

Keep Excitement High, Costs Low

Building plans on hold? You can still respond to needs in the short term while keeping stakeholders engaged in the future vision

By Henry Myerberg, AIA

In this economic climate, many libraries that have developed extensive plans to renovate or expand are now finding themselves unable to execute their capital projects. They face fewer and overtapped donor sources in both the public and private sectors. This contraction of support collides with greater demand for library services and shifting expectations for the services and experiences at the library. With a little creativity, libraries can respond to the most pressing needs while keeping stakeholders engaged in the long-term vision for the library.

Shifting patron needs The library has evolved from a place where information is stored and retrieved to a place where information is exchanged and created. Gen Y is now surprisingly the largest growing demographic user group of public libraries. Look at colleges, social networks, hotels, and markets to imagine the future of the public library. As such, the library is an active mixed-use community center for groups to study, meet, and attend events and conferences while employing various media and information technologies. At the same time, the library is a

quiet oasis for individuals to work, compute, relax, read, and contemplate. However, the fixed spaces and outdated furnishings of many libraries conceived in the 20th century were not designed for the mixed and flexible uses of the 21st century. Often groups cannot find available or suitable places to collaborate and socialize, and individuals cannot find an empty seat at a computer table or at a program.

Poised for the future During lean times, how can libraries respond to needs in the short term and remain poised for the future? How can a library keep big visions and big plans alive in the minds and hearts of its constituents and supporters?

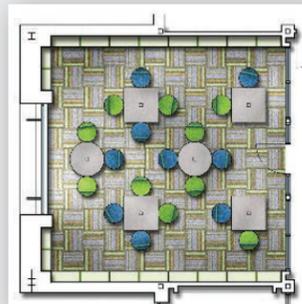
Westport Public Library (WPL), one of the busiest libraries in Connecticut, is addressing these issues head on. Some 1,600 visitors per day cram into every bit of its 50,000 square feet. Concept plans completed two years ago responded to the library's ambition to provide more welcoming and flexible spaces for gathering, working, and socializing for a 21st-century-minded community, but the funding to realize plans for the 80,000 square foot expansion and renovation is not all in hand while the needs are mounting. Doing nothing is not an option, and neither is spending a lot of money. Instead the library will leverage scarce dollars wisely, with furnishing and technology improvements that create and demonstrate:



An engaging periodical room

EXISTING CONDITIONS The periodical room is an enclosed 500 square feet with river views, with tables and chairs flanked by periodical shelves.

PROPOSED Transform space into an adaptable setting that invites talking and sharing—a kind of café for conversation—that at any given time can be a game room, conference room, or comfortable place to relax and read. Configure four-person square and round Allsteel Merge tables for individual or group activities. Use brightly colored Metro Top Mobile chairs that swivel and roll like task chairs but feel like lounge chairs. Convert a section of periodical shelving to an interactive whiteboard like the Steelcase ENO System here.



- a fresher look and feel
- collaborative and flexible uses of key spaces
- more capacity and choices of seating
- integration of current technologies and power outlets
- energy savings and green design

In addition, by showcasing how the library is addressing some pressing needs, WPL hopes to garner donor attention and foster public discourse of its intended expansion plans.

WPL has identified about 5,000 existing square feet to implement and test these improvements, which Director Maxine Bleiweis characterizes as an opportunity to perform a “preoccupancy evaluation.” Three key areas are a periodical room, a quiet corner room, and an alcove of reading/work tables. These proposed cosmetic and furnishing improvements, potentially costing under \$250,000 and targeted to be completed over the next year, are sustainable investments. They can be reused when the larger scale renovation and expansion plans are enacted.

Henry Myerberg, AIA, the principal of HMA2 architects, based in New York City, focuses on the design and planning of academic, school, and public libraries. Among the libraries he is currently working on are those in New York; Washington, DC, where he did the LJ makeover of the Southeast Neighborhood Library (LBD, Fall 2007); Elon, NC; and the American University of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan



Rooms within a room

EXISTING CONDITIONS In this area of tightly spaced carrels and reading tables collaborative groups can disturb others and discourage solo table users.

PROPOSED Transform this alcove into a mix of single and group work and study spots. Increase seating and improve acoustics with a row of diner-like booths built from AGATI Hampton High-Back Banquette and tables, with sound-absorbing upholstered high-back benches and Tretford-Wild Rice carpet-like wall treatment. These welcome teens doing group homework, adults preparing media presentations (the Steelcase Mediascape System is pictured), or those seeking semiprivacy. Fit each booth with an LED task light. Add movable Danko Atmos chairs with comfortable seat and back straps made from colorful recycled seat belts.



Contemplative corner

EXISTING CONDITIONS A 1,400 square foot room with generic reading tables, chairs, and lounge seating.

PROPOSED UPDATES Create a “contemplative corner” that welcomes individual study and relaxation. Line one end of the space with inviting high-back Nienkamper Turnaround Swivel chairs, to enjoy views or avoid glare, with a portable Bix Metro side table to hold laptops or coffee cups. Anchor the middle of the room with six movable Worden Stance tables equipped with state-of-the-art Worden LED reading lights (long-life, low-heat, low-voltage fixtures not requiring hard wiring) that elegantly define personal space without blocking open space.

