of computers available for public use and provides a wireless environment in which visitors can use their own laptops. In addition to the shop/gallery, café and meeting rooms, it has a digital teaching lab for public and staff training as well as dedicated computer clusters for children, teens and adults. Shopping baskets, carts and self-service checkout are provided like the supermarket, while books are displayed throughout the stacks and can be read in comfortable armchairs with a cup of coffee. Material can be checked out online and collected or returned at drive-up windows.

The new Des Moines central library was commissioned in 2001 through an open request for proposals. David Chipperfield learned about the project in the course of his work on the Figge Museum in nearby Davenport and, once appointed, engaged in extensive public consultation. Four alternative schemes were offered for a public ballot, and their favourite has been built. The project has succeeded through the careful cultivation of many constituencies by a committed client and design team and has been realised by a partnership of the library city and state, private foundations and individual donors. Public pride in the building is palpable, with every donation, large and small, acknowledged on the walls of the pedestrian passage through the site and the library busy with users of all ages and persuasions.

While minimalism is often dismissed as an acquired taste of the architectural cognoscenti, the appointment of David Chipperfield and the broad public support for this sparse and uncompromisingly modern building suggest otherwise and confound the notion of a conservative American Midwest. Local citizens suggest that conservatism in Iowa is less about tradition and more about being frugal and practical. The new library scores high on both counts. Submitting to a strict discipline and stripping away unnecessary finishes and flourishes, Chipperfield has achieved many efficiencies. Focusing on the supple form of the building and its shimmering skin, he has leveraged a modest programme and tight budget to create a powerful public presence. ANNETTE LECUYER