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# The Library as Community Center

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## ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE DEALS WITH the role that the public library plays as a center for community activities, as a civic building, and as a representative of government as it interfaces with citizens, and some of the problems and avenues of funding.

## INTRODUCTION

Thoughts of a town bring a dreamy vision of rolling hills, a main street with shops, a fire department with shiny engines, the city hall sitting stately somewhere near the town square, a bank on the corner, the park with a bandstand, the schoolhouse somewhere near the downtown, and the library with its prominent steps and perhaps a sculptured lion or two at the entrance. Of all the buildings which make up the town, the library is the one which all may use—from the smallest child to the oldest senior citizen. When a community has a library, it somehow seems as if the community has achieved legitimacy, is solid, sure. As a governmental agency, the library reflects the organization of which it is a part—it holds the documents of the government, makes them available to the public, and it reflects that government in its interface with the community it serves. It also reflects the governmental concern for society being involved in, and responsive to, various social needs.

The library is often one of the largest of the civic buildings. It is prominent in its location and in its fine architecture which represents the town. Andrew Carnegie, in his designs for public

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libraries, acknowledged the majesty of the library building. This same look of substance, with a much different design, is being carried on in the new libraries of today. The Harold Washington Library of the Chicago Public Library is an example. Here the style of the building was chosen to fit into the traditional look of the downtown area and to carry on the tradition of fine architecture. The newly reopened Los Angeles Public Library blended its restoration and addition with the original 1926 style, restoring well-loved murals and enhancing the architectural detail. The San Francisco Public Library, currently under planning and construction, will be adjacent to the civic auditorium to enhance the city's art and cultural status. The building itself is designed to accommodate the latest in the technology associated with the Bay area.

The library in a new community is often one of the first buildings to be established, whether a storefront or permanent building. If a storefront building, it has the unique ability to attract people to that shopping area, that commercial complex, or that series of buildings who may not have come to that area before. The storefront library is complementary to other businesses in the complex, and the use of all the businesses is very likely to increase because of the presence of the library. In its commercial location, the library interacts with its neighbors as a business, and its programs and collections can directly address the concerns of the neighborhood—whether it be providing job information for un- or underemployed, producing a trade fair, or providing meeting facilities and information for citizens planning for community improvement.

As a new building, it is often one of the largest, adding heft to the civic center complex, and, because it is one of the first, may set the design and style for other buildings in the complex. The new civic center at Oceanside, California, integrates the library into the complex completely, adding public meeting rooms, plazas, and a corner anchor to the complex. An older example is the Marin County Library in the Marin Civic Center designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. A caution should be made, however, for this type of inclusion that, whereas it centralizes services for the citizen, lack of planning for community growth in terms of space and functional design may lead to problems as the community grows and its need for services increases. The library then may be in competition with other governmental services for space and may find itself needing to relocate to an area which can provide expansion space.

The library focuses residents on one place for information and civic activity. It attracts many who may be unaware of other civic services and creates a positive image in its services, as opposed to some other services which may be regulatory in their nature and

may create, though unintentionally, a negative image. Residents closely identify with their library and are quite loyal to it. This is particularly true in smaller communities or in branch library locations which serve neighborhoods. The Friends of the Library, the literacy groups, the preschool story hours, the career and job centers, the business information centers, and so on, all provide individuals with opportunities to participate in the library as users and as supporters. The Yucaipa Branch of the San Bernardino County Library system is an excellent example.

This community of 30,000 people has no motion picture theater, and only within the past few years has added several fast food restaurants. The city's recreation program is full with many senior citizens participating. There are several very large churches, a senior high school, and a community college within the city. The library has a friends group of some 300 members, which has assumed responsibility for providing additional cultural and recreational outlets ranging from travelogues, author's presentations, wine and cheese tasting, rare book auctions, arts and crafts displays, musicals and theatricals, as well as giving direct library service to shut-ins.

The Highland Branch Library (California) became the meeting and discussion place for incorporation plans. After incorporation, the library was the first place for the new City Council of the City of Highland (50,000 population) to meet. Now that the council has moved to a permanent location and has acquired property for construction of a civic center, the library will again plan to lead as a key building in that complex. This same path has been followed by other communities. The Loma Linda Civic Center was located in the office buildings of the Loma Linda University. The branch library was located first in other university buildings and later in a storefront. In 1989, plans were made to construct a civic center to include city offices, fire station, and library. The overall design was coordinated, and the library was constructed so that the meeting room of the library adjoined a patio of the civic center with a large meeting room just beyond. These three areas—the large city meeting room, the enclosed garden patio, and the library meeting room—have been used as a unit for special civic, library, and community programs ranging from an Asian Festival to all-day training sessions which involved meals and breakout sessions, to musicales. The library, as an independent building, can be expanded when needed, or can be assumed by the city with another library building built on readily available land. This city of some 20,000 persons will be well served by this complex for many years to come.

The Grand Terrace City Hall is an example of incorporating the branch library into the design of the building and further sharing

space. The City of Grand Terrace, California (12,000 population), is also fairly newly incorporated. The architectural firm of Wolff, Lang, and Christopher Architects, Inc., of Rancho Cucamonga, California, designed the two-story brick civic center to be energy efficient, compact, and easy for the public to use. Innovations included banking the planting at the side of the building halfway up the first floor, setting skylights in the length, and extending to the height of the building to take advantage of natural light; the use of many live plants within the building; a solar heating and cooling system; locating the council chambers at a level lower than the audience to reflect the attitude of government serving the people; designing the chambers to be used for a number of events including being a television studio; and placing the public counters off a central walkway with the offices supporting them immediately behind them. Walls are limited so that the public has easy access to the decision-making person. The community room, the public restrooms, the central hallway, and the central entrance are shared by the civic center and the library—they are one. There are no hallways nor public restrooms or meeting room facilities within the library, but these are immediately outside the door. The security for the building is maintained by the city, and library activities are an important part of city recreation activities.

An additional benefit of this arrangement is that there is a close working relationship between individuals in city government and the library staff. The Friends of the Library active members include former mayors, city council persons, and city employees as well as members of the general public. There is no newspaper in this city which is surrounded by larger cities with newspapers, so the library newsletter is sent to each household as an insert in local water bills. Library programs addressing the needs of young undereducated mothers who are often unemployed, or programs addressing the problems that latchkey children bring to the library, directly address an economic situation. The ability to network with others in the same situation in a nonjudgmental environment adds to the feeling of self worth of these vulnerable people.

The many literacy programs available in libraries assist the undereducated in becoming prepared for a better job, and, through the postings and information services in the library, allow the employer to recruit from an improved workforce. Library services which include material collection, services, and followup are extremely important as well as other programs—workshops on writing résumés, informational sessions on retirement and creative leisure time, job and career changes, improving computer skills, personal finances and investments, and, of course, taxes. The literacy

programs, such as the California Literacy Campaign and the complementary program, Families For Literacy, further address the cycle of illiteracy by reaching younger children of parents involved in the literacy campaign.

*A State of Change: California's Ethnic Future and Libraries* (Jacob, 1988), a report of a conference on ethnic awareness funded by the California State Library, pointed out the dramatic changes in the ethnic population of California by the twenty-first century. New ethnic groups, by their numbers, are making dramatic impacts on communities, bringing with them old-country cultures and having to adapt to totally new ones. The needs of traditional minorities who may have been here for generations—the blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics—have yet to be resolved. The number of new immigrants, particularly from Southeast Asia and Latin America, is growing rapidly and, as our governmental bodies struggle to understand and to deal with the impact they make on the socioeconomic-political system, it is the library, through its variety of resources and ability to collect and search, which will assist those making decisions which affect personal lives as well as those who are attempting integration into this society. The library is sensitive to the changing nature of cities due to this immigration, the evolution of rural communities to suburbs, and the impact this has on the family structure and the environment.

Local historical groups have traditionally found a center in the library. As new technology is added to the library's arsenal of tools, the historical societies, archivists, and students have found the library to be an even greater resource. The library's commitment to preserve a record of local history has led to seeking out, microfilming, and indexing local newspapers. Sometimes this has meant that the newspaper is no longer being published and the papers themselves are scattered in several garages, private collections, and the library's own collection. Working with commercial microfilm agencies when in-house capabilities do not exist, the library serves as a collection and organizing point for microfilming and making available these papers.

In larger libraries or more inventive smaller ones, other cultural opportunities are given to the public. The San Diego Public Library has perhaps the oldest ongoing concert series in the city. The lawn in front of the Riverside (California) City and County Public Library has a summer series of films for the family. In many libraries, the meeting room is often called the community room and may bear the name of some local hero or celebrity. This room often serves as an

extension of the meeting rooms in city/county government, or it is used for conducting CPR classes, a polling place, or a homework center.

Through its community involvement and reflection, the library and its staff are often a part of the community group which is making decisions on the direction of the city. Librarians serve on planning task forces, participate in various networks, and serve on committees which address community needs. The Children's Network, a grouping of services serving children (primarily social services, probation, schools, and so on), includes San Bernardino County Library representatives on the policy council and its committees. Often the concerns of the network center on life and death situations for children, but there are many times when the library can participate. In a conference directed primarily at care providers and social workers, the library presented workshops on multiculturalism through children's books, storytelling, and literacy.

Looking beyond the physical library is the perception of the library as a neutral place, a place where divergent ideas and people with differing lifestyles, education, and economic levels can gather. Here is where the very successful California Literacy Campaign is centered, where the grandparents and books program is based, and where discussion groups are held on any range of civic and social concerns. Environmental impact reports requesting citizen input and information on federal job openings may sit side by side on a shelf. The minutes of the governing board of supervisors or city council are current, with the librarian answering questions on meeting dates and the process for speaking before the group.

The library's quiet is also a mediating presence when tempers run high. The problems of the community with "city hall" may be reflected in the information the library carries, but the destructive violence in the street does not often carry over into the library itself. For the most part, the library is still respected for its ability to provide a respite or a place of reason in the abstract. In the day-to-day operation, the library faces the problems of society, and each library must find a way to deal with street people, those who should be institutionalized, overwhelming numbers of students, demands being made for more and more materials/information when budgets are limited, vandalism, and so on. This raises the questions, Can libraries meet all of the needs voiced? Can we be everything to everybody? How do we choose?

Even though it is a part of government (city, county, parish, state, and so on), the library is not viewed by the general public as such. It is apolitical. As an often central governmental building open to the public and providing the conveniences of restrooms, easy

chairs, and, of course, good reading and program material, the homeless and the unemployed are attracted. Working with governmental and social agencies, the library is able to focus its specialized skills on these problems as a resource to both. The library's organizational and collecting skills focus on providing information to the job seeker and the employer, to the governmental caseworker and the individual case person. Information and referral files which feed back into the city databases, such as that of the Pasadena Public Library (California), and are available to the job provider as well as the job seeker, strengthen public support.

The public library, dependent upon tax revenue and operating within a governmental structure, is highly aware of, and affected by, the social and economic concerns around it. In California and Massachusetts, consumer tax revolt left their marks on the ability of the public library to operate. The current social and economic uncertainties as well as the changing ethnic demographics dictate the manner in which the library operates.

Traditional sources of income, such as property tax or redevelopment passthroughs, cannot provide the funds necessary to carry on the operations of the library, as these funds may be rerouted to support other services or agencies. Proposition 98 in California and the ensuing AB8 provided for the shift of funds earmarked for special districts (which included county libraries) to the K-12 educational system. General Fund libraries also lost support as the library and other departments of the county competed with local law enforcement for funds.

Libraries need a dependable financial stream. It has been suggested that a pay-for-service plan be developed to support libraries with the public voting on which services they want and need and all others being abandoned or deemed unnecessary. Socially conscious public libraries find this difficult to accept. In the emerging awareness of the promise of a multicultural society, which includes many who do not have a free public library background, where outreach services are beginning to be reflected in usage, it would be difficult to obtain the needed support for charging for basic services such as book loans, attendance at a story hour, or answer of information or reference questions which do not require expensive database searching. It would also be difficult to defend charging for some services which had been considered basic to a user group which might not be able to pay. Would information and library use then belong to the privileged who could afford them?

There are situations where such a dependable financial source can be encouraged. Joint marketing of the library with other services—such as museums, parks, arts groups—can save funds.

Publicity which includes all promotional activities—such as a jazz festival, folk festival, and so on—can provide some saving of funds.

These can all be a way to augment local property tax receipts where public libraries receive between 85 and 95 percent of their funding from local sources and approximately 5 percent, mostly indirectly, from federal sources. An attempt was made in preparation for the first White House Conference in 1979 to propose a National Library Act to increase federal funding for libraries. This was unsuccessful, and so the major federal funding support is through the Library Services and Construction Act titles which, over the past thirty or so years, have been funded at a minimal level.

The use of other taxing or assessment authorities could provide additional funds—the transient tax, bed tax, additional local sales tax, and so on. Community Development Block Grant Funds, which address blight in improvement of communities, may sometimes be used for library construction or alteration. Where grants come to communities for social programs, it is possible for libraries to receive some of this funding as the library program melds with the purpose of the grant. Federal grants which go to Indian tribes for furthering of library service can also be molded into a library which is also a community center, or contracting with a nearby public library to provide assistance to upgrade staff skills or assist in collection development. This is particularly interesting as it would allow libraries on tribal lands to also become the collection point of tribal memories and histories. Federal funding for the direct support of libraries through programs such as the MURL grants (Metropolitan Urban Resource Libraries) might be expanded to include all libraries to a minimum level or to assure that local libraries will not fall below a designated level. This last could be a staggered amount dependent on the local level of support so those which are at the lowest levels will be raised and those at the higher level will still find an incentive to continue to improve their libraries. The networking efforts available in many states should be encouraged as they supplement, rather than supplant, local libraries.

In all, public libraries have historically been a part of community government and have themselves been community centers. This is a difficult time for funding of both, but their paths are coterminal in providing the best resources, the best representation, and the best government for the people they represent and for being responsible members in society.

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