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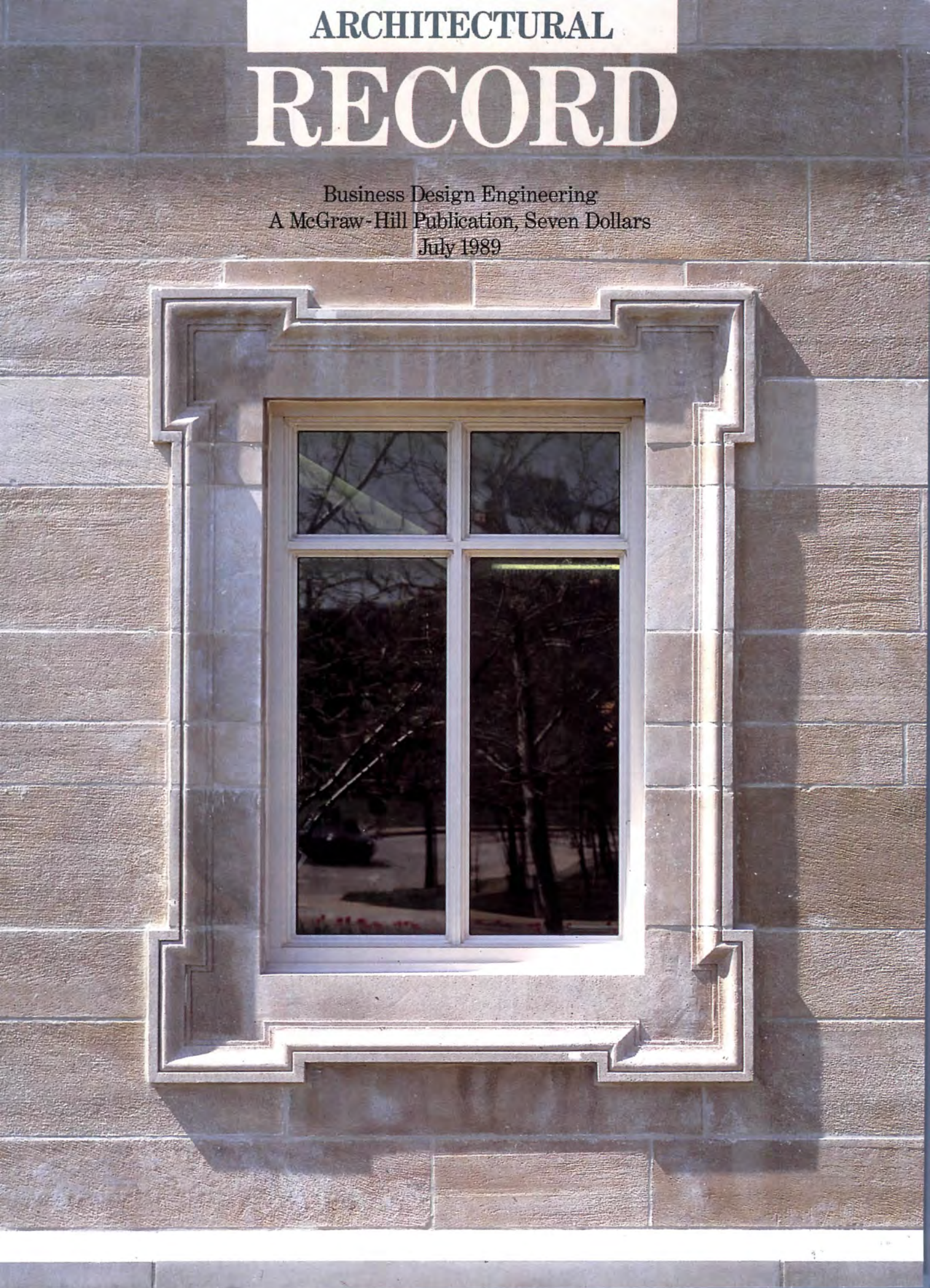


Return to splendor

Prospect Park Administrator's Office

When it was completed in 1874, the Oriental Pavilion was one of several buildings in Prospect Park designed by Calvert Vaux; by the time it was nearly destroyed by fire 100 years later, however, it was the last Vaux building left standing in the park. Located in an area known as the Concert Grove, this piece of Moghul-inspired Victoriana served as the colorful focal point of a picturesque ensemble of architecture and gardens overlooking Prospect Lake. Over time the pavilion deteriorated (its playful finials are missing in a circa 1940 view, left), and the only elements not completely ruined in the fire were eight cast-iron pillars that had supported the structure's massive roof.

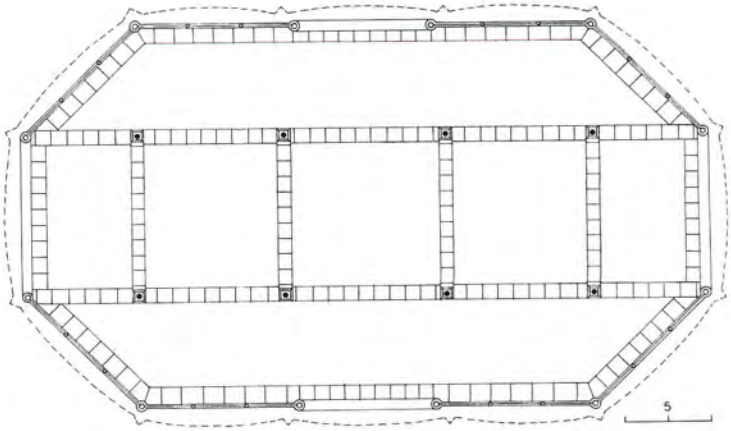
Determined not to let the building disappear into history, Joseph and Adrienne Bresnan, architects then on the staff of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, initiated an effort to reconstruct the pavilion according to Vaux's original scheme. The city commissioned James Lamantia, a New Orleans architect who had worked with the Bresnans on restoring Vaux's Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, to execute a set of drawings based on historic photographs (no original plans remained).

Oriental Pavilion
Prospect Park
Brooklyn, New York
James Lamantia/
Russo & Sonder, Architects

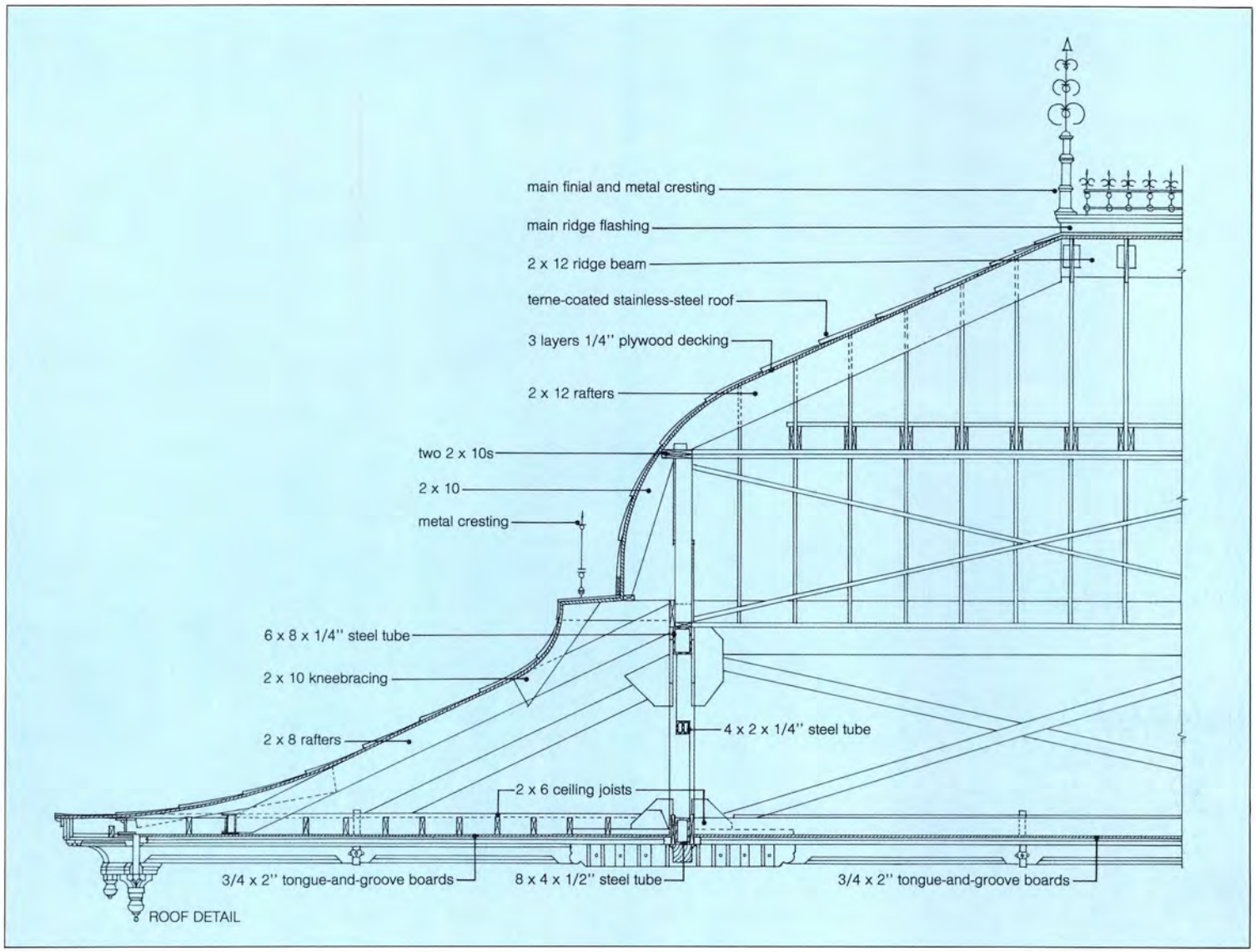
Stephen Senigo photos, except as noted

In reconstructing the pavilion, Lamantia, working in joint venture with William Rogan of the New York firm Russo & Sonder, faced two significant challenges: reproducing the precise curves of the structure's enormous roof, which Lamantia characterizes as "a great sculptural object," and determining the building's proper late-Victorian color scheme. The new roof is clad in terne-coated stainless-steel shingles and supported on a truss comprising wood members and steel tube (section page 113). Lamantia turned to another Vaux building of similar vintage—the National Arts Club in Gramercy Park—in order to arrive at a working palette of grays, greens, and mauves. The pavilion's stained-glass skylight exhibits a similar color scheme.

In the end, the architects could not replicate every detail of the original structure. "The brio and elegance of some of the carving just can't be bought today," notes Lamantia. Still, although the veracity of color and quality of detail on the rebuilt pavilion does not in all cases match the original, Lamantia is satisfied with the project. "I think we got more than the carcass of it," he observes. "We got the soul of the design." *Scott Gutterman*



Although the joinery for the Oriental Pavilion's cast-iron columns and roof was extremely complex, "we were able to chain-saw off a section of the old roof to see how it was put together," reports William Rogan. The building's stained-glass skylight (below right) was reproduced with fewer "jewels" than the original, and its color scheme was "largely guessed at," notes James Lamantia. Since no drawings remained, stained-glass specialist Charles Barone copied the skylight's design cartoon from photographs. The architects'

Oriental Pavilion
Prospect Park
Brooklyn, New York
Owner:
New York City Department of Parks and Recreation
Architect:
James Lamantia/Russo & Sonder, joint-venture architects—James Lamantia, principal-in-charge; William Rogan, project architect; Vonée Reneau, project team
Consultants:
Charles Barone (stained glass); Historic Arts and Casting (cast iron)
General contractor:
Trocom Construction Corp.

biggest challenge was rebuilding the pavilion's awesome roof (section below). From the cast-iron cresting that tops the structure to what Rogan refers to as its enormous "bow between two bays," the roof has an Asiatic grandeur that Lamantia partly attributes to the influence of Jacob Wrey Mould, an architect who frequently worked with Calvert Vaux. "There is a sophistication to detail that reveals an almost Eastern complexity," notes Lamantia. "The whole thing just breathes exoticism."