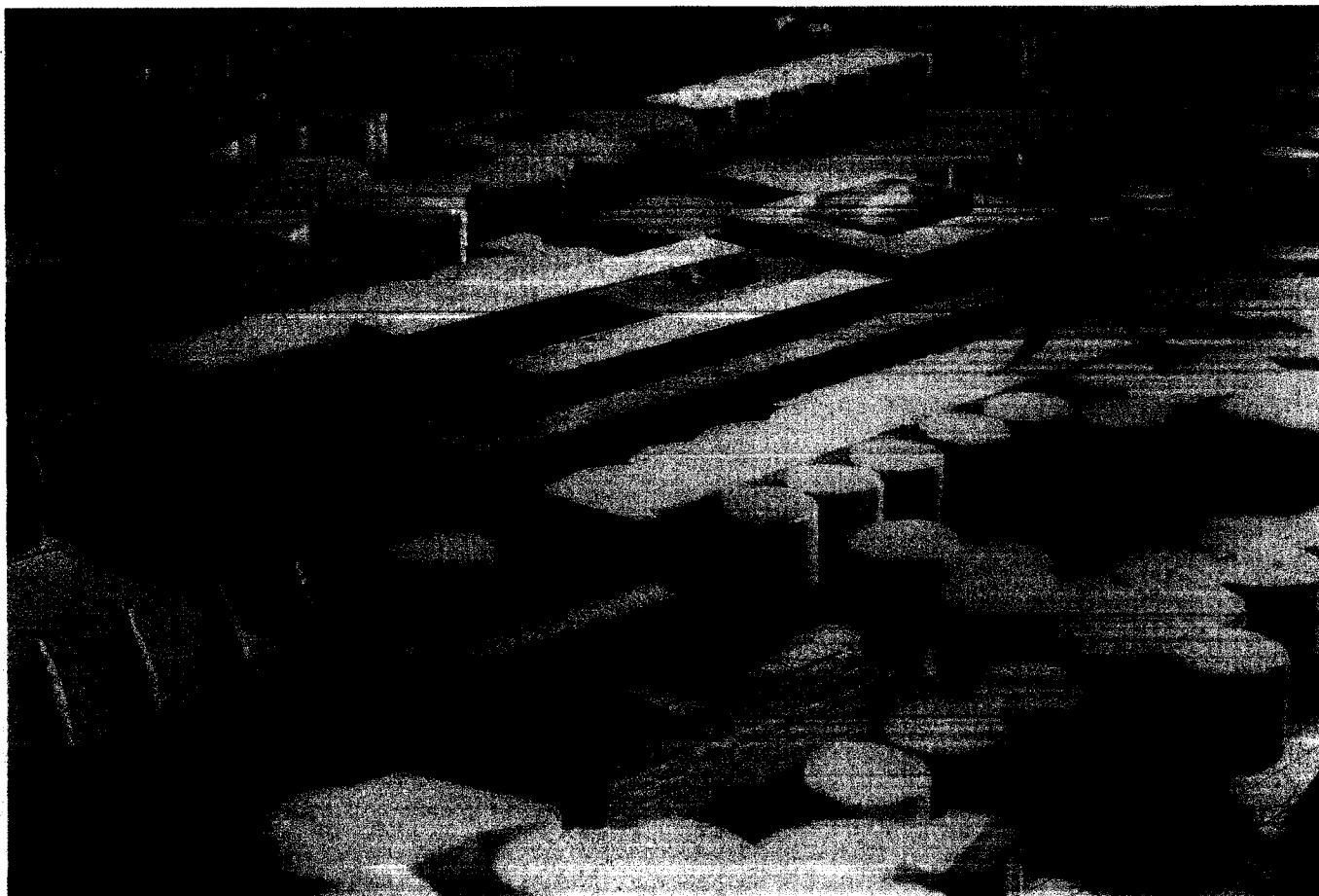


# Not Just Any Building

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*Architect's model of the new library in its setting on the Rice Campus*

In 1998 the Board of Trustees of Rice University and President Malcolm Gillis set their sights on the goal of resolving the severe shortage of space for the collection in the existing Fondren Library and the need to use innovations in information technology to strategically place Rice in the leadership role expected of a world-class research institution.

The elevation of this goal as

a priority for Rice University set the university on a journey of assessment, introspection, and discovery that we had not fully anticipated. This journey has carried us through the last two years and has included an extensive programming process, several campus-planning initiatives and a variety of design options by two different design architects. Each step has informed and educated the project team

and the university community about our aspirations, our environment and our values. Each step has "raised the bar" of excellence for this facility and clearly informed us all that for this new iteration of the library, "good" would not be good enough for Rice. So it has become clear that the new library would not be just any building.

The vision of the new library was clearly defined in the earli-

est stages of the programming process. Programming is sometimes referred to as the phase of design when each space is identified and sized. In many cases, as in the library project, programming is a time to develop a vision for the building including understanding how the building is to be used, what functions it will serve and how it might grow and change. The most important aspect of the vision, as defined by Dr. Charles Henry, is how the Fondren Library will fit into and support the mission of the university. Dr. Henry's vision is one that reflects on the traditional role of the library while addressing the possibilities and needs of the future. Intrinsic to that vision is to make the library the first great research library of the new century. A team led by Geoffrey Freeman of Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott (SBRA), the foremost academic library designers in the world, listened well and, in May 1999, published a program and master planning study that defined this vision. Central to this definition is the capacity to expand the current collection on campus while creating a world-class service-oriented electronic resource center and creating a space that supports the interdisciplinary exchange so important to Rice.

The first attempt to define how the building would take shape was the job of Robert Venturi, one of the finest architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Mr. Venturi fully respected the academic mission of Rice. He also accepted the constraints of the project. These constraints included budget, location, and the preservation and renovation of the original Fondren Library building. Mr. Venturi enthusiastically took on this challenge developing an architectural argument and interpretation that proposed a transitional and flexible "loft" structure attached to the original Fondren building. In the Venturi design, the appearance of the original structure was to have been modified, not through changes to the exterior but by a change in the building's context by adding a freestanding wall in front of the existing library addressing the academic quadrangle. This wall would create a context that would make the existing building visually less important. A glass wall faced the more informal quadrangle to the west behind which flexible space would continuously accommodate the changing needs of the library.

The Board of Trustees did not approve the Venturi design. Finalized in the summer of 2000, the design effectively

challenged the board's understanding of the Rice campus environment and raised many more questions than could be answered within the Venturi approach. The board also came to understand, through this process with Robert Venturi, that the quality of design of the library was extraordinarily important, not only because of its prominent location on the academic quadrangle but also because of what the building was to accomplish. If this library were truly to carry Rice into the next century as a resource, the building must also carry the university architecturally into the next century; no small challenge.

Recognition of the large scale of the Venturi design, the incredible difficulty of dealing with the existing building and the need to look again at the original Cram master plan for guidance, led the board to initiate a Pre-Design study by Michael Wilford. Michael Wilford, an architect of international regard from the United Kingdom, has an intimate understanding of the Rice Campus and the academic quadrangle in particular. Mr. Wilford taught at Rice in the School of Architecture in the eighties and designed Anderson Hall with his partner, Sir James Stirling. Mr. Wilford has continued to prac-

tic architecture at an internationally recognized level since Sir James Stirling's death in 1992.

The Pre-Design study began in October of 2000 and required approximately three months to complete. The process developed by Michael Wilford has been an inclusive one that has required discussion and review with the Buildings and Grounds Design Subcommittee every few weeks. The study revisited the Cram Master Plan first in an attempt to understand how a facility placed in this location might address the intentions of the master plan. From that analysis, Mr. Wilford developed five options for the diagrammatic development of the project, always keeping the programmatic vision a priority. Through extensive work with the board, the library representatives and the project team, the options were narrowed and a new budget defined. Principles for the development of the final scheme included respecting the existing scale of the campus using the "slip bar" design embraced by the earliest Cram buildings; respecting the architectural style of the academic quadrangle through contextually sensitive design; allowing the architecture at the western quadrangle to address the need for transition; and, finally, to maintaining the programmatic goals by creating a multilevel "immersion concourse".

The massing "diagram" developed through this Pre-Design

effort calls for the replacement of the existing Fondren Library with a new facility of nearly 300,000 SF that will have two stories of construction underground. Two "slip bars", approximately the same scale as



those forming Sewall Hall and the Physics Building, will be set at the end academic quadrangle. The cloister at that end will be newly aligned, eliminating the existing bend. The overall building will be narrower allowing the original cloisters of oak trees along the western quad to be replanted and reinforced. This will also allow pedestrians to "slip" past the

building on either side without being pushed outside the quad area. The western portion of the building will include an ellipse of flexible space open to two floors below grade and four floors above. This ellipse, placed directly on the intersection of two major axes will be the source of the functional transition of the program, the spatial transition of the architecture and the plan transition anticipated by Cram. A reading room floating above the oaks, the highest point on campus punctuates this intersection. The facility will incorporate ten years of growth of the collection as well as expanded seating and study areas.

Most importantly, the proposed diagrammatic concept is a physical manifestation of the library program. The Pre-Design incorporates the vision of the "new" library of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, adopts the "idea" for a flexible research and learning laboratory and embraces the "multi-disciplined and collaborative educational approach" of Rice University.

It was determined by the Board of Trustees in March 2001, that development of this Pre-Design concept will address the goals of the board, the president and the university community, and so Michael Wilford, Geoffrey Freeman, Dr. Charles Henry and the project team will continue this amazing journey to develop a design for the new library; a project that will be more than just any building.