

Design



A Good Public Building

Chicago's new main library revives old-fashioned architectural virtues

by Witold Rybczynski

THE SEVENTIES and eighties were the decades of building museums. The international boom was easy to understand: the public's interest in art was fueled by blockbuster exhibitions, the well-publicized extravagances of the art market, public-television programs, including Kenneth Clark's *Civilization*, and the museums themselves. It appears that the nineties are going to see another boom in cultural buildings—one that was less predictable. Not new

opera houses or concert halls, not cineplexes or theme parks—new public libraries.

Los Angeles is currently spending more than \$200 million to renew and expand its public library, and San Francisco

is building a new 377,000-square-foot main public library. Denver recently held an architectural competition, won by Michael Graves, for a \$65 million central library, and San Antonio is undertaking a similar project. Even Las Vegas,



not known as a book town, has built a new public library, designed by that southwestern firebrand Antoine Predock. In Canada, Vancouver has chosen Moshe Safdie as the architect of its new public library. The French have begun work on an immense new national library, which Parisian wags have already christened the TGB, for *très grande bibliothèque*—a pun on “TGV,” the supertrain. The pompous composition of four glass towers has become the focus of a public controversy.

Chicago has also built itself a new public library. Some library! The Harold Washington Library Center, which opened to the public on October 7 of last year, is the largest municipal library in the country and the second-largest public library in the world, after The British Library, in London. The \$144 million, 756,000-square-foot building occupies a full city block on State Street in the South Loop. Perhaps “possesses” would be a better word, because the sturdy ten-story monolith lays claim to its place in this city of famous architecture in such a forceful manner that it already looks as if it had been there forever.

No doubt this impression is exactly what the architect had in mind. “It’s a building of memories,” Thomas H. Beeby, of Hammond Beeby and Babka, told the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Beeby, who headed the design team, is a native-born Chicagoan, and his fellow citizens will easily recognize in the library bits and pieces of many of their favorite Chicago buildings.

The cyclopean granite base is an obvious reference to the Rookery Building, designed by Burnham & Root and completed in 1886. The brick walls recall the same architects’ massive Monadnock Building of 1891, which stands just around the corner. The arched entrances repeat those of Adler & Sullivan’s 1889 Auditorium Building. The huge pediments on the roof and the composition of the main façade are derived from the classical front of the Art Institute, a *beaux-arts* landmark on Michigan Avenue designed by the Boston firm of Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge. And some of the metal ornament is based on the same botanical forms that inspired Louis Sullivan’s exuberant Carson Pirie Scott Store. Although most of the references are to old buildings, the back of the library—a steel-and-glass

curtain wall—is a nod to Chicago's modernist tradition.

Perhaps this makes the library sound like a collage. But this is not one of those buildings that deconstruct the architectural past in order to reassemble it in some bizarre, skewed format that delights the architecture critics and confounds everyone else. Nor is it, like Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's recent Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London, a clever but weak-kneed and ironic rendition of a classical building. Beeby and his colleagues take their classicism seriously. Their use of traditional elements avoids the shallowness of much post-modern architecture, because instead of merely aping the classical style or, worse still, parodying it, they are attempting to revive a classical attitude. If this sober and rugged building looks old-fashioned, it is because its designers are concerned with old-fashioned architectural virtues: civility, clarity, utility, and beauty.

THE NEW library has no wind-swept plaza with a forlorn Calder or Henry Moore sculpture, no dried-up reflecting pools, no concrete planters with dying evergreens and paper litter. The walls spring straight up from the sidewalk, just as all downtown buildings in Chicago (or, indeed, any American city) did from the 1870s until the 1950s, when architects adopted Mies van der Rohe's tower-in-a-plaza approach. The Harold Washington Library Center reaffirms the older tradition, and it's a reminder that cities are made up first of all of streets, and that the prime function of urban buildings is to define these streets.

The exterior of the library, like that of all well-designed buildings, conveys several messages. Its heavy walls proclaim solidity and permanence. The monumental scale suggests a civic building of some importance. The different materials—metal and glass on top, brick for the main body, and stone at the base—are not arbitrary choices but represent the need to support heavier and heavier loads. The tripartite organization also reflects what is going on inside: the base houses special facilities (the lobby, a bookstore, a film and video center, the children's library), the brick body contains six floors of book stacks, and the top con-

tains special public rooms (a restaurant, a winter garden) and the administrative offices.

If the interior of this mammoth building feels familiar and unthreatening, that is probably because it resembles a department store, with social sciences on one floor, literature on another. As in a department store, the public is transported from floor to floor by escalators as well as elevators. Each of the library floors consists of book stacks through which the public can freely browse. There are plenty of reading tables and, along one side, a series of intimate alcoves that resemble the carrels often found in academic libraries. The library incorporates a wealth of technical gadgetry, including an electronic directory system that displays floor layouts, book locations, and information on special events; a computerized reference system; on-line information services; and banks of freely accessible computers and printers.

The main lobby is a bland, characterless space that is a letdown after the robust exterior. Its focus is an art installation that incorporates text from Harold Washington's speeches, but the intent of the art, which conveys neither wisdom nor joy, remains obscure. The winter garden, however, a glass-roofed space at the top of the building, is spectacular. Perhaps too spectacular. Unfortunately, what was to have been a public room, filled with trees and benches, remains largely unfurnished; it appears to have been co-opted by the library management for civic galas, and is also being rented out for private social events. Too bad.

A great deal of credit goes to a municipal administration that insisted on good-quality construction, inside and out, figuring that flimsy materials would only increase maintenance costs later. The Napoleon red granite of the base looks thick because it is thick; the entrance doors are bronze; the interior walls are plaster on metal lath, not wallboard; and the old-fashioned, comfortable courthouse chairs in the reading areas are solid maple. Parenthetically, the solid craftsmanship was realized concurrently with the most modern of construction techniques: "design-build." In design-build a developer, a contractor, and an architect form a team that undertakes to design and build a project within a fixed peri-

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od of time and to swallow any cost overruns. In the case of the Chicago library, the building was built within the budget and was delivered only one month late.

IN HIS recent book, *Architecture: The Natural and the Manmade*, the architectural historian Vincent Scully repeats the old architectural aphorism that "one should decorate construction, never build decoration." Scully is referring to the use of decoration to give character to buildings, contrasting this with striving for individuality by trying to make the shape of each building different. It's not surprising to learn that Scully was on the jury for the 1987 architectural competition that chose the Hammond Beeby and Babka design. The building is really a large box that derives its architectural character precisely from the use of applied decoration.

The library is probably the first large American public building since the 1930s to incorporate figurative ornament. There are cast-stone festoons between the windows, and medallions with puff-cheeked faces, drolly personifying the Windy City. Window spandrels are decorated with sheaves of corn stalks that terminate in a head of Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, and a ribbon with Chicago's motto, "Urbs et Hortis" ("Garden City"). The most dramatic ornaments were designed by the sculptor Raymond Kaskey for the

perimeter of the roof. Huge cast-aluminum barn owls, backed by spreading palm leaves, appear at the corners of the building, and the center of the main façade, on State Street, is marked by a huge horned owl, wings spread, clutching a book.

"Classicism is an architectural language that is highly developed and understood by most people," Thomas Beeby says. But do the sweatshirted and baseball-capped teenagers who use the library know who Ceres was? Can they read Latin? Probably not. And they won't know that the chain-patterned band of cast stone that surrounds the building's base is called a guilloche, or that the frieze along the pediments represents swords and shields. That will not necessarily stop them from deriving pleasure from the decorative shapes, the puff-cheeked faces, and the wise owls. In any case, the function of architectural decoration is not only symbolic. Ornament provides buildings with scale, or rather with many scales. Modernist buildings

that lack decoration can be handsome structures, like Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building, say, or Louis Kahn's Salk Institute, and can make their powerful presence felt at a distance. But what happens when one approaches? Nothing. There is no finer grain, no detail, except perhaps a neoprene gasket or a bolt head. Seen close up, the abstract shapes of the bronze mullions and flat concrete surfaces are one-dimensional, dull, uninteresting.



At the top, glass pediments offer a sweeping view of the city

In 1982 Michael Graves built the Portland Building, in Portland, Oregon; it was the first large public building by a postmodern architect. After the Portland Building, critics of postmodernism, of whom there were many, could no longer dismiss it as a fringe movement—it had joined the mainstream. Will the Chicago library, a more accomplished piece of design and a more prominent building, do the same for classicism? That is unlikely. The spread of postmodernism in the 1980s, like deconstructivism today, was driven by architectural magazines and schools of architecture, neither of which appears to be interested in classicism. Although *Progressive Architecture* magazine did single out the design of the Chicago library for a citation in its 1989 awards for excellence, since then no historicist work has been so honored. And students in schools of architecture are not being taught the classical vocabulary but are being encouraged to find a personal language of architectural expression.

Beeby has stubbornly refused to develop an individual style and has preferred to adapt his buildings to their contexts. Several years ago he built a children's camp in Connecticut, for the Paul Newman Foundation, and took his cue from the rugged log-cabin vernacular of the Adirondack camp. A ranch he recently designed outside Santa Fe, New Mexico, is built in adobe. And in London, Beeby is part of



Intimate reading alcoves are set off from open book stacks

an Anglo-American team that is replanning and rebuilding Paternoster Square, a seven-acre area around St. Paul's Cathedral, to conform to its original, early-Georgian roots.

It is unlikely that there will ever be a recognizable Beeby style, just as there was no Thomas Hastings style, to name an accomplished classical architect of the turn of the century. With John Carrère, Hastings built Spanish Revival hotels in St. Augustine, Florida, French stately houses on Long Island and in the Berkshires, and—his masterwork—the *beaux-arts* New York Public Library, a building as ambitious, grand, and technologically advanced in its day as the Harold Washington Library Center is in ours.

NEW YORK built its public library almost a hundred years ago, and to some people the idea of building a large downtown library might seem an anachronism. They would argue that the grand public library, like the majestic railroad terminus or the opulent city hall, is a relic of the nineteenth century; surely the money would be better spent on strengthening the branch libraries, on

which could be anywhere—in the office, at school, at home, or even in one's car—replace the grand public library?

Decentralization may yet come, but although we need reading programs, and neighborhood libraries, and books, we also need civic monuments. A civic monument enshrines values that we hold dear, and it publicly proclaims these values to us and to our children. It is surely no coincidence that the boom in building public libraries coincides with a serious public effort to combat illiteracy and to promote reading. "I do think that the life of the mind is still vital," says John B. Duff, the commissioner of the Chicago Public Library. Just so.

I spent several hours in the Harold Washington Library Center. The atmosphere was different from that in other public buildings. Unlike a museum, it had no price of admission, and the security guards were unobtrusive; the stacks were open, and the books were there to be picked up and leafed through. There was also a more mixed crowd than one finds in a museum or a concert hall: groups of teenagers, elderly

men and women, college students, street people. In a period when even art museums are beginning to resemble shopping malls, this library stands apart. It didn't make me feel like a consumer, or a spectator, or an onlooker—it made me feel like a citizen.

Most striking of all, the library makes not the slightest effort to entertain the people who use it. Too many of our public places (shopping malls, airports) are either selling us something or at-

tempting to keep us amused. The Chicago library takes itself, and its users, seriously, and through an architecture that is calm and measured, it resolutely communicates this sense of purpose: that books and reading and knowledge are important. □



The main lobby. Escalators lead to the book collections above

outreach programs, on promoting literacy, and on books. This position is bolstered by the fact that technology has in great part done away with the need for central libraries. The banking machine has replaced the stately bank, so why shouldn't a computer terminal,



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