

Linda Lewin Graif

The Paradox of Public Discourse: Designing Vancouver Library Square

Architecture is a discipline that operates in a complex public arena. While architecture may be defined as the art and science of conceptualizing the built environment, the journey from the drawing board to the constructed artifact is a perilous one. The architect's initial concept, itself subject to constraints of many kinds, must be negotiated with clients, engineers, contractors, financial partners, special interest groups, and the general public. Architecture, particularly public architecture, is inherently non-hermetic and, as such, is open to challenge and debate.

Of all Moshe Safdie's Canadian projects, Vancouver Library Square produced one of the most exhaustive and comprehensive discussions about the role of architecture in public life. Of particular interest are the nature and scope of the public discourse arising from the singular set of circumstances surrounding it. A wide range of issues related to preservation, politics, economics, culture, and aesthetics converged in an

atmosphere of vigorous and often heated debate. This essay examines the public and professional exchanges engendered by the Vancouver Library Square project and illustrates the potential conflicts inherent in the public nature of architecture.

Despite the apparent dialogue between the public and the professionals on the Vancouver Library Square project, I would argue that this discourse had a negligible impact on the outcome of the design. Rather than emerging as a vital part of the discussion, public response was solicited but then disregarded by professionals in the fields of architecture and politics.¹

"Libraries have always represented the cultural heritage of a society. As such, they must transcend the commercial architecture of our time."

Moshe Safdie

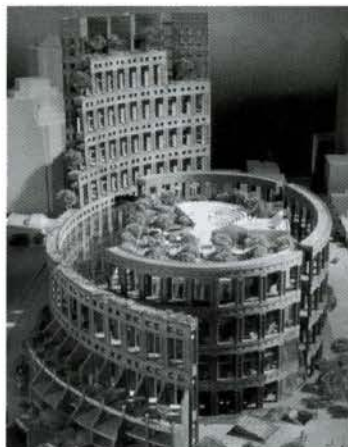
"Probably you'll love it. You did vote for it after all. Highbrow critics may attack it as Caesar's Palace but for you faux is fine. You don't know the difference between modern and post-modern, anyway."

Doug Ward,
The Vancouver Sun, 24 May 1995

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Fig. 1. Model of original design.
(Moshe Safdie Archive, Canadian Architecture
Collection (CAC), McGill University Libraries)



This essay will examine the evolution of the library as a building type; the background of the development of Vancouver Library Square; the design selection process that encompassed the architectural competition, public response, and the impact of public opinion on the final choice; Safdie's original design for Vancouver Library Square and the goals and philosophy out of which it arose; the design revisions recommended by the jury before construction commenced; an overview of the professional and public response to the completed building; and a look at Vancouver Library Square five years after its inauguration — the response of its administrators, users, and the general public.

The Evolution of the Library as a Building Type²

The library was a place designed specifically for the storage of texts and the provision of access to them. As such, its history has been characterized by the nature of the texts it holds, from papyrus rolls and cuneiform tablets, codices and printed books to microforms and digital forms. The technology of storage and the notion of access have had to keep pace with textual developments, and so the very buildings that house them have undergone radical changes.

Ancient Greek and Roman libraries were located in palaces, municipal buildings, and temples, and some were open to the public. Following their dissolution, literature in medieval Europe survived in monastic and cathedral collections. The typical library consisted of a long narrow room lighted on both sides with windows and furnished with rows of lectern desks. While the desks were gradually replaced by the alcove system at the end of the Middle Ages, the longitudinal rooms were retained as late as the eighteenth century.

In the early Renaissance private collections began to grow, inspired by the revival of humanistic literature. Wall shelving and galleries were introduced, resulting in a spacious hall. Eventually the wall system proved inadequate, and by the early nineteenth century the reading hall was separated from the storage area. The need for light engendered ingenious solutions such as clerestoreys, lunettes, and skylights.

By the late nineteenth century social pressures led to the development of the public library in its modern form. The Boston Public Library, the Italianate *cinquecento*-style building by McKim, Mead and White inaugurated in 1895, was the prototype of the public library as we know it today, a building designed especially as a library.

A basic functional change began to affect the interior plan-



Fig. 2. View of south piazza
with stepped amphitheatre:
Robson and Homer Streets.
(Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC,
McGill University Libraries)

ning of libraries. The public library not only provided places for study but now also loaned books for use off the premises. Toward the end of the nineteenth century the system of "open access" was instituted, revolutionizing library layout in two ways: first, bookshelves had to be low and spaced far enough apart for readers to use; second, as a means of preventing theft, the "check-out" counter near the exit doors became almost universal in public library buildings for most of the twentieth century.

In the last years of the nineteenth and the first years of the twentieth century, public libraries became ubiquitous features of the North American landscape when Andrew Carnegie established thousands of library buildings across the continent. Referring to the library as "the people's university," Carnegie believed that free libraries would elevate the status and productivity of the community as a whole.

The design of the library building up to World War II rarely indicated the activity within. Life inside the institution was clearly separate from that of the community at large. The prevailing style tended toward the monumental — buildings dramatically set on podia, symbolically elevated above the quotidian as befitting an edifice devoted to scholarly pursuit and intellectual activity. Following World War II, a great explosion in the amount of published material resulted in a corresponding increase in the number of readers. Library use grew exponentially, and the programmatic scope of the building reflected social and political change. The assumption that the contents of the library were understood and appreciated by only a few gave way to the notion that the formerly sequestered temple to culture was to serve as a resource for the general public. This paradigm shift was reflected in the dramatically altered scale and complexity of the building.

The library building of the last part of the twentieth century has become a multi-use complex conceived as a centre of activity and consumption, a hybrid structure in which the library is but one element of a cultural setting. Retail, dining, entertainment, lectures, exhibitions, day-care facilities, and fund-raising now vie with the original mission of the library as a place for study and reflection. The glazed entrances and grand atria speak to new intentions that encourage communication between the library and its expanded audience and demonstrate the extent to which the library has become primarily a public institution. Today's library complex reflects a more ludic definition of culture, attracting patrons to the library's threshold in an atmosphere of fun and expectation. Jefferson's dictum that "Nothing of mere amusement should lumber a public library" seems far removed from modern-day applications.³

Among the consequences of the increase in the number of people frequenting cultural institutions is the more vulnerable position of culture in the realm of public policy. While the com-

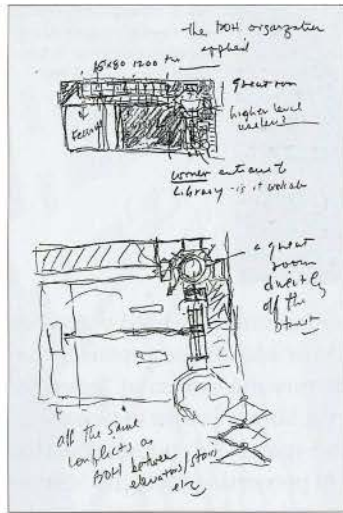


Fig. 3. Moshe Safdie Sketchbook No. 72 (27 December 1991). (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)



Fig. 4. View of concourse looking northward (photo L. Noppen).

munity to a greater or lesser extent supports government funding of the arts, this support has inevitably invited public participation. By the end of the

twentieth century, few public cultural institutions can expect to revise or reform either their programs or their architecture without wide-open and often lively discussion.

For most of the twentieth century a library was defined by its holdings. Indeed, the greatest of the world's libraries were judged by the number of their catalogued items. The vastly expanded and transformed information network makes the library of the late twentieth century a very different place from what it was even a few decades ago. The contemporary library has been undergoing a shift from a print-based repository to a global digital information service. The introduction of new technologies into the library setting has created new imperatives for the physical environment.

The card catalogues near the entrance have all but disappeared, superseded by the computer-filled "Information Mall," "Information Commons," or "Information Café." Buildings provide the metaphor for the ways in which information is stored and presented. The proliferation of linguistic definitions illustrates how libraries are appropriating models from the business and academic domains, thus bridging private and public realms. Public spaces — the mall, commons, café — are non-hierarchical communal spaces inhabited by people and housing computer work stations with access to online catalogues, databases, CD-ROM networks, and the World Wide Web, thus collapsing borders between media, time, and space.

It can be argued that with the emergence of the digital library the need for a building in which to house it has waned. Yet the library structure continues to serve a vital role: it affirms our belief in knowledge as an essential element of our culture as well as responding to a desire for collectivity. A library requires a physical setting to give it identity and to support its activities and services. This communal character guarantees its perseverance as a building type.

Background of Vancouver Library Square

In North America the 1990s were distinguished by a resurgence of library building on a scale virtually unprecedented in any previous decade. This ten-year period saw more than US \$2.7 billion in library construction and renovation, almost 50 percent more than was spent throughout the entire 1980s.⁴ New central libraries that opened during this period include such major buildings

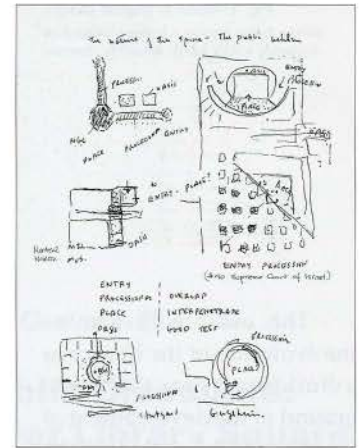


Fig. 5. Sketchbook No. 78 (23 December 1992). (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

as Mississauga Central Library (Ontario), and, in the United States, Chicago's Harold Washington Library (Illinois), Phoenix Central Library (Arizona), San Antonio Central Library (Texas), and San Francisco Public Library (California). A special issue of *Architecture* notes the role of the library in the cityscape: "No longer simple reference centers, these new libraries are being conceived as civic magnets — cornerstones of urban revitalization designed to bring people back downtown."⁵

The construction of Vancouver Library Square took place during this period, the political impetus for which was provided by then-Mayor Gordon Campbell during the municipal elections in 1988.⁶ He explained, "I had been Mayor for two years and I wanted to have a building that 'belonged to the citizens of Vancouver' and that they all felt had as much to recommend it as did our natural surroundings [...] this was one of the most positive projects that I undertook as Mayor."⁷ It was also to be Campbell's only major civic project.

The program of Vancouver Library Square called for a dynamic, people-oriented information and cultural centre that would reflect the idea of a "people's university" for the citizens of Vancouver. Because the library was intended as the most important civic and cultural facility in the area, it was part of the city's plan to shift urban renewal to the south and east, thereby energizing future development and the growth of the downtown area.⁸

Since 1957 the Vancouver Public Library had occupied the premises at 750 Burrard Street,⁹ an International-style building designed by Howard Semmens and Douglas Simpson.¹⁰ After 35 years the library had outgrown its physical plant and technological capabilities; only half of its collection was accessible to the public. According to Madge Aalto, director of the Vancouver Public Library since 1988, "It was overcrowded, overused, overaged."¹¹

In January 1989 the Vancouver Public Library board commissioned an exhaustive twenty-month, \$300,000 study to reassess and consolidate previous planning efforts and to outline the scope of services required by all branches of the Vancouver Public Library system into the twenty-first century. The findings were summarized in a 300-page report that called for a new central library to replace the existing building, a new branch in the Renfrew-Collingwood area, the examination of the collection, and finally the redevelopment of the system over a 25-year period.¹² The report represented the outcome of an intense period of assessment,

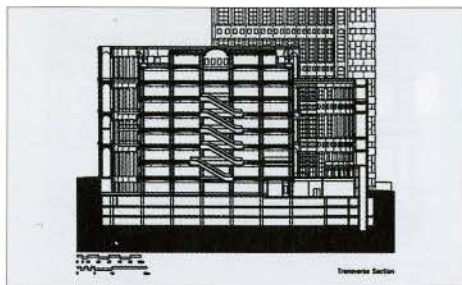


Fig. 6. Transverse section through library. (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

analysis, and decision making by the staff of the library system, public meetings, and an analysis of written responses from the public. This information would form the basic instructions to the architects who would eventually compete for the commission.

Kyle Mitchell, chair of the library board, spoke of a continuous level of public engagement: "Vancouver Public Library is one of the most utilized public library systems in North America [...] During the initial planning phase, we spent considerable time in communities throughout Vancouver [...] listening to people speak about what they wanted in a new central library. We also had to undertake a city-wide campaign to generate support for a referendum that would be needed to fund the project [...] This was the largest project the City of Vancouver had ever undertaken. We wanted them involved."¹³

In November 1990 a referendum was held as part of the municipal elections. Sixty-nine percent of the voters approved the expenditure of \$29.5 million for the new main library and a branch in Renfrew.¹⁴ This would bring the total number of branches in the library system to 21. On 21 August 1991 city officials selected the site for the proposed library complex: a vacant block owned by the federal government and known as Block 56. On 6 December 1991 the city purchased the block for \$14 million (although the market value of the land was \$26 million).¹⁵ The site was bounded by Georgia Street on the north, Hamilton on the east, Robson on the south, and Homer on the west. A car park occupied the site surrounded by the CBC building, the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, and the main post office building.

The financing of Vancouver Library Square involved three levels of government. In addition to the \$29.5 million approved in the 1990 referendum, the city sold municipal bonds totaling \$27 million. Another \$22.9 million was eventually realized from the sale of the old library building. Income from retail establishments, restaurants, and parking fees from Library Square was to be added to the capital. A private fund-raising initiative, the Library Square Capital Campaign, was to add another \$12 million.¹⁶

More creative, however, were agreements with the federal and provincial governments. The federal government agreed to a 25-year lease-purchase deal for the office tower, an arrangement designed to help pay Library Square's mortgage. The federal government would assume ownership at the end of that period and contribute \$7 million to the project. The provincial government through the B.C. Building Corporation agreed to contribute \$8.4 million to build two additional storeys above the library building, which would serve as provincial office space. These floors would revert to the library for expansion or revenue in 20 years.¹⁷

Yet the undertaking met with resistance almost from its inception.¹⁸ The earliest critique questioned the selection of the new

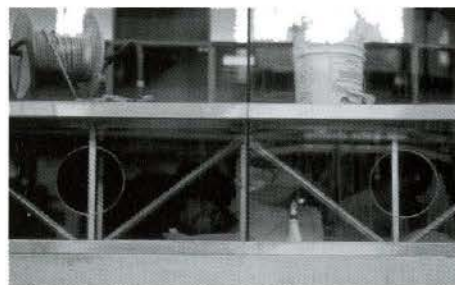


Fig. 7. View of access floor (photo Michal Ronnen Safdie). (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

site and the relocation of the library from a prominent downtown intersection at Robson and Burrard to a new facility on the eastern fringe of downtown, away from the pedestrian and public transit facilities. It was seen as an "opportunity to develop an orphan block on the coattails of the federal government, rather than the public interest."¹⁹ While Bing Thom, architect and chair of the Library Steering Committee, conceded that no site could improve on that of the old library, the price for a new location was right, especially as the downtown core had begun to shift east to Cambie and south to Pacific Streets. The block was expected to become the hub of a new city centre within the decade.²⁰

A second line of criticism focused on the fate of the old library building. The city council had earmarked the building for demolition as the high-density zoning of its real estate would help pay for the costs of the Library Square project.²¹ The site was rezoned for the highest density available, a 26-storey development. Nevertheless, a movement emerged to save the existing library and grant it heritage status. University of British Columbia professors, Andrew Gruft and Rhodri Windsor Liscombe argued for the building's preservation, citing it as "one of the best examples of buildings of the modern movement."²² Regarding Gordon Campbell's insistence that the former library was a liability, Toronto architectural critic Adele Freedman observed, "[i]f you were mayor of Vancouver intent on raising a crowd-pleaser, would you let something like heritage get in the way of maximum bucks?"²³

The city council's decision to sell the building with a demolition permit was a crucial step in raising the estimated \$30 million to finance the new library. The sole councilor to vote against the sale and demolition was Lynne Kennedy, who had recently resigned as the city's Heritage Advisory Committee's chair to take a council seat. She noted, "100 years from now people will look back and say, 'Those barbarians, they destroyed a whole style of architecture for purely economic reasons'."²⁴

The library was sold for \$22.9 million in December 1994 to the Edgcombe Group Inc. and was designated a landmark heritage building. Completely renovated as a commercial building, it currently houses Virgin Records, a TV station, and a branch of the Planet Hollywood chain of restaurants.²⁵

Selection Process

Because Vancouver Library Square would be a vast project dependent on public funds and goodwill, the city council, acting on advice from Bing Thom, wanted to avoid the controversy that would doubtless surround an outright patronage appointment. Its members elected instead to hold a limited competition requiring the competing architects to present and defend their vision in a public forum.²⁶

But the idea of establishing such a forum was instantly ve-

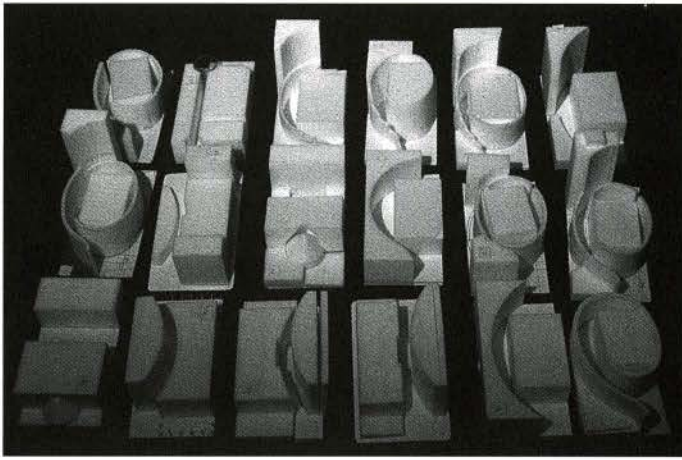


Fig. 8. Massing study models
(photo Michal Ronnen Safdie).
(Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC,
McGill University Libraries)

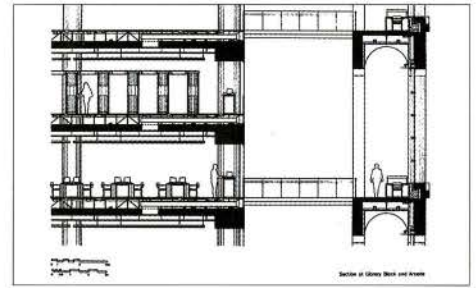


Fig. 9. Section through
library block and arcade.
(Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC,
McGill University Libraries)

toed by the Architectural Institute of British Columbia (AIBC), which feared that the competition process “would become a circus. Architectural excellence — not personality, and not rhetoric — is the whole point of a competition.”²⁷ Moreover, the rules of competition insist on anonymous submissions. A discussion between city representatives and the AIBC resulted in an extension of the rules of the Royal Architecture Institute of Canada (RAIC) to include an anonymous public presentation of the three finalists in Stage 2 of the competition, called “Expression of Vision.”²⁸

While many architects would have preferred an open competition, this decision was not theirs to make. Not only did the AIBC endorse the competition, but it also provided a professional advisor, Rand Thompson, architect of Chernoff Thompson Architect, to ensure the fair administration of the process.²⁹

In September 1991, the City of Vancouver launched a two-stage process for the selection of an architectural firm. Stage 1, the “Call for Expression of Interest,” was a pre-qualification stage to select three firms that would participate in a limited design competition.³⁰ Implicit in this “Call for Expression of Interest” was the search for an international “star” who would guarantee world-wide interest in and publicity for the project. All respondents were to be affiliated with a British Columbia firm and reviewed by a seven-member Proposal Evaluation Committee coordinated by Rand Thompson.³¹

Each team of architects would make a formal presentation to the committee, including written proposals that outlined its approach. Then each team would be interviewed: How would it analyze the different site requirements, slope, traffic, and proximity to downtown? How would it handle design direction? How would it administer the construction phase? What kind of vision did it have for this building?³²

The competition parameters outlined that the architects were to “create facilities which have symbolic meaning, that are functional, that respond to the needs of their users and can be constructed on time within their budget.” Twenty-seven firms responded to the “Call for Expression of Interest.” On 15 October 1991, eight semi-finalists were culled from this list of 27.³³ This was reduced further to seven consortia following the withdrawal of James Stirling, who cited dissatisfaction with the committee’s “unrealistic” expectations of preliminary design work and what he saw as the paucity of qualified judges.³⁴

Adele Freedman cast a scornful eye on both finalists and jury as “a mix of local heroes, outsiders from Ontario, and big-time U.S. operators [...] It goes without saying the city of Vancouver wasn’t shooting for the dreamer or the little guy [...] Much less encouraging is the makeup of the jury, which looks to be another case of cultural immaturity.”³⁵ Freedman’s trenchant stance may be the point from which to question the entire process of engaging public discourse in professional consideration for the design of Vancouver Library Square. At the outset, Freedman identified caustically the political and civic yearnings for a world-class building that would put Vancouver on the architectural map, as it were. And the professional community divided itself along several lines: the matter of “outside” versus “inside” firms became the subject of heated debate. Moreover, one position held that only established firms had the wherewithal to bring the project in on time and under budget, while the other decried the limited competition as forcing out talented younger architects.

The three finalists were announced on 27 November 1991: Boston-based Moshe Safdie and Associates, Inc., working with Downs/Archambault & Partners; the Los Angeles-based Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates in joint venture with Waisman Dewar Grout Carter Inc.; and the Toronto firm of Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects in association with James K.M. Cheng Architects and Musson Catell Mackey Partnerships.³⁶ The process of selecting a winner from the three finalists was entrusted to the Selection Advisory Committee (SAC), a nine-member jury.³⁷ The jury’s deliberations were based, in part, on reports and recommendations from the Urban Design panel, the Technical Advisory committee (primarily city and library staff), and the Library User Advisory committee.

The six evaluation criteria used by the Technical Advisory committee to assess the planning and urban performance of the three final submissions were built form, public open space, street response, accessibility of library, Library Square as catalyst, and image. Safdie’s scheme, known as Submission C, scored a total of 45.5 points out of 60.³⁸ The Urban Design panel, composed exclusively of architects, landscape architects, engineers, and planners, reviewed the schemes on 25 March 1992. The panel voted 8 to 1 in favour of Submission C. However, the Library User Advisory committee believed that Proposal C contravened the functional criteria and scored it only 47 out of a possible 85 points.³⁹ The findings of the individual committees would form the basis of the required modifications to the winning design and will be discussed in the section “Vancouver Library Square as Built.”

Community Phase

On 3 March 1992, the Vancouver City Council and the Vancouver Public Library launched the final stage of the Library Square competition by unveiling the three finalists’ designs submitted any-



Fig. 10. View of reading arcade. (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

mously as Proposals A, B, and C, consistent with RAIC competition rules.⁴⁰ They were presented successively at City Hall, the existing library, two community centres, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and a shopping mall for three weeks in March 1992.⁴¹

This community phase was coterminous with the jury's deliberation and was intended to continue the level of public engagement with the project. At this time the public was asked to respond to a questionnaire seeking its opinion on which of the three finalists' schemes it found most appealing. An initial printing of 500 questionnaires proved inadequate as some 7,000 people responded, voting overwhelmingly — 70 percent — in favour of the "Roman Coliseum," as Proposal C was dubbed.⁴²

"Like everything, very interesting"
 "Only design that is interesting"
 "Very striking, but too Disneylandish, tacky"
 "Classy, historical"
 "It is aesthetic to the maximum. It would look great in Italy"
 "The coliseum model seems an ironic historical parallel, a joke on Vancouver. The decadence and conceit of Rome"
 "Most memorable and different"
 "Classical, will not fade with time"
 "Will bring in tourists to see this one"
 "Why are we drifting back to the past?"

The written responses ranged from enthusiastic acceptance to bewildered resistance.

Christopher Hume called the display "In a city where architecture is a spectator sport [...] the hottest show in town," and apparently had no difficulty in identifying the source of Proposal C: "Submitted by none other than Moshe Safdie [...] it is pure Disney, an instant ruin." Commenting acidly on the library structure flanked by a 21-storey tower "in the manner of a toilet bowl and its tank," Hume cited Vancouver's "California-complex" and concluded, "Proposal C has a good chance of taking the prize. It's like, really neat."⁴³

A special council meeting at City Hall on 24 March 1992, offered citizens an opportunity to present their views. Although the public consultation process was unprecedented in Canadian architectural competitions, it actually served as only one of the factors that the jury considered. One might challenge the validity of public engagement in a discourse with professionals and experts in the field. Certainly the use of this discourse to further the requirements of political expediency might seduce the public into believing the myth of its own authority. Gordon Campbell said: "As it was the public's embrace of the project meant that it belonged to the public, which was one of the critical components of the project for me when I initiated it as Mayor."⁴⁴

That a "public" building can "belong" to the people is at once

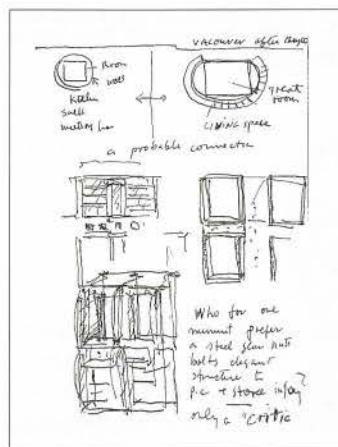


Fig. 11. Moshe Safdie Sketchbook No. 74 (19 March 1992). (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

a visionary ideal and a disingenuous pose: public opinion, in the form of "comment" cards, was solicited for a vote to contribute municipal funds

for a building and not to achieve some vast utopian goal. And yet even seasoned professionals had to acknowledge that the project tapped into a yearning for the expression of civic pride. "People seemed to like the boldness of the scheme," Bing Thom observed. "It really represents what Vancouver wants to be."⁴⁵ Similarly, Madge Aalto commented, "I believe that the jury saw the Safdie design as having the potential to be a 'great public building'."⁴⁶ By appearing to encourage public appreciation for the design before its implementation, the politicians involved in the process managed to obtain much of the necessary funding for the project. And Safdie himself delineates the possible uses of "public" opinion: speaking five years later on the role of community participation in the building of the Salt Lake City Main Library, he allowed, "I would like to encourage Salt Lake people to take an interest, to come to all the public presentations and feel free to express their views *when it is appropriate*" (italics mine).⁴⁷

The architect's own qualifying phrase underscores the archness of canvassing "the people" for their response to a project actually undertaken by highly trained and vetted professionals. Andrew Gruft is similarly skeptical: "You can't solve things like this [Library Square] by popularity poll. That's making a mockery of public participation. Safdie's building was clearly the most popular, but why? Because it's splashy! It's easy to 'read.' It made the biggest gesture."⁴⁸

Gruft's frankness illuminates the possible and serendipitous convergence of popular taste with the more sophisticated and informed aesthetic that determined the jury's choice of design. Safdie himself outlines the perils of offering the public a deceptively inflated sense of its own power. "One side of me says 'Trust the public, their instincts are probably better than the more complicated thinking of the professionals.' Another side of me shudders at the fact that it [public opinion] could eliminate any kind of *avant garde* solution which, by its nature, takes time to get used to."⁴⁹ And so the apparently sincere and democratic attempt to include *vox populi* in the design considerations of an architectural project is revealed as choreography by self-interested politicians currying favour with the voting citizenry.

The Selection of Moshe Safdie and Associates

On 14 April 1992 the architects of Proposal C — the joint venture of Moshe Safdie and Associates, Inc. and Vancouver architects Downs/Archambault & Partners — were declared the winners of the Vancouver Library Square competition, subject to clarifi-

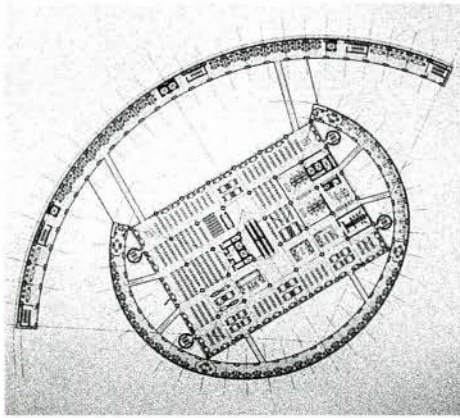


Fig. 12. Shenzhen Cultural Center. Plan of library level 5.
(Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

cation of design concepts and budgetary issues.

The Selection Advisory Committee (SAC) underlined the fact that the competition had not been held to select a detailed design but was concerned instead with discovering the architect who, in its opinion, demonstrated an understanding of library design and who possessed an ability to respond to the unique features of the site, providing the city with not only a practical but an inspiring building. Responding to the distinctive and compelling features of Safdie's proposal, the report stated, "The Committee particularly commends this design for its elliptical form, double wall appearance, loggia at the roof and galleria space."⁵⁰

Yet the final decision of the jury in favour of Safdie's design provoked immediate opposition from within the architectural community: "once again, a team spearheaded by Moshe Safdie, [...] emerged from a restricted architectural selection process to design one of Canada's landmark buildings [...] Architects and critics are cringing at the literal historicism, and questioning the appropriateness of the imagery."⁵¹

James Cheng, who worked with Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg on Submission A, concedes that their design was too conservative and accords Safdie a certain praise: "If I were the city fathers and I wanted to build the biggest legacy of the past fifty years, I'd raise a statement that my grandchildren would be proud of. And Safdie's strength is that he understands the big statement."⁵²

Perhaps the clearest understanding of what is entailed in a world-class architectural competition was articulated by Richard Archambault, principal of Downs/Archambault & Partners: "I think that it is important to win the job, and then benefit from the users' input on functional and relationship matters, as we were able to do during the design development stage."⁵³

In the public press the response was mixed, although it was clear that the project generated considerable excitement. Admirers felt that the building would be an interesting and long-overdue addition to the cityscape, while critics grumbled about the "Coliseum," seeing it as the emblem of an ancient culture and therefore inappropriate for a young, vital city like Vancouver. Coverage of the story appeared almost daily in the local press and on the day the winner of the competition was announced, the local CBC television station led its newscast with the story.⁵⁴

Design

Any discussion of Safdie's vision for Vancouver Library Square must consider the project in relation to its original intentions and

design philosophy. Safdie's proposal was guided by three primary concerns as articulated in his submission:

1. [...] the design for the Library must create a meaningful symbol for Vancouver, one with an appropriate image and character.
2. The design for the Vancouver Public Library must recognize a fundamental change in the social and political structure and values of our society. The library is for everyone, [...] the library is open and accessible to all.
3. [...] we shall again seek an architectural language particular to the character of Vancouver — set upon the rim of the Pacific, its cultural roots extending east to Europe and west to Asia, its rugged landscape of sea and mountains, its specific fauna and flora, indeed, extending to the cultural roots of its native people.⁵⁵

Safdie's design centres the building on the site — one square block with a total area of 12,000 m² (fig. 1).⁵⁶ The library consists of a seven-storey rectangular core containing open book stacks, library services, and circulation. The core is encircled by an ellipse — a free-standing, precast concrete double shell that holds reading and study areas accessed by steel bridges spanning skylit light wells at intervals between rectangle and oval. The library's internal glass façade overlooks an enclosed concourse formed by a second elliptical wall that defines the east side of the site. The glass-roofed concourse serves as an entry foyer to the library. One side of the concourse holds retail shops and cafés; on the other side is the library. The second elliptical wall anchors a 21-storey federal office tower on the southeast (northeast as built) corner of the site. At the northeast (southeast as built) corner, a series of buttress walls extends out from the concourse wall consisting of three levels of additional retail space and day-care facilities.⁵⁷ The design for the library made it more than twice as large (32,516 m²) as the previous structure, with seating capacity for 1,400 as compared with 350 and room for more than two million volumes.⁵⁸

The rectangular core is topped by a landscaped roof garden and amphitheatre. Piazzas, located at the corners of the block facing Robson and Homer on the south and Georgia and Homer on the north, lead into the concourse. The south piazza encloses a small stepped circular amphitheatre replicating the curve of the building and intended as a venue for street theatre (fig. 2). Below the concourse on the ground level are an auditorium and meeting rooms. A three-level underground car park accommodates just over 700 cars.

The library is clad in sandstone-coloured precast concrete, as is the office tower, whose glazed corner faces the city and the bay.

In designing Vancouver Library Square, Safdie had to resolve the many contradictions of the contemporary library: an imposing public structure providing intimate space for personal study and intellectual pursuit; the ideal of solitary endeavour giving way to community enrichment; elitist vision underscored by democratic



Fig. 13. Salt Lake City Main Public Library. Presentation model (photo Peter Vanderwarker). (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

endorsement. It had to function as a civic monument, visible from surrounding areas and adjacent buildings, thus establishing itself as the preeminent public building in the city. The challenge for Safdie was to design such a building while remaining true to his overall philosophy and specific project goals: "And in Vancouver which is screaming modern, towers all over the place, different coloured glasses, the best and [...] mostly the worst of contemporary commercial architecture in a wonderful setting, I did a building that is nicknamed the Coliseum which is [...] in some ways a high-tech building and in other ways has a memory of ancient libraries."⁵⁹

Safdie artfully addressed the site's considerable slope.⁶⁰ The piazzas on either end of the square form a single warped plane that accommodates the natural grade without recourse to complicated level changes and barriers. The height of the outer wall increasingly opens up as the elevation rises toward the south side (north as built), providing an inviting, dynamic sequence for both those using the building and passersby, thus establishing a connection with "life beyond the block." Bing Thom acknowledges this feature as the one that ultimately determined his decision: "I think this was a brilliant stroke of thinking in terms of the urban design solution to this unique problem."⁶¹

As Safdie indicated on a sketch, the challenge of this project was similar to that of the Ballet Opera House (Toronto, Ontario, 1987-1990; unbuilt): designing for a city block that divided downtown and midtown and that was itself bordered by streets with distinct characteristics. In both projects he explored the idea of a corner entrance leading to a "Great Room" (fig. 3).

The architect separated the building's various features — especially the entrance foyer or concourse (referred to in the original submission as the "Urban Room") and other public amenities — from the library proper. This crucial decision allowed him to create two quite different environments with separate public profiles as stipulated by the building program.

The glazed concourse is the most dramatic feature of Vancouver Library Square, reflecting Safdie's predilection for vast, naturally lit spaces (fig. 4). It serves as the interior focus, the "spine" of the complex, and connects the exterior and the library itself, providing a meeting place for social, cultural, and commercial activities in all seasons. Thus the animation and vitality of a mercantile artery are captured within the concourse. According to Madge Aalto, Safdie envisioned the concourse as a kind of Burlington Arcade, but as the city owned the building, it negotiated for the most lucrative retail establishments, "And so it was Burlington

Arcade out the window and Yogen Fruz in the front door."⁶²

Safdie himself calls the promenade "the best public room I've ever designed."⁶³ The vast welcoming concourse, from which the entire organization of the building can be instantly perceived, orients visitors, unifies the structure around it, and facilitates a broad field of vision. In a letter to Christopher Hume, the architect wrote: "I wanted a scheme where upon arrival you could see each and every level for orientation. I decided to make the concourse [...] into a space where library meets city, and to make that space feel as the foyer of the library as well as an urban room of multiple activities."⁶⁴

Safdie pursued the theme of orientation, juxtaposing the nature of public space and "the nature of spine" with the elements of entry, procession, place, and oasis. Vancouver Library Square extends previous studies in the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1983-1988) and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (1985-1991) (fig. 5), while the curved, glazed concourse and elliptical spine as elements of public meeting places would become features in future projects such as the Shenzhen Cultural Center (Guandong Province, China, 1998; unbuilt), National Library Board (Singapore, 1999; unbuilt), and Salt Lake City Main Library (Utah, 1999; in design). The competition proposal for Shenzhen Cultural Center featured a seven-storey-high glass wall by means of which visitors might orient themselves to the entire building. Similarly, the Montreal Museum makes use of a vast, ritualized staircase that traces the route through all floors of the museum, while the courtyard, which rises five storeys, permits visitors to orient themselves both within the building and to the adjacent urban landscape.

The overall transparency of the Vancouver Library Square design not only permits orientation but, equally importantly, expresses in symbolic terms the importance of an inclusive institution and the accessibility of its collections to the public. And here, Safdie has succeeded admirably in two of the three intentions stated in the submission brief: he has designed a building that reflects the youth and vitality of the city and that recognizes the public nature of the library. Only in the third goal can he be said to have fallen wide of the mark: the "cultural roots" of Vancouver are not addressed in the Vancouver Library Square design. Nevertheless Safdie's vision that "the library is for everyone [...] accessible and clearly organized" has been achieved. His design embodies the idea that a library should be more than a repository of books and computers — that it should reflect a city's collective imagination and aspirations.

As in most of Safdie's *oeuvre*, natural light remains a vital feature of his design, an organizing principle to clarify space. The architect noted in his submission brief that the library must be a luminous building, for both practical and symbolic purposes. In the concourse Safdie uses natural light to dramatic effect. While provid-

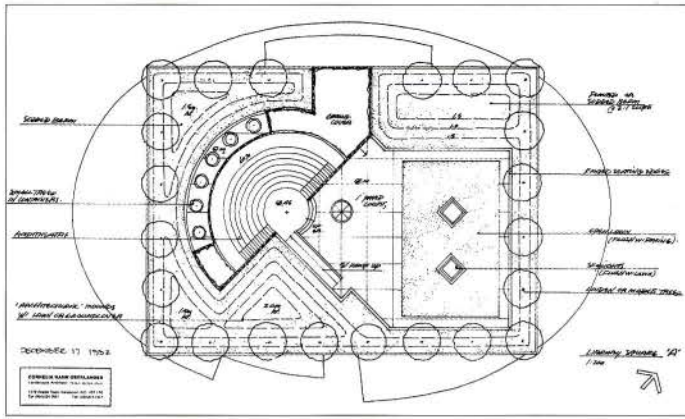


Fig. 14. Cornelia Hahn Oberlander.
Original submissions: roof garden and amphitheatre (17 December 1992).
(Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

ing protection from the elements, the concourse permits light to filter deeply into the space, animating it with ever-changing patterns.

The main entrance to the library is located off the concourse, thus making the transition from social meeting place to cultural repository in a carefully conceived modulation between the bustling activity of the concourse and the quiet and serious study within the library.

Safdie's commitment to orientation and clarity of circulation is likewise demonstrated within the library. The entry level (level 2) functions as an "Information Commons" with approximately thirty computer work stations replacing the traditional card catalogues and permitting access to online catalogues of the library's collections, databases, the World Wide Web, and a CD-ROM network. The objective was to create a building in which users can immediately find all departments, facilities, and amenities, which are placed identically on each floor. The organization is revealed by the transverse section (fig. 6).

To achieve flexibility and to accommodate inevitable changes in computer technology as well as possible adjustments in library configuration, the architect specified open-ended raised access floors on each level. From the atrium, the maze of supply and return ducts, sprinkler piping, and cable trays with electrical and communication wiring is clearly visible through continuous glass panes that stretch from each ceiling and terminate at the concrete slabs between floors. This configuration gives the public a bracing glimpse of the structural, technical, and mechanical workings of the building, evoking in yet another way the spirit of enquiry animating the library (fig. 7).

Within the library, Safdie addressed the paradox inherent in large libraries that must reconcile two contradictory functions: open, communal areas for discussion and collective learning and smaller spaces for concentrated study. The carrel associated with medieval monasteries provides one early example of how to offer personal space within a larger whole.⁶⁵ Safdie spoke of wanting to reinvent the traditional nineteenth-century reading room, "a new type of linear reading room where one sits in contact with both the city and the library in the presence of others but with much more privacy [...] So I began modeling this square surrounded by a free-standing circular wall [...] This did not fit on the site, so I made it rectangular and the circle became oval."⁶⁶ Once the model was massed, Safdie recognized that the four-tiered organization suggested not only the Coliseum but other circular Graeco-Roman structures. "I was surprised — even

shocked — as my search had begun without any preconceived image of what this library should be as an object in the city."⁶⁷ A photograph of eighteen massing models (fig. 8), oddly evocative of an exhibition of student works in the Russian Constructivist basic course of space discipline of the mid-1920s,⁶⁸ provides valuable insight into this process — exploring the various options within the context of the site that was ultimately transformed into the built form of the Vancouver Public Library.

Once inside the library, users move throughout the centre rectangular block to collect books and study materials and cross light steel bridges on levels four, five, and six, leading to reading arcades with tables and carrels (figs. 9 and 10). The bridges span interstitial light wells, which not only provide daylight throughout but also articulate the spaces into zones, separating and identifying the structural components and lending a sense of scale to a building of this size. Safdie has devised an innovative and elegant method of bringing daylight to all levels of the building without compromising the needs of conservation.

The conventional reading room is reinterpreted into a sequence of linear reading galleries that preserve the concept of a community of readers and the ritual of the library visit while providing a greater level of privacy and connection to the city. Windows along the perimeter offer views out onto the neighboring urban landscape.

The library develops from Safdie's earlier experience and vocabulary, acknowledging a memory of Kahn's meeting room at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, which prompted the idea of a room surrounding the free stacks block (fig. 11).

Earlier in Queen's University Library (Kingston, Ontario, 1990; unbuilt), however, Safdie incorporated the idea of intimate study spaces in the "house-like" forms surrounding the large stack block. And in the National Gallery, instead of locating the public spaces at the heart of the building and surrounding them with galleries, Safdie reversed the plan and located the colonnade on the exterior.

Kahn's "meeting house" and its composition of a square within a circle inspired Safdie's rectangle within an ellipse in Vancouver. Safdie once again used one geometric shape contained by another as a point of departure in Shenzhen Cultural Center. There the main rectangle was to have been surrounded by an elliptical wall linked by bridges to small work areas (fig. 12). There are also many formal similarities in Salt Lake City Main Public Library where a free-standing elliptical reading spine surrounds a triangular form containing the stacks (fig. 13).

One might ask: did the architectural language of the Vancouver Public Library emerge spontaneously, as Safdie claims in his letter to Jardinat, as a marvelously historical "answer" to the problem of housing texts and one that he "realized" after the

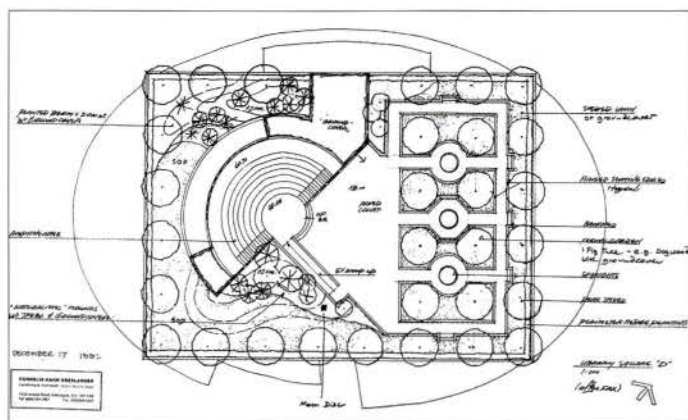


Fig. 15. Cornelia Hahn Oberlander.
Original submissions: roof garden and amphitheatre (17 December 1992).
(Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

massing of the model? Or did the architect envision a classically allusive structure to anchor — or, indeed, to surpass — the disparate architectural elements of a young city like Vancouver? Safdie has demonstrated some defensiveness on this issue: questioned by David Beers about the library's mimicking the Coliseum, he responded brusquely, "What people call it is their business. At moments undoubtedly it looks like some coliseum [...] But when you enter it [...] [y]ou move through the building, and feel the technology of construction at each and every moment [...] and you're sure to forget the Coliseum. So the fact that you can come from outside, with its roots in the past of Rome and Europe, and enter this world is to be the success of the building."⁶⁹

The jury debated the Coliseum comparison, which according to Bing Thom "worked as a negative element."⁷⁰ Clearly the jury was concerned that the reference to the classical past might undermine the project's appeal, intimating a grandiose and extinct structure completely antithetical to the architect's claimed vision for a building that would both reflect and inspire the city and its citizenry.

Behind many of Safdie's projects is the ideological impetus to provide everyone with access to a garden: "Both in urban institutional and residential projects, the metaphor is for an approach [...] harmonious with nature."⁷¹ As originally conceived, the roof garden and amphitheatre were to be an integral part of Safdie's design, located above the rectangular core of the main library block and accessible from both staff and visitors' elevators. The garden was designed by Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, a Vancouver landscape architect with whom Safdie had collaborated at the National Gallery of Canada. Oberlander's two design concepts show paved areas surrounding formal gardens with seating and flowering trees around the perimeter (figs. 14 and 15). But Safdie proposed a less formal approach.⁷²

At ground level, Oberlander conceived of paved plazas and *Liriodendron tulipifera* trees encircling Library Square and Morgan maple trees, as requested by the city, on Georgia Street. The northeast (southeast as built) side of the building, which housed retail and day-care facilities, featured cascading roses and white flowering dogwoods in planter boxes.

The comparison between Vancouver Library Square, Shenzhen Cultural Center and Salt Lake City Main Library continues. In Shenzhen a roof-top garden was to have included an amphitheatre. Likewise the design for Salt Lake City's library incorporates a roof-top garden above the triangular core.

Safdie uses the façade to comment on the passage of time in

practice, technology, and tradition. The multi-tiered elliptical shell of both the library and the tower is constructed of an outer facing of large-scale precast concrete panels made with local red granite aggregate. During the construction process, these elements served as form work for the cast *in situ* concrete structure (fig. 16).

The fenestration, tiers, and columns provide a rhythmic subdivision of the long elevation and moderate the difference in levels between the tower and library. The precast cladding of the outer shells — dense, gravity-bound, classically detailed — gives way to a modernist glazed interior. Inside and out, the building changes with context and circumstance (fig. 17).

The building is composed of two kinds of space: the public space — exuberant, flooded with light and activity — and that of the library proper — introverted and calm, with controlled soft light and removed from the hustle and bustle of urban life. The contradictions of the contemporary library are thus not hidden but affirmed. Moreover, the transparent concourse makes the library appear open and inviting. From the exterior one thus sees a building that celebrates people and movement. Vancouver Library Square's symbolic impact derives not from its stated mission as a repository of knowledge but from its social function. Perhaps this is a true reflection of the library's evolved role as a "high-traffic showplace for information and technology."⁷³

Safdie has spoken of the concourse as "a new kind of public space [...] an active city room which transcends the urban shopping center."⁷⁴ This it does: facing each other across the concourse are the library and the shops, and so while sipping coffee at one of the cafés, one can see the library, its taut, glazed skin revealing the building. The social and educational realms are thus brought together in a welcoming habitat.

Vancouver Library Square as Built

Safdie's original design did undergo a number of modifications as stipulated by the jury prior to the awarding of the commission. None of these, however, affected the elemental spirit of the project.⁷⁵

The principal design modification involved relocating the federal office tower from the Robson/Hamilton corner on the southeast to the Georgia/Hamilton corner on the northeast in order to solve three problems: the tower as originally designed intruded 42 feet into the Cambie Street and Tenth Avenue view corridor, presenting its widest dimension there; moreover, the tower placed the scheme's open space on Robson Street and the library roof into shadow for much of the day. And the tower would be too close to an approved 16-storey hotel tower across Robson Street. The reconfiguration would provide full sunlight on the public spaces on the Robson and Hamilton sides of the site⁷⁶ (fig. 18 and see also fig. 1).

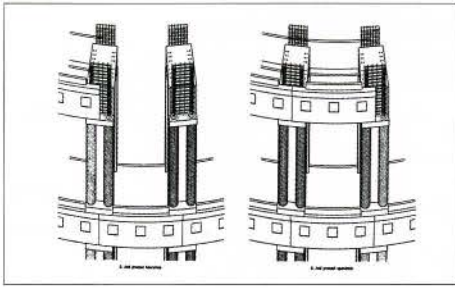


Fig. 16. Details of outer precast concrete panels. (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

The position of the tower better reflects the formality and ceremonial scale of Georgia, a street of commercial high-rises, and the shops at the lower level of the building, now moved to the southeast side, respond more fully to Robson, one of Vancouver's informal, pedestrian-oriented shopping streets (fig. 19). On the other hand, the tower now blocks the view of the library where it would have been visible from the Georgia Street viaduct with its piazzas blending with rather than challenging the neighbouring Queen Elizabeth Theatre and the CBC plazas.

Major changes were required to meet the functionality of the library program. One of the key issues was the need to modify the library floor plates by filling in the atrium spaces, eliminating bridges, and reducing the perimeter of the library. Aalto was concerned that the floor plates as designed exposed galleries at each end of the building: "The galleries are not only difficult to supervise, but of greater concern to us is the difficulty for our staff to interact with our patrons."⁷⁷

Safdie was unhappy with this proposed solution, noting that filling in the end spaces would result in "continuous undifferentiated" floor plates. More importantly, he saw the question of the light wells as a matter defining the architect's role: that is, the process of consultation with library staff members was intended to open up discussion, particularly about utilitarian or functional matters, but the aesthetic authority and vision of the architect must not be compromised. "As such, the light wells are not an idea put forward by the architect to be decided by referendum, but are a design position and a firm recommendation [...] There might not be much reference in the program to such issues but I assure you that it is those subtle questions, in addition to obvious operational issues, that will make the difference between a great and a mediocre library"⁷⁸ (fig. 20).

The result was that Safdie partially filled in the north and south atria but maintained the bridge links and so retained the geometric identity of the rectangle and ellipse (fig. 21). One below-grade floor was eliminated while a second was "raised," thus providing natural light in all staff areas.

It was also stipulated that all unprogrammed space (1,291 m²) be deleted. The original design, which was estimated at \$15-25 million over the \$100 million budget, was revised.

The presence of the garden and amphitheatre was greatly reduced in the modified plan for Vancouver Library Square. While the complexity, cost, and appropriateness in Vancouver's weather were debated, the city council was unanimous in its decision that the roof garden be off limits to the public.

In a letter to Clyde N. Hosein, Facilities Development manager, Safdie wrote, "The roof garden was incorporated as a fully landscaped and accessible garden in the design submitted to



Fig. 17. Southwest elevation: Robson and Homer Streets (photo T. Hursley). (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

Council [...] Given the enormous public interest in the roof garden its deletion signals a lack of credibility in the public process."⁷⁹ But Aalto considered the logistical nightmare of administrating such a garden: "From the library's point of view, it offered little but problems, [patrons] taking books [there] and leaving them behind, dropping them off the edge of the building. You may be thinking that people wouldn't do that but I can assure you they would [...] No, I don't regret its loss other than sympathizing with Moshe and Cornelia's vision of what could have been."⁸⁰

Archambault explains that "the demise of the roof garden was ultimately caused by the addition of a two-storeyed shell space for future expansion. Outdoor space was limited to two small terraces at either end of the oval and the roof was designed to be viewed from the Public Works Canada office tower and other future high-rise buildings adjoining the site."⁸¹

The addition of the two floors had further repercussions. In a letter to Mayor Campbell, Safdie expressed his concern that the addition of the two floors would render the building "extremely top heavy, losing the airy quality of the original design." Safdie proposed adding only one floor, but Campbell remained adamant.⁸²

The redesigned garden could be seen only from the two-storey provincial government space, set back from the central volume. Oberlander described the final roof garden as a "new concept in 'greening' tall buildings. As seen from adjacent towers, the only visually accessible roof of the Library simulates the Lower Mainland. The blue grass echoes the Fraser River while the green grass is land. Higher elevations are represented with the rich deep green of kinnikinnick. It is a low maintenance planting"⁸³ (fig. 22).

On 12 June 1992, following twelve weeks of negotiations and design modifications, Safdie presented his newly revised plan to the city council. He was awarded the commission and authorized to proceed with the design of Vancouver Library Square and, when asked what compromises had been made, publicly stated, "There are none."⁸⁴

Inauguration

Fast-tracked construction permitted the library to be ready in an astonishing 26 months, "on time and on budget."⁸⁵ The inauguration of Vancouver Library Square was highlighted by "Litterazze: A Family Festival," a ten-day celebration leading up to the opening of the library. The festivities began with "Operation Bookworm" on 21 May 1995, a symbolic transferral of 10,000 books from the old library to Library Square, followed by Literazzi, a gala event on 24 May and culminating in the official opening ceremonies on 26 May presided over by Mayor Philip Owen, who had succeeded



Fig. 18. Vancouver Library Square as built. Aerial view (photo T. Hursley). (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

Gordon Campbell in 1994.

Twelve hundred people filled the concourse for the opening ceremonies while another thousand lined up outside

the doors. Much of the discourse in the architectural community was negative in tone and focused on the exterior of the building, the alleged excess of its concrete envelope, its Coliseum-like form which was seen as an inapt trope, its assertiveness, and its irrelevance to Vancouver. In an essay entitled "Toga Party," Bruce Haden censured both the building and the public that endorsed its construction: "The Coliseum offers an easily imageable monument, a reassuring adornment to a city uncertain of its status. Obviously the graphic pow appeals to Vancouverites, but so does its anti-modernity."⁸⁶ And John Bentley Mays was scathing in his appraisal: "Mr. Safdie's \$106 million mixed-use complex is my first encounter with a wholesale plunk-down of the Roman Colosseum's imposing ruin in the middle of a North American city. Or something like a ruin, anyway [...] The result of this gaming with historical types and figures is phantasmagorical [...] which perhaps helps explain why almost every architect and architectural historian I spoke with in Vancouver considers it an abomination."⁸⁷ Yet Safdie may have answered Mays's caustic charges in a lecture he delivered in 1989: "There is a clear if confusing difference between the world of stage sets and real life. Or, as beautifully stated by August Peret, 'Will the building make a beautiful ruin?'"⁸⁸

Witold Rybczynski sounded a positive note: "Safdie's approach is understandable. Western cities, unlike Montreal and Toronto, aren't lucky enough to have a solid heritage of nineteenth-century buildings [...] The Colosseum-like structure is memorable, but it is also an ingenious architectural solution [...] Most library lobbies are forbidding sorts of places. This one isn't. It's a sunny, informal and bustling sort of place that appears to suit Vancouverites to a T."⁸⁹

Despite his scorn, Mays acknowledged the pleasure that the public apparently took in the library: "The crowds of patrons and visitors I observed during drop-bys seemed to be minded otherwise, however, zestily using both library and commercial concourse as though grumpy architects did not exist."⁹⁰ Mays's admission is significant: along with Haden and Rybczynski, he acknowledged the disparity in tone between the professional and public discourse on Safdie's design, and observed that in so many of the architect's public projects the critics are harsh while the public — along with the popular press — embrace the work whole-



Fig. 19. View of southeast corner: Robson and Hamilton Streets. (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

heartedly. *The Vancouver Sun* devoted an entire section to "Your New Li-

brary" in its edition of 24 May 1995, just before the inauguration, and *The Link* of 31 May 1995 announced the opening of "Vancouver's gorgeous new library," emphasizing its role as "[a] community resource beyond compare."⁹¹ *The Vancouver Courier* touted the public's enthusiasm: "It's obvious Vancouverites like the new design [...] People haven't stopped talking about the ancient-looking design and it would be difficult to find a Vancouverite not excited about touring the complex. Ambivalence is scarce."⁹²

Ambivalence may have been scarce, but uncertainty was articulated by Robin Ward, writing in *The Weekend Sun*: "It's stop-you-in-your-tracks architecture, but will Library Square patrons encounter a functional environment as they explore a building based on the artifact of a crumbling European civilization?"⁹³ And criticism also focused on the city council's decision to reduce the library's operating budget, thus curtailing sharply the library's hours: "What did Vancouver council think voters were saying in 1990 when they approved \$30 million [...] We're pretty sure they wanted a bigger, better library, not a \$100 million-plus monument they could admire from outside its closed doors."⁹⁴

Five Years Later

On 26 May 2000, Vancouver Library Square celebrated its fifth anniversary with a five-day festival that included readings, music, theatre, and children's entertainment culminating in an all-day street fair. Five years seems an appropriate point from which to judge the impact of the project. On a pragmatic level, the primary rationale for the building of the new library was the inadequacy of the former building. Library Square was designed to expand with the needs of a growing population and increasingly sophisticated technology.

In an interview, Madge Aalto emphasized her satisfaction: "The design works as we had planned it to do [...] people coming in for a quick piece of research or a book to borrow come into the core of the building and spend relatively little time there; those coming in for a day or an extended period of research and study tend to settle in the reading galleries."⁹⁵

Sue Yates, planning librarian, was equally enthusiastic about the functionality of the library. Asked what she would change in terms of the design, she said the escalators that rise through the centre of the building produce an irritating "white noise," but she conceded that they provide the patrons with immediate orientation in the library.⁹⁶

Aware of the changing role of libraries at the end of the twen-

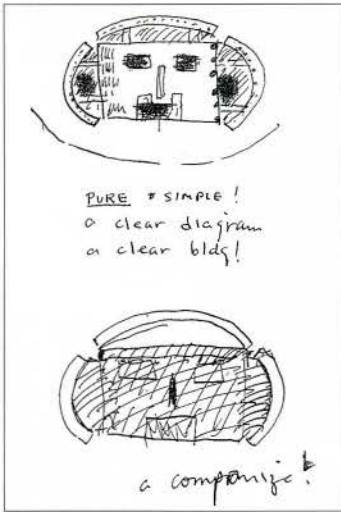
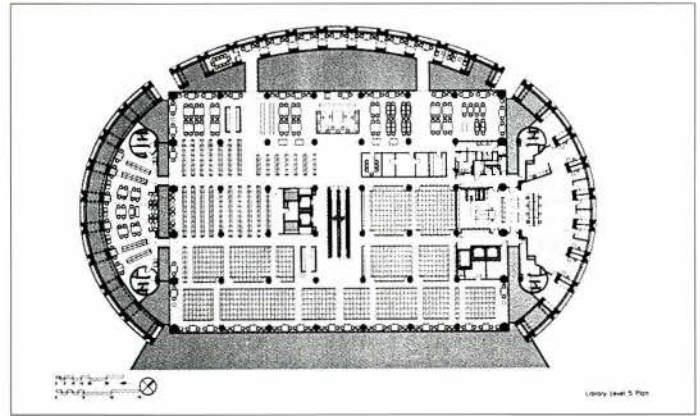


Fig. 20. Moshe Safdie Sketchbook No. 75 (12 June 1992). (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

Fig. 21. Plan of library level 5. (Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)



tieth century, Yates spoke of the library's expanding mission to connect with the larger community. Despite the fact that people are accessing the library's resources increasingly from the workplace, home, and schools, she maintains that the library must continue to preserve its communal character by establishing in a physical place a sense of collective endeavor.⁹⁷

Michael Seelig, Professor of Urban Planning at the University of British Columbia, saw "a great opportunity missed [...] which could have created a public precinct. In the evening nothing is happening in the area." Nevertheless, he notes that most people enjoy the building: "regardless of what they think of the outside [...] its huge indoor street is outstanding. The library is well equipped, well run. Many people use it. It is amazing."⁹⁸

On the issue of the library's role as an anchor in an area that the city had slated for urban renewal, Kyle Mitchell observes that the library was "most definitely a catalyst in the redevelopment of the eastern part of downtown." He credits the building, along with the upgrading of zoning in Yaletown, as having created "a vibrant residential area with great restaurants, commercial spaces, and a proliferation of high-tech companies." Yet he indicates that urban development was only an ancillary issue: Library Square's primary goal was to establish a central downtown library as a civic symbol.⁹⁹

Shortly after the Library Square project began, plans were approved for the building of GM Place, a sports and entertainment arena located to the east of Library Square. In late 1994, the Ford Centre for the Performing Arts, also a Safdie design, opened on Homer Street. Several high-rise residential buildings and hotels have since been integrated into the surrounding area.

In order to get an overview of patron response to Library Square, four interviews were conducted at the library on the evening of 18 July 2000.¹⁰⁰ Each person was asked 18 open-ended questions, and each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes.

A 29-year-old journalist works at CBC across the street and frequents the library daily during work breaks. "I like it. My favourite things are the colours and the lighting. It has a light and airy feel [...] I feel comfortable spending time in this building [...] I don't use the arcades. Walking over the bridges is too creepy. I get vertigo. The concourse could have been more selective with the choice of vendors. It feels a little too corporate/commercial [...] A garden would have been really nice to get out of the city fray."

A retired printer about 65 years old visits the library four or five times a week. "I think it's terrible. It's a very poor copy of an old Roman building. There is tremendous wasted space and it func-

tions poorly. The library shouldn't have moved to such an expensive building if it couldn't afford it." He thinks the concourse is "probably the best place in the building. It's a good communal place for chatting." Asked about the roof-top garden, "It's an example of poor planning again. A public garden would have been very nice."

A bank officer in her early fifties uses the library twice a month and says that she never went to the old library. "It's a nice building. Since it's Roman-style architecture that is rare in Canada, it's unique. Also it's a new building. It's quiet and spacious; even when the library is really busy [it] feels quiet. However, there's too much concrete around the building; it would be better with more greenery. The concourse is bad; it's dirty. The area conflicts with the main purpose of a library."

A university student in his twenties visits the library once a month. "I like the aesthetic. The social element of the concourse is good; it's nice that it's close by. The atmosphere is nice, there's lots of glass, the shape is cool; it's clean and the chairs are comfy." He spends most of his time in the arcades: "I like them. Looking down from them is interesting. I'm not scared." He likes the concourse: "It's convenient to go down for a snack. I'm mad that McDonald's is part of the complex and the food in general is too expensive. This is a community building and the stores don't relate to the community." When asked about the proposed roof garden, he said, "I would like to see it."

Conclusion

Although the considerable strength of public support for Safdie's design for Vancouver Library Square helped to defend the project against its critics, the almost unanimous desire to keep the roof garden did not manage to save this element in the final version. The fact remains that the inclusion of public discourse did not significantly influence design issues in Vancouver Library Square. Although, as Adele Freedman points out, during the community phase of the project the media became an extension of public opinion,¹⁰¹ there was little real dialogue between the architect and the public. Certainly the professional sniping over the design of Vancouver Library Square impeded the project's reception not at all; if anything, the rancorous discourse seemed to fuel popular approval of the design. Ultimately this aesthetic debate seems to crystallize the ambiguous role of public opinion in civic architecture: the apparent tension between popular acceptance of a building intended for community use and professional disdain for exactly the sort of design that might engage the imagina-

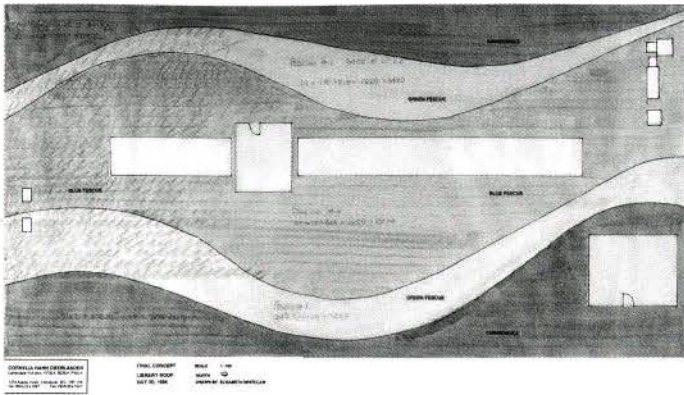


Fig. 22. Cornelia Hahn Oberlander.
Final roof garden (30 May 1994).
(Moshe Safdie Archive, CAC, McGill University Libraries)

tion of a layperson. Despite the resistance and even outright opposition to the design of the complex, Vancouver Library Square is a remarkably compelling public building, encompassing as it does a vibrant community centre and a library dedicated to the city's idealism and spirit of intellectual endeavour.

Notes

1 I am indebted to Irena Murray, Curator of Canadian Architecture Collection (CAC) and Chief Curator Rare Books and Special Collections Division, McGill University, for her encouragement and guidance in the writing of this essay, her careful reading, and her incisive commentary.

This essay is based on research conducted by Ewa Bieniecka (EB) at CAC from June to September 1999. The CAC is the principal repository of more than 100,000 drawings, models, and personal papers that constitute the Moshe Safdie Archive. Donated by the architect in 1990 as part of an ongoing bequest, this substantive body of primary documents is one of the most extensive individual monographic collections of architectural documentation in Canada. The extraordinary richness and scope of the material in this archive have been the catalyst for a significant number of research-based projects. Based entirely on the archive, the book *Moshe Safdie: Buildings and Projects, 1967-1992*, published by McGill-Queen's University Press, provides a thorough documentary record of the first 25 years of Safdie's career.

Funded by Industry Canada, the *Moshe Safdie Hypermedia Archive* website (1999-ongoing) presents a survey of Safdie's past and recently completed projects and works-in-progress in the form of 1,000 images, numerous audio and video clips, and an indexed bibliography. The website is designed as a regu-

larly updated version of *Moshe Safdie: Buildings and Projects, 1967-1992*.

Finally two new components have been developed from the *Hypermedia Archive: Building for Culture and Habitat '67*. The former, a virtual exhibition, highlights what has become the single most dominant aspect of Safdie's work: large-scale public projects with a distinct cultural and educational mission. The latter examines the internationally renowned Habitat '67 complex against the backdrop of a comprehensive online analysis of the continuing viability of high-density, urban cluster housing.

Together these undertakings have generated a considerable amount of new information, and several research directions have emerged as a result. It is hoped that this essay will be the first in a series aimed at providing comprehensive insight into the work of this Canadian architect.

2 The information in this section is drawn from: Jane Turner, ed., *Dictionary of Art* (New York: Grove's Dictionaries, 1996), vol. 19, 311-321.

3 *Ibid.*, 319.

4 Robert Neuwirth, "Library Science," *Metropolis*, March 1996, 45-58, 82-87.

5 *Architecture* 84 (October 1995): 55. A special issue on libraries.

6 Campbell is currently provincial Liberal leader.

7 Gordon Campbell, letter to EB (11 July 1999). CAC.

8 Stage 1 Guidelines: "Call for Expression of Interest," September 1991. CAC.

9 Irene Scott, "Vancouver Public

Library," *Pioneer News* 15 (June/July 1992): n.p. The Vancouver Public Library was officially established as a free public library in November 1887. It was founded with a grant of \$250 from the city council and was operated from several successive locations. In 1903 the library moved to a new building at Hastings and Main Streets. The funds for this building, which the library occupied until 1957, were provided by Andrew Carnegie.

10 Adele Freedman, "Modernism versus Money: The Case Unfolds on the West Coast," *The Globe and Mail*, 7 September 1991, C-11. The building was awarded the Massey Foundation Silver Medal for architecture in 1958. In 1953 Semmens and Simpson had the distinction of winning the first Massey Gold Medal ever awarded for an office building, since destroyed.

11 Ann Jarmusch, "The Vancouver Library," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 1 April 1996, A10.

12 Vancouver Public Library Planning document (unpublished report, September 1990). CAC.

13 Kyle Mitchell, letter to EB (28 May 1999). CAC.

14 Kyle Mitchell, telephone interview with Linda L. Graif (LLG) (12 July 2000): the cost to the owner of the average Vancouver house was \$14.55 a year over a period of ten years.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.* As of July 2000 most of the \$12 million had been raised.

17 *Ibid.*

18 An examination of the literature throughout the project reveals a disparity in the amount of coverage that Vancouver Library Square received in the professional as opposed to the popular press. About twenty-five articles have appeared in approximately eight professional journals, such as *The Canadian Architect*, *Architecture*, *The Architectural Review*, *Canadian Consulting Engineer*, whereas the public press covered the project in more than 200 ar-

ticles, most of which appeared in local papers. While no books have been written exclusively on Vancouver Library Square, the project is featured in Michael Brawne, ed., *Library Builders* (London: Academy Editions, 1997), 178-181; Wendy Kohn, ed., *Moshe Safdie* (London: Academy Editions, 1996), 285; Murray, *Moshe Safdie*, 204-205; Jeremy Myerson, *New Public Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 1996), 188-191.

19 Sandra McKenzie, "Mistake or Masterpiece?" *Vancouver* 26 (January/February 1993): 42-50.

20 Sean Rossiter, "The Birth of a Statement: The New Library is an Instant Landmark, But is it our Landmark?" *The Georgia Straight*, 26 May 1995, 9.

21 Sandra McKenzie, "Closing the Book," *The Vancouver Step*, (June/July 1992): 32-33.

22 Andrew Gruft and Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, "For the Love of Modern, Save the Library," *The Vancouver Courier*, 11 October 1992, A15.

23 Adele Freedman, "Modernism versus Money?"

24 Sean Magee, "\$30 Million Estimate 'Too High'," *The Vancouver Courier*, 19 August 1992, 1.

25 "Vancouver City Library Now a Designated Heritage Landmark Building," *The Vancouver Sun*, 18 January 1995, A6. The \$7.1 million shortfall was due to a depressed real estate market.

26 Sandra McKenzie, "Mistake or Masterpiece?" 45.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

29 Clyde N. Hosein, letter to Rand Thompson, MAIBC (6 May 1992). CAC.

30 "Call for Expressions of Interest from Architectural Firms," *The Vancouver Sun*, 7 September 1991.

31 Sandra McKenzie, "Mistake or Masterpiece?" 45.

32 *Ibid.* 45.

33 Clyde N. Hosein, letter to Richard Archambault, (15 October 1991). CAC.

- 34 Sandra McKenzie, "Mistake or Masterpiece?" 45.
- 35 Adele Freedman, "Squaring Off for Library Square," *The Globe and Mail*, 16 November 1991, A2.
- 36 Bronwen Ledger, "Queen's University Library Competition," *The Canadian Architect* 36 (March 1991): 33-36. In 1991 Moshe Safdie and Associates (MSA) and Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects (KPMB) had participated in a limited design competition for a new library at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. The schemes for the five finalists were displayed for a week, and the public and students were invited to submit their comments. According to an unofficial count from 70 responses the "favourites" were the designs by MSA and the winning competition proposal by KPMB.
- 37 The members of the Selection Advisory Committee (SAC) included four architects (Fumihiko Maki, William Pedersen, Gerald Rolfsen, and Bing Thom), two aldermen (Tung Chan and Henry Rankin), the chair of the library board (Kyle Mitchell), the city manager (Ken Dobell), and the Mayor of Vancouver (Gordon Campbell), who served as chair of the committee.
- 38 Review of Library Square Competitions Submissions by the Technical Advisory committee and Urban Design panel. April 1992. A simplified rating system was adopted by the Technical Advisory committee that assigned a value of ten points for each of the categories for a total of 60 points. CAC.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Proposal A: KPMB; Proposal B: Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer.
- 41 John Kirkwood, "Choosing Library Democracy in Action," *The Vancouver Courier*, 18 March 1992, 4.
- 42 Public Questionnaire Evaluation; Sample of Public Responses. CAC.
- 43 Christopher Hume, "Library Designs Have Vancouver Abuzz," *The Toronto Star*, 14 March 1992, H12.
- 44 Gordon Campbell, letter to EB (11 July 1999). CAC.
- 45 Stephen Godfrey, "A Colossal Exercise in Denial," *The Globe and Mail*, 9 May 1992, n.p.
- 46 Madge Aalto, letter to EB (6 October 1999). CAC.
- 47 Douglas D. Palmer, "Libraries Termed a 'Treasury' for Culture," *The Salt Lake City Tribune*, 6 April 1999.
- 48 Sandra McKenzie, "Mistake or Masterpiece?" 46.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Clyde N. Hosein, Report to Vancouver City Council: Announcement of Competition Winner. CAC.
- 51 Bronwen Ledger, "Vancouver Library Square Competition," *The Canadian Architect* 37 (July 1992): 20-23.
- 52 Sandra McKenzie, "Mistake or Masterpiece?" 48.
- 53 Richard Archambault, letter to EB (17 June 1999). CAC.
- 54 *CBC Evening News* with Ken Evans, 14 April 1992. (videotape). CAC.
- 55 MSA: Supplementary Qualification Documents re: The Library Square Project (October 1991). CAC.
- 56 Stage 1 Guidelines: "Call for Expression of Interest," September 1991. CAC.
- 57 Administrative Report submitted to Vancouver City Council by City Manager for Library Square Building committee (15 June 1992). CAC. The library was originally intended to be 40,900 m². It was subsequently reduced to 34,500 m² and finally to 32,514 m². The federal office tower and the additional retail and daycare facilities are 28,340 m².
- 58 Sue Yates, telephone interview with LLG (19 July 2000).
- 59 George Goodwin, interview with Moshe Safdie (17 October 1992) (audiotape). CAC.
- 60 The site terrain descends by almost two storeys to the southeast corner.
- 61 Sandra McKenzie, "Mistake or Masterpiece?" 49.
- 62 Madge Aalto, telephone interview with LLG (15 June 2000).
- 63 David Beers, "Architect of Boom," *Vancouver* (May/June 1995): 61-66.
- 64 Moshe Safdie, letter to Christopher Hume (17 April 1992). CAC.
- 65 Michael Brawne, *Library Builders*, 6.
- 66 Moshe Safdie, letter to Donald R. Jardinat (20 July 1992). CAC.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Selim O. Khan-Magomedov. *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 121, fig. 335. Daniella Rohan, assistant curator, CAC, brought this analogy to my attention.
- 69 David Beers, "The Architect of Boom," 65.
- 70 Stephen Godfrey, "A Colossal Exercise in Denial."
- 71 Marjie Hadad, "Moshe Safdie: Vision in Concrete," *Real Estate Investment in Israel*, 13 September 1996.
- 72 Phillips Matthews, memo to Cornelia Oberlander (29 January 1992). CAC.
- 73 Laura Shapiro, "A Mall for the Mind," *Newsweek*, 21 October 1996, 84.
- 74 Moshe Safdie, letter to Christopher Hume (17 April 1992). CAC.
- 75 The information in this section is drawn from the Administrative Report (15 June 1992). CAC.
- 76 The tower also had to be lowered by two storeys although it still protruded into the view corridor. The shape of the tower had to be modified as well in order to provide marketable floor plates.
- 77 Stephen Godfrey, "The Image Builder," *The Globe and Mail*, 27 June 1992, C1-C2.
- 78 Moshe Safdie, letter to Clyde N. Hosein (1 September 1992). CAC.
- 79 Moshe Safdie, letter to Clyde N. Hosein (6 August 1992). CAC.
- 80 Madge Aalto, letter to EB (6 October 1999). CAC.
- 81 Richard Archambault, letter to EB (17 June 1999). CAC.
- 82 Correspondence between Moshe Safdie and Gordon Campbell (8,23,25 February 1993). CAC.
- 83 Cornelia Oberlander, "Library Square Vancouver," (unpublished report, n.d.). CAC.
- 84 Sandra McKenzie, "Mistake or Masterpiece?" 49.
- 85 Jeff Lee, "New Library: Finding Old Horseshoe Called a Lucky Omen at Ground-breaking," *The Vancouver Sun*, 2 February 1993, B4.
- 86 Bruce Haden, "Toga Party," *The Canadian Architect* 55 (August 1995), 32-33.
- 87 John Bentley Mays, "A West Coast Cityscape Reels From the Oz Effect," *The Globe and Mail*, 2 November 1995, D3-D4.
- 88 Moshe Safdie, "The Language and Medium of Architecture," lecture delivered at Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 15 November 1989.
- 89 Witold Rybczynski, "A Sight for Sore Eyes," *Saturday Night* 111, No. 2, March 1996, 82.
- 90 Mays, "A West Coast Cityscape."
- 91 "Vancouver's New Landmark Library Opens," *The Link*, 31 May 1995.
- 92 Fiona Hughes, "Beauty and the Books," *The Vancouver Courier*, No. 42, 86, 24 May 1995.
- 93 Robin Ward, "Roamin' the Ruins," *The Weekend Sun* (Vancouver), 3 June 1995.
- 94 Editorial, "Operating a Library," *The Vancouver Sun*, 30 May 1995.
- 95 Madge Aalto, letter to EB (6 October 1999). CAC.
- 96 Sue Yates, telephone interview with LLG (19 July 2000).
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Michael Seelig, letter to EB (10 June 1999). CAC.
- 99 Kyle Mitchell, telephone interview with LLG (12 July 2000).
- 100 These interviews were conducted by Matthew Soules. (typescript). CAC.
- 101 Adele Freedman, telephone interview with LLG (14 July 2000).