ARCHITECTURAL MASTERPIECE TURNS FIFTY  

by Ogden Tanner

May 23rd marks the fiftieth anniversary, to the day, that President William Howard Taft dedicated Carrère and Hastings' magnificent New York Public Library building at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street. To celebrate the occasion, the library staff plans a three-day series of functions starting with outdoor ceremonies at noon and continuing with various testimonials and social events.

To New York's architectural fraternity, the main library should be a source of particular civic pride. Beside housing one of the world's finest Art and Architecture collections, it is among the foremost examples of early 20th Century "modern Renaissance" architecture in America. In an ever-crowding city its open spaces, promenades and park-like rest areas are increasingly becoming more cherished.

The Library was built on the site of the old Croton Reservoir, and some of the original stonework is contained in its foundation. Its design and construction spanned some fourteen years, and as Harper's Magazine observed at the time of its completion: "Few buildings in any time have been planned with greater patience and foresight, or have been executed with more technical care and refinement."

Every fragment of the building, after thorough study, was drawn first in quarter scale, then three-quarter scale and finally in full scale. Carrère and Hastings produced nearly 10,000 sketches and some 6,000 finished drawings. The remarkable precision of its construction is such that (it has been said), a two-block long knife edge passed horizontally through any seam of mortar would cut clearly through the entire building dividing corresponding seams in the exterior columns, piers and interior walls.

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A TIME FOR DOING

The citizens of the United States are slowly becoming the champions of "gobbledygook." Perhaps we've already made it. Some even say that Russia is going to beat us in this race too. However, it's high time that we stop for a moment to ask ourselves "why so many words?"

Right now, in our troubled world, we must resolve what are those basic values, principles and rights that are necessary to maintain our freedoms and human dignity. Not only for our national purpose but for our architectural profession, our community and even for our family.

Somehow these programs we determine rarely get started when it comes to assembling the "team." This happens because we as individuals dislike adjusting certain privileges and vested rights acquired over time, only because of basic insecurity concerning the unknowns of the future. We prefer to hold on to what we are accustomed to; we are familiar with it; it's safe!

And so in order to play it safe, we use words, we complain, we question, we reserve our decisions, we abstain. Now if ever there was a time for doing. It is now! It is time for each and everyone of us to become fully alert, fully responsible as citizens, as architects to decide what we want, what we need, and to proceed to work toward these basic goals.

Many may ask where we can look for direction. The directions are here—as long as one keeps his eyes open—to his responsibilities. There have been just recently the Columbia series, the League Symposiums and other lectures, articles and programs.

From these activities and reports should come a plan of action. Once these are determined we must rally to support them fully by active and dedicated participation.

King Mohammed V of Morocco, who died recently, was credited with the following opinion: "Americans confuse education with wisdom. They confuse money with intelligence. They confuse sex with love. And they confuse plumbing with civilization."

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Senate Bill

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water pollution, and assistance to blighted downtown areas.

A significant gap in this assumption of responsibility — and one which tends to negate the value of such programs — has existed until now in governmental neglect of our growing urban problems.

The interest of the nation’s architects in S-345 lies primarily in its promise to fill this serious gap in the government’s program for restoration and effective development of our urban areas. Specifically, we see in this legislation an important means of relating transportation to the comprehensive plan for community redevelopment. Traffic cannot be considered as a separate and isolated problem. It does not generate itself, but derives from the uses of land for the design and construction of buildings. To provide any community with the vitality, economic health, and beauty which are the goals of large-scale urban architecture, efficient land use, access, storage, and movement of people and goods must be planned as elements in a single problem.

Especially praiseworthy in this legislation is its concept of planning grants “for areas embracing several municipalities or other political subdivisions.” The problems of effective transportation are not confined to single political entities within a metropolitan area. The social and economic health of an entire area depend upon the rational and orderly development of the whole.

AIA therefore favors the intent of S-345 to “authorize the Administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency to assist State and local governments and their public instrumentalities in planning and providing for necessary community facilities to preserve and improve essential mass transportation services in urban and metropolitan areas,” and commends its emphasis on the relationship of mass transit development to “housing, urban renewal, and other land use developments in urban and metropolitan areas” and its proposal that such development be “an integral part of comprehensive plans for the land use development of the area as a whole.”

Masterpiece

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The building contains some two hundred rooms and halls, and is noted for spacious reading rooms and attendant artwork. Perhaps the most famous are the lions flanking the main steps, created by Edward C. Potter.

Over some four million books, nine million manuscripts, fifty thousand phonograph records, a quarter million maps are contained in one of the largest research collections in the world. The original cost of the building was $9,000,000.

Coming Events

MAY 1, 1961, Monday, 7:00 p.m., Rotunda of Low Memorial Library, Columbia University
“Homage to Great Makers”
Chairman: Professor Fitch, Columbia University
Dinner for Dr. Gropius, Dr. Mies van der Rohe, Dr. LeCorbusier under the joint sponsorship of The American Institute of Architects—New York Chapter, Architectural League of New York, and Columbia Architectural Association—Cost of Ticket $16.00

MAY 8, 1961, Monday, 5:15 p.m., Gallery A
Lecture by Victor O. Schinnerer
Insurance Consultant
AIA Committee on Professional Insurance
Topic: Professional Liability Insurance

MAY 11, 1961, Monday, 5:15 p.m., Gallery A
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MAY 11, 1961, Thursday, 12:30 p.m., Gallery A
School Committee Luncheon
Speaker: Dean Charles R. Colbert
Columbia University School of Architecture

MAY 11, 1961, Thursday, 6:00 p.m., Brass Rail, 521 Fifth Avenue, New York City
Hospital and Health Dinner Meeting
Topic: “A Synopsis of the Planning of the New Bellevue Hospital Center”
Speaker: Mr. Albert B. Bauer, R.A.
Director of Division of Buildings
City of New York
Department of Public Works

MAY 17, 1961, Wednesday, 5:15 p.m., Gallery A
Hospital and Health Discussion Group
Film: “Positive Patient Safety through Simplified O. R. Nursing Techniques by American Cyanamid Co. and discussion with Miss M. V. Schwendeman, R.N., Nurse Consultant, American Cyanamid

MAY 23, 1961, Tuesday, 5:15 p.m., Gallery A
Technical Committee Lecture
Speaker: Mr. Paul Weidlinger, Structural Engineer
Topic: Aluminum and its Architectural Structural Application (The Emphasis is on Particularly Large Spans)

JUNE 7, 1961, Wednesday, 12:30 p.m., Gallery A
Annual Luncheon for the Election of Officers and Elective Committees
House Consulting Committee

Where are those Brownstones?

Mortimer Freehof, acting chairman of the House Consulting Committee would like members who are interested in submitting their solutions for the competition of Brownstone renovations to get in touch with the committee. A tentative date of May 22 was set for judging entries, and Olindo Grossi has been asked to serve as chairman of the jury.

Glen Fowler of the New York Times attended a luncheon meeting of the House Consulting Committee which was reported to be a lively “give and take” affair. The committee suggested to Fowler that the Real Estate section of the Times has been showing the poorer side of Architecture. The meeting concluded with a promise from him that he will cooperate with the profession and attempt to publish the better side of architecture in the future.

Legislative Committee

Harry Rutkins, chairman of the Legislative Committee reported that the “Corporate Practice” bills were killed in the New York State Assembly and barring any last minute action on the part of the Senate, the bills are believed dead. As in previous years, the letters written to the legislators expressing strong opposition to the measures were instrumental in stopping the passage of these bills.

A bill permitting the waiving of certain qualifications for the architects’ licensing requirements for persons who have practiced for more than 15 years, with the State Association’s recommendations, was defeated.

Another bill, permitting the open-type unenclosed parking structure or carport is being revised to include the New York State Association of Architects’ recommendations and is expected to be acted upon shortly.

Chairman Rutkins informed the Committee that the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn has been retained by the New York Building Congress and other builder-contractor groups to study the necessity for revision of the New York Building Code. The study is expected to include recommendations on the desirability of rewriting the code, the desirable type of code (performance vs. specification), code format, method of accomplishment of any recommended rewriting, estimated cost of rewriting and estimated time necessary for rewriting.

Among the bills reviewed by the Committee was legislation on the corporate practice of engineers. This is definitely opposed by the New York State Society of Professional Engineers. In addition to this bill, there was legislation permitting any professional person to practice through partnership or corporation. This bill is also definitely opposed since it would permit incorporation of all professions.

Office Practice Briefs

Professional Liability Insurance:

No longer being written by Fidelity Casualty, Lloyds of London continues to write coverage above that normally covered. Continental Casualty (A.I.A recommended) continues to write this coverage.

Plan Review by Insurance Rating Bureau:

Submission of plans during working drawing phase to owner’s insurance representative may result in lower insurance rates if suggestions made by them can be incorporated.

Coordination of Architectural, Structural, Mechanical and Electrical Drawings:

Some architectural offices require submission of design schematics from consulting engineers in early stages of preliminary design, and have found this to be very beneficial.

Civic Design Committee

Simon Breines, Civic Design Committee Chairman reviewed the progress of the sub-committees’ work and announced that sufficient headway had been made to warrant Chapter meetings this spring on the city’s new Zoning Amendment, the Master Plan and on the Urban Renewal Program.