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METROPOLITAN DESK

Updating a Bookish Aristocrat; City's Main Library Adapts Itself for a Computer Age

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Behind two massive, rosette-studded doors, temporarily sealed from the eyes -- and ears -- of readers, the Main Reading Room of the New York Public Library resonates with the rapping, whining and screeching of hammers, drills and saws.

Accompanied by Elton John on a raspy radio, workers this week were patching the creamy old marble floors and treating the bronze frames of the new audiovisual carrels. Every moment counts. The enormous chamber is to reopen Nov. 16 after a \$15 million, 16-month renovation.

Even now, the sweep of the transformation is plain to see. No longer a crumbling expanse of shadows, the 297-foot-long ceiling seems to open to the heavens through three newly painted trompe l'oeil murals. Clouds float beneath a cornflower-blue sky; some look like puffs of pink cotton candy, others like roiled gray-green ocean swells.

"We're dressing up an aristocratic dowager for her 90th birthday and making her look better than she did at her debut," said Lewis Davis of Davis Brody Bond, the architects responsible for the renovation of the Fifth Avenue building, known formally as the Center for the Humanities.

The paint has scarcely dried on the murals, but the library is already planning its next big project: the first significant above-ground addition since the building opened in 1911.

The \$15 million addition will be a building within a building, filling much of the open-air South Court, which is now used for deliveries and parking. The new six-level structure will include a training center where the public can learn how to use the library's expanding electronic resources. Groundbreaking -- or, more accurately, asphalt-breaking -- is to take place next year, with completion expected by the end of 2000.

As different as the Reading Room and South Court projects seem, there is a common thread: bringing the Beaux-Arts library fully into the information age.

"The key word in our plan is access," said Marshall Rose, the chairman of the library. "Access to the building. Access to computers. Access to knowledge."

The library, designed by Carrere & Hastings, opened a decade before the first long-distance television transmission, two decades before photocopying was invented, four decades before the first commercially successful computer and five decades before the Internet was started.

"The trick is to take a building with walls that are three feet thick and make it

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smart, make it hum, make it user friendly," said Paul LeClerc, the library president. "We would like to turn over the building to the next generation in a fresh, refurbished and wired condition."

He means that literally. In the Main Reading Room, most of the carved oak tables have been wired with 16 electrical outlets and data ports, one for each seat. They are arranged in bronze grommets set flush into the tabletop, alternating with the classic bronze reading lamps.

To avoid cutting through the marble and the red Welsh quarry tiles in the floor, workers ran the wires through conduits in the ceiling of the book stacks below the Reading Room and threaded them directly into the pedestal of each table.

The tables themselves have been stripped and refinished as part of the renovation.

No attempt was made either to restore or replicate the original ceiling murals by James Wall Finn, which were badly marred by chalky patches caused by leaks. "This isn't fine art," Mr. Davis explained. "This is decorative art."

Instead, Mr. Davis said, he studied Tiepolo, Tintoretto, Turner and others to learn the secrets of a beautiful sky. The overall restoration of the ceiling was undertaken by the EverGreene Painting Studios of Manhattan. The canvas panels composing the murals, each one 36 feet by 18 feet, were painted by Yohannes Aynalem and then affixed to the ceiling.

The cost of renovating the Main Reading Room was met by the real-estate developer Frederick P. Rose and his wife, Sandra Priest Rose, a library trustee. (Frederick and Marshall Rose are not related, although Marshall's daughter, Wendi, is married to Frederick's nephew, Joseph B. Rose, the chairman of the City Planning Commission.)

Just below the Reading Room's arched windows, and invisible from the street, will be the new South Court addition, set back three feet from the surrounding walls of the courtyard. Its floors will be more like platforms, reached by small bridges cut through existing window openings in the library that have been enlarged to serve as doorways.

The new addition will have 28,400 square feet of space, enough for orientation and training centers, offices, meeting rooms, a loading dock at street level and a staff cafeteria underground.

A band of glass extending around the perimeter of the sixth level of the new structure will turn most of the courtyard into a kind of atrium. The ornate exterior walls of white Danby marble, cleaned and repointed, will become interior walls.

Rather than looking out through these walls, the attraction will be looking at them.

"It is, all of a sudden, going to open a new facade that has never been visible to anybody," Marshall Rose said.

The \$10 million construction cost of the South Court project is being paid by New York City, largely through the efforts of Speaker Peter F. Vallone of the City Council. The \$5 million needed to equip the addition will be raised privately.

"To me, it's the cathedral of all libraries," Mr. Vallone said. "I was a little concerned about taking away the open space, but they figured out a way to preserve that concept while at the same time fulfilling very important needs."

Community Board 5 was also worried about filling in the courtyard and asked the library to "explore off-site or underground facilities that might help to reduce the size of the proposed building."

But Mr. LeClerc said the orientation and training centers had to be built within the main building, especially for disabled patrons. And he said it would not be practical to excavate deeper than one level.

The South Court is largely unknown to the public, although it can be glimpsed through an archway on 40th Street, from the Slavic and Baltic Division on the second floor, from a balcony on the stairway to the third floor and, according to informed sources, from the women's room on the third floor.

In early years, the courtyard was used by the staff for recreational and social events, according to a report by Higgins & Quasebarth, historic preservation consultants. There was a marble fountain and marble horse trough. A trellis-covered bungalow was added in 1919 as a "rest and luncheon room" for employees.

The fountain was demolished in 1950. The bungalow will be razed to make way for the new structure.

Thought was given in the early 1980's to building an addition in the South Court, Mr. Rose said, but other projects intervened.

The first was the opportunity in the 1980's to link an expansion of the book stacks under Bryant Park with the renovation of the park itself. Then came the opportunity to buy 213,000 square feet on the Madison Avenue side of the old B. Altman & Company store at 34th Street for use as the Science, Industry and Business Library, which opened in 1996.

At the science and business library, about 40,000 readers have been taught how to use electronic resources, Mr. LeClerc said. That offered a model for the Fifth Avenue training center.

"You can't expect people to know how to use all this technology," Mr. LeClerc said. "We realized we had to create an orientation center with a suite of classrooms for the public to learn how to use the computers that the building would be packed with."

The South Court project was approved unanimously by the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission.

"We worked with them on the concept of an infill building floating in the courtyard, so that the image remains that of a courtyard," said the commission chairwoman, Jennifer J. Raab.

"Every time someone tells me you can't adopt an historic building to modern needs," she said, "I point to the library."

Photo: In the oak tables of the New York Public Library's Main Reading Room, workers have installed brass grommets with outlets for patrons' computers. (Jack Manning/The New York Times)

Map showing Manhattan, W. 40th Street, location of library:

Chart: "Expanding Inward"

The New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue plans to build a \$15 million addition within its South Court. The six-level structure will cover 28,400 square feet and contain a center to train patrons to use the library's electronic resources. To preserve the building's landmark architecture, the structure will stand three feet away from the original exterior walls and connect to the main building by small bridges. A band of glass will turn most of the courtyard into an atrium-like space. (Source: Davis Brody Bond)