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HIGH-TECH BIBLIOPHILIA

Rem Koolhaas's new library in Seattle is an ennobling public space.

BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

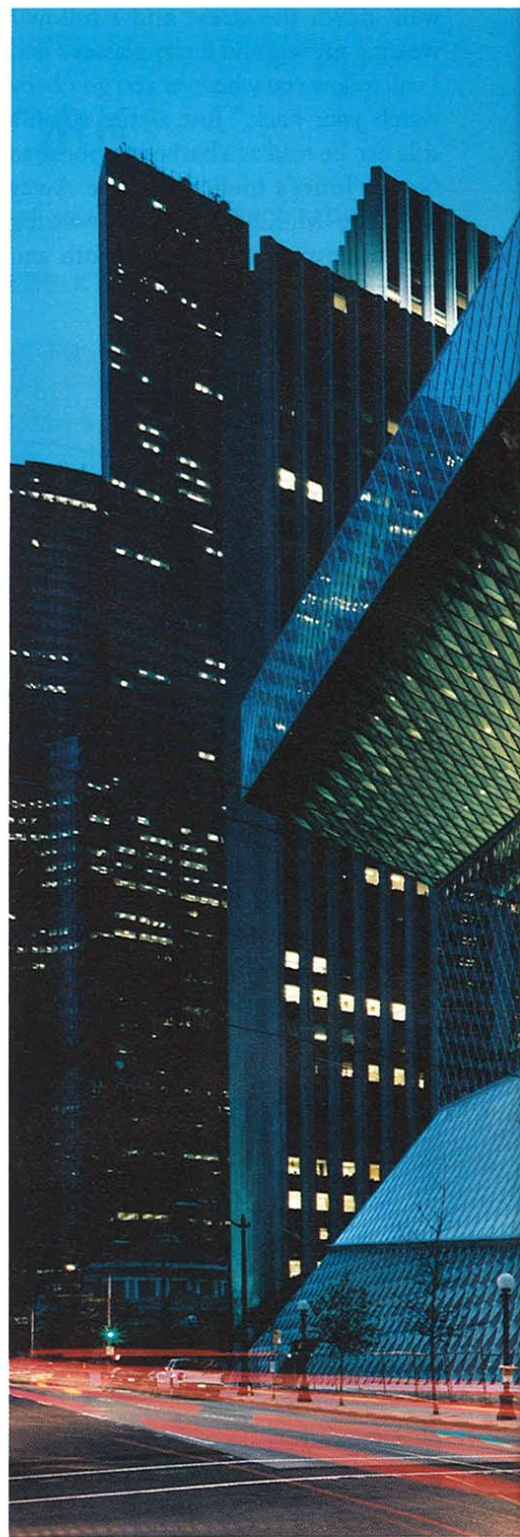
If you wanted to build a new library downtown somewhere, Rem Koolhaas is probably the last architect you would think to hire. For years, Koolhaas has been ranting about how traditional cities don't matter anymore, and how the rise of new technologies has made public space obsolete, and how when people leave their houses the only thing they want to do is shop. His firm, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, which is based in Rotterdam, wasn't on the original list of architects being considered for a new library in Seattle, but one day in 1999 Koolhaas's partner, Joshua Ramus, who comes from Seattle, got a phone call from his mother saying she had read in the local newspaper that any architect who wanted to be considered should show up the next day for a briefing. Ramus rushed to the airport, flew to Seattle, and eventually the firm got the job.

The result is the most important new library to be built in a generation, and the most exhilarating. Koolhaas has always been a better architect than social critic, and the building conveys a sense of the possibility, even the urgency, of public space in the center of a city. The design is not so much a rejection of traditional monumentality as a reinterpretation of it, and it celebrates the culture of the book as passionately, in its way, as does the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue. The Seattle building is thrilling from top to bottom. Koolhaas and Ramus started out by investigating how libraries actually work, and how they are likely to change. They went with Deborah Jacobs, Seattle's chief librarian, and several trustees and staff members to look at libraries around the country, and then they held a series of seminars about the future of the book with scholars and representatives of Microsoft, Amazon, M.I.T.'s Media Lab, and other organizations. They concluded, not surprisingly, that people are not ready

to give up on books and that they are not ready to give up on libraries, but that they find most libraries stuffy, confusing, and uninviting. Patrons wanted a more user-friendly institution, and librarians wanted one that was more flexible, and would not require constant rearrangement as collections expanded.

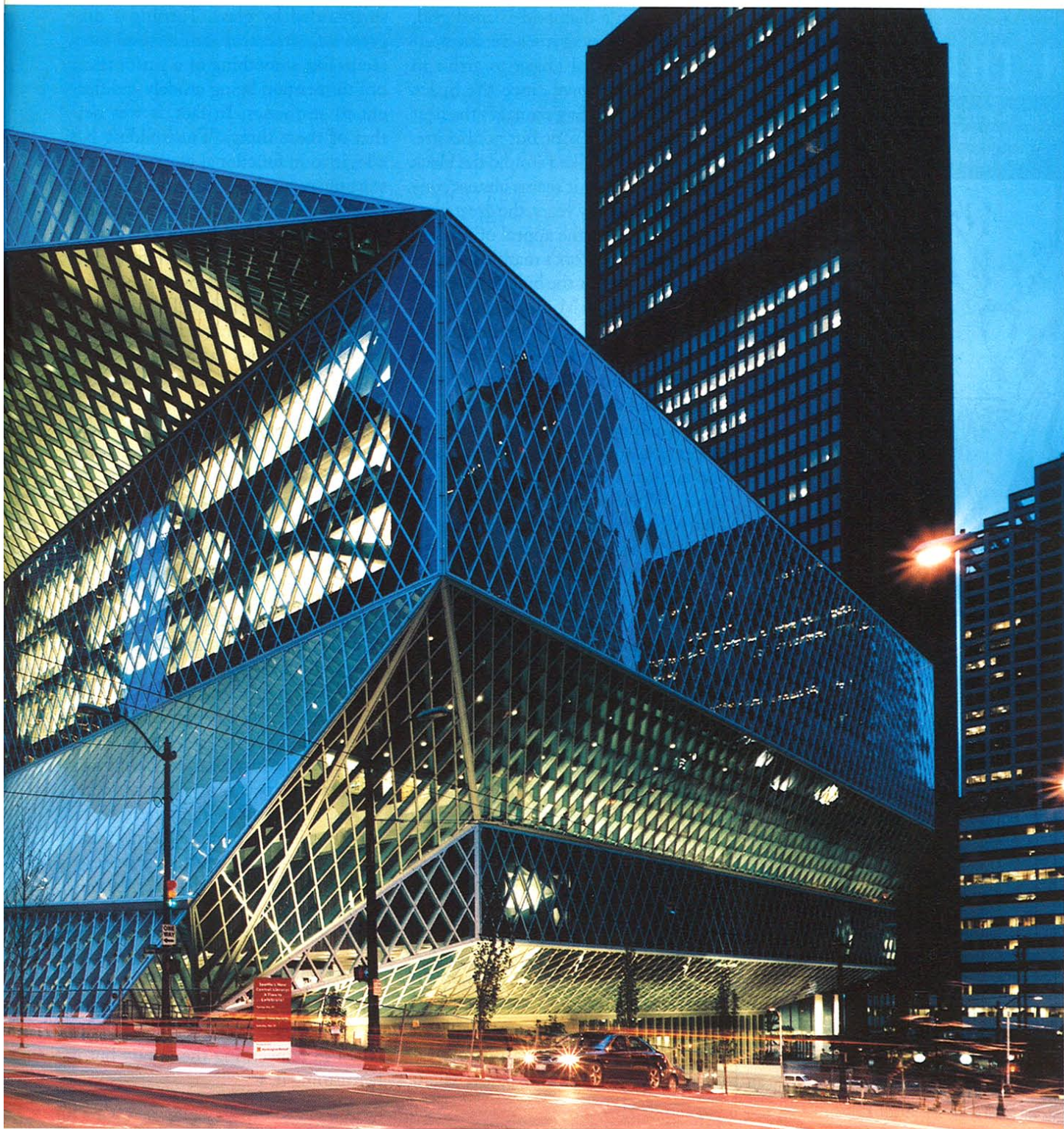
The architects saw that in most older libraries, where books are stored on rows of shelves on separate floors, collections are arbitrarily broken apart, depending on the amount of space available on each floor. But since the Dewey Decimal System is a continuous series of numbers, they reasoned, why couldn't books be stored on a continuous series of shelves? And what if the shelves wound up and up, in a spiral? They saw that it was possible to design stacks in the manner of a parking garage, with slanted floors joined in a series of zigzagging ramps. The stacks, which the architects named the Spiral, take up the equivalent of four floors in the middle of the eleven-story building. They are open, which means that you can browse. You get to the Spiral via a chartreuse-colored escalator and stairway that slices through the middle of the ramped floors. (All vertical circulation in the building, including the elevator cabs, is chartreuse.)

Above the stacks area, on the tenth floor, is a spectacular reading room, with slanted glass walls. The room has an unusual perspective on the Seattle skyline, since the library building is surrounded by skyscrapers, and the waters of Elliott Bay are visible only between the towers. The soaring glass shed is as spectacular, in its way, as the Rose Main Reading Room in the Fifth Avenue library. Just below the stacks is a room full of computers. Koolhaas calls it the Mixing Chamber, which sounds more high-tech and radical than it really is. The Mixing Chamber is simply a reinterpretation of the traditional library reference room. People who visit it are di-



Koolhaas designed the library as a series of boxes

rected to the books they need. Koolhaas's verbiage is always a little annoying. He calls an expansive, atrium-style lobby the Living Room. The Living Room is a splendid vestibule that anoints the act of reading with grandeur and civic pride, and Seattle is lucky to have it. But what Koolhaas has done here is not so different, in its way, from what Carrère & Hastings were trying to achieve



wrapped in a glass-and-steel skin. The stacks of books are at the center, under the reading room. Photograph by Robert Polidori.

when they put Astor Hall at the entrance to the New York Public Library.

I thought of the Carrère & Hastings building often as I walked through the Seattle library. Two buildings could not possibly look less alike, but both were born of a marriage of earnestness and opulence. When the library on Fifth Avenue was finished, in 1911, a grand library that was free to the public was

still a fresh, almost radical notion, and the architecture was intended to give it gravitas. In the same way that McKim, Mead & White designed the original Pennsylvania Station to confer a kind of nobility on the act of entering and leaving the city, Carrère & Hastings expected the public library not only to house books but to dignify the act of seeking them out.

Koolhaas and Ramus did not pretend that the world is unchanged since 1911—a view that held sway in Chicago a few years ago when a huge new central library designed by the architect Thomas Beeby went up. It looks vaguely like a nineteenth-century train station and is overbearing and bombastic. The complex polygonal form of the Seattle library, which is sheathed almost entirely

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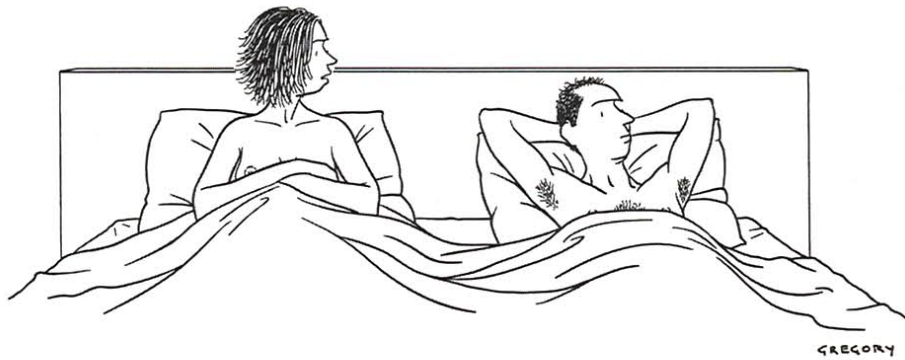
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in glass set in a diamond-shaped grid, has a dazzling energy; it's the most alluring architectural object to arrive in this city's downtown since the Space Needle. The building manages the neat trick of seeming exotic but not bizarre. Once you have walked around the block a couple of times, it seems almost conventional. In a few years, the great glass tent will connote the appeal of reading as much as New York's marble lions do. It's significant that the building was put up in the land of Microsoft (and with some of the company's money), since it is such a powerful testament to architecture as a container for the delivery of information. We don't need big library buildings the way we once did, but if you surf the Internet at home you are just a click away from a video game. When you do it here, you feel that you are engaged in a serious pursuit. A building like this emphasizes the value a culture places on literacy. (It cost a hundred and sixty-five million dollars, most of which was paid by voter-approved city bonds.)

The library, for which the Seattle firm of LMN Architects served as associate designer, is clearly organized and will be easy to use. When Koolhaas and Ramus designed the building, they did what architects often do—they made a diagram. It was, essentially, five boxes: the book stacks were one box, the administrative offices were another, and there were boxes for staff work areas, meeting rooms, and below-ground parking. Then they did something remarkable. For all intents and purposes, they built the diagram. They sketched the boxes floating in space and placed the large public areas—the Living Room, the Mixing Chamber, and the Reading Room—above and below them,

surrounded by glass. Turning a diagram into an actual architectural form seems like something of a parlor trick, not to mention being crudely indifferent to aesthetics. In fact, it was neither of these things. The building has a logic to it: functional sections are the starting point, but they are placed so that the spaces between them are large enough and spectacular enough to produce powerful architectural effects. The glass skin is thrown over the entire structure, like a blanket. The diamond pattern in the skin is actually seismic bracing, engineered to protect the building in the event of an earthquake or strong winds.

Deborah Jacobs seems to have been about as close to an ideal client as could be imagined, and she protected the architects from some of their worst instincts. She rejected the green-colored, unfinished Sheetrock that they had used in other recent projects, including the Prada store in New York, on the ground that it was trite and cheap-looking. "I thought it was important that you have a sense of awe when you come into a public building, especially a library," she said. But she had no interest in a traditional building: "This is the first library of the twenty-first century." Jacobs analyzed every aspect of the library's operations, and insisted that there be no compromise in accommodating them. When the library's trustees saw Koolhaas and Ramus's first design, they were relieved to find that the building fulfilled all the practical demands that had been set. The architects presented the building as a reinvention of the idea of the public library, which in many ways it is. Their greatest achievement, though, is not in reinventing the library but in reaffirming it. ♦



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