Secret stacks

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Scott Sherman

PATIENCE AND FORTITUDE
Power, real estate, and the fight to save a public library
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Scott Sherman's subtitle is slightly coy: his book isn't about the fight to save just any old library. He's talking about the revered New York Public Library, one of the world's great scholarly archives and research institutions. Located at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue, this block-long Beaux Arts building, established in 1895 and comparable in scale to the British Museum, is guarded by two monumental stone lions nicknamed "Patience" and "Fortitude". In Sherman's pages these modest virtues are pitted against the institutional vices of hubris and condescension.

Essentially, Sherman, a contributing writer for the *Nation*, provides a scathing account of how the library's well-intentioned but high-handed overlords wasted millions of dollars – and who knows how many man-hours – on an ill-conceived renovation project. To put it crudely, to "save" the NYPL its president and trustees decided to get rid of all the books. They didn't plan to just load up scores of dumpsters, then tip them into the East River. Instead, trucks would transport 3 million books to an offsite facility in Princeton, New Jersey. After the shelves were emptied, work crews would then gut the seven floors of the library's underground stacks and replace them with – well, it's never entirely clear what they would replace them with. The new reader-friendly "circulating" library, however, would be more open and inviting, with airy public rooms and lots of computer consoles and the usual electronic stuff. Public outreach, rather than specialized research, would be paramount. In short, an "elitist" scholar's library would be transformed into a twenty-first-century media centre, where New Yorkers could check out e-books and drink cappuccino and chai latte. Once this "Central Library Plan" (CLP) was completed, the NYPL would resemble, more or less, a gigantic internet café.

Before you start to splutter with tweedy indignation, bear in mind that the New York Public Library has been struggling financially ever since the Second World War. More than most public libraries in America, it depends, as Sherman makes clear, "on a precarious mix of private philanthropic funds, an endowment, and city, state and federal aid that is usually too little for the institution's grand responsiblities and ambitions". Consequently, when facing any financial shortfall, the library has regularly eaten into its capital. When, in the 1950s and 60s, even more money began to be needed, it started to "deaccession" its assets.

Initially, that meant selling its most important paintings, among them works by Reynolds, Constable and Turner. In 2005, the NYPL even auctioned off Asher B. Durand's beloved "Kindred Spirits", a Hudson River School masterpiece that depicts the artist Thomas Cole and the poet William Cullen Bryant standing on a bluff of the Catskill Mountains, with gloriously wild landscape surrounding them. This vision of the American sublime was a special gift from the artist's daughter to the NYPL, which is located in Bryant Park.

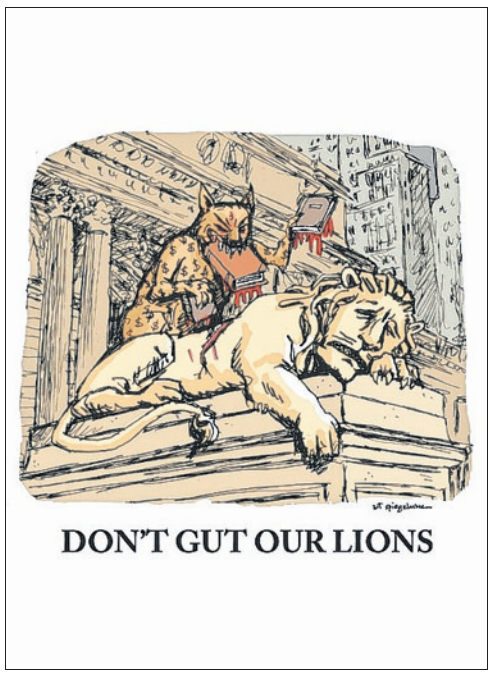
After the art was gone, the NYPL looked for other sources of revenue. For eight years, the then president, Vartan Gregorian, found an angel in the very rich and generous Brooke Astor. But Gregorian stepped down in 1988 and his successor, Fr Timothy Healy, died after only three-and-a-half years in office. A Columbia University administrator, Paul LeClerc, was chosen to become the new president and, in Sherman's words, soon began "to think seriously about a radical overhaul at the NYPL involving real-estate sales, consolidation, and fund-raising". As LeClerc set out to remake the institution, Sherman emphasizes that by 2008 many "seasoned curators, archivists and librarians left the NYPL under a voluntary 'separation incentive program'", even as, according to investigations by a fellow reporter, Charles Petersen, "the ranks of executives and 'strategists' had ballooned".

To help jump-start his Central Library Plan, LeClerc enlisted various wealthy businessmen, notably the real-estate moguls Marshall Rose and Stephen A. Schwarzman. The latter – described by Sherman as "a character out of the pages of Balzac or Dreiser" – would pledge to donate $100 million to the NYPL in exchange for having the building renamed in his honour. Michael Bloomberg, then the Mayor of New York, would contribute an identical amount from the city's treasury. Yet more money would be generated by selling off three important Manhattan branch libraries, starting with the Donnell Library (exceptionally strong in foreign language material). It was later discovered that that midtown property – for which the NYPL received $59 million – was almost certainly undersold: just the penthouse apartment in the luxury tower that replaced the Donnell went on the market for $60 million.

"By 2011", Sherman writes, "the NYPL was reeling from budget cutbacks and staff reductions." Instead of spending $300 million or more on the CLP, he counters that "prudent cost-cutting measures, combined with cool-headed management, were urgently needed: bloated executive salaries might have been trimmed (NYPL vice-presidents are paid $315,000); foundations could have been approached for support; a public campaign to stabilize City funding could have been initiated. LeClerc might even have consulted New Yorkers about a plan to sell one facility" – the Science, Industry and Business Library on 34th Street – "and channel the proceeds back into the NYPL's daily operations". But as Sherman concludes, "none of these measures . . . were ever considered: the CLP was the only way forward". At this point, with the "starchitect" Norman Foster hired (for an initial $9 million) to come up with the redesign, LeClerc stepped down and moved to Paris. He was succeeded by Anthony Marx, the former president of Amherst College, who seconded his predecessor's proposed renovations. In Marx's view, the Central Library Plan would "replace books with people; that's the future of where libraries are going".

Initially, the major news media welcomed a trendy reimagining of a decaying institution. But then critics began to emerge. Scholars bristled at the loss of the historic book stacks and no one believed that a volume could be retrieved from storage in twenty-four hours. Two historians, Joan Scott and Stanley Katz, issued a protest letter to halt the CLP, which they saw as "a misplaced use of funds in a time of great scarcity". Their petition was signed by some 2,000 writers, academics and public intellectuals, including Mario Vargas Llosa, Salman Rushdie and Tom Stoppard. The NYPL, it was pointed out, was already a highly democratic institution, among the few scholarly research libraries open to anyone. Rather than disembowel a national treasure, wouldn't it be better to spend the money on revamping the neighbourhood branch libraries, desperate for basic amenities?

To the trustees' dismay, just a month before she died, the elderly Ada Louise Huxtable, a Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic for the *Wall Street Journal*, blasted the proposed Foster designs. She also declared that "a research library is a timeless repository of treasures, not a popularity contest measured by



"Don't Gut Our Lions" by Art Spiegelman

head counts, the current arbiter of success". The *New York Times* architecture critic Michael Kimmelman chimed in by dubbing the CLP "a potential Alamo of engineering, architecture and finance", whose monetary underpinnings were "opaque". The cartoonist Art Spiegelman contributed a drawing of an evil-looking leopard, its jaws ripping through a book, while it crouches on the back of a dying stone lion.

In response to this barrage of protest, the library called up support from its big guns: the famous trustees, the influential friends in city government, an expensive public relations firm. The CLP critics, though, displayed far greater media savvy, and were both passionate and relentless. Crucially, the then mayoral candidate Bill de Blasio proved sympathetic to their cause. The plans, he proclaimed, seemed "to have been made without any forethought to the building's historical and cultural integrity". Soon after de Blasio's election, the Central Library Plan was, finally, quietly shelved. Even Marx then admitted it had been a mistake. Nonetheless, the underground stacks – though not destroyed – had already been stripped of their books. The current plan, Sherman writes, is to build additional underground book storage adjacent to the Schwarzman building, to go ahead with the sale of the Science, Industry and Business Library, and to fully renovate the Midtown Manhattan Library, which is popular with students. We shall see.

Patience and Fortitude tells a complicated story, one packed with lots of names, financial data and reporting by many individuals, yet its narrative moves briskly and grippingly along. While no one here, Sherman emphasizes, can be viewed as a villain, many of the people involved with the CLP – nearly all of whom refused to speak to him – acted with arrogance and a lack of transparency. For instance, the trustees made crucial decisions in "executive session", which meant that no minutes were kept and no outsiders were present. "Between 2006 and 2014", Sherman notes, "the NYPL did not sponsor a single public meeting about the CLP." And, so far as one can tell from this book, at none of the meetings did the higher-ups at the library ever seriously consult with the librarians, curators and other members of the working staff. This attitude, if nothing else, testifies to uneasiness, coupled with rank paternalism. While the large board of trustees did include a few scholars (notably, the historian Robert Darnton) and some recognized intellectuals (such as the Editor of the *New York Review of Books*, Robert Silvers), its power players were mainly real-estate and hedge-fund oligarchs. If the NYPL wanted their money, they expected to get their way. Also, in the rush to recreate the NYPL, the planners denied that they would be undermining – almost literally, it turns out – an architectural landmark that has been called "America's finest classical revival building". Structural engineers determined, quite late in the game, that it would be both extremely difficult and expensive to remove the seven levels of stacks around which the library was constructed. In the process, the very foundation of the original structure might be compromised.

Finally, the CLP was a product of the early days of book digitization. Who would need access to those smelly old volumes and all that crumbling paper when everything would soon be available on little screens? But, as bibliographical scholars remind us, there are orders of information only available to those who examine the physical books and documents. Consider size alone. When viewed on an e-reader, a John James Audubon elephant folio looks no bigger, and a miniature book no smaller, than an ordinary paperback. Above all, to place one's trust in pixels or cyberspace is a fool's game. Hard copy remains the only truly reliable backup.

Even though the Plan was ultimately scuttled, the New York Public Library still faces serious financial difficulties. To address them, Sherman tells us, several proposals have been made. For example, patrons might pay some small sum to enter the library as they do the subway. An even more radical notion might be to reduce the salary for upper management: in his first year as president, Anthony Marx cost the library nearly $800,000 and the compensation for his lieutenants is comparably exaggerated. Some have even suggested that the NYPL be taken over by the federal government and made an adjunct to the Library of Congress. Whatever happens, one hopes that large-scale planning in the future will be more open and democratic – and give priority to books over cheque books.