A Resource for the City: The Detroit Public Library

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**Introduction**

There are 23 total branches of The Detroit Public Library. The main branch of the library broke ground in 1915 and finished construction in 1921. The construction of the main branch was funded by Andrew Carnegie. There was an addition to the library that was constructed in 1963. This year, in 2015, the library celebrated its 150 year anniversary with “entertainment, food, a photo booth and architectural tours of the historic main branch” (Moutzalias). The front and main entrance of the library is located on Woodward directly across from the Detroit Institute of Arts. The back entrance is located on Cass. The building is located between Putnam and Kirby in the center of Midtown Detroit. This location of the library is considered the main branch. Others from around the city and the surrounding universities can come and read as well as research in the library. The Detroit Public Library has very important historical significance since construction started during World War I, has several interesting physical and behavioral observations, and serves a purpose to inform the people who we are as Detroiters by containing the knowledge of the city.

**Historical Significance**

As previously mentioned, the Detroit Public Library broke ground in the midst of World War I. The War pushed back the construction of the building to 1915 due to a shortage of materials and labor. In 1917, the Cornerstone for the building was laid and construction was finally finished in 1921. The designer and architect of the library was Cass Gilbert. Gilbert’s son, Cass Gilbert, Jr., was the architect for the addition of the library in 1963. Andrew Carnegie, robber baron, founder of Carnegie Steel, and philanthropist, donated money to build the library. Carnegie funded construction for several different libraries around the country. Andrew Carnegie’s father “was one of the five weavers in Dunfermline who gathered together the few books they had and formed the first circulating library in that town” (Carnegie). According to the Detroit Public Library: Information for Readers and Visitors, in 1901, “Commission applied to Andrew Carnegie. He offered to supply $750,000 for library buildings” and in 1910, “Carnegie offer accepted” (*Detroit Public Library: Information for Readers and Visitors*). The new library was constructed because the original Detroit Public Library located in Centre Park was too small to hold the Detroit population. The population of Detroit in the early 1900s was much larger than it is now, due to the migration to suburban areas, resulting in more people utilizing the library.

**Physical Observations**

There are several interesting physical observations inside and outside the Detroit Public Library. As previously stated, construction for the library started in 1915 and was completed in 1921, when the library was officially opened. The site was constructed due to the growing Detroit City population. This new branch of the Detroit Public Library was constructed during the first world war. The library has an Italian Renaissance style to the architecture which follows the concept of city beautiful. During the Cold War and Space Race, John Coppin painted a mural of the man holding the past in one hand with the present and future in the other hand. The architectural features of the library correspond with the libraries main function which is to inform. The art of the library follows the themes of the different learning areas. On the front of the building, the side located on Woodward, there are names of famous philosophers on the lower level along with pictures of astrological signs on the top level. The encouraging phrase of “Knowledge is Power” is imprinted over the main entrance door welcoming all to enter the library and gain knowledge. Inside the library, there is a directory where a button is pressed next to an intended section resulting in a red light laminating the area on the map showing where that section is located. The directory is mostly accurate, although some sections have been moved. The mission of the Detroit Public Library located inside at the entrance stated, “The mission of the Detroit Public Library is to support and enhance the quality of life in the city of Detroit and the state of Michigan, by providing library and information services that meet the cultural, professional, educational, and recreational needs of our customers.”

The library is across the street from the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) and the Detroit Historical Museum as well as Wayne State University. The location of the Detroit Public Library is in the heart of Midtown, Detroit. The library, the DIA, and Detroit Historical Museum are in close proximity allowing the citizens to attend all attractions. Since the library is in such close proximity of these other attractions, this shows the culture of Detroit is diverse but focused on the past and arts since it is located in the center of a cultural historic district. The library is in a smaller region located in the center of educational areas and is easy access to all who would like to visit. There are several Carnegie quotes around the library as well as a plaque stating the Carnegie funded the construction of the library thus instilling politics. Since the library is free along with the DIA and Detroit Historical Museum, this infers that citizens of Detroit and the tri-county area are more likely to attend due to there being no cost. This implies that the economy in the surrounding areas is not thriving. There were financial troubles with the library including corruption which correlates to corruption within the city of Detroit. A few branches of the library were closed due to the economic troubles, but have since been re-opened.

**Behavioral Observations**

As previously stated, the Detroit Public Library is located in the center of Midtown

Detroit. The library is surrounded by qualities of a big city including the M1 Rail, several parking structures, restaurants, and attractions of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) and the Detroit Historical Museum. The Detroit Public Library is directly across and symmetrically aligned with the DIA, where the DIA stands for the “Arts” and the library stands for the “Letters”. The library exists in the center of the historical showcase of Detroit. The library is also located near the Scarab Club, which is an art gallery and studio, and the Hilberry Theatre. Wayne State University students utilize the library since it is located in the middle of education and research. The library consisted of an Italian Renaissance marble design incorporating city beautiful and the design was very symmetrical. The art throughout the library was symbolic of the progress in history, learning, and education. The library itself is 420,000 square feet.

On Thursday, November 5th, 2015 in the morning there was hardly anyone in the library. A few older people were there using the computers as well as scanning the books. There were several employees scattered throughout the library at several locations. Also, a few men were gathered outside of the main entrance of the library talking. However, on Saturday, November 7th, in the morning to afternoon there were several people gathered at the library. The amount of people in the library depends on the time of day as well as the day itself. On Saturday morning, there was a genealogical society using the library as a meeting place which consisted of older African American men and women. When on the tour, the tour guides and others in the tour group consisted of older Caucasian men and women. There were several middle-aged African Americans using the library’s computers. During the week, there were no children, but on the weekend there were lots of children in the library due to the fact that there is no school on the weekends. The African American groups utilized the library for work, study, and socializing while the Caucasian group seemed to observe and study the library as a whole.

The people throughout the library seem very relaxed, but also like they are enjoying themselves. Most seemed to be very studious and focused on their tasks. A few of the librarians were rude, but several were very kind and helpful. The attitudes of the librarians mirrored those of citizens you can find on the streets: some people are kind while others are rude. The librarians interact with patrons along with their coworkers. The majority of the people inside the library do not interact with each other since they are using the library for their own individual purposes. Although there are some direct interactions in the library, some are indirect. For example, the computers throughout the library allow people to look up where the books are located rather than asking a librarian to do it for them. The library is a very casual place with social bonding and interaction. A few children were skipping around the library and laughing, but that sight was very rare.

The librarians utilized verbal communications in order to give the patrons information and instruct where books were located. There are forms of non-verbal communication throughout the library such as a large directory on the wall where when a button is pushed next to the intended section, a light would illuminate an area on the map instructing the patron where to go. Most people throughout the library speak very quiet and respectfully. There is a code of conduct that is displayed throughout the library in various locations.

While on the tour, there was an organized meeting for the genealogical society. The tour was also an organized gathering that was happening on Saturday late morning to early afternoon. Most of the people at the library were there for their own individual purposes such as research, studying, utilizing the genealogy section, and using the internet.

**Evaluation**

The Detroit Public Library has implemented various programs to help improve literacy rates amongst young Detroiters. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation gave $257,763 to the Detroit Public Library to help improve library skills instruction and reading enrichment to 6,700 young Detroiters (Bulletin Board). The observations portray Detroit’s “ways of seeing” as more cultural. Since the library is surrounded by the arts and a museum, the thoughts of the Detroiters are molded into being cultural, yet historic since they are exposed to and seeing all the sites even if they only attend one. Since the sites are in close proximity, it seems that Detroiters are somewhat lazy if they are not willing to travel around the city to various sites, but also makes attending the attractions easier, especially to those who have a hard time getting from place to place. The sites are within walking distance of each other, which is ironic since Detroit is the Automobile Capital. With Detroit being known for automobiles, it would make more sense that the sites should be further away from each other in order for the citizens of the city to utilize their vehicles. The close proximity and free admission also reflect the economy, where some may not have enough money to drive around to the sites as well as pay to get in. The free admission and fact that all the sites are in the same area infer that the economy of the city is not strong. Without a strong enough economy, the owners of the site may believe that the citizens of the tri-county area and city of Detroit cannot afford to attend these various sites unless it is free and nearby other attractions. The happiness of the patrons and of the librarians implies that the citizens are happy to participate in their society. The attitudes of the patrons also express that they are proud to be able to have such a great resource in their city to which they can get information five days a week. The art of the library is viewed in different ways due to the fact that we all think differently.

On Saturday, the library was a very popular place to be. According to Jon Horrigan, “78% [of those 16 and older] believe that libraries are effective at promoting literacy and the love of reading” (Horrigan). The library is a resource located in the middle of the city that is free to attend. The library has a children’s section as well as a very popular genealogical section which both promote reading and research. The library also has book clubs which promote literacy as well as a love for reading. Two branches of the library, the Main Library and the Parkman Branch, have a program called “Detroit Reads!” which helps people learn to read or improve their reading skills (Special Services | Detroit Public Library). The library has many programs that encourages those of the city to improve their literacy as well as their passion for reading.

The Detroit Public Library is an important resource to the city of Detroit that lies in the center of a cultural historic area. The library is a resource where people from all over the tri-county area as well as the surrounding universities can gather information and utilize the resources that the library has to offer. The library has a large section dedicated to just genealogy and has several computers where patrons can complete online research and have access to the internet. There are several programs that help improve the literacy of the citizens. In 2012, the library had shut down several branches due to financial reasons, but has re-opened those select branches at restricted hours in order to afford the cost to keep them open (Sands). Even though the city was having a hard time, their main interest was keeping the libraries open and available to their patrons.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the library serves a purpose to the city to help improve literacy skills, help

patrons gain access to material for research, and allows citizens from the tri-county area to gain, or further, a passion for reading. The library is a critical part of Detroit that lies in a historic cultural area that truly adds to the city. The library holds over 7 million books and, according to Executive Director Jo Anne G. Mondowney, “[The library] has served as the community’s living room, a place for education, exploration, and inspiration”. The library this year also celebrated its “50th anniversary of the Junior Great books literacy program” (Mutzalias). The Detroit Public Library is more than a place that just houses books; it is a place where the community can gather together and learn while still embracing the history and past of Detroit. The library is an example that even though times are hard where money is not coming in, there are other answers than just quitting and letting a resource for the city close down. The library has the patrons in its best interest, which is why they reevaluated the times of the branches and restricted some hours. The Detroit Public Library is a well utilized resource throughout the tri-county area and is important to the city of Detroit due to the historical significance, the physical and behavioral observations, and for the programs improving literacy.

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