

A new chapter for the Morgan Library

Architecture | The opening of a long-planned garden is an attempt to seduce the eye back to the Beaux Arts building, writes *Edwin Heathcote*

At the centre of John Pierpont Morgan's library, above the Renaissance-style fireplace, hangs a tapestry, "The Triumph of Avarice". It depicts a winged figure emerging from Hell in a griffin-drawn chariot followed by Death, Betrayal and Larceny. King Midas and Croesus are there too. The tapestry was commissioned, we are told, by Henry VIII and once hung on the walls of Hampton Court. It's unclear whether it was displayed by Morgan with a hint of irony. I expect not.

JP Morgan (1837-1913) was one of the greatest acquirers of his day, a man as rich as Croesus who built empires in steel, gold, rail and banking and spent extravagantly on art, objects, architecture and especially books. At the dawn of the 20th century, he commissioned a library beside his house on Madison Avenue to keep his expanding collection.

Designed by McKim, Mead & White, it was built in a severe, Neo-Renaissance manner, a huge chunk of perfectly carved stone that looked very much like the public building it has since become. At the same time, the architects were also designing not only New York's incredible Pennsylvania Station but a series of public libraries for the city (including the beautiful Tompkins Square Library), funded by



Todd Longstaffe-Gowan designed the new garden — Brett Beyer

Andrew Carnegie, one of Morgan's fellow robber barons.

For most of its life, that dignified, austere and deceptively civic-looking facade has been isolated and inaccessible. Now, through the addition of a long-planned garden, it has been brought back into the city. Designed by British landscape designer and historian Todd Longstaffe-Gowan (who, as it happens, also worked on the gardens at Hampton Court), the garden is the culmination of a six-year, \$13mn restoration of the library, 98 years after JP Morgan's son Jack opened it as a public building.

Since then, the Italian architect Renzo Piano was commissioned to create a campus on the site (it opened in 2006)

with a modern museum which, with its luminous steel and glass spaces, was as radically different to the heavy stone and dense ornament of the library as was possible. If Piano's upmarket high-tech addition distracted attention for a few years, the new project, which includes everything from external lighting to stonework cleaning, is an attempt to seduce the eye back to McKim, Mead & White's still-stunning Beaux Arts structure.

Its story is told in an exhibition inside, *Building the Bookman's Paradise*. Here you can see an earlier domed design for the library by Whitney Warren (of Warren and Wetmore, architects of Grand

Central Terminal, among other major civic structures) that is fancy and elaborate, resembling an icing-sugar design for a World's Fair pavilion. It is perhaps not surprising that Morgan opted rather for the more austere design. McKim was anxious about being seen to have poached the commission from a competitor (these were clearly more gentlemanly times in the profession).

His practice's incredibly detailed pen and ink drawings are here, rarely seen artefacts from the New-York Historical Society, which holds the architects' archive. These exquisite works depict every last column capital, moulding and Greek key. But there is more too, includ-

ing the remarkable story of the Morgan's first librarian, Belle da Costa Greene, a light-skinned black woman who passed as white. When Morgan was introduced to her in 1905 (she had been working as a librarian at Princeton), he hired her on the spot and she worked in the library until 1948.

The building itself, probably a lot better illuminated than when Morgan last saw it, looks exquisite, every inch taken up with rare books, rich timbers, stained glass, carved stone, tapestry and intricately painted surfaces. It is truly a book lover's dream and currently hosts an exhibition of some of its finest volumes and manuscripts, including jew-

elled medieval Bibles and pages handwritten by John Milton and Jane Austen.

The contrast between the luxurious intensity of the interior and the pale Tennessee pink marble of the facades is stark. According to Longstaffe-Gowan, it was difficult to persuade the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission that the garden was needed. His solution was a subtle design that reconciles the garden as part of a civic landscape, introducing surfaces of thousands of black and white pebbles that were individually selected from around Mount Etna by Sicilian artisan Orazio Porto.

Their Graeco-Roman inspiration would surely have appealed to Morgan, and their graphic nature (the pebbles appear in places to ripple out like water) are both classically formal and playful. They provide a surface for some of the artefacts from Morgan's huge collection, including a Venetian well head, a pair of Renaissance corbels, a funerary stele and a carved Roman sarcophagus depicting a pair of lions, a nod perhaps to the stone lionesses flanking the entrance.

The garden will be open for tours but the entrance will remain in the Piano building. The grand bronze doors of the library, inspired by Ghiberti's designs for the Baptistery of Florence's Duomo, will — unfortunately — remain shut.



The dignified and austere facade of the industrialist's library — Brett Beyer