

Books for all

In the collective imaginary, Washington, DC, is a planned city whose central districts embody the national consciousness of America. What is less well known is that these urban corridors of power are surrounded by countless communities with no access to the elementary advantages of city life. Libraries, as Gideon Fink Shapiro explains, could be the solution

DESIGN

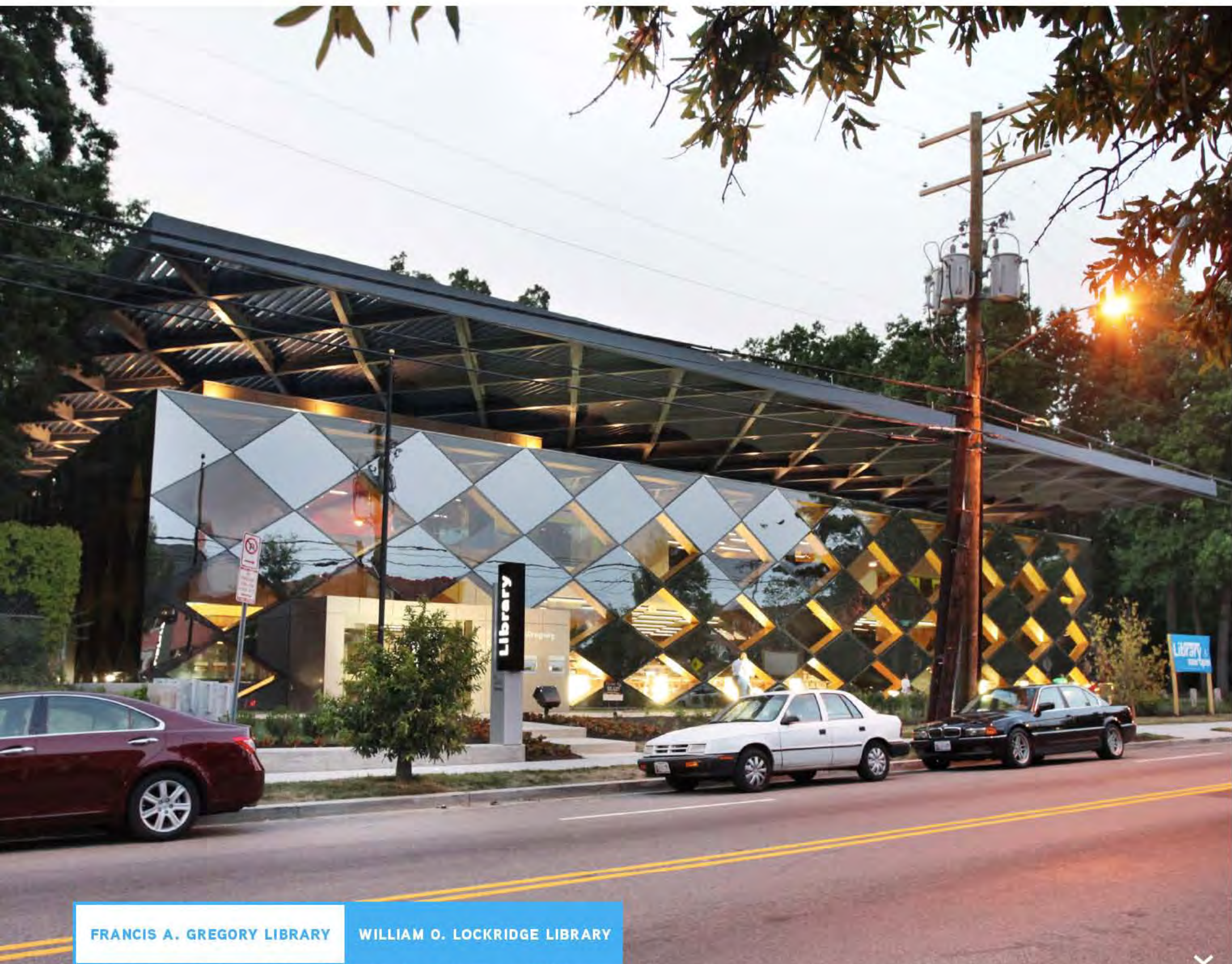
Adjaye Associates

TEXT

Gideon Fink Shapiro

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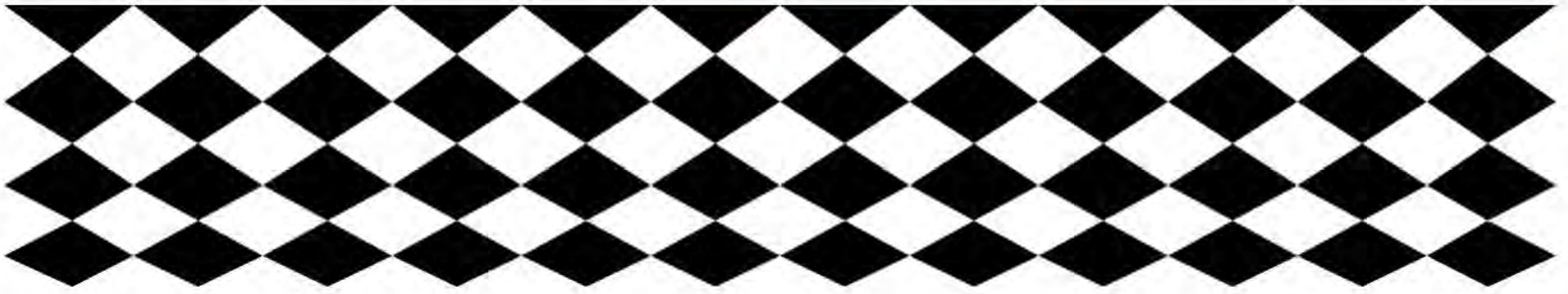


FRANCIS A. GREGORY LIBRARY

WILLIAM O. LOCKRIDGE LIBRARY







Participation and pleasure



The geometric pattern of the elevations on the Francis A. Gregory Library plays on its visual perception by passers-by, so that the building dematerialises among the trees of the neighbouring Fort Davis Park. The south and north fronts are defined by a texture of elongated rhombuses, whilst on the east and west fronts the rhombuses are more squashed

Most of the public architecture and landscape in Washington, DC, is concentrated in the central governmental and museum district laid out by Pierre Charles L'Enfant in 1791. The next major public building to rise here may be the 500-million-dollar National Museum of African American History and Culture, designed by David Adjaye and the Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup, scheduled for completion in 2015. Outside of the National Mall and Capitol Hill, however, the city's unified image of civitas splinters into historically segregated communities. The posh and the poor have little in common save the Potomac River and the lush southern climate. How does public architecture work in these localised, non-touristic settings?

The answer, to use an old phrase, is to be found in a library. Two libraries, in fact, located deep in the Southwest and Southeast quadrants of Washington. Designed by Adjaye Associates, the new Francis A. Gregory Library and the William O. Lockridge/Bellevue Library aim to be the most open, the most useful and the most inspiring places in their respective communities. On one hand they are visually stirring objects that stand out from the ordinary houses and shops in their vicinity. By virtue of imaginative design they evoke a world of untapped possibilities. On the other hand they are hard-working buildings that achieve legitimacy based on what they can offer directly, unpretentiously, to local youths and adults. They do not impose an external ideal or image, nor do they model themselves on what is already there. Instead they invite neighbours to use them as agents of transformation in everyday life.

Ambitious library architecture is increasingly sprinkled throughout Washington. Under the direction of Ginnie Cooper, the DC public library system has built or renovated 13 branch libraries since 2006, with new projects coming soon from Enrique Norten and Bing Thom. "What happens inside the buildings is



According to Adjaye, the building is a kind of folly with an unusual design that frames well-defined views of the woods in Washington's Fort Davis Park

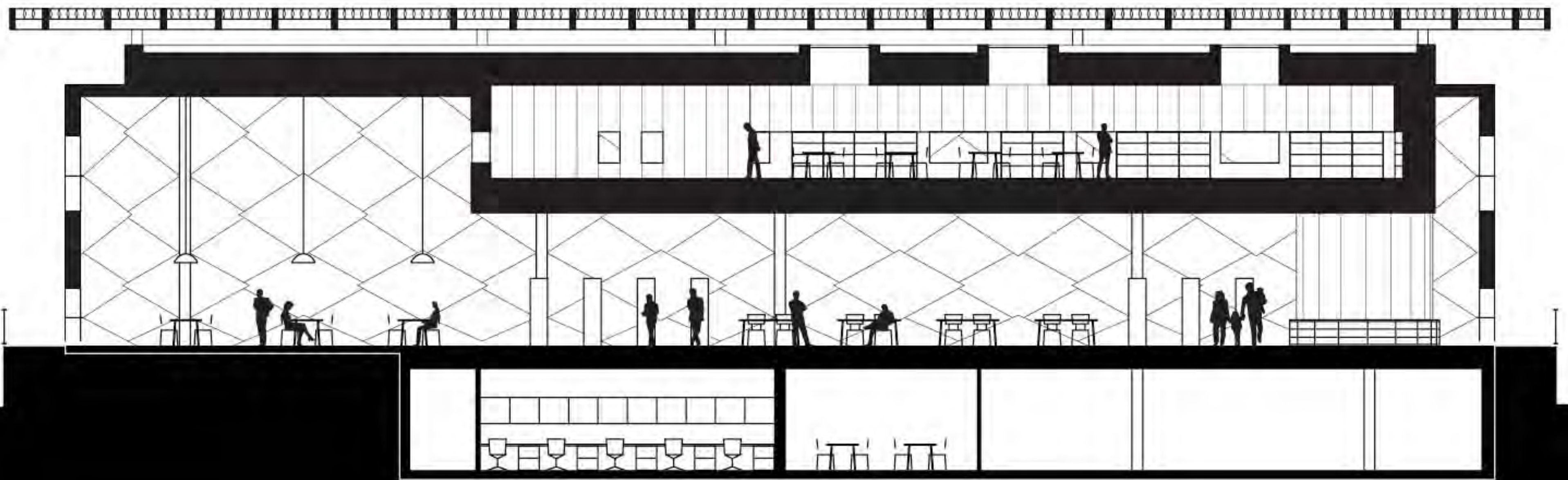
more important than the buildings themselves," says Cooper. But architecture "signals to people that the library is a different place than they have assumed it is". Every new neighbourhood library in DC offers large and small meeting rooms, free WiFi, computers, events, classes, circulating media and dedicated spaces for different age groups. Adults often line up to use the computers early in the morning, young children are escorted by parents or nannies at midday, and teens arrive in the afternoon when school is out. To accommodate these users each library must seat 200 people, hold up to 80,000 books and DVDs, cover an area of 22,000 square feet, and cost no more than 10 million dollars. The budget is modest for a world-famous architect, but still higher than what most cash-strapped city governments could afford today.





FRANCIS A. GREGORY LIBRARY

WILLIAM O. LOCKRIDGE LIBRARY



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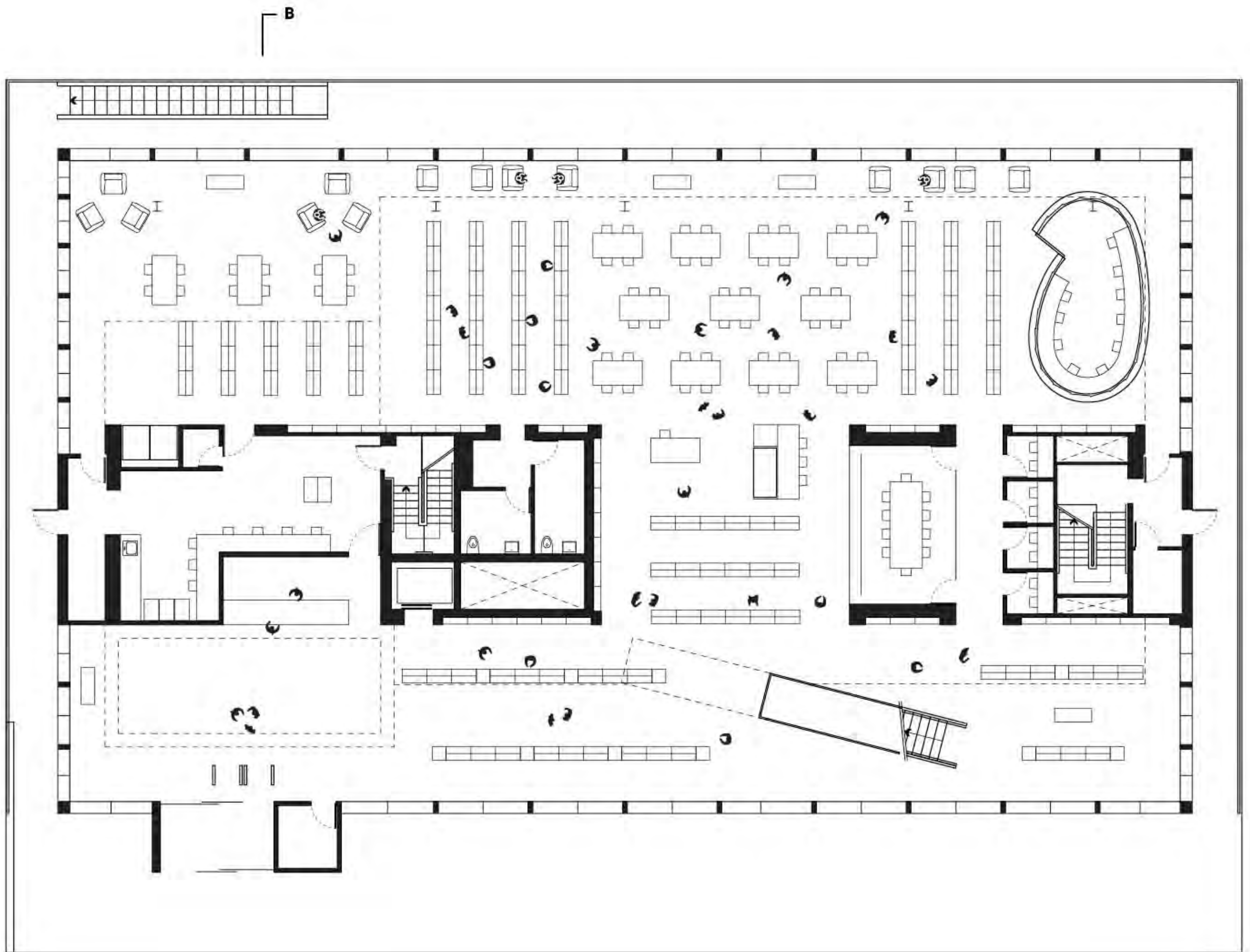
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GROUND FLOOR PLAN

FIRST FLOOR PLAN

SECTION A-A'

SECTION B-B'



CREDITS +





In the William O. Lockridge/ Bellevue Library the facades have been created with a combination of concrete sections, large glass surfaces and Parallam-type wooden slats

Adjaye's two public libraries in London, the so-called "Idea Stores" of Chrisp Street (2004) and Whitechapel (2005), made a point of connecting with the life of the street. The sites in DC are quieter and less dense. Therefore the Gregory and Lockridge libraries draw from their placid surroundings to generate urban density on the spot. The two have totally different design concepts and relationships to their site. One is a cool glass box nestled in the woods, while the other is a chunky, pinstriped creature on a hill. By day, the Gregory Library's reflective glass walls make it dissolve into the surrounding foliage. Only the hovering black steel-and-aluminium roof slab is visible from 50 metres up the road. This light-filled, two-storey modernist cube is sheathed in a two-layer screen of warped diamond-shaped boxes. The outer glass layer alternates between clear and mirrored panels, varying in shape across the facade like an argyle sock that stretches as you pull it on. Behind the glass lies a 40-centimetre-thick lattice of plywood boxes congruent with the stretched-diamond pattern. Visually the plywood screen creates a popping rhythm of solids and voids. Technically it provides some shading and insulation while concealing the steel supports of the curtain wall.

Everything appears to float inside the Gregory Library. The only visible structural elements are the four I-beams that lift the roof canopy a few metres above the building envelope. Semi-transparent meeting rooms and quiet areas are carved out of the floor plan without losing the feeling of openness. Each space allows a glimpse into another and different space, inciting curiosity about who is doing what where. You can study people and landscape as well as books and movies here. An upper-level children's room, for example, overlooks the double-height teen space below. A window seat tucked into the plywood facade gives an intimate view of the forest that tickles the library's north side.

Four miles to the southwest, the Lockridge Library has something of a brutalist flavour: humbly exposed building materials and a blocky massiveness. It exploits the site topography by rising up as the ground slopes down, creating a shaded entrance plaza and event space. The main architectural body sprouts three articulated volumes, which turn out to be dedicated programme areas for children, teens and adults. To enter the library is to pass between thickset concrete columns, as if through the legs of a giant elephant. Ductwork is housed in a raised floor rather than a dropped ceiling, so the ceiling is where you see the concrete slab.

Some people may be confused (or outraged, or both) by the

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The libraries are visually stirring objects that stand out from the ordinary houses and shops in their vicinity
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Adjaye creatively interprets inexpensive building materials: poured concrete, EIFS, Parallam, plywood and laminate panels

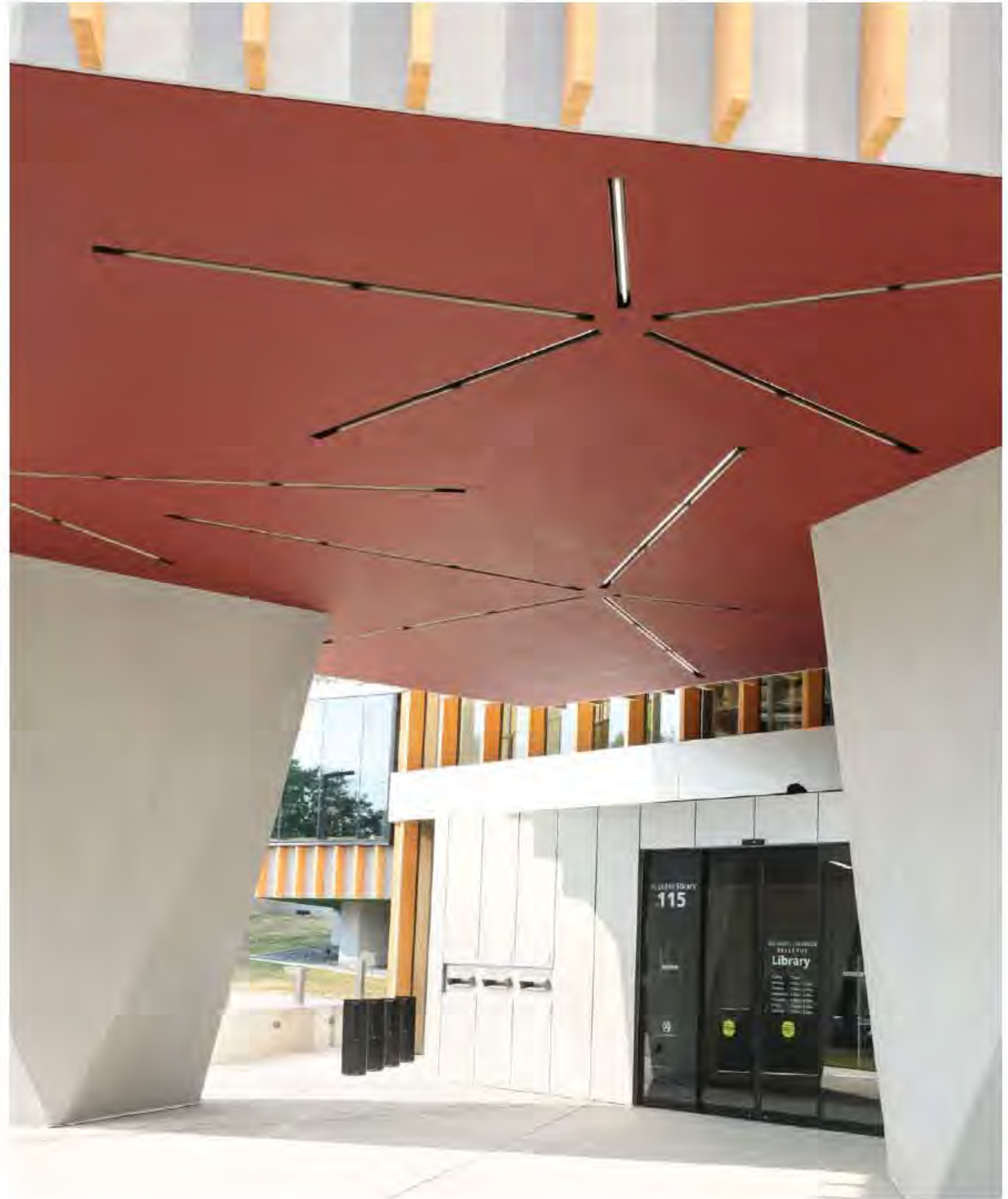


The William O. Lockridge/ Bellevue Library is fragmented into smaller blocks, relating it to the hilly topography of the site and making optimal use of natural light. The ramp connecting the first and second floors is a prominent feature on the east side of the building

external vertical wood fins that look like 30-foot-high studs waiting for drywall. The factory-made Parallam beams are mounted externally, much like Mies van der Rohe's I-beams are hung outside the curtain wall of the Seagram Building. The fins serve first of all to stabilise and shade the tall, insulated glass wall panels, which happen to be the costliest part of the building. The fins also serve as dressing for the large expanses of lowly, ultra-cheap artificial stucco (eifs)—almost allowing the grey eifs to read as raw concrete like the columns below. The Lockridge facade recalls the exposed ceiling joists of the Idea Stores, now tilted vertically and pushed outside.

Although Lockridge has a lot of windows and natural light, it is not outwardly transparent. To appreciate the richness of its interior you must enter and start using your eyes and feet. The three-storey building is organised as an architectural promenade that moves you through fields of colour, kaleidoscopic reflections, contrasting surface textures and endlessly unfolding views. This library has more atmosphere and visual delight than most nightclubs. Teenagers get the coolest space in the house: a luminous red aerie equipped with books, lounge chairs, long white shiny desks and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the entrance plaza and the neighbourhood. Bisecting the building is a three-storey-high light slot encased by yellow-green glass. You pass through this chartreuse canyon soon after entering on the ground floor; thereafter only your gaze can pass through—but not without simultaneously bouncing off and creating all kinds of optical mischief. (Here it is worth recalling that Adjaye has previously collaborated with the artist Olafur Eliasson.) “Seeing light is just as important as having light,” says Adjaye.

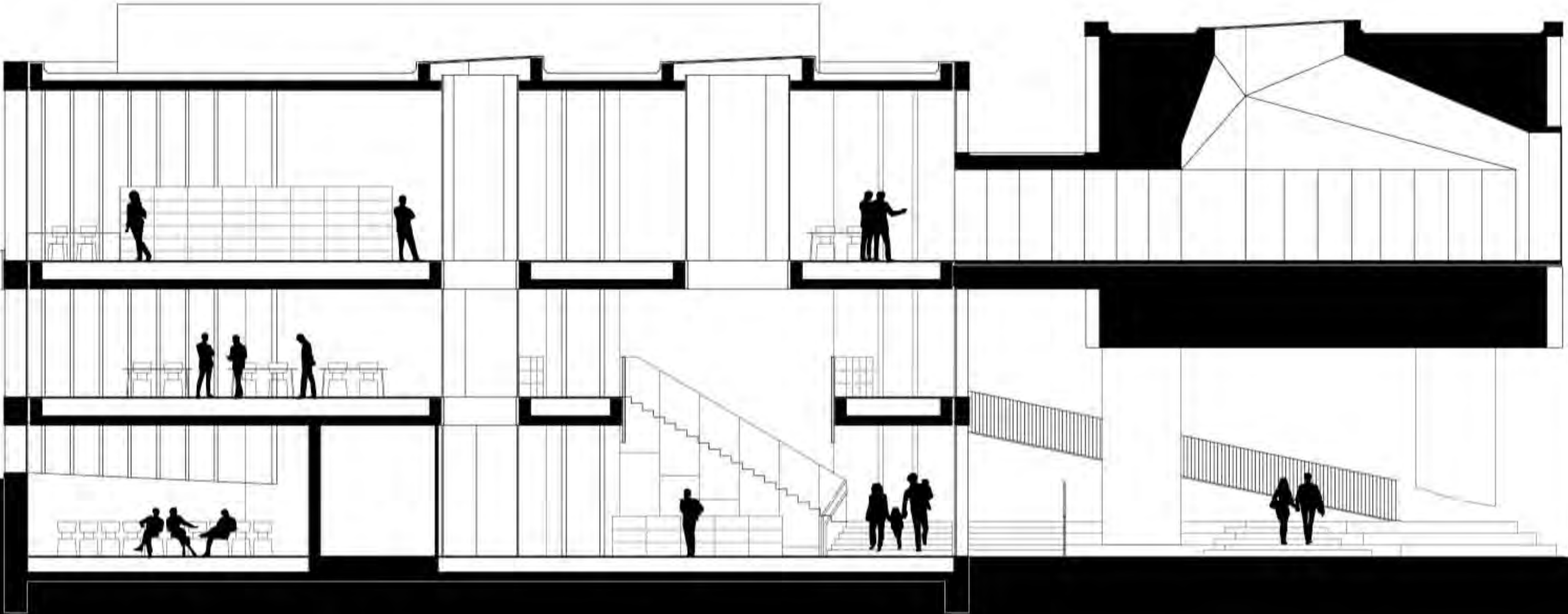
Adjaye's creative deployments of inexpensive building materials—poured concrete, eifs, Parallam, plywood, and laminate panels in both matte and gloss finish—point to the influence of the late Alison and Peter Smithson, with whom Adjaye studied at the



Adjaye has aimed to create a civic building here that has a certain urban look and fits into the residential fabric

Royal College of Art in 1992-93. At the same time there is another, more rarefied strain of minimalism in Adjaye's work, one that could perhaps be traced to his 1991 turns in the offices of David Chipperfield and Eduardo Souto de Moura. The Gregory and Lockridge libraries show that even modest materials can take on a certain rigour and opulence when they articulate light, space and scale.

Good libraries have always been more than mere repositories of books. The grand reading rooms of the 19th century have morphed into a variety of informal, shared programme spaces that offer varying degrees of privacy in public. Pleasure is also part of the equation. In Adjaye's Washington libraries, the mind stirs in concert with the senses. The ethics and aesthetics of restraint are here inflected with an extroverted exuberance that could be called utopian, were it not thoroughly grounded in everyday life and use.



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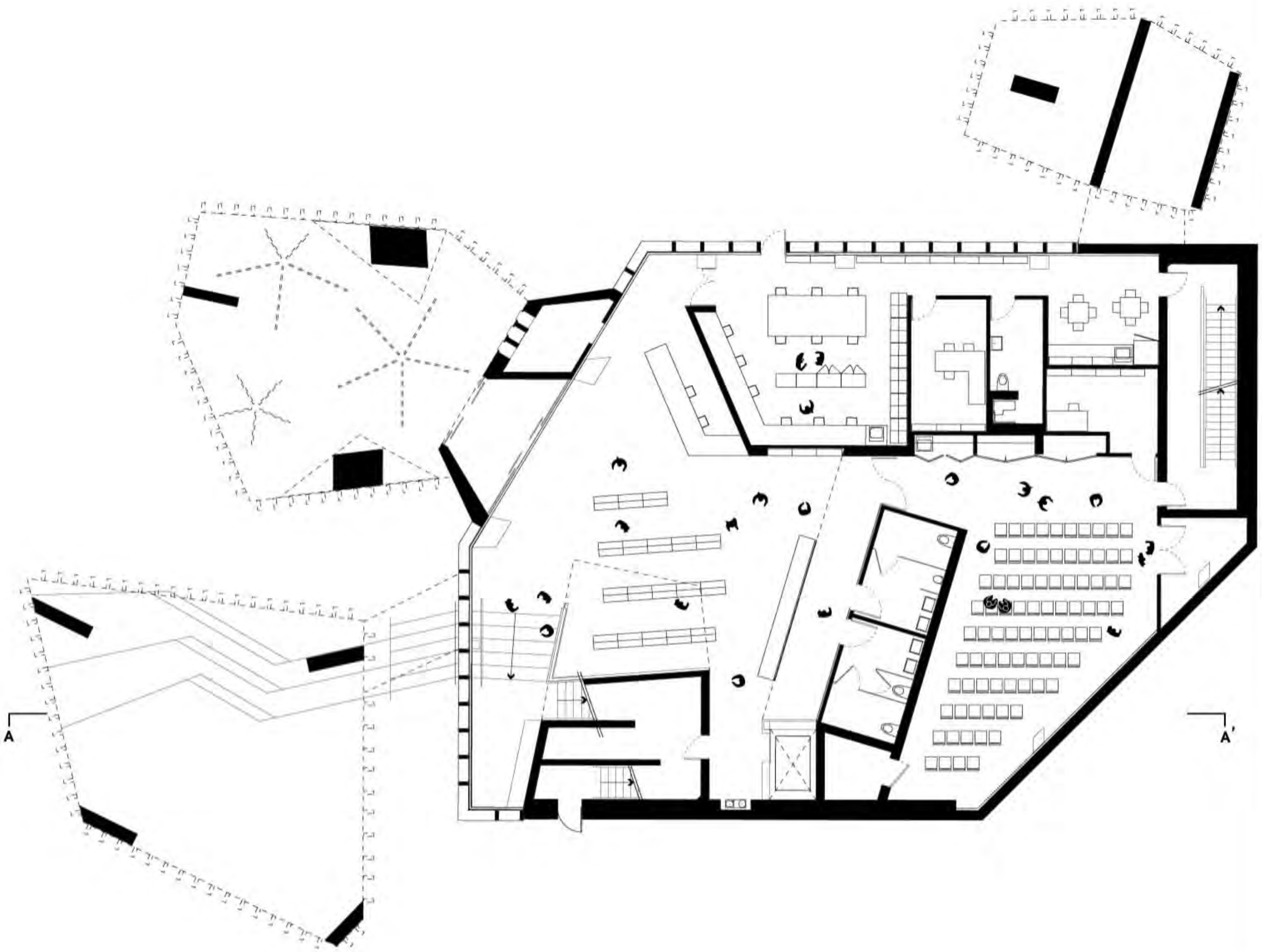
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CREDITS





GROUND
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