

Student:

Adam Davis

Mentor:

Margaret Fletcher

Buildings:

1. Ballard Branch Library
Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, Seattle, WA, 2005.
2. East Boston Branch Library
William Rawn Associates, Boston, MA, 2013.
3. William O. Lockridge Bellevue Neighborhood Library
Adjaye Associates, Washington, DC, 2013.
4. Hillary Rodham Clinton Children's Library
Polk Stanley Wilcox, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

Institution:

Auburn University

School of Architecture, Planning, and Landscape Architecture

Author Biography



Adam Davis is a fifth-year thesis student at the Auburn University School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture. As a student from Spanish Fort, Alabama, Adam visited Auburn University and was immediately drawn to the collaborative, hands-on environment of the design studio. This culture of critique and iterative design through drawing and building led Adam to pursue his architectural education in the fall of 2017. During his time at Auburn, Adam has been involved in the school's chapter of the American Institute of Architecture Students, serving as both treasurer and internal vice president. In these roles, he has worked to promote student engagement and events outside of the design studio. Apart from his studies, Adam has an appreciation of film, biking, and gardening.

As of fall 2021, Adam is working in a team of four to complete a design-build thesis project at Auburn University's Rural Studio in

Hale County, Alabama. Design-build allows for the close design of the project, from the details to the build process, working jointly with a team in all phases. In this work, teams seek a meaningful understanding of place and of appropriate, effective design for the client.

In rural Alabama and elsewhere, Adam practices drawing and photographing the world around him, from the mundane to the significant. The Aydelott Travel Award has been a tremendous resource, allowing him to refine these skills and gain a greater understanding of the ways that people and communities interact with the built environment.

Beyond Books

Uncovering the Role of the Contemporary Neighborhood Library



Fig. 1. William Rawn Associates, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

The public library of the twenty-first century is yet undefined. Over the past twenty years, the internet has provided a limitless wealth of information to anyone with access to it. But rather than rendering the library obsolete, the Information Age has revealed its new potential and present vitality in communities. As an American building typology, the library uniquely represents a free, accessible, and almost universally accepted public interior space. This openness has maintained the life and use of the library even as physical books have lost some of their relevance. From small town to major city, the public library now hosts gathering and social activity, in addition to the usual reading and research.

It is, however, at the scale of the neighborhood, that the public library intersects with the distinct needs of community. The shared resource needs of neighborhoods across the United States vary as widely as the neighborhoods themselves, and books no longer stand on their own as the given purpose of any library. Today, it is the architect's duty to uncover and provide for the specific shared needs of the library's served community. Thorough documentation and analysis of four contemporary neighborhood libraries across the United States can illustrate four distinct architectural responses to diverse and challenging contexts.



Fig. 2. Adjaye Associates, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

Subjects

The investigation begins in Seattle with the Ballard Branch Library. Completed in 2005, it is an early iteration of a public library providing community-specific shared resources and public spaces as a response to the declining need for books alone. From there, the East Boston Branch Library in Boston, the Lockridge Bellevue Neighborhood Library in Washington, and the Clinton Children's Library in Little Rock, all completed in 2013, provide critique in a variety of answers to the contemporary neighborhood library.

Points of Investigation

To sum up the questions at the heart of this investigation: what are the shared needs of the community, and are they being met architecturally? In each location, I first spent time walking through the surrounding neighborhood and spent the next several days visiting the library as a regular patron. The nature of the library program itself allowed me to socialize, analyze, sketch, and meticulously photograph both the neighborhood and the library, inside and out, while maintaining a (nearly) authentic visitor experience.



Fig. 3. Polk Stanley Wilcox, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

Broader Context

This close study is crucial to understanding how the library works, but each location also presents opportunities for secondary research. Architect interviews provide site background information, descriptions of details, and the firm's attitude toward the library's place and purpose. At a broader scale, each city's built environment tells the story of the neighborhood's regional context. Downtowns, landmarks, other neighborhoods, and other libraries describe the building's social and architectural relationships. Telling the story of the neighborhood is the first step to understanding the distinct

shared resource needs of any community, and this background information outlines the context to which the library design is responding.

Each structure must bridge the context of the neighborhood to the provided functions and spaces of the library. The next point of comparison between different library design strategies is the way in which the building's form and exterior moves relate to the surrounding environment. As a public institution and a symbol of shared knowledge and resources, the library must address the public in a way that conveys collective importance and free access. Does the library appear and function as a distinctive landmark? Does it operate within the known fabric of the local area?

The exterior positioning of each library reflects the functions and values of the interior. Each of the four designs is read as a statement about what makes a contemporary library appropriate and beneficial to its place. The buildings' structure, organization, space types, attitude toward privacy, and more, are compared with attention to direct observation and personal experience inside the library. How does the library function? What kinds of activities are encouraged by its interior spaces, and how does the public use them?



Fig. 4. William Rawn Associates, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

Method and Purpose

At each location, these questions are addressed by experiencing and documenting both the neighborhood and the library in sketch, diagram, observation, conversation, and analytical photography. By investigating four contemporary library designs at the neighborhood scale, this paper provides an analysis of distinct approaches to addressing the program of the contemporary American library across a diverse range of communities. In the design of a contemporary library, architects must uncover and analyze the shared spatial and resource needs of the local public, further than books and information. Through analysis and critique, we can understand what the library means to neighborhoods today, and what it can be in the future.

Ballard Branch Library

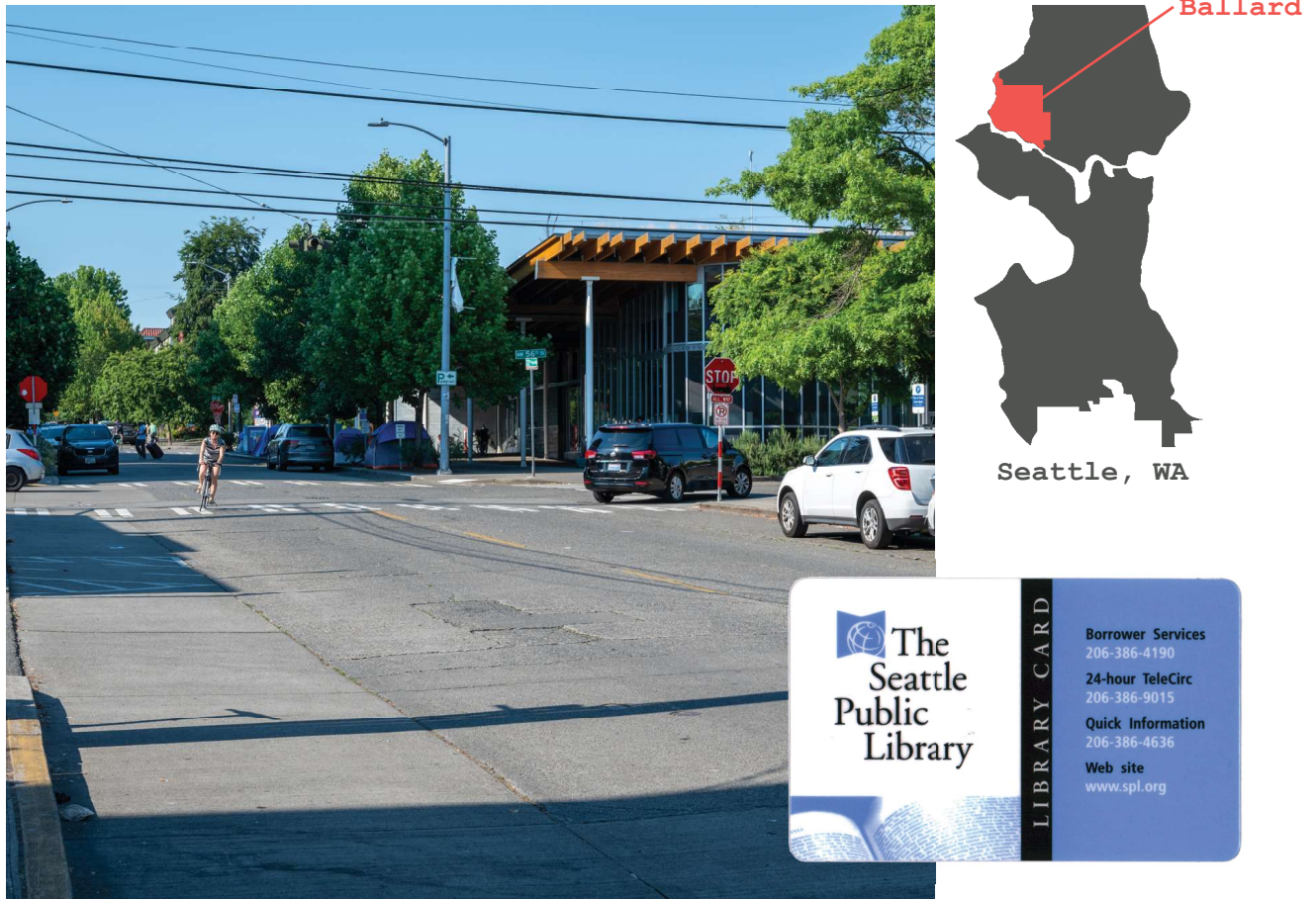


Fig. 1. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, view north from 22nd Avenue, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.

In the early 2000s, as access to information was undergoing a sweeping shift towards the online and the digital, Ballard, in northern Seattle, was also beginning a dramatic change. Skyrocketing housing prices in the city began a large influx of development, along with new, younger residents as the neighborhood urbanized toward the north. The Ballard Branch Library, completed in 2005, confronts this complex and dynamic social landscape to provide a library with spaces that unify and support the neighborhood. However, the building's ability to accommodate local residents has been challenged by conflicting group needs over time.

Neighborhood Context

Ballard began as an industrial port suburb north of Seattle, across Salmon Bay. The area's lumber industry attracted a large number of immigrants, particularly from Scandinavia. By the early 1900s, Ballard was annexed by Seattle and gained a shipping industry with the completion of the Lake Washington Canal and Ballard Locks. Today, it is a large neighborhood with its own identity and institutions within the larger city.¹ Downtown Ballard, the older heart of the neighborhood, is filled with restaurants and shops on narrower streets by the bay. Moving north, the neighborhood fabric spreads out and becomes more residential.

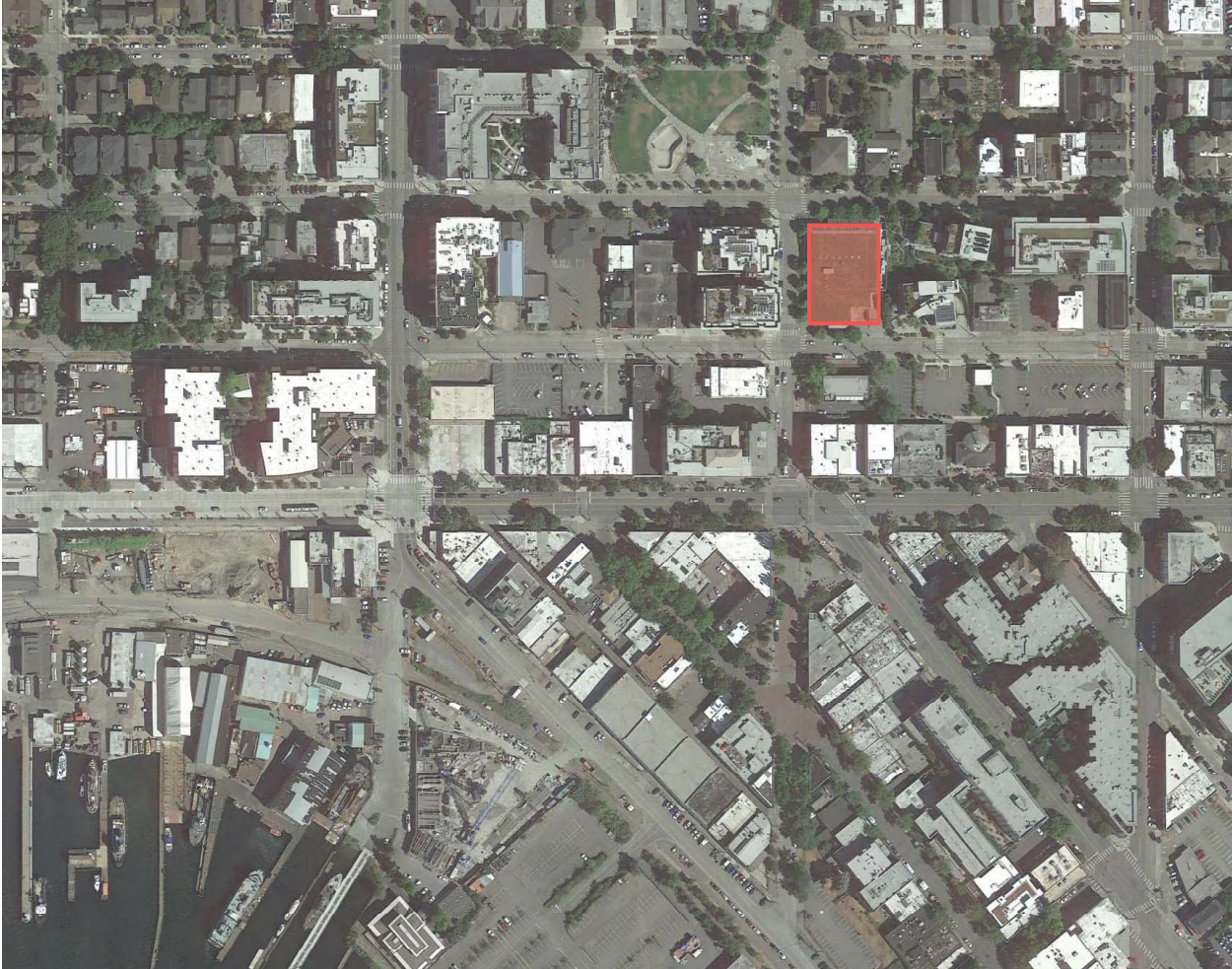


Fig. 2. Ballard site plan, Seattle, WA.





Fig. 3. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, looking east on 56th Street, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.



Fig. 4. Glue-lam structure.

The Ballard Branch Library is sited just north of downtown, where newer and taller construction is developing in place of parking lots and strip malls. In the expanse of anonymous, mis-rise apartments and businesses, the Ballard Branch Library is uniquely true to its place. The library's repeating system of pointed glue-laminated timber beams (Fig. 4) angle upward to the north and south, catching the warm morning light and celebrating Ballard's still-thriving lumber industry. A lively planted environment of native grasses and birds is intermittently visible on top of the roof (Fig. 6) as the glulam structure curves downward toward the library entry. On the western edge of the building, the prominent and recognizable landmark of the engineered lumber structure overhangs, becoming a deep covered entry. White steel columns extend the library's heavy roof, engaging the building with the activity of the street and sidewalk.



Fig. 5. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, green roof and local housing, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.



Fig. 6. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, green roof, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.

Social Context

Ballard Commons Park, across the intersection from the library, was completed one year before the Ballard Branch Library. The park's open space creates a prominent and public corner at 22nd Avenue and 57th Street, bounded by the landmark roof form of the library. During my visit in June 2021, Ballard Commons Park was, and had been for many months, functioning as an impromptu tent community. Amid the rapid growth and economic boom in the neighborhood, there is a very high number of Ballard residents left with nowhere to go. At the same time, many more marginalized residents of Seattle move to Ballard for its safety and available resources. Homelessness has long been a significant concern in the city, including during the design of the Ballard Branch Library, but the amount of people sleeping on the streets of Ballard has more than quadrupled in recent years.² The causes of the homelessness crisis are complex and multiple, but the issue has only worsened as Ballard continues to develop and grow.



Fig. 7. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, 22nd Avenue sidewalk, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.

On the corner opposite Ballard Commons Park, the neighborhood of tents continues along the northern and western façades of the library. One man, sharing a small furniture arrangement with two friends, spoke highly of the library while sweeping the sidewalk. He had been living in a tent on the northern face of the Ballard Branch Library for over a week, having left his home in San Francisco due to the unmanageable cost of public housing in his neighborhood. "It's nice so far. I charge my phone inside. I make friends fast, but there's people around that cause me trouble," referring to the safe atmosphere of the library in comparison to that of Ballard Commons Park.³ During the past year, the park has been the subject of local headlines and neighborhood concern due to several fires, incidents of overdose, and an ongoing city effort to move tent residents into sheltered housing.⁴ During this time, the Ballard Branch Library has, like no other building in Ballard, maintained a presence as a safe, public space and a free resource for anyone. Functionally, the neighborhood library's use goes beyond its stated program as a repository for shared knowledge. It is a public forum where community members from varying backgrounds meet to access different resources and share secure, conditioned space.



Fig. 8. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, park-facing corner, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.



Fig. 9. Entry porch.

Community Needs and Library Function

Whereas the community in the park was operating in a very insular way, those camped just outside the library shared space with pedestrians and library-goers. Along 22nd Avenue, the iconic glulam roof of the Ballard Branch forms a low and deep porch space over the sidewalk at the library's entry. Here, pedestrians walk past the line of tents to reach the library entrance, with few people stopping for more than a brief moment under the overhang of the porch. According to one of the library's project architects at Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, the confluence of residents with diverse backgrounds and resource needs was a design priority from the beginning. After the first five years of operation, however, the Seattle Public Library system had removed chairs, installed additional security lighting, and installed rails to prohibit impromptu seating (Fig. 11).⁵ Over time, these changes, along with the effects of the local housing crisis, have reduced the library's porch to little more than circulation. The library's connection to the street and its use as a public forum have thus been limited. In this case, the specific needs of the neighborhood were uncovered and fore fronted in the design, but they conflicted with the operational needs perceived by the city library system.



Fig. 10. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, western entry, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.



Added lighting with bird spikes



Removed conversational seating



Railed-off impromptu seating

Added window screen

Defensive vents along sidewalk



Railed-off impromptu seating

Fig. 11. Defensive architecture, added by the library after 2005.

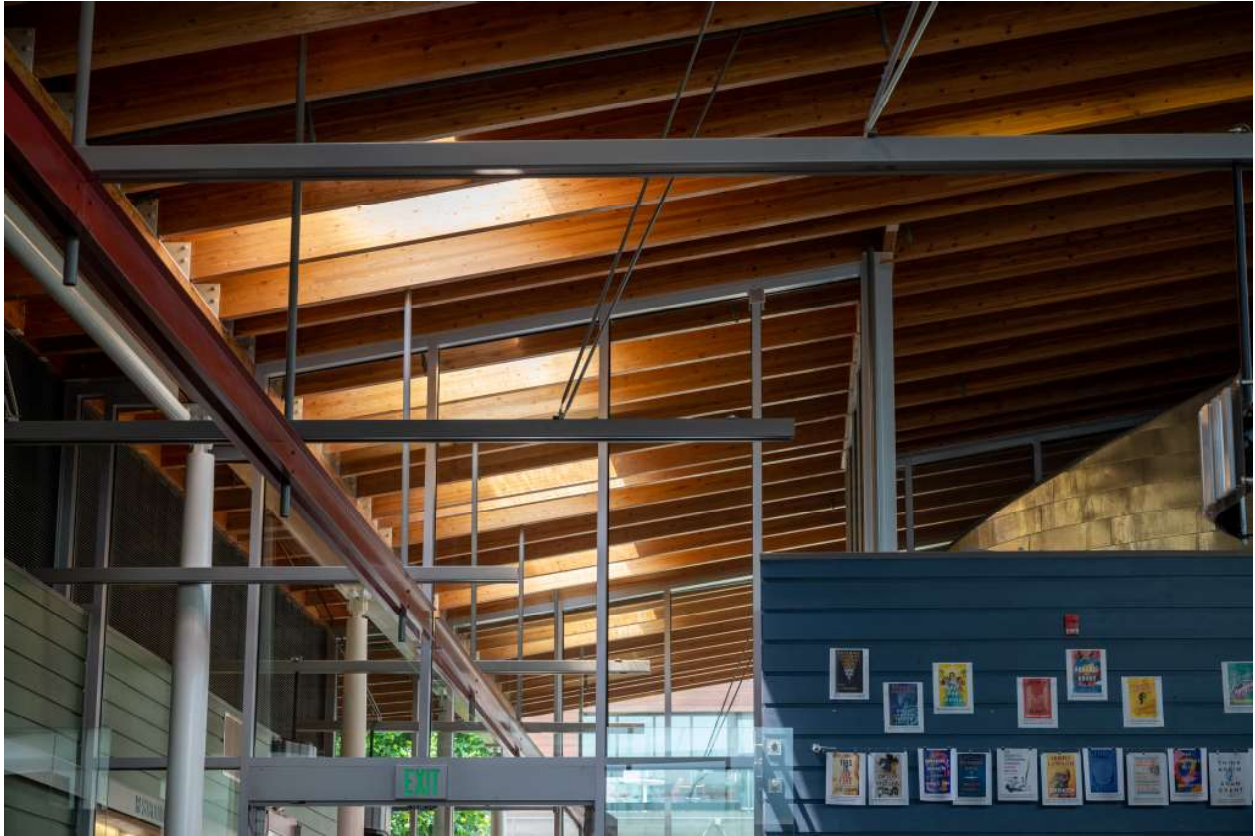


Fig. 12. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, skylights over entry, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.

Beyond the building entry, the Ballard Branch Library continues its effort to be a library for all neighborhood residents under one roof. The majority of the library is a single, uninterrupted space. This space opens up after passing through a threshold of the library's enclosed spaces, a collection of restrooms and staff rooms. A series of circular skylights align within the lumber structure overhead, guiding visitors through the compressed entry and directly to the reference desk at the front of the open interior (Fig. 12). The final skylight, directly above the reference desk, was covered with a sheet of cardboard during my visit (Fig. 13). According to the librarian on staff, "It makes us feel like ants under a microscope during the summer."⁶

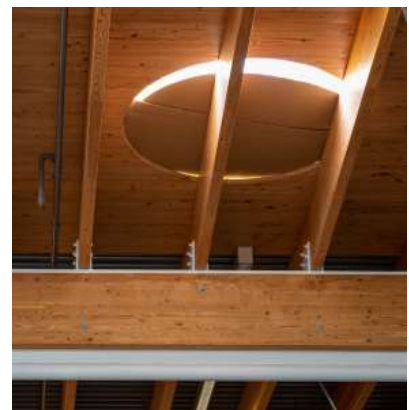


Fig. 13. Covered skylight.

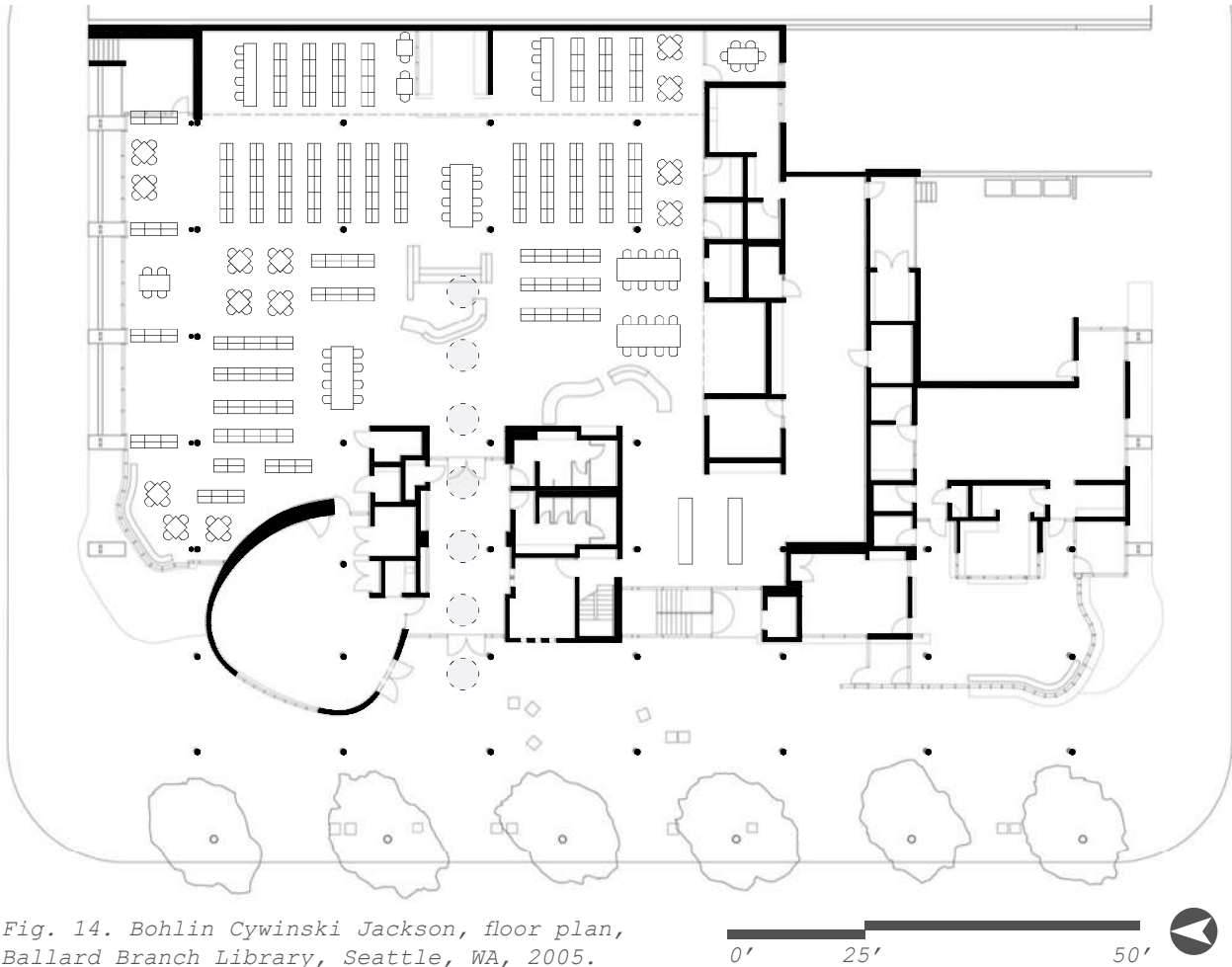


Fig. 14. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, floor plan, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.

Interior Strategies

Aside from this harsh moment of direct light, the Ballard Branch is structured to receive even and indirect light, particularly along its eastern and northern faces. The library's enormous glulam roof covers the whole footprint of the building, but its high upward curve toward the north creates a tall clerestory condition. As a result, the center of the floor is as bright as any other area in the building, with soft light more than adequate for reading, studying, and browsing.

Soft, even lighting across the entire floor of the Ballard Library is made possible due to the building's structure. There are no bearing walls or large columns to interrupt the continuous space or cast areas in shadow. The massive timber roof that unifies and enlivens the

library is supported instead by a comparatively light system of steel columns. White columns express pin connections and narrow slightly at the top and bottom to further exaggerate their lightness under the heavy load of the roof. Only four rows of the columns stretch across the nearly 120-foot-wide expanse of the library's open space. Around the front reference desk, these spans are even greater as three columns within the grid are omitted with the use of an expressed fitch plate, adding tension to the bottom of three heavy glulam beams.⁷ In its minimalism, the structural system holding up the Ballard Branch clearly indicates openness as an important value in both the library design and its identity.



Fig. 15. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, soft daylighting, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.

Looking past the modern material palette that composes the Ballard Branch Library, the building's tall, uninterrupted space and indirect lighting follow a recognizable and long-held tradition in

library architecture. The reading rooms of La Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the Boston Public Library (Fig. 16) famously employed this strategy in the 1800s. The simple, established library diagram is summed up by Louis Kahn, "A man with a book goes into the light. A library begins that way."⁸ Within this diagram, however, the comparatively small Ballard Branch Library provides more than the traditional book stacks and reading desks. It houses a calm and cohesive space that brings together the variety of activities and resources needed by the Ballard community. Circulation remains fluid and visually open as the floor is divided into different areas by furniture and the changing ceiling plane. The primary stacks area is composed of high, parallel bookshelves under the building's translucent eastern clerestory. The high shelves, in turn, shelter and shade the library's semi-enclosed quiet room. The stacks transition into distinct areas for research, reference, meeting, and for different age groups. The openness and transparency of the interior even translates to the library's service areas. The large staff space for sorting and reshelving books is open and embedded with a lower ceiling plane on the south wall.

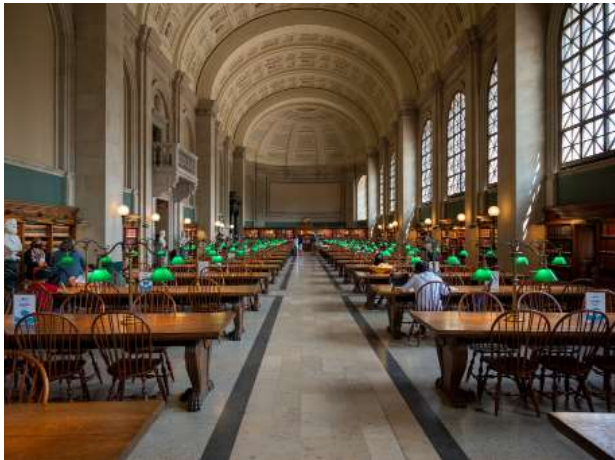


Fig. 16. McKim Mead and White, reading room, Boston Public Library, Boston, MA, 1895.



Fig. 17. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, open interior, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.

Throughout the floor, hanging mechanical systems lower the scale of the space. At the highest angle of the glulam roof overhead, an additional roof form drops down along the library's northern side (Fig. 18). Here, the structural system and arrangement of shelves divide the space, creating unique and semi-private areas for reading and studying within each of the age groups' sections. Notably, this area rarely had an empty seat during my visit. It felt separated from the circulation of the floor while remaining visible and not isolated. It was significantly more popular than the enclosed quiet room for people coming to sit, read, or work for an extended period of time.



Fig. 18. reading spaces.



Fig. 19. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, window to street, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.

The attention to transparency, however, seems to only apply to the interior of the library. The northern wall along 57th Street is the only sitting space with windows to the activity outside. Seating is sunken in the ground next to the sidewalk, but a translucent screen has been applied to part of the window (Fig. 19), just enough to prevent library visitors from seeing anyone outside. It makes sense that readers would not want pedestrians looking down on them from the sidewalk, but the two groups are already so close in this part of the library. The screen

was added years after construction and now simply renders shadows of the people and the tents just outside.⁹ Together with the elimination of the outdoor seating, the Ballard Branch Library has lost all direct interaction between inside and out at street level. This represents a conflict between the library's identity as a unifying and public space for all and its active operation as a conventional library.

Patterns of Use

Inside the Ballard Branch Library, this architectural conflict between the needs of readers and the needs of unhoused neighborhood residents is not as readily apparent. People who sleep outside the library come inside to use the restrooms, get water, use the internet, and charge cell phones, as well as simply to socialize or sit in comfort. Here, the needs of this marginalized community overlap with the needs of other Ballard residents, but the library is more of an assistance and far from a solution to the complex issues that accompany homelessness.

The week of my visit happened to include Seattle's hottest recorded day in history. The temperature reached 108 degrees in a city where many people don't have air conditioning. The weather was potentially life-threatening on several afternoons, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation, making it more difficult to find accessible, air-conditioned space. This dire and unusual circumstance only highlights the value that libraries bring to neighborhoods as free and public interior spaces. At the same time, it underlines the inadequacy of existing public responses to homelessness that would be more appropriate and effective, such as shelters, healthcare, and housing.

Conclusion

When the Ballard Branch Library was conceived, both the role of the library and the future of the neighborhood context were uncertain. Its efforts, however, represent a commitment to the neighborhood library as a symbolic and versatile institution with the power to bridge the gaps of uncertainty. As a starting point, the library is a free and public place by nature. The simple move of a sweeping timber roof creates an open floor that is a social but focused interior environment. This controlled and transparent environment is an adequate background for a spectrum of public activity, from meeting to reading and using the internet.

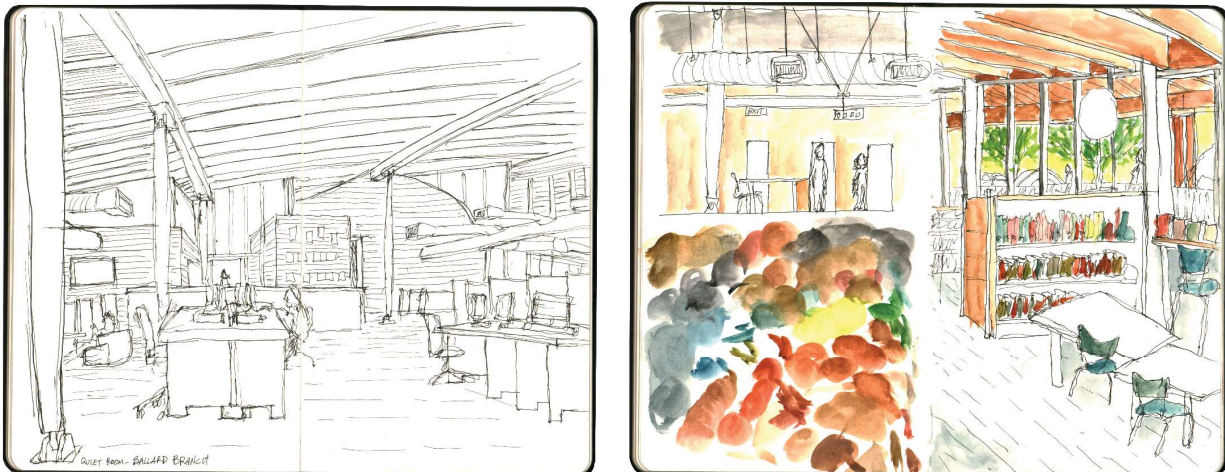


Fig. 20. On-site sketches, Seattle, WA, 2021.



Fig. 21. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.

The Ballard Branch Library's volume of visitors and diversity of activity demonstrate the value of the resources the library brings to its community, but it also raises the question of which community is being served. People increasingly come to the library seeking safety, comfort, and basic resources. As a public library, it is one of the few places that can provide many of these to anyone as a shared resource. However, changes to the library over time have diminished its openness to the public life outside, indicating a perceived conflict between the needs of local marginalized residents and the needs of the larger neighborhood. This conflict represents a limit to the effective role of the contemporary neighborhood library. It can and should be a public interior, open to all, but when basic necessities like shelter are failing to be provided elsewhere in the community, the neighborhood library, in its unique position, will tend to fill that gap, resulting in conflicts of use in the library.



Fig. 22. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.

Notes

1. Walt Crowley, "Seattle Neighborhoods: Ballard – Thumbnail History," last modified March 4, 2003, <https://historylink.org/File/983>.
2. Scott Greenstone, "Ballard's Homelessness Quadrupled Last Year, and Anger is Spilling Over," last modified March 13, 2019, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/ballards-homelessness-quadrupled-last-year-and-anger-is-spilling-over/>.
3. Discussion with a 57th Street tent resident, Seattle, July 1, 2021.
4. Deedee Sun, "Pioneer Square encampment cleared; Ballard, other neighborhoods waiting," last modified November 10, 2021, <https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/pioneer-square-encampment-cleared-ballard-other-neighborhoods-waiting/VCBPTXEQBNHV5PRVQ3TDGRB4LY/>.
5. Robert Miller, interview by author, Seattle, June 30, 2021.
6. Discussion with a Ballard Branch librarian, Seattle, June 29, 2021.
7. Robert Miller, interview by author, Seattle, June 30, 2021.
8. Paul Richard, "Louis Kahn, Builder of Dreams," last modified October 19, 1991, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1991/10/19/louis-kahn-builder-of-dreams/7bebf51b-662d-49c3-a484-957c33b0c5fc/>.
9. Robert Miller, interview by author, Seattle, June 30, 2021.
10. All photos and sketches by author, Seattle, 2021.

East Boston Branch Library

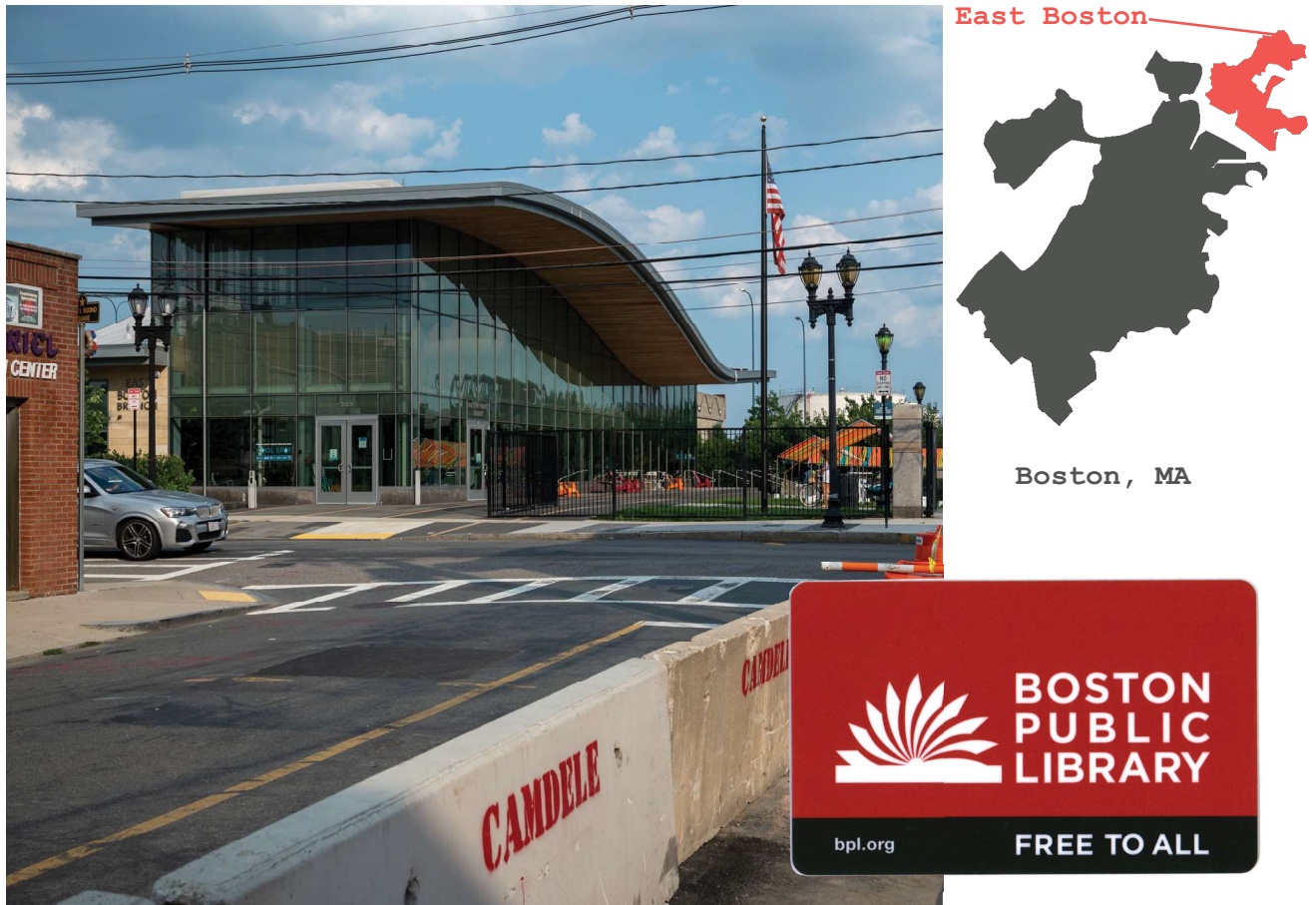


Fig. 1. William Rawn Associates, view from the neighborhood, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

The Boston Public Library opened its first branch library in the neighborhood of East Boston in 1870 in an effort to extend the reach of its resources to more city residents.¹ Today, branch libraries are common local institutions that both support and represent the well-being of neighborhoods. Rather than mere access points to the larger city's stores of information, the neighborhood library should be a public destination for education and social connection that unites different ages and groups in a community.

Neighborhood Context

East Boston is a large, urban neighborhood, separated from downtown by Boston Harbor. For over a hundred years, East Boston has been known as a vibrant immigrant community. The neighborhood welcomed several large waves of European immigration, and today, the community is home to a highly diverse population, largely from Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East.²

With the harbor separating the neighborhood from the rest of the Boston, East Boston has its own distinct identity and a unique urban fabric. The majority of residences are narrow, two-to-three story homes, clad in wood or synthetic cladding. They are often subdivided and maintain a minimal gap between one another. The homes are similar in shape and typology to the familiar brownstones and brick rowhouses of Back Bay or Beacon Hill, but differ in material, size, and importantly, color. Bright blue, white, yellow, green, and salmon-colored homes give the working-class neighborhood a remarkably different character than that of the rest of Boston.

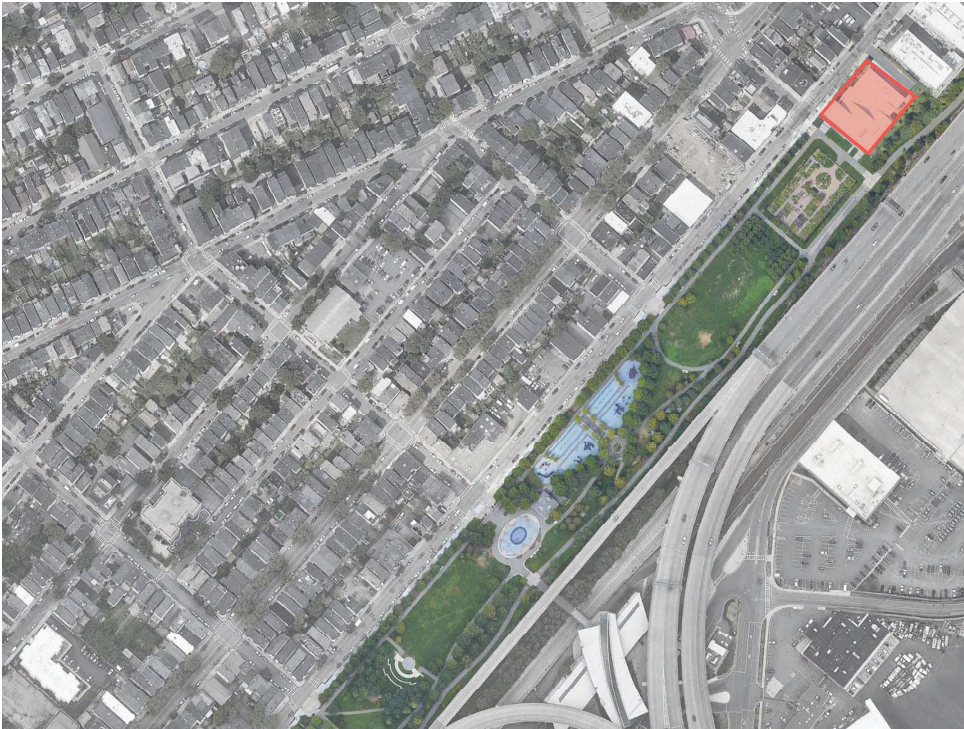


Fig. 2. Site plan, East Boston, MA.



East Boston has a history as a center of heavy industry, but since the 1960s, the neighborhood has been dominated by the presence of Logan International Airport. The neighborhood is bounded by the enormous footprint of the airport in the east (Fig. 2) and petroleum tanks along Chelsea Creek to the West. The completion of the airport brought pollution, noise, and displacement to East Boston, as well as the destruction of Frederick Olmsted’s well-loved Wood Island Park. Without the 46-acre park, East Boston was left with very few green spaces in comparison to the rest of Boston.³



Fig. 3. I-90 dividing Bremen Street Park from Logan Airport, Boston, MA.

Change finally came in 2007 with the construction of a long, linear park along Bremen Street in the neighborhood center. Today, Bremen Street Park not only buffers the effects of Logan Airport and the adjacent Interstate 90 (Fig. 3), but it also attracts community members from across East Boston. During my visit in July 2021, the park was full of life, especially in the afternoon. Joggers, cyclists, students,

seniors, and families frequented the park as both a destination and a pleasant way to walk a half mile to cross the neighborhood. At the northern terminus of Bremen Street Park, the East Boston Branch Library is, in many ways, a gateway to East Boston. It is within eyesight of Logan International Airport beyond Interstate 90. The interstate, airport, and the MBTA Blue Line constitute a major transportation artery connecting the isolated East Boston directly to the city's mainland. They are also, however, a harsh physical barrier and a symbol of historical conflict over infrastructure that has harmed and displaced the local community.



Fig. 4. William Rawn Associates, Bremen Street Park meets the library, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

Landmarking

The East Boston Branch Library was constructed in 2013 as a consolidation of two older library branches on opposite sides of East Boston. Its site, at the north end of Bremen Street Park, allows the library branch to bring together all corners of the neighborhood and further establish a public center for the diverse community.⁴



Fig. 5. William Rawn Associates, I-90 beyond the library, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.



Fig. 6. William Rawn Associates, park community garden, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

Occupying a site with such prominence toward both the neighborhood and the larger city, the East Boston Branch strives first to be a landmark public building. To visitors from the neighborhood, the interstate, the park, or the Airport MBTA station, the first impression of the library is the curving gesture of its roof form. The roof is composed of four undulating surfaces that intersect and spread apart toward the corner of Bremen Street and Bremen Street Park. The library's southwestern, park-facing edge (Fig. 6) is its most striking and immediately noticeable. The curve begins low, near the wall of Interstate 90, and sweeps toward Bremen Street, perching high to face the neighborhood. To East Boston residents living northwest of the library, the library's curving roof is most commonly experienced as a narrow, oblique form (Fig. 5). Its tallest corner is a recognizable glass box, both signaling entry into the library and the urban threshold into Bremen Street Park. Thus, the library's most sculptural face ties the two places together, bookending the park and activating the library. In return, the space of the park breaks open the urban fabric of Bremen Street in front of the library, further singling out the transparency and the overhang of the public library within East Boston's iconic urban fabric.

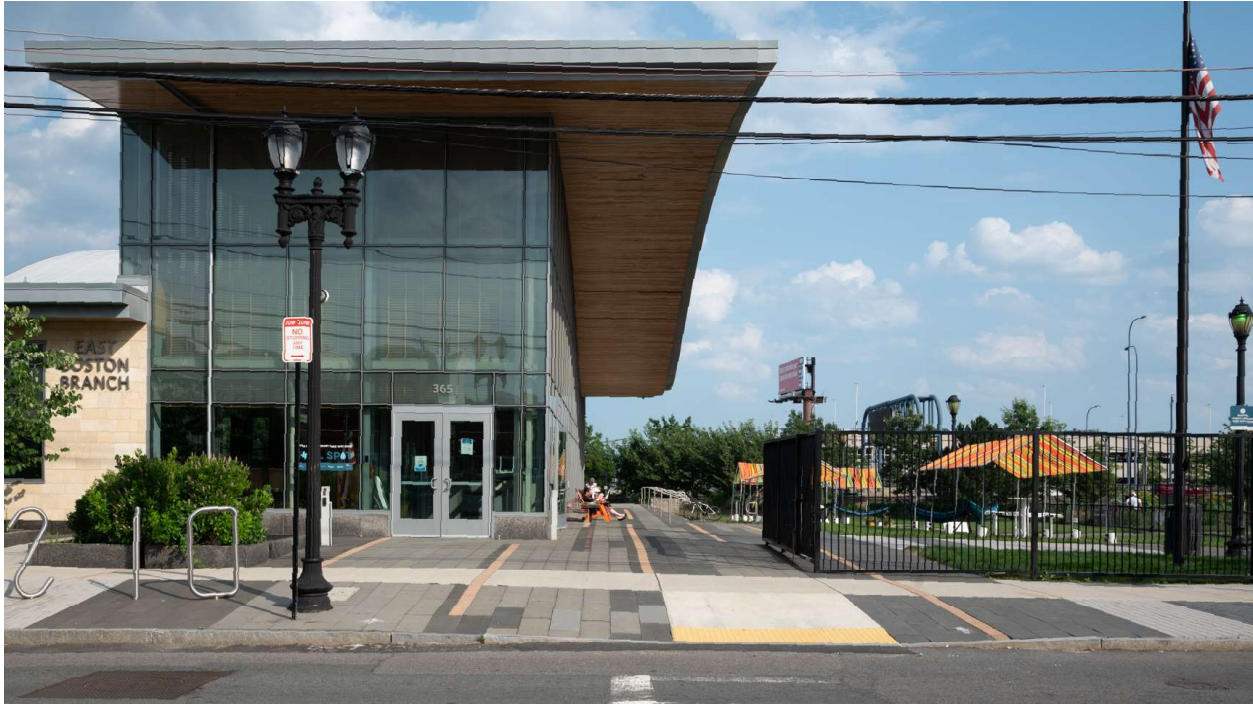


Fig. 7. William Rawn Associates, front elevation and porch, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.



Fig. 8. View from Bremen Street Park.



Fig. 9. Reading porch along the park.

This curved southern façade bounding Bremen Street Park is a backdrop of shadows and varying transparency through the building, changing throughout the day. The roof overhangs to create a porch space (Fig. 9), elevated slightly above the park. The narrowness of the porch limits activity to reading and sitting to watch the park, but the monumental height and flat form of the glass makes this façade an eye-catching, occupiable billboard for the library. Readers step outside to enjoy the fresh air, and park-goers stop to sit and enjoy the elevated view.

Interior Strategies

Visitors access the East Boston Branch on either side of its high western corner (Fig. 7). Within the glass envelope, they pass through the tall, narrow vestibule to the reception desk. Reception is separate from the reference desk, and acts, in some ways, like a checkpoint, funneling all patrons inside the library (Fig. 10). Although the library's front façade celebrates its relationship to Bremen Street Park, the overly directed nature of the entry and reception limits the fluidity of circulation in and out of the library. I noticed several groups, after spending time at the park, enter the library out of curiosity and exit before or shortly after reaching the reception desk. This is, perhaps, a hesitation to abruptly transition from the social and active environment of the park to the calm and focused environment of the library. Tables and desks inside the building accommodate small groups, but the sudden and narrow entry into the library's open space functions as a boundary between perceived social space and study space.

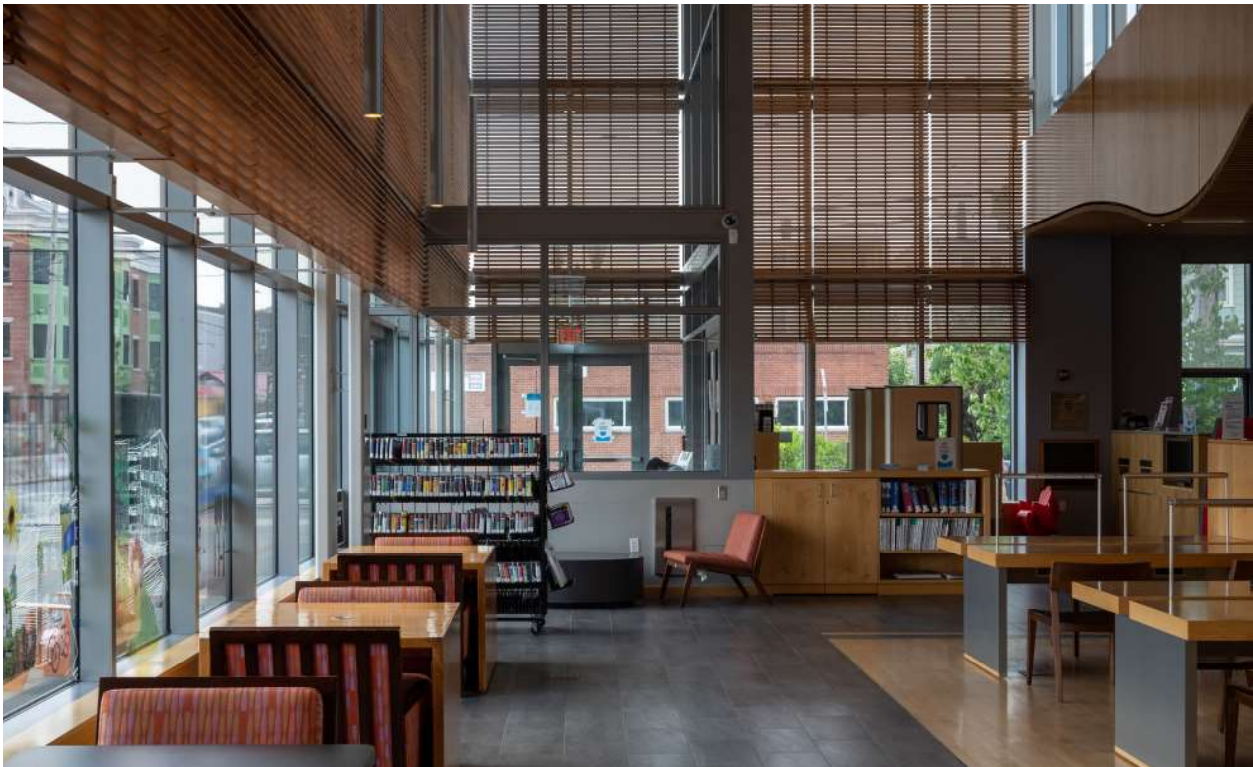


Fig. 10. William Rawn Associates, library entry, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

Within the library, boundaries are minimal. Like the Ballard Branch Library in Seattle, the interior of the East Boston Branch is a single, high, uninterrupted space. Support and utility areas occupy an enclosed volume to the north of the plan. Circulation across the library follows along this support volume, preserving the center of the floor as a public study forum and hub of activity in the library. Structure is pushed to the perimeter of the building, and the simple steel columns holding up the roof interrupt the floor in just three places.

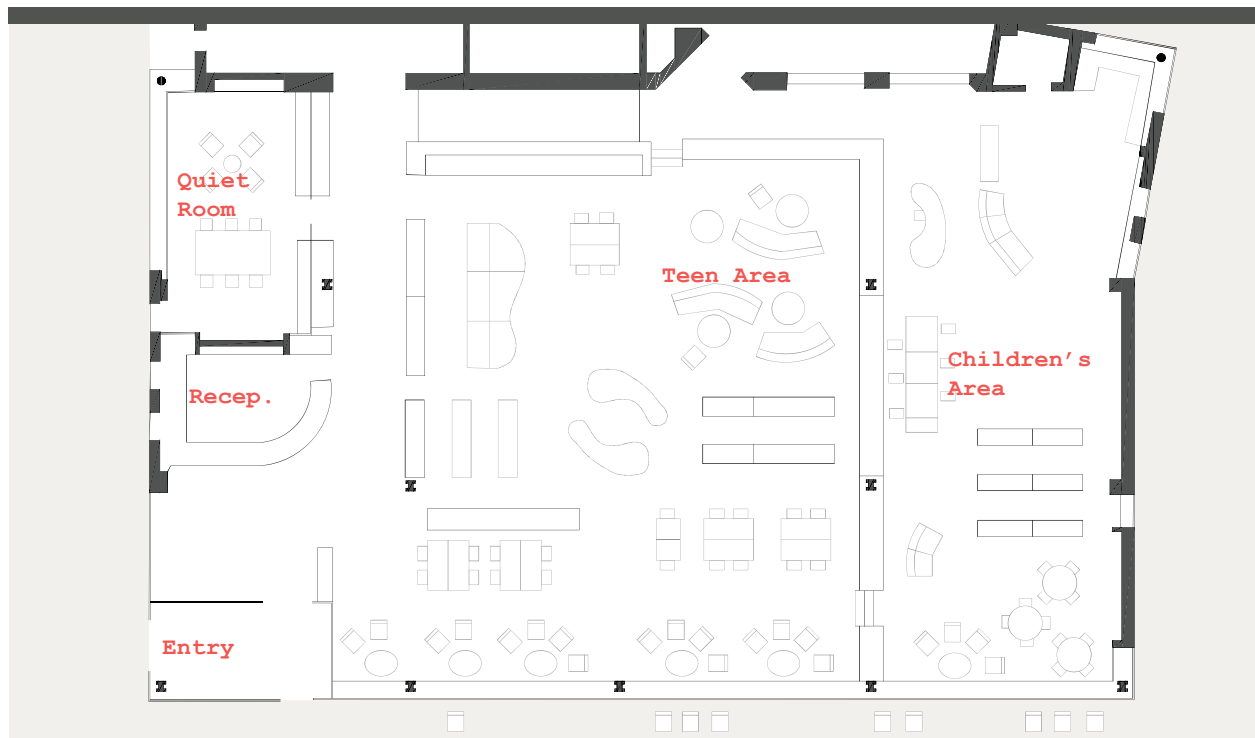


Fig. 11. William Rawn Associates, floor plan, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

The continuous curves comprising the library's high ceiling plane span an exceptional distance and seem to float overhead. In this case, the building's structural strategy is obscured rather than expressed. The intersecting edges of each of the three curving faces support one another with vertical structural members. In essence, the edges of each form function as curved, or lenticular, trusses. Smaller beams span between the trusses to create the surprisingly thin roof and ceiling forms.⁵



Fig. 12. William Rawn Associates, open interior, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.



Fig. 13. William Rawn Associates, open interior, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

The structural gaps between curving ceiling forms are also clerestory windows that bring light into the center of the open floor space. For a few minutes during my visit, the southern sun cast a sharp shadow across the center of the library (Fig. 12). Throughout most of the day, however, the clerestory light is indirect, and light in the center of the library is highly controlled to accommodate reading and screen use. Across the library's broad, park-facing façade, a screen of wood slats keeps the direct southern sun from penetrating the library center (Fig. 15), but it does not extend all the way to the floor.

Instead, the screen stops overhead, making a distinct space for sitting in the sun. These tables looking out to Bremen Street Park were popular with library patrons throughout my time in East Boston, even during the summer, and they further engage part of the library's interior with the outside.

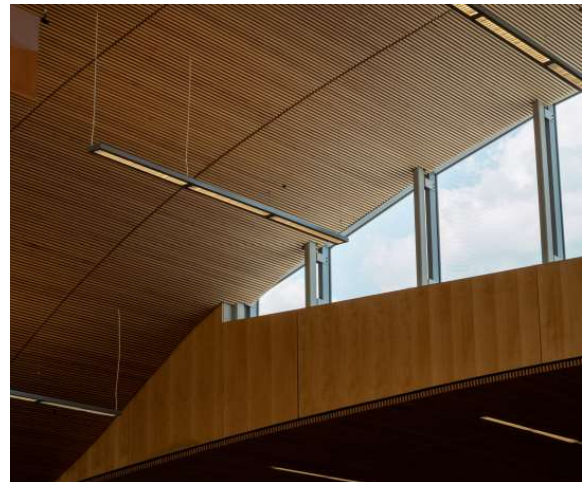


Fig. 14. Truss clerestory.



Fig. 15. William Rawn Associates, southern tables along the park, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

Defining Space

In much of the library's active interior areas, the East Boston Branch relies on the undulating, wood-clad ceiling plane to define space. The varying heights of the three ceiling forms and their intersections organize a loose grid of nine zones of different height across the library floor. For instance, the ceiling curves low to house the reception desk and the quiet room (Fig. 16) at the front of the library. The designated quiet room is a common feature in neighborhood libraries today as contemporary designs lean more and more away from the notion of libraries as silent spaces. Unlike the Ballard Branch Library, the quiet room in the East Boston Branch is totally enclosed as the only public space without open, fluid access. This adds to the room's inherent perception as a limited and less accessible part of the library.



Fig. 16. William Rawn Associates, quiet room, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

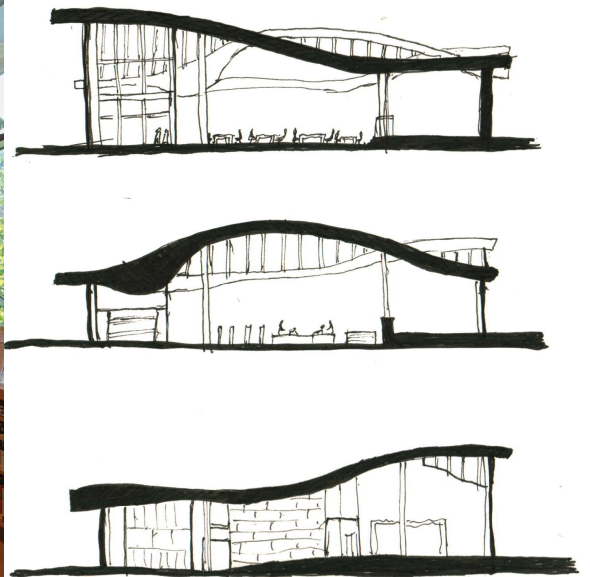


Fig. 17. Series of sketched sections, 2021.

In the back, the ceiling plane creates three small spaces that comprise the children's area. The population of East Boston is, on average, much younger than the rest of the city, and over 20% of the neighborhood is under the age of 18.⁶ Fittingly, the designated children's area of the library is relatively large, making up about a third of the floor area. The children's area is raised three steps above the central floor and located behind a higher barrier of bookshelves, with just two points of access. Windows in the children's area look toward the tree line bordering Interstate 90. As a result, the area is secure yet highly visible and connected within the library's open space.



Fig. 18. William Rawn Associates, open interior and ramp to children's area, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

The designated spaces for adults and teenagers in the East Boston Branch are clusters of tables and seating around the reference desk in the library's center. The few, low bookshelves mainly work to divide space. In total, there are very few physical books for a library serving such a large population; the branch's primary focus

is on providing free access to a social space to study, work, and use shared technology resources. These central areas in the library occupy space under the highest point of the ceiling, giving it a quality reminiscent of a traditional library reading room with tall, open space and light from above. The edges that surround this high space, however, somewhat undermine the area's success. It is surrounded by circulation, and there are no hard edges that would provide a sense of personal space within the open room. The most exposed spaces were the least frequented, and the majority of visitors working for longer periods of time stayed at tables near bookshelves along the outside edges.

Spatial Autonomy

The library's 360-degree staffed reference desk is in this central area, in view of all the nearby clusters of shelves, tables, and seating. To adults visiting the library, the staff at the reference desk was invaluable. Patrons frequently approached librarians for help with applications, work, and other activities on the computers. The teen area, however, was immediately adjacent to the reference desk. Younger library-goers often left the teen area to sit somewhere else after browsing the available books. One group of students visiting the library in the afternoon went directly to the computers in the adult area on the other side of the library. Different user groups have different spatial needs, and, in the East Boston Branch, teenage patrons are not provided a space of which they can take full ownership. Staff presence is important in public libraries, but it means something different to different age groups. In this case, the library's design prioritizes supervision above the spatial autonomy of East Boston's sizable population of young people.



Fig. 19. William Rawn Associates, open interior and reference desk, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

Conclusion

With its iconic curving roof form, the East Boston Branch Library is a landmark in the neighborhood, bookending Bremen Street Park and introducing a more focused scale of public space to the new neighborhood center. The library's glass façade and wood palette manipulate light to form space and change the experience of the library inside and out. Like the Ballard Branch Library, the East Boston Branch embraces a continuous, open plan with high ceiling and indirect light. Here, however, the library demonstrates several key limitations and issues that may result from applying this established library diagram to a neighborhood with its own specific needs.

One of the most important functions that the contemporary neighborhood library serves is to provide space that is comfortable to sit and work or study for an extended time. Some may come for a specific

book or activity in mind. Still, many visit with the simple assumption that the library is a place to find answers. Others have no particular task in mind and visit the library to kill time. In any case, people gravitate toward spaces that make them feel held, or somewhat enclosed, without isolating them from engagement with others. The open plan and perimeter circulation of the East Boston Branch Library leaves many spaces over-exposed while the designated quiet room feels secluded. This organization is more successful when full of people and motion. Neighborhood libraries, like the East Boston Branch Library, are more often slower spaces, with periodic rushes and communication in small groups. In contemporary neighborhood library design, architects must uncover the specific spatial needs of likely library users in the community to provide spaces with appropriate relationships between different areas and different levels of socialization and focus.

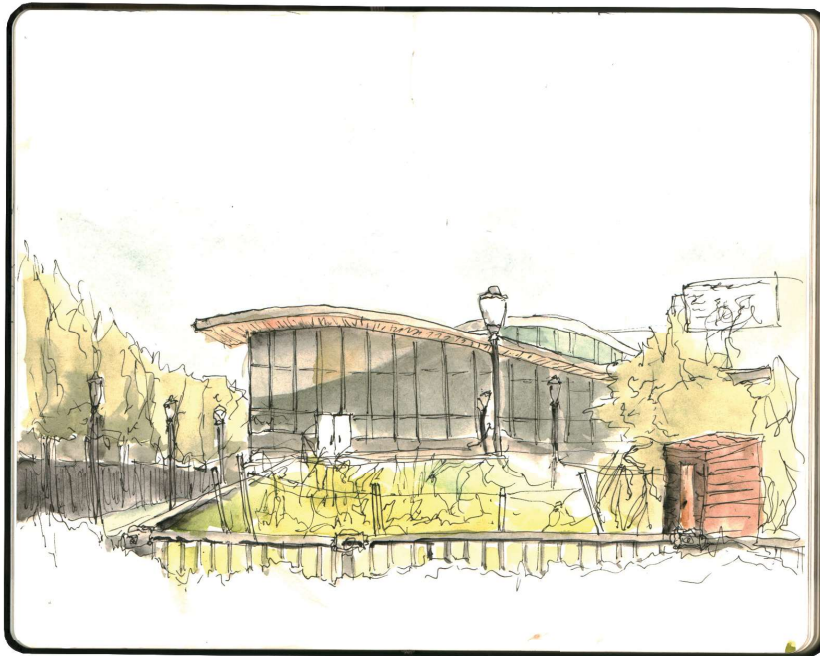


Fig. 20. On-site sketch, 2021.

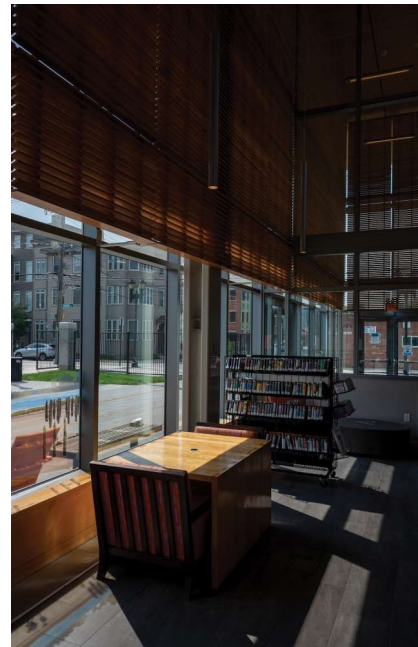


Fig. 21. William Rawn Associates, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

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2. American Community Survey, "East Boston," last modified May 2013, <http://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/c6b4a4f7-ed70-40a0-ace9-58874ac79df5>.
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5. Sindu Meier, interview by author, Boston, July 28, 2021.
6. Boston Planning and Development Agency, "Historical Trends in East Boston," last modified May 2017, <http://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/28c2e99c-af11-47e0-b65e-b609fdbc44bd>.
7. All photos and sketches by author, Boston, 2021.

William O. Lockridge Bellevue Neighborhood Library



Washington, DC



Fig. 1. Adjaye Associates, view from Atlantic Street, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

Just six miles south of the National Mall, the William O. Lockridge Bellevue Neighborhood Library feels far-removed from the power and wealth of central Washington, DC. From downtown, the journey to the small residential neighborhood of Bellevue takes approximately an hour, across two trains and a bus.

Neighborhood Context

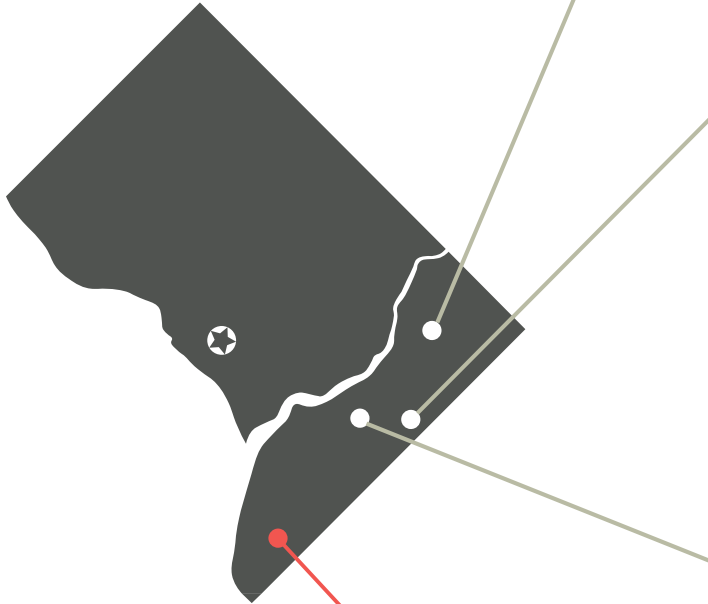
The collection of majority-Black neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River are greatly underserved by city services. Even as many areas of Washington experience rapid growth and development, Bellevue and the surrounding neighborhoods continue to suffer the highest rates of economic disparity and violent crime in the city.¹ Throughout the ongoing hardships of recent decades, this region across the Anacostia River has empowered itself with a strong history of community activism.²

The early 2010s began a period of increased public institutional investment in many of DC's long-neglected eastern neighborhoods. While the National Museum of African American History and Culture moved toward completion as the Smithsonian's newest flagship museum, many of the same prominent Black architects involved in that project contributed to the design of new neighborhood libraries east of the Anacostia. J. Max Bond Jr. contributed to the Height Library in Benning shortly before his death.³ Phil Freelon led work on the Anacostia Neighborhood Library, and David Adjaye designed the Francis A. Gregory Library in Fairfax Village (Fig. 3).⁴ Adjaye's William O. Lockridge Library in Bellevue, however, introduces a refreshing solution to the neighborhood library typology that brings specific, vital spatial resources to its community.

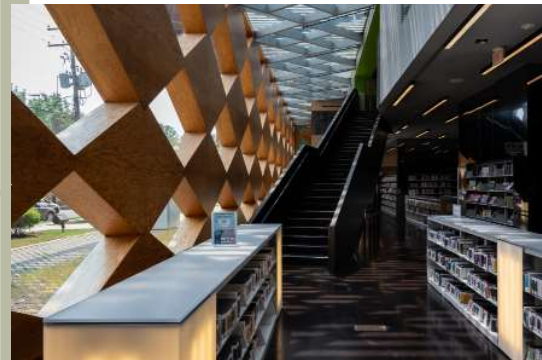
At the southern corner of the District of Columbia, Interstate 295 separates Bellevue from the Anacostia-Bolling military base along the Potomac. The community surrounding the Lockridge Library is predominately made of duplexes, triplexes, and older homes (Fig. 2). The library's setting, at the intersection of Atlantic Street and South Capitol Terrace, is mostly comprised of small stores as a commercial threshold into residential Bellevue. Since completion of the library, the construction of an affordable apartment complex, a medical center, and a mixed-use building on Capitol Street have dramatically increased the scale of the area. The new construction provides few storefronts and little engagement with the street, but they have heightened the public nature of the library's immediate site.⁵



Fig. 2. local neighborhood housing, 2021.



Height Benning Library
Davis Brody Bond Aedas
2010



Francis A. Gregory Library
Adjaye Associates
2013



Anacostia Neighborhood Library
The Freelon Group
2011



Lockridge Bellevue Library
Adjaye Associates
2013

Fig. 3. Contextual library construction, Washington, DC.

Much of the new construction in Bellevue is far out of proportion to the existing residential fabric. For a neighborhood library, however, it is imperative to build a proud and distinctive landmark without alienating the established built language of the place. A community's library should be a symbol of civic investment and shared resources. At best, library spaces are a source of inspiration within the immediate local context of a community.⁶



Fig. 4. Adjaye Associates, rising out of Capitol Terrace, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

A Corner Porch

The Lockridge Library emerges from the sloping hill of Capitol Terrace as a fractured figure (Fig. 4). Its wood-clad forms of concrete and glass are, at first, sunken in the ground at the height of nearby homes. As the street slopes toward the corner, the forms rise from the ground and come apart to frame the entry and face of the library. To Bellevue residents walking or driving between homes in the west and businesses in the east, the Lockridge Library is a monumental yet welcoming form that engages with the activity of the sidewalk.

The Ballard Branch Library and the East Boston Branch Library share a similar exterior strategy. Eye-catching roof elements form shaded porches with a transparent relationship to the ground floor. The Lockridge Library, on the other hand, breaks down its height and its large footprint, greeting pedestrians at a more approachable scale.

A vertical, branching assembly forms the library's model of a social public square for the people of Bellevue. Two elevated volumes jut outwards from the library's three-story core, shaping a covered porch and entry (Fig. 5). The concrete volumes overhead are heavy masses, but they form a porous ceiling and a soft edge outside the library. During my visit in July 2021, walkers stopped to talk in the shade, and a city public health initiative was giving information at a table by the front door. The porch's openness and relationship to the sidewalk at the corner give it a sense of safety and community. It encourages public ownership of the porch and, in turn, the library itself.



Fig. 5. Adjaye Associates, library meets the sidewalk, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.



Fig. 6. The corner porch.



Fig. 7. View from interior to neighborhood.

Interior Strategies

The ground floor of the Lockridge Library, with a large book display and reception to one side, operates as a lobby and guide to exploring the building (Fig. 8). It also introduces visitors to the bright color scheme that marks different sectional elements of the structure and humanizes the concrete structure's material palette. A green lightwell penetrates all floors of the building in the center. This lightwell divides the large core volume on each floor and organizes circulation around it. On the ground floor, it separates the lobby area from a large community meeting room further inside. For the day-to-day library patron, the library indicates movement toward the spaces upstairs. Using the library's interior is understood not to be a brief or unintentional encounter. In its organization, visitors are encouraged to explore and actively engage with the library's different spaces.

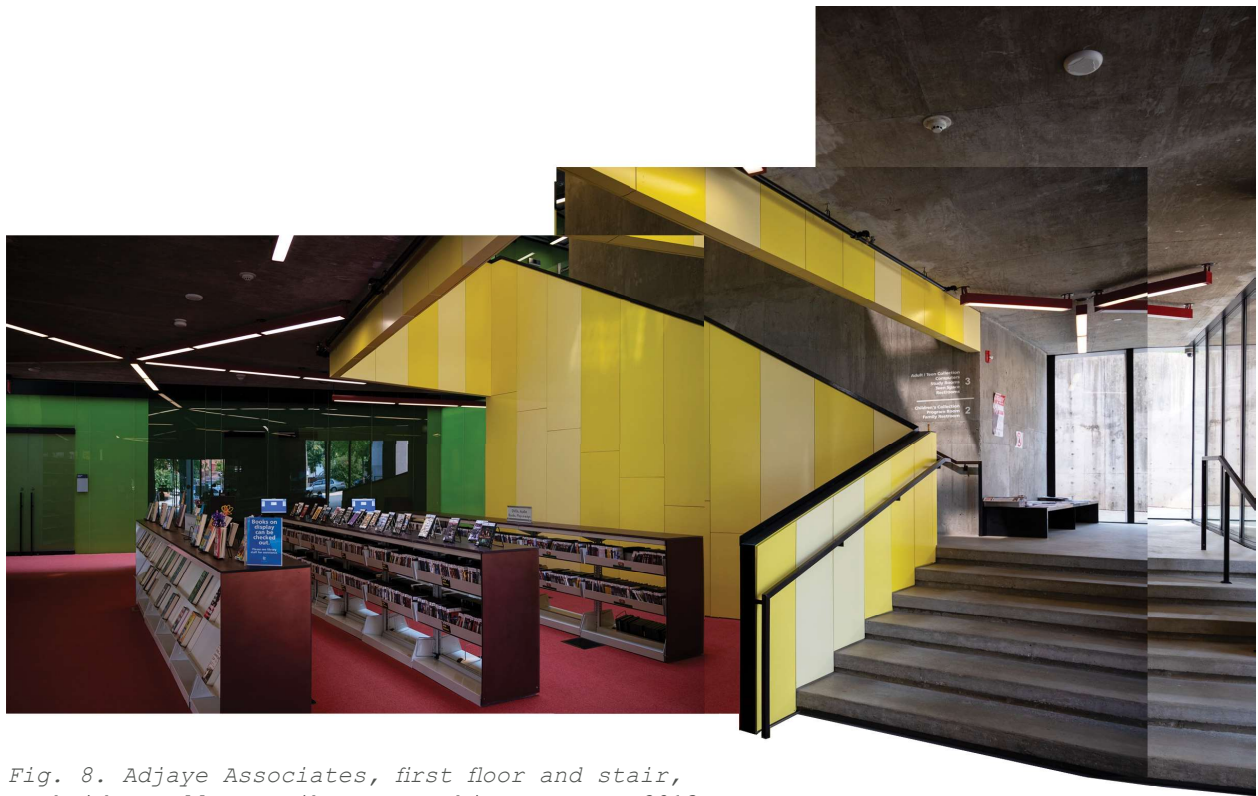


Fig. 8. Adjaye Associates, first floor and stair, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.



Fig. 9. Adjaye Associates, atrium stair with skylight above, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

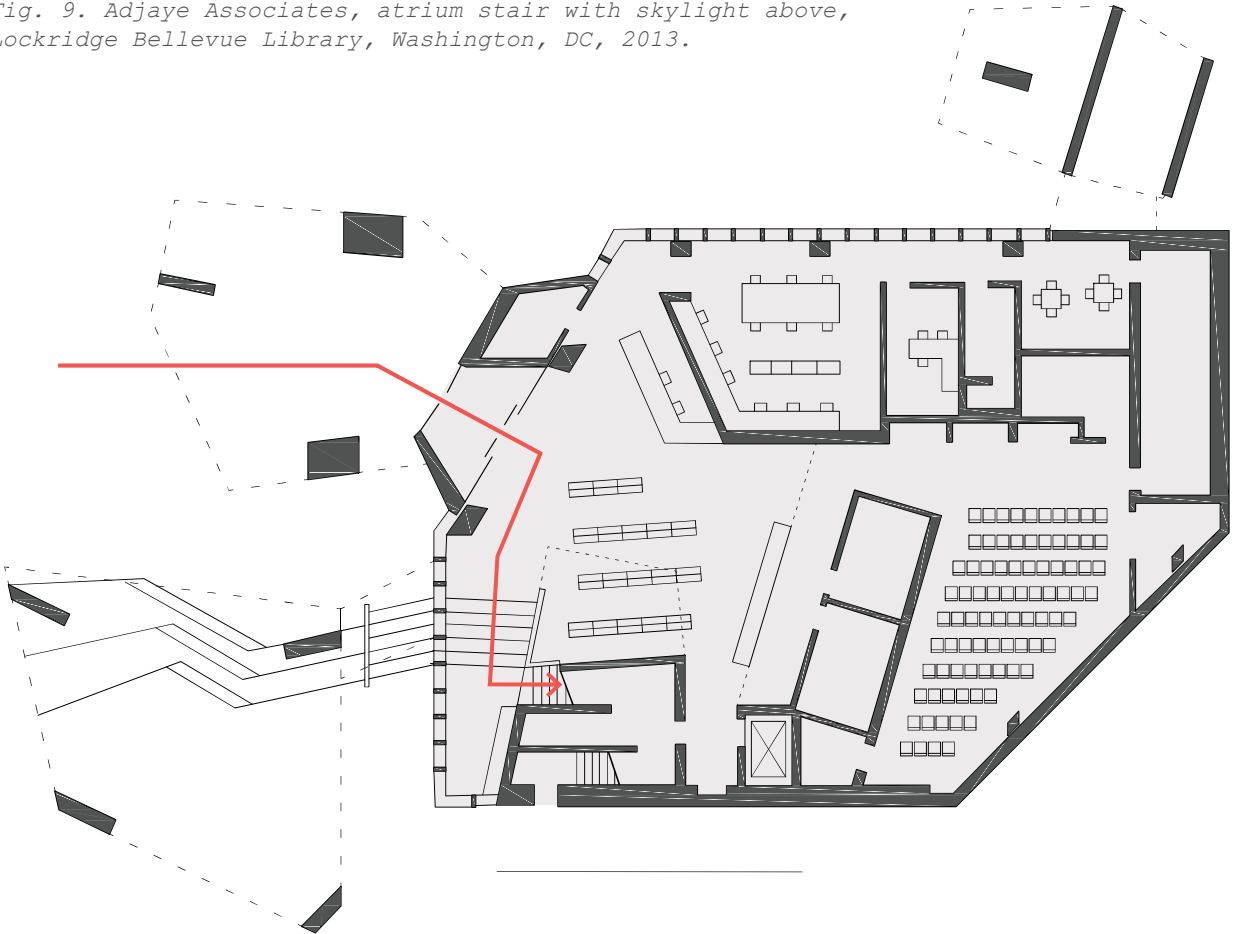


Fig. 10. Adjaye Associates, first floor plan, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.





Fig. 11. Adjaye Associates, children's space, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.



Fig. 12. Second floor seating.

As evidenced on the exterior of the building, the Lockridge Library places value in elevated spaces, and the ground floor wastes no time bringing visitors upstairs. A bright yellow atrium stair winds upward, rising from concrete steps that extend from the porch outside. On the second floor, the green lightwell is, again, a barrier, forming the boundary of the children's area (Fig. 13). The area is visible through the green tint, but entry is limited to a narrow, staffed access point. The children's area is an open space and arranged with its own sub-spaces within the library. Inhabiting the rear half of the library's core volume, the children's section is more private and inward facing. However, a branching volume, similar to the two in the front, extends from the building as a public-facing, dedicated space for readings and children's events. During my visits, unfortunately, this elevated volume was unoccupied and being used as a storage space. More so than the previous libraries studied, the Lockridge Library's large children's section was used in periodic waves. It was often empty during the day until a field trip group came in, filling the space. The partial enclosure of the space not only provides a level of security for the children's room, but it also limits the noise of large groups mostly to the second floor.



Fig. 13. Adjaye Associates, lightweight barrier from children's space, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

On both the first and second floors, the rear half of the library serves more specialized functions, essentially leaving the front half as a switchback circulation to the next space. Rather than continuing to the third floor via the initial atrium stair, visitors instead cross the library, past the children's section to reach the next yellow stair (Fig. 14). This time, the floor above opens along a straight-run stair, following parallel to the slope of Capitol Terrace outside large windows. The third floor of the Lockridge Library houses the adult and teen sections, book stacks, desks, and technology resources. To the majority of library patrons, it is the destination of their visit. The meandering path to this point, rather than discouraging use of the third-floor space, only adds to the experience of the library as a whole. By activating all three floors with indirect circulation, each floor and space has presence and visibility, even on a slow day. Changing views of Bellevue and moments of vertical connection through the floors ensure that no area feels isolated, and the wide range of space types are always closely linked to the outside. Visitors are encouraged to use the stairs and explore as new views and spatial relationships pull them to the top of the building.



Fig. 14. Adjaye Associates, stair to top floor, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

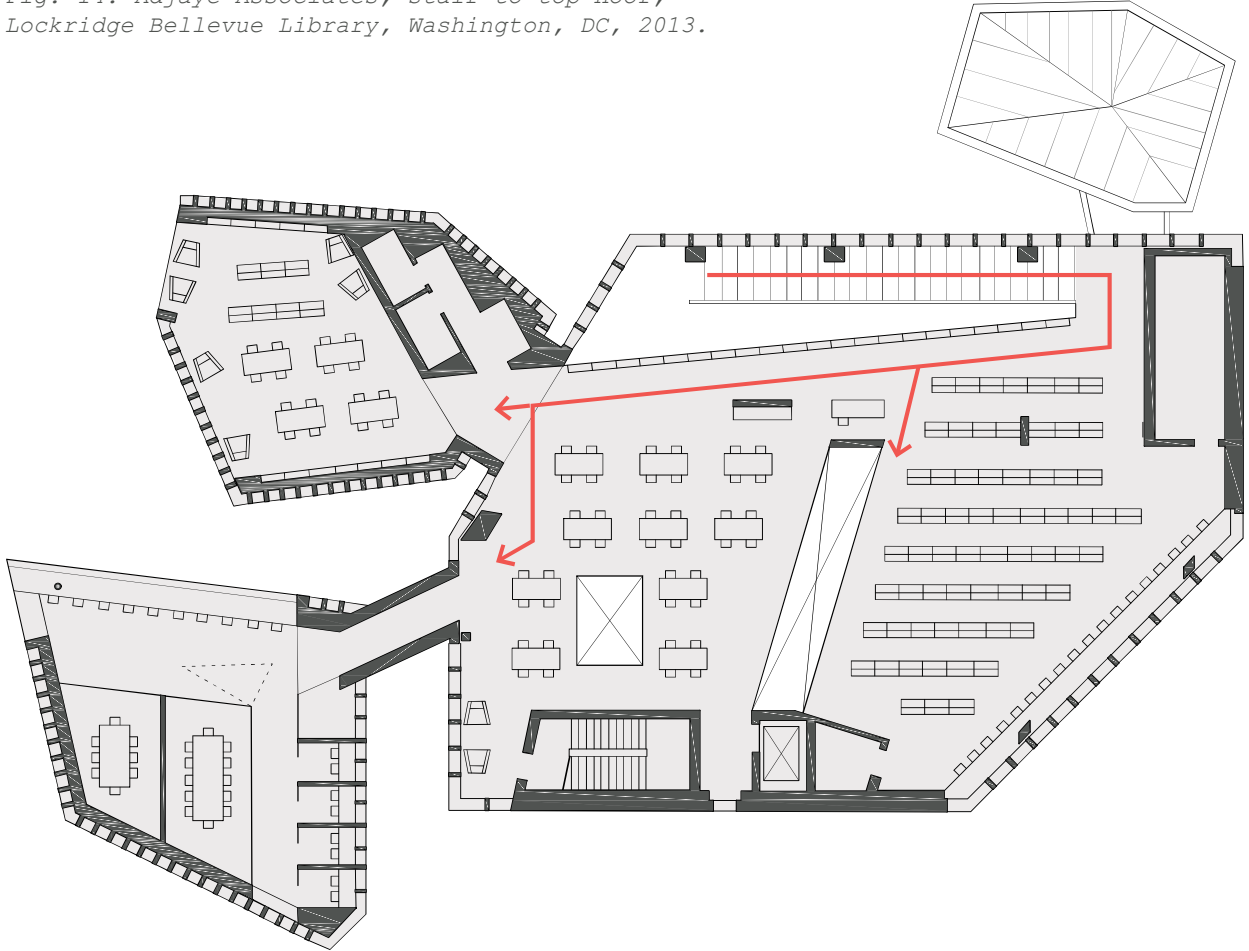


Fig. 15. Adjaye Associates, top (third) floor plan, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.



Arrival

The final, straight-run stair leads visitors to the rear of the third floor. There is a sense of arrival as the ceiling height increases and the view opens up across the floor. Like the other libraries in this investigation, the Lockridge Library places less emphasis on physical books as the sole object of a library. Unlike the other examples, though, it has a dedicated and partially enclosed space solely for the book stacks. The recurring green lightwell is brightly lit on the third floor, and it divides the stacks in the rear of the building from the technology and work desks in the front. Rather than mere spatial dividers, the stacks are celebrated objects, given their own space suited for the act of reading. All the seating in this room faces outward, along floor-to-ceiling windows, framed by the wood fins of the façade (Fig. 17). Where the other large windows look out above Bellevue, these windows face an inaccessible exterior space formed

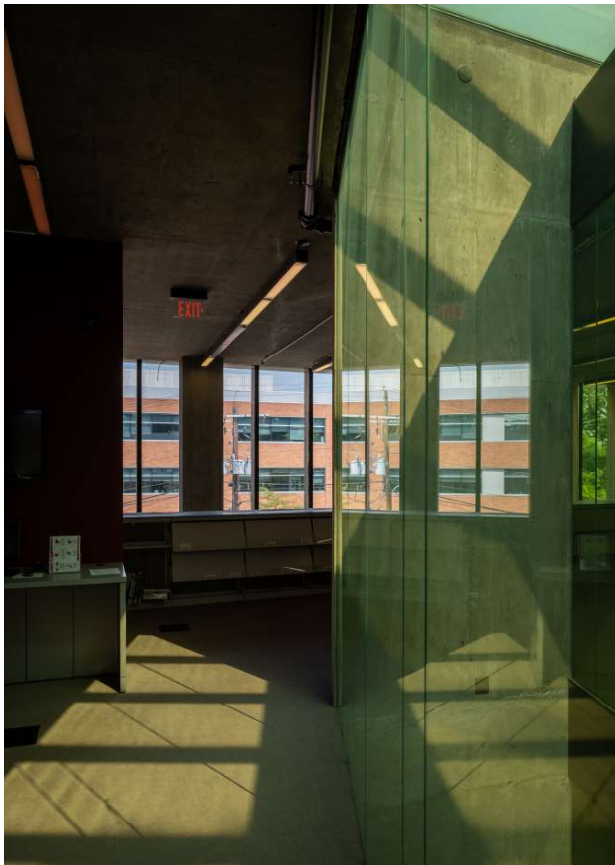


Fig. 16. Adjaye Associates, dividing lightwell, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.



Fig. 17. Adjaye Associates, reading room view, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

by the building's tall eastern retaining wall. In the afternoon, the concrete wall and overgrown plants are bathed in sunlight. When I visited, the third-floor reading space was relatively quiet; visitors who did come to browse the book selection always seemed to stay to use the scenic row of seating. The rows of tall bookshelves and unique views to the outside make the reading space focused and calm without compromising visibility and social connection.

The front portion of the third floor was, by far, the most popular and well-used part of the Lockridge Library. Program is less strictly defined, and this space functions as the library's social center despite its position at the highest point of the library. People cross the space, join in conversation, and study alone as the neighborhood's elevated living room. Computer desks and group study tables surround a square skylight that forms another lightwell (Fig. 19). As with



Fig. 18. Adjaye Associates, reading space, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.



Fig. 19. Adjaye Associates, lightwells, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

the other punctures through the building's floors, this lightwell is experienced as a three-dimensional object and a spatial void. It joins the sky above the space to the winding yellow stair below and acts as a centerpiece in the room. It connects the destination at the end of the library's path of circulation to the beginning while bringing dynamic light and shadow into the space.



Fig. 20. Adjaye Associates, view into teen space, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

Elevated Spaces

This social space on the third floor finally opens access to the two branching volumes that shape the library's front porch. The first of the two volumes houses the space designated for teenage Bellevue residents. All surfaces of the room are a deep crimson. The room's concrete walls open into tall windows, directed through exterior wood fins over Atlantic Street. At this height, you can see homes far down the adjacent streets and experience a new perspective of the recent large construction nearby (Fig. 21). The room holds several bookshelves but mainly functions as a workspace and scenic sitting area for small groups.

The third floor of the Lockridge Library has a staffed reference desk, and like in the East Boston Branch Library, librarians on staff were a consistently helpful resource to adult patrons using the available computers. In this case, however, the teen room is separated from the library's open space, only accessed by a narrow threshold into the separate volume (Fig. 20). While still visible to the adults and staff on the floor, the room has a degree of physical separation and distance that gives it a sense of autonomy. Teenage library users can take ownership of the space and program it themselves in the way it is used in the moment, whether that be studying, reading, socializing, or using the internet. In neighborhood interviews, community members reiterated the need for the new library to be a safe space for young people.⁷ In an area where violent crime affects a disproportionate number of teenagers, the teen room's relative privacy and elevated views make it a desirable and safe place to be after school. This one room is by no means a solution to systemic issues, but by elevating this space for teenagers, the architects demonstrate the value of autonomy and public, group ownership of space.



Fig. 21. Adjaye Associates, view from teen space, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.



Fig. 22. Teen space.



Fig. 23. Adjaye Associates, teen space, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

The second elevated volume, branching parallel to the teen room, contains meeting rooms and quiet sitting spaces. Whereas the views in the teen room are direct north, the views over Bellevue in this space point east and west down Atlantic Street. Group conference rooms in this space remain locked, but were available upon request. Aside from the view, they do not make as much sense at the very far end of the library's winding path of circulation, so far from the larger community assembly space on the first floor. Other seating in this space, however, was used by single patrons for longer periods of time, but it was not as popular as the desks in the third floor's more social work space. A long row of seats lines the large eastern windows (Fig. 24), and the last seat in the row occupies a sharp glass corner, perched over the sidewalk. This area offers a more active and distracting view than that of the reading room. Here, people most often sat with their phones or laptops. Some simply sat watching foot traffic around the library's porch and entry.



Fig. 24. Adjaye Associates, study space, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.



Fig. 25. Adjaye Associates, study space, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

Conclusion



Fig. 26. Adjaye Associates, study space, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

To quote David Adjaye from a 2016 discussion at MIT, successful libraries “create a sense of social pride in knowledge sharing.”⁸ As technology continues to decentralize the sources of knowledge, the library remains a vital local institution. The neighborhood library holds value in its shared spatial resources that facilitate communication, learning, and positive community interaction. As evidenced previously in this investigation, the neighborhood library functions as a free and accessible interior space, a public square. The David O. Lockridge Library, however, rejects the notion that a single, tall, open space is the most effective solution to the social sharing of neighborhood resources.

The Lockridge Library pursues smaller, diverse space types that accommodate a wide range of activity. There is a distinction between

social and quiet areas that does not compromise the library's public nature. Instead, careful control of light and view designate space and allow the community of library users to bring meaning and purpose to the provided public spaces. From the public corner of the library's porch to the secluded volumes overhead, the Lockridge Library contributes an array of intuitive, autonomous, elevated spaces that serve and empower the people of Bellevue.

Notes

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9. All photos and sketches by author, Washington, 2021.

Hillary Rodham Clinton Children's Library

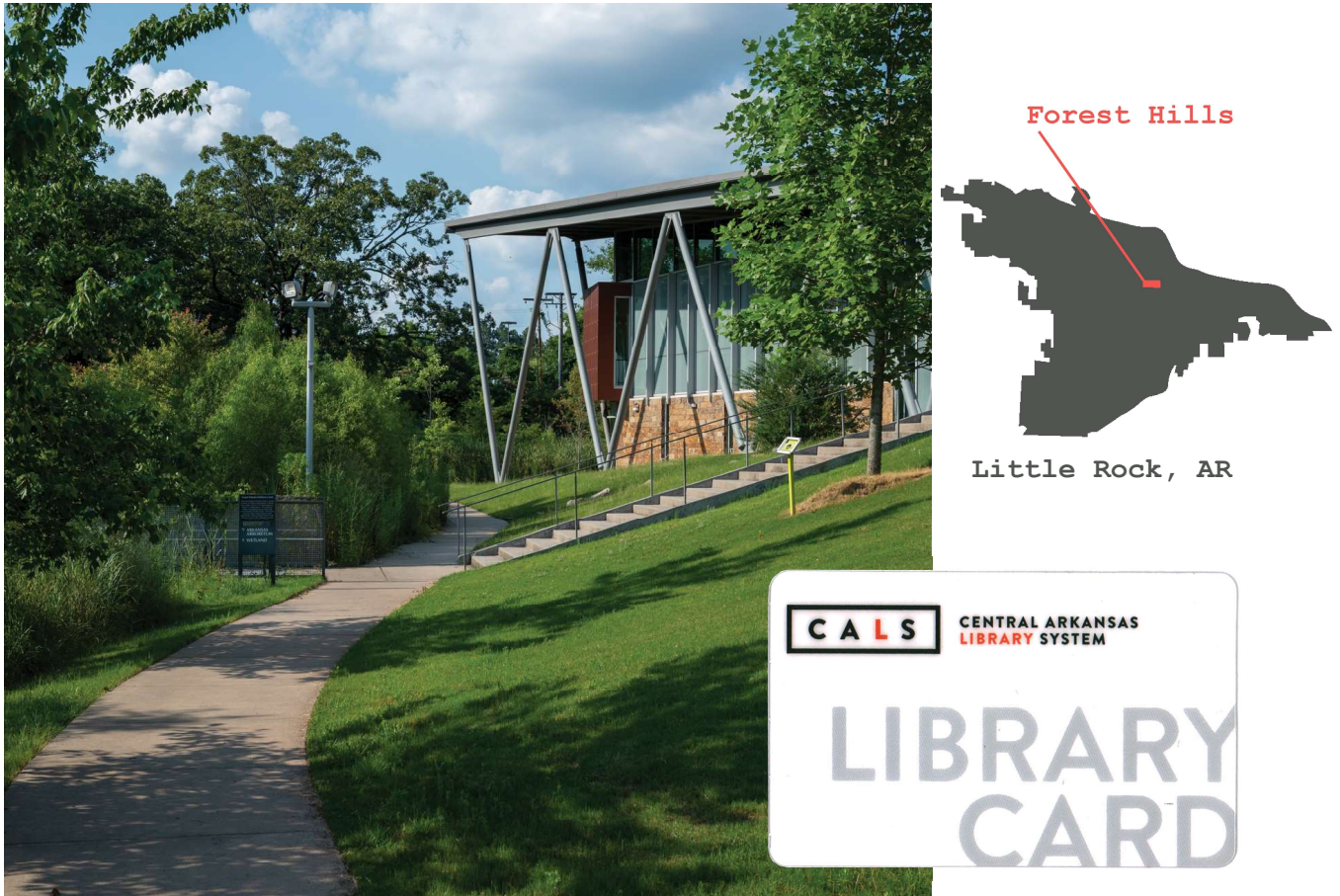


Fig. 1. Polk Stanley Wilcox, children's library and surrounding landscape, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

At the scale of the neighborhood, libraries are architectural responses to questions of both social and physical context. In Little Rock, Arkansas, the social context and the physical landscape are inextricably linked. As in other cities throughout the United States, urban renewal and years of de facto segregation deprived many of the Little Rock's predominately Black neighborhoods of fundamental public resources otherwise freely accessible in other parts of the city.

Neighborhood Context



Fig. 2. Interstate 630, West Little Rock.

The history of the displacement and ongoing inequality of western Little Rock is, at its core, the story of Interstate 630. I-630 was conceived of in the 1930s as high-speed connection between downtown and the emerging suburbs west of the city. The following decades saw funding issues and delays, but the project moved forward. The last phase of I-630 through West Little Rock was completed in the 1980s. By that time, the reaction against school integration, persisting suburban sprawl, and the local real estate market had established the north and west of Little Rock as predominately White areas while the city's Black population was pushed to the south and the east. I-630 not only displaced hundreds of families, but the highway destroyed the thriving Black business district of West Ninth Street. Today, I-630 is a heavily trafficked, important connection between downtown and West

Little Rock. To its surrounding neighborhoods, however, it remains a conspicuous line of existing segregation in the city and a cruel barrier that fractures and isolates communities.¹



Fig. 3. Site plan, Little Rock, AR.

Four miles west of downtown, the Hillary Rodham Clinton Children's Library occupies a six-acre site just south of I-630. The loosely defined neighborhoods around the library overlap, but the immediately adjacent community is known as Forest Hills. Forest Hills is a small residential neighborhood along I-630, dotted with churches and businesses. Just north of the Clinton Children's Library, across I-630, several large public structures dwarf the scale of nearby homes, namely the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and War

Memorial Stadium. Although I-630 divides these institutions from the southern neighborhoods, rumors of future displacement persist. One older man, making conversation from his porch, told me there was talk that UAMS was planning to buy up nearby homes for a new medical center. "We ain't going nowhere. We got nowhere to go."² This specific rumor turned out to not be true, but the common fear of removal is based in the region's history of displacement, as well as real proposals that occasionally circulate. Around the time of the library's construction the city board heard proposals from local business leaders to construct a new technology park in place of Forest Hills.³



Fig. 4. Local churches in Forest Hills.

Bridging Neighborhood and City

Forest Hills may not be going anywhere any time soon, but ever-present rumors speak to the complex social context that the Clinton Children's Library inhabits. As a children's library, it serves children and families across the Little Rock metro area. However, the library's place south of I-630 presents a crucial opportunity, as a neighborhood library, to serve the specific needs shared by residents of the underserved community. Thus, the Clinton Children's Library must be, at once, a city-wide resource for children and a neighborhood resource for local community members.

For families visiting the Clinton Children's Library from outside the neighborhood, getting to the library is straightforward

and simple. I-630 provides fast and easy access from almost anywhere across Little Rock. However, this same road infrastructure fractures the library's accessibility from nearby homes. I experienced this on my first walk to visit the library in June 2021. Across just a one-mile walk to the building, I had to run to cross two busy intersections that had no crosswalk, and there were almost no sidewalks until I reached the children's library. "Little Rock is a driving city," I was told.⁴ Like most American cities of similar size, development over the last 75 years has overwhelmingly favored those who can afford to drive. The dangerous, multi-lane roads I crossed exit from I-630 and cut the neighborhoods apart, north to south. Between the interstate and its exiting roads, Forest Hills and the surrounding neighborhoods are broken into pieces. Homes are walled off from nearby grocery stores, parks, schools, and businesses, and people who do not have access to a car are left to walk through the grass, cross parking lots, and yield to traffic.



Fig. 5. Between I-630 and Forest Hills.

Within the library's fractured piece of the city landscape, the area south of I-630 is a quiet, working-class residential community. Most homes are modest in size, with well-used porches and large trees. The palette of material and form is highly diverse, expressing decades of periodic construction and home additions (Fig. 6). Minding the history of pernicious construction in the area, the library's context includes fears of displacement and real concern among residents that new buildings will only hurt the neighborhood. Considering this, the library must be a native landmark and an accessible resource to the local community while also serving its broader function as a children's library.



Fig. 6. Sketches of local Forest Hills homes, 2021.

The Clinton Children's Library sits on a hill that slopes steeply down toward the barrier of I-630. Before construction of the library, the site was often flooded. The six-acre site contained several abandoned homes, but the noise and constant runoff from the interstate had rendered it an unlivable piece of Forest Hills.⁵ In response, the Clinton Children's Library embraces the site, connecting its different communities of patrons with a positive shared resource.

Unlike the previously discussed libraries, the children's library occupies a large site and does not engage directly with the street. Instead, it sits back from the street at the site's highest elevation. The library, as approached directly from the parking lot is a low, single-story mass, in scale with the nearby homes. When walking from the residences to the south, however, the children's library reveals its true size. As the site slopes down to the north, the library's exposed diagonal structure extends its overhanging roof over the land. At the bottom of the hill, the library is a two-story structure that opens up to embrace the low northern portion of the site.

The library's truss-like exterior structure describes its ambition as a bridge between communities. It aims to bring positive community interaction between the disadvantaged neighborhoods south of I-630 and the wealthier, predominately White neighborhoods north of I-630 and in the western suburbs.⁶



Fig. 7. Polk Stanley Wilcox, truss-like structure emerging from the landscape, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

Landscape as a Resource

War Memorial Park and the Little Rock Zoo are popular areas of outdoor family activity in West Little Rock. The original entry sign to War Memorial Park on Jonesboro Drive is still, in fact, within Forest Hills, but today, Jonesboro Drive is intersected by I-630. As a result, these recreation resources are completely inaccessible to the people of Forest Hills without the use of a car. The large city park is less than a half mile from the Clinton Children's Library, but the interstate bars access to families to the south while families to the north are provided much easier walking access.

While beneficial resources are unreachable south to Forest Hills, the harmful effects of the built environment to the north easily cross I-630 to the south. Massive parking lots serving UAMS and War Memorial Stadium (Fig. 8) generate polluted stormwater, inundating the low-lying areas of the library's site. The Clinton Children's Library



Fig. 8. Parking lots serving UAMS and War Memorial Stadium north of I-630.

answers this environmental inequality across the highway with an extensive landscape strategy. A system of three, tiered, marshy ponds filter and hold runoff water. The ponds range from always full to seldom full, supporting a diverse biome of native plant species.⁷



Fig. 9. Polluted stormwater drains across I-630 to the library.



Fig. 10. Polk Stanley Wilcox, ponds and landscape, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.



Fig. 11. Polk Stanley Wilcox, walking path, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

A path connects to the sidewalk in the front of the site and branches into a winding, shady walking trail that goes all the way around the library. Crucially, the walking trails are a free and public resource, accessible to nearby residents even when the library is closed. The ponds also function as a security measure, funneling access to the children's library through several monitored thresholds. This landscape approach to security is what allows the Clinton Children's Library to safely host indoor and outdoor activities for children without building more obstructive barriers in the neighborhood. The library's landscape design reinforces a sense of pride and community ownership of the place, and the walking trails offer a healthy and welcoming engagement with both the land and the library. Although not part of the commonly accepted library program, in this case, public outdoor recreation is an appropriate response to the specific resource needs of the place. The interstate is still very loud here, and invasive species have crept to overtake some parts of the trails. Despite this, the exterior of the children's library was popular with walkers, students, and families alike, even in the heat of summer.

Entry and Discovery



Fig. 12. Polk Stanley Wilcox, front entry, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

The library is tall, open, and transparent as it faces the landscape in the north of the site. The library entry, in contrast, greets the houses of Forest Hills as a low, horizontal structure (Fig. 12). The large overhanging roof angles upward to the entry, and the front façade is a warm, golden-orange stone. This gives the Clinton Children's Library the character of a flat wall. It is a moment of discovery. Beyond the wall, the ceiling angles up in the other direction, revealing a high, open interior, bounded on the opposite side by the glass wall that overlooks the landscape toward I-630.

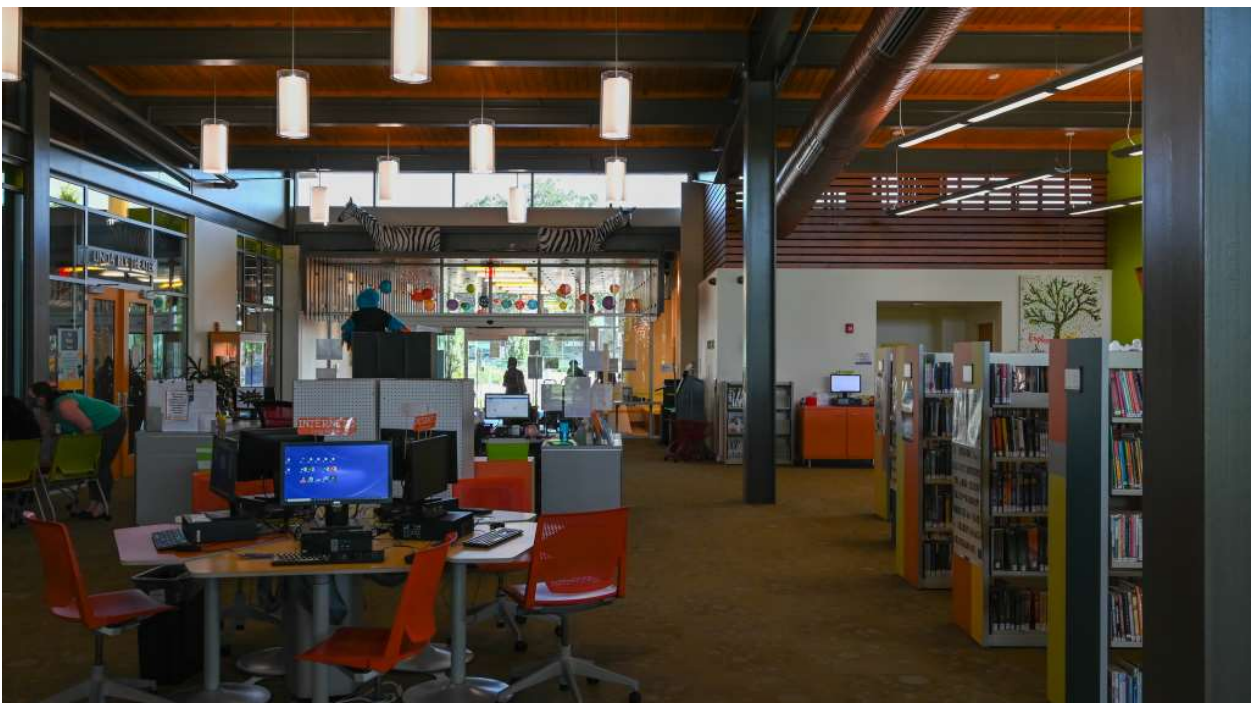


Fig. 13. Polk Stanley Wilcox, library entry and desks, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

The Clinton Children's Library is accessed through a low, thickened threshold comprised of enclosed utility spaces. Like the Ballard Branch and the East Boston Branch libraries, the children's library embraces a high, open plan. The building's primary floor is a simple organization of tables, book stacks, and computer desks, not too dissimilar to the library organization strategies seen in Seattle and Boston. Since the library primarily caters to school-age children, there is a significant emphasis on physical books. Computers are available, and some near the reception desk are even made available to adult community members, but the computers are placed along a wall near the front, not given a celebrated space of their own like the book stacks.

Shaping Space in Section

Unlike the open plan libraries studied previously in this investigation, the Clinton Children's Library has an open second floor with an additional floor below. On the main, open floor, the library shapes comfortable, fun reading spaces that kids can enjoy. A lowered ceiling along the northern glass wall forms the most popular spot to sit and read. The view is elevated, looking out over the walking trails. Several kids pointed at the cars racing by on I-630. The interstate is not hidden from the library, but it is obscured. From this vantage point, I-630 is no longer a barrier or a cruel limitation on Forest Hills; it is a curiosity beyond the tree line.

Along the western wall, the library's main floor leaves an open gap to the floor below. Here, the few enclosed activity spaces on the library's main floor are expressed as objects, and they gain a playfulness from their relationship the floor below. One enclosed room hosts small events and readings, extending like a bridge over the double-height space below. Two quiet study rooms, referred to as the "treehouse" also perch above the lower floor from above (Fig. 15).



Fig. 14. Polk Stanley Wilcox, book stacks, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.



Fig. 15. Polk Stanley Wilcox, lower floor, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.



Fig. 16. Polk Stanley Wilcox, western walkway, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

Expanding the Role of the Library



Fig. 17. Polk Stanley Wilcox, afternoon sun on the western stair, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

A curved stair in this double-height space impresses on the western glass, creating a moment of bright afternoon sun that joins the two floors. The lower floor of the library is more divided and specialized for kids' activities. Fittingly, it is a less public space, embedded in the slope of the site. Multi-purpose rooms for events open outside to a kind of back porch, stepping down toward one of the site's ponds. During one visit, there was a group of students discussing plants from the back porch while another group enjoyed a French music class in a multi-purpose room.

The last two spaces are a teaching kitchen, temporarily closed due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, and an auditorium. During normal operation, the kitchen teaches healthy, safe recipes while providing food for students after school.⁸ The auditorium, taking advantage of

the slope of the site, steps down from the main floor to connect to the lower floor. At the end of one of my visits to the library, a teacher was using the space to get all the children to pay attention to instructions. Some days, the library uses the space to show movies or put on performances. At other times, the space is open for families to sit and read or talk.⁹

The teaching kitchen and the auditorium, like the walking trails, are not the typical program of either a neighborhood library or a children's library, but they speak to the designers' attitudes about the purpose and potential of both. In designing the Clinton Children's Library, Polk Stanley Wilcox Architects uncovers the patterns and nuances of the neighborhood social context and how they manifest in the local built environment. The product of this contextual understanding is a community library that properly answers the complex task of providing for multiple groups with disparate needs.



Fig. 18. Polk Stanley Wilcox, back porch and pond, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

Conclusion



Fig. 19. Polk Stanley Wilcox, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

To wider Little Rock, the Clinton Children's Library is a well-loved destination, particularly for families with younger children. The open floor, outdoor views, special events, and playful reading spaces make it a fun environment for early reading and weekend activities. Parents visiting the library from the suburbs of western and northern Little Rock often spoke of the children's library as a semi-regular family activity. As a specialized library, even this broader client group feels a sense of belonging and community south of I-630.¹⁰

Considering the history of relentless displacement embodied by the area's existing built environment, building in Forest Hills carries a particular mandate to prioritize and provide for the adjacent neighborhoods. In doing so, the Clinton Children's Library serves a diverse range of needs. The library interior is just as popular with

local families. Unlike visitors to the neighborhood, local patrons tend to use the library on a very regular basis. The same older resident who had expressed skepticism of new construction in the area jokingly remarked, "All I hear from my grandkids is 'when can we go to the library?' We used to go over there every day. I'm library-drunk!"¹¹

It is the atypical resources of the Clinton Children's Library that give it meaningful presence as an effective neighborhood library. Older, local students make up another common user group, visiting the library as a free place to hang out after school. The kitchen, computer desks, and landscape introduce activities that engage students of all ages with the place. Additionally, the free and public nature trail is a popular destination for both education and exercise. It brings a unique, much needed outdoor recreational space to Forest Hills while promoting transparency and community ownership of the children's library. The landscape turns the flooded site below the interstate into an invaluable shared resource. To quote one of the project architects about the site, "There is no wrong side of the tracks."¹²



Fig. 20. Polk Stanley Wilcox, Clinton Children's Library, Little Rock, AR, 2013.

Notes

1. Acadia Roher, "Expansion or Segregation? The History of I-630 in Little Rock," last modified February 12, 2020, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/f6bb9fbcc77c4dfebf2acf2dc16db77b>.
2. Discussion with elderly Forest Park resident, Little Rock, June 17, 2021.
3. Max Brantley, "There goes the neighborhood: Push emerges to sell Forest Hills for Tech Park," last modified February 7, 2013, <https://arktimes.com/arkansas-blog/2013/02/07/there-goes-the-neighborhood-push-emerges-to-sell-forest-hills-for-tech-park>.
4. Discussion with local taxi driver, Little Rock, June 19, 2021.
5. Reese Rowland and Mandy Breckinridge, interview by author, Little Rock, June 18, 2021.
6. Reese Rowland and Mandy Breckinridge, interview by author, Little Rock, June 18, 2021.
7. Reese Rowland and Mandy Breckinridge, interview by author, Little Rock, June 18, 2021.
8. Reese Rowland and Mandy Breckinridge, interview by author, Little Rock, June 18, 2021.
9. Discussion with HRC Children's librarian, Little Rock, June 17, 2021.
10. Discussion with HRC Children's librarian, Little Rock, June 17, 2021.
11. Discussion with elderly Forest Park resident, Little Rock, June 17, 2021.
12. Reese Rowland and Mandy Breckinridge, interview by author, Little Rock, June 18, 2021.
13. All photos and sketches by author, Little Rock, 2021.

The Future of the Neighborhood Library



Fig. 1. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, Ballard Branch Library, Seattle, WA, 2005.

Among countless lessons learned during the COVID-19 Pandemic, one is a firm reiteration of the power of online information. Anyone with access to the internet has access to a limitless database of information. The past 20 years, however, have demonstrated, in surprising ways, the persistent importance of the public library. The library owes much of its enduring relevance to its unique status in the United States as a freely accessible, public interior. In the words of critic Sarah Williams Goldhagen, "To use the library to sit and read and rest, you need only to want to sit and read and rest."¹ In addition to informational resources, libraries are spatial resources, environments that provide access to common, shared needs as a community.

A neighborhood library should contribute spaces and resources that embrace the limits and possibilities of a free public library in a

way that is adequate and appropriate to the place. After investigating four prominent library designs in diverse contexts across the United States, I can synthesize several values and considerations that are crucial to neighborhood library design today.

Understand the Place

At the scale of the neighborhood, the built environment is personal. It reflects the daily function of the community and ongoing changes that affect people. The first responsibility in library design is to uncover and understand the past and present context of the place. In the case of the Clinton Children's Library in Little Rock, the area's history of displacement necessitated a transformative yet welcoming approach to the neglected landscape of the site below the interstate.

Invite Community Ownership

The neighborhood library, due to its inherently free and open nature, is a rare, accessible element of city infrastructure. The library represents a shared public investment in the community, and thus, must express its elevated local importance with a respect of the nearby context. The Ballard Branch Library is a monumental structure, but the library's indigenous palette of materials reaches down to form an approachable urban porch. An effective neighborhood library is a proud landmark that empowers its users to take ownership of the public institution.

Activate the Exterior

The contemporary neighborhood library breaks away from the understood notion that library spaces are enclosed, guarded, and silent places. Today, the library can and should invite communication and interaction within the community. By engaging the interior with neighborhood activity outside, the library can shape spaces of open-ended conversation and exchange that enliven the more focused library

interior. The Lockridge Library in Washington forms a transparent yet comfortable outdoor room at a public corner. It functions as a safe and inviting space for pedestrians to stop in the shade. The East Boston Branch Library, on the other hand, celebrates the space between the library interior and the park just outside. This creates areas on each side of the enclosure that benefit from their relationship to the other, whether from light quality, spatial boundary, view, or social environment.



Fig. 2. William Rawn Associates, East Boston Branch Library, Boston, MA, 2013.

Balance Openness and Enclosure

High, open interiors are a time-honored tradition in library architecture. They allow for even and equal daylighting and promote visible connections between all patrons. As a new kind of public square, open views throughout contemporary libraries are essential.

However, neighborhood libraries are also places where individuals and small groups seek calm, focus, and comfort. Contemporary library design should promote public views throughout the building without leaving ambiguous, uninviting spaces. By varying the qualities of light, sound, and openness to other areas, the Lockridge Library hosts a diverse range of environments that accommodate the diverse range of activities that patrons bring to the library. From collaborating with a small group to individual research to community assembly, the library brings a level of autonomy to the neighborhood in its varied layout. Even in a more wide-open library, like the other examples in this paper, variation and degrees of enclosure can promote a sense of discovery, focus, and belonging in the library.



Fig. 2. Adjaye Associates, Lockridge Bellevue Library, Washington, DC, 2013.

Closing Thoughts

Recent years of library design have introduced new possibilities and tested the potential of the neighborhood library. As a free and public interior space found in communities around the country, the library also tends to fill the gaps of public infrastructure when the need arises.² In the case of the Ballard Branch Library, many Ballard residents looked to the public library as their only source of basic needs, such as shelter. This led to operational conflicts between patrons' use of the library and the day-to-day functions of the building and its management.

By understanding limits and context, a library can more appropriately serve its community. This paper documents libraries that function successfully as community centers, outdoor recreation, classrooms, event spaces, city outreach locations, and after-school hangouts, demonstrating the versatility and value that public libraries bring to their neighborhoods. Above all else, architects should design spaces with a core ethos of free, public, and shared access, beyond the sole resources of books and information. With a thorough and specific understanding of the past and present contexts of the place, contemporary libraries can be landmarks of shared needs and values in communities.

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2. Shannon Mattern, "Library as Infrastructure," last modified June 2014, <https://placesjournal.org/article/library-as-infrastructure/?cn-reloaded=1>.
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