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## **A Re-assessment of the Design of Carnegie Public Library Buildings with a View to Their Future Use: The Case of Evanston Public Library, Illinois (1908)**

*Alistair Black and Oriel Prizeman*

In their seminal book *The American Public Library Building* (1941), Joseph Wheeler (Director of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, 1926-45) and Alfred Githens (architect of the monumental, Art Deco Brooklyn Public Library, 1941) told the story of the function and evolution of the modern library building. Subsidized by the Carnegie Corporation, which meant it could be sold for just four dollars, a relatively low price for such a richly illustrated book, their book not surprisingly included discussion of the Carnegie library building type. Wheeler and Githens described turn-of-the-twentieth-century library architecture, the years of the Carnegie library building programme, as an 'era of pretentious display' (7), a view complemented by their assertion that 'Beauty through proportion and colour is to be preferred to beauty through elaborate ornament' (84). At the same time, however, they also gave credit to the overall progressive influence of the programme which, in their opinion, especially in its later phase, 'decried elaboration' (9).

### **Conflicting Perceptions of Carnegie Public Library Buildings**

Herein lies the split personality of the much Carnegie library building. On the one hand, its image accords with the perception of architecture immediately prior to World War I, criticized as early as the 1930s as pompous, old-fashioned and pretentious (Prizeman, 2013: 239). This has made it easy to argue that Carnegie libraries in their original form were architectural *mistakes*, their designs seen as having added little or nothing to the development of library architecture (Allen, 1976: 96). The implication of this line of argument -- that Carnegie libraries had serious architectural problems and limitations 'baked in' from the outset -- is that preserving and adapting old, dysfunctional buildings in a historically responsible way can soak up considerable resources (Mattern, 2007: 29). The small footprints of original libraries has meant the construction of many additions, some of which don't always work (Schlipf, 2019). To bring Carnegie libraries into line with the digital age and disability legislation has been a challenge, as has been the task of providing the 'openness, transparency, and flexibility' expected in a pluralist, inclusive society (Hille, 2019: 361). Many Carnegie libraries have not stood the test of time; and because bringing a Carnegie library into alignment with the requirements expected of a modern library service may cost more than building a new library, a large number have been razed or re-cycled for other purposes (Schlipf and Moorman, 2018: 343). Although there is evidence that a section of library users like historic library buildings, their image corresponding with an abiding notion of 'libraryness', others welcome the experience and services available in new-build premises (Black, 2011). Today's information-age patrons do not necessarily display the ardour for Carnegie library buildings that earlier generations did (Maloney, 2013). Some see Carnegie libraries as representing obstacles to progress in widening and popularizing library use (Elmborg and Pawley, 2003: 237).

On the other hand, the Carnegie library building has been seen as having played a pivotal role in the creation of the functional, public-friendly, modern library -- or as Van Slyck (1991: 374-380, 1995: 33-40) has put it, the *reformed* library. In many places, Carnegie libraries remain as key components of civic identity and local heritage, with large reserves of goodwill and a deep sense of nostalgia garnering support for their protection. In the United States, for example, it is estimated that some 770 of the 1679 public libraries Carnegie's money helped build (between 1889 and 1923) still fulfil a library function, a notable testament to their original designs, even if buildings have required extensive remodelling or additions (Bobinski, 1969; Weismantel, 2017). Other buildings conserve their heritage as civic landmarks by having been converted to serve other public functions. Many Carnegie libraries 'have been transformed and reused as historical museums, city halls, art centers, and even bars and restaurants, sometimes by dramatic means' (Capps, 2014). Whether retaining their original function or re-purposed, many Carnegie libraries still stand, fulfilling the expectations of their founders that they should be built to last. This is something which seems to have been understood in St. Paul, Minnesota, where three

Carnegie libraries have survived, either largely unchanged (Riverview Library), sympathetically remodelled with money raised by a neighbourhood library association (St. Anthony Park Library), or re-cycled as a repository and centre for labour history (East Side Library) (Lindeke, 2016).

Based on an extensive investigation of archival sources (CCNYA, EPL, EPLA), this study focuses on the original design of a Carnegie library that has *not* survived. The purpose-built Evanston Free Public Library, Illinois, fifteen miles north of Chicago, opened its doors on New Year's Day 1908, and continued to serve the local community for half a century. Its eventual closure and demolition, however, should not be allowed to detract from the many positive aspects of its original design, despite the view that in the digital age Carnegie's library buildings have become anachronisms. Nor should its demise, like that of many others, obscure the use that can be found in adapting or remodelling the Carnegie library built-form – a pathway to continual or adaptive re-cycling that can be bedded in by re-assessing the value in original designs like that at Evanston.

### **The Town of Evanston and Its First Libraries**

The town of Evanston was named after the Methodist politician John Evans, who was instrumental in founding Northwestern University, in 1851. Three years later, the University settled on the site of what was to become Evanston, which was officially incorporated as a village in 1863. The aftermath of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 saw a growth of towns and suburbs around the metropolis. As both suburb and independent town, Evanston offered a peaceful alternative to the hustle and bustle of a resurgent Chicago, and the once modest township rapidly became the site of leafy streets and new homes, many individually designed. In 1892, Evanston was incorporated as a city. By the turn of the century, its population had reached just under 20,000 (a figure which was to increase threefold in as many decades (League of Women Voters of Evanston, 1955: 1). Evanston at this time was seen as at once 'an up-to-the-minute city' and a 'residential City Beautiful' – the 'most beautiful city in the world', according to the Director of Works at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair (Reeling, 1928: 456).

By the time the Carnegie library came along, Evanstonians had already enjoyed access to a free library for over three decades. A local library association had been founded in 1870, and in the following year it was in a position to open a library, its mission being 'to awaken a desire for sound knowledge and a correct taste, and to provide for the gratification of all classes of the community' (EPL, 1897: 4). Although technically open to all, the library operated on the basis of membership subscriptions, the cheapest of which was set at \$5 per year (or just over \$100 at 2020 prices). Shortly afterwards, however, in 1873, local citizens voted unanimously to turn their fledgling fee-based social library into a free public library. Nearly a thousand volumes were transferred from the subscription library into the ownership of the public library. The public library soon began purchasing new stock, and in 1879 it began buying books for children under the age of ten. In 1894 the library received its first trained librarian who immediately oversaw the introduction of a card catalogue, the Dewey classification system and the offer of membership to students from Northwestern University. The open-shelf, or open-access, system, by which readers were given direct access to shelved books, was adopted in 1898, Cleveland Public Library having inaugurated the system in the United States eight years earlier (Brett, 1891).

Although in 1893 relatively spacious accommodation for the library had been found on the first floor of the new city hall, by the early-twentieth century the demands of a growing and increasingly prosperous and educated population were placing a considerable strain on the library's facilities and administration, as the librarian's annual reports repeatedly reported. In 1900, a wealthy local resident, Charles Grey, offered \$100,000 for a new library building, on the understanding that the city could provide a site for its construction. This substantial pledge was withdrawn two years later, when it was made clear, partly as a result of municipal financial difficulties, that no site could be found, at least not in the near future.

### **The Carnegie Grant and Preliminary Planning**

The city thus approached Andrew Carnegie for help and in 1903 the philanthropist promised to gift \$40,000 (excluding the cost of the site and ongoing maintenance) for a new library building. In 1904 the Library Board asked for a further \$10,000, the President of

the Evanston Library Board, J.W. Thompson, and the city's mayor, John Barker, meeting Carnegie's secretary, James Bertram, in person in New York to discuss the matter. The Evanston representatives believed they had received a pledge from Bertram to meet the request, but Bertram later wrote to them saying that he could not recall the meeting. Nonetheless, Carnegie eventually increased the grant to \$50,000 (CCNYA, 1903, 1905a, 1905b, 1905c, 1905d, 1905e, 1906).

Spurred on by the gift, in 1904 the city was able to procure a site from Northwestern University, for \$31,600. To make good the shortfall in the funding required to build a new library, the city allotted \$65,000 for the project and in 1906 a bond issue of \$25,000 was unveiled. In addition, a number of private donations were forthcoming, eventually amounting to \$12,000. Money for a collection of music sheets and literature was donated by George Coe, a professor at Northwestern University. The collection, named after his wife, Sadie Knowland Coe, was extensive and would require a dedicated space when the new library came to be built. Other donations included: a mantel for the children's room; a statue of Psyche (Greek goddess of the soul), made in Italy, for the reference room; and the book collection of the Evanston Medical Science Library Association. It was predicted that a local library tax would raise \$10,000 per year.

To design the new library the Library Board placed its faith in Charles Phillips (of the firm Rogers and Phillips). Phillips worked up several designs for consideration by the Board and in the late summer of 1905 a decision was reached on what was believed to be the best option. The original estimate of costs was \$110,000 but this was for a building substantially constructed of wood. Clearly, for reasons of fire safety the predominance of wood in the design was less than acceptable for a library building, so a revised design and associated schedule of costs – increasing to \$130,000 – were drawn up. The new design gave the building a steel frame, steel roof trusses, cement floors, tile partitions, a tile roof and wire lathing. The exterior was to be dressed in buff Bedford stone.

Bertram, representing Carnegie, expressed his disappointment that the so much money was being spent on the new library building in excess of the \$50,000 Carnegie had promised; and even threatened to withhold payment of the grant (CCNYA, 1906). However, the Evanston Library Board defended its expenditure, and the design of the new building, arguing that: 'Utility has been the primary object in planning, and the exterior will be as devoid of ornamentation as it possibly can be, and [will] present a pleasing and symmetrical appearance' (CCNYA, 1905d). Briefing the local press, when the new library was finished the Library Board re-asserted its belief in the modernity of the design: 'the building has been built with a view to utility and economy of administration seldom found' (*Evanston Index*, 1907). Any disagreement with this defence by Carnegie's office did not last long because eventually the grant was paid.

### **Construction and Design**

The foundation stone was laid on 2 June 1906. Construction was speedy and the library was opened on 1 January 1908. The design of the new library was said to have 'met with general approval throughout, both on the part of the public and experts in architecture and library construction' (*Evanston Review*, 1933). Most reports described the library as 'classical Greek' in style but one source was more specific in its description: 'Classical-Ionic' (*Evanston Review*, 1933). Set back from the road, the building was surrounded by generous and pleasant gardens either side of a long walkway leading to a tall flight of entrance steps typical of a Carnegie library (**Figure 1**). Clearly, in respect of its Classical-Revival lineage and the manicured, green environment that was flung around it, the library chimed with the City Beautiful movement of the time, as did the urban development of Evanston generally.

The library was said to be 'beautiful inside and out' (*Evanston Index*, 1907). Cut in Roman capitals on the cornice of the building were the words 'Evanston Public Library'. The word 'free' was not included in the name, as it was felt that the truly *public* nature of the public library in America had already imbedded itself in people's minds. The word 'Carnegie' was also deemed unnecessary, as city elders believed they had already enthusiastically expressed their gratitude for the great philanthropist's assistance; and Carnegie certainly never demanded that his name be used in connection with the gifts he bestowed.



**Figure 1.** Evanston Public Library (1908). Source: Evanston Public Library Archives. Reproduced courtesy of Evanston Public Library.

The interior of the building was said to be in keeping with its grand, classical exterior. Entering through a vestibule, readers found themselves in a spacious delivery hall illuminated during the day by a full-width skylight (**Figure 2**). The hall was finished in mahogany, as were all the principal rooms. In the children's, general reading and reference rooms slabs of marble formed the base of every piece of woodwork and furniture. Throughout the ground floor, cork flooring laid on soft cement helped reduce noise. Directly opposite the vestibule, situated at the back of the delivery hall and flanked by catalogue cabinets and book-display cabinets, was a loan (circulation) desk, lit by two tall lamps and 'equipped with all modern conveniences for the necessary records of circulation' (EPL, 1907: 16).



**Figure 2.** Delivery hall, Evanston Public Library, in the early-1930s. Source: *Evanston News-Index* (20 February 1931). Reproduced courtesy of Evanston Public Library.

Behind the delivery hall and its loan desk the architect placed a large bookstack room. Extending to four stories, the iron framework of the room, made by the Snead and Company Iron Works, was built on concrete foundations (Snead and Company Iron Works, 1915). The firm specialized in the construction of multi-tier, self-supporting book-storage rooms. Columns supporting the shelving also bore the weight of the tiers above. Later, under the direction of Angus Snead Macdonald, the Company became closely involved in developing the concept of the 'modular library' (Black, 2016: 122-125; Baumann, 1972). To diffuse light, as in other Snead projects, the floors of the Evanston bookstack room were made of ground glass. With a capacity of 100,000 volumes, the room had more than enough capacity to house the 38,000 volumes transferred from the old library (this spare capacity in part ensured the survival of the building for over 50 years, its replacement not being required until 1960).

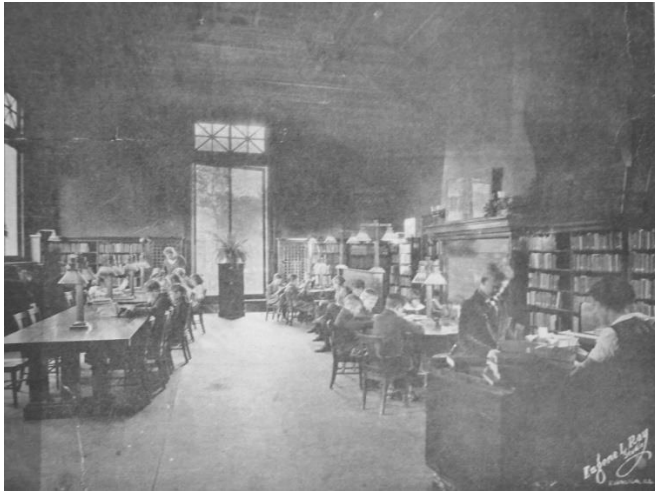
Two floors of the bookstack room were open on one side, facing into the delivery hall. In the tradition of oversight from a central position, Evanston librarians thus had a direct view of the public's movements in the stacks from their positions at the loan desk in the entrance hall. However, oversight of the children's room and the reading room were limited from this central position, views only being available into these apartments through their open doorways, unlike in many small Carnegie libraries where the absence of solid partitions facilitated full and direct lines of sight.

Access to the reading room was off the delivery room, to its right-hand side. An entire wall was devoted to a periodical rack, and some volumes on open-access wall shelving were made available. A large doorway on one wall of the room gave access to the reference department, 'a large, light room, somewhat apart from the rest of the library' (**Figure 3**) (EPL, 1907: 17). Each reading table had four places and two reading lamps. Alcoves on both sides of the reference room provided 'cosy retreats for students' (*Evanston News-Index*, 1931). Situating the reference accommodation at the rear of the library in a secluded position, as well as using the reading room as the means of conveyance into the hallowed reference space, echoed a traditional hierarchical arrangement of library spaces. Art folios were arranged at the far end of the reference room, accompanied by large tables convenient for their examination (alongside medicine and music, art was promoted as one of the library's major specialisms).



**Figure 3.** Reference room, Evanston Public Library, in the mid-1930s. Source: *Evanston Review* (13 January 1938). Reproduced courtesy of Evanston Public Library.

Returning to the delivery hall, readers leaving it to the left of the loan desk entered a large children's room (**Figure 4**). With their own catalogue, children were promised personal assistance in selecting books. The children's collection contained not only children's books but also a selection of standard works of adult literature aimed at challenging children to become familiar with 'the master minds of the world' and providing an antidote to 'undirected and misguided reading in youth' (EPL, 1907: 17). At the rear of the library and proximate to the children's room, thus offering easy oversight of younger readers, was an office for librarians, which was also connected to cataloguing and work rooms. These, in turn, were connected to the four-level bookstack.



**Figure 4.** The children's room, Evanston Public Library, in the mid-1930s. Source: *Evanston Review* (13 January 1938). Reproduced courtesy of Evanston Public Library.

Above the ground floor, a mezzanine floor accommodated a Directors' room, a staff room and a women's lavatory, as well as the aforementioned Sadie Knowland Coe Music Collection. Moving below ground, in the building's half-basement a lecture/meeting room – which the design termed 'audience room' – was provided (like the rest of the basement as well as the mezzanine level, flooring was in hardwood). The audience room could accommodate up to 150 persons and was furnished with a stereopticon (magic lantern). Space next to the audience room was reserved for a historical room, the contents and use of which, it was anticipated, would expand rapidly. The third major space in the basement was a boys' room, to be used for both reading and activities arranged by boys' clubs. A special, separate space for boys was regarded as important in order to attract them away from the immorality of street life: 'The boy who is won over from the loafing habit is on the safe road to good citizenship' (EPL, 1907: 18). A men's lavatory, a janitor's room and areas for heating and ventilation equipment completed the basement plan (a fan system was adopted in preference to the natural-draft system that operated in Evanston's schools) (EPL, 1905).

### **Development and Demise**

After the library opened 'Evanstonians rediscovered their library and patronage figures jumped sharply' (*Evanston Review*, 1933). Numerically, the new building was an immediate success, use of it increasing by 12% in the period 1 March to 31 May 1908, compared with the same period the year before (EPL, 1908: 13). By 1935 half of the city were using the library (EPLA, 1935). In the years that followed much was made of the growing development of the children's room, a stimulating isotype image being distributed to the local press to depict a 120% increase in children's reading in the decade to the end of 1937 (*Evanston Review*, 1938). The library was viewed as not only efficient but also comfortable, the latter characteristic being enhanced by the provision of an 'outdoor reading room' – likened to the upper deck of a cruise ship – on the roof of an addition built in 1934 from Federal funds to facilitate the expansion of the collection and its user base (EPLA, 1935).

After World War II the building became seriously overcrowded. In 1953 local citizens voted against a serious remodelling of the building. A minor remodelling was undertaken in 1955 but this was not enough to allay fears that the building was not fit for purpose. It was razed in the late-1950s and a new library, opened in 1961, was built on the same site. Had the Carnegie library in Evanston made it into the era when, as a reaction to modernism's embrace of radical urban development, the preservation and re-cycling of buildings became more popular, its fate might have been different. However, constructing an extension to provide the same amount of space that eventually became available in the building that replaced it would have required a good deal of architectural creativity as well as money.

## **Evaluation**

Evanston's Carnegie library building was completed the year before rigorous architectural control was introduced by Carnegie. In 1897, Carnegie appointed James Bertram as his private secretary. The following year Bertram became responsible for reviewing all applications for library building grants. Through familiarizing himself with building plans (drawings and written statements of intent) sent by grant applicants, Bertram gradually began to link his perusal of plans to the funds he advised his employer to offer or withhold. In 1908, this process became formal, Carnegie's office stipulating that plans needed to be received, inspected and, if necessary, amended before any pledge could be issued. Bertram's control of planning was intensified in 1911 with the production of his *Notes on Library Buildings* [sic], a set of guidelines written with small libraries in mind but applicable in its fundamental principles to larger libraries also (Bobinski, 1969, p. 58). Bertram's aim, which developed gradually over a number of years and which culminated in the publication of *Notes*, was to exercise control over any tendencies that existed on the part of local library authorities and the architects they appointed to waste space in buildings and to embellish them with superfluous ornament or decoration.

The plans for Evanston were drawn up before formal control of design plans was instituted by Carnegie. However, this does not mean to say that the Evanston design, as well as others produced before 1908, can be automatically categorized as overblown, extravagant or deficient in functional characteristics, a criticism often levelled at the first generation of Carnegie library buildings. On the contrary, the Evanston building contained a great many features that were in alignment with the new thinking on efficiency in library design that had been emerging since the end of the nineteenth century (Poole, 1881; Soule, 1912).

What immediately threatens to obscure the fact that Evanston was the product of a period of significant experimentation and innovation in library design is the building's classical style, which for today's observer often implies a stuffy and elitist mission. However, focusing on style misses the critical architectural contribution library buildings like Evanston made to the development of user-centred library architecture. Although it was in the inter-war period that the transition to modernism and the rise of a functionalist principle became highly visible, a palpable sense of the modern can be detected before the First World War. The beginnings of the modern movement was essentially a 'fin de siècle' phenomenon, and was inclusive of the trend in the Edwardian period – notwithstanding the flourishing of architectural eclecticism at the time – towards a strong revival in monumental classicism (Summerson, 1989: 214, 218, 237).

Evocative of the civic culture of the ancient polis, the Evanston building's prominent 'municipal landmark' location and classical style symbolised the importance attached to public education and culture. This reverential material statement in support of modernity continued to be expressed inside the building, its interior components comprising: open stacks; generous children's accommodation; elegant, mahogany-clad reading and reference rooms; a historical records room that chimed with the democratic spirit of the republic; a space for lectures and community meetings; and a spacious delivery/entrance hall, top-lit by a large skylight, accentuating the library's openness, and flanked by catalogue book-display cabinets, marking the institution's commitment to public knowledge.

Evidence taken from designs like that at Evanston shows that the Carnegie programme, far from perpetrating an epochal architectural disaster, contributed to a significant era of transition in library design (Prizeman, 2012; Van Slyck, 1995). The Carnegie library in Evanston points not to the production of architectural follies but to significant advances in library design, contradicting the discourse that Carnegie libraries represented an episode of elitist over-indulgence in wasteful aesthetics at the expense of functional library economy.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the course of its lifespan of half a century, Evanston's Carnegie library was one of the town's most cherished and revered buildings. Its demise, along with that of others, encourages us to reflect on the changing popularity of Carnegie libraries as public buildings in relation to their potential for ongoing or future use (Prizeman, 2018; *Shelf Life*, 2020) – a potential that is increased by revising any negative images that may persist regarding their original design.



Celebrating the legacy of Carnegie public library buildings – providing it is possible to separate their material form from their funder’s reputation as one of the most brutal employers of America’s Gilded Age – can work to enhance today’s image of their origin and thus help heighten expectations for their future. Re-assessing the reputation of the original Carnegie library built-form adds weight to the argument that where technically and economically feasible meaningful efforts should be made to conserve them – that is, to renew their fabric either for a continuation of library service or for repurposing.

It goes without saying, of course, that many libraries, hampered by built-in technical deficiencies, irrespective of the general progressivism inherent in the Carnegie library built-form, have outlasted their usefulness and have consequently perished. However, in recent years, support has been expressed for the great potential of public library buildings of the formative era that are now threatened with closure. There is clearly a growing heritage-conservation zeitgeist surrounding the retention of such historic cultural infrastructure. The prolific nature of Carnegie libraries, alongside burgeoning positive attitudes towards sustainability and re-cycling, has caused them to become familiar illustrations of a growing mentality that enthusiastically welcomes the notion and practice of heritage preservation. Extant Carnegie library buildings, subject to evaluation using modern architectural techniques and to rigorous historical documentation and assessment, surely have a bright future.

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Abbreviations:

CCNYA      *Carnegie Corporation of New York Archives, Columbia University, New York.  
Carnegie Library Buildings Grants.*  
EPL         *Evanston Public Library.*  
EPLA        *Evanston Public Library Archives.*

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