

LOW MEMORIAL LIBRARY INTERIOR, main floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the main reading room and the encircling hallways; the third floor consisting of the upper part of the reading room up to and including the ceiling and the balconies opening onto the reading room, and the fixtures and interior components of the spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, and windows; Columbia University, Borough of Manhattan.  
Built 1895-97; Architect Charles F. McKim of McKim, Mead & White.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1973, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On January 8, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Low Memorial Library Interior, main floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the main reading room and the encircling hallways; the third floor consisting of the upper part of the reading room up to and including the ceiling and the balconies opening onto the reading room, and the fixtures and interior components of the spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, and windows; and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing was continued to March 11, 1980 (Item No. 5). Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Letters have been received in support of designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Low Memorial Library of Columbia University, a designated New York City Landmark, was designed in 1894 by Charles McKim of McKim, Mead & White and constructed in 1895-97. An excellent expression of the neo-Classical style, the monumental domed building is the focal point of the campus, and its imposing interior, dominated by a vast central hall with rich, classically-inspired ornament, ranks as one of the finest monumental spaces in New York City.

#### Historical Background

Located on the Columbia University campus at Broadway and 116th Street, the Low Memorial Library building is situated in an area of New York that remained relatively undeveloped until the late 19th century. Today's Upper West Side was originally known as Bloomingdale, a name derived from the Dutch "Bloemendale", in recollection of a flower-growing area in Holland. By the 18th century, the Bloomingdale Road provided the principal link between the established city in lower Manhattan and the farmlands of the Upper West Side, encouraging the growth of small clusters of villages along its course. The road also provided access to a number of country seats that were established by wealthy landowners during the 1700's.

During the first half of the 18th century several large institutions relocated to the Upper West Side, attracted to the area by the ready availability of land. In 1821,

the Asylum for the Insane constructed a new building at 117th Street between present-day Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue. The Asylum, thereafter known as Bloomingdale Insane Asylum, was situated on open grounds, occupied by gardens and stables, that extended from 113th Street to 120th Street. Today, this land comprises the heart of the Columbia University campus. Another nearby institution was the Leake & Watts Orphan Asylum, built at 113th Street in 1843. By the 1850's a number of hotels had also appeared in Bloomingdale, catering to Manhattan residents who desired to escape the heat of the city during the summer months.

In a move to protect the Hudson River Shore, plans for Riverside Park and Riverside Drive were approved in 1867, and in 1868-71 Bloomingdale Road was replaced by a wide avenue with grassy central malls from 59th to 155th Streets. Originally called "Boulevard", this Street was renamed Broadway in 1899. Riverside Park and Drive, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, were completed in 1898.

The residential development of the old Bloomingdale district advanced slowly, its pace influenced by the opening of rapid transit links and successive waves of land speculation and depression. Transportation was first provided by the Hudson River Railroad, established by 1851, which opened several local stations in the Bloomingdale section. In 1878, the Ninth Avenue El was extended to 155th Street, and cable traction cars followed along Amsterdam Avenue in 1885. Finally, in 1893, the extension of the proposed Broadway subway with a station at 103rd Street was approved.

Historically, the development of the city's fashionable residential districts had been on the east side. In 1890, however, the New York Herald ran a series of editorials extolling the amenities of the Upper West Side, particularly the Riverside Drive area. As a result, the city's upper middle class began to take the area seriously. Although lacking the old family traditions of Fifth Avenue, the beauty of Riverside Drive and the quiet atmosphere of the adjacent side streets attracted a stable group of prominent residents. Two monumental building complexes which were begun in the 1890s -- St. John the Divine Cathedral on the site of the Leake & Watts Orphan Asylum at 113th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, and the new campus of Columbia College on the Bloomingdale Asylum site -- also spurred further development of the area.

Columbia College, the first college in New York State, was chartered as King's College by George II of England in 1754. The original student body, which numbered eight, met in the vestry room of the school house, adjacent to Trinity Church on Broadway. King's College was rechristened Columbia after the American Revolution, when it moved to a Park Street address. In 1857, the institution moved to a new site on Madison Avenue at 49th Street, relocating to the Morningside Heights campus in 1897. In 1896, Columbia College was renamed Columbia University.

#### History of the Project

Low Memorial Library built in 1895-7, was the first major building constructed on the new campus. Funds for the Library were donated by

Seth Low (1850-1916), president of Columbia University between 1890 and 1901, in honor of his father, Abiel Abbot Low (1811-1893). Both Lows were notable New York figures. Abiel Abbot Low, who established a successful import business in 1849, was a prominent tea merchant in the China trade. He was also associated with the construction of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad and the founding of Newport News, Virginia.

Seth Low, the youngest child of Abiel Abbot Low, graduated from Columbia College in 1870, and entered his father's business where he remained until it was liquidated in 1887. Low became active in public affairs and gained political prominence as president of the Republican Campaign Club which promoted the election of James Garfield and Chester Arthur. In 1881, Low was elected Mayor of Brooklyn, an office he held for two terms, and at age 39, was appointed president of Columbia College. Upon leaving that post in 1901, Low was elected to the office of Mayor of New York and was responsible during his term for extensive civic reform. During his tenure as president of Columbia, Low organized the University Council and brought Teachers' College, Barnard, and the College of Physicians and Surgeons into association with the University. It was under Low's administration that the new Columbia site at Morningside Heights was acquired.

In 1892, architects Charles McKim, Richard Morris Hunt, and Charles C. Haight, were asked to form a committee to study the new site and recommend a plan for the campus design. Hunt proposed a complex that looked west toward the Palisades, while Haight advocated an eastern orientation. McKim, however, envisioned the University as a self-contained community set on a hill looking south to the city of New York. In the end, elements from the plans of all three architects were combined in the final scheme by McKim, who was appointed campus architect.

The firm of McKim, Mead & White was one of the most famous and productive in the history of American architecture, and played a leading role in promoting classically inspired styles in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The remarkable success and influence of this firm has been noted by both critics and admirers. The architectural historian Leland Roth wrote in the 1973 reprint of A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White:

The use of such classicism for civic, public, commercial, residential buildings spread until by the time of Mead's death in 1928, there was virtually no village or town in the U.S. that could not boast a bank or courthouse in some variant of the classic theme. During the early years of the twentieth century the influence of the firm extended even to England... (p.12)

The firm's national reputation and influence are largely attributable to the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. This exhibition, known as the "Great White City", presented America with a

vision of the neo-classical city composed of monumental buildings designed by such important architects as McKim, Hunt, and Louis Sullivan. It ushered in a new era in American urban planning known as the City Beautiful Movement and assured the prominence of neo-classicism in American architecture for many years. The influence of McKim, Mead, & White was especially strong in New York. The firm designed many buildings in and around the city, of which approximately 75 are designated New York City Landmarks or are in New York City Historic Districts.

Modeled after the Pantheon in Rome, Low Library was conceived as the visual and academic focal point of the campus plan, housing both administrative offices and the college libraries. Designed on a Greek cross plan, the Library is composed of a central, octagonal hall with upper galleries, ambulatory, four corner staircases, and the four projecting arms of the cross. The great hall served originally as the library's principal reading room, modeled after the main reading room of the British Museum in London. The room contained side, corner, and central bookcases for 12,000 volumes, and was dominated by a circular arrangement of tiered desks fitted with bronze reading lamps. These desks surrounded a central reference desk bordered by four columns. An elaborate iron configuration rested on the column capitals, supporting a central, four-faced clock crowned by a bronze eagle. A white sphere was suspended from the center of the domed ceiling, designed to produce the effect of a luminous moon, by reflecting light from lamps situated in the galleries. A stack room beneath the reading room housed 150,000 volumes while the galleries above shelved an additional 16,000 books. At full capacity the library was expected to accommodate 1.5 million volumes. From the beginning, Low Library was not considered an adequate library facility and an efficient system for calling books was never fully established. Two weeks after their installation, 10,000 feet of pneumatic tubes failed to work, and dumbwaiters, subsequently used, were also unsuccessful.

That the central hall was never a successful library reading room is due in part to the fact that the building was conceived as a civic monument (critics claimed it was designed as a monument to Seth Low himself) rather than as an effective college facility. It is a small wonder that the Columbia newspaper claimed in 1925, "Library is a misnomer for an edifice designed for the benefit of sightseers."

In 1934, the college library was moved to the newly completed South Hall, although the Low Library building continued to house the offices of the President, Secretary, the Summer Session, and the Columbiana and Rare Book Collections. Avery Architectural Library and the Law Library had been previously relocated to separate buildings. Since 1934, the central reading room has been the scene of exhibitions and major convocations, and among the prestigious figures that have been received there are King George VI of England, Winston Churchill, and Queen Juliana of the Netherlands. The remainder of the building houses the University's administrative offices.

#### Low Library Interior

The interior of Low Memorial Library is characterized by the same

classic monumentality as the exterior. The central foyer, the principal point of entry, is entered through bronze and glass double doors. The two-story room is distinguished by a very handsome floor of red, rust, gray, and beige marble designed in an octagon pattern of panels. Arranged on eight marble panels are the twelve signs of the zodiac, sculpted of bronze in low relief in 1897 by George William Maynard (Columbia class of 1859). A white marble bust of Pallas Athene the Greek goddess of wisdom, arts, and industries, which is a copy of the head of the Minerve du Collier in the Louvre, rests on a fluted marble pedestal in the center of the octagon. At the east and west ends of the foyer, four marble steps lead to corner offices, originally the President's and Trustees' rooms. The paneled oak office doors are marked by handsome stone architraves detailed with leaf and dart moldings and paneled lintels. Monumental, two-story limestone pilasters crowned by ornamented gilt capitals flank the doors and mark the vestibule corners. Plaster panels with acanthus leaf borders, painted in shades of green and gold, and a band course of Greek fret work articulate the lobby walls. A large double window appears over the front door, while a narrow balcony with iron railings runs along the south wall above. A second window, marked by an ornamental lattice of cross bars, or clathri, lights the balcony. The elaborate decorative scheme of the vestibule is completed by a coffered ceiling composed of nine square coffers, or caissons, distinguished by rich foliate ornament. The caissons are divided by stylized boughs of laurel leaves and corner medallions. A handsome bronze lantern is suspended from the central coffer directly over the bust of Pallas Athene. A wrought-iron lamp post mounted on a marble pedestal and crowned by a glass globe appears in each corner of the foyer, while busts of Zeus and Apollo flank the entrance doors.

On the north side of the foyer, four marble steps of Istrian marble ascend to a narrow hall which is one of eight connecting sections that encircle the central rotunda and comprise the ambulatory. This southern hallway is screened from the vestibule by a striking pair of two-story columns constructed of striated, green Connemare marble quarried in County Galway, Ireland. The north side of the corridor is set apart from the main hall by four similar columns of highly polished green Vermont granite crowned by Greek Ionic capitals of gilt bronze. Identical columns separate the north, east, and west corridors from the hall, forming an effective screen that is very classical in character. The corridor floor is designed with a geometric pattern of circles and squares of yellow, pink, white, and black marble with a low-relief bronze seal of the universe located in the center. The walls are articulated by limestone pilasters in the Doric order and plaster wall panels painted orange. A Greek fret band course, leaf and dart moldings, and decorative grilles echo the motifs that appear in the foyer. Oak panels, (the backs of the original reading room bookcases), are carved with the names of the library benefactors and a frieze of classical wreaths. Busts of former Columbia Presidents, Grayson Kirk and Nicholas Butler, flank the staircases. An elaborate ceiling composed of five richly ornamented caissons completes the corridor design. A bronze and glass lantern hangs from each end caisson. The east, west, and north corridors exhibit the same motifs, with identical marble floors, elaborate ceilings, and wall panels and grilles. Central double wooden doors flanked by three pilasters on the outer walls of the corridors lead to various offices. Three bronze lanterns hang from the ceilings in each hall. A narrow

balcony projects over the north hall, and the east and south corridors are distinguished by handsome iron gates that offer access to the main hall.

Four, smaller oval halls mark the corners of the main hall, connecting the main corridors and housing double staircases. These oval halls are simply designed, with plain plaster walls, arched recessed doorways and wall panels, vaulted ceilings, and simple pilasters. A particularly striking feature of these halls are the four bronze standing lamps intact in each. The lamps, resting on lion's head feet, are mounted on marble pedestals and crowned by small glass globes.

The interior of Low Memorial Library is distinguished in particular by the magnificent, classically designed central hall. The eight-sided room, in essence a square with bevelled corners, measures 73 feet across and is crowned by an imposing dome, 105½ feet high. This inner dome, painted sky blue, is constructed of plaster over a steel mesh frame and rests on pendentives that spring from four massive limestone corner piers. The piers, actually hollow ducts, partially support large vaults that arch over each of four semicircular clerestory windows. The sixteen granite columns that border the room support four stone galleries or balconies that originally housed library books. Two levels of oak shelving are still intact in each gallery. The gallery fronts, designed as entablatures for the supporting columns, are ornamented with classical wreaths and crowned by a decorative crossbar railing. Mounted on pedestals over each column on the north side of the main hall are the free-standing statues of Euripides, Demosthenes, Sophocles, and Augustus Caesar. Similar statues planned for the other galleries were never completed. Additional ornament in the rotunda includes double rows of richly ornamented coffers that appear in each clerestory vault. The inscriptions "law", "philosophy", "theology" and "medicine" mark the entablatures of the corner piers, which are ornamented with dentals and carved foliate motifs. Large gold circles appear on the pendentives, contrasting handsomely with the expanse of the blue dome.

Each element of this classically inspired room was carefully conceived as part of the whole. The grandeur of the main hall is enhanced by the emphatic symmetry of its design and the restrained, but striking, nature of the classical ornament. With the original shelves and desks removed, the result is a monumental Roman hall and ambulatory. Although impractical for library use, the interior is an aesthetic success. Few visitors fail to be impressed by the dramatic hall, the imposing foyer and the handsome ambulatory. The Library is a fine example of the work of Charles McKim and of the classical spirit that so strongly influenced American architecture at the turn of the 20th century.

Report prepared by Rachel Carley  
Research Department

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Low Memorial Library Interior, main floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the main reading room and the encircling hallways; the third floor consisting of the upper part of the reading room up to and including the ceiling, and the balconies opening onto the reading room; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors and windows; Columbia University, Borough of Manhattan; has 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 the Interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more and that the Interior is one which is 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 Low Memorial Library Interior ranks as one of finest monumental spaces in New York City; that it was designed by Charles McKim of McKim, Mead & White; that the design is characterized by a restrained but striking combination of classical ornament and richly colored materials; and that it is an excellent expression of the classical spirit that so strongly influenced American architecture at the turn of the 20th century.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a landmark the Low Memorial Library Interior, main floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the main reading room and the encircling hallways; the third floor consisting of the upper part of the reading room up to and including the ceiling, and the balconies opening onto the reading room; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, and windows; Columbia University, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1973, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Columbia University. Columbiana Collection (Articles, letters, clippings, photographs).

Dictionary of American Biography. vol 6, part I. New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1961.

Landmarks Preservation Commission. Low Memorial Library, Columbia University, Designation Report, (LP-0304). New York: City of New York, 1966.

Landmarks Preservation Commission. Metropolitan Museum Historic District Designation Report, (LP-0955). New York: City of New York, 1977.

Landmarks Preservation Commission. Riverside - West 105th Street Historic District Designation Report, (LP-0323), New York: City of New York, 1973.

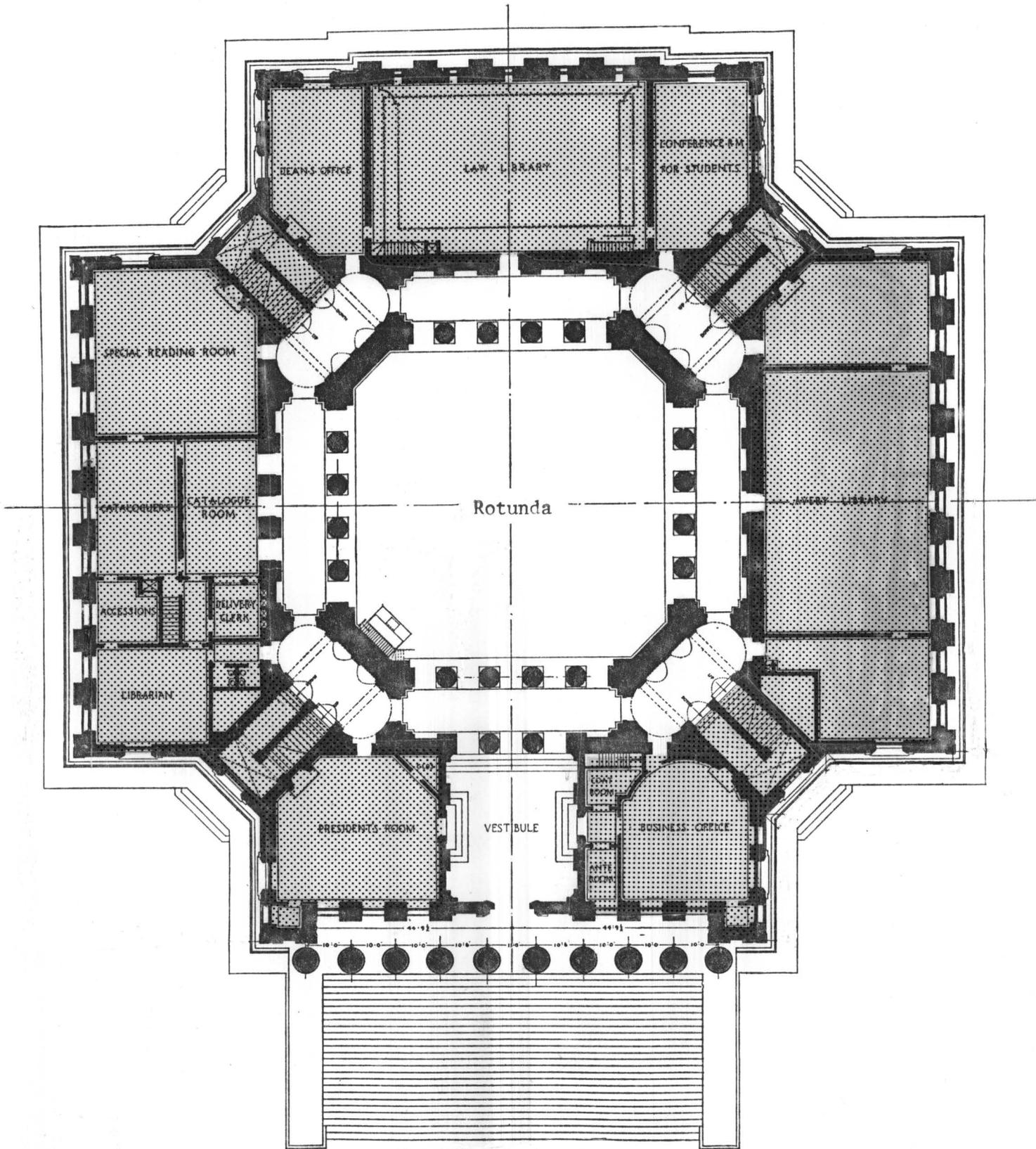
Lyman, Susan. The Story of New York. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1964.

A Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White 1879-1915. New York: Arno Press, 1977.

Passanti, Francesco. "The Design of Columbia in the 1890's, McKim and his client." Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 36(May, 1977), 69-84.

Robson, John. A Guide to Columbia University. New York: Columbia University Press, 1937.

Telfer, Dean. "Columbia Today." Fall, 1977.



Low Memorial Library Interior  
 Columbia University  
 116th St. and Broadway  
 Manahttan

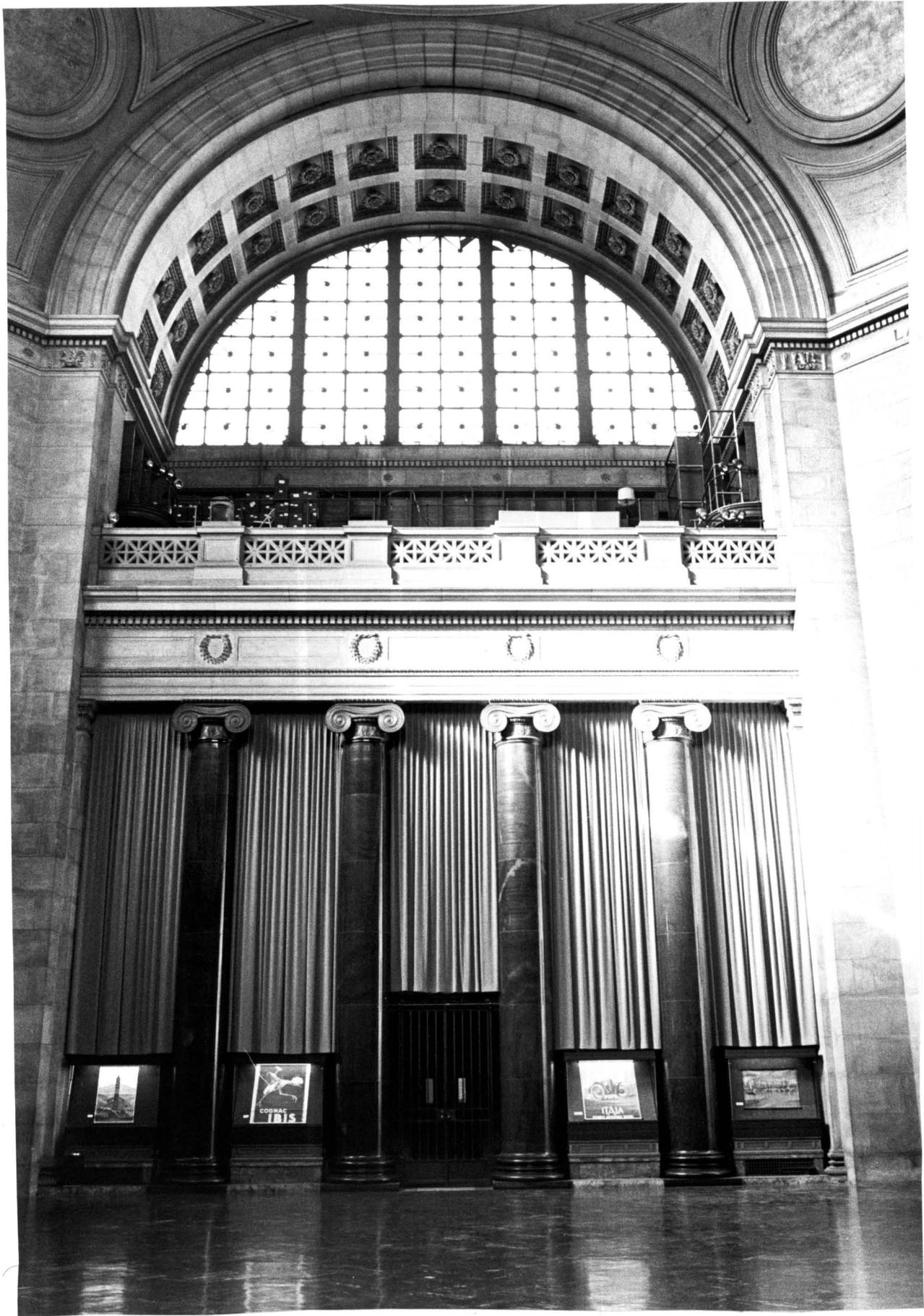
Architects: McKim, Mead & White  
 Date: 1895-98

Not Drawn to Scale  
 Deleted Areas



Low Memorial Library Interior  
Vestibule  
Built 1895-97

Architect: Charles F. McKim of McKim, Mead & White



Low Memorial Library Interior  
Main Reading Room  
Built 1895-97

Architect: Charles F. McKim of McKim, Mead & White