

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Triumphant Renovation of Cooper Union

In 1974, the Cooper Union Foundation Building—a New York landmark since 1859 and an officially designated landmark since 1966—was renovated “in the spirit of tradition and a contemporary state of mind.” This description by the school’s administration says a lot about the 118-year-old institution. Established by Peter Cooper as a tuition-free school open to anyone “of good moral character,” the Cooper Union was dedicated to the unassailable 19th-century ideal of “the advancement of science and art.” Still a tuition-free institution, it ranks today as one of the country’s finest professional, degree-giving schools of art, architecture and engineering.

Cooper Union has the advantages and disadvantages of being small and special, without ties to a larger university. Lacking the security blanket of such an affiliation, it has, on the other hand, a singleness, or a uniqueness, of viewpoint that gives it a character distinctly its own, in which the spirit of tradition and a contemporary state of mind are well-joined in theory and practice.

That attitude is particularly noticeable in the Schools of Art and Architecture headed, respectively, by George Sadek and John Hejduk, and it is made manifest by the recent renovation of the building, an act of poetry and practicality carried out by Mr. Hejduk (a graduate of the architecture school) and Professor Peter Bruder (a graduate of the engineering school), backed by the trustees and president John F. White.

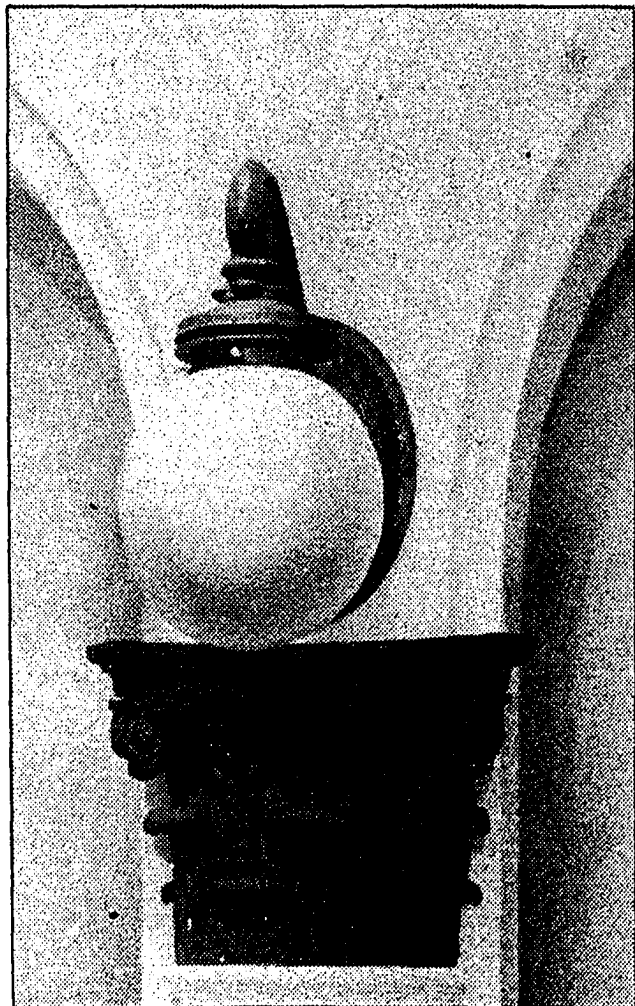
• • •

Like a set of Chinese boxes, this renovation offers meanings within meanings: It is a radical reinterpretation of history and space in which present and past are expressed separately while mutually enriching each other in an intricate game of visual and functional references. The key themes are sensitivity and art. The result is a carefully restored brownstone shell (the original architect was Fred A. Peterson and the mode was Victorian “Renaissance”) and a completely new interior.

The interior takes off from the modular structural iron frame, which was a radical innovation in its own day—straight into the 20th century. Pristine white surfaces and spaces are brilliantly light-filled through round-arched windows and stylistically evocative of DeStijl and LeCorbusier. The studios are classic open lofts.

But the striking difference between this remodeling and others that purport to marry contemporary design with a landmark structure is that there are no strident or superficial poses here in the name of “contrasts” and “modernization,” and none of the banal or discordant clichés of current recycling. There is respect and sympathy for the old building, and above all, understanding. With all of Mr. Hejduk’s esthetic legerdemain, in this case, tradition is dramatized by art.

I go back to Cooper Union periodically because I love the place and the old part of New York where it is located; to me, the building is one of the city’s more rewarding architectural experiences, both in the quality of its design and the “presence” of its history. But this week there was a specific purpose for the visit—the art students have undertaken to



Mark Jenkinson

Newly restored capital and lamp at Cooper Union

complete the restoration of the exterior, where many of the decorative elements of the ground floor were missing.

To celebrate the project, there is a display of the techniques by which the replacements are being made. This small show, which will remain until January, will be of particular interest to restoration buffs, but its elements also have a surprising impact as art objects. In a modest way, this is part of the enlarging vision of art and architecture today.

This visit found the building as pristine and handsome inside as ever, a miracle of sparkling upkeep and constantly renewed white paint that is evidently possible with maintenance crews that are able to paint as well as clean, and a student body that cares. (Columbia University, on several recent visits, was an academic slum. Windows and paint were permanently grimy, and halls littered with the detritus of education and fast food. Perhaps the depressingly ordinary design of so many of the interiors helps invite this kind of “dismaintenance.”)

A walk along the side of the Cooper Union Building from Astor Place to the entrance on Cooper Square reveals the parts of the facade that are being restored. A handsome progression of arches springs from pilasters with ornate cast-iron capitals, enhanced by a rhythmic series of projecting cast-iron lamps with glass globes. Some capitals and lamps are completely gone; others have missing volutes, acanthus leaves or rosettes. The glass shades have been replaced with shatterproof plastic.

Estimates for professional casting and repairs of the missing cast-iron elements came to \$2,000 a capital. The fiddle-fern arms of the lighting fixtures (renamed “elephant trunks” by the students) would have been \$500 each, and two other castings are needed to complete the lamps. There are 16 parts for each capital. In all, about \$40,000 worth of work was needed.

Continued on Page 32

Continued from Page 29

Since there was no money, the students decided to do the job, as they say, for love. It is clear, however, that they found it a rewarding experience, utilizing techniques of sculptural casting that go back to the beginning of artistic time. Working with Professor Reuben Kadish and using their own studio foundry, they have cast over a hundred pieces—a process that takes about two weeks—"gang-casting," as they put it, over the summer. Large elements were formed in one piece; smaller parts were ingeniously connected with feeds and vents to make a single unit.

The technique used is the ancient lost wax process, a method of casting that has been practiced from Stone Age artifacts to space-age hardware. In this case, the missing elements were reproduced by molding latex over a remaining original, to make a wax replica. This wax copy was then encased in plaster and baked in an oven for a week, which

melts the wax while hardening the mold. The mold is then filled with melted silicone aluminum—a tough exterior aluminum that substitutes for cast iron. After the metal has cooled, the plaster mold is broken open, and the aluminum elements are chased and finished, ready to install.

In a permissible bit of whimsy, a wall label has Peter Cooper thanking as well as crediting the participants: Joe Burchfield, Alan Dubinsky, Leonard Elger, Lorilee Garbowski, David Gerlach, Del Hillgartner, Max Hyder, William Jung, Sandra Lesch, Jon Olsen and Jimmy Wong. Another label quotes Benvenuto Cellini on casting.

"Technical skill serves you up to a certain point, but sometimes you need the deeper knowledge of the rules of art and that leaves technical skill on one side," Cellini wrote in 1568. "Perhaps you think I ought to give you a diagram of it all in my book. But I fancy that you who know about casting will know this well. So who am I to tell you?"

Who, indeed? At Cooper Union now, they know.