

Space, Place and Behaviour in the Seattle Central Library

Tuesday 15th June, 2021

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Yearning for familiar, communal spaces...

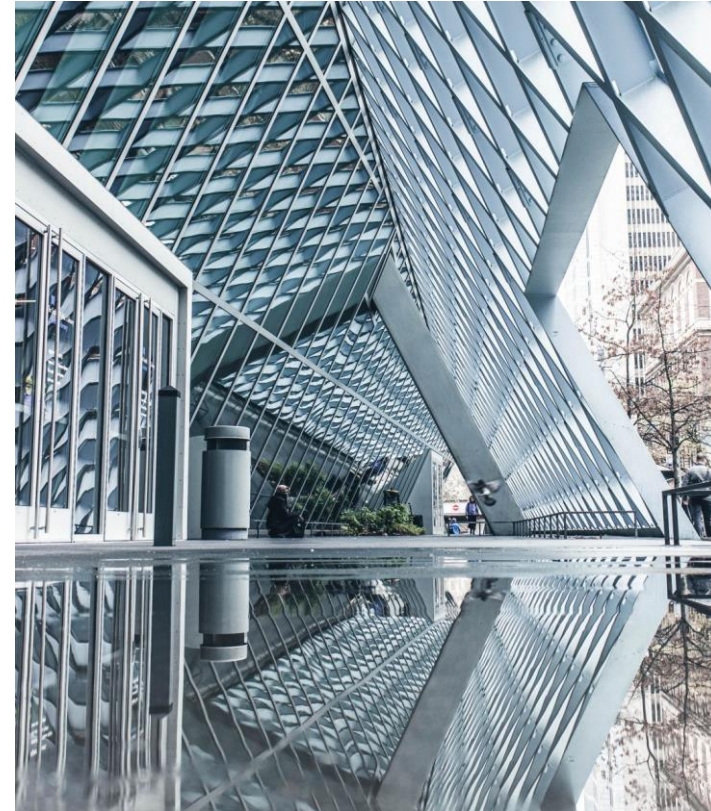


Seattle Central Library



Research Questions

- Q1. How can a building be both outstanding and defective?
- Q2. Is it possible to find the causes of this incongruity?



Praise for the library

“At a dark hour, Seattle’s new Central Library is a blazing chandelier to swing your dreams upon. If an American city can erect a civic project as brave as this one, the sun hasn’t set on the West. In more than 30 years of writing about architecture, this is the most exciting building it has been my honor to review.”

(Muschamp, 2004).



Praise for the library



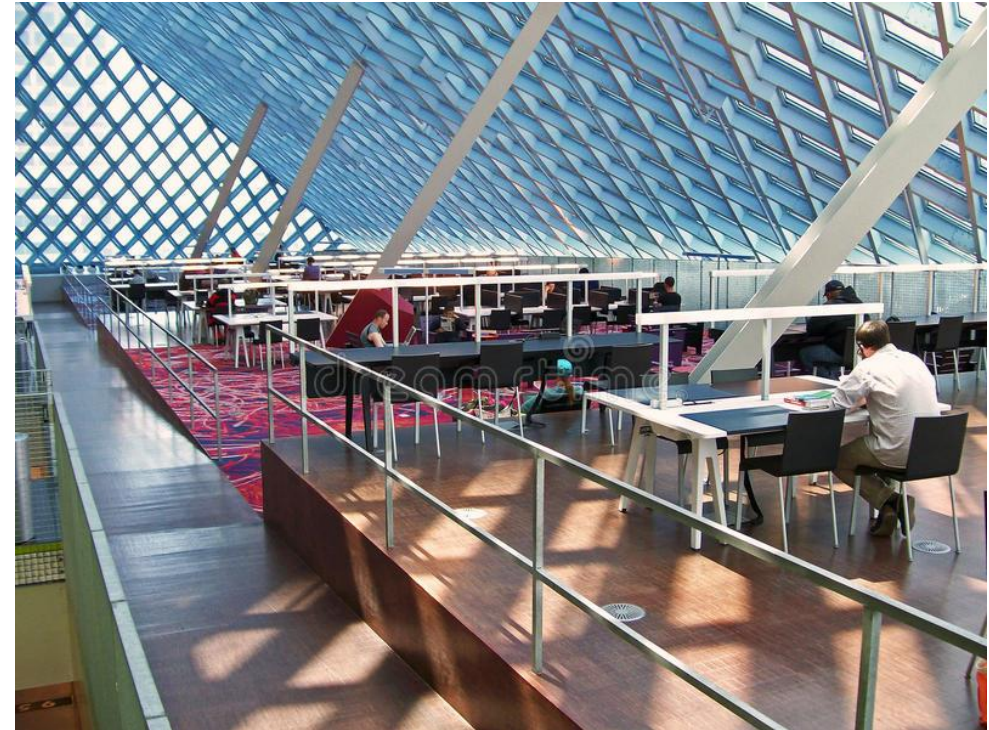
“Seattle’s new downtown library is so striking, so revolutionary, so odd and so lovely that one struggles to find a metaphor to explain it.”

(Dietrich, 2004).

Praise for the library

“Spaces are now designed especially for different modes of reading, from cozy corners with comfortable reading chairs to monumental reading rooms that elevate the act of reading by situating readers at long rows of tables within a community of intellectual engagement”

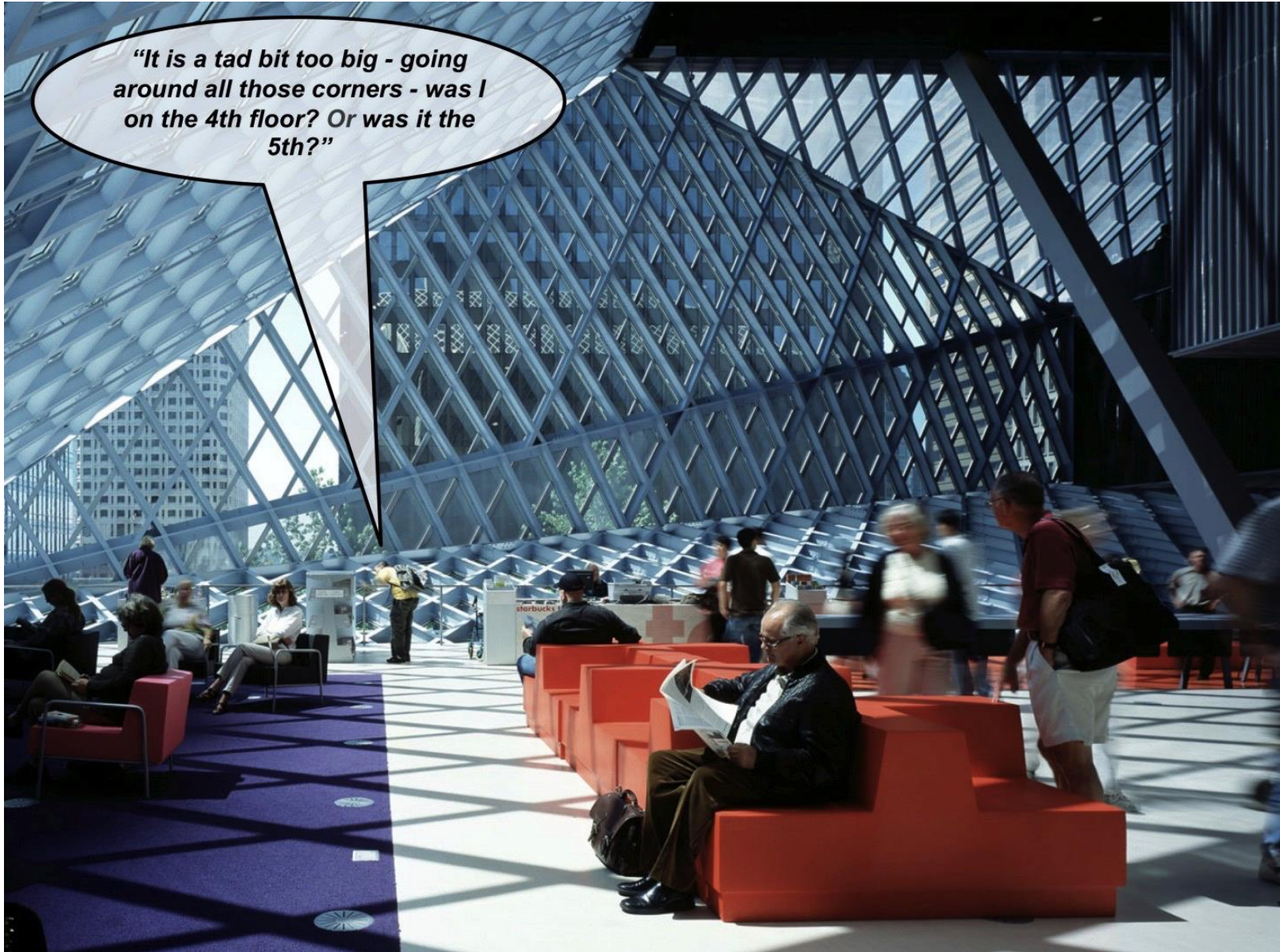
(Van Slyck, quoted in Mattern, 2007)



Praise for the Library

“Perhaps no other Seattle building has involved so many really bright people, thinking really hard, about what architecture is supposed to accomplish.”

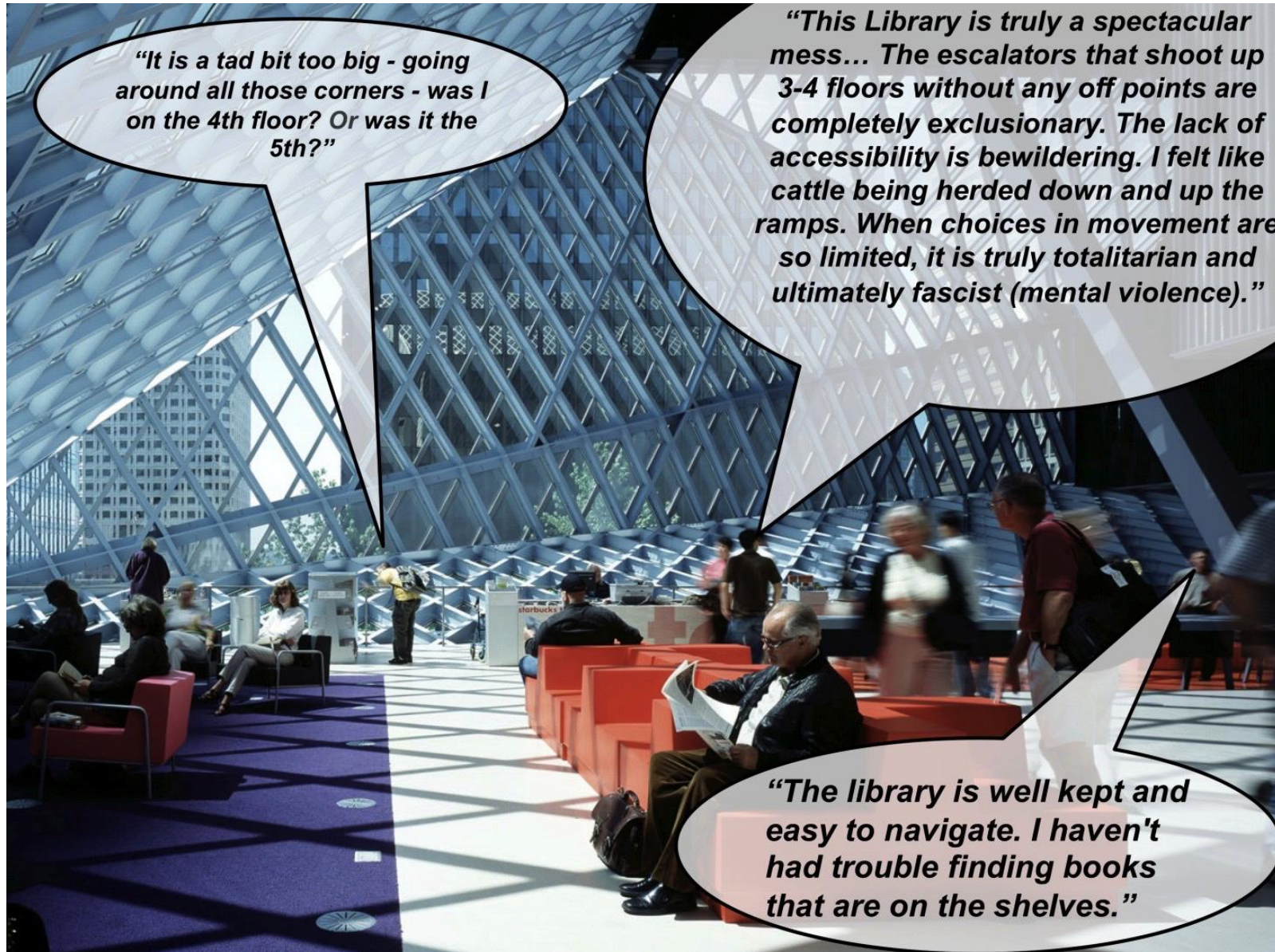
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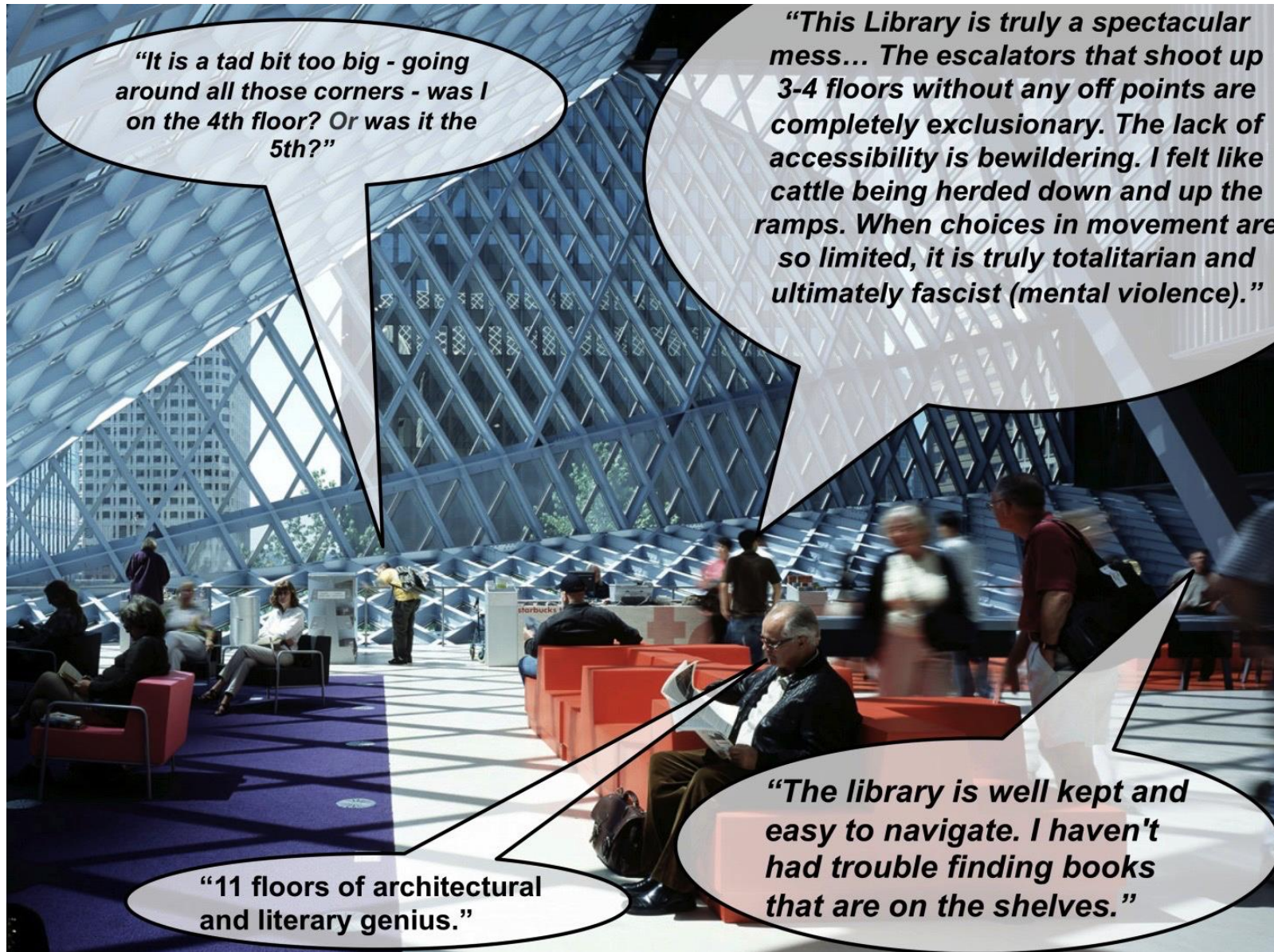
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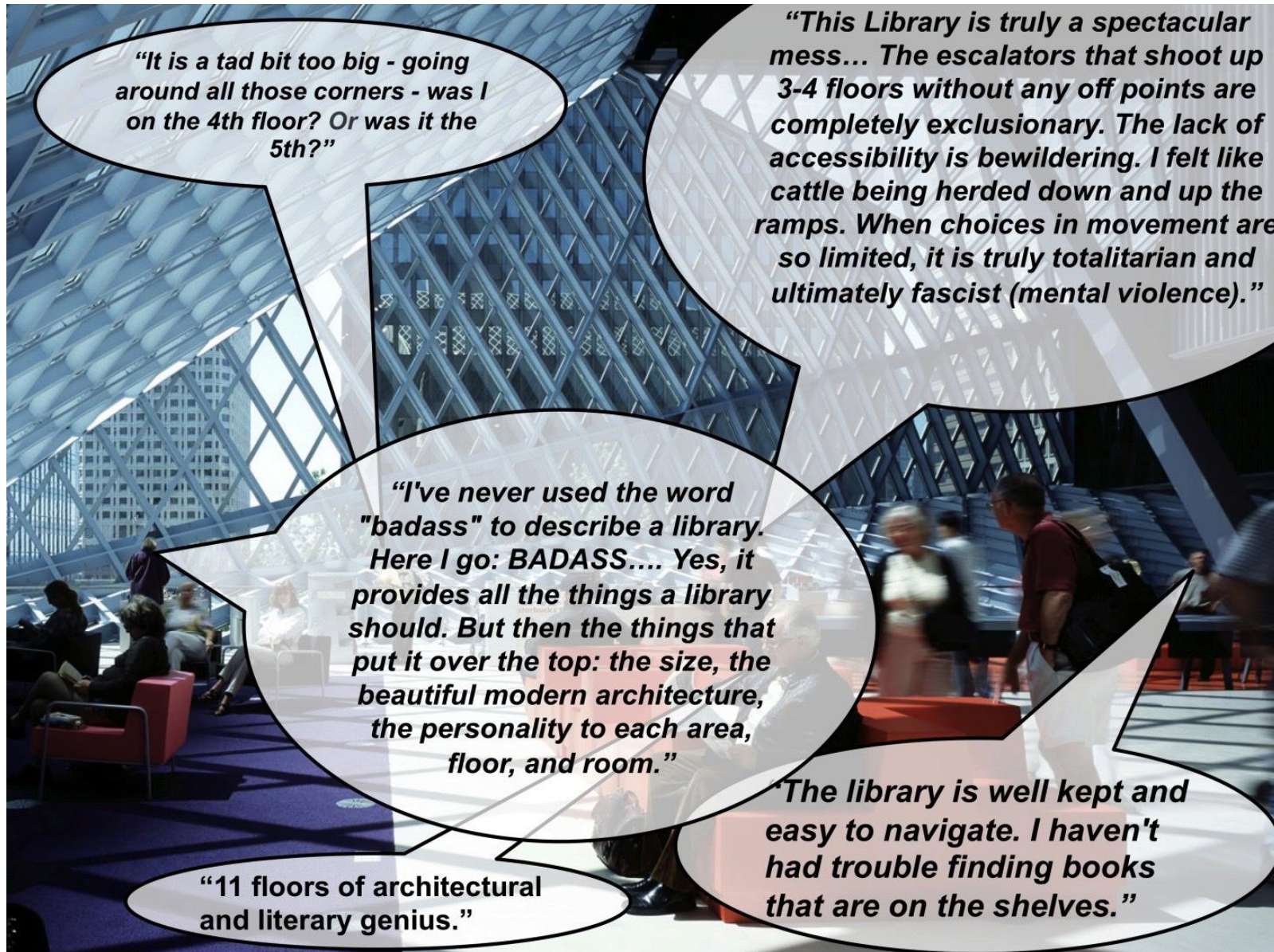


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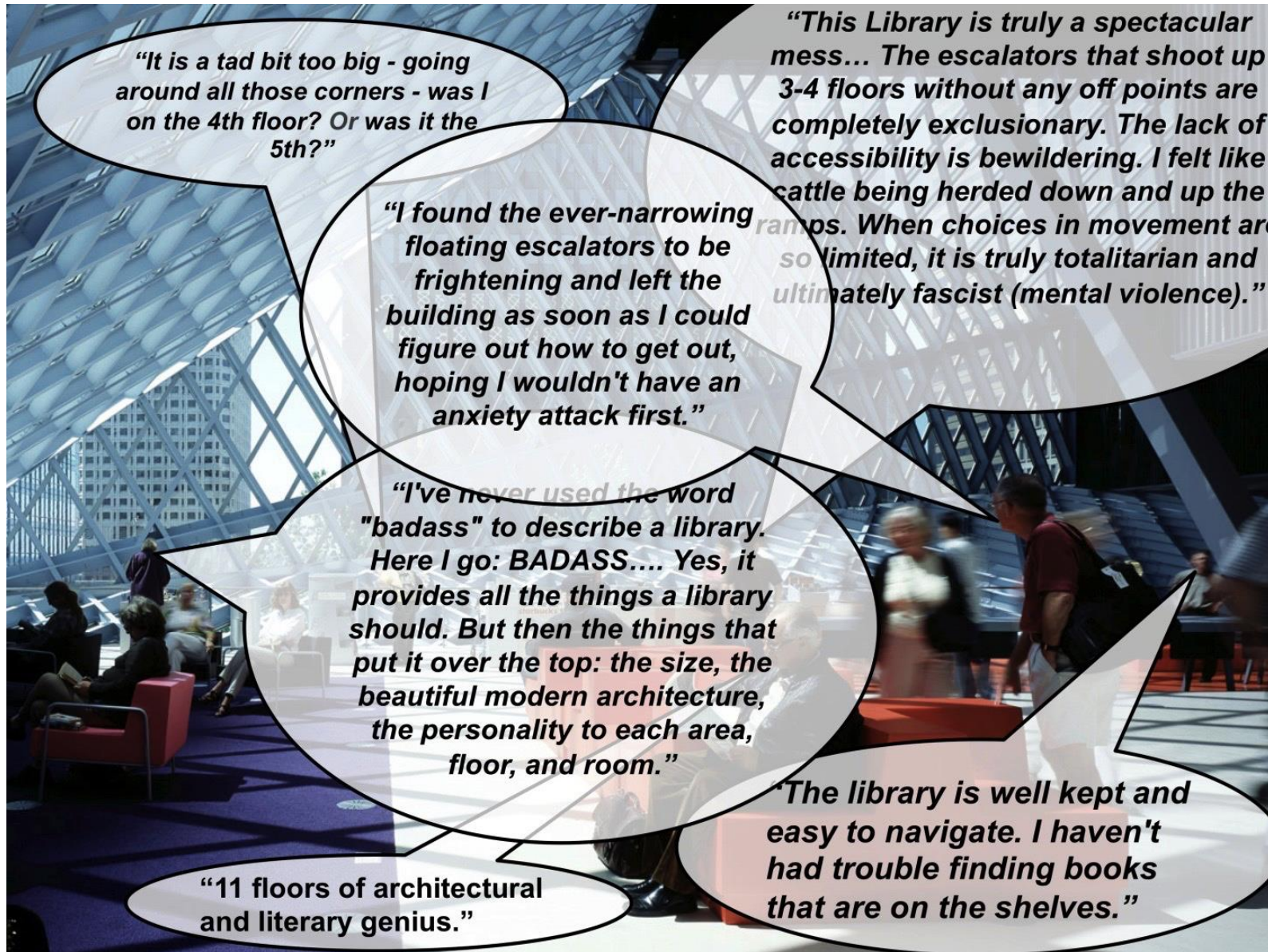
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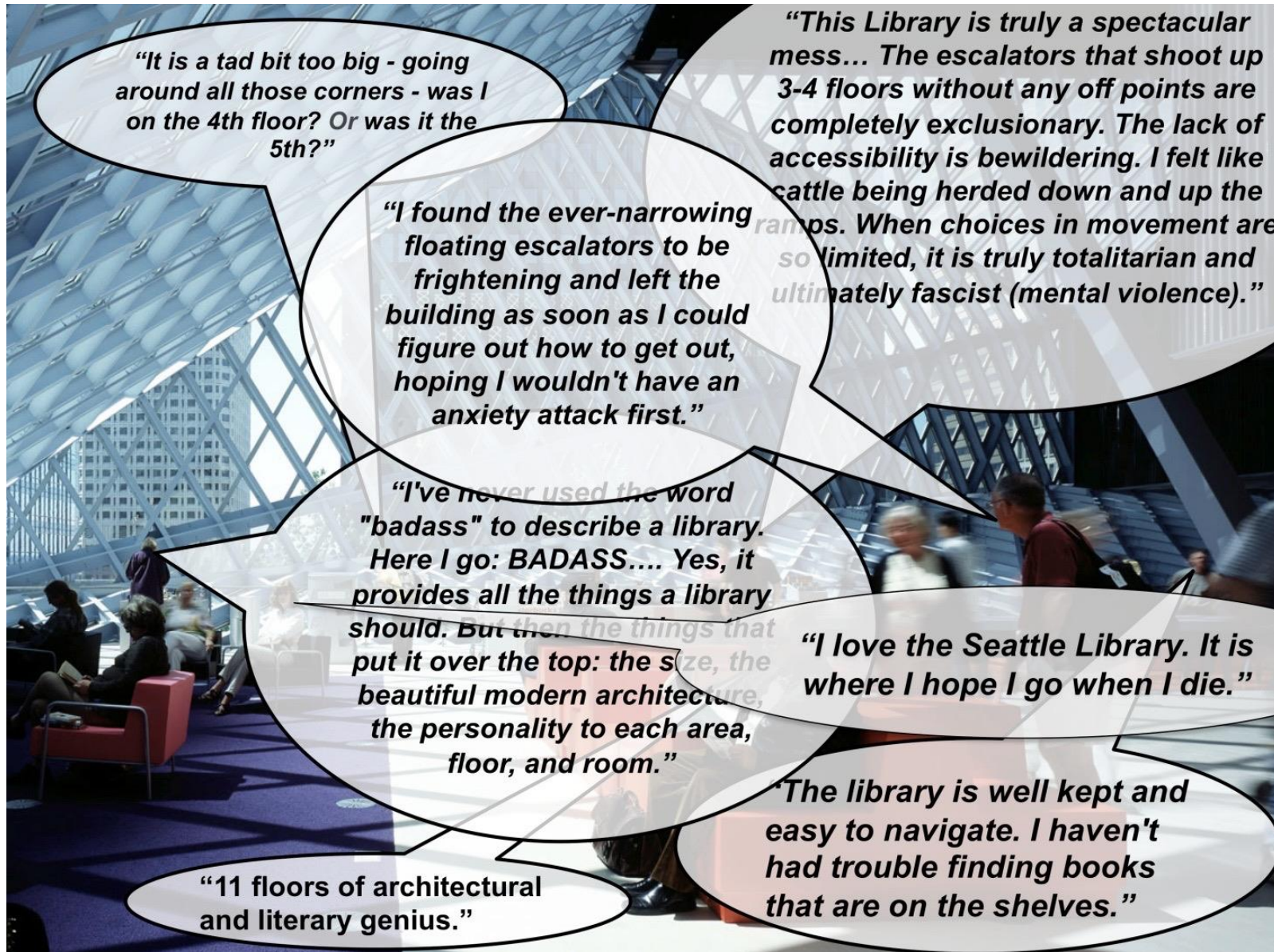
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"I love the Seattle Library. It is where I hope I go when I die."

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The Project Architect



“The wayfinding wasn't done perfectly, to put it kindly... When you understand the building, it is very simple—just a series of boxes.

But what we didn't understand is, to the uninitiated person... it can be complex if they don't understand that.

What we thought is blatantly obvious, isn't.”

(Joshua Prince-Ramus)

The Chief Librarian



“The way-finding isn't working. By the second or third day, we had to put up signs to help people”

(Deborah Jacobs, Chief Librarian, 2004)

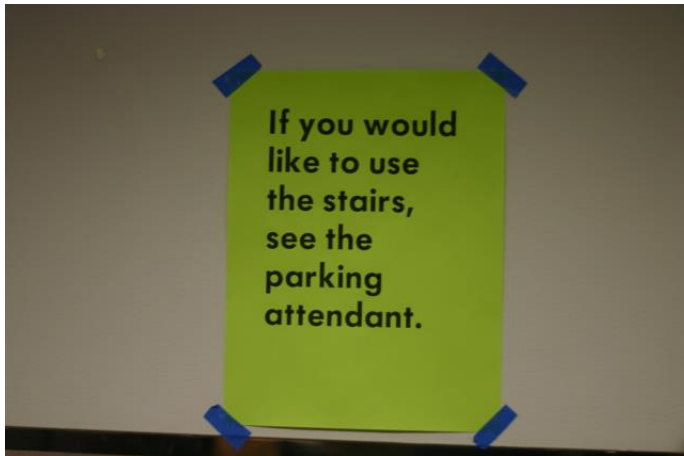
The Signage Designer



“It is not without heart-breaking irony that we acknowledge a near-total lack of legibility...”

While librarians themselves should be commended for their improvisational tactics, overall the patrons confront a constant meddle, with one organizational layer of information Scotch-taped over another.”

(Bruce Mau, 2005, p.242)



you have reached the
bottom of the book
spiral

to continue down:
take the stairs behind
you to level 5 and to
escalators to the 5th and
4th avenue exits

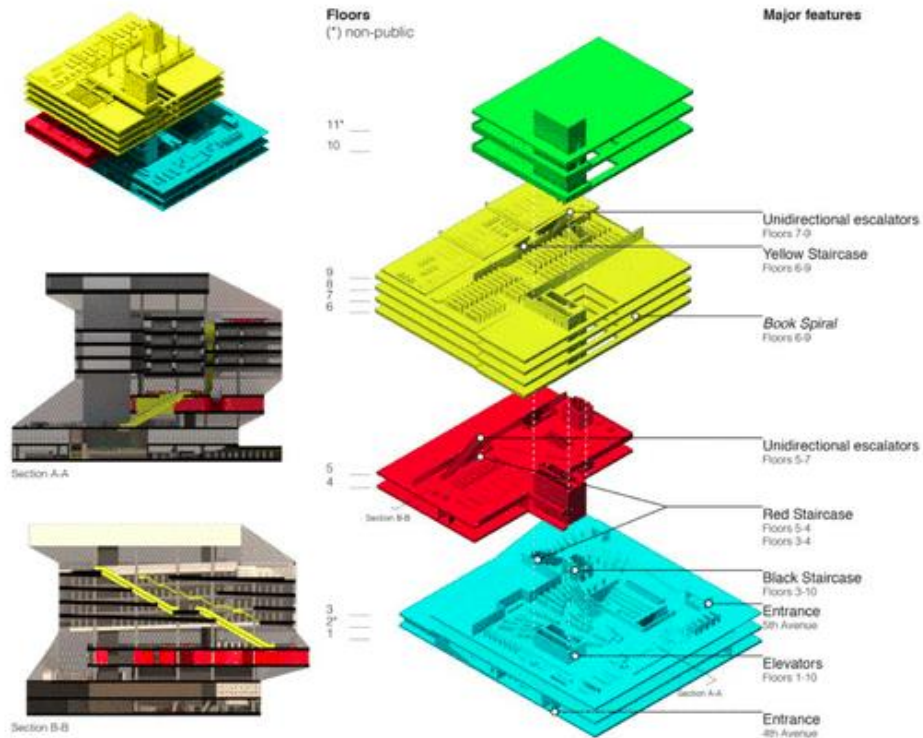
or

take the elevator
located behind you to
the right

stairs



Analysis of Seattle Central Library



What makes the Seattle Central Library complicated?

- Cognitive Mapping
 - Stack of 5 buildings
 - Heterogeneous layouts
 - non-alignment of floor plates
- Decision Making
 - Non-reversibility of routes
 - Escalators by-passing floors
 - One-way Hyperlinks, vertical dead-ends
 - Poor visibility of vertical connections

Imagining the User

- Were the problems with this building a result of the architects failing to ‘put themselves into the shoes’ of the users during the design process?



Imagining the User

To understand the Seattle Library...
the architects built a mock-up:

“We also [built] the book ramp. We basically did one bay of it and we went from ground level, maybe 6 feet high... And even the public was invited to examine it, including disabled people who could test whether they could actually use the wheelchairs.”

(Yaneva, 2009)



Imagining the User

“Information gatherers will take the elevator directly to their pre-selected materials, while knowledge acquirers will wander through the book spiral, hoping to serendipitously discover resources within a general subject area. Browsers can simply climb the ramp...and elevator stops throughout the spiral are labelled with the Dewey Decimal numbers....”

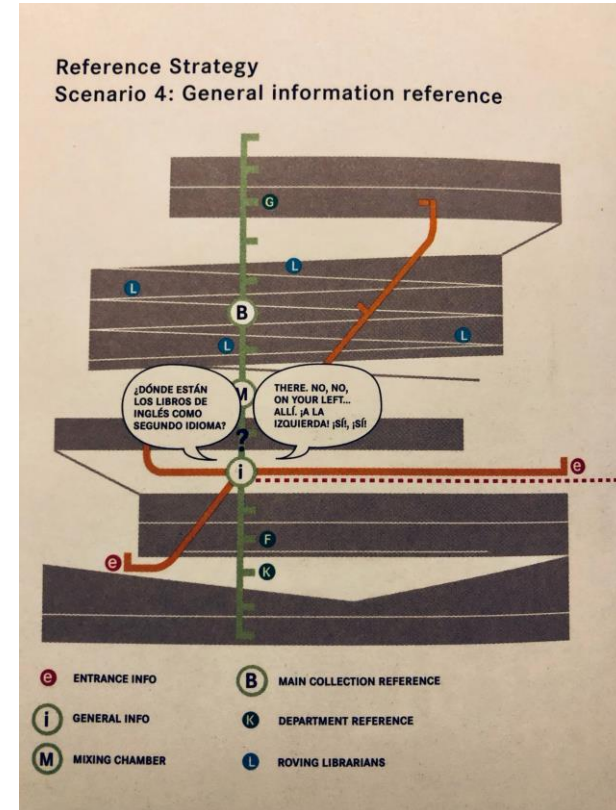
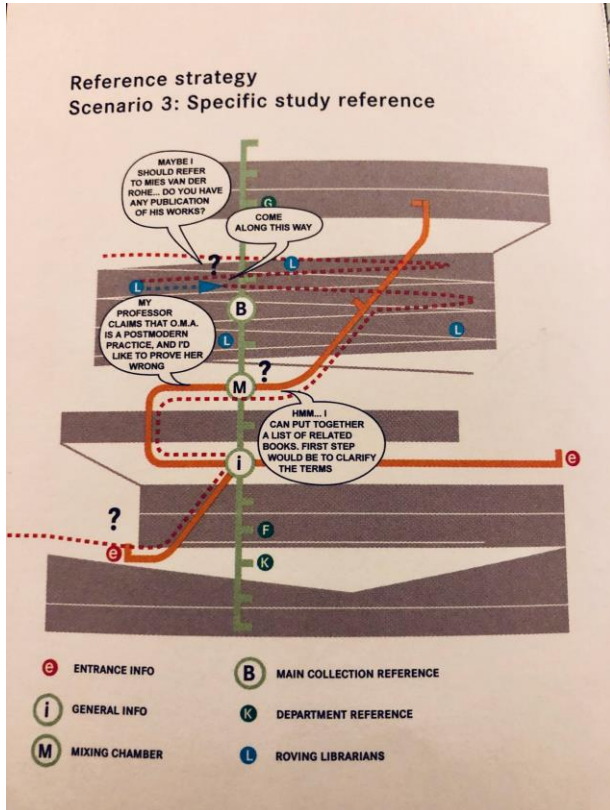
(Mattern, 2007, p.119).



Imagining the User

- A persona is a description of a user archetype that can serve as a guide in the design process.
- A persona may be synthesised from ‘field activities’ such as interviews and work observations resulting in a representation of an individual that embodies the characteristics of a target user population.
- The origin of personas most likely comes from the theatrical tradition.
- Designers may gain insight without having to consult real users.

Reference Strategies / Personas



OMA & the Library User

There is strong evidence that OMA thought deeply about the role of the user and about navigation in the building.

1. Public mock-up on a section of the book spiral and subsequent test with wheelchair users
2. The distinction between user-types: 'knowledge acquirers', 'information gatherers' and 'hang-outers'
3. The use of 'personas' or different user-scenarios, which is quite innovative in architectural practice

Conclusions

Theory 1: the desire for 'usability' came into conflict with the desire to overturn expectations (to be contrary) and in some cases the desire to be 'edgy' won out (possibly in other cases the usability won out, for example the requirement for the stair from level to 3 to 4 was a fire-escape requirement and not an original architectural intention.)

Theory 2: it is an effect of **complexity**. The building is spatially and programmatically so complex that it is simply impossible to predict all interactions that emerge from the interrelation between the two. However experienced an architect may be, aspects of final use become unpredictable when the building is this complex.

Clearly these two theories are not mutually exclusive!

Thank you for attending, any questions?
