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## Places

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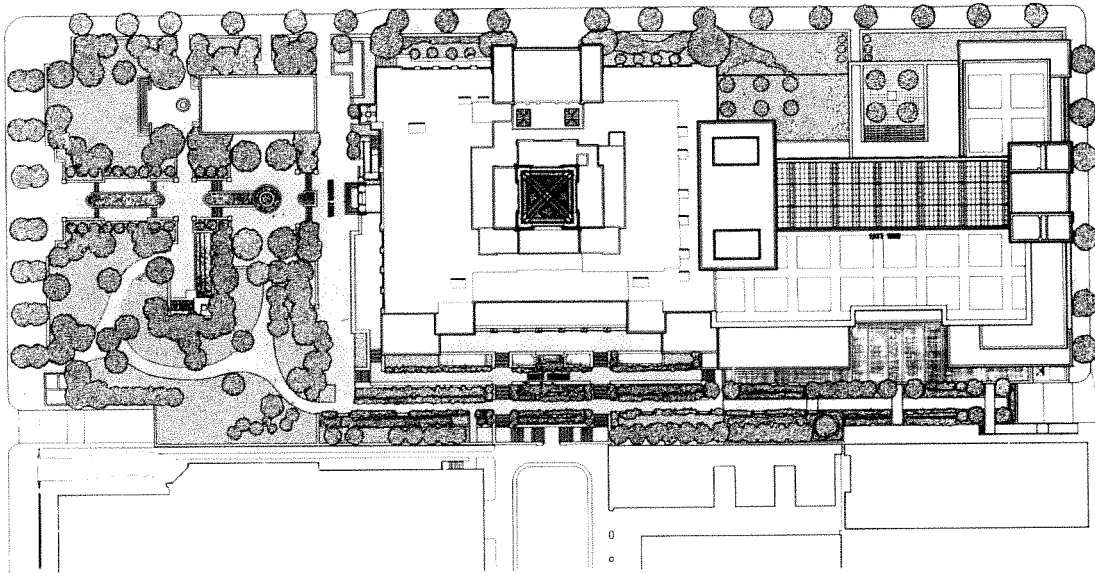
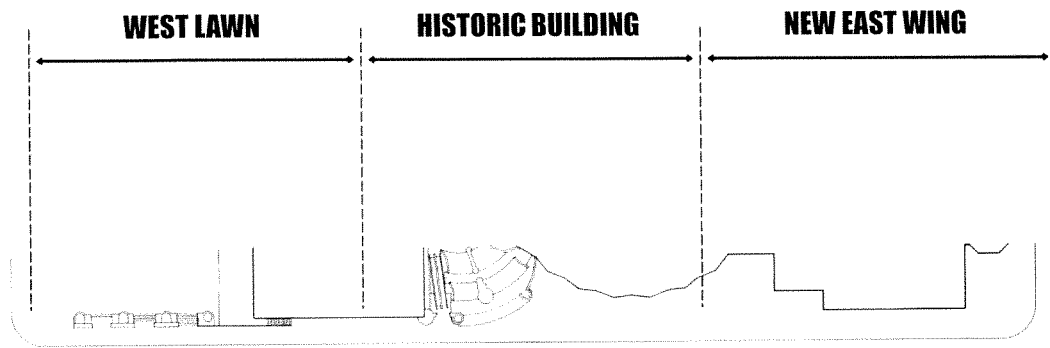
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Robert S. Harris

The Los Angeles Central  
**Library**



Los Angeles built its central downtown library in 1926. Given the importance of such a project, the renowned architect Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue was commissioned for the project. This was truly an extension of the city-building of that era, in which the place of downtown was clearly central and the role of the library was as symbolic as functional.

By 1983, not only had the clarity of downtown's position in its region been challenged, but the great library had also fallen into disfavor among its own staff. They found it inefficient and cramped and wished that it could be demolished and replaced by a larger structure, which could be built on a less centralized, less expensive site. Symbolism and place-making were to be set aside in favor of the business transaction that would bring sufficient new capital to fund construction of a new and much enlarged library.

Over the thirty years the Central Library declined in quality as its interior was fragmented to accommodate offices and operations that Bertram Goodhue could not have imagined. Its interiors were further diminished by uneven maintenance, its intended bridge connection to Bunker Hill had never been made, and the quality of its grounds, of the small parks Goodhue

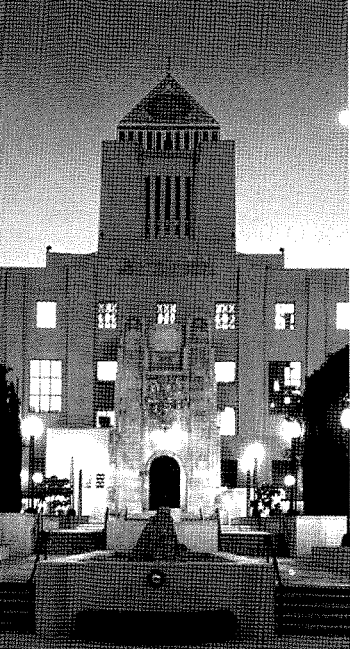
had pressed so hard to create, had been increasingly eliminated in favor of automobile parking space. The American Institute of Architects and the Los Angeles Conservancy brought suit against the city to prevent the demolition of the Library. But there was no workable plan for the future of the Central Library where it stood. Further, two terrible fires were set in the building in 1986, and an earthquake caused further damage in 1987.

Against this background, two downtown business leaders, Robert F. Maguire and Robert Anderson, began a series of initiatives and negotiations that eventually became the Central Library Redevelopment Plan. This was a remarkable financial plan based on two primary purposes: to create and re-create great public value, and to create new private opportunity. This model of serving such multiple purposes, with important economic and cultural advantages for the city, became the heart of the project, and is one of the two great lessons it teaches. There is an inextricable linkage between the quality and prosperity of the public realm and the opportunity for robust private enterprise.

*facing page:* **Aerial view of main stair leading to Central Library.**

*Photo:* **Jay Venezia**

*this page:* **Site plan showing the original Bertram Goodhue library, the new east wing by Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer Associates, and the Maguire Gardens by the Office of Lawrence Halprin.**



*top:* **Night view of Central Library.**

*Photo:* **Tim Street-Porter**

The plan came to include both restoration and expansion of the Central Library, and the development of three additional public places: the restoration and renewal of the library's West Lawn, now to be known as Robert F. Maguire III Gardens; the construction of the Bunker Hill Steps, which finally relate the library to both Bunker Hill and to the primary business terrace of downtown; and the redevelopment of Pershing Square, a separate but highly related initiative of Maguire-Thomas Partners and a consortium of nearby property owners. A great public realm was to be created as a setting for the library and as a stimulus to new private sector investment in the district. Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer Associates were chosen to restore the existing Goodhue building and to design its expansion, a new East Wing. This eight-story new wing (four-stories high and four-stories underground) holds the library's main collection.

These developments were made possible because two major office projects, Library Tower and the Gas Company Tower, were part of the negotiation. Their own significant economic contribution to the city became important, stemming not only from their construction but also the attraction of important tenants and the creation of many jobs. Moreover, their occupants were to rely heavily upon the restaurants and

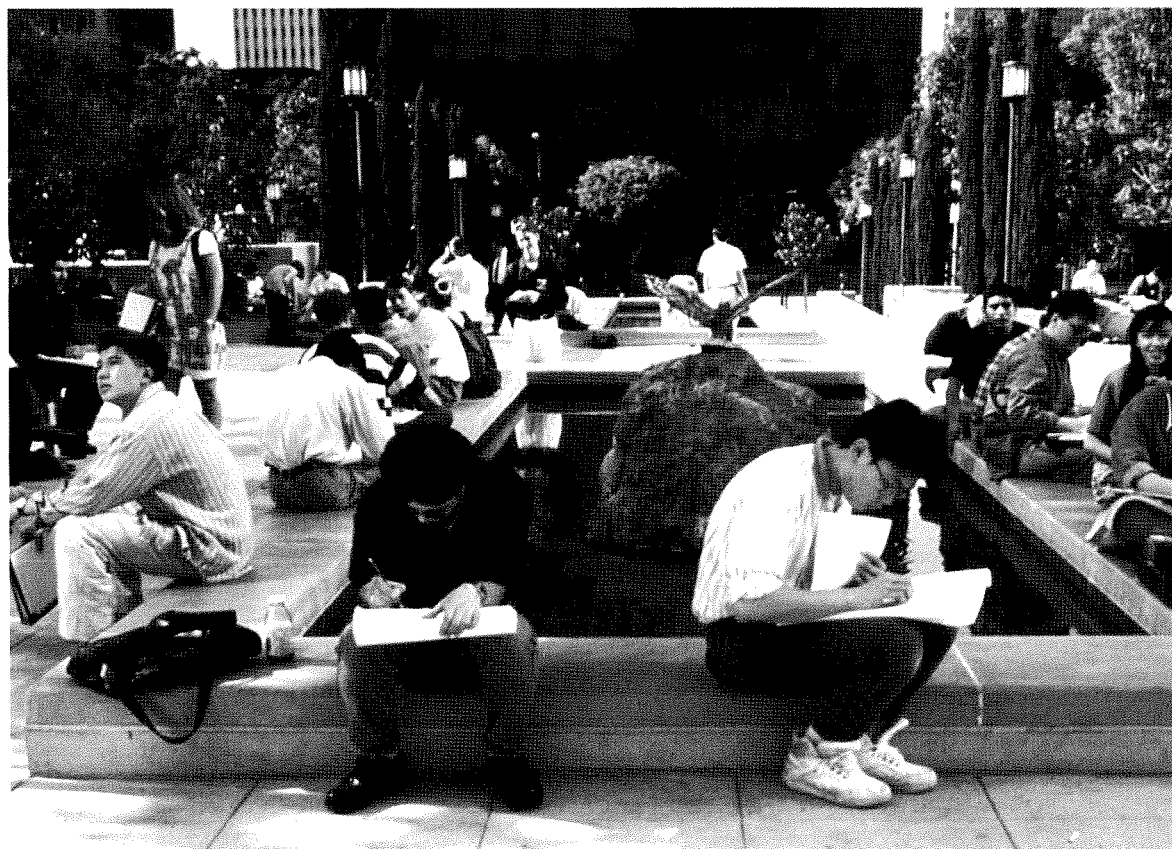
shops and other amenities of downtown rather than following the earlier model of such projects that attempted to be almost entirely self-sufficient.

Significantly, these buildings became rather exemplary designs, urbanistically well behaved as they enliven sidewalks around them and provide visual interest from afar as well as nearby. Library Tower, whose principal architect was Harry Cobb, and the Gas Company Tower, whose architect was Rick Keating, then with Skidmore Owings Merrill, are Southern California's two most distinguished office towers of the last twenty years. And so the second lesson is finding the talent able to realize the power of architecture to bring urban places to life.

The transformed and expanded library is an especially rewarding destination in the city, and has been a catalyst for new activity around it. The Goodhue Library, which remains the central element, can be entered from three directions. It has been restored to its earlier glory, and it is once again a cultural and architectural landmark. Its rotunda was never the center of activity because it is on the second floor and the bridge that was to enter it from Bunker Hill was never, and will never be built. Meanwhile, from the rotunda one can enter the children's library restored wonderfully and

*bottom:* **Public life in the West Lawn.**

*Photo:* **Foad Farah**







*top:* Library on fire as a result of arson, 1986.

always busy with young readers. On Saturday mornings, the house is packed for marionette shows. That the library for children has such a central location in such a central place in the city is a source of pride to Angelenos.

The new addition is thus entered from the historic building, and on axis is the wing's great atrium. Within the atrium is a series of descending terraces that give entrance to the library's collections, thus each distinct collection has its own prominent location. The historic building's public spaces are used for all the most active purposes including information desks, of course, but also a gift shop, cafes and exhibits. Outside on the west is a restored – new garden, designed by Lawrence Halprin, with a restaurant pavilion, terraces, 160 trees, lawns, and actually engaging water features. Works of art are integral to the construction and relate closely, but discretely, to the sciences and literature.

On the side of the principal street, toward the center of greatest pedestrian access, is a public auditorium. It can be entered from inside the library or independently, and is adjacent to a small but well proportioned courtyard. On the side of the library that is towards the center of the block, a paseo provides both convenient pedestrian linkages, several of the most rewarding spatial experiences, and a connection to Hope Street on the south and one of the best views of the Goodhue library. The east facade, on Grand Avenue, finally allows one to grasp from outside the great size of the new addition. However, because of the good decision to provide entrance only from the historic building, the east facade brings no activity to the street. Wide sidewalks may some day become host to vendors' carts, and this problem will be overcome.

Purposeful and inventive sponsors found the political and financial tools necessary for action to be taken,

and design talent was assembled to assure that great city-making would actually occur. The meaning and fabric of history has been respected and given a new trajectory into the future. The Los Angeles Central Library is a textbook example of how the potential for a meaningful public realm and the expectations of private opportunity can be powerfully fulfilled.



*bottom:* Central Library Atrium.

*Photo:* Foad Farah