

ENTERTAINMENT

Tuesday, March 27, 2007 · Last updated 7:17 a.m. PT

On Architecture: How the new Central Library really stacks up

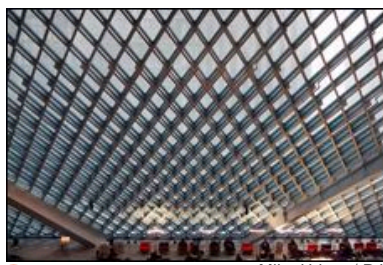
By LAWRENCE CHEEK SPECIAL TO THE P-I

Three years after the Seattle Central Library opened to starbursts of praise, including mine, I am trying to understand why, when I need to spend a working day at a library, I retreat to the Bellevue Regional instead of Seattle's downtown flagship.

And why, after guiding at least a dozen out-of-town guests through it, I'm becoming less enthusiastic about Seattle's crystal palace on each successive visit.

It's time for a reconsideration -- something like what architects call a post-occupancy evaluation, which looks at how a building is working for people in everyday use. This one, however, won't rag on the library's already well-documented functional shortcomings, such as the unwieldy and baffling vertical traffic flow. Instead, we'll venture into a region few architects know how to talk about: how a building feels.

This one feels, in varying places, raw, confusing, impersonal, uncomfortable, oppressive, theatrical and exhilarating. Ponder any spot in this vast building, and two, three or more of those adjectives inevitably swirl together. That's the first indicator of trouble. If this building were fulfilling the showers of acclaim heaped onto it, all we'd be talking about is joy.



The "Living Room," which has the feel of a vast indoor park, is not conducive to intimacy with a book. The huge overhead space, a thrill to library visitors, works against readers, who mostly crave private spaces for curling up with a book.

This library, incredibly, is an uncomfortable place to read. The third-level "Living Room," which has the feel of a vast indoor park, is not conducive to intimacy with a book. It harvests and energizes routine noise; conversations from hundreds of feet away coalesce as ambient babble. The vast overhead space, a thrill to library visitors, works against readers -- most of us instinctively crave small, private spaces when curling up with a book. And "curling up" here is no fun. The foam seats are decidedly unpleasant and are looking shabby -- cracked, torn, stained -- after three years.

The 10th-floor reading room is quieter, more intimate, and yet more stimulating. Punched into the city skyline like a rhomboid treehouse, it connects startlingly with Seattle's urban energy. That may be a positive environment for the digestion of knowledge here in the 21st century. But once the exhilaration subsides, the truth emerges: The room is badly designed and cheesily detailed. The drab plastic study cubicles fail to resonate with the jazzy character of the building envelope. The shin-high steel fences built around the slanting structural I-beams to avert head-bonking look like improvised fixes for a problem nobody anticipated. The "sustainable" flooring, made of lumber-mill scrap, looks scrappy indeed. It's the sort of finish you'd use in the office of a low-budget warehouse, not a basilica of knowledge.

And here's a hardly forgivable functional miscue: If you're spending the

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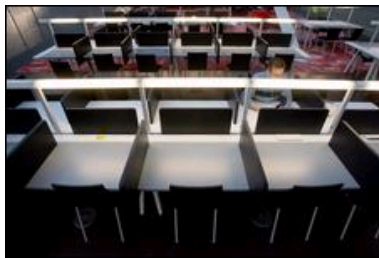
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day studying or reading on the 10th level, the nearest restroom is on the seventh.

One of the library's most touted innovations was the spiral stacks spanning the sixth through ninth levels, a continuously unfolding ribbon of books instead of the traditional separation by floors. "The subjects form a coexistence that approaches the organic," enthused Rem Koolhaas' Office for Metropolitan Architecture in a brochure published for the 2004 opening. The architects' theory is seductive, but in practice the organic ribbon is no easier for the user to negotiate than discrete floors, and in some cases it may be harder. It's relentlessly monotonous and there are few attractive study niches.

The fifth-level "Mixing Chamber," or reference/computer nexus, is a profoundly dreary and depressing environment. The 120-odd computer stations are jammed together in regimental rows that offer little privacy and exude a funereal mood. It would feel bleak even as an insurance-claim processing office.

I'm beginning to suspect that the building's celebrated splotches of weirdness -- the red sea-monster-bowel corridors on the fourth level, the bile-yellow elevators and escalators, the vertiginous canyon overlooks on the upper levels -- exist to draw attention away from the fact that most of its work and pleasure spaces are actually cheaply finished or dysfunctional. And that the building's working viscera are failing at fulfilling the promise of its stunning skin.



Cliff Barnard studies in the 10th-floor reading room, which is badly designed and cheesily detailed, including drab plastic study cubicles.

The Central Library hasn't stumbled in its iconic mission, not at all. It has energized our urban center more than any building in Seattle's history. It has launched both the image and substance of the Seattle Public Library into a new era.

Its provocation has infused us with new thinking about the possibilities of architecture and urbanism, far more than the Space Needle and Experience Music Project ever did. The Needle is beautiful and EMP is bizarre, but the Central Library has both of these qualities plus a visible structural integrity that seems almost spiritual. We feel these qualities at gut level when we walk around the building or wander through as sightseers. It's only when we settle in for a day's real library work that the design failures suddenly intrude.

A building can be great and still have glaring functional flaws -- in fact, great buildings always do. An inspirational space usually works at cross purposes to efficient function, but when it's overwhelmingly good, its art trumps the shortfall of craft. There's something missing from the art in this building, and it's so basic and simple that it can be captured in one word: warmth.

A great 21st-century library building should stretch our imaginations and aspirations beyond the book-centered technology of the past, and this one certainly does. But we depend on buildings to remind us from where we've come as well as where we might go. The Central Library breaks so radically with the character of the traditional public library that nothing remains as an anchor except the books themselves -- and they seem almost like afterthoughts, dust specks adrift in deep space. This library feels communal and theatrical instead of personal and contemplative, focused so outwardly on the world that it has no time for the individual.

And people are feeling the slight. My mostly laudatory appraisal at the one-year mark (June 2005) drew some vigorous rebuttals in private e-mails, which I saved because they thoughtfully expressed the embryonic doubts I was beginning to have.

"The library is a building we are all 'trying' to like," wrote one reader. "What gets in the way? ... large spaces that are unusable ... spare if not barren spaces ... the triumph of an architect's style over respect for the character of Seattle."

Another, more bluntly, accused: "You and other critics have been had. From the tip of this glass squeeze box to the bowels of its red metal stomach, this library is a joke, a monument to the architects' vanity,

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to the critics' collective vanity, to a city's greedy desire to be noticed. And noticed not for achievement, not for actually doing anything, but for looking cool."

To cast it in the passive-voice construction so beloved of recent presidents and cabinet members: A mistake has been made.

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