Rethinking Walt Whitman Library
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Executive Summary

Brooklyn Public Library’s mission is to ensure the preservation and transmission of society’s knowledge, history and culture, and to provide the people of Brooklyn with free and open access to information for education, recreation and reference.
In the midst of its most significant era of rebuilding in Brooklyn Public Library’s history, Brooklyn Public Library is renovating Walt Whitman Library to upgrade the outdated branch and better meet the needs of the neighborhood.

Brooklyn Public Library is a critical democratic civic institution and one of the nation’s largest library systems, serving patrons in every neighborhood of the borough. Brooklyn Public Library’s vision is to be a vital center of knowledge for all, accessible 24 hours a day, and will be a leader in traditional and innovative library services which reflect the diverse and dynamic spirit of the people of Brooklyn.

To ensure that the renovated branch best serves the needs of its users and stakeholder input is meaningful, inclusive and expansive, Brooklyn Public Library engaged Hester Street to lead the community engagement process, in coordination with Belmont Freeman Architects. Through a participatory design process with Fort Greene residents, organizations, policymakers, service providers, and other key stakeholders, participants shared their priorities and helped shape the program and design of the Walt Whitman Library renovation.

What follows is a summary of the initial community engagement process and the community feedback that will guide the re-design of Walt Whitman Library. It is the result of a collective community-driven vision for a space that is truly reflective of the priorities and concerns of Fort Greene stakeholders and will continue to be a vital neighborhood resource for generations to come.
Introduction

Brooklyn Public Library’s Walt Whitman Branch has served the Fort Greene community and its environs since its opening in 1908.
Funded by Andrew Carnegie, the 7,000-square-foot library was designed to be a distinct structure and intentionally placed in close proximity to several schools, social service centers and cultural institutions in the Fort Greene and greater Brooklyn area. Directly south is Fort Greene Park, a vital public park providing essential recreation and open space to the community. It is also in close proximity to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and provided crucial community services to its workers through the decades. Additionally, Walt Whitman Library’s immediate neighbors include the New York City Housing Authority’s Walt Whitman and Ingersoll Houses, as well as Stonewall House, New York’s first LGBTQ+-friendly affordable elder housing.

Housed in its original building, there have only been several small renovations to Walt Whitman Library over the years, the most major update taking place in 1998. However, in order to meet the neighborhood’s need for increased library space and programming, as well as modernize Walt Whitman Library’s mechanical systems, the library is receiving a comprehensive renovation.
Brooklyn Public Library has secured $9 million to fund this project, including a grant from the Downtown Revitalization Initiative, capital allocations from Council Member Crystal Hudson and the City of New York, and proceeds from the redevelopment of Brooklyn Heights Library.

This renovation provides an opportunity to reshape the branch for the patrons who rely on it now and for future generations.

Inside, Walt Whitman Library’s outdated systems will be upgraded, including its heating and cooling system and IT networks. Each of the branch’s three levels will be reconfigured to offer expanded spaces for patrons and to create a more welcoming environment. Outside, changes to the grounds of the library will include friendly landscaping and a new outdoor program space. ADA upgrades will happen both inside and outside the library.

A community engagement process led by Hester Street in coordination with Belmont Freeman Architects commenced in Spring 2022. It provided an opportunity for community stakeholders of varied ages and backgrounds to contribute input about the types of programs and services they rely on, and the expansions they would like to see in the new library. This input will directly inform conversations between Brooklyn Public Library and Belmont Freeman Architects as they work to incorporate the community’s vision into plans for the renovated library.
Fort Greene is in Northwest Brooklyn with a population of about 33,770 residents.
In the Fort Greene neighborhood:

20.8% are foreign born
35.6% borough-wide

9.2% have limited English proficiency
13.9% borough-wide

Median Household Income

- Fort Greene: $86,076
- Borough-wide: $72,108

Race + Ethnicity

- White: 34.1%
- Black: 31.83%
- Hispanic/Latino: 16.3%
- Asian: 10%
- Other: 7.8%

Age Distribution

- Under 5 years: 6.5%
- 5-9 years: 5.6%
- 10-14 years: 3.9%
- 15-19 years: 5.4%
- 20-24 years: 5.7%
- 25-44 years: 39.5%
- 45-64 years: 21.8%
- 64 years+: 11.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2016-2020 ACS Database, Table Brooklyn: Fort Greene [BK0203]; generated by NYC Department of City Planning; using ACS Data Tables; Accessed October 31, 2022; https://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/planning-level/nyc-population/american-community-survey.page
Historically, Fort Greene has been a predominantly Black neighborhood but has seen a decline in the Black population due to gentrification. In recent years, the neighborhood is home to a growing population of Chinese residents.* Fort Greene is included in Community Board 2, also serving Boerum Hill, Brooklyn Heights, Clinton Hill, DUMBO, Fort Greene, Fulton Ferry, Navy Yard and Vinegar Hill.

**Walt Whitman Library and the surrounding neighborhood is filled with historical and cultural significance.** The Fort Greene neighborhood was part of the Underground Railroad, a network of interconnected routes, places, and individuals that helped enslaved people in the American South escape to the North.** A few blocks over is Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, where prominent abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman spoke out against slavery. Additionally, Brooklyn’s first African-American School, Colored School No. 1, is located on the present-day grounds of Walt Whitman Houses.


Process

A community-driven design process that honors + centers lived experiences.
Walt Whitman Library utilized a community-centered design process to ensure that community needs were properly identified and that community members saw themselves reflected in the renovated library. With this in mind, Brooklyn Public Library partnered with Hester Street in collaboration with Belmont Freeman Architects to develop an engagement process that aimed to:

**Goals: What Are We Aiming To Achieve?**

**Strengthen relationships between Walt Whitman Library and its stakeholders**

**Gather meaningful input to inform building and programmatic needs for the library renovation**

**Synthesize and present engagement findings to inform future design and programming decisions**
Principles: How Did We Achieve Our Goals?

This project was guided by the following principles to ensure inclusive and expansive engagement that would result in clear recommendations about space, programs and features:

- **Creation and use of easily available graphic and visual tools for a variety of audiences**
- **Transparency about project parameters, timeline, and opportunities for feedback**
- **Creation of opportunities for stakeholders to adjust and affirm feedback throughout the engagement process**
- **Building relationships with diverse local partners to ensure engagement reflects the community**
Upon establishing goals and principles among project partners, Hester Street worked to understand the neighborhood context and the relationships between the library and local organizations, service providers and local elected officials. Neighborhood assets were identified—schools, community-based organizations, community and senior centers—and Hester Street worked with Brooklyn Public Library to identify local partners who could help support outreach and focus groups while also providing feedback on Walt Whitman Library’s renovation. Additionally, Hester Street and Belmont Freeman Architects toured Walt Whitman Library with library staff to better understand the current library’s constraints and to gain programmatic and spatial insights from those who know the library best.

Beginning in Spring 2022, through one-on-one meetings, focus groups, tabling, workshops, and surveys, feedback was gathered from over 250 people to ensure the library is reflective of the neighborhood’s diverse needs.

Hester Street and Brooklyn Public Library met with elected officials, community boards, cultural institutions, schools, CBOs and local youth organizations to introduce (or reintroduce) the community to Walt Whitman Library and its renovation, learn more about their needs and discuss their vision for the renovation. Engagement activities were held over the phone, through Zoom, and in person to meet a diverse group of community members in environments that were most familiar and comfortable to them. Particular attention was paid to understanding how COVID-19 impacted the Walt Whitman community and identifying challenges as well as opportunities for the library to better serve its patrons.
Timeline

2022

Workshop 1
Informal Engagement at Community Events
Focus Group Meetings
Surveys
One-on-One Meetings

2023 2024 2025 2026

Design

Library closed for renovation

Grand Opening!

Who We’ve Engaged

Neighborhood Institutions + Organizations
Downtown Brooklyn Partnership
Fort Greene Park Conservancy
Ingersoll Community Center
Myrtle Avenue Business Improvement District
Phoenix Rehabilitation and Nursing Center

Neighborhood and Tenant Associations
Brooklyn Community Board
Fort Greene Council
Ingersoll Houses Tenant Association
NYCHA Resident Engagement Department
Stonewall House and SAGE Center
Walt Whitman Houses Tenant Association

Elected Representatives
Borough President Antonio Reynoso
Council Member Crystal Hudson
Assembly Member Phara Souffrant Forrest

Brooklyn Public Library Partners
Adult Learning Department Staff
Library Youth Council Participants
Teen Techies Program Participants
Walt Whitman Library Staff

Schools
P.S. 67 Charles A. Dorsey
P.S. 287 Bailey K. Ashford

...and over 100 neighbors and neighborhood leaders!
Engagement by the Numbers

2 Community Workshops

3 Focus Groups

10 Stakeholder Interviews

104 Surveys
Community Workshops

Community-driven workshops helped broaden our reach to the Fort Greene community and were a significant portion of the participatory design process.

In each workshop, participants shared their priorities and helped shape the programs and design of the Walt Whitman Library renovation.

After each workshop, feedback was synthesized and engagement findings were documented and shared with Brooklyn Public Library and Belmont Freeman Architects to inform future design and programming decisions.
The focus of Workshop #1 was to understand how library stakeholders currently use Walt Whitman Library, how COVID-19 has impacted library usage, and the identification of spatial and programmatic changes that could be included with the library renovation. An additional goal of Workshop #1 was to increase the public’s awareness of Walt Whitman Library’s presence in the neighborhood.

Due to COVID-19 considerations and public health guidelines, Workshop #1 was held outside on a Saturday in Fort Greene Park instead of inside Walt Whitman Library. Through an open house format with multiple stations, participants were able to talk to Brooklyn Public Library staff, and the engagement materials allowed participants with varied experiences, perspectives, backgrounds and abilities to share feedback. Refreshments were provided, and conversations engaged kids, teens, adults and elders.
Workshop #2 was held virtually via Zoom to allow as many people as possible to comfortably participate given COVID-19 precautions. Building from the previous workshop, Workshop #2 provided the community with a general overview of the project, a chance to adjust or affirm feedback gathered thus far, and an introduction to Belmont Freeman Architects and members of the design team who will be helping to design the renovated library.

A collage activity showing the library’s outdoor space and communal areas in the basement and on the first floor, generated discussion and helped gather deeper feedback on patrons’ programmatic, service and spatial priorities.
In an effort to reach as many community members as possible, digital and printed surveys were distributed at the library, engagements and other community events to gather meaningful patron input. **Surveys allowed community members to share how they used Walt Whitman Library services and their future ideas for the renovated library.**
Focus groups allowed underrepresented library patrons to contribute their community vision to plans for the renovated library. **Three focus groups** were conducted to maximize the opportunity to hear from community members who were less likely to attend the larger public workshops, **including second graders at P.S. 67, teens from Brooklyn Public Library’s internship program and elders at the Fort Greene Citizen Council.**
Outreach Kit

An engagement outreach kit was developed to assist Brooklyn Public Library in continuing the community feedback loop throughout the design and construction process. **Colorful and whimsical, the outreach kit contains posters, banners, social media templates and website text that outlines the community engagement process, summarizes findings and provides a project timeline—presenting helpful information to library patrons and serving as a tool to further deepen the branch’s community connections.**
In the Renovated Walt Whitman Library, Community Members Want To See:

- A welcoming street front
- Separate spaces for specific programs & uses
- Improved bathrooms and water fountains
- A quiet zone

- Bright, airy, and well-lit spaces
- More charging stations

- More computer, printing, and technology access
- Clear sightlines

- Enhanced ADA Accessibility
- Clear signage

- An expanded kids area
- A dedicated teen space

- Varied, movable, and multipurpose furniture
- Storage for materials and strollers

- Community and workshop spaces
- Indoors and outdoor movie nights

- Individual spaces
- Coding, design software, and robotics trainings

- Art Classes
- Poetry Festivals, book readings, and author talks

- More programs:
  - More weekend & family programs
  - ESL, tutoring, & reading lessons
  - Physical & mental health programs
Takeaways and Recommendations for the renovated library
Following completion of the surveys, focus groups, stakeholder interviews, and community workshops, participant feedback was collected, analyzed, and synthesized. This information was shared with Belmont Freeman Architects and Brooklyn Public Library to help shape the renovation’s space, features, and programs to ensure that the new branch best serves the needs of its users. The following are the takeaways and recommendations that spoke to the community’s priority areas throughout the engagement process.

**Designated Spaces**

**Accessible Features**

**Community-driven Programs**
Designated Spaces

Currently, a majority of the library’s usage occurs on the main floor. Patrons browse library stacks, use computers, engage with library staff at the information desk, and use the space for personal work all within a tight footprint. Participants collectively emphasized that different spaces should accommodate different needs.

**Flexible community, individual, and workshop spaces** to address a variety of needs, acoustic concerns, and spatial separation

**Expand the children’s area** with computers, interactive technology/elements, clear sightlines, and sound buffering, as well as distinguishing between the age groups using this section

**Separate space for teens** that offers acoustic privacy and flexible furnishings so that they can make the space their own

**Additional storage space** for library materials and patrons’ strollers

**Enhance the outdoor space** with a community garden, reading areas, furniture, and ability to provide relief from weather elements

**Accessible pathways and clear signage** should connect the outdoor space with the rest of the library
“Libraries are a safe haven for kids. Children should feel safe inside it.”
Young Parent

“I would like to curl up in a corner and read for hours.”
Fort Greene Resident
Accessible Features

Patrons were asked what features they wanted to see in the new library. Some ideas included enhanced ADA accessibility, more computers, and flexible, multipurpose furniture.

Enhance and broaden **ADA accessibility**, a top priority from the community

**Improve the bathroom facilities** with designated bathrooms for adults and children

**Provide varied, movable, and multipurpose furniture** to foster a comfortable and welcoming environment

**Expand computer, printing, and technology access** accompanied by more charging stations

**Bright, airy, well-lit, and well-ventilated spaces** that feel warm, happy and inspired

**Drinking water fountains**

**Clear sightlines and impactful wayfinding and signage** to support navigation inside and outside the library

**Welcoming street front presence** to increase the library’s neighborhood visibility
"I would like the library to feel like fresh air."
Second grader, from P.S. 67

What are some feelings that the community would like to experience in the library?

Comfortable + welcomed
Warm + inspired
Safe + informed
Connected + proud
Community-driven Programming

Programs are an important part of the library experience for patrons. Community members shared their desire for more ESL classes, art and culture-related programming, and opportunities to learn about the neighborhood’s history.

Expansion of existing beloved programs and services, such as weekend and family programming, ESL classes, tutoring and reading lessons.

Increased community programming to include book readings, poetry festivals, and author talks as well as art, health and mental and physical wellness offerings.

Community-centered programming to learn about community history, significant neighborhood literary figures and the unique history of Walt Whitman Library.

Trainings for youth patrons focused on coding, design software and robotics.

Opportunity to participate in community gardening.
“I want the library to be a **bridge** between my neighborhood, its history, and my community.”

Fort Greene Resident

“**Our community garden** is a very big thing that holds the community together.”

Ingersoll Community Center Member
Lessons Learned

What were some wins? What were some challenges?
Small + Big Wins Through The Process

Participation in the various engagement activities reflected input from regular Walt Whitman Library patrons as well as others less familiar with the branch. Those engaged found accessible opportunities to contribute their ideas through a variety of engagement tools.

Varied engagement activities and methods ensured that as many stakeholders as possible were able to help inform the design and programming of the new library. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, engagement workshops, individual and group interviews, and focus groups were held in person, as well as virtually, to allow us to hear from stakeholders in locations and formats they identified within their comfort zones. Refreshments were provided for in-person engagements, and an upbeat virtual environment was created with warm welcomes, an active chat box and lively music that signaled a break from the status-quo to participants. Additionally, surveys were administered in both digital and analog formats.

Engagement activities and materials were colorful, well-designed and accessible to participants of all ages and backgrounds. They invited people to participate in modes most comfortable to them. Participants could provide written or verbal feedback, as well as illustrate their ideas using art supplies. Additionally, the wide range of engagement activities were designed to allow people to provide their input regardless of how much time they were able to give. Less time-intensive activities included filling out a bookmark with a prompt in less than a minute, while interactive poster boards allowed other participants to dive into longer, more substantive conversations.
Challenges Along The Way

While the process was successful overall, there were a few challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to shape people's comfort levels with gathering indoors, and the collective decision was made to hold an in-person community workshop in Fort Greene Park and another workshop virtually rather than in Walt Whitman Library. Hosting a workshop in Fort Greene Park also allowed us to gather input from teens and kids since engagement was conducted over summer months and school was closed.

Additionally, unlike other branches within the Brooklyn Public Library system, Walt Whitman Library is not well-known to the neighborhood. During the Fort Greene Park workshop, many were surprised to learn that there was a library only a few blocks away, or cited that they travel to other larger Brooklyn Public Library branches to access amenities and services. To help with Walt Whitman Library’s visibility, an outreach kit was created that includes a large vinyl banner to be displayed on the library’s outside fence, social media assets, a slide deck and highly graphic and user-friendly postcards and fliers that will be used to engage library patrons as Walt Whitman Library enters the design and construction phase.
Next Steps
Looking Ahead

Working with Belmont Freeman Architects, Brooklyn Public Library will continue to advance the architectural design of the library and ensure that recommendations and findings from this inclusive community-driven process guide the future renovation of Walt Whitman Library. As the design of the library progresses, Brooklyn Public Library will provide updates to the community through their staff, website, partnerships and neighborhood outreach.

Walt Whitman Library is an indispensable community resource that will gain increased neighborhood visibility as it renovates its indoor and outdoor spaces to better serve the needs of the community. With programming and spaces that are inviting, supportive, and celebrate the unique contributions and identities of the Walt Whitman community, it will ensure that the library continues to be a vital civic space to learn, gather, and celebrate.
Acknowledgments

A Big Thanks

This process would not have been possible without the active participation of Walt Whitman Library patrons who joined us for engagement workshops and conversations to share their ideas and vision for a renovated space.

Hester Street would also like to acknowledge the support of community-based organizations, elected officials, public schools, and Walt Whitman Library and Brooklyn Public Library staff members who dedicated their time and contributed their brilliance, knowledge, creativity and insights to help guide a community-driven process.
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