Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh-Beechview provides an inviting and inspiring space for a neighborhood that has become an attractive spot for families, including an immigrant population who are drawn by reasonably-priced housing, job opportunities and a convenient light-rail line that connects the community and others to downtown Pittsburgh.

The nearly 50-year-old building was transformed to give it a more recognizable and welcoming presence within the street face of the residential neighborhood. It also provides enhanced services, is a sustainable and accessible building, and has bright, day-lit spaces for the occupants.

During the design phase, neighborhood users were engaged in a series of community meetings and made it clear that in addition to more space, they wanted the library to have a more prominent presence. A sculpted exterior provides a modern interpretation of the residential context and adds an appropriate sense of scale to the building and shapes a compelling volumetric experience inside. The extruded gable that outlines the addition at the side of the building frames a view through the building, from the active street-front to the dense woods in the back. Reflected sunlight captured by the full length building clearstory illuminates the interior even during the day.

The design team worked with the Library to facilitate a complete reorganization of the services and spaces and to provide a sustainable design that is also universally accessible. The Adult Service Area provides generous lounge and study seating, a comfortable computer space, and shelving arranged to facilitate serendipitous browsing. An enlarged, dedicated Teen Area occupies a front corner of the building, in a brick screened area that is enhanced by sublimely filtered natural light and is distinct from the Adult Services space.

An open stair connects the entry floor to the lower level which contains the Children’s Area and a new 32-seat community room, providing direct visual and physical connection. Lower shelving units were provided in the children’s space to increase opportunities for children to browse and to provide quality seating space. An intimate reading nook underneath the stair is a playful area for children to discover and share. The introduction of daylight and view to the green wooded area behind the library is a welcome addition to what was once a dark, internal space.

Since the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (CLP) began renovating their facilities in 2003, library use has increased significantly, contributing to Pittsburgh’s status as one of America’s Most Literate Cities. The impact to the community, which relies on the library, is tangible. “I think that this means everything to this community. We were so distressed when there were plans to close it,” a Beechview community member stated. “We fought really hard with the help of a lot of other people and we are so thrilled with this.”