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ICON IS WORTH SAVING
GROSSE POINTE CENTRAL LIBRARY IS SLATED FOR RAZING
JOHN GALLAGHER
Free Press columnist

With its tree-lined streets and its old-money feel, the Grosse Pointe community might seem like the last place for a controversy to erupt over architectural preservation.

But one of metro Detroit's most important disputes over landmark preservation right now concerns the Pointes. There, the

community's library board plans to demolish the Grosse Pointe Central Library and replace it with a newer, bigger structure, despite efforts by some to save the original.

The dispute **is** unusual on several fronts. Unlike most endangered landmarks, the Central Library isn't a neoclassical or Romanesque edifice from the 1800s, but a modernist work built in 1953.

Nor **is** it vacant and dilapidated, as are many landmarks in danger of demolition. The Central Library **is** as busy today as when it opened.

What this case highlights **is** the fragile status of so much modern architecture. While it's easy to fight to save classics like the Old Wayne County Building or the Book-Cadillac Hotel, modern designs from the mid-20th Century are often overlooked in the preservation wars.

Hungarian-born Marcel Breuer, one of the mid-20th Century's great architects, designed the Central Library. He had started his career as a furniture designer, creating an **icon** with his tubular steel and leather Wassily chair. Later he became famous for designing the Whitney Museum in New York and other modern landmarks.

Getting Breuer to design the library in the Pointes was considered a coup. He crafted a small but elegant structure, two stories tall, with a front facade that was partly unadorned brick to echo the traditions of Grosse Pointe building materials, and partly a series of tall windows that created a transparency inside and out.

As decades passed and library functions grew and changed, the Central Library lost some of its functionality. Recently, Laura Bartell, president of the Pointes' library board and an advocate of demolition, listed for me all the operational deficiencies, from a lack of sufficient parking to inadequate space for staff, computers and children's activities.

The library board backs a \$24-million replacement on the same site. The new building **is** yet to be designed, but clearly it would be taller and include underground parking.

As for Breuer's design, Bartell **is** unimpressed. "Frankly, it's pretty undistinguished," she told me last week.

Plundering a cultural gem

Among the few people trying to head off the destruction of the library **is** William Hartman, an architect and a member of the Grosse Pointes Farms Historic District Commission. At a recent library board meeting, Hartman told the trustees that destroying Breuer's library would be a form of cultural illiteracy - a plundering of the contribution that modernism has made to Michigan.

I agree. Far from being mundane, Breuer's design **is** a jewel that nestles perfectly into the quietly elegant streetscape of the Grosse Pointe Farms' Hill commercial district.

I don't doubt that it may be too small by current standards. But I can think of at least two ways to save it.

First, the library board ought to consider expansion as part of a plan to gain the space it needs.

Bartell said they've considered and rejected that idea as unworkable. But I'd like to see them ask for full studies from whichever architectural firms bid on the new design job.

Second, the board should consider selling the central branch to another user, and building anew elsewhere.

Maybe the Central Library could make an upscale restaurant. Perhaps it could find new life as a community theater, a real estate office or some other commercial use. Surely some use can be found for this gem.

Will it happen? The odds aren't good. The library board seems pretty determined to raze Breuer's building. And the Pointes will be weaker for it.

As Hartman says, most new buildings in the Grosse Pointes get stitched together from architectural odds and ends - a gable here, a cornice there - in a sort of fake historical style. Commercial districts in parts of the Pointes now border on kitschy.

Breuer's building **is** the real deal. Even if it's doomed, we can at least have a spirited debate about what's **worth saving**, in the Grosse Pointes and elsewhere. That could be Breuer's legacy to us.

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ILLUSTRATION: Map Detroit Free Press;Photo

CAPTION: Patrons use the Grosse Pointe Central Library, located at Kercheval and Fisher in Grosse Pointe Farms, Thursday.

CAPTIONWRITER: WILLIAM ARCHIE / Detroit Free Press

MEMO: ARCHITECTURE

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