

## PLANNING LIBRARY FACILITIES TODAY

Twenty-one months ago, April 2001, in preliminary study leading to this Master Facilities Plan for the Louisville Free Public Library, we at PROVIDENCE Associates Inc stated what we believed – and still believe – a public library can be and do. We said:

As centers of lifelong learning, public libraries help communities develop productive members. They also help form critical thinkers, essential to the health of our democracy. With adequate support, public libraries are able to:

- Provide cultural, informational, educational, and leisure resources
- Adapt and continuously improve the availability of information services
- Promote and affirm the value of reading
- Give the book its proper place, and provide books when books serve needs best
- Provide trained and helpful staff
- Offer a safe, enjoyable, and friendly place for people and ideas, setting the library as a stage for community life
- Respect and protect the rights of individuals to obtain and use information
- Function as a cornerstone of democracy based on free and equal access to information
- Rely primarily on public funds for support in order to ensure continued public ownership.<sup>1</sup>

Now, with this Master Plan, it is time to focus on the physical facilities that are being recommended for the Louisville Free Public Library (LFPL). What should they include? What services and functions should be provided for?

Public library facilities are opportunities for communities to aspire to the highest levels of service. They need to express dignity, permanence, and a civic pride. They

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<sup>1</sup> *Louisville Free Public Library Long-Range Facilities Plan. PROVIDENCE Associates Inc, April 2001.*

are gathering places built not only for functionality, but also to delight, to bring a higher sense of purpose.

*Publicly accessible spaces can have, and should have, a civic orientation that is direct, palpable, and in place for the purposes of reminding all who enter and pass by both of who we are and who we might become.*

When Thomas Jefferson contemplated the role of physical design within the context of education, opportunity, and community his design was based upon the notion that architecture can facilitate discourse and a sense of community. The public architecture of today, we believe, has the challenge to return to earlier generation's vision of public buildings while inventing functioning public spaces for the future. Publicly accessible spaces can have, and should have, a civic orientation that is direct, palpable, and in place for the purposes of reminding all who enter and pass by both of who we are and who we might become.

## **PLANNING FOR LOUISVILLE**

Louisville should expect its libraries of the future to create, in their own way, a sense of rejuvenation, a sense of pride, a sense of ownership. The several library projects recommended in this *Master Facilities Plan* should result in new public library buildings that aspire to become much more than what the community has settled for over the past few years. The new libraries can provide a perfect juxtaposition to capture the hearts and minds of people and to provide the enchantment essential to a city that is on the brink of greatness. The Louisville Free Public Library can become the soul of the city if given the support it needs that is so long overdue.

The new library facilities – be they branch libraries, regional libraries, or a Main Library – must be aesthetically pleasing and enhance the environment of Greater Louisville. As important as a public library is to a community, these projects must integrate the environment and public use of urban space. Community gathering occurs both indoors as well as outdoors. Library plazas can become centers of inspiration for young and old alike.

Louisville has an opportunity to build a series of new library facilities that are much more than buildings that warehouse books and computers. This Master Plan should be viewed as an opportunity to build a public library system that aesthetically compliments the city and provides experiences that enhance and provokes the education, information gathering, and acquisition of knowledge for all people in this new century.

Building new libraries at this time can provide all residents of the city an opportunity to experience spaces that function as a renaissance for learning. The LFPL's new, and renovated, public library facilities can and should strive to be multi-sensory learning centers. They should be places like the best of teachers, giving students of all ages the ability to learn for themselves.

## **PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND STABILITY**

The traditional library buildings that many have grown up to know and love are filled with books and offer a sense of stability and comfort. This stability is important to maintain as the LFPL sets out to expand its role in the information and learning community.

*The knowledge that children and their caregivers continue to come to the library for story hour and to borrow books to read together at bedtime is an essential element of life in Louisville that should not be changed.*

The knowledge that children and their caregivers continue to come to the library for story hour and to borrow books to read together at bedtime is an essential element of life in Louisville that should not be changed. Indeed, the LFPL should want to enrich these experiences with books by providing discovery centers, experiences, programs, and classes of all types and kind. In short, the LFPL should strive to provide multiple ways to interact with information in all formats for all persons.

The role of the public library in today's society is undergoing a fundamental transition. The new library buildings must incorporate and integrate three elements into a meaningful and cohesive whole. They must be:

- The traditional library
- A center for technology
- As a community gathering place.

Consider the following, as envisioned by another library client of PROVIDENCE Associates Inc:

To read about butterflies is one layer of knowledge, to watch them cocoon and go through the process of chrysalis, then see them flying through the garden, provides a sense of magic. To video tape this process and integrate into a story or report at the library provides for integration of learning. To have butterfly nurseries where we can watch this process gives us another layer of experience. To access this experience via the Internet, combined with books, music, literature integrates the learning even further. As we develop an awareness of learning styles and intelligence, we understand that learning takes place in multiple ways. The

library has an opportunity and a responsibility of creating education environments that expand traditional learning. Following the oral tradition, the printed word provided unique learning experiences that became the mass-market method of communication and education. We are experiencing the beginning of yet another transition. The reliance on the printed word is declining and the use of image in communication is expanding. This change may be decried as a demise in education and learning, it is actually an evolutionary shift on the continuum of communication. Libraries have choices: become a dinosaur, the place where people used to go to check out books, or evolve as learning centers. There are few places in our culture positioned to provide the integration of learning in a multi-sensory experience besides the public library. This transition into multi-media/multi-sensory communication and learning is a natural one, one that the library can foster and support.<sup>2</sup>

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

As digital information increasingly becomes the rule, and not the exception, the public libraries of tomorrow – if not of today – have their work cut out for them as they transform their mission, their design, and the public perception of their services. Designing libraries for the digital future requires substantially different types of spaces. These spaces include – at least in some buildings:

- Computer training areas
- Video production areas
- Digital conferencing and meeting areas of different sizes.

Designing public library facilities for the future is going to require re-thinking the vision of the institution as well as a high degree of adaptability. Just as technology is redefining how we use information and how we communicate with each other, it can also create isolation. Virtual experiences may support collaboration and community building. They cannot, we contend, replace real life, person-to-person experiences. Nor should they!

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, Pam Sandlain. 2001.

As many in our society spend more time in front of computer screens and talking on cellular telephones, the opportunity to spend time in the company of others becomes more and more essential. Meeting spaces, places to collaborate in small groups, communal thinking places, and public spaces for spontaneous gathering become more essential. As technology takes precedence, people will seek out opportunities to be with other people. Public spaces in public libraries can provide the perfect gathering opportunity.

The public library may be the only place in the community where all members can come to in a free and welcoming atmosphere. Public libraries can function as anchoring institutions with their meeting and conference rooms, courtyards, plazas, and gardens – all critical to the creation of community space. This contribution will play a major role in bringing neighborhoods together psychologically, emotionally, and physically – into world class cities. Public libraries will become – and many already are – one of the few places where persons of affluence sit next to those less fortunate reading the same literature, regardless of format, on a daily basis. Fostering such experiences is critical for the building of cities of excellence.

This expansion of information technologies and community gathering places requires more, not less space, in public library facilities being planned today. This increased allocation provides for a variety of different uses such as comfortable reading spaces, meeting rooms for collaborative and distance learning, and substantially increased space for personal computers.

Another spatial consideration is the requirement for division of quiet and active spaces. Many library customers miss the quiet libraries of the past. Providing places for thinking and contemplation is as essential in the facilities of tomorrow as are the larger open areas. In order to accommodate both personal spaces and areas of increased activity including interactive media, programs and collaboration, additional space and division are essential. The blend of interactivity with comfort and quiet requires sophisticated design integration into the public library of the future.

## **THE CHALLENGE AND THE OPPORTUNITY**

As this Master Plan is considered in the weeks and months ahead we at PROVIDENCE Associates Inc believe that the words of Andrew Carnegie bear repeating:

The public library outranks any other things that a community can do to help its people.

That is the challenge and the opportunity that Louisville now has before it. It is time to accept the challenge and deliver on the opportunity!