

## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Once

# There Was a Palace On 42d Street

**T**here is a charming and edifying small exhibition in the Mall of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York at 33 West 42d Street that affords—in New York's own throwaway fashion—several casually related pleasures. Called "The Crystal Palace on 42d Street, 1853-54: A Graphic Presentation," the show celebrates an early and short-lived landmark of the 42d Street area; the Crystal Palace burned in 1858 after a rapid slide from high hopes to economic disaster.

The exhibition consists of photographic enlargements of prints of the building that was America's first world's fair, a giant greenhouse modeled after London's enormously successful 1851 Crystal Palace exposition. Called "The Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations," the New York version, like its predecessor, was dedicated to the marvels of technology and the arts. Blandly heroic statues of children about to be plucked by eagles from half-draped mothers were packed next to reapers and sewing machines and grand pianos in what was fondly believed, in the spirit of the times, to be a union of Art and Industry. An easy walk through the Mall offers a capsule representation of the Victorian mind and taste. (What to make of a popular sculpture of obviously wretched, caged cupids?)

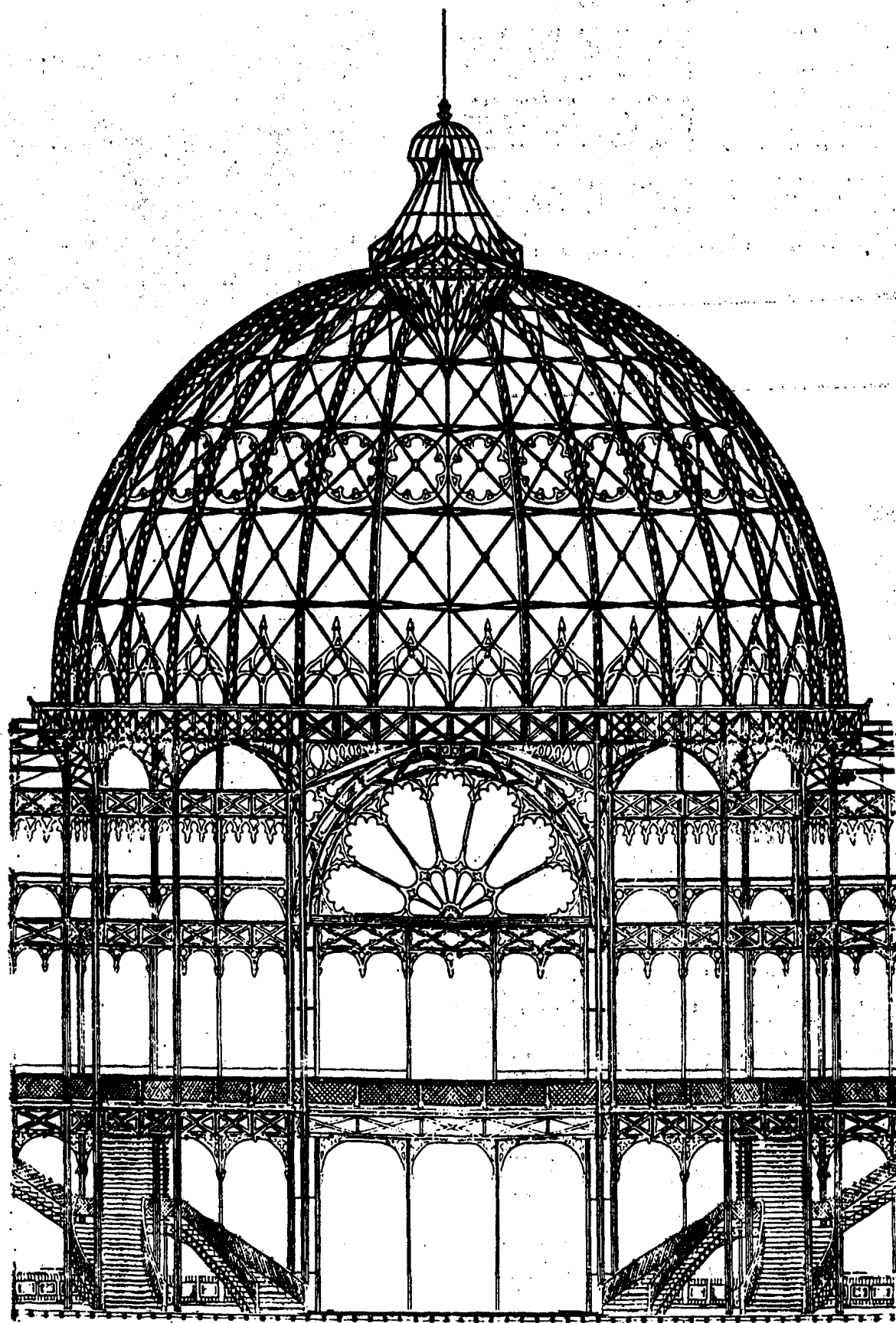
The striking glass and iron building stood for five years in what was then called Reservoir Square at 42d Street, almost directly across the street from the current presentation. It shared the site with the Croton Reservoir. In the 1850's this was all the way uptown, at the uppermost point of Manhattan's development. Today, it is Bryant Park.

Bryant Park is lovely at this time of year. (This is the first of the peripheral pleasures of seeing the show, and they are not at all unrelated in terms of the urban experience.)

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# Art

"Sugarman's work, at its best, is like that of Calder—gregarious and playful." (James R. Mellow)



The Crystal Palace, which burned to the ground in 1858

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The trees arch airily overhead in a formal pattern grown graceful with age. This oasis, on a scale unachievable at today's midtown land prices, is presided over serenely at its east end by the landmark that replaced the glass and iron Crystal Palace slightly more than a half-century later—the Public Library.

That superb Beaux Arts monument by Carrere and Hastings, rich in solid woods and marbles and unstinting of the craftsman's skills, is now up for interior landmark designation at the same time that Bryant Park is being considered for scenic landmark designation. Raymond Hood's black and gold American Radiator Building (now American Standard), a small Art Deco "skyscraper" of 1924 on the 40th Street side of the park, has also been recommended for listing.

So before entering the Mall, we recommend that you savor a few of these New York treasures—detour through the library's grand spaces and walk through Bryant Park for that refreshing moment of sylvan repose in the city's frenetic heart and then cross 42d Street to the Graduate Center and the show. (Both the exhibition and the catalogue have been prepared by Linda Hyman, a graduate student.)

The show's Mall setting provides another extra. It is a New York specialty—the offhand, there-to-take-it-when-you-wish pleasure. It is also a genuine civic amenity. The Mall is actually the entire ground floor, or what would be the ground floor, of the building, opened up as a well-designed pedestrian promenade through the structure. (This is an example of one way a smart city handles high density.) You can take the passage from 42d to 43d Street as a direct route or a nice detour, complete with music, edification and incidental delight.

There is another pleasure to be had from the Mall for those who stop to think about things that come under the heading of sensitivity to the urban environment. The Graduate Center, properly called the Graduate School and University Center, is one of New York's most successfully recycled buildings, the old Aeolian Hall and Piano Building of 1912. Through skillful conversion in 1970, it now serves the City University with character and style.

There are felicities of design that include the

retention of the original ornate bronze elevator doors, darkened to match new bronze-framed (not imitation anodized aluminum) glass entrance doors from the Mall, and a Dining Commons, open to the public, on the 18th floor (where the exhibition continues with original prints) that is unique in its rejection of false pubbery. Credits go to Dean Marilyn Mikulsky working with the architect, Carl J. Petrilli, and design and project architects Samuel J. DeSanto and David Taylor.

Now that you've seen the show and the building and walked through the Mall and maybe had a bite to eat, turn left on 43d Street for an object lesson in what not to do to a city. Next to the Graduate Center is a conspicuous slope-sided building, and we have inveighed before on its outrageously aggressive lack of sympathetic relationship to the street and the people.

The architect, Gordon Bunshaft, and his firm, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, have had to take some well-earned hard knocks lately for similar environmental transgressions against city and man. (Paradoxically, Mr. Bunshaft's rural corporate headquarters are often as good as his city designs are bad.) But the sizable plaza that he has appended to this building at the corner of 43d Street and the Avenue of the Americas is so relentlessly sterile and hostile that it has been a motivating factor in the city's current attempt to change its zoning rules for open space design. (Someone must be doing something wrong, if it has to be legislated against.) Bryant Park, just one block south, is an Olympian rebuke.

One block to the west is the Times Square area, still remarkable for its vitality in spite of its seamy clutter of porn-junk. Deterioration, aided by such boy scout acts as the Franklin Savings Bank's demolition of one of the few quality anchors in the neighborhood, its substantial stone and bronze ex-headquarters (the scaffolding is up), speeds a decline that New York cannot afford.

On the bright side, a health insurance company has bought the abandoned McGraw-Hill Building on West 42d Street, which will bring new life to another of Raymond Hood's skyscraper masterpieces. The Department of Midtown Planning and Development is advancing schemes through the bureaucracy that include a Broadway Mall (the greening of Broadway?) and an attractive tourist center. But the current hesitance of New York's financial institutions to back John Portman's proposed Times Square hotel can tip the area irretrievably. It is a matter of conscience as well as cash. This one new landmark could lift Times Square from sordid to spectacular.

Things were apparently not very different on 42d Street 130 years ago. On the empty lots surrounding the Crystal Palace, we are told, "there quickly appeared side-shows, gambling dens and other haunts of dissipation"—the porn-junk of the 1850's. The lessons of the past are self-evident. The historian is the true-believer in the future.

"The Crystal Palace on 42d Street, 1853-54: A Graphic Presentation," through Nov. 18. Open Monday through Friday from 9 A.M. to 6 P.M., Saturday, 11 A.M. to 3 P.M.