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Building Conditions Assessment - ARCH 4830
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Harry Belafonte Library (115th Street Branch) Conditions Assessment Report



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I. 115th Street Background and Initial Observations

Building Description and Background

The 115th branch Library was part of several branch libraries funded by the Carnegie Fund. In 1901 Andrew Carnegie donated 5.2 million to New York City with the intent of developing branch libraries. The library, located at 203 West 115th Street, cost 88,060 dollars to construct and 40,000 for the purchase of land. (Figure 1) The 115th branch was opened in 1908, It is a three-story building with a basement, with a total square footage of 16,000. (Figure 2) The building was designed by the prestigious firm of McKim Mead and White, who designed twelve of the Carnegie branches in New York

City. The design employs an Italianate, Palazzo style architecture, characterized by heavy rustication across the facade with a projecting bracketed cornice. The facade is divided by three symmetrical window bays. Between the first and second floors is a horizontal band carved with a repeated swirl design. Below the cornice is another band course with geometric patterns and the inscription "New York Public Library". Flanking the door are two highly ornamented copper lanterns and a cartouche rests above the middle window on the first floor. The crest within the cartouche represents the seal of New York City. The cartouche signals to entrants the scholastic nature of the building. The library is faced with gray limestone on a granite base. It supports a pitched asphalt roof and flat asphalt roof behind, with a combined area of 3,500 square feet. The basement level supports an auditorium. (Figure 3) The first floor has a wooden vestibule, a general circulation desk, and reading rooms. (Figures 4, 5, 6) On the second floor are the children's reading rooms and circulation desks. (Figure 7, 8) On the third floor, which is no longer accessible to the public, is another reading room and a custodial apartment. (Figure 9)

The 115th Street library branch was designated a New York City Landmark by the Landmark Preservation Commission in 1967 as an "excellent example of those small libraries built at the turn of the Century in New York City" due to its "outstanding architectural detail." In 1980 it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Historical Significance

It is important to note the relationship between the 115th branch and the Harlem branch Library. (Figures 10 and 11) McKim, Meade, and White also designed the Harlem branch which opened in 1909. Located within walking distance of the 115th branch on West 124th St, the Harlem branch maintains the same interior organization. Further, the organization and massing of the facades are alike in the rhythm and distribution of the windows and doors. The flanking lanterns are also matching. The architectural similitude between each McKim, Meade, and White branch brought attention to their status within a network of scholastic outposts.

Further, the 115th Street branch has a rich social history attached to its location within South-West Harlem. The library is significant as it was the first library in the country to host bilingual story hour, initiated by its assistant librarian Pura Belbré. Pura was an Afro-Puerto Rican librarian who recognized in 1929 that the large Puerto Rican community in South-West Harlem did not have access to spaces in which they could exercise their cultural heritage. The 115th branch and Pura's story-telling sessions therefore were significant to the establishment of the Spanish Renaissance in Harlem. (Figure 12) In 2017 the library was renamed the Harry Belafonte in recognition of his contributions as a civil rights figure and a prominent resident of the area.

Rehabilitation Programs

Since its opening in 1908, the library has seen two major renovations. In 1953 an interior refreshment was carried out. New paint, new linoleum floors, and new lighting were all updated. The most significant alteration was carried out in 2002 by Li Saltzman architects and funded by the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. Li Saltzman added a ramp to the exterior in conjunction with a restoration of the stone façade and entryway. (Figure 13) This report believes that in adding the ramp for barrier-free access, the window behind the balustrade was blocked with limestone. The interior renovation addressed the basement auditorium, reading rooms, offices, and toilet facilities. (Figure 14) Historic finishes encompassing ornamental plaster, marble, wood paneling, and the wrought iron staircase were restored. All mechanical systems were upgraded and an ADA-compliant elevator was installed.

Further alterations we have noticed through consulting historic images were the addition of striped awnings on the first and second-floor windows sometime before 1913 and their subsequent removal before the 1940 tax image was taken. From 1908 a flag post projected from the middle upper window, which was moved at some point following the 1980 designation image to its current location above the entrance portal.

Documents and Sources Consulted

In producing our report we conducted two on-site observation campaigns, with binoculars and a point-and-shoot camera. We consulted historic images from the New York Public Library, tax photos from 1940 and 1980, and historic designation reports from the National Register of Historic Places and the New York City Landmarks Commission. (Figures 15, 16, 17, and 18) Further, we consulted a thesis survey carried out in 1950 by A. V. Thakore on the use of the library. After a generous walkthrough of the library on February 15 with facilities manager Evan Montilla, we were further supplied with the final drawings put together by Li Saltzman Architects for the 2002 rehabilitation campaign as well as a recent roof report and probe that was carried out in the last year. From these documents and our guided site visit, we were able to glean additional information regarding the most recent restoration of the facade and changes to the interior as well as current issues with the building envelope. Finally, using a GigaPan image produced by WJE Associates we were able to see conditions on the upper floors with more clarity to produce more sensitive recommendations.

Building Facade Observations

The facade is constructed with a minimal selection of materials. The base, staircase, and ramp are made out of light gray granite. The staircase and ramp are also accompanied by black steel railings. The main material of the facade is limestone, it covers the front of the three-story building and is part of the decorative elements such as the sculpted crest that sits above the center of the first-story window, the banding that sits between the first and second stories, and it's also the material of the cornice. The windows and doors are made out of the usual wooden frames and glass panes, and the frames are painted a forest green color. Two copper lanterns flank either side of the entrance double doors and the original roof is believed to have been copper based on the runoff on the cornice. The current roof of the building is asphalt shingles for the pitched part of the roof and flat asphalt roofing for the other part.

Interior Observations

The interiors haven't changed much since the library was constructed other than some minimal repairs and renovations. Most interior changes happened during the early 2000's when the layout of the floor plans slightly changed to include new bathrooms and an elevator, as well as the addition of some office spaces. New partitions were also installed that match the existing wooden partitions. Most of the existing furniture was salvaged and the cast iron staircase is in its original condition. New interior LED lights were also installed along with carpeting which covered the original wooden flooring. Some minor renovations also took place on the cellar floor, including the addition of a new boiler system.

Figures



Figure 1. Site Plan, Courtesy Li Saltzman Architects.



Figure 2. 115th Street library exterior elevation.

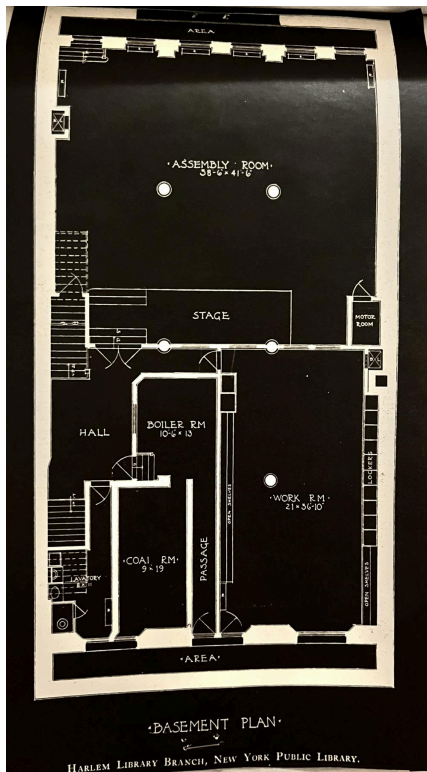


Figure 3. Basement plan of Harlem branch library. Thakore, A. V. *Survey of the 115th Street branch of the New York Public Library*, 1950.

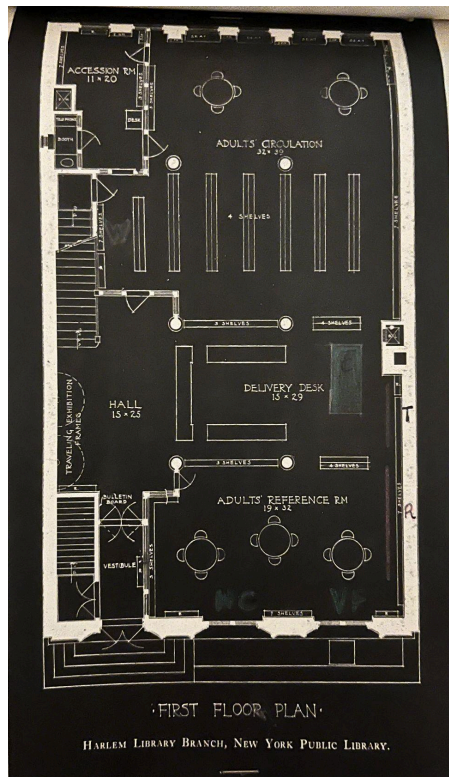


Figure 4. First-floor plan of Harlem branch library. Thakore, A. V. *Survey of the 115th Street branch of the New York Public Library*, 1950.



Figure 5. New York Public Library Archives, "115th Street, librarian at desk, windows opened and awnings down, beyond, "Main room". Accessed February 4, 2024.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-8236-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



Figure 6. New York Public Library Archives, "115th Street, entrance and charge desk". Accessed February 4, 2024.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-8235-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

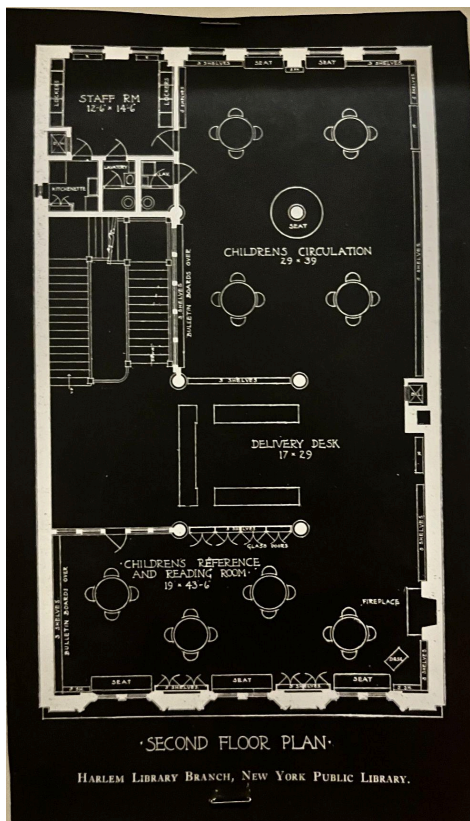


Figure 7. Second-floor plan of Harlem branch library. Thakore, A. V. *Survey of the 115th Street branch of the New York Public Library*, 1950.



Figure 8. New York Public Library Archives, "115th Street, girls reading by fireplace, children's reading room". Accessed February 4, 2024.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-8233-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

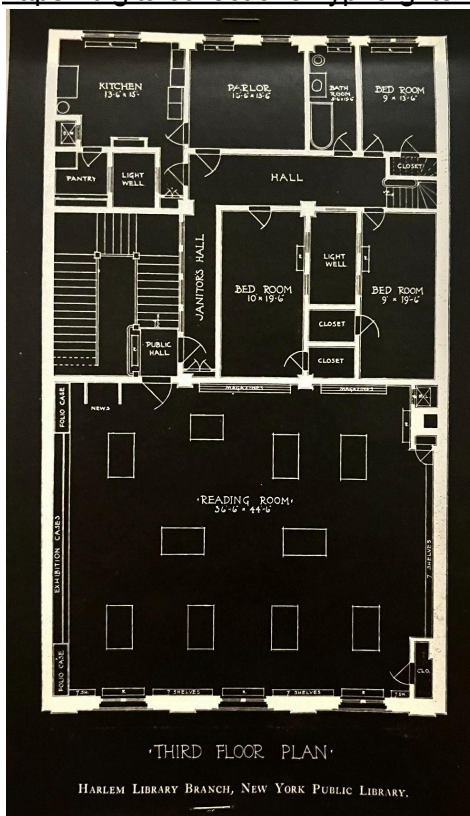


Figure 9. Third-floor plan of Harlem branch library. Thakore, A. V. *Survey of the 115th Street branch of the New York Public Library*, 1950.



Figure 10. New York Public Library Archives, "Harlem Branch. Exterior, West 124th Street." Accessed February 4, 2024.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/92eb72c7-f5b4-2bc5-e040-e00a180646d3>



Figure 11. New York Public Library Archives, "Harlem Library Branch, Fireplace in a Children's Reading Room" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1875 - 1925.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dd-e1eb-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



Figure 12. New York Public Library Archives, "115th Street, story-telling group, African American children with Miss Pura Belpre" Accessed February 4, 2024.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-8237-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



Figure 13. Addition of ramp to facade, 2002. Courtesy Li Saltzman Architects.

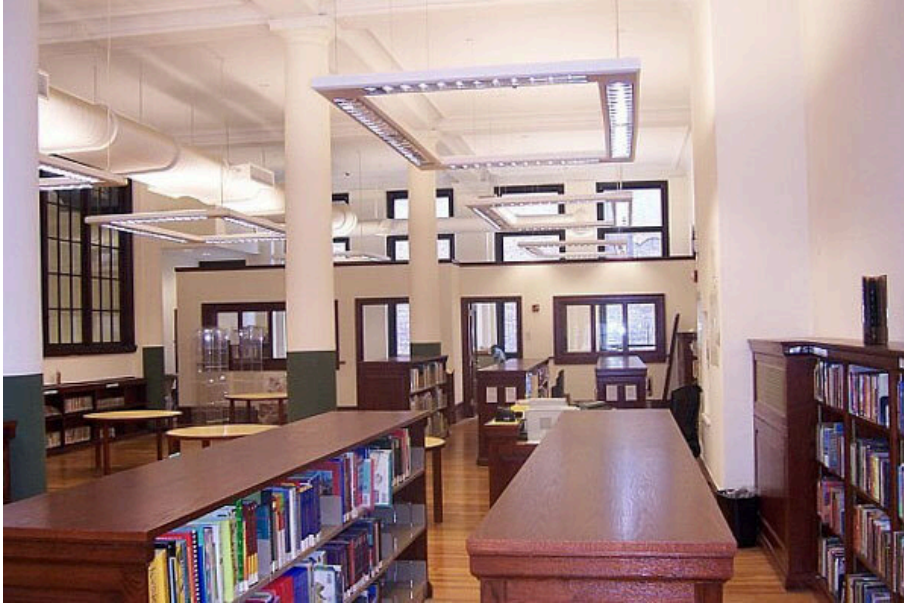


Figure 14. Interior details of the second-floor renovation. Courtesy Li Saltzman Architects.

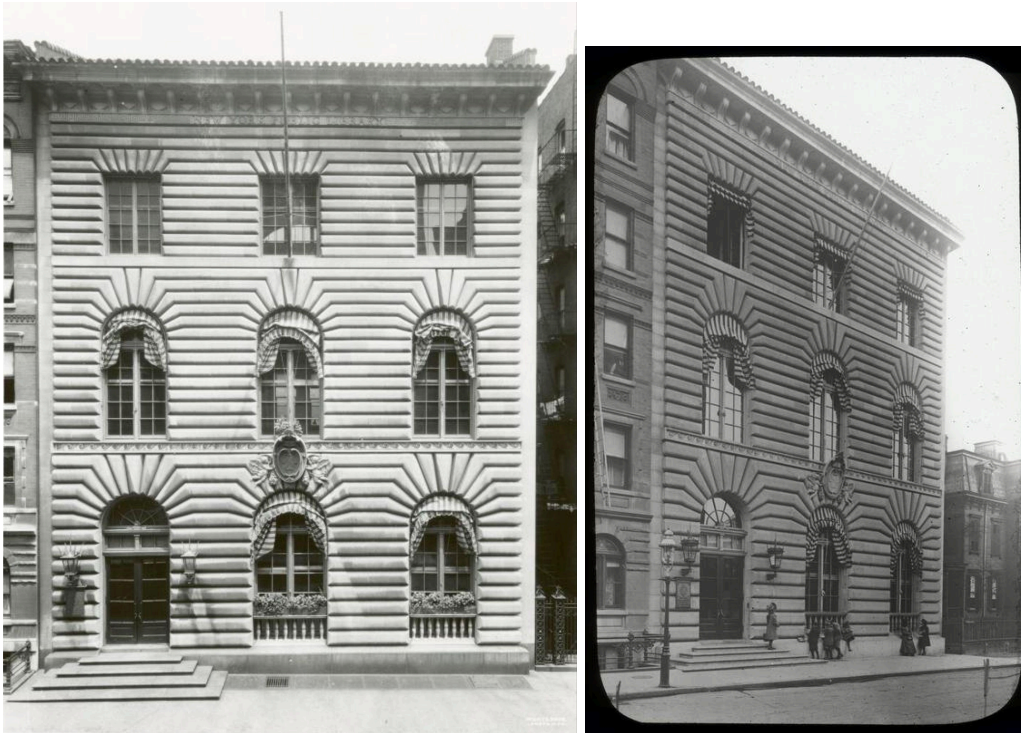


Figure 15. New York Public Library Archives, "115th Street, Exterior". Accessed February 4, 2024. 1913 <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-e509-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



Figure 16. New York Public Library Archives, "Library #32, 115th Street, Exterior"
Accessed February 4, 2024.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-e50a-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

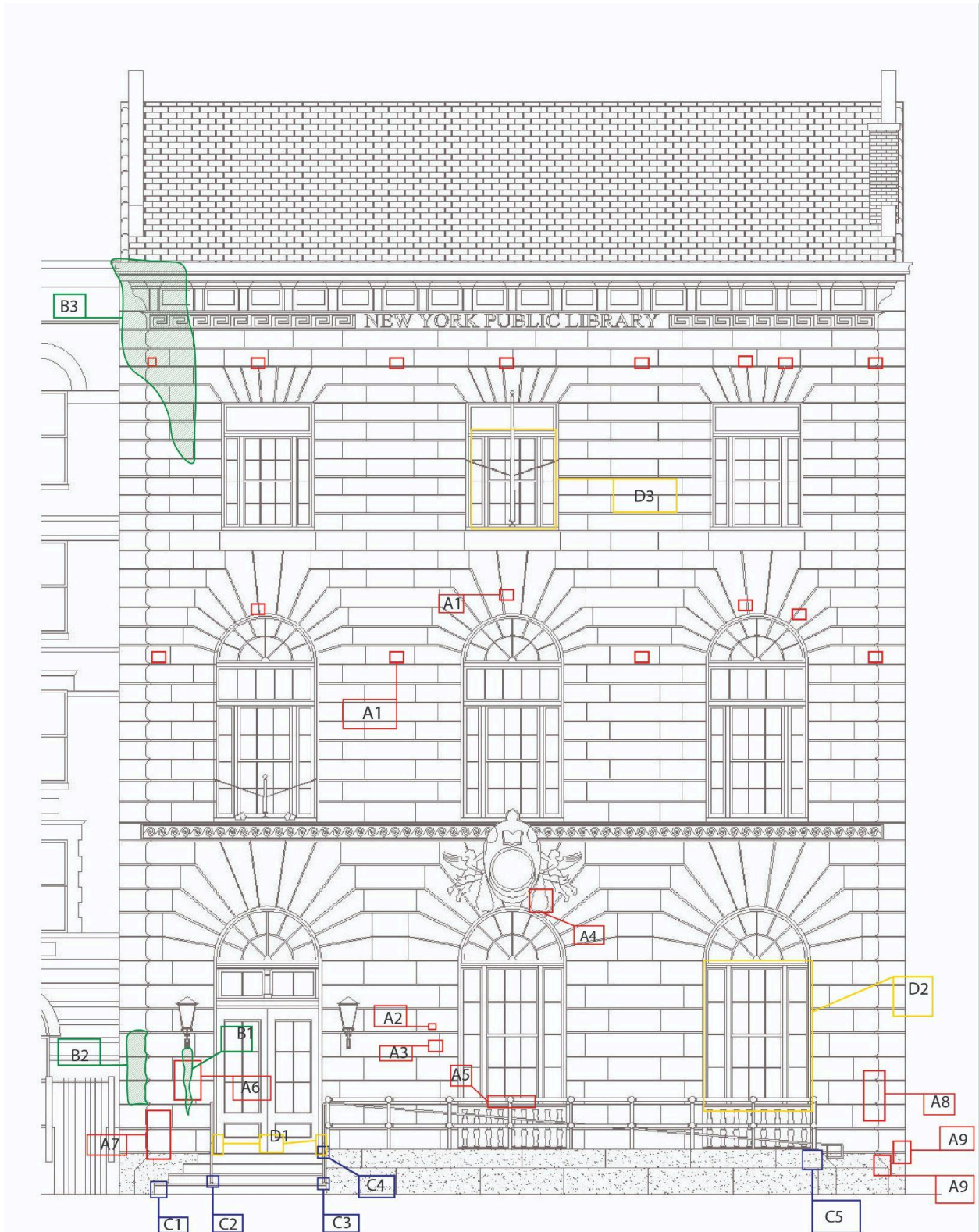


Figure 17. DOF 1940 Tax Photo, 201-203 West 115 Street, Block 1831, Lot 26.










Figure 18. 1 980 National Register Nomination for 115th Street Library.



II. Conditions



Limestone

Key	Image	Description
A1		Holes where a conduit was likely attached
A2		Area of limestone where an insect nest is visible
A3		A Dutchman repair that is located below the insect nest
A4		The New York City crest where a piece of the limestone vine on the right is missing

A5		Discolored limestone lintel where the damaged stone was repaired with a concrete fill
A6		Holes on the limestone to the left of the entrance where a plaque used to exist
A7		Slight graffiti at the corner of the building


A8		Two Dutchman repairs at the right corners of the building facade
A9		Two chips at the right corner of the building's facade



The limestone is overall well maintained except for some minor conditions. Those conditions include unrepaired holes on the left of the entrance door where something was attached to the limestone such as a mailbox or a plaque (A6). There's evidence of repair across the facade where small holes have been filled with mortar which is slightly discolored but isn't very noticeable. Those holes were most likely caused by attaching conduits to the facade in the past (A1). Other conditions have been identified as well, all on the first story of the facade, one of which is an insect nest that is located to the left of the center window and coincidentally sits right above a Dutchman repair (A2, A3). On the sill below that same center window, part of the limestone was damaged likely due to impact, and has been repaired with a concrete fill (A5). The area of the limestone surrounding the fill is evidently discolored due to the collection of moisture in the area.

Evidence of a Dutchman repair is also apparent on the first floor at some corner pieces of limestone, the original limestone was most likely damaged by physical impact given its location (A8). Areas where a Dutchman repair is needed include the limestone city crest where a piece of the carved vine had fallen off the facade (A4). Given its location, the damage on the limestone lintel could've been caused by the vine piece colliding in that area when it fell.

Moreover, there's minor graffiti on the facade and some of it seems to have been done with crayons and paint, they're not very noticeable which could be due to the rain gradually rinsing them off (A7). Similar to the graffiti, some paint splatters are visible by the doors and windows which likely occurred accidentally during paint jobs that took place during the 2002 renovation (D1). The last existing condition on the limestone is some chipping at the corners of the facade, one chip which is on the granite and another on the limestone (A9). Given their location, the chips most likely occurred due to impact.




Soiling

Key	Image	Description
B1		Copper runoff due to copper lantern

B2		Soiling at the left corners of the building
B3		Soiling at the top left corner of the building/cornice

Soling is another minor condition that exists on the facade. Gypsum is present in the crevices of the decorative elements which are the crest, banding, and cornice due to the lack of contact with rain water (B3). The elements are highly detailed with sections where water can't reach which resulted in the buildup of gypsum. There's also evidence of soiling on the facade along the corners of the building and the edges of the limestone blocks, it is quite minimal and should be easy to resolve (B2). Another condition is copper runoff, there's some copper runoff beneath the entrance lanterns and on the cornice where a copper flashing might've been used on the roof (B1). The runoff is minimal and there might've been an attempt at cleaning it before during a past renovation.




Stairs, Ramps, and Railing

Key	Image	Description
C1		Missing piece of stone at the corner of the staircase
C2		Rusting at the top left corner of the staircase
C3		Rusting and cracking at the bottom right corner of the staircase

C4		Cracking and rust at the top right corner of the staircase
C5		Cracking, rust, and displacement at the bottom of the ramp

The stairs and ramp are functional but they could be in better condition. Cracking of granite is evident in many conditions where the steel tubes of the railing meet the stairs and ramp (C2, C3, C4). The issue could be caused by corrosion and age as many of the cracks are accompanied by rust runoff. In places where the cracks were detrimental, pieces of granite were entirely displaced, such as the bottom of the ramp and the corner of one of the steps where an entire piece of granite was missing (C1, C5).

Windows and Doors

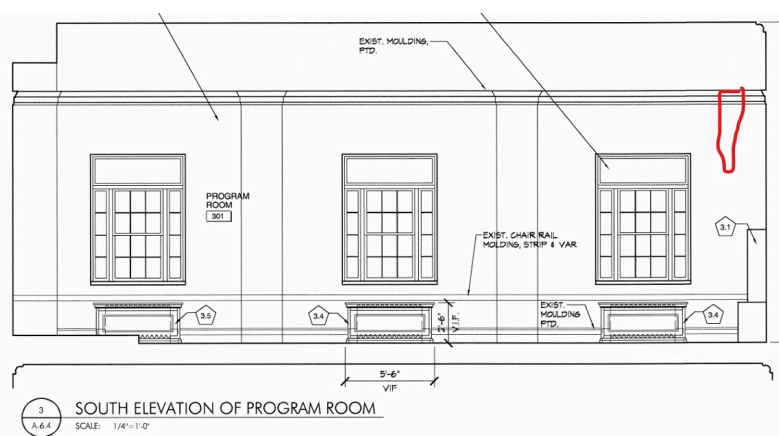
Key	Image	Description
D1		<p>The paint is delaminating due to iron rusting from the hinges as well as water pooling at the entrance.</p>
D2		<p>All of the windows display peeling paint.</p>
D3		<p>The iron rods which supported the flag post are now unsecured and pose a risk to pedestrians below.</p>

The windows and doors are not in the best condition. The first floor windows and double doors have been repainted during the 2002 renovation but the paint is not faring well. It is already delaminating at some spots like at the base of the door frame and on the window sills, those spots are critical as they get damaged the most by environmental factors (D1). The second and third-floor windows have not been repaired when the 2002 renovations took place and they're currently in need of attention. The paint delamination on them is in a much worse condition than the first-floor windows and the wooden frames are deteriorating (D2). There's also the issue of some old flagpoles that are hanging loose on the center window of the third story (D3). The current flag is above the entrance door and the old ones could pose a hazard if not secured.

Other Conditions

Third Floor Interior Conditions

On the third floor of the library, particularly in the program room, a lot of water damage exists on the walls. It is worse on the south wall which is the exterior wall of the main facade, where the damage is very prominent and is due to leakage within the roof system. The damage also exists on the east wall where the exterior wall is brick masonry that is infiltrated with water as well.



Brickwork on the East Elevation

Although the front facade is mainly constructed of limestone, the other facades are constructed out of brick. The rear and west facades are not visible but part of the east facade is visible as the adjacent building is not attached to the library. There's evidence of salt deposit on that facade but it's quite minimal and is limited to the third story.



Roof

According to a roof report carried out on September 22, 2023, there are issues with the roof assembly, posing a significant risk to water infiltration of the building envelope. Firstly, the gutters along the back of the pitched roof section of the roof are damaged and at risk of falling, creating a lack of proper channels for water to run off. The shingles on the pitched roof section have reached the end of their life cycle, critically, there is evidence of improper shingle application. At some point maintenance necessitated patches of shingles placed along the corner of the parapet wall, however, these were simply applied atop the old shingles and not properly installed or tied to the existing shingles. On the flat roof section, there is evidence of open seams resulting in improper waterproofing of the roof assembly. This has resulted in complete saturation of the roof system, which a subsequent roof probe confirmed.

III. Recommendations

Stairs, Ramps, and Railing

The recommendations for the stairs, ramp, and railing are to replace the pieces of granite that are not salvageable, such as the condition that exists at the ramp where the stone is completely cracked and displaced. We also recommend salvaging whatever is deemed possible of the stone and railing and replacing it where needed.

Limestone and Soiling

As for limestone, recommendations include a Dutchman repair for the missing limestone vine at the crest, filling the holes left by the plaque with mortar that matches the limestone, repairing or replacing the chipped stones at the corner of the facade, conducting a mortar analysis and repointing the mortar where needed including the discolored mortar filled conduit holes and the area of masonry on and surrounding the salt deposits. As for the soiling, paint, and other debris, there are some cleaning and product recommendations. The paint and graffiti can be easily removed with a gentle paint stripper such as SmartStrip where a quantity of it can be applied for a few hours and then removed. It is simple to use and is gentle enough to work on multiple surfaces. As for the copper runoff, a poultice stain remover such as Sure Klean will assist in the removal of the copper stains by the lanterns and on the cornice. For the overall debris and soiling, a soaking cleaning technique will be efficient and gentle enough on the limestone.

Windows and Doors

Recommendations for windows and doors include securing the flagpoles on the third-story window as they pose a threat, restoring the door and window frames to stop further deterioration, and conducting paint sampling to find the correct paint color for repainting.

Third Floor Interior

As for the water damage on the third-floor interiors, the first step would be to find the source of the leakage and address the issue. Once the roof is repaired and the envelope is tightly sealed then repairs need to take place on the interior walls where the damaged parts of the wall system can be repaired or replaced.

Brickwork on the East Elevation

The cause of trouble on the east elevation, including the salt deposit, has to do with water infiltrating and moving throughout the brick masonry. The recommendation here is to repoint all the mortar within that area with a type N mortar and repair the tiles that are capping the wall as they are the source of the water infiltration.

Roof

Recommendations for the roof align with those of the third-floor interior. The cause of the leakage needs to be identified and addressed and the shingles need to be completely replaced as they weren't attached properly during the past roof renovation.

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