Divine Design
How to create the 21st-century school library of your dreams
By Margaret Sullivan
Things are changing. For starters, ebooks, apps, and the web are now a part of your students’ daily lives. So how do you determine the best way to turn your library space into a learning center that’s right for today’s rapidly changing digital world? Take it from me, a longtime designer of school libraries, it’s not easy.

I’ve discovered that the things I used to labor over just five years ago don’t seem as important anymore. For instance, I really don’t worry about how many books you currently have, your space’s measurements, what wood finish to use, how many students are in each class, or even where the circulation desk should go. They’ve been replaced by more urgent questions. Questions such as, what are the tools and resources your students will need, what are your school’s learning goals, and how can they be woven into your library?

I’d love to say that I know how to create the perfect school library, one that’ll serve you and your students for years to come. But the truth is, no one-size-fits-all model exists. The bottom line is that you’ll have to assess your curriculum and your district resources to discover what will work best for your students. But there are things I can suggest to move you closer to creating the best space for your students. Here are five design considerations that you shouldn’t overlook when planning your dream school library.

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1. **Make sure your space is flexible.**

Many librarians—even those in brand-new media centers—are forced into using stagnant teaching methods because their libraries don’t have flexible instructional spaces. Don’t let that happen to your library.

Students need to learn how to formulate meaningful questions, appreciate multiple viewpoints, and use a wide variety of resources in their research. Plus, 21st-century learners need to demonstrate their understandings in new ways, such as producing their own videos or multimedia presentations. That’s why every school library needs a flexible learning space that supports multiple learning and teaching styles—not one that only accommodates lectures. Not one that assumes you’ll never switch to smaller, wireless technology. Not one that’s furnished with heavy, immovable tables and chairs or, worse yet, built-in workstations.

Learning models are changing, and school libraries need to take the lead. In many schools, collaborative and project-based learning are popular, as well as peer-to-peer...
The boldly colored library at the New Vision School, P.S. 69 in the Bronx, is the school’s learning epicenter. To enter the building, students must pass through the library on their way upstairs to the school’s main floor. The shelving system is from Haller of Switzerland, and the chairs are Arne Jacobsen’s “Seven” chair from Denmark.

Interactive whiteboards, such as the SMART Board 600i, ActivBoard 500 Pro, and eBeam Engage, are just some of the exciting new learning tools librarians are incorporating into their lessons. These new devices let users share information on their laptop screens with teachers and other students, and they’re perfect for student presentations, seminars, distance learning, exploring websites, performances, and, yes, even reviewing lectures. Educators can use interactive whiteboards to make content available to students to review who need additional time or were absent.

When planning a school library, be sure to communicate often and passionately about the librarian’s role as a collaborative educator. Those conversations, coupled with an awareness of learning styles and new technology tools, are bound to spark innovative ideas for interactive learning spaces.

2. Remember, you’re not running a book warehouse

It’s time to stop warehousing books and start merchandising them. Take a tip from Barnes & Noble. Make your books and magazines more attractive (and more visible!) to students by taking advantage of displays, mobile fixtures, signage, and lighting.

Instead of focusing on how many shelves you need, think about how the print collection can enhance your digital resources. Printed books are still an essential tool, especially for beginning readers. And traditional books are a valuable resource that can enrich any student’s learning experience, particularly in subjects like language arts, social studies, art, and history. In fact, print materials remain a fundamental library resource, especially in schools that don’t have a computer for every student.

And while you’re breathing new life into your print collection, don’t shy away from ebooks and digital reading devices. After all, which reading format do you think most
digital natives crave? A print book that's stored in an 84-inch-high stack (classified according to Melvil Dewey's 1876 system) and requires a step stool to reach? Or an ebook that can be downloaded onto a Kindle, Nook, or Sony Reader in less time than it takes to find a step stool? By the way, there's now another ereader alternative—Ectaco's jetBook, designed especially for K-12 schools.

3.

Insist on a strong infrastructure.

Don't cut corners by underpowering your library. A few wall sockets scattered around the room just won't cut it anymore. Media centers should be tech central, and users need power to support their ever-growing arsenal of electronic devices. Remember to plan ahead, because there's no turning back. Once the cement floor is poured, your electrical plan is set in, well, concrete.

Limited outlets will also control how a space is used in the future. I've visited numerous new libraries where students can only conveniently use computers in one small area of the room. Laptops and handheld devices, visual and audio tools, printers, interactive whiteboards, and multimedia equipment are evolving at an incredibly quick pace—but sooner or later, most of them will need to be recharged. So give your students and staff a break and buy some eight-outlet power sources (like the Smith System I-O Post) that can sit, within arm's reach, in the center of a configuration of tables or among lounge chairs.

It's also unwise to scrimp on window treatments. New school libraries are awash in natural sunlight, which is a wonderful way to reduce the need for artificial lighting. Natural light truly adds beauty to the immediate environment, enhances learning, and creates an exquisite space for studying. Unfortunately, direct sunlight can also be blinding, wash out computer monitors and screens, and put a strain on your school's heating and air-conditioning systems. To manage sunlight throughout the day, you might want to consider using Hunter Douglas's Sun Louvers, which are a dramatic way to filter light, or consider using traditional shades and blinds.

You'll also want to get in touch with your IT department and school administrators as soon as possible, to explore the best way to incorporate a secure, wireless network or even better a private cloud network into your new space. Take time to listen to their concerns and to establish appropriate-use guidelines but don't hesitate to push for technology that will expand student access and learning.

A final word of caution: your new library space will fight you every workday if you don't actively take part in planning its infrastructure. Although that may not sound glamorous, trust me—the rewards are well worth the effort.

4.

Don't sacrifice livability for beauty.

You know those drop-dead gorgeous spaces that grace the pages of interior design and architectural magazines? Well, that's not necessarily the look...
NOTES FROM THE FIELD

It's all about staying flexible

The vendors who offer furniture and design solutions to libraries are unanimous: library furnishings and spaces need to be adaptable to change. "Spaces need the ability to be repurposed quickly and easily through the day," says Janet Nelson, Demco's director of industry and media relations. "With tight budgets and a focus on sustainability, square footage is at a premium and must be used effectively."

School libraries are increasingly being used by communities in the evening, or offering extended hours for families. These new services are also challenging librarians to use space better than ever before.

One solution? Casters. "All of our leg-based furniture...can either be ordered with casters or retrofitted to have casters," says Chris Frantz, director of marketing and sales at Brodart. Casters throughout the library, including on shelving, displays, and seating, "allow the spaces to quickly and easily be reconfigured by the library and students rather than relying on custodial staff," says Nelson.

Education through collaboration

"Collaborative learning follows along with the modular idea as well as mobility—furniture that allows for group work as well as individual work—sometimes in the same class period, are a definite reality," says Frantz. Nelson says that some of the changes in the public library are being echoed in schools, where librarians and administrators want to create more comfortable and functional environments to support not just collaboration but social interaction as well. "Not only does this make the library a more desirable destination, it also supports current education trends," she says. "These libraries are working to develop a sense of community through the design of the space. Many are also using programming and the addition of activities, such as gaming, to further these efforts."

"The idea is to create a learning atmosphere while removing the institutional, back-in-the-day flavor," adds Donna Longo, Gaylord's marketing communications director.

The digital impact

The rise of digital collections—especially in reference and nonfiction—and the ever-growing need for more technology are both impacting design. But according to Nelson, technological advances—such as wireless access and the increase in laptop usage—mean that libraries don't need to increase the footprint of the furniture (although they do need to increase access to electricity).

Adding more digital resources—and weeding your collection—can also open up space "for merchandising collections and providing more materials that help students discover that reading can be a worthwhile leisure activity. Periodicals, graphic novels, and popular literature have taken on renewed emphasis," says Nelson.

The one big thing

Short on budget, but want to make a big impact, quickly? Frantz suggests buying products with multi-use functions, such as tables that can serve as laptop/computer desks, come together to make meeting areas, or support individual students. Think also about mobile shelving as another cost-effective way of getting the most out of the space.

"Updating seating provides a perfect opportunity to introduce new styles and color into a space," says Nelson, as can introducing colorful graphics or flexible display fixtures to merchandise browsing collections. Refreshing or adding end panels to shelving can also be used to merchandise or add color or personality. Nelson's least expensive solution? "Reduce the clutter that has accumulated over the years. Take a look at a space through the eyes of a newcomer...the accumulation of excess materials and equipment is often overlooked on a daily basis but provides opportunities to reclaim additional space or simply make the space more inviting."—Brian Kenney

you should be aiming for. A school library isn't just an aesthetic statement; it has to be hardworking as well. Guests may walk in and gasp, "Wow, this is beautiful!" But you have to ensure that it's also an energetic, inviting space packed with students who are busy gathering information and exchanging ideas.

And am I the only person who has a problem with high school "Starbucks" libraries—the ones with a coffee bar, café tables, and scores of lounge chairs? Students hang out there with their friends—before and after classes and during lunch break—to check email, tweet, flip through magazines, play cards, and drink coffee. Granted, it's very cool and very social, but how exactly does it prepare students to succeed in college?

These plush, cool environments are often the result of an interior designer who doesn't understand the educational role of a school library or confuses your space with a public library's. Some credit can also go to librarians who can't resist these pristine spaces. After spending years in an overcrowded room with uncomfortable seating, old, beat-up end panels, tables with cracked laminate, and a circulation desk that's turned into a storage ledge for everything from printers to book displays, some librarians have simply gone too far the other way.

As attractive as these new spaces can be, they will be undervalued over time. Even at home, a pristine living room isn't used for studying; it's a nice spot to sit in and entertain guests. When people want to study or create something or chat, they head for the kitchen. People use the kitchen table to spread out their work, to be close to others, to watch TV, or to see what their siblings are doing. In the kitchen, you can drink a beverage without fear of spilling it on a thousand-dollar chair. The same applies to a school library. It's
a working environment; it should have a lot of "appliances" and space to do research, make stuff, and consume a "big information meal."

Now, that's not to say your library can't be one of the most attractive spaces in the school. I've been in a lot of wonderful "kitchens" that are both hard-working and beautiful.

I'm also not implying that school libraries shouldn't have comfortable lounge seating. A library should have appropriate seating to support students in all of their learning endeavors. If your library has space for lounge chairs, then include tablet arms on them so your students can use them to multitask.

Start planning your library by listing and prioritizing important activities and desired student outcomes, and be able to clearly articulate the culture you want people to see when they walk into your library. Whatever you do, don't let the furniture become the main topic of conversation or dictate the space's culture.

5. And finally, whatever happened to the great outdoors?

With almost every waking minute immersed in technology, it's even more important to consider how to stimulate students' other senses. Whether or not you agree with child-advocate Richard Louv's Last Child in the Woods (Algonquin, 2005), which argues that contemporary children are increasingly cut off from nature, it's obvious that today's young people don't spend as much time outdoors as previous generations. That's one good reason to create an outdoor reading patio for your school library.

Space in libraries is a limited commodity. Creating a secure environment outdoors for students to gather, read, perform, or just relax expands your space significantly. And no, this outdoor space won't be available every day, but the days it can be used will be extremely special. People develop fond memories of class periods spent outdoors in the sunshine, so why not library periods as well? It's an easy way to relieve eye-strain by looking up and around at nature. Include this possibility when planning your school library both for practical and aesthetic reasons.

Natural sunlight already pours into new libraries with good window treatments, and a wall of windows can frame trees, green plants, and blue sky. Whether you create a reading patio or not, encourage your architects to attractively landscape the area adjacent to your wall of windows, and then reserve the floor space directly in front of the windows for students—not shelving. They'll enjoy the sunlight, the view, and watching...
Marino Jeantet School, P.S. 19 in Queens, uses its learning garden for both science and reading programs. During April’s poetry month, students will read aloud their works in this peaceful outdoor space. The garden is also a huge hit with members of the mostly Spanish-speaking community, who like to help out with the gardening.

Seven resources to inspire you


After reflecting on numerous research studies and humorous anecdotes, Emory University Professor Mark Bauerlien arrives at an uncomical conclusion: we’ve produced a generation of students who are extremely ill-prepared for college.


A quick read, this simple fable provides thought-provoking insight into how people deal (or don’t deal) with change. It’s one of my go-to books.


Journalist Louv uses a broad range of studies to show that kids need to spend more time in the great outdoors—and the importance of nature in children’s physical and emotional development.


If you’re planning a new school, get this excellent reference book that combines learning research with innovative design to create some great spaces for kids.


The erudite authors offer an insightful sociological portrait of a younger generation that’s sophisticated in the use of media while, at the same time, often innocent and reckless. This is a fascinating look at the generation that will shape the future.


The former United States assistant secretary of education provides bold commentary on educational reform, its failure to improve education, and what should be done.


With terrific text and stunning images, the author documents a joint effort of the Robin Hood Foundation and the New York City Board of Education to re-imagine the school library and combat poverty through leading-edge design and top-notch instruction.

the change of seasons; the experience will enrich their learning.

Color and texture are another way to add sensory excitement to your library. The walls, floor, and ceiling all offer surfaces for bright colors, murals, and artwork. Besides adding some pizzazz, these elements can visually unite different areas in your library or highlight a particular area. Beige, white, and nondescript carpeting have had a monopoly in school libraries for far too long.

End panels with built-in shadow boxes can add more visual interest to the space, or they can become a canvas for creative images. And finally, bold signage, graphic icons, and unique fixtures, props, and lighting can all contribute to making your library a place that students will want to explore with their minds and their senses.

If all of these recommendations are a little overwhelming, I can empathize. Change can be scary—but embrace it. It’s crucial to recognize where changes can be made to improve students’ learning experiences. Don’t wait too long to consider your library’s future—or your students will leave you behind.

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