Unsuspecting visitors strolling through the popular Mexico City district of Cuauhtémoc will be astonished to stumble upon the mighty concrete hulk of the Biblioteca Vasconcelos, and even more surprised by its imposing yet sophisticated interior. Mexican architect Alberto Kalach and his team won the international tender for the new library building in the early 2000s with their spectacular design. Daylight floods into the interior and lush foliage glints between the 40,000 meters (131,230 feet) of bookshelves, which are made of a steel structure that appears to float. The vast main hall is around 238 meters long. Its elongated shape has echoes of classic library designs such as the imposing Long Room at Trinity College (see page 258).

In addition to the general collection, which numbers some 600,000 books, and the ambitious section for children and teens, the library also puts on a wide-ranging program of cultural events. "What we do comes about organically, in response to the needs of the local people," writes the team at the Biblioteca Vasconcelos. "Besides providing information, culture, education, and leisure all feature here. We aim to cater to those needs by providing a traditional library service, a range of art-related activities, and free access to our collections, plus a contemporary visitor concept." In practical terms, this means exhibitions, concerts, theater performances, dance classes, workshops, book launches, storytelling evenings, and movie screenings.

The library is inclusive and accessible, with a Braille area and a remarkable collection of media in sign language. "This collection mainly deals with deaf culture and Mexican sign language," writes the team. "Our deaf visitors can also enjoy books in other languages that address sign language or the lives of those with hearing impairments, plus books for deaf children. We also have books without words, which can help people understand what it's like to live without sound. Stories can be told without words, after all." The collection is also enhanced by videos.

The principal artwork in the Biblioteca Vasconcelos is a sculpture by Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco, based on the skeleton of a gray whale that the artist found on a beach in Baja California. He placed a metal fitting beneath it and labeled the bones with thousands of graphite circles. Today the piece, entitled *Mátrix Móvil*, adorns the entrance to the library and provides a remarkable visual counterpoint to the building's skeletal shelving. The sculpture also forges a link with the nature present, in the form of the botanical garden that surround the colossal building. "Culture and →

In this building, the books ascend to dizzying heights. Sweeping, open spaces between the shelves invite visitors to read and study. The computers have internet access and can be used free of charge.