The City of Seattle

Landmarks Preservation Board

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

<u>REPORT ON DESIGNATION</u> LPB 421/01

Name and Address of Property: **Douglass-Truth Library**
2300 E. Yesler Way

Legal Description: Poncin Gamma Addition, Block 27 B, Lots 4,5 and 6

At the public meeting held on November 28, 2001, the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board voted to approve designation of the Douglass-Truth Library as a Seattle Landmark based upon satisfaction of the following standards for designation of SMC 25. 12.350:

C. *It is associated in a significant way with a significant aspect of the cultural, political, or economic heritage of the community, city, state or nation.*

D. *It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, period, or of a method of construction; and*

E. *It is an outstanding work of a designer or builder*

F. *Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age or scale, it is an easily identifiable feature of its neighborhood or the City and contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or the City*

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Historic Overview of Seattle's Public Library System

Seattle's first Library Association was organized on August 7, 1868. The next year, a small loan library opened in Yesler Hall on First and Cherry, with a collection of approximately one hundred books. Little is known about that particular library, as it folded after a few years, with the collection being sold to the Territorial University.

During the ensuing decade, the city spread northward along Elliot Bay during its early development. Steep grades made the slopes above Front Street (First Avenue) unattractive to horse-drawn and pedestrian commerce, but provided a location for many residences, away from the noise and odor of the harbor. By the 1880s, Seattle's population surged from less than 7,000 to nearly 64,000.

In 1888, the Ladies Library Association was organized at the home of Mrs. Bailey Gatzert, in a renewed effort to establish a free public library in the city. Assisted with seed money from Leigh S. J. Hunt (owner and editor of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*) and businessperson Henry Yesler, the library was adopted as a branch of the Seattle City Government in October 1890. From 1891 to 1894, the library was housed in the Occidental Block in Pioneer Square. It then moved northeastward to the Collins Block for two years, followed by another two-year stay in the Rialto Building. In 1898, the collection was moved to the elegant, forty-room Yesler mansion, which provided ample room, light, and convenience for its patrons.

Early downtown re-grades and those on Denny Knoll and the steeper Denny Hill, north of Pine Street, were followed by the introduction of streetcars, and commercial development along First and Second Avenues. The national depression in 1893 slowed local economic growth, and the city did not fully recover until the onset of the Klondike Gold Rush in 1897. With the transcontinental railroad connection, the city's population growth resumed, its population rising to 110,000 in 1900.

By 1900, the city's public library had over 25,000 volumes and close to 10,000 registered borrowers. Patrons were allowed direct access to shelves to browse and select books, a rarity for libraries on the West Coast. The many rooms of the Yesler mansion allowed the library staff to establish separate departments, such as a Children's Room.

On New Years Day, 1901, fire swept through the Yesler mansion, destroying almost the entire library collection. Three days later Andrew Carnegie provided the sought after assistance. Carnegie previously had declined to provide funding when representatives from Seattle approached him in 1899, due to his view that the city was a "hot air boom town." In this new time of need, he admired the city's pluck and donated $200,000 for a new building. Subsequent gifts also allowed the Library to establish its first permanent neighborhood branches.

In 1901, the City of Seattle purchased the Central Library's present site for $100,000. Construction began in 1905, and the central Carnegie Library opened in 1907, with a collection of 93,784 volumes and 29,118 borrowers. The new building allowed for additional departments and services, such as a periodical room, and a Fine Arts Division. That same year, the first embossed books for the blind were circulated and several deposit stations opened around town -- nineteen of them in fire stations.

Seattle maintained an extraordinary growth rate through annexation and immigration. The city's land area nearly tripled in 1907, with annexations of Ballard, West Seattle, and Southeast Seattle, and by 1910 its population reached 285,000. Public schools, which served as national models at the time, and cultural activities, such as theater and symphony, also made great advances prior to World War I.

Changes and turbulence within the city's social, economic, and political fabric characterized the city's history during the decades of 1900 – 1920, and the residential population during this time increased 190 percent. Efforts were underway to bring utilities, police and fire, as well as sewer and water services under municipal control, while industrial relations and the fight for civil liberties raised issues of life quality. Reform campaigns brought these issues to the fore of public discussion.

City residents living in the neighborhoods received their first municipal library services through stations, which were managed by a separate Branch Department. In 1908, the City received a Carnegie grant of $105,000 for construction of three branches including Green Lake, West Seattle, and the University Branch. A $70,000 Carnegie Grant, in 1911, funded two additional branches – Columbia and Queen Anne. In 1917, the Carnegie Corporation promised $35,000 for a branch library in Fremont. Halted by World War I, the commitment was honored and construction resumed following the war, with the library's completion in 1921. The Yesler Memorial Library, renamed the Douglass-Truth Library in 1975, is of the Carnegie era, but was not built with the help of a Carnegie grant.

By 1913, library patrons throughout Seattle were served from 495 distribution points: the Central Library, six drugstore deposit stations, seven branch libraries, six playgrounds, eight special deposit stations, twenty-four fire engine houses, and 443 separate schoolrooms.

In 1910 the Library's Schools Division was opened, under the supervision of the Children's Department. School children were served exclusively by SPL until 1927, when responsibility for library service shifted, and the Library System and Seattle Public Schools created the first model school library in Wallingford's Hamilton Intermediate School.

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.

The 1920s saw a resurgence of old problems such as unemployment, and social and political unrest. The move for municipal ownership dominated city politics, while funding was reduced or eliminated for socially sensitive programs in schools. Circulation during the 1920s and early 1930s grew along with the city's literate population. By 1930, the SPL collection had grown to nearly 450,000 volumes, with over 100,000 borrowers. Nearly one-fourth of Seattle's residents had library cards. A large foreign section was in place, indicating the diversity of Seattle's growing population. Circulation reached a highpoint in 1932.

In the 1930s, with the Hoover years and the Great Depression, Seattle experienced minimal physical development and a continuation of unresolved social and political issues. The Depression and cutbacks in municipal funds impacted public library services. Library staff, salaries, and benefits were cut, and many services were curtailed for a full decade. Library hours were restricted, extension services eliminated, and in 1933, branch departments were abolished. All deposit stations were closed and book mobile services ceased, and only ten branches remained active. In 1935, workers organized the Seattle Public Library Staff Association, which led to their inclusion in the city's pension program and a return to pre-Depression salary levels. A forty-hour workweek was also instituted.

The onset of World War II eased class tensions, but it also precipitated dramatic social changes. The internment of thousands of Japanese Americans, along with an influx of large numbers of African

Americans, the introduction of women to many traditionally male jobs, and the establishment of a technocratic middle class dependent on the aerospace and defense industries all contributed to a shifting of Seattle's demographics.

Seattle boomed during the war, and its library services expanded vastly to serve military personnel, as well as local residents. In 1940, the library inaugurated its film library, the Great Books Program, discussion groups and an art gallery in its downtown auditorium. Collections were expanded, including phonograph records. Free service was extended in 1941, to all soldiers and sailors in the Puget Sound region, and in 1942, to all war workers. Adult education, which was organized in 1928, to provide individual reading programs, shifted its focus in 1942, to group literacy classes. Between 1942 and 1948, twenty-five library stations were established. In 1943, the King County Library System was created, contracting with the Seattle Public Library for services.

Expansion of post war library services continued in the 1950s, in both Seattle and surrounding King County. In 1953, Seattle annexed nearly fifteen square miles, including the Lake City and Northgate areas, increasing its population by 54,000. Library services in these new areas continued to be provided by the King County Library System, which by 1956, included thirty-seven branches and two bookmobiles. Seattle's library expanded its services in the 1950s, to include chamber concerts, teas, book clubs, and annual classroom visits to 150 public schools.

A $5,000,000 bond was sought in 1950 for a new Central Library and five branches, but it was defeated at the polls. After a second $1,500,000 library bond failed in 1952, City Librarian John Richards successfully lobbied the Seattle City Council for funds from the Cumulative Reserve Fund for three new branch libraries and the purchase of a second mobile unit.

It was not until 1956, when voters approved bonds for construction of a new Central Library and six neighborhood branches, that significant funds would be spent on the maintenance and construction of Seattle's public libraries. By the end of 1960, registered patrons in the city numbered 260,425, nearly half the city's total resident population.

By the early 1990s, the Seattle Public Library system had grown to more than twenty-five branches. Its downtown hub was severely stressed in serving the needs of the system and its immediate patrons. The Library proposed a major bond issue in 1994, to build a new Central Library and add several regional centers. This was joined on the ballot with major bond issues for police precincts and the Seattle Public Schools. All of these bonds failed.

Following this defeat, the Library Board launched a new review of its capital needs with extensive citizen participation. This process confirmed the need for a new Central Library, and a system-wide program of improvements, "Libraries for All." This bond passed with a majority of nearly 70 percent, and provided $196.4 million to renovate libraries throughout the city. In addition, this bond was intended to provide support for the arts, cultural diversity, and neighborhood vitality through the renovation of Seattle's Public Library buildings.

A new Central Library, and three new libraries, to serve the Delridge, International District, and Northgate communities, will be added to the present system of twenty-two neighborhood libraries. Plans call for renovation, and expansion of existing facilities and services, to be completed over an eight-year period from 1999 to 2007. These plans include system upgrades and expanded service and public program space in the Carnegie-era Libraries.

In addition to the public funding, the Seattle Public Library Foundation pledged to raise $40 million from the private sector. This private investment will complete that vision and ensure funding for high quality furnishings, works of art and new technology. In addition, it will build endowment funds for books, materials, and programs.

The Central Area Neighborhood

Seattle's Central Area was not established as an autonomous town, like Fremont, nor were its origins part of a development, such as the University District. Rather the neighborhood's character is a product of its residents and its urban environment, both of which have continually changed throughout the years.

The Central Area is that part of the city generally defined as north of Interstate 90, east of Broadway, south of Union Street and extending east to Lake Washington. Early development of this area centered on logging. The logs were skid down Yesler Way (then Skid Road) to the Yesler sawmill. This activity left a large flat area, well suited for residential development.

By 1884 a hack (wagon) line ran daily on Jackson Street to Lake Washington, providing transportation between the neighborhood and downtown Seattle. By 1889, the city's first cable car line was set along Yesler Way to Lake Washington, returning back on Jackson Street. Development in the 1800s was closely linked to the transportation provided by the hack line. The area rapidly grew to a middle class residential neighborhood, with its own churches, synagogues, hospitals, schools, fire stations, and public library.

By 1910 streetcars ran throughout the Central Area, increasing in number and frequency as the years progressed. By the mid-1900s, however, arterial traffic through the neighborhood and to suburbs along Lake Washington, contributed to the area's fragmentation. This situation was further aggravated by the plans for the R. H. Thompson freeway to run through the Central Area; fortunately these were terminated because of citizen opposition.
Census demographics as early as the 1890s, indicate the Central District has been a traditional home to many racial and ethnic minorities. Numerous synagogues in the area attest to the large Jewish population, especially in the blocks surrounding the Temple de Hirsch at East Pike Street and Fifteenth Avenue. By the 1900s, the Judkins Neighborhood had become predominately German and Italian. Between ca. 1916 to 1941, Japanese Americans and other Asian immigrants moved into the area, and by 1940, the Central Area held Seattle's most concentrated Russian population.

Early African American settlement is attributed to William Gross (1835 – 1898), who, after serving with Commodore Perry in the Orient, came to Seattle in 1859 at the suggestion of Washington's territorial governor, to open a hotel. The hotel, called "Our House," was at the time the second largest in Seattle. An important landowner and a leader in the African American community, Gross acquired a large tract of land between Twenty-First and Twenty-Third Avenues, near Madison Street, in payment for a debt. He then moved his residence to this area. Several other early African

American families, including the Collins family (at Twenty-Seventh Avenue and East Madison), also moved to this area, representing the origins of the African American community in the Central Area. By 1940 the African American community had substantially increased in number, concentrated with residences and businesses along Twenty Third Avenue between Yesler Way and East Roy Street.

One poignant result of World War II was the internment of all Japanese and Japanese Americans living in the Pacific Coast States. Their formal removal from Seattle coincided with a great demand for military-industrial workers, and the migration of many African Americans, from the East and South to Northern and West Coast cities, such as Seattle.

In the post war era, new outlying suburbs drew the middle class away from the Central Area, leaving it an enclave of the working class, low-income families, and the elderly. Disinvestment in the form of redlining, housing blight, and general decay of the social and environmental condition followed.

The 1950s and 1960s saw several attempts at planning and community efforts to improve living conditions in the neighborhood. In 1964, the Yesler/Atlantic Urban Renewal Project began removing substandard housing from the area in anticipation of its replacement with high-density government subsidized housing. Federal funds were removed, however, and consequently development slowed, leaving vacant lots and blocks interspersed throughout the area. In 1968, improvements to the social and economic conditions were initiated by the Model City's Program. However, these efforts did not focus on the physical environment.

African American identity with the Central District has played a prominent role in the community's history beginning in the 1970s. One result of this was the renaming of the Henry L. Yesler Memorial library to the Douglass-Truth Library in 1975.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a renaissance in the Central Area began, created by general economic prosperity, community efforts, and greater investment in housing and businesses in the area. City investments included the new Central Neighborhood Service Center at Twenty-Third Avenue South and South Jackson Street in 1996.

Present demographic studies suggest the Central Area is again undergoing a transformation. The area has become more diverse with its racial make up consisting of African-Americans, Caucasians, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, Native Americans and others. Dramatic declines in African American residents have occurred from 1980 to 2000 with black residential population changing from more than 90 percent to less than 25 percent in some portions of the neighborhood, particularly those near Garfield High School and the intersection of East Union and Twenty-Third. Gentrification is suggested by the rise in median housing prices, which have increased in the past 15 years from $62,000 to $286,000. At the same time homeownership, and the number of children under high-school age have increased.

Despite recent demographic changes, the Central Area still retains the highest concentration of African-Americans in the city, with 32 percent of its residents, comparing to the city-wide figure of 8.3 percent. Many who have moved from the neighborhood remain in Seattle, settling further south in Rainier Beach and Rainier Valley neighborhoods.

Current projects in the neighborhood include the rehabilitation of four, wood frame Victorian homes at Twenty-Third Street South and Yesler Way, across from the Douglass-Truth Library, an ongoing project by Historic Seattle. Other development efforts are underway to encourage a mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented urban village along Jackson Street. The block, bordered by South Main Street, Twenty-Third Street and Yesler Way and Twenty-Fourth Street, is zoned for increased commercial use. An increase in residential density is also planned for the block between Twenty-Second and Twenty-Third Streets and Yesler Way and Main Street to support.

A History of the Douglass-Truth Library

The Douglass-Truth Library, formerly the Henry L. Yesler Memorial Library, has served the Central Area community for more than 80 years, during a time when the neighborhood experienced sweeping economic and social changes, as well as shifting residential patterns.

A site for the Henry L. Yesler Library, at the corner of Twenty-Third Avenue East and East Yesler, was purchased in 1912 for $17,566. The site was expanded in 1913, with the purchase of the adjacent property at Twenty-Fourth Avenue East and East Yesler for $13,500. $40,000 of city funds were made available to build the library as its construction was not supported by a Carnegie Corporation grant.

The Henry L. Yesler Memorial Library opened in the present location on September 15, 1914, with a ceremony and high neighborhood turnout. The Library, in addition to regular services, included the use of an auditorium and a separate story hour room. Within four months, by the end of that year, twenty-two groups had held meetings in the library auditorium, and the library circulation had reached over 39,800 volumes (of this, sixty percent was for children).

Specific library services have been developed throughout its history in response to community needs. According to Census data, many Jews lived in the Central Area prior to the 1920s. Thus the Yesler Library held all Hebrew and Yiddish books in the Seattle Public Library System from 1916 to the 1960s. The late 1920s saw an increase in foreign immigrants to the area. Beginning in 1919, “Americanization” classes were held in the library auditorium, and citizenship papers were prepared on-site. Beginning in 1926, one week each year was set aside to focus on African American history and literature.

The Depression in the 1930s saw an initial rise and then a drop in circulation at the Yesler Library, as in libraries throughout the city. The 1940s and World War II brought what the librarians at the time described as a change in attitude towards reading: every one was either too tired after work or had too little time. In August of 1942, the library’s skylights were painted black, in accordance with wartime dim-out regulations. The end of the war brought an additional influx in young readers.

By the 1960s, seventy percent of the Library’s users were African American. Racial tensions during the late 1960s impacted library use, resulting both in decreased circulation. These conditions strengthened the community’s resolve to claim the Library as their own. Seminars, lectures, and readings–including presentations by the poet and playwright LeRoi Jones in 1966, and Grass Roots Forums in 1965 – 1968 addressed social problems, and the issues of riots and the role of African Americans in society. Children’s films were shown weekly from 1965 to 1967.

The early 1970s brought proposed budget cuts, racial stereotyping, and one of the lowest circulation levels in the city. The Library and Central Area community responded with Community Education Awareness Program to address the role of African Americans in the history of the United States, and the Bicentennial Program, which featured displays from the Smithsonian Institute about African Americans in the westward movement. In 1972, the Boys' Rotary Club donated the "Soul Pole" to the Library, a wood pole carved by four local youth which depicted African American history.

Efforts to initiate a name change began in the late 1960s. The reference to Henry L. Yesler lacked meaning, and the community sought a name to reflect the predominant user group in the Central Area. This effort was initiated by groups such as "The Black Friends of Yesler" (established 1966), and was supported by community groups such as the Central Seattle Community Council. The community felt a new, relevant name was needed to stimulate pride and inspire library users.

After long debate, forms were distributed throughout Seattle, with the following names for the library were suggested: James Baldwin, Benjamin Banneker, Gwendolyn Brooks, W. E. B. DuBois, Lorraine Hansberry, James Weldon Johnson, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth received an equal number of votes. The building's new official name, The Douglass-Truth Library, was declared in December 1975, by Mayor Wes Uhlman. (A similar name change occurred in the late 1980s when a major arterial, Empire Way, was renamed in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Frederick Douglass (1817 – 1895) was a seventeenth century abolitionist newspaper editor, writer, founder of the famous *North Star* newspaper, and holder of several governmental offices. Sojourner Truth (formerly Isabella Baumfree, 1797 – 1883) wrote and lectured in the cause of women's rights and the abolition of slavery.

By 1975, the Douglass-Truth Library had established a comprehensive collections on African American history and literature. Most of this collection has been donated by Seattle's African American community. It is the largest of its kind in the Pacific Northwest, and contains periodicals, videos, clippings, picture files and more than 10,000 books on the African American experience. The west wing of the library houses the African American Collection.

Presently there are several distinct neighborhoods within the Central Area, which are further subdivided by its major arterials -- Yesler Way, South Jackson, Twenty-Third Avenue, and Martin Luther King Junior Way. The service area for the Douglass-Truth Library consists primarily of the residential area, presently defined by the area north of Interstate 90, west of Lake Washington, east of Sixteenth Avenue and south of Cherry Street. The edges of this service area are shared to the northwest with the Central Library, and libraries at Seattle University and the Seattle Central Community College. The northeast portion is shared with the Madrona – Sally Goldmark Library. The Montlake Library provides service to the north.

There are fourteen public and private schools within these primary and shared service areas surrounding the Douglass-Truth Library. Six schools are in close proximity, these include two public elementary schools, three public high schools, and one private high school.

The unique character of the Douglass-Truth Library is drawn from its neighborhood's history. Today its name, and its special African American Collection, represent close community involvement and a proud community association with the Library.

The Architects, Somervell & Thomas

W. Marbury Somervell

Woodruff Marbury Somervell was born in Washington D.C. on May 3, 1872 to Augustus and Mary Eliza (Somervell) Maccafferty. Through his architectural career, he was actively involved in civic improvement efforts, as well as the design of public and commercial buildings in Seattle and Vancouver, Canada.

Somervell's family name was changed by a Supreme Court decision, due to a clause in the will of his maternal grandfather (Woodruff Marbury Somervell), in order to inherit certain properties. His paternal grandfather, an Irish civil engineer, was associated with DeWitt Clinton in the Erie Canal project, and later traveled to Cuba where he built the island's first light house, railway and located the first copper mines.

Somervell apparently inherited some of this restless nature. After graduating in 1892, with a degree in Architecture from Cornell University, he left for the School of Fine Arts in Florence, Italy. He moved to Paris in 1893 to be part of an American atelier. He later worked a year in Baltimore, before moving to New York in 1902. He stayed in New York, working for the firm of Heins & LaFarge until he was sent to Seattle in 1904 to supervise construction of the Saint James Catholic Cathedral (1903 – 1907; altered), on First Hill. During his work for the firm of Heins & LaFarge in New York City, he met Joseph Coté.

Somervell formed a Seattle partnership with Coté for a four-year period before forming a sole proprietorship in 1911. He opened a branch office in Vancouver, Canada, with John L Putnam, while retaining an independent office in Seattle. A large portion of Somervell & Putnam's work in Vancouver included banks and office buildings, such as the Birks Building (1912; destroyed), which was then the only terra cotta faced building in Vancouver.

Somervell's independent Seattle practice built upon Beaux-Arts Classicism with adaptations reflecting Pacific Northwest conditions. By 1912, he and architect Harlan Thomas, in a new partnership, had secured commissions for the Queen Anne, Henry L. Yesler Memorial/Douglass-Truth, and Columbia Libraries. The buildings were designed and constructed, respectively, in 1910, 1914 and 1915. Each was designed utilizing the standard Carnegie plans, yet each retained separate qualities, with exterior features and siting well matched to their sites and neighborhoods.

These commissions for public buildings provided Somervell an opportunity to realize and refine his thoughts on civic improvement, an important component of his professional writings. He had an avid interest in civic art, which he defined as useful and communal art. This interest corresponded well with the civic and community intent of Carnegie public libraries.

World War I saw Somervell's departure from Seattle to serve in the Corps of Engineers and Chemical Warfare. He later remained in Europe to work on restoration of cultural monuments. Following the war he and Putnam both moved to Los Angeles. There they worked together until 1929, after which Somervell worked both independently and with architect S. Tilden Norten, until 1935. He then retired to Cannes, France, and pursued a lifelong interest in etching until his death at the age of 64 on April 2, 1939.

<u>Harlan Thomas</u>

One of the more urbane and versatile architects of Seattle, Harlan Thomas (1870 – 1953) drew both on contemporary developments in American architecture and the influence of specific architects rather than academic trends in the 1920s and 1930s to produce fresh and sophisticated designs for Seattle.

Thomas was born in Des Moines, Iowa on January 10, 1870. His family moved to Colorado in 1879 where his interest in drawing, mechanics, and his experience as a carpenter, led to employment as a draftsman for a Denver architect. He later graduated from Colorado State College with a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics and Mechanics in 1895.

He opened his own architectural office in Denver in 1895, already having designed a residence and two buildings for Colorado State College. His travels included sixteen months of study in Paris at an American atelier. In 1903 – 1904, he undertook a fifteen-month round-the-world trip to study, paint and sketch. Later he would make two more trips to Europe.

Harlan Thomas moved to Seattle in 1906 and built a house on Queen Anne Hill. By 1907 he had commissions for the Chelsea and Sorrento Hotels, local residences, as well as for schools in Aberdeen, Monroe, and Enumclaw. The balance of his practice was spent in partnership with other architects: Thomas, Russell & Rice; Thomas & (Clyde) Grainger (1887 – 1958); Thomas, Grainger & Thomas (with Harlan's son, Donald P. Thomas, 1898 – 1970); and several temporary associations. One of these resulted in work with W. M. Somervell on the Queen Anne, Columbia, and Henry Yesler Branch Libraries in 1912 to 1915.

Thomas was active in the Seattle Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, where he served as chapter president (1924 – 1926). In 1928 he was elected a Fellow. In 1926, until 1940, he was appointed Professor of Architecture and Director of the Architecture Department at the University of Washington. He retired in 1949, and devoted his time to painting and sketching, before his death at age 83, on September 4, 1953.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Urban Context

The physical context of the Douglass-Truth Library, in the Central Area, has experienced constant change over the years. In 1913, when the Henry L. Yesler Memorial Library was first constructed, the area surrounding it was residential, with a number of un-built lots, and several churches. In 1931, the Art Deco style Fire Station No. 6 was built on the corner of Twenty-Third Avenue and Yesler Way, southwest across the intersection from the Library.

The Central Area's environment is made up by its residential housing stock, community oriented and small businesses, and public and non-profit community facilities, such as the Douglass-Truth Library, Langston Hughes Cultural Arts Center, and Cherry Hill Neighborhood Facility. While some open spaces and un-built lots remain, the neighborhood's density has grown in the last several decades with the increase of infill housing and new commerce. The neighborhood surrounding the Douglass-Truth Library is characterized primarily by single family and townhouse development.

The Carnegie Building Type

Although the Douglass-Truth Library was not funded by a Carnegie grant, it nevertheless follows the precedent of the Carnegie library building plan. Earlier local precedents for the building included the Carnegie grant-funded University, Green Lake, and West Seattle Libraries (all dating from 1910), and the Queen Anne Library (1913).

The Carnegie library plan of the early twentieth century was typically rectangular and featured bi-axial symmetry and an open floor plan. Although variations emerged, its functions were proscribed, and the building was divided into specific spaces – entry stairs, vestibule, central area and circulation desk, open shelf area, reading rooms, work and staff rooms, and restrooms. Buildings typically featured a separate children's area, story hour room or alcove. A lecture or meeting room (auditorium), located at or partially below grade, was another standard addition to the library program. Spatial volumes were tall, with the sills of perimeter windows located 6' above floors to accommodate book shelving.

The Original Site

The Douglass-Truth Library is located at 2300 East Yesler Way. The site, a 17,785 square foot rectangular, through-block lot is situated at the northeast corner of the intersection and at block's south end. The main public entry and primary facade are oriented south, onto Yesler Way. The east facade faces Twenty-Fourth Avenue, and the west facade faces Twenty-Third Avenue. The north facade faces a loading and service area, accessed by a service driveway from both Twenty-Third and Twenty-Fourth Avenues. The building is set back from the side streets, and from the front property line approximately 35'.

A review of the original plans, dating from July 1913, provides a contemporary view of the building and its site. The historic landscape design, according to these drawings, showed very few side or entry plantings, and no shrubs. A raised, oval flowerbed was located between two symmetrical, curving stairs leading to the main entry. At the rear and along the sides, the lawn was slightly raised above sidewalk level. Slight slope areas to either side of the building were treated as lawns that rose from the rear of the site to the front, resulting in an elevated lawn at the front. The site corners were square with the exception of a curved corner at the corner of Twenty-Third Avenue and Yesler Way.

Entry stairs, landings, pedestals, and seats that led up to the entry were concrete, with brick surfacing on the landings. The two semi-circular stairs that led up from sidewalk, were bordered on both sides by low, narrow, concrete walls. These served as outer borders, and extended down to sidewalk level, wrapping around the corner of the elevated lawn, terminating in small piers. The inner borders formed a retaining wall for the raised flower garden.

The first exterior stair landing was surfaced with brick, laid in a herringbone patter, with soldier course edging, and a central concrete paver. To either side were raised plinths with light standards. A second, higher stair landing was also surfaced with brick, laid in a herringbone pattern. Lamps stood on raised pedestals framing the entry. The Classical style main entry was highly decorated with terra cotta, and contained a pair of single panel oak doors with stained glass relites.

A 10’ wide concrete driveway sloped down from street level to access the below-grade service area on the north. A service entry at the northeast corner of the building led into the basement. An original access chute for coal was provided at this location.

Exterior and Structure

The Douglass-Truth Library is a well-detailed example of Renaissance Revival design which also exhibits influences of the Mediterranean Revival style. Its massing is horizontal, and its form appears symmetrical. The building features a strong window pattern of single units precisely composed in groups and set within brick and terra cotta masonry. The earth tones of its terra cotta cladding and tile roofing are suggestive of a warm, sunny climate. Overall horizontality is reinforced by the roof overhand, the consistent window placement and masonry trim.

The overall building plan is a short T-shape with approximate dimensions of 110’-10” by 34’-5” at the front or south portion that comprises the entry, circulation desk and side reading rooms at the main floor, and an asymmetrically placed, 88’-4” by 25’-1”, back portion that contains the central open shelf room, and side work room, office and other service spaces. The central 48’-10” wide portion of the back section, which encloses the open shelf room, projects an additional 7’-5” further to the north.

The building features a primary hipped gable roof over the front portion, and a gable roof over the back portion of the library (with a partial flat section). Roofing material is a red mission tile, with formed copper gutters, and copper downspouts. The cornice and trim around the windows are clad with tan-colored terra cotta. Decorative wood eaves complete the Mediterranean style roof details. Roof framing consists of wood trusses, with steel rod tension members. A brick chimney with a decorative corbel and cap is located at the back of the building.

Foundation walls, footings, and outer walls were of reinforced concrete. Outer walls above grade had a veneer of buff-colored tapestry brick, of local origin. (The original specifications called for the same brick used on the Columbia Library, which was obtained from an eastern US company. The library board voted for local materials.)

The Original Interior

The library plan was partitioned originally according to its function, with specific rooms for staff activities on the main floor in the staff room, kitchen, librarians' room and workrooms. Two small custodial closets, were located at the sides of the vestibule. Public space on the main floor included the central circulation desk, adult and children's reading rooms (on the east and west sides respectively), and open shelf area. Originally there were no plan elements to distinguish adult or children's reading rooms, rather the size of furniture itself and the collections designated the patrons' ages.

Typical of a Carnegie library plan, the interior arrangement of public space on the main floor focused on the central circulation desk. Extending from it, and clearly visible to the seated librarian, were the open shelf area and reading rooms. Partial-height, stained wood and glass partition walls were placed between the central area and the side reading rooms, to reinforce the open plan. Spatial qualities reinforced the importance of the public rooms, with their 16'-6" ceiling heights, in contrast to the service spaces and offices with 10' ceilings.

Original finishes on the main floor were decorative yet simple. They included stained fir flooring, plastered ceilings and walls, and stained wood baseboard in the staff room. The vestibule had a decorative plaster ceiling, with marble cladding on the walls. The open shelf room had 6' tall shelves placed along the perimeter walls, just below the tall window sills. The windows appeared to extend up to the ceiling cove molding, casting plentiful natural light into the interior.

An interior wood stairway between the main floor and basement was located off the open shelf room, and the staff room. The basement landing opened onto a corridor, which led to the auditorium. Other public space in the basement included the story hour room, corridor, and the men's bathroom. Service areas included the fuel room, boiler room, and the "unstacking room" (the processing room).

Finishes in the basement were primarily utilitarian. Floors were concrete. The corridor featured a wood base, and plastered walls. The bathroom had plaster walls, with a Keene cement wainscot and wood toilet stalls. Boiler, fuel, and unstacking room walls were finished with whitewash. The basement story hour room was finished with painted plastered walls, wood baseboard and wood picture molding, and contained a 3' by 10' slate blackboard on the west wall. Obscure glass formed the upper half of south partition wall, between the story hour room and the corridor.

Decorative features of the main floor included the prominent plaster cornices in the reading room, central area and open shelf rooms. Decorative pillars and engaged piers, with ornate modeled plaster capitals are located between the central entry, the reading rooms, and the open shelf room. Doors between interior spaces were stained oak with a large upper panel and a lower panel. In the basement, the doorway into the story hour room from the corridor featured a pivoting transom window.

Windows at the main floor were placed along the perimeter walls illuminating the north wall of the open shelf room, and the side and south walls of the two reading rooms. Windows also provided natural light into the kitchen, toilets, workroom, staff room, and the librarians' room. Windows included painted wood frames, sash and trim. The typical windows in the reading rooms and open shelf room were large, each approximately 8' by 4', and featured a two over two pattern. The windows' verticality was reinforced by the sash design with the lower units approximately twice the height of the upper ones. Originally these windows were operable. Windows in the staff room and other areas featured were double hung types.

A prominent original feature of the building was the large, approximately 18' by 14', stained glass skylight which was symmetrically located over the open central shelf room. It had copper trim, and a fourteen-inch ventilator, and white, yellow and green colored translucent glass.

Changes to the Original Building

According to building permit records from DCLU, upgrading and changes over time have included the following changes:

1940	Install new lighting fixtures
1962	New interior flooring
1962	Repair storm damage to roof, repair metal skylight flashing and broken tiles
1965	Remodel heating system
1965	Install stainless steel book drop
1966	Install fluorescent fixtures
1968	Alter portion of existing library
1972	Erect and maintain sign, new copier outlet
1973	Extend receptacle
1974	Install cast iron gas burner
1975	Hang three light fixtures in office
1977	New boiler
1982	All floor outlets and light fixtures
1984	Alter Existing library per plans, install fire alarm system, and pathway lights
1987	Renovation of existing library building per plans, new CMU shear walls, and lighting
1990	Landscaping, accessibility signs at access ramps and restrooms

Changes to the site included removal of trees in 1951, which were described as damaging the roof and obscuring the building. A master landscape plan, prepared in June of 1984 by G. Davis and Associates, proposed extensive plantings adjacent to the building's foundation and around the site perimeter. However, the current landscape does not reflect this proposed design.

Changes to the site entry were made as part of the major renovation in 1987 to provide ADA access. The main entry was effectively shortened at the first landing, by relocation of the upper flight of steps and light plinths to accommodate ramps on either side. The ramps extended out from the entry landing, aligning with the outer corners of the south wall, before turning back to meet the sidewalk. A low, concrete border wall, detailed to match original border walls, flanked the ramps and the inner wall and met the existing outer border wall of the stairs. This plan retained the overall character and symmetry of the original design. A new exterior stair was also added at this time on the northwest corner to access the basement corridor.

By 1968, the auditorium functions included storage of discarded books. This room was renovated that year, after the "Black Friends of Yesler" initiated a project to create a public meeting space for the community. The new meeting room was dedicated in 1968 as the Sam Smith Meeting Room, in honor of Seattle's first African American City Councilman. Plans dating from 1969 no longer show the original partition wall between the basement corridor and the story hour room (presently a meeting room).

Renovations in 1969 included removal of the original linoleum and the addition of a drop ceiling in the basement auditorium. A book drop was installed in the east room adjacent the vestibule during a 1984 renovation.
Changes in public access and interior rooms occurred in 1965, and again during the 1969, 1984 remodels and the 1987 rehabilitation. Existing public entries experienced renovations, but maintained their original configuration. In 1987, a new exterior entry was provided to replace a ca. 1965-era aluminum entry with. It featured wood-framed transom windows and a pair of panel type doors based on the original entry design.

New interior stairs and landings were installed in the basement in 1987, and a new carpet and interior ramps were added in the west corridor. A new ceiling was installed in the meeting room, and fixtures, and doors were also repaired, cleaned, and replaced as needed.

Public room arrangements and connections on the main floor have maintained their original configuration and remain characteristic of the Carnegie library building type. The layout remains symmetrical at the upper floor, and the central location of the circulation desk has been preserved. However, the arrangement of features within the public spaces reflects ongoing adjustments to new library service needs.

The original configuration of six desks in each reading room were changed to include new shelving along north and south walls in 1987. Compartmentalized desks for computer use were added between these, and north-south oriented, free-standing shelf units placed in the middle of both reading rooms. Standing stack units were increased from three to four shelves in height, and another unit placed at the north end. A new information and reference desk was added directly behind the circulation desk, and the circulation desk casework redesigned to hold computer equipment and other built-in components. The new casework features design elements reflecting the original cabinetry and furniture.

In 1987, attic vents and insulation were added, and the original clay tile roof was removed and salvaged, then reinstalled over a new plywood roof diaphragm. The original masonry chimney was dismantled and reconstructed with reinforcing. The skylight was restored, and new, double-faced, fiberglass core panels placed on new, sloped curbs were provided to protect the stained glass below.

Windows were scraped, cleaned and painted, and the brick masonry and terra cotta were cleaned and patched.

Public art in the library includes two mural portraits, painted by Eddie Walker, which depict Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. Portraits prints of great African Americans, by Clarence Shavers, are found in the west wing, along with the Library's African American Collection. The 1972 "Soul Pole" remains on the site.

The features of the Landmark to be preserved, include:

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

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