

Arlington Hills Public Library/East Side Freedom Library, Ramsey County



IN 2012, when the city of St. Paul decided to move the Arlington Hills Public Library into a new community center, the chance of finding a buyer for the historic East Side building seemed slim.

The original Arlington Hills Public Library, built in 1917, was one of St. Paul's first branch libraries. At that time, the East Side was home to many immigrants, predominantly Swedes, but also Germans, Italians, Irish, Poles, and other Eastern Europeans who labored in local industrial powerhouses—Hamm's Brewing, Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing (3M), and Seeger Refrigerator (later Whirlpool). Business leaders bragged that the Payne Avenue commercial district provided "every convenience and product of modernity" with one exception: it had no library. So, when Andrew Carnegie agreed to fund three branch libraries, the East Side Commercial Club competed to have their neighborhood chosen as a site and fundraised to purchase suitable property for the building, on Greenbrier Street, one block from Payne. Charles Hausler, the city's first architect, designed the library with a neo-classical, Beaux Arts façade.

Since then, new groups have moved to St. Paul's East Side, beginning with African Americans and Mexicans and joined later by Southeast Asians, Africans, and Central Americans. From its beginning, the Arlington Hills library was a heavily used and welcoming place for newcomers as well as longtime residents. Hmong author Kao Kalia Yang fondly remembers visiting as a child and climbing a stool to reach "higher up in the world of stories." In 1984, the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

After treasuring this Carnegie library for almost a century, East Siders faced the prospect of an abandoned, slowly deteriorating building in their midst. Remarkably, a negative became a positive when Peter Rachleff and Beth Cleary, Macalester College professors, negotiated a long-term lease to adapt the structure into a new nonprofit East Side Freedom Library (ESFL), promoting solidarity, justice, and equity through exploration of working-class, African American, Native American, immigrant, and feminist history. Now celebrating its tenth year, the ESFL houses 35,000 books and a wealth of other resources. More than



Arlington Hills Branch Library of the Saint Paul Public Library, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1917. PHOTO FROM THE MINNESOTA DIGITAL LIBRARY.



The site as the East Side Freedom Library. PHOTO BY GREG GAUT.

a research center, it is a gathering place where trade unionists, immigrants, scholars, musicians, poets, artists, and neighbors share stories that place the past "in conversation with the present." The ESFL sponsors about 150 educational and cultural programs and events annually—including musical performances, readings, art exhibits, book clubs, movies, and puppet shows.

For more information: eastsidefreedomlibrary.org.

—Greg Gaut and Marsha Neff

Sources

Greg Gaut, *Reinventing the People's Library* (St. Paul, MN: East Side Freedom Library, 2019); Kao Kalia Yang, "Invisible Stories," in Doug Ohman, *Libraries of Minnesota* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2011), 113.



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