Welcome to All: Design's Role in Creating an Inclusive, Safe, and Beloved Community Destination

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Abstract:

As places that serve all, public libraries often find themselves at the forefront of serving community members who are experiencing some combination of homelessness, mental illness, joblessness, or social dislocation. Libraries are responding creatively by expanding or adapting services to address these needs more effectively. At times these efforts alienate other community members who are uncomfortable, or feel threatened by, sharing space with the community's so-called "undesirables." How can a library building become a place that not only serves everyone, but also feels welcoming to everyone? The building design process and the design itself can serve as powerful tools for creating a comfortable, safe, relevant destination for the entire community. This paper uses the renovation and addition project for Madison Public Library's Central Library (Wisconsin, United States) as a case study. Through extensive community outreach, focus groups with local social service providers, and design critiques by members of local law enforcement, the design team identified several ways the reimagined building could address comfort, safety, and troubling behaviors. The resulting inclusive library building provides on-site assistance for those in need. In the words of a long-term Madison Public Library administrator, "MSR turned our library from a fear-based program to a hope-based program."

Keywords: library design, inclusive, homeless, renovation, social sustainability.

By most measures, Madison is an ideal place to call home. Wisconsin's capital city is home to one of the world's top research universities and consistently ranks in the top 10 best places to live in the United States due to its strong local economy, parks and outdoor attractions, quality healthcare, restaurant scene and cultural amenities, and high-quality public schools. In fact, *National Geographic* named Madison one of the happiest cities in the world in 2015. [1] However, like many other cities, Madison is experiencing increased homelessness due to a lack of affordable housing and resources for people experiencing poverty, addiction, mental illness, or domestic violence, or for those with physical disabilities. In these cities, the downtown library often becomes a place for people experiencing homelessness to temporarily escape the elements, gather with others, and use the library's offerings and amenities.

Madison Public Library's Central Library is situated one block off Capitol Square. This location positions the library adjacent to farmers markets, restaurants, boutiques, the region's premier performing arts center, and other amenities that contribute to the vibrant downtown. However, prior to a major renovation and addition in 2013, community members often referred to the library as a "*de facto* homeless shelter," and most chose to use one of the system's branch libraries instead. Opened in 1965, the 95,000 square foot (approximately 8,825 square meters) building badly needed renewal, but many residents resisted the idea of investing in the building due to their perception that a renovated library would become an "expensive homeless shelter." The original design of the building itself contributed to this perception. For instance, the entry approach—which was originally designed with an exterior court flanked by stairs, public art, and planters—had become a popular gathering area for people experiencing mental illness and chronic homelessness. This situation deterred community members, who expressed apprehension about having to "walk the gauntlet" upon entering the building. [2]

Figure 1: The existing building was often referred to as a "*de facto* homeless shelter" (Photo: MSR).

Overpacked interior public spaces led to severely compromised sightlines with little daylight. The finishes were worn and stained, which negated the staff's substantial efforts to keep the building clean. Hidden and lockable, toilet rooms had become venues for drug use, endangering the lives of those taking the drugs and unsettling those who encountered them. The tall shelving and its dense layout prevented effective staff supervision. The lighting was glaring in some areas and too dim in others. At times, a perceived threat was all it took for a complaint to be lodged to staff. Over time the library staff had eliminated all soft seating to discourage lingering. People who had nowhere else to go occupied the remaining small number of tables, concentrated in a few locations. This created a perceived threat to some customers who wanted to access collections or services in those areas, especially families with young children.

Figure 2: Minimal seats were available for patrons and were concentrated to a few locations in the building (Photo: MSR).

The City of Madison hired the nationally-recognized library design firm MSR with local architect Potter Lawson for the building redesign effort. The design team created a quantitative building program in summer 2010, which enumerated the future building's functional needs. Concurrently, the team began defining the qualitative aspects that would create a downtown destination for the entire community.

Early in the process, the design team conducted a survey of community members to understand their hopes for the project and perceived barriers to its success. Common hopes included more meeting space, a destination for families, more seating, and increased daylight. However, many of the barriers cited by residents underscored perceptions of the downtown library as a hangout for the homeless population and as an irrelevant amenity for others in the community. Examples of specific comments highlighting perceived barriers include: "lack of understanding in general of all the conflicting functions a central library performs (i.e., need for people to feel safe vs. need for all people of various degrees of sanity and socialization to have a place to go)" and "it continues as a de facto homeless shelter which impedes [its] usefulness." Other comments expressed hope for addressing the root causes of homelessness: "space to assist [with] social services issues" and "allow the least fortunate access to most current technologies to stay employable." The comments helped the design team appreciate that the central library's future success would depend on whether it solved this design problem.

As the building program began to take shape through Autumn 2010, the design team considered ways to ensure that the building would be welcoming to all members of the community. Public forums helped the team gather additional input that would further define the space qualities the

building should contain. During each forum, significant discussion ensued regarding "the homeless issue." Some expressed the opinion that only the homeless and mentally ill would use the building. The design team worked to understand what drove these opinions and to broaden the conversation by sharing imagery, stories, and statistics from the national and global library community that illustrate buildings that welcome everyone. The process increased community awareness of the intersection of libraries and homelessness as a national issue and helped shift the conversation from being about fear to being about solutions. The design team helped library staff and the community expand their definition of "library" and generate excitement about the myriad ways an urban library could be a destination and resource in the 21st century.

The discussion expanded beyond stakeholders already informing the project when *The Capital Times* reporter Pat Schneider covered a public presentation of early design concepts in November 2010. The article (entitled "Can Remodeled Library Attract Public, Suit Homeless?") summarized much of what the design team was hearing from the public and underscored the priority to create a place for everyone. Schneider quoted then-president of the Madison Library Board Tripp Widder, who stated, "We have to balance the need to accommodate the homeless with the need to accommodate other user groups. Everyone has to feel comfortable and safe here." The article's publication marked a turning point in the community's conversation related to homelessness and the reimagined library and fueled the design team's progress. [2]

Supported by the city's facilities team, the design team hosted a separate round of focus groups with local social services providers and law enforcement officials. The perspective of those on the front lines of the issues helped the design team better understand the challenges and needs of people experiencing homelessness and mental illness and how those issues intersect with the public library building. Several themes emerged that ultimately shaped the project in fundamental ways:
- A need for on-demand, on-site outreach services.
- A need to increase actual *and perceived* safety of all library users.
- Addressing the reality that people experiencing homelessness often have lots of belongings with them.
- Addressing the issue of toilet rooms being used in ways that violated library policies.

Conversations quickly became focused on how to solve these issues, while creating an exciting, attractive, and safe destination that contributed to the vibrancy of downtown Madison. The first issue to be solved was perhaps the easiest: creating space for on-site outreach, case management, and referral services in partnership with several local service agencies to provide direct access and support for potential beneficiaries of social services who already frequent the library. The library had been reserving the building's only meeting room once per week for consultations, but the room's scale was large and inappropriate for intimate consultations, tied up the neighborhood's only large meeting space, and was hidden away on the top floor of the building. As a result, many people in need of services simply didn't realize they could access them at the library. These issues informed the design of one of the planned study rooms. The study room design includes enough space for a family to meet while not feeling too large for a one-on-one meeting. Translucent film on the glass provides both security and privacy, a phone and computer are available, and a lockable credenza can be used to conveniently store supplies and handouts for the various social services providers.

While these public conversations and focus groups were taking place, the design team merged the programming phase with the early schematic design phase. Because the project entailed renovating and expanding an existing building, the programmatic needs could be easily tested against a known condition (the existing building footprint and floor stacking). All parties could more easily envision the proposals and think through likely positive and negative impacts. Thus, concepts such as providing plentiful and varied seating dispersed throughout the building to increase user comfort across the community spectrum (rather than eliminating seating as was the current strategy) gained traction. The design team tested additional design concepts such as the location of enclosed rooms, placement of staff areas and service points, areas for collection, and the configuration and location of toilet rooms. Each entity provided its own perspective on how various configurations affected customer and staff safety and comfort, which informed the final design proposal.

A key outcome of this iterative process, the second public entry allows children and families to access to the children's suite without passing through other areas of the library. In community conversations and focus groups a more controlled entry to the children's area emerged as a high priority, both for convenience and, for some, comfort. This second entry offers access to the rest of the library as well, via elevator and stair, and includes an exterior book drop for added customer convenience. People with limited mobility or those pushing strollers have found the significant elevation change from the nearest public parking garage to the library's main entry difficult to navigate. Located closer to the public parking garage, the second public entry eliminates the need to traverse the entire elevational change. Before the renovation, the dimly-lit streetscape felt deserted, unwelcoming, and disconnected from the activity inside the building. The second entry's design features windows with views to the building interior and an LED wall that animates the street and lights the sidewalk and building approach.
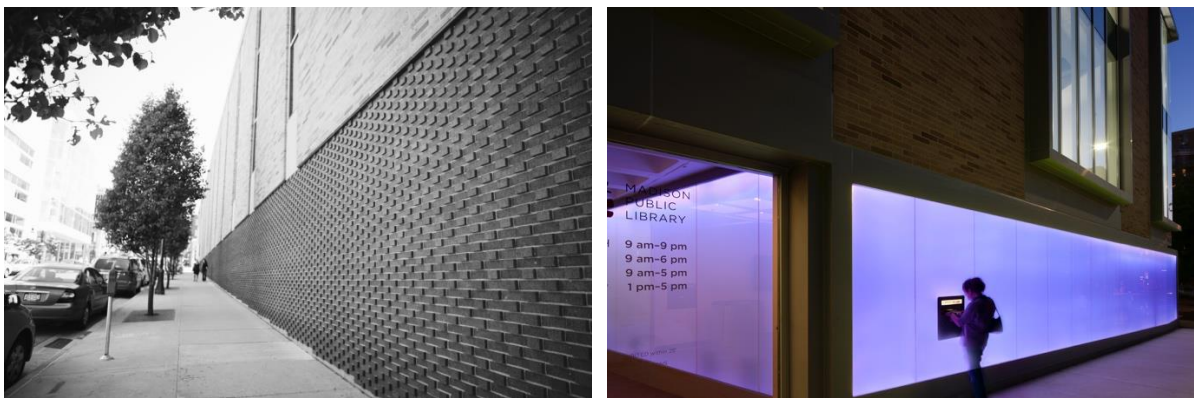
Figures 3 and 4: Before and after: a secondary entry adds light and visual interest to the street scape and convenience to public parking (Figure 3 photo: MSR; figure 4 photo: Lara Swimmer).

Another design outcome is the absorption of the problematic exterior court outside the main entry, eliminating the hangout space that deterred many community members. Factors that led to this strategy include the need for additional square footage and lack of available locations for an addition. Enclosing the space also creates access to the building via a long gradual ramp starting at the entry. This ramp makes the area unsuitable as a hangout and creates a welcoming and accessible entry for all users with clear sightlines to the stair, elevator, and service point.

Figure 5: A problematic exterior entry court became a gracious and accessible main entry (Photo: Lara Swimmer).

Concerns expressed by patrons, staff, and law enforcement about toilet room safety and security led to a doorless, ganged (i.e., multi-user) toilet room design. Doorless entries and careful placement of the toilet rooms within view of service points on each floor have largely eliminated the inappropriate use of toilet rooms. Staff concerns about potential drug use and overdoses, bathing, and camping out outweighed the benefits of incorporating single-occupant toilet rooms, which would be typical in a contemporary public library. Family toilets are included on the children's floor and can be used by building users who may prefer the privacy of a single-occupant toilet room.

Although the building was expanded by just 25,000 gross square feet (approximately 2,323 square meters), customer seating increased to over 500 seats, not including the maker space and program and large meeting rooms. A wide variety of seating, including soft seating, is dispersed throughout the building. This mix allows all building users to find comfortable places to sit to meet individual needs. The spacious table layout accommodates 120-degree tables for computers. Most users appreciate the space provided by the 120-degree tables, and people experiencing homelessness especially appreciate the additional privacy the privacy panels afford. The additional space means that an individual's personal belongings do not encroach on a neighbor's space. Providing cubbies or lockers for storing belongings was considered; however, this would have potentially conveyed a message that the library building would act as a day-shelter, negating the hotly-debated need for a proper day-shelter in Madison. Some staff also expressed concern that lockers would need to be monitored to ensure belongings were not left overnight. [4] [5]

Figure 6: 120-degree computer tables offer more privacy and delineation of space and space for belongings (Photo: Lara Swimmer).

The transformed Madison Public Library Central Library opened in autumn 2013 to community acclaim. A building many citizens wanted torn down has become a vibrant community destination. In the first 12 months after the library's reopening, visits were up 252%, checkouts were up 101% and 15 weddings were booked; after just over four years of operation that number climbed to nearly 100. As home to the world-renown Bubbler program, the building is alive with maker activities and art exhibits. The library's expanded program space is used for a wide variety of community and library events, from lectures and poetry slams to hack-a-thons, drop-in making, and concerts. The children's suite is now a popular destination for families and young children. Use of program and meeting rooms was up nearly 1,500% in the first year as compared to the year prior to the renovation, and continues to grow.

Madison Public Library has built upon the momentum in social services created by the newly-imagined central library building. Since reopening, the library has expanded its social services offerings, providing over 50 hours per week of on-site case management, outreach, and referral services. Originally designed to double as an office for social services providers one day per week, the study room has been converted into a full-time resource. Social services staff help low-income individuals with health care enrollment; assist homeless veterans with exams, treatment, referrals, and case management; and connect individuals experiencing addiction, mental illness, or homelessness with additional resources. Permanent on-site case managers from the local nonprofit organization Porchlight provide shelter, housing, and food assistance to individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Volunteers provide parent education, training, and support and maintain a closet at the library with diapers and clothing for families in need. The library has added a calendar on its website to indicate when customers can access various services at each of its branches. [6]

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Figure 7: An assistance calendar on the Madison Public Library website helps community members easily connect with social services (Screen shot from www.madisonpubliclibrary.org).

Including a wide range of community voices, the design process for Madison Public Library's Central Library transformation served as a catalyst for contentious but necessary conversations. Biases about people experiencing homelessness and mental illness surfaced in both nuanced and blatant ways, compelling all project members from the city, library, community, and design team to consider each design decision from multiple perspectives. Ultimately, this process helped create a facility with as few barriers to use as possible. The process required stakeholders to critically consider the public library's role in building community. The result is a building that supports the library's mission to welcome and serve all and to be a community hub. In the words of long-term Madison Public Library administrator Mark Benno, "MSR turned our library from a fear-based program to a hope-based program."

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