

# RIBA *Journal*

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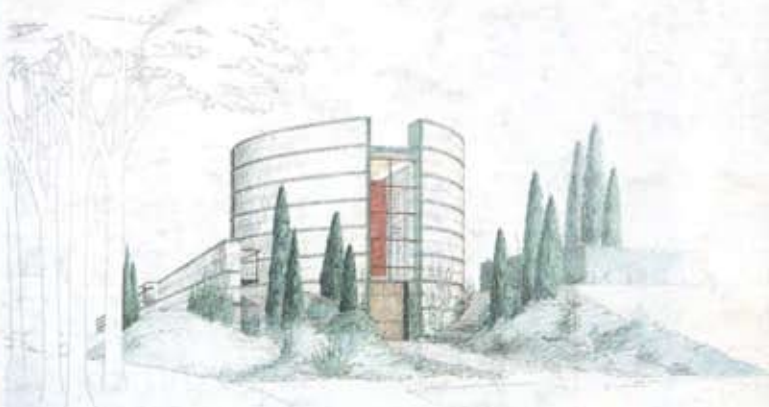


**Bookworms:** *The RIBA J digs for the truth behind the Hello!-style world of architectural publishing.*



**Scruples:**

*How low would you go to win the game of ethics versus business? Rules for the morally correct.*



**Dear John:** *MacCormac Jamieson Prichard library project bids a fond farewell to Ruskin.*



**Stepping out:**

*Catwalk culture hits the high street and hard landscaping gets the heavy treatment in Oxford Street.*

**Cover picture:** *Well studied – Scogin Elam & Bray's university law library in Tempe, AZ, USA.*

## Desert storm

**A law library for Arizona State University has given US architect Scogin Elam & Bray an opportunity to put its spatial and contextual ideas into built form. The scale of the building, larger than SEB's earlier work, also gives a clue to its architectural direction, argues John Welsh.**



Materials and spaces overlap: the John J. Ross-William C. Blakley Law Library in Tempe, Arizona, by Scogin Elam & Bray.

Like MacCormac Jamieson Prichard's Ruskin Library, Scogin Elam & Bray's John J. Ross-William C. Blakley Law Library for Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, is also a memorial to the dead. But whereas MacCormac's building refers to a grand, historical figure of the nineteenth century, SEB's building is named after two young attorneys killed in an air crash.

The contrast between the people after whom the two buildings are named also characterises the different approaches to these two libraries: Ruskin, the nineteenth-century aesthete, the arts and crafts missionary, the Venetian traveller, provides MacCormac with his narrative; the two lawyers, whose lives belonged so firmly in this century, represent a far more modern world, appropriate to the work of SEB.

The Atlanta-based architect commonly deals with the most habitual of US location

– the American suburb, where building sites are squeezed between retail strips and the multi-media icons of drive-thru America. Here SEB has tried to achieve an architecture of substance despite the contextless wastes.

The result is an architecture successfully alien to its surroundings, either in achieving character despite its surroundings or realising sophisticated architectural ideas distant from more clichéd urban locations, such as New York or LA. One library, at Morrow (1991), Atlanta, has its terracotta-coloured walls decorated with local children's handprints, another at Buckhead (1989) displays the angular geometry and cantilevers more common to deconstructivist architecture.

It is easy to interpret the work of SEB in this light but that is far too easy. The work of SEB can be defined in a quite different light, to which the law library

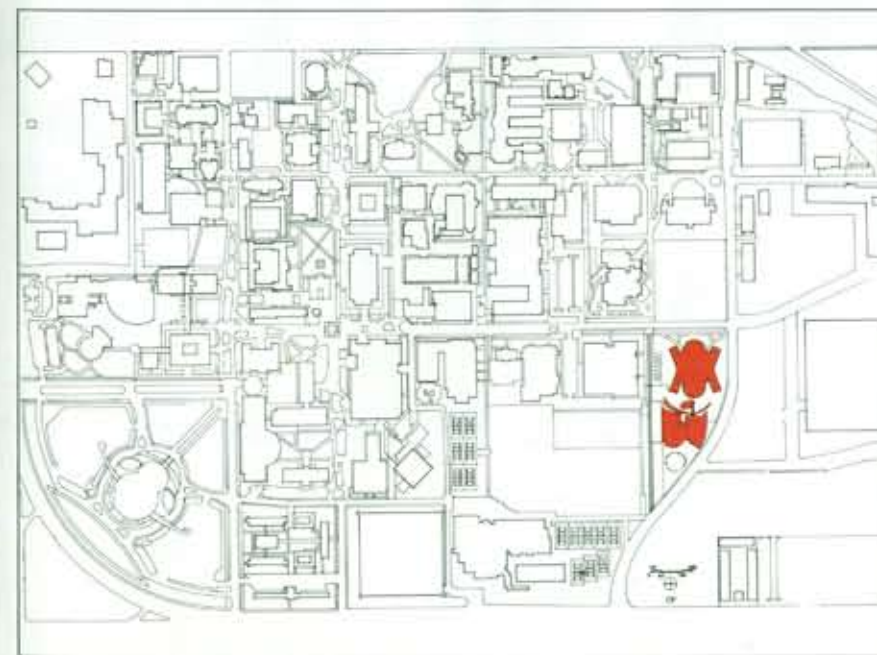
belongs and that first appears with the Chmar House (1989). Here the architect is confronted not with a horrible site but rather with the beauty of a fantastic forest. SEB's response is to place the narrow building – partner Mack Scogin compares its floor plan to a Swiss army knife with its bottle opener and shallow blade extended – exactly on the site of a long-fallen tree.

Of course the law library does not enjoy quite the same rural environment, located on the fringe of the densely built-up, orthogonally planned university campus, beside Armstrong Hall, the existing law school building by Cartmell & Rossman (1968). But just as the Chmar House responds to its location, so SEB produces a building responsive to the Arizona desert. 'The sun bursts over the horizon not bothering with the filtering effect of east coast greenery, immediately filling an enormous sky with incredible light,' SEB says. 'Every

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Desert conditions: the open, north side (opposite) contrasts with the closed, southern facade, protecting the interior from the sun.



Library is located on fringe of campus beside law school by Cartmell & Rossman (1968).

form takes on a hyper-ness; incredibly legible and overly important.'

SEB's buildings can be interpreted as inspired by the two sides of Frank Lloyd Wright's organic legacy: the interest in locating buildings in the perfect spot – Fallingwater, for example, in comparison with the siting of the Chmar House or the law library, exploiting an intimate association with the dry, Arizona desert; and that later period of Wright's work where the helicoid plan takes precedence. Think here of the David Wright house (1950) in nearby Phoenix, the Guggenheim Museum in New York (1959) or even some of the work by Bruce Gough, such as the Bavinger house (1950) in Oklahoma.

The organisation of SEB's law library seems to follow some of these rules, achieving what American critic Mark Alden Branch has called the use of 'circles, triangles, stars and logarithmic spirals as



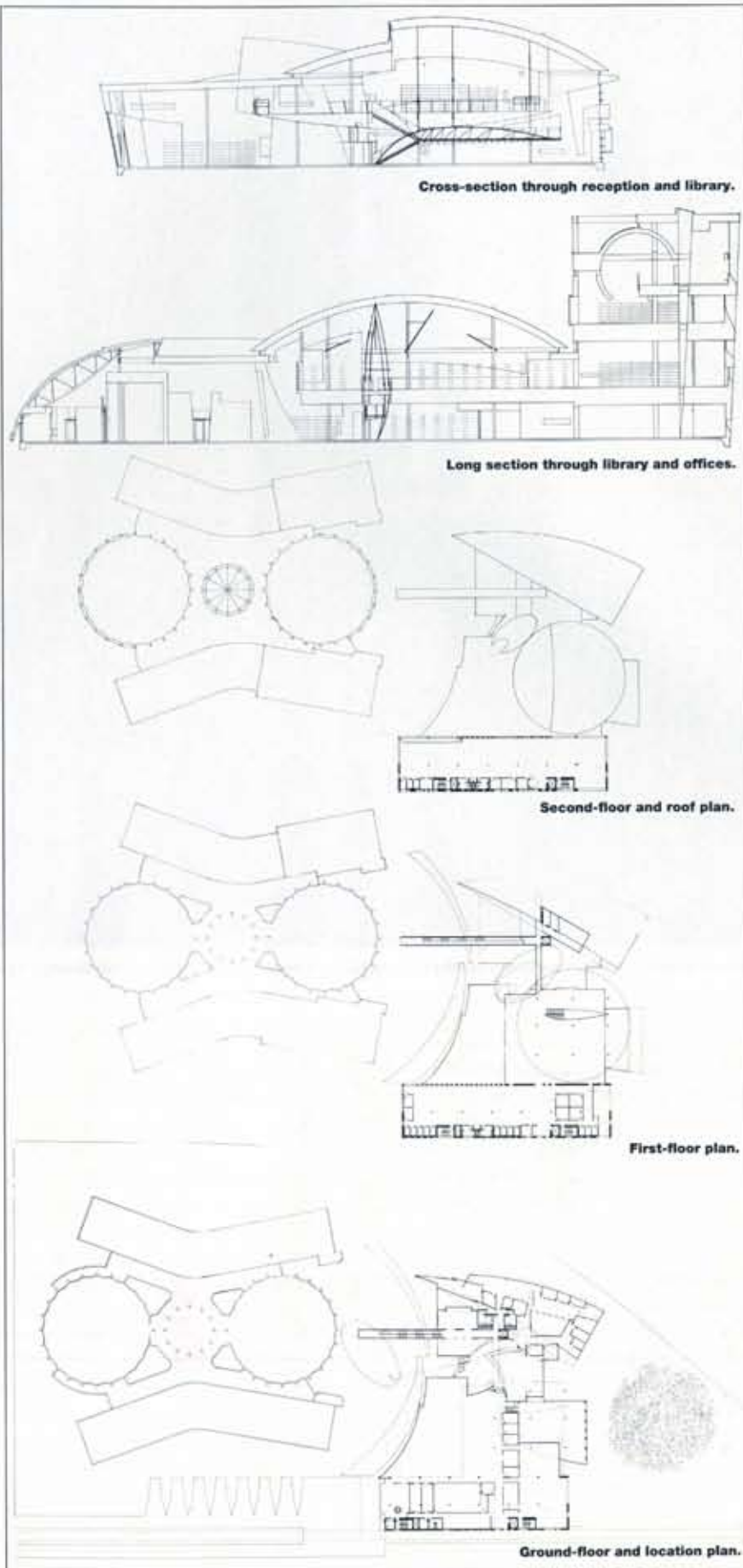
**Buckhead Library, Atlanta (1989).** One of two libraries by Scogin Elam & Bray that bring powerful architectural forms to a wasteland of drive-thrus and shopping malls.



**Chmar House, Atlanta (1989).** The wooden and glazed private house was placed in a clearing of dense woods on the exact spot of a fallen tree. Bedroom terrace projects into the wilderness.



**Morrow library, Atlanta (1991).** Another dull suburban site but one SEB counteracts with a simple device - local children were encouraged to leave handprints in the still-wet render.



Stucco finish and desert landscape: SEB's architecture has an appearance consistent with, though grander than, its surroundings.

ordering devices'. The building's footprint, therefore, is determined by factors such as the adjacent law school, the eastern property line and other, neighbouring buildings, each element building up into a geometric plan of apparent disorder.

But circles and colliding lines are developed in plan and section into a complex set of functions. The library, with its dense squadron of bookshelves, forms the core of the block, other forms and spaces organised over and around it; technical services, circulation services, the core collection and the other discrete collections. This overlaying and overlapping of zones encourages a building ready to confront the intense Arizona sunlight. But it also provides the curvaceous forms of the metal-clad roof over the library, a type of womb-like interior space and a cervix-like section over the main reception – perhaps the female version of the Buckhead/Morrow libraries, just as Wright saw the Larkin building (1905) or Beth Shalom synagogue (1959) as the masculine equivalents of Johnson Wax building (1936–39) or Guggenheim Museum.

What can resolve this conflict in the work of SEB between the attempt to make a building suit its location, though in a form more suited to the city; between the Wrightian context and the city-slickness of deconstruction? Anthony Vidler, another American critic, has said that 'deconstructionism seems at once to discard all ornament to become entirely ornamental'. But another solution rests with an interpretation of deconstruction which sees it not as some stand-alone development but as a natural and inevitable progression by the postwar, European avant-garde from Mies' parallel arrangement of rooms – the German pavilion in Barcelona (1929), for example – used not only in plan but also in section. And what inspired Mies but a similiar order of rooms in Wright's Prairie houses?

#### CREDITS

**Client** Board of Regents for Arizona State University

**Architect of record** Leo A. Daly Company

**Design architect** Scogin Elam & Bray

**Law Library specialist** George Grossman

**Structural engineer** Robin E. Parke Associates

**Mechanical and electrical engineer** Leo A. Daly Company

**Landscape architect** The Campbell Collaborative

**Construction budget** £4.9 million (\$7.37 million)



Interior of library: despite the ferocity of the desert sun, the interior is flooded with light.



Swirls and lines of floor plan read as vibrant elevations to interior spaces.



Bridge from exterior continues straight through the interior, creating a dramatic catwalk over the library's main reception space.