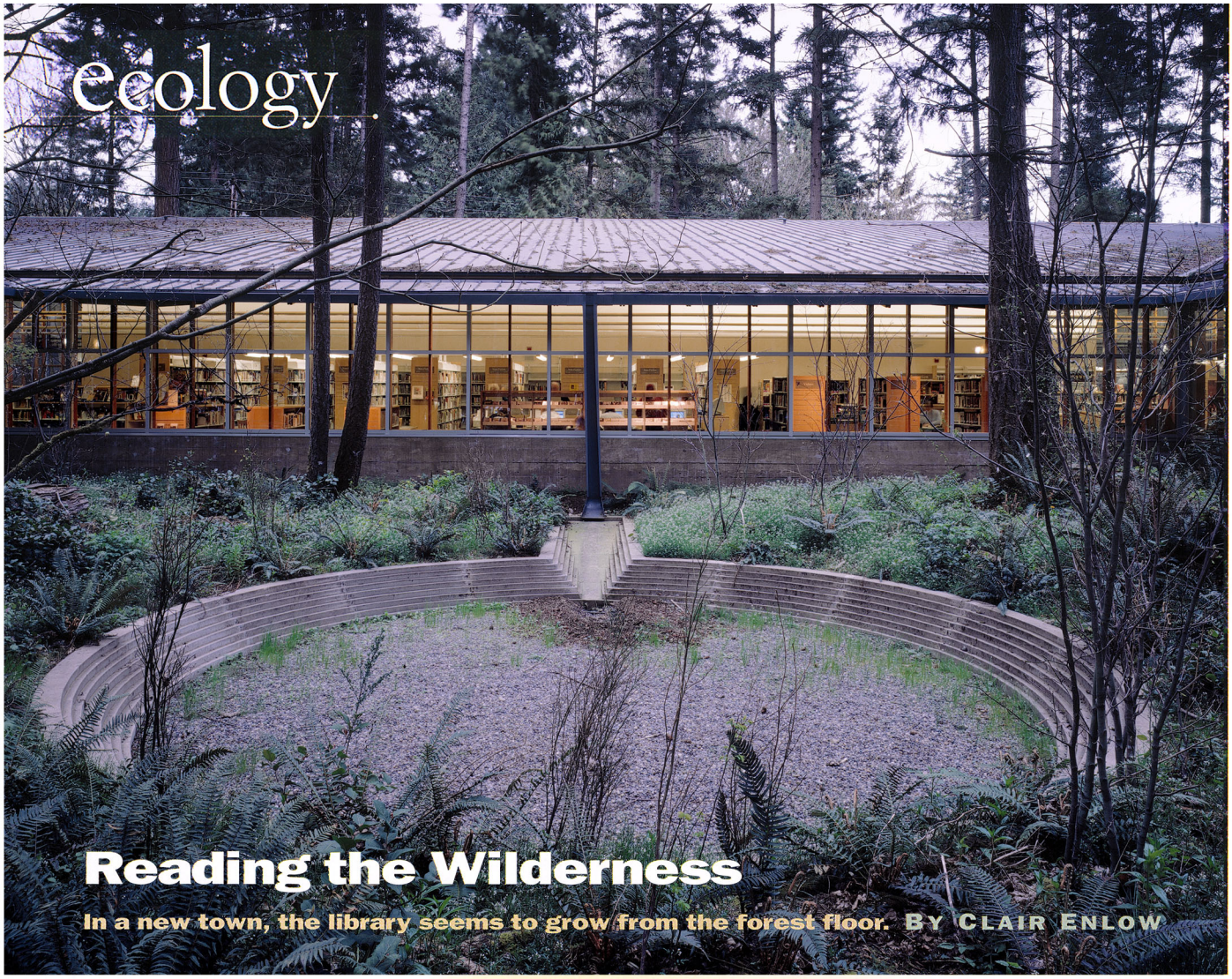


Reading the Wilderness

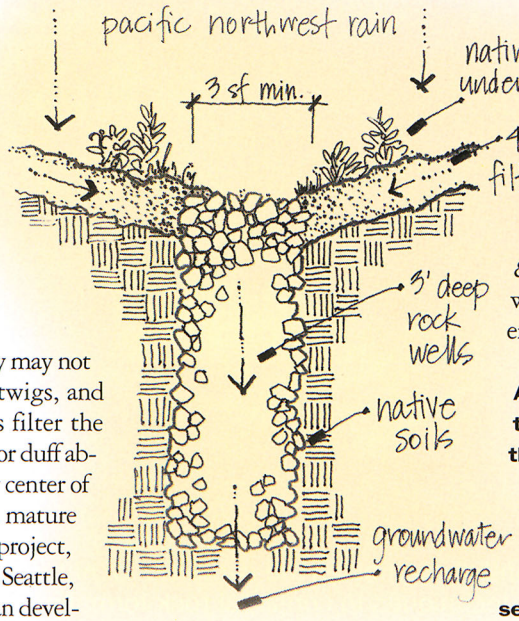
In a new town, the library seems to grow from the forest floor. BY CLAIR ENLOW

"Nature and books belong to the eyes that see them."
—RALPH WALDO EMERSON
(on bronze sculpture at the Maple Valley Library)

Maple Valley Library may not seem like it's in a city. Decaying logs, twigs, and small snags litter the ground, tall trees filter the sunlight, and a thick cushion of forest floor duff absorbs sound. But the project is at the very center of a plan to turn a small community into a mature and livable "edge city." With the library project, the new city of Maple Valley, just outside Seattle, has begun to do the impossible: mix urban development with a healthy, intact Pacific Northwest forest ecosystem.

The landscape is not exactly "designed." Instead, the natural landscape is recomposed around a very strategic set of decisions about the site—decisions made by the landscape architect with the entire design team. Like nature, it seems a little haphazard. "Scruffy," is what landscape architect Barbara Swift, ASLA, calls the look.

But looks are deceptive. Underneath the forest litter, the project is surgical, she said. Swift is principal of Swift & Company, and her firm worked with James Cutler Architects and civil engineer SvR Design Company. The



As with most construction projects, the largest watershed on the site is the roof of the building, *at top.* From the roof, all water is collected and delivered to one point at the center of the U-shaped plan. It follows the gutter into a stepped cistern that is set into the ground with an underlayer of gravel. As the floor of the cistern becomes overgrown in the complete reforestation of the landscape, it will keep doing its environmental work. Other stormwater on site is caught in strategically placed swales and rock wells, *above.*

BEN BENSCHNEIDER, PHOTO; DRAWING, COURTESY SWIFT & COMPANY LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

operation at Maple Valley Library involved fitting a dramatic, modern library snugly into the woods. Absorbing a 12,000-square-foot building and 61 parking stalls into a healthy forest required the design team to go beyond the usual environmental standards and the typical tools for achieving them.

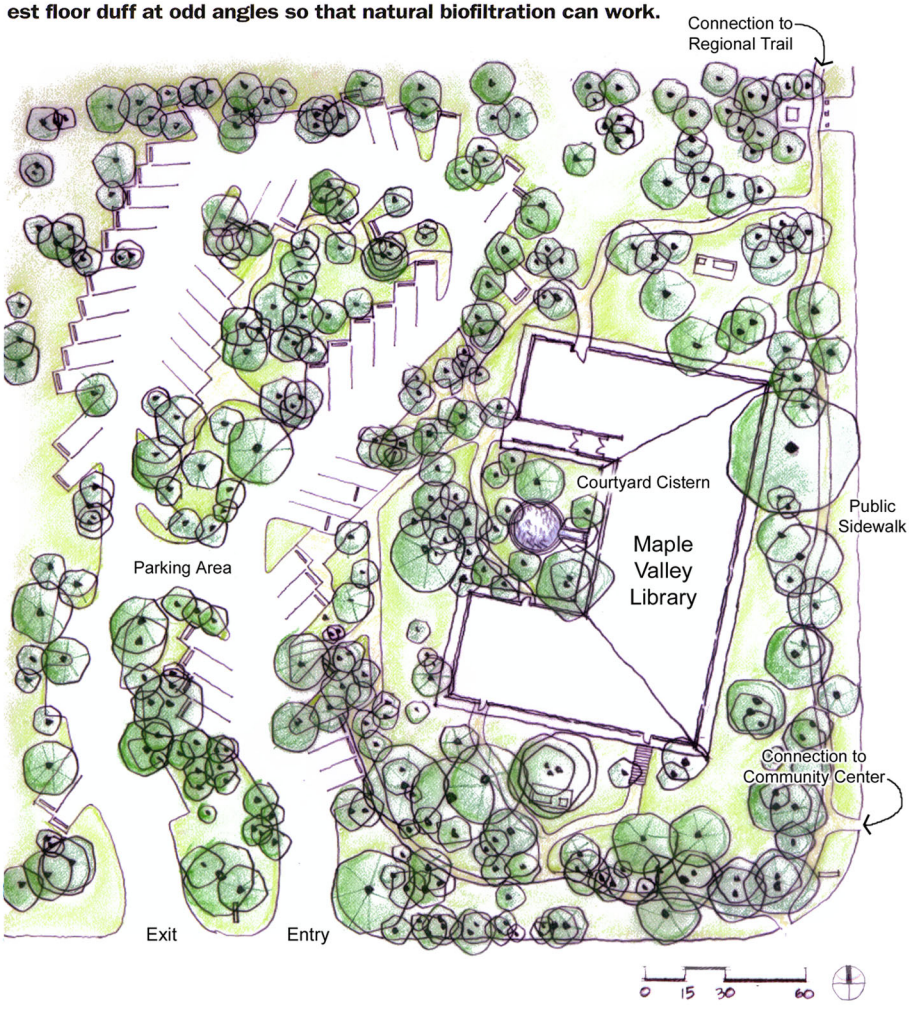
It began with a strategically open plan and a well-placed footprint for the building. A disbursed pattern of parking and a carefully rearranged system of biofiltration made it all work. Ultimately, it was necessary to carefully remove and reconstruct a part of the forest floor and understory in order to restore the ecosystem of the original site.

This kind of experiment required the imagination and support of an entire community. It began when Maple Valley started to take the future into its own hands by incorporating as a city back in 1997.

There are citizens who still remember when it was a tiny timber and mining town. After a golden age with small buildings scattered in the woods, the community saw commercial development crop up along nearby Maple Valley Highway, about 10 miles southeast of Seattle. Then came the housing developments, part of a pattern of what city manager John Starbard calls "abusive suburbanization." In the mid-1990s, Maple Valley was on its way to becoming another paved bedroom community.

Unlike some other suburbs, this community had some concerned residents, visionary leadership, and important, well-protected open-space assets. Starbard, who studied architecture and urban design and worked as a planner with the city of Bellevue before coming to Maple Valley as city manager in 1997, sees a classical town plan of crossing axes in the pattern of open spaces and trails the new town has embraced as its heart. The Maple Valley Library is now the terminus of an east–west series of public facilities that meet the linked open spaces at the nearby arboretum.

King County's Lake Wilderness Park and conference center lies just to the south of the South King County Arboretum, and the city has just purchased a 54-acre maple and Douglas fir forest, now the focus of a planning effort that includes Swift & Company as consultant. These open spaces are linked through the King County regional trail, which goes from Seattle at



The intimate presence of the forest, *above*, complements the tentlike structure of the library. *Below*, parking stalls loop around the site and reach into the surrounding forest floor duff at odd angles so that natural biofiltration can work.

BEN BENSCHNEIDER, PHOTO; LISA CORRY, SWIFT & COMPANY LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS, PLAN

A concrete path, *above*, laces through the forest floor between parking and entrances to the library. *Below*, cars are partially screened by trees between parking spaces. Curbs, the sine qua non of urban development, were eliminated in the design of the Maple Valley Library. The paving on the flat site is gently sloped to drain into several "mini watersheds" in the restored forest floor.

the northern end to Flaming Geyser State Park to the south of Maple Valley.

During the planning process required by Washington State's Growth Management Act, the new city council decided that public development in Maple Valley would be guided by a "wilderness theme." After seeing broad tracts of land scraped clear for cookie-cutter housing, they knew what they didn't want. It was much harder to define what they did want.

Shortly after the new city of Maple Valley was organized, the county library system chose to build a new, larger, and more technologically advanced library in the area. The city's new deputy mayor sat on the consultant selection committee, and the designers were chosen, in part, for their interest in realizing Maple Valley's ill-defined wilderness theme. Architect Jim Cutler had never designed a library before, but he was well-known for his designs of houses set into wild surroundings. Swift & Company was known for projects with ambitious environmental goals and for management of large public projects, including libraries.

They found that the pristine two-acre site was typical of Northwest forests in mature second growth. The plant palette was completely natural, with no invasion of weeds. The all-important layer of "duff," where important mycorrhizae and soil bacteria live, was about four to six inches deep.

Early in the project, the design team decided that site-specific soils were essential in realizing aesthetic and environmental goals. To keep things in place, construction work would be limited to within five feet of the outer walls of the building.

With this severe restriction in mind, the design team went on to deal with the other major site impact—parking. To get the most benefit from the natural layers of soils and duff, the requisite minimum number of parking stalls was strung through the site along a looping drive. The parking spaces form fingers that reach at different angles into the natural landscape, relieving the continuity of the paving on site.

The paving on the flat site is gently sloped to drain into several "mini watersheds" in the restored forest floor. Ultimately, the water is caught in strategically placed

BEN BENSCHNEIDER, TOP; BARBARA SWIFT, SWIFT & COMPANY LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS, BOTTOM

swales and rock wells. After filtering through the topsoil and gravelly subgrade beneath the site, the stormwater from the library site recharges the groundwater.

While it would be difficult to gather empirical data on the success of the filtration process, independent research since the design of the Maple Valley Library supports this approach to stormwater management, according to SvR principal Tom Von Schrader.

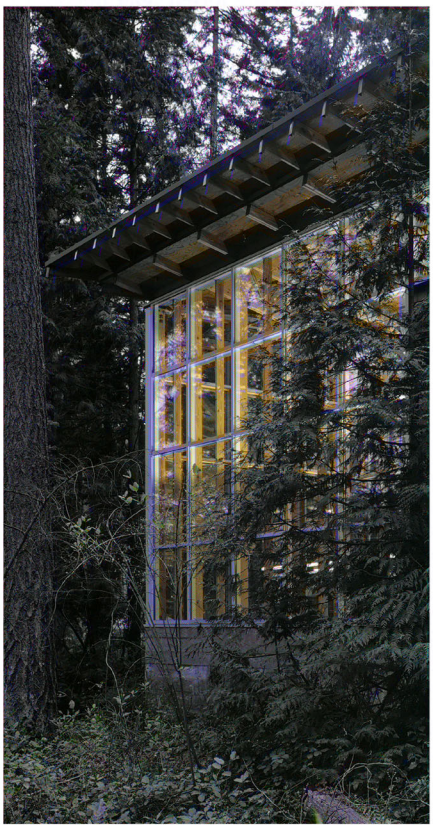
After the site and building were completed on paper, the design team returned to the site to visualize the way each of several important trees would interact with the building. The outline of the building itself was shifting accordingly.

With tall windows on each side of the building and continuous glazing along the wall, the visual connection between outside and inside at Maple Valley Library is immediate and intimate. Because of the natural screening of sunlight from outside, the interior of the library shares a naturally fluctuating light level with the entire site. Tall trees screen views of the building from outside. At least one of the mature Douglas firs skims the edge of the rooftop with fewer than 12 inches to spare. It looks as if forest and building had somehow grown together.

After trees and understory plants were mapped by Swift & Company and Urban Forestry Services, members of the Maple Valley Community turned out to dig up specimens. They were replanted temporarily at the arboretum and brought back after building construction was complete. Forest floor "litter" and duff collected around the perimeter of the building and the parking area were stored on site and then carefully replaced.

When reconstructing a wooded landscape, it's difficult to resist improving upon nature, said Swift. The task of remembering the landscape is nearly the same as re-imagining, and it's tempting to set a better scene. The addition of a building itself in the midst of it all does not make things easier.

But the landscape architects held on to the vision of very limited intervention in a remnant forest. They revisited the site after construction and, finding a number of decaying cedar logs cast off site, they dragged them back into place. It worked. When they returned awhile later, the setting was both strange and shockingly familiar.



Rotting snags, *above*, are kept to provide wildlife habitat. Mature trees, *below*, stand close to exterior walls.

"We burst out laughing," said Lisa Corry of Swift & Company, "to see this brand new building on an old forest floor." LA

Clair Enlow is a journalist and design critic in Seattle.

PROJECT CREDITS

Swift & Company Landscape Architects LLC: Barbara Swift, ASLA, principal/designer; Lisa Corry, ASLA, project manager/designer; Oona Johnsen, Cindy Cloud, Darcy Ferrari, Dean Koonts.

James Cutler Architects/Johnston Architects: Jim Cutler, principal; Ray Johnston, principal; David Cinamon, Mark Pevoto.

SvR Design Company: Tom Von Schrader, principal; Barbara Van de Fen, Mark Davies.

Urban Forestry Services: Jim Barborinas.

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