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A pair of lions guard the entrance hall of the Boston Public Library.

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The Regal Boston Public Library

A striking combination of architectural styles

by John Sedgwick

Combining the classic lines of 19th-century architecture and the sheer planes of 20th-century modernism, the Boston Public Library represents, by its style no less than by its books, the very best of New England's long cultural tradition. Located in treelined, brick-paved Copley Square, the library looks out on Trinity Church, the elegant Copley Plaza Hotel, and a new complex of stores, restaurants and a hotel. But it is not overshadowed by any of this.

As Longfellow wrote in a poem dedicating the original building in 1895, "This palace is the people's own." And palace it is—from the white Georgia marble of the foyer to the elaborately carved fireplaces, and the copper gargoyles adorning the lightning rods up on the roof.

Built only a few years after the surrounding Back Bay was filled in to create land for the city's expansion, the old wing, designed by Charles F. McKim of McKim, Mead and White, rests not on solid ground but on wooden piers over open water. And the new wing, designed by Philip Johnson and opened in 1972, is pitched on clay. With more than five million volumes, the Boston Public Library is one of the 10 largest libraries in the United States.

The entrance to the old part of the library is graced by a pair of voluptuous

ladies forged in bronze, now green with age, who represent Art (she with a painter's palette) and Science (with a globe). The three arched doorways are overhung with four wrought-iron lamps, and the head of Minerva pokes out over the middle door. Above her, the inscription reads, "Free To All."

Unfortunately, that entrance was closed recently, so now you have to enter the library through the revolving glass doors of the new wing on Boylston Street. Operating on an "open-stack" basis, as opposed to the closed reserve system of the old wing's collection, Johnson's addition is fully utilitarian—three tiers of wide open space within a massive granite cube. Because each floor has nine equal sections, Johnson himself referred to his construction as a giant "tic-tac-toe." Yet it serves the purpose of displaying more than two million volumes effectively.

So divergent are the classical and modernist styles that the only apparent thing the two wings have in common, aside from their vast size and extensive use of granite, is that they both are built around a courtyard. But Johnson's courtyard is totally enclosed, making it an atrium.

Going down a corridor to the left of the entrance, passing three charming dioramas that depict scenes from popular children's books, you will come to McKim's courtyard and suddenly enter another world. Like a medieval cloister,

it is a wonderful, peaceful place, delightfully cool in summer. It is lined with columns and filled with Japanese maples.

So pleased was McKim with this cloister that he planned to install a statue—by Frederick MacMonnies—in memory of his wife. But those plans were stopped when proper Boston got wind of what the statue was: a nude, dancing Bacchante feeding grapes to her baby. Nudity was scandal enough, but a drunk? The now defunct *Boston Post* bannered: "No Tip-sy Statue For Boston." And the paper was right. After the rector of Trinity Church arranged for a private inspection, the statue was relegated to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

From the courtyard, you enter the McKim wing and make a right to reach the original entrance hall. With the doors shut and the natural light closed off, the place has the cool, damp feeling of a wine cellar because of its low vaulted ceilings and extensive use of stone. But you can appreciate its appeal by asking the guard to open up one of the heavy (1,500-pound) bronze doors leading out to the vestibule. Crafted by Daniel Chester French, the sculptor of the Lincoln Memorial, each of the six doors bears a graceful allegorical figure carved in relief. Back inside, notice the signs of the zodiac inlaid in the marble at your feet, and the mosaics overhead spelling out the names of New England's greatest writers amid a latticework of vines.

But you will ascend to even greater heights by climbing the massive classical staircase, heavy with columns and arches, which won the praise of Henry James, presumably a connoisseur of libraries, for "its splendor of tawny marble." The yellow Siena marble was quarried from the private preserve of a religious order that was accustomed to prying loose merely a block or two at a time to pay off an occasional debt; McKim managed to relieve the friars of 400 tons. The stairs are watched over by a pair of lions, dedicated to two Massachusetts regiments that fought in the Civil War. High above, the ceiling is deeply coffered in squares of cream and blue. Sunlight streams in from three windows. On the loggia above, as if to culminate this great mounting-up-to-glory, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes has painted a vast fresco of sylphs.

In a slightly less enchanting motif, the artist also decorated the walls of the staircase with a series of murals that are intended to represent the range of the library's classification system, going from literature through the social sciences to chemistry and physics, each illustrated with a scene from Classical Arcadia.

To the right, just past the Venetian vestibule, is the Delivery Room. Now sadly mismatched in form and function, the room is essentially a glorified booth where you present a written request to one of the clerks to collect a book from

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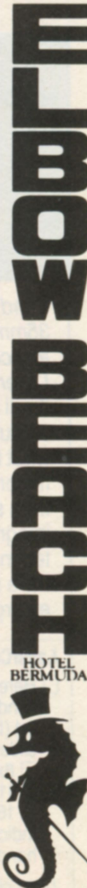
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Boston Library *continued*

the closed stacks. In the old days, a miniature railroad chugged down the rows of books; now, despite computerized processes elsewhere in the library, that service has regressed and is performed by hand and foot. But what a glorious room. With a ceiling of gilded beams, a fireplace of red marble and walls of oak paneling, it calls to mind the Doges' Palace in Venice. And it is ringed with yet another series of murals, this one by Edwin Austin Abbey, depicting the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail. It isn't quite so difficult, one hopes, to obtain a book.

Since books from this collection, known as the Research Library, do not circulate, they are customarily read in adjoining Bates Hall, a long, barrel-ceilinged gallery built on a monumental scale. Here, as you sit amid the rows of tables, each place with its individual reading light, busts of ancient authors and eminent Bostonians gaze down on you.

Back outside the great hall, you should pass down the corridor in the other direction from the Delivery Room toward a Pompeii-style vestibule and turn right up the dark stairs. Although they seem to be the sort of stairs that might lead to a dungeon, in fact they open onto illustrious Sargent Hall, resplendent with murals on Judaism and Christianity that turn the gallery into something closer to a Byzantine church.

Returning back downstairs, you might take a variety of exhibits that are tucked away in the different reading rooms of the old library. In the specially cooled and humidified rare-books collection, for example, there are displays of incunabula, or books printed before 1501, and handwritten manuscripts, as well as a multivolume edition of all of Shakespeare's plays that fits into a bookcase no larger than a box of kitchen matches.

Over in the Johnson wing, the central atrium on the main floor is the site of frequent exhibits, and the Rabb Lecture Hall, on the concourse level below, schedules regular lectures, concerts and film showings. ■

How and Where

Located at the corner of Dartmouth and Boylston Streets, the library is best reached by subway, since parking is scarce. Take the Green Line to Copley Square. The library and most exhibits are open Monday-Thursday from 9 to 9, on Friday and Saturday from 9 to 5. Temporary library cards are available to visitors from out of state; inquire at the circulation desk by the front hall of the new wing. Admission is, as the old entrance declares, "Free To All." Information on lectures, concerts and exhibits can be obtained by calling the public-relations office of the library: 617-536-5400, extension 231.



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