

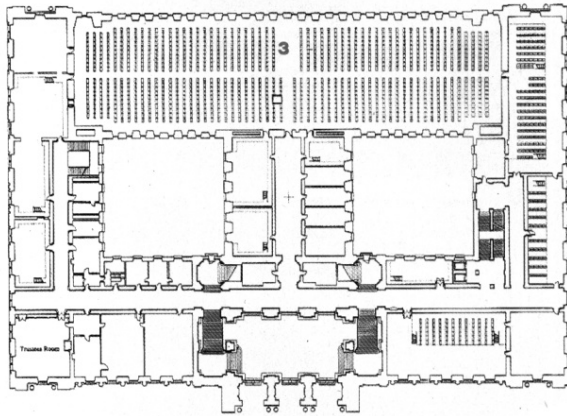


Figure 48: New York City Humanities Library

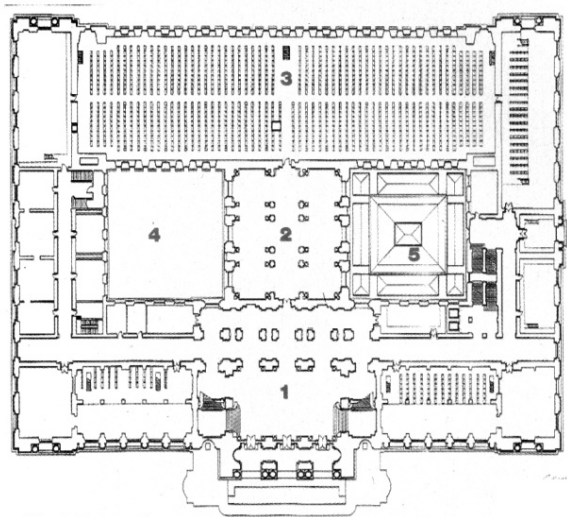
CASE STUDY 4 - The Nexus at 5th and 40th

What occurs at the intersection of 5th Avenue and 40th Street in midtown Manhattan is what I am calling a Nexus. It is a crossroads between a late 18th century library – built in the early 19th century, The Humanities and Social Sciences Library; a mid to late 20th century library, the Mid-Manhattan Library; and an early 21st century library (arguably still a late 20th century library), The South Court, within the Humanities Library. All of this is within or adjacent to the context of Bryant Park, or more specifically the 5th Avenue terrace of the park, which acts as a threshold to the Humanities Library.

The Humanities Library is a mighty Beaux Arts building that is perfectly at home surrounded by buildings five times its height, for in spite of this lofty distinction it manages to overpower all of its neighbors handily. It is a rare moment in New York City when your attention is so clearly and effortlessly fixed on one



Second-floor plan.

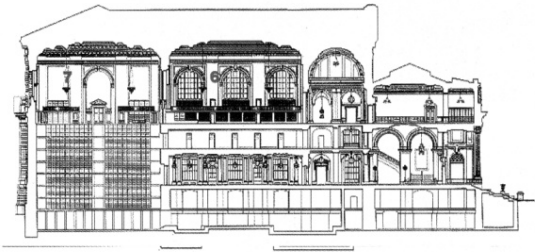


First-floor plan.

Figure 49: Humanities Library Plans

distinct aspect of the cityscape, and this is certainly one of them. Appropriately, the same is true for the interior of the library itself; the vast reading room has a similar effect on the contents of the building, even though it is only a small part, a mere fraction, when you consider the total interior square footage.

Part of the charm, or even quaintness, of the Humanities Library is the way the vast majority of it is simply off limits to the general public. This creates a mystique to the building, as if you were a visitor into a foreign land with new customs which you must follow or face expulsion. The five stories of stacks which remain hidden to the public eye can be seen as a metaphor for the contents of the books themselves; you have no proof that what is within is actually true, but you take it on good authority to be fact. These books cannot be taken from the library, thus compounding the mystique and feeling of being in a foreign land. No matter what you see and do within,



Cross section (Bryant Park, Fifth Avenue, left to right).

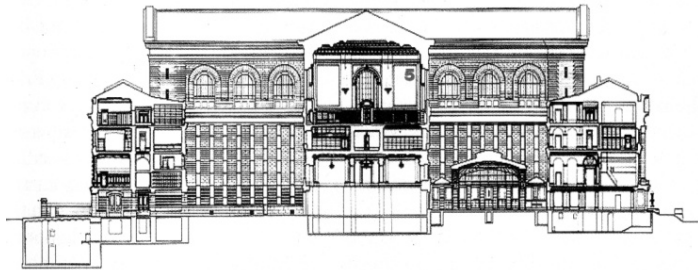


Figure 50: Humanities Library Sections

no matter how much time you spend, you can only depart with what you brought in with you, with the exception of the newly laid contents of your mind.

There is an undeniable, almost tangible feeling associated with being within the vast reading room of the Humanities library. A hush falls upon all those who enter. In some ways it is merely an interaction between the physics of sound and human nature. We know we must be quiet within a library, but within this space the slightest noise bounces and echoes at an increased intensity such that the source of this noise is quickly made very self conscious. It is the amplification of the noise which demands that those within be quiet. But it is far more than a simple behavioral trick into a state of quiet. Something about that space is very conducive to feelings associated with study, learning, and thought. Why this is so is much more difficult to pin down, but I do have a theory.



Figure 51: Humanities Library Reading Room

It has a great deal to do with the vast empty space that one finds one's self suddenly in. Immediately the human scale is torn away with staggering effects. Suddenly, humility takes precedence. When I say humility I am not talking about self humiliation, which has come to be the popular meaning, but the older, spiritual variety of humility, which simply means to completely forget yourself. Forgetting yourself, that is to say, forgetting all of the thousands of trivialities which bounce around in our heads at every conscious moment, is the first step towards reaching a state where we can achieve anything remotely resembling studious.

But, again, it has to be more than this. If it were simply the humility achieved by having the human scale violently torn from us in the direction of vastness, any great space would be a good spot for study. I imagine that this is not the case at all. One has only to look in the immediate vicinity to see other examples of vast open interior spaces: Grand Central Station, and any of the many great cathedrals in Manhattan. Though scale itself varies among these three examples, (Grand Central being much larger and most cathedrals not as large) in comparison to the human scale all three are equally vast. But why does the interior of the reading room elicit a feeling of thoughtful, scholarly meditation whereas these other spaces elicit nothing of the sort? Vast as they are, the shapes are different. Grand Central station involves a series of arched barrel vaults, creating a round dome-like interior. The arch is an excellent symbol for a gateway, for passage and thus transportation. A cathedral will use triangular forms, indicating towards heaven and the divine. The reading room in the humanities library however is rectilinear.



Figure 52: Humanities Library Fountain

It is a box. A box is for storage; here the storage of books. But what does that have to do with the quiet, contemplative ambience? An arch or a barrel vault indicate passage – they evoke an attitude of what is forward, ahead. The pointed chambers indicating towards heaven indicate what is beyond as well, though here in a spiritual sense of the almighty unattainable and perfection. Both of these work well with the sense of humility, but in taking our focus away from ourselves, they are thrusting our attention so far out of ourselves as to render it improper for focused study. However, a box indicates no directions but simply inside and outside. Thus, when you are inside, your focus turns to within.

Thus it is the simultaneous flood of humility combined with an inward focus, not inward into ourselves but inwards to whatever lines of thought we are internalizing, which is the source of this strong feeling associated with the reading room in the Humanities library. It is the cause, and the rest are



Figure 53: Humanities Library Reading Room

simply fortifications: the colors, textures of the materials, the quality of the light, the intricate carvings of the woodworks, the fundamentally decorative books lining the walls. All of this is context which gives the already present foundation a fine tuned shape. It would still be very possible to feel this way without all of these surface details present. But with them present, it is impossible to feel any other way. It is not simply a room; it is a finely crafted emotional engine.

Attempting the skeptic's point of view, then shouldn't any sufficiently vast rectilinear chamber also evoke this feeling? As I mentioned above, surface details can be the deciding factor. For instance, unless one is totally ignorant beyond any recognizable measure of anything that has to do with indoor sports, a gymnasium will produce enough contextual identity to quickly override the effects of being a vast box. On the other hand, a similar chamber in a museum can potentially overpower the artwork present – if the artwork is very bland

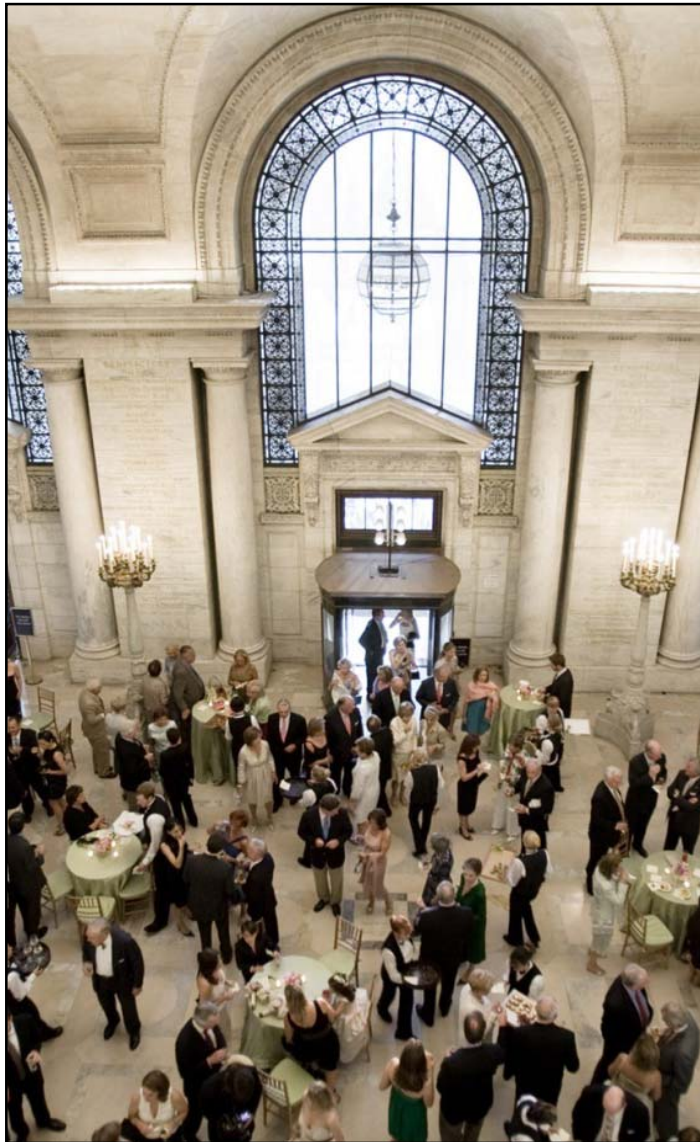


Figure 54: Humanities Library Lobby

and disinteresting – and produce in one present a state of quiet, inner reflection which would happily take the form of studiousness were a book and a task thrust into the hands of the one bored by the artwork. (I am speaking from personal experience, when my visit to the MoMA produced an excellent chance to open up my new camera’s user’s manual.)

Even if no book or task is thrust into the hands of the one present in the Humanity’s Library reading room, the feeling is still inescapable because of the flood of catalysts for it. Still, if one is intent on avoiding any emotion one will usually find a way to do so, and this is no exception. But first one must find that intention, and I think that most would find that thought rather unappealing when it comes to this space.

That is why this room is important. It is something only it can do. Icomde cannot match this, however, one must always be aware that there is usually more than one road to a desired



Figure 55: South Court Ceiling

destination, especially when the destination is something so open ended as a feeling. But then, just as we are ensorcelled so entrancingly by the ambience of this chamber, nearby is something very new and very different that inspired a very different effect. I am talking about the South Court. (Barreneche)

Where the reading room deals with the profound, the South Court deals in the novel. But it is merely novel. It is an interesting attempt at something clever, though perhaps it is its own cleverness that becomes its undoing, as it seems to be unable to cast off the shackles of being simply and utterly novel. It sets itself up as strikingly new in contrast to the antiquated to such a degree that it cannot go beyond the contrast. It exists simply to provide the contrast, and any use or meaning beyond that becomes lost. As useful or successful or important as it may or may not become, and in saying this I am taking the position that it is neither useful nor successful