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The Susan Morse and Frederick Whiley Hilles Library at Radcliffe College

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The Susan Morse and Frederick Whiley Hilles Library at Radcliffe College*

Max Abramovitz

OFTEN, when a building has been completed and several months have elapsed, if the building has failed in one aspect or another, polite friends say very little to the architect. If it is a success the comments refer to the practical and to the aesthetic, but the Hilles Library has produced yet another range of comments, comments of special interest to the librarian. They refer to the warmth, the charm, the pleasantness, and the livability of the building. Its environment seems to envelop as well as please the reader who comes to use this academic building in a residential corner of the Cambridge community.

How did this come about? Before any work was done on the graphic planning of the Library, there were earnest discussions between the architect and Mrs. Bunting, the President of Radcliffe; her Library Committee; and her library advisors — Ruth K. Porritt, the Radcliffe Librarian; Richard De Gennaro, Assistant Harvard University Librarian; and Douglas W. Bryant, the Harvard University Librarian — concentrating on the character and the atmosphere in which

* The Hilles Library — Harrison and Abramovitz, architects — opend in September 1966. It was made possible by the generosity of many friends of Radcliffe, and is named in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick W. Hilles of New Haven, Connecticut. Mrs. Hilles, a trustee of Radcliffe College, is a collector of contemporary art; Mr. Hilles, Bodman Professor of English *Emeritus* at Yale University and Vice President of the Yale University Press, is an author, editor, and authority on eighteenth century literature. The committee of librarians whom Mr. Abramovitz names in this article worked with a committee of trustees consisting of Mrs. Howard J. Sachs (chairman), Mrs. Frederick W. Hilles, Mrs. James Laughlin, Mrs. Atherton Loring, Mrs. Edward S. Stimpson, and Mrs. John G. Williams; Dean Barbara M. Solomon served as liaison officer between the two committees and the architects.

— Eds.

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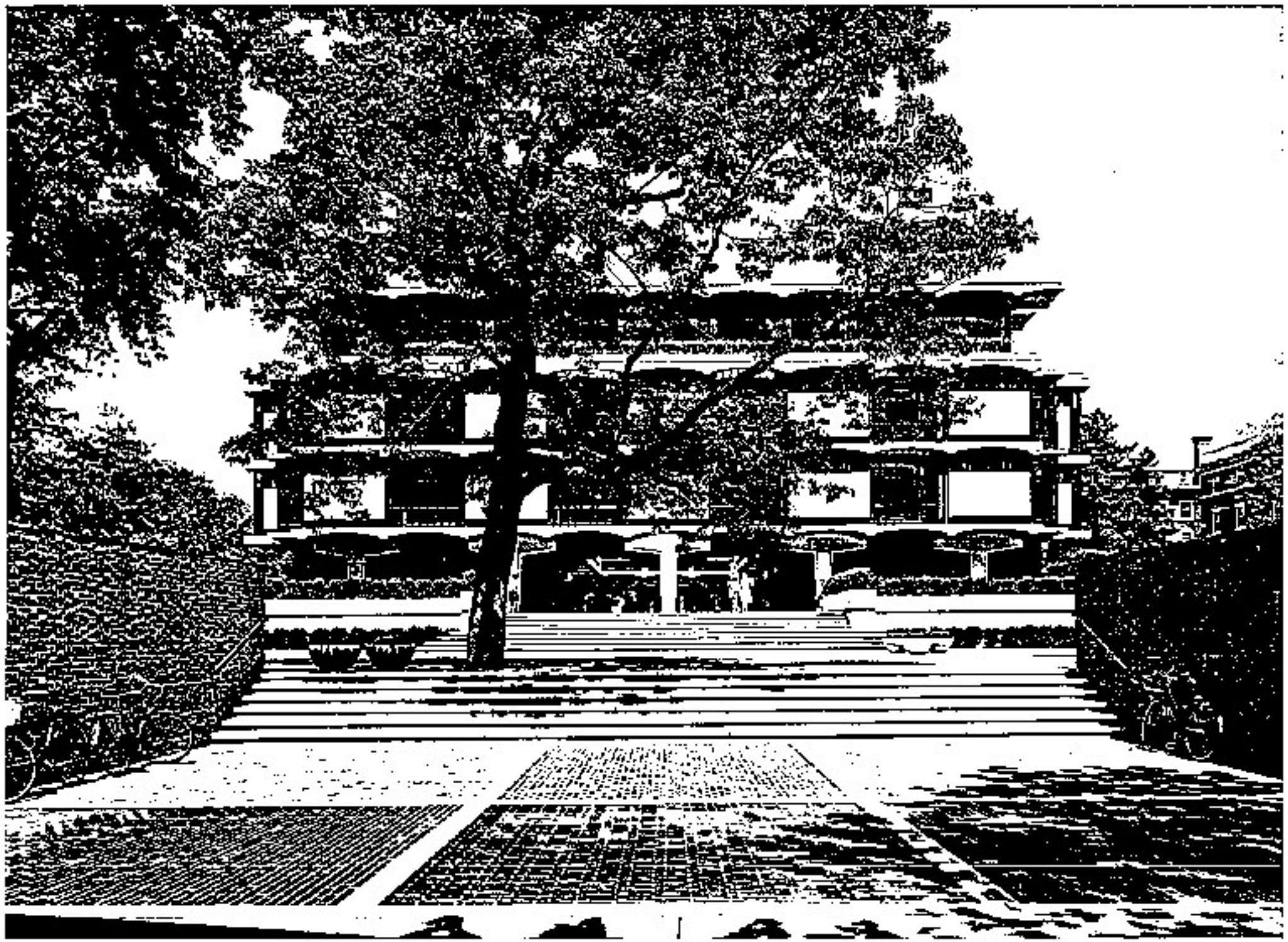


PLATE I

THE HILLES LIBRARY; APPROACH TO THE MAIN ENTRANCE FROM THE SOUTH

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PLATE II

THE HILLES LIBRARY: MAIN FLOOR, THE BIBLIOGRAPHY SECTION

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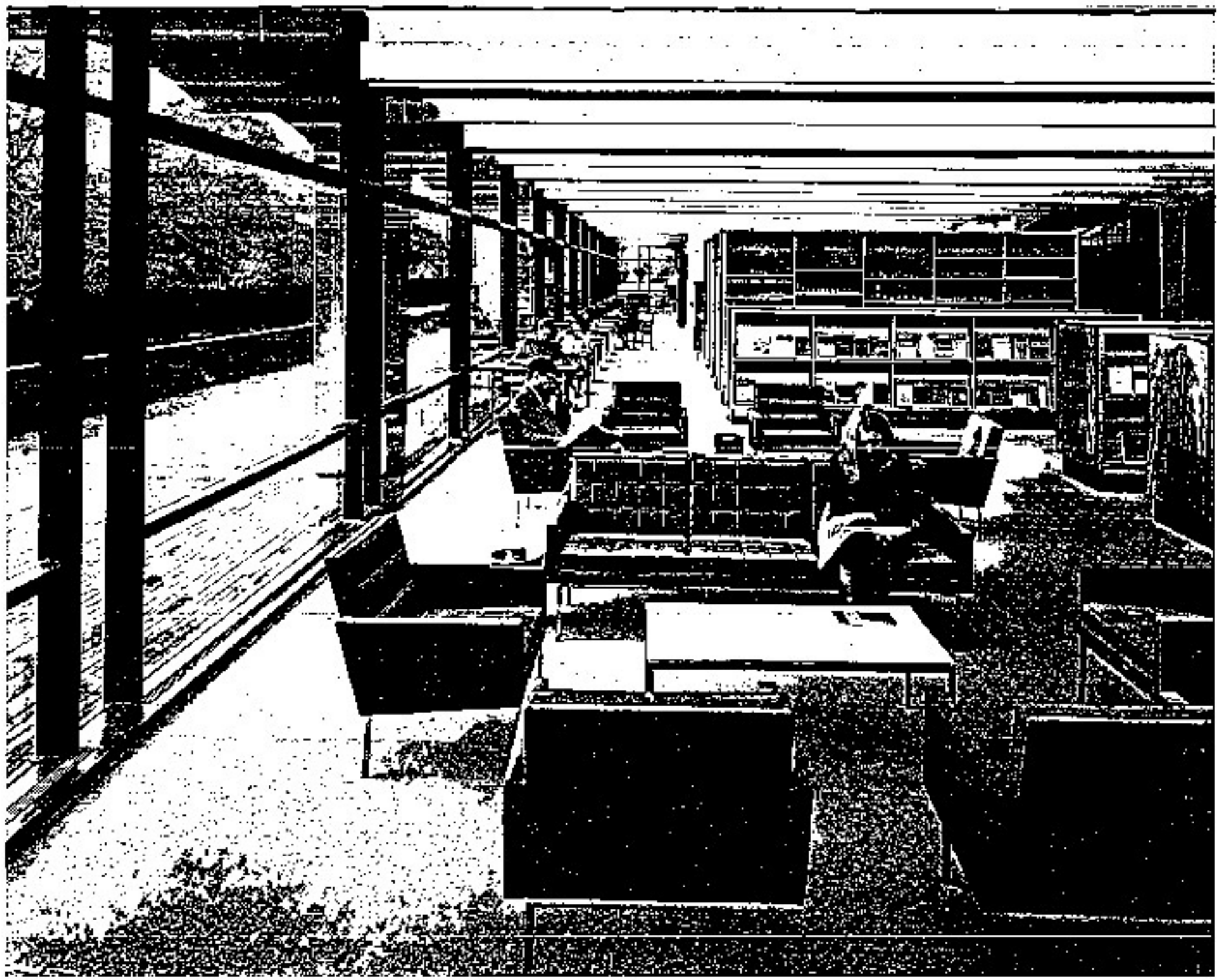
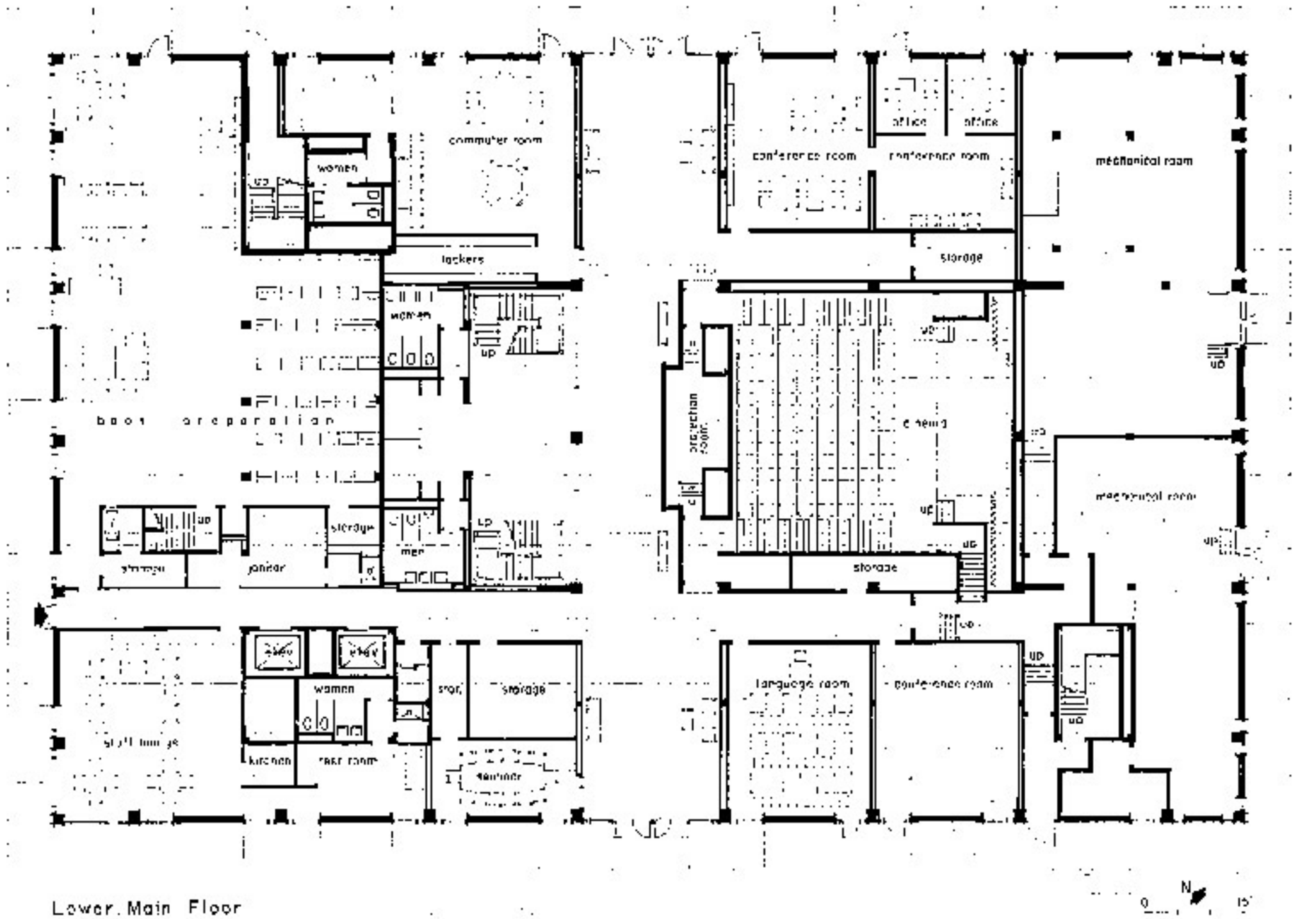


PLATE III

THE HILLES LIBRARY: MAIN FLOOR, THE PERIODICAL SECTION

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Lower Main Floor

Plate IV

THE HILLES LIBRARY

HARRISON & ABRAMOVITZ, ARCHITECTS

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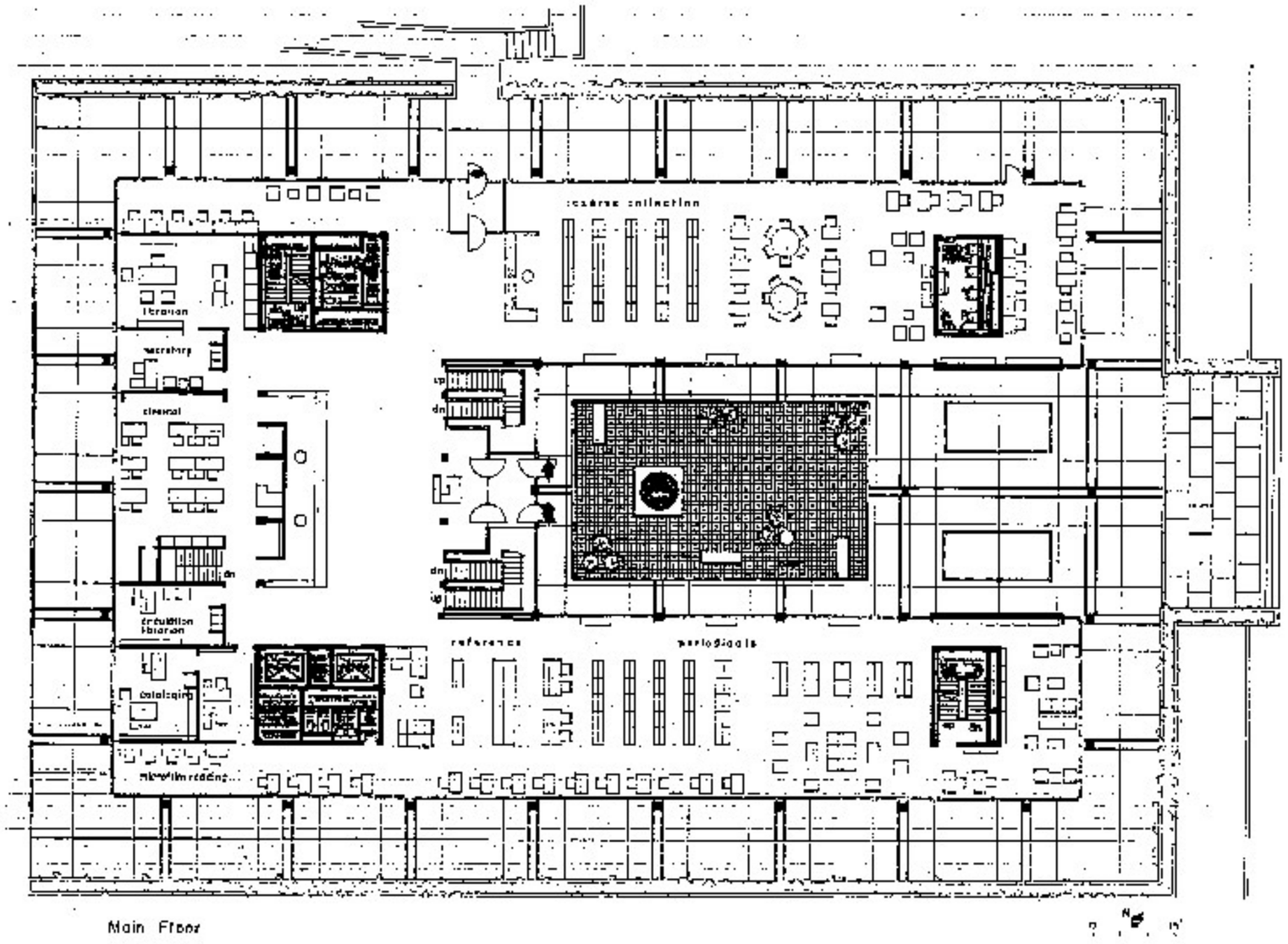


PLATE V

THE HILLES LIBRARY

HARRISON & ABRAMOVITZ, ARCHITECTS

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PLATE VI

THE HILLES LIBRARY

HARRISON & ABRAMOVITZ, ARCHITECTS

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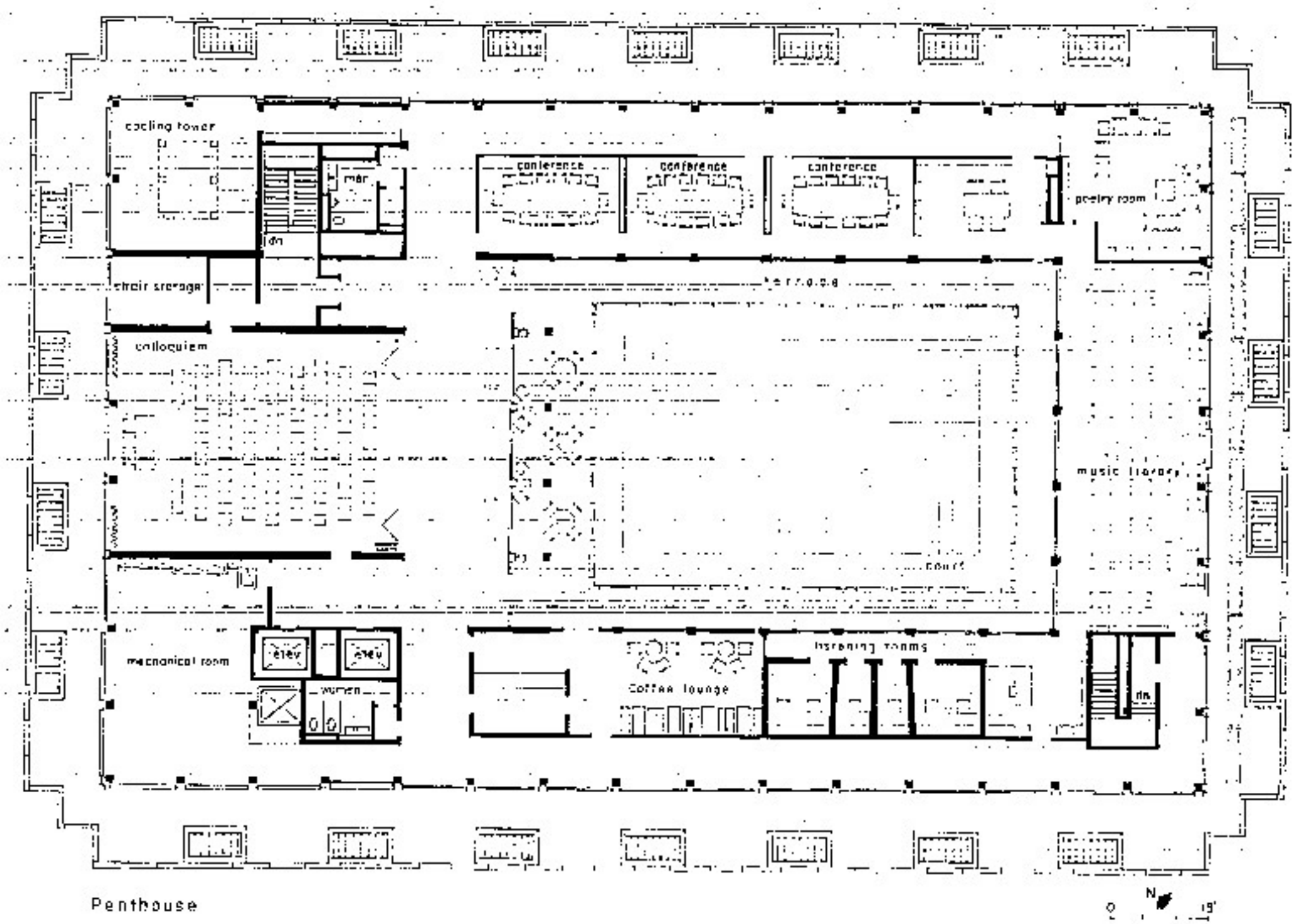


PLATE VII

THE HILLES LIBRARY

HARRISON & ABRAMOVITZ, ARCHITECTS

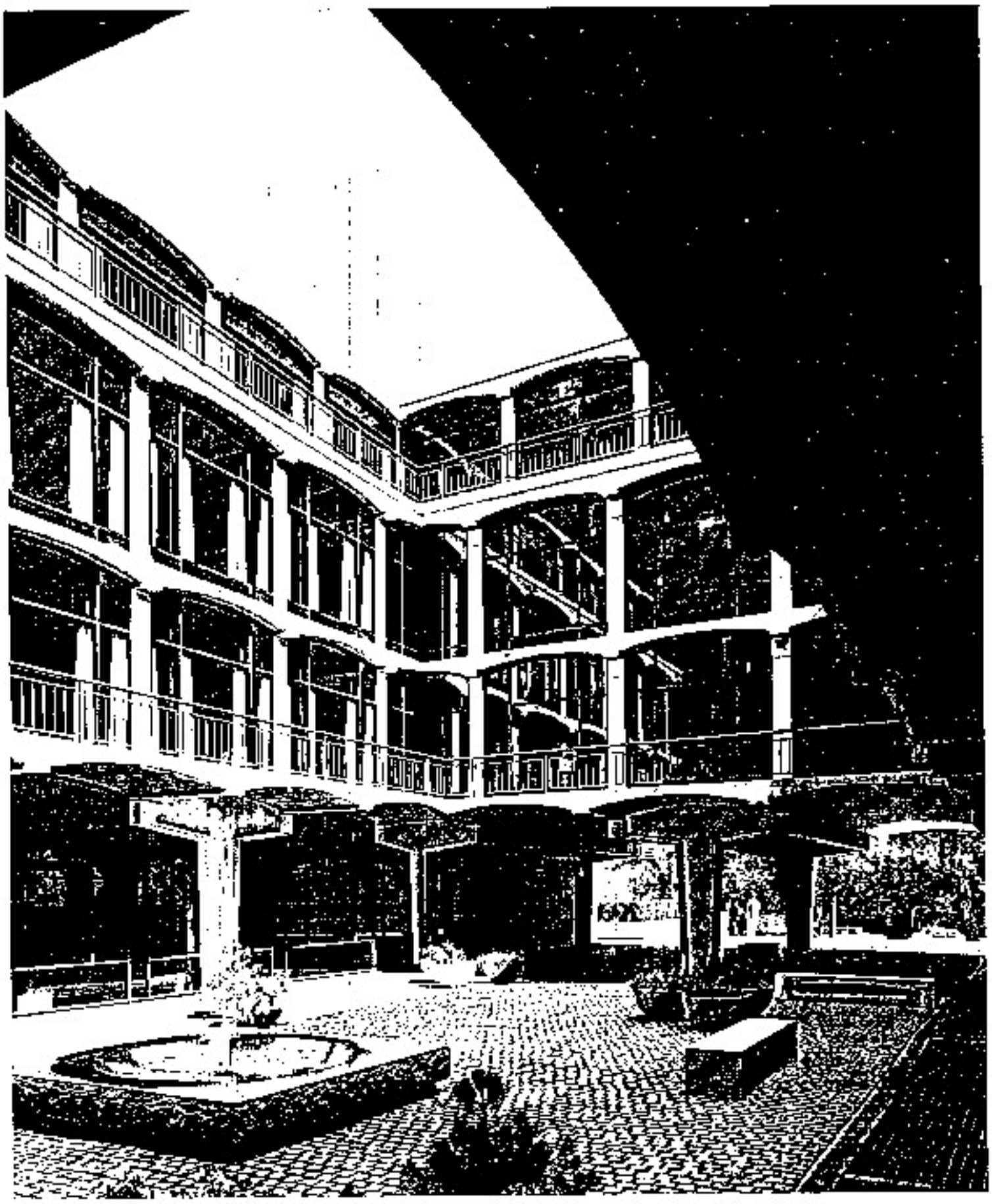


PLATE VIII

THE HILLES LIBRARY: MAIN ENTRANCE COURT

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the Radcliffe student might best thrive and be comfortable. Again and again their talk turned to the sense of intimacy, to the kind of friendly ambiance one might feel upon entering the home of a friend who possessed a large well-lit library where one was comfortably surrounded by books; a space pleasantly carpeted, furnished with an easy chair, an arm chair or two, and a table; a place where one could work, relax, or gaze out to the sky and a garden.

How to achieve such an environment in a college library within the traditional discipline of operation, control, and maintenance, and with consideration for an economic use of personnel was a challenge. Many past efforts have begun with similar desires, yet soon the narrow interpretation of uniformity and control would enter the discussion and the "warden" approach to books and their users took command and the dream became yesterday's stereotyped library.

Constant vigilance and consideration were required to avoid this, and to effect the original dream. Its achievement is a credit to the sincere interest in the idea by the Radcliffe leadership and their advisors who kept the original goal constantly in view. Moreover, this library was to complement the adjacent dormitories as well as to become an intellectual center open and available to the students and their associates at all hours; to be in spirit an extension of the educational environment of Cambridge and to include study and lounge rooms, faculty and advisors' offices, and seminar rooms to bring Harvard professors into daily association with the students of Radcliffe. Another important requirement, since this was a library to be predominantly occupied by young women, was that an ambiance be sought that related in scale and in character to the feminine.

It was an advantage to the architect that existing libraries were nearby and in regular use by the Radcliffe women. A study of these libraries and of the reading habits as well as the behavior patterns of students as individuals or groups served as an invaluable guide to the research undertaken. Since the existing Radcliffe Library, soon to be turned over to others, functioned not unlike a departmental library, patterns were discernible which could be elaborated on. One was a tendency among many of the girls to seek out corners in the upper floors out of the way of traffic, where they could sit casually and comfortably and read at leisure alone, or discuss a subject with a friend quietly. An informality was evident whenever privacy was available.

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It was apparent that an intimate library convenient to the student could easily encourage study and browsing. Study-patterns in reference areas where formal reading occurred, or in specific areas where the use of books and periodicals was limited, varied decidedly from patterns of study prevailing in informal reading areas next to stacks and especially open stacks. Study patterns of male and female students sharing an area are quite unlike the patterns of female students studying in an area which provides privacy. A consideration of the differences suggested a need for various spaces of different sizes. Further research showed that large reading areas were too informal and disturbing, while single carrells were too small and too difficult to use if a leisurely air were be created.

Before long — within the framework of minimal control, i.e., entrance and exit control and immediate access to the catalogue and reference areas — it appeared desirable to create an array of spaces for special uses on different levels, with a variety of light orientation (warm south, shadowless north, morning east light, and very little, if any, west light).

The library as a study and reference center close to the living quarters would often be used during the mornings and evenings as well as during the day; and since daylight entering the reading spaces changes in direction and intensity with the hour of the day, it was agreed that the spaces should permit a choice, a preferred corner for each reader. All this was to be achieved with maximum possible use of the open stack system.

Slowly there evolved a concept of a series of book-walled spaces without the architectural discipline of the old-fashioned stacks; a series of alcoves not unlike a home library with two or three walls of books and a window wall, with shapes and proportions oriented to various interesting views, sometimes to the south, or north, or east, with each alcove designed to hold a comfortable seating group of chairs of the lounge type as well as straight chairs, and a table or two with a seating group of from four to eight readers. Each space was organized with its books so arranged in relation to the natural light that direct sun on either readers or books would be avoided. Naturally, this called for different solutions, depending on whether the space faced north, south, east, or west. Every alcove had some outside light. The artificial light that fell on books and readers would be indirect. The arch form, which contributed to the architectural design on the ex-

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terior and the interior, proved functional and economical; it also provided an excellent light diffuser. The light from a long indirect fixture was thrown onto the ceiling, deflecting and diffusing the light to the reader. It was also pleasing to the eye, and it eliminated glare.

Each floor and alcove was planned to assure a close relation between books and study spaces. A special design for a drop table was developed to provide additional seating during examination periods.

Areas of solid wall and glass vary from alcove to alcove. A bronze glass on the exterior reduces glare. Room partitions for offices are high enough to assure privacy but they are glass-topped to allow maximum light to come through to surrounding spaces. The only solid elements rising to the ceiling are the four corner service cores evident in the plans; they contain elevators, enclosed stairs, rest rooms, and some soundproof typing rooms.

A full-size mock-up was built and revised many times. Adjustments were made in the length and width of the spaces, in the position of the entering light, in the quality of the artificial light, and in the height of the book shelves to permit easy viewing and access to the books by young women. The types and numbers of seats and the table arrangements were reviewed, as well as the type of floor covering. Teak woods and harmonious materials and carpeting were selected to add to the warmth of the spaces.

The building was also affected by the desire of all concerned to have its height and character relate to the local residential neighborhood as well as to the existing adjacent dormitory buildings.

Outdoor spaces for lounging and reading were encouraged in the program. The final design produced a building of four stories and penthouse with a surround of low brick garden walls enclosing a sheltered outdoor garden with alcoved seating spaces. The building is approached through a large, carefully landscaped and paved area of brick. The bays, terraces, and balconies, with their planting boxes for shrubbery and flowers, and the inner court and arcade, with its light and shadow, all contribute to a peaceful and inviting environment. Within, the many reading alcoves and study and seminar rooms are fully carpeted to contribute also to the atmosphere of comfort and quiet.

The plan of the building reflects the manner in which the library functions —

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The *lower main floor* (see Plate IV), entered by a stair from the main paved level above, contains facilities for a center for study as well as the library work area, which is located at the south end adjacent to a service ramp. A large open room is given over to book preparation and binding, storage, and order work; it lies directly below and in a good working relation to the professional offices above, which are situated behind the circulation desk on the main floor, and are interconnected by a book lift and a staff stairway. Deliveries are made directly from the service ramp. The study center's focal point is a steep-ramped cinema auditorium seating 120, off a broad lobby accessible to the main floor above by stair and opening onto garden areas at each end. Here informal groups can gather for conversation after a program. Adjacent to the cinema is a language laboratory with individual listening booths and several seminar rooms.

The *main floor* (see Plate V) accommodates the working core of the professional library services behind the main circulation desk facing the main entrance. The working core contains the offices of the librarian, the assistant librarian, and the staff for circulation and cataloguing. The reserve-book section and desk are located near the side entrance, adjacent to the quadrangle on the east, and since its facilities are heavily used and can be noisy, this location diverts such traffic from the main reading area, which remains quiet and undisturbed. A reference section on the opposite side is easily available to staff and students. Periodicals are arranged in a large alcove with magazines and journals on open shelves; armchairs, sofas, and casual tables are nearby. Readers can move conveniently from the main floor by stair and elevator to the main book collection and to the more secluded reading alcoves on the floors above.

On the *second and third floors* (see Plate VI) the reading alcove becomes the dominant architectural element. These floors contain the main collection of 137,000 volumes. (The book capacity of the entire library is 170,000 volumes, and there is a seating capacity of 600). The second and third floors are similar in plan and the perimeter is that of the previously described reading alcoves formed by the book shelves. The corner alcoves are larger, accommodating larger groups of students. Each floor has ten teak-paneled faculty offices facing on a large inner court. Each floor has two large conference rooms seating twelve for study, tutorials, or seminars, while the second floor has a large open exhibition space immediately off the

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main stairway, designed as a flexible space to permit hanging of a small art exhibit or for similar compatible uses.

The *fourth floor* (see Plate VII) or penthouse floor is devoted to extra-library functions and also houses at its south end a special collection of music and poetry. The music library contains tables equipped for listening by earphones, and open shelves for a collection of 7,800 records and 4,300 scores. The poetry room has a large collection of spoken recordings, tapes of poetry, plays, and literary works. This floor also contains a Colloquium Room at the north end seating 150, and three conference rooms, each seating fourteen. A frequently used coffee and sandwich bar opens onto a terrace that extends around the inner court.

The building expresses its function and form in daylight by its balconies, terraces, and bays which follow the form of the alcoves within; at night, the glass areas glow and show again the alcoves as though the building were a negative of a photograph, illustrating the activities and the domesticity of its surroundings while the light glances on gardens and large landscaped areas surrounding it. This building becomes a live and beckoning structure — day and night — to all library users, and the last three years have shown that we have produced a sympathetic and human library environment.

What would we do differently if we were to do it again? I don't know — except that we surely would not give up those qualities which, though they may require a bit more personal attention and maintenance, make for a "cared for" home, a home for books.

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CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

MAX ABRAMOVITZ for many years has been a partner in the firm of Harrison and Abramovitz, architects of a long list of distinguished buildings that include the Dag Hammarskjold Library at the United Nations, Amsterdam Plaza and the Law School at Columbia University, Lincoln Center, and many of the buildings at Brandeis University.

DR. ROBERT M. GOLDWYN is Clinical Associate in Surgery at the Harvard Medical School.

CHARLES R. GREDLER, Archibald Cary Coolidge Bibliographer in the Harvard University Library, has headed the Slavic Division of the Harvard College Library since 1954.

PATRICK J. MCCARTHY, Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is the author of *Matthew Arnold and the Three Classes*, which was published by the Columbia University Press in 1964.

JEANNE T. NEWLIN is Assistant Curator of the Theatre Collection in the Harvard College Library.

JAMES E. WALSH, Keeper of Printed Books in the Houghton Library of the Harvard College Library, has contributed several articles to the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN, including "Erasmus: *Von Walfart*, 1522" in the issue for July 1968.

CORRIGENDA

Vol. XVII, No. 3 (July 1969)

On page 302, line 15, "Thomas Bowlder" should be Thomas Bowdler.
On page 343, the note on Dr. Shipton's retirement should have stated that he was Director of the American Antiquarian Society from 1959 to 1967, when he was succeeded by Marcus A. McCorison.

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