

Carnegie / Central Library

A Building Full of Stories With Its Own Tale to Tell

Atlanta has a history of tearing down its history. The Peachtree Arcade, the Loew's Grand Theatre, and the Grady Hotel are a few of the downtown edifices lost to time or the wrecking ball. But, there are also numerous examples of buildings that have survived, even when their futures seemed uncertain, such as the Fox Theatre. Then, there are those buildings that have survived, but not in the style that some Atlantans may recall.



*Atlanta, c. 1905
Image via wdanielanderson*

Near the intersection of Forsyth Street and what is now Carnegie Way sits the Central Library, the headquarters of the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System. This building has stood at this location since 1980. But, the System's roots go back much further.

Public libraries in Atlanta have their roots in the years after the Civil War when, in 1867, a group of Atlanta men founded the Young Men's Library Association (YMLA). The YMLA was a subscription library, which meant that it was a lending library that utilized membership fees and, sometimes,

charges for borrowing the books. As the name suggests, the YMLA was exclusionary. Membership was exclusively available to white men. It would be 1873 – six years after its founding – before membership was opened to white women. Additionally, though it claimed to be open to the public, only Association members were allowed to check out books.

In the waning years of the 19th century, Atlanta's need for a public library became more widely recognized. At this time, philanthropist Andrew Carnegie was in the midst of an over three-decades-long span of donating funds to cities around the country to build libraries. Before he was finished, he would donate more than \$40 million to construct over 1,600 library buildings.

In early 1899, a committee led by YMLA president Eugene Mitchell persuaded Carnegie to donate \$100,000 (more than \$3 million today) to Atlanta for a library building. That summer, the City agreed to set aside \$5,000 per year to operate the library, which would be free to its patrons. By the time the new library was built, Carnegie had twice agreed to donate more funds, an additional \$45,000 over his original donation.

As they had done for many other Carnegie-funded libraries around the country, the New York-based architecture firm of Ackerman and Ross designed Atlanta's new edifice. The building, built at Forsyth and then-Church Street

(now Carnegie Way), was in the classical style, its marble façade marked by large columns. Inscribed atop the façade was a dedication reading "Erected in the Year of Our Lord Nineteen Hundred and Dedicated to the Advancement of Learning." Atop each of the windows, the name of a great writer was engraved. Over the entrance, was the name of the library's benefactor and namesake, "Carnegie."



*Atlanta's Carnegie Library, Forsyth & Church Streets
Image via Wikimedia Commons*

While the arrival of Atlanta's Carnegie Library did usher in some changes in the city's library use, some things remained the same. African Americans were excluded from the Carnegie. It would not be until 1921, when the Auburn Branch of the Carnegie Library opened, that Black Atlantans could use a library facility. Black Atlantans would not have access to the main location, by then sometimes referred to as the Central Library, until 1959.

As Atlanta grew and changed, the Central Library remained a constant. Through the decades, it continued to serve the citizens. By the 1970's though, it was no longer able to match the needs of its patrons and it was decided that a new library must be built. In 1977, after 75 years of service to the citizens of Atlanta and Fulton County, the Carnegie Library was demolished.



*Atlanta's Marcel Breuer-designed Central Library, pre-2018 renovation
Image via Wikimedia Commons*

It had been determined that a new library would be constructed on the same site. Architects Marcel Breuer and Hamilton Smith were hired to design the new structure. Breuer had built a reputation as a proponent of the Bauhaus school, an artistic movement that combined style and function, often with an unornate, minimalist result.

For the new Atlanta library, Breuer envisioned a striking, Brutalist-style building. Gone was the ornateness of the Carnegie Library. In its place was a minimalist, bare, steel and concrete structure rising ten stories. It would be Breuer's final project.

The new Central Library opened to the public in May 25, 1980. In the ensuing decades, it would be updated and renovated to meet the needs of the changing city. As the 21st century began, its future came into question. While – at the very least - an extensive renovation was deemed necessary, there were some who argued that a new facility would be a better use of funds. The potential loss of Breuer's library led to an outcry. Consideration of a new facility was tabled, and, in 2018, a major renovation of Atlanta's Central Library began.

Even though the library had been spared demolition, controversy remained. One of the more controversial planned aspects of the multi-million dollar renovation was the addition of windows to the building's façade. Critics saw this was taking something away from Breuer's design. Still, the library building was closed for more than three years, while it was renovated, inside and out. It reopened in Fall 2021, with the new windows.



*The Carnegie Pavilion, Atlanta
Image via Wikipedia*

Given Atlanta's history of tearing down its past, it is fair to ask how the city's main library fits into that history. These days, little survives of the 1902 Carnegie Library, except for some of the inscribed stones from the façade, like those found in the Carnegie Education Pavilion in Hardy Ivy Park, at Peachtree and Baker Streets. The Breuer-designed library remains, but it has been drastically altered. Does this mean that Atlanta has lost yet another part of its architectural history? Perhaps, in the end, it is simply a new chapter in a building full of stories.

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