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Culture and the City

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(left) Stapleton Library: Passersby get an expansive view of the new extension's long, high-ceilinged great room.

Branching Out

There's much more to today's public libraries than books, and architects are adding to their shelf life

BY RICHARD STAUB

It goes against libraries' traditional image to become news stories. But for the last several years, two unfolding public dramas have concerned libraries. Consider the controversial and finally doomed plan to turn the book stacks of the New York Public Library's (NYPL) landmarked main branch, the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, into a Foster + Partners-designed circulating library. To help pay for it, two nearby facilities, the Mid-Manhattan Library, the main circulating branch and the busiest in the system, and the Science, Industry and Business Library (SIBL), were to be closed and sold.

Under a new plan, SIBL will move into the Schwarzman Building, which will get renovated, up-to-code book stacks under Bryant Park. But the Mid-Manhattan Library, which NYPL President Anthony M. Marx has said was never an inspiring place, will be completely renovated to include a media and computer lab and a large adult education center.

Libraries were also in the news in 2012 when, acting as community gathering places and information centers, they were a stabilizing force in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. That crisis highlighted a shift noted in "Branches of Opportunity," a 2013 study by the Center for an Urban Future, which considered the evolving role of branch libraries. Their use has increased 59% over the last decade. "During that time, 48 different branches citywide have at least doubled annual attendance at programs, ranging from computer literacy classes to workshops on entrepreneurship, while 18 have more than doubled their circulation." It continues: "Although they are often thought of as cultural institutions, the reality is that the public libraries are a key component of the city's human capital system." They are part of the city's social infrastructure and should be valued as such. Note, however, that between 2002 and 2011, city funding for libraries decreased by 8%.

Stapleton Library, Staten Island, NY

CLIENT: New York Public Library; NYC Department of Design + Construction

ARCHITECT: Andrew Berman Architect

DESIGN TEAM: Andrew D. Berman, FAIA, Dan Misri, RA, Vinci So

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: WRT New York

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: Gilsanz Murray Steficek

M/E/P ENGINEER: IP Group Engineers

CIVIL ENGINEER: Langan Engineering

LIGHTING DESIGN: Cline Bettridge Bernstein

CONSTRUCTION MANAGER: NYC Department of Design + Construction

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Plaza Construction

Indeed, it is the library's role in the community that keeps coming into play as new branch facilities and additions are being built by the city's three library systems: NYPL, which serves Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island, and the separate systems in Brooklyn and Queens.

All of them were created by architects chosen through the NYC Department of Design + Construction's (DDC) Design Excellence Program. What is noticeable is how different they are from the 67 Carnegie libraries built between 1901 and 1923, which are the foundations of the three systems. With the majority created by McKim, Meade & White and Carrère and Hastings, these sober masonry buildings were designed in a variety of historic revival styles as civic monuments to learning and uplift.

"Libraries are now an active presence in communities, and instead of just being about solitary pursuits are also places where people connect," says DDC Commissioner Feniosky Peña-Mora. "Each new library project has to take on the specific needs of its community, whether it's in Queens, where many immigrants need to be introduced to how libraries can help them succeed, or Staten Island, where they are beacons for underserved communities."

A well-used civic presence expands

Three award-winning buildings in middle- or low-income neighborhoods are illustrative. With generous glass walls and straightforward entrances, they are meant to be as welcoming as possible. Their programs are similar: separate spaces devoted to children, teens, and adults; a community room for meetings, cultural events, and training



(above) Stapleton Library: The 1907 Carrère and Hastings-designed building now houses the children's area.

programs; and information areas and separate offices for staff. For active teenagers there are open, ground-floor spaces where they can do homework and “hang” until their parents return home from work. These are near the entrance and windows so young patrons can come and go, see and be seen, without disturbing others. Yes, patrons will find plenty of books, too.

“The Stapleton Library had needed to grow for a long time,” says Andrew Berman, FAIA, about the Carnegie-funded, Carrère and Hastings-designed building on Staten Island. His firm, Andrew Berman Architects, restored, renovated the single-story 1907 building, and expanded it with a 7,000-square-foot addition. “Decades ago it had been part of a bustling town center. But as the area went into decline, only the library remained as a well-used civic presence.”

The original 5,700-square-foot building has a corner site, and the addition extends a long glass wall on the side street, angled inward on two sides towards the new main entrance. Passersby get an extended look at what they will find inside – a long, high-ceilinged great room that continues the Carnegie building’s grand scale. Lined with seven-foot-high bookshelves, it is divided in the center by a rectangular volume that rises the full height of the space and contains a community room, staff offices, and bathrooms. The community room has seven-foot-high glass walls on either side, with translucent panels above that ring the volume’s perimeter. A timber frame and ceiling contrast with the room’s cool glass expanses and concrete floor.

“We wanted to extend the image of the library as a contemporary form,” says Berman, “so we put all the books within reach and introduced long reading tables.” The children’s area is in the historic section, which is now painted white except for the restored wood molding and paneling. The section for teens is on the street side of new building with the adult section on the far side. Daylight comes in through generous rectangular skylights, the vertical ribbons of windows on the adult side, the window wall, and the original large arched windows.

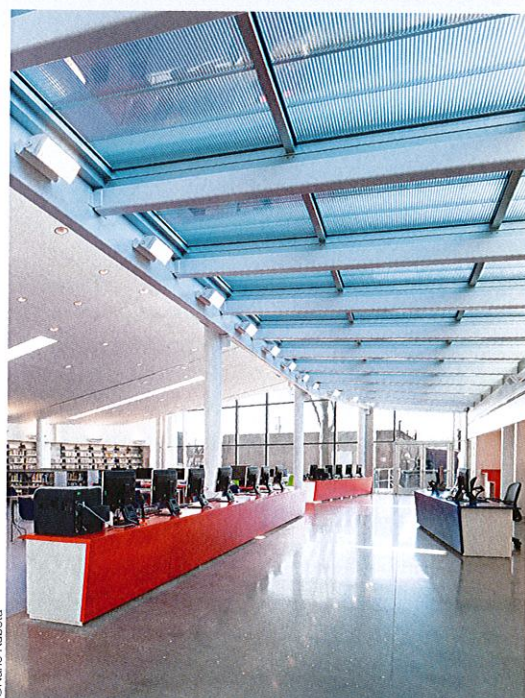
The library is your oyster

Not too far away is the Mariners Harbor Branch Library, a new, 10,000-square-foot facility that borders a residential neighborhood on one side and an industrial zone on the other. “This is a low-income neighborhood that desperately needed a library,” says Anna Torriani, AIA, a principal with A*PT Architecture (formerly Atelier Pagnamenta Torriani), which designed the project. “Our research



(above) Mariners Harbor Branch Library: An open oyster shell inspired the design, hearkening back to the community’s oystering history.

(right) Mariners Harbor Branch Library: A skylight runs the length of the building, creating a light-filled central circulation spine.



Mariners Harbor Branch Library, Staten Island, NY

CLIENT: New York Public Library; NYC Department of Design + Construction

ARCHITECT:

A*PT Architecture (formerly Atelier Pagnamenta Torriani)

DESIGN TEAM:

Lorenzo Pagnamenta, AIA, Anna Torriani, AIA, Wasmiya Tan, Raffaele Stefani, Damien Romanens, Nam Suk Oh, Juan Carlos Salas Ballestin, Caterina Inderbitzin, Petya Ivanova, Felix Lederberger, Roxane Bervini, Anais Iglesias, Nuria Forques

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: Weidinger and Associates

CIVIL ENGINEER:

Michael Wein, PE

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT:

SCAPE/Landscape Architecture

MEP, LEED: Plus Group

LIGHTING DESIGN:

Fernando Soler

CODE: Berzak-Schoen

cost: Faithful & Gould

SPECIFICATIONS:

Construction Specifications

CONTRACTORS: Plaza

Construction Corporation;

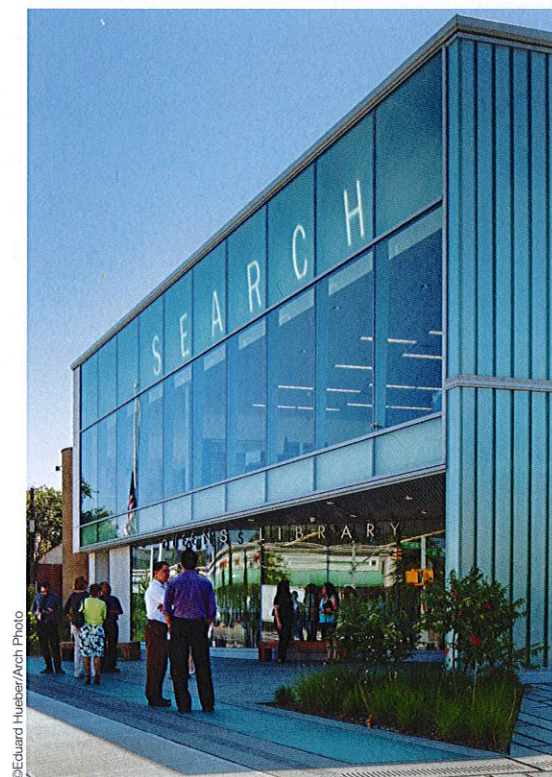
Ace Contracting; EF Pro

Contracting; Adco Electric

Corp.

revealed that the area had once been a thriving oystering community, and the image of the open oyster shell inspired the building’s form.” The side walls bend inward slightly in front and back, and the roof slopes upward from both sides, meeting at a skylight that runs the length of the building. The building height slopes lower on the residential side to match the scale of adjacent homes.

The straightforward circulation spine runs beneath the skylight with the glass-walled community room and support spaces on the residential side, and the information desk and book-lined areas for adults, teens, and children on the other. The spine is separated from the reading areas by a low, bright red counter with a row of computer monitors on top, and it concludes with an entrance to a



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landscaped back patio. “The librarians asked for a one-story building that was as open as possible, so patrons could easily find their way and staff could have quick oversight,” says Torriani. “We used glass to demystify what happens inside and enrich the space with subtle daylong shifts in natural light and change of seasons. There are three smaller skylights in the reading areas, and we embedded seashell fragments in the concrete floor as quiet hints about its history.” Animating the interior are large-scale graphics and vibrantly colored stools, chairs, and sofas. The building has a LEED Silver designation pending.

Begin search here

The 18,000-square-foot Glen Oaks Library in Queens, designed by Marble Fairbanks, replaces an undistinguished, one-story brick building with a light-filled, two-story facility that meets LEED Gold standards. Its much-expanded program serves a very diverse immigrant community. “The site is between an industrial and residential area, but we wanted the building to have a civic presence while deferring to the scale of its residential neighbors,” says firm principal Karen Fairbanks, AIA, LEED AP. “We set it apart on a small plaza and put a large portion of the building below ground – it fills the lot – which includes the adult reading area, meeting room, and staff offices. High ceilings, three skylights set into the plaza, and a



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(above) Glen Oaks Library: The second-floor Children's Reading Room sports a ceiling-mounted art installation by Janet Zweig as a part of the Percent for Art program, which cycles through a series of “unanswerable questions.”

(left) Glen Oaks Library: On the façade, the word “SEARCH” is projected onto the glass curtain wall by sunlight filtered through a film with cut-out lettering set in the parapet.

Glen Oaks Library, Queens, NY

CLIENT: Queens Borough Public Libraries; NYC Department of Design + Construction

ARCHITECT:

Marble Fairbanks

DESIGN TEAM: Scott Marble, AIA, Karen Fairbanks, AIA, LEED AP, Robert Booth, RA, LEED AP, Mallory Shure, RA, LEED AP, Jake Nishimura, Eric Ng, AIA, Adam Marcus, RA, LEED AP, Stacey Murphy, Katie Shima, Christopher Kroner, Andrew Colopy, RA, Jane Lea, AIA, Darren Zhou, Jennifer Downey, LEED AP, Alexis Coir

LIGHTING DESIGN: Richard Shaver Architectural Lighting

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT:

SCAPE/Landscape Architecture

MEP ENGINEER: Plus Group

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: Buro Happold Consulting Engineers

GEOTECHNICAL ENGINEER: Langan Engineering

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Summit Construction Service Group

generous double-height opening between the first and ground floors make it feel quite open.”

Except for the side facing the industrial area, the walls are either clear glass or have channel glazing. Putting the children's area on the second floor allows librarians to make sure that only adults who are with children are using the space. Teens are on the first floor. The top of the front façade declares the building's purpose with the very 21st-century word “SEARCH” projected onto the glass curtain wall by sunlight that passes through a film with cut-out lettering set in the parapet. The word varies in position, scale, and legibility according to time of day, amount of sunlight, and season. Thirty different languages are spoken in the neighborhood, and the architects acknowledge them with a graphic film pattern on the ground-floor side windows that reads from a distance as a vertical abstract pattern, but up close as the word “search” in all of the area's languages.

It is a given that library facilities will continue to change. What form they take has recently been examined by the Center for an Urban Future and the Architectural League of New York, which co-sponsored “Re-envisioning Branch Libraries,” a design study underway by five interdisciplinary teams including architects, real estate developers, and librarians. The study looks at the financial, programmatic, and architectural possibilities for branch libraries, and its insights and conclusions will offer a renewed sense of purpose for New York's essential library systems. ■

Richard Staub is a marketing consultant and writer who focuses on issues important to the design and building community.