

Los Angeles Times

Robert Dawson tells the story of 'The Public Library' through photos

By Craig Nakano

May 10, 2014



The Public Library

Robert Dawson, Princeton Architectural Press

The one-room public library in Allensworth, Calif., shown in 1995, is a re-creation of the original that was built by former slaves

Photographer Robert Dawson recalls in his new book how the libraries of his childhood "always kept my interest partly because they allowed me to escape the mundane existence of my life in West Sacramento.... They showed me something better."



The closed Mark Twain Branch in Detroit, photographed in 2011, looks to be on the verge of collapse. (Robert Dawson / Princeton Architectural Press)

It's a theme that pops up throughout the recently released "The Public Library: A Photographic Essay" (Princeton Architectural Press), Dawson's 18-year journey through 47 states documenting libraries as reflections of our culture and physical manifestations of our dreams — some fulfilled, some failed.

The contrasts are stark: architect Rem Koolhaas' ambitious, modern, view-filled Seattle Central Library, followed by, a few pages later, the book repository in Tchula, Miss., which the author describes as part of the poorest county in the poorest state in the nation. There Holmes photographed a darkened room. The air conditioning had been broken for a year, and the librarian turned off the lights in a futile attempt to make a sweltering building feel tolerable.

The pictures that open the first chapter show the gleaming, classical architecture of the main library in Milwaukee alongside a closed Detroit library that is falling apart. "Those juxtapositions I chose on purpose," Dawson said from his home in San Francisco. "This is not just a study of architecture. It's a look at the uses of libraries and their places in society."

The unintended results, he said, were portraits of communities through the lens of the library.

This is not just a study of architecture. It's a look at the uses of libraries and their places in society.-
Robert Dawson, photographer

In most cases, Dawson eschewed dramatic angles and complicated framing. Each building or room is pictured straight on, from eye level. The photographer asked himself, "How much of this did I want it to be about me and my vision, and how much did I want it to be about the building, unadorned," he said. "Obviously I have a particular point of view, and I wanted it to be as honest a statement about what I saw as a witness to the whole culture of libraries."

That point of view includes a call for more support of libraries, not only as symbols of democracy but as great equalizers, tools of social justice to lift the poor and to provide equal opportunity. Dawson, perhaps best known for his work exploring dwindling water supplies in the West, recently received grants, including a Guggenheim fellowship, to study in detail the Stockton library system. In that project, the photographer expects to find inspirational stories about education's role in turning lives around.

Nakano, Craig. "Robert Dawson tells the story of 'The Public Library' through photos." *Los Angeles Times* (May 10, 2014) [online]

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-ca-public-library-20140511-story.html>