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Ballard Library and Neighborhood Service Center—Seattle, WA

Bohlin Cywinski Jackson Architects



Seattle residents love their libraries. On November 3, 1998, they overwhelmingly approved a “Libraries for All” bond measure that raised \$196.4 million to upgrade their public library system with new facilities, technology, and books. Since then, the money has been used not only to fund a new central library, designed by Rem Koolhaas, but also to build three neighborhood branches, replace six other branch buildings, and renovate the rest.

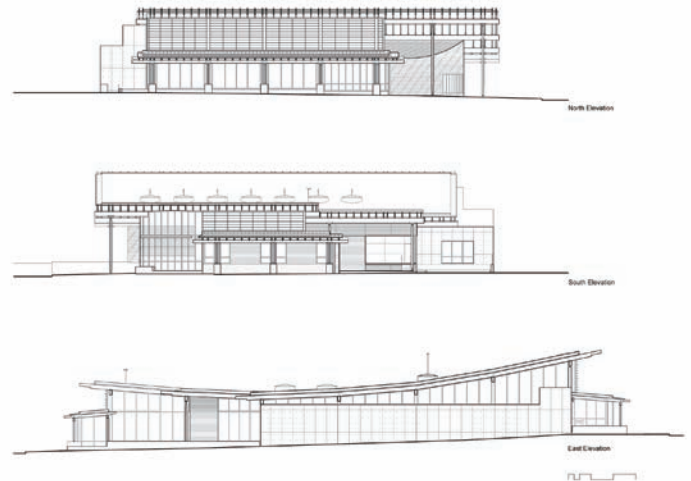
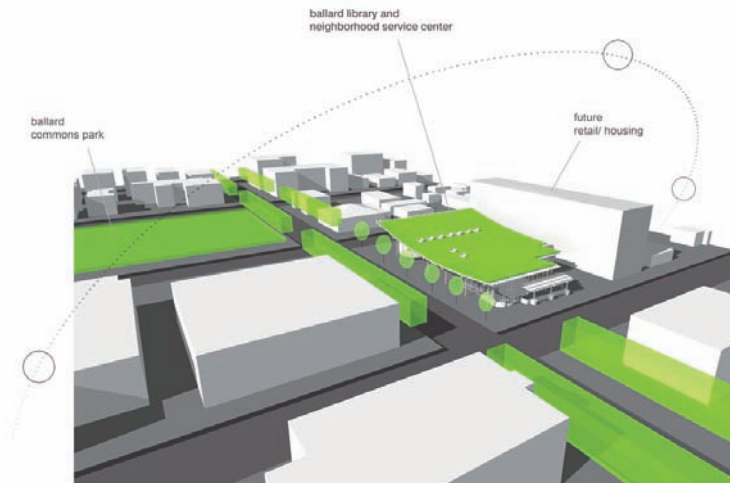
It was this commitment that allowed replacement of the 1963 Ballard Public Library with this award-winning project. However, in designing the Ballard Branch Library and Neighborhood Service Center, the architects, Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, were also challenged to begin implementation of a new Ballard Municipal Plan. A key aim of

that plan is to create a lively civic district that will include improved museums, parks, public art, and a light-rail station. In that sense, this 18,600-square-foot, \$7.3 million building is already helping to transform the center of this district on the city’s northwestern fringe.

Since its opening, in May 2005, the library and service center—now the largest of the city’s branch libraries—has been hailed as a success by nearly everyone—and, most important, the community that uses it.¹ The architects attribute this positive response to the variety of residents who were involved in the design from its earliest stages. The community’s goal was to assure that the building would be more than a warehouse for books; it would be a place that provided a safe learning environment for people of all ages and cultures. Toward that end, the design focused on fostering a sense of community, starting with children.

“We wanted to create a sense of discovery and a way to draw kids in to the library,” says BCJ’s managing principal

Above: The Ballard Library and Service Center’s green roof features a variety of native plants and an array of photovoltaic panels, all of which can be observed from inside by means of a periscope.



architect, Robert Miller. “If children come, adults come with them, and it creates a strong community.”

Another goal was to create a place for people to gather—whether outside, at the built-in furniture of its western plaza, or inside, at its tables and reading rooms. Providing it a green roof, solar-energy systems, and environmentally friendly materials, the designers also hoped it would provide an educational resource in itself—one that could be easily read, like a book, by people of all ages.

A Northwest Sensibility

In selecting the library and service center for a design award, the jury was aware that it was giving both 2008 design awards to projects in Seattle. However, this concentration would serve as a deliberate “shout-out” to the city, one said, in recognition of its leadership in establishing, and investing in, new forms of urban awareness. But they also praised the building for its inherently beautiful and progressive qualities. Partly, this had to do with their feeling that it was a successful restatement of a Pacific Northwest regional modernism, faithful to an existing architectural language without literally reproducing past forms. Its material choices and simplicity of form recall a variety of time periods, yet the building also manages to fit comfortably in the present.

Low-lying and well-scaled, the building houses both the library (15,000 square feet) and the service center (3,600 square feet) under a single sweeping roof. This roof gently curves up at both its north and the south ends, allowing natural light to penetrate deep into the interior. The form

also suggests an upturned boat hull, recalling Ballard’s past as a home to fishermen and ship builders. The roof’s curved joists and exposed decking further this expression, while its structural steel columns recall the white masts of sailboats on nearby Puget Sound.

Ballard’s population has strong Scandinavian roots. Like the sod roofs on vernacular Scandinavian buildings, the roof of the library and service center is planted with species that give it the appearance of a windswept field. Yet only four inches of soil are required for its sustenance, allowing its profile to be surprisingly thin.

Other features of the buildings are also well conceived. For example, the extended overhang to the west, which covers both entrances and provides shelter from the rain, is a comfortable, welcoming place. The entrances themselves are color-coded for clarity: red for the library and blue for the service center. Both are set well back from the street, marked by steel beams that extend from the interior. In effect, this shared space creates an urban plaza. Kids ride by on skateboards; teens lean against the building; and adults and children sit on the steel furniture set in groups along the building’s edge. It is a space activated by people—studying, playing, eating, or simply passing through.

Inside, beneath the massive upturned roof, the interior of the library space is open and flooded with natural light.

Above left: The library is integrated with key public improvements in the Ballard Municipal Plan.

Above right: North, south, and east elevations.



The mast-like columns march lightly through, interspersed with five “boxes” of stained local cedar that house areas for the library staff, restrooms, and storage. The largest and most prominent of these is really a curving form of galvanized panels that wraps a gathering and meeting space for up to 120 people. The room looks out onto a new park diagonally across an intersection from the building, and so connects outdoor public space with indoor public functions.

These forms float in an area that feels simultaneously intimate and spacious. As a library built for community use and activity, it allows a visible connection from the children’s corner to the circulation desk. Even the “quiet room,” a glazed-in box opposite the entry, designed to be acoustically separate, is visually connected by its placement. This is a library that begs for interaction, not only quiet learning and research.

Sample Juror Comments—Ballard Library and Neighborhood Service Center

Fritz Steiner: The other one that might be worth an award is the library in Seattle. The green roof is fantastic. With all the various green roofs, it is more poetic than most of them.

Dennis Frenchman: You visited it and you liked it?

Leanne Rivlin: I went on a weekday, and it was filled with people.

Fritz Steiner: I think we could be giving a shout-out to Seattle here. Say Seattle has made the kind of

commitment to place and to sustainability and to art and culture. If there is another winner from Seattle I think that would be impressive.

Susan Szenasy: And also it’s nice to have a building—a public space and a building.

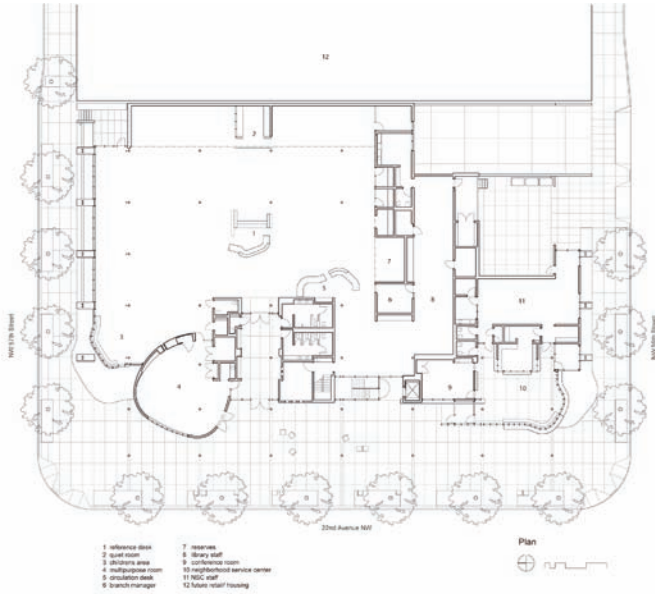
Dennis Frenchman: And it’s the right scale. It is not the grand city hall. It’s the building you wouldn’t have suspected.

Susan Szenasy: There you go.

Leanne Rivlin: I found it a user-friendly place and with qualities I certainly have not identified with libraries before. It’s light. It’s beautiful. It fits into its context very well. And I just enjoyed being there. My husband did too. We went together. We were brought by students who said you couldn’t leave Seattle without visiting it.

Jane Weinzapfel: That’s fantastic.

Dennis Frenchman: It struck me as a very simple



Repository for Learning, Tool for Teaching

A strong focus of the design from the beginning was sustainability and educational outreach. “We wanted this to be more than just a repository for books,” says Miller. “We wanted the public to experience how the building works.”

It is, in fact, a building that teaches innovation by example. Portraying themes of wind, water, and earth, it uses cutting-edge technologies to take advantage of energy resources in ways that are visible and publicly intelligible.

In this sense, its green roof is its most dominant feature. Visible from the street, it was planted with more than 18,000 native, drought-tolerant plants. The form of the roof dictated the location of the species: where the water gathered toward the lower section, sedums were planted; toward the upper edge, even more drought-tolerant plants were used. The



Opposite left: The front entrance is sheltered by a broad overhang. The upturned roof recalls Ballard’s maritime traditions. View from the corner of 22nd Avenue NW and NW 57th Street.

Opposite right: View from the west across 22nd Avenue NW (above). View from the north across NW 57th Street (below).

Above left: Site plan.

Above right: On the interior, the wood-framed roof is supported by slender steel columns, creating an open space filled with natural light.

building. And yet its achievement is enormous. And it creates these different worlds—the one on the top, the one inside, and the one on the street. So to achieve those experiences in such a simple way I think is a lesson.

Susan Szenasy: It also feels to me—and I haven’t been there—but from the pictures, it feels like Aalto’s Viipuri Library. It has this beautiful light coming in.

Fritz Steiner: There’s a building tradition in the Northwest with wood and light—because light is so

important there. It is tied to a Puget Sound type of architecture that is a modern, regionalist approach. It is part of that, but is not just mimicking it; it advances it.

Susan Szenasy: I think that’s why we respond to it so well, because of the modern feeling. But it feels like it is of a place.

Dennis Frenchman: I think the connection between the wood structure and the grass—it’s really kind of amazing. Because normally when I think about dirt

and grass on roofs I think of concrete and steel, and you need all this drainage, and it has to be heavy. But to connect those two I think is a wonderful symbol.... And the lightness actually comes through on the edge. How can that support this?

Jane Weinzapfel: So it gets lighter and lighter at the edge.

David Moffat (moderator): Sometimes it is difficult to demonstrate research in a design project.



result looks like a field that might have emerged from natural patterns of rainfall. A periscope inside the library allows visitors see the rooftop vegetation close up and feel a connection to this patch of nature in the city—as well as catch views of the Olympic Mountains to the west on a clear day.

Patrons can also learn about the advantages of green roofs by reading posted information. And tours each week by library volunteers teach the advantages of green roofs: how they reduce stormwater runoff and the urban heat-

island effect, insulate in both cold and warm climates, produce oxygen, and mitigate other negative effects of impermeable urban surfaces.

“Our climate is perfect for green-roof structures, both civic and residential,” says the architect Peter Steinbrueck. A former member of the Seattle City Council, he was an advocate for green roofs while in office. Now that other civic projects in the city utilize green-roof technology, local design professionals and advocates of green-roof technologies hope more will be built.²

The periscope also allows library patrons to see the seventeen photovoltaic arrays mounted on the roof to collect energy. Meters, on the windowsills of the children’s section below, record the energy collected by each module, providing a live-time readout of the collection of electricity, determined by the sun’s position.

Photovoltaic cells were also applied as thin “frits” to areas of the south- and west-facing glass surrounding the Neighborhood Service Center. These produce an amount of energy equivalent to that needed to power a large single-family home. The frit has the additional benefit of screening interior spaces from excessive glare and adjusting overall daylight to an appropriate level. And the energy-absorbing glazing is set low enough so that people may observe it and understand its utility in a climate where solar power is often thought to be impractical.

The effects of microclimate are apparent in other ways, too. Equipment was placed on the roof to measure wind speed, wind direction, sunlight, and rainfall. A computer program interprets this data and responds to changes by triggering patterns of motion on LED panels inside, creating an interactive environment. Along with climate information, this display incorporates sounds gathered by rooftop equipment and a readout of energy production from the building’s solar modules.

Sample Juror Comments—Ballard Library and Neighborhood Service Center

Susan Szenasy: I think the roof does. I think the light conditions, the structure—you know, what’s right for the region. Studying what’s there: where the sun comes from, how do you make the most of it? I think they did a lot of thinking.

Jane Weinzapfel: Use of local materials and local sensibilities....

Leanne Rivlin: Seattle as a whole has had a real commitment to libraries.

Jane Weinzapfel: I think this does well, it commends Seattle in terms of its risk-taking, in terms of its urban adventure, in terms of its place-making, in terms of these satellite libraries, of which we saw several that were terrific.

Dennis Frenchman: The research, just to reinforce, is into the place-making and what kind of building is perfect for this place in the city with its grid of green and this pattern of open spaces that they are trying to

frame. It also uses photovoltaic film and other really advanced technologies. I like that—sustainable, but it also involves technology.

Details Make Place

Along with the cutting-edge technologies, simpler energy-saving ideas were also employed. To reduce the need for electric light, seven skylights were placed at strategic locations, and light wells provide abundant natural light to the underground parking deck that serves both the library and the service center. Where electric fixtures are used, sensors monitor ambient levels, eliminating the need for manual switching. Ventilation systems similarly monitor indoor air quality constantly and make periodic adjustments.

Other products were designed to reduce embodied energy and create a healthier environment. Recycled materials such as carpet, glass, ceramic tiles, and ceiling tiles were used throughout. Environmentally friendly paints and adhesives have reduced off-gassing and other toxic effects.

The architects were also hired to design the interior of the building, a commission that included its furnishings. However, when the first bid for Alvar Aalto-inspired furniture came back too high, Miller went into his basement and started working on new prototypes to reduce manufacturing costs. The results were designs that could be cut from a single sheet of laminated plywood, reducing wood waste, and that would be held together by notches, eliminating the need for mechanical fasteners.

Eventually, the furniture was cut and shaped via a CNC (computer numerical control) router in a Michigan factory, flat-packed without packaging, and trucked to Seattle. Assembly took half the time expected, and cost less than the amount budgeted. Each piece calls attention to its mode of assembly by exposing its notched connections.

The architects designed steel chairs and tables for the building's entry plaza. The furniture is placed in groups to encourage social interaction—an important element of learning that few libraries manage successfully.

Since its completion, the project has received numerous awards. Among them have been green-roof environmental citations and local and state AIA honors for civic and library design. It has earned a national AIA Design Award, and was cited as a 2006 Top Ten Green Projects by the AIA's Committee on the Environment.³

While these recognize professional achievement, its real success, however, is measured by the experience of users, who praise it as an excellent reflection of Ballard, one that embodies local goals as well as the diversity of Seattle neighborhoods. It is already providing the cornerstone for the lively new civic center envisioned by the Ballard Plan.

On a typical day, families sit in the bright section for children's books, young adults occupy its computers, and older adults read the local papers. This is a reflection

of twenty-first-century library culture, of a community coming together to pursue education through a variety of resources. The Ballard Library presents an inspiring space to those who want to take advantage of all the Seattle Public Library has to offer: books, videos, computers, and now a building that speaks of a more civil and sustainable future.

— *Kathryn Rogers Merlino*

Notes

1. The old Carnegie Library, on Fifteenth Avenue NW, is now a restaurant.
2. The Seattle Justice Center (2000) and City Hall (2001) both have green roofs.
3. The project has won numerous awards: 2007 Design Award, AIA/ALA Library Design Awards; 2007 Merit Award for Design AIA Northwest and Pacific Region; 2006 Top Ten Green Projects, American Institute of Architects Committee on the Environment; American Institute of Architects, 2006 National Honor Award for Design; American Institute of Architects 2006 Commendation, AIA Seattle; 2006 Green Roof Award of Excellence, Extensive Institutional Category, Green Roofs for Healthy Cities; 2005 Honor Award for Civic Design, AIA Washington Council; 2003 Commendation for Design Excellence and Innovation, Seattle Design Commission.

All photos by Nic Lehoux. All drawings by Bohlin Cywinski Jackson Architects.

Opposite: A curved meeting room at the northwest corner of the building looks out on a nearby park.