Libraries Unbound
Taking a page from Starbucks, dusty public institutions overhaul and expand their mission—with a chai latte on the side

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When the American Library Association convenes for its annual conference in Washington, D.C. in June, thousands of librarians will spend several days considering such questions as "Why Does My Building Project Need an Interior Designer?" A panel discussion on that topic is intended to help attendees comprehend what is by all measures a full-blown sea change. Signs of the times: special lighting to merchandise collections; acoustical controls; and the death of the monolithic, stationary circulation desk.

As for the latter, it's "an expensive piece of furniture to redo when the technology changes—and it changes every year," explains one of the panelists, Michaels Associates Design Consultants principal Andrea Michaels. Those changes are driving the current burst of innovative libraries. Far from becoming obsolete in the high-tech age, libraries are reinventing themselves as places where information is created and exchanged, not just stored and retrieved.

In turn, designers are making library interiors more nimble and transparent. Fast becoming relics are dim lighting, neutral palettes, heavy wooden furniture, dusty stacks, and bank-teller cages housing shushing librarians. Designers are specifying bold colors, user-friendly way-finding graphics, stand-up/sit-down workstations, movable tables, comfy seating, and retail-inspired racks.

"Think of libraries as combining the attributes of a marketplace, a theater, an oasis, a spa, and an event space, all centered on learning and lifestyle—with an adjunct café," HMA2 principal Henry Myerberg says. The theater and café functions are more than passingly familiar to Myerberg from his years as a principal at the Rockwell Group. Now, with funding from the Robin Hood Foundation, he's helping the New York public-school system turn its libraries into what he calls "playgrounds for learning."

In Westport, Connecticut, Myerberg is renovating and expanding a library. "Mix and blur is my mantra, reflecting our multitasking, multigenerational society," he says. In short, a library must be more than a library.

It's almost impossible to discuss libraries without bringing up the Office for Metropolitan Architecture's Seattle Central Library, which opened in 2004. With its spiral stacks and energy-efficient transparent skin, the 412,000-square-foot facility "transforms itself wholeheartedly...as an institution no longer exclusively dedicated to the book, but as an information store," OMA founder Rem Koolhaas declares in the firm's Web manifesto.

While the Seattle library has become a top tourist destination, upped area real-estate values, and sent book circulation through the diamond-pattern glass roof, the backlash has begun, as critics lament the lack of intimacy and warmth. When Myerberg toured the building, he searched in vain for a comfortable place to sit, finally retiring to a neighborhood café. "Ironically, that library is the one place in Seattle where you can't get a cup of coffee," he says. "Every public library seems to know these days that, if you brew it, they will come." Indeed, the biggest influences on library design are Starbucks Coffee and Barnes & Noble.

The whole Pacific Northwest is a hotbed of progressive library design. Washington state's King County hired Snyder Hartung Kane Strauss Architects to design a library at Southcenter Mall as part of the 40-year-old shopping center's multimillion-dollar revitalization. The 3,000-square-foot branch is decked out with glass pendant globes and furnished with case goods from Herman Miller's Resolve system. An neon sign over the entry reads Library Connection. "People walk in, and it's only after a while that they say, 'Oh, this is a library.' Which is exactly what we want to hear," notes Kay Johnson, the system's associate director for facilities development.

Like retail counterparts, public libraries are ratcheting up their programming, which usually calls for a central atrium that can quickly transform from a reading room to performance, lecture, exhibition, or party space. For Westport, Myerberg says he imagined the traditional central reading room as a 300-person assembly hall with stadium seating amid the stacks: "across between a Quaker meetinghouse, the MIT media lab, and the Spanish Steps."

So, where are the books? (Or other materials that have not yet been digitized.) According to Johnson, increased traffic means higher circulation, thus less need for shelf space. King County also has a sophisticated interlibrary loan program and a central sorting warehouse. At many libraries, the stacks that do exist are being relocated away from windows, freeing up the valuable perimeter for sunlight reading areas.

Daylighting is among the sustainable features that distinguish today's libraries. In Pike County, Pennsylvania, Frederic Schwartz Architects is preparing to break ground for the New Central Library, which organizes interior circulation around a high, open, skylit space. Glass perimeter walls, shaded by deep overhangs, allow indirect light to enter as well as providing views of the town both in front and rainbox in back. "This building is about transparency. The vibrancy of library life will be seen from the street, creating an amazing pull," says MDA Design/Group International principal Elisabeth Martin, who served on the jury that selected Frederic Schwartz.

Phoenix's Desert Broom branch, which will receive an ALA/IAA award in June, combines sustainability with high-tech engineering for a welcoming, flexible environment. Designed by Richárd + Bauer Architecture, the 15,000-square-foot LEED Silver building features an expansive roof that produces a shaded microclimate. Skylights of colored glass create a kaleidoscopic effect throughout the space, culminating in the children's area.

A raised flooring system for the entire library makes it easier to adapt to changing technology. "A lot of libraries built in the '70s and '80s didn't even think about computers. Then it was boxes plugged into the wall," principal James Richárd says. "Now its laptops, PDAs, and cell phones that serve as mobile PCs. With an accessible floor, you can move tables around, then plug media in again—instead of having the tables pushed up against the wall to be near outlets."

The question of ample indirect lighting comes back into play with regard to the mobile furniture: There's no need to worry about deconstructing the ceiling fixtures whenever the program changes. Instead of fluorescent strip lighting, table lamps add a living-room feel.

As for the former centerpiece of most libraries, that 40-foot-long circ desk, it's gradually being supplanted by automated checkout kiosks. Unshackled from clerk duty, librarians can spread out to help "customers" with meader tasks. A hallmark of the modern library is the variety of junction points where people can meet, work, or "be alone together," says Hillier Architecture principal Joseph Rizzo, who has designed 80 libraries in his career.

Rizzo points out that Starbucks built its success on the universal truth that human beings are social creatures. But libraries have the edge, he adds: "People get addicted to coffee, but they also get addicted to books."

Clockwise from top: An example from New York public schools' Library Initiative, with design by HMA2 and funding from the Robin Hood Foundation. The "living room" at the Office for Metropolitan Architecture's Seattle Central Library, Painted sheet-metal signage at another New York school.

From top: Richárd + Bauer's Desert Broom library in Phoenix, where aluminum mesh defines service zones. Colorful stacks at Goucher College's future "atheneum," designed by Hillier Architecture with principal Joseph Rizzo as library specialist.