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Talking History: SPL's Carnegie libraries provide modern service in lovingly maintained historic surroundings

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When Scottish-American businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) began donating money for the construction of libraries he probably could not have predicted the impact he would have on the civic architecture of American cities, Seattle included. Eight Carnegie libraries were built in the city between 1904 and 1921. Seven still stand. Six remain libraries operated by The Seattle Public Library. These are the Fremont, Queen Anne, Green Lake, University, Columbia and West Seattle branches. The seventh is home to the Kangaroo & Kiwi bar in Ballard.

Today, SPL works hard to steward and maintain these striking 19th century properties whilst also ensuring they are fit to serve patrons in the 21st. This means providing modern-day services that Carnegie himself couldn't have imagined, such as computers and multipurpose community rooms, and ensuring that the buildings are compliant with current safety, accessibility and energy codes. This is no simple task especially considering that all of SPL's Carnegies are landmarked, meaning that any work and/or changes must be approved by the city's Landmarks Preservation Board.



"Maintaining the integrity of the Carnegie libraries' original design and keeping these buildings fit for use is really important to SPL and our patrons," Dennis Reddinger, capital improvement program manager at SPL, explained, "but they certainly have their challenges."

One unique challenge is sourcing authentic original materials, which are often very hard to find and in some cases might no longer exist. SPL is also sure to hire contractors who have experience working with rare materials and historic properties because, as Reddinger pointed out, if you are repairing a historic feature that can't be replaced and something happens there's no fixing it. "Of course, when we are repairing something on these buildings, like an old roof or stained glass window, the goal is to make it look like no work has been done at all, which certainly isn't the case," Reddinger reflected.



Photo courtesy of The Seattle Public Library [\[enlarge\]](#)

SERVING THE COMMUNITY

The University Branch Carnegie library opened in 1910.

Another challenge SPL faces with its Carnegies is fitting all the services that are now expected of a library into spaces that weren't built for modern-day needs. Since Carnegie's time, libraries have come to be seen as a space for community gatherings and events as much as a repository for books. "While the needs of patrons

have certainly changed, the size and massing of the buildings hasn't," Reddinger continued. One effective solution has been to move collections to the perimeter of reading rooms instead of in the center, where they tended to be in the original Carnegie layouts, creating more communal space. Another has been to move collections online.

The Columbia Branch, at 4721 Rainier Ave. S., was actually expanded in 2004 to better serve the Columbia City community that had grown exponentially since the library opened in 1915. The expansion consisted of an addition to the back of the branch that increased the building's size from 6,825 to 12,420 square feet. The expansion, designed by Cardwell Architects and built by Graham Contracting, was designed to respect and blend in with the architecture of the original building.

Reddinger shared that when it comes to community input, SPL gets a wide range of feedback about what people want and expect from the Carnegies. Some call for predominately quiet spaces, similar to how the library might have felt and sounded in the early 19th century, with others wanting a more active communal environment. "We really do try to accommodate everyone," Reddinger said.

Andrew Carnegie would have most certainly approved of this approach. Anyone seeking a grant from him had to ensure that the resulting library would abide by the "Carnegie Method." This stipulated that any additional funding and support for the library had to come from public elements and was not to include any private endowments. Financial commitments for maintenance and operation also had to come from the town. This was important to Carnegie because he wanted his libraries to be a place for the entire community and was fearful that endowed institutions were prone to becoming what he described as "the prey of the clique." To get a grant, the library also had to provide a free service to all.

Laura Gentry, head of communications at SPL, notes the active and important role that community members still play in keeping the Carnegies going and fit for purpose through patronage, feedback and the successful passage of many voter-approved bond and levy measures that provide funding for maintenance and renovation projects.

"We find that patrons often have a generational relationship with these properties," Hayden Bass, regional manager for SPL's Mid-City West region, said. "Individuals will often come in and talk to staff members about their childhood memories in the space and how the Carnegies inspired a love of learning and reading in them as children.

"I personally love being and working in these libraries and thinking about the hundreds of community members who have sat in the space before me, sometimes even in the same chair at the same table," Bass continued.

PREPARING FOR THE PRESENT AND FUTURE

SPL's six Carnegie libraries have all been renovated within the last 20 years and three are set to get further upgrades as a result of a voter-approved levy in 2019. The Green Lake, University and Columbia branches — all designed by architects Woodruff Somervell and Joseph Cote — will get a full seismic retrofit, ADA accessibility upgrades that include the installation of an elevator, and will be fitted with new energy-efficient HVAC and electrical systems, including air conditioning.

The Green Lake Branch, at 7364 E. Green Lake Drive N., will be the first to be upgraded. Design work for the project is complete and ground is expected to be broken this fall. BuildingWork is the project architect. A general contractor has been selected but not yet announced. The two lowest bidders were Good News Group and Western Ventures Construction.

The 9,557-square-foot two-story URM building will receive a full seismic upgrade and a host of other upgrades that include the replacement of existing HVAC and fire alarm systems, modifications to plumbing, fire sprinkler service, electrical systems, structural upgrades including shotcrete walls and steel moment



Rendering by BuildingWork [\[enlarge\]](#)

Architect BuildingWork's design for renovations at the Green Lake Branch include exposed sections of a steel seismic retrofit structure.

frames, the replacement of an existing elevator, excavation and site improvements for accessibility upgrades, and low-voltage and security improvements. The project also includes some interior upgrades and remodeling which the architect says will “respect and preserve the Carnegie legacy represented in the historic architecture, while integrating a host of critical, contemporary improvements.”

“When we work on projects like this with such high historic value we need to be really careful and considerate about what elements we preserve and touch lightly and what ones need to be modified to better suit today's needs,” Matt Aalfs, principal at BuildingWork, explained. One important and somewhat unique design choice that has been made with this project is the decision to leave parts of the steel seismic retrofit structure exposed. Aalfs said that the framing will be elegantly designed and installed. “I think exposing parts of the structure instead of trying to hide it will actually enhance patrons' understanding of the building and its history as it will be in visual dialogue with the historical interior,” he added.

Work is expected to be complete at the Green Lake Branch by early summer 2023. Next to receive upgrades will be the University Branch at 5009 Roosevelt Way N.E. Architect SHKS is currently in schematic design for this project. An RFQ will be going out for the final improvement project, the Columbia Branch, in the next few months.

In these refreshed spaces, Carnegie's legacy and the architecture of Somervell and Cote will live on in buildings that have evolved to serve the 21st century patron and that SPL is bolstering so that they can continue to serve and be an asset for future generations.

“It's both a tremendous honor and a great sense of responsibility to help steward this public resource into the future, both in terms of what the library provides and also the physical artifact of the historic building,” Aalfs said about his work on the Green Lake Branch.

A total of 2,509 Carnegie libraries were built between 1883 and 1929, with 1,689 in the United States.

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