Laurentian Library
Church of San Lorenzo Complex

Project Data:
Architect--  Michelangelo Buonarroti
Client--  Clement VII
Location--  Florence, Italy
Construction Time Frame-- 1524 to 1571
Approx. Area-- 680 sq. meter
7320 sq. foot

Book Collections--  Mostly Greek and Latin manuscripts
includes 11,900 manuscripts
4000 incunabula

Special Condition--  The library is built on top of the monastic quarters. Therefore, maintaining wall width below and assure minimal disturbance were important issues.

Comments--  The project was first commissioned in 1524 for the reading room vestibule. The famous staircase was constructed by Vasari and Ammannati in 1559-71.
Laurentian Library is located along the Brunelleschi’s cloister to the south of the Basilica. A staircase, near a statue of the historian Paolo Giovio ascends to the library’s main entrance. The approximate ten meters by ten meters vestibule acts as a transitional space from the outdoor to indoor, the open to contained, the cloister to reading room. Visitors progress further into the library and farther away from the outside world.

The Slender footprint of the reading room draws the users from the overwhelming vestibule to the vault of ancient knowledge, where rows and rows of manuscripts waiting to be explored. Michelangelo’s concept is about the pulling and pushing between the contrasting yet complementing relationship of the vestibule and the reading room. The adjoining circular room was not Michelangelo’s work, but added in 1841.
In order to prevent a dramatic increase in the wall width beneath the library, Michelangelo applied a buttress system to the exterior wall. However, this created a bay-system, which controlled the placement of the windows and the interior articulation. Michelangelo turned this limitation into a strong gesture by incorporating the wooden benches into the structural system, as a visual pilasters. In response to this relationship, Michelangelo maintain the a delicate membering detail and emphasis on planes. On the other hand, the vestibule took on an overwhelming character from the double relieved columns and double storey height. The innovative column capital’s design, reverse tapering pilister, and broken pediment differentiate itself from the rest of the complex
Series of blind windows in both the reading rooms and the vestibule was not intended for the source of natural lighting, but a motifs for reinforcing the repetitiveness along with the pilasters, beams, ceiling and floor tiles, and the wood furnitures. Natural lighting is provided from both sides of the reading room, which are facing east and west. Apparently, the library was designed primarily as a collecting room for rare manuscripts, than a public library function. Therefore, the lighting strategy was not the main concern. In terms of the vestibule, open windows near the ceiling emphasize the double storey height and disconnect the visitors from the outside, which helps preparing the users for the library ahead.
The free standing staircase flows out into the vestibule like lava fills up the room and became a sculpture. In fact, Michelangelo initially designs a double staircases ascend along the side walls and terminate in front of the threshold into the reading room. In comparison, the final sculptural design is more successful due to its push and pull effect on the vestibule. The convex profile of the stairs pours out of the reading room and intrude the vestibule, and simultaneously invites visitors back into the reading room. Michelangelo used the repetitive elements to reinforce spatial qualities, such as the horizontality of the reading room and verticality of the vestibule. Even the wood benches are well blend with the reading room by aligning with the ceiling and floor tiling.