



# Designing Space for Children and Teens

in Libraries and Public Places

Sandra Feinberg and James R. Keller, AIA

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# Designing Space for Children and Teens in Libraries and Public Places

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## Introduction

**D**esign is the creative mechanism employed to organize concepts into media and space. The range of discussion around design contained in this book is intended to include architecture, interior design, graphic design, themed design, and the continuum of these aspects as they inform space for children and teens. The use of design as a tool for defining and enhancing space is the focus of our investigation and discourse. It is our intent to present a balanced and objective presentation of ideas that will be helpful to library and design professionals in the quest to improve the quality of services for young people in libraries and other public places.

There is much to be learned in the area of design for children, and we hope that this book fosters inquiry, study, and exploration. Library administrators coping with the need for more space, differently used space, and renovated interiors are faced with a daunting task. In some instances, older buildings reach a condition in which they require major improvements and directors and boards are faced with refurbishing or adding to existing space. In other situations, new programs and services created by staff and then demanded by the community cannot be accommodated within an existing facility. Hedra Packman, in her article on the branch renovations of the Free Library of Philadelphia, summarizes the library of the future: “Public service must truly drive the design of every part of [a library] project. Special programs and library services of the future evolve from current successes, community needs, creative responses, and flexible interior environments that result from renovations” (Peterman 2001, 3).

The direction that a building project takes is reflective of the mission of the library. Growth of the Internet has affected many of the library’s traditional roles, particularly reference services and access to books and media. The need for creating a sense of community and places for social interaction and civic engagement is influencing how library space is being used. Firmly establishing the library as a community center or destination is uppermost in the minds of many library leaders. Sam Demas and Jeff Scherer reflect on the library as a community institution: “As noncommercial, altruistic educational institutions, libraries fill a vital human need for communal exploration of ideas. . . . When designed and maintained with ‘place-making’ in mind, the physical library serves as a vital agent in community-building—bringing people together to promote a community’s civic and educational values” (2002, 65).

In their book *Civic Space/Cyberspace*, R. K. Molz and P. Dain emphasize the role of the library as civic institutions:

Libraries’ unique characteristics take on special meaning today, when thoughtful people worry about the fragmentation of contemporary life and the apparent decline of

local activities that bound people together in the past. . . . We see new attention given to the meaning of place, to social interaction, not in anonymous commercial suburban malls or in chatting at home with computer buddies in the new communities of cyberspace, but in neighborhood institutions in real space. People are looking for social moorings. Libraries—stable, welcoming, venerable, but also modern—make good candidates. They are associated with education and culture and understood as communal property but not too associated with government. (1999, 205–6)

Expanded, renovated, or newly constructed libraries are often designed to provide spaces that address the needs of specific audiences. For many public libraries in the United States and abroad, service and space for children, their families, and teens have been identified as a priority. Consideration must first be given to understanding the needs of youth—at varying ages and stages of development—their families, and caregivers. Defining how services, activities, and collections will satisfy those needs drives the various elements of design such as color, furniture, flooring, shelving, and lighting. As we design spaces for young people, characterizing the library’s mission to serve the literacy, educational, recreational, and social needs of youth is paramount.

Historically, children’s space was in the basement, behind glass walls, too small, and limited to school-age children. Preschool and kindergarten services began in the 1950s and primarily included storytimes. During the 1980s, libraries began to open their doors to infants, toddlers, parents, and child-care providers. Since then, the field has been influenced by information on brain development and the critical role that parents and caregivers play in helping children gain literacy skills beginning at birth. James Keller summarizes the development of children’s rooms: “The children’s room tucked away in the back corner of a Carnegie basement is part of the library of the past. There is a very real need for these resources and programs [for early childhood] and we have probably only seen the beginning of this evolution, if not revolution. The children’s library of the future is one of spatial and architectural significance” (James Keller, in Ramos 2001, 12).

Architecture has an amazing power to shape our thoughts and focus our energy in a particular way. Through the building of libraries that are created as dynamic community institutions and the design of space that is especially appealing to children and teens, architecture adds to the message societies want to send to their own and future generations. Integrating the educational, social, and developmental stages of childhood and adolescence with creative and well-thought-out designs can enhance learning, discovery, and exploration. The marriage of design professionals with youth services library staff sets the stage for endless possibilities on how libraries can and will serve children and teens.

For youth of all ages, learning is active and interactive. In an article titled “Project Play,” Andrew Blum reflects on designing children’s spaces: “Designing for kids means engaging them, not controlling them. . . . If buildings are to succeed as social spaces they must be armatures for discovery; not dictating specific responses but providing opportunities for the widest range of experiences” (2005, 83–84). As Peter Moss and Pat Petrie (2002) see it, public spaces for children are designed

- for the childhoods children are living here and now, as well as creating relationships and solidarities between children, between adults and between adults and children.

- as a community place for both adults and children to work on special projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance.
- to provide a wide range of opportunities from educational and task oriented to lightly structured for unsupervised play—sometimes with an adult and sometimes without—and settings where young people meet each other as individuals and where they form a social group.

Modern library space supports learning through movement, play, art activities, media, technology, group study, homework assistance and tutoring, drama, writing, child-to-child and adult-to-child conversation, and peer networking. The need for appropriately designed space for youth—and enough of it—is substantially affecting the way public libraries are being conceptualized and built. Jeffrey Scherer points out:

One of the fundamental misconceptions about designing libraries, especially space for children, is that the children's area is thought of as equal to, and coexistent with, other departments. But, in fact, because the developmental abilities of children and their age differences are so wide ranging, it really puts a different kind of pressure on [the children's department] in terms of accommodating all the variety of age and developmental differences.

To address specific users' needs and cater to a wide age range—birth to young adult—a variety of issues need to be considered. The patrons' age group and their wants and needs affect how the library goes about the process of designing the various spaces. It is imperative to separate those areas so that adolescents do not see themselves being perceived as children and schoolchildren do not see themselves as toddlers. In "Designing Library Space for Children and Adolescents," Lesley Boon states:

If the space is for children, it should tap into the naturally inquisitive nature of the child and his or her need to explore. If it is for adolescents, how they will (or how would they like to) use the space is the critical factor. If it is for both, it needs to be organized so that all the groups (preschoolers, school aged children, teens) can function well and share it effectively. (2003, 151)

Two major movements have sprung up during the past several decades that have influenced the direction of youth services and the way library spaces and services are envisioned. According to Clara Bohrer,

public libraries are reaching out to families with young children to actively support early learning . . . [and] translating research findings about early literacy into exciting physical spaces where families can engage in early literacy experiences. [Librarians] need to do all that they can to create active and exciting learning environments where families or caregivers with young children can engage in meaningful early literacy experiences right in their neighborhood. (2005, 127)

With the emergence of research data on the importance of early childhood development, "the public library is the only fully (and universally) accessible public institution that can sponsor or host early childhood development programs. It is the transformation of this new role of the public library that is, and will remain, one of the most significant aspects of its mission as we enter a new century" (James Keller, in Ramos 2001, 11).

At the other end of the spectrum, the reestablishment of teen services and ensuing need for specially designed areas have received increasing attention by library administrators, youth services librarians, and architects. Providing a healthy, socially engaging learning environment suitable for adolescents within the library setting presents many challenges for designers and architects, not the least of which include noise control, flexible furniture, contemporary media, food, and music.

The proportion and positioning of early childhood, school-age, and teen spaces; the size and variety of collections, furnishings, and interactive activity stations; the integration of media and technology; and the general tone or ambiance that expresses what the staff, board, and community find comfortable are issues that need to be thoroughly explored in any project. Every library expansion and renovation is unique, and the range of philosophies varies in the conception of space needs, how the space will be used, what specific ages will be served, and the reasons for focusing on youth. How libraries decide to build for children and teens generally begins with a strong philosophy or vision of one or more staff members within the institution who are supported by the administration and board. Research, exploration, community outreach, education, and flexibility work in tandem with the architectural and design process to achieve the final goal—outstanding architecture and interior design that render creative community learning space for young children, youth, and families in the public library.



It takes a lot of time, energy, and people—library staff, trustees, elected officials, supporters, architects, designers, builders, vendors, and lenders—to make building projects happen. Planning and organizational skills, perseverance, and commitment are required for any successful venture. Designing for children and teens requires additional attention to details, information, and expertise that goes beyond traditional library facility planning. In these types of projects, youth services staff need to be thoroughly involved in the planning process and, if the area targets older youth, teen involvement is imperative.

Deciding what should be built, how large the space needs to be, and how the overall design will be presented is determined in the latter stages of the process. To get to these latter stages, some initial steps need to be taken, including selecting an architect or design firm, forming a project management team, and deciding on a communication process. Following these steps can help libraries through the critical beginning stages of a building project.

### **SELECTING AN ARCHITECT OR DESIGN PROFESSIONAL**

Choosing an architect or design firm is one of the most important decisions to be made. An architect has tremendous influence on the future of the library in that the overall design will impact programs, staffing, and how the community uses the facility. The director, board, town representatives, or elected officials usually select the architect. If a major part of the expansion, renovation, or building project is focused on youth, it is important to discover through interviews or an RFP (request for proposal) process if potential architects have ever been involved in designing children's or teen spaces and the value they place on children and families as a major audience for public libraries. It may also be valuable to involve children's staff in the selection process.

An architect should be brought on board as early as possible. In addition to designing and preparing plans for the library, an architect can help evaluate the existing building and site, assess alternative pieces of property, and prepare a program for the new facility. Architects assist the director and board in working with patrons and staff to help define the vision for the library, and their input early on can be critical to the successful implementation of the project. In conjunction with a project manager, they educate the project team on the entire building process.

The chosen architect should have the experience and capability to handle the project and a good track record on similar projects. Most important, however, the selected architect or architectural firm should be one with whom the staff and board

can form a good working relationship—one with whom they feel comfortable, who understands the goals and complexity of the project. The library will be spending months if not years with this individual or firm.

It is equally important for the client to carefully select an architect or design professional who demonstrates the desired creative force, someone who can encourage the design team to realize the vision through their creative talents and skills. The architect should not dictate operational matters to the library or attempt to alter services, programs, or collections requirements to fit some architectural scheme. Likewise, the library professionals (and others) should be comfortable with the architect before starting the process and not try to design the space. There needs to be a comfortable balance and sharing of ideas.

## Professional Fees

One of the key components of any project's success is developing, managing, and maintaining the budget. The first outlay in the expenditures for a project is the payment of professional services: legal, library consulting, and design professionals. It is important to understand the range of fees that are customary for the services required and to have realistic expectations. Professional services are, by their description, based upon professional time and experience. The cost of professional fees is directly related to the professional's years of experience and rate, expected amount of time to be expended, and expertise.

Experience in most, if not all, professions brings compounded value to the client. This is true in law, medicine, accounting, architecture, and interior design. Telling us of his experience as a township manager for over thirty years and the success of the Horsham Township (Pa.) library project, Michael McGee stated, "I have learned not to hire an architect solely on the basis of price any more than I would hire a neurosurgeon on the basis of price." It is important to analyze cost relative to the value the library will receive from the design professional, just as one would evaluate a surgeon's credentials or an attorney's experience. Design professionals usually calculate their fees on a lump-sum, percentage, or hourly basis. Regardless of the computation method, the cost is always directly related to the rate, time, and expertise of the professionals who work directly on the project.

## Selection Process

Many libraries have suffered over the past forty years because of poorly qualified design professionals. A carefully structured and balanced selection process empowers the library to make the final decision on the most appropriate architect or interior designer for its particular project. It can also happen that architect selections are made by poorly qualified staffers or a disinterested other party, such as when a municipal body and the library enter into an "arranged marriage" that is not beneficial to achieving the vision and goals. In this instance, it may be better to postpone a project until various issues and concerns have been addressed and the library has an important voice in the selection process. Working with a professional library consultant with regard to some of these situations may be helpful. The consultant can advise and assist in securing the services of the best architect or design professional and also help

manage the selection process. The following steps for selection and the criteria for making the final decision are a greatly expanded version of those first published in Harvey (2005, 5).

1. Develop a list of prospective architects who have the basic qualifications for the project. This list can be as small as three and as large as ten. Referrals, word-of-mouth, neighboring libraries, local AIA chapters, state library associations, library conferences, design awards, and magazine articles all supply good ways and resources to identify architects.

2. Contact the firm by phone or e-mail to solicit an initial interest. Follow up by sending a description of the library and the project, and ask these firms to send information on their background, their capabilities, experience on similar projects, resumes of the individuals who would be involved in the project, a description of their understanding of the project and their approach, a list of references, an outline of how they charge for their services, and any other information that would be helpful in making an evaluation.

3. Research the architect or firm. Does the architect have a strong philosophy or design from a basis of research and development, whose buildings become tourist destinations—improving the image of cities and towns? Does the firm specialize in designing libraries and youth spaces? Does the architect have a philosophy regarding space for children or teens? Where are the firm's headquarters, and how will travel affect the cost and management of the project? The library board and staff may want a firm from their community or city. Conversely, it may be beneficial for the library and community to bring in a nationally or internationally recognized architect. Bringing in a firm renowned for excellence in libraries and cultural projects helps to assure a solution that meets the functional and aesthetic vision for the project and often helps with private fund-raising. A notable architect teamed with a local architect provides another solution that can be blended to bring acclaim to the library and city.

4. On the basis of the candidates' initial responses, select a smaller group and invite them to the library for an interview with the administration, selected staff, and board members. An interview should last from 45 minutes to an hour to give the candidate enough time to make a presentation and the selection committee or board enough time to ask specific questions. Have the list of questions ready in advance, and ask each candidate the same questions. The most essential part of the selection process is asking questions. The architect also needs to articulate clear questions to the committee.

5. In some instances, particularly for larger libraries, the selection committee may prefer to base the choice of an architect on the presentation of a specific design. This may involve fee-based selection, design competitions, qualifications-based selection, or an RFP. A consultant or library administrator often serves as a coordinator for the selection process and helps to create a time line and administer the paperwork. This type of selection process may extend the time line of the project.

6. Visit some of the architect's completed projects, particularly those with significant children's or teen areas, and talk with staff. Take notes. Was it a successful project? Did the architect creatively solve their problems? Was the architect available in an ongoing and timely manner? Was the architect or designer flexible and engaging as a partner?

7. Call references. Keep a written summary of the information collected, including the packet of materials sent by the architect, notes on questions answered,

references, and photos of other projects. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses candidly among the selection committee members. Draw up a chart of strengths and drawbacks to assist in the decision-making process.

8. Request information on professional fees and how costs are figured. Keep in mind that costs should not be considered as an isolated factor. In other words, if one architect's price is less, it is not necessarily the better value. The costs, qualifications, and services provided need to be considered as a whole.

Consider these criteria in your final selection:

- Experience in similar projects, particularly in designing libraries and youth space.
- Experience working on similar types of construction projects (school district, municipal).
- Ability to provide the appropriate services and staff to complete the project, and current availability to begin work.
- Experience of individuals to be assigned to work on the library's project. (To ensure good chemistry and communication between architect and library, it is imperative that the library staff meet the actual working partners before making the final selection.)
- Ability to connect fully and successfully with the library's goals. Look for common philosophies and values, someone who will share the staff and board's vision for the future of the library. There needs to be a match between the library's values and goals and those of the architect.
- Track record of successfully completing similar projects within a budget and time frame.
- Creativity outside of the firms' usual architectural work, such as involvement in professional organizations, partnering in creating a special material or product, or publications.
- Good presentation skills and well-prepared accompanying materials. Remember that the design professional will need to describe the project to the community and other stakeholders.
- Costs that are relative to the overall scope and extent of the project. Consideration needs to be given to the costs relative to the qualifications and experience of the architect or designer.

## FORMING A PROJECT TEAM

The project management team should be composed of decision-making representatives from all stakeholder departments and divisions. For a project encompassing space for children and teens, the team should include the library director, the youth services librarian, the architect, the project manager or

The [Schaumburg Township District Library] first put out an RFP and short-listed those who responded. Then, before we interviewed, we visited libraries and projects that the architects had built. We were familiar with their work during the interviews and, in the end, we think it produced a better fit. It was a little easier because we saw some things that we could talk about—things we liked and didn't like—and got a better understanding of how [the architects] worked.

The key things we were looking for were a company that could handle a project of this size and one that they [the board and staff] could have a rapport with; an architectural firm that wouldn't control the process but would have it be more of a team process. Some of the architects were rejected because they seemed too strong—strong in a sense that it wouldn't be quite a teamworking relationship. Some of the architects didn't give the board and the committee the feeling that they were really collaborative.

—Michael Madden (interview, June 2005)

coordinator, consultants, and vendors. These individuals need to work together to plan, manage, and implement the project.

It is critical for the team to designate a principal arbitrator or day-to-day decision maker. On small projects, the library director often serves in this role. On larger projects, architect Sam Miller points out, “A big challenge is working with clients that have many heads; one strategy is to find the key decision makers and stakeholders and . . . work with them to identify who can make decisions day-to-day. . . . A strong client making decisions and leading is a great asset to the project” (Wallace 2005, 51). Library project management teams will be ahead if they make an early, conscious choice as to whom this day-to-day decision maker will be and communicate that choice to all parties.

### **Library Director**

The library director needs to be involved in the overall direction of the project and represents the library’s interests during the visioning and planning stages. A board member may also be willing to participate. In any case, the primary responsibility for the library project rests with the library director or key library administrator.

Library directors in small and medium-size libraries often find that they are performing two jobs—directing the library and overseeing construction—during a building project. It may be best to assign the administration of the library to an assistant director or department head in order to maintain the day-to-day operations. The library director can then concentrate on construction demands, problems, and issues as they arise. In larger libraries, a project manager often handles the daily construction tasks, but the director still needs to maintain overall control and be aware of the issues and how they are resolved. During expansion and renovation projects, problem resolution that involves change orders or a significant change in the design must be fully understood by the library director.

### **Project Manager or Coordinator**

Enlisting the help of a project manager or coordinator facilitates the design and building process. Some larger architectural firms offer this service, but often the project manager is an individual employed by the library or municipality and generally trained as an engineer or architect. Many libraries prefer to hire an independent project manager or coordinator, one who is familiar with local ordinances, building codes, rules, and regulations and has worked with other library or building projects. The project manager is responsible to the board and administration, represents the library on the project team, and confers with the architect and other consultants working on behalf of the library. Selecting a project manager often follows the same steps and uses some of the same criteria as selecting an architect.

The primary responsibilities of the project manager are to keep the project on focus, within the time line and on budget. Project managers conduct the meetings, keep (or track architect’s or construction manager’s) official minutes, and follow through with many of the details assigned to the various team members. They are generally knowledgeable about construction work and often assist with problems and issues that arise throughout the building project. In tandem with the architect, they

assist with the identification and hiring of other consultants or vendors who may be needed for specific tasks or jobs.

## Architect

The relationship between client and architect is similar in many aspects to other professional relationships—client/lawyer or client/physician. The architect is the advocate for the owner in all matters of design and project implementation. This includes advocacy for cost management during construction. Part of the architect/client relationship includes delineating the responsibilities of the client, which need to be understood and agreed upon beforehand. A key element in the architect/client relationship comes in the area of visioning:

Librarians and architects envision and experience the process of planning a new public library very differently. The divergence is crucial because the degree of harmony between the two professionals influences the final success of the new building they are designing. In general, the librarian brings an intimate knowledge of the library's functions and requirements to the project, while an architect contributes creative artistic talent and building expertise. In a well-run project, both professionals participate in the creative effort. (Curry and Henriquez 1998, 80)

Architects help clients determine their true needs and prioritize their wants. They are responsible for the design of a building or creation of an interior space based on the integration of design concepts and practices, environmental and physical conditions, and the vision and goals expressed by the library. "Throughout the design process, architects think in terms of facts, values, goals, performance requirements and in conceptual terms of privacy, security, territoriality, image, maintenance, physical comfort, audibility, visibility, etc." (Wallace 2005, 49). Architects turn design problems into advantages, limitations into design parameters. They analyze the building site or location and its particular strengths and weaknesses and often review the proposed sites, infrastructure, environmental issues, local weather, climate patterns, zoning, and nearby commercial operations that may affect the placement, entrance, and sight lines of the building.

Another critical job for the architect is to involve the community in the design process. This can often become a difficult process and requires tremendous communication and facilitation skills. Jeff Scherer explained it to us this way:

One of the things that architects don't realize, and/or they aren't as aware of as much as they should be, is that the creation of a building in a community is a big deal. And if an architect is not savvy about how they orchestrate the participation of key people, they can find that bad decisions will be made because [a certain] person needs to impose their decision on the process just to make it clear to the politicians that they were involved. [The architect] needs to orchestrate the decision-making process in a very delicate way that lets individuals be empowered to make decisions that they are good at, but don't force them into making bad decisions simply to show that they can make the decision. . . . you need to build trust so that [the team] can actually make a decision together, which is the better decision in the long run.

A major area of concern when designing youth spaces may involve the youth services staff's desire to create a specialized theme area or design features. Architects



often have knowledge of and access to other professionals who can assist the library with specific design needs that arise. They often partner with manufacturers to create custom and specialized building materials, furniture, artwork, and carpets.

### Youth Services Librarian

In a major building project, the youth space may be only a part of the overall design. For smaller projects or interior renovations, the entire project may focus on children's or teen spaces. Whether large or small, it is critical that the youth services staff be involved. At least one representative should be part of the team, preferably at the beginning of the project. They often serve as principal advocates of library service for children and teens, expressing their knowledge and impressing it upon all team members, particularly those not directly associated with libraries. They need to be involved in answering questions and assisting the team in understanding the vision and mission underlying service to youth in their library. Lesley Boon emphasizes that

the designing of library space for young people takes specialist knowledge and skills. Most important is knowledge of behavior and information needs, combined with a love for children and/or adolescents. . . . When designing a library or library space for children and adolescents, many questions need to be addressed. For each library facility, the questions may be the same, but the answers must come from local knowledge and expertise about what this particular user group needs. (2003, 151)

Engaging and getting input from the youth services staff in the design of children's and teen areas greatly enhance information pertinent to size, design, activity areas, collection and program space, and staff areas. Their expertise with children, teens and parents, and library services for these audiences is invaluable. At all points during the process, the youth services staff involved with the project must be informed and seen as active, valued members of the team. Reflecting on a Philadelphia project, the architect noted:

In retrospect, if there is anything about the Free Library process that we could change or re-do, it would be to add a separate design meeting or meetings just with the children's librarian. We did spend a considerable amount of attention on the design of the children's area, but time devoted specifically to the knowledge of the children's librarian would have improved our understanding and success in the design solutions. (James Keller, in Ramos 2001, 11)

The youth services staff need to communicate their vision to the building team and become liaisons with the architects. They also need to understand their role and potential influence in the building project. Do they have a lot of say in how things should be done? Are they allowed to choose the colors, furnishings, or signage? It is important from the outset to be explicit about how things will function and who is responsible for these types of decisions. By being informed professionals and able to convey appropriate information to the architects and designers, youth services staff will be valued members of the planning team.

In an article on a Sacramento (Calif.) Public Library building project, the authors wrote about the role of the youth services librarian:

Establishing a common perception of all planning decisions became imperative during our lengthy planning process, and we learned the importance of taking complete notes in every meeting with architects, interior designers and other library staff. We also learned the power of our role in the planning process; as principal advocates of children's library service we must express our knowledge, and impress it upon all players not directly associated with libraries. (Chekon and Miles 1993, 24)

## Consultants and Vendors

Depending on the complexity of the facility, good design requires integrating the work of acoustical, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, structural, civil, geotechnical, energy, and environmental engineers along with interior designers, landscape architects, security integrators, technology consultants, furniture and shelving vendors, and other specialists. Library consultants who are skilled and experienced at the building process can be of great help, particularly when designing spaces for children and teens.

The process of selecting and working successfully with outside consultants or vendors can be difficult, and it is best to work with the architect and project manager for selection purposes. It is important to understand who is out there and what is available. Writing RFP guidelines helps clarify the library's relationship with any vendor. Follow the same selection guidelines outlined above, such as checking references and other work the vendor/consultant has been involved with, as part of the process. With any consultant, a strong, clear contract is the library's best insurance, no matter who is chosen.

In any major project—expansion or new building—a Program of Requirements is developed (on the Program of Requirements, see chapter 3). This document serves as the guiding plan for the entire project and is often prepared by a professional library consultant. Library consultants should be familiar with library planning and design, management, programming, staffing, and materials requirements. They may also assist the library in operational planning and budget preparation and provide a subjective viewpoint throughout the project. During the hiring process, the library consultant should provide credentials and references for this type of work prior to selection. It is advisable to request samples of a completed Program of Requirements as part of the selection process and before finalizing selection of the library consultant.

## ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

Deciding the role, size, function, and targeted ages of the youth space within a newly constructed or renovated facility is accomplished over time during meetings, conversations, visits, research, and one-on-one interactions among team members. Most important is the ability of the team to communicate effectively (and synergistically) throughout the process. Success depends on the library's ability to communicate with the project team and vice versa. Turning goals into vision and vision into concrete implementation is difficult for the library alone; it can get more complicated when the library brings in the various members of the project team.

Good communication leads to improved, often larger and more dynamic spaces and inventive solutions that better reflect the library's mission as a community place for



In a series of interviews with librarians and architects who worked together on building projects, some fundamental differences between the perception of the architects and design professionals and those of the library staff surfaced:

Librarians spoke more extensively about the need for personal flexibility, compromise and diplomacy. They alluded frequently to the different agendas of people on the committee and emphasized that tradeoffs were necessary if the project was to move forward. . . . In contrast, the architects emphasized the need for a strong, singular vision, which could be diluted by “too many cooks.” . . . They rarely spoke about team dynamics . . . and were more focused on creating fresh, innovative interpretations of public library facilities that would make a personal statement.

The final major point that emerged from the data was an overall difference in perception between the architects and librarians about the nature of the building itself. Throughout the interviews, the architects concentrated on building form, the librarians on building function. The architects emphasized the “look” of the building exterior and interior, while the librarians were most concerned with “use.” . . . It appears that form/function viewpoint difference exists even in the initial planning stages, and leads to a communication gap that both architects and librarians must recognize.

—Ann Curry and Zena Henriquez (1998,88)

families. It is not unusual for an involved project team to create a space that had not been imagined before, to place the children’s space in a different position within the library building, or to designate a larger proportion (though not originally planned) of the facility for children and teens. Following these communication principles aids in the smooth running of the project:

- Maintain a clear line of communication and direction. The project manager acts as a pivotal person, considering all team members’ concerns and relating decisions to the library director, architect, or other team members who may be affected. It is important that team members and staff know that all decisions and directions funnel through this one person. This ensures that all are marching to the same drummer.

- Respect the expertise of each team member. The design and building process is a series of compromises as the staff discovers what does and does not work from a structural standpoint and the architects, builders, and vendors learn what does and does not work in terms of library service. “If the library thinks they know more about designing a library than the architect, builder or consultant, then they have the wrong partner. On the other hand, library staff cannot give away their power—expertise on how

libraries work, how people use the library, and what the community needs” (Peterman 2001, 6). The importance of respecting the expertise of each team member or partner cannot be emphasized enough.

- Establish a common perception of all planning decisions; this becomes more imperative as the planning process progresses. It is important to develop rapport among the team members and an informal way of giving input on many aspects of the building. Understanding the ultimate objectives and clarifying the vision of the building project help all team members reach their individual goals as the team moves the project along to its final destination.
- Get to know every person who works on the project. Team members become like staff and need to be treated as equal partners in the project. Recognize limitations; architects, consultants, and project managers cannot save the world and solve all of the library’s problems. Remember to consider the strengths and position of different team members.
- Ongoing planning, communication, and trust are essential throughout the building project. The threads of communication and trust must weave together to create a strong relationship that can lead to a better design. It is important to reflect on lessons learned as the process unfolds.

- Although the project manager or architect is responsible for taking official notes, it is imperative that each staff member take his or her own notes in every meeting with architects, interior designers, and other library staff. During the project, one of the telling points is how often the same issue is on the agenda. After so many weeks, everyone gets tired of talking about it, so the team must jointly find a solution and then record who is responsible for implementation. In any project, no matter the size of the team or project, it is important to state clearly who is responsible for each item and who must be informed of decisions made and actions taken.
- Get prepared before meetings and conversations—time is money. List the objectives the library has for each meeting or conversation and follow up on whether or how the issue is resolved. The results of “sidebar conversations” and secondary meetings need to be properly reflected in follow-up meeting notes.
- Follow through on those responsibilities assigned to library staff in a timely fashion. No library wants to be responsible for a time delay or for holding up another team member from doing his or her task. Be as accommodating as possible within the framework of the projected time line.
- Be prepared for delays, which can happen for any number of reasons: materials in production not ready; labor strikes; inclement weather; selected materials no longer available and other selections needed. Whatever the reason, it is good to make note of the issue at the meetings and decide if the team has control and can resolve the problem quickly. If one of the team members is the problem, this needs to be handled promptly by the project manager, library director, or board member, and when required by the library’s attorney.
- Knowledge transfer is key. Library staff must end up with knowledge, skills, and internal expertise to manage and maintain the building. Outside team members will leave eventually, and library staff need the skills to keep the library running. Ongoing maintenance and technology issues must be considered throughout the entire project.

According to Graeme Murphy of Hamlet Management Pty. Ltd., using good communication techniques during the design process helps the architect, designer, and library staff to adopt and use the same language: “This is powerful evidence that listening has taken place and that the effort has been effective. Ownership and trust between the two groups begins to develop as one. On occupation and handover to the client there must be no surprises. . . . The process of feed back and consultation for the entire project must foster the culture of ‘team.’ It must be sensitively handled. It must be respected” (Murphy 2002, 5).

## THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The vision for the children’s or teen space evolves throughout the design process. The early stage of design should be a season of celebrating ideas; the more ideas in this early stage, the richer the results may be. The evolution of the vision for the space should be shared by the staff, board, design professionals, and community.

Lesley Boon expresses how important it is to visualize how the space could fulfill one's dream:

Don't think within the constraints of what is happening in your library now; don't be reactive. Think, dream, create. Brainstorm all the possible activities, spaces, and attitudes that would serve your client needs best and be identified as best practice within the field. The only limit is your imagination. Not all things may be possible, but this is definitely an excellent start. Prioritize, from what is most important down to what you would love but could live without. (2003, 152)

At the 2008 launching of fund-raising for the first Children's Public Library in Muscat, Oman, founder and board chair Dr. Samira Moosa introduced the inspiration for the library:

The idea first came to mind when a child who had spent a year in the U.S. was returning home and was asked what he would miss most about America. The answer was definitely surprising and a light bulb went on in my head. Ever since then, I've been obsessed with the idea of a public library in Oman.

What stuck in my mind most was that if a child who has a great deal of access to books, like him, misses a library most of all, how must the majority

of children in Oman, who do not have access, feel about it? How much are they missing out on? As the obsession grew, I started asking people and I realized that many Omanis shared my hunger for such a project. It's been at the back of our minds, but action has never been taken to bring the vision to the front of our thoughts—where it belongs. We have to believe in this project, in this vision. H. H. Said Haitham [Minister of Heritage and Culture] believes in it, and that is why he gave us the land. A vision only becomes a reality when you take action and work toward it. It is the only way for our dreams to come true.



Rendering of library entrance, Children's Public Library in Muscat, Oman. Architect, COWI/VITETTA. Used by permission of VITETTA.

Many libraries and spaces for children have started with the vision of an individual or small group of dedicated individuals, committed to seeing their vision through. The journey comes with variables, some out of the control of the visionaries. Sometimes the process takes a very long time, and this may be the reality. Sometimes patience is a needed virtue in planning and building new spaces—especially libraries and spaces for children. Perseverance is the engine that drives many successful projects to realization. A capital project does not just happen on its own—it takes vision, dedication, perseverance, persistence, and commitment on the part of all involved. The result will be a special library space for children or teens with collections, services, and programs that foster and stimulate the quest for knowledge and initiate the process of lifelong learning.

The most successful architectural space derives from a strong conceptual vision. It is important for the library to know—at or near the beginning of the process—what the goals are and what the conceptual vision is. Predesign meetings may be instituted to conduct internal discussions with staff and, in some cases, with board members. These preliminary meetings provide the project team with background knowledge of library plans and expectations, help set the overall parameters for the project scope, and encourage board, staff, and community involvement.

Clarity of purpose on the part of the library fosters synergy with the design team and also serves as the compass for project delivery. This clarity of purpose serves to keep the project on track throughout its stages of development. Without clarity of purpose—or vision—the project will drift and the result will more than likely be a disappointment. It is not unusual for design professionals to excel in their art and craft—designing—but to struggle with client communication. “Design is a process. The most successful design solutions share several common elements. First of all there is a clear goal, an outline of how to achieve the goal or mission, and talent, energy, and discipline to carry the design through” (James Keller, in Ramos 2001, 10).

*Designing right is a reflection of listening well.* Architects need to learn about staff and how they do their work. It is crucial for architects to meet with the appropriate stakeholders—from board members and administration to library staff and patrons—in order to hear about the library’s true needs and wants. They need to know what role the library plays in the culture and aspirations of the community.

“The architect’s design is only as good as the information provided him or her. Architects want to understand, to gather information/concepts, and transform them into design ideas. The most abstract but important part of design is getting that information” (Geoffrey Freeman, in Wallace 2005, 52). What can the library be? What makes it effective? How does it interact with the community? Families? Children? Teens? This strategic information is what makes a library unique and a truly valuable asset.

*It’s a balancing act.* Although the input from staff, friends, board members, and others is important, it can be fraught with contradictions. Project architects and managers need specific information to determine customer needs, but each group that participates in the process adds another layer of time and information that is frequently extraneous to decision making. The balancing act is to get staff and community input while moving decisively on designs to meet future needs.

*Understand “no.”* It is critical that the project participants enjoy healthy communication and that the word “no” be understood to be a business term and never a personal affront. In our work and that of the contributors to this book, the ability to

say no to ideas or solutions and move forward quickly has been essential to the success of every project. It may, however, be worthwhile to vet an idea fully before saying no.

*Trial and error lead to solutions.* The creative process is organic and flowing. Many creative ideas simply do not work in the built environment or are not appropriate, but one good idea and sometimes even a bad idea may lead to a brilliant solution. Most often in the creative process, it takes trial and error to reach the optimal design results.

*Take risks.* A willingness to take risks with design is another element of success. Design risk does not have to be unconsidered risk, but the message here is to be open-minded and willing to brainstorm. It is important to share ideas and think about one's own vision and goals before the design process begins. Likewise, it is important to be willing to let go of ideas that simply do not work in real space. These same ideas may give way to alternate solutions that are imaginative and successful.

*Be ready to compromise.* The many successful spaces for children and teens are the result of collaboration between the professionals with expertise in youth services and the design team. Chekon and Miles recall their experience in creating the Kids' Place at the Sacramento Public Library: "Over the six years, the building program underwent many changes. The process was a series of compromises as we discovered what would and what wouldn't work from a structural standpoint, and the architects learned what would and wouldn't work in terms of library service" (1993, 21).

*Avoid micromanaging the creative process.* There is an old adage that "it takes a great client for an architect to produce great architecture." This could not be truer than in designing space for young people. The more informed the library stakeholders are, the more interested in the design process and results, the better the results will be. But part of being a great client is also knowing when and how to allow the design professionals the license to create, imagine, define, and realize the project. Although the client should check or review the specifics of the design, micromanaging the design is the sign of a poor client or a poorly selected design professional.

## Involving Youth Services Staff and Others

The creative process is dynamic, and library stakeholders are an important part of this process. The following strategies can help staff gather information, formulate their vision, and come to some consensus as a department before approaching the design team.

- Institute predesign meetings to conduct internal discussions with staff and, in some cases, with board members and Friends groups. These preliminary meetings provide background knowledge of library plans and expectations, provide an opportunity to elicit general comments about the project, and serve as morale boosters and team-building exercises.
- Identify the key staff members who will represent youth services on the project team. It is important that contractors, partners, and staff know that all decisions and directions funnel through specific people.
- In addition to working with the architect and project manager, the key staff members should set up internal meetings that allow for the involvement of other staff members (from librarians to clerks to pages to custodians) in every step of the process. Though time consuming, it is well worth it.

- Keep a notebook for staff to jot down ideas as the project is being developed. It is easier and less costly to revise the building plans to correct oversights than to make changes during or after construction.
- Be there to check every point of progress. Check that the assumptions about what would be done are actually happening as envisioned. Be prepared to press for what is needed and to compromise on less important issues.

How well the library staff and architect resonate determines how successful the project will be. Architect Jeff Scherer told us that the architect/librarian team needs to “get to know each other really well; spend time with the people who are going to use the space; and make sure that the staff (is working together). The ‘staff issue’ is a little bit more complicated to talk about because the staff (may have) several agendas at one time.”

Hedra Packman of the Free Library of Philadelphia told us about getting staff to express themselves:

People were really strongly directed and encouraged, coached into speaking their mind. If people were more shy or inclined not to say what they really thought in a public forum (which was the design meeting), they would either go ahead and get over that inhibition and communicate it in a design meeting or, immediately after the design meeting, communicate it on more of a one-to-one basis with somebody at the library who could represent that input. So we didn’t go through a whole design process, get buy-in from everybody else, and then have one or two of the key people really unhappy at the end.

## Preparing Idea Boards

One way to prepare for the design process is by writing ideas on paper and sharing them with the design team. The ideas can be verbal or graphic or they may be photographs of spaces, furniture, colors, and other design elements that are appealing or that appear successful.

Some design professionals begin the visioning process by creating design idea boards. Often used to communicate ideas and images and to reference the concept to be developed during the design stages, idea boards are usually done before the concept design begins. They may include a collage of photographs, fabric samples, material samples, words, or three-dimensional objects (e.g., a slinky might represent flexibility or energy). This is a fun method that often communicates the ideas better than a description.

Having children and young adults create their own idea boards and present them to the design team and library professionals can form the basis of the design concept and often helps with the choice of furniture, equipment, activity areas, colors, and other design elements (figure 1.1). Architects and designers are essential in pulling together the various ideas presented by the teens, for young adults are often quite inventive and articulate in their preferences. This process can be enlightening and edifying for the design team and provides a great learning experience for the teens as well.

When the VITETTA/Swartz Architectural Group team worked with the Middle Country Library on the enhancement of the Selden building teen space, the



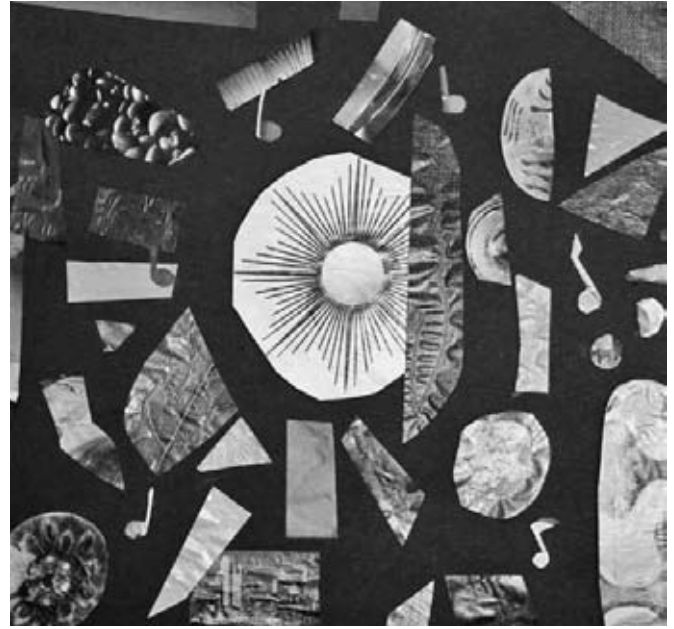


Photo credit: Middle Country Public Library

**FIGURE 1.1** Teen idea boards, Middle Country Public Library, Selden Branch, Selden, N.Y. Teen space architect, Swartz Architectural Group; consultant, VITETTA. Used by permission of the teens and library.



design team conducted a series of design meetings involving representative teens and young adults. They asked each representative to create an idea board. The teenagers were enthusiastic about the assignment, and most of the participants prepared a board as requested. The design team subsequently had the participants present their idea boards—just as an architecture/design student presents a project to peers and jury—to key staff and the design team. The design team did not act as critics, however, but rather as information gatherers. The teens and design team

immediately saw the wide range of ideas and contrasting opinions about how the space should look and feel.

In a subsequent meeting with the participants, the design team forged a common vision for the newly enhanced space, balancing the teens' ideas with the bold environment the library had already built. The palette of existing space included orange glazed wall tile, blue Marmoleum flooring, gold metal trim, purple painted metal deck, and blue painted structural beams. Some of the teens loved these colors and some detested them. The teams' challenge was to create a cohesive environment in this space that included the teens' ideas and reflected their taste but respected the interior design elements of this recently constructed and noteworthy building. The energy and commitment of the teen participants, and how they anticipated the use of the space, informed the design decisions at every turn.

## Teen Focus Groups

The design process may include focus group meetings with children and teens, which can be a fantastic part of the experience. This age group has ever-changing tastes and ideas about what is “in” and “out.” The tastes vary not only regionally but from neighborhood to neighborhood in urban areas and from town to town in rural areas. What is great for one community may be horrible for the next, according to teenagers.

When working with teens during the design process, it is important to recognize that this is a volatile period in their lives. Teens are influenced by many factors, including hormonal volatility to embarrassment. This is a biochemical reaction and a passing phase, but one that influences their reactions and participation.

In addition to getting teen ideas and perspective, an advantage of teen participation in the design process is that representative involvement teaches the teens a great deal about compromise. Every design project involves conflict resolution. Never does everyone on a design team agree on every point. Involvement allows the teens to learn how important they are as stakeholders in the use of public space. They also learn a great deal about how a building or its interior space is designed.

## CONCLUSION

Designing and building library facilities and spaces for children and teens are the future for libraries that pride themselves on being community centers. As with the beginning of any building project, one of the most important activities involves selecting architects, design specialists, and library consultants, and one of the determining factors in those selections is personal chemistry. This factor should be considered as heavily as credentials, for without shared enthusiasm the design process will be unnecessarily onerous and possibly even unpleasant.

Designing a new space for children and teens should be one of the greatest experiences in one’s professional life—even if it creates new and unusual experiences and stress at times. Forming a project team through sound selection processes and establishing communication guidelines will help the project go smoothly and efficiently. Integrating the youth services staff in the process is critical to making the vision a reality and the entire project a success.

A good building and good design depend upon the vision and clear articulation of that vision by the clients. How well the library and architect resonate determines the project’s degree of success. It is imperative that staff inform the architect about how and what they need to do their work, since the architect relies upon the accuracy and completeness of the information the library shares. “In the final analysis, the threads of communication and trust must weave together to make a strong relationship that can lead to a better built design” (Wallace 2005, 54).



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