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## The Intersection of Design and Culture: The New Guangzhou Library and Its Relationship to the City

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### Abstract:

*A new facility for the Guangzhou Library was recently completed, and it is currently among the largest in China. It is situated on Flower City Square in Guangzhou's Zhujiang New City, which is home to the city's most modern cultural institutions. It was designed by an international team from Japan and China. The design is based on the Chinese character “之”, and its exterior walls are inspired by a collection of books, an idea the designers call “美丽书籍”, or “Beautiful Books.” The facility is a cultural landmark and represents a new direction in architecture and design for Chinese libraries. The paper explores the facility's relationship with the square and the surrounding institutions, the Guangzhou Opera House, the Guangdong Museum, and the Second Children's Palace. Additionally, the paper examines both the exterior and interior designs of the facility to show how it not only represents a break from traditional library design in China, but also the ways in which design and planning have created a library that captures the spirit of the city and is prepared to engage with and meet the various needs of its users.*

**Keywords:** Library design, Interior design, Guangzhou Library

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The Library is an essential part of the community, and it should embody its character and culture. Through architecture and interior design, a successful library building will not only be a reflection of its community, but also provide a space for learning, sharing knowledge, and interaction. To accommodate the needs of Guangzhou's library users, a new facility was recently completed, and it is currently among the largest in China. It is located in an area of Guangzhou's Zhujiang New City containing its most modern cultural facilities including the

Guangdong Museum, the Guangzhou Opera House, and the Second Children's Palace. Architectural firms from numerous countries presented possible plans, and in the end, an international team from Japan and China created the design. While the exterior needed to be aesthetically pleasing and a complement to the surrounding structures, the interior had to be both aesthetically pleasing and user-oriented. Within this context, the paper examines the role the new library plays within Guangzhou's cityscape, and how its design reflects a break from tradition in China. Lastly, the paper examines the ways in which design and planning have created a library prepared to engage with and meet the various needs of its users.

### I. Zhujiang New City: Home of the New Library

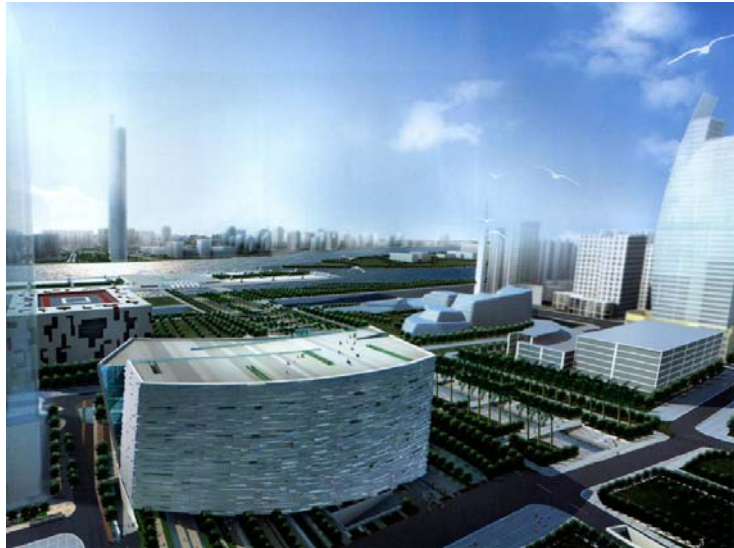
The new Guangzhou Library is situated on Flower City Square in the heart of the city's modern commercial district, Zhujiang New City. Construction began on the new facility in 2006, and the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> floors of the north tower were opened December, 28 2012 offering access to a portion of the Library's Chinese language materials collection. The three surrounding structures had already been erected prior to the opening of the new Guangzhou Library. They include the Guangzhou Opera House, the Guangdong Museum, and the Second Children's Palace. The three structures are noted for their unique designs, and as far as uniqueness of design is concerned, the Library's new facility is no exception. While there is no common theme in the designs linking the structures, they come together to form an architecturally distinct modern cultural center.

Flower City Square has become a de facto cultural center. The city planners have consolidated its most modern cultural institutions into one location, and in doing so have created an iconic public space that represents the city's commitment to remembering the past and building toward the future. Susan Imholz notes that many of the Carnegie Libraries built in the United States during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were built in locations "which situated them at the intersection of social life."<sup>1</sup> While Zhujiang New City cannot currently be considered the center of Guangzhou's social life, the square and the riverside have quickly become popular gathering spots for recreation and relaxation, and the library has been at the center of much of that activity.

The image below, from *Archicreation* shows Flower City Square and the locations of the Guangzhou Library, the Guangzhou Opera House, the Guangdong Museum, and the Second Children's Palace. The library, situated prominently in the bottom left corner, faces the main gathering space on Flower City Square. The museum is situated on the south side of the library, on the upper left-hand side of the image, and the Children's palace and the opera house are located respectively to the west and southwest of the library just across the square. The square often hosts outdoor art exhibitions, there is shopping and dining nearby, and with the river on its southern border, it is a nice place for Guangzhou residents to enjoy some open space. Visitors to the square can often be seen photographing the buildings and the flower gardens, and events at the museum, opera house, and children's palace are also regular draws for residents and tourists alike. The open spaces of the square and the four institutions that it hosts serve as a centrally located destination for visitors to enjoy the unique architecture and offerings of Guangzhou's newest cultural centers.

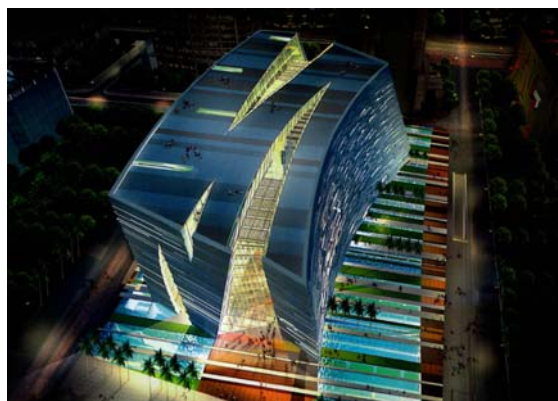
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<sup>1</sup> Susan Imholz, "Public Libraries by Design," *Public Library Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (December 2008): 342.



*Flower City Square – Zhujiang New City – Archicreation, 2010*

As previously mentioned, there is no common architectural theme linking the buildings, but the relationship of the structures to one another was certainly a factor during the initial design phase. The library was designed to resemble the Chinese character “之”, which can be seen in the image below from *Archicreation*. This in itself is a powerful cultural statement, but it is not the character’s literal meaning that is significant in this case; rather it is its shape. A more detailed discussion of the structure’s exterior design will be offered in a proceeding section, for now, its relationship to the surrounding structures is the focus. Hiroshi Miyakawa, a designer with Nikken Sekkei Ltd. stated, in planning the library, "we considered the surroundings of the structure and the cultural connotations of the design. Therefore, based on these two considerations, the concept was inspired by a collection of books. At the same time, taking into account that the adjacent museum has a square shaped design, and that the two structures will be in close proximity to one another, we decided that a proper design would be rectangular and linear in nature." With this in mind, the character-shaped design was chosen. This way, the library’s profile would be most visible, and as a result, whether you are viewing the library from close-up or from a distance, the resemblance to the character is apparent. The design gives the impression of pages of a book being turned.<sup>2</sup>



*Guangzhou Library’s “之” Design – Archicreation, 2010*

<sup>2</sup> “广州图书馆行馆：每块石材和玻璃都单独定做,” *Guangzhou Library*, 2013/01/07, Accessed: April 01, 2013, [http://www.gzlib.gov.cn/aboutus/meiti/meiti\\_news.do;jsessionid=B5934C29D91757F21191330727C18A13?id=379560](http://www.gzlib.gov.cn/aboutus/meiti/meiti_news.do;jsessionid=B5934C29D91757F21191330727C18A13?id=379560).

James K. Elmborg reminds us that “The collective vision of planners gives rise to structures and rules intended to harmonize with and express the spirit of the people and to achieve the goals of society.”<sup>3</sup> Within this context, when the four structures and the square are viewed as a whole, they represent Guangzhou’s sense of culture and its commitment to the future. Furthermore, the location of the public square and the cultural institutions offers residents and tourists a conveniently centralized cultural and recreational area.

## II. Exterior

The allure of the structure’s exterior lies in its cultural significance. The design itself is a fusion of architecture and culture. In addition to the traditional functions of a library building, Elmborg argues that “They also provide other more ‘mythic’ functions by intentionally symbolizing through architecture and design the values that libraries espouse.”<sup>4</sup> Access to and storage of information are two values espoused by libraries, and these values can be elicited from the exterior design of the structure. As was previously mentioned, the design is based both on the character “之” and a collection of books. The collection of books concept is called “beautiful books” or “美丽书籍”. In books we often find knowledge, ideas, beliefs, and wisdom. In this regard, the “collection of books” that comprises the exterior façade of the building, seen in the image below, is not only a metaphor for the previously mentioned values, but also for what we find in those books. It might also be said that the exterior walls are composed of “layered books” representing the “layers” of culture and history, prompting people to walk in and explore.<sup>5</sup>



*Front Entrance, Guangzhou Library, 2012*

In designing the exterior, a number of issues had to be taken into account. The positioning of the building in relation to the sun and Guangzhou’s sub-tropical climate, for example, had to

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<sup>3</sup> James K. Elmborg, “Libraries as the Spaces Between Us: Recognizing and Valuing the Third Space”, *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2011): 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Xin Dai, “广州新图书馆,” *Guangzhou Design Institute*, Accessed: April 01, 2013, [http://www.gzdi.com/cn/html/2011-08-17/49\\_1304.html](http://www.gzdi.com/cn/html/2011-08-17/49_1304.html).

be considered. Once those factors were considered, designers still had to assure that the exterior would be both aesthetically pleasing and built to withstand the elements. While the inside of a library building should be dynamic, the outside should be constructed in such a way that it will stand the test of time.<sup>6</sup> According to Dai Xin, of the Guangzhou Design Institute, the plan is to achieve architectural symbolism. "The design must be in harmony with the atmosphere and conditions in Guangzhou. A material representing stone was used on the walls to reflect the structure's stability. The east and west exterior walls were designed in such a way so as to avoid the tremendous heat from the sun, and while the height and placement of the windows is suitable for readers to see out, their placement will also help reduce the amount of direct sunlight that penetrates, this in turn, will allow the facility to conserve energy by using less air-conditioning."<sup>7</sup>

In addition to aesthetics, the designers also considered the structures environmental footprint. A roof-top garden was included in the character-shaped design. Due to the insulation from the vegetation on the roof, it now takes less energy to air-condition the facility. Furthermore, the landscaping and the geometrical construction of the garden are similar to that of the square on which the building stands. In this way, the building shares a relationship with its immediate environment.<sup>8</sup> The roof top garden also allows for a panoramic view of the Guangzhou skyline.

### III. Interior

When standing in the first floor lobby, you can see straight up, nearly 50 meters, to the glass paneled ceiling from which an abundance of natural light enters. Additionally, when you look to the left and right (north and south), nearly each level of the building is in plain view. Walkways connect the upper levels of the north and south towers so patrons need not return to the first floor in order to move from one tower to the other. The stairways, escalators, and elevators, seen in the image below, ushering patrons from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> floors are also visible. According to Peter Gisolfi, visibility is a key issue in library design. He points out that it is easier to observe your surroundings in vertically arranged spaces. "From any one point", he asks, "how much of the facility is visible?"<sup>9</sup> As opposed to a two or three level horizontally arranged structure, an atrium style, vertically arranged structure allows for greater visibility from any one point. The architects who designed the Guangzhou Library brought this idea to life with their design. Dai Xin points out that "it's not unusual for visitors to be surprised by the design of the new library. Entering the facility, you cannot help but to be in awe, and think that it does not entirely resemble a library. On the contrary, actually it feels more like a shopping mall"<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Meredith Schwartz, "Building for the Future," *Library Journal* (September 16, 2012): 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Xin Dai, "广州新图书馆," *Guangzhou Design Institute*, Accessed: April 01, 2013, [http://www.gzdi.com/cn/html/2011-08-17/49\\_1304.html](http://www.gzdi.com/cn/html/2011-08-17/49_1304.html).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Peter Gisolfi, "Library Architecture Influences Efficiency," *Journal of the Library Administration Management Section* 7 no. 2, (2011): 24-25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.



*First Floor Lobby, Guangzhou Library, 2012*

Traditional library design is characterized by compact, static spaces with an emphasis on the collection and the convenience of the librarian. In some respects, traditional library design might be considered rigid and inflexible, argues Tan Xiangjin, former School of Information Management professor at Sun Yat-Sen University.<sup>11</sup> Modern library design bucks those aged trends, and many modern libraries place an emphasis on using natural light and having adaptable, open spaces. The vast majority of modern library design is flexible, argues Tan, creating spaces that can easily be changed, adapted, or reorganized. This way, the same space can have multiple uses. This is conducive to the efficient use of resources.<sup>12</sup> While the efficient use of resources is a necessary consideration, it is also important to consider the users' potential experience. In this context, how can a space be created that will at once be accessible, adaptable, and welcoming?

Similar to the main entrance of a shopping mall, the first floor of the library is characterized by its wide open space and visually accessible layout, and due in part to the large number of anticipated visitors, the designers agreed that an expansive space was appropriate. According to Miyakawa, "As it is a large public building, we must consider the number of people it will hold. We didn't want the interior to appear too narrow; we wanted the feel of open space, so we chose an atrium style design." Furthermore, "Because of the size of the building, we chose an open design which allows for maximum visibility."<sup>13</sup> This open space also allows for many possibilities. Because it is easily accessible, highly visible, and welcoming, it is a perfect place to host book displays or art exhibitions. The space also provides an easy access home for the numerous self-service lending and returning terminals for patrons to take

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<sup>11</sup> Xiangjin Tan, et al. "The New Thinking of Library Building in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—The Building Concept of Shenzhen New Library," *Journal of Information, Communication & Library Science* 9, no. 3 (March 2003): 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> "广州图书馆行馆：每块石材和玻璃都单独定做," *Guangzhou Library*, 2013/01/07, Accessed: April 01, 2013, [http://www.gzlib.gov.cn/aboutus/meiti/meiti\\_news.do;jsessionid=B5934C29D91757F21191330727C18A13?id=379560](http://www.gzlib.gov.cn/aboutus/meiti/meiti_news.do;jsessionid=B5934C29D91757F21191330727C18A13?id=379560).

advantage of. Additionally, the flow of air through the extremely tall ceiling of the atrium creates a natural air circulation system. This allows for a reduction in the use of energy.<sup>14</sup>

The main information desk is also located on the first floor. It is situated in such a way that the patron can easily identify it without it being obtrusive, and in addition to the other service areas on the first floor, the Reader's Experience Area offers library patrons a hands-on lesson through the history of print culture, especially as it pertains to China. Additionally, library patrons will be able to take advantage of the newest interactive technologies the library has to offer. While the first floor lobby is opened-up in its design, the natural light shining down and various plants placed about make for a comfortable and welcoming environment.

The general layout of the 2<sup>nd</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup> floors is fairly similar. Upon exiting the elevator, stairs, or escalator, you are met with a wide opening that ends with an information/circulation area. When looking to the east and west, OPAC terminals, the collections, and seating areas are in plain view. Many of the shelving units are shorter, which allows for increased visibility and more space to present the materials. Tables and seating line the stacks and are also interspersed throughout. The tables include built-in lamps, cable Internet connections, and electrical outlets. Because the tables are stationary, however, movable cushioned seating was also placed throughout. The cushioned seating offers patrons a comfortable place to read, and it can also be moved to suit their needs. This way, a combination of traditional study and reading desks as well as comfortable seating is available.



*Stacks and Seating, Guangzhou Library, 2012*

Because the library is increasingly being regarded as a place of social interaction, argues Amanda Aspenson, Jack Poling, and Jeffrey A. Scherer “Traditional accommodations for people in the library fall far short of expectations for library use today and in the future. Traditional library seating – lounge seating, study tables in open areas and individual study accommodations are in increasing demand.”<sup>15</sup> To meet the various needs of the patrons, individual study rooms and small group meeting rooms are available. Based on the size and purpose of the rooms, they will generally include white boards, Internet connections

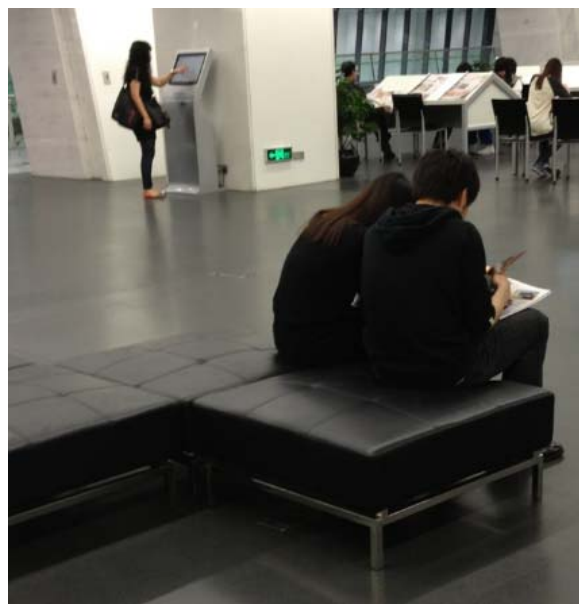
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<sup>14</sup> Xin Dai, “广州新图书馆,” *Guangzhou Design Institute*, Accessed: April 01, 2013, [http://www.gzdi.com/cn/html/2011-08-17/49\\_1304.html](http://www.gzdi.com/cn/html/2011-08-17/49_1304.html).

<sup>15</sup> Amanda Aspenson, Jack Poling, and Jeffrey A. Scherer, “The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Library Building: Adjust or Wither” (presentation, IFLA Standing Committee on Library Buildings and Equipment & IFLA Standing Committee on Information Technology, Satellite Conference, Atlanta, GA, August 10-11, 2011).

(including Wi-Fi), seating, and work surfaces. The addition of the individual and collaborative workspace and the varied seating options represents a shift in perspective from an emphasis on the collection to an emphasis on user experience.

The lower levels of the library include a variety of functional spaces, such as meeting areas, lecture halls, and a cafe. The two lecture halls feature simultaneous interpretation facilities and can seat a total of 800 people. The areas on the lower levels highlight the library's emphasis on offering collaborative spaces as well as community and professional gathering spots. As opposed to simply housing the collection and providing a space for patrons to use the materials, the focus is now on accommodating their various needs and activities while they take advantage of the collections. Whether they desire to read quietly or participate in group activities, they will be accommodated. Whether they wish to use materials from the various print or audio-visual collections or take advantage of web-based services, they will be accommodated. In short, the design places the user ahead of the collection.



*Seating in an Open Use Area, Guangzhou Library, 2013*

It is important that the interior design capture the essence or spirit of Guangzhou. Sam Demas and Jeffrey A. Scherer argue that successful library buildings forge a “connection to the values, traditions, and intellectual life of the community” to create what they call “esprit de place.” This concept refers to features that reflect local traditions, regional or period décor, or art and artifacts.<sup>16</sup> From the interior decoration and design to the contents of the materials, The Library of the People and Culture of Guangzhou, a collection containing materials about the people, history, and culture of Guangzhou, is a perfect example of “esprit de place.” The entrance is modeled after a traditional Chinese building, and the decoration inside the room is reminiscent of the South China Lingnan style.

The aforementioned Reader's Experience Area also captures the “esprit de place.” In the art and artifacts that patrons can view, and in some cases handle, there lies a direct connection from the history and culture of Guangzhou and China to the patron. As Guangzhou is an international city and the library supports patrons from a variety of nations, The Multicultural Library, a service area containing select foreign language materials, materials from

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey A. Scherer and Sam Demas, “Esprit de Place,” *American Libraries*, 2002, 65-66.



international sister libraries, and the host space of future activities and exhibitions is meant to be a window to the world for the residents of Guangzhou as well as a forum for expatriates and international guests to bring their culture to China. Using an allusion to Guangzhou's history to illustrate the "window to the world" concept, the Multicultural Library will have a Maritime Silk Road theme. For now, the decoration largely consists of maps, but in the near future, it is hoped that additional decorations and possibly artifacts will be added. Furthermore, there will be decorations representing each of the nations represented in the collection. The interior design of the aforementioned spaces, their potential for mixed use, and their emphasis on user-experience all point to Guangzhou Library's commitment to engaging the community and creating a space the patron can interact with. In order to build a connection with library patrons, and to allow them to have a personal investment in the interior design, they have been invited to submit calligraphy, paintings, handicrafts, or similar works of art that tell a story about the library. Selected submissions will be put on rotating displays throughout the library.

The library is place for interaction and collaboration. At the same time, the library is a reflection of its community. It is a reflection of local culture, a keeper of local traditions and history, and a window to the world. Through architecture and design, the library has the potential to embody the spirit of the community and its users. With its unique “之” shaped design and the “beautiful books” or “美丽书籍” that comprise the building's exterior, the new Guangzhou Library reflects Chinese culture. The “glass skin” of the library creates a uniquely transparent environment that beckons visitors to enter. The design is at once aesthetically pleasing and environmentally friendly. While it allows for the use of natural light, a rooftop gardens, and an air flow system, it also captures the culture of China and Guangzhou. The interior design and building layout is user-oriented in nature and built to meet the technological and diversified needs of the patrons. The building's open spaces, variety of seating, and independent and collaborative spaces accommodate those who wish to read and reflect on their own as well as those who wish to communicate and work with others. The library, while built to withstand the heat and humidity of the Guangzhou climate, is also built to accommodate the varied and changing needs of the users, the changes in technology, and the growth of the city.

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[http://www.gzlib.gov.cn/aboutus/meiti/meiti\\_news.do;jsessionid=B5934C29D91757F21191330727C18A13?id=379560](http://www.gzlib.gov.cn/aboutus/meiti/meiti_news.do;jsessionid=B5934C29D91757F21191330727C18A13?id=379560).
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