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Grandeur and Modernity in New Library

By PAUL GOLDBERGER

There are no Corinthian columns, no ornate coffered ceilings, and the grand staircase is of stainless steel and terrazzo rather than marble. No lions guard the door. But the new Science, Industry and Business Library of the New York Public Library, which is to be dedicated this morning at Madison Avenue and 34th Street, is every bit as grand, in its way, as the library's great main building at Fifth Avenue and 42d Street.

It is just that the grandeur is of a late-20th-century sort: less a matter of grandeur than of comfort; less of sprawling physical space than of accessible cyberspace.

The new \$100 million library, which occupies roughly 160,000 square feet in the former B. Altman building, is the largest single project the library has undertaken since the construction of its landmark main building was completed in 1911. It unites all of the library's various collections of scientific, technological, mathematical and business material, which had been divided between 42d Street and the library's West Side annex, and places them in a new environment that is itself a showpiece of technology.

The Science, Industry and Business Library, which will open to the public on May 2, is intended for use by both the general public and business people, with special attention to the needs of smaller businesses that do not have their own research facilities. But it also has a wider goal, which is to serve as a prototype for a whole new level of computerized access at the library. There are about 250 computers on the premises, as well as 500 work stations equipped for visitors with laptops: the main reading room is really a vast computer docking station.

The presence of technology is clear from the moment visitors pass through the door. Kiosks holding interactive computer screens offer everything from general information to a video introduction to the library. For the casual browser, there is even an onscreen history of the building, the grandiose Italian palazzo by Trowbridge & Livingston that was built by Benjamin Altman from 1906 to 1913 and housed his department store until it closed in 1990.

Serious researchers can move on to a card catalogue that is entirely computerized, and sit at computer terminals (on Herman Miller's dazzlingly high-tech "Aeron" chairs) where book requests are printed out. SIBL, the acronym for the library, also contains a circulating branch for science, technology and business books, separate from the main research collections.

The library is so oriented to making technology inviting and accessible that it even has classrooms in which free introductory courses to computer usage will be offered -- the equivalent of adult literacy classes of times past. Technology rules here, but the goal of this institution is to prove that it can be a benign dictator.

Lest all this interactivity make SIBL seem like yet another attempt to turn the city into a theme park, the architecture gives the new library a firm and solid grounding. The collection's 1.2 million books and publications are housed in an architectural environment that manages to walk a delicate line between respect for the traditional library ambiance and an expression of the sleek, light forms associated with the computer age.

The architects, Charles Gwathmey and Robert Siegel of the firm of Gwathmey Siegel, along with their associate Jacob Alspector, avoided the easy gesture of designing SIBL as a pure celebration of technology; this place may be sleek compared with the old library at 42d Street, but a high-tech loft it's not.

Indeed, the atmosphere is more high-end corporate than downtown new media. There is no glitz here. Mr. Gwathmey and Mr. Siegel have carved out of the southeast corner of the vast building a series of spaces that have a kind of classic modernism to them, updated to acknowledge that this is the 1990's but characterized by the same combination of luxurious materials and extraordinary attention to detail that has always marked their work.

The mood is refined; hard-edged enough to seem crisp and sharp, soft enough to feel inviting. There is lots of oak paneling, plenty of stainless steel and glass, and expanses of gray terrazzo, all of which come together to make public spaces that feel like the splendid lobby these same architects designed a few years ago for the Morgan Stanley skyscraper at Broadway and 47th Street.

But this is no lobby, intended to momentarily excite; this library has to appeal to visitors hour after hour, and to staff for years. It gives every indication of being able to do so, with an appealing blend of dignity and efficiency: a businesslike workplace with a sense of permanence.

The allure of this design begins on the street: B. Altman's old windows have been opened up, and expanses of glass offer a view from both Madison Avenue and 34th Street into the new library's main hall, a two-story space incorporating the street level and the former basement level. By day, natural light pours into the space; at night, the lighted space reveals not just the presence of the library, but uses the activity within to enliven the street.

The main hall has been named in memory of Timothy Healy, the former president of the library and the man who initiated the SIBL project with Marshall Rose, now the library's chairman emeritus. There is a sense everywhere of bright openness: in the entry lobby, with a high, undulating wall filled with quotations about business; in the glass and metal elevator enclosure; in the terrazzo and stainless steel stair that takes visitors to the main hall and reading room that are one level below the street but that feel as filled with light and air as a penthouse.

The old Altman's was the first great retail palace on Fifth Avenue, and it remains among the finest buildings of its kind in New York. That it was lost to its original use is a sadness -- what New Yorker past the age of 30 does not miss B. Altman, the last department store that could be described as genteel? -- but nowhere in New York is there better proof of the adaptability of fine old buildings to new uses than this one.

After all, Altman's interior was really just sprawling loft space, ideally suited to new uses like the library. Indeed, this whole project is elegant and eloquent testament to the synthesis of old and new: the house of 21st-century technology set within an early-20th-century limestone palace. The real landmark here was the outside, not the inside. Magnificently restored, the facade looks better now than it probably has at any time in the last 75 years.

Another tenant at the Madison Avenue end of this blocklong building is Oxford University Press, and City University has just taken over the Fifth Avenue side to build a new graduate center, giving the whole building a more literary and academic air than the real-estate developers who purchased it some years ago could ever have expected. (They had planned to fill the building with office and showroom space.) This project is a victory not only for library users, but for the whole city: a landmark restored to the public realm.