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The Library as a Social Contract: Lessons Learned

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The Library as a Social Contract: Lessons Learned

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Abstract:

“It is a lot easier to design a utopia than to deal with the complex reality of a present time and place.” —Robert Campbell

This paper is based on the premise that how humans are treated and their needs met defines a community culture. Cultures that do not meet the needs of their people will wither. It is a very personal statement and is not intended to be a lengthy treatise of library technologies, collections, service models or architecture. It focuses on the messiness of dealing with the complex realities of today’s culture and the intersection of the library as a place of service and a sustainable part of a community.

Introduction

This paper is based on a presentation by the author at Grand Valley State University on August 11, 2015 to the *Re-Think It* conference. It is a personal reflection on the author’s experience with the design of more than 200 libraries over 40 years of practice. It is not intended to be a scientific paper full of data that is extensively footnoted. It is a simple, personal statement of what the author believes is at the heart of change in a community—activism, rooted in sustainable behavior, can create change. Of course, *no action* also creates change by enabling the status quo, through institutional inertia, to remain in power and influence the future of the library. The

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motivation for change, on a community level, is usually rooted in the feeling that one's needs are not being met in a fair way.

Libraries, nationwide, have mission statements that profess equality of access and fairness. The library in the United States is rooted in these high ideals. As libraries evolved to deal with dwindling resources, they have to make choices. How these choices are made, and by whom, will determine the future of the library in our world.

The library continues to be a central focus in the lives of US citizens. According to the *Public Libraries in the United States Survey: Fiscal Year 2012*, there were 1.5 billion in-person visits to the public libraries across the United States. This was a 10-year increase of 20.7 percent. Also, according to the same source, revenue declined after a peak in 2009, but is up 7.2 percent over 10 years. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that over this same period the cumulative inflation was 27.6 percent. That is 20.4 percent drop in real-dollar spending power for libraries. This dramatic increase coincides with one of the worst periods of economic distress the world has seen since the 1930s Great Depression. This situation has placed libraries into double jeopardy: increased use and decreased financial support. This stress reveals itself in low staff morale, pressure on the physical infrastructure, demands for increased services, and making do with less and less resources. The stress has extended to lack of financial support from communities for building maintenance, financial reserves for deferred maintenance, and operating costs including utilities and cleaning. Because of the demand, an interesting shift has recently occurred in library planning. This shift is focused on how to do more with less. Living with this stress and making do is becoming, sadly, the new normal.

Before focusing on the practical ways to deal with this stress, communities must first open their listening channels to better understand the fundamental needs of those they serve—especially those who have traditionally been denied a seat at the table. Jacque Fresco states “I was once asked ‘You are a smart man, why aren’t you rich?’ I replied, ‘You are a rich man, why aren’t you smart?’” While this quote may seem misplaced, it strikes an important anvil in the debate about serving our communities: what do we assume about our community members as we put in place policies that shape their choices and, consequently, lives?

Figure 1 illustrates the key intersections that should be considered as a library begins to consider the “who, why, and how” of community listening sessions. It is crucial that all of these elements be held in equilibrium. Without understanding how these intersections overlap in the community, the ability to argue for a sustainable operation is diminished.

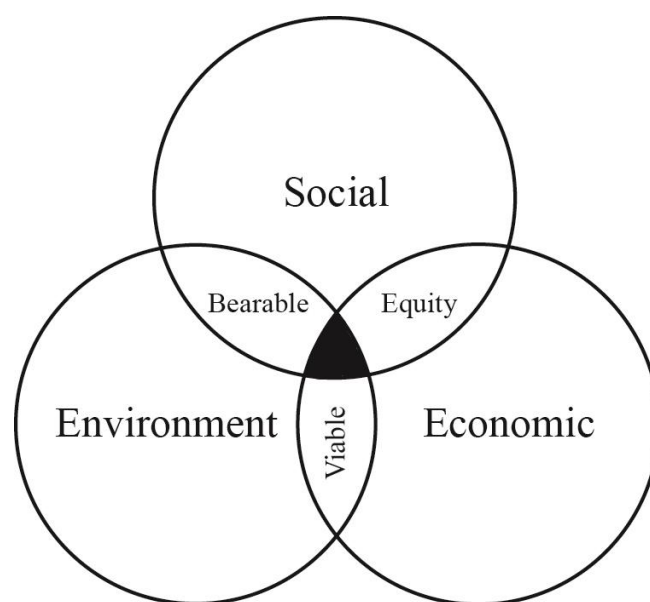


Figure 1

Social

Annie Dourlet, a French librarian, in a recent discussion group at the *International Federation of Library Associations* World Congress in Lyon, France, posed the following question: “For whom are we designing libraries?” What is crucial about this simple yet profound question is the underlying premise that the social aspect of a library mission often is subsumed by other priorities like collections, library protocols and operational issues. While this is not to suggest anything negative about these aspects of the library, it does point to where our questioning should begin. When the content of the library is delivered in useful formats, in a timely way and continually updated to be relevant to the community served, the social equity equation can be balanced. Better yet, when the collection is specially tailored to a community, the results will likely be a social compact that results in sustainable behavior through community consensus.

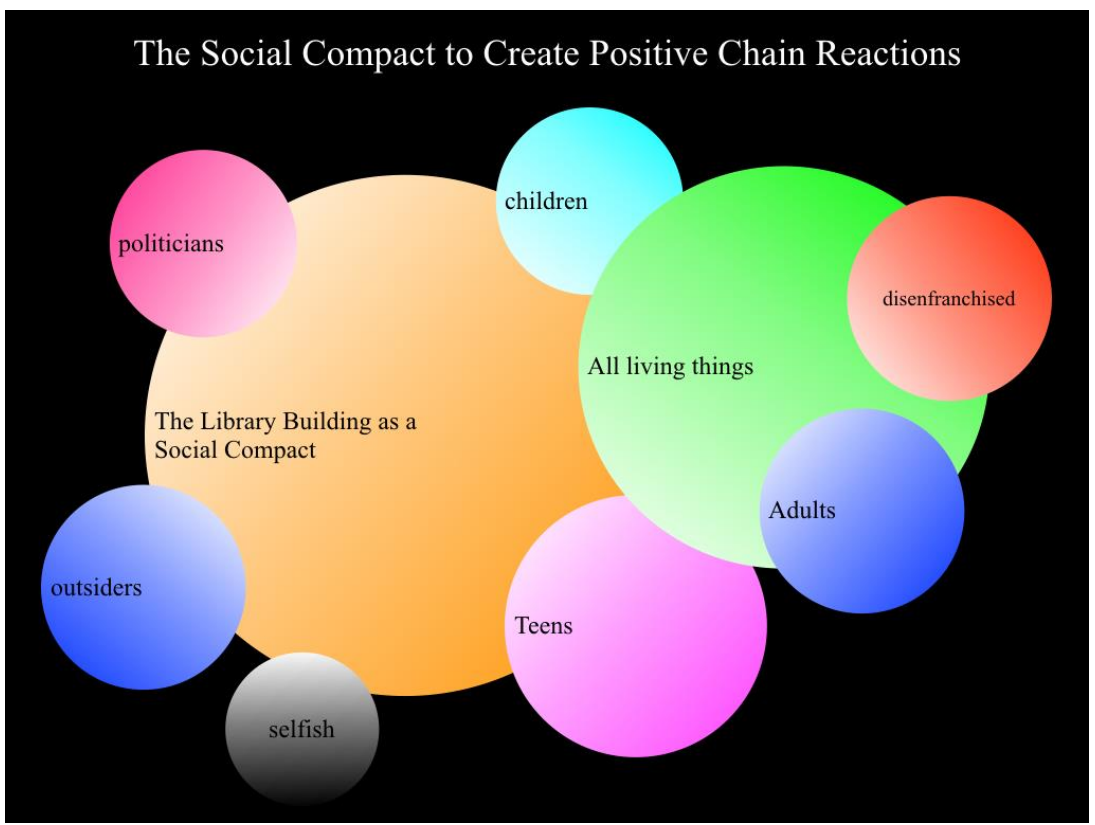


Figure 2

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Besides founding collection decisions on this social compact, libraries can leverage this consensus by triangulating their decisions against the environment and economic coordinates of equity. There can be a positive chain reaction if the community is the center of focus. There is too much at stake to stay rooted in the inertia of the status quo.

Environment

As an architect, the author has stated that his personal ethical stance is:

I will place social and environmental sustainable practices at the core of my professional responsibilities; and I will design the library as a place for the benefit of society first—and my reputation second.

The purpose in stating this is simple—too often the greater good is sacrificed in favor of the aesthetic self-interest of the architect. Of course, the author is not naïve or ignorant to the importance of great design. What is crucial is the place where an architect starts the design process. Does it start with a preconception of what the building should look like? Is the commission merely a way to further a personal design agenda? Does the design spring from a community process or set of values? An architect's responsibility and duty is to ensure that the final library design is shaped by a community's needs and ethics—not warped by some personal manifesto. We all strive to create beautiful architecture. The library's architecture must, in this author's opinion, emerge from a series of public meetings, which can establish a design that evokes the spirit of the community while meeting higher standards of sustainable excellence. The process also teaches.

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As the consequences of our consumptive and irresponsible ways are becoming clearer through evidence-based science, it may seem, at times, hopeless. This feeling is exacerbated by the irresponsible denial by certain political parties of mankind's impact on global climate change. While this futile debate is raging through the US, the earth's temperature is rising in direct proportion to the heat of the argument. While we fiddle a tune that will ensure maintenance of an economic status quo, the earth is burning. There may be days where hopelessness reigns supreme. However, if we shift our worry from "macro-decisions" to "nano-decisions" rooted in the social compact, we can, at a local level, start to shift things. It is a fundamental premise that focusing on making small, incremental decisions about the environment can collectively lead to big change. The library can be at the nexus of these nano-decisions. These nano-decisions related to the environment include:

- Ensure that the use of the collection is understood as a sustainable act. Oftentimes, local political leaders do not appreciate that a circulating collection is a sustainable act. The *Public Library Data Service* reports that nationally, the annual circulation of materials was 1,529,604,633 (for 1,293 reporting libraries.) In 2011, the population of the US was 311.7 million. That means that for every single person, an average of 4.9 items was circulated. Of course, this is not adjusted for the actual number of people who check out the materials. This would increase the number.
- Emphasize the efficient and sustainable use of community resources. When a person is at the library, they are not somewhere else: they are utilizing a facility and service that has been paid for by the community. Fully using a facility ensures that the investment in resources is maximized. The community's use of resources can also be maximized by

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reminding users that when they are in the library, they should ensure their homes are being efficient by setting back thermostats and turning off lights. It is a sustainable act to maximize the use of the library.

- Advocate and argue for the library to be designed in the most energy efficient way possible. Do not accept the lack of money as an excuse to succumb to short-term thinking. While first costs are often the most political of all political footballs, the librarian must have the courage to engage an architect who can rationally and effectively make the case to the politicians and voters for long-term thinking. The architect should also be smart enough to prioritize and design to the budget. Whining about insufficient funding is not a design process. The benefits from understanding this impact are raising the conscience of the community—and perhaps spurring them on to think more systemically and long-term. The direct benefit is to enumerate that the primary results of environmentally sensitive design are a) reducing the impacts of natural resource consumption, b) improving the financial bottom-line, c) enhancing the health benefits to the occupants of the building and community, and d) minimize the strain on local infrastructures such as water production or natural materials.
- Model the behavior you wish to encourage.

Sustainable Design Objectives

Over the course of the last decade many publicly funded facilities have been under an economic strain due to the reduction of operational and maintenance funding. Sustainable design practices can and will impact long-term cost of operations and facility upkeep. Every new civic institution has a responsibility to fulfill not only the immediate needs of today, but also the needs of

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tomorrow. Establishing a new standard for a public library will provide a healthy, safe, comfortable, sustainable, maintainable and energy-efficient environment. This list of sustainable guiding principles establishes a series of goals for a project, utilizing four major Sustainable Building Guidelines. These objectives can serve as a roadmap for the design team to establish specific objectives and standards and as an outline of schedule and responsibilities. Specific goals identified in the course of the design phase need to be supported by the project budget and cannot compromise other requirements of the building program.

- Site and Water

A project should investigate and incorporate practical strategies to reduce the use of water and reduce waste developed in the building and on the site. These strategies include incorporating reduced-flow plumbing fixtures, as well as investigating opportunities for waterless urinals (if approved by local municipalities) and use of native and drought-tolerant plant material. The site design will address minimizing storm water runoff created by the project and investigate treating storm water generated on the site to reduce down-stream pollution. Site strategies may include reduction of hard surfaces and use of a permeable paving system. Storm water infiltration basins and bio-retention areas shall be considered.

- Energy/Atmosphere

Optimized building and site energy consumption will minimize long-term operational costs of the facility. The design process should explore energy modeling to identify the combination of systems and materials that in total maximize energy performance. Use of renewable resources for the library heating and cooling plant should be investigated. If

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appropriate, incorporate the use of a geothermal system, significantly reducing the building's energy consumption demands. Mechanical systems should be designed with the goal of installing systems that are easy to maintain, thus extending the life of the systems, and allowing the community to maintain a high level of performance. Energy efficient lamps and fixtures using appropriate lighting controls should be incorporated. The design team should work towards developing energy-management techniques through the building's energy management system to maintain a high level of system performance. The site design should examine the use of shade trees to shade the library in the summer months (to reduce cooling cost) and to reduce the heat-island effect created by new parking areas.

- Indoor Environmental

Improved indoor environmental quality has many benefits including improved employee productivity, lower operating costs, less occupant complaints, extended equipment life and community recognition as a healthy environment in which to work and visit.

Strategies to improve air quality, such as under floor air distribution, should be investigated. Minimizing source pollutants within the building, proper ventilation, and thermal and moisture controls should be incorporated into the design. Daylighting and a visual connection to the outside should be studied and incorporated into the design, where appropriate.

- Materials and Waste

To reduce the environmental impact of the new construction the design team should examine the use of regional materials and rapidly renewable materials, as well as materials with recycled content. First consideration should be given to materials with low life-cycle cost and recyclable materials. The site design should explore the use of site

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furniture with high recycled content. In the design phase, state and local objectives for recycling and waste management should be considered. The design team should plan for an effective construction waste management system.

Economic

“Money makes the world go round,” is from the musical play ‘Cabaret.’ It implies that money is the primary (maybe only) reason the world turns. The emphasis on money as the underlying “engine” for change and motivation is a crucial one in the consideration of all library planning. However, despite the evidence to the contrary, this author believes that libraries can become one of the main engine that propels the world to “go round.” They are a neutral ground with only equity of service as their mission. They do not use their mission to undermine or sabotage other community efforts. They are, ideally, apolitical. Librarians are thoughtful and caring. They see their role at the centerpiece of a renewing community—renewal through efficient and economical delivery of services for learning, entertainment and participation.

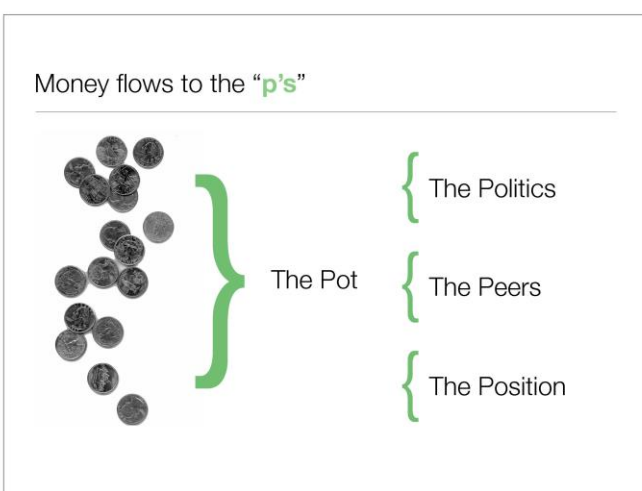


Figure 3

In figure 3, the three “pots” that receive public money are shown. As with any resource, it is nearly always insufficient to meet the needs. Of course, when there is a shortage, there is usually a fight. Those in power win fights, at least political ones. For the library to be at the table, under any political regime, takes an extraordinary

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effort. Recently, for example, in a Bethlehem, Pennsylvania city council debate, Commissioner Mike Hudak said "On the whole, libraries are going the way of the dodo bird. Everyone goes to the Internet. You'd be hard-pressed to find a student not going online" (Malinchak 2016). The argument in this case, illustrative of many money fights, is that a) nobody is using the library and b) it is too expensive per capita. Every librarian knows this is not true.

Yet in city and county commission meetings around the country, people in power are pontificating about something they know little about—since most critics do not darken the door of the library. The argument that services should be justified on a per capita basis of use, not of the population served, is positing that these services are not essential and are therefore dispensable. Folks who do not have children could (and some have) argue they should not be taxed for schools. One could take this to the logical extreme and say only those who have fires or break-ins should pay for fire and police services. Of course, rationality, rather than ideology, should be reigning amongst the politicians in this debate. Sadly, from this author's perspective, it is often absent. Librarians need to embed themselves in the politics, peers and positions of the community money chest.

What good is an award-winning library if it cannot be maintained, financed or operated?

Recently, for example, the flagship and award winning new Birmingham (UK) Library has had to ask the public to donate books, as *The Guardian* reported:

After a flyer from a Birmingham library began circulating online last week, claiming that "due to public saving cuts we are no longer purchasing any new books or newspapers. Therefore we are looking for any books that have been published in the last 12 months to be donated to the library", Birmingham city councilor Penny Holbrook confirmed a "pause on the book fund." (Flood 2015)

The Politics

This paper is not advocating that librarians become politicians. It is advocating that in a social contract with the citizens, the librarian should know the political process, the underlying motives of the politicians and, most importantly, know whether or not the politicians who control the money know the facts about community usage and service effectiveness. It may sound simplistic, but this author has found over and over that too many librarians assume that purse-string holders know the facts. Keep repeating the substantiated facts and make sure they are put into context with other community services. There is nothing to be gained by trying to outmaneuver another needy service for the limited scraps at the table. Demonstrate with real facts that using a library saves money (on materials citizens do not have to buy), the earth (through efficient and sustainable practices) and the community (by increasing education, awareness, and togetherness.)

The Peers

Of course nothing does or can exist in a vacuum. As operational funding for public institutions becomes more limited, it is important to consider architectural solutions to manage and reduce operational expenses, while simultaneously increasing the level of comfort of both the staff and patrons. By demonstrating to peer institutions in your community that you are doing more with less, your credibility increases. Beyond the tangible operational and economic benefits, the sensitive expression of environmental technology in architecture can serve to educate the community and strengthen the general understanding of environmental stewardship. This can

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spread to other community institutions so that, collectively, all institutions can work making do with less while providing more.

The Position

A library or any other major public building is more than the sum of its material parts. It is not simply a structure—it is a visible symbol and an expression of a community’s values. Therefore, it is important to broaden the discussion to include the position the building plays in a community’s overall health. Construction of a sustainable building creates a healthy balance of the community’s the spirit, environment and finances. This balance requires that decisions be scrutinized from an ethical, financial and behavioral point of view. How this triad is placed in equilibrium reveals the position that the library will hold in the community. For example, in deciding on the cost of a specific system, like an underground rainwater storage cistern, the first cost of the cistern should be evaluated against the long term benefits of removing the demand for million gallons of water per year from the city’s water supply system. While this analogy is fiscal, the roots behind the decisions are ethical. Money and how it is spent is the “canary in the coal mine” that reveals the real reasons politicians allocate money. While it may seem simplistic, experience has shown that nearly every funding behavior flows matches the ethical position individuals have in regards to community priorities. For example, in Nebraska a city council person once said to me: “why would we want to make the building cheaper to run (utilizing sustainable measures) when we run the utility company. That will cost us money.” You can deduce from this the resistance was about maintaining a status quo funding source for a city-run municipal utility company— even though the library was city funded. You can see where this “Alice in Wonderland” scenario ended.

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This long-term thinking is not always rational—especially when a community has to decide to raise its taxes to pay for a building. Short-term thinking is, perhaps, the root cause holistic community design and thinking is so difficult to accomplish in the United States. It is also why this author believes it is worth the fight.

“It is not differences that divide us. It is our judgments about each other that do.”

—Margaret Wheatley

Now, Local and Forever

It is surprising how easy it is to listen to someone. It does not take much effort. No need to be thinking about what you will say next. Just let the person’s reality soak in. Hear what is being said. What is needed? When is it needed and why do they need it?

There is tremendous pressure in our society today to meet a myriad of needs. Our infrastructure is falling apart. Our schools are deteriorating. Our water supplies are tainted. Our economy is increasingly unequal.

Every librarian knows who his or her customers are: not the people at top of the economic heap, but rather the ones at the bottom. This is not profound nor revelatory. It is simply the truth. And the truth is the neediest need the library more than ever—for practical and political reasons.

Final Thoughts

What does this small, simple paper suggest? Why has it been written?

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There is nothing too small in this world. While the big egos command the media attention, it is the tiny acts of resistance to ignorance that will make a difference. By respecting the call to gather together to make a community of meaningful places, citizens can create a safe, smart and sustainable community. By listening, truly listening, to each other they can find the path to unravel the complex social, political and financial dilemma we are experiencing. A creative community requires a community of learners not takers. The library can be the nexus of this creative community.

From the experience of this author, people in a community tend to:

- Define the library by how they personally use it
- Base money decisions on their own means
- Want the most convenience for themselves

On the surface these seem selfish—and they are. It is precisely why the library, as a long-standing institution, has survived. The library has been able, somewhat miraculously, to be all things to all people. Paradoxically, this is also what is beginning to unravel the threads that bind communities together. People want things now. They want it fast, and they want it for as little money as possible. As long as my needs are being met that is all that matters. If someone's needs were being met through a smart phone then why would they ever feel they need a library? If someone can get to work by car, why is a public transportation system needed? If I do not have children, why do I have to pay for schools? It is not difficult to see the consequences of this isolated individualistic view of the community. Will this cycle change?

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“I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do whatever I can.” —George Bernard Shaw

Of course, any community with a library is one of privilege, but that privilege is created by cooperative action. This paper has attempted, perhaps feebly, to advocate for more active engagement by librarians in the shaping of their community by how they develop their library’s persuasive strategies. It has tried to point out how interconnected we all are and that the consequences of nano-decisions are as important as macro-decisions.

We have seen in the past 50 years the rapid evolution of how information has been dispensed and commoditized. The marketplace and the brokering of information have steadily eroded the central role of the library as an information hub and repository. Libraries have moved from strict, orderly, quiet repositories of printed materials to free-for-all exchanges offering classes, tutoring, and help-centers. The planning of libraries, over this same period, has evolved from one-size-fits-all organizations to custom-tailored institutions fine-tuned to the social, economic and political realities of the local community.

Parallel to this has been an erosion of trust in institutions. Those institutions that cannot justify their existence are disappearing or are being reshaped by fiscal agents outside of their influence. We have seen the compounding of community needs by decades of neglect. Simultaneously we have seen library usage rise. We are seeing a wider diversity of users in the library. We are at a turning point in the history of the library as an institution.

This is not a doomsday paper. It is hopeful. Rainer Marie Rilke, in *The Book of Hours* wrote this important and appropriate poem:

*In all these things I cherish as a brother
still it is you I find; seedlike you wait,
basking serenely in the narrowest compass,
and greatly give yourself in what is great.
This is the marvel of the play of forces,
that they so serve the things wherethrough they flow:
growing in roots, to dwindle in the tree-trunks,
and in the crowns of resurrection show.*

In conclusion, this author believes firmly that our way out of this dilemma is to be a servant and not one who demands to be served; to let the community emerge through the flowing of service to all; and to see everyone as equals and with legitimate needs. It will also happen when librarians are bold, brave and fearless in the face of misinformed and selfish politicians.

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Biography

Jeffrey A. Scherer, FAIA

Jeffrey A. Scherer is a founding principal in the firm of MSR Design (Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle, Ltd.) located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The firm of 50 specializes in academic, public and special libraries—as well as public and corporate work. Mr. Scherer received his Bachelor of Architecture with Honors from the University of Arkansas. He taught design, ethics and professional practice at the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the University of Minnesota from 1978-1998. Mr. Scherer has focused his work on innovative public, academic and private libraries. He is the past President of AIA Minnesota, the Library Foundation of Hennepin County and the Americans for Libraries Council and Libraries for the Future in New York. He is past chair of the ALA Architecture for Public Libraries Committee and past ALA representative to the IFLA Building and Equipment Section where he served for 6 years.

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Appendix

Check List

The following checklist is a general guide to be used during the design phase to ensure that the building systems and products are thoughtfully considered with regard to energy usage, environmental awareness and human health:

- Is the building designed and constructed in ways that preserve the natural outdoor environment and promote a healthful indoor habitat?
- Is the building designed to avoid adversely impacting the natural state of the air, land, and water, by using resources and methods that minimize pollution and waste?
- Is the building designed to maximize passive and natural sources of heating, cooling, ventilation, and lighting? During the early design phases, consider:
 - o Modeling energy systems and building components simultaneously.
 - o Establishing overall design goals for energy consumption at the beginning of the Design Phase. Do not limit thinking to merely “meeting the building code.”
 - o Making sure the systems are correctly sized. Do not use rules-of-thumb or over-design the systems because of early design phase indecisions. By creating design goals early, the system can be “right-sized.”
 - o Taking advantage of any electrical utility rate savings by shifting or shaving loads during peak demand. Lighting accounts for 50-60% of the electrical load in a library—so make sure integrated daylight harvesting is embedded in the design strategy.
 - o Designing for modular expansion. While the library is planned for expansion, do not invest in equipment or systems that are intended to serve future needs. Instead, design the system space and modularity of equipment to accommodate future expansions.
 - o Providing to the community the cost and advantages of commissioning of HVAC systems.
 - o Providing to the community an operations and maintenance manual.

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- Are innovative strategies and technologies employed (such as porous paving to conserve water, reduce effluent and run-off and thus recharge the water table)?
- Is the library planned to reduce the need for individual automobiles, use alternative fuels, and encourage public and alternate modes of transportation?
- Is the library constructed and operated using materials, methods, and mechanical and electrical systems that ensure a healthful indoor air quality while avoiding contamination by carcinogens, volatile organic compounds, fungi, molds, bacteria, and other known toxins? Is particleboard that emits formaldehyde emissions prohibited in the building?
- Is furniture constructed without particleboard that emits formaldehyde? Are only solvent-free paints specified for the project? Are low-emitting, solvent-free adhesives specified for the project?
- Are the HVAC system's outdoor air intakes located as high as possible above the ground and far enough away from the exhaust ducts to reduce the intake of ground level air pollution?
- Are stainless-steel-strip bird guards installed over the horizontal rooftop outdoor air intakes to prevent birds from settling on the grating and polluting the shafts below?
- Does the HVAC have an efficiency air filtration system with pre-filters and final filters at 30 % and 85% efficiency respectively?
- Are air filters designed to be easy to access, clean and/or replace?
- Has the exposed fiberglass within the HVAC system been encapsulated to eliminate amplification sites for fungal and bacterial micro-organisms?
- Are copy rooms and similar spaces that emit possibly toxic substances equipped with their own dedicated air exhaust systems?