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ARCHITECTURE

Undertaking Its Destruction

By **ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE**

Dec. 3, 2012 4:40 p.m. ET

New York

There is no more important landmark building in New York than the New York Public Library, known to New Yorkers simply as the 42nd Street Library, one of the world's greatest research institutions. Completed in 1911 by Carrère and Hastings in a lavish classical Beaux Arts style, it is an architectural masterpiece. Yet it is about to undertake its own destruction. The library is on a fast track to demolish the seven floors of stacks just below the magnificent, two-block-long Rose Reading Room for a \$300 million restructuring referred to as the Central Library Plan.

The plan would consolidate three libraries—moving the popular Mid-Manhattan circulating library (just across Fifth Avenue at 40th Street) and the underused Science, Industry and Business branch (in a 34th Street building that runs from Fifth to Madison Avenues) back into the main building to eliminate substantial operating costs. Two million to three million of the five million volumes in the stacks—including the more specialized material many of us depend on, and referred to by the library as the “least used” books—would be moved to Siberia. (Excuse me, to New Jersey, where the offsite storage is located.) Books would be returned in an optimistically estimated but unreliable 24 hours, by truck, on the traffic-jammed New Jersey Turnpike.

The vacated stacks would house a state-of-the-art, socially interactive, computer-centered Mid-Manhattan branch designed by the library's chosen architect, the British firm of Foster+Partners. This “repurposed” space—a common real-estate term—would also make room for writers, scholars, seminars, adult education and children's activities. We are being assured that, with savings estimated at \$7 million to \$15 million, closed collections could be reopened, dismissed librarians rehired, and book-collecting resumed, reversing cutbacks that have downgraded a noble institution.

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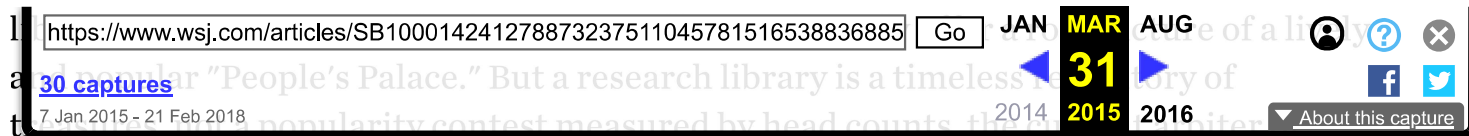
A vintage illustration of the stacks built below the New York Public Library's reading room. NYPL

increase of online accessibility of the most popular material, with only 6% of print sources consulted in a given year. A 78% drop in the use of the Science, Industry and Business library, with most of the material already online, makes that branch expendable. The Mid-Manhattan circulating library is heavily used, while its quarters have deteriorated badly. Corrective action was inevitable.

The library's embrace of the future is commendable; it has been on the frontiers of change in technology and practice for some time. But some of these numbers are misleading. A research library is devoted to the acquisition, maintenance and availability of collections of amazing range, rarity and depth, much of which will not be consulted for decades, have not been digitized and probably never will be. If we could estimate how many ways in which the world has been changed by that 6%, the number would be far more meaningful than the traffic through its lion-guarded doors. The

engineering involved, providing additional offsite storage for the books, and reconstructing the space, would be paid for by the sale of the two vacated Fifth Avenue buildings, a promised \$150 million city (read: taxpayers') contribution, and a fund-raising campaign.

The rationale for the plan is a 41% decrease in the use of the collections in the past 15 years, and the

A screenshot of a web browser interface. At the top, there is a search bar containing the URL "https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB100014241278873237511045781516538836885" and a "Go" button. To the right of the search bar is a calendar for the month of March 2015, with the date "31" highlighted. Below the search bar, there is a snippet of text from the article: "30 captures 'People's Palace.' But a research library is a timeless...". At the bottom of the screenshot, there are social media icons for Facebook and Twitter, and a small "About this capture" button.

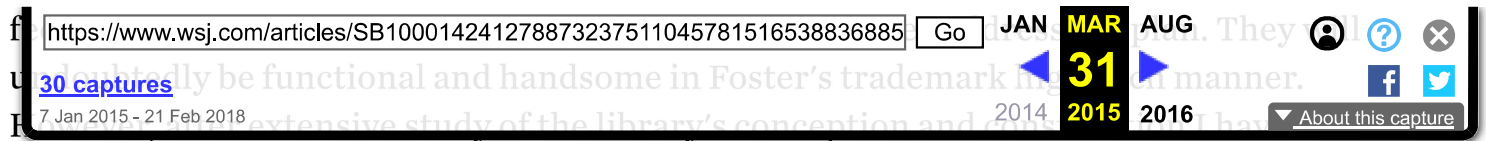
success. This is already the most democratic of institutions, free and open to all. Democracy and populism seem to have become hopelessly confused.

Not surprisingly (except to the library), the plan is highly controversial. For most critics it's about devaluing the primary purpose of a research library by reducing the accessibility of its resources. A letter of protest has been signed by more than a thousand famous writers and distinguished scholars, with a particular outcry about the removal of the books. Indeed, the loss of so many books got so much flak that Abby and Howard Milstein generously donated \$8 million in September to complete a second storage level, underneath Bryant Park just behind the library, to keep about 1.5 million of the banished volumes on site, a proposal previously dismissed by the library as unfeasible because of dampness and water seepage. This is clearly meant to mollify critics. But it is also a red herring. The stacks will still be demolished.

Other dissenters fear that an august institution is being turned into "a vast Internet café," an accusation the library considers a grossly unfair misinterpretation of the plan. But such skepticism was inevitable. The library lost credibility in 2005 after it sold Asher B. Durand's painting "Kindred Spirits" (1849), a depiction of the poet William Cullen Bryant and the painter Thomas Cole in a Catskills landscape, in a closed auction—something New Yorkers considered a betrayal of their artistic and literary patrimony.

If the library feels that the plan has been vastly misunderstood, it is its own fault; its communications are deplorable. Three calls made this past August requesting information and an interview with President Anthony Marx or another qualified spokesman were not returned until the head of the Landmarks Preservation Commission intervened. That produced a contact who has been extremely helpful. Asked for corrections of misunderstandings and for a statement on the rationale for the plan, she supplied them. But when repeated requests were made to see schematic studies of how the vacated space would be used—Foster had been authorized to start them in February—they were never available. In August I was told schematics would be ready in September. In September I was told they would be available in October. In October I was told it would happen in November. In November I was promised a presentation in December. Any experienced architect would know that studies are well under way. The library has been less than forthcoming, and sensitivity to criticism has obviously reached a fever pitch.

I have been patient and cooperative, but I believe I have waited long enough. I am certain Foster will come up with impeccable, creative solutions. However, I no longer



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become convinced that irreversible changes of this magnitude should not be made in this landmark building. I am not going to rehearse the intellectual, literary and sentimental arguments already on the record. This is all about the building, a subject that has not been adequately addressed.

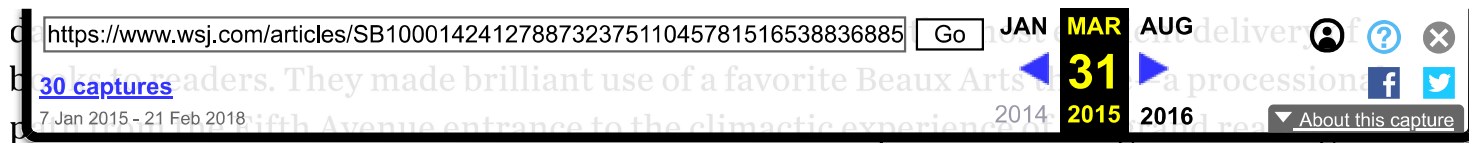
No wonder the stacks seem like fair prey; they occupy 38% of the library's gross area. The buzzwords are "outmoded" and "obsolete." The fact is that they require substantial upgrading of climate control systems for proper preservation. But what no one seems to have noticed, or mentioned, is that the stacks are the structural support of the reading room. They literally hold it up.

An end section through the building shows the stacks and reading room as a structurally inseparable unit. A longitudinal section reveals their full extent, from end to end and side to side, under the 297 foot long, 78 foot wide and 51 foot high reading room. They are a supporting steel cage, with infills of iron shelving, end pieces and dividers detailed by Carrère and Hastings. There is a different structural system for the rest of the building. Each of the seven stack levels is 7 feet 6 inches high, an extremely compact use of the space.

The stacks are an engineering landmark, but they cannot be designated because they are not open to the public. Incredibly, the Rose Reading Room has not been designated either, although it is eligible. Landmark protection covers the building's exterior and entrance and exhibition hall.

Bernard Green, who devised the system for the Library of Congress that was built a few years earlier than the New York Public Library, was hired as the engineering consultant for the New York stacks. A contact at the engineering firm that upgraded the Massachusetts State House Library believes that the space freed by moving some books under Bryant Park, along with the existing subbasement below the stacks, could accommodate the necessary mechanical equipment. Restoration and retrofitting would be easier and cheaper than supporting the reading room with the enormously complex and expensive engineering needed during demolition and reconstruction.

The location of the stacks under the reading room was the concept of the first librarian, John Shaw Billings. His rough sketch for the building was developed with the help of William R. Ware, the founder of the Columbia School of Architecture, and incorporated into the competition to design the library. No one was allowed to deviate from it. When the distinguished firm of McKim, Mead & White had the hubris to go its own way, it lost to Carrère and Hastings—architects who realized Billings's scheme for an enormous,



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room at the top. But all of Carrère and Hastings' elegant classicism is not just window dressing. Their wonderful spatial relationships and rich detail are intimately tied to the building's remarkable functional rationale.

The current Central Library Plan was conceived internally, using commercial consultants known for doing the numbers and moving the pieces around for organizational change and the best bottom line. It has the approval of Mr. Marx and his predecessor, Paul LeClerc, under whom it took shape, and a 60-member board of successful business leaders with a few writers and scholars for literary embellishment. Commercial consultants are generally clueless about nonquantifiable architectural and cultural values. And so, apparently, are most of the 60 trustees. There is an obvious paucity of architectural historians and structural experts among them.

This is a plan devised out of a profound ignorance of or willful disregard for not only the library's original concept and design, but also the folly of altering its meaning and mission and compromising its historical and architectural integrity. You don't "update" a masterpiece. "Modernization" may be the most dangerously misused word in the English language.

Buildings change; they adapt to needs, times and tastes. Old buildings are restored, upgraded and converted to new uses. For architecturally or historically significant buildings with landmark protection, the process is more complex; subtle, subjective and difficult decisions are often required. Nothing, not even buildings, stands still.

But there are better options than turning the library into a hollowed-out hybrid of new and old. The radically different 21st-century model deserves a radically different style of its own, dramatically contemporary and flexible enough to accommodate rapid technological change. Sell the surplus Fifth Avenue property at 34th Street. Keep the Mid-Manhattan building; the location is perfect. Let Foster+Partners loose on the Mid-Manhattan building; the results will be spectacular, and probably no more costly than the extravagant and destructive plan the library has chosen.

Perhaps someone could follow the Milsteins' lead with a gift to retrofit the stacks. A public campaign helped the Central Park Conservancy restore a beloved landscape. Do New Yorkers love their library any less?

Ms. Huxtable is the Journal's architecture critic.