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Library as a Place:  
Modern Public Library Design and Patron Service

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## Abstract

Library buildings have always had an important place in our lives and our society. Early libraries, despite many inefficiencies or lack of design esthetics have served a community by providing patrons with information and educational services. Other library designs have been beautiful monuments and pillars of communities. Modern designs have tried to combine the esthetics and the functionality needed to serve communities effectively. A history of library design is revealed to illustrate how libraries have progressed until modern day to serve their patrons. Using a local public library as a basis for observation, a discussion of recent library trends will reveal the effect on patron services in the community. Also included in this discussion is a review of reference services, youth services, and services to young adults in the observation library.

## Library as a Place: Modern Public Library Design and Patron Service

Public libraries have long been a source of civic pride in many communities across the country. Even despite the fact that the modern library has been scrutinized as to its necessity in a rapidly evolving digital environment. What has emerged from the scrutiny from communities, civic leaders, and continuous discussion among librarians is that the library's function goes beyond a simple book repository, but as a destination for information, recreation, and education. "The physical library building, when designed and maintained with "place-making" in mind, serves as a vital agent in community-building – bringing people together to promote a community's civic and education values." (Demas & Scherer, 2002, p. 65)

Library building and renovation projects have exploded in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and communities are in full support of these initiatives. Many librarians will see themselves involved in these library projects at some point in their career, and they will be responsible for creating a space that is both appealing and functional. The modern public library has come a long way from libraries of the past, while not perfect; modern designs have exhibited that they can serve patrons effectively in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, even while digital information becomes the primary means of information access.

Library renovation and construction projects have been on the rise through the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as Nolan Lushington writes, "the 1990s saw a remarkable period for library construction in big cities." (2002, p. 7)

These construction projects set the stage for many of our modern, patron

friendly library designs. A number of trends have emerged during the 1990s, including ergonomic design, the display of popular materials, also known as the “bookstore concept”, and the availability of computer and electronic resources. (Lushington, 2002, p. 7) These early models have inspired librarians, architects, and various civic leaders to consider new models in library planning. Shifting demographics have caused libraries to appeal to different library users, including diverse ethnic or age groups. Technology access continues to be an important aspect of library design, and public libraries have stepped up to offer education to their patrons. Libraries have even become community gathering places, offering means for collaboration and study. According to Lushington, the ideal library space includes, “an open coffee area for conversation”, “acoustically separated” study rooms, “computers and books distributed throughout the library”, “ergonomically designed electronic workstations”, and quiet zones “without computer or cell phones.” (2002, p. 13)

A glimpse at historical library buildings can exhibit just how far communities have come to balance both the esthetic appeal and the functionality of today’s ideal library designs. The atrium designs of the 1800s were glorious, monumental community landmarks, however their closed stacks limited patron access, and their designs were even detrimental to the preservation of library materials due to the inability to heat them correctly and evenly. "Early designs were so dysfunctional they promoted Carnegie's library consultant, Richard Bertram, to issue one of the first

codifications of useful library design." (Lushington, 2002, p. 4) During the 1900s, Carnegie libraries, still beloved landmarks in many communities, were the first libraries to consider function and esthetics. Unfortunately for many communities, it was Bertram's dislike for "wasted space" that prevented many Carnegie libraries to expand when their collections swelled. (Lushington, 2002, p. 4)

It did not take long for libraries to see their collections expand beyond their limits; the period during 1850 and 1920 brought forth a boom in book publishing and lower book prices. "In 1897 John Cotton Dana pointed out that the decreases in book costs made the concept of a library as storehouse of treasure obsolete." (Lushington, 2002, p. 4) With this, open stacks were integrated into libraries, which allowed patrons to roam freely among the materials. This empowered many library patrons, and communities recognized the importance of public libraries as learning institutions or "People's Universities". "Libraries designed from 1880-1920 fulfilled the promise that American institutions for the people would be designed as great monuments to the uplifting of all citizens." (Lushington, 2002, p. 5) These were noble sentiments in library design during this period, however there was a great disconnect between the monumental Greek revival designs of these buildings and how the average library user felt when they saw these buildings.

While libraries celebrated people and books their ornamentation and art glorified the buildings. Many people including architects and

municipal leaders loved these temples, but for the average person the design was formidable no matter what the incised stone letters above the Greek revival columns said about “the People’s University.

(Lushington, 2002, p. 5)

Many patrons felt intimidated by these libraries and others avoided them completely thinking that libraries were institutions for the rich or elite, not the average person. (Lushington, 2002, p. 5) While these buildings were generally not comfortable or even accessible for the average library user, it was undeniable that the public library during this time had a great impact on enriching and educating many communities, especially during the difficult times of the 1930 depression.

As community demographics shifted, many library architects saw a need for flexible library space, during the 1950’s and 1960’s modular library designs were introduced into many communities. These libraries, however, lacked esthetic appeal, and despite their intent, were anything but functional. (Lushington, 2002, p. 6) The sum of all of these previous library projects has brought us to the present day, where library planners realize the positives and negatives of earlier designs. It is through the successes and failures of the previous library planners that we are able to plan functional and esthetic libraries today.

Many trends have emerged in modern library design, while many of these trends do serve patrons transparently, it is apparent that the layout of a library does have a drastic effect on many services offered to patrons. A

recent visit to a local public library (real name withheld for confidentiality purposes) exhibits how a new library building can uplift and improve a community overall. The visit also demonstrates that despite the most careful planning, unforeseeable outcomes can arise from a new library project. A discussion of library design trends will also reveal how these trends were incorporated into the library where observation was conducted (hereafter referred to as Library Millennial). To put Library Millennial in context, it was constructed in 2001 at a cost of \$15.1 million with a total square footage of 60,000. Library Millennial has been described by a community librarian as “the pride” of the low income community that it serves, that is often times overshadowed by a neighboring more affluent community.

A great deal of collaboration and planning is conducted when a library such as one like Library Millennial is executed. Mary Thomas explains that, “what works best in each space determines the design. If reference service is best accomplished face to face, then the reference area becomes the center of the design and all other subsidiary functions move to the edges.” (2000, p. 408) However, when you continue to analyze each and every service that a library offers its patrons, it can become difficult to prioritize one without diminishing another.

Library collections have been and will always be the core of any library building. At the heart of many library services are a library’s reference and information services. Reference services encompass more than just the

reference collection but also include the librarians at the reference desk. Unfortunately the sense of centralized reference was the weakest observation of Library Millennial. The reference desk is tucked away in a corner behind the reference collection on the second floor of the library. The librarians are conveniently located next to the reference collection, however inconveniently located away from the computer terminals and the remaining collections of the library. In describing the importance of user designed reference services in a new library, Gerard McCabe explains that “after entering the library, the traffic plan should take the user directly to [reference].” (2000, p. 77) After a patron enters Library Millennial they are immediately confronted with a “Customer Service” desk, or “Information Desk”. The purpose of this desk is to help answer directional questions. While this “Information Desk” is a common practice in many new libraries it does diminish the effectiveness of the Reference Desk, especially in this particular case when this small desk is normally not even staffed.

Other than the Reference Services of Library Millennial, the other collections of the library are effectively organized, appropriately labeled, and even intuitively designed. Library Millennial makes effective use of displaying popular materials with attractive end displays. Popular material collections are an important aspect of library design often known as “Bookstore Arrangement.” “New libraries often are arranged like bookstores, and many offer light refreshments that encourage customers to linger.” (Sannwald, 2003, p. 5) While Library Millennial does not offer any

sort of refreshment to its patrons, by way of either vending machines or a coffee shop, it is an inviting environment that does encourage patrons to browse stacks or sit and read and study by its fireplace.

Another trend in library design is consideration for specific age groups, including children. Library Millennial's children's department is an outstanding feature of this new library building. "The optimum for a children's area is a self-contained space exclusively for service to children, making it unnecessary for them to leave." (McCabe, 2000, p. 85) For very young children this has been accomplished with Library Millennial, the children's area in the lower level houses all of the children's collection, including juvenile non-fiction. Computers are available for children in this area, as well as a self-contained story room. Reference services for children were not overlooked either; the reference desk is conveniently located and complete with a children's specific reference collection.

Where great detail was given to young children, young adults in this library unfortunately seem like an afterthought. "The need to improve services for the expanding population of young adults will become critical if it is not already so." (McCabe, 2000, p. 89) McCabe continues to describe the planning for such an area in a library, including group study rooms, workstations suitable for group work, lounge chairs, and "generous" space. Study rooms in the Library Millennial's young adult area are small, meant initially as a tutoring room and not for group work. A few comfortable seats are provided, but the overall space allocated to the young adults is minimal

in comparison to the younger children and adult services. There are few computers for the teens to use as well, while they are required to use the computers in the children's area if under the age of 18, many of the teens would rather go to adult services where there are open computers and less of a "childish" décor. Also initially overlooked in the planning of this area is that while the children's area is sufficiently sectioned off from adult services upstairs, the teen area downstairs sits under an opening next to the reference desk upstairs. It is unfortunate that many of these teens are constantly shushed by the librarians upstairs as the sound of their voices carries up to adult services.

Libraries do mean different things to a variety of people, and while the building can have a positive or negative effect on the outcome of many services, libraries are still about people. Whether it is the people that make the community or the people that serve the patrons as librarians or other employees, these people are what give the collections and services meaning. The building is only one part of what the library is, but it is an important part. Library Millennial does have much to celebrate with their new building; they have come together as a community to design a building that does serve its patrons beautifully. The community has designed a library building that functions with an outstanding youth department. The librarians are helpful and are willing to continuously educate its patrons through various programming and celebrate the spirit of the community. Library Millennial has created a place; a place that its patrons can certainly be proud of.

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