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Redesigning Spaces for Safety, Flexibility, and Sustainability

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📖 Krista is currently reading *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui.

The pandemic has forced libraries to make drastic changes in public spaces. Formerly the community's living room that welcomed sharing and connections among all, libraries reopening to the public are now adding plexiglass barriers at service desks, affixing social-distancing decals on floors, wiping down surfaces, and barricading or removing furniture to prevent prolonged visits or loitering. Once thought of as the "great equalizer" and one of the last places where anyone can stay for long periods without commercial pressure, public libraries are encouraging pandemic-induced "grab and go" service and quick visits. These precautions are necessary to prioritize the health and safety of staff and the public. Yet, plagued with a sense of COVID-fatigue and economic uncertainty, and overwhelmed by hearing from patrons wishing for a return to normalcy, I can't help wondering—How long will these steps continue? Should we be redesigning spaces for the long term? And if this is the "new normal" or "next normal" for public libraries, is it possible to find a sweet spot between spheres of offering welcoming, accessible, and inclusive public spaces that encourage connection while maintaining necessary protocols for public health and safety?

No matter how long the pandemic continues, post-COVID society will likely maintain a more wary stance of being near strangers in high-density and high occupancy settings for extended periods. As Marci Swede is quoted by Ted Anthony, "'No man is an island' has no more truth than when we're talking about the air we're breathing. And it's hard to be around other people when you don't have that sense of trust."[1] Anthony continues, "As isolation ebbs, a similar question confronts Americans repopulating the public places they share. How will these places reshape society— and how will trepidations about a post-isolation world shape them in turn?"[2]

Priorities and Sustainability

I interviewed Elisa Walker, the lead interior designer for McMillan Pazdan Smith's library design team, to better understand how libraries can plan for flexible

and sustainable spaces to align with both rapid flux in institutional priorities and steadfast safety protocols. Her team recognizes that each library space and community is unique and encourages libraries to create "road map master plans" that define a future end goal of success and the components needed to achieve. Having a plan in place for renovating or redesigning spaces allows libraries to strategize beyond immediate need, prioritize, and budget accordingly across fiscal years. As Walker notes, "Since many libraries have limited resources and work with small budgetary installments, making the most of those resources is imperative to accomplishing down-the-road goals."[3]

ALA's "triple bottom line" framework places sustainability at the intersection of practices that are environmentally sound, socially equitable, and economically feasible.[4] Sustainability is a key element to redesigning spaces, not just in sustainability of materials used, but in how the redesigned space accommodates new traffic flows, accessibility, and environmental support of altered workloads from added safety protocols and service models. For example, a library that continues offering a popular curbside service after reopening doors to public visits may find the additional service to interfere with traffic patterns of patrons within the library. Juggling the additional service and "playing Frogger" with patrons gathering at the library entrance may hinder efficiency and drain energy from staff and patrons alike. As Walker notes, "The effort and time required of staff to offer these services optimally will take a toll as the physical spaces reopen and other job requirements need to be met. Without building adaptations and operational modifications, maintaining the expected level of service will prove difficult."[5] Intentionally considering traffic flow and space design alongside priorities in customer behavior and service will minimize conflict and draw libraries closer to the middle ground between welcoming and accessible spaces and measures for health and safety.

Race Track Design

Walker's team promotes a "race-track design," or traffic path of imaginary concentric circles that places self-serve materials near the entrance for convenience, allowing for quick "grab and go" service for cautious and more at-risk patrons. From this starting point, Walker suggests working outward from most-used collections and popular spaces to least-visited areas of the collection. In architecture and design, "circulation" refers to the way visitors move through the space within a building. Placing the most-used resources near the entry will save patrons from having to venture further than necessary in the building or navigate around other visitors. As Walker states,

To minimize cross contact and unnecessary density, it's important to design public libraries sequentially from the entry, starting with the most popular program spaces, then critical resources and collections with the highest circulation rates, working back to the least visited spaces and collections. With this approach, patrons are able to access the critical resources they need with less risk of circulating as "through-traffic."

Walker promotes this traffic pattern in "back-of-house" work areas as well to allow for proper distancing to avoid cross contact among staff. She notes, "It provides inherent autonomy so that staff and patrons have options as they circulate through a space. If someone is in the aisle you were planning to take, you can easily shift to a free aisle without back-pedaling and creating 'traffic jams.'"

Modular Flexibility and Variety

Along with consideration of circulation and traffic patterns in public areas, Walker advises incorporating flexibility in redesigned spaces through use of modular shelving and furniture. While many libraries were incorporating modular fixtures such as rolling shelves and retractable room dividers before the pandemic, the flexibility of moveable shelves and furniture in redirecting traffic, creating more

distance, and redesigning areas has become even more desirable as libraries aim to safely restart services and reopen spaces. Being able to rearrange rolling furniture allows libraries to redesign spaces without costly structural renovations to buildings. As Walker states, "We have a unique opportunity to embrace the flexibility and adaptability that sets us up to respond to unexpected circumstances now and in the future. Buildings, spaces, and furnishings that are rapidly adaptable and inherently flexible make it easy to reorganize a library with little to no structural modifications needed."

In addition to the flexibility that results from modular furniture, Walker suggests offering a variety of seating options and arrangements to promote low-density occupancy in these times of social distancing. She advocates offering cues through space design to make social distancing and safety intuitive to visitors. Many libraries have removed or barricaded comfortable furniture to dissuade long visits. As we emerge further from isolation, how and when we reintroduce various types of more comfortable furniture and arrange spaces can provide silent guidance to patrons for expected behaviors, length of visit, and ownership over their own safety measures and comfort levels. As Walker describes, "Planning an intentional variety has benefits for maintaining distance; while

they may seem subtle, it provides social distancing cues that are intuitive."

For libraries receiving CARES funding for COVID-related upgrades, other building improvements may include upgrading high-touch surfaces to materials able to withstand multiple cleanings, and upgrading fixtures such as faucets, soap dispensers, and hand dryers to "no-touch" automatic options. These improvements, along with automatic entry doors and light switches, can also help increase building accessibility for people with disabilities. Of buildings designed around modular flexibility and accessibility, Walker notes, "Investing in solutions that solve problems now and can be modified for future use supports rapid adaptability and rebranding goals while maintaining a focus on accessibility and self-service."

Drive-Through Convenience

"Drive up" or "drive through" windows are not new concepts to libraries. The public library where I did my graduate school internship in the early 2000s already had a window for conveniently picking up reserved materials. Yet with increased attention to safety protocols, curbside service, and grab and go practices, drive through windows are even more appealing to those systems with funding available for structural renovations. The option is also an attractive

solution to sustaining new service levels without overwhelming staff or creating competing traffic patterns inside buildings. As Walker relates, "An example of a building design solution to minimize the burden on operations is a drive-through pickup window as an alternative to the traditional holds within the building or labor-intensive curbside service."

Walker advises library administration to conduct a feasibility study if interested in installing a pickup window in an existing building structure. She notes the importance of having the window adjacent to the staff workroom to maintain efficient traffic patterns between the window, holds area, and return processing without needing a separate staging area. When integrated with the staff workroom, the drive-through window can be more efficient than curbside pickup or a self-service holds area inside

READ MORE

Rebekkah Smith Aldrich, *Sustainable Thinking: Ensuring Your Library's Future in an Uncertain World* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2018).

Michael Gorman, *Our Enduring Values Revisited: Librarianship in an Ever-Changing World* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2015).

the library. Traffic patterns of cars and other vehicles visiting the window, along with pedestrian safety in the parking lot and surrounding areas for library visitors, are extra considerations of installing a window in an existing structure.

Thinking Outside the Library

A large movement was starting before the pandemic of reaching underserved populations by taking programs, services, and materials "on the road" outside of library buildings through mobile units, off-site partnerships, and pop-up libraries. The need to self-isolate and social distance encourages staff to continue thinking beyond library walls with curbside service, mail and home delivery, and grab-and-go activities. As promotion and use of online resources and offerings increased during COVID, many libraries turned to lending hotspots and devices and extending Wi-Fi access outdoors to increase accessibility. While buildings were closed, the importance of a welcoming and accessible website as the main entry point to public library resources and services became even more apparent. Even as libraries reopen doors and gradually increase access to inside and in-person programs and services, the website and online presence as a "virtual third space" will likely continue to be an area of focus for upgrades and redesign for many public libraries. The

pandemic brought more awareness to the lack of access to connectivity in underserved communities and must be considered along with the redesign of online spaces that aim for equity and inclusivity.

Public Space and Democracy

As more of society reopens and self-isolation lessens, is it possible for public libraries to return to their role as a place for town-hall discussions and participatory democracy? As Weidl, Huff, and Hynes note,

> So much has transpired in 2020, but one thing has not changed; our innate desire to gather. Our urban areas serve a vital role in our communal identity, providing a place to come together, to celebrate, exchange ideas, and protest injustices. We're in a unique moment in time; a moment of self-reflection, an opportunity to examine traditional strategies and strive for more inclusive process that embraces diverse perspectives while amplifying their voices.[6]

Public libraries have done an admirable job of continuing opportunities for participatory democracy in virtual settings (see Best Practices, Sept./Oct. 2020). However, as Anthony quotes John Parkinson, "Democracy depends to a surprising extent on the availability of physical, public space, even in our

allegedly digital world."[7] As libraries are in a unique position of reimagining programs and services for the "next normal" of a post-COVID world, we also have the opportunity to rethink our use of space to optimize the values and opportunities that are top priorities in our communities. As Weidl, Huff, and Hynes write, "Rethinking the public realm in the wake of COVID-19 is the first step in a larger conversation about how we reconsider public space design, the importance of inclusive design processes, and how we advance an entirely new public social contract."[8] There is still much uncertainty about a timeline for a return to prepandemic types of high density programs and services. Public libraries can take incremental and gradual steps to create safe, welcoming, and accessible places that meet current protocols while intentionally preparing for future change and adaptability through careful redesigning of public spaces. PL

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8. Weidl, Huff, and Hynes, "Rethinking Public Space with Empathy."

Learning Tapas from PLA

Bite-sized professional development resources just for you! PLA has announced two members-only professional development resources. PLA's new Learning Tapas are quick, self-paced videos with corresponding guidebooks designed to provide a "taste" or introduction to the topic at hand. Effective Networking Skills sets the participant up for networking success with guidelines, space for self-reflection, and additional resources. Finding a Mentor or a Coach directs the participant through the journey of finding a mentor, including setting goals, working agreements, and mentee responsibilities. The Learning Tapas videos and guidebooks are free to all PLA members and can be found in the PLA Member Library in ALA Connect (ALA member login required: https://connect.ala.org/home). If you have any issues logging into ALA Connect, please email customerservice@ala.org.

Digital Skills and Employment Webinar

PLA's free webinar, "150 Million New Technology-Oriented Jobs and the Skills Needed to Get Them," is now available to view online. The webinar identified ten jobs that are well-positioned to continue to grow in the future and shared time-limited resources to integrate into the library's programming and communications, such as free learning paths and LinkedIn Learning classes and low-cost Microsoft Certifications. Examples from the Kenton County (KY) Public Library and the Washington State Library were provided. "The value of certification is increasingly recognized as the best way to validate a specific skill set acquired through nontraditional learning," said Elizabeth Iaukea, workforce development librarian at the Washington State Library. "It's especially useful for entry-level positions and career changers as a way to prove continuous learning and growth." View the webinar here: https://bit.ly/37bW6hv.

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