



Library Design Tips for the 21st Century

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Description: Here are a few practical and simple tips that consistently lead to the most successful projects, whether planning a new building, an expansion, renovation, or a simple re-vamp.

Libraries of various sizes and types are realizing the positive impact of creating comfortable and welcoming library environments for patrons all ages. For years, school and public libraries have drawn in the very young and their parents with creative, enticing children's areas. A more recent emphasis is the shift toward attracting the thirteen to twenty-two year-old customer through comfortable furniture and engaging decoration. Those who have adopted this design approach are finding customers of all age groups attracted to these areas. There is no doubt that over the last several years there has been a noticeable transformation in the world of library interiors. Relaxing and inviting library facilities are no longer rarities, they are realities.

Over the years, in working with librarians, architects, and interior designers, I have learned several valuable lessons in building planning and design. There are numerous critical components involved in creating a library space with a user-centered user-friendly look and feel. Among one of the key elements is the selection of *furniture* and *fixtures* for the public. Here are a few practical and simple tips that consistently lead to the most successful projects, whether planning a new building, an expansion, renovation, or a simple re-vamp:

1. **Get patron input** – The main thing to remember is that it's not about you or the architect or the interior designer...it's about them, the customers!
 - In the most successful of instances, positive space transformation and successful purchases are a result of open-minded library professionals and significant community input from users of *all ages*, so utilize focus groups, surveys, and interview techniques.
 - Any architect or designer worth working with will be more than receptive to participating in a community needs analysis, focus groups, interviews, etc. Do not let anyone try to tell you what he/she 'thinks' your community needs.
 - Think about each user group (children, teens, adults, and senior citizens). One design rule of thumb does *not* apply to all. Color, style, durability, and material choices will and should vary by group. It is possible to have both a cohesive look and feel for the entire library, while still serving the individual needs of various user groups.

1. **Think comfort** – Comfortable furniture, whether lounge seating or tables and chairs, is where it's at for patrons of all ages.
 - The type of furniture you choose sets the tone of your library, so if you want to make your patrons feel welcomed and keep them coming back...think comfort.
 - Comfort is not restricted to lounge style furnishings. Tables and chairs, whether for general seating or computer use, should also be considered at all times. Think about ergonomics and, remember, just because it's a library, doesn't mean it has to be hard and made of wood.
 - Never settle for an item before testing it. Ask vendors to let you 'trial test' a few of your final furniture choices for a week or two. This can be useful to determine if a chair fits your library and users' needs.

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3. **Be adventurous** – Look to new styles, colors, ideas and even ways of doing business. Being adventurous does not have to mean being eccentric, but it does mean keeping an open mind.
 - Shop around...get ideas. What are others such as book stores, museums, shopping malls, etc. doing? Consider durability as well as basic design elements such as style and color. You'd be amazed at what the right combination can accomplish.
 - Never settle for what's easiest or cheapest. Don't pick something because it's the first you're shown. And, never let the cost of an item be an obstacle. Believe me...I have spent many of day finding ways to purchase the right item at the right cost. Balancing quality, durability, comfort, and cost can be a tall order, but it can be done.
 - Look to designers and vendors who are continually expanding their ways of thinking. Who has produced the same old furniture and fixtures for the last 30 years and who is producing new product lines and listening to what their customers are asking for?

4. **Put thought into fixtures** – As with furniture, consider the practicality as well as the visual impact of fixtures. Consider fixed and portable shelving, display items such as countertop, end panel, and feature displays, and even signage. Note that many of the suggestions provided in tips 1 and 3 also apply here.
 - Are fixtures 'make do' or truly functional? How are patrons exposed to all library materials, including books, audiovisual items, magazines, etc.? Think about how fixtures can enhance your library's look and feel as well as its effectiveness and merchandising potential.
 - Signage serves form and function, so select signs that are visually appealing, scaled correctly, and user-friendly. Pay attention to all signs, whether directional or for collection and service areas. Before installing an expensive signage system, consider living with interim paper signs for a few months before choosing and installing permanent signs. Live with the space, see how your patrons live with the space, and ask users for their input on wording, placement, etc.

1. **Plan for the future** – As with most everything, styles will change and things will get worn out, so it is important to choose purchases wisely and then have a plan for the future.
 - Create a long-range plan for keeping furnishings fresh and up-to-date. This may involve regularly cleanings, reupholstering and/or replacement options.
 - Factor in the expansion and/or replacement of fixtures as collections grow and change.

When it comes to furniture and fixtures, here are just a few vendors to consider:

Bretford - www.bretford.com
 Creative Arts Unlimited, Inc. - www.creativeartsinc.com
 Demco - www.demco.com
 Franklin Fixtures - www.franklinfixtures.com
 Martin Bratrud - www.martinbratrud.com
 Metro Furniture - www.metrofurniture.com/home.html
 Turnstone Furniture - www.turnstonefurniture.com

Kimberly Bolan is a Library Consultant and Author based in Indianapolis, IN. She has over ten years experience in facilities design, is the author of *Teen Spaces* (ALA, 2003) and *Technology Made Simple* (ALA, 2006), and travels across the United States speaking and consulting on a variety of topics ranging from space planning and design to technology planning to customer service and marketing. For more information, please contact Kimberly at bolan_kimberly@yahoo.com.