

Architecture

# Library As Friend

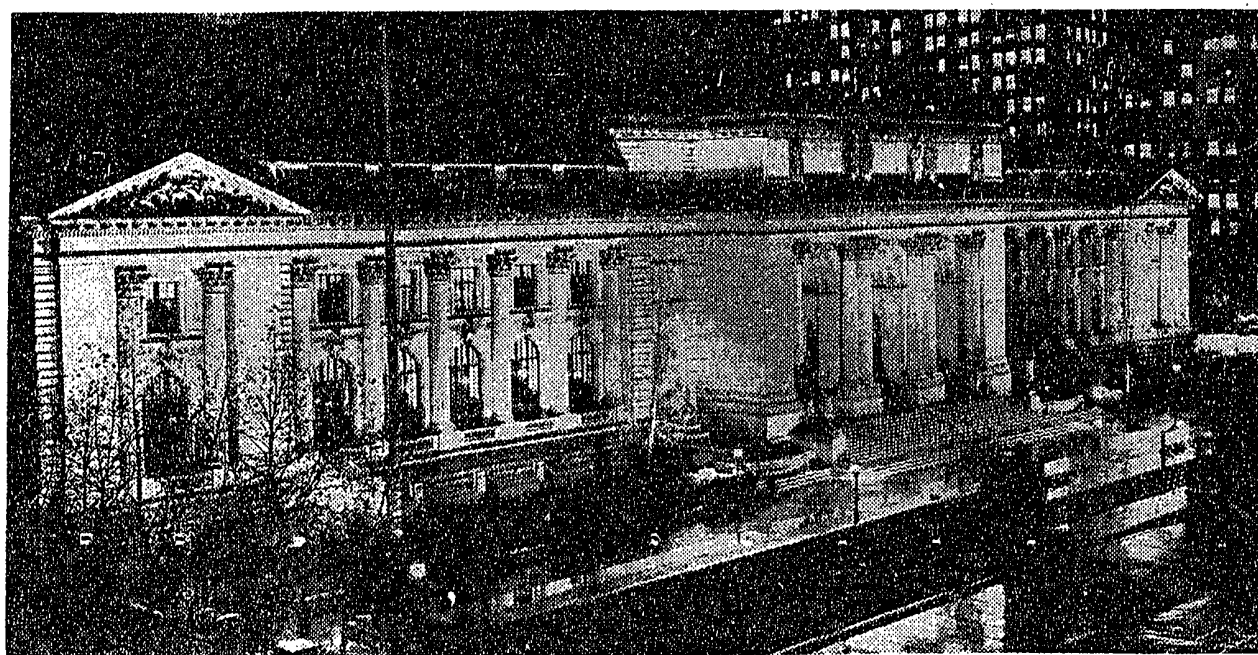
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

I HAVE had two continuing love affairs with Beaux Arts buildings in New York, the Metropolitan Museum and the Forty-Second Street Library. Both institutions have opened doors to the discovery of the wonders and beauties of the universe for me as a child and an adult, something the big city is supposed to do—and does.

High school, college, graduate work and professional research have led me to the library's elegant French classical pile of Vermont marble on Fifth Avenue, past Mr. E. C. Potter's lions of 1911, through the Corinthian columns of the triple-vaulted entrance and the rich, bronze doors to the noble foyer, up the monumental stairs into the half-acre vastnesses of the reading rooms as gently murmurous as trees by the sea.

One can, of course, rise directly to the treasures of the third floor by elevator, now efficiently if somewhat banally automated, but I remember the open bronze cages run by autocratic ladies in sweaters on stools who took grim delight in closing the doors in your face. When you missed them, you waited, and waited, and waited. You walked, then, along corridors as wide and splendid as ballrooms lined with displays of rare prints on the way to the imposing stairs and the skylit silence of History and Genealogy and the Fine Arts.

I can do it blindfolded, but except for the section of the second floor where the addition of ugly fluorescent lighting fixtures strikes a harsh, false note, I wouldn't want to. I'd hate to miss that prime example of sentimental Victorian pictorial history by the yard, Munkacsy's Blind Milton Dictating Paradise Lost to his Daughters on the second floor landing. But it is not for nostalgia or memorabilia that I sometimes detour to Fifth Avenue. It is for substance, style and quality in a city and world that are hard put to provide such commodities today and hardly know how to evaluate them. I am not weeping for the past; I am concerned for the future.



Substance and style and a few financial problems — The New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue  
*You can't be literate or educated and non-visual at the same time*

For me, the building has always worked well. I have found it an excellent tool, and much, much more. I could not be persuaded to admire a monument that does not work, not even the beautifully detailed elegance of Carrère and Hastings's Beaux Arts masterpiece of 1902-09. That is a perfectly logical statement. No building is admirable that abuses function.

Some turn-of-the-century commentators thought the library forfeited claims to architectural greatness because its classical grandeur had been fitted to function as the designers' primary concern, with some sacrifice of approved monumental formulas. Later it was fashionable to admire only the rear of the building, where plain, vertical slit windows light the stacks and lighten the structure's mass with proto-modern simplicity. How temporal are the standards of critics!

It must be remembered that this is one of the last of the great 19th-century buildings. It was actually conceived and planned in the 1890's. Still, it has consistently filled 20th-century needs. In spite of its formal grandeur, the experience of the building is intimate and emotional. In spite of its scale, it is never cold or tiring. It is always like going home.

Alas, you can't go home again anymore on Sundays and holidays. The library is having money problems like everyone else. Today there is a cardboard sign on the bronze entrance door that says "The Library regrets that it will necessarily be closed on Sundays and Holi-

days until further notice as an economy measure." There are other economies, less noticeable. Fewer books are being purchased and conserved. Maintenance is battling with costs. What is being quietly cut back is not the conspicuous consumption of an affluent society, but its civilized and liberating foundation.

The New York Public Library receives support from two sources. The city-wide circulation system is paid for by public funds from city and state. The research collections, of which the 42d Street branch is the heart, are sustained by private funds from the Astor, Tilden and Lenox Foundation, the three sources united in 1895 to create the New York Public Library, plus gifts and annual fund-raising. A group of Friends of the Library has been formed. (If the library has been a friend to you, join.)

Operations at 42d Street have been running a steadily increasing deficit for the last ten years. The library has been forced to use capital where it can, since most funds are for restricted use or special collections, thus diminishing both capital and income. This year, a projected deficit of \$5 million has been reduced by a \$2.3-million grant from the New York State Council on the Arts. But every year does not bring such a windfall.

This year also brought the Mid-Manhattan Library, an addition across the avenue in the Arnold Constable building to increase the availability of general research and circulation material. The new facility arrived in a year of austerity

because it was put into the city's capital budget about a decade ago and has been slowly inching its way through municipal glue to realization. It represents a careful jigsaw of city, state, Federal and public and private funds.

Welcome. It is wonderful to have it. But did it have to be so depressingly ordinary in design? The trip across the street was all downhill. It makes one hope that the furniture of the mind is what really counts. I don't, of course, believe that for a minute; you can't be literate, or educated, and non-visual at the same time.

Across the street, Messrs. Carrère and Hastings keep their backs politely turned. Mr. Carrère is in bronze by Jo Davidson and Mr. Hastings is in marble by Frederick MacMonnies. Both are in niches at the foot of the north and south stairs. (Under the north stair is also one of the best small gift boutiques in New York.)

They got the commission by competition in 1897, a process that has produced some of the country's best public structures. The building was authorized by the city on the site of the old Croton Reservoir in the same year. It is city-owned and largely city-maintained with private funds filling growing gaps.

The completed structure cost \$9-million and is virtually unreproducible at any price. Pressed for a description, Mr. Hastings called it a modern building. It was meant to serve the needs of its day, he explained, by an evolutionary use of the Renaissance forms that he believed most suited the tastes

of Western man. He was rumored to be less than satisfied with the Fifth Avenue front. Some thought the building overly rich in decorative detail. That was before craftsmanship died. On weekdays, evenings, Sundays and holidays, it was to bring art and education to the people. That was before power to the people.

As urban planning, the library still suits the city remarkably well. A stepped terrace on the Fifth Avenue side offers a balustraded, tree-shaded space skillfully separated from street traffic. An "esplanade" at the rear, between the building and Bryant Park, from 40th to 42d Streets, arched over by giant trees and bordered with ivy, is one of the best and earliest examples of the block-through pedestrian passage now stressed by New York's planners. Compare this gentle monumentality and knowing humanism with the pompous aridity of the new street treatment of the library's sister Beaux Arts monument, the Metropolitan Museum. Someone should have looked 40 blocks south.

The library's white Vermont marble, cleaned in 1950 and hosed down early Sundays, is mellowing to a pale Athenian gold. "It is one building in the spring morning with the new green of the lindens," wrote David Gray in Harper's Monthly of March, 1911, "another in the autumn rain, another in the snow-suffused winter twilight, and others under the moon or the night sky, or under the low-hanging yellow mist, tinged with the city's lights." That is the enduring magic of New York.