



The new, 12,500-square-foot library replaces a 5,000-square-foot facility built 40 years ago. The main entrance (this page and opposite) is located in the middle of the long elevation.

Hodgetts + Fung reworks L.A. Modernist vocabulary resulting in a sleek and linear design for the SYLMAR LIBRARY



By Suzanne Stephens

For most of the 20th century, the icons of Modern design were best represented by the single-family house, notably in Los Angeles. To be sure, schools and colleges, museums and other cultural facilities also became cynosures of new architectural movements. But rarely would you look to public libraries as a building type that embodied visionary promises. Now, the Los Angeles Public Library system has opened up just such a possibility, as demonstrated by a new branch library in Sylmar, about 30 miles from downtown.

Designed by Hodgetts + Fung, the 12,500-square-foot structure is not just a lone example. It is part of an ambitious program involving the design of 32 branch libraries for Los Angeles, 28 of which replace smaller facilities, and four of which are brand new. Initiated in 1998 with a bond issue for \$178 million, the expansion plan has resulted in the opening of 17 branches in the past year, with 14 to open in the next. Hodgetts + Fung already has another branch currently in construction in South Central Los Angeles.

None of the libraries looks particularly like the others, notes Fontaine Holmes, the director of library facilities. The 16 architects selected by an RFQ process were given only standard programs, not design directives, so that “the community process could make a difference in the design,” she adds. Since the tastes of some communities in the library system can be architecturally unadventurous, veering all the way from Spanish Colonial to Mission style, Hodgetts + Fung was relieved to find an open attitude in Sylmar. Located in “The Valley” (San Fernando), with a burgeoning population of about 70,000—70 percent of which is Hispanic/Latino, with a median income of \$53,860—Sylmar’s middle-class citizenry involved in the library’s planning process is characterized

by a can-do attitude fused with upwardly mobile aspirations. Libraries represent the educational future, not a gentrified past.

Although Sylmar had outgrown the 40-year-old, 5,000-square-foot building formerly on the site, its budget of \$3.5 million was modest. But Hodgetts + Fung, long known for its interest in off-the-shelf materials and lightweight technologies, could easily adapt. While the firm’s formal vocabulary harks back more to the 1960s rectilinear volumes and zigzag rooflines of Don Wexler (page 158) than to the sinuous, shimmering curves of Frank Gehry (page 134), a fascination with steel or metal technology unites all three architects. Indeed, this inclination to use industrial materials and techniques in all sorts of building types has given Los Angeles’s architecture of the last half-century its distinctive imprimatur.

In designing the library for the 1-acre corner site, the firm sought to create a light, bright reading room where the view was focused upward toward the San Gabriel Mountains. “We wanted an umbrella,” says Fung, “a central space that was like an outdoor pavilion.” She and Hodgetts thought of the Mexican market with its long, high central volume, and designed a rectilinear steel frame structure that stretches from

Project: Los Angeles Public Library, Sylmar Branch, Sylmar, Calif.

Architect: Hodgetts + Fung—Craig Hodgetts, AIA, Hsin-ming Fung, partners in charge; Ron Calvo, project architect; Greg Stutheit, project manager; Denise Zacky, Birgit Bastiaan, Crister Cantrell,

design team

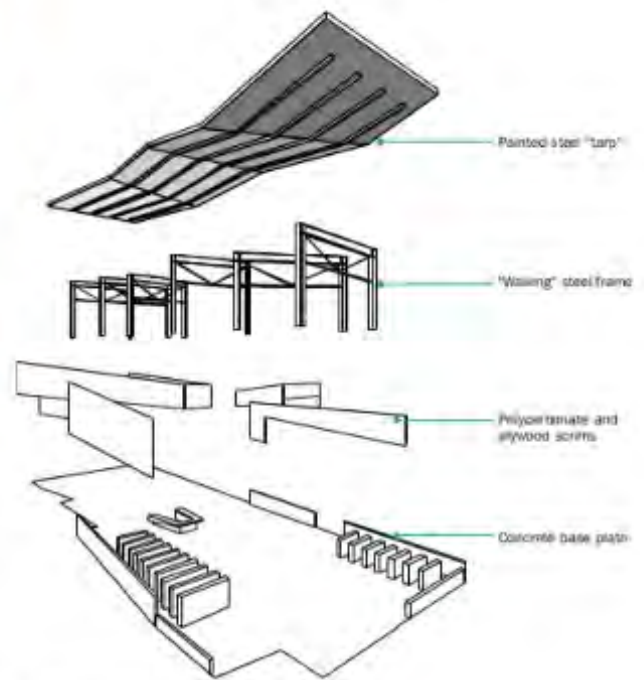
Engineers: Englekirk Partners (structural); The Sullivan Partnership (mechanical); Patrick Byrne & Associates (electrical); Delon Hamton & Associates (civil)

Consultants: Katherine Spitz (landscape); Barbara Strasen (artist)



The reading room is called out on the short end of the building (above) by ample glazing. From the entrance (opposite, top left), visitors proceed into

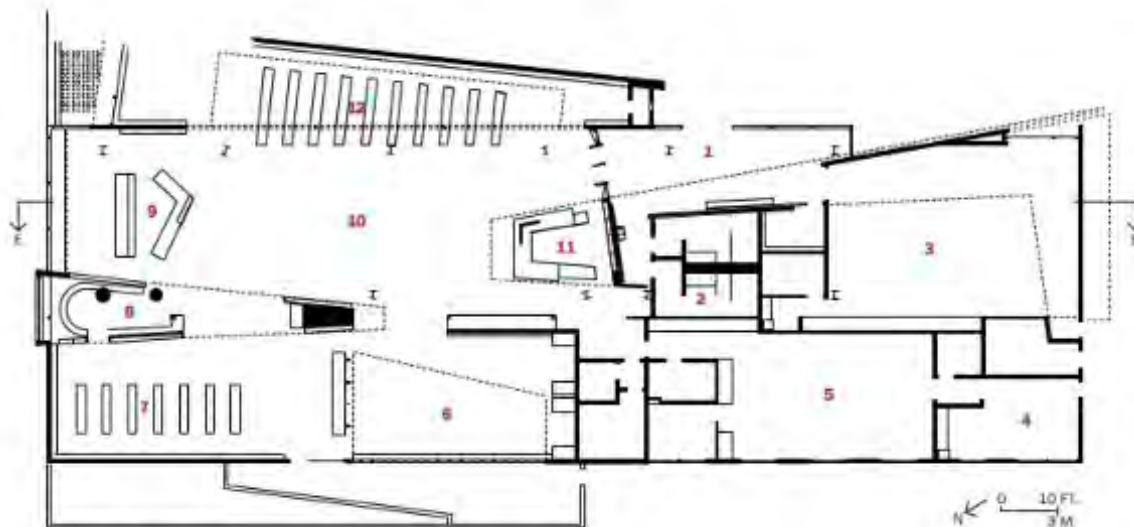
the daylit library (opposite, top right and bottom), where the circulation desk is defined by a plywood base and translucent polycarbonate scrims.



EXPLODED AXONOMETRIC

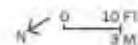


SECTION E-E



FLOOR PLAN

1. Lobby
2. Restrooms
3. Meeting room
4. Staff lounge
5. Workroom
6. Young adult
7. Children
8. Storytelling
9. Reference
10. Main reading
11. Circulation
12. Adult reading





one end of the site facing the main thoroughfare of Glenoaks Boulevard, back along Polk Street, to a rear parking lot for 30 cars.

The architects pulled the library volume back from the building line, but situated it on a concrete plinth that fills out the lot, while following the changes in grade, incorporating plazas, steps, and even an outdoor bench in its overall form. The main entrance is located midblock in the structure to separate the reading area from the community room, and to allow the latter to be entered separately.

To vary the spaces inside, Hodgetts + Fung designed a folded, canopylike roof of steel decking to be supported on six structural bays of beams and columns. The steel framing doesn't march enfilade down the length of the interior, but "walks" in a peculiar syncopation, according to the angles of the roof. "It's pure bossa nova," says Hodgetts. "We didn't want a regimented feel for the interior."

The columns are vertically cantilevered from 12-foot-deep caissons to which the base of each column is bolted, saving on the cost of moment frames with welded connections. "We worked with FormZ on the computer to make sure that the locations of the beams and folds would work and we would not have a warped deck," says Ron Calvo, the project architect. The folded roofline not only mimics the contours of the mountains, but gives the interior framed views of the range through its ample glazing. The plan offers varying degrees of intimacy to reading spaces, including a lowered soffit for the children's storytelling area.

The materials that Hodgetts + Fung's employ in Sylmar deliberately retain the lightweight feeling of the firm's design for Temporary Powell (aka Towell) Library at UCLA [RECORD, March 1993, page 94], with its yellow tent of polyester and vinyl over aluminum ribs. Although Towell was a temporary library facility erected for campus use during the renovation of the permanent library, Sylmar is meant to have a longer life. The image almost defies this notion: Sylmar's roof, for example, is only 8 inches thick. "We wanted a sense of enclosure that would feel like a stretched canvas," says Hodgetts. In order to keep the thickness of the enclosing materials to a minimum, the architects used a 3-inch insulation

that is glued on. And in addition to the crisply detailed aluminum and glass curtain-wall system, a swath of translucent polycarbonate structural sheets acts as the exterior wall surface, then cuts through the building and wraps around the circulation desk as an interior canopy.

In searching for the aluminum siding to clad the exterior, Hodgetts + Fung looked to truck trailers, since their horizontal ribbing is narrower than normal corrugated aluminum. "The smaller-scale texture contrasts with the wider ridges of the translucent, vertically ribbed polycarbonate sheets," explains Hodgetts. He also noticed that the neighborhood was dotted with painted aluminum corrugated sheds, and so convinced Fung and the rest of the office to inject a bit of color in the underside of the steel "tarp."

Such flourishes are not surprising for Hodgetts, who has been known for his vernacular pop-cultural predilections since his wild and woolly youth in the late 1960s. "I come in like a hot-rod, and Ming comes in as Ms. Architect. She's more austere," he says. The combined talents of Hodgetts and Fung, however, have meshed well over their almost 20-year partnership. As the work has matured, it has retained the crisp, linear geometries of the early Los Angeles Modern legacy, combined with the rakish swerves of a contemporary sensibility.

The industrial-type materials give the library a legibility and translucence, while the syncopated structure, with its shifting steel framing, varies the spatial experience in the vertical dimension. At the same time, the solution manages to respond straightforwardly to the program, with imagination instead of gimmickry. ■

Sources

Exposed metal deck and standing-seam metal roofing: *IMSA Building Products*

Truck trailer aluminum exterior panels: *Wabash National*

Glass (for curtain wall): *Aital Custom Glass & Mirror*

Polyisocyanurate available rigid

insulation: *Apache Iso Products*

Polycarbonate structural sheeting: *Polygal Plastic Industries*

For more information on this project, go to Projects at

www.architecturalrecord.com.





The folded steel roof is supported on a series of columns and beams that follow a syncopated rhythm through the space (this page). The community room occupies the rear of the building (opposite, left).

In the library proper, a dropped ceiling (opposite, right) with illuminated lenticular tiles created by artist Barbara Strasen helps impart a sense of intimacy to the storytelling area.