

Court temporarily delays plan to gut the New York Public Library

By Philip Guelpa
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A recent court ruling has temporarily halted proposed plans for major renovations by the New York Public Library (NYPL) that would literally gut its iconic central branch building on 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan and include the sale of two branch buildings, also in midtown Manhattan. The “Central Library Plan” or CLP, as the scheme is called, was first made public last year. It has provoked substantial opposition, including a petition against the plan signed by 1,000 artists and scholars.

The 42nd Street library, as the main building is usually called, is a research institution which houses more than 5 million books and other documents, second in size only to the holdings of the Library of Congress in the United States. Opened in 1911, the building is a masterpiece of Beaux Arts architecture that has been designated a historic landmark. For more than a century, its vast collections have provided information, much of it difficult or impossible to find elsewhere, for countless numbers of scholars, students, and members of the general public, at no cost to the users.

The CLP calls for the demolishing of the seven stories of below-ground “stacks” or book storage facilities that lie underneath the main reading room. A large portion of the research collection, including 2 to 3 million volumes, is to be housed off-site at a new storage facility across the Hudson River in New Jersey. Requests for these materials would supposedly be filled within 24 hours by trucking the items from New Jersey back to the main building.

Critics have rightly pointed out that anyone familiar with road traffic in and around New York City would have grounds to question this timetable, not to mention the dubious wisdom of exposing rare and delicate documents to unnecessary handling and the dangers inherent in road transportation, as opposed to the short and secure trip from the underground stacks to the main reading room. Furthermore, many prospective users of the library’s resources might not have the luxury of making repeated visits or of waiting days to receive requested materials. Reportedly, many of the displaced volumes will be scanned and made available digitally.

The reconstructed underground storage would be used to house the collections of two other branches of the library, the Mid-Manhattan branch and the Science, Industry and Business library. The former is one of the most heavily used circulating libraries in the US, with 1.5 million visitors a year. It houses approximately 700,000 books and other materials and is located immediately across Fifth Avenue from the main library. The Science library, located less than 10 blocks away, holds more than half a million items and has over 750,000 users annually. The sale of these two buildings would be used to help finance the work at the main library.

The proposed scheme is being justified on a number of grounds, principally cost savings of supposedly between \$7 and \$15 million. Anthony Marx, the library’s president, claims that the stacks in the main library lack proper climate control and fire protection, which would be impossible or too costly to install; that conditions at the two branch libraries have deteriorated substantially and would be costly to repair; and that the renovation of the main library would make it more accessible to the public.

The plan has been roundly criticized on a number of grounds. The alleged cost savings and improved conditions for the collections are open to question. Aside from the increased risk and delay of access to the materials stored in New Jersey, the claim that the existing stacks cannot be made safe for the collection has not been independently verified. In fact, according to information obtained by the Committee to Save the New York Public Library, the stacks were air conditioned in the 1980s, although they are now in need of upgrading.

Furthermore, this Committee states that “The technical challenge of installing advanced fire suppression and climate control in the stacks is no more daunting than that of demolishing the stacks and installing an entirely new structural system, and it would almost certainly cost a fraction of what is proposed in the CLP.” According to a commentary published in the *New York Times*, the stacks in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, similar to but even older

than those at the New York Public Library, have recently been upgraded with modern climate controls and fireproofing. The NYPL has not provided an analysis of alternatives that would compare the various options. The proposed renovation of the 42nd Street Library has an estimated cost of over \$300 million, nearly half of which would come from public funds. However, public release of specific plans for the reconstruction of the stacks has been delayed for a year, and they are reportedly still not finalized. There is strong reason to believe that the ultimate cost will be substantially higher.

Prominent architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable commented in the *Wall Street Journal* that “Restoration and retrofitting [of the stacks] would be easier and cheaper than supporting the reading room with the enormously complex and expensive engineering needed during demolition and reconstruction.” The stacks are not only the facility for storage of the collection, but also form the structural support for the main reading room in the overlying building.

An alternative would be to renovate and upgrade the existing Mid-Manhattan library, located across the street, which is heavily utilized and in serious need of renovation. The stacks in the main library could be upgraded at a much lower cost than now proposed. In addition, a project for expansion of the 42nd street library’s storage capacity is currently under way with an underground extension under Bryant Park, located immediately to the west. Again, however, no analysis of feasible alternatives has been made public.

What, then, is the motivation for the proposed changes? One element is the commercial and residential building boom that has resumed following the 2008 financial crash and is fueled by billionaire real estate interests.

Real estate in Manhattan is very expensive and difficult to obtain. While the Library’s trustees, backed by the administration of billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg, may not be prepared to sell off the Public Library’s central branch itself, the proposed consolidation would free up the nearby Mid-Manhattan and Science, Business and Industry buildings for real estate development.

These buildings are both prime locations. Precedent for this sort of asset sell-off was set in 2008 when the Donnell branch of the New York Public Library was closed and sold for development. A combination hotel and condominium is scheduled to open on that property next year.

Similar “consolidations” of public libraries are being proposed in other parts of the city. Plans for the sale of two branches of the Brooklyn Public Library, both located in downtown Brooklyn, again valuable real estate, have been announced. All the city’s libraries have suffered from underfunding and staff cuts, especially since 2008. These

systems serve more people than attend professional sports events.

The library’s administration is attempting to promote the CLP plan as a populist move, claiming that it will result in a facility more accessible to the public. The initial proposal, which has now been withdrawn, would have turned the main library into something resembling an entertainment center. This is part of a nationwide and indeed worldwide attack on the access of workers and young people to education and the arts.

While trillions of dollars are being poured into the coffers of banks and corporations and trillions more are being spent on imperialist wars around the globe, we are told that “there is no money” to support resources such as schools and libraries. Advances in information technology hold the potential to open vast resources to workers and young people. However, growing numbers do not have the means to make use of these resources and facilities. Access to education and the arts is increasingly seen by the ruling class through the lens of aristocratic privilege. A prime example is the proposed sell-off of the Detroit Institute of Art’s collection to pay off the city’s corporate creditors.

Dominant voices during the rise of capitalism held that an educated populace was a key element for social progress, but today the decay of the capitalist system has brought with it the growing view of the arts and education as the exclusive prerogative of the wealthy, to be dispensed or withdrawn at its whim. Great institutions such as the New York Public Library, as well as countless other libraries, museums, parks and similar facilities intended for public use, are being undermined if not destroyed due to inadequate funding, or are being privatized for the benefit of the wealthy.

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