

Committee to Save the NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

June 1, 2017

Commissioner Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
David N. Dinkins Municipal Building
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor, North
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chair Srinivasan:

The Committee to Save the New York Public Library requests that the Landmarks Preservation Commission designate the celebrated interiors of the New York Public Library at 42nd Street and 5th Avenue (the Schwarzman Building) as New York City interior landmarks. We have enclosed LPC Request for Evaluation forms, a petition supporting designation with 2,000 signatures, and letters of support from political leaders, preservation organizations and concerned citizens.

We understand that LPC has engaged in discussions with NYPL representatives concerning landmark designation for the Rose Reading Room. This is welcome news, but we urge the Commission to designate all eligible interiors. Failure to do so would leave rooms of both historic and artistic significance unprotected.

Carrère & Hastings conceived of the library as a unified design expressed through a shared architectural vocabulary, use of similar materials, and decorative motifs that recur throughout its many rooms. A piecemeal approach to interior designation does not adequately respect this design and leaves some of New York's most sublime manifestations of Beaux-Arts interiors unprotected. By comparison, all of the significant public interior spaces in McKim Mead & White's Boston Public Library, including Bates Hall, were landmarked in 2000.

Despite the commendable renovations to the ceilings of Rose Reading Room and the Bill Blass Catalog Room, a cursory examination of NYPL's record as custodians reveals an extremely checkered history. Insensitive alterations made to the intricately carved wooden ceiling in the Gottesman Exhibition Hall (figs. 1, 2), the loss of the marble Croton Reservoir plaque (fig. 5), the closure of nearly half the skylights in the Celeste Bartos Forum (figs. 3, 4), and a misguided attempt to demolish seven-floors of book stacks (fig. 6) serve as reminders that New York's most cherished building needs vigorous public oversight.

These reading rooms have served as sanctuaries of the mind for generations of scholars, students, and readers from every walk of life. The architectural critic Paul Goldberger remarked that the Rose Reading Room was a metaphor for an ideal city, "a place where a wildly diverse group of inhabitants are thrown together within something vast and monumental and left to achieve their private goals, communally." Here ordinary New Yorkers have silently shared the same tables and collections with luminaries such as E.L. Doctorow, Norman Mailer, Nora Ephron, Barbara Tuchman, John Updike, Edmund Morris, Tom

232 East 11th Street. New York, NY 10003

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Wolfe, Theodore H. White, Mary Gordon, and E. B. White.

Enclosed you will find a petition containing over two thousand signatures from individuals urging landmark designation for these magnificent spaces, as well as letters of support from the Historic Districts Council, New York Landmarks Conservancy, Municipal Arts Society, Preservation League of New York State, New York School of Interior Design, Society for Architectural Historians, and Beaux-Arts Alliance.

As an addendum, we are also submitting the Request for Evaluation letter sent to the Commission by the Historic Districts Council in 2013 and a supplemental Request for Evaluation for the Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III Trustees Room, which is eligible and deserving of designation.

Given the universal support for designating these spaces as New York City interior landmarks, we hope you will evaluate, calendar, and designate them in a timely manner.

Respectfully,

Charles D. Warren
President

Thomas H. Collins
Treasurer

Theodore Grunewald
Vice President

Monica Strauss
Secretary

cc: State Senator Brad Hoylman; Assembly Member Richard Gottfried; Mayor Bill De Blasio; Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer; City Council Member Daniel Garodnick; New York Public Library President Anthony Marx; Layla Law-Gisiko, Community Board Five Landmarks Committee Chair; Sarah Carroll, Executive Director, NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission; Kate Lemos-McHale, Director of Research, Landmarks Preservation Commission

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1 Note that the wood ceiling of Gottesman Exhibition Hall was cut in hundreds of places to accommodate track lighting and new holes cut for new pendant fixtures in new locations altering the spatial organization of the room and damaging one of its principal decorative features. (Photo: Ann Day)



Fig. 2 The original light fixtures, designed by Carrère & Hastings are lost. (Photo: Library of Congress)

ILLUSTRATIONS (continued)



Fig. 3 Circulating Library, New York Public Library with perimeter skylights and original Carrère & Hastings light fixtures. (Photo: NYPL)

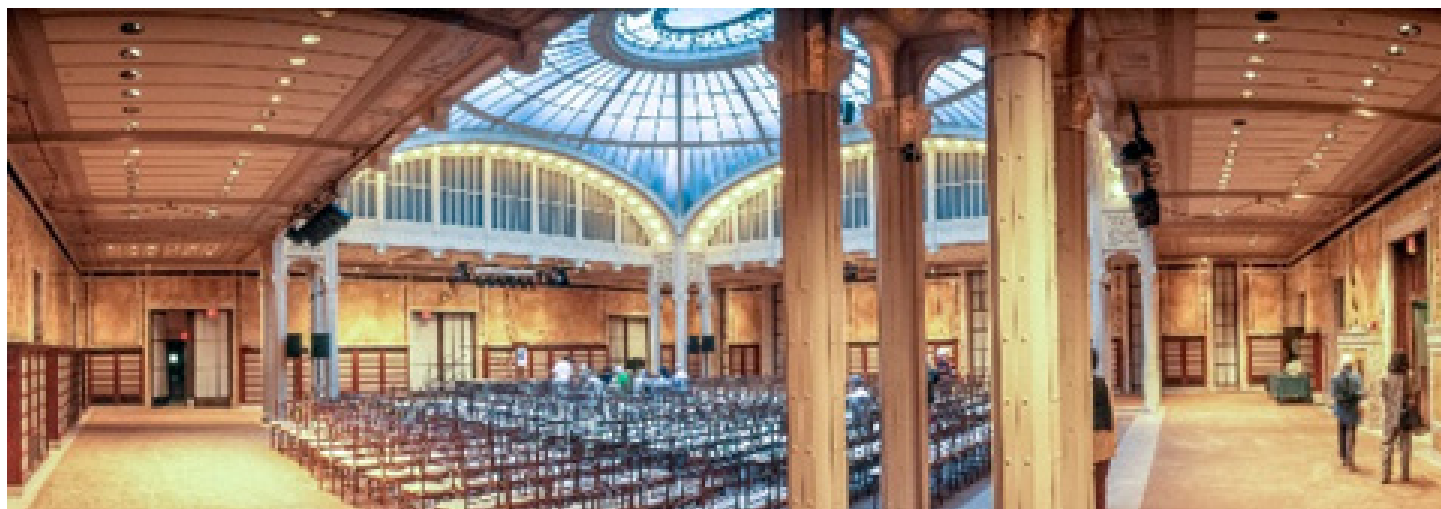


Fig. 4 Note the elimination of perimeter skylights, loss of original light fixtures and addition of theatrical lighting, which inappropriately alters the steel arches in what is now the Celeste Bartos Forum. (Photo: Peter Aaron)

ILLUSTRATION (continued)

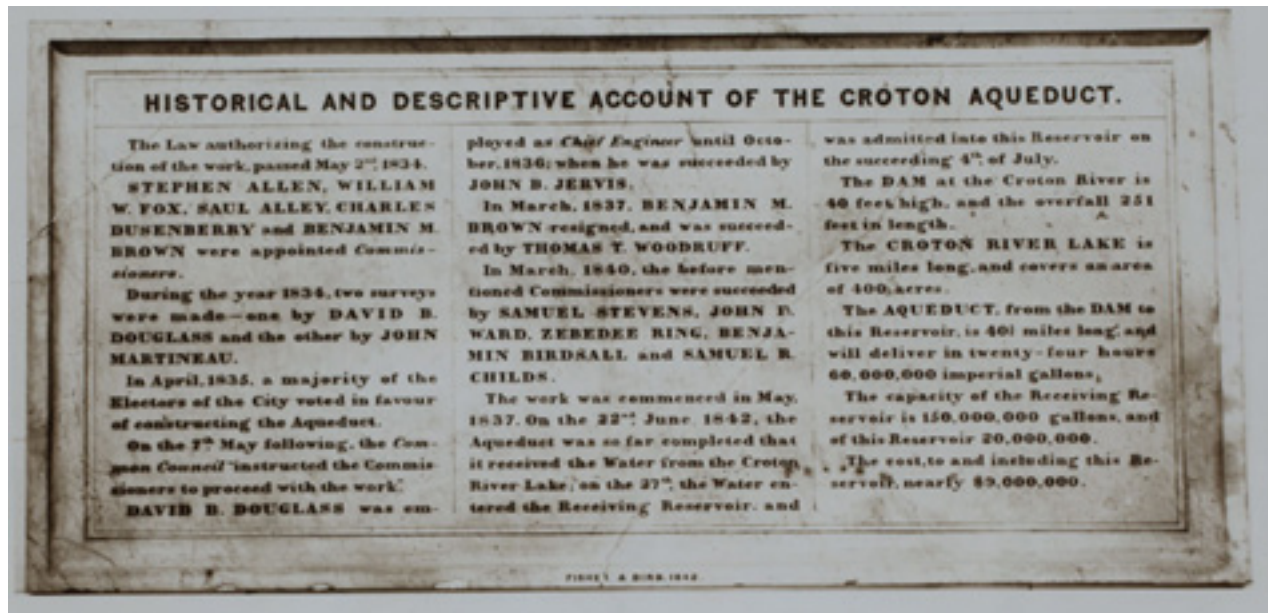


Fig. 5 This nine foot long marble tablet carved by Fisher & Bird in 1842 was carefully removed from its original location in the Croton Reservoir and stored by Carrère & Hastings during demolition of the reservoir and construction of the library. They installed it in the south corridor of the new library. This key piece of New York's material culture was removed and lost in 1968. (photo: NYPL)



Fig. 6 Seven floors of steel bookshelves provide structural support for the reading room above.

QUOTATIONS

“There is no more important landmark building in New York than the New York Public Library, known to New Yorkers simply as the 42nd Street Library, one of the world’s greatest research institutions. ... Incredibly, the Rose Reading Room has not been designated either, although it is eligible.” – **Ada Louise Huxtable**

“[Room] 315 gave me the most beautiful freedom of investigation into the fiction, the criticism, the periodicals of the period! And the spaciousness of the great twin reading rooms, each two blocks long and 50 feet high, covering a half-acre, gave me a sense of the amenity that still lay behind so many intellectual and literary battles in America.” – **Alfred Kazin**

“With its profusion of sunlight ... and its great oak tables burnished by millions of elbows, the chamber expresses the democratization of earthly awe: Even people who live in joyless garrets have a right to grandeur.” – **Justin Davidson**

“The Rose Reading Room is luxurious in the way that only certain shared spaces can be. Its grandeur attracts its visitors, and is in turn amplified by their presence: the true urban symbiosis.” – **Alexandra Schwartz**

“How many wonderful days and nights I spent at the 42nd Street library, seated at a long table, one among thousands, it seemed, in that main reading room. ... Often, while waiting for the books to come up from the mysterious depths of the library, I would stroll along the outer aisles glancing at the titles of the amazing reference books which lined the walls. Thumbing those books was enough to set my mind racing for days. Sometimes I sat and meditated wondering what question I could put to the genius which presided over the spirit of this vast institution that it could not answer. There was no subject under the sun, I suppose, which had not been written about and filed in those archives. My omnivorous appetite pulled me one way, my fear of becoming a bookworm the other way.” – **Henry Miller**

“What a luxury to be able to break away from the desk and walk up and down that long marble hallway with those vaulted ceilings and those marvelous chandeliers that stretch for two whole city blocks.” – **Johnathan Kandell**

“If the New York Public Library is the temple of New York, then the map room is the holy of holies.” – **Phillip Lopate**

“It was the first time I was taught that I was welcome in a place of education and learning. I would go into that great marble palace and I would check my shoeshine box. A gentleman in a brown cotton jacket would take it as if I’d passed over an umbrella and a bowler hat.” – **Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan**

“Despite the comings and goings of the patrons, the atmosphere of this monumental Reading Room is one of quiet intensity. This commodious space has nurtured generations of writers and scholars, and given comfort and knowledge to many an ordinary citizen. As I observed the readers here, ferreting out and feeding off the printed page, the noise and the craziness of Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, just outside, seemed a world away.” – **Diane Asséo Griliches**

“The one exception to the architectural feeding frenzy has long seemed to be the New York Public Library, whose great 101-year-old Carrère and Hastings palace of white marble on Fifth Avenue, arguably the city’s greatest cultural building of all and surely its most beloved, looks almost exactly as it always has.” – **Paul Goldberger**