



Furniture for Library Offices and Staff Work Areas

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WHEN ONE REFLECTS upon the concentration of interest concerning library buildings and equipment since 1950, and the countless words written and spoken about this subject, it is most surprising that the needs of the library staff itself have been largely ignored. There exists a dearth of material about equipping library offices and staff work areas. However the library profession need not feel too badly about this. Neither has the subject received adequate attention in office management literature.

How would a library continue to give service without an acquisitions department, a cataloging section, periodical records, physical preparation? And yet all of the building and equipment institutes, their resultant publications, and other professional literature expiate at length only about such things as modules, ceiling heights, stack spacing, and lounge furniture. In truth our attention has been given over to the public areas of libraries and the impression and impact that these will make on our public and our peers. As a result we have relegated to hit and miss methods those areas which are truly the nerve centers of our libraries.

Quite obviously, then, the author cannot draw upon a survey of existing literature in order to lay down the doctrines of good furniture selection for library offices and work areas. At the 1962 Library Furniture and Equipment Institute, at Coral Gables, Florida, Martin Van Buren adequately described the lack of references; the librarian, he said, “. . . is left with very little to go on other than manufacturers’ catalogs and a few elemental principles.”¹

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With today's emphasis on data processing, the term "system analysis" is becoming rather common. No less than a particular routine should the entire "office" operation of a library be subjected to systems analysis. It is here that proper selection of furniture and equipment must start. Only when one is sure that he has achieved the most efficient and effective work distribution, that the work flows smoothly and without interruption, and that proper forms have been designed and useless items eliminated can he sit down to lay out the physical arrangement of furniture and equipment.

A well-done analysis will reveal the optimum number of people or positions needed to accomplish the current work load and the additional positions likely to be needed in the foreseeable future. After preparing a list of equipment used, the planner is ready for a preliminary layout plan.

The listing of equipment used is a critical point. Too often librarians have thought of their work processes as something unique with no counterpart in the business world. As a result, they have been blind to equipment innovations and improvements in business and industry. Not only the administrator definitely planning a new installation, but all library administrators should constantly be aware of new ways of doing things in banks and other business offices which they visit, even in supermarkets and drugstores. Many excellent designs of loan desks have started from the design of new equipment in other fields.

Not only have managers been relatively uninterested in their office layout and equipment in the recent past, but even the manufacturers of such equipment have made no attempt to stimulate their market. One does not have to review manufacturers' catalogs for too many years back to find the era of "Model T" desks. Happily this has now changed radically. One can now find desks designed for any ordinary use in standardized, interchangeable units. Such desks are available in wood or metal, in traditional or modern design, with linoleum or plastic tops, with any variety of drawers and drawer accessories, in colors that are standard or custom. Like comments can also be made in regard to chairs, files, tabulating equipment accessories—even typewriters now vie in design and color.

A relatively recent concept in the design of office furniture and office layout has been that of the work station. This has come about with the use of the L-return unit that is a type of credenza joined to the desk unit to form an L. The depth and height as well as the type of cabinets or drawers of the L-return is determined by the work to

be done at that work station. The variety of units available to customize work stations has led to the labeling of such units as modular units.

In planning work areas just as in the public areas, a keynote today is space economy. The modular units make possible the ultimate in space conservation while providing, at the same time, a more efficient work station than was possible with traditional office furniture. Thoroughly planned use of modular office furniture has not yet been fully exploited in libraries. It should be in the future.

In the past, perhaps as a "fringe benefit" to compensate for low pay, we have tended to be too lavish with space allocated for work stations. Every clerk was assigned to a secretarial desk no matter what his duties. The keynote of space conservation noted above no longer allows us this luxury. Even though one does not use the new modular furniture, desks should be selected to fit the job. For the typist whose regular assignment is the preparation of catalog cards, a 42-inch fixed bed typewriter desk is adequate and satisfactory.

On the other hand it is equally important to provide a large and versatile desk for the position that demands it. When space saving cuts into the efficiency and morale of a staff member, it is no longer a saving.

In any desk the selection of the proper drawers and drawer inserts is important and very often overlooked. The girl typing catalog cards finds a drawer with a stationery rack completely useless. The administrator will gladly give up two standard storage drawers to have a file drawer in which he may keep frequently used files at ready call.

Metal or wood, plastic or linoleum top, traditional or contemporary design, bright colors or office grey—most of these decisions must be left to the librarian or his consultant. One can find convincing arguments on either side and quite often the selection will depend upon one's personal taste or the location of the installation. Two hints of caution need to be mentioned. One will not find a concise explanation of the fine points of office furniture construction, and therefore one cannot base his selection of furniture on established standards. It is recommended that the planner examine carefully several grades of furniture to determine the quality that best suits him and the funds available. In general, the reputable manufacturers will be his best guide.²

Secondly, once he has determined this grade or quality, he should purchase all of his furniture from one manufacturer. This will not

Furniture for Library Offices and Staff Work Areas

only prevent many headaches at installation time, but will provide for interchangeability as needs and functions change—which they will, all too soon. It is also the only insurance against a crazy quilt pattern when new furniture is added in the future.

For those in the library who must operate by the seat of their pants, it is very important that they be seated with maximum comfort. This demands a true posture chair; one that can be adjusted in height and depth, and which has a vertically adjustable backrest. Two other adjustments can also be provided: a backrest pitch adjustment and a spring tension adjustment. For the ultimate in comfort and thus in staff efficiency, the office equipment dealer should be contracted to check chair adjustments regularly.

So long as the chair selected is of the true “posture” type, it matters little for worker efficiency what its design, its fabric, or its base may be. As with desks, these are matters of taste, total decor, and available funds. Certainly there will be gradations of quality and certainly reputable manufacturers should set the standard.

Library offices *per se* will range from the private enclosed space assigned to the higher administrators, to the smaller, semi-enclosed type formed by movable partitions and occupied by various supervisors. Selection of type of furniture, its finish, supporting units, and accessories will depend upon the position of the administrator and the nature and variety of his duties.

The top administrator will ordinarily have the finest desk in the library although not necessarily or even desirably the highest quality. The modular U station is becoming the standard in executive offices. There is no end to the accessories that can be provided in a custom-built desk for the administrator. Most librarians, even if they could, would not expect their desk to be fitted with television, refrigerator, bar, etc. But executive desks of today have as standard such things as built-in dictation stations, personal files, and other convenient work organizers.

As one moves from one administrative office to another, the differing duties will dictate the furniture needs. This man uses dictating equipment, Miss S needs a typewriter, Mr. T is a regular user of a calculator, etc.

Quite often it will be necessary to custom design equipment for special needs. This will most often happen when one is planning a new library and has the opportunity to employ designers from the architect's or interior decorator's staff. Rather universally, comments

are made that these people really do not understand the work of librarians and so prepare a faulty design. More likely, the librarian is not sufficiently aware of what he needs himself and so does not adequately describe his needs to the designer. If a table is needed to carry a special piece of equipment such as a cutter, the dimensions of the equipment must be made known to the designer. Likewise if the cutter is to be used with the operator standing up, one does not want the table to be at desk height of 29 inches. The librarian should carefully check the final drawings and specifications of all specially designed equipment for just such mistakes. He should above all not be reluctant to ask for an explanation of anything not clear to him in such specifications. Far better to admit ignorance at this point than to be stuck with a \$500 piece of white elephant.

Quite easy to overlook, but of great importance are many items of everyday humdrum use. What will be done with wraps, boots, and umbrellas? Will there be staff lockers? Wardrobes? Costumers? What provision is there for trash? Wastebaskets at each desk? Type? Style? Color? What of waste from incoming shipments? How to store packaging materials for interlibrary loans? Binding shipments? Where and how will everyday supplies be housed? Is there duplicating equipment in ordinary working areas, such as a mimeograph and office photocopiers? What provision is made for housing these and their supplies? What provision is made for clocks and water fountains? Obviously all of the above items are minor. But enough minor irritants piled one on another soon lead to bad staff morale, bickering, and reduced efficiency and production.

The increasing rapidity with which larger libraries are using data processing equipment raises new problems of equipment selection. In this case, it is necessary that librarians seek the advice and guidance of those who have had such installations for some time. University libraries will likely find departments on their own campus which can advise them. Others must seek the advice of local businesses. There are companies specializing in the manufacture and sale of supporting equipment for data processing departments. As with library and office furniture, many will furnish guidance in actual layout of an efficient department based upon the data processing equipment to be installed.

At this point, one has presumably designated his personnel needs and the equipment which will be used to complete the necessary tasks in an efficient and economical fashion. Now these must be reduced to a scale model drawing fitting them into the space available.

Furniture for Library Offices and Staff Work Areas

Not to be overlooked at this time is the location of electric outlets, telephone stations, plumbing such as sinks and running water, doors and their direction of swing (which are interior and which exterior?), conditioned air outlets—hot or cold, windows, columns, and other building details. Desks for typists using electrical typewriters should not be placed fifty feet from the nearest electrical outlet. A desk is not wanted in the natural corridor of traffic that a door will provide. All of which is quite obvious, but surprisingly quite often overlooked.

When the scale diagram is drawn, the librarian should sit down and trace the work flow through the various areas. Where are orders prepared? Where mailed? At what point is incoming mail received, unpacked, and sorted? This flow of work needs to be charted throughout the area from the time an operation starts until it is finished. When such tracing is completed, the librarian can readily see whether the proposed layout is actually the most efficient possible. Most likely it will not be. Then comes shifting, redrawing, and retracing of work flow. Eventually the optimum will be reached.

This is still not the end, however. There are certain space factors to be considered over and above the worker, his furniture, and equipment. The most obvious is the traffic flow. The need for secondary and intermediate aisles could not possibly be determined until the optimum layout for work flow was determined. Traffic flow must now be studied and adequate aisle space provided: three to four feet for secondary and intermediate aisles, five feet for main aisles, and six to eight feet for corridors to the exits.³

At this point one may ask why the worry and trouble over a few extra feet of walking. After all we do need exercise, and the entire length of the cataloging area can be walked in just one-half minute! But let us take those thirty seconds and suppose that they are lost at each of ten steps a book takes from ordering to shelving. We now have five minutes of lost time per book. Should the library be growing at 10,000 books per year, these extra five minutes total 833 hours in a year. Those 833 hours represent over \$1,000, or quite a few more books that could have been added for the public's use.

Eventually one looks at paper diagrams until no further progress can be made in bettering work flow or traffic movement. At this point there is nothing more to be done. Most likely the schematic drawing will suffice to provide an efficiently functioning department for at least the first year—that is unless Miss P happens to have her chair right below that noisy air diffuser!

JAMES V. JONES

References

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