ARCHITECTURAL VIEW: THE 'MIRACLE' OF COOPER-HEWITT COOPER-HEWITT
Huxtable, Ada Louise
*New York Times (1923-Current file);* Oct 3, 1976; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 93

**ARCHITECTURAL VIEW**

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# The 'Miracle' Of Cooper-Hewitt

After a 13-year saga of abandonment and rescue, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Design is reopening this week in the remodeled Carnegie Mansion at Fifth Avenue and 91st Street, its gardens abloom with chrysanthemums, its collections secure, its future a bright promise.

The lengthy process has led from Cooper Union's decision in 1963 to dispose of one of the world's finest collections of decorative arts and design because it could no longer afford to maintain it, through the threat of public sale and absorption by other museums, to the creation of a totally new institution. It has required over $6 million in privately raised funds, the adoption of the collection by the Smithsonian Institution in 1967 as part of the national collections, the gift of the landmark Carnegie House in 1972 and the talent and ingenuity of the renovating architects, Hardy Holzman, Pfeiffer, the indomitable drive of the museum's steel and porcelain director, Lisa Taylor, and the sweat and tears of its dedicated staff.

What has finally been achieved by the Cooper-Hewitt is much more than the rehabilitation of a building or a collection; it is a miracle. The new museum is a successful combination of a unique esthetic resource with a landmark structure, realized over formidable obstacles, that adds an extra cultural and environmental dimension to New York. Because it has a particularized appeal and ambience, like the Frick and the Guggenheim, it offers an intimate and personal kind of pleasure in a city that swallows large-scale treasures. The Cooper-Hewitt is not only a very special kind of collection, including everything from ormolu to urban design, it is a very special place.

Because New York is a conspicuous consumer of the cultural and the new, the Copper-Hewitt has also acquired instant chic. With a membership drive ahead, the museum doesn't particularly mind. But what it is trying to stress at its inauguration—with an opening exhibition that is a highly provocative, cosmic statement of the importance and omnipresence of the arts of design—is its universality, not its specialness.

Called "Man Transforms," this show has been designed by a galaxy of international artists and architects, headed by Vienna's Hans Hollein, and paid for by the Johnson Wax Company. It includes such things as a definitive presentation of bread in its infinite variations and a dissertation on cloth as an instrument of man's progress through time, all fraught with psycho-historical meaning. It also obscures a good part of the house. But that is temporary, because plans call for installing selections from the collection after the show closes.

In addition to being scholarly, and chic, and handsome, the new museum is bound to be somewhat controversial. The fact that its opening gun is an ambitious and rather arcane effort at design consciousness-raising rather than a rich, discreet sampling of its possessions, is a calculated surprise. It is meant as a conceptual awakening for the public, with the aim of strengthening understanding and support for the new institution. While the museum has the status of the Smithsonian affiliation, which is now providing maintenance and guards, it must still raise funds privately for its programs.

The show also serves the purpose of clearly announcing the museum's broadened horizons. Its superb collections of textiles, metalwork, glass and ceramics, prints, drawings and furniture have been re-evaluated and redefined in terms of their use and appeal for a vastly enlarged program and audience. Cooper-Hewitt's traditional role as a research facility for designers and students will be retained, but it will be expanded to include educational and exhibition functions for a wide, contemporary public. (How else, in fact, does an arts institution survive?)

'The new museum adds an extra cultural dimension to New York'

In addition to the famous birdcages that come immediately to mind (delightfully installed in the opening show by Arata Isozaki), the wallpaper samples, the rococo ornament, the Winslow Homer watercolors, the Frederick Church drawings (once insured at $50 each and now up to $5,000), the landscape designs of Capability Brown, the renderings of Brighton Pavilion—just to give a random sampling—there will be contemporary inventories in film and photographs of 20th-century industrial and environmental design.

There will certainly be controversy about the "restoration" of the building—a process that has had to adapt a house (less than a palace and more than a home, and not one of the grandest interiors of its overreaching time) to very undomestic and unrelated uses: display and study space, a library and offices.

The 64-room mansion that Andrew Carnegie built in 1901 in the raw reaches of upper Fifth Avenue, designed by Babb, Cook and Willard, is substantial rather than splendid. It featured beautifully carved wood (by Scottish and Indian craftsmen) with Lincrusta panels (a patented, gilded composition board that looks like leather) and had a utilities basement like a steamship engine room that is, in itself, a museum of turn-of-the-century technology.

The building's handsomest architectural feature is a splended vista through drawing, dining and breakfast rooms to a conservatory at the end, an elegant and gracious use of space that cannot be seen fully with the present exhibition. The six-story neo-Georgian exterior sits well in a park-like setting. It is the total amenity of the building, its spaces and its grounds that adds up to landmark quality.

The renovation has all been done within distinct financial restraints. The roughly $2.5 million spent did not permit the return of some of the elaborately and beautifully crafted surfaces to their original condition, where the former owner and tenant, Columbia University's School of Social Work, had painted them standard educational green. A combination of scraping and scholarly guesswork has produced a sensitive approximation, or substitution when necessary, using glazes rather than paint, and where all else fails, there is a soft, standard gray. Hugh Hardy, the architect in charge, calls the process "interpretive restoration."

Downlights, tracks and smoke detectors have been inserted into coffers, plaster decoration and vaults with a minimum of jarring effect. Washing has brought ceilings back to life that are a rich combination of gold and silver leaf, bronze glaze and stenciling. For the carved teakwood room by Lockwood de Forest, with its Tiffany stenciled ceiling, Cooper-Hewitt will try to find a replacement for the missing Tiffany turtleback chandelier. A skylight has had to remain concealed on the top floor. An ornate glass and iron entrance canopy waits in the basement for funds. But Andrew Carnegie's mottos gleam brightly around the library walls with fresh gilt and Calvinist piety.

The obvious problem has been what to change and

*Continued on Page 33*

The New York Times/Neal Boenzi

"This is not only a very special collection, it is a very special place."

# Cooper-Hewitt

*Continued from Page 31*

where to stop. When Carnegie's organ was replaced with an elevator, the wall was redesigned with details invented to keep the hall stylistically intact. Where exhibition surface was wrested from Lincrusta walls, unbleached muslin was substituted between mahogany columns. A gilded ceiling long reduced to the indignity of radiator paint has simply been painted a neutral tone to match the muslin. One set of bedrooms has given way to an attractive long gallery. Carnegie's small private elevator has become a return air duct. At the same time, fire partitions have been carefully removed to reopen the grand stairs, as they were originally designed.

It becomes obvious that such a building, for such a use, cannot be "restored" with any real authenticity, except for those few areas that can be kept intact as public spaces. Decisions must be made by ear and by eye, by the rule of art and purpose, with license, but without violation. What has been done here is rational and sympathetic remodeling; the building has been returned to appropriate life.

The last Cooper-Hewitt exhibition of the museum's original drawings for John Nash's Brighton Pavilion was tucked into obscure showcases for the cognoscenti in the old building at Astor Place. The next Brighton Pavilion show is scheduled for the new building in February. This time the Queen is sending generous loans. Perseverance is its own reward.