A Comprehensive Architectural Plan for the Second Century

JANE SCHWARZ Staff Writer

Over the past year considerable controversy has surrounded the Museum’s announcements about its plans for expansion and reorganization. There have been headlines about the “encroachment on the park” and public pressure for the Museum to decentralize. There have also been public hearings before city agencies and the City Council, where criticism as well as broad-gauged support for the Museum’s plans has been expressed. As so often happens, the controversy has managed to obscure the facts and much of the reasoning behind the Museum’s present philosophy that is embodied in its new Comprehensive Architectural Plan for the Second Century.

The roots of this plan date back to the very early years of the Museum, when the decision was made to move the Metropolitan from its temporary quarters and to incorporate it as a permanent feature of Central Park. In 1878, the Museum entered into a lease agreement with New York City for the tract of land bounded by Eightieth and Eighty-fifth streets and by the park’s East Drive and Fifth Avenue. For a long time the building was entirely park-oriented, and actually surrounded by the park, with
the main entrance facing first west and then south. It wasn't until an addition in 1902 that it turned around and faced Fifth Avenue, and the entrance on the park side was no longer used.

From the beginning there were building plans that involved expansion on the Museum's park site. The present one happens to be fifth in the Museum's history, each of the past ones being discarded by succeeding administrations and Boards of Trustees who then produced their own. The immediate thought is, why not this one too? What makes this plan so different from its fated predecessors that it won't be junked a few decades from now? There are no guarantees, but two things make it different from earlier ones and should give the skeptic some reason to believe that this may be the final master plan for the Museum.

First, this plan, unlike any of the others, deals with the works of art already collected as well as the present problems of the Museum, instead of offering grandiose architectural schemes for collections of the future. Second, and more important, over the past year there has been a significant change in the Museum's acquisition policy. The three major recent acquisitions—the Temple of Dendur, The Michael C. Rockefeller Collection of Primitive Art, the Robert Lehman Collection—each fill gaps in the present collections. Now the Metropolitan's task will be to refine its collections. This not only means buying fewer, more important works of art, but also winnowing out pieces no longer useful for exhibition or study, and selling or exchanging them.

But does the Metropolitan need a comprehensive plan at all? As the Museum enters its second century, the original building has been engulfed by sixteen additions covering seven acres. Any visitor who has tried to find his way from one area to another is painfully aware of the need for a better organization of the various departments. The galleries are overcrowded, with the annual number of visitors many times what it was in 1926, when the last major addition for exhibition space was constructed. So inadequate is the space that significant portions of several collections—such as the American nineteenth-century period rooms and much of the decorative arts collection—are forced to be in storage. There
is, of course, no room in the existing building for the Lehman collection, the Temple of Dendur, or the Rockefeller collection of primitive art. Staff offices are cramped and cluttered and often located in inappropriate back corners.

Because of the complexity of the problems, it seemed essential to base proposed solutions on an exhaustive study of the Museum’s present facilities and to devise a comprehensive plan for its future. To this end, the architectural firm of Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates has been working closely with the Museum’s staff for three years.

One part of the plan deals with the Metropolitan’s present buildings. Detailed scientific studies, including structural, mechanical, and electrical surveys, were made. These will help the Museum make best use of the space it already has by outlining what can be done to update existing facilities. Some of the work of renovation has been completed. The new plaza in front of the Museum, with its impressive fountains and broad stairway, and the cleaned and refurbished Great Hall are the two most dramatic features.

A very important aspect of the plan is its design for a more logical organization of galleries with smoother transitions between them. Each department will have an orientation room and space for special exhibitions near the display of the most important objects from its collection. Study-storage rooms will be available to the public, and much more space will be devoted to educational facilities such as classrooms.

The second part of the plan is devoted to renewing the direct access from Central Park to the Museum, and with housing the new acquisitions. The Temple of Dendur, a first-century B.C. Egyptian monument given to the United States by the United Arab Republic, was awarded to the Metropolitan because, among other reasons, our design provided shelter for its delicate stone. The glass-enclosed temple will be placed in a re-creation of its original Nile River setting to enhance the visitor’s understanding and appreciation of the temple, and of our great Egyptian collections in the adjoining galleries. It will be built over the employees’ parking lot at the building’s north end.

The Michael C. Rockefeller Collection of Primitive Art, containing over 3,000 objects of art from Oceania, Africa, and the Americas, will be housed in a building over what is now the public parking lot at the south end of the Museum. Its design will echo the enclosure for the Temple of Dendur. The plans call for subtle illumination of both wings at night for the benefit of strollers.

The magnificent Robert Lehman Collection of European paintings, drawings, and decorative arts, which includes works by Rembrandt, El Greco, and Ingres, will be placed in a new wing in the center of the west façade of the Museum. Among the many attractions of the building will be seven period rooms, recreating the ones in the Lehman house that Mr. Lehman had decorated specifically for showing masterpieces of his collection.

Until now, the west or park side of the Museum has been largely ignored: its architecture is a jumble and gives the impression of being unfinished. The new designs will not only complete the western façade, but will preserve those architectural elements that contribute to the Museum’s classification as a landmark, such as the early park entrance and the southwest façade designed by Theodore Weston in 1888. Furthermore, the light and airy feeling of the glass architecture should make the entire Museum blend better with its park environment, as the founders had envisioned.

The expense of realizing a design such as the comprehensive architectural plan comes high in this day of spiraling costs. The Lehman pavilion will be constructed entirely with private funds, and its maintenance and operation have been endowed. The Rockefeller wing will also be largely privately funded. The Museum realizes that the cost of other parts of the plan will have to be shared between the city and generous private donors. One might object that the debt-ridden city should not put up any of its money for additions to museums, when so many other public facilities are inadequate, but if New York is to be livable in the future, it will be partly because of its museums, parks, and libraries. The Museum is a great educational institution—by far the largest public school or university in the city—existing for the benefit of New Yorkers of all ages.

If the matter of money has been the cause of concern, the issue of encroachment on the park has provoked outrage. The construction, however, is well within the tract described in the lease granted to the Metropolitan by the city. Most of the additions will be built on what are now parking lots (garage space will be relocated underground). Several areas that are now asphalt will be turned back to grass, including various driveways, part of the public parking lot, and the playground that was
The most complex objection to the expansion, and the one that goes right to the heart of the Museum's philosophy, is whether the new acquisitions should be placed here at all. Some supporters of decentralization argue that the Museum is too big already, and that the city would be better served if the Metropolitan housed its newest collections at different locations around the boroughs. A few of the most frequently voiced suggestions call for putting the primitive art collection in Harlem or in the American Museum of Natural History, placing the Temple of Dendur on Welfare Island, and opening the Lehman townhouse on Fifty-fourth Street to the public.

These ideas were appealing at first, but after thorough investigation the practical problems appeared to outweigh the advantages. For one thing, the cost of building and staffing a series of branch museums around the city would be prohibitive. By adding to the present building, the new wings can draw on the specialized facilities that already exist and that would be costly to duplicate even on a small scale, such as the complicated security network, expert curatorial and educational personnel, and the well-equipped conservation department. It is estimated that the new American Wing would cost more than twice the contemplated amount if it were detached from the main building.

The question of whether as many people would get to see the works of art if they were located in Harlem or on Welfare Island can be argued both ways. "If you've got something good, people will come," is one point, but attendance at the Museum of the American Indian and the Hispanic Society, both in northern Manhattan, the Staten Island Museum, and other small but excellent institutions around New York appears to disprove this.

In addition to the technical and financial reasons against putting the Rockefeller primitive art collection in Harlem, a compelling argument against doing this was voiced at one of the public hearings on the Museum's plans by a resident of that neighborhood: she insisted that she wanted the art of her black African forebears in the same place as the art of early white people. If there is Greek and Roman art at the Metropolitan, why not African? If the collection were to be put across the park at the Museum of Natural History it would be considered anthropology. It's art and belongs in an art museum.

The possibility of opening the Lehman house was thoroughly explored. The problems involved in safely and successfully converting it into a public gallery seemed insurmountable. First of all, wall space was so limited that only half of the collection was ever on exhibition there at one time. Then, too, it is a typical private residence with a narrow staircase and Lilliputian elevator. It is not fireproof and it lacks space for storage, for study-seminar rooms, and for the extensive Lehman library that was given to the Museum along with the rest of the collection.

The Metropolitan is in favor of a decentralization that would extend educational opportunities into areas of the city where there are now very few. But this can be accomplished without literally splitting up the Museum. Instead, the Museum can share its services and facilities with the communities, and the administration has already sought the advice of organizations throughout the city that have indicated their interest. These groups have suggested that a "colonial" or "imperialistic" move by the Metropolitan to set up branches would be resented. They feel each community should have absolute control over its museums. Larger institutions like the Metropolitan should support local cultural centers by allowing them to draw on its resources. The Museum has concluded that these groups are right, and will cooperate in the development of new community cultural programs by lending works of art from its collections and providing specialized technical help such as conservation techniques and exhibition design. Several community projects have already been undertaken: a mobile exhibit called Eye Opener has been traveling through the five boroughs since August 1970, and pilot programs of loan exhibitions and special assistance to organizations and libraries in Queens and the Bronx have been started.

Many details of the Comprehensive Architectural Plan for the Second Century are still being worked out. Originally, for instance, the plan suggested the removal of the Great Stairs, but a number of factors, including some public opposition to this idea, caused the Museum to restudy and eventually drop this proposal.

A plan the size and scope of this one will never totally please everyone and it will continue to have its critics. But it should be considered as an overall guideline—a truly comprehensive plan. It is meant to resolve the Metropolitan's present urgent problems of organization and space. The Museum must be ready to face the demands that will be placed upon it in the future, and to meet its responsibility of sharing its vast treasures with the public in the most enjoyable and enlightening way possible.