


# DESIGNING SPACE

## for CHILDREN and TEENS

### IN LIBRARIES AND PUBLIC PLACES

How to carve out a niche that epitomizes service

By Sandra Feinberg and James R. Keller



Envisioning a new youth services space is a joint effort on the part of the architects, design professionals, staff, board, and community. It requires an examination of the mission and roles of the library and how the library utilizes space to satisfy the needs of the community and, in particular, the needs of families and youth, birth through the young adult years. Ideally, children's and teen spaces need to reflect the library's philosophy of service and be designed as an integrated entity with a consideration of and an attraction for young patrons.

How parents and caregivers act within the library setting often influences how children feel and how often they will come to the library. How children feel when they use the library will affect their attitude and behavior not only when they are children but also when they become parents. The teen audience also needs attention from the library world. In *Teen Spaces: The Step-by-Step Library Makeover* (ALA Editions, 2009), author Kimberly Bolan reflects: "Teenagers today long to be needed, to be respected, and to belong—and libraries are ideal places for these things to happen. By creating a space designed especially for teens, librarians present themselves with the perfect opportunity to embrace this age group full force."

The success of public libraries tomorrow may well lie in our ability today to serve young children, their families, and teens in a healthy, appropriately designed environment—one that introduces the library to new users, serves as a laboratory for experimentation and discovery about what the "future" library may offer, and presents an exciting opportunity for garnering financial support and political backing.

Animatronic greeter animal at Brentwood (Tenn.) Public Library's children's library. See p. 40 for more.

The term “design” has many implications and meanings. The comprehensive array of influence design bears on a single idea, mechanism, or space extends not only to the actuality of what is created, but also the organic nature of the creation and how it will influence activity and thought. Design of space for children and teens includes the perceived physical space (how patrons view and use the space), and the equally important intuitive space; that is to say, what the dynamic of the interactions in the space will be affects how the space, its contents, or its habitation will influence users in their daily lives.

Integrating ideas about how children and teens learn and perceive the world; understanding how architectural and design features can influence learning and usage patterns; listening to, interpreting, and incorporating ideas from the staff and community; and reflecting the current and future goals of the library provide the underpinnings for a good design. The design team provides additional outside views based on experience and knowledge that not only adds to the discussion but also brings critical skills of facilitation and organization to the process.


It is vital for the project team to gather as much information as possible about the library’s core philosophy of patron service and how it is to be reflected in the design

of children’s and teen spaces. It is also important to uncover any serious disagreements between the children’s or teen departments and administration regarding youth services. After reaching some central decisions such as the ages of the targeted audiences, the estimated size and scope of the space, and the basic activities and collections to be included within the space, the project team needs to gather information and validate their ideas through research, site visits, conversation, and exploration.

The success of any library space is reflective of the staff’s personal attention to and involvement with the entire process. Getting the staff’s input right from the start improves the architect’s understanding of how the building needs to function and the audiences that the library needs to reach. Youth services staff must tell the architect what they need to do their work, as the architect relies upon the accuracy and completeness of the information that the library shares. Staff has tremendous library expertise, street smarts, and skills in serving children. They need to bring this knowledge to the table and share their expertise with the architect.

While board members or administrators may not be interested in the details of the children’s space, they often set the tone for how much of the overall project is going to focus

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on children and teens, establish the role that the library will play regarding youth services in the future, and provide the funding support to accomplish the goals of the project.

In January 2009, Gonzalo Oyarzun, director of the Santiago Public Library in Chile, spoke with us about his view of the library experience for children and young adults, and the underlying principles that influenced the building of the new library. “A children’s and young adult library serves as a public square, where children and young adults can go and have fun; where they can feel free to choose, explore, and know; where parents and children can talk and know each other. It’s an intimate place where children and young adults can meet and interact with others, assuming and respecting their differences and ages; an environment that teachers and students can experience together, reading far from the school’s curricular pressure; a multimedia and interactive zone in which children have free access to books, new technologies, activities, highly trained professionals, comfortable furnishings, and state-of-the-art infrastructure—designed to their own scale.”

Most successful children’s and teen-space projects have been initiated because one or more board members or an enthusiastic library director sees the value of investing in youth services. In smaller libraries, a board member or director often acts in tandem with—or in lieu of—children’s staff because of their background (i.e., children’s librarian or teacher), interest in, or understanding of children. In most instances, designing and building spaces for youth has the support of one or more board members, the library director, and/or those who control the finances. Without this type of support, it is difficult to move forward.

Though some staff have strong opinions about who the

library serves and can envision how the new space will function, it is imperative that children’s staff have ongoing meetings with each other and the architects/designers, review literature on library services and space design for children and teens, conduct onsite and online visits to a variety of venues, look at demographic trends in the student population and the types (size, ages, ethnic background) of families that are moving into the community, and assess the needs, behaviors, and learning styles of children and teens.

It may be advantageous to involve current and potential users, including children, teens, and parents. They may come up with many ideas not thought of by staff or the design professional. Having users participate in the planning and development of services and new space generates interest in and enthusiasm for the project.

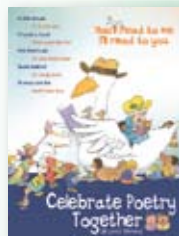
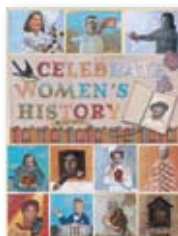
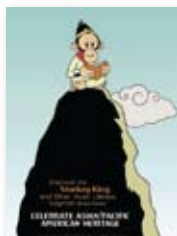
Depending on the clientele and the situation, patrons can be asked about their preferences in several ways, including surveys, focus groups, design or idea boards, and suggestion boxes in various areas in the library. It is often best to target specific groups such as elementary or middle-school students, older teens, or parents of very young children. It is recommended that staff work with a consultant to assist with the survey design or to conduct focus groups, and with the design professional to work on design boards.

It is also beneficial to visit other libraries and children’s facilities, especially in other geographies if possible, to benefit from lessons learned and see other solutions for serving youth. Many of the best ideas for creating space are inspired by a completed project. Sometimes a poor attempt at implementing a good idea in one location will lead to resolution and success in the next.

How children feel when they use the library will affect their attitude and behavior not only when they are children but also when they become parents.

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Current and potential users may come up with many design ideas not thought of by staff or the design professional, and their involvement may generate interest in and enthusiasm for the project.

Visits to other libraries are preferable during high-use hours. Talk to the library staff about what works and what doesn't. Arrange for the architect to observe excellent library services for children, parents, and adolescents in well-designed library spaces. Also visit museums, recreation centers, parks, youth centers, sports facilities, and child-care settings. Many of the materials on display or used in various settings can be replicated or adapted for the public library environment.

Peruse library furniture catalogues and attend conferences and tradeshow that display children's furniture and equipment. Talk to library suppliers about what you would like; they can be very helpful.

Have a look at others' floor plans. In the beginning, it is often hard to visualize size. Comparing your library's floor plans to an actual space helps staff to prepare for proportion and size, what the new space will feel like, how patrons will use it, and whether the space is big enough to accommodate the many activities envisioned.

Search appropriate websites. Look at photos, print out text descriptions, examine the types of programming and activities offered, and review public policies and procedures relative to youth. Understand that the area's design and functionality says a lot to those who enter the space.

### Community demographics

As part of the planning process, the architect or library space planner will provide a "Program of Requirements"—an introductory description of community needs and how the library project addresses those needs—and often defer to the library representatives for input on why the building needs to be built, expanded, or renovated. This is a great opportunity for the youth services staff to gather, analyze, and summarize the need for youth space based on local statistics and community information.

This research often produces estimates on the number of children and families that currently live in the area as well as the estimated growth or decline of the youth population. Other important information includes the ethnic diversity and education level of families, the performance of the school district, and the availability of other youth resources, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, youth centers, sports facilities, parks, and children's museums.

Preparing a chart of resources, ages served, programs offered, and other pertinent information helps staff determine what role the library can play to satisfy unmet or partially met needs:

- Assess what other youth resources exist in the community. Visit these places and speak with the professionals who manage them. Ask what services are being offered

and what needs they feel are unmet. Elicit their ideas and support for your new library space.

- Locate reports created from a community-visioning process or the development of a long-range plan by the town or city council,

school district, local businesses, or civic organizations. These reports often outline the need for recreational and educational community space for children and teens.

- Analyze a census report, which provides a demographic breakdown by age, gender, ethnic background, languages other than English spoken in the home, household income, etc. Cull this information relative to the number of preschool and school-age children and teens in the community. Also, contact the school district and the parents organization for student-population data.

- Search for information on local history and a general description of the service area, which your library may have readily accessible. Cull this material for information on youth services and the growth of the young population.

In the February 1993 *School Library Journal*, Terry Chekon and Margaret Miles of Sacramento (Calif.) Public Library explained how they learned about their target population through a children's-services marketing study during the planning process for the new library. Staff determined what specific services and materials were of interest to potential users, and confirmed their belief that there were a limited number of children living in the central library's service area, and that many of them were from non-English speaking families. The study also confirmed that the children's space would need to be accessible at times when families from beyond the surrounding area could visit.

The library's mission must be taken into consideration when designing new space, particularly the influence and position of youth services. In today's society, the public library's role as a community institution embraces services for children, families, and teens. During the initial planning stages, the project team needs to learn just as much about the attitudes and commitment to youth by staff, board, and the community. More important, they need to become educated and immersed in the behavior patterns, learning needs, and tastes of children and teens. Devoting time and energy to fully understanding the behaviors of young people at various ages will culminate in a successful expansion or renovation: one that satisfies the end users. ■



SANDRA FEINBERG is director of Middle Country Public Library in New York. JAMES R. KELLER is director of library planning and design for Vitetta Architects and Engineers in Philadelphia. This article previews their new book, *Designing Space for Children and Teens in Libraries and Public Places*, forthcoming from ALA Editions.