

# Book Ends

As libraries take on more civic functions, traditional styles are proving quite capable of meeting the new demands.

By Martha McDonald

**L**ibraries have always been important civic buildings, keepers of our culture and history, and recently they have been asked to take on even more functions. In addition to book storage and seating for reading and study, new libraries are also becoming community centers, providing cafes, meeting rooms and spaces for events such as concerts. This applies to libraries of all sizes, ranging from those found in small traditional communities to those among high-rises in major downtown areas.

While older traditional library buildings can be updated to meet today's needs, new construction is another issue. Here, architects are finding that traditional styles provide the flexibility needed to meet these demands while still creating buildings of civic proportions and demeanor.

Recent examples include a small (2,968 sq.ft.) single-story library in Craftsbury Common, VT, a new university library (136,000 sq.ft.) at Rhodes College in Memphis, TN, and a major (297,000 sq.ft.) civic library in downtown Jacksonville, FL. Designed by Sandra Vitzthum, Architect, of Montpelier, VT, the first is set in a small community and was built on a very limited budget – \$635,000. At Rhodes College, the school requested the Collegiate Gothic style to coordinate with its existing campus and provide an aura of tradition and permanence; the new \$42-million Paul Barret, Jr. Library was designed by Hanbury Evans Wright Vlattas + Company of Norfolk, VA, and Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott of Boston, MA. Another new building, the \$57-million main library in Jacksonville, FL, was designed by Robert A. M. Stern Architects of New York City using Classical language adapted to the local community.

## The Tradition of Place

When Craftsbury, VT, a small, close-knit community proud of its architectural heritage, outgrew its two-room library on the town green, it wanted a new one with a traditional design to fit in with the community. “The community requested a new library that reflects the ‘best Classical architectural traditions of Vermont without being overscaled,’” says Sandy Vitzthum. “We decided to use a Greek model because it is more three dimensional than a Roman façade and also because the Greek Revival movement is so strong and symbolic in Vermont.

“We spent a lot of time modeling the building,” she adds. “We started out with different entries and porches based on the Erechtheum, and the final design was a



Sited just off the town common, the Craftsbury Library was designed by Sandra Vitzthum drawing from Roman precedents. The entry is a miniature temple front with an oversized porch, designed to welcome all who enter from the common. Significant features include a bay window in the meeting room and a reading porch looking out on the Green Mountains. Photo: Carolyn L. Bates

compromise with a frontal entry. The inside is very plain because much effort was spent on the exterior. I think it is fitting that they put their budget into creating a civic structure.

“The community was really behind the building. Everyone, old and young, was very involved in the process. They attended public meetings and the model was displayed and examined intensely. Countless fundraisers were held. One typical incident occurred shortly before construction when one of the neighbor’s trees fell down and he donated the wood for the floor of the Vermont Room.”

The new library features an approximately 800 sq.ft. entry area, 1,000-sq.ft. reading room, 800-sq.ft. children’s room, 600-sq.ft. Vermont Room, and 1,000 sq.ft. for storage. Because the community of 1,200 has a limited budget, one of the requirements of the design was that all parts of the library be visible from the circulation desk, which reduces staffing requirements. Vitzthum solved this problem by using a pinwheel design with the circulation desk at the center.

“Traditional design lends itself to libraries because the rectangular shape is more efficient for book storage,” she notes. “Also, libraries are community centers, so a good share of the activity is not around books. A traditional design with more rooms is better – it reinforces the tradition of place.”

Vitzthum also points out that the building received an Energy Star rating, and suggests that traditional architects need to stress the advantages of energy conservation in their designs. “One place we traditional architects have hurt ourselves is that we have not taken the green movement more seriously,” she says. “We have to show how we can excel in ecological performance. Some people are going with more modern buildings because they think they are more ecological.”



The Craftsbury Library is designed in a pinwheel plan with the circulation desk at the center so that one person can monitor the entire library. This view from the circulation desk looks into the main reading room. Photo: Carolyn L. Bates

## True to Style

The Paul Barret, Jr. Library on the Rhodes College campus in Memphis, TN, was completed in August 2005. The \$42-million project provides 136,000 sq.ft. (108,000 sq.ft. occupied) of space to house up to 500,000 volumes, as well as computer labs, an assistive technology room for the visually and hearing impaired, a 32-seat viewing theater, “hang-out” spaces, a 24-hour coffee lounge and expanded reading rooms for special collections.

“This building is not only traditional in its form, but it is traditional in its siting,” says Jane C. Wright, AIA, design principal and president of Hanbury Evans Wright Vlattas + Company. “While many campuses are moving their libraries to the perimeter of their grounds, Rhodes College embraces the library as both the traditional and intellectual and geographic heart of the campus – it is a traditional approach that meets contemporary needs. The outcome is a vibrant, 24-hour active student/faculty environment reinforcing the academic goals of the institution.”

One of the major challenges was placing a large building on the back edge of an intimately scaled Collegiate Gothic village. “The strategy adopted was to create a new ‘campus gateway’ using the large scale of the program and its monumental scale to give the new gateway explicit civic authority both as



**Above:** The Paul Barret, Jr. Library at Rhodes College in Memphis, TN, was built in the Collegiate Gothic style to coordinate with the campus. Designed by Hanbury Evans Wright Viattas + Company with Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott, the 136,000-sq-ft. building has created a new entrance to the campus. The design of the central 120-ft. tower, the second highest point on the campus, was based on the Fibonacci series, a formula discovered by the 13th-century Italian mathematician. Photo: Robert Benson

**Right:** The interior of the apse is filled with light from the tall stained-glass windows. In addition, the constellation painted on the ceiling represents the position of the stars on January 1, 1849, the first day of classes for the original school. Photo: Robert Benson

a place of arrival onto the campus and as an emblem of Rhodes' institutional values. The opportunity was to create a building in a language that is true to the style with elements that scale down to honor the buildings around it," says Ralph Jackson, FAIA, principal for design, Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott. "This was accomplished by designing a building with a large central mass that terraces down to create a dialog with the intimate scale of the existing fabric."

The first consideration was siting, utilizing a parking area wedged between the college's athletic facilities and scholarly environment. "We built on what had been the back of the campus," says Jackson, "creating a new front door in an area that had been mute. With this new front door came the opportunity for a civic scale and iconic expression to which libraries lend themselves. The new library has created not only a new campus gateway, but also a mediating element between two previously discrete elements of the existing campus."

Defining features include two towers, a 120-ft. main tower and a second one, as well as a large interior staircase and interior balcony, an apse with a copper dome and a cloister. Symbols important to the Rhodes tradition are carved in stone and reflected in stained-glass windows. The constellation painted on the ceiling in the apse represents the position of the stars on Jan. 1, 1849, the first day of classes at the earlier location of the college. Interior features such as columns, balconies and arches are made of lightweight GFRG (glass-fiber reinforced gypsum). The exterior is clad in Indiana limestone and rubble stone laid in a random pattern. Vermont slate was used for the roofing and trim.

"This language and precedents of this traditional design allowed us to manipulate forms and create variety," says Jackson. "It has the ability to morph into smaller scales and articulate different parts of an institution in an accessible language that does not rely on the observer's visual sophistication that Modernist buildings often require. Modern architecture is sort of like abstract art – if you don't understand what the artist meant, it's difficult to understand it. People readily understand traditional styles."

As for sustainability, "the design is a perfect example of how traditional design can dovetail with sustainability issues," Wright notes. "The building envelope, systems, and site were designed with long-term life cycles in mind. The building envelope, which includes a slate roof and limestone façade, has a life cycle of 100-plus years. Regional stone was used, reducing transportation impacts. The liberal use of natural lighting throughout the building helps control energy costs. Additionally, computer modeling helped maximize energy performance. A new building is a new building – all should be designed with a sustainable outcome in mind."

### A Great Civic Place

The use of traditional design for libraries also reaches into civic libraries, even those found in contemporary downtown areas. Robert A. M. Stern Architects, for example, has designed a number of civic libraries in the past few years, each reflecting the character of its location. In Nashville, TN, a Classically styled library was built partially on top of an existing parking structure. Completed in 2001, it features a formal pedimented main entry and significant public areas organized on an axis with the Capitol to help strengthen the fabric of the civic center of the city.



In Columbus, GA, the firm designed a three-story red-brick library for a 42-acre site that once included a shopping mall. The brick and limestone front façade creates a two-story covered porch entry that leads into a central area with a circular lantern that provides sunlight and panoramic views.

More recently, the new main library in Jacksonville, FL, completed in November 2005, is another example of how Classical styling was adapted to create a grand civic building. "A great library must be much more than a depository for books or a facility for information exchange – it must be a great collective civic place," according to Robert A.M. Stern of Robert A.M. Stern Architects in New York, NY. "Our design for the Jacksonville Main Library continues the city's rich tradition of civic buildings that speak in a version of the Classical language adapted to the particulars of local climate and culture."

Stern notes that the firm received this commission as the result of a competition. "One of the entries was an extremely Modernist design and others were somewhere in between," he says. "Clearly the city responded to our approach. I think they felt that adding a Classical building to the center of the city would reflect on the stability of the expression of the public realm and also contrast to the commercial office buildings that surround the site."



Designed by Robert A.M. Stern Architects and completed in November 2005, the new main library in Jacksonville, FL, shares the block frontage with the existing Museum of Modern Art. Metal columns on the entry façade and around the corner on the Monroe Street façade, along with the giant statue of the owl of Minerva in the corner insert, create a Classical entry. Photo: Peter Aaron/Esto

“This is a monumental building, but it is not imposing,” he explains. “The great Classical spaces that we achieved, the sequence of the stairs, the way the building looks on the outside, the monumental sculpture of the owl, and so forth, all suggest that this is a great monumental building and that it’s also accessible. Unlike older monumental buildings, it doesn’t confront people with a monumental stair. It’s a Classical building. It is not without its own twists, given that the site created interesting challenges.”

To work with the long rectangular site of the city block, Stern divided the mass into seven sections, the eighth being the existing Museum of Modern Art – the only other structure within the block. The courtyard that was carved out of the building was one of these sections. Each area was then designed to reflect the interior uses as well as to create a single monumental structure.

The \$57-million, 297,000-sq.ft. building fills most of a city block in downtown Jacksonville, wrapping around two sides of the Museum of Modern Art. The

four-story library fronts on Laura Street, next to the museum and facing Hemming Plaza. The architects emphasized the entry facade with metal triple-height porches topped with an eyebrow clerestory window. The generously proportioned main entrance leads past a popular library and café to the circulation desk in the entry hall and a monumental staircase.

This central stair acts as an organizing element, traveling up through the building to lead to the various departments. It culminates at the 100-ft. square Grand Reading Room on the fourth floor. Here, the 46-ft.-high handkerchief-vaulted ceiling reveals the clerestory windows that bathe the room in natural sunlight.

A second entrance on the Main Street façade leads to the Conference Center to allow these facilities to be used independently. This area includes a theater with seating for 398 people as well as other smaller conference rooms. The building wraps around a courtyard on the second floor. A fountain, pergolas and landscaping create additional seating and a respite from the city. The third and fourth floors house additional collections and reading rooms.

Stern notes that sustainability is an important issue for all architects, adding that traditional architecture often serves it better. “Traditional architecture often addresses sustainability issues better than so-called non-traditional architecture, in part because we often have less glass, thicker walls and many other formal elements that help reduce the use of energy,” he states. “Big buildings like libraries, no matter the style, have to be powered by machinery and have to have climate control. Every architect has to work very hard to make sure that his or her building is not an energy hog.”

On the topic of Classicism versus Modernist for libraries, Stern says that “a Classical library provides one or more great living rooms built around the theme of learning as opposed to Modernist libraries that tend to be universal or neutral in their inside space. For example, the new library in Seattle is a spectacular shape, but as far as I am concerned, I couldn’t decide if it was a library or a bus terminal. There is no place to sit down, to dream. It’s just a big place for movement.

“Our building has beautiful movement sequences and grand stairs. You can move around without asking your way, and then you get to rooms like the Grand Reading Room on the top floor or the Special Collections Reading Room or the courtyard where you can sit down and enjoy the calmness that architecture can deliver. Many people today think architecture should reflect the chaos of the world. I am one who thinks it should be a counterpoint to the chaos of the world. You can’t escape chaos, but you don’t have to have chaos morning, noon and night.”



Classical details throughout the library, such as these walnut columns at the entrance to the Grand Reading Room on the fourth floor, emphasize important spaces in the building. Photo: Peter Aaron/Esto