

# Montgomery Branch Library

A Civic Building Proposal for Montgomery, Alabama

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the Bachelor of Architecture Degree, Auburn University.



I would like to thank the Auburn University School of Architecture administration and faculty whose guidance and critical insight helped shape my architectural education. I would also like to express my deep gratitude to my family for their constant love, support, and encouragement, which has enabled my every success.



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## THE NATURE OF CIVIC SPACE

The buildings that serve our collective needs as citizens of cities, states, and nations often reflect the principles and power of the government who commissioned their construction. They are designed to embody dignity and authority, but often fall short of their larger purpose: serving citizens. Too often, our civic buildings are overly fixated on appearing to be massive, strong, and unmovable. While these qualities are not bad in and of themselves, they are used in a way that fails to connect with the people they are meant to serve. Instead, our civic buildings should seek to engage the public, and reflect the passion, fluidity, and lifestyle of the citizens they serve<sup>1</sup>.

In our society, our government buildings have been designed to convey a sense of strength, emphasizing abstract

elements of government itself. There is a certain sense of comfort and stability in these massive, monolithic buildings. However, they often convey the opposite of their intended function. By placing emphasis on the building form, we emphasize the importance of the building and not its function. Instead of constructing buildings for public use whose domineering forms emphasize the unimportance of the people they serve, public buildings should engage the public and provide a sense of comfort and intimacy, bringing people together in a common, accessible space<sup>2</sup>.

Creating a sense of intimacy and comfort can be a difficult task in a public building, especially in an urban setting. However, this dichotomy of private perceptions and feelings in public spaces is not rare in typical, everyday circumstances.

<sup>1</sup> Fentress, Curtis W., and Robert Campbell. *Civic Builders*. Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2002. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Fentress, 11.

It is interesting to observe how blurred the line has become between public and private. For example, many people hold private conversations on mobile phones while walking down the street or commuting to work on the subway. Dining, usually considered a private occasion, commonly takes place at tables on the sidewalk, exposed to the public<sup>3</sup>. These examples show the delicate balance of public and private actions and how the two interact. This interaction is essential in public buildings in order for them to be inviting and non-threatening spaces for public inhabitation and use.

Terms that relate to buildings such as program and form are generic, nondescript terms that can describe a number of buildings in various locations. The feeling of a building, however, should be unique

and relative to that building's surroundings<sup>4</sup>. A building's feeling is often tied to its community, or context. While context most commonly refers to physical surroundings in relation to design, it can also apply to a culture or community's values and the nature of what occurs inside a building<sup>5</sup>. These abstract ideas are as important contextually to a building's design as adjacent buildings and architectural styles. In public buildings, design should be contextually accurate in all aspects in order to create spaces that can serve all people.

### **CHOOSING A THESIS PROJECT**

In August 2009, thesis students in Auburn University's School of Architecture learned that the site for all thesis proposals would be in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. We took several trips to the area for

<sup>3</sup> Erlhoff, Michael, *Designing Public: Perspektiven Für Die Öffentlichkeit*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Fentress, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Fentress, 10



context studies, site selection and analysis, documentation, and various assignments. As I gathered information about the area, it became apparent to me that a very diverse group of people occupy the downtown area everyday. I realized that there are two distinct, very different groups of individuals living in downtown Montgomery. On one end of the spectrum, there are the people who rent or own loft apartments or condominiums downtown, many of which have been recently renovated. On the other end, there are multiple low-income neighborhoods and housing projects, all in close proximity to the higher-end residences. In addition to the residential population downtown, there is a very large number of professionals who commute to work downtown during the work week. These three, very diverse groups of people seem to have little in common

with one another, including the areas they frequent downtown.

Downtown Montgomery is somewhat fragmented, without a strong sense of place or overall unifying element. It was with this observation in mind that I decided to explore ways in which I could help bridge the gap between people of different income levels and vocations by focusing on ways to bring people together downtown.

I began to consider building types that could help solve this disconnect and decided to explore and develop a building with a civic function that could serve the various needs of the surrounding community. I ultimately decided that a library could serve a very diverse group of individuals and began developing a proposal for a public branch library in downtown Montgomery.



# **CONTEXT AND MATERIAL STUDIES**

North Court Street - Montgomery, AL







In August 2009, thesis students in Professor Nakhjavan's studio were asked to conduct a precedent analysis and contextual study of any building located in downtown Montgomery. The assignment was simple: choose a building downtown that is beautiful, document the building, and draw the building.

The building I chose is located on North Court Street between Madison Avenue and Jefferson Street, near Montgomery's Riverwalk Stadium and the banks of the Alabama River. Although the building appears dilapidated, I was drawn to its detailed brick facade and character. I chose to draw a detailed rendering of the building's entrance on the southern edge of the facade.







This image is a detailed rendering of the building's existing conditions. The building is shown with the original windows, many of which have been boarded-up with plywood; the building's main entrance, consisting of a door positioned at an angle away from the sidewalk and street; and instances of vandalism, including graffiti on the door. The original drawing is graphite on Arches watercolor paper.

This image is a rendering of a proposed building to function as a replacement for the original building on Court Street. New features include angled windows designed to maximize interior space and exterior views as well as a covered ground floor entrance which angles away from the street, functioning as a buffer between the sidewalk and the building's main entrance. Brick details echo lines of the original building and serve as a study in materiality, adding depth and complexity to the facade. The building's general proportions were maintained from the original building to the new proposal to serve as a reference to the old building and the surrounding city grid. The original drawing is graphite on Arches watercolor paper.



## **BUILDING TYPE CASE STUDIES**

Small Community Libraries



## **GENTRY PUBLIC LIBRARY**

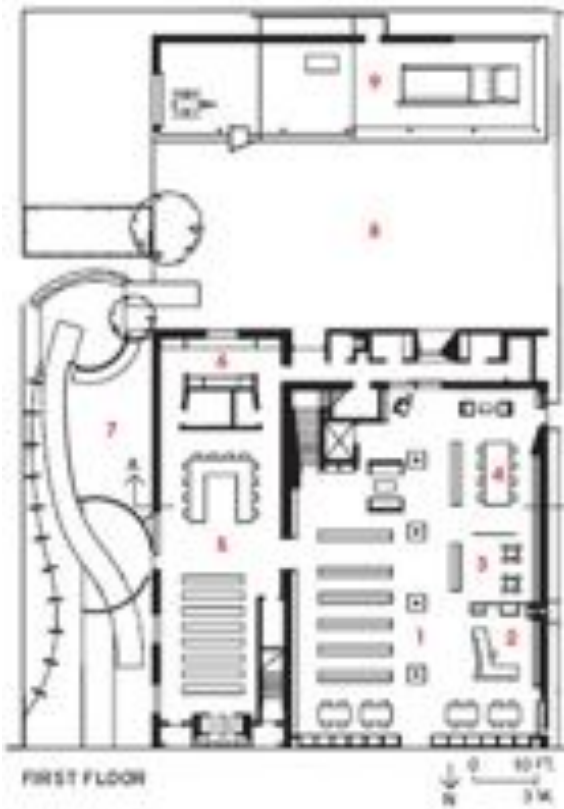
Gentry, Arkansas

The Gentry Public Library in the small town of Gentry, Arkansas, has become the cornerstone for the revitalization of a faded downtown. Completed in 2007 by Marlon Blackwell Architects, the two-story building houses a small library in a century-old building that was formerly a hardware store. The library consists of a reading room, community room, and a history and genealogy center. Vacant lots adjacent to the library provide the possibility of extending the building's program outside to provide opportunities for additional community activities.

The building's program elements reflect the city's desire for the building to serve as a community center; a place useful to citizens in multiple ways. By including interactive program elements like meeting rooms and interpretive centers, the library can serve multiple community needs. The building naturally draws people to downtown Gentry and has begun the process of revitalizing the area.







1. Library
2. Book Checkout
3. Children's Area
4. Computer Area
5. Community Center
6. Kitchen
7. Community Park
8. Community Plaza
9. Fire Truck Exhibit
10. Librarian's Office
11. Historic Lift
12. Display Area
13. Library Archives



## **HONAN-ALLSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY**

### BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

The Honan-Allston Public Branch Library in Boston, Massachusetts, is a one-story, 20,000 square foot library built by the city of Boston and designed by Macado and Silveti Associates. The library serves the Allston area near Boston, and was completed in 2001.

The library's design features standard library services and reading areas flanked by small gardens. The building is organized around a three-bar scheme, with a prominent reading room as well as library stacks and services occupying the front of the library. The middle area consists of reading rooms and utilizes large amounts of glazing to create a feeling of transparency and to connect with exterior gardens. The rear zone of the building consists of meeting and program spaces, and can be accessed after hours for community use.

The building's exterior utilizes a unique palette of materials including slate panels and shingles as well as wood cladding, metal, and glass. Interior finishes continue the warm material scheme with wood and cork flooring.

The Honan-Allston Library's location along a prominent neighborhood street and its community oriented building program help the library serve its community by providing a pleasant and inviting civic space.









# **SITE ANALYSIS**

Montgomery, Alabama

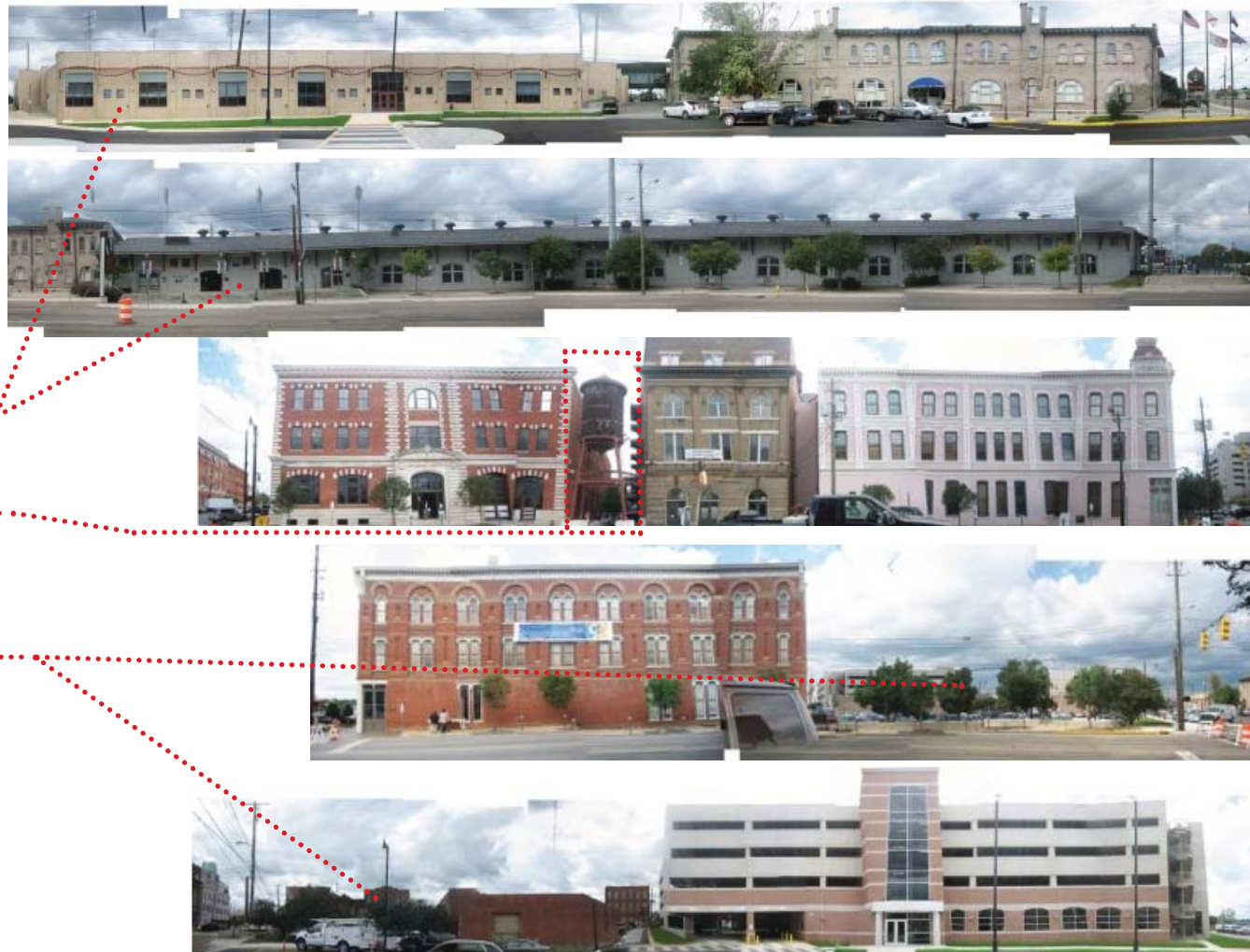




Professor Nakhjavan's studio was divided into groups of four or five students, with each group in charge of selecting a site for their projects. The selected sites were required to be in close proximity to one another in order to facilitate collaboration among projects from the same group.

When selecting our site, my group was naturally drawn to the riverfront. This area has been the focus of revitalization efforts in downtown Montgomery for several years. Riverwalk Stadium, home to a minor league baseball team, is a recent addition to this area. The redevelopment of an area known as "The Alley" has brought restaurants and shops to the riverfront area as well as residential loft apartments. As we studied and documented this area, it became apparent that a large parking lot on the corner of Coosa and Tallapoosa Streets would be an ideal site for our thesis proposals.

We decided to subdivide the vacant lot into four smaller parcels with one corner lot, one lot facing Tallapoosa Street and two lots facing Coosa Street. I decided to work with the corner lot, which was the largest of the four lots and measured 100 ft x 100 ft.

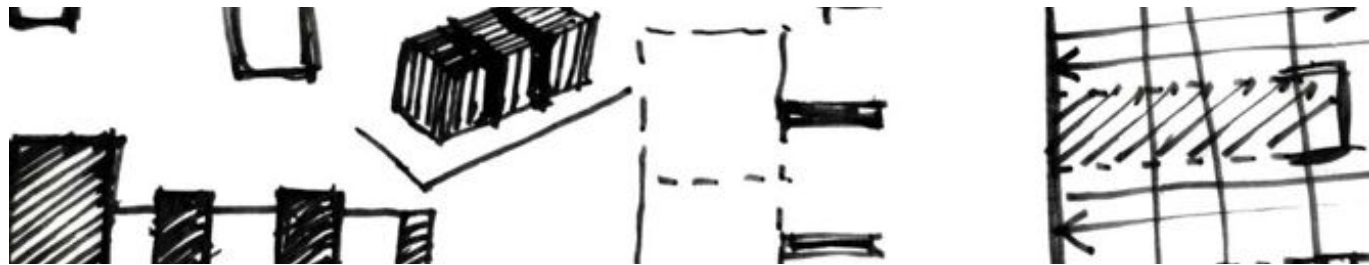






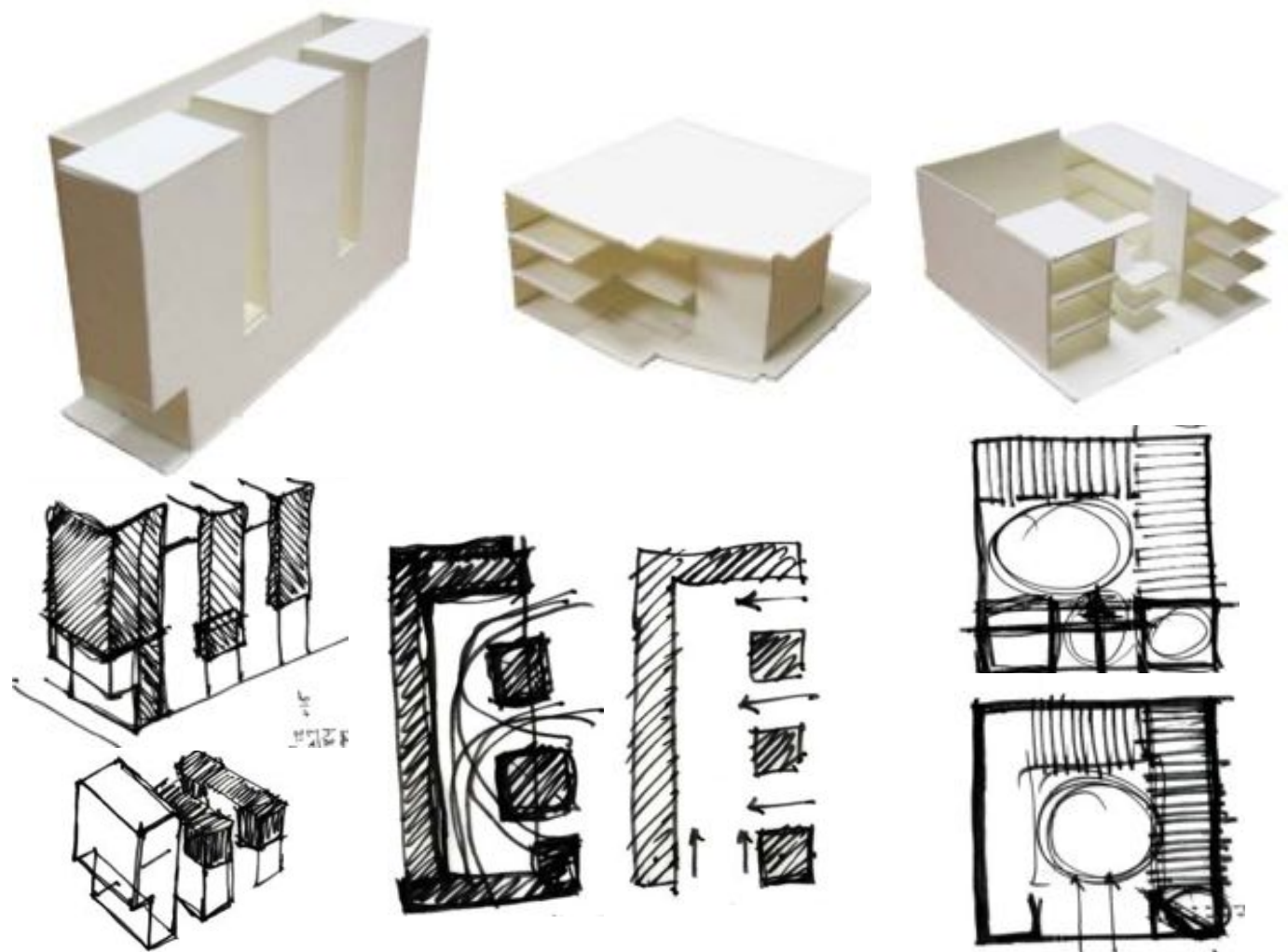
# **SCHEMATIC DESIGN**

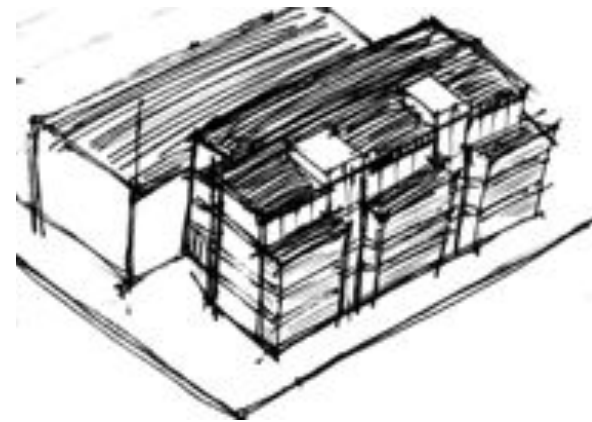
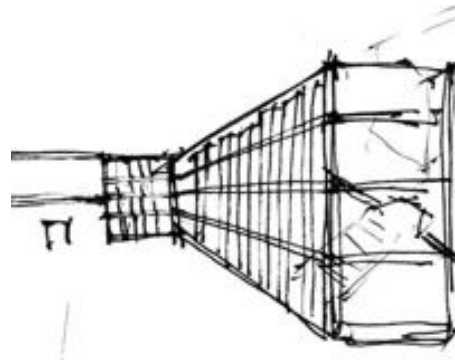
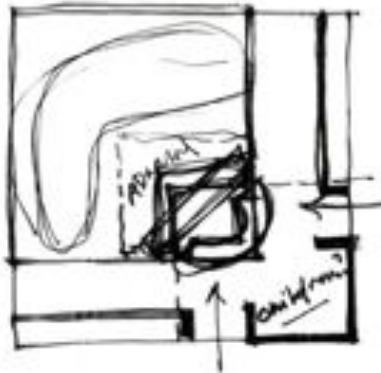
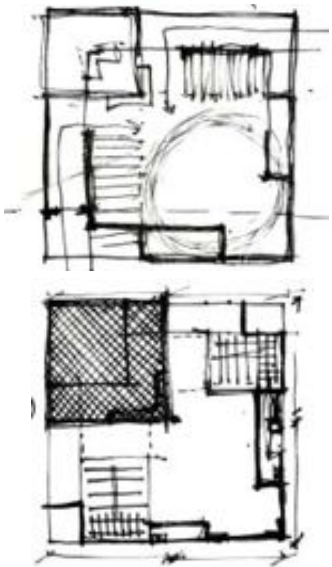
Study Models + Process Sketches



These various study models and schematic concepts track the testing and development of possible spatial arrangements and schemes. Each schematic concept is based on the assumption that the basic library plan should consist of two elements: 1) Library stacks (bookshelves), and 2) a space for reading and studying. By studying schemes through sketches and massing models, I was able to analyze spatial conditions and arrangements while exploring multiple concepts in succession. Each model and sketch is in order of development and reflects ideas from the previous explorations.

In addition to exploring the building spatially, these studies allowed me to address the public street and sidewalk. In each scheme, I attempted to create forms that would engage the public.





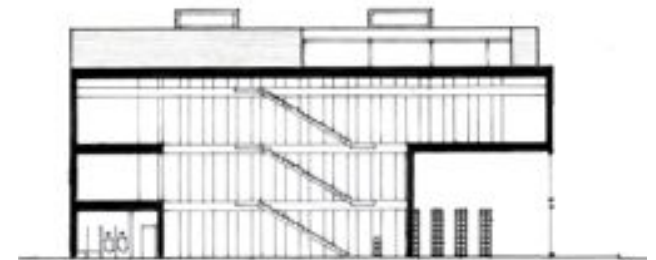
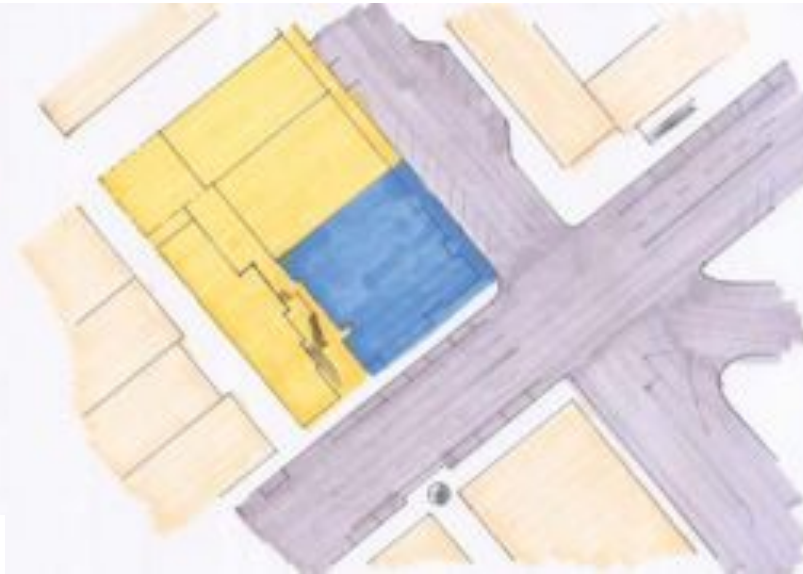


# MID-SEMESTER PROPOSAL

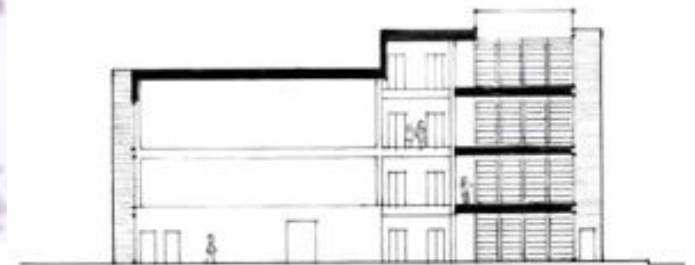
Fall 2009



The library proposal at mid-term consisted of a four-story scheme with stacks occupying the street corner. The reading room was located off of the street and looked out onto a pedestrian alleyway created between my building and the adjacent building proposal. A used bookstore occupied the entrance to the alleyway and served as a buffer between the street and the main reading room.



Longitudinal Section



Transverse Section



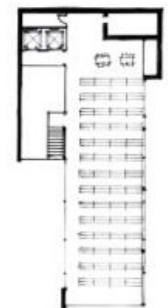
Ground Floor Plan



2nd Level Floor Plan

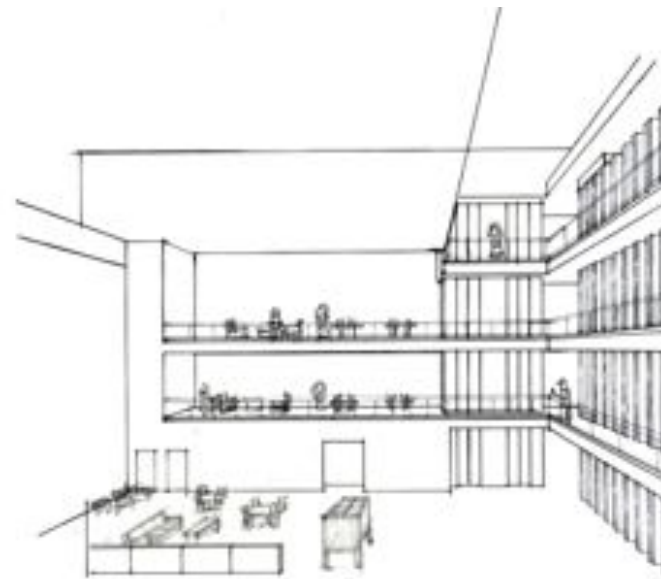


3rd Level Floor Plan



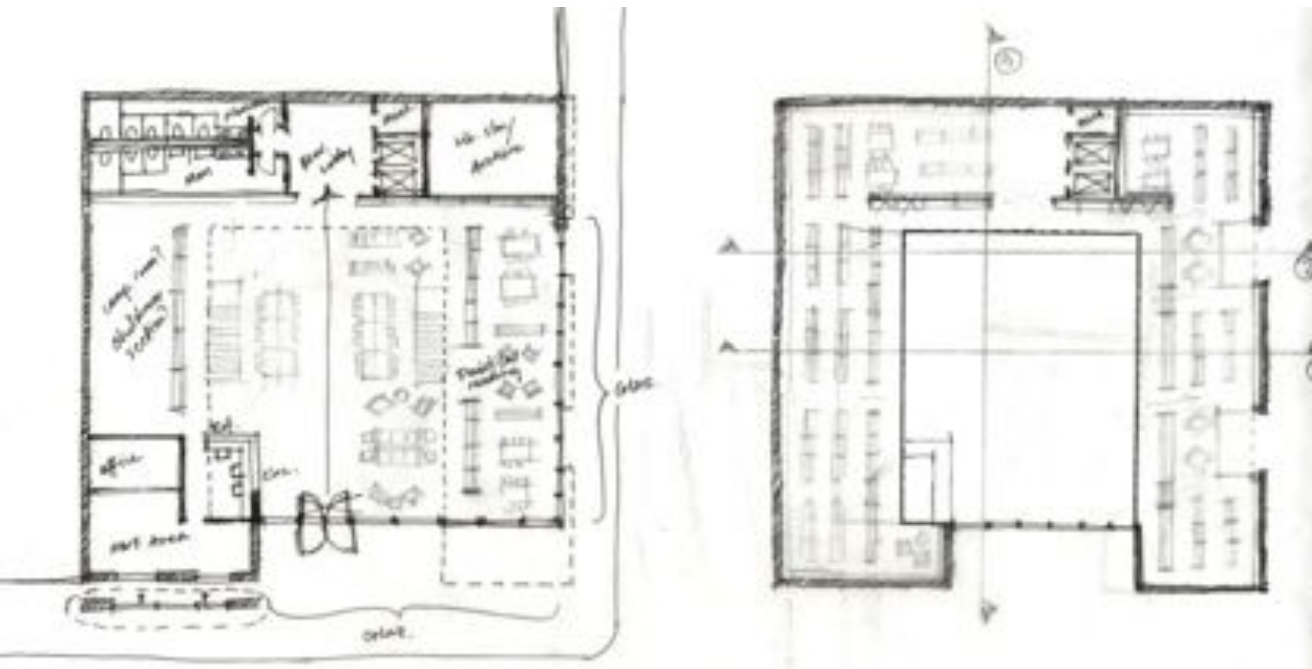
4th Level Floor Plan





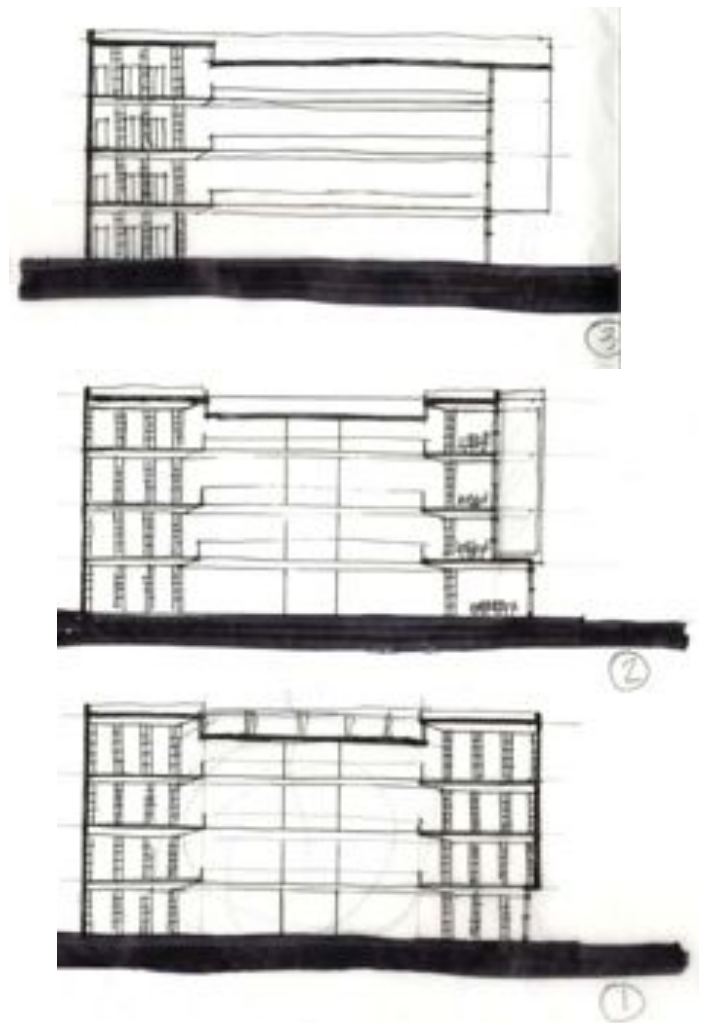
## FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Spring 2010

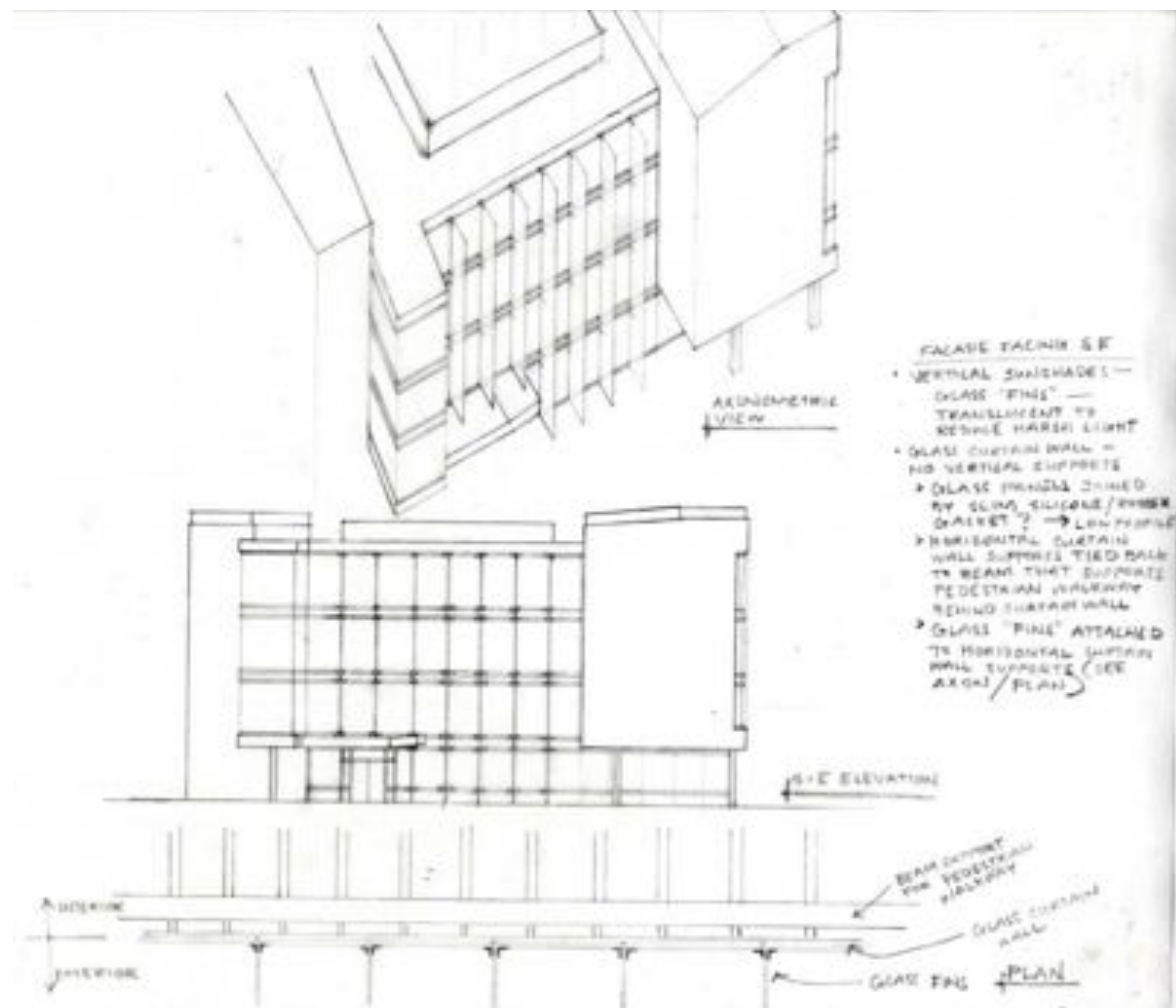
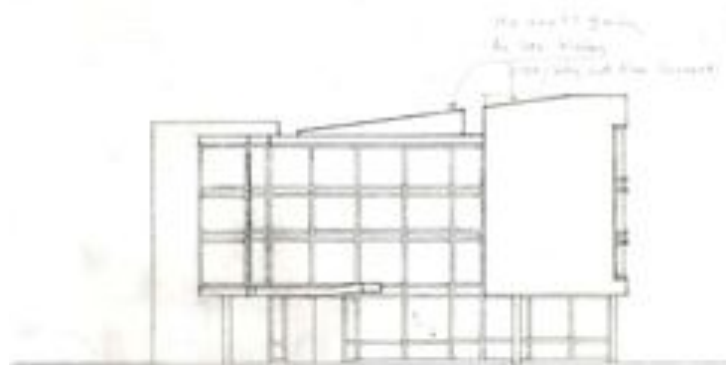


Following mid-semester reviews, I refined and simplified my floor plans and worked to further develop sections and elevations. The main reading room shifted forward and now occupies a prominent space at the center of the library. Stacks at the building's

corner remain and serve as an anchor for the library. All core activities were moved to the rear wall of the building in order to allow for maximum, uninterrupted space in the reading room and stacks.







## PROGRAM ANALYSIS

In order to design a public library, I decided to develop a building program based on a study and analysis of the Auburn Public Library in Auburn, Alabama. Library Director Margie Huffman and Assistant Director Tyler Whitten graciously agreed to meet with me in December 2009 to discuss the needs of a typical library. After I presented my thesis idea and progress, they gave me feedback on my design and took me on a tour of the Auburn Public Library, explaining all program elements and library services. I have included notes I compiled from my visit and our discussions:

- Auburn Public Library
  - » Originally 24,065 SF, addition recently completed +10,000 SF. 34,065 SF total.
  - » Addition was needed b/c space was too cramped, too noisy
- » Successful children's programs - program space requires extra SF
- » Computer lab/access is one of most used services - needs own space for monitoring and containing noise
- » Employee space - need offices and work area; lots of storage space; separate bathrooms; break area.
- » 25 total staff
- Thesis feedback/suggestions:
  - » First, define clientele and services
  - » Is library @ that location practical? Should be in heavily traveled business district or residential area.
  - » Study demographics of area
  - » How many staff employed?
  - » Limited by small lot footprint (only 10,000 SF footprint)
  - » In facility this small, can't afford employee offices; just main work area

and break room

- » Library should include electronic services
- » Don't include used bookstore - too difficult to staff b/c never enough volunteers
- » Everyone should come by main desk/main entrance
- » Electrical Room
- » Consider walk-by traffic

With this and other feedback in mind, I decided to refine the building program and adjust the size and function of several spaces. The final building program contains the following elements:

- Large, central reading area (full height)
- Smaller reading/study nooks
- Library stacks located around exterior of building

- Circulation Desk located at front of building
- Employee work area/ library director office
- Employee break room and rest room
- Employee access to private service stair
- Two storage rooms on first and fourth floors
- Computer lab
- Conference/meeting room
- Public rest rooms on each floor
- Mechanical/fan room on each floor



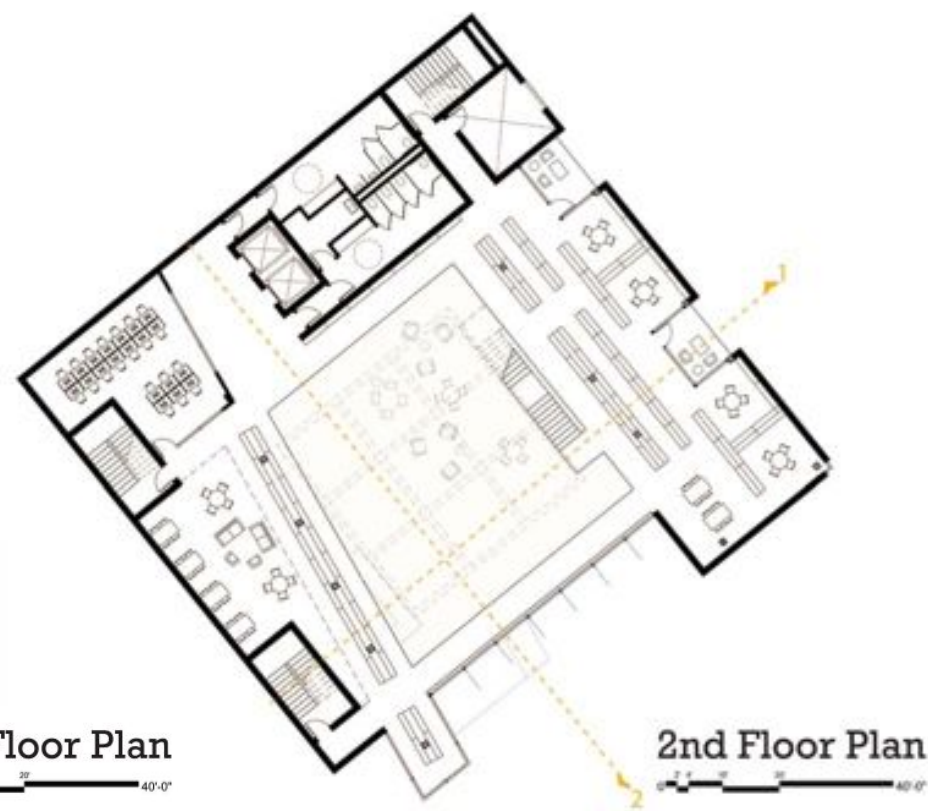
# **FINAL THESIS PROPOSAL**

April 2010

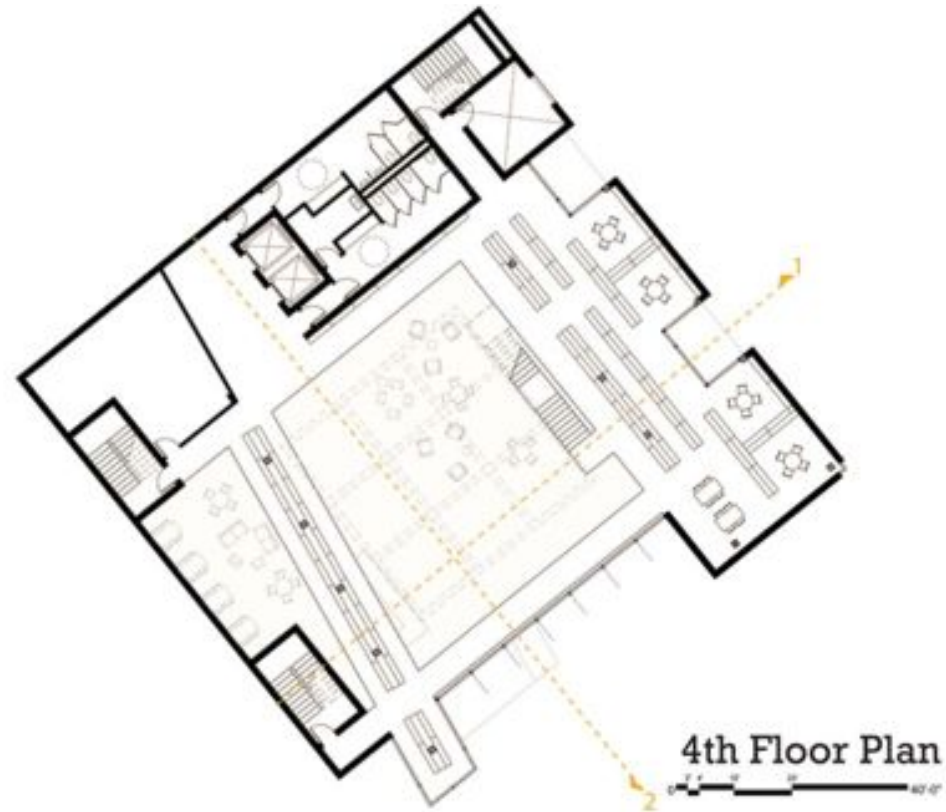




N 1st Floor Plan  
0 20 40'-0"



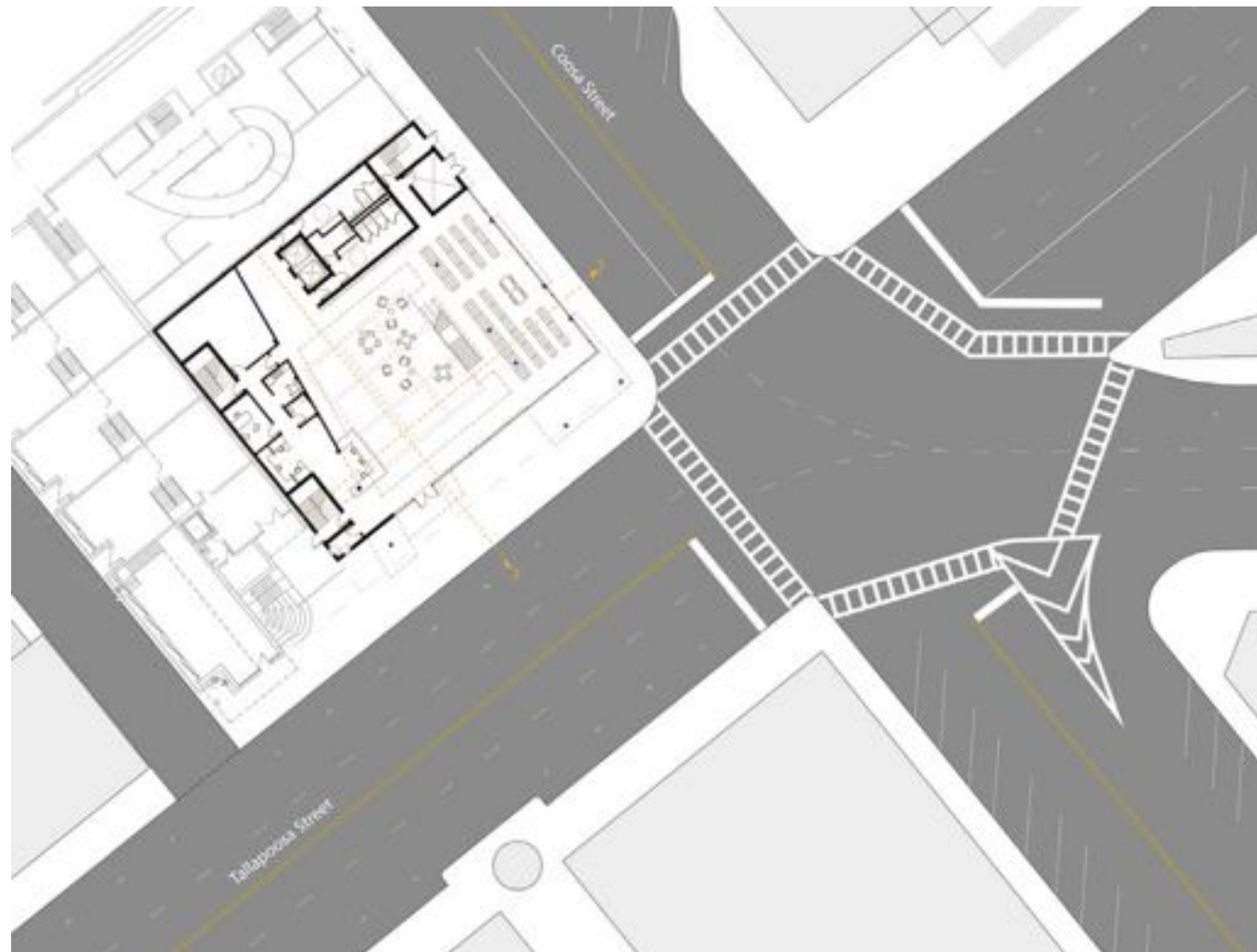
2nd Floor Plan  
0 20 40'-0"



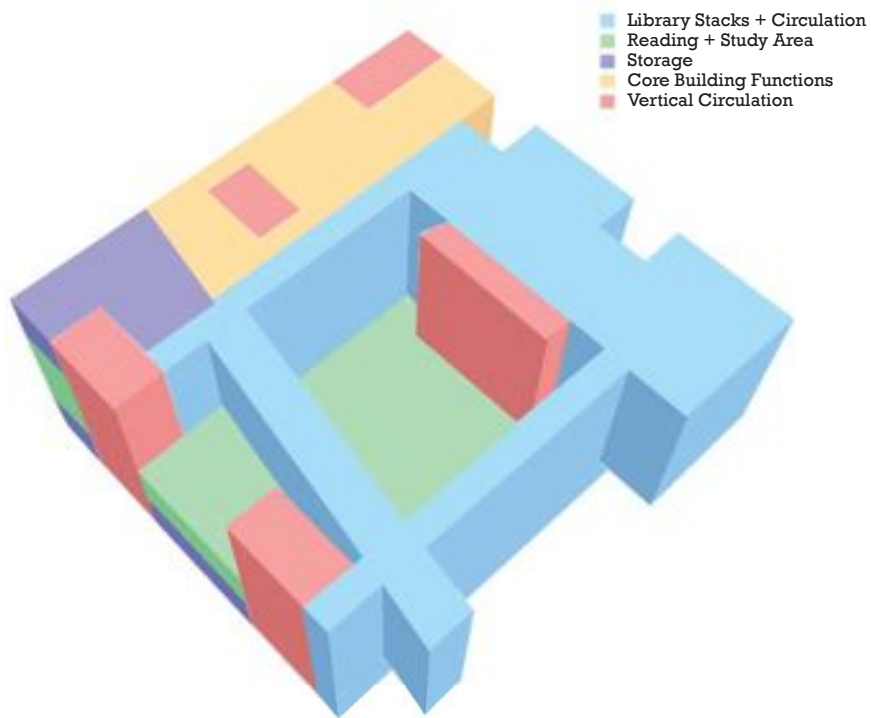


The final proposal for a branch library in downtown Montgomery brings together many considerations and lessons learned through the design process. The design reflects a strong desire to connect with the public and contains the following elements:

- **Ground Floor** - At ground level, the library is very transparent in order to invite the public inside. The corner of the building is glass storefront, with stacks and reading areas visible from the sidewalk. The building footprint is smaller than the lot size, with overhangs extending above the sidewalk in two instances to increase usable space in upper levels. This arrangement provides for a larger sidewalk at ground level, which is consistent with the condition in front of Riverwalk Stadium across the street. It also reflects the effects of downtown revitalization efforts and the anticipation of increased pedestrian traffic in the area.



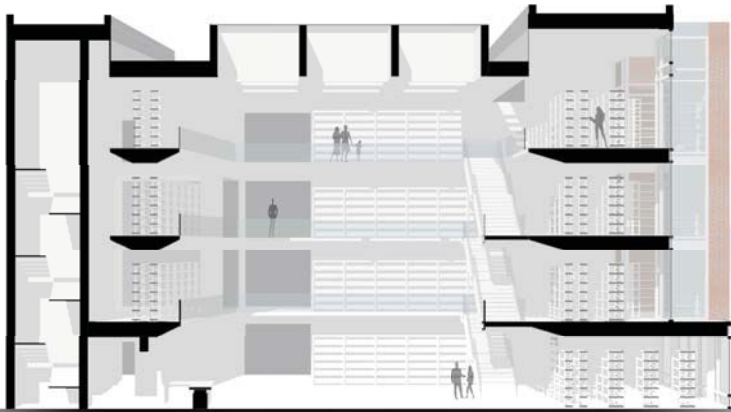




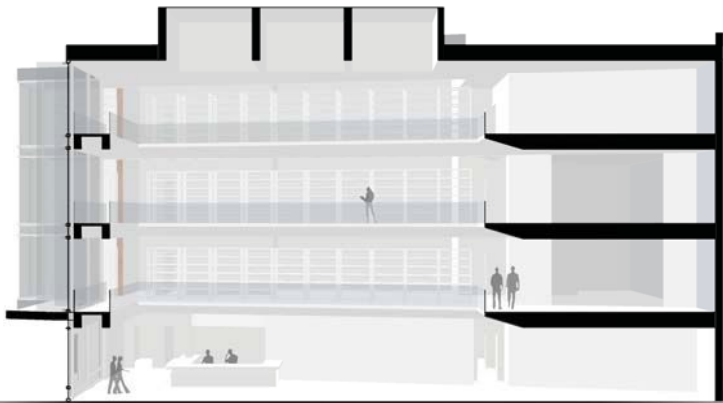
- **Reading Room** - The large, central reading room is located on the ground floor and consists of a casual arrangement of tables and seating to encourage a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere that is unthreatening to visitors. Patrons may browse the upper levels by taking an elevator or by climbing the ceremonial stair centered on the edge of the reading room.
- **Circulation Desk** - The circulation desk is located just inside the library's front door and is easily accessed by staff members, whose offices and workspace is adjacent to the desk.
- **Stacks** - Library stacks occupy space around the exterior of the building, most prominently on the corner of the building. The building's

two exterior overhangs both house books: the main corner overhang and the overhang that is angled as a reference to the alley across the street. A pedestrian bridge inside the front facade connects the "ring" of stacks and allows for efficient circulation and patron safety.

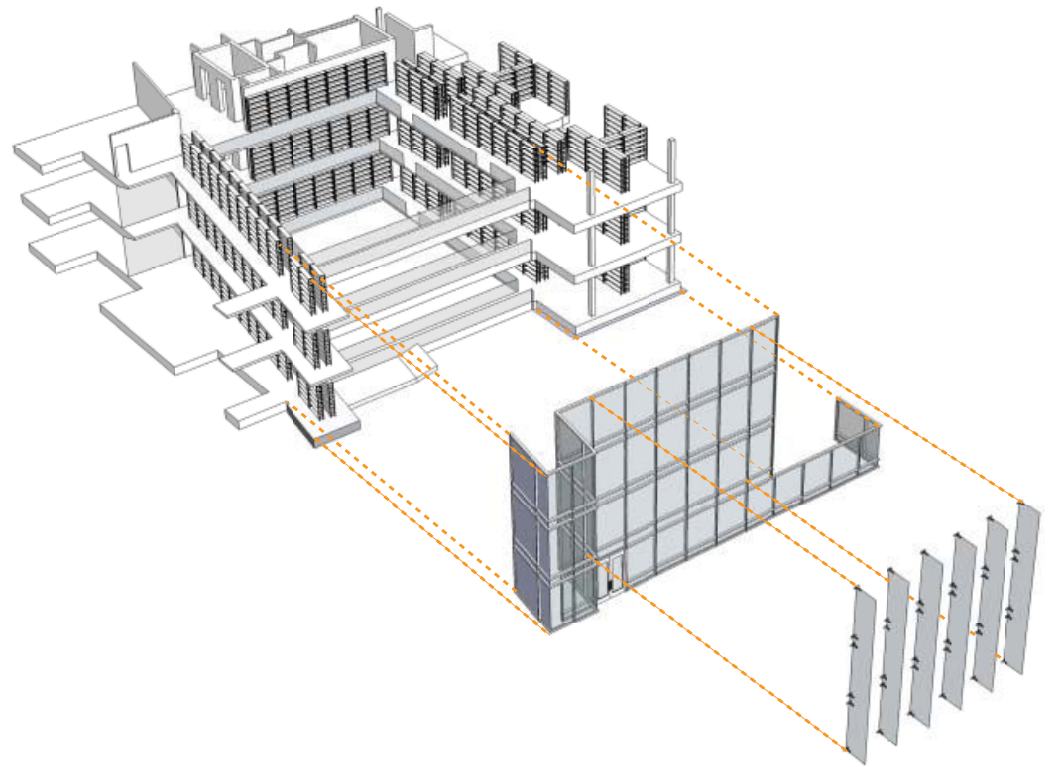
- **Core** - The building's core is located along its back wall to provide for maximum clear space in the reading room and stacks. The core consists of rest rooms, elevators, fan rooms, and vertical circulation on every floor as well as storage on the first and fourth floors, a computer lab on the second floor, and a meeting room on the third floor.



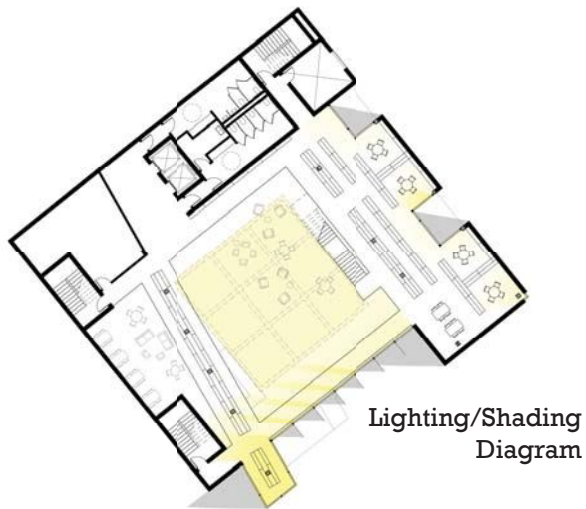
Section 1



Section 2



Exploded Axonometric Diagram



The sections on page 40 show building floor plates and stack location as well as skylights that bring light into the main reading area. Lighting considerations are represented in the lighting diagram above, with the main reading room receiving abundant natural light because of the building's glass facade and central skylight. The exploded axonometric drawing on page 40 explains the facade assembly, complete with vertical shading components.

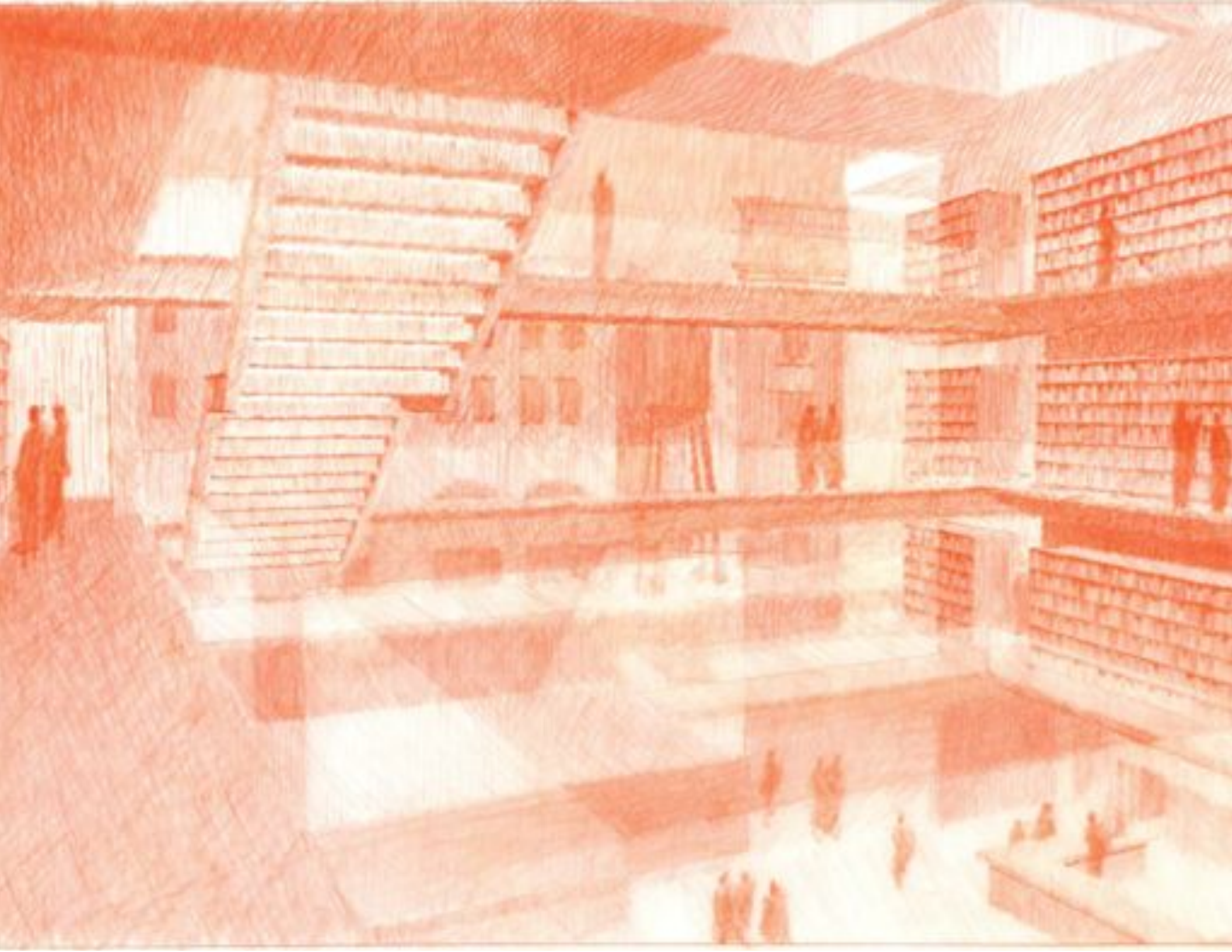




The exterior perspective to the left is a view of the library at street level. The corner condition consists of glazing at ground level with brick cladding the upper levels. The sidewalk at ground level is wide to accommodate pedestrians while building overhangs seek to create a sense of engagement and interaction with what is happening on the street.

The rendering to the right is an interior perspective drawing completed during an intensive week-long workshop with visiting professor Kelly Wilson, of the Harvard Graduate School of Design. This perspective shows the view from the library stacks through the front facade to the alley across the street (Prismacolor on mylar).





## CONCLUSION

Over the last year, my study of civic building types and functions has increased my understanding of the relationship between people and the buildings we use. The design of all buildings, no matter the program or function, should weigh heavily towards connecting to the individuals who will occupy the space. In my thesis proposal, I sought not only to design a functioning library, but also to design a library whose form and organization would foster a connection and sense of intimacy with its patrons.

While my site selection in downtown Montgomery helped shape my design physically, it was also one of the factors that led me to propose a thesis project with a civic building program. Just as with any site, the site I chose is unique, posing challenges and presenting opportunities that are evident in my project. Contextually, I tried to create a building whose exterior would not dominate

the street corner but whose presence was interesting, intriguing, and inviting.

In the end, I believe this project was more about addressing public needs than about designing a perfectly functioning library. By choosing a library as my building function, I was able to study and better understand the relationship between public and private through the different levels of intimacy and privacy experienced in a library. Focusing on these relationships rather than strictly following programmatic requirements, I concentrated on designing experiential elements of the space first, then adapting the programmatic elements to exhibit those qualities. After a year of hard work, I believe I have created a pleasant, inviting space whose function is not hidden by its form. More importantly, I believe I have created a beautiful space in which to enjoy a good book.