



If You Build It, They Will Come!

by Dan Horne

Ten years ago, when planning my relocation to North Carolina, I looked through the *ALA Directory* to get information and a feel for the state's different library systems. I started with Raleigh and the Wake County Public Library system, but couldn't figure out which library was the main library. Where would I call if I wanted information? Where would I go if I wanted to take a closer look and talk to key members of the staff? The impression was of a mess of store front libraries surpassed in ugliness only by the strip mall and office park surroundings. I was bewildered and decided right then I didn't want to work in a library surrounded by dollar stores, independent insurance agencies, and beauty parlors.

Although Tom's theory of branch placement makes a certain kind of perverse sense, it is misguided. The American free public library is the greatest public institution in the history of the world. Libraries provide a service that people need and want. People will flock to a library no matter where it is. Given free parking, the promise of an intelligently developed collection full of useful materials, and excellent service committed to helping individuals with everything from navigating their way through the complexities of electronic resources to finding a good book to read, people will drive the extra ten or fifteen minutes it takes to get to such a wonderful place.

So what's the matter with building a centralized library and branches designed by architects expert in library design? When I came to North Carolina, I was fortunate enough to be hired by the New Hanover County Library in Wilmington. New Hanover County transformed an old department store that had been forced out of downtown by urban sprawl and the proliferation of strip mall blight into a beautiful, well-designed, modern facility. The presence of the library downtown has contributed greatly to old Wilmington's revitalization and reemergence as a center of culture and commerce. The main library's downtown location may be inconvenient for some, but that hasn't stopped close to half million visitors per year finding the place. As a member of the reference staff, I have a panoramic view of the library and let me tell you that we are extremely busy from the moment we open our doors in the morning to closing time when we pry the last patron out. Sometimes it seems more like the county fair rather than the county library. And no one has yet complained that the drive wasn't worth it!

Library systems don't have to stoop to putting libraries where people go. Libraries are the place to be and where we build them, they will come. Branch development isn't a bad thing. And small, easily accessible, convenient facilities stocked with the latest novels and talk show titles are a valued and necessary adjunct to a strong, centralized library. But locating these branches in busy malls and ugly store fronts doesn't make them anymore accessible than building an attractive stand-alone facility on any decent intersection in town. Planning and design are the keys! Libraries should never become just another road side attraction!

So let's strive for beauty in our public library design. Attractive surroundings are much more compatible with intellectual endeavor than boring store fronts with parking lot views. The public and the members of our noble profession deserve better.

And about those two boys with basketballs? Tom—let's be realistic—bleeding hearts are out of style. I strongly suspect that they were using the library as a "cooling off place" after all.

*Let's try some new things.
Let's put our libraries where
the people go.*

— Tom Moore

*Attractive surroundings are
much more compatible
with intellectual endeavor
than boring store fronts
with parking lot views.*

— Dan Horne