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A PHENOMENAL construction boom has taken place in public library building during the past seven years. New edifices are appearing all over the country. In metropolitan Detroit alone some seventeen new public library buildings have been planned or put up in this short period. Most of the construction nationally has been confined to branch libraries in the large and medium-sized cities, and to main libraries in the medium and small-sized communities.

Information concerning library buildings erected since World War II is brief and widely scattered in library and architectural journals, in newspapers, and in the files of the American Library Association. Unfortunately there is no recent publication on buildings comparable to Wheeler and Githens' monumental prewar volume.1 The references included in this article have been selected to show the most recent trend in the design of public library buildings.

The new buildings indicate clearly that a basic shift in style is taking place.2 The "monumental" and "informal" designs of earlier periods are being replaced with "functional" structures which fit the needs of their communities and help to promote the library program rather than simply serve as reading rooms and repositories for books. The "functional" library is simple in form, open, efficiently laid out, flexible, and relatively cheap to operate.3-4 In physical appearance it is more friendly and inviting than its predecessors.

The change in public library design has been brought about by many influences. Perhaps the greatest impetus toward the new approach sprang from the lean years of the depression, the scarcities created by the war, the ever-present need for more economy in governmental services, and a striving for the best possible library service at the least possible cost.5 A second factor favoring new design was growing awareness of the uninviting aspect of older libraries, which were poorly

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lighted, expensive to operate, wasteful of space, and apparently suffered from a disease which manifested itself in a brown and tan coloration. A third influence was the inauguration of new services designed to make the resources of the library more useful to the community. Finally, there has been a realization that improved methods of library operation bring new and different physical requirements.5

One of the more noticeable new developments in the public library is its emergence from the side streets, or quiet neighborhoods, into the hurly-burly of the shopping center, often having as its neighbor a supermarket or a local movie house. The convenience to the library patron of having his library building, and particularly that of a branch, located in the business area and within a few steps of the places where he does his weekly marketing, far offsets any advantage of quiet which the more secluded spot offered.7 Sites are now selected for availability to the user.8 Parking lots are often furnished to the public and the staff. Bicycle racks are placed near entrances to avoid clutter on the sidewalks and round doors.

Since buildings have been located in business districts they have come to embody many of the features which merchants have found important in attracting customers.9 Entrances are placed at sidewalk level for easy access, and large areas of glass are used on fronts, in order to permit passers-by to view the books and readers and the colorful and inviting interiors.10-14

It is inside the buildings, however, that the greatest changes have been made.15 Light-colored floor coverings are used to brighten the effect and to reflect light on the lower bookshelves. The trend is away from cork floors and toward asphalt tile, rubber tile, and linoleum. Painted cinder block walls appear to be increasing in favor, as they provide a colorful and attractive texture, beside having desirable acoustical properties and being much cheaper than plaster. The treatment of ceilings with sound-absorbing materials is standard practice. A highly important quality for any new library—and this is particularly true of the branches—is convertibility. Changes may occur in any neighborhood over a period of twenty to twenty-five years. The modern branch library building, placed in its appropriate location and constructed without columns and interior bearing walls, can easily be converted to commercial purposes. It has a resale value which was not possessed by the older single-purpose buildings.

The layout of the new interiors differs widely from that of the old.16
Many of the new features have been introduced to eliminate the forbidding atmosphere of earlier days, and to invite the reader to use the books and facilities at hand. The public service space no longer is divided into rooms designated as being for adults, juvenile departments, and reference purposes. The separating walls are omitted, and any division desirable is achieved by means of free standing bookcases. The inside of the building remains open, free, and pleasant to the sight. Not the least important aspect is flexibility. As the needs of the community change, altering, for example, the proportion of children to adults and bringing necessity for reallocation of space, the building can be adapted with a minimum of cost through the simple expedient of moving bookcases.

The new buildings often are so designed that all public service may be kept on the ground floor. Usually one control desk can serve for charging and discharging of books and registration of borrowers. In many newer plans such a desk is placed so that its staff may supervise most of the public service area, this being particularly true in branches. In main buildings, where limitations of building site must be taken into consideration, the effort is toward the maximum public service on the ground floor. This arrangement renders the library easier for the public to use, eliminates the need for space-consuming stairways and corridors, enables the public service staff to be concentrated on one floor, induces coordination in work assignments, and adds greatly to ease of supervision.

Careful studies have been made of the requirements of illumination. While there is no universal agreement on the amount of light required for reading areas, experience has shown that forty foot-candles maintained is adequate for most readers. The chief consideration is that all public service areas be evenly lighted, so that free-standing bookcases, tables, chairs, and other equipment may be moved to new locations and still have the necessary supply.

An aid to good lighting, as well as to economy in many directions, has been the lowering of the ceilings and the use of bright or light colors on walls, floors, furniture, and books. The esthetic appeal of a room where color has been employed with discrimination and taste is a psychological lift to both staff and public. The old heavy oak tables, with chairs and reading lamps to match, have been replaced with end-tables and colorful plastic upholstered chairs, which lend the
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air of an inviting lounge. Reference areas are provided with individual tables, or with those of a type seating four persons.

There have been many changes in branch building layout with reference to public service. The place reserved for young people is located between the children's and the adult areas, so that the child is able to progress toward adult reading as rapidly as his intellectual interests impel him. The reference facilities, since they are used heavily by boys and girls of high school age, are placed near to, or sometimes in, the section used by the youth group. The adult lounge, for obvious reasons, is situated near the adult bookstacks. Since this lounge commonly is a most attractive and colorful area, it has been placed directly inside the large glass part of the building front.

A meeting room has become an important and almost necessary feature of the modern branch library. The addition of a great variety of community services in the form of educational programs has called for rooms which can be separated from the main area for such activities. The ideal location for the meeting room is on the ground floor, at a point easily accessible from the children's and adult sections. This arrangement permits crowds of children to move in or out for story hours without disturbing other patrons. It also allows the space to be used for smoking when no gatherings are scheduled.

In this connection, public librarians are recognizing the need for smoking facilities in their buildings. The patron who spends considerable time in the library should not be required to retire to the outside for the relaxation of a smoke. The dual-purpose meeting and smoking room is often separated from the lounge area by means of a glass partition, which provides for adequate supervision. When the space is used for meetings, draperies can be drawn to insure privacy. Colorful draperies can have a softening effect and add to the distinction of the building as a whole.

Thus far we have been concerned with trends in public library design which directly affect the patron and concern his attraction and comfort. There are other new features which are not obvious to the public, but are of tremendous importance in the behind-the-scenes life of a library.

A common practice in planning buildings of the older type was the inclusion of multiple small workrooms. The trend now is toward incorporation of these into one larger area which may serve two or three departments, thus saving in building cost and lessening the
duplication of typists, and of typewriters and other equipment. A further economy in the workroom may be achieved by adopting work stations in place of desks. Each of these is assigned to a staff member to assure him adequate space for his routine duties. In branch libraries the staff workroom is usually placed directly behind the control desk, so that clerical operations may be removed from the desk and not appear overprominent, and yet be near at hand. It is planned with access either from the street or from a vestibule, permitting deliveries without disturbance of public service departments.

The staff kitchenette is sometimes situated adjacent to the workroom, in which case it is open only to the staff; or it may be placed near the meeting room, in position to serve as well such occasional groups as may hold meetings in the building. Available on the market today are self-contained kitchen units which include a small stove, refrigerator, sink, and cupboard. Such a unit, and a snack bar attached to the wall, conserve space in the staff quarters and allow use of part of the room for a staff lounge.

One of the most importance shifts in the arrangement of public libraries is a change in the situation and size of the control desk. According to this, the desk is adjacent to the entrance and parallel to the course of the borrower as he enters, rather than directly ahead of him. Such a position seem preferable, inasmuch as the borrower sees the book collection at once and, furthermore, does not feel that he is under observation from the moment he enters the building. The new control desk is smaller and lower than the old, being thirty-five inches high on the adult end and thirty inches high on the juvenile end. This smaller desk is made possible by the newer methods of book charging, such as the transaction system and other devices for routine simplification. The transaction method of book charging, incidentally, is being successfully used with such varied types of equipment as punched card machinery, tape and wire recorders, and photographic machines which reproduce on either film or paper.

Great attention has been given to saving space and time in the smaller details of the new buildings. It has been found that the elimination of closets reduces building costs and provides greater flexibility, especially since oversized closets tend to become catchalls and to harbor material and articles of no value. Undersized closets, on the other hand, result in an overflow and general clutter. A desirable alternative is substitution of movable steel or wood cabinets, which
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may be added to if more space is needed. They also contribute to the flexibility of the building, as they may be moved when expediency indicates a change.

Many libraries are now using bin-type periodical cases. These have a sloping hinged surface, where current issues of magazines are displayed while previous issues are stored behind them. The whole cover of the current issue is in view, there is no overlapping of items, and the effect is pleasing and colorful as well as convenient. The bin-type case does, however, require more space than the more conventional type of periodical rack.

Perhaps a further word is indicated regarding trends in the selection of furniture, since chairs are the obvious spots for placing the warm or contrasting bits of color necessary to a pleasing general appearance. New plastic materials are available in a wide choice of color and designs. They have proved to be durable and easy to keep clean. Many libraries are buying chairs designed for hotels and restaurants, since they are built to withstand the rough wear of public use. Selections are made with regard to a room as a whole, and with thought of wall and floor coverings as well as of the heights and relative weight values of the other equipment. A colorful, balanced, well-lighted interior which may be seen from the outside, particularly at night, is a far more potent advertisement for library service than any showcase could be.

Some libraries have added exterior conveniences which deserve attention. One of these is a timing device which floodlights a parking area, and which may be controlled so that the lights are turned off automatically after the staff has left the grounds. Another innovation is the book-return box, which is placed at the curb in front of the building for the convenience of the patron driving to or from work.

There has been no intention in this article of implying that all old ways are bad and all new ways are good. Tradition has its place in the lives of all of us. It lends a pattern to our affairs in which we find comfort and security, and breaks with it are wisely undertaken with caution. What has been presented here, in the way of innovations and changes of various kinds, represents tried and tested features which have proved satisfactory, desirable, and acceptable not only to staffs but to the public and to the handlers of city purse-strings. Staffs, on the whole, have expressed appreciation of the ease of operation of the new structures. Public enthusiasm for the new kind of building is
articulate, and evidenced by growing use of library facilities. Those members of city governments who control budgets are aware that buildings of the type described are less expensive to construct and to operate than others, and have resulted in more widespread service. In the face of such wholesale popular approval there can be no doubt that public libraries are establishing new traditions which more than compensate for loss of the old.

References

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