

Yale University Library
Yale University

A Statement by the Architects: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

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A Statement by the Architects

Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

The famous Yale collection of rare books and manuscripts comprises a history of man's writings and printings from the oldest known documents to the works of the most modern writers. To house this important collection and to provide space for future acquisitions the Beinecke family have given to Yale a new library building, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

The site chosen was the northeast corner of Wall and High Streets, diagonally across from the Sterling Memorial Library. This area is near the focal point of activity of the Yale campus. The new building was placed so that it faces Woodbridge and Woolsey Halls and flanks the University Dining Hall, completing the Hewitt Quadrangle upon which these buildings open. In placing the Library on the site it was necessary to form a strong and complementary relationship with the other buildings in the quadrangle. This has been effected in two ways: first, by using natural stone of similar color and texture, and, second, by connecting all the buildings in the group by a two-hundred-by-three-hundred-foot paved plaza. The natural stones used for the Library are a light, warm grey Vermont Woodbury granite and white, grey-veined Vermont Montclair Danby marble. The paving for the plaza is the same Woodbury granite used in the Library.

The visual form of the building is that of a marble-and-granite rectangle that seemingly floats above the plaza. The only visible supports are four massive pyramid-shaped granite columns curving up from the granite paving. The space of the plaza appears to flow under the building through an eight-foot-high glass wall recessed on all sides from the mass above. The four raised façades of the building are large trusses, spanning from corner column to corner column. The individual truss members are four-pointed stars whose ends are connected, thereby forming octagons of the spaces in between. The stars are clad in granite while the octagonal spaces in between are filled with single translucent panels of marble. The tapered granite members recall the Gothic stone work of the buildings across Wall and High Streets.

The entrance to the Library is through bronze-encased revolving

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doors set in the recessed glass walls. This low-ceilinged entrance expands into the exhibition hall, a vast cathedral-like space. The light in this great room is diffused and warm, seeming only a reflection of the rich bindings of the rare books and periodicals displayed. Rising in the center of this space to within a few feet of the coffered ceiling is a shaft of books in six tiers, illuminated to show the bindings of the books. At the base of this great shaft, opposite the entrance doors, is an eight-foot square of bronze lettered in polished bronze:

MAY THIS LIBRARY, GIVEN TO YALE UNIVERSITY BY EDWIN JOHN BEINECKE,
FREDERICK WILLIAM BEINECKE AND WALTER BEINECKE, THREE YALE MEN,
STAND AS A SYMBOL OF THE LOYALTY AND DEVOTION OF THREE BROTHERS,
AND SERVE AS A SOURCE OF LEARNING AND AS AN INSPIRATION TO ALL
WHO ENTER

Around the perimeter of the hall is a mezzanine approached by two wide bronze-and-granite stairways. The mezzanine serves as a gallery for changing exhibits of books and manuscripts, and for the permanent display of the Gutenberg Bible and the Audubon Elephant Folio. These are shown in especially designed bronze-and-glass cases, individually air-conditioned. The walls on all four sides of the exhibition hall are the same translucent marble octagons seen from the exterior. During the day, natural light and the movement of the sun are seen through the changing colors and values of the marble panels. At the same time harmful ultraviolet and infrared rays are excluded. The ceiling of this great room is coffered, with lighting fixtures and air-conditioning diffusers made an integral part of the design.

In designing the Beinecke Library the architects determined that three important functions must be fulfilled: to provide the necessary storage facilities, protection, and atmospheric environment for the preservation of the books and manuscripts; to create a research center for the use of the books and manuscripts; and to dramatize appropriately the fact that the building contains great treasures. The Library thus has been divided into three areas: the exhibition hall, the research center, and the bookstacks. The research center occupies the central position in the Library, lying below the exhibition hall and above the main stack area. It is approached from the exhibition hall by two stairways which meet at the bottom in the lobby of the research center, directly in front of a control desk.

This control desk is the communications heart of the Library.

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Here are an elevator and book lift to the stacks, pneumatic book and message tubes to the Sterling Library, and telephone and inter-communication service connecting all parts of the Library. Adjacent to the control desk is a room containing a large panel continuously informing of conditions affecting the safety of the books. Any condition warranting attention is announced visually and audibly through electronic circuits. Should there be warning of variations in climate, the degree of variation may be checked by exact readings from any part of the Library. Flanking the control desk are the staff work area and the card catalogue room. Directly opposite the control desk across the lobby is the reading room, a large, bright space looking out to the sculpture court. Its ceiling is made of a cellular grill of teakwood, functioning also as the source of illumination. Off this room are smaller rooms for typing and microfilm reading.

The reading room extends the length of one side of the sculpture court, while curators' offices make up the other three sides. The court is a sunken space visible from the plaza above as one approaches the Library entrance. It serves to relate the research center below to the exterior above. Sculpture was chosen rather than landscaping as the center of interest in order to eliminate the danger of water accumulating and seeping into the stacks below. There are three pieces in the court all designed by Isamu Noguchi. They are a "Sun," symbolizing cosmic energy, a "Pyramid," symbolizing the geometry of the earth, and a "Cube," symbolizing chance. These sculptures and the paving on which they rest are all in one material, white Imperial Danby marble.

The stacks for the storage of books are in three large reservoirs with shelves for 800,000 volumes. One stack rises six tiers into the exhibition hall, another lies along the Wall Street side of the research center in three tiers, and another lies underneath the research center in a single tier. Each aisle between bookcases is continuously lighted with louvered fluorescent strips shielded with filters to reduce the transmission of ultraviolet rays. Constant temperature of 70 degrees and constant humidity of 50 per cent are maintained, and any variation is indicated by recording devices in the room behind the control desk and in the office of the building engineer below. There is also a smoke and fire detection system sensitive enough to record almost instantaneously the presence of a lighted cigarette. A

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fire extinguishing system of carbon dioxide rather than water from sprinklers will minimize book damage in case of actual fire. The detection system actuates an alarm in the office of the Campus Police in case no one should be on watch in the Library itself.

The architects for the Library were Skidmore, Owings & Merrill of New York, with Gordon Bunshaft as partner in charge of design and David H. Hughes as partner in charge of coördination. Paul Weidlinger was structural engineer, and Jaros, Baum, and Bolles were the mechanical engineers. The contractors were the George A. Fuller Company.

In summarizing the entire design of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Gordon Bunshaft has said:

We know that we have provided the proper protection against theft and fire and a controlled environment ideal for book storage. We have achieved a comfortable environment in which scholars may work. And, we hope we have dramatized the importance of this collection in a building that is in the heart of the Yale campus.