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Planning Your New Library Building

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This checklist is based upon my experience in helping to plan a new library building at Western Oregon University. It is anecdotal, and I make no claim that it is comprehensive. However, it may help those of you who find yourselves involved in planning your own new building or remodeling project.

Many librarians never have the experience of planning a new library building or the remodel of an existing facility. For those who do, however, it can be an exciting but often intimidating process. As facility planners, Librarians find themselves thrust into a variety of situations for which they may have no formal training or expertise. Not only may they need to learn about construction processes and language, they may also have to develop their skills as fund-raisers.

Most library schools do not teach courses in these areas. Librarians who work for institutions that employ fund-raisers and physical facility planners are fortunate, because they can rely on fund-raising experience and technical building expertise of those individuals. However, there is no substitute for learning the “lingo” of the architectural profession and the building trades. Your ability to understand what is being said and proposed will be directly related to the success of the design effort.

Most librarians will need to do some reading on the topic and consult resources on the library planning process. Depending upon whether you work in a public, school, academic, or special library, there are guides to the process. The Building and Equipment Section of ALA's Library Administration and Management Association has published a number of useful volumes, and also sponsors relevant sessions at ALA conferences. There are also a number of useful articles in the library literature. A note of caution, however: many of those accounts relate the specific experiences of the author in a given library, and those experiences may be so different from your own situation to be of little or no use. Each building project involves unique funding situations, administrative oversight, patron communities, architects, interior designers, and contractors. The transferability of experiential information to your project may be limited.

Pre-planning

Even if a building project seems unlikely or far in the future, it is a good idea to establish a record of needs. Inevitably, there are things that are not right about your current building. Perhaps the building design was faulty to begin with. Perhaps you have outgrown your location. Maybe your building does not allow you to make the number of electrical and data connections that you need, or perhaps your building does not meet code requirements. If you work in an academic library, you may be prompted to plan by outside assessments such as those done by the general and specialized accrediting bodies. Over time you should document the inadequacies of your space. You should also engage in forecasting your need for services and space. Plan for growth in population served, or for expansion of resources and services. Share your notes with your staff and place copies in a handy file for future reference. You may find it helpful to subdivide the file by topic: fund-raising, selection of architects and designers, standards, space issues, etc.

Planning Phase

When you get serious about planning a new building, one of the first things to do is determine what the latest



Exterior of the new Wayne and Lynn Hamersly Library at Western Oregon University.

standards are for your type of library. Academic librarians can turn to the standards for college or university libraries issued by the Association of College and Research Libraries. Although many standards have been quantitative, the recent trend is to express the standards in terms of quality and outcomes. While these new standards are helpful in general, they are less convenient than the older standards for planning physical space since they do not rely on numbers and ratios. For example, the older ACRL standard specifies that there should be sufficient seats for readers to accommodate one in five students on a commuter campus. The problem with such numbers is that they are not necessarily valid, and they may be of little help to your library. The new standards do not rely solely upon numeric measures.

Talk to others

One of the best sources of information about planning library buildings is talking to your colleagues who have planned and built or remodeled libraries, especially if their projects have been recent. Although you should be sure to talk to colleagues who work in libraries similar to yours, do not overlook the benefits of talking with library staff in other kinds of libraries. In many cases, the issues and concerns are the same, and you may learn of a solution from another kind of library that can be adapted to your needs and situation.

Ask your colleagues how they started the planning process, how they developed the justification for the project, what their planning issues were, how they convinced their administrators or boards as well as members of their library communities, how they used standards and accreditation reports to make their case, how they raised funds, how they selected their library consultants and architects, how they developed the design, what their greatest challenges were in the process, and how satisfied they were with the results.

Talk to your users

Planning efforts are usually more successful if you have collected recent and reliable information about your users' needs and concerns. While you may think that your patrons want more periodicals, they may rate the need for more computer terminals as a higher priority. A word of caution, however: user feedback can vary. It can be contradictory, unreliable, or uncharacteristic of the majority of your users. If you use surveys, be sure that they are carefully constructed according to best survey practice, and that the information derived is reliable. If you don't have survey experience, seek out someone who does and ask them to review your survey techniques and questions.

If you have a library advisory board, faculty library committee, Friends group, or other appropriate group, ask them for advice and comment. Suggestion forms, both paper based and online, can be another important way to gain knowledge about patron concerns.

Even if you have reliable patron data, don't abandon your own professional judgment and your knowledge of your own budgetary circumstances. You and your staff members

should be working from your own "wish list" of desired improvements.

Visit other libraries

If you are a visual learner, you may find it helpful to visit other recently-constructed or remodeled libraries. Pay attention to the relationships of spaces for various activities, collections, and services. Watch how patrons use the spaces, including aisles, stairways, and elevators. Take notes on what works and what does not. One of the challenges of any building or remodeling project is to avoid the mistakes made in other projects. Taking pictures to review later, especially with other staff members, can be a very effective way to communicate good as well as bad building design practices.

Prepare the justification

Justifying your new building or remodel project may be a challenge. The decision-makers who will approve or deny your proposal may have opinions and make assumptions about the need for a new or remodeled library. In particular, you may be confronted with suggestions that libraries are no longer needed because everything is now online. Dealing with such attitudes takes diplomacy and tact. Remember that you are dealing with a non-librarian audience. Document the need for an expanded library as well as the need for technology.

Hire a library building consultant

If neither you nor any of your staff members have ever been involved in a building project, you may want to consider hiring a library building consultant. A note of caution: consultants vary in their styles, techniques, abilities to communicate, and expertise. Ask for references and check them all out. Your comfort level with the individual or firm selected will be critical in the initial planning stages.

Appoint a library design committee

Be sure to include representatives from all of the staff categories in your library. It is particularly important to get input from paraprofessional staff members. Appoint people who are creative and flexible, and who will likely be around for the entire planning, design, and building process. Add representatives to the committee from user groups if appropriate. A design committee should be small enough in number to facilitate meeting and efficient use of time, but large enough to provide a wide range of ideas and opinions.

Carefully interview architects

Establish a strong interview team with representatives from the library, your institution's or organization's physical facilities staff, and administrators. Interviews for architectural services should consist of rigorous questions and follow-up. Make sure you know who will be working on your project. In particular, ask whether senior-level architects or rookies (or a combination) will be assigned to your job. Ask what technical resources are used by the firm. Do they have someone on staff who can do CAD work? Ask what services will be included in your contract and which will not. Determine whether they are a good match for your organization, environment, budget, and circumstances.

Don't just take the low bidder. Ask how often they plan to be on site. This is particularly important when you hire an architect from out-of-state, or from a city some distance from your location. Call as many references as you can, including those you know of but that are not cited by the applicants. Visit the buildings they have designed and ask the staff questions. Take pictures and share them with your own staff members.

Be particularly vigilant about architects who want to design "signature" buildings. Such buildings may be dramatic or controversial and contribute to an architect's reputation, but will probably do little to meet your needs.

After the selection of an architect, make sure that you do your part to maintain good communication. Do not assume anything, especially if the architects have never built a library before. Even if they have, the kind of library they built and their experience may not be very relevant to your project. Make sure that the architects understand your priorities, concerns, and needs. Put them in writing to ensure that they are not ignored.

Your relationship with your architects is crucial to the success of your project. In the end, you have to trust them to deliver a high-quality building or remodel project.

Focus on function

The shape your design takes should be related to the functions you must fulfill. Good architects will listen carefully to your list of major functions and responsibilities and your descriptions of activities. Be sure you indicate the relevant importance of each element of your operations. As the design begins to develop, review it critically for its correspondence to your functional needs.

Designing libraries to meet developing technological standards is a difficult process. Aim for the maximum flexibility and avoid basing your design on outmoded technologies.

Question, question, question

If you do not understand at any point in the design discussions, ask questions until you do. If it doesn't sound right to you, it probably isn't right. Trust your instincts about libraries and library services. Ask for clarification, and, better yet, ask the architects to draw you a picture. A high-quality architectural firm ought to have someone on the staff who can draw! Insist on hearing what all of your options are. Computer-drawn (CAD) images are an excellent way to explore alternatives, options, and "what-ifs." Be sure you understand what will be built, what it will look like, and what materials will be used. Insist on seeing submittals of all materials, surfaces, coverings, lighting, signage, and accessories. Ask for clear pictures of all architectural details. Watch out for features that are "over-designed"—too expensive for what they provide and not connected enough to your needs.

Check and double-check the information as it develops. You will probably need to develop skills in reading blueprints and floor plans.

Pay attention to the latest code requirements

While consultants and architects should be current in their knowledge of building codes, you should also develop a familiarity with the basic requirements, especially laws relating to the Americans with Disabilities Act and fire and seismic codes. Maintaining adequate aisle widths can become a serious challenge as the design develops, particularly if your budget constrains your ability to build the space you need.

Plan for growth

To the extent your construction budget allows, plan for future growth and expansion. This may take the form of instructing the architects to provide plans and options for expansion as the design develops. However, be careful to plan a building that you can afford to operate with your existing budget.

Document every step in the design process

Keep track of the evolution of the library design. A good architectural firm will provide minutes of the meetings they hold with you and your staff, but you should also keep track of the development of the design. Err on the side of too much documentation. You may find your records invaluable when questions or problems arise later. Be sure to date all of your records and indicate who was present at the discussions. Recording decisions as they are made will keep the record straight.

Participate fully in any "value engineering" discussions

If your design will cost more money than you have available, you will likely get involved in discussions about making cuts. Make sure that all options are explored and the consequences and impact of each are thoroughly reviewed. Be particularly alert to any impact on functionality.

Realize that planning does not end at this stage

Stay flexible, because you may be called upon to make changes in plans and designs throughout the construction process. In many projects, things get missed in the design phase, then show up during construction. Sometimes there are opportunities for improved designs that aid function; occasionally, you may be faced with difficult choices that compromise functionality and operations.

Conclusion

Each building or remodel project is unique, and that makes it very difficult to prescribe a cookbook approach to the planning effort. Add to that the presence or absence of staff experience with building projects, and you have an interesting situation. You may feel that by the time you finally figure out how to plan a building, it is too late! However, you are the owners of your building, and your enthusiastic involvement in the planning process will energize the other players. Be rigorous but flexible in playing your role, and the result should be a building to be proud of and a productive professional relationship with your architects, designers, and contractors. 