



## THE LEWIS AND CLARK BRANCH LIBRARY: A MODERN MASTERWORK SLATED FOR DEMOLITION

by Lindsey Derrington

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The Lewis and Clark Branch Library, completed in 1963, was once the pride of the St. Louis County Library system. Designed by architect Frederick Dunn, FAIA with stunning stained glass windows by master artist Robert Harmon, it was constructed as part of a progressive mid-century building program which sought to re-envision libraries in the postwar era. Yet today, as it celebrates its fiftieth birthday, the building's future hangs in the balance under the threat of demolition.



*Exterior View, Main Facade, Northeast Corner, (photo by Lindsey Derrington)*



*Exterior View Looking Northwest (photo by John Guenther)*

The St. Louis County Library system was voted into existence in 1946. Charged with serving 455 square miles of land (excluding independent St. Louis City and eleven smaller municipalities with established libraries), its first few years were tenuous. It had no books, no buildings, a delayed budget,

and was challenged by two ballot initiatives aimed at its destruction.<sup>1</sup> Newly appointed Director Stewart W. Smith acted quickly, building a fleet of bookmobiles and in 1951 converting a former Dodge dealership into the system's first library.<sup>2</sup> Support grew, and in 1955 county voters approved a five year "special building tax" to construct four additional branches.<sup>3</sup> With Smith at the helm, this populist building program launched the county system to national prominence by challenging traditional notions of library programming.

Smith, a former jazz musician, lifeguard, and factory worker with a master's degree in library science from the University of Chicago, approached building the system with mid-century eyes.<sup>4</sup> He recognized the opportunity to build new libraries for a new America, ones tailored to the suburban lifestyle and imbued with postwar optimism. In his words, "I'm not interested in reaching the double-domed intellectual. He knows where the library is anyway. I want to reach Joe Doakes, fresh from the hills, who doesn't realize how much the library can change his life."<sup>5</sup> The new county libraries were light-filled and colorful, with curving bookshelves, modern furnishings, and playful section titles. Patrons could talk freely, smoke, and even bring their dogs to browse through books, records, and films to the reassuring hum of soft background music. Ample parking lots and innovative, mechanized checkout and card registration processes greatly increased accessibility.<sup>6</sup> Smith's "supermarket libraries" stripped away "the unnecessary, the stuffiness, the atmosphere of intellectual snobbery" he felt were counterintuitive to keeping libraries relevant in the postwar era.<sup>7</sup>



*Interior View, Reading Room Looking northeast (photo by Lindsey Derrington)*

Though controversial, his vision worked.<sup>8</sup> Two libraries opened in 1958 - one newly-constructed and one in a renovated movie theater - and a headquarters branch opened in 1960.<sup>9</sup> They were wildly popular, and by 1961 the system was circulating over 3.5 million books annually and had the largest fleet of bookmobiles in the nation. It was the third largest county library system in the United States, and by 1963 offered patrons a wide-ranging collection of 700,000 books, 50,000 records and 7,000 films.<sup>10</sup>

Construction of the Lewis and Clark Branch Library constituted the final piece of the building program. Located in the tiny new municipality of Moline Acres, it would serve the residents of northeastern St. Louis County and was named for its proximity to the launch of the Corps of Discovery Expedition. Surrounded by modest post-war suburban ranches, the site was located on a four-lane highway, increasing accessibility. Plans were announced in late 1960, with Frederick Dunn & Associates as the architect.<sup>11</sup>



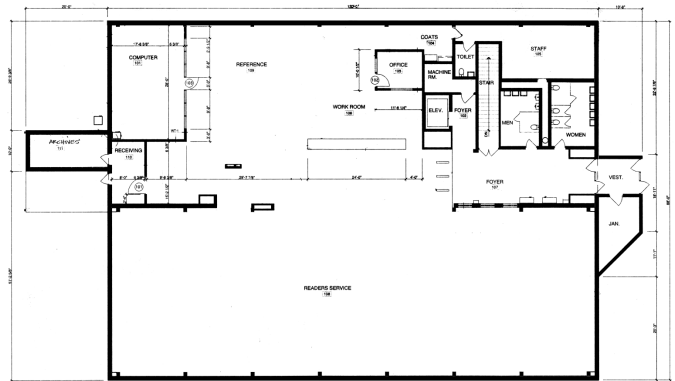
*Interior View, Reading Room, Northeast Corner (photo by Lindsey Derrington)*

Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, Frederick Dunn (1905-1984) attended the Carnegie Institute of Technology before earning his BFA and MFA in architecture from Yale between 1927 and 1933. He was a top student, winning a First Medal in the Beaux Arts Institute of Design's Paris Prize competition as well as the prestigious William Wirt Winchester travelling fellowship to Europe.<sup>12</sup> While at Yale he befriended St. Louis-born Charles Nagel, Jr., (1899-1992), an assistant professor of art history and curator of decorative arts at the Gallery of Fine Arts. Nagel, who had trained in architecture as well and worked as draftsman for firms in St. Louis and Boston, convinced Dunn to relocate to his hometown to establish their own office in 1936.<sup>13</sup>

There Nagel and Dunn were part of a young group of artists and architects struggling against St. Louis' conservative tendencies, counting Grace Lewis Miller (of Richard Neutra's 1937 Miller House) and Charles Eames (who left for Cranbrook in 1938) among their friends.<sup>14</sup> With Eames they were members of the Paint and Potter Club, a Saturday night social gathering "where the local intelligentsia met to drink and to discuss art, design,

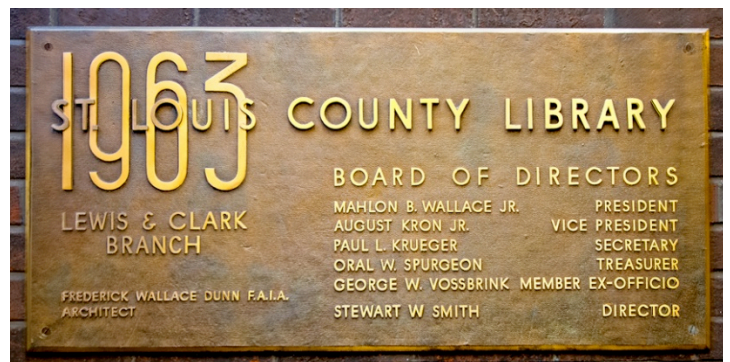
and life," as well as paint and practice various crafts.<sup>15</sup> At the time most of Nagel & Dunn's commissions were for Revival style homes for the well-to-do, but in 1938 they were chosen to design St. Mark's Episcopal Church in St. Louis City, a stunning modernist composition of masonry, stained glass, and sculpture in the vein of Eliel Saarinen. It was the first modernist church in the region and garnered national attention.<sup>16</sup>

Nagel & Dunn dissolved in 1942 when the latter entered the Navy. Dunn served as Curtis-Wright's chief construction engineer in St. Louis before reassignment to submarine construction in Philadelphia.<sup>17</sup> Nagel would serve on the jury for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial and embark on a decorated career as director of the Brooklyn Museum, the Saint Louis Art Museum, and the National Portrait Gallery.<sup>18</sup>



*Original plan, Lewis & Clark Branch Library*

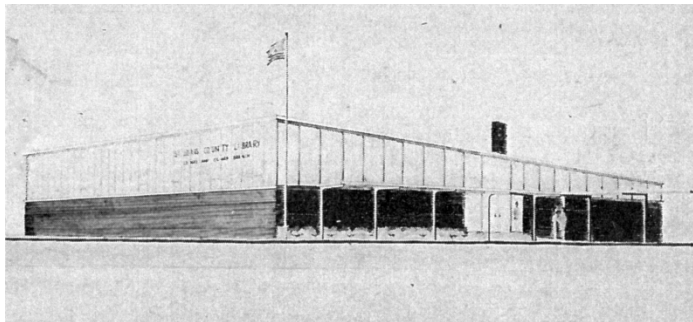
After the war Dunn returned to St. Louis to establish Frederick Dunn & Associates. The city's attitude towards modernism was rapidly changing; Washington University was churning out a new generation of young modernists while Dunn's contemporaries such as Harris Armstrong and Joseph Murphy were coming into their own. His own firm flourished, producing award-winning works such as the Bobe Residence (1953), Faith-Salem Church (1954), Steinberg Memorial Ice Skating Rink (1957), and the National Council State Garden Club Headquarters (1960).<sup>19</sup> Dunn's early interest in traditional arts translated into the modern idiom continued, and he routinely incorporated the work of important sculptors and artisans in his designs.



*Dedication plaque in entrance lobby (photo © Andrew Raimist)*

Dunn's selection for the library project came at the height of his career in April 1956 and by 1961 the design, executed in collaboration with associate Nolan Stinson, Jr. (1922-1997), was in place.<sup>20</sup> The steel-framed building was rectangular in plan with a shed roof rising from its rear. Its charcoal gray brick base gave way to aluminum and glass curtain walls wrapping around its main and side facades to optimize natural light.<sup>21</sup> Set into a sloping site, it presented a one-story front to the street with its basement level visible to the rear. The main reading room – virtually free of vertical supports – and library offices were on the main floor, with closed stacks, a 250-seat auditorium, and two meeting rooms below. Upon its completion the highly functional building was elegant in its simplicity, with its sole decoration focused on stunning stained glass windows by artist Robert Harmon.

Harmon (1915-1999) was at the forefront of his craft during the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in St. Louis, he attended Washington University's School of Art and was hired by the legendary Emil Frei & Associates stained glass studio in 1936. He became lead designer and helped push the studio into the modern era with national award-winning designs. In 1948 Harmon moved his family to the Ozark Mountains in Arcadia, Missouri, where he operated a rural studio and continued designing windows and mosaics for Frei remotely.<sup>22</sup> He was one of twenty artists chosen for the American Federation of Arts and Stained Glass Association of America's national exhibition "New Work in Stained Glass," which the State Department took on a European tour in 1955 and 1956.<sup>23</sup> He had executed designs for over 200 churches by 1961, with some of his most stunning work executed in collaboration with Dunn on St. Mark's Episcopal and Faith-Salem Evangelical.<sup>24</sup>



Rendering ("Robert W. Wright Gets Contract for New County Branch Library," St. Louis Construction Record, 12 September 1961).

Placed at the northern end of Lewis and Clark's main façade and echoed in smaller blocks of colored glass embedded throughout the curtain wall and in tiny hopper windows, Harmon's design imbued the otherwise symmetrical building with a delicate asymmetry. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark are featured along with their Shoshone guide Sacagawea and her baby Jean Baptiste Charbonneau. Flora and fauna, including a buffalo in sprint, are interwoven with abstract patterns to complete the stunning composition.

The \$300,000 Lewis and Clark Branch Library opened to community acclaim on Tuesday, January 8, 1963.<sup>25</sup> Natural light flooded its reading room, tinted by the yellow and reds of Harmon's windows. Almost completely open in plan,

freestanding shelves allowed for relaxed but efficient circulation and Eames and Saarinen furnishings by Knoll enhanced its modernity.<sup>26</sup> Airy, utterly welcoming, and surrounded by 160 parking spaces, Lewis and Clark was the fullest embodiment of Smith's vision and by far the most architecturally sophisticated branch in the county library system.<sup>27</sup>

Librarians reported on the enthusiastic stream of patrons flooding the building upon its opening – housewives in the mornings and early afternoons, hundreds of children after school ("It looks as if the school busses emptied at the door"), and entire families after dinner.<sup>28</sup> The auditorium played host to popular "Family Affair" presentations where patrons gathered to show their travel slides, its two meeting rooms were in constant demand, and children's story hours and film screenings were regular features.<sup>29</sup>



Reading Room Looking Southeast in 1963 (Nell Gross, "Something New in Suburbia," St. Louis Globe-Democrat, 14 July 1963).

Fifty years later, the Lewis and Clark Branch Library remains in constant use by its 45,000 patrons.<sup>30</sup> The St. Louis County Library system, now twenty branches strong, is the busiest in Missouri and circulated 14.4 million items amongst 6.3 million visitors in 2012.<sup>31</sup> Yet this success has come with a questionable push to revamp the system's facilities. In 2012 Library Director Charles Pace lobbied hard for and won a \$108 million, voter-approved facilities plan to replace, renovate, or add to various branches throughout the system.<sup>32</sup> Lewis and Clark, based on consultants' recommendations from 2008 and 2012, is one of the branches slated for demolition.<sup>33</sup>

There are no specific complaints lobbied against Lewis and Clark – indeed, the 2012 study notes that all of the library system's facilities are well-maintained, and Dunn's building has had several upgrades in the past ten years including a new roof and HVAC system.<sup>34</sup> Rather, demolition is recommended based on the building's age and perceived obsolescence with no consideration for its architectural or historic significance, let alone its potential for reuse.<sup>35</sup> Size is a questionable issue, since the 16,000 square foot Lewis and Clark is to be razed for a marginally-larger 20,000 square foot building despite the fact that the system is developing a new 15,000 square foot prototype at another, equally-busy branch.<sup>36</sup> There is no

indication that the possibility of adding to the building – an entirely feasible solution given its spacious site – has been entertained.

Modern STL, the St. Louis County Historical Buildings Commission, Landmarks Association of St. Louis, and AIA St. Louis have all called for Lewis and Clark’s preservation as one of the most impressive modern designs in the region. It is the only county library from the mid-century building program which remains almost entirely intact and in use. While Library Director Pace had tepidly maintained that the consultants’ recommendations were not set in stone, he abruptly resigned in the summer of 2013 and the building remains in limbo.<sup>37</sup> His vision for the county libraries was not so different from his early predecessor’s – while Pace felt that “libraries have ‘evolved’ over the years to the point where they should be more like community centers than warehouses for books,” Stewart W. Smith stated that “We have people-centered, rather than book-centered, libraries.”<sup>38</sup> Advocates can only hope that the St. Louis County Library Board and its future director will realize that demolishing the Lewis and Clark Branch Library would not only destroy an important piece of St. Louis’ architectural heritage, but a crucial piece of its own history.

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North end of library showing main entrance and canopy (photo by Lindsey Derrington)

## GLASS AS ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN FREDERICK DUNN’S LEWIS & CLARK BRANCH LIBRARY by Andrew Raimist

The Lewis and Clark Branch Library is located at 9909 Lewis & Clark Boulevard (Missouri Route 367) in the north county community of Moline Acres. It was designed by Frederick Dunn and dedicated in 1963. Currently threatened with demolition by the administration of the St. Louis County Library, it is *the* architectural and artistic jewel of their library system. The design of the building surpasses the other branches

both functionally and aesthetically. It features an innovative structural system that provides a wide open floor plan with few fixed columns. The Lewis and Clark theme of the library is carried out in a thoughtful, representational way that appeals to children and on a more abstract level for adults.



*Lewis & Clark Branch Library, 9909 Lewis & Clark Blvd., 1963, Frederick Dunn (photo © Andrew Raimist)*

Based on my recent visits, the library appears to be well used and much loved. People arrived by automobile, bus, bicycle, on foot, and by skateboard. The patrons ranged from children who had clearly finished school earlier that afternoon to seniors performing computer searches.

The building is modest and unassuming from the street. It's a low slung rectangular solid with a brick base and glass top. The roof slopes gently toward the back of the site. The most distinctive element of the facade is the colored art glass that adorns some of its panes, primarily located at the north end of the primary eastern facade. This was designed by artist Robert Harmon for Emil Frei Studios, a firm which worked with many of the leading modernist architects during this period. The colorful display features clearly legible identifying texts in addition to prominently featuring standing images of Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and Sacagawea. If one heads northward on Lewis and Clark Boulevard, one will cross the Missouri River close to the location from which their journey across the North American continent began in 1804.

Beyond their didactic function, the art glass elements help to direct patrons toward the main entry located on the north building face. In fact, each of the three figures is subtly oriented toward the north. Both Lewis and Clark are gazing toward the north, while Sacagawea is actually offering directions to visitors pointing them in the same direction.

A series of rectangular "dashes" extends from the main facade around the corners to the north and south, connecting these sides visually and conceptually. These brightly colored windows occupy the only operable glazing on the facade: horizontal, rectangular windows. In a sense, the building invites patrons to engage with the glazing by offering these low tilt-in hopper windows.

The glass facade is remarkable in its simplicity and sensitivity. The aluminum framing is kept to a minimum dimension and the glass is held nearly flush with the brick partition wall below. We understand this exterior wall as a non-structural skin based upon the manner in which the clearly visible steel columns and beams are kept free of the glass and brick wall. Emphasizing

this disjunction, the columns are located on the center of individual glass panes. There's no attempt to disguise the structural system. On the contrary, it is exhibited proudly in a no-nonsense manner that might even be characterized as solidly midwestern, if not emblematic of Missouri's "Show Me" attitude.



*Southeast corner of library with clerestory (photo by John Guenther)*

The glazing creates a clerestory that wraps the entire building, offering clear views from inside to out and vice versa. In this way, patrons are constantly reminded of the weather, sunlight and exterior conditions in a way not unlike the way that Lewis and Clark might have viewed the skies over the prairies for hints of oncoming storms.

The combination of art glass with large text allows the facade to serve several purposes. In one sense, it functions almost as a kind of artistic billboard advertising the building's basic purpose as well as visually marking the building with its namesake figures almost as if they were religious icons. There's a sense in which the facade acts as a kind of storyboard for children whereby they can be told the story of the remarkable adventures of the Corps of Discovery at the direction of President Thomas Jefferson, who believed that understanding the landscape in all of its richness – cultural, scientific and aesthetic – was essential to the future of our United States. It was in connection with his monumental Louisiana Purchase that the expedition was launched, and it has become an iconic episode in the founding of our nation.

While the scholarly Lewis is shown with paper and quill taking notes and making drawings as a record of their travels. The large plants that surrounds his coonskin-capped head reaches around and over him to point visitors toward the east in another reminder of the building's orientation to history and for the more routine purpose of entering the library. Lewis' figure is seated and clothed in robes suggesting both Michelangelo's Moses as well as the gaunt, bearded figures of El Greco.

Clark stands erect holding his long gun in one hand and displays a creature that he's captured in the other. His figure is ready for action and appears clad in animal skins not unlike those that Sacagawea wears. With his knees and legs exposed, he is clearly the more active figure of the two men. The beast he's bagged has been rendered with an artistic resemblance to Picasso's fragmented figures in "Guernica" suggesting the

impending violence the white race would bring to the indigenous peoples of the area. Indeed he gazes at Sacagawea almost stoically with a sense of dynamism and violence that contrasts perfectly with her symmetrical, peaceful Madonna-like figure.



*Meriwether Lewis in glass designed by Robert Harmon for Emil Frei Studios, seen from the interior (photo by John Guenther)*

Of the three figures, she's the most heavenly and otherworldly. Surrounded by signs of peace and life (dove in flight) and immortality and renewal (peacocks perched on branches), Sacagawea carries her son Jean Baptiste Charbonneau on her back. Like a representation of the Madonna and Christ, the child appears to understand its role in communicating the peaceful intentions of these foreign explorers in the untamed lands of the American west.



*Sacagawea left and William Clark right, seen from the interior (photo © Andrew Raimist)*

Between Clark and Sacagawea, a red path appears which meanders across the facade suggesting their wanderings in the wilderness and the sometimes confusing doubling back that their journey experienced.

While the namesakes of the library are explicitly named in the building's name (along with the boulevard on which it is located), Sacagawea's name is rendered in a thin modernist font

over an amorphous plant below her pointing hand. This detail helps reveal the special qualities of the enameled glass employed in creating this unique mid-century modern installation. The problem with using standard stained glass is that it tends to be primarily visible from only one side (either from the interior during the daytime or at night when the interior is lit). The enameled glass allowed the figures to read clearly from inside and out during a wide range of lighting conditions. The alignment of the figures on the interior and exterior faces of the glass vary in a way that creates a palpable sense of depth.



*Bison window from inside, with the meandering red path beneath (photo by John Guenther)*

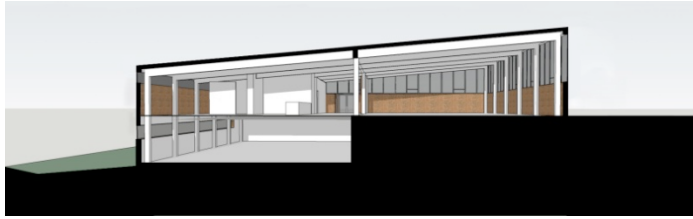
The bison, an iconic figure of the American West, is rendered in the manner of an ancient cave painting. Its outline is precisely delineated, while some of the other marking are wonderfully child-like. Like the other major figures of the composition, the bison charges toward the east as if to say, "Get thee in to the library!"



*Bison window from outside (photo © Andrew Raimist)*

Fred Dunn developed a remarkable talent for creating understated, yet innovative architecture. The Lewis and Clark Branch Library is one of his best last works in St. Louis, before he moved to New York and stopped practicing independently. He is perfectly happy to create a functional, beautiful work of architecture without feeling a need to declare his creative genius through his flair for original, startling form. He allows the building to be exactly what it needs to be. The reading room and book stacks are closest to the street and ensconced under the soaring ceiling above. The ceiling slopes gradually down toward the rear of the building where the librarian's offices and work spaces are located and a lower second story with community spaces can be found.

Of course daylighting is a major driver of the architectural form in this structure. It informs the building's overall configuration and highlights its artistic decorative elements. There is a sense in which this building is a concatenation of two works of modernism: Phillip Johnson's Glass House and his solid brick house. Dunn uses brick where it performs an excellent backdrop for bookcases and desks. The glass begins from a consistent horizontal datum located above head height providing a continuous clerestory around the building's perimeter. It not only lights the interior, provides views of the sky and trees outside, but also highlights the building's structure and its isolation from the enclosure.



*Section perspective view of library. Main facade (facing east) at right. 3D model created by Xiaoyang Gui, Washington University graduate architecture student as part of the history/theory seminar "Mid-Century Modernism in St. Louis."*

The SketchUp model with its roof removed reveals the ingenious way that Dunn has deployed the structural system. Only two free-standing columns are visible. The other two columns are embedded in brick screen walls located to the south of the main entry and the loading dock. These two screen walls provide several advantages. They serve to define the reading room as a defined space separate from the rest of the programmatic requirements of the library. They also help to control gusts of air from entering that space. In addition, they help to create a smaller scale, more intimate space adjacent to the two other major decorative glass installations in the building.



*View of building model with roof removed. Main entry at right. Loading dock at upper left. 3D model by Xiaoyang Gui, for Washington University seminar "Mid-Century Modernism in St. Louis."*

The line of yellow and red dashes that run around the building in the operable hopper windows lead to the two functional building entries: the main entry on the north and the loading dock for books and other library materials. The north-south orientation of this axis which is aligned directly adjacent the

building's centerline knits together multiple meanings in the context of the building. Over the main entry is an abstract maze of red paths set into yellow and white zones. This formal emblem symbolizes the starting point of Lewis and Clark's journey across the unknown lands to the Pacific Ocean and invites library patrons to enter a world of intellectual adventure of the mind.



*Decorative glass panel positioned over the book loading dock.. The main entry is aligned directly to the north. (photo © Andrew Raimist)*

Upon entering the library, patrons would look across the building and see the intricate panel of art glass located over the loading dock. At this moment, there would be a sense of recognition, if not epiphany, that they are traversing an intricate path of exploration just as Lewis and Clark did in 1804. How many buildings are able to incorporate purely functional spaces like a loading dock into an integrated artistic program that ties the architecture, historic theme and circulation patterns together into a meaningful whole?

The bronze plaque inside the main entry on the brick partition wall located to your left is a beautiful and simple evocation of the period and the aesthetic intentions of the building and the organization: Provide a simple, clear, beautiful useful place for the public to access books. What could be a better definition for a library?



*Lewis & Clark Branch Library, 9909 Lewis & Clark Blvd, by day*



*Lewis & Clark Branch Library, 9909 Lewis & Clark Blvd., by night*

# News Letter

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