Art

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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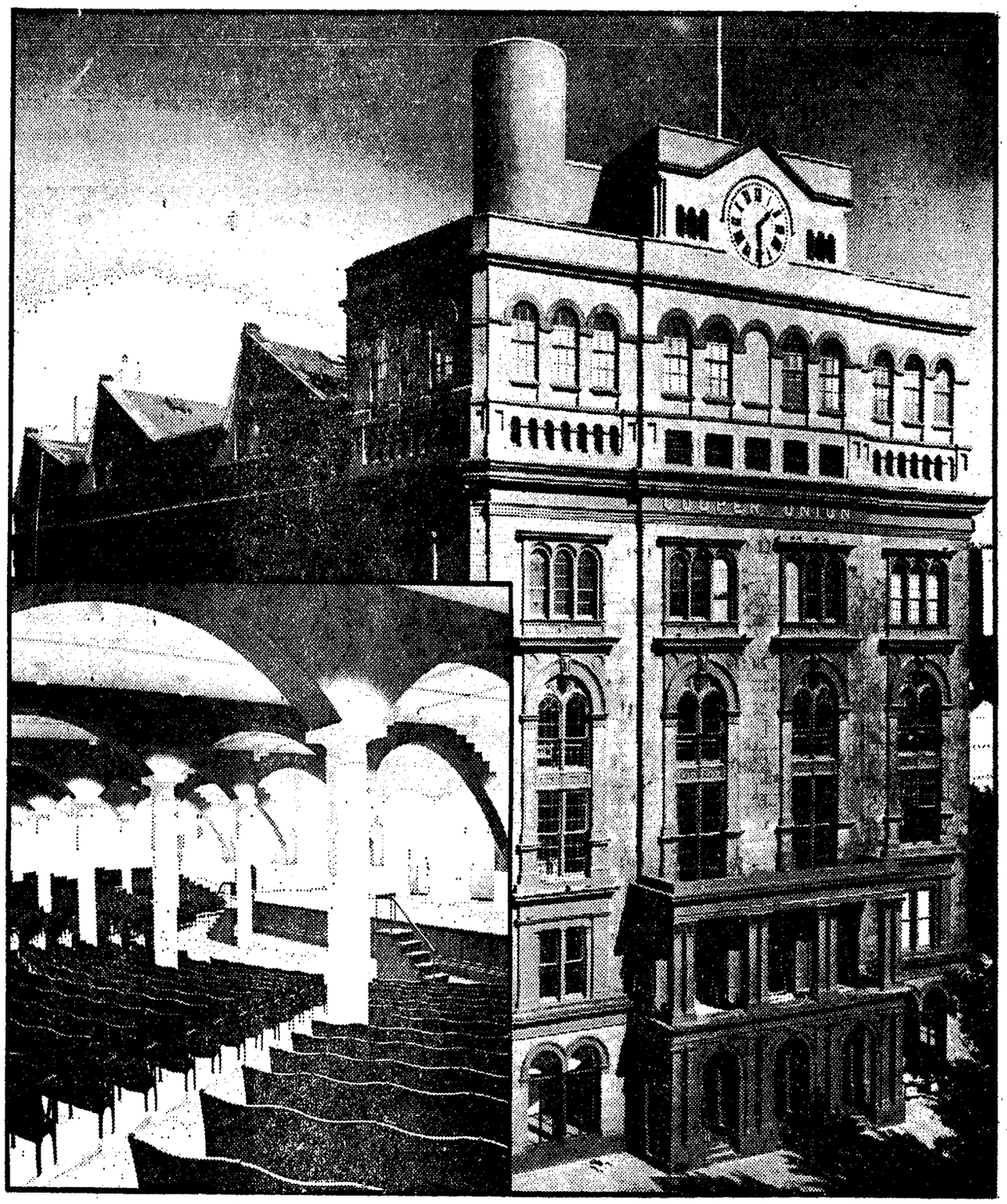
The New Cooper Union Still Evokes The Past



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"It's a tough old building." (John Hejduk)

PETER COOPER was a self-made man with a a fortune from glue and iron rails and a passionate attachment to New York. He founded and endowed the Cooper Union for the Advancement of the Arts and Sciences, a tuition-free school open to anyone of "good moral character," and housed it in the Foundation Building at Astor Place in the 1850's. At the time, the building stood for the most advanced 19th-century technology and style, in the structural use of early steel beams and in the Italianate chic of Fred A. Petersen's arcaded facade.

One hundred and fifteen years later the building had experienced a number of changes, including the addition of some extra stories that give a rather awkward proportion to the original scheme, and the gradual transformation of what must have been fairly straightforward interiors into a shabby maze. The cylindrical elevator shaft that Cooper so prophetically included for the future (he was sure that elevators would be round) had been given a rectangular cab, and visitors milled through a boiler room to get to the basement Great Hall, the setting of Lincoln's famous "Right is Might" speech. The building had been designated a city landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The School of Art and Architecture continued to occupy the Foundation Building, although the School of Engineering had gotten a dumb and ordinary (no compliment intended) new building across Seventh Street in the early 1960's.

A decade later, the Trustees, with President John F. White, decided to renovate the Foundation Building and commissioned the head of the Architecture School, John Hejduk (a Cooper Union architecture graduate) and Professor Peter Bruder (a Cooper Union engineering graduate) to do the job. The first intention was simply to clean it up and bring it up to code, but that involved so much work that logic dictated a more extensive and creative solution.

The rehabilitation, which was completed in the fall, has taken two years. There is still some shaking down going on in the first semester of use, but the operation was a success.

That success is notable on interlocking philosophical, esthetic and functional levels—in a way that comments significantly on the values implicit in the act of preservation. Mr. Hejduk has done more than present New York with a refurbished landmark and the school with efficient new quarters. He has asked some serious questions about use, history, art and continuity, and he has answered them visibly, with logic and style. The Cooper Union renovation is an outstanding example of the real meaning of preservation at a time when the "recycling" of older buildings of architectural merit is becoming increasingly common.

These are not simple questions, and Hejduk's thoughtful answers range through an assortment of strengths and subtleties. What he has done, in essence, it to put a new building in the old shell. The programming of that new plan is conceptually and spatially elegant. It is a modern solution that still manages to evoke the past, even though literal conservation has been sacrificed in many places. Compliance with current codes has hidden the fine, foliated cast-iron columns in sleek, fireproof plaster, and the original plan is recalled but transformed for contemporary uses. But what no longer exists is still suggested in spirit. Calculated new-old contrasts add an extra dimension to the building appropriately expressive of its 20th-century life.

A good old building should develop layers of esthetic meaning like the rings of a tree, continually enriched, rather than violated, by contemporary functions. This process does not include the abortive accretions of expediency, but the appropriate revisions of space and use. Pickling a la Williamsburg, or restricting restoration to the limited doctrine of "accurate reconstructon," is is actually an evasion of history. (There are some buildings of museum caliber, of course, where only this process will do.) That kind of preservation is a form of mercy killing.

In the new Cooper Union plan, studio spaces and "cells" are virtually where they were in the northern sector; the south end is still used for formal circulation. But there are significant differences. The space has been opened up for greater simplicity and a contemporary esthetic. What was dark is now flooded with light. What was closed and fragmented is now an expanded spatial geometry. Where stairs and walls have been moved, the round elevator shaft stands virtually as abstract sculpture, played against the light-filled drama of the Victorian windows.

The counterpoint of new and old is constant. The first two floors, housing the library and exhibition and administration space, are now treated as an intricate construct of volumes and planes no older than De Stijl and Le Corbusier. A play of partially opened and closed spaces is viewed from above and across through interior windows. Trompe l'oeil vistas appear flat and painterly at first, and then resolve themselves progressively in three dimensions. On the top floor, one wall of the "Peter Cooper suite" is the floor-to-ceiling translucent glass face of the building's old clock, with the 19th-century works poised like freestanding art in front of it.

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"It's a tough old building," Mr. Hejduk says with obvious affection. "I wanted to keep the feeling, which ran from Palladian to industrial, from bottom to top. It was good, solid stuff." It also has extraordinary scale and an unreproduceable generosity of proportions and ceiling heights. This amplitude is emphasized by bright, white loft spaces dimensioned by forests of columns on their original modules.

The structural work, by the Fuller Construction Company, was an engineering spectacular. The south end of the building was gutted, and the exterior walls were temporarily braced from outside. For a while this "cathedral" space "found" inside was astounding. (The cast-iron columns discarded from the reworked south end disconcerted a number of watchful observers unaware of the total scheme.)

On the north end, two floors of bearing walls were removed to accommodate the library. The original framing above these walls was literally jacked up to remove the load while new structural steel was inserted. Then the old cast-iron columns on the upper floors were realigned. The building still rests on the original granite arches and cast-iron columns of the restored and updated Great Hall.

Cooper Union is now the best of both worlds. Its "Renaissance" shell is intact. And the clarity and detail of the consciously sophisticated modernism of the interiors speaks of the creative continuity of history and art. Almost symbolically, Peter Cooper's round elevator shaft is finally fitted with a stainless steel tube. "My joy is boundless," says Mr. Hejduk.