

Progress in preservation: Downtown library merits renovation

By Cynthia Rogers

None of the rhetoric about building a new "signature" library in downtown Atlanta makes a specific case for constructing a new building.

Two separate issues exist, but blur in conversation. The first addresses the library's purpose: what will be its use and evolution? Second to that, but equally important, stands the architectural significance of the existing structure.

Distributed forms of information are changing the role of libraries as repositories of knowledge. Necessarily, libraries are changing from centers of information to centers of culture. As cultural and educational hubs, they can continue inspiring the community to enter their doors not only to acquire information and culture, but to create them as well — music, video, words, drama, imagination — using technology. Certainly this is a forward-thinking vision for education, literacy and value as a cultural institution.

Current public conversation endorses such changes in use but then leaps to the necessity of constructing a new building at two to four times the cost of renovating the current architectural treasure, without stating or proving why.



Atlanta Fulton County Public Library

The justification for a new building seems to be that such construction and expense would follow the "wise path" of other cities, without defining what that wisdom might be. An implication exists

that forward commitment can only take place in a new building. I disagree.

If young global architects like David Adjaye, collaborating with information designers like David Smalls, can convert a landmark former train station into a cutting-edge center of information arts for the Nobel Peace Center museum in Oslo, Norway, surely a vibrant community on the verge of the future like Atlanta can envision such an outcome for a 28-year-old modernist icon in our city.

Our existing world-class signature library building was designed by the architect considered by many to be the "father of modernism," Marcel Breuer, named by Time Magazine as one of the 20th century's "Form Givers" and described by the American Institute of Architects as a "monumental figure among modern architects" when he was awarded its Gold Medal.



Marcel Breuer

As the first living architect given a retrospective by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the designer of the very significant Whitney Museum in New York (with a similar cantilevered form), Breuer, at his death in 1981, left the Atlanta Fulton Public Library as his last public work in a body of nearly 200 buildings. His Grosse Pointe, Mich., Central Library has undergone the same scrutiny as ours, is listed by the World Monuments Fund as endangered, and is now a beneficiary of its own Marcel Breuer Library Preservation Fund.

Lessons of waste confront us daily in the news — from energy to water to capital. Consequences confront us. We must grow wiser and thriftier than to simply abandon and rebuild. And we must teach new ways to our children. We should use the lessons of structures like our own High Museum, which was expanded and renovated by another world-class architect, Renzo Piano; the New York Public Library's Bryant Park development, which brought restaurants, hotels and upscale night life to its neighborhood; and the Nobel Peace Center, which draws multiple generations from the entire world to its interactive capabilities while revitalizing an area formerly not inhabited after dark.

These were great buildings renovated to showcase progress alongside preservation; they drove greater economic and cultural development, to say nothing of positive media attention. Such buildings and initiatives drive tourism, educate our youth and promote community pride.

Our result would be the cornerstone of a vital downtown. Our city deserves to conserve its heritage while building its future.