

Snøhetta 

Calgary's new Central Library

Calgary, Alberta, Canada



November 5, 2018

Press Release: Calgary's new Central Library opens to the public

Calgary, Alberta, Canada - On November 1, 2018, the Snøhetta- and DIALOG-designed new Central Library opened its doors to the public. With aims to welcome over twice as many annual visitors to its 240,000 SF of expanded facilities, the library will fill a vital role for the rapidly expanding city. As Calgary's largest public investment since the 1988 Olympics, the library signals the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the city, one centered on the creation and innovation of knowledge and culture. Calgary Public Library is one of the largest library systems in North America, where more than half of its residents are active cardholders, and accordingly, the new main branch was created for and inspired by its diverse inhabitants. The new building provides spaces for all types of people and activities—for social interaction and exchange, for studying and learning, for quiet and introspection—championing the unique civic function that libraries provide today.

The building is sited within a complex urban condition, where a fully operational Light Rail Transit Line crosses the site from above to below ground on a curved half-moon path, dividing Downtown and East Village. In response, the design lifts the main entry over the encapsulated train line. Gently terraced slopes rise up to the heart of the building, allowing for people arriving from every direction to interact with the library. Outdoor amphitheaters nestled into the terraces provide places for people to sit and for library programs to spill outside. Plantings that reference the native landscape draw Calgary's mountains and prairies into the cityscape, and line the plaza's surrounding streets with elms and aspen trees. Doubling as a portal and a bridge, the entry plaza heals the previously-split seam between the two neighborhoods and re-establishes visual and pedestrian connections across the site.

The dynamic, triple-glazed façade is composed of a modular, hexagonal pattern that expresses the library's aims to provide a space that invites in all visitors. Aggregated variations on the hexagon form scatter across the building's curved surface in alternating panels of fritted glass and occasional iridescent aluminum. From these shapes emerge familiar forms: Parts of the pattern might resemble an open book, snowflake-like linework, or interlocking houses, anchoring the ideas of the collective and community. Most importantly, the entire building volume is enclosed in the same pattern, allowing all sides to function as the "front" of the building. This visual vocabulary continues inside, expressed in the design of CPL's new visual identity and wayfinding signage in the building, unifying the library's goals of inclusivity.

The crystalline geometry of the façade is carved away to reveal an expansive wood archway that embraces visitors as they approach. Framing the entrance of the building, the form references the Chinook cloud arches common to the region. Created entirely of planks of western red cedar from nearby British Columbia, the double-curved shell is among one of the largest freeform timber shell in the world. Its organic form and texture bring the large building down to a tactile, intimate scale. Visible from the outside of the building is the main atrium, inviting people in.

As the archway continues into the lobby and atrium, the wood spirals upwards over 85 feet to a view of the sky through the oculus. Wood slats line the perimeter of the open atrium, shaped in plan like a pointed ellipse, serving as an orientation device for people to quickly grasp the circulation and organizational logic of the library. Inside, the concrete structure is left exposed and unfinished, hinting at the open-ended possibilities within. The rhythm of beams and columns are reminiscent of a stoa, the public, open-air colonnades of ancient Greek architecture that doubled as spaces of gathering and intellectual exchange. The rawness of the material palette is intended to give people the sense that the library is a place of engagement, rather than a sacrosanct repository for books.

Organized on a spectrum of ‘Fun’ to ‘Serious,’ the library program locates the livelier public activities on the lower floors, gradually transitioning to quieter study areas on the upper levels as one spirals upwards. At the street level, a series of multi-purpose rooms line the perimeter of the building, enhancing the connectivity between inside and outside. On the ground floor, a Children’s Library offers playhouses that provide space for crafts and drawing-based activities, early literacy programs, and a full-body indoor play experience.

Throughout the six floors, a variety of spaces provide for digital, analog, group, and individual interactions. At the uppermost level of the library is the Great Reading Room, conceived as a jewel box tucked within the library, which provides a space for focused study and inspiration. Readers enter through a transitional space with softened light and acoustics. Within, vertical wood slats line the space to provide both privacy and visibility, defining an interior space without using solid walls. Natural light illuminates the space through the wood slats creating glancing sightlines between the atrium and western façade.

Arriving at the northernmost point of the library, one finds oneself at the Living Room, overlooking the train line and the meeting point of the two neighborhoods. Filled with light and activity, this prow of the building will not only serve as a beacon to those outside, inviting them to enter, but also as a prospect for looking back out – a fitting vantage point to observe the impact of a building that hopes to re-energize the spirit of culture, learning, and community in Calgary.

Project Background

The Calgary Public Library system is actively used by over 670,000 Calgarians (over half of its 1.2M population) and plays a major role in connecting residents from all walks of life. Accordingly, the new Central Library was catalyzed by a significant public engagement process. A series of programs were held in 2012, where more than 16,000 people provided input for what they hoped to see in the Library’s role within the community and its function. In 2013, CPL and CMLC hosted an international design competition to select the architecture and landscape architecture team to realize the Central Library. The Snøhetta- and DIALOG-designed library reached substantial completion in July 2018, was handed over to Calgary Public Library in September, and opened on time and on budget to the public on November 1, 2018. The new Central Library will join Studio Bell, the Arts Commons, and the Glenbow Museum as part of a burgeoning cultural campus in downtown Calgary and the East Village.

Team Credits

Design Architect, Landscape Architect, Interior Architecture, FF&E, Millwork, Signage & Wayfinding: Snøhetta

Executive Architect & Executive Landscape Architect: DIALOG

Client: Calgary Municipal Land Corporation (CMLC)

Location: Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Status: Completed 2018

Size: 240,000 sqft (2/3 larger than original library)

Budget: \$245 million CAD (total project cost), \$147 million CAD (hard cost)

Structural: Entuitive

Mechanical: DIALOG

Electrical & Lighting: SMP Engineering

IT/AV: McSquared System Design Group, Inc.

Contractor: Stuart Olson

About Snøhetta

For nearly 30 years, Snøhetta has designed some of the world's most notable public and cultural projects. Snøhetta kick-started its career in 1989 with the competition-winning entry for the new library of Alexandria, Egypt. This was later followed by the commission for the Norwegian National Opera in Oslo, and the National September 11 Memorial Museum Pavilion at the World Trade Center in New York City, among many others. Since its inception, the practice has maintained its original trans-disciplinary approach, integrating architectural, landscape and interior design in all of its projects.

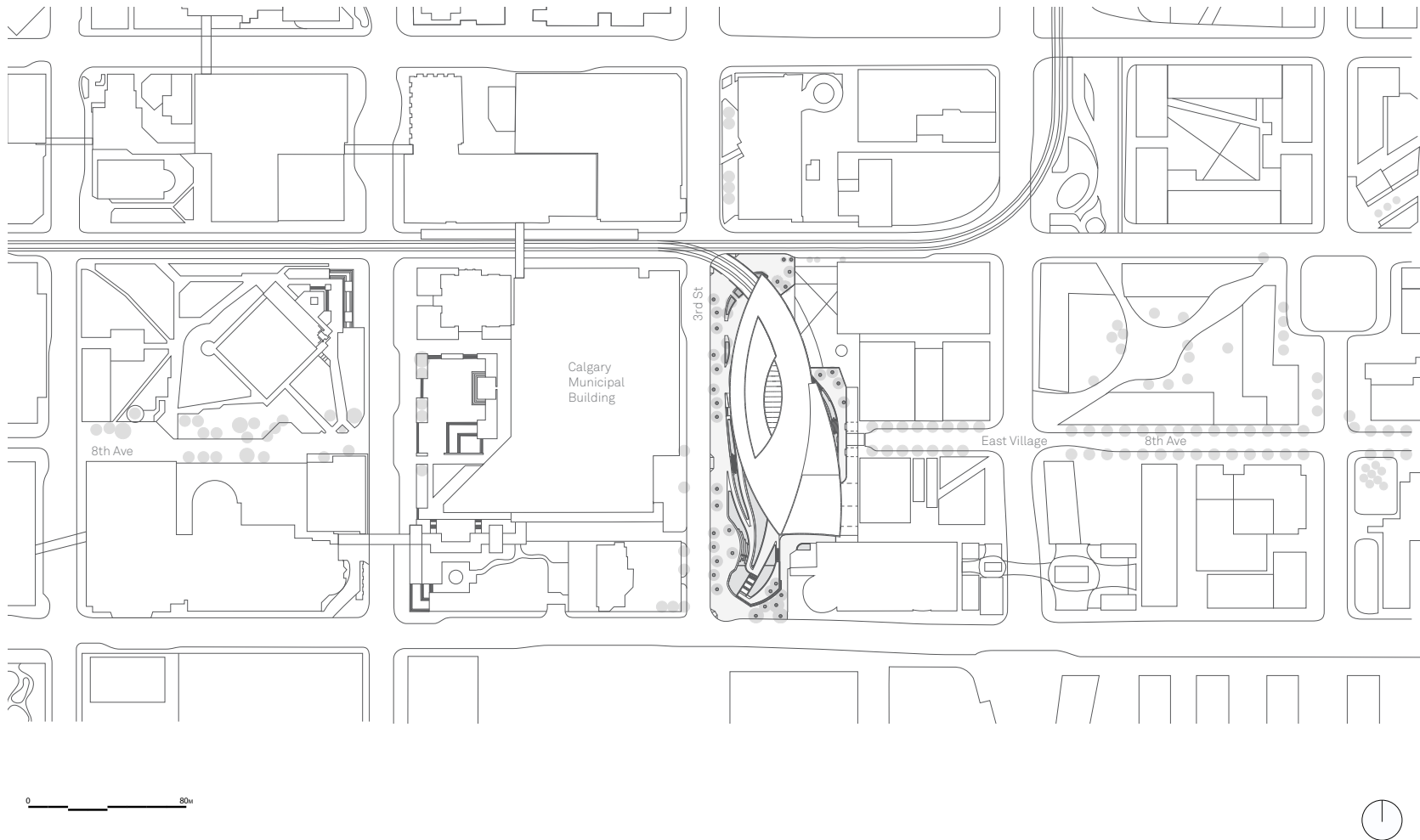
Snøhetta is currently working on a number of projects internationally, including the Le Monde Headquarters in Paris; Temple University's upcoming library, and the design for Norway's new banknotes which went into circulation in 2017. The new Central Library in Calgary is Snøhetta's most recently completed library project, following the Ryerson University Student Learning Centre in Toronto, Canada and the James B. Hunt Library at North Carolina State University. Additionally, Snøhetta is currently working on the Cornell University Executive Education Center and Hotel and two public libraries in New York City, one in Far Rockaway, Queens and one in the Bronx. Recently completed works include the redesign of the public space in Times Square, the Lascaux IV Caves Museum in Montignac, France, and the expansion to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

About DIALOG

DIALOG is a multi-disciplinary design firm with studios across Calgary, San Francisco, Vancouver, Edmonton and Toronto. The firm's work includes designing for urban vibrancy, health and wellness, transportation, education, arts and culture, residential, retail, and commercial, as well as mixed-use solutions.

DIALOG is passionate about design. They believe it can, and should, meaningfully improve the wellbeing of our communities and the environment we all share.





Site Plan

A fully operational Light Rail Transit Line bisects the site from above to below ground on a curved half-moon path, dividing Downtown and East Village. In response, the design of the library lifts the main entry over the encapsulated train line, healing the previously-split gap between the two neighborhoods, and re-establishing the major pedestrian spine of 8th Ave as it crosses the site through the entry plaza.



Atrium, looking north from level 2



Children's Area

Located on the mezzanine level is the Children's Library, where playhouses provide space for crafts and drawing-based activities, early literacy programs, and a full-body indoor play experience. Festooned in a colorful, graphic wallpaper of origami birds, the entire Children's Area is delineated by custom-designed bookshelves with kid-sized nooks to play and read.

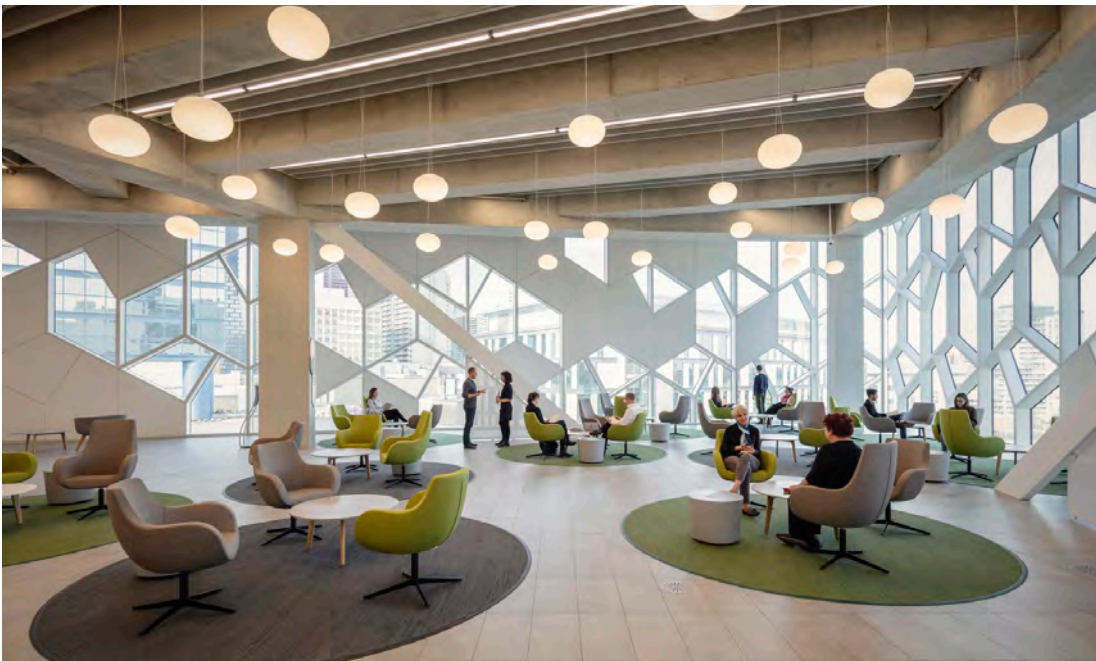
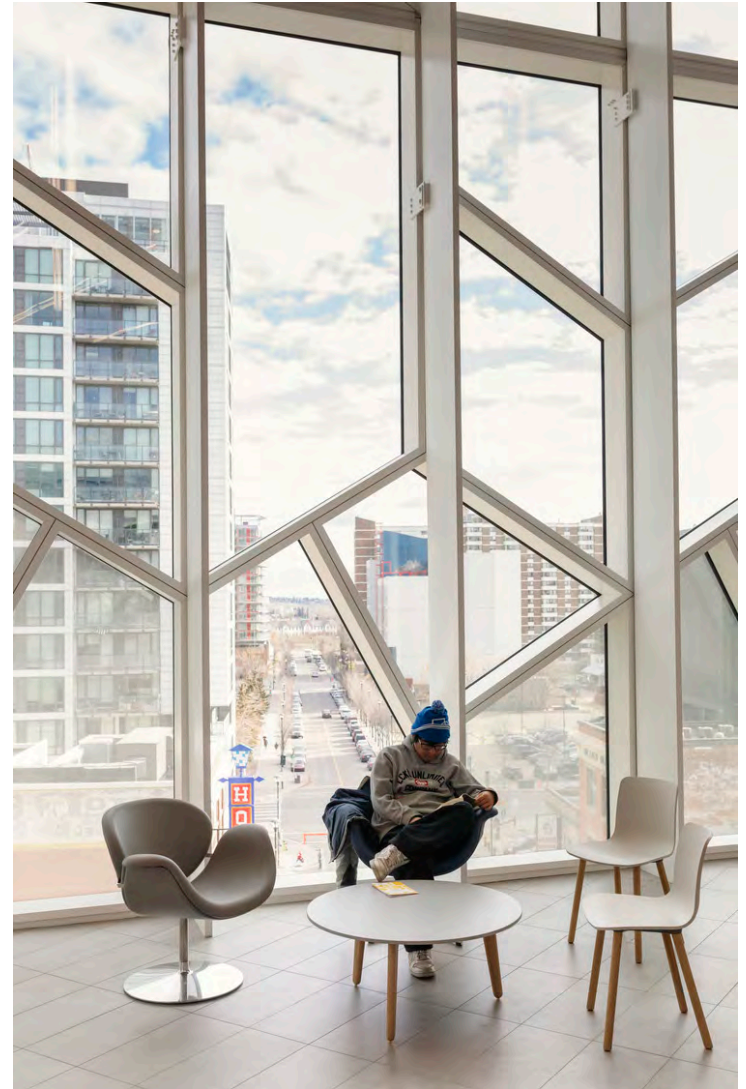


Great Reading Room:

Vertical wood slats line the Great Reading Room to provide both privacy and visibility and create an interior space without the use of solid walls. This method allows natural light to penetrate between the wood slats and connects the atrium and western façade through glancing sightlines.



Great Reading Room, Level 4



The unique hexagonal geometry of the façade balances the distribution of clear and fritted glass openings to control desired daylight levels, responding to the library's need for a broad variety of interior experiences.

