

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

Boston, Massachusetts

PHILIP JOHNSON • ALAN RITCHIE
A R C H I T E C T S



The original library, built during 1888 - 1895 in Boston's Back Bay District, is one of the finest works created by the great classical American architects, McKim, Mead & White. Johnson was asked to take on a very difficult task, to make an addition to a beloved historic landmark.

The configuration of closed bookstacks, which were geared to the library users of the nineteenth-century, proved burdensome to the needs of the library by the 1960s. In 1964, the City of Boston, came to Johnson for a practical and responsive addition to the existing library building. Adjacent to the old library, the new 550,000 square foot building is larger than the original with eight floors above ground, and two floors below.

Johnson used McKim, Mead and White for inspiration for his design, especially the roof. Johnson at the time explained: "The pitched roof is a feature that normally I would never use. Compromise is necessary when building a wing on to an older building." The facade of the addition utilizes the same granite as the original library. Where the addition distinguishes itself from the existing building is in the detail. Johnson created what was then perceived as an overly referential work to the original 19th century structure. In later years, the design would be criticized for its stark modernity.

The new facade was divided vertically into three bays, corresponding to the divisions of structure and interior space. The nine-square floor plan has three bays on each facade and one square locked in the middle. This central square becomes the reference point for the whole building, remaining open at all eight levels. It is sixty feet high and is lit from skylights above, which also repeat the nine-square theme. Mr. Johnson commented the following: "In my design approach, second only to the clarity of circulation is the monumentality of a central space."



Client: Boston Public Library
Area: 550,000 square feet
Completion Date: 1973
Associate Architects: Architects Design Group, inc.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
Boston, Massachusetts

