

Central Library History

Each year, approximately one million people walk through Central Library's majestic 50-foot high entryway, and countless others access its unique services online. Located at the intersection of Flatbush Avenue and Eastern Parkway on Grand Army Plaza, Central Library contains well over one million cataloged books, magazines and multimedia materials. In addition, its local history division, the Brooklyn Collection, holds millions of individual items including photographs, maps, manuscripts, Brooklyn Dodgers memorabilia and other ephemeral items. The landmarked facility boasts the state-of-the-art S. Stevan Dweck Center for Contemporary Culture, which hosts lectures, readings, musical performances and other events for people of all ages. The recently renovated plaza hosts concerts throughout the summer. It is also Brooklyn's favorite outdoor destination for free wireless internet access.



1889 The Brooklyn Park Commission is authorized to select a site for Central Library.

1905 Legislature legalizes the choice of the plot at Prospect Park Plaza (Grand Army Plaza).

1912 Ground is broken for architect Raymond F. Almirall's Beaux-Arts building. The cornerstone of the building that promises efficient and modern library service to Brooklyn is laid with elaborate ceremonies.

1915 TO 1927

Construction slows down and eventually ceases as the nation is hit with economic difficulties due to the Depression and World War I. Mayor John F. Hylan refuses to support further appropriations for the building's construction.

1930 A new library president and chief librarian are appointed, and with the help of Brooklyn Borough President Raymond V. Ingersoll, they decide to change Central Library's design. The purpose of the revised design is to cut costs, create a more modern look and meet contemporary library needs.

1935 Architects Alfred Morton Githens and Francis Keally are selected for the project on the recommendation of architect and Brooklyn Museum Director Philip Youtz. Sculptors Carl P. Jennewein and Thomas Hudson Jones are commissioned to create the entranceway.

1937 The Board of Estimate approves plans for a \$1.88 million structure after much public and critical praise of the Githens and Keally model.

1938 Construction begins, retaining a great deal of Almirall's original design, but without the planned Greco-Roman ornamentation.

FEBRUARY 1, 1941

The Children's Room and Central Circulation Room are briefly opened to the public. More than 2,500 people visit, and two days later, the library begins regular service. In the months that follow, a formal dedication is held with Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in attendance. A memorial inscription is unveiled in the plaza honoring former Borough President Raymond V. Ingersoll, whose persistent support brought about the library's completion.

1955 The second floor reading rooms open and public space nearly doubles.

1957 The library gains possession of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* "morgue" (clippings) files, and records, from Frank D. Schroth, the newspaper's last publisher.

1960s Further expansions include the creation of new and larger reading rooms by extending the central portion of the first and second floors into what were once the courtyard and garden. These changes mask the original rear façade.

1973 After four years of renovations, including installation of escalators and air conditioning, and completion of the Flatbush Avenue wing, Central Library resumes normal operations. The renovation also provides for an expanded Audio-Visual Division.

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- 1980** Due to extreme budget deficiencies, the library's first used book sale raises over \$2,400 and heightens awareness of Brooklyn Public Library's financial hardship.
- 1987** Five new computer catalog terminals are installed. The terminals are part of a guide to materials called an On-Line Cataloging System owned by Brooklyn Public Library and other area library systems.
- 1990s** A two-floor addition is built on top of the curving, windowless extension that houses the library's original Branch Distribution Room and loading docks.
- 1993** The bronze screen above the main entry is regilded, and a small garden is planted outside the entrance to the children's library on Eastern Parkway.
- 1997** Restoration of Central Library's Grand Lobby takes place in preparation for Brooklyn Public Library's centennial celebrations.

MAY 6, 1997

The Landmarks Preservation Commission grants the library landmark status.

- 1999** After a "virtual" groundbreaking ceremony, renovation begins on Central Library's new 10,500-square-foot Youth Wing, designed by the firm of Pasanella+Klein Stolzman+Berg. The architectural plans include restoring the wing's ceiling to its original height and refurbishing wooden window seats and oak bookcases around the room's perimeter.

MAY 4, 2000

The \$2.5 million renovation and expansion of the Eastern Parkway wing is completed. The new Youth Wing officially opens, creating a contemporary space for state-of-the-art technology, expanded book collections, new programs and exclusively designed areas for children and teens. The Technology Loft in the Youth Wing adds 36 iMac computers.

- 2000s** The Grand Lobby provides a public venue to showcase the work of established and emerging artists. Compelling exhibitions range from Brooklyn fashion designers to the history of pre-Civil War African-American homesteaders to the history of the pop-up book.

- 2003** With financial support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the library digitizes the first sixty-one years of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. The world-renowned *Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online 1841-1902*, becomes the library's most important electronic resource.
- 2006** A major renovation of the second floor balcony results in a number of new spaces, the most striking of which is the beautiful new Brooklyn Collection and reading room.
- 2007** The S. Stevan Dweck Center for Contemporary Culture, a 189-seat auditorium, opens and quickly establishes itself as a premier Brooklyn destination for free lectures, musical performances, and other cultural events. At the same time, the beautifully renovated plaza reopens and hosts seasonal music concerts and becomes the borough's largest and favorite access point for free wireless internet.

ARCHITECTURE: Shaped like an open book, Central Library is clad in limestone with impressive Art Deco detailing designed by sculptors Thomas Hudson Jones and Carl P. Jennewein. The most striking feature is its 50-foot-high entry portico, set into the concave façade that reflects the elliptical configuration of Grand Army Plaza. Columns on either side highlight the dramatic entrance with sculptured gold leaf figures that depict the evolution of art and science, created by Jennewein. Above the entranceway are 15 panels in a decorative bronze screen featuring favorite characters from American literature, including Tom Sawyer, the Raven and Moby Dick, sculpted by Jones. Inscriptions above and alongside the entrance doors were composed by Roscoe C. E. Brown, president of Brooklyn Public Library's Board of Trustees from 1940 to 1942. Praised for being both prominent and pragmatic, the building design is an expression of civic pride.

