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The Man Who Dies Rich, Dies Disgraced: The Carnegie Vision of Library as Place

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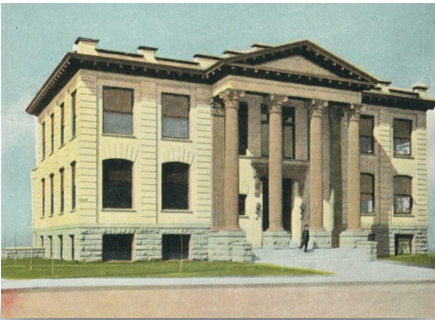
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In 1905, the doors of a Carnegie library opened to the public in Spokane, Washington. Crisp detailing and neoclassical design suggested astute scholars assembling before the grand fireplaces within. German-American architects Herman Preusse and Julius A. Zittel imbued the building with a grandiose façade befitting of the famous Andrew Carnegie quip, “the man who dies rich, dies disgraced.” The façade of the Spokane Carnegie library, with its portico front and Corinthian columns, spoke of the riches promised within—whether those would be the wealth of knowledge, or the financial riches hoped to be gained through the use of greater information.



Spokane Library Postcard

enhancing a sense of the building's solidity, rustication represents the solid intellectual foundation built by the careful study within



Women's Reading Room



Cataloging Room, early 1900s

Andrew Carnegie's vision of the library as a place for intellectual elevation through the introspective act of reading offered the promise of increased prosperity and wisdom to persons in all walks of life. The architecture of Spokane's Carnegie library spoke of this promise through its neoclassical façade and visual references to an age revered for civilized accomplishment. While some of these sentiments have fallen out of favor, the underlying principle of encouraging curious engagement by inspirational architecture remains true for libraries today.

THE MAN WHO DIES RICH, DIES DISGRACED: THE CARNEGIE VISION OF LIBRARY AS PLACE

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The Spokane Carnegie library, like other Carnegie libraries throughout the nation, was to embody ideas utility and display a direct expression of its function. The façade is the embodiment of a robust, neoclassical style that presents an image of security—a monument to its own well-guarded tomes of vetted knowledge. The style chosen by architects Preusse and Zittel—a form of *architecture parlante*—is “aimed at recapturing the sober magnificence of the antique world and producing an architecture embodying the ‘noble simplicity and tranquil greatness’ which Winckelmann regarded as the outstanding qualities of antique art” (Fleming, Honour, Pevsner, 1966). In this evocative but loose description, the definition of neoclassicism remains somewhat elusive. Certainly the Spokane Carnegie library appears noble and simple in its forms, sober and magnificent, and draws upon the antique for inspiration, but not all buildings that engage these qualities are necessarily neoclassical.

A cultural bridge from elite living in Browne's Addition to the west and economic prosperity to the east in downtown Spokane



Carnegie Library Construction Workers

Photo credit:
Northwest Room,
Spokane Public
Library, Spokane,
WA. <http://spokanehistorical.org>



Carnegie Library 1930s

architecture is a kind of theater,
both as the stage setting for
society and as itself an actor

Reading Room



Reference Room early 1900s



The building is perhaps best read in terms of multiple roles: it represented both the height of pursued knowledge while nodding to the elite prosperity the city already possessed. Spokane's early 1900s saw a city-wide boom in creativity and cultural refinement—the debonair San Marco flats were crowned with decorative finials, prominent architect Kirtland Cutter built sumptuous homes, and Manito Park was landscaped. Andrew Carnegie's vision of library as place is manifest in Spokane's neoclassical gem in the now-named Carnegie Square. While a vision of elevating splendor responsive to its day, we may still learn from Carnegie's vision of knowledge—and architecture. In true early twentieth-century *caractère*, the building references the past while establishing a foundation for the future.