The Practical Handbook of Library Architecture
Creating Building Spaces that Work

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FRED SCHLIPF has been hanging out in library buildings since the early 1940s (at about the age of four, he turned out all the lights in the Detroit Lakes (Minnesota) Public Library one evening—a happy moment that is still both bright and dark in his memory), and has been working for libraries and teaching about libraries and consulting on library buildings since he was 17. He’s been a library school faculty member for over 50 years, and he spent nearly 33 years as director of The Urbana Free Library, the public library of Urbana, Illinois (just down the street from the University of Illinois). He’s done formal building consulting for between 150 and 200 libraries and quick consulting for many more, and he visits library buildings everywhere he goes. He has a BA from Carleton College and an MA and PhD from the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago. He has served on dozens of committees and task forces of the American Library Association, Illinois State Library, Illinois Library Association, local library groups in Illinois, and the Illuminating Engineering Society of North America. He was Illinois Librarian of the Year in 2000.

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Preface

A large number of people have helped us with this book.

Many librarians gave us advice over the years, taking time to show us through their libraries, pointing out both the wonderful and the not-so-wonderful features.

Many others took time to read portions of this book and tell us where we were either dead wrong or omitting vital facts or were difficult to understand. Without their help, we could never have finished the book, and we would be terrified that we got things seriously wrong.

Here, in alphabetical order, are some of the people who helped us by reading chapters.

- **Celeste Choate**, Executive Director of The Urbana (Illinois) Free Library (Fred’s old library), who read many of the chapters in the book and suggested points that had been omitted.
- **Jim Derden** of State Farm of Bloomington, Illinois, and a retired contractor, who read and commented on the chapters on design, construction, and security.
- **Julie Derden**, librarian at Illinois State University at Normal, and professional editor, who read and commented on the chapters on programming and staff workrooms.
- **Jack Hayes**, president, Frederick Quinn Corporation, Addison, Illinois, construction management, who read and commented on the chapters on design and construction.
- **Diane Hillard**, a biologist and Fred’s wife, who read chapters of the book and told us (in the very friendliest sort of way) where we were clear as mud.
- **Bill Hobbs**, Brown, Hobbs, McMurray (insurance), Urbana, Illinois, who read and improved the chapter on security.
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John Howard, director, Farmington Area Public Library District, Illinois, and professional fundraiser, who expanded and improved the section on money.

Joe Huberty, partner, Engberg-Anderson architects, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and extraordinary expert on library building design, who answered endless technical questions for Fred, and who read and commented on the chapters on design and construction.

Mark Misselhorn, apaceDesign, Peoria, Illinois, and architect on many library construction projects, who read and commented on the chapters on design and construction.

Bev Obert, retired director of an Illinois multi-type library system and of Illinois public libraries, who read and commented on almost all of the chapters in the book.

Karl Schlipf, a computer expert for the University of Illinois and Fred’s son, who rescued Fred on a number of (often very late-night) occasions when Fred embroiled himself and his computer in electronic messes, some merely stupid but several others genuinely serious and manuscript-threatening.

We also want to thank our editors at ALA Editions, Jamie Santoro and Angela Gwizdala, who provided support and help and exhibited extraordinary patience as we struggled to finish writing.

Since we occasionally ignored really good advice from people who read sections of the book, it’s important to point out that any errors are due exclusively to our stubborn attitudes and behavior.
Part I

Introduction
Introduction

This is a how-to-do-it book on library buildings. It's intended primarily for use by professional librarians, and it's written by professional librarians who have spent their lives working in and coping with library buildings. We obviously hope that library owners, managing boards, and architects will read it as well, but we are particularly interested in working with librarians, who we feel are too often nearly ignored when it comes to planning the spaces they know best and work in constantly.


We had so much fun writing “snappy rules” for library architecture that we’ve included a couple dozen of them at the end of each chapter in this book.
One question we always ask ourselves is how so many dysfunctional ideas have managed to permeate library buildings. We’re convinced that part of the problem is the nature of librarians. By and large, librarians are friendly and helpful people, who are probably given far too little to complaining. (We know that describes us . . . Or maybe not.) When we ask directors of new buildings about dysfunctional features, what we hear is almost never a rueful, “Yes, we know,” but rather an appreciative, “But it’s so much better than our old building.” Unfortunately, “better than our old building” doesn’t always make it good enough.

Fred’s students have reviewed drafts of the chapters in this book. The students tell him that they always start by reading the “snappy rules” and then get on with the full text. You may find that a good approach as well, but a lot of good stuff is not covered by any of the snappy rules, just as some good points appear only as snappy rules.

In writing this book we’ve assumed that very few people will read the entire thing straight through. As a result, some chapters repeat important points that appear in other chapters. However, we’ve tried to remove excessive repetition from individual chapters (not always successfully), and we’ve tried to tell favorite war stories only once.

This book is far longer than we imagined it would be when we started out. Much of the problem appears to be due to the fact that there are very few sweeping rules of functional library design, but rather a nearly endless number of useful details. The sweeping rules are repeated endlessly in the book, but just in case people feel that there should be rules in the introduction, here are some of the basics:

- Keep space flexible. Use all-purpose, low-glare lighting. Keep ceilings high enough. Make all floors strong enough for books. Don’t build stuff in when movable furniture works just as well. Beware of ornamental soffits. Have electrical outlets everywhere. Tell your architects that libraries move stuff around all the time, and they’ll have to plan for that.
- Design for security. One public entrance is almost always enough. Pay attention to sight lines. Provide glass walls for study rooms. Avoid places where users or staff can be cornered. Control humidity at all times. Don’t build “reading terraces.” Don’t force people to grope their way into dark rooms to activate automatic lights. Have exterior book return slots lead to fireproof receiving areas. Beware of basements. Keep floors wide and open.
- Provide bright but low-glare lighting. All exterior pieces of glass that face any direction except straight north require movable blinds. (Cute little windows need cute little blinds.) Avoid harsh, direct lights, such as recessed downlights.
and direct LED lights. Bounce almost all light off ceilings. Saving energy by making lights too dim involves missing the entire point of libraries.

- **Make library users comfortable.** Provide pleasant places to sit. Don’t frighten people who have acrophobia. Don’t create places where people can be cornered. Avoid atriums and floating staircases passionately. Keep indoor air fresh and comfortable. Always try chairs out before buying them. Use round tables only for coffee. Provide elbowroom.

- **Keep things simple.** The sequence of call numbers in shelving needs to be easy to figure out. Service desks need to be easy to find. Build no more partitions than necessary. Don’t create labyrinths. Provide directional signs. Beware of courtyards, which tend to lead to beads-on-a-string room arrangements.

- **Plan for growth.** Despite digital enthusiasms, book collections continue to grow and libraries continue to run out of space for books. Sooner or later, all libraries need extra workspaces for extra staff. And they need new spaces for users. Don’t let political pressures lead you to construct a building that is full the day it opens. (We were tempted to say “fiscal or political pressures,” but most fiscal pressures are actually political pressures.) Never construct a building that can’t be expanded.

- **Never lose control.** Do preemptive building programming. Make sure that someone who knows a lot about how libraries occupy space plays a central role in your library’s planning team. Never give your designers any rights to your building after the ribbon is cut. Avoid design competitions and other building beauty contests. And never let aesthetics trump function.

We wrote this book over a number of years.

The oldest chapter is “The Library Construction Process” which we first wrote as a handout to accompany our talk at a Public Library Association symposium on library buildings in 1999 and have revised more or less annually since then.

Fred wrote the chapter on “Evaluating Library Buildings by Walking Around” for use by his clients for whom he was writing building programs.

The vocabulary list at the end of this book began as a handout for Fred’s how-to-do-it course on library buildings at the University of Illinois library school in Urbana-Champaign. The main change for this book is the removal of references to a number of local buildings in Urbana and Champaign.

Much of John’s article on “Library Buildings: Planning and Programming” (*Library Trends*, 2011) is incorporated in the chapter on “Programming.”

This book has been underway for more years than we ever intended. We finally finished a full draft in 2016 by hiding from the world, by both being retired at last (from our day jobs, at least), and by Fred’s backing off from consulting on building projects.

Because we have extremely different writing styles, we were unable to assign chapters to one or the other of us. Fred tends to be wordy and given to smart remarks. He wrote the first draft of the text. John tends to be sober and professional and well-organized. He added missing things, clarified Fred’s hasty diction, and removed some of Fred’s more seriously ill-considered remarks.

We could not have written this book without the help of many friends and colleagues who read drafts of chapters and told us gently where we had wandered off the track.

Most of the book is based on the authors’ personal experiences during two lifetimes of working in library buildings, consulting on library building design, and teaching how-to-do-it courses on library buildings, rather than on the published library literature, and you won’t find a lot of citations to the library literature.

A note on pronouns. First person is us. Second person is our librarian friends and colleagues. And third person is everyone else.

This is a very personal document. We wrote like crazy for years and finally decided we had to quit. The book’s coverage is somewhat uneven, depending on the degree to which we think librarians need to focus on things and the frequency with which things seem to go wrong in library buildings.

We’ve put a lot of emphasis on things to avoid, particularly things that owners and architects and architectural critics tend to love, but that librarians and library users tend to hate. Our experience has been that the relationship between architects and owners (city fathers, university trustees, school boards, and the rest) is sometimes similar to the relationship between Svengali and Trilby, with the Innocent Owners sometimes Led Down the Garden Path.

The problem with library buildings is that bad decisions can last a century. Poorly selected books can be dumped into the next book sale, and uncomfortable furniture wears out or can be transferred to the library staff lunchroom, but
buildings last for generations. If we get only one chance to do it right, we need to make sure that we really do get it right the very first time we do it.

But often we get it wrong. As a library director told us: “Once a week we tell ourselves how great it is to work in a library designed by a world-famous architect. The rest of the time we hate the place.”

We hope that this book reduces your chance of hating the place.

We’ve tried hard to make this book helpful, friendly, and usable. Please call or e-mail us if you have questions. Tell us what we’ve left out. Tell us (particularly if you are a practicing librarian) what you think we got wrong and should change. If we live long enough to write a second edition of the book, we’ll try to incorporate all sorts of ideas that people send us. Although we’re connected to social media, we almost never look at it, so the way to get in touch with us is by telephone, U.S. mail, and e-mail.

We also tend to have a lot of strong opinions. So, on the advice of all sorts of people, we hereby expressly disclaim liability to any and all persons and entities for personal injury, property damage, and any other damage of any kind or nature (whether or not such damages are direct, indirect, consequential, or compensational) resulting from or in any way related to the information and opinions in this book.
More than Two Hundred Snappy Rules for Good and Evil in Library Architecture

SINCE WRITING SNAPPY RULES is always fun, here are some of them. Most of them can be found in the various chapters of the book, but others are here alone.

1. Don’t be led astray by winsome but dysfunctional designs. As P. J. O’Rourke said, “It’s always tempting to impute unlikely virtues to the cute.”
2. A badly designed and constructed building is a pain forever. Or until it falls down, whichever comes first. Never cut planning time short.
3. Select your architect with care. There are some amazingly competent designers around.
4. Having the same firm write your building program and design your library is always a seriously bad idea.
5. You will have a far better-balanced project if your consultant is a librarian with a knowledge of buildings rather than an architect with a knowledge of libraries.
6. Never have an architect write your building program. With a tiny number of exceptions, architects don’t know enough about libraries, even if they’ve designed a few. And few architects can divorce themselves from design issues that should come later.
7. If you hire a world-famous architect, you’ll probably get a lot less library than you pay for and have a lot higher operating costs than you hope for.
8. The single most important construction material is money.
9. In addition to being functional disasters, atriums with dramatic staircases are one of the most overworked clichés in unoriginal library architecture.
If one is inflicted on your library, you’ll be gaining five minutes of “wow” and suffering 50 to 100 years of problems.

10. When you are planning a building, always think in terms of project cost and never in terms of construction cost. And make sure all of your hired help (building consultants, architects, and construction managers) do the same.

11. You have only one chance with naming opportunities. Plan first and negotiate second. All too often, libraries initially give things away too cheaply and find themselves short of money but fresh out of places to name.

12. Donors would rather pay for a new college library (think shining city on the hill) than for a new dormitory (think restrooms on Friday night). This is probably why dormitories are often named after early college presidents.

13. Never begin with a project cost and design a building that fits. Start with needs, estimate costs, ask whether you can afford them, and only if and only when you decide it’s too expensive, compromise on needs.

14. Skylights are too bright by day, too dark by night, and noisy, but they make up for all that by leaking.

15. Unless you have a particularly nasty turn of mind, there’s no real need to terrify all your users who have a fear of heights.

16. Reading terraces accessible from inside libraries are golden doors to the theft of library materials. The term secure reading terrace is a total oxymoron.

17. Saying that a new library “meets all applicable codes” is a little like saying that it’s right on the edge of being illegal.

18. Even if it’s stupid, as long as it’s legal you can have anything you want.

19. Creating excitement with light in a library is like creating excitement with steps in a nursing home.

20. The best entrances to libraries face south. The worst face north and west.

21. Regardless of initial intent, all library floors need to be strong enough to bear the weight of books. Flimsy floors are never a good investment.

22. When the time comes to replace sections of your carpet, it will no longer be in production. That’s why people invented attic stock.

23. There’s no such thing as too many electrical outlets in a library. Or too many electrical circuits in a library kitchenette.

24. When your architects ask you where you want to put computers, the correct answer always is, “Anywhere we want.”

25. Preparing building programs and selecting architects can take a surprising amount of time and cost surprisingly little. It’s a lot easier to have a program completed and an architect waiting in the wings than to suddenly have to rush madly about.

26. NEVER build a library on land to which you do not hold completely clear title.
27. For financing public library buildings, know the spirit of your community. Some angrily antitax people can be amazingly generous when asked for voluntary donations.

28. Any project larger than a woodshed will be called a Taj Mahal and a monument to the inflated egos of managing boards. It’s good to have people handy (usually consultants and architects) who can point out the actual modesty of your plans.

29. Unless your name is “Library of Congress” or “British Museum,” you don’t need a round reading room or a dome.

30. ALL windows that don’t face directly north need blinds, including especially little tiny windows high up that look innocent on the plans. “Modern glass” is not a substitute. (You can often expect a fight from your architects on the unshaded windows issue. They will be wrong, but they will be impressively determined.)

31. Most departmental libraries benefit from a “T”-shaped interior furniture layout. Enter from the center of the broad side of the department, facing the service desk. Walk to the desk and then turn left or right for the rest of the department.

32. A “monitor” is a four-sided structure that rises above the roof and has glass on all four sides. Since monitors do not have adjustable blinds, this is glass on three sides too many. Stop monitors the first time you hear them mentioned.

33. A schematic design without furniture placement is totally useless. Reject it.

34. Beware of designing buildings that are just small enough to slither under code requirements. Sooner or later, you’ll need to expand, and the cost of upgrading the existing building can be painfully high.

35. Trying to weasel out of building codes is not a good idea, as the choice of verb suggests.

36. In addition to spreading Legionnaires’ disease, indoor “water features” have many other nasty aspects. For example, mayors tend to fall into them.

37. Anyone who has dealt with children in a library knows that “infectious” does not apply just to lilting laughter. All staff workrooms need sinks.

38. If you have an open exterior staircase leading down to a basement door, sooner or later the drain at the bottom of the steps will plug up and rainwater will flow into your basement.

39. The most important place for childproof (tamper-resistant) electrical outlets is in public library adult departments, because that’s where parents hand their keys to their children to play with while the parents are otherwise occupied.

40. There’s no such thing as too many electrical circuits in kitchenettes.
41. If your library has balconies a dozen stories above the main level, you will terrify your users with acrophobia, and sooner or later someone will jump off. “Splat” is not an encouraging sound to hear while you’re at the reference desk.

42. Study rooms need individual thermostats. If two rooms share one thermostat, the people in the room without the thermostat are likely to be seriously unhappy.

43. High-quality cantilever steel shelving can last a century, but it’s extremely difficult to repaint. This tells us why bright orange and vivid magenta are seriously bad color choices.

44. If you arrange shelving around the walls of a room, know how you will prevent people sitting at tables from blocking access to those bookshelves.

45. It’s hard to shelve books on spinner racks because there are so many small pockets. Spinners also tend to tip over in the presence of enthusiastic teenagers.

46. When as a library user you’re trotting along a range of shelves and they end at 327.8, it should be extremely clear where to find 327.9.

47. Libraries are inherently flat rather than vertical. A twelve-story library on a small piece of land is Not a Good Thing.

48. If anyone who does not work for a library is authorized to have a key to the building, there will be trouble.

49. Dead-end aisles in shelving areas are a particularly nasty threat to the personal safety of both library users and staff. And they’re seriously rude to people in wheelchairs.

50. If you’ve never worked in a library, you have no right to object to plans to include a staff restroom.

51. Outside of study rooms, program rooms, and restrooms, libraries don’t benefit from small spaces for public use. Wide, flat, and open makes a happy library.

52. Study tables should be rectangular with chairs on two sides only. Round tables are for conversation only. Pleasant libraries need a few round tables, but only a few.

53. If your windows are custom-made on a different continent, you’ll have an interesting time after the Big Hailstorm.

54. A reading table without electrical outlets on top is just about as modern as a reading room with kerosene lighting.

55. A building project can absorb the full attention of a library administrator for years. Don’t expect staff to add it to their other duties.

56. One of the truly fine places for a special library is next door to the cafeteria.

57. Programming is inexpensive, and proactive programming is invaluable.

58. Thank all of your donors. For some donors, $100 was a greater stretch than $100,000 for other donors.
59. The planning process begins with enumerating needs. Then estimate costs, ask whether you can afford them, and, finally, if and only if it’s too expensive, compromise on needs.

60. Protect your library building’s expansion space with the fierceness of a mother grizzly bear with cubs. You’ll need the fierceness, for many people cast covetous eyes on open spaces, often displaying glib self-justification.

61. Starting your project by asking how much money you have to spend is often totally backwards planning.

62. If you know you’ll be expanding your library, have your library building consultant write a two-phase building program and have your architects prepare schematic designs for both phases. If you don’t do this, you may find that you’ve painted yourself into a corner, and that your Phase I design makes it impossible to construct Phase II.

63. No sane library wants anything to do with screen porches.

64. Don’t ever buy cheap shelving. If it isn’t steel cantilever shelving, the right price to pay is free.

65. Outside of counters with sinks, none of the furniture in library workrooms should be built in.

66. A toilet stall without two sturdy hooks for coats, purses, book bags, jackets, coats, and so on is an abomination.

67. “Design first, program second” is an easy recipe for a seriously bad building.

68. Forcing a contractor to honor a mistakenly low bid may lead to nothing but trouble.

69. If your contractor messes up, be extraordinarily careful about accepting cash in lieu of corrected work. If your architects encourage you to accept a cash settlement, always talk to your owner’s rep and the consulting librarian. You have a right to a building that works the way it is supposed to, and it’s easy to bargain away proper performance for far too little money.

70. When it comes to groundbreaking and ribbon cutting, short public ceremonies followed by extensive eating and drinking make everyone happy.

71. Most soffits (lowered sections of ceilings) are a seriously bad idea, including in particular all perimeter soffits and all soffits over service desks. Recessed downlights in soffits just make things a lot worse.

72. Buy strong furniture. There is no theoretical upper limit to the number of teenagers that can occupy a single armchair.

73. All library glass surfaces that do not face straight north need blinds. Your architects will almost certainly argue with you on this point, but they will be amazingly (not to mention spectacularly and extraordinarily) wrong.

74. Sofas in public libraries have two uses—sleeping and necking. Unless you are eager to create opportunities for sleeping and necking, never buy sofas.

75. The number of architects who understand libraries is exceeded by several thousand percent by the number of architects who don’t understand libraries but are confident that they do.
76. The least expensive source of good library security is good sight lines.
77. The right number of entrances into a library is anything up to one.
78. Staircases with open risers are a tribute to everyone who loves to terrify people who suffer from fear of heights. But very few people like looking down to the floor below between their feet. Don't go there.
79. If you don't want to climb the stairs, the elevator should be immediately next door. (Sometimes designers hide the elevator down the hall and around the corner, apparently hoping to encourage people to climb the cute stairs.)
80. If you put your reading room light switches where kids can play with them, kids will turn off your reading room lights.
81. Light switches that require user training are a bad idea in meeting rooms shared with the general public. Keep things simple.
82. If the lights in a room are controlled by sensors, they should turn on BEFORE people enter the room, rather than forcing people to grope their way into a dark space.
83. The fact that people occasionally walk to the public library on perfectly lovely spring days does not mean you don't need a parking lot.
84. Angry historical preservationists should come accompanied by checkbooks.
85. The rights of people with disabilities overrule the rights of designers to be cute.
86. Before you start remodeling an old building, always ask your architects what it would cost to simply start over and erect a new building. Sometimes starting over is cheaper, and with lower long-term operating costs to boot.
87. Legitimate fundraising consultants always work for agreed fees or hourly salaries and never (as in NEVER) for a percentage of fees raised.
88. Unless your library is so far south that you worry about Burmese pythons lurking in the parking lot, you need an entrance that faces south. Under duress, settle for east.
89. Curved exterior walls lead to all sorts of problems with shelving placement, light fixture location, workroom shapes, acoustics, and other good things. On the other hand, they cost a lot more than straight walls.
90. Clarify contractually that your architects have no rights to your building once it's completed. This is a building, not fine art. You must have the right to alter anything you want at any time you want, whether your architects like it or not.
91. If your restroom washbasins aren’t strong enough to bear the weight of adults, sooner or later someone will break one off the wall.
92. Owners who can’t unload vacant buildings often have special epiphanies about what wonderful libraries they’ll make.
93. Unfortunately, there’s often no such thing as a “free” building, and lots of “free” buildings can end up costing more than starting over from scratch.
Chapter 2  
More than Two Hundred Snappy Rules for Good and Evil in Library Architecture

94. When a building is standing vacant, there is likely to be a very good reason. Or many very good reasons.
95. Converting a building that has no expansion space and no off-street parking space into a library involves making two impressively major errors at the same time.
96. Punch listing tries the previously warm social relationships between owners and contractors.
97. At groundbreaking and ribbon-cutting events, what people want to hear is probably more important than what you want to tell them.
98. One of the first and most vital decisions in library planning is stack aisle width, because it determines structural column spacing.
99. No matter how short your library is of space, never have book aisles with dead ends.
100. To the intense chagrin of some designers, end panel indicators you can actually read are far more important that indicators that provide aesthetic gratification.
101. Shelving does best in long, continuous ranges. Dividing it up into lots of separate chunks in lots of separate spaces is A Very Seriously Bad Thing.
102. Shelving needs to be in parallel rows. Always.
103. Shelves supported by clips on the end panels, or slipped into slots in the end panels, have a tendency to fall, dumping books on the place (or persons) beneath.
104. Triangular and round interior spaces cost a lot more to construct, but they compensate for it by not holding much.
105. You need a good excuse for internal partitions. “Functional necessity” is often a good excuse. “Architectural concept” is almost never a good excuse.
106. Funny-shaped buildings may be architecturally interesting, but they’re usually expensive and dysfunctional. Curved walls are funny-shaped.
107. Basements in new libraries cost about the same amount as extra floors, but they have many fewer advantages. As in no advantages whatsoever.
108. An Illinois public library has a young adult study room with one tiny window. The library staff call it “the sex room.”
109. If you have to install dark gray film on a window to block the glare, you should be asking yourself why you allowed someone to install that window in the first place.
110. You always need more storage space than your board of trustees, university administration, school principal, or hospital administrator think you need.
111. If you have study rooms that can’t be supervised by your staff from service desks, they’ll spend a lot of time running back and forth, peeking into study room windows.
112. High-density storage next to your library is infinitely better than high-density storage two counties off.
113. Always have your consulting librarian check your schematic design for functionality.
114. For any library construction project larger than a bicycle shed, you need an architect.
115. If your architects have little or no library experience, decide how you will fill the gap.
116. Of all architectural words of tongue or pen, “We will reinvent the library” are among the most terrifying.
117. Good librarians can be seriously annoying to architects who start off with little intention of listening to them.
118. Be particularly wary and aggressive when your library is a small element in a large building. Do proactive programming. Insist on being heard.
119. Sometimes the word concept should bring terror to your heart.
120. Clarify contractually what will happen if your lowest bid is significantly higher than your architects’ estimate.
121. Complete honesty in architectural renderings is of mixed value. Sometimes it’s better to leave off the HVAC penthouse.
122. One way to design a library building is to lay out all the needed spaces and then wrap an attractive exterior around them. Another way is to design an attractive exterior and then cram all the library spaces into it. The latter approach was invented by Procrustes, and you will not enjoy the results.
123. Soaring spaces with monumental staircases provide a few moments of “wow,” followed by endless years of problems with heating, lighting, maintenance, acoustics, getting from point A to point B, unusable but expensive space, and (for many users) paralyzing fear of heights. Say “no” early and often.
124. Make sure that your library staff have enough time to work on your building project.
125. Don’t pressure architects to do something illegal.
126. If your architects have to labor mightily to talk you into their design concept, it may be because it’s a crummy concept.
127. Design competitions for less than truly major libraries may simply drive off good architects. (They may also be a sign of excess owner pomposity.)
128. Working with your architects to list words that will define your project is fun, but don’t engrave them on the front of your building.
129. If users have to shield their eyes from the glare anywhere in your library, something is wrong.
130. If you stand at the top of a staircase, looking down, and start fantasizing about tumbling down head over heels, this is Not a Good Thing.
131. Water features may be exciting and desirable, but only in someone else’s library. If you’re stuck with one, convert it to a planter.
132. “How will we change the light bulbs?” is an important question. If your designer says, “Use a lift,” that is about as helpful as being told to “Use a screwdriver” when you ask how to rebuild the carburetor on your XKE.
133. If a railing has horizontal bars that can be climbed like a ladder, someone’s child will climb them. And fall off.
134. Never allow anyone to put perimeter soffits in your library.
135. Your architects and engineers are your experts on codes of all sorts.
136. Screen porches sound romantic, but they’re not. Always say “No.”
137. Book stacks don’t fit into non-rectangular spaces.
138. Sight lines are vital, whether they’re cute or not.
139. *Ars longa, technologia brevis est.* (Fake Latin for “technology is fleeting, but art—as in architecture, for example—endures.”)
140. Rooms with dark ceilings are hard to light. Historic dark ceilings probably need to be preserved, but we don’t need to create any new ones.
141. There are no cheap substitutes for elevators.
142. As with other building codes, the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act are legal minimums, not ideals. Don’t feel seriously smug about things if your building just squeaks through.
143. The undersides of floating staircases are wonderful places to bump one’s head.
144. Steps that serve no necessary purpose whatsoever serve no purpose whatsoever.
145. Staircases should not terrify library users, who are nice people and deserve better treatment.
146. A member of a governing board envisions a balcony overlooking a library atrium as an inspirational vantage point. A library manager wonders how long it will be before someone falls off.
147. There is no excuse for staircases with funny-shaped treads.
148. For people with a serious fear of heights, a glass-walled elevator is not a kindly alternative to a vertiginous staircase.
149. Beware of providing eternal exhibit space for things you don’t own.
150. Never compromise with color rendering index (CRI). There’s no need to accept anything less than 85.
151. And never compromise with color temperature. Anything higher than 3500K is too cold.
152. Be sure your lighting is bright enough. Anything less than 50 foot-candles of soft, even light is unacceptable, and 60 foot-candles is a lot better.
153. Entryways need to be brightly lit and welcoming, even though all most people do is just move on through them.
154. No motion detectors should force people to grope their way into dark rooms.
155. With the exception of study rooms and program rooms, put light switches where library users can’t play around with them.
156. When it comes to a bond referendum, making sure your friends all vote works a lot better than trying to convert your enemies.
157. Remodeling is almost always more expensive than either your critics or supporters expect.
158. Construction costs tend to increase faster than the value of money in the bank.
159. Some donors come equipped not only with money (good) but also with weird structural ideas they want to inflict on you (bad). Some want to pay only part of the cost of the building but still get to inflict their unfortunate ideas on you. It hurts to say “no” to money, but sometimes that’s the only sane option.
160. Bake sales and book sales are fun and make everyone feel involved and appreciated, but they don’t bring in much money. Construction projects rely on seriously big bucks from a more limited range of sources.
161. You can’t get through any funding for a new library without hearing “The book is dead.” Be prepared to point out how packed your library is, but don’t expect to convert everyone.
162. Know what you’ll do if you end up with the larger library of tomorrow but with yesterday’s operating budget.
163. Local nonexperts are frequently eager to estimate construction costs on your behalf. Run away quickly.
164. Some sinks may require garbage disposals, particularly in staff lunchrooms.
165. If you construct an open terrace next to your library, below grade level, you will regret it deeply. Sooner or later the storm drains will fail, and water will fill your library.
166. A happy library is a basement-less library.
167. Install enough electrical outlets. Fire marshals will not appreciate your extension cords.
168. Wall-mounted computer counters with outlets at the back force users to sit with their backs to the room. Lots of users don’t like this much.
169. Study rooms and staff workrooms all need individual thermostats.
170. Heating with propane is a lot more expensive than heating with natural gas. If you have a choice of sites, pick one with access to natural gas.
171. Never buy a site or a building without input from an architect (and a consulting librarian, if possible).
172. When possible, use the term workroom rather than office. It’s a lot more accurate and creates far fewer emotions on the part of observers.
173. Floor-mounted toilets are cheaper than wall-mounted toilets, but only if you don’t count the cost of maintenance.
174. Always use flush-valve toilets unless your community suffers from low water pressure.
175. Unless your building successfully bans infants, your restrooms will need changing tables. And receptacles for dirty diapers.
176. Even in tiny libraries, staff do not want to share restrooms with library users. Unless you’ve spent your life working in libraries, you have no right to regard this as an unreasonable attitude.
177. Restrooms must never open directly into reading rooms, program rooms, or staff lunchrooms.
178. The only acceptable restroom floor covering is anti-slip ceramic tile with very dark grout.
179. Be sure all of your toilet stalls are large enough for actual human beings.
180. Written building programs for expanding existing buildings should always be written without regard to those structures. It’s always a matter of what you need, not what you have.
181. Remodeling and expanding a historic library is difficult. Trying to merge it with a second historic building is seriously scary, but the concept has an evil appeal to the inexperienced.
182. Once they’ve been expanded, historic buildings frequently have too many floors and too many rooms, with resulting expensive implications for access, supervision, and excessive elevators and staircases.
183. The walls of most historic libraries are uninsulated, and you probably won’t be able to do anything about it.
184. The great temptation in dealing with historic buildings is to construct what you can have rather than what you need. Starting with a written building program is particularly vital.
185. A bargain building in a bad location is a bad building. A beautiful building in a bad location is also a bad building.
186. A contemporary addition to a historic building will frequently—with the passage of time—become a painfully dated addition to a historic building, the architectural equivalent of avocado shag carpet.
187. A service desk is a service desk, not a monument.
188. Most service desks need occasional rearrangement, relocation, readjustment, and repurposing. Inflexibility of construction is not a virtue.
189. A matching soffit with recessed downlights over a service desk ensures a strong and happy combination of inflexibility and glare.
190. Atriums are rotten places for service desks.
191. All program rooms need adequate storage closets for all furniture and program supplies.
192. Movable room dividers in program rooms are expensive and hard to maneuver, do a bad job of acoustical separation, change the shapes of rooms in weird ways, and are hard to repair. But outside of that they sound like a pretty good idea.
193. Funny-shaped meeting rooms are less amusing than one might hope. Nature loves rectangles.

194. Very few libraries complain that their meeting rooms are too large. Unless you have a large and pompous library, conference rooms with large and pompous conference tables and with large and pompous chairs tend to look extremely silly.

195. Few public libraries complain that they have too many study rooms, but most of them complain that they have too few.

196. Be careful that parent agencies like universities or city governments don’t take over control of your program rooms. And set things up so there won’t be any serious security problems when they overrule you and take over anyway.

197. Study rooms need to be terrariums—glass boxes that can be supervised from every possible angle.

198. Good architects can envision solutions to design problems in ways that would never occur to the rest of us. Make your needs clear and then see what happens.

199. When you are planning a library, always ask what additional building codes will come into play when you expand it.

200. All entrances need to be staffed, whether or not they have security gates.

201. Never let your library be a passageway to someone else’s turf.

202. The lowest-cost theft prevention system is keeping something that’s theft-worthy in an area limited to staff.

203. Avoid creating places where staff and users can be trapped.

204. Workrooms need internal windows with Venetian blinds to adjoining areas.

205. If you plan your new building for thirty years of collection growth but no staff growth, the fact that workers eventually end up on each others’ laps shouldn’t come as much of a surprise.

206. When people are waiting to see the library director, where will they sit?

207. Access lanes to drive-up book returns and book pickups need to have curves wide enough for real vehicles to handle.

208. Staff mailboxes need to be large enough for 8½ × 14-inch documents. Pigeonholes don’t work.

209. A staff lunchroom without a powerful exhaust fan is not as gross as a staff restroom without an exhaust fan, but the general principle is the same.

210. Staff toilets located directly next to staff lunch areas are depressingly prevalent and are one of the most easily avoided library design idiocies.

211. Staff mailboxes need to be large enough for 8½ × 14-inch documents. Pigeonholes don’t work.

212. A bad site for a nice store is a bad site for a nice public library.

213. Whether you have a campus library, a school library, a business library, or a public library, if you have a great site, everyone always wants to steal it.

214. Never let anyone else relieve you of your vacant land, and never let nearby land slip through your fingers.
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