



Rebirth of an Architectural Treasure

The Renovation of Walter Library

Walter Library was built in 1922/23 and first opened to the public as the University of Minnesota's main library in 1924. Designed by architect Clarence Johnston and built at a cost of \$1.4 million, the library was a very ornate and classical building with its stone and brick exterior, ornamental plaster ceilings, intricate woodwork, and state-of-the-art steel book stacks. Like its neighbors on Northrop Mall, it was built in the Roman Renaissance style of red brick and Bedford limestone trim, with a colonnaded portico.

The renovation, designed by Minneapolis architectural firm Stageberg Beyer Sachs, began in December 1999 and was completed in December 2002 at a cost of \$63.4 million. The building now houses the Science & Engineering Library, Digital Technology Center, Learning Resources Center, Digital Media Center, IT Dean's office, and the Minnesota Supercomputing Institute.

Not only is the renovated Walter Library an architectural wonder, with its ornate recessed ceilings and marble staircases, but it is also a high-tech showcase. With 60,000 square feet of flooring raised to conceal digital wiring, 200,000 feet of fiber optic cable, and over 800,000 feet of data cable, the building is wired to the hilt. Students can bring in their laptops and enjoy high-speed Internet access using plug-in or wireless connectivity. In the library reading rooms, state-of-the-art terminals with sleek flat-screen monitors enhance the research experience.

The Ceilings

In order to return the building to its former glory, the restoration firm of Conrad Schmitt Studios of New Berlin, Wisconsin, was selected to completely repaint the decorative ceilings. These ceilings, though they appear to be stonework or timber, are actually cast plaster. In the restoration, gold leaf was used instead of the original bronze paint that had oxidized to a green color shortly after the building opened. The necessary smoke detectors and sprinkler heads were very carefully disguised to match the design of the ceilings.

The First Floor Lobby

The use of gold leaf is dramatic in the restoration of the first floor lobby ceiling. The astrolabe chandelier in the center of the lobby is an original fixture, thoroughly cleaned to return it to its original beauty.

In the center of the two sets of brass grills, about three feet up from the floor, are some of the owls, a motif that runs throughout the building. At the corners of the door lintels there are owls along with turtles, a hand-held torch and an oil lamp, all ancient symbols of learning. In the relief carvings over the exhibit cases, you can also see the footed urn and garland motif that is repeated in the cornice of the South Reading Room on the second floor.

In the corridor leading to Pleasant Street, the stone panels along the walls once formed part of the floor of the original book stacks.

The Second Floor – Great Hall

This second floor space was originally the hub of the library, housing the card catalog and the counter where users could request books from the closed book stacks. The counter, which stood on the west side of the room, was dismantled and pieces of it used to create the counter now on the east side. As with the ceilings, gold leaf was used on the Corinthian caps of the green alpine marble columns. The walls are of Mankato travertine, and the relief carvings over the doors are Tennessee marble. In the carving over the door to Room 208, the presence of the single owl figure at the lower right-hand side of the chair suggests that the figure seated in this carving may well be Athena, the goddess of learning, whose talisman was the owl.

Room 208 – The North Reading Room (Science & Engineering Library)

Besides the careful restoration of the coffered ceiling in this room, a notable feature of the restoration is the “reappearance” of the cornice motif. The cornice in this room, along with the one in the South Reading Room, had been painted the same color as the walls, making most of the detail nearly invisible. The dolphin motif in the cornice is now restored to its original detail.

The large oak tables in this reading room and the East Reading Room are the library's original tables. They have been carefully restored, and a re-creation of the original task lights that were originally on the tables now sit on an oak pediment housing electrical power and access ports to the Internet. All three reading rooms have floors raised 10” above the concrete to accommodate power lines and data cables.

Room 206 – The East Reading Room (Science & Engineering Library)

The elaborate detail in the design of the ceilings is most dramatic in this room. Above the bookcases is an impressive execution of the owl motif, with carved owls ringing the entire room. All of the owls were carved with blank eyes, with the exception of one, which has pupils. A private little stonecutter’s joke?

Room 204 – The South Reading Room (Learning Resources Center)

Here, as in the North Reading Room, the plaster ceiling is painted to appear as a wood-coffered ceiling. The cornice detail is unique, picking up the footed urn and garland detail that was used in the carvings on the first floor. In the bronze radiator covers, the narrow bands that separate the crosshatched panels appear to contain more owls, but a closer look shows that these figures are actually flowers and leaves that from a distance look like a stylized owl.

So How Many Owls are in Walter Library?



The latest count is 225, plus the stylized “owls-head” design in the Reading Room light fixtures, which would add hundreds to the count.

New Book Stacks

Most of the library’s collection is housed below ground in the refurbished basement, sub-basement, and foundation levels. As in all the newly constructed spaces in the building, the woodwork is natural oak, with accents of the green alpine marble used on the second floor.

Photos of the Library and the renovation project can be viewed on the Science & Engineering Library’s Web site; <http://sciweb.lib.umn.edu/walter/photos/index.html>