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## Outdated Eyesore or Modern Masterpiece?

Return to Glory Imagined for City's Flagship Library

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It was designed by one of the 20th century's greatest architects. More than 30 years ago, this newspaper reported that the building "creates impressive, almost exhilarating spaces" and that "generosity, airiness and a nobility, or rather an ennobling feeling, are the words that come to mind throughout the building's four stories of book stacks."

For many D.C. library patrons, those words have long ceased to describe the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library at Ninth and G streets NW.

A recent visit found three elevators out of order, broken water fountains and locked bathrooms, blown-out lights in dark stairwells and missing ceiling tiles that exposed the building's rotting innards. With patrons sleeping in cheap folding chairs and ripped vinyl covering an old piano, the atmosphere was hardly "ennobling."

The question now is whether the library building itself is an architectural gem or a poorly designed, poorly maintained anachronism. And now that formerly "new" and "modern" buildings such as the library are getting up there in years, how much effort should be expended to protect them?

Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) and the library board of trustees want to replace the King library with a building -- also named after the slain civil rights leader -- that would anchor the redevelopment of the old Washington Convention Center site. A November draft report by the mayor's library task force said, "A new system needs a new central library to replace the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library, an outmoded structure erected long before the advent of the digital world."

But some preservationists and community groups say it would be cheaper and equally effective to renovate the flagship building. A group of organizations and the city have filed to add the 34-year-old library to the National Register of Historic Places, effectively preventing any immediate demolition, said David Maloney, spokesman for the city's Historic Preservation Office. City officials are planning to solicit proposals for renovation and possible alternative uses of the G Street structure.

Historic preservationists say the District must protect its modern buildings of significance, such as the library, and not just places with columns that were once home to people who wore powdered wigs. Other modernist buildings in the city include the I.M. Pei-designed Third Church of Christ, Scientist, at 16th and I streets NW, and the Danish Embassy on Whitehaven Street NW. Even better known are two neighbors on the Potomac River, the Watergate complex and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

Modern architecture uses modern materials such as concrete and glass, employs forms defined by function and is generally bereft of ornamentation.

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Look beyond the water stains, broken blinds and worn carpet of the central library, preservationists say. The building, which opened in 1972, is the only library designed by architectural icon Ludwig Mies van der Rohe that was actually built. Look closer and you will see the fingerprints of the man who designed New York's Seagram Building and was director of the Bauhaus, the influential German design institution.

"It's extremely significant as the only Mies van der Rohe in the District," said Nell Ziehl, spokeswoman for the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Outside, notice the ground-floor loggia with cantilevered upper floors clad in grids of black-painted steel and dark glass. At night, the library looks see-through, with bookshelves and overhead lights forming another neat grid. Very Mies.

Inside, see the granite-topped circulation desks with custom-made shelving and pencil holders. Notice all the chrome-plated hardware and the shadow on the main floor where card catalogs used to be. Many of the original Steelcase tables remain. In the fourth floor's executive offices, Mies's original furnishings are still there, including his famed Barcelona chairs with X-shaped chrome bases.

But in the button-down District, the International-style library was not a hit with everyone.

Weeks after its opening, Richard J. Wightman of the District wrote to The Washington Post and Times Herald that "the facade is an eyesore enough: a monstrous, girdered base for a Madison Avenue office slab in a hangover design from the 1950s. The interior is still worse: The overall impression is bleak sterility."

Part of that bleakness results from budget cuts. Mies originally wanted the base of the building and parts of the lobby clad with marble and envisioned custom-designed furniture throughout. District officials objected. So Mies instead chose tan brick around the building and ordered chairs and tables off the shelf.

The building has been chronically sick, beginning with elevators that broke within days of its opening and reports of air ducts leading into brick walls. Time and again, the building closed because of a lack of air conditioning or heat. In 1976, a worker suffered second-degree burns to his head, neck and shoulders when a steam valve opened. The burned worker then tore a ligament in his leg trying to escape the hot steam and water.

But supporters say the Mies design should not be judged against those of ordinary buildings. After all, one doesn't buy a Jaguar for its reliability or gas mileage.

"We'd like to see the building saved," said Rebecca Miller, executive director of the D.C. Preservation League, which also sponsored the National Register of Historic Places nomination for the library.

"We don't dictate use. But we'd like to see something that would not rip up the interior with walls and cubicles," she said. "It's a see-through building."

Miller said modern architecture is playing a larger role in the preservation movement.

In January, the society hosted a two-day conference called DC Modern that highlighted the city's often neglected modernist buildings, such as the Martin Luther King Jr. library and the city's cluster of mid-century residential buildings in Southwest. Miller acknowledged the irony of helping to preserve buildings that replaced historic structures during redevelopment in the 1960s and 1970s.

W. Kent Cooper, a District architect, said the library building could be renovated and reused as a library or a museum.

"I don't think the public totally understands what they've got and what they could have," he said. "It's going to be there and could contribute to the glory of the city instead of an eyesore."

Six years ago, Cooper and other design and construction professionals with the D.C. chapter of the American Institute of Architects got together to imagine what a renovated library could look like. The black steel would be repainted silvery white, the dark window panes replaced with clear, modern glass that would reflect harmful rays. Mies designed the building to accommodate additional floors, so Cooper's group added another floor and a roof deck. Inside, a new open stairway would give patrons options other than the elevators.

Cooper said it was worth the effort to keep the library, which Mies never got to see finished. He died in 1969 at age 83.

"I don't think we ought to be throwing the building away," Cooper said.

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