context of the site

The Shaw Neighborhood Library resides at a prominent site in the middle of the neighborhood. 7th Street is the main commercial corridor in the area and Rhode Island Avenue is a major thruway connecting Shaw to other parts of Washington, DC, making their intersection one of the busiest in the neighborhood. The other streets bounding the site, R Street and 8th Street, are quiet residential roads, but still host enough traffic to make the long wedge, in essence, a large traffic island. A Metro station entrance is directly across R Street and there are two bus stops serving the library. Though the surrounding buildings are primarily residential, wide streets and adjacent parking lots leave the site open and lacking the density relished in other parts of the neighborhood.

Site Plan
1. Existing Library
2. 7th St.
3. Rhode Island Ave.
4. R St.
5. 8th St.
6. Metro Entrance - Shaw/Howard U. Station
7. Bus stop
8. Ashbury Dwellings
The site's angled geometry creates a challenge of arranging spaces in an economical manner. The East Wing of the National Gallery of Art, designed by I.M. Pei, is planned on a 70-degree angle\(^5\), making it similar to the 66 degrees of the library site and thus an appropriate precedent within the city for dealing with such a distinctive geometry. The building's library and Central Court present especially articulate examples of spaces arranged using the geometry of the site.

5. Kwederis, Donna. Building Tour. 2 March 2007. Donna Kwederis is an architect with the National Gallery of Art’s design department.

The precise angle of the East Wing's plan is 70.5425 degrees.
A great deal of the library's patrons will arrive by Metro. Because of its close proximity to the library, the station entrance demands the building's attention. Rather than orient itself toward the main intersection, as most buildings along 7th Street do, the main entrance of the building is oriented toward the plaza across R Street. This plaza is in fact considered a part of the site, and the entrance of the building gestures towards it.

The volume of the building and its position relative to the street are derived from precedents set by the traditional architecture of the neighborhood. The building stands at a height of 50 feet, roughly equivalent to the height of the Ashbury Dwellings across 7th Street. This is also roughly the average height of all buildings adjacent to the site, which range from 15 to 80 feet tall. The building engages the surrounding streets in a bold way, leaving minimal setbacks to eliminate any physical disconnect from the urban environment, thus announcing itself as a vital institution on a prominent site.

In an effort to maximize the available space on the site, the utility spaces for the building [including offices, rest rooms, mechanical and storage spaces, etc.] are arranged along the perimeter, housed within steel-framed, metal-clad walls that act as book ends on the East and West sides of the library. Concrete terminating elements support the utility walls as visual and spatial braces. These concrete elements also carry the vertical shafts for the building's infrastructure.

As a direct result of this arrangement, the remaining space is naturally divided into two large zones. The Eastern of these two zones contains the library's stacks and reading spaces, while the remaining zone consists of an indoor public gathering space.