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## Upheaval at the New York Public Library

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In July 2010, Hilde Hoogenboom, a professor of Russian literature at Arizona State University, sent an impassioned missive to Paul LeClerc, president of the New York Public Library, to protest the closure of the NYPL's Slavic and Baltic division. It "was one of the best places to work in the world," she wrote. Indeed, in the universe of Russian studies, the Slavic division was legendary. "I recall [it] as an agreeably dim sort of place, with a faintly reverential, almost cathedral-like ambience," George Kennan said in 1987. Among its 750,000 items are the first book printed in Moscow, the "Anonymous" Gospels; a first edition of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*; and John Reed's collection of broadsides and posters from the Russian Revolution. Trotsky and Nabokov toiled in the division's reading room. Václav Havel and Mikhail Gorbachev made visits of tribute.

Eleven weeks later, a senior NYPL official replied on LeClerc's behalf: "If I may put this matter into its sadly grim financial context, in the last two fiscal years our budget has been reduced by \$20 million and our workforce by 300 positions. While we recognized and prized the special cultural and scholarly resource that was the Slavic Reading Room, we simply could no longer afford to operate it."

The New York Public Library, which comprises four research libraries and eighty-seven branch libraries, has seen other cutbacks as well. Since 2008 its workforce has been reduced by 27 percent. In a recent newsletter to library supporters, the institution reported that its acquisitions budget for books, CDs and DVDs had been slashed by 26 percent.

Despite these austerity measures, NYPL executives are pushing ahead with a gargantuan renovation of the Forty-second Street library, the crown jewel of the system. The details of the Central Library Plan (CLP) are closely guarded, but it has already sparked criticism among staff members, who worry that the makeover would not only weaken one of the world's great libraries but mar the architectural integrity of the landmark building on Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, renamed the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building in 2008, following the Wall Street billionaire's gift of \$100 million. (Every staff member I spoke with demanded anonymity; a number of them talked openly about their fear of retribution from management.)

These are arduous times for public library systems. More people are using libraries during the economic downturn, but state and local legislators are steadily cutting their budgets. The American Library Association notes that since 2008, "more than half the states have reported a decrease in funding, with cumulative cuts averaging greater than ten percent." Library systems of all sizes are under pressure. The

Los Angeles County public library system, which serves 3.7 million citizens, faces a structural deficit of \$22 million a year for the next decade. Budget cuts have forced the Seattle Public Library, one of the nation's finest, to shut down for a week in late summer. Thomas Galante, CEO of the bustling Queens Library, which serves hundreds of thousands of immigrants in New York City, spoke reverently about one healthy and outstanding public library—in Toronto.

The man who must contend with the NYPL's budget difficulties is its new president, a tall, amiable, casually dressed political scientist named Anthony Marx, who started at the library on July 1. Marx had been the president of Amherst College, where during his eight-year tenure he raised great sums of money and did much to diversify the student body. But obtaining the financial resources to sustain the NYPL in these lean and mean times is a task that's sure to keep Marx tossing in his bed at night. (Personal reasons may also keep Marx from sleeping soundly: on the afternoon of November 6 he was arrested in Upper Manhattan for driving while intoxicated; his blood alcohol level was 0.19. He is scheduled to appear in court on December 9.) He faces an additional challenge with the CLP, devised by his predecessor and scheduled to be completed in 2015.

The centerpiece of the CLP—expected to cost anywhere from \$250 million to \$350 million—is the construction of a state-of-the-art, computer-oriented library designed by British architect Norman Foster, in the vast interior of the Schwarzman Building. To make space for this library within the library, the seven levels of original stacks beneath the third-floor Rose Reading Room—stacks that hold 3 million books and tens of thousands of adjustable and fixed shelves—will be demolished (the exterior of the building is landmarked; the stacks are not). When the new library is completed, patrons will be able to leave the building with borrowed books and other materials; for decades, those materials had to be used inside the library.

NYPL officials have grand hopes for their new high-tech circulating facility: it will be “the largest comprehensive library open to the public in human history,” LeClerc wrote in an internal NYPL publication in 2008. How will it be paid for? The City of New York will provide about \$150 million for the project. The NYPL expects to raise another \$100–\$200 million by selling off two prominent libraries in its system: the busy (but decrepit) Mid-Manhattan branch library on Fortieth Street, and the Science, Industry and Business Library on Thirty-fourth Street, a research library that opened in 1996 to considerable fanfare.

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Today, top NYPL officials talk about the CLP—announced in late 2008 but delayed by the economic downturn—as a done deal. But Marx says the NYPL's powerful board of trustees has not yet given its final stamp of approval; he adds that he is still analyzing the plan. Yet the CLP has gathered an enormous amount of momentum. On June 29 I was sitting in the cavernous office of Ann Thornton, a top NYPL librarian, when LeClerc, just days from retirement, burst in, in a state of high excitement. “Here's the news,” he declared. “We got the \$100 million from the city. Isn't it just fantastic?” (Noting my puzzled look, LeClerc turned to me and said, “It's for Norman Foster's renovation of this building.”) Thornton jumped to her feet and embraced him. “Paul, that's *wonderful!*”

The CLP raises thorny questions. Will Forty-second Street remain a serene environment for scholars, serious readers, intellectuals and book lovers, or will it be converted into a noisy, tumultuous branch library? Might the \$250–\$350 million designated for the renovation of Forty-second Street be better spent on the eighty-seven branch libraries, many of which need structural improvements as well as books,

periodicals, DVDs and computers? Finally, there is the question of the public good. NYPL executives say the objective of the CLP, which involves the sale of two prime Manhattan properties, is to democratize the Forty-second Street library, incorporate the latest digital technology and serve the public. They emphasize their desire to expand public access to Forty-second Street: Thornton told me that in a building of 600,000 square feet, only 32 percent of that space is available for public use. After the renovation, she says, users will have access to almost 70 percent of the building.

NYPL executives may be keen to serve the public, but they are not so keen to engage it. Many aspects of the CLP remain cloaked in secrecy, and top NYPL staff imparted details of the plan only with great reluctance. The NYPL's mission statement, which executives are quick to invoke, highlights the word "accountability." My reporting, which included sixty interviews, left me with a different impression: the NYPL preaches accountability, but it doesn't always practice it.

When the Beaux-Arts building at Forty-second Street, designed by famed architects Carrère and Hastings, opened on May 23, 1911, more than 30,000 people came to see a library that had taken twelve years to construct. "The first book to be delivered," Phyllis Dain wrote in her 1972 history of the NYPL, "seven minutes after deposit of the call slip, was a Russian-language study of Nietzsche and Tolstoy." Over the decades, the NYPL would acquire a spectacular range of materials: Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence, Walt Whitman's personal copy of *Leaves of Grass*, Virginia Woolf's cane, Man Ray's portrait of Arnold Schoenberg, Oscar Wilde's early typewritten versions of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Beethoven's sketches for the "Archduke Trio," a first edition of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. The list goes on.

The NYPL was a vital institution in twentieth-century New York: a refuge and a magnet for immigrants, writers, intellectuals, students, the unemployed and lost souls. Dain writes that in 1917 the young David Ben-Gurion used the NYPL to research his first book. In a *New York Times* essay about his early years as an Irish immigrant in the city in the early 1950s, Frank McCourt, author of *Angela's Ashes*, recalled, "It was Tim Costello who told me to get out of his bar and walk a few blocks to where I'd see two lions, and to go in there and get myself a library card.... Up on the third floor, I discovered Paradise: the great reference room with its hundreds of index-card drawers. I asked a librarian if it would be all right to look in the drawers and he said, 'Of course, of course, anything you like.'"

For the NYPL, the 1960s and '70s were a period of decay and decrepitude. The most evocative account of that period is Philip Hamburger's 1986 *New Yorker* profile of Vartan Gregorian, who took over the NYPL presidency in 1981. His colleagues reminisced about the rot that greeted Gregorian: "that beautiful, aging building, just being taken for granted, and going downhill fast"; "the back yard is Bryant Park—drunks, drugs." Gregorian revitalized the library with prodigious fundraising from individuals, foundations and corporations (\$10 million from the Vincent Astor Foundation; \$1 million from Exxon, etc.), and a series of lavish dinners and events—all necessary: Hamburger's sources stressed that while the Library of Congress received more than \$200 million annually from the government, the NYPL had to scramble for funds—a situation very much the case today.

Gregorian was succeeded by LeClerc, a French literature scholar. Many staff considered LeClerc frosty and aloof, but he accomplished much in his sixteen years at the NYPL: a \$50 million renovation of the main branch's facade; a \$15 million renovation of the magisterial Rose Reading Room; a series of first-rate exhibitions; the creation of eight branch libraries; the launching of the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers; the acquisition of major manuscript collections; and some fine web initiatives, including the much-praised digital gallery.

Like Gregorian, LeClerc was a skilled fundraiser. In 2008 he persuaded Schwarzman, one of his trustees, the chairman, CEO and co-founder of the Blackstone private equity group, to donate \$100 million to the NYPL. In recognition of the gift, Schwarzman's name was carved into the facade at Forty-second Street in five prominent places. (Schwarzman told the *Times* it was the NYPL's notion—not his—to rename the main branch for him. He added that it was a “pretty good” idea.) However, the local community board opposed the five carvings, on the grounds that they were “excessive and unnecessarily intrusive to this iconic facade.” (LeClerc, whose salary and benefits package in 2009 was \$866,865, declined to be interviewed for this article.)

Other controversies trailed LeClerc. Writing in *The New Yorker* in 1998, Mark Singer reported that the NYPL had allowed 500 cartons of printed pamphlets, some of which were produced in the seventeenth century, to be sold to rare book dealers. In 2005 the NYPL sold a renowned painting from its collection, Asher Durand's *Kindred Spirits*, for \$35 million in a closed auction at Sotheby's. (The buyer was Walmart heir Alice Walton.) That closed auction inspired a scorching essay by *Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman, who described the process as “hasty and secretive.” In 2007 the NYPL agreed to sell a beloved branch library—the Donnell, across from the Museum of Modern Art—to Orient-Express Hotels for \$59 million. A refurbished Donnell was supposed to be incorporated into a new hotel on the site in 2011. But the economic downturn prompted Orient-Express to extricate itself from the deal, and the building has been vacant for more than three years. The Orient-Express contract was recently transferred to two developers, who finally paid the NYPL. But local residents will have to wait until late 2014 for the Donnell library to reopen.

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On a sweltering July afternoon, I called on the NYPL's new president in his elegant wood-paneled office on the second floor of the Schwarzman Building. Marx was born in 1959 to parents who took flight from Hitler's Germany. He was raised in the Inwood section of Upper Manhattan, where he haunted the local branch of the NYPL. He attended Wesleyan and became active in the student movement against apartheid, which had captured his imagination. After graduation he went to South Africa. He was keen to see—in his words—the place he had been “yelling and screaming about”; he also wanted “adventure.” There, in what he now sees as the “pivotal moment” of his life, Marx helped create a preparatory institution, Khanya College, which he describes as a “one-year residential college for a select group of African students who had been undereducated by apartheid.” Those were heady days for Marx: his residence in 1984 was a “commune of blacks and whites living illegally together, where we would get raided, and amazing people would come through hiding from the police.”

After graduate study at Princeton, Marx was hired by Columbia as a professor of political science in 1990. In addition to his academic duties, he organized a program to help Columbia undergraduates get fast-tracked to teaching jobs in New York City public schools. But writing academic monographs wearied him. Says his friend Robert Townsend, an English professor at Amherst, “He told me he'd reached the end of a scholarship track, and that he wanted to switch to something else. That's good self-knowledge.” In 2002 Marx's name was given to a search committee at Amherst hunting for a new president. They chose Marx; he was 43. In his eight years at Amherst, the college raised nearly \$500 million. Marx secured two remarkable gifts—one for \$100 million and the other for \$25 million.

His fundraising efforts were matched by a passionate campaign, resisted by some faculty members, to bring non-elite and foreign students into the ranks of one of America's most selective private colleges: as

a result, students of color constitute almost 43 percent of Amherst's freshman class. Richard Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation who writes frequently on education, credits Marx with helping to "change the conversation in higher education about diversity, expanding it beyond race to include socioeconomic status. He used his position of leadership and his charisma to bring attention to the idea that having rich kids of all colors wasn't enough. Second, he showed that excellence and economic diversity were two sides of the same coin, not competing values. Over a five-year period, he oversaw a 24 percent increase in students eligible for Pell grants even as other institutions were seeing declines."

Marx's friends say his interests and passions—egalitarianism, the democratization of knowledge, public access to information—make the NYPL an ideal fit for him. (They also say he was eager to return to New York. His wife, Karen Barkey, teaches at Columbia.) But Marx faces a steep institutional learning curve: the NYPL is a much more complex and labyrinthine institution than Amherst College. Amherst has 835 employees; the NYPL has over 2,200 employees in more than ninety locations, many of them unionized. At Amherst, Marx faced opposition from perhaps 15–20 percent of the faculty, who questioned his admissions policies and wondered if Amherst could adequately support students from non-elite backgrounds. (Some professors also felt that Marx's rhetoric was too sanctimonious.) In New York City, by contrast, he could find himself at odds with a wide constellation of political opponents and critics. At Amherst, Marx worked harmoniously with a twenty-person board of trustees; the NYPL's board comprises sixty-two people—some of whom contribute hefty sums to the institution. Observers say the NYPL is a trustee-driven institution and that staff members approach trustee meetings with palpable anxiety and dread.

At least two matters from LeClerc's tenure continue to reverberate in the Marx era. In September 2008 the NYPL dissolved two specialist divisions at Forty-second Street: the Slavic and Baltic division and the Asian and Middle Eastern division. Three of the divisions' old-fashioned reading rooms were also shut down. The closing of the Slavic and Asian and Middle Eastern divisions surprised their devoted users, many of them scholars. The scholars I talked with lamented the covert way the decision was made. Some NYPL staff are sympathetic. Says one, "It was a stealth closure, a *fait accompli*. It was done in a way to prevent protests." The reading rooms are closed to the public, but a few hints of the past remain. On a bookshelf in front of the old Slavic Reading Room are several dozen bulky maroon volumes that constitute the NYPL's dictionary catalog of the Slavonic collection; mounted on a nearby wall are two charts of the Cyrillic transliteration system.

Questions remain about access to those collections. Since 2008 users of the Slavic collection have lamented the absence of a distinguished full-time curator, as well as full-time staff, to guarantee the safety and accessibility of Slavic materials. Not long ago, a scholar was invited into the closed stacks at Schwarzman to retrieve a book. ("We can't read Cyrillic," a librarian explained.) As Hoogenboom wrote in her letter to LeClerc: "Despite cutbacks in library staff at other foremost Slavic collections in the U.S., every Slavic collection of any standing in this country has a curator and several librarians." Marx told me in July that he was "disturbed" to learn about accessibility problems with the Slavic collection. A bit of progress has since been made: on November 17 the NYPL confirmed the appointment of Stephen Corrsin as curator of Slavic, Baltic and Eastern European collections. But Corrsin is not full-time; he is also the curator of the Dorot Jewish Division. There is no full-time Slavic expert to serve the public and interact with scholars. (NYPL officials insist they are still committed to building and supporting their Slavic holdings.)

The anger and dismay about the closing of the two divisions have emanated mainly from the Slavic scholars. Few users, it seems, have complained about the closing of the Asian and Middle Eastern

division (some veteran NYPL staff still refer to that division by its original name, the Oriental division). But the former curator of that division, John Lundquist, made a noisy departure. Marilyn Johnson's recent work, *This Book Is Overdue!: How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save Us All*, contains an interview with Lundquist, whom she describes as "a refined presence, as if he'd been polished at Oxford, or just come from tea with T.S. Eliot." Lundquist, who has since left the NYPL, is blunt:

Our division has been dissolved. Our reading rooms have been closed. Our librarians have been reassigned.... In theory we continue as collections, the Asian and the Baltic, but I'm highly skeptical.... The whole library has been drastically downsized.... There has been nothing about this in the press, no. Obviously the library doesn't want any publicity.... They foresee many thousands more people in this building, and that, to them, is a worthy goal. There is a perception that libraries are archaic, dead, outdated, and that everything is now on the Internet, in digital form. We are old, stooped-over people, doing old, stooped-over things. [The NYPL administration] want[s] to lighten things up, they want the library to be active and hip.

Lundquist concludes: "I gave a talk about my new book across the street at the Mid-Manhattan branch. That place is utter chaos. And it will all come here—the noise, the teenage problems, the circulating DVDs." Lundquist was alluding to the Central Library Plan.

NYPL officials insist that the CLP is primarily about consolidation and cost-cutting. "We need to get more efficient," a high-ranking official told me. "Our sources of revenue from the city and state are not keeping up with inflation. We've got to find ways to structurally reduce our costs. And one way to do that is to have less overall square footage systemwide, because every square foot of space costs money to clean it, to maintain it and to staff it." (The City of New York provides most of the funding for the branch libraries; the four research libraries, including Forty-second Street, are sustained to a great extent by private philanthropy and an endowment of \$813 million.)

Marx frames the CLP as a matter of public access. He argues that too much of the Schwarzman Building is off-limits and that exquisite rooms are used as storage spaces. Says Marx, "The driver of the idea of a central library plan is that in the back quarter of this iconic building are stacks of books that are rarely used. We can store and get access to those books without having to take the prime space in a prime location in New York City. To the degree that we can make that space available, and replace books with people, that's the future of where libraries are going."

One of the NYPL's more energetic trustees, Carl Pforzheimer III (whose family endowed a majestic room in the main branch, the Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle), puts it a little differently: "The stacks are important to have, but it's more important to use the space properly for the future." Robert Darnton, director of the Harvard University Library and a longtime NYPL trustee, takes the same view—that Forty-second Street should be reconfigured to make room for computers and public spaces where users can talk with one another. Darnton contests the notion that removing 3 million books from Forty-second Street constitutes a retreat from the NYPL's research mission. "Books can be rearranged in lots of ways," he says. "What you need to do is to assure accessibility" to the books "and to increase the growth of your collections."

How accessible will the books be? NYPL officials say they will put them in two colossal storage facilities: one behind the library below Bryant Park, the other in Princeton, New Jersey. (NYPL officials say the latter facility is far superior to the Forty-second Street stacks in terms of climate control; they also

affirm that materials can be faxed and e-mailed to patrons at Forty-second Street.) And what about those users who need books immediately from the Princeton facility? NYPL officials uniformly insist that the materials can be transported to Forty-second Street in twenty-four hours; but staff members dispute that, saying that book delivery can take up to five days. (I recently waited two weeks for materials that never arrived; “off-site” requests have become onerous in recent years. Also, a great many books seem to be missing from the library.) Staff members are concerned that books being transported from Princeton to Forty-second Street might be damaged en route.

Storage and book delivery are paramount issues for library staff, some of whom maintain that the Schwarzman Building has become less attractive to scholars, researchers and serious readers. One can and does strike gold at the NYPL; still, a downward trend is evident. One employee says, “I know many people who do not come to Forty-second Street anymore because they cannot get the books they need to work there.” Top NYPL administrators bristle at those words, but the statistics show that a large gap has opened up between NYPL and other top research libraries. In 2008, according to data from the Association of Research Libraries, the four research libraries of the NYPL spent \$15.2 million on “library materials expenditures.” In 2010 the NYPL spent \$10.8 million. By contrast, in that year Harvard spent \$32.3 million; Columbia, \$26.4 million; and Princeton, \$23.1 million. (A pilot program involving NYPL, New York University and Columbia allows “vetted” NYPL users with a “sustained research need” to check out certain books from the libraries of NYU and Columbia. This program—by which books can leave the Schwarzman Building for the first time in decades—seems to be a tacit acknowledgment by the NYPL that it can’t keep up with those institutions.)

One staff member told me about the recent experience of a researcher who came to the Schwarzman Building for scholarly reference books. The books, it turned out, were in the Princeton storage facility. “She didn’t want to go to the trouble to call the whole set from off-site, and to renew it every week, and this and that,” the staffer explained. Columbia’s library had those books on the shelf, so she went there. “I think her experience counts for exactly *zero* with the current library administration,” the staff member told me. “That’s not the kind of reader they want—this woman probably doesn’t even know how to tweet.”

The pungency of that remark suggests several things: the low staff morale at the NYPL’s research libraries (morale has fallen further since the news of Marx’s DWI arrest landed in the papers); the deep-seated suspicion many staff members feel toward NYPL executives, some of whom have MBAs but not library science degrees; a feeling among some that the NYPL administration is excessively enamored of social media and Google Books (a plan to digitize tens of millions of books, now in legal limbo) to the detriment of old and new materials printed on paper; and widespread staff skepticism about the CLP. Nearly every employee I talked with expressed affection for the old stacks at Forty-second Street and horror at the idea that those thousands of shelves might be gutted. “The whole building is a single architectural masterpiece,” says one. “The CLP would basically destroy half the library.”

Staff members have many questions about the CLP: if a principal goal is to tear down the stacks and replace books with computers, why not refurbish Mid-Manhattan, or the much newer Science, Industry and Business Library, as a modern computer center, thereby preserving Forty-second Street for its original purpose—the housing of books and printed materials?

Devotees of New York City architecture are also growing alarmed. Charles Warren, a Manhattan architect who co-wrote a 2006 book about Carrère and Hastings, says, “The building is a machine for reading books in. The stacks are part of what the building is. There’s an idea there: that the books are in the

center and they rise up out of that machine into the reading room to serve the people. It's a whole conception that will be turned on its head by ripping out the stacks. It's a terrible thing to do." New York-based scholars also express concern about demolishing the stacks. David Levering-Lewis, an NYU historian twice awarded the Pulitzer Prize, says, "We would need to review that very carefully, and perhaps resist it."

Staff members were aroused by a September 18 *Times* article that mentioned Norman Foster, the architect hired to renovate Forty-second Street. The article, by Philip Nobel, disclosed that one of Foster's prominent buildings in Las Vegas, the Harmon, will soon be torn down; according to the article, "construction flaws were found years ago."

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In mid-August I accompanied Marx on a tour of four NYPL branch libraries in Upper Manhattan. (An NYPL manager did the driving.) Our second stop was a branch on 160th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue, in a densely populated section of Washington Heights. Things looked grim from the outside: the facade's elegant nameplate had been defaced with spray paint, and the NYPL flag was in tatters. But the branch was full of users. At the end of the tour, the director asked Marx, "Would you like to see the custodian's apartment?"

Marx hesitated. The expression on his face suggested that showing the apartment to a reporter might not be the best idea, but his finer instincts prevailed. As we mounted the stairs to the top of the building, the director explained that when the branch libraries were constructed, with funds from Andrew Carnegie in the early 1900s, the top floor was given to a custodian, who lived there with his family. The apartment we were about to see had been vacant for half a century.

The director opened the door, and suddenly we were in Jacob Riis's New York. The space was pitch black, except for a bit of sunlight coming through dingy windows. I saw rubble, cobwebs, peeling paint and an ancient tenement bathtub; there were six bedrooms and a spacious kitchen. Why was this space never renovated and incorporated into the bustling library downstairs? The director replied that there was never enough money. Later that day we visited the George Bruce branch library on 125th Street in Harlem. That building, too, had an empty custodian's apartment. I asked the director what she would do with it if funds were available to renovate. "I'd use it for a teen center," she said. When asked about her branch's needs, she quickly answered, "Ten more computers."

A few weeks earlier, sitting in Marx's office, I had asked whether a significant portion of the \$250–\$350 million designated for the Central Library Plan should go instead to the eighty-seven branch libraries. I could see the annoyance in his eyes as he replied, "I won't sacrifice what those branches can do for the opulence of Forty-second Street." But Marx didn't say how he would get the money to fully renovate the branches, which need a lot of help: for instance, the famed Jefferson Market Library in the heart of Greenwich Village has been encased by scaffolding for ten years; that branch has no public restrooms. A staff member there told me that a shortage of money explains the glacial pace of the renovation. Reconfiguring the CLP in a way that would benefit the branches may require delicate negotiations between Marx and the board of trustees, which appears to be strongly committed to the CLP.

Although stabilizing and improving the finances of the NYPL is Marx's principal order of business, incorporating the voices of the community into the decision-making process will be another challenge for him. One word that comes up frequently is "secrecy." Staff members use it to describe the routine



behavior of the NYPL administration; activists who resisted the closing of the Donnell employed it; the scholar/activists galvanized by the Slavic and Baltic division's shutdown used it; and Michael Kimmelman mentioned it in his *Times* essay about the NYPL's sale of the Durand painting. Kimmelman's words still resonate: "It's time for transparency. Increasingly we demand it from government, the media and Wall Street, in response to dwindling public faith. The same should apply to libraries and museums, which also regularly test our trust."

The NYPL's responsiveness to the public was put to the test in Harlem. In the spring of last year Howard Dodson, longtime director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture—one of the NYPL's four research libraries and a revered institution in Harlem—announced his retirement. Some local residents, according to the *Times*, speculated that the Schomburg's enormous collection would be transferred to Forty-second Street; others postulated that the Schomburg would abandon Harlem for New Jersey. In response to those rumors, and the passions they ignited, the NYPL convened a "community conversation" in the Schomburg's auditorium on 135th Street, which lasted for two hours. Onstage were LeClerc, Dodson, actress Ruby Dee and Malcolm X's daughter Ilyasah Shabazz. LeClerc assured the crowd that the Schomburg was secure in Harlem. But people who know the building well say it needs extensive renovations and new computers.

It was wise of LeClerc to convene a meeting in Harlem. Rumors were dissipated; facts were presented; opinions were exchanged. The theory of accountability was put into practice. Marx would do well to convene another "community conversation," at which the public can articulate its feelings not only about the contours of the Central Library Plan but about the shape of the entire New York Public Library in the years to come.

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