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# Tips for Planning Library Interiors

by Carol Brown

**L**ibrary building projects are usually filled with surprises and challenges that are stress-producing for everyone involved. If the completed building proves to be functional and pleasant, however, the hard work and headaches are justified.

In library building projects, as with other areas of library administration, planning is the key to the effective use of resources. Thorough preparation prior to designing a library interior will help to ensure that a new or renovated building will be satisfactory when the project is finished, and for a long time to come. Good planning results in a library that is workable for staff and users and reduces the possibility that funds will be wasted on items that are not functional. Some tips for librarians launching a building project follow.

**Plan a building that will support your library's mission.** The design process for a new or renovated library really begins with general plans for library services. In other words, the completed building should allow the staff to carry out the library's mission and stated goals and objectives effectively.

In some cases, a library may have a formal written document stating short-term and long-range goals and objectives; some libraries may have only informal plans of service; many public libraries will have plans based on the Public Library Association's process as outlined in *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries*.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the format of the plans, however, a library staff that is launching a building project should know what it hopes to accomplish in its new facility.

Library goals and objectives that are directly tied to the parameters of the building program will be useful during the design process. An example of such a goal and several related objectives is included here. (The example was developed by the author during the process of writing the building program for the expansion of Watsonville Public Library in California).

**Goal:** As the community's major information center, the library serves to improve and enhance the quality of life of Watsonville's diverse, multicultural population by providing well-balanced collections of books in English and in Spanish for residents of all ages.

**Objectives:**

1. To expand the adult area in order to shelve a maximum of 75,600 books (73,600 adult and 2,000 young adult) and provide seating for 82 adults, and to expand the children's area to shelve a maximum of 38,400 books and provide seating for 30 children.
2. To expand the adult Spanish-language collection by approximately 2,000 books and to improve the depth of the Spanish-language collection in order to serve a variety of reading levels and interests on the same subject.
3. To add four double-faced sections of 84" high shelving in the workroom for storing multiple copies of books in Spanish that go out of print quickly.
4. To establish a browsing area near the entrance to the building for the merchandising of new books, high-demand titles, and audio-visual materials on attractive, lighted display shelving or racks.

The library building program and plans for the library interior, therefore, reflect the facility requirements dictated by the objectives. In the case of the example above, the objectives provide an indication of how much building space will be needed for adult, juvenile, and Spanish-language bookstacks and, therefore, how many bookstacks will be required for the various collections. The objectives also indicate how much additional stack space will be needed in the workroom for one particular function and the need for space in the library for a browsing area.

Goals and objectives may be written even more specifically by noting the number of square feet needed in a building for a particular service or function. Also, goals and objectives may tie a new or remodeled space to a new service that the library will be able to offer because of the building project, for example, the addition of meeting space that will allow for adult programming, literacy tutoring, and adult education classes. One of the most useful questions for the staff to ask itself is: what do we want to be able to do in the new building that we can't do in the old one?

**Plan with an open mind.** A primary obstacle to effective interior planning is a library staff's "things-are-never-going-to-change" mindset. (This attitude is closely related to the "we've-always-done-it-this-way" syndrome.) Employees who have been working in an inadequate building, with too few staff members and a re-

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stricted budget, find it difficult to plan a building for expanded services and more business. Sometimes the staff has to be encouraged to make an attitude adjustment from pessimism to optimism in order to contribute to planning a new building that will accommodate a larger staff with up-to-date equipment.

Staff members (even the director) also need to remember that procedures change as individual staff members change. There are many ways to operate a library effectively; what works for the current director

and staff may not work ten years from now, with a different director and staff. Ideally, the library will be planned to function well for the current staff, but will be flexible enough to function well when changes are made in the future.

**Look at other libraries—carefully.** In addition to consideration of the organization's goals and objectives, effective planning involves looking at what others have done. Librarians, architects, designers, board members, and other members of a planning team often visit other recently completed library projects in order to obtain ideas for their building. Nothing, however, should be planned for your library just because it looks good in another library. Rather, it is important to talk to the staff of the library being visited to find out how effective the admired element really is. Also, before borrowing an idea from another library, the planning team should consider whether a supposedly desirable element really fits the needs of their particular library.

Sometimes a seemingly good concept turns into a disaster in practice. In one very busy library, for example, a cleverly designed puppet theatre was built into a corner of the children's area. The theatre was raised above the floor of the room; ramps led up either side of the structure to the "stage." Because of the design of the theatre (and its location in a Texas library), the structure was nicknamed "the Alamo."

Within minutes of the opening of the new library, children discovered that it was fun to run up one ramp, down the other, around the front of the theatre, and so on. A seat for the performer, located behind the stage, made a terrific platform for jumping and pushing off other little boys and girls. A few days after the library opened, the library director looked across the reading room and saw a small child standing at the very top of the structure, about twelve feet above the floor of the reading room. That was the end of "the Alamo." It was condemned as unsafe. The ramps were barricaded, and children were forbidden to walk, jump, or climb on it.

In a less-busy library, where the staff has more time for crowd control, a structure of this type might work satisfactorily. In a busy library, however, or in a library in which children often visit unattended by parents, something clever in the children's area can become a problem for the staff if its structure encourages climbing, jumping, pushing, or running. On the other hand, spaces or cubbyholes at floor level that encourage crawling or sitting seem to work well in most libraries.

**Thoroughly assess the building currently in use.** In designing a building, most of the effort and concern is concentrated on planning the large public areas of the library. The planning team naturally studies the adjacency of the various interior spaces, the layout of the bookstacks, and the number and

arrangement of readers' seats. Unfortunately, however, some of the small details that make a library attractive to the public and workable for the staff are ignored, or are just an afterthought, in the planning process.

The staff should take a fresh look at the existing facility before making plans for a new building. Assess in detail what isn't functional in the old library. While studying the existing building, set aside assumptions about how a library is supposed to look and operate. Instead, ask questions: What works well for my staff and my community in the library currently? What doesn't function well? Are there elements of the building that aren't used by the public, or about which the public complain? What looks attractive and tidy in the old library? Where do we generally have a mess?

Notice, for example, what kinds of materials or services are not handled effectively in the existing building. The distribution of free literature presents a problem for many older public libraries. In assessing the library, consider how the numerous bookmarks, pamphlets, and free newspapers are displayed. Are they spread across the top of a counter or laid out on an extra table set up in the lobby? Are some of them sitting on the top of the circulation desk? The building of a new library provides an opportunity to plan a better way to handle these materials. A literature rack designed to display and store giveaway items in an attractive and uncluttered manner can be included in the building plans.

Storage, generally, is a neglected area in library planning. Look around the existing library and notice the materials not appropriately stored. Consider the diverse items requiring storage in the library: the artificial Christmas tree; large, plastic book covers in many sizes; cases of toilet paper; audio-visual and processing equip-

ment; paper and office supplies; folding tables and stacking chairs; and interesting items, like egg cartons, used in children's programming. When designing a new library, make sure that you will have enough closets, cabinets, drawers, and shelves to store everything effectively.

**Collect opinions from staff and users regarding how they view the old library and their expectations for the new facility.** Gathering information from the public may be as simple as talking to patrons using the library. Often, staff members on the front lines receive input from patrons on a regular basis, without even asking questions. Information can also be collected by means of a formal survey. At Baltimore County Public Library, a committee headed by Jane Eickhoff developed an instrument that was used to assess patron reaction to library buildings in the system. The "Visitor Impact Survey" asks questions about the convenience, comfort, appearance, and maintenance of the libraries. The survey covers items such as building access, parking, signage, lighting, restrooms, arrangement of furnishings, and the overall appearance of the building. A survey similar to the one developed by Baltimore



Salem College in Winston-Salem integrated its CD-ROM index services with the traditional Moravian decor of its Reference Room by using two oak roll-top desks specifically designed by Oak Crest Manufacturing to accommodate microcomputers. Printer noise is contained by closing the roll-out printer shelves built behind the four-drawer panel on the left.

— Photo: R.A. Simon.

County would be useful in gathering information from users prior to beginning a building project.

Staff input is essential in library planning. When encouraged to voice an opinion, even the most complacent staff members can tell you what building details are needed to help them perform their work assignments more effectively. The staff should provide input about their individual workstations: What items will require storage? What kinds of storage (shelves, filing cabinets, or box drawers) are needed? What equipment will be used? At what height is the worksurface best for the work to be done? Staff members may work in a group to determine the requirements for shared space, such as the circulation and reference desks.

Obviously, the best planning for a technical services area involves studying the movement of library materials. The staff can, for example, develop a flow chart that shows how a new book moves through the work area, from the time it is ordered and received until it is placed on the shelf for the public. The flow chart serves as the schematic diagram that indicates how individual workstations should be located in relation to each other.

**Plan a library that will fit your community.** Study proposed plans carefully to determine whether or not all of the elements in the design will work in your particular community. Architects, consultants, and designers who have worked on several library building projects can be an asset; however, the library members of the planning team should feel free to question assumptions that are made by the design professionals on the basis of previous library building experience. An idea that worked successfully in one library may not work in your library.

Some communities, for example, have very specific characteristics that determine the layout and furnishings of a building. These community-specific conditions should be identified during the planning process. Perhaps visual control of stack areas and restroom entrances will be a primary consideration in the layout of libraries in some cities. In other libraries, control may be a secondary consideration, while the aesthetics of the library will be the primary consideration.

Some libraries provide services or materials that are not traditionally available in libraries. One public library in a small town checks out such unusual items as cake pans and sports equipment. Another library serves as a community dispatch point; one resident may leave an item to be picked up by another resident. Make sure building plans include a place for handling these special community needs.

**Plan a building that will accommodate your electronic equipment effectively.** The planning of a new library provides an opportunity to ensure adequate power and data distribution. It is essential that planning include preparation of a written inventory of all electronic equipment that will be used in the new library, both when the building first opens for business and in the future. An equipment inventory should note the kind of equipment, where it will be located, the maximum expected size of the equipment, power rating (amps and watts of power needed to operate the equipment), any special power requirements (such as surge protection or a dedicated circuit), and any specific communication requirements (such as cable to the minicomputer or multiplexer). The equipment inventory should include all computer and microform equipment, audio-visual equipment, photocopiers, and processing equipment.

Make sure that the building's electrical plans reflect the special requirements of the equipment. Consider not only the quantity and placement of outlets and junction boxes, but also the number of circuits that will be needed. (A large microfilm reader/printer, for example, can draw as much as 13 amps of power and cannot, therefore, be plugged into a 20-amp circuit along with a second piece of equipment having the same power requirements.) A good furniture vendor, library consultant, or designer should be willing

and able to help you in preparing the inventory.

The equipment inventory will not only provide information for planning power and data distribution in the building, but will also be used in planning the particular size, configuration, and electrical requirements of furnishings that will hold the pieces of equipment. The information given on the inventory, for example, will be used in designing or selecting the circulation and reference desks, computer catalog carrels or tables, microform workstations, audio-visual carrels, and study tables or carrels that may eventually be used with electronic equipment.

The transition of libraries from manual to automated functions has made obvious the need for flexibility in library design. Furnishings for any new building should be designed to accommodate automated equipment. The circulation and reference desks should be planned to handle computers, even if the library currently has a manual circulation system and a card catalog. The reference area should be planned to accommodate CD-ROM or online services, even though the library still depends on Reader's Guide and indexes in hard copy for access to information.

As shown with these tips, effective planning for a new or renovated library involves several information-gathering tasks. Look around carefully at what you now have and ask staff and users lots of questions about what they need and want in the new building. Use the information thus gathered to design a functional and attractive building that demonstrates the value of effective planning and careful use of resources.

#### References

<sup>1</sup>Charles R. McClure, Amy Owen, Douglas L. Zweizig, Mary Jo Lynch, and Nancy A. Van House, *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1987).

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