Reutilizing Existing Library Space

MARLYS CRESAP DAVIS

Introduction

THE PROBLEM OF FINDING additional space in which to house materials and conduct public and technical service operations is a continual one for most libraries. Because there is a constant drive to improve collections, expand services, and in general do more for the public, libraries are always outgrowing their facilities. Just as humans begin to age from the moment they are born, so library buildings begin the process of "shrinking" as soon as they are occupied—despite all efforts to plan ahead for this contingency. There are several options open for libraries to investigate when searching for a solution to this perennial problem.

There is of course the possibility of constructing a new library facility or building an addition to the present building in order to expand the space available. These solutions nearly always seem, at least on the surface, to be the only way to overcome space limitations. However, they are not always possible because both have at least one major drawback—i.e., cost. Another option, one which many libraries may find more feasible at least in the short run, is reutilizing the existing space to better advantage. Most of the ideas and suggestions contained here are put forth with public libraries in mind. However, most—if not all—should prove adaptable to other types of libraries as well.

Marlys Cresap Davis is Reference Associate, Missouri State Library, Jefferson City, Missouri.

The most pressing reason for making a decision to reutilize existing space rather than undertake a building project, is usually the cost factor involved in building. In the current economic climate (or at any time for that matter) the expense of new construction, whether of a completely new facility or of an addition to an existing building, is daunting. Often library boards and city officials feel that the money simply is not there to pay for such a major project. That may or may not be true. Nevertheless, the decision is often made to compromise by assessing the current use of space and finding ways to better utilize it in order to serve the library's needs and those of its patrons. The word *compromise* does not necessarily imply a negative view of this decision. In many instances this may actually be a better route to follow than that of new construction.

There are a number of arguments in favor of reutilizing existing space. One might be that the current library is housed in a historic and/or aesthetically pleasing building or location, and that it is preferable to preserve those aspects. In some cases the design to reassign space may represent a temporary measure aimed at maintaining quality library services while other alternatives are explored or necessary funding is acquired in order to pursue more attractive options.

In any case, libraries facing the problem of limited space should always consider how their existing facilities could be better utilized, at least as a temporary measure. Three things to keep in mind when reassigning library space are: (1) use common sense, (2) think big, and (3) avoid preconceptions.

The Decision Process

Making the decision to reassign space in an existing facility is obviously not one to be arrived at haphazardly. A great deal of time and effort may need to go into this decision process in order to ensure that the decision is the correct one, and, if so, that its implementation goes smoothly.

Common sense is an invaluable tool for use in decision-making. For one thing, you may have to justify your needs to governing and/or funding bodies. Going about the preliminaries in an organized manner and being able to show that your solutions to the problem are sensible and workable will go a long way toward assuring approval for the project from those in positions of power. It may also garner future support at a time when a new building or addition has become the only alternative.

Several ways of determining why and how to reassign existing space are available to librarians facing this problem. It is hoped that a combination of these would cover all bases and provide the information needed to make implementation decisions as well.

First of all an inventory of current space and how it is being used is essential. This might be accomplished by studying the building's original construction documents if available and by conducting a "walk-through" of the building, taking notes on which areas are used for what purposes and how they might be rearranged or their uses changed in order to improve access, the availability of space, or workflow.

This examination is often recommended as a regular duty of the librarian and the library board as a check on the general physical condition of the building. There is no reason not to consider space needs and alternatives at the same time with a view toward better utilization of existing spaces.

In conjunction with this first step, the librarian may conduct formal or informal use studies of the various areas of the library. This could provide valuable information regarding such things as whether existing tables or lounge seating are used to capacity. There is no formal "output measure" from the Public Library Association for determining usage of furniture and equipment, but the In-House Materials Use Survey from *Output Measures for Public Libraries*[1] might be adapted for this use. In smaller libraries where most functions and areas are within sight of the circulation desk, this process would be simpler than in a large library where public seating areas—both lounge and study—are more likely to be scattered over the buildings perhaps even over several levels. However, it is possible to construct a method for collecting this information with a minimum of trouble for all concerned.

A check on the current demographics of the community may give insight into possible changes which could be made due to changes in the population. For instance, if the number of children in the community has dropped significantly over a period of years, the library may want to consider rearranging its space to reflect at least a temporary lessening of the need for room in the children's area.

Finally, a survey of the community can prove valuable. Determining residents' perceptions of the library's role, their reasons for using the facility (or not), and their views on the accessibility of materials, arrangement of equipment and service areas, and/or the need for more or fewer seating areas can provide insight for making decisions on space needs. Such a survey might, for instance, uncover a need for changing the library's plan of service to introduce a new collection or format in

order to meet the community's information needs. This in turn could have bearing on the question of how best to utilize the current space available.

Implementation

Thinking big is essential to the process of reutilizing space. By this we mean that you must try not to let the walls close in on you. The parameters of the building should not be a deterrent to uncovering more usable space than currently exists. It might prove helpful to picture the interior space—as a whole and as separate areas—without any furnishings or fixtures.

So far this discussion has assumed that the library's collections are adequate but not "fat." That is, that an ongoing weeding program is in place in order to either maintain the collection at a given size or ensure its quality and viability. If this is not the case, then a first step to take when attempting to make more space in the library is to weed out materials which are outdated, not used, and/or in poor physical condition. This might apply in some instances to furnishings and equipment as well.

Shelving books two-deep or by size of volumes or in other space-saving configurations can, in the very short term, make more shelf space available. However, in most libraries where a policy of open stacks is followed, the saving in space would likely be offset by the need for additional staff to help patrons locate materials which are shelved by nontraditional and relatively inaccessible methods.

More and more libraries are attempting to attract their patrons to materials by use of ingenious methods of shelving and display which show off books and other items to advantage. This is not always the best way to save space, but in some instances it can provide a solution to the space problem and at the same time promote the use of materials by displaying them to advantage. For instance, if the library's collection of paperback books is shelved on regular stacks, either spine-out or on some sort of face out or slanted display shelving, it may be taking up valuable shelf space which could better be used for regular collections. The introduction of spinner racks will not only free shelf space with a relatively small cost in floor space (since they can be placed in areas otherwise often underused such as at the ends of stacks) but will also allow the front covers of these materials—graphically designed to attract readers—to be shown off to best advantage. The library gains in several ways: increased availability of standard shelf space, limited additional use of floor space, and attractive display of materials.

Another way in which many libraries have created space while at the same time improving work flow is by intergrating some sections of the collections. Shelving the adult and juvenile nonfiction materials together, rather than in two separate sections of the library, may free up space in the children's department without inconveniencing patrons. A second benefit may be to allow access to materials written at lower reading levels to adults who may be hesitant to enter the children's area. In addition, the librarian may find his/her work flow improved by eliminating the need to search in two separate locations for information on a topic. This solution works well in many small libraries where staff is limited and the adult and children's areas are not distinctly separated from one another. Even in larger libraries this shelving method has been implemented successfully.

Once everything possible has been done to create space without moving furniture, the real decision-making begins. Perhaps the first step should be to make a scale drawing of the existing interior spaces and of all pieces of furniture which are currently in use and which can be moved around within the building. Cut out the pieces of furniture and use them to experiment with different layouts. Try moving the furniture around into various configurations—both within the areas where the pieces are currently and to other places in the building.

Remember—avoid preconceptions. You need not necessarily be shackled by past practices. No rule says that the functions of the library must remain in their currently appointed places.

There may, of course, be some factors which should be considered before you indiscriminately start moving things. Floor loading capacities or other structural limitations, for instance, may dictate that certain functions must remain where they are. On the whole though, if it is possible—and works better—to switch things around, do it.

Examples from the Field

Morningside Branch Library, Sioux City, Iowa
The Morningside Branch of the Sioux City Public Library was built in the late 1960s. Its architecture is typical of the time period—a one-story building which, while the interior appears to be long and narrow, is actually nearly square. The branch serves approximately 30,000 residents of the Morningside neighborhood.

The Problem: During eighteen years of service at the branch, no renovation had been done although several services had been added such as videotapes, a public-access microcomputer, and large print books

used in the homebound delivery program (formerly housed in the main library but moved to Morningside in 1986).

By 1986 it was obvious that the library needed a rearrangement of its equipment, not to mention a face-lift. The library board approved expenditure of funds for new carpeting and other minor renovations, and a consultant from the Northwest Iowa Regional Library System was asked to revise the existing space plan to improve the look of the library as well as increase the available space in some of the public service areas.

One of the problems with the existing space arrangement was that the magazine lounge area was extremely small and crowded. There was not adequate display shelving for current subscriptions, and the photocopier and paperback exchange rack were also located in this area.

Because an ongoing weeding program existed, it was not necessary at this time to create additional shelf space although it was desirable to allow for that contingency in the future. Consultation with the branch manager indicated that all of the existing study tables were used heavily, and so it was decided that it would not be expedient to remove them at present in order to expand the lounge area.

The Solution: Since expansion of public service had apparently been taken into consideration when the branch was built, the wall at the back of the lounge area was originally installed as a temporary wall which could be removed in order to expand the public areas of the library. Behind this wall was the staff workroom, staff lounge, entrance to the librarian's office, and access to the mechanical room and bookmobile garage. A secondary entry to the public meeting room was also located in this area.

In most cases it is not necessarily the best solution to a space problem to decrease the amount of staff work area. In fact, it is this nonpublic space that is often the problem rather than the solution since many libraries seem to be built with inadequate space for technical services and other staff functions. However, in consultation with the branch manager it was determined that the workroom was perhaps as much as twice as large as it really needed to be. This resulted in its being used as a catchall storage space. It was decided that the space could better be used by moving the temporary wall back, creating additional public space while precluding the use of the workroom as a place to store junk. Additionally, the door to the librarian's office, previously not visible to the public, would now face this newly expanded lounge area. This would allow patrons easier access to the librarian as well as allowing the librarian a view of the public areas which was not possible before.

In order to further open up the public areas of the branch, it was decided to explore the possibility of rearranging the book stacks. This would allow a different configuration of study tables, relocation of the ready-reference area, and ease of location of public-access terminals for a planned online catalog.

After exploring several alternative floor plans, it was decided to implement a staggered arrangement of freestanding stacks which would provide the same amount of linear shelving in a smaller area of floor space. By concentrating the stacks in one end of the building, the "front" of the room was expanded visually and there was space to relocate some of the study tables which had previously been located in the center of the building due to lack of flexibility in the furniture arrangement.

Because all of the furniture and equipment had to be moved in order to lay conduit for the future computer terminals and to install the new carpeting, both projects were implemented simultaneously in order to minimize inconvenience to patrons.

This project was not cost-free. However, it certainly was considerably less expensive than new construction. The only suggested purchases of new equipment were additional slanted display shelves for current magazines and a rack on which to display current issues of newspapers (formerly housed on a tabletop for lack of any other place). The cost for moving a wall was relatively minor; paint and carpeting came to somewhat more but were needed even more than the additional space created by the expansion project. The branch library now sports a whole new look, and both staff and patrons are pleased with the result. The following figures 1 and 2 are "before" and "after" illustrations of the interior space plan of the Morningside Branch Library.

Aurelia Public Library, Aurelia, Iowa

Aurelia is a farming community of approximately 1150 people and located in Cherokee County in northwest Iowa. The Aurelia library is in two-thirds of a city-owned building, the other one-third houses the local historical society. The building is situated on Main Street at one end of the business district and is sandwiched between two other structures. There is no room on the present site for expansion of the facility.

The library is housed in one large room with an office and restroom at the back. Behind the main part of the library is a good sized room used for story hours, library meetings, and occasional public functions.

The Problem.: The library's children's area was located to one side of the main room. All of the children's materials were shelved here and
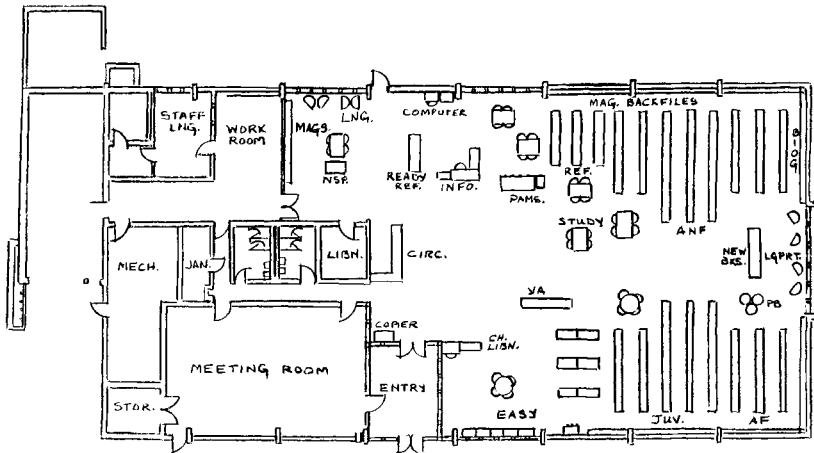
Figure 1. "Before" Floor Plan of the Morningside Branch, Sioux City Public Library, Sioux City, Iowa

space for materials was at a distinct premium. There was no practical way to expand this area into other parts of the library. In early 1986 it became obvious that the need for expansion of the children's area was too great to ignore or to solve through constant weeding.

The Solution: Since the meeting room at the back of the library was rarely used for public functions (and other facilities were available in the community for this purpose) it was decided to convert the meeting room into a place where the preschool and lower-elementary materials could be shelved. It would still serve as a programming space for story hour and the summer reading program.

A space plan was devised which would allow adequate shelving for primary materials as well as the addition of some child-size study tables. Because a bright mural depicting characters from nursery rhymes had been painted on two walls of this room previously, one object of the project was to preserve this artwork; therefore single-face shelving could not be placed on these walls.

Taking into consideration the current and projected size of the primary collection and the need for reading tables as well as chairs for program use, a space plan was devised. A grant was requested from the Kinney-Lindstrom Foundation of Mason City, Iowa and the request was granted in the summer of 1986.
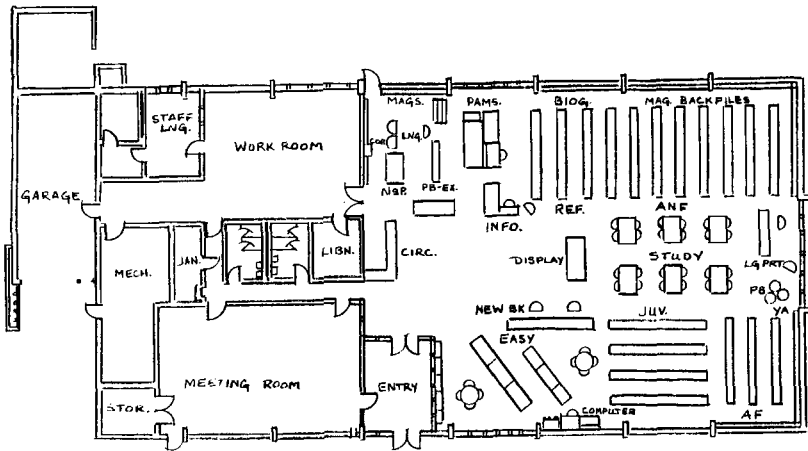
Figure 2. "After" Floor Plan of the Morningside Branch, Sioux City Public Library, Sioux City, Iowa

Following receipt of equipment and furnishings, the primary collection was moved into the new "children's room." Materials for upper elementary and junior-high students were left in the area which had previously housed all children's materials; however, due to the removal of the other items, this area has been visually expanded and now has additional shelf space available for books on this higher reading level.

Again, this project was not cost free (although the grant paid for new furnishings and needed equipment). But for a relatively small amount of money the library's services to children were enhanced by the creation of an area especially for the use of young children, the upper elementary and junior high collections can now be expanded, and better use was made of a space that was previously underutilized (see fig. 3).

Conclusion

New buildings are not always the only solution or the best solution to a space problem. A little creative thinking can go a long way toward alleviating the problem without creating a whole new set of problems to deal with.

What this article has tried to show is that libraries facing the problem of inadequate space do not necessarily have to embark on a
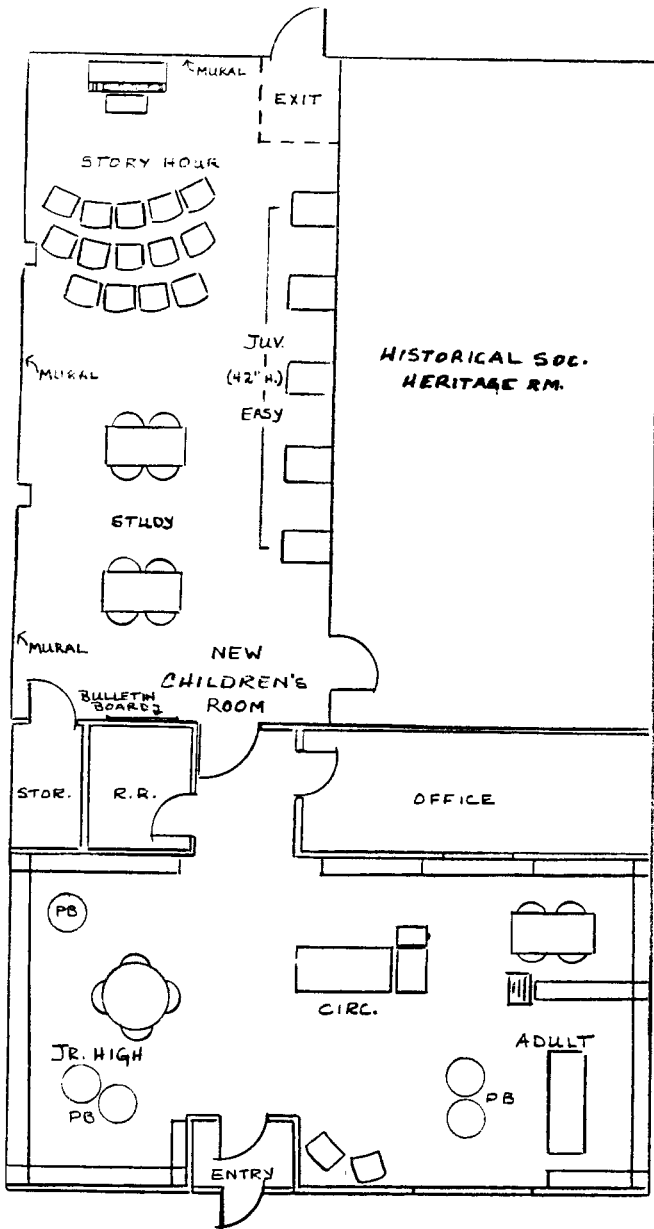
Figure 3. Floor Plan of the Aurelia Public Library, Aurelia, Iowa, After Reorganization.

construction project immediately. In fact, such an undertaking may be delayed for some time if enough thought is given to the problem of how to better utilize the existing facilities.

There are ways of expanding space without creating new buildings. And there are ways of determining which of those ways might work best in any given situation. Librarians who follow the three rules mentioned earlier—use of common sense, thinking big, and avoiding preconceptions—should find the task of reassigning space less onerous than might be expected.

Reference

1. Zweizig, Douglas. *Output Measures for Public Libraries: A Manual of Standardized Procedures.* Chicago: ALA, 1982.

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