James J. Hill Center and Rondo Community Outreach Library: An Investigation of the “Library” As We Know It

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INTRODUCTION:

The Rondo Community Outreach Library is located in the Summit-University neighborhood of St. Paul, MN. In the 1960’s, many homes in this area were bulldozed to make way for Interstate 94, displacing hundreds. Rondo Avenue was the heart of the city’s black community prior to construction. In long overdue response, the Rondo Community Outreach Library was erected in 2006 to not only commemorate a rich history but bring the people in that region back together. In addition to providing access to literature and technology, Rondo offers employment classes, technology help, tutoring, and many more seminars that appeal to a wide range of demographics whether young or old, male or female, black or white.

In comparison, the James J Hill Reference Library stands proudly in the business/entertainment district of downtown St. Paul. The edifice opened in 1921 as a gift from industrious railroad pioneer James J. Hill. He wanted a simple and grand building, and notably to be reminiscent of the intricate JP Morgan Library in New York City. The library offers business and engineering archives and reference services. Most successfully it performs as a scholarly space suitable for quiet research or small business conventions. Because the space consists of just the eastern wing of a larger structure housing the St. Paul Public Library, its entrance is rather discreet and does not necessarily invite just any passersby on the street.

THESIS:

The James J. Hill Center and Rondo Community Outreach Library use architectural organization and cultural accessibility to achieve their own definitions of a library; the James J. Hill Center succeeds in being a library of research, scholarship, and public governance while Rondo achieves a communal and accessible program that is in touch with the twenty-first century and focuses on revitalizing a lost community.
CONTEXT

SITE CONTEXT:

Selective highlighting on top of aerial views of each building draws attention to the surrounding neighborhoods and buildings, which point to insights about cultural communities in each location. This study functions to complement each building’s program or mission. For example, the James J. Hill Center is most dominantly surrounded by a mixture of entertainment and municipal clusters, serving those who are most likely in the area for work or leisure purposes. On the other hand, Rondo is successful in more directly reaching out to its community as it is in closest proximity to residential streets and small commercial businesses.

TRANSPORTATION/ACCESS:

Both libraries are accessible by car, bicycle, or light rail. However, Rondo is directly in front of the east and west bound Dale Street Stations, making it a highly convenient destination coming from afar. No matter how one chooses to approach this library, the experience is the exact same. The James J. Hill Center by contrast, is just a few blocks away, but out of sight from the downtown St Paul light rail stop, distancing it from being an immediate destination for many. Its downtown location makes transportation variant in terms of parking a car or a bike. This simple geographical distance contributes to the narrative that Rondo is calling visitors inside its doors while the James J. Hill Center almost invites only those who know of its existence by some third party source.
CONCEPTS

PROGRAMMATIC SECTIONS:

These abstract diagrams inform the viewer of the general programs of each library and connected structures. Rondo’s section supports the integration of site and cultural significance; part of the residential community which it seeks to revitalize is physically connected to Rondo. Contrastingly, the James J. Hill Center is attached to another scholarly programmed building centered around learning and education: its main mission.
MATERIAL COMPARISON:

The J.J.Hill Center’s facade and architectural elements share similarities with neighboring buildings, making it a symbol or icon of the cultural area in that section of downtown St. Paul. Rondo’s surroundings are much more defined by residential activity. For instance, the architectural elements include floor to ceiling glass. The reflective surfaces allow the outside community to see inside the space and visitors inside can see their reflections.
CONCEPTUAL COLLAGES:

These illustrations provide a viewer with a general feel for what the space is like to inhabit as well as the types of activities that are conducted in each. Conceptual drawings like these are particularly useful in portraying the atmosphere as well as intended purpose of each space. Rondo’s interior consists of many nodes to sit, read, and talk as well as inspire children to use their imaginations and learn. The James J. Hill Center on the other hand mimics a long corridor of bookshelves, each level acting as a “shelf” storing a grand collection of knowledge.
CIRCULATION

GAMMA ANALYSIS:

The Rondo Community Outreach Library fosters many paths branching off from one congregational area, which promotes a heavily populated core. The J.J.Hill Center clearly has much more segmented spaces where each corridor is separated and detached from a common space. From these diagrams, I am able to interpret that Rondo’s center hosts more activity while the James J. Hill Center’s periphery tends to see more action.

Rondo:  

JJHC:

BETA ANALYSIS:
The Beta syntax diagrams serve to further demonstrate the concept that architectural organization directs visitor traffic; the James J. Hill Center’s floorplan yields walking paths towards the peripheral areas, while the major “hot spots” tend to be centralized and dispersed in Rondo. Observing color coding, the warmest colors are the most connected spaces, and colder colors are spaces with very few connections to other areas. I gather that a more populated core increases a sense of community and encourages greater engagement with the immediate surroundings, while a more populated periphery is more promotional of personal space and isolated studying.

**INTERIOR CONCENTRATION:**

Circulation within each building is alternately distributed, the James J. Hill’s structural organization pushes activities towards the perimeter where the bookshelves and a majority of the workspace lives. This organization intends for visitors to have more personal space as seating elements are spread out and structural columns divide spaces, promoting a studious “keep-to-yourself” behavior. In divergence, Rondo maintains an open layout and defines space by a series of movable furniture such as bookshelves, desks, chairs, work spaces, etc. Centralized computers and workspaces seem to be gravitational forces for congregation. Ultimately this layout reinforces togetherness.
DEMOGRAPHIC FLOWS:

A series of overlayed lines on identical floorplans of each library analyzes characteristics of the buildings’ visitors from age to gender to fitness level to ethnicity. From this four-part diagram, we learn Rondo sees much greater diversity in its users than the James J Hill Center, which sees predominantly white middle-aged citizens.

Age: Gender:
Rondo’s greater diversity in users truly speaks to its multifunctionality that the James J. Hill Center simply was not made to embody. The downtown St. Paul reference center is geared towards a very narrow type of user.

**CONCLUSION:**

Through a holistic lens, both buildings demonstrate the elasticity of what it means to be a public library by existing as disparate systems and serving distinct missions. This investigation reveals that a library can offer a great multitude of services or focus on a single use to employ. No matter what the group’s previous schema of a library was prior to this intensive study, it is certainly broadened after conducting this comparison. Rondo’s eclectic and down to earth approach toward achieving a local community gathering place is just as valid as the James J. Hill Center’s formal, strict approach toward achieving a dignified place of intellectuality. For designers, it is important to recognize the variability under project categories whether it be a library, museum, or school in the question; the number one question that ought to lead the designing of public buildings is, “what does the program need to accomplish?”
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Photos 1-6 (Pgs. Cover - 2) and 7 (Pg. 10) courtesy of T_________. Photo 8 (Pg. 10) courtesy of BKV Group.

Floorplans courtesy of the Rondo Community Outreach Library staff and James J. Hill Center archives.

Observational data by __________________________. Data tables available upon request.

History and Context:

