

PITTSBURGH SUPERCOMPUTING CENTER

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The Mellon Institute Building

Pittsburgh Supercomputing Center offices are housed in the Mellon Institute (MI) Building, on the campus of [Carnegie Mellon University](#). The MI building, dedicated in May, 1937 to brothers Andrew W. and Richard B. Mellon, was erected to house the [Mellon Institute of Industrial Research](#).

Architecture of the MI Building

Planning for the MI building began in 1927. From the early stages, the Mellons preferred a classical style of architecture. They wanted a building which would harmonize with the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning and nearby St. Paul's Roman Catholic Cathedral, but "... More importantly, they wanted the architecture to be a tangible recognition of the link between the science of the past and the science of the present and future, as exemplified in their institute's purpose and work. ... they felt that they had found in ancient Greece not only the beginnings of modern science but also an architecture that combined ageless, unadorned beauty with a simplicity that would be appropriate for a home of science." [1]

Covering a city block, the building is a "display of classical monumental grandeur whose purpose was to combine beauty with utility."...[1] Inspiration for the limestone and granite building came largely from the Parthenon and from the small temple of Nike Apteros on the Acropolis. Sixty two monolithic limestone columns line the four sides of the building, each weighing approximately 62 tons. The columns are over thirty six feet tall, with diameters of approximately six feet at the bottom and five feet at the top. The sidewalk, platform and steps are

made of granite.

The exterior is not a true rectangle, but a hollow trapezoid with center and connecting wings forming a cross. This creates four interior courts which are lined with glazed ivory terra cotta. Over 1000 windows in these interior courts provide natural light to the interior offices and laboratories.

To retain its classical form, three of the building's eight stories are constructed underground and the roof is flat. The center sections of the flat roof are covered with quarry tiles to provide space for weathering and exposure tests.

Inside the fourth floor lobby stand eight monolithic marble columns, and the ceiling is suspended marble. In all, there are fourteen different kinds of marble used in the Mellon Institute building, coming from Italy, France, and Belgium as well as from six sites in the U.S.

More aluminum was used in the building than had been previously used in any single structure. The main elevator doors are of extruded aluminum with ornamental plaques of cast aluminum. The elevator cabs are a combination of extruded aluminum and aluminum finished to resemble curly maple and satinwood. The laboratory doors on the upper floors are made of aluminum, as are the windows, interior door jambs and trim.

In addition to marble and aluminum, many types of beautiful wood are found throughout the MI building. Woodwork in the original Director's office (now the Boardroom), the third floor Conference Room, and the library ceiling are of what was known in 1937 as Slavonian oak. The columns, bookcases, and standing panels in the fourth floor library are English oak. In what is now the Computer Training Center (originally a lounge), the walls are made of American walnut, with panels of satinwood and ebony under the windows. The frieze panels are inlaid with satinwood, light pearwood, maple and boxwood.

Most of the wood in the second floor auditorium is avodire, an African wood. Pink maple, American walnut, boxwood, dark pearwood and ebony are used as accents. Panels on either side of the room are inlaid with brass and aluminum.

The Mellon Institute of Industrial Research

In 1909, Andrew W. and Richard B. Mellon became aware of the writings of Dr. Robert Kennedy Duncan. Dr Duncan, a professor of chemistry at the University

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of Kansas, advocated a partnership between scientific research and industry in order to create new and better consumer products.

In 1911, the Mellon brothers established a department of industrial research at the University of Pittsburgh. This research institute was organized on a contractual basis. A firm would hire the institute to solve a specific problem; the institute would then hire an appropriate scientist to do the research. All results obtained were the property of the contracting firm.

By 1913, the institute had proved such a success that permanent headquarters were erected on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh, and dedicated to Robert Kennedy Duncan and Andrew and Richard's father, Judge Thomas Mellon.

In 1927, the Mellons incorporated the institute as a nonprofit, independent research center, and began to plan the erection of a new, larger, and grander headquarters. The current Mellon Institute Building was dedicated posthumously in May 1937 to Andrew and Richard Mellon.

See also:

[Maps of the area and the Mellon Institute Building.](#)

References:

1. Wilson, Cathy A., "Building a Temple of Science: Pittsburgh's Mellon Institute," *Pittsburgh History*, Winter 1994/95, pp. 150-158.
2. Clark, Roy, "The Material Mellon Institute," *The Crucible*, May 1937, pp. 120-121.