Selecting Informal Seating For University and College Libraries

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The selection of informal library seating is directly related to its intended function and location within the library. It must fit the environment and achieve a character suitable for the purpose it serves. It must, above all, be comfortable, no matter what use it is required to satisfy. Within each of these characteristics, recognition must be given to varying reader demands and to the manner in which, for example, bibliographic materials, periodicals, and browsing collections are handled. Special elements, such as audio-visual facilities, lounges, typing rooms, and similar areas, are aspects of informal use in which the character of the space relates to its special function. Group study rooms and separate smoking rooms are relatively new and important definitions of specialized, informal readers' space. The use and disposition of informal furnishings develops out of the recognition of new demands created by changes in the sociological habits of readers.

Basic planning for informal furnishings should begin with a coordinated design program which will result in a selection of items which will complement each other, which will produce an environmental expression suitable for an informal readers' area in the library, and which will achieve proper harmony with the library as a whole.

Careful study must be made of the location and individual placement of informal seating. The classic lounge chair grouping around a coffee table, frequently used in libraries but so closely related to the home living room environment, encourages oral communication between students occupying such seats. In many instances this is not an appropriate use of library facilities. The desirability of using sofa units

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in these informal areas should also be carefully evaluated because of the risk that such furniture will not be properly used. Reclining or sleeping on sofas in lounge areas is not only inappropriate for the library environment, but results in one person using space designed for two or three.

Today, library planning emphasizes the individual reader and his environment. Informal seating should limit rather than encourage oral communication and the consequent distraction of others in areas where quiet is required. At the same time, there is a need for the design of better informal seating. Such seating should emphasize comfort and provide for a variety of postures and uses suited to individual needs within that portion of the library in which it is to be placed. In instances where informal seating for group use is desired, this may well be assigned to a separate space such as a smoking room, where talking and lounging will not disturb or distract others.

Coordinated planning, identification of proper functional designs, and a carefully evaluated layout of informal furnishings are important preliminaries to final selection. Here, durability and suitability of construction are of prime importance.

Since adults and teen-agers can do a great deal of damage to library furniture merely by using it, construction must be durable enough to withstand the attacks of these users. It should be remembered, however, that it is up to the designer to provide a library environment that will arouse both respect and affection for these items. The use of steel legs, laminated plywood bonded to foam rubber, zippered upholstery, and other new methods of construction should be investigated when choosing and selecting informal furniture for a library.

The following construction features, characteristic of well-made, good quality furniture, should be kept in mind when selecting upholstered furnishings. Frame construction may be of any American hardwood, kiln-dried to approximately 5 per cent moisture content. All joints should be double dowelled with birch spiral dowels and glued.

Springing should contain approximately sixteen heavy-duty coil springs per seating space. Spring construction should be of the type usually referred to as "wire edge or spring edge," or that referred to as "tied to frame on hard edge" construction. In either case, springs should be tied 8-ways with jute spring twine, with eight knots per spring, using the French method (criss-cross), or the German method (straight double tie). Covering of springs should be 10 ounce burlap
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tied through to the springs, with a one-half inch rubberized hair pad on top and a sixteen ounce cotton batting top layer.

Webbing should be used on all inside arms and backs of units, and be covered with a layer of cotton if required by style. Muslin is applied on all first class upholstering jobs before the final upholstery fabric is applied. Upholstery should be of the best standard of workmanship, neatly tailored with all joints straight, welt seams double-stitched, and sufficient returns on the fabric to prevent ripping or tearing. Exposed fabric seams should not be allowed on visible areas of the units. When foam rubber cushions are used, all corners should be mitered and hand-stitched to the covering fabric to prevent movement of the cushion within the cover.

Casters or glides should be carefully chosen for the floor finish in the area where they are to be used. Carpet protectors should be used on all bases where installation is on carpeting or on area rugs, to prevent damage to carpet and to stabilize furniture and prevent movement. Rolling casters (either wheel or ball type) may be chosen where floor conditions make them desirable. Rubber treads on casters can be used to cut down noise and prevent damage to floor surfaces. Ball-type casters are preferable for use on soft surfaces such as carpeting. Rust proof glides should be furnished where floor mopping and washing is required. Glides should be of proper size to support the weight of the furniture units to prevent imprinting and marking of floors.

Where fire-resistant upholstery is mandatory, the choice of fabric is between vinyl or vinyl-coated fabrics, and tightly woven mohair. Other fibers may be acceptable if they have been given suitable fire-proofing treatment. The choice is predicated not only on the initial cost of each unit but on other factors. For example, in temperate climates, under high soil conditions, the vinyls may be acceptable. In warm climates and non-air-conditioned buildings, the vinyls can be uncomfortable and are usually not to be recommended. Under low soil conditions, where the interval between cleanings may be long, woven fabrics may be suitable. Here the choice is between fiberglas fabrics and treated fabrics of natural fibers. Fiberglas fabrics, however, although easy to clean, are highly vulnerable to abrasion and wear. Fabrics woven from one of the better synthetic fibers, such as nylon, possess excellent wearing qualities and are available in a good color range. Where soil conditions are sufficiently bad to warrant the choice, removable cushions or zipped-on covers may be used. Special fabric treatments such as “Scotchguard” are recommended where furniture
may be exposed to food and liquid stains, or where general soil should be kept to a minimum.

Fabrics should be selected to complement the design of the building and to harmonize with the character and design of the furniture. Fabric texture, print, color, weight, and weave should be carefully selected for each item or type of item in the library. Some fabrics show good wear characteristics when used on a flat surface, but when used on a curved surface, such as the edges of an upholstered seat pad, they split and tear, exposing the inner fibers of the material to abrasion and thereby reducing durability. Other fabrics, when stretched on a tight fitting, upholstered unit reflect light in such a manner that they give the appearance of a stained or soiled fabric. Furnishings which will normally be occupied for relatively long periods at a time should not be covered in vinyl, leather, or other hard-coated surfaces since they become too warm and too moist for comfortable seating. Under such conditions, textured and plush fabrics of woven construction should be specified.

The color scheme should be carefully thought out in planning fabric use. Natural, undyed yarns mixed with dyed yarns in textured fabrics take washing, wear, and soil with little loss of vitality. Synthetic fabrics, such as nylon, should be used where frequent maintenance, such as repeated cleaning, is likely. The type of weave and the color of the fabric are important factors in the durability of the fabric under conditions where constant maintenance is required. A natural colored yarn, for example, is much less subject to discoloration by repeated cleaning than is a dyed yarn. Similarly, the dye characteristics of a loosely woven fabric are superior to those of a tightly woven fabric.

The cost of the labor required to maintain any item of furniture is a valid factor in evaluating its worth. Informal furnishings must stand up not only to the eye, but to the hardest usage, to dust-laden air, to moisture, smoke, grit, chemicals, stains, spills, friction, and other attacks on their integrity, attacks both frontal and insidious. The specifications, implied by the popular word "functional," include both ease of maintenance and the ability to survive the damages inflicted by soil and wear on the one hand and those inflicted by cleaning agents on the other. The most important motivation of the reformation in furniture design which we call "contemporary" was the need to improve maintenance characteristics. Today, institutions should demand interiors that are easy to keep clean and in good repair. The high cost of labor places an enormous financial benefit in the hands of any
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institution whose premises have been so planned and designed that cleaning and repair are kept to a minimum, both in labor and in time.

The interior designer must provide for the soundness of the interiors he designs, in the fabrication and detailing of the materials he selects as well as in the cleanability and ease of repair thereof. The librarian's responsibility is to provide information about those areas in which wear and tear and soil will occur, and about the equipment, personnel, and work schedules available to maintain them. Proper upkeep in libraries requires both daily care and periodic repair to keep an interior looking its best within the usual amortization period, or until it is more profitable to replace it than to continue maintaining it. Initial investment versus running expense is a major concern in selecting all furnishings for libraries.

In budgeting funds for the interior of a library, the librarian and designer usually have a choice between a high investment in quality materials and workmanship balanced against low maintenance costs in the future, or a low initial investment balanced against higher maintenance costs. The known immediate costs of the furnishings are weighed against unknown future costs consisting largely of labor expenses.

In the present article, it is not possible to treat all the details of this subject. However, the check-list that follows poses a series of questions for which the librarian must have answers before making a final selection of the informal furnishings for the library. For additional information, he should seek the assistance of the architect or interior designer responsible for the building.

1. The cleanliness standard—what is the desired level of cleanliness?
2. Invasion of dirt—what is the location of entry of dirt and traffic?
3. Heating and air-conditioning—will high soil and coating residues affect furniture maintenance?
4. Maintenance versus obsolescence—can the wearability and life of furniture be estimated?
5. Redesign of furniture—must furniture be redesigned to meet changing library needs and requirements?
6. Contingencies of climate—what effects will climate have on maintenance schedules?
7. Fire code requirements—will this affect treatment of upholstery fabrics?
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8. Interior structure—what are the limitations on placement of furniture?

9. Lighting fixtures—what will be the relamping and cleaning cycle?

10. Floor cleaning hazards—how and by what type of cleaning equipment will floors be cleaned, what type of baseboards should be specified, what type of legs on furniture should be detailed to resist marks from vacuum cleaners, waxers, and mops? (Fabrics should be out of the way of solvents used on floors. Heavy furniture should be on casters.)

11. Furniture materials and finishes—to what conditions of wear and soil will furniture be exposed?

12. Types of windows and doors—are dust-catchin installations and light control devices required to prevent fading of fabrics?

13. Furniture materials—what are the relative advantages of oiled, lacquered, varnished, and painted finishes on wood furniture and where is metal furniture preferable for low maintenance requirements?