

Two Aspects of Readers' Services Areas: Recommendations to Library Planners

BY ROBERT M. PIERSON

IN MANY library buildings, utility—the achievement of some practical goal—is the primary consideration rather than the stimulation of amusement, awe, or some other complex of feeling and attitude; and it is lucidity rather than mystery which is thus chiefly to be valued, even if it can be achieved only at the expense of charm. Unless a library building is to be used only by the fully initiated, pains should be taken, in planning it, to achieve utmost clarity so that the least experienced patron may be informed at every step in his progress, not only in respect to where he is, but also to where he is going. Signs, exhibits, and guidebooks help; a large reference staff is even better; best of all (but too seldom achieved) is the kind of library planning which enables the building itself—through barriers, vistas, contrasts, repetitions, and the like—to help keep the patron informed.

In getting down to cases—in imagining precisely how built-in information service, so to speak, might function—I have found myself constantly touching upon a second problem in planning readers' services areas: supervision (by which I mean whatever the librarian does to control and facilitate the activities of patrons while on duty, while "at the desk," as opposed to what he does while absent from the public areas). Architectural features which make for clarity *may* make for ease of supervision; but the latter success is by no means an automatic by-product of the former. It is possible to design entrances, service centers, reading rooms, stacks, and other areas which are clearly laid out but which are unmanageable.

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The extent to which the following suggestions regarding these two problems can be applied will vary from library to library. Exceptional situations are to be found. A building recently visited seemed altogether too mysterious: the patron wishing to renew a book had to cross a large lobby, enter a second lobby, climb a flight of stairs invisible from the first lobby, cross a hall, enter a large catalog and bibliography area, cross it, and enter a "circulation room," the door to which is not visible from the head of the stairs. A second building which I visited seemed to be laid out just as impractically. On the first floor were service desks facing a lobby. This was good but otherwise the building—several floors of cozily integrated stack and study areas—was utterly unsupervised. Yet at both libraries, staff members assured me that their arrangements cause no difficulties.

EASE IN FINDING AND ACCESS

The library should be easy to find. Public libraries should stand where patrons will pass; college libraries should dominate campuses; libraries within multi-function buildings need not spill into main lobbies, but neither should they be hidden away. But easy to find is not enough; easy to identify is also important: the library should suggest a library—or at least nothing else: not a church, not a prison, nor a court house,

not even a country club. One common way to label a library is to plan it so that books and readers are visible from without. Another way is to be frank about its structure. I am impressed by the number of university libraries whose facades suggest nothing in particular. But go around to their backs—ah, the stacks, like nothing else in academic architecture: multi-windowed blocks obviously featuring seven- or eight-foot ceilings, with glimpses of books within: structures as true to themselves as are greenhouses.

The library should be easy to reach. A driveway that takes one past the front door so that one may pick up and deliver passengers and books and even, at least momentarily, park, is not a point-less luxury—certainly not in a shopping area and not even on a college campus. Hilly campuses should reserve their summits for observatories, presidential mansions, war memorials, and other incidentals; getting to the library should not necessitate a long climb, however impressive the edifice eventually reached.

Glass doors dispel mystery, as does a place in which to pause to get one's bearings, and as do clear indications that one is in the right place. In even a large building it should be possible for the incoming patron to see (1) a person, obviously a staff member, who is ready to help him, (2) a counter (not a charming desk more suited to a parlor) or other piece of equipment at or through which books may be returned, (3) a catalog or evidence as to where one is, (4) a place to sit and read, and (5) books. If the library is so arranged that the main service floor is not the floor at which the patron enters, care must be taken that the lobby (1) is so designed as to direct, even impel him to the service area (lest he wander down blind alleys into classrooms, staff lounges, etc.) and (2) is staffed with a person competent to direct him or is furnished with a readable directory and has space for exhibits that

proclaim the character of the institution in unmistakable terms, i.e., exhibits that tell about the library and its collections and services—not about the Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, the garden club, the school band, and the like.

For various reasons, it may not be possible for the incoming patron to behold the collection, i.e., the main collection, as opposed to reference books, rentals, new books, and other items more or less on exhibit. Such is generally the case in sizable buildings with separate stack areas. Two things will help: (1) a librarian stationed conspicuously and (2) a conspicuous stack entrance. Reading areas should be visible or at least clearly indicated and should be adjacent to or within the stack area but not, I should think, between the incoming patron and the stack area. Ideally, too, the stack area should be clearly accessible from whatever point in the building from which the patron may need to approach it. Once within the stack area, no matter where he came in, the patron should be able to determine easily: (1) how the sequence of shelving runs, (2) where tables and chairs are, and (3) where to go when he is ready to leave. What is needed is a simple rectangle (no aisles to cross) with aisles on all four sides, with ranges open at both ends, with study tables along one or more of the surrounding aisles, and with conspicuous stairs and exits. If there is a stack assistant, it should be obvious where he is normally to be found. Some sort of fenestration should be provided, if only because there are few rooms more mysterious than a cave-like stack room when the power fails.

If the library contains several reading rooms, these should, if possible, be placed according to some simple and repeated pattern, so that the patron may learn, for example, that reading rooms are at the east and west ends of each floor. Within rooms, a similar uniformity will aid the reader, e.g., files always to the right, service desk always opposite the

door. Incidentally, the fact that every part of a room is visible from the entrance will not only simplify supervision, but will also enable a patron to spot a librarian who has momentarily left his post to go to a remote part of the room. The location of the service desk in relation to the door is also important: it should intercept but not block the patron's progress, if such a distinction may be made; i.e., it should either be at the end of a brief vista or just a third of the way across the patron's view, so that although he may easily pass it by, he cannot very well ignore it.

And so on throughout. Color variations will provide a clue to which of several virtually identical areas one is in. Counters that look like counters will tell the patron where public areas leave off and staff areas begin. The route to take to get to the librarian's office, the catalog room, and other areas occasionally visited by the public should be easy to follow. Continuous shelving in reading rooms does not cause the confusion inherent in a series of detached ranges set on various planes. Furniture which avoids the hotel lounge look will, to younger patrons in particular, communicate the fact that a library is not a recreation center. Smoking rooms, typing rooms, and rest rooms need not display themselves to passersby; but from "serious readers" who have penetrated the outer barriers such conveniences should certainly not be concealed.

EASE OF SUPERVISION

We have noted some ways in which clarity may be achieved. In considering our second problem, ease of supervision, it will be helpful to think of it under four headings: visibility; accessibility; maintenance of silence in areas where silence is needed; and economy of personnel. Visibility is an obvious aid to supervision. Although we blanch at the thought of installing a system of mirrors

such as chills the air of many a ten-cent store, we can imagine a situation, in at least one respect ideal, in which the desk-bound librarian can see every inch of the public area (this suggests a large fan, with shelves on the periphery and, conceivably, along the spokes—the librarian sufficiently raised that he can see over nearby patrons and penetrate, like Big Brother, the heights and depths). For various reasons, this too Orwellian effect some may not wish to adopt; but the principle need not be altogether discarded. Four practical suggestions for increasing visibility are:

- (1) Long narrow items, like catalogs, banks of vertical files, and ranges of shelving, should be placed either flat against walls opposite service desks or endwise; if they stand cross-wise there will be hidden areas behind them.
- (2) Exits from building—or from areas where control must be maintained—should require patrons to pass service desks.
- (3) Subsidiary service desks, e.g., those in special reading rooms, should be so placed that librarians can see into adjacent halls.
- (4) Reading areas should include a minimum of remote alcoves, secluded mezzanines, and the like (my impression being that library planners sometimes adopt a too idealized view of human nature or have an undue admiration for informal effects).

When I speak of accessibility I have in mind not how far the librarian must walk but rather how far and how fast he must run if he is to watch the door, stay near the phone, greet the public, help at the index table, prepare bibliographies, inspect stacks, encourage research, discourage romance, etc., etc.—in other words, function as the one person on duty in a library (or in a reading room therein) must ordinarily function.

In planning details of readers' services areas, various points should be kept in mind—if the librarian is to have access to what he needs to have access to. Stack

entrances, even if uncontrolled, should be adjacent to service counters. Counters should be so constructed that one may emerge from behind them readily, without having to cut back through work areas, around pillars, etc. If books and briefcases are to be inspected, some means must be found of forcing patrons to come all the way up to counters rather than stroll by out of reach. Most important, main entrances, charging desks, catalogs, index and bibliography areas, vertical files, reading areas, and shelf areas should all be as accessible as possible to reference librarians—whose role, when fully realized, is to give service at all these points, not just at two or three.

CONTROLLING NOISE

How can library planning help control noise? Obviously, through well-designed floors, walls, and ceilings. Some other ways are as follows:

- (1) By so placing auditoriums, classrooms, and the like that traffic in and out of them does not enter library service areas.
- (2) By arranging the various areas so that the least frequented will be the most remote.
- (3) By avoiding traffic lanes that cross reading areas.
- (4) By erecting banks of rooms—offices, restrooms, stairs, elevators, seminar rooms, and the like—between quiet and noisy areas.
- (5) By separating reference (i.e., inquiry) areas from study areas.

This last suggestion is, I gather, somewhat iconoclastic. I agree that reference and study areas should be adjacent, so that the transition from “look it up” to “read about it” and its converse may be easily achieved; but it should not be necessary always to answer *sotto voce*, nor always to try to answer Patron A’s question while considering how best to discourage the conversation of Patrons B and C.

Economy of personnel is a considera-

tion of particular importance in library planning. My study of library plans suggests to me that buildings are sometimes designed with expectations of considerable increases in staff. Years may pass before such expectations are fulfilled. In many libraries, especially those with considerable subdivision, the minimal staff for minimal service is enormously large in proportion to the number of people employed by the library or the number of patrons likely to be in the building at certain times. “Here I sit, chaperoning five couples, when I could be helping out at the catalog downstairs” is a typical comment; one difficulty is that one never knows at what point the couples may need bibliographical assistance. A sign saying, in effect, “No one on duty here; go to the Circulation Desk for help” is not an ideal solution; nor is closing the area; nor is placing an incompetent person at the desk. Some better solutions are these:

- (1) Placing the reference desk and the circulation desk next to each other so that one person can man both.
- (2) Placing the reference desk so that the same person can assist with indexes, supervise the catalog, and direct incoming patrons.
- (3) Placing two reading rooms with their service desks contiguous or continuous, so that one person can supervise both rooms.
- (4) Relating service desks and offices so that a person working in an office is readily visible to the patron at the desk and so that patrons, whether incoming or seated, are visible from the office.
- (5) Avoiding unnecessary duplications of such control points as building exits.

Careful planning can thus smooth the patron’s path and can assist the librarian in guiding the patron and in maintaining an appropriate atmosphere. In other words, careful planning can facilitate reference service. In the foregoing recommendations (recommendations which, if

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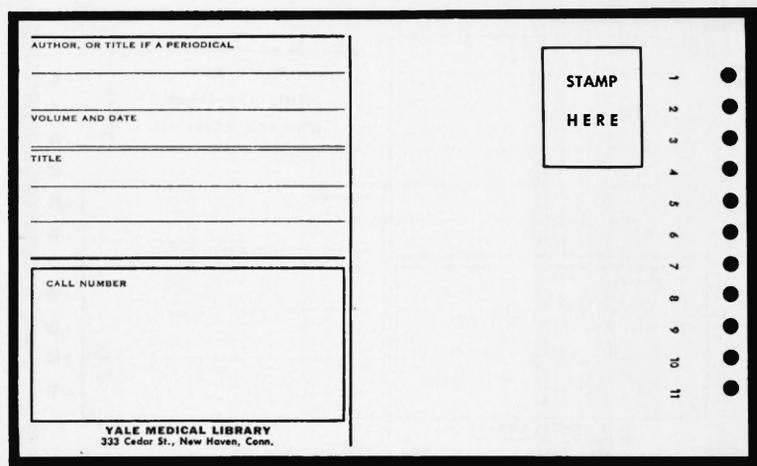


FIGURE 2

tices that actually go into the mail are obtained. The second benefit is increased availability of books and periodicals, for in the first six months of 1955 (following the installation of the original system in December 1954) the recorded circulation increased 18 per cent, excluding renewals, over the first six months of the previous year, despite the fact that in each

month of the last six of 1954, circulation had been lower than the corresponding month of 1953. During the six months following the installation, there was no other variation to affect the amount of circulation such as more borrowers or new educational or research programs. Here, then, is a nearly one-fifth increase in service achieved at relatively low cost.

Readers' Services...

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not particularly novel, bear repetition) a point of view regarding reference service is implicit which has been expressed before but acceptance of which is not always implicit in library plans. Reference service should be pervasive. Library activities can scarcely survive inadequate acquisition, catalog, and circulation service; but they can—and do—survive inadequate reference service. Why is reference service so often inadequate? Because for thing, it is, unlike Mount Everest, so often simply not *there*. In too many libraries, reference service is available in the sense that it is on call (if you know how to call it) but is not present at various points, e.g., front doors, catalogs, stack entrances, where it is

needed. One solution is to station non-professional help at such points and to train it to call on professional help when uncertain how to answer inquiries: surely a rather roundabout approach—and hardly foolproof, as so often it is just the thing one is least certain about that he is most certain about. A second solution is to hire more professional librarians, but this may result in a waste of professional skill (as one sits and waits for people to wait on); and, in any case, who has that much money? Still another solution is the one offered in this paper: to plan buildings so as to make arrangements of rooms, services, and collections easy to apprehend and so as to enable reference service, however small the reference staffs, to be as nearly as possible ubiquitous.