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The Lamont Library: Design

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Accessibility

The Lamont Library

I. Design

AS the first library building to be planned primarily to meet undergraduate needs, the Lamont Library was necessarily an experiment in construction as well as in function. The pioneer nature of the uses to which the building was to be put naturally led to a particularly careful working out of requirements both in size and arrangement before the selection of a site was considered.

The philosophy on which the functioning of the Library was based required, first, that it be conveniently located and inviting of access. It should be on one of the main undergraduate traffic routes, and there should be no flights of steps to climb to the entrance or monumental vestibules or foyers to traverse before coming to the books. Second, once within the Library, the student should find the entire book collection as accessible as possible. The arrangement devised by the Librarian to accomplish these requirements called for long reading rooms on three floors on one side of the building paralleled for their entire length by open stack areas down the center. Specialized reading rooms, such as those for reference, browsing, and the modern poetry collection, were to be on the opposite side of the stack area. As a result, students would pass through the stacks in going to the reading rooms or in passing from one reading area to another.

This arrangement of a long stack area between two reading areas produced a building almost as wide as it was long. Further, the arrangement complicated the exterior treatment by creating eight foot high stories at the ends of the building, corresponding to the stack heights, while the reading room areas on the two long sides were in stories sixteen feet high.

Besides the undergraduate library proper, the building was required to house the conference rooms and offices of the new General Education Center. Although the Center was not strictly a library function, its rooms were to be entered through the main Library entrance and were to have free access to the Library on all floors.

With these basic requirements clearly in view, four sites were con-

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sidered by the University, as described in a previous issue of the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN,[1] and preliminary sketches were prepared by the architects for each site. The Boylston Hall site proved to be too small altogether, and was early abandoned. The two sites on Mount Auburn Street were adequate in size and presented no particular architectural problems, but the Yard site on the corner of Quincy Street and Massachusetts Avenue, which had great advantages from the Library point of view, was a different matter. There was question as to whether the very large square shape of the plan and the three stories of reading rooms could be satisfactorily handled on the restricted site, or whether the building could be related comfortably to its neighbors, the Union, the Houghton Library, Wigglesworth Hall, and the Bacon-Roosevelt Gate to the south, the monumental bowed wall of which emphasized an axis that could not be ignored. However, after considerable deliberation, the advantages of the Yard site appeared so compelling from a University point of view that this was selected in spite of the severe architectural difficulties.

The problem was intensified with the public announcement that the Lamont Library was to be built in the Yard. At once certain graduates sought assurance that it would be in the colonial style, while others as urgently advocated that it be modern. Many expressed their concern to Mr Lamont, President Conant, Mr Metcalf, and the architects, advocating one or the other. The correspondence on this point between Mr Lamont, Mr Metcalf, and the writer is interesting, and is herewith quoted:

Thomas W. Lamont to K. D. Metcalf — 3 March 1947

. . . I looked over the drawings that Shepley sent through my son, and the only question that arose in my mind, which I am sure that Mr. Shepley would answer in the affirmative, was as to whether, with the rather awkward site on a hillside that we had to utilize and with the technical operation of the Library, we had been able to adhere as much as possible to the general spirit of the architecture of the Yard. I have no doubt that effort has always been strongly in mind and that it has been carried out so far as it possibly could be. . . .

HRS to Thomas W. Lamont — 7 March 1947

I have seen your recent letter to Mr. Metcalf and want to assure you that we are making every effort to treat the exterior of the Library so that it will blend with the other buildings in the Yard. The material will be dark red brick like

[1] K. D. Metcalf, 'The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library,' HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN, I (1947), 302–304.

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the Chapel, with limestone trim like the Union. The grading and planting will be carefully done to make the building look at home from the start.

Actually, that part of the Yard where the Library is to be contains a very varied assortment of buildings of different types. Widener, Emerson and Robinson are Classic, Sever is Richardson Romanesque, the Union is English, the President's House, Houghton and Wigglesworth are modern Colonial. Many of these are distinguished examples of the style in vogue at the time, and thus make an interesting historical record. Most of them were carefully designed to fit into the general spirit of the Yard. The Library is being studied with great care in this respect and I am confident that you will not be disappointed with the result.

Thomas W. Lamont to HRS — 11 March 1947

Many thanks for your most excellent and satisfactory letter of March 7th. I agree with everything you say as to the other buildings in the Yard. I remember in my freshman year from my room on the third floor in Gray's Hall I used to gaze out on Matthews at my left and Weld at my right, and wonder a little why they happened to be so different from each other, and both of them coincident in no way with University Hall.

I know well that I shall not be disappointed, but more than pleased with your final results.

Thanking you for the great attention that you are bestowing on this matter, I am . . .

K. D. Metcalf to HRS — 21 May 1947

I had an opportunity to talk with Mr. Lamont Sr. yesterday, and he asked me to report to you that he had seen the model and the plans and that he likes them. He wanted you to know that he did like them. . . .

In the intensive study by the architects to adapt the building to the site, the three stories in height were reduced to an apparent two by placing the three stories of reading rooms on the Massachusetts Avenue side, where the slope of the land brought the lowest story partly underground and the Bacon-Roosevelt Gate, with its retaining wall, provided further concealment. The actual size of the building on the ground was considerably reduced by restricting the General Education Center to a group of conference rooms along the Quincy Street side within the body of the building and placing the other sections of the Center in a low roof house set back sufficiently on all sides so as not to count in the apparent over-all height.[2]

The main entrance was put on the north side, on the main path from

[2] The present article is accompanied by eight plates and seven plans, the plates reproducing exterior and interior views of the Library, and the plans representing seven of the eight levels which comprise the building.

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the Yard to the Union, along which almost all the freshmen pass going to and from their meals. The entrance in this location has the advantage of being on the middle level of reading rooms, requiring only one flight of stairs to the upper or the lower reading room level. A second entrance was established at the lower level on the west side next to the end of Wigglesworth, so that those approaching from this side would not have to climb the hill to the main entrance.

The architectural treatment is modern, but the exterior has been carefully studied in proportions, fenestration, and materials to make it fit in comfortably and naturally with its traditional surroundings. Exaggerated modern features and affectations have been avoided and the treatment restricted to a simple and direct expression of the interior arrangement and philosophy, with special emphasis in certain appropriate cases.

This emphasis of interior features in exterior treatment may be seen in the projection of the main entrance motive beyond the face of the north front, increasing the importance of the entrance and giving a valuable accent to an otherwise long unbroken façade. This entrance is very wide, almost the width of the lobby inside, and consists of six glass doors in a glass wall, flanked by limestone buttresses carrying a thin roof slab. The glass wall is recessed several feet from the buttresses and roof to give a sense of shelter. The wide glass entrance tends to lessen the barrier between exterior and interior; and to enhance this effect the lobby lighting has been made to simulate daylight. Furthermore, the interior arrangement is such that from without one may look through the lobby into the stacks, and beyond into the reading room on the farther side of the buliding.

Next to the main entrance is the Reference Room with its great north window overlooking the Yard and offering to all those passing a clear view into the Library. This window, occupying practically the whole side of the room, can afford to be spacious as it never receives any sun, while all the other windows on the main floor have to be shaded on sunny days.

The main floor reading room on the south side is emphasized on the exterior by tall windows extending from floor to ceiling, spaced twice as far apart as the windows of other rooms. This gives an effect of dignity that relates well in scale with the Union, and particularly well with the Bacon-Roosevelt Gate.

One important feature of the exterior is the free use of large un-

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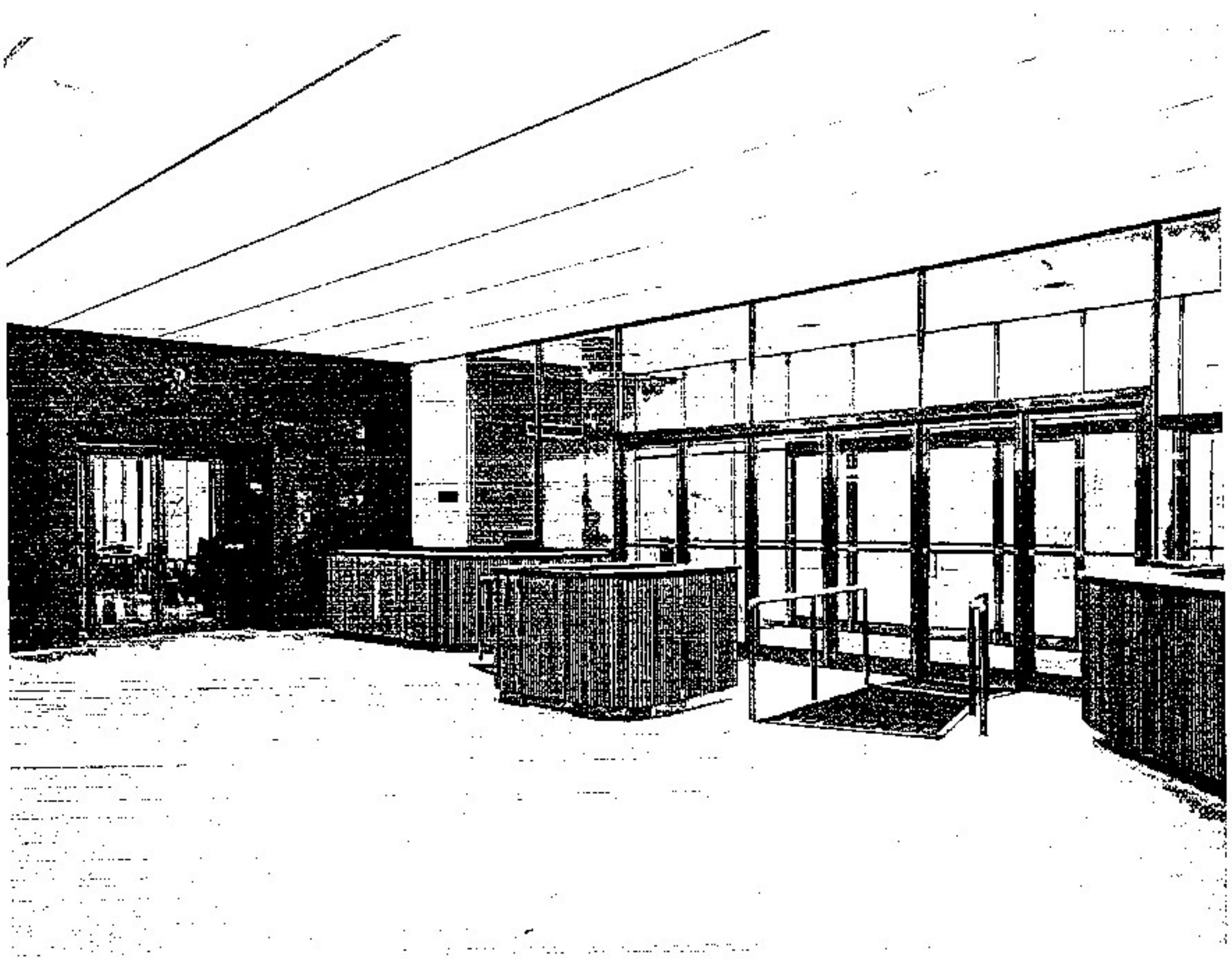

PLATE I

LAMONT LIBRARY: MAIN ENTRANCE LOBBY, THIRD LEVEL

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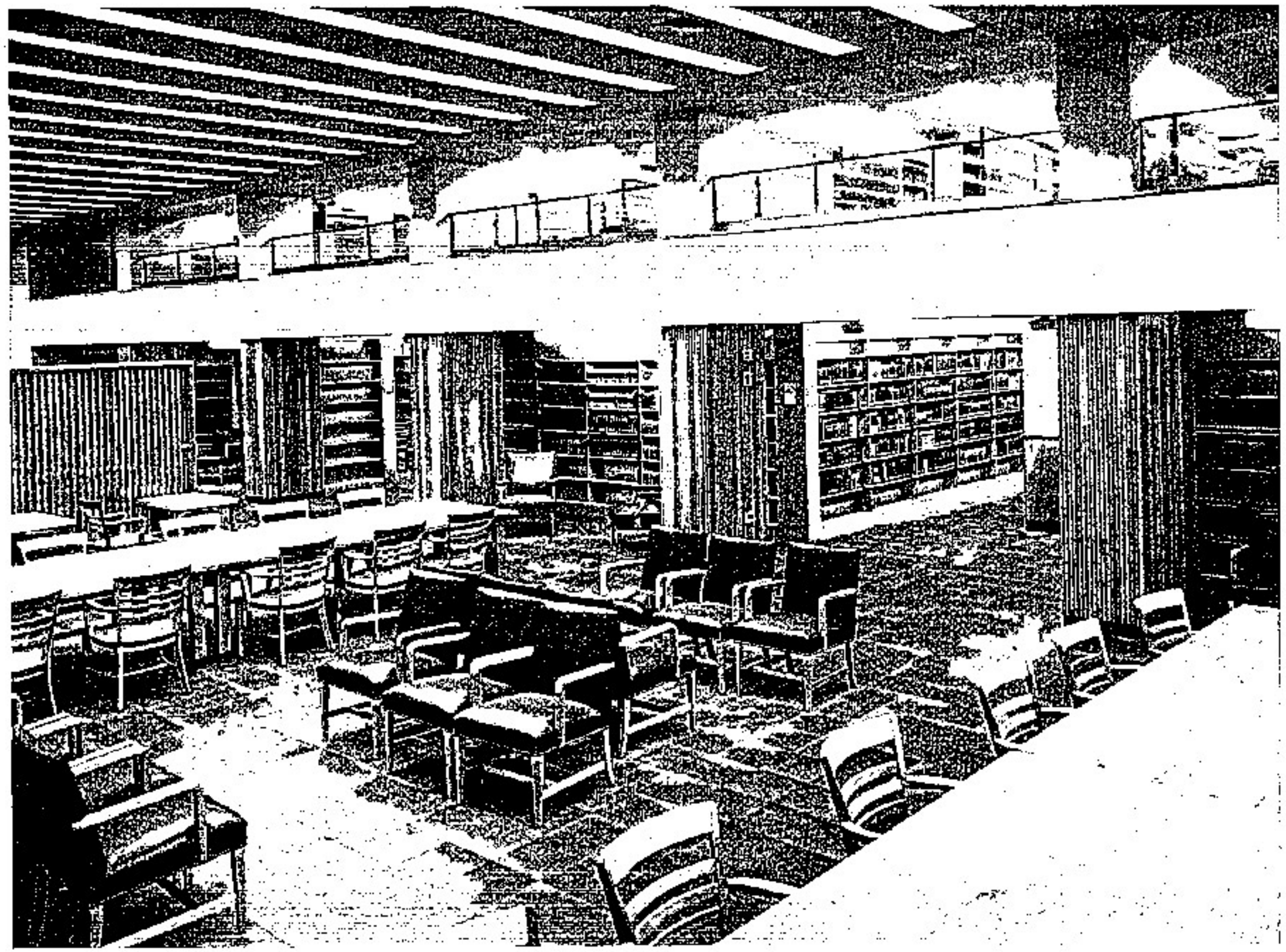

PLATE II

LAMONT LIBRARY: READING AREA AND STACK AREA, FIRST AND SECOND LEVELS

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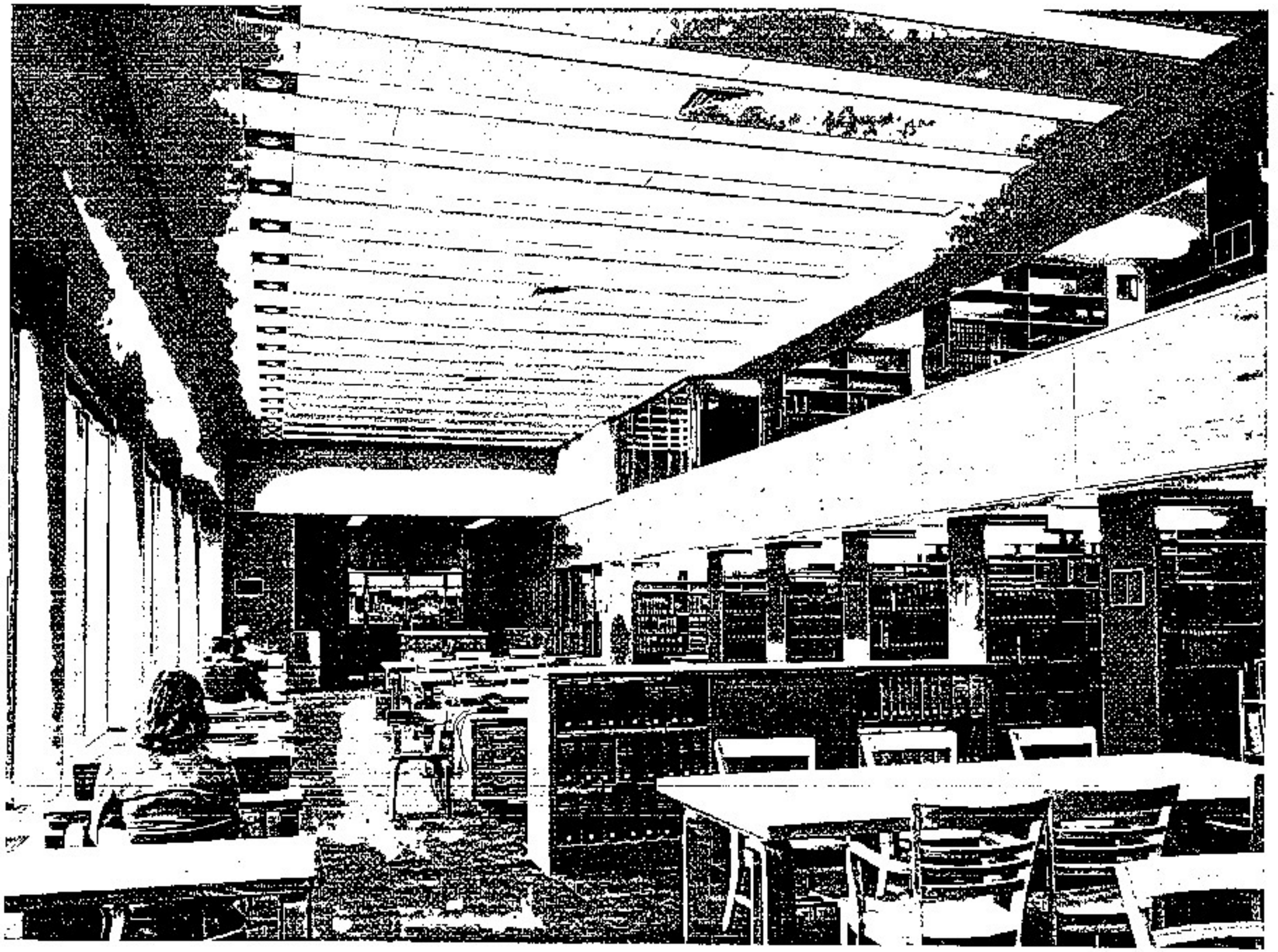

PLATE III

LAMONT LIBRARY: REFERENCE ROOM AND BALCONY, THIRD AND FOURTH LEVELS

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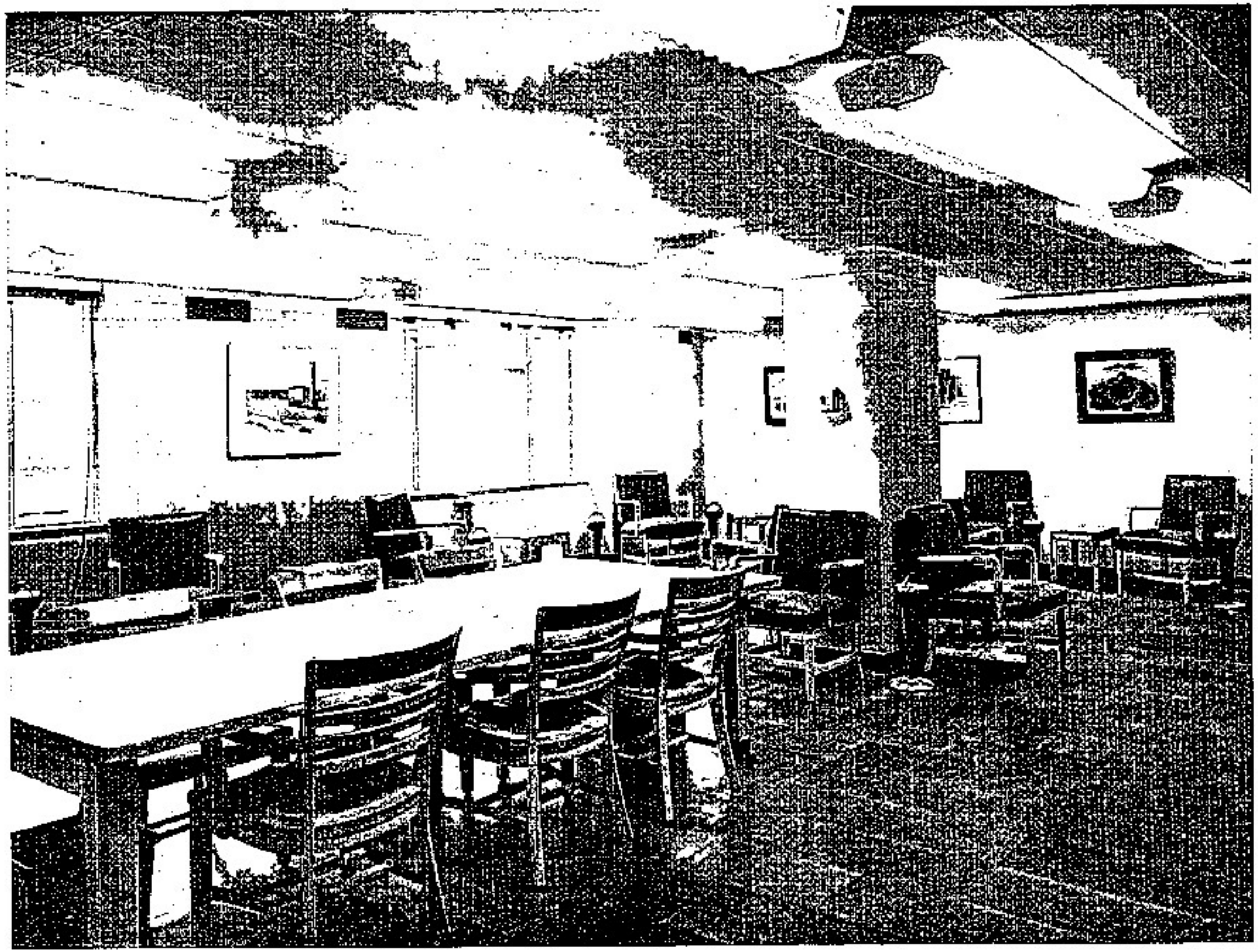

PLATE IV

LAMONT LIBRARY: SMOKING ROOM, SECOND LEVEL

PLATE V

LAMONT LIBRARY: ALCOVE, THIRD LEVEL

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PLATE · VI

LAMONT LIBRARY: STACK AREA, FOURTH LEVEL

PLATE VII

LAMONT LIBRARY: READING AREA, FIFTH LEVEL

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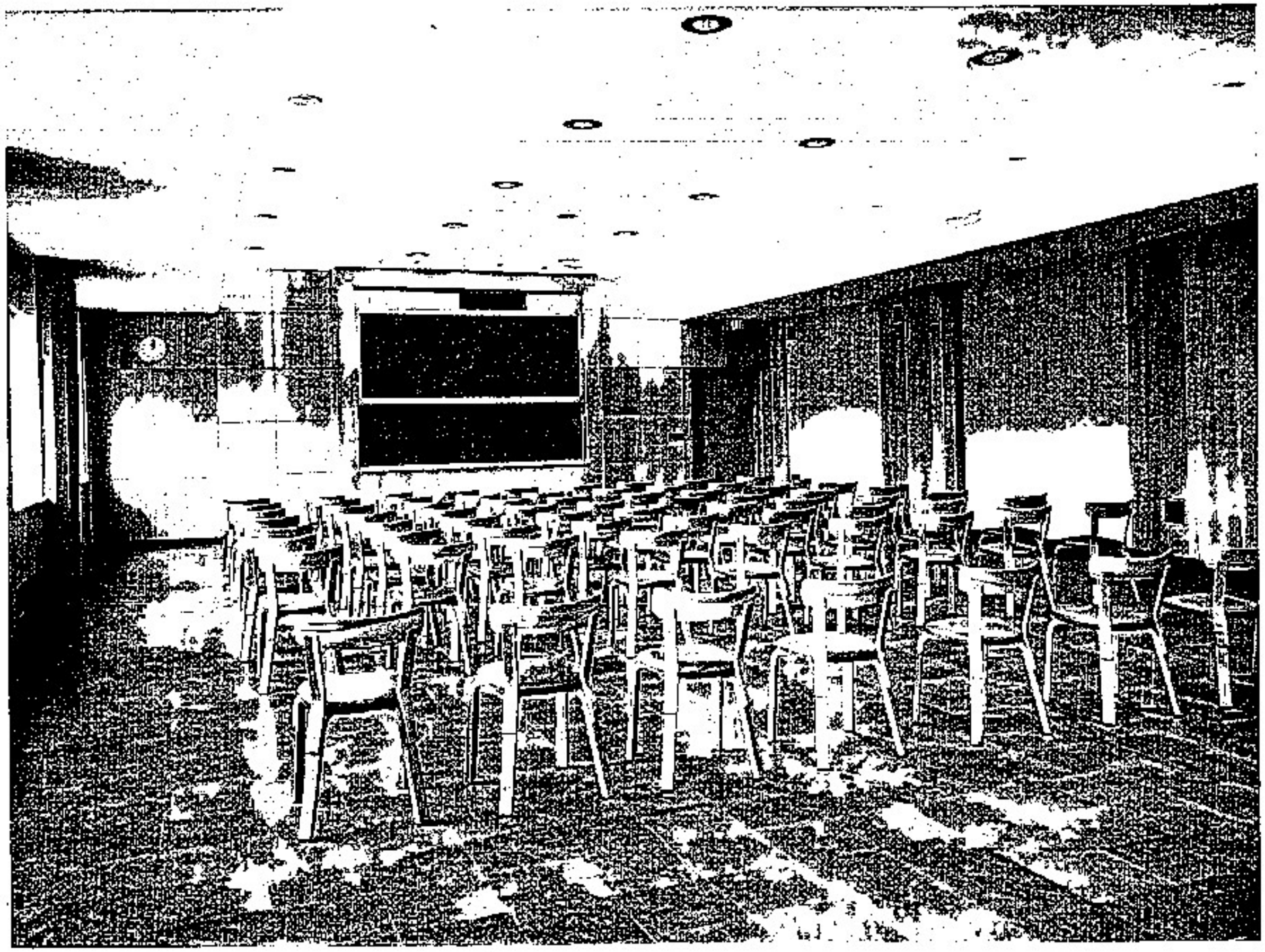

PLATE VIII

LAMONT LIBRARY: FORUM ROOM, FIFTH LEVEL

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broken wall surfaces. This is made possible by the fact that it is preferable to light the reading areas from one side only. The introduction of these wall areas at the corners of the building has the effect of breaking up the apparent bulk of the building by interrupting the continuity of window treatment. This interruption has the additional advantage of permitting each elevation to be treated appropriately and honestly in itself without the necessity of reconciling it too closely with its neighbors. The result has been an exterior with more interest and vitality than would otherwise have been possible.

During the studies, some consideration was given to a sloping roof. This could not have been put on the main portion of the building because it would have covered the windows of the General Education Center in the roof house, but it could have been put on the roof house itself. It was tried here on the model and looked well enough, but even the most conservative were not strongly in its favor. It would have been so evidently a rather feeble concession to tradition, at considerable cost, that it was ultimately abandoned.

With complete air-conditioning, the windows are of two thicknesses of plate glass separated by a small air space, and are sealed. This prevents heat transfer between interior and exterior and also acts as insulation against noise from Massachusetts Avenue.

The lighting was studied with the greatest care. The Librarian, the architects, and the lighting engineers visited working examples of all types of fluorescent lighting and based their final selection on special installations set up side by side in the same room. The selection for the reading rooms is the aluminum ceiling trofler type set three feet apart, which gives the required twenty-five foot-candles on the reading plane with the least apparent light in the room, reducing eyestrain to the minimum. The corridors and stacks and areas with eight-foot headroom have exposed fluorescent ceiling fixtures, with aluminum louvers to cut down the glare. The lobby has a three-inch-square louvered ceiling from wall to wall with high intensity lighting above to make it bright and inviting from without.

A modular system has been used as far as it seemed appropriate and no further. It has been applied principally to the stack areas and adjacent spaces to permit freedom of rearrangement at will. The basic plan for the Library, which required circulation through the stacks, has resulted in an exceptionally efficient use of space, with practically no waste. The main stairway, near the center of the building, is generous

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and will easily handle the main traffic in and out of the Library. It should be noted that each of the two end stairways is double, one over the other, so that the double stairs occupy the same space in plan as a single stair, but add up to four separate stairs in the building. The east stair, which is opposite the main entrance, serves the occupants of the General Education Center, leading directly to their conference rooms.

The interior colors were selected with a view of avoiding sharp contrasts, which would cause eye fatigue. The woodwork, stalls (or reading cubicles), and furniture are mostly of birch, light colored, in a natural finish. The easy chairs are covered in leather, colored tan, red, or green. The bookcases are finished in a medium value of enamel of different colors for the three main floors: old gold for the ground floor, dull red for the first floor, and gray blue for the second floor. The floors throughout the building are cork of a medium brown color, except in the lobbies, where light gray marble has been used. In the main lobby the piers are finished in dark cedar Tennessee marble, as are the west wall and the wall of the main stairway up to the second floor. The use of marble here will ensure a permanent material for the areas of greatest wear.

The Farnsworth Room, on the second floor, is finished in natural cherry from floor to ceiling, and has bookcases recessed in the walls from a height of two to seven feet above the floor. There are also free-standing cherry bookcases forming alcoves. The furniture formerly in the Farnsworth Room in Widener has been moved here. The lighting is by floor lamps, to maintain the atmosphere of a private library. The intent has been to make this the most conservative room in the new building.

The Woodberry Poetry Room, on the other hand, is the most modern. The interior arrangement and furnishings have been designed by Finland's foremost architect, Alvar Aalto, who is well known throughout this country as one of the most talented in the profession. The room differs from any other at Harvard, and makes an interesting and stimulating contribution to the Library.

In view of their length, the three main reading rooms on the south side of the building have been given a sense of division into three parts by low screens projecting from the walls, with the furniture grouped so as to accentuate the divisions. Each of these rooms is entirely open on one side to the stacks, which on the two lower floors include mezzanines. The other three sides of each room are lined with light-col-

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ored wood cubicles, with dividing partitions and a dado against the wall. The stairways at the end of the stacks have glass walls giving on to the reading rooms, which contributes to the feeling of openness.

Aside from these similarities, each room has, to a considerable extent, an individuality of its own. The south or window sides have been treatéd quite differently in each case. The ground floor room, being half underground, has a continuous horizontal window high up near the ceiling for its entire length. On the main floor the windows are tall and widely spaced, running from floor to ceiling, as already noted. On the second floor there is a row of individual windows of normal spacing with their sills three feet from the floor. This latter room has a lower ceiling and no stack mezzanine. The colors of the bookcases are different for the three floors, as previously described, and the wall colors are considerably varied.

The furniture in the building is of special design worked out by the architects in close conjunction with the Librarian. In general, it is very simple, and as light in weight as is consistent with comfort and sturdiness. In order to avoid monotony and give added interest, the first floor has been largely equipped with furniture designed by Alvar Aalto and manufactured in Sweden. Mr Aalto modified some of his designs to suit the conditions. This furniture is markedly individual in style, and the woods used are very handsome. All of it has been shipped to this country knocked down and has been assembled here, the prices comparing very favorably with prices for furniture made in America.

The combination of light natural finish in the woods, soft illumination, absence of contrasting colors and values, and reduction of inside walls produces a general effect which is quiet, cheerful, and spacious. This interior and the carefully related exterior have been designed primarily to meet fully the exacting conditions of function and site. Although both interior and exterior are necessarily modern in conception and treatment, it is believed they have been so handled that the Library will fit into the spirit of the Harvard Yard and be an interesting and appropriate addition to its architecture.

HENRY R. SHEPLEY

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