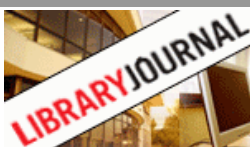




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After Seattle

By discarding every preconception about a public library building, they created the first 21st-century library

By Brian Kenney -- Library Journal, 8/15/2005

Few public buildings, and no libraries, have ever received the sort of acclaim that Seattle's central library garnered even before it opened in May 2004. "The Seattle building is thrilling from top to bottom," wrote Paul Goldberger in The New Yorker. Herbert Muschamp, in the New York Times, agreed: "In more than 30 years of writing about architecture, this is the most exciting building it has been my honor to review." The accolades hardly stopped there, and by year's end the library had won an armful of awards, including the American Institute of Architect's Honor Award for Outstanding Architecture.

Certainly the library was poised for attention. Designed by Dutch star architect and theorist Rem Koolhaas, the building is his largest U.S. project to date. And it is startling. It looks like a mantle of steel and glass was thrown over a random set of Lego® blocks—several of which seem to be fighting to get free.

National media attention. A new icon for Seattle. Suddenly, public libraries were on the map—and not because teens were looking at Internet porn. What Bilbao has become to museums, Seattle is becoming to libraries. It's no wonder even your dentist was asking, "What's up with that Seattle library?"

Despite all the coverage, the most important questions, at least for librarians, were barely asked, never mind answered: How does this building work as a library? Does it serve the information needs of Seattle's citizens? As a library, is there anything new here?

The quick answer to all three questions is yes. Seattle's new building succeeds as well as a library as it does a work of art. When the building falters, which it does occasionally, it can be forgiven. That's what happens when you take risks, especially multiple ones. What Seattle's team of architects and librarians did was no less than to deconstruct the public library—laying out its various services and collections—then put it back together, seemingly unburdened by history. As Ginnie Cooper, executive director of the Brooklyn Public Library, put it, "From now on, anyone who builds a public library will have to first come to Seattle and study this central library."

According to Seattle city librarian Deborah Jacobs, Seattle's design responds to three fundamental questions. "As the library's role changes, how do you protect the interest of public spaces?" asks Jacobs. "How do you plan for technology? How do you design a building that can house one million books that grow at immeasurable rates?" It is in its answers to these issues—as relevant for a small branch library as a central urban one—that Seattle has the most to teach us.

Creating the public space

This is the third central library to be built on the same site, a steeply sloping block between Fifth and Fourth avenues in downtown Seattle. The roots of this building go back to 1998—the dot-com years—when Seattle voters passed a \$196.4 library bond (see "Seattle's Fast Facts," p. 37).

Enter from Fifth Avenue, the upper part of the slope, and you are in the Living Room—one of the most exhilarating public rooms in the nation. Facing south, the light-infused atrium rises up eight stories. On a Thursday morning in May, nearly 60 visitors wait for the library to open at 10 a.m. As they cross the

threshold, their reaction is akin to tourists entering one of the great European cathedrals: their eyes are drawn upwards in wonder, to the dazzling glass and steel skin, then the sky. There are information and circulation desks, self-check stations, a bank of computers, and a large number of surprisingly comfortable cubist chairs. Opposite the seating, visitors can browse a selection of popular magazines as well as the library's fiction collection. A coffee stand—not Starbucks but run by FareStart, a program that empowers the homeless—and a gift shop are nearby.

Other libraries have great reading rooms, such as New York Public's Humanities and Social Sciences Library at 42nd Street and the Phoenix Public Library's Burton Barr Central Library—but Seattle's Living Room is entirely different. It's not about research, nor does it require visitors to engage in any explicit library-related task. It's about pleasure. One can enjoy a coffee with a friend, flip through a recent issue of *GQ*, review a stack of mystery novels or DVDs, or just stare into space. It comes closer to the ancient Greek *agora*—an open space in a town, a meeting place—than perhaps any other public room in America. Many libraries talk about being at the center of their community, but Seattle went and created a center for its community.

At the back of the Living Room is the Starbucks Teen Center, a reference desk and a bank of computers with a limited book collection. While set apart through color and other design elements, it remains very open to the larger Living Room. A different model than most teen spaces, it's more an entry point to the building than a room unto itself.

Poke around in the back of the fiction collection and—surprise!—there's a fiction/readers' advisory desk. Why these librarians with all their knowledge are hidden away, or even sitting behind a desk at all, is a mystery. This ambiguous relationship with public service (do we want a desk or don't we?) surfaces repeatedly throughout the building.

Room for Socrates

The Living Room is actually on level three. If you enter the building on Fourth Avenue, at the bottom of the slope, you come in on level one, a more understated space seemingly tucked under the edifice of glass. On the left, with plenty of windows looking onto the street, the children's center beckons. It is smart placement, both in ease of access and in guaranteeing that Seattle's children know they have a home in this huge building.

To the right of this entrance sits a circulation desk, striking because of a large conveyor system that moves materials overhead and through the ceiling. The library uses RFID tagging throughout its system to manage materials, and the conveyor moves items to an automated sorting room on the second floor (see "[Feeding the Beast](#)," below). Behind the desk are aisles filled with materials on hold, accessible to patrons, who can borrow them quickly through self-check. A Learning Center shares the floor; it contains the literacy, English as a second language, and world languages collections.

Rising from the center of level one and extending up through level three is the 275-seat Microsoft Auditorium. It is classic Seattle, bold and ingenious, using the natural slope of the terrain. Partially open (you can peer into it from the Living Room above), this prominent space for public discourse—think again ancient Greece but colder—reinforces the idea of the library as the community's center.

A chartreuse escalator (all vertical movement in the building is color-coded chartreuse) takes you from level one up to the Living Room. The second level, closed to the public, houses the loading dock, technical services, and the automated sorting room. New items can enter the library, be cataloged and processed, then sorted and sent to the central library or the branches with efficiency unimaginable in older buildings.

Straight up, with a twist

Tucked above the Living Room sits the Mixing Chamber, or what everyone else calls a reference center. Once Seattle's patrons locate the 19,500 square foot Mixing Chamber, they will certainly not forget it.

The room features computers dedicated to the catalog and subscription databases, a general reference print collection, and a long, minimalist reference desk that seems almost an afterthought. Is it necessary? "Perhaps not," admits Craig Kyte, manager of general reference services, who foresees a day when librarians just work the floor. "But we are grappling with how to identify librarians to the public."

Deeper into the room is an eye-popping field of over 135 public access, Internet-enabled computers. "We talked about what sort of whiz-bang effect we wanted for our technology," Jacobs says. "In the



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end, we decided the most significant thing we could do was supply enough." Reference librarians will get it: finally, a computer for everyone. Midafternoon on a Friday the computers operate at nearly full capacity.

The goal of the Mixing Chamber is ambitious: to deliver multidisciplinary reference help that will satisfy nearly all queries, eliminating the need for patrons to bounce from department to department. It is staffed by a mix of librarians from general reference as well as specialists culled from throughout the building. While there are four specialized service points in the book collection upstairs (Business; Science, Newspapers, Magazines; Art & Music; Genealogy & History), staff in the Mixing Room try to move the question and not the user.

Everyone on a reference desk is equipped with a Vocera® Badge, a sort of hi-tech walkie-talkie. Those working in the Mixing Chamber who need help on a business query can say "call business" and connect with a business librarian for collaboration. If a particular book is needed, a dumbwaiter brings it down to the Mixing Chamber. General reference also receives queries through virtual reference software and the telephone—these can also be bumped along to subject specialists.

Is the model working? Putting aside some initial difficulties with establishing a wireless network for Vocera, "It's become clear that many questions can be resolved in the Mixing Chamber, saving users time and removing much of the confusion," says Kyte.

Spiraling the books

How do you present your nonfiction collection in a logical way, while allowing for unpredictable growth spurts? Seattle's answer is the Book Spiral, another design as bold as it is ingenious. The spiral presents the collection in one continuous Dewey run on series of gently sloping ramps—a parking garage for books.

The spiral is a wonderful management solution. Four levels high, it can house up to 1.4 million books, allows the library to place 75 percent of its nonfiction collection on open shelves, and has tremendous flexibility—the collection can expand and contract as needed. As with much of Koolhaas's design, it seems so simple you wonder why no one ever thought of it before. But to get it right actually took months of testing; the library constructed prototypes to ensure that the design was both ADA-compliant and inviting.

The spiral is far more than an effective book warehouse. It is also a book lover's dream, a Barnes & Noble on steroids, except here old and new live together. The aisles are wide and well lit. There are tables, and on Saturday at noon dozens of people are scattered about the spiral, reading. Book storage—a prosaic activity in most libraries—here becomes an experience, a destination.

While a boon to serendipitous discovery, what's the Book Spiral like when you have 15 minutes to find a book on science experiments with water? Admittedly, the floor mats are labeled with the Dewey numbers (very cool), and the elevator stops are also Dewey-coded. But locating a specific call number within four floors of books, especially when each spiral is elliptical, remains a challenge, no matter how logical—at least in theory—the layout may be. It doesn't help that the building opened with poor signage, especially for the Book Spiral. The library is still revamping its way-finding.

The spiral suffers most when it comes to service. The four service desks, one on each level stacked above each other on the Fourth Avenue side, are a disaster. Understandably, librarians need to be available to help patrons with such an enormous nonfiction collection. Library planners seemingly felt they couldn't truly collapse all reference collections and services into the Mixing Chamber. Business and genealogy in particular have strong and vocal user groups. But these desks, located on the side of each level, are difficult to find. Cementlike, they are astonishingly high; librarians must actually climb up a couple of steps to get behind them. Their look and feel—authoritarian and remote—clash with the spirit of the building.

Ascending the Book Spiral, one reaches the Reading Room—another gift to residents. Like the best of the great reading rooms, this calm, technology-free oasis with dazzling views supports sustained research and contemplation.

The economic edge

As great a building as this is for Seattle's readers and researchers, learners and dreamers, its impact is even bigger. For libraries to be able to stake their claim in today's civic enterprise, it helps if they can flex their economic muscle.

A year after its opening, the library's foundation and Seattle's Office of Economic Development sponsored a study to assess the new building's effect on the local economy. In its first year of operation, the study reports, the library was visited by over 2.3 million individuals, 30 percent from out of town—and more coming. Seattle's library is becoming a destination point for a global community.

The study also says that, in its first year, the building was responsible for \$16 million in new economic activity. Over the next 20 years, the life of the bond issue, the central library is expected to generate \$320 million. The study also finds that the library could help reposition the downtown as a cultural center as well as improve and promote the city's identity.

These are great numbers for Jacobs and staff. But if they are leveraged successfully, they could be even better news for library users, translating into longer hours and more materials. In Seattle, a great library should only become even greater.

Brian Kenney is Executive Editor, Technology & Web, LJ

Feeding the Beast

Make no mistake. Automated materials handling at the Seattle Public Library is no lightweight operation. It's industrial, more so than any previous library procedure.

Tech Logic has been the library's partner in developing the system. Items come in to the central library through book drops and circulation desks and then travel a 250'-long conveyor system to the sorting room on the second level. Material also arrives in bins on trucks from the branches—headed "home," or placed on hold and on its way to another outlet for pickup.

Each item is fed through the sorter where the RFID chip is read by an antenna. Then the RFID system communicates with the library's Dynix catalog to determine where it belongs. As it passes along the conveyor belt, it is routed into one of the branch bins or, for the central library, onto a book truck. Newly processed material is also distributed this way. The system—including three computers, software, bins, tilting machines, conveyors, and more—cost \$5 million.

Reality check

Seattle's librarians were in uncharted territory. No library of its size or volume had attempted automated sorting. "We were willing to pay the price of on-the-job R&D. There was no suitable turnkey system option," says Bob Hageman, the central library's assistant director.

The library first thought that circulation staff could rotate through the sorter room. "But 30 years of working face-to-face, checking out materials doesn't prepare you for this sort of work," says Hageman. Mike Watts, who had previously been with the distribution center at Starbucks corporate offices, was hired as supervisor for the sorter room. "You need someone who will become one with the machine," says Hageman, explaining that the job requires a mix of mechanical and computer skills and the knack to work with both IT and facilities staff.

While the sorter can handle 1400 items an hour, with downtime to change the bins, trucks, and address problems, the average is closer to 1100. This means that the sorter needs to run seven days a week: 24 hours a day for three days, 7 a.m.–11 p.m. two days, and 9 a.m.–6 p.m. weekends. The library hired an additional 3.8 FTE to work the machine.

Seeing the benefits

By handing repetitive, labor-intensive work over to the machines, the staff now is freer to work with the public and the user's experience is improved through services like self-check. According to Hageman, self-check now accounts for over two-thirds of all transactions. Without RFID and the sorter, it would be difficult to handle the ever-growing patron-generated holds and implement the popular self-pickup of holds.

Branches are having a positive impact as well. When material once had to be sorted by hand locally,

Hageman says, "now it all just gets dumped into a Smart Bin, brought to central, and the machine does it." Conversely, when a branch receives a bin full of 130–150 returned items, they can all be checked in with a single click.

Seattle's Fast Facts

IT'S A LIBRARY RENAISSANCE The \$196.4 million bond financed construction of the new library plus 27 new or renovated branches. The Seattle Public Library Foundation raised an additional \$82 million. Total cost for the central library? \$165.5 million, of which \$10 million went toward temporary facilities.

IT'S CHEAP A star architect and 11 stories of spiraling glass may seem expensive. But the library came in at a modest \$273 a square foot.

IT'S BIG The new central is nearly 363,000 square feet, with 49,000 square feet for underground parking. The old building was 206,000 square feet. The library opened with one million items with capacity for 1.4 million—compared with 900,000 in the old central.

IT'S A COLLABORATION Office firm Metropolitan Architecture, the Netherlands, designed the building as a joint venture with LMN architects, Seattle.

IT'S GREEN Water use is efficient, with all irrigation provided by rainwater; interior water use is reduced. The building outperforms Seattle energy code by ten percent. Recycling needs were designed into the building. It qualifies for a silver LEED™ (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating.

IT'S HIGH TECH Boasting more than 400 public computers, the building also has wireless access.

IT'S GOT ART Included are video sculptures by Tony Oursler, a 40 square foot video projection piece on the library's east wall by Gary Hill, and a 7200 square foot floor, with raised lines of text in 11 languages by conceptual artist Ann Hamilton.



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