



THE NEW YORKER

Slide Show: American Public Libraries Great and Small

By Rachel Arons

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In the course of eighteen years, beginning in 1994, the California-based photographer Robert Dawson took pictures of hundreds of public libraries across the United States. The results are collected in his new book, “The Public Library: A Photographic Essay,” to be released next month. Many writers have written eloquently about the role of libraries in American life (see Mark Twain’s impassioned praise of Fairhaven, Massachusetts’ Millicent Library, in the third slide above), but Dawson’s project makes a powerful case for how public libraries serve communities in every corner of the country. In the introduction, he writes, “Public libraries are worth fighting for, and this book is my way of fighting.”

All photographs from “Public Library: A Photographic Essay,” by Robert Dawson, Princeton Architectural Press, 2014.



Peterborough Town Library; Peterborough, New Hampshire, 2009. Established in 1833, this is the first tax-supported library in the United States.

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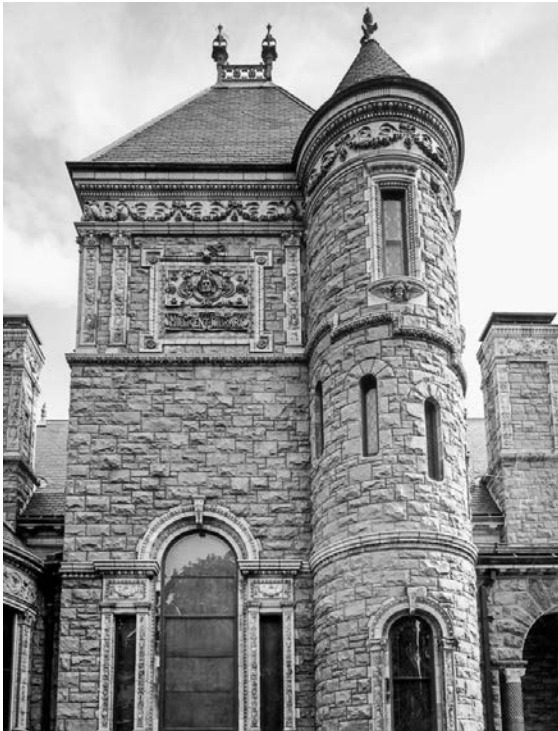
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Willard Library, Evansville; Indiana, 2011. Built in 1885, this is the oldest public library in Indiana. Housed in a spectacular Victorian building, it is rumored to be haunted. While photographing a dark corner of the interior, I thought I saw the resident ghost. Live GhostCams are currently keeping watch at willardghost.com.



Millicent Library; Fairhaven, Massachusetts, 1994. In 1894, Mark Twain wrote a letter calling this library “ideal”: “Books are the liberated spirits of men, and should be bestowed in a heaven of light and grace and harmonious color and sumptuous comfort, like this, instead of in the customary kind of public library, with its depressing austerities and severities of form and furniture and

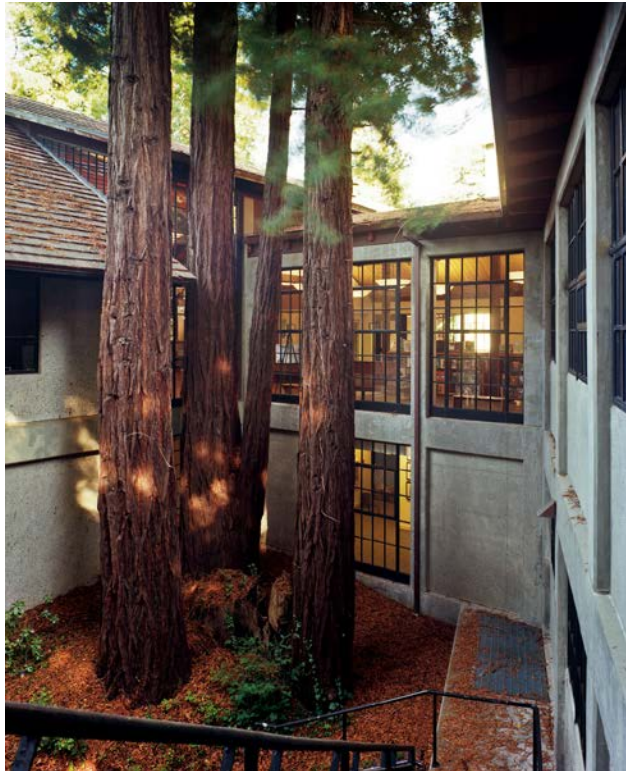
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decoration. A public library is the most enduring of memorials.... All other things which I have seen today must pass away and be forgotten; but there will still be a Millicent Library when by the mutations of language the books that are in it now will speak in a lost tongue to your posterity."



Mill Valley Public Library; Mill Valley, California, 2012.



Mark Twain Branch Library; Detroit, Michigan, 2011. This is one of several Detroit-libraries branches that closed in 2011, owing to budget cuts.

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The Handley Regional Library; Winchester, Virginia, 2011. A Confederate sympathizer built this library after the Civil War.



George Washington Carver Branch Library; Austin, Texas, 2011. Black citizens in East Austin strongly advocated for a library in their community, and this was the first branch to serve them. The mural is by the Austin artist John Fisher.

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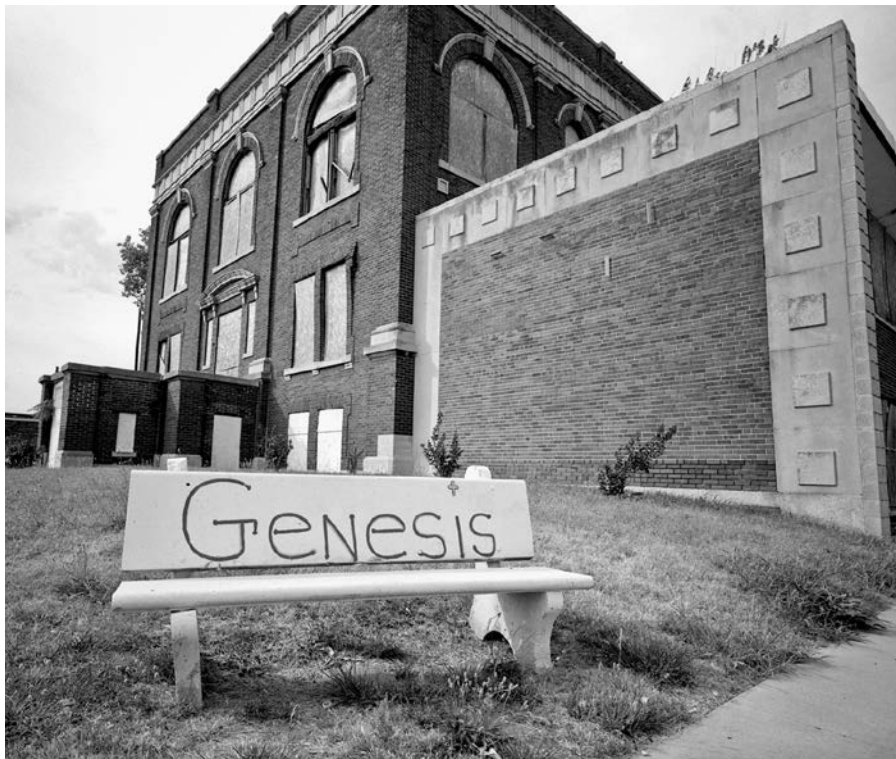
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A library built by former slaves; Allensworth, California, 1995. Allen Allensworth was born into slavery, in Kentucky, in 1842. He later became a petty officer in the U.S. Navy, a Baptist minister, and a chaplain in the U.S. Army, and he founded the colony of Allensworth in Tulare County, California, in the early part of the twentieth century. This library is a re-creation of the original, in what is now called Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park.



A former night club and library; St. Louis, Illinois, 2012. Originally built as an Elks Club, this abandoned library was once a popular night club, where Miles Davis, who grew up in East St. Louis, got his start.

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Central Library; Seattle, Washington, 2009. The Dutch architects Rem Koolhaas and Joshua Ramus were the principal designers of this library, which opened in 2004.



Richard F. Boi Memorial Library, the first Little Free Library; Hudson, Wisconsin, 2012. Todd Boi started the Little Free Library movement as a tribute to his mother, who was a book lover and a schoolteacher, by mounting a wooden container designed to look like a schoolhouse on a post on his lawn. Library owners can create their own boxes, usually about the size of a dollhouse, or purchase one from the movement's Web site (littlefreelibrary.org).



The Queens Library bookmobile; New York, 2012. The bookmobile stationed in the Rockaways, after Hurricane Sandy.

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