Architecture: Misgivings at the Metropolitan
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Architecture

Misgivings at the Metropolitan

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THIS is the first of two columns of caveats. They deal with some important New York projects being watched here with a measure of uneasiness.

First, the Metropolitan Museum. I have been trying very hard to like the new look at the Met since last spring, but I find myself increasingly distressed by the initial steps of the remodeling that is part of the planning projected for the museum's second century. The distress grows on every return visit. The new street frontage and the restored Great Hall, in particular, wear badly with an insinuating malaise. There is something very wrong going on architecturally at the Met that bodes ill for the second century. Errors that are not always apparent in skillful preliminary presentations become larger than life in execution.

In all the debate about the museum's master plan, this signally important consideration is being lost. As for the complex, non-architectural issues of that debate, let me say only that the museum has done a considered and conscientious job of accommodating its own point of view, based on its own understanding of its needs, and it has used a top firm, Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo Associates, to do the job.

That this understanding suffers from some elegant tunnel vision is indicated not only from the expected protests of park conservationists and the radical art world, but from serious reservations voiced publicly by some respected professional organizations. The museum finds itself, to its own obvious puzzlement, so out of touch with the mood and conditions of society today that it dismisses the debate as cavalier or conspiratorial. It is bent on aggrandizement, sincerely believing that this is still what museums are all about.

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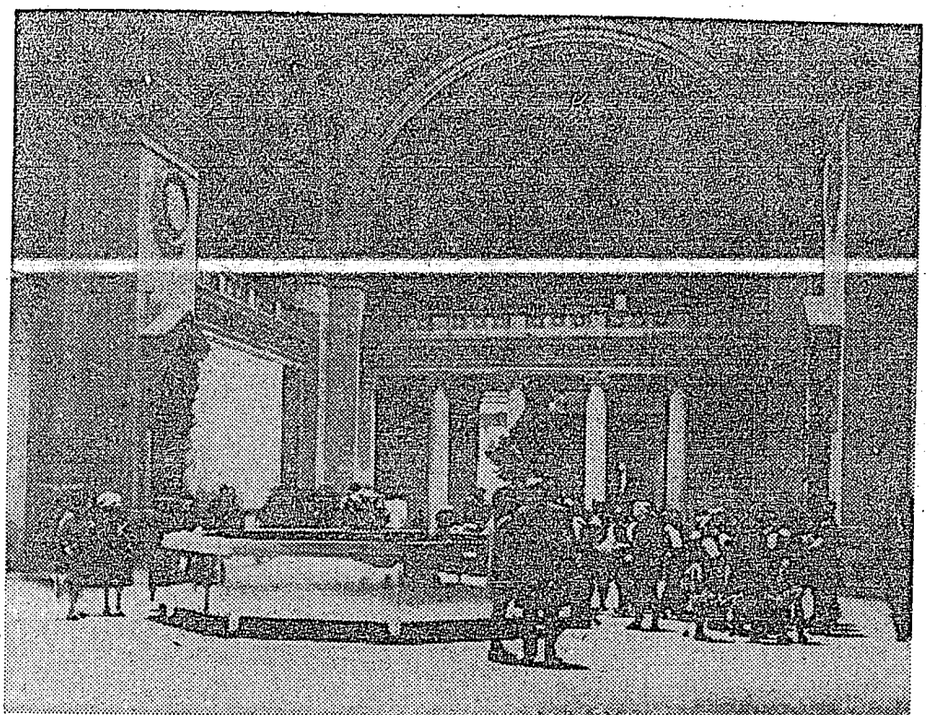
Concerned New Yorkers who love and admire the Met and all the eternal values that it stands for, and who do not want to see the traditional museum role diminished in any way, still hope that there are better answers than monolithic, *in situ* expansion. To cite the decentralized community museum as the only alternative reduces the debate to false polarities. For the record, this writer believes that the museum is superlatively and dangerously wrong in its present policy and course. But what will be discussed here will be limited to what has already been achieved, architecturally, on that course, and what the visible and ineluctable evidence promises for the future.



Part of the refurbished Great Hall at the Metropolitan Museum
"A cross between an information concourse and an expensive bank"

I have been walking through the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum since I was allowed to travel around the city alone, a long time ago. The Met, in those days, had throwaway grandeur, great scale without pomposity, quality with quiet ease, the elegant diffidence of the true aristocrat. Its treasures had to be taken in small doses because the eye-to-heart experience of great art shatters. Some of the most memorable museums are small and specialized, *sui generis;* the encyclopedia argument for expansion is untenable except in terms of human and institutional vanity.

The Met taught me many things about the sublimity of man's achievements. It sometimes gave pleasure as sharp as pain. It did all this best in a discreet gallery, without hoopla, where quality spoke for itself. In the cultural potpourri of the Great Hall, rich rugs and tapestries saluted Thebes and Nineveh, beckoning to the ancient worlds beyond. Painting came later, suitably approached by the monumental stair.

I find all this changing now. The tone is set by the new approach. I do not miss the "doghouse" at the museum's entrance, but its elimination is a thin thread to support all those new front steps. (It is just possible that the museum is slightly overstaired. Outside, that is.)

I do not dislike the idea of the stairs and the plaza. The public uses them as planned, and that is good; taxis and cars, drawing up at the curb for more congestion than formerly because they seem unaware of the poorly marked drives, do not; and that is bad. But the change has done something deplorable to the building's facade.

In the critical game of relationships that make or break art and environment, the scale of the building has been altered and damaged. The monumental Richard Morris Hunt-McKim, Mead and White facade was a detailed series of relationships of its classical parts; even monumentality has its subtleties. There is nothing subtle about the new treatment, or what it does. The building is downgraded, overwhelmed by the overscaled approach, the overlong and sterile fountains (great space fillers, fountains), the overdose of hard-surfaced pavement flanked at the too-far ends by regimented trees. For a perceptive account of the curious connections between stairs and facade and comments on the style of the detailing see Bernhard Leitner in October Artforum.

And so on into the Great Hall, supposedly returned to its original splendor. The hall had become somewhat cluttered over the years with accretions of sales desks, and checking coats was an exercise in frustration. It was dingy with the passage of time. But for the notably masculine (a no-no word today?) monumentality and authentic architectural sophistication that it possessed it now has a slick, commercial grand luxe that even comes off—whisper it—as a kind of provincial grandeur. What destructive wonders are wrought with light, paint, expensive corporate details and a few cuts in the walls.

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The old chandeliers, whatever their defects or provenance, enhanced the hall's sense of size and scale. The space is now efficiently and uniformly lit, every surface washed from domes to ground, with no shadowed suggestion of awesome height, no mystery, no revelation or emphasis. Interesting, how the most impressive space can be flattened and dematerialized with light.

This dematerialization is further carried out by the double openings cut in the east and west walls, the better to accommodate and make entrances for improved cloakroom and bookstore facilities. The essential sense of solid enclosure for the definition of a great space is ruptured by this mutilation of the walls. A few rugs are now creeping back to cover their inconclusive nakedness.

For the original spatial grandeur there is a disquieting, scaleless emptiness and a strange loss of style. This is not ameliorated by plantings and fresh floral arrangements like department store displays that seem to resist all efforts not to look cheaply artificial.

The fact is that the concept and function of Hunt's Great Hall have been completely misunderstood. It was a palatial Grand Room. The around-the-edges messiness has been cleared away, replaced by a new and wrong kind of order—three "things" plunked down right under the domes, a central information desk and two big planters. In spirit, the Grand Room has become a cross between an information concourse and an expensive bank with corporate accessories to match. This is heartbreakingly, totally wrong.

Now the damage is to be completed by removing the Grand Stair. Forget the arguments about their utility, although we've seen as many people climbing them as the new front steps; man does not rise by escalator alone. This is the last remnant of the knowing use of a monumental hierarchy of forms and spaces that Hunt and his successors (it doesn't matter who did what, it all works together) provided with conspicuous success. The replacement will be an escalator-flanked monumental bowling alley with free traffic flow. The unavoidable question is whether the Lehman collection as now planned, and the removal of the stair as a "barrier" to it, is either correct or justified. It will be the last step in the wrecking of a landmark interior.

Architecturally, the plan is a disaster. There is no doubt that the new additions, not only for the Lehman collection, but for the Temple of Dendur, the Rockefeller primitive art collection, and eventually, the American wing and the special exhibition galleries (after which the museum promises to call it quits) will be splendidly executed. But will they be equally wrong? That is the question for today and the next hundred years.