

CANADIAN
ARCHITECT





INNER TRANSFORMATION

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY'S WEBSTER LIBRARY IS REDESIGNED FROM THE INSIDE OUT

PROJECT R. H. Webster Library, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec

ARCHITECT Menkès Shooner Dagenais LeTourneux Architectes

TEXT Odile Hénault

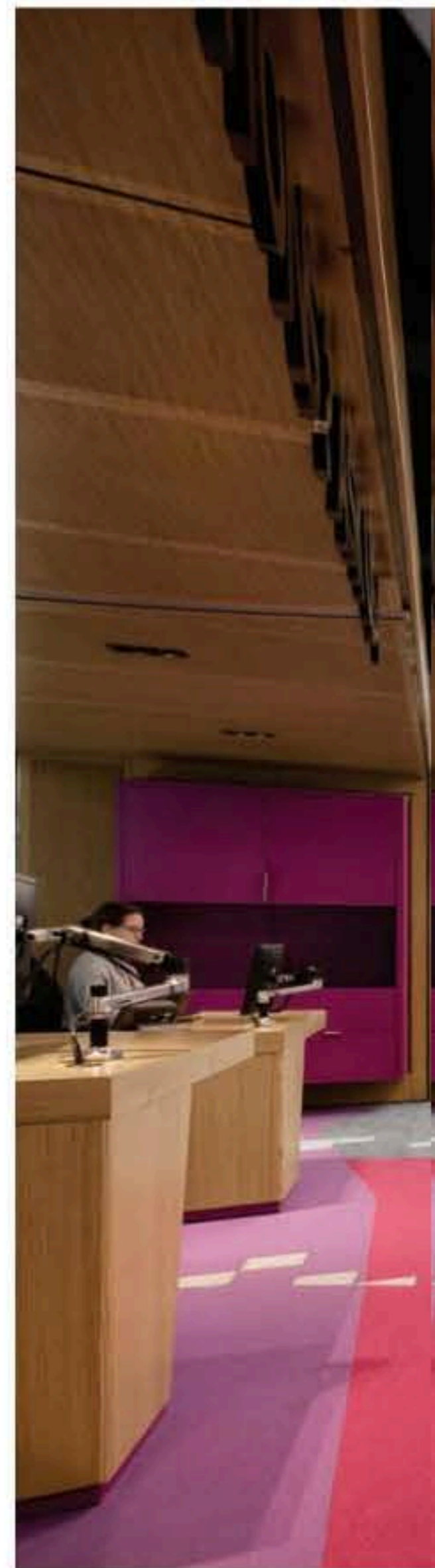
PHOTOS Adrien Williams, unless otherwise noted

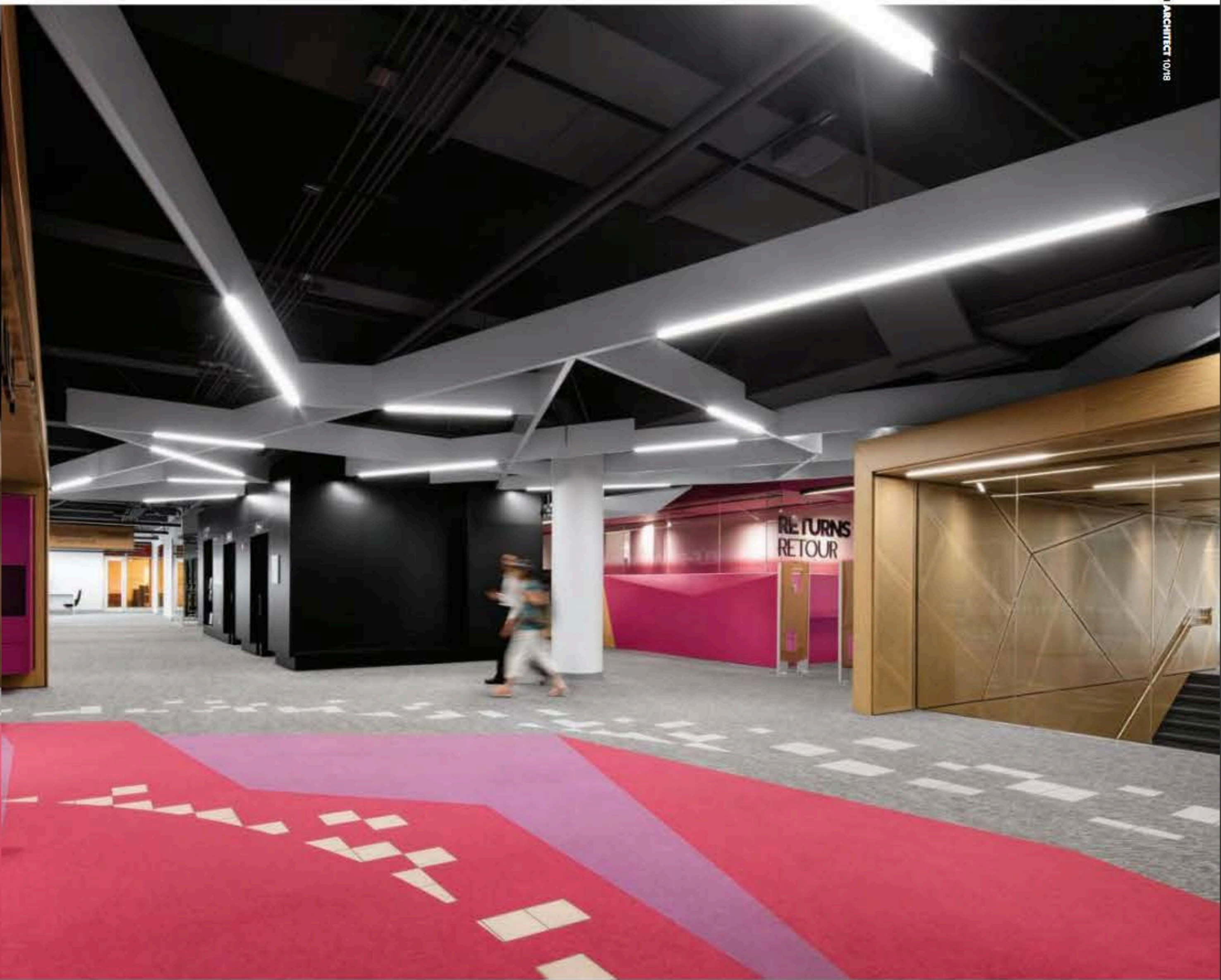
There is no denying the sheer joy one gets stepping into a traditional library with its old book stacks and its long tables. Yet pleasure can turn into pain as a library gets ever more crowded and noisy, eventually becoming almost impossible to work in. Five years ago, this was the situation at Concordia University's Webster Library, as the student population had grown from 25,000 to 46,000 within two decades. Watching students scramble for space, particularly at exam times, librarian Guylaine Beaudry embarked on a campaign that led to a total transformation.

When she tackled her "optimization" project, Beaudry—who is now Chief Librarian—was not just thinking of growth. She was also think-

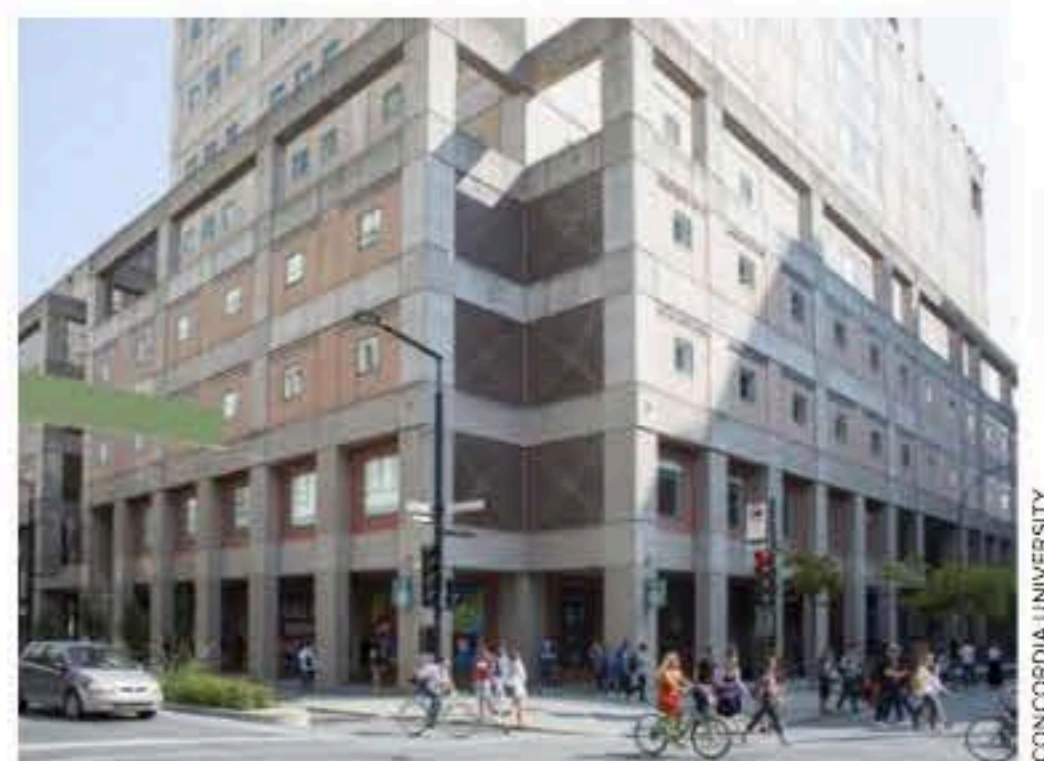
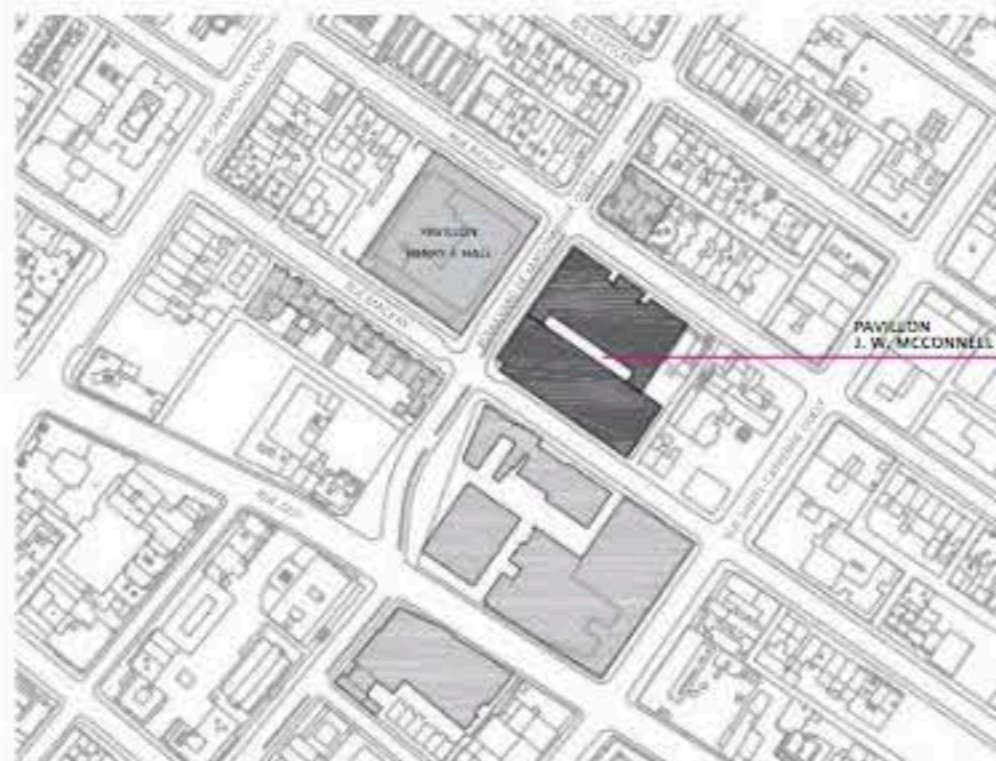
ing of an entirely new reality, that of the virtual library—in her words, the "library of the future." Finally, she wanted Webster to be open to all: students, faculty and the general public.

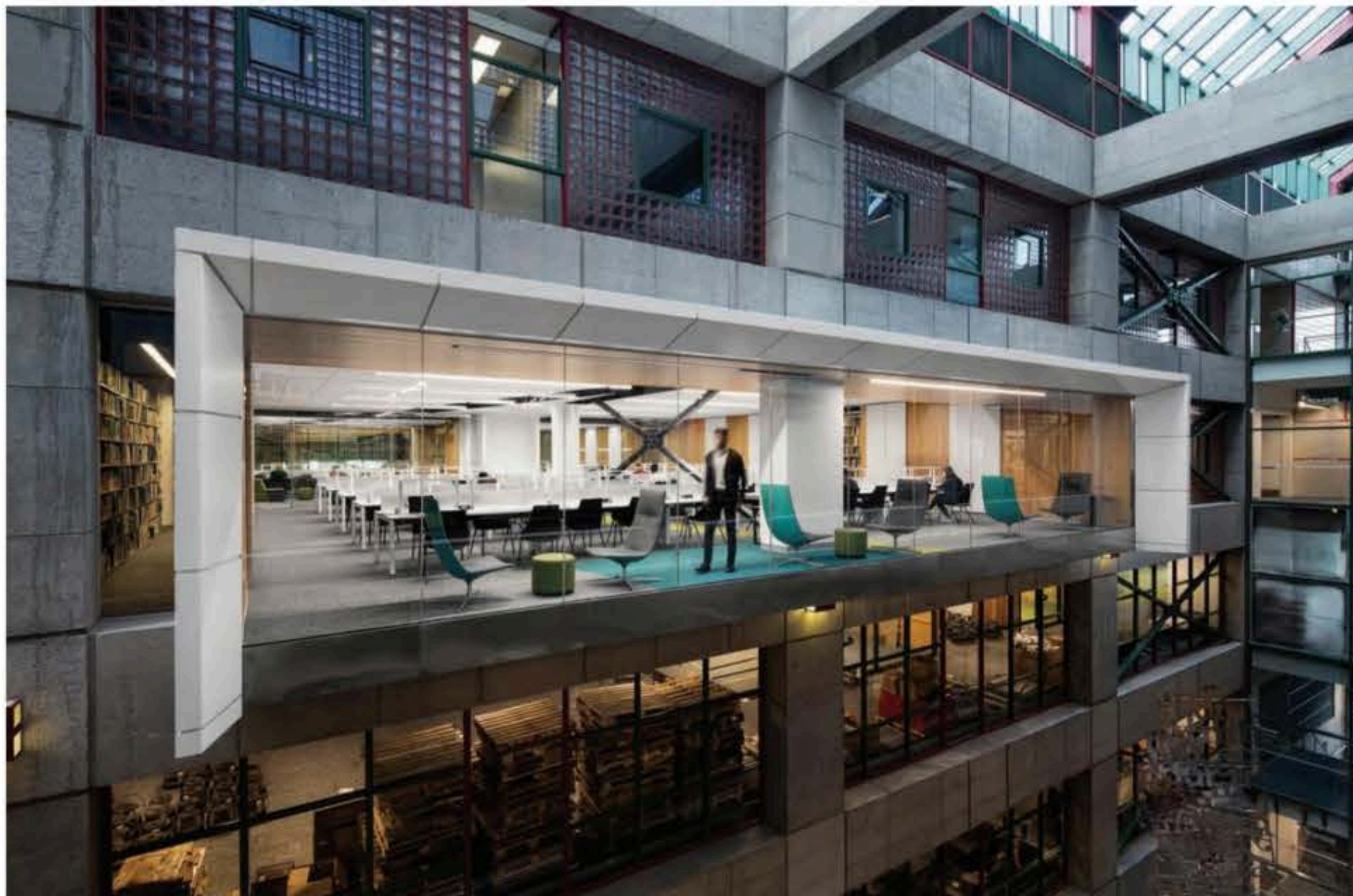
Designed by Montreal firm Menkès Shooner Dagenais LeTourneux Architectes (MSDL), the newly renovated Webster Library is still largely a secret to outsiders. No one can guess its presence from the street since the architects had to work within an existing structure, the J. W. McConnell Building. Built in the early 1990s, the pavilion is a heavy postmodern building with opaque walls, a bulky structural grid and a brash colour scheme. Its only saving grace is the integration





TOP LEFT A wood-framed portal on the ground level of the existing building invites students to the renovated library. **ABOVE** Fuschia-hued carpet inserts and millwork add visual punch to the second-floor reference desk area. **RIGHT** The library is housed in the 1992 J. W. McConnell Building.





ABOVE Used for graduate student presentations, the fifth-floor reading lounge extends into the atrium, enlivening the existing building.

OPPOSITE The pleated geometry of the ceiling and library shelves, along with the dynamically shaped carpet inserts, are inspired by principles of anamorphic design.

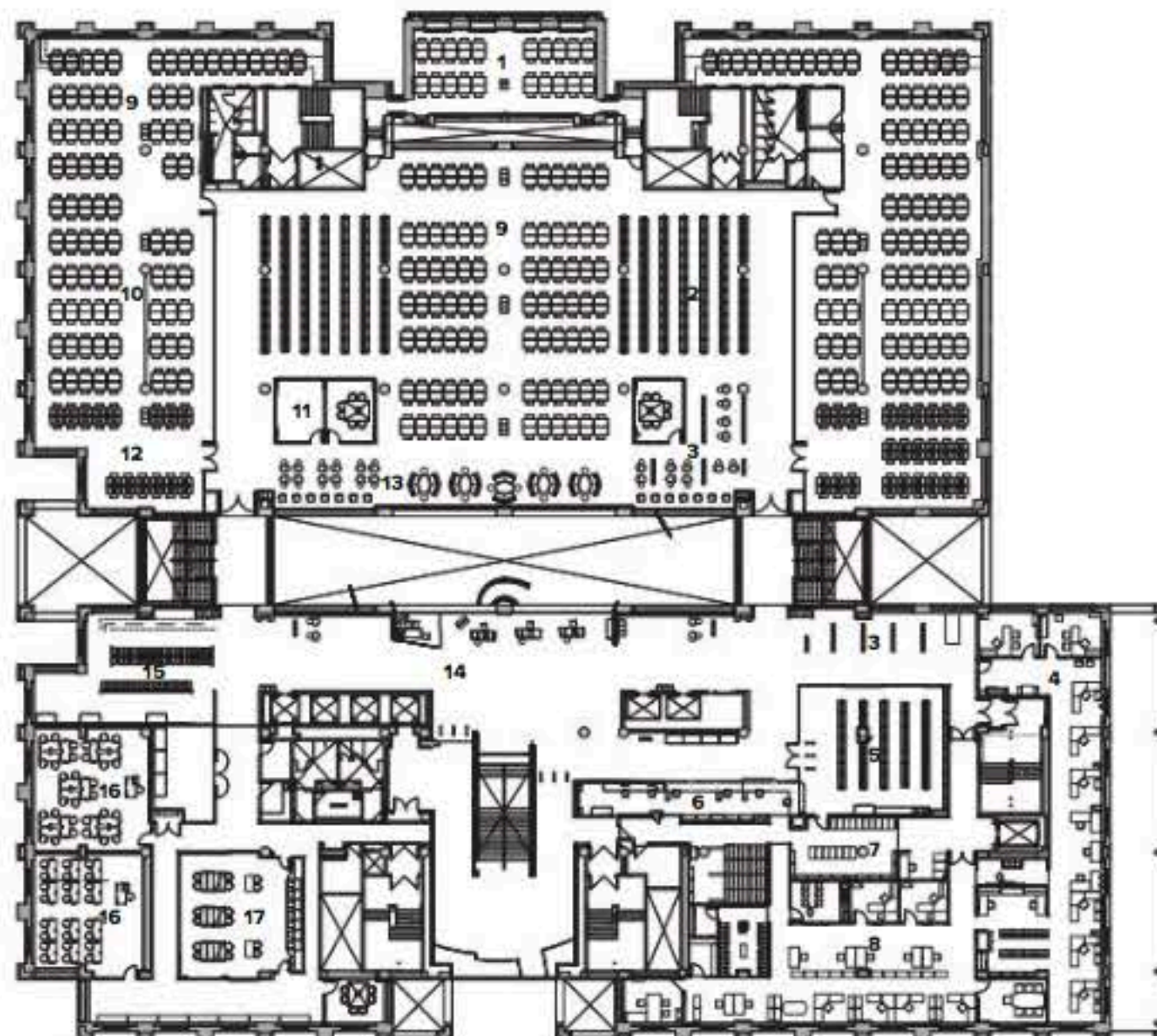
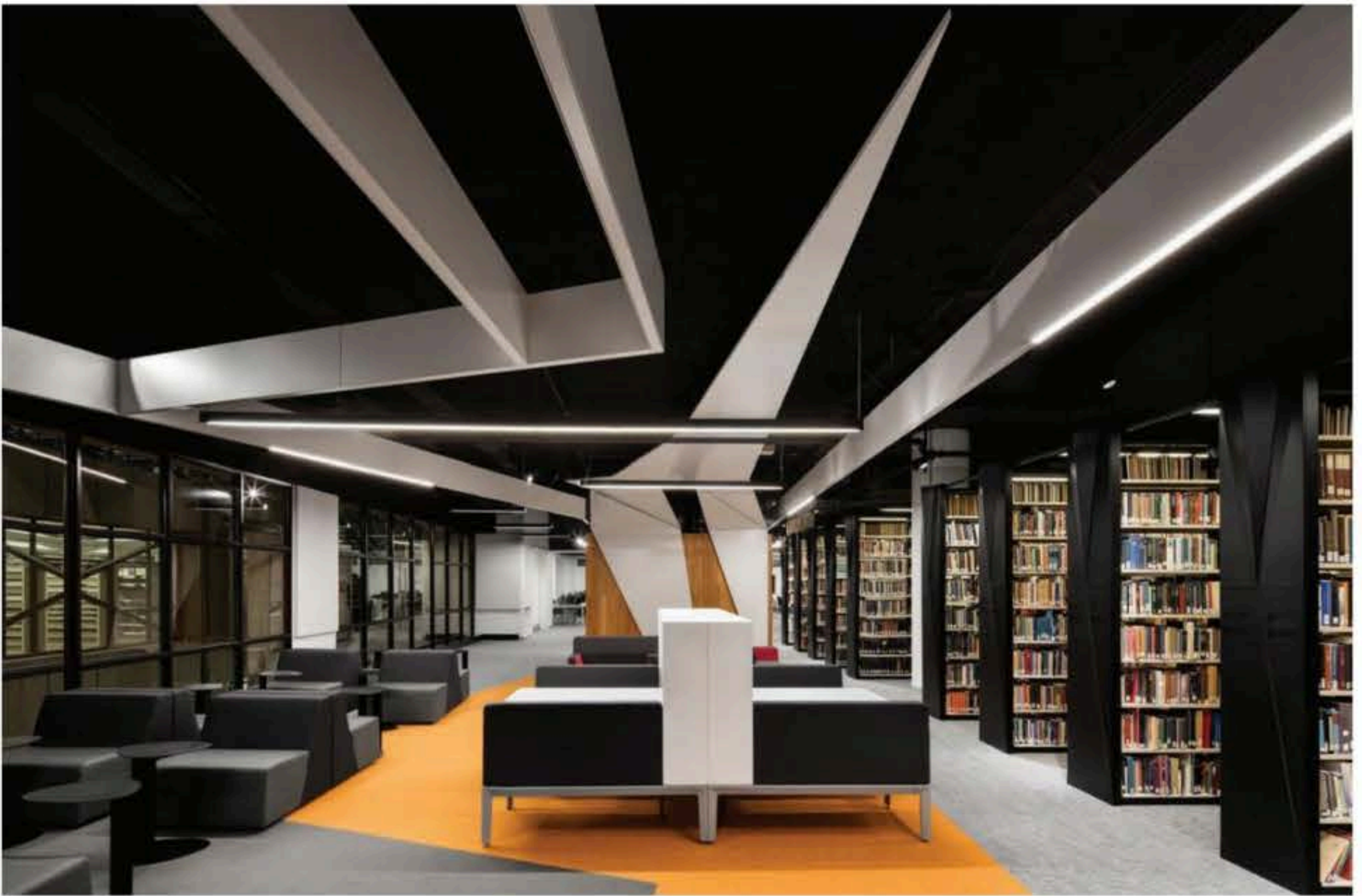
of a beautiful 1913 white glazed terracotta façade on the Mackay Street side, the former Royal George Apartment Building.

The program was developed in a rigorous way, but left ample room for imagination. Inspired by the optical explorations of Swiss artist Felice Varini, the architects managed to respond to programmatic requirements while alluding to the concept of anamorphosis—a way of arranging visual components so that they appear dynamically distorted, but resolve into a coherent image from a single vantage point.

The program called for the reorganization of the second, third, fourth and fifth floors of the library, and had to take into account the structural grid, the central atrium and the exterior envelope of the 1992 building. A formal portal was built on the ground floor to create a strong visual transition to the existing surroundings. The wood-lined gateway leads up a wide staircase with acoustically treated walls into the hushed environment of the reception area.

The presence of the building's atrium, despite the constraints it entailed, provided the architects with the opportunity to generate very clear and efficient circulation patterns. The elongated void creates a physical separation between library-connected spaces and administrative services. On the south side of the atrium, each floor is bookended by two large reading rooms filled with natural light, facilitating user orientation. The floorplate on the north side of the atrium includes work rooms, offices, cataloguing areas and a number of spaces where users can experiment with state-of-the-art techniques such as 3D printing, virtual reality or a Technology Sandbox. Although the Webster Library is destined to become much more virtual, books and journals still occupy significant stack space, particularly on the upper three floors, where they are grouped towards the centre of the plan.

Working with the clients, the architects increased seating capacity from 1,500 to 3,300 seats and planned 22 different kinds of study



- SECOND FLOOR**
- 1 SILENT STUDY ROOM
 - 2 STACKS
 - 3 PERIODICALS
 - 4 ADMINISTRATION AND INTERLIBRARY LOANS
 - 5 COURSE RESERVES
 - 6 CIRCULATION
 - 7 SORTING
 - 8 ADMINISTRATION AND SELF-CHECKOUT
 - 9 STUDY CARRELS
 - 10 SOLO READING AREA
 - 11 COLLABORATIVE WORK ROOM
 - 12 COMPUTERS
 - 13 OPEN COLLABORATION ZONE
 - 14 REFERENCE DESK
 - 15 PHOTOCOPIERS AND SCANNERS
 - 16 CLASSROOM
 - 17 TECHNOLOGY SANDBOX

