Princeton Library merges old and new architecture

Burlington slate from England and New York Bluestone were selected for the materials palette of the new public library in Princeton, NJ, to blend with the historic community's existing stone architecture, yet at the same time, offering a more contemporary look.

by Jennifer Adams

Home to the renowned Princeton University and rich in historical stone architecture, the community of Princeton, NJ, is saturated in art and culture. Recently added to the downtown line-up of notable buildings is the new public library, which incorporates a palette of Burlington slate from England and Tar Hollow Bluestone from New York State throughout its interior and exterior design.

"We wanted to create a building that would fit in with a fairly eclectic city, but wouldn't look overly historical - something that would blend with both the new concept and older buildings," said Principal and Lead Design Architect Nick Garrison of Hillier Architecture in Princeton, NJ. In generating the design, Garrison and his team of architects, including Project Manager Peggy Keherer, met with librarians and various community groups and organizations to share ideas, which ultimately assisted in creating a 58,000-square-foot building that is both functional and visually pleasing.

"We developed a color palette inside in a range of red, green and slate blues," said the architect. "These were important colors that warmed up the inside. We also brought a lot of brick inside and a red terra-cotta color."

Garrison explained that the interior design was intended to reflect the materials used on the exterior, which included Bluestone, brick and stainless steel. "Bluestone was used for all the banding and stone trim," he said. "It was a way to introduce a slightly different palette. It is honed, so it has a light patina. Stainless steel was also used to give a moderm appearance."

With the objective of maintaining a consistent palette inside and out, large slabs of Tar Hollow Bluestone - quarried by Tompkins Bluestone of Hancock, NY, and supplied by Ottey and Hoopes, Inc. of Frazer, PA - were used to form a fireplace in an interior reading room. Additionally, Elterwater slate with a honed finish - quarried in England and supplied by Burlington Natstone of Plano, TX - was employed as flooring throughout the public spaces of the library.

"When we went to try to find flooring for the main entrance, it had to be extremely hard and go with the palette," said Garrison. "With public buildings, color is important. If it is too dark, it is gloomy. If it is too light, it gets dirty. Burlington Stone is a natural stone with a softer look. It has a lot of veining and depth of color. It's a fairly spirited stone. When we put it down next to the brick and maple, we really liked how they complemented each other. It also married well with the Bluestone. The Elterwater green color is soft and easy on the eyes."

In total, 3,000 square feet of Eltyerwater slate planking was employed as flooring. "We used a combination of random lengths and a running bond pattern, " said Garrison. "The idea was to create more visual interest in the floor, and feel a little more of the exterior brought in. The random pattern gave it a less formal presence."

The slate floor pieces include widths of 8, 12, and 16 inches with lengths ranging from 12 to 32 inches. They have a thickness of ¼ inch.

One of the main focal points of the library is a curved staircase, also comprised of Elterwater slate. The stair treads measure 68 x 13 x 1 ¼ and 60 x 13 x 1 ¼ inches. Tile sizes on the landings are 36 x 24 x ¾ and 54 x 24 x ¾ inches.

Installing the slate

The Elterwater slate planking took approximately one month to install, according to Project Manager Paul Vigna of Artisan Tile & Marble Co. of NJ Inc. in Somerset, NJ, the installer for the job. There were at least four workers on site at all times, and additional installers were needed for the slate stairs.

"It looks like wood planking," said Vigna. "We had to go from one expansion joint to another [because of the varying tile sizes]." A thick mud set - at least 2 inches thick - was used to install the stone flooring.

"The product itself is really a decent cut material," said the installer. "Burlington does a nice job supplying what it says it is going to. It's a really nice-looking library. It fits Princeton well." Vigna also added that the Princeton Library does an excellent job of maintaining the slate floor.

According to the architect, once construction began on the project, it took approximately 14 months to complete. "The design process took a little long because of some delays," said Garrison. "One challenge was that the completion had to correspond with a nearby garage project. We were delayed six months before construction started because the garage project was delayed. You can't have a public building with nowhere to park."

The Princeton Library opened its doors with a grand opening in the spring of 2004.

Architect: Hillier Architecture, Princeton, NJ
General Contractor: Turner Construction
Stone Quarriers: Burlington Stone, England (slate); Tompkins Bluestone, Hancock,NY (Bluestone)
Stone Suppliers: Burlington Natstone, Plano, TX (slate); Ottey and Hoopes, lnc.; Frazer, PA (Bluestone)
Stone lnstallers: Artisan Tile & Marble Co. of NJ, Inc., Somerset, NJ (slate);
Speranza Brickwork, Whitehouse Station, NJ (Bluestone)