



Rem Koolhaas' design for a central library in Seattle has created a stir in library circles, and offers suggestions for new ways to look at what a library should be.

Courtesy Seattle Public Library

they once did," says Gubbin. "Yes, there are those who still see libraries as book depositories, as simply quiet places to sit and read, but there are others who see a library as much more of a community center, a media center, and who aren't into being shushed. So we have to figure out how to deal with both types, to provide a place for quiet study, but to have places for more robust activities as well."

The last decade has seen a number of cities replace their aging central libraries. Chicago recently opened a new central library, as have Denver and Phoenix. Nashville will unveil a new central facility later this year, while Minneapolis has passed a bond issue for a library and discussion is underway about building something new in Kansas City.

In many cases, the new libraries have simply been bigger versions of their predecessors, with the printed word dominating. But some communities are wrestling with the evolving notion of what a library should be. One of the most notable is Seattle, whose new central library is being designed by Rem Koolhaas. Composed of five discrete volumes perched one on top of another, Koolhaas' library contains a square spiral of books that creates a continuous flow that starts at the beginning of the Dewey Decimal system and continues uninterrupted to the system's end. But more crucially, Koolhaas has envisioned his library as something more than a repository of the written word. A modern library, Koolhaas insists, "must transform itself into an information storehouse aggressively orchestrating the coexistence of all available technologies."

In theory, at least, Houston library director Gubbin tends to agree with Koolhaas. Any new central library that might be built in Houston, she says, not only has to be able to cope with a variety of media, from books to videotapes to CDs and DVDs and whatever else might follow, it must also be flexible enough to accommodate both existing and emerging computer technology. Equally important, it has to balance between being a research facility and a public amenity.

"Inevitably, the Starbucks issue comes up," says Gubbin. "We are actually saying, radical thought, why not let people drink coffee in the stacks? Why not have a coffee shop, or a café, in the library? Why not a large auditorium

where we could partner with a theater group, letting them use it for performances while we use it for lectures and other public gatherings? Or for that matter, why not a copy shop instead of scattered copy machines? The library, we've come to realize, is a public space with a variety of public uses, and to attract people we have to determine the best way to accommodate those uses."

But that, of course, presupposes that a new central library will be built, something Gubbin acknowledges is very far from certain. Indeed, in the latest bond issue proposed to be placed before the public in November as part of a five-year capital improvement plan, the library system is allocated only \$56 million — enough for some continued renovation of branch libraries, perhaps, but hardly enough for any substantial new construction.

If a new central library is to be built, it may well require a special bond issue, and to build public support for such an initiative the first wave of improvements would likely have to be out in the neighborhoods, not downtown. But eventually, Gubbin hopes, people will realize that a library system can't survive without something strong at its core, and that something is no longer the Jesse H. Jones Building. Though plans are being developed to renovate the Jones Building's interior — a renovation that would not only deal with problems that have developed during years of deferred maintenance, but also radically reshape the way services are provided by making the first floor into the equivalent of a neighborhood branch for downtown — that is at best, Gubbin notes, a stopgap measure.

"It's possible for the library to go on doing the piecemeal renovation it has been doing," Gubbin says, "but I don't think the city deserves that. Because once it's done, even after we've spent a lot of money, we'll still have inadequate facilities. What I've heard in the meetings we've held is that people don't want that. They want something revolutionary."

Revolutions, though, don't always come easily, and they rarely come cheaply. So in the end the question remains, how much does the city think its library system is worth? And how much are they willing to pay for it? ■

Though no decision has been yet made on when — or, for that matter, if — a new central library might replace the Jesse H. Jones building, it's still not too early to begin thinking about where such a library might best be placed. Some might argue for a location near the current site, close to, if no longer quite in the heart of, the civic center downtown. But as Jane Jacobs has noted, lumping civic institutions together in mock-imperial arrays undermines their potential to enliven multiple parts of the city. Better, she advised, to station these components independently, like "vital chessmen," at judiciously chosen sites.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs points to the New York Public Library — originally deposited as a stand-alone civic ornament at Fifth Avenue and 41st Street — as an exemplar of her ideal of "the mingled city." Such a mingling is possible in Houston as well. Just as Houston's civic center spun off the business of its site-bound Albert Thomas convention facility in favor of the George R. Brown Hall on the east side of downtown, perhaps the main branch of the Houston Public Library might be relocated to similar advantage. In replacing the current central library, the city could do worse than to shop for an address on Main Street somewhere between downtown and the museum district. As it happens, the city already owns two blocks on the west side of Main just north of Holman; the library's collections might well find a hospitable venue there, near the main branch of Houston Community College, capitalizing on not just the land the city currently owns, but also the availability of several more undeveloped blocks nearby (to grow on). Aside from Metro's recently begun light rail line, which is to include a Holman Street station, the site is easily accessible from the freeway system via Spur 527 and Travis Street.

The development of a public library in collateral support of nearby educational activities has a precedent just north of downtown, where the library's Carnegie Branch is used not only as the neighborhood branch for the Near North Side, but also as the primary library for Davis High School and Marshall Middle School.

Main Chance

A library can help more than just minds to grow

BY DREXEL TURNER

A new central library on Main Street at Holman would relate not only to HCC's Main Street academic building, but to the other buildings of the HCC central campus, clustered several blocks east in the same latitude of Midtown, as well. Apart from its prospective town-gown synergy, a central library at Main and Holman would also advance the efforts of the Main Street Coalition to restore Main Street to its once prime position in the life of the city.

For the library to reach its full potential, however, a congenial location is not enough. The architecture needs to be a persuasive advertisement for what lies within, hospitable to the library's surroundings and indicative of its importance to the cultural life of the community. The building should also accommodate a range of activities conducive to institutional vitality and the enjoyment of its patrons, blending some of the elements of an athenaeum — lecture halls, dining and club rooms — with the customary features of a public library.

To maximize the potential of a Main Street site, a new Houston central library might provide for shops and cafés at ground level, as does Gunnar Asplund's Stockholm Public Library. It could build partnerships with, and provide generous accommodations for, organizations such as Writers in the Schools, Inprint, and Nuestra Palabra.

Vincent Scully has observed without exaggeration that "a free public library ... is by far the most important monument a city can build to itself and its people." As such, the new central library should be accorded the same level of architectural talent engaged for the city's museums, which since the mid-1980s have included buildings by three Pritzker Prize winners — Rafael Moneo, Renzo Piano, and Robert Venturi, the last of whom famously pronounced the American "Main Street almost all right" as a setting for public life. The right library in the right place could go a long way toward making Houston's Main Street more than all right. ■