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Thom Mayne's Perceptual Shift

and introducing:

house



Architect Scogin Elam and Bray carved away the southwest corner of their Philmon Branch Library in Atlanta to serve as a covered entrance porch (above). Librarians' offices lie immediately behind, and the front door is to the right. The projecting steel member and slanted ceiling of the canopy prefigure the suspended light fixtures and undulated ceiling of the interior (facing page).

Scogin Elam and Bray transforms a spartan budget into a serene library.

Tight Bookkeeping

By Vernon Mays

After completing two libraries for the Clayton County Library System in suburban Atlanta, Scogin Elam and Bray Architects found their reputation preceding them when they began work on a third. What had changed since they built the Carol Cobb Turner Library in 1991 (May 1993, page 104) was the makeup of the system's board of trustees, which had taken a more conservative tilt. Principal Merrill Elam recalls, "They said, 'Maybe this building could be a little quieter.'"

Elam and partners Mack Scogin and Lloyd Bray accepted that remark as their marching orders and set to work defining just what "quiet" could mean, esthetically speaking. "We also talked a lot about trying to create the new library within the milieu of the nearby suburban strip and all the automobile traffic passing by—to make it a quiet place."

That discussion soon led to ideas of garden, the metaphor that began to inform their design studies. But while the new Philmon Branch Library embraces the idea literally with a small outdoor space, nonliteral notions of garden did more to

germinate this inventive building's abstract qualities as a salve for the sensory whipping delivered by its suburban context.

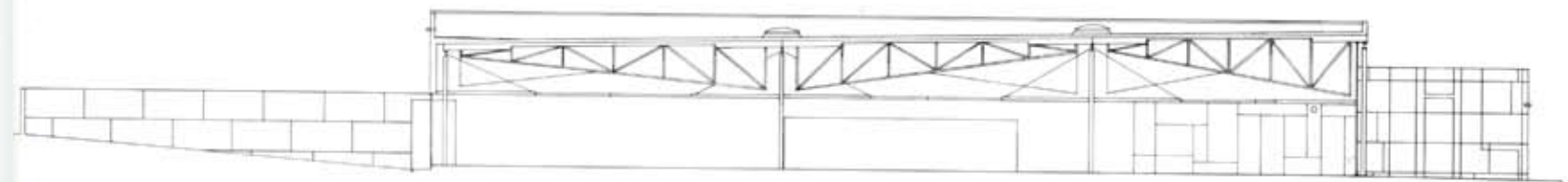
In much the same way Olmsted anticipated that his rural Central Park would someday be surrounded by Manhattan, Elam predicts that the \$1.3 million Philmon Library, which opened in January 1998, will be engulfed by a hodgepodge of gas stations, convenience stores, muffler shops, and big-box retail centers. For now, its most visible neighbor is an inelegant pair of metal sheds that house the Living Waters Assembly of God church. "The idea was to let people get away from the rattle of the outside world," Elam explains.



The architect exposed the library's steel frame on its south face (above). The curved form (at right) houses a meeting room that can be accessed through the lobby for after-hours events. The fiber-cement panel-clad lower half of the library's lean east side (below) extends to enclose a north-facing garden (facing page, below). The zigzag profile of the roof trusses (section, facing page, center) echoes in the scissor pattern of the clerestory windows on the west facade (facing page, above).

LEE B. PHILMON BRANCH LIBRARY, RIVERDALE, GEORGIA

CLIENT: Clayton County Library System **ARCHITECT:** Scogin Elam and Bray Architects, Atlanta—Merrill Elam (principal-in-charge); Mack Scogin, Lloyd Bray (principals); Tim Harrison, Denise Dumais, Ned Frazer, Jeff Atwood, Martha Henderson-Bennett, Dustin Lindblad, Beth Morris, Cecilia Tham, Kathy Wright (project team) **LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT:** Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates **ENGINEERS:** Uzon and Case Engineers (structural); Arthur Vanderhoogt (mechanical); Beaudry Tankersley Associates (electrical); Jefferson Consultants (civil); Minick Engineers (plumbing) **CONSULTANTS:** Construction Industry Service Associates with Lusk & Associates (cost); Ramon Luminance Design (lighting); Soorikian Furniture, Motheius (casework fabrication); Evan Levy Sculpture and Design (signage); Starry Night Designs (furniture) **GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** Van Winkle and Company **COST:** \$1.3 million **PHOTOGRAPHER:** Timothy Hürsley



North-south section 19'





- 1 entrance
- 2 meeting room
- 3 stacks
- 4 reading area
- 5 offices



Clayton County's program for the 12,000-square-foot building was not unlike the other libraries Scogin Elam and Bray has completed for the client, especially in requiring a meeting room available for public use after library hours. Most of its functions—adult stacks, children's collections, and staff workspaces—fit neatly in the uncomplicated wedge-shaped plan. Only the meeting room—an egg-shaped volume grafted to the front facade—announces itself as special.

The building's main event is inside: an undulating landscape of zigzag ceiling planes. Activated by shadow and sunlight, angled up and down, the ceiling was inspired by the architects' recollections of garden trellises. "Our premise was to take that idea and enlarge it as a kind of megatrellis," Elam relates.

By inverting the long-span trusses and reversing their direction so the undersides rise and fall, the architects created an alternating rhythm of angled surfaces to

Full-height windows at floor level illuminate reading areas on the perimeter of the library (above). Light from skylights and the triangular clerestory windows washes across the ceiling (facing page).

bounce light and disperse sound. "For economy's sake, we used the same length and depth everywhere," Elam points out. The net effect is an ever-changing play of diffused light coming from skylights, windows, and a mixture of warm and cool artificial lamps suspended overhead in 40-foot-long steel fixtures.

Not unlike its kin on the suburban strip, the library's architecture is pieced together from thin walls and flat facades. By the time a visitor sees the volumes that compose the ceiling inside, the triangular clerestories strung along the sides of the building can be appreciated for their cleverness. Complementing the building's crisply detailed windows is exterior cladding of unpainted fiber-cement panels attached with exposed fasteners.

Tables in the reading area along the north facade line a glass curtain wall that overlooks the sloped reading garden. Library director Carol Stewart had long wanted

to include a garden space in one of the branches. But in this case, the sparsely landscaped lawn, enclosed by a monolithic fence and a row of evergreens, was justified primarily as a way to buffer the noise, both aural and visual, that is certain to kick in when the adjacent corner lot becomes a gas station or convenience store.

In that regard, the new Philmon Branch Library is an impulsive brushstroke on a canvas of predictability. Overscaled but delicate, provocative yet serene, a concoction of opposites—this urbane container for books and media both celebrates and rejects its place in the matrix of time, space, and commercial culture. ■