**ARCHITECTURE VIEW**

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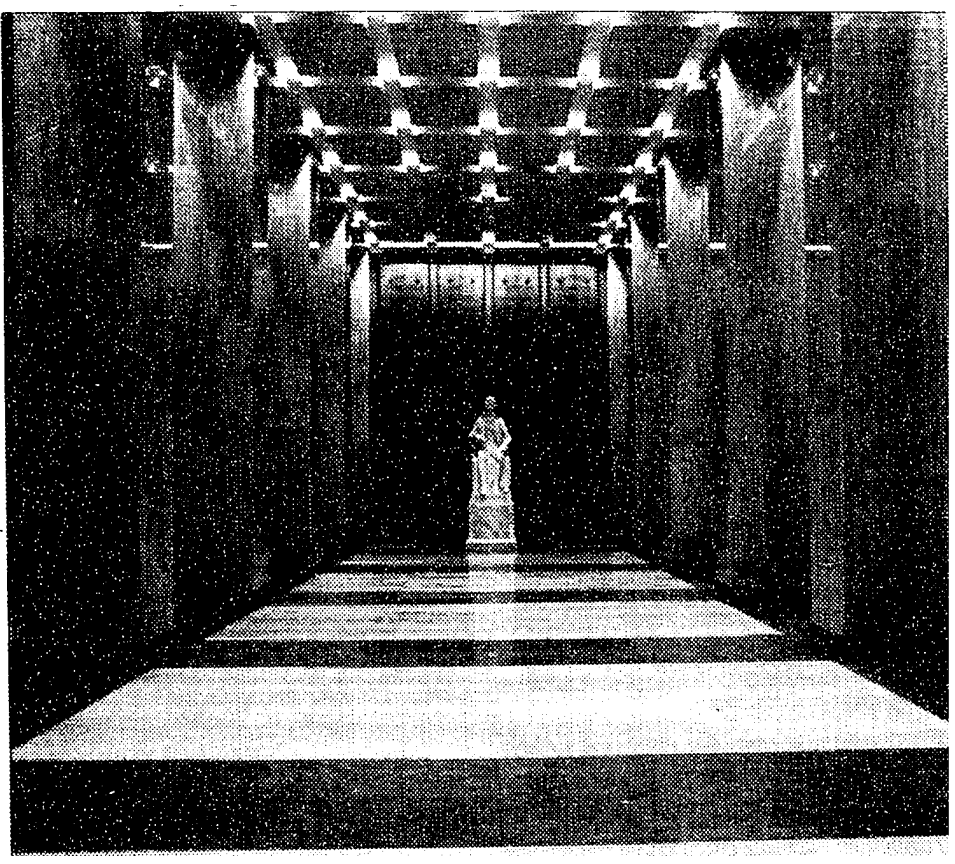
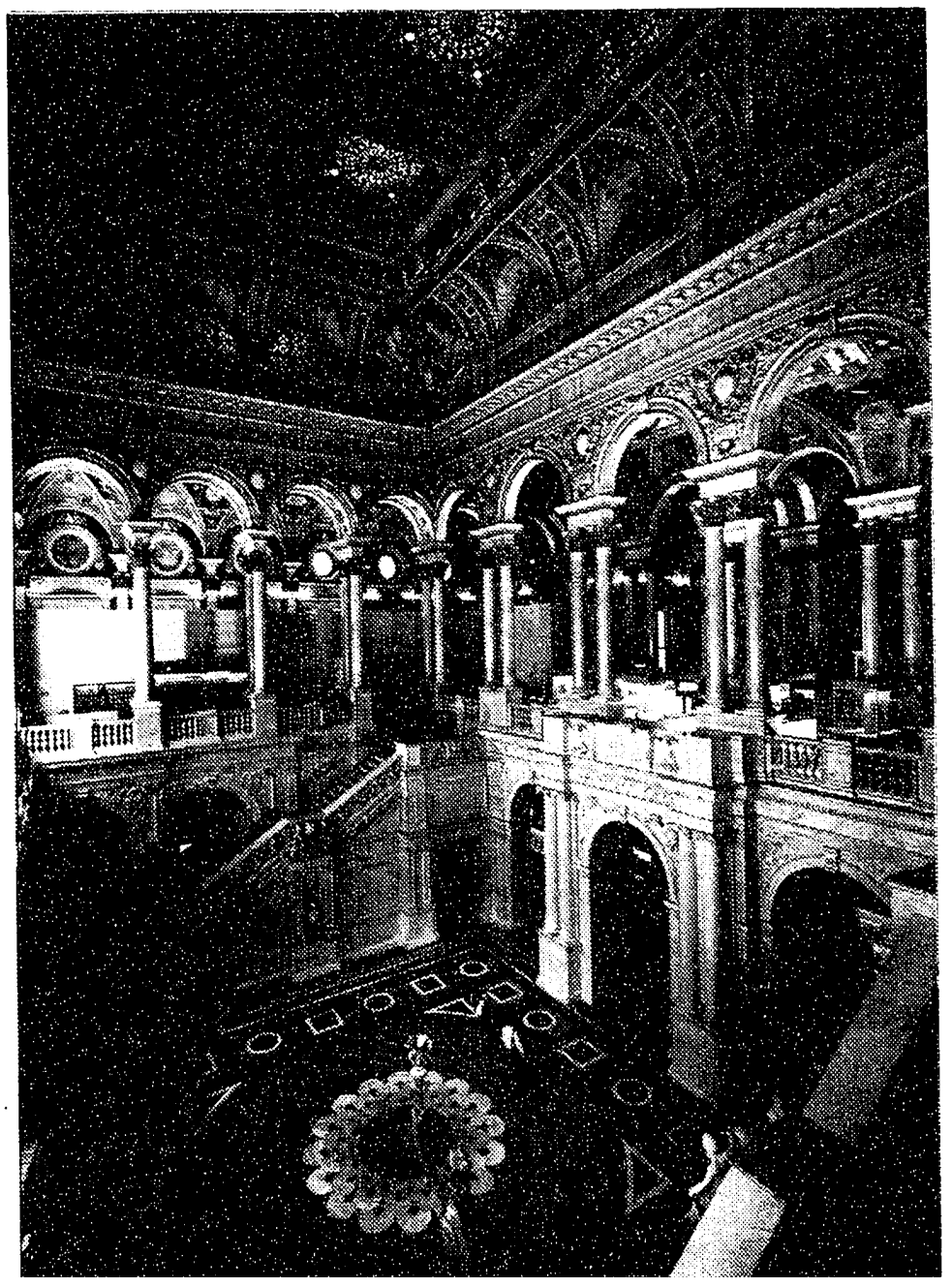
# A Bureaucratic Behemoth of a Library





The "vacuous" new Madison Memorial Building, at left, and the "unequaled" Great Hall of the Library of Congress

WASHINGTON

After 32 years of planning, 20 years of design and nine years of construction by a consortium of three architectural firms under the direction of two Librarians of Congress, two Architects of the Capitol, three chairmen of the Senate Office Building Committee, four chairmen of the House Office Building Committee and seven chairmen of the Joint Committee on the Library, and after one abortive takeover attempt by the space-hungry House of Representatives, the James Madison Memorial Building, the new addition to of the Library of Congress, was finally dedicated and turned over to the cultural and informational service of the nation last week.

While the ceremony was held marking the official transfer of the completed building from the Federal Government to the Library on the anniversary of the signing of the original Library of Congress legislation by President John Adams in 1800, workmen continued to install the interior fittings of the new structure. The massive movement of resources from the old to the new quarters will be carried out over the rest of the year. The first section to be rehoused, the Geography and Map Division, is open to the public. Although the new building will not be fully functioning until 1981, the completed structure can be assessed now.

The Madison Memorial Library is colossal; it is the second largest building on Capitol Hill, just after the elephantine Rayburn Building. This is big even for official Washington, which specializes in Brobdingnagian scale. It is less ludicrous and more efficient than the Rayburn Building, and it is the last of the solid marble bombs in the long line willed to the nation by the late Architect of the Capitol, J. George Stewart. Stylistically, this one has not quite caught up with Moscow's Palace of Congresses, or the Soviet avant-garde of 1961.

Built at a cost of $130 million, it occupies the superblock bounded by Independence Avenue, C Street, and First and Second Streets, just across from the main Library of Congress Building, a Beaux Arts monument of notable grandeur completed in 1897. The new building is 514 feet long and 414 feet deep, has nine stories and contains 2,100,000 square feet of space and enough computerized and mechanized library equipment to put Gutenberg into shock.

Among its features are a James Madison Memorial Hall with a life-size statue of Madison surrounded by marble, travertine and teak (the Memorial was incorporated into the Library in 1965), a two-story exhibition gallery that one might categorize as flashily retardataire, an interior garden court which, in common with much of the staff, will never see the light of day, and 1,560,000 square feet of usable working space.

Let us immediately state the best and the worst of this new building. It is both desperately needed and totally ordinary. So much ordinariness becomes almost extraordinary. The interiors that are to be devoted to the display and dissemination of the world's art and culture are pure, catalogue commercial; the executive offices are unadulterated cliché corporate, from the conference rooms with sliding walls to the overcontrived lighting. The whole is clothed in enough Georgia marble to sink a Ship of State.

But the building is long overdue for an institution bursting at every seam, with personnel tucked into nooks and corners of balconies and hallways and offices carved out of corridors and triple-decked under 30-foot ceilings. The Library and its staff are grateful for every undistinguished inch. The present Architect of the Capitol, George White, who inherited the project, has managed to upgrade its execution with above-average supervisory care. And the space is being very well used by the Library's rather awesomely named planning unit, the Environmental Resources Office, under James Trew, to put in effect a total reorganization plan that has been conceived by the present Librarian of Congress, the historian Daniel Boorstin.

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This reorganization involves the Main Building, the Thomas Jefferson Building (an extension largely for storage built in the 1930's) and the Madison Building. Collections will be shifted to form "halls of knowledge" of related artifacts and research materials devoted to Western and Eastern civilizations, the arts and sciences, language and literature, philosophy and religion, maps and geography, manuscripts, law and bibliography, and library science. The result will create a kind of "multi-media encyclopedia" for easier access and use.

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The additional space that makes this rational rearrangement possible is the new building's chief virtue. But there is another conspicuous and very important benefit: the spectacular Main Building will now be released from the pressure of overuse for restoration. As the index to all of the collections, this historic structure will remain the Library's centerpiece.

It can be stated without reservation that the turn-of-the-century Library of Congress Building is one of the most magnificent works of its time in this country, representing a period and style, a quality of workmanship and material, a richness of color, detail and decoration, that will never be seen again. It is the work of a Washington architectural firm, Smithmeyer and Pelz, collaborating with sculptors, muralists and artisans. Its interiors show a masterful use of ceremonial and symbolic public space that is still inadequately understood, and in this case, almost unequalled in

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American architecture. This building is one of the capital's few real gems.

I am thinking, in particular, of the Great Hall with its stairs, colonnades and balconies, of an architecture so sophisticated and skilled in its manipulation of levels, planes and light, and so lavish in its use of decorative arts, that it recalls the Grand Foyer of the Paris Opera; this is less extravangantly baroque, but no less successful. The huge, domed, circular main reading room is one of the most impressive interiors in the United States.

I am thinking also of parts of the building that cannot be seen, which are just beginning to be visible through gaps and holes as "temporary" offices start to be dismantled. Four glorious corner pavilions connected by two-block long vaulted and coffered corridors or galleries that completely encircle the building's perimeter, have been hidden for decades by partitions, false ceilings, screen walls and assorted interior crimes and atrocities. One could not even guess at their existence except for the presence of floating capitols and giant column segments sandwiched between wallboard and ceiling panels.

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Fortunately, little was destroyed. These changes were reasonably careful acts of spatial desperation by a growing staff dealing with burgeoning collections; such incursions can be easily removed to reveal the building's original splendor. Restoration is now a top concern and priority of both the Librarian of Congress and the Architect of the Capitol. Does one need to remind the Congress that this is its Library as well as the national collection?

The ceremony, symbolism and art of the older structure are the qualities most obviously lacking in the new building; there is no indication that this is a place that contains and celebrates the treasures of civilization. Nothing here suggests that architecture traditionally gives expression to such values. This is any speculative office building behind a Mussolini-modern facade.

In the Madison Memorial Hall the standard 9-foot, 3-inch ceiling is pushed to two storeys and the walls and columns are buttered up with wood and travertine; the result is vacuous, not noble. The garden court behind the entrance is another exercise in punching up the space, three storeys this time, in response to early protests about the building's lack of beauty and amenity. Because the court is topped, not by sky, but by six more storeys, and surrounded by standard, dark glass, curtain-walled offices, a battery of artificial lights must mimic sun for ficus trees (that most durable of species) buttressed in granite. Only six percent of the building's surface is windowed; the set-back top floor, with a glass wall offering views from the staff dining rooms and executive offices, is like a release from limbo.

One could simply file this building under the heading of the decline and fall of public architecture, but it is more complex than that. The architects selected in a typical bureaucratic shotgun wedding — Roscoe DeWitt of Texas, Alfred Easton Poore and Homer Swanke of New York, and A.P. Almond and Jesse Shelton of Atlanta — were in the rear guard, rather than the vanguard, of architecture. They produced a dated and lackluster design that embodied a program which also became obsolete as the long, bureaucratic process of appropriation, approval and construction proceeded over 20 years.

In those years, a revolution in computerized library technology took place; as recently as a year and a half ago the power capacity of the building had to be restudied and upgraded. The flexibility that was supposed to be built into the plan has proved to be more theoretical than practical in spite of modular design; the movable partitions weigh 200 pounds. Twenty years ago libraries and museums avoided destructive natural light like the plague. But even at that time, the new filtering and reflective glass was being developed that has created a radical and agreeable change in their architecture.

Today, the windowless behemoth is dead. Two of the architects who started with the project are also dead, and most of the others are retired. The Madison Library, in fact, could be called dead on arrival.

There are no easy answers to technological revolutions or Congressional tastes. But even the most superficial research indicates that other countries are building national libraries in less time that relate better to the state of architecture and science. It would be worth some studies to see how it is done. Washington is running out of room for these stillborn Federal blockbusters, and it has long since run out of art. ■