

New York Public Library plan provokes opposition

Fred Mazelis
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A plan to restructure the historic central branch of the New York Public Library has aroused a storm of opposition from writers, academics and other intellectuals.

The project, announced several months ago by library president Anthony Marx, is a somewhat complicated renovation that involves the closing of two major midtown Manhattan branches and their incorporation into a much-expanded central branch.

The proposal would cost an estimated \$350 million, with \$200 million of that sum coming from the proceeds of selling off the two nearby buildings that currently house the Mid-Manhattan branch, across the street from the central branch, and the Science, Industry and Business Library, a few blocks south.

The central branch building on 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue would be turned into a circulating library in part, instead of being devoted solely to research. Space for the additional libraries would be made available by moving a large portion of the 5 million volumes currently in the stacks of the central branch into storage in New Jersey. Library president Marx claims that materials needed for research could be shipped to Manhattan within 24 hours.

Library officials say the biggest reason for the change is the financial problems facing the library system. The number of curators has been reduced from 64 to 51 since 2008, and the book acquisition budget has fallen from \$15 million to \$11 million annually.

Critics of the plan, who have circulated a letter to Marx that has so far attracted the signatures of more than a thousand writers, librarians, scholars and others, declare that the proposal means that the “New York Public Library will lose its status as a premier research institution (second only to the Library of Congress in the United States).” “Books will be harder to get when

they’re needed, “ they warn, “either because of delays in locating them in the storage facility or because they have been checked out by borrowers.”

The opponents of the proposal include Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa, writers Annie Proulx, Luc Sante, Jonathan Lethem, Salman Rushdie and Caleb Crain, biographers Edmund Morris and David Levering Lewis, cartoonist Art Spiegelman, playwright Tom Stoppard, and many others.

Library officials have claimed that the changes will “democratize” the institution. In response, the critics point out that use of the library requires no credentials and that its facilities are open to anyone, including visitors and scholars from any part of the world. “More space, more computers, a café, and a lending library would not improve an already democratic institution,” they wrote in their letter to Marx.

Some of the opponents of the plan have also argued that any funds the library can raise should go towards assisting branch libraries in working class neighborhoods that have suffered from years of neglect. They have pointed out that the proposal does not include any promise to restore library staff positions that have been cut in recent years.

Behind the library’s plan is a policy and outlook that is the very opposite of the officials’ high-flown promises of change and bringing the library into the 21st century. In fact library facilities have suffered a prolonged decline in many areas of the city, one that has gotten worse since the beginning of the financial crisis. As in other spheres of public life, the problems are to some extent disguised by the infusion of resources into central locations in Manhattan.

In this case the plans for the central branch are not an improvement, however. The historic 42nd Street building is in danger of being turned into something of

a tourist destination. At the same time, the neighborhood libraries, where the bulk of the population still makes use of library services, continue to be shortchanged.

Of course there is plenty of reason for tourists to see the landmark building on 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue, but that need not have a harmful impact on the historic purpose of the institution itself. The central branch is rightly considered to be one of the treasures of modern culture, both architecturally and above all through the 15 million items in its collections, including more than 5 million volumes. Since the official dedication of this building 101 years ago, it has served millions, from scholars and writers to millions of ordinary workers and students.

It should not be a matter of choosing between serving the needs of researchers on the one hand or of readers on the other. In fact the proposed library plan serves the interests of neither. It seems to fit in with what has been called “Disneyfication,” as in the case of nearby Times Square—the homogenization and commercialization of historic districts, partly to meet the business needs of major corporate and retail firms.

While the complaints of the opponents of the plan are legitimate, there is one glaring omission in their arguments. They apparently accept the premises of Mr. Marx and his board, and that of the city authorities behind them, that “there is no money” for a vast expansion of library services. This only helps the authorities make their claim that library properties must be sold and drastic changes made in the building that has served generations of readers and researchers so well.

This in a city presided over for the last 10 years by a billionaire mayor and an overwhelmingly Democratic Party political establishment that refuses to entertain sharply higher taxes for the wealthy. Far from challenging the priorities of the giant banks, this establishment functions as its faithful representatives. Public facilities are starved of funds and forced to turn to wealthy patrons and private funding for support.

The New York Public Library went so far as to rename its central facility on 42nd Street The Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, in honor of the private equity billionaire who donated \$100 million to the library several years ago. The current library plan appears to be one that has been scaled down from a proposal that was

made before the financial crash in 2008 (See “New York’s premier library to be renamed for billionaire Wall Street speculator”)

The controversy over the library plan raises the issue of the fate of public services, and of which interests and classes determine their future. Pleading for a few more dollars for the branch libraries is not the solution. There must be a fight for a massive library expansion plan for working class communities, as part of a broader attack on poverty and unemployment and for quality public education and other social needs.

Such a program, including new and upgraded library facilities and highly trained staff, could have enormous positive consequences, but it must be part of a socialist answer to the current crisis. It is bound up with fundamental political issues that the liberal scholars, although they may be sincere in their concerns about the library, are not prepared to raise.



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