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NYU right on with Bobst renovations

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Posted: 9/20/04

Bobst Library is open for business once again.

It never actually closed, of course, but in the year since two students fell to their deaths in the atrium, a dark cloud has loomed over an already shadowy building.

As the new year gets underway, students are now taking their first look at the newly renovated lower levels and first floor reference area. By almost any account, the results are magnificent.

When NYU first announced plans to renovate Bobst, it released few details, and many students probably thought it would just amount to a few added computers and a fresh coat of paint.

But the basement levels are nearly unrecognizable. What was once a stuffy, dark place where stressed students toiled until their eyes sealed shut is now a bright and modern resource center and lounge.

"I thought I was in the wrong place," said CAS sophomore Morgan Vortrefflich, describing her first time downstairs this fall.

While university officials said they were updating Bobst for the 21st century, the most significant improvement by far is that the library feels much more inviting to students.

"It was really depressing," Vortrefflich said. "I look forward to coming here now. It felt like a cage before."

The deaths had a scarring effect on the library, both in their unprecedented nature and the gruesome images they conjured. Though by no means did they empty the library, many students were hesitant about going back to Bobst - and some said they have not been back at all.

If nothing else, the new look gives all students, faculty and staff members a reason to return to the library, the anchor of the NYU campus for three decades.

While the change is dramatic, it marks only the first phase of a larger project to renovate the entire building.

Students can expect similarly extensive changes to the upper floors, Dean of Libraries Carol Mandel said. But unlike the lower levels, those changes won't appear as drastic. Architects had more freedom to redesign the lower levels, because unlike the 12 above-ground floors, they do not open visually onto the atrium.

"It's a very carefully contrived building," Mandel said of Bobst, which was designed in the 1960s by Philip Johnson and Richard Foster. "On the upper floors, we're going to have to be clever."

There is no timetable for the next phases, but Mandel said the upper floors would eventually resemble

the first-floor reference area, rather than the refurbished basement.

Whereas students could hardly recognize the lower levels, the changes to the reference area are just as extensive, but more subtle and seamless, Mandel said. With a central reference desk, aisles of work stations and a glass-encased study area, the space was overhauled, but it feels like it had always been that way.

After last fall's tragedies, NYU faced a compound challenge to immediately address the deaths and the image - even perceived danger - they brought to Bobst, while continuing with long-planned renovations. Administrators installed protective Lexan paneling around the balconies, providing a hasty - if necessary - response that officials now admit will only be temporary.

"We know that the [Lexan] walls are not there forever," Mandel said.

More recently, NYU added scattered seating and plants to the atrium, Mandel said. This, too, is a limited fix. But it is at least an indication that administrators are finally coming to grips with what the library has come to represent.

"It's a very austere space, and we're trying to make it less austere," Mandel said.

The atrium notwithstanding, the refurbished lower levels suggest NYU is on a promising course with Bobst, and the shadows are slowly receding. The renovated areas are light, state-of-the-art and, most importantly, inviting. The gigantic building has a long way to go, but so far, NYU has gotten it just right.

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