

Maine Home

June 2010

+DESIGN



Design Distinction

AIA Maine awards
the state's best architecture

Portland's Public Library
Retrofitted for the 21st century

Maine Home +DESIGN

75 Market Street

Suite 203

207-772-3373

www.mainehomedesign.com

If whole or part of this article is reproduced online, we ask that
a link back to MaineHOME+DESIGN be placed. Thank you.

A Few Pages Ahead

PUBLIC SPACES

PORTLAND PUBLIC LIBRARY


by Susan Grisanti Kelley
Photography Trent Bell

The Portland Public Library—Maine's largest—has served the community since 1867. In its current location since 1978, it stands strategically on Congress Street as a gateway to the arts district, including the Portland Museum of Art, Maine College of Art, and numerous art galleries. "Anchoring one end of the Arts District in our city is a singular opportunity and responsibility for the library. Our goal is to play a major role in strengthening the cultural fabric of this city," says library director Steve Podgajny. Thanks to Scott Simons of Simons Architecture and those who worked to make his design a reality, the newly renovated library is now retrofitted to engage more openly than ever in the social life of Monument Square. "Just as the trusses reach out to hold up the façade, the design is intended to reach out to the public, inviting them inside to a new library experience," says Paul B. Becker of Becker Structural Engineers.

We recently toured the new library with Scott Simons while he shared his vision for Portland's newest space.

MH+D: HOW HAVE THE USES OF THE LIBRARY EVOLVED OVER TIME? HOW DOES THE NEW LIBRARY REFLECT THESE NEW USES?

SS: They have evolved dramatically in the past twenty years. While they still lend a lot of books, they have become much more like community centers. Steve Podgajny, the executive director of Portland Public Library, calls them "resource-rich community centers," and I would agree. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, libraries were seen as the repositories of the world's knowledge. They were rendered by the world's best architects as "the mind," often with circular, central reading rooms either lit from above, as in the Stockholm Public Library by Gunnar Asplund or with central dark spaces representing the center of the mind, like Louis I. Kahn's Exeter Library. People would come to the library, enter the central space, find the



As much a cafe, a performance space, a public art gallery, as it is a library—the state's newest space strengthens the cultural fabric of Portland

PUBLIC SPACES



Adding to the library's dynamic street presence, the glass above the entrance (previous page), is laminated with "library" in twelve different languages, in a pattern by graphic designer Brad Woodworth. Woodworth also worked on a multicultural signage system throughout the building. Over two dozen languages are spoken in Portland High School this year. Simons and his team took great consideration in designing the library to reflect this tremendous diversity.

Cafe space overlooking Monument Square (above) serves as a new living room for Portland. Soon the façade of the building will have live video capabilities—plans are in place to install a 30- by 20-foot LED Urban Screen that will project cultural information from the library out to Monument Square. The prospect of outdoor screenings and the sharing of international joint broadcasting are part of an already strong momentum in creating a square that is a significant place in the city.

A mixed media piece by Maine artists Gayle Fraas and Duncan Slade, highlighted in the entrance atrium (opposite page) is part of the library's art collection, that includes a painted installation by Frederick Lynch and the newly restored Little Water Girl fountain. Natural Maine materials such as the white oak handrails and slate floors and stair treads offer warmth and durability.

book/knowledge they wanted, and take it to the window, or bring it to the light, thus becoming enlightened. In reinterpreting this age-old paradigm for the City of Portland, we realized there was more information in the palm of most of our hands in our iPods than there was in the library. You can access more information from your phone than you can in the books of any library in the world. So we had to change the way the library worked to respond to this. We literally put the information "in the public realm"—the urban screen that will be on the outside wall of the library, hopefully soon, will face Monument Square. We brought the activities of the library to the Square, into the public realm. Portlanders no longer have to walk up a 150-foot ramp to get to the front door, go up a dark firestair or elevator to access the collection or public spaces. They are all right there in the new front of the library.

MH+D: YOU TOLD US "OLD LIBRARY LAYOUTS DON'T WORK." CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT YOU MEANT BY THAT?

SS: Library users want access to information and informational resources fast. The staff of the library works more like the staff in an airport now, moving around to help the library users help themselves. You can self-check-out, access resource information

through the interlibrary system computers, email your family in Ghana with the public-use computers, or meet a friend for coffee and talk about the latest news in the cafe—all while overlooking Monument Square. Old libraries didn't work that way. They were more suited to lending books. Remember having to be quiet? No longer. The new library is more inclusive, even more democratic. It encourages community interaction.

MH+D: WHAT WERE YOUR OUT-OF-THE-BOX VISIONS FOR ALL THE NEW, NONLIBRARY WAYS THIS SPACE COULD BE USED?

SS: Let's see...new public gallery space just off the entrance lobby, to be used as a public art gallery with exhibits from the city's major galleries, possibly even the Portland Museum of Art; the gallery is also designed to be used as a performance space, possibly for Portland Symphony Orchestra ensembles and soloists; a new cafe space along Congress Street, that can also be used for reception space for events in Rines Auditorium; five meeting rooms adjacent to new Rines Auditorium, which can also serve as break-out rooms, some of which have good acoustical properties so they can be also used for rehearsal rooms by Portland Symphony Orchestra members who need space to teach lessons and rehearse; the list goes on...

MH+D: HOW DID YOU INTEGRATE THE HISTORIC BUILDING

WITH THE NEW SPACE?

SS: Well, it's not that old a building, so it wasn't very difficult. Basically, it was a late-seventies international-style building, fairly well designed by Shepley Bulfinch Richardson from Boston. It had pretty good bones, but it was tired and needed a facelift, and it was also ready to be brought into the twenty-first century. Our budget was very modest for a renovation of this magnitude, so we had to be very clear about our architectural goals. We didn't make any structural changes, that are expensive, so we could preserve more of our budget for the new entrance, atrium/cafe, and staircases, which were the major elements in bringing the library spaces into the public realm.

MH+D: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE KEY DESIGN PRINCIPLES AT PLAY?

SS: Keep it simple, modern, clean, and legible. The previous library had signs hanging from the ceiling everywhere. You couldn't find your way around. The new library has very few signs because the layout is self-evident. You can see all the major public spaces from the new entrance hall. The three-dimensionality of the new library opens up before your very eyes the minute you walk in the door.

Make the daylight wonderful. We wanted the experience of the new library to be joyful, with light penetrating deeply into all the public spaces. We designed large planters beneath all the skylights to make it feel like a botanical garden!

Make a great public space for the City of Portland. The new cafe space along Congress Street is one of the great places to meet, hang out, and people-watch.

MH+D: CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT SOME OF THE AUTOMATED SYSTEMS THAT ARE INVOLVED?

SS: Self-check-out, as mentioned earlier, to make it easier for library users to interface with the library resources; there are four "information walls" where people can get information on the day's events, their place in the public-computing queue, etc. These are large flat-screen monitors located throughout the library to encourage people to move about and discover the library's



PUBLIC SPACES



resources while they are waiting for a public computer, for example. The urban screen, that is not yet built, will be a huge LED screen for displaying cultural content, right out into Monument Square. And there's a very good digital projector and PA system in the new Rines Auditorium.

MH+D: TELL US ABOUT THE GREEN ELEMENTS YOU'VE INCORPORATED.

SS: There was a fairly limited budget for energy improvements, but we managed to improve the performance of the building quite a bit. We removed the baseboard electric heat and replaced it with high-efficiency hot-water baseboards. We installed all new high-efficiency lighting fixtures, greatly reducing the electrical load on the building. We installed super-high-performance skylight and curtainwall glazing, reducing the heating and cooling load on the building. There is a unique feature on the front of the building; we call it the solar chimney. The top of the glass curtainwall is designed as a greenhouse to capture heat for the mechanical system located on the top floor of the building. In cold months, warm air rises and is drawn into a duct at the top of the chimney as preheated fresh air for the mechanical systems, saving dramatically on the cost of preheating cold, outside air. In the summer, warm air is exhausted out of the top of the chimney. There is a thermostat that controls the flow of the heated air from season to season. We also designed green roofs for the two flat roofs on the north of the building. They are extensions of the second and third floor, where the building steps back. These green roofs, that are not yet funded, will reduce heat-island effect (i.e., hot roofs), absorb rainwater—thereby reducing storm surges on the city storm-water sewer system, protect the roofing membranes from ultraviolet degradation, and provide beautiful, planted gardens for the library users to look at instead of rubber-membrane roofs.



In contrast with the large, public spaces, library visitors can also find quiet places (top, left) to read and study.

New and traditional materials are combined to create a whole new feel to the library spaces (above, top).

Congress Street's newest destination on the First Friday Art Walk—the Lewis Gallery (above) on the lower level of the main library hosts monthly exhibitions of the work of artists from Maine and New England.

PUBLIC SPACES

MH+D: THE FAÇADE WILL BE QUITE IMPRESSIVE. CAN YOU TELL US HOW THAT CAME ABOUT AND WHAT IT WILL INVOLVE?


SS: Well, I've talked a lot about the cafe/social space in responses to earlier questions, so I won't repeat myself. The space came into being as a result of many long conversations between Steve Podgajny, the library trustees, Austin Smith (the project architect), and me. We wanted to bring the life of the city and the library together, and to create a living room for the city. You may remember we did an earlier study for the Portland Public Market to see if the library might possibly be relocated to that space. While that proposal did not go forward (the voters rejected the idea), we did learn a lot about how the library could be reorganized and rethought to be more a place of social interaction, more of a "resource-rich community center." The earlier study was important to the development of the new library because we essentially tested these ideas on the very unusual Portland Public Market space and found they could work, could create a new vibrancy and excitement that didn't currently exist in the old library space. **MH+D**

5 MONUMENT SQUARE, PORTLAND
207-871-1700, PORTLANDLIBRARY.COM

For more information, see Resources on page 112.

Architect: Scott Simons Architects—Scott Simons, lead architect; Austin Smith, project architect; Leslie Benson, Chris Berry, Stephen Fraser, and Will Gatchell, architectural team.
Builder: Ledgewood Construction—Clint Gendreau, project manager; Bob Parsons, superintendent, Pete Pelletier, director of preconstruction services. **Mechanical, Electrical & Plumbing Engineering:** Allied Engineering. **Structural Engineering:** Becker Structural Engineers. **Lighting Design Consultant:** Peter Knuppel Lighting Design. **Interior Furnishings:** Creative Office Pavilion. **Lighting Fixtures:** Swaney Lighting Associates. **Sign Design:** Woodworth Associates. **Interior Woodworking & Millwork:** Precision Millwork.

MH+D JUNE 10 35



FOGG
LIGHTING
FINE SPECIALTY LIGHTING
AND LAMPSHADES

Your Source for Interior & Exterior Lighting

Visit our showroom to view our expanding selection of:

*Wall Sconces, Chandeliers, Pendants, Track Lighting,
Table Lamps, Floor Lamps, Recessed Lighting, Lighting Controls,
Exterior Lighting, Landscape Lighting, Ceiling Fans,
Lampshades and more*

*Our ALA Certified staff is available for consultations and on-site visits
to develop a lighting plan for your project*

Go to our website to preview a selection of our lighting

FOGG LIGHTING
281 Marginal Way • Portland, ME 04101
Tel: 207-797-7568 • Fax: 207-797-7569
www.fogglighting.com • info@fogglighting.com

