ARCHITECTURE VIEW: A TEMPLE OF JUSTICE THAT INSPIRES

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ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Temple Of Justice That Inspires

"The public building in which I worked a greater portion of my life than any other was the Appellate Division Courthouse on Madison Square," writes Charles D. Breitel, Chief Judge of the New York State Court of Appeals, in a foreword to the catalogue of an exhibition of the Courthouse, called "Temple of Justice," at the House of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York (42 West 44th Street, through Aug. 5).

Designed and built by James Brown Lord from 1896 to 1900, the Appellate Division Courthouse is a small white marble palace at Madison Avenue and 25th Street—a compendium of classical culture backed up against the featureless glass facade of a recent office tower. Its facade offers porches and pediments, and its roof is rimmed with lifesize sculptured figures like a fancy wedding cake.

"There is no doubt that man's physical surroundings are significant and often crucial to the stimulation and inspiration which a mind needs to do its work," Justice Breitel adds. To which one would like to say the legal equivalent of Amen. Perhaps that is what Justice Breitel did recently in the opinion he wrote for the Court of Appeals upholding the landmark designation of Grand Central Terminal.

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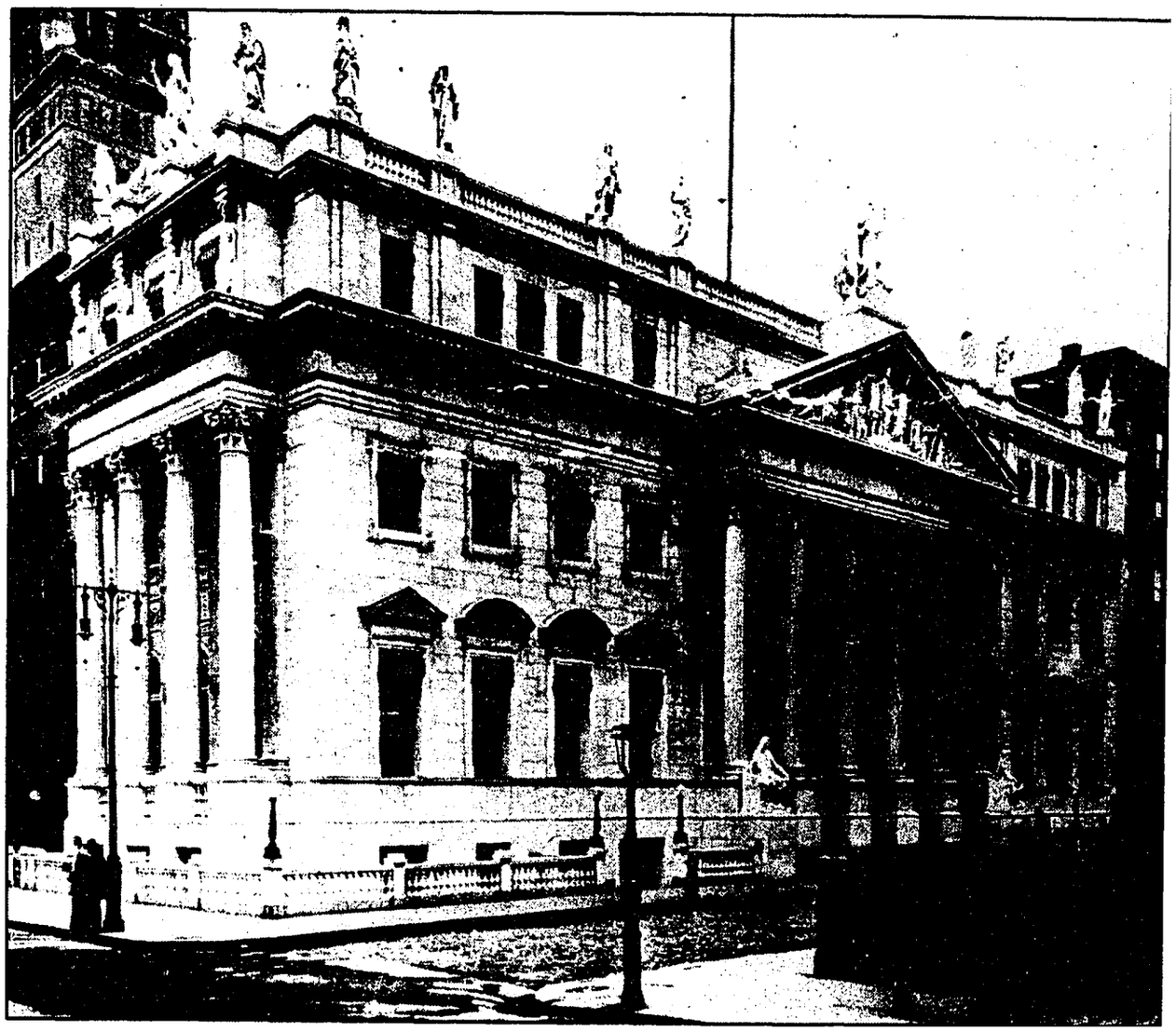
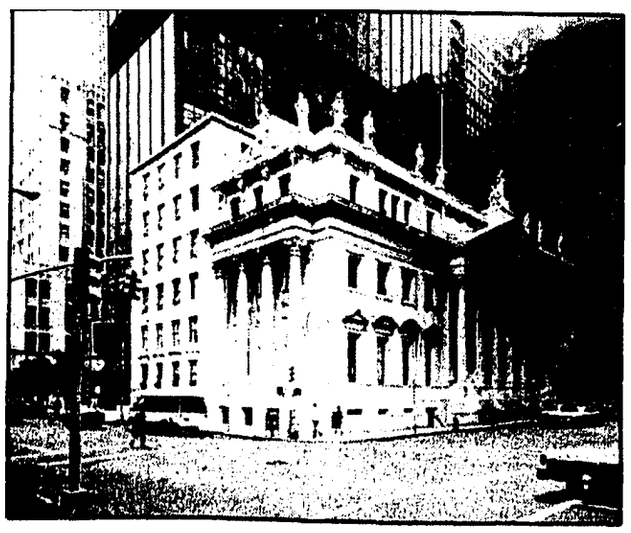
The case was decided on highly technical grounds of hardship definition and the role of society and the private owner in creating the value of landmark property. But one has the feeling, or at least the hope, that the ambience and quality of the extraordinarily rich and beautiful Appellate Division Courthouse (where, incidentally, the original lower court decision that knocked down the city's Grand Central designation was reversed, preceding the final appeal that reaffirmed its landmark status) was a conditioning factor that had something to do with the outcome.

I have a feeling that such a decision might never have come out of a court whose judges have had their professional and architectural experience in those gimcrack new courthouses with splitting walls, peeling veneer and cheap, grim courtrooms that insult human and environmental dignity, to say nothing of the dignity of the law. There are no values or aspirations expressed in those buildings except pork-barrel-on-the-cheap. They could never "stimulate or inspire" the minds of anyone at all.

The exhibition of the Appellate Division Courthouse, co-sponsored by the Bar Association and the Architectural League of New York and directed by Jane Gregory Rubin and Nancy Stout, stimulates and inspires one to rush right down to Madison Square to see the actual building. The show's great virtue is that it is a scholarly teaser for the real thing, which is immediately available. However, it might be a good idea to check when the courtroom is open to the public during these summer months.





The Appellate Division Courthouse, then (top) and now (below)

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It is also particularly appropriate that the display is in the Bar Association building, because this, too, is a classical landmark of the period, built in 1895 by Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz. The exhibition is small and handsomely installed. There are photographs of the Courthouse at the time it was completed in 1900, original drawings, oils and models for some of the murals and sculpture by Edwin Blashfield, Kenyon Cox and Daniel Chester French, from the galaxy of works with which the Courthouse is so richly endowed, and a selection of ornate and somber dark oak furniture complete with lions and griffins.

Until recently, the Appellate Division Courthouse had to be a secret addiction, like hidden candy, among those loyal to the modernist discipline. Now it is not only respectable to enjoy its elaborate academic detail (as classicists like Henry Hope Reed Jr. always have), but a taste for its bourgeois splendors makes one sort of avant-garde. This is one more exercise in revisionist art history.

In 1900, this was an extremely stylish building—although the style was one for which two subsequent generations either lost or renounced an appreciative eye. Its gleaming white marble facade, colonnaded porches and elaborate statuary owed much to the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, where Beaux Arts classicism reigned in snowy plaster.

The route through the Fair came out of Paris and Palladio for a palatial turn-of-the-century manner in the United States that was considerably drier, whiter and often more carefully eclectic than what had gone before. The Appellate Division Courthouse preceded the better-known New York examples of the Custom House, Penn Station and the 42d Street Library. There is also a strong, familial Palladian relationship to the earlier Tweed Courthouse, a still underappreciated landmark that is fighting for survival.

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The Appellate Division Courthouse was an extraordinary structure in many ways. Its arts and decoration are uniquely devoted to the iconography and symbols of the law. Nearly one third of the construction budget of $750,000 was for works of art by 16 sculptors and 12 painters who worked with the architect, James Brown Lord, from the start. All of the furnishings and equipment were custom designed. The architect was chosen by the judges of the Appellate Division, who enjoyed a unique autonomy in the commissioning and management of their building—and still do.

Fortunately, the building is in a good state of preservation. Some restoring and remodeling was done in the 1950's, when an extension was built. At that time the courtroom's original lighting fixtures were replaced (badly) and sconces removed (unpardonably), and standard new lighting was added with dropped ceilings and air-conditioning in clerical and office areas, but generally the architects were concerned with preservation.

Maintenance is now in the hands of George Weinschenk of the Courthouse staff, who patiently redowels the original wood furniture, which is increasingly in demand among the judges, restrings crystal lights and supervises the restoration of marble walls and colored glass windows, as well as dealing with crises of dry rot (humidity control is badly needed), eroded steel and water leaks.

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The interiors, with their veined gold marble and carved and gilded ceilings, should be seen, not described. The lawyers' coatroom has oak fixtures with rows of brass top-hat hooks, under the eye of winged mermaids. The courtroom is covered with a domed skylight of colored glass and features a justices' bench that is a carved reredos of shell panels and columns. The Blashfield and Cox murals are elegantly fashionable, their colors freshly cleaned.

The exhibition has been funded by the New York State Council on the Arts, the Joe and Emily Lowe Foundation, the Samuel Rubin Foundation and the New York City Bar Association. One thing that can be seen best in the show is the small-scale group of Daniel Chester French's figures of Justice, Power and Study for the center top of the building, which has the grace of the handmade plaster model.

However, anyone who is lucky enough to get up to the roof overlooking Madison Square Park will also be in the company of Zoroaster, Alfred the Great, Louis IX, Justinian, Solon, Manu and other givers of the law. (Mohammed has been missing since the 1950's.) You can't get in with a better crowd, artistically and iconographically, than that. ■