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## ARCHITECTURE VIEW; Democratic Decorations At Bard College

**BYLINE:** By Herbert Muschamp

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Though the Post-Modern movement took Robert Venturi's ideas in ridiculous directions, many of those ideas have become even more valuable with time. Architects agonizing over how to design buildings for today's culturally fragmented public, for example, could do worse than reacquaint themselves with Venturi's concept of the "difficult whole." Unity is not meant to be easy, Venturi proposes, nor is diversity synonymous with distintegration. Difference is as great a civic virtue as justice, faith or grandeur.

And seldom has it been celebrated as delectably as at Stevenson Library, Venturi's new addition to a pair of library buildings at Bard College. The strength of the design is due partly to Venturi's smart solution to a complex problem, but it also owes much to the context he found there. A small school with a progressive reputation, Bard sits high on a bluff above the Hudson River in Annandale, commanding views that have scarcely changed since the days of the Hudson River painters. Its original library, a perfectly proportioned Ionic temple built in 1893, is the ideal architectural accent for this American arcadia. Of ivory brick surrounded by weathered stone columns, this Greek Revival gem stands for the idea of America as a natural paradise where democracy could take root.

Venturi has designed additions to classical buildings in the past, most notably the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College. But the purity of Bard's picture-perfect Parthenon clearly sparked his historical imagination. Bard's temple exemplifies more than a style. It is the supreme architectural symbol of European civilization as the 19th century imagined it, a building that speaks less of the Greeks than of the Victorians who rediscovered ancient Athens and declared it their ancestral home. Venturi's library is his contribution to the Great Books debate. It says that the best way to honor the classical canon is to show that it retains the power to inspire.

The library had already been added to. In the early 1970's, a dun-colored brick saddlebag of an annex was hung off one side of it. A decade later, there was talk of slinging a matching saddlebag off the other side. But in his competition-winning design, Venturi argued that the best way to honor the temple's classical symmetry was not to ape it but to contrast it. Attached to the western wall of the earlier annex, flaring slightly as it projects beyond the temple's portico, his addition is colorful, varied and lop-sided where the temple is monochrome, uniform and symmetrical; flatly surfaced instead of deeply recessed; marked by horizontal bands that counter the temple's columns. The addition is the temple's dream of itself in another life -- in modern life, in fact.

The result is far from the prototypical Venturian "decorated shed." In addition to designing the new addition, which has doubled the library's size, Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates has remodeled the two existing structures, creating marvelous interiors throughout: a soaring, light-splashed lobby; irregularly shaped seminar rooms; and loftlike reading areas furnished with tables and carrels of sturdy oak. The sequence of spaces is benignly labyrinthine: a gentle maze for the pursuit of knowledge.

Still, it is the building's exterior ornament that most graphically conveys Venturi's idea of the difficult whole. Each of the addition's three exposed sides is treated differently, forming a wraparound triptych that increases in visual complexity as you circle it. Moving from the rear, the design progresses from plain brick (a dull yawn caught from the 70's addition) to polychrome brick woven into a richly textured diaper pattern, and finally to the brilliant sunrise of an entrance facade composed of metal panels painted lemon, orange and white, with contrasting strips of purple and olive. Here, Venturi's

inspiration appears to be the painter Kenneth Noland. The entrance facade suspends a color field over a soccer field, a scrimmage between study and play.

Windows create counterpoint patterns, and also adjust the addition into harmonious relationship with the temple. Their rhythm and proportions echo the Ionic colonnade, while the mullions suggest fluting and even impart an illusion of roundness. Ornament turns out to be much harder than many post-modernists imagined. If there is a down side to this building, it is that Venturi's masterly patterns put to shame the checks and stripes of nearby Olin Hall, a stale post-modern building from 1987. For Venturi, ornament has never been merely a matter of delighting the eye with visual candy. It is a matter of punching up the vision to shape up the mind.

Though Venturi has said that he works in the classical tradition, the weakest part of the design is the most explicitly classical: a pediment, raised on fat concrete columns, that forms a gateway to the forecourt. This cartoon device is classic Venturi, if hardly classic Greek. And, as a whole, the addition is closer in sensibility to 19th-century Gothic Revival. Venturi's love of pattern, his fascination with irregularity and his pointed indifference to good taste recall the deliberate ugliness of William Butterfield's Victorian churches, and the qualities for which Ruskin praised Venetian Gothic: rudeness, love of change, obstinacy and generosity.

UNLIKE RUSKIN, VENTURI DOES not despise the classical. He allows the temple's pediment to rise above his wing, and a concrete block retaining wall creates the illusion of a plinth. By pulling his entrance facade slightly apart from the side wall of the temple, Venturi has actually restored to the temple an integrity that the earlier annex had compromised. And by angling the facade, he invites reflections of the temple to ripple across its windows. This interplay brings out the temple's underlying contradiction. For unlike the Parthenon, Bard's Greek Revival pavilion was not an urban building. Though it glorified the democratic ideal, it sat comfortably removed from the industrial cities where society endured the tumultuous social consequences of that ideal. With his urbane, contentious addition, Venturi has tried to make an honest temple of it.

And his ability to embrace the poles in the 19th-century War of the Styles indicates more than catholicity of taste. It shows that he grasps what that war was about. Classicists and Gothicists were not fighting over styles. They were agonizing over qualities of mind: reason and intuition, order and the romantic desire to escape it. Venturi has reconciled these poles by allowing that they can no more be fully integrated or separated than the left and right sides of the brain. That is his apt message for this house of learning.

**LOAD-DATE:** October 31, 1993

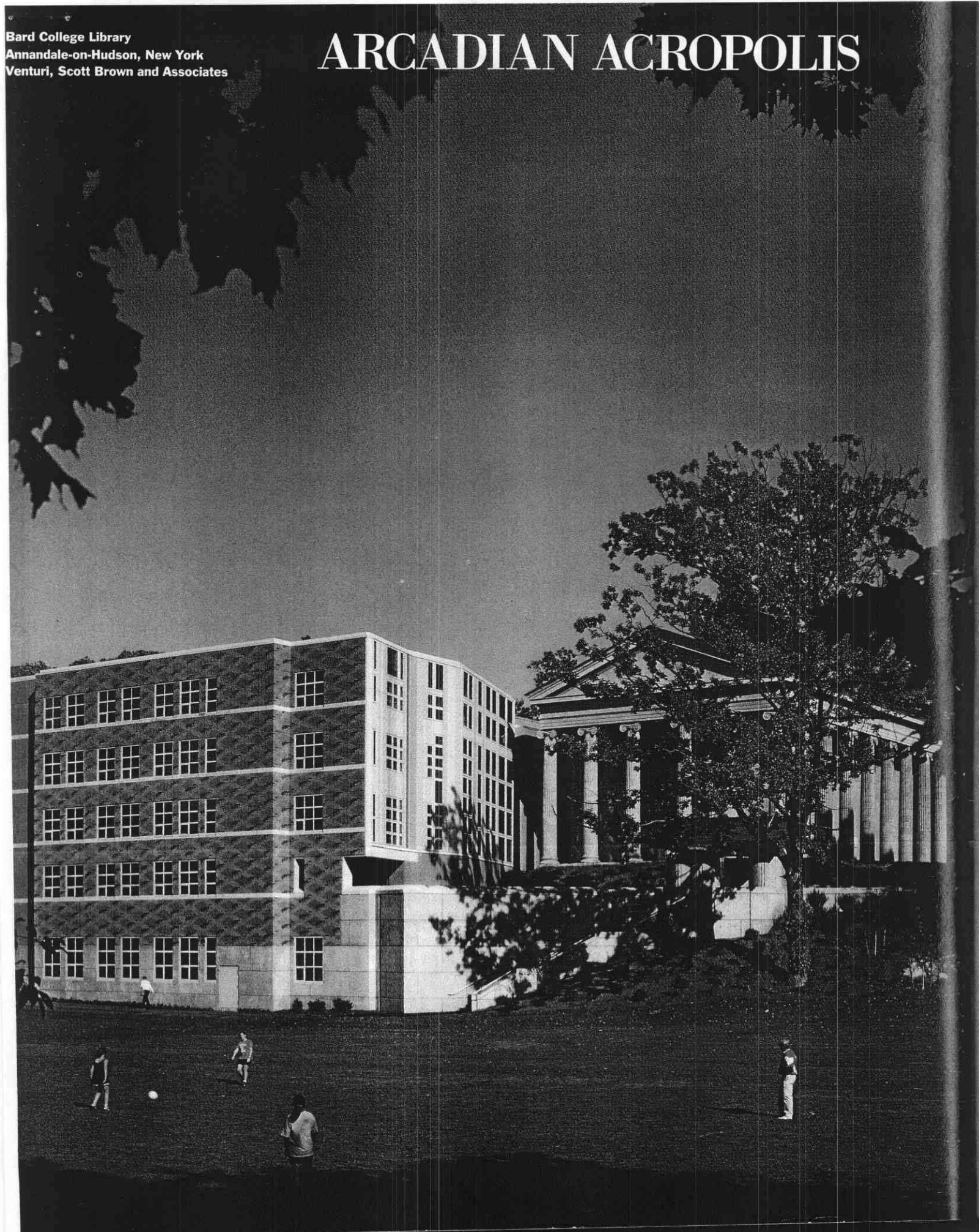
**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**GRAPHIC:** Photo: The new Robert Venturi library next to the original, Greek Revival one -- A gentle maze for the pursuit of knowledge. (Matt Wargo/Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates)

**TYPE:** Review

Bard College Library  
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates

# ARCADIAN ACROPOLIS



The Bard College library stood alone for nearly a century, as if in a dream, on an Arcadian bluff near the Hudson River. Completed in 1893 by an architect who remains unknown, the building epitomizes the Romantic cult of individual freedom. It was designed as a temple, isolated like an English garden folly, and dedicated to the pursuit of democratic ideals. But the library contained only one splendid, skylit room, which was as impossible to expand as the Parthenon—at least until 1976, when New Canaan, Connecticut-based SMS Architects tacked on a fashionably Brutalist concrete addition. The resulting hybrid haunted the campus like a vengeful ghost whose proud, solemn stance had been vanquished by a tuberous growth. At last, in 1988, Bard commissioned Philadelphia-based Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates to double the library's capacity, ensuring a brilliant and precarious treaty between old and new.

By Venturi's own admission, adding to the finite composition of a temple is unconscionable: "It would have pained me to design the first addition," he confesses. "But I love the perversity of it." Venturi's extension succeeds for the very reasons preservationists love to hate it: The new wing is an intrepid modern counterpart to the 1893 temple, a poignant contrast which, stylistically, looks nothing like its Classical neighbor. It is designed as part of a larger composition that includes the existing library; without the older building, the addition would be meaningless.

Venturi extends the new wing out in front of the existing building, forms a plinth, and adds a crude propylaeum. As a result, he not only conceals the unsightly 1976 addition, but also defines a new precinct for the 1893 temple. Here in Arcadia, Venturi creates an acropolis by evoking the soul of the ancient precedent: Bard's Victorian maiden is reborn as a Greek, joined in a difficult but strong marriage, trumpeting once again all the sculptural vigor of her creation.

The strength of Venturi's scheme derives from the differences between the library's new and old facades. Paired like billboards above the soccer field, the temple's west portico and Venturi's five-story, west-facing facade form an inexorable diptych. The ancient and the modern are inextricably bound by intense struggle: The horizontal bands on Venturi's west facade defy the vertical stance of the portico, and the solid between windows counters the void between columns. Most curiously, Venturi incorporates a small arsenal of gunlike shapes into the pattern of the

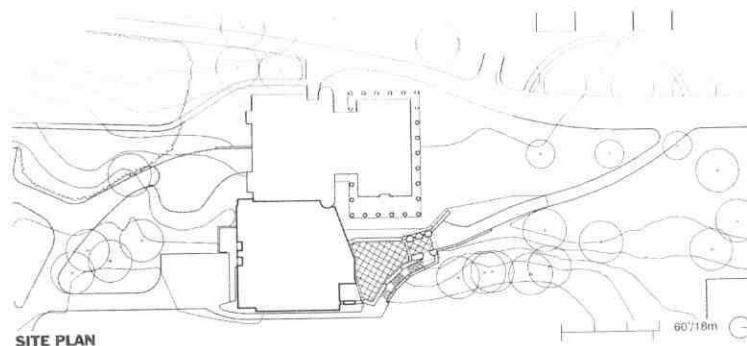
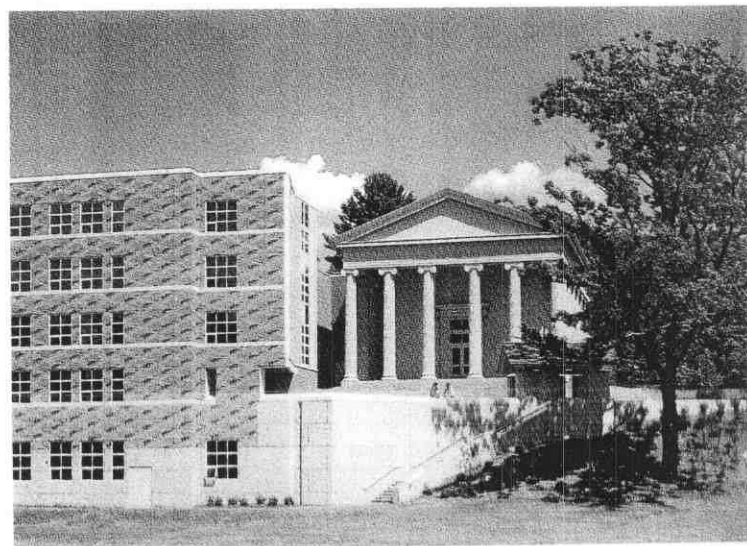
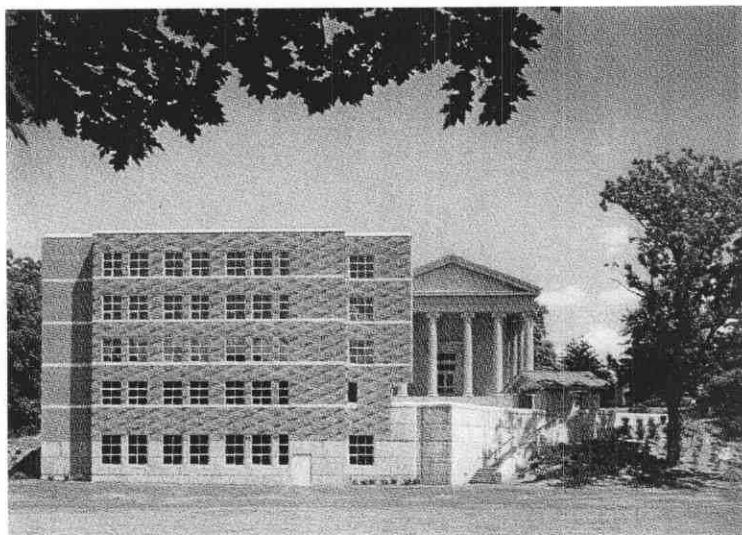
**FACING PAGE:** Venturi, Scott Brown's addition to the Bard College library extends from SMS's 1976 addition to north side of 1893 temple.

**BELOW:** Addition, original library, and new propylaeum form an academic acropolis at Bard College.

**BOTTOM:** Retaining wall supports new plinth overlooking soccer field.

**SITE PLAN:** Expanded library consists of existing temple (center); Venturi-designed plinth and extension (bottom); and 1976 addition (upper left).

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**SITE PLAN**





brick. These appear to fire masonry bullets in the direction of the old building, as if to defend the very existence of his new wing.

The horizontal rush of bands and bullets is cut off abruptly at the corner of the south facade, where Venturi employs the more conciliatory tactics of his 1991 addition to the National Gallery in London. On the gallery's south facade, the architect replicates in limestone the Classical order of William Wilkins' 1838 original to orchestrate a Baroque concatenation and inflection toward the center of the building. As the new wall extends away from Trafalgar Square, Venturi gradually strips away the ornamental surface, revealing a flat, elegant box. At Bard, however, Venturi abandons this fluid boundary between new and old, seeking instead what he calls "harmony through analogy and contrast." Rather than replicating and extending the Ionic portico of the 1893 building, he echoes its rhythms and evokes its depths, alternating vertical bands of metal solid and glass void on a two-dimensional surface as graphic and colorful as a De Stijl painting.

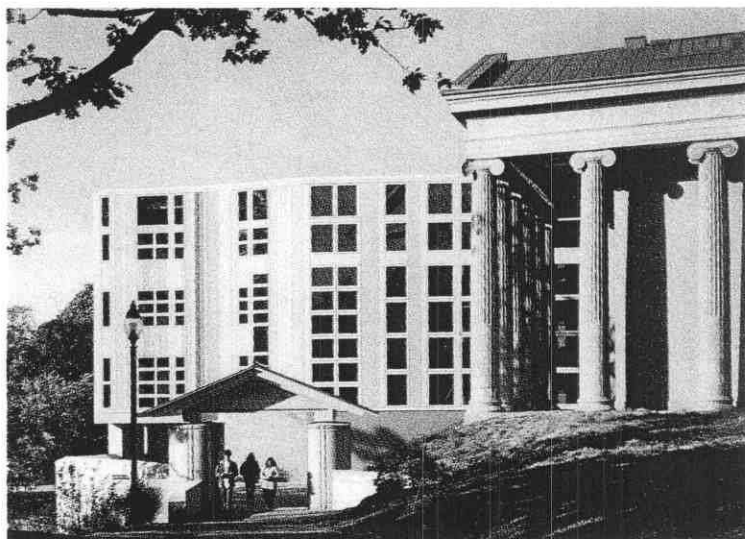
Even after establishing a convincing affinity between the two buildings, Venturi restores the object quality of the temple by cleverly inverting his unifying strategy for the National Gallery. The library's south facade is faceted like its precedent in London, but in this case, the walls appear gradually more solid and traditional as one moves away from the existing building. Rippling like a flag toward the adjacent portico, the angled south wall nearly dissolves into a Miesian frame, transforming the windows into a mirror for the temple. Venturi's reflective, chromatic facade can be seen as a backdrop, too, as if the architect had drawn a curtain before a stage. At dusk, the lights go on and the performance begins: Students appear at reading tables beside windows on three upper floors. Outside, the audience pauses on the plinth and, afterward, either slips in from the corner entrance beneath the stage or descends the stair to the soccer field.

In contrast, the library's north facade derives its simplicity and planarity from the early architecture of New England. "Too many buildings are all flair," Venturi deplores. "Sometimes it's appropriate to be boring and ordinary." His words best describe the library's interior. The new addition was conceived as a flexible loft, with offices facing north, reading areas overlooking the soccer field to the west, and a four-story-high lobby flanking the south wall. By locating the stacks in the center of the new wing, Venturi

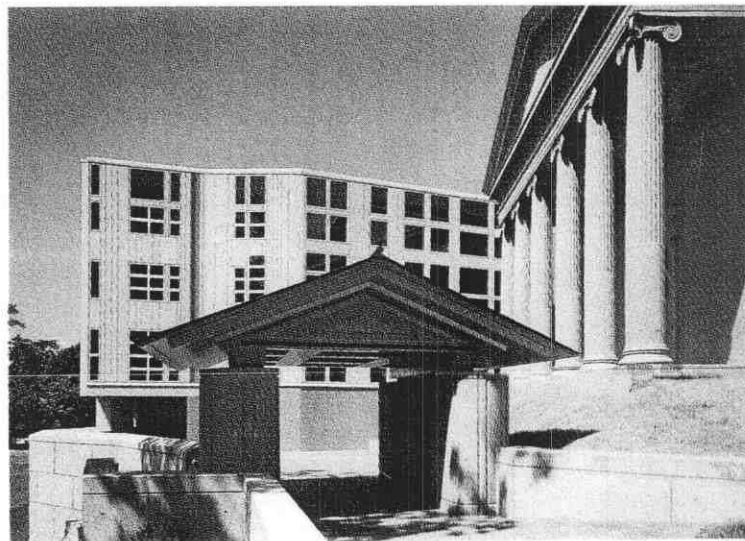
**FACING PAGE:** Painted-metal south facade appears more solid as it extends from portico toward southwest corner.

**BELOW:** Propylaeum with concrete piers and wood roof marks south approach to library's main entrance.

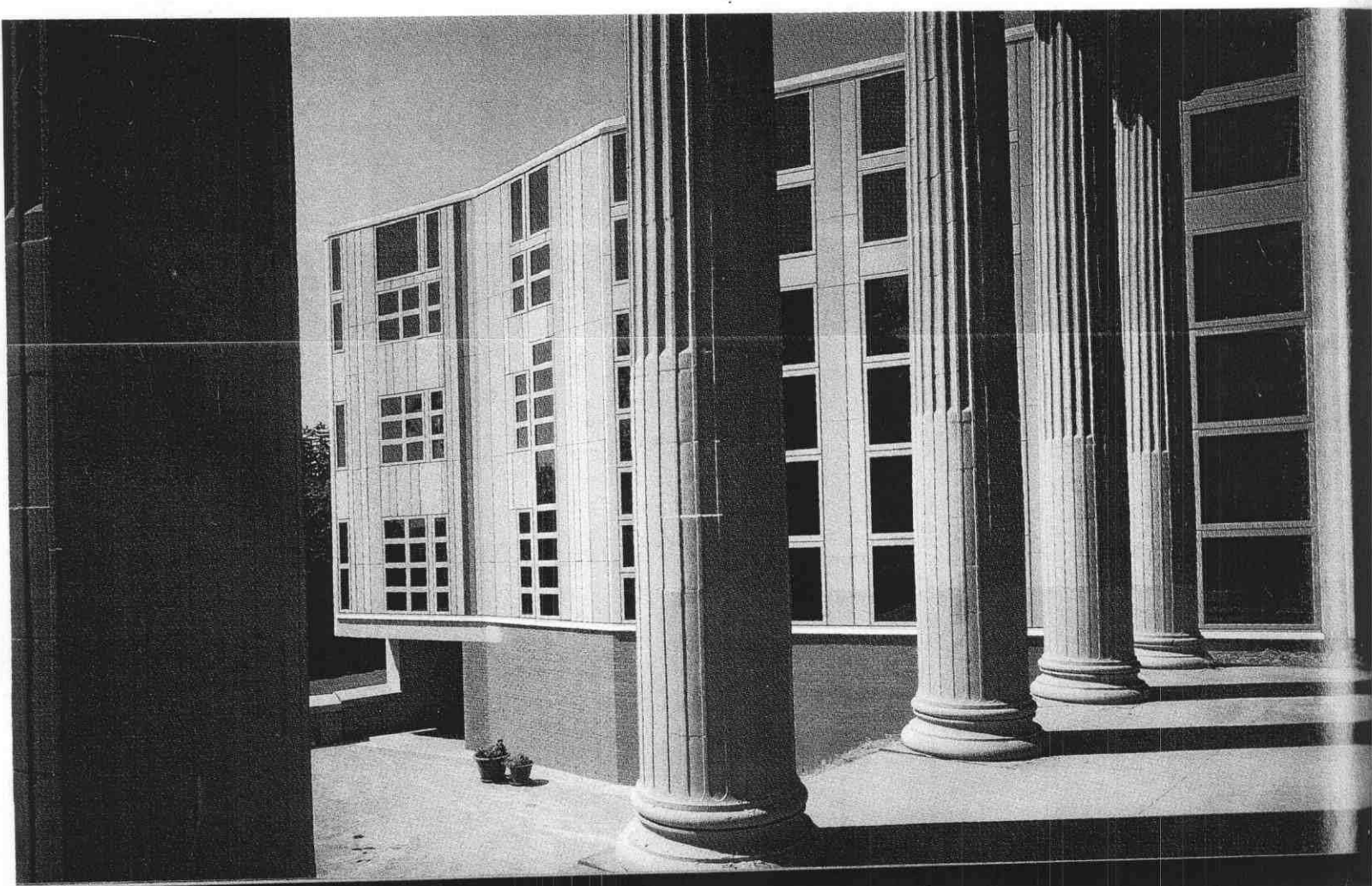
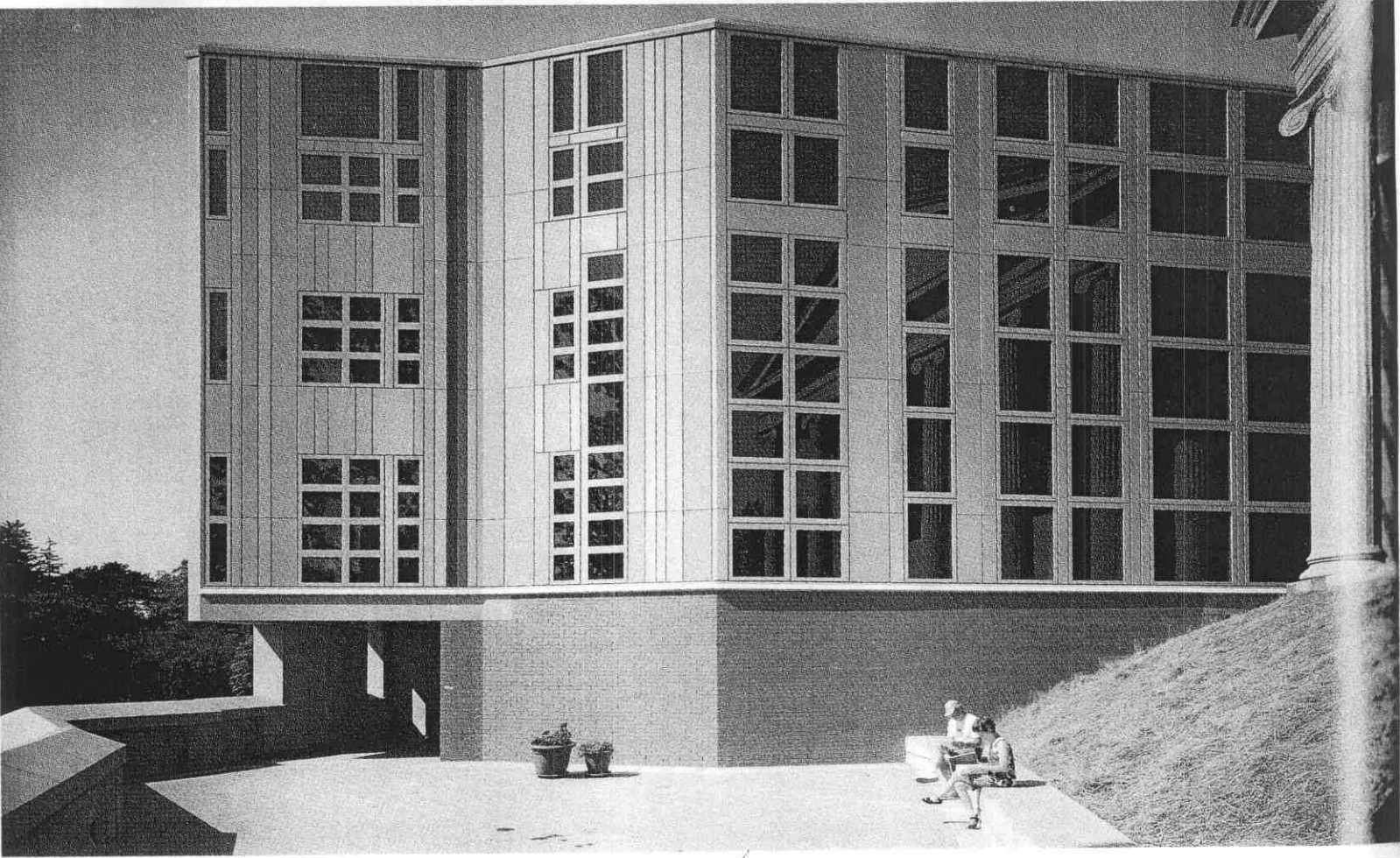
**BOTTOM:** Design of propylaeum combines form of 1893 temple with color and planarity of 1993 addition.



MATT WARGO







invokes Louis Kahn's idea that "one gets a book and takes it to the light," in this case, one of the nooks or windows looking south and west onto the Hudson River landscape.

The only embellishment within the no-frills interior is the new main entrance lobby, which is treated as a narrow, four-story slot compressed between an interior wall enclosing the stacks and the south facade. Beyond the diminutive corner entrance, one merely passes through this lobby alongside the high, solid base of Venturi's facade; and the drama of movement and transition between indoors and out is diminished. Although action seems imminent on the field below or the portico above, neither the lobby nor the terrace offer places to sit and watch, or make a grand, stately entrance. In early schemes, Venturi incorporated a broad stair to the 1893 portico. To avoid confusion over the location of entry, this stair was never built. As a result, students enter the library through the new addition, and the portico remains inaccessible—dead space above a lively soccer field.

Although Venturi's propylaeum is compromised by squat proportions and elephantine concrete supports, it forms an essential part of the acropolis by marking the entrance to the library's new precinct. Venturi's design for this gate synthesizes the form of the temple with the flat articulation of his addition. In a subtle but tragic way, Venturi realizes a popular version of Bard's temple in our age of cheap Classicism; through the threshold of the propylaeum, he clarifies the bond between the 1893 temple and the 1993 wing as a dialogue of opposing solids.

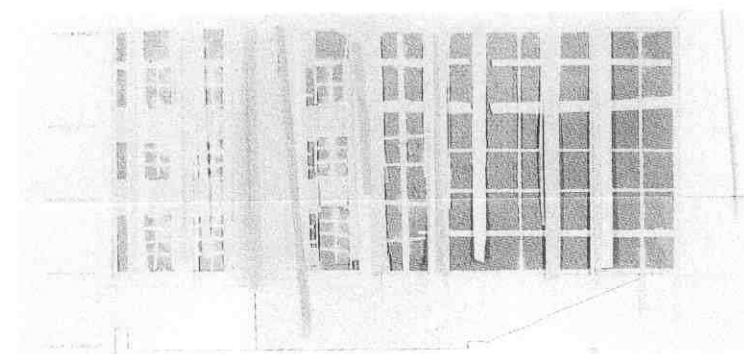
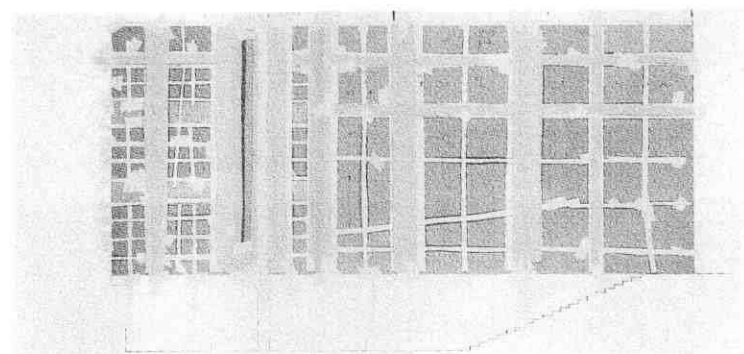
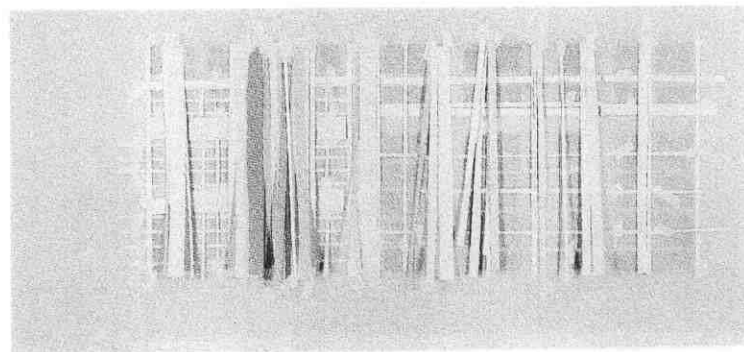
Despite the studied relationship between the temple and the addition, preservationists object to Venturi's scheme on superficial, esthetic grounds. They would prefer a "sympathetic" facade adorned with Classical detail and painted to match meticulously the existing portico, thus reducing the art of architecture to a choice of style and color.

Indeed, Venturi's wing is decidedly novel for this small, rural college where few buildings attract a second glance. But it is no more perverse than the 1893 temple, which is a freewheeling Victorian collage of Classical precedent, replete with terra-cotta-clad columns, tawny brick walls, a bluestone base, an antiqued copper pediment, and a combination of Greek and Roman proportions. After Venturi, Scott Brown's expansion, the library is still the most important building at Bard College; and its identity as the center of campus is more convincing now than ever before.—*M. Lindsay Bierman*

**FACING PAGE, TOP:** Faceted south facade is angled to reflect portico. Venturi reduced thickness of metal panels toward portico to suggest transformation of wall into Miesian frame.

**FACING PAGE, BOTTOM:** Alternating vertical bands of metal panels and windows on south facade pick up rhythm and suggest depth of 1893 portico.

**FACADE STUDIES:** Venturi arranged strips of paper to compose south facade, from dense initial sketch (top) to final schematic design (bottom).





**BELOW:** North light penetrates reading area through band of offices at rear.

**BOTTOM:** Oak paneling and built-in seating adorn west wall of reading area. Mechanical system is concealed in 2-foot-thick wall.

**PLANS:** Stacks occupy core of Venturi's addition (left side, each floor); entrance lobby flanks Venturi's south facade; new reading areas face west.

**FACING PAGE:** Three enclosed floors of stacks and reading areas (upper left) overlook entrance lobby.



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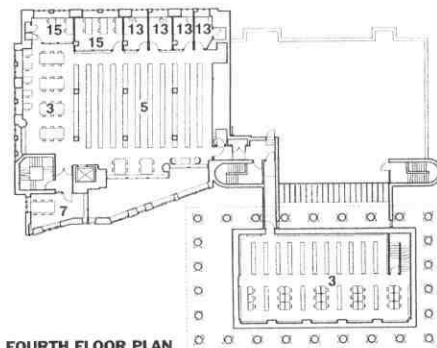


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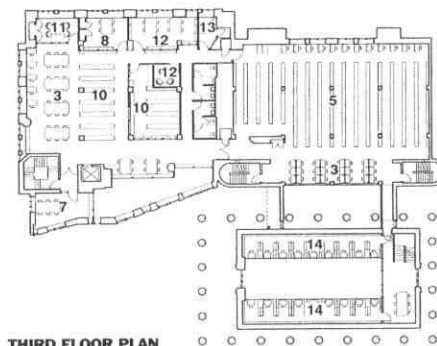
**BARD COLLEGE LIBRARY**  
ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, NEW YORK

**ARCHITECT:** Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Philadelphia—Robert Venturi (principal); Ann Trowbridge (associate-in-charge); Edward Barnhart, Thomas Purdy (project managers); Timothy Kearney, Nancy Rogo Trainer, Ronald Everts (design team)  
**ENGINEERS:** Keast & Hood (structural); Marvin Waxman Consulting Engineers (mechanical/electrical/plumbing); Morris Associates (civil)

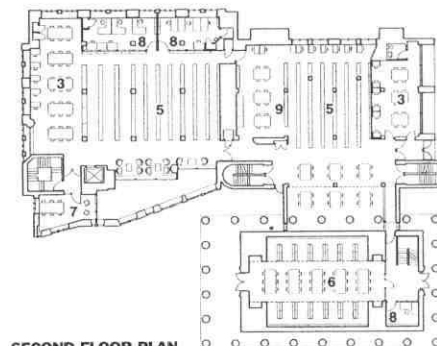
**CONSULTANTS:** Jules Fisher & Paul Marantz (lighting); Chapman Ducibella Associates (security); International Consultants (cost); Ostergaard Acoustical Associates (acoustics); George Thomas, Noble Preservation Services (historic preservation)  
**GENERAL CONTACTOR:** Barry, Bette, and Led Duke  
**COST:** Withheld at owner's request  
**PHOTOGRAPHER:** Peter Aaron/Esto, except as noted



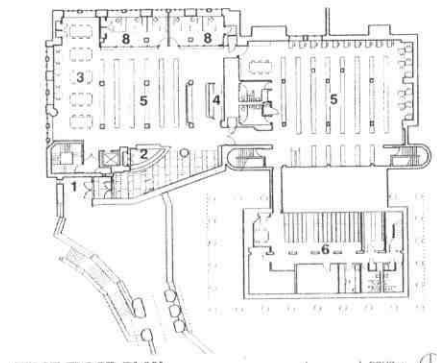
FOURTH FLOOR PLAN



THIRD FLOOR PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

- |                    |                        |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| 1 ENTRANCE         | 9 MICROFILM READERS    |
| 2 CIRCULATION DESK | 10 RESERVE COLLECTIONS |
| 3 READING ROOM     | 11 AUDIOVISUAL ROOM    |
| 4 CATALOG AREA     | 12 MUSIC ROOM          |
| 5 STACKS           | 13 FACULTY STUDY       |
| 6 ARCHIVES         | 14 SPECIAL COLLECTIONS |
| 7 GROUP STUDY      | 15 COMPUTER ROOM       |
| 8 OFFICE           |                        |

