

PROFILES: MINNESOTA CENTER FOR BOOK ARTS:BOOK HEAVEN

From the outside, the MCBA is basically a non-descript combine of three older buildings joined into one great center for book arts. But there is a marquee with notification to the public of what exhibits or lectures are going on inside, there is a coffee shop that serves up divine coffee and great vegetarian soups, sandwiches and homemade pastries (everything is homemade), and there is Ruminator Books, an alternative to all those big chains, a branch of a larger store in St. Paul where literature and art, periodicals and poetry mingle with the art of the book under the same roof.

As you walk in, you know an architect knew what he was doing—combining space with light, inviting the visitor to ruminate, meditate and create books of all kinds. The “Open Book” comes out of the total complex called Open Book, Minnesota’s center for reading, writing and book arts including a performance hall, a resource library, comfortable classrooms and meeting rooms, a literary commons with conversation nooks, with The Loft Literary Center, Ruminator Books, MCBA and Milkweed Editions.

Literature and Art commingle, while each sets its own course under the same very high roof. Milkweed Editions, for instance, publishes with the intention of making a humane impact on society, publishing 17-20 titles a year in fiction, memoir, intermediate juvenile fiction, poetry and nonfiction.

MCBA shares this space with the other partners in the first facility in the nation devoted to the literary arts. Of course, MCBA extends that mission into the visual book. Nestled in the St. Anthony Falls Historic District corridor between downtown Minneapolis and the University’s West Bank, one sees that the Guthrie Theater will be moving into the area as well as the History Center to be opened in the flour that made Minneapolis so great in the past.

The 52,000 sq. ft. center, designed by Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle, is a renovation of three contiguous turn-of-the-century brick buildings. Elements of the building’s history have been retained, including patches of original wallpaper, fragments of now derelict stairs (what a wonderful opportunity for some artist to do a piece about the stairs that go nowhere), and vintage windows and doors which have been reused throughout the building.

A unique central staircase forms a vertical spine connecting Open Book organizations. Chief architect Garth Rockcastle calls the staircase “a metaphor joining the craft of bookmaking (on the ground floor) with literary content (upstairs)...designed like a book being taken apart, with

letters falling from unfurled pages and a center binding with its stitches pulled apart.”

Perhaps the only fault with the building is the gallery space for MCBA which is not a totally dedicated space, flowing into spaces with antique presses soon to be restored, and workshop spaces which invite adults and children to come learn how to make paper, make a book, and bind those books. School classes spend a week making a book as part of their curriculum, and adults take classes every week and weekends to learn the art of bookmaking, printmaking, papermaking and alternative photography. The furniture, equipment and environment are so conducive to making this an engaging venue for collaborative experiences. But there is a bookshop as part of MCBA which supplies artists with the materials they need to make books, sells bookworks as gifts, and catalogs and bookworks from elsewhere as well.

Lectures and special programs bring new audiences to MCBA, and exhibitions promote new work from other parts of the country and the world. Peggy Korsmo-Kennon is the Executive Director, Mary Jo Pauly is the Artistic Director of MCBA, a freelance designer/illustrator and book artist; Allison Chapman is the Youth and Community Programs Coordinator at MCBA and proprietor of Igloo Press; Julia Welles is Adult & Artists Programs coordinator, and there are many other staff members and Steve Pittelkow is the Office Manager and papermaker extraordinaire.

If you want a treat, don’t miss visiting MCBA on your next trip to Minnesota. It is an awe-inspiring experience. The address is:MCBA, 1011 Washington Ave., Suite 100, Minneapolis, MN 55415.

