A MODERN ATRIUM FITS
IN A VICTORIAN SHELL
AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

For a decade and a half after its opening in 1873, the Hall of Languages was Syracuse University, and for more than a hundred years it has served as the center of the school's College of Arts and Sciences.

More than antiquarian sentimentality prompted its salvation from decrepitude and demolition, however. Designed by architect Horatio Nelson White shortly after the Civil War, the Second-Empire-style building sits on the brow of one of Syracuse's seven hills, dominating the area from the top of the long axis of University Avenue and clearly marking the gateway to the campus. Moreover, other late 19th-century buildings flank the Hall of Languages, stretching out on either side to form an imposing architectural collection at the front edge of the campus. The interposition of a modern building in the middle of this row would be, at least, unseemly.

The architects—Architectural Resources Cambridge for design, Sargent-Webster-Crenshaw & Folley for construction documents and supervision—made very few alterations to the building's exterior. The most visible are the glazed vestibules at the back of the building, through which many of the students enter from the rest of the campus. The enclosed vestibules replace decaying wood porches contemporary with the original building. The original "pecked" finish Onondaga limestone bearing walls became the vestibules' interior walls. In addition, lowering of the floor to grade for the admission of the handicapped to elevate revealed the building's stone foundation.

Apart from the new vestibules, little was altered on the building's exterior. Metal-framed casement sash with thermal glass replaces the old wood-framed double-hung sash, but the new mullions and muntins repeat the proportions of the old. And cleaning was minimal—one of the architects, Arthur C. Strebel, has a fondness for the "enhanced effect of soil" on ornate stone carving.

But if the exterior of the Hall of Languages remains its old nostalgic self, the same can hardly be said of the interior. Here architectural resources transformed. By all accounts, architect White concentrated his art on the impressive exterior and left the interior to penny-pinch. Afterthought: vertical T&G board walls, pressed tin ceilings, noisy radiators, and central wood stairway repeatedly described as "quaint"—all still in use in 1978.

The new central stairway sweeps upward through a sloping, five-story atrium, a visitor first opening the Victorian front door sees a totally unexpected ascent of reveal: gray and white plaster railings, graduate
At Swarthmore University's Hall of Languages, the replacement of the main floor became necessary. The existing floor was to be removed and new steel columns poured to receive new steel floor. The existing columns were to be used as the new foundations. The new floor was to be poured and left to cure for 28 days before the remaining masonry could be removed and the floor could be used. The new floor was to be poured to the desired thickness and allowed to cure for 28 days before the remaining masonry could be removed and the floor could be used. The new floor was to be poured to the desired thickness and allowed to cure for 28 days before the remaining masonry could be removed and the floor could be used.

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from pale to paler to exaggerate the atrium's apparent height. The first-time user easily comprehends the circulation pattern, however, and despite the geometric monumentality, the scale of the spaces is in fact quite comfortable, almost domestic. The wide corridors around the stairway, paved with bluestone, answer the school's request for generous milling space for students.

The plan places the bulk of heavy student traffic on the lower two floors, although some seminar spaces are located on upper floors. Faculty members have their offices on the top two floors, while the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences has a suite of offices on the third floor.

To say that the Hall of Languages was gutted would be to understate the case seriously. In order to insert five concrete floors where there had been four of wood, and to accommodate 76 faculty offices and as many as 2,300 students at class time (4,600 between classes), the old floors had to be removed and the old timber columns and most of the interior brick bearing walls replaced with steel. At the same time, the exterior stone walls could not even temporarily bear the weight of the heavy timbered mansard roof and cupolas unassisted by lateral support from the floor joists (reconstructing the roof with steel was economically impossible). And because the old fourth floor bore the brunt of the roof load on studs, it was, paradoxically, most practical to phase construction from top to bottom, transferring the roof load to the new steel columns via two 12-inch steel channels lag bolted to the wood studs, excess length of stud was snapped off below the new fifth floor when it was complete. The old fourth floor, 4 feet below the new fifth floor, served as a construction platform. (For a graphic description, see preceding page.)

The project was completed within the allotted 15 months—that is, the one school year the faculty felt it could spare the space—and within the $4-million budget, barring a $281 cost overrun.

The stairway at the Hall of Languages, cutting a swath through a series of setbacks, offers climbers a choice of easy flights in two directions at each landing. On the fifth floor, the procession culminates at the Colloquium, a large room for scholarly lectures set below and daylighted by the hall's central tower, which commands a long view of Syracuse through its three arched windows and down the axial street that leads to the front door. Built glazing between the Colloquium and the stairwell provides auditory protection. Departmental offices—English, Fine Arts, Religion, Philosophy and the Honors Program—occupy the fourth and fifth floors, while the Dean’s office and student advisers for the College of Arts and Sciences occupy the third, symbolically accessible to both faculty and students.