



The City of Seattle

Landmarks Preservation Board

700 Third Avenue · 4th floor · Seattle, Washington 98104 · (206) 684-0228

REPORT ON DESIGNATION

LPB 27/01

Name and Address of Property: **North East Library**
6801 35th Avenue NE

Legal Description:

N 132 FT of the South 822 FT of that portion of the Southeast Quarter of the Southeast Quarter of Section 4T 25 N, 2 4E WM lying West of 35th Ave. NE and East of the East Line of the strip of land conveyed to the City of Seattle for alley by deed recorded in King Co. under Auditor's File No. 3358323, records of said county, said alley being a production of the alley in Block 1, Roosevelt Heights 2nd Addition according to the plot thereof recorded in Volume 33 of Plats, page 37, Records of King Co.

At the public meeting held on January 17, 2001, the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board voted to approve designation of the North East Library as a Seattle Landmark based upon satisfaction of the following standards for designation of SMC 25. 12.350:

- D. It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or of a method of construction.*
- E. It is an outstanding work of a designer or builder*

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

History of the City's Branch Libraries

City residents living in the northeast region of Seattle received their first municipal library services in March 1906 when the University Branch opened in the University Pharmacy which was located at the entrance to the University of Washington campus. In November the library was relocated to the neighborhood's Methodist Church. That same year the Library System established a separate Branch Department. Deposit stations were created in 1907, and in 1908 the City received a grant of \$105,000 for construction of three branches including Greenlake, West Seattle and the University Branch. (Two additional branches – Fremont and Yesler/Douglass-Truth Libraries -- were funded by

a \$70,000 Carnegie Grant in 1911.) The University Branch Library opened in August 1910 at its present location at Roosevelt Way Northeast and Northeast 47th Street.

By 1913 library patrons throughout the city were served from 495 distribution points: the Central Library, six drugstore deposit stations, seven branch libraries, six playgrounds, eight special deposit stations, 24 fire engine houses, stations, and 443 separate schoolrooms. The system's Schools Division, called the "Teachers Room", opened under the supervision of the Children's Department in 1910. A Stations Division opened in 1921. In the late 1920s, responsibility for library service to school children shifted, and the Library System and Seattle Public Schools created the first model school library in Hamilton Intermediate School in Wallingford.

In 1930 the Library published a Ten Year Program which included studies of the population and collection growth; library revenues and endowment funds; school, municipal reference and county services; and expansion of the Central Library. Circulation during the 1920s and early 1930s grew along with the city's literate population. Circulation reached a highpoint in 1932 by which time the library's collection had exceeded 450,000 volumes, and the number of borrowers surpassed 100,000. With the Depression and cutbacks in municipal funds, this all changed, and for a full decade many services were curtailed. Library hours were restricted, extension services eliminated, and in 1933 all branch departments were abolished. All deposit stations were closed and book mobile services ceased. Only ten branches remained active.

Seattle boomed during World War II and its library expanded services vastly in the 1940s to serve military personnel as well as local residents. In 1942 the Branch system was revived and John S. Richards was appointed city librarian. Between 1942 and 1948, 25 library stations were established including one at Sand Point in 1943. In 1943 the King County Library System was created, contracting with the Seattle Public Library for services. Richards immediately began planning for the city's post-war era.

Expansion of post war library services continued in the 1950s in both Seattle and King County. Seattle's library expanded its services in the 1950s to include chamber concerts, teas, book clubs, and annual classroom visits to 150 public schools. In 1953 Seattle annexed nearly 15 square miles, including the Lake City and Northgate areas, increasing its population by 54,000.

Community Context

The community that surrounds the North East Library is loosely defined by the hills of Wedgwood to the east, and Ravenna Park to the west. Comprised of the Ravenna-Bryant, Wedgwood, and View Ridge neighborhoods, and characterized by its close proximity to the University of Washington, this district was known as a bedroom enclave for professors and graduate students. Seattle developer Albert Bach was responsible for the development of the Wedgwood and View Ridge neighborhoods. In 1940, Bach purchased a tract of land from Seattle University, with the intent of establishing a 200-home development. Prior to Seattle University's ownership, a ginseng farmer, Charles Thorpe, held the land. It is believed that Bach's wife, an avid collector of Wedgwood china, named the new development. Architects Thomas, Grainger and Thomas were contracted for the design of the \$1 million development. View Ridge had preceded Wedgwood in its planning and construction.

As with many close-in suburban neighborhoods, this area exemplifies a pattern of pre and post war growth in Seattle. Private automobiles and single family residences were preferred by the middle class by the 1940s. As a result, the neighborhoods of Wedgwood, View Ridge and Ravenna-Bryant are defined by wider streets, larger lots with deeper yards that contrast with the city's older "streetcar" suburbs. Its buildings are typically single story, with wood frame construction and extensive domestic landscaping. Commerce in these areas appears to be limited to neighborhood services, such as grocery and drug stores, with some restaurants and cafes. Institutions are those that relate to a primary pattern of residential use with churches, retirement and nursing homes, schools and daycare facilities.

Between the years 1980 and 1990, the population of the children in the district under the age of 5 increased by 35%, while the population aged 65 years and over decreased by 7.6%. During the same period, the number of people of color increased by 47%, while the Caucasian population fell by 1.3%.

History of the North East Library

In 1944, Seattle's City Librarian, John Richards, promoted a specific \$1,425,000 line item in the city's proposed post-war annual budget for an addition to the Central Library and construction of several branch libraries. Included in this was a proposed new branch library to serve the northeast portion of the city. Meanwhile, in response to community needs, the Ravenna-View Ridge station was opened in December 1945 on 33rd Avenue NE near East 65th Street. (The Sand Point station was closed in October.) In 1950 approximately 11,250 people were served by the Ravenna-View Ridge Station, which then had a total of 8,825 circulating volumes. Approximately 41,700 volumes circulated in 1948, compared to 55,200 in 1950, an increase of 13% that clearly indicated the growing demand for library services.

On February 1, 1950, the Finance Committee of the Seattle City Council requested the Planning Commission to render its recommendation on the purchase of a branch library in the Ravenna-Bryant district. The residential population of the North East Community District had increased over 100% between the years 1940 and 1950, and this post-war growth showed no signs of diminishing. Increased circulation and overcrowding of the existing station necessitated a new branch.

Other factors contributed to the construction of the North East Library. These included the community's proximity to the University of Washington to the south and newer public schools, such as Nathan Eckstein Junior High School, to the north. New homeowners in the district were predominantly young families, indicating to city officials that there would soon be demands for new school and library services.

Analysis by the Seattle Public Library suggested that new branch facilities would be best located in or near a shopping center or commercial district. At the time, none were in existence in the Ravenna/View Ridge area, although some were in the planning stage. As a result, the focus fell on the topographic center of the district, just south of East 76th Street and east of 35th Avenue NE. This location was centered between Nathan Eckstein Junior High School and a proposed new elementary school to the east. A site was chosen a few blocks south of the topographic center at 6801 35th Avenue NE.

A \$5,000,000 bond was requested in 1950 for a new Central Library and five branches, but it was defeated. After a second \$1,500,000 library bond issue failed in 1952, Librarian John Richards successfully lobbied the Seattle City Council to allot funding from the Cumulative Reserve Fund for three new branch libraries and the purchase of a second mobile unit. The City Council responded with funds totaling \$492,000 in the 1953 budget to build the North East, Greenwood and Henry branches and the purchase of a second book mobile. The Greenwood branch opened on January 20, 1954, North East on June 3, 1954, and Henry on August 26, 1954.

When the North East branch opened it was practically empty, but it moved from the bottom in circulation to nearly the top within six months. Two years later, the North East Library became the most heavily used branch in the SPL system, a position it has held for over forty years.

The Library Designer, Architect Paul Thiry

In 1953, an article in *The Seattle Times* indicated that the Seattle firm of Kirk & Steinbrueck was initially selected for the design of the North East Library. However, architect Paul Thiry ultimately received the commission for the design of the library. Its construction was completed in 1954.

Paul Thiry (1904 – 1993) was responsible for a wide variety of buildings during his lengthy career, and is credited with introducing European Modernism to Seattle and the Northwest. He was born in Alaska in 1904, was educated at the University of Washington, and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Fountainbleu, graduating from the former in 1928. Upon returning to Seattle he worked with Butler Sturtevant briefly before opening his own office in 1929.

At the beginning of his career, Thiry focused on residential work. His early designs, such as the Lakecrest/Lake Court Apartments (Seattle, 1929) referenced historic styles, including French Norman and Colonial revival forms. In the early 1930s, with commissions dwindling due to the Depression, Thiry took a yearlong trip to Europe, Japan, India, China, Egypt and Central America. During this trip he was exposed to the work of European Modernists, and he met both Le Corbusier and Antonin Raymond.

The trip abroad significantly influenced Thiry's work, as is evidenced by the house he designed for himself upon his return to Seattle (the house, at 330 – 35th Avenue East in the Denny Blaine neighborhood, was built in 1936). The house exemplified European Modernist design with its simple cubic forms, smooth stucco and brick exterior, continuous strips of window glazing, industrial sash and glass block, and thin metal railings. At the time it was a radical advancement for architecture in the Northwest.

Thiry's early application of modernist principles brought him recognition as designer. But he was also an early critic of the Modern movement, noting in 1945 that “. . . the Pacific Northwest should develop a type of architecture indigenous to this part of the country – one which will take advantage of the natural surroundings and beautiful views that the Pacific northwest offers.” Thiry was recognized in a 1953 guide to Seattle architecture as one of the few local architects who advanced “new and provocative forms” and a “strong western tradition” in Modernism.

During World War II, Thiry partnered with a number of other architects to produce large-scale public planning, housing and military projects. His work during this period included design of the UW's West Kiln Building (1942), and collaboration on the Holly Park Housing Complex (1943). Thiry's post-war career focused on a wide variety of residential, civic and institutional buildings, including the McDonald House (Madrona, 1948), Alhadeff Residence (Mount Baker, 1949), Museum of History and Industry (1950), and the Church of Christ the King (Greenwood, 1952).

In the 1950s Thiry became more active in civic affairs. He served as the president of the Washington State AIA in 1954, and was an influential member of the Executive Committee of the Puget Sound Regional Planning Council from 1954 to 1957, and the city's Planning Commission from 1952 to 1961.

It was during this period in his career that Thiry designed the North East Library. The design of this building successfully integrated a single-story, low-gable pavilion building into its residential neighborhood. The site was landscaped with what are now mature conifer trees, and a small Japanese-inspired garden at the entry. An exterior reading space, defined by a low, half-circular fence and bench, projected into the landscape on the north side. The interior volume was open and spacious, distinguished by the clarity of its exposed structural system of steel and glu-lam beams.

Thiry's design of the North East Library was recognized immediately by local and national publications, and received an award from the AIA in 1957. The building was cited in Victor Steinbrueck's 1962 Seattle Cityscape as "a prototype for handsome neighborhood libraries . . . a residential idiom, with considerable restraint and confidence. . . a building of lasting quality." More recently this specific building was recognized as pivotal in the emergence of Northwest Modernism in the 1950s.

Thiry's view of Modernism was a clear departure from that of practitioners who utilized the standard palette of the International Style. His work, like that of others in the Northwest – John Yeon and Pietro Belluschi in Portland, and Paul Hayden Kirk, John Sproule, Roland Terry and Victor Steinbrueck, and later Fred Bassetti, Jack Morse, Gene Zema and Ibsen Nelson in Seattle -- went beyond Modernism to create a new form of "critical regionalism."

Paul Thiry's view of the Northwest environment and his use of materials lead him early to a personal interpretation of Modernism, as a "softer, more regional variant." This style became known as Northwest Modernism, or Northwest Contemporary. Thiry characterized his interpretation in humanistic terms: "We need to design with respect for people, for the person, for environment, and in scale and harmony with nature. . . We need an environment that is the direct result of our cultural aspirations."

Thiry's career continued to flourish for several decades after his work on the North East Library. He was selected as the Planner for the State Capitol Grounds, and his firm was one of three considered for the Seattle's Central Public Library in 1957. He was selected from among 35 architects in Washington State to design the prestigious \$1.2 million Washington State Library in Olympia (1959). Other work from this era included more institutional work: Covenant Chapel (Seattle, 1956), and a Women's Dorm and Science Building at Western Washington University (1957 - 1959), and increasingly larger homes, such as the American Embassy Residence in Santiago, Chile

(1958 -1961), and the Francis Brownell Residence (The Highlands, 1962). In 1967 he was selected to design the \$1.5 million library for Lewis and Clark College, Portland.

Greater local recognition of Paul Thiry's design came with his work for the Seattle World's Fair. In 1958, while the plans for this Exposition were in a seminal stage, he was appointed as its primary planner and architect. The Century 21 Exposition Grounds/Seattle Center represents Thiry's Modern concepts of city planning and architectural design, primarily through site planning and his design of both temporary and permanent structures.

Thiry's innovative use of light-weight, folded plate and pre-cast concrete structure and architectural design are exemplified by the Washington State Coliseum/Key Arena and other buildings on the World's Fair/Seattle Center grounds, the Mercer Island Presbyterian Church (Mercer Island, 1960 - 1961), St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church (Montlake, 1964 - 1968), and his work on the Libby Dam (Montana, 1962 - 1984).

Thiry's architectural work championed economy, context, expressive use of local materials, awareness of local light conditions, and the integration of fine art and innovation, particularly with concrete technology.

As a planner he called for an environmental approach with a focus on integrated regionalism, transportation and infrastructure. He also articulated these views in speeches, presentations and interviews.

He has made the point a number of times that the modern movement, which was as revolutionary as the Gothic, was in revolt essentially against outworn methods, against inefficiency, and against copying . . . Now he finds in (Modernism) too often a conglomeration of materials brought into one composition, structural gymnastics for their own sake; an emphasis on techniques and applied decoration. (He says) "the desire for novelty, linked with the swiftness of communications, has brought the modern movement full circle; most architecture today is the art of copying."

Thiry's buildings, and the influence of his planning and architectural ideas were recognized in local and national publications. Both the Chamber of Commerce and the City Council honored him as "Man of the Year" in 1962. Likewise, he was elected to the AIA's College of Fellows that same year. He was appointed to the National Capitol Planning Commission by President Kennedy in 1963, and to the Kennedy Library Commission by Jacqueline Kennedy in 1964. His later design included the Agnes Flanagan Chapel at Lewis and Clark College (Portland, 1972).

Thiry died in 1993 at the age of 89. He was known throughout his career as a leader in twentieth century Northwest architecture. His five decades of practice resulted in a lasting legacy of local, national and international projects.

DESCRIPTION

The Site

The North East Library is located on the corner of Northeast 68th Street and 35th Avenue Northeast. The property is well landscaped on the south and east, with large evergreen trees along the north, east and south edges. A single run of wide concrete stairs provides pedestrian access to the library from 35th Avenue Northeast. A driveway from Northeast 68th Street and an alley access a parking lot west of the building. The building is bordered by single family residences to the west and north, an apartment building to the south, and neighborhood businesses and churches along 35th Avenue Northeast to the east.

The neighborhood context was an important determinant in the building's design. After its completion, it was recognized that "the North East Branch of the Seattle Public Library...carried out the architect's idea that institutional buildings constructed in residential sections be compatible with surrounding environments." Consistent with Paul Thiry's beliefs, it was fitting that the North East Library employed principles of the Northwest Contemporary style, then commonly seen only in residential architecture.

Structure

The library is constructed of an exposed steel column and girder system, supporting glu-lam beams. The columns punctuate a structural grid of seven bays running north to south, and eight bays running east to west. The resulting 7,858 square foot building has a footprint of 76.5' by 84' on the eastern 45', and 96 on the western 32'. Modular aluminum sash windows run above solid panel walls and concrete stem walls, and serve as infill between the columns. The concrete stem walls are consistently level, banding the library, except at the entry and courtyard access. The building sits on a concrete slab-on-grade, with a partial service basement located on the west side. The roof form is a single, encompassing, low gable (1.5:12 slope), with a ridge along the north-south axis.

The Exterior

Exterior finishes are the expressive quality of the structural materials themselves. Steel and glu-lam beams are exposed, the aluminum window frames have been painted, and the exterior walls are infilled with terrazzo-like cast stone (concrete) panels. The steel framing members are exposed between the panels and at the corners, reinforcing the clear articulation of structure.

The main entry is located on the south façade of the library, and is marked by full-height glazing. The entry is covered and set inward one bay from the front face of the structural grid. The concrete tile soffits at the underside of the glu-lam beams provide 5' overhangs at the perimeter. Directly adjacent to the entry door is the original book drop and a surface-mounted glazed display case.

Mature conifer trees along 35th Avenue Northeast partially obscure the east façade from view. The cast stone panel walls and aluminum-framed windows create continuous horizontal bands around the building perimeter. The line between these two components is interrupted at the southeast corner of

the east elevation to punctuate the entry. The west elevation is almost identical to the east. Here, the windows and opaque walls are continuous along the full eight bays. The only break in the facade is a staff door for access to the book intake/processing room.

The library's north façade is the least visible. A semicircular, enclosed courtyard area is located on the facade. It is comprised of a poured concrete bench, which supports a metal frame with corrugated fiberglass panels. Similar to the wall treatment at the main entry treatment, access to the courtyard from the library interior is accented by full height glazing. The windows introduce copious amounts of natural light into the building, mediated by the exterior landscaping. Similarly, the glazing allows views out into landscaped areas.

The Interior

The library interior follows an open plan, with the exception of the enclosed staff areas and public restrooms in the building's southwest corner, and a glass-partitioned room at the northwest corner. This latter space was designed originally as a meeting room, and currently houses the fiction stacks. The open flexible layout was innovative for its time. The functionality of the plan was recognized in 1962 as "a prototype for neighborhood libraries." The design met the guidelines of the "Comprehensive Plan for Libraries" published by the Seattle Public Library in 1965 more than ten years after the North East Library was built.

Legibility between the interior spaces and exterior façades is an important principle of Modernism. It is illustrated in the built-in shelving which lines the library perimeter and corresponds to the height of exterior cast stone panels.

The Children's Area remains in its original location in the southeast corner of the library adjacent to the entry vestibule, and, notably where the concrete walls are lowest. Freestanding shelving and tables define the Research Materials and Information Areas. Computer stations are currently located in the center of the library in what was noted as the "Teenager's Area" on the original plan. The checkout desk at the southwest corner of the building fronts the private staff rooms, but relites provide the public with visual access to the staff offices. The only soffited portion of the open gabled ceiling is over the staff core.

Staff rooms include a staff lounge, librarian's office, and a private restroom. A book intake and processing room is accessible from the interior and from the parking lot. Public restrooms are located adjacent to the staff areas. A partial basement, 24' by 32' in size, placed along the building's west side, is accessed via stairs leading from the book intake room. It contains a mechanical room, electrical systems, and storage.

Within the public portion of the library, the floor, originally finished with vinyl tile, is currently carpeted. The ceiling is finished with 12"x12" acoustical ceiling tile with the painted steel and glulam structure left exposed. Banks of 2'x4' fluorescent lights run north to south. The staff rooms are also carpeted, although the basement below is an unfinished concrete slab. Walls are finished with plasterboard.

Several discrete remodel and upgrading projects have been undertaken at the North East Library. These have included changes to plumbing and mechanical equipment, accessibility, electrical power and distribution, changes to light fixtures and lamping, and finishes. The changes appear minimal however. Although the present finishes and furnishings are worn, the building original integrity is preserved. Crowding is apparent, due to increased collections and additional public services such as computers. Due in part to its open plan and lofty interior space there remains a sense of clarity on the interior. The exterior, with its simple form and materials, and mature landscape continues to express the building's Modern origins.

The features of the Landmark to be preserved, include:

The exterior of the building, the interior of the building excluding movable furniture, and the site.

Issued: January 26, 2001

Karen Gordon
City Historic Preservation Officer

cc:

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