

Architecture

# A Place Of Genuine Joy

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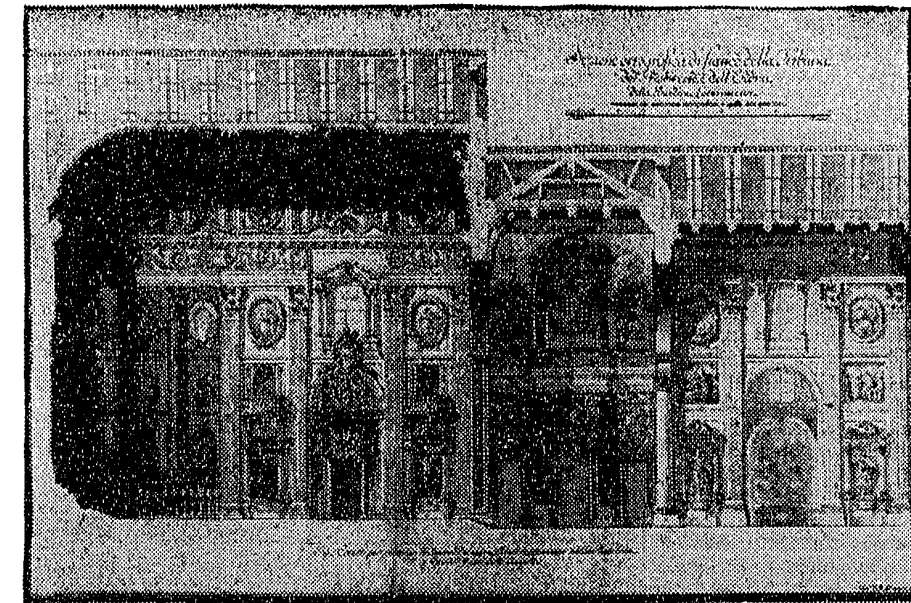
THE troubles and riches of this city are bottomless. Perhaps it is that strange mix and those extraordinary polarities of beauty and desolation that make metropolis an enduring Armageddon where the battle is never lost or won, but where hope, as they say, springs eternal.

Among the least known and most splendid of New York's riches is the Avery Architectural Library at Columbia University. With the library of London's Royal Institute of British Architects, it is one of the two most complete collections of the finest and rarest in architectural literature in the world, an incomparable repository of scholarship and beauty. It is pertinent to relate that during what are referred to as the "troubles" at Columbia in 1968, the striking students barricaded and protected Avery Library with the greatest of care; they did not consider it irrelevant. There was blood on the steps after the bust, but its treasures were intact.

At the moment, the exceptional resources of Avery are being used for a quietly spectacular exhibition of drawings and etchings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, on display in the Rotunda of Low Memorial Library. It can be seen Monday through Friday, 10 A.M. to 4 P.M., through April 17.

The 101 items on view include the finest of the famous 18th-century Vedute di Roma and a rare set of first impression Carceri etchings, climaxed by 23 recently rediscovered and newly acquired ink and wash drawings for the completion of San Giovanni in Laterano in Rome. The drawings have been given to Avery, with the Carceri etchings, by Dr. and Mrs. Arthur M. Sackler.

The exhibition, installed by



Piranesi drawing for San Giovanni in Laterano in the Columbia show from Avery Library. Where, if you have the credentials, you can hold the Renaissance in your hands

Calvert Coggeshall, is co-sponsored by the Avery Library and the Department of Art History and Archeology and is dedicated to the distinguished historian, the late Rudolf Wittkower. There is a handsomely produced catalogue with a text by Dorothea Nyberg.

The work transports one immediately to Piranesi's Rome, a world of splendid monuments and shadowed ruins. Grounded in 17th-century baroque and prophetic of 19th-century neo-classicism and romanticism, a curious blend of antiquarianism and mannerism, it ranges from the lovely Venetian lightness of his north Italian heritage to the violent and sinister contrasts of his later style. These are some of the most evocative and emotionally stirring pictures that art history has bequeathed to us.

The rediscovered architectural studies, executed in immaculate gray washes and precise brown ink, offer five versions of the church sanctuary. A marvelously rich baldacchino and papal altar, full of Piranesian invention, are a model of fantasy and control. The drawings have been beautifully restored by Barry Byers of the Metropolitan Museum.

These treasures, like all Columbia University art collections, are under the curatorship of Jane Sabersky. They are, however, specifically part of the Avery Piranesi collection, which

was first catalogued in 1895. The library was founded in 1890, in memory of Henry Ogden Avery, an architect whose 2,000 volumes formed the nucleus of its holdings.

In 1912, the library was moved to its present McKim, Mead and White building, once spacious and now hopelessly cramped by the need for expansion and the architecture school above. Its still-grand reading room in stack-lined alcoves reaches to a lofty ceiling. It is not a public library, or an undergraduate library, although anyone with appropriate research credentials may use it. There are only 75 seats, where one may set up scholarly housekeeping for the duration of a dissertation or a book. There is a casual, old-window-shade, plain-wood-table, shabby-aristocrat atmosphere of rich erudition, comfortable as an elegant old shoe.

I can testify, as a graduate student and professional privileged to use its limited seats and unlimited resources, that Avery is a place of genuine joy. I have known three distinguished Avery Librarians — Talbot Hamlin, whose legacy of Greek Revival writings form the standard references in American architecture, James Grote Van Derpool, a man of impeccable credentials and connoisseurship, and Adolph K. Placzek, the current Avery Librarian, blessed with a rare blend of intelligence, warmth and sensibility. Obviously they are picked for

qualities other than computerized retrieval expertise.

There is not a single major book written today in the fields of architecture or urbanism that is not indebted to Avery Library. When a scholar of the stature of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner comes to this country, Avery is his headquarters; he is currently installed in one of its alcoves daily at 9 A.M.

When the dean of American architectural historians decides to give away his collection of 19th-century Americana to concentrate on German baroque, he gives the books to Avery Library. When Louis Sullivan drawings can be bought, they are acquired, with the help of a donor who prefers to be anonymous, for Avery Library.

Avery's catalogue of its collection and index of its periodicals, 19 volumes each, have been purchased by other institutions at \$1,140 and \$820 respectively. They represent the equivalent of a national library of architecture. The subject of architecture is broadly defined to include archeology, related decorative arts, and all phases of city planning, subjects that have extended the collection to nearly 95,000 volumes.

Today, there are problems of pilferage and security and one must be checked in at the door. But if you have the credentials, you may browse through Alberti's De Re Aedificatoria of 1485, the 1570 copy of the four books of Palladio and subsequent edi-

tions, and the unpublished sixth volume of Serlio with original drawings. It is strange and wonderful to hold the Renaissance in one's hands. There are, in Mr. Placzek's words, "running feet of Vitruvii" and virtually every important or precious volume on the art of building known.

There are also running miles of 19th- and 20th-century periodicals dating from initial publication. I know; I spent one winter in the unheated basement, in coat and gloves, using them. The heat had to be kept off because there was no air-conditioning or humidity control and the periodicals were in danger of disintegration. So were the rare books. An anonymous friend air-conditioned the building and its collections not too long ago, as incredible as that seems.

The University is not unmindful of the gem it possesses. But caught in today's financial crunch it can provide only basic maintenance, personnel and book purchase funds and complete freedom of operation, which is a considerable virtue.

Still, while Avery cries for space and care, Columbia has managed to erect all around it some of the biggest and most expensive and most appallingly bad buildings on any university campus anywhere. While the Kress Foundation gave Avery money for essential restoration of literary treasures, Columbia alumni gave to building funds for those awful structures that have arisen to certify not knowledge of architecture, but ignorance. A rare book fund is fueled by foundation generosity, or the library could no longer maintain its standards.

At a time when architectural offices have reached record business proportions and profits, give or take a recession, no major firm has made a gesture to Avery. There was a day when men like William Delano and Ernest Flagg and others of an era when the architect was gentleman and scholar gave recognition and support, but now they can be counted on one finger of one hand. With the American Institute of Architects taking the lead, today's offices could probably put together an appropriate endowment. It is no testament to the glory of architecture or its practitioners—so splendidly documented at Avery—that they do not.