

The Truth About the Central Library Plan

Summary

The Central Library Plan (CLP) would close and sell two major public libraries – the Mid-Manhattan branch and the Science, Industry and Business Library (SIBL) – and consolidate their functions within the 42nd Street Research Library building. To accomplish this, the Research Library’s historic seven-story book stacks would be demolished, at least 1.5 million books displaced to remote storage in New Jersey, and a new circulating library built in their place.

The plan is highly controversial:

- It will be hugely expensive, costing a minimum of \$300 million (probably much more), of which \$150 million will come from New York City taxpayers. There is great concern that the Library’s focus on a highly-complex construction project will absorb desperately-needed funds which might otherwise pay for renovations of branch libraries, and replenish slashed curatorial and acquisitions budgets.
- It will radically reduce the space available for the Mid-Manhattan and SIBL.
- It will threaten the 42nd Street Library’s status as one of the world’s great research libraries.
- It will threaten the architectural integrity of the landmarked 42nd Street building.
- It does not take into consideration more efficient and less destructive alternatives, such as combining SIBL and the Mid-Manhattan into a rehabilitated and expanded building on the Mid-Manhattan site.

Underlying our concern is the extraordinarily closed process through which the Library administration has made its decisions. Despite the fact that the 42nd Street building is owned by the City and is one of our most iconic structures – a designated New York City Landmark,¹ and a State and National Historic Landmark inside and out – the plan was formulated with minimal public notification and no public input. The \$150 million which the City has earmarked towards the project was awarded without any oversight by the City Council and with no public hearings. If alternatives have been considered they have never been disclosed, and no cost-benefit analysis or detailed budget has ever been presented to the public. Though the Library’s leaders continue to call their plans preliminary, they are pressing to start demolition in the summer of 2013, just months from now.

Given the circumstances, the Committee to Save the New York Public Library believes the Central Library Plan must not proceed until there has been an independent study of its costs, the costs of feasible alternatives, and the impacts which the plan will have on the branch libraries, the Research Library, and on the iconic 42nd Street building itself. Here are some facts about the project:

Funding Issues

Costs Are Escalating

When the Central Library Plan was initially proposed in 2008, the Library estimated it would cost \$250 million.² Following the plan's reintroduction in early 2012, the Library repeatedly insisted that the plan would cost \$300 million. Then, in its press release for the December 19, 2012 presentation of architect Norman Foster's design, the NYPL conceded that "we expect the actual budget to be somewhat higher" than \$300 million.³ NYPL President Anthony Marx subsequently stated that the costs may go as high as \$350 million.⁴ Most recently, a February 8, 2013 *New York Times* article reports that NYPL Board Chair Neil Rudenstine wrote to the trustees that "Our own budget estimates are reasonable, but even they *cannot be refined with any precision at this stage.*"⁵ [italics added]

How can the NYPL justify committing to a massive construction project which will irrevocably alter its central building before reliable cost estimates are available? What will happen if and when the costs of the CLP continue to escalate? Norman Foster's reputation for cost over-runs⁶ and the extremely complex engineering involved should provoke caution, not haste.

Sources of Funding Are Unclear

The Library has not been consistent about how the plan will be funded. Prior to December 2012, the NYPL repeatedly stated that the plan would be paid for with \$150 million of New York City taxpayers' money, plus proceeds from the sale of the Mid-Manhattan and SIBL libraries, and some additional money raised from private donors. However, in a December 19, 2012 article the *New York Times* reported a very different funding plan: \$150 million is still coming from the City, but \$50 million is coming from the controversial 2008 sale of the Donnell Library, and \$100 million is coming from the 2011 sale of the Research Annex and the 2012 sale of five floors of office space above SIBL.⁷ Note that this represents a clear acknowledgement that the plan (or an alternative) could be funded without selling the Mid-Manhattan Library.

The Library Has Chosen the Most Expensive Option

A primary stated reason for the huge cost of the CLP is the complex and expensive engineering necessary to demolish the 42nd Street stacks. The network of iron and steel stacks is the structural support for the floor of the Rose Reading Room above them. Joe Tortorella of Robert Silman Associates, the lead structural engineer, has likened the project to "cutting the legs off a table while dinner is being served."⁸ By contrast, a 2003 design by Gwathmey Siegel Associates to rehabilitate the Mid-Manhattan building and add eight floors on top of it was estimated to cost \$120 million;⁹ even allowing for a decade's worth of inflation, the difference between this and the \$300-350 million estimated for the CLP is radically disproportionate.

The Library Has Over-Estimated Operating Savings

Finally, a major benefit which the NYPL originally claimed for the plan is that by consolidating the Mid-Manhattan and SIBL into the 42nd Street building, it could realize \$15 million of annual savings in operating costs. However, the Library has more recently acknowledged that this figure also includes money anticipated from additional fundraising. David Offensend, the NYPL's Chief Operating Officer, has stated that the Library was "conservatively" counting on realizing only \$7 million in annual operating savings.¹⁰ The additional money from fundraising is clearly independent of the combination of Mid-Manhattan and SIBL into the 42nd Street building.

Negative Impacts on Library Patrons of Mid-Manhattan and SIBL

The NYPL administration has consistently maintained that the users of Mid-Manhattan and SIBL will be better served when these facilities are consolidated in the 42nd Street Library.

However, the two existing libraries comprise approximately 300,000 square feet of public and service space,¹¹ while the proposed new facility will contain only 80,000 square feet.¹²

SIBL and Mid-Manhattan attract 2 million patrons annually; if they are combined into the 42nd Street facility (which currently is visited by 1.5 million people annually), this means *an additional 2 million people* will be trying to use a building whose entrances are already crowded. These 2 million patrons will then be squeezed into a circulating library that is *one third* the size of its predecessors.

Furthermore, how will the book collections held by the Mid-Manhattan and SIBL be shoe-horned into the new, far smaller space? The Mid-Manhattan alone must contain close to 700,000 books, and there are also a significant number of books in SIBL's circulating collection.¹³ What is the book capacity of Foster's design? How many books will the Library have to discard when the circulating collections are moved into this smaller space? The Library has not provided the public with answers to these questions.

Negative Impacts on the Research Collections

The 42nd Street Library was built to rival the Library of Congress in Washington, the British Library in London, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. The Research Library's acquisition budget has been slashed, and curatorial staff has already been greatly reduced. If in addition a significant percentage of the Library's holdings is shipped off site, the 42nd Street Research Library's status as one of the world's leading research facilities will be endangered, reducing the building to an elaborate marble shell. Without books and the librarians to care for them, how will the Research Library continue to serve New Yorkers as it has in the past? If the CLP exceeds its budget and the envisioned operating savings fail to materialize, will library services face further cuts?

The 42nd Street Library currently holds at least 4.5 million books on site.¹⁴ Of these, 3 to 3.5 million volumes are in the stacks; 1.2 million books are in compact storage under Bryant Park; and the rest are stored in other locations throughout the 42nd Street building.

The original plan was to transfer all of the millions of books from the soon-to-be-demolished 42nd Street stacks to remote storage in New Jersey. But in response to considerable pressure, the NYPL agreed in 2012 to complete a second layer of compact storage under Bryant Park to hold an additional 1.5 million books.¹⁵

Nevertheless, at least 1.5 million books will be moved to New Jersey; this represents at least a one-third reduction in the number of books held on site. The Library already stores 3.51 million books off site;¹⁶ if the CLP is completed, approximately 60 percent of the Research Library's books will be stored off site.

Where does this leave the patrons who depend upon the massive holdings at 42nd Street for their research? What about researchers from all over the world who make expensive trips to New York expressly to use these collections? It is in the nature of research that one work unexpectedly leads to another; the 42nd Street Library's research mission is called into question if the waiting time for many materials is increased from 20 minutes to what the Library claims will be 24 hours, a wait that experience shows is more likely to stretch to several days.

Finally, the ReCAP facility in New Jersey, where offsite books are stored, is now 99% full.¹⁷ Have the costs of building additional storage space for the 1.5 - 2 million additional books which will be sent there been factored into the plan?

Banal and Historically-Destructive Design

Architectural and Historical Significance of the 42nd Street Building Ignored

The existing 42nd Street building has been a model for functional library design. The stacks are among the most important early examples of a highly innovative book storage system that simultaneously serve as a structural skeleton. The book stacks support the Rose Reading Room built immediately above them while simultaneously allowing for the fast, efficient delivery of books to readers waiting there. Hence the stacks are both the literal and metaphorical heart of the building.

Demolishing the stacks makes a mockery of the essential concept underlying the building's form. In the words of the late Ada Louise Huxtable, the dean of New York architecture critics, the CLP "is a plan devised out of a profound ignorance of or willful disregard for not only the library's original concept and design, but also the folly of altering its meaning and mission and compromising its historical and architectural integrity. You don't 'update' a masterpiece."¹⁸

A Flawed New Design

Architect Norman Foster's design for the new circulating library to be built within the 42nd Street building has been widely criticized as mediocre and banal: *New York Times* architecture critic Michael Kimmelman dismissed it as having "all the elegance and distinction of a suburban mall,"¹⁹ and *Bloomberg News* critic James Russell described it as "thin architectural gruel."²⁰ No doubt much of the problem is inherent in the assignment Foster was given: design an exemplary new library for the digital age with perhaps 750,000 to one million circulating books; fit this library into a space far smaller than optimal; work within a building designed for other purposes; maintain all existing operations during construction; create the illusion that a dark vault built for books has adequate natural light; and assume that there is a fine view from this vault onto a public park when in fact little can be seen through its deeply-inset, slit-like windows.

The truth is that Foster's design is simply not good enough – not good enough to replace an architectural and engineering masterpiece, and not even adequate to fulfill its functional requirements. And the expense is staggering: thousands of dollars per square foot for renovation; tens of millions required simply to demolish the existing stacks; huge sums for engineers and architects.

An Alternative Solution Exists: Retain the Stacks and Upgrade the Mid-Manhattan Library

Freed of the compromises imposed by working within the ill-suited 42nd Street space, a skillful architect would have an extraordinary opportunity to design a beautiful and efficient state-of-the-art circulating library on the existing Mid-Manhattan site. Since this would avoid the immense costs of demolishing the 42nd Street stacks while protecting the historic structure they currently support, the expense would be considerably lower than if a new circulating library were forced into the 42nd Street building. Furthermore, the Library would still be able to realize significant operating savings by combining SIBL and the Mid-Manhattan into a single structure.

This alternative was suggested by both Michael Kimmelman and Ada Louise Huxtable in their critical essays about the Central Library Plan. This alternative was also advanced by the Library itself, when it hired Gwathmey Siegel Associates in 2003 to design a renovation and eight-story expansion of the Mid-Manhattan. The \$120 million cost was minimal by comparison to the CLP. Moreover, an addition to the Mid-Manhattan building might well create multiple floors of rentable space which could generate additional income for the Library.

In response, the NYPL now claims that rehabilitating the Mid-Manhattan is impractical because it would require the library to be closed during construction. This argument is spurious; there are many examples of libraries remaining open through the course of extensive rebuilding.²¹ And if it truly proved necessary to close the Mid-Manhattan during renovation, its holdings could be temporarily moved to the SIBL space; SIBL could then be sold after reconstruction of the Mid-Manhattan is complete.

The Library claims that the 42nd Street stacks do not currently provide state-of-the-art control over environmental conditions. However, the technical challenge of installing advanced fire suppression and climate control in the stacks is no more daunting than that of demolishing the stacks and installing an entirely new structural system, and it would almost certainly cost a fraction of what is proposed in the CLP. Preservation architects often meet such challenges to save historic structures from needless destruction.

Rehabilitating and expanding the Mid-Manhattan on its current site, perhaps in partnership with a developer, would:

- give Mid-Manhattan and SIBL patrons the uncompromised library they deserve
- avoid the huge expense of demolishing the 42nd Street stacks
- preserve the architectural integrity and functionality of the 42nd Street building
- avoid shipping over 1.5 million additional books off site
- generate additional funds for the Library through the sale of the SIBL space
- generate operating savings by combining Mid-Manhattan and SIBL
- potentially generate rental income from commercial office and retail space in an enlarged Mid-Manhattan building.

An Independent Review Is Necessary

The Committee to Save the New York Public Library continues to question the process by which the Library developed the Central Library Plan. The people of New York deserve to see other alternatives before signing on to a plan that is so expensive and leaves so much destruction in its wake. Better and less expensive ways of achieving the goals in the Central Library Plan have been suggested. Why haven't alternative approaches been seriously considered and publicly explored by the current Library administration?

Furthermore, a decision with such profound impacts on library users and on one of New York's most important cultural landmarks should not be made by a small group of trustees with no public input or oversight. The same insular decision-making process which created the CLP was responsible for the failed design of SIBL; built at a cost of \$100 million in 1996, it was heralded as the library of the future but is now to be closed a mere 17 years later.

We believe there must be a full and independent review of the Central Library Plan.²² In the words of the *New York Times*' Michael Kimmelman, "the library owes New Yorkers a clear and open accounting of both its plan and some alternatives. It should make public a detailed cost analysis by at least one independent party – not one of the firms the library has already hired."²³

It is time to stop and reconsider the merits of the Central Library Plan under a more transparent process. The citizens of New York City deserve no less.

¹ The library was designated a New York City individual landmark in 1967. Subsequently, the local landmarks law was amended to permit designation of interiors customarily open to the public, and in 1974, the Main Lobby, North and South Staircases 1st to 3rd Floor, and the Central Hall on the 3rd Floor were designated an interior landmark. Because our local landmarks law allows the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission to exercise police powers, forbidding inappropriate demolitions and alterations, the LPC generally cannot regulate private spaces, as such control is deemed unconstitutional. The LPC believes it does not have jurisdiction over the stacks and has not approved their demolition; the approval they gave (1/22/13, calendar item #17) was for an “application to install rooftop mechanical equipment, replace windows, modify window openings and modify the loading dock.” In no way did this action constitute approval of the Central Library Plan, as the Library has suggested.

² Robin Pogrebin, “British Architect to Redesign City Library.” *New York Times*, October 22, 2008
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/23/arts/design/23libr.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1361292719-kS+2GZ74ByVLAkdPIWStlw

³ NYPL Press release December 19, 2012, downloaded from
<http://www.nypl.org/press/press-release/2012/12/19/new-york-public-librarys-central-library-plan-takes-next-step-release>

⁴ Michael Kimmelman, “In Renderings for a Library Landmark, Stacks of Questions.” *New York Times*, January 29, 2013
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/30/arts/design/norman-fosters-public-library-will-need-structural-magic.html?pagewanted=2&ref=michaelkimmelman>

⁵ Robin Pogrebin, “Library Chairman: Renovation Budget Still A Work in Progress.” *New York Times*, February 8, 2013 <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/08/new-york-public-library-chairman-says-renovation-costs-are-preliminary/?ref=arts>

⁶ See, for example, the Hong Kong Bank building and Wembley Stadium.

⁷ Robin Pogrebin, “After Criticism, Public Library Offers Peek at Renovation Plans.” *New York Times*, December 19, 2012
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/arts/design/new-york-public-library-offers-peek-at-renovation.html?pagewanted=all>

The Donnell Library actually sold for \$67.4 million when the sale was finally closed in 2011, though some of this money was earmarked for furnishing a new library in a space contractually provided by the developer of the new building on this site. Sales price reported in “Partnership closes on Donnell Library site, plans development” in *Real Estate Weekly*, July 27, 2011 <http://www.rew-online.com/2011/07/27/partnership-closes-on-donnell-library-site-plans-development/>

⁸ Jennifer Maloney, “Engineer Unpacks Plan for the Stacks.” *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2013 <http://stream.wsj.com/story/latest-headlines/SS-2-63399/SS-2-145226/>

⁹ see http://www.gwathmey-siegel.com/portfolio/proj_detail.php?job_id=200001

¹⁰ Charles Petersen, “Lions in Winter” part 2. N+1 Magazine, May 9, 2012
<http://www.nplusonemag.com/lions-in-winter-part-2>

¹¹ SIBL contains roughly 160,000 sq/ft (Paul Goldberger, “Grandeur and Modernity in New Library.” *New York Times*, April 24, 1996
<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/24/nyregion/grandeur-and-modernity-in-new-library.html>) and the Mid-Manhattan contains 139,000 sq/ft (this is the figure given for the size of the existing Mid-Manhattan library in the Gwathmy-Siegel plans for the proposed 2003 redesign at http://www.gwathmey-siegel.com/portfolio/proj_detail.php?job_id=200001; the 2012 NYPL Branch Library report states that the Mid-Manhattan is 159,880 sq/ft, see http://collect.btol.com/pdf/Results/BTCollect_20130227123450576323.PDF)

¹² NYPL President Anthony Marx has used the 80,000 sq/ft figure at several hearings, including the January 8, 2012 Joint Meeting of the Landmarks and the Education, Housing and Human Services Committees of Community Board 5. This figure is also referenced in Jennifer Maloney, “Set to Turn the Page at Bryant Park.” *Wall Street Journal*, December 19, 2012
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324407504578187752061130238.html>
The December 19 NYPL press release references “100,000 sq/ft,” but this apparently includes 20,000 sq/ft of newly-opened space elsewhere in the building, not part of Foster’s proposed circulating library in the stacks area.

¹³ The Mid-Manhattan was designed with a capacity of 700,000 books (Barbara Campbell, “Dream of a New Library Is Realized.” *New York Times*, October 21 1971). It contained 550,000 volumes (including music albums) in 1981 (William G Blair, “Plans that Could Change Fifth Avenue... While Renewal Proceeds.” *New York Times* June 27, 1981 <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/06/27/realestate/plans-that-could-change-fifth-avenuewhile-renewal-proceeds.html>). In addition to the natural increase in holdings which might be expected between 1981 and the present, the Mid-Manhattan’s collection was also enlarged by the addition of the approximately 175,000 volumes in the World Language Collection transferred from the Donnell when it closed in 2008. SIBL contained 1.2 million books and publications in 1996 (Paul Goldberger, “Grandeur and Modernity in New Library.” *New York Times*, April 24, 1996
<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/24/nyregion/grandeur-and-modernity-in-new-library.html>) though much of SIBL’s research collection is expected to be moved off site.

¹⁴ Robin Pogrebin, “New York Public Library Shifts Plan for 5th Ave. Building.” *New York Times*, September 19, 2012 http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/20/books/main-library-revises-storage-plan-for-research-books.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1361160966-uhdeAyej/UFrIhmdMpNJJQ

¹⁵ Robin Pogrebin, “New York Public Library Shifts Plan for 5th Ave. Building.” *New York Times*, September 19, 2012 http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/20/books/main-library-revises-storage-plan-for-research-books.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1361160966-uhdeAyej/UFrIhmdMpNJJQ

[library-revises-storage-plan-for-research-books.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1361160966-uhdeAyej/UFrlhmdMpNJJQ](http://www.nypl.org/press-releases/2012/12/19/nypl-revises-storage-plan-for-research-books.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1361160966-uhdeAyej/UFrlhmdMpNJJQ)

¹⁶ See the statistics page of the ReCAP website: <http://recap.princeton.edu/statistics/>

¹⁷ ReCAP is a storage facility serving Princeton and Columbia Universities, in addition to the NYPL. According to the ReCAP website, total current storage capacity is 10 million volumes (see <http://recap.princeton.edu>), and as of 12/31/12 nearly 9.9 million volumes were actually in storage (<http://recap.princeton.edu/statistics>). New storage areas are under construction, but they are not expected to open until June 2013. No information appears to be available on the cost of constructing this additional storage. Incidentally, all this begs the question of what is happening to the millions of volumes currently being removed from the 42nd Street Library as the stacks are emptied. ReCAP is practically full, and construction has not yet started on the second level of stacks under Bryant Park. Where are the books being stored? Are books being deaccessioned?

¹⁸ Ada Louise Huxtable, “Undertaking its Destruction.” *Wall Street Journal*, December 3, 2012
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323751104578151653883688578.html>

¹⁹ Kimmelman goes on to describe Foster’s design as an “awkward, cramped, banal pastiche of tiers facing claustrophobia-inducing windows, built around a space-wasting atrium with a curved staircase more suited to a Las Vegas hotel.” Michael Kimmelman, “In Renderings for a Library Landmark, Stacks of Questions.” *New York Times*, January 29, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/30/arts/design/norman-fosters-public-library-will-need-structural-magic.html?pagewanted=2&ref=michaelkimmelman>

²⁰ James Russell, “N.Y. Public Library, Norman Foster Evict a Million Books.” *Bloomberg News*, December 19, 2012 <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-12-19/n-y-public-library-norman-foster-evict-a-million-books.html>

²¹ For example, Columbia’s Butler Library just completed a multimillion-dollar top-to-bottom renovation while maintaining full services and access to all collections. Princeton’s Firestone Library is likewise in the midst of a comprehensive renovation while maintaining normal operating hours and access to its collections.

²² The questions examined by such an independent review should include:
What is the likely cost of demolishing the stacks in the 42nd Street building?
What is the likely cost of building Foster’s design for a new circulating library within the 42nd Street building?
What would be the real savings in operating costs of combining the Mid-Manhattan and SIBL into the 42nd Street building?
What would be the real savings in operating costs of combining just the Mid-Manhattan and SIBL?
What is the likely cost of rehabilitating the Mid-Manhattan, and what additional income might be realized by partnering with a developer on the site?

What is the likely cost of installing additional HVAC and fire suppression in the existing stacks?

²³ Michael Kimmelman, “In Renderings for a Library Landmark, Stacks of Questions.” *New York Times*, January 29, 2013

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/30/arts/design/norman-fosters-public-library-will-need-structural-magic.html?pagewanted=2&ref=michaelkimmelman>