



Photos: Tom Bonner, provided by Steven Ehrlich Architects

# Reading Materials

BY PATRICIA RHEE

**IT IS THE MISSION OF EVERY LIBRARY TO EXPOSE ITS PATRONS TO READING.** In the case of the new Westwood Branch Library in Los Angeles, exposure to structural steel and other building materials is also part of the experience.

Located near Westwood Village and the UCLA campus, the new library was designed in the spirit of the Case Study Houses that were built in the Los Angeles area after World War II. Like those homes, the project incorporates the idea of indoor-outdoor space, the expression of structural systems, and the use of natural materials, bringing the structural steel skeleton to the surface in an appealing way.

The entry plaza is composed of linear branch-integrated planters and shaded entries into the lobby and community room. The

exterior presents diverse and durable building materials, including naturally weathering copper, burnished concrete block, clear and translucent channel glass, resin-impregnated wood panels, and an exposed structural steel frame.

The first floor includes a public meeting room that can open up to the plaza. A two-story entry lobby leads library patrons up to the second floor main reading room. The reading room follows the same design concept and expression of materials as the exterior, with exposed steel columns, beams, and bracing, and even an exposed steel deck ceiling. The deck, a proprietary system manufactured by Epic Metals, is acoustical, using a spongy insulation in every other flute; the steel itself is perforated so that noise travels through and is absorbed by the insulation.



The architect chose to leave as much of the structure as possible exposed to library patrons and staff.

### Open to View

Due to California's well-known seismic issues, the structural system of the building is a steel moment frame combined with concrete masonry shear walls. Steel brace frames are exposed at the clerestory level and meet AISC *Code of Standard Practice* Architecturally Exposed Structural Steel (AESS) requirements (Section 10). As such, special intumescent paint was applied to the steel beams and columns for fireproofing, allowing the structural system to read through. Exterior steel on the sides and back is also coated with intumescent paint, given the close proximity to adjacent buildings. The idea is to express the beauty and nature of the steel, while maintaining a consistent aesthetic throughout. This way, the architecture is revealed, not hidden.

Not only is the structural system exposed in the reading room, but so are the building systems, and fire protection piping is routed through the ceiling beams. Steel interacts with the "plumbing" on the outside as well, as rain spouts are routed along the web and between the flanges of portions of the exterior steel.

### A Higher Degree of Care

When it came to fabrication, a lot more care had to be taken with the exposed steel in order to meet AESS requirements. Most steel is essentially "buried" in a building, but when it's exposed, directions need to be made very clear on the plans. In the Westwood Library, not only did exterior exposed beams serve an aesthetic purpose, they also served as part of the waterproof skin of the building. As such, no "rat holes" were allowed on the exposed members, and this had to be communicated properly in the plans.

The goal of the exposed steel of the

Westwood Branch Library didn't necessarily follow the typical exposed steel path of bending beams or using castellated steel for purposes of flair. Rather than altering the steel to transform it into an artistic element, the library's design allows the steel to simply speak for itself.

#### MSC

*Patricia Rhee is an associate with Steven Ehrlich Architects and was the project architect for the Westwood Branch Library.*

#### Owner

Los Angeles Public Library

#### Architect

Steven Ehrlich Architects, Culver City, Calif.

#### General Contractor

Sinianian Development, Inc., Tarzana, Calif.

#### Structural Engineer

William Koh and Associates, Los Angeles



All exposed steel in the library meets AISC's AESS requirements.