The Carnegie Library of the Future

At the end of the 20th Century, it was expected by many, that the library as we knew it would vanish. Due to the rapid rise of digital technologies many believed that books would disappear. Digitization, combined with the internet, would make the need for public gathering to read and make use of library research catalogs unnecessary. Yet the last 15 years were dominated by the rise and renewal of the large Central Libraries branches. Today’s libraries continue to thrive and evolve. Fulfilling much more functions than only storing books. The focus however, has mainly been on the Central Libraries, but what about the neighborhood branches?

Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, one of the most important cultural philanthropists of 19th Century America, financed in total 1,679 Public Libraries in the US only. The Carnegie-funded libraries were all built between 1886 and 1917. More than half are nowadays still serving their communities as libraries, many in middle- to low-income neighborhoods. For example, Carnegie libraries still form the heart of the New York Public Library system in New York City, with 31 of the original 39 buildings still in operation.

Carnegie’s interest was to make library facilities available to the public free-of-charge, promoting self-directed individual development. With this new approach, he redirected the course of American library design and the nature of library use.

With the new Carnegie Libraries, the public library system evolved from the traditional closed-stacks policy (the treasure house, protecting its book from untrustworthy readers) to an open shelf library, free access to books: people could choose for themselves what books they wanted to read. This “New Library Idea” also included ideas such as introducing services to children, cooperation with schools, branch libraries, traveling libraries and library advertising.

This new philosophy on public library design asked for a new typology, a new organization of spaces.

The focus of our studio will be an architectural design research for the necessity of the renewal of branch libraries: a search for a new typology. The questions that formed the basis of the Carnegie libraries are still valid, especially for the branch libraries in the different neighborhoods:
- who will use / need these branches?
- what functions should it house?
- what is its value?
- what is its relationship to other institutions and activities?
- where should it be located?
- how do we want people to perceive it?
- what gaps in the neighborhood’s community is the library able to fill?

And: how should it be designed? What makes a building look and feel like a library, and what distinguishes a neighborhood branch library from its Central Library or a community center?

The semester will start with students working together in small groups to analyze the current views on branch libraries and their historic origins and relevance. Our trip will take us to both New York City to study some specific (originally Carnegie financed) branch libraries. And to the Netherlands, to visit and analyze a diversity of libraries (university libraries; central libraries; branch libraries), both in the cities of Delft and Amsterdam. The goal of the studio is to create a spatial program and design a new branch library on one of the existing locations. The new design should address the site specific issues, neighborhood needs and cultural characteristics. A new typology will be developed to meet the contemporary challenges of a branch library.

Primary readings:
- Houben, Francine. “People, Place, Purpose” (2015)
Proposal for Student trip to the Netherlands

Besides a visit to branch libraries in town, we would like to visit and analyze the diversity of libraries in the Netherlands. The Netherlands has a long history of innovation in libraries. Our proposal is to see together university libraries, central libraries and branch libraries in the cities of Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Delft. We are in good contact with the several directors and librarians who are willing to engage with the students. With the experience of both continents, we believe the students will have the best knowledge to understand and develop their own branch library. If time and budget allows, it would be a valuable contribution to the studio if we can visit the Library of Birmingham (a People’s Palace) together. We will create a place in our office in Delft for all students to be able to work(shop) during their visit.

Tentative itinerary:

Saturday February 11
Departure from New York

Sunday February 12
Arrival London (or Birmingham)

Monday February 13
Visit Library of Birmingham

Monday February 13
Departure early evening to Amsterdam

Tuesday February 14
Introduction to Mecanoo office
Visit Library and campus of Delft University of Technology
Visit Central Library of Delft (DOK)

Wednesday February 15
Visit Rotterdam Central Library
(and possibly Mecanoo projects in Rotterdam to understand Design philosophy. i.e. Montevideo, Nieuw Terbregge, St. Mary of the Angels Chapel)

Thursday February 16
Visit Amsterdam Public Library (OBA) and one or two branch libraries

Friday February 17
Visit Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment of Delft University of Technology
Work(shop) at Mecanoo office
Parting dinner at Mecanoo and Screening of the documentary “A legacy of Mies & King” (on Mecanoo project Martin Luther King jr. Library in DC)

Saturday February 18
Departure to New York