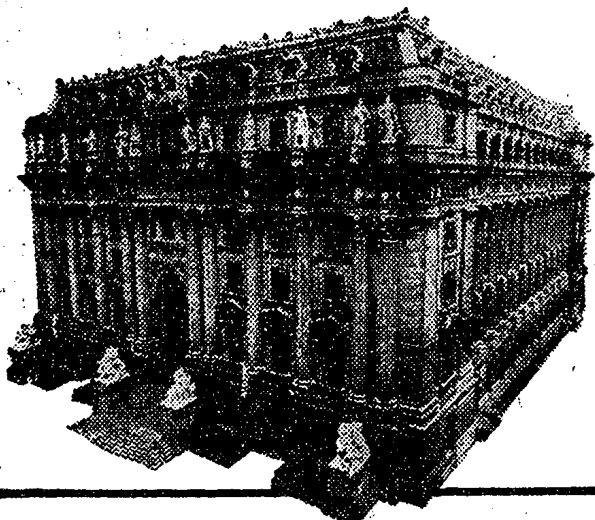


New Custom House: Modern, Functional, No Match for the Old: The ...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Oct 4, 1973; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times

pg. 47



New Custom House: Modern, Functional, No Match for the Old

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A funny thing happened on the way to the new Custom House at the World Trade Center. Public architecture declined

An
Appraisal

and fell. On Oct. 19 at 2 P.M. the United States Custom Service will dedicate its new building, a seven-story glass and aluminum structure flanking the Trade Center's North Tower, part of the complex designed by Minoru Yamasaki and Associates and Emory Roth and Sons. The new offices, a vast functional improvement over the old ones at Bowling Green, will consist of efficient, standardized accommodations with eight-foot ceilings and all the latest me-

chanical comforts and conveniences. It will also be a paradigm of modern commercial and institutional blandness.

Sixty-six years ago at Bowling Green, the Customs Service moved into its brand new Custom House designed by Cass Gilbert. The 1907 structure, about to be abandoned, is a fruitcake of Maine granite, a potpourri of marbles, congeries of statuary. Comparison of the two buildings staggers the sensibilities. It is an exercise in cultural shock.

The new building, like the whole Trade Center group including the giant twin towers, is an exercise in design by reduction. This is partly the fault of the times, when soaring construction costs have led to cheapness by choice and necessity, and

partly because of current building systems, which substitute the technology of the neutral grid for solid, stylish stonework.

But it is more the fault of the architect, who has trivialized the inherent drama of modern engineering, and nullified the legitimate and powerful esthetic that is its true effect. He has succeeded in making some of the biggest buildings in the world ordinary and inconsequential.

The old building is richly embellished with references to the sea. Its stone and wood carvings, metal grills and plaster trim flaunt dolphins, seashells, ships' prows, rudders, masts and waves.

The Splendor Remains

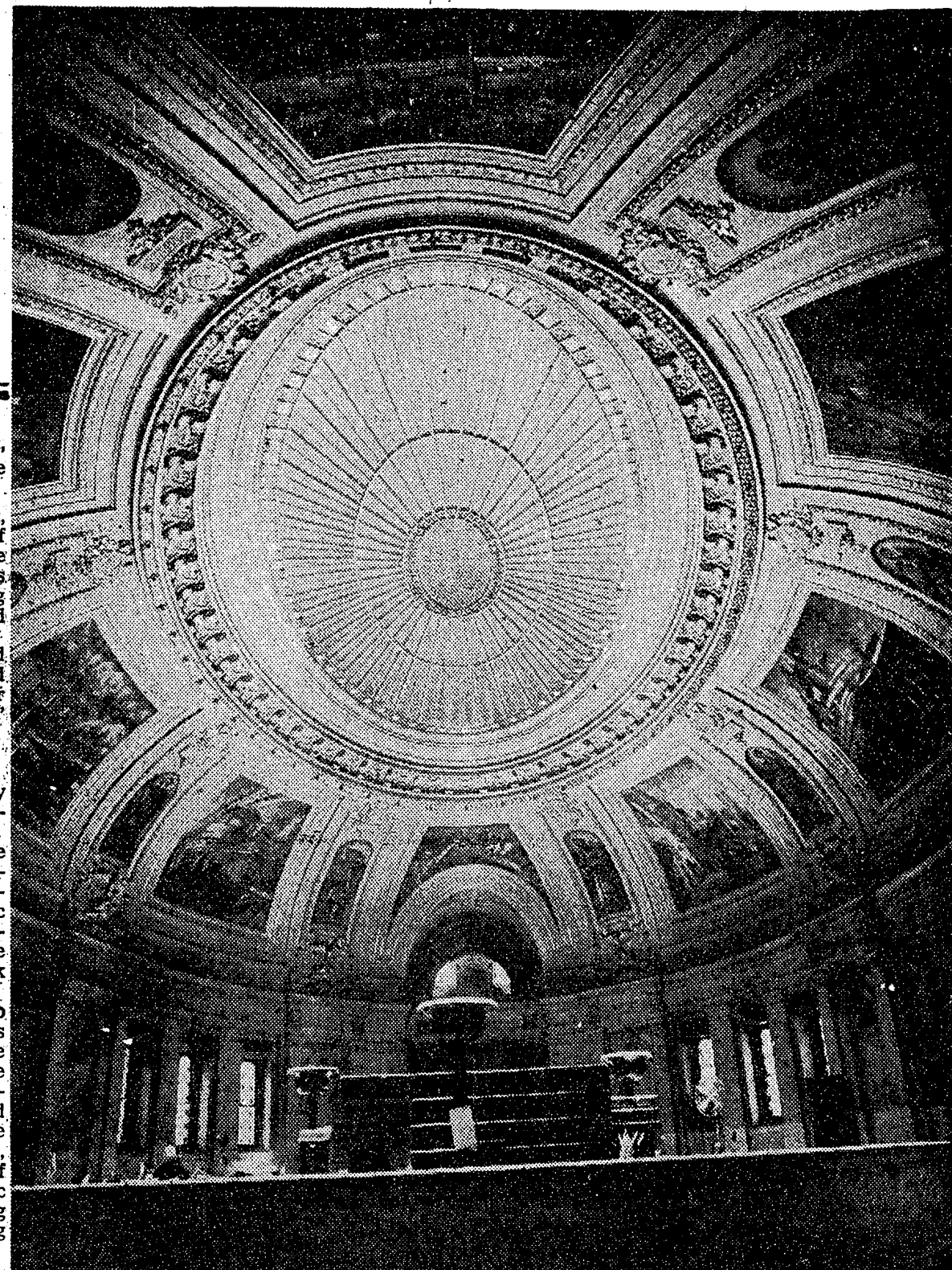
What is not nautical is classical. Forty giant columns girdle the building's substantial and ornate stone mass.

There are masks of Mercury and the keystones of the elaborately framed windows are carved heads of the races of mankind. Tennessee marble figures in the attic represent the ancient and modern seafaring powers. Four heroic statues of the continents by Daniel Chester French flank the front.

None of this splendor can be moved to the new building's functional, featureless grid, or to the stock spaces inside. The Customs Service cannot take along the huge, hanging bronze lanterns of the soaring grand hall with its rose, green and cream marbles, nor can the service remove the Reginald Marsh murals from the vast, gloomy Rotunda that depict the stages of arrival of a ship in port, painted as a Public Works project 30 years after the building was completed. (Marsh received something like \$90 a month for the job.)

But some things will be moved speci-

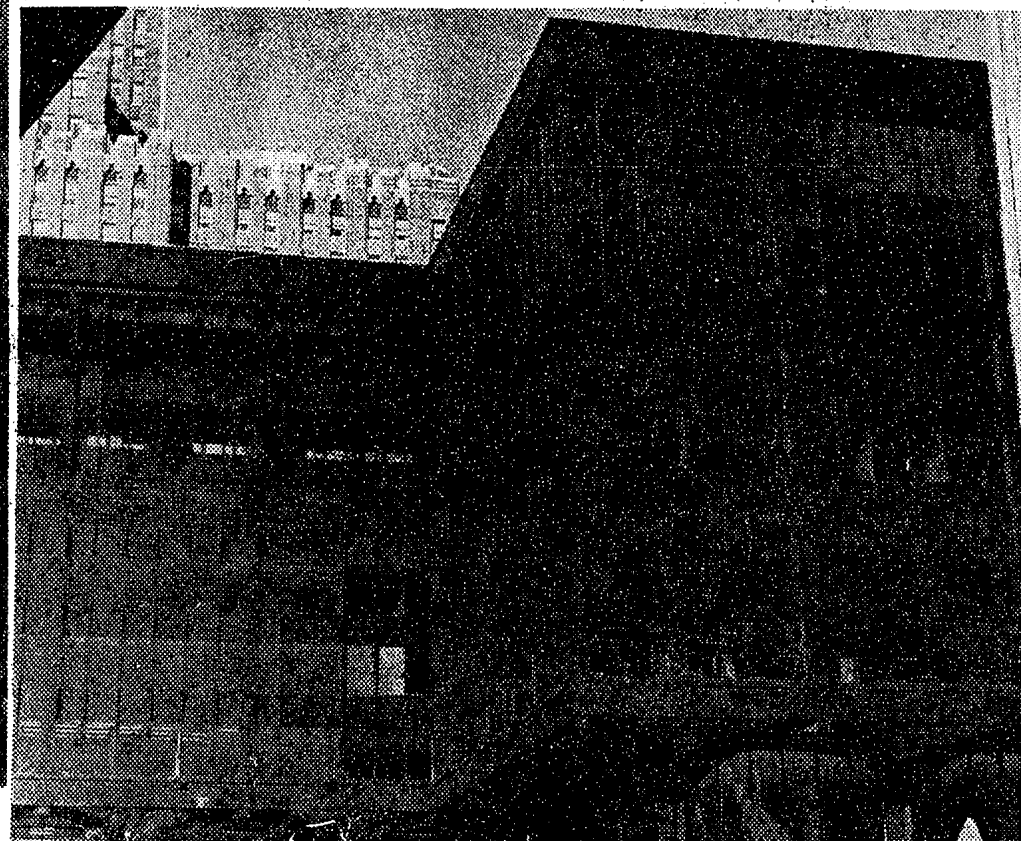
Continued on Page 90, Column 1



Murals in the Rotunda, like other decorations in the old building, have nautical themes



The statuary on the old Custom House on Bowling Green will not be moved to the new one, the aluminum and glass structure, right, in the World Trade Center.



Institutional Blandness In New Custom House

Continued From Page 47

ally, a few of the 1907 and earlier Custom House furnishings. Before Bowling Green, the Service occupied the even more distinguished Greek Revival Merchants' Exchange by Isaiah Rogers on Wall Street. In 1906 Montgomery Schuyler, the great critic, temporized about the new building because he liked the old one better. But he called the new one a valuable civic possession and a work of distinction.

What will go along to the Trade Center are massive classical bookcases from the Merchants' Exchange, chairs from the original United States Appraiser's office that preceded the Customs Court, portraits of 16 former collectors including Chester A. Arthur and Theodore Roosevelt, miscellaneous tables and sofas and some wall sconces.

Barrel-Vault Ceiling

Their present setting is the office of Fred R. Boyett, Regional Commissioner, with its barrel-vault ceiling, fluted pilasters and mahogany doors. Their new setting will be a "ceremonial" room in the new building, but the 8-foot 2-inch ceiling—a whole two inches higher than the office ceilings—will not hold the crystal chandelier that hangs close to that length at the center of the old room; it would touch the floor.

Mr. Boyett's office is part of a main-floor suite designed for the Secretary of State. It includes a coffered and gilded ceiling with shell and ribbon motifs, a carved wooden screen and walls and an unused, monumental stone fireplace. The new building has photolabs, projection and screening rooms and a pistol range.

"Our people will be more comfortable," Mr. Boyett says. "They don't all have offices like this one. We need room for training programs and employe cafeterias and lounges that we don't have now. The Customs operation has grown and changed radically."

"But if I'd had my say 10 years ago," Mr. Boyett adds, "we'd have used the \$36-million we're putting into the new building to remodel this one and make it the show Custom House of the world."

A Preservation Movement

The cost in 1907 was \$5,130,000 for the building and \$2½-million for the land. It stands where the original Fort Amsterdam was built, probably the most historic spot in Lower Manhattan.

Not long ago it would have been looked on only as one of the city's most valuable pieces of real estate and its scraps and shards would have been carted off to Seacausus like Penn Station in favor of a profitable, die-stamped tower. Today, a strong preservation movement is getting under way.

The city, through its Landmarks Preservation Commission and Office of Lower Manhattan Development, the Federal Government, through the General Services Administration, which owns the property and has the power of transferral, and the leaders of the downtown business community, are all interested in saving the structure and finding new uses for it. It is an officially designated New York landmark, and a listed building on the National Register.

Following a preliminary report by the Office of Lower Manhattan Development, the preservation effort has started in earnest with a \$40,000 feasibility study to determine possible future uses and costs of renovation and operation. The money, raised privately, is being administered by the newly formed New York Landmarks Conservancy.

Committee Sponsors

A Custom House Committee has been set up, headed by James Parton, founder of American Heritage publications, to carry out the study. Among the sponsors are Hoyt Ammidon, David Rockefeller, Robert W. Sarnoff, Whitney North Seymour Sr. and Mayor Lindsay.

A group of expert advisers, including I. M. Pei, the architect, Richard Ravitch, one of the city's most progressive builders, and Cushman and Wakefield, experts on the realty market, is contributing its services.

The objective of the study is to find a mix of cultural, community and commercial uses for the building that will bring in enough operating income to make it self-supporting. Nobody wants, or can afford, a white elephant.

To do this, however, it is estimated that initial public grants and private donations of \$10-million to \$15-million will be needed. This "front money" would be used for restoration and conversion, from cleaning to new mechanical systems. It would eliminate mortgage and money charges so that subsequent income would be free and clear.

The sponsors and the city hope that, with the right

uses, the building could generate about \$1½-million a year. With approximately \$500,000 for maintenance and operation, \$1-million would be available for subsidized activities.

The program is still undetermined. The New York Public Library has its eye on 40,000 square feet of space, including the Rotunda, for a downtown branch, for which rental would be paid. The ground and basement floors are being considered for revenue-producing specialty shops and restaurants. There might be prestige offices above.

Problems Ahead

Some people want to see a visitor orientation center and a New York exhibit. Others are interested in branch museums. Everyone envisions the building as a future cultural resource for a residential community of almost 125,000, now in the planning stage for Battery Park City and Manhattan Landing.

In spite of dust and drafts and the gloom resulting from Federal economy waves that have removed light bulbs from bronze ceiling fixtures

that illumined frescoed walls, the departing occupants express sentiment and concern.

There are serious legal and financial problems ahead. But the sponsors point out that other cities, such as Boston with its successful remodeling of its Old City

Hall, have already shown the way. Customs may have entered the age of jet transport and the functional esthetic, but you just can't get those dolphins, masts, rudders, sails, winged wheels and cosmic connotations of commercial glory any more.