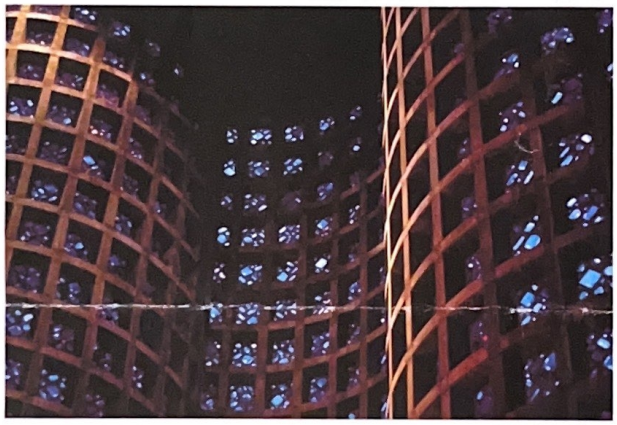
40-Year Watch

New York Hall of Science by Wallace K. Harrison/Harrison and Abramovitz, 1964; Polshek Partnership Architects, 2004

By Fred Bernstein

If science was, for many, the 20th century's great religion, why shouldn't a building dedicated to scientific knowledge resemble a cathedral? For the 1964-65 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows Park, Wallace K. Harrison created a science pavilion in the form of a soaring, 80-foot-high room, bathed in light filtered through panels of cobalt blue glass. The building is often compared to the 13th-century Saint-Chapelle, and yet it is at least as futuristic as it is medieval. Curvy and cornerless, it seems to have no fixed dimensions. "Harrison wanted to express the limitless quality of space," says Alan Friedman, director of what is now called the New York Hall of Science. "People walk in and their jaws drop."



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Above: Hall of Science: 5,400 rectangular coffers studded with shards of blue glass form the walls of the Great Hall. Right: Exterior of Hall of Science with detail of Polshek Partnership's addition in foreground

And yet the Hall of Science is one of the least known remnants of the World's Fair (perhaps because, unlike the Unisphere and Philip Johnson's New York State Pavilion, it is not visible from the Long Island Expressway). It is also far less prominent than several of Harrison's other buildings, including the United Nations headquarters and the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center.

But now the room, its power undiminished after 40 years, is about to be rediscovered. On November 23, the city-funded Hall of Science will unveil a 55,000-square-foot addition by Polshek Partnership Architects. The addition (part of a $68 million capital project) will not only improve access to Harrison's original room, sometimes called the Great Hall, but will allow the museum to remove amusement park-type installations incompatible with Harrison's sublime architecture. The museum will use the room for special events, and even rent it out for private functions. "If you're looking for a secular cathedral, this is it," says Todd H. Schliemann, FAIA, Polshek Partnership Design Principal.

Though he worked in partnership with Max Abramovitz, the Hall of Science was, by all accounts, Harrison's pet project. You can see Harrison's detailing, says Schliemann, by which he means, "There are no details. It looks like it went directly from a sketch on a napkin to a building." The concrete wall, just over a foot thick, is formed into 5,400 rectangular coffers of about 28 by 48 inches; inside each rectangle is a thin panel of concrete studded with shards of blue glass. The structure and the membrane are one and the same, which Harrison reportedly thought was important for a building that, in plan, appears to represent a cell.

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Adding to the drama: Harrison didn't interrupt the wall for an entrance; instead, he unfurled the membrane just enough to allow visitors (who congregated on a large, hexagonal plaza) to slip into the building. Inside, the other-worldly space was used to symbolize the heavens. During the World's Fair, a film about space exploration (directed by Frank Capra and narrated by Danny Thomas) was projected onto a suspended screen; when the film ended, two space modules performed a docking maneuver overhead. A stairway led down to a series of underground galleries containing exhibits with such titles as "Atoms for Children."

The building has been modified a number of times since the fair ended. A 1990s addition by Beyer Blinder Belle added a needed entry rotunda and auditorium, but inevitably detracted from the simplicity of Harrison's scheme. But the Great Hall itself was left virtually intact, and has had very few maintenance problems. According to Friedman, the building was one of the first uses of silicone caulk and "every once in a while people from DuPont come and take pictures of it." Still, the wall is now in the first stage of a two-year refurbishment; the Willet Stained Glass Studios of Philadelphia, which created the originals, is also making about 25 replacement panels.

Schliemann has given the Hall of Science another luminous space, but his new gallery is white, angular, and decidedly horizontal – a riff on the Great Hall that doesn't try to compete with it. The addition should give the Polshek firm, designers of the New York Times printing plant and the Flushing Branch library (both in Queens), and the Brooklyn Museum expansion, another notch in their Belt Parkway. But Schliemann is equally proud that his scheme will make the Great Hall more accessible to the public. "It's a religious experience," he says, "It's not just the light, but even the smell makes you feel like you're in a cathedral."

Fred Bernstein, an *Oculus* contributing editor, studied architecture at Princeton University, and has written about design for more than 15 years. He also contributes to the *New York Times*, *Metropolitan Home*, and *Blueprint*.