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TITLE: **IS THE SPACE FINISHED? THE BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY**

ABSTRACT:

Libraries occupy a special places in culture as a repository of knowledge, as a place for learning and enrichment, as a refuge from the bustling world and toil of everyday life. Libraries are quiet contemplative places set apart. The collection of the library sits ready to be tapped for our nourishment. The very notion of the library is evocative.

Libraries are sought after projects for architects, and exciting programs for the patrons who commission them. Architects savor the opportunity to bring their vision for a library into being as an addition to a great typological continuum dating back to the ancient world. Patrons too place themselves in this great tradition, setting expectations for the quality of the design. The design of libraries centers on the display and access to the books, journals, manuscripts, maps, archives in the collection. Wood is a material commonly associated with libraries, used naturally for the shelving, cases, flat files, seating, and tables. The warmth of the wood and the texture and color of the spines of the materials on the shelves combine to embrace us in a womb like way, comforting us and calming our spirits.

The small library that is part of a larger institution is a unique subset of the typology. Small libraries can be found in monasteries and madrasas, in clubs, in private homes, and in colleges. One can trace a lineage of the small institutional library that includes libraries found in Rome and Prague, Oxford and Cambridge, Paris and London, New York and Boston. Study of the great tradition of the small libraries reveals common design strategies. Very common in small institutional libraries is a configuration as follows: the library space is double height, the shelves surround a central space, a gallery or mezzanine provides additional storage and access to the collection but also a spatial drama, the eye is drawn up. This configuration endows importance to the ceiling or vaults that finish the space above. Frequently the ceiling is articulated by the structural elements that span across the space: wood beams, wrought iron trusses, masonry vaults. Where structure is hidden, decorative schemes on the ceiling often complete the space: frescos, moulded plasterwork, stenciled coffers.

The Brooklyn Historical Society Othmer Library undoubtedly aspires to sit proudly in this continuum of the small institutional library. The configuration follows the typical formula. The woodwork's warmth and richness immediately strike the visitor and speak of this great traditional. All the elements are here, except for one: the ceiling. In this space, the ceiling hovers uncomfortably just above the cornice of the mezzanine shelves, with awkward shadows lurking in this gap of space. The contrast of the richness below and the blankness above is conspicuous and mysterious and begs the question: was this intentional or the result of some particular contingency of the project?

My research is seeking to answer this question. But this research is also intended to provide context for a creative intervention (likely ephemeral): an artistic and architectural competition to "finish the space."