

FACT SHEET on the Columbia Branch of The Seattle Public Library

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History

On June 22, 1909, The Seattle Public Library opened a small branch library in the main room of Columbia City Hall. The Board of Public Works provided the room rent-free. The restroom was in the furniture store across the unpaved street, over the double tracks of the railroad. The collection started with 1,200 books.

In 1911, philanthropist Andrew Carnegie gave the Library \$70,000 to build two branch libraries. In 1912, a site was chosen for the Columbia Branch and was purchased with \$2,500 in money collected by community members and \$2,000 from the city.

Seattle architects W. Marbury Somervell and Harlan Thomas designed the Beaux-Arts, Georgian Revival style building. The Columbia Library opened Dec. 30, 1915.

The branch got a facelift in 1986, funded by the 1984, \$3.9 million bond issue to restore the old Carnegie libraries.

In 1998, voters approved a \$196.4 million bond measure and The Seattle Public Library Foundation pledged to contribute privately raised money to improve the entire library system. The plan included expanding the Columbia Branch.

The branch closed July 20, 2003. Construction began in August 2003 and the expanded branch reopened Aug. 22, 2004.



The Seattle Public Library

About the Branch

The \$3,517,985 expansion project increased the 6,825-square-foot branch to 12,420 square feet. The expanded branch has more seating; 24 public computers; modern electrical, mechanical and ventilation systems; a more efficient interior layout; better access for people with disabilities; and parking for 17 vehicles.

The library is in the Columbia City Landmark District and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The updated collection includes materials in Chinese, Spanish, and Vietnamese with smaller collections in Somali, Oromo, Amharic, Tigrinya, and Tagalog. Also available are materials for people who are learning English as a second language.

Architect: Cardwell Architects

Contractor: Graham Contracting Ltd.

Artist: Gu Xiong

About the Architecture

- The addition, which was built onto the back of the existing branch, was designed to respect the architecture of the original building.
- The project relates to the adjacent Columbia Park setting by putting the children's area, new reading room, study room, meeting room and staff areas in the new addition. Each space has large park-side windows for daylight and great views of grass, trees and sky. Construction materials were chosen to complement, but not match the historical building.
- The children's area is a bright porch-like room with park views to the north and west.
- The new reading room is naturally lit with diffused daylight from the overhead roof projection, which is equipped with electronically controlled louvers to release rising warm air.
- The branch includes artwork by Vancouver, B.C., mixed-media artist Gu Xiong - 42 photographs of residents of the multicultural neighborhood and messages written in English and their native languages that evoke a sense of joy and belonging.
- Xiong, a Chinese immigrant and survivor of a Cultural Revolution work camp, uses his work to explore cross-cultural issues and questions of identity. He draws on his experience as an immigrant to examine universal issues of belonging and understanding.
- Forty of the photographs and accompanying messages are installed in large displays on top of the bookshelves. Another two are mounted on a wall.