Architecture of Carnegie Libraries in Indiana

Backstory
Initially, I knew I wanted my final project to be about Carnegie libraries in Indiana. After reading several books about the topic, I started to focus on the unique architecture of these old buildings. I learned that beginning in 1908, Andrew Carnegie’s secretary James Bertram required all building plans for Carnegie libraries be submitted for approval (Bobinski, 1969). He even produced an instructional pamphlet, “Notes on Library Bildings,” which was sent as a guide to each community constructing a library with Carnegie funds (Bobinski, 1969). I decided to examine the impact Bertram and his pamphlet had on the architecture of Indiana’s Carnegie libraries.

From 1901 to 1922, 164 Carnegie-funded library buildings were constructed in 155 Indiana communities, the most in any state in the U.S. (McPherson, 2003). Many are still operating as libraries; others are used as offices, community centers, restaurants or private residences. Carnegie libraries are a major part of Indiana’s history, and it is important to understand why they look the way they do.

A very helpful resource was Temples of Knowledge: Andrew Carnegie’s Gift to Indiana. Author and photographer Alan McPherson, who received his M.L.S. from Indiana University in 1985, drove around the state to photograph each Indiana Carnegie library. He was able to capture some wonderful architectural details. Using McPherson’s book, I listed each Indiana library chronologically, based on when it received a gift from Carnegie, and then categorized them by architectural styles. I discovered that certain styles were more prevalent either before or after Bertram’s pamphlet; Carnegie’s secretary definitely influenced library architecture in Indiana.

One limitation to this project was that I am certainly not an expert on architecture. I had to rely on secondary sources to categorize the Carnegie libraries. I also wish I could have taken photographs of the libraries myself, but time and distance did not allow for that.

James Bertram & “Notes on Library Bildings”
James Bertram served as Andrew Carnegie’s private secretary from 1897 to 1914 and the secretary to the Carnegie Corporation of New York from 1911 to 1934 (Bobinski, 1969). (Judging from his use of “bildings” in his pamphlet title, Bertram subscribed to Andrew Carnegie’s simplified spelling ideas as well.) Bertram was described as devoted, logical, meticulous and methodical; he was also a man who lacked tact or patience (Bobinski, 1969). His abruptness was frequently apparent in his correspondence to local libraries.

Bertram took his job seriously. His boss, Carnegie, was not happy about the wasted space in some early-built libraries. “When he was shown a news clipping of the plan of the grandly colonnaded library in Denver, the tycoon scribbled across it: ‘I am sorry to have my money wasted this way. This is no practical library plan. Too many columns!’” (Jones, 1997, p. 69). Carnegie thought features like domes and columns represented wasted reading space. To fix this problem, Bertram started to examine the building plans in more detail. He discovered poor library planning, and beginning in 1908, requested all plans be submitted for approval (Bobinski, 1969).
In 1911, he took it a step further with his instructional pamphlet “Notes on Library Buildings.” It was revised and expanded over the next eight years and eventually grew from a one-page text to a document that included six possible floor plans (Van Slyck, 1995). The ideal Carnegie library, according to Bertram, was “a one-story rectangular building with 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” (Van Slyck, 1995, p. 37). The circulation desk would be located close to the entrance. The basement would contain storage, work and lecture rooms, making sure not to give too much valuable space to cloakrooms or restrooms (Bobinski, 1969).

While Bertram’s pamphlet strongly encouraged using one of the suggested floor plans for a library’s interior, the exterior was left up to the community. “Carnegie had intended each community library's exterior design to be a local decision and to reflect the surrounding landscape” (Smith, 2006, p. 61). At the same time, Carnegie and Bertram wanted communities to attain the greatest amount of usable space while still exercising good taste (Bobinski, 1969).

**Architectural Styles**

Before Bertram began exercising architectural control, Beaux Arts Classicism was a popular style choice for Indiana libraries. From 1901 to 1910, more than a dozen libraries were built in this fashion. Beaux Arts Classicism is characterized by entrances within monumental arches, stone exterior walls and paired columns (Jones, 1997). The New York Public Library is an example of Beaux Arts Classicism; perhaps Indiana libraries looked to it for inspiration before they had Bertram’s pamphlet as a guide. Beaux Arts Classicism libraries in Indiana included Marion, Peru and Shelbyville.

After Bertram had to approve library building plans, three architectural styles emerged as popular choices: Eclectic, Tudor Gothic Revival and Craftsman-Prairie Tradition. Six Eclectic libraries were constructed between 1911 and 1915. Eclectic style combined a number of architectural features. Eclectic libraries in Indiana included Garrett, Noblesville and Warsaw.

There were also approximately 15 Tudor Gothic Revival libraries built between 1907 and 1917. Tudor Gothic Revival libraries in Indiana included Hobart, Indianapolis (East Washington branch) and New Castle.

Craftsman-Prairie Tradition was the second-most popular style for Indiana Carnegie libraries. About 50 libraries were built between 1911-1918. The Prairie School style was created by Frank Lloyd Wright and was characterized by a low and horizontal design emphasis and walls of stucco, brick or wood (Jones, 1997). Craftsman-Prairie Tradition libraries in Indiana included Angola, Flora, Rising Sun and Westville.

Two styles were popular throughout the Carnegie library era in Indiana; Bertram and his pamphlet did not seem to have an influence either way on their popularity. Approximately 55 Neo Classical Revival libraries were constructed between 1901 and 1917. Neo Classical Revival, which was introduced during the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, featured evenly spaced columns, stone construction and a long flight of steps (Jones, 1997). “Patrons ‘stepped up’ intellectually when they walked up the main entryway, entering ‘higher ground’ through the temple-like portal into the rooms of knowledge” (McPherson, 2003, p. 20). It was a simpler style than Beaux Arts Classicism; perhaps that is why it never fell out of favor with Bertram. “About 24 percent of all Carnegie libraries are Classical Revival structures” (Jones, 1997, p. 67). Neo Classical Revival libraries in Indiana included Bedford, Hartford City, Muncie and Wabash.

Renaissance Revival was another style that persisted from 1901 through 1917, and it was utilized by more than a dozen Indiana libraries. Its design features include a clear definition of
elements and simple decorative devices (Jones, 1997). Simplicity was a trait encouraged by Bertram. Renaissance Revival libraries in Indiana included Attica, Frankfort and Scottsburg.

*Note: This list is not inclusive of all Indiana Carnegie libraries. Other architectural styles, like Modern or Italianesque, are represented by just a handful of libraries.

Conclusion
Even though Andrew Carnegie did not visit any of his Indiana libraries, he had an enormous impact that is still felt more than a century later. I would argue that his secretary, James Bertram, also had a strong influence on Indiana libraries, especially when it came to architecture. Beginning in 1908, all communities were required to submit their building plans to Bertram for approval. After the creation of Bertram’s instructional pamphlet in 1911, they had a resource that guided their design decisions. These factors contributed to a shift from the grandiose designs of Beaux Arts Classicism to the Midwestern sensibility of Craftsman-Prairie Tradition. Simpler styles, like Neo Classical Revival and Renaissance Revival, proved popular throughout the years.

Google Site
I created a Google Site about library architecture in Indiana. It can be accessed here: https://sites.google.com/site/slis2012s580/.

References


Photo Sources
Attica: in.gov

East Washington Branch: www.imcpl.org


Noblesville: photos.indystar.com

Rising Sun: http://ocpl.lib.in.us/location/