



## The Glass Library

In tandem with the protracted debate over the ramifications of the digital information technologies for the library, there has been a surprising surge in the construction of new libraries over the course of the past twenty-five years. The overarching intent behind these new libraries has been to address the specific demands and challenges of the digital age. However, the responses have not been merely programmatic and functional, or for that matter technological in nature. In these regards, old and new libraries alike have responded and adapted in like manner. Yet, in mark contrast to the punctured masonry frame of traditional libraries, what is most visibly different about the majority of the new libraries is their appearance as articulated volumes clad often entirely in glass. This has led at least some observers to conclude that “regardless of who designed these libraries,” they “share one characteristic: relatively few of these schemes look like libraries” (Mattern 2007, 82). Whereas the traditional punctured masonry frame of the library served to perceptually protect and to various degrees discreetly conceal the library’s interior from the passersby, the new glass-clad library is intended, in principle, to expose and showcase its interior. Library Architects, we are told, “have adopted transparency as a means of allowing passersby to see for themselves what a library has to offer (Van Slyck 2000, 151).

Why for the last two and half decades “permeability and transparency” of the library’s exterior envelop (Dunlap 2002), “revealing the bustle of multi-levels of activity through a glass curtain wall” (McGuigan 2015) has been considered a requisite virtue, and not so in the many preceding decades, is the focus of this paper. Given that there is no overt programmatic, functional, or technological correlation between the incorporation of digital information technologies and the aesthetic desirability of the display-case (vitrine) approach to the outer envelop of the library, this essay examines the overlap as an ideational rather than a technological response to the unique conceptual challenges of digital information technologies. It traces the correlation back to the 1989 design competition for Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) billed as the forerunner of “an entirely new type” of library, incorporating cutting edge technologies to make every form of knowledge accessible to researchers in 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond (Perrault, Jacques and Lauriot 1995, 8). Specifically, the paper offers a close analysis of Perrault’s winning entry and Koolhaas’ entry, as it would develop in time into the Seattle Central Library (SCL). Perrault’s is analyzed for its alleged failings as a library for the “electronic present”, and Koolhaas’ for its purported successes.

The paper points out that the measure of success and/or failure used by various critics for these and similar projects has not been provisions for the effective deployment of the digital media in the library. Rather the measure has been the degree to which the outer enveloping form of the library is correlated with and reveals the library’s inner disposition. The culprit for the deployment of this specific measure is - the paper points out - the virtual text that brings to surface certain culturally unsettling aspects of writing that the analogue age had carefully kept under wraps within the cover of the book, inside the confines of the library. Unlike the analogue text, the virtual text offers no correlation between its temporal appearance (the screen) and its indiscernible spatial presence (the digital media). What it presents is a spatial and temporal dislocation and dispersion of appearance and substance that the library for the “electronic present” is critically asked to recompense as the measure of its aesthetic success. The less the “electronic text” is like the analogue text, the more the “library for the electronic present” is wished to offer, by way of substitution and supplementation, what the “electronic text” does not: a “perceptible correlation between the boundaries of the texts” and “the physical properties of the artifact” (Nunberg 1993), i.e., between appearance and substance, or else outer-form and inner-content.