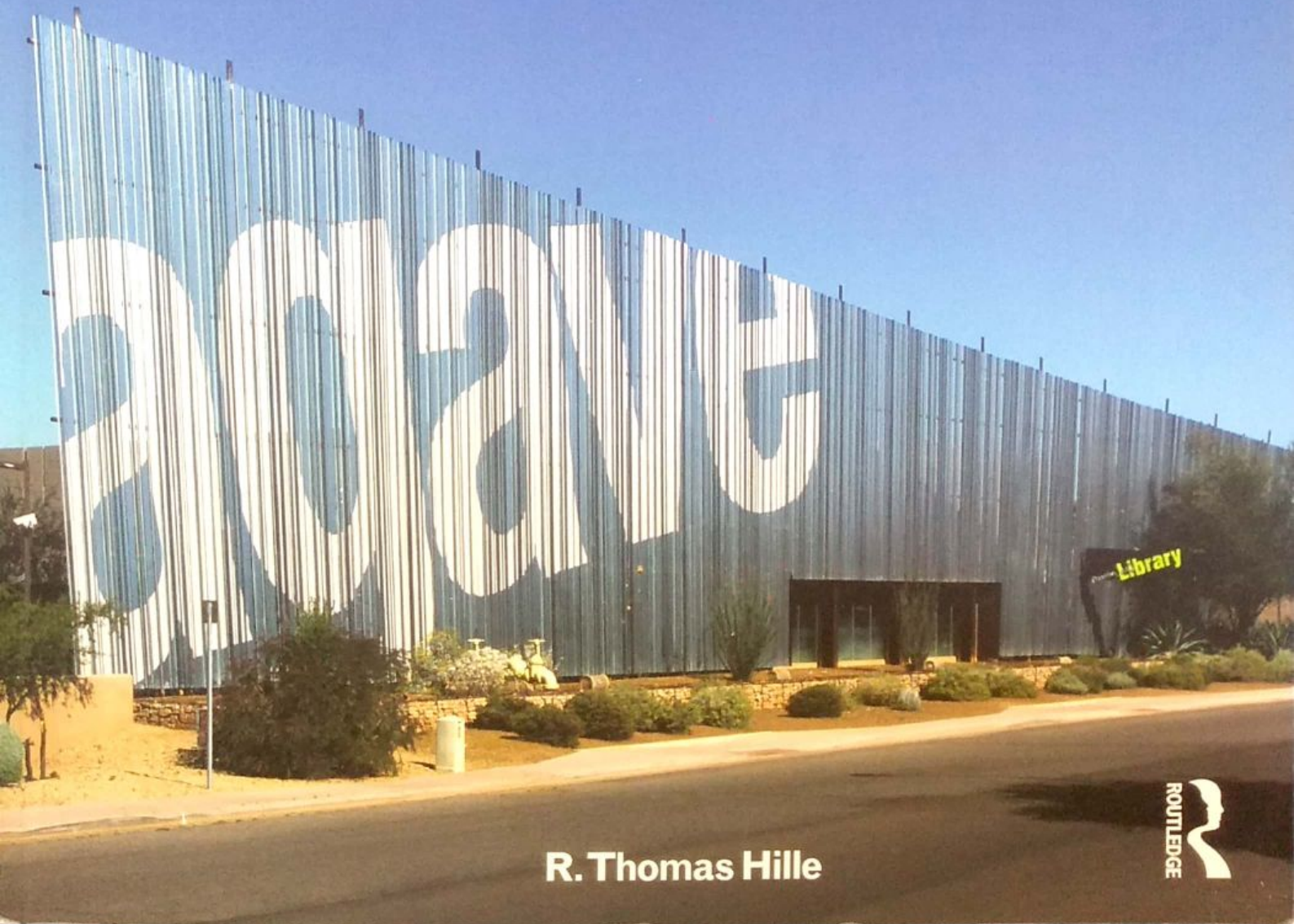


The New Public Library

Design Innovation for the Twenty-First Century



R. Thomas Hille

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**The New
Public Library**

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for the
Twenty-First Century

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Preface

There is perhaps no institution more fundamentally democratic than the American public library, which came into existence over a century and a half ago, and has thrived ever since. To accommodate this unique institution, public library design has evolved over time to address the many practical and logistical challenges intrinsic to the project type and also the special architectural opportunities it represents. Architects and librarians, as well as those who use libraries, have strong ideas about library design based on different experiences and expectations, and the various functional, technical and aesthetic considerations that come into play.

As an architect, my own interest in libraries comes from experience in practice and teaching, and my desire to better understand the architectural potential of this important project type through the study of exemplary work, past and present. The process of investigation began here with the compilation of reference material on new public libraries, the documentation of which was assembled incrementally over time from a variety of secondary sources, supplemented eventually with field visits and photographic documentation of my own. To better understand these projects and the context of their development, I subsequently found it useful to delve into related historical precedents, documenting the evolution of the project type and its influences over time. The series of design themes that course through the study, informing the analysis of projects and precedents, came initially from my experience in practice and teaching, working with client groups on projects to articulate design goals and priorities. The resulting synthesis of these three components, I believe, presents a fairly comprehensive picture of the current state of the art in public library design, its development over time, and the underlying concepts that characterize this unique project type and its potential for future development.

Regarding the material itself, several additional observations are useful here for clarification. First, as a design study, the emphasis throughout is on visual representation of the work, relying extensively on scale drawings and photographs, with supportive text as necessary to provide background and clarify intent. Many of the photographs are my own, showing lighting conditions, wear and tear, and other signs of inhabitation "as found"—an acknowledgement of the everyday use of the library environment, which is often more cluttered and disarrayed than architects might like it to be. Also, people and activities are shown, wherever possible, in the photographs as indications of inhabitation; however, in many libraries photographs of patrons and staff are not allowed. Most of the drawings here are reconstituted from a variety of mostly secondary sources indicated in the bibliography and may vary somewhat in detail and accuracy, depending on the quality of the source material itself. Indications of furnishings, in many cases, are also lacking in the source drawings, unavoidably limiting the understanding of the way spaces are actually used.

Lastly, as a footnote on relevance, the emphasis here on public libraries versus academic libraries, research libraries, and archives is a deliberate acknowledgement, indeed a celebration of the social and political nature of the institution's charter, which guarantees free and open access for everyone to the information, ideas, and learning opportunities public libraries offer. In the current era of "alternative facts" and "fake news", privatization of public education and related resources, and the general attack on our most basic democratic institutions, this is worth bearing in mind. In the words of James Madison: "A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives".* Public libraries offer us that opportunity.

* *Epilogue: Securing the Republic:*
James Madison to W.T. Barry

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The formulation and development of this study would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of many friends, colleagues, students, educators, library staff and administrators, architects, and design professionals with experience and expertise in the planning, design, and management of public libraries.

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Special thanks also to my longtime friend and collaborator, Professor Franc Nunoo-Quarcoo of the Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan, for his tireless work, informative discussions about design and, most importantly, the elegant design and layout of the publication itself. Without him, I can say with confidence, the seamless confluence of content and presentation would never have been realized. Also thanks to Maria Phillips for her moral support, her unerring critical eye, and impressive organizational skills. Without her help, the end result of the project would have been much diminished.

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Professionally, I would like to thank, posthumously, my friend and mentor Professor Imre Halasz of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT, with whom early in my career I worked closely on the preliminary planning and design for the Rotch Library addition

and modernization—a project that inspired in me an enduring passion for library building. All of my thoughts on the subject are ultimately filtered through this experience and Imre's intellectual and artistic approach to design.

For their enlightened approach to public library planning and design, I am also indebted professionally to the administration and staff at King County Library System and Integrus Architecture for our work together on Covington Library. Many of the design themes presented here are the result of this experience.

For related academic work in the area of design, I would like to thank students and faculty in the Department of Architecture at the University of Oregon who participated in the Sustainable Cities Initiative studio, working with staff and administrators at the Springfield Library. Also, thanks to faculty and students at the School of Design and Construction at Washington State University who, along with library staff, participated in the Neill Public Library studio in Pullman.

For reference and research assistance on library design, and for his unique insights into the subject as a librarian and historian, I am indebted to Dr. Alan Michelson of the University of Washington Built Environments Library, who, as always, was generous with his time. Also thanks to Professor Catherine Wetzel of the College of Architecture at IIT for help obtaining photographs of Chicago libraries, and for sharing insights on the numerous libraries we visited together here in Seattle.

Also, special thanks to staff and administrators in the many libraries who allowed me access to their facilities to photograph, including: Almelo Public Library, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System, Berlin State Library, Boston Public Library, Cambridge Public Library, Clayton County Library System, Contra Costa County Library, Crane Public Library, DC Public Library, Detroit Public Library, Enoch Pratt Free Library, Fort Vancouver Regional Library, Gloucester Cathedral, Grosse Pointe Public Library, Helmond City Library, The Historical

Society of Washington DC, King County Library System, Los Gatos Public Library, Merton College Oxford, Mt. Angel Abbey and Seminary, Multnomah County Library System, Peabody Institute of The John Hopkins University, Peoria Public Library System, Phillips Exeter Academy, Phoenix Public Library, San Francisco Public Library, Scottsdale Public Library, Seattle Public Library, Spijkenisse Library, St. Walburg's Church, Stockholm Public Library, Surrey Libraries, Trinity College Cambridge Fellows, Southwark Council libraries, and Tower Hamlets Council libraries and Idea Stores.

I am also indebted to the libraries, archives, offices, and institutions that provided historical photographs for the *PART I: Precedents* section of the publication, including: Alamy Stock Photos, Boston Public Library Print Department, Cleveland Public Library Archives, HBRA Architects, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, New York Public Library Digital Collections, New York Public Library Photographs and Prints Division, Newberry Library, The Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County Digital Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and Wikimedia Commons.

Special thanks also to architectural offices that provided photographs for the *PART II: Projects* section of the book, including: Patkau Architects, VJAA, Helen & Hard Architects, and JKMM Architects.

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Throughout history, libraries have played a vital role in our social, cultural, and intellectual development, as repositories of the written word, and the information and ideas it represents. The materials and activities libraries have traditionally accommodated sustain a collective knowledge base that encompasses no less than the record of human endeavor and the progress of civilization over time. Dedicated to the preservation of scholarly materials, mainly in the form of books, traditional libraries were rarefied places for reading, study, and research—exclusive domains of the educated elite. Closely associated with spheres of social, cultural, and political influence, libraries conveyed power and prestige to those allowed privilege of access, with collections housed in monasteries, cathedrals, palaces, and universities.

Public libraries, which promote broader access to books and the information they contain, have appeared in various incarnations since early classical times. The modern institution, as we know it today, however, is a product of the nineteenth century, when dramatic increases in the production and availability of printed materials, and popular demand for their use among a growing and literate middle class, led to its formative development, first in the U.S. and then in Great Britain. In an era of dramatic social change, its early development paralleled the rise of modern industrialization and liberal democracy, associated in the U.S. with mass immigration, and the movement for universal, compulsory public education. Free and open to the general public, and funded with public tax revenues, the library's inherently populist program was broadened to accommodate popular reading materials and lending of books, and a more diverse user base that included, for the first time, working people and families.

Public libraries today are popular and highly valued community resources that continue to thrive in cities, towns, and neighborhoods across the U.S. and elsewhere, enjoying broad public support for the services they provide. Increasingly diverse in the materials they contain, and the programs and activities they support, public libraries have continued to evolve

over time, differing in significant ways from their nineteenth century predecessors, which were devoted mainly to reading and study, and the circulation and storage of books. Books are still important in public libraries, and book circulation remains robust; however, new forms of electronic media and mass communication, including audio-visual materials, the Internet, and social media, have dramatically affected library use in recent years, and will continue to do so in the future. At the same time, the public library today functions more and more as a new kind of social center, reinforcing its importance in the community as a physical place—one that serves as a forum for social interaction and exchange of ideas, accommodating a variety of activities and programs for an increasingly diverse user base.

Architecturally, these changes have had profound effects on the development of the public library as a project type, offering new and exciting opportunities for design. Traditional design paradigms have given way to new ones, more responsive to contemporary library needs and program imperatives. As a result, we are experiencing today the emergence of a new generation of innovative library design, and growing interest in the subject among architects, library professionals, and the public at large. It is timely now to recognize and assess this important body of work, to better understand the factors that have influenced its design, and the implications for future development.

The New Public Library: Design Innovation for the Twenty-First Century is an in-depth design study of an exemplary collection of historical and contemporary public libraries from the U.S., Canada, and northern Europe, representing a diverse body of work that builds on the past as it looks to the future. *PART I: Precedents* is a survey of historically significant public library architecture, tracing the development of the project type over time. Its primary focus is on precedents from the U.S., where the modern public library originated, and its design has been most comprehensively developed. Early precedents from Europe are included for historical context and thematic continuity. *PART II: Projects* is a survey of contemporary public libraries, focusing on current developments in design.

The selection includes projects from the U.S., Canada, and northern Europe, all completed within the past 30 years. Projects vary in scale and complexity, representing a broad sampling of design approaches in different contexts.

The design themes that follow provide a critical framework for understanding and assessing this work and its underlying design intent. All have origins in the development of historical precedents, evolving over time to accommodate changing program needs and opportunities. Prioritization of themes varies from project to project based on specific circumstances; however, their general application is comprehensive and, ultimately, definitive of the new public library.

Library Identity

Library identity promotes a unique sense of place responsive to the physical, cultural, and social context of the library and the community it serves. It suggests a strong physical presence and distinctive architectural expression appropriate to the civic and community functions of the library, and the larger built and natural environments that surround it.

Historically, library identity is closely associated with the classical traditions of Ancient Greece and Rome that celebrate the library as a venerable civic institution distinguished by the formal architectural treatment of the edifice, the room, and the written materials contained within. Monumental in scale and hierarchical in organization, its architectural influence, like the classical ideals it embodies, is timeless and enduring, recurring over time in the Renaissance hall libraries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Beaux-Arts public libraries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, more recently, the postmodern libraries of the 1980s and 1990s. Similarly, the medieval traditions of Europe are reflected in the architecture of the monastic library, which, in association with the church, represents an alternative approach to library identity based on the functional accommodation of natural light and

books for the comfort and convenience of the reader. Intimate in scale and less formal in its organization, it too represents an enduring legacy that includes the functionalist expression of the modern library in the twentieth century, with its pragmatic planning, rejection of classical norms and conventions, and appropriation of more prosaic architectural forms associated with commercial and residential use.

Today, library identity encompasses a broad spectrum of design influences that clarify the library's unique place within the community and give broader meaning and expression to its form. Traditional classical conventions and norms are less prevalent in its design, which is radically transformed by a variety of innovative architectural strategies and solutions—functionally responsive, and freely expressive of new program needs and site opportunities. Inside and out, the public library today is an informal and active place—distinctive, dynamic, vibrant and attractive—its identity more commercial than institutional in spirit, similar in many respects to contemporary retail environments. Site and context are important architectural influences, establishing relationships to characteristic features of the built environment, including those associated with residential and commercial use. Responsiveness to the natural environment is also critical for the library's sense of place, establishing relationships to the landscape and highlighting special features of the local climate. On the site, a strong physical presence is important, acknowledging the library's special place within the community, and its symbolic function as a civic beacon. Inside, outlook and views reinforce connections to the surrounding context, while feature rooms, courtyards, and gardens focus inward, emphasizing the library's function as a special place of refuge and retreat.

Community Use

Community use facilitates access to the shared resources and activities of the library, encouraging public interaction by providing strong physical connections to the surrounding community. For accessibility, the public library is

conveniently located, open and inviting to the community, and closely associated with other public resources and amenities.

Historical precedents for community use originate with the civic libraries of Ancient Greece and Rome, as well as some monastic and church libraries of the medieval and Renaissance eras in Europe, all of which supported some level of public use, but with access limited to a relatively small educated class. In the mid-nineteenth century, the modern public library in the U.S. and Great Britain dramatically expanded community access by opening the library and its resources to everyone in the community, including, for the first time, working people and families. Smaller branches popularized in the Carnegie era further extended the outreach of the library, providing greater access to outlying neighborhoods in cities. Architecturally, public libraries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, like their classical precedents, are relatively insular and introverted, with closed interior spaces separated from the day-to-day activities of the community outside. In the mid-twentieth century, the functional expression of the postwar modern library is more extroverted, opening interior spaces of the library to the outside to encourage community use, much like contemporary commercial retail and residential environments.

Today, the new public library is centrally located in the community it serves—prominent and accessible to encourage everyday use. Its architectural expression is attractive and inviting, less institutional in character, and more like a contemporary commercial retail environment. Outside, openness and transparency reveal activities and resources of the library inside, opening views there to the surrounding community. Special lighting effects and signage encourage nighttime use and enhance the library's physical presence in the community. Convenient pedestrian access further encourages community use, along with onsite parking and convenient street access for cars. Outside, community interaction is reinforced by the library's proximity to other public buildings and open spaces, including: municipal complexes, civic centers, community centers, recreational facilities,

neighborhood service centers, city parks, and outdoor public markets. Additional community activities are accommodated within the library, including: public meetings, lectures, exhibits, social gatherings, and performances.

Variety of Library Activities

Variety of library activities supports the widest possible range of uses within the library, expanding access to information, and providing new opportunities for learning and exchange of ideas. The public library today is an active and inclusive place, accommodating diverse activities that reflect the varied interests and needs of the community it serves.

Historically, the medieval alcove library associated with the monastic tradition supported a limited range of activities, accommodating books and readers together in a consolidated room reserved exclusively for reading and study. The hall library of the Renaissance also accommodated books and readers in the same room, which, in the classical tradition, was larger and more decorative, providing an informal venue for social gathering, scholarly discourse, and public display. With the advent of the public library in the nineteenth century, library activities become increasingly diversified with the integration of the circulating library, with its popular collections and associated activity spaces. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Carnegie program popularized the children's library, along with other new activity spaces for lectures, classroom instruction, exhibits, and historical collections. Early and postwar modern libraries in the twentieth century continued the trend toward diversified use, incorporating a variety of multipurpose spaces for browsing, informal reading, social gathering, and other related activities, now more spatially unified and interconnected.

The public library today accommodates a more diverse range of activities than ever before—activities that can be formal or informal, active or passive, public or private, collective or individual. Traditional library use associated with reading, study, and research is now expanded

to include a wide offering of associated community activities like meetings, classroom instruction, workshops, group study, lectures, performances, exhibits, receptions, social gatherings, and children's programs. Associated activity spaces can be open and extroverted, incorporating informal reading areas, open-shelf collections, public computers, information and circulation desks, and flexible seating for special library programs. Others, like community rooms, classrooms, auditoriums, meeting rooms and study rooms, are more introverted and enclosed, in some cases, with direct outside access for afterhours use. Special designated areas for children, teens, adults, and seniors function like libraries within the library, maintaining a degree of autonomy and separation, with their own collections, services, and specialized program spaces.

Access To Library Materials

Access to materials facilitates public use of library resources by making them more directly available to the user. In the public library today, free and open access to books and other library materials is encouraged wherever possible, eliminating physical barriers that impede their use.

Historically, access to library materials is closely associated with library organization and the corresponding relationships between readers and books. In the medieval alcove library, where the relationship is direct, the individual reader had immediate access to books for reference, reading, and study, without the intervention of a librarian. In the Renaissance hall library, books were openly displayed within the room as an architectural feature, but direct access to the reader was prohibited, requiring the assistance of library staff. In the mid-nineteenth century, closed-stack bookrooms further limited access to books in growing collections, which were stored remotely, with centralized library services in between for control. At the same time, the advent of the public library, with its popular circulating collection, enhanced access for working people and families by making books available for use outside the library. In the Carnegie libraries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

open-shelf collections for browsing were introduced, further enhancing access to popular collections. In large libraries at the time, decentralized subject departments facilitated access to collections, reducing the need for remote closed-stack book storage. Early and postwar modern libraries in the twentieth century continued the trend toward openness and accessibility, with open-shelf collections attractively displayed like merchandise in a contemporary retail environment.

Today, the contents of the library are more accessible to the public than ever before, enhancing utilization of available resources, and minimizing the need for closed stacks and other forms of remote storage that require the intervention of library services. The quantity and variety of these materials continue to increase, as the library incorporates a growing assortment of new digital media like e-books, books on tape, CDs, and DVDs that complement more traditional print media like books, magazines, and newspapers. Throughout the library, open-shelf collections showcase these materials, which are attractively displayed and convenient to access. To encourage browsing and lingering, movement is routed through collections, not around them, and informal sitting and reading areas are decentralized and interspersed throughout. For improved visual access to materials and associated spaces, the library environment is open and transparent, inside and out, with integrated feature lighting and signage. Computers and Wi-Fi networks are also incorporated throughout the library, providing convenient public access to an extensive offering of additional online materials and services.

Flexibility and Adaptability

Flexibility and adaptability maximize utilization of space in the library by accommodating multiuse and change over time. The library environment today is dynamic and tractable, flexibly planned to support a greater variety of program activities, and readily adaptable to accommodate growth and change.

Historically, the evolution of library

planning, from carrel and lectern to alcove and hall, is a direct reflection of the on-going problem of growing collections and how to house them. In the nineteenth century, long-term adaptability for this purpose was nominally addressed with the introduction of efficient, closed-access book stacks, which could be filled in or expanded incrementally as needed, without impacting the traditional reading room, where bookshelves and furniture remain relatively fixed. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, decentralized subject departments in large Beaux-Arts libraries accommodated incremental growth of collections, reading rooms, and services, which were increasingly open and interconnected to encourage flexible use. In the early modern libraries of the twentieth century, open planning and enhanced spatial relationships between different activity areas provided additional flexibility for multiuse. In the mid-twentieth century, modern libraries of the postwar era incorporated more extensive open planning based on commercial office and retail models, with flexible furnishings that encouraged multiuse and long-term adaptability.

The library environment today, more than ever before, is both flexible and adaptable to accommodate multiuse and change over time. Open planning, with tractable furnishings, fixtures, and equipment, including bookshelves, allows maximum utilization of the library facility, which can be reconfigured to support a greater variety of program activities, now and in the future. Inside, library interiors are open and transparent, with complex spatial relationships that encourage multiuse and interaction of complementary program activities throughout. For flexible planning, open clear-span structures leave floors open and unobstructed, with the capacity to support books in a variety of locations. Movable, non-bearing partition walls ensure long-term adaptability to support a greater variety of uses without modification of the building's basic infrastructure. Raised floors accommodate flexible and unobtrusive mechanical, electrical and data systems, which, along with lighting systems, can be easily accessed and reconfigured to accommodate changes in layout and

space utilization. In the era of digital media, the uncertain future of print media, and its impact on the size of collections, reiterates the need for greater flexibility and adaptability in the library's planning and organization.

Quality of Library Environment

Quality of environment ensures that the library is a comfortable, attractive, and stimulating place to be, enhancing livability for community use. The public library today is a vibrant, varied, and dynamic place, incorporating natural light and views, a rich palette of materials, colors and finishes, feature lighting and signage, and integrated artwork.

Historically, the most fundamental amenity of the library environment is natural light, the use of which, for livability, is varied. In the medieval alcove library, its function was purely utilitarian, providing illumination for the comfort and convenience of the reader. By contrast, in the Renaissance hall library, its use was more aesthetic, providing general illumination of the room and its formal decorative treatment, which were paramount in the design. Early public libraries of the hall-and-alcove type in the nineteenth century combined the two forms, illuminating the room for architectural effect, and providing the reader with functional daylighting, which, in time, was supplemented with artificial sources. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, large departmental libraries continued this trend, with decentralized reading rooms and collections that facilitate access to natural light for utility as well as aesthetics. At the same time, the enduring legacy of the classical tradition reinforces the institutional character of the library environment and its civic associations. In the early modern libraries of the twentieth century, natural light was more diversified and spatially articulated, enhancing both the function and form of the library environment, which was further enhanced by the expressive use of natural materials and naturalistic forms. Modern libraries of the postwar era continued this trend, incorporating natural materials, color accents, feature lighting, artwork, and outside views, using contemporary

residential and commercial retail models of design for reference.

For quality of environment, the library today is designed for comfort, convenience, and visual appeal, accommodating a wide variety of activities in an informal, non-institutional setting. Balanced and controlled natural light is incorporated throughout, both for functional daylighting, and as an architectural feature, often in association with outside views of the site and surrounding context. Materials and finishes are tactile and expressive, humanizing the library environment through the introduction of color, texture, and visual warmth. Throughout the library, integrated artwork complements the architecture, providing meaning and context for library activities, especially those associated with children. Feature lighting provides visual contrast and highlight for enhanced display of library collections, and a broad range of related activities. For wayfinding and visual interest, signage is also integrated architecturally, using contemporary commercial retail models for reference.

Integration of Technology

Integration of technology facilitates access to information and ideas by incorporating new digital technologies into the library environment. The public library today provides unprecedented community access to a wide variety of digital media, computer technology, and online services for reading, reference, research, entertainment, and communication.

Historically, the technological development of traditional print media to meet an ever-increasing market demand correlated directly with the problem of growing library collections, and how best to house them. The evolution of reading materials from scroll to codex to book, papyrus to vellum to paper, and manuscript to print, gave rise to the parallel development of the library facility itself, from carrel to lectern to alcove to hall, and beyond. Quantitatively, increases in the capacity of libraries over time were dramatic, with volumes in large collections numbering in the hundreds in medieval times, the tens of thousands in

the Renaissance era, and millions today. In the late twentieth century, the introduction of new digital media continued to expand this capacity, while offering the potential of reducing the physical size of collections and, subsequently, the library facility itself.

Today, the public library provides access to a combination of traditional print and new digital media, which are complementary of one another, rather than mutually exclusive. In addition to books, magazines, and newspapers, the library offers a wide selection of digital media available on disk or for downloading, including e-books, books on tape, CDs, and DVDs. For Internet access, personal computers are available to the public at dedicated stations, which are centrally located in open, common areas of the library. Wi-Fi services for laptop computers and other portable electronic devices provide additional remote access to the Internet in other non-dedicated areas of the library. For reference and research, online public access catalogues (OPACs) are dispersed throughout the library, providing direct access to library services, which are also available via the Internet. Dedicated computer classrooms for technical instruction and training are open and accessible to the library, with glass enclosures for transparency and sound isolation. Access and servicing of IT systems throughout the library are facilitated with raised computer floors that provide flexibility and adaptability over time.