

Democracy Bestowed:
The Boston Public Library and the Evolution of the Ideal of Civic Education

By

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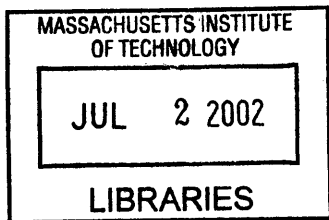


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ABSTRACT

A critical examination of the architectural and institutional history of the Boston Public Library, this thesis blends primary sources and contemporary architectural theory to develop a thematic argument about the linkages between architecture, urban design, and the institutional mission of the Library. Beginning with a review of the early history of the public library movement in Boston and working through an in-depth analysis of the design and development of the Copley Square Library building (1895) of Charles Follen McKim and its substantial addition (1972) by Philip Johnson, this thesis demonstrates that the tools of architecture and urban design have been used in varying ways throughout the history of the Library to emphasize or de-emphasize different elements of the Library's institutional mission. In particular, the thesis traces the ways in which the use of architecture evolved in the seventy-seven years between the McKim Building and the Johnson addition, arguing that the design of the second structure implicitly and explicitly rejected the cultural agenda of the McKim Building in favor of a design of functionalism, efficiency, and consumerism. Where McKim integrated the aesthetics of personal and social uplift into his design, a design simultaneously elitist and democratic, Johnson produced a structure dedicated primarily to utility. The thesis concludes that, by so doing, Johnson sacrificed an opportunity – important to the core mission of American public libraries – to communicate the pleasure and privilege of reading and self-education.

The thesis also includes a discussion of representative branch libraries, applying the same method of architectural and urbanistic analysis to three local facilities in order to provide a sense of the architectural and cultural development of the Boston Public Library outside of Copley Square.

Thesis Supervisor: Lawrence J. Vale

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*Cambridge
May 2002*

As to the terms on which access should be had to a City Library, the Trustees can only say, that they would place no restrictions on its use, except such as the nature of individual books, or their safety may demand; regarding it as a great matter to carry as many of them as possible into the home of the young; into poor families; into cheap boarding houses; in short, wherever they will be most likely to affect life and raise personal character and condition.

-Report of the Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston, 1852

What is the Boston Public Library? To the people who make up the city's budget, it is a service . . . But the library is also a legacy. It contains the knowledge of the past, from Homer, Emerson and even Wilfred Owen. And it is a gift from the past: from former Boston generations who contributed their money and their books to build a library befitting the "Athens of America."

-The Boston Globe, 1981

The main entrance to the Boston Public Library used to face Copley Square across Dartmouth Street. There was a broad exterior stairway and inside there was a beautiful marble staircase leading up to the main reading room with carved lions and high-domed ceilings. It was always a pleasure to go there. It felt like a library and looked like a library, and even when I was going in there to look up Duke Snider's lifetime batting average, I used to feel like a scholar.

-Robert B. Parker, Looking For Rachel Wallace, 1980

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY
OF THE CITY OF BOSTON
BUILT BY THE PEOPLE
AND DEDICATED TO
THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING



1858
1895
1972



FREE TO ALL

INTRODUCTION

Democracy Bestowed

Setting

On the 17th of September 1855, a group of prominent Bostonians gathered on Boylston Street, across from the Boston Common, to witness the laying of the cornerstone for a new building of the Boston Public Library. Housed since the early 1850s in several rooms of a local schoolhouse, the Library had outgrown its quarters and needed a new structure designed specifically for the storage and use of its collections. The construction of the Boylston Street building was prompted by the pledge of a substantial donation from Joshua Bates, a Weymouth native and wealthy banker, for the purchase of new books for the Library. Bates, who had spent happy hours of an impoverished childhood reading in a local bookstore, believed that a public library would be a vital resource for the residents of Boston, many of whom were eager to better themselves through reading but unable to afford the purchase of books.¹ Writing of his childhood memories, Bates was “confident that had there been good, warm, and well-lighted rooms to which we could have resorted, with proper books, nearly all of the youth of my acquaintance would have spent their evenings there, to the improvement of their minds and morals.”²

Bates’s gift was conditioned, however, on his request that the City of Boston construct a building for the Library. Indeed, Bates suggested that the new library, the first truly public library in urban America, would honor the city by fulfilling its important mission. “The only condition that I ask,” wrote Bates to Mayor Benjamin Seaver in October of 1852, “is that the building shall be such an ornament to the City, that there shall be room for one hundred to one hundred and fifty persons to sit at reading-tables, – that it shall be perfectly free to all, with no other restrictions than may be necessary for the preservation of the books.”³

Within this seemingly simple request lies an intriguing ambiguity. Bates appears to have understood the “ornamental” quality of the library as a function of its mission – that by providing open reading space and free reading material to the citizens of Boston, the Library would enrich and embellish the city. Latent within that vision is the possibility that the ornamental quality could be extended to the Library building itself, that the appearance of the Library – not merely its facilities – could communicate its importance as an urban institution dedicated to the education and enrichment of urban society. Although it would take the second generation of Boston library-builders to realize Bates’s vision in architectural and decorative terms, his early suggestions, albeit unintended, about the ways in which ornamentalism and functionalism can intersect have remained an important part

of the identity of the Boston Public Library since the Boylston Street building opened to the public in 1858.

In the mid-nineteenth century, architects in Europe and America were engaged in developing and refining appropriate architectural styles for specific types of buildings, many of which, like public libraries, were inventions of the period and demanded new architectural forms. The form of Bates's Boylston Street building reflected the tastes of the 1850s – a somewhat severe square structure, done in red brick and fronted with tall arched windows. The building featured a central reading room surrounded by three stories of alcoves, which together held the majority of the Library's 22,000 books.⁴

In 1895, when the Boylston Street building was replaced by the opening of a far larger and grander structure, designed by the New York firm of McKim, Mead & White in the newly developed Copley Square, the public image of the Boston Public Library became one of neo-Classicism. The new building was an ornamented square, designed in the disciplined Italianate style and housing hundreds of thousands of books, most of them hidden from public view within closed bookstacks. And so it remained until 1972, when the Library expanded with a massive modernist addition designed by Philip Johnson and featuring open shelving for the efficient storage and circulation of millions of volumes of general reading materials.

In the four decades between the laying of the cornerstone for the original Boylston Street building and the opening of the new Library in Copley Square – the institutional heart of elite Boston of the late nineteenth century – the urban society served by the Boston Public Library changed dramatically. Decades of European immigration had swelled the population and altered the demographic composition of the city to such an extent that traditional, homogeneous Yankee Boston was rapidly fading into history. In 1855, the year construction began on the Boylston Street Library, the population of Boston was only 50,000 people.⁵ By the 1890s, when the Library relocated to Copley Square, the boundaries of the city had expanded and the population had grown tremendously, swelled by waves of immigration from Ireland, Eastern Europe, and the Mediterranean.⁶ The physical landscape of the city had been transformed as well, with the creation of the prestigious neighborhood of the Back Bay. This westward expansion was designed not only to provide the crowded city with additional buildable land and open space, but also to insulate the wealthy classes, who could move to an area physically separated by the Public Garden from the

increasingly deteriorated downtown neighborhoods.

Boston of the later decades of the nineteenth century, although still an important seaport and manufacturing power, had ceded its historic economic pre-eminence to New York City. Increasingly, Boston was perceived by its educated elite as a city whose strengths were more academic and intellectual than commercial and industrial. With Harvard University, the new Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a long intellectual and literary legacy, Boston of the late nineteenth century had a fading but still valid claim to being the literary and academic capital of America. The challenge, however, was to find a way to incorporate the flood of new residents into its long-standing tradition of personal industry and education as a route to social improvement. Handsome, well-equipped public libraries fit this vision nicely, not only for their ability to bolster Boston's reputation as a city of erudition and civism, but also as public institutions able to bring the pleasures of the mind to diverse populations while simultaneously helping to promote the Yankee values of hard work and moral rectitude on which – according to local mythology – Boston had been built.

Thus, the expanded Boston Public Library that opened its doors on Copley Square in February of 1895 responded to a new urban environment, one in which the Library could no longer assume that its patrons shared common values, history, or even language. Given these circumstances, architecture became increasingly important as a means to communicate both the mission of the institution and the respectful attitude – both for the material housed within the Library and for the Library as a civic institution – expected of those crossing its threshold. In this way, the Boston Public Library of the late nineteenth century, both in its aesthetics and in its institutional outlook, is an artifact of the gradual transition from insular Yankee Boston to an increasingly pluralistic Boston,⁷ an institution that explicitly employed architecture and urbanism as a medium for the transmission of cultural values – the values, it was hoped, that new and unschooled Bostonians would receive and adopt, in part, through their use of the Library.

This effort to communicate the values of traditional Boston was given further urgency by the decline in Yankee political power, power seized by rising Irish politicians in the decades following the Civil War. In a city in which traditional authority – both economic and political – was being lost to upstarts, the members of the Yankee elite coalesced around cultural institutions, including public libraries, as a means to protect and reinforce their vision of what a good city Boston – John

Winthrop's city on a hill – could be. With Charles Follen McKim's design for Copley Square, architecture and urban design became key components of this cultural campaign, offering aesthetic messages both welcoming and distancing to library patrons. Understood this way, the architecture and urban design of the nineteenth-century Boston Public Library served as an exercise in the evolving aesthetics of hierarchy and social control.

Design

At their most basic, public libraries are simply collections of books and other materials available for use by the citizenry. To carry out this fundamental mission, a public library could easily be housed in a building much like a warehouse or barn, one with plenty of open space for shelving, seating, and storage and without particular attention to architectural detail. Indeed, the earliest public libraries were generally housed in small, modest buildings, often sharing quarters with schools or other public facilities. So long as their books were reasonably protected and available for general use, early library facilities served their limited purpose. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, as public libraries became important features of urban society in America, the straight-forward goals of storage and access had been augmented by those of the aesthetics of inspiration. Library architecture reached new and elaborate heights, as cities competed to raise the grandest buildings, each designed to embody the values of learning, knowledge, and enlightenment. Early public libraries were often located in prominent urban areas in order to reflect the importance of their mission and position. As the first truly public library in a major American city – the first urban library to require neither membership nor dues – the Boston Public Library led this movement toward distinctive library architecture and urban design.

A century later, the architecture of the Boston Public Library remains one of the most interesting and distinctive examples of civic design in the United States. A careful analysis of the architecture and urbanism of the two components of the Library reveals an evolving institution, one in which the physical design of inspiration – so central to the expression of institutional identity in the McKim design – had been greatly de-emphasized by the time of Philip Johnson. While the mission of the Library has remained largely unaltered in the century-and-a-half since Joshua Bates first laid out his vision for the institution, the changing character of the urban society of which the Library is a part has led to periodic rearticulations, through architecture, of that mission. Each new building and every renovation of an existing building, whether the grand complex on Copley Square or a small

neighborhood branch library, offers an implicit opportunity to re-state and clarify the architectural personality of the Library. The architectural and urbanistic presence of the Boston Public Library has evolved over the past 150 years and that evolution can now be interpreted for meanings, intended and not, about the institution and the society of which it is both a product and a reflection.



The McKim Building of 1895 offers a robust expression of social and intellectual hegemony in combination with unprecedented public access and openness. This mixture of asserted privilege and progressive social policy has defined the Boston Public Library throughout its history but was particularly strong at the time of the design of the McKim Building, a period of urban change and anxiety coupled with a reformist spirit dedicated to improving the lives of the poor and uneducated.

McKim himself embodied this spirit, the son of an abolitionist family and a professional dedicated to the beautification of the American city as the stage for American cultural and political life. McKim was in the vanguard of the neo-Classical revival in America, an architectural movement that offered a clear vision for the design of prominent civic buildings, buildings unafraid to aggressively communicate the importance of their urban mission. In keeping with this ideology, McKim produced a neo-Classical building for the Boston Public Library that is handsome and legible. Most importantly, McKim believed that a public library needed to provide a sense of uplift and of awe, awe not only of the information stored within the Library, not only of the Library as an institution, but of the very society that has managed to produce such an admirable creation. The McKim Building perfectly captures the tension between populism and elitism that underlay Boston society during the Gilded Age, a tension that is so intricately woven into the building's design that not only is the building itself enduringly interesting and the experience of entering it enduringly powerful, but it also sheds light on Boston society of the late nineteenth century.

In the mid-1960s, when the Boston Public Library commissioned Philip Johnson to design a much-needed addition to the McKim structure, the explicit mission of the Library remained much the same as it had been in the nineteenth century – to provide free access to books and other materials as a means of personal betterment – but the cultural and architectural expectations for the Library had changed dramatically, broadening its purpose and in some ways diluting its message. The collections of the Library had substantially outgrown the storage space provided for in McKim's

design, and new media – including film, audio recordings, and materials for the physically disabled – were confounding the existing shelving system. Furthermore, urban libraries were expected to offer not merely printed and recorded items, but also conference rooms, meeting areas, performance and exhibition spaces – to be community centers in ways only remotely considered by McKim and the Library Trustees of the late nineteenth century. The Library needed new and different facilities, and Johnson was hired to design them.

The Trustees of the Library were primarily concerned with the construction of a building that would offer efficient, functional spaces for the provision of up-to-date library services. At the same time, the modernist framework within which Johnson was then working offered no clear guide for the design of a major civic building. As a result, the Johnson structure lacks the easy cultural “readability” of the McKim Building; it is a functional public library without explicit social and cultural messages. Perhaps this is because what was self-evident to McKim at the end of the nineteenth century – that public libraries have a responsibility not only to educate but also to inspire, not only to offer books but also to offer readers a vision of what their lives could be – was no longer clear by the 1960s. Older American cities had experienced decades of decline, including dramatic decreases in population and a diminished sense of cultural and social authority. In many ways, public institutions were no longer in a position to couple the provision of city services – public libraries among them – with hortatory messages of social uplift and betterment.

In this uncertain environment, one in which the cultural and moral confidence of a Joshua Bates was nearly impossible, Johnson still faced the task of designing a structure for a pre-eminent civic institution, one embodying the complex relationship between knowledge, the elite, and the general public. Furthermore, Johnson had to grapple with the perplexing challenge of how to add to an existing building – a universally acclaimed building – in a way that would both respect what had come before and allow him to express his own architectural style. Johnson’s solution was to design an addition for the Library that provided easy access to books and other materials, rows of reasonably comfortable tables and chairs, and provisions for multiple community uses, yet lacked the sense of personal uplift and inspiration that has defined the McKim Building since its opening. In the Johnson vision, endorsed by the Library Trustees of the time, the mission of the Boston Public Library focused less on the promise of personal uplift through the provision of free access to books and other reading materials than simply on the promise of the effective provision of books.

The Library System

If the image presented by the Copley Square complex is that of the changed needs and attitudes of Boston society between the 1895 and the 1972, the network of branch libraries reflects the spirit of particular periods in the history of the Library. Where the central library is intended to accommodate a broad audience, including researchers from Massachusetts, from New England, and from around the world, the branch libraries are specifically designed to serve a particular neighborhood and particular population. The architecture of some branch libraries, especially those libraries of the later decades of the twentieth century, seems explicitly intended to reflect and respond to the surrounding community, while other neighborhood libraries are without easily interpretable designs – the aesthetic choices seem largely arbitrary and based only on the notion that a public library, even a small one, should be handsome and notable structure in a community.

Three branch libraries in particular – the Kirstein Business Branch in downtown Boston, the Parker Hill Branch in Roxbury, and the North End Branch – offer insights into this evolving presentation of the Library and will be analyzed in depth in this thesis. There is no single way to design a neighborhood library, and the different images that the Boston Public Library has assumed over the decades – images both intentional and accidental – offer a way to understand the Library not only as a massive architectural and institutional presence in Copley Square but also as an extended aesthetic and cultural system, one which has grown organically, in fits and starts and from neighborhood to neighborhood, since the late nineteenth century. Although this thesis is primarily a study of the architecture of the central library in Copley Square, the branch system provides important historical evidence for interpreting the activities and ambitions, both architectural and programmatic, of the Boston Public Library.



The story told by the Boston Public Library is one of the evolving relationship between the civic establishment and the publics it serves, as expressed through architecture and urbanism. The Library as originally conceived by Joshua Bates was an institution designed to fulfill an intellectual and moral purpose, to provide access to books and other reading materials in the cause of individual and social improvement. Bates himself did not draw attention to the architectural and urbanistic possibilities of public libraries, but by implication his ideas can be interpreted – as indeed they were

within just a few decades – as a mandate to translate his vision into aesthetic terms. Both Bates and McKim were products of the nineteenth century, a period in which the cultural values of traditional Boston, although under pressure from changing urban demographics, were still clearly defined and clearly understood. McKim’s building, with its celebrated reading room named in Bates’s honor, was a part of that culture, and it embodies the contradictions inherent in any institution designed to simultaneously reinforce the existing social structure and to influence the personal aspirations of the general public by providing broad access to education and knowledge.

In many ways, the Johnson addition continued the social themes embedded in McKim’s design, but changed their expression dramatically, and not simply because modernism as an architectural style rejected the articulation and ornamentation that gave traditional architecture much of its character. The period in which Johnson worked on the third architectural iteration of the Boston Public Library was a period of urban decline and social displacement, in which civic institutions were struggling to redefine their relationship to the public. This was a different social and moral environment from the one in which McKim lived and worked, and the change is reflected in the design. Johnson’s building is one of function, of openness without expectation, and of architecture that does not give a clear sense of uplift or inspiration. Constrained by the demands of designing an addition for “perhaps the most admired, discussed, and influential building in the American architectural evolution of the nineteenth century,”⁸ the Johnson addition houses library services in a reasonably efficient and straight-forward manner, yet it presents the public with no obvious messages about the pleasures or benefits of library use.

Both Charles Follen McKim and Philip Johnson designed for an institution dedicated to the ideal of public access to information, to the ideal of self-improvement as a mechanism for the improvement of society. The institutional mission of the Boston Public Library has remained largely consistent throughout its history, but its architectural mission – a dynamic mission, evolving not only in Copley Square but also through the system of neighborhood branches – reveals a public institution experiencing on-going redefinition, a process of highlighting different elements at different periods and in different places. In this way, the Boston Public Library, both its central building on Copley Square and its network of branch libraries, offers an illuminating way to understand a changing urban society and a means to appreciate how architecture and urbanism are transformed by and with social values and norms.

CHAPTER 1

The Meanings of Buildings

Any analysis of the social and cultural significance of a particular building, especially a prominent civic building, should begin with a review of the extensive body of theoretical literature available on the methods and value of interpreting architecture. That the “reading” of architecture for social, cultural, and political meanings is a legitimate and compelling methodology has been argued by members of a number of academic disciplines, including art history, cultural history, anthropology, and archaeology, and one should consider the contributions of all in order to fully appreciate the field.

Buildings form our physical environment and each of us, as we move through public spaces and past the buildings that give cities their form, picks up cues, cues about accessibility, about safety, about wealth, and about power. “Except in cases where the building and its surroundings are protected by walls of privacy,” writes Robert Stecker in *Architecture and Civilization*, “they intrude into our lives, not only of those who use the buildings, but anyone who passes through, or in sight of, the environments of which they are a part.”⁹ We understand, often without consciously thinking about it, whether a particular building or urban space is public or private (or something in between), whether we will be welcome in it, whether we will be dressed properly for it, and whether we can afford whatever it may have to offer. We make these evaluative assumptions about the nature of a building or urban space based on certain physical characteristics, characteristics which are in turn associated, through shared cultural understandings, with particular meanings. The cultural linkages between Classical design and government, between gothic architecture and religion are only two common examples of the ways in which buildings can communicate meaning. Much of what is transmitted from buildings and urban spaces is more subtle and complex, as will be discussed in the following sections.

Buildings as Historical Record

In his 1988 essay “How Buildings Mean,” the philosopher Nelson Goodman developed a theory for interpreting architecture based on four mechanisms by which, he argued, structures can convey messages about their identity. Of these mechanisms – denotation, exemplification, expression, and mediated reference¹⁰ – the category of mediated reference is the most useful for our purposes. A means of interpreting not only the surface appearance of a building but also the cultural associations linked to that appearance, mediated reference offers a way to interpret the implicit meanings behind the styles chosen for any building, such as the neo-Classical design of McKim’s central library

building in Copley Square. Not only was neo-Classical architecture in fashion at the time that McKim was working on the Library, but the cultural associations attached to neo-Classicism – rationality, discipline, and order – provided McKim with a wealth of symbolic meanings considered appropriate for a proud public library. “Representation, exemplification, and expression are elementary varieties of symbolization,” writes Goodman, “but reference by a building to abstruse or complicated ideas sometimes runs along more devious paths, along homogeneous or heterogeneous chains of elementary referential links.”¹¹

On the other hand, it is important to note that these meanings can only be fully understood within the context of a shared culture, culture that arms individuals with the necessary “referential links” to fully read a particular building. The meanings latent in architecture only come alive with human interaction, and the rhetorical force of a building can vary and change based on the interpretative capacity of its audience. Furthermore, people living outside the sphere of collective knowledge are generally excluded from receiving the more subtle messages communicated by architecture, although buildings may maintain broad meanings even for outsiders.

The idea that architecture holds symbolic value within particular cultures leads logically to a recognition that buildings can serve as historical texts, as capable of being read for evidence of past life as are written documents. This notion appears frequently in the literature on the cultural meanings of buildings and is a powerful one for many historians and anthropologists. As Michael H. Mitias writes in the preface to *Architecture and Civilization*, architecture is a form of art, and “the ability of an art work *to express* is exactly what makes it an autobiographical book that records the inner life of a culture: Its moral, religious, and artistic values, social outlook, major accomplishments, and the meaning of life and destiny.”¹²

One of the challenges of architectural analysis is to figure out how a building from the past can be interpreted in the present, without inappropriately employing contemporary theories to study a historic structure. Buildings may be of the moment and style in which they are built, speaking specifically to particular issues, tensions, and fashions current at the time, but they continue to resonate, often in different ways, into the future. Although buildings should not be interpreted anachronistically – applying the values of today to criticize a medieval cathedral or an eighteenth-century prison – they can be interpreted, sensitively, in eras other than their own. “The expressive meaning of an architectural past must be interpreted with care,” writes Charles T. Goodsell in *The*

Social Meaning of Civic Space, “since it cannot be understood except by appreciating the socio-economic context in which it was built.”¹³ This is particularly important when comparing structures of different periods, as in an analysis of the two components of the Boston Public Library. The comparison should be neutral and should recognize that the buildings are the products of different societies, while also searching out compelling commonalities and persistent themes.

While this may seem like a novel approach for traditional historians, who as scholars are more accustomed to searching written sources than architecture for proof of activities and beliefs in the past, it has long been the norm for archaeologists, who appreciate that the physical record of societies can be as revealing as the written word – and is often all one has to go on. “We build our homes according to the way we think we should live, our churches to fit our form of worship, and so on,” writes Eugene Raskin in *Architecture and People*. “In short, architecture mirrors the various aspects of our lives – social, economic, and spiritual – so much so that archeologists and anthropologists are sometimes able to describe in minute detail civilizations long gone entirely upon the basis of uncovered fragments of architecture and the artifacts found with them.”¹⁴ A study of the architecture of the Boston Public Library is bolstered by the use of written sources, but conclusions about its form and function can be drawn simply from an analysis of the architecture alone.

Not only is architecture a record of culture waiting passively to reveal its implicit meanings, but it is also a producer of culture. “Architecture is a protagonist in the public realm,” writes Herbert Muschamp of *The New York Times*.¹⁵ By projecting dominant social values and reinforcing dominant beliefs, public architecture – indeed, any type of architecture – can serve to communicate and perpetuate the priorities and power of hegemonic groups long after the structure of society may have changed or adapted to allow for the dominance of new groups. Furthermore, the presence of particular buildings and building styles can serve to constrain society, reminding it of its past and compelling it to maintain certain social structures that were in place at the time a building was built.¹⁶ Architecture therefore has a powerful dualism: buildings are both informed by the society from which they come and are informers of the society into which they are placed. This is a power which, though not immutable, can be retained across time despite significant changes to the buildings and urban context. “The architect is the delineator, the historian, of his society and his period,” writes Raskin. “At the same time he is a critically active force in molding that society, in giving it shape, character and quality.”¹⁷

Buildings, Cities, and Meaning

It is too narrow an approach simply to interpret urban buildings on their own, for they should be studied as elements of blocks, neighborhoods, cities, and potentially even nations. Buildings, although architects generally design them to stand alone, are really pieces of larger puzzles and, as with puzzles, can only fully be understood in their context. It is through our understandings of cities, and the cultural values that shape cities, that we can best appreciate the relationship between “the highly specific realm of buildings as designed objects and the social universe that surrounds them,”¹⁸ as described by the cultural historian Neil Harris.

The discipline of urban planning is also an important element of appreciating Harris’ “highly specific realm.” Whether understood as a professional responsibility or the exclusive right of the powerful, planning introduces conscious choice into the form of the city, and choices can often be read for evidence of authority and privilege. “One of the most basic, and most important, questions that arises in the study of buildings and settlements is the extent to which they are planned, designed entities or are organically-developed over time,” writes Martin Leacock, editor of *Meaningful Architecture*. “Clearly, any attempt at ascribing meaning must first establish whose meaning is encoded.”¹⁹ As a dramatic example of purposeful planning – from the decision to locate in the midst of the institutional power of Copley Square to the choice to hire celebrated architects from outside of Boston – the Boston Public Library is a vivid example of architecture and urbanism which is anything but organic and, as a result, can be richly studied for embedded cultural meanings.

Cities are made up of buildings and spaces, and each building brings to the mix its own character and texture and use. Some buildings, however, help to give a city its basic form, civic and social as well as architectural. “The city came into being as a place where [some] elements and institutions were physically singled out amidst the general fabric of buildings,” writes Moshe Safdie in his essay “Collective Significance.” “Monumentality in its elemental sense is the articulation of a network of spaces and particular buildings that give the city legibility. It is that network of significant buildings and public places, and the connections between them, that has always given the city perceptible order, a sense of location for the people within it, and a much needed hierarchy.”²⁰ In republican America, the social legibility of which Safdie speaks has generally been provided by the buildings of democratic government and civil society, including city and town halls, courthouses, schools, and public libraries.

The elevation of certain buildings – buildings deemed important for their civic purpose – has long been achieved through architecture and urban design, both of which have been expertly used to visually and symbolically underscore the significance of the Boston Public Library building in Copley Square. The great majority of buildings in American cities are designed and built for commerce, and the resulting urban landscape is often a jumble – sometimes handsome, sometimes mediocre, and sometimes simply neutral – of private buildings developed without any coherence or clear inter-relationship. We rely on the design of our civic buildings and public spaces – whether organically developed or consciously planned – to give physical definition to our cities and, more importantly, to assert the place of the public sphere in the world of private enterprise. “The legibility of the city,” continues Safdie, “depends on the public domain as the connective framework between individual buildings.”²¹

The Special Meanings of Civic Buildings

The issue of the symbolic meanings of buildings, although relevant for private buildings, is much more important and vivid in a discussion of public and civic buildings. Because civic buildings are produced by government for some form of public use, because they are funded with public money, and because they generally seek to assert the dominance of a political ideology or ruling party, they are richly endowed not only with imagery and messages but specifically with messages about political and civic life. In civic space, writes Goodsell, “location, design, and layout have received the state’s imprimatur. Ideas of authority and status, as reflected in the space, are either officially endorsed or at least are not in conflict with accepted regime values.”²² Where private buildings can be analyzed for clues about business or domestic life, civic buildings stand as testaments to the relationship between the governed and the governing, to the conceptualization and distribution of power and authority, and to the political values – those officially espoused and potentially those in opposition – at the time a building is designed and created. “We can, therefore,” writes Lawrence J. Vale in *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, “learn much about a political regime by observing closely what it builds.”²³ Although traditional theories about the meanings of civic buildings have generally been grounded in analyses of explicitly political buildings, including parliaments and city council chambers, similar theories can be applied to buildings, such as the Boston Public Library, in which political purpose is less obvious but whose civic character and form still make the buildings useful to analyze for evidence about the structure of political society.

Civic architecture is often described as a stage or theater for the display of political ritual and power. Public spaces and buildings are used to form and maintain societal connections; writes Safdie, “public places must of necessity bring together elements that reflect or can support common bonds.”²⁴ Decorated with symbols central to social and political authority – including flags, shields, quotations from important texts, and statues or paintings of former and current leaders – civic buildings can passively impart meanings during ordinary times and then come alive with significance upon special occasions such as inaugurations, dedications, and celebrations of culturally significant events. “Buildings [are] deliberately created as stage-sets for social theatre,” writes Leacock.²⁵ Moreover, the use of civic architecture for the transmission of political and cultural messages does not have to be limited to the building itself; some of the more important and powerful civic spaces are in fact the areas that surround major public buildings. “The source of potential meanings for a government building extends far outward from its façades,” writes Vale.²⁶ As was dramatically demonstrated in the twentieth century, the tools of architecture and urban design can be used for the reinforcement of powerful social forces, as with the myriad uses of the National Mall in Washington, DC, or for the perverse expression of a cult of ideology, as in the architectural fantasies of the Third Reich.

Although, as mentioned above, libraries may lack the architectural and symbolic potency of parliaments and palaces, they can still be used to communicate messages about and to the society around them. This was particularly true in the nineteenth century, when urban public libraries were new and library trustees and administrators were eager to use physical design to locate libraries squarely in the tradition of Western culture and learning to which the young America considered itself an heir. “Public libraries were born of a long and rich tradition of historical, and to a lesser extent architectural, associations,” writes Kenneth Breisch in *Small Public Libraries in America 1850 – 1890*, “that stretched back through the great monastic libraries of the Middle Ages to the Classical institutions of the Hellenistic World.”²⁷ Developed during a period of rapid and sometimes overwhelming urban and industrial change, the first American public libraries identified themselves with an idealized Classical past in which knowledge and rationality were understood to have been highly prized.²⁸ Without question, the physical form of libraries has changed significantly in the century and a half since they were first introduced as important urban institutions, but, as this thesis will explore, public libraries have continued to use their architecture and interior configuration to communicate messages about the importance and accessibility of information.

In his analyses of legislative chambers, Goodsell establishes a framework for understanding the ways in which civic architecture uses the power of symbolism to express the meanings latent within it. Of his different ideas, the most interesting for an analysis of public libraries is the notion of *degree of enclosure*, the extent to which a civic building, as opposed to an outdoor public area, is able to fully surround individuals and thus influence not only their feelings but also potentially their conduct.²⁹ “This point is crucial if we are concerned with the behavioral impact of physical settings,” writes Goodsell. “In enclosed spaces the opportunity exists to embrace the occupant from all directions, to monopolize the occupant’s attention, and to immerse the occupant in a fully controlled set of physical symbols and mood cues.”³⁰ This point is of particular relevance when considering the transition from the McKim Building of the Boston Public Library, a structure composed of a series of specialized spaces, to the Johnson addition, which is built around very large, very open general-purpose areas. As civic architecture is concerned with the communication of symbolic messages, some of which rely upon the enclosure of physical space for their transmission, it is important to recognize that changes in physical design, particularly internal design, can influence not only the appearance of a building but also the experience of using a building.

Civic Architecture and Changing Society: Modernism

With the introduction of modernism into civic architecture, the very use of architecture for civic purposes and civic expression changed. Whereas pre-modernist styles had offered architects and clients clear guidelines for the design of certain types of buildings, modernism challenged traditional aesthetic expectations and replaced them with a philosophy of flexibility and functionalism. No longer would buildings be clearly defined by their use – no longer could one necessarily tell whether a building was a bank, a school, a police station, or a motel simply by looking at it – as architects would be free to follow the dictates of modern design. “The new style adapts itself to every kind of structure, whether it be a factory, church or home,” wrote Philip Johnson in 1931. “In every instance, the building will be modern architecture without a single change in principle.”³¹ This attitude is reflected in Johnson’s design, thirty-five years later, for the Boston Public Library, which, although responding in some ways to the neighboring McKim structure, is also self-consciously devoid of the traditional symbolism associated with American civic architecture prior to the advent of modernism.

This is a radically different architectural and aesthetic world from the one in which McKim worked

and it presents particular problems for civic architecture. If civic architecture provides, in part, a sense of structure in the city, if it helps to instruct individuals about the underlying form of society, what happens when civic architecture loses its legibility? The architecture of McKim is an architecture of responsibility, of obligation, and of civic pride, whereas the architecture of Johnson “substitutes for the belief that architecture is reformatory . . . the sure knowledge that it is a perceptual experience.”³² What messages does this send to the users of civic architecture? Writing of early modernism, Moshe Safdie argues, “The tragedy of the recent decades in architecture is that we have come to recognize collectively and by consensus the short-comings of the architecture of the modern movement in the early part of the century in its response to the need for symbol and cultural expression.”³³ While this thesis is intended neither as a critique of modern architecture on aesthetic grounds nor as a argument in favor of a return to nineteenth-century design, aesthetic judgments do enter into the analysis, especially when examining the ways in which different styles of architecture communicate social and political messages.

Conclusion

It is important to recognize that the messages communicated by architecture, while they may be presented as the shared values and beliefs of a people, are unlikely to be read and received in the same way by everyone. The problem of individuals outside a society has already been mentioned, but what about those inside who are not part of the hegemonic group or who do not share the values of the dominant culture? Sub-groups clearly play a role in shaping the intellectual and aesthetic forms of a society, but their influence can be harder to trace and identify. No society is monolithic and one shouldn’t assume that societies of the past have been significantly more homogeneous than ours is today. “We should not assume that the fragmentation of culture is a new phenomenon,” writes Leacock. “The unity of past culture may be one of survival, not of actuality.”³⁴ A major civic building like a public library may be read in one way by an educated professional, in another way by a native-born working-class person, and in yet a third way by a new immigrant unfamiliar with the language, culture, or architectural norms of the city in which he or she has arrived. We must not imagine that the values expressed by the Boston Public Library would have been universally held or even universally understood at the times the two structures were designed. Rather, they must be understood as the aspirations of a dominant group, aimed both at society as a whole and at the constituencies within it, and then make suppositions about how the messages would have been received and interpreted. Specific, subjective information about message

reception by diverse groups and individuals is, alas, largely lost to history.

Buildings taken in isolation have little power to shape human thought and society. The power of architecture, the power to inspire, to humble, to energize, and to intimidate, comes from the interaction between buildings and individuals – individuals able to understand the symbolic meanings latent in architectural design. The capacity to express meaning is multi-layered, with some meanings writ clearly on the surface and others submerged in the design in ways that allow them to be interpreted differently by different people or, in some cases, interpreted only by certain people. “There is no reason to suppose that there exists a monolithic single meaning for an individual building, ‘out there,’ waiting to be observed,” writes Leacock. “A building can be seen as the reification of multiple choices of the past – choices by a range of interested groups, some on a rational plane, some unconscious, some irrational.”³⁵ The Boston Public Library presents an engaging and illustrative case of the phenomenon of meaningful civic buildings precisely because the two components of the Copley Square structure, coupled with the facilities of the branch network, demonstrate how a single institution can present multiple, evolving architectural images of itself across time, each made up of a series of public and private choices.

CHAPTER 2

The Foundations of the Boston Public Library

The 1855 cornerstone-laying for the Boylston Street building was both the beginning of a new phase in the institutional life of the Library and the culmination of decades of experimentation with different types of libraries, both public and private, in Boston. Joshua Bates's gift spurred the erection of the Boylston Street building, a building dedicated solely to the Library, but libraries formal and informal had existed in Boston since before the American Revolution, making Boston an important city in the history of the institutional development of the American public library. Bates's Boylston Street building is crucial to this story not only because it is the first building designed in the United States specifically for the general circulation of library materials but also because it planted the seeds for the first conscious linkage between the architecture of the Boston Public Library and its institutional purpose. However, it is valuable to understand that the Library as it opened on Boylston Street was the product of a long-term effort in Boston society to preserve and make available written materials, first for posterity and then for general use. The middle of the nineteenth century was a time in which public literacy was growing and the availability of inexpensive books was increasing; Boston was on the forefront of combining those trends through the medium of a public library.

The urban American public library is, to a large extent, a Bostonian invention. Although a few public libraries, scattered across New England, opened prior to the Boston Public Library, Boston was the first major American city to promote the notion that public libraries could be valuable civic assets. Other important early public libraries include the Enoch Pratt Free Library of Baltimore (1882), the Free Library of Philadelphia (1891), and the New York Public Library (1895), all founded significantly after the public library in Boston. In looking to design its first public library buildings, then, Boston had to look to Europe for inspiration, although it would quickly become clear that American public libraries differed significantly in conception and design from the traditional libraries of Europe. European libraries of the nineteenth century were highly restrictive, with the majority of their collections limited to rare and important works and their use confined to academics and public officials. Although McKim would base his design for the Copley Square building on several European antecedents, the internal life of the Boston Public Library was built upon uniquely American theories of the purpose and design of libraries: that libraries should collect popular as well as scholarly materials; that they should serve as centers for community life and education; and that they should be as open and accessible, indeed as *public*, as possible.

That the first urban American public library should appear in Boston in the middle of the nineteenth

century is in keeping with other cultural trends in New England at the time. American cities were growing exponentially, in population and wealth, and port cities like Boston were all but overwhelmed with new immigrants fleeing lives of poverty, hunger, and oppression. Social reformers struggled to understand the needs of the new city inhabitants, many of whom came from rural backgrounds, and to meet the growing demand to improve the lives of the poor – with an eye to preventing potential political unrest and instability – through the provision of valuable services and institutions. As Abigail Van Slyck writes in *Free to All*, “Along with picturesque parks, museums, auditoriums, and even department stores, libraries were part of an explosion in the number of urban settings designed to soften the sharper edges of daily life.”³⁶

Furthermore, many educated New Englanders were steeped in the intellectualism of the American Lyceum movement and of transcendentalism, which, coupled with the struggles for abolition, temperance, and women’s rights, made for a potent atmosphere of social reform. Many believed that the power of knowledge could promote not only individual self-improvement but also a better, more thoughtful, and more peaceful society.³⁷ Andrew Carnegie, the great private patron of public libraries, poetically captured this notion in an 1894 speech at the opening of the public library in Jedburgh, Scotland, in which he declared that “the result of knowledge is to make men not violent revolutionaries, but cautious evolutionaries; not destroyers, but careful improvers.”³⁸

Through an implied promise that access to knowledge could create an assimilated, hard-working, and – above all – peaceable population, public libraries offered solutions to several real and potential urban problems within the walls of a single institution. Boston became the first major American city to embrace libraries as important elements of civil society, thereby boosting their stature across the county. “What the public library movement most needed in the fifth decade of the nineteenth century was the stimulus to be derived from the acceptance of its principles by a major metropolitan community,” writes Jesse Shera in *Foundations of the Public Library*. “Such recognition and prestige were exactly what Boston could, and did, give.”³⁹

Circulating Libraries

Before there were public libraries in Boston, even before the growth of private archives like the Boston Athenaeum, Boston had circulating libraries. An invention of the pre-Revolutionary period, circulating libraries served the colonial demand for reading material by offering books, generally one

at a time, in exchange for a small, annual fee. In this way, social libraries were more like clubs than like the public libraries of today – individuals would pay dues to join the library and then be allowed use of the books. Inspired by similar models in Great Britain, circulating libraries were often run from stores, including bookstores and – for those libraries that catered to the tastes of women – from millinery shops.⁴⁰

Operated for modest profit, circulating libraries lacked the openness of character so crucial to the public library as it would eventually develop, but they were nevertheless successful in distributing books around the city. “The cultural atmosphere of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with widespread public interest in contemporary authorship, furnished an admirable environment for the encouragement of the circulating library,” writes Shera. “As an economical method of book distribution the circulating library has never been rivaled.”⁴¹ Adding to the efficacy of the circulating library, some libraries included home-delivery services as part of their offerings, young men to carry books to customers in out-lying neighborhoods.⁴² In these ways, the circulating library – although fundamentally different in purpose and economic structure from public libraries – established some of the early expectations for the ways in which libraries could and should function.

In their effort to be profitable, circulating libraries primarily stocked novels, romances, tales of adventure and history, theological works, and other materials that were likely to be broadly popular and in demand. The early nineteenth century saw the growth of the novel as a form of fashionable entertainment enjoyed by many people, particularly women, across a range of social classes, and the success of the circulating library was fueled in part by the demand for this sort of writing. The popular desire for fiction, sometimes to the exclusion of other types of writing, led to anxiety among some clergymen and prominent social leaders both in America and Great Britain that urban residents were in need of better, more serious, and more uplifting reading materials – materials that could only be provided by institutions unconcerned with turning a profit. Henry Nourse of the Free Public Library Commission addressed this issue in an 1891 essay in *New England Magazine*, arguing that public libraries, carefully managed, offered the best medicine for the popular plague of poor judgment in reading material.

Pessimistic critics can see little that is hopeful in the unquestionably lamentable fact that a large majority of book borrowers give evidence of low literary taste; that the average reader prefers the brummagem to solid worth, the vapid novel to converse with genius, the buffoonery of the clown to the fancy of the masters in wit and

humor. But if the censors locally elected for the duty are worthy their high calling, and do their duty in excluding that which is unwholesome, the free public library always proves a fountain of refining salutary influences.⁴³

The circulating library was thus an initial effort to make books widely available to the citizens of Boston, but one in which access was provided only in exchange for dues and the quality and variety of reading material offered was generally popular and limited. Nevertheless, the circulating library is an important step in the history of the public library movement in New England precisely because of these qualities, which – as the quotation above demonstrates – helped to turn attention to the possibility of free public libraries, libraries with broad and diverse collections and with doors open to all.

Social Libraries and the Boston Athenaeum

If circulating libraries catered to popular tastes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, social libraries offered specialized collections of books and other materials. Begun in the early eighteenth century, social libraries were formed by collective associations of individuals – members of the wealthy elite and almost always men – who joined together to share the cost of purchasing, storing, and organizing books. Many social libraries of the colonial period were dominated by books on theology, while others specialized in the classics, history, geography, biography, and other topics.⁴⁴ With books relatively expensive and rare, social libraries played an important role in making substantial reading material more generally available than it would have been otherwise, particularly during the early colonial period. “There may have been some who joined for the prestige value of appearing to be well read, and local pride was doubtless a factor in the urge to library formation,” writes Shera, “but, most of all, the proprietors were motivated by the hard fact of necessity that compelled them to work together in order that they might obtain the books that each wished to use.”⁴⁵ Although circulating libraries and social libraries developed during the same period and would both in their own way influence the ultimate development of public libraries, their collections, patrons, and place in urban society were quite different.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Boston was home to a number of social libraries, of which the Boston Athenaeum, an institution that continues to this day, was among the most important. The Athenaeum was founded in the first decade of the nineteenth century by the fourteen members

of the Anthology Society* and initially specialized in the collection of written works and artwork.⁴⁶ The Athenaeum has been housed in the same Beacon Street building, designed by Edward Clarke Cabot and located down the street from the Massachusetts State House, since 1847. For many decades, it has been dedicated to the preservation of New England history and literature and supported by the wealthy and established members of Boston society. Describing the intellectual life of mid-nineteenth century Boston, historian Thomas H. O'Connor writes in *The Hub*, "Another favorite gathering place for the Boston literati during this same period was the . . . Boston Athenaeum. . . . The Athenaeum was established in 1808 in order to bring private collections together under one roof and to provide an institution – 'a place of social intercourse' – where members could read and study in quiet and comfortable surroundings."⁴⁷ In the intellectual history of Boston, and particularly the history of the public library movement, the Athenaeum – as one of the most successful of the social libraries – is an important stepping stone to the development of a fully accessible public library.

The Boston Athenaeum influenced the development of the Boston Public Library in a number of important ways, both direct and indirect. As an early, distinguished private library, the Athenaeum offered an important model for the physical and programmatic design of public libraries. In fact, its Italianate architecture was taken as a model for libraries around the country. "It was only the grandest of the Social and Mercantile Libraries, Athenaeums and universities, that were able to raise their own buildings before 1850, and even in this realm fewer than a dozen edifices were erected in the entire country," writes Breisch. "More important was the influence which some of the most prominent of these institutions, such as the Boston Athenaeum, had in shaping a general conception of early public libraries as cultural institutions."⁴⁸ Interestingly, prior to the decision to build the Boylston Street headquarters for the Boston Public Library, the City of Boston offered to pay the Athenaeum a one-time fee of \$50,000 and an annual appropriation of \$5,000 in return for the Athenaeum opening its facilities to the public.⁴⁹ Ultimately rejected by the members of the Athenaeum in favor of keeping their resources protected and exclusive, the offer reflects the significance of the Athenaeum as an institution, and its failure reflects the need for a new kind of library, a truly public library, one built on the model of general public access, not on the model of a private club. "This conflict over the conversion of the Athenaeum is particularly interesting not merely because it coincided with the most dynamic library movement known but because it pictured

*The Anthology Society was founded in 1805 to edit *The Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*.

both the conditions and the ideas which were beginning to force the transition toward more democratic cultural institutions,” writes Ditzion. “The Athenaeum was in a class of institutions started in the previous century to meet the needs of a very different society. Expanding populations and the broader distribution of educational advantages were proving private institutions to be inadequate.”⁵⁰

Alexandre Vattemare and The International Book Exchange

The seeds of the public library idea had in fact been planted several years prior to the proposal for a partnership between the city of Boston and the Boston Athenaeum. In the spring of 1841, a renowned French ventriloquist and actor named Alexandre Vattemare arrived in Boston to promote his plans for the international exchange of reading materials, a project he had been passionately pursuing across the United States and Canada.⁵¹ Vattemare’s idea was premised on the belief that “international exchanges of books and works of art were to lead to free institutions that would sooner or later bring about a kind of high-minded millennium.”⁵²

Vattemare’s principal interest was in exchanges, but he soon discovered that North American cities lacked libraries capable of participating in significant exchange programs and so added the construction of libraries to his campaign. “He therefore proposed in Boston that the several local libraries, controlled by private associations, be united into one public library,” writes Shera.⁵³

Despite their unlikely source, Vattemare’s ideas struck a receptive chord among members of Yankee society, many of whom belonged to social libraries and were interested in the general promotion of literacy and knowledge. Vattemare performed and made presentations not only to large public audiences but also in the homes of prominent Bostonians, spreading his charm and the gospel of reading and of libraries throughout the city. A small committee was established to consider the feasibility of implementing Vattemare’s proposals, and ultimately put forth a tentative plan for the City of Boston to construct a library building and for it to be filled with books supported by membership fees, private contributions, and, possibly, a city tax. “It is a tribute to the almost hypnotic power of Vattemare’s eloquence,” writes Whitehill, “that five hard-headed New England individualists . . . even imagined that their friends and neighbors might so far succumb to emotion as to surrender property painfully accumulated for specific learned purposes over many decades to a promotional scheme of this kind.”⁵⁴

Despite Vattermare's persuasive appeal, his influence on Boston waned following his return to Europe. He did secure a gift of fifty books to be sent from Paris to Boston, books that arrived in 1843 to form the early core of the collections of the Boston Public Library. Vattermare himself may be nothing more than a colorful footnote to the story of the Boston Public Library, but his ideas found fertile ground among the educated elite of the city and can be credited, at least indirectly, in the history of the opening of the first public library building, in the Mason Street schoolhouse, fourteen years after his visit to Boston. "Probably Vattermare did little directly for the establishment of the library," writes Shera, "but indirectly he did much."⁵⁵ Boston would likely have established a public library without the influence of Alexandre Vattermare, but the ideas and enthusiasm of the eccentric ventriloquist seem to have taken hold in Boston in a way they did not in other cities and, perhaps, contributed to Boston's early adoption of the public library ideal.

The Boston Public Library and Private Philanthropy

Although the Boston Public Library was founded as a public institution, private philanthropy has always played a pivotal role in supporting and shaping the life of the Library. From the very beginning, the idea of a public library in Boston was conceived and promoted by private individuals, members of the Yankee elite, while the city and state governments were left to follow private initiatives. Perhaps because the first libraries in Boston sprang from private concerns – enterprise on the one hand and scholarship on the other – or perhaps because Boston has a long tradition of charity aimed at elevating public morals and behavior, the origins of the Boston Public Library were rooted in the efforts of just a few men, most of them working in a private capacity to promote the idea of a library. A public library was an appealing cause for the Yankee patricians of the mid-nineteenth century because it held out the promise of social stability in a rapidly changing world, a world in which the Yankees were to see their position of authority greatly diminished. "[The] fear of instability and radical behavior," write Michael Harris and Gerard Spiegler, "whether it emanated from right or left, controlled the behavior of those central to the establishment of public libraries in this country."⁵⁶

Interestingly, the promoters of the Library were often not from the absolute top of the Boston social pyramid; rather, they were the children of modest or middle class origins who, like Bates, had grown up to be wealthy, successful, and committed to the idea that public libraries would allow the striving poor to better themselves and their communities. George Ticknor – son of a grocery

merchant, member of the Boston Athenaeum, correspondent of Thomas Jefferson, and one of the first Trustees of the Boston Public Library – fought for his belief that libraries should exist not only for scholarly research and reading but also for the distribution of popular books and other materials. Edward Everett – Unitarian minister, Harvard professor, one-time governor of Massachusetts, and an early Trustee of the Library – argued passionately that public libraries were a vital adjunct to the system of public schools, offering opportunities for adults to continue to educate themselves throughout their lives. So intimate was their association with the early decades of the Boston Public Library that the names of Ticknor and Everett are practically synonymous with its founding.⁵⁷ The faith of Bates, Ticknor, Everett and the other early backers of the Library in the salubrious influence of reading and of quiet contemplation was enormously powerful, giving their work on behalf of the Library a moral, almost spiritual, dimension.

Ticknor, Everett, and their peers among the intellectual bourgeoisie contributed not only passion to the cause of the Library, but money as well. From the time of Joshua Bates until today, many important private gifts – both of books and of funds – have undergirded the growth of the Library. Indeed, a late twentieth-century guide to the Library notes the tradition of private philanthropy as crucial to the success of the institution, claiming that “the Library is today still blessed with friends who believe in the support of their public library . . . with gifts of money, collections, and just as importantly, their time and talents, these friends keep up the age-old Boston tradition.”⁵⁸

The nineteenth-century gifts for the construction of the library were aimed not only at supporting an august public institution, but at improving the poor – morally, intellectually, and as urban citizens. This has historically been a powerful idea in Boston, a city in which charity is associated not with a handout but with a well-considered cause designed to better the lives of the deserving and industrious. “And we acknowledge the unfolding of Thy benevolent designs in all the progress which human society is making,” intoned the Reverend E.N. Kirk at the cornerstone ceremony for the Bolyston Street library, “and especially in the opening of fountains of knowledge at the doorstep of poverty; in the instances which we behold of the rich devoting their wealth to the improvement of the poor.”⁵⁹ The idea of a public library may have succeeded so dramatically in Boston when it did because public libraries simultaneously served multiple urban interests: libraries offered the economic and social elite a way to shore up their own position by offering themselves as the providers of culture and stability in the city, while also giving social reformers a way to bring new resources and benefits to the poor and working classes. “Indeed,” writes Van Slyck, “the public

library figured prominently in several, sometimes conflicting, versions of what American culture was, and where it was going.”⁶⁰

The tight association between the wealthy Yankee elite of Boston and the institution of the Boston Public Library allows one to analyze the Library as, among other things, a product of elite aspirations for the city. Unlike many civic institutions, which may more directly represent the interests of city government, the Boston Public Library has traditionally been supported by the privileged classes and shaped, both architecturally and programmatically, to suit their wishes and ideas. This makes the Library a particularly rich subject for study, and especially for the study of the evolving relationship between the dominant culture of Boston and the rest of the urban society into which the Library was inserted and which it was intended to serve. It also points to early and lasting tensions – tensions between public access and private control – inherent in the basic conception and structure of the Boston Public Library. “The great weakness of philanthropy as a medium of library promotion lay in its independence of public desire,” writes Shera. “It was not a direct expression of public need. . . . As an embodiment of the donor’s wish to further the welfare of society it was personal and individual, an instrument rather than a cause of public library promotion.”⁶¹ This tension has had a profound impact on the institutional and physical design of the Boston Public Library from the construction of the McKim Building through the erection of the Johnson addition and beyond.

Conclusion

The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of exploration in the development of libraries in Boston. From the popular literature of the profit-driven circulating libraries to the high-minded intellectualism of the social libraries, Boston was a city in which access to the written word was prized. However, the early libraries were neither free nor open to all, only to those who could pay the dues and had the leisure to peruse the books and other materials. With the rapid social and demographic changes that began in the 1830s and continued throughout the century, prominent Bostonians turned to public libraries as a way not only to spread the gospel of reading but also to offer a bridge to new city residents, many of whom arrived without education and without an understanding of urban society. “The latter half of the nineteenth century [was] an era, which, in America, witnessed a bewilderingly rapid, and at times dehumanizing, period of industrial and institutional growth,” writes Breisch. “It was in the midst of this violently changing world, in

particular, that the American Public Library was born and reared.”⁶²

Without a doubt, the Yankee elites promoted the idea of a free public library as a way to manage potentially destabilizing social forces and maintain their own traditional authority. By offering access to their collections of books, journals, newspapers, and other materials, but also to their magnificent buildings, public libraries seemed to be a mechanism for producing a rational, docile populace, one grateful for the presence of such a fine institution and thus not tempted to try to disrupt – through radical politics or the pathologies of poverty – the prevailing social order. Furthermore, libraries offered opportunities for unskilled individuals to learn a trade or prepare for an apprenticeship; for new immigrants to study, and learn to appreciate, the ideals on which American society was based; and for children to escape the confines of poor households and neighborhoods to immerse themselves in the wonders of books – so long as they were tidy and kept quiet. Children embodied many of the hopes of nineteenth-century library activists, as demonstrated in the Nourse article from 1895. “The youth who, by the neighborhood of a choice reading-room or library, are privileged to enter into intimate fellowship with the regal minds of the ages . . . can hardly fail to assimilate something of value, to absorb many instructive and ennobling lessons, and be made by it happier and better men and women, more valuable citizens of the republic.”⁶³ In this way, libraries held out to the elite classes a means for producing good citizens, good Bostonians, individuals who would come to appreciate the advantages of the social system as it was and who would – through their own industry and the resources provided for them – become productive and conscientious residents.

While these self-serving concerns were certainly an element of the campaign for public libraries in Boston, they were far from the only element. Existing alongside the very real fears of social instability and waning power was a genuine and profound commitment to the ideal of democracy, as realized through the establishment of an open and impressive public library that housed a broad collection of materials. “Who shall undertake to measure the importance or calculate the value of good reading, as an instrument in advancing the welfare and promoting the happiness of mankind!” asked Robert Winthrop, president of the Board of Commissioners for the Erection of the Library Building, in his speech at the 1855 cornerstone laying. “Even one good book, read by snatches, in the intervals of labor, or in the watches of the night, - what unspeakable comfort and aid has it not often imparted to the humblest, or, it may be, to the loftiest mind and heart!”⁶⁴ For every means that a public library could offer to control discord or squelch a threat to the social hierarchy, so by

the same method could it truly improve the lives of library patrons, offering them routes out of poverty and ignorance, offering them the joy of reading a poem or story for the first time, or simply offering them a warm and handsome room in which to enjoy a book on a cold evening.

So popular was the original Library building on Boylston Street that, as the nineteenth century began to come to a close, the Trustees of the library turned their attention up the street, to the promise of a larger building in Copley Square. It was with the hiring of Charles Follen McKim and the move to Copley Square that the Boston Public Library came into its own, not only as an intellectual institution but as an architectural landmark. With sufficient space for a grand building, with neighbors of equivalent cultural importance, and serving an increasingly pluralistic and cosmopolitan populace, the Library used architecture to assert its presence not only physically but socially and politically. “The large urban library buildings erected in this era,” writes Van Slyck. “reflected the tension that Trustees felt between the urge to protect culture from the contamination of the working class and the desire to use culture to redeem the ‘general public’.”⁶⁵ The Library of McKim is a repository of culture, of knowledge, and of social status, but it is also a monument to democratic access to information on the eve of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 3

A Palace for the People: Charles Follen McKim and the Boston Public Library

PART I: URBAN CONTEXT

Changing Economics, Demographics, and Attitudes

As has already been noted, the second half of the nineteenth century was a time of intense change in Boston. This point bears repeating because it is of significance not only for the motives behind the founding of the Boston Public Library but also for the architectural form the Library would eventually take. Hundreds of thousands of new immigrants arrived in Boston during the decades before and after the Civil War, many of them Irish, many others Italian, German, Greek, Chinese, East European, and Russian, as well as other nationalities. In 1800, the population of Boston was recorded at 25,000; by 1855 – after the Irish Famine and the year construction commenced on the Boylston Street Library building – it had reached 50,000 people, almost one-third of who had been born in Ireland; by 1875 it had grown to 341,000.⁶⁶ By the 1890s, the population had grown to more than twice that number.⁶⁷ A rapid infusion of new residents and new cultures would be transformative under any circumstances, but such large-scale immigration, coupled with a regional transition from an agrarian economy to one based primarily on industrial production, made the Boston of the post-Civil War decades a dramatically different city from the Boston of the beginning of the century.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Boston had been almost unrivaled as a seaport, blessed with a well-protected harbor and strong cultural and financial ties to Europe and beyond. The Boston mercantile class of the colonial period earned fortunes many times over from the production and shipping of goods, fortunes that continued to grow in the decades following the American Revolution. Although Boston's economic dominance had begun to wane in the 1820s, after the opening of the Erie Canal and the expansion of the port of New York, greater Boston continued to be an important manufacturing center through the Civil War. The mill communities of Lowell, Lawrence, and Fall River generated new wealth for old Boston families, while also attracting international attention to the revolutionary techniques of hydro-powered mass production perfected in Lowell. The economic changes brought about by the Civil War slowly ate away at the economic landscape of New England manufacturing, however, and it was never again to regain its earlier strength. "The shoe and textile industries that flourished on the outskirts of Boston in the decades after the Civil War – thanks in large part to cheap Irish labor – would soon relocate to the South and

Midwest, where even lower wages could be paid,” writes Maureen Dezell in *Irish America*.⁶⁸

By the final decades of the nineteenth century, therefore, Boston had become a place to manage old wealth carefully rather than a place to create new affluence. The city in which the Boston Public Library was founded was not then as economically dynamic as it had been in the previous century, but it perceived itself as having other important attributes, particularly its educational and intellectual resources. Home to Harvard University, to the newly founded Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to countless bookstores, academic societies, and reading clubs, elite Boston considered itself to be the literary capital of America, heir to both European culture and American creativity. “Thus at the close of the Civil War, New England dominated the literary scene even more strongly than it had twenty years before,” writes Kenneth Lynn in *William Dean Howells: An American Life*. “New York was the only other center of influence worthy of the name, and New York was filled with New England men and women living in ‘splendid exile.’”⁶⁹

It was this cultural environment that first produced the idea for a major public library and this cultural environment that was deeply affronted by the founding of the Astor Library, a major private research library, in New York in 1852. Boston might have ceded her economic power to New York, but she would never abandon the superiority of her erudition. “The imminent opening of the Astor Library menaced the jealously guarded literary supremacy of [the] city; at least, such was the view of Boston’s mercantile-dominated cultural leadership,” writes Ditzion. “By force of their renowned good reading habits and their fast-developing minds Bostonians must soon become an honor to their nation.”⁷⁰ Bates made his gift to the City of Boston within just a few months of the opening of the Astor Library, and the construction of the Boylston Street building was underway three years later.

In this context, that of a city sinking into economic stagnation but still with a strong sense of itself as a repository of American intellectualism and creativity, the arrival of shiploads of new people, people not schooled in the tradition of Boston values, was discomfiting. Other cities, among them New York and Chicago, also absorbed huge numbers of European migrants during the height of nineteenth-century immigration, but the unprecedented urban growth of the period was particularly unsettling for small, traditional Boston, which saw its very social underpinnings menaced by its increasingly diverse population. “Especially alarming was the way in which the flood of European immigration, which had started during the decades before the Civil War, was picking up again and

threatening to inundate the whole city with strange faces and even stranger ways,” writes O’Connor. “The fact that a large percentage of these newcomers were from Ireland increased even further the feelings of fear and anxiety spreading through the native population whose staunch Puritan background made them ill-equipped to deal with outsiders.”⁷¹

If traditional Boston was unprepared to accept the typically illiterate rural newcomers as urban citizens entitled to the privileges of native Bostonians, the long-standing tradition of progressive reform-minded philanthropy inclined a portion of the urban elite to approach the new immigrants as individuals in need of help, education, and betterment. The decades prior to the Civil War had seen the birth of scores of movements dedicated to the improvement of society, many of them spear-headed by wealthy, determined Yankee women whose causes ranged from temperance to prison reform to abolition. “What was striking about the late 1820s and early 1830s . . . was that conservative Bostonians extended their reform activities in an organized fashion to include social and humanitarian concerns affecting the welfare of the less fortunate members of the community,” writes O’Connor in *Bibles, Brahmins, and Bosses*.⁷² For all the good embedded in its efforts at outreach and reform, however, Boston was notorious for its self-righteous high-mindedness, its “ethereal disdain for human imperfections.”⁷³ Furthermore, the reform mentality permitted established Boston to maintain a distance between itself and its new inhabitants, who were problematized rather than integrated, reformed rather than accepted.

New immigrants were incorporated into the framework of social reform, and many institutions were created or modified to provide assistance to immigrant families. Foremost among these were the settlement houses, several of which were established in the South End during the 1890s to help poor families become acclimated through lessons in subjects such as English, hygiene, nutrition, and child-rearing. The settlement house movement was born out of a genuine concern over the appalling conditions in which many new immigrants to Boston were forced to live, as described in 1849 by the Boston Committee of Internal Health. “[The North End] is a perfect hive of human beings, without comforts and mostly without common necessities; [with residents] in many cases huddled together like brutes, without regard to sex or age . . . [U]nder such circumstances, self-respect, forethought, all high and noble virtues die out, and sullen indifference and disrepair or disorder, intemperance and utter degradation reign supreme.”⁷⁴

The founding of the Boston Public Library, an institution designed to instruct and educate, fits very

clearly into this framework of Yankee concern and anxiety about the lives and morals of urban immigrants, immigrants who were understood to need uplifting public institutions to try to free them from the misery of their social and economic situation.

Although progressive Bostonians promoted new social institutions, including public libraries, as a way to help new immigrants and the native working classes to better their lives and adjust to urban American society, such institutions were also touted as a way to prevent crime and unrest. The late nineteenth century was a time of civil and economic dislocation, highlighted by the financial panic of 1893, and many urban elites were frightened by the potential for violence, particularly political violence, latent in the growing urban underclass.* This concern was not entirely speculative, as strikes and riots had become a source of constant anxiety in post-Civil War Boston. “As immigrants moved into the old housing,” writes Michael B. Katz in *In The Shadow of the Poorhouse*, “cities increasingly fragmented into social and ethnic enclaves. These isolated, poor tracts within great cities became the new American wilderness, untamed, unknown, subversive.”⁷⁵ Anarchism and socialism were in the air, and public libraries seemed to offer a palliative combination of education, traditional morals, and inculcation in dominant American values. “Books and libraries were said to be efficacious not only in soothing the savage beasts of labor’s men of action, but also in controverting some of the troublesome social philosophies which were beginning to attract the American worker,” writes Ditzion. “There was no cure like humility before the intellectual leaders and theorists of the past for wild, visionary ideas of social reform; nothing like the study of history to rout the ‘economic delusions’ of the day.”⁷⁶

Not only were public libraries crucial to the maintenance of order in the growing city, they were a vital part of the American democratic experiment, a necessary link in the chain of informed and responsible citizenship. Libraries offered a means for common citizens to educate themselves about politics, economics, history, and culture, and to use that new-found knowledge to – it was assumed – participate in democratic society through intelligent voting. “For it has been rightly judged that, – under political, social and religious institutions like ours, – it is of paramount importance that the means of general information should be so diffused that the largest possible number of persons should be induced to read and understand questions going down to the very foundations of our

*The anti-immigrant anxiety that gripped many Bostonians found a political outlet in the Know-Nothing or American Party of the 1850s, which organized to restrict Catholic immigration to the United States and to limit the rights and privileges of foreign-born residents.

social order,” reads an 1852 report prepared by the early Trustees of the Library, “which are constantly presenting themselves and which we, as a people, are constantly required to decide, and do decide, either ignorantly or wisely.”⁷⁷ Public libraries were a means for the diffusion of knowledge and thus they were a means – albeit indirect – to secure the health of the democratic system.

On a more individual level, the promoters of public libraries also extended Bates’s early argument that many young men of his generation would have chosen a life of study and personal betterment had they had access to library facilities. Libraries, it was believed by some, offered young people an alternative to the temptations of the street and the pub, providing instead a wholesome and uplifting environment, one in which the message to follow the path of honesty and hard work was communicated not only through the content of the books but also through the design of the building. “Thus would the young working men of the city not only be inspired by the architecture and the books,” writes Breisch, “but they would also be drawn in off the street, where lurked the evils of bad companionship and the immoral amusements of the alleys and the saloons.”⁷⁸

In this way, public libraries were an important part of a larger campaign to promote the principles on which Boston society was perceived to have been founded – principles of personal industry, integrity, rectitude, and respect for the entrenched order. “May the books here to be gathered become a source of healthful relaxation,” appealed Reverend E.N. Kirk at the 1855 cornerstone ceremony, “of manly culture, and of Christian instruction.”⁷⁹ From this mix of progressive reformism and urban anxiety public libraries were born in Boston, succeeding when and how they did in part because they seemed to offer solutions, at least partial solutions, to many of the perceived problems of nineteenth-century city life.

A Changing Urban Landscape

Of the urban reforms undertaken in Boston during the middle of the nineteenth century, some of the most significant altered the very landscape of the city. “With vastly increased populations spread out over larger areas,” writes Katz, “cities had to expand their services and finance sewers, water mains, police and fire protection, street paving, lighting, and schools.”⁸⁰ Under pressure from a growing population and an increasingly inadequate infrastructure, the City of Boston launched an unprecedented effort to increase its area through the filling of wetlands surrounding the city. Not

only were Boston harbor and the South Boston waterfront modified by piecemeal filling, but the entire shape of the western half of the city was transformed by the creation of the Back Bay. Where once the city had all but ended at the foot of Beacon Hill, it could now stretch out for blocks into a new and orderly district, modeled on Haussmann's Paris, for the wealthy and prestigious.

The development of the Back Bay is, in some ways, a physical embodiment of the social tensions that underlay many of the reform movements of nineteenth-century Boston, including efforts in support of a public library. The expansion of the city was promoted in part as a way to provide more buildable land and open spaces for new immigrants and others living in cramped, outdated housing around the harbor – and, indeed, the filling of the Back Bay produced the lovely Public Garden – but the main beneficiaries of the project were those who bought land and built houses in the new areas and were thus able to insulate themselves from the increasingly unpleasant downtown neighborhoods. As it had in the 1840s in the then-new South End, Yankee society retreated from the traditional center of the city, re-establishing itself on new land in an effort, in part, to disassociate itself from the rapid changes overtaking traditional Boston. “First opened in 1872, the Back Bay was also appealing to a number of well-to-do residents of Beacon Hill, who had begun to fear that the Hill lay too close to deteriorating neighborhoods,” writes Lynn. “Berkeley, Clarendon, Dartmouth, Exeter, and the other English-named streets of the Back Bay seemed to beleaguered Yankees like a tight little island of Anglo-Saxon culture in the midst of a vast, Hibernian sea.”⁸¹

If the Back Bay was the premier residential neighborhood of post-Civil War Boston, Copley Square was the premier institutional address. Named in 1883 for the renowned colonial portraitist John Singleton Copley, Copley Square sits at the intersection of the thoroughfares of Boylston Street, Dartmouth Street, and Huntington Avenue, and is surrounded by the posh residential and shopping districts of the Back Bay. By the 1870s, Copley Square had become the antithesis of the old parts of the city: orderly if not yet fully built up, open and airy, with several prominent institutions of Yankee Boston – including Trinity Church (built 1872-77 by H.H. Richardson), New Old South Church (built 1874 by Cummings & Sears), and the Museum of Fine Arts (built 1876-79 by Sturgis & Brigham) – arrayed around it. Prior to the construction of McKim's neo-Classical building for the Library, the important structures of the Square were done in Romanesque and Ruskinian Gothic, producing “a singular variety of recent buildings, inspired by various aspects of the middle ages.”⁸² The reputation of Copley Square as an important institutional center was established early and has remained with it throughout the past century. “About the square and in its immediate

neighborhood are grouped some of the most important institutions of the city,” wrote Edwin Bacon in the 1922 version of *Boston: A Guide Book*, “with noble buildings, beautiful churches, and attractive hotels.”⁸³

Since its construction, Trinity Church has been the defining architectural and urbanistic element of Copley Square, and all later additions to the Square – including the Boston Public Library – have had to contend with its presence. Designed in the later decades of the nineteenth century by H.H. Richardson for the largest Episcopalian congregation in Boston, Trinity Church is considered by many architects and architectural critics to be one of the finest examples of ecclesiastical architecture in America. “We can without hesitation agree with those fellow Boston architects who, on a plaque installed in the courtyard of the church in 1913, labeled Trinity ‘his noblest work,’” writes James F. O’Gorman in *H.H. Richardson: Architectural Forms for an American Society*, “and we can unblushingly extend this reference to say that it is among America’s noblest buildings.”⁸⁴

Trinity Church popularized the architectural style that came to be known as Richardsonian Romanesque – a heavy, eclectic aesthetic based on the churches of the Auvergne region of France – which was soon used across America not only for churches but also for public libraries, courthouses, and city halls.⁸⁵ There is convincing evidence that the young McKim, prior to founding his own firm, worked for Richardson on some of the early drawings for Trinity Church, and that Stanford White may have taken McKim’s place when he left.⁸⁶ Although this is not the place to explore all of the rich architectural and social associations between McKim’s design for the Boston Public Library and the design of his mentor for Trinity Church, it is important to keep the relationship between the two buildings in mind.

Despite [the] contrast between opposing architectural ideals . . . Richardson’s influence on the Public Library is more profound than a first glance at the confrontation on Copley Square might indicate. . . . The Library reflected the drift of taste away from the predominantly medieval inspiration of the most progressive nineteenth-century picturesque architecture, toward the predominance of classical inspiration for early twentieth-century academicism. . . . In this evidence of greater cautiousness, this concern for correctness as opposed to the freewheeling individualism of the architecture immediately preceding it, the Library heralded the main impetus in American architecture from the nineties through the thirties.⁸⁷

Several of the institutions that had settled in Copley Square prior to the construction of the new Boston Public Library had, like the Library, begun their lives in downtown Boston, deciding

eventually that Copley Square offered a more fitting and congenial environment not only for their patrons but also for the display of their architecture. For the Library to elect to locate in Copley Square, therefore, was to make a clear statement about the sort of institutions it wanted for its neighbors, the sort of urban landscape it wished to inhabit, and the sort of individuals it saw as its natural constituency. It was joining elite and established company, as indicated by the 1886 newspaper headline “The Boston Public Library – Another Important Building to be Added to the Notable Structures on the Back Bay.”⁸⁸

That the Library should hold a site of honor in the city, that it should both enhance and be enhanced by its prominent surroundings was, for some library proponents, self-evident. “It occupies, as is fitting, the central and most conspicuous position in Copley square, the most important square in the city,” wrote Herbert Small in *The Handbook of the New Public Library in Boston*, published in the year of the opening of the McKim Building. “It is surrounded by some of the most notable buildings in Boston.”⁸⁹

Still, the choice of Copley Square did not meet with universal approval, as articulated by an unsigned 1887 letter to the editor of *The Boston Daily Globe*. “Will someone give a good reason for removing the Public Library from its present location to the Back Bay?” wrote the outraged reader. “Those who have a voice in deciding this matter should remember that the library is for *all* the citizens of Boston, and not just for a chosen few who live in the aristocratic Back Bay quarter, and who wish to enhance the value of their real estate by beautifying the neighborhood at the expense of the masses.”⁹⁰

These sentiments are echoed in modern criticism of the placement of the Library in Copley Square, as described in a 1991 article entitled *Demographic Analysis of the Placement of the Boston Public Library in Relation to the Irish Population*, which argues that, “with respect to the Irish population in Boston, the Boston Public Library was placed in locations ill-suited to serve the disadvantaged.”⁹¹ Clearly, the choice of Copley Square as the new home for the Boston Public Library sent ambiguous messages about the place of the Library in urban society, a place defined both by its elite physical surroundings and by its articulated commitment to serve the urban population as a whole. The original Trustees were certainly committed to the social goals of public education and individual and social betterment, but their motives – as revealed by their choice of library location vis-à-vis the needy populations they claimed to serve – appear to be contradictory and ambiguous.

Changing Political Control

Even as the Trustees of the Library were considering their move up Boylston Street to Copley Square, the political power represented by the Bates, Ticknors, and Everetts was waning. In the years after the Civil War, the Irish population had been influential in bolstering the strength of the local Democratic party, and by the late 1860s they were poised to become a major force in city politics. Although Yankee Bostonians still had political clout, particularly at the state level, urban politics were more and more dominated by new Bostonians, many of them Irish. “With their substantial growth in numbers and their extraordinary movement into the neighborhoods in the course of a single generation, the Boston Irish now formed a larger political constituency than ever before,” writes O’Connor.⁹² The first Irish-American mayor, Hugh O’Brien, was elected in 1884, making way for an increasingly Irish-controlled urban political scene. In the four decades that separated the opening of the Boylston Street library building from the opening of the Copley Square building, the politics of Boston had changed, leaving the traditional Yankee power-structure significantly diminished.⁹³

In this context, the relocation of the Boston Public Library to Copley Square and the use of the architecture of the new Library to express messages about cultural values becomes more complex. McKim designed his building, a monument to high Western culture, not at a time of Yankee political ascendancy but one of change and fluidity, in which the Library had to define its mission and its clientele differently than it had when the institution was first founded. “This was the context of the Boston Public Library,” writes Douglass Shand-Tucci in *Built in Boston*, “which may also be taken as a sign of the underlying continuity between the old and exclusively Yankee culture and the new, more pluralistic culture then beginning to evolve.”⁹⁴ For although the Boston Public Library of the nineteenth century was very much a Yankee institution, it was also supported by the Irish political ascendancy, which understood the potential of a public library to better the lives of the poor and marginalized in Boston. “Boston’s Irish politicians fought on both sides of the cultural struggle,” writes Shaun O’Connell in *Imagining Boston*. “Hugh O’Brien . . . raised funds for the completion of the Boston Public Library, which he saw as ‘a monument to our intelligence and culture,’ but he also ordered Boston’s libraries closed on St. Patrick’s Day.”⁹⁵

The Irish might have been gaining control of local politics and exerting some influence in cultural matters, but the Yankees remained firmly in control of the administration of the Boston Public

Library. Indeed, established Boston retained a powerful cultural certainty, reflected not only in the design and policies of the Library, but also in the composition of the early Boards of Trustees. In addition to George Ticknor and Edward Everett, the first Board of Trustees of the Library – established in 1852 – included prominent New England names such as Quincy, Appleton, and Bigelow. As heirs to the moral and cultural values on which Boston had been founded, with a strong sense of confidence in the mission of the Library to bring the improving power of self-education to the public, the original Trustees approached their task as a calling, with high moral dimensions.⁹⁶

While the Trustees may have had no doubts about the appropriateness of their efforts on behalf of the Public Library, they were criticized by the local press for their arrogance and detachment from the needs of the general public, particularly as the costs of McKim’s design greatly overran the original estimates. “The hauteur of this high-minded, and often high-handed, oligarchy,” writes William Jordy in *American Buildings and Their Architects*, “certainly contributed to the venom of tabloid ‘crusades’ against the Board in the ‘people’s interest.’”⁹⁷ While many would likely now agree that the sumptuousness of McKim’s design produced a magnificent building, the attacks on the Trustees reveal some of the tensions that underlay not only the physical design of the new Library building but also the relationship between the Library, as a project of the Yankee elite, and the broader Boston public for whom the Library was ostensibly intended.



As illustrated by the tensions built into the identity of the Library, Boston society of the second half of the nineteenth century was a society of contradictions, in which the wealthy and established classes were compelled by their moral beliefs to promote the perceived needs of the general public, an increasingly diverse and alien population which the wealthy both feared and disliked. This tension is captured wonderfully in an early chapter of Henry James’ 1886 novel *The Bostonians*, in which the protagonist is faced with a dilemma: how to travel from her home on Charles Street to an evening meeting of a reform society in the South End.

The logic of her conduct was none of the clearest; for if she had been alone she would have proceeded to her destination by the aid of the street-car; not from economy (for she had the good fortune not to be obliged to consult it to that degree), and not for any love of wandering about Boston at night (a kind of exposure she greatly disliked), but by reason of a theory she devotedly nursed, a theory which

bade her put off invidious differences and mingle in the common life. She would have gone on foot to Boylston Street, and there she would have taken the public conveyance (in her heart she loathed it) to the South End.⁹⁸

Charles Follen McKim's neo-Classical structure for the Boston Public Library on Copley Square was a physical embodiment of just these contradictions, simultaneously welcoming new Bostonians with its mantra of 'Free to All' while distancing them with its architectural allusions to Classical and European cultures. In the next part of this chapter, we will explore these tensions more fully, as they were expressed in the motivations behind McKim's design.

PART II: DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The Hiring of Charles Follen McKim

In 1880, the Massachusetts Legislature granted the Boston Public Library a parcel of land at the corner of Dartmouth and Boylston Streets. The Trustees of the Library then faced the challenge of relocating from their modest building across from the Boston Common to a much larger and more prominent structure in Copley Square. The Trustees lacked a clear sense of what the new library should look like, however, how it should be organized, or who should design it. The original Library building had been modeled closely on the Boston Athenaeum, and that design had worked reasonably well for the first decades after the building had opened. But the Library had grown significantly since then, and new methods for the storage of library materials had become popular. Furthermore, there was no useful architectural precedent for the new structure contemplated by the Trustees, for no American city had undertaken to build such a large public library or one that combined the services of both a traditional research facility and a more experimental circulating library. Moreover, the Trustees were under pressure to break ground for the new building, as the Legislature had imposed a deadline – a deadline later extended – for the commencement of construction.

The early story of the design of the new Library facility is a confusing one. The first proposal for an expanded Library came from Henry van Brunt of the architectural firm of Ware & van Brunt, and was followed shortly by a set of preliminary sketches from George Clough, the city architect and designer of the Pemberton Square Courthouse of 1886. It is unclear whether either of these proposals was solicited by the Trustees or whether they were submitted uninvited. In any event, the

Trustees felt the need for a competition, holding one in 1884 without acceptable result – although a significant sum was distributed in prize money. The Trustees then turned again to the office of the city architect to prepare an appropriate design. “With time and money wasted, and with a tight deadline for the start of the building after which the State Legislature could legally rescind its gift of the site, the commission fell, once more, by default, to the City Architect, one Arthur H. Vinal, who had succeeded the abler Clough,” writes Jordy. “He interrupted his work on firehouses and precinct stations to sketch a Richardsonian mass.”⁹⁹ Despite the initial drilling of piles for the design prepared by Vinal – drilling done on the very last day authorized by the Legislature – his proposal would also prove unsatisfactory to the Trustees. With time almost out, the Trustees successfully appealed to the Legislature to be given full control of the choice of an architect for the new Library, control that would open the way for the selection of McKim.¹⁰⁰

The firm of McKim, Mead & White had come to the attention of the Library Trustees through Samuel A.B. Abbot, a member and later president of the Board of Trustees and cousin to McKim’s second wife. Abbot is reported to have admired the firm’s work on the Italianate Henry Villard Houses (1883) on Madison Avenue in midtown Manhattan, and in March of 1887 he organized a meeting with McKim in New York to discuss the possibility of his taking charge of the Boston Public Library project.¹⁰¹ The firm was just beginning to establish itself as a leader in the Renaissance Revival, and Abbot seems to have desired that the new Library reflect the aesthetics of that movement. The meeting between Abbot and McKim must have gone well, for the Library Trustees voted within a week to give McKim the commission for the new building. McKim then relocated his household to Boston, where he would spend a good part of the next decade working on the new quarters for the Library. Although the contract for the project was between the Library and the firm of McKim, Mead & White, McKim was the guiding light of the effort, with limited if any involvement from William Rutherford Mead or Stanford White.

Abbot never seems to have doubted his promotion of McKim, nor his support for the designs that McKim eventually developed for the Library. Not a man known to second-guess his own decisions, Abbot steadfastly stood by McKim, even when the Library project came under intense criticism from the press, the public, and city politicians for its growing budget and the perceived lavishness of its design. When called in 1891 to testify before the City Council on the expanding costs of the project, Abbot described the choice of McKim as made, “only after careful consideration. None of us had known Mr. McKim, and we chose him as being a man . . . who would have the best judgment

for the work we required of any man we could get, and from what we saw of Mr. McKim's work we came to the conclusion that he was best fitted for this special work we had in mind. We have seen no reason to doubt our judgment.”¹⁰²

The selection of McKim was not without controversy, both among the Trustees and within the city as a whole. Abbot, who had served as the Chief of Police before joining the Library project, was known for his autocratic leadership style, and several members of the Board seem to have chafed at his choice of architect. Abbot was criticized not only for hiring an architect from outside of Boston, particularly a New York architect, but for moving quickly, and perhaps furtively, in his decision to do so. “I think that such action was unnecessarily hasty, that presumably a Boston architect of sufficient skill could have been secured, and that until the latter point was decided, no outsider should have been selected,” reads a letter of March 31st, 1887 from William Whitmore, a member of the Board, to William Greenough, President of the Board prior to Abbot taking the role. “Personally, I protest against the action of those members of the Board visiting New York for the purposes of obtaining information without having requested the other members to join them. Under these circumstances I feel myself entirely relieved from any responsibility in regard to the construction of the building.”¹⁰³

Library records show that Whitmore remained on the Board for only another year, although one can't be sure that his retirement was related to his displeasure over the choice of the New Yorker McKim. Nevertheless, his letter to Greenough reflects certain Bostonian attitudes of the time: insular, perhaps parochial, but also committed to the idea that the Public Library was a Boston institution and, as such, should be designed by a Boston architect who understood and embodied Boston values. Among other things, this is further evidence of the growing jealousy Boston felt for New York. For all of his talents and fame, Charles Follen McKim was not a Bostonian and would, therefore, always be treated as an outsider by some members of Boston society.

McKim, Mead & White

This is not the place for a lengthy discussion of the significance of the firm of McKim, Mead & White in American architectural history, but a brief overview of the attitudes of the partners and the role of the firm in establishing neo-Classicism as a pre-eminent style for American civic architecture is worthwhile. Between 1879, when White was made a partner in the firm, and 1909, when McKim

died, the firm had over 1,000 commissions of almost every conceivable building type, of which more than one-third were within the five boroughs of New York City.¹⁰⁴ Mead was primarily responsible for the management of the firm, while White and McKim were responsible for the bulk of the design work. Throughout the life of the partnership, the firm designed some of the best-known structures, both public and private, in the eastern United States, including numerous buildings on the campuses of Columbia, New York, and Harvard Universities; the J. Pierpont Morgan Library; the Century, Metropolitan, University, and Harvard Clubs of New York City; Boston Symphony Hall; the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences; the Rhode Island State Capitol; the New York City Municipal Building; the original Pennsylvania Station; and the Tiffany & Co. building in New York City. The list could go on for pages, highlighting the influence McKim, Mead & White not only on the urban landscape of New York and other major American cities, but also on the American perception of how civic architecture should look: monumental, of light color, and in the neo-Classical style.

The neo-Classicism made popular by McKim, Mead & White all but banished the Victorian Gothic and Richardsonian Romanesque styles that had dominated American tastes in the middle of the nineteenth century, replacing the heavy, dark, eclecticism of the Middle Ages with the spare, light, symmetry of Antiquity. As has been mentioned above, both McKim and White spent portions of their early careers in the service of H.H. Richardson, the tremendously influential dean of American architecture in the 1870s and 1880s. Had Richardson lived to continue his prominent career, the Boston Public Library could well have been fashioned in his Romanesque style, but instead it is an early example of the neo-Classicism that was to characterize American civic architecture until the First World War and that in many ways continues to shape popular notions of what civic architecture should be. “Their dream [the firm] of an American architecture of urbanity, beauty and grace frequently provided impetus for the creation of that core of classical buildings which so often forms the most beautiful parts of towns and cities all over the United States,” writes Allan Greenberg in *Monograph of the Work of McKim, Mead & White*.¹⁰⁵

McKim, Mead & White embraced Classical design as the style most appropriate to urban America of the late nineteenth century, an environment not only of rapid change but also of high civic ideals, one in which continuity with the past seemed vital to providing an aesthetic and cultural framework for the future.¹⁰⁶ The partners made their homes in New York City and were deeply committed in their work to the improvement and beautification of the urban landscape of America. The members

of the firm participated in the planning for the World Columbian Exhibition in Chicago of 1893, helping to spread the ideals of the City Beautiful movement, and focused the majority of their mature work on projects with the potential to unify the disparate character of the urban American landscape. “Their architecture was developed in accordance with the landscape of the street and not that of the prairie,” writes Leland Roth in *McKim, Mead & White, Architects*. “At the same time it recognized that success in the confines of the street would come from subordination to rule . . . and from an adherence to a transmittable system of design which would foster rather than obviate architectural harmony in the ensemble.”¹⁰⁷ In addition to designing for the street, McKim, Mead & White often designed for the heavens, incorporating the work of painters, sculptors, and muralists in their urban buildings. McKim in particular believed that art was a vital part of civic architecture, and he assembled some of the most famous artists of the late nineteenth century – including John Singer Sargent and Augustus Saint-Gaudens – to participate in the design and decoration of the Boston Public Library.

As noted earlier, McKim himself shared many of the contradictory social attitudes of his patrons on the subject of the new building for the Boston Public Library. A Pennsylvanian by birth, from a family of abolitionists and Quakers, McKim was related to William Lloyd Garrison by marriage.¹⁰⁸ He clearly believed in the power of civic architecture and civic institutions to improve urban life, and he used the weight of his own fame to encourage many of his wealthy clients to contribute to causes he believed to be important. “It was [his] good fortune to come upon the scene just at a time when people of wealth were taking a new interest in the beautification of their environment,” wrote Royal Cortissoz in an article for *The Brickbuilder* from 1910.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, much of McKim’s private work was done for the newly rich of the Gilded Age, and he appears to have shared some of their attitudes about the ways in which behavior can be affected by physical design.

In this way, McKim and his partners were tremendously influential, both as architects and urbanists, working in the neo-Classical style during a period in which Americans were looking to the past to develop an aesthetic for the urban present, an aesthetic that would offer a new vision for city residents while also protecting and reinforcing the existing social order.

McKim and the Design Philosophy Behind the Boston Public Library

The challenge faced by McKim in designing a new building for the Boston Public Library was not a

small one. Hired to prepare plans for what was then the second largest public library in the world – only the collections of the Library of Congress were larger than those of Boston – a library with significant circulating and research components and located across Copley Square from Richardson’s masterful Trinity Church, McKim must have felt under pressure to produce an extraordinary building. Furthermore, the new building had to be extraordinary in multiple ways: not only did it have to be orderly, functional, and efficient in its interior workings, but it also had to use its architecture and urban design to project the importance of the cultural mission of the Library clearly and powerfully into the city environment.

McKim considered many potential models for the Library new building, ultimately deciding on Henri Labrouste’s Parisian Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève of the 1840s as the appropriate inspiration. Similar in many ways to the ultimate design of the Boston Public Library, the Bibliothèque is a starker and more disciplined version of the same type of building; McKim softened and humanized his design in ways that Labrouste did not. “But although the Paris library . . . furnished a suggestion in masses and in locating a great hall with arched windows on the front of the second floor,” writes Whitehill in *Boston Public Library: A Centennial History*, “McKim’s design and details were very much his own.”¹¹⁰

In the design of the Library, as in the bulk of his work, McKim was committed to function as well as to aesthetics. In this he was supported by the Library Trustees, who were eager for a more capacious and efficient building than the existing structure on Boylston Street and who argued in a June 1881 report to the City Council that “no elegant edifice is to be designed in which the books are to be deposited in conformity to the architectural or ornamental structure of the building; but it should be erected over the books, the arrangement and classification of which for convenience of use must determine the form and details.”¹¹¹ One could argue that the hiring of McKim introduced the Trustees to the expressive possibilities of library aesthetics as a partner to library function, but the record suggests that the symbolic power of library design was much on the minds of the Trustees even prior to their exposure to the ideas of McKim. As early as 1883, in fact, the instructions for the original design competition for the new Library building urged the hopefuls to be sure that the “outside appearance should indicate, as far as practicable, that it was built to contain a public library.”¹¹²

This simple statement is remarkable for a number of reasons, including the implied assumption that

public libraries had a certain, recognizable style and that the use of that style was somehow important to fulfilling the mission of the institution. Although McKim did not participate in this early competition, his choice of the Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève as a model for Boston points to his sensitivity to the question of proper library appearance.

McKim's design for the Boston Public Library had to find a way to express a complex of ideas about the information stored within the building, the accessibility of that information, and the power of self-improvement offered by the Library and symbolized by the design of the building. Furthermore, the building had to communicate this three-part message within the framework of traditional American and European cultural values and aesthetics supported by established Boston and the backers of the Library effort. "The new building of the Boston Public Library . . . may be called without much fear of contradiction the most beautiful library structure in the world," reads the 1895 *Handbook of the New Public Library in Boston*. "Primarily, of course, it was designed to house, conveniently and accessibly, the great collection of books which the city had been accumulating for nearly forty years, but it was also designed to express in a fitting manner the significance of that collection in the intellectual life of the city – to be, in a word, a work of art."¹³

Book Storage

The central design feature of any library lies in the choice of the method of storage and distribution of books. This issue has been hotly debated by librarians for generations, but the time at which McKim designed for the Boston Public Library was one in which libraries were beginning to reach such size that the challenge of housing their collections safely and efficiently was becoming pre-eminent. H.H. Richardson, who had designed a number of small, elegant suburban libraries in the decades prior to the construction of the McKim Building, had earned the ire of librarians for electing to use a system of alcoves rather than more up-to-date bookstacks. McKim faced an added problem in designing for the Boston Public Library: the sheer volume of the collection, which was unrivaled for both size and diversity by any municipal library anywhere in the United States.

From the early stages of his designs, McKim favored the use of centralized, closed storage for all of the collections of the Library, and the Trustees came to support him in this choice.¹⁴ McKim's design is of especial importance here because of its significance for the experience of using the Library. A system of centralized, closed stacks requires the vast majority of the interior space of a

library building to be limited only to librarians and kept out of the sight of patrons. It also requires that the procedure for obtaining a book involve direct interaction with a member of the Library staff, a mechanism that can be problematic for patrons for both cultural and linguistic reasons. Closed stacks prohibit browsing, and so enforce a more rigid, focused use of library resources. The choice to use a system of closed stacks raises compelling questions about perceived ownership, about rights, and about access. Public libraries belong to the public, at least in an idealized sense, but closed stacks suggest that library books are the property of the library itself, rather than of the patrons.

Within just a few years of the opening of the McKim Building, dissenting voices began to criticize the use of closed stacks as an inappropriate obstacle to the realization of the democratic ideal of public libraries, as in this 1897 essay:

The cheapness of books; the growth of the public's feeling of ownership in its library and of the propriety of laying hands on its own; a recognition of the great educational value of the laboratory method in library administration; and the widening of its field of work which a library gains by the added attraction of free access to its shelves – these considerations, save in peculiar cases, seem to decide the question of the proper policy of the public library toward its public. That more communities do not now demand the adoption of the system of open shelves in their public libraries is due largely to the conservatism of library boards, and to an unreasoning submission to authority on the part of the reading public. Even the enlightened are slow to ask for a right before they have exercised it and experienced its advantages.¹¹⁵

Ornament

For McKim, the issue of book storage appears to have been a technical one, of less interest than the aesthetic and message-making challenges presented by the Library project. This was not unusual in pre-modernist civic architecture, in which “the elementary needs that relate to the livability of a building or a public space are sacrificed to meet preconceived formal objectives.”¹¹⁶ For McKim, the power to meet those objectives lay in ornament, for ornament gave a building the power to declare its identity and purpose. For the Boston Public Library, that purpose was the provision of moral and intellectual uplift – and, implicitly, social control – through reading and self-education. Ornament gave a building character, and while McKim worked within the tradition of neo-Classicism, he also devised new and unorthodox ways for a building to communicate its messages. “To McKim, Mead & White . . . ornament was not only to facilitate weathering and promote

longevity,” writes Roth, “but to announce and articulate, to celebrate function.”¹¹⁷ For McKim, the aesthetics and the function of the Boston Public Library were so intertwined – part of the function of the building was to broadcast its mission, and that could only be achieved through its aesthetics – that ornament became, rather than a luxury, an integral part of the architecture. McKim remained committed to his belief in the power of ornamentation even when criticized for its cost, as in his 1891 testimony before the Boston City Council:

When we recently brought in our estimate to the trustees of \$985,000, we brought in items for sculpture, bronze work, and work of a highly decorative character, which we deemed, and do deem, essential to the success of the building, including the approaches, and all that. . . . I would distinctly state that in my opinion, if these things were omitted and left out, it would be to the great disadvantage of the building as a whole, and would reflect on all of the labor that has been put upon it.¹¹⁸

If ornament was the language, then the explicit message was of personal inspiration and uplift, to be interpreted in varying ways by different users. The urban elite of Boston, understanding that their world was changing but eager to preserve and promote their own values, viewed the public library of McKim as part of that effort, architecturally and institutionally. For McKim, the vocabulary of neo-Classical architecture was the best way, aesthetically, to express the purpose of a public library.

November 28th, 1888: The Laying of the Cornerstone

Having been hired in March of 1887 and having struggled for eight months to develop a set of acceptable plans for the new Library building, McKim was finally ready for construction to begin in late November of 1888. In keeping with the significance of the occasion, a ceremony was arranged for the laying of the cornerstone, and many of the members of established Boston society were invited to attend. So significant was the event that Governor Oliver Ames himself was asked to participate, although a prior commitment kept him from the ceremony. Governor Ames’ letter of regret offers an intriguing glimpse at the cultural and historical continuity between the opening of the first Library building on Boylston Street and the construction of McKim’s much larger structure in Copley Square. In language reminiscent of Joshua Bates, Governor Ames wrote, “In the erection of the building I take great interest, as I believe it is not only to serve the most useful purpose, but it is to adorn the city.”¹¹⁹ In this way, we see how the linkage between library function and aesthetics, only implied in Bates’s vision, had been articulated and realized by the time of McKim.

In writing about cornerstone-layings in *Building Lives*, Harris argues that such events offer a defining

moment in which not only to celebrate the coming of a major institution but also to reinforce the dominant conception of the institution. “The ceremony provided an opportunity to affirm certain values and to associate the coming structure with powerful natural symbols,” he writes.¹²⁰ By bringing together politicians, academics, clergymen, and other members of the elite, cornerstone ceremonies were a time to assert the importance of the effort, the benevolence of those involved, and the ultimate benefit that would accrue to the community from the investment of effort and money represented by the new building.

“Another institution that accorded its dedication . . . great seriousness was the public library,” writes Harris, “that secular church devoted to literacy, democratic citizenship, and economic mobility.”¹²¹ The ceremony of November 28th, 1888 included a religious service in New Old South Church, the reading of a poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes, an address by Mayor O’Brien – representing the Irish ascendancy – and the playing of musical selections from Beethoven, Bach, and Wagner.* The attendees also witnessed the burying of a box of papers and trinkets, a time capsule enclosing a copy of Holmes’s poem, photographs of the Library Trustees, and a copy of the invitation to the ceremony itself.¹²² While the cornerstone ceremony was no doubt intended in part to display to the public the progress of the new Library building and the commitment and public spiritedness of the Trustees, it also seems, equally importantly, to have been a celebration of elite society and its rituals. Furthermore, the presence of Mayor O’Brien would have emphasized the power of the Library to act as a cultural bridge between traditional Yankee Boston – represented by Holmes and the Trustees – and the new Boston, increasingly dominated by members of the influential Irish political class. The Yankees and the Irish were unable to find common ground on many other issues, most notably in the freighted spheres of religion and morality, but the Library seems to have offered a rare forum for partial consensus. In these ways, the cornerstone ceremony of 1888 was an opportunity to highlight not only the progress of the construction of the Library but also the myriad social and cultural trends that underlay the expansion of the Library to Copley Square.

The major Boston newspapers supported the new Library project, at least at this early stage, and they generally echoed the belief that the Library was an important vehicle for personal improvement, a bulwark against social chaos, and a reinforcement of the social status quo. In the press coverage of

*It is interesting to note that the ceremony was not held at Trinity Church, the more prominent of the two Copley Square religious institutions.

the ceremony, the papers articulated for their readers the conviction that the Library was not only a benefit to the community but also a product of the public will. Many newspapers also drew an implicit connection between the design of the building and the realization of its lofty mission. “The work on the foundation is now so far advanced that an idea is well conveyed of the size of this new monument to the public spirit of Boston,” wrote *The Boston Daily Globe*, “and to the conviction of the people that knowledge is the source of the stability of civilization.”¹²³ “It is, however, the intellectual outlook, so to speak, which the design for this noble structure symbolizes, which is of paramount significance, and without this there would be little interest in the ceremonies of today,” argued *The Boston Post*. “Were it not for the promise which the success of the library in the past holds out, the new building would be hardly more interesting than if it were only another addition to our palaces of trade. It is because the higher life is to be ministered to within its walls with a potency that the imagination can hardly compass that I recognize the deep significance of the occasion.”¹²⁴

Most of the articles also quoted from Holmes’s poem, echoing his belief that,

*Behind the ever-open gate
No pikes shall fence a crumbling throne,
No lackeys cringe, no courtiers wait, –
This palace is the people’s own!*¹²⁵

Early Criticism

If the cornerstone ceremony was a display of early consensus support for the McKim library, dissenting opinions were to be heard over the coming months and years. It is difficult now to know how Bostonians of different classes, religions, and ethnicities felt about the new Library building, or whether they thought much about it at all, but the record has preserved some revealing and intriguing examples of criticism expressed in the years between the 1887 hiring of McKim and the 1895 opening of the Library. Early criticism over the choice of Copley Square as the location of the new Library building has already been cited, but other dissenting voices complained about the design of the building, its interior organization, and – more than anything – its cost. While *The Boston News* was particularly aggressive in attacking not only the plans for the new Library but also the perceived elitism and high-handedness of the Board of Trustees, other critics joined the fray as well.

The design prepared by McKim for the new Library building was to be the first major neo-Classical

building in Boston, a city accustomed to the eclectic styles of the Victorian period. To some observers, the McKim design was simply too severe to join the Copley Square ensemble or to communicate the institutional importance of the Library. “As the owners of Copley Square estates have contributed so liberally to maintain its beautiful proportions of open area, it seems only justice to them that they should have some voice in deciding on the architecture of the building which ought to beautify and complete the westerly side of the square,” reads a letter to a Boston newspaper signed merely *A Copley Square Taxpayer*. “The building is simply a cube. The façade on each of the three streets is a plane. The first story, perhaps twenty feet in height, has no projections nor resess (*sic*) of any kind to relieve its somber effect. . . . [I]t will look like a store-house; but whether for books or for pig-lead, will be a matter of conjuncture (*sic*).”^{126, *}

This letter – and one imagines that the author must not have been alone in his or her sentiments – raises the question of public process, and whether McKim and the Library Trustees undertook to elicit comments or thoughts from the Boston citizenry on the design for the new Library building. The record indicates that a model of the building was publicly displayed at the Old State House, but the following exchange between McKim and a member of Boston City Council reveals a decidedly undemocratic attitude toward public participation.

City Councilor: The public didn’t come to your office to interest themselves directly in the matter?

McKim: We shouldn’t have paid any attention to the public.¹²⁷

On the subject of interior configuration, McKim and the Trustees were roundly criticized for their failure to consult librarians and other specialists in library science for guidance on the proper lay-out of a new library, with some people arguing that problems embedded in the design of the original Boylston Street building were being replicated in the new building. “A singular feature in the evolution of the plans for the new building is the failure to get counsel or criticism in the most natural source of light on the construction of a library – librarians,” wrote *The Boston Herald* in February of 1892. “This statement will doubtless excite surprise and incredulity, but it is a fact. By the neglect of its agent, the city of Boston has spent, or will be forced to spend, millions of dollars on a library building without consultation with expert librarians.”¹²⁸ The critics who castigated McKim and the Trustees for their failure to call upon the experience of senior librarians argued for

*One has to wonder what the writer would have thought of the Johnson addition.

function over beauty, efficiency over architecture.

“The thing wanted is a library, not a monument,” wrote one Boston newspaper. “If it can be both, well and good. But the first question, the question far in advance of all others, is whether we are able to have a library building that shall meet the requirements of this great and growing city.”¹²⁹

Although McKim and the Trustees were clearly concerned about the question of function, they were also equally – if not more – concerned with creating a landmark, a monument to education and Western culture, and as such they would have been unlikely to consider the possibility of sacrificing architectural power for strict utility and organization. For these reasons, and perhaps others involving social control, it seems that the architect and the Trustees – steeped in top-down planning and design – felt no need to consult either experts or lay-people.

As mentioned earlier, the most significant criticism leveled at the new Library project involved its projected cost, which was first increased when McKim joined the project and which then continued to grow as work progressed. McKim would later defend himself and his design, arguing that the early financial estimates had been prepared in haste and inaccurately, but the criticism continued. *The Boston News* in particular launched a front-page series about the costs of the project, arguing that the exorbitant price-tag of the new building was indicative of a betrayal of the core mission of the Library – the public provision of books – and had contributed to public disapproval and alienation. “The Boston Public Library was founded for the use of the people, and for years was conducted with an eye solely to that end,” wrote *The News* on the 1st of January, 1892. “Its present position in the public eye is deplorable, and the trustees are at fault. Their extravagance in the erection of a new building is a disgrace to the city.”¹³⁰



While it is impossible to know how the majority of the public, or even just the readers of *The News*, felt about the expanding budget of the McKim Building, it is interesting to note that support for the project was not unanimous throughout the seven years between the laying of the cornerstone and the opening of the Library, and that criticism tended to coalesce around issues of cost and design. In commenting on the years of sniping that led up to the opening of the Library, the Boston-based *American Architect and Building News* in 1895 described the McKim project as “a perfect boon to those who seek an object for semi-ill-natured criticism ever since it was started, beginning with the waste

of \$10,000 on the first competition, the further waste of more public money in laying foundations for a building that was known to be a preposterous piece of imperfection, and culminating with the appointment of an architect who was not a Bostonian.”¹³¹ Despite all of the criticism and the long years of construction, the Boston Public Library of Charles Follen McKim opened to praise in early 1895 and has remained one of the most widely celebrated civic buildings in America in the century since.

PART III: A PALACE FOR THE PEOPLE

The Façade

The McKim Building functions as the western wall of the outdoor room that is Copley Square, its façade filling the entire block of Dartmouth Street between Boylston Street and the intersection of Blagden Street and Huntington Avenue, then stretching half-way along the block of Boylston Street between Dartmouth and Exeter Streets. With the Johnson addition, the library came to fill out the back half of its block of Boylston Street, reaching all the way to Exeter Street, but at the time of the construction of the McKim Building the library shared the block with a Ware & van Brunt building owned by the Harvard Medical School.* The overwhelming visual impression of the McKim Building is one of solidity and blockiness, a sense intrinsic to a building that is of practically equal proportions on all four sides, without deviation or interruption of its roof-line or edges. The red tile roof and fortified air of the building hints at an Italian influence, perhaps a palazzo of Renaissance Florence, but architectural elements from other periods and styles are clearly present as well. The building gives away very little about its internal configuration and use from its external appearance, unlike the highly articulated Victorian churches that neighbor it. In its basic form, the McKim Building announces itself as a different kind of architecture from that of the rest of Copley Square – there are no spires, no towers, no uneven massing or eclectic detailing. One is able to take in the whole building at once, as there are no asymmetrical elements demanding individual attention.

The art and architecture of the McKim Building have been studied at great length over the past century, so this analysis will be relatively brief and will emphasize those elements that relate to the

*Like the Museum of Fine Arts before it, Harvard Medical School moved away from the Beacon Hill/Back Bay area and out Huntington Avenue in the direction of Brookline in the twentieth century. Both moves can be understood as part of a gradual institutional relocation away from the historic core of Boston.

expression of the social and political identity of the building. As one walks closer to the façade, that expression comes into focus, first with the words *The Public Library of the City of Boston Built by the People and Dedicated to the Advancement of Learning A.D. MDCCCLXXXVIII* carved into the cornice and then, as one looks even more carefully, with the listing of hundreds of names – carved into the space, designed to look like pages of a book, under the tall windows of the second story of the building – of artists, inventors, scientists, writers, poets, and historians, seemingly in random order. One also notices that the center of the façade contains three doors, the iron gates and elaborately-wrought iron lamps of which again give a sense of defensibility. Over the entrance are displayed the shields of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the City of Boston, and the Boston Public Library itself. The Library, which from a distance seemed so severe and plain, at close range seems replete with decoration, ornamentation, and messages, some explicit and some less so.

The explicit messages, the carved words, are easy to read, but perhaps somewhat more difficult to interpret. Beginning at the top, one pauses on the phrase *Built by the People*. By which people was the Library built? The population of Boston as a whole or some subset thereof? Urban societies are complex organisms in which no effort is ever undertaken by the entire citizenry, and one can only assume that the Library must have been no different. Furthermore, one can imagine that the construction of such a large and elaborate structure must have been financially costly, so its completion signals the support of the wealthy and established classes. So the effort to project an appearance of cultural unanimity with *by the People* must be understood as just that – an effort – in the service of presenting the Library as an institution of consensus and unity.

One reads on, but then stumbles again. What is meant by *Built*? Does it refer to the physical act of building the library – indeed, the work would have been done by the laborers and craftsmen of Boston – or to the financial act of funding its construction? Or perhaps it is a more non-specific contribution to the effort, such as general support for the idea of erecting a new public library in Copley Square. These are questions without definitive answers, but they highlight the manner in which the façade of the McKim Building is used not only to indicate the institutional identity of the Library but also to frame the Library in such a way that a superficial glance at the building will leave one with the reassuring sense that the Boston Public Library is an institution founded with harmonious, broad-based support.

The next phrase, *Dedicated to the Advancement of Learning*, also piques the curiosity. Is the Library

dedicated to the advancement of just any kind of learning, without specificity or oversight, or are there particular types of learning more likely to be found within the Library than others? One suspects that certain types of knowledge are more highly valued than others, and in fact a confirmation of that hunch is also to be found on the façade, in the lists of names intricately carved across the face of the building. Beginning with Moses, the list – described in the 1895 *Handbook of the New Public Library in Boston* as, “the names of the greatest writers, artists, and scientists of history, especially of American history . . . these names were intended in the first place as decoration, but they also serve as a sort of ‘roll of honor’”¹³² – gallops from Herodotus to Mohammed to Rembrandt to Columbus to Beethoven, through Goethe and Molière and on to Gutenberg and Newton and beyond. The list pauses briefly to include a few women, including Brontë (all of the sisters, one assumes) and a few individuals from outside of Western civilization, including Confucius, but the carvings are, first and foremost, a synopsis of Western culture, captured in a list of names designed to “suggest the diversity of the riches to be found within.”¹³³ Given the particular ethnic composition of Boston at the end of the nineteenth century, it is interesting to note that no prominent Irish artists or writers – W.B. Yeats, for example – appear on the façade, although at least one Anglo-Irishman, Jonathan Swift, is included.

By carving the names of so many historical luminaries on the outer walls of the Boston Public Library, the Library – and, by extension, the city – is laying claim to a cultural tradition many thousands of years old, one that implies fellowship with the great cities of Europe and the Classical world. Moreover, the implicit task of the list is to suggest the type of knowledge one is ideally supposed to seek within the walls of the Library – the writings of the greats, the art of the masters – and so to fill Library patrons with a heavy sense of obligation and seriousness as they enter the building. This is not a place for frivolity, vulgarity, or mere entertainment, the user is implicitly told, but a place for contemplation and learning. The names listed on the façade are perhaps designed to engage the curiosity of passers-by, while also implying that the means to satisfy that curiosity are to be found within.

A knowledgeable populace is not important simply for its own sake, however, but as the foundation for a stable political and social community. This is implied by the honor roll and, for those who can’t interpret the message behind the roll of names, another prominent carving on the northern cornice makes it unmistakably clear: *The Commonwealth Requires the Education of the People as the Safeguard of Order and Liberty*. The McKim library exists then not only to provide individuals with a source of

self-betterment for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of the established social and political structure of the city as a whole. “A public library can be the center of the activities in a city that make for social efficiency,” reads the 1902 essay *The Place of the Public Library in a City’s Life*. “It can do more to bind the people of a city into one civic whole, and to develop among them the feeling that they are citizens of no mean city, than any other institution yet established or that we can yet conceive.”¹³⁴

The messages of the façade of the McKim Building described so far seem to be efforts at inclusion, at incorporating the general public into the genesis story of the Library and at incorporating the Library itself in the pantheon of Western high culture. But seen from a different perspective, the façade also radiates messages of exclusion and delineation, sub-dividing its patrons by class and education. First and most simply, the use of Roman numerals to date the building, although a long-standing convention and in keeping with the neo-Classical design, would segregate those library users, presumably many in the last nineteenth century, who were unfamiliar with the Roman system.

The ‘honor roll’ of names is a far more vivid example of this phenomenon, invoking for patrons not only an intellectual world to which to aspire but also a means of reinforcing a sense of ignorance and otherness, of separation from the educated classes of Boston. The façade of the McKim Building thus could have completely different effects on different patrons: to the wealthy, educated Yankee, it could reinforce his sense of belonging and cultural inheritance; to the striving middle-class professional, it could encourage him to work harder and learn more; to the poor and uneducated immigrant, it could remind him of his alienness and the near impossibility of real inclusion.

“Government buildings would appear to serve several symbolic purposes simultaneously,” writes Vale. “Some of these meanings may be traceable to a designer’s – or a politician’s – intentions . . . other meanings are not introduced by an individual’s formative act but arise as unintended and unacknowledged products of a widely shared acculturation.”¹³⁵ In this way, the façade of the McKim Building can be understood as dynamic, offering different images of the Library to different constituencies – some explicit and some so latent that they may not be consciously understood, by the viewer or perhaps by the architect – and thereby reflecting the tension between access and control that underlies the nineteenth-century Library as a cultural institution.

The doorway of the McKim Building deserves comment, as it would have been the main portal to

the Library at the time the building opened for public use. The doorway is reached by walking up a set of granite steps and then through a corridor in space defined by two statues – guardians almost – one representing science and the other art. The fact that one has to step *up* to knowledge is surely no accident; even in the rarefied cultural environment of Copley Square, McKim physically elevated the Library in order to emphasize the power of uplift contained within. The black iron light fixtures around the doorway are fantastical, almost alive, reaching out into the air with their spikes and metal fingers. A carved bust of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, watches over the entrance from above and offers an invocation to the Classical tradition, while above her are Bates’s words ‘Free to All,’ an invocation to the personal mythology of the Library. One passes under Athena and enters an interstitial area between the front door and the actual lobby of the Library, a space now used – in a vivid example of the distancing power of physical space – to check patrons’ bags and packages for dangerous or suspicious objects.

For all of its appeals to high culture, the façade of the McKim Building offers some startlingly progressive and appealing features, reminding us that McKim himself was profoundly committed to the use of civic architecture as a vehicle for the improvement of urban society. Radiating out from the main entrance is a knee-high ledge, just the right size and shape for sitting, providing the public with a built-in, round-the-clock bench. The steps are also used for sitting, and many weary urbanites rest on them while waiting for the bus, while resting between errands or appointments, or while simply watching the world go by. McKim’s bench is also a favorite for those too tired or too intoxicated to go another step; one can often find people soundly asleep under the ‘honor roll’ of Western civilization, raising an interesting, if somewhat ironic, question: did McKim and the early promoters of the Boston Public Library believe that the urban society of which the Library was a part could, through the proper application of hortatory messages and the provision of a well-stocked public library, mold itself into the cultural image offered by the façade of the building?

The connection between architecture and public behavior is never an easy one to prove, but an analysis of the McKim façade can only lead one to conclude that both McKim and the Library Trustees firmly believed that design had the power to inspire, to shape, and to control. This attitude was echoed in publications of the time. “In the new building of the Boston Public Library there has been a definite and pronounced design to produce a work of art,” wrote an article in *The Forum*. “Such a structure has in itself undoubted educational value.”¹³⁶

The Front Lobby and Main Staircase

Once inside the main door of the McKim Building, the space narrows dramatically. In comparison to the wide expanse of the façade, the front lobby feels startlingly enclosed and dark, a tiled, vaulted area leading to a large staircase. The passage from the steps outside the door, through the ante-lobby, and then into the lobby itself provides a sense of journey, of movement through a series of increasingly interior spaces from the din of the outside world into the serenity of the library. Interestingly, the lobby of the McKim Building contains no books, in fact contains no real indication that the building is a library at all. What the lobby spaces do contain is a profusion of cultural images, coming at the visitor from almost every angle: the walls are decorated with statues and paintings of famous Bostonians, the floors are inlaid with bronze decorations of the symbols of the zodiac and the names of the founders of the Library, and the ceiling displays tiled decorations – done in a Roman floral pattern – around the names of prominent Boston intellectuals. If the façade of the McKim Building is a two-dimensional representation of the world beyond Boston, the lobby is a three-dimensional representation of the world of Boston.

What at first seems a puzzle – that McKim would waste interior space on rooms not directly associated with the storage and use of books – becomes clear: the lobby areas are designed to prepare the user for the experience of entering the Library, to put the patron into the appropriate frame of mind to receive and absorb the cultural lessons contained within and to respect not only the institution of the Library but also the society that produced it. “The sort of enlightenment that the library made its business described and assumed a process of change in those who came to read and study,” argues Promey. “The Boston Public Library . . . generated a set of social rituals, then, not merely in their architectural and artistic orchestration as privileged spaces apart, but also in their cultural identification as liminal space, as space in which transformation in the status of individuals was presumed to occur.”¹³⁷

The narrow dimness of the lobby propels the eyes and the feet of Library visitors towards the main staircase, a wide, marble stair that follows directly in the path from the front door. The staircase is lighted from above by a tall window, causing natural light to spill down into the stairwell and pull visitors, almost unconsciously, up the stairs. Again, McKim employs an upward motif – the patron must keep moving up, must keep searching, towards the light and towards enlightenment. “Read as Romantic symbols,” writes van Slyck, “[the building implies] that the benefits of culture are not

automatically open to everyone. Instead, the journey toward enlightenment requires conscious effort on the part of readers. Enlightenment is a struggle, but a struggle that redeems the uncultured and makes them worthy to receive culture's benefits."¹³⁸ The staircase itself is a sensual experience, with the white marble of the stairs, the yellowed marble of decorative lions, and the surrounding murals of Puvis de Chavannes depicting enlightenment through poetry, philosophy, history, and science. "It is quite within bounds to say that the staircase is unequalled in richness and magnificence by anything in the United States," reads the 1895 *Handbook of the New Public Library in Boston*. "It serves at once to convey to the visitor the true intention of the building – tells him, that is, that he is within a building which is none the less a palace for being the property of the people and not of a king."¹³⁹

Color and texture are everywhere, lighted by the window, and one can't help but feel propelled upward, from the nighttime of the lobby into the day of knowledge contained above. In this way, the passage from the doorway, through the lobby, and up the main staircase can be seen as a form of pilgrimage, a sense which is explicitly reinforced by the Chavannes murals: from the secular world outside, through the symbolic passage of the lobby, and upstairs into the world of revealed knowledge. This brings to mind Goodsell's idea of *degree of enclosure* – "a space that is strongly demarcated presents a clear definitional image" – for McKim clearly understood the importance of fully surrounding Library patrons with symbolism as they travel up to the reading areas. The highly enclosed nature of the McKim design gives him maximum control over the experience of using the Library.¹⁴⁰

The decision to require library patrons to travel up one floor to access the resources of a library is a very interesting one – a decision that would be repeated in the Carrere & Hastings design for the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue – because it delays the experience of reaching the books and provides time for the design of the building to influence the feelings and behavior of its visitors. Again, one can never really be sure how architecture and emotion interact, but anecdotal evidence supports the theory that the impact of the McKim lobby and stairwell is a powerful one, as does a 1926 piece from *The Boston Herald*, describing the almost reverential attitude of a group of Library visitors as they passed through McKim's lobby. "Polished by all passing feet, the zodiacal figures of the pavement distract most eyes from the groined ceiling, and its mosaics reminiscent of Venetian St. Mark's and its dim glories," reads the article. "Men and women move slowly up the great staircase, usually almost in silence. Most men go hat in hand."¹⁴¹ Just as the façade of the McKim

Building has the power to speak in different ways to different audiences, so does the design of the front lobby space and the staircase. The continued use of names as symbols of cultural achievement could be equally embracing or alienating, depending upon the visitor, just as the grandness of the staircase could be inspiring or intimidating. It is this dual power of the McKim design that makes it such a provocative example of the contradictions of 1890s Boston society.

Reading Facilities

As already described, McKim designed his library to house a system of closed bookstacks to which only library staff would have access. Such an arrangement requires immense spaces, hidden from public view, for the storage of books and other materials, as well as spaces within which patrons can request items, receive them, and then – if the items are ones that do not circulate outside of the building – read through them. A system of closed stacks has many logistical features appealing to librarians, including a high level of control over library items, but it also has a defining influence on the relationship between library patrons, reading material, and the institution of the library itself. Simple browsing is impossible in a closed-stack system, as is a search for similar volumes in the vicinity of a volume one has read and enjoyed. Furthermore, the fact that a system of closed stacks requires library patrons to request an item, have it reviewed by a librarian, and then publicly delivered would, one imagines, greatly reduce the chances that a patron might request a book that could be considered inappropriate, controversial, or suspicious. The choice of a system of closed stacks for the McKim Building, a system that continues to exist there today, therefore creates a mediated relationship between patrons and reading materials. In this way, the freedom promised by the façade of the building is tempered by the realities of the physical and institutional design within, realities that again point to an institutional conflict between access and control.

The interior design and configuration of the McKim Building is in large part determined by this method of storage and retrieval. Upon reaching the top of the main staircase, patrons move through “a processional sequence of spaces,”¹⁴² each representing one step in the process of requesting and receiving a book. Although uses of the various rooms have changed during the years since the Library opened, of particular interest today is the room immediately to the right of the top of the main staircase. A large space, paneled in carved dark wood, decorated with Edwin Austin Abbey’s mural cycle *The Quest of the Holy Grail* and reminiscent of an affluent domestic space from the late Middle Ages, the Abbey Room is now used to request items from many of the Library’s

collections. The Abbey Room is sparsely furnished, dominated on one side by a high desk – generally staffed by one or two librarians – and, behind the desk a window leading into the storage areas of the Library. One approaches the desk and submits call-slips – one for each requested item – which are then handed to staffers through the window in order to be filled.

Although the delivery system seems to work reasonably well, the combination of dark, somber interior, high desk, and inaccessible window into the riches of the Library leaves one feeling like a supplicant, granted access to the materials of the Library not because the Library was *built by the people* and thus belongs, by right, to the people, but because a librarian chooses to grant access. Although one should avoid making presumptions about how the book-delivery system would have appeared to patrons at the end of the nineteenth century, it is nevertheless a striking example of the way in which physical design and institutional organization come together to make a strong statement about the cultural agenda of the Library.

From the darkness of the Abbey Room one can pass directly into the magnificent brightness of Bates Hall, the main reading room and the grandest space in the McKim Building. Bates Hall runs almost the entire length of the front of the building, with tall windows overlooking Copley Square and a high, rounded coffered ceiling. Bates Hall “suggests rather the hall of a great Roman bath,” writes Whitehill, “with decorative elements of the Italian Renaissance superimposed.”¹⁴³ Bates Hall seems to function now much as it would have when the McKim Building opened, as a long, sunny space with rows of wooden tables and chairs for people to study and read. The walls of the Hall are surrounded by bookshelves containing reference texts, and each table has an English dictionary on it – chained to the leg of the table – but otherwise no books are to be seen. In a system of closed stacks, in which books are to be requested and delivered, a large reading room becomes a functional requirement. McKim elected to elevate the reading space to a thing of beauty, however; in Bates Hall, aesthetics and function come together to produce a great space. It is a chamber in which the mission of intellectual and personal uplift is embedded everywhere in the physical design, from the high ceilings to the hushed silence to the Classical allusions. Bates Hall is a secular temple – a temple to reading.

Spaces for Children

The McKim Building has been used solely as a research library for the past three decades, and as a

result many of the standard features of public libraries have long been absent from the building. As the education of children – education not only in reading, but also in socialization, manners, and respect for shared property – is one of the most important aspects of public library life, a brief mention of McKim’s original design for the children of Boston is worthwhile.

The original Boylston Street building had been of insufficient size to provide a separate space for children, but McKim was able to do so, creating the first facility exclusively for children in any public library in America. McKim located the Children’s Room within easy reach of the main staircase, and rumor has it that Library guards in the early decades of the McKim Building spent a good part of their time removing children from the lion sculptures adorning the staircase. Although the McKim Building today seems a highly formal structure, children were clearly an important part of its life as a general public library, as noted somewhat sourly by Henry James on a visit to Boston in the first years of the twentieth century. “The simplicity of the plan, the open doors and immediate accesses, admirable for a railway-station, the ubiquitous children,” wrote James, “*most irrepressible of little democrats of the democracy.*”¹⁴⁴

As a public institution designed, in part, to serve a large immigrant population, one can deduce from the design and ornamentation of McKim’s Children’s Room that one of the goals of the space was to introduce children to American history and American values. “On the wall hang four framed documents of almost unique interest – the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, the Articles of Confederation, and the Address to the King,” reads the description of the Children’s Room in the 1895 *Handbook of the New Public Library in Boston*, “all, of course, reprints of the originals, but followed by genuine autographs of the men who signed them, cut from letters and documents.”¹⁴⁵ Beyond simply educating children, the children’s rooms of early public libraries were designed, in part, to invite parents to become patrons of the library as well. “The library calls in the children, and gives them the English books they ask for,” reads a 1906 article titled *Many-Sided Interest: How the Library Promotes It*, “through them it attracts the parents; learns that the latter wish to read of their new country in their own tongue.”¹⁴⁶

The McKim Building as a whole can be understood as an exercise in acculturation and in the communication of cultural values, but this effort seems to have been made most explicit in the Children’s Room.



McKim's Copley Square library was thus designed to serve multiple purposes. Not only did it need to be a functional and efficient public facility, one that could provide services and spaces beyond what had been accommodated in the original Boylston Street building, but it also needed to use the power of physical design to communicate a variety of social and cultural messages. From an initial glance at the Italianate cube that is the Library, through a closer study of its highly ornamented façade – bearing the names of luminaries of Western culture – through entry into the lobby and up the main staircase, the experience of the McKim Building is one of mood-setting, of ambience, of introduction not only to the type of information one is likely to find inside the Library but also to the behavior and attitude expected of Library patrons. The Library is a place of seriousness and of contemplation, a place to absorb the knowledge defined and developed by the greats listed on the façade, the knowledge, by extension, on which Boston society was built.

As the book-delivery system makes clear, the messages of the McKim Building are more complex than a simple advertisement for high culture and knowledge. The use of closed bookstacks – a controversial design even in the 1890s – makes the McKim Building an exercise in mediated access to information, in the learning process controlled through physical and institutional design. For every way in which the McKim Building truly does realize Joshua Bates's ambition of a public library free to all, there are ways in which that freedom is curtailed or managed through the use of the art and architecture of uplift and inspiration, inspiration pre-determined by the cultural standards and expectations of elite Boston. Holmes's palace for the people is just that, an architectural palace given *to* the people, provided *for* the people, but the terms of the gift are complicated, problematic, and not always immediately evident.

PART IV: MCKIM: CONCLUSIONS

The Boston of Joshua Bates was a city beginning to grapple with transition; the Bostonians of the middle of the nineteenth century who saw the Back Bay as an opportunity to create a new Boston were reacting to unprecedented levels of immigration and cultural change in their city. These elite Bostonians were primarily interested in asserting their authority in matters of culture: art, knowledge, education. An expanded public library offered the means not only to achieve this goal but also to realize the progressive spirit of philanthropy that was a powerful part of nineteenth-century Boston

society. “There is always a little barrier between the brain-worker and the hand-worker. It should be slight,” argued the author of the 1902 essay *The Place of the Public Library in a City’s Life*. “It should not lead to misunderstandings. If the hand-workers discover that the library is their building and that in it they have a meeting ground common with them to all their fellow citizens, this will do much to promote good understanding and mutual good will.”¹⁴⁷

From this environment of cultural re-definition came the move of the Boston Public Library to Copley Square, and from it also came the basic dissonance that underlay the identity of the Library through much of its early history: an institution founded both to serve the needs of the elite, who wished to reinforce their own image of Boston society and protect it from instability, and the needs of the general public, who were understood to require better access to information in order to be more informed and industrious citizens.

Charles Follen McKim and his firm of McKim, Mead & White were hired by the Trustees of the Library in March of 1887 to design a new building for the Library, a building that would not only announce the presence of the Library as a new and worthy institutional occupant of Copley Square but would also provide a visual précis of the knowledge to be found within the building. McKim was chosen by the Trustees in part for his experience working in the neo-Classical style, a style which McKim, Mead & White would, during the three decades of their partnership, establish as the pre-eminent form of civic architecture in American cities. By selecting neo-Classicism for the Boston Public Library, the Trustees were making an explicit architectural and cultural claim about the place of the Library in the Western tradition, implicitly associating the Library with the individuals whose names would come to be carved on McKim’s façade. The McKim Building communicates a clear and easily legible message about the place of the Boston Public Library in Boston society, Euro-American culture, and the entire Western canon, all with the design of its exterior. This was the image that the Library Trustees wanted for the Library’s new building, a design the meaning of which they wished to be absorbed by Library patrons, both real and potential.

Since it opened on February 1st, 1895, the McKim Building of the Boston Public Library has been hailed almost universally as a masterpiece of civic design. The intricacy of the carving, the superiority of the stone, the symmetry of the design, the attention to color and texture and light, as well as the inclusion of significant works of art, all combine to produce a building that does truly feel like a palace, although it is an open and free public institution, dedicated to providing access to all.

“The exterior of [the] library is conceived and adorned in such a way that it can never be mistaken for a building of purely utilitarian purpose,” wrote the architecture critic M.G. Van Rensselaer. “Clearly it is a civic monument . . . and its builders rightly felt that a greater degree of sumptuousness would be appropriate within its walls, as expressing its erection by a populous and prosperous city, with a past enriched by intellectual achievement, and with fine ambitions for a still broader and more fertile future.”¹⁴⁸ McKim’s design is highly sophisticated, operating on multiple levels simultaneously, so that for every message it sends of openness, there is a second message of hierarchy and authority, privilege and restriction. The design guides patrons through an aesthetic experience designed to elicit certain emotions and behaviors – those of dignity, of seriousness, of respect for the institution and its founders and the knowledge that the Library has chosen to provide.

The McKim Building is many things at once: a handsome structure, an excellent public library, a significant urban and cultural institution, a mechanism for acculturation, and an architectural lesson in behavior and values. At the time it opened, moreover, it was a cultural achievement unrivaled in America, a public library dedicated to the polyglot mosaic that was the American city of the 1890s. “It Opens Today,” reads the simple headline of *The Boston Daily Globe*. “Public Library at Last Is the People’s.”¹⁴⁹

CHAPTER 4

A Monument to Function: Philip Johnson and the Boston Public Library

PART I: URBAN CONTEXT

Declining City, Changing Expectations

Boston of the 1890s was a city in profound transition. The Boston of the McKim Building was a city in which traditional social, political, and economic power was giving way in the face of new populations, and the city was being recreated, both physically and culturally, by the changes. It was an unsettled time, even an anxious time, but it was also a time in which new institutions – the Boston Public Library among them – were helping to redefine Boston for the twentieth century.

Half a century later, however, when the Boston Public Library first began to think seriously about expanding its Copley Square facilities, Boston was in many ways a diminished city. The end of the Second World War had brought an end to economic growth in New England – growth that had been on the decline since the 1930s – and Boston suffered from an aging infrastructure, a shrinking population, and the consequences of post-war transportation planning, which, though promising renewed prosperity for the downtown areas, in fact only abetted the suburban exodus.

“The steady drain of young people out of the central area had been further accelerated,” writes O’Conner in *Bibles, Brahmins, and Bosses*, “when a number of industries and electronics firms established a string of plants along Route 128 that drew an even greater number of middle-class families out into the suburbs.”¹⁵⁰ It was a time of urban retrenchment, in which politicians and civic leaders were grasping for new ideas and new projects to breathe life back into old urban centers. The addition to the Boston Public Library, planned in the mid-1960s and completed late in 1972, was born of this environment, an environment in which a genuine need for urban revival was coupled with an almost poignantly diminished sense that cities were valuable places.

In any number of categories, Boston of the post-war decades was in decline. A city which had seen its population increase without pause from 1790 until the 1930s, reaching more than 800,000 during the years of the Second World War, had fewer than 650,000 residents by the middle of the 1950s. The growth of suburban communities outside the city, fed not only by the buses and trolleys of public transportation but also by an expanding network of highways, depleted the city of much of its middle class population, leaving Boston, which had ranked third out of thirty cities in per capita income in 1929, to rank only twenty-second by 1959. Employers also left the city in the post-war

years, and Boston lost more than 15,000 manufacturing jobs between 1945 and 1960.¹⁵¹

Some of this shrinkage was due to the cessation of war-related activities – the port of Boston had experienced a resurgence during the Second World War, serving as an important base for the transfer of men and materials and the construction and repair of warships – but some was the result of a gradual evolution across America away from older cities and to new suburbs. Cities were seen as tired, congested and grimy, while the suburbs offered the freedom of single-family homes, private automobiles, and open land. Even the municipal government seemed to despair of the state of Boston in the post-war decades, described in retrospect by the Director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority as a city in trouble, “with a rotting waterfront, empty warehouses, moldering 19th century public buildings, and deteriorating triple deckers.”¹⁵² In an age before the rise of the historic preservation movement, the architectural and urbanistic legacy of the nineteenth century was no longer considered of value for post-war Boston.

Boston of the 1890s had been defined in part by the struggle between the traditional Yankee elite and the ascendant Irish population. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, the Yankees were no longer a major social force, having moved out of the city center and merged into the indistinct affluent suburban class, while the assimilated Irish had, in many ways, become the most powerful cultural group in Boston, controlling a good segment of local politics and business. The Irish had begun to assert their ethnic identity in the city that had once despised them. “Wealthy Irish Americans bankrolled immigration assistance efforts,” writes Dezell, “organized peace initiatives; funded Irish studies and cultural centers; launched economic exchanges.”¹⁵³ The Irish had supplanted the Yankees as the dominant cultural group in Boston, but their philanthropic interests were, in many cases, not in traditional institutions of high culture, such as the Boston Public Library. The citizens who made up the Board of Trustees of the Library during the years of the design of the Johnson addition represented no single social or ethnic group, no clearly defined set of shared values. By the middle of the twentieth century, therefore, the clear connection between the Library and the elite of Boston had become attenuated, leaving the Library without the values of a strong, homogeneous group of citizens from which to receive coherent guidance and direction.

Although the dynamic between the Irish and the Yankees had been transformed, Boston of the mid-twentieth century remained an immigrant city, and the post-war decades saw an influx of new

populations, including African-Americans from the rural south, Puerto Ricans in the 1950s and 1960s, and, by the 1970s, other groups from Latin America. But where nineteenth-century immigrants to Boston had found a growing, if small-minded, city, with opportunities for those able to work, twentieth-century immigrants found a city of limited possibilities and increasing geographic segregation. “The migration of large numbers of blacks began in earnest only after 1950, with Boston’s black population increasing from 5 percent to 16 percent by 1970,” writes Jack Tager, “Throughout this period . . . income levels in comparison to whites actually fell. . . Besides income deprivation from menial labor positions, blacks, along with poor whites, found their housing conditions worsened under the impact of urban renewal.”¹⁵⁴ Boston of the 1950s and 1960s – the Boston of Mayors Hynes and Collins – was a city trying to reinvent itself, trying to shake off the inertia of the post-war decline by attracting the middle class to the city. In this context, there was limited place for new immigrants and no progressive movement, as there had been in nineteenth century, to create and sustain institutions of assimilation and acculturation. Just as the 1890s had been a period of racial and ethnic tension, in which new immigrant groups challenged existing social structures in an effort to secure a place for themselves, so were the 1950s and 1960s. Where the Irish of the nineteenth century had gradually been able to assume sufficient economic and political power to rise out of poverty and oppression, minority groups became trapped in mid-twentieth-century Boston, without a clear route into established society.

Like the city as a whole, the Boston Public Library felt the need to reinvent itself in the post-war decades, to modify both its physical presence and its programmatic offerings to better respond to the needs of the changing city. Although still handsome, the McKim Building was no longer as commodious as it had once been, leaving the staff to manage an increasingly cramped and uncomfortable facility. The collections of the Library had greatly expanded in the more than fifty years since McKim created his design, forcing many volumes to be kept in storage – “often in unsatisfactory and off-premises quarters, or otherwise not readily accessible”¹⁵⁵ – reducing the speed with which patrons could have access to books. Also, many new and specialized departments had been added to the Library during the years that the McKim Building had been in use, requiring awkward modifications to the interior configuration and the sub-division of existing spaces. These alterations had, in some cases, impinged upon the areas reserved for the use of readers, reducing the amount of available reading space and inconveniencing both patrons and librarians. “The congestion is serious,” reads a pamphlet written in 1953-1954 to celebrate the centennial anniversary

of the founding of the Library, “The need for more open shelves, better seating arrangements, and facilities for exhibits is urgent.”¹⁵⁶

In addition to space constraints, by the 1950s the McKim Building was also suffering from significant structural problems. Built on the unstable filled land of the Back Bay, the building had first experienced troubles with its foundation in the late-1920s, when it was discovered that shifting levels of water around the wooden piles upon which the building had been built were putting excessive strain on the granite blocks that made up the basement of the Library. “In 1929, the same year in which the financial foundation of the United States cracked open,” wrote David McCord in *Reflections on the Centennial Anniversary of the Boston Public Library*, “there appeared the first cracks in the foundation blocks of the Library.”¹⁵⁷ These problems were solved with piecemeal patching and adjustments, but a sense remained that the McKim Building was no longer as solid or reliable as it had once been. Furthermore, the interior of the building had also begun to decay, leaving sections of the storage areas unsafe or unusable. Rumor has it that a young staffer once fell through a section of rotting floorboards, requiring an entire area of the stacks to be closed off, thereby eliminating access to the books held there. The Library, chronically short of funds for proper maintenance, was also beginning to show the age of its interior décor; peeling paint, inadequate lighting, and insufficient furniture had become common problems by the middle of the century. Although the McKim Building was still the great pride of the Boston Public Library, it was also becoming a significant constraint on the growth and efficiency of the Library.

In ways other than strictly physical, moreover, the McKim Building was causing the Library to become out of date. The expectations for public libraries began to change in the years after the Second World War, with newer libraries no longer offering their patrons simply books, newspapers, and other reading materials, but also access to a range of different media and activities. Technology was changing, making new kinds of materials available for general consumption. “For at least 30 years,” wrote Francis Moloney, Assistant Director of the Library, in a 1964 opinion piece for a Boston newspaper, “the physical limitations of the Central Library building have hampered on-going library operations and have prevented the introduction of new and improved services that have become familiar in other cities.”¹⁵⁸ Boston, which had always been in the vanguard of providing modern library services to its patrons, was now faced with the prospect of being held prisoner by its landmark building, a building that prevented it from easily offering new services. “Special services, especially those which have been developed since the Central Library opened, are handicapped by

cramped quarters. These include services to young adults, to adult groups who use the Library more and more for leisure-time activities, to business and industry, to users of audio-visual materials (films and recordings), the photographic reproduction services, the hospital library service, the bookmobile library services and a host of other library services.”¹⁵⁹ In these ways and others, the McKim Building was becoming physically unsatisfactory, no longer able to house the Library’s vast collections, difficult to modify for the provision of new services, and in a state of gradual decay.

The pressure to provide new and more contemporary services came not just from within the Library itself, but also from local communities around Boston. Felt most acutely in struggles over the proper administration of neighborhood branch libraries, grassroots efforts to alter the number and type of Library activities also influenced the character of the central library in Copley Square. Of particular importance was the growing number of local high school students using the Library for research and homework – in response, perhaps, to a reduction in the quality of in-school libraries – a group that put new demands on both the physical spaces of the Library and the work of the librarians. As an institution long-associated with the mission of public education, the Library took its responsibility to young students seriously and saw their needs as a driving force behind the desire to expand the library. “The projected addition,” wrote Moloney, “will give the library an opportunity . . . to meet the growing demand for library service from students.”¹⁶⁰ City residents were also looking to their Library to offer book groups, story hours, play groups, classes in English, in adult literacy, in tax preparation – a whole range of services that had not been anticipated or even considered in the design of the McKim Building. The city was changing, available technologies were changing, and the Boston Public Library needed to find a way to enlarge its physical space in order to maintain its tradition of providing current, valuable library services.

Modernizing the Urban Landscape

The Back Bay of the mid-twentieth century retained much of the genteel appearance that it had had in the mid-nineteenth century, but transformation had come there as well. Changing lifestyles coupled with declining urban wealth meant that many of the grand houses that had been built to serve single families with servants had been divided into flats designed for individuals or couples, and some buildings had been divided and sub-divided so many times as to produce tiny, peculiarly-shaped apartments. Many buildings, particularly in the blocks closer to Kenmore Square and the Fenway, had been bought in the 1960s for dormitory space by area educational institutions and

“even many of the handsome brownstone mansions in the fashionable Back Bay section were being transformed into roominghouses and dormitories for local colleges.”¹⁶¹ Newbury Street and the other commercial areas of the Back Bay were still elegant – if a little less so than in the nineteenth century – and still attracted expensive, tony shops, but the overall neighborhood had changed, becoming less exclusive and more transient.

The Back Bay had begun to reclaim some of its early cachet by the first years of the 1970s, with the transition of several residential buildings to condominium ownership, but it remained a significantly more diverse area than it had been in the late nineteenth century. In this way, the community from which the nineteenth-century Library had drawn its most immediate support was no longer an isolated enclave of wealthy and established Boston.

Although still one of the pre-eminent cultural and institutional areas of the city, Copley Square itself had evolved in the half-century since the McKim Building had opened. The Museum of Fine Arts had been replaced by the Copley Plaza Hotel in 1912 – the museum having moved up Huntington Avenue in the early part of the century – although the other major buildings remained much as they had been when McKim first considered his plans for the Library. Trinity Church was still one of the most significant religious institutions in Boston, still popular with the traditional elite of the city, and the Copley Plaza Hotel had become an attraction for wealthy and well-known travelers. The traffic patterns through Copley Square had changed somewhat, and the Square itself had been landscaped and redesigned at various times – as it would continue to be into the future – but the area remained prominent and busy.

Moreover, some businesses that had traditionally been located in the downtown area, particularly insurance companies, had moved into the streets neighboring Copley Square. Rather than diminishing the stature of the Library, these new developments were understood to enhance it. “An increasing concentration of business in the Back Bay area is tending to make the Central Library more important and increase the demands upon it,” reads a 1954 pamphlet on the future of the Library.¹⁶²

Of greatest significance for the future use and appearance of the Copley Square area – and, indeed, for the future of the expansion of the Library – was the proposal to redevelop the Boston & Albany railroad yards along Boylston Street into a modernist, multi-use project, incorporating residential,

retail, and commercial space in a single unified design.* The project, which would come to be known as the Prudential Center, was already in the offing in the mid-1950s when the Library first began to consider seriously the possibility of expansion. As eventually realized in the 1960s, the Prudential Center radically transformed the area just to the west of the Library, combining multiple mid-rise residential towers with a single high-rise commercial tower, all surrounded by an open-air pedestrian mall. The project also included significant open spaces, although the raised and exposed design ultimately limited the appeal of the walkways for most pedestrians.

An early effort at a large-scale, mixed-use development, the Prudential project was a product of post-war attitudes about the importance of newness, of modernity, and particularly of stimulating commercial activity in the city. Although architecturally frumpy by the standards of today, the Prudential development was welcomed by many at the time as one of the first major commercial developments to be undertaken in Boston in decades, and one with the potential to generate broad-based community improvement. “The acquisition by the Prudential Insurance Company of the Boston and Albany train yards will not only change the skyline but completely alter the insular character of the Back Bay,” wrote Whitehill, “[and] one may hopefully anticipate that the contagion of improvement may redeem many of the lost opportunities of Huntington and Massachusetts Avenues, and some of the drearier stretches between them and the Fenway.”¹⁶³ When the Boston Public Library selected Philip Johnson to design an addition to the McKim Building, the presence of the new Prudential complex was very much on his mind as he went to work.¹⁶⁴

The Mission of the Boston Public Library, 100 Years After Joshua Bates

Despite the realities of an aging building and a changing city, the stated mission of the Boston Public Library remained largely consistent during the more than half-century between the opening of the McKim Building and the decision to expand. The population of the city might have changed, the resources available to librarians might have changed, but at its core the Library was still an institution dedicated to improving the lives of individuals through the provision of free access to books. In reporting on a celebratory dinner held to mark the 1953 centennial of the Library, *The Herald-Traveler* noted that one speaker, “reminded that public libraries help bring unity from the ‘chaos’ of our age and serve as a source of uplift and enlightenment to people of all ages.”¹⁶⁵ In a document prepared

*Also of importance for Copley Square, although somewhat after the period discussed here, was the construction of I.M. Pei’s John Hancock Building (1972-1975).

by the Centennial Commission, the Library laid out its own understanding of its mission:

*Aid and encourage all, irrespective of age, to enjoy more fully their leisure, enrich their lives, and gain full access to the wonderful world of books, pictures, and music;
Create and maintain, in conjunction with other agencies of the City and the Commonwealth, appreciation and understanding of democracy and the ideals of a free and orderly society.*¹⁶⁶

This rhetoric, so similar to what might have been voiced at the opening of the McKim Building or even that of the original Boylston Street building, clearly indicates that the Library was still convinced of the on-going relevance and power of its historic mission.

If the core mission of the Library remained unchanged, the aspirations for the physical and architectural expression of the mission had changed dramatically between the time of McKim and the time of Johnson. Although concerned that his building be efficient and usable, McKim and the Library Trustees of the late nineteenth century put great emphasis on the aesthetics of the building, an emphasis that was significantly diminished by the middle of the twentieth century. For McKim, the aesthetic and the functional were inseparably linked precisely because he conceived of the function of the building as being, in part, the communication of messages of cultural and intellectual inspiration. By the post-war decades, however, in a city of diminished confidence and aspirations, the vision for the addition to the Library was one in which the mission could be realized simply through the provision of modern, efficient, and professional library services, with grand architecture as a secondary priority. “You ought to have two [buildings] that are each fine and in relation to each other,” read the minutes of the Library sub-committee on buildings from June of 1963, “but certainly that the objective of function would receive a very much higher level of consideration than it did in the construction of [the McKim] building.”¹⁶⁷

The Boston Public Library imagined its new addition as a place for the efficient storage and distribution of books, with a physical design that would somehow bridge the decades between the McKim Building and the new Prudential Center and provide the Library with a good, solid, workable building. In this way, the mission of the Library had in fact changed, had implicitly rejected the philosophy of the design of the McKim Building and with it the notion that beautiful, uplifting architecture offered as many educational lessons as did the contents of books. “The future extension must also be sufficiently functional and flexible to accommodate the library for many decades to come,” wrote Whitehill. “The Boston Public Library has twice in its history moved into fine new buildings that did not work; it does not propose to do so a third time.”¹⁶⁸ Philip Johnson, a

prominent architect and architectural critic known for his devotion to ideological adaptability, was retained in 1963 to manage the challenge of designing an addition to the Boston Public Library at a time when the leaders of the Library themselves had no clear vision for what an urban public library should look like, other than to emphasize that it should not sacrifice function for art – as, the implication went, McKim and the early Trustees had opted to do. The addition Johnson produced in response to this mandate would prioritize function but be architecturally and culturally inscrutable, lacking explicit messages but still symbolic of cultural attitudes, and – perhaps most importantly – devoid of any expressed sense of the pleasures and benefits of reading and learning.

PART II: DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The Hiring of Philip Johnson

The Trustees of the Boston Public Library had begun to seriously consider the possibility of expanding the McKim Building as early as 1953-1954, when the Library celebrated its centennial. The centennial was marked with a series of lectures, galas, and, particularly, publications, many of which mention the need for a new and different space for the Library. One can assume that the discussions about the inadequacies of the McKim structure must have begun prior to the middle of the 1950s, given that a partial renovation of the McKim Building was already underway by the time of the centennial. The renovation was only a temporary measure, however, designed to bring a modicum of modernity to the Library. “[The Library] installed comfortable surroundings for book browsers. . . . It added headphone installation so that book enthusiasts, if they wish, can combine music with their reading and not disturb others,” wrote *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1954. “In addition, the library authorities have modernized their book-charging facilities . . . placing it, moreover, on the ground floor so as to be of even greater convenience to the public.”¹⁶⁹ The emphasis of these short-term innovations was strictly on convenience and usability.

The Library faced a significant problem in considering a major expansion: cost. The 1950s and 1960s were not a good time for the municipal coffers, and the city government was unable to underwrite the entirety of a major new library facility. As early as the centennial celebrations, the Library administration had launched a campaign to appeal for private donations to support an expansion project, arguing that the residents of Boston, in effect, owed the Library their contributions. “The Centenary of the Boston Public Library is an occasion which every grateful

citizen should wish to observe. In what way can it better be celebrated than by making sure that the Library's usefulness will be fully and appropriately advanced?" reads *Building a Great Future Upon a Glorious Past*, a 1953 Library-sponsored publication. "For the first time, in its 100 years of usefulness, the Boston Public Library turns to the great public it has served so well and asks for funds – to enable it to promote more effectively the education of the people and the preservation of order and liberty."¹⁷⁰ Although the Library may never have before directly asked the public for financial assistance, it has been noted that the connection between private philanthropy and the Library is a strong and long-established one, going back to the early days of the public library movement in Boston. By drawing so clear a connection between private donations and the maintenance of public order, the Library was boldly asserting itself both as a public institution with strong ties to individual wealth and a public institution capable of preserving social stability. This would be a powerful message in any context, but particularly in the environment of post-war urban decline. Even if the Boston Public Library had lost its guiding Yankee hand, appeals of this nature indicate that it must have retained a potent pull on the educated elite of Boston.

The campaign to raise funds for the expansion of the Library would have been a slow one, had it not been for a significant contribution from John Deferrari, a first-generation Italian-American who began his career in the 1880s at the age of thirteen as a fruit-seller on the streets of the North End. Within a few years Deferrari moved his cart to the more lucrative neighborhood of Boylston Street, where he eventually established a fruit stand near the original building of the Boston Public Library. "The new location enabled John Deferrari to visit the Public Library next door regularly," writes Whitehill, "and devour books on real estate, law, business, economics, and statistics."¹⁷¹ Deferrari abandoned his fruit stand at the age of 28, going on to earn a fortune as a private investor in securities and real estate. "He paid cash for securities over the counter; had no office more private than the waiting rooms of railway stations; kept his files in his coat pockets secured by safety pins; and sought no advice more personal than the books of the Boston Public Library . . . could give."¹⁷² Upon reaching his later years 1940s, Deferrari made a gift of \$2 million to the Boston Public Library in recognition of the importance of the Library in his life and financial success.

Although only one, rather eccentric individual, Deferrari is a fascinating example of the power of the Library. Born poor in a nineteenth-century working-class immigrant neighborhood, Deferrari used the Library to make a life for himself that would have been admired by even the most high-minded of Boston Yankees. In fact, a 1962 article in *The Christian Science Monitor* announcing the use of

Deferrari's gift for the planned expansion of the Library noted that the only other gift of comparable size came from a trust left by the heirs of Josiah Benton, one of the first promoters of the Library.¹⁷³ Deferrari can be understood as an embodiment of the vision for the Boston Public Library first espoused by Joshua Bates, the vision of working-class immigrants elevated by their access to and use of the Library.

With sufficient funds in hand to begin the process of planning for the addition, the Library's Trustees turned to a panel of noted architects, critics, academics, and urban planners to consider the question of who should be chosen to design the addition to the McKim Building. Although frustrated with the interior workings of the McKim Building, the Trustees were acutely aware of its architectural and cultural significance and felt a heavy responsibility in selecting an architect to design the new structure. Rather than use an open competition to choose the designer, the Library looked to the 'nominating panel' – which included, among others, Douglas Haskell, editor of *Architectural Forum*; August Hecksher, art commissioner for New York City; and Martin Meyerson, acting dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design* – to propose a small number of possible architects. Of the fifty firms considered by the nominating panel, five were selected for review by the Trustees. Of those five firms, Philip Johnson Associates of New York City was chosen in 1963 for the job.

Three times in its history has the Boston Public Library hired an architect to design and build a new structure for its collections; on none of these occasions has the Library used a formal, open competition to select a final architect. Furthermore, of the three times that the Library has hired architects, they have twice been from New York City, despite vocal complaints during the hiring of McKim that a Boston architect would have been more appropriate for the project. One shouldn't read too much into these similarities, other than to say that they demonstrate both a certain level of insularity – a comfort using a selection mechanism more contained than an open competition – and a commitment to hiring the architect perceived as the best for the job, regardless of whether that person is a Bostonian. The unpredictability of an open competition was clearly of concern to the Trustees during the process of selecting an architect for the addition, as recorded in the minutes of the sub-committee on buildings. “[T]here was a problem if a competition was held,” read the

*The remaining three members of the selection panel were Bartlett H. Hayes Jr., director of the Addison Gallery of American Art; G. Holmes Perkins, dean of the Department of Architecture of the University of Pennsylvania; and

minutes from June 14, 1963, “in that there would enter some people who were wilder in their design that (*sic*) the Trustees would want. Further, that an architect is bound to be much more in love with his design that has won and will not be amenable to change in his design.”¹⁷⁴

Throughout the architectural history of the Boston Public Library, therefore, it seems that the Library Trustees have been interested in maintaining a degree of institutional control over the artistic process of design. Moreover, the choices of McKim and Johnson indicate that the Trustees, both in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth, wanted a famous architect with a national, if not international, reputation to design for them. The Boston Public Library may be a local institution, but it has always had larger aspirations.

The Career of Philip Johnson

In selecting Philip Johnson to design the addition, the Trustees chose an architect who was to become one of the most prolific, and most controversial, of the twentieth century. While McKim concentrated much of his career on working in variations of traditional neo-Classical design, Johnson has experimented with multiple styles and ideologies, from the early modernism of Mies van der Rohe, a mentor, to the post-modernism of the 1980s. Johnson, now in his nineties, has been a force in the fields of architecture and design for much of his career, through his own architectural work, his writings, and through the mentoring and promotion of younger architects. Beginning his public career in the 1930s as the Director of the Museum of Modern Art, Johnson first became famous for co-authoring, with Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the catalog for a groundbreaking 1932 exhibition on the International Style. Johnson then trained in architecture at Harvard University in the early 1940s, studying there with Walter Gropius, and has worked as an architect, generally in a series of partnerships, ever since. In addition to his work with libraries – he designed Bobst Library for New York University (1973) at the same time that the addition in Boston was underway – Johnson has designed museums, corporate headquarters, performance halls, and university buildings.

With a career so long and varied, it is very difficult to characterize Johnson’s style, other than to say that he works within the general frameworks of modernism. Johnson himself has rejected any efforts to define his aesthetic, arguing instead that modernism is infinitely flexible and that “style is

Christopher Tunnard, professor of city planning at Yale University. Assisting the panel was John E. Burchard, dean of

not a set of rules or shackles, as some of my colleagues seem to think. A style is a climate in which to operate, a springboard to leap further into the air.”¹⁷⁵ This is a very different architectural orientation from that of McKim, who was almost dogmatic in his conviction of the power of particular architectural forms to improve public life. The early modernism of Gropius, and even that of Mies, had a strongly progressive, socially-oriented character, but much of that character had dissipated from the field by the time Johnson was retained by the Boston Public Library. Rather, Johnson believed that architecture – instead of being a moral, enlightening influence – is characterized by its power to entertain and to entice. While speaking in the early 1970s, during the final construction of the Boston Public Library, about his design for a community of subsidized apartments, Johnson responded heatedly to a question about the reforming power of architecture: “Reactionary! I never improved anyone. To entertain, yes. Not to improve.”¹⁷⁶ Although the McKim Building can surely entertain, it is serious entertainment, and one in the service of the higher mission of enlightenment and uplift. The transition, therefore, from an architect who believed in the inspirational influence of architecture to an architect who believed in architecture as entertainment – even if that capacity was to take the form of the functional provision of reading material – was a major one for the Boston Public Library to decide to make.

Despite his advocacy of architecture as entertainment, Johnson has not been unaware of the political and cultural power of buildings. “Johnson is neither naïve about architecture’s political and social role,” writes Jeffrey Kipnis in *Philip Johnson Recent Work*, “nor disingenuous about design’s capacity to engineer spiritual, ideological and theoretical effects.”¹⁷⁷ The Johnson who was hired to design the addition for the Boston Public Library was then in a monumentalist phase of his career, creating buildings of great mass and weight. Monumentalism is a highly contested movement in the field of twentieth-century architecture, sometimes controversially associated with totalitarian and fascist political regimes. Nevertheless, in the 1960s and 1970s Johnson designed structures of enormous size and scale, championing them as buildings that could supercede fleeting trends and styles to become architecture with lasting cultural power. “If you leave out that desire for immortality, you just get cheap design, or the diagonal line that is ‘in’ this year,” argued Johnson in 1973, “rather than a sense of a monument.”¹⁷⁸

Several years after he completed the plans for the Library, however, Johnson voiced doubt about his

the School of Humanities and Social Science at M.I.T., as a general consultant.

choice of design, noting that, “[The Library is] my most controversial building because it’s the most enormous, I mean, out of scale. It’s the most small-making, makes people look small. It’s not a human building.”¹⁷⁹ This is a trenchant analysis of the addition, a structure which expresses nothing so much as brute force and which looms over the street in such a way as to greatly reduce the importance of its patrons relative to the mass of the structure itself. The Johnson design for the addition to the Boston Public Library is a product of this particular period in his career, but one is left to wonder whether the Trustees of the Library – who felt that the McKim Building needed a monument to stand beside it – or even Johnson himself intended the addition to be so out of scale with its neighboring structures.

McKim was an architect who designed buildings to become parts of cities; Johnson has generally designed buildings to stand alone, particularly his monumental buildings, without clear relationship to the urban fabric of which they are a part. In his writings and speeches, he rarely speaks of the importance of urban planning as a complement to his own architecture, and has even argued, during the period that he was designing for the Boston Public Library, that modernism as a movement has made cities uglier than they had been before.¹⁸⁰ It is difficult to gauge Johnson’s feelings about cities, or about the proper design and function of cities, because he seems to speak so little about them. One can safely argue, however, that the middle of the twentieth century was a time in which few people were optimistic about the power of the American city to transform both individuals and society in the way that the partners of McKim, Mead & White had been, and that that lack of optimism was reflected in much of the architecture of the period, including that of Philip Johnson.

A crucial component of Johnson’s work has been in defining the proper role, if any, of ornament in modern architecture. For McKim, much of the force of a building, particularly a civic building, came in the use of ornament as a means to give a building identity, legibility, and a voice for the expression of its purpose. The early modernists rejected nineteenth-century styles of ornament as excessive and artistically and culturally outmoded, arguing instead that buildings could be given character through their materials, through the joining of elements, and through the aesthetic possibilities provided by new building technologies. In many ways, the denial of conventional styles of ornamentation was what made modernism such a dramatic break from pre-modernist styles; it has certainly become its defining characteristic in the second half of the twentieth century. Although by the 1960s Johnson was no longer a traditional modernist, his basic subscription to the tenets of modernism all but pre-determined that his addition to the Boston Public Library would be

spare and unornamented compared to the elaborately detailed façade of the McKim Building. And, indeed, critics later noted this difference in the two buildings, arguing that “where the addition differs from the 1895 building is in the grain of its detail. The architects felt that such a delicately ornamented façade was no longer affordable or appropriate to the long-span structural systems of modern construction.”¹⁸¹ In choosing Johnson, a noted modernist, therefore, to design the addition to the Library, the Trustees implicitly determined a building significantly different from that of the McKim structure in regard to ornament.

Johnson and the Problem of the Addition

When Philip Johnson was retained, he was handed a distinctly challenging task, more difficult in some ways than McKim’s original assignment. Had the Library simply decided to move out of Copley Square, as the Museum of Fine Arts had done at the beginning of the century, Johnson could have had free rein to design an entirely new building in his own style and to suit his own ideas. As it was, Johnson was required to design an addition for an existing building, a nineteenth-century landmark of a very distinctive style – a style no longer in vogue at the time that Johnson was working – designed by a famous architect for a well-known site. “The addition will have to live with McKim’s renaissance palace next to and connected organically and functionally with it,” reads a newspaper article from 1963.¹⁸² Even a man of great self-confidence, as Johnson surely was, would have found this a daunting assignment.

The addition planned by the Boston Public Library was unusual for a number of reasons. First, where additions are often smaller than the buildings to which they are attached, the Johnson structure was to be of virtually the same size as the McKim Building, obscuring the hierarchy of *original* and *addition*. Second, as the Johnson structure was to fill out the back-half of the block of Boylston Street between Dartmouth and Exeter Streets, the addition would be essentially the same shape as the McKim Building, again confusing the natural hierarchy of the two facilities. Third, the Library administration had determined in advance that the new addition would serve as the general circulating library, with the McKim Building modified for research purposes only, meaning that the addition – the structure that, by architectural right, should be the subsidiary one – would become the focus of most library activity. Finally, the addition would house the new main entrance to the Library, through which most patrons would access the Library facilities. In these ways, the addition of the Johnson structure would fundamentally re-orient the public perception of the Boston Public

Library away from the original McKim Building with its elaborately designed experience of entrance and toward the new, modernist structure. The record indicates that the Trustees wrestled with these issues prior to hiring Johnson, wondering whether “this addition was to be a building subordinate to, equal to, or greater than the present building.”¹⁸³ This question remained largely unanswered at the time that Johnson received the commission, with the Trustees having decided that “it would have to be worked out with the architect.”¹⁸⁴

To grapple with the design challenges of creating an addition to the McKim Building, Johnson would have had available to him contemporary theories on the proper role and appearance of an addition to an historic structure. With the preservation movement beginning to take hold, particularly in older American cities, questions of the appropriate treatment of historic buildings had come up for consideration in the fields of architecture and urban planning. “When Philip Johnson was asked, in the late 1960s, to design a major addition to McKim, Mead & White’s great 1895 Boston Public Library, architects in the United States and elsewhere were struggling with issues like contextualism, postmodernism, and historic preservation – most of them having to do with questions of how to design a new building next to a bona fide historic landmark,” writes Peter Blake in *Philip Johnson*. “There seemed to be only three possible ways of approaching a problem of that sort: you could either build an extension in the same style as that employed by the architects of the original landmark; or you could ignore the historic precedent and design and build something that was entirely of our time, and make that addition as good a job as the architects of the original landmark had made theirs; or you could simply do a workmanlike addition that would look as if the addition had been put up by the local Department of Sanitation.”¹⁸⁵ The third route was clearly not one that Johnson’s talent, prestige, or ego would allow him to take, but both of the other two posed significant problems: the first because it would have betrayed Johnson’s modernist training and philosophy and the second because the Trustees of the Library were unlikely to allow a design with the potential to diminish the McKim Building. How then could Johnson proceed in a way that would be true both to himself and to the legacy of McKim?

Prior to the construction of the addition, Johnson went on the record in several interviews with the Boston press to explain his design theory for the addition and to testify to his admiration and respect for the McKim Building. Based on his statements, one can assume that he felt pressure to assert early on that he would do nothing in his new structure to threaten the artistic or architectural integrity of the McKim Building, nor would he try to over-shadow it. “I believe [the McKim

Building] to be one of the finest buildings of the 19th century. . . . [N]ow my task is to honor that building, to pay it obeisance, so to speak,” argued Johnson in a 1963 interview with a Boston newspaper. “The roof of my addition will be flat, and it will not rise above the cornice of the present building. The materials of the cornice of the present construction will be the same. The architectural style, of course, will not; the architecture will be different. But it won’t scream; its keynote will be modesty.”¹⁸⁶ Johnson repeated similar sentiments in other interviews and articles, but he also acknowledged that the assignment of reconciling the design of the McKim Building with the prevailing modernist aesthetic of the 1960s was a tricky one, “the most difficult design problem in the United States, for the simple reason that the new structure is touching one of the monuments in architectural history.”¹⁸⁷ It is also interesting to note that, while Johnson did maintain the cornice line of the McKim Building, the roof of the addition is not flat and the materials of the Johnson cornice are only partly the same as those in McKim’s structure.

After the addition had been completed and time had elapsed, Johnson expressed some uncharacteristic uncertainty about some of the design choices he had made in his plans for the Library addition. Arguing both that he had moved too far from the McKim design and that he had not moved far enough, Johnson explained his thinking in the following passage from *Philip Johnson: The Architect in His Own Words*:

Interviewer: The contextualism isn’t complete.

Johnson: Yes, incomplete. I elbowed the scale entirely out. So I did insult the original in a way. I should have kept the scale and nothing else. . . .

Interviewer: If you were building it today, would you feel compelled to use the same forms and scale of the older building?

Johnson: Well, I’d be more like McKim, just run the same arcades along the sides.

Interviewer: You would do that?

Johnson: Well, I wouldn’t do it at all. But at the same time, I think that was the right kind of compromise. I was doing a modern building. . . . [W]e have to do a modern scale. And it is ‘out of keeping,’ that’s right.¹⁸⁸

Johnson and the Design Philosophy Behind the Addition to the Boston Public Library

The Library Trustees who hired McKim were convinced of the appropriateness of his neo-Classical style, but they had little sense for the proper configuration of the interior of a library building. The Trustees who hired Johnson, conversely, had few ideas to offer about the architectural design of the building, but they were confident in their belief that the internal workings of the addition had to serve several specific functional purposes and that they had to do so efficiently, comfortably, and

well. The new structure needed to hold the general circulating collection of the Library – estimated at 750,000 volumes shortly after the Johnson addition opened in 1972 – in a manner that would be easily accessible to the public, and it had to provide individual spaces for the many new services and collections of the Library.¹⁸⁹ The Library administration yearned for a new and modern building, one that would eliminate many of the inconveniences of the McKim design. A Boston newspaper quoted Milton Lord, Library Director during the early stages of the planning for the addition, as stating, “We are determined that the new section will be completely functional. . . . [T]he present structure is monumental, Classical, and is built like an Italian palace, but from an operational point of view it really is not designed for library operations.”¹⁹⁰

The emphasis on function was not simply for the benefit of Library staff or the internal workings of the Library. It was also to better serve Library patrons, by offering a modern, appealing environment for browsing and reading. “The building will be planned for the convenience of readers,” declares the Moloney article.¹⁹¹ While the McKim Building, with its cramped spaces, peeling paint, and inadequate ventilation, had no doubt become less than pleasant for its users, the emphasis on patron comfort also seems to suggest a certain concern on the part of the Library administration that the Library had to work harder to attract users in the 1960s – by which point television had become the dominant form of popular entertainment – than it had had to in the 1890s. The addition was seen as an opportunity not only to better serve the existing patrons of the Library but also potentially to attract new ones, to reassert the importance of the Library in Boston civic life. “The new building is to house those functions that are most used by the public. This part of the library should offer itself generously and actively invite passer-by to avail himself of this rewarding amenity,” wrote Stanford Anderson in a 1967 article for *The Boston Globe*. “This sense of openness and public engagement needs special emphasis in order to attract the great majority of the users directly to the lending facility on Boylston Street.”¹⁹²

The addition to the Library was important not only for reviving the internal life of the Library, allowing it to provide new and better services to its patrons, but also for the economic and cultural life of the city as a whole. Just as the McKim library had been hailed as a major accomplishment in furthering the vision of an educated and industrious populace, so the Johnson addition was regarded as an important step in rejuvenating the sagging fortunes of Boston. “The goal, simply, is to breathe back life into decaying sectors of the City,” announced Mayor Kevin White at the inauguration of the Johnson wing. “It is a goal steeped in an awareness that Boston is an old City, but a City

completely desirous of discovering anew its legacy; a City capable of meeting the challenges of the future; a City with a need to meld the old Boston with the new. . . . It is a sign of new life and vitality.”¹⁹³ Thus, the Johnson addition was not simply a means for providing additional space for the Library, not simply a means for encouraging the residents of Boston to read more, but a symbol of intellectual and cultural renewal in a city climbing out of a long period of decline. The Johnson addition to the Library was greeted as an indication that Boston, just a few years from the American Bicentennial, was a city ready to reclaim its literary and cultural traditions.

Book Storage and Reading Spaces

A particularly important element of the internal design of the addition was the possible ways in which books could be shelved to provide patrons with freer and easier access than they had in the McKim Building. Although the McKim design had been modified somewhat to make available a limited number of volumes on open shelves, the vast majority of the collection was still kept in restricted access, available only through the traditional system of book distribution. From the beginning of the planning for the addition, the Trustees emphasized the necessity of placing the bulk of the collection in public view and open to public access, a method of book storage that had recently been successfully implemented, with some fanfare, at Harvard University’s undergraduate Lamont Library. Open stacks seemed to offer modernity and smooth efficiency. “Facilities for use of the Library’s resources do not meet modern standards,” reads a Library-sponsored pamphlet from 1954. “Lack of ample open shelves restricts ready access to books and reduces the Library’s usefulness.”¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, open stacks offered an opportunity to democratize the Library, to dispel the lingering scent of elitism and hierarchy that seemed to hang over the McKim design. “Not only does the Central Library lack useful space,” argued Director Lord in a 1963 newspaper interview, “but judged by modern standards of what a library ought to be, its design as a whole is obsolete. Like the great European libraries of the 19th century most of its books are in closed bookstacks, relatively few being accessible to the public.”¹⁹⁵ The issue of book storage and access would, in many ways, drive the design of the Johnson addition.

Open stacks were not the only way in which the Johnson addition offered an image of modernity in its design. New building technologies allowed Johnson to create enormous interior spaces – spaces used for the arrangement of bookshelves and reading tables – with only minimal interruption from supporting beams and walls. Where McKim had been required by existing construction techniques

to create discrete rooms and spaces, with load-bearing walls in between, Johnson could design a building with almost no visual separation between spaces. For Johnson, and for the critics who were to comment upon the addition, these technological accomplishments were to become a type of aesthetic statement in themselves, critiqued in architectural journals as if they were an art form. “The \$23 million, 10-level addition is about the same size as the stately McKim, Mead & White building next door,” wrote *Progressive Architecture* shortly after the opening of the Johnson addition. “But it boasts three times as much useable floor space. . . . [A] grid of interconnecting trusses, 16-ft deep . . . provides support for the third through sixth floors, which are hung from the grid. Most of the 42 trusses are supported by steel columns rising from the basement foundation slab; except for four 4-column towers at the center of the building, the columns are at the corners and sides.”¹⁹⁶ This emphasis on technology was a hallmark of the design of the Johnson addition, encouraged by a client enamored of the possibilities of new construction techniques, and it would ultimately come to define the aesthetic qualities of the structure.



To touch briefly again on the question of the relationship between the addition and the existing McKim structure, it is important to emphasize that, in addition to the desire for increased functionality, the Library Trustees were committed to protecting the architectural and cultural legacy of the McKim Building. Almost every newspaper article or library-sponsored document about the addition notes that the new structure would respect the basic form and appearance of the McKim structure – maintaining the existing height and form of the McKim Building, for instance, and even using the same granite for the exterior – and that the McKim Building would continue to serve Boston as a working library, becoming the headquarters for the Library’s research facilities. In a 1967 press release announcing the completion of the plans for the Johnson addition, the Office of the Mayor was careful to emphasize that “the fenestration of the new building is kept to a minimum, and the basic proportions are in sympathetic relationship to the present Library.”¹⁹⁷

As eager as the Library administration was for a new kind of library building, then, one that was up-to-date and efficient, the presence and stature of the McKim Building was an abiding force in any design decisions about the addition. “Several members of the Committee . . . expressed the opinion that aside from having the building complementary to the present structure, they would like the building as functional as possible,” read the Trustee minutes from November 8th, 1963. “They

stressed the point of functionalism despite the fact that it must be faced that the greatest public relations problem will be external appearance, that it will be a matter of designing a building that will be completely harmonious with the present architectural masterpiece.”¹⁹⁸ The challenge of the design for the addition was precisely the challenge of navigating these two, potentially competing, interests. “[The addition] has to take into account what has gone on between the time of this building and now,” noted the Trustees on June 14th, 1963, “and still stay harmonious, and convey the same purpose, but hopefully be more efficient.”¹⁹⁹



In conclusion, Philip Johnson, an iconoclastic modern architect, was hired in 1963 by the Boston Public Library to design an addition to the nineteenth-century structure of Charles Follen McKim, an addition that would equip the Library with newer, larger, and more efficient spaces for the provision of modern library services. Of particular importance was the inclusion of open bookstacks, a fundamental departure from the restrictive philosophy of the McKim Building and a move towards a model of a more open and accessible public library. This expansion and modernization was understood as a way not only to improve the core services of the Library, but also to revive an historic urban institution and, through it, help to revive the city as a whole. The unwavering programmatic emphasis on the functionalism and structural technology of the new structure, combined with a reluctance to countenance any design that could threaten the architectural primacy of the McKim Building, produced a situation in which the functional elements of the addition were elevated to the level of the aesthetic. The artistic aspects of the Library that had been so important to McKim – so important for the realization of his vision of the Library as an vehicle for personal and communal uplift – were largely lost in the philosophical and architectural choices made for the Johnson addition, depriving the new public face of the Boston Public Library of a core component of the aesthetic identity that had been at the heart of the institution since the opening of the McKim Building in 1895.

PART III: A NEW FACE

The Facade

Unlike the McKim Building, which can be viewed almost in its entirety from across the expanse of

Copley Square, the Johnson addition can only be seen from close range. The main entrance of the addition is on Boylston Street, immediately across the street from a block of mid-rise commercial and retail buildings, and the size and scale of the addition are such that it is impossible to stand far enough away to be able to take in the whole structure easily. Where McKim had the advantage of fronting his building onto an open space surrounded by important institutions, a space that gave the structure an air of civic importance while also minimizing the visual appearance of its great bulk, Johnson had to fit his addition into a dense, urban block, a block in which his building was fated – by the size of its lot and the expectations of its design – to be the largest and most massive structure in the mix. “The height limitation, when combined with the strict site limits and the required floor area, has led to the necessity of completely filling the spatial envelope with construction,” wrote Stanford Anderson in 1967. “Under these conditions, the new building tends to become a mass.”²⁰⁰

Like the McKim Building, however, the Johnson addition is all of a piece, a giant square block without projecting details or elements. Although obviously of different styles and periods, the Johnson addition is clearly related to the McKim Building, not only by its proximity – the west wall of the McKim structure actually meets the east wall of the addition – but by the similarity of their basic form, size, and massing. The Johnson addition feels heavier and more looming than the McKim Building, however, both because of the tightness of its site and because of the slight outward thrust of the upper stories, which seem to hang over the sidewalk in an unsettling way. “Johnson maintains alignments with the essential horizontal divisions of the adjoining Renaissance façade,” reads a 1967 article from *Architectural Record*, “but in his bold handling of the massive masonry elements of the new building he makes no concession to its more delicately scaled neighbor.”²⁰¹

Where the McKim Building reveals, upon close inspection, an elaborately detailed façade, the Johnson building reveals very little. Not only is there no ‘honor roll’ of Western culture, no philosophical-political sayings akin to the ones carved into the cornice of the McKim Building, but there is barely any acknowledgement of the identity and purpose of the building. The sole carving – in fact, the sole ornamentation – on the façade of the Johnson addition is a spare *Boston Public Library* incised over the front entrance, without even a date of opening, a list of benefactors, or a stated mission. So blank is the façade of the Johnson addition that without that simple means of identification over the front door, one might genuinely not recognize the purpose of the building, a building which could be confused for a performance hall, a convention center, or even a department

store. What decoration there is on the façade of the addition comes from the quality and arrangement of the handsome granite slabs, artfully positioned so as to create a sense of thoughtful design. “The cornice line of the old building was maintained in the extension and an attempt was made to rhyme the stonework of the predecessor,” reads *Boston: Forty Years of Modern Architecture*.²⁰² In this way, the façade of the Johnson addition becomes almost inscrutable, a modernist building that has so radically reduced the ornamentation of its nineteenth-century predecessor that any expression of institutional identity, as aesthetically conceived, has been removed.

The design of the façade of the Johnson addition is so remarkably different from that of the McKim Building that one must pause longer to consider it. Clearly, Johnson was working in the modernist tradition, the late-stage modernism of the 1960s, and as such was artistically inclined to limit the appearance of obvious ornamentation. But the explanation for the blank façade cannot be so simple. For to reject all trace of ornament was also to renounce the mechanism for transmitting cultural and political messages developed by McKim and therefore to dramatically reconceive the aesthetics of the Boston Public Library as they had been established more than seventy-five years before. For McKim, ornament was not only beautiful but also a means of expression – expression of the promise of uplift, of inspiration, and of the personal and community betterment to be found within the walls of the Library. To wholly eliminate that message was not only to design a structure in keeping with the architectural paradigm of the late twentieth century but also to alter the fundamental expression of the mission of the Library itself. As expressed by the façade of the Johnson addition, the Library was no longer a place to absorb the lessons of Western civilization, no longer a place to experience the influence of physical design on behavior and attitude. Instead, the Library became a place devoid of explicit cultural exhortation, a neutral place, in which patrons were encouraged to design their own experience, without the burden of hortatory messages.

There are other ways in which the exterior of the Johnson building both echoes the McKim design and subtly transforms it, neutralizing its messages. Like McKim, Johnson included an expanse of stone around the approach to his front entrance, but, unlike McKim, Johnson elected not to elevate the stone, leaving it simply as a section of sidewalk made of the same granite as the exterior of the building. The walls of the building seem to flow down into the sidewalk, symbolically joining the institution with the street. There is no need to step up to enter the Johnson addition, no physical metaphor of uplift. One can simply walk in directly from the street. The doorway itself is simple and plain, but transparent, a large wall of glass cut into the front of the building, reducing the

separation between interior and exterior and allowing pedestrians to easily view the activities inside. Where the McKim design requires visitors to pass through multiple interior spaces before even glimpsing a library book, passers-by can all but see the books stored in the Johnson addition from the sidewalk. The doorway is lit by light-fixtures, much as in the McKim Building, but they are small and recessed, little more than covers for electrical sockets. Where the McKim doorway is guarded by the twin sentries of science and art, the Johnson doorway is framed by modest items of public accommodation: trash cans, receptacles for spent cigarettes, and a metal box for the returning of books after hours. The Johnson addition offers no continuation of the stone bench surrounding the McKim Building.

The design choices for the façade of the Johnson addition can be explained on several, aesthetically intriguing, levels. First, each can be understood as a means of improving the functionality and usability of the building: the façade is blank because ornamentation, other than the simple *Boston Public Library*, is expensive and provides no particular utility for the Library; the entrance is level with the sidewalk because that makes it easier to access the front door; the front entryway is glass because the Library wished to appear welcoming and open; the doorway is devoid of decoration for the same reasons the façade is, cost and utility. Seen a different way, each of these choices has the effect of undoing the aesthetic and political choices made by McKim and the early Trustees. The Johnson addition is an attempt, deliberate or not, to neutralize the cultural content of the design of the Library by offering, as a modern alternative, a seemingly content-less façade, one apparently without explicit message or meaning. In this way, one can argue that the design of functionalism has taken the place of explicit aestheticism in the Johnson addition.

Even without explicit cultural messages, the façade of the Johnson building still communicates, although the meanings are ambiguous and problematic. Goodman offers a useful framework for trying to understand buildings that seem message-less. “A purely formal building that neither depicts anything nor expresses any feelings or ideas is sometimes held not to function as a symbol at all,” he writes. “Actually, it exemplifies certain of its properties. . .”²⁰³ In this way, the façade of the Johnson addition emphasizes its great weight and massive scale, hanging over the sidewalk like a square helmet with holes for three eyes, each eye represented by one of the giant, quizzical half-moon windows on the upper stories of the building. Where the McKim Building may be preachy, the Johnson building is vaguely disconcerting, even ominous, cold and not particularly welcoming, despite its large windows. “In my vocabulary,” writes Goodman, “the façade *exemplifies* the first

(literal) property and *expresses* the second (metaphorical) one.²⁰⁴ The literal property of the Johnson addition is its size and apparent blankness, while the metaphorical property lies in its lack of human scale and its helmet-like, almost militaristic appearance. Softening that image slightly is the presence of small gardens, tucked in front of the windows of the first floor, peaceful oases of green in a dense urban area. But Johnson again confounds this softer image, surrounding the gardens with granite walls, leaving them only for the enjoyment of those inside the Library, not those on the street. Where the McKim Building is immensely legible, both at the literal and metaphoric levels, the Johnson addition is perplexing, even troubling, offering a façade without explicit messages but with layers of metaphoric meanings.

The Main Lobby and Central Atrium

The Johnson addition has no interstitial space between the outside and the lobby – one simply passes through a set of revolving doors and into the lobby. Where the lobby of the McKim Building is small and dark, the Johnson lobby is expansive and light, with a clear view from the front door all the way into the heart of the building. This is a welcoming feature of the addition, at odds with its heavy-browed façade. The entering visitor is presented with a row of turnstiles – much as one would find in a subway station – with desks on either side for the checking out of books and other materials. The right-hand wall of the Johnson lobby bears the same text found on the front cornice of the McKim Building – *The Public Library of the City of Boston Built by the People and Dedicated to the Advancement of Learning* – but the words are small and tucked away, without anything to draw the eye to them, almost as if Johnson was chagrined to have to include such a clearly nineteenth-century sentiment in his late twentieth-century building. As Goodsell writes about legislative chambers of the twentieth century, “detailed ornamentation and attempts to replicate Neoclassical or revivalist detailing are vigorously rejected.”²⁰⁵ Other than the text, the lobby is without installed decoration of any sort, save for a small, utilitarian clock. The lack of ornamentation combined with the transparency of the design makes the experience of the Johnson lobby wholly different from the experience of the McKim lobby, with its riot of ornamentation and its constraining dimensions. There is nothing about the Johnson lobby that dictates how a patron should feel about the experience of entering, nor what he or she can expect to find. The Johnson lobby is utilitarian and functional – it could be the lobby of an office building, a small airport, or a modern city hall – and it offers openness and utility where the McKim Building offers a normative vision of what a public library should be.

Furthermore, where the McKim lobby clearly guides the visitor through a set of pre-determined steps – through the lobby of art and symbols and up the main stairway toward the light of the second floor – the Johnson building provides no sense of momentum or direction, leaving the patron with a variety of options. To the left of the entrance, one can return books in a room designed for that purpose; to the right, one can examine piles of local newspapers, flyers for community events, and myriad tax forms. Through the turnstiles, one can go to the right into the Children’s Room, to the left into the sections for new fiction and books with large print, or straight ahead into the central atrium, an open area reserved for exhibits of photography and paintings. From the atrium, one can use either the elevator or the stairs to go up or down. There is no guiding design evident in the Johnson building, no explicit plan other than to provide patrons with a neutral experience of a public library, one full of available choices. This openness was promoted as a means to provide easy orientation within the building, to be “unlike McKim’s Florentine palace . . . so planned that the visitor will know where he is in relation to the rest of the building, i.e. it will have what Mr. Johnson calls ‘clarity.’”²⁰⁶ The Johnson addition invites without challenging, offers without demanding. Its design speaks of a public library in which patrons determine their own experience, not the Trustees, the benefactors, the architect, or the cultural elite.

The central atrium is arguably the most interesting space in the Johnson addition, the core around which the rest of the building is structured and the sole public space consciously left empty of books. In this way, the atrium appears to be the only area within the Johnson addition that is designed almost solely for aesthetic purposes, an open well of light in the middle of an enormous building of books. Interestingly, it was a source of conflict between Johnson and the Library Trustees, who were concerned that the atrium was a waste of space. “The Director reported that . . . there was still incorporated the great hall up through the building,” reads the Trustee minutes from October 23rd, 1964, “which Mr. Johnson knows does not meet with approval and which in earlier stages he had agreed to cut down.”²⁰⁷

The atrium rises from the ground floor up to the ceiling, through which a geometrically designed skylight allows natural light to filter down through the levels to the ground floor. Much of the Johnson building receives no natural light, but the central atrium enjoys plenty of it, making it an ideal space for the display of artwork. Around the walls of the atrium are staircases, carrying patrons between floors and adding to the sense of vertical movement already present in the tall space. Johnson has compared his atrium to McKim’s outdoor courtyard, contending that the square design

of the courtyard is echoed in the design of the atrium, but arguably the atrium is more akin to McKim's grand staircase. Like the grand staircase, the atrium is a shaft of light in an otherwise dark building, drawing library patrons upwards into the addition. "In my design approach," explained Johnson to *The Boston Globe*, "second only to the clarity of circulation is the monumentality of a central space, which should be symbolic of the devotion to the Muses, inherent in a public library."²⁰⁸ In this way, the atrium is not only an aesthetic space but also a metaphoric statement, one of few acknowledgements throughout the Johnson addition of the power of physicality to symbolize the experience of public library use.

Reading Facilities

While the design of the façade and the central spaces in the Johnson addition are significantly different from those in the McKim Building, it is in the storage and distribution of books that the Johnson addition truly declares itself a fundamentally different kind of library. The internal structure of the McKim Building was, in large part, driven by the decision to install a system of restricted bookstacks, requiring both large, hidden storage areas and a procession of public rooms designed for the ordering and delivery of books. The design of the Johnson addition is likewise structured around a choice about the storage of books. "In the old building, now a Research Library, readers and books only met," wrote *The Boston Globe*. "Now books, periodicals, recordings, pictures, and other library materials are at your fingertips for browsing or borrowing."²⁰⁹ The Johnson addition, following the desire of the Library administration, offers its books in a completely different way from the McKim Building, storing hundreds of thousands of books in eight-foot shelves throughout the open spaces of the Library.

This choice inverts the basic design of the McKim Building, revealing the books that had before been hidden and placing them at the center of the design of the Library, a space that had been reserved in the McKim structure for ornamental public areas. The interior spaces of the Johnson addition – enormous, uninterrupted spans – are defined not by art but by shelves and shelves of books, punctuated by rows of reading tables and chairs, presenting patrons with an almost limitless view of the riches of the Library. The visual effect of so many shelves of books is almost overwhelming, particularly as the Library staff often finds it difficult to maintain the shelves in an orderly fashion. Books are simply everywhere in the Johnson addition, not only on the shelves but also on carts, tables, chairs, and the floor. Patrons have complete access to almost every volume

stored within the Johnson addition – all general reading materials and some research materials – as well as to videos, music recordings, and computer resources. In this way, the Johnson addition offers a vision of mild chaos, of democracy run a little rampant, as opposed to the elegant control of the McKim structure.

As the choice to keep the stacks closed in the McKim Building is a decision with layers of meaning, so is the choice to offer completely open access to books in the Johnson addition. Where the McKim design forced patrons into a mediated relationship with reading material, the Johnson design eliminates control over the availability and use of Library resources. This gives the Johnson addition the sense of being a product of an increasingly consumer-driven society – an accurate reflection of the United States in the 1960s and 1970s – a building in which the importance of individual choice trumps the power of social and intellectual hierarchy. The use of open shelves, moreover, has implications not only for the interior configuration of the building, but also for the treatment of the books themselves. The decades between the design of the McKim Building and the design of the Johnson addition saw an explosion in the number of books published and a corresponding decline in their cost and specialness. Books became commodities, like so many other things, and the design of the Johnson addition reflects that commodification. The acres of shelves lend themselves to the rough handling of books – books are pulled from the shelves and then hastily reshelfed or left to sit out. Books tip over on each other, fall from the shelves, and are bent or crushed. Books are often out of sequence and difficult to find, and books are also easier to steal or disfigure than in a system of closed stacks.

The ideal of open shelves is a powerful one and should not be discounted by the logistical problems inherent in it. Open shelves represent a genuine effort to make the Boston Public Library a place of truly free inquiry, of the free exploration of knowledge, in which library patrons determine their own course of study without the intercession of Library staff. Despite the many ways in which the Johnson addition is architecturally illegible or problematic, the open stacks are a clear and powerful symbol of a public institution evolving in its efforts to provide library resources that are truly free to all.

Without a system of closed stacks, the Johnson addition has no need for the individual spaces dedicated to the different stages of the process of book delivery. Instead, long reading tables are arrayed around each floor, interspersed among the shelves of books, without a particular area

reserved exclusively for reading and studying. There is no space in the Johnson addition akin to Bates Hall, no single room used only for reading. The Johnson addition is designed instead for patrons to browse through the shelves, pick out a book of interest, sit at the nearest table for a few moments of perusal, and then move on. The reading tables can be used for hours of study, if a patron is so inclined, but the environment is one of traffic, in which people are moving between the shelves and the tables, picking up books and setting them down, in which the work spaces are as open as the shelf spaces.

The decision to provide open shelves and open work spaces is symbolic, as has been noted, but it is also functional.* In a time of reduced public budgets, open bookstacks require significantly fewer library staffers – no one is needed to retrieve books for patrons – and those that are required tend to be the low-skilled, low-paid employees needed for re-shelving. The utilitarian quality of the interior spaces of the Library, moreover, emphasizes function over aesthetics, providing little more than comfortable, convenient spaces in which to read and work. Except as hinted at in the central atrium, the Johnson addition makes no effort to include the sort of inspiring, uplifting spaces offered throughout the McKim Building, no architectural or artistic reminders of the social importance of the Library, no invocations of the power of self-education to provide moral and intellectual uplift.

This emphasis on function over art has another interesting implication, one harder to prove but nevertheless impossible to ignore. The Johnson addition has become – has, in fact, been for many years – a public building used by many homeless people as a place of refuge from the streets. A quick tour of the Johnson addition brings this point home dramatically; some of the reading tables seem to be used entirely by people seeking rest rather than enlightenment. Some apparently homeless people read books, magazines, and newspapers, while others do not. Some pack and repack their belongings on the reading tables, and others talk softly to themselves. Although the homeless population seems to mingle reasonably comfortably with the regular patrons of the Library, the Library has struggled with this issue over the years, unsure of how best to handle it. For our purposes, the interesting characteristic of the presence of the homeless in the Boston Public Library is that they seem to gravitate almost exclusively to the Johnson addition. One rarely, if ever,

*The Johnson addition to the Boston Public Library was one of several major libraries designed in the 1960s and 1970s with open bookstacks. Others include Johnson's Bobst Library for New York University (opened 1973) and Louis I. Kahn's library for Philips Exeter Academy (opened 1972).

sees a homeless person in the McKim Building, and yet the Johnson addition is often crowded with them. One couldn't know without greater research whether this is the result of explicit security policies on the part of the Library or whether something about the design of the two structures allows the homeless to feel more welcome in the Johnson addition. To the extent that the McKim Building urges attitudes of personal and community rectitude, industry, and morality, however, one can imagine that the less demanding aesthetic of the Johnson structure could be more appealing to individuals whose lives have become disassociated from the dominant values of American society.

Spaces for Children

As part of the effort to offer better specialized services through the expansion into the Johnson addition, the Boston Public Library increased and modernized its facilities for children. The current Children's Room is prominently located in the Johnson wing, immediately to the right of the front lobby, and is large and sunny and provides half-height tables and chairs for small patrons. The Children's Room is one of the most pleasant rooms in the Johnson addition, cheerier and more inviting than the spaces for adults, and always active with children and librarians. The Johnson addition also offers a specialized room for young adults, separated from the space for both children and adults, stocking not only books but also research materials for homework, for applying to college, and for planning a career. Both spaces are largely devoid of the symbols of acculturation embedded in the design and décor of the Children's Room in the McKim Building. Instead, these rooms offer comfortable areas for children to enjoy reading, to learn how to behave in libraries, and to have access to books and other materials that might not be available at home. "Among the many levels of service are those designed to reach young people as students with specific research needs; as visitors getting the feel of a great library; or as browsers, open-minded to trying out a fresh idea or new book."²¹⁰ These rooms provide a service, in pleasant surroundings, but are without the explicit social sub-text of acculturation and Americanization found in the Children's Room of the McKim design.



From the spaces for children and young adults and radiating out through the rest of the building, the Johnson addition to the Boston Public Library is a structure dedicated to serving a particular function – the provision of books and other library services – in an efficient and straight-forward

manner. It is a structure without many of the aspirations of the original McKim Building, a structure in which invocations to the achievements of Western civilization are all but absent, a structure in which moralizing lessons about personal responsibility and the pleasures of privilege are few if any. Where McKim and the Trustees of the 1890s understood the mission of the Boston Public Library as the promise of personal transformation through the experience of self-education, Johnson and the Trustees of the 1960s understood the mission simply as the provision of self-education and self-entertainment alone. Transformation and enlightenment had become too complicated, too fraught to be explicitly offered by public institutions in the middle of the twentieth century. “[Modern civic architecture] barely asserts authority at all – at least not openly,” writes Goodsell. “Instead of demanding obedience or proposing reasonableness, it presents itself as inherently attractive and desirable . . . it seduces, rather than frightens; invites, rather than imposes; comforts, rather than commands . . . elitist fine art is replaced by egalitarian technology.”²¹¹ The Johnson addition to the Boston Public Library fits this description very well – a modern civic building without a clear expression of authority or hierarchy, but one ultimately still concerned with “image-producing” and message-making.

PART IV: JOHNSON: CONCLUSIONS

The seventy-seven years between the 1895 opening of the McKim Building and the 1972 addition of the Johnson wing were a time of decreased social hierarchy and increased social flexibility in America, a time in which public libraries had to learn to compete with other forms of education and entertainment to attract patrons. Public discourse was becoming more diffuse, less distinct, with more voices arguing to be heard and more groups questioning the authority of the traditional elite. Cities were declining and public institutions were losing their sense of self-assurance, leaving a building like the McKim library – an aesthetic exercise in the expression of dominant cultural values – as something of an anachronism.

Not only an anachronism, the McKim Building was also increasingly dysfunctional as a library facility, constraining the Boston Public Library in its ability to provide new services and specialties, to enlarge its available holdings, and to increase public access to its collections. The major addition designed by Philip Johnson in the late 1960s was an answer to the physical deficiencies of the McKim structure, a new, more flexible building that could allow the Library not only to expand its

services, not only to democratize access to its collections, but also to move away from the weighty messages of the McKim Building. “The lovely original library building was conceived as an architect’s dream,” wrote Library Director Lord in *The Boston Globe*, “not as an example of superior library facility (*sic*).”²¹² This may be an overly critical assessment of the McKim Building, which one can assume functioned well as a public library in its early decades. Nevertheless, the decisions to emphasize function over form in the Johnson design, to relocate the main entrance of the Library to the new addition, and to open the holdings of the general library to public view all combined to offer a new image of the Boston Public Library, one carrying the explicit cultural message that it endeavors to communicate no message at all.

But even in silence, there is message. Johnson is a complex architect, one for whom the constraints of designing an addition to a prominent work of nineteenth-century civic architecture were no doubt vexing. His addition is true to the McKim Building in the sense that it respects its roof line, maintains its basic form and massing, and uses the same granite. But the emphasis on function and on openness produces a strange hybrid, a building that is simultaneously neutral and weighted with the symbolism of neutrality, a building in which the choice to provide egalitarian access to books deprives the privilege of library use of some of its specialness, and in which the utilitarian character of its reading spaces has turned them into a sometime homeless shelter.

Quite aside from the meanings of its aesthetics, the mere fact of the erection of the Johnson addition was taken as an important symbol of the renewed vitality of Boston, a city that had lost much of its self-confidence and optimism in the years since the McKim Building was inaugurated. So little had been built in the city in the decades immediately before and after the Second World War that the new wing of the Library – a major building in a prominent area, designed by a famous architect – was a metaphor for a city trying to reclaim its legacy as an intellectual capital. “Mayor Kevin White last night said the construction of a massive addition to the Boston Public Library symbolizes the city’s refusal to succumb to ‘urban obsolescence and the hopelessness of urban failure,’” wrote *The Boston Globe* on the morning after the opening of the Johnson addition. “‘At a time when post-mortems are being written about other great urban centers of this nation, Boston defies the skeptics. A chaotic and troubled city, to be sure, but Boston is also a city which is vital, dynamic and growing.’”²¹³

The Philip Johnson addition to the Boston Public Library received little critical attention after its

opening, and has been the subject of only a fraction of the amount of historical and architectural scholarship that has been focused on the McKim Building. Perhaps this is because the period of the Johnson addition lacks the perceived elegance and grandeur of the Gilded Age. Perhaps it is because McKim is revered as a master of civic architecture and urban design while Johnson, still with us, is an artistic and ideological chameleon, frustrating to try to typify. Or perhaps it is simply the fate of additions always to be in the shadow of the buildings to which they are attached, forever unfavorably compared to the one that came first.

All of these things have no doubt contributed to the minimal recognition of the Johnson addition over the past three decades, yet there is something more. The Johnson addition is an exercise in the elevation of function and technology to the level of the aesthetic, but it is an aesthetic that seems somewhat hollow compared to the palace of personal uplift designed by McKim. For all of the logistically and culturally problematic qualities of the McKim library, it offers a vision of reading, of learning, and of the possibility of personal transformation that is nowhere to be found in the Johnson addition. The newer structure, despite its many functional advantages, is the poorer for it. Public libraries are not simply intended for the storage and distribution of books and other reading materials; they are about the pleasure, insight, and self-improvement that comes from intellectual exploration.

CHAPTER 5

An Urban Network

The Early Branch Movement

The Copley Square facility is the grand statement of the Boston Public Library, the largest and most prominent use of architecture and urban design to highlight the evolving expression of the mission of the Library. The Library as an institution, however, is much greater than its presence in Copley Square: it reaches out through a network of branch libraries, of bookmobiles, and of community programs to bring the benefits of Library services to neighborhoods many miles from Copley Square. This point was emphasized at the inauguration of the Johnson addition, the printed program for which reads, “The present addition to the Central Library becomes a capstone to the structure of the Boston Public Library . . . [with its] community services in the neighborhoods through 26 branches, a hospital library service, a service to shut-ins and a bookmobile service.”²¹⁴ Although the Copley Square building is the focus of this thesis, it is important to recognize and understand the Library as an urban network, one which has grown and evolved in concert with, but somewhat separately from, the central library. In this way, an examination of the branches can help to create a sense of cultural and architectural continuity between the McKim Building and the Johnson addition, emphasizing that the Library has evolved not only through two isolated structures in Copley Square but also through an expansive intellectual and architectural system. This is not to imply that the evolution of the branch network, particularly its architectural evolution, has been carefully planned and managed as part of a comprehensive scheme for articulating the mission of the Library through physical design. Rather, the network has grown organically, from neighborhood to neighborhood, and so offers a window into the piecemeal progress of the Boston Public Library.

From its first decades, even prior to the move to the McKim Building, the Boston Public Library has emphasized the importance of maintaining branch libraries, a system that enables the Library to reach out to the neighborhoods of Boston, to create new communities of Library patrons by offering its resources to individuals unable or unwilling to travel to Copley Square, and to better unify the city in the process. “This Branch is established as a means, so far as it goes, of bringing this district into full fellowship with the city in which it is now merged,” declared Mayor Samuel Cobb at the opening of a branch library in Dorchester in the 1870s, “and of giving you the benefit of its institutions.”²¹⁵ Branch libraries, therefore, are a mechanism to spread the mission and the message of the Boston Public Library throughout the city it serves.

The Dorchester library was one of the first branch facilities to open as part of a greater Library

network,* but it would soon be followed by many more. By the end of the nineteenth century, branch libraries were recognized as important amenities for local neighborhoods, used by adults and children alike, and politicians lobbied heavily for their constituents to receive the benefits of library resources and services within their own communities, much as they lobbied for fire stations, public pools, and other municipal services. By the turn of the century, the neighborhoods of Allston, Dorchester, East Boston, Roxbury, Mattapan, Roslindale, South Boston, the South End, and the West End all received local library services, although it was limited in some communities to a desk in the corner of a store or a shelf in the basement of a church.²¹⁶ Two other local libraries joined the Boston Public Library system through the political annexation of the towns of Charlestown and Brighton, and still more branches would be founded throughout the city during the early decades of the twentieth century. Over time, the branch system has expanded in waves, growing during the periods in which the city has been flush with funds and pro-Library politicians had been in office. The branches have also declined in waves, with lean fiscal periods forcing reduced hours, minimal staff, and occasional branch closings. Some branches have been lost over the decades and others have been added; the network currently including twenty-seven individual facilities, each serving a particular community with books, periodicals, films, and community programming.



The Copley Square building was intentionally designed to serve a broad audience, patrons not only from Boston, not only from Massachusetts, but potentially from anywhere in the world. The branch libraries, on the other hand, are designed to serve the needs of a specific neighborhood and a specific population. Throughout the history of the branch system, the Library has been explicit in its hope and desire that the branch libraries will serve not only neighborhoods remote from Copley Square but also neighborhoods of poor and working-class residents, neighborhoods for which the transformative benefits of reading are perceived to be the most tangible and powerful.

“If grand central libraries did not cater to working-class readers, other library facilities did,” writes Van Slyck. “In the last years of the nineteenth century, branch libraries became a regular part of the public service offered by libraries in larger cities. . . . [T]his explosion of library facilities was fueled by middle-class settlement workers and their willingness to experiment with unconventional means

*The first municipally-supported branch library in America opened in East Boston in 1869.

for disseminating culture.”²¹⁷ The central library on Copley Square is an institution dedicated to the democratic provision of reading material, but its mission is complicated by its location in an elite district of the city, well served by public transit but far removed from many residential neighborhoods, particularly those of the poor and working-class. The branch system helps to rectify the tensions inherent in the placement of the central library by offering Bostonians an alternative: a local outpost of the Library.

Coupled with the belief that branch libraries could best serve the poor and working-class was a belief that they could also be used to further the project of acculturation and Americanization implicit in the core mission of the Boston Public Library. Although somewhat changed today, the ethnic and racial identities of many Boston neighborhoods were once as defining as their geographic boundaries. The early branch libraries served these communities as institutions designed, in part, to bring dominant American values to new immigrants through the provision of reading material and community programs. The branch libraries of the early twentieth century served astonishingly diverse and multi-lingual constituencies; in 1920-1921, the West End branch alone was estimated to serve twenty-two different nationalities.²¹⁸ Many immigrant communities were poor, some families unable to purchase books or even perhaps to read English, and the branch libraries offered a crucial means for individuals, particularly children and young adults, to absorb the new language and culture of America within the security of their own neighborhood. “In North Bennet (*sic*) Street, the worn, shabby book is the key to a palace of delight, and the crowded rooms are positively ablaze with the sheer happiness which radiates from the faces of the scores of reading boys and girls,” wrote the Boston Public Library Examining Committee of 1910-1911 about the North End branch library. “There is surely no part of our City where the hunger for books is so keen and so universal as among the crowded tenements in the North End, where the children of twenty different nations are being made . . . into American men and women.”²¹⁹

Just as the Americanizing aspects of the branch network are a reflection of one component of the overall mission of the Boston Public Library, so too did the branches promote a second aspect of the cultural project of the Boston Public Library: the reduction of crime and social disruption. Just as the Copley Square building was imagined to have a salubrious impact on the many passers-by in the area, so the branches were understood to improve the morals and behavior of the residents of far-flung neighborhoods. “The story of how a local library branch had driven a neighboring saloon out of business demonstrated one practical result of opening branches,” writes Ditzion. “Some

citizens . . . considered it practical to establish a branch collection in each of the city's precinct houses. In this way, they claimed, the municipality could develop an economic method of preventing and punishing crime."²²⁰ In the system of the branch libraries, a system which served individual neighborhoods, some with quite significant social and economic problems, the moralistic and acculturating aspects of the experience of using the public library were brought to the fore.

The Branches, Modernizing

During the same period that Philip Johnson was grappling with the task of designing an addition to the McKim Building on Copley Square, an addition that would express the evolving nature of the relationship between the Boston Public Library and its public, the branch system was also wrestling with questions of how to re-define the role of the branches in local neighborhoods. With a legacy of promoting a particular vision of acculturation, the branch system was confronted in the 1960s with demands for greater local control over the branch collections, as well as over the programs and other community functions provided by the branches. No longer were branch libraries expected to offer the values and teachings of the dominant culture, through choices of books and other reading materials, nor were they to encourage cultural assimilation and conformity. Branches were to become a part of the neighborhood in which they were located, not satellites of an outside institution.

The evolving character and function of branch libraries was particularly vividly demonstrated in the design of a new branch library for the Dudley Square neighborhood in the late 1960s, an area that at the time was predominantly African-American. In 1968, several community groups became involved in discussions about the design of a new public library for the neighborhood, arguing that the library should both reflect and be a product of the neighborhood. "In addition to books, newspapers and records, this branch would also house film-strips, films, exhibits of rare documents, books, and art, with a strong emphasis on African and Afro-American subjects," wrote *The Herald-Traveler* in 1968. "The proposal calls for locating the library in the Dudley Station area and asks for a building with an African motif. It should be named for a person of great significance to Roxbury residents."²²¹ Although branch libraries have from the beginning tried to cater to the tastes and wishes of local residents, they traditionally remained within the context of the cultural project of the Boston Public Library as a whole. With the 1968 proposals for the new Dudley Square library, the notion of a branch library was fundamentally reconceived to allow for the cultural identity of the

neighborhood to supersede, in the physical design, programmatic offerings, and collections of the branch, the cultural identity of the Library as a city-wide institution.

Although the 1968 proposal for the Dudley Square library was only partially realized, that library today does hold a significant collection of books on African-American history and culture. Other branch libraries have developed specialized collections that reflect the ethnic and cultural make-up of the communities they serve, including an African-American collection at the Codman Square branch in Dorchester, Spanish-language materials in East Boston and Mission Hill, and a collection of Irish history in the West End. Other quirky collections, including one on the Civil War at the Adams Street branch in Dorchester, and an extensive one of mystery novels in Lower Mills, points to the colorful individuality and personality of each of the branches. With limited shelf-space and tight budgets, however, branch libraries generally provide the materials that are most consistently demanded by local residents, with particular emphasis on items for children and young adults. Many branch libraries devote as much as half of their interior space for the use of children, and a visit to any branch will reveal how intensely they are used by children, adolescents, and young parents. Branch libraries also offer programs for both adults and children, including films, arts and crafts, lectures, slideshows, performances, story hours, and assistance with adult literacy and with English as a Second Language. These programs, plus the regular flow of Library patrons, combine to make small branch libraries active community centers, bustling at almost any time of the day.

The Architecture of the Branch Network

Copley Square offers the Boston Public Library its most conspicuous public setting, as befits the central location of a major public institution, and the McKim and Johnson structures are designed to dominate their combined site, both architecturally and urbanistically. Although branch libraries lack the pomp of the Copley Square complex, they are each interesting as architectural moments in the history of the Library, moments in which the Library chose one design over another and one setting over another as proper and appropriate. It is important to note, however, that the branch libraries do not appear to represent a conscious, systematic effort to integrate architectural styles into particular neighborhoods in keeping with the evolving character of the mission of the Library. To argue that they do so would be to inappropriately attribute intentionality where observation indicates that the design choices for many of the branches – particularly those branches built prior to 1960 – were often haphazard, made without consideration of a larger plan for the overall network. Instead,

the branch libraries should be understood as individual architectural “essays,” representative of the particular period in which they were built but not of a larger, clearly-defined flow through the course of the twentieth century. The branch network taken as a whole offers a vision of 125 years of civic architecture in America, representing a dramatic range of styles, of interior configurations, and of choices about the expression of the relationship between a public library and the communities it serves.

The three branch libraries to be studied here – the Kirstein Business Branch (1930), the Parker Hill Branch Library in Roxbury (1931), and the North End Branch Library (1965) – each represent a particular type of approach taken by the Boston Public Library in designing facilities for its branch network. The Kirstein Business Branch, unusual for being the only subject-specific branch in the system, offers an architectural image of the past that calls to mind the great age of Boston mercantilism, thereby grounding the pursuit of wealth within a particular cultural and historical context. The Parker Hill Branch Library, a small Tudor-style building apparently designed in part to complement a large Gothic church next door, offers an architectural image wholly distinct from the rest of the working-class urban environment around it, an appeal to the cultural associations between England and New England, and an allusion to an age of literary and artistic creativity. Lastly, the North End Branch Library, a small, modern building, represents a conscious effort to fit into an Italian-American neighborhood, with a design intended to evoke the architecture of the Mediterranean and interior artwork honoring Dante Alighieri. In this way, these three branch libraries together offer representative images of a library network constantly searching, sometimes consciously and sometimes seemingly without a clear plan, for the best way to express its mission within individual neighborhoods and at particular times.

Kirstein Business Branch, 20 City Hall Avenue, Downtown Boston

The Kirstein Business Branch, the only branch in the system dedicated to a single subject, opened on City Hall Avenue – in the heart of downtown Boston – in May of 1930. The establishment of the Kirstein branch was inspired by the growing importance of financial publications in the world of business, and the library building itself was funded by a gift from the Kirstein family, owners of Filene’s Department Store. “Libraries had operated as a place for encouraging recreational reading, adult literacy, and children’s services, but a business reference area added a whole new purpose to the library,” reads the website for the Kirstein branch. “It helped patrons solve economic issues and

became a support for their livelihood by providing information to start and maintain a business, find a job, study in business school, and invest for the future.”²²² The Kirstein branch was the first public library in the United States devoted to business publications and materials, and today the branch stocks information on investing, business law, corporate America, the economic performance of cities, states, and countries, and many other issues.²²³ Kirstein appears to be well-used by a broad range of people.

The siting of the Kirstein branch in traditional, downtown Boston indicates, not surprisingly, that it was intended primarily for use by professionals and business people, many of who would have had offices within easy walking distance of the branch. The Kirstein building is tucked away, out of sight of a main street and somewhat hidden by the buildings around it, but it is well-located for use by downtown workers and likely would have been convenient and comfortable for the traditional Boston financial elite. At the time the branch opened, furthermore, it would have been next door to Boston City Hall and within a few blocks of several major banks and financial firms, locating it squarely within the radius of local financial and political power.

It is interesting to note that the Kirstein branch opened in the midst of the Great Depression, a period when American business was not only struggling but also widely unpopular, blamed by many for the uncontrolled growth of the 1920s and the ensuing financial collapse. For the Boston Public Library to have chosen to accept the Kirstein family gift and to open the branch when it did can be understood as an acknowledgement not only that business would continue to be an important part of American culture and of the economy of the American city, but also that it was important for the general public to have access to financial information. The Kirstein branch was located in downtown Boston, within easy reach of the financial district and the offices of prominent businessmen, but it was fundamentally still a public library, open to all. The Kirstein branch is a reflection of traditional Boston financial society, but it also makes a tacit statement that financial information should be widely and easily available.

Designed by the architecture firm of Putnam & Cox, the Kirstein branch is modeled very closely on the buildings of the Tontine Crescent, a residential area of downtown Boston designed in 1793 by Charles Bulfinch and demolished in the nineteenth century. As in the structures of the Tontine Crescent, the Kirstein branch is done in the Federalist style – albeit the neo-Federalist style – with a façade of red brick, decorative pillars, and a central Palladian window. Even a sign immediately

inside the front door of the building, dedicating the branch to the Kirstein family, is done in a style that brings to mind the eighteenth century. The interior facilities of the library are on three stories, with a main reading room on the first floor.

The choice to use a neo-Federalist design for the Kirstein branch is an interesting one, particularly considering that the building opened in 1930, only a year before Philip Johnson would begin planning his M.O.M.A. exhibition on the International Style. In electing to house the business branch of the Boston Public Library in a building designed in an architectural style popular in the last years of the eighteenth century, the Library was electing to look backward, to the age in which Boston was an economically dynamic city and a mercantile power. The Kirstein branch is closely associated in style and design with prominent Boston buildings of that period, particularly buildings on Beacon Hill, many of which were built by an earlier generation of successful, wealthy Bostonians, who were perceived to have prospered through frugality and hard work. The Kirstein design also calls to mind the historical association between colonial Boston and Georgian London, another mercantile city.

The architecture of the Kirstein Business Branch is an explicit invocation of a past period and an implicit rejection of the pluralistic, cosmopolitan Boston of the 1930s in favor of the homogeneous Yankee Boston of the 1830s and before. In particular, it is an effort to associate the pursuit of wealth with a period in which fortunes were made – or were perceived to have been made – by restrained means, controlled by the dictates of propriety and business ethics and less chaotic and destructive than the means of the 1920s. In this way, the message of personal uplift and inspiration embedded in the institutional mission of the Boston Public Library is here directed at the accumulation of wealth, but grounded in the values of an earlier time. The Kirstein Business Branch is an homage to the period that made Boston a wealthy city, and to the aesthetic tastes of the individuals who made it so.

Parker Hill Branch Library, 1497 Tremont Street, Roxbury

The Parker Hill Branch Library sits on the flank of Mission Hill, with a panoramic view of downtown Boston spreading out behind the little building. The branch library, a small, handsome stone structure done in the neo-Tudor style, sits to the right of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the Mission Church Basilica, and together they form an impressive institutional tableau on Mission Hill.

Surrounding the library and the church are blocks and blocks of simple storefronts and wooden houses, many of them triple-deckers, which have served generations of working-class and immigrant populations. Historically, Mission Hill was a district of breweries, an industry which for decades provided much of the employment in the area. Designed by Ralph Adams Cram and opened in 1931, the branch library has served the same populations as have the triple-deckers and the breweries, but with an architectural presence which is dramatically different from anything else in the neighborhood.

The Parker Hill library is located on an embankment, raised above the sidewalk, requiring visitors to climb a significant flight of stairs in order to reach the front door. As in the McKim Building, the Parker Hill library is physically separated from the quotidian space of the street, and patrons must walk *up* to it, up to the knowledge contained inside. The building is also surrounded by a decorative iron fence, a further means of distinguishing the space of the library from the general space of the neighborhood. The building itself is done in pale stone, with careful masonry work and elaborate detailing around the front door. The door is made of wood, but over it hangs a large, carved stone seal of the Boston Public Library, almost as wide across as the door itself. The building has an ecclesiastical feel, as does much of Cram's work, but on a miniature scale. The Parker Hill branch clearly announces itself as an institution of learning and of culture, if not necessarily as a public library.

Upon stepping through the front door, however, visitors are left without a doubt that the building is a public library and is, in fact, an important community center. Tables and benches lining the walls of the small inner foyer are overflowing with local newspapers, printed notices about up-coming events, colorful flyers for services, meetings, performances, and lessons, some held within the library and some held around the neighborhood. The library is crowded and bustling on a wintry afternoon, with patrons of all ages crowding the small interior space. The library's public computers appear to be particularly heavily used, as do the spaces for children. As is true for many of the branch libraries, children seem to be the most important constituency of the Parker Hill branch, with half of the interior area of the library used for children's books and learning materials.

The interior of the library maintains the neo-Tudor design of the exterior. The interior is divided in two by intricately carved wooden screens, each approximately eight feet tall, with one side of the library used for books and materials for adults and the other side reserved for children. Immediately

inside the front door, between the two reading spaces, sits the circulation desk. The overall interior of the building is airy and bright, with high, decorated ceilings and lots of small, paned windows. The neo-Tudor detailing is carried throughout the décor and furnishings, from carved wall paneling to miniature tables and chairs in the children's section. The interior design has been modified to reflect the ethnic identity of the current population of Mission Hill, with African artwork and masks decorating the walls of the library.

Where the Kirstein Business Branch offers an image of an earlier, mercantile Boston, the Parker Hill Branch Library offers a romantic vision of sixteenth-century England. Cram's plan for the Parker Hill branch calls upon the architecture and aesthetics of that great literary period as the proper inspiration for a public library. In so doing, Cram established a dissonance between the Mission Hill neighborhood and the design of the branch library established to serve it. For many decades, Mission Hill has been a poor, immigrant community, and the branch library offers, through its architecture, an invitation to experience personal uplift through the legacy of the Anglo-American literary canon. Where the design of the Kirstein library is insular, referring to a cultural and architectural tradition that is largely local to Boston, the Parker Hill Branch Library implicitly encourages its patrons to taste life outside their immediate neighborhood, to dream beyond a job in a brewery and an apartment in a triple-decker. The Parker Hill library embodies the vision that literature, particularly literature in the English tradition, can be a source of profound inspiration and uplift, even if the patrons are unfamiliar with the referent sources.

North End Branch Library, 25 Parmenter Street, North End

The North End, one of the oldest neighborhoods of Boston and one that has traditionally housed a large immigrant population, had book-delivery service from the Boston Public Library as early as 1882 and a branch library by 1913. Public libraries in the North End have long played an important acculturating role, and the early North End libraries were often held up as models of successful public libraries in multi-lingual, multi-cultural communities. The current branch library opened in May of 1965, part of a wave of new and renovated branch libraries that were intended to conform to modern architectural styles and modern theories of library science. Designed by Carl Koch & Associates, the North End Branch Library fits neatly into a block of mid-rise apartment and commercial buildings, an unobtrusive modernist building that is able to blend in well with structures from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Where the Parker Hill Branch Library offers an

architectural image of a public library that is benignly alien to its immediate surroundings, the North End Branch Library reflects a more contemporary architectural trend in the evolution of the branch network: an effort to use physical design to reflect the neighborhood, not to elevate it. “The design . . . tries to capture some of the spirit of the background of the neighborhood,” reads a Library-produced pamphlet on the North End branch, “with its deep Italian roots and Latinate feeling.”²²⁴

Although designed to call to mind the appearance of a Roman villa, the exterior of the branch is actually fairly non-descript. Much of the library is blocked from easy view from the street, thereby focusing the eye on the front doorway, which is made of brick and large-paned glass. The North End branch is very much in keeping with the Johnson addition in Copley Square, in that the glass front allows pedestrians to observe the activity of the library without obstruction. The doorway is set prominently back from the sidewalk in a way that creates a separate protected space, not yet within the library but away from the general sidewalk. In this way, the North End branch uses the styles of modernism to create a welcoming, open, non-hierarchical neighborhood library, but one which employs traditional mechanisms for separating the environment of the library from the environment of the street.

Once inside the North End branch, the overwhelming impression is of brightness, comfort, and domesticity. The roof seems to float on columns dispersed around the room, allowing the interior of the library to remain largely unbroken by walls and providing space for skylights across the ceiling. The center of the interior space is reserved for a pool of water, a small oasis surrounded by seating and by tall plants and trees. The effect of this small space is to create a center of calm in the midst of a busy little building, and also to bring to mind the outdoor courtyard of the McKim Building and the central atrium of the Johnson addition, as well as the Mediterranean styles to which the structure is referring. The interior space is not large, but it is carefully divided with half-height bookcases so as to create multiple interior areas, each designated for different uses. Where the open plan presents problems of organization and orientation for the Johnson addition, the North End branch is small enough that it can work well and comfortably there.

As in the Parker Hill branch, much of the North End library is used for children’s books and other materials, but more of the North End library is reserved for adults and for other services, including videos, periodicals, and books-on-tape. The library also includes a significant auditorium, which can be used for lectures, performances, and community meetings, as well as for events for children.

With the inclusion of a bust of Dante Alighieri and a large diorama of the Piazza san Marco in Venice, the design of the interior of the North End branch makes explicit reference to the Italian-American population of the neighborhood, a demographic currently being changed by new residents, many of them young professionals without Italian heritage. One can still hear Italian spoken in the library, however, which also stocks books and magazines in Italian. Unlike the design of the Parker Hill branch, which invites its users to think beyond the confines of their immediate neighborhood, the design of the North End branch is specifically built to be an invocation of local culture. In a more oblique way, the North End library also offers its patrons something that can be hard to find in the North End, something that would have been even harder to find in the 1960s when the library first opened: airy, uncluttered space, full of light and sun and green plants. The North End is an extremely dense neighborhood, made up of small apartments, many of them lacking in direct sunlight. Outdoor open spaces are few. In this way, the North End library presents itself as an extension of the domestic spaces of the North End community, but one with benefits rarely found in private apartments. “The scale is inviting, the atmosphere sheltered,” reads *Boston: Forty Years of Modern Architecture*.²²⁵ The North End Branch Library attempts to meet the needs of its local patrons without imposing on them ideas of personal or community uplift. What uplift there is to be found is merely through the provision of access to books and other materials in a comfortable and tranquil setting.

Conclusion

Through its network of neighborhood branches, the Boston Public Library constantly reinvents itself architecturally, trying out different styles in different communities and adopting new and changing tastes through the decades. In this way, different facets of the mission of the Library – historical continuity, personal uplift, community service – have been emphasized and de-emphasized depending on the environment and the time. The Copley Square complex is the grand statement of the Boston Public Library, its most public face, but the neighborhood branches are a crucial element of the overall provision of library services; for many Bostonians, the local branch is the only library they know. The branch libraries, coupled with bookmobiles and other niche services, are the primary means by which the Library brings its services to the people of Boston, rather than expecting them always to come to Copley Square. In all cases, the branch libraries are heavily used by local residents, and most heavily by children. They are more casual and flexible than is the central library – there is little effort to maintain a quiet environment – and they are centers of

community life, now as much as ever. For these reasons, branch libraries tend to emphasize the internal provision of services, the offering of community programs, over the message-making capacity of exterior design, although both are clearly important to the overall presence of a library in a neighborhood. More than anything, branch libraries stand out as civic institutions in residential neighborhoods, something different and special from the majority of the surrounding structures.

The three branches studied here are illuminating because they represent three different incidents of mission-expression in the history of the Library. The Kirstein Business Branch invokes early Yankee Boston, a time and a cultural environment very different from the 1920s and 1930s. The Parker Hill Branch Library, designed almost concurrently with the Kirstein branch, is a vision of Tudor England, an effort to insert a library into the Mission Hill neighborhood that would be different and would offer a romantic vision of the power of literature to lift individuals out of their modest environments. Lastly, the North End Branch Library of 1965 is an explicit effort to design a branch library around the existing needs and culture of a neighborhood, with the result of a domestic and comfortable small library. The evolution from the explicitly uplifting message of the Parker Hill library to the unassumingly functionalist message of the North End library reflects, in some interesting ways, the evolution experienced in Copley Square between the design of the McKim Building and the design of the Johnson addition. Nevertheless, the branches are each individual structures, experiments, designed on their own for the service of particular neighborhoods. For this reason, they can best be studied on their own aesthetic and cultural terms.

CONCLUSION

An Evolving Institution

The Boston of Joshua Bates was a small city undergoing a remarkable transition. Traditional, homogeneous Boston was gradually disappearing, as tens of thousands of new immigrants – some fleeing poverty, famine or oppression, some simply looking for a new and better life – arrived in Boston Harbor in the space of just a few decades. The unprecedented influx of new residents tested the fundamental character of the city, challenging not only its physical infrastructure but also its ability to tolerate, if not welcome, strangers bringing with them different languages, religions, and cultures. The Yankee elite believed that the dramatic transformation brought on not only by immigration but also but industrialization and urbanization threatened the fundamental stability of the city, and they looked to the development of particular public institutions to reinforce the social and political status quo. This was not a wholly self-serving effort, as Bostonians of the nineteenth century were heir to a tradition of progressive social reform, one imbued with the values of New England Protestantism and dedicated to the improvement of human life. This tradition produced some of the most vocal and prominent proponents of abolition, as well as movements to promote public education, end alcoholism, provide decent housing for the poor, and better the lives of children and families. The dissonance between elite anxiety over the changing urban environment and elite commitment to important social causes was a fundamental feature of Boston society in the second half of the nineteenth century, and it was from this environment that the idea for a truly public urban library, the first in America, was born.

Support for the campaign for a public library in Boston coalesced around the belief that a library, by providing broad access to books and information, offered the potential to elevate, to ennoble, and to uplift its patrons. The belief in the power of books and reading to better the lives of individuals and communities was so strong as to have an almost a religious character for many of its proponents, who promoted the public library as a mechanism for secular salvation, an extension of the New England, Calvinist cultural project. “We now commend to thy goodness, O Thou, the God of our fathers, this institution, designed to promote the great end they sought in coming to the wilderness,” intoned the Reverend E.N. Kirk at the 1855 cornerstone ceremony, “the establishing of a free, enlightened, and Christian people. . . . Promote in the midst of us sound learning and true godliness. Make us a wise and righteous people, to the praise of Thine own infinitely revered and holy name.”²²⁶ This image of a God-fearing and just society, to be realized through the provision of public access to reading material, spoke to the interests and emotions of Yankee Boston and drove the campaign for the establishment of a public library. This vision – the provision of books as an

instrument of both personal improvement and the preservation of social stability – became the abiding institutional mission of the Boston Public Library.

In making a gift of \$50,000 for the purchase of books for a public library, Joshua Bates required the construction of a building to house the library. For Bates, the glory of a public library lay in the simple realization of its mission. The next generation of library advocates, however, made explicit what had only been implicit in Bates's rhetoric: that aesthetics and architecture could play an important role in the identity of the Library. For the Trustees who recruited Charles Follen McKim in the 1880s to design a new building for the Library, aesthetics became an integral part of the mission, a vehicle for communicating not only that the Boston Public Library was heir to the cultural traditions of Europe but also that its patrons were expected to honor that legacy with their comportment and behavior, both inside the Library and out. For McKim and the Library Trustees of the final decade of the nineteenth century, physical design and institutional mission became inseparable, as the aesthetics of the exterior and interior of the Library were expertly marshaled to convey a sense of personal inspiration. No longer was the Library simply the embodiment of Bates's straight-forward vision of the delivery of library services to the public.

Just as nineteenth-century Boston society itself was shot through with seeming contradictions, so too was the design of the McKim Building. For every way in which the McKim design offers unprecedented public access both to general reading material and to reference volumes, rare books, and research texts, it also complicates this democratic vision with messages of control and containment. Not only does the design of the façade, particularly the 'honor roll' of Western civilization, both inspire and exclude, but the closed system of book storage makes a particularly strong statement about the limits of public access, even within an institution dedicated to the ideal of "free to all." In these ways and others, the McKim Building is a complex and fascinating structure, one which simultaneously communicates on multiple levels. McKim's design tells of personal transformation tempered by the anxieties and expectations of an elite eager to use public institutions of culture and education to maintain the existing social structure.

In the more than half-century that separated the opening of the McKim Building and the decision to commission Philip Johnson to design a substantial addition, the institutional mission of the Boston Public Library remained largely unchanged. What changing urban circumstances did transform, however, was the expression of that mission. No longer was Boston a culturally optimistic or self-

confident city, sure of its place in the nation and the world. Boston had been drained of people and vitality by the economic decline of the of late 1940s and 1950s, and changing social attitudes no longer permitted public institutions to be openly hierarchical and hortatory. In this environment, the Library approached the design of its addition cautiously, electing to avoid the use of architecture and aesthetics for the communication of cultural messages and opting instead to focus primarily on the functional aspects of the new structure, those aspects that would allow the Library to offer new and expanded library services. In some ways, this is a return to the vision originally offered by Bates, that of a simple, functional public library, one focused on the effective storage and distribution of books. Johnson was, and is, a sophisticated, enigmatic architect, and not one to produce a modest, purely functionalist structure. The resulting design is a puzzle, a modernist building which attempts to be contextual while also minimizing the explicit expression of messages and emphasizing the interior functions of the building – a structure that, in eschewing McKim’s legacy of cultural messages, in fact becomes freighted with the effort of cultural neutrality.

The two components of the Copley Square complex represent two moments in the institutional history of the Library – moments in which different aspects of the Library mission were emphasized architecturally, one in neo-Classicism and one in late-stage modernism – and in the final analysis each structure has its strengths and weaknesses. The McKim structure is a glorious civic building, an artifact of the City Beautiful movement, and an expression of optimism about American urban life that has proved enduringly compelling. At the same time, it is a vehicle for the communication of elitist aspirations, and therefore culturally problematic. It is also an inefficient structure for the provision of modern library services. The Johnson addition is, in many ways, a better public library facility than is the McKim structure, designed to support multiple specialized departments as well as the open storage of hundreds of thousands of books. But the design of the building is fundamentally cold, without human-scale detailing and devoid of the sense of uplift that the McKim design so adroitly conveys.

In their wish to avoid confrontation – confrontation either with the McKim Building or with a society resistant to messages of personal improvement – the Library Trustees and Johnson created an addition that confronts precisely because it is aggressively neutral, a structure that challenges by seeming to demand nothing at all. This is the paradox of the Johnson addition, a structure designed to be human-centered where the McKim structure is hierarchical, but one that menaces in its massive blandness.



The Johnson addition was completed in 1972, and the Boston Public Library undertook an extensive renovation of the McKim Building in the mid-1980s. The McKim renovation is currently in the second of three phases, and is scheduled to continue for several more years. With funding from the federal government and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, as well as from private donors, the Library has been painstakingly restoring McKim's design – including the many works of art within the building – and, where possible, converting the building for modern uses. The McKim Building is now used limited to the storage and use of research materials, materials which continue to be kept in a system of closed stacks. Many of the individuals rooms of the McKim Building have been turned into exhibition and function spaces.

Without doubt, the McKim structure was badly in need of renovation and repair by the middle of the 1980s, and the Library was feeling pressure to ensure the long-term protection of its nineteenth-century landmark. At the same time, the restoration work has further diminished the stature of the Johnson addition, underlining its utilitarian, functionalist qualities in contrast to the opulence of the McKim structure. Furthermore, the restoration has only served to increase the public presence of the McKim Building, a building that tourists visit, architects study, historians analyze, and the Library itself uses as its public face.

This phenomenon raises intriguing questions about the nature of civic architecture and the relationship between urban society, always evolving, and the structures it builds. The vision of personal transformation offered by McKim, no matter how culturally problematic it may be, remains potent even at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For Johnson to have denied that legacy was, arguably, to have fundamentally misinterpreted the role of public libraries as repositories of shared culture and knowledge in urban society. Public libraries are not only for the storage of books, perhaps not even primarily for the storage of books. They exist to inspire, to offer a realization of dreams and an escape from reality. They also serve to elevate the urban environments around them, to use architecture and urban design to both beautify and embolden. McKim understood the importance of the multifaceted functions of a public library, while Johnson either did not understand it or was constrained, by the presence of the McKim structure and the expectations of the Library Trustees, from realizing it in his design.



The Boston Public Library will continue to modify its Copley Square complex for years into the future, but it is extremely unlikely that any major exterior changes will be made there. The architectural future of the Library lies in its network of neighborhood branches, a network which has recently gained renewed vitality after years of dormancy. A branch library was opened in the neighborhood of Allston in 2001, the first new local library in twenty years, and the Hyde Park library recently received an award-winning addition to its 1899 structure. These two new branch facilities offer an interesting glimpse at the current trends in the architectural expression of the mission of the Boston Public Library. Designed by the firm of Machado & Silvetti, the Allston branch is an open, sunny space, sub-divided with shelves and tables into different areas, including a substantial area for children and one for the use of computers and electronic media. The branch also acts as a community center, housing not only the library but also a meeting space and a hallway designed for the exhibition of paintings and photographs. The Hyde Park addition is done entirely in glass, a rectangular structure enclosing an area dedicated primarily to children. It also contains spaces for community activities.

These new branch structures are more similar to the Johnson model than to the McKim model, in that they are modern buildings housing large open spaces with open-access bookshelves. They are also without explicit cultural or architectural messages and – unlike in the North End Branch Library – they make no obvious attempt refer to the neighborhood around them. At the same time, they preserve an aesthetic element that McKim would appreciate, creating handsome and comfortable spaces that manage to both offer library services and provide attractive buildings that have the feel of public libraries, places of learning, of exploring, and of dreaming. With time, and in small ways, the Boston Public Library is finding a compromise between the image offered by McKim and the image offered by Johnson, a way to combine both function and inspiration. One hopes that the new branch library currently planned for the Uphams Corner neighborhood will continue this trend.



In closing, it is important that the emphasis here on architectural analysis not obscure the enormous cultural achievement represented by the Boston Public Library. First established by an act of the Massachusetts Legislature in 1848, the Boston Public Library was the first public circulating library

in America, the first public library to establish a system of neighborhood branches, and the first public library to include facilities devoted solely to children. The Boston Public Library developed when it did both because it served a perceived public need for social stability and because it spoke to a genuine Bostonian belief in the importance of democratic access to knowledge as a route to personal and community betterment. “It has originated in no mere design to furnish a resort for professed scholars, where they may pursue their studies, or prosecute their researches, historical or classical, scientific or literary, – important as such an object might be,” declared Robert Winthrop, Library President, at the 1855 ceremony on Boylston Street. “It is to be eminently a library for the people, – for the whole people.”²²⁷

The Boston Public Library of today, both the Copley Square complex and the neighborhood branches, is still very much a library for the people. A few hours spent in any facility of the Library will leave the observer with the impression of a vibrant public institution, always busy, always bustling, serving an immense range of people and needs throughout the day and across the city. The Library remains what Bates and the early Trustees envisioned: a public institution for people of all races, classes, and cultures to use for their own enjoyment and edification in the service of bettering their communities. For children, for adults, for men, women, the young and old, the Boston Public Library continues to fulfill its mission on a daily basis, to bring people and books together with minimal restrictions and maximum freedom.

We now take public libraries for granted in America, but they are a profound symbol of social achievement, an institution dedicated to the proposition that civil society will be a better and healthier place if freedom of thought and inquiry is not only permitted but endorsed and supported, the proposition that public access to information – no matter how challenging to the status quo – will strengthen the bonds of urban society rather than threaten them. These are the values on which the Boston Public Library was built, and these are the values it has continued to promote, through urban prosperity and decline and now prosperity again, through changing architectural trends, and through evolving philosophies of library management. “The Library is in Boston, for Boston (though its services extend far beyond the city), but it is not wholly of Boston,” wrote *The Herald-Traveler* in 1958. “It is an institution of such unique distinction, being one of the great libraries of the world, that it is something which is, in its field, bigger than Boston – a part greater than the whole.”²²⁸

APPENDIX

TIMELINE OF THE FACILITIES AND LOCATIONS OF THE BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY[†]

<u>Facility</u>	<u>Dates in Use</u> [*]
Mason Street Schoolhouse (shared rooms)	1854-1858
Boylston Street Building	1858-1895
Charlestown Branch Library	Location 1: 1862-1869** Location 2: 1869-1913 Location 3: 1913-1970 Location 4: 1970-present
East Boston Branch Library	Location 1: 1869-1914 Location 2: 1914-present
South Boston	Location 1: 1872-1948 Closed: 1948-1957 Location 2: 1957-present
Brighton Branch Library	Location 1: 1874-1969 Location 2: 1969-present
Lower Mills Branch Library	Location 1: 1876-1883 Location 2: 1883-1931 Location 3: 1931-1981 Location 4: 1981-present
Jamaica Plain Branch Library	Location 1: 1877-1908 Closed: 1908-1911 Location 2: 1911-present
South End Branch Library	Location 1: 1877-1879 Location 2: 1879-1904 Location 3: 1904-1923 Location 4: 1923-1971 Location 5: 1971-present
McKim Building – Copley Square	1895-present
West End Branch Library	Location 1: 1896-1960

[†]This list includes only those Boston Public Library facilities dedicated to library services. It does not include private facilities (e.g. stores and churches) used as book deposit stations, nor does it include early reading rooms, many of which were quasi-private.

^{*}Because many branch libraries have changed locations, some multiple times, this list includes the dates of each of the different facilities occupied within a particular neighborhood.

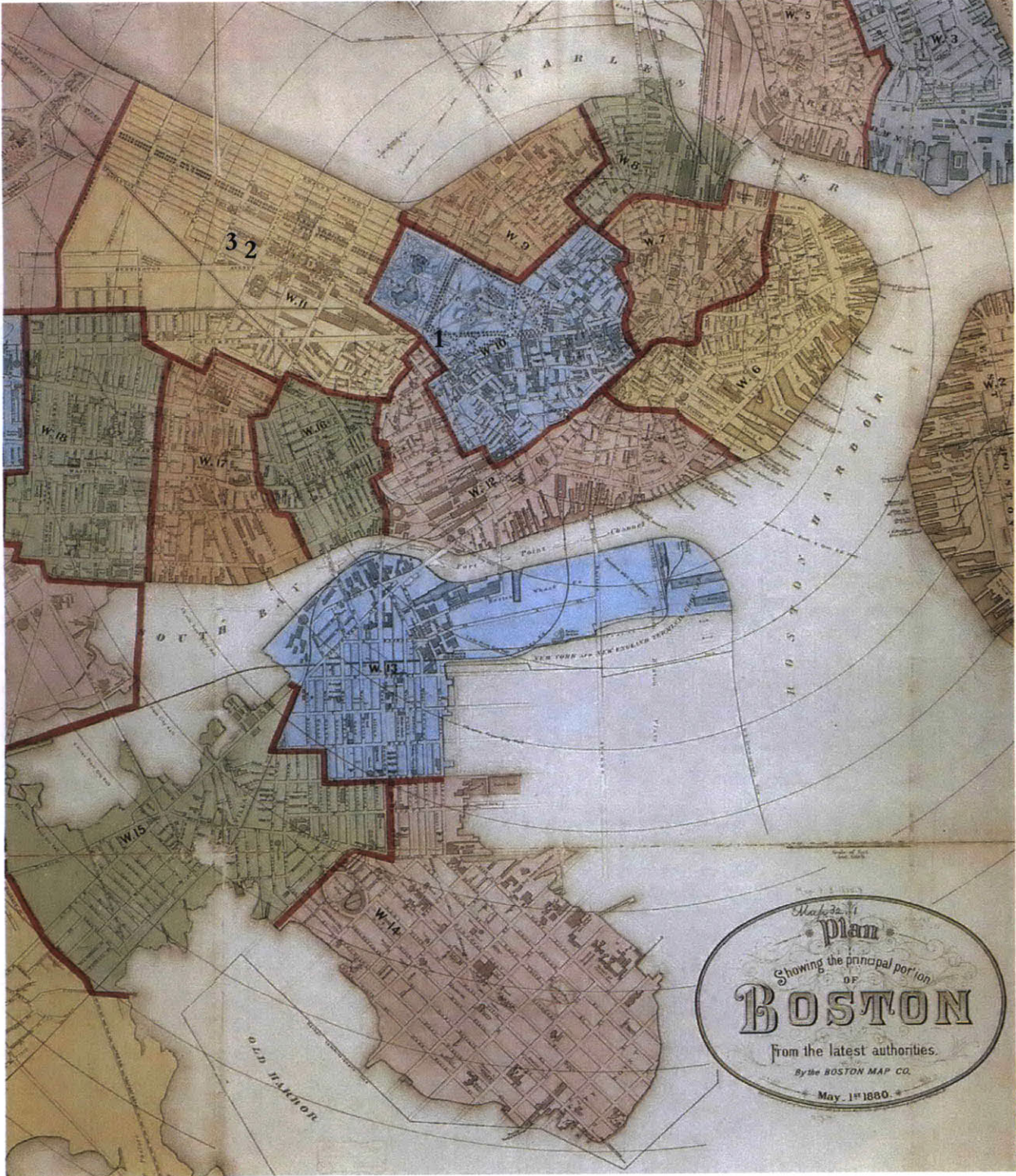
^{**}Supported by the Warren Institution for Savings.

	Closed: 1960-1968 Location 2: 1968-present
West Roxbury Branch Library	Location 1: 1896-1922 Location 2: 1922-present
Hyde Park Branch Library	1899-present
Washington Village Branch Library (Old Colony Housing Project, South Boston)	Location 1: 1901-1942 Location 2: 1942-1972 Closed: 1972-1983 Location 3: 1983-present
Uphams Corner Branch Library	1904-present
Codman Square Branch Library	Location 1: 1905-1978 Location 2: 1978-present
Connolly Branch Library (Jamaica Plain)	Location 1: 1905-1932 Location 2: 1932-present
Grove Hall Branch Library	Location 1: 1905-1919 Location 2: 1919-1926 Location 3: 1929-1970 Location 4: 1970-present
Parker Hill Branch Library (Roxbury)	Location 1: 1907-1931 Location 2: 1931-present
Orient Heights Branch Library	1912-present
North End Branch Library	Location 1: 1913-1965 Location 2: 1965-present
Roslindale Branch Library	Location 1: 1918-1961 Location 2: 1961-present
Mattapan Branch Library	Location 1: 1923-1931 Location 2: 1931-present
Allston Branch Library	Location 1: 1924-1929 Location 2: 1929-1979 Closed: 1979-2001 Location 3: 2001-present
Kirstein Business Branch Library	1930-present
Faneuil Branch Library (Brighton)	1931-present

Adams Street Branch Library (Dorchester)	Location 1: 1947-1951 Location 2: 1951-present
Egleston Square Branch Library	1953-present
Fields Corner Branch Library	1969-present
Johnson Addition – Copley Square	1972-present
Dudley Branch Library	1978-present***

***The current Dudley Branch Library replaced the Mount Pleasant Branch Library and the Fellowes Athenaeum (private), now both defunct.

ILLUSTRATIONS



(1) Boylston Street Building (1858), (2) McKim Building (1895), (3) Johnson Addition (1972).

Plan Showing the principal portion of Boston From the latest authorities (Boston: Boston Map Company, 1880), reprinted from Alex Krieger, David Cobb, and Amy Turner, eds., *Mapping Boston* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1999), plate 43.

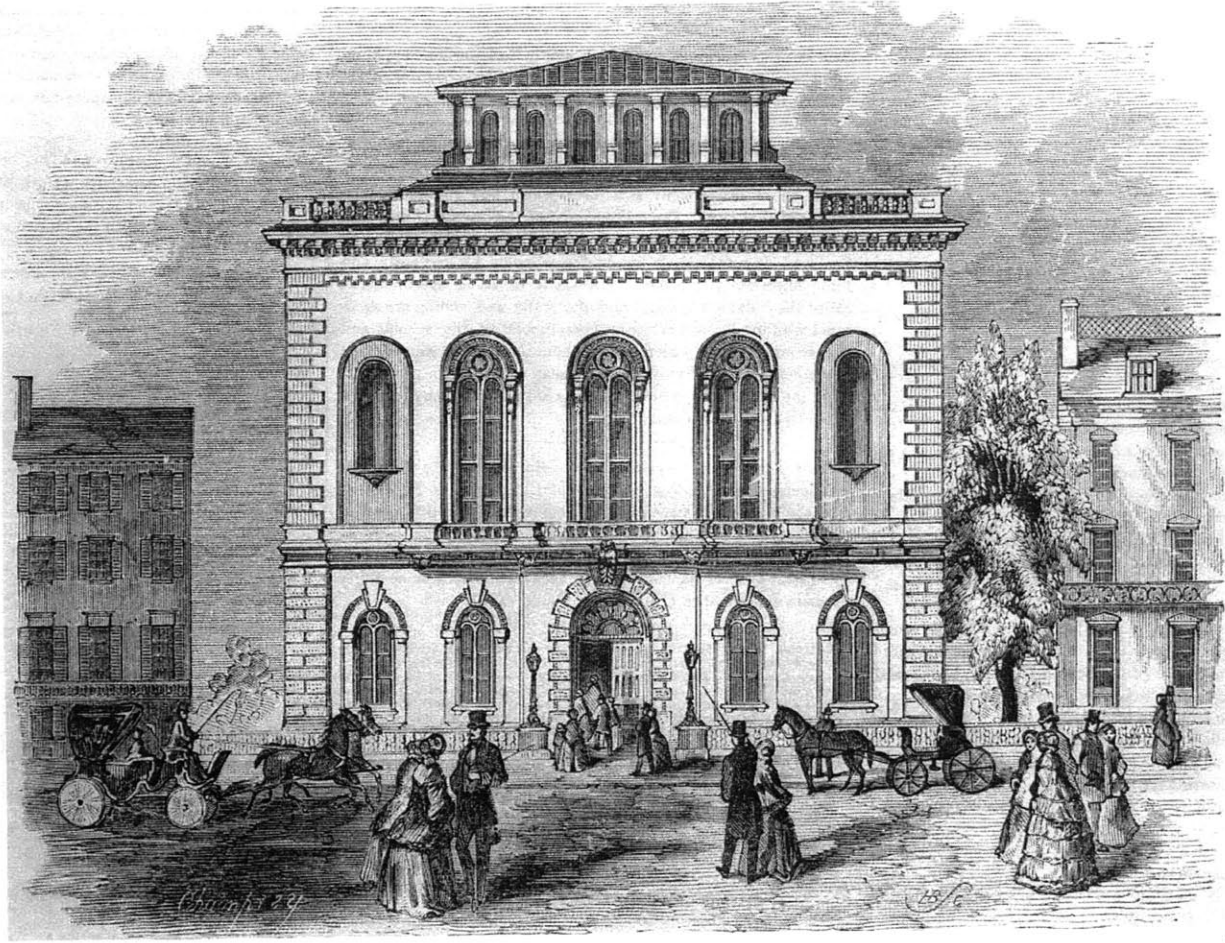


Top Left: Joshua Bates

Bottom Right: Alexandre Vattemare

Website of the Boston Public Library: www.bpl.org.





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The first Boston Public Library building (opened 1858) – Boylston Street.

Barbara Meil Hobson and Paul M. Wright, *Boston, A State of Mind: An Exhibition Record* (Boston: Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston, 1977), 65.

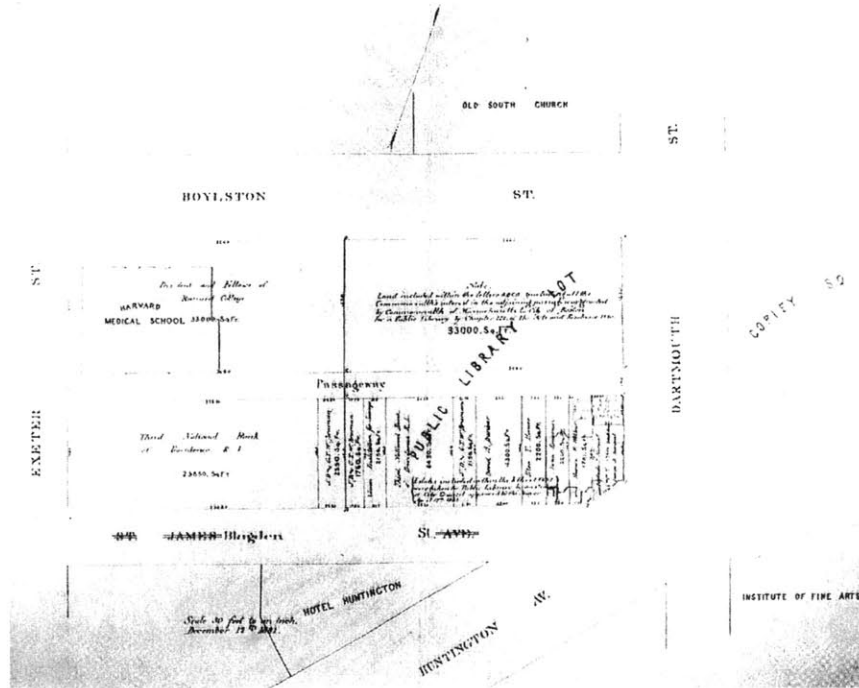


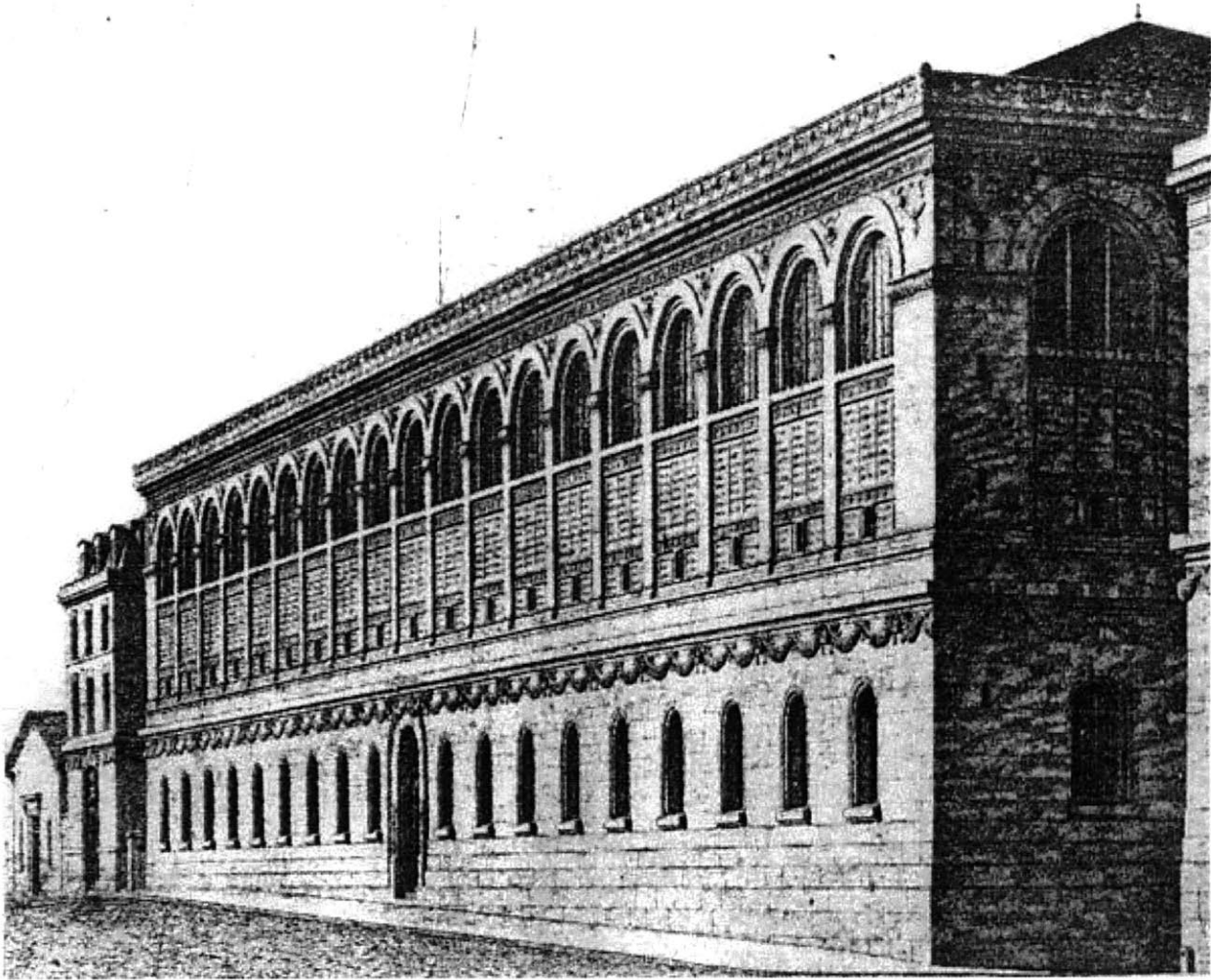
Top Left: Portrait of Charles Follen McKim, 1903.

Leland M. Roth, *McKim, Mead & White, Architects* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 2.

Bottom Right: Map of the Copley Square site for the McKim Building.

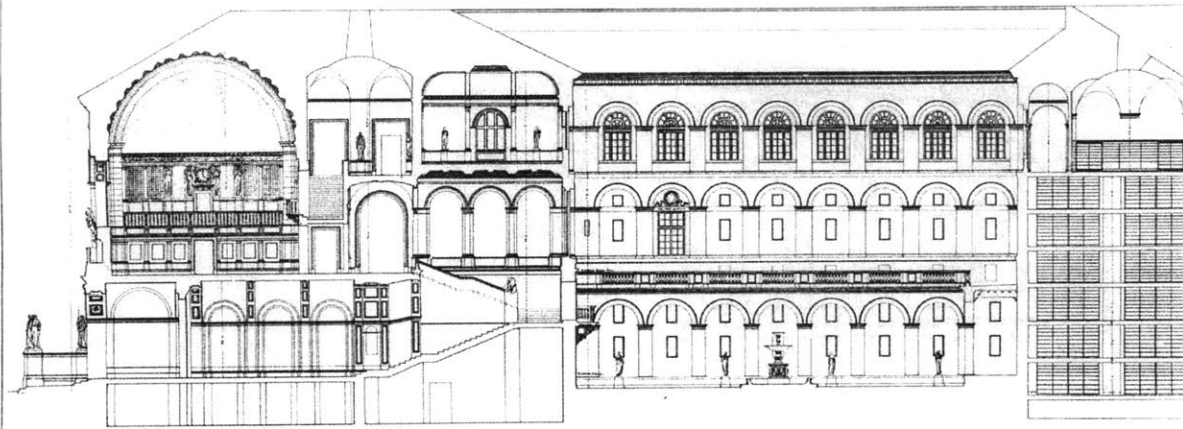
Archives of the Boston Landmarks Commission





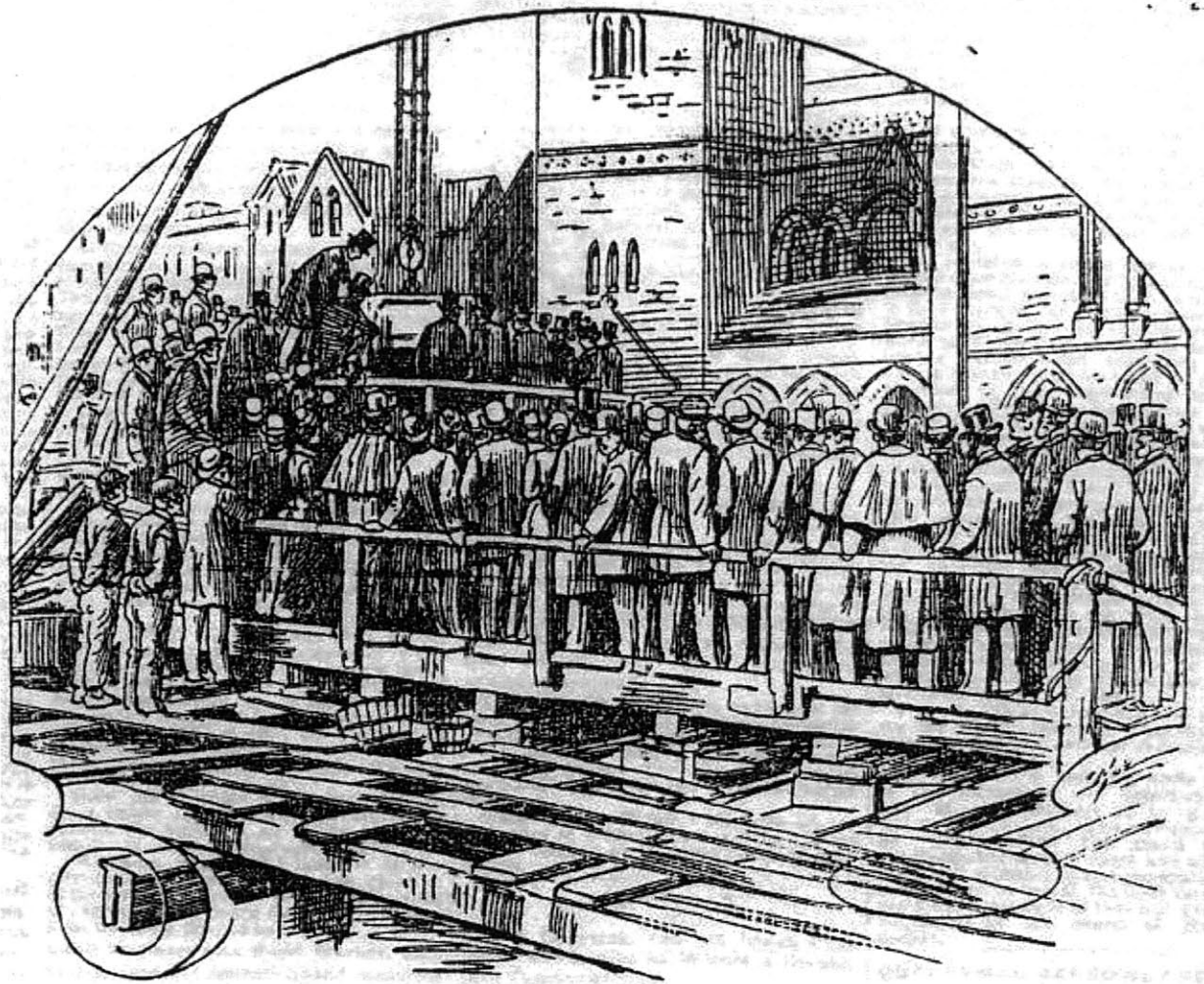
Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève, Paris.

Herbert Small, *Handbook of the New Public Library in Boston* (Boston: Curtis & Co, 1895), 67.



Early designs for the McKim Building.

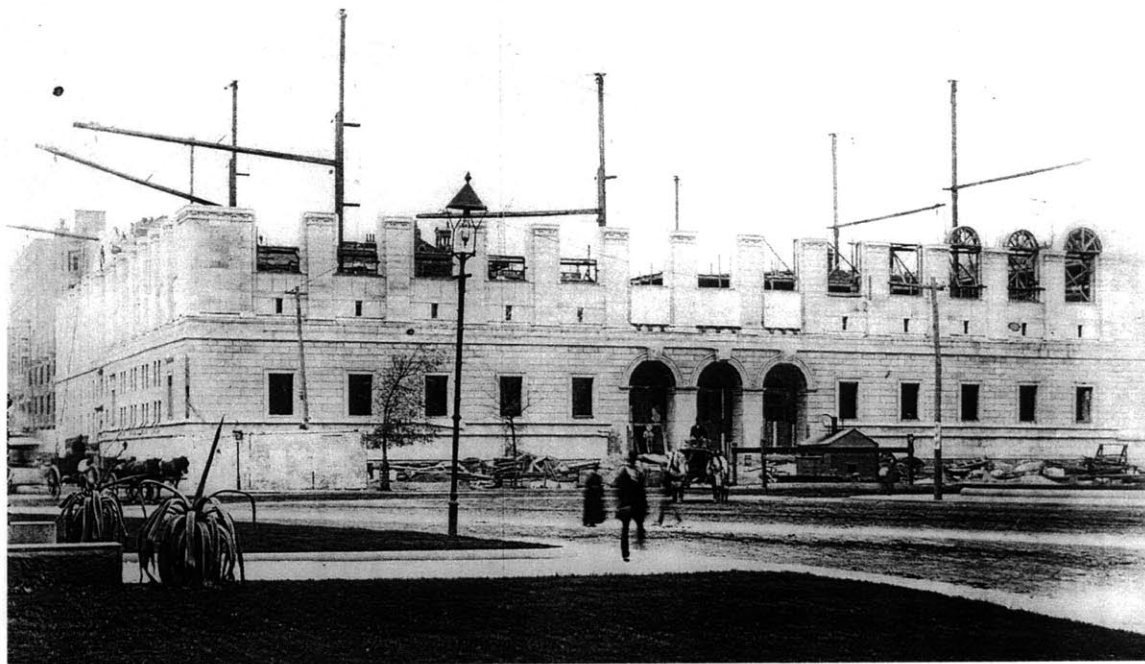
Supplement to Thirty-Seventh Annual Report of the Trustees of the Public Library, 1889.



OWERING THE STONE INTO PLACE.

The laying of the cornerstone for the McKim Building, 1888.

"Stone in Place," *The Boston Daily Globe*, 29 November 1888, 8.



Construction of the McKim Building.

Top: Archives of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities

Bottom: Archives of the Bostonian Society



View across Copley Square from Trinity Church, with McKim Building in center, 1910.

Website of Great Buildings Online: www.greatbuildings.com



View across Copley Square from the McKim Building, with Trinity Church in center, 2002.

Photograph by author



Entrance to the McKim Building.

Photograph by author



Illustration of the entrance to the McKim Building.

Postcard, Found Image Press



Top Left: Entrance and light fixtures, McKim Building.

Bottom Right: Entrance statue, McKim Building.

Photographs by author

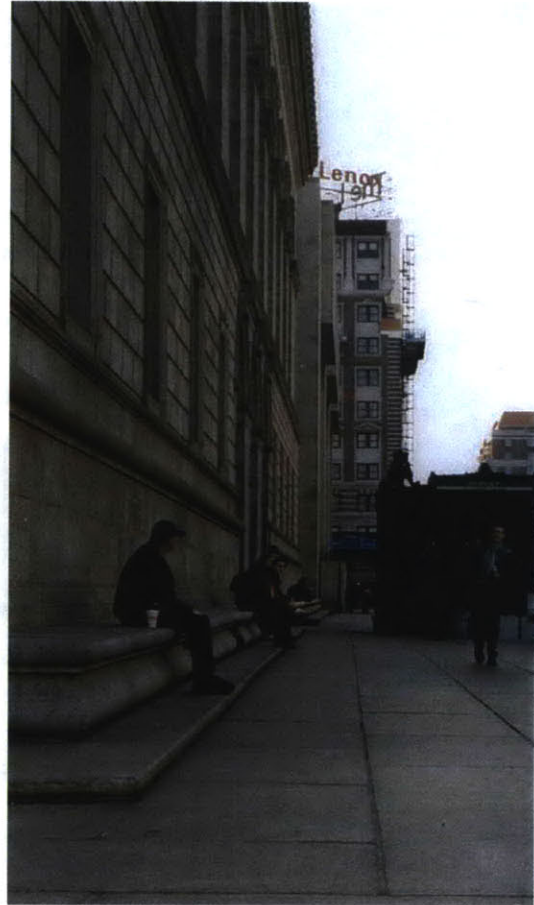


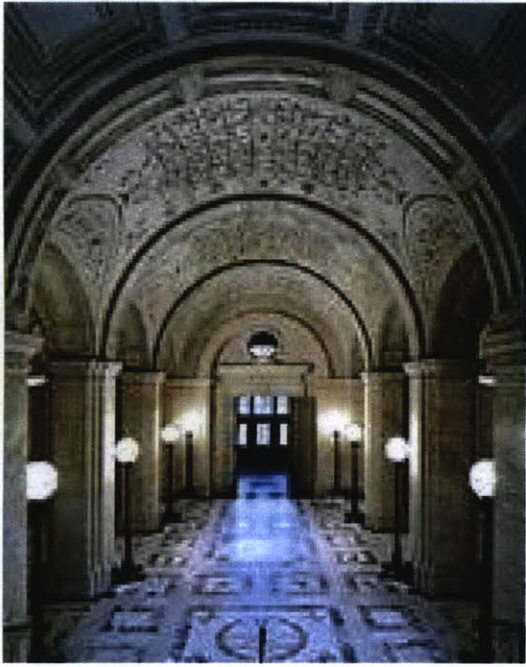


Top Left: Carved names, McKim façade.

Bottom Right: Exterior bench, McKim Building.

Photographs by author





Lobby, McKim Building.

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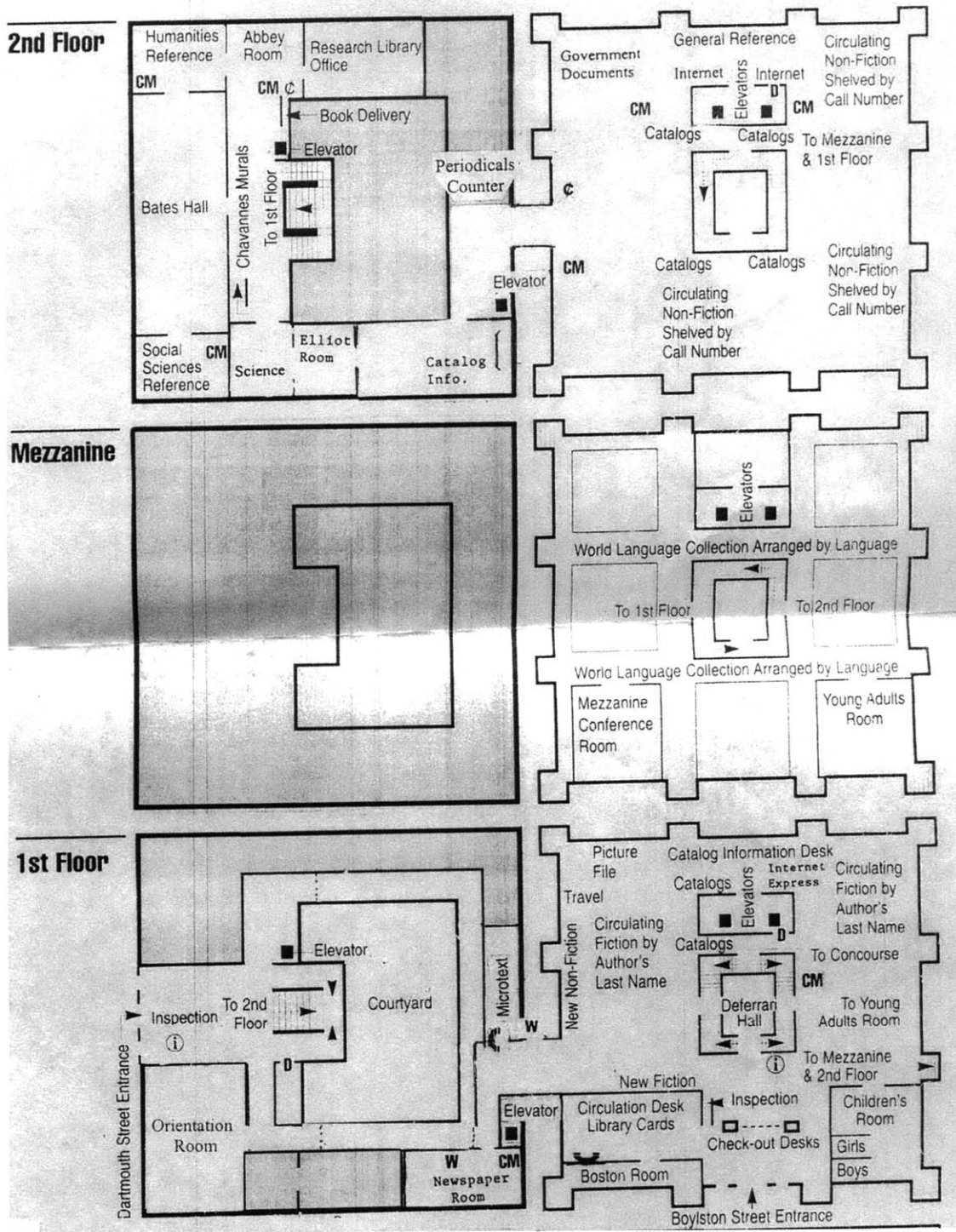
Main staircase, McKim Building.

Jon Marcus, *Boston: A CityLife Pictorial Guide* (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, 1998), 63.



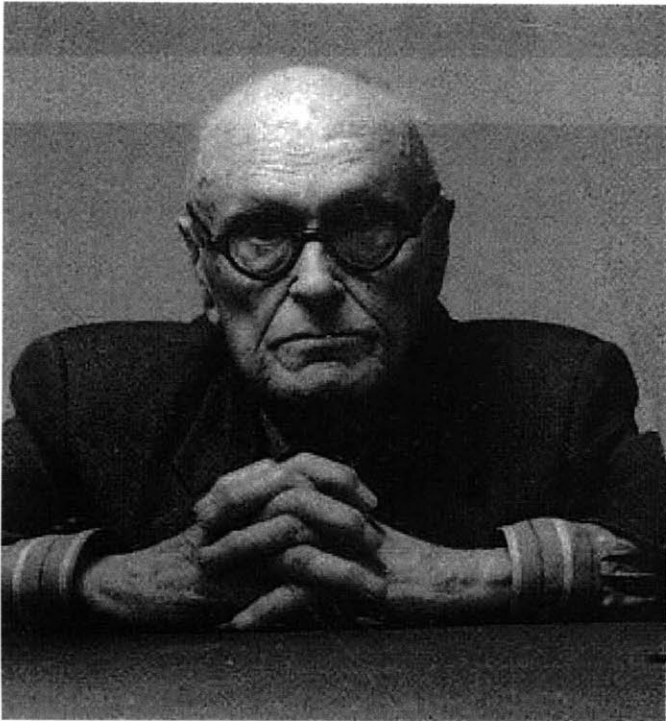
Historic photograph of Bates Reading Room, McKim Building.

Leland M. Roth, *McKim, Mead & White, Architects* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 129.



Floor plans of the McKim Building (left) and the Johnson addition (right) indicating the different interior configurations and systems of book-storage and -retrieval in the two structures.

Boston Public Library

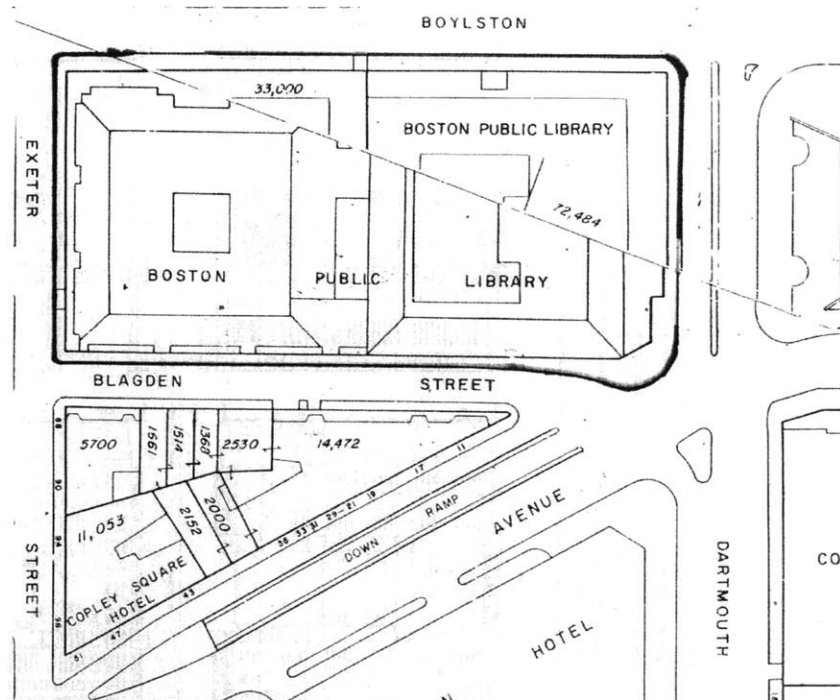


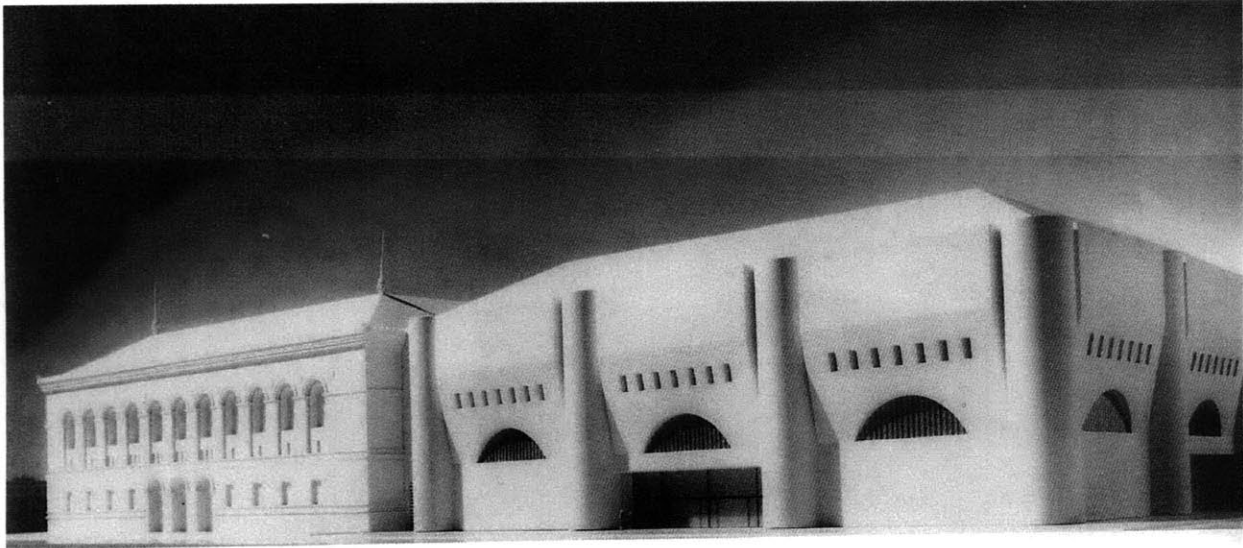
Top Left: Portrait of Philip Johnson, circa 1996.

Peter Blake, *Philip Johnson* (Berlin: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1996), back cover.

Bottom Right: Map of the Copley Square site for the Johnson addition.

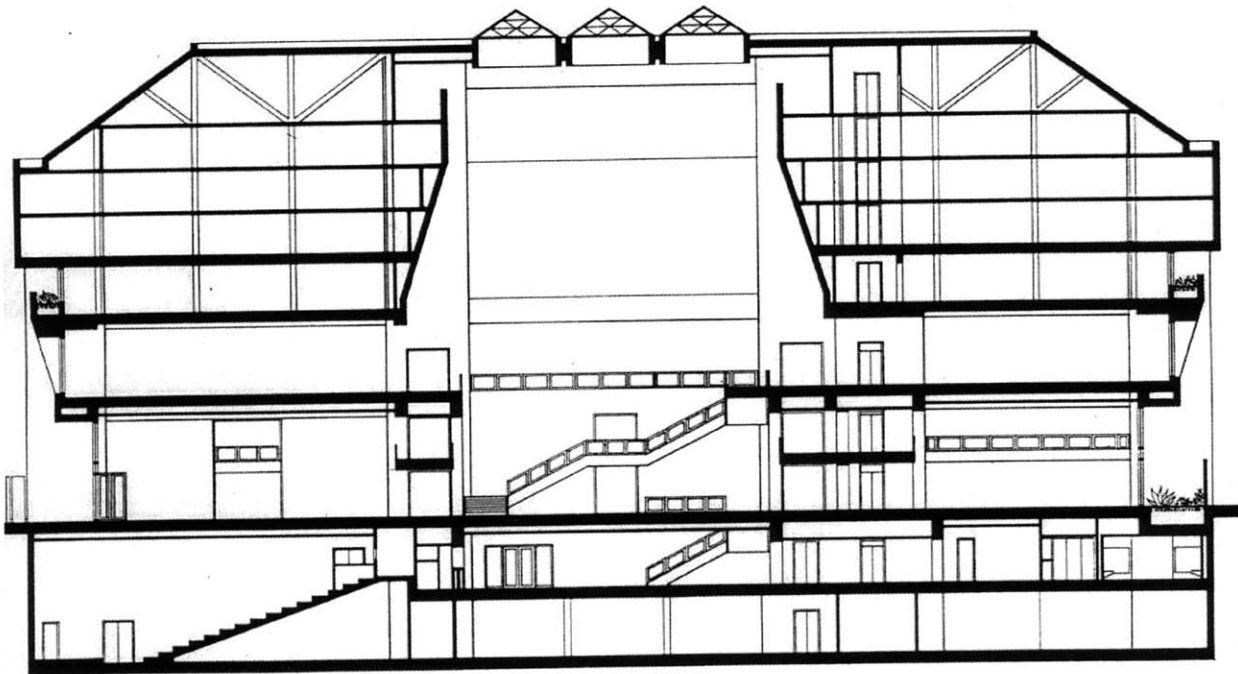
Archives of the Boston Landmarks Commission





First model for the Johnson addition.

Hilary Lewis and John O'Connor, *Philip Johnson: The Architect in His Own Words* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 86.



Cross-section of the final design for the Johnson addition.

Hilary Lewis and John O'Connor, *Philip Johnson: The Architect in His Own Words* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 91.



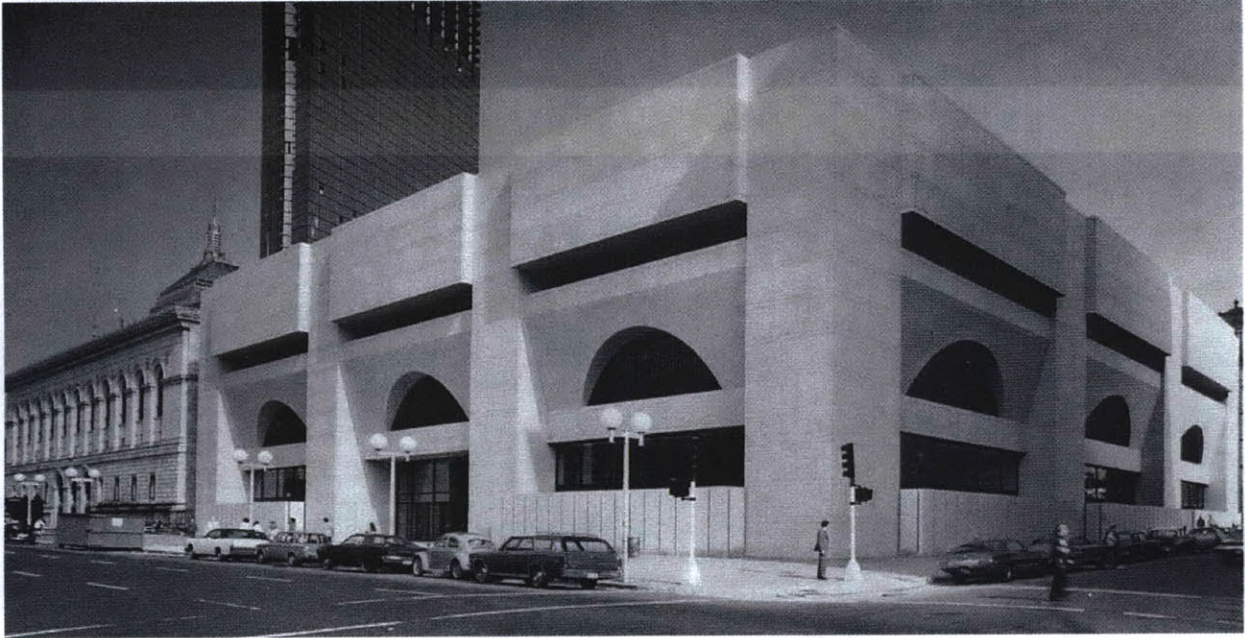
Top Left: Construction of the Johnson addition, 1971.

B.P.L. News, January 1971, 4.

Bottom Right: Western side of the Prudential complex, neighbor to the Johnson addition.

Photograph by author



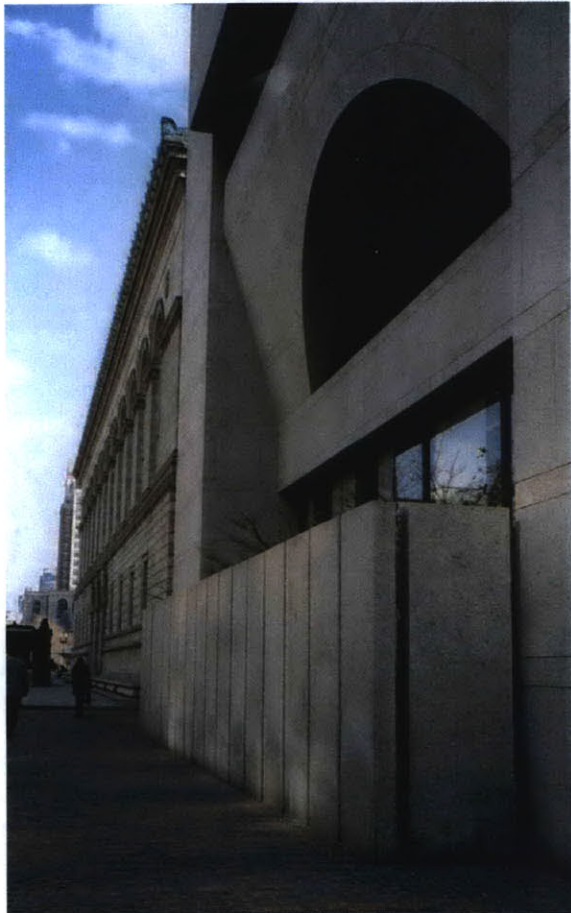


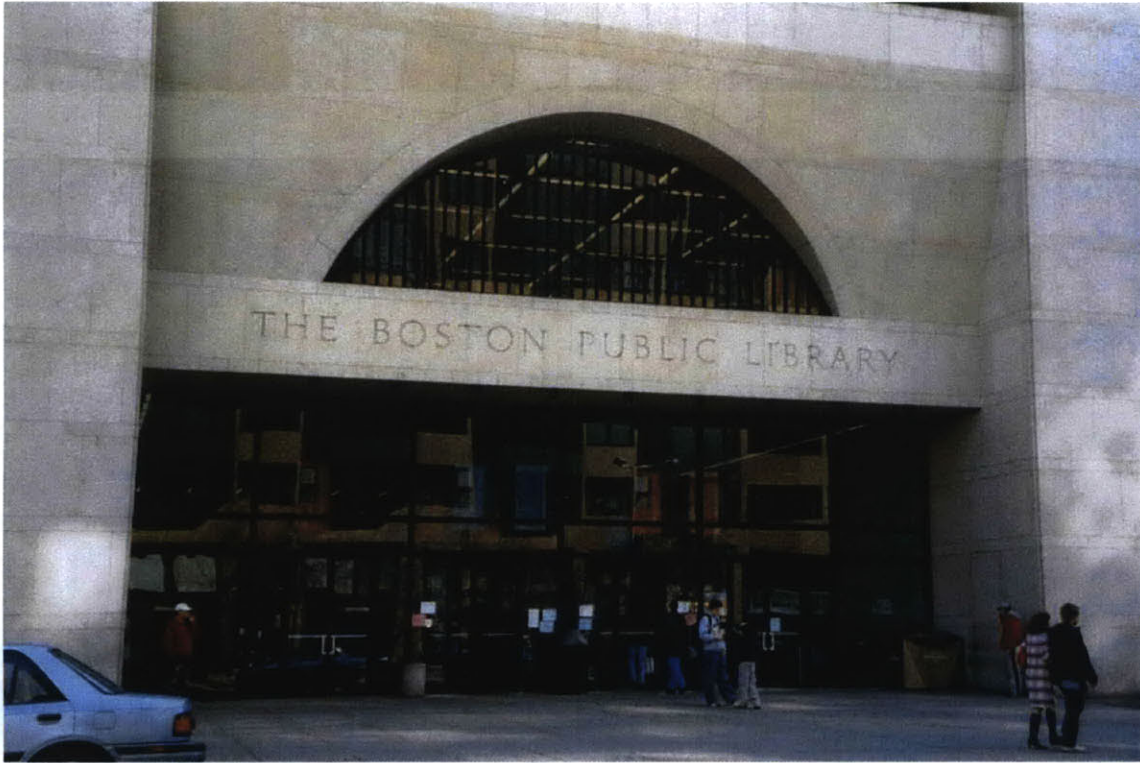
Top: Johnson addition, circa 1975. Note the construction of the Hancock Building in back.

Unknown source

Bottom Left: Hidden garden, Johnson addition.

Photograph by author





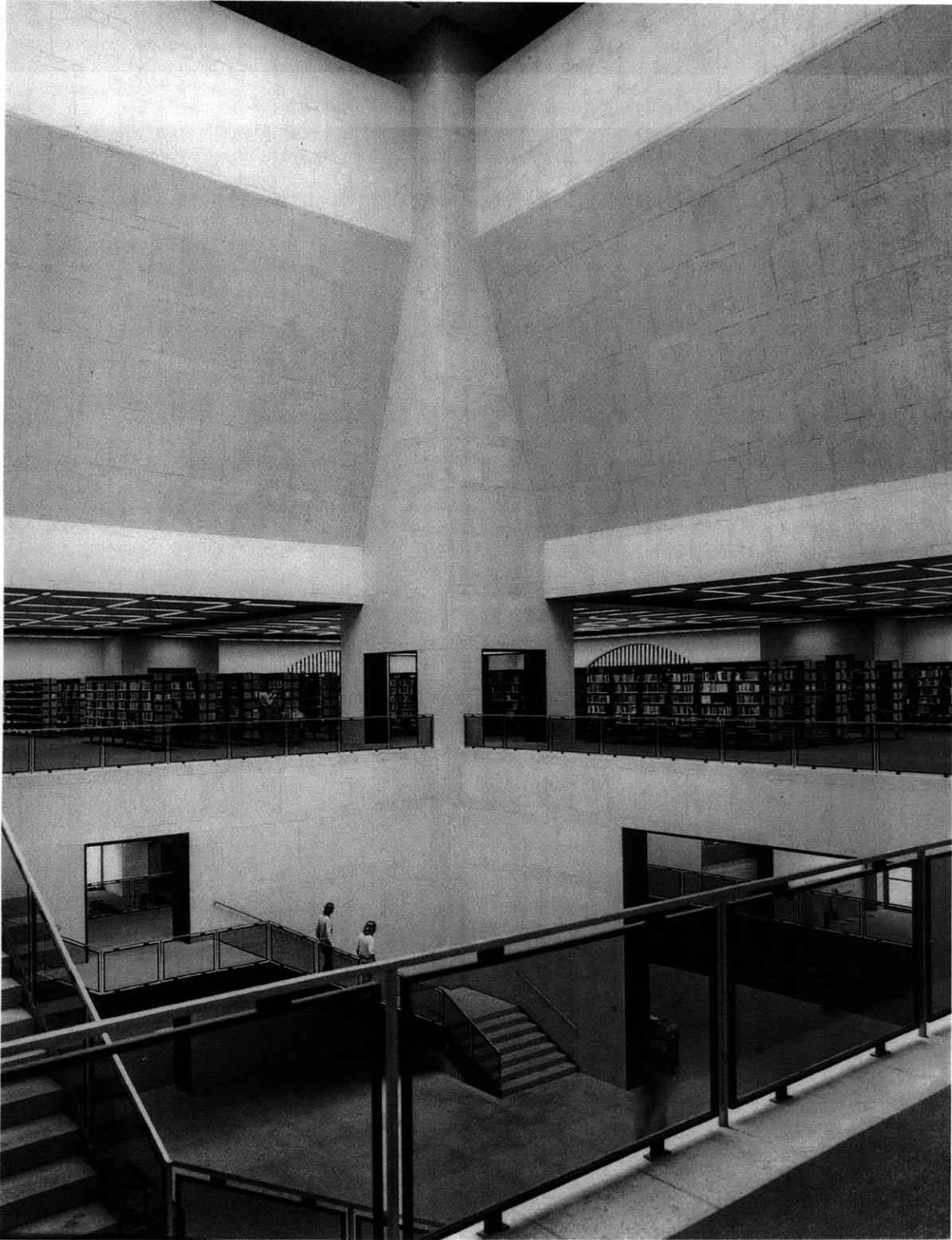
Entrance to the Johnson addition.

Photograph by author



Lobby, Johnson addition.

Photograph by author



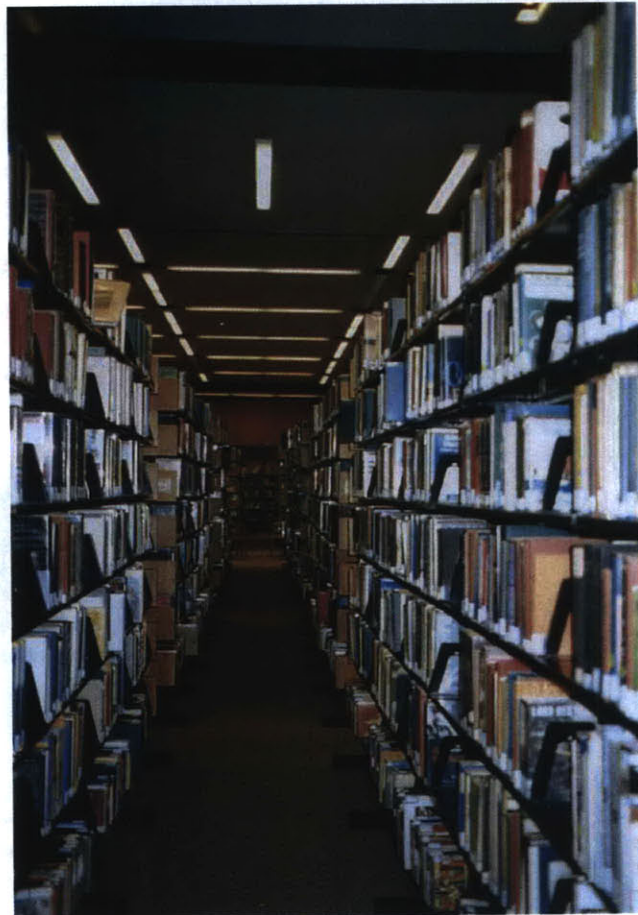
Central atrium, Johnson addition.

Hilary Lewis and John O'Connor, *Philip Johnson: The Architect in His Own Words* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 85.



Open bookstacks, Johnson addition.

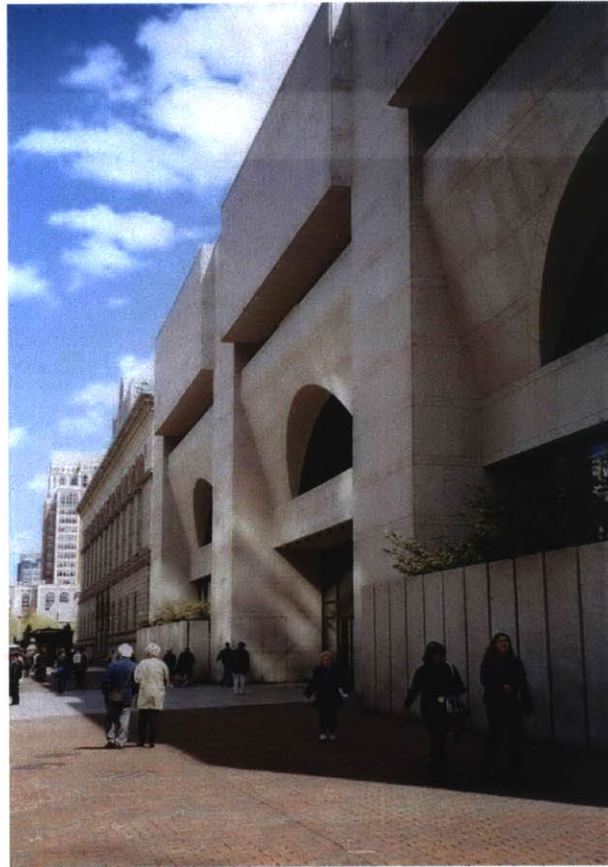
Photographs by author



Top Right. Meeting of the McKim Building and the Johnson addition, Boylston Street.

Bottom Left. Meeting of the McKim Building and the Johnson addition, Blagden Street.

Photographs by author





Kirstein Business Branch Library, Downtown Boston.

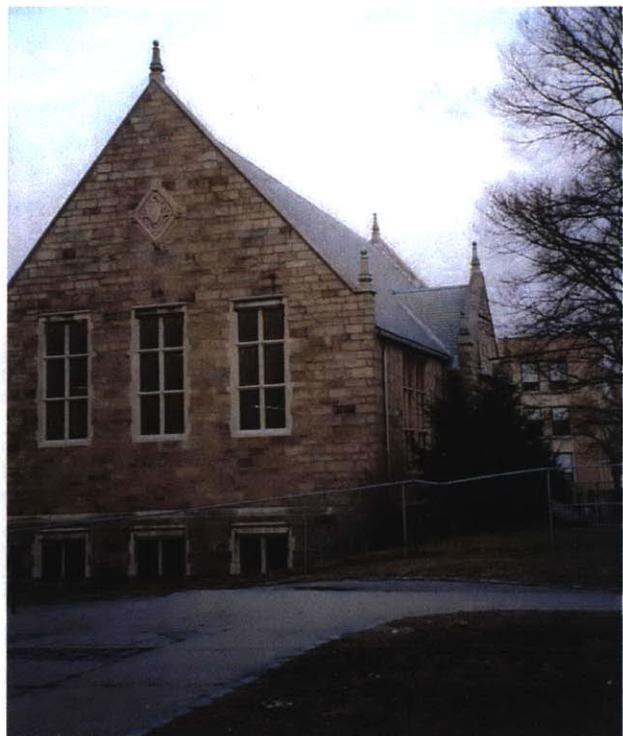
Photographs by author





Parker Hill Branch Library, Roxbury.

Photographs by author





North End Branch Library.

Photographs by author



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NOTES

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Katherine Sophia Fichter graduated in 1995 with a B.A. in History from The College of The University of Chicago. Her B.A. thesis was a study of revolutionary politics in seventeenth-century France in the years prior to the ascendancy of Louis XIV. Before matriculating at M.I.T., she worked for the Antitrust Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, the National Conference of the State Legislatures, and the Massachusetts House of Representatives. While at M.I.T., Ms. Fichter has focused her studies on urban development in the United States and abroad, both economic and political, with particular emphasis on the role of public institutions. In addition to her academic studies, Ms. Fichter worked as an intern for the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC and as a summer staff member for Adaptive Environments in Boston. She also worked as both a Research Assistant and a Teaching Assistant in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning.

Among other honors, Ms. Fichter is the recipient of a Ford Foundation Research Grant (1994), an Outstanding Contribution Award from the U.S. Department of Justice (1996), and an Award of Appreciation from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (2000). In 2002, Ms. Fichter was named a Presidential Management Intern.