ARCHITECTURE VIEW: UPDATING LANDMARKS CON AMORE
Huxtable, Ada Louise
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Updating Landmarks Con Amore

To appraise a building objectively requires detachment, and the two structures I am about to discuss are ones to which I am attached in a very special way; therefore this will be a subjective report. Both buildings—the Avery Architectural Library at Columbia University and the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University—were home to me for many years. In retrospect, those were wonderful years when the sheer, heady pursuit of knowledge and the luxury of total immersion in the arts was its own justification and end. How is one to be objective about the privilege of associating with great minds and great books? How to cast a cool eye on places that were the source of revelation and discovery?

My years of graduate study at the institute were spent in the old building, the former Warburg house at 17 East 80th Street; since 1958 the institute has occupied the far more sumptuous Duke Mansion at 1 East 78th Street. For me, seminars, boiserie and old plumbing are synonymous.

The years I spent at Avery were passed in the quiet alcoves of its spacious Beaux Arts reading room, or in the dusty basement with periodicals and the ghosts of 19th-century architects. In winter, the basement heat was turned off to keep the archives from crumbling, and before a generous donor added air-conditioning and humidity control, I worked in a coat and woolen gloves until my fingers were too stiff to turn the pages.

Things have changed. For the better, of course. Avery Library, founded with 2,000 volumes in 1890 and probably the greatest architecture library today, has been housed since 1912 in the handsome structure that Charles Follen McKim designed for it on the Columbia campus. The extension that has just been completed contains the architecture library (now 100,000 volumes) and its drawing collections, consolidated with Columbia's fine arts library. It also provides more space for the School of Architecture and Planning, which shares the Avery building.

The Institute of Fine Arts has partially restored and partially remodeled the palatial landmark that was generously given to the school by Mrs. James B. Duke and Doris Duke almost 20 years ago. (For a passage-of-time note, the attractive original conversion was done by the then-shocking young architect, Robert Venturi, with Cope and Lippincott.) The house has been replanned for a much larger fine arts library and student body.

Both institutions faced the dilemma of how to make a landmark of exceptional quality (they were built in the same year, 1912), accommodate growth and serve today's needs. Avery solved this by constructing a connecting new building totally underground. The institute has rehabilitated Horace Trumbauer's Franco-American palace for an adaptive institutional use, rather than as a restored house-museum. Both procedures presented great problems of sensitivity and transition.

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The Avery extension has been designed by Alexander Kouzmanoff, an architect who is also a professor in the architecture school, working with the Avery librarian, Adolph Placzek. It is an example of Columbia's belated new policy of using its own architectural talents, an innovation for which credit must go to the Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning, James Stewart Polshek, and the campus architect, Dean Telfer, after a long era of clubfooted construction that is beginning to look particularly painful by contrast with the new work.

There are many cooks in a project of this sort, and the way is strewn with conflicts and budget cuts. But the result is nothing less than magic. By burrowing 30 feet under the courtyard that unites the rear of Avery with the rather fussy neo-Georgian facades of Schermerhorn and Fayerweather Halls and the back side of St. Paul's chapel, and adding a sub-sidewalk carpenter shop, it has been possible to create 28,000 square feet on two underground levels. This includes a new 80-by-155-foot main reading room and reference service center, offices, stacks, a rare book room, a library seminar room, classrooms for the architecture school, an exhibition space and two auditoriums.

The old and new reading rooms are connected by a central stair, on axis with the entrance. Two large skylights, one over the stairs, are augmented by a very pleasant level and mix of artificial light; this, plus a ceiling that is raised in its central section in line with the skylight and stairs, dispels any sense of the subterranean.

The new building's virtues are in the architect's skillful arrangements and uses of space, rather than in any claims to high style. These are not showy skills, but the results are no less outstanding. An asymmetrical plan is disposed within a large open area, and small lounges are arranged where natural light makes them most inviting. At the rear, both levels are opened to the second skylight; one of the lounges overlooks a daylit exhibition gallery below. The neat, intimate auditorium is attractive and serviceable.

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Battling bottom-line economies of materials and fittings, the architect cut arches out of gypsum board to frame a stair to the lower level and curved a classroom wall for a simple geometry. Red quarry tile, off-white walls, and bright vertical stripes and quiet graphics make for a kind of quality beyond the means at hand. It is architecture *con amore*—the result of 20 years of hoping and scheming, five years of planning, and three years of building.

Avery now offers, as Mr. Placzek points out, anything from a pamphlet on solar heating to the first incunabulum on architecture—the 1485 treatise by Leon Battista Alberti. Not the least of my memories is having this treasure, or one of the 16th-century editions of Palladio's four books on architecture, placed in my hands. Holding Avery's unpublished Serlio manuscript of the 1540's, one feels the immediacy of art; there is nothing between the eye and Serlio's own ink-line and pastel washes except four centuries linked by his undimmed intent. Another passage-of-time note: The original documents of the modern movement have now joined Alberti and Serlio in Avery's unparalleled rare book collection.

It would be nice to stop there. But an essential element is still missing. The original reading room, McKim's superb 50-by-155-foot space with its 20-foot-high coffered ceiling, remains in shadowed gloom. It has become no more than a passageway to the stairs and the new extension now that one is drawn there by the focus of light and space below. What is desperately needed is a way of lighting the old room to define its elegant volume and detail, to establish transition, emphasis and balance. This is a delicate and critical matter. The reading tables should be returned to their original position in the alcoves, and some handsome, well-lit cases provided for a dramatic, central display of selections from Avery's still totally invisible book and drawing treasures. The design job is not yet done, and a patron is needed to finish it.

Downtown, the Institute of Fine Arts has carried out an equivalent act of magic: the fitting of the 80,000-volume Stephen Chan fine-arts library into a beautiful architectural Procrustean bed. Richard Foster, the architect, has solved the problem by inserting a steel-deck balcony within the 17-foot ceilings of the second floor, weaving it through the halls and service spaces, leaving most of the reconditioned rooms for reading and study. The $1.2 million project has been aided by John L. Loeb and the Hagop Kevorkian Fund.

This is, on the whole, exemplary adaptive use, marked, like the Avery job, by notable professional skill. For the building's function, however, certain compromises had to be made, such as the downlights that have been installed in the very high ceilings to create a general working illumination. Something is needed—perhaps table-level lamps to help restore scale to these rooms and provide some pleasant light modulation. The effect now is coolly and respectfully institutional. But the boiserie glows, the hardware shines, the ballroom chandeliers glitter and the rug can still be rolled back from the original hardwood floor if the occasion arises. What better cause for celebration? ■