

Museum of the Bible

Washington, DC

Project Category

Institutional Architecture

SITE

When the Museum of the Bible opened on November 17, 2017, its strategic location at the cultural axis along 4th Street connected the National Mall and major cultural landmarks to Southwest Washington, further invigorating the urban revival of a fascinating, historic, and rapidly transforming part of the city.

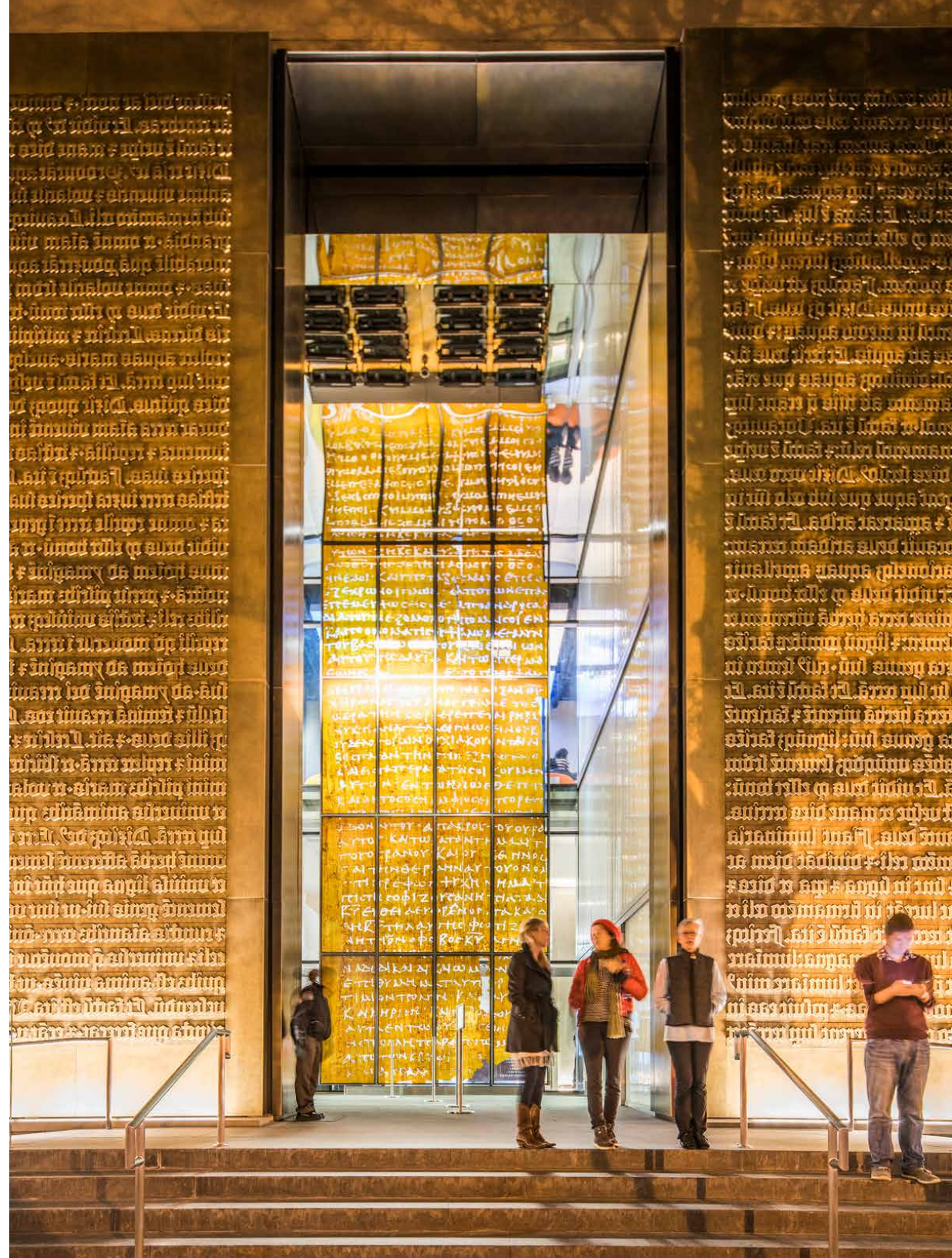
PROGRAM

Museum of the Bible is noteworthy for its architectural programming, representing a new model for contemporary museums. Whereas traditional museums typically consist of exhibition galleries, spaces for lectures and educational activities, shops, and perhaps a café, Museum of the Bible was conceived, programmed, and designed to be more ambitious and flexible. Given the breadth of such functions, Museum of the Bible may be regarded not so much as a singular museum but as a one-building campus of interrelated facilities.

SOLUTION

Museum of the Bible is the premier museum dedicated to one of the world's oldest texts. The new eight-level, 430,000 sf museum is housed in an adapted historic 1922 refrigerated warehouse in Southwest Washington, DC. It is resolutely modern, incorporating striking architectural forms and cutting-edge technologies. The finished project is a built equivalent of a manuscript that bears traces of several versions of text added and erased over time.

The building avoids the easy, literal symbolism that is often associated with biblical representation, in favor of rich but subtle allusions. The result is a work of architecture that is simultaneously timeless and of-the-moment, universal and place-specific. It reflects a concerted effort allowing for, and encouraging, a multiplicity of views, interpretations, and experiences.





Museum of the Bible B

Bold asymmetry of the sculpted rooftop addition plays off the subtler asymmetry of the existing structure – requiring several innovative design and construction solutions.



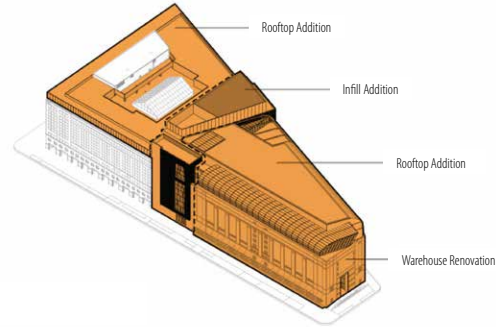
Terminal Refrigerating and Warehouse Co. c. 1970



Converted to "The Washington Design Center" in 1982

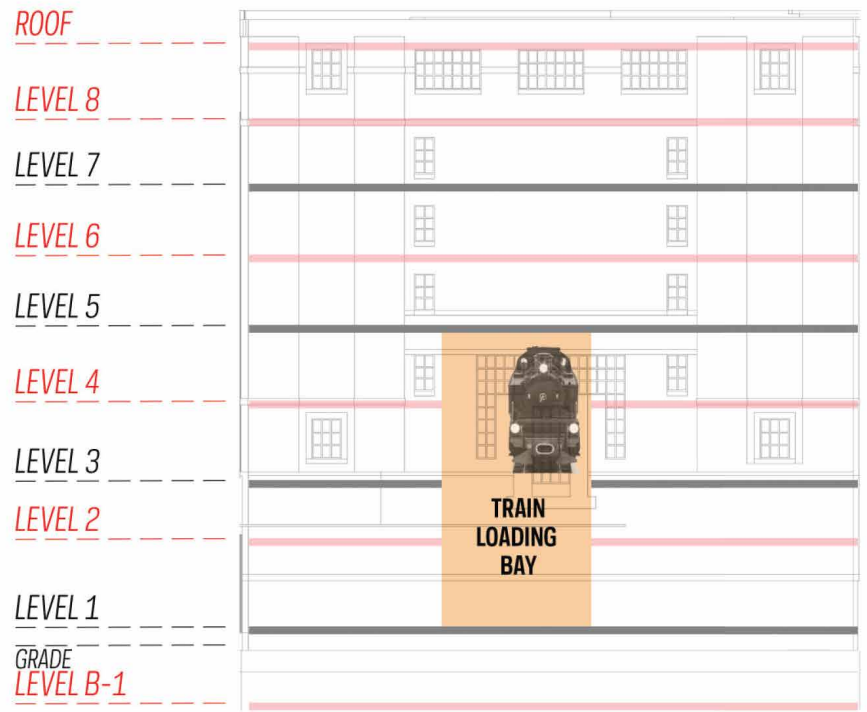


The Washington Design Center c. 2012

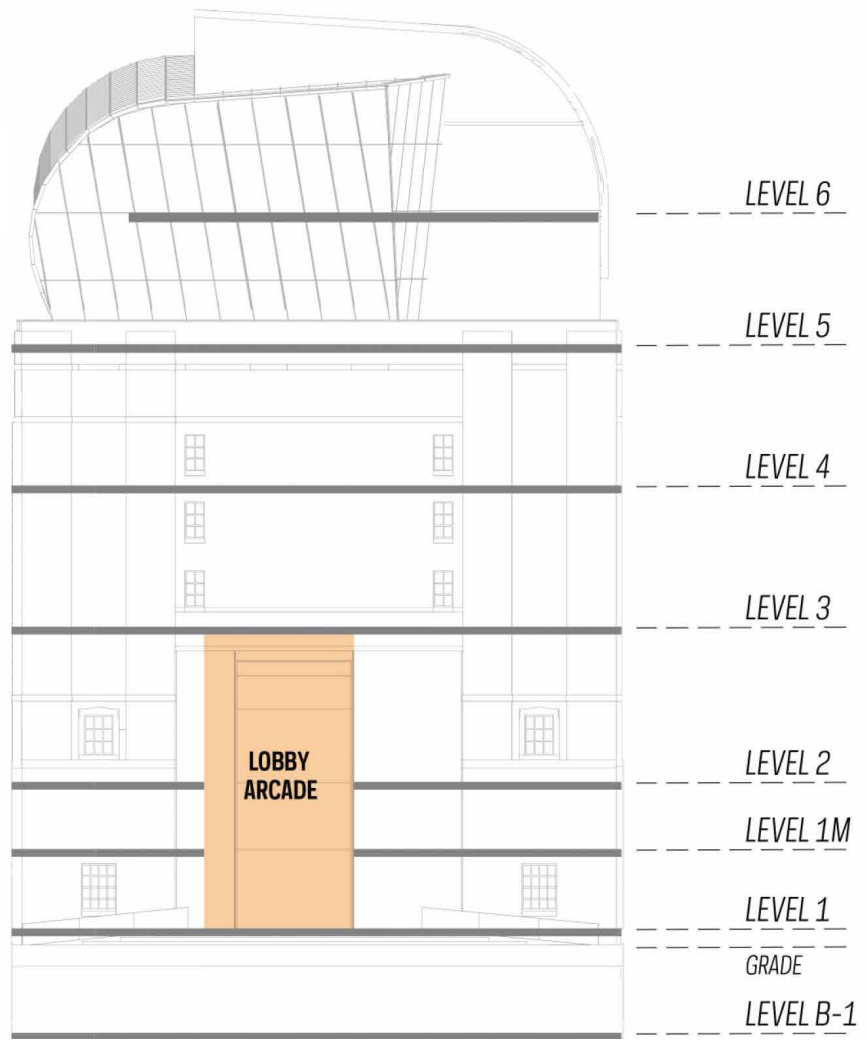


The museum occupies not a purpose-built building but a renovated industrial structure—a former refrigerated warehouse that later served as Washington’s Design Center—and its design reflects that unusual architectural heritage as well as the museum’s non-sectarian educational mission.

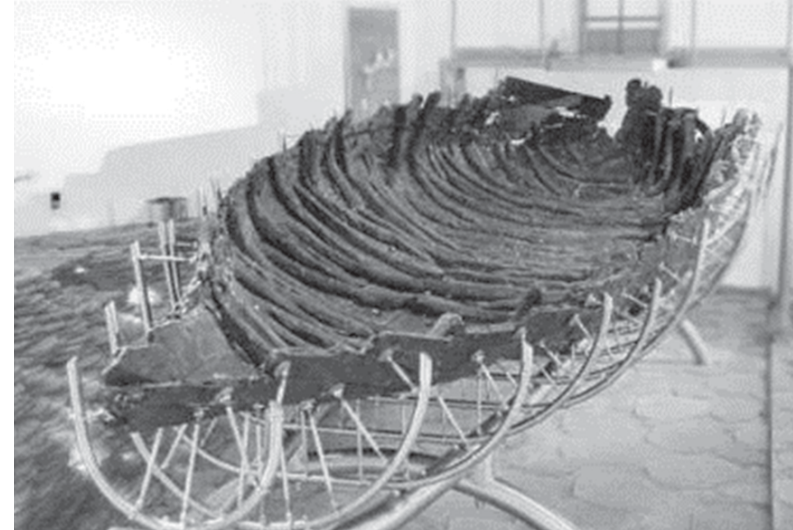
Original Floor Levels in 1922



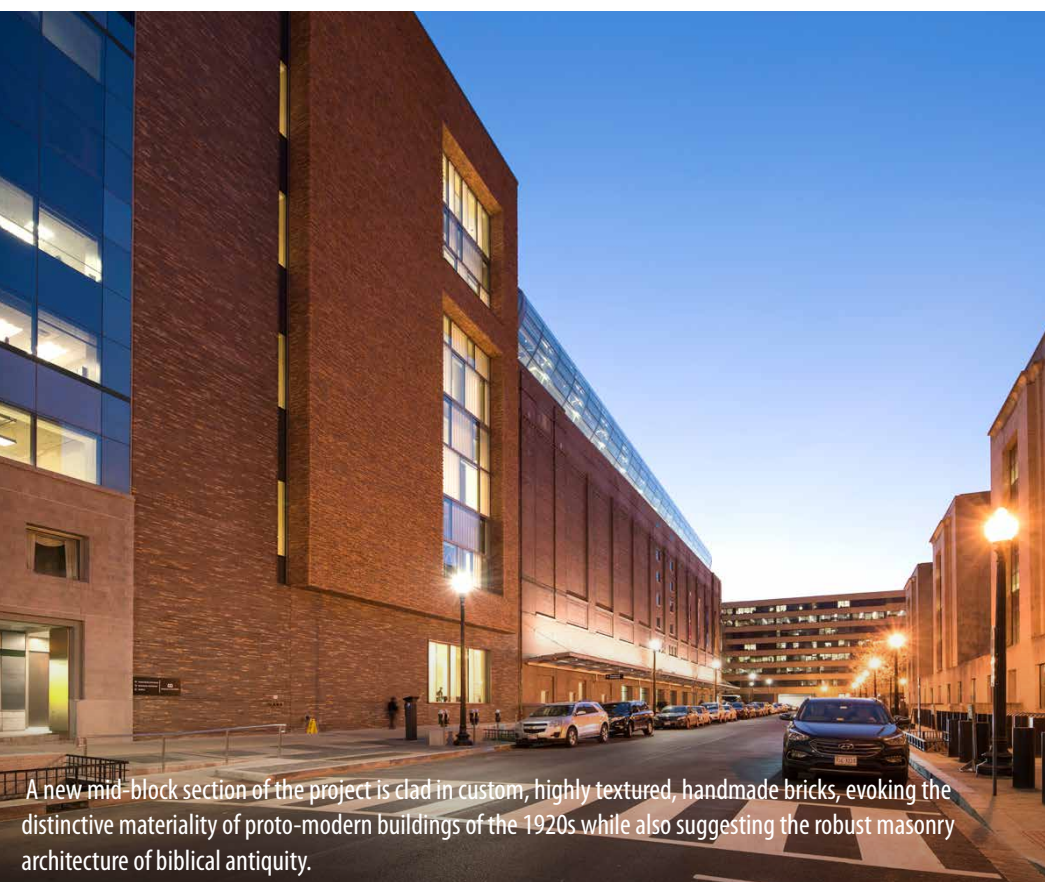
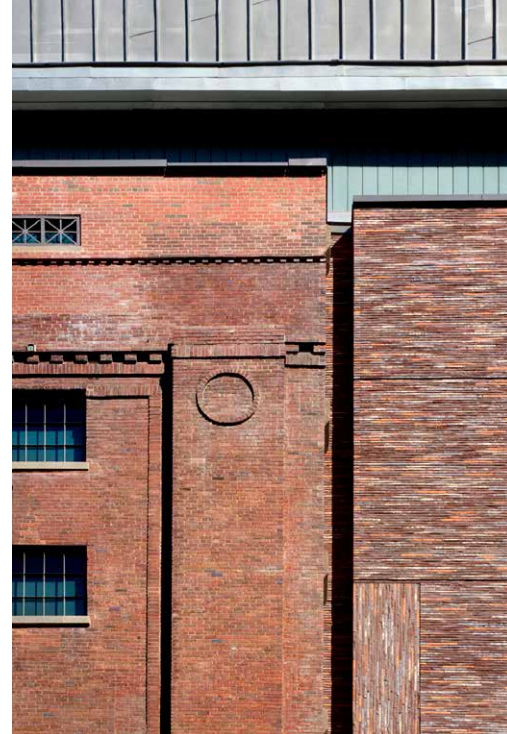
New Floor Levels in 2017



To save time, the team decided to remove every other floor of the building and add two levels to the roof rather than gut the entire interior and rebuild within the existing envelope.



The glassy "Galley" prow not only marks the main museum entrance below, but also positions the Museum of the Bible as an extension of an existing cultural axis along 4th Street, which links institutions such as the National Building Museum, the National Gallery of Art, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the National Air & Space Museum.



A new mid-block section of the project is clad in custom, highly textured, handmade bricks, evoking the distinctive materiality of proto-modern buildings of the 1920s while also suggesting the robust masonry architecture of biblical antiquity.



Surrounding the entry, a significant art installation consisting of a triptych composition of grand 40-foot milled brass panels stands as a beacon to welcome visitors into the museum.



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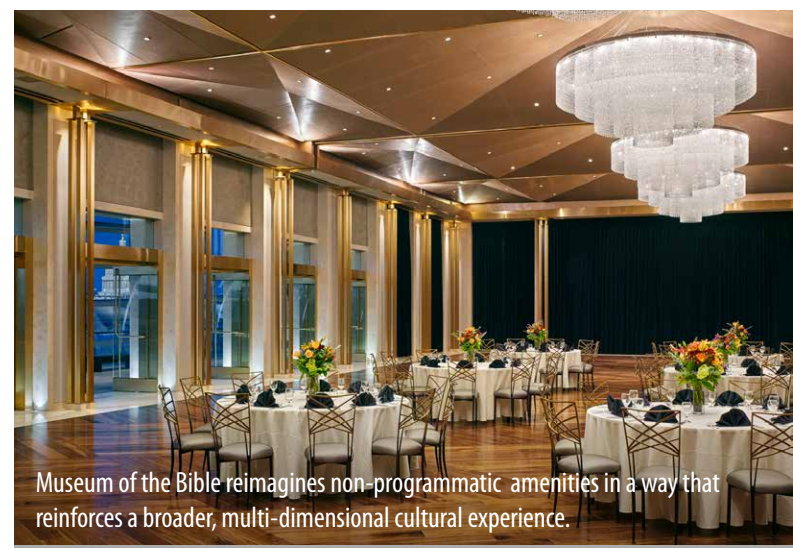
The internal train loading bay was recast as a main lobby arcade, incorporating a programmable LED display running the length of the ceiling, suggesting the nave of a Gothic or Renaissance church.



The atrium is a vertical hub-and-spoke, organizing the floors and allowing visitors to create their own path, with each museum space offering unique stand-alone experiences.



One of twelve theatres in the museum, the immersive World Stage Theater is a highly sculptural tabernacle, incorporating sophisticated audiovisual technology.



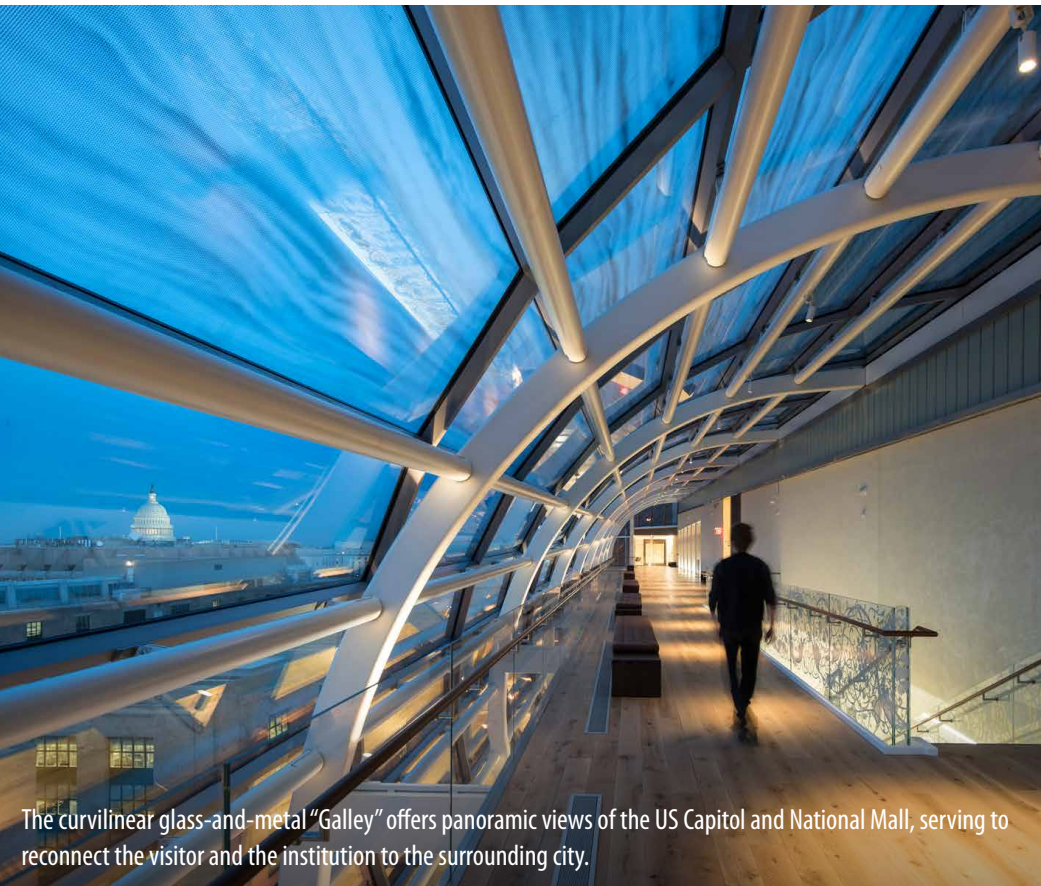
Museum of the Bible reimagines non-programmatic amenities in a way that reinforces a broader, multi-dimensional cultural experience.



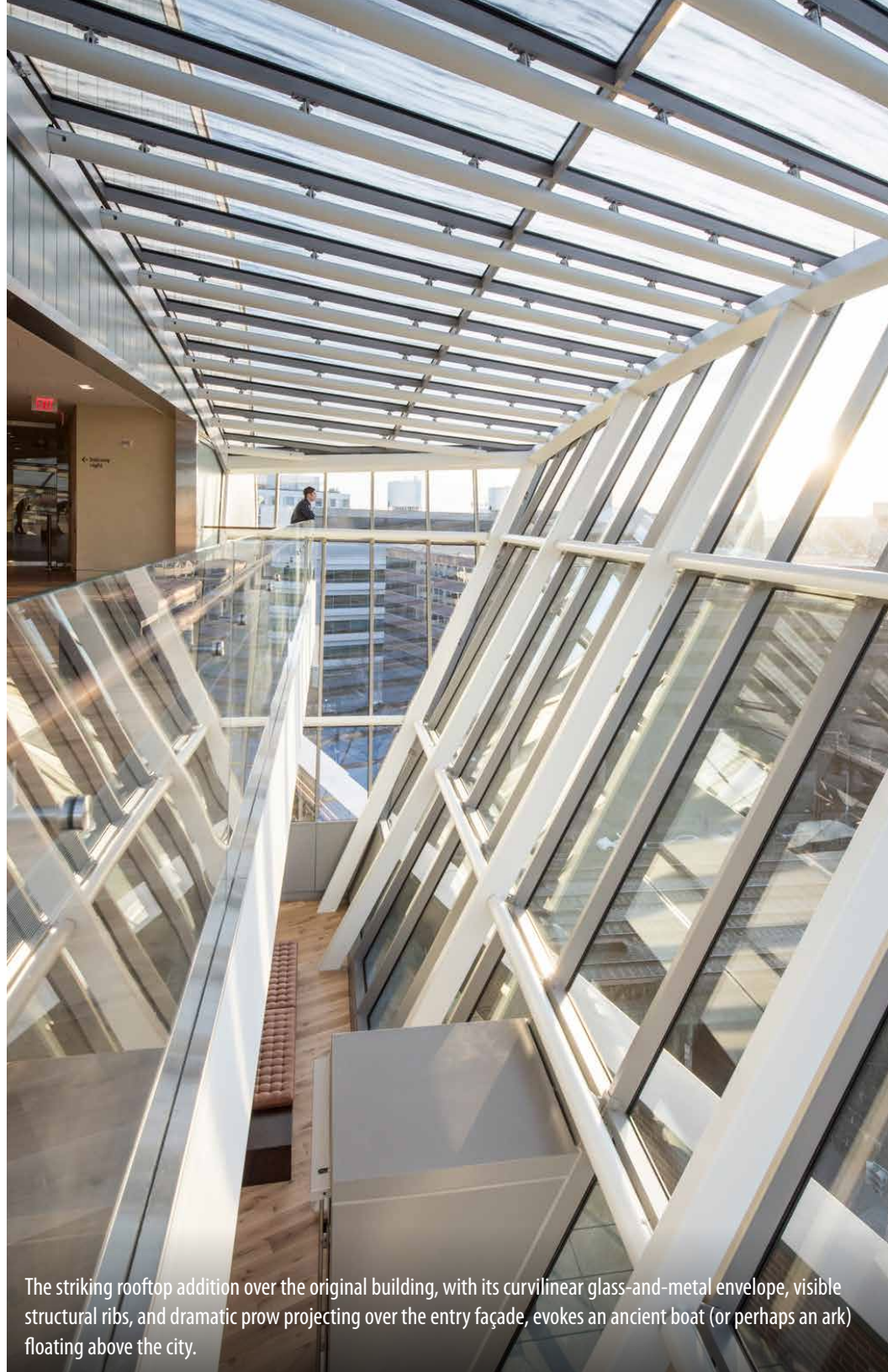
The café is inspired by Middle Eastern street food and strives to connect visitors to historical narratives through culinary traditions.



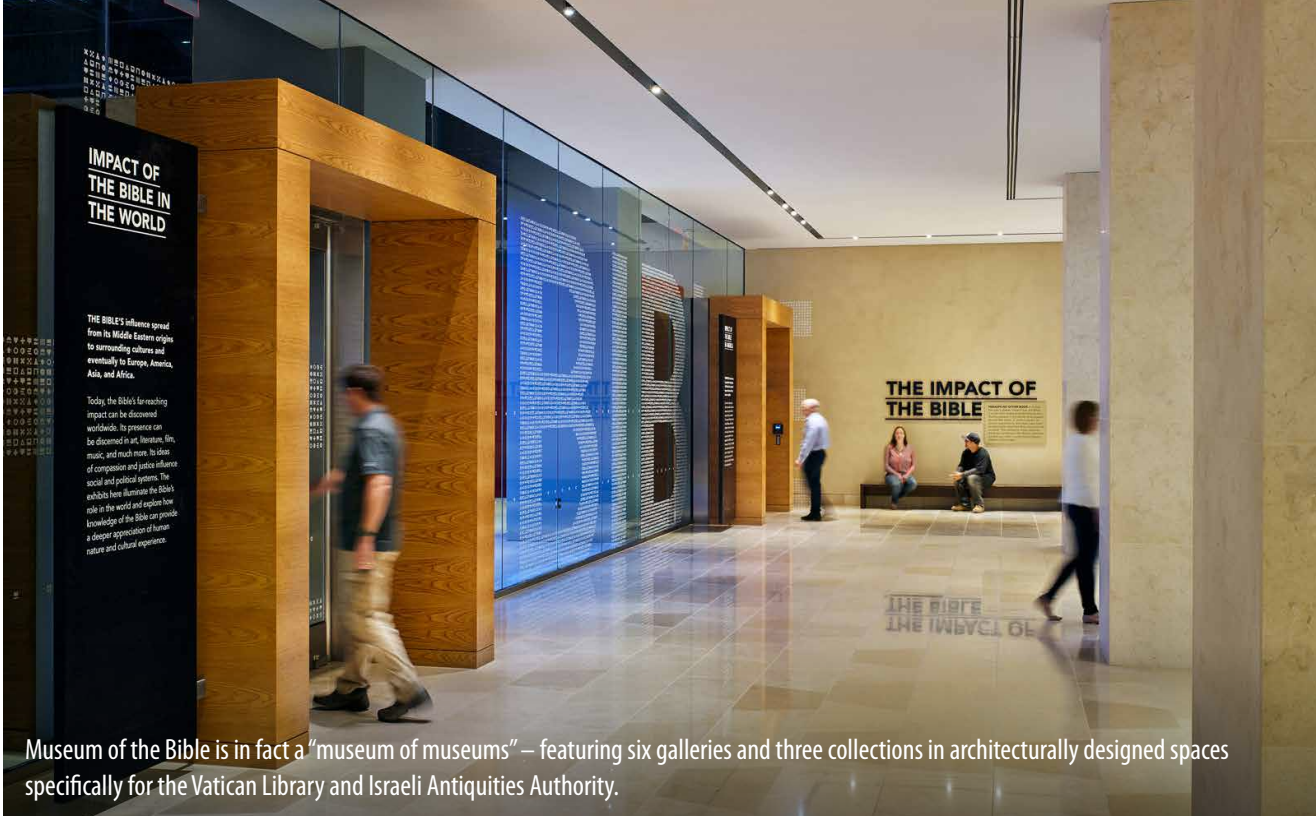
A rooftop terrace incorporated a Biblical Garden, which not only serves as a green respite in the middle of the city, but also explores biblical themes through horticultural and aquatic elements.



The curvilinear glass-and-metal "Galley" offers panoramic views of the US Capitol and National Mall, serving to reconnect the visitor and the institution to the surrounding city.



The striking rooftop addition over the original building, with its curvilinear glass-and-metal envelope, visible structural ribs, and dramatic prow projecting over the entry façade, evokes an ancient boat (or perhaps an ark) floating above the city.



Museum of the Bible is in fact a “museum of museums” – featuring six galleries and three collections in architecturally designed spaces specifically for the Vatican Library and Israeli Antiquities Authority.



The array of event and exhibition spaces, commissioned artwork, state-of-the-art technologies, theaters, interactive experiences, culinary and horticulture areas – plus the sheer breadth of the building on a tight urban site – offers visitors both a place of respite and an opportunity to contemplate, explore, learn, be entertained, and connect to biblical culture.



 museum of the Bible

The design of the museum brings a new architectural landmark to a developing neighborhood of Washington, DC — a core cultural component and boost to the rebirth of Southwest Washington.