

Design Review:  
**Birmingham  
Library**

# Designed by Mecanoo

## Birmingham

Planning reference 2012/05116/PA

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We support the City's ambition for this new Library of Birmingham to be a world-class facility. We continue to think that the building is sited in the right location and that the central design concepts of "three palazzos" on Centenary Square, the shifting central rotundas of the internal circulation route and the close relationship of the architecture and its immediate landscape are strong. Achieving the world-class potential of this building is dependent on realising the compelling concepts in the detailed design. However, now that the scheme has been submitted for planning, we are concerned that it has not been worked up in sufficient detail to lock down the design.

Based on the presentation and material provided, we are not confident that the design team has a sufficiently clear sense of what the building will be like and how it will work, to clearly communicate the critical aspects of the design to the contractor. Specifically, we need to be convinced that the relationship between the lower levels of the library and its context, including The REP and Centenary Square, has been fully resolved, that a sophisticated approach to the façade and its responsiveness to the internal layout, orientation and site context has been developed, and that the spatial quality and function of the rotundas have been worked through in detail.

### Site layout and massing

The concept of the "three palazzos" is a strong one that is largely successful both in the articulation of the building form and massing, and the treatment of Centenary Square. It is important to the expression of this concept that all three buildings on Centenary Square remain distinct; if the architecture of the library at the lower levels is allowed to dominate The REP this principle will be compromised. We welcome the clearer distinction made between the library and The REP in the revised ground floor layout. The clarification that a separate entrance to the theatre will be retained also goes some way to assure us that the identity of the different building functions will be maintained. However, we still question the current shared ground floor layout and podium treatment, and the position and articulation of the entrance. In particular, we do not think that the shadow of the overhang is enough to define the ground floor of the library and we are still concerned that the homogeneity of the continuous glazed screen between The REP and the new library compromises the compelling diagram of the "three palazzos". More work is needed to resolve the interaction between the two buildings, the operation of the shared uses and the entry sequence for each.

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We question the current proposal to reduce the height of the building as the consequent loss of library space is likely to be regretted in the future. In our view, the reduced massing does not improve its relationship to the adjacent buildings and could compromise the idea of the rising tower of rotundas announcing the presence of the new public facility.

### Public realm

We welcome the connection between the library building and the central section of public space to its south, which reinforces the concepts of the library design as a whole. The library massing with the long south-facing terrace onto the square helps to break down the perception of the length of Centenary Square and draws the visual focus away from the ICC at the square's western end. However, for this world-class library, the public realm that it sits in must also be world-class. While we understand that funding is not yet in place to deliver a comprehensive redesign of Centenary Square, we think that the new library building should be designed within the context of a clear and logical approach to function and character of the central section of Centenary Square.

In the absence of definite proposals for Centenary Square, resolving the design of the sequence of interior spaces and their relationship to the exterior spaces should be a priority to ensure the new library connects to the public realm and functions as a community facility. Views of the city from the external terraces at different levels are an important part of this.

### The amphitheatre

The circular opening in Centenary Square, now called "the amphitheatre", is a strong gesture, which we support as an overture to the sequence of internal circulation space within the library. Although we agree that it should not become an entrance to the building, we urge the design team to consider the amphitheatre and entrance as a single, easily comprehensible concept. We think the integration of more seating around the space is moving the design in the right direction. However, we doubt the amphitheatre will work as a useful performance space, and continue to think that it might work more successfully as a preview of the internal rotundas if it were more clearly and immediately engaged with the main entrance to the active library use. For example, the connection between the amphitheatre to the entrance lobby could be punctuated with some openings at ground floor level to make the three-dimensional relationship clearer. Sightline drawings into the deep space are essential to understand what will be visible from ground level.

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We support the treatment at ground floor level to Cambridge Street to the north. This is a difficult frontage to activate and we think that the proposal to locate workshops here with views into them from the street and the arrangement of the service access on the side street, King Edwards Place, is an intelligent solution. We think that the building's response to the softer green open space of Cambridge Gardens beyond should be resolved in detail at planning stage.

### **Internal layout and circulation concept**

We continue to think that the sequence of shifting rotundas that forms the building's internal vertical circulation is a potentially compelling focus to the library interior. While the removal of the mezzanine level will slightly improve the relationship between the building entrance and the first rotunda, we think that the vertical circulation route, including way-finding at each arrival point, has not been fully resolved.

At detailed planning stage, we would expect this 'experiential public journey' through the building to have been worked up in greater detail and we find it frustrating not to have information precisely defining the design of the rotundas. Specifically, we think it is critical to define how the sequence of spaces is experienced on entry at ground floor level (including the extent to which sunlight will penetrate down to the lower levels), the precise parameters of the rotundas and the degree to which they will read as defined volumes, and the treatment of their perimeter, which may be different at each level. For example, we think it is essential to clearly define the extent of permeability between the rotundas and the surrounding spaces and their connection to the external terraces. The approach to lighting and acoustic control of the perimeter spaces will also be critical in creating circulation and library spaces that work well.

At this stage, the design team should have developed a clear strategy to the internal planning that establishes a set of rules differentiating between functions and types of spaces in response to their location within the building and defines the technical requirements for environment control. This should acknowledge the need for spaces that are: noisy/quiet, controlled/uncontrolled, requiring heavy/light structural loading and direct/indirect natural light. How natural light will be introduced into this deep plan building and how direct sunlight will be controlled at the perimeter spaces, for example, should to be carefully defined in relation both to the internal planning and façade treatment.

### **Façade treatment**

While we support the concept of the uniform filigree façade treatment in principle, we are disappointed that the idea has not evolved beyond the initial abstract idea into a convincing detailed design proposal. It is regrettable that the opportunity has not been taken for the façade to perform another practical function. If the screen is purely decorative, its budget may be at risk, whereas it is critical that the material and details are delivered to the highest quality.

We continue to think that rigorous investigation is needed to explore the potential for the screen and the cladding behind to respond more fully to the different functional and environmental requirements internally and the different

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solar orientations and city context externally. The current proposal for a largely glazed building envelope will, in our view, result in high cooling loads. It would be disappointing if the glazed elevations were to be compromised by the addition of tinted solar glazing or blinds at a later stage.

### **Conclusion**

Although this is a very promising starting point and the basic design proposition is compelling, we are concerned that at planning stage the scheme is still unresolved in many critical respects and is not yet, therefore, a fully convincing architectural proposition. Given the design and build procurement method and the current terms of the novation, control over the detail will be critical to ensure that the essential qualities of the scheme are not dissipated in construction. In the absence of more detailed information, we are unable to take it on trust that the scheme will result in the world class library the City hopes for. CABE would encourage the local authority to ensure that all critical aspects of the design are set out in detail as part of the current planning application.

**Design Council  
Angel Building  
407 St John Street  
London EC1V 4AB  
United Kingdom**

**Tel +44(0)20 7420 5200  
Fax +44(0)20 7420 5300**

**[cabe@designcouncil.org.uk](mailto:cabe@designcouncil.org.uk)  
[designcouncil.org.uk](http://designcouncil.org.uk)  
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