

# New York Style

The Old Custom House at Battery Park opened for the Bicentennial with a trumpet flourish and a cleaning of statuary. The holiday crowds flanked Daniel Chester French's Four Continents and climbed the noble entrance stair to watch Op Sail; the evening fireworks gilded the freshly washed white marble facade.

Inside, other richly colored marbles and mosaics glowed in halls of triumphal scale, also freshly cleaned; and the Rotunda soared to Reginald Marsh's newly-lit murals of a ship entering New York harbor—immortal W.P.A. vignettes of Moran tugs and a starlet shipboard interview. (Legend says it's Greta Garbo.)

But this was more than a gala exercise in nostalgia. The refurbishing of Cass Gilbert's regally splendid 1907 Beaux Arts structure (abandoned when the Customs Service moved to the World Trade Center) was a joint effort of the Federal General Services Administration, the New York Landmarks Conservancy and the Custom House Institute—all trying to find a way to keep the building alive. The reopening to the public is temporary—merely an advertisement, for the duration of the summer, of the quality of the landmark and the need for new users of its empty upper floors.

Now that the tall ships and the visitors are gone, the Custom House and Lower Manhattan are still an urban spectacular, though the exciting upward sweep of the city as it used to be seen from the harbor is now largely lost to those grossly brutal new skyscrapers along the East River and their ticky-tacky checkerboard neighbors inland. Still, they do not entirely obscure the romantic spires and towers of 50 years ago; there are small, shadowed streets and a few low brick buildings to mark another century or two.

New York, surprisingly, is no longer young—with its sharp glass blocks rising above sculptured classical grandeur from shabby pot-holed streets—but it manages to sustain its style.