

The Success of the Seattle Public Library

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Modern cathedral, a human accessible rubix cube, a city's giant pub offering lattes instead of lager and librarians instead of bartenders, the Seattle Public library opened its doors on May 23, 2004, inviting journalists and critics to scramble for a metaphor to describe the building said to be the most significant visual icon added to Seattle since the Space Needle. Opening day included a parade and press and exceeded Seattle's head librarian, Deborah Jacobs, prediction of 20,000 visitors and only increasing the curiosity of library-lovers worldwide. Even before opening day, the Seattle Public Library was being proclaimed as a universal example of the future of public libraries in the 21st century; a library that incorporates community needs and technology without forgetting the historical need for a library as a place to house and access books.

Not surprisingly, the Seattle Public Library did not appear without heated debate and controversy. In 1996, just as the conception of building a new public library for Seattle was making the transition from pipe dream to reality, Seattle's head librarian for the previous seven years, Liz Stroup, announced her resignation in a dramatic meeting with the board of trustees. Criticism of Stroup's ability to manage such a large institution, its budget, and act as a positive leader in the construction of a new library had been growing, so for many her resignation did not come as a surprise. Stroup said it was in the library's best interest, and her own best interest as well, to resign adding that "its time for new leadership to raise this library to new levels."

After a nationwide search for a new librarian, Deborah Jacobs was chosen, despite being initially viewed as a wildcard because she did not have any experience heading an institution as large as the Seattle Public Library. Jacobs had been the head of the city-county library in Corvallis, Oregon, a small college town, and had been a leader in defeating a proposition meant to keep gay and lesbian materials out of libraries. For her efforts she was named The Librarian of the Year by *Library Journal* in 1994. Although this title was impressive to the board in Seattle there were some that questioned whether this was enough. Soon after Jacobs arrived to Seattle she proved herself with her passion and leadership abilities to both the public and the board as she quickly stepped in to help pass a bond to finance and find a location for the new library. Neither was an easy task as the Seattle Public Library was competing for

funds with the fire department and the public schools and the initial proposal of having the new location of the main branch situated across the street from Pike Place Market was greeted coldly. Some argued that this location would not have enough space for parking and the area's shady reputation as a spot for drug problems did not help. Eventually this location was thrown out and after assessing several other potential spots the board decided to keep the main branch in its same location in the heart of downtown despite the extra cost it would require since the collection would have to be moved twice; once to move out and again to move in.

Once the future location was decided the hunt for an architect to visualize and execute what was hoped to become the world's greatest public library began. The search was eventually narrowed down to two men, Steven Holl, a native of Washington, and Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas. Like Deborah Jacobs, Rem Koolhaas was viewed as a wildcard because he was not from Washington and didn't even have any of his buildings in North America. After impressing the board during a final presentation where both candidates were only allowed to use the paper and pencils and watercolors the board provided to demonstrate their vision in an hour and forty-five minutes, Koolhaas became the front runner. In large part because of his three dimensional cut-outs illustrating the many shapes that could guide the architecture as well as for his charisma, humor, and worldly outlook on design and life that the board thought would reflect the community of Seattle.

Koolhaas's vision was realized in an eleven story glass building that reaches between Madison and Spring street, using diamond-windows to play on light and showcase the city's spectacular views. Users can enter on the first level off of Fourth Avenue which houses the children's room that uses slopes and red and yellow splashes of color to create a cozy and happy atmosphere. The main entrance is on the third level, on Fifth Avenue, called "The Living Room" which is quickly becoming one of the most famous rooms in the world of Libraries. The entrance invites awe with its glass cathedral ceilings over a civic lobby, espresso stand (not hosted by Starbucks but by FareStart, a program whose mission is to empower the homeless), fiction stacks, magazines, information and circulation desks, self-check stations, and cube-like chairs. At the back of the Living Room is the Starbucks Teen Center and a fiction/reader's advisory desk.

From The Living Room, users can take the bright chartreuse escalator (all of the vertical movement in the library is chartreuse, and on my first visit, made me feel like I was in a sort of book-lovers romper room designed by Ikea) to the "Mixing Chamber" or also known in old fashioned terminology as the reference center. Here are 135 public-access, Internet-enabled computers. "The goal of the Mixing chamber is ambitious: to deliver multidisciplinary reference help that will satisfy nearly all queries, eliminating the need for patrons to bounce from department to departments." Everyone working in the reference department wears a hi-tech walkie talkie, a Vocera Badge, that allows staff to communicate with each other, making retrieval of reference items fast and efficient.

What is often referred to as the most memorable and frustrating aspect of the new library is the "Book Spiral", four floors of non-fiction, 75% of the library's total non-fiction collection available on open shelves. Large Dewey numbers appear in white on black mats on the floors that gently incline. While the idea behind this sounds good in theory, utilizing the four floors can be difficult because there are no escalators up or down. It is easy to get turned around. Also, if one is turned around or in a hurry to find a book it is difficult to locate help since there is only one service desk per floor (this author felt she needed a map and compass in order to find them).

At the top of the spiral is what might be deemed the "jewel" of the library, the Reading Room, free of computers, serene with gorgeous views and light supporting an afternoon spent reading for recreation or study.

A beautiful library—as any library user will tell you—does not equal a functional library, but so far the reviews relieve the Seattle Public Library from being guilty of the old architect's criticism of all form, no function. Today the library provides 400 public computers, wireless access, but in addition to the technology being utilized in the library, so are its programs for teens and children, computer classes, English as a second language programs, and umpteen number of book clubs. In its first year the library was used by over 2.3 million individuals and that number is growing, which may result in longer hours and more materials for the library and, of course, in its being recognized as worthy of its reputation as a fine example of a 21st century public library.

Kiera Miller's primary interests are public libraries and children's librarianship.