AN IDEA FOR A LIBRARY

by

Mark Robinson Sheeleigh

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APPROVED:

William W. Brown, Chairman

Scott Poole  Salahuddin Choudhury

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This project arises as a result of carefully considered variations on themes of an established model. The thesis uses Michelangelo's Biblioteca Laurentiana as the basis for a new library in New York City.

This use of an historical precedent can be seen as the desire for continuity, and as an expression of a belief in the themes of recurrence and constancy in history.
In addition to my committee members, I wish to acknowledge the assistance of [insert names] in making this work.
"...we speak of a self-beautiful and of a good that is only and merely good, and so, in the case of all the things that we then posited as many, we turn about and posit each as a single idea or aspect, assuming it to be a unity and call it that which it really is.

"And the one class of things we say can be seen but not thought, while the ideas can be thought but not seen."

Plato
Republic, Book VI
In the Laurentian Library (Florence, 1524), Michelangelo used the journey through the library as a metaphor for a journey through man's existence. The division of the library into three distinct spaces conforms to the classical division of body, mind, and spirit.

The first space, the ricetto or stair hall, is representative of the imprisonment of the soul within the body. Filled with overscaled elements and columns pressed into enclosing walls, the space speaks of conflict. This is man's natural state, a seemingly unbearable state. The room's most prominent feature, a stairway, spills out of the main hall above and offers the visitor a means of escape from the disturbances around him.
The second space, the main hall, is representative of rational thought and of the power of knowledge to order experience. Consequently, the hall is highly rhythmic, with columns engaged in walls separating windows and defining spaces for desks which hold the library's manuscripts. The columns repeat down the length of the hall and end in a doorway to the piccola libreria.

This final space, a triangular room which was not built, was to have held the library's most valuable books, and represented the transcendence of order into divine unity. Here the issue of the spirit was addressed through the selection of rare books arranged around a central reading desk.
The tripartite division of the library into spatial units each with its own character, and corresponding to a subdivision of man's existence into interrelated realms, serves as the basis for the library illustrated here.

The new library is situated in Greenwich Village in Manhattan on the southern edge of Washington Square. This area of New York City has housed, over time, a staggering amalgam of artists, writers, and intellectuals. It is an area of tenements, welfare hotels, industrial lofts, town houses, and mansions, and today the residents reflect this cultural and physical diversity.

Washington Square, at the center of the Village, is bordered on the North by a stately row of Greek Revival town houses known since the nineteenth century as The Row. To the West are several high-rise apartment buildings, and the South and East sides are home to New York University law, media and mathematics buildings. It is amongst these last buildings that the library is set.

In the entry space, the visitor is confronted by convex curving walls and a low ceiling. Beyond the nearest wall, a bust can be glimpsed in light coming from the floor above. The nearest wall bears an inscription which identifies the library as a monument to four residents of #61 Washington Square South, the so-called "House of Genius," which previously stood on this site.

Stepping around the near wall and into the light, four busts are revealed: Willa Cather, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, and O. Henry, the former residents of #61 Washington Square South. Turning away from the busts, a great window appears directly ahead up steep steps which curve inward.

At the top of the steps the window is very close and there is a view out to Washington Square. Now in the main hall, books can be seen through small openings in heavy walls that flank the space and lead to the doorway of a large cylinder. Light pours from the cylinder into the hall.

In the cylinder a great amount of light filters down from the ceiling where an array of trusses and a shallow glass lens cap the space. Below, a succession of balconies leads to a small cylinder—the housing for the library's computer.

From here the rest of the library is accessible by leaving the cylinder to enter the stacks to either side. Passing through the stacks leads to reading rooms which overlook the park.
EAST ELEVATION
"As to the chapel at the head of the Library, he [the Pope] does not want chapels, but wishes that it should be a secret Library to hold certain books more precious than the others."

Giovanfrancesco Fattucci
(Agent to the papal office)
Beauty is in us naturally; as we are a part of Nature, so we can make beautiful all that we set our hands to. The bird's song is beautiful not because the bird makes it so but because the bird and his song conform to the laws of all that Nature has put around us. The engineer makes beautiful things because he must follow the laws of Nature in order to build.

We are all of us born into these laws and possess an inherent affinity for line and proportion. If we simply follow what is within us we will make beautiful things.

Art is not beauty; it may be beautiful, but it need not be. Art is the translation of Idea into physical form. It is the attempt to make the force of an Idea only dimly perceived into something understandable.

The mathematician is an artist when he describes with equations the orbit of one point around another. The poet is an artist when he uses words to conjure experience. The greater the art, the lesser the means and the more perfectly is the Idea translated.

Ideas exist eternally and independently of man. They have force and describe and determine the condition of man's world. They do not need man for existence—but they need him for Life.
"We shall study the recurrent, constant, and typical, as echoing in us and intelligible through us . . . and now let us remember all we owe to the past as a spiritual continuum which forms part of our supreme spiritual heritage."

Jacob Burckhardt
Force & Freedom, Reflections
On History
Notes

1 See C. Norberg-Schulz, Meaning in Western Architecture, pp. 138-139 for a discussion of this idea.

2 Quoted by Rudolf Wittkower in Idea and Image, pp. 43-44.
Bibliography


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