We really have something to celebrate on the corner of 6th and Copper.”

--Cathy Robbins
The architects statement:

Our design of the main building of the Albuquerque Public Library System began with a great advantage which too many new buildings lack — an architecturally sophisticated client. The Director and staff, keenly aware of their problems, were determined that their architect should solve them. Many new building programs are derived directly from an unconscious remodeling of the inadequate space which the client is using at the time of the formulation of program for the new building. Many other programs are too much influenced by other new buildings which, with a change here and there, could satisfy the client's immediate needs. In both cases the solution to the design problem is damaged by a mixing of program and solution which most often overlooks the rudimentary design issues. These pitfalls were avoided in the derivation of the program for Albuquerque's new library, a collaborative effort between the director of libraries, his staff, and the architect. The main library had been operating in a 1924 building designed for a population of 20,000. No one wanted a revised version of the existing building. Also, although the librarians travel a great deal and examine new library buildings, no one had encountered a new building which they wished to copy or even to be heavily influenced by.

"Everything which we are doing now we will probably be doing differently within ten years. Give us a building which will not get in the way of our need to change..."

"We want the busiest urban site which we can get, where we have a chance to relate to the greatest possible number of people. Give us a building which invites these people to come in. Give us the excitement of this urban location where we want it, but protect us from the noise and busyness where it gets in our way..."

"Give us a building which the City and the region will be aware of, and which people will want to come to see. Give us a friendly monument without domes or grand stairways — we can't afford them, and they would get in the way of changes which we are sure to need..."

"Most of the patrons will feel comfortable with a reasonably high noise level. Some will want as much quiet as possible. Give us as wide a range of reader environments as possible — open lounges, partially secluded carrels, closed study rooms, open courts sheltered from the noise and danger of the street..."

"Give us a New Mexico building, but use no false adobe..."

These statements from pre-program conversations with Library Directors Don Reichman and Alan Clark reflect their extraordinary professional excellence as well as their awareness of the responsibility of the public library to the community. They also indicate a rare sophistication in regard to the nature of architectural programming and the role of the architect in the processes of both program and design. The clients confined themselves to definition goals and requirements, and once the program was complete we confined ourselves to solving these problems.

In addition to their definition of a superb program, the clients gave us another vital advantage. They expected an extraordinary design from us and consistently expressed their confidence in our ability to achieve it. They provided the climate of calm optimism which enabled us to do the best work of which we are capable.

Before the program was finalized, we visited twenty of the most conspicuous new libraries in the country, all close to our program of 500,000 volumes and 500 patrons. We talked to the librarians, the architects, and the library users about the good and the bad aspects of their new buildings. One circumstance became dominant. Changes in library media and methods of handling it are so rapid and omnipresent that flexibility of interior space is the preeminent architectural requirement for providing continuously adequate and creative library services. Everywhere, we saw that this requirement had not been met. In every library which we examined there was a mixture of public spaces with fixed building elements. Stairways, monumental multi-story shafts of vertical space, elevators, ducts shafts, toilet rooms, etc., were scattered throughout the building — all logically placed in relation to the way the library was presumed to operate at the time it was programmed, and all based upon the assumption that the functions would remain about the same for the life of the building. We found expensive built-in equipment which had already been abandoned and departments which could not grow or change because of immovable building elements.

We agreed to strive for the most flexible public library in the country, and we probably have it. All walls in the master spaces are easily movable on 9'-0" coffered ceiling modules, each of which contains its own lighting, air supply and return, and connections to electrical, telephone and video systems.

The program was finalized, and the downtown site at Fifth & Copper was acquired. Three levels were dictated by program, site, and budget. We agreed to strive for a rectangular public space on each level as large as the half block site permitted, and interrupted by nothing permanent except the structural columns, 36'-0" o.c. In order to keep the big spaces free we had to place all fixed elements in contiguous but separate buildings. We found ourselves talking in the cliches of master and slave spaces, coined by the Philadelphia school, but based upon practices at least as old as the earliest high school gymnasium with attached shower and locker rooms.

We allowed these servant buildings to be shaped

(Text continues on page 18)
Site Plan

Street Level

Non-Fiction

Fiction

Circulation

Work
by the functions they housed, and by their relation
to the site. The heating and cooling equipment
buildings were located at east and west ends with
their major volumes carried by cantilevers so that
as much open space as possible could be given back
to the street. Elevators, stairways, toilet rooms, top
administration offices and conference rooms occupy
the south projection. This mass was deliberately
opposed to the otherwise rigid orthograph of the
street pattern and the building's structure in order
to emphasize the main entrance and the main public
stairs and elevators. Fixed staff and service facil-
ities occupy the north servant building, where the
staff lounge is cantilevered over a ramp leading
down to a service court at the northwest corner of
the site.

In order to preserve the flexibility of the main
volume of public space, these servant buildings had
to project outside the central rectangle. The master
volume was therefore forced back from the property
lines. More of the site was thus preserved for public
space outside the building and the servant projec-
tions added interest to the building's massing. This
configuration of large volume set back from the
streets as much as thirty feet gave us the opportu-

ity of developing basement level courts around much
of the building's periphery. Three of these courts
form public reading areas, sheltered from the noise
danger of the busy streets. A fourth basement

court at the northwest corner of the building is
devoted to all vehicular service to the building, in-
cluding bookmobiles. A great advantage to these
courts, aside from the interest and ambience which
they give the complex, is the fact that the public
level below the street is not a basement, either in
feeling or building code definition. A sprinkler sys-
tem, more hazardous to books than fire, was not
required.

The main volume is set back so far from the street
that large glass areas, well protected from the sun
by the overhanging upper level, can reveal the most
popular library elements to the passing public with-
out the distractions of noise and sun. Glass on the
upper level where the main public collections are
housed is used sparingly and with maximum con-
cern for providing architectural drama as well as
clarification of orientation in the 30,000 square feet
of this largely brick enclosed space.

Although landscaping is waiting upon the opti-

mum planting season, maximum consideration was
given to planting, both at street level and in the
below grade courts, the textured concrete walls of
which were designed for evergreen vines. Deciduous
native trees will dominate the ample street level
planting beds. Wood benches surrounding lower
courts at street level are located three feet out and
two feet above the required railings so that shrub-
bery behind the seating safely minimizes the re-
quired 42" high railing and provides additional tex-
ture and protection for the courts below. Planting

beds within courts provide for ground covers as
well as deciduous trees tall enough to relate to the
upper level windows, which provide near views of
the rapidly changing cityscape and distant views
of the Sandia Mountains.

The building is a three story facility having ap-
proximately 104,577 sq. ft. of space with provisions
for adding an additional floor of 34,000 sq. ft. Cool-
ing is provided by two 150 ton centrifugal chillers
having a double bundle condensor to allow heat
recovery to heat the building. Heating, in the event
the heat recovery from the chillers is inadequate, is
provided by a gas fueled steam boiler. Air distribu-
tion is provided by two fan systems through a dual
duct, medium velocity system. Humidification is
provided for the entire building.

The poured in place concrete structure has post
tensioned beams and slabs. All outside walls and
most permanent interior walls are of smooth sur-
faced, tan colored brick. S. M. P. C.
and in the opinion of a user:

I'm no Ada Louise Huxtable, but here goes. With the opening of the new main branch of the Albuquerque Public Library downtown, Albuquerque has entered the big league of public buildings . . .

The Grand Opening on March 8 was a people's affair and, more than that, a children's affair. Our three year old delightedly tailed after Winnie, Eeyore and other Pooh characters who wandered about the children's area, compliments of Sears. Stories, mime, theater, lectures, animals, puppets, crafts demonstrations — all were open to the curiosity and excitement of the hundreds of kids and adults who jammed the library on that Saturday.

But the real star of the day was the building itself. Can a building make you feel good? Yes. We've all had the experience of entering a building and sensing immediately that the building is sharing with us, in a personal way, its soul and its identity. I've felt that way in, for instance, the Hermitage in Leningrad, the Metropolitan Museum in New York (especially when ascending the great staircase) and the New York State Theater in Lincoln Center (notwithstanding the impersonality which some planners and architects ascribe to the Lincoln Center complex.)

Albuquerque's new library, though constructed on a much smaller scale than these buildings, makes me feel good. As I wandered around the three levels in March, I couldn't help but silently compare the library to the Convention Center. The library is everything the Convention Center is not — human, warm and inviting.

(If you're on the third floor, you get a bird's eye view of the city's ever-changing skyline set dramatically against the New Mexico landscape. If you're on the main level, you have a more mundane and homely view of the auto and pedestrian traffic on the street. The building keeps you aware of the contrast between the interior and exterior environments, while it imparts to you a sense of yourself in those environments.

On that rainy Saturday of the Grand Opening, the library was full of people, and that heightened the excitement about the new building. Everyone was pleased as punch, and not a few citizens, including library director Alan Clark, walked around with silly grins on their faces.

The crowds reminded me that this branch, in the heart of the city, is an urban facility, that this library, with its newly widened range of community services, offers a public experience. The library opening brought home again the idea that the richness of city life derives from happenings and interpersonal relationships which simply are not possible in suburban or rural life and which enlarge one's vision of the world and self.

There are some who worry that "undesirables" from Central Avenue might intrude on the splendor of the downtown branch. But here is one who recalls her college days and the characters who haunted the New York Public and Columbia libraries. Those street scholars included some who actually read in the libraries and many who just used the reading rooms as convenient shelters. They caused no harm and added a bit of variety to the otherwise drab academic types who are often found in libraries. In any case, I hope no one chases out the grandfathers who now sit in the sun on Central Avenue but who just might find the library a more pleasant place to gather.

The new library tells us the direction we should be heading in. It proves that we can have truly exciting and beautiful modern buildings right here in River City — assuming we choose the right architects.

We have done it folks! We really have something to celebrate on the corner of 6th and Copper. All of us lucky people who live and/or work downtown are the chief beneficiaries. To those of you on Albuquerque's frontier — eat your hearts out! Or, better yet, try taking the bus downtown to visit the library. There's a stop just a block away.

Cathy Robbins
Executive Secretary, Albuquerque Art League

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