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Opinion

Central Branch must be saved

02/08/2007 - Expansion of the Central Branch of the Grosse Pointe Public Library has become somewhat of a controversy in the Grosse Pointes and nationwide.

When architects across the country learned the library board here was leaning toward tearing down the Marcel Breuer-designed building erected in 1953, they bombarded the board and library administration with e-mails objecting to the demolition of an architectural gem.

Mr. Breuer is considered one of the mid-20th century's great architects. The Central Branch library in Grosse Pointe Farms is the only Breuer building in the Detroit area. Further, the Central Branch was built with the generosity of the local Dexter Ferry family of the seed company fame.

However, the library board determined late last year that renovating the 53-year-old building to modern standards was impractical. Rather, the board favored the idea of raising the architectural gem and replacing it with a 40,000- to 45,000-square-foot building with underground parking on the same site.

The Grosse Pointe Central Branch building committee will meet at 7 p.m. Wednesdays, Feb. 14, 21 and 28, at the Ewald Branch in Grosse Pointe Park.

Due to the nationwide backlash to razing the Breuer building, including letters to the editor in the Grosse Pointe News and Detroit daily newspapers, the library board did some backpedaling last week and said it had not yet decided the fate of the Central Branch.

We agree with the critics that the Central Branch should be saved,

Opinion

◆ Editorial Cartoon

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for many reasons:

- 1) It is architecturally significant.
- 2) It is the legacy of the prominent Ferry family of Grosse Pointe.
- 3) It can be renovated to meet most of a modern library's needs.
- 4) It is not certain the library requires as much square-footage as the library board deems necessary.

Going back several years, the library administration was presented with options and architect recommendations for renovating the Central Branch. We are told those plans have been since lost, but the architects who first developed the plans still live in the Pointes and can be called on to consult the library board.

It seems to us the Central Branch, if all its contents were temporarily removed, could be gutted and new wiring, plumbing and modern computer networking incorporated. New heating and A/C units and ducting could be installed.

With modernization doable, that leaves square-footage as an obstacle.

According to Grosse Pointe library officials, half of all patron usage occurs at the Central Branch. Further, while the Central Branch ranks among the top 20 percent of Michigan libraries as far as patron usage, it ranks in the bottom 25 percent in terms of square feet per resident.

Also, library administration and officials would like to see the Grosse Pointe library system ranked among the nation's best. There is no doubt they take great pride in their stewardship.

But it seems to us, and we have expressed this opinion in the past, that libraries' function in the future is uncertain. The difference today versus half a century ago is, of course, the Internet.

Ask any secondary or college instructor what the primary source of student research is and you will be told the Internet. Further, with homes increasingly being serviced by broadband companies, much if not all of research these days is being done from home via the Internet.

We have to ask ourselves: Do libraries of today and the future

require as much square feet – largely for bookshelves – as they did 53 years ago?

Many people who are opposed to the grandiose plans for the Central Library say no. But library officials counter that the library has become more than a place to check out books or read periodicals. Rather, they are becoming community centers for groups and clubs and students to meet. More space is needed for such nontraditional library uses, officials believe.

Other valuable resources modern libraries offer are subscriptions to knowledge databases that would be too costly for the individuals who only need the resources occasionally. Consequently. However, many of these databases can also be accessed from home using broadband Internet connections to the local library. As for community meeting space, we already have the new Grosse Pointe Park and Woods branches, not to mention the War Memorial, Neighborhood Club, schools and community centers in the Woods, Farms and Park.

We are not opposed to a modernization of the Central Branch, but we do insist the original Breuer facade built by the generosity of the Ferry family be kept. Whether the Central Branch can, or should, be added onto remains to be determined.



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