Renowned architect embraces Boise main library project

International architect Moshe Safdie designs on the grandest scale: Raffles City in Chongqing, China; Marina Bay Sands in Singapore; and dozens more. Architectural Digest spotlighted 11 Iconic Moshe Safdie buildings in 2016.

And now the Somerville, Massachusetts-based Safdie Architects is in the last month or so of drawing up a conceptual design for a new Boise main library.

Safdie acknowledges the Boise library is among the smallest projects he’s undertaken, but Safdie personally shepherded his proposal through the city of Boise interview process with finalists for the library conceptual design competition. He flew to Boise two or three times to meet with city officials and also walked the library property.

“We were very excited about the Boise project,” Safdie said. “It seems to have all the right ingredients from our perspective.”

In early April, the Boise project was the top project on the Safdie Architects website home page, above Raffles City with its four 820-foot towers and two 1,148-foot towers; the National Medal of Honor Museum in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina; above the Albert Einstein Learning and Research Center in Sao Paolo, Brazil; and above the Jewel Changi Airport in Singapore (insert link).

“Anything we take on becomes a top story,” Safdie told the Idaho Business Review. “There is love and care for everything we take on.”

The Boise City Council on Feb. 13 awarded a 120-day, $495,000 contract to draw up the basic look or concept of a new main library at Capitol Boulevard and River Street budgeted at $60 million to $70 million. Safdie told the city at that time that work was expected to be completed in 12 weeks or by mid-May.

After that, if the city is satisfied with the concept, Safdie Architects and its local partner CSHQA would likely provide the architectural designs. That is a second contract yet to be negotiated.

The city seeks a 150,000-square-foot library complex with 110,000 square feet for the library, 20,000 square feet for the city Department of Arts & History and 20,000 square feet for a 400-seat event space. The desire is to start construction in mid-2019 and have a new main library open in mid-2021.

Safdie’s preliminary ideas

Safdie was drawn to Boise’s desire to incorporate a theater and arts and history into the main library, along with the library’s site within steps of the Boise River, Julia Davis Park and proximity to downtown.

“I walk around a site and try to decipher it,” he said about his standard process in evaluating a project. “I can never design a project without being at the site.”

As an event center, the city simply envisioned what is called a “black box” in the theater world — typically four black walls and a flat floor. Safdie already has thoughts of how to enliven the black box by adding a daylight option with windows.

Safdie and his team are still tossing around multiple design options for the overall library with nothing specific in place yet. Neither Safdie nor the city of Boise were willing to share any preliminary drawing.
However, he does have some ideas that likely will progress to the final concept. Safdie wants to orient the library toward the Boise River with a "lens-like glass wall facing the water" for the reading room and children's library. He envisions entrances on "any side" but the main entrance likely facing north onto River Street and toward downtown.

"We're going to have the building literally embrace the river physically," Safdie said.

The city's initial conceptual plan for the main library — prepared by Gardner Company and Architectural Nexus — handed off to Safdie two basic concepts revolving around keeping or demolishing the 1940 warehouse that houses much of the main library now. The concept also involves the option of on-site or off-site parking.

Safdie noted the warehouse has low ceilings, inconvenient columns, doesn't meet code, and "it's a big block that cuts off downtown" from the rest of the library property.

"I think, considering everything right now, (the warehouse) is not worth keeping," Safdie said.

Safdie has made no decisions about on-site or off-site parking.

"It's too early to say," he said, however adding: "We have 700 cars under the Salt Lake City library and it's critical to its success."

Safdie has not designed many libraries, but he does have two signature libraries in the greater region in this docket: He designed the Salt Lake City Public Library main branch and the Vancouver Public Central Library in British Columbia.

Safdie was born in Israel and moved as a teen to Montreal, where he graduated from McGill University and also designed his first iconic structure, the Habitat 67 housing complex for the Expo 67 world's fair in Montreal in 1967.

The open question remains finding an iconic design for Boise that fits the current $70 million budget. Or adjusting the budget upward.

The city is employing a construction manager/general contractor approach with Okland Construction of Salt Lake City, which is actively involved with pricing the Safdie concepts as they evolve. The CM/GC process creates a guaranteed maximum price, which rules out cost overruns.

"The ambition is to do something special," Safdie said, acknowledging the $70 million limit. "It means we need to work hard and be careful about resources. We have to be precise about how we do this. Here we don't have any margin of error."

**Boise's CSHQA landed a big fish to design new main library**

Boise architecture firm CSHQA brought Safdie Architects to the Boise Main Library projects.

Projects of this size often involve a large out-of-state architecture firm partnering with a local architecture firm. In this case, CSHQA wanted to be involved in the library and sought a suitable partner.

CSHQA President Kent Hanway researched architecture firms across the country with civic and library experience that would "differentiate" CSHQA from the national partners other local architecture firms might choose. He settled on Safdie Architects in Somerville, Massachusetts, which specializes in large-scale iconic structures around the world.

Why did Hanway think he stood a chance with Safdie for a library far smaller than Boise's Walmart?

He knew Safdie had been to Boise before as a candidate to design J.R. Simplot's tractor museum, which eventually became JUMP. Also, in his global forays, Safdie designed the nearby main libraries in Salt Lake City and Vancouver, British Columbia.

"He'd been to Boise and liked the community," Hanway said. "We took the attitude 'Let's go big or go home.' All they could say is no. I literally picked up the phone and called them."

Hanway had never had contact with Safdie Architects. His first point of contact was Christa Mahar, Safdie's communications director. Mahar transferred him to Greg Reaves, a Safdie principal and project director for some of the firm's most complex global projects.

In the national-local architect partnership scenario, specifically in this case, Safdie does nearly all the design work at the conceptual stage, while CSHQA is the "local boots on the ground," dealing with government entities, Hanway said.

Once the project moves into architectural designs, Hanway said the design work will likely be a 50-50 split between Safdie and CSHQA architect. Once construction starts, CSHQA will be primarily involved, Hanway said.
Public Library Association (PLA) in Philadelphia
March 21-24th, 2018
Ellen Druckenbrod, Collection Development Librarian
Acquisitions and Technical Services Department

There were many outstanding sessions offered at this well-attended (over 7800 attendees) library conference. Here are summaries of my top three favorite presentations:

Lost in the Library? Never Again With User-Centered Design

This session was presented by Bridget Quinn-Carey, Director/CEO of the Hartford, CT Public Library, along with two design professionals, Maxine Bleiweis and Margaret Sullivan.

This session contained several attention-grabbing takeaways:

Make “Desk” a four-letter word!

Ban the phrase “On the desk.”

Big desks and monitors/screens are barriers.

If you must have a desk and a screen, position the screen to the side.

Take the desk away and make staff “work the room”.

Identify the points of confusion in your building and put staff there.

Journey Map your library.

Overstaff your library programs, give each staff member a task/role, and tell staff they can’t talk to each other.

More info here: https://tinyurl.com/y7dz4cfu
Libraries Taking the Lane: Using Bikes to Connect Communities

Panel Discussion with staff from six libraries who currently have successful book bike programs.

“Biking is one of the most income-diverse activities in the country. As libraries strive to move beyond our walls, partner with grassroots organizations, leverage place-making movements, and empower our patrons, bikes are emerging as more than a means of transportation. Following a brief presentation by panelists, facilitated discussions will examine how bike programs allow libraries to reach underserved patrons. From youth-led bike shops to a national movement of book bikes, cycling connects communities.” —from the promo blurb for this session.

Boise is already known as a bike-friendly community, so wouldn’t it be great if Boise Public Library had a book bike? The bikes are easy to customize (picture the one above with our library logo on it) and set up. They would be a great pop-up presence at the Saturday farmer’s markets, Treefort, holiday parades, May in Motion events, Twilight Criterium, or in one of our many parks or on the Greenbelt! Many libraries take along a wifi hotspot for customer access to the internet, provide games or crafts for the kiddos, hand out information about library programs, and make library cards on the spot. Several libraries also mentioned that they target underserved populations, such as veterans, homeless, and assisted living locations.
Great Expectations: Customer Service and the Future of Libraries

This session was presented by Alicia Snarr and Paula Wilson from the Maricopa County Library System, which is located in the Greater Phoenix area of Arizona.

Maricopa County Library District had a goal of wanting more people to use their services, and they wanted libraries that provided memorable experiences. They determined that one of the ways of reaching this goal was to make excellent customer service standards a requirement for their staff. They realized that staff will make up their own definition of great customer service if library management doesn’t make it clear what is expected. Maricopa modeled their customer service training after Disney Institute’s staff training: https://disneyinstitute.com/

The key customer service initiatives are listed below:

Make Everyone Feel Welcome
Treat All Customers Fairly/Have Enthusiasm for Each Customer
Anticipate Customer Needs/Reduce Customer Effort
Proactively Look for Unique Customer Service Opportunities
Inspire Curiosity/Empower the Customer With Knowledge
Creatively Solve Problems/See the Person, not just the issue
Personalize the Experience
Act with Integrity

When a customer is upset, use the HEAT approach:

Hear them out
Empathize
Apologize
Thank them for their time and patience

More information on each Expectation, along with 3-5 observable, trainable, and coachable behaviors for each statement can be found on the Maricopa County Library District’s web page: https://mcldaz.org/custom/about/greatexpectations/
Dear Mr. Booe,

Just wanted to let you know how pleased we were with the large meeting room at your library and to compliment and thank the staff who were working Wednesday evening, April 11. They had the room set up when we arrived at 6 pm for our 7 pm meeting. The chairs and tables were arranged as needed and the projector ready to go. They set up one of the library’s computers for me, as I am at a complete loss when it comes to that sort of thing, and added in a microphone. And when the computer didn’t function to their liking, they traded it out for a new one and then gave me a quick lesson on operating the system.

We received many comments and compliments on the room; lighting, equipment, comfort and location. For several of the attendees, this was their first visit and they were very pleased with the whole library.

We will definitely be using the facility in the future for our large and small meetings and gatherings.

Thank you again and thank the staff for me please.

Sincerely,

Donna Burns, President

Warm Springs Mesa Neighborhood Association