



# Hands-on Architecture

*An imaginative architect and a community's willingness to experiment have produced an unusual branch library near Atlanta.*

*Carol Cobb Turner Branch Library  
Morrow, Georgia  
Scogin Elam and Bray Architects*



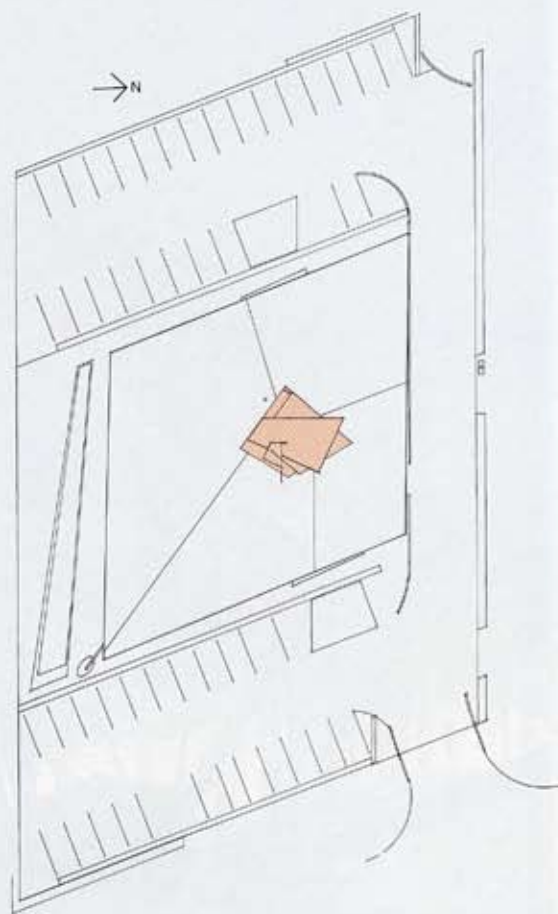
To the untrained eye, the one-acre site designated for Clayton County's branch library had little to offer. The parcel is located in the city of Morrow, where there is "no main street, no downtown, no obvious hierarchy—urbanistically it's Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionism," according to Mack Scogin. Its neighbors included a florist turned caterer, a gas station, a fried-chicken outlet, and what Merrill Elam calls "your basic assortment of 'American Dream homes.'" The site's lack of distinction was heightened by its location in a septic no-man's-land: situated in between two active sewer lines, the property required any future occupant to provide, at considerable cost, its own pumping system. But the schizophrenic country road/town strip character of the area held considerable appeal for architects Scogin, Elam, and partner Lloyd Bray, who have built their Atlanta-based practice on being able to integrate the prosaic and the poetic with the technical finesse of skilled engineers.

Though Clayton County is small in area (at 148 square miles, the fourth smallest county in Georgia), its population has swelled from 98,000 in 1970 to 190,000 in 1990, an increase that, among other things, has overburdened its public libraries. Although Carol Stewart, director of the county library system, concedes that Scogin Elam and Bray's bold, idiosyncratic brand of Modernism might initially shock constituents comfortable in more countrified settings, she adds that "libraries are exciting places, and they should be in exciting buildings." Stewart and the library board have been promoting this idea for several years, and a crucial step in its public acceptance was the completion in 1988 of the library system's Scogin Elam and Bray-designed headquarters in Jonesboro some five miles away. While the earlier building's corrugated metal exterior stenciled with a black-and-white notebook-cover pattern did at first cause a local stir, the structure's desirable combination of durable, inexpensive materials and bright study areas in the end satisfied its users.

In Morrow, the smaller site and the reduced program of a branch library—10,000 square feet of lending and reference collections, staff offices, and public meeting rooms—led the architects to a simple parti of long walls along lot lines to screen unwanted views and clerestories beneath the roof to light what is in effect a giant, easy-to-supervise reading room (photos and plan page 92). The architects integrated their client's vision of libraries as communal gathering places, likening their scheme to a giant umbrella with a center pole (a two-story tower) that structurally supports its "ribs" (roof trusses), which extend toward such community landmarks as Morrow's public schools to the west and the Jonesboro library headquarters to the southeast. After building adjustable cardboard models to study the complex angles of the three-part roof (section page 90), the architects used computers to generate truss drawings for the steel fabricator. Technical considerations aside, they sought a hand-hewn effect on the exterior: under their guidance, construction workers swept the synthetic stucco surface with homemade brushes of bundled pine branches culled from the area, and, before the surface dried, they invited neighborhood children to make hand prints in the Georgia clay-colored surface as a touching symbol of ownership.

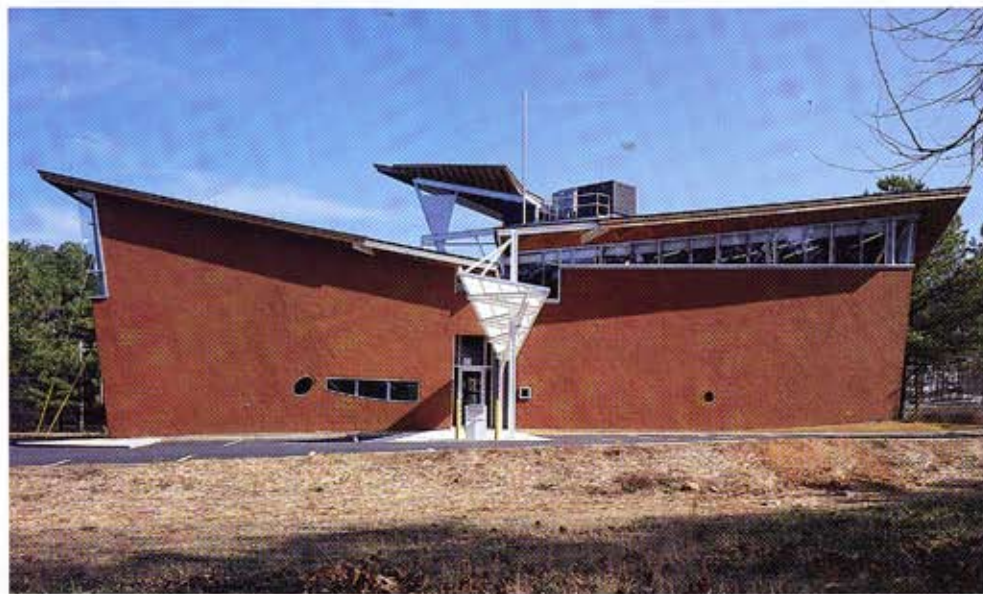
"We wanted to build something that is a draw and something that we could afford," Stewart recalls of the library board's intentions. With attendance up 75 percent since the Morrow branch opened last January and cost on budget at \$72 per square foot, it looks like Scogin Elam and Bray gave the county exactly what it sought.  
*Karen D. Stein*

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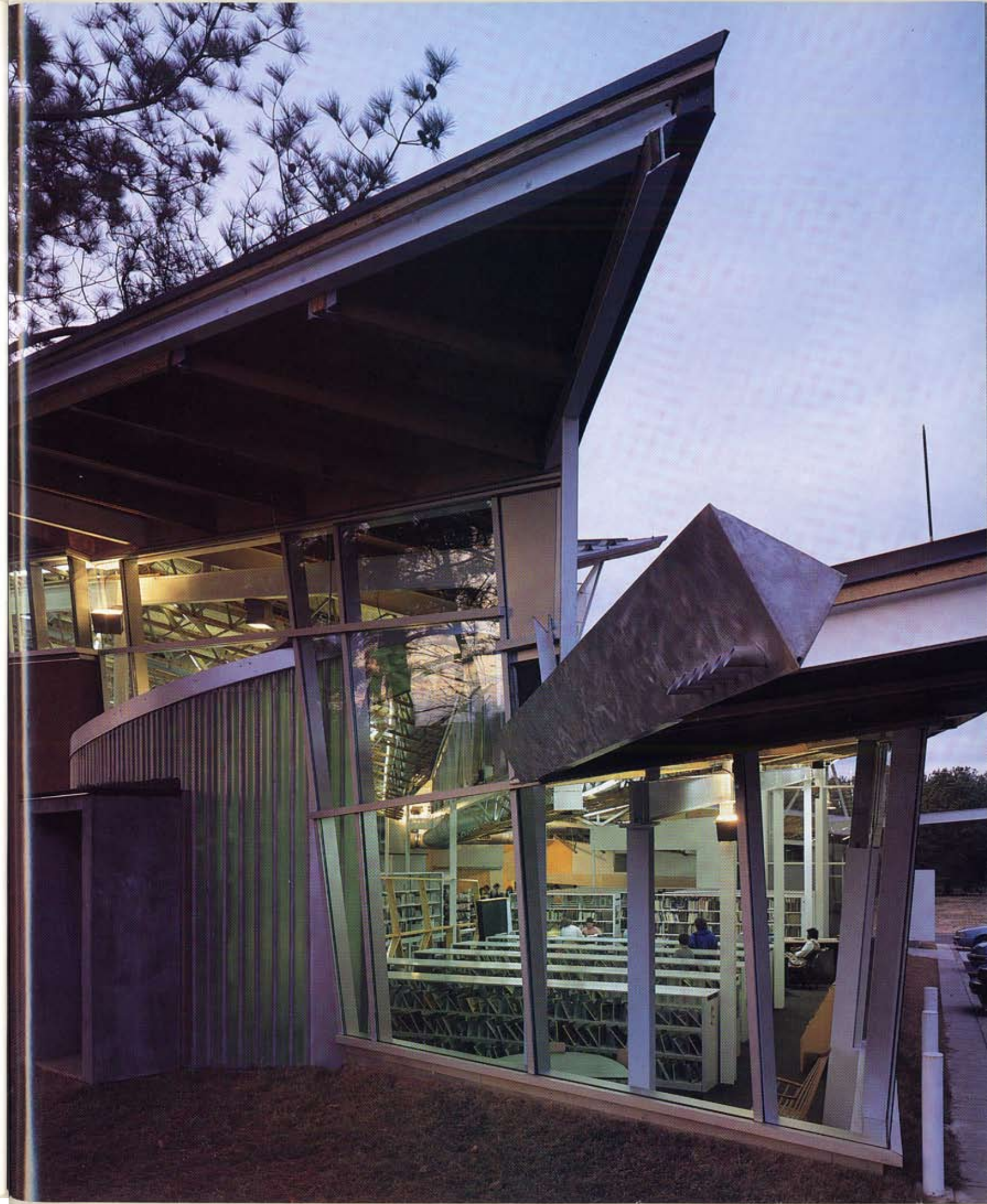
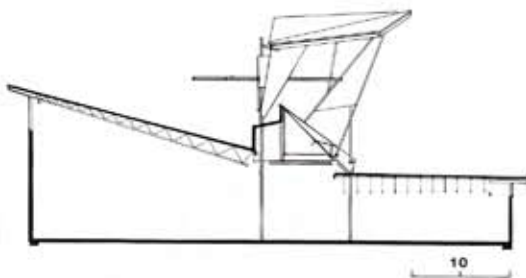


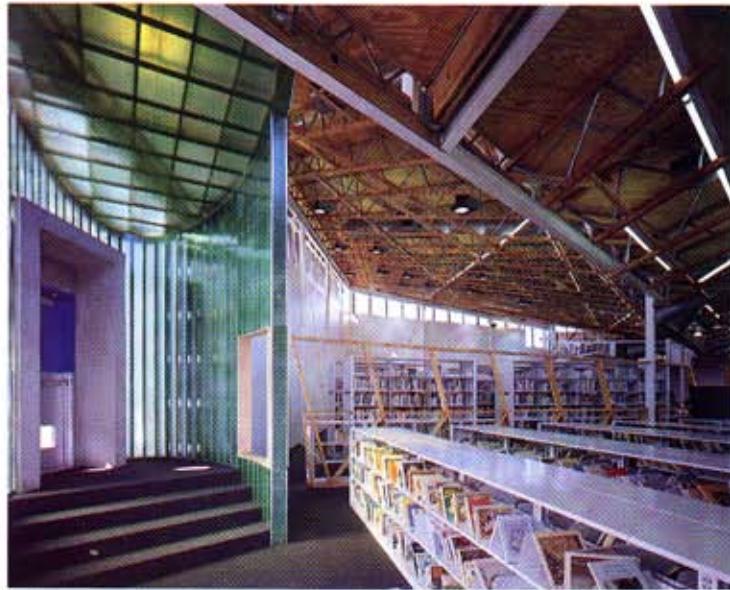
*The one-acre site that Clayton County purchased for its new branch library was barely able to accommodate the 10,000-square-foot program and necessary parking (plan, photo above) in a handicap-accessible one-story structure. The architects used the tight constraints to advantage. By pushing long, stuccoed walls to lot lines, and placing in the site's center a canopied steel tower (opposite) that appears to burst from boxy confines, they gave the building a much-needed presence within its jumbled urban/suburban setting.*





Since sites adjacent to the library's east, west (middle left) and north (bottom left) facades contain a variety of undistinguished structures, or are slated for future development, the architects placed most windows on those sides high enough to block unwanted views yet still admit light. They opened up the south facade, however, where a canopy screens the main entrance and the glass wall of the story area (opposite). The architects used cardboard models with movable wood dowels to study the inclination of the three-part roof (section below). This architectural "puppet" became a useful tool not only to achieve the desired sculptural effect but also to demonstrate to the Clayton County library board how light would enter the tower and permeate the interior. (The tower also acts as a return plenum.) Rough measurements from the final model were refined on computers for working drawings.





An oval entry foyer of aqua fiberglass extends into the parallelogram form of the library (top left). Aware that budget cuts could leave the library short of staff, the architects integrated adult and children's collections and the reference area into one easy-to-supervise reading room (middle and bottom left). Behind a curved circulation desk are offices and a public meeting room (opposite). Ducts to electric heat pumps are woven between trusses, creating an active ceiling that fulfills the client's premise of a lively library as vital to a culturally thriving community.



**Credits**  
 Carol Cobb Turner  
 Branch Library  
 Morrow, Georgia  
**Owner:** Clayton County Library Board of Trustees  
**Architect:** Scogin Elam and Bray Architects—Merrill Elam, Mack Scogin, Lloyd Bray, principals-in-charge; Carlos Tardio, Jeff Atwood, Susan Desko, Richard Ashworth, Julie Sanford, and Criss Mills, project team  
**Engineers:** Pruitt Eberly, Inc. (structural); Engineering Design Concepts, Inc. (electrical); Sunbelt, An Engineering Group (mechanical); Williamson & Associates, Inc. (specifications); Roger S. Lingerfelt, PE (civil)  
**Consultants:** Costing Services Group (costing); Ramon Luminance Design (lighting); Charles J. Schmidt (library programming)  
**General Contractor:** Lusk & Associates, Inc.



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|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Circulation desk      | 6. Story area          |
| 2. Periodicals           | 7. Public meeting room |
| 3. Reference             | 8. Storage             |
| 4. Adult collection      | 9. Staff breakroom     |
| 5. Children's collection | 10. Librarian's office |

