

Reinventing the Billings Public Library

A sustainable, technologically advanced and beautifully dynamic pavilion of community pride and iconic presence anchors Montana's largest city

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIK PETERSEN

LIGHT, SPACE AND BOOKS DOMINATE the Billings Public Library. In this new building, architect Will Bruder created "a comfortable room with a view in which to learn and to grow, a place to answer a question, plan a trip, discover a career, engage an idea, a place to riff on life as it is or daydream about life as it could be." The "room" is vast, spanning a city block with 66,000 square feet over two stories. Here, from the realization of thoughtful design, all minds that enter can freely think, reaching beyond



the confines of metal, glass and concrete.

The new structure incorporates the efforts of man and Mother Nature. Robyn Peterson, director of the Yellowstone Art Museum, says of the library, "It is a great pleasure to move through the airy, cleanly designed spaces of the new library." Contentment is felt upon the first steps into the building. In the lobby, natural light cascades from a skylight, two stories above. Sound is moderated with natural and manufactured materials, synchronously combining voices from within, roaring cars from outside and the grind of espresso beans from an on-site cafe. Sun and sky are welcomed contributors to temperature with ultimate control from an underfloor air distribution system. Freshness seeps in from the nearby Rimrock Reflecting Pool, accompanied by the quiet resonance of splashing water.

Left: A group of children gather at the Rimrock Reflecting Pool, which is lit by a photo pane of the Sacrificial Cliffs by former Billings photographer Michael Sample. **Above:** Rachelle Telford reads to her sons Owen, 7, and Ty, 5, in the children's area at the Billings Public Library.



Left: The Billings Public Library exterior. The 66,000-square-foot library opened on January 6, 2014. There are some 200,000 volumes to check out. **Below:** The view from the second floor looking down through the skylight as a group of students pass through the lobby.





The expansive rectangular building is broken into elliptical elements. An ellipse, formed by intersecting a plane with a cone, offers interest and versatility. The oval shape carries into the stairwell, the skylight, the reflecting pool and the Story Tower, as well as in the borders and boundaries of the children's area and craft area. The help and reference desks are oval as is the staff conference table. An ellipse appears to orbit overhead in the center of the lobby, a ring of yellow resin panels with the names of donors and words from library believers. However, the signature elliptical space is the 44-foot Story Tower where tales reach the sky as they are told from a red throne.

Don Olsen of O2 Architects, the local partner for Bruder, says, "My biggest take on the library is that it's architecturally clean, honest and pure." The pristine palette allows the mind to focus. Simple orange lettering announces the Billings Public Library outside.

Above: The northeast corner on the second floor features a 22-foot wall of windows, allowing visitors a view of Billings and plenty of light to read by. **Right:** A young boy finds a quiet and colorful place to read.

Question marks dangle over the checkout and reference desks. Colorful lowercase block letters identify the entrance to the children's area. Opaque resin signs, marking specific sections, carry few words with the important word capitalized. Sight lines are unobstructed with lower bookshelves. A long grouping of study desks in the center of the second level and along the east windows allow for the eye and mind to move out.



"This library is familiar and surprising, massive yet minimal, mysteriously cloaked yet transparently ethereal — a form that carries both sunlight and shadow, snow and wind, with unexpected reflections and connections to the place," states Bruder. From Michael Sample's photo backdrop of the Rimrock Reflecting Pool of the Sacrificial Cliffs, to the use of Ryegate stone veneer at the entrance walls, to the reclaimed wood planks from the Underinner Motors building lining the outside of the Story Tower, pieces of Montana in actual and virtual ways are integrated throughout. Five coffee-sized "Extraordinary Tables" — built by Montana artists Scott Herries, Mark King, Colin Letts, James McGregor and Lee Proctor — in media including wood, concrete, steel, glass and stone provide more local contributions. But to experience the real sense of place, the northeast corner on the second floor offers the best testimonial with a 22-foot wall of windows. Views of the northern bordering sandstone rims are juxtaposed

Right: Students gaze skyward during storytime inside the Story Tower, a 44-foot high elliptical space that ends at the top with a skylight.



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Extraordinary Tables (left to right): James McGregor, Red Lodge; Lee Proctor, Bigfork; Colin Letts, Bozeman; Scott Herries, Missoula; Mark King, Whitefish

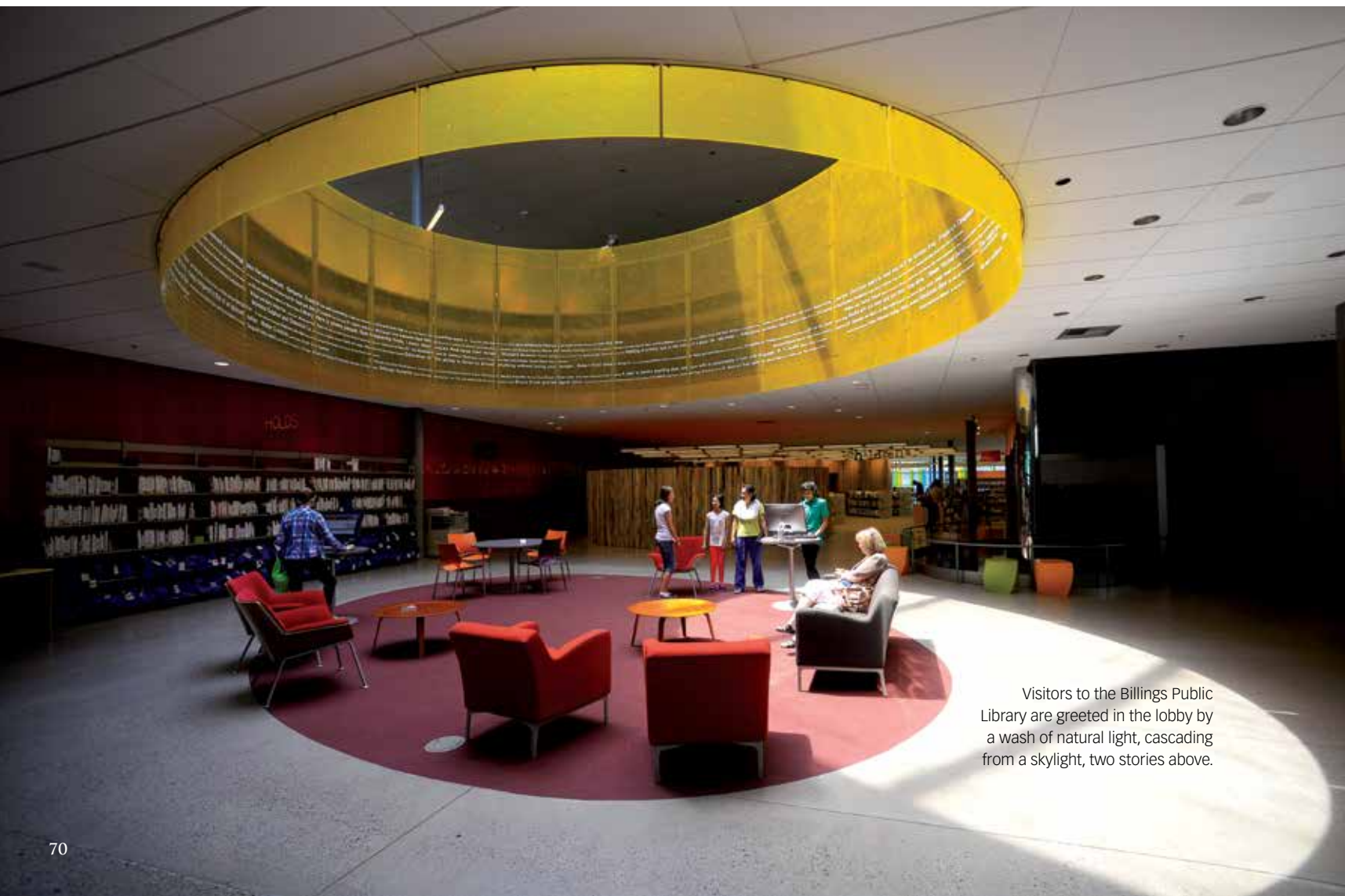
against the bustling street below. Stainless steel perforated scrim coverings soften direct solar lighting, preventing heat loss and gaining further play with the real and ethereal.

Library Director Bill Cochran emphasizes, "The building is designed to be incredibly flexible, so that it can remain usable and relevant for decades, even as the pace of technological change accelerates." A raised floor provides access and

creates space for the distribution of mechanical and electrical systems. Unsightly wires and unattractive ducting are eliminated, but more importantly, the layout allows for flexibility for future installations.

For the Billings Public Library, a building filled with light, space and books, Don Olsen believes "there was no attempt to copy an architectural style." Here Will Bruder has exceeded

expectations. "Our architectural vision for the new Billings Public Library is a sustainable, transparent, beautifully dynamic pavilion of community pride and iconic presence," says Olsen. After a multi-year fundraising effort, the new library cost just under \$20 million and stands as a testament to local priorities within Billings. For the community and the future, Bill Cochran predicts, "The library is a unique public space in Billings that will be a treat for the mind and senses for generations to come." **BSJ**



Visitors to the Billings Public Library are greeted in the lobby by a wash of natural light, cascading from a skylight, two stories above.



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Stella Fong spends time on land and water in Seattle, Billings and Big Sky. Her articles have appeared in The Washington Post, Blue Water Sailing and Yellowstone Valley Woman. When not writing she is fly fishing, bicycling and running.

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