



ARCHITECTURE
FOR THE
BOOKS

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Introduction

Designing the Contemporary Library

Our historically romantic notion of the library is that of mellow book-lined walls creating discrete places for reading, browsing, and study; the book defining the architecture. Such a mental image is valid for good reason. The book defining the space of architecture has a long history. In medieval monastic libraries, book-lined cabinets or cells provided individual study spaces within greater structures. The 1475 painting, *St Jerome in his Study* by Antonello da Messina,¹ illustrates this beautifully. In baroque monastic libraries, sensuous walls and piers of books created fluid spaces with the carefully controlled natural light to dramatic effect.² In Etienne-Louis Boullée's drawings of 1785 for the enormous reading room of the Bibliothèque du Roi, Paris,³ where the power of the collector is omnipresent, the walls are book-lined. In Paris, at the Bibliothèque Saint-Geneviève of 1850 and the Bibliothèque Nationale of 1868,⁴ both by Henri Labrousse and both highly innovative in their use of light and application of structure, the walls are multi-tiered book ranges. In the US, at about the same time, H.H. Richardson, in his inventive Romanesque Revival mode, was making thick walls of stone, brick, and books.⁵ As late as 1928, Gunnar Asplund was lining the great rotunda at the Stockholm Public Library⁶ with books.

As rich and evocative as these examples are, it is not the environment of most contemporary libraries. As digital catalogs have taken the place of card catalogs, the computer, with patrons busily clicking and searching, is one of the first interior impressions of the library. The great benefits of the digital catalog, the dispersion of catalog information throughout the library, remote access to information, and the enhanced catalog search beyond the collection at hand, assure its status. More often than not, the tactile, visual contact with books is a third, fourth or fifth removed experience in the library's sequence of spaces and functions. With only the occasional exception, walls of books no longer make the space of the contemporary library. The San Juan Capistrano Public Library, in San Juan Capistrano, California of 1982 by Michael Graves⁷ is one of the exceptions.

The storage of large collections, the advent of a numerical and linear cataloging system, and concerns for flexibility in the ever-changing library landscape have prompted the creation of large open areas filled with furniture. The quantities and locations of reading tables, carrels, shelving, and other furniture and equipment are manipulated to meet current and changing needs. Large open areas address the issue of security and supervision, particularly important in public libraries where patron safety is a concern and library staffing is frequently subject to fluctuating funds.

The architectural design challenge of large open spaces is two-fold; first, the articulation of such spaces can prove daunting at the very moment such spaces present architectural opportunities. The problem becomes more pronounced in stacked, multistory libraries than in single-story libraries, which have only the plane of the roof to address. A second significant challenge of large open undifferentiated space is the loss of intimate space for the individual to study or concentrate and interact personally with a book or computer. While furniture, in many cases, can solve this need, it is often relegated to bulk-purchasing programs or is procured under arrangements separate from the architect's purview. In such cases, the result is often disappointing and conceptually inconsistent with the space design.

There are, however, wonderful examples where furniture and architecture work together beautifully. At Louis I. Kahn's Library at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire, 1972,⁸ individual study carrels at the building's perimeter give scale, privacy, visual access to the exterior, and even the modulation of natural light to the user. Alvar Aalto often made similar furniture or furniture-like rooms. The spaces at the perimeter of his Mount Angel Abbey Library of 1970,⁹ the monastic library at the Mount Angel Benedictine Monastery east of Mount Angel, Oregon, are an excellent example. More recently, Moshe Safdie's design for Library Square, comprised of Vancouver's Central Library and Federal Government Office Tower,¹⁰ places patrons in intimate spaces at the library's perimeter overlooking the city.

In one 'future think' digital scenario, the personalized intimate space, in the form of the carrel or cabinet, could take on new life. One can imagine cabinets enhanced for exterior conditions or as portable mobile units. The carrel/cabinet could be dispersed across a library, a neighborhood, a city, or a region. In such a scenario, the dispersion of 'small public libraries,' or conglomerated cabinets could prove particularly important to those of us who are not able to personally acquire the software and/or hardware necessary to be adequately 'cyberized' or not able to amass personal book collections.

The free, public accessibility to computers, books, and other informational media is essential to any society that values freedom of thought and speech. Public libraries find and will continue to find creative and affordable ways to honor this mandate—the Jeffersonian ideal of the free library open to everyone.

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In the US, public libraries may be the only truly public buildings. Unlike private or academic libraries, public libraries generally serve widely diverse communities. As a result, the making of public libraries tends to be a complicated process. During the design of a public library, the community may be involved through public meetings established by law or instituted by the library system. In other cases, a library board or a committee may represent the community. County, city, or state entities may all be involved. In any combination or configuration of stakeholders, influencers, or decision makers the collective community personality registers itself on the building design through its attitude towards budget, program, leadership, and issues of architectural character. One example is the programmatic inclusion of public space. While a subset to the primary focus of the library, such spaces and their functions leave their mark on the plans and use-patterns of the building.

New technologies affecting library design are both architectonic and informational. Since the great tracery and buttress walls of the Gothic cathedrals, the trajectory of architectural tectonics has included the search for the thin or highly efficient wall. Thin walls have become a characteristic of modern/contemporary architecture. No longer of thick masonry, the thin wall resonates in the architecture of contemporary libraries in important ways and holds out the promise of elegant solutions in the future. Thin walls are constructed of glazing systems or of structural framing with exterior and interior veneers, both systems manufactured from parts and pieces often of close tolerances. Because the book has become disengaged from the wall, library buildings now act as 'tents' or cloaks around collections and the advanced technologies of thin walls equate to efficient enclosures.

The four bold glass towers of the National Library of France in Paris, 1995–96, by Dominique Perrault¹¹ clearly express the thin walls/large collection phenomenon. In contemporary revivalist or historicist architecture, the thin wall begs the question of authenticity. While often producing pleasing picturesque representations, such an approach seldom takes on the more productive task of the thin wall as a medium of exploration. As with examples from the past, the libraries that will be celebrated in the future will be those that have prompted and/or benefited from the continuing research of innovative structural systems, building materials, and techniques, and the exploration of architectural space. Architectural character born of such exploration signals the reinvention or evolution of the building type as well as the investment required to go beyond formulaic solutions. Architectural character is, in the final analysis, the aspect of great libraries that endear them to us and over time ensure their continued presence.

Light is a defining consideration for libraries. Whether natural or artificial, light is the key to access the treasures of the library—be it light from the computer screen or light that falls upon the page of an open book. The technologies of artificial lighting are constantly improving, allowing greater and greater flexibility of design approach. This is particularly important for very large collections where natural light is simply not a comprehensive option. In contemporary architecture, natural light is controlled and filtered by progressively more sophisticated and effective glazing materials and window treatment systems.

The search for the relationship or interface of digital or informational technologies with physical technologies will surely take architecture to places yet unpredictable. In a recent publication focusing on school design architect Sheila Kennedy commented, 'The physical world has not been "replaced" by the digital world, as once initially predicted. Instead, we are discovering that the digital world is increasingly absorbed into and merged with the physical world.'¹² It is fundamental that the human interface with either the book or the computer is based on the dimensions and capabilities of the human body and is wonderfully one of the 'givens' in the otherwise shifting project of architecture. The physical relationship of the individual to the computer is not so very different from the individual's relationship to a book, note once again *St Jerome in his Study*. New technology may enhance but will not diminish the need for the human dimension of the library. Until such time that information technology becomes integrated with our bodies, or our buildings, the space required to use a computer or to read a book remains constant and definable.¹³

The computer—while giving us access to enormous stores of information electronically—has, rather than producing a paperless society, facilitated an ever-increasing production of paper publication. Individuals may publish with ease in informal formats. In the US, the average number of books published annually in paper format over a four-year period from 1998–2001 was 119,049 volumes.¹⁴ Although this may change radically in the future, the development of the e-book is presently considered a supplement to the traditional book. With the application of the computer, there is reason to believe that, in the future, even libraries themselves may generate or become the publishers of information.¹⁵ The longevity of electronic storage continues as a consideration, and it is currently estimated that the amount of digitized information is only 10 percent of all text.¹⁶ The feel of a book in our hands is comforting and hard copy is reassuring.

Libraries are the containers for and disseminators of information. Libraries gather our universes of understanding under a single roof. Even as the method of storage shifts into a digital format, two aspects remain constant. First, the library houses and makes accessible the apparatus of information transmission. Second, the library provides a place of socialization and collectivity. Socialization may be in the form of interaction with the librarian whose task it is to handle information and see that it gets to those desiring it, or it may be in the form of interaction of community, either scholarly or casual. The individual alone with either a book or a computer has limits. As social creatures, our need for human interaction is essential and inherent. The library building functions as a symbol of our collective belief in knowledge as the sustaining fiber of our culture and of our human civility. Even as the virtual library is being realized, the need for access to resources beyond our means and the need for human contact collectively drive the prediction of the library of the future not to an either/or condition, but rather to a both/and condition—both the electronic, virtual library and the library of space, light, and materiality. The merging of the virtual and the physical portend well for the continuing tradition of extraordinary developments in the architectural presence of libraries and the development of architectural character yet unfathomable.

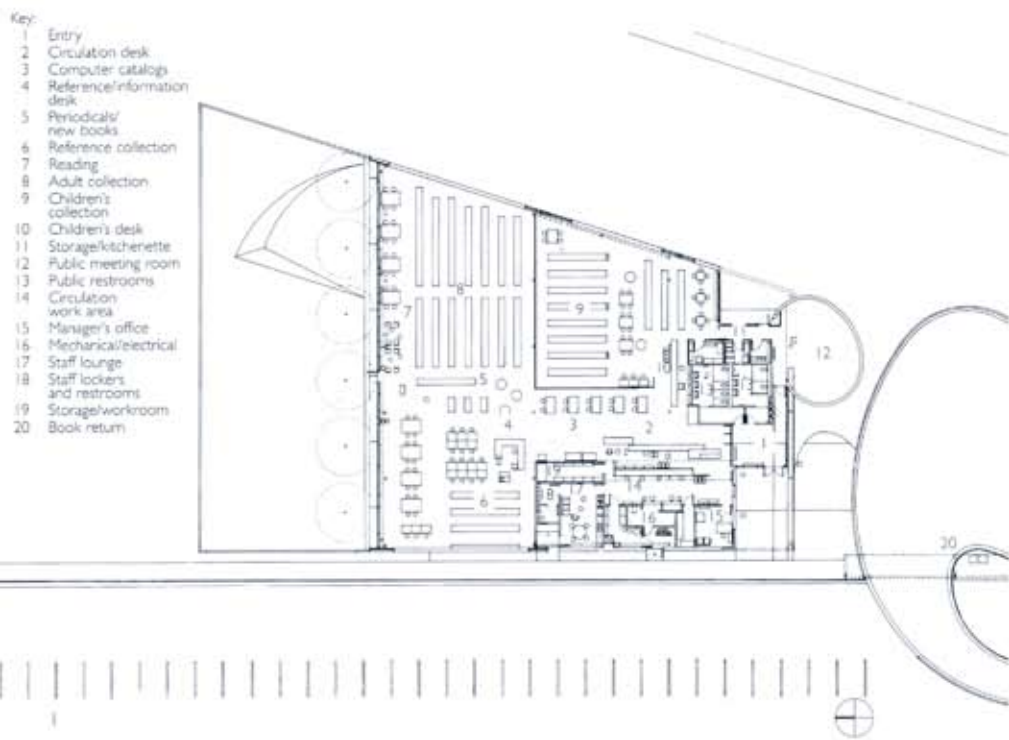
Merrill Elam, Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects

Notes

- 1 Paul Crowther, *The Transhistorical Image: Philosophizing Art and Its History* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002), 50.
- 2 Michael Brawne, *Libraries: Architecture and Equipment* (Praeger Publishers, New York, 1970), 14–15.
- 3 Philippe Madec, *Boullée* (Fernand Hazan, Paris, 1986), 90.
- 4 Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1985), 658.
- 5 Sir Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1961), 1063–1064.
- 6 Claes Caldenby and Olof Hultin, *Asplund* (Arkitektur Förlag, Stockholm, 1985), 92–141.
- 7 John Pastier, 'An Intimate Sequence of Spaces,' *Architecture*, Dec. 1989, 64–67.
- 8 David B. Brownlee and David G. De Long, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (Rizzoli International Publications, New York, 1991), 258–265.
- 9 David Dunster ed., *Alvar Aalto* (St Martin's Press, New York, 1978), 60–62.
- 10 Wendy Kohn ed., *Moshe Safdie* (Academy Editions, London, 1996), 284–301.
- 11 Michel Jacques ed., *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (Birkhauser-Verlag, Basel, 1996).
- 12 Sheila Kennedy, 'Something from "Nothing": Information Infrastructure in School Design,' *Schools for Cities, Urban Strategies*, ed. Sharon Haar (National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC, 2002), 45.
- 13 Paul Lukez, 'Whiter://Multi-media,(Cyber)Libraries?' *Library Builders*, ed. Michael Brawne (London: Academy Editions, 1997), 13.
- 14 Dave Bogart, ed., *The Bowker Annual 2002*, 47th ed. (Medford, New Information Today, Inc, Jersey, 2002), 548.
- 15 Paul Lukez, 14.
- 16 Paul Lukez, 14.

Lee B. Philmon Branch Library

Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects



Within earshot of the Atlanta airport, in Riverdale, Georgia, this 12,000-square-foot library sits on a triangular-shaped leftover site wedged between properties slated for development. Corralled by sprawling suburbia, the little library asserts itself with quietude within this rapidly changing landscape. Unlike the nearby Wal-Mart or the neighboring metal shed that houses the Living Waters Assembly of God, which announces itself with bold signage and clarifies its functions with familiar forms, the library is a mysterious brushstroke against a background of predictability. Its curiosity becomes its invitation to visit.

Inside, along with computers and books, is an oasis of variegated space and light. Giant pennant patterns of glazing filter the daylight and allow it to bathe the interior. These tapered geometries of the façade glazing mirror the slope of ordinary, wallboard-clad roof trusses inside. The trusses, which give shape to the ceiling, are installed with alternating slopes to provide an undulating play of space, and to bounce light and disperse sound. Skylights on top of each column further encourage the dappling of daylight.

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- 1 Floor plan
- 2 Exterior expresses bold geometry
- 3 Interior ceilings are tent-like
- 4 Courtyard on building's north side

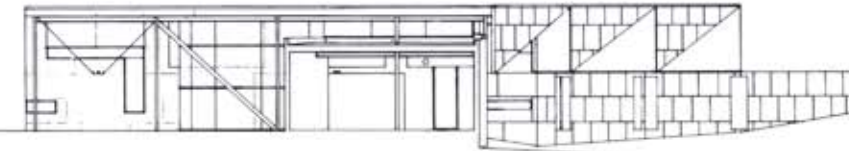
Most of the library's functions, adult stacks, children's collections, casual reading and study tables, public computers, reference area, circulation, and staff lounge, share space under the expansive trellis-like ceiling. The barrel-shaped public meeting room is found to the south and the outdoor reading garden to the north. These two exceptions appear as solid masses outside the building. Inside they are habitable discoveries and moments of repose.

At the north end of the library, the reading tables and reference area look out onto the walled garden. Throughout the day, sunlight washes the slightly inclined ground plane, sending soft reflected light into the interior. The garden and its immature plantings are a buffer zone against the eventual but inevitable convenience store planned for the adjacent site to the north.

At the south and entrance façade, the site rolls gently downward to the now-realized parkway. The library sits at the crown of this hill, giving the small building a greater-than-actual presence and making it highly visible from the parkway.



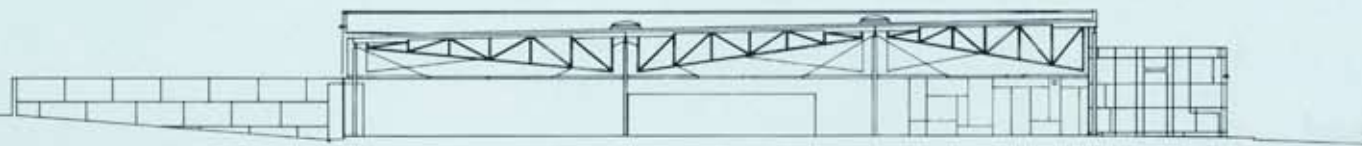
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- 5 Reading areas are interspersed among stacks
- 6 North-south section
- 7 East-west section
- 8 Detail of angled windows on east elevation

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9 Entry with its gesticulating elements
 10 View of building from east
 11 Low wall creates protected courtyard
 12 North wall contains reading areas and views of courtyard
 photography: Timothy Hursley



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