State of the Art in Darien

A long, flexible process helped the new Darien Library become the Northeast's first projected LEED Gold library building, while truly reinventing the public library

By Louise Parker Berry & Alan Kirk Gray -- Library Journal, 05/15/2009

The new Darien Library opened on January 10, 2009, a snowy day in our corner of Connecticut. After the speeches, the governor's proclamation, and the ribbon cutting, 7200 revelers headed toward the building (the crowds were so large, it took them more than 20 minutes to make their way in). Some 10,000 people visited that weekend.

When we first started thinking about how to provide new services to our community ten years ago, we had no idea how long it would take us, how much it would cost, or how, exactly, our plans would be realized. Certainly we had no idea of the technology involved, or that we would end up pursuing LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. And we could never have imagined the extraordinary building into which we'd eventually be moving.

We knew our project had a great pedigree. We already enjoyed strong community support—the library's use statistics were off the charts—and have for several consecutive years been ranked by Hennen's American Public Library Ratings among the country's top ten libraries. The library's trustees had created a long-range plan that set forth the community's need for additional services, concluding that a new building would have to be constructed. The subsequent building program was authored by Princeton Public Library, NJ, director Leslie Burger, also head of Library Development Solutions and later president of the American Library Association. Written in 2002 and significantly updated in 2005, it defined our new building needs clearly, including the need "to reduce maintenance and operating costs as much as possible...utilize efficient building systems and...achieve LEED certification."

We decided to work with Peter Gisolfi of Peter Gisolfi Associates in Hastings-on-Hudson, NY. Peter is an architect whose work we respected, someone who realized, as we did, the importance of a significant public building at the center of a New England community. Peter likes "heavy" buildings, but he imbues them with light and transparency, and we wanted our new facility to be open and accessible while also having a heavy, i.e., permanent, presence.

A "POWER"-FUL PRESENTATION An open staircase (top left) leads to the entrance of the basement's "Power Library," equipped with 32 public access computers and including a room dedicated to office needs. Also on this level are an adjacent Teen Lounge, technical services, the materials handling system, and space for future expansion.

On "Main Street," (bottom left) which staff call "the heart of the library," patrons can find holds, return/check out materials, browse the fiction collection, consult with staff trained in readers' advisory, or hang out in the café. The flat-panel screens on the brick pillars behind the welcome desk announce new releases and upcoming events.

The Reference Room (below) exemplifies one of the building's driving design principles: transparency. The windows look out to other areas of the building.

Bottom: The exterior view of the new library when it opened this winter, with the biofiltration system in the foreground. The four-level structure (including the mezzanine) blends both traditional and modern architecture. *Photos By Rob Mintzes, Peter Gisolfi Associates*

As it happened, our early planning was derailed in 2002 when our first idea—to acquire neighboring property and expand the existing 22,750 square foot library—fell through. In retrospect, it was a stroke of luck. On our initial trajectory, we would have built a better Darien Library, but we would have missed an opportunity to take our building vision, and our service vision, to the next level.

After several frustrating years spent looking for a suitable site in Darien, our perspective gradually changed. We shifted our focus to the future instead of trying to improve on the past. We stopped thinking about ourselves and about what we wanted and looked around the corner to a future we couldn't clearly see—a future in which we envisioned our patrons approaching us with entirely different concerns and values. We visited new libraries looking for takeaways and saw lots of great architecture but found few ideas we could use. So we decided to design a library entirely our own.

Considering what the future might look like

We knew the building would have to retain the small-town look and feel of the existing, 50-year-old library, which many of our users did not want to lose. We would be fanatical about making sure that every space in the new building worked exactly right. And we would place a big bet on technology as the means to allow us to provide an expanded array of services to each patron as an individual.

LOSE THE CIRCULATION DESK The automatic returns in the lobby are part of the RFID/automated materials handling technology from 3M and FKI Logistex that eliminate the circ desk and encourage patrons to check materials in and out themselves. Through a window in the main entrance (inset), patrons can watch returned books travel along a conveyor belt and into sorting bins. *Photos By Rob Melzer, Peter Gluck Associates*

Our working partnership with Peter and his team was the most important element in the success of the project, because it was a true partnership. In a sense, we designed the library from the inside out, space by space, while Peter, as an architect does, designed the building from the outside in and from the ground up. At our request, he was a participant in every design meeting for the first three years.

We agreed on the building's core structure early on—a three-floor facility, plus a mezzanine, with an active main level, classic library functions on the upper level, and technology and computers on a lower level. When Peter first proposed this idea, he referred to Charles McKim's 1887 design of the Boston Public Library, a "palace for the people" with a busy main floor and a grand staircase that pulled people up to the second level.

That idea resonated with us, and it anchored us to hallowed library tradition, even on so much smaller a scale, but we had a different reference point: Ray Oldenburg's vision of libraries as described in his 1991 book, *The Great Good Place*. There, Oldenburg foresees libraries as "the third place," that "heart of a community's social vitality, the grassroots of a democracy." We wanted our library to be less what he referred to as "exacting, complicated and expensive internal arrangements," i.e., less like a hospital, and more like a café or a bookstore, so that it would be at the heart of our community's social vitality.

With this perspective in place, we probably had a clearer view of what we wanted to accomplish than many other library clients do at the early working stage. This was sometimes to Peter's disbelief and sometimes to his dismay but often to the benefit of the project.

Roadblocks along Main Street

In a couple of areas, we were breaking new ground as far as we knew, with our concept of a "Main Street"—an active central area with all our new books, DVDs, and audiobooks on CD arranged as though in a store, with sidewalk displays, café tables, connecting the Children's Room on one side and the Community Room (a 170-seat auditorium), café, and fiction stacks on the other. But it took more than nine months to agree on how the space would be laid out.

That's partly because we didn't have the same understanding of space as architects do. Architects know how big a space is just by looking at plans. We needed to see what the space was actually going to look like. We found a basketball court and bought a lot of blue painter's tape to lay out spaces like Main Street, to see how they would really work, where shelves would be, and if we could walk in and use it as our patrons would. In some cases, we were able to reduce the size of spaces when we realized what they were really like when they weren't on paper in 1/8" scale. We did it alone once but then included the architects, which was very helpful. Working together in a neutral environment, though not exactly a breeze, did promote the sense of us being on the same team.

LOOKING FORWARD "We'd decided we wanted to build the first of the new libraries, not the last of the old," say Barry and Gray about the new Darien Library. The staff reconsidered how users would interact in the library of the future when designing vital services like the nonfiction collection (at left). They reorganized nonfiction into browsing areas envisioned as "glades," with Dewey taking a bit of a backseat. As part of its green initiative (the library is projected to receive LEED Gold certification this month), the entire building is infused with daylight via massive windows, as in the periodicals room, above.
Photos By Rob Mintzes, Peter Gisolfi Associates

We knew what we wanted to achieve on the lower level, where we placed most of the building's patron technology: a Power Library. The Power Library is as close to a learning commons as we could make it—a central space with PCs, a tech training center, a SO/HO (small office/home office) copy and binding center, two smart conference rooms that can be upgraded to allow for videoconferencing, and the Teen Lounge, which is a hangout space with books, chairs, and some fairly robust computers that can drive a flat-panel wall display.

We're much more comfortable than most libraries in putting computer users close together and letting them drink coffee while they do their work. We're also prepared to give a lot of help to users, so we saw the Power Library as an active, not a private, space, where users have a sense of being together. The values there are tech, not library. In a community where more than 95 percent of households have high-speed Internet access and nearly everyone has his/her own technology—a PC, at the very least—things get pretty busy. Kind of like a great good digital place.

Why is the Teen Lounge there, too? Someone said early on that we needed to put the teens next to either the coffee or the computers. Someone else said if they were close to the computers they'd be more likely to get into Harvard. Case closed.

Funding a higher price tag

Perhaps unique to Darien, the library board always knew the building project would be paid for with privately raised funds, as the existing library had been. The cost of the expansion, originally estimated at $10 million, jumped significantly when it became a stand-alone building. We ended up with a design for a 54,000 square foot structure (including 7000 unfinished square feet on the lower level) and a project cost of $28 million, including land acquisition and remediation. It is a library built to last a century, with steel columns and concrete block walls, brick and aluminum-clad windows, and a slate roof. The interior combines timeless New England and modern finishes.

George Wyper and Kim Huffard, as cochairs of the capital campaign and successive board presidents, took on the task of raising the $24 million needed once we factored in the $4 million proceeds from the sale of the old building. Their success is a tribute to their hard work and tenacity as well as to the community's widespread and longstanding support of our library. Though it didn't hurt that Darien, with a per capita income of over $77,000, is one of the most affluent communities in the United States, this was a much larger fundraising effort than had ever before been attempted here. The citizens of Darien really took to heart the motto, "Once in a lifetime a community builds a library."

The site we eventually chose was comprised of three properties, including a former gas station at which there had been several major spills. The environmental remediation project, which involved close coordination with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, was complicated, lasted three years, and cost $1.5 million. Dot Kelly, a socially aware community member who first joined our building committee, then later the board, played a major role in guiding us through the excavation and contamination cleanup. She also enabled the library to receive a nearly $1 million reimbursement from the state as a partial offset to those expenses.

The importance of materials handling

We decided early in our planning to use RFID technology as a means of rebalancing the services we could provide to patrons. We'd already invested in touch screens and omnidirectional barcode readers to make our circulation desks more efficient but still had to address that 90 percent of staff–patron interactions in the old building amounted to books and DVDs being pushed back and forth across desks.

After we studied RFID for several years, we realized that we needed to be thinking about materials handling—the automatic return and sorting

of items—since that's where the potential savings lie. Because we were early enough in the planning process, we were able to avoid the problem we've seen with other libraries when RFID materials handling systems are put in as an afterthought, without getting much benefit for the expense they incurred.

We felt that the right way to approach the process was to involve the RFID vendors as active participants, not as passive respondents to a request for proposal (RFP). Out of the eight vendors with whom we'd consulted, we asked three to review our plans and propose the system they would install. Each examined our circulation statistics, a review of our operations, and the plans for the new building to make their proposals, which were then refined by a technology committee. At that point we asked each to make a financial proposal. On the basis of all this, we chose 3M to provide the RFID tags and self-check machines and FKI Logistex to provide the automated returns, conveyors, and sorting system.

Since the whole point of adopting RFID/materials handling technology was to allow us to provide better service to our patrons, we opted against having a circulation desk, which we felt has kept other libraries from achieving high patron self-check usage. Instead, we planned for a Welcome Desk, essentially a concierge desk for the building. But we didn't just dismiss our circulation staff. Instead, those among them who were readers began a three-year education process to become readers' advisors (RAs). We sent them to conferences as well as brought in speakers from bookstores and publishing companies to share their insights, and we gave them the responsibility of purchasing all our fiction books. Main Street is their bookshop—they acquire the stock, and they handsell it. The remaining circulation staff, those who did not have futures as RAs, are mainstays in the materials management area, involved in the care and feeding of our automated return system and in organizing the shelvers who take the sorted return items and get them back on shelf.

Our adoption of materials handling technology caused us to consider the future of other critical interaction-based services like reference. In 2005, we asked ourselves: How long before patrons start IM-ing us their reference questions? How should we organize the library to manage IM and other kinds of internal and external e-reference services?

We spent the next four years trying to answer those and many other questions, and the resulting dialog influenced our thinking and design choices. For instance, we decided on "pods" as a way of describing the nature of our reference desk structures (meaning they would be collaborative spaces) but didn't have a clue what they'd look like. And we came up with "glades" as a way of expressing our plan to reorganize the nonfiction collection into browsing areas somewhat divorced from Dewey.

By 2007, on track to build a library we knew would be extraordinary, we put off design decisions on furniture and shelving [for more on furniture, etc., see p. 14] while working department by department on what services we would deliver and how we would do so. Throughout, we kept reminding ourselves that the new Darien Library was not our library but our patrons' library, the center of their community. This drove innovation, and change. We reconfigured our plans for children's services three times, for example, and our nonfiction shelving strategy four times.

Using technology to redefine user experience

We always knew we'd have an opportunity late in the project to decide on technology, since new generations of technology tend to follow closely on one another's heels. Leading up to that, we asked such library tech luminaries as Michael Stephens, Aaron Schmidt, and Jenny Levine to speak to our staff, we hosted conferences, and we made sure to stay current on the latest thinking and trends. We also attended conferences other libraries typically don't, such as InfoComm, which bills itself as the world's "largest information communications" conference.

It wasn't until we convinced John Blyberg of Ann Arbor District Library, MI, to join us in 2007 that we began actively planning the role of technology in our library. Technology ultimately became an integral part of the services we provide, and we attempted to infuse it into the library experience in ways that aren't glaring when they don't need to be.

This attitude led to a major innovation: Blyberg's concept of a UX (User eXperience) team to oversee all the technology-based interactions between patrons and the library, whether virtual or onsite.

Say you ask an information services librarian a question about the Crimean War—you might not recognize it's an ASUS EEe PC subnotebook she's using to access a database for you, you're just grateful to get the information you want. Similarly, if you're in the Technology Center taking a class on Excel, you don't care that you're looking at an 82" Samsung flat-panel display, you're just enjoying seeing all the details. And if a book you want is on the shelf, you might not give a thought to the role the materials handling system played in getting it there. The aim of Blyberg's UX team is to address the reality of these and other patron experiences and continually seek better ways to deliver the appropriate services.

We also wanted technology to create a contrast between the timelessness of the building and the immediacy of the digital world. To that end, we installed flat-panel displays driven by a neat piece of InfoComm software called Sedna Presenter to lighten our Main Street area. To make the statement that the library is committed to providing patrons access to the latest and best technology, we put 24" monitors on the ASUS EEe PCs in the Power Library and a Microsoft Surface in the children's room. (The former was a relatively inexpensive statement to make; the latter, at $15,000, a costly one.)

The next generation library

In 2005, we'd decided we wanted to build the first of the new libraries, not the last of the old. We felt a responsibility to do something more than just expand on the success of the existing Darien Library. Our goal was not bravado, just a way of saying, "We haven't figured everything out yet, but we will."

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A Sustainable Library, Inside and Out

By Peter Gisolfi, AIA, ASLA

Because the Darien Library board committed early to a sustainable site and building, we were able to integrate sustainable strategies into all aspects of the design.

Green on the inside

The building is intrinsically sustainable. It is made of heavy materials such as concrete and concrete block, which provide high thermal mass and help to maintain a comfortable interior environment. This construction enables stable temperatures that complement the functioning of the geothermal heating and cooling systems. The building is constructed with high-resistance to heat transfer and low air infiltration at the building envelope. Other features include daylighting in all spaces, multilevel lighting controls, and a building management system that further help to save energy. Materials used within the building include porcelain tile, carpeting, wood paneling, and gypsum board, which are nontoxic and easy to maintain.

Green on the outside

The building forms three sides of a reading courtyard shaded by honey locust trees. To the west of the courtyard is the parking area, shaded with native plant materials.

The formerly toxic land on which the building sits—previously home to a gas station and car wash—was fully remediated and is now a sustainable green site. Four "standing-column" geothermal wells provide ground water for the heating and cooling system as well as irrigation water for the site. To manage stormwater, bioswales, vegetative landscape elements that remove silt and pollution from surface runoff, filter the water and direct it to retention basins under the parking area. The filtered stormwater is then gradually released into the ground water beneath the site.

The building's exterior materials, including brick, slate, aluminum-clad wood windows, and copper flashings and gutters, are permanent and require virtually no maintenance.

The proof is in the points

The new library is slated to achieve LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold certification, obtaining nine out of 14 credits for the site, four out of five credits for water efficiency, nine out of 17 credits for energy and atmosphere, five out of 13 credits for materials, ten out of 15 credits for indoor environmental quality, and five out of five credits for innovation.

The metrics for the building are equally noteworthy. For instance, 85 percent of the stormwater infiltrates on the site. The building saves 48 percent in energy costs when compared to a baseline building of the same size that meets all energy codes. It also uses 41 percent less potable water. The landscape requires no irrigation from the potable water supply. Of all materials used, ten percent are from recycled sources, and 20 percent are local; 84 percent of the waste was recycled.

The new Darien Library was envisioned, designed, and constructed with the idea that life cycle costs are more important than initial savings. It is a beacon of sustainable design, serving as both an educational tool for the community and an inspiration for all.