

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY BUILDING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By Margie Herron

The public library offers a unique service to the community. Few other services provided by local government are so frequently used by such a wide range of residents as the library. The contemporary public library is the most economically efficient community resource for providing people of all ages and educational levels with ready access to information and knowledge.

Planning for new or expanded library facilities is a major undertaking. It is vital that planning be done with a long-term view of future needs. A library building should have a useful life of twenty years or more. *Standards for South Carolina Public Libraries* recommends that "All buildings should be planned with a **minimum** of ten years' growth in services, collections, and staff."

Because of its special place in the community, a number of ideas are important to keep in mind when planning library buildings.

- ***Public library buildings appear simple, but are actually very complex.*** The public library provides a wide range of services, and many people simultaneously use the library for different purposes. A businessman seeking information on a company, a student doing research, a mother and child attending a children's program, an older adult browsing through new books; all these people have different needs for space, lighting, noise levels, guidance, and access. The library must be designed so that any one use does not intrude on others.
- ***The purpose of the library is service.*** Libraries are more than buildings filled with books. The public library provides basic information services to the general public. Buildings are one important tool for achieving this purpose, but they are just a tool. The building should be designed around the services provided.
- ***Libraries are for use.*** The public library must be convenient to use. No other building provided by local government will receive more use by a greater number of citizens than the public library. While the general public may visit the average government office only once or twice a year, many users visit the library weekly. The library must be located and designed to serve the maximum number of people possible.
- ***More service with smaller budgets.*** Operating funds for the library will likely remain inadequate for the foreseeable future. The library building must be designed for efficiency in operating costs, with a maximum of self-guided use by the public and minimum requirements for library staff.
- ***Wise investment in technology.*** The building should be designed to take full advantage of new information technology, both that which is currently available and what can be anticipated in the future. Advances in computers, data storage, telecommunications, and other information technology are vital to the future of library service. The public library is increasingly becoming an electronic library, with users "visiting" the library from their homes, schools, and places of work through computers.

Buildings should be designed to be “libraries without walls” within an emerging information network.

- ***Books will remain the core of the library.*** While new information technology will greatly impact library service, books will remain the major resource for the public library for the foreseeable future. The number of books published is increasing each year, and libraries must plan for making more books available to the public.
- ***Security and preservation will be an increasingly critical issue.*** Library users, staff members, and collections must be ensured a safe environment. Protecting library materials from vandalism, theft, and deterioration is a major concern for public libraries. Because the library is designed for use by the entire community, including children, people should feel safe in and near the library building.

Public libraries will continue to undergo unprecedented change during the next twenty years. Though many of those changes are unknown at this point, their general direction is clear. Library buildings should be planned to be flexible and adaptable in serving the public’s needs for today and tomorrow.

ADDENDUM

Many supposed that electronic technology would do away with printed materials, and thus reduce the size of library buildings, but it has instead had the opposite effect. With Internet access, the use of printed materials has actually gone up. They really are complementary technologies. Although the reliance on Internet resources has somewhat reduced the demand for reference books, there is still a net increase in overall space requirements. Computers have also increased the space requirements for support service spaces in order to provide space for computer staff as well as communications and central hardware. Other issues driving the total square footage of public library buildings upward include:

- The public’s ever-increasing demand for more multi-purpose PC workstations, at which they can be allotted more time per session, means an additional 50 square feet for each new workstation added.
- The replacement of the card catalog with Public Access Computer workstations (PAC’s) has increased the need for more floor space.
- Code requirements have generally increased the need for more space in all areas of library facilities.
- ADA accommodations have increased space requirements. The need to provide access to all services, collections, and spaces and to accommodate staff members with physical disabilities results in a significant increase in floor space.
- There is a trend to reduce the height of 90” adult height shelving to make access to all shelves more convenient to people in wheelchairs and persons of average height. It also dramatically improves the appearance of stack spaces and improves visual control in those areas.

- New media such as Books on Tape, Audio CD's, CD-ROM, and DVD's have created new demands on public library collections. Generally libraries have responded by creating new collections of such media.
- There is a trend toward public libraries' devoting a portion of their space to display shelving rather than traditional stacks. Display shelving is much easier to use and presents materials in a "face out" manner rather than "spine out."
- Public libraries are increasingly seen as the "community's living room." As such, there is more demand than ever to provide meeting room space so the community as a whole, or individual community groups, can assemble for activities.
- Libraries have become popular locations for educational and training activities that require meeting room space.
- The importance of exposure to reading and books at an early age has led to a tremendous demand for children's story hours and programs. This has increased the need for more meeting room space in libraries.

All the factors sited above have generally increased the total square footage to such an extent that even a library which was built in the eighties will frequently require more than twice as much space now.