Change and the Older Library Building

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Old library buildings like many old buildings, until recent years, have often been viewed as obstacles to progress and development, contributing to economic stagnation and decline. The attitude was so deeply ingrained that old buildings were sometimes seen as the cause of the community's problems; problems that would disappear if all the old buildings were cleared away. The popularity of redevelopment by this "slash and burn" approach has faded with the successes of adaptive use projects. In Indianapolis, the renovation of the historic City Market and the planned development of Union Station are helping to turn the City Center around economically. Why should this be any different in the smaller communities of Indiana? Smaller towns, like big cities, have local landmarks which should be saved and utilized. These may include the Courthouse, train station or the old Carnegie Public Library.

The public library is far more than a visual landmark. It is a major activity focus in the community and a valuable resource for the community's future. If one looks at the typical Carnegie Library, one finds what was originally a sound, functional and flexible library facility. Andrew Carnegie's charge to local communities to whom he gave his grants was to build libraries—functional and efficient, attractive but not monumental. And that is what was done all over the Untied States. In the 70 years that have passed, changes in information technology, growth of collections and random change have all contributed to turning the once efficient libraries into cluttered, substandard ones. Change has happened at all levels - every time a new book or piece of equipment was added, someone had to decide where to put it. Each of these little decisions combined and unplanned could lead to entropy.

As services evolve, programs should be re-evaluated and modified to fit within the overall structure. As an example, when the Indianapolis Public Library first began to use microfilm for periodicals, it was a minor component of the division. Hence it was put in the periodical room. Now, the microform service has grown to such a degree that it is disrupting the services for bound periodicals and vice versa. In addition, the large open reading room with uncontrollable natural light and a variety of other distractions is inefficient. Now a separate microform department is being developed with 25 reader and printer stations, providing increased efficiency and ease of client service.

This scenario can be repeated in endless variations to explain why a library facility evolves to one of disorganization and inefficiency. The solution is not to simply knock down one building, build a new structure and start over on the cycle of change and creeping disorganization, but rather to develop a systematic and well-reasoned planning cycle. The outcome of a planning cycle may be as simple as rearranging furniture or as complicated as a major building program. Also, the ever increasing pace at which information technology is evolving and changing will have as great an impact on libraries in the next generation as the development of movable type had 500 years ago.

Planning for updating library facilities requires a multi-directional approach. Not only does it take extensive work by a professional library staff to assess the actual programmatic needs of the library, it takes equally detailed work by an architect to look at the functional, economic, energy and life safety code related aspects of the planning process. If there is an existing library building which is being considered for continued use, these requirements are all given an added dimension of complexity. The existing building has its own distinct architectural flavor and features. Unfortunately, many older buildings suffer from highly unattractive, but often quite cosmetic, modifications such as peeling institutional green paint, strip fluorescent lighting, suspended ceiling—all hiding architectural detail. Even clutter and mismatched furniture serve to make the buildings less than aesthetically pleasing. It is important to understand the building's original design and architectural character before modifying it. Too often when the decision is made to renovate an existing library, the architecture of the old building seems to have gotten in the architect's way. In the name of progress, the windows have been bricked up, the main entry has been moved, and the front steps replaced with a flower planter; interiors were gutted— removing ornamental plaster work, hardwood woodwork, even stained glass. This is not using the old building as a resource or recognizing its unique character.

When renovating an existing building, the planning must be approached working from opposite directions towards the middle. The two directions are 1) the functional requirements of the anticipated library facility and 2) the architectural and aesthetic potential of the existing building. In dealing with an old building such as a Carnegie-type library, there is no typical building solution because no two buildings are alike, nor library programs the same. They demand an individualized approach to truly meet and satisfy their particular needs.

A master planning cycle begins with data collection. In the data collection phase, several semi-independent planning tracts are followed. The intent is to assemble the basic information on the building and its functional requirements, not prejudging the relative merits of any component. It is not possible or practical to attempt to develop any tract in isolation as all tracts have sufficient requirements which must be met in the final design solution. An obvious first tract is the facilities program which is normally developed by the library's professional staff. It will provide the basic data for the optimum use program. Unlike the other planning tracts which are essentially prepared by the architect, the facilities program has to be developed and accepted by the owner early in the planning process. It is understood that an optimum facilities program is an ideal. With a renovation project, it is not always possible to meet every program requirement without some modification.

When working with an older building, particularly one of the Carnegie era, preservation/restoration data tract is an important planning component. An architectural/historical evaluation is needed to provide the general information and detailed analysis of the architectural design merits of the building. The interior spaces should be divided into zones for evaluation based on design differences, various architectural finishes and spatial characteristics. The objective is to identify those areas and features which should be restored and those which can be modified and adapted as the building program would dictate.

A third data tract is the building code and life safety requirements. A thorough evaluation is made of the building as it complies with both the intent and letter of the applicable codes. The evaluation reviews the codes for conformance relative to anticipated space utilization. Solutions are found to meet the letter of the code wherever possible and the intent of the code where existing conditions do not permit actual compliance. With older library buildings, typical code problems are insufficient numbers of or illegal means of egress, lack of area separation for fire zones, the absence of automatic fire suppression or fire warning systems and handicapped accessibility of the buildings.

The general building condition is the fourth tract which is a review of all the building systems and building fabric based on a detailed physical inspection. The review addresses the general condition, structural condition, plumbing, heating, ventilation, air conditioning and electrical systems. The site and landscape development tract assesses the existing site, its significance and evaluates where improvements and modifications are required.

Once the data is collected and evaluated, individual priorities within each tract are established. As with any planning process, it is not always possible to meet every programmatic requirement. Therefore, prioritizing is important to establish the most important components. This approach gives the building committee a clear understanding of the way the architectural planning and design will progress. It also serves to demystify the planning process and make it more understandable. After the program is established and accepted by the building committee, the process of architectural design proceeds through schematic design, design development, construction documents and construction. This is true whether one is talking about renovation of an existing building or construction of a new facility. The key to success is comprehensive planning at the beginning to produce a clear understanding of what the new library facility should be.