A Worthwhile Addition: The Reception Wing of Gracie Mansion, Viewed as Object Lesson in Excel
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The Reception Wing of Gracie Mansion, Viewed as Object Lesson in Excellence

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

If anyone is thinking of building a nice five-room house with ballroom in the 18th-century style, with appropriate authentic furnishings of the period, he'd better have $800,000. That is the price tag of the new Gracie Mansion reception wing. And let it be said right now that it is worth every penny that the city did not spend.

An Appraisal

This impeccably executed, superbly appointed addition to Gracie Mansion has been given to New York by a citizens' committee that raised the money, hired the architect, Mott B. Schmidt, and asked Mrs. Francis Henry Lenygon of the White House and Blair House restoration, to do the interiors.

The result is a curious object lesson. It makes it clear that the 18th century, with its virtually irreproducible architectural details—you can count the artisans available today—and its top-of-the-market antiques, is only for the very rich and nostalgic.

A Copy Lacks Meaning

In the case of the new wing, reproduction was probably the only answer to the problem of additional space to be connected directly to the circa 1798-1811 white clapboard house.

The most desirable solution, architecturally, would have been to give the city the best of two centuries: the addition of a 20th-century jewel to an 18th-century jewel—if it were one—in the effective, dramatic manner in which Philip Johnson provided the modern pavilion for the Georgian-style house at Dumbarton Oaks.

But this requires an ordered, formal, McIntire or Bulfinch building of classic presence and importance. It simply would not have come off with Gracie, which is not a mansion at all, but a pleasantly unpretentious, country house. Given this lack of strong form of character, it is very doubtful whether a modern wing could have made the contrasting or positive statement required for architectural success.

A copy, or reproduction of an old building, on the other hand, treads dangerous water; it lacks the direct meaning and vitality of the original produced in, by and for its own time, and it depends for effect largely on a museum-ambience created by the quality, authenticity and beauty of its furnishings.

But the copy works well here. This is largely because the exterior, or architectural shell, is of minor importance. It is the interiors, with their 18th- and early 19th-century museum-caliber furnishings, serving the building's primary public reception functions, that count. The craftsmanship is close to perfect. Classical capitals and borders were modeled in wax and then cast for precise detail.

A Magic of Names

These furnishings have the magic compounded of names like Adam, Sheraton, Hepplewhite, Waterford and Sheffield. The value of a single pair of candelabra is $6,000, and everything else is right in line. Catalogue descriptions abound with words like "exceedingly important," "rare," and "notable." Only the hard-service furniture, chairs and settees, are reproductions. Portraits of New Yorkers of the period, loaned by the Metropolitan Museum, make the rooms come warmly alive.

When pure 18th-century style is adapted to serve purely 20th-century administrative needs, however, the museum gives way to the look of tasteful hotel Georgian, as in the Mayor's office and conference room, downstairs.

Ironically, within the reproduced rooms, inspired by Boston, Waltham and New York, are real mantles rescued from old New York houses.

Mantles Are Rescued

This reporter last saw the Adam mantle from the former Bayard Mansion at 7 State Street, now the Mission of Our Lady of the Rosary, crusted with paint in a dark backroom of that building, waiting to be knocked out for a new chapel. It has been donated by the mission and installed in the ballroom. The dining room mantle comes from a bulldozed house on Greenwich Street. During the years, uncounted other equally beautiful New York mantles, ornate plaster ceilings and colonial doorways have simply been reduced to dust.

Comparisons with the White House will be inevitable. The technique of bringing together appropriate and handsome antiques, faultlessly combined, is identical. But the White House is also an authentic building, an important period work of architecture in its own right, of which much of the original fabric and design have been scrupulously retained through rebuilding and restoration. The furnishings complete a historical architectural whole.

The tasteful interiors of the new Gracie wing are installed in a suitable setting with no intrinsic value except the substantial cost of reproduction. A plaque in the hall states clearly that this 18th-century-style building was begun in 1965 and completed in 1966. With an understanding of these artistic limitations, the city can use it with gratitude and pleasure.

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