

MAIN LOBBY, THE NORTH AND SOUTH STAIRCASES FROM THE FIRST FLOOR TO THE THIRD FLOOR, AND THE CENTRAL HALL ON THE THIRD FLOOR, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, 476 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Completed 1911; architects Carrère & Hastings.

On October 8, 1974, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Main Lobby, the North and South Staircases from the first floor to the third floor, and the Central Hall on the third floor of the New York Public Library at 476 Fifth Avenue (Item No. 13). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including a representative of the Library. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The main building of the New York Public Library, a New York City Landmark, is a majestic marble structure designed by Carrère & Hastings. It is one of the masterpieces of the Beaux-Arts style of architecture and a magnificent civic monument. Its splendid site has often been referred to as "The Crossroads of the World."

The interior of this great building is as magnificent as its exterior. Among the notable interior spaces readily available to the public are: the Main Lobby, the North and South Staircases from the first to the third floor, and the Central Hall on the third floor.

The Main Lobby, the principal point of entry, is approached from Fifth Avenue by a handsome flight of steps leading up to a wide triple-arched portico. Three paired, pedimented entrance doors, set beneath high arched transoms of glass, are embellished by ornamental wrought-iron borders. The great interior space of the entrance lobby is over seventy feet long and forty-four feet wide, rising to a height of about thirty-four feet. This huge space is all of stone, including the two grand Staircases leading to the upper floors. To achieve this monumental effect, the architects introduced a low-arched barrel vault of stone, with lateral penetrations from the side arches. The vault takes its curve from the paired, arched interior openings at the ends, resulting in groin vaults at the sides. The upper portion of the main vault is handsomely paneled with a classical enframement of garlands and rosettes. The arches of the three entrances, and those facing them which open into the corridors at the first and second stories, are all supported on columns. The stonework is a creamy white, Vermont Danby marble with just enough natural veining to give contrast to the individual stones.

On either side of this imposing rectangular room, grand Staircases begin their ascent to the third floor through the arches nearest the entrance. After reaching low broad landings, they continue their dramatic rise, partially screened by the arches. The fact that these two impressive Staircases are supported on flying arches contributes to the soaring effect. These identical staircases end in the large Central Hall on the third floor at opposite ends of the room.

In making this ascent from the Main Lobby, one arrives first at a low landing under a groin vault where the stairs make a right-angle change of direction. Each of the landings has a bust of one of the architects of the building set in a niche in front wall: Thomas Hastings on the left-hand landing, as one enters the building, and John Mervin Carrère on the right-hand. A bust of John Stewart Kennedy, one of the early trustees and a donor to the library, is set in a marble niche on the south wall of the left-hand landing. Continuing the ascent, one is struck by the gracious breadth of the stairs and by the handsome stone balustrades which serve as handrails.

Crossing the second floor corridor, one walks up a few steps to a low landing, where the stairs make another right-angle change of direction. Crowning this landing is a high, bronze-colored octagonal vault of plaster; the narrower panels of this octagon, above the corners, are embellished with handsome bas-relief ornament. There is a narrow door beneath a high arched window on the landing which opens onto an inner courtyard. From here, the stairs rise through coffered arches which open into the imposing Central Hall.

The Central Hall, except for the colored marble base and the door enframements on two sides, is of dark wood up to the high cornice line from which springs a paneled barrel vault of plaster. The side walls consist of a series of arched openings in shallow bays designed for murals. The arches, separated by paired fluted pilasters with Corinthian capitals, support the handsome entablature which is crowned by a richly molded cornice resting on evenly spaced console brackets. An unusual feature of this rectangular room is the manner in which the barrel vaulted ceiling is carried out over the cornice line at the north and south ends to receive light from segmental-arched windows designed to stress the diagonal. The barrel vault has three large panels on each side, crowned at its apex by a long rectangular enframement which is curved at each end. It surrounds an aerial, illusionistic painting which gives the effect of an opening to the sky.

The murals in this room were painted by Edward Laning under the auspices of the Artists Program of the WPA. The four panels and two lunettes were completed in 1940, and unveiled by Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia. Laning completed the ceiling two years later. The four arched murals on the east and west walls represent four stages in the development of the recorded word: on the west wall, "Moses with the Tablets of the Law" and "The Medieval Scribe"; on the east wall, "Gutenberg Showing a Proof to the Elector of Mainz" and "The Linotype--Mergenthaler and Whitelaw Reid." The charming murals in the lunettes above the square-headed doors are: "Learning to Read" on the west side and "The Student" on the east. The great aerial mural of the ceiling, with its trompe d'oeil effect, tells the story of "Prometheus Bringing Fire to Men."

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Main Lobby, the North and South Staircases from the first floor to the third floor, and the Central Hall on the third floor of the New York Public Library, 476 Fifth Avenue, have a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among their important qualities, the Main Lobby, the North and South Staircases from the first floor to the third floor, and the Central Hall on the third floor of the New York Public Library are interior spaces of monumental scale and outstanding quality, that they display some of the finest stonework and vaulting in the City, that the ornamental plaster ceilings are of great elegance, that the murals and decorative objects are among the best of their kind, and that these rooms and staircases provide a grand approach to the facilities of one of the finest libraries in the world.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark, the Main Lobby, the North and South Staircases from the first floor to the third floor, and the Central Hall on the third floor of the New York Public Library, 476 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan.