The Carnegie Libraries of Connecticut: An Architectural Perspective

Octavia Porter Randolph

Andrew Carnegie was born 150 years ago on November 25, 1835, and doubtless the occasion will be duly noted in newspaper editorials throughout the country, variously praising and damning the works and philosophy of the great steel magnate. Another important date lies ahead, 1986 will mark the 100th anniversary of the commencement of Carnegie library philanthropy in this country. Carnegie’s first gift of library facilities was in his native town of Dunfermline, Scotland in 1881. The initial American Carnegie library was given in 1886 in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, the first of 1,679 public libraries funded by the Steel King in this country.

Connecticut, like most of the New England states, already enjoyed a well-developed public library system, and as a result only eleven Carnegie buildings were built here, with only one of the towns, West Haven, not possessing library facilities prior to the Carnegie grant. The simplicity of the method of application bespeaks an age untroubled by bureaucratic excess: the town or city wrote to James Bertram, Carnegie’s longtime secretary, stating their desire to receive building funds. Bertram forwarded a form to be signed by the town council, verifying what library facilities already existed, the town’s population (grants were generally awarded on a basis of two dollars per capita), and specifying that the recipient town must A) provide an appropriate site for the building and B) levy an annual tax amounting to 10% of the Carnegie gift for maintaining the structure. In this way Carnegie felt he was providing funds only to those communities that would manifest their earnestness by agreeing to support the future of the building through taxation. Construction money was meant to include fixtures, shelving, and furniture. No money was provided for books; the town was to select and purchase these from other funds.

Until 1910 neither Carnegie nor Bertram exercised design control or even evinced any real interest in the layout of the buildings. In 1911 however, Bertram, increasingly concerned that money was being ill-spent in erecting “Greek Temples” replete with ancillary non-library uses (town meeting rooms, smoking rooms, dance halls and the like) issued with Carnegie’s promise of funds a brief directive, “Notes on Library Buildings.”

This missive, later to be expanded to a four page leaflet and to see six editions, issued strong warnings that wasted space in the form of over-large entrance halls, grand staircases, fireplaces and trustee’s meeting rooms would no longer be tolerated. All plans were to be submitted for appraisal, and the doughty Bertram had many a pithy remark to make on architect’s conceptions which displeased him. “Notes on Library Buildings” included sample floor plans considered by Bertram and architect-consultant Edward Tilton to be particularly suitable for small libraries, those built with $10,000 or less.

No guidelines were proffered for larger buildings, as cities receiving such grants generally sought and received designs experienced in library and educational work. Nor did any edition of the “Notes” provide any guidelines to the exterior, but since many of the floor plans of the smaller libraries built after 1911 derived their layout from Bertram’s suggested plan (center entry, one flight up to main reading room, half submerged basement floor for lecture room or children’s room) it was inevitable that numbers of these small buildings exhibited similar lines.

Norwalk

Foremost in architectural interest among the Connecticut Carnegie libraries was the Norwalk building, the first in the state to be built with the philanthropist’s funds. A grant of $20,000 was accepted by the city in 1901, and the building opened in 1903. Norwalk was fortunate in obtaining the design services of two Englishmen, W. and G. Audsley, architects of the great Liverpool Library in this country, and the Worthington Art Gallery. The Audsleys (continued on page 2)
had settled in New York following the Milwaukee commission, and Norwalk’s search for pre-eminent design talent brought the architects to Connecticut.

Their Norwalk building was of uncommonly fine proportions, skillfully executed in the Elizabethan style, and with that great attention to detail and ornamentation inside and out that can rarely be indulged in by modern library designers, or their patrons. The architect’s description, written shortly after the completion of the building, includes this statement of intent: “The design has been treated so as to accord with the nature of the site, and to avoid the plain and severe character so commonly and unpleasantly obtaining in the small library buildings recently erected. The desire has been to impart a cheerful, comfortable, and home-like feeling by an effective grouping of parts and features externally, and by an open treatment and brilliant lighting internally.”

The tall, leaded-glass windows, patterned in a lozenge design, the dark-stained and richly molded woodwork, the bay windows and airy atmosphere all contribute to a general loveliness of intent and aspiration. Buildings like these formed whole generations of American’s views of the “library experience.” By linking the library to university and ecclesiastical architectural motifs borrowed from the Renaissance and later periods, the American libraries and especially many Carnegie libraries reveal their recognition of the new world’s debt to the greatness of the old. In their bold handling of native materials and siting they embody the confidence of an energetic new public architecture of monumental proportion and social import.

The exterior is equally satisfying, strongly modeled out of red brick, picked out in black brick, with limestone sills and door trim. The woodwork on the gable ends is pierced and beaded, and when new was darkly stained and set in a tinted cement of light grey. The slate roof is green, and of a clean unfettered line. Withal, a building of dignity, but of a humane sort.

This exceptionally fine Carnegie has lost its front entrance steps, and in an otherwise careful restoration much of the building’s visual power has been dulled by inappropriately painting the aforementioned woodwork and cement stucco a uniform white. Overtaxed by the demands of growth, the building has become an adjunct to a massive 44,000 square foot addition completed in 1982. The original structure serves as library offices and the city genealogy center.

South Norwalk
Boston architect W.H. McLean designed this buff brick Greek Revival building in 1906, two years after his West Haven library. The South Norwalk Branch is an imposing structure for its size, and it is evident that McLean sought to squeeze every ounce of monumentality out of the $20,000 construction budget. Steps of handsome Deer Isle granite lead to the large, flanked by slender fluted Ionic columns. Heavily squared pilasters stand just outside the columns and provide visual support for the heavy entablature and pediment above. At one time this pediment was crowned with finials, now lost, representing the lanterns of Wisdom. A shallow hip roof, once punctuated by a skylight, rises above the pediment. Unfortunately McLean, unwilling to let well alone, added two large bays to either end of his otherwise well-designed building. The bays project beyond the deeply incised cornice, the roofline is thus weakened, and the consolidated effect of the limestone quoins at the building’s corners are refuted. It is a repeat of the visual blunder he perpetrated upon the smaller West Haven building in 1906, and one is left to reflect upon the difficulty of relinquishing deleterious architectural manners. The building is in good condition and still in use as a branch library.

Derby Neck
Few Carnegies nationwide were built as inexpensively or as attractively as the Derby Neck Library. Through the endeavors of a prominent local citizen, Major Wilbur Osborne, Derby Neck received $3,400 in March of 1906 to house the town’s impressive collection of 13,000 volumes, then shelved on the second floor of the schoolhouse.

New York architect Henry Killam Murphy joined with contractor Robert Scholley of Shelton to produce this small but outstanding example of Beaux Arts library design. A deep hip roof, sheathed in slate, caps a gracefully detailed stucco-covered masonry building. The recessed front door sits behind a colonnaded archway, creating the welcome illusion of serenity and coolness within. The steel-framed “starburst” upper lights of the flanking windows, beloved of Beaux Arts library designers (Charles Follen McKim used them in his 1888 Boston Public Library), lift the eye to contemplate the pierced archway and clean cornice detailing bearing the bronze lettering “Andrew Carnegie” and “Wilbur F. Osborne.”

A small building of grace and charm, the Derby Neck Library was further blessed by a sensitive, well-scaled addition in 1973 which maintains the integrity of the original edifice while providing modern library facilities and an additional 4,200 square feet of floor space.

The cost of the addition was $300,000, and the architects were the Antinozzi Association of Stratford. Both the original structure and the addition are extremely well maintained, although the original entrance is now unused and an overabundance of landscaping obscures its delicate lines.

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West Haven

On September 18, 1909 the doors of the West Haven Public Library were thrown open for its dedication. The buff brick and limestone building, designed in Greek Revival style, was the result of an architectural competition held by the library building committee. A design competition for such a modestly budgeted building ($10,000) was unusual enough, but the committee was rewarded by receiving entry designs from fifteen architects from New Haven, Boston, and New York. The winning entry was submitted by McLean & Wright of Boston, for which they received $450 in architectural fees.

The building is a handsome one, restrained in its ornamentation and residential in scale. The Ionic columns on either side of the center entry support a well-detailed pediment, and the hip roof sits above a simple cornice and double-hung windows. Bays extend beyond the roofline on either end of the building; these serve only to break the nicely compact form of an otherwise pleasing structure. (See South Norwalk) The building was subjected to a bulky addition in 1960 and is now in use as the reference department.

New Haven

In March of 1913 the city of New Haven received word that $60,000 in Carnegie funds had been designated for the construction of three badly needed branch libraries: Fair Haven, Dixwell, and the John Davenport Branch (originally Congress). A trying series of circumstances ranging from site controversies to the unavailability of materials and labor during the war years ensued, delaying the opening of the branches until 1918, 1922 and 1924 respectively. In addition, the near astronomical increase in construction costs following World War I required the city to issue $50,000 in bonds to help meet the expense of the last two branches.

Fair Haven Branch

It was the Fair Haven Men's Club which was originally responsible for procuring the Carnegie gift for Fair Haven, and it was there on Grand Avenue that New Haven's first Carnegie branch library opened. New Haven architect L.W. Robinson designed a sober, modest Colonial Revival building clad in red Flemish bond brick with cast-stone trim. Construction cost was $23,000 of which $20,000 was from the Carnegie gift, with the remainder paid through city appropriation. It remains a branch library.

Dixwell Branch

New Haven architects Norton & Townsend were the successful entrants in the design competition held for the significant Dixwell Branch. A double stair of brick and cast-stone leads up to the main entrance on Dixwell Avenue. The recessed entry doors are flanked with pilasters crowned with Corinthian capitals. The cornice work directly above the capitals runs as a continuous band of egg-and-dart modillions. A brick crenelation work pierced with cast-stone balusters encircles the roofline. Figured brick work and articulated brick pilasters framing the plain, generous double-hung windows unify the design and lend further dignity to this impressive neighborhood branch. Construction cost was $49,800, and the general contractor was Eastern Engineering & Construction of Bridgeport. The building, in fine condition, is now the home of the congregation of Mt. Hope Temple.

Davenport

In 1664 John Davenport, minister of New Haven, suggested the present site for the Main Library of that city (the Cass Gilbert building of 1908). His interest in making books accessible to the residents of New Haven was commemorated in the naming of one of the city's Carnegie. In March 1924 the John Davenport Branch opened on Porter Street, the design again the result of a competition, this time won by Charles S. Palmer of New Haven. A rectilinear building with a low hip roof, it is distinguished by Palladian windows with a delicate upper light, a prettily detailed scrolled entrance pediment. Like the Fair Haven and Dixwell branches it is built of brick in Flemish bond pattern with door and window trim of cast-stone. The Davenport building also featured a skylight glazed with colored glass. It was constructed at a cost of $34,900. In recent years it has served as the Davenport Multi-Purpose Senior Center.

Bridgeport

In April 1914 the city of Bridgeport received funding notice for the construction of their two workmanlike branch libraries at a cost of $25,000 each. The North Branch is of red brick with cast-stone trim and a deep hip roof, sheathed in slate. The East Branch, also of red brick, sports white-painted Ionic columns and wooden cornice-hanging. Both buildings have received additions and both are still in use as branch libraries. The East Branch is unfortunately much defaced by graffiti.

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Unionville

No visitor to the lovely town of Unionville (now part of Farmington) could fail to remark on the charming, diminutive building now housing the Unionville Museum. A small and perfect jewel of Beaux Arts architecture, the former Unionville Carnegie Library perches daintily upon a greensward of lawn. Its immaculately scaled proportions generously returning the consideration of the passerby. The designer was Richard F. Jones of Unionville, a self-taught local architect of striking talent who was responsible for several important buildings in the town, including the Town Hall (no longer extant). Here he coupled his considerable design ability with his skill as a builder, for he acted as general contractor as well. Erected in 1917 with a Carnegie gift of $8,500, the building is of carefully crafted cement stucco and features a singularly handsome red tile hip roof. Six large Palladian windows flank the fan-lit entry door, and a ribbon of “starburst” fixed windows run along the cornice. A very modest alteration to the entry — the addition of a small exterior foyer — was done with taste and restraint. The building is meticulously maintained and obviously greatly prized by its stewards.

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John McManama, Unionville Museum

Octavia Porter Randolph is an architectural designer with a special interest in the architecture of the early 20th century. She is preparing a book on the architecture of the American Carnegie public libraries.

The photographs used to illustrate this article were made from old postcards in the Norman D. Stevens collection of librarians. He is University Librarian at The University of Connecticut.

Unionville Public Library

people

Kathryn Amiet is the new children’s librarian at the Oliver Wolcott Library in Litchfield.

George Butterick, curator of literary archives at UConn’s Babbidge Library, has received a grant of $2000 from the Swedish-American Exchange Fund to support 4 weeks of research in Sweden this fall. He is working on a biography of poet Charles Olson, whose archives are located at the Babbidge Library.

Suzanne Fiese is the new special services librarian at the Groton Public Library. She’s worked previously for the Russell Library in Middletown and for the New London Public Library.

Barbara Fitzgerald, formerly CSL’s building consultant, has left the State Library to become assistant director of the Simsbury Public Library.

Marietta Johnson has been appointed executive director of the Eastern Connecticut Library Association. She holds an MLS from UConn, has worked for the University of Connecticut in Storrs, including work in the Library, and has extensive experience with various organizations in eastern Connecticut.

Joan Lamb, former head of the reference department at Naugatuck’s Wittemore Library, has been appointed director of the Library.

Jocelyn Low has been appointed Region One’s program services supervisor, responsible for interlibrary loan and union cataloging and assisting with publications and automation.

John McDonald, director of the Homer Babbidge Library at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, has announced his intention to take a sabbatical during the spring of 1986. He will be working on the Library’s Edwin Way Teale Archive.

Janet Pagano, formerly of the Cromwell Public Library, has joined the staff of the West Hartford Public Library as library assistant/children’s services at the Faxon Branch.

Christine Ryan, former director of the Taft School Library, has joined the reference staff at Yale University.

Linda Senkus is the new librarian at Memorial Middle School in Middlebury.

Gary Wait has joined the staff of the Connecticut Historical Society’s Library in Hartford as catalog librarian. He was formerly employed by the Dartmouth College Library’s Special Collections Division.

John Wiehn, a member of CLA and a student at SCSU, was selected as one of twenty library science students in the USA and Canada to participate in ALA’s Chicago Student Staff Project.