

## Turning the Page

AN OLD BRANCH LIBRARY BEGINS A NEW LIFE

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“A man with a book goes to light,” architect Lou Kahn used to say, and he probably didn’t have fluorescent bulbs in drop ceilings or tanning lamps in mind. Yet before the new renovation of the Carnegie Library’s Brookline branch was completed, the only plentiful light source on the ground floor were fluorescent lamps. The building’s upper floor, meanwhile, housed a defunct tanning salon. But such an approach seemed, however unintentionally, to pervade the pre-renovation structure. Not the least bit historic, Brookline’s branch library has been in a much-abused 1950s storefront on Brookline Boulevard, its absence of side windows compounded by openings in the front and back being blocked or sealed over the years.

Now, of course, everything is much different. In a new design by Loysen + Kreuthmeier Architects, sunlight streams into the building from all over. Because the second floor was not sturdy enough to support bookstacks, it has been removed to make a dramatic yet welcoming double-height reading room at the front of the building. A new skylight in a long narrow configuration at the building’s edge scoops light from above the roof, directing it through the building, even down into the basement. Also, reconfiguring a fire stair allowed the back of the building to be opened into a large window wall, gazing out to a characteristic neighborhood Brookline roofscape.

The sense of rediscovered openness and

natural illumination has its analogue in a concerted effort to open the design process to community interests. Holly McCullough, now a special assistant to the director, was the Brookline branch manager from the project’s inception. She describes a lengthy series of public meetings and design sessions “to get the community’s input about what they liked about what we do, and what they thought we could improve.”

Designers worked with URS Corporation of Pittsburgh and the Design Group of Columbus to establish a comprehensive program — assessing the surroundings, capacities and configurations of each space to quantify what the patrons wanted from their library.

### The Brookline branch library joins the Carnegie Library’s Homewood branch renovation as a piece of hugely successful library architecture.

It is really the Loysen + Kreuthmeier design, though, that makes these desires into art. The wash of light inside also reveals the sorts of sculpted spaces, crafted details and harmonious uses of materials that are the hallmarks of good architecture. “We were pretty confident that we could transform this into something wonderful,” Karen Loysen allows. Her confidence was justified.

On the building’s façade, a screen of Parklex — wood veneer over Bakelite —



with a fairly subtle V-shaped fold as well as a big library logo, announces that this is a revived building. Of course, so do the big storefront windows that display books, magazines and happy readers. Inside, a wooden screen at the entrance leads visitors to the reading room and also visually supports the space’s downward-angled canopy. This overhead feature gives the room form and scale, while also reflecting more light inside. Organization, though

laboriously studied, is seemingly intuitive throughout. The librarian’s desk is purposefully visible but not imposing, while computers line one wall, below the skylight, and offices line the other.

One of the best things about the library, though, is that the architectural language of form, material and detail that begins on the façade expands with pleasing functional and aesthetic logic through the building. Folded walls that work based on space, structure or symbol independently also create a unified visual composition in relation to each other, to imply a rigorous yet playful intellectual logic that is very appropriate for a library.

Elements such as screens and bits of exposed steel framework are also of similar artistic families. A lively but harmonious vocabulary of finish surfaces and colors completes the project.

This Brookline branch library is an outstanding example of savvy and artful design with an ethos of community service and responsiveness. It joins the Carnegie Library’s Homewood branch renovation as a piece of hugely successful library architecture, demonstrated already by substantially increased use. Auspiciously, other renovations are to follow in other buildings.

The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh is currently determining the fate of some of the historic branch buildings that will no longer serve as libraries. It’s crucial that library officials solve this important and contentious issue, so as not to overshadow their achievements thus far. ☞