

cowboy modernism

Will Bruder draws from the Wild West and the car wash to design an up-to-date library.

BY CLIFFORD A. PEARSON

IN PHOENIX, SPRAWL CREATES

cultural, economic, and architectural mash-ups both weird and wonderful. Time and space collapse in the so-called Valley of the Sun, opening up views of Jiffy Lubes framed by rugged mountains, foreclosed houses next to a new boutique hotel, and Tod Williams Billie Tsien's Phoenix Art Museum just blocks away from a mock-Aztec restaurant offering "Mex & Match" menu items. This is where the frontier meets the strip mall. Will Bruder, who moved here from Milwaukee more than 35 years ago, knows and loves this place. His work—from the Deer Valley Rock Art Center [RECORD, October 1995, page 64] to the Central Library and Loloma 5 condominiums [RECORD, July 2005, page 132]—mines the area's geological, archaeological, and stylistic heritage, then transforms these sources into buildings that glorify the act of construction, whether humble or lavish. Without ever being literal, his designs put you in touch with desert ravines, Hohokam ruins, and the spirit of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Approaching Bruder's new Agave Library in an outlying part of town, you drive past a car wash and a Blimpie before reaching what seems to be a tilting, curving billboard with giant letters sliding off to one side. Made of vertical strips of galvanized-steel hat channels attached to steel I-columns and tube beams, the freestanding structure serves as a false front announcing the library. Leaving narrow spaces between the steel



1. From the east, the library announces itself with a tilting "scrim" rising as high as 56 feet. The architects used the kind of reflective paint found on highway signs for the giant letters.

2. South of the library, the context includes a car wash and a fast-food restaurant.

3. A story tower anchors a garden outside the library.

4. The folded-metal entry canopy on the north facade acts as a foil to the orthogonal mass of the cinder-block building.



PHOTOGRAPHY: © BILL TIMMERMAN

annels and using reflective film for the letters spelling t *agave*, the architect made sure the supersize “scrim” 5 feet at its highest point) plays with shadow and light ring the day and catches headlights at night. “It’s a wboy front with a scale and presence big enough to nify the civic role of a library,” says Bruder, referring 19th-century Western buildings that used false fronts seem grander than they really were. The next moment, he’s talking about the library’s scrim as a drive-in vie screen, adding another layer of cultural reference the mix.

Working with a tight, \$6.65 million budget for the ,400-square-foot branch library, Bruder tucked an expensive masonry box behind the swaggering street ade. What at first seems to be dumb cinder-block nstruction, however, turns out to be a tutorial in using ndard concrete-masonry units (all 8 by 16 inches) in otle and unorthodox ways. For example, he angled (or obbled,” in Bruder lingo) some blocks slightly out of gnment, so they create vertical strips that catch shad- s and add texture to the facade. At the four corners of e building, he stacked the blocks so they form a mid- edge running straight up in a crisp line.

Most important, he used the posttensioned, cked-bond blocks to choreograph a lively dance be- een solid and transparent elements—a duet that im- ms both the interiors and the exteriors. Visitors enter e library on the north (not the east, where the false ont merely catches their attention). Mostly opaque, the try facade contrasts the sandblasted concrete blocks th vertical slits of glazing irregularly spaced along the ver 8 feet of the building. Once inside, visitors notice at the south wall offers an inverse composition—with ncrete block and glass slits resting above an 8-foot- gh band of glazing. Because the interior is mostly one ge, open space, the play of one side off the other, and ade off of light, animates everything. And the sight heavy concrete block seemingly floating above glass at in fact supported by slender steel-pipe columns) ds a welcome element of surprise.

“I like to reinvent the ordinary,” says Bruder about s use of materials such as cinder block. “It’s also a utter of being local and creating buildings that people nt to touch.”

Inside the library, Bruder used low, perforated-el partitions and bookshelves to create separate ar- s while maintaining views through the 24-foot-high ace. In a few places, he dropped the ceiling a couple feet and inserted skylights to give the areas below a ferent ambience. To separate a computer-training o from the rest of the library, he hung from the ceiling nslucent-orange strips of the plastic used in refrig- ited-meat warehouses. Colorful carpet tiles on trow- d-concrete floors form “area rugs” in certain places,

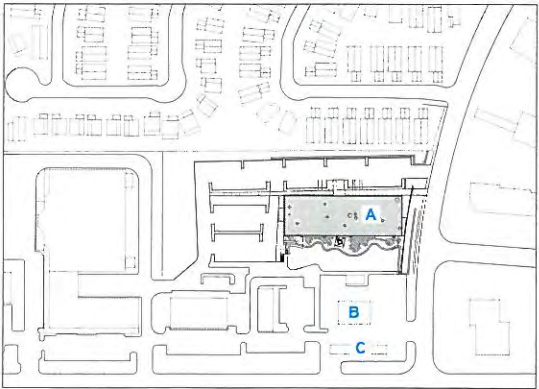


1. Christine Ten Eyck landscaped the garden with low gabion walls and native species.
2. By putting masonry above glass, Bruder created an element of surprise on the south wall of the main library space.
3. Angled cinder blocks catch shadows and light on the north facade.
4. Glazed vertical slits help define a protected reading area.

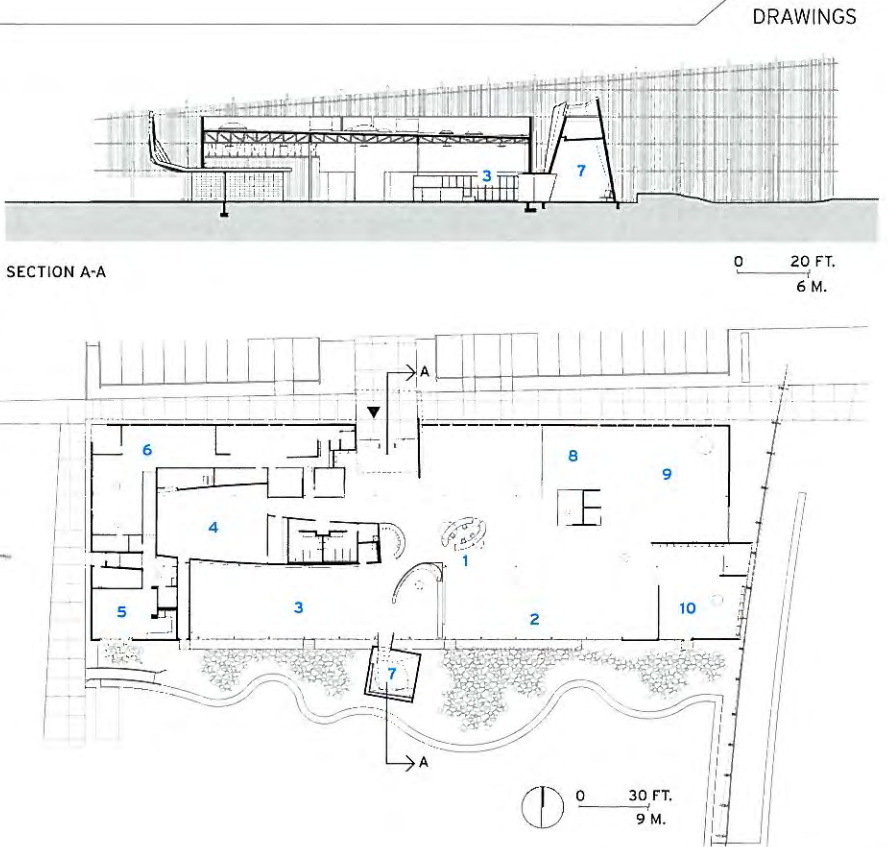
5. Materials such as troweled-concrete, wooden trusses, and concrete masonry units form a neutral envelope for splashier interior elements such as colorful bookshelves, curving counters, translucent plastic curtains, and a suspended white sculpture by Kendall Buster above the service counter.



- | | |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| 1 Service desk | 7 Story tower |
| 2 Lounge | 8 Computer training lab |
| 3 Children | 9 Nonfiction |
| 4 Meeting | 10 Teens |
| 5 Staff lounge | |
| 6 Staff | |



- A Library
B Fast food restaurant
C Car wash





steel beams supporting the entry canopy project to the main library space. Bruder dropped the ceiling light and added colorful tiles in certain places without using partitions. A curtain made of the same plastic found in refrigerated warehouses separates the computer reading lab from the rest of the library. Waxed-steel panels give the restroom area its own identity. POSITE: A torqued and tilted tower with a skylight and two small windows serves as an engaging place for story reading. When the suspended lights were being installed, the architects decided to hang them at different heights to further the room's off-kilter effect.

serving as another way of identifying spaces without resorting to partitions. Maintaining views through the building not only makes it easy for visitors to navigate the interiors, but allows the city to staff the library with just one person at a centrally located service desk and another roaming about. Exposed gang-nail timber trusses running from one end of the building to the other also reinforce the sense of one big communal space. And as Bruder notes, they act as “a poor man’s wood ceiling.” The cinder-block walls and sealed-concrete floors establish a low-key envelope within which Bruder added a few splashes of electric color—in particular, lime green paint on the gypsum-board walls of a study block, the translucent-orange-plastic curtain of the computer lab, and candy-colored furniture scattered about. While the mostly solid north facade blocks views of and sounds from the parking lot, the south elevation opens onto a garden landscaped by Christine Ten Eyck and separated from the adjacent property by a low, winding gabion wall. Here, Bruder placed a torqued and tilted, steel-framed story tower that can be entered directly from the library but has its own off-kilter identity. A skylight at the top and two windows cut into the stucco walls at different heights and angles direct shafts of daylight into the small space and are best appreciated while sitting on the floor. Context means different things to different archi-

itects. In an anything-goes kind of place like suburban Phoenix, context is particularly hard to pin down, let alone respond to in an intelligent way. So a modest-size project, such as Agave Library, that both fits in and stands out among strip shopping centers, saguaro cacti, and jagged-edged mountains makes a proud statement about the role of architecture in the modern Southwest. ■

Project: Agave Library, Phoenix, Arizona
Architects: Will Bruder + Partners – Will Bruder, AIA, lead design architect; Richard Jensen, AIA, project manager; Chris Balzano, Dominique Price, project architects; Marjorie Fichthorn Whitton, interior designer; Ben Nesbeitt, Rob Gaspard, Joaquin Roesch, design team
Engineers: Rudow + Berry (structural); Ideas for the Built Environment (mechanical); McKay Conant Hoover (acoustical)
Consultants: Ten Eyck (landscape); Roger Smith (lighting)
General contractor: Hardison/Downey Construction
SOURCES
Masonry: Integra Wall Systems
Glass: PPG (Solexia)
Carpet: Shaw Contract; Durkan Modular; Interface; C&A
Interior ambient lights: Zumtobel; Elliptipar; Delray; Bega

