

# 22 RECENT AND ENDURING DESIGN TRENDS IN ONTARIO PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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In recent years, despite predictions to the contrary, we in the public library community have seen numerous new and renovated library buildings appear in small and large communities across Ontario, indeed throughout North America. Whereas it was thought that technology advances would place less demand on the library facility, the opposite has proven to be the case. The emergence of the library's community development role and, in particular, the library as crucial community space, has meant that more people have more reason to visit their local library. In Canada alone, over 150 million people visit one of the country's 3,000 plus public library buildings every year (that's almost three times as many libraries as there are McDonald's restaurants in Canada)<sup>1</sup>.



Iroquois Ridge Branch, Oakville PL<sup>2</sup>

Not only are libraries being built, rebuilt and improved upon, they are being planned and built with attention to beauty and practicality, form and function. The following design features and considerations, while no replacement for on-site visits, may help those embarking upon a building project to envision the best of what a public library can be<sup>3</sup>. While some of the features are new and may appear trendy, they are well received by community residents and library patrons. Many of them speak to the library's efforts to: reflect back to the community

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<sup>1</sup> For more statistics on Canadian public libraries, see the Canadian Library Association's website at: <http://www.cla.ca/divisions/capl/advocacy/quotes.htm>

<sup>2</sup> All photos are used with permission from the libraries depicted.

<sup>3</sup> This report is not intended to serve as advice on all matters related to library building projects, but rather to alert the reader to enduring, popular trends and features in newer library buildings.

the best of itself; heighten community awareness; and facilitate community interaction and development. In fact, the design of a library can influence that library's capacity to serve its community, making programs and services easy or impossible to deliver. Several of the features identified have been around for a number of years, and continue to grow in popularity and relevance.

**1. A library building that makes a statement and heightens the library's presence in the community**

Whereas Carnegie libraries were built to be noticed, ideally as the most impressive building in town, rivaled only by the grandeur of eighteenth century churches, it then seemed, for a number of decades, that builders of libraries paid very little attention to the exterior of the building. Fortunately, that is no longer the case. Whether a stand-alone library, or part of a joint, multi-purpose facility, whether new or renovated, libraries are being built to be noticed, raising the profile and the presence of the library in the community. In some cases, the style is traditional, intended to blend in with neighbouring buildings; in other cases, the opposite effect is desired. Regardless, the public increasingly understands the public library as a symbol of the community's commitment to ideas, to learning, to bettering oneself and they expect the building to be worthy of that symbolism. There is also greater focus on making the library an appealing destination, of interest to passersby. An important consideration is how well lit the building is at night, whether or not it is open. Even a closed library holds promise if the lighting is such that it suggests an interesting, worthwhile place to spend time.

Noteworthy examples include: Niagara-on-the-Lake PL, Huron County PL's Exeter Branch, Cornwall PL, Smiths Falls, PL, London PL's Crouch Branch



Exeter Branch, Huron County PL



Smiths Falls PL



St. Marys PL



Woodstock PL

## 2. External landscaping that serves as part of the library as destination

Reading gardens, courtyards, and park-like surroundings heighten the library's appeal, both as an image of the community at its best, and as an inviting destination where it is possible to take time out from the pressures of busy lives and spend some quiet time in a natural oasis.

Noteworthy examples include: Barrie PL, Niagara-on-the-Lake PL, Leonard E. Shore PL, North Perth PL's Listowel Branch, London PL's Main Library



Listowel Branch, North Perth PL

## 3. An accessible, user friendly facility, inside and out

In today's world, a facility that is fully wheel-chair accessible, with automatic doors and accessible washrooms, is a given for any public service, libraries included<sup>4</sup>. Increasingly, savvy architects and designers understand the importance of ensuring the accessibility of the building's interior with wide aisles and open spaces, left uncluttered. In addition, good lighting and clear and legible signage does much to make any building, especially a library, easy to use.

As attractive as old Carnegie buildings are, they typically include at least two levels and plenty of steps, both inside and out. Making them accessible is a major, costly

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<sup>4</sup> Section 2.3 of the *Ontario Public Library Guidelines* specifies 7 physical access requirements for serving patrons with disabilities.

undertaking that usually requires additional land to house the expanded, accessible facility. While choosing to renovate or build a new library is entirely a local decision, based on an assessment of current and future library needs, ***choosing to remain inaccessible is not a viable option***. The public library has a responsibility to be accessible to every member of the community, including those in wheelchairs, scooters and strollers, those who cannot climb a dozen steps, and those with other special needs<sup>5</sup>.

Ample free parking nearby, well cleared and well lit paths and sidewalks, and clearly designated parking for bicycles contribute greatly to the accessibility and ease of use of a public building. Also, drive-thru book returns are greatly appreciated by people who are simply returning items and do not want to have to park the car.

#### **4. An opening up of space in the library**

Library interiors are not only accessible, but open and spacious. This is achieved through lower shelving units, except against walls, wide aisles and lots of clear, uncluttered space between furniture and equipment. As well as being appealing as a place to be, this openness facilitates orienting and directing the public to different parts of the library. The clean sight lines also enable better security as staff can more easily track who is in the library and where they are.



Iroquois Ridge Branch, Oakville PL

#### **5. An abundance of natural light through lots of windows and glass walls**

An important feature in many of the newer libraries built across North America is the prominent role played by windows and natural light. While Carnegie libraries also featured windows, near windowless libraries dominated the building scene for a number of years. External walls were loaded with stacks and any windows, therefore, had to be small and very high, so as not to interfere with the stacks. It is no coincidence that windows have re-emerged at the same time as the public library is endeavouring to be a destination, a place to spend time, not just a clearinghouse of books and information. Generally speaking, people do not like to spend time in rooms or buildings without windows, and when given a choice will gravitate toward window seating. It is not

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<sup>5</sup> For information on using adaptive technologies to serve people with disabilities see the National Library of Canada publication *The Accessible Canadian Library II* [<http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/9/10/p10-1000-e.html>] and other related resources at <http://www.sols.org/Profinfo/professional.html#Adaptive>.

surprising, therefore, that these newer libraries with large windows have been well received by the public and library visits are longer in duration. In fact, windows are frequently named as an important feature when members of the public are asked to envision or describe their ideal library.

It is important to remember that windows do cause glare and the functional layout of the library needs to take this into consideration. Specifically, computers must be placed where the screens will not be affected by direct sunlight. Skylights, in particular, have been known to create glare and render computer screens useless. It is also worth noting that windows create particular heating and cooling issues, depending on the direction they face and the exposure to direct sunlight. While the preference is for minimal window dressing because of the appeal of natural lighting, some blockage of sun may be necessary. Equally important is ensuring that electrical lighting, both overhead and additional reading lamps, is sufficient to compensate for the lack of natural lighting on dark days and during evening hours.

Windows are an ideal setting for reading areas, including tables and chairs and comfortable lounge seating. Some libraries have successfully created individual reading niches with built-in window seats.



Iroquois Ridge Branch, Oakville PL



Cavan, Millbrook, North Monaghan PL

## 6. A soothing, relaxing colour scheme

While interior wall colours tend to go in and out of fashion on a cyclical basis, studies have shown that certain colours do create a relaxed, soothing atmosphere. Warm, rich earthy tones of blues, yellows, browns, and greens are known to contribute to a sense of well-being and relaxation. They are also less trendy and less prone to a tired or dated appearance.

A recent design trend is to use colour to distinguish between the functional areas of the library. The challenge in this practice is to find a balance between a unifying look for the

library as a whole and the use of different colours for distinct areas in the library, eg. children's area, teen corner, reference, reading room, etc. Not surprisingly, children's areas tend to be painted in a bright, often primary, colour scheme.



Hespeler Branch, Cambridge PL

#### **7. Proportionately less collection space and more people space**

Because of the increased focus on the library as destination or public gathering space, and the conversion of much of the reference and non-fiction collection into electronic resources, some libraries have found it appropriate to give up collection space in the name of a variety of public seating. Whereas library staff used to crowd in as many volumes as possible, with the unspoken mantra of 'more is better,' there is a growing recognition of the importance of providing adequate, comfortable seating for people who wish to spend time in the library, and widespread acknowledgement that the provision of such seating is a role of the library that is valued by the community.

This shift in use of space is proportional and does not reflect a minimizing of the collection. An appropriately-sized, responsive, up-to-date print collection remains of enduring importance to any public library. The professional standard of between two and three books per capita is still a useful benchmark for size of collection, but in addition to the collection there is a need for a variety of seating and public use space.

Computer workstations, wheelchair accessibility, non-book collections, meeting rooms and exhibit space have also contributed to a shift in the proportion of a library's floor space dedicated to the collection.



Goderich Branch, Huron County PL<sup>6</sup>

## **8. A seamless integration of technology into overall library design**

It can be very challenging to accommodate new technology into existing structures, especially old buildings with lots of nooks, crannies and pillars, and often, inadequate voltage. A building project, then, is a not-to-be-missed, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to plan ahead and prepare the library for the incorporation of immediate and future technology needs. While technology trends cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty, considerable flexibility can be achieved through high grade wiring (and lots of it, behind walls and dropped ceilings), and extra receptacles. The potential for wireless technology should also be investigated.

It is important to plan carefully for the optimum location for public computers, the circulation desk, staff work areas, and other technology-related functions, such as task lighting, listening centres, plug-ins for personal laptops, library security, a sound system, and a built-in projector for programs. When planned well, technology in a library is almost invisible, there to use, but not in the way.

Considerations in planning where to locate public computers include: having them near enough to staff that staff can monitor their use and provide assistance easily; providing good lighting without glare; offering a mix of stand-up and seated workstations; and allowing for the easy use of at least one workstation by someone in a wheelchair.

## **9. A visible staff presence**

Regardless of the shape or design of the library, the circulation desk – and information desk, if there is one - should be in a prominent, visible location, with clear signage indicating where to approach with a question. People entering the library, possibly for the first time, should be able to gauge in an instant where they can get staff assistance. There should always be clear sight lines between the public space and the workroom so that staff can easily monitor people entering the library and/or needing assistance.

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<sup>6</sup> Photo credit David Harvie.

Equally important to the location of the desk is its height. High desks serve as a psychological and physical barrier, actually inhibiting people from asking for help. This is particularly true for children and people in wheelchairs



Iroquois Ridge Branch, Oakville PL

### **10. An arrangement conducive to independent use**

Library patrons exist on a continuum, ranging from entirely dependent on staff in their use of the library to entirely independent, and, in fact, any given patron may shift their position on that continuum in any given visit. While dependent users rely on the availability, approachability and expertise of staff, independent users rely on the ease of use of the library facility. The very word *facility*, in fact, has as its root the Latin word *facilis* which means to put at ease, posing little if any difficulty. Apart from the obvious applications of self-check technology, there are many interior design features that contribute to ease of use: a logical layout and arrangement of the library (easy to explain); clear sight lines; good lighting; open, uncluttered aisles and floor space separating areas; the use of colour to distinguish between areas; and, most importantly, clear and consistent signage. While staff must be available for anyone requiring assistance, independent use should always be an option.

### **11. A reading oasis with fireplace and comfortable seating**

While made popular by large bookstores like Chapters and Indigo, quiet, cozy havens within libraries are a long tradition that is making an impressive comeback. As lives get busier and busier in the twenty-first century, more and more people crave respite from that busyness, a quiet place where they can relax and, for a time, forget about the many things needing their time and attention. Public libraries, with quiet space, furnished with comfortable lounge seating are well positioned to be that sanctuary or oasis.

Many Carnegie libraries included wood-burning fireplaces with beautiful mantels. Unfortunately, the burning of wood and books do not mix and the mantels have been largely decorative. In recent years, many libraries have installed a gas fireplace or converted a wood one to gas, providing ambience and an extra source of heat, without the hazard to the collection.



Goderich Branch, Huron County PL<sup>7</sup>

## 12. Availability of tea and coffee

While some libraries have a long established practice of making tea and coffee available to patrons, many more have recently started doing so in response to public demand engendered by the popularity of the sip and browse atmosphere created by Chapters and Indigo bookstores. Amenities range from a full-service café/ coffee shop within or adjacent to the library to the simple offering of a kettle and coffee pot with cream and sugar on a self-serve basis, payment left to the honour system. Some libraries have resisted because of a concern for damage to library materials resulting from spilled beverages. However, it must be remembered that most library materials circulate and are, therefore, taken home where spilled beverages are also a distinct possibility. At any rate, it seems pretty apparent that the availability of tea and coffee contributes to the library's success as a pleasant destination, a place to spend time. Some libraries do place special restrictions on eating and drinking near the computers and/or special collections (local history).

## 13. Quiet space and attention to acoustics

Libraries are no longer the eerily quiet, almost silent places they once were. Public libraries, especially, have worked hard to shake off the oppressive insistence upon quiet whispers in favour of being a comfortable, welcoming place for all people, including young children. The library as community gathering place necessitates a tolerance for noise and, at the same time, the library as sanctuary is valued as a quiet place to read. Library planners are wise to incorporate design features that absorb sound and minimize the carrying of noisy chatter while protecting quiet space in part of the library. Such strategies used to achieve that effect include: positioning the quiet reading area as far as possible from both the children's area and the circulation desk; the use of dropped or suspended ceilings in quieter parts of the library; the use of acoustic ceiling tiles; the placement of stacks and furniture into little alcoves that soften noise from beyond; the growing of plants that help absorb noise; the use of carpet and/or area rugs to soften noise; the avoidance of atriums that tend to amplify noise; a library design that keeps meeting rooms, washrooms, fountains, elevators, stairways, etc. outside of the library proper. It

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<sup>7</sup> Photo credit David Harvie.

can be argued that no other issue more challenges library planners than designing a facility that allows for both noise management and the preservation of quiet spaces.

#### **14. Multi-purpose meeting rooms accessible outside of library hours**

Increasingly, library buildings are designed in such a way that the library proper can be closed off separately from meeting rooms and washrooms. This allows for use of meeting rooms outside of library hours, optimizing the library's capacity to be a community gathering place.

#### **15. A captivating, interactive children's area**

The children's area is typically brighter than the rest of the library and decorated in colours and images that appeal to children. The stacks and furnishings are low to the ground, allowing for optimal visibility and accessibility. Toys and games are used to complement the collection in making the library an exciting, engaging place to be. Ideally, the children's library has furnishings scaled to preschool and school-aged children, as well as comfortable seating for children to share with their caregivers.

Storyhour pits have long been a popular feature of children's library design, but are really only successful if the space they occupy is in addition to the square footage required to serve children and their families through the collection and regular seating. Indeed, all enhancements to make the library child-friendly must always take into consideration the collection as the primary service the library offers to children and their caregivers.

For safety purposes, the children's area is best positioned as far away as possible from the library doors. Children are quick and can be out side before anyone realizes it.



Iroquois Ridge Branch, Oakville PL



Essa Township PL



Cavan, Millbrook, North Monaghan PL

### **16. A distinct and welcoming teen area**

It should come as no surprise that young people who are no longer children and not yet adults report they do not feel comfortable in the children's or adult areas of the library, and request a place of their own. Distinguished by colour and layout, and the presence of comfortable, funky furniture, even a small space can make teens feel welcome, as though they, too, belong in the library. Preferably, such a space can be shared by or adjacent to a young adult collection.

It is important to remember that the purpose of a teen space is to make teens feel at home, not to relegate them to an out-of-the-way corner of the library. They have numerous reasons and the right to use any part of the library, provided they are complying with library policy/ code of conduct. Staff attitude is often underestimated as a contributing factor to a welcoming or unwelcoming environment.

Good clear sight lines between the staff area and the teen space can minimize noise and behaviour problems typical of this age group, and can also serve to heighten staff presence, promoting a relationship based on respect and willingness to help, as needed.

### **17. A gallery/exhibit space**

Most recently built libraries include some kind of exhibit space for local art, arts and crafts, collections and/or memorabilia. Whether or not the public library houses a full fledged art gallery is largely dependent upon whether or not one exists elsewhere in the community and whether or not there is a vital arts community, creating a demand for exhibit space. Regardless, it would seem there is a widespread public perception that the public library is an appropriate place to view the works of local artists. An increasing number of libraries have responded favourably to this expectation, not only soliciting and exhibiting local works of art, but hosting and advertising exhibit openings on a regular basis, usually monthly. While some libraries assume this role independently, others find it more feasible to manage art exhibits in conjunction with key community partners, for example, Friends of the Library, artists' guilds, and high school art programs.

Essentially, these libraries are playing the role of mirroring back to the community its creative endeavours, a role well received, even expected, by the community. Significantly, it is a role of the public library that repeatedly brings in a segment of the community that might otherwise not visit the library. Similarly, the public expects libraries to purchase and make available the written works of local authors.

Noteworthy examples of gallery and/or exhibit space include: Cambridge Public Library & Art Gallery; Owen Sound Public Library; Masonville Branch, London Public Library; Leonard E. Shore Memorial Library; Wiarnton Branch, Bruce County Public Library; Collingwood Public Library; Dwight Branch, Lake of Bays Public Library

### **18. Local information displayed prominently and appealingly**

Public libraries are highly valued for their role in heightening community awareness. Bulletin boards, pamphlets and brochures, as well as staff knowledge and awareness, are the primary ways in which public libraries inform the public about community issues, events, organizations and services. Whereas, in the past, out of necessity, such local information was crowded into any available nook and cranny, newer buildings have allowed for optimum space for the housing and displaying of local information. Adequate wall space for a library and community bulletin board is a significant service to the community, especially in smaller, rural communities where there are few public places to promote events. Careful placement of the bulletin board should ensure that people studying/browsing the posters and notices are not made to feel they are in the way of traffic. It is important that a staff member be assigned as regular duties the updating and tidying of local information.

### **19. Preserving the old in the new**

A growing trend in newer library buildings is the inclusion and accentuation of aspects of the old library building and/or other local history. In renovation projects, this typically involves restoring the old interior, replicating some of the old features in the addition, and using colour and design to make the two blend into a cohesive aesthetic experience. Even in brand new library buildings, planners have successfully incorporated a piece of the old library, eg. a fireplace, brick archway, or circulation desk. The presence of historical features in the library building can reflect a commitment to the provision of local history and genealogy.



Listowel Branch, North Perth PL



Goderich Branch, Huron County PL

## 20. Décor appealing to readers and thinkers

Readers who use the public library frequently report that one of the things they value highly about the library is the sense of belonging to a community of readers. Whereas at work and in their daily lives, readers often feel as though they're a rare breed, at the library they are encouraged to think about and talk about what they are reading.

Bookstores and libraries have, in recent years, understood the importance of this sense of belonging and have incorporated into their surroundings images and quotes that encourage and celebrate a love of reading. Examples include murals, posters and paintings depicting readers; quotes on walls; carvings or statues of books or readers; upholstery and fabrics with books as a dominant feature.



“Volumes of Giving” sculpture, Uxbridge PL

## 21. Attention to functionality and ergonomics

By adopting a collaborative, inclusive planning approach, library managers, architects and builders have proven it is entirely possible to build libraries that are functional *and* attractive, beautiful *and* practical. In the past, magnificent library buildings have been constructed with no attention to acoustics, workflow or storage needs; and windowless, concrete libraries have been built with carefully planned functionality, but no warmth or

appeal. Because of increased demand for public accountability and the growing practice of cross-functional/representative building committees overseeing building projects, today's libraries tend to be better planned. This means due attention has been given to such mundane matters as optimum workflow, staff amenities, ergonomic workstations and seating, good sight lines, ample storage, coat hooks and mats for winter boots, even the space required for bulky recycling bins. At the same time, these features are planned for and incorporated into the library design so that the overall effect is uncluttered and orderly, not in any way interfering with the spaciousness or the attractiveness of the library.

Certainly, the demand for public accountability and the wise expenditure of public money makes staff input into planning a new facility or renovation an absolute necessity.

## **22. Built in flexibility for future needs**

Also related to public accountability is the issue of building a facility that will not be outgrown in a few years, a far too frequent experience with public buildings. At the same time, since the cost of the project grows with each square foot, new buildings are typically kept as small as possible as a way of containing costs. It is essential that the library board and the building committee utilize population projections in persuading local politicians and the community to plan for longevity, without being unduly extravagant. Equally important is to build a facility that incorporates principles of flexibility by minimizing the degree to which the interior is divided by permanent walls. A far more effective long-term strategy is to use stacks and furnishings to create distinct areas within the library, allowing for rearrangement as needed. In fact, in Europe some libraries have developed a practice of putting at least some of the stacks on wheels, making it very easy to shift space on an ongoing basis.

Another aspect of flexibility to be considered is the capacity for future expansion, an issue of particular relevance in high-growth communities. Ideally, the library lot is large enough to accommodate a larger building if ever needed. Building up is also a possibility, of course, bearing in mind that multiple floors increase operating costs substantially.