

ROSS-BROADWAY BRANCH LIBRARY

33 East Bayaud Avenue, Denver, Colorado 80209



Architect: Victor Hornbein

Year Built: 1951

The Ross-Broadway branch of the Denver Public Library is a unique example of Usonian architecture. It is named for Frederick R. Ross, a Vermont-born tuberculosis sufferer who, like many in the 19th century, came to Denver's dry and sunny climate in hopes of recovering from the disease. Once here, he made a fortune with a successful real estate company before becoming involved in civic activities and eventually positioning himself as the president of the Denver Board of Water Commissioners. Here, he helped to guide the region through the controversial water diversion projects of the 1930s. He was known as an avid reader.

The Usonian influence in Ross-Broadway's design is unquestionable. The movement itself was developed by perhaps the most well-known American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, as a vessel for his deep belief that architecture should be distinct from previous styles. Wright appreciated the prairie style of building as uniquely well-suited to the flat expanses of the American countryside, but his Usonian movement expanded on the ideas of the prairie house and manifested specifically as dramatic cantilevers, abundant clerestory glass and low profile, horizontal forms.

All of these can be seen in the Ross-Broadway Branch Library. This one-story building is sited at Bayaud Street between two busy thoroughfares, South Lincoln Street and Broadway. The structure is steel-framed, sitting on a raised concrete foundation, with brick and wood framed curtain walls. A flat roof with exaggerated eaves and exposed structure and copper trim shelters and extends into a large, dramatic cantilever on the east side.

The south façade holds the main entrance in a brick-wrapped opening with concrete cap while clerestory windows run in long bands across the majority of the elevation, descending as a full curtain wall east of the entry door. On the east face, the exaggerated cantilever holds an extended bay with curtain glass. Inside, one can see the clerestory windows run the perimeter of the main room. These remain operable through a system of cranks and gears. Ceilings are staggered with projecting soffits that break up the long spaces.

The architect, Victor Hornbein, was a Denver native born in 1913. He had already achieved noteworthy status at the time of his selection for the Ross-Broadway Branch Library but his most well-known building is generally considered to be the Botanic Gardens Conservatory, built in 1964. In a 1995 interview, Hornbein called the Conservatory his second favorite project, with Ross-Broadway being the first.

References

National Register of Historic Places, Ross-Broadway Branch, Denver Public Library, Denver, Denver County, Colorado, National Register #100000655

Victor Hornbein (1913 - 1995). Retrieved from <https://history.denverlibrary.org/Colorado-biographies/victor-hornbein-1913-1995>