

THE UNION COUNTY LIBRARY STORY

by

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A day like no other; that was Jan. 25, 1964. Matching funds for public library building might possibly become available by law within hours. Yes, the trustees would build. In its 34 years of history the library had offered books and services from one second-floor room in the courthouse; more recently from a 1904 residence, turned hospital nurses home, turned public library in 1956. The old lady was active but increasingly cramped for traditional services as well as those newer ones (lending art, film strips and slides, more and more recordings) which were drawing people.

By October a number of trips had been made to other libraries for building ideas — trips involving trustees, Friends of the Library, and others — and a program had been written for a headquarters building to serve Union County's library needs. Shortly the trustees retained Charles Morrison Grier and Associates of Charlotte, even then building a library for Davie County. A plan was drawn for a site in the next block, utilizing proximity to the old site and, by count, Monroe's most-traveled thoroughfare as strong points in a favorable location. Relationships with the architects were well established even prior to February, 1965, when county voters approved the expenditure of \$270,000 to match Library Services and Construction Act funds. There were times when a locally-based architect might have added assurance, but there was complete rapport between the architectural organization and the local planners. Communication was extraordinarily good considering the not-so-vast experience in building libraries.

Various citizen committees became involved in the planning and furnishing of the library, spending many hours in investigations and meetings. The color scheme, the commissioning of a sculpture for the front garden, the choice and purchase of lamps and accessories, landscaping — all this was done by small groups of interested citizens, working with the librarian and trustees.

The exterior is of grey-beige ripple brick with aggregate panels, and effective brick wall offsets which afford an interesting as well as constantly changing pattern of shadows. The interior service area is in tones of grey, bringing inside the greys in the aggregate, in the terrazzo, and more especially the stainless steel free-form sculpture in the entrance garden. These become the background, with endless interpretation of light and shadow from the Armstrong ceiling, for warm cinnamon wood, gold chair cushions, and the dra-

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This interior view of the Union County Public Library in Monroe shows the current periodical reading area (left foreground), circulation desk (right foreground), and reference desk (right background). The library was formally opened to the public in May, 1966.

matic effect of well-placed Chinese red accents. Everywhere the color of books, recordings, and magazines points up the role of the floors, walls, ceilings, and furnishings.

Built to within 4,000 sq. ft. of minimum standards for a projected 1980 population, the building brings forth frequent comments on its spaciousness. Miss Phyllis Snyder, consultant from the North Carolina State Library, commented that the patrons had been well-served in the planning, the staff less so. But, since office "walls" are double-faced shelving, areas may be extended. As a "showcase" for books and other materials the building leaves little to be desired. Only built-in features, such as public desks and cabinets, are nailed down. Every other item can be rearranged. For the present the building is set up for control at two points, with one entrance-exit. Low furnishing and diagonally placed stacks permit full overview of the entire service area from circulation and reference desks.

Service records have been broken every month since the library settled in the new building. Adult services have shown more growth, but at this time (December) the after-school mobbing has scarcely begun. The panting hordes may well be more easily served by photocopying, by instant service with back issues of periodicals, to say nothing of space in which to work.

A combination meeting room, board room and art gallery, with access to public rest rooms and staff kitchenette, and its own outside entrance is a frequently enjoyed community service. A film projector and tape recorder are available for use in this room, and specially designed moldings, serving both decorative and picture-hanging purposes, are a feature. Magazine, map, and pamphlet storage is in a "closed reference" bay in the general reference area equipped with a microreader. Wall space adjacent to the public desk was prepared for the promotion of the library's collection of lending art; pull-out receptacles built into Myrtle Desk low double-face shelving furnish both display and storage space for the growing collection of recordings, further enhanced by a specially

designed "well" cabinet for the record-player, with earphones. A 1966 Gerstenslager is housed in the back of the building, surrounded by ramps with wall shelving. There is parking at the rear for 30 cars and a drive-in book depository on one side of the driveway.

Aside from relating the building to function, and the grace of eye-appeal, three facts distinguish the Union County building program. (1) It was one of the first LSCA building projects approved (prior to June 30, 1965). (2) It was built for the least money among all those built so far in North Carolina (\$11.04 sq. ft. for the building, \$14.69 sq. ft. furnished). (3) Perhaps the most astonishing of all is the fact that because of the low bids, some \$80,000 in bonds were not sold, nor the matching funds applied for.
