

A Place to Hang Out (Read, Too)

Design for New Donnell Library by Enrique Norten



A rendering of the bleacher seating in the 53rd Street branch of the New York Public Library.

TEN Arquitectos

It is definitely not your mother's Donnell.

Gone are the library's revolving doors and those original Winnie-the-Pooh dolls, sitting behind glass in the Children's Reading Room. It may not even be called the Donnell anymore.

The Donnell Library Center's replacement, which the [New York Public Library](http://www.nypl.org/) is to unveil officially on Tuesday, has been reconceived to fit at the base of a high-rise hotel and two of the new library's three floors will be underground.

The library, which is expected to cost \$20 million and was designed for the digital age by the architect Enrique Norten and his firm [TEN Arquitectos](http://www.tenarquitectos.com/), emphasizes places to congregate more than shelves for books. And it is a library that will be about one third of its former size.



An architect's cross-section rendering of the three-story Donnell branch, which is expected to cost \$20 million.

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"It has become more like a cultural space, which is about gathering people, giving people the opportunity to encounter each other," Mr. Norton said. "It's not really about just being a repository of books."

People in the neighborhood have been upset about losing the Donnell since it closed on West 53d Street in 2008.

"They are shrinking it," said Veronika Conant, a former librarian and a member of the Committee to Save the New York Public Library, an advocacy group. "We want our full-size library back, nothing less."

Anthony W. Marx, the Public Library's president, said the new space would be a positive addition to the library system and to an important city block that is dominated by the [Museum of Modern Art](#).

"I grew up with the old Donnell," he said. "I certainly understand the nostalgia for Donnell. But I think when people see this amazing new library, providing a great new facility, they are going to be excited."

Some had begun to wonder if the Donnell, built in 1955, would ever come back. Orient-Express Hotels, which purchased the property from the library five years ago for \$59 million, had planned an 11-story hotel with space for a library at street level.

But in 2009, the company backed out of the deal, citing concerns about the economic downturn. In 2011, the property was sold to [Tribeca Associates](#) and Starwood Capital, which is building a 50-story hotel and residences on the site. As a result, reopening dates have continually been pushed back — the current estimate is late 2015.

"At this point people have to be a little more patient with us," Mr. Marx said. "When the Donnell plan was envisioned, no one could foresee that the economy was going to collapse and that years would be

added to this plan. That was the coincidence of timing and really unfortunate.”

“I do think the library learned from this experience,” he added, “that heavily used branch libraries should not be closed for extended periods, if we can possibly help it.”

Some who have mourned the loss of the Donnell say it was sold furtively, without adequate public notice. Earlier this month, [Citizens Defending Libraries](#), an advocacy group, gathered on the steps of City Hall to protest the selling of libraries for real estate gains, namely the Brooklyn Heights Library — which is part of a different system — “that closely replicates the disastrous and secretive closing of the Donnell Library.”

Proceeds from the Donnell sale have been used to pay for its new incarnation as well as a temporary replacement, the Grand Central Library on East 46th Street, in a leased space where it will remain until the new branch opens.

The new library will have 28,000 square feet, down from the original 97,000. But library officials said that because the new library will not have a teenagers’ center, a media room or its World Languages area, the space devoted to reading rooms and book shelving will be about the same as at the old Donnell.

Mr. Marx said the Donnell’s operations have not been reduced, but instead have been relocated in some cases. The World Languages collection, for example, is now at the Mid-Manhattan library, where 622,000 items from the collection are checked out annually, a threefold increase from when it was at the Donnell, the library said.

“In part what we did was we found places elsewhere in the system where the public could access the material more readily,” Mr. Marx said, “and that diminished what we needed on 53d Street.”

He said that the library might be renamed for a new donor but that the Donnell family would be honored elsewhere in the building.

Mr. Norton said he had a tough assignment, namely making a library airy and inviting when two floors are below the street. One solution, he said, was to give up using most of the ground floor, instead making it a dramatic entryway that draws visitors to the lower floors.

Patrons entering from the street will encounter a set of wide bleacher steps to the levels below that can also serve as a 144-seat amphitheater. “I think of it sort of as an agora,” Mr. Marx said, “a place that will attract people to sit and read and write and talk to each other.”

A glass wall at street level brings sunlight into the spaces and allows passers-by to see the activity inside (the design received an award of merit from the [American Institute of Architects, New York Chapter](#)).

In addition to traditional library elements — like some book shelves and a children’s area — there will be public spaces, including sitting areas, a 141-seat auditorium and a technology hub.

Might people coming to the library find themselves entering a hotel lobby by accident? Mr. Marx said that is unlikely. The library will have a separate entrance and “the whole wall of the library is a glass window,” Mr. Marx said. “It will be very clear to everyone who walks down the street that this is a library and they are welcome.”