

April 28, 2017

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street
New York, NY 10007

Dear Ms. Srinivasan and Commissioners,

I write in support of landmark designation of the original interior spaces of the New York Public Library's Schwarzman Building. From popular film and television to the literary and visual arts, the library inside and out has been the setting and even the protagonist in countless works of imagination. The building itself is an impressive imaginative work revealing the city's cultural and intellectual ambitions, the treasure house of a citizenry that takes the care of its heritage seriously. The library's interiors, especially the Rose Main Reading Room, are of a piece with the exterior. To protect a few parts is to leave the whole vulnerable, as the recent—and thankfully failed—Central Library Plan (CLP) showed. I urge the Commission to act now to safeguard this treasure.

I spent years reading and researching at the library while a student at the CUNY Graduate Center, and I continue to use the library as an independent art historian. My doctoral dissertation included a chapter on the library showing how the building stages a unique urban experience. It enacts a processional route from the busy street, up the great steps, into Astor Hall, up the twin stairs, through grand and gracious halls, and into the reading room. The sequence, articulated by architectural details that give it shape and substance, is the product of a Beaux-Arts architects' imagination at its best. It is also something more. It is the embodiment of inspiring, authentic civic spectacle and of the pride of the city.

This has been recognized from the start. Herbert Croly, the Progressive political theorist and architecture critic, wrote in 1910 that the library's gracious architecture "issues to the people an invitation to enter rather than a command." He recognized that the library—inside as much as outside—is a civic monument of the first order. When one enters the library, a new world is revealed, so different from the one outside. It is a gift to the city and to visitors and researchers from around the world. The outpouring of support for the library during the CLP fiasco proved this.

As I work now to turn my dissertation into a book, the chapter on the library grows longer and more complex. My hope is to better convey the significance of the building as an urban ensemble, possibly New York's best. How fortunate we are to still have these spaces intact, with but few changes from Carrère and Hastings' original design. Like any landmark, the library is a monument of another age. But it is also a living monument that sustains and is sustained by the vitality of the present. It should be safeguarded as a whole.

I ask the Commission to add the library's interior to the city's roster of protected monuments.

Sincerely,



Paul Ranogajec
Independent art historian
Staten Island, NY