

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Libraries Can Be More Than Just Books

By Matt A.V. Chaban

Sept. 18, 2017

For all of Sunset Park's celebrated taquerias, dim sum parlors and picturesque piers, the most popular destination in that neighborhood might just be the local branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. Despite its squat concrete frame and fluorescent lights — a far cry from the neighboring brownstones — the library draws a capacity crowd most days.

On a recent afternoon, students from down the block and around the world scribbled out homework, studied with tutors, practiced English and honed their chess skills. On the walls, posters promoted not just reading but citizenship services and business-planning classes. Parents and children alike sat at banks of computers, indulging in a world of knowledge that many New Yorkers take for granted.

It was a hive of activity, one that actually buzzed. Four portable air-conditioners the size of refrigerators blasted air through coiled ducts. One could be forgiven for thinking the place was being fumigated, but really, the central air was broken and has been for years.

The patrons of the Sunset Park library, one of the 20 busiest in the city, are hardly alone in their love for, and frustration with, their local branch. Demand for libraries reaches new highs with each passing year (nearly 34 million visits in 2016), while many of New York's branches are woefully outmoded (the average library is 62 years old).

New York, graced with the generosity of Astor, Tilden and Carnegie, was foundational in the library movement. Today, those foundations are crumbling. Despite their popularity, and because of it, the city's 212 branches face nearly \$1.5 billion in capital needs. And that is simply to reach a state of good repair.

Chipping away at these needs can seem overwhelming. But New York has an opportunity, one shared by cities across the country, to improve library infrastructure while creating badly needed housing. By using aging branches as sites for development, new libraries may rise with affordable apartments on top. The administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio should seize the chance at sites citywide to link these crucial needs.

Michelle de la Uz has made a career of tackling complicated affordable housing projects. As the executive director of the Fifth Avenue Committee, she has helped build hundreds of units inside developments that include community spaces, medical offices and prekindergartens. "It shouldn't just be the communities that can support these projects — every neighborhood, and every community, deserves great civic spaces," said Ms. de la Uz, who is also a city planning commissioner.

In 2014, the city selected the Fifth Avenue Committee to undertake the novel task of redeveloping the Sunset Park branch. There, an eight-story building will rise, with the first two floors dedicated to a library 75 percent larger than the one there now. The floors above will have 49 apartments, all of which will be rented to low- and middle-income families in perpetuity.

Imagine if the city did the same at the branch in Corona, Queens, where cramped quarters force study groups to huddle on the floor; or Red Hook, Brooklyn, where families from the nearby housing projects are eager for more job training; or Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, where rising sea levels and storms like Sandy threaten its very operations.



Some might complain that such public-private partnerships do not earn the libraries enough space or money, or that the resulting buildings are too big. Such criticism ignores the complexities of building in the country's oldest and largest metropolis. These deals do not undermine the libraries within — they underpin their futures. When cities lack housing, new libraries and capital dollars, here is a way to get all three for the nominal public investment of an underused property, one the public continues to own once it is built.

Indeed, New York has already undertaken a number of library partnerships that underscore their promise.

Across from the Museum of Modern Art, a new 53rd Street branch has opened beneath a luxury hotel to largely positive reviews. New residential towers, from Battery Park City to the BAM Cultural District in Fort Greene, have incorporated libraries. A similar development underway in Brooklyn Heights has drawn criticism for having only market-rate apartments; this overlooks the \$52 million earned in the deal, which is underwriting the Sunset Park project, among others.

Admirable as these are, New York has fallen well short of its potential. The city has built only 16 branches the past two decades, a paltry 8 percent increase, and nothing compared with rival metropolitan areas.

Other cities are much further ahead. Starting in 1995, Chicago created a master plan tying libraries to community development and has replaced more than three-quarters of its branches. In 1998, Seattle issued the largest library bond in history, allowing for the construction or replacement of all 27 branches. And Columbus, Ohio, unveiled a plan to double, and possibly triple, its system's square footage over two decades.

New York ought to take such an integrated approach to the billion-dollar needs of its libraries. At the very least, it should embrace the partnerships already flourishing here and foster even more.

My organization, the Center for an Urban Future, working with the architecture firm Marble Fairbanks, has identified at least 25 libraries with surplus development rights. These could easily be redeveloped into libraries beneath housing, or even offices or manufacturing centers, depending on a community's needs. Factoring in some smart rezonings, dozens more libraries could be upgraded in this fashion.

The Robin Hood Foundation is seeking to nurture this model. In 2015, the foundation offered the de Blasio administration a challenge grant of \$25 million, to be divided among five libraries, one in each borough. A \$5 million match from the city effectively covers the cost of building out a library, which would be in a new affordable housing complex. It is akin to the venture in Sunset Park.

"The city has used up most of its vacant land, so we really have to get creative about our existing resources," said Beatriz De La Torre, Robin Hood's managing director of housing.

So far, the administration is piloting this effort in only one location, Inwood Library on the upper reaches of Broadway. But many neighborhoods are clamoring for both affordable housing and expanded library services.

Libraries have become 21st-century settlement houses, providing a world of resources under one roof. They help bridge the digital divide, invest in early literacy and lifelong learning, increase language skills and serve as civic hubs. Let's add affordable housing to the list.