

## Architecture & Engineering

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### Project of the Month: A library's well-loved past, and its bold new future

By [CLAIR ENLOW](#)  
Special to the Journal

The stately brick and terra cotta, Carnegie-era Douglass-Truth branch of the Seattle Public Library is still there, commanding the corner of 23rd and Yesler, just as it has for almost a century.

But there's definitely something new going on. Behind it, shining like a million new pennies, is the copper-clad addition completed last fall. It's a kind of architectural arm around the outside of the lot, and a very 21st-century direction for the historic library.



Photos by Michael Jensen

**The Douglass-Truth library addition leaves the historic dignity of the library intact. Copper cladding will turn blue-green over time.**

In time, the bright metal will oxidize to a soft blue-green verdigris, with even more affinity for the historic structure. But for now, it is a clear signal that this library is not just about history. It's about the future of a diverse and changing community, and an expanding role for the library.

More than 200,000 patrons come in the front door every year, and they used to compete with all of the returned and transferred books that were coming in the same way. It was getting tight. "I think of the dance we had to do just to get our holds on the shelves," remembers branch manager Valerie Garrett-Turner.

Now, there is a loading and book processing area in the back. Patrons enter through the door they always have, but in an opened-up floor plan, they have several choices depending on mission or mood.

The historic wall screen is still there, along with the flesh and bones of the historic interior and the well-loved paintings of Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. But now there are plush, expansive sitting areas. And the bright new wing — full of books, multi-media offerings and new places to sit or study — beckons to the right.

### **Douglass-Truth Branch of the Seattle Public Library, 2300 E. Yesler Way**

Owner  
Seattle Public Library

Architect  
Schacht Aslani Architects Walter Schacht, managing principal, Cima Malek-Aslani, principal architect, Eric Aman, project manager

Type  
Library renovation and addition

The copper-clad walls visible from the street really are the tip of the iceberg. A meeting room at ground level is fronted by a one-story monitor, which captures daylight and views of the sky. Most of the addition, designed by Schacht Aslani Architects, is below-grade — dug into the space between the historic structure and the lot line to the east.

At night, light from the large space below makes the inner walls glow. Art on display there, including three panels by artist Vivian Linder and copper sculpture by Marita Dingus, is now part of the neighborhood.

This is a bold, new move among historic library additions in Seattle. Others have opted for an addition that somehow looks as if it has always been there. But the result, like the addition to the Columbia branch, can undermine a historic structure, with its exquisite proportions and identity. Perhaps more importantly, these decisions miss an opportunity to express the future of the community — an aspiration Andrew Carnegie himself would surely have supported.

“There are patrons who have been here for 75 years,” according to Garrett-Turner. “People have a great attachment to the (old) building.” At the same time, she said, “you have to move forward. This community is changing.”

The hip-roofed, symmetrical design is clearly in the vein of the many community libraries built through the endowment of the 19th Century tycoon. But in fact the 1914 library, designed by architects Marbury Somervell and Harlan Thomas and originally named for Henry Yesler, was the first branch library financed entirely by the city of Seattle. At the time, the area was the center of Seattle’s Jewish community.

Other groups, from Irish to Japanese to Filipino, came in waves. After World War II, a large number of African Americans made the Central Area their home, and the library was renamed Douglass-Truth in 1975. It houses a large collection of African American literature and history.

Size  
8,000 to 16,500 square feet

Completion  
October 2006

Construction cost  
\$4.6 million

Structural engineer  
KPFF Consulting Engineers

Electrical engineer  
Travis Fitzmaurice

Mechanical engineer  
The Greenbusch Group

Civil engineer  
KPFF Consulting Engineers

Landscape architect  
Swift & Company Landscape Architects

Library systems  
Design Perspectives

Envelope consultant  
The Building Envelope

Cost estimator  
Roen Associates

General contractor  
Construction Enterprises & Contractors

Steel fabricator  
Ferrotek

*Jury comments:*

*“The new does not compete with the simple majesty of the old, yet it defines its own powerful presence.”*

*“A less confident architect would mimic the original classical design, and pay a very high price to achieve similar levels of quality in the details.”*

*“There are no apologies here: Whether or not the new or the old are masterpieces is less certain than that each stand confident in its own time.”*



**At night, the walls of the addition glow, lit from below.**

Over the last two decades, a new wave of young and affluent people have moved in, making the neighborhood one of the most ethnically and economically diverse in Seattle. In that sense, it really is the neighborhood of the future.

The task of Garrett-Turner and the other people on the design team and the steering committee, which also included long-time librarian Samuel Jackson, was to find an architect that was up to the task of expressing that change while respecting the historic building.

The committee had already toured other Carnegie-era libraries with additions, and made a tentative decision not to mimic the traditional style. So when Walter Schacht and Cima Malek-Aslani of Schacht Aslani came to the interview with a decidedly modernist portfolio and a stated bias against replicating historic styles, the committee listened.

“They had great appreciation for the old building,” said Garrett-Turner, “but they weren’t awed by it.”

Cima Malek-Aslani was project architect (then with Cardwell/Thomas) for the restoration of Parrington Hall at the University of Washington and Thomas Hall at Washington State University. She now serves as a landmarks commissioner for King County.

Most importantly, the architects seemed to be able to listen to the community.

“They were willing to explore different options and explain why things will work or not,” said Garrett-Turner. “That’s what our community deserves.”



**The architects designed the sweeping stair, fabricated by Ferrotek, that connects the old library interior with the addition. A circular bench at the base is subtly reminiscent of the flamboyant style of mid-century architect Morris Lapidus.**

Doubling the library space from 8,000 to 16,500 square feet threatened to add a hulking mass to the historic structure, whether the addition was historicist or modern in character.

According to project manager Eric Aman, the design team studied several options for keeping the new square footage on the same level, a conventional efficiency for small libraries.

They rejected the idea of placing it on the open portion of the site which faces the thoroughfare of 23rd because it would have obscured the historic library. Eventually, architects and committee returned to an original idea of going below grade and creating a two-level facility with a very open and public lower level.

“We farmed the models,” said Schacht, referring to the time-honored method of exploring design options and relationships between new and existing structures.



Photo by Schacht Aslani Architects  
**Architects Eric Aman, Walter Schacht and Cima Malek-Aslani.**

The architects worked with the idea of keeping the addition confined to one compact footprint with cascading clerestories right next

to the historic structure. But the lot line kept forcing the plan toward Yesler.

So with modernist rationality, they turned the addition so that its length lies perpendicular to the rectangular historic structure. The new orientation — and the new attitude — is expressed in the copper-clad light monitor, with strip skylights on top, that extends almost to the sidewalk. From the front it connects lightly to the outer wall of the older building through a row of one-story windows over the stairway.

“You can still see all four sides of the roof,” said Schacht.

Except for the below-grade walls and the partial metal skin, the entire addition is abundantly transparent. Glass openings between the new first-floor meeting space, situated at the back of the site, and the light monitor and stacks below, offer the opportunity — made popular by urbane additions ever since I.M. Pei’s glass pyramid at The Louvre — to admire the outside of the old building from the interior of the addition.

The assertive copper-clad addition, with its smooth concrete base, focal wrap-over skylight and recessed windows on the side, make for “a strong object, clearly differentiated from the original object,” according to Schacht. It’s a whole new generation, all right.

One of the school kids who visits the library every day put it another way, according to Garrett-Turner: “He told us we were ‘bomb-digity.’”

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