
Furniture for the Children's Area

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"CHANGE—RAPID, RADICAL and often beyond our comprehension—is the keynote of our time."¹ This change, reflected in the use and growth of libraries, has resulted in a great activity by both school and public librarians to create a new look manifested in sizes, shapes, colors, materials, and total atmosphere. Concomitant with the more obvious technological changes is a subtler one, an attitude, long-growing, which considers children to be not diminutive adults but individuals who are physically, intellectually and emotionally different from their elders. This attitude is reflected in the attempt to furnish children's rooms in both school and public libraries with dignity and spirit.

Recognition of differences between adults and children does not condemn each to isolation. Although a children's area serves specifically the library needs of childhood, it also provides a link, both physical and visual, between childhood and the beckoning world of adulthood. Although children constitute the largest audience in the children's area, adult use by those seeking its services for work with children or for personal needs is becoming an increasingly important factor, particularly in public libraries. Gone, for example, are the picture book characters floating flamboyantly in great murals across the room, creating a confining atmosphere and appealing only to the youngest children. Some librarians complain that we have replaced gewgaws with sterility and have robbed our children's rooms of the individual objects that related the world of books to other cultural media. Perhaps this is occasionally true. But the real individual personality of a library is created only after the original tone is established, and more by the staff and books than by *objets d'art*.

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Like today's modern house, the children's area of a library is re-defined in zones where equipment, design, and decoration reflect the use: pre-school areas, story hour locations, places for individual study and reference, browsing, audio-visual sections, and areas for group use.

This attitude is shared by both elementary school and public libraries. But running parallel to this is a difference, partly determined by their difference in use and purpose, partly in their relation to a larger organization that distinguishes the trend in each. Because school librarians are working constantly and simultaneously with whole classes of children, with small groups engaged in one project, and with individuals, the maneuverability of library furnishings is number one in importance. Tables that can be combined for large gatherings, then separated quickly into smaller units accommodating three or four children or used as individual carrels, and chairs that are light-weight enough to be shifted into various group patterns by even young children are being sought, sometimes at the cost of appearance.

Since furniture for the school library is sometimes purchased at the same time as equipment for the rest of the school, or included in non-separable bids, style is affected and money for any individual piece of furniture often severely limited. Frequently, too, the person responsible for choosing the furniture and for writing the specifications has many other diverse tasks to perform and consequently can allot only a small portion of his time to sifting through the literature from manufacturers, listening to sales talks, examining products, or visiting other libraries. Hence the prevalence of the traditional all-wood birch or maple institutional furniture, or the newer tubular metal and plywood combinations which may be more practical but can hardly be called more beautiful.

Certainly the need is obvious for a consultant's services in school library planning when renovating or building. Probably because of this there is a current trend among library furniture manufacturers to sell what is called a "package deal" that provides all furniture and offers the special services of a consultant. Perhaps this results in a more coordinated, better styled appearance, but in the future it probably will also result in a new kind of stereotype. Critics and evaluators of school libraries have noted that "most often the library is too formal, too institutionalized, devoid of pleasant furniture . . ." ² and have offered innumerable excellent suggestions for the establishment of conditions contributing to the relaxed and comfortable, invitation-to-learning atmosphere that the library should provide.

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Public libraries, on the other hand, having had a long courtship with eternal oak and later with opaque birch, are in many ways freer and readier to experiment. Seeking primarily to encourage browsing and the individual pursuit of reading for a multitude of personal reasons, and competing for the time and attention of its patrons with other organizations such as community centers, recreation councils, and religious organizations, the public library places particular emphasis on attractiveness, good taste (for so often the decor of the library may be the only example of quality in design that a child experiences in his daily life), warmth, comfort, and other factors which tend to promote an inviting atmosphere conducive to reading. And sometimes this is at the expense of durability.

To be sure, they too are often severely restricted in their pursuit of the beautiful by bid restrictions or by governmental stipulations requiring furniture and fittings to be purchased from the lowest bidder regardless of appearance, or produced by state prisons and similar institutions. There are many libraries committed to life sentences with such furniture, for while it is often cumbersome in appearance and almost unmovable, it is frequently totally indestructible. Occasionally, however, when such requirements are confined to the permanent fittings such as shelving, one finds libraries with the warmth and noise resistance of wood shelving, well-constructed, and nicely finished at a reasonable cost. In general, however, public libraries have both the initiative and the freedom to experiment with high-styled furniture in a variety of woods, metals, and plastics which are related to the structure as a whole. The children's area is no longer isolated but visually and physically connected to the rest of the library. Since resources beyond the scope of the children's department are made available to patrons of all ages, the area is aesthetically related to the rest of the library.

Today's furniture—lightweight, adaptable, adjustable, durable, and maneuverable—but less frequently beautiful in children's sizes, in many ways satisfies the desire to have form follow function. Unlike librarians of the past, purchasers of this furniture no longer limit themselves to the traditional manufacturers of library equipment, perhaps because of the influence of modern design on all aspects of our personal life, because of the building boom of business and industry which has made more people on all levels aware of new materials and their uses, or because established library manufacturers have not kept pace with their colleagues in allied fields. The fact is, however, that more and

more libraries, especially public libraries, turn to manufacturers and designers of other institutional furniture in an effort to avoid the stereotype, to add flair and imagination, and to achieve coordination between adult and children's areas at lower costs. One librarian, commenting on the use of non-library furniture in children's areas, says: "We feel that these have decided advantages over the more traditional manufacturers as they have been cheaper, equally functional and, we feel, avoid the stereotype created by much traditional library furniture."³

That library furniture manufacturers are beginning to recognize this search on the part of librarians is evident. They have become more conscious of aesthetic design and are beginning to offer more variations on basic styles. The irony is that manufacturers who provide excellently designed furniture in adult sizes, such as the new, beautiful oiled finishes and metal combinations, have not followed suit in children's sizes. It seems as if there is an unhappy combination of library equipment manufacturers who have not recognized the importance of developing good taste early, and have consequently provided children with durable but unimaginative furniture, and librarians who have in theory recognized the importance of these impressionable years, but who have not been willing or are unable to pay the cost.

The problem of furnishing seating and tables in children's areas is four fold: the need to provide the right variety of chair and table heights to suit a great variation in age, physical size, and interest of the patrons; the search for taste-developing style and warmth or color in keeping with the spirit of childhood; the need for durability that will be challenged not so much by intentional misuse as by inexperienced use; and the intent on the part of the public libraries to coordinate the children's areas with the adult and young adult reading rooms.

Children served in libraries constitute three main age groups: pre-school through second grade, third grade through fifth grade, and sixth grade through adult. Of these, the easiest to satisfy is the youngest. Both school and public libraries tend to seat children of this age at slope-top picture book tables either single or double sided (depending on space available), approximately six and one half feet long and seating three to four children to a side on accompanying benches or stools. This type of table, a specialty item, is fairly expensive, and libraries rarely purchase more than one to an area. The picture book tables are available in solid wood, in wood with metal legs, and in wood or

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metal bases with plastic laminated book surfaces; some of the newer ones have a handy book slot between the two sides. They range in style from simple, stolid, and adequate, to simple, high-styled, and desirable. Because of the limited number of such items in any one area, the less handsomely styled do not become as much of an eyesore as they might.

Bench versus stool preference is highly individual. More children can be crowded onto a bench, but stools provide convenient access to the center of the table and can be shifted around easily to be used for other purposes. The fact that very young children can move them is a factor sometimes not in their favor. One recently renovated library purchased individual stools for its new picture book table and abandoned the old benches. Adult protest, however, forced them to resurrect the benches, not for child use at the table, but for parent use at the picture book shelves. They permitted the adult to slide back and forth easily from one section of the shelves to another. Benches are obtainable in solid wood or with metal legs and a Naugahyde upholstered cushion.

Stools are not as readily available from library furniture manufacturers, although at least one company lists an attractive one with metal legs and Naugahyde upholstery. Sometimes suitable stools can be purchased from local furniture houses or interior decorators, or even made to order. Librarians have found three-legged stools, especially those on which the seat extends over the legs, undesirable because they tip easily when climbed upon by very young children.

Some libraries still use one small round table with chairs in place of, or in addition to, a picture book table for the youngest group. Most frequently used sizes are twenty-two to twenty-four inch tables with twelve to fourteen inch chairs. Libraries that use these are limited in choice, particularly if they intend to coordinate this furniture with other pieces in the library. Other libraries, with limited space or a limited budget, have capitalized on the fact that many children under six prefer the floor to any other seating and use small Naugahyde cushions which can be scattered around the picture book shelving and also double as pre-school story hour seating. Some supplement these cushions with small stools at the shelves.

One library installed a two-foot wide strip of carpeting in front of the picture book section—easy on adult knees and children's bottoms. Another library set the top of the standard slope picture book table directly on the floor where small children could kneel or sit tailor-fashion on cushions. Perhaps the trend toward carpeting in libraries

will eliminate more seating in this youngest area, although such a trend would make it more difficult for parents who come to help their small children select books.

In seating the next two groups of library patrons in the children's area, there has been a definite trend away from either a multitude of sizes in one area or a preponderance of small sizes. Increasingly both school and public libraries use only one size of chairs and tables in addition to whatever furniture is purchased for the youngest group. The most popular size is a sixteen inch chair with a twenty-seven and one-half inch table. A few libraries, primarily those in schools, will combine this size with a much smaller number of twenty-five inch tables and fifteen inch chairs. Still others, principally public libraries, which serve adults and great numbers of junior high school students in their children's area, are supplementing the twenty-seven and one-half inch tables with the regular adult twenty-nine inch table and eighteen inch chairs. Some children even below junior high age prefer adult furniture, although whether physically or psychologically is undetermined. Those libraries which mix adult and children's furniture in one area are quite restricted in their choice. It is difficult enough with the existing furniture styles to coordinate the two groups within the library building. To coordinate them within one area requires either astonishing ingenuity and knowledge, accessibility to diverse furniture outlets, or a blind eye.

A good looking, durable, light weight (in appearance and structure), comfortable, inexpensive children's chair is the most difficult item to procure either from library or non-library manufacturers. And it is in this field that wide experimentation in use is being done on the part of libraries. This seems to be less of a problem to school libraries in which chairs and tables normally measure up to the standards of construction and taste of the rest of the school furniture and in general are quite stolid and institutional looking, than it is to the public libraries in which the quest for the "living room look" has become so fervid. Chairs in children's sizes with upholstered backs and seats (usually in Naugahyde), of which only a small variety is available, tend to be the most comfortable, offer an easy way to add a touch of color, need little maintenance, and can be easily recovered. But some schools have restrictions prohibiting upholstered seating for student use because of possible vandalism.

Libraries have experimented with the unusual looking steel wire mesh chairs (in some cases the wire mesh split under heavy use),

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molded plywood (in some cases the plywood split, and the back of the chair wore where it rubbed against the table edge), and adult size molded, reinforced fiberglass cut down to proper height by using fifteen inch legs. The latter has the advantage of color and easy maintenance but has proven unsatisfactory because the backward slope of the seat makes it uncomfortable to use when writing at a table. Too when occupied for any great length of time, this impervious material can become uncomfortably warm, although this is not as much of a problem in air-conditioned buildings.

Traditional wooden chairs are still used extensively for a variety of reasons, including preference and availability. Some librarians believe that the warmth of wood adds a tone to the room which cannot be achieved with any of the newer materials, such as metal and plastic, even when they are used in color and have design advantages, and that this warmth out-weighs the disadvantages of wood. Cane backs on regular wooden chairs, a recent innovation, lighten the look considerably and offer a pleasant variation. Some librarians maintain that wooden chairs are as low on maintenance and repair and are as durable as any of those using new materials, despite the reported superiority in strength of a welded over a glued joint. Other librarians disagree, particularly where finish is concerned, and suggest that refinishing is a problem in time, labor, and money. Perhaps Edward G. Stromberg's suggestion of oiled finishes on walnut furniture, now available in adult sizes, will provide one solution, if the cost is not prohibitive.⁴ What is obviously needed is a larger assortment of children's high-styled, well-designed, and well-constructed chairs in metal, wood, plastic or a combination of these which will satisfy a variety of good tastes and avoid monotony, sterility, and an institutional look.

Tables do not present as many problems as do chairs. Since their design is considerably less difficult, one might expect a swifter solution. Part of the difficulty is that manufacturers often offer only some of their lines in children's sizes, and the high-styled table chosen for an adult area cannot then be matched in the children's area. This is particularly awkward when both adult and children's tables are used within the same area. One manufacturer, for example, offers an exceedingly handsome style in picture book table and adult size reading table, but according to the catalog does not provide an equivalent in an intermediate size. But, in general, an acceptable number of shapes and finishes are available. Some companies suggest in their catalogs that unlisted tables for special needs can be obtained.

The most common table size in use, twenty-seven and one-half inches high, is also the most readily available. In general, schools tend to use a rectangular table sixty inches long and thirty-six inches wide, which seats four children. This shape easily combines into larger units when necessary, and a child can spread out materials conveniently without interfering with another student's activities. Rectangular and the newer hexagonal tables offer the greatest possibility for rearrangement into individual carrels.

Round tables, forty-eight inches in diameter, seating four, are frequently seen in children's areas of public libraries where their informal appearance softens the tone of the room and contrasts nicely with the more formal rectangular tables frequently used in the adult areas. Often a combination of rectangular and round tables are used to break up the pattern. Forty-two inch square tables, now available from several manufacturers, present another possibility for variation. They are more "conversational" in tone than the rectangular tables but less informal than the round tables. Many librarians feel that in spite of rounded corners on square and rectangular tables, the round tables provide the safest solution, particularly in public libraries where toddlers are likely to roam or rush about the children's areas.

Table tops are made of either wood or plastic laminate, the latter taking precedence. Since both wood tones and colors are available in low-glare surfaces, most tastes can be satisfied and librarians can indulge happily in the easy maintenance of plastic laminate, without losing too much of the warmth of wood. Many libraries which use wood tones in adult areas turn to colored table tops for gaiety and contrast in the children's area. Some libraries that have experimented with plastic laminate edges on tables have abandoned them in favor of wood edge bandings, because the plastic edges are exceedingly vulnerable to buttons, belt buckles, and the crash of chair backs.

One of the most interesting concepts in the current furnishing of children's areas concerns the use of lounge furniture. Thomas McConkey, of the Free Library of Philadelphia, says: "Many libraries . . . are moving toward the increased use of lounge furniture in children's reading areas as well as the adult and young adult areas."⁵ In the last five years, we have noticed only a slight trend toward such use, but many more librarians are talking about it, particularly in those public libraries which serve junior high children in the children's area. A number of junior high school libraries have small lounge areas, often in browsing corners or in magazine sections. Their

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use in elementary school libraries is quite limited partly because of space, but mostly because the average length of stay of any one child is fairly short and his purpose, which is most frequently curriculum oriented, is served more efficiently by formal seating.

If the trend toward lounge furniture in children's reading areas is to blossom, it will be in public libraries. If the growth of school libraries reduces the use of the public library for specific school related assignments, then perhaps the increased use of the public library for browsing and the individual pursuit of reading and learning will result in a greater need for comfortable, informal lounge reading areas. Up to now, since public libraries often have to substitute for the needed school libraries, every possible square inch is devoted to table and chair arrangements that can serve all purposes. Thus McConkey pointed out that to his knowledge only one company produced lounge furniture in children's sizes,⁵ and we know of no additional furniture in small sizes. Some librarians who have felt the need for such furniture have used the molded reinforced fiberglass arm chairs, either with or without the foam padded cover, on fifteen inch legs—normal "cocktail" height as opposed to dining height. These chairs have served the purpose well, since they are comfortable and light weight enough to make reductions, enlargements, or rearrangements of the lounge area easily possible and may also be grouped around small tables for library programs involving informal discussions. Librarians seeking lounge areas as another possible place in which to add color and an informal touch find these chairs quite suitable.

In general, librarians think regular adult size lounge furniture, most of it quite low anyhow, suitable for use by children. Very small children prefer the floor, small stools, or picture book tables, and anyone browsing in areas other than picture books is large enough to be accommodated by adult size lounge furniture just as he is in his own living room. As far as expense is concerned, one and two seater furniture can sometimes be purchased more cheaply than the equivalent formal table and chair seating. However, lounge furniture takes up more space, and space costs money. The trend in the future will be determined probably not so much by money, or by availability, but by the nature of children's use of the library.

In contrast to typical seating, special library furniture for children is not only similar but frequently identical to that used in young people or adult areas. Although there are some special applications, the most important differences are usually in size. In the choice of charging

desks, for instance, there is a sharp distinction in size between those used in school and public libraries. Thirty-two or thirty inches, referred to as sitting height, is the size used most frequently in elementary school libraries. Although thirty-two inches is not uncomfortably low for adults, and is accessible to most children, public libraries tend to use a thirty-nine inch counter, providing a real barrier to many children.

The children's card catalog is another furniture item that is distinguished from that used by adults only in size. Since children below the third grade rarely make use of the catalog, the most convenient height has been found to be a seventeen and three-quarter inch base with no more than four drawer units in height above. Additional drawer space is then provided by a whole supplementary catalog unit rather than by drawers stacked higher on the original base. As the trend toward book catalogs gains momentum, the card catalog cabinet may be on its way toward obsolescence. To date this is likely to be true more in public libraries than in schools. As book catalogs become more prevalent, no doubt special tables or stands will be devised for them. In the meantime, it has been suggested that they be placed on regular tables, at counter height on shelves, or interspersed among regular book shelves in several areas.

Dictionary and atlas stands which usually appear in adult reference sections are used sparingly and seem to be considered of questionable value in children's areas. A contributing factor to such limited use is the uncomfortable height for children of most of the available stands. But in addition, only a few of the reference tools used in most children's areas are oversized enough to require special storage. Normal reference size shelving adequately houses the bulk of children's materials. Most libraries use revolving dictionary stands placed on reading tables, ledges, or low counter-height free-standing book shelf units for their unabridged dictionaries. Such stands used for a large atlas or other oversized reference books bring the volume within easy reach of children. Librarians who observe students using large reference books at the picture book table often wonder whether or not a similar table placed close to the reference section might not provide more adequate work space for examining these tools than the flat reading tables.

The use of study carrels has become quite prevalent in secondary school libraries. If the present trend continues toward individualization of instruction and emphasis on independent study, there is every rea-

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son to assume that carrels will soon have their place in elementary school libraries. Curiously, their extensive use in children's areas of public libraries seems highly remote. They are ideal for individual use of audio-visual materials. Carrels are available in almost every furniture line or they may be built to specification. *The School Library*, a report from Educational Facilities Laboratories, Inc., contains specifications for many types of carrels as well as ingenious suggestions for their placement in the library area.⁶

Since the pattern of school libraries as instructional materials centers was firmly established by the 1960 *Standards for School Library Programs*,⁷ most school libraries are being designed with this in mind. In planning a new building or renovating existing quarters, it is possible to arrange for built-in storage cabinets to accommodate films, filmstrips, phonograph records, maps, and charts as well as the equipment needed for their use. There are detailed specifications for filmstrip and phonograph record cabinets in the manual which accompanies the filmstrip, *Remodeling the Elementary School Library*.⁸ Cabinets for the storage of maps, charts, and large display materials are available from art supply houses. Regular filing cabinets have proven satisfactory for pamphlet and picture files although experienced librarians warn that care must be taken to select cabinets with drawers easily movable even when heavily loaded.

Magazines are currently a part of most children's collections in school and public libraries. Since the variety of magazines available within the children's area of public libraries is often limited because of accessibility to files in the adult area, these libraries sometimes tend to house the magazines in free-standing racks, often as part of the lounge area. In school libraries, where magazine collections are self-contained and can therefore be expected to be larger, regular wall shelving is often provided for their storage.

Display and bulletin boards are most frequently provided in original construction. They usually consist of glass front cases in the corridor outside the library in the case of schools, or within the children's area in public libraries. If these are not available, there are free-standing glass cases of both vertical and horizontal types. Children's eye-level height is usually the major consideration in their selection.

Book trucks are available in wood, steel, and wire. In school libraries, where the shelving is usually done by children, the lighter steel trucks have proved most maneuverable. Since a large part of the

circulation in any children's area is in oversized books, flat rather than sloping shelves are more frequently used.

The wide variety of wood, steel, and plastic shelving available offers more leeway for the imaginative use of color and materials than is often possible with furniture. Each type has its advantages. Wood offers softness, silence, and durability, while steel and plastic provide color and the opportunity for greater flexibility. To date there seems to be a predominance of wood in school libraries, while public libraries tend to use steel. There are several possible explanations for this tendency. School administrators are usually most interested in durability. One purchasing agent suggested that school libraries were too poor to economize on permanent installations. Since a larger portion of the furniture budget must be devoted to shelving in public libraries and steel is much less expensive than wood, except for State use system installations, most public library administrators feel that the initial outlay for wood shelving is too great and hope that excellent acoustics will alleviate the noise problem. Public librarians, too, in their search for sparkle, often find the available color range in steel shelving a boon.

In addition to wood and steel, some experimentation has taken place in the use of plastic laminate shelves. Apparently the success of this type of shelving depends upon the core materials on which the plastic surface is laminated. In cases where particle board core is used, the shelves are subject to warping. Plastic surfaces are durable, even easier to care for than wood and less noisy than steel, all decided advantages if the tendency to warping can be overcome. Shelving for children is usually the same as for adults except for the size factor. Generally, shelving in children's areas is no more than sixty inches in height. In school libraries, where the use of the non-fiction collection is likely to be more specific than in public libraries, it has been possible to use seventy-two inch shelving in this area. Step stools are then a necessity. The kick-stepstool which is on wheels and moves readily is most satisfactory.

Picture book shelving has more particular characteristics than other types. The usual maximum height is forty-two inches, which allows for two shelves with a sixteen inch clearance, as well as toe space and top. Most picture books require twelve inches in depth, and this is necessary despite the tendency for some small books to fall behind. Upright dividers at least every eight inches along the shelves make it possible to keep the oversized books in order. The thinness of the

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steel dividers has been found to be a book hazard. Picture book shelving in libraries using steel units is adjustable, but frequently permanent wood installations meet the same requirements without such adjustability.

That librarians are seeking to provide the best that contemporary creativeness has to offer is indeed laudable. However, the zealot may, in his eagerness, rush headlong after an unnecessary goal. H. K. Gordon Bearman remarks: "It would seem to me that in our chase after modernity and variety, we are in danger of overlooking the basic requirement that furnishing should be related to the use for which it is intended. In simple terms the task is to furnish a library and not to create a library showroom."⁹ Perhaps the following succinct statement in *Standards for Children's Services in Public Libraries* best sums up the goals of all librarians concerned with furnishing children's areas whether they are in school or public libraries: "The physical facilities of a children's area should be conducive to efficient and economical library service to children and adults. They serve as a symbol of library service, inviting children of all ages to enter, browse, read, and listen."¹⁰

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