

An architect's perspective on the new Cambridge library: The church and the glass box

Cambridge Chronicle (MA) - Wednesday, November 18, 2009

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In 1887, Frederick Rindge, Cambridge-born and Harvard-bred scion to a large family fortune, gave his hometown a library. The Cambridge Public Library, an elegant beige and maroon Church of Knowledge, served the city well for years.

It was clear by the 1990s that this library was inadequate. And a solution using the original site appeared to be impossible. There was not enough room to build a modern library, preserve an architectural treasure, and share a large public open space with the city-wide High School.

Today, a new addition, designed by William Rawn Associates and Ann Beha Architects does all that.

The new main entrance is at the center of the complex. The original Library, its arched entry turned into conference room, is on the left and the new glass box of books is on the right. Upon entering, a left turn up a short set of stairs brings you past the Large Print Room, a quiet, dim chapel with frescoes of the history of printing covering the vaulted ceiling. Then you come into another lovely vaulted space full of public computer terminals.

At one end of this space, you see the entry to the long, brick-piered Young Adult Reading Room and a fresco commissioned by Rindge. It lists the Ten Commandments and the warning: "Men, Women, Children, if you obey these commandments you will be happy. If you disobey them, sorrow will come upon you." Is this meant to be a lesson for teenagers or just serendipity?

Walking back towards the new addition, it's easy to understand how to get around the buildings. The main stair to the upper floors lies directly ahead. On one side the new media collection is on a raised mezzanine and on the other side, books, magazines and seating. The space is narrow, high, and surrounded with glass.

During the day, grab your Chronicle from the rack (or Le Monde, the London Times, or the Washington Post) and sit by the state of the art double glass wall which cools the building in the summer and warms it in the winter. You'll feel as if you are sitting outside in Joan Lorenz Park. At dark, the Library becomes the Park's nightlight.

For years, library designers placed the children's room in the basement. Here, the children are at the top of the building. Their glass wall looks southwest with incredible sunset views over the treetops and rooftops of Cambridge. Up here, columns look like tree trunks, the ceiling is a canopy of leaves, and the carpets mimic a soft pebble beach.

A city's Public Library is its living room, and Cambridge now has a living room big enough for everyone, young, old and in-between. But the real test of a successful design is whether it serves its users well.

At closing time on a cold, rainy Saturday night, the long lines of beaming patrons and their borrowed books at the checkout desk quietly shouted the answer.

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