

Autumn 2005 Winner

Jennifer Chin

Instructor's Foreword

Jennifer Chin's essay on the new Seattle Public Library (2004) designed by Rem Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture emerged out of my course, "Speaking with Things: The Rhetoric of Display." In this class we sought to understand how objects on display, and the environments that contain them, "speak" to us; how they make arguments, and incite desire.

At first, Jennifer was struck by how this new library, in her hometown, was futuristic and radical in its form: shaped like a stack of falling books and clad in glass and steel, it smacks of the new, of a postmodern disregard for the past. But as Jennifer struggled to understand this building, and the library as an institution, she came to realize that it was, in fact, a very traditional library, in its function and aspirations.

I think we can see in this a double moral. First, Jennifer's astute perspective on the Seattle library offers an excellent example of how *not* to be beguiled by new forms into thinking that everything has changed. Second, Jennifer's uncertainty and genuine curiosity about her topic – so successful in propelling her through her research, writing, and multiple revisions – testify to the importance of finding a topic that you are interested in and uncertain of.

Mark Feldman

Reaffirming, Not Redefining: A Look at Rem Koolhaas' New Seattle Central Library

Jennifer Chin

A snippet of honeycomb, a work of Picasso, a Lego creation, an enormous pile of rock candy and a stack of falling books. These are all descriptions architectural critics have bestowed upon the new glass and steel building situated at the very heart of Seattle's downtown, safely nestled between Fourth & Fifth Avenues and Spring & Madison Streets (see figure 1) (Gilmore, Goldberger, Lacayo, Muschamp). Of these, perhaps the last description of a stack of falling books is most fitting – not necessarily because it best expresses the structure of the building, but because the building itself functions as a haven for books, both fallen and upright: it is a library. More specifically, it is the newest Seattle Central Library, renovated at the turn of the century to its current post-modern design and unveiled to the general public in May 2004 (“A Brief History”).

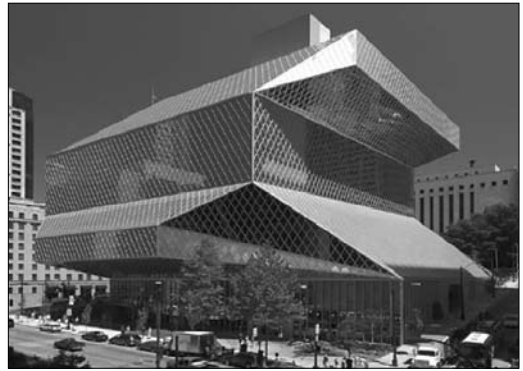


Fig. 1. The Seattle Central Library's exterior. <<http://www.spl.org/images/slideshow/NewCentralSlideshow.asp>>.

Even though the new Seattle Central Library stands at the very same site as its predecessors, including the first central library building raised 98 years earlier, most comparisons stop there, at least on a physical level. While an elegant Beaux-Arts style creation and later a classic “international” style building greeted former patrons (“History of the Central Library”), current visitors find themselves welcomed by an enormous yet irregularly shaped building that seems to defy architectural convention as well as common sense. The central structural



Fig. 2. Looking down on the Living Room. Picture taken by J. Chin

components are stacked, shifted on top of each other to create a zigzag effect; seemingly random angles of steel lattice and glass jut out from the main form to pierce Seattle's more traditional downtown skyline. If patrons can break long enough from their admiration of the outside form, equally stunning features await them inside, starting with the reception area dubbed the “Living Room” that reaches fifty-foot heights and allows views into the meeting floors and reference areas above (see figure 2). Brightly colored chartreuse escalators lined with installations of talking modern art take patrons up to those very meeting and reference areas, where rows of new computers sit ready for use and librarians wait to answer questions of any sort.

Additional escalators and elevators chug quietly upwards to the gently sloping floors that contain the 1.45 million nonfiction volumes found in the “Book Spiral” and, eventually, towards the Reading Room that spans the entire top floor and channels every single ray of Seattle sunshine that streams in through the glass walls and ceiling (“Floor by Floor Highlights”).

By all standards, the Seattle Central Library is not a normal library, or even a normal building. Given credit for this architectural marvel is the famed Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and his Rotterdam-based Office for Metropolitan Architecture, abbreviated “OMA.” Koolhaas and his firm were selected from a smattering of architectural firms in 1999 for the library redesign, and worked side by side with the Seattle Public Library for five years to create the finished product (Goldberger). Many critics believe that Koolhaas’ avant-garde monster of a library was successful in part because it was built in Seattle, the city that gave the world Amazon.com, the Internet’s leading book and media retailer, and whose residents check out more books per capita than any other American city (Ouchi). But even if this library reconfirms Seattle’s love for and dedication to books, there is still the issue of its radical form and appearance.

Caught up in all the glass, steel and exotic chartreuse, many residents and spectators believe that the new building introduces vast amounts of contemporary aesthetics and innovation and consequently hail the Seattle Central Library as a complete redefinition of what a library is. Though this is a popular conception, it is ultimately a misreading of the building. Aesthetics and innovation were not the focus of Koolhaas’ original plan for the library, and while they remain salient aspects of the building, they are not the focus of the finished product either. As with previous libraries, the focus of the Seattle Central Library – its heart, one might say – remains its patrons, its employees, its resources and, most importantly, its books and information. The plethora of knowledge contained within the library’s walls may no longer be the aspect that strikes visitors first, but it still exists in full force, through more books to peruse, more accessible librarians to consult, and now, more computers and digital information of which to take advantage. In this way, and in many others, the Seattle Central Library is still deeply traditional and does not redefine the library as an institution. Instead, Koolhaas and the new library have simply reaffirmed the basic values of a traditional public library, updated them to meet a twenty-first century standard, and cemented the place of the library as an institution in a changing modern era.

To fully understand the implications of these assertions, a certain amount of background knowledge is required. First, it is necessary to examine the library as an institution, particularly the established functions and values that have driven library progress and expansion through the years. With this knowledge, it is then possible to understand how these principles have shaped the specific history of the Seattle Public Library and how the renovation of the library system’s main branch was a logical next step in the city’s attempt to constantly improve the library experience. Finally, one will see that Rem Koolhaas, despite being a relative outsider to the Seattle library scene, was a fitting choice for the new building’s main architect due to his previous library design theories. In combination, this wealth of background information ultimately places the new Seattle Central Library in the appropriate contexts so that the library’s final form, purpose and function can be accurately evaluated, analyzed, and contemplated.

A logical place to commence would be the beginning: the roots of the library as an establishment and as an institution. With a long history dating back to at least the third

century BC under Ptolemy II of Egypt (Brundige), libraries as institutions are defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “place[s] set apart to contain books for reading, study, or reference.” This definition was especially true of the first libraries, which began as mere rooms to house literature, usually in private homes. However, libraries soon grew to fill entire buildings and serve communities rather than individuals. In fact, the scope of libraries has expanded so much in the present day that a classification of library types based on function is now possible. Libraries generally fall into four categories: the national library, the public library, the academic library, and the specialist library – the last of which refers to libraries that are topical in nature, such as poetry libraries and law libraries (Edwards 111). While all are generally dedicated to books and literacy, these four types of libraries serve four very different purposes; for instance, a national library, where copies of every published piece of work are deposited, is primarily concerned with creating a comprehensive collection for historical reference. On the other hand, academic and specialized libraries – although also concerned with reference – are geared more towards research and educational support. This often includes having extensive electronic and technological resources in addition to printed materials (Edwards 20).

And perhaps of the most importance, or at least of the most relevance to the Seattle Central Library, is the function of the public library. Unlike other libraries, the public library can pride itself on being free and open to all (Edwards 132). This is in part because public libraries strive to lure people inside to become “permanent readers and learners” (Burke 283). The readers described here are not necessarily readers of academic material; public libraries also contain pleasure reading sections and have specific areas catered to certain demographic groups: children, the elderly, English language learners. Because of this general campaign for an appreciation of reading and learning, public libraries are usually much more dedicated to the printed book than academic and specialist libraries (Edwards 20). The Social Science Research Council, in a study for the book *The Public Library in the United States*, finds that, on the whole, public libraries have three main objectives: (1) to assemble and organize books and other materials to promote knowledge and citizenship; (2) to provide general information for the community; and (3) to “provide opportunity and encouragement for children, young people, men and women to educate themselves constantly” (Burke 282). In simple terms, these three objectives represent the values to which modern public libraries should hold themselves: a dedication to patrons, to communities, to books, to education and ultimately, to knowledge. These are the values that, through further investigation, the new Seattle Central Library actually upholds.

In fact, these values have played a vital role throughout the history of the Seattle Public Library and, more specifically, the evolution of its central library branch over the years. A city with a long tradition of fascination with books, Seattle has housed a public library of some sort for approximately 140 years of its 155 years of existence. A group of fifty residents gathered in the summer of 1868 to create the city’s first library association and in 1890, the city of Seattle officially formed the Seattle Public Library (“Brief History”). The fact that the beginning of the Seattle library system lay in residents’ own desire for books – and not just for books, but for more of them – is symbolic of the path the Seattle libraries would take. Books and patrons’ needs have driven every step. For example, Seattle’s very first library was just a floor of an office building in the historic Pioneer Square district, but it was quickly deemed unacceptable for its lack of adequate shelving and seating space. With an eventual expansion to an Andrew Carnegie-funded beaux-arts style library in 1906 (see figure 3), the Seattle Public Library was able to finally offer

patrons a larger collection and a sitting area from which to enjoy that collection. This building was, in fact, the first to be handed the honor of being titled the Seattle Central Library and the first building to sit on the downtown city block where a version of the central library still stands today (“History of the Central Library”).

Eventually, however, the library’s collection again grew too big for the Carnegie building’s shelves and patrons outnumbered the amount of seating available. Seattle Public Library responded by unveiling a brand new building with four times as much square-footage in 1960. This new building took dedication to books and patrons to a new level; for example, it featured the first escalator in an American public library to make the process of finding books on multiple levels easier. Beyond that, the new library also featured a drive-through service window through which users could pick up books they had requested from librarians in advance (“Brief History”). The drive-through window served two purposes: it demonstrated the Seattle Public Library’s commitment to making patron’s lives as convenient as possible – the downtown location lacked parking and thus it was a hassle for residents to simply pick up the books they wanted – and consequently, the lengths the library was willing to go to encourage and promote a love of books, literacy and knowledge.



Fig. 3. The 1960 Seattle Central Library.
Source: http://www.spl.org/default.asp?pageID=branch_central_history&branchID=1.

But like its predecessors, the 1960 Central Library would not last. As the turn of the millennium approached, it became evident that a new central library building would be necessary to accommodate a still-growing collection of books, materials and library users. Realizing the need for a library update, Seattle Library officials took it one step further: they proposed to revamp the entire city’s library system. The “Libraries for All” bond measure – the largest American library campaign to date, according to its website – designated \$194.6 million in city funding to remodel existing branches, build new branches and completely redo the Central Library. In 1998, an unprecedented 69% of Seattle voters gave their support to the measure (Dietrich), showing the public’s dedication to improving their library buildings and, by default, their library collections and library experiences. The question for the Seattle Public Library, then, was whom they would trust with the enormous task of redesigning their main symbol, the Central Library, and continuing the tradition of patron service and knowledge dispersal.

Seattle librarians found an unlikely answer in Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, founder of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture. At the time, Koolhaas was known more for his design theories than his completed buildings. Educated for four years at the prestigious Architectural Association School in London, Koolhaas first found success with his writing. His most famous works include *Delirious New York*, a “retroactive manifesto” of Manhattan’s architecture and urbanism, and *S, M, L, XL*, a collection of essays, diaries and meditations on architectural theory. To this day, Koolhaas still considers himself “as much writer as architect” (Lubow). But even now that many of his designs have found their way from paper to steel, glass and concrete, Koolhaas is still known for the scope and heft of his ideas. Even renowned architect Frank Gehry, of Guggenheim Museum Bilbao fame, once praised Koolhaas in a meeting by claiming, “Koolhaas is something.

His ideas. He's beyond what I'm doing" (Buchanan). On another occasion, Gehry even hailed Koolhaas as "one of the great thinkers of our time" (Lubow).

It was Koolhaas' great thoughts that clinched the Seattle Central Library job. Although OMA was not on Seattle's initial list of architecture firms considered for the building redesign, the company eventually surged past the other contenders under the skillful guidance of Koolhaas and his Seattle-based lead project partner Joshua Ramus. The board officially picked OMA as the chief architects of the library project in 1999, citing Koolhaas' "intellectual approach to the library of the future" as the main factor (Buchanan). Despite their initial confidence in choosing Koolhaas, the Seattle Public Library faltered when he submitted his first design concept. They were stunned by Koolhaas' plan to build an eleven-story monster of a building that did not seem to adhere to the laws of either structure or gravity, and frankly, more closely resembled a stack of falling books than an urban public library. The idea, they feared, was simply too radical. But after an oft-mentioned tense moment at a preliminary planning meeting, when board members shooed Koolhaas and his OMA partners outside while they argued the design's merits, the verdict came: "We don't know what it is, but we can see the design accomplishes what we agreed to" (Dietrich). Radical or not, Koolhaas' plan had answers for all of the Seattle Public Library's concerns going into the project and even went above and beyond certain aspects of the library's goals to serve the community and disseminate knowledge. For this, the library board could not fault him.

Like many of the library's visitors nowadays, Seattle Public Library board members initially failed to understand Koolhaas' perception of the library's twenty-first century challenges – and this failure caused members to believe that Koolhaas' design was truly radical. Always a stickler for research, Koolhaas spent three months investigating libraries of the world, their successes as well as their failures. He concluded that even in an age when technology threatened the extinction of the printed word entirely, the public was not ready to give up on either books or libraries. People still considered libraries a prime source for general information and knowledge. The problem for most patrons, however, was the fact that libraries were often "stuffy, confusing, and uninviting" (Goldberger). From a more operational standpoint, libraries also faced the logistical problem of expanding book collections that needed constant rearrangement (Goldberger), as well as an expanding realm of technological sources that needed to be addressed and incorporated (Lacayo). As Koolhaas himself put it, "The library's insistence on one kind of literacy [the literacy of books] has blinded it to other emerging forms that increasingly dominate our culture" (Proposal 4). Koolhaas' challenge, then, was to decide how, in a twenty-first century saturated with multimedia, online knowledge and 100,000 Google hits per search, a library could reconcile the seemingly old-fashioned book and printed page with the technologies of the future.

The solution, in Koolhaas' eyes, lay in the one similarity all these forms shared: the storage of information. Koolhaas claimed that new libraries do not "reinvent or even modernize the traditional institution; they merely package it in a new way" (Proposal 4), and in his plan for the Seattle Central Library, Koolhaas planned to repackage information and knowledge. He hoped to create "an information store, where all media – new and old – are presented under a regime of new equalities" (Proposal 8). The library as an institution would no longer celebrate just the printed book. In addition to books, the library would present information and knowledge through other forms – the most prominent of which would be technology, an addition that Koolhaas claims "enables the realization of ancient

ambitions – totality, completeness, dissemination, accessibility” (Proposal 8). Here, he refers to totality, completeness, dissemination and accessibility in terms of information; with the introduction of technology to the library, patrons would have online databases, journals and websites available to them at the click of a mouse. The amount of information this would introduce to the library collection would be huge, a logical and important step for an institution whose basic function, as declared previously, lay in promoting knowledge and continuing education. Besides, the incorporation of technology into the library as an institution was especially logical in Seattle, the city that originally spawned technology super-giant Microsoft and received a \$3 million in contribution to the library in the company’s name (Gilmore).

Koolhaas’ concept for the Seattle Central Library as an information network is not so surprising when taken in the context of his previous work with library design. Though neither was ever built, Koolhaas designed two library models for design competitions: the Bibliothèque de France in 1989 and the two Bibliothèques Jussieu in 1993 (OMA). Like the new Seattle Central Library, they foregrounded the concept of a library as a network of information, printed and otherwise. Koolhaas’ Bibliothèque de France, for example, was created for a competition whose goal was to create a collection of five different libraries that together would contain “the world’s entire [post-World War II] production of words and images” (*S, M, L, XL* 608). Koolhaas called the Bibliothèque a “utopia of fully integrated information systems” (*S, M, L, XL* 608), a place where books were not excised, but where other types of information were just as celebrated and available. Koolhaas accomplished this by presenting the building as a “solid mass of information” with all five libraries in one building (Koolhaas, *Conversations* 25). Each particular library was designed according to the function it served, and was not dependent upon the structure of any other library. For instance, the reference library was made into a continuous spiral reminiscent of a parking garage, connecting five floors of book stacks, study carrels and study booths. The *cinemathèque* for videos and media, on the other hand, was angular, spanning three floors vertically with auditoriums and viewing booths. The five library sections fit together into a cube, and Koolhaas simply excavated public spaces such as reading rooms from the shape (*S, M, L, XL* 613). Ultimately, this library model confirmed that, at heart, libraries were still staying true to their basic function: to be a center of accessible knowledge and information – only now this information came in the form of books, computers, databases, videos and other resources.

Koolhaas reintroduced this concept of the library as an updated information storehouse with his two Bibliothèques Jussieu for the University Jussieu in Paris, France (OMA). In this project, Koolhaas worked only with two libraries, a science library and a humanities library, but his ultimate goal was the same: to consolidate everything within one building so that information was concentrated instead of dispersed. He accomplished this by envisioning a malleable building surface, folding and twisting parts of the structure into each other and then stacking functional platforms to create useable space. As a result, the floors of the Bibliothèques are not stacked traditionally, yet there is an “interior boulevard” (*S, M, L, XL* 1308) that brings all the library elements together (see figure 4). This boulevard

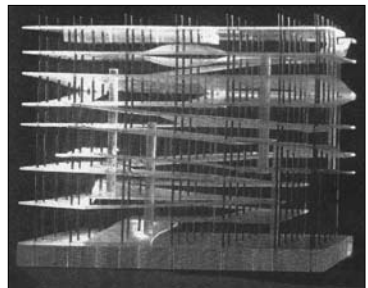


Fig. 4. An inside look at the Bibliothèques Jussieu.

sweeps the visitor into a land of knowledge – knowledge contained in books as well as in electronic sources. Koolhaas himself claims that the library visitor is “seduced by a world of books and information,” as the Bibliothèques Jussieu constitute a “three-dimensional network, not a building” (*S, M, L, XL* 1308). Like Koolhaas’ previous Bibliothèques de France, the network here was a centralized one of information and knowledge, presented in a new and modern way.

In many ways, the Seattle Central Library represented the same type of network. It too was a celebration of information in its many forms, and this allowed Koolhaas to actually take aspects from his un-built French bibliothèques and realize them in the new Seattle library. Take, for instance, the building’s basic structure. Concerned with preserving maximum flexibility by merging functional and public space, as so many modern libraries do, without “strangling [any of] its own attractions” (Proposal 10), Koolhaas adopted the stacking platforms idea from his Bibliothèques Jussieu project (see figure 5). In this new design, each platform would be dedicated to a separate function, and flexibility would occur within each platform without compromising the function of any other program (Proposal 10). Koolhaas also found that this method of division allowed for the different types of media to be connected in a way that supported and played off of each other. For example, nonfiction volumes were given their own “books” platform while technological sources were placed on a different platform labeled “assembly,” a name given for the platform’s primary purpose as a gathering place for groups. Other platforms and functions included “headquarters” for library management, the “store” for fiction, periodicals and other collections, and “operations” for book sorting and parking (Proposal 24). These five platforms are a prime example of the “reaffirmation” and “repackaging” of the Seattle Central Library mentioned previously. By separating areas by function and placing them on different platforms, Koolhaas did not necessarily introduce any new radical programs to the library. Instead, he took what the library already had and repackaged it in a way that was logical and made the most of every function.

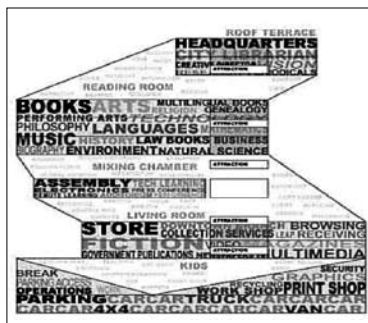


Fig. 5. Koolhaas’ platform design concept.

Continuing in the tradition of the Bibliothèques Jussieu, Koolhaas took these five platforms and stacked them untraditionally on top of each other. Instead of making a rectangular tower, the platforms are thrust in different directions, some forward and some backwards, making an “irregular silhouette” (Lacayo). But perhaps more surprising than this set-up of unaligned platforms is the fact that, for all intents and purposes, Koolhaas simply threw a blanket of glass and diagonally-latticed steel over the whole thing and called it finished building. As *New Yorker* critic Goldberger claims, he essentially built a diagram of “boxes floating in space,” filling in the open gaps between platforms with public spaces such as a reading room and a reference area. This approach created an exterior to the Seattle Central Library that almost defies proper description, though many try. As mentioned in the introduction, the building has been described by critics as everything from “a big rock candy mountain of a building, twinkling in the middle of office buildings” (Lubow) to “a stack of falling books,” or even perhaps “Lego pieces stuck together” (Gilmore). It should be noted, however, that despite the colorful descriptions

that have come as a result, the aesthetic appeal of the Seattle Library's exterior was never Koolhaas' goal. In his world, form follows function; beauty is a byproduct but not an intention of the work (Lubow). What this means for the building's spectators is that their focus should lie on what is contained *within* the walls of glass and steel: the books, the technologies, the knowledge, as that is where the focus of the building itself lies.

What awaits inside the Seattle Central Library is as stunning as the outside: eleven stories and 363,000 square feet of space containing, among other features, a cathedral-like "Living Room" atrium, a reading room that overlooks downtown, a four-floor span of non-fiction nicknamed the "Book Spiral," and a "Mixing Chamber" of 150 new computers (Gilmore). Many of these features are certainly creative – after all, who besides Koolhaas ever conceived of a parking lot-style book stack? – but the price of this novelty is that many spectators are misled into believing that the Seattle Library has completely redefined the library as an institution. After all, it is form that strikes before function. In his initial proposal, however, Koolhaas submitted that redefinition was never his intention and a closer look at salient features in the library supports this reading on a physical level, as opposed to the more conceptual levels discussed earlier.

Take, for instance, Koolhaas' "Mixing Chamber." This area, found atop the "assembly" platform on the fifth story ("Floor by Floor Highlights"), is a prime example of how the Seattle Library does not redefine the traditional library, but instead takes its basic values and expands upon them. At first glance, the Mixing Chamber seems to be a spacious yet mildly intimidating room filled with 150 new computers and a swarm of librarians, each of whom is connected to his or her peers by sight as well as intercom. Even the floor is revolutionary, an odd aluminum surface that is meant to be scratched over time for a "patina" look (Dietrich). But at its heart, the Mixing Chamber is nothing more than an expanded reference desk for information of all sorts, something that Koolhaas himself acknowledges. To him it's all in the vocabulary: "If you mention in one sentence 'reference desk' and 'mixing chamber,' the one sounds uninspiring, and the other one sounds as if something is about to happen" (Buchanan).

What this Mixing Chamber does well, besides generating anticipation by its name alone, is two-fold. On one level, Koolhaas has injected life – human life – into a library feature that is generally thought to be mundane by turning it into a "trading floor for information" ("Floor by Floor Highlights"). Most non-fiction reference librarians can be found on the Mixing Chamber floor, meaning that patrons can go to one location for their general, in-depth and interdisciplinary questions. Librarians have access to extensive collections of resources, online as well as printed, and can therefore easily work one-on-one with patrons to answer their questions. Librarians are also encouraged to support patrons in teams, hence the intercom system, which also connects Mixing Chamber librarians to further experts stationed in the non-fiction stacks (Dietrich; "Floor by Floor Highlights"). This new service program places patron satisfaction as a top priority, once again confirming a basic value of a library: commitment to its public.

In addition to introducing a human aspect to the reference section, the Mixing Chamber also introduces technology to the forefront of the new Seattle library, a goal of Koolhaas' from the very beginning. The 148 computers located in the room represent the biggest concentration of technology in the building ("Floor by Floor Highlights"); in total, the library has 320 computers, 300 more than the previous central library (Dietrich). The computers also show how the worlds of information and knowledge have expanded to include technology. Patrons can use these computers to search the



Fig. 6. Patrons enjoying the Mixing Chamber.

Internet and the library's many online databases for information (see figure 6). In this way, the Mixing Chamber connects technology to books by presenting both as legitimate and reliable sources of knowledge. On a more literal level, technology in the Mixing Chamber and books from the stacks are physically connected by a dumbwaiter; reference librarians can page books in the stacks, which can be sent down to the main desk. Theoretically, this can cut the time it takes to search for a book in half (Dietrich).

And what of those book stacks, exactly? The Seattle book stacks are like no other book stacks the public had ever seen, save for those who followed Koolhaas' work on the Bibliothèque de France. Koolhaas ultimately borrowed from his previous design to create Seattle's innovative "Book Spiral," the parking lot-style book stack mentioned earlier. Arguably the most distinctive feature of the new Seattle Library, based on critics' responses alone, the Book Spiral actually covers four continuous floors and holds over a million books ("Floor by Floor Highlights"). In reality, the "spiral" aspect of the Book Spiral is not as dramatic as the name would have it seem; it is actually more a "continuous, gentle spiral of shelves, a kind of interior avenue for the library stroller" (Lacayo). Other critics compare it to a parking lot, with its square ramp and switchback style (Lubow). Various levels of the Book Spiral are accessible by chartreuse-colored escalators and stairways – all vertical movement in the library is tracked by the color chartreuse, including the cabs of elevators – that cut through the middle of the ramps (Goldberger).

The Book Spiral too has a two-fold function, both of which seem to contradict the commonly-held belief that the Seattle Central Library is entirely radical, that it redefines the library as an institution. First, the Spiral is undeniably dedicated to books. With its four-story span and 10,000 total shelves, the Book Spiral can hold 1.45 million volumes at capacity – half a million more books than its predecessor. This figure represents 75% of Seattle's entire collection, whereas the old building only displayed 35% of its non-fiction (Dietrich, Gilmore). This expanded number of books available to patrons supports Koolhaas' and OMA's initial research findings mentioned previously. Books are not becoming irrelevant; if anything, they are more important in a growing world of information, which is why the building contains so many. Like any traditional library, the new Central Library has reaffirmed the necessity and value of books and the printed word.

What the Seattle Library does, however, is repackage the way these valuable books are presented. In his research, Koolhaas found a "kind of sadness" about the way traditional libraries structured their collections: "[The library] is simply divided into floors and each floor is more or less a random grouping of subjects" (Buchanan). This meant that patrons had to go to several floors looking for a topic, and also presented the problem of librarians having to re-shelve and move books from floor to floor every time the collection grew ("Floor by Floor Highlights"). Koolhaas combated this problem by creating a "single, continuous experience" that made "individual floors almost mute" (Buchanan). The solution also made logical sense: the Dewey Decimal system, by which the library classifies its materials, was a continuous series of numbers. Why not a continuous length of shelves to mirror this? The final product even makes

this connection obvious by including floor mats with the Dewey Decimal codes at appropriate levels (see figure 7). The entire Dewey Decimal collection is available at once, meaning that “people [are able] to move freely among topics, to have those serendipitous encounters Koolhaas loves” (Lacayo). This encourages education and knowledge in a way that no other public library’s traditional book stacks can.



Fig. 7. Dewey Decimals in the Book Spiral.

From this perspective, perhaps the Seattle Central Library is not as radical and extreme as its fancy glass and steel exterior would lead the public to believe. It may not be, as Koolhaas continues to boldly claim, “really a traditional building” (Buchanan), but at its heart, the Seattle Central Library is a traditional library: it is a storehouse for information and knowledge of all sorts, dedicated to serving the local community, its public. The building may now take a drastically different form than its predecessors, both in Seattle and worldwide, but Koolhaas has done nothing to dramatically change the basic function of the library. The changes he has implemented are undeniably significant, perhaps even revolutionary, but his intentions are simple: to make the library a more logical, accessible and relevant experience in the twenty-first century, and to update the library to include the vast amount of resources currently available. Instead of being confined to knowledge printed in books, patrons can now turn to technology and even to librarians, who have networked themselves in a way so that every area of expertise is available by speaking to just one person. What Koolhaas has done with the Seattle Central Library, essentially, is expand the resources available for education and make them even more accessible, even more prominent within the Seattle community. He has updated and repackaged the library, but he has not redefined its purpose or function. With the Seattle Central Library, Koolhaas has boldly reaffirmed the principles of the public library building and cemented its place in the new millennium.

On a broader level, Koolhaas has also presented a strong argument for the future of the public library as an institution. In a time when some see “libraries as institutions awaiting extinction in the glow of [technology’s] electrons and photons” (Haas 131), he has created a massive library that will undoubtedly be standing for many years to come. In this way Koolhaas has asserted that the library’s end is no where near, that books are still as valuable as they were before, that libraries can indeed cooperate with emerging technologies. He and his building argue that even in a world that is increasingly digital, the library – an institution dedicated first and foremost to the printed word – still has a prominent place in society. And while Koolhaas may be more architect than library aficionado, perhaps he is on to something. As library expert Brian Edwards claims, the library is a “symbolic domain” that demonstrates the value of learning and of the written word, printed or digital – objectives that only grow with time: “More reading, learning and research are undertaken today than in any previous age” (Edwards 207). Library historian Warren Haas agrees, claiming: “The content of libraries is the foundation for all scholarship. They consolidate and give order to the human experience” (Haas 132), and certainly the human experience never becomes obsolete. In this way, perhaps the library as an institution is destined to endure and the Seattle Central Library is only one example of how a library can change and expand to accommodate a new era. Beyond that, perhaps

the library also serves as an example for how pressing historical circumstances often dictate radical changes to institutions and organizations, but how it is still possible – how it is still necessary – to look beyond the aesthetics and innovation and recognize that the heart, the soul and the spirit of these very institutions and organizations will forever remain the same.

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