

St. Louis Central Library at

100

BY JEAN GOSEBRINK



In 1901, philanthropist Andrew Carnegie gave the City of St. Louis \$1 million, half to be spent on construction of a Central Library building and half on neighborhood branches. At the beginning of the twentieth century, St. Louis Public Library was poised for expansion. It looked forward to increasing collections, library use, and the size of its building.

The St. Louis Public Library's origins were in the Public School Library and Lyceum, a private subscription library established in 1865 by St. Louis Superintendent of Education Ira Divoll and others affiliated with the public schools. In 1869, its operations were officially transferred from the Library Society to the St. Louis Board of Education. Frederick Morgan Crunden became its second librarian in 1877.

A dynamic leader, Crunden promoted the public library as the "people's university," and advocated its expansion into neighborhood branches and conversion to a free, tax-based, citywide service. He worked for passage of a new state law that in 1885 authorized cities in Missouri to levy taxes for public library services. In St. Louis, his advocacy saw its fruition in the April 1893 election in which St. Louis voters approved moving administration of the Library to an independent board of directors and taxing themselves for its support. The Library and its collections were transferred to control of the new board on March 1, 1894, and the Library opened free to the public on June 1.

By the mid-1890s, the St. Louis Public Library, recently independent of the St. Louis Board of Education, occupied quarters on the top two floors of the new Board of Education building at Locust and 9th streets and was looking for "adequate room for a growing institution and proper accommodations for its ever increasing patronage." Library promoters had in mind "an edifice which will not only fill present and prospective demands, but be an ornament to the city... a library building worthy of the fourth greatest city of the Union."

The attempts of St. Louis Public Library to levy a building tax in popular elections in 1897 and 1898 had been defeated. The library board corresponded with steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, who had embarked on what he called his "wholesale" period of providing funds for library construction. The board also sent the Reverend Samuel Jack Niccolls to New York to persuade Carnegie in person to donate funds for a St. Louis Library. Niccolls, an acquaintance of Carnegie's and friend of Carnegie's pastor, proved successful.

St. Louis officials and citizens promptly moved to take advantage of Carnegie's offer. On April 2, 1901, St. Louis voted 73,646 to 10,184 in favor of a tax of two-fifths

As you enter the building from Locust Street and step inside the Atrium, you'll be amazed by its vastness and brightness—three stories of windows and white tile walls flood the space with light. You can stop in the café for a bite and a drink as you read a magazine or newspaper. Then check out the Discovery Wall screen for a look at cool library stuff.

New York: 12th March 1901.

Dr S.J. Nicolls,
2651 Washington Ave, St Louis, Mo.

Dear Sir,

In reply to yours of March 5th. It would be a great mistake in my opinion to spend a million dollars upon a Central Library Building. The masses are best reached by Branch Libraries, and the Central Building is much less important than before. If the city of St Louis will agree to tax itself and expend not less than \$150,000 per annum on its Library System I shall be glad to give \$500,000 for a Central Library, and also \$500,000 to be expended hereafter in Branch Libraries as these are needed, the city to furnish sites for the Libraries and the money I give to be used for the Buildings.

Greater Pittsburgh spends over \$100,000 a year on its Library System, and Buffalo of much less population than St Louis spends over \$140,000; Boston also with less population than St Louis appropriates \$300,000 for its Libraries annually, so that \$150,000 cannot be considered excessive.

Care should be taken in making contracts for the Central Building, to leave a margin for contingencies. The buildings should be dignified, but not ornate. The building is only the frame; the treasures of a Library are within.

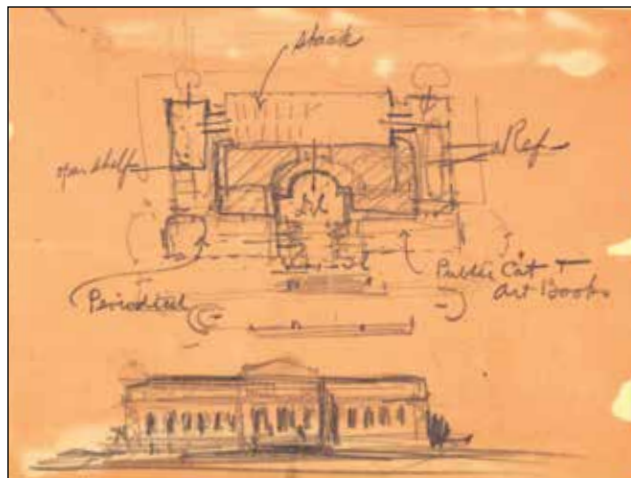
Very truly yours,

Andrew Carnegie

The Library Board chose Gilbert after a national competition. Architects submitting plans included the New York firm Carrere & Hastings and St. Louis architects William B. Ittner; Eames & Young; Mauran, Russell & Garden; Theodore C. Link; and Barnett, Hanes & Barnett. Gilbert's quick sketch shows strong elements of the basic design that can be seen in the completed building. Gilbert had designed Festival Hall and the Palace of Fine Arts (now the St. Louis Art Museum, the only main exposition building designed to be permanent) for the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition. In January 1912, the new massive granite and marble Central Library opened (the site of the former St. Louis Exposition and Music Hall).

of a mill on the dollar for use of the Library. Carnegie's other stipulations were also met as sites for new buildings were secured. Between 1906 and 1912, six neighborhood branches and the Central Library were built from Carnegie funds. The grand Central Library, occupying the entire city block between Olive and Locust and 13th and 14th streets in downtown St. Louis, opened to the public amidst great fanfare on January 6, 1912.

Around the turn of the 21st century, serious discussion began about restoring and renewing Central in order to bring it up to contemporary building standards as well as provide it with the resources necessary to keep it relevant in the fast-changing "Information Age." After feasibility studies had been completed and designs had been reviewed, the decision was made to commence with



Sketch of Central Library by New York architect Cass Gilbert, circa 1908.

the enormous project. Central Library closed to the public on June 14, 2010, with the goal of reopening during its Centennial year.

With a \$70 million total budget (\$20 million raised by the St. Louis Public Library Foundation's "Central to Your World" capital campaign and \$50 million procured in bonds), the library board and administration worked closely with Cannon Design principal George Nikolajevich, FAIA; general contractor BSI Constructors; and a small army of subcontractors to ensure that the project remained on time, on budget, and up to expectation. Most importantly, the library's patrons were not to be inconvenienced by the closure—all normal library services would continue at the library's 16 branch locations throughout the city.

The project was daunting. The library's massive, 4.7 million-item collection was moved off-site (at a rate of 50,000 items per day), and staff was relocated to make way for construction crews. From that point on Central Library was a hive of activity, with tradesmen and women of every description working in what seemed to be chaos, but was in reality a finely choreographed ballet. The dance would last for two and a half years.

In the waning months of 2012, workers put finishing touches on their handiwork and Library staff became reacquainted with "their" Library. So much had changed. The historic Great Hall, foyer, and reading pavilions had been fully restored to their original splendor while being fitted with fully updated mechanical and electrical systems. Broadband infrastructure, HD Discovery Walls, and wireless web had been installed throughout the building. The former seven-story glass stack tower, which contained the bulk of the collection, was removed and replaced with a soaring atrium. Modern, high-density storage space was added throughout the building. A state-of-the-art, 250-seat auditorium was carved out of lower level space originally used for coal storage.

When the Grand Reopening Day finally arrived, more



Opening ceremonies for Central Library were held on January 6, 1912. Scrapbook: Opening of the Central Building; Program of Exercises, Invitations, Acknowledgements, etc., 1912, St. Louis Public Library Archives.

Guests from other cities as well as citizens of St. Louis identified prominently with civic and educational life received invitations for the exercises held in Central Library's Great Hall. Cass Gilbert accepted the invitation, while others, including librarians from the New York Public Library, Howard University, and the Imperial Library of Japan could not attend. Over 700 attended the opening in Central Library's Great Hall, where a "flashlight photograph" was taken of those present for the occasion. On the program were Episcopal Bishop Daniel S. Tuttle, who made the invocation; Dr. Herbert Putnam, librarian of Congress; the Hon. John H. Gundlach, president of the St. Louis City Council; John F. Lee, vice president of the Library Board, and librarian Arthur E. Bostwick; Gilbert delivered keys to the building to Board president George O. Carpenter. Archbishop John J. Glennon ended the exercises with a benediction. During and after the formal program the whole building was open for public inspection.

than 1,000 eager patrons and dignitaries gathered on Central's massive, restored Olive Street steps and plazas. After a brief ceremony, the crowd was let in to inspect their beloved Library. The atmosphere was electric as masses of people rushed through the bronze gates, eager to behold the changes and new features their old friend had in store for them. Ohs and Ahs immediately filled the restored foyer as the crowd looked up at the ceilings and continued to make their way into the magnificent Great Hall, the newly decorated and refurbished Fine Arts Room, and the Entertainment, Literature, and Biography Room. The new Locust Street entrance welcomed guests with its dramatic stainless steel canopy with etched columns and an infinity water treatment. Visitors were delighted as they made their way to the revitalized first floor that

now held the new Center for the Reader, Children's Library, Teen Lounge, Studio, and Science & Technology, Patents and Trademarks rooms. The Creative Experience was a must stop for everyone visiting the Library that day. Its advanced technology wowed all, proving that an old building could be transformed into the Library's "crown jewel" for the 21st century. On the third floor, an 83-percent increase in public space gave the Genealogy, St. Louis, Special Collections, and History and Geography rooms much needed room to display books and items that researchers find invaluable. In addition, several conference rooms, computer areas, and a café have been added. Before the day had ended, more than 4,000 patrons had experienced the new Central Library.



Stack tower, 1912. F.D. Hampson Commercial Photographer.

The stack tower, a block-long structure built of steel seven stories high, was constructed within the north wing (the Locust Street side) of the building. The stacks housed the majority of Central Library's collection of millions of books and periodicals. Glass floors in the stacks allowed light to penetrate through the area. Original pieces of glass from the stacks are used behind the atrium desk in the renovated Central Library.



Book cleaning vacuum machine, 1928. F.D. Hampson Commercial Photo Co.

A Library employee uses a portable electric vacuum machine in the stacks. "For all cleaning where dust is dry and adheres loosely, these cleaners do excellent work, though they will not remove oily or greasy dirt that cannot be blown away, such as the fine sooty layer deposited on books and furniture from soft-coal smoke. This must be wiped by hand, no mechanical device having yet been found that will remove it." Machinery in the Library by Arthur E. Bostwick, 1928, separate in 1927-1928 Annual Report.

The Open Shelf Room, 1920.

One of the library's grand reading rooms, the Open Shelf Room provided access to Central Library's circulating collection. Here readers could browse the shelves for the classics and new books and check them out of the library. At Central's opening the Open Shelf Room contained 25,000 volumes of circulating books. With the exception of books in the Open Shelf and Children's rooms, other Central collections were marked for in-library use only. The wooden beamed ceiling is decorated with delicately painted symbols of learning, wisdom, and strength.



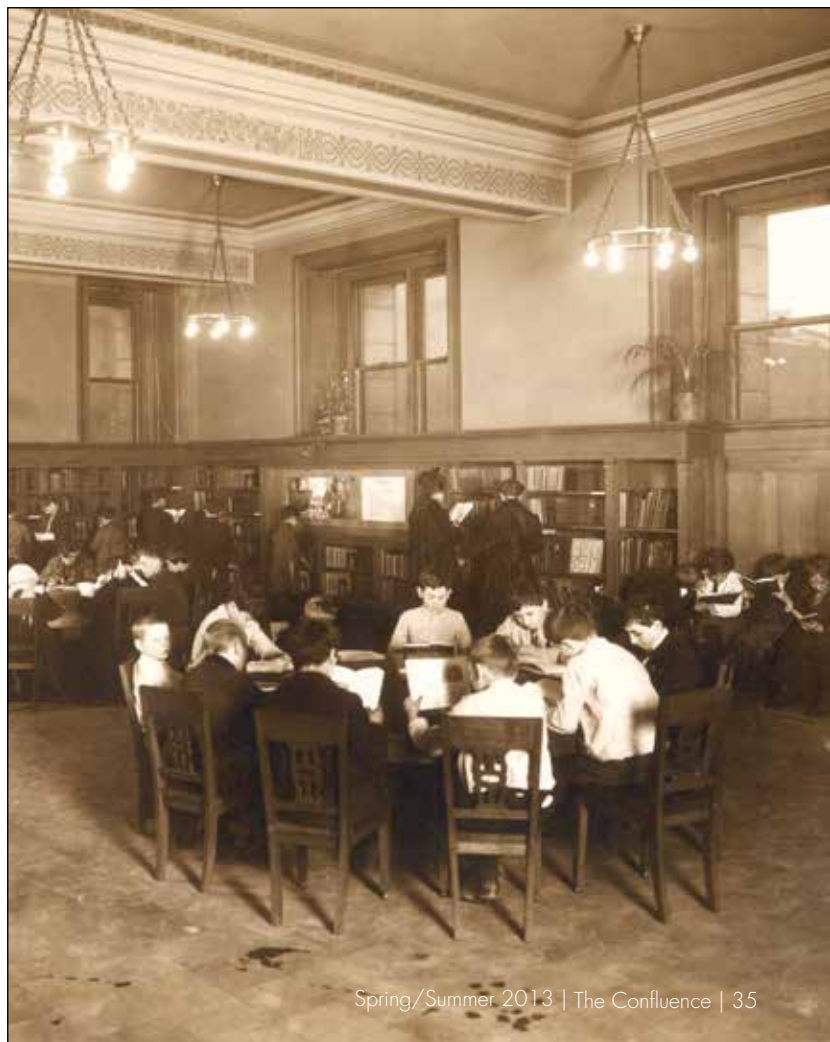


"Once upon a time" storytelling at Central Library, 1912. A.W. Sanders Commercial Photographer.

Librarians drew upon fairy tales, myths, and legends from King Arthur, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and other classics. As Effie Powers, head of the Children's Department, pointed out, "The children ask for the book after hearing a story which they enjoy."

A corner of the Children's Room, 1912. A.W. Sanders Commercial Photographer.

Unlike other public libraries of the nineteenth century, St. Louis Public Library had no age restrictions and encouraged children to use the library. The library's 1912-1913 Annual Report stated that the Children's Room was used by children from all parts of the city, "but it is also a neighborhood library where the Russian Jew and his Italian brother touch elbows with the negro child who has the same taste in books. The only rule is cleanliness and good behavior, and a spirit of democracy rules." The dedicated Children's Room had ceiling beams decorated with the titles of children's books—Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and Tom Brown's *School Days* can be seen on the beams in the photograph. The fireplace tiles, produced by the Moravian Tile Works of Doylestown, Pennsylvania, depict scenes of Native American activities, including "Starting a fire" and tiles based on medieval and renaissance motifs, like the whimsical "Centaur of Nuremberg" and the more stylized "Little Castle" and "Fleur de Lys."





Catalog Room, 1922. F.D. Hampson Commercial Photo Co.

A wing on the third floor housed the Catalog Department, where department staff ordered, processed, cataloged, and classified books and periodicals. In 1922, staff added 46,765 volumes to the Library collection and filed 148,097 cards in various catalogs.



A basement originally used for the furnace and coal storage has been transformed into a 250-seat acoustically excellent auditorium for author events and concerts. It has state-of-the-art audio visual capabilities and a new Green Room.

One of the stunning new additions to Central Library is the energy efficient LED exterior lighting.





Great Hall, 1925. F.D. Hampson Commercial Photo Co.

The Great Hall occupied the full length and width of the central pavilion of the Library. The walls and floor of the room were made of Tennessee marble. The molded plaster ceiling was decorated in gold, picked out with color. The library's public card catalogs were massed in the room. Here library patrons stand before the delivery desk waiting for books from the stacks. Ten decades of patrons had worn down a section of the marble in front of the desk making the floor uneven. The section of the floor was replaced in the recent renovation.

