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Libraries reinvent themselves for the 21st century

Beyond the stacks

By Tom Mullaney

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For centuries, the defining role of the library has been as a repository of books. Now, in the 21st   advertisement
century, the library faces perhaps its most momentous challenge: Americans are moving away
increasingly from the printed page to digital screens for information and communication.

Library leaders nationwide are adapting to this shift by reimagining the library as an engaged community center.
The role of librarians is being re-branded to reflect their expertise as content curators and trusted navigators in an
ever-expanding ocean of information — in whatever format it may exist.

Core issues — including technology integration, new services, institutional identity and right-sizing collections
(consider the flap over New York Public Library's proposed redesign) — are under active review. Last month,
the American Library Association announced it had received a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library
Services to establish a Center for the Future of Libraries.

What will the nation's 9,000 public libraries be like in 2020 and beyond? Starting this summer, when the ALA
hosted its annual conference here in Chicago — its theme was "Transforming Libraries, Ourselves" — Printers
Row Journal began examining this question. Visits to several new and recently renovated Chicagoland libraries,
reports from other cities, and interviews with library directors offer clues.

Space

Walk into Arlington Heights Memorial Library, whose renovations were completed this year, and you'll see an
expansive, open space. Several dividing walls have been removed. One section of the library, Marketplace,

mimics a supermarket aisle, with 20,000 books, DVDs and music CDs. Books are divided by category — Cookbooks, Health, Jobs & Money and Trending — and shelved with covers, rather than spines, facing out.

The attractive display is so popular, reports library executive director Jason Kuhl, that although it occupies only 10 percent of floor space, Marketplace accounts for more than one-quarter of the library's 2.6 million circulation. "It's much easier to find a cookbook here than under its 641.5 (Dewey Decimal System) classification," Kuhl says.

This is just one example of how libraries have begun to rethink library design. Striking architecture — LEED-certified, energy efficient with green roofs — and an expanded portfolio of practices that broaden the library's community impact are central. For cities without the funds to build new libraries from scratch, a promising solution lies in repurposing abandoned and vacant commercial properties. The city of McAllen, Texas, purchased a vacant 123,000-square-foot former Walmart that MSR, a Minneapolis architectural firm, transformed into a new main library.

In existing libraries, former storage areas and the elimination of stacks of reference books and magazine back issues have enabled architects to give old spaces new life. A study of the Pew Internet & American Life Project indicated that 59 percent of library users want more comfortable reading areas. Glenview Public Library and Arlington Heights Memorial Library both feature living room-like spaces with plush chairs and fireplaces.

Another major trend in library design, digital studios, began as a way to entice a younger, digitally savvy audience. Now, library directors report, adults are flocking to them to convert old photographs and vinyl discs to digital formats and to create podcasts. Local businesses are using studios to make marketing videos.

Traditionally, libraries have served two populations: young children and adults. Teenagers were a lost demographic.

"That's a group that libraries tend to lose, especially when they turn 16," says Kuhl. "It's a group that wants to create their own space, which is one thing that was keeping them from the library. They never felt welcome."

In addition to digital studios, libraries nationwide have begun to offer dedicated, tech-rich teen spaces. Arlington's library has The Hub, a large glassed-in room where teens study in groups, play video games or design products with a 3-D printer. The Vortex is Bolingbrook's similar space in the Fountaindale Public Library. Staff at both sites report the spaces are packed every afternoon after school.

The New York Public Library opened its first full-floor dedicated teen space in a branch last year. The design, which won a 2013 American Institute of Architects/American Library Association Building Award, converted 4,400 square feet of unused space into a colorful environment with bleacher-style seating, akin to what project architect Lyn Rice calls "a clubhouse where teens can be themselves and a little louder."

The Chicago Public Library has its YouMedia teen showcase at Harold Washington Library Center and four branches. Library Commissioner Brian Bannon said YouMedia will debut in six additional branches next year along with 12 roving pop-up venues around the city.

Chicago's Harold Washington Library had the misfortune to open in 1991, just before the start of the digital era. The floor plan thus follows a traditional spatial arrangement for furnishings, reading areas and book display. Bannon said a spatial study is underway to introduce "some experiments" — including the newly installed

Innovation Lab, which features a 3-D printer — and to create a more contemporary environment.

"We are looking at ways in which to align our services with what our patrons need," he says.

Library staff are working with IDEO, a "human-centered" design practice, to update the building's functional program. This fall, staff held the Library Redesign Challenge, a pop-up display in the lobby that asked patrons what changes they'd like to see. Among user suggestions were better Wi-Fi, lounge areas with couches, more enclosed spaces and "nooks everywhere with good lamps."

Services

A Pew Internet and American Life Project study this year found that 91 percent of Americans 16 years or older say public libraries are important to their communities. Yet just 22 percent say they know most of the services their libraries offer now, and 31 percent said they know little or nothing about such offerings.

Libraries are abuzz with services that go beyond traditional fare to offer more active programming for patrons. The title of a recent talk at the Wisconsin Library Association sums up the new philosophy in programming: "From Repository to Experience: Library Becomes a Verb."

New initiatives include Glenview's drive-up window for customers' pick-up orders; Oak Park, Skokie and Arlington public libraries' off-site book discussions; and Arlington's tech "petting zoo," which allows patrons to test various models of computer tablets.

Chicago Public Library recently rolled out several new services. All of its 80 branches offer Teacher in the Library, an after-school program to aid students with homework. In the summer, Chicago instituted the Summer Learning Challenge to counteract students' usual "summer slide" after school lets out: 71,000 students read a reported 2.1 million books.

Barbara Stripling, president of the American Library Association, says these initiatives mark "a huge shift in turning libraries into learning centers." Many who lost their jobs in the 2008 crash started their own companies from home. Arlington Heights Memorial Library's response was to open its Business Center. Library director Kuhl says entrepreneurs and business owners come for coaching and guidance on financial, marketing and tech matters that they couldn't otherwise afford. The Harold Washington Library Center offers a similar program with its recently launched Geeks in Residence program.

Libraries here and nationally are adding more meeting rooms for patrons to use for business appointments, community gatherings or private study. Glenview's community rooms are separate from the library area so meetings can be held after library hours.

Both suburban libraries feature computer labs where patrons learn tech skills. Arlington programs more than 50 tech classes each month on Microsoft Office and social media sites, such as LinkedIn, Pinterest and Twitter. Standard computer use is down slightly, reports Kuhl, but tech classes are booming.

"It's more about learning the tool than just providing the tool," he said.

Such an attitude reflects an emerging commitment by libraries to lifelong learning. The fast pace of new knowledge, college's high cost, plus the need to gain or maintain professional skills, will drive the demand for more adult courses now through 2020. A current hot topic among librarians involves introducing massive open

online courses, or MOOCs. Margaret Donnellan Todd, County of Los Angeles Public Librarian, recently told a professional audience that she has put MOOCs into the library's new strategic plan.

"In the future, we see the library becoming a local meeting place for people enrolled in specific MOOCs," Todd said. "We also believe we may offer group MOOC viewing — perhaps for literacy-based classes, GED prep and courses from Gage's Ed2Go platform."

Storytelling

Librarians have been touting their shift to community learning centers for about a decade, yet public perception lags behind, said Bannon, the Chicago Public Library commissioner.

"The challenge is that so many people perceive the brand of a public library solely with the checking out of a physical object," he said, noting that the library system is the city's most visited cultural institution, registering 12 million visitors annually. "Libraries of the future will be less about stuff we are providing than about how we are connecting with our communities."

And yet a recent Urban Libraries Council report argued that libraries' "stature as civic engagement leaders is far from confirmed." According to the report, libraries need to change both how they view themselves and how community stakeholders' view them.

Two responses the library profession has mounted to meet this challenge are Edge, a $5.6 million tech initiative supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and California State Library's Story Map.

Stacey Aldrich, California's former state librarian and currently deputy secretary of education and commissioner for Pennsylvania libraries, and Michael Margolis, an adviser who teaches "transformational storytelling," unveiled an illustrated story map at the state library conference November 2012. Although libraries are reportedly the most trusted government bodies, Margolis said, that esteem doesn't always translate into public financial support. The map's introduction states that it was designed to "help librarians reframe community conversations taking place regarding the compelling ways libraries are adapting to the 21st century."

Edge, a more ambitious undertaking being tested for national launch next month, will develop the first set of national benchmarks to improve public access to technology services and demonstrate libraries' community impact. The Edge grant was a response to the field's demand for "a tool or resource to capture and explain the services they were providing," according to Chris Jowaisas, the Gates Foundation's senior program officer for global libraries. He noted that, as more areas of national life — taxes, employment, health care — move online, libraries need better research to guide their interactions with technology and local communities.

Testing has been underway for the last year in seven state library systems nationwide, including Chicago. After completing the assessment, libraries will receive recommendations and resources to make informed decisions.

The Edge tool kit is designed to improve the technology services a library provides, encourage sharing of best practices among library peers nationwide, and enhance engagement with community decision-makers, according to an Edge statement.

After Edge's rollout, the library association's new Center for the Future of Libraries plans to host forums with assorted library stakeholders to address common issues. A library summit is planned for May, said library association president Stripling. Fifty thought leaders will be invited, half from the library community.

"We will pay attention to what and how we measure value," she said. "Part of what we're doing is figuring out how we can be accountable to our funders."

Tom Mullaney is a Chicago freelance journalist.

21st century library services

If you haven't been to your local library in a year or more, it's time to go. Here's a glimpse of some of the relatively new services available at local libraries.

→**Digital studios:** Arlington Heights Memorial Library, Fountaindale Public Library (Bolingbrook), Skokie Public Library

→**Dedicated teen zones:** Arlington Heights, Fountaindale (Bolingbrook), Chicago Public Library (various locations), Evanston Public Library, Glenview Public Library, Oak Park Public Library, Skokie

→**Conference rooms:** Arlington Heights (14), Chicago (varies by location), Evanston (14), Glenview (8), Oak Park (5), Skokie (16)

→**Computer and social media classes:** Arlington, Glenview, Oak Park, Skokie

→**Small business/technology centers:** Arlington, Chicago, Skokie

→**3-D printers:** Arlington, Fountaindale (Bolingbrook), Chicago, Evanston

For details, visit:

Arlington Heights Memorial Library at **ahml.info**.

Fountaindale Public Library (Bolingbrook) at **fountaindale.org**.

Chicago Public Library at **chipublib.org**.

Evanston Public Library at **epl.org**.

Glenview Public Library at **glenviewpl.org**.

Oak Park Public Library at **oppl.org**.

Skokie Public Library at **skokie.lib.il.us**.