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At least public architecture is thriving in Boston



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

The newly renovated Boston Public Library opens to the public Saturday.

By Dante Ramos GLOBE COLUMNIST | JULY 08, 2016

Say what you like about the state of architecture in Boston, but at least the city itself hasn't been shy about investing in lively design that reflects changing public needs. A major renovation project at the Boston Public Library — to be unveiled in a grand reopening ceremony Saturday — is the latest example. Designed by Boston-based William Rawn Associates and built by contractor Consigli Construction Co., the project reimagines famed architect Philip Johnson's early 1970s addition to the library. Gone are the hulking stone tablets that used to obstruct the view into and out of the Johnson Building. There's now a "Big Urban Room" along Boylston Street and a WGBH studio.

For this project, there were lots of questions on the table. For instance, how do you make a well-known building by a big-name American architect work better? Also, what's a library for, anyway? The very term suggests a secular temple, a place for study and quiet contemplation, a place where the unspoken motto is "Shhhh!" This renovation turns one of the nation's leading libraries into a place whose users will, you know, talk.

Lots of people are grumbling about Boston's most prominent construction zone, a Seaport District that's filling up with boxy, antiseptic office and condo blocks. In contrast, city projects such as the Bruce C. Bolling Municipal Building in Dudley Square and new public library branches in East Boston and Mattapan have met with far more public and critical enthusiasm.

William Rawn Associates designed the Eastie and Mattapan branches as well. This week, I spoke with two principals of the firm, William Rawn and Clifford Gayley, about the central library renovation, and about the role public architecture plays in a city. Here's a condensed and edited transcript of our conversation:

Q: What's changed since the Johnson building first went up, and how did that affect what went into the renovation?

William Rawn: Philip Johnson was very concerned what it was like to be in a library. Was the library a place of respite, a retreat from the city? Did he think that looking out on the city streets — with cars going by, with pedestrians walking by — was a distraction? He did this [project] at the very time when we were opening up all sorts of buildings in highly transparent ways.

His first scheme was a building that had no windows, that was very self-contained and inward-focused. And the [library] trustees — bless their souls, they are heroes — said "you can't do that." They forced him to put windows. Then, of course, he put up these granite tablets which blocked the windows. But nonetheless, the trustees of the '60s deserve some credit, if you will, for creating an infrastructure that we could take advantage of in 2016.

Clifford Gayley: In the last 15 years, Boylston Street itself has evolved. From a street that had plenty of underdeveloped parcels, it's now become much more of an active retail corridor. The library needs to participate in that street life.

Q: I'd assumed that those granite tablets in front of the windows were a paranoid security measure. The 1960s and '70s were a tumultuous time in Boston, right?

Rawn: We did a lot of research on Johnson's ideas for the building. He really focused on what it was like to be inside, and how it felt looking out at the traffic. The run-of-the-mill life of a city was not in keeping with what a library was. He made a big point of really thinking about it from the inside looking out, rather than the outside looking in.

Gayley: It was almost a suburbanized version of the library, rather than one connected to the city. Writing the city off, if you will. That building, from the inside out, could've been anywhere.

Q: Libraries have always been monuments to the book, but readers are shifting from print to digital media. How did that affect the way you designed the interior?

Rawn: John Palfrey, who headed the search committee for the new library director, is the head of school at Andover and an expert on libraries. He uses the term “the hybrid model of the library.” He thinks that books are here to stay. At the BPL, because of the extent of their historic holdings, those books will always be a cultural object that needs saving, even as they are being digitized. Palfrey thinks that we have to be thinking of libraries in both ways, because to choose one and not the other is ignoring reality. Thirty years from now, will it be totally digitized? The thing that gets printed and that you hold — is it disappearing? We don't have an answer to that. We adopted the hybrid model.

Gayley: More and more these days, the library is becoming an interactive place that, yes, has books and digital material but also is a place of collaboration — whether you're a student wanting to collaborate more with other students, or an entrepreneur wanting to set up a business. More and more we're seeing food in libraries. We have a number of places in the new BPL that there will be food. The WGBH studio even pushes the idea even further: Why not have non-library uses such as a broadcast studio or other things? Why does a library have to only be about books? It can be about many things.

Q: How do you decide what to exclude from the building? If there's food and a broadcast studio, maybe a lot of other uses belong there, too. How do you draw the line?

Gayley: One thing a library should be is very, very flexible. We don't know where the library as an idea will end up, and why have it be constrained by things that can't happen there as opposed to things that could happen there? In this particular case the library wanted to find uses that were mission-compatible. They didn't want to have a steakhouse or men's clothing store. But it's a great question: Why can't there be other things that draw people together in a space that is one of the few free places that you can go to?

Rawn: You can carry that one step further: Most public places now are relatively controlling about who can go there. You think of a public school as a non-elitist place, but in fact the security at a school is extreme. You or I couldn't walk in unaccompanied by someone associated with the school.

Q: This particular site, of course, is right at the Marathon finish line. In light of the 2013 bombing, did you have to adapt the design in subtle or unsubtle ways for any added security risk?

Gayley: There was a very strong directive, from the city, that the city and the library were not

going to react in a defensive way. The City of Boston wasn't going to cower and hide behind a wall. It was going to remain open and celebrate the values that are at the heart of the city.

Q: There have been a lot of complaints lately about the state of architecture in Boston. Why is it that the more critically acclaimed recent buildings in Boston are public ones, not private ones?

Raw: These public buildings are embracing the city in a very strong way. They're responding to the importance of the public realm to the city. They're doing that far more aggressively than office buildings or even commercial buildings.

Gayley: What Bill is saying [about public buildings] would also apply to university buildings. In both cases, these are owners who are building for the long term. They're not flipping products. They're going to be occupying those buildings 50 years, maybe even 100 years from now.

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