

Commentary/Op-Ed - December 2014

Libraries of the Future

In this op-ed in *City & State*, CUF's Jonathan Bowles and Jeanette Estima highlight some of the visionary ideas presented by design teams at our December 4th conference to re-imagine and rethink New York City's branch libraries.

Jonathan Bowles and Jeanette Estima

With roots in nearly every community across the five boroughs, New York City's 207 public library branches are uniquely positioned to help address several economic, demographic and social challenges that will impact New York in the decades ahead, from the rapid aging of the city's population— libraries are a go-to resource for seniors—and the continued growth in the number of foreign-born—libraries are the most trusted institution for immigrants—to the rise of the freelance economy—libraries are the original co-working spaces.

But city policymakers have not thought strategically about these assets in decades. Although libraries have stepped in to fill community needs in a variety of ways, the vast majority of the city's branch libraries are struggling to meet the demands of their communities. As the Center for an Urban Future (CUF) detailed in a recent report, the average branch library in New York is 61 years old, and 59 branches have at least $5 million in maintenance needs. Meanwhile, too many branches are poorly configured for the ways New Yorkers are using libraries today. Many don't have enough space to accommodate the growing demand for literacy and after-school programs, computers and quiet spaces to work.

At a time when more people are using libraries than ever before, and technology has revolutionized how we learn, communicate and socialize, how can New York tap the full potential of the city's 207 branches? What would an Andrew Carnegie-scale reinvestment in our libraries look like today?

On Dec. 4 six interdisciplinary design teams came together to present their answers to these questions at a dynamic symposium convened by CUF, the Architectural League and the Charles H. Revson Foundation.

One of the design teams—Marble Fairbanks with James Lima Planning + Development, Leah Meisterlin and Special Project

Office—suggested that branch libraries could be better integrated into the city's housing, community development and resiliency goals. The team developed an innovative planning tool that combines extensive demographic, geographic, zoning and library use data to inform the development of new library spaces so they are grounded in community needs. For instance, it showed that the Grand Concourse branch in the Bronx has a high concentration of young people in the immediate vicinity, whereas the Rego Park branch in Queens has a diversity of age groups. This might suggest that Grand Concourse could maximize its impact by investing in resources for young people, while Rego Park has work to do to appeal to seniors, families, professionals and teens.

The planning tool showed that 74 branches are within flood zones, and another 75 are within a half-mile walk of a flood zone. Layering growth patterns, current population density and development potential onto their environmental resiliency and library data, the team identified several sites where a new, environmentally sustainable library could be built with affordable housing, such as the Brighton Beach branch, which needs about $5 million to repair its boiler, windows and the building's exterior.

The Marble Fairbanks team noted that many of the city's aging library buildings sit on properties that could be developed for affordable housing— thus allowing the city to rebuild an aging library at no cost to the city while also creating affordable housing, a key priority for Mayor Bill de Blasio. They considered the development potential of six different library sites across the city, and proposed modest zoning changes that could maximize the impact of a mixed-use development with a community facility such as a library. These included: permitting higher use on split lots, extending adjacent higher-density districts, increasing FAR (the floor area ratio) for community facilities and providing a resilience bonus.

Other design teams focused on new ideas and strategies for maximizing the impact of libraries in their communities. The dynamic suite of strategies developed by UNION, an interdisciplinary team of communication designers and architects, addressed libraries' PR problem. They outlined a more effective identity system (including a clearer library icon and signage), a library card that can unlock services far beyond libraries, "librarians-at-large" who meet community members on the streets, a marketing campaign that draws on the libraries' fleet of delivery trucks, and architectural strategies that leverage needed investments in roof and facade repairs to create more distinctive, open and flexible facilities.

L+, an interdisciplinary team led by Situ Studio, created a "kit-of-parts" for dramatically improving the libraries' ability to puton a broad range of educational and community programming. CUF has documented a huge increase in demand for these types of programs as well as a dearth of facilities and equipment that can accommodate them. L+ created a highly flexible and affordable solution that can be manufactured offsite and implemented in a range of contexts, including the community rooms in existing branches, retail spaces, and transit hubs.

Finally, designs from Andrew Berman Architect tackled the need to connect the library's typically indoor activities beyond its walls so that they reverberate throughout the community. Activating building facades creates outdoor spaces to gather and quieter reading nooks around the library, and ATM-vestibule-like rooms are visually open to passersby and remain accessible 24 hours a day, offering basic services like a book drop, seating and electrical outlets without overburdening operating budgets.

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