

## **Library Design for the Rest of the World: How Beyond Access is Helping Librarians Rethink Space in Developing Countries**

**Ari Katz**

Regional Director for Asia, Beyond Access, IREX, Bangkok, Thailand

E-mail address: akatz@irex.org



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### **Abstract:**

*Library design has gone viral over the past few years, with photos sets of fantastical post-modern libraries shared on Buzzfeed and techno-powered prestige projects sprouting up in national capitals. In the developed world, libraries have come a long way from the perpendicular stacks and tables of stereotype.*

*But there are 320,000 public libraries in the world, and for most of those – and nearly all of them in developing countries – the viral images are a distant dream. For many of these libraries – staffed by one or two underpaid library workers – design hasn't been a priority.*

*But poor design results in underuse. And lack of use is compounded into a lack of local prioritization. If libraries are to remain relevant even where resources are limited, their space must be friendly, welcoming and functional, enticing users to come in and spend time. For libraries considering their place in the 21st century, it can be a daunting prospect. But friendly redesign is possible, even with the meager budgets available to most libraries in the developing world.*

*Beyond Access – a library modernization program managed by IREX and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation - has developed a guide and training for libraries to undertake simple space redesign with limited or even no budget, particularly targeted at libraries in developing countries. It approaches library design through four categories of adjustments that help the library respond to the needs of users. The training walks librarians through the steps to make easy, meaningful changes. This paper reviews the guide and training.*

**Keywords:** *Library design, developing countries, modernization program*

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Library design has gone viral over the past few years, with photos sets of fantastical post-modern libraries featured in recurring BuzzFeed listicles<sup>1</sup> and techno-powered prestige projects sprouting up in national capitals. While the debate about the value of the public library in the age of Google still pops up in the media on a regular basis, higher-income countries have demonstrated over the last decade a ready appetite for the public library as an architectural spectacle.

This global emphasis on the library as a national or municipal status symbol has an effect beyond the particular institution's locality. Eager to catch up with the trend, even in countries where local public libraries are left to decay, some governments have found one way to convey modernity is to spend millions to construct flashy megastructures at enormous cost. Tajikistan, a country ranking 133rd in the latest UN Human Development Index<sup>2</sup> for example, spent more than \$40 million to construct its national library in the capital Dushanbe, and then reportedly begged for books to fill it from the country's university students.<sup>3</sup> In Myanmar, the vast national library building sits in the new capital Naypyidaw, air-



1) The new National Library of Tajikistan, constructed at a cost of \$40 million.

conditioned and equipped with hundreds of computers, though largely empty because it is so distant from its audience. Meanwhile, many of the country's 5,000 public libraries struggle with electricity and lack technology of any sort.

To be sure, there are worse ways to spend public funds. While it's comforting that libraries are an outlet for this kind of spending - and even as outsize demonstrations of national pride, their utility likely exceeds many other similar monumental projects - this focus on the giant and the central leaves most of the

world's public libraries behind. There are 320,000 public libraries in the world, and for most of those - and nearly all of the 230,000 in developing countries - the persistent viral images are not only inapplicable and irrelevant, they are discouraging. They communicate the message that a modern library requires million-dollar design, expensive technology and slick furnishings. For most of the world's libraries, at one room and with minimal budget covering upkeep, this kind of design is far beyond reach, and the result is the perception that any kind of thoughtful design is out of reach.

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- <sup>1</sup> For example, see: 16 Libraries You Have To See Before You Die. (2013, September 3), <http://www.buzzfeed.com/harpercollins/16-libraries-you-have-to-see-before-you-die-9npd#.pkwGa29pD>; Jones, J. (2015, April 7). 25 Incredible European Libraries To Visit Before You Die, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/jamiejones/libraries-all-book-lovers-will-want-to-visit#.edxaZQMoW>; Ortile, M. (2013, July 18). 49 Breathtaking Libraries From All Over The World, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mattortile/49-breathtaking-libraries-from-all-over-the-world#.mxDZg01V8>; Rebolini, A. (2015, February 26). 19 Totally Magical Libraries To Visit Before You Die, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/ariannarebolini/totally-magical-libraries-to-visit-before-you-die#.sxGDo2ZOp>.
  - <sup>2</sup> United Nations Development Programme. Human Development Reports. (n.d.). Retrieved May 26, 2015, from <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/table-1-human-development-index-and-its-components>
  - <sup>3</sup> Rickleton, C. (2012, April 10). Tajikistan: Where Size Matters · Global Voices, <https://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/04/11/tajikistan-where-size-matters/>.

This has consequences. Poor design translates into reduced utility and spaces that aren't useful result in libraries that are underused. When a library is used infrequently, it shortchanges its users and becomes detached from its community. It then loses the opportunity to become a priority on local agendas and budgets.

## The Role of Beyond Access

Beyond Access is a program managed by IREX and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that helps countries modernize their public library systems.<sup>4</sup> In most of the countries where Beyond Access works, libraries haven't been substantially re-envisioned in decades. As a result, their resources and spaces are outdated and typically used sparsely. Beyond Access works with partners in each country to update librarian training and bring new technology into libraries, but even with these fundamental steps towards 21st century relevance, many libraries remain stale and unpleasant places for visitors to spend time. Unless this facet of modernization was also addressed, IREX realized that the libraries Beyond Access was working to modernize would remain underused.



2) This library in Myanmar is unlikely to show up on any Buzzfeed lists.

Over the past few years, IREX staff searched for simple guides on space layout and arrangement appropriate for its participating librarians, but was unable to identify any existing resources targeted at those with the level of resources generally available to librarians in developing countries. So IREX took the first steps towards creating this guide. This paper describes the thinking behind the initial version of the guide and its accompanying training.

## A starting point

For developing countries, an alternative approach to design is needed - one that de-emphasizes the flash and situates library design as part of the process of modernizing the library in accordance with community needs - using whatever resources are available. To undertake this effort, IREX started out with the following basic assumptions:

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<sup>4</sup> Beyond Access ([www.beyondaccess.net](http://www.beyondaccess.net)) is a program managed by the international education and development nonprofit IREX ([www.irex.org](http://www.irex.org)). The mandate of Beyond Access is to help developing countries modernize their public library systems. In each country, library modernization is tied to explicit national development objectives, so that libraries gain ways to measure and explain their value in the 21st century. In some Beyond Access countries, partners have identified literacy as the most appropriate topic on which to build public library development. In other countries, library modernization efforts are connected to digital skills or workforce development. See the Beyond Access website for further details.

- Librarians most likely will not be able to purchase new things for the library. They may be able to request recycled or used materials from others in their community, but any suggestion that redesigning the library's space requires new funds will serve as a deterrent to taking any action. Therefore, the recommendations must be concepts that can be adapted to any situation, rather than instructions to use specific furniture, technologies or other items.
- Outdated space is a constraint on usage. A library can begin offering all manner of new services – something Beyond Access trains librarians to do – but if the space itself is unfriendly, it will always be a struggle to get people to make use of the library. Therefore, any adaptation of the space to respond to modern needs is a step in the right direction. A full reconceptualization of the space is not essential – but attentive arrangement of the space so that it can be used more effectively is an important first step for a modern library.
- The guide must be simple and brief. IREX set out to contain the recommendations on one page so that the guidelines could be easily reviewed and absorbed by librarians with minimal training background, and that it could be easily and quickly translated into new languages<sup>5</sup>.
- Examples must be based on developing country experience. So often in work with librarians in lower-income countries, librarians are exposed to new ideas and services from North America and Europe. While interesting, this frequently leads to a response of, 'sure that's possible in a rich country, but we could never do that here'. The training's slide deck<sup>6</sup>, therefore, includes examples only from other developing countries. When a librarian from Bangladesh sees an example from Bolivia, it's much more difficult to disregard it as something unique to rich countries.

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<sup>5</sup> To date, it has been translated into the Bangla language.

<sup>6</sup> The slide deck can be found at:  
<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1ZsUg91Zokn29D4SFnpmys0T8iwJqQQEBTxYjVDVh1rk/edit?usp=sharing>

## The training and guide

### MODERNIZE YOUR LIBRARY'S SPACE

It's easy to make your library into a modern, welcoming space for users, even with few resources. Involve your community and follow these four easy guidelines.



#### MAKE IT FRIENDLY

Design a place where people will want to stay - open, bright, colorful and comfortable.



##### COLOR

Fill the walls with posters and children's artwork.



##### LIGHT

Make use of windows. Seating near natural light.



##### COMFORT

Comfortable furniture. Cushions and blankets. Soft carpet. Children's corner.



#### MAKE IT ABOUT LEARNING

Libraries are places to encourage exploration, discovery and creativity.



##### PLACES FOR GATHERING AND INDEPENDENT WORK

Seating for collaboration, such as chairs placed in circles and quiet, individual spaces.



##### PLACES FOR CREATIVITY

Objects for playing, drawing and building.



##### A PRINT-RICH ENVIRONMENT

Text, labels and words everywhere. Friendly signs welcome and guide exploration.



#### MAKE IT EASY

Users appreciate the library most when what they need is easy to find and use.



##### EASY SHELVES

Placed at users height.



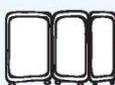
##### DISPLAY FOR DISCOVERY

Face books out, more than 40% of shelf space used means clutter and books hard to find.



##### HUMANIZE TECHNOLOGY

Accessible throughout at heights for children and adults. Visible to librarians so you can help new users.



#### MAKE IT ADAPTABLE

Use a small space best by changing it for changing needs.



##### MOVEABLE SCREENS AND BARRIERS

For private or separate space when needed. Use wheels.



##### BOXES AND BINS

Books sorted by topic, level. Small, mobile containers.



##### ZONE THE LIBRARY

Spaces for kids, for reference, for meeting, for quiet reading.

With thanks to the Shine Center & Wordworks (South Africa), OCLC (US) and the Global Libraries community for input and recommendations.

The resulting training and guide aim to demonstrate that friendly redesign is possible, even with the meager budgets available to most libraries in the developing world. The recommendations within the training are based on a review of materials available for libraries in more advanced countries, which was adapted and rationalized by IREX staff for librarians from environments where exposure to modern customer service and interior design ideas may be very limited.<sup>7</sup>

The materials are targeted at the librarians most commonly encountered in Beyond Access projects. These library staff have usually not received any formal training in modern library services for years, or perhaps ever and have usually not been exposed to the concepts of a modern library and its potential community value.

The guidelines approach library design through four themes centered on responding to the needs of users. The training walks librarians through the concepts, displays corresponding

<sup>7</sup> Some sources for the recommendations included below include:

- Bennett, S. (2007). The Information or the Learning Commons: Which Will We Have? , <http://www.libraryspaceplanning.com/assets/resource/Information-or-Learning-Commons.pdf>.
- Feinberg, S., & Keller, J. (2010, March 14). Designing Space for Children and Teens, <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2010/03/14/designing-space-for-children-and-teens/>.
- Lesneski, T. (2011, August 16). 10 Steps to a Better Library Interior: Tips That Don't Have To Cost a Lot | Library by Design, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2011/08/buildings/10-steps-to-a-better-library-interior-tips-that-dont-have-to-cost-a-lot-library-by-design/#> .
- Model Programme for Public Libraries. (n.d.), <http://modelprogrammer.kulturstyrelsen.dk/en/challenges/challenges-in-the-librarys-zones-and-compartments/the-childrens-zone/#.VWfyiU-eDGd>.
- OCLC WebJunction. Space Planning, <http://www.webjunction.org/explore-topics/space-planning.html>.

images and encourages discussion about how different libraries around the world are making the best of what they have to respond to different needs. It then guides librarians in steps to make easy, meaningful changes. The intended outcome is to help librarians take the first steps in making the facilities more useful to more people.



3) Open Book Children's Library, Phnom Penh.

The main message of the guidelines is that usefully redesigning one's library does not require a lot of new funds. The training starts off with this picture from a library in Cambodia (3) and a discussion that changes don't require a lot of resources. Almost everything in this picture is repurposed from a previous owner and nothing within it costs much money.

The guidelines also emphasize that providing space for children facilitates the library's use by adults. In order for a

library to be useful to audiences throughout the community, it must provide resources and space for both adults and children. Where libraries want to be part of the local solution for digital literacy and ICT skills - a frequent theme with which Beyond Access works - often parents can only participate in such activities when there is something nearby for their children to do. A library with a children's corner with books, games and toys provides activity for a child while a parent participates in job-related training or other community activities.

The space arrangement guidelines encourage librarians to think about their space using four guiding themes related to a modern library, as follows.

### *Make it Friendly*

Many developing country libraries suffer from lack of visitors because the spaces are arranged in an academic style suitable to 1960s expectations for libraries as spaces for studying, or for checking out a book and leaving. Librarians are often hidden behind fortress-like desks, separating them from their visitors and conveying a sense of intimidation and authority. If a modern library is a place meant for community activity, gathering and creativity, it must be arranged so that people want to spend time there. The more people associate friendliness with the library, the more they will see it as an indispensable part of their community. In this category, Beyond Access recommends some simple adjustments that librarians can make.

- Color and light promote a sense of warmth and friendliness. If wall paint isn't an option, librarians can decorate the walls with children's artwork. They can make sure windows are unobstructed and place seating near sources of light.
- Remove barriers between the librarian and the public. In many places, libraries are perceived as institutions solely for the elite and educated. To break down this perception, librarians must make all kinds of visitors feel at ease - free to ask questions and explore. Typical librarian furniture that might convey librarians as a formidable guardian can be removed in favor of shared space. Glass cases communicating to users that books are precious treasures to be protected from their fingers can be removed in favor of open shelves.

- Provide comfortable spaces. Libraries' competitors for people's free time are cafes and shopping malls - places that over the last couple decades have figured out how to create a warm, relaxed environment. Libraries must learn from these examples if they are to survive as public spaces. Even with limited resources, libraries can be fitted with furniture like bean bags - which can be made locally if necessary - along with cushions, blankets, and soft carpets. Many libraries lack dedicated space for children, but a children's corner or space designated for children to feel free to read and play is critical for a modern library to be able to serve its community.



4) Participants in the training contrast the two images above, discussing what the library's layout conveys to visitors.

### *Make it Easy*

Libraries are often associated in the public mind with obstacles. Patrons must decipher the cataloguing system to find the materials in which they're interested. They must sift through overstuffed shelves to find what they're looking for. They must ask a librarian to help them find things. In thinking about becoming a modern library, librarians must plan intentionally to make visitors' as painless and obstacle-free as possible. Every time a visitor has to get up and ask for something, ask for permission, or search multiple unfamiliar places, the library presents a disincentive to use. People will often leave rather than approach someone for help. Typical ways libraries might unwittingly present obstacles to their users include high or locked shelves, information stored away in file cabinets, or a lack of signs providing clear directions. So with a little consideration, it's easy to remove some of these barriers.

- Shelves can be placed at the height of the intended users. Collections can be weeded or rationalized to promote exploration and ease finding the most in-demand materials. So many libraries' shelves are overstocked with outdated materials that haven't been used in decades. Shelves with some space to browse, and with popular resources facing out, make it easier for visitors to find what they're seeking.
- Given that it is the place where so many people will use technology for the first time, it is the library's responsibility to humanize technology, making it approachable and useful. Technology should be integrated into library space, rather than set aside as something separate. It should be surrounded with signs providing guidance on the most common topics and ensuring that visitors know help is available.

### *Make it About Learning*

Though libraries have long been associated with education, more modern assumptions about how people learn are rarely reflected in library layout. These outdated library designs assume people learn individually, quietly, and by looking at printed materials. Learning in the 21st

century, however, as often takes place in groups, through collaboration and exchange that sometimes requires making some noise, doing creative activities, and using a variety of materials beyond books. A modern library, therefore, must provide space for – and even actively encourage – these activities.



5) These two pictures are used to contrast a bland, academic display of computers, and a friendly and easy one, where information is proactively offered on the walls about how to make best use of the technology.

Ways libraries can adapt for modern learning needs include creating space dedicated to group work and discussions, such as seating in circles. This includes providing space for caregivers and children to spend time together, so the library can serve to support family interaction around learning. For children, making available simple tools and space for writing, drawing and creativity provides opportunities for self-guided learning and experimentation, conveying the message that the library is about learning in its many forms, rather than just a place to find books. For everyone, the library should be a print-rich environment, with text and labels everywhere - helping children attach words to objects, and helping adults navigate the library with ease.<sup>8</sup>

### *Make it Adaptable*

Finally, a modern library is not static - it is used for a range of activities, so library space is best planned to be flexible. Since for most libraries, space is extremely limited, making the library easily re-arrangeable for different uses is critical. This can be done simply and cheaply, with light, mobile furniture. Books - especially those for children, where a specific order is less important - can be taken off the shelves entirely and placed in recycled boxes or crates by category or age group. Screens or other makeshift dividers can be used to zone the library, setting off quiet zones from group collaboration areas, and then can be easily set aside when communal events are taking place in the library.

### *In Action*

While the guidelines are available on the Beyond Access website and distributed in print form, conveying the concepts behind them requires in-person contact and experimentation. Beyond Access has developed a facilitator's guide for a half-day workshop that uses the slide deck linked above to prompt discussion of the different themes, and provide librarians the opportunity to analyze images from different libraries and make relevant suggestions. After

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<sup>8</sup> Beyond Access has also created a guide for involving the community in creating a print-rich environment in the library using a one-day event.

the presentation and discussion, participants get the chance to practice using legos, playdoh and other toys.



6) Participants in a training workshop in India apply the guidelines using Legos.

In groups, they either design libraries in communities with pre-assigned characteristics, or they redesign their own libraries and then explain how their adjustments respond to the concepts described above. They also fill out a worksheet laying out their plans and making commitments as to how the library will appear differently the next time a colleague visits the library.



7) Results: a library in Zamboanga, Philippines shares on Facebook some before/after pictures after applying these guidelines to its redesign effort. The librarian's fortress-like desk has been removed, and space has been freed in the shelves in the background.

## Moving forward

These guidelines represent the first step in helping meet the needs of developing country libraries as they reconsider the best use of their space. They were created to begin addressing a gap in library development where nothing else suitable existed. As Beyond Access continues to work with libraries around the world, IREX intends to regularly revisit and refresh the materials based on feedback and experience. It is also hoped that others will take these materials and build on them locally as best suits their needs and context. The latest version can always be found on the 'resources' page of the Beyond Access website.<sup>9</sup> IREX also welcomes input and advice from the global librarian community.

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://beyondaccess.net/resources/>

**Photo notes and credits:**

- 1) National Library of Tajikistan: Robert Wilson,  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/10186213@N07/16983900859/in/photolist-oGNwBq-oqkUyN-oqkJ4R-oqkHGt-5Uzurr-5VLtoE-rSNW1T-rSNpLV-sa6sk5-rdemjJ>
- 2) Myanmar community library: Phyu Township, Bago Division. Photo shared in MBAPF Facebook group,  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1457443364533036&set=o.260444500789175&type=3&theater>
- 3) Open Book Children's Library, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photo by author.
- 4) Left, library in Romania. Photo by IREX Biblionet staff. Right, Riecken Community Library, Zacualpa, Guatemala  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/riekenguatemala/4855312003/>
- 5) Libraries in Ukraine. Photo by IREX Bibliomist program staff.
- 6) India Public Library Conference, March 2015. Photos by author.
- 7) Zamboanga City Library. Photos by Angelo Ramos, shared on Beyond Access Philippines Facebook group,  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1488138651430559/permalink/1624614124449677/>