



Vancouver Public Library's Garden in the Sky

Sarah Radi, BA, LEED AP BD+C, WELL AP
Light House, Vancouver, BC

James Kao, AIBC, LEED AP BD+C, B.Arch., BSc.
DA Architects and Planners, Vancouver, BC

Two decades after the completion of the Vancouver Public Library (VPL) Central Branch in downtown Vancouver, the joint venture architectural team of Moshe Safdie and DA Architects along with landscape architect Cornelia Oberlander (1921-2021) reunited to fulfill the original design intent: a publicly accessible rooftop garden.

The VPL Central expansion project boasts a commitment to sustainability and connecting to nature. The project purposefully reconnected access to the green roof, but also brings biophilic design elements into the new interior space, feeding an innate love of and need to be around nature. The library expansion project is LEED® Gold® certified under the C1 v1.0 rating system.

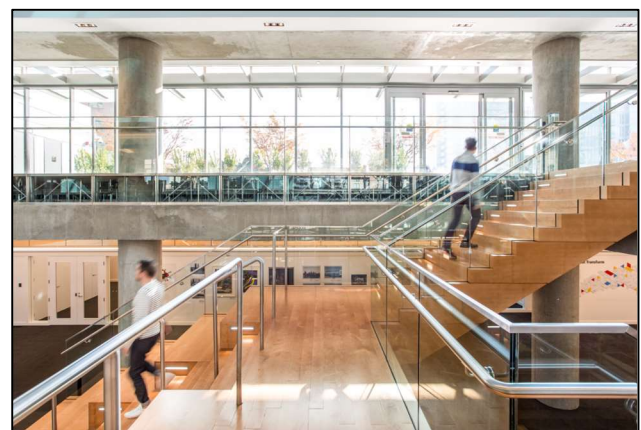
Original Design Intent

The original design included a roof garden and additional formal gardens, along with an outdoor amphitheater. Shortly thereafter in 1993, and with great disappointment from the original design team, the public roof garden was replaced with an inaccessible green roof and two-storied shell space (Levels 8 & 9) that was leased to the Provincial Government. In 2015, the 20-year lease ended, affording the library an opportunity to reclaim the upper two-floors for the library use, and to reinstate the original design intent of a publicly accessed roof garden. This allowed the project to also pursue sustainability features and to celebrate the space through beauty and a connection to nature.

A Changing Library

In light of this new opportunity, the design team took a deep look at how the role of the library has changed

in recent years – in particular how the rise of the internet has eroded the dominion of physical books. This shift has allowed for new ways of visualizing and programming a public library space. Now fully built (as of Fall 2019), the space includes an 80-seat theatre; a maple clad Feature Stair with bleacher style seating and glass cases built-in for art and information to be displayed; the “Vancouver Salon”, a wall devoted to art focusing on Vancouver and Indigenous art; Resident’s Offices in which VPL patrons can book appointments with scholars and artists including the Writer in Residence, Indigenous Storyteller in Residence, and Vancouver’s Poet Laureate; a traditional reading room; eating area; a Lounge; and numerous Multi-Purposes Rooms that can be programmed for any variety of activities. The renovation area totaled 43,800 sq. ft with a 20,000 sq. ft public exterior space.



Above: The feature wood bleacher/stair case installed at VPL Central Branch. Natural light pours in from the skylight above as well as the surrounding windows. These stairs serve as a place to read, for meetings, announcements, and performances.

Public Art and Biophilia

A thought-provoking piece of public art hangs above the feature staircase – *Adrift*, by artists Rebecca Belmore and Osvaldo Yero – floating beneath the feature sky light. This haunting piece entices patrons to ask, “carcass or boat?” and consider “our limited understanding of our ancient past and our inability to predict what is to come in time”. This displays powerful biophilic principles of change, aging, the patina of time, and our connection to natural cycles as days, seasons and even millennia pass. This conversation piece is a prompt to reflect on who we are and where we’re going.



Above: “Adrift”, by Rebecca Belmore and Osvaldo Yero, which is currently displayed in the newly renovated space at VPL Central Branch. The sculpture challenges our perception of and our relationship with time and change.

Biophilic design—that is, design principles founded in a love of nature—can be found throughout the new space, whether it be the literal representations (the roof garden and various trees to the north and south, pocket gardens, the views that allow for prospect around the city and the feature skylight) or more abstract representations (colour choices of furnishings, the connection to local culture and place, excitement from exploring the garden, dynamic and diffuse light all throughout, the pockets of refuge where patrons can reflect and recharge). This space is meant to be welcoming, rejuvenating, inspired by nature, beauty, and local culture – a space for all.

Design and Construction Challenges

Technically, the challenges for the project to overcome were daunting. The Provincial Government Offices had no connection to the lower floors of the library and the two main elevators stopped just below the Provincial Government Offices. Two small

express elevators were previously used by the Provincial Government staff. For the new renovation, the team extended the two main elevators and cut a hole in the concrete floor of Level 8 in order to add two escalators.

To bring the new escalator parts into the building (which was occupied during the renovation), contractors Smith Brothers Wilson temporarily removed portions of the existing skylight through which each escalator (segmented into three pieces) was dropped down through with a luffing crane. The heaviest of the three pieces was 10,000 lbs.

The project required the conversion of 7300 sq. ft. of the interior space into the new exterior garden. Months were spent chipping away concrete inch by inch in an occupied building. Luckily the public spaces were separated from the construction zone by the office level on Level 7. Library staff gamely agreed to withstand one year of deconstruction noise for the greater benefit of the library.

Now fully accessible, this main garden on Level 9 is physically connected through bridges and stairs to existing 6000 sq. ft. patios on Level 8 to form a walking loop. The curve of the building naturally guides patrons around this walking loop, taking occupants on a journey and back again, all the while allowing for views of beautiful Vancouver from a garden in the sky.

Vancouver Central Branch is located at 350 W Georgia St in downtown Vancouver, BC, Canada. We encourage all to visit this iconic building and enjoy the garden in the sky.



Sarah Radi
Project Manager
sarah(at)light-house.org

James Kao
Partner
jkao(at)da-architects.ca