Be a Guest

A French Look on American Libraries

Claudine Lieber

I n the United States, librarians are passionate about customer service. As a matter of fact, the library uses whatever means it has to seduce and serve the clientele. Collections, services, conveniences—nothing is spared to attract people to the library. The main goal is to catch customers' eyes, please them with attentive listening, and anticipate public needs, all with a never-ending search for quality and variety.

This term "client," sometimes used by American librarians, is still a matter of astonishment to French librarians, as it is not widespread in the French library professional culture. Why such resistance? According to our sense of values, the notion explicitly refers to the world of profitable business and money. In our libraries, we welcome "users," not "clients." But at a deeper level, the tailored customer service *à l'américaine* is built on exactly the same principles as the nonprofit, noncommercial public service in France.

At Home in the Library

To achieve the goal of serving the client, attention is paid first to the building and its interior design. As Sam Demas and Jeffrey Scherer put it, creating an "esprit de place" in the library is essential.[1] Ideally, the library can be beautiful, but it is equally important that it be welcoming and comfortable. Above all, the library should provide an open, inviting environment for its visitors, whether they are kids, teens, or the elderly. This has been a fundamental principle ever since the first library was founded in Boston in 1848, and through today's present construction and renovation boom.

In the United States, as Don Kelsey points out, there are two types of buildings with proud and distinctive architectural styles: the church and the library.[2] Both hold symbolic places in their communities. The library and the church stand out as cultural icons. Both share a respect for etiquette.[3] Until recently, everyone had to behave in those

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places according to the established rules—that is, no loud talking, no eating or drinking, no inappropriate behavior.

The similarities do not end there, but this stands as the beginning of a good explanation as to why architecture is the route that many major cities in the United States take to assert the symbolic status of their libraries—if they can afford the cost. Prestigious architecture is very trendy. For instance, the 2004 grand opening of the Seattle Public Library (362,987 square feet, designed by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas) provoked huge crowds of visitors as well as architectural critics raving about the building. While some think it's a revolutionary structure—"the most important new library to be built in a generation, and the most exhilarating"—to others it is nothing but "a gargantuan ventilation duct plunked into downtown."[4] Either way, its visibility in the city is undeniable.

Another modern design that deserves mention is the San Francisco Public Library, built by Pei, Cobb, Fried Architects (1996). Tradition persists, though. One should remember that the director of the library was fired shortly after its opening for, among other things, having eliminated too many books in the name of progress and trying to get rid of the useless wooden card index filing cabinets. Today, however, elevators and some walls have now been decorated with photographic enlargements of the old cards from the former paper catalog.

The modern style is not for everybody. Architecture evolves, and times are changing, but the basic principles remain that the library should be regarded as the best spot to curl up with a good book. Thus, when municipalities consider the library as an architectural object, they rarely adopt an avant-garde plan. Besides, librarians are not so keen on having a famous architect or a wonderful artist who may lack pragmatism intervene. When the new library project in Santa Monica, California, was being planned, some staff began to fear that Frank Gehry, an expressionist architect and a celebrated citizen in the town, would get involved in the design of their library and the result would reflect style over substance.

Typically, in the native land of skyscrapers and changing urban landscapes, libraries evoke memories, and people adore historical reconstruction. In Chicago, home of the bold and innovative Frank Lloyd Wright, tourists

are enraptured over the central public library building (1991), situated near the elevated subway. It is a beautiful nineteenth-century gem—actually a perfect copy of the last century's solemn edifices. When Los Angeles, a city with its own unique urban architecture, opted for a new project after its library burned down, the winner was . . . an identical reconstruction of the old library. In the same way, the post-modern public library in Denver (1995) introduced some totally unexpected medieval dungeons in the design of its new building.

Each year, *American Libraries* publishes a special issue dedicated to construction and renovation; its title in 2004 was "Building on the Past."[5] All the evidence of this ever-increasing concern about preservation and an established taste for cultural heritage is present in the libraries that are featured in that issue. Traces of local history have been integrated into a library housed in a 1914 post office in Ypsilanti, Michigan. In Pittsburgh, they have carefully renovated the so-called Carnegie libraries in all their original beauty. Elsewhere, in Fayetteville, New York, the library sits in an old furniture factory, and the Williamsburg, Virginia, college library is in the office of the head of the Supreme Court. This frenzy of reconstruction has even reached the small town of Hays, Kansas, whose library has regained, in every little detail, its appearance of olden times, when Buffalo Bill walked down its streets.

New constructions—or remodeling—meet the contemporary taste for integrating natural light, landscapes, and intimacy with nature. Who can deny the pleasure of reading while facing the panorama of the Wasatch Mountains at the Salt Lake City (Utah) Public Library? Or in the attractive building of wood, bricks, and glass situated in a forested location at the Sierra Nevada College library in Lake Tahoe? Inside gardens also are in fashion. Vast armchairs and couches are likely to be in the vicinity of a piano, and it also is highly recommended that they be placed near a fireplace that is both cozy and decorative—even in places like California, where, in most areas of the state, the temperature does not drop much below 18°C (64°F) during winter.

User Power

Whatever a library's architectural style, technology is omnipresent. Librarians are urged to offer more and more technology to their users: general access to wi-fi and broadband; exponential increases in the number of computers and workstations; technology in clusters, disseminated, and gathered in special implementation areas (information commons, labs, group study rooms, and so on). Demand is high, and will only increase. American librarians also consider it a question of democracy; every citizen must be able to comfortably and easily enjoy technological advances free of charge, including e-mail, Web navigation, and up-to-date software and electronic resources.

Even though fully equipped with state-of-the-art technology, the library makes it a point of honor to offer warm, welcoming spaces to its clientele—which does not mean luxurious, but mostly similar to what North European designs offer. Wood, being a smooth and pleasant material, is often a favorite, as are as soft colors; furniture that is large and comfortable is chosen over elegant or chic designs. Most American librarians give comfort full precedence over appearance in order to make people feel at home, or even better than at home. This is an increasing trend due to fears that clients should unremittingly melt away with the massive use of the Internet and competition. Moreover, for even greater convenience, libraries often offer drive-in book returns, where busy customers can quickly return borrowed documents without leaving their cars.

The introduction of small coffee shops has become commonplace, if not a moral obligation. American library rules, incidentally, have become much more flexible, in a way to make Europeans turn pale, as they are so different from our standards. Customers can sometimes drink, nibble, or use a cell phone in the library. Librarians, reasonably, try to take into consideration the changing behavior, especially with teens, in service to the customer. They are keen to erase the image of the "shushing librarian."[6] The library is no longer a silent sanctuary; noise is part of everyday life. But, as the place must remain tolerable for all categories of readers, libraries feature layouts that properly distribute relatively active, noisy zones and quieter ones.

The community often is invited to give its views about future equipment purchases, through surveys, consultation of targeted groups of citizens, or even through referendums. A community frequently is asked to contribute financially to the building or its operation through special fund-raising events supported by a Friends of the Library group or the library's foundation. Some might even play Maecenas, and sponsor the project. American librarians will never consider it an appropriation of their privileges to do so. They greatly prefer the community to be involved rather than indifferent.

Moreover, libaries will allow groups of patrons the freedom to take initiative when specific needs or wishes are put forward. San Francisco Public Library entrusted a group of hearing-impaired users with the task of designing a room for their own particular use—a room that they have conceived without any opening on the main corridor of the library in order to not be surprised by people whom they would not be aware of entering. Other libraries, such as the public library in Carmel, Indiana, that wished to create a teen space sought advice from adolescents and followed their suggestions rather than imposing upon them what the library thought should be there. As a result, those teen areas are among the most popular places in the library, although they may shock the visiting adults with their clashing colors, big television screens, games, and computers.

Libraries' areas and services are designed to suit users' profiles. You'll feel like you're at a night club in South

Bend (Ind.) Central Library's multimedia room, called "Sights and Sounds." Children are particularly well-treated. It could be a whale that welcomes kids (South Bend), or a puppet theater that rises to the ceiling (Hennepin County [Minn.] Library). At Southfield (Mich.) Public Library, the "Story Time Space" has turned into a space station. There are also giant aquariums and boats or full-scale trees that have sprung up in many children's sections of libraries, allowing the little ones to set up and read nicely.

Spaces are constantly subject to redefinition as the functions of the library are evolving. Even in newly opened buildings, demolishing may occur to introduce new areas based on user requests or the dictates of fashion. In 2003, the San Francisco Public Library proposed to open a teen area, which was thought to be lacking. The library's initial arrangement was conceived with change in mind. It offers centers on its seven floors for different categories of users (a center for the deaf, a library for the blind, a center for small businesses, and so on) as well as for the major sociological and ethnic groups represented by the city and its suburbs (a Chinese center, a Philipino-American center, an African-American center, and a gay and lesbian center, where there has been for years a daily gift of a bouquet of flowers from an anonymous donor).

Many other libraries share this policy. Los Angeles' Chinatown branch owns a large collection of Chinese language materials. Denver Public Library has recently opened the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library, a very important branch (40,000 square feet) and a showcase for the history, arts, and music of the African-American community. They also routinely offer rooms for group or community meetings, "for the presentation and exchange of information and opinions, available on equal term to all persons and groups, regardless of opinions or affiliations."[7]

The American Library: A Quilt or a Melting Pot?

American Libraries, in its 2005 issue, ran "So Goes the Community" on the front page.[8] Is it *the* community or *many* communities? In trying hard to stay in tune with each category of users, isn't the American library going too far? Of course, you may consider this a matter of point of view.

French librarians think that foreign people should give evidence of a strong will to integrate into the community. Adhering to their culture's behavior and clothes and their language only isolates foreigners and stands in the way of their integration. The French prefer to offer the immigrants the handy tools of a successful integration, just as they treat their own citizens.

On the other hand, American librarians are convinced that they should anticipate wishes from the varied communities and meet their needs by offering spaces as well as collections, user guides, brochures, and even Web sites in their native languages. By doing so, foreign communities will feel at home in the friendly atmosphere of the library. They will be gently acquainted with the new environment and be encouraged to fit gradually into the American nation. Better to have them inside than outside.

There always has been, and still is, an enormous curiosity in our profession concerning American libraries. New ideas and services are highly valued, and particularities are carefully scrutinized.[9] On the reverse, American librarians love to visit French libraries whenever they have the opportunity. They appreciate the attention we generally pay to library architecture and style. They even study our local characteristics.[10] However, mentalities obviously remain different across the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean. These observations and remarks have then no other aim than contributing to a better understanding for both. Getting more acquainted with each other is always a step forward.

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References and Notes

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2. From personal correspondence with Don Kelsey, who has been involved in programming and designing many libraries during his career at the University of Minnesota. He has been a library planning consultant for thirty years.
3. As indicated by Philip Tramdack, of the Bailey Library, Slippery Rock (Pa.) University, in personal correspondence.
4. Cathleen McGuigan, "A Cool New Library," *Newsweek* 143, no. 21 (May 24, 2004), 12.
5. "Building on the Past," *American Libraries* 35, no. 4 (Apr. 2004), 38–58.
6. Susan Dimattia, "Silence Is Olden," *American Libraries* 36, no. 1 (Jan. 2005): 48–51.
7. Denver Public Library, "Meeting Rooms," http://denver library.org/about/meetings (accessed Jun. 1, 2007).
8. "So Goes the Community," *American Libraries* 36, no. 4 (Apr. 2005), 35–21.
9. For example, two articles speak about American libraries in the recent issue of the *Bulletin des bibliothèques de France.* They are Aurélie Godfroy and Albane Lejeune, "Le Cercle de Lecture Invisible," *Bulletin des bibliothèques de France* 51, no. 5 (2006): 58–62, and Philippe Cantié, "USA PATRIOT Act: Une Exceptionl Durable," *Bulletin des bibliothèques de France* 51, no. 5 (2006): 64–81.
10. Jo Kibbee, "Aux armes, citoyens, Les bibliothèques publiques françaises face à l'extrême droite," *Bulletin des bibliotheques de France* 49, no. 6 (2004): 10–19. Jack Kessler runs an electronic journal about France, called FYI France. See: www.fyifrance.com (accessed Jun. 1, 2007).