Phoenix, Arizona is the sixth largest city in the United States. By the mid 1990's, after a decade of being one of the fastest growing cities in the United States, Phoenix recognized the need to develop their cultural and community base. Having outgrown their existing library, the City was looking for new premises in which all of its collections could be available, with room to expand for the 21st century. The library project also presented a number of interesting challenges to the design team: the extreme Arizona climate with summer daytime temperatures reaching 120°F (49°C) and a quarter of the site extends over a tunnel carrying the 1-10 freeway.

Since there are no landmark buildings in Phoenix, people identify with natural anomalies - such as Camelback Mountain. Drawing on richness of Arizona landscape, William Bruder designed a building that appears as a monolith in the flat landscape, which the locals refer to the library as the "Mesa." The building was designed to incorporate energy conservation, aesthetics, and regional history. The city wanted a "Library for the 21st Century."
Head librarian, Ralph Edwards, wanted a "warehouse for books" where books are readily accessible to the maximum number of people in the most direct fashion possible. The result is an open plan building, with a structural column grid at 32 feet 8 inches in compliance with book stacks and circulation paths. The grid column system also allows for future expansions. The lower floors are structured with pre-cast concrete T-stems, beams, and columns, in the manner of a conventional parking structure.

The ground floor consists of a circulation desk, children's books, popular culture magazines, videos, new books, and fiction collection. Bruder envisioned the ground floor is a "shopping center" of high-circulation materials, an extension of suburban floor, to meet everyday needs of common people. The second floor houses the reference department, public access computers, and government information. The third floor is the private zone of the library with administration offices and technical support services. The fourth floor has special collections and lecture facilities. The entire fifth floor is main reading room, which Bruder wanted a "City Room" where the room overlooks the Arizona landscape.
A concept emerged for a building with a service zone on either side of a "warehouse for books" using the western metaphor was the saddlebag. The "saddlebags" for the library hold the fixed service functions such as service elevators, exit stairs, and rest rooms, as well as spaces for all of the mechanical and electrical rooms and the lateral framing of the structure. The "saddlebags" are on the east and west facades. The corrugated solid and perforated copper sheeting combined with 12 inch pre-cast concrete walls isolate the saddlebags from the main body of the building, delaying the radiation of absorbed heat until evening hours.

The glazing on the north and south walls open the library to views of Phoenix and also bring in the necessary daylight for reading. The south face is protected from sun by motorized adjustable aluminum louvers whose movement is regulated by programmed computers, which tracks the path of the sun and adjusts the louvers accordingly. The north face manages north-east and north-west summer glare and direct sunlight from March to September with fixed fabric sails attached to the curtain wall.
Vertical Elements: Two saddlebags house the mechanical and ancillary spaces on the east and west side of the building. Slender concrete columns reach from the ground floor all the way to the roof.

Horizontal Elements: Light floor plates are stacked for five floors. The plates are supported by the column grid, allowing for a free floor plan.

Structure: The lower floors are structured with pre-cast concrete T-stems, beams, and columns, in the manner of conventional parking structures.

Circulation: The main entrances of the building are on the east and west facades, burrowing through the saddlebags. The main vertical circulation is through the central atrium. Emergency stairwells are located at each corner of the building housed withing the saddlebags.

Grid System: The column grid is spaced at 32 feet 8 inches square, in compliance with the measurements of the book stacks and circulation path.

Vehicular Circulation: To the north of the site is Willetta Street, a small residential street. The west side is Central Avenue, a larger street. A quarter of the site extends over a tunnel carrying the I-10 at the southern end of the site.
Rocks symbolize mass and density, bringing to mind the mechanical and ancillary programmatic elements. Bruder allocated these spaces in the saddlebags along east and west side of building, metaphorically and literally resemble a rock (Mesa). The perforated copper membrane, covering the saddlebags appears opaque from the outside, making the building appear to look like a massive rock formation within the cityscape.

Paper covers, represented by the roof and floor plates, which protects the heart of the library. The suspended arching roof seems to be floating, only tethered down by the cable grid, a narrow crack between the roof and the side walls enhance the illusion. The roof lightly covers the reading room, arching as if it were a page in a book being turned.

Scissors are used to cut. The floor of the library are five levels of consistent floor slabs pierced through by concrete columns that maintain a regular profile from the ground floor to the top reading room. Two entry crevasses burrow towards the buildings core, to reveal a space connecting the ground floor all the way up to the stainless steel rooftop. Circulation is organized around this atrium known as "Crystal Canyon," because of the structural glass sheathing that functions as a fire and noise barrier.
Light filters into the entire library at the north and south ends through glass curtain walls, but the fascinating play with light happens in the reading room. The reading room, on the fifth floor, is 300 feet long, 170 feet wide, and 30 feet high. The one-acre "City Room" is a latter-day hypostyle hall of slender tapering columns, generous reading areas, and panoramic view. Bruder was inspired by the salle des imprimés, the main reading room, by Henri Labrouste at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (1875). Labrouste believed that natural light is central to the meaning of building, connection between light and enlightenment. The structure of the Bibliothèque consists of slender iron columns, crowned with lively foliage capitals, supporting a cluster of 9 domes of glass and porcelain. At the Phoenix Central Library, the concrete columns taper as they reach the top floor, stopping short of touching the roof. Directly above each column is a laminated circular skylight with a small hole in its blue interlayer positioned to produce a zenithal beam of light. The beam alludes not only to ancient Egyptian hypostyle halls with grid of columns top lit through small openings, but also to candle-flame flowers sprouting from the top of cacti. During equinox, the beams penetrating the reading room are especially intense. Native Americans give special meaning to this equinox light because these day are the holy days, giving further reference to the desert landscape and identity.