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Guest columnist
There is still time to fix the library

by David Sucher
Special to the Seattle Times

Rem **Koolhaas** proclaims eloquently about furthering the urbanity of Seattle, yet he has designed a most uncivil building in the new Seattle Public Library.

His library plan confuses amusement-park posturing with urbane vitality. It is isolated from the street. It would better fit in a suburban office park than a city street.

It is still not too late to revise **Koolhaas'** design to meet his goals and create a true "living room" for Seattle.

The architect and the Library Board need to notice if this building connects to the streets around it. The key question is: Does the design create a "pedestrian-friendly" Seattle? On a "pedestrian-friendly" street, people like to walk, peer into interesting windows and bump into other people.

We pay too much attention to how a building appears; the central question for every building is how it behaves. Does the design connect the inside with the outside? The library design must ultimately place existing library functions at street level if it is to contribute to a lively streetscape.

Rem **Koolhaas'** blueprint for the Seattle Public Library reminds us that even a Pritzker Prize-winning, globe-trotting architect must adhere to the rules of good urban design.

Three rules of urban design

It's only possible to cultivate people-filled streets if the architect follows these simple rules of urban design. Following them promotes a strong connection between the inside and the outside of a building.

- **Build to the sidewalk:** Create a strong "street wall" so the building meets or comes close to the sidewalk. Too far from the street, the building is remote, and people won't relate to it.
- **"Open" the building front:** Use windows and doors to connect the activities inside with the sidewalk outside.

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- **Park anywhere except in front of the building:** Put parking above, below, behind, on the street or next to the structure, but not separating pedestrians from storefronts.

Does the **Koolhaas** design meet these three rules? If not, how can he make it more "user-friendly"? On Fourth Avenue, the library is set back about 40 feet, creating a plaza. Seven steel tubes, the size of utility poles, rise diagonally from the front of this plaza to the second floor, cutting off the plaza from the sidewalk. The scale model of the library shows this plaza appropriately populated with miniature people; but, in reality, people would have no plausible reason to be there.

The plaza concept is a throwback to a now-discredited notion that empty areas create social spaces. It is as if 50 years of architectural history had never happened.

Farther north along Fourth, a chest-high wall ensures that no one falls onto an emergency stairway from the basement auditorium. This wall is a deterrent to rule No. 2, as it impedes any view of/from the building interior.

Furthermore, because of its function, the auditorium windows may require drapes or blinds, further diminishing any inside-outside connection. If only the architect had located activities close to sidewalk level to keep human energy within easy view and access.

Instead, his plan creates a "dead zone." The Spring Street elevation consists of a series of "giant steps" which climb the hill in roughly two-foot risers, interrupted midway by the entrance to the parking garage. These "steps" are not steps at all; in fact they serve no useful purpose. They are too high to climb, unless you happen to be one of the taller Sonics.

Why **Koolhaas** conceived of the steps is unclear. If he builds them with translucent material, they will allow light to enter the basement. But this seems an extraordinarily expensive solution, considering the alternatives: windows and artificial lighting.

Along Fifth Avenue, a crisscross of steel tubes slopes away from the sidewalk. Behind this lattice is an empty courtyard open to Seattle weather and then, the doors to the library.

Both lattice and courtyard will block visibility, act as barriers and possibly present a safety hazard for hapless patrons who aren't careful how they navigate their way through lattice to library.

These massive pieces of bare steel suggest the kind of sterile monumentality reminiscent of the Bank of America building nearby. The courtyard is another "dead zone."

How to salvage the library design:

It is ironic that a designer touted as such a brilliant and far-out theorist should have produced such a conventional and anti-urban 1950s design. But as currently designed, the library does not connect well to the sidewalk; it is not a street-friendly building, contributing to a lively downtown, nor does its "face" entice the pedestrian to step inside.

How do we salvage this design? The answer is simple: Take the library to the "edge." Bring human uses to the periphery of the building. This is a two-fold process:

- **Initial design:** Create rooms at sidewalk level for street-oriented functions and "open" them to the street with windows and doors.
- **Ongoing management:** The Library Board must demand a sidewalk-friendly design and library management must schedule activities and events at street level throughout the years that this library will serve the community.

There is an old adage that behind every great building is a great client. The Library Board must raise these and other questions about how the **Koolhaas** design organizes itself spatially and how it relates to the cityscape around it.

Because of the interplay of initial design and ongoing management, and the necessity of a full understanding of the library's internal operations, there may be a variety of ways to take the library to the edge.

Fifth Avenue

The forecourt along Fifth Avenue is virtually useless.

Solution: Replace the structural lattice with an enclosed, weather-proof space. A cafe is already envisioned for the Fifth Avenue level. Put it here instead. (The lovely Third Avenue Arcade at Benaroya Hall demonstrates convincingly that commercial uses can co-exist with dignity and grace in a very "high culture" address.) A sidewalk location will also allow the cafe to remain open when the library is closed.

Madison Street

Currently, the blank wall hides the loading dock from view.

Solution: Abolish the requirement that the Central Branch receive delivery trucks. Relocate this function to a branch where parking is available. Why use valuable downtown real estate for warehousing?

Alternate solution: Make the trucks drive through the building, entering on Spring, loading/unloading inside, and exiting on Madison.

A third approach would install windows into the loading area. Books don't get moved around the system by magic; there is nothing embarrassing about this logistical function, so why hide it behind walls? Hold more activities on the periphery of the building and make them visible.

For example, the reading room of the main library in Edmonton, Alberta, directly faces - and enlivens - the street. There's a branch library in West Vancouver that's also visible from the sidewalk.

No doubt there are many other library services that could benefit from direct access to the sidewalk.

Fourth Avenue

Here the plaza is also, in the most literal sense, useless. Put activities there to attract people. Bring the first floor wall out beyond the steel tubes so that the Library can bring interior activities close to the sidewalk.

There is about 6,000 square feet of space on this plaza, ample room for a number of uses. (Why not display books — perhaps best-sellers — right there at the sidewalk!?)

One practical constraint (common to the Fifth Avenue frontage as well) will be the sloping metal beams. Seattle's building code will require barriers underneath them for pedestrian safety. This will severely constrain visibility and restrict the flexibility of the space.

Fourth Avenue auditorium

Bring the auditorium up to street grade. Allow for direct entry so that it can be rented by private groups when the library is closed. Let the auditorium double as a reading room when no event is scheduled there.

Spring Street's "steps" provide a most exciting opportunity for small spaces — either library functions, or better yet, how about renting them to used-book stores? On each step a small shop — individualistic, quirky, very Seattle.

There is still time, but not much, to redeem this dysfunctional building and make it relevant to 21st century Seattle. The Library Board meets on July 25. Send your comments to Deborah Jacobs, the city librarian, before it's too late. Her e-mail address is Deborah.Jacobs@spl.org.

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