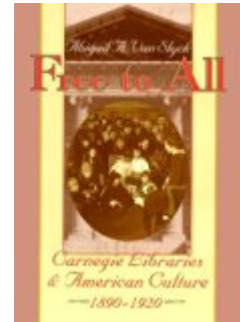


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Abigail A. Van Slyck. *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries & American Culture, 1890-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. xxvii + 276 pp. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-85031-3; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-85032-0.

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Published on H-Urban (March, 1997)



With *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries & American Culture, 1890-1920*, Abigail A. Van Slyke makes a very valuable contribution to the history of architecture, of urban development, of culture, and of philanthropy in the United States. From a starting point in the history of architecture, Van Slyke aligns herself with the effort “to look at all buildings as evidence of social processes in which a variety of attitudes are negotiated in specific social and cultural settings” (p. xxi). Andrew Carnegie’s gifts supplied “1,679 libraries to 1,412 towns at a cost of well over \$41 million” (p. 22). In a book filled with architectural details and sharply observed cultural commentary (and very nicely illustrated), Van Slyke successfully demonstrates that Carnegie’s library program provides an excellent opportunity for the cultural analysis of America’s towns and cities.

As Van Slyke points out, Andrew Carnegie contributed only very reluctantly to public libraries designed as grand architectural monuments, and as a result the libraries he supported have rarely attracted historians of formal architecture. His smaller libraries represented works that were too professional and formal to attract historians of vernacular architecture who prefer structures that are modest, amateur, informal, and idiosyncratic. And his small libraries play a minor role in the heroic story of the creation of the American library profession. Yet the Carnegie libraries are important institutions in many city neighborhoods and small towns: their designs and their operational policies do indeed reflect community decisions “negotiated in specific social and cultural settings.”

Van Slyke’s book is especially strong in its analysis of the negotiations among professional librarians,

professional architects, library furniture makers, small town cultural associations, women’s clubs and business groups over the internal design and operations of modest Carnegie libraries in small towns. Many mid-nineteenth-century libraries, she shows, were little more than clubs designed to celebrate the social superiority of the members of their boards. The Carnegie libraries shifted the design emphasis to the professional librarian, reducing the ceremonial emphasis on donors and board members. Carnegie’s willingness to provide funds to large numbers of libraries attracted the attention of early promoters of librarianship as a profession, whose focus on efficiency appealed to Carnegie. Manufacturers of standardized library furniture and supplies also applauded the large scale of his program and his willingness to pay for durable and uniform fittings. Architects often found themselves at odds with Carnegie, who became less and less willing to pay for decorative designs: but a few firms prospered by accepting the disciplines that Carnegie imposed.

Van Slyke’s treatment of gender is particularly effective. The professional libraries provided professional opportunities for many women, she notes, sometimes at the expense of the amateur clubwomen who had promoted a town’s library in the first place. Yet the gendered assumptions of the time denied librarians salaries that were anywhere near those available through the professions dominated by men. And gendered assumptions helped produce library layouts and designs that limited the librarians’ autonomy even as they helped them maintain close control over every nook and corner of their domains. Carnegie and his assistants insisted that the libraries be open to all, but in segregated Texas, Van Slyke shows, the “public” libraries were firmly closed to

African-Americans. Proposed separate facilities in one town, she demonstrates, were never designed to be equal, and in fact were long delayed.

*Free To All* goes far to open a wonderful topic. Future studies might profitably examine the economics and politics of the Carnegie libraries, and reconsider their role in the bigger cities. As a philanthropy, Carnegie's library program was extraordinary in the commitment it exacted from local governments. In each case, Carnegie agreed to pay for a library building only if the community that was to receive the gift agreed to impose a special and permanent new tax to pay the library's operating costs. In most cases, this requirement led to the adoption of state legislation making it possible to establish library districts that were comparable to but often separate from school districts, and then to local decisions to set up such districts for the continuing benefit of library systems. These arrangements remain in place today. Carnegie's library philanthropy was, thus, one of the most successful efforts in American history of a donor's use of a gift to shape public policy. Van Slyke refers to this aspect of Carnegie's library program only in passing, though it is certainly relevant to the local politics of library design and operation, as well as to her account of the way in which a Carnegie library grant could shift control of a local library from a women's club to the male-dominated local government.

Van Slyke's account of the cultural politics of small town libraries, especially in the West and Great Plains, is entirely persuasive. The story of Carnegie libraries in the big cities might well deserve another look. Many of the forces Van Slyke finds at work in small towns surely appeared in big-city neighborhoods as well. But the cultural politics of big cities cannot be characterized as a simple

"confrontation ... between ... an older, native-born elite ... and municipal officials drawn from more recent immigrant populations" (p. 65). The "older" elite was in fact so divided as to constitute several very distinct elites—and the same was of course also true of the "immigrant populations," which were indeed plural even in the rare cities where they derived from a limited number of European regions. Van Slyke offers some intriguing quotations from immigrant users of New York City branch libraries, but unfortunately she ignores cultural diversity among the immigrants. She doesn't acknowledge that all of her quotations about New York City's branch libraries, for example, come from Jewish writers who had lived on the Lower East Side, in a period when Catholics far outnumbered Jews in New York City, and when the city also housed large numbers of Protestant immigrants from Germany, the Czech lands, and other parts of Europe. On one other point, anyone who has used downtown or branch libraries in such cities as Boston, New York, Cleveland, or Portland, Oregon, will have noted that many of the users seek business information. This may well have been equally true for the users of small town and southern libraries. But Van Slyke confines her cultural analysis largely to the readers of fiction.

Altogether, Abigail Van Slyke's *Free To All* is an impressive, ambitious, and stimulating book. It opens a new approach to the history of America's small towns and urban neighborhoods, and it deserves a wide readership among students of urban development and design and American culture.

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**Citation:** David C. Hammack. Review of Slyck, Abigail A. Van, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries & American Culture, 1890-1920*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 1997.

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