

# TRENDS IN RECENT PUBLIC LIBRARY BUILDINGS

*by*

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The greatest impetus to public library construction, since Andrew Carnegie stopped giving money for buildings shortly after the turn of this century has been the construction amendment to the Library Services and Construction Act of 1964. Since then, twenty-five projects, including new buildings, additions to buildings, and remodeling to convert unused space in public library buildings, have been approved by the North Carolina State Library. At this writing, the staff is involved with librarians, boards, governmental officials, and architects in various stages of planning for many other new buildings across the state.

The availability of Federal funds has materially accelerated library construction. Requirements connected with the funds have resulted in some new trends. Others reflect architectural, educational, and cultural trends.

## Planning

Careful planning prior to designing a building for even the smallest library is a fairly recent trend. It has not been too long ago that the appearance of a benefactor with funds, or the legacy of them, was the signal to call in an architect to build the "best building possible" for the funds at hand. Only larger library buildings were professionally planned. Recent public library buildings of all sizes in the state have been built to provide functional space for a service program related to the community and the library system to which it belongs.

One of the first requirements for a Federal construction grant is a written building program. This statement, placing the library in the community it serves and spelling out

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in detail the services the library will offer, the nature and size of space required to do so, and the relationships of the various areas to each other, provides the architect with essential information. It has the added benefit of allowing the librarian, board of trustees, and city or county officials to look at the services their library is, or should be, offering. Since the program for LSCA projects must be approved by the State Library, the community has a further safeguard against an inadequate building.

Some libraries have employed building consultants to help with the planning. A consultant is helpful if he works with the librarian who knows the service and if he remains on the job throughout the planning and construction. But as the architect-librarian author of a recent article in *Library Journal* points out, unless the librarian is really incapable of doing the job, "Help should be provided, not by engaging a consultant to do the librarian's thinking for him, but by employing an additional staff member . . . to free the librarian for planning."<sup>2</sup> It is unfair to the library and to the consultant to employ him for a quickie plan.

In North Carolina, planning teams have also included one or more consultants from the State Library staff. In many cases, the public library directors and the architect have brought preliminary drawings to the State Library to obtain the pooled experience of several Extension staff members on problems of relationships and priorities.

The participation of library trustees and interested citizens, many of whom also have special talents needed, has been helpful in many cases. However, when a major donor insists on veto powers in planning, the community's best interests are not always served.

### Site Selection

The site of a public library is of primary importance. The expenditure of up to half the cost of the building for a site is a defensible one. Numerous studies have shown that a building in the heart of the retail business area, where pedestrian traffic is thick, is used by many more people than one further out, even though it provides free parking space. With shopping centers growing at tremendous speed and multiplying too, the situation with regard to location of the main library and branches may be changing.

As yet, there is no evidence to indicate a better site for the main library than downtown. But there are great changes in librarians' thinking toward the establishment of branch libraries. The old neighborhood branch is being replaced with various kinds of library units which may not all meet the statistical definition of a "branch." Some of our cities are experimenting with renting commercial space in shopping centers. Sometimes such a facility will contain ready reference resources as well as circulating books and periodicals. In some cases, it will be a browsing center where "shoppers" will stop by to pick up the family's reading for the week on the same trip made to buy the groceries. There also will shortly be some renting of temporary facilities in poverty neighborhoods to introduce library services to those who need an intermediate step before they will enter "the big library" downtown. At present, city bookmobiles are being used for this purpose.

Now that most of our larger municipalities and counties have planning commissions and professional planners, site studies for public library systems are likely to increase. In a review of four such studies in the *Library Quarterly* (vol. 36, April, 1966, p. 155), Guy Garrison calls attention to the need for improved communication "among planners, librarians, and consultants and an increased sensitivity by all parties involved to the changing

2. Nancy R. McAdams, "Super-Librarian and Sub-Architect," *L.J.* vol. 91, December 1, 1966, p. 5828.

ing role of the public library in urban life." The Division of Community Planning of the North Carolina Department of Conservation and Development makes planning studies to help communities prepare for orderly growth. It provides professional help for towns which cannot afford to employ it. Sometimes such studies are inclined to put public libraries in a "cultural complex" rather than in the preferred foot traffic area. It is important that the librarian be involved when these studies are being made.

In smaller towns in North Carolina, many of the new libraries are being constructed several blocks from the retail business area. It is seemingly impossible to obtain land in the small area, and local leaders are convinced that "everyone drives everywhere" even though stops are little more than one block apart. Building teams for these libraries, which serve rural areas for miles around as well as townspeople, have decided that a site on a main thoroughfare a few blocks from the heart of town, with adequate parking and space for expansion horizontally, is the ideal site. Are small towns different from cities? Studies are needed to indicate the answer.

### Architectural Design

Public library design in North Carolina has generally been toward flat roofs instead of pitched ones, sidewalk level access instead of stairways to the front door, and larger windows in place of residential or colonial church type windows. In general, architects have made form follow function in designing buildings, and they have tended to simplicity of line that may be more timeless than the ornate styles.

Brick of various color, size, and texture is generally used with glass. One architect has used cedar shingles for an effective note and another's use of glass brick gives a fairy tale aura at night. A few buildings have reflected continuing interest in the colonial roots of the state by more traditional styling or a combination of traditional and contemporary design.

It would appear that the newer buildings may have a more limited use of glass than those built five to ten years ago. One librarian referred to the earlier ones as "libraries in glass boxes." Some large expanses of glass were found to create problems in glare, heating, and cooling. Many recent buildings have featured long narrow panels of glass, sometimes tinted, to avoid the above mentioned disadvantage and still invite passersby to enter.

Most public library buildings with less than 20,000 square feet have been built on a single floor. They can be operated with smaller staffs. Sometimes at slack periods one person is on public duty in smaller libraries. When a building goes to two stories, it might as well go to three or more since elevators, stairs, and access halls become necessary. Interior walls are kept to a minimum so that different areas can be expanded, contracted, moved, or eliminated as the service program changes. Areas are set off by shelving, rugs, and other equipment. Color in walls, bookstacks, and furnishings lend accents where needed. Two of the new libraries have sculpture near the entrance identifying the library with creative as well as recreative activity.

### Other Trends

Most public libraries being constructed today contain one or more rooms for meetings, film programs, story hours, and other group activities provided or co-sponsored by the library. Of varying size, these rooms have access both from the reading area and from the outside. Rest rooms are placed so that they are accessible to either the library or the meeting room when the other is closed. General purpose rooms are wired and

equipped for projection of films and for the display of paintings and other art expressions. Other libraries have used access halls for the display of local and borrowed art. Exhibits do not then interfere with meeting room activities.

Loading areas for bookmobiles and other vehicles are provided by outside or inside docks. Usually some cover is provided especially when vehicles are parked overnight. Mild climate in most of the state makes the expense of garages questionable where funds are limited.

Since it is a requirement for the receipt of Federal construction funds, new libraries are being constructed for access by the handicapped. This means ground level entrances or ramps not too steep for wheelchairs. It means wide doorways, exterior and interior (including rest rooms). The comprehensive *American Standard Specifications for Making Buildings and Facilities Accessible to and Usable by one Physically Handicapped*<sup>3</sup> gives detailed information.

As suggested earlier, the new buildings today are being planned to take care of 10 to 20 years growth and capable of expansion. As new buildings go up, more people use them and they are soon too small unless immediate growth of service is allowed for. The availability of Federal funds administered through the State Library has created the hope of a new library in many areas. It is the responsibility of librarians and trustees to see that the importance of the facility is not placed before the other two requisites of library service: (1) books and other resources, and (2) adequate staffs. All are needed to provide good library service to Tar Heels.

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3. Free from the National Society of Crippled Children and Adults, 2023 West Ogden Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60612.