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Just How Public Is the Seattle Public Library?
Publicity, Posturing, and Politics in Public Design

When they voted to tax themselves to support the overhaul of their city's library system, Seattleites expected to play a leading role in deciding how those funds would be spent—particularly in the case of the city's new Central Library. Throughout the design process, the public's input was solicited and catalogued—but because the library and design team controlled both the major design decisions and the discourse surrounding that design, the public's input had only limited effect. A case study of the communication surrounding the design of the Seattle Public Library illuminates the discursive system that frames the design agenda, informs the design itself, and defines the extent of public involvement.

Introduction

Seattle of the 1990s was a city in transition—a city whose identity was bound up with its Native American heritage, its geographical splendor, and flannel shirts, but also with its status as birthplace to some of the world's largest and most successful technology, aviation, and bioengineering companies, and its distinction as home to two of the world's richest individuals. One constant, however, was the city's reputation—or perhaps even notoriety—for public process. And recently, Seattle, also famous for its great love of books, was given the opportunity to build a new downtown public library—an institution supposedly founded on the ideals of free and universal access. Coloring the public process surrounding this design project were, first, a critically acclaimed, Dutch-born, internationally practicing intellect-architect, and, second, a climate of architectural suspicion that arose after Frank Gehry's multicolored blob, the Experience Music Project, appeared beneath the Seattle Center's Space Needle.

Gehry's design was only the latest in a series of unpopular public projects. In 1991, Robert Venturi's Seattle Art Museum met with a cool reception. And in the mid-1990s, Seattleites rejected Microsoft billionaire Paul Allen's offer to fund Seattle Commons, a park linking the central business district to the waterfront. In their attempts to update the city's architectural image, the city government, civic

organizations, real estate developers, and public institutions found that Seattleites suffered from what Douglas Kelbaugh, former member of the architecture faculty at the University of Washington, called the "Lesser Seattle syndrome." Local architect Mark Hinshaw explained what Kelbaugh meant:

> Architecturally, Seattle is very reticent city. Almost as if people are afraid to make a social blunder that might offend someone. Perhaps . . . we've been working so hard at becoming a cosmopolitan/commercial, cultural hub of the Pacific Rim that we've taken ourselves way too seriously. Maybe all that turgid praise in magazines like *Newsweek* and *Fortune* has given us a collective complex.[1]

The city was indeed facing what urban historian Thomas Bender might call a "crisis of representation"; its civic identity, and the architectural representation of that identity, stood somewhere between provincialism and cosmopolitanism.[2] Resolving this crisis was not a matter of choosing one or the other, but of finding a way to integrate the city's multiple identities. Geographer David Harvey argues that the modern city is a "'palimpsest' of past forms superimposed upon each other."[3] And he recognizes that "shifts in the experience of space and time," like those that Seattle was undergoing, "generate new struggles in such fields as esthetics

and cultural representation. . . . The way a city imagines itself, represents itself, and materializes itself are not necessarily congruent."[4] These inconsistencies between Seattleites' self-images, their visual and verbal representations of themselves, and the steel, glass, and concrete representation of those identities in their physical city spark "discursive struggles over representation."[5]

Not to mention that the relative homogeneity of Seattle's demographics in the past round of investment in building civic infrastructure, which might have fostered cultural and aesthetic consensus, no longer held. In the days of Forward Thrust, a regional development program begun in the late 1960s, minorities accounted for less than 20 percent of the city's population, but, by the 1990s, that percentage grew to near 30 percent.[6,7] The city's increasing ethnic diversity can account in part for the existence of multiple publics, whose histories, interests, and perspectives varied.

Perhaps a new Seattle Public Library—the institution that, according to City Librarian Deborah Jacobs, represents the "transparency of democracy"—was Seattle's "chance to get it visibly [and ideologically] right."[8] These "discursive struggles over representation" could be edifying and productive for the city as they are debated and resolved in the public process surrounding the library design project. A case study of this place-making process could prove instructive in uncovering the discursive

variables — verbal and visual — that informed the design process, shaped the library building itself, and, most importantly, embodied in built form prevailing institutional and civic ideologies. These discursive struggles — although they may at times seem to be petty word games, visual puns, or semantic debates — are actually integral to public process: they help to set the design agenda, to determine the way people talk about design and envision "representations of space," and to ultimately shape the function and form of the city's civic realm.

It is my contention, however, that, despite the volume and robustness of public discourse in the Seattle Public Library's design review process, the public's commentary and criticism had only a limited effect on the form and character of the design. The public was indeed kept well informed throughout the process, and input, from staff and patrons, was indeed solicited, but this input resulted in only minor interior changes — such as the shifting of programmatic elements and the reorganization of floor layouts — while the core design scheme remained intact. It seemed at times that the library and the design team used public participation merely as a strategy of public management, providing a semblance of involvement and influence, but in reality excluding the public from any of the substantial decisions. The major decisions lay, perhaps rightfully so, with those who were best qualified to make them, with the experts: the architect, the library's governing body, and City Librarian Deborah Jacobs.

The Nature of the Institution

America's public libraries are, by design, democratic and based on the principle of universal access. But how far does this right to access extend? Does it simply mean that citizens cannot be denied entry to the library building? Or does accessibility imply that every citizen has a right to contribute to the institution's ideological development and participate in determining how that institution is designed and built?

John Pastier, former *Los Angeles Times* architecture critic, argues that an urban library's architecture "should announce that this is the city's prime public building, a place that celebrates knowledge, imagination, and self-improvement."[9] According to Pastier, it is the city — not an architect or the city elites — that produces great buildings. Making great buildings is a citywide enterprise, which means that everyone is entitled to participate in the design of these civic structures.

In its own literature, the Seattle Public Library (SPL) also emphasized the representative and democratic nature of this institution. This downtown library would be a "special civic place," the SPL asserted, "a signature building that [would] be an enduring and instantly recognized Seattle landmark, embodying not only Seattle's civic values, but also conveying a sense of wonder, expectation and discovery. Through the unified success of its physical design and function, the new Central Library [would] both engage and express the richness of Seattle's public, cultural and intellectual life."[10] This "richness" implies plurality, inclusiveness, and the engagement and concrete expression of the city's diverse publics, cultures, ideals, and values. These two dense sentences also convey the complexity of the library's program, its symbolic richness, and its active role in shaping — not only concretizing, or solidifying — Seattle's culture and values. As Pastier argued, if this building is to do all these things, it is the entire city's responsibility to make it work.

Seattle's public was welcomed into the design process even before the city knew where that library would be built. As early as 1998, when the SPL was developing its capital plan outlining the construction and renovation of the downtown and branch libraries, Jacobs met with people in their neighborhood libraries, church basements, and local restaurants — more than one hundred meetings in all — to get their input. Then, on November 3, 1998, a revised $196.4 million bond measure, believed to be among the largest measures passed for an American urban library, was placed before the citizens of

Seattle. Despite a small opposition that claimed that the proposition favored the downtown library at the branches' expense, the bond passed with a 72 percent majority.[11] Voters expected, in addition to a new downtown library, a doubling of the total square footage of their branch libraries. They anticipated the arrival of three brand new branches, six replacement branch buildings, and improvements of some sort for every remaining neighborhood library.
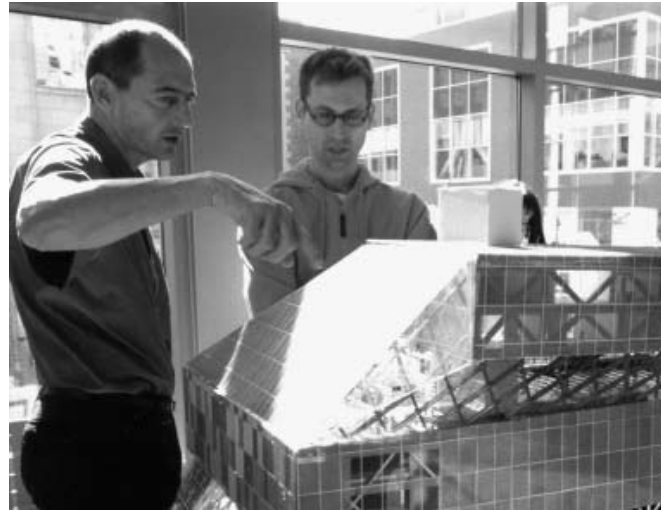
Because Jacobs needed to win citizen support for the bond measure, as well as approval of new construction in the design review process, an extensive campaign to rally public support and involvement was critical to the success of the initiative. Seattleites, for their part, felt an even greater sense of entitlement to contribute to the development of their new library system because they were footing the bill. Public skepticism about paying the high cost of design left Jacobs with the challenge of transforming the elevated cultural ambitions of the city's cognoscenti into a beloved populist initiative. Newspaper critics played a critical role in advancing the notion that support for libraries translated into support for innovative design, arguing that, for their downtown library, Seattleites wanted more than a "box for people and books," expecting instead "a design to arouse emotions, shape thoughts and declare a new civic sensibility. We're not interested in the merely functional," Casey Corr wrote in *The Seattle Times*, putatively on the public's behalf. "We want ideas in our buildings."[12]

Close to a thousand people attended the public meeting at which Steven Holl and Zimmer Gunsul Frasca were eliminated from the semifinalist round of the architect selection process, leaving the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) and its local partners, LMN Architects, to design the downtown library. The public again packed Benaroya Hall, the city's new home for the symphony, only six weeks into the schematic design period to see how the library was taking shape. (See Figure 1.) According to Jacobs, "the Library Board and OMA/LMN had a commitment from the beginning to present early

ideas publicly in order to give everyone an opportunity to comment and be involved in the process."[13] She continues, "It is more typical for an architect to wait until there is a more completed design before presenting anything to the public. We wanted to do things differently."[14] This early solicitation of public input bespoke, at least ostensibly, the SPL's commitment to public process through all stages of the design.

But, in late 1999, a small crisis erupted, generating a "climate of distrust."[15] A clandestine shift of $15 million in bond money from the neighborhoods to the downtown library was regarded by many as a "broken promise."[16] Jacobs had guaranteed the neighborhood libraries equal representation and proportionate funding, but, when the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation donated $20 million — $15 million of which was to fund neighborhood library projects — library officials offset the Gates's gift by shifting $15 million in bond money from the neighborhoods to the central library.[17] The branches would still receive the $68.2 million promised to them, the library asserted, but they offered an inadequate explanation as to why the Gates's contribution would replace, rather than supplement, the bond money. The Library Board, Mayor Paul Schell, and the City Council — the real decision makers — approved the shift.[18,19] And, instead of seeking public input and responding to public concerns, the library explained the funds transfer as a simple "bookkeeping change," or a "housekeeping measure."[20] Even for those eventually convinced of the shift's legality, the misunderstanding bred suspicion that lingered, particularly among branch librarians and patrons, for years afterward.

By the early part of 2000, however, central librarian Jill Jean was helping to organize the roughly 550 full-time employees of the library into thirty-seven staff work groups, each addressing a different aspect or area of the library, from the loading dock to information services to artwork. Jacobs made clear to her staff that "we want you to get your questions answered so you feel comfort-able with the process and are able to answer questions from the public."[21] At the same time, Seattleites were invited to join ten public workgroups addressing the needs of various populations served by the library, including, among others, the business, arts, and disabled communities. These concurrent programs for involving the public and the staff demonstrate that the client and design team recognized that this public library would have to serve multiple publics in multiple ways: it would have to work effectively as both a functional and a representative space, for both its patrons and its librarians.

The public at large reconvened periodically throughout the next two years — often numbering a thousand or more — to view the design in each stage of development. At these presentations and at the open houses that followed, people were free to ask questions and fill out comment cards — or to mail or e-mail comments to the library, to post comments to the SPL's website, and even, as Jacobs joked, to accost her at the grocery store. Every public comment was inventoried by either the library or the project manager and forwarded to the design team. And, in her introduction to OMA/LMN's schematic design presentation, Jacobs informed the audience that changes in the design "are in direct response to your comments and your thoughts and the thoughts and comments from the library board, staff, the design commission, and anybody else" who made his or her opinions known.[22] *Seattle Times* journalist David Brewster commented that "with other projects there never seems to be time

2. The mixing chamber, where all reference librarians congregate to provide "one-stop" reference for library patrons. Note the stock market-esque flurry of activity, the wall of information monitors, the digital text behind the counter, reading "Service Bar," and the red LCD display in the upper left, reading "SPL Information Exchange." (Courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture.)

for input, but the library has a genuine rhythm of proposal-counterproposal."[23] But was this "rhythm" the pulse of a public sphere, in which a genuine process of public participation reshaped the architects' initial ideas, or only the cadence of an information retrieval system, soliciting and inventorying comments that were rarely seriously considered? At times, it seemed that the designers used public comments to construct nothing more than justifications for their designs; they collected criticism only to refute it, or explain it away, in the next public assembly.

Metaphors

Capitol Program Director Alexandra Harris said of those public presentations, "certainly Rem (Kool-haas, principal of OMA) brought his own kind of star power to the equation that attracted a lot of people with interest in architecture. I think that created the buzz initially, and then we had to be careful to provide enough information to the press," in part to meet the public demand for information.[24] These ideas of meeting public demand and giving the press and public what they want unavoidably influenced the way the design team and the library talked about the project. Initially, metaphors of commerce crept into their discourse. In its early scope briefing before the Seattle Design Commission, the design team spoke of "stealing back" the aura that was stolen from the library by the bookstores — and in effect "stealing back" patrons, too. They planned to "take cues" from retail design, and even referred to the reception area of the library as "the retail store" and the interstitial spaces as "trading floors."[25] (See Figure 2.)

The Design Commission was greatly troubled by the idea of a Barnes & Noble–inspired public library, and they decided to reorient the initial direction of the design by reassessing the metaphors used to describe it. Commissioner Nora Jaso encouraged the design team to think of the library as "the last real public place that isn't trying to sell you something."[26] Harris acknowledged that "if you look at Rem's body of work," which includes retail outlets for Prada, the Italian clothing designer, and a book on shopping produced through his Harvard Project on the City, "it makes sense that he uses that [commercial] vocabulary."[27] Still it is indeed important to consider the metaphors adopted and the rhetorical registers tapped throughout the discussion of the design. In the November 1994 issue of *JAE*, Coyne, Snodgrass, and Martin also address the importance of examining metaphors used in the design studio. They suggest that metaphors have the power to "define problem regimes and to prompt action" in design practice.[28] In this case, commercial metaphors defined a "problem regime" that the commission found inappropriate for such a prominent public building.

Yet, only a few years before, in 1998, the SPL's search for a site for the new central library led

them to consider sharing space with condominiums and retail outlets across from Pike Place Market.[29] And two years prior, the city contemplated moving City Hall to Key Tower, a sixty-four-floor skyscraper built as the AT&T Gateway Tower.[30] The commission had been troubled for some time by the growing commercialization of the civic realm and pressed for serious debate on what constituted an appropriate design vocabulary for the city's civic realm.

Even as the commission reviewed the schematic design for the central library, the SPL made plans in several neighborhoods, including Delridge, Greenwood, Ballard, and the International District, for mixed-use development, combining libraries with low-cost housing, other public agencies, and even banks.[31] Branch libraries, it seemed, may not only "take cues" from retail design, but actually partner with retail designers to create more vital neighborhoods. Rainer Beach, catering to time-pressed car-dependent patrons, even integrated drive-through drop-offs. It wasn't until spring of 2002 that the Seattle Design Commission expressed its concern that branches were designed for drivers.[32] Increasingly, the rhetoric of city agencies reconceptualized citizens as customers and library patrons as consumers, giving rise to serious concerns about the intrusion of market ideologies and practices into the civic realm.

It is these metaphors — of public service or commerce, of enlightenment or efficiency — that shape the direction of the predesign deliberation and, consequently, the form of the design itself. They establish the nature of the public relationship between a library and a city's citizens: whether these people are regarded as "patrons" or "consumers" makes a big difference, both experientially and ideologically. Should the library be compared to a superstore, a mom-and-pop shop, a bazaar, or an amusement park? Again, each of these metaphors dramatically influences the definition of the design problem, the direction of the schematic design solution, and shared perceptions of the institution's mission. What may seem to be semantics squabbles

and overintellectualized debates over "concept" are actually necessary and consequential deliberations that set the agenda and tone of further communications — and ultimately influence the program and character of the built space and the ideals and values embodied in it.

Personas and Publicity

But why not have a library for consumers when even the architect is a brand name? Having an architect with star power surely drew a host of aspiring contributors — and, of course, critics — who might not otherwise have cared about building a new library in Seattle. And, from the time Koolhaas began his work in Seattle, his persona and professional reputation expanded exponentially. In April of 2000, he was named that year's recipient of the Pritzker Prize, and, in November, even though the library design was still undergoing revision at the end of the design development stage, OMA/LMN's design was recognized with an award from the American Institute of Architects.[33] "It's not hard to figure out why young architects flock to Rem's speeches like teenage girls to a Britney Spears concert," wrote James Bush of the *Seattle Weekly*.[34]

For some, however, the architect's and the project's celebrity bred suspicion. In an e-mail message to the library, a Seattleite describes her unresolved impression of the architect:

> Mr. Koolhaas is clearly one of the most dazzling luminaries in the architectural heavens. . . . But it is for that same reason that I am concerned. . . . Despite all their intentions to the contrary, their work often fails to capture the "feel" of simple humanity, beauty, and common sense that makes great architecture livable. . . . But, hey, why am I worrying? He's a Pritzker Prize winner: how can he go wrong?
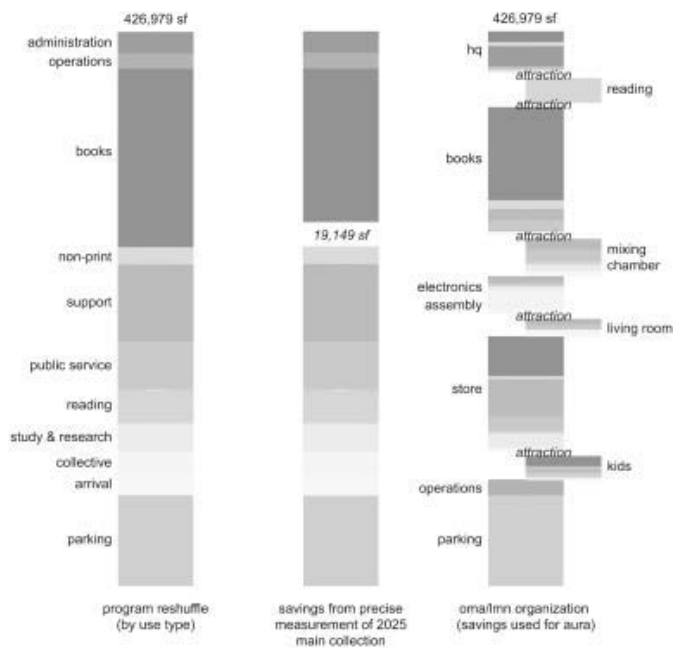
Despite its sarcastic tone, the e-mail raises an important issue: the credibility and fame that come with critical acclaim can confer a sense of legitimacy that

places the laureates outside the realm of debate and above criticism. The Pritzker, an institutional endorsement of the architect's work, seemed to bestow sovereignty, even invincibility, to its recipient.

According to Sheri Olson, Koolhaas had become a "phenom here in Seattle. . . . Front-page articles and editorials regularly analyze everything from his Pritzker Prize to his Prada wardrobe."[35] He became the stuff of myth. A *Seattle Times* editorial from December 16, 1999, insinuated that the library would contain transparent floors, and this single piece of misinformation was propagated in subsequent newspaper articles and by word-of-mouth for months to come.[36] *The Seattle Times*' Susan Nielsen wrote in her December 23, 1999 column that "To Koolhaas, glass floors represent the blurred ephemerality of the urban context, or something like that. To me, it means one thing: No skirts or dresses on library day."[37] Her columns were among the most venomous in all the local press. "I have this fantasy that Rem Koolhaas will wake up one morning and realize — oops! — he designed for Seattle the ugliest library in the world."[38] Other journalists described the design as "an example of media hype," and "pure ugliness and stupidity cloaked in a honeycomb of elitist self-importance."[39]

These press reports legitimated nonsupporters' feelings of alienation, transformed their confusion into anger, and unleashed a flood of angry letters to the editor and e-mails and letters to the library. Many citizens were concerned with the library's lack of "northwestern-ness" and attributed the design's anti-contextuality to Koolhaas's foreignness, a bit of protectionist thinking that for decades had rationalized the choice of local architects for major civic projects. Several critiqued the design's dismissal of the urbanist's mantra that new designs need to "fit" into the existing urban fabric and historic context. Seattleite Louise Hirasawa said of Koolhaas's "disdainful" design, "it's as if he were thumbing his nose at Seattle."[40] Another imagined the library as a toned-down version of what Koolhaas really wanted to build: a "gigantic fist thrusting out from the

3. "The 'combing' and consolidation of the apparently ungovernable proliferation of programs and media" (OMA/LMN, Concept Book, December 1999). Color coded bar-graph style images show how OMA clustered "like [functions] with like" to create five programmatic platforms. The logic and efficiency of this organizational format is made even more apparent with OMA's mention of the nearly 20,000-square-foot space savings. (Courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture.)

426,979 sf

administration
operations

books

non-print

support

public service

reading
study & research
collective
arrival

parking

program reshuffle
(by use type)

426,979 sf

19,149 sf

savings from precise
measurement of 2025
main collection

426,979 sf

hq
attraction — reading
attraction

books

attraction — mixing chamber
electronics assembly
attraction — living room

store

attraction — kids
operations

parking

oma/lmn organization
(savings used for aura)

downtown soil, its 20-story middle digit upraised to the infinite."[41] Koolhaas's active rejection of regionalism, Harris suggested, "has been a struggle for some of our audience because there's a lot of pride in the Northwest."[42] I discuss these concerns later.

One critic addressed a common public perception that libraries ought to be recognizable as a type, in keeping with the coherent style that was applied to the old Carnegies. He said, "Not only does it not look like a library; it does not look like a building." For many, the design simply did not make sense, and they found commiseration for their confusion through the press. Several writers even encouraged Jacobs to read Nielsen's articles to find out "what people are saying" about the library. The press thus became the voice of the people — many of whom, perhaps disarmed by Koolhaas's persona, seemed to have lost confidence in their own right and ability to critique the design.

On those occasions when negative press incited a deluge of angry correspondence, the library entered crisis management mode. In the first six months of 2000, library officials received several hundred e-mails, letters, and phone calls — most from infuriated patrons. Each of those messages was documented and passed along to the design team, and each message received a response. "Clearly we were presenting a library design that was challenging to many people," Harris said.[43] "They assumed that the building was a dominant architectural concept at the expense of function." Harris referred people to newspaper articles and images and documents on the library's web site that explained the logical, functional derivation of the design. (See Figure 3.) "We couldn't convince people to like it," she said, "but we could answer their questions and provide them with information."

Many were so surprised by the library's response that they promised to "further educate themselves" about the project before making hasty judgments. Some one-time critics reassessed their positions after reading local journalists' rebuttals of initial misinformation and earlier criticism of the

design.[44–46] "I opened the *Seattle Times* . . . to an article by Matthew Stadler about [the library] and concluded that many of my fears might be totally unfounded," admitted one letter writer. "Now I'm thinking I may be totally incorrect and it may indeed be quite a nice library."

Jacobs agreed with Harris that much of the public process is "like a political campaign where you just explain things to people. My favorite thing to do is to go meet with groups and talk about the library," she admitted.[47] Jacobs found these public appearances integral to the public process — particularly because "the press . . . trust[s] us. They trust library staff. . . . And when we told them that [the library design] works for us, that's really . . . all they wanted to hear. Because they worried that we're . . . not standing up to the architect, and letting them take over the design."[48] Jacobs uses the local press as her political ally to reassure the public that the librarians, the good guys, are still in control.

Thus, while the architectural and national presses functioned to develop Koolhaas's "star power" and to build around him a shield of fame and a cocoon of acclaim, the local press worked on both the public's and the library's behalf, often mediating debates between the two. Functioning as a forum for the "discursive struggles" of representation, the press shaped the public process, colored public opinion, and framed the design agenda. The press had the power to both inflame and appease, to make claims on behalf of a public whose opinion hadn't objectively been measured, and then to turn around and shape public opinion.

Furthermore, the comments of Harris and Jacobs suggest that public criticism was regarded as a "public relations problem," rather than taken as an indication that the architect had not adequately responded to legitimate public concerns about the design. It could be argued that civic leaders were merely "using" the participation process to manufacture consent rather than to design a building that incorporates grassroots concerns. Their comments raise questions about the operative definition of "participation" in the SPL's project: to provide information to the public or to provide critical information to the architect?

Yet the architect's and project's popularity were not only public relations liabilities; Koolhaas's "avant-garde aura," says Olson, may have drawn in a "new breed of philanthropists . . . [who] . . . embraced the library as a particularly hip cause."[49] A contingent from the tech community began to attend every public event, and the project attracted millions in funding from computer billionaires like Paul Allen and Bill Gates. These large contributions led the Seattle Public Library Foundation to increase its fund-raising goal from $40 million to $75 million, and later to $77.5 million.[50,51] According to Elizabeth Castleberry, Deputy Director of the Seattle Public Library Foundation, $32 million of those private funds are to go toward the library's collections, $8.5 million toward programming, and $37 million toward a "building fund," which is then distributed to the central library or to branches at the discretion of the Library Board.[52] Donors may identify which libraries or which segments of the library's collection will benefit from their contributions, said Ms. Castleberry, but their authority ends there. Funders receive subscriptions to the foundation's newsletter and invitations to special programs and events, but no special privileges in dictating how the buildings will take shape.

Jacobs also assured the design commission that these donors sought neither to influence the designs, nor to affix their names in gold letters to library façades (although Paul Allen did stipulate that $5 million of his $20 million gift would go toward construction of the Faye G. Allen Children's Center, named after the donor's mother).[53,54] And, even if Allen made no attempts to reshape the library design to reflect his personal tastes or interests, his contribution was, as Sue Coliton, manager of the Paul G. Allen Charitable Foundation, put it, a "show [of] support for innovative architecture."[55] Funders' contributions provided tacit commendation for the library's project and Koolhaas's design, attracted additional funding, and drew public attention — media coverage and public discourse that often associated the goodness of philanthropy with the goodness of libraries, and, by extension, the goodness of this library.

Rhetorical Skill

As mixed as was his reception in the press, Koolhaas delivered consistently compelling performances in his public presentations. He was funny and accessible — and, as usual, a master rhetorician. Matthew Stadler, a local writer and a member of the advisory panel that endorsed OMA, noted that the architect "outlined, step-by-step, the way consultations with library staff, and workers in associated fields, led directly to the allocation, arrangement and design of the building's 355,000 square feet of interior space."[56] Belinda Luscombe of *Time* magazine commented on Koolhaas's rhetorical ability, which she attributes in part to his exceptional media savvy: "He knows that the arcane architectural language and connect-the-dots academic ephemera that fill his books only go so far among the media, or their clients — and his — the public. So he has learned to be multilingual: he speaks to architects, to clients and to the press."[57] (See Figure 4.) In public open

4. Cover of OMA's Statement of Qualifications, submitted to the Seattle Public Library in fall of 1999. Koolhaas, well aware of his bibliophilic audience and himself an author of several publications, immediately coveys his firm's commitment to writing and the book by featuring an image of his 1995 monograph, *S,M,L,XL*. (Courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture.)

5. Half-naked teens cavorting on the grass. This image, which appears in OMA/LMN's Concept Book, supposedly comments on the type of architectural space needed for teenage library patrons — but it also functions, like the naked boxers, as a visual taunt. (Courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture.)

houses, for example, the design team offered models of the building, floor plans, and computer-generated videos of the design — different representational formats to appeal to different viewers with different ways of learning.

Koolhaas's finesse and eloquence proved particularly persuasive when paired with graphics by designer Bruce Mau. "OMA generates this metaphysical face in something that they call data," said Stadler.[58] Their graphs and charts and diagrams imply that their research has "objectively directed them toward some spatial organization." Timelines, flowcharts, and bar graphs, with their precise spatial organization and their implied linearity and logic, become "natural[ized] expressions of data," which consequently naturalize their proposed designs.[59] OMA's graphics function as scientific data sets, seemingly derived through objective study and rigorous testing. Who could refute such an elegant solution? According to Stadler, OMA "anchors their design arguments in the graphical presentation of research data." In the firm's hands, data visualization became yet another rhetorical device.

Photographs functioned rhetorically, too. Koolhaas began one of his public presentations with an evocative image of the World Trade Organization riots, explaining to his audience that, while Seattle was trying to decide whether or not it wanted to be a real city, the world had already made that decision for it. The visual taunt hit close to home and elicited nervous laughter. In another public forum, he flashed an image of two naked boxers eating oysters — an image drawn from his 1978 book, *Delirious New York*. (See Figure 5.) The image was intended not only as a commentary on program and the functions of architectural spaces — but also as provocation. One journalist noted that "it seemed like a moment from . . . 'Saturday Night Live.' Was he playing with us?"[60]

Mocking or not, Koolhaas's polished presentation made the design seem unassailable. A local reporter suggested that the refinement and seeming comprehensiveness of Koolhaas's proposal enhanced

his persuasiveness. The public expected to see a rough design "scheme" that would then be revised based on the library staff's and their own comments. Koolhaas offered instead a "whole vision very early and all at once."[61] It seemed that the design team had a head start; they presented an ambitious, seemingly complete design and supported it with "near lawyerly arguments."

So too, the complexity of translating an ambitious program for managing twenty-first-century library services into built form left Koolhaas and OMA the experts because the general public was not sufficiently educated about technical details to enter into debates over the assumptions on which fundamental decisions were based. Thus, the graphical analysis of the problem that Koolhaas presented to the public has the combined qualities of legibility, at an abstract level, and indecipherability, at a concrete level. In this way, graphics were marshaled to buttress a particular solution rather than to make informed debate possible.

According to Jacobs, the staff initially "didn't necessarily believe in the mixing chamber," an area in which all reference librarians would be concentrated for "one-stop reference." She said, "I think part of it was the way Rem was talking about it; . . . we had 'stock exchanges,' . . . and a 'trading floor.' I think it was only when we began to understand it in terms of how it would work—then we [still] had some trepidation, but we got it."[62] The librarians were taught to read blueprints not so that they could scrutinize the design or propose changes; rather, they learned to read blueprints to "get" Koolhaas's ideas, to fully appreciate the functionality and appropriateness of his proposed design solutions.

Rick Sundberg, chairman of the design commission, commented on Koolhaas's "methodical way of presenting the design that makes it seem plausible, if not inevitable."[63] The reviewers and the public, then, faced with a presumably complete design, were left to question the worth and possible effect of their feedback. According to Nielsen, the public

was "too timid to do anything but ask small questions," such as "How much Windex do you need to clean the glass walls? Can you see up a woman's dress through the translucent floors?"[64,65] The designers' rhetorical skill seemed to disarm the public. Nielsen claimed to have a "warehouse of input from card-carrying library users who want to speak up, but worry the Big Idea has too much momentum to slow down for good advice."[66]

Rhetorical Aggrandizement

Yet the design team responded to whatever criticism the public was brave enough to voice. In a presentation the following spring, Koolhaas addressed the rumors and misinformation with his usual charm, proclaiming that "it's always a real pleasure to contribute to an urban myth."[67] In all of his presentations, Koolhaas assuaged the public's fears—often by directly addressing the concerns they voiced in the press and in their letters to the library, and by making use of rhetorical "framing" strategies. He began several of his public presentations by issuing a challenge to the city. Seattle has a promising future, he acknowledged, but he "wasn't convinced that is was already a city."[68] When Koolhaas showed a picture of the December 1999 World Trade Organization uprising, he cautioned: "Your previous ideal is coming to an end. . . . You have to face the kind of responsibilities that come with being really urban"—one of which is to "live with architecture."[69]

Was Koolhaas suggesting that he, the Pritzker laureate, would give Seattle its first "really urban" architecture? According to several journalists, Koolhaas, cosmopolitan and worldly, represented everything that Seattle aspired to be. Nielsen wrote, "This is a city poised at the edge of the millennium, a temporal excuse to forbid the questioning of Progress."[70] Koolhaas's paternalistic—and, in Jacobs's and Harris's estimation, oftentimes elitist—approach essentially belittled opponents as uncultured hicks, which had a stultifying effect on public discourse. Could it be that celebrity, aspirational

desires, and the promise of delivery from provinciality and architectural blandness stultified criticism in the context of the public process—even in this process-loving city?

In presenting himself as Seattle's redeemer, Koolhaas also rhetorically aggrandized the weight of the library project, elevating Seattle's architectural naissance to a level of global significance that only an international star could effectively realize. Koolhaas also made frequent mention of the changed social context in which the contemporary library must function. Today's library must deal with commercialization, the "unpredictable proliferation of new technologies," "the multiplication of [the library's] social obligations," and the "erosion of the public realm."[71] (See Figure 6.) In this "overstimulated world," a world "drenched in imagery," the high-minded architecture of the Carnegie era "doesn't convey the same image" of goodness and morality that it once did. Today, "an earnest presence like that of the library in its pure and traditional form would simply fail to register."[72]

This is why OMA's library cannot "look like a library," at least not like the Carnegie libraries most had grown up with. In establishing this social context, Koolhaas set up an argument for why his library had to be unconventional. In this new world, the library was obligated to "make a shift" in its "mental image."[73] This updated image might prove challenging, or seem alien, to many, but such an imagistic shift was necessitated by new social conditions—conditions beyond most people's recognition or comprehension.

Meanwhile, in Seattle's neighborhoods, library officials sought landmark status for old, outmoded buildings; they would of course renovate the interior, but the Carnegie exterior was to remain. It seemed that these new global social conditions failed to reach the suburbs; outside of downtown, "the library in its pure and traditional form" was still an appropriate architectural expression for the modern institution. Indeed, the strategy of pursuing more conservative contextual design in the neigh-

borhoods itself provided a kind of rationale and springboard for Koolhaas's more urbane downtown design. Finally, in March of 2002, the design commission encouraged the library to establish as one of its goals to "'design contemporary libraries,' rather than urging design teams to design libraries to appear historic."[74]

But in his discussion of the central library, Koolhaas's repeated attention to contemporary social themes — global politics, commercialization, technologization, privatization — reflected his intention to link his design to a larger framework, a context that extended beyond the immediate time and place to include the "social, political, economic and

technological disruptions wrought by globalization."[75] Faced with such an overwhelming obligation — to confront the forces of modernization — Seattle may need a redeemer, after all. Koolhaas would serve that role by providing Seattle with the architecture it needs to become not just urban but urbane in the process.

6. Proliferation of Social Roles. OMA's timeline shows the increasingly complex social responsibilities taken on by the public library. This ever-growing chaos of activity, the designers argue, necessitates a new architectural format. (Courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture.)
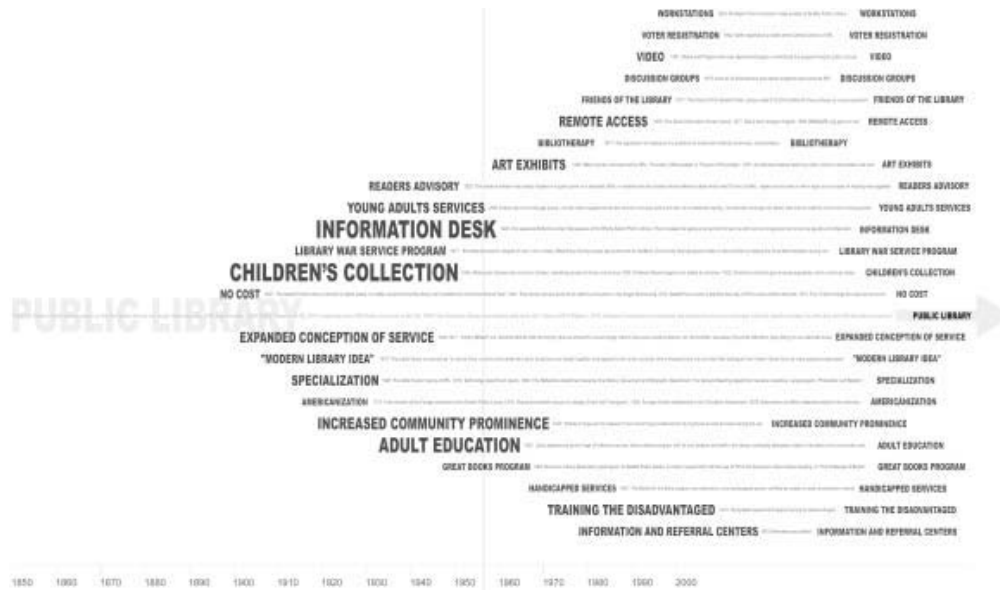
What Is "Context," Anyway?

But what is "really urban" architecture? It is easy to see that a "really urban" design could meet the library's demands for a "signature building," an "enduring and instantly recognized Seattle landmark," but could a design that is responsive to the delocalized, highly dynamic forces of modernization also embody "Seattle's civic values," convey "a sense of wonder, expectation and discovery," and "engage and express the richness of Seattle's public, cultural and intellectual life"? Could a library be both "urban," as Koolhaas defined it," and "public," in the sense that it reflected the local public's history, values, and sense of place?

What does it mean to reflect a sense of place? Is that sense defined by local history, values, and geography, or is the "place," the context, now defined by global social, economic, political, and technological forces? When the library selected a Dutch architect, people wondered if a local firm might be better equipped to represent the public's values in the design process and to capture the "spirit of the city" in the design. Some Seattleites' objection to Koolhaas's appointment raised additional questions regarding the responsibilities of the architect — especially a foreign architect — in addressing issues of context. Was it the architect's duty to reflect the context — perhaps employing Scandinavian aesthetic references or Japanese architectural details, or, as Koolhaas joked, by throwing in some bearskin rugs? Or was it his duty to exploit the context by capturing as much precious daylight as possible, by celebrating Seattle's drizzle, or by providing views of the region's splendid geography? Or was it his duty to enhance the cityscape by introducing something new, visually interesting, and provocative — if out of "context"?

Koolhaas chose the latter interpretation. He made his case for an innovative, provocative design by arguing that the library must "make a gesture"; it must somehow distinguish itself from the characterless, "generic" office buildings immediately sur-

rounding the site.[76] Stadler supports Koolhaas's interpretation of context, and, in fact, claims to "find the building's intentions consummately Northwest."[77] Seattle, he said, is a region that "destroys its history. All we've had are 200 years of apocalypse. Why not import [new architectural] forms?" Yet, according to Koolhaas, the design "can't be simply eccentric," nor can it be as "boring as its context."[78] The SPL paraphrased Koolhaas's statement: Koolhaas "has proposed a solution that seeks to create a dynamic and attractive presence in the downtown without mimicking adjacent buildings."[79] Innovation was appropriate for downtown, but tradition and contextuality were, for a long while, expected from the branch library architects.

There was also the possibility for differences in interpretation of the term *contextuality* or the phrase *sense of place*. The architects repeatedly attempted to explain to the public why the building looked as it did. According to the designers, the form and the surfaces that mark that form — the curtain wall — were both derived rationally. They were defined by internal function and by structural soundness and efficiency. They were derived from context, by their responsiveness to views and daylight. The designers focused their attention on the interior experiencing of views and daylight — that is, what geographic features one sees from inside, and how daylight enters the building. To the architect, "place" was something appreciated from inside, not enhanced from the outside. To much of the public, however, it seemed that place was something reflected through the building's exterior and interior aesthetics. These differences in orientation — that is, the vantage points from which a building reflects its context — highlighted differences in the architects' and some Seattleites' "senses of place," which may have explained their opposing interpretations of and reactions to the building's exterior.

Once again, semantic differences launched large-scale disputes over the design's ability to serve and reflect its city's history, geography, and

spirit. Furthermore, this long debate over the contextuality of the design also had implications for the library's values, in terms of how this institution would serve as a representative space — and for civic architectural values, in terms of how "sense of place" can be represented architecturally without resorting to nostalgic gestures.

The Output of Public Input

Some detractors still undoubtedly feel as if they have been cheated of hard-earned tax dollars and still nurse wounds to their civic pride inflicted by a library that seems to disparage the city by declaring nothing "northwestern." Perhaps some resent Koolhaas's paternalism and fear that they've been hoodwinked. Yet Seattleites did have a place in the process of designing this library. Of course, the library board had the final say in all design decisions — and the Seattle Design Commission's opinions weighed heavily, as well, because Department of Design, Construction and Land Use permitting was carried out with advice from the commission — but public and staff comments did result in revisions to the design. (See Figure 7.) The staff and public were concerned about the initial location of the children's area in a subterranean space amidst the print shop, recycling area, and parking deck. Subsequent versions of the design showed that the kid's area shared a level of the library with the English as a Second Language (ESL) area and the auditorium, and was placed along the façade to allow for maximum sunlight. Members of the ESL public workgroup were concerned that patrons with language barriers would be reluctant to travel deep into the library to find assistance. So the designers moved the ESL and multilingual collections from upper levels of the library to locations adjacent to a major entrance to allow for "direct and easy access to these important departments . . . for patrons who may find it difficult to navigate a large, public building using signage potentially foreign to them."[80,81]

7. Design development building section. Compared to the preliminary design (see Figure 4), this revised version reflects several of the changes suggested by the public and staff. The ESL section, for instance, is now located on the ground floor, easily accessible for patrons who may be reluctant to navigate a building using signage in a foreign language. (Courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture.)
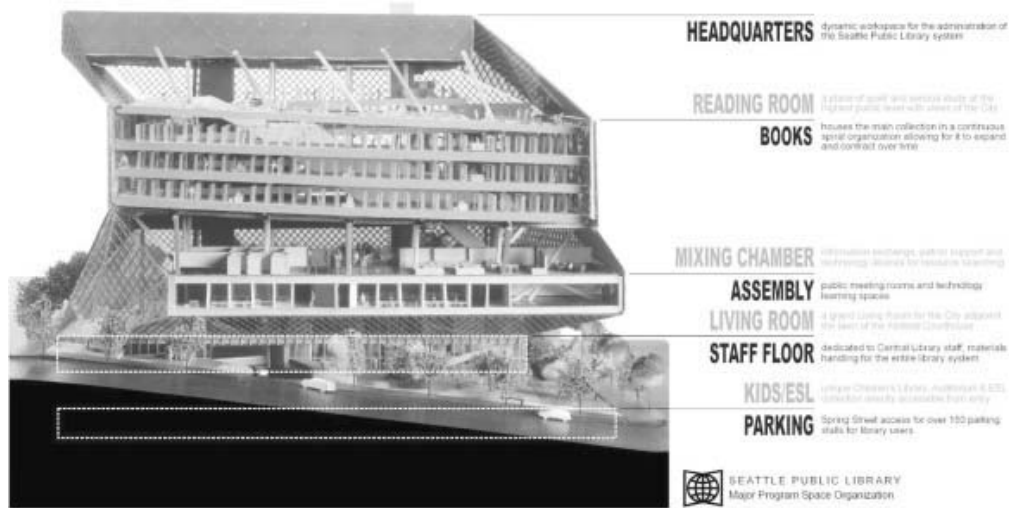
The book spiral, one of the more innovative features of the building, underwent rigorous testing and numerous revisions as a result of public and library staff criticism. The library's main collection was to be organized into a continuous spiral that looped through four levels of the building. (See Figure 8.) This organization would allow for a "continuous Dewey run" to facilitate book shelving and browsing and exploit adjacencies between related subject areas that, in any other library, might have been located on separate floors. The Department of Justice had been made aware of the accessibility issues related to the sloped floors, and they were investigating the design's compliance with the American with Disabilities Act standards for accessible design.

Late in the design process, the library invited Seattleites to test two versions of the book spiral and to fill out comment cards indicating their preferences and criticism of either design. According to Alexandra Harris, the library sought comments from "older users, parents with strollers, the visually impaired and users with mobility issues — as well as Library users without disabilities."[82] In the end, the library and design team settled on a design that met with the approval of the public and library staff and satisfied the Department of Justice. By means of participatory mockups of controversial elements of the design scheme, Jacobs succeeded in diffusing public overreaction to innovation. Thus, public participation was successfully mobilized to support design innovation, unlike the conservative and obstructionist tendencies that tend to arise in the course of public testimony in the design review process.

Yet some patrons and librarians were still concerned that the spiral and the mixing chamber would eliminate special subject areas and their knowledgeable subject librarians. Modified designs of the book spiral incorporated space for subject staff — initially in the spiral's core, and then pushed to the side of each floor at the librarians' request.

Later versions of the book spiral also included workspaces interspersed throughout the stacks to break up the monotonous run of books — an alteration requested by both patrons and librarians.[83] And subsequent renderings included an expanded book spiral. The provision of ample space for books had been a primary public concern, and this change helped to alleviate the public's fears that Koolhaas was phasing out the book.[84] Through a series of design revisions, programmatic elements moved between floors, floor layouts metamorphosed, additional circulation routes appeared, entrances became more grand and accessible, public spaces became visible at street level, spatial characters were defined and refined — all in response to public and staff comments.

Yet throughout the two-and-a-half-year deliberation process, the major design scheme remained, for the most part, intact. Like the model presented in late 1999, the library building opening its doors in early 2004 will have five "quaked" platforms

8. Book spiral. The nonfiction collection will be housed in one continuous spiral that loops through several levels of the building. This diagram serves to visually explain a design concept not easily described verbally, and to highlight the form's primary benefit: the continuous "Dewey run." (Courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture.)
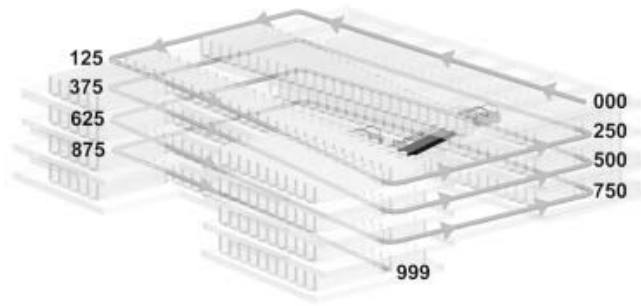
wrapped in an aluminum skin. The preliminary design was presented, rhetorically, as a fait accompli — and, essentially, it was. Not much changed between 1999 and 2002. What became of those meticulously logged and categorized public comments? What happened to the public process? Where is the public in this public library?

The public process, according to Matthew Stadler, was alive and well. Its critics, he said, have based their opinions on misconceptions of both the nature of public process and the nature of OMA's work. "When people hear 'public process,' they think 'my vote will count,'" he said.[85] But OMA's research-based design — according to Stadler, one of the primary reasons the library found the firm so attractive — is not based on vote counting. Anyone who expects from OMA a populist approach to design is bound to be disappointed. Similarly, as the *Seattle Weekly*'s James Bush wrote, "Hiring Koolhaas and getting angry over [his] conceptual model is a bit like hiring McDonald's to cater your party and being annoyed when they serve hamburgers."[86] When Seattle chose Koolhaas, they also chose his approach to design — one based more on exerting leadership to realize a vision than on pandering to public taste.

Yet the public was led to believe — through Jacobs's frequent grassroots public meetings, through regular solicitation of their comments and criticism, and through repeated promises that changes in the design reflected their desires — that this library would physically manifest their every idea, that every voice would hear itself echoed in

this library. And their financial support of the program, they thought, guaranteed them significant influence in the design process. But, from the very beginning of the process, the library and design team delimited the field of imaginable ideas and framed the discourse surrounding the project. It was these decision makers who chose the metaphors, designed the imagery, framed the debates, set the agendas, and established the basic framework of the design. A public process with an unequal distribution of rhetorical power is bound to have limited effects.

What was true in Seattle is true elsewhere: the communications within and around a public design project serve not only in deliberating over the design itself but also in negotiating just how "public" a public space will be. Architects must be made aware of the political implications of particular rhetorical strategies. They must learn to critically examine the metaphors they use in talking about design. They must recognize the effect on architecture of mass media and public opinion and the related institutions of celebrity and critical acclaim. They must realize that interpersonal communication and public relations, and visual communication and media management are central to their practice — particularly in public design projects. In the public realm, much depends upon the designers' ability to monitor and responsibly manage the communication surrounding and informing their practice. In the public realm, architects are in the business of building not only buildings, but also consensus — and, in the process, values, identities, and ideologies.

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