

## Library design and building ideas: A community dialogue

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LIBRARY DESIGN is perhaps in its most exciting and demanding age. Libraries continue to remain relevant and are constantly changing to effectively serve their communities. Today's library offers more than just a place to store and lend books, it now serves as a marketplace of ideas offering varied ways to engage patrons. Library design teams are challenged to create spaces that serve multiple purposes and have the flexibility to grow and change.

Working with several library teams in our region on designing library renovations and new libraries, I have seen how innovative library design has energized their communities. I thought it would be interesting to reach out to the leaders of four of these libraries to find out what's worked and what's next: Frank Sykes, MLS, Livonia Public Library Director; Adrienne Pettinelli, MLS, Henrietta Public Library Director; Jeff Baker, MLS, Chili Public Library Director; and Keith Suhr, MLS, Greece Director of Personnel (Greece Children's Library).

### What were your hopes and dreams for your new library?

*Frank Sykes, Livonia:* Everybody wants more space, but what do you do with that space? It was important to figure out what the use was and what the community wants and needs.

*Adrienne Pettinelli, Henrietta:* Building a new library was all about making the library work for a growing community with a variety of needs, including traditional services, meetings, quiet study, tutoring, proctoring, and to utilize technology. Increased accessibility was essential to ensure that every member of our community can access the library's resources.

*Jeff Baker, Chili:* We wanted the new library to provide a space where lifelong learning and innovative new community programs and services would occur. The previous library had reached its shelving capacity, forcing usage of less accessible shelves. The small Chil-



Henrietta Library Computer Room. (Photo provided)



Livonia Library children's section. (Photo provided)

dren's Room limited our ability to fully engage children, and teens did not have a place to call their own. The makeshift Makerspace Room was not sufficient.

*Keith Suhr, Greece:* For the Children's Room expansion, we wanted to create a literary experience for our residents; something that tied the theme of literary classics with active learning and play. Disney meets Narnia with a seasoning of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

## How did the new library realize or not realize your vision?

*Frank Sykes, Livonia:* It surpassed my expectations, and now that we are using the renovated and expanded library, we are discussing additional ways to activate it. I visit other libraries to compare, but I don't see anything that we could have done better.

*Adrienne Pettinelli, Henrietta:* Our new facility is exactly what it needs to be. We have the types of spaces and functionality we need, and our services have grown and flourished in the new space. We're better meeting the needs of long-time patrons, and we've gained new users who are excited about the possibilities here.

*Jeff Baker, Chili:* We have expanded the collection and improved access, with defined places for specific collections. The Children's Room features separate play and reading areas. Teens now have a space of their own. The 1,000 square foot Makerspace Room has the equipment and layout needed for patrons to gather, design, and create. The new library facilitates our ability to provide a welcoming environment responsive to patron's needs, to promote literacy and encourage the joy of learning, to foster a culture of innovation and creativity, and to serve as a center of community engagement.

*Keith Suhr, Greece:* The measure of our success is in the tremendous response of our residents. Named "The Story Garden," the Greece Children's Library has become a destination for our residents to bring their families to learn, to read, to play, and to create. The library is now a center for community learning and activity for our young residents and their caregivers.

## What were some unanticipated outcomes of your library project?

*Frank Sykes, Livonia:* Despite using very efficient building materials, LED lighting, and a new heating system, utility costs have increased significantly largely due to the increased size of the library. With increased patronage, custodial supply costs have also increased. We have also increased staffing to offer additional programs (30-40 per month) and activate the space.

*Adrienne Pettinelli, Henrietta:* With our flexibly designed space, we were easily able to pivot to a COVID-friendly curbside pickup service model, and then to a socially distanced service model, and ultimately back to normalcy with updated protocols. I was so grateful to have this malleable space when these unanticipated needs arose. We were able to deliver our core services through the pandemic, and our patrons were very grateful.

*Jeff Baker, Chili:* The new library is part of the new Chili



Greece Childrens Library gateway. (Photo provided)

Community Center, with the Town's library, recreation department, and senior center housed together. With this combined resource attracting visitors, previous non-library users have now become regular patrons. There has also been an increase in partnerships with Town departments and other organizations.

*Keith Suhr, Greece:* The new Children's Library has brought young Greece families together, bonded by raising children in a town that values recreation and learning. In the winter, it gave them a place to gather and enjoy what was available for their children while providing offerings for their own interests.

## How has the new library engaged your patrons?

*Frank Sykes, Livonia:* The new Children's Library, with its lively design, brought in the kids, which allows the library to connect with their parents, grandparents, and caregivers. The library's central village location, the buzz of the project, and the wide variety of new programs we can now offer (sensory play, maker space for all age groups, story time, tai chi, Erie Canal museum programs, and concerts on the lawn) constantly attracts new patrons.

*Adrienne Pettinelli, Henrietta:* You may think of a library as a building full of books, but as someone who works in a library, I think of a building full of people. That's what I love about my work. We've increased our events, children's story times, and hands-on activities for teens and adults. We offer more book groups and excellent services to help people find that next beloved book.

*Jeff Baker, Chili:* The new Makerspace has attracted many users, and the library offers kits for patrons to explore Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math



Chili Community Center Library fireplace. (Photo provided)

(STEAM)-related activities. The Children's Room features space for learning through play while parents watch nearby. The Teen Room provides video and tabletop gaming. The Community Room is in continual use with programming for all ages and a variety of interests.

*Keith Suhr, Greece:* The additional programming space has allowed for more children's programming, creativity, and socialization. Our library has earned a reputation for excellence and enjoyment via the press, social media, and residents.

### **What new library features are most beloved by your patrons?**

*Frank Sykes, Livonia:* Our new children's library gets the most attention, and the study rooms receive constant use. People love the new accessible lift. Our community members contributed hours of volunteer labor to complete the restoration of the original historic library building, refinishing the paneling, windowsills, and hardwood floors under expert direction. Our beautifully lit entranceway and memorial wall welcomes and honors our community.

*Adrienne Pettinelli, Henrietta:* People are delighted that they can check out at any of our service desks. Knowing they can walk up to any desk and check out makes life easier. People also love, love, love our study rooms and conference rooms, which are in constant use for meetings, studying, online interviews, drawing, scrapbooking, and playing board games. The building is full of windows and natural light, and people enjoy it. There's something aspirational about going to the library, patrons want to improve themselves or their lives in some way, and this build-

ing reflects that. Light is life-giving. It's hopeful. Libraries are life-giving and hopeful, too.

*Jeff Baker, Chili:* Patrons love the attractive two-sided fireplace in the large Reading Room that houses magazines, a local history collection and exhibit, and local artwork. Patrons also love the Makerspace, study rooms, and the in-library Book Sale area. The large windows, skylight, and LED lighting throughout the building make the library an inviting and welcoming place.

*Keith Suhr, Greece:* All the new features have their dedicated fans. Whether it's the Story Garden House, the variety of programming options, the interactive farmers market, the woodland tree ball drop, or the multiple interactive play features, there is something for everyone.

### **What would you like to see in a future library improvement project?**

*Frank Sykes, Livonia:* Public libraries are moving to a community center-based model. People still read, but I think the future of libraries is in programming, particularly in offering more STEAM activities and adult education. Not a lot of places in rural areas offer those activities. Our Teen area is also something we are currently improving.

*Adrienne Pettinelli, Henrietta:* I'd like to develop a more robust setup for livestreaming where we can have greater success with hybrid events, complementing our ability to hold events held entirely online or entirely in-person. I'd also like to incorporate our beautiful outdoor spaces more fully, capitalizing on their potential.

*Jeff Baker, Chili:* It is my goal to further improve access for those with disabilities. The large glass doors in some areas can be a challenge for patrons in wheelchairs and I am hoping to resolve this issue. Having a hearing loop in the Community Room will also increase accessibility as will increased directional signage.

*Keith Suhr, Greece:* We would like to add a café that enables adults and professionals to gather with friends or visit solo to nourish their interests, relax, and have coffee or light snacks while enjoying the benefits of a Town that values its residents and invests in their recreation and learning.

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*I extend my thanks to these leaders of several of the new and remodeled libraries in our region. It is very exciting to see the impact their vision and dedication has had on our communities and on the practice of library design. Future design efforts will be challenged to anticipate the growing diversity of library patrons and their needs as they pursue their full potential.*