do not know it, we recommend a trip to the Battery on one of these fine days to see this turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts monument in which everything that is not classical is nautical, and no expense or effort was spared for design, structure or embellishment.

The good news is that the Federal Government, which owns the building, has decided to restore and remodel it for Federal offices. This sensible and desirable action is in line with a policy established in recent years by the General Services Administration, the agency in charge of all Federal construction and properties. This policy gives a higher priority to the reuse of the Government's older, and often superior structures for its own space needs than to renting commercially or building anew.

Like many other good things, that policy is being threatened now. The present Administration has a short memory of earlier policies which habitually demolished landmarks for parking lots, as well as shortsighted accounting practices that fail to weigh in the price of the destruction of civic art and amenity with the cost of new construction — quite aside from the proven savings of a well-done rehabilitation.

(A footnote: The construction scandals that have recently rocked the General Services Administration will not be corrected by changing good policies to bad. The opportunities for corruption that feed routinely on the traditional pork barrel of new projects are reduced by the kind of restoration that requires qualified and specialized practitioners rather than the usual party friends and hacks. By questioning landmark use, the Federal "watchdogs" are undoing lessons learned at a high price.)

But back to the good news. While G.S.A. was embarked on its enlightened course, encouraged by its recent administrator, Jay Solomon, who left when the scandals that predated his tenure broke, the case of Old Custom House was resolved. The building and the issue of its survival have been kept alive by the excellent efforts of the New York Landmarks Conservancy and the Custom House Institute, a private group of influential citizens formed to find a way to preserve it. Both the national and regional G.S.A. offices have been patient and helpful during the process.

A scheme based on the transferal of the Custom House to the city for commercial purposes was tested and found unfeasible in its lower Manhattan location. Mr. Solomon then decreed that the Federal Government should keep the handsome and substantial 1907 structure and convert it to offices for its own use.

The next decision, also an exemplary one, was to hold a competition for the best restoration and reuse plan. This was a particularly appropriate touch, because the Custom House was itself the result of a competition, won by the architect Cass Gilbert, who went on to design the Woolworth building and other early New York skyscrapers.

The present competition went through three stages. More than 50 firms entered the first stage, a number whittled down to eight for the second stage and finally reduced to three. The finalists were each given $67,000 for detailed presentations of proposed solutions and cost estimates — work that was beautifully executed at a considerably higher cost to the participants. ("You don't count, on a project like this one," one of them says.)

'The Custom House conversion must be a practical reuse before it is anything else.'

The competition was extremely slow-moving, with a delay of a year, from 1978 to 1979, when nothing happened at all. In January of this year, the firms of Marcel Breuer Associates, James Stewart Polshek and Associates, Stewart Daniel Hoban and Associates and Goldman-Sokolow-Copland were designated as the joint venture architects for the restoration and conversion. The competition procedure was demonstrably successful; it produced excellent architects and excellent results.

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An Enlightened Plan

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The program has two parts. The old offices are to be transformed into updated working floors, and the Custom House's most dramatic architectural features — the huge, oval rotunda with its Beaux Arts details and now-nostalgic Reginald Marsh murals added by the W.P.A. program in the 1930's, and its marble-enriched entrance and stairs of palatial scale and detail — are to be restored to their original splendor.

In accordance with another enlightened building practice recently enacted into Federal law, 10 percent of Government office structures must now be given over to public, rather than Government, uses, an innovation meant to eliminate their uniformly lifeless aspect. By a fortuitous coincidence, the Custom House's spectacular central spaces make up just about 10 percent of its total area. It was understood that these architectural features were to fill this public need, and an important part of the assignment was to suggest appropriate uses.

In addition, the program called for an auditorium to serve both Federal and public functions, and all currently required Government standards, such as energy conservation and access for the handicapped, were to be met. Underlying everything was the assumption that the architectural integrity of the building would be kept.

The winners have come up with an admirable architectural solution. They have rejected commercial functions for the public space because of the earlier, discouraging studies and the difficulties of servicing them on this site. Their plan is to restore the rotunda and the great hall in a careful, accurate and non-specific way that would be suitable for a number of institutional possibilities, including a branch library or museum.

That is probably bad news for the Museum of the American Indian, which has had pilot displays in the Custom House, and has been seriously interested in it as a permanent home. Its collections require more room than is available in the public portions of the building, able to house only a very small museum or a branch display.

To accommodate larger collections would mean cutting back on the offices, and it is essential that a maximum amount of usable office space be provided. This is the realistic justification of the restoration, as well as the guarantee of the structure's future viability. The priorities are clear: the Custom House conversion must be a practical reuse in functional and economic terms before it is anything else, or it will not support preservation on a permanent basis. The Federal bureauracy is, after all, the client to be satisfied. The flexible potential of the restored public spaces can be an asset rather than a liability. The job should not be hung up on the problem of a particular institutional user now.

The architects rejected one idea that has been much bandied-about — cutting out the floor of the rotunda down to basement level to create spectacular height to the dome. They felt, quite correctly, that this would be destructive of the original design.

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Instead, they have devised a way to add to the rotunda space ingeniously, in a way that does not substantially change its character. The rotunda itself is free-standing, separated from the enclosing, U-shaped office wings by a kind of blind outdoor alley, a space that has acted only as a collector of refuse over the years. The plan is to connect the two elements with a continuation of the floor and a glass roof. This encircles the rotunda with an additional skylit court. The great rotunda skylight, covered with tar during World War II, will be cleaned and restored. The new auditorium is to be inserted below the rotunda at basement level.

Circulation has been worked out just as ingeniously. At no point are the most important architectural elements — rotunda, stairs and great hall — either cut off from the public or denied to the office workers; the two main levels are shared by all. Entrances on the street below the formal stair lead directly to an elevator lobby that will separate most of the office traffic from the public. Only where necessary, and usually because of differences in office hours, will ornamental gates be added to close off stairs on upper floors.

The architects have also rejected the idea of stripping out those office floors for completely new interiors. The more they walked the 15-foot-high, marble-walled, cornice-lined corridors, the less expendable they seemed. Instead of dropping the ceilings, they will be used as reflectors for lights below. Acoustics, light and flexibility have been the chief concerns.

The entire scheme is most laudibly based on minimum architectural intervention. At the same time, it is distinguished by a sensitive analysis of user needs and conversion possibilities. The merits of the solution are in the excellent planning and the discreet creativity of such suggestions as the rescue of the unused space surrounding the rotunda for a carefully related new feature.

It would be nice to be able to say that this admirable plan is now rolling merrily ahead. But in the six months since it was accepted not even a draft agreement has been signed with the Federal Government, and that is only the first step of a bureaucratic process of submissions, audits and approvals that are needed to proceed.

At current inflation rates, the estimated project cost of $25 million is escalating $250,000 a month — a high and unnecessary price to pay for lack of action. That alone, even without political uncertainties, could jeopardize this hard-won victory. Behind Daniel Chester French's statues of the Four Continents, the Tennessee marble figures of the ancient and modern seafaring nations, and the sculptured masks of the races of man, the building is quietly deteriorating. The Old Custom House is almost, but not quite, home. ■