

The San Jose Main Public Library:
Its Evolution Over Time

An Essay
Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

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SAN JOSE PUBLIC LIBRARY [07

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Introduction

A library is, of course, much more than a building, but a building is the necessary parts of library service. Even with aggressive technology developments, a library will remain an important physical place in a community. The Martin Luther King Jr. Library has been and will continue to be a standing inspiration for all inhabitants of the Santa Clara County. It is known to be a multipurpose library used intensively as a popular materials center, a formal education support center, an independent learning center, and a reference library. After surpassing several location changes, the Main Library settled into its present downtown location in 1970. However, in the beginning years of its development, the Main Library was formally known as the San Jose Main Public Library. On January 11, 1990, the building was rededicated as The Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Main Library (MLK). This action expressed a commitment by the City of San Jose and The Library Department to serving all residents. The Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Main Library is as it should be, a marker of San Jose's direction. It has been challenged by the growing demands of its community since its inception and has evolved with the challenge.

Incorporation of the San Jose Library Association

In the spring of 1872, a carriage maker by the name of I. F. Thomas was one of the first enthusiasts to try to arouse a public interest in a library project for the city of San Jose. Unfortunately, he was not successful in sparking any interest, but he might well be called the "father of the San Jose Public Library."¹ However, in that summer, a group was successful in managing to start a library association. On July 13, 1872, the San Jose Library association was incorporated. Among the members was Judge D. S. Payne, who became the president of the association, and Alfred Pfister, Mayor of San Jose. As Vice-president of the association, Mayor Pfister set a precedent by donating his official salary and gift of \$1,000 to the library.

The "Knox New Addition"

The officers of the San Jose Library Association had hoped to secure the collections of the local Odd Fellows and of the Joseph Benevolent Society, along with the YMCA library, but this was not achieved.² To establish a library, books from the former YMCA reading room were eventually purchased at a nominal cost. In combination with a few other purchases, they accumulated a total of about 2000 volumes to start off the library. However, along with this purchase came \$600 in debt for the Library Association, but still the library managed to open with 1200 books and 320 members, including twenty lifetime members.³

The Library rooms in 1872 were located on the second floor of what was known as the "Knox New Addition"—the old Knox building of today, on the corner of First and Santa Clara Streets.⁴ The Library was opened to the general public in the beginning, and it often asked for support from the city, but this hope for support was in vain.⁵ In 1875 the

Library Association went on record in favor of the City's taking over the library. They knew that if the City was in charge, the library could soon become tax supported. Unfortunately, this proposal turned out to be unsuccessful. However, in the following winter the library association circulated a petition asking for \$100 per month support from the city in order to make the library freely available to those people who could not afford the fifty cents per month subscription fee.⁶ Alas, this petition also failed. As a result, the library had no choice but to close its doors to the general public.

Establishment of a Tax-supported Public Library

With the passage of the Rodgers Act of 1878, designated to promote the establishment of tax-supported libraries and reading rooms throughout the state, the San Jose Library Association renewed its hope that the city would take over the library.⁷ However, in June the City Council overthrew the notion to create a city library. Unfortunately, in 1879 the electorate of San Jose decided against supporting a public library.

The library continued to be a private institution until February 25, 1879, when the Library Association turned its entire organization, including \$1600 in cash, over to the City of San Jose.⁸ After being turned down three times for an establishment of a free public library, zealous supporters had finally persuaded the City Council to create the institution by resolution. Luckily, on April 30, the resolution was passed by the citizens of San Jose with only ninety minutes left in the extant of the Rodgers Act.⁹ The vote was by 1232 to 605.¹⁰

Head Librarian, and the Board of Trustees

The city's next plan was to position a head librarian. After asking for applications for the position, only one person applied. William Redding was then offered the position on July 6, 1880. Soon thereafter, the library officially opened on August 10.

The Board of Trustees was a committee composed of three members. The entire selection of books for the library were primarily selected or purchased by the committee. They were allowed to allocate only \$100 per month, and a monthly report was to be presented at each board meeting.¹¹

Occupancy at Germania Hall

In October 1882, after only two years at the Knox Building, the San Jose Public Library relocated to Germania Hall between Market and First Streets. The rent there was \$20 per month, and the owner remodeled the rooms at his own expense.¹²

Due to an increase in demands on library services, Miss Agnes Barry was hired in February 1884 to help Mr. Redding. She was later appointed head librarian on May 17, 1887, when Mr. Redding's services were terminated because he failed to give the Board of Trustees advance notice of his intent to take a vacation.¹³ She was then positioned permanently on July 15, 1886, and Miss Nellie Egan was appointed to assist her.

Relocation at City Hall

The library was shifted in May of 1889, to the second floor of the new City Hall building, located on Market Plaza. Although there were some public disputes over the move, because of an arduous climb up two flights of stairs, the library remained at City Hall despite the unpopular location. Robert D. Hook in his History of the San Jose Public Library: 1903-1937 noted that:

In 1890 three new trustees were added to the board, and this resulted in more liberal policies in relation to the library. One of these policies was the closing of the library on holidays such as Christmas and New Year's Day. The Board still retained regulation on the selection of books.¹⁴

In 1899, Miss Agnes Barry resigned from her service to the library, and so Miss Nellie Egan was hired as head librarian. As time went on, a slight increase in library assistance was available, and Miss. Mary Barmby, Miss Nellie McGinley and Miss M. J. Burchard were hired to assist Miss. Egan.¹⁵

The Benevolent Andrew Carnegie

A large accumulation of many volumes of books and patronage over the years eventually caused the facilities at City Hall to become inadequate. As a result, a number of individuals called this problem to Mayor C. J. Martin's attention. Under the pressure of these demands, the baffled Mayor wrote to Andrew Carnegie, the industrialist and humanitarian who funded many libraries, on November 16, 1900. His first notice had no response from Mr. Carnegie. However, the interest in the city was intense enough that in February 1901, O. A. Hale, a community representative, went to Pittsburgh for an interview with Mr. Carnegie.¹⁶ The success of Mr. Hale's visit was soon reflected on a letter from the Andrew Carnegie Foundation, stating that Mr. Carnegie was willing to donate \$50,000 towards the construction of a new library building. But to be able to accept this donation, the municipality would have to acquiesce in contributing \$5,000 a year to support to the library. The offer was accepted, and on July 15, 1901, a resolution was adopted and forwarded to Andrew Carnegie by the mayor and the common council, showing their willingness to comply with the conditions, which were attached to the donation.¹⁷ As for the matter of production, two contracts were given in January and February of 1902 to Mr. F. A. Curtis and his construction company. After the laying of

the cornerstone on February 16, 1902, at the southwest corner of Fourth and San Fernando Streets, construction was set in motion.

The laying of the cornerstone was quite an affair. It included a parade of a police platoon, city and county officials, a long line of private citizens and the members of the Elks Lodge who dedicated the cornerstone. The San Jose Daily Mercury gave the following account of the ceremonies: The end of the beginning of one of San Jose's fondest dreams was celebrated today by the laying of the cornerstone of the \$50,000 library building donated to the municipality by Andrew Carnegie.¹⁸

Oddly, however, the commemoration by the San Jose Elks Lodge, led to much controversy afterwards. The Pastors' Union protested in disgust to the idea of the Elks's commemoration. As a result of their objection the legend ended up being defaced one night. Thereafter, the cornerstone was replaced bearing nothing but the date.¹⁹

On June 1, 1903, the new Carnegie Building, on East Santa Clara Street, was completely constructed and finally opened its doors to the public.

The Renovated Old Main Post Office

After functioning for more than thirty years, war, depression and epidemics took their toll on the library and its services at the Carnegie Building. Its collection of books continued to grow, however, and by the 1930's the small building was soon outgrown.

The need for more storage space was called to the attention of the City of San Jose. The Carnegie Building was thus sold to San Jose State College for \$55,000 (the building would later house the Student Union of San Jose State College).²⁰ After allocating \$50,000 to the U.S. Government, for the new location at the old Main Post Office, on the corner of Market and San Fernando Streets, they spent the extra \$5,000 toward the remodeling expenses, which later totaled about \$34,000.²¹ The renovation

started on June 1, 1936, and a year later, books were moved into their new shelves in preparation for the dedication services that took place on June 23, 1937.

Mrs. Geraldine L. Nurney

In March 1943, Mrs. Geraldine L. Nurney became one of San Jose Public Library's most esteemed head librarians. She was a graduate of the University of California in Berkeley. Her impressive background consisted of a teaching credential and library certificate from San Jose State College. Though she was not famously recognized for her work, her service and contributions to the city of San Jose were widely respected and appreciated.

Grants and Funding for the Construction of a New Library Building

The new location at the old Main Post Office served to popularize the Main Branch by dramatically increasing its book circulation. However, it was considered as a temporary location until the City could find a way to establish a permanent residence that a library, such as the Main Branch, would not outgrow.

Decades went by before the Federal Library Services and a Construction Act was passed. By the mid-1960s the library was still in its temporary quarters, and it seemed to the staff that the only way to get another book inside was to hang new shelves from skyhooks.²² It was not until the 1961 bond issue and a 1965 federal grant that the City of San Jose realized that there was money in the federal pot to build a new dwelling for the Main Branch. About \$4,470,000 was provided to the city for the construction of a 105,000 square foot San Jose Main Public Library building.²³

After the funding was fixed, the location in which the library would be built was still undetermined. At first the block between San Carlos, Almaden, Park, and Vine

seemed ideal for the construction, but unfortunately, other people had already had their eye on that same block. As the City tried to get the best contract on the project, the long anticipated library was left shifted around to every corner of the block. Soon an architect by the name of Norton S. Curtis, designed the structure of the building, and the Carl N. Swenson Construction Company was hired. The architect complained it was like building a library on wheels-- and every site was a different size, shape, street orientation...²⁴ Eventually, the city settled on a forthcoming site, located on the south side of San Carlos Street, at the corner of Almaden Avenue. On September 25, 1965, the ground-breaking ceremony was held at the San Carlos location and construction was underway.

A Permanent Location

When the newly constructed facility was finished on April 20, 1970, a prestigious opening ceremony was held on the sunken patio, at the main entrance of the new San Jose Main Public Library. More than 350 inhabitants from all over Santa Clara County attended the exuberant event. The featured speaker to present the library to the city was George M. Mardikian, San Francisco restaurateur and chairman of the Stated Citizens' Committee for National Library Week. Architect Norton S. Curtis and Builder Carl N. Swenson were also on hand to take their bows for their magnificent work on the construction of the structure. In addition, chairman of the library commission, George D. Snell, was also there to accept the building from Mayor Ron James and to give an outline of the history of the library from its beginnings back in 1850. The hour-long ceremony was then followed by a three-hour open house and tour of the structure.

After more than thirty years of operation in a renovated Post Office building of only 22,000 square feet, library staff and patrons were immediately elated by the

commodious modern splendor of the new structure. Although the San Jose Public Library system already has two smaller municipal libraries, and is a part of a number of fast growing branches, the 112,000 square foot structure projects as the hub of that large metropolitan library system. A 1974 article entitled "San Jose: A Swinger" depicted this detailed architectural critique of the structure:

San Jose's new 4.7 million dollar main library appears to float suspended on nothing more than air. Yet the graceful cantilevered lines of thrusting elements at the second and fourth floor levels give the impression of ageless strength. Designed as part of the proposed cultural center, the building is contemporary, but hints of the Spanish lines so integral to the cultural history of the area. In particular, the red tile surface of the decks and entry-way bridge, the ceramic tile fountains in the sunken plaza area and the tile casing on the arched windows of the first floor are reminiscent of early California style. As the first of the new structures in the cultural center, the library design will be crucial in the overall development of the cultural area in downtown San Jose.²⁵

Soon after head librarian, Geraldine Nurney retired in 1970; a Mr. Homer Fletcher took her position in early October of 1970. His previous accomplishment was to oversee the completion of a new library in Vallejo, and he felt very fortunate to inheriting the modern facility at the newly constructed library in downtown San Jose.

The Structural Layout

The building, which houses the San Jose Main Public Library is composed of six-levels. Four levels are for public use, and the other two floors are embedded below street level. The lower basement houses all the building systems installations as well as a stack storage area that is actually below the average yearly water table level. As for the upper basement that opens out into the sunken plaza below street level, it contains the audiovisual department, with a projection room and the book sorting room.

The main entrance is a spiral stairway that leads from the plazas to the arched concrete ramp and bridge which spans to the plazas from the sidewalk to the entrance located on the first floor. The building was designed to give expression to subject departmentalization of the main library collection.²⁶ The first floor for public use accommodates patron services such as registration, circulation, casual use, a language and media section, and a community room with a large quarter for children references. The second floor is systematized for use of the history, social sciences, and business and sciences departments. As for the third floor, it houses the non-checked out section of the library, music and art collection (accommodated periodically), and the special California Room.

Known as a signature showpiece at the Main Branch, the California Room houses an extensive collection of material on California history with a solid emphasis on the history of San Jose and Santa Clara County. The collections also consist of historical materials on the cities and counties of the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as Central and Northern California.

Technological Catalog Development

In 1976, subject arrangement of the Main Library was abandoned, and the collection was rearranged to coincide with the Dewey Decimal System. However, later surveys inferred that most patrons came to the library to browse through the collection, rather than to look for a specific item. So the presentation of the collection was then reconstructed to reflect a merchandising and marketing approach.

When the Silicon Valley Information Center opened to the public in September 1986, the Main Branch was given its first step in new computer technology. The center received funding from the State Library, which helped boast an on-line catalog. This new attraction soon led to visits from local high technology company representatives. Unfortunately, however, budget problems led to the closure of the SVIC in July 1992.

Much of the book collection was incorporated into the reference and circulating collections at the Main Library and branches. Other components of the collection, including files of clippings, company archives and the SVIC database, are no longer available.²⁷

The Center of Attention

When the ground-breaking of the Convention Center began on December 19, 1986, the Main Library became an oasis in a sea of downtown construction.²⁸ Soon another ground-breaking was held, in front of the Main Library, for the Light Rail Transit station on March 6, 1978. These new additions to downtown San Jose led to a large attraction of patronage for the library. With the newly constructed Convention Center right beside it, and an attainable transit station right in front, the Main Library was definitely hard to resist.

A Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

At a Martin Luther King Jr. Good Neighbor Awards breakfast in 1989, Mayor Tom McEnery announced San Jose's proposed tribute to Dr. King. He said that, "This will commemorate not just (his) name, but also the ideas, ideals and inspirational qualities of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr."²⁹

After a committee of black organizations was rejected for their proposal to rename part of Penitencia Creek Park for King, Mayor McEnery recommended that the council rename the Main Library downtown. The councilwoman for the Penitencia Creek Park district, Shirley Lewis, stated her opposition against the renaming of the library, "because it is not centrally located and she believed it would be better to find a memorial that would give greater visibility to the King's name."³⁰ After the City Council approved the renaming in February 1989, the Mayor also suggested the council to allocate \$25,000 in next fiscal year's budget for educational programs associated with library to make it "a fitting memorial for Dr. King."³¹ However, the specifics on how the \$25,000 would be spent were undetermined, with hope that the fund would be increased by donations from the community.

McEnery's proposal drew immediate support from several council members, as well as the black community. Ellious Dunson, chairman of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Association of Santa Clara County, was elated by the news, because the facility was her committee's first choice. As for councilwomen Iola Williams and Shirley Lewis, whose district included Penitencia Creek Park, both uttered support for renaming the Main Library. Mrs. Williams expressed that it was appropriate to use the library to honor King, "who doesn't simply belong to the civil rights movement (but) belongs to the world."³²

Soon the black community raised a concern. They were uncertain if the name would stay with the library, if the facility were to be moved or be rebuilt in the future. However, their concerns were appeased after “the mayor fully guaranteed that the name goes with it.”³³

Although there was some protest on renaming the library after King, the decision still remained strongly supported by the city. Though the opposition to King’s name is racially unclear, most protestors just felt there was no need to change the name. Some were just ignorantly blinded to see that it was a joint effort between people of different races and religions; a cooperative effort between the public and city staff; and a blending of resources and knowledge in the pursuit of a common goal.

However, there were definitely more supporters than protestors at the dedication ceremony, opened to everyone. The event took place on January 11, 1989, on the friendly steps of the Main Library. The itinerary for the ceremony consisted of some short speeches, the unveiling of the new name, and was followed by the demonstration of the King exhibit indoors. Ron McPherson, an ardent member of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Association, expressed his thoughts that, “it’s going to bring a sense of pride and it will be a constant reminder of what people can do if they make their minds up no matter how insurmountable the odds.”³⁴

The King Exhibit

The extensive Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. exhibit was first established on January 11, 1990. Currently (2001) located on the third floor, the exhibit honors displays of Dr. King’s civil rights movement. The exhibit was also intended to be a mosaic of references mainly focusing on the civil rights movement. Part of it also documents Dr. King’s life,

and the local Bay Area people who were affiliated with the movement. The exhibit consists of more than fifty photographs of King during his lifetime. In addition, members of the community using materials from the National Archives and the King Center in Atlanta Georgia prepared a detailed scrapbook documenting his life. This was Virginia Carpio's (assistant city librarian) thoughts towards the collection:

"The exhibit will be integrated into a prominent part of the library. Dr. King was a national hero and we feel that he was a very worthwhile hero to emulate. We feel like the values that Dr. King installed are what we want to come through in this exhibit, because they are the same values, with an emphasis on education, that the public library shares."³⁵

Stepping into the 1990s

As the years passed, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Main Library soon accumulated a wide variety of services. With an increase in funding, from the City of San Jose and community supporters, and more technological advances, the Main Branch now consists of extensive media and book circulation, general reference, online and periodical references, disability outreach services to the homebound, and literacy tutoring for English-speaking adults. Their main department currently includes Youth Services, Language/ Media, Adult Services, and two cherished historical collections. These two collections consist of the California Room (which serves as an archive for local history) and the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. exhibit located on the third floor.

In addition to in the year 1990, the highly esteemed Homer Fletcher retired from his position as the city librarian. In his thirty-year tenure, Mr. Fletcher made many contributions to the City of San Jose, and over half of those years he headed up the San Jose Public Library system. During that time, Mr. Fletcher and his staff collaborated to keep pace with their community's growth and needs. As a result, their approaches led to a

responsive outlook on the diverse nature of their community. One of their main contributions is their work on creating what is now our large foreign language collection located at the Main Branch.

Right after his retirement, librarian Virginia Carpio acted in Mr. Fletcher's place until the city found a permanent city librarian. Soon on October 8, 1990, Jim Fish, a 43-year-old director of the Springfield, Massachusetts, library system, was appointed to take over as the head librarian for San Jose's libraries.

The Anniversary

April 1995 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Main Branch at its San Carlos Street location. After several decades of serving its community, the library still remains strong as ever. Through many location adjustments and struggles to be the prominent structure that it has become, the twenty-fifth anniversary was an astounding celebration to remember what it has achieved. The celebration ceremony included dedications, live music, and displays of new multi-media information systems.

Librarian Jane Light

Currently today, San Jose's city librarian is Jane Light. She has been the director of the San José Public Library since March 31, 1997. Prior to this she served twelve years as Director for the Redwood City Public Library. One of her major accomplishments as Library Director for Redwood City, was the improvement of the library facilities. She has proven to have a strong commitment to public libraries and its diversity and is ardent about the future of libraries in the city of San Jose.

Constructing a Joint Facility

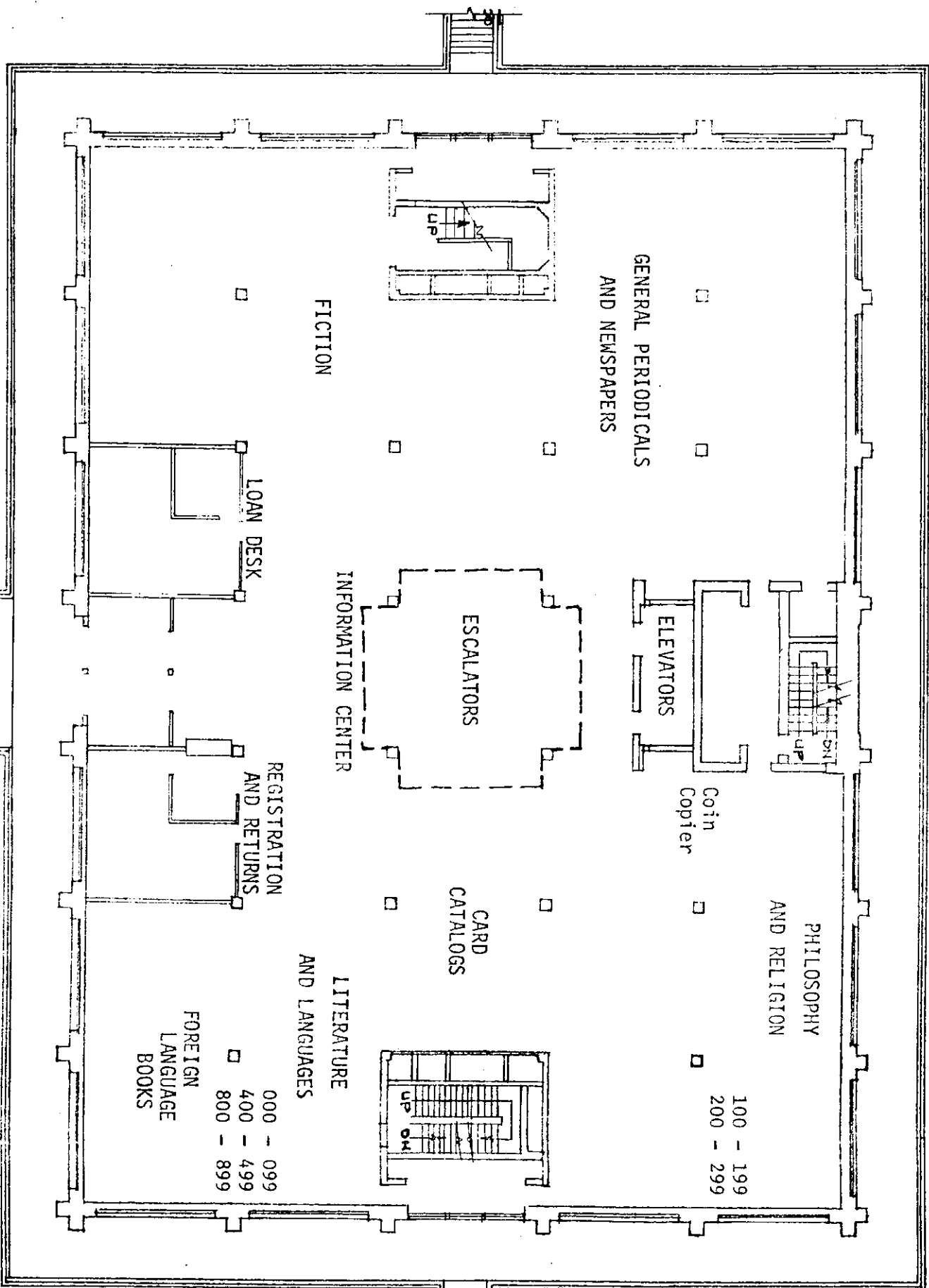
By 1996 familiar problems began to surface. San Jose State University President Robert Caret and Susan Hammer, mayor of San Jose, both found themselves faced with similar goals to change the Dr. King Main Library. Problems such as overcrowded facilities, the need for technological upgrades, and limited space for expanding collections, inspired the idea to build a new building. Although, neither leader had the financial resources to address this notion alone, they collaborated on the possibilities of constructing a joint facility.

After considerable and prolonged debate in the community, an agreement was reached, and in the State of the City address in February 1997, Susan Hammer formally announced her plans for a new joint city/university library. After the finances, and location were outlined, the groundbreaking for the new Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Main Library took place on October 20, 2000, on the site of the original Carnegie Public Library at the corner of Fourth and San Fernando streets. With an undecided date, construction is expected to be completed by the year 2003.

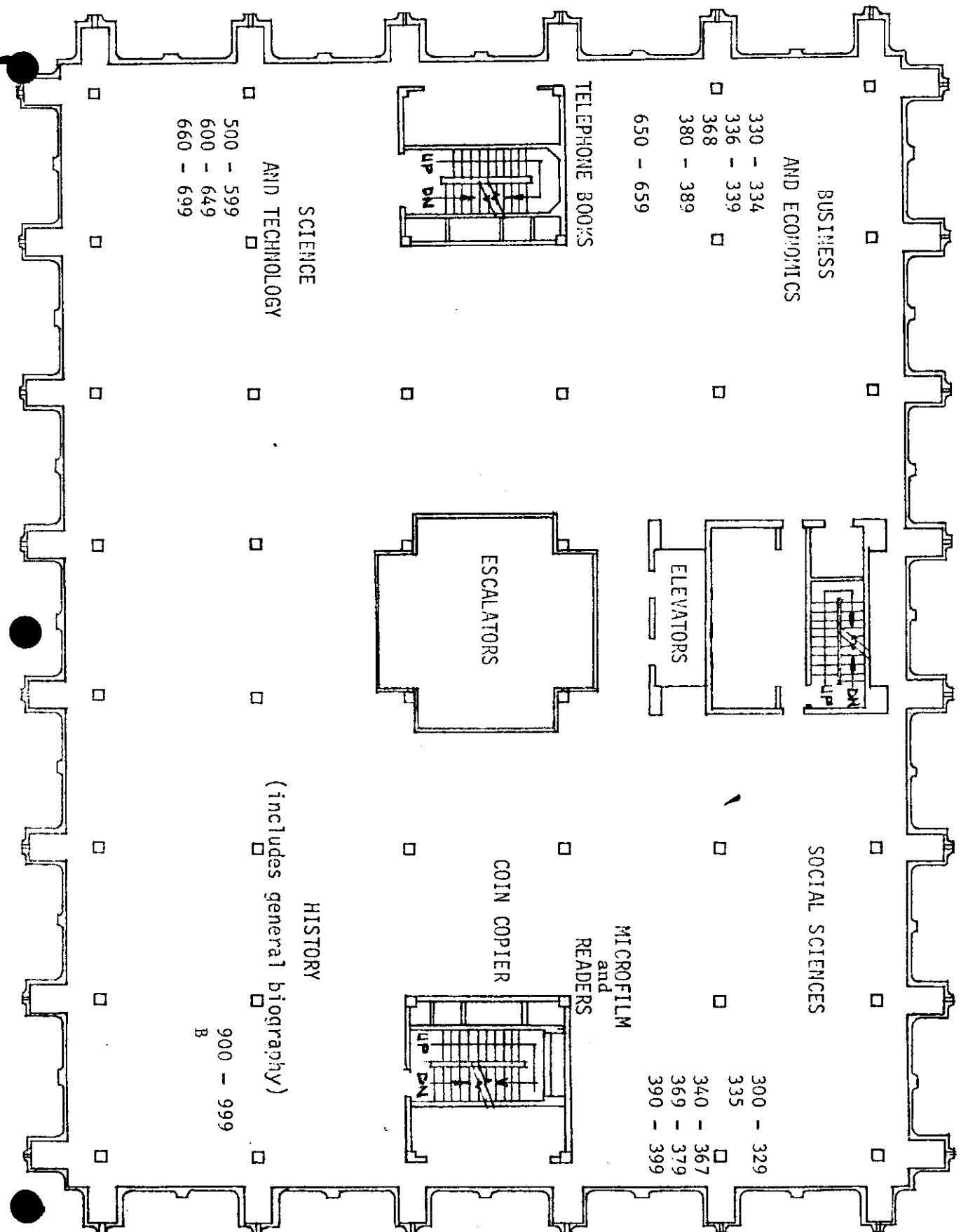
The True Significance

Primarily, over the years the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Main Library has helped many individuals, either personally in their life, or educationally in their future. Many patrons look towards it as a never-ending portal to what can be learned, and as for others, it serves as their ever-lasting refuge from the world. In doing this, it positively contributes to the community as a whole. As a center for information and continuing education, the Main Library serves, as a vital and essential community need. This library truly represents its name proudly, and will continue to change the lives it touches.

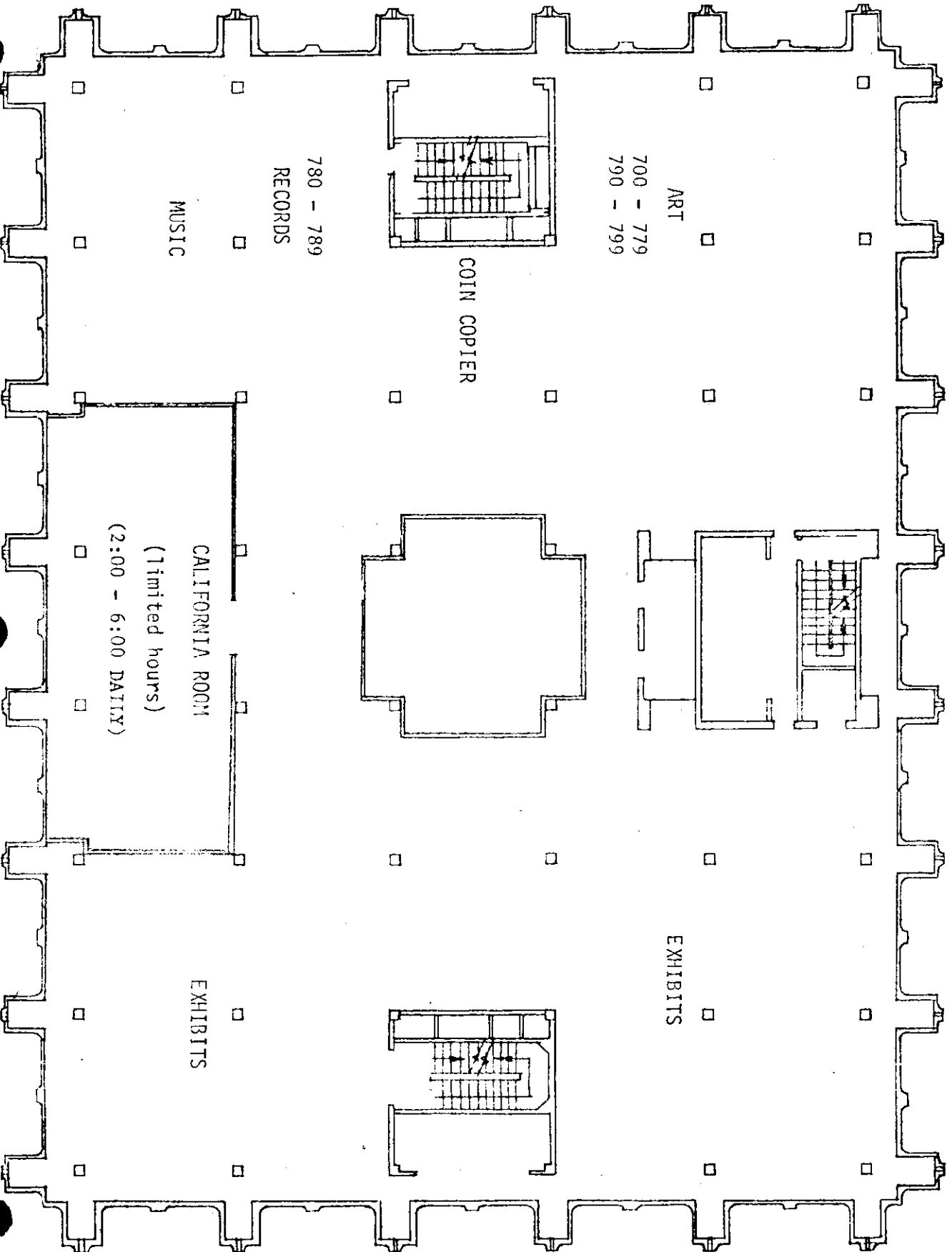
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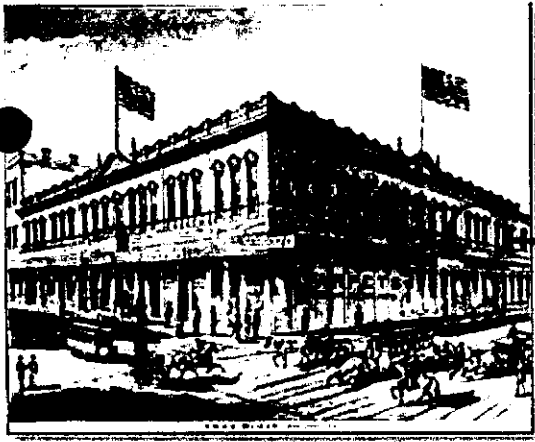


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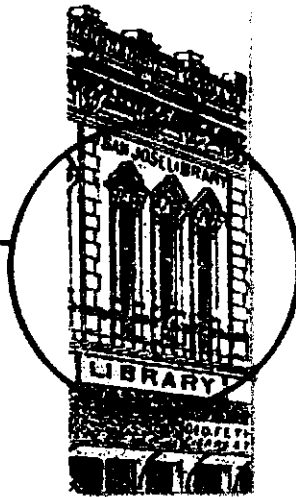


MAIN LIBRARY - - THIRD FLOOR





Knox Block
1872



Knox Block, San José, California, ca 1872
Site of the first location of the
San José Free Public Library
The block is located on the South Side of
Santa Clara Street East of Market Street

San Jose City Hall ca 1889
From 1889 to 1903, the library was located on
the second floor of the newly completed City Hall.

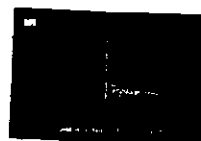
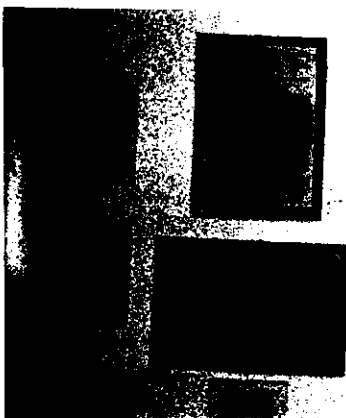
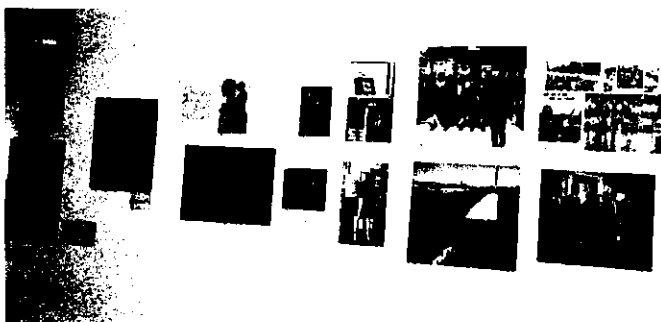
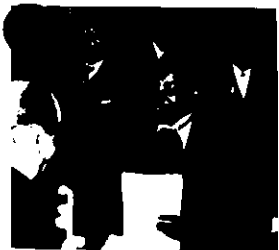
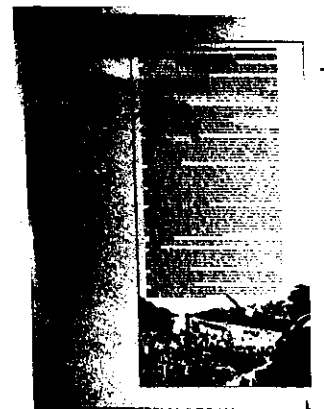
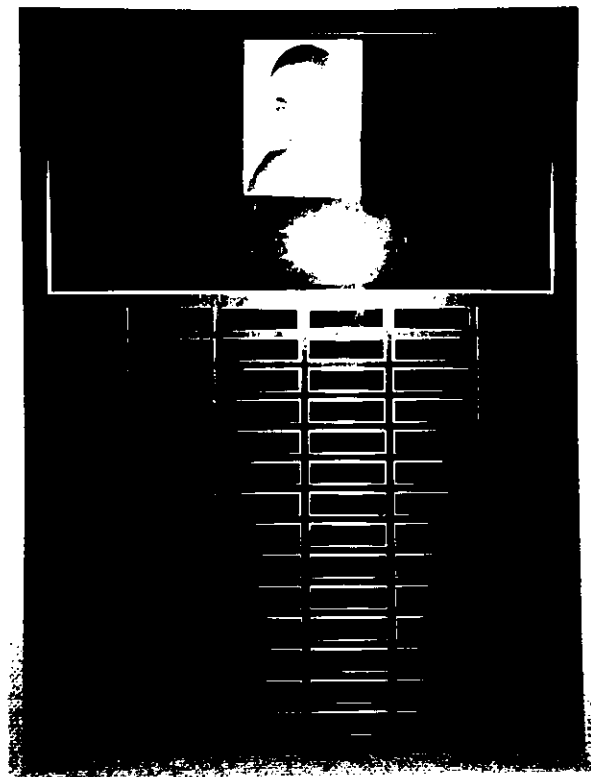


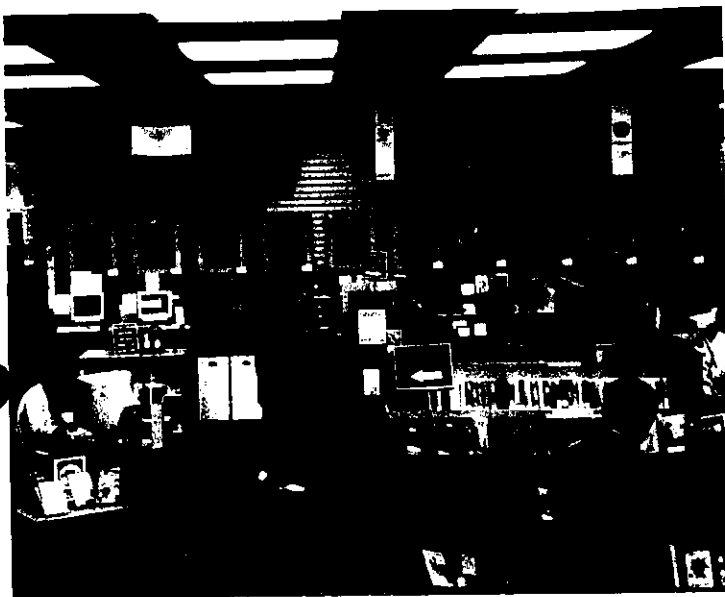
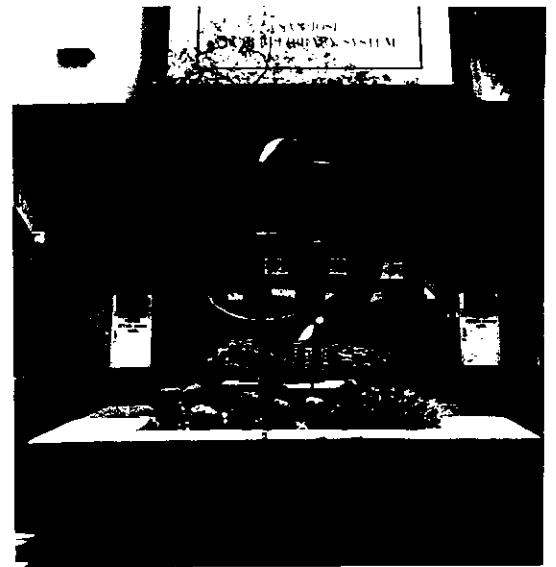
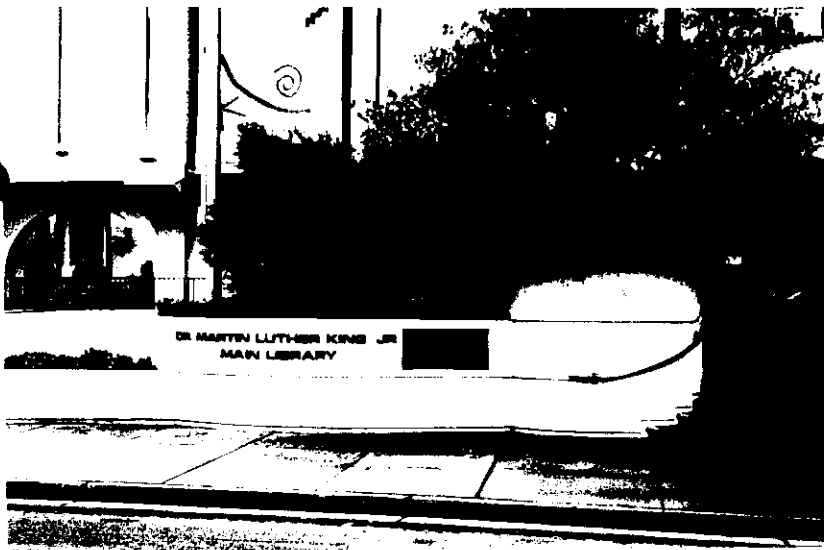
San José Public Library
(Carnegie Library) ca. 1903
From 1903 to 1937, the library was
located on the southeast corner of
Fourth and San Fernando Streets.

Old Post Office Building ca 1937
(now the San Jose Museum of Art)
Site of San Jose Public Library from 1937 to 1970



A DREAM BEGINS...







THE DREAM CONTINUES...

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