

**THE NEW YORK
LANDMARKS
CONSERVANCY**

June 27, 2013

STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON LIBRARIES AND EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY REGARDING THE PRACTICE OF SELLING PUBLIC LIBRARY BUILDINGS TO PRIVATE DEVELOPERS

Good day Chair Kellner and Assembly Members. I am speaking on behalf of the New York Landmarks Conservancy. The Landmarks Conservancy is a private, independent, not-for-profit organization, founded in 1973. Our mission is to preserve and protect historic resources throughout New York.

First, we thank you for bringing this important issue to a public hearing. New York City's historic library buildings are some of its most valuable assets. They represent fine civic architecture and they are vital to communities, providing services well beyond lending books, for long-time residents and new populations. Therefore, the Conservancy has been dismayed to see both the New York Public Library and the Brooklyn Public Library unveil plans that would mean the loss of several significant structures.

In Brooklyn, we have requested that the Pacific Library and the Brooklyn Heights Library be designated as local landmarks. The Pacific branch was the first Carnegie Library in Brooklyn. Built in 1903, it was designed by Raymond F. Almirall in a robust Beaux-Arts style. Public outcry over the potential loss of this beloved building led to a deal that puts off demolition. A Library spokesman, however, has stated that the latest plan "could include maintaining some or all of the Pacific Street building." Which sounds like the building is still not safe.

The Cadman Plaza branch, dating to the 1950s, was designed in a classic mid-century style. The bas-relief figures at the entrance are reminiscent of those at the Brooklyn main library. It is a rare and attractive physical reminder of an era that was transformative for downtown Brooklyn. This remains a development site. In areas with population surges, where no libraries exist, it could make sense to put a library in the basement of a new luxury condominium building, but to demolish an existing branch library for development is the wrong decision.

The New York Public Library's plan to sell the Mid-Manhattan and Science, Industry, and Business Libraries is short-sighted. The City's substantial investment in the Science, Industry and Business Library will be lost if it is sold – an especially bitter pill in this time of budget reductions. After years of cuts to the branch libraries, the allocation of \$150 million dollars to the Central Library Plan is puzzling.

Our Public Policy Committee has reviewed the plan and the designs for a new branch inserted in the western end of the building. They were unhappy with that design, and we understand that a new scheme is underway, so we are reserving judgment until the Committee has seen the new design. In the meantime, we have asked the Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate many of the unprotected interior public spaces.

Completed in 1911, the Library is a very significant example of the Beaux-Arts style, and the most important work of the firm of Carrère and Hastings. The NYC LPC designation report notes: "This majestic marble building, one of the masterpieces of the Beaux-Arts style of architecture, is a magnificent civic

monument and fully justifies the pride of its generation and of ours... This building comes closer than any other in America to the complete realization of the Beaux Arts design at its best." The exterior, the main lobby, the central hall, and the some of the staircases are designated landmarks, but some of the best-known, most-beloved and best-designed interiors are not.

We have requested that 14 of those interiors be designated as landmarks, including the Rose Main Reading Room and Bill Blass Catalog Room (the full list is in the written testimony).

- Rose Main Reading Room (Room 315)
- Bill Blass Catalog Room (Room 316)
- Gottesman Exhibition Hall (Room 113)
- Dorot Jewish Division (Room 111)
- Milstein Genealogy Room (Room 121)
- Wallace Periodicals Room (Room 108)
- Princess Firyal Map Room (Room 117)
- Celeste Bartos Forum (Room 80)
- Trustees' Room (Room 206)
- Edna B. Salomon Room (Room 316)
- Art and Architecture Room (Room 300)
- Brooke Astor Reading Room for Rare Books (Room 328)
- South-North Gallery
- 42nd Street staircases and landings

The Brooklyn Public Library has argued that maintaining its historic buildings is just too expensive. But taking care of a Carnegie Library does not have to cost more than other buildings in the Library's portfolio, as long as maintenance is not deferred due to budget cuts, creating larger problems. The City has a long tradition of supporting branch libraries throughout all of the boroughs. The failure to do this adequately must be remedied. These beloved and well-used branch libraries should continue to be an important part of the City's legacy for future generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the Conservancy's views.