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# A spatial revolution continues in Oakland

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# A Spatial Revolution Continues in Oakland

► ANTHONY BERNIER AND BRENDA ELWOOD

**Description:** Revolutions grow up in Oakland. That rings as true of the 60s and 70s social equity movements as of today's broad social movement to imagine young people in more complex and socially integrated ways. In a conscious effort to maximize seating options and social experience for teens, the 81st Avenue branch library's YA space both extends the Oakland Public Library's (OPL) commitment to public space equity for teens as well as contributes to the profession's on-going revolution in better serving young adult users. In distancing itself from the information trough-like atmosphere of the "computer lab" model, for instance, this design inverts the conventional construction of young adults as objects of surveillance and pedagogy, and moves ever-closer to achieving a concept of youth as subjects and creators of their own ripples out into the community.

The Oakland Public Library's recent 1,345-square-foot execution of purpose-built YA space in its new 81st Avenue Branch opened on January 29, 2011, demonstrating OPL's latest installment, over the last seven years, of its dedication to YA spatial equity across the system's fifteen branches and Main Library. The 81st Avenue branch follows the marquee TeenZone at the main library (VOYA August 2009), a customized YA space incorporated into the new Cesar Chavez branch's original design (2004); spatial re-allocations at six other branches' and an expanded YA space renovation now under design for OPL's Rockridge Branch. The YA space revolution continues in Oakland!

The branch is "co-located" on the same site as two Oakland Unified School District elementary schools: Woodland and EnCompass academies, and serves as a joint public/school library. The children's space is within easy visual reach so that older youth can enjoy the YA area without worrying about younger siblings when visiting together. With so many children around, the library's commitment to YA space equity stands out all the more.

Teens access their space through a long horizontal beam/entry portal which, in combination with a lowered ceiling, creates a more intimate and ambient noise-suppressing atmosphere. The space occupies a prime location on the first floor with large south-facing windows bringing views of pedestrian movement into the space, thus avoiding the static aesthetic of a "computer lab."

The artistic, watery motif apparent throughout the building appears subtly reinterpreted in the YA space to remind youth that water creates ripples just as their lives ripple out into the community. Purple, yellow, and blue constitute the color scheme, complemented by blonde wood furniture, and accented with yellow and purple wall treatments. All metal trim appears in varying hues of watery gray.

Environmentally-friendly LEED silver fluorescent lighting installed on white acoustic ceiling tile softly washes lighter



PHOTO CREDIT: CESAR RUBIO

shades of purple and yellow on the walls. The natural light impresses the most. The large south-facing windows discourage direct sun and take advantage of the Bay Area's comfortably sunlit weather.

Maximizing seating options in the 81st Avenue branch plays a critical role in articulating the YA space, as it does in all OPL YA spaces, where seats function more as verbs than nouns. A custom-built, curved, double-sided, wooden counter resides between two YA shelving units and defines the northern boundary of the space. Offering two different surface heights with six task chairs and stools, the counter also invites standing or leaning as well. Along the south wall appears a long, low, and undulating (watery theme again) hard foam bench with matching task chairs and two small droplet-shaped tables. The two-level, curved, custom computer island hosts four stations on the bottom level, topped with a tall display counter and rolling task chairs.

The signature seating element, however, remains the two-level, curved, foamy platform occupying two adjacent corners. Sporting the same aqua-blue fabric upholstery the curved wall bench and chairs, this seating element invites YA users into their much-preferred floor seating postures while enjoying elevated comfort on supportive foam. The platform offers various and shifting seating configurations for groups, as well as "spread-out" space few local residents likely enjoy at home. Two similarly upholstered foam rolling ottomans and three playfully colored soft foam seating balls encourage playful socialization as pillows, footstools, or backrests for actual floor seating. Adding up the seating options, it is clear that the YA space ensemble achieves maximum seating flexibility; postural, height, and task variety; and fun!

To avoid the "computer lab" feeling of a school media center, the four art Apple iMacs now encourage the way youth actually prefer to interact with technology: socially, collaboratively,

simultaneously. Of course, for the more curricular-minded, the 81st Avenue branch offers dozens more computer stations throughout the wireless building.

A mobile shelving unit holds popular CDs and is located at the end of a low curved table containing computers on one side and several display shelves for a hot collection of high-interest fiction, science fiction, and manga. The comprehensive comic book collection is featured in another mobile bookshelf. The periodical collection resides on wheels as well. Another mobile bookshelf houses a comprehensive Spanish and bilingual collection. The intention to house so much of the high interest collection on wheels is to facilitate staff/group demonstrations. Other fiction and non-fiction titles live in custom built-in units scattered throughout. Further, all window ledges and bookshelf tops serve as accessible hip-height displays.

**Young Adult Population and Community:** The city is a modest size of just over 400,000. The branch is located in a low-income, immigrant neighborhood (forty-six percent speak Spanish at home) and older youth are between ten to twelve percent of the local population.

**Hours, Staffing, Teen Traffic:** The space hosts a full-featured YA service profile. This includes a full-time YA specialist librarian supported by part-time paraprofessional and support staff. The teen space is open all the hours as the rest of the library.

**Planning Process:** As with the previous new and renovated spaces, teens played thick collaborative and planning roles with architects and library staff. In the case of 81st Avenue, the OPL Youth Leadership Council (YLC) met with architects throughout the process to evaluate and contribute to planning documents, location, fixtures, and furnishings for the YA space. By the time of the 81st Avenue project, the YLC's participation in several previous design processes entitled them to call the architect by her first name and draw from their own institutional memory. Indeed, they played an integral role in developing the library system's overall master facilities plan.

**Youth Participation and Programming** Annual and occasional programming, YA volunteers, and a Teen Advisory Group all appear in the branch operational, and strategic plans are in place for more programming.

## TRUE CONFESSIONS

### This is the YA space of my dreams because...

The conscious effort to maximize seating options and social experience in the 81st Avenue branch library's YA space both extends the Oakland Public Library's commitment to public space equity for YAs as well as contributes to the profession's on-going revolution in better serving young adult users.

### I still dream of these improvements...

The bare walls of the YA space call out for help; the rectangularity of the floor plan allows for much of the space to be visually tucked-away from the main reading room inviting locally-produced and circulating YA artistic exhibits.

### Teen Patron Comments

"It's clean and tight - Off the hook! It's cool cuz you can chill here. It's comfortable to hang out." —Stephanie B.

"I like the teenzone space. I like the pictures on the walls, the chairs, the computers. We're lucky to have a teen space with a big ole' TV." —Josh D.

"I like the couches. I like it cuz you can come to the library and chill and lay down on them." —Alan D.

"I like it because you can lay on the couches and study and read or meet friends and go on the computers." —Richard M.

"It's cool. Only teens should be allowed in here, though." —Laneal I.

The authors thank Young Adult Specialist Librarian Eric Hannon for gathering the comments of the 81st Avenue youth.

### Library Contact

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