

**NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY (STEPHEN A. SCHWARZMAN BUILDING) Interiors, Main Reading Room and Catalog Room** (now Rose Main Reading Room and Bill Blass Public Catalog Room), third floor, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, which may include but are not limited to the wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, murals, decorative plasterwork, metalwork and woodwork, built-in bookcases, balconies and railings, doors and frames, windows and frames, light fixtures, attached furnishings and decorative elements; 476 Fifth Avenue (aka 460-476 Fifth Avenue, 1 West 40<sup>th</sup> Street, 11 West 40<sup>th</sup> Street, 2 West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street), Manhattan. Built 1900-1911; Carrère & Hastings, architect.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1257, Lot 1.

On July 18, 2017, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the New York Public Library (Stephen A. Schwarzman Building) Interiors, Main Reading Room and Catalog Room (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with provisions of the law. Seven people testified in support, including representatives of the New York Public Library, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, Historic Districts Council, Municipal Art Society, the Society for the Architecture of the City, and the Committee to Save the New York Public Library. The Commission received a petition supporting designation of the Main Reading Room (and several other spaces) with approximately 1,950 signatures, as well as letters of support from the Preservation League of New York and State Senators Brad Hoylman and Liz Krueger.

### Summary

The Main Reading Room and Catalog Room, on the third floor of the New York Public Library Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, are among the finest public interiors in New York City. Masterpieces of Beaux-Arts design, they are the library's principal public spaces, central to its civic and intellectual role and to the experience of the many researchers and writers who quietly read and study there.

John Shaw Billings, the library's first director, conceived the building's general plan and the placement of the Main Reading Room on the third floor, elevated above the city streets and atop the library stacks. Carrère & Hastings won the 1897 architectural competition and realized Billings' vision with their elegant plan, designing the palatial Main Reading Room as the culmination of a dramatic ceremonial route that begins at the Fifth Avenue entrance.

The Main Reading Room and Catalog Room are the primary destinations for most visitors. Both have 52-foot tall ceilings and round-arched windows that fill the interiors with natural light. The Catalog Room is 81-feet long and 77-feet wide, and the nearly two-block-long Main Reading Room is 297-feet long and 78-feet wide. Carrère & Hastings designed all of the interior features, including the room finishes, furniture, lighting fixtures and hardware. Of particular note are the sumptuously-decorated ceilings, immense fields of classical ornament that frame colorful murals of clouds and sky. The New York Public Library opened on May 24, 1911. Over the past century these cherished interiors have been treated with the utmost care, including a comprehensive ceiling restoration in 2014-16. The building was designated a New York City Landmark in January 1967. The sequence of spaces that lead to the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room, including Astor Hall, the central stairs and third-floor McGraw Rotunda, became New York City's first Interior Landmark in November 1974.



## HISTORY

### Library Consolidation

The New York Public Library was formed in 1895.<sup>1</sup> At this time, there was no major public library in New York City, only the Astor Library (begun 1849, a New York City Landmark, now the Joseph Papp Public Theater) on Lafayette Street, near Astor Place, opened in 1849, and the Lenox Library (demolished) on Fifth Avenue, between 70<sup>th</sup> and 71<sup>st</sup> Streets, opened in 1871.<sup>2</sup> When former New York State governor Samuel J. Tilden died in 1886, he left funds to “establish and maintain a free library and reading room in the city of New York.”<sup>3</sup> John Bigelow, a lawyer and Tilden trustee, conceived the plan to consolidate the three organizations, to be known as the New York Public Library, Astor Lenox and Tilden Foundations. George L. Rives, a trustee of the New York Public Library, recalled in 1911:

Personal considerations, family considerations, the natural desire of preserving the identity of the separate corporations, were all subordinated to the great end of furthering the public interest; and though many details had to be considered and worked out, the meetings of the representatives of three corporations were so absolutely harmonious, and all were so devoted to the accomplishment of a definite purpose, that the business was transacted with great ease and rapidity.<sup>4</sup>

These libraries contained an estimated 350,000 volumes in 1895 – a modest number as compared to the British Library (part of the British Museum, London) and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, which claimed 1.75 and 3 million volumes, respectively. Even Boston Public Library, at 600,000 volumes, was substantially larger.<sup>5</sup> The formation of the New York Public Library was, consequently, a matter of civic pride, in which the founders hoped to create a premiere cultural institution, containing a central reference collection, a circulating collection, and administrative offices.

### The Site

The trustees considered various Manhattan locations for the new library, including the sites of the Astor and Lenox Libraries, as well as Columbia College (demolished) at Madison Avenue and East 50<sup>th</sup> Street, but in the end they strongly favored acquiring the abandoned Croton Distributing Reservoir (1837-42) on Fifth Avenue, between 40<sup>th</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> Streets, for its “ample” size and convenient central location.<sup>6</sup> While the plan was approved by the New York State Legislature in May 1897, due to opposition from Mayor Van Wyck it wasn’t until May 1899 that the Board of Estimate authorized \$500,000 in bonds to begin construction.

Demolition of the reservoir began in June 1899, under the supervision of engineer Eugene Lentilhon.<sup>7</sup> The preliminary phase would take an estimated 14 months to finish and 120,000 cubic yards of material would be removed. It took seven weeks to tunnel through the 25-foot-thick walls and much of the demolition work was completed by the end of 1901.<sup>8</sup>

### Planning the library

John Shaw Billings, the library’s first director, conceived the general arrangement of interior space in a casual sketch dating to 1897. In consultation with William R. Ware, founder of the Columbia School of Architecture, it was used to develop the “Terms of Competition,” a

booklet which provided the architects with precise instructions, including a detailed “schedule of rooms.”

Located on the top (third) floor, not only would the main reading rooms be “removed from dust and noise, and enjoy the best form of light,” but by placing them directly above the stacks readers would enjoy efficient delivery of books and other materials. Though some prestigious 19<sup>th</sup>-century libraries had circular or octagonal reading rooms, such as the domed British Library (1857), Library of Congress (1897) and Low Memorial Library (1897, a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark), the New York Public Library’s main reading room would have a flat ceiling and be rectangular, a tradition that goes back to libraries of the Italian Renaissance.

Relatively little text was devoted to interior aesthetics, only that the ceilings “be kept as low as is consistent with pleasing proportions” and that it was “not desired that these reading rooms should be showrooms so as to attract sight-seers.”<sup>9</sup> Despite such instructions, the winning architect, Carrère & Hastings, would produce some of the grandest interiors in all of New York City, rooms that attract crowds daily.

#### Architect: Carrère & Hastings

Carrère & Hastings were awarded the commission in November 1897. The jury praised their entry: “It is distinctly the best of the designs submitted and of very exceptional merit in every respect. In its interior arrangement this design follows closely the plan outlined by the Committee in the Terms of Competition.”<sup>10</sup> John Mervin Carrère (1858-1911) and Thomas S. Hastings (1860-1929) were among the most celebrated and prolific American architects of their time. Both studied architecture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, where they met. Carrère, who was educated in Switzerland, graduated in 1882, while Hastings, who was born in New York City and briefly attended Columbia University, graduated in 1884. For a brief time, both architects worked with McKim, Mead & White, but they soon decided to establish their own practice, forming Carrère & Hastings in c. 1885. Their first commissions came from Henry M. Flagler, a founding partner in Standard Oil, who built several Spanish Renaissance style resort hotels in Florida. The practice grew steadily during the 1890s, resulting in such varied projects as 105 Hudson Street, an office building in the Tribeca West Historic District; the Jefferson Hotel (1893-94) in Richmond, Virginia; Paterson City Hall (1894) in New Jersey; as well as many impressive private residences.

Their winning proposal for the New York Public Library had a great impact on the firm’s reputation. In addition to this remarkable civic structure, Carrère & Hastings would design 14 branch libraries (1904-29) in New York City, the William Cullen Bryant Memorial (1910) directly behind the library, and the monumental approach to the Manhattan Bridge (1910-15, a New York City Landmark) on the east side of Canal Street. During this period, Carrère & Hastings attracted many prestigious clients, working for Yale University, Cornell University, and the U. S. Senate and House of Representatives.

After Carrère’s death in 1911, Hastings continued to work under the firm’s name, or as a consultant. Many of these projects were high-rise structures with classical-style ornament, including the Standard Oil Building (with Lamb & Blake, 1919-21), the Cunard Building (with Benjamin Wistar Morris, 1919-21), and Ritz Tower (with Emery Roth, 1925), all New York City Landmarks. Significant architects who began their careers with Carrère & Hastings included Chester Holmes Aldrich, William Welles Bosworth, William Adams Delano, Bernard Maybeck, Benjamin Wistar Morris, and Richard H. Shreve, of Shreve Lamb & Harmon.<sup>11</sup> The office

closed at the end of 1929. To honor their crucial contributions to the New York Public Library, busts of both Hastings (Frederick MacMonnies, 1935) and Carrère (Jo Davidson, 1940) are displayed in niches at the bottom of the stairs in Astor Hall.

During construction of the New York Public Library, both Carrère & Hastings developed a close relationship with Billings. Though *The New York Times* wrote in 1911 that “most of the credit for the new library” belonged to Carrère, who had recently died, a decade later chief reference librarian Harry M. Lydenberg claimed: “Mr. Hastings was generally responsible for the design.”<sup>12</sup> About 25-30 people were employed in the firm’s office at 28 East 41<sup>st</sup> Street, at the corner of Madison Avenue. The first superintendent on the project was P. B. Polhemus (1900-06), followed by S. H. Francis (1906-09). The specifications for the interior finish were written by Owen Brainard, John S. Humphreys, and Franklin J. Ward.<sup>13</sup> Humphreys (c. 1875-1958), who like the senior partners, studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, joined the firm in 1899 and was promoted to junior partner in 1907. Once the contractors had submitted their drawings, it was his responsibility to check them for “requirements of design.”<sup>14</sup>

### Construction

The near-simultaneous construction of the New York Public Library and Grand Central Terminal (1903-13, a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark) gave the blocks adjoining Bryant Park (a New York City Scenic Landmark, 1898-1911) enormous caché. To create a complementary neo-classical setting, Carrère & Hastings not only designed the terraces and pavilions but they proposed that a substantial section of West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, curb to curb, be submerged to diminish traffic noise, and that the “practically unused” west end of the park, in the shadows of the Sixth Avenue elevated railroad (demolished), be given to the National Academy of Design. Neither scheme was approved or built.<sup>15</sup>

Foundation work began in 1900. The principal contract for the superstructure was submitted in May 1900 and signed in August 1901. Norcross Brothers Company, builders of the Low Memorial Library, was general contractor. The exterior walls began to rise in December 1901 and the first block of Vermont marble “was set” in August 1902. The cornerstone, weighing 7.5 tons, was “laid” in a public ceremony on November 10, 1902, following a private ceremony attended by Billings, Carrère, and Hastings in August.<sup>16</sup> The cellar and basement were finished in late 1903 and the first floor in 1904. The roof was completed in December 1906 and the exterior was mostly done by late 1907. Work, however, often lagged behind schedule, causing one library trustee to remark: “the atmosphere is so peaceful and slumbersome that one is inclined to fancy himself gazing upon an antique rather than upon an unfinished structure.”<sup>17</sup>

Designs for the “interior finish” were approved by the Art Commission of the City of New York (now the Public Design Commission) in June 1906 and the contract was awarded to the John Peirce Company in April 1907.<sup>18</sup> Peirce, who began his career as a granite supplier in Maine, started to take general contracting projects in the 1890s. His firm received many large and complicated commissions, including the Hall of Records (1899-1907), United States Custom House (1899-1907), and Grand Central Terminal (1903-13) – all New York City Landmarks and Interior Landmarks. Like many of these projects, Peirce relied on numerous sub-contractors, highly-skilled firms specializing in carpentry, metal work, and plastering.

Progress was described as “rapid” and by the end of 1908 the “painting and decorating of the main reading room and public catalogue room [were] well under way.”<sup>19</sup> A year later, in December 1909, bids were requested to supply “furniture and equipment.” The Cobb Construction Company oversaw this final contract (No. 11), hiring such firms as S. Karpen &



Brothers to build the tables, desks and chairs, designed for the building by Carrère & Hastings.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, the library cost New York City about \$9 million to erect (plus the value of the site) – more than three times the original estimate.<sup>21</sup>

The New York Public Library was dedicated by United States President William Howard Taft on May 23, 1911. He called the opening a “matter of national importance”<sup>22</sup> and the following day, May 24, the library opened to the public at 9 am. It was estimated that thirty to fifty thousand people visited on opening day. The first book delivered to a reader was N. Y. Grot’s *Nravstvennye idealy nashevo vremeni* (Moral ideas of our times: Frederic Nietzsche and Leo Tolstoy, 1894). According to the library director, the book was delivered in seven minutes.<sup>23</sup> To provide service to as many people as possible, the central library had extensive hours. The Main Reading Room and Catalog Room were initially open every day, from 9 am to 10 pm, Monday through Saturday (including holidays), and from 1 to 10 pm on Sundays.<sup>24</sup>

In January 1967, the building was designated a New York City Landmark. The primary circulation spaces, including Astor Hall, the central stairs and the McGraw Rotunda, adjoining the Catalog Room, became New York City’s first interior landmark in November 1974.

### The Main Reading Room and Catalog Room

The New York Public Library occupies a two-block-long rectangular plot, 390-feet long and 270-feet deep. The main entrance is at the center of the Fifth Avenue facade, facing the intersection of East 41<sup>st</sup> Street. Symmetrical in plan, the first floor contains the lobby (Astor Hall) and exhibition room (Gottesman Hall), as well as reading rooms and offices. To reach the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room, one ascends the central stairs that flank Astor Hall, passing, first, through the second floor’s north-south hallway, and then, reaching the third floor, through the wood-paneled McGraw Rotunda. This grand sequence of spaces up to the third floor landing provides a dramatic ceremonial route that culminates at the double doors that lead into the Catalog Room.

The Main Reading Room and Catalog Room have always been the primary destination for library visitors. Architectural historian Kate Lemos (McHale) wrote:

The route to the reading room allows one to experience the great library as an unfolding book, with anticipation mounting at every turn . . . the destination of this architectural promenade is the great reading room.<sup>25</sup>

From the McGraw Rotunda, one enters the luminous Catalog Room, an 81 x 77 foot nearly square space, between the north and south light courts. At the far (west) end of the room is the entrance to the Main Reading Room. A small square vestibule directs readers to the Main Reading Room’s north and south halls. At far end of the south hall is the entrance to the Art and Architecture (originally American History) Collection and at the far end of the north hall, the Manuscripts & Archives (originally Genealogy) Division.

Among the largest public interiors in New York City, the Main Reading Room is a half-acre column-free space that measures 297-feet long and 78-feet wide – rivalling the dimensions of the main concourse in Grand Central Terminal. Both the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room have 52-foot high ceilings.<sup>26</sup> These volumes rise higher than the adjacent rooms and their substantial mass can be recognized on the building’s exterior, with its gable pediment visible above the Fifth Avenue facade and fully visible from Bryant Park, where the arched windows of

the Main Reading Room express their important function, above the narrow windows that illuminate the stacks.

The general configuration of these rooms was conceived by Billings, who envisioned a T-shaped space divided in three sections. Carrère & Hastings, however, took responsibility for the layout of the library's largest interiors. The "Terms of Competition" made no mention about where the card catalog should be located; only that it should occupy at least 150-square feet. By placing the Catalog Room between the McGraw Rotunda and the Main Reading Room, the architects allowed it to function as a grand foyer, leading to the building's primary public space.

Libraries first introduced catalog cards in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. A great improvement over hand-written book catalogs, standardized cards were stored on metal rods in deep drawers that were easy to use and maintain. While some libraries placed the catalog inside the reading room or in a secondary space, here the Catalog Room is the first space we encounter, separating the process of research into distinct but related acts – searching and reading – while increasing the drama before arrival in what *The New York Times* architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable poetically described in 1971 as a "half-acre vastness . . . as gently murmurous as trees by the sea."<sup>27</sup>

The north side of the Catalog Room contains the information desk "to help readers who need or ask for help."<sup>28</sup> Though the footprint was later expanded on both sides, this oak structure was originally free standing and flanked by tables where readers could thumb through the catalog and submit call slips. Each reader would be given a number that directed them to the Main Reading Room. Those with odd-numbered slips would use the south hall and readers with even numbers would use the north hall.

Carrère & Hastings chose design elements that provide strong visual clues. With large numbers of readers and visitors anticipated from the start, the various doorways that provide exit and entry from the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room were given conspicuous round pediments, three-dimensional forms that rise slightly above the adjacent woodwork. In contrast, the entrances to the adjacent reading rooms have simpler triangular pediments. To encourage a predictable pattern of circulation, bands of white marble divide the red quarry tile floor into sections. Not only do the pavers define a central axial pathway but they also indicate how the tables and desks should be arranged. A similar marble was used on the perimeter steps – highlighting a small change in grade for people consulting the catalog or using books shelved along the walls.

### Interior Design

Carrère & Hastings designed all interior features, including the room finishes, furniture, lighting fixtures, and hardware. Under the pseudonym A. C. David, Hebert Croly<sup>29</sup> wrote in September 1910:

. . . the New York Public Library is the most important building erected since the American architectural revival began . . . The main reading-room is one of the most spacious rooms in the world – beautifully proportioned, lighted by a series of windows on both the long sides of the room . . . To have obtained a room of these dimensions, so excellently adapted to its purpose in every respect, was a great triumph for the architects.<sup>30</sup>

Made of molded plaster, supported on wire mesh, the ceilings are painted to resemble gilded wood. Divided into multiple sections, the various relief panels incorporate figurative imagery and intricate classical detail, including scroll cartouches bordered by cherubs, nude female figures with wings, cherub heads, satyr masks, vases of fruit, foliate moldings, and disguised ventilation grilles.

These immense fields of classical ornament frame colorful murals. In contrast to earlier libraries, such as the one in Melk Abbey, which features a ceiling fresco (1731-32) that depicts the goddess Minerva (representing wisdom) floating in the sky, the paintings in the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room display no figures – only billowing clouds and sky. They suggest what might be visible if rectangular openings were cut into the ceiling, like what the visionary architect Etienne-Louis Boullée proposed for the French royal library in the 1780s. Furthermore, they might be considered a challenge to day-dreaming readers, urging them to work hard and take their place among the gods.

The original ceiling paintings were created by James Wall Finn (1866-1913), a prolific French-born decorative artist who attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and started his career as a draftsman with the New York architects Babb, Cook & Willard.<sup>31</sup> Praised in *The New York Architect*, a professional journal, he was described as:

. . . both able and willing to merge himself in the architect's thought, and that his work does not obtrude itself from any architectural background, but carries out the architectural scheme.<sup>32</sup>

Finn's contribution was hardly mentioned in articles about the new library and the images are barely visible in early photographs, so its original appearance remains mostly unclear.<sup>33</sup> In New York City, comparable murals can be found in the University Club (artist unknown, 1896-1900, a New York City Landmark), which has "three expanses of cloud-filled sky" in its Fifth Avenue reading room.<sup>34</sup>

The Klee-Thomson Company, a New York City firm that specialized in "Plain and Decorative Plastering; Imitation for Wood, Stone, and Bronze," produced the rest of the ceiling, as well as the cornice, arches, piers and ashlar walls, which are made of imitation Caen stone, a type of plaster (sometimes referred to as cement) that "can be tooled just as effectively as marble or Caen Stone [a French limestone] itself, and has all the softness and richness of Caen Stone."<sup>35</sup> This economical material was used to great effect by many leading architects in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Warren & Wetmore in Grand Central Terminal's Main Concourse and Vanderbilt Hall.<sup>36</sup>

Monumental arched windows bathe both sides of the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room with natural light. The bronze window frames<sup>37</sup> were fabricated by the Henry Bonnard Company, Mt. Vernon, New York, using extruded moldings. Set high on the wall, above the bookcases, they recall the fenestration in the reading room of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genevieve in Paris (Henri Labrousse, 1838-50), as well as in Boston Public Library (McKim Mead & White, 1888-95). In the Catalog Room, six windows face the north or south light court, while the fifteen windows in the Main Reading Room face the light courts or Bryant Park. An interior window, aligned with the east entrance to the Catalog Room, as well as the vestibule and delivery desk, provides a visual link between the two rooms. This transparent feature clarifies the sequence of spaces and may have been inspired by the unbuilt "glass screen" that Billings wanted to use to divide the Main Reading Room.<sup>38</sup>

The Main Reading Room and Catalog Room are illuminated by large circular chandeliers, arranged in four descending tiers.<sup>39</sup> There are two rows of nine fixtures, hung close to the windows, in the Main Reading Room, and four fixtures near the corners of the Catalog Room. Suspended from the ceiling by multiple chains, they provide general illumination and a sense of glamor, as if one has arrived in a splendid European ballroom. Incandescent lighting was still relatively new and the bare spherical bulbs celebrate the technology.<sup>40</sup> Though gas lighting had been used since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, allowing libraries like the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genevieve to stay open after dark, electricity was significantly safer and the New York Public Library was built with its own generating plant. A close look at each fixture reveals an elaborate network of cast metal, including bronze chains, roped moldings, bobèches (collars), and satyr masks.

Wood bookcases of consistent height line the lower walls of the Main Reading Room. Though the majority of books were stored in closed library stacks, below, a significant number have always been shelved in the Main Reading Room. *The Central Building Guide* (c. 1912) stated:

Along the walls of the main reading room are shelved about 25,000 volumes that may be read without formality of signing application blanks. These works may be taken to the tables or may be consulted on the lecturns at the end of each reading table.<sup>41</sup>

The Hayden Company, a Rochester cabinetmaker and decorating firm with a showroom near the library at 523 Fifth Avenue, advertised in 1911 that it had provided “All the cabinet interior finish for the New York Public Library.”<sup>42</sup> Of simple design, using American white oak, both levels of bookcases have a consistent shelf width. These vertical elements, along with the gallery railing, establish a steady visual rhythm, allowing books (and their gilded spines) to stand out as decoration. The lower bookcases, up one step from the floor, function as the base for the gallery, where librarians can access the upper bookcases, recessed between the piers and below the windows. A third level of low bookcases, added prior to 1944, hides the step and platform. It was here that Carrère & Hastings had proposed to “run a railing some three feet or so away from the wall shelving” but Billings was strongly opposed and it was never executed.<sup>43</sup>

The focus of the Main Reading Room is the room-wide delivery desk, where non-circulating materials are delivered from the stacks and distributed to readers. It was described by “an art expert” as:

Possibly [the] finest decorative feature . . . running right across from east to west, a distance of eighty-four feet. Elegant in proportion, simple and dignified in design, with beautifully carved Corinthian [sic] columns . . . it carries the beholder back to the rood screens in the old English abbeys.<sup>44</sup>

Made of oak, the delivery desk incorporates a continuous counter resting on corbels, as well as round arches, Tuscan columns, and pilasters that support an intricately-carved cornice with cresting. It, too, was fabricated by the Hayden Company, possibly with assistance from the M(aurice) Greive Company, the picture framers who fabricated the elaborate ceiling in the first-floor exhibition hall.<sup>45</sup> Carrère was especially proud of the library’s woodwork. He credited it to

German artisans who were “expressly imported to this country,” claiming that their craftsmanship would be “more renowned than ever a century hence.”<sup>46</sup>

The delivery desk divides the Main Reading Room into two equal-sized halls. Though Billings conceived the location and general configuration, it was Carrère & Hastings who determined its appearance. In a 1910 article on the library’s interior decoration, *The American Architect* observed:

The ingenious way this key to the entire working library has been treated as a decorative screen in character with the colossal wall and ceiling treatment of the apartment, giving scale to the whole, is an example of the resourcefulness of the architects.<sup>47</sup>

Low and fairly transparent, the massing of the delivery desk allows the room’s entire volume to be experienced from nearly any vantage point. Only slightly taller than the adjoining bookcases, this skillful solution allows for a mostly uninterrupted view of the ceiling, walls, windows, and chandeliers. The north and south fronts also disguise some of the inner workings, including dumbwaiters and book storage. In some of the arched openings, illuminated numerical signs were originally hung to indicate the arrival of books or to display instructions for library users.

In the Catalog Room, readers stand beside oak tables, waist high, arranged in rows along the south side and, originally, on both sides of the information desk. Once described as “consulting tables,” they have elaborately-carved pedestals with fluted pilasters flanked by volutes that grow from dolphin’s heads. The desks in the Main Reading Room are similar but longer and lower. Arranged in two rows around a center aisle, the pedestals display the seal of New York City, flanked by volutes. Because a small group have been moved to provide space for additional services near the delivery desk, the room’s capacity has been reduced to 624 from 768 seats.<sup>48</sup> Some of the desks have elegant oak lecterns to support weighty volumes, conveniently positioned close to the bookcases. Each desk has four evenly-spaced reading lamps. Executed by the Sterling Bronze Company, these handsome electric fixtures have bronze bases and shades.

Considerable attention was also paid to less prominent details, especially metalwork. Not only were the door (lever) handles and key plates designed by the architects but so were the hinges, which incorporate book-case-like rods topped by pineapples, symbolizing welcome. Russell & Erwin Mfg. Company of New York manufactured the knobs and handles. Tuttle & Baily Mfg. manufactured the radiator grilles, set close to the bronze registers near the floor.<sup>49</sup>

### “Renaissance” Style

The Main Reading Room and Catalog Room are masterpieces of interior design. The style is often described by critics and historians as “Beaux-Arts,” a term that was not widely used until the mid-1960s, when it became a popular short-hand for works by the numerous American architects who attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, or for the late-19<sup>th</sup> or early-20<sup>th</sup> century structures that display an abundance of classical-style ornament.

Most early-20<sup>th</sup> century writers, in fact, identified the library’s architectural style as “Renaissance.” *The Upholsterer*, an interior decoration magazine, commented:

No particular school has been followed in preparing the specifications for the furnishing. No part of the building itself attempts to follow the architecture of any

particular period . . . if the architecture could be classified at all it might be denominated Americanized Renaissance, more or less French, with such modifications as our own age demand.<sup>50</sup>

Lydenberg later wrote that it had been Hastings' aim to produce a "simple and dignified design, not depending on an over amount of ornamentation, Renaissance in style, based on classical principles, and modern in character."<sup>51</sup>

*The New York Times* observed an "intermingling of both the Italian Renaissance and French Renaissance,"<sup>52</sup> while the *New York Architect* said the overall style was "modern Renaissance, generally inspired from the Louis XVI. period, with such modifications as the conditions and needs of the present age suggest."<sup>53</sup> An early phase of neo-classicism dating to the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Louis XVI aesthetics were described in 1902 by architect-historian Russell Sturgis as a "curious revival of severity and simplicity, as opposed to the overdone scrollwork and magnificence of the rocaille decoration common in the previous reign, is chiefly known to us by internal decoration, as in the paneling and painting of boudoirs and libraries in private houses and at Versailles and Fontainebleau."<sup>54</sup>

### Later History and Renovations

Over the past century, the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room have been treated with the utmost care. Close inspection of period photographs reveal the addition of bookcases in both rooms, as well as the reconfiguration of some service areas. Most of the attention has been paid to refurbishing the extraordinary ceilings and updating library technology.

The earliest repairs probably involved the Catalog Room's plaster ceiling, which was "repainted" in 1935.<sup>55</sup> The card catalog grew rapidly, an estimated 150,000 items a year, and in 1952 some of the oak cabinets were replaced by steel and aluminum. Though the chief of the information division admitted they had an incongruous look, he believed they "would be easier for the public to handle."<sup>56</sup>

The Catalog Room was restored as part of a much larger project by the architects Davis, Brody & Associates in 1983. At this time, shelves were added beneath the windows, the information desk was substantially expanded, adding cubicles and partitions, an 800-volume "dictionary catalogue" (for library materials up to 1971) was introduced, as well as a separate computer database for more recent publications.<sup>57</sup> In 1984, the room was named for library trustee Bill Blass, who financed the restoration.

In 1997-98, for the first time, the Main Reading Room was closed and renovated.<sup>58</sup> More than 30 specialists were involved with the project; the ceiling was cleaned, wood refinished, and various partitions removed, including a semi-enclosed copy room and the Wertheim Study area for writers in the southeast corner. The ceiling paintings, which had been damaged by water and the "occasional hole punched through by a foot," were barely distinguishable in 1980s photographs.<sup>59</sup> New paintings, created by Yohannes Aynalem, of EverGreen Painting Studios, were made on canvas sections and attached to the ceiling. According to *The New York Times*:

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 . . . [Aynalem] studied Tiepolo, Tintoretto, Turner and others to learn the secret of a beautiful sky.<sup>60</sup>



At this time, 60 of the original desk lamps were replaced with reproductions, and energy efficient glass panes to filter ultra-violet rays were installed in the windows.<sup>61</sup> The renovation was made possible by a gift from Frederick Phineas Rose and Sandra Rose, who renamed the room in honor of their children: Deborah, Jonathan F. P., Samuel Priest, and Adam Raphael. To celebrate the 1998 reopening, library trustee Calvin Trillin presented a whimsical poem:

So now each wooden surface shows  
Its grain, and yet does not disclose  
The cyber-line each tables stows.  
Like muscles hidden by one's clothes.  
With clouds like archipelagoes  
The ceiling's like those great tableaux  
They have in French chateaus  
Displaying angels in repose  
In brown and greens and indigos,  
The lighting positively glows –  
So light, in fact, it's hard to doze.<sup>62</sup>

The Main Reading Room and Catalog Room were closed for a comprehensive ceiling restoration in 2014-16. Each of the ceiling's individual plaster rosettes were reinforced with steel cable and the Catalog Room's 33 x 27-foot ceiling mural was completely repainted by Bill Menching and Zini Veshi of EverGreen (now Architectural Arts), to match the ones in the Main Reading Room.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the 22 chandeliers were restored by Aurora Lampworks, adding LED bulbs.<sup>64</sup> When the rooms reopened in October 2016, Alexandra Schwartz commented in the *New Yorker* magazine: "The Rose Reading Room is luxurious in the way that only certain shared spaces can be. Its grandeur attracts its visitors, and is in turn amplified by their presence: the true urban symbiosis."<sup>65</sup>

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Magnificent public spaces that welcome all, regardless of expertise or stature, the New York Public Library's monumental Main Reading Room and Catalog Room are among the most beautiful classical-style interiors in New York City. Over the past century, there have been relatively few changes to their Beaux-Arts design and they remain a cherished place to study, think, and discover.

Researched and written by  
Matthew A. Postal  
Research Department

## DESCRIPTION

The interior finishes, fixtures, and furnishings of the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room were designed by Carrère & Hastings and reflect the architects' education at the Ecole de Beaux-Arts and the general preference for a restrained Renaissance style at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Located on the third floor, both rooms have been carefully restored and adapted to modern-day use. Historic design features and materials have been retained, reusing original components where possible. In general, alterations have continued the design intent and materials of the rooms' original appearance.

### CATALOG ROOM

This nearly-square room, 81 x 77 feet with a 52-foot ceiling, is located directly west of the McGraw Rotunda. Flanked by interior light courts, to the north and south, the arched windows provide ample natural light, and a corresponding window on the west wall provides views into the Main Reading Room. Overall, the finishes, furnishings, light fixtures and hardware correspond to the Main Reading Room.

The room is organized with the information desk and staff area at the north half and tables arranged in a row at the south. Between the two sections, an aisle leads from the entrance to the Main Reading Room. This arrangement is reinforced by the floor pattern, quarry tiles with bands of marble that define the perimeter, aisle, and study/work areas.

As originally built, card catalogs lined the walls and there was a much smaller information desk. In 1983-84 the catalog trays were removed and bookshelves were installed within the original carved panels. As part of the remodeling, the information desk and staff area was expanded to fill most of the north half of the room.

#### Significant Features

Overall shape, dimensions, volume, axial symmetry

General use of materials in specific zones

- floor, quarry tile with marble borders
- lower walls defined by carved oak with bronze accents
- upper walls finished with imitation Caen-stone
- windows, arched, bronze
- ceiling, molded plaster

Floor

- quarry tile (dark terra cotta), 9" x 9" squares, laid diagonally
- marble borders (cream color) delineating major room divisions
- marble platforms along perimeter

Ceiling

- painted plaster, classical details
- color palette: brown, red, green, gold, copper
- mural (repainted 2016, installed over original)

## Walls

- imitation Caen-stone plaster, ashlar pattern, divided by expressed piers
- plaster cornice and frieze with foliated modillions, rosettes, egg-and-dart, dentils, and similar decorative trim
- arched openings at north/south/west walls containing bronze windows; blind arch over east doorway

## Windows

- north/south walls: round-arched bronze multi-pane windows, bronze
- west wall: round-arched bronze multi-pane window above entrance to Main Reading Room

## Bookshelves & balconies

- oak casework (catalog drawers replaced, now bookshelves) divided into bays with fluted pilasters, triglyphs along frieze, decorative bronze grilles at base on north/south walls
- north/south walls: shallow balconies supported by floor-level tier of oak casework, bronze railings with Greek key design

## Doors

- east: bronze doors framed by cream-colored marble architrave, oak pediment and frieze with rinceaux and griffins; oak relief panels flank doorways
- west: oak doors flanked by fluted columns, fluted pilasters and screens, rounded pediment with quotation from Milton, marble base
- north/south sides: single-panel service doors, oak, at floor level and on balconies
- decorative escutcheon plates, lever handles and hinges

## Lighting fixtures

- chandeliers (4), bronze, each with four circular descending tiers of bulb holders
- table lamps, bronze, three to a table/desk, with metal shades and narrow turned posts (some are reproductions)

## Tables/desks

- trestle-type Renaissance-style tables (6), oak, carved pedestals, marble bases
- low reading desks (2), oak, carved pedestals, marble bases, ebony inlay

## Information desk area

- oak panels reused from original desk enclosure
- goose-neck pneumatic tubes

## Other features

- east wall/north side: bronze clock with Roman numerals
- bronze guard rails (4) on marble platforms beside doors and bookshelves

### Alterations and non-historic features

- catalog drawers replaced by bookshelves, four walls, retain original casework (1983-84)
- information desk expanded (1983-84), carved panels from original counter integrated into expanded desk, columns added above counter and entries, valance above counter, floor pattern reconfigured, work cubicles and carpet tiles installed
- north and south sides: balcony bookshelves installed below windows (1983-84)
- east entrance: pair of inner doors, wood, six glass panes each
- technical-security upgrades, including cages for electronic equipment on undersides of some tables, electrical outlets in surface of tables and desks, soffit lighting installed at top tier of bookshelves, fire alarm units (4), surface-mounted above secondary doors at floor level, security cameras on top of balcony bookshelves
- donor plaques, light-colored marble, set into floor

## **MAIN READING ROOM**

This rectangular room, 297 x 78 feet with a 52-foot ceiling, is located directly west of the Catalog Room and is entered through a vestibule that adjoins the delivery desk. This desk divides the room into two halls, north and south, without disrupting the volume of space or obscuring views of the ceiling.

Overall, the finishes, furnishings, light fixtures and hardware correspond to the Catalog Room. Arched windows establish a strong rhythm. They are set within cream-colored walls above the bookshelves that ring the room. Major doorways are highlighted with oak surrounds. The ceiling, uninterrupted by columns or partitions, is divided into three sections with molded plaster reliefs framing three murals. Suspended from the ceiling are two rows of bronze chandeliers (18 in total). These fixtures are aligned with the window bays and hang at the midpoint of the windows.

Reading desks are arranged in two rows perpendicular to a wide center aisle. The room arrangement is reinforced by the floor pattern, quarry tile edged with cream-colored marble. As originally organized, the desks occupied most of the space, along with a bench and atlas case, located near the delivery desk. A small number of desks, on the west side, near the delivery desk, have been removed and replaced by an information desk and work station enclosure, with a glass screen.

The interior of the delivery desk has been modified with updated cabinets, shelves, fittings, and lifts. These alterations are not fully visible to the public and were executed with complementary materials.

### Significant features

Overall shape, dimensions, volume, axial symmetry, ceiling visibility

General use of materials in specific zones

- floor, quarry tile with marble borders
- lower walls, oak with bronze accents
- upper walls, imitation Caen stone, bronze windows
- ceiling, molded plaster

#### Floor

- quarry tile (dark terra cotta color), 9" x 9" squares, laid diagonally
- marble borders (cream color) delineating major room divisions of center aisle and desks
- east/west walls: low marble platforms beneath bookcases

#### Ceiling

- painted plaster, classical details
- color palette: brown, red, green, gold and copper
- three murals (repainted 1998, installed over originals)
- bronze grilles, circular with lattice pattern, cover ventilation openings

#### Walls

- imitation Caen-stone plaster, ashlar pattern, divided by expressed piers
- plaster cornice and frieze with foliated modillions, rosettes, egg-and-dart, dentils, and similar decorative trim
- east and west sides: arched openings containing bronze windows; blind arches flanking Catalog Room window
- north and south ends: blind arches in center bay, oak paneling around entrances to adjacent rooms

#### Windows

- bronze round-arched multi-light windows (17' x 14') along the east and west walls
- imitation Caen stone window surrounds with pilasters and decorative key stones

#### Bookshelves & balconies

- east/west: oak casework divided into bays for bookshelves, bronze grilles at base; low bookcases, adjacent to marble platforms (added before 1944)
- marble (cream color) at base of paneling where there are no platforms
- north/south: dumbwaiter casework, carved oak brackets under balconies
- balconies/galleries above bookshelves on four walls, some supported by bookshelves or wood profiled knee brackets, bronze railings with Greek key design, book rests on upper railings

#### Doors

- north hall: north doors in deep doorway with marble architrave, oak pediment and frieze
- south hall: south doors in deep doorway framed with marble architrave, a second pair of swinging doors with oval glass panel, covered with brown leather-like fabric attached with decorative nail heads; oak pediment and frieze
- wood doors and trim located at wall piers along the first floor and balcony
- door hardware, including escutcheon plates, lever handles, hinges

#### Delivery desk

- north and south sides: wood-arcaded screen extending east-west with counter, round arches, fluted columns, cresting, center clock, solid panels beneath counter, arched pediments with wood doors at east and west ends

### Vestibule

- carved wood paneling
- north and south sides: sliding pocket doors, oak, spindles, bronze railings on upper level
- east/west: double doors, oak, spindles, fluted pilasters support curved pediment

### Lighting & special features

- chandeliers (18), bronze, each with four hanging circular sections
- table lamps, bronze, four to a desk, metal shades and turned posts (some reproductions)
- north/south: bronze railings encloses stairs to book stacks
- north/south: marble drinking fountains (inactive) with lion heads
- east walls in north and south halls: bronze fire hose cabinets

### Fixed desks, benches, atlas stands

- trestle-type Renaissance-style desks, oak, carved pedestals with New York City seal, dark veined marble bases, ebony inlay, desk numbers, wood lecterns
- oak bench with New York City seal, near delivery desk, one in each hall
- atlas stand, near delivery desk, one in each hall

### Alterations and non-historic features

- delivery desk: removal of built-in assemblies, shelving, lifts and cabinetry, installation of new cabinets, shelving, two dumb waiters, elevator, book retrieval train, infill of several arches for notice boards
- north/south halls: removal of some reading desks to make room for installation of information desk and adjacent enclosure, west side near delivery desk
- north hall: north doors, wood, glazed panels and transom
- technical/security upgrades: electrical outlets in surface of reading desks, mounted security cameras and antennae on east and west walls on top of balcony bookshelves, light fixtures at top shelf of built-in bookcases at floor level, valence lighting above bookshelves on balconies, "Exit" signs added at south doorway and along at doorways leading to vestibule
- south hall/west-side: secondary door missing lever handle, replaced with knob; push bars added secondary doors at east end
- donor plaque, white marble, vestibule floor

Room descriptions written by Marianne Hurley, with  
Matthew A. Postal, Research Department



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The most complete history of the library is Harry Miller Lydenberg, *History of the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations* (New York: New York Public Library, 1923). Various chapters were first published in the “Bulletin of The New York Public Library.” Lydenberg (1874-1960) was chief reference librarian, and later, 3<sup>rd</sup> library director. For a study of the building’s classical features and ornamentation, see Henry Hope Reed, *The New York Public Library: Its Architecture and Decoration* (New York + London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986). Reed’s book was updated by Francis Morrone in 2011. For a detailed discussion of the library’s exterior and interior design, see Kate Lemos, “New York Public Library,” in *Carrère & Hastings, Architects* (New York: Acanthus Press, 2006), vol. 1, 285-323.

<sup>2</sup> The privately-funded Astor Library was open free to the public during business hours, whereas the Lenox Library was only open by application and was mainly used by specialists. Other significant libraries that existed in New York City during this period included the New York Society Library (1856), Columbia College Library (1883), and the Mercantile Library (1890) – all demolished and since relocated. The earliest surviving structures that served as libraries in New York City are the Long Island (now Brooklyn) Historical Society (1881, a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark), the Van Schaick Free Reading Room/Huntington Free Library and Reading Room (1882-83, a New York City Landmark) in the Bronx, and the former New York Free Circulating Library, Ottendorfer Branch, now part of the New York Public Library (1883-84, a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark) in the East Village.

<sup>3</sup> Viewed at <https://www.nypl.org/help/about-nypl/history>.

<sup>4</sup> *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 1911 (vol. 15), 336. Rives spoke at the library’s dedication. See “George L. Rives,” *The New York Times*, August 19, 1917, this and all other NYT articles used in this essay were viewed at [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com)

<sup>5</sup> Lemos, vol. 2, note 6, 415.

<sup>6</sup> “Public Library’s Home,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 1895; “For The Public Library,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 1896.

<sup>7</sup> Lentilhon trained at Yale University and was later an official in the Dock Department. See “Eugene Lentilhon, Civil Engineer, Dead,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 1932.

<sup>8</sup> Lemos, 295.

<sup>9</sup> “Terms of Competition for the building to be erected for the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations,” (New York Public Library, August 2, 1897), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Lemos, 294.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Alan Hewitt and Charles D. Warren. “Introduction,” *Carrere & Hastings, Architects*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Harry Miller Lydenberg, “A History of The New York Public Library,” *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, August 1921, 605.

<sup>13</sup> Lydenberg, 594.

<sup>14</sup> Lydenberg, 595. Humphreys studied architecture at MIT and at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1895-96. He joined the firm in 1899. He began teaching at Harvard University in c. 1910. See “John S. Humphreys Ex-Architect Here,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 1958; “History of the New York Public Library,” 601; Anthony Alofsin, *Struggle for Modernism*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 46.

<sup>15</sup> According to the *New York Evening Post*, a building of harmonious design would “complete the group, and also shut out the unsightly elevated structure from view.” See “Not Practically Decided On,” *New York Daily Tribune*, May 2, 1903, 8; “Bryant Park For Academy,” *New York Evening Post*, December 24, 1910, 3.

<sup>16</sup> “Public Library’s Cornerstone Laid,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 1902; Lemos, 295.

<sup>17</sup> “Protest at Delay on City Library,” *New York Herald*, June 18, 1906.

<sup>18</sup> *Report of the Director for the year ending 1907* (New York Public Library, January 2, 1908), 3.

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- <sup>19</sup> *Report of the Director for the year ending 1908* (New York Public Library, January 2, 1909), 5.
- <sup>20</sup> *Report of the Director for the year ending 1910* (New York Public Library, January 3, 1911), 3.
- <sup>21</sup> Lemos, 322.
- <sup>22</sup> “City’s \$29,000,000 Library Is Opened,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1911.
- <sup>23</sup> “The Opening of the Central Building,” *Report of the Director for the year ending 1911* (New York Public Library, 1912), 20.
- <sup>24</sup> *Central Building Guide* (New York: New York Public Library, c. 1912), 17.
- <sup>25</sup> Lemos, 511.
- <sup>26</sup> The Bibliothèque Sainte Genevieve is 278-feet long. Bates Hall, the main reading room in the Boston Public Library, is 218-feet long, with a 50-foot ceiling.
- <sup>27</sup> Ada Louise Huxtable, “Library as Friend,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 1971.
- <sup>28</sup> *Central Building Guide*, 14.
- <sup>29</sup> David W. Levy, *Herbert Croly of the New Republic: The Life and Thought of an American Progressive* (Princeton Legacy Library, 1984), 85, viewed at googlebooks.
- <sup>30</sup> “The New York Public Library,” *The Architectural Record*, September 1910, 145, 148.
- <sup>31</sup> Reed, 141.
- <sup>32</sup> “The Achievements of the American Artisan,” *The New York Architect*, vol. 4, no. 11, November 1910, not paginated.
- <sup>33</sup> In 1923, a journalist described the paintings as representing “a night sky in which a few moonlit clouds are floating.” See “The Library,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 17, 1923, 14.
- <sup>34</sup> “The Treasures of the University Club,” 1980, LPC files.
- <sup>35</sup> Advertisement, *Barnard Bulletin*, May 19, 1909; “Notes For Architects,” July 1910, not paginated.
- <sup>36</sup> “Notes For Architects.”
- <sup>37</sup> The metal window frames and sash was designed by architect Ferdinand Miller. See *Sweet’s Indexed Catalogue of Building Construction*, (New York: Architectural Record Company, 1909), 455.
- <sup>38</sup> Lydenberg, 594.
- <sup>39</sup> “The New York Public Library,” *Electric World*, December 2, 1911, 1354.
- <sup>40</sup> “The Lighting of the New York Public Library,” *The Illuminating Engineer*, June 1911, 200.
- <sup>41</sup> *Central Building Guide*, 17.
- <sup>42</sup> Advertisement, *The New York Architect* (May 1911), not paginated, viewed at googlebooks.
- <sup>43</sup> Lydenberg, 594. This proposed railing is depicted in a 1909 drawing by Vernon Howe Bailey. See <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2011/08/25/my-centennial-post-tilden-library>.
- <sup>44</sup> “Sectional View of New York’s New Public Library,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 1911, SM3.
- <sup>45</sup> Established in Belgium in 1721, the firm moved to New York in 1906. See “About New York,” *The New York Times*, February 18, 1955.
- <sup>46</sup> “Sectional View of New York’s New Public Library,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 1911.
- <sup>47</sup> “Interior Decoration of the New York Public Library,” *The American Architect*, November 9, 1910. 155.
- <sup>48</sup> *Central Building Guide*, 5.
- <sup>49</sup> Advertisement, *The Architectural Record*, September 1910, 49.

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- <sup>50</sup> “New York’s Public Library,” *The Upholsterer* (date unknown), 45, photo-copy viewed in Art & Architecture Division, New York Public Library, information desk file.
- <sup>51</sup> “History of the New York Public Library,” *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, (New York: New York Public Library, 1921), 603.
- <sup>52</sup> “New York’s Fine New Library,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 1910.
- <sup>53</sup> “The New York Public Library,” *The New York Architect*, May 1911, 76.
- <sup>54</sup> Russell Sturgis, *A Dictionary of Architecture and Building*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902), vol. 2, 803.
- <sup>55</sup> “Relief Workers Repair Libraries,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 1935.
- <sup>56</sup> “Library Files To Go Into Steel Cabinets,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1952.
- <sup>57</sup> “Library Catalogue Takes a New Form,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 1983; “Fifth Ave. Library Is Poised To Move Into Computer Age,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 1985.
- <sup>58</sup> “Open for Travel in Realms of Gold,” *The New York Times*, November 5, 1998; “Updating a Bookish Aristocrat,” *The New York Times*, August 22, 1998.
- <sup>59</sup> “Open for Travel in Realms of Gold.”
- <sup>60</sup> “Updating a Bookish Aristocrat.”
- <sup>61</sup> “Seeing a Familiar Haunt Again, but in a New Light,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 1999, AR39.
- <sup>62</sup> Calvin Trillin, “One Proposes a Toast to the Roses,” November 12, 1998, photo-copy viewed in Catalog Room, New York Public Library, information desk file.
- <sup>63</sup> “Restoring a Home for Scholars at the New York Public Library,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2016.
- <sup>64</sup> “Restoration of (22) Historic Chandeliers,” viewed at <http://auroralampworks.com/portfolio-items/library/>.
- <sup>65</sup> “The Rose Reading Room and the Real Meaning of ‘Luxury’ in New York City,” *The New Yorker*, October 7, 2016, viewed at [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com).

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this Interior, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the New York Public Library (Stephen A. Schwarzman Building) Interiors, consisting of the Main Reading Room (now the Rose Main Reading Room) and the Catalog Room (now the Bill Blass Public Catalog Room), third floor, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, which may include but are not limited to the wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, murals, decorative plasterwork, metalwork and woodwork, built-in bookcases, balconies and railings, doors and frames, windows and frames, light fixtures, attached furnishings and decorative elements, have a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City, and that these interiors are customarily open and accessible to the public, and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room on the third floor of the New York Public Library (Stephen A. Schwarzman Building) are among that finest public interiors in New York City; that they are masterpieces of Beaux-Arts design; that they are the library's principal public spaces, central to its civic and intellectual role and to the experience of the many researchers and writers who quietly read and study there; that John Shaw Billings, the library's first director, conceived the building's general plan and the placement of the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room on the third floor, elevated above city streets and atop the library stacks; that Carrère & Hastings won the 1897 architectural competition and realized Billings' vision with their elegant plan, designing the palatial Main Reading Room as the culmination of a dramatic ceremonial route, designated as an interior landmark in 1974, which begins at the Fifth Avenue entrance and continues up the central stairs to the third floor; that the Main Reading Room and Catalog Room are the primary destination for most visitors to the library; that both rooms have 52-foot tall ceilings and round-arched windows that fill the interiors with natural light; that the rooms are grand volumes which, with the adjacent McGraw Rotunda, are expressed on the exterior within a prominent roof line; that the Catalog Room is 81-feet long and 77-feet wide and the nearly two-block long Main Reading Room is 297-feet long and 78-feet wide; that Carrère & Hastings designed all of the interior features, including the room finishes, furniture, lighting fixtures and hardware; that particularly noteworthy are the sumptuously-decorated ceilings, immense fields of classical ornament that frame colorful murals of clouds and sky; and that over the past century there have been relatively few changes to each room's design.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark, the New York Public Library (Stephen A. Schwarzman Building), third floor interiors, consisting of the Main Reading Room (now the Rose Main Reading Room), and the Catalog Room (now the Bill Blass Public Catalog Room), and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, which may include but are not limited to the wall surfaces, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, murals, decorative plasterwork, floor surfaces, metalwork and woodwork, built-in bookcases, balconies and railings, doors and frames, windows and frames, light fixtures, attached furnishings and decorative elements, 476 Fifth Avenue (aka 460-76 Fifth Avenue, 1 West 40<sup>th</sup> Street, 11 West 40<sup>th</sup> Street, 2 West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street), Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map 1257, Lot 1, as its Landmark Site.

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair  
Diana Chapin, Wellington Chen, Michael Devonshire, John Gustafsson  
Jeanne Lutfy, Adi Shamir-Baron, Kim Vauss  
Commissioners



Main Reading Room, New York Public Library  
 South hall, view north  
*Photo: Sarah Moses, 2017*  
*Photo: Courtesy New York Public Library, c. 1911*





Catalog Room, New York Public Library  
 View east towards McGraw Rotunda | View northeast  
*Photo: Sarah Moses, 2017*  
*Photo: Courtesy New York Public Library, c. 1911*





Catalog Room  
View north to information desk | Entrance to Main Reading Room  
*Photos: Sarah Moses, 2017*





Main Reading Room  
Vestibule, view east toward Catalog Room  
*Photo: Sarah Moses, 2017*





Main Reading Room  
Ceiling | South hall, delivery desk  
*Photos: Sarah Moses, 2017*





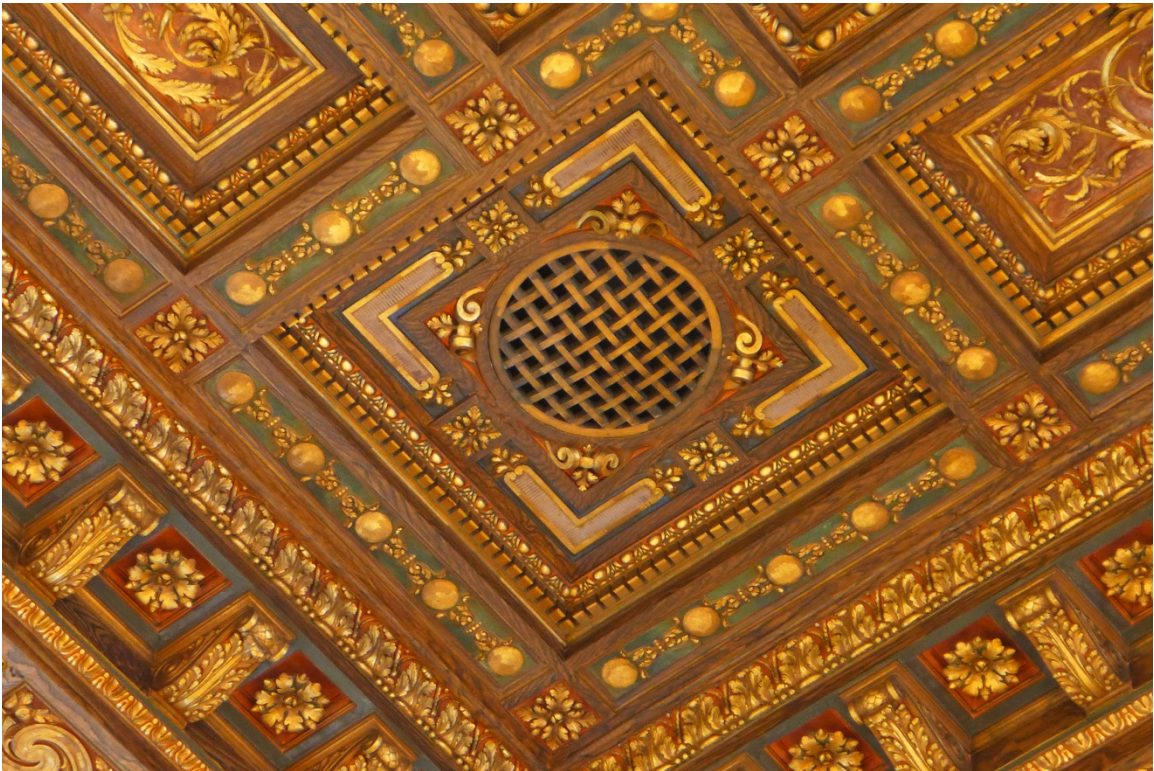
Main Reading Room,  
South hall, reading desk, view east  
*Photo: Sarah Moses, 2017*





Main Reading Room  
South hall, delivery desk, west doors  
*Photo: Sarah Moses, 2017*





Main Reading Room  
Ceiling details  
*Photos: Sarah Moses, 2017*

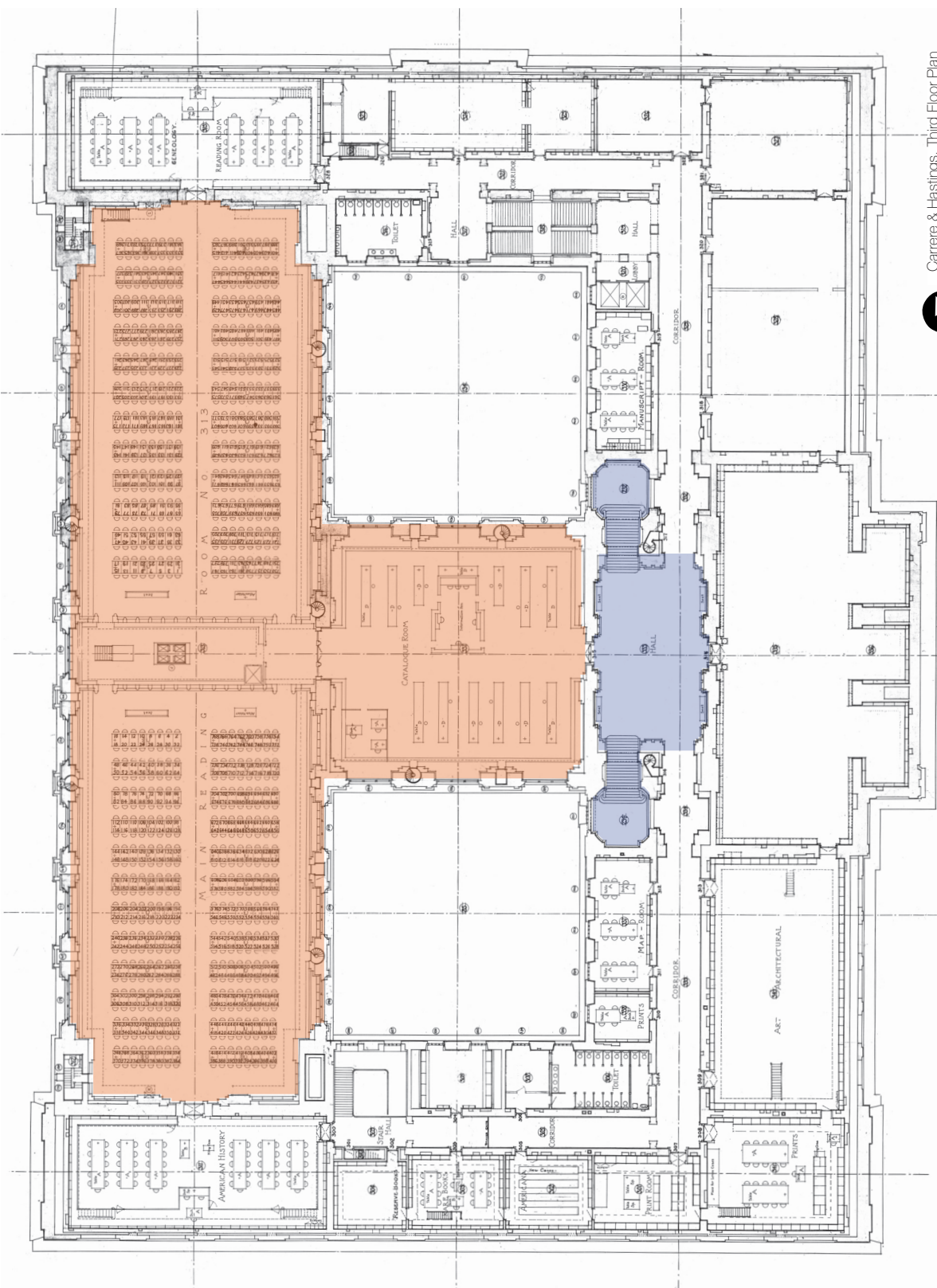




Main Reading Room  
Chandeliers, view west  
*Photo: Kate Lemos McHale, 2017*



New York Public Library (Stephen A. Schwarzman Building) Interiors, Main Reading Room and Catalog Room (now Rose Main Reading Room and Bill Blass Public Catalog Room) (LP-2592)

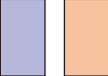


Carriere & Hastings, Third Floor Plan  
Courtesy of NYPL



McGraw Rotunda and Stairs (Part of LP-0880)

Main Reading Room and Catalog Room (LP-2592)



New York Public Library (Stephen A. Schwarzman Building) Interiors, Main Reading Room and Catalog Room (now Rose Main Reading Room and Bill Blass Public Catalog Room)

