

Creative use of Space in Public Libraries

Robert C. Russell

Ask any group of public library directors for a list of their major problems, and you will likely find that some variation of the statement "I need more space" appears on virtually every list. It is rare for a library director to say he has all the space he needs in order to accomplish what he wants to do.

Since lack of space in public libraries appears to be so widespread, one would expect to find a large number of articles dealing with the subject. Unfortunately, this is not the case. A survey of the literature on space problems in libraries yields three interesting facts. First, the vast majority of articles deal exclusively with academic and research libraries. Secondly, the most commonly discussed solutions to space problems are constructing a new building, and renovating or adding to an existing facility. And finally, articles on working with an existing facility deal predominantly with solutions such as cooperative acquisitions, use of microform, and wholesale storage of large numbers of books—again, solutions which are much more applicable to academic than to public libraries.

There are a large number of public librarians in North Carolina who are faced with serious space problems. Talk of a new building, or of renovating or enlarging an existing building is fruitless, because the money (or the necessary commitment by public officials) simply is not there. And even if there is the possibility of a new building, completion of that building may be far down the road. One consulting firm has estimated that it takes between three and ten years from initial serious discussions of a new building until the actual move.¹ In the meantime, a conscientious librarian must deal with his space problem.

It may be useful to pause here and ask what we mean by a space problem. If everyone says he needs more space, how does a librarian determine when he indeed has a space problem? He could, of course, use A.L.A. or N.C.L.A. standards, which specify a minimum of one-half square foot per capita. This would bear out the claim that nearly every public library lacks adequate space. An examination of the annual architectural issues of *Library Journal* shows that very few main library buildings meet this standard.

Lowell Martin has said that a standard which hardly anyone meets is of limited value. He goes on to point out that standards are upgraded periodically, often without any valid reason.²

I think most librarians would accept considerably less than one-half square foot per capita as the minimum space required to provide good library service. The amount of space needed depends on a number of factors. Is the population

urban or rural? What percentage of the population uses (or can realistically be expected to use) the library? Does the system have branches? Does it have a bookmobile? What is necessary or desired in the way of in-library programming and outreach services? These factors and others will determine the amount of space needed to provide good service.

This leads to the conclusion that the determination of space requirements must be a subjective one. The good librarian should know intuitively if he has a space problem. Is there usually a seat for every patron who wants one? Is there enough space to conduct basic programs such as children's story hours and adult film series? Is there sufficient space to provide a desk for each full-time staff member? After conscientiously weeding the collection, is there room for the books and periodicals, and for normal expansion? Is there adequate space for quiet study and reference work? These are the questions a librarian will ask (perhaps subconsciously) to determine whether he has enough space to meet the library needs of his community.

Suppose a librarian has asked himself these questions and has come to the conclusion that he indeed has a space problem. How does this librarian, faced with a space problem, and with no immediate prospects for a new building, renovation or expansion, deal creatively with his situation? That is, how does he obtain maximum use of limited space? I think the answer can best be obtained from public librarians in the state who have dealt with just this sort of situation.

A brief questionnaire was sent to the directors of five North Carolina public libraries: Central North Carolina Regional Library, Cumberland County Public Library, Harnett County Library, Onslow County Public Library, and Rowan Public Library. After being requested to supply information such as population served, size and layout of building, staff size, book volumes and capacity, these directors were asked to respond to three items: (1) Describe your space problems. (2) How have you dealt with these problems? (3) Based on your experience, what advice would you give to a librarian coping with a situation similar to yours? Table I lists basic information for each of these five library systems.

Each of these libraries falls far short of the recommended minimum standard of one-half square foot per capita. Building sizes range from one-tenth square foot per capita in Onslow County to one-sixteenth square foot per capita in Harnett County. This range leads me to believe that the minimum standard for building size should be somewhere between one-half square foot per capita and one-tenth square foot per capita.

As described by the directors of these libraries, their space problems fall into four categories. These are: (1) lack of adequate office and work space; (2) insufficient shelving space for books, periodicals and other materials; (3) not enough public space, including seating, and areas for study and reference work; and (4) lack of space for programming and meetings.

Table I
Summary of Data on Five Public Libraries

Library System	Population Served	Building (Sq. Ft.)	Staff (FTE)	Sq. Ft. Per Cap.	Sq. Ft. Per Staff (FTE)
Central N.C.	130,000	10,700	20	.082	535
Cumberland	247,000	23,000	42	.093	548
Harnett	59,000	3,700	6	.063	617
Onslow	112,000	11,000	16	.098	688
Rowan	99,000	8,500	23	.086	370

Lack of adequate office and work space was cited as a problem by all of the librarians. This is not surprising; staff space seems to be the area in which authorities responsible for planning a new building are most likely to skimp. Perhaps this is because staff work areas are the least visible sections of a library. Even when space is allocated for normal growth of materials and public use, the assumption is often made that this expansion can occur without needing to increase the size of the staff and work space.

Harnett has one small room which provides office and work space for all staff members, including the director. Onslow has two small offices and a workroom to serve as office and work space for sixteen staff members, and as periodical storage space. Cumberland has similar problems; for example, three staff members with desks share a 120 square foot office. At Central North Carolina, five staff members share a twelve by fourteen foot office. Rowan has a 752 square foot technical services area, which serves as office space for a minimum of seven and a maximum of twelve employees.

Four of the libraries have reached full capacity for their book collections. The fifth, Onslow, is rapidly approaching that point. Three of the libraries cited as a problem the lack of sufficient shelving space for periodicals.

All of the library directors say they need more space for the public to read and study. Cumberland has been forced to eliminate some public seating areas to provide space for additional shelving units. Harnett has space for only four chairs in the children's area. Three librarians mention their inability to provide any area in the library for quiet study.

Finally, all of the libraries except Onslow lack sufficient space for library programs and community group meetings. Onslow is the only one of the five libraries which has a large auditorium or meeting room.

The directors of these five libraries have employed a variety of approaches in dealing with their space problems. I have divided these approaches into six categories. Each of the directors used a number of these approaches, and some used them all. There is never a single solution to a space problem.

Rearrange the library. All libraries do this to a limited extent: a desk is turned around; tables are moved; other minor adjustments are made. However, two directors in this survey have carried out wholesale rearrangements in an attempt to create additional usable space. Both Margaret Randall of Harnett and Phil Barton of Rowan mentioned a second objective of rearrangement: to give the library a less cluttered appearance.

Barton has some good advice for any librarian considering an extensive rearrangement of the library:

Never look upon any arrangement as permanent or unchangeable. To aid our thinking we did a scaled drawing of the building and then cut out scaled representations of the furniture. Using this tool we were able to do all our planning on paper prior to moving one bit of furniture. It's far easier to move a piece of paper from one area to another than a 1,000 pound circulation desk.

Squeeze a little more (people, books, furniture, etc.) than was originally intended into a given area of space. In and of itself, this is no solution; if done thoughtlessly, it is likely to make matters worse. However, there are some techniques that can be used to minimize clutter. A prime example occurs in office areas, where every librarian in the survey has had to crowd more staff members into offices than those offices were designed to accommodate. Rowan and Harnett have used partitions to divide work space in crowded office areas. Working along similar lines, Cumberland uses wooden partitions and equipment cabinets to create office and work spaces.

Two of the library directors, Patsy Hansel (Onslow) and Margaret Randall (Harnett) share their offices with other staff members. Of course, a library director needs privacy for personnel evaluations, budget preparation and meetings with trustees and other officials. However, if other arrangements can be made when these needs arise, a director can create additional space by sharing an office.

The same approach is used with books and other materials. At least one library (Central North Carolina) has replaced standard shelving with tall (90 inch) shelving. Shelving oversized books together, either in separate sections or on bottom shelves, also makes it possible to crowd more volumes into a given area.

A variation of this technique is to use areas of the library for purposes other than those for which they were designed. Before the construction of their new auditorium, Onslow conducted programs in its bookmobile garage. Onslow also used its public area for programs during the pre-auditorium days. Rowan's periodical room is sometimes used for library programs.

Harnett now uses one of its bathrooms as a much-needed storage area. Onslow has converted large closets into staff work areas. Cumberland stores periodicals in janitorial closets and around air-conditioning units.

Harnett director Margaret Randall has become a master at using every available inch of space, while minimizing the appearance of clutter. A few examples of her creative thinking include: installing attractive shelving in a

window of the children's corner; hanging clear plastic shoe bags on the outside of closet doors, to hold paperbacks and pamphlets; attaching a white window shade to the wall, for use as a screen for children's films; and using wall telephones to free desk space. As Mrs. Randall says, "Almost every acquisition is made with the limited space factor in mind."

Stretch out staff schedules, and increase the number of hours the library is open. Onslow is open eighty hours a week, possibly the most hours of any public library in the state. Library director Patsy Hansel explains:

I'm not sure if this makes sense to anybody else or not, but one of the reasons for the large number of hours that we are open is the smallness of the facility. We figure that we need to try to spread patrons out as much as possible. It's nice to be able to say to somebody who's complaining about all the students that if they want a relatively quiet time to visit the library, they can come on a weekend night.

Onslow spreads out its staff through the use of flex-time. Staff members come in as early as 7:30 A.M. and leave as late as 6:00 P.M. (This does not include night people, who work until 9:00 P.M.).

Create additional space by eliminating materials, equipment or services. Weeding is the most obvious example of this sort of approach. I daresay there are not more than a handful of public libraries in the state that would not benefit from extensive weeding of their collections. Four of the five librarians specified weeding as one way of dealing with crowded conditions. In addition to creating more space, weeding offers the advantage of making the collection more attractive and usable. (The good books are not as likely to get lost among the worn and outdated ones).

In using weeding as a solution to crowded shelves, one eventually arrives at a dilemma. At some point, the collection has been thoroughly weeded, and the shelves are still filled to capacity. With a decent book budget, annual acquisitions will outnumber the volumes which need to be weeded. Then a library director decides whether to weed merely for the purpose of creating shelf space for new books. At least one librarian, Cumberland director Jerry Thrasher, believes that a library should never weed for this reason.

Another solution to the space problem is to eliminate public seating areas. Like rearrangement, this has two advantages. The first is the obvious one of creating additional space for shelving or whatever else is needed. The second was outlined by Rowan director Phil Barton. Referring to his rearrangement of the entire library in 1979, Barton states:

Not only was furniture rearranged, but also a considerable amount was removed from use. In studying our particular situation we felt the environment could be made more comfortable for both the public and the staff if there was less clutter. To achieve that we sacrificed table and seating capacity. I definitely feel the removal of furniture and opening up of space has had a good effect on the staff, especially those working directly

with the public. I also feel the general appearance of the library was enhanced by this change.

Jerry Thrasher has also eliminated public seating areas at Cumberland. However, Thrasher again advises caution, believing that a librarian should decide upon the minimum amount of seating needed and not eliminate beyond that.

Central North Carolina has eliminated services as well as public seating. As the library became more and more crowded, Central North Carolina eliminated its meeting room, audiovisual listening area, and all programs except children's story hours. Obviously, eliminating services should be used only as a last resort. And, as Central North Carolina director Margaret Blanchard points out, the reasons for such cutbacks should be carefully explained to the public.

Use microform. Several of these libraries have begun purchasing periodicals on microform. At least one (Onslow) purchases telephone books on microform. Cumberland has freed the space taken up by card catalog units by switching to a microform catalog. Rowan is now considering a similar move.

Find space outside the library for conducting library programs. Rowan does this frequently and has found area churches to be especially cooperative. Margaret Randall states that one reason for Harnett's emphasis on outreach programs is that so little can be done in the library, due to crowded conditions.

In reading over the questionnaires, I was impressed by the amount of thought that the directors and their staffs had put into solving their space problems. It then struck me that there are some positive aspects to having to deal with a building that is too small. I was thus glad to find that two of the directors addressed this issue, although it was not a question on the survey.

Onslow director Patsy Hansel sees three advantages to working in a building with limited space. The first has to do with weeding.

We have only so much space for our reference collection, so we are to a certain extent forced to weed more than libraries with lots of space. As a result, we have a tiny reference collection—500 volumes, more or less—and I think that's about all we need.

A second advantage seen by Hansel comes from the necessity of microform in order to conserve space.

Also, we've been getting into microform—mostly fiche—for everything possible, and as a result, we have, I believe, *better* sources than we would have if we had the space to store years and years of periodicals, telephone books, etc. Telephone books are a case in point. We could never get good coverage from the local telephone company, and we spent a lot of time in a futile attempt to get telephone books from other telephone companies. That and the lack of space led us to get Phonefiche, which has been one of our best purchases ever.



Morganton-Burke Library

Until about September 1980: area including Reference collection, Director's office, processing room and both fiction and nonfiction stacks; photo taken from old circulation desk back into stacks.



Morganton-Burke Library

January 1981 after renovation of interior; Reference collection and reading area; photo taken from stack area back toward new circulation desk; one arch and both offices and public rest rooms and office closets removed.

Finally, Hansel compares dealing with a small building to dealing with a small budget. "It forces you to be a little more creative, maybe, and there's a little less temptation to be wasteful, and there's definitely less space to supervise . . ."

Rowan's Phil Barton also believes that space limitations have been beneficial in some ways. Due to limited space for programming, Rowan often has to rely on outside locations for programs. Program planners must anticipate audience size, in order to decide on the location for a particular program. Barton sees two beneficial aspects which have come from this situation: increased cooperation with other agencies; and better planning.

Because of our need for outside locations, the RPL has learned to cooperate well with other agencies, particularly the local churches. I feel also the need to estimate audience size to determine location has required better planning on the part of our staff, a quality which I highly value.

Each of the library directors in this survey has put a lot of work and creative thought into solving space problems. I am sure they would all agree that none of the approaches discussed above ultimately solves their space problems. I am equally certain that they would all jump at the chance to move into a larger building.

However, these librarians have shown that there are many things that can be done to get maximum use of limited space. More importantly, they have demonstrated that it is possible to provide good library service in a building that is too small.

I should like to end by quoting from the advice that each of these directors offered for librarians faced with similar space limitations.

Margaret Blanchard, *Central North Carolina Regional Library*: Periodically study your space problems to determine what services can best be sacrificed. Maintaining good relations with local government officials and patrons is of utmost importance. Try to explain in a positive fashion that changes or cutbacks in service are the result of space problems. Make everyone aware that you are attempting to deal with the situation in a creative way. Don't whine about it!

Jerry Thrasher, *Cumberland County Public Library*: Squeeze in shelving wherever you can, but do not entrench on public seating any more than you have to. Make an assessment of the minimum amount of seating that your library needs for current use, and make a vow in blood never to go below that number. Weed your collection conscientiously but do not discard books just to make room for the new ones. Use what storage space you have for lesser used books, and let the newer books stack up on the floor if you have to.

Margaret Randall, *Harnett Public Library*: The one word of advice is "be patient," for it takes many years to build a library . . . Remember, the Library Board hired the Library Director to administer the library, not build a new library, single-handedly. A successful building program must be a cooperative adventure, but if that Library Board and the governing body are not promoting building a new library and solving space needs of the library, the Library Director might as well make the best of the situation and continue with as much professionalism as possible.

Patsy Hansel, Onslow County Public Library: Build big enough to start with, and do not think you can get a building designed to do things that you have never shown the community that the library can or should do. I can certainly understand why the Onslow County Commissioners couldn't see putting up a 20,000 square foot building for a library that had never done anything to prove that it needed one . . . I know that when we made the deal with them (County Commissioners) that we'd raise half (of the funding for a library auditorium) if they would raise the other half, they didn't believe that we could do it. And that we were able to do it is a testimony to how over a couple of years we did convince the community that the library was doing things that it really didn't have the facilities to do.

Phil Barton, Rowan Public Library: Based on our experience, I would say the most important thing librarians can do in coping with inadequate space is to learn to think imaginatively and creatively . . . One can have a very dynamic library program even in the tightest situation, for the qualities of a dynamic program are found foremost in the people working in the library, not the building in which they are working. This does not mean an attractive spacious building is unimportant . . . I have often imagined how the RPL staff would react in a large new building. I suspect it would be like unleashing a genie from a very small bottle! Oh well, it's fun to dream.

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References

1. Elaine Cohen and Aaron Cohen, "Do our library buildings have to be discarded every fifteen years?" in *LJ Special Report #1, Library Space Planning* (New York, Library Journal, 1976), p. 57.
2. Lowell A. Martin, "Standards for Public Libraries," *Library Trends* 21 (October 1972), p. 174-75.

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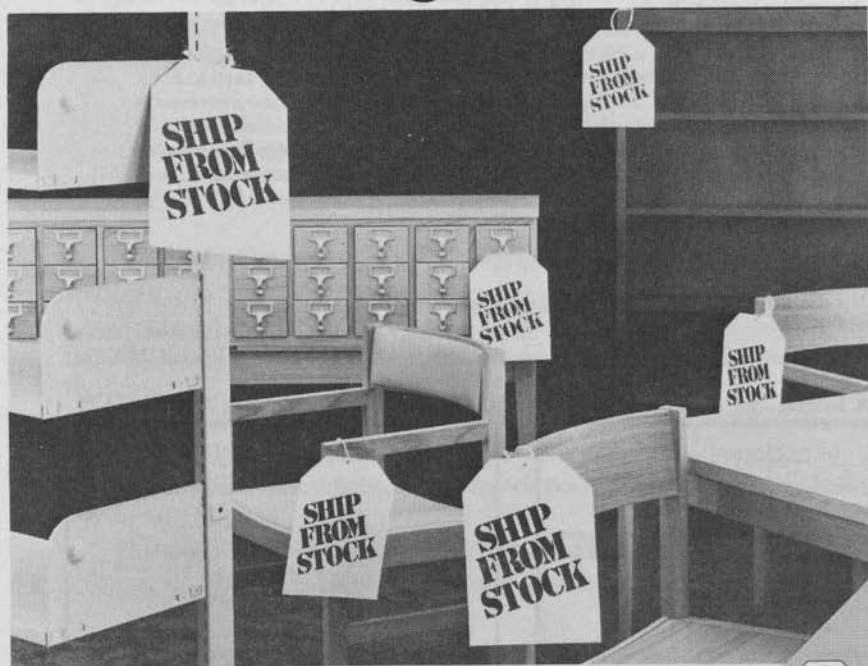
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