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Montreal, Inside Out + Andreas Uebele + 21st Century Libraries + Airports in Transition

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Branching Out

Hardworking graphics add punch to the community-centered design of the 21st century library.

BY JENNY S. REISING

Think of a public library, and what comes to mind? Perhaps the red-brick blocks of our youth, where fluorescent lighting cast a yellowish glow and anything above a whisper was strictly taboo? Fast-forward to today, and a slew of newly built libraries are conversation starters, awash in natural light, with vibrant colors and patterns beckoning card-holders to linger and explore.

The Seattle Central Library, designed by Rem Koolhaas, revolutionized library design when it opened in 2004. With its unconventional steel-and-glass architecture, colorful interior design, and inviting public spaces, the 400,000-sq.-ft. building reimaged

the public library as an iconic destination for learning and lounging. Across the pond, London's Idea Stores—a retail-inspired concept for libraries by architect David Adjaye—take cues from their fashionable neighbors, with an emphasis on transparency. After the first Idea Store opened in 2002, library traffic was three times higher than the two libraries it had replaced. Adjaye has since been tapped to design branch libraries in Washington, D.C.

What's driving this sea change in library design from staid to stellar?

"Things are changing so fast and people's expectations of a library and what it needs to be and who it serves are all very dynamic," says Richard Jensen, vice president of Will Bruder + Partners (Phoenix). When the architecture firm conceptualized the first of

three libraries for the City of Phoenix, building cookie-cutter branches was out of the question, and community involvement was key.

"We decided that each community should have a say in what they wanted their library to be, then we hired the best architect the budget would allow and got out of the way," says Shera Farnham, assistant city librarian for the City of Phoenix.

As a result, collections have gotten smaller and the libraries have focused on the most sought-after items for each community, reducing the amount of shelving by about a third. More computers and computer training rooms have

been added, open flexible spaces abound, and colorful, comfortable furnishings appeal to all ages. More emphasis is also being placed on signage and environmental graphics. When a bond allowed the Plainsboro Public Library in New Jersey to build larger digs, Library Director Jinny Baeckler made sure there was enough money in the budget for graphics. Circulation rose 13% when a new signage system was installed in the old library, so she understood the value of helping visitors—particularly the community's large non-English-speaking Asian population—get where they need to go easily.

From a budget- and site-challenged structure in Phoenix to Plainsboro's not-so-plain new building, here are two shining examples of 21st century libraries.

Features

- 22 Archtype**
At the intersection of architecture, typography, and information design, Andreas Uebele is making—and breaking—the rules.
- 28 Montreal Inside Out**
A Montreal designer and magazine publisher gives us an insider's view of the design-centric city, from urban street art to the Quartier des Spectacles.
- 38 Signs of Change**
A small project for Montreal's city-owned recycling centers teaches a big lesson about sustainability.
- 44 Pictos Vivants**
A dynamic wayfinding and sign system leads visitors to discover the wonders of science at Montreal's Old Port.
- 50 Remembering Expo 67**
Canada's first World Exposition left indelible marks on the city and on designers who experienced it firsthand.

57 Branching Out

21st century libraries are redefining the essential community gathering place. Environmental graphics play a big role.

68 In Transition

By providing compelling experiences for travelers and visitors, airports are transcending their old roles as generic waystations.

Columns

- 8 From the Editor by Jessica London
- 10 On the Web
- 13 Hot Reads
- 15 Shortlist Falls Creek Ski Resort, D'Espresso, Letterkundig Museum
- 76 Out There
- 78 Design Marketplace
- 79 Ad Index
- 80 Get Lost

On the cover: Quartier des Spectacles, Montreal's entertainment district and cultural hub, has a new visual identity created under the artistic direction of Ruedi Baur and Jean Beaudoin, Intégral. Lighting is a key element, including its new "luminous signature" of red dots (created by Axel Morgenthaler). See story, page 28. (Photo: Martine Doyon, Partenariat du Quartier des Spectacles)

Succulent Surprise

AGAVE LIBRARY

Below: The 207-ft.-long "cowboy front" on the east side of the Agave Public Library is constructed from random hat channels of varying widths and depths that taper from 40 ft. down to 26 ft. to meet zoning ordinance height limitations. The 30-ft.-tall "Agave" graphic consists of straight strips of white, reflective, adhesive-backed 3M vinyl that resemble a barcode.



AGAVE LIBRARY

Client Phoenix Public Library

Location Phoenix

Client Team Shera Farnham, Julaine Warner, Wally Scholz (Phoenix Public Library); Jon Kolstad (City of Phoenix Engineering and Architectural Services Department); Ed Lebow, Donna Isaac (Phoenix Office of Arts and Culture Public Art Program)

Design Will Bruder + Partners

Design Team Will Bruder (director of design); Richard Jensen (project principal); Chris Balzano, Dominique Price (architects); Marjorie Fichthorn Whitton (interior designer)

Fabrication ASI

Consultants Kendall Buster (public artist), Roger Smith Lighting Design (lighting), McKay Conant Hoover (acoustics), Ten Eyck Landscape Architecture (landscape architecture), Burgion Group (emerging literacy), Hardison/Downey Construction (contractor)

Photos Bill Timmerman, Timmerman Photography

You don't need a big budget to make a big splash, and the new Agave Library in Phoenix is proof. "This was the last of four libraries built on a bond, and money was running out," says Richard Jensen, vice president of Will Bruder + Partners. With a budget of just \$6.65 million for a 25,400-sq.-ft. building, the architects also had to deal with a less-than-ideal site: the library is situated on a blighted wasteland between a residential neighborhood and a strip mall, and behind a carwash.

Never one to balk at a challenge, the Bruder team found the solution in signage—specifically, a modern version of a western cowboy facade that would amplify the library's visibility while hiding the building's otherwise nondescript, budget-friendly masonry-block construction. "We knew we had to do something that really stretched out, was big and audacious to reach out to the streets, and that's what a cowboy front does," Jensen explains.

The 207-ft.-long oversized scrim, which simply declares "Agave," tapers down from 40 ft. at its peak to 26 ft., deliberately scaled to meet zoning ordinance height limitations as the sign gets closer to the adjacent residential neighborhood. Constructed of randomly placed hat channels of varying widths and depths, faced with white reflective vinyl and illuminated with floodlamps, the billboard/facade is hard to miss.

“We knew we had to do something that really stretched out, was big and audacious to reach out to the streets, and that's what a cowboy front does.”

Top: A take on movie-theater marquees, the entry sign juts out about 15 ft. from the scrim wall and is fabricated from steel pipe and 10-gauge steel panels.

According to Josh Livingston, principal at sign fabricator ASI (Oklahoma City), Bruder deserves a lot of credit for getting around sign ordinances by convincing the city that it was public art. Jensen adds, "Typically, you couldn't get away with this, but it's a testament to the city's desire to do great things when it comes to public libraries."

The building is designed with an open, flexible plan and very few walls, allowing for future modularity. Signage is used sparingly but with impact. "We try to do a minimal amount of signage, only where it needs to be," Farnham explains. "I like to think that the architecture acts as a silent sign." For example, a cloud-like public art project by Kendall Buster over the information desk draws attention with no words. And because everything is on one floor, wayfinding is more intuitive: main areas are defined by concrete flooring, seating areas are carpeted, and an exterior reading garden is visible through a glass wall.

However, where it is used, signage is "like a sprinkling of candy" on an otherwise neutral palette, says ASI's Livingston. Section signs are constructed of aluminum with neon-lit cutout letters in blue, red, and green. Fabrication and installation elements are exposed rather than hidden because of budgetary restrictions. For example, the neon is

Bottom: Signs were used minimally but with impact. A floating cloud installation by artist Kendall Buster stands in for signage over the main information desk. Neon used to illuminate hanging signs adds a colorful pop to the modest materials palette, "like a sprinkling of candy," says Josh Livingston of fabricator ASI.

Below and opposite top: The 42-in.-square, two-sided anodized aluminum signs for restrooms, copy stations, and other library amenities boast cut-out letters and neon, which is visible from the side reveals. Ceiling-hung aircraft cable is strategically arranged to give the signs an organic, sculptural feel.



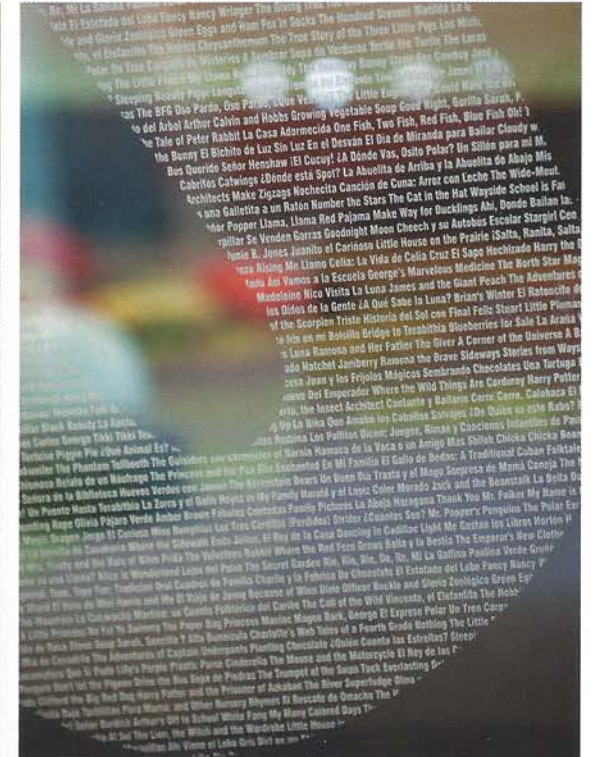
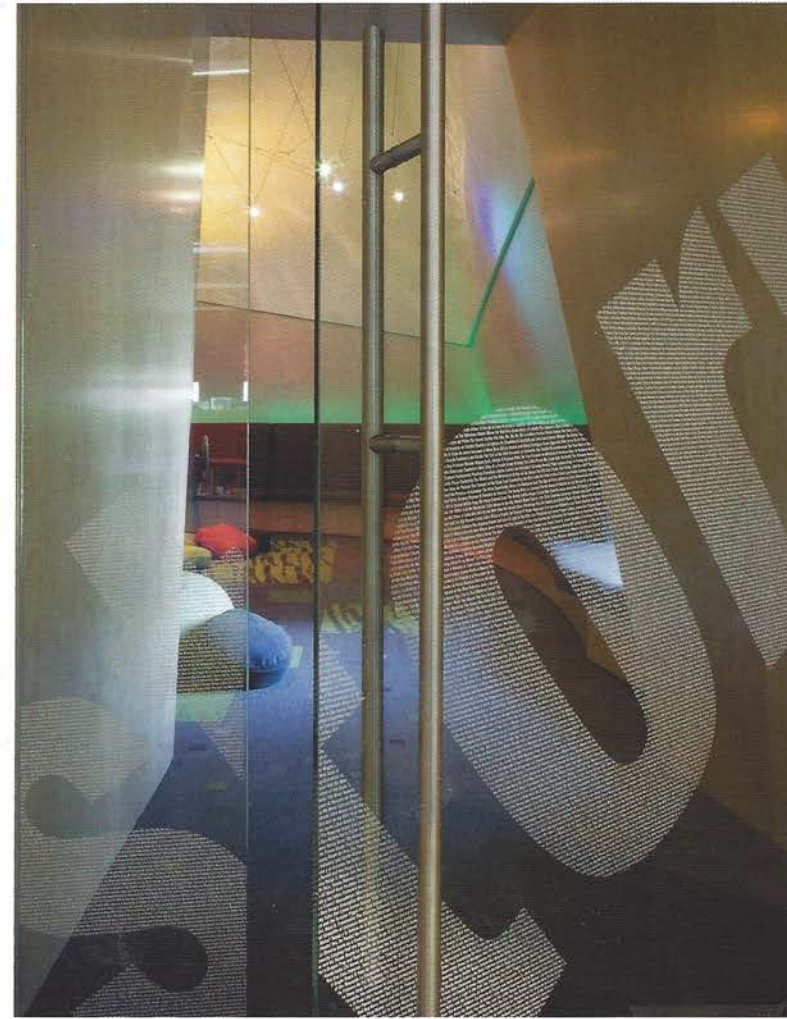
"We try to do a minimal amount of signage, only where it needs to be," Farnham explains. "I like to think that the architecture acts as a silent sign."

visible from the side, the screws are exposed, and aircraft cable from the ceiling-hung signs is carefully arranged to lend an organic feel, "like branches from a tree," according to Jensen.

On the door to the children's "story tower"—a sculptural, white space with colorful LED lighting—each letter in the word "story" is comprised of storybook titles in 10-point type. From a distance, kids only see the word "story." But up close, the smaller story titles become more visible.

Since its 2009 opening, the Agave Library has earned accolades from the design world as well as the community it serves. "It's very busy, and what I like about it is that each group—adults, teens, kids—has found its place in the library," Farnham says.

In fact, many elements of the library were derived during initial meetings Bruder hosted to gain input from the community. They wanted a comfortable, inviting reading room, an outdoor space that's part of the indoor building, and the ability to read next to nature. And they got it all. They also got something they didn't ask for: an extraordinary building. "The 'wow' factor is intense. You know you're not in an ordinary building," Farnham says. "Everybody has their own space—all in 25,000 sq. ft. behind a carwash." X



Left and above: The 6-ft.-wide "story" graphic on the door leading to the children's Story Tower is comprised of storybook titles in 10-point type using white epoxy ink. The 20-in.-high letters are placed on a slant from the ground up to encourage little readers to view the titles up close.