

NOW AND THEN

Library Lobbies

Celebrating 100 years of reading

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This month the Seattle Public Library celebrates its centennial. On April 8, 1891, a reading room opened on the fifth floor of the Occidental Building (Seattle Hotel), which filled Pioneer Square's pie-shaped block west of Second Avenue and between James and Yesler.

The library moved many times between then and the 1906 dedication of its Carnegie-endowed permanent home on Fourth Avenue. This view of the main branch's vaulting lobby was photographed about 1912 and shows the talents of its architect, P.J. Weber of Chicago.

Although formidable, this landmark was unsafe. The 1949 earthquake revealed neither steel nor reinforced concrete had been used to strengthen its masonry. Officials decided the structure might collapse in another quake.

Consequently, it was with some justice that the library board's 1955 campaign for a new plant repeatedly denounced the old one as a "death trap." It was demolished in 1957 and replaced. The lobby of the modern library, while not so sublime, still makes its own escalated climb to a skylight.

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COURTESY OF SEATTLE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Above: The Seattle Public Library, built with Andrew Carnegie's money, opened in 1906 at its present site, Fourth Avenue and Madison Street. This year the library celebrates its centennial in the modern building, left, which opened in 1960 to replace the old Carnegie landmark.

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