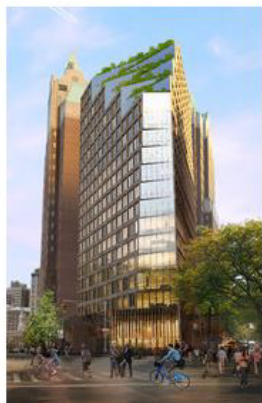


Evolution for Libraries in Brooklyn

Plans for Brooklyn Branches Have Merit

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN JAN. 25, 2015



A rendering for the proposed Brooklyn Public Library in Brooklyn Heights that has apartments on top. Brooklyn Public Library

Two proposals to sell and develop local library sites are wending through the Brooklyn Public Library pipeline, and, predictably, opponents have manned the barricades, citing the usual arguments about selling off public land to rapacious developers.

But for a change, the plans look promising. There is good and bad development, after all, and sometimes, with foresight and some help from City Hall, a community asset like a public library can anchor positive development.

One plan envisions updating, but shrinking, a branch in Brooklyn Heights built in the 1960s. The other overhauls a popular, decrepit branch, from the 1970s, in Sunset Park. Both involve housing, a fair chunk of it subsidized,

mostly on top of new storefront libraries.

There's reason for skepticism. In 2007, the New York Public Library sold off its Donnell site in Midtown Manhattan for what now seems like a song. Library authorities also cooked up a [scheme](#) to pool resources and cash in on the property values of the Mid-Manhattan branch and a science library at 34th Street, consolidating both in the 42nd Street building by demolishing its historic stacks. That derailed last year in the face of stiff protests and runaway cost estimates. So did a separate proposal to demolish a century-old branch near Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn.

Community groups, rightly, screamed bloody murder.

But these latest plans for Brooklyn have merit, insofar as City Hall wants to keep leaning on real estate to help pay for basic public services, a policy whose logic, as Donnell proved, can also seem to evaporate when the market shifts.

In Brooklyn Heights, the issue is a dilapidated, low-rise, 62,000-square-foot building on a prime lot at Cadman Plaza, combining a neighborhood branch and a somewhat orphaned business library. It would make way for a 38-story tower with 132 market-rate apartments. The tower's designer is Jonathan Marvel, the New York architect. A new 21,000-square-foot storefront library would occupy the building's ground floor. Library officials say much of the existing branch is unused and that moving the business collection to the main library at Grand Army Plaza rationalizes Brooklyn's holdings. More to the point, they insist the new library will be an upgrade, with stacked auditoriums, a lower-level reading room and a mezzanine that could serve as a children's wing.

Hudson Companies, the developer, is promising affordable units offsite, a red flag. But offsite development allows for more subsidized units — 114 — than would have been possible at Cadman Plaza, if the library still hoped to make real money. As is, the library pockets \$51 million. That's enough to

outfit the new Brooklyn Heights branch; fix the one near Atlantic Yards, called the Pacific branch; and repair two others, Walt Whitman near the Navy Yard, and Washington Irving in Bushwick, leaving millions more for additional projects.



BROOKLYN HEIGHTS The old Cadman Plaza library branch could be replaced by a 38-story tower.
Pablo Enriquez for The New York Times

In effect, the de Blasio administration prevented the library from making a larger bundle by stressing subsidized housing. But all these public-private ventures involve trade-offs. This one seems equitable. Whether this deal looks reasonable in the end will depend on the quality of the offsite housing and the new branch.

The Sunset Park deal, in a less affluent neighborhood, is a different case, growing out of community demands for subsidized housing and a bigger library. The existing 12,000-square-foot branch on Fourth Avenue at 51st Street is a bunker. A seven-story tower with some 50 units of affordable housing would rise in its place above a 20,000-square-foot library. The developer is the local nonprofit Fifth Avenue Committee. No architect has been chosen yet. With tax credits, the tower should pay for the shell of the new branch. That means another \$10 million would still be needed to outfit the place — but that's half the cost of a new, stand-alone library.

Once upon a time, libraries didn't need to act like real estate entrepreneurs, wheeling and dealing. When Andrew Carnegie donated the branches, beginning in 1899, one of the great philanthropic acts in American history, New York City contracted to maintain them and keep them open 72 hours a week in perpetuity. But it reneged years ago. The branches are now open 43 hours a week, and not on Sundays, when millions of people need them most. With circulation soaring and 36 million visitors using the branches in 2013 (nearly 40 million, if you count the research and main libraries), there's more reason than ever to renew the city's obligation.





SUNSET PARK A seven-story building with some 50 housing units could rise on the site of this branch.
Jeremy Lange for The New York Times

That's especially the case for Mayor Bill de Blasio, because the 200-plus branches across the three systems (Brooklyn; Queens; and New York, which oversees Manhattan, Bronx and Staten Island) align with the mayor's agenda. They cater to pre-K toddlers, after-school teenagers, seniors, the unemployed looking for job training, and immigrants learning English as a second language. Nearly 150 branches are in or near flood zones. More than a few became [safe havens](#) after Hurricane Sandy.

They're also shelters during heat waves. But broken air-conditioning means many older adults have a harder time finding lifesaving relief; crippled electrical systems mean a lack of outlets and computers to help bridge a digital divide that exacerbates the city's economic one.

Mayor de Blasio has stabilized the libraries' operating budgets, which fell for years, so at least library officials are no longer paralyzed by potential cuts every budget cycle. But funding for branches is still shamefully below what it was before the crash in 2008.



BRIGHTON BEACH An idea for a mixed-use building on the branch's site, Marble Fairbanks

Now the administration is preparing a 10-year capital budget plan, its first. New York's branches face a \$1 billion mountain in capital repairs, the consequence of long neglect. The Bloomberg administration found more than \$2 billion for cultural venues and more than \$4.5 billion for parks across a decade. It's Mayor de Blasio's turn. He ought to make library repairs a priority — and, while at it, double down on the Design and Construction Excellence initiative, which hires local architects for public

buildings. Architecture is too often skimmed to save money, but the social benefits of good design are obvious. Some of the [best new libraries in Queens](#) and Staten Island have come out of that program.

Brooklyn's proposals show how hard it is with public-private deals to strike a balance among competing priorities. Last month, at a [conference on libraries](#), a team of designers — Marble Fairbanks, James Lima Planning & Development, and Leah Meisterlin — demonstrated a digital tool that could help. It lets city planners, developers and communities mix, weigh and compare all different kinds of data to coordinate priorities. The designers used it to make a compelling case for a mixed-income building with ocean-view apartments and ground-floor shops on the site of the current Brighton Beach branch, another dilapidated, heavily used Lindsay-era box facing nearly \$5 million in repairs. The architectural sketches looked terrific. A new library, paid for by the development, anchored the proposal.

City Hall may want to look into that too. After all, neighborhoods are networks of green spaces, schools, cultural attractions, businesses and homes. And increasingly, libraries are their hub.

A version of this article appears in print on January 26, 2015, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Evolution for Libraries in Brooklyn. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)