

Remarks for the Dedicatory Ceremony for the Re-opening of the  
Vassar College Art Library

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Libraries are not so much institutions for preserving the past as they are instruments for remembering the past, so that present and past, experience and memory, may illuminate and inform one another. This is as true for the library when considered as a place or building as it is when considered as a collection of texts. As Paul Byard expressed it in his book, *The Architecture of Additions* :

*There is in a sense no such thing as  
"preservation" .... Every act of preservation is  
inescapably an act of renewal by the light of a later  
time.*

Yet despite this realization that memory is an active faculty and that, if it is not continuously reformulated, "knowledge keeps no better than fish," as Alfred North Whitehead once put it, there is a recognition implied in this very act of renewal that meaning persists, that the objects that come down to us from the past convey a presence--a certain imperturbable solidity, durability, integrity, and weight--that offers us a different way of understanding. There is always more to these objects than meets the eye, and it is this that draws us to their potential for shedding new light on past and present both. Again this is as true of architecture as it is of texts and works of art. Librarians, curators, and architects thus build with an eye to the long term: not measuring in years but in decades and centuries. But we also build knowing that our work, however seemingly durable, is ever in flux: deriving meaning through the way it mirrors the changing needs and uses it will be put to, affecting these uses in turn, and thus always in an open and expressive discourse with a mutable environment.

The special quality of Paul Byard's and Charles Platt's striking renovation of the Vassar College Art Library is their recognition that renewal in this case is a matter of memory, of uncovering and illuminating the integrity, function, and material eloquence of John

McAndrew's original 1937 design in light of present needs. It is a testament to the visionary intelligence of John McAndrew--like Paul Byard, an educator as well as architect--that the programmatic enhancements that his dynamic learning center provided for are those we are only beginning to require of the twenty-first century library, driven by an embodied, as opposed to transparent, modernism. McAndrew's library included, for example, extensive space devoted to group study, wide surfaces for display and access to material in various media, a local service point, ample and penetrating natural light, a porous relationship with the community it serves, and an almost unique incorporation of curriculum into the design itself. The introduction of new elements into the facility, including the addition of a technology-enhanced seminar room and the placement of digital visualization panels into the group study rooms, engage and enlarge upon these innovations.

This notion of an embodied learning practice is a prominent theme in contemporary educational theory, especially in feminist circles. But it is also one that has a history, certainly here at Vassar, where the notion of "going to the source," is a byword. This seems to have been fostered by Matthew Vassar himself, who took pains to acquire for his new institution a foundational collection of works of art, and who insisted that the study of this material culture be given a prominent place in the curriculum. He also purchased over a thousand books on art and architecture to form the original College Library. And although we have acquired other books besides art books over the years, the Art Library collection still stands as a solid and secure cornerstone of our whole edifice. We routinely, for example, are asked to fill interlibrary loan requests for major research institutions such as the National Gallery from areas of the collection in which we have historical strengths.

Lastly, with respect to this idea of an embodied pedagogy, embodiment is about people as well as objects. It is the basis of the notion of a charismatic education, upon which American undergraduate education has been traditionally based, whose origins can be traced to the curriculum of the medieval cathedral schools. This was a type of schooling that sought to develop public individuals trained in the spirit as well as the letter of the liberal arts, who would be peacemakers, leaders, and teachers of others through

inspiration and example, in whom form and substance were to be inseparable. It was a system that privileged *mores*--virtues, manners--as much as it did letters, where the term *documenta* referred as often to the body of the master or teacher to be emulated as it did to literary documents. One of the architects of this system, Hugh of St. Victor, drew a relation between person and object when he wrote:

*We long to be perfectly carved and sculpted in the image of good men, and when excellent and sublime qualities . . . stand out in them, which arouse astonishment and admiration in people's minds, then they shine forth in them like the beauty in exquisite statues, and we strive to recreate these qualities in ourselves.*

Anyone who spent five minutes in a room with Paul Byard would understand precisely what Hugh was talking about here and what the ideal product and vehicle of such an education looks like. Paul had a powerful beneficent effect on everyone around him—as his colleagues and students will attest. I believe, by all accounts of him, that John McAndrew had this same affect on others. I have also come to believe that this shaping quality is extant in the intelligence and humanity of the architecture of the library in which I have dwelled for the past 23 years, where John McAndrew's name is still routinely spoken. And I am confident that the excellent and sublime qualities of both of these extraordinary individuals will continue to influence those who live, work, and play in this space they have made for us long after we who are here now are gone.

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