

Geisel Library Architectural History

The building core and the tower above were completed in 1970, with the expansion wings to the east and west completed in 1993. Originally called the Central University Library, it was renamed to Geisel Library in 1995 following a \$20 million donation from Audrey Geisel, the wife of Theodor Geisel—better known as Dr. Seuss. The Library also houses the Dr. Seuss Collection, which contains approximately 8,500 items including original drawings, sketches, manuscript drafts, books and memorabilia. There is an anecdote that Ted Geisel, a longtime resident of La Jolla, told Audrey, “If I ever designed a library, that’s what I would design.”

The actual architect of the building is William Pereira. Pereira is probably most famously known for designing the TransAmerica Pyramid in San Francisco, although a large contingent of his work is in Southern California, including the Disneyland Hotel, the Theme Building at the Los Angeles International Airport, the San Diego International Airport, and numerous buildings across the University of Southern California campus.

Building design began in 1965, just five years after the University’s inception, in order to create the keystone building for the entire UC San Diego campus. In preparation for his work at UC San Diego, Pereira studied other research libraries and found that they were transforming to place more emphasis on retrieving and transmitting knowledge and information rather than on storing it away. He immediately discarded the concept of the high-ceilinged reading room—think Library of Congress in Washington DC—instead creating smaller, scattered spaces and individual carrels with open and well-spaced stacks. The aim of the interior design of the building was to bring readers into as close as possible contact with the books themselves.

Design documents show Pereira started with the basic architectural scheme of the tower. The model was discarded because the usually smaller floors of a tower limit space available for library collections, require a larger staff to control multiple floors, and vertical circulation needs can restrict a person to a relatively small area of the total building because of the time required to move vertically by stair or elevator.

Pereira then considered flattening the tower to create a cube or box, which reduces the problems of vertical travel by creating larger floor areas to allow for easier organization of collections. However, the cube architectural form has less visual impact and the window to floor ratio is reduced.

Pereira considered the pattern of area accessible in any given time in a multistory building. By extending the middle floors, the cube transformed into a flattened sphere

and restored the high window to floor ratio. The sphere provides a single, large circular floor at the center where there is space for a proportionately large number of people and books. The floors above and below become progressively smaller, so that from the center of the central floor, the outer rim of stacks on the other floors are equidistant once taking into account vertical movement by stairs or elevators. Initially, eighty percent of the Library's collection was housed in the three central floors of the stacks—floors 5, 6, and 7—with the plan that no book would be more than 100 yards or two minutes away from any study point.

The sphere was chosen as the basic form for the Central University Library in part because of the unusual shape that could create a powerful image for the University center, but also because it best satisfied the need for expansion and the highest possible level of library operation.

Once this conceptual design was approved, work on the design of the structural system began. This was during the Vietnam War, and both steel prices and the costs of fabricating and erecting the necessary type of steel truss system were increasing at an alarming rate. Pereira noted that costs related to reinforced concrete were not increasing nearly so fast and began studies to eliminate as much structural steel as possible in order to keep the building within the agreed-upon construction budget.

These studies produced a building that was framed in concrete up to the second level of the spheroid, with a steel truss above. While the scheme came within the budget, the truss created an interior planning problem on the second level that limited the flexibility of planning furniture, book cases and other uses. For these reasons, a third and final structural scheme was developed, using only reinforced concrete.

The all-concrete system provided a new dimension and vocabulary in design. Concrete, unlike structural steel, can be left in its natural state and is fire proof. It has the plastic quality of being able to take almost any shape and texture, the only limitation being the texture and design of the form in which it is cast. If you look more closely at the concrete, you will see the individual wood grain impressions from the framing. This board-form is considered a key architectural feature of this building.

The lower two floors of the building were built first so that the Forum level could be used as a platform for the scaffolding to hold the form work in place until the building was virtually complete. Core building infrastructure, such as the air handlers, were put into place and the building literally built around them.

Even as it was being designed, the University recognized that the building would not be sufficient for the ongoing needs of a growing campus and asked that Pereira propose options for future expansion. One scheme called for attaching structures to the base of the building and cascading them down the sides of the canyon to the north. However, later changes in regulations by the California Coastal Commission and seismic safety meant that those original designs needed to be rethought.

In 1992, Gunnar Birkerts, most famously known for designing the Corning Museum of Glass, was brought on to propose an addition that would double the assignable square feet of the library and meet the needs of a new generation of students. Birkerts deliberately subordinated his design to the existing structure. By crafting two underground wings surrounding the original pedestal on three sides, Birkerts was able to provide the necessary extra space while preserving the building's unique silhouette.

The roof of the addition is a green roof, covered with assorted ground covers and plants. Birkerts opened the seam between the new and old to form "daylight canyons," which bring daylight into the underground spaces of the addition. The faceted glass walls are intended to refer to the original geological formations of the area, like transparent fault lines in the rock. Similarly, five crystalline skylights jut through the mantle to allow daylight to enter into the lower interior atrium gardens. At night these skylights project the interior light as a manifestation of the space below.

In 2015, the Library began a revitalization initiative to transform and update the most heavily-used interior public spaces to meet the evolving needs of 21st century students and scholars in our increasingly digital world. Audrey Geisel again showed her patronage to the Library by spearheading the campaign with a \$3 million donation.

The first phase of the revitalization was the construction of a cafe within the Library, meeting the caffeine needs of students. In recognition of her generosity, the cafe was named Audrey's Cafe and Lounge. The Library completed a remodel of its 8th Floor in 2018, removing book stacks and creating a silent study space with epic views across campus. The final and most extensive phase was our Floor 2 Remodel completed in September 2022. Kevin deFreitas was the Executive Architect and drew on the original interior images of Pereira's design as well as the natural elements of Birkerts in order to bridge the past with current design concepts, while creating new flexibility for the interior in anticipation of changing needs in the future.