20 WEST GATE

CORNISH LIBRARY

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

August 1992

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CORNISH LIBRARY

In 1907, two years after the opening of Winnipeg's first public library, the question of establishing branch libraries arose. The response championed by the City's first librarian, James H. McCarthy, was to create small depositories in drugstores, schools and other centres. These collections of approximately 500 books were to be rotated every two or three weeks, thus providing out-lying areas with limited library service. Although there were 35 such depositories by 1914, it became obvious to all involved that the need remained for construction of permanent branches.[1]

The City's first public library, on William Avenue (Plate 1), had been built in 1905 with funds from Andrew Carnegie, an American industrialist who donated large sums of money across North America for library development. In early 1913, Winnipeg City Council decided to approach the Carnegie Corporation again, this time to finance two branch libraries. By December 1913, Council had submitted its formal request to the Corporation. After the plans were approved, construction contracts were awarded in September of 1914.

Two pieces of City-owned land were selected as building sites - one in the North End at the corner of Machray Avenue and Salter Street, and the other in Cornish Park, a small parcel of land at one of the entrances to Armstrong's Point.[2]

The park had been named after Winnipeg's first mayor, Francis Evans Cornish.[3] In 1882 the City

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[1]   N. Beattie, "Library twins celebrate 75 years of service," The Winnipeg Real Estate News, June 1, 1990, p. 4.

[2]   M. Peterson, "86 West Gate - Westgate Mennonite Collegiate," Report of the City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, April 1989, p. 1. Armstrong's Point is a 22-hectare (54-acre) U-shaped plot of land. Begin-ning in 1881, it was developed as an elite residential district. It attracted some of the City's most affluent families who built some of the finest turn-of-the-century homes found in western Canada. The planned exclusivity of the area was enhanced by large ornamental stone and iron gates marking all entrances into the area.

[3]   N. Beattie, op. cit., p. 4.

opened the Winnipeg Waterworks on the site.[4] That facility was dismantled 29 years later, then was succeeded by two new buildings, the Cornish Public Bath and Cornish Library (Plate 2).

The library was officially opened on June 15, 1915 during a ceremony similar to one held a few days earlier (June 2) at the new St. John's Branch in the North End. Both events were attended by an orchestra, dozens of local dignitaries, and hundreds of citizens (Plate 3).[5]

STYLE

Library architecture in North America can be categorized in two phases, the significant difference being the manner of funding which created the institution. The 1870-90 period saw libraries established through the 'paternal philanthropy' of private donors. After 1900, however, library development was increasingly funded by the public or by corporations. What these benefactors expected, and how their gifts were perceived, were entirely different. This difference in turn affected both the style and design of libraries.

A. 'Paternal Philanthropy' and Library Funding:

> Typically, late nineteenth-century library buildings were the product of local philanthropy, gifts of men grown wealthy during the [Civil] war.[6]

By the 1870s, numerous men of wealth in the northeastern United States were concerned enough with their public image to make highly public donations to libraries. These businessmen often made large endowments to towns with which they were personally connected and the relationship between philanthropist and recipient was that of an extended family.

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4   "Historical Tour - A Walking Tour of Armstrong's Point," p. 29, in Cornish Library, Vertical File of the Cornish Library.

5   The Manitoba Free Press, June 3, 1915, p. 6; and The Winnipeg Telegram, June 3, 1915, p. 7.

6   A.A. Van Slyck, "'The Utmost Amount of Effectiv (sic) Accommodation": Andrew Carnegie and the Reform of the American Library,' Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Vol. L, No. 4 (December 1991), p. 360.

Each of these...builders cast himself in the role of the patriarch of an extended family, while the recipients of his gifts played the parts of dependent relations.[7]

The libraries were not simply buildings with books; they were monuments to the benefactor who supported them. They held museums, picture galleries, small reading rooms, and distant book shelves (Plate 4). Books were retrieved by the librarian, not the user, so as to remind visitors that "they had access to these fine library facilities only by the grace of the donor."[8] This paternal approach pleased the philanthropist; however, librarians and ultimately the public saw it differently. They wanted more than the cramped reading alcoves that were the norm of these facilities, but it was not until the twentieth century that library reforms were institutionalized.

Stylistically, pre-1900 libraries followed the path created by famous American architect Henry Hobson Richardson. He had prepared designs for several influential philanthropists in the 1870s, and almost single-handedly created the library building type in North America. Under Richardson's scheme, each building function was separate in plan and ornamentally different in elevation.[9] He chose the Romanesque style because it allowed the architect to clothe each function differently on the exterior, and because it stylistically represented the massing and ornamentation of the medieval monasteries on which contemporary libraries were based.[10]

B. Public Libraries:

In the twentieth century, Andrew Carnegie and his Corporation spent a total of $56 million and helped build 2,509 free public libraries in North America.[11] The size and scope of his influence

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[7]   Ibid., p. 360.

[8]   Ibid., p. 364.

[9]   Ibid., pp. 361-62.

[10]   Ibid., p. 362.

[11]   T. Rub, "'The day of big operations': Andrew Carnegie and his libraries' in <u>Architectural Record</u>, July 1985, p. 82.

necessarily brought him to the forefront of library design and organization.

Carnegie's approach to the funding of libraries, and ultimately to the design of the buildings, differed drastically from the 19th century. He gave funds for buildings, never books, and would only agree to provide assistance funds if the community donated the land and devoted at least 10% of the building's cost to its maintenance.[12] As author A.A. Van Slyck saw it,

> If the population was large enough, the annual appropriation high enough, and the existing library facilities poor enough, the town had a good chance of securing a library offer from Carnegie.[13]

With such power came the ability to change the status quo. Carnegie's funding arrangement, especially the public funding involved, meant a stricter budget and a need to make the new libraries more efficient. Beginning about 1904, exterior treatment became a chief concern of the Carnegie and his personal secretary, James Bertram. Bertram, who became increasingly involved in library design and planning, did not want to see money wasted on exterior ornamentation at the expense of book shelves and furniture. By 1908, his approval of plans was necessary before funding was given.[14]

Stylistically, a Bertram approved Carnegie library was based on a simple rectangular plan and classically detailed. In 1911, Bertram went so far as to issue a pamphlet entitled "Notes on the Erection of Library Bildings [sic]," a copy of which accompanied all formal offers of library gifts thereafter.[15] The document outlined what the Corporation felt was the proper form and design of libraries. Interestingly, neither Carnegie nor the Corporation he formed in 1911 ever sent ready-made plans to endowment recipients. This explains the wide range of exterior finishes found on

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[12]   Ibid., p. 82.

[13]   A.A. Van Slyck, op. cit., p. 370.

[14]   Ibid., p. 376.

[15]   Ibid., pp. 376-77.

Carnegie libraries across North America.[16]

Both Richardson's Romanesque Revival libraries and the classical designs of the new Carnegie libraries were firmly based in teachings of the École des Beaux-Arts. The difference resulted from the perceived use of the building. Architects had long used classical detailing to describe a public building. The Carnegie libraries were more public in orientation than the old libraries and, therefore, were classically detailed.[17]

CONSTRUCTION

The Cornish Library is a one-storey solid red brick structure resting on a concrete foundation. It measures 25.0 x 14.2 x 10.4 m. (82 x 46.5 x 34') or nearly 4,000 cu. m. (141,074 cu. ft.) of interior space. The basement ceilings are 3.7 m. (12'), while the main floor features 5.5 m. (18') ceilings.[18]

The building is located between the Assiniboine River and West Gate, near the Maryland Street Bridge, on land legally described as 86 St. James, Plan 119, Lot 59 and part of Lot 60.[19]

Stone is used as trim on the exterior brick facades, while oak and walnut trim is used on the interior walls. Construction required 75 million bricks, 1,002 superficial sq. m. (1,200 superficial sq. yds.) of plaster, and 229 cu. m. (300 cu. yds.) of concrete. The building cost approximately $30,000.[20]

DESIGN

In keeping with the specifications established by the Carnegie Corporation, the Cornish Library is a

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16   Ibid., p. 377.

17   Ibid., p. 372.

18   City of Winnipeg, Assessment Record, Roll No. 917290, Ward 1, PC 86.

19   Ibid.

20   City of Winnipeg, Building Permit (below as BP), #3018/ 1914.

simple utilitarian structure with classical detailing (Plate 5). The raised cement foundation is met by a band of smooth-cut stone that encircles the building. The red brick walls are interrupted above the lower windows by a smooth-cut stone belt course. The main level is punctuated by large rectangular windows, accented with smooth-cut stone lug sills. A continuous ornamental band of stone tops these openings and leads into heavy eaves embellished with modillion blocks.

The projecting main entrance, centrally placed on the front (east) facade, is the most detailed element of the structure. Its doors are framed by large, Tuscan Order stone columns. Above the doorway is a stone entablature, including a panel that reads "Public Library," "Cornish Branch" and "A.D. 1914." The entrance is finished with a pedimented overhanging eave displaying modillion blocks similar to those under the eaves of the main structure.

The building's rear also features a projecting section, its pediment highlighted by a round window with keystones (Plate 6). The sides are uninterrupted and continue the ornamentation of the front and rear facades (Plate 7).

INTERIOR

Just as Carnegie, and later his Corporation, altered the exterior of libraries, so too did he reform the interior organization. As mentioned previously, pre-1900 libraries were not laid out to facilitate public use of the holdings. An individual facility instead became "a treasure house, protecting its books from untrustworthy readers."[21] Children under 12 were usually barred from admittance, the public was not given free access to the book shelves, and reading rooms were cramped, poorly planned, and inconveniently located.[22]

Carnegie and Bertram became sympathetic to the complaints of the professional librarian associations in the United States, and sought to change the way interior space was divided and

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[21]   A.A. Van Slyck, op. cit., p. 370.

[22]   Ibid., pp. 370-71.

utilized. After years of suggesting different plans to communities receiving Carnegie grants, Bertram decided to include six different floor plans in his 1911 "Notes on the Erection of Library Bildings [sic]" (Plates 8 and 9). As it evolved, Bertram's ideal for a Carnegie library was a rectangular, one-storey structure with an interior arrangement suited to the building's size and site. Bertram warned in the text accompanying the outlines that "those responsible for building projects should pause before aiming at radical departures."[23] Inside the main door was

> ...a small vestibule leading directly to a single large room; where necessary, this room was subdivided by low bookcases that supplemented the bookshelves placed around its perimeter to hold the library's collection. In addition to book storage, this room provided reading areas for adults and children and facilities for the distribution of books. The basement had a lecture room, a heating plant, and "conveniences' for staff and patrons.[24]

"Plan A" (Plate 8) is closest to the interior of the Cornish Library (and the St. John's branch as well). The entrance vestibule is framed by two sets of stairs leading to the basement. The lower level contains a large lecture room, heating equipment, washrooms, and a staff room, all finished with dark wood (Plate 10). The upper floor has ample space for book storage along the outer walls and in central shelving units (Plate 11). Two green-tiled fireplaces (Plate 12) add to the comfortable, home-like atmosphere of the branch.

INTEGRITY

The library occupies its original location and appears to be in excellent structural condition. Alterations to the structure have been insignificant and deal mostly with pilings to support the foundation (Appendix I). The foundation was damaged was in 1918, as a result of flooding and the strain put on it from the nearby public baths. The 1918 damage was repaired with the help of a $7,000 Carnegie grant.[25]

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[23]   Ibid., p. 378.

[24]   Ibid., p. 377.

[25]   N. Beattie, op. cit., p. 5.

STREETSCAPE

The Cornish Library forms an integral part of a residential neighbourhood that is one of Winnipeg's most architecturally diverse areas. Its classical detailing and relatively small scale further contribute to the streetscape.

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTOR

S. Frank Peters, a local architect who designed many buildings in Winnipeg and throughout the province (see Appendix II for biography), was chosen to design the branch. The National Construction Company of Winnipeg built the structure.[26] Peters has been given 20 points by the Historical Buildings Committee.

INSTITUTION

In 1848, a 2,000 volume Red River Library was created at the Red River Settlement by the Council of Assiniboia. It was open every Saturday, served the wealthy of the community, and was virtually extinct by the 1870s. In 1881, the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, which had been founded two years earlier, established the first circulating library in Winnipeg. It was, however, still an elitist institution as its membership accounted for only 1% of the population.[27]

In 1888, this little library was located in the basement of City Hall, and the City provided $600 per annum for new books. By 1903, the facility housed 34,000 volumes in the increasingly cramped quarters. Carnegie's offer of $75,000 for construction of a building dedicated to library use was met with some trepidation by members of City Council who saw the associated commitment of $7,500 for annual upkeep as too high. However, the offer was eventually accepted, the site was purchased,

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26   BP #3018/1914.

27   "Winnipeg Public Library - A Capsule History," paper in the City of Winnipeg's Historical Buildings Officer files, p. 1.

and the library at 380 William Avenue was completed,[28] followed a decade later by the Carnegie-assisted St. John's and Cornish branches.

It was almost 50 years before the City built other branches, choosing instead to use bookmobiles to service the outskirts.[29] Today there are 22 libraries to serve all parts of the city. While the William Library has been altered to house both a branch library and the City of Winnipeg Archives, the two 1915 buildings have remained virtually unchanged.

EVENT

The Cornish Library has been used by many influential authors and citizens. The most famous of these was Nellie McClung (1873-1951), novelist, prohibitionist and women's rights and reform movement activist.[30] McClung used the basement of the library for lectures.[31]

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[28]   Ibid., pp. 2-3. So popular was the new library that a second Carnegie grant of $39,000 was needed for an addition in 1909.

[29]   Ibid., p. 4.

[30]   The Canadian Encyclopedia (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers Limited, 1988), Vol. 2, pp. 1256-7.

[31]   Louise Worster, "The Cornish Library. Both Sides of the Street," in Cornish Library, Vertical File of the Cornish Library.

CONTEXT

> I choose free libraries as the best agencies for improving the masses of the people, because they give nothing for nothing. They only help those who help themselves. They reach the aspiring, and open to these the chief treasures of the world - those stored up in books.[32]

These words of Andrew Carnegie provide the framework from which grew over 2,500 libraries funded by Carnegie and his Corporation across North America. Carnegie had risen from his humble beginnings as the son of poor Scottish immigrants to one of America's most wealthy industrialists. With this wealth, as Carnegie saw it, came the responsibility of furthering the lives labourers. But he did not wish to simply give money away. Funding library construction was the perfect solution because, in his own words, "they give nothing for nothing. They only help those who help themselves."[33] Given this philosophy, it is not surprising that the communities themselves were expected to provide funds for books and upkeep.

Winnipeg's first three libraries were built with Carnegie money. The City's good fortune is more apparent when it is realized that out of the 124 Carnegie libraries built in Canada between 1901 and 1923, only 13 were located outside Ontario.[34] Carnegie's method of funding and his increasing involvement in the planning and design of libraries had an impact on all buildings, including the Cornish Library. Ceiling heights, ornamentation, furnishings, layout, window size, and shelf dimensions were all elements scrutinized by Carnegie and his assistant, and the Cornish Library reflects these careful preparations.

The library is also set within the context of the neighbourhood. The well-known exclusivity of Armstrong's Point was heightened not only by the district's ornamental gates, but also by its public institutions, including the Public Bath and the library. That Winnipeg required branch libraries also

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[32]   Andrew Carnegie, quoted in T. Rub, op. cit., p. 82.

[33]   Andrew Carnegie, quoted in ibid., p. 82.

[34]   N. Beattie, op. cit., p. 4.

illustrates the growth of the city prior to World War I.

Another pattern that emerges is that of the city's increased involvement in public works. These included baths, libraries, and technical schools which were in high demand from citizens and which the city undertook to provide. An interesting feature was the "twinning" of these facilities to reduce the always vociferous debate between the North and South Ends. To curb political backlash, the city built two technical schools (St. John's in the north and Kelvin in the south), two public baths (Cornish in the south and Pritchard to the north), and two branch libraries (St. John's in the north and Cornish to the south).[35]

LANDMARK

The Cornish Library stands at an entrance to one of Winnipeg's most outstanding residential districts. The diversity of styles, the high quality of design, and the original state of most homes makes this an unique part of the city. As one of the few public structures in Armstrong's Point, and given its important function within the community, the library is conspicuous both in the area and as seen from the busy street that passes nearby.

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[35] Ibid., p. 4.

Plate 1 – Winnipeg Public Library, 380 William Avenue, ca.1905; built 1903-05, Samuel Hooper, architect, Smith and Sharpe, contractors; the library was given a Grade II evaluation in June 1984 by the City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N1045.)
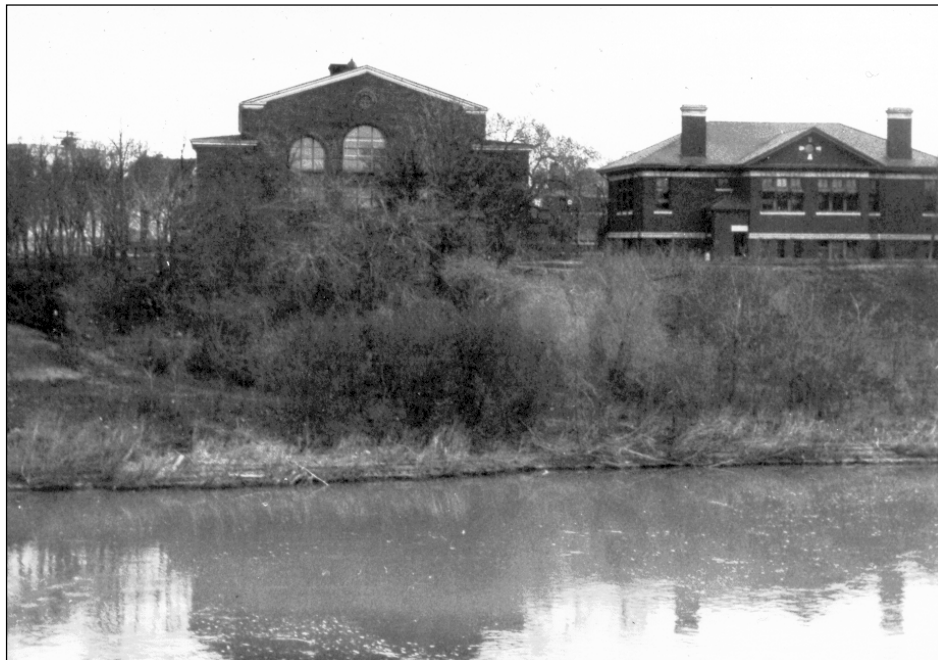

Plate 2 – The rear of the Cornish Bath (left) and the Cornish Library from the Assiniboine River, ca.1915. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N7391.)

Plate 3 – St. John's Branch, 500 Salter Street; built 1914-15, architect J.N. Semmens, contractor Fraser and McDonald; front or east façade. (M. Peterson, 1992.)
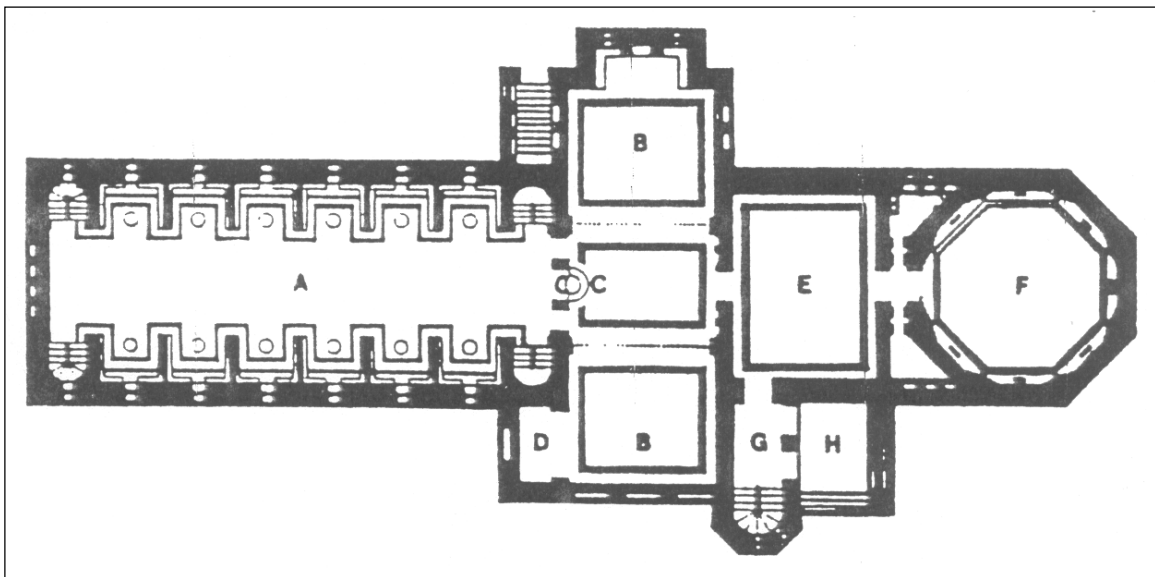

Plate 4 – The Winn Memorial Public Library, Woburn, Massachusetts, built 1876-79, designed by H.H. Richardson. Plan: A, library; B, reading rooms; C, librarian's desk; D, alcove; E, picture gallery; F, museum; G, vestibule; H, porch. (Reproduced from A.A. Van Slyck, '"The Utmost of Effectiv (sic) Accommodation": Andrew Carnegie and the Reform of the American Library' in Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Vol. L, No. 4 (December 1991), p. 361.)

Plate 5 – Cornish Library, 20 West Gate; built 1914-15, architect S.F. Peters, National
Construction Company, contractors; front or east façade. (M. Peterson, 1992.)

Plate 6 – Cornish Library, 20 West Gate, rear or west façade. (M. Peterson, 1992.)

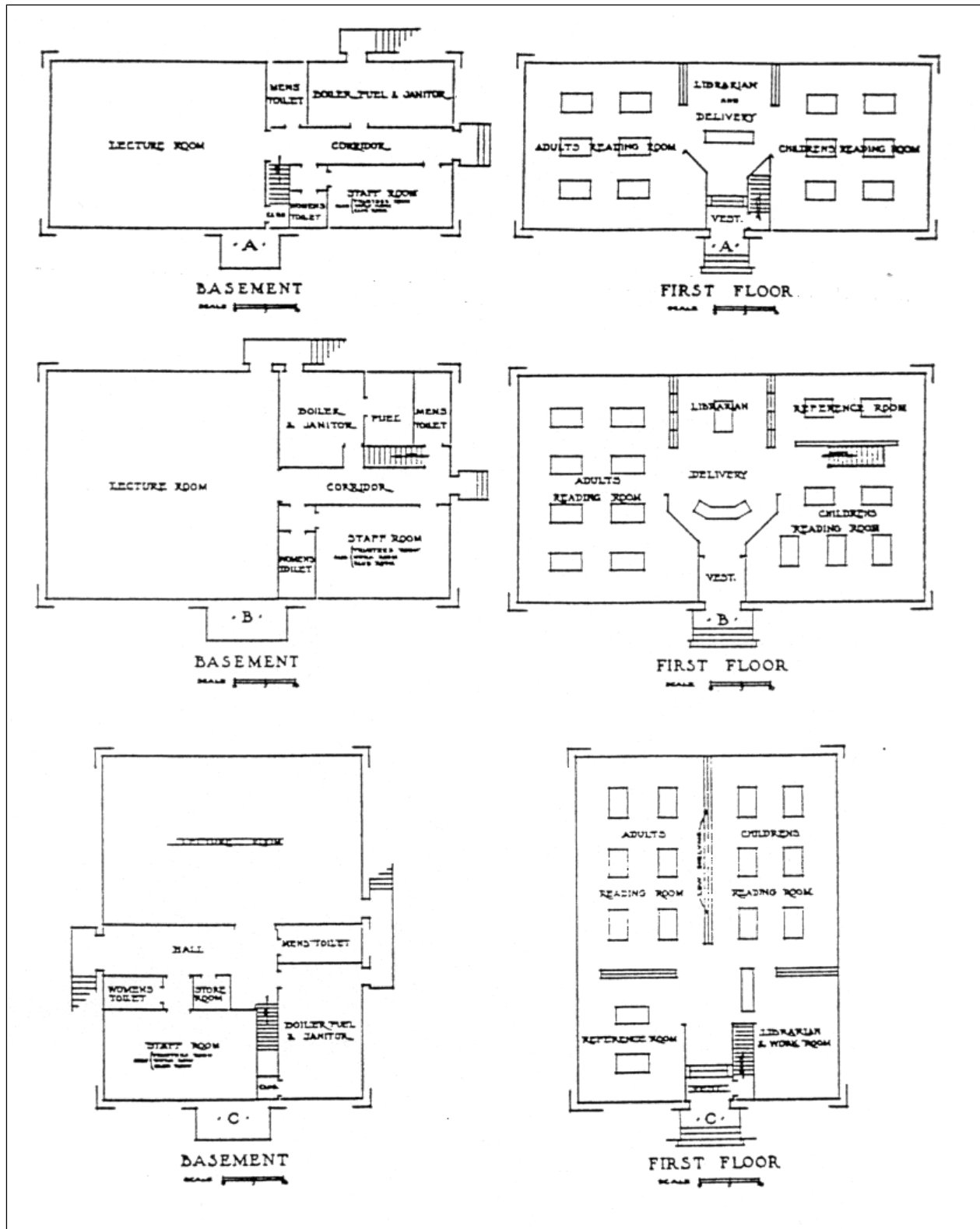Plate 7 – Cornish Library, 20 West Gate, north façade. (M. Peterson, 1992.)

Plate 8 – Schematic Plans A, B, and C from James Bertram, "Notes on the Erection of Library Bildings [sic]." (Reproduced from A.A. Van Slyck, op. cit., p. 378.)
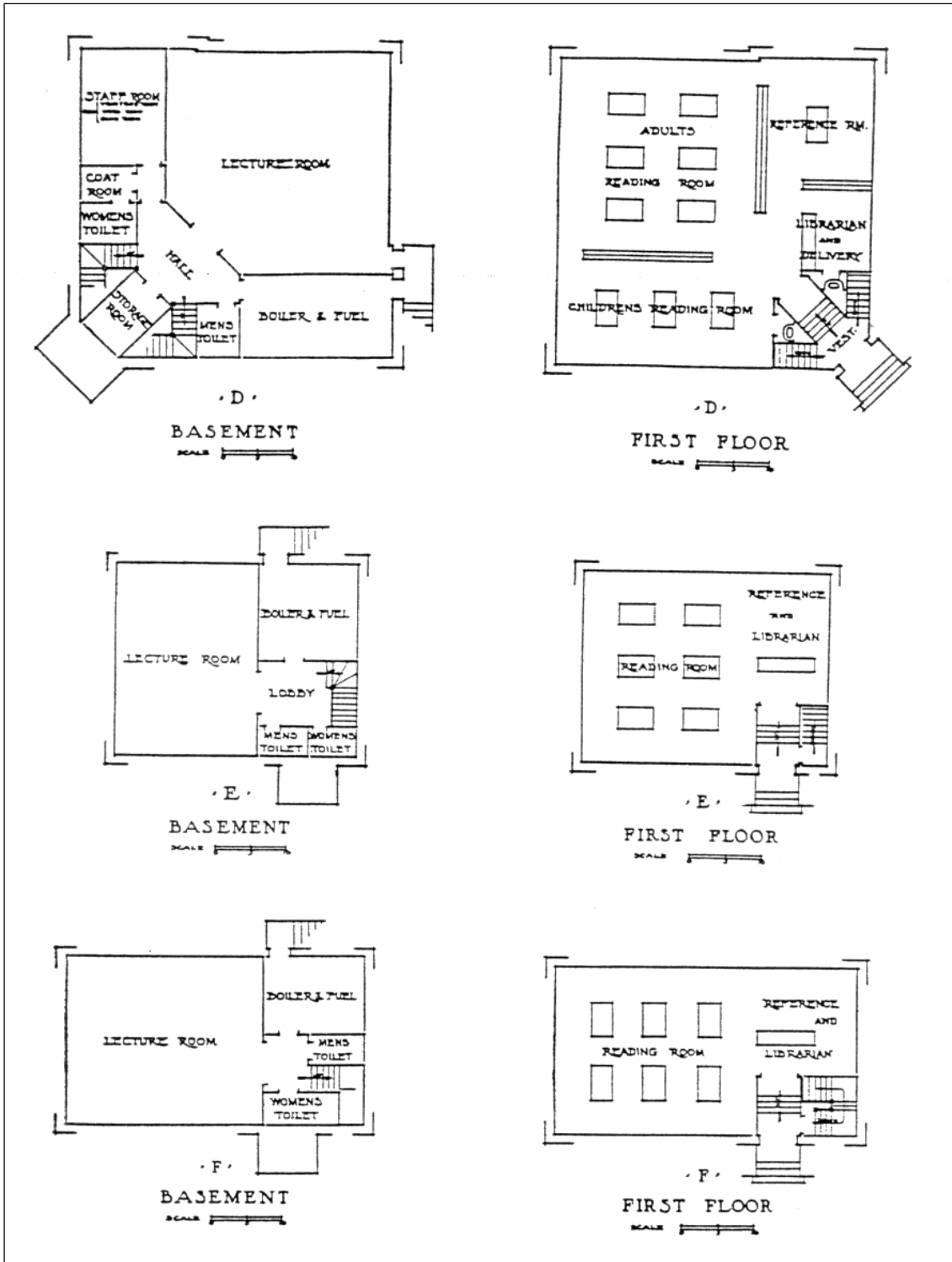
Plate 9 – Schematic Plans D, E, and F from James Bertram, "Notes on the Erection of Library Bildings [sic]." (Reproduced from A.A. Van Slyck, op. cit., p. 379.)

Plate 10 – Cornish Library, 20 West Gate, basement. (M. Peterson, 1992.)

Plate 11 – Cornish Library, 20 West Gate, main floor. (M. Peterson, 1992.)

Plate 12 – Cornish Library, 20 West Gate, one of two main floor fireplaces. (M. Peterson, 1992.)