The original American Memorial Library in West Berlin was built by Fritz Bornemann as the result of an American funded German competition in 1954. In 1988 when the city had outgrown the library, the Berlin government supported a competition for American architects. Steven Holl designed one of the competition entries. Holl’s design allows one to see the original building, a very ordinary piece, in a completely new way.

The library is located on an important urban site in West Berlin. The north face of the library addition defines the south edge of the new Blucherplatz. To the east, the library creates a clearly defined park space which strengthens the connection to the Church Zum Heiligen Kreuz.

The library is made into a major urban element within the city plan, and is intended to be analogous to a city gate, with the children as the guardians. In addition, the tower offers a public observation point focused on the city.
The earlier library provided open stacks in what was then an innovation for formal European libraries. Holl chose to enhance this idea by arranging the additional library space in a browsing circuit surrounding the original building without overpowering it.

In addition, the library stacks were developed as furniture in order to give different characteristics to the open plan. In this way the browsing circuit is given memorable variety. The circulation patterns were developed less to facilitate easy access than to encourage "browsing."

The browsing concept was taken further by creating an irregular mullion pattern that links various viewing points and in which the pattern is intended to be analogous to the act of browsing.
Steven Holl has taken the act of visiting a library and formed a building out the experience. The browsing circuit is literally the way a person would flow through a library. If this experience is not wanted, there are stairs and elevators that will bypass the meandering circulation route. In this way, circulation drives the architecture, but it does not force itself on the users.

Holl’s design embellishes the experience of engaging in a library. His fanciful journey through the library ends in the children’s exhibit that bridges across the existing building.
The library addition contrasts with the existing library by setting off the solid heavy piece with the children's library that floats across it. The new library wraps around the existing, but never touches it, leaving plenty of open space cut out between them in order to let the existing building stand alone.

The solid concrete or lead panelled walls give definition to the interior of the library, while the curtain walls make a light skin to finish the enclosure. The path then zig-zags from one level to the next, cutting out space to create connections from every floor and each department to the next.
The major library space, in the 6-story building behind the existing library, is placed between two curtain walls of clear, amber, and blue sandblasted glass. The sandblasted glass is used to work with Berlin’s generally overcast condition in order to create a soft diffused light that will evenly illuminate the library’s interior.
The new addition wraps the old in such a way that it emphasizes major site lines, including the view down the length of the Friedrichstrasse from the tower, a strengthened connection with the Church Zum Heiligen Kreuz, and a further definition of the Blucherplatz. The connection with the Blucherplatz is reinforced by the placement of the main entry. The major idea of the library addition is the "browsing circuit." The circuit serves as a new framework through which the old library may be seen.

Additionally, the circuit literally forms the shape of the building. The idea of the "browsing circuit" takes precedence over all other organizational principals, so that programmatic elements are spread out along it in random order, creating small pockets for different uses, rather than bisecting the building into separate uses. The only hierarchy found in the building is given to the viewing tower, the children's library, and the