

Sterling Library's L&B Room, a campus gem, slated for renovation

By Mike Cummings

Generations of Yale students have nestled into the green leather easy chairs of the Linonia and Brothers Room, in Sterling Memorial Library, to study, read, or even snooze. For nearly a century, in fact, it's been one of the most beloved parts of the iconic building.

A renovation will restore the room's original luster and update it so that future generations can study and relax there in comfort, renewing a space long cherished for its cozy and tranquil atmosphere, said Stephen F. Gates '68 University Librarian Barbara Rockenbach.

"Libraries need warm and inviting spaces like the L&B Room where students and faculty can relax with a good book in a comfortable chair," Rockenbach said. "Our aim for this project is to improve the space while maintaining its traditional character and charm. We hope it will bring back fond memories of the past while also feeling fresh and exciting."

The renovation, which is expected to begin next year, will refurbish the room's millwork, ornamental ceiling, and vast stone fireplace. Original parquet floors, long hidden underneath green wall-to-wall carpeting, will be restored and augmented with area rugs. The room's chandeliers will be refinished and refitted with efficient LED lighting. Its signature green armchairs and divans will be reupholstered where necessary but otherwise left in place. A new HVAC system will bring much-needed ventilation and climate control to a space notorious for getting stuffy in the winter and sultry in the summer.

A double colonnade spanning the room's entrance will also undergo a significant change. The colonnade originally formed three open archways, but two were closed off years ago with wood paneling, creating an anteroom that now houses the library's bibliographic press. The archways will be reopened, and the press relocated to roomier space that will better accommodate classes and demonstrations. The space adjoining the archways will be transformed into a foyer. A collection of books about Yale's history will line its built-in shelves. Natural light will filter into the L&B Room from the new foyer's leaded windows.

"Restoring the archways will create a brighter and more welcoming entrance," Rockenbach said.



The renovation will open two archways in a colonnade at the room's entrance, creating a bright and inviting foyer that will draw people into the room. (Image courtesy of Apicella + Bunton Architects)

The project is the latest in a series of renovations to preserve and modernize Sterling Library. Recent years have seen the library's iconic Nave and its Manuscripts and Archives Department thoughtfully restored to align with architect James Gamble Rogers' vision. The Franke Family Reading Room was transformed into the Franke Family Digital Humanities Laboratory, a cutting-edge campus hub for applying advanced computing to humanities-related scholarship.

"A continual cycle of renovation is necessary to keep Sterling relevant to each generation of students, scholars, and faculty, and now it's the L&B Room's turn to receive a thoughtful restoration," said Nancy Better '84 B.A., chair of the University Library Council, an advisory body composed of Yale alumni and friends who support the library's leadership. "We're excited to see this campus gem — a room beloved by so many alumni — renewed so that it will once again become central to the undergraduate experience."

When he designed the library in the late-1920s, Rogers envisioned the L&B Room as a place for students to relax and read for pleasure. Originally, the space was restricted to men only — a policy that lasted until July 1963 when women were finally allowed to enjoy the room and its booklined alcoves with windows looking out onto the library's Selin Courtyard.

The room's name honors Linonia and Brothers in Unity, two literary societies formed on the Yale campus in the 18th century to offer students access to English literature and contemporary works of fiction. At the time, the Yale Library, like most academic libraries, did not collect these kinds of materials. Eventually, Yale acquired the literary societies' collections, which became the primary source of books lining the L&B Room's shelves when the Sterling Library opened in 1931.



The L&B Room as it appeared in 1930. The room's parquet floors, long hidden underneath a green wall-to-wall carpet, will be revealed and restored.

Library Council member J. Frederick Berg Jr. '66 B.A., who has provided a lead gift for the renovation, recalled visiting the L&B Room a few years ago while on campus to attend a Saybrook College fellows meeting. He randomly pulled a book from a shelf. It was a book about the assassination of Russian Tsar Alexander II in 1881. He took a seat in one of the green leather chairs and was soon immersed in the events, sights, and sounds of late 19th-century Russia.

"I was a history major, and almost immediately I was hooked on the story," he said. "I nearly missed the fellows meeting. That's what is so great about L&B, it's a warm and inviting place to read for pleasure, but it was also a great place to study. Coming back to L&B always brings back good memories."

Berg's experience is typical, Better said.

“When alumni visit the library, they make a beeline for the L&B Room,” she said. “They don’t just remember the room, they remember their favorite alcove or the exact green leather chair where they used to sit, study, or sleep. They remember the cracks in the chair’s leather which are so reminiscent of their undergraduate experience.”

Nostalgia for the L&B Room crosses generations. Library Council member Eric Schneider ’03 B.A. first visited the room as baby in 1981 during his parents’ 10th reunion weekend. His parents, members of the class of 1971, took a picture of him on one of the room’s green leather couches. Schneider recreated the photo during his own 10-year reunion in 2013 with his two-year-old daughter, Victoria.

“My mom and dad got a big kick out of the picture,” he said.

The renovation will set the stage for more fond memories of the L&B Room, Better said.

“It’s not just a beautiful room in an extraordinary university library,” she said. “It’s an intimate space that became central to generations of Yale scholars as a home away from home. We are excited for students to feel at home there again.”